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THE MARKET-PLACE

by Harold Frederic

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CHAPTER I

THE battle was over, and the victor remained on the field—sitting alone with the hurly-burly of his thoughts.

His triumph was so sweeping and comprehensive as to be somewhat shapeless to the view. He had a sense of fascinated pain when he tried to define to himself what its limits would probably be. Vistas of unchecked, expanding conquest stretched away in every direction. He held at his mercy everything within sight. Indeed, it rested entirely with him to say whether there should be any such thing as mercy at all—and until he chose to utter the restraining word the rout of the vanquished would go on with multiplying terrors and ruin. He could crush and torture and despoil his enemies until he was tired. The responsibility of having to decide when he would stop grinding their faces might come to weigh upon him later on, but he would not give it room in his mind to-night.

A picture of these faces of his victims shaped itself out of the flames in the grate. They were moulded in a family likeness, these phantom visages: they were all Jewish, all malignant, all distorted with fright. They implored him with eyes in which panic asserted itself above rage and cunning. Only here and there did he recall a name with which to label one of these countenances; very few of them raised a memory of individual rancour. The faces were those of men he had seen, no doubt, but their persecution of him had been impersonal; his great revenge was equally so. As he looked, in truth, there was only one face—a composite mask of what he had done battle with, and overthrown, and would trample implacably under foot. He stared with a conqueror's cold frown at it, and gave an abrupt laugh which started harsh echoes in the stillness of the Board Room. Then he shook off the reverie, and got to his feet. He shivered a little at the sudden touch of a chill.

A bottle of brandy, surrounded by glasses, stood on the table where the two least-considered of his lieutenants, the dummy Directors, had left it. He poured a small quantity and sipped it. During the whole eventful day it had not occurred to him before to drink; the taste of the neat liquor seemed on the instant to calm and refresh his brain. With more deliberation, he took a cigar from the broad, floridly-decorated open box beside the bottle, lit it, and blew a long draught of smoke thoughtfully through his nostrils. Then he put his hands in his pockets, looked again into the fire, and sighed a wondering smile. God in heaven! it was actually true!

This man of forty found himself fluttering with a novel exhilaration, which yet was not novel. Upon reflection, he perceived that he felt as if he were a boy again—a boy excited by pleasure. It surprised as much as it delighted him to experience this frank and direct joy of a child. He caught the inkling of an idea that perhaps his years were an illusion. He had latterly been thinking of himself as middle-aged; the grey hairs thickening at his temples had vaguely depressed him. Now all at once he saw that he was not old at all. The buoyancy of veritable youth bubbled in his veins. He began walking up and down the room, regarding new halcyon visions with a sparkling eye. He was no longer conscious of the hated foe beneath his feet; they trod instead elastic upon the clouds.

The sound of someone moving about in the hallway outside, and of trying a door near by, suddenly caught his attention. He stood still and listened with alertness for a surprised instant, then shrugged his shoulders and began moving again. It must be nearly seven o'clock; although the allotment work had kept the clerks later than usual that day, everybody connected with the offices had certainly gone home. He realized that his nerves had played him a trick in giving that alarmed momentary start—and smiled almost tenderly as he remembered how notable and even glorious a warrant those nerves had for their unsettled state. They would be all right after a night's real rest. He would know how to sleep NOW, thank God!

But yes—there was somebody outside—and this time knocking with assurance at the right door, the entrance to the outer office. After a second's consideration, he went into this unlighted outer office, and called out through the opaque glass an enquiry. The sound of his voice, as it analyzed itself in his own ears, seemed unduly peremptory. The answer which came back brought a flash of wonderment to his eyes. He hurriedly unlocked and opened the door.

“I saw the lights in what I made out to be the Board Room,” said the newcomer, as he entered. “I assumed it must be you. Hope I don't interrupt anything.”

“Nothing could have given me greater pleasure, Lord Plowden,” replied the other, leading the way back to the inner apartment. “In fact, I couldn't have asked anything better.”

The tone of his voice had a certain anxious note in it not quite in harmony with this declaration. He turned, under the drop-light overhanging the Board-table, and shook hands with his guest, as if to atone for this doubtful accent. “I shake hands with you again,” he said, speaking rapidly, “because this afternoon it was what you may call formal; it didn't count. And—my God!—you're the man I owe it all to.”

“Oh, you mustn't go as far as that—even in the absence of witnesses,” replied Lord Plowden, lightly. “I'll take off my coat for a few minutes,” he went on, very much at his ease. “It's hot in here. It's by the merest chance I happened to be detained in the City—and I saw your lights, and this afternoon we had no opportunity whatever for a quiet talk. No—I won't drink anything before dinner, but I'll light a cigar. I want to say to you, Thorpe,” he concluded, as he seated himself “that I think what you've done is very wonderful. The Marquis thinks so too—but I shouldn't like to swear that he understands much about it.”

The implication that the speaker did understand remained in the air like a tangible object. Thorpe took a chair, and the two men exchanged a silent, intent look. Their faces, dusky red on the side of the glow from the fire, pallid where the electric light fell slantwise upon them from above, had for a moment a mysterious something in common. Then the tension of the glance was relaxed—and on the instant no two men in London looked less alike.

Lord Plowden was familiarly spoken of as a handsome man. Thorpe had even heard him called the handsomest man in England—though this seemed in all likelihood an exaggeration. But handsome he undoubtedly was—tall without suggesting the thought of height to the observer, erect yet graceful, powerfully built, while preserving the effect of slenderness. His face in repose had the outline of the more youthful guardsman-type—regular, finely-cut, impassive to hardness. When he talked, or followed with interest the talk of others, it revealed almost an excess of animation. Then one noted the flashing subtlety of his glance, the swift facility of his smile and comprehending brows, and saw that it was not the guardsman face at all. His skin was fresh-hued, and there was a shade of warm brown in his small, well-ordered moustasche, but his hair, wavy and worn longer than the fashion, seemed black. There were perceptible veins of grey in it, though he had only entered his thirty-fifth year. He was dressed habitually with the utmost possible care.

The contrast between this personage and the older man confronting him was abrupt. Thorpe was also tall, but of a burly and slouching figure. His face, shrouded in a high-growing, dust-coloured beard, invited no attention. One seemed always to have known this face—thick-featured, immobile, undistinguished. Its accessories for the time being were even more than ordinarily unimpressive. Both hair and beard were ragged with neglect. His commonplace, dark clothes looked as if he had slept in them. The hands resting on his big knees were coarse in shape, and roughened, and ill-kept.

“I couldn't have asked anything better than your dropping in,” he repeated now, speaking with a drag, as of caution, on his words. “Witnesses or no witnesses, I'm anxious to have you understand that I realize what I owe to you.”

“I only wish it were a great deal more than it is,” replied the other, with a frank smile.

“Oh, it'll mount up to considerable, as it stands,” said Thorpe.

He could hear that there was a kind of reservation in his voice; the suspicion that his companion detected it embarrassed him. He found himself in the position of fencing with a man to whom all his feelings impelled him to be perfectly open. He paused, and was awkwardly conscious of constraint in the silence which ensued. “You are very kind to put it in that way,” said Lord Plowden, at last. He seemed also to be finding words for his thoughts with a certain difficulty. He turned his cigar round in his white fingers meditatively. “I gather that your success has been complete—as complete as you yourself could have desired. I congratulate you with all my heart.”

“No—don't say my success—say our success,” put in Thorpe.

“But, my dear man,” the other corrected him, “my interest, compared with yours, is hardly more than nominal. I'm a Director, of course, and I'm not displeased that my few shares should be worth something instead of nothing, but——”

Thorpe lifted one of his heavy hands. “That isn't my view of the thing at all. To be frank, I was turning over in my mind, just awhile ago, before you came in, some way of arranging all that on a different footing. If you'll trust it to me, I think you'll find it's all right.”

Something in the form of this remark seemed to restore to Lord Plowden his accustomed fluency of speech.

“I came here to say precisely that thing,” he began—“that I do trust it to you. We have never had any very definite talk on the subject—and pray don't think that I want to go into details now. I'd much rather not, in fact. But what I do want to say to you is this: I believe in you. I feel sure that you are going to go far, as the saying is. Well, I want to tie myself to your star. Do you see what I mean? You are going to be a power in finance. You are going to be able to make and unmake men as you choose. I should be very much obliged indeed if you would make me.”

Thorpe regarded the handsome and titled man of fashion with what seemed to the other a lethargic gaze. In truth, his mind was toiling with strenuous activity to master, in all its bearings, the significance of what had been said. This habit of the abstracted and lack-lustre eye, the while he was hard at work thinking, was a fortuitous asset which he had never up to that time learned that he possessed. Unconsciously, he dampened the spirits of his companion.

“Don't imagine I'm trying to force myself upon you,” Lord Plowden said, growing cool in the face of this slow stare. “I'm asking nothing at all. I had the impulse to come and say to you that you are a great man, and that you've done a great thing—and done it, moreover, in a very great way.”

“You know how it was done!” The wondering exclamation forced itself from Thorpe's unready lips. He bent forward a little, and took a new visual hold, as it were, of his companion's countenance.

Lord Plowden smiled. “Did you think I was such a hopeless duffer, then?” he rejoined.

For answer, Thorpe leant back in his chair, crossed his legs, and patted his knee contentedly. All at once his face had lightened; a genial speculation returned to his grey eyes.

“Well, I was in a curious position about you, you see,” he began to explain. The relief with which he spoke was palpable. “I could not for the life of me make up my mind whether to tell you about it or not. Let's see—this is Thursday; did I see you Tuesday? At any rate, the scheme didn't dawn on me myself until toward evening Tuesday. But yesterday, of course, I could have told you—and again this afternoon—but, as I say, I couldn't make up my mind. Once I had it on the tip of my tongue—but somehow I didn't. And you—you never gave me a hint that you saw what was going on.”

Again Lord Plowden smiled. “I voted with you,” he put in softly.

Thorpe laughed, and relit his cigar. “Well, I couldn't have asked anything better than this,” he declared once again. “It beats all the rest put together, to my mind.”

“Perhaps I don't quite follow your meaning,” commented the other tentatively.

“Why man,” Thorpe explained, hesitating a little in his choice of words, but speaking with evident fervour; “I was more anxious about you—and the way you'd take it—than about anything else. I give you my word I was. I couldn't tell at all how you'd feel about the thing. You might think that it was all right, and then again you might round on me—or no, I don't mean quite that—but you might say it wasn't good enough for you, and wash your hands of the whole affair. And I can't tell you what a relief it is to find that you—that you're satisfied. Now I can go ahead.”

“Ah, yes—ahead,” said the younger man, thoughtfully. “Do you mind telling me—you see I'm quite in the dark as to details—how much further ahead we are likely to go? I comprehend the general nature of our advance—but how far off is the goal you have in sight?”

“God knows!” answered Thorpe, with a rising thrill of excitement in his voice. “I don't give it any limit. I don't see why we should stop at all. We've got them in such a position that—why, good heavens! we can squeeze them to death, crush them like quartz.” He chuckled grimly at the suggestion of his simile. “We'll get more ounces to the ton out of our crushings than they ever heard of on the Rand, too.”

“Might I ask,” interposed the other, “who may 'they' be?”

Thorpe hesitated, and knitted his brows in the effort to remember names. “Oh, there are a lot of them,” he said, vaguely. “I think I told you of the way that Kaffir crowd pretended to think well of me, and let me believe they were going to take me up, and then, because I wouldn't give them everything—the very shirt off my back—turned and put their knife into me. I don't know them apart, hardly—they've all got names like Rhine wines—but I know the gang as a whole, and if I don't lift the roof clean off their particular synagogue, then my name is mud.”

Lord Plowden smiled. “I've always the greatest difficulty to remember that you are an Englishman—a Londoner born,” he declared pleasantly. “You don't talk in the least like one. On shipboard I made sure you were an American—a very characteristic one, I thought—of some curious Western variety, you know. I never was more surprised in my life than when you told me, the other day, that you only left England a few years ago.”

“Oh, hardly a 'few years'; more like fifteen,” Thorpe corrected him. He studied his companion's face with slow deliberation.

“I'm going to say something that you mustn't take amiss,” he remarked, after a little pause. “If you'd known that I was an Englishman, when we first met, there on the steamer, I kind o' suspect that you and I'd never have got much beyond a nodding acquaintance—and even that mostly on my side. I don't mean that I intended to conceal anything—that is, not specially—but I've often thought since that it was a mighty good thing I did. Now isn't that true—that if you had taken me for one of your own countrymen you'd have given me the cold shoulder?”

“I dare say there's a good deal in what you say,” the other admitted, gently enough, but without contrition. “Things naturally shape themselves that way, rather, you know. If they didn't, why then the whole position would become difficult. But you are an American, to all intents and purposes.”

“Oh, no—I never took any step towards getting naturalized,” Thorpe protested. “I always intended to come back here. Or no, I won't say that—because most of the time I was dog-poor—and this isn't the place for a poor man. But I always said to myself that if ever I pulled it off—if I ever found my self a rich man—THEN I'd come piking across the Atlantic as fast as triple-expansion engines would carry me.”

The young man smiled again, with a whimsical gleam in his eye. “And you ARE a rich man, now,” he observed, after a momentary pause.

“We are both rich men,” replied Thorpe, gravely.

He held up a dissuading hand, as the other would have spoken. “This is how it seems to me the thing figures itself out: It can't be said that your name on the Board, or the Marquis's either, was of much use so far as the public were concerned. To tell the truth, I saw some time ago that they wouldn't be. Titles on prospectuses are played out in London. I've rather a notion, indeed, that they're apt to do more harm than good—just at present, at least. But all that aside—you are the man who was civil to me at the start, when you knew nothing whatever about my scheme, and you are the man who was good to me later on, when I didn't know where to turn for a friendly word. Very well; here I am! I've made my coup! And I'd be a sweep, wouldn't I? to forget to-day what I was so glad to remember a week ago. But you see, I don't forget! The capital of the Company is 500,000 pounds, all in pound shares. We offered the public only a fifth of them. The other four hundred thousand shares are mine as vendor—and I have ear-marked in my mind one hundred thousand of them to be yours.”

Lord Plowden's face paled at the significance of these words. “It is too much—you don't reflect what it is you are saying,” he murmured confusedly. “Not a bit of it,” the other reassured him. “Everything that I've said goes.”

The peer, trembling a little, rose to his feet. “It is a preposterously big reward for the merest act of courtesy,” he insisted. “Of course it takes my breath away for joy—and yet I feel I oughtn't to be consenting to it at all. And it has its unpleasant side—it buries me under a mountain of obligation. I don't know what to do or what to say.”

"Well, leave the saying and doing to me, then," replied Thorpe, with a gesture before which the other resumed his seat. "Just a word more—and then I suppose we'd better be going. Look at it in this way. Your grandfather was Lord Chancellor of England, and your father was a General in the Crimea. My grandfather kept a small second-hand book-shop, and my father followed him in the business. In one sense, that puts us ten thousand miles apart. But in another sense, we'll say that we like each other, and that there are ways in which we can be of immense use to each other, and that brings us close together. You need money—and here it is for you. I need—what shall I say?—a kind of friendly lead in the matter of establishing myself on the right footing, among the right people—and that's what you can do for me. Mind—I'd prefer to put it all in quite another way; I'd like to say it was all niceness on your part, all gratitude on mine. But if you want to consider it on a business basis—why there you have it also—perfectly plain and clear."

He got up as he finished, and Lord Plowden rose as well. The two men shook hands in silence.

When the latter spoke, it was to say: "Do you know how to open one of those soda-water bottles? I've tried, but I can never get the trick. I think I should like to have a drink—after this."

When they had put down their glasses, and the younger man was getting into his great-coat, Thorpe bestowed the brandy and cigars within a cabinet at the corner of the room, and carefully turned a key upon them.

"If you're going West, let me give you a lift," said Lord Plowden, hat in hand. "I can set you down wherever you like. Unfortunately I've to go out to dinner, and I must race, as it is, to get dressed."

Thorpe shook his head. "No, go along," he bade him. "I've some odds and ends of things to do on the way."

"Then when shall I see you?"—began the other, and halted suddenly with a new thought in his glance. "But what are you doing Saturday?" he asked, in a brisker tone. "It's a dies non here. Come down with me to-morrow evening, to my place in Kent. We will shoot on Saturday, and drive about on Sunday, if you like—and there we can talk at our leisure. Yes, that is what you must do. I have a gun for you. Shall we say, then—Charing Cross at 9:55? Or better still, say 5:15, and we will dine at home."

The elder man pondered his answer—frowning at the problem before him with visible anxiety. "I'm afraid I'd better not come—it's very good of you all the same."

"Nonsense," retorted the other. "My mother will be very glad indeed to see you. There is no one else there—unless, perhaps, my sister has some friend down. We shall make a purely family party."

Thorpe hesitated for only a further second. "All right. Charing Cross, 5:15," he said then, with the grave brevity of one who announces a momentous decision.

He stood still, looking into the fire, for a few moments after his companion had gone. Then, going to a closet at the end of the room, he brought forth his coat and hat; something prompted him to hold them up, and scrutinize them under the bright light of the electric globe. He put them on, then, with a smile, half-scornful, half-amused, playing in his beard.

The touch of a button precipitated darkness upon the Board Room. He made his way out, and downstairs to the street. It was a rainy, windy October night, sloppy underfoot, dripping overhead. At the corner before him, a cabman, motionless under his unshapely covered hat and glistening rubber cape, sat perched aloft on his seat, apparently asleep. Thorpe hailed him, with a peremptory tone, and gave the brusque order, "Strand!" as he clambered into the hansom.

CHAPTER II

"LOUISA, the long and short of it is this," said Thorpe, half an hour later: "you never did believe in me, as a sister should do."

He was seated alone with this sister, in a small, low, rather dismally-appointed room, half-heartedly lighted by two flickering gasjets. They sat somewhat apart, confronting a fireplace, where only the laid materials for a fire disclosed themselves in the cold grate. Above the mantel hung an enlarged photograph of a scowling old man. Thorpe's gaze recurred automatically at brief intervals to this portrait—which somehow produced the effect upon him of responsibility for the cheerlessness of the room. There were other pictures on the walls of which he was dimly conscious—small, faded, old prints about Dido and AEneas and Agamemnon, which seemed to be coming back to him out of the mists of his childhood.

Vagrant impressions and associations of this childhood strayed with quaint inconsequence across the field of his preoccupied mind. The peculiar odour of the ancient book-shop on the floor below remained like snuff in his nostrils. Somewhere underneath, or in the wainscoting at the side, he could hear the assiduous gnawing of a rat. Was it the same rat, he wondered with a mental grin, that used to keep him awake nights, in one of the rooms next to this, with that same foolish noise, when he was a boy?

"I know you always say that," replied Louisa, impassively.

She was years older than her brother, but, without a trace of artifice or intention, contrived to look the younger of the two. Her thick hair, drawn simply from her temples into a knot behind, was of that palest brown which assimilates grey. Her face, long, plain, masculine in contour and spirit, conveyed no message as to years. Long and spare of figure, she sat upright in her straight-backed chair, with her large, capable hands on her knees.

"I believed in you as much as you'd let me," she went on, indifferently, almost wearily. "But I don't see that it mattered to you whether I did or didn't. You went your own way: you did what you wanted to do. What had I to do with it? I don't suppose I even knew what part of the world you were in more than once in two or three years. How should I know whether you were going to succeed, when I didn't even know what it was you were at? Certainly you hadn't succeeded here in London—but elsewhere you might or you might not—how could I tell? And moreover, I don't feel that I know you very well; you've grown into something very different from the boy Joel that left the shop—it must be twenty years ago. I can only know about you and your affairs what you tell me.”

“But my point is,” pursued Thorpe, watching her face with a curiously intent glance, “you never said to yourself: 'I KNOW he's going to succeed. I KNOW he'll be a rich man before he dies.'”

She shook her head dispassionately. Her manner expressed fatigued failure to comprehend why he was making so much of this purposeless point.

“No—I don't remember ever having said that to myself,” she admitted, listlessly. Then a comment upon his words occurred to her, and she spoke with more animation: “You don't seem to understand, Joel, that what was very important to you, didn't occupy me at all. You were always talking about getting rich; you kept the idea before you of sometime, at a stroke, finding yourself a millionaire. That's been the idea of your life. But what do I know about all that? My work has been to keep a roof over my head—to keep the little business from disappearing altogether. It's been hard enough, I can tell you, these last few years, with the big jobbers cutting the hearts out of the small traders. I had the invalid husband to support for between three and four years—a dead weight on me every week—and then the children to look after, to clothe and educate.”

At the last word she hesitated suddenly, and looked at him. “Don't think I'm ungrateful”—she went on, with a troubled effort at a smile—“but I almost wish you'd never sent me that four hundred pounds at all. What it means is that they've had two years at schools where now I shan't be able to keep them any longer. They'll be spoiled for my kind of life—and they won't have a fair chance for any other. I don't know what will become of them.”

The profound apprehension in the mother's voice did not dull the gleam in Thorpe's eyes. He even began a smile in the shadows of his unkempt moustache.

“But when I sent that money, for example, two years ago, and over,” he persisted, doggedly—“and I told you there'd be more where that came from, and that I stood to pull off the great event—even then, now, you didn't believe in your innermost heart that I knew what I was talking about, did you?”

She frowned with impatience as she turned toward him. “For heaven's sake, Joel,” she said, sharply—“you become a bore with that stupid nonsense. I want to be patient with you—I do indeed sympathize with you in your misfortunes—you know that well enough—but you're very tiresome with that eternal harping on what I believed and what I didn't believe. Now, are you going to stop to supper or not?—because if you are I must send the maid out. And there's another thing—would it be of any help to you to bring your things here from the hotel? You can have Alfred's room as well as not—till Christmas, at least.”

“Supposing I couldn't get my luggage out of the hotel till I'd settled my bill,” suggested Thorpe tentatively, in a muffled voice.

The practical woman reflected for an instant. “I was thinking,” she confessed then, “that it might be cheaper to leave your things there, and buy what little you want—I don't imagine, from what I've seen, that your wardrobe is so very valuable—but no, I suppose the bill ought to be paid. Perhaps it can be managed; how much will it be?”

Thorpe musingly rose to his feet, and strolled over to her chair. With his thick hands on his sister's shoulders he stooped and kissed her on the forehead.

“You believe in me now, anyway, eh, Lou?” he said, as he straightened himself behind her.

The unaccustomed caress—so different in character from the perfunctory salute with which he had greeted her on his arrival from foreign parts, six months before—brought a flush of pleased surprise to her plain face. Then a kind of bewilderment crept into the abstracted gaze she was bending upon the fireless grate. Something extraordinary, unaccountable, was in the manner of her brother. She recalled that, in truth, he was more than half a stranger to her. How could she tell what wild, uncanny second nature had not grown up in him under those outlandish tropical skies? He had just told her that his ruin was absolute—overwhelming—yet there had been a covert smile in the recesses of his glance. Even now, she half felt, half heard, a chuckle from him, there as he stood behind her!

The swift thought that disaster had shaken his brain loomed up and possessed her. She flung herself out of the chair, and, wheeling, seized its back and drew it between them as she faced him. It was with a stare of frank dismay that she beheld him grinning at her.

“What”—she began, stammering—“What is the matter, Joel?”

He permitted himself the luxury of smiling blankly at her for a further moment. Then he tossed his head, and laughed abruptly.

“Sit down, old girl,” he adjured her. “Try and hold yourself together, now—to hear some different kind of news. I've been playing it rather low down on you, for a fact. Instead of my being smashed, it's the other way about.”

She continued to confront him, with a nervous clasp upon the chair-back. Her breathing troubled her as she regarded him, and tried to take in the meaning of his words.

“Do you mean—you've been lying to me about—about your Company?” she asked, confusedly.

“No—no—not at all,” he replied, now all genial heartiness. “No—what I told you was gospel truth—but I was taking a rise out of you all the same.” He seemed so unaffectedly pleased by his achievement in kindly duplicity that she forced an awkward smile to her lips.

“I don't understand in the least,” she said, striving to remember what he had told her. “What you said was that the public had entirely failed to come in—that there weren't enough applications for shares to pay flotation expenses—those were your own words. Of course, I don't pretend to understand these City matters—but it IS the case, isn't it, that if people don't subscribe for the shares of a new company, then the company is a failure?”

“Yes, that may be said to be the case—as a general rule,” he nodded at her, still beaming.

“Well, then—of course—I don't understand,” she owned.

"I don't know as you'll understand it much more when I've explained it to you," he said, seating himself, and motioning her to the other chair. "But yes, of course you will. You're a business woman. You know what figures mean. And really the whole thing is as simple as A B C. You remember that I told you——"

"But are you going to stop to supper? I must send Annie out before the shops close."

"Supper? No—I couldn't eat anything. I'm too worked up for that. I'll get something at the hotel before I go to bed, if I feel like it. But say!"—the thought suddenly struck him—"if you want to come out with me, I'll blow you off to the swaggerest dinner in London. What d'ye say?"

She shook her head. "I shall have some bread and cheese and beer at nine. That's my rule, you know. I don't like to break it. I'm always queer next day if I do. But now make haste and tell me—you're really not broken then? You have really come out well?"

For answer he rose, and drew himself to his full height, and spread his bulky shoulders backward. His grey-blue eyes looked down upon her with a triumphant glow.

"Broken?" he echoed her word, with emphasis. "My dear Louisa, I'm not the sort that gets broken. I break other people. Oh, God, how I shall break them!"

He began pacing up and down on the narrow rug before the fender, excitedly telling his story to her. Sometimes he threw the words over his shoulder; again he held her absorbed gaze with his. He took his hands often from his pockets, to illustrate or enforce by gestures the meaning of his speech—and then she found it peculiarly difficult to realize that he was her brother.

Much of the narrative, rambling and disconnected, with which he prefaced this story of the day, was vaguely familiar to her. He sketched now for her in summary, and with the sonorous voice of one deeply impressed with the dramatic values of his declamation, the chronicle of his wanderings in strange lands—and these he had frequently told her about before. Soon she perceived, however, that he was stringing them together on a new thread. One after another, these experiences of his, as he related them, turned upon the obstacles and fatal pitfalls which treachery and malice had put in his path. He seemed, by his account, to have been a hundred times almost within touch of the goal. In China, in the Dutch Indies, in those remoter parts of Australia which were a waterless waste when he knew them and might have owned them, and now were yielding fabulous millions to fellows who had tricked and swindled him—everywhere he had missed by just a hair's breadth the golden consummation. In the Western hemisphere the tale repeated itself. There had been times in the Argentine, in Brazil just before the Empire fell, in Colorado when the Silver boom was on, in British Columbia when the first rumours of rich ore were whispered about—many times when fortune seemed veritably within his grasp. But someone had always played him false. There was never a friendship for him which could withstand the temptation of profitable treason.

But he had hung dauntlessly on. He had seen one concession slipping through his fingers, only to strain and tighten them for a clutch at another. It did not surprise his hearer—nor indeed did it particularly attract her attention—that there was nowhere in this rapid and comprehensive narrative any allusion to industry of the wage-earning sort. Apparently, he had done no work at all, in the bread-winner's sense of the word. This was so like Joel that it was taken for granted in his sister's mind. All his voyages and adventures and painful enterprises had been informed by the desire of the buccaneer—the passion to reap where others had sown, or, at the worst, to get something for nothing.

The discursive story began to narrow and concentrate itself when at last it reached Mexico. The sister changed her position in her chair, and crossed her knees when Tehuantepec was mentioned. It was from that place that Joel had sent her the amazing remittance over two years ago. Curiously enough, though, it was at this point in his narrative that he now became vague as to details. There were concessions of rubber forests mentioned, and the barter of these for other concessions with money to boot, and varying phases of a chronic trouble about where the true boundary of Guatemala ran—but she failed clearly to understand much about it all. His other schemes and mishaps she had followed readily enough. Somehow when they came to Mexico, however, she saw everything jumbled and distorted, as through a haze. Once or twice she interrupted him to ask questions, but he seemed to attach such slight importance to her comprehending these details that she forbore. Only one fact was it necessary to grasp about the Mexican episode, apparently. When he quitted Tehuantepec, to make his way straight to London, at the beginning of the year, he left behind him a rubber plantation which he desired to sell, and brought with him between six and seven thousand pounds, with which to pay the expenses of selling it. How he had obtained either the plantation or the money did not seem to have made itself understood. No doubt, as his manner indicated when she ventured her enquiries, it was quite irrelevant to the narrative.

In Mexico, his experience had been unique, apparently, in that no villain had appeared on the scene to frustrate his plans. He at least mentioned no one who had wronged him there. When he came to London, however, there were villains and to spare. He moved to the mantel, when he arrived at this stage of the story, and made clear a space for his elbow to rest among the little trinkets and photographs with which it was burdened. He stood still thereafter, looking down at her; his voice took on a harsher note.

Much of this story, also, she knew by heart. This strange, bearded, greyish-haired brother of hers had come very often during the past half-year to the little book-shop, and the widow's home above it, his misshapen handbag full of papers, his heart full of rage, hope, grief, ambition, disgust, confidence—everything but despair. It was true, it had never been quite real to her. He was right in his suggestion that she had never wholly believed in him. She had not been able to take altogether seriously this clumsy, careworn, shabbily-dressed man who talked about millions. It was true that he had sent her four hundred pounds for the education of her son and daughter; it was equally true that he had brought with him to London a sum which any of his ancestors, so far as she knew about them, would have deemed a fortune, and which he treated as merely so much oil, with which to lubricate the machinery of his great enterprise. She had heard, at various times, the embittered details of the disappearance of this money, little by little. Nearly a quarter of it, all told, had been appropriated by a sleek old braggart of a company-promoter, who had cozened Joel into the belief that London could be best approached through him. When at last this wretch was kicked downstairs, the effect had been only to make room for a fresh lot of bloodsuckers. There were so-called advertising agents, so-called journalists, so-called “men of influence in the City,”—a swarm of relentless and voracious harpies, who dragged from him in blackmail nearly the half of what he had left, before he summoned the courage and decision to shut them out.

Worse still, in some ways, were the men into whose hands he stumbled next—a group of City men concerned in the South African market, who impressed him very favourably at the outset. He got to know them by accident, and at the time when he began to comprehend the necessity of securing influential support for his scheme. Everything that he heard and could learn about them testified to the strength of their position in the City. Because they displayed a certain amiability of manner toward him and his project, he allowed himself to make sure of their support. It grew to be a certainty in his mind that they would see him through. He spent a good deal of money in dinners and suppers in their honour, after they had let him understand that this form of propitiation was not unpleasant to them. They chaffed him about some newspaper paragraphs, in which he was described as the “Rubber King,” with an affable assumption of amusement, under which he believed that he detected a genuine respect for his abilities.

Finally, when he had danced attendance upon them for the better part of two months, he laid before them, at the coffee-and-cigars stage of a dinner in a private room of the Savoy, the details of his proposition. They were to form a Syndicate to take over his property, and place it upon the market; in consideration of their finding the ready money for this exploitation, they were to have for themselves two-fifths of the shares in the Company ultimately to be floated. They listened to these details, and to his enthusiastic remarks about the project itself, with rather perfunctory patience, but committed themselves that evening to nothing definite. It took him nearly a week thereafter to get an answer from any of them. Then he learned that, if they took the matter up at all, it would be upon the basis of the Syndicate receiving nine-tenths of the shares.

He conceived the idea, after he had mastered his original amazement, that they named these preposterous terms merely because they expected to be beaten down, and he summoned all his good nature and tact for the task of haggling with them. He misunderstood their first show of impatience at this, and persevered in the face of their tacit rebuffs. Then, one day, a couple of them treated him with overt rudeness, and he, astonished out of his caution, replied to them in kind. Suddenly, he could hardly tell why or how, they were all enemies of his. They closed their office doors to him; even their clerks treated him with contemptuous incivility.

This blow to his pride enraged and humiliated him, curiously enough, as no other misadventure of his life had done.

Louisa remembered vividly the description he had given to her, at the time, of this affair. She had hardly understood why it should disturb him so profoundly: to her mind, these men had done nothing so monstrous after all. But to him, their offense swallowed up all the other indignities suffered during the years of his Ishmaelitish wanderings. A sombre lust for vengeance upon them took root in his very soul. He hated nobody else as he hated them. How often she had heard him swear, in solemn vibrating tones, that to the day of his death his most sacred ambition should be their punishment, their abasement in the dust and mire!

And now, all at once, as she looked up at him, where he leant against the mantel, these vagabond memories of hers took point and shape. It was about these very men that he was talking.

“And think of it!” he was saying, impressively. “It's magnificent enough for me to make this great hit—but I don't count it as anything at all by comparison with the fact that I make it at their expense. You remember the fellows I told you about?” he asked abruptly, deferring to the confused look on her face.

“Yes—you make it out of them,” she repeated, in an uncertain voice. It occurred to her that she must have been almost asleep. “But did I miss anything? Have you been telling what it is that you have made?”

“No—that you shall have in good time. You don't seem to realize it, Louisa. I can hardly realize it myself. I am actually a very rich man. I can't tell how much I've got—in fact, it can be almost as much as I like—half a million pounds, I suppose, at the start, if I want to make it that much. Yes—it takes the breath away, doesn't it? But best of all—a thousand times best of all—practically every dollar of it comes out of those Kaffir swine—the very men that tried to rob me, and that have been trying to ruin me ever since. I tell you what I wish, Louise—I wish to God there could only be time enough, and I'd take it all in half-sovereigns—two millions of them, or three millions—and just untwist every coin, one by one, out from among their heart-strings. Oh—but it'll be all right as it is. It's enough to make a man feel religious—to think how those thieves are going to suffer.”

“Well” she said, slowly after reflection, “it all rather frightens me.”

As if the chill in the air of the cheerless room had suddenly accentuated itself, she arose, took a match-box from the mantel, and, stooping, lit the fire.

He looked down at the tall, black-clad figure, bent in stiff awkwardness over the smoking grate, and his eyes softened. Then he took fresh note of the room—the faded, threadbare carpet, the sparse old furniture that had seemed ugly to even his uninformed boyish taste, the dingy walls and begrimed low ceiling—all pathetic symbols of the bleak life to which she had been condemned.

“Frightens you?” he queried, with a kind of jovial tenderness, as she got to her feet; “frightens you, eh? Why, within a month's time, old lady, you'll be riding in the Park in your own carriage, with niggers folding their arms up behind, and you'll be taking it all as easy and as natural as if you'd been born in a barouche.”

He added, in response to the enquiry of her lifted brows: “Barouche? That's what we'd call in England a landau.”

She stood with a foot upon the fender, her tired, passive face inclined meditatively, her rusty old black gown drawn back by one hand from the snapping sparks. “No,” she said, slowly, joyless resignation mingling with pride in her voice. “I was born here over the shop.”

“Well, good God! so was I,” he commented, lustily. “But that's no reason why I shouldn't wind up in Park Lane—or you either.”

She had nothing to say to this, apparently. After a little, she seated herself again, drawing her chair closer to the hearth. “It's years since I've lit this fire before the first of November,” she remarked, with the air of defending the action to herself.

“Oh, we're celebrating,” he said, rubbing his hands over the reluctant blaze. “Everything goes, tonight!”

Her face, as she looked up at him, betrayed the bewilderment of her mind. “You set out to tell me what it was all about,” she reminded him. “You see I'm completely in the dark. I only hear you say that you've made a great fortune. That's all I know. Or perhaps you've told me as much as you care to.”

“Why, not at all,” he reassured her, pulling his own chair toward him with his foot, and sprawling into it with a grunt of relief. “If you'll draw me a glass of that beer of yours, I'll tell you all about it. It's not a thing for everybody to know, not to be breathed to a human being, for that matter—but you'll enjoy it, and it'll be safe enough with you.”

As she rose, and moved toward a door, he called merrily after her: “No more beer when that keg runs dry, you know. Nothing but champagne!”

CHAPTER III

THORPE took a long, thoughtful pull at the beer his sister brought him.

“Ah, I didn't know I was so thirsty,” he said, when he put the glass down. “Truth is—I've lost track of myself altogether since—since the big thing happened. I seem to be somebody else—a comparative stranger, so to speak. I've got to get acquainted with myself, all over again. You can't imagine what an extraordinary feeling it is—this being hit every few minutes with the recollection that you're worth half a million. It's like being struck over the head. It knocks you down. There are such thousands of things to do—you dance about, all of a flutter. You don't know where to begin.”

“Begin where you left off,” suggested Louisa. “You were going to tell me how—how 'the big thing' happened. You're always coming to it—and never getting any further.”

Nodding comprehension of the rebuke's justification, he plunged forthwith into the tale.

“You remember my telling you at the time how I got my Board together. I'm speaking now of the present Company—after I'd decided to be my own promoter, and have at least some kind of 'a look-in' for my money. There wasn't much money left, by the way; it was considerably under three thousand. But I come to that later. First there was the Board. Here was where that Lord Plowden that I told you about—the man that came over on the ship with me—came in. I went to him. I—God! I was desperate—but I hadn't much of an idea he'd consent. But he did! He listened to me, and I told him how I'd been robbed, and how the Syndicate would have cut my throat if I hadn't pulled away,—and he said, 'Why, yes, I'll go on your Board.' Then I told him more about it, and presently he said he'd get me another man of title—a sky-scraper of a title too—to be my Chairman. That's the Marquis of Chaldon, a tremendous diplomatic swell, you know, Ambassador at Vienna in his time, and Lord Lieutenant and all sorts of things, but willing to gather in his five hundred a year, all the same.”

“Do you mean that YOU pay HIM five hundred pounds a year?” asked the sister.

“Yes, I've got a live Markiss who works for me at ten quid a week, and a few extras. The other Directors get three hundred. This Lord Plowden is one of them—but I'll tell you more about him later on. Then there's Watkin, he's a small accountant Finsbury way; and Davidson, he's a wine-merchant who used to belong to a big firm in Dundee, but gets along the best way he can on a very dicky business here in London, now. And then there's General Kervick, awfully well-connected old chap, they say, but I guess he needs all he can get. He's started wearing his fur-coat already. Well, that's my Board. I couldn't join it, of course, till after allotment—that's because I'm the vendor, as they call it—but that hasn't interfered at all with my running the whole show. The Board doesn't really count, you know. It only does what I want it to do. It's just a form that costs me seventeen hundred a year, that's all.”

“Seventeen hundred a year,” she repeated, mechanically.

“Well, then we got out the prospectus, d'ye see. Or first, there were other things to be done. I saw that a good broker's name counted for a lot on a prospectus. I picked out one that I'd heard was reasonable—it'd been a splendid name if I could have got it—but he calmly said his price was two thousand pounds, all cash down—and I came away. Finally I got a fellow who hadn't done much of anything yet, and so wasn't so stiff about his figure. He agreed to take 500 pounds cash, and 2,000 in shares. It was God's luck that I hit on him, for he turned out, at the pinch, to be the one man in a million for me. But I'll tell you about him later. He's the Broker, mind; you mustn't forget him. Well, then, he and I got a Solicitor—he took 200 pounds cash, but he had to have 2,000 shares—and the firm of Auditors—they were 100 pounds cash and 1,000 shares. Every company has to have these people pasted on to it, by law. Oh yes, and then you must have your Bankers. You don't pay them anything, though, thank God! Well, then, there was the machinery complete, all ready to start. I took a handsome set of offices, and furnished them up to the nines—but that I was able to do pretty well on credit. You see, ready money was getting short.

“And now came the biggest pull of all. There was the press to be worked.”

He spoke as if there were no other papers in London but the financial journals.

“I didn't sleep much while that was being fixed up. You've got no more idea of what the press means, Louisa, than you have of—of a coil of snakes thawing out hungry in the spring. Why, if one blackmailer came to me, I swear a hundred did. They scared the life out of me, the first month or so. And then there's a swarm of advertising agents, who say they can keep these blackmailers off, if you'll make it worth their while. But they all wanted too much money for me—and for a while I was at my wits' ends. At last I got a fellow—he's not behaved so badly, all things considered—who had some sporting blood in his veins, and he was willing to do the whole thing for 5,000 pounds, if I could pay 1,500 pounds down, and the rest in shares. But that was just what I couldn't do, you see, so finally he took 1,000 pounds down and 5,000 in shares—and as I say he's done it tolerably well. There was one editor that I had to square personally—that is to say, 100 pounds cash—it had to be in sovereigns, for notes could be traced—and a call of 2,000 shares at par,—he's the boss pirate that everybody has to square—and of course there were odd ten-pound notes here and there, but as a rule I just opened the door and fired the black-mailers out. The moment a fellow came in, and handed me his card, and said he had proofs of two kinds of articles in his pocket, one praising me, one damning me, I told him to go and see my advertising agent, and if he wouldn't do that, then to go to hell. That's the way you've got to talk in the City," he added, as if in apologetic explanation.

Louisa looked impassively at her brother. "Oh, I've heard the expression as far west as the Strand," she remarked.

"Well, then came the issue. That was last Saturday. You saw the prospectus in Saturday morning's papers, and in the weeklies. The list was to be kept open, it said, till Wednesday morning—that was yesterday. That is to say, during all that time, people could apply for shares."

"Which they didn't do—according to your account," the sister suggested, dryly.

Thorpe passed his fingers through his roughened hair, and eyed her with a momentary quizzical gleam in his eye. Then he became serious again. The recollection of what he was now to narrate brought a frown to his brows.

"On Tuesday afternoon," he began, with portentous deliberation—"Or no, first I must explain something. You see, in bringing out a company, you can't put up too stout a bluff. I mean, you've got to behave as if you were rolling in wealth—as if everything was coming your way, and fortunes were to be made by fastening to you. I don't know that it often fools anybody very much, but it's part of the game, and you must play it. Well, accordingly, my Broker goes on 'change Saturday morning, and has his jobber shout out that he'll buy 'Rubber Consols'—that's what our shares are called on the street—at an eighth premium; that is to say, he offered to buy for twenty-two-and-six what we were offering to the public for twenty shillings. Of course, you see, the object of that was to create the impression that there was a regular God-almighty rush for our shares. As I say, I don't know whether that ever fooled anybody—but at least there was the chance that it might start up some dealing in the shares—and all those things help. Besides, you got the sales noticed in the papers, and that might start up applications from the public. Well, the Broker bought 1,000 shares this way on Saturday. On Monday, when it might still be possible to change the luck, he bought 3,500 more, still at that premium of an eighth. He bought some Tuesday morning too—say 4,000. Well, now, keep those figures in your head, and keep an eye on the Broker. He's worth watching—as you'll see."

"What's his name?" asked the sister, with an accession of alertness in her face. "You call him 'Broker'—and that doesn't mean anything to me. They're all brokers, aren't they?"

"Semple—Colin Semple, that's his name. He's a young Scotchman—father's a Presbyterian minister. He's a little, insignificant runt of a chap to look at—but I learned a long time ago not to judge a singed cat by his looks. However—where was I?"

"You were going to tell about Tuesday afternoon, weren't you?"

He nodded gravely, and straightened himself, drawing a long breath in preparation for the dramatic recital before him. "On Tuesday afternoon," he began again, with impressive slowness, "I was walking on Throgmorton Street, about four o'clock. It was raining a little—it had been raining on and off all day—a miserable, rotten sort of a day, with greasy mud everywhere, and everybody poking umbrellas into you. I was out walking because I'd 'a' cut my throat if I'd tried to stay in the office another ten minutes. All that day I hadn't eaten anything. I hadn't slept worth speaking of for three nights. The whole game was up for me. I was worse than ruined. I had half a crown in my pocket. I had ten or twelve pounds in the bank—and they wouldn't let me overdraw a farthing. I tell you, I was just plumb busted.

"There came along in the gutter a sandwich-man. I'd seen the cuss before during the day, walking up and down near my offices. I took notice of him, because he was the raggedest, dirtiest, most forlorn-looking cripple you ever saw in your life. Now I read what was on his boards. It was the bill of a paper that I had refused to be bled by, and there it was in big letters: 'The Rubber Bubble Burst!' 'Thorpe's Audacity Punished!' Those were the words. I can see them with my eyes shut. I stood there, looking at the fellow, and I suppose there was something in the way I looked, for he stopped too. Of course, he didn't know me from Adam, but all the same, I'm damned if he didn't wink his eye at me—as if we two had a joke between us. And at that I burst out laughing—I simply roared with laughter, like a boy at a pantomime—and I took that last half-crown out of my pocket, and I gave it to the sandwich-man. God! you should have seen his face."

"I don't particularly mind, Joel," said his sister, "but I never heard you swear so much before."

"Oh, what the—what the deuce!" he protested, impatiently. "Don't interrupt me now! Well, I went on down the street. The members of the Stock Exchange were coming out of 'the house,' and making up little groups on the pavement. They do business inside, you know, until closing time—this day it happened to be four o'clock—and then they come out and deal in the street with one another, with the kerb-stone mob, who are not allowed inside, standing round to watch the thing. I came along into the thick of these fellows; they were yelling out all sorts of things—'East Rands,' 'Oroyas,' 'Lake View Centrals,' and what not, but these went in one ear and out the other. If there ever was a man with no stomach for the market it was me. But then someone roared out:

"'At seven-eighths, sell Rubber Consols! Sell five hundred Rubber at seven-eighths! Sell five hundred at three-quarters! At three-quarters you have 'em! Rubber Consols! Sell a thou. at three-quarters!'

"This thing went into my brain like a live coal. I stopped and looked up at the fellow—and by God, it was one of the men I've been talking about—one of those Kaffir scoundrels. I wish I was better at remembering names—but I knew his face. There were some of the others around him, and they laughed at me, and he laughed at me. Oh, they had a heap of fun out of me—for a minute or two. Pretty good fun, too! I guess they'll remember it quite a while."

"Go on!" Louisa adjured him. The obvious proximity of the dramatic climax drew her forward in her chair, and brought a glow of expectation to her eyes.

“I got myself away from that crowd somehow—I think I was afraid if I stayed I'd strangle the one who was shouting on the steps—and I went toward my office. But when I got to the door, I didn't have the courage to go in. I'd furnished it better, I suppose, than any other office in Austin Friars, and I had a kind of feeling that the sight of those carpets, and oak-tables and desks, and brass-railings and so on would make me sick. I owed for 'em all, bear in mind——”

“But—Joel,” the sister interposed. “One thing I don't understand. How many people had applied for shares? You haven't mentioned that.”

A fleeting smile lighted up the saturnine gloom of his present mood. “It was hardly worth mentioning,” he answered, with bitter mirth. “Between five and six thousand shares were subscribed, all told. I think the withdrawals by telegraph brought it down to practically five thousand. We offered a hundred thousand, you know.—But let me go on with my story. I stood there, in front of our street-door, in a kind of trance. The words of that Jew—'Sell Rubber Consols at three-quarters!'—buzzed inside my head as if they would burst it open. I turned—and I happened to see my Broker—the Scotchman, Semple, you know—coming along toward me. Right at that minute, like a flash, something dawned on me. In less than a second, I saw the whole damned rotten outfit turned upside down, with me on top. I made a jump, and ran to meet Semple.

“'How many shares of ours have you bought?' I asked him, with a grip tight on his arm.

“The little chap was looking mighty sick. He figured up in his mind. 'I'm afraid it's eight thousand five hundred, all told,' he said, in a sort of Presbyterian whimper.

“'Well—how would these gentlemen go about it to deliver their goods—that is, supposing we got a settlement?'

“I asked him this, and kept my eye on his face. He looked puzzled for a minute. Then he put out his lip. Then he shot me a glance as sharp as a razor, and we looked into one another's eyes.

“'They were shouting them out to me at three-quarters, a minute ago,' I told him.

“He was onto the game like lightning. 'Wait for me in the office,' he whispered. 'We'll go nap on this!'

“With that he was off like a streak. He stopped running just before he got to the corner, though, and began walking slowly, sauntering along, you know, as if his mind was on nothing but second-hand books. I watched him out of sight—and then I went back, and up to the offices. The furniture didn't scare me a bit this time. Why, I stopped and felt of the brass-railing just outside the Board Room, and I said to myself—'Pshaw! We could have you of solid gold, if we wanted to.'”

He paused here, and regarded his sister with what she felt was intended to be a significant look. She shrank from the confession that its meaning was Greek to her. “Well—and what next?” she asked, guardedly.

“Semple came back in twenty minutes or so—and the next morning he was at it again—and what with him and his jobber, by George, on the quiet, they picked up nearly eighteen thousand of our shares. Some they paid fifteen shillings for, some they got at twelve-and-six and even ten. That doesn't matter; it's of no more importance than the coppers you give to crossing-sweepers. The thing was to get the shares—and by God we've got them! Twenty-six thousand two hundred shares, that's what we've got. Now, do you see what that means?”

“Why yes,” she answered, with a faint-hearted assumption of confidence. “Of course, you know the property is so good that you'll make a profit on the shares you've bought far below their value. But I don't think I quite see——”

He interrupted her with an outburst of loud laughter. “Don't think you quite see?” he gurgled at her, with tears of pleasure in his eye. “Why, you dummy, you haven't got the faintest glimmer of a notion of what it's all about. The value of the property's got nothing in the world to do with it. That's neither here nor there. If there wasn't any such property in existence, it would be just the same.”

He had compassion upon her blank countenance, at this, and explained more gently: “Why, don't you see, Lou, it's this way. This is what has happened. We've got what's called a corner on the bears. They're caught short, and we can squeeze them to our hearts' content. What—you don't understand now? Why, see here! These fellows who've sold twenty-six thousand of our shares—they haven't got them to sell, and they can't get them. That is the point—they can't get them for love nor money—they must pay me my own price for them, or be ruined men. The moment they realize the situation, they will begin offering a premium for Rubber Consols. The price of a one-pound share will be two pounds, then four—six—ten—twenty—thirty—whatever I want to drive it to.”

Louisa stared up at him with wide open eyes. It seemed to her that she understood now. It was very exciting.

“You see,” he went on, taking approving note of the new light of comprehension in her glance, “we did something that Tuesday afternoon beside buy up these shares. Semple rushed off to his office, and he and his clerks got up a lot of dummy applications for shares, made out in all the different names they could be safe in using, and they put these into the bank with the application money—Semple found that—and next day he went and saw the advertising agent and the solicitor and the auditors—and got them to pool the shares that I've promised to give them. A pool? That means they agree to transfer their shares to me as trustee, and let me deal with them as I like—of course to their advantage. In any case, their shares are vendor's shares, and couldn't be dealt with in this transaction. So you see the thing is hermetically sealed. Nobody can get a share except from me, and at my price. But these fellows that have sold them—they've got to have them, don't you see. They had their little temporary joke with me on the street that afternoon—and now they must walk up to the captain's office and settle. They've got to pay me at least half a million pounds for that few minutes' fun of theirs. I may make it a good deal more; I don't know yet.”

“Oh, Joel!” she groaned at him, in awed stupefaction. His rather languid indecision as to whether half a million was going to be enough, impressed her more powerfully than had any detail of his narrative.

In a few comprehensive sentences he finished up for her what there was to tell. “This afternoon my Board met to allot the shares. They saw the applications, amounting in all to over ninety thousand shares. It took their breath away—they had heard that things were going quite the other way with us. They were so tickled that they asked no questions The allotment went through like a greased pig. About 5,000 shares went to those who had actually applied for them, and 88,000 were solemnly given to the dummy applicants. Of course, there wasn't a whisper about these dummies. Nobody winked so much as an eyelash. But I've found since that one of the directors—that Lord Plowden I told you about—was onto the thing all the while. But he's all right. Everybody's all right. Of course the dummies' shares still stand in their names—on paper—but in reality I've got them all in my safe—in my pocket you might say. They are really mine, you understand. So now there's nothing for us to do but to apply to the Stock Exchange for a special settlement date, and meanwhile lie quiet and watch the Jews stew in their own juice. Or fry in their own fat, eh? That's better.”

“But,” she commented slowly, “you say there are no shares to be bought—and yet as I understand it, there are those five thousand that were sent out to the people who really applied.”

“Bravo, Lou!” he answered her jovially. “You actually do understand the thing. You've put your finger straight on the point. It is true that those shares are out against us—or might be turned against us if they could be bought up. But in reality, they don't count at all. In the first place, you see, they're scattered about among small holders, country clergymen and old maids on an annuity and so on—all over the country. Even if these people were all traced, and hunted up, suppose it was worth the trouble and expense, they wouldn't sell. The bigger the price they were offered, the more mulish they would be about holding. That's always the way with them. But even if they did all sell, their five thousand would be a mere drop in the bucket. There would be over twenty thousand others to be accounted for. That would be quite enough for my purposes. Oh, I figured all that out very carefully. My own first notion was to have the dummies apply for the whole hundred thousand, and even a little over. Then, you see, we might have allotted everything to the dummies, and sent back the money and applications of the genuine ones. But that would have been rather hard to manage with the Board. The Markiss would have said that the returns ought to be made pro rata—that is, giving everybody a part of what they applied for—and that would have mixed everything up. And then, too, if anybody suspected anything, why the Stock Exchange Committee would refuse us a special settlement—and, of course, without that the whole transaction is moonshine. It was far too risky, and we didn't send back a penny.”

“It's all pretty risky, I should think,” she declared as she rose. “I should think you'd lie awake more than ever now—now that you've built your hopes so high and it'd be so awful to have them come to nothing.”

He smilingly shook his head. “No, it can no more fail than that gas can fail to burn when you put a light to it. It's all absolute. My half-million is as right as if it were lying to my credit in the Bank of England. Oh, that reminds me,” he went on in a slightly altered tone—“it's damned comical, but I've got to ask you for a little money. I've only got about seven pounds at my bank, and just at the minute it would give me away fearfully to let Semple know I was hard up. Of course he'd let me have anything I wanted—but, you can see—I don't like to ask him just at the moment.”

She hesitated visibly, and scanned his face with a wistful gaze. “You're quite sure, Joel?”—she began—“and you haven't told me—how long will it be before you come into some of this money?”

“Well,”—he in turn paused over his words—“well, I suppose that by next week things will be in such shape that my bank will see I'm good for an overdraft. Oh heavens, yes! there'll be a hundred ways of touching some ready. But if you've got twenty or thirty pounds handy just now—I tell you what I'll do, Lou. I'll give you a three months bill, paying one hundred pounds for every sovereign you let me have now. Come, old lady: you don't get such interest every day, I'll bet.”

“I don't want any interest from you, Joel,” she replied, simply. “If you're sure I can have it back before Christmas, I think I can manage thirty pounds. It will do in the morning, I suppose?”

He nodded an amused affirmative. “Why—you don't imagine, do you,” he said, “that all this gold is to rain down, and none of it hit you? Interest? Why of course you'll get interest—and capital thrown in. What did you suppose?”

“I don't ask anything for myself,” she made answer, with a note of resolution in her voice. “Of course if you like to do things for the children, it won't be me who'll stand in their light. They've been spoiled for my kind of life as it is.”

“I'll do things for everybody,” he affirmed roundly. “Let's see—how old is Alfred?”

“He'll be twenty in May—and Julia is fourteen months older than he is.”

“Gad!” was Thorpe's meditative comment. “How they shoot up! Why I was thinking she was a little girl.” “She never will be tall, I'm afraid,” said the literal mother. “She favours her father's family. But Alfred is more of a Thorpe. I'm sorry you missed seeing them last summer—but of course they didn't stop long with me. This was no place for them—and they had a good many invitations to visit schoolfellows and friends in the country. Alfred reminds me very much of what you were at his age: he's got the same good opinion of himself, too—and he's not a bit fonder of hard work.”

“There's one mighty big difference between us, though,” remarked Thorpe. “He won't start with his nose held down to the grindstone by an old father hard as nails. He'll start like a gentleman—the nephew of a rich man.”

“I'm almost afraid to have such notions put in his head,” she replied, with visible apprehension. “You mustn't encourage him to build too high hopes, Joel. It's speculation, you know—and anything might happen to you. And then—you may marry, and have sons of your own.”

He lifted his brows swiftly—as if the thought were new to his mind. A slow smile stole into the little wrinkles about his eyes. He opened his lips as if to speak, and then closed them again.

“Well,” he said at last, abruptly straightening himself, and casting an eye about for his coat and hat. “I'll be round in the morning—on my way to the City. Good-bye till then.”

CHAPTER IV

IN Charing Cross station, the next afternoon, Mr. Thorpe discovered by the big clock overhead that he had arrived fully ten minutes too soon. This deviation from his deeply-rooted habit of catching trains at the last possible moment did not take him by surprise. He smiled dryly, and nodded to the illuminated dial, as if they shared the secret of some quaint novelty. This getting to the station ahead of time was of a piece with what had been happening all day—merely one more token of the general upheaval in the routine of his life.

From early morning he had been acutely conscious of the feeling that his old manners and usages and methods of thought—the thousand familiar things that made up the Thorpe he had been—were becoming strange to him. They fitted him no longer; they began to fall away from him. Now, as he stood here on the bustling platform, it was as if they had all disappeared—been left somewhere behind him outside the station. With the two large bags which the porter was looking after—both of a quite disconcerting freshness of aspect—and the new overcoat and shining hat, he seemed to himself a new kind of being, embarked upon a voyage of discovery in the unknown.

Even his face was new. A sudden and irresistible impulse had led him to the barber-shop in his hotel at the outset; he could not wait till after breakfast to have his beard removed. The result, when he beheld it in the mirror, had not been altogether reassuring. The over-long, thin, tawny moustache which survived the razor assumed an undue prominence; the jaw and chin, revealed now for the first time in perhaps a dozen years, seemed of a sickly colour, and, in some inexplicable way, misshapen. Many times during the day, at his office, at the restaurant where he lunched, at various outfitters' shops which he had visited, he had pursued the task of getting reconciled to this novel visage in the looking-glass. The little mirrors in the hansom cabs had helped him most in this endeavour. Each returned to him an image so different from all the others—some cadaverous, some bloated, but each with a spontaneous distortion of its own—that it had become possible for him to strike an average tolerable to himself, and to believe in it.

His sister had recognized him upon the instant, when he entered the old book-shop to get the money promised overnight, but in the City his own clerks had not known him at first. There was in this an inspiring implication that he had not so much changed his appearance as revived his youth. The consciousness that he was in reality still a young man spread over his mind afresh, and this time he felt that it was effacing all earlier impressions. Why, when he thought of it, the delight he had had during the day in buying new shirts and handkerchiefs and embroidered braces, in looking over the various stocks of razors, toilet articles, studs and sleeve-links, and the like, and telling the gratified tradesmen to give him the best of everything—this delight had been distinctively boyish. He doubted, indeed, if any mere youth could have risen to the heights of tender satisfaction from which he reflected upon the contents of his portmanteaus. To apprehend their full value one must have been without them for such a weary time! He had this wonderful advantage—that he supplemented the fresh-hearted joy of the youth in nice things, with the adult man's knowledge of how bald existence could be without them. It was worth having lived all those forty obscure and mostly unpleasant years, for this one privilege now of being able to appreciate to the uttermost the touch of double-silk underwear.

It was an undoubted pity that there had not been time to go to a good tailor. The suit he had on was right enough for ordinary purposes, and his evening-clothes were as good as new, but the thought of a costume for shooting harassed his mind. He had brought along with him, for this eventful visit, an old Mexican outfit of yellowish-grey cloth and leather, much the worse for rough wear, but saved from the disreputable by its suggestion of picturesque experiences in a strange and romantic country. At least it had seemed to him, in the morning, when he had packed it, to be secure in this salvation. Uneasy doubts on the subject had soon risen, however, and they had increased in volume and poignancy as his conceptions of a wardrobe expanded in the course of the day's investigations and purchases. He had reached the point now of hoping that it would rain bitterly on the morrow.

It was doubly important to keep a close look-out for Lord Plowden, since he did not know the name of the station they were to book for, and time was getting short. He dwelt with some annoyance upon his oversight in this matter, as his watchful glance ranged from one entrance to another. He would have liked to buy the tickets himself, and have everything in readiness on the arrival of his host. As it was, he could not even tell the porter how his luggage was to be labelled, and there was now less than two minutes! He moved forward briskly, with the thought of intercepting his friend at the front of the station; then halted, and went back, upon the recollection that while he was going out one way, Plowden might come in by the other. The seconds, as they passed now, became severally painful to his nerves. The ringing of a bell somewhere beyond the barrier provoked within him an impulse to tearful profanity.

Then suddenly everything was all right. A smooth-faced, civilly-spoken young man came up, touched his hat, and asked: “Will you kindly show me which is your luggage, sir?”

Thorpe, even while wondering what business of his it was, indicated the glaringly new bags—and then only half repressed a cry of pleasure at discovering that Lord Plowden stood beside him.

“It's all right; my man will look out for your things,” said the latter, as they shook hands. “We will go and get our places.”

The fat policeman at the gate touched his helmet. A lean, elderly man in a sort of guard's uniform hobbled obsequiously before them down the platform, opened to them a first-class compartment with a low bow and a deprecatory wave of the hand, and then impressively locked the door upon them. “The engine will be the other way, my Lord, after you leave Cannon Street,” he remarked through the open window, with earnest deference. “Are there any of your bags that you want in the compartment with you?”

Plowden had nodded to the first remark. He shook his head at the second. The elderly man at this, with still another bow, flapped out a green flag which he had been holding furled behind his back, and extended it at arm's length. The train began slowly to move. Mr. Thorpe reflected to himself that the peerage was by no means so played-out an institution as some people imagined.

“Ho-ho!” the younger man sighed a yawn, as he tossed his hat into the rack above his head. “We shall both be the better for some pure air. London quite does me up. And you—you've been sticking at it months on end, haven't you? You look rather fagged—or at all events you did yesterday. You've smartened yourself so—without your beard—that I can't say I'd notice it to-day. But I take it every sensible person is glad to get away from London.”

“Except for an odd Sunday, now and then, I haven't put my nose outside London since I landed here.” Thorpe rose as he spoke, to deposit his hat also in the rack. He noted with a kind of chagrin that his companion's was an ordinary low black bowler. “I can tell you, I SHALL be glad of the change. I would have bought the tickets,” he went on, giving words at random to the thought which he found fixed on the surface of his mind, “if I'd only known what our station was.”

Plowden waved his hand, and the gesture seemed to dismiss the subject. He took a cigar case from his pocket, and offered it to Thorpe.

“It was lucky, my not missing the train altogether,” he said, as they lighted their cigars. “I was up late last night—turned out late this morning, been late all day, somehow—couldn't catch up with the clock for the life of me. Your statement to me last night—you know it rather upset me.”

The other smiled. “Well, I guess I know something about that feeling myself. Why, I've been buzzing about today like a hen with her head cut off. But it's fun, though, aint it, eh? Just to happen to remember every once in a while, you know, that it's all true! But of course it means a thousand times more to me than it does to you.”

The train had come to a stop inside the gloomy, domed cavern of Cannon Street. Many men in silk hats crowded to and fro on the platform, and a number of them shook the handle of the locked door. There was an effect of curses in the sound of their remarks which came through the closed window. Mr. Thorpe could not quite restrain the impulse to grin at them.

“Ah, that's where you mistake,” said Plowden, contemplating the mouthful of smoke he slowly blew forth. “My dear man, you can't imagine anybody to whom it would mean more than it does to me—I hope none of those fellows have a key. They're an awful bore on this train. I almost never go by it, for that reason. Ah, thank God we're off!—But as I was saying, this thing makes a greater difference to me than you can think of. I couldn't sleep last night—I give you my word—the thing upset me so. I take it you—you have never had much money before; that is, you know from experience what poverty is?”

Thorpe nodded with eloquent gravity.

“Well—but you”—the other began, and then paused. “What I mean is,” he resumed, “you were never, at any rate, responsible to anybody but yourself. If you had only a sovereign a day, or a sovereign a week, for that matter, you could accommodate yourself to the requirements of the situation. I don't mean that you would enjoy it any more than I should—but at least it was open to you to do it, without attracting much attention. But with me placed in my ridiculous position—poverty has been the most unbearable torture one can imagine. You see, there is no way in which I can earn a penny. I had to leave the Army when I was twenty-three—the other fellows all had plenty of money to spend, and it was impossible for me to drag along with a title and an empty pocket. I daresay that I ought to have stuck to it, because it isn't nearly so bad now, but twelve years ago it was too cruel for any youngster who had any pride about him—and, of course, my father having made rather a name in the Army, that made it so much harder for me. And after that, what was there? Of course, the bar and medicine and engineering and those things were out of the question, in those days at least. The Church?—that was more so still. I had a try at politics—but you need money there as much as anywhere else—money or big family connections. I voted in practically every division for four years, and I made the rottenest speeches you ever heard of at Primrose League meetings in small places, and after all that the best thing the whips could offer me was a billet in India at four hundred a year, and even that you took in depreciated rupees. When I tried to talk about something at home, they practically laughed in my face. I had no leverage upon them whatever. They didn't care in the least whether I came up and voted or stopped at home. Their majority was ten to one just the same—yes, twenty to one. So that door was shut in my face. I've never been inside the House since—except once to show it to an American lady last summer—but when I do go again I rather fancy”—he stopped for an instant, and nodded his handsome head significantly—“I rather fancy I shall turn up on the other side.”

“I'm a Liberal myself, in English politics,” interposed Thorpe.

Plowden seemed not to perceive the connection. They had left London Bridge behind, and he put his feet up on the cushions, and leant back comfortably. “Of course there was the City,” he went on, speaking diagonally across to his companion, between leisurely intervals of absorption in his cigar. “There have been some directors' fees, no doubt, and once or twice I've come very near to what promised to be a big thing—but I never quite pulled it off. Really, without capital what can one do?—I'm curious to know—did you bring much ready money with you to England?”

“Between six and seven thousand pounds.”

“And if it's a fair question—how much of it have you got left?”

Thorpe had some momentary doubts as to whether this was a fair question, but he smothered them under the smile with which he felt impelled to answer the twinkle in Plowden's eyes. “Oh, less than a hundred,” he said, and laughed aloud.

Plowden also laughed. “By George, that's fine!” he cried. “It's splendid. There's drama in it. I felt it was like that, you know. Something told me it was your last cartridge that rang the bell. It was that that made me come to you as I did—and tell you that you were a great man, and that I wanted to enlist under you. Ah, that kind of courage is so rare! When a man has it, he can stand the world on its head.” “But I was plumb scared, all the while, myself,” Thorpe protested, genially. “Courage? I could feel it running out of my boots.”

“Ah, yes, but that's the great thing,” insisted the other. “You didn't look as if you were frightened. From all one could see, your nerve was sublime. And nothing else matters—it was sublime.”

“Curious—that thing happened to me once before,” commented Thorpe, with ruminating slowness. “It was out on the plains, years ago, and I was in pretty hard luck, and was making my way alone from Tucson north, and some cowboys held me up, and were going to make kindling wood of me, they being under the impression that I was a horse-thief they were looking after. There was five or six minutes there when my life wasn't worth a last year's bird's-nest—and I tell you, sir, I was the scaredest man that ever drew the breath of life. And then something happened to be said that put the matter right—they saw I was the wrong man—and then—why then they couldn't be polite enough to me. They half emptied their flasks down my throat, and they rode with me all the way to the next town, and there they wanted to buy everything liquid in the place for me. But what I was speaking of—do you know, those fellows got a tremendous notion of my nerve. It wasn't so much that they told me so, but they told others about it. They really thought I was game to the core—when in reality, as I tell you, I was in the deadliest funk you ever heard of.”

“That's just it,” said Plowden, “the part of you which was engaged in making mental notes of the occasion thought you were frightened; we will say that it was itself frightened. But the other part of you, the part that was transacting business, so to speak—that wasn't in the least alarmed. I fancy all born commanders are built like that. Did you ever see General Grant?”

Thorpe shook his head.

“What reminded me of him—there is an account in his Memoirs of how he felt when he first was given a command, at the beginning of the Civil War. He was looking about for the enemy, who was known to be in the vicinity, and the nearer he got to where this enemy probably was, the more he got timid and unnerved, he says, until it seemed as if cowardice were getting complete mastery of him. And then suddenly it occurred to him that very likely the enemy was just as afraid of him as he was of the enemy, and that moment his bravery all returned to him. He went in and gave the other man a terrible thrashing. It doesn't apply to your case, particularly—but I fancy that all really brave men have those inner convictions of weakness, even while they are behaving like lions. Those must have been extraordinarily interesting experiences of yours—on the plains. I wish I could have seen something of that part of America when I was there last year. Unfortunately, it didn't come my way.”

“I thought I remembered your saying you'd been West.”

Plowden smiled. “I'm afraid I did think it was West at the time. But since my return I've been warned that I mustn't call Chicago West. That was as far as I went. I had some business there, or thought I had. When my father died, that was in 1884, we found among his papers a lot of bonds of some corporation purporting to be chartered by the State of Illinois. Our solicitors wrote several letters, but they could find out nothing about them, and there the matter rested. Finally, last year, when I decided to make the trip, I recollected these old bonds, and took them with me. I thought they might at least pay my expenses. But it wasn't the least good. Nobody knew anything about them. It seems they related to something that was burned up in the Great Fire—either that, or had disappeared before that time. That fire seems to have operated like the Deluge—it cancelled everything that had happened previously. My unhappy father had a genius for that kind of investment. I shall have great pleasure in showing you tomorrow, a very picturesque and comprehensive collection of Confederate Bonds. Their face value is, as I remember it, eighty thousand dollars—that is, sixteen thousand pounds. I would entertain with joy an offer of sixteen shillings for the lot. My dear father bought them—I should not be surprised to learn that he bought them at a premium. If they ever touched a premium for a day, that is certainly the day that he would have hit upon to buy. Oh, it was too rare! Too inspired! He left nearly a hundred thousand pounds' worth of paper—that is, on its face—upon which the solicitors realized, I think it was thirteen hundred pounds. It's hard to imagine how he got them—but there were actually bonds among them issued by Kossuth's Hungarian Republic in 1848. Well—now you can see the kind of inheritance I came into, and I have a brother and sister more or less to look after, too.”

Thorpe had been listening to these details with an almost exaggerated expression of sympathy upon his face. The voice in which he spoke now betrayed, however, a certain note of incredulity.

“Yes, I see that well enough,” he remarked. “But what I don't perhaps quite understand—well, this is it. You have this place of yours in the country, and preserve game and so on—but of course I see what you mean. It's what you've been saying. What another man would think a comfortable living, is poverty to a man in your position.”

“Oh, the place,” said Plowden. “It isn't mine at all. I could never have kept it up. It belongs to my mother. It was her father's place; it has been in their family for hundreds of years. Her father, I daresay you know, was the last Earl of Hever. The title died with him. He left three daughters, who inherited his estates, and my mother, being the eldest, got the Kentish properties. Of course Hadlow House will come to me eventually, but it is hers during her lifetime. I may speak of it as my place, but that is merely a facon de parler; it isn't necessary to explain to everybody that it's my mother's. It's my home, and that's enough. It's a dear old place. I can't tell you how glad I am that you're going to see it.”

“I'm very glad, too,” said the other, with unaffected sincerity.

“All the ambitions I have in the world,” the nobleman went on, sitting upright now, and speaking with a confidential seriousness, “centre round Hadlow. That is the part of me that I'm keen about. The Plowdens are things of yesterday. My grandfather, the Chancellor, began in a very small way, and was never anything more than a clever lawyer, with a loud voice and a hard heart, and a talent for money-making and politics. He got a peerage and he left a fortune. My father, for all he was a soldier, had a mild voice and a soft heart. He gave a certain military distinction to the peerage, but he played hell-and-tommy with the fortune. And then I come: I can't be either a Chancellor or a General, and I haven't a penny to bless myself with. You can't think of a more idiotic box for a man to be in. But now—thanks to you—there comes this prospect of an immense change. If I have money at my back—at once everything is different with me. People will remember then promptly enough that I am a Hadlow, as well as a Plowden. I will make the party whips remember it, too. It won't be a Secretary's billet in India at four hundred a year that they'll offer me, but a Governorship at six thousand—that is, if I wish to leave England at all. And we'll see which set of whips are to have the honour of offering me anything. But all that is in the air. It's enough, for the moment, to realize that things have really come my way. And about that—about the success of the affair—I suppose there can be no question whatever?”

“Not the slightest,” Thorpe assured him. “Rubber Consols can go up to any figure we choose to name.”

Lord Plowden proffered the cigar case again, and once more helped himself after he had given his companion a light. Then he threw himself back against the cushions, with a long sigh of content. “I'm not going to say another word about myself,” he announced, pleasantly. “I've had more than my legitimate innings. You mustn't think that I forget for a moment the reverse of the medal. You're doing wonderful things for me. I only wish it were clearer to me what the wonderful things are that I can do for you.”

“Oh, that'll be all right,” said the other, rather vaguely.

“Perhaps it's a little early for you to have mapped out in your mind just what you want to do,” Plowden reflected aloud. “Of course it has come suddenly upon you—just as it has upon me. There are things in plenty that we've dreamed of doing, while the power to do them was a long way off. It doesn't at all follow that these are the things we shall proceed to do, when the power is actually in our hands. But have you any plans at all? Do you fancy going into Parliament, for example?”

“Yes,” answered Thorpe, meditatively. “I think I should like to go into Parliament. But that would be some way ahead. I guess I've got my plans worked out a trifle more than you think. They may not be very definite, as regards details, but their main direction I know well enough. I'm going to be an English country gentleman.”

Lord Plowden visibly winced a little at this announcement. He seemed annoyed at the consciousness that he had done so, turning abruptly first to stare out of the window, then shifting his position on the seat, and at last stealing an uneasy glance toward his companion. Apparently his tongue was at a loss for an appropriate comment.

Thorpe had lost none of these unwilling tokens of embarrassment. Plowden saw that at once, but it relieved even more than it surprised him to see also that Thorpe appeared not to mind. The older man, indeed, smiled in good-natured if somewhat ironical comprehension of the dumb-show.

“Oh, that'll be all right, too,” he said, with the evident intention of reassurance. “I can do it right enough, so far as the big things are concerned. It'll be in the little things that I'll want some steering.”

“I've already told you—you may command me to the utmost of my power,” the other declared. Upon reflection, he was disposed to be ashamed of himself. His nerves and facial muscles had been guilty of an unpardonable lapse into snobbishness—and toward a man, too, who had been capable of behaviour more distinguished in its courtesy and generosity than any he had encountered in all the “upper circles” put together. He recalled all at once, moreover, that Thorpe's “h's” were perfect—and, for some occult reason, this completed his confusion.

“My dear fellow”—he began again, confronting with verbal awkwardness the other's quizzical smile—“don't think I doubt anything about you. I know well enough that you can do anything—be anything—you like.”

Thorpe laughed softly.

“I don't think you know, though, that I'm a public-school man,” he said.

Plowden lifted his brows in unfeigned surprise. “No—I didn't know that,” he admitted, frankly.

“Yes, I'm a Paul's Pigeon,” Thorpe went on, “as they called them in my day. That's gone out now, I'm told, since they've moved to the big buildings in Hammersmith. I did very well at school, too; came out in the first fourteen. But my father wouldn't carry the thing any further. He insisted on my going into the shop when I left St. Paul's and learning the book-business. He had precisely the same kind of dynastic idea, you know, that you fellows have. His father and his grand-father had been booksellers, and he was going to hand on the tradition to me, and my son after me. That was his idea. And he thought that Paul's would help this—but that Oxford would kill it.

“Of course, he was right there—but he was wrong in supposing there was a bookseller in me. I liked the books well enough, mind you—but damn the people that came to buy them, I couldn't stand it. You stood two hours watching to see that men didn't put volumes in their pockets, and at the end of that time you'd made a profit of ninepence. While you were doing up the parcel, some fellow walked off with a book worth eighteenpence. It was too slow for me. I didn't hit it off with the old man, either. We didn't precisely quarrel, but I went off on my own hook. I hung about London for some years, trying this thing and that. Once I started a book-shop of my own—but I did no good here. Finally I turned it up altogether, and went to Australia. That was in 1882. I've been in almost every quarter of the globe since; I've known what it was to be shipwrecked in a monsoon, and I've lain down in a desert not expecting to get up again, with my belt tightened to its last hole for hunger—but I can't remember that I ever wished myself back in my father's book-shop.”

Plowden's fine eyes sparkled his appreciation of the other's mood. He was silent for a moment, then lifted his head as if something had occurred to him. “You were speaking of the plan that you should succeed to your father's business—and your son after you—you're not married, are you?”

Thorpe slowly shook his head.

“Our station is the next,” said the younger man. “It's a drive of something under two miles. You'd better light another cigar.” He added, as if upon a casual afterthought: “We can both of us think of marrying now.”

CHAPTER V

FOR the next two hours, Thorpe's thoughts were almost wholly occupied with various phases of the large subject of domestic service. He seemed suddenly to have been transported to some region populated exclusively by clean-shaven men in brown livery. One of these was holding a spirited horse outside the station, and when Lord Plowden had taken the reins, and Thorpe had gathered the rugs about his knees and feet, this menial silently associated himself with the young man who had accompanied them from town, on the back seat of the trap. With these people so close behind him, Thorpe felt that any intimate conversation was out of the question. Indeed, talk of any sort was not invited; the big horse burst forth with high, sprawling strides upon a career through the twilight, once the main road was reached, which it taxed all Plowden's energies to regulate. He kept up a continual murmuring monologue to the animal—“So—so—quiet, my pet,—so—so—easy, my beauty—-so—so”—and his wrists and gloved hands were visibly under a tremendous tension of strain, as they held their own against the rigid arched neck and mouth of steel. Thorpe kept a grip on the side of the trap, and had only a modified pleasure in the drive. The road along which they sped seemed, in the gathering dusk, uncomfortably narrow, and he speculated a good deal as to how frightened the two mutes behind him must be. But silence was such a law of their life that, though he strained his ears, he could not so much as hear them sigh or gasp.

It seemed but a very few minutes before they turned off, with but the most fleeting diminution of pace, upon a private road, which speedily developed into an avenue of trees, quite dark and apparently narrower than ever. Down this they raced precipitately, and then, coming out all at once upon an open space, swung smartly round the crescent of a gravel road, and halted before what seemed to be the door of a greenhouse. Thorpe, as he stood up in the trap, got an uncertain, general idea of a low, pale-coloured mansion in the background, with lights showing behind curtains in several widely separated windows; what he had taken to be a conservatory revealed itself now to be a glass gallery, built along the front of the central portion of this house.

A profusion of hospitable lights—tall wax-candles in brackets among the vines against the trellised wall—gave to this outlying entrance what the stranger felt to be a delightful effect. Its smooth tiled floor, comfortably bestrewn with rugs, was on a level with the path outside. There were low easy-chairs here, and a little wicker table bearing books and a lady's work-basket. Further on, giant chrysanthemum blooms were massed beneath the clusters of pale plumbago-flowers on the trellis. Directly in front, across the dozen feet of this glazed vestibule, the broad doorway of the house proper stood open—with warm lights glowing richly upon dark woods in the luxurious obscurity within.

What Thorpe noted most of all, however, was the servants who seemed to swarm everywhere. The two who had alighted from the trap had contrived somehow mysteriously to multiply themselves in the darkness. All at once there were a number of young men—at the horse's head, at the back and sides of the trap, at the first doorway, and the second, and beyond—each presenting such a smooth-faced, pallid, brown-clad replica of all the others that Thorpe knew he should never be able to tell them apart.

Lord Plowden paused for a moment under the candle-light to look at his watch. “We did it in a bit over eight minutes,” he remarked, with obvious satisfaction. “With four people and heavy roads that's not so bad—not so bad. But come inside.”

They moved forward through the wide doorway into an apartment the like of which Thorpe had not seen before. It was a large, square room, with a big staircase at the end, which separated and went off to right and left, half-way up its visible course. Its floor was of inlaid woods, old and uneven from long use, and carpeted here and there by the skins of tigers and leopards. There were many other suggestions of the chase about the room: riding boots, whips, spurs, and some stands of archaic weapons caught the eye at various points; the heads of foxes and deer peeped out on the blackened panels of the walls, from among clusters of hooks crowded with coats, hats, and mackintoshes. At the right, where a fire glowed and blazed under a huge open chimney-place, there were low chairs and divans drawn up to mark off a space for orderly domestic occupation. The irregularity of every thing outside—the great table in the centre of the hall strewn with an incongruous litter of caps, books, flasks, newspapers, gloves, tobacco-pouches; the shoes, slippers, and leggings scattered under the benches at the sides—all this self-renewing disorder of a careless household struck Thorpe with a profound surprise. It was like nothing so much as a Mexican ranch—and to find it in the ancestral home of an English nobleman, filled to overflowing with servants, amazed him.

The glances that he cast about him, however, were impassive enough. His mind was charged with the ceaseless responsibility of being astonished at nothing. A man took his hat, and helped him off with his coat. Another moved toward the staircase with his two bags.

“If you will follow Pangbourn,” said his host, indicating this second domestic, “he will look after you. You would like to go up and change now, wouldn't you? There's a fire in your room.”

Thus dismissed, he went up the stairs in the wake of his portmanteaus, taking the turning to the left, and then proceeding by a long, low passage, round more than one corner, to what he conceived to be a wing of the house. The servant ushered him into a room—and, in despite of himself, he sighed with pleasure at the sight of it. The prettiest and most charming of rooms it seemed to him to be—spacious and quaintly rambling in shape, with a delicately-figured chintz repeating the dainty effects of the walls upon the curtains and carpet and bed-hangings and chair-covers, and with a bright fire in the grate throwing its warm, cozy glow over everything. He looked at the pictures on the walls, at the photographs and little ornaments on the writing desk, and the high posts and silken coverlet of the big bed, and, secure in the averted face of the servant, smiled richly to himself.

This servant, kneeling, had unstrapped and opened the new bags. Thorpe looked to see him quit the room, this task accomplished, and was conscious of something like dismay at the discovery that he intended to unpack them as well. Pangbourn began gravely to unwrap one paper parcel after another and to assort their contents in little heaps on the sofa beside him. He did it deftly, imperturbably, as if all the gentlemen he had ever seen carried their belongings in packages done up by tradesmen.

Thorpe's impulse to bid him desist framed itself in words on the tip of his tongue—but he did not utter these words. After circling idly, hands in pockets, about the man and the bags for a little time, he invented something which it seemed better for him to say.

“I don't know what you'll be able to make of those things,” he remarked, casually. “My man has been buying them today—and I don't know what he mayn't have forgotten. My whole outfit of that sort of thing went astray or was stolen at some station or other—the first part of the week—I think it must have been Leeds.”

“Yes, sir,” said Pangbourn, without emotion. “They're very careless, sir.”

He went on impassively, shaking out the black garments and spreading them on the bed, laying out a shirt and tie beside them, and arranging the razors, strop, and brushes on the dressing-table. He seemed to foresee everything—for there was not an instant's hesitation in the clock-like assiduity of his movements, as he bestowed handkerchiefs, in one drawer, socks in another, hung pyjamas before the fire, and set the patent-leather pumps against the fender. Even the old Mexican shooting-suit seemed in no way to disconcert him. He drew forth its constituent elements as with a practised hand; when he had hung them up, sombrero and all, in the wardrobe against the wall, they had the trick of making that venerable oaken receptacle look as if it had been fashioned expressly for them.

Thorpe's earlier uneasiness quite lost itself in his admiration for Pangbourn's resourceful dexterity. The delighted thought that now he would be needing a man like this for himself crossed his mind. Conceivably he might even get this identical Pangbourn—treasure though he were. Money could command everything on this broad globe—and why not Pangbourn? He tentatively felt of the coins in his pocket, as it became apparent that the man's task was nearing completion—and then frowned at himself for forgetting that these things were always reserved for the end of a visit.

“Will you dress now, sir?” asked Pangbourn. His soft, distinct enunciation conveyed the suggestion of centuries of training.

“Eh?” said Thorpe, finding himself for the moment behind the other's thought.

“Shall you require me any further, sir?” the man reframed the question, deferentially.

“Oh! Oh—no,” replied Thorpe. “No—I'll get along all right.”

Left to himself, he began hurriedly the task of shaving and dressing. The candles on either side of the thick, bevelled swinging mirror presented a somewhat embarrassing contrast to the electric light he was used to—but upon second thought he preferred this restrained aristocratic glimmer.

He had completed his toilet, and was standing at the bay-window, with his shoulder holding back the edge of the curtain, looking out upon the darkened lawn and wondering whether he ought to go downstairs or wait for someone to summon him, when he heard a knock at his door. Before he could answer, the door opened, and he made out in the candle-and firelight that it was Lord Plowden who had come in. He stepped forward to meet his host who, clad now in evening-clothes, was smoking a cigarette.

“Have they looked after you all right?” said Plowden, nonchalantly. “Have a cigarette before we go down? Light it by the candle. They never will keep matches in a bedroom.”

He seated himself in an easy-chair before the fire, as he spoke, and stretched out his shining slippers toward the grate. “I thought I'd tell you before we went down”—he went on, as Thorpe, with an elbow on the mantel, looked down at his handsome head—“my sister has a couple of ladies visiting her. One of them I think you know. Do you remember on shipboard a Miss Madden—an American, you know—very tall and fine, with bright red hair—rather remarkable hair it was?”

“I remember the lady,” said Thorpe, upon reflection, “but we didn't meet.” He could not wholly divest his tone of the hint that in those days it by no means followed that because he saw ladies it was open to him to know them.

Lord Plowden smiled a little. “Oh, you'll like her. She's great fun—if she's in the mood. My mother and sister—I had them call on her in London last spring—and they took a great fancy to her. She's got no end of money, you know—at least a million and a half—dollars, unfortunately. Her parents were Irish—her father made his pile in the waggon business, I believe—but she's as American as if they'd crossed over in—what was it, the 'Sunflower'?—no, the 'Mayflower.' Marvelous country for assimilation, that America is! You remember what I told you—it's put such a mark on you that I should never have dreamt you were English.”

Thorpe observed his companion, through a blue haze of smoke, in silence. This insistence upon the un-English nature of the effect he produced was not altogether grateful to his ears.

“The other one,” continued Plowden, “is Lady Cressage. You'll be interested in her—because a few years ago she was supposed to be the most beautiful woman in London. She married a shocking bounder—he would have been Duke of Glastonbury, though, if he had lived—but he was drowned, and she was left poor as a church mouse. Oh! by the way!” he started up, with a gleam of aroused interest on his face—“it didn't in the least occur to me. Why, she's a daughter of our General Kervick. How did he get on the Board, by the way? Where did you pick him up?”

Thorpe bent his brows in puzzled lines. “Why, you introduced me to him yourself, didn't you?” he asked, slowly.

Plowden seemed unaffectedly surprised at the suggestion, as he turned it over in his mind. “By George! I think you're right,” he said. “I'd quite forgotten it. Of course I did. Let me see—oh yes, I reconstruct it readily enough now. Poor old chappie—he needs all he can get. He was bothering her about money—that was it, I remember now—but what an idiot I was to forget it. But what I was saying—there's no one else but my mother and sister, and my brother Balder. He's a youngster—twenty or thereabouts—and he purports to be reading for his exams for the Army. If they opened his head, though, I doubt if they'd find anything but cricket and football, unless it might be a bit of golf. Well—that's the party. I thought you might like to have a notion of them in advance. If you've finished your cigarette”—he threw his own into the grate, and rose as he spoke—“we may as well be moving along. By the way,” he concluded, as they walked toward the door, “I've an idea that we won't say anything, just at the moment, about our great coup. I should like to keep it as a little surprise—for my mother and sister, you know.”

Some two hours later, Thorpe found the leisure and the restored equanimity needful for a dispassionate survey of his surroundings. He had become temporarily detached from the group over by the fireplace in the big drawing-room and was for the first time that evening very much at his ease. It was all much simpler, upon experiment, than he had feared. He stood now in a corner of the ornate apartment, whither he had wandered in examining the pictures on the walls, and contemplated with serenity the five people whom he had left behind him. He was conscious of the conviction that when he rejoined them, it would be on a new footing of assured equality. He knew now the exact measure of everything.

The Hon. Balder Plowden—a tall, heavily-built youth, with enormous shoulders and thick, hard hands, and pale straw-coloured hair and brows and eyelashes—had amiably sauntered beside him, and was elucidating for his benefit now, in slow, halting undertones, some unfathomable mystery connected with the varying attitude of two distinct breeds of terriers toward rats. Across the room, just within reach of the flickering ruddy firelight from the hearth, the American guest, Miss Madden, was seated at the piano, playing some low and rather doleful music. Thorpe bent his head, and assumed an air of attention, but in truth he listened to neither the Honourable Balder nor the piano. His thoughts were concentrated jealously upon his own position in this novel setting. He said to himself that it was all right. Old Lady Plowden had seemed to like him from the start. The genial, if somewhat abstracted, motherliness of her welcome had been, indeed, his sheet anchor throughout the evening. She had not once failed to nod her head and smile and twinkle her little kind eyes through their spectacles at him, whenever by word or look he had addressed her. Nor did his original half-suspicion, that this was her manner to people in general, justify itself upon observation. She was civil, even excessively civil, to the other two guests, but these ladies did not get the same eager and intent smile that he could command. He reasoned it out that Plowden must have said something pleasant to his mother about him—perhaps even to the point of explaining that he was to be the architect of their fortunes—but he did not like to ascribe all her hospitable warmth to that. It was dear to him to believe that she liked him on his own merits—and he did believe it, as his softened glance rested upon her where she sat almost facing him in her padded, wicker chair—small, white-haired, rosy-cheeked, her intelligent face radiating a kind of alert placidity which somehow made him feel at home.

He had not been as much at home with the others. The Honourable Balder, of course, didn't count; nobody paid attention to him, and least of all a busy Rubber King. He gave not much more heed to the American—the tall young woman with the red hair and the million and a half of dollars. She was plainly a visitor like himself, not at all identified with the inner life of the household. He fancied, moreover, that she in no way desired to be thus identified. She seemed to carry herself with a deliberate aloofness underlying her surface amiability. Then he had spoken his few words with her, once or twice, he had got this effect of stony reserve close beneath her smile and smooth words. True, this might mean only that she felt herself out of her element, just as he did—but to him, really it did not matter what she felt. A year ago—why, yes, even a fortnight ago—the golden rumour of millions would have shone round her auburn hair in his eyes like a halo. But all that was changed. Calculated in a solidified currency, her reported fortune shrank to a mere three hundred thousand pounds. It was a respectable sum for a woman to have, no doubt, but it did nothing to quicken the cool indifference with which he considered her.

The two other young women were different. They were seated together on a sofa, so placed as regarded his point of view, that he saw only in part the shadowed profiles of the faces they turned toward the piano. Although it was not visible to him, the posture of their shoulders told him that they were listening to the music each holding the other's hand. This tacit embrace was typical in his mind of the way they hung together, these two young women. It had been forced upon his perceptions all the evening, that this fair-haired, beautiful, rather stately Lady Cressage, and the small, swarthy, round-shouldered daughter of the house, peering through her pince-nez from under unduly thick black brows, formed a party of their own. Their politeness toward him had been as identical in all its little shades of distance and reservation as if they had been governed from a single brain-centre. It would be unfair to them to assume from their manner that they disliked him, or were even unfavourably impressed by him. The finesse of that manner was far too delicate a thing to call into use such rough characterizations. It was rather their action as a unit which piqued his interest. He thought he could see that they united upon a common demeanour toward the American girl, although of course they knew her much better than they knew him. It was not even clear to him that there were not traces of this combination in their tone toward Plowden and the Honourable Balder. The bond between them had twisted in it strands of social exclusiveness, and strands of sex sympathy.

He did not analyze all this with much closeness in his thoughts, but the impressions of it were distinct enough to him. He rather enjoyed these impressions than otherwise. Women had not often interested him consecutively to any large degree, either in detail or as a whole. He had formulated, among other loose general notions of them, however, the idea that their failure to stand by one another was one of their gravest weaknesses. This proposition rose suddenly now in his mind, and claimed his attention. It became apparent to him, all at once, that his opinions about women would be henceforth invested with a new importance. He had scarcely before in his life worn evening dress in a domestic circle which included ladies—certainly never in the presence of such certificated and hall-marked ladies as these. His future, however, was to be filled with experiences of this nature. Already, after this briefest of ventures into the new life, he found fresh conceptions of the great subject springing up in his thoughts. In this matter of women sticking together, for example—here before his eyes was one of the prettiest instances of it imaginable. As he looked again at the two figures on the sofa, so markedly unlike in outward aspect, yet knit to each other in such a sisterly bond, he found the spectacle really touching.

Lady Cressage had inclined her classic profile even more toward the piano. Thorpe was not stirred at all by the music, but the spirit of it as it was reflected upon this beautiful facial outline—sensitive, high-spirited, somewhat sad withal—appealed to something in him. He moved forward cautiously, noiselessly, a dozen restricted paces, and halted again at the corner of a table. It was a relief that the Honourable Balder, though he followed along, respected now his obvious wish for silence. But neither Balder nor anyone else could guess that the music said less than nothing to his ears—that it was the face that had beckoned him to advance.

Covertly, with momentary assurances that no one observed him, he studied this face and mused upon it. The white candle-light on the shining wall beyond threw everything into a soft, uniform shadow, this side of the thread of dark tracery which outlined forehead and nose and lips and chin. It seemed to him that the eyes were closed, as in reverie; he could not be sure.

So she would have been a Duchess if her husband had lived! He said to himself that he had never seen before, or imagined, a face which belonged so indubitably beneath a tiara of strawberry leaves in diamonds. The pride and grace and composure, yes, and melancholy, of the great lady—they were all there in their supreme expression. And yet—why, she was no great lady at all. She was the daughter of his old General Kervick—the necessitous and haughtily-humble old military gentleman, with the grey moustache and the premature fur coat, who did what he was told on the Board without a question, for a pitiful three hundred a year. Yes—she was his daughter, and she also was poor. Plowden had said so.

Why had Plowden, by the way, been so keen about relieving her from her father's importunities? He must have had it very much at heart, to have invented the roundabout plan of getting the old gentleman a directorship. But no—there was nothing in that. Why, Plowden had even forgotten that it was he who suggested Kervick's name. It would have been his sister, of course, who was evidently such chums with Lady Cressage, who gave him the hint to help the General to something if he could. And when you came to think of it, these aristocrats and military men and so on, had no other notion of making money save by directorships. Clearly, that was the way of it. Plowden had remembered Kervick's name, when the chance arose to give the old boy a leg up, and then had clean forgotten the circumstance. The episode rather increased his liking for Plowden.

He glanced briefly, under the impulse of his thought, to where the peer sat, or rather sprawled, in a big low chair before the fire. He was so nearly recumbent in it, indeed, that there was nothing to be seen of him but an elbow, and two very trim legs extended to the brass fender. Thorpe's gaze reverted automatically to the face of General Kervick's daughter. He wondered if she knew about the Company, and about him, and about his ability to solidify to any extent her father's financial position. Even more, upon reflection, he wondered whether she was very fond of her father; would she be extremely grateful to one who should render him securely comfortable for life? Miss Madden rose from the piano before Thorpe noted that the music had ceased. There came from the others a soft but fervent chorus of exclamations, the sincerity and enthusiasm of which made him a little ashamed. He had evidently been deaf to something that deeply moved the rest. Even Balder made remarks which seemed to be regarded as apposite.

“What IS it?” asked Lady Cressage, with obvious feeling. “I don't know when anything has touched me so much.”

“Old Danish songs that I picked up on the quai in Paris for a franc or two,” replied Miss Madden. “I arranged and harmonized them—and, oddly enough, the result is rather Keltic, don't you think?”

“We are all of us Kelts in our welcome to music—and musicians—like this,” affirmed Lord Plowden, who had scrambled to his feet.

With sudden resolution, Thorpe moved forward and joined the conversation.

CHAPTER VI

THORPE'S life-long habit of early rising brought him downstairs next morning before anybody else in the house, apparently, was astir. At all events, he saw no one in either the hall or the glass vestibule, as he wandered about. Both doors were wide open, however, to the mild, damp morning air. He found on one of the racks a cap that was less uncomfortable than the others, and sauntered forth to look about him.

His nerves were by no means in so serene a state as his reason told him they ought to be. The disquieting impression of bad dreams hung about him. The waking hour—always an evil time for him in these latter days of anxiety—had been this morning a peculiarly depressing affair. It had seemed to him, in the first minutes of reviving consciousness, that he was a hopelessly ruined and discredited man; the illusion of disaster had been, indeed, so complete and vivid that, even now, more than an hour later, he had not shaken off its effects.

He applied his mental energies, as he strolled along the gravel paths, to the task of reassuring himself. There were still elements of chance in the game, of course, but it was easy enough, here in the daylight, to demonstrate that they had been cut down to a minimum—that it was nonsense to borrow trouble about them. He reviewed the situation in painstaking detail, and at every point it was all right, or as nearly all right as any human business could be. He scolded himself sharply for this foolish susceptibility to the intimidation of nightmares. “Look at Plowden!” he bade his dolorous spirit. “See how easy he takes things.”

It was undeniable that Lord Plowden took things very easily indeed. He had talked with eloquence and feeling about the miseries and humiliations of a peerage inadequately endowed with money, but no traces of his sufferings were visible to Thorpe's observant eye. The nobleman himself looked the very image of contented prosperity—handsome, buoyant, light-hearted, and, withal, the best-groomed man in London. And this ancestral home of his—or of his mother's, since he seemed to insist upon the distinction—where were its signs of a stinted income? The place was overrun with servants. There was a horse which covered a distance of something like two miles in eight minutes. Inside and out, Hadlow House suggested nothing but assured plenty. Yet its master told the most unvarying tales of poverty, and no doubt they were in one sense true. What he wished to fix his mind upon, and to draw strength for himself from, was the gay courage with which these Plowdens behaved as if they were rich.

The grounds at the front of the house, hemmed in by high hedges and trees from what seemed to be a public road beyond, were fairly spacious, but the sleek decorum of their arrangement, while it pleased him, was scarcely interesting. He liked better to study the house itself, which in the daylight revealed itself as his ideal of what a historic English country-house of the minor class should be.

There had been a period in his youth when architecture had attracted him greatly as offering a congenial and lucrative career. Not much remained to him now of the classifications and phraseology which he had gone to the trouble of memorizing, in that far-off time, but he still looked at buildings with a kind of professional consciousness. Hadlow House said intelligible things to him, and he was pleased with himself for understanding them. It was not new in any part, apparently, but there was nothing pretentious in its antiquity. It had never been a castle, or a fortified residence. No violent alteration in habits or needs distinguished its present occupants from its original builders. It had been planned and reared as a home for gentle people, at some not-too-remote date when it was already possible for gentle people to have homes, without fighting to defend them. One could fancy that its calm and infinitely comfortable history had never been ruffled from that day to this. He recalled having heard it mentioned the previous evening that the house stood upon the site of an old monastery. No doubt that accounted for its being built in a hollow, with the ground-floor on the absolute level of the earth outside. The monks had always chosen these low-lying sheltered spots for their cloisters. Why should they have done so? he wondered—and then came to a sudden mental stop, absorbed in a somewhat surprised contemplation of a new version of himself. He was becoming literary, historical, bookish! His mind had begun to throw open again, to abstract thoughts and musings, its long-closed doors. He had read and dreamed so much as a lad, in the old book-shop! For many years that boyhood of eager concern in the printed page had seemed to him to belong to somebody else. Now, all at once, it came back to him as his own possession; he felt that he could take up books again where he had dropped them, perhaps even with the old rapt, intent zest.

Visions rose before him of the magnificent library he would gather for himself. And it should be in no wise for show—the gross ostentation of the unlettered parvenu—but a genuine library, which should minister to his own individual culture. The thought took instant hold upon his interest. By that road, his progress to the goal of gentility would be smooth and simple. He seemed not to have reasoned it out to himself in detail before, but now, at all events, he saw his way clearly enough. Why should he be tormented with doubts and misgivings about himself, as if he had come out of the gutter?

Why indeed? He had passed through—and with credit, too—one of the great public schools of England. He had been there on a footing of perfect equality, so far as he saw, with the sons of aristocratic families or of great City potentates. And as to birth, he had behind him three generations at least of scholarly men, men who knew the contents, as well as the commercial value, of the books they handled.

His grandfather had been a man of note in his calling. The tradition of Lord Althorp's confidence in him, and of how he requited it by securing Caxton's “Golden Legend” for the library of that distinguished collector, under the very nose of his hot rival, the Duke of Marlborough, was tenderly cherished as an heirloom in the old shop. And Thorpe's father, too, though no such single achievement crowned his memory, had been the adviser and, as one might say, the friend of many notable writers and patrons of literature. The son of such forbears needed only money to be recognized by everybody as a gentleman.

On his mother's side, now that he thought of it, there was something perhaps better still than a heritage of librarians' craft and tastes. His mother's maiden name was Stormont, and he remembered well enough the solemnity with which she had always alluded to the fact, in the course of domestic discussions. Who the Stormonts were he could not recall that he had ever learned, but his mother had been very clear indeed about their superiority to the usual ruck of people. He would ask his sister whether she knew anything about them. In the meantime there was no denying that Stormont was a fine-sounding name. He reflected that it was his own middle name—and, on the instant, fancy engraved for him a card-plate on which appeared the legend—“Mr. Stormont Thorpe.”

It was an inspiration! “Joel” he had not used for so many years that now, after six months' familiarity with it on his sister's lips, he could not get accustomed to it. The colourless and non-committal style of “J. S. Thorpe,” under which he had lived so long, had been well enough for the term of his exile—the weary time of obscure toil and suspense. But now, in this sunburst of smiling fortune, when he had achieved the right to a name of distinction—here it was ready to his hand. A fleeting question as to whether he should carry the “J” along as an initial put itself to his mind. He decided vigorously against it. He had always had a prejudice against men who, in the transatlantic phrase, parted either their hair or their names in the middle.

He had made his unheeding way past the house to the beginning of the avenue of trees, which he remembered from the previous evening's drive. To his right, an open space of roadway led off in the direction of the stables. As he hesitated, in momentary doubt which course to take, the sound of hoofs in the avenue caught his ear, and he stood still. In a moment there came into view, round a curve in the leafy distance, two horses with riders, advancing at a brisk canter. Soon he perceived that the riders were ladies; they drew rein as they approached him, and then it was to be seen that they were the pair he had judged to be such close friends last night—Lady Cressage and the daughter of the house.

They smiled and nodded down at him, as he lifted his cap and bowed. Their cheeks were glowing and their eyes sparkling with the exhilaration of their ride. Even the Hon. Winifred looked comely and distinguished in his eyes, under the charm of this heightened vivacity. She seemed to carry herself better in the saddle than she did out of it; the sweep of her habit below the stirrup lent dignity to her figure.

But her companion, whose big chestnut mount was pacing slowly toward the stepping-block—how should he bring within the compass of thought the impressions he had had of her as she passed? There seemed to have been no memory in his mind to prepare him for the beauty of the picture she had made. Slender, erect, exquisitely-tailored, she had gone by like some queen in a pageant, gracious yet unapproachable. He stared after her, mutely bewildered at the effect she produced upon him—until he saw that a groom had run from the stable-yard, and was helping the divinity to dismount. The angry thought that he might have done this himself rose within him—but there followed swiftly enough the answering conviction that he lacked the courage. He did not even advance to proffer his services to the other young lady, while there was still time. The truth was, he admitted ruefully to himself, they unnerved him.

He had talked freely enough to them, or rather to the company of which they made part, the previous evening. There had been an hour or more, indeed, before the party broke up, in which he had borne the lion's share of the talk—and they had appeared as frankly entertained as the others. In fact, when he recalled the circle of faces to which he had addressed his monologue of reminiscences—curious experiences and adventures in Java and the Argentine, in Brazil and the Antilles and Mexico and the far West—it was in the face of Lady Cressage that he seemed to discern the most genuine interest.

Why should she frighten him, then, by daylight? The whimsical theory that the wine at dinner had given him a spurious courage occurred to him. He shrugged his shoulders at it, and, with his hands in his pockets, turned toward the stables.

The stable-yard is, from some points of view, the prettiest thing about Hadlow. There is a big, uneven, grass-grown space, in the centre of which, from a slight mound, springs an aged oak of tremendous girth and height. All around this enclosure are buildings of the same pale yellowish brick as the mansion itself, but quaintly differing one from another in design and size. Stables, carriage-houses, kennels, a laundry, a brewery, and half a dozen structures the intention of which is now somewhat uncertain—some flat-topped, some gabled, others with turrets, or massive grouped chimneys, or overhanging timbered upper stories—form round this unkempt, shadowed green a sort of village, with a communal individuality of its own.

A glance shows its feudal relation to, and dependence upon, the great house behind which it nestles; some of the back-kitchens and offices of this great house, indeed, straggle out till they meet and merge themselves into this quadrangle. None the less, it presents to the enquiring gaze a specific character, of as old a growth, one might think, as the oak itself. Here servants have lived, it may be, since man first learned the trick of setting his foot on his brother's neck. Plainly enough, the monks' servants lived and worked here; half the buildings on the side nearest the house belong to their time, and one of them still bears a partially-defaced coat of arms that must have belonged to an Abbot. And when lay lord succeeded cleric, only the garb and vocabulary of servitude were altered in this square. Its population crossed themselves less, and worked much harder, but they remained in a world of their own, adjacent and subject to the world of their masters, yet separated from it by oh! such countless and unthinkable distances.

Thorpe sauntered along the side of the stables. He counted three men and a boy who visibly belonged to this department. The dog-cart of the previous evening had been run out upon the brick-pavement which drained the stables, and glistened with expensive smartness now beneath the sponge of one of the hostlers. Under cover, he discerned two other carriages, and there seemed to be at least half a dozen horses. The men who, in the half gloom of the loose-boxes, were busy grooming these animals made a curious whistling noise as they worked. Everybody in the yard touched a forelock to him as he passed.

From this quaint, old-world enclosure he wandered at his leisure, through an open gate in the wall at the back, into the gardens behind the house. There was not much in the way of flowers to look at, but he moved about quite unconscious of any deprivation. A cluster of greenhouses, massed against the southern side of the mansion, attracted his listless fancy, and he walked toward what appeared to be an entrance to them. The door was locked, but he found another further on which opened to his hand. The air was very hot and moist inside, and the place was so filled with broad-leaved, umbrageous tropical plants that he had to stoop to make his way through to the end. The next house had a more tolerable atmosphere, and contained some blossoms to which he gave momentary attention. In the third house, through the glass-door, he could see a man—evidently a gardener—lifting some pots to a shelf overhead.

The thought occurred to him that by entering into conversation with this man, he might indirectly obtain a hint as to the usual breakfast-hour at Hadlow. It was now nearly ten o'clock, and he was getting very hungry. Would they not ring a bell, or sound a gong, or something? he wondered. Perhaps there had been some such summons, and he had not heard it. It might be the intelligent thing for him to return to the house, at all events, and sit in the hall where the servants could see him, in case the meal was in progress.

Looking idly through the glass at the gardener, meanwhile, it suddenly dawned upon him that the face and figure were familiar. He stared more intently at the man, casting about in his memory for a clue to his identity. It came to him that the person he had in mind was a fellow named Gafferson, who had kept an impoverished and down-at-the-heels sort of hotel and general store on the road from Belize to Boon Town, in British Honduras. Yes, it undoubtedly was Gafferson. What on earth was he doing here? Thorpe gave but brief consideration to this problem. It was of more immediate importance to recall the circumstances of his contact with the man. He had made Gafferson's poor shanty of an hotel his headquarters for the better part of a month—the base of supplies from which he made numerous prospecting tours into the mountains of the interior. Had he paid his bill on leaving? Yes, there was no doubt about that. He could even recall a certain pity for the unbusiness-like scale of charges, and the lack of perception of opportunity, which characterized the bill in question. He remembered now his impression that Gafferson would never do any good. It would be interesting to know what kind of an impression he, in turn, had produced on his thriftless host. At any rate, there was no good reason why he should not find out. He opened the door and went in.

The gardener barely looked up from his occupation, and drew aside to let the newcomer pass with no sign of a gesture toward his cap. Thorpe halted, and tried to look at the pots on the staging as if he knew about such things.

“What are you doing?” he asked, in the tentative tone of one who is in no need of information, but desires to be affable.

“Drying off the first lot of gloxinias,” answered the other. “Some people put 'em on their sides, but I like 'em upright, close to the glass. It stands to reason, if you think about it.”

“Why, certainly,” said Thorpe, with conviction. In his mind he contrasted the independence of Gafferson's manner with the practised servility of the stable-yard—and thought that he liked it—and then was not so sure. He perceived that there was no recognition of him. The gardener, as further desultory conversation about his work progressed, looked his interlocutor full in the face, but with a placid, sheep-like gaze which seemed to be entirely insensible to variations in the human species.

“How did you ever get back here to England?” Thorpe was emboldened to ask at last. In comment upon the other's stare of puzzled enquiry, he went on: “You're Gafferson, aren't you? I thought so. When I last saw you, you were running a sort of half-way house, t'other side of Belize. That was in '90.”

Gafferson—a thick-set, squat man of middle age, with a straggling reddish beard—turned upon him a tranquil but uninformed eye. “I suppose you would have been stopping at Government House,” he remarked. “That was in Sir Roger Goldsworthy's time. They used to come out often to see my flowers. And so you remembered my name. I suppose it was because of the Gaffersoniana hybrids. There was a good bit in the papers about them last spring.” Thorpe nodded an assent which it seemed better not to put into words. “Well, it beats all,” he mused aloud. “Why, man, there's gold in those mountains! You had an inside track on prospecting, placed as you were. And there's cocoa—and some day they'll coin money in rubber, too. All that country's waiting for is better communications. And you were on the spot, and knew all the lay of the land—and yet here you are back in England, getting so much a month for messing about in the mud.”

He saw swiftly that his reflections had carried him beyond his earlier limit, and with rapidity decided upon frankness. “No, I wasn't in the Governor's outfit at all. I was looking for gold then—with occasionally an eye on rubber. I stopped at your place. Don't you remember me? My name's Thorpe. I had a beard then. Why, man, you and one of your niggers were with me three or four days once, up on the ridge beyond the Burnt Hills—why, you remember, the nigger was from San Domingo, and he was forever bragging about the San Domingo peppers, and saying those on the mainland hadn't enough strength to make a baby wrinkle his nose, and you found a pepper coming through the swamp, and you tipped me the wink, and you handed that pepper to the nigger, and it damned near killed him. Hell! You must remember that!”

“That would have been the Chavica pertusum,” said Gafferson, thoughtfully. He seemed to rouse himself to an interest in the story itself with some difficulty. “Yes—I remember it,” he admitted, finally. “I shouldn't have known you though. I'm the worst in the world about remembering people. It seems to be growing on me. I notice that when I go up to London to the shows, I don't remember the men that I had the longest talks with the time before. Once you get wrapped up in your flowers, you've got no room in your head for anything else—that's the way of it.”

Thorpe considered him with a ruminating eye. “So this is the sort of thing you really like, eh? You'd rather be doing this, eh? than making your pile in logwood and mahogany out there, or floating a gold mine?” Gafferson answered quite simply: “I wasn't the kind to ever make a pile. I got led into going out there when I was a youngster, and there didn't seem to be any good in trying to get back, but I wasn't making more than a bare living when you were there, and after that I didn't even do that much. It took me a good many years to find out what my real fancy was. I hated my hotel and my store, but I was crazy about my garden. Finally an American gentleman came along one day, and he put up at my place, and he saw that I was as near ruined as they make 'em, and he says to me, 'You're no good to run a hotel, nor yet a store, and this aint your country for a cent. What you're born for is to grow flowers. You can't afford to do it here, because nobody'll pay you for it, but you gather up your seeds and roots and so on, and come along with me to Atlanta, Georgia, and I'll put fat on your bones.'

“That's what he said to me, and I took him at his word, and I was with him two years, and then I thought I'd like to come to England, and since then I've worked my way up here, till now I take a Royal Horticultural medal regular, and there's a clematis with salmon-coloured bars that'll be in the market next spring that's named after my master. And what could I ask more 'n that?”

“Quite right,” said Thorpe. “What time do they have breakfast here?”

The gardener's round, phlegmatic, florid countenance had taken on a mild glow of animation during his narrative. It relapsed into lethargy at the advent of this new topic.

“It seems to me they eat at all hours,” he said. “But if you want to see his Lordship,” he went on, considering, “about noon would be your best time.”

“See his Lordship!” repeated Thorpe, with an impatient grin. “Why I'm a guest here in the house. All I want is something to eat.”

“A guest,” Gafferson repeated in turn, slowly. There was nothing unpleasant in the intonation, and Thorpe's sharp glance failed to detect any trace of offensive intention in his companion's fatuous visage. Yet it seemed to pass between the two men that Gafferson was surprised, and that there were abundant grounds for his surprise.

“Why, yes,” said Thorpe, with as much nonchalance as he could summon, “your master is one of my directors. I've taken a fancy to him, and I'm going to make a rich man of him. He was keen about my seeing his place here, and kept urging me to come, and so finally I've got away over Sunday to oblige him. By the way—I shall buy an estate in the country as soon as the right thing offers, and I shall want to set up no end of gardens and greenhouses and all that. I see that I couldn't come to a better man than you for advice. I daresay I'll put the whole arrangement of it in your hands. You'd like that, wouldn't you?”

“Whatever his Lordship agrees to,” the gardener replied, sententiously. He turned to the staging, and took up one of the pots.

Thorpe swung on his heel, and moved briskly toward the further door, which he could see opened upon the lawn. He was conscious of annoyance with this moon-faced, dawdling Gafferson, who had been afforded such a splendid chance of profiting by an old acquaintanceship—it might even be called, as things went in Honduras, a friendship—and who had so clumsily failed to rise to the situation. The bitter thought of going back and giving him a half-crown rose in Thorpe's inventive mind, and he paused for an instant, his hand on the door-knob, to think it over. The gratuity would certainly put Gafferson in his place, but then the spirit in which it was offered would be wholly lost on his dull brain. And moreover, was it so certain that he would take it? He had not said “sir” once, and he had talked about medals with the pride of a scientist. The rules were overwhelmingly against a gardener rejecting a tip, of course, but if there was no more than one chance in twenty of it, Thorpe decided that he could not afford the risk.

He quitted the greenhouse with resolution, and directed his steps toward the front of the mansion. As he entered the hall, a remarkably tuneful and resonant chime filled his ears with novel music. He looked and saw that a white-capped, neatly-clad domestic, standing with her back to him beside the newel-post of the stairs, was beating out the tune with two padded sticks upon some strips of metal ranged on a stand of Indian workmanship. The sound was delightful, but even more so was the implication that it betokened breakfast.

With inspiration, he drew forth the half-crown which he had been fingering in his pocket, and gave it to the girl as she turned. “That's the kind of concert I like,” he declared, bestowing the patronage of a jovial smile upon her pleased and comely face. “Show me the way to this breakfast that you've been serenading about.”

Out in the greenhouse, meanwhile, Gafferson continued to regard blankly the shrivelled, fatty leaves of the plant he had taken up. “Thorpe,” he said aloud, as if addressing the tabid gloxinia—“Thorpe—yes—I remember his initials—J. S. Thorpe. Now, who's the man that told me about him? and what was it he told me?”

CHAPTER VII

THE experiences of the breakfast room were very agreeable indeed. Thorpe found himself the only man present, and, after the first few minutes of embarrassment at this discovery, it filled him with surprised delight to note how perfectly he was at his ease. He could never have imagined himself seated with four ladies at a table—three of them, moreover, ladies of title—and doing it all so well.

For one thing, the ladies themselves had a morning manner, so to speak, which differed widely from the impressions he had had of their deportment the previous evening. They seemed now to be as simple and fresh and natural as the unadorned frocks they wore. They listened with an air of good-fellowship to him when he spoke; they smiled at the right places; they acted as if they liked him, and were glad of his company.

The satisfied conviction that he was talking well, and behaving well, accompanied him in his progress through the meal. His confession at the outset of his great hunger, and of the sinister apprehensions which had assailed him in his loitering walk about the place, proved a most fortuitous beginning; after that, they were ready to regard everything he said as amusing.

“Oh, when we're by ourselves,” the kindly little old hostess explained to him, “my daughter and I breakfast always at nine. That was our hour yesterday morning, for example. But when my son is here, then it's farewell to regularity. We put breakfast back till ten, then, as a kind of compromise between our own early habits and his lack of any sort of habits. Why we do it I couldn't say—because he never comes down in any event. He sleeps so well at Hadlow—and you know in town he sleeps very ill indeed—and so we don't dream of complaining. We're only too glad—for his sake.”

“And Balder,” commented the sister, “he's as bad the other way. He gets up at some unearthly hour, and has his tea and a sandwich from the still-room, and goes off with his rod or his gun or the dogs, and we never see him till luncheon.”

“I've been on the point of asking so many times,” Miss Madden interposed—“is Balder a family name, or is it after the Viking in Matthew Arnold's poem?”

“It was his father's choice,” Lady Plowden made answer. “I think the Viking explanation is the right one—it certainly isn't in either family. I can't say that it attracted me much—at first, you know.”

“Oh, but it fits him so splendidly,” said Lady Cressage. “He looks the part, as they say. I always thought it was the best of all the soldier names—and you have only to look at him to see that he was predestined for a soldier from his cradle.”

“I wish the Sandhurst people would have a good long look at him, then,” put in the mother with earnestness underlying the jest of her tone. “The poor boy will never pass those exams in the world. It IS ridiculous, as his father always said. If there ever was a man who was made for a soldier, it's Balder. He's a gentleman, and he's connected by tradition with the Army, and he's mad about everything military—and surely he's as clever as anybody else at everything except that wretched matter of books, and even there it's only a defect of memory—and yet that suffices to prevent his serving his Queen. And all over England there are young gentlemen like that—the very pick of the hunting-fields, strong and brave as lions, fit to lead men anywhere, the very men England wants to have fighting her battles—and they can't get places in the Army because—what was it Balder came to grief over last time?—because they can't remember whether it's Ispahan or Teheran that's the capital of Persia.

“They are the fine old sort that would go and capture both places at the point of the bayonet—and find out their names afterward—but it seems that's not what the Army wants nowadays. What is desired now is superior clerks, and secretaries and professors of languages—and much good they will do us when the time of trouble comes!”

“Then you think the purchase-system was better?” asked the American lady. “It always seemed to me that that must have worked so curiously.”

“Prefer it?” said Lady Plowden. “A thousand times yes! My husband made one of the best speeches in the debate on it—one do I say?—first and last he must have made a dozen of them. If anything could have kept the House of Lords firm, in the face of the wretched Radical outcry, it would have been those speeches. He pointed out all the evils that would follow the change. You might have called it prophetic—the way he foresaw what would happen to Balder—or not Balder in particular, of course, but that whole class of young gentlemen.

“As he said, you have only to ask yourself what kind of people the lower classes naturally look up to and obey and follow. Will they be ordered about by a man simply because he knows Greek and Latin and Hebrew? Do they respect the village schoolmaster, for example, on account of his learning? Not in the very slightest! On the contrary, they regard him with the greatest contempt. The man they will serve is the man whose birth gives him the right to command them, or else the man with money in his pockets to make it worth their while. These two are the only leaders they understand. And if that's true here in England, in times of peace, among our own people, how much truer must it be of our soldiers, away from England, in a time of war?”

“But, mamma,” the Hon. Winifred intervened, “don't you see how badly that might work nowadays? now that the good families have so little money, and all the fortunes are in the hands of stockjobbing people—and so on? It would be THEIR sons who would buy all the commissions—and I'm sure Balder wouldn't get on at all with that lot.”

Lady Plowden answered with decision and great promptness. “You see so little of the world, Winnie dear, that you don't get very clear ideas of its movements. The people who make fortunes in England are every whit as important to its welfare as those who inherit names, and individually I'm sure they are often much more deserving. Every generation sniffs at its nouveaux riches, but by the next they have become merged in the aristocracy. It isn't a new thing in England at all. It has always been that way. Two-thirds of the peerage have their start from a wealthy merchant, or some other person who made a fortune. They are really the back-bone of England. You should keep that always in mind.”

“Of course—I see what you mean”—Winnie replied, her dark cheek flushing faintly under the tacit reproof. She had passed her twenty-fifth birthday, but her voice had in it the docile self-repression of a school-girl. She spoke with diffident slowness, her gaze fastened upon her plate. “Of course—my grandfather was a lawyer—and your point is that merchants—and others who make fortunes—would be the same.”

“Precisely,” said Lady Plowden. “And do tell us, Mr. Thorpe”—she turned toward where he sat at her right and beamed at him over her spectacles, with the air of having been wearied with a conversation in which he bore no part—“is it really true that social discontent is becoming more marked in America, even, than it is with us in England?”

“I'm not an American, you know,” he reminded her. “I only know one or two sections of the country—and those only as a stranger. You should ask Miss Madden.”

“Me?” said Celia. “Oh, I haven't come up for my examinations yet. I'm like Balder—I'm preparing.”

“What I should like Mr. Thorpe to tell us,” suggested Lady Cressage, mildly, “is about the flowers in the tropics—in Java, for example, or some of the West Indies. One hears such marvelous tales about them.”

“Speaking of flowers,” Thorpe suddenly decided to mention the fact; “I met out in one of the greenhouses here this morning, an old acquaintance of mine, the gardener, Gafferson. The last time I saw him, he was running the worst hotel in the world in the worst country in the world—out in British Honduras.”

“But he's a wonderful gardener,” said Lady Cressage. “He's a magician; he can do what he likes with plants. It's rather a hobby of mine—or used to be—and I never saw his equal.”

Thorpe told them about Gafferson, in that forlorn environment on the Belize road, and his success in making them laugh drew him on to other pictures of the droll side of life among the misfits of adventure. The ladies visibly dallied over their tea-cups to listen to him; the charm of having them all to himself, and of holding them in interested entertainment by his discourse—these ladies of supremely refined associations and position—seemed to provide an inspiration of its own. He could hear that his voice was automatically modulating itself to their critical ears. His language was producing itself with as much delicacy of selection as if it came out of a book—and yet preserving the savour of quaint, outlandish idiom which his listeners clearly liked. Upon the instant when Lady Plowden's gathering of skirts, and glance across the table, warned him that they were to rise, he said deliberately to himself that this had been the most enjoyable episode of his whole life.

There were cigar boxes on the fine old oak mantel, out in the hall, and Winnie indicated them to him with the obvious suggestion that he was expected to smoke. He looked her over as he lit his cigar—where she stood spreading her hands above the blaze of the logs, and concluded that she was much nicer upon acquaintance than he had thought. Her slight figure might not be beautiful, but beyond doubt its lines were ladylike. The same extenuating word applied itself in his mind to her thin and swarthy, though distinguished, features. They bore the stamp of caste, and so did the way she looked at one through her eye-glasses, from under those over-heavy black eyebrows, holding her head a little to one side. Though it was easy enough to guess that she had a spirit of her own, her gentle, almost anxious, deference to her mother had shown that she had it under admirable control.

He had read about her in a peerage at his sister's book-shop the previous day. Unfortunately it did not give her age, but that was not so important, after all. She was styled Honourable. She was the daughter of one Viscount and the sister of another. Her grandfather had been an Earl, and the book had shown her to possess a bewildering number of relationships among titled folks. All this was very interesting to him—and somewhat suggestive. Vague, shapeless hints at projects rose in his brain as he looked at her.

“I'm afraid you think my brother has odd notions of entertaining his guests,” she remarked to him, over her shoulder. The other ladies had not joined them.

“Oh, I'm all right,” he protested cordially. “I should hate to have him put himself out in the slightest.” Upon consideration he added: “I suppose he has given up the idea of shooting to-day.”

“I think not,” she answered.” The keeper was about this morning, that is—and he doesn't often come unless they are to go out with the guns. I suppose you are very fond of shooting.”

“Well—I've done some—in my time,” Thorpe replied, cautiously. It did not seem necessary to explain that he had yet to fire his first gun on English soil. “It's a good many years,” he went on, “since I had the time and opportunity to do much at it. I think the last shooting I did was alligators. You hit 'em in the eye, you know. But what kind of a hand I shall make of it with a shot-gun, I haven't the least idea. Is the shooting round I here pretty good?”

“I don't think it's anything remarkable. Plowden says my brother Balder kills all the birds off every season. Balder's by way of being a crack-shot, you know. There are some pheasants, though. We saw them flying when we were out this morning.”

Thorpe wondered if it would be possible to consult her upon the question of apparel. Clearly, he ought to make some difference in his garb, yet the mental vision of him-self in those old Mexican clothes revealed itself now as ridiculously impossible. He must have been out of his mind to have conceived anything so preposterous as rigging himself out, among these polished people, like a cow-puncher down on his luck.

“I wonder when your brother will expect to start,” he began, uneasily. “Perhaps I ought to go and get ready.”

“Ah, here comes his man,” remarked the sister. A round-faced, smooth-mannered youngster—whom Thorpe discovered to be wearing cord-breeches and leather leggings as he descended the stairs—advanced toward him and prefaced his message by the invariable salutation. “His Lordship will be down, sir, in ten minutes—

and he hopes you'll be ready, sir," the valet said.

"Send Pangbourn to this gentleman's room," Miss Winnie bade him, and with a gesture of comprehensive submission he went away.

The calm readiness with which she had provided a solution for his difficulties impressed Thorpe greatly. It would never have occurred to him that Pangbourn was the answer to the problem of his clothes, yet how obvious it had been to her. These old families did something more than fill their houses with servants; they mastered the art of making these servants an integral part of the machinery of existence. Fancy having a man to do all your thinking about clothes for you, and then dress you, into the bargain. Oh, it was all splendid.

"It seems that we're going shooting," Thorpe found himself explaining, a few moments later in his bedroom, to the attentive Pangbourn. He decided to throw himself with frankness upon the domestic's resourceful good-feeling. "I haven't brought anything for shooting at all. Somehow I got the idea we were going to do rough riding instead—and so I fetched along some old Mexican riding-clothes that make me feel more at home in the saddle than anything else would. You know how fond a man gets of old, loose things like that. But about this shooting—I want you to fix me out. What do I need? Just some breeches and leggings, eh? You can manage them for me, can't you?"

Pangbourn could and did—and it was upon his advice that the Mexican jacket was utilized to complete the out-fit. Its shape was beyond doubt uncommon, but it had big pockets, and it looked like business. Thorpe, as he glanced up and down his image in the tall mirror of the wardrobe, felt that he must kill a large number of birds to justify the effect of pitiless proficiency which this jacket lent to his appearance.

"We will find a cap below, sir," Pangbourn announced, with serenity, and Thorpe, who had been tentatively fingering the big, flaring sombrero, thrust it back upon its peg as if it had proved too hot to handle.

Downstairs in the hall there was more waiting to be done, and there was nobody now to bear him company. He lit another cigar, tried on various caps till he found a leathern one to suit him, and then dawdled about the room and the adjoining conservatory for what seemed to him more than half an hour. This phase of the aristocratic routine, he felt, did not commend itself so warmly to him as did some others. Everybody else, however, seemed to regard it as so wholly a matter of course that Plowden should do as he liked, that he forbore formulating a complaint even to himself.

At last, this nobleman's valet descended the stairs once more. "His Lordship will be down very shortly now, sir," he declared—"and will you be good enough to come into the gun-room, sir, and see the keeper?"

Thorpe followed him through a doorway under the staircase—the existence of which he had not suspected—into a bare-looking apartment fitted like a pantry with shelves. After the semi-gloom of the hall, it was almost glaringly lighted. The windows and another door opened, he saw, upon a court connected with the stable-yard. By this entrance, no doubt, had come the keeper, a small, brown-faced, brown-clothed man of mature years, with the strap of a pouch over his shoulder, who stood looking at the contents of the shelves. He mechanically saluted Thorpe in turn, and then resumed his occupation. There were numerous gun cases on the lower shelf, and many boxes and bags above.

"Did his Lordship say what gun?" the keeper demanded of the valet. He had a bright-eyed, intent glance, and his tone conveyed a sense of some broad, impersonal, out-of-doors disdain for liveried house-men.

The valet, standing behind Thorpe, shrugged his shoulders and eloquently shook his head.

"Do you like an 'ammerless, sir?" the keeper turned to Thorpe.

To his intense humiliation, Thorpe could not make out the meaning of the query. "Oh, anything'll do for me," he said, awkwardly smiling. "It's years since I've shot—I daresay one gun'll be quite the same as another to me."

He felt the knowing bright eyes of the keeper taking all his measurements as a sportsman. "You'd do best with 'B,' sir, I fancy," the functionary decided at last, and his way of saying it gave Thorpe the notion that "B" must be the weapon that was reserved for school-boys. He watched the operation of putting the gun together, and then took it, and laid it over his arm, and followed the valet out into the hall again, in dignified silence. To the keeper's remark—"Mr. Balder has its mate with him today, sir," he gave only a restrained nod.

There were even now whole minutes to wait before Lord Plowden appeared. He came down the stairs then with the brisk, rather impatient air of a busy man whose plans are embarrassed by the unpunctuality of others. He was fully attired, hob-nailed shoes, leggings, leather coat and cap, gloves, scarf round his throat and all—and he behaved as if there was not a minute to lose. He had barely time to shake perfunctorily the hand Thorpe offered him, and utter an absent-minded "How are you this morning?"

To the valet, who hurried forward to open the outer door, bearing his master's gun and a camp-stool, he said reproachfully, "We are very late today, Barnes." They went out, and began striding down the avenue of trees at such a pace that the keeper and his following of small boys and dogs, who joined them near the road, were forced into a trot to keep up with it.

Thorpe had fancied, somehow, that a day's shooting would afford exceptional opportunities for quiet and intimate talk with his host, but he perceived very soon that this was not to be the case. They walked together for half a mile, it is true, along a rural bye-road first and then across some fields, but the party was close at their heels, and Plowden walked so fast that conversation of any sort, save an occasional remark about the birds and the covers between him and the keeper, was impracticable. The Hon. Balder suddenly turned up in the landscape, leaning against a gate set in a hedgerow, and their course was deflected toward him, but even when they came up to him, the expedition seemed to gain nothing of a social character. The few curt words that were exchanged, as they halted here to distribute cartridges and hold brief consultation, bore exclusively upon the subject in hand.

The keeper assumed now an authority which Thorpe, breathing heavily over the unwonted exercise and hoping for nothing so much as that they would henceforth take things easy, thought intolerable. He was amazed that the two brothers should take without cavil the arbitrary orders of this elderly peasant. He bade Lord Plowden proceed to a certain point in one direction, and that nobleman, followed by his valet with the gun and the stool, set meekly off without a word. Balder, with equal docility, vaulted the gate, and moved away down the lane at the bidding of the keeper. Neither of them had intervened to mitigate the destiny of their guest, or displayed any interest as to what was going to become of him.

Thorpe said to himself that he did not like this—and though afterward, when he had also climbed the gate and taken up his station under a clump of trees at the autocrat's behest, he strove to soothe his ruffled feelings by the argument that it was probably the absolutely correct deportment for a shooting party, his mind remained unconvinced. Moreover, in parting from him, the keeper had dropped a blunt injunction about firing up or down the lane, the tone even more than the matter of which nettled him.

To cap all, when he presently ventured to stroll about a little from the spot on which he had been planted, he caught a glimpse against the skyline of the distant Lord Plowden, comfortably seated on the stool which his valet had been carrying. It seemed to Thorpe at that moment that he had never wanted to sit down so much before in his life—and he turned on his heel in the wet grass with a grunt of displeasure.

This mood vanished utterly a few moments later. The remote sounds had begun to come to him, of boys shouting and dogs barking, in the recesses of the strip of woodland which the lane skirted, and at these he hastened back to his post. It did not seem to him a good place, and when he heard the reports of guns to right and left of him, and nothing came his way, he liked it less than ever; it had become a matter of offended pride with him, however, to relieve the keeper of no atom of the responsibility he had taken upon himself. If Lord Plowden's guest had no sport, the blame for it should rest upon Lord Plowden's over-arrogant keeper. Then a noise of a different character assailed his ears, punctuated as it were by distant boyish cries of “mark!” These cries, and the buzzing sound as of clockwork gone wrong which they accompanied and heralded, became all at once a most urgent affair of his own. He strained his eyes upon the horizon of the thicket—and, as if by instinct, the gun sprang up to adjust its sight to this eager gaze, and followed automatically the thundering course of the big bird, and then, taking thought to itself, leaped ahead of it and fired. Thorpe's first pheasant reeled in the air, described a somersault, and fell like a plummet.

He stirred not a step, but reloaded the barrel with a hand shaking for joy. From where he stood he could see the dead bird; there could never have been a cleaner “kill.” In the warming glow of his satisfaction in himself, there kindled a new liking of a different sort for Plowden and Balder. He owed to them, at this belated hour of his life, a novel delight of indescribable charm. There came to him, from the woods, the shrill bucolic voice of the keeper, admonishing a wayward dog. He was conscious of even a certain tenderness for this keeper—and again the cry of “mark!” rose, strenuously addressed to him.

Half an hour later the wood had been cleared, and Thorpe saw the rest of the party assembling by the gate. He did not hurry to join them, but when Lord Plowden appeared he sauntered slowly over, gun over arm, with as indifferent an air as he could simulate. It pleased him tremendously that no one had thought it worth while to approach the rendezvous by way of the spot he had covered. His eye took instant stock of the game carried by two of the boys; their combined prizes were eight birds and a rabbit, and his heart leaped within him at the count.

“Well, Thorpe?” asked Plowden, pleasantly. The smell of gunpowder and the sight of stained feathers had co-operated to brighten and cheer his mood. “I heard you blazing away in great form. Did you get anything?”

Thorpe strove hard to give his voice a careless note. “Let some of the boys run over,” he said slowly. “There are nine birds within sight, and there are two or three in the bushes—but they may have got away.”

“Gad!” said Balder.

“Magnificent!” was his brother's comment—and Thorpe permitted himself the luxury of a long-drawn, beaming sigh of triumph.

The roseate colouring of this triumph seemed really to tint everything that remained of Thorpe's visit. He set down to it without hesitation the visible augmentation of deference to him among the servants. The temptation was very great to believe that it had affected the ladies of the house as well. He could not say that they were more gracious to him, but certainly they appeared to take him more for granted. In a hundred little ways, he seemed to perceive that he was no longer held mentally at arm's length as a stranger to their caste. Of course, his own restored self-confidence could account for much of this, but he clung to the whimsical conceit that much was also due to the fact that he was the man of the pheasants.

Sunday was bleak and stormy, and no one stirred out of the house. He was alone again with the ladies at breakfast, and during the long day he was much in their company. It was like no other day he had ever imagined to himself.

On the morrow, in the morning train by which he returned alone to town, his mind roved luxuriously among the fragrant memories of that day. He had been so perfectly at home—and in such a home! There were some things which came uppermost again and again—but of them all he dwelt most fixedly upon the recollection of moving about in the greenhouses and conservatories, with that tall, stately, fair Lady Cressage for his guide, and watching her instead of the flowers that she pointed out. Of what she had told him, not a syllable stuck in his mind, but the music of the voice lingered in his ears.

“And she is old Kervick's daughter!” he said to himself more than once.

CHAPTER VIII

IT may be that every other passenger in that morning train to London nursed either a silent rage, or declaimed aloud to fellow-sufferers in indignation, at the time consumed in making what, by the map, should be so brief a journey. In Thorpe's own compartment, men spoke with savage irony of cyclists alleged to be passing them on the road, and exchanged dark prophecies as to the novelties in imbecility and helplessness which the line would be preparing for the Christmas holidays. The old joke about people who had gone travelling years before, and were believed to be still lost somewhere in the recesses of Kent, revived itself amid gloomy approbation. The still older discussion as to whether the South Eastern or the Brighton was really the worst followed naturally in its wake, and occupied its accustomed half-hour—complicated, however, upon this occasion, by the chance presence of a loquacious stranger who said he lived on the Chatham-and-Dover, and who rejected boisterously the idea that any other railway could be half so bad.

The intrusion of this outsider aroused instant resentment, and the champions of the South Eastern and the Brighton, having piled up additional defenses in the shape of personal recollections of delay and mismanagement quite beyond belief, made a combined attack upon the newcomer. He was evidently incapable, their remarks implied, of knowing a bad railway when he saw one. To suggest that the characterless and inoffensive Chatham-and-Dover, so commonplace in its tame virtues, was to be mentioned in the same breath with the daringly inventive and resourceful malefactors whose rendezvous was London Bridge, showed either a weak mind or a corrupt heart. Did this man really live on the Dover line at all? Angry countenances plainly reflected the doubt.

But to Thorpe the journey seemed short enough—almost too short. The conversation interested him not at all; if he had ever known the Southern lines apart, they were all one to him now. He looked out of the window, and could have sworn that he thought of nothing but the visit from which he was returning.

When he alighted at Cannon Street, however, it was to discover that his mind was full of a large, new, carefully-prepared project. It came to him, ready-made and practically complete, as he stood on the platform, superintending the porter's efforts to find his bags. He turned it over and over in his thoughts, in the hansom, more to familiarize himself with its details than to add to them. He left the cab to wait for him at the mouth of a little alley which delves its way into Old Broad Street through towering walls of commercial buildings, old and new.

Colin Semple was happily in his office—a congeries of small, huddled rooms, dry and dirty with age, which had a doorway of its own in a corner of the court—and Thorpe pushed on to his room at the end like one who is assured of both his way and his welcome.

The broker was standing beside a desk, dictating a letter to a clerk who sat at it, and with only a nod to Thorpe he proceeded to finish this task. He looked more than once at his visitor as he did so, in a preoccupied, impersonal way. To the other's notion, he seemed the personification of business—without an ounce of distracting superfluous flesh upon his wiry, tough little frame, without a trace of unnecessary politeness, or humour, or sensibility of any sort. He was the machine perfected and fined down to absolute essentials. He could understand a joke if it was useful to him to do so. He could drink, and even smoke cigarettes, with a natural air, if these exercises seemed properly to belong to the task he had in hand. Thorpe did not conceive him doing anything for the mere human reason that he liked to do it. There was more than a touch of what the rustic calls "ginger" in his hair and closely-cropped, pointed beard, and he had the complementary florid skin. His eyes—notably direct, confident eyes—were of a grey which had in it more brown than blue. He wore a black frock-coat, buttoned close, and his linen produced the effect of a conspicuous whiteness.

He turned as the clerk left the room, and let his serious, thin lips relax for an instant as a deferred greeting. "Well?" he asked, impassively.

"Have you got a quarter-of-an-hour?" asked Thorpe in turn. "I want a talk with you."

For answer, Semple left the room. Returning after a minute or two, he remarked, "Go ahead till we're stopped," and seated himself on the corner of the desk with the light inconsequence of a bird on a twig. Thorpe unbuttoned his overcoat, laid aside his hat, and seated himself.

"I've worked out the whole scheme," he began, as if introducing the product of many sleepless nights' cogitations. "I'm going to leave England almost immediately—go on the Continent and loaf about—I've never seen the Continent."

Semple regarded him in silence. "Well?" he observed at last.

"You see the idea, don't you?" Thorpe demanded.

The broker twitched his shoulders slightly. "Go on," he said.

"But the idea is everything," protested the other. "We've been thinking of beginning the campaign straight away—but the true game now is to lie low—silent as the grave. I go away now, d'ye see? Nothing particular is said about it, of course, but in a month or two somebody notices that I'm not about, and he happens to mention it to somebody else—and so there gets to be the impression that things haven't gone well with me, d'ye see? On the same plan, I let all the clerks at my office go. The Secretary'll come round every once in a while to get letters, of course, and perhaps he'll keep a boy in the front office for show, but practically the place'll be shut up. That'll help out the general impression that I've gone to pieces. Now d'ye see?"

"It's the Special Settlement you're thinking of," commented Semple.

"Of course. The fellows that we're going to squeeze would move heaven and hell to prevent our getting that Settlement, if they got wind of what was going on. The only weak point in our game is just there. Absolutely everything hangs on the Settlement being granted. Naturally, then, our play is to concentrate everything on getting it granted. We don't want to raise the remotest shadow of a suspicion of what we're up to, till after we're safe past that rock. So we go on in the way to attract the least possible attention. You or your jobber makes the ordinary application for a Special Settlement, with your six signatures and so on; and I go abroad quietly, and the office is as good as shut up, and nobody makes a peep about Rubber Consols—and the thing works itself. You do see it, don't you?"

"I see well enough the things that are to be seen," replied Semple, with a certain brevity of manner. "There was a sermon of my father's that I remember, and it had for its text, 'We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.'"

Thorpe, pondering this for a moment, nodded his head. "Semple," he said, bringing his chair forward to the desk, "that's what I've come for. I want to spread my cards on the table for you. I know the sum you've laid out already, in working this thing. We'll say that that is to be paid back to you, as a separate transaction, and we'll put that to one side. Now then, leaving that out of consideration, what do you think you ought to have out of the winnings, when we pull the thing off? Mind, I'm not thinking of your 2,000 vendor's shares——"

"No—I'm not thinking much of them, either," interposed Semple, with a kind of dry significance.

"Oh, they'll be all right," Thorpe affirmed. He laughed unconsciously as he did so. "No, what I want to get at is your idea of what should come to you, as a bonus, when I scoop the board."

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Semple, readily.

Thorpe's slow glance brightened a trifle. "I had thought thirty would be a fairer figure," he remarked, with an effort at simplicity.

The broker put out his under-lip. "You will find people rather disposed to distrust a man who promises more than he's asked," he remarked coldly.

"Yes—I know what you mean," Thorpe hurried to say, flushing awkwardly, even though the remark was so undeserved; "but it's in my nature. I'm full of the notion of doing things for people that have done things for me. That's the way I'm built. Why"—he halted to consider the advisability of disclosing what he had promised to do for Lord Plowden, and decided against it—"why, without you, what would the whole thing have been worth to me? Take one thing alone—the money for the applications—I could have no more got at it than I could at the Crown Jewels in the Tower. I've wondered since, more than once—if you don't mind the question—how did you happen to have so much ready money lying about."

"There are some Glasgow and Aberdeen folk who trust me to invest for them," the broker explained. "If they get five per cent. for the four months, they'll be very pleased. And so I shall be very pleased to take thirty thousand instead of twenty—if it presents itself to your mind in that way. You will give me a letter to that effect, of course."

"Of course," assented Thorpe. "Write it now, if you like." He pushed his chair forward, closer to the desk, and dipped a pen in the ink. "What I want to do is this," he said, looking up. "I'll make the promise for thirty-two thousand, and I'll get you to let me have two thousand in cash now—a personal advance. I shall need it, if I'm to hang about on the Continent for four months. I judge you think it'll be four months before things materialize, eh?"

"The Special Settlement, in the natural order of events, would come shortly after the Christmas holidays. That is nearly three months. Then the work of taking fort-nightly profits will begin—and it is for you to say how long you allow that to go on."

"But about the two thousand pounds now," Thorpe reminded him.

"I think I will do that in this way," said Semple, kicking his small legs nonchalantly. "I will buy two thousand fully-paid shares of you, for cash down, NOT vendor's shares, you observe—and then I will take your acknowledgment that you hold them for me in trust up to a given date. In that way, I would not at all weaken your market, and I would have a stake in the game." "Your stake's pretty big, already," commented Thorpe, tentatively.

"It's just a fancy of mine," said the other, with his first smile. "I like to hold shares that are making sensational advances. It is very exciting."

"All right," said Thorpe, in accents of resignation. He wrote out two letters, accepting the wording which Semple suggested from his perch on the desk, and then the latter, hopping down, took the chair in turn and wrote a cheque.

"Do you want it open?" he asked over his shoulder. "Are you going to get it cashed at once?"

"No—cross it," said the other. "I want it to go through my bankers. It'll warm their hearts toward me. I shan't be going till the end of the week, in any event. I suppose you know the Continent by heart."

"On the contrary, very little indeed. I've had business in Frankfort once, and in Rotterdam once, and in Paris twice. That is all."

"But don't you ever do anything for pleasure?" Thorpe asked him, as he folded the cheque in his pocket-book.

"Oh yes—many things," responded the broker, lightly. "It's a pleasure, for example, to buy Rubber Consols at par."

"Oh, if you call it buying," said Thorpe, and then softened his words with an apologetic laugh. "I didn't tell you, did I? I've been spending Saturday and Sunday with Plowden—you know, the Lord Plowden on my Board."

"I know of him very well," observed the Scotchman.

"Has he a place that he asks people down to, then? That isn't the usual form with guinea-pigs."

"Ah, but, he isn't the guinea-pig variety at all," Thorpe asserted, warmly. "He's really a splendid fellow—with his little oddities, like the rest of us, of course, but a decent chap all through. Place? I should think he HAD got a place! It's one of the swellest old country-houses you ever saw—older than hell, you know—and it's kept up as if they had fifty thousand a year. Do you happen to know what his real income is supposed to be?"

Semple shook his head. He had taken his hat, and was smoothing it deftly with the palm of his hand.

"I asked," Thorpe went on, "because he had so much to say about his poverty. To hear him talk, you'd think the bailiffs were sitting on his doorstep. That doesn't prevent his having fast horses, and servants all over the place, and about the best shooting I've seen in the South of England. As luck would have it, I was in wonderful form. God! how I knocked the pheasants!" A clerk showed his head at the door, with a meaning gesture. "I must go now," said Semple, briskly, and led the way out to another room. He halted here, and dismissed his caller with the brief injunction, "Don't go away without seeing me."

It was the noon-hour, and the least-considered grades of the City's slaves were in the streets on the quest for cheap luncheons. Thorpe noted the manner in which some of them studied the large bill of fare placarded beside a restaurant door; the spectacle prompted him luxuriously to rattle the gold coins remaining in his pocket. He had been as anxious about pence as the hungriest of those poor devils, only a week before. And now! He thrust up the door in the roof of the cab, and bade the driver stop at his bank. Thence, after some brief but very agreeable business, and a hurried inspection of the “Court” section of a London Directory, he drove to a telegraph station and despatched two messages. They were identical in terms. One sought General Kervick at his residence—he was in lodgings somewhere in the Hanover Square country—and the other looked for him at his club. Both begged him to lunch at the Savoy at two o'clock.

There was time and to spare, now. Thorpe dismissed the cab at his hotel—an unpretentious house in Craven Street, and sent his luggage to his rooms. There were no letters for him on the board in the hallway, and he sauntered up to the Strand. As by force of habit, he turned presently into a side-street, and stopped opposite the ancient book-shop of his family.

In the bright yet mellow light of the sunny autumn noontide, the blacks and roans and smoked drabs of the low old brick front looked more dingy to his eye than ever. It spoke of antiquity, no doubt, but it was a dismal and graceless antiquity of narrow purposes and niggling thrift. It was so little like the antiquity, for example, of Hadlow House, that the two might have computed their age by the chronological systems of different planets. Although his sister's married name was Dabney, and she had been sole proprietor for nearly a dozen years, the sign over the doorway bore still its century-old legend, “Thorpe, Bookseller.”

He crossed the street, and paused for a moment to run an eye over the books and placards exposed on either side of the entrance. A small boy guarded these wares, and Thorpe considered him briefly, with curious recollections of how much of his own boyhood had been spent on that very spot. The lad under observation had a loutish and sullen face; its expression could not have been more devoid of intellectual suggestions if he had been posted in a Wiltshire field to frighten crows with a rattle, instead of being set here in the highway of the world's brain-movement, an agent of students and philosophers. Thorpe wondered if in his time he could have looked such a vacant and sour young fool. No—no. That could not be. Boys were different in his day—and especially boys in book-shops. They read something and knew something of what they handled. They had some sort of aspirations, fitful and vague as these might be, to become in their time bookmen also. And in those days there still were bookmen—widely-informed, observant, devoted old bookmen—who loved their trade, and adorned it.

Thorpe reflected that, as he grew older, he was the better able to apprehend the admirable qualities of that departed race of literature's servants. Indeed, it seemed that he had never adequately realized before how proud a man might well be of descending from a line of such men. The thought struck him that very likely at this identical doorway, two generations back, a poor, out-at-the-elbows, young law-student named Plowden had stood and turned over pages of books he could not dream of buying. Perhaps, even, he had ventured inside, and deferentially picked acquaintance with the Thorpe of the period, and got bookish advice and friendly counsel for nothing. It was of no real significance that the law-student grew to be Lord Chancellor, and the bookseller remained a book-seller; in the realm of actual values, the Thorpes were as good as the Plowdens.

A customer came out of the shop, and Thorpe went in, squeezing his way along the narrow passage between the tall rows of books, to the small open space at the end. His sister stood here, momentarily occupied at a high desk. She did not look up.

“Well—I visited his Lordship all right.” He announced his presence thus genially.

“I hope you're the better for it,” she remarked, turning to him, after a pause, her emotionless, plain face.

“Oh, immensely,” he affirmed, with robust jocularity. “You should have seen the way they took to me. It was 'Mr. Thorpe' here and 'Mr. Thorpe' there, all over the place. Ladies of title, mind you—all to myself at breakfast two days running. And such ladies—finer than silk. Oh, it's clear as daylight—I was intended for a fashionable career.”

She smiled in a faint, passive way. “Well—they say 'better late than never,' you know.” “And after all, IS it so very late?” he said, adopting her phrase as an expression of his thought. “I'm just turned forty, and I feel like a boy. I was looking at that 'Peerage' there, the other day—and do you know, I'm sixteen years younger than the first Lord Plowden was when they made him a peer? Why he didn't even get into the House of Commons until he was seven-and-forty.”

“You seem to have the Plowden family on the brain,” she commented.

“I might have worse things. You've no idea, Lou, how nice it all is. The mother, Lady Plowden—why she made me feel as if I was at the very least a nephew of hers. And so simple and natural! She smiled at me, and listened to me, and said friendly things to me—why, just as anybody might have done. You'll just love her, when you know her.”

Louisa laughed in his face. “Don't be a fool, Joel,” she adjured him, with a flash of scornful mirth. He mingled a certain frowning impatience with the buoyancy of his smile. “Why, of course, you'll know her,” he protested. “What nonsense you're thinking of! Do you suppose I'm going to allow you to mess about here with second-hand almanacs, and a sign in your window of 'threepence in the shilling discount for cash,' while I'm a millionaire? It's too foolish, Lou. You annoy me by supposing such a thing!”

“There's no good talking about it at all,” she observed, after a little pause. “It hasn't come off yet, for one thing. And as I said the other night, if you want to do things for the children, that's another matter. They're of an age when they can learn whatever anybody chooses to teach them.”

“Where are they now?” he asked. Upon the instant another plan began to unfold itself in the background of his mind.

“They're both at Cheltenham, though they're at different places, of course. I was recommended to send Julia there—one of our old customers is a Governor, or whatever it's called—and he got special terms for her. She was rather old, you know, to go to school, but he arranged it very nicely for her—and there is such a good boys' college there, it seemed the wisest thing to send Alfred too. Julia is to finish at Christmas-time—and what I'm going to do with her afterward is more than I know.”

“Is she pretty?” the uncle of Julia enquired.

“She's very nice,” the mother answered, with vague extenuation in her tone. “I don't know about her looks—she varies so much. Sometimes I think she's pretty—and then again I can't think it. She's got good features, and she holds herself well, and she's very much the lady—rather too much, I think, sometimes—but it all depends upon what you call pretty. She's not tall, you know. She takes after her father's family. The Dabneys are all little people.”

Thorpe seemed not to care about the Dabneys. “And what's Alfred like?” he asked.

“He wants to be an artist!” There was a perceptible note of apprehension in the mother's confession.

“Well—why shouldn't he—if he's got a bent that way?” demanded Thorpe, with reproof in his tone. “Did you want him to be a shop-keeper?”

“I should like to see him a doctor,” she replied with dignity. “It was always my idea for him.”

“Well, it's no good—even as an idea,” he told her. “Doctors are like parsons—they can't keep up with the times. The age is outgrowing them. Only the fakirs in either profession get anything out of it, nowadays. It's all mystery and sleight-of-hand and the confidence trick—medicine is—and if you haven't got just the right twist of the wrist, you're not in it. But an artist stands on his merits. There is his work—done by his own hands. It speaks for itself. There's no deception—it's easy enough to tell whether it's good or bad. If the pictures are good, people buy them. If they're bad, people don't buy them. Of course, it won't matter to Alfred, financially speaking, whether his pictures sell well or not. But probably he'd give it up, if he didn't make a hit of it.

“I don't know that there's any crying need that he should do anything. My own idea for him, perhaps, would be the Army, but I wouldn't dream of forcing it on him against his will. I had a bitter enough dose of that, myself, with father. I'd try to guide a youngster, yes, and perhaps argue with him, if I thought he was making a jack of himself—but I wouldn't dictate. If Alfred thinks he wants to be an artist, in God's name let him go ahead. It can be made a gentlemanly trade—and the main thing is that he should be a gentleman.”

Louisa had listened to this discourse with apathetic patience. “If you don't mind, I don't know that I do,” she said when it was finished. “Perhaps he wouldn't have made a good doctor; he's got a very quick temper. He reminds me of father—oh, ever so much more than you do. He contradicts everything everybody says. He quite knows it all.”

“But he's a good fellow, isn't he?” urged Thorpe. “I mean, he's got his likable points? I'm going to be able to get along with him?”

“I didn't get along with him very well,” the mother admitted, reluctantly, “but I daresay with a man it would be different. You see, his father was ill all those four years, and Alfred hated the shop as bad as you did, and perhaps in my worry I blamed him more than was fair. I want to be fair to him, you know.”

“But is he a gentleman? That puts it in a word,” Thorpe insisted.

“Oh, mercy yes,” Louisa made ready answer. “My only fear is—whether you won't find him too much of a gentleman.”

Thorpe knitted his brows. “I only hope we're talking about the same thing,” he said, in a doubtful tone. Before she could speak, he lifted his hand. “Never mind—I can see for myself in ten minutes more than you could tell me in a lifetime. I've got a plan. I'm going on the Continent in a few days' time, to stay for three or four months. I've got nothing special to do—just to travel about and see things and kill time—I shall probably go to Italy and Switzerland and Paris and the Rhine and all sorts of places—and it occurred to me that I'd take the two youngsters with me. I could get acquainted with them, that way, and they'd be company for me. I've been lonesome so long, it would feel good to have some of my own flesh and blood about me—and I suppose they'd be tickled to death to go.”

“Their schooling and board are paid for up to Christmas,” Mrs. Dabney objected, blankly.

“Bah!” Thorpe prolonged the emphatic exclamation into something good-natured, and ended it with an abrupt laugh. “What on earth difference does that make? I could go and buy their damned colleges, and let the kids wear them for breastpins if I wanted to. You said the girl was going to quit at Christmas in any case. Won't she learn more in four months travelling about on the Continent, than she would trotting around in her own tracks there at Cheltenham?

“And it's even more important for the boy. He's of an age when he ought to see something of the world, and I ought to see something of him. Whatever he's going to do, it's time that he began getting his special start for it.” He added, upon a luminous afterthought: “Perhaps his seeing the old Italian picture galleries and so on will cure him of wanting to be an artist.”

The mother's air displayed resigned acquiescence rather than conviction. “Well—if you really think it's best,” she began, “I don't know that I ought to object. Goodness knows, I don't want to stand in their way. Ever since you sent that four hundred pounds, it hasn't seemed as if they were my children at all. They've scarcely listened to me. And now you come, and propose to take them out of my hands altogether—and all I can say is—I hope you feel entirely justified. And so, shall I write them to come home? When do you think of starting? Julia ought to have some travelling clothes.”

“I can wait till you get her ready—only you must hurry up about it.”

Remembering something, he took out his cheque-book, and spread it on the desk. “I will give you back that thirty,” he said, as he wrote, “and here's a hundred to get the youngsters ready. You won't waste any time, will you? and if you want more tell me.”

A customer had entered the shop, and Thorpe made it the occasion for leaving.

His sister, looking after her brother with the cheque in her hand, was conscious of a thought which seemed to spell itself out in visible letters before her mental vision. “Even now I don't believe in him,” the impalpable legend ran.

CHAPTER IX

GENERAL KERVICK was by habit a punctual man, and Thorpe found him hovering, carefully gloved and fur-coated, in the neighbourhood of the luncheon-room when he arrived. It indeed still lacked a few minutes of the appointed hour when they thus met and went in together. They were fortunate enough to find a small table out on the balcony, sufficiently removed from any other to give privacy to their conversation.

By tacit agreement, the General ordered the luncheon, speaking French to the waiter throughout. Divested of his imposing great-coat, he was seen to be a gentleman of meagre flesh as well as of small stature. He had the Roman nose, narrow forehead, bushing brows, and sharply-cut mouth and chin of a soldier grown old in the contemplation of portraits of the Duke of Wellington. His face and neck were of a dull reddish tint, which seemed at first sight uniformly distributed: one saw afterward that it approached pallor at the veined temples, and ripened into purple in minute patches on the cheeks and the tip of the pointed nose. Against this flushed skin, the closely-cropped hair and small, neatly-waxed moustache were very white indeed. It was a thin, lined, care-worn face, withal, which in repose, and particularly in profile, produced an effect of dignified and philosophical melancholy. The General's over-prominent light blue eyes upon occasion marred this effect, however, by glances of a bold, harsh character, which seemed to disclose unpleasant depths below the correct surface. His manner with the waiters was abrupt and sharp, but undoubtedly they served him very well—much better, in truth, than Thorpe had ever seen them serve anybody before.

Thorpe observed his guest a good deal during the repast, and formed numerous conclusions about him. He ate with palpable relish of every dish, and he emptied his glass as promptly as his host could fill it. There was hardly a word of explanation as to the purpose of their meeting, until the coffee was brought, and they pushed back their chairs, crossed their legs, and lighted cigars.

“I was lucky to catch you with my wire, at such short notice,” Thorpe said then. “I sent two, you know—to your chambers and your club. Which of them found you?”

“Chambers,” said the General. “I rarely dress till luncheon time. I read in bed. There's really nothing else to do. Idleness is the curse of my life.”

“I've been wondering if you'd like a little occupation—of a well-paid sort,” said Thorpe slowly. He realized that it was high time to invent some pretext for his hurried summons of the General.

“My dear sir,” responded the other, “I should like anything that had money in it. And I should very much like occupation, too—if it were, of course, something that was—was suitable to me.”

“Yes,” said Thorpe, meditatively. “I've something in my mind—not at all definite yet—in fact, I don't think I can even outline it to you yet. But I'm sure it will suit you—that is, if I decide to go on with it—and there ought to be seven or eight hundred a year for you in it—for life, mind you.”

The General's gaze, fastened strenuously upon Thorpe, shook a little. “That will suit me very well,” he declared, with feeling. “Whatever I can do for it”—he let the sentence end itself with a significant gesture.

“I thought so,” commented the other, trifling with the spoon in his cup. “But I want you to be open with me. I'm interested in you, and I want to be of use to you. All that I've said, I can do for you. But first, I'm curious to know everything that you can tell me about your circumstances. I'm right in assuming, I suppose, that you're—that you're not any too well-fixed.”

The General helped himself to another little glass of brandy. His mood seemed to absorb the spirit of the liqueur. “Fixed!” he repeated with a peevish snap in his tone. “I'm not 'fixed' at all, as you call it. Good God, sir! They no more care what becomes of me than they do about their old gloves. I gave them name and breeding and position—and everything—and they round on me like—like cuckoos.” His pale, bulging eyes lifted their passionless veil for an instant as he spoke, and flashed with the predatory fierceness of a hawk.

Intuition helped Thorpe to guess whom “they” might mean. The temper visibly rising in the old man's mind was what he had hoped for. He proceeded with an informed caution. “Don't be annoyed if I touch upon family matters,” he said. “It's a part of what I must know, in order to help you. I believe you're a widower, aren't you, General?”

The other, after a quick upward glance, shook his head resentfully. “Mrs. Kervick lives in Italy with HER son-in-law—and her daughter. He is a man of property—and also, apparently, a man of remarkable credulity and patience.” He paused, to scan his companion's face. “They divide him between them,” he said then, from clenched teeth—“and I—mind you—I made the match! He was a young fellow that I found—and I brought him home and introduced him—and I haven't so much as an Italian postage-stamp to show for it. But what interest can you possibly take in all this?” The unamiable glance of his eyes was on the instant surcharged with suspicion.

“How many daughters have you?” Thorpe ventured the enquiry with inward doubts as to its sagacity.

“Three,” answered the General, briefly. It was evident that he was also busy thinking.

“I ask because I met one of them in the country over Sunday,” Thorpe decided to explain.

The old soldier's eyes asked many questions in the moment of silence. “Which one—Edith?—that is, Lady Cressage?” he enquired. “Of course—it would have been her.”

Thorpe nodded. “She made a tremendous impression upon me,” he observed, watching the father with intentness as he let the slow words fall.

“Well she might,” the other replied, simply. “She's supposed to be the most beautiful woman in England.”

“Well—I guess she is,” Thorpe assented, while the two men eyed each other.

“Is the third sister unmarried?” it occurred to him to ask. The tone of the question revealed its perfunctory character.

“Oh—Beatrice—she's of no importance,” the father replied. “She goes in for writing, and all that—she's not a beauty, you know—she lives with an old lady in Scotland. The oldest daughter—Blanche—she has some good looks of her own, but she's a cat. And so you met Edith! May I ask where it was?”

“At Hadlow House—Lord Plowden's place, you know.”

The General's surprise at the announcement was undoubted. “At Plowden's!” he repeated, and added, as if half to himself, “I thought that was all over with, long ago.”

“I wish you'd tell me about it,” said Thorpe, daringly. “I've made it plain to you, haven't I? I'm going to look out for you. And I want you to post me up, here, on some of the things that I don't understand. You remember that it was Plowden who introduced you to me, don't you? It was through him that you got on the Board. Well, certain things that I've seen lead me to suppose that he did that in order to please your daughter. Did you understand it that way?”

“It's quite likely, in one sense,” returned the General. He spoke with much deliberation now, weighing all his words. “He may have thought it would please her; he may not have known how little my poor affairs concerned her.”

“Well, then,” pursued Thorpe, argumentatively, “he had an object in pleasing her. Let me ask the question—did he want to marry her?”

“Most men want to marry her,” was the father's non-committal response. His moustache lifted itself in the semblance of a smile, but the blue eyes above remained coldly vigilant.

“Well—I guess that's so too,” Thorpe remarked. He made a fleeting mental note that there was something about the General which impelled him to think and talk more like an American than ever. “But was HE specially affected that way?”

“I think,” said Kervick, judicially, “I think it was understood that if he had been free to marry a penniless wife, he would have wished to marry her.”

“Do you know,” Thorpe began again, with a kind of diffident hesitation—“do you happen to have formed an idea—supposing that had been the case—would she have accepted him?” “Ah, there you have me,” replied the other. “Who can tell what women will accept, and what they will refuse? My daughter refused Lord Lingfield—and he is an Under-Secretary, and will be Earl Chobham, and a Cabinet Minister, and a rich man. After that, what are you to say?”

“You speak of her as penniless,” Thorpe remarked, with a casual air.

“Six hundred a year,” the father answered. “We could have rubbed along after a fashion on it, if she had had any notions at all of taking my advice. I'm a man of the world, and I could have managed her affairs for her to her advantage, but she insisted upon going off by herself. She showed not the slightest consideration for me—but then I am accustomed to that.”

Thorpe smiled reflectively, and the old gentleman read in this an encouragement to expand his grievances.

“In my position,” he continued, helping himself to still another tiny glass, “I naturally say very little. It is not my form to make complaints and advertise my misfortunes. I daresay it's a fault. I know it kept me back in India—while ever so many whipper-snappers were promoted over my head—because I was of the proud and silent sort. It was a mistake, but it was my nature. I might have put by a comfortable provision for my old age, in those days, if I had been willing to push my claims, and worry the Staff into giving me what was my due. But that I declined to do—and when I was retired, there was nothing for me but the ration of bread and salt which they serve out to the old soldier who has been too modest. I served my Queen, sir, for forty years—and I should be ashamed to tell you the allowance she makes me in my old age. But I do not complain. My mouth is closed. I am an English gentleman and one of Her Majesty's soldiers. That's enough said, eh? Do you follow me? And about my family affairs, I'm not likely to talk to the first comer, eh? But to you I say it frankly—they've behaved badly, damned badly, sir.

“Mrs. Kervick lives in Italy, at the cost of HER son-in-law. He has large estates in one of the healthiest and most beautiful parts; he has a palace, and more money than he knows what to do with—but it seems that he's not my son-in-law. I could do with Italy very well—but that doesn't enter into anyone's calculations. No! let the worn-out old soldier sell boot-laces on the kerb! That's the spirit of woman-kind. And my daughter Edith—does she care what becomes of me? Listen to me—I secured for her the very greatest marriage in England. She would have been Duchess of Glastonbury today if her husband had not played the fool and drowned himself.”

“What's that you say?” put in Thorpe, swiftly.

“It was as good as suicide,” insisted the General, with doggedness. His face had become a deeper red. “They didn't hit it off together, and he left in a huff, and went yachting with his father, who was his own sailing-master—and, as might be expected, they were both drowned. The title would have gone to her son—but no, of course, she had no son—and so it passed to a stranger—an outsider that had been an usher in a school, or something of that sort. You can fancy what a blow this was to me. Instead of being the grandfather of a Duke, I have a childless widow thrust back upon my hands! Fine luck, eh? And then, to cap all, she takes her six hundred a year and goes off by herself, and gives me the cold shoulder completely. What is it Shakespeare says? 'How sharper than a serpent's teeth'——”

Thorpe brought his fist down upon the table with an emphasis which abruptly broke the quotation in half. He had been frowning moodily at his guest for some minutes, relighting his cigar more than once meanwhile. He had made a mental calculation of what the old man had had to drink, and had reassured himself as to his condition. His garrulity might have an alcoholic basis, but his wits were clear enough. It was time to take a new line with him.

“I don't want to hear you abuse your daughter,” he admonished him now, with a purpose glowing steadily in his firm glance. “Damn it all, why shouldn't she go off by herself, and take care of her own money her own way? It's little enough, God knows, for such a lady as she is. Why should you expect her to support you out of it? No—sit still! Listen to me!”—he stretched out his hand, and laid it with restraining heaviness upon the General's arm—“you don't want to have any row with me. You can't afford it. Just think that over to yourself—you—can't afford—it.”

Major-General Kervick's prominent blue eyes had bulged forth in rage till their appearance had disconcerted the other's gaze. They remained still too much in the foreground, as it were, and the angry scarlets and violets of the cheeks beneath them carried an unabated threat of apoplexy—but their owner, after a moment's silence, made a sign with his stiff white brows that the crisis was over. “You must remember that—that I have a father's feelings,” he gasped then, huskily.

Thorpe nodded, with a nonchalance which was not wholly affected. He had learned what he wanted to know about this veteran. If he had the fierce meannesses of a famished old dog, he had also a dog's awe of a stick. It was almost too easy to terrorize him.

“Oh, I make allowances for all that,” Thorpe began, vaguely. “But it's important that you should understand me. I'm this sort of a man: whatever I set out to do, and put my strength into it, that I do! I kill every pheasant I fire at; Plowden will tell you that! It's a way I have. To those that help me, and are loyal to me, I'm the best friend in the world. To those that get in my way, or try to trip me up, I'm the devil—just plain devil. Now then—you're getting three hundred a year from my Company, that is to say from me, simply to oblige my friend Plowden. You don't do anything to earn this money; you're of no earthly use on the Board. If I chose, I could put you off at the end of the year as easily as I can blow out this match. But I propose not only to keep you on, but to make you independent. Why do I do that? You should ask yourself that question. It can't be on account of anything you can do for the Company. What else then? Why, first and foremost, because you are the father of your daughter.”

“Let me tell you the kind of man I am,” said the General, inflating his chest, and speaking with solemnity.

“Oh, I know the kind of man you are,” Thorpe interrupted him, coolly. “I want to talk now.”

“It was merely,” Kervick ventured, in an injured tone, “that I can be as loyal as any man alive to a true friend.”

“Well, I'll be the true friend, then,” said Thorpe, with impatient finality. “And now this is what I want to say. I'm going to be a very rich man. You're not to say so to anybody, mind you, until the thing speaks for itself. We're keeping dark for a few months, d'ye see?—lying low. Then, as I say, I shall be a very rich man. Well now, I wouldn't give a damn to be rich, unless I did with my money the things that I wanted to do, and got the things with it that I wanted to get. Whatever takes my fancy, that's what I'll do.”

He paused for a moment, mentally to scrutinize a brand-new project which seemed, by some surreptitious agency, to have already taken his fancy. It was a curious project; there were attractive things about it, and objections to it suggested themselves as well.

“I may decide,” he began speaking again, still revolving this hypothetical scheme in his thoughts—“I may want to—well, here's what occurs to me as an off-chance. I take an interest in your daughter, d'ye see? and it seems a low-down sort of thing to me that she should be so poor. Well, then—I might say to you, here's two thousand a year, say, made over to you in your name, on the understanding that you turn over half of it, say, to her. She could take it from you, of course, as her father. You could say you made it out of the Company. Of course it might happen, later on, that I might like to have a gentle hint dropped to her, d'ye see, as to where it really came from. Mind, I don't say this is what is going to be done. It merely occurred to me.”

After waiting for a moment for some comment, he added a second thought: “You'd have to set about making friends with her, you know. In any case, you'd better begin at that at once.”

The General remained buried in reflection. He lighted a cigarette, and poured out for himself still another petit verre. His pursed lips and knitted brows were eloquent of intense mental activity.

“Well, do you see any objections to it?” demanded Thorpe, at last.

“I do not quite see the reasons for it,” answered the other, slowly. “What would you gain by it?”

“How do you mean—gain?” put in the other, with peremptory intolerance of tone.

General Kervick spread his hands in a quick little gesture. These hands were withered, but remarkably well-kept. “I suppose one doesn't do something for nothing,” he said. “I see what I would gain, and what she would gain, but I confess I don't see what advantage you would get out of it.”

“No-o, I daresay you don't,” assented Thorpe, with sneering serenity. “But what does that matter? You admit that you see what you would gain. That's enough, isn't it?”

The older man's veined temples twitched for an instant. He straightened himself in his chair, and looked hard at his companion. There was a glistening of moisture about his staring eyes.

“It surely isn't necessary—among gentlemen”—he began, cautiously picking his phrases—“to have quite so much that's unpleasant, is it?”

“No—you're right—I didn't mean to be so rough,” Thorpe declared, with spontaneous contrition. Upon the instant, however, he perceived the danger that advantage might be taken of his softness. “I'm a plain-spoken man,” he went on, with a hardening voice, “and people must take me as they find me. All I said was, in substance, that I intended to be of service to you—and that that ought to interest you.”

The General seemed to have digested his pique. “And what I was trying to say,” he commented deferentially, “was that I thought I saw ways of being of service to you. But that did not seem to interest you at all.”

“How—service?” Thorpe, upon consideration, consented to ask.

“I know my daughter so much better than you do,” explained the other; “I know Plowden so much better; I am so much more familiar with the whole situation than you can possibly be—I wonder that you won't listen to my opinion. I don't suggest that you should be guided by it, but I think you should hear it.”

“I think so, too,” Thorpe declared, readily enough. “What IS your opinion?”

General Kervick sipped daintily at his glass, and then gave an embarrassed little laugh. “But I can't form what you might call an opinion,” he protested, apologetically, “till I understand a bit more clearly what it is you propose to yourself. You mustn't be annoyed if I return to that—'still harping on my daughter,' you know. If I MUST ask the question—is it your wish to marry her?”

Thorpe looked blankly at his companion, as if he were thinking of something else. When he spoke, it was with no trace of consciousness that the question had been unduly intimate.

“I can't in the least be sure that I shall ever marry,” he replied, thoughtfully. “I may, and I may not. But—starting with that proviso—I suppose I haven't seen any other woman that I'd rather think about marrying than—than the lady we're speaking of. However, you see it's all in the air, so far as my plans go.”

“In the air be it,” the soldier acquiesced, plausibly. “Let us consider it as if it were in the air—a possible contingency. This is what I would say—My—'the lady we are speaking of' is by way of being a difficult lady—'uncertain, coy, and hard to please' as Scott says, you know—and it must be a very skilfully-dressed fly indeed which brings her to the surface. She's been hooked once, mind, and she has a horror of it. Her husband was the most frightful brute and ruffian, you know. I was strongly opposed to the marriage, but her mother carried it through. But—yes—about her—I think she is afraid to marry again. If she does ever consent, it will be because poverty has broken her nerve. If she is kept on six hundred a year, she may be starved, so to speak, into taking a husband. If she had sixteen hundred—either she would never marry at all, or she would be free to marry some handsome young pauper who caught her fancy. That would be particularly like her. You would be simply endowing some needy fellow, beside losing her for yourself. D'ye follow me? If you'll leave it to me, I can find a much better way than that—better for all of us.”

“Hm!” said Thorpe, and pondered the paternal statement. “I see what you mean,” he remarked at last. “Yes—I see.”

The General preserved silence for what seemed a long time, deferring to the reverie of his host. When finally he offered a diversion, in the form of a remark about the hour, Thorpe shook himself, and then ponderously rose to his feet. He took his hat and coat from the waiter, and made his way out without a word.

At the street door, confronting the waning foliage of the Embankment garden, Kervick was emboldened to recall to him the fact of his presence. “Which way are you going?” he asked.

“I don't know,” Thorpe answered absently. “I think—I think I'll take a walk on the Embankment—by myself.”

The General could not repress all symptoms of uneasiness. “But when am I to see you again?” he enquired, with an effect of solicitude that defied control.

“See me?” Thorpe spoke as if the suggestion took him by surprise.

“There are things to be settled, are there not?” the other faltered, in distressed doubt as to the judicious tone to take. “You spoke, you know, of—of some employment that—that would suit me.”

Thorpe shook himself again, and seemed by an effort to recall his wandering attention. “Oh yes,” he said, with lethargic vagueness—“I haven't thought it out yet. I'll let you know—within the week, probably.”

With the briefest of nods, he turned and crossed the road. Walking heavily, with rounded shoulders and hands plunged deep in his overcoat pockets, he went through the gateway, and chose a path at random. To the idlers on the garden benches who took note of him as he passed, he gave the impression of one struggling with nausea. To his own blurred consciousness, he could not say which stirred most vehemently within him, his loathing for the creature he had fed and bought, or his bitter self-disgust.

The General, standing with exaggerated exactness upon the doorstep, had followed with his bulging eyes the receding figure. He stood still regarding the gateway, mentally summarizing the events of the day, after the other had vanished. At last, nestling his chin comfortably into the fur of his collar, he smiled with self-satisfaction. “After all,” he said to himself, “there are always ways of making a cad feel that he is a cad, in the presence of a gentleman.”

CHAPTER X

ON a Sunday afternoon, early in February, Thorpe journeyed with his niece and nephew from Bern to Montreux.

The young people, with maps and a guide-book open, sat close together at the left side of the compartment. The girl from time to time rubbed the steam from the window with a napkin out of the lunch-basket. They both stared a good deal through this window, with frequent exclamations of petulance.

“Isn't it too provoking!” cried the girl, turning to her uncle at last. “This is where we are now—according to Baedeker: 'As the train proceeds we enjoy a view of the Simmen-Thal and Freiburg mountains to the left, the Moleson being conspicuous.' And look at it! For all one can see, we might as well be at Redhill.”

“It is pretty hard luck,” Thorpe assented, passively glancing past her at the pale, neutral-tinted wall of mist which obscured the view. “But hang it all—it must clear up some time. Just you have patience, and you'll see some Alps yet.”

“Where we're going,” the young man interposed, “the head-porter told me it was always cloudier than anywhere else.”

“I don't think that can be so,” Thorpe reasoned, languidly, from his corner. “It's a great winter resort, I'm told, and it rather stands to reason, doesn't it? that people wouldn't flock there if it was so bad as all that.”

“The kind of people we've seen travelling in Switzerland,” said the girl—“they would do anything.”

Thorpe smiled, with tolerant good humour. “Well, you can comfort yourself with the notion that you'll be coming again. The mountains'll stay here, all right,” he assured her. The young people smiled back at him, and with this he rearranged his feet in a new posture on the opposite seat, lighted another cigar, and pillowed his head once more against the hard, red-plush cushion. Personally, he did not in the least resent the failure of the scenery.

For something more than three months, this purposeless pleasure-tour had been dragging him about from point to point, sleeping in strange beds, eating extraordinarily strange food, transacting the affairs of a sightseer among people who spoke strange languages, until he was surfeited with the unusual. It had all been extremely interesting, of course, and deeply improving—but he was getting tired of talking to nobody but waiters, and still more so of having nothing to do which he could not as well leave undone if he chose. After a few days more of Switzerland—for they had already gazed with blank faces at this universal curtain of mist from such different points of view as Lucerne, Interlaken, and Thun—it was clear to him that they would, as he phrased it, to himself, make a break for home. Unless, indeed, something happened at Montreux. Ah, would anything happen at Montreux? For four days his mind had been automatically reverting to that question; it lurked continually in the background of his thoughts, now, as he smoked and idly ruminated, on his way southward through the fog.

All the rest of the prolonged trip had been without any specific motive, so far as he was concerned. The youngsters had planned all its routes and halts and details of time and connections, and he had gone along, with cheerful placidity, to look at the things they bade him observe, and to pay the bills. Perhaps in all things their tastes had not been his tastes. He would have liked more of Paris, he fancied, and less of the small Dutch and North German towns which they seemed to fancy so much. Still, the beer was good—and really their happiness, as a spectacle, had given him more satisfaction than a thousand miles of boulevards could have done.

He liked this niece and nephew of his more than he could ever have imagined himself liking any young people. They had been shy with him at the outset—and for the first week his experiment had been darkened by the belief that, between themselves, they did not deem him quite good enough. He had been wise enough, then, to have it out with the girl—she was the one to whom he felt it easiest to talk frankly—and had discovered, to his immense relief, that they conceived him to be regarding them as encumbrances. At breakfast next morning, with tactful geniality, he set everything right, and thereafter they were all extremely happy together.

So far as he could judge, they were very superior young people, both intellectually and spiritually. The girl spoke French, and her brother German, with what seemed to him remarkable proficiency. Their young minds were the repositories of an astounding amount of information: they knew who Charles the Bold was; they pointed out to their uncle the distinction between Gothic and Romanesque arches; they explained what was the matter with the Anabaptists; they told him that the story of the Bishop and the rats at Bingen was a baseless myth, and that probably there had never been any such man as William Tell. Nor did they get all this out of the guide-books which they pored over with such zest. It was impossible not to see that they were familiar with large numbers of the subjects that these books discussed, and that the itinerary which they marked out had reference to desires and interests that they had cultivated for themselves.

Julia, upon even first sight, made a much pleasanter impression than her mother's hesitating description had prepared him for. As he came to know her well, he ceased to remember that there was a question in any mind as to her being a pretty girl. There was less colour in her face than he could have wished. Her smooth, pallid skin, almost waxen in texture, had a suggestion of delicate health which sometimes troubled him a little, but which appealed to the tenderness in his nature all the time. The face was unduly thin, perhaps, but this, and the wistful glance of the large grey eyes in repose, made up an effect that Thorpe found touched him a good deal. Even when she was in visibly high spirits, the look in these eyes seemed to him to be laying claim to his protection. She could be merry upon occasion, in a gentle and tranquil way, and as her self-confidence expanded under the shelter of their growing intimacy, she disclosed to her uncle plenty of initiative and individuality—but what he felt in her most was a peculiarly sweet and girlish trustfulness, which made him like himself more than he had ever done before. He could feel that he was at his very best—a hitherto unsuspected best—when Julia was about. He wanted to buy for her everything in the windows upon which she bestowed the most casual approving glance. It was a delight merely to look at her, and to meditate upon the felicity of being able to do things for so charming a girl.

Alfred made a less direct demand upon his uncle's admiration, but he was a very good fellow all round. He was big and fair and muscular, and nothing about him but his spectacles seemed in Thorpe's mind to be related to his choice of art as a profession. That so robust and hearty a young fellow should wish to put paint on a canvas with small brushes, was to the uncle an unaccountable thing. It was almost as if he had wanted to knit, or do embroidery. Of the idleness and impatience of discipline which his mother had seemed to allege against him, Thorpe failed to detect any signs. The young man was never very late in the morning, and, beside his tireless devotion to the task of hunting up old pictures in out-of-the-way places, did most of the steward's work of the party with intelligence and precision. He studied the time-tables, audited the hotel-bills, looked after the luggage, got up the street-maps of towns and the like, to such good purpose that they never lost a train, or a bag, or themselves. Truly, an excellent young man. Thorpe noted with especial satisfaction his fine, kindly big-brother attitude toward his sister Julia—and it was impossible for him to avoid the conviction that Louisa was a simpleton not to appreciate such children. They did not often allude to their mother; when they did, it was in language the terms of which seemed more affectionate than the tone—and Thorpe said often to himself that he did not blame them. It was not so much that they had outgrown their mother's point of view. They had never occupied it.

The journey, so far as Thorpe comprehended its character, had been shaped with about equal regard for Julia's interest in the romance of history, and Alfred's more technical and practical interest in art. Each had sufficient sympathy with the tastes of the other, however, to prevent any tendency to separation. They took their uncle one day to see where William the Silent was assassinated, and the next to observe how Rembrandt's theory of guild portrait-painting differed from Van der Helst's, with a common enthusiasm. He scrutinized with patient loyalty everything that they indicated to him, and not infrequently they appeared to like very much the comments he offered. These were chiefly of a sprightly nature, and when Julia laughed over them he felt that she was very near to him indeed.

Thus they saw Paris together—where Thorpe did relinquish some of the multiplied glories of the Louvre to sit in front of a cafe by the Opera House and see the funny people go past—and thence, by Bruges and Antwerp, to Holland, where nobody could have imagined there were as many pictures as Thorpe saw with his own weary eyes. There were wonderful old buildings at Lubeck for Julia's eyes to glisten over, and pictures at

Berlin, Dresden, and Dusseldorf for Alfred.

The assumption existed that the excursion into the Thuringenwald to see the memorials of Luther was especially for the uncle's benefit, and he tried solicitously to say or look nothing which might invalidate it. There were other places in Germany, from Mainz to Munich, which he remembered best by their different beers. They spent Christmas at Vienna, where Julia had heard that its observance was peculiarly insisted upon, and then they saw the Tyrol in its heaviest vesture of winter snows, and beautiful old Basle, where Alfred was crazier about Holbein than he had been at Munich over Brouwer. Thorpe looked very carefully at the paintings of both men, and felt strengthened in his hopes that when Alfred got a little older he would see that this picture business was not the thing for a young gentleman with prospects to go into.

It was at Basle that Thorpe received a letter from London which directly altered the plans of the party. He had had several other letters from London which had produced no such effect. Through Semple, he had followed in outline the unobtrusive campaign to secure a Special Settlement, and had learned that the Stock Exchange Committee, apparently without opposition, had granted one for the first week in February.

Even this news, tremendously important as it was, did not prompt Thorpe to interfere with the children's projects. There was no longer any point in remaining away from London; there were, indeed, numerous reasons for a prompt return. But he was loth to deprive the youngsters of that descent into smiling, sunlit Italy upon which they had so fondly dwelt in fancy, and after all Semple could do all that was needful to be done for another month.

So they went to Basle, and here it was that another kind of letter came. It was in a strange hand, at once cramped and fluttering, which puzzled the recipient a good deal; it was a long time before even the signature unravelled itself. Then he forced himself to decipher it, sentence by sentence, with a fierce avidity. It was from General Kervick.

The next morning Thorpe astonished his young companions by suggesting an alteration in their route. In a roundabout and tentative fashion—in which more suspicious observers must have detected something shamefaced—he mentioned that he had always heard a great deal about Montreux as a winter-resort. The fact that he called it Montroox raised in Julia's mind a fleeting wonder from whom it could be that he had heard so much about it, but it occurred to neither her nor her brother to question his entire good faith. Their uncle had displayed, hitherto, a most comforting freedom from discrimination among European towns; he had, indeed, assured them many times that they were all one to him. That he should suddenly turn up now with a favourite winter-resort of his own selection surprised them considerably, but, upon reflection, it also pleased them. He had humoured all their wishes with such unfailing and bountiful kindness, that it was a delight to learn that there was something he wanted to do. They could not finish their breakfast till the guide-book had been brought to the table.

“Oh! How splendid!” Julia had cried then. “The Castle of Chillon is there!”

“Why of course!” said Thorpe, complacently.

They laughed gayly at him for pretending that he had known this, and he as good-humouredly accepted their banter. He drew a serious long breath of relief, however, when their backs were turned. It had gone off much better than he had feared.

Now, on this Sunday afternoon, as the train made its sure-footed way across the mountains, the thought that he was actually to alight at Montreux at once fascinated and depressed him. He was annoyed with himself for suffering it to get such a hold upon his mind. What was there in it, anyway? There was a big hotel there, and he and his youngsters were to stop at it, and if he accidentally encountered a certain lady who was also stopping there—and of course the meeting would bear upon its face the stamp of pure chance—what of it?

And if he did meet her, thus fortuitously—what would happen then? No doubt a lady of her social position met abroad great numbers of people that she had met at home. It would not in any way surprise her—this chance encounter of which he thought so much. Were there sufficient grounds for imagining that it would even interest her? He forced his mind up to this question, as it were, many times, and invariably it shied and evaded the leap.

There had been times, at Hadlow House, when Lady Cressage had seemed supremely indifferent to the fact of his existence, and there had been other times when it had appeared manifest that he pleased her—or better, perhaps, that she was willing to take note of how much she pleased him. It must have been apparent to her—this fact that she produced such an impression upon him. He reasoned this out satisfactorily to himself. These beautiful women, trained from childhood for the conquest of a rich husband, must have cultivated an extraordinary delicacy of consciousness, in such matters. They must have developed for themselves what might be called a sixth sense—a power of feeling in the air what the men about were thinking of them. More than once he had caught a glimmer of what he felt to be the operation of this sense, in the company of Lady Cressage. He could not say that it had been discernible in her glance, or her voice, or her manner, precisely, but he was sure that he had seen it, somehow.

But even assuming all this—admitting that in October, on a wet Sunday, in the tedium of a small country-house party, she had shown some momentary satisfaction in the idea that he was profoundly impressed by her—did it at all follow that in February, amid the distractions of a fashionable winter-resort, and probably surrounded by hosts of friends, she would pay any attention to him whatever? The abject fear that she might not even remember him—might not know him from Adam when he stood before her—skulked about in the labyrinths of his mind, but he drove it back whenever it showed itself. That would be too ignominious.

The young people at the other side of the compartment, forever wiping the window with the napkin, and straining their eyes to see the invisible, diverted his unsettled attention. A new perception of how much he liked them and enjoyed having them with him, took hold of his thoughts. It had not occurred to him before, with any definiteness, that he would be insupportably lonely when the time came to part with them.

Now, when he dwelt upon it, it made him feel sad and old.

He said to himself at once, with decision, that there need be no parting at all. He would take a house without delay, and they should live with him. He could not doubt that this would be agreeable to them; it would solve every problem for him.

His fancy sketched out the natural and legitimate extensions of this project. There would be, first of all, a house in town—a furnished house of a modest sort, having no pretension save to provide a cheerful temporary shelter for three people who liked one another. Here the new household would take shape, and get its right note of character. Apparently Louisa would not be urged to form part of this household. He said to himself with frankness that he didn't want her, and there had been nothing to indicate that her children would pine for her. She showed good sense when she said that her place was in the shop, and in her ancestral home over the shop. No doubt there would be a certain awkwardness, visible to others if not to themselves, about her living in one part of London and her children in another. But here also her good sense would come on;—and, besides, this furnished house in town would be a mere brief overture to the real thing—the noble country mansion he was going to have, with gardens and horses and hounds and artificial lakes and deer parks and everything. Quite within the year he would be able to realize this consummation of his dreams.

How these nice young people would revel in such a place—and how they would worship him for having given it to them for a home! His heart warmed within him as he thought of this. He smiled affectionately at the picture Julia made, polishing the glass with vehement circular movements of her slight arm, and then grimacing in comic vexation at the deadly absence of landscape outside. Was there ever a sweeter or more lovable girl in this world? Would there have to be some older woman to manage the house, at the beginning? he wondered. He should like it immensely if that could be avoided. Julia looked fragile and inexperienced—but she would be twenty-one next month. Surely that was a mature enough age for the slight responsibility of presiding over servants who should be the best that money could buy. Many girls were married, and given households of their own to manage, when they were even younger.

This reflection raised an obstacle against the smooth-flowing current of his thoughts. Supposing that Julia got the notion of marrying—how miserable that would make everything. Very likely she would never do any such thing; he had observed in her no shadow of a sign that a thought of matrimony had ever crossed her brain. Yet that was a subject upon which, of course, she could not be asked to give pledges, even to herself.

Thorpe tried to take a liberal view of this matter. He argued to himself that there would be no objection at all to incorporating Julia's husband into the household, assuming that she went to the length of taking one, and that he was a good fellow. On this latter point, it was only the barest justice to Julia's tastes and judgment to take it for granted that he would be a good fellow. Yet the uncle felt uneasily that this would alter things for the worse. The family party, with that hypothetical young man in it, could never be quite so innocently and completely happy as—for instance—the family party in this compartment had been during these wonderful three months.

Mechanically he rubbed the window beside him, and turned to look out with a certain fixedness—as if he might chance to catch a glimpse of the bridegroom with whom Julia would have it in her power to disturb the serenity of their prospective home. A steep white cliff, receding sullenly against the dim grey skyline; a farmhouse grotesquely low for its size, crouching under big shelving galleries heaped with snow; an opening in front, to the right, where vaguely there seemed to be a valley into which they would descend—he saw these things. They remained in his mind afterward as a part of something else that he saw, with his mental vision, at the same moment—a strikingly real and vivid presentment of Lady Cressage, attired as he had seen her in the saddle, her light hair blown about a little under her hat, a spot of colour in the exquisite cheek, the cold, impersonal dignity of a queen in the beautiful profile.

The picture was so actual for the instant that he uttered an involuntary exclamation—and then looked hastily round to see whether his companions had heard it. Seemingly they had not; he lolled again upon the comfortless cushion, and strove to conjure up once more the apparition. Nothing satisfactory came of the effort. Upon consideration, he grew uncertain as to whether he had seen anything at all. At the most it was a kind of half-dream which had visited him. He yawned at the thought, and lighted a fresh cigar. All at once, his mind had become too indolent to do any more thinking. A shapeless impression that there would be a good many things to think over later on flitted into his brain and out again.

“Well, how are the mountains using you, now?” he called out to his niece.

“Oh, I could shake them!” she declared. “Listen to this: 'A view of singular beauty, embracing the greater part of the Lake of Geneva, and the surrounding mountains, is suddenly disclosed.' That's where we are now—or were a minute ago. You can see that there is some sort of valley in front of us—but that is all. If I could only see one mountain with snow on it——”

“Why, it's all mountains and all snow, when you come to that,” Thorpe insisted, with jocose perversity. “You're on mountains yourself, all the time.”

“You know what I mean,” she retorted. “I want to see something like the coloured pictures in the hotels.”

“Oh, probably it will be bright sunlight tomorrow,” he said, for perhaps the twentieth time that day.

“There—that looks like water!” said Alfred. “See? just beyond the village. Yes, it is water. There's your Lake of Geneva, at all events.”

“But it isn't the right colour,” protested Julia, peering through the glass. “It's precisely like everything else: it's of no colour at all. And they always paint it such a lovely blue! Really, uncle, the Swiss Government ought to return you your money.”

“You wait till you see it tomorrow—or next day,” said the uncle, vaguely. He closed his eyes, and welcomed a drowsy mood. As he went off to sleep, the jolting racket of the train mellowed itself into a murmur of “tomorrow or next day, tomorrow or next day,” in his ears.

CHAPTER XI

FROM their windows, high up and at the front of the big hotel, Julia looked down upon the Lake of Geneva. She was in such haste to behold it that she had not so much as unbuttoned her gloves; she held her muff still in her hand. After one brief glance, she groaned aloud with vexation.

Beyond the roadway, and the deserted miniature pier of Territet, both dishevelled under melting and mud-stained snow, there lay a patch of water—motionless, inconspicuous, of a faded drab colour—which at some small distance out vaguely ceased to look like water and, yet a little further out, became part and parcel of the dull grey mist. Save for the forlorn masts of a couple of fishing boats, beached under the shelter of the pier, there was no proof in sight that this was a lake at all. It was as uninspiring to the eye as a pool of drippings from umbrellas in a porch.

While her uncle and brother occupied themselves with the luggage being brought up by the porters, she opened a window and stepped out upon the tiny balcony. A flaring sign on the inner framework of this balcony besought her in Swiss-French, in the interests of order, not to feed the birds. The injunction seemed meaningless to her until she perceived, over by the water, several gulls lazily wheeling about. They were almost as grey as the fog they circled in. Suddenly they seemed to perceive her in turn, and, swerving sharply, came floating toward the hotel, with harsh, almost menacing cries. She hurried in, and shut the window with decision. It seemed to her that the smile with which, as she turned, she was able to meet her uncle's look, was a product of true heroism.

Apparently this smile did not altogether delude him. “Oh, now, you mustn't get down on your luck,” he adjured her. “We're going to be awfully cozy here. Have you seen your room? It's just there, in a little alley to the right of the door. They say it has an even finer view than these windows. Oh, you needn't laugh—this is the best view in the world, I'm told by those who know. And as a winter-resort, why——”

“I say, look here!” The interruption came from Alfred, who, having gone out on one of the balconies, put in his head now to summon them. “Come here! Here's some fun.”

He pointed out to Thorpe the meaning of the inscription on the sign, and then pulled him forward to observe its practical defiance. A score of big gulls were flapping and dodging in excited confusion close before them, filling their ears with a painful clamour. Every now and again, one of the birds, recovering its senses in the hurly-burly, would make a curving swoop downward past the rows of windows below, and triumphantly catch in its beak something that had been thrown into the air.

Thorpe, leaning over his railing, saw that a lady on a balcony one floor below, and some yards to the left, was feeding the birds. She laughed aloud as she did so, and said something over her shoulder to a companion who was not visible.

“Well, that's pretty cool,” he remarked to his niece, who had come to stand beside him. “She's got the same sign down there that we've got. I can see it from here. Or perhaps she can't read French.”

“Or perhaps she isn't frightened of the hotel people,” suggested the girl. She added, after a little, “I think I'll feed them myself in the morning. I certainly shall if the sun comes out—as a sort of Thanksgiving festival, you know.”

Her uncle seemed not to hear her. He had been struck by the exceptional grace of the gestures with which the pieces of bread were flung forth. The hands and wrists of this lady were very white and shapely. The movements which she made with them, all unaware of observation as she was, and viewed as he viewed them from above, were singularly beautiful in their unconstraint. It was in its way like watching some remarkable fine dancing, he thought. He could not see much of her face, from his perch, but she was tall and fashionably clad. There was a loose covering of black lace thrown over her head, but once, as she turned, he could see that her hair was red. Even in this fleeting glimpse, the unusual tint attracted his attention: there was a brilliancy as of fire in it. Somehow it seemed to make a claim upon his memory. He continued to stare down at the stranger with an indefinable sense that he knew something about her.

Suddenly another figure appeared upon the balcony—and in a flash he comprehended everything. These idiotic, fighting gluttons of gulls had actually pointed out to him the object of his search. It was Lady Cressage who stood in the doorway, there just below him—and her companion, the red-haired lady who laughed hotel-rules to scorn, was the American heiress who had crossed the ocean in his ship, and whom he had met later on at Hadlow. What was her name—Martin? No—Madden. He confronted the swift impression that there was something odd about these two women being together. At Hadlow he had imagined that they did not like each other. Then he reflected as swiftly that women probably had their own rules about such matters. He seemed to have heard, or read, perhaps, that females liked and disliked each other with the most capricious alternations and on the least tangible of grounds. At all events, here they were together now. That was quite enough.

The two ladies had gone in, and closed their window. The sophisticated birds, with a few ungrateful croaks of remonstrance, had drifted away again to the water. His niece had disappeared from his elbow. Still Thorpe remained with his arms folded on the railing, his eyes fixed on the vacant balcony, below to the left.

When at last he went inside, the young people were waiting for him with the project of a stroll before dinner. The light was failing, but there was plenty of time. They had ascertained the direction in which Chillon lay; a servant had assured them that it was only a few minutes' walk, and Alfred was almost certain that he had seen it from the window.

Thorpe assented with a certain listlessness, which they had never noted in his manner before, but when Julia begged him not to stir if he were in the slightest degree tired, he replied honestly enough that he would do anything rather than be left alone. Then, of course, they said, there should be no walk, but to this he would not listen. The party trooped downstairs, accordingly, and out into the street. The walking was vile, but, as Julia had long ago said, if they were to be deterred by slush they would never get anywhere or see anything.

It proved to be too late and too dark to either enter the castle or get much of an idea of its exterior. Returning, they paused again to look into the lighted window of the nice little book-shop. The numerous photographs of what they were entitled to behold from the windows of their hotel seemed more convincing than photographs usually were. As the young people inspected them, they became reassured. It was not credible that such a noble vista would forever deny itself to such earnest pilgrims. When their uncle introduced this time his ancient formula about the certainty of brilliant sunshine in the morning, they somehow felt like believing him.

"Yes—I really think it must change," Julia declared, with her fascinated glance upon the photographs.

Alfred looked at his watch. "We'd better get along to the hotel, hadn't we?" he suggested.

"By the way"—Thorpe began, with a certain uneasiness of manner—"speaking of dinner, wouldn't you like to dine at the big table d'hote, instead of up in our sitting-room?"

"If you're tired of our dining alone—by all means," answered Julia, readily. There was obvious surprise, however, in both her look and tone.

"Tired nothing!" he assured her. "I like it better than anything else in the world. But what I mean is—I was thinking, seeing that this is such a great winter-resort, and all the swagger people of Europe come here—that probably you youngsters would enjoy seeing the crowd."

Julia's glance, full of affectionate appreciation, showed how wholly she divined his spirit of self-sacrifice. "We wouldn't care in the least for it," she declared. "We enjoy being a little party by ourselves every whit as much as you do—and we both hate the people you get at table d'hotes—and besides, for that matter, if there are any real swells here, you may be sure they dine in their own rooms."

"Why, of course!" Thorpe exclaimed swiftly, in palpable self-rebuke. "I don't know what I could have been thinking of. Of course they would dine in their rooms."

Next morning, Thorpe rose earlier than ever—with the impression of a peculiarly restless and uncomfortable night behind him. It was not until he had shaved and dressed that he noted the altered character of the air outside. Although it was not fully daylight yet, he could see the outlines of the trees and vinerows on the big, snow-clad hill, which monopolized the prospect from his window, all sharp and clear cut, as if he were looking at them through an opera-glass. He went at once to the sitting-room, and thrust the curtains aside from one of the windows.

A miracle had been wrought in the night. The sky overhead was serenely cloudless; the lake beneath, stirring softly under some faint passing breeze, revealed its full breadth with crystalline distinctness. Between sky and water there stretched across the picture a broad, looming, dimly-defined band of shadow, marked here and there at the top by little slanting patches of an intensely glowing white. He looked at this darkling middle distance for a moment or two without comprehension. Then he turned and hurriedly moved to the door of Julia's room and beat upon it.

"Get up!" he called through the panels. "Here's your sunrise—here's your Alpine view. Go to your window and see it!"

A clear voice, not unmirthful, replied: "I've been watching it for half an hour, thanks. Isn't it glorious?"

He was more fortunate at the opposite door, for Alfred was still asleep. The young man, upon hearing the news, however, made a toilet of unexampled brevity, and came breathlessly forth. Thorpe followed him to the balcony, where he stood collarless and uncombed, with the fresh morning breeze blowing his hair awry, his lips parted, his eyes staring with what the uncle felt to be a painful fixedness before him.

Thorpe had seen many mountains in many lands. They did not interest him very much. He thought, however, that he could see now why people who had no mountains of their own should get excited about Switzerland. He understood a number of these sentimental things now, for that matter, which had been Greek to him three months before. Unreceptive as his philistinism may have seemed to these delightful youngsters, it was apparent enough to him that they had taught him a great deal. If he could not hope to share their ever-bubbling raptures and enthusiasms, at least he had come to comprehend them after a fashion, and even to discern sometimes what it was that stirred them.

He watched his nephew now—having first assured himself by a comprehensive downward glance that no other windows of the hotel-front were open. The young man seemed tremendously moved, far too much so to talk. Thorpe ventured once some remarks about the Mexican mountains, which were ever so much bigger, as he remembered them, but Alfred paid no heed. He continued to gaze across the lake, watching in rapt silence one facet after another catch the light, and stand out from the murky gloom, radiantly white, till at last the whole horizon was a mass of shining minarets and domes, and the sun fell full on his face. Then, with a long-drawn sigh, he turned, re-entered the room, and threw himself into a chair.

"It's too good!" he declared, with a half-groan. "I didn't know it would be like that."

"Why nothing's too good for us, man," his uncle told him.

"THAT is," said the boy, simply, and Thorpe, after staring for a moment, smiled and rang the bell for breakfast.

When Julia made her appearance, a few minutes later, the table was already laid, and the waiter was coming in with the coffee.

"I thought we'd hurry up breakfast," her uncle explained, after she had kissed him and thanked him for the sunrise he had so successfully predicted—"because I knew you'd both be crazy to get out."

He had not over-estimated their eagerness, which was so great, indeed, that they failed to note the excessive tranquility of his own demeanour. He ate with such unusual deliberation, on this exciting morning, that they found themselves at the end of their repast when, apparently, he had but made a beginning.

"Now you mustn't wait for me at all," he announced to them then. "I'm a little tired this morning—and I think I'd just like to lie around and smoke, and perhaps read one of your novels. But you two must get your things on and lose no time in getting out. This is the very best time of day, you know—for Alpine scenery. I'd hate to have you miss any of it."

Under his kindly if somewhat strenuous insistence, they went to their rooms to prepare for an immediate excursion. He was so anxious to have them see all there was to be seen that, when Julia returned, properly cloaked and befurred, and stood waiting at the window, he scolded a little.

“What on earth is that boy doing?” he exclaimed, with a latent snarl in his tone which was novel to her ear. “He'll keep you here till noon!”

“He's shaving, I think. He won't be long,” she replied, with great gentleness. After a moment's pause, she turned from the window and came gayly forward.

“Oh, I forgot: I was going to feed the birds. There are several of them out there now.” As she spoke, she busily broke up some of the rolls on the table. Her face was bright with the pleasure of the thought.

“If you don't much mind, Julia,” her uncle began, with almost pleading intonations, “I rather think I wouldn't feed those birds. The rule is there before our eyes, you know—and it's always been my idea that if you're at a hotel it's the correct thing to abide by its rules. It's just an idea of mine—and I daresay, if you think about it, you'll feel the same way.”

The girl freed the last remaining bread-crumb from her gloves. “Why, of course, uncle,” she said, with promptitude.

Although there was no hint of protest in her tone or manner, he felt impelled to soften still further this solitary demonstration of his authority. “You see I've been all round the world, my little girl,” he explained, haltingly, “and when a man's done that, and knocked about everywhere, he's apt to get finicking and notional about trifles every once in a while.”

“You're less so than anybody I ever knew,” she generously interposed.

“Oh, no I'm not. You don't know me well enough yet; that's what's the matter. And you see, Julia—another thing just because you saw that lady throwing out bread, that aint a very good reason why you should do it. You don't know what kind of a person she may be. Girls have got to be so frightfully careful about all that sort of thing.”

Julia offered a constrained little laugh in comment. “Oh, you don't know how careful I can be,” she said.

“But you're not annoyed?” he entreated her—and for answer she came behind him, and rested an arm on his shoulder, and patted it. He stroked her hand with his own. “That's something like the nicest niece in the world!” he exclaimed, with fervour.

When at last she and her brother had gone, he made short work of his breakfast, and drank his coffee at a gulp. A restless activity suddenly informed his movements. He lit a cigar, and began pacing up and down the room, biting his lips in preoccupation as he went. After a little, he opened a window, and ventured cautiously as far out on the balcony as was necessary to obtain a view of the street below. Eventually, he identified his nephew and niece among the pedestrians beneath him, and he kept them in sight till, after more than one tiresome halt at a shop window, they disappeared round a bend in the road. Then he turned and came back into the room with the buoyant air of a man whose affairs are prospering.

He smiled genially to himself as he gathered from the table in one capacious hand all the pieces of bread his beloved niece had broken up, and advanced again to the open window. Waiting here till one of the dingy gulls moving aimlessly about was headed toward him, he tossed out a fragment. The bird dashed at it with a scream, and on the instant the whole squawking flock were on wing. He suffered the hubbub to proceed unappeased for a little while he kept a watchful though furtive eye on that balcony to the left, below. Unhappily he could not get out far enough to see whether the inner curtains of its window were drawn. He threw another bit of bread, and then looked at his watch. It was a few minutes past nine. Surely people travelling to see scenery would be up by this hour.

The strategy of issuing just enough bread to keep the feathered concourse in motion commended itself to his mind. As a precautionary measure, he took all the rolls remaining on the table, and put them in the drawer of a desk by the window. It even occurred to him to ring for more bread, but upon consideration that seemed too daring. The waiter would be sufficiently surprised at the party's appetites as it was.

Half an hour later, his plan of campaign suddenly yielded a victory. Lady Cressage appeared on her balcony, clad in some charming sort of morning gown, and bareheaded. She had nothing in her hands, and seemed indifferent to the birds, but when Thorpe flung forth a handful of fragments into the centre of their whirling flock, she looked up at him. It was the anxious instant, and he ventured upon what he hoped was a decorous compromise between a bow and a look of recognition.

She was in no haste to answer either. He could see rather than hear that she said something to her invisible companion within, the while she glanced serenely in the general direction of his balcony. It seemed to him that the answer to her remark, whatever it was, must have exerted a direct influence upon his destiny, for Lady Cressage all at once focussed her vague regard upon him, and nodded with a reasonably gracious smile.

“It's wonderful luck to find you here,” he called down to her. Having played their part, he wished now that the birds were at Jericho. Their obstreperous racket made conversation very difficult. Apparently she made him an answer, but he could catch nothing of it.

“I'm here with my niece and nephew,” he shouted down. “I don't hear what you say. May I come down and pay my respects—later on? What is your number, and when may I come?”

These questions, as he flashed them in review through his mind, seemed to be all right from the most exacting social point of view. Doubtless it was equally all right that, before replying, she should consult her companion, as she did at some length. Then she replied—and he had no difficulty now in hearing her above the birds—that it would be very nice of him to come, say, in an hour's time. She told him the number—and then almost abruptly went in.

Thorpe, during this hour that ensued, smoked with volcanic energy. He tried to interest himself in one after another of half a dozen Tauchnitz novels his niece carried about, with a preposterous absence of success. He strove to arrange in some kind of sequence the things that he should say, when this momentous interview should begin, but he could think of nothing which did not sound silly. It would be all right, he argued to himself in the face of this present mental barrenness; he always talked well enough on the spur of the moment, when the time came—and still was not reassured.

He wondered if both ladies would be there to receive him, and decided that they would probably regard that as indispensable to the proprieties. In that case, their conversation would necessarily be of the most casual and general character. He would tell them a good deal about his niece, he foresaw. A man travelling about with a niece—and such a delightfully lady-like and engaging little niece—would take on some added interest and dignity, he perceived, in the eyes of ladies travelling alone. He essayed to estimate just how much they would probably like Julia. Of course he would say nothing about her mother and the book-shop; a vague allusion to a widowed sister would be ample on that head. But there could be confident references to Cheltenham; he knew from what Julia had said that it suggested the most satisfactory social guarantees, if taken strictly by itself. And then so much would depend upon Julia herself! If she succeeded in striking up a friendship with them—ah, then everything would be all right. Perhaps they would take a fancy to Alfred too! He was a boy, of course, but conceivably the fact that he wanted to paint, and knew about pictures, would appeal to them. He seemed to have heard somewhere that artists were the very devil among women.

At last the weary time of waiting had worn itself out, somehow, and, after a final polishing before his glass, he went down, and found his right corridor, and knocked at the door. A pleasant voice bade him enter, and, hat and gloves in hand, he went in.

As he had imagined, both ladies were present. He had not been prepared, however, for the fact that it was the American who played the part of hostess. It was she who received him, and invited him to sit down, and generally made him free of the apartment. When he shook hands with Lady Cressage, there was somehow an effect of the incidental in the ceremony, as if she were also a guest.

Nothing could have been simpler or more pleasing than the little visit turned out to be. Miss Madden had suddenly grown tired of the snowless and dripping English winter, and had as promptly decided to come to Switzerland, where the drifts ought to be high enough, and the frosts searching enough, in all conscience. They had selected Territet, because it was familiar to her, and because it was on the way to Martigny and Brieg, and she had had a notion of crossing either the Simplon or the St. Bernard in winter. As she found now, the St. Bernard was quite impracticable, but admittedly a post road was kept open over the Simplon. It was said now that she would not be allowed to proceed by this, but it often happened that she did the things that she was not allowed to do. The hotel-people at both Brieg and Berisal had written refusing to let their horses attempt the Simplon journey, and they were of course quite within their rights, but there were other horses in Switzerland. One surely could buy horses—and so on.

Thorpe also had his turn at autobiography. He told rather whimsically of his three months' experiences at the tail of the juvenile whirligigs, and his auditors listened to them with mild smiles. He ventured upon numerous glowing parentheses about Julia, and they at least did not say that they did not want to know her. They heard with politeness, too, what he could contrive to drag in about his artist-nephew, and said it must be very pleasant for him to have such nice company. At least Miss Madden said this: her companion, as he thought it over afterward, seemed hardly to have said anything at all. She answered the few remarks which he found it possible to direct to her, but the responses took no hold upon his memory. He fancied that she was bored, or unhappy, or both.

Finally, in the midst of commonplaces which, to his apprehension, were verging upon flatness, a bold inspiration disclosed itself—as splendid as the Dent du Midi revealing its glaciers above the mounting sunrise—in his brain.

“We should all be charmed if you would come up and dine with us tonight,” he said, under the abrupt impulsion of this idea. “It's been such an age since we wanderers have had the privilege of company at our table!”

The felicity of these phrases from his lips attracted his admiring attention, even while he waited in suspense for an answer to them.

The ladies exchanged a look. “Yes,” said Miss Madden, after the slightest of pauses, “we shall be very happy.”

Shortly thereafter Thorpe took his leave, and went downstairs and out. He wandered about till luncheon time, observing the mountains across the lake from various standpoints, and, as it were, with new eyes. He was interested in them in a curious new fashion; they seemed to say things to him. His lip curled once at the conceit that he was one of the Alps himself.

CHAPTER XII

IT did not happen until three days later that Thorpe's opportunity to speak alone with Lady Cressage came.

In this brief period, the two parties seemed to have become fused in a remarkable intimacy. This was clearly due to the presence of the young people, and Thorpe congratulated himself many times each day upon the striking prescience he had shown in bringing them.

Both the ladies unaffectedly liked Julia; so much so that they seemed unwilling to make any plans which did not include her. Then it was only a matter of course that where she went her brother should go—and a further logical step quite naturally brought in their willing uncle. If he had planned everything, and now was ordering everything, it could not have gone more to his liking.

Certain side speculations lent a savour to the satisfaction with which he viewed this state of affairs. He found many little signs to confirm the suspicion that the two ladies had been the readier to make much of Julia because they were not overkeen about each other's society. The bright, sweet-natured girl had come as a welcome diversion to a couple who in seclusion did battle with tendencies to yawn. He was not quite convinced, for that matter, that the American lady always went to that trouble. She seemed to his observation a wilful sort of person, who would not be restrained by small ordinary considerations from doing the things she wanted to do. Her relations with her companion afforded him food for much thought. Without any overt demonstrations, she produced the effect of ordering Lady Cressage about. This, so far as it went, tended to prejudice him against her. On the other hand, however, she was so good to Julia, in a peculiarly frank and buoyant way which fascinated the girl, that he could not but like her. And she was very good to Alfred too.

There was, indeed, he perceived, a great deal of individuality about the friendship which had sprung up between Miss Madden and his nephew. She was years his senior—he settled it with himself that the American could not be less than seven-and-twenty,—yet Alfred stole covert glances of admiration at her, and seemed to think of nothing but opportunities for being in her company as if—as if—Thorpe hardly liked to complete the comparison in his own thoughts. Alfred, of course, said it was all on account of her wonderful hair; he rather went out of his way to dilate upon the enthusiasm her “colour scheme”—whatever that might mean—excited in him as an artist. The uncle had moments of profound skepticism about this—moments when he uneasily wondered whether it was not going to be his duty to speak to the young man. For the most part, however, he extracted reassurance from Miss Madden's demeanour toward the lad. She knew, it seemed, a vast deal about pictures; at least she was able to talk a vast deal about them, and she did it in such a calmly dogmatic fashion, laying down the law always, that she put Alfred in the position of listening as a pupil might listen to a master. The humility with which his nephew accepted this position annoyed Thorpe upon occasion, but he reasoned that it was a fault on the right side. Very likely it would help to keep the fact of the lady's seniority more clearly before the youngster's mind, and that would be so much gained.

And these apprehensions, after all, were scarcely to be counted in the balance against the sense of achieved happiness with which these halcyon days kept Thorpe filled. The initiatory dinner had gone off perfectly. He could have wished, indeed, that Julia had a smarter frock, and more rings, when he saw the imposing costumes and jewelled throats and hands of his guests—but she was a young girl, by comparison, he reflected, and there could be no doubt that they found her charming. As for Alfred, he was notably fine-looking in his evening-clothes—infinitely more like the son of a nobleman, the gratified uncle kept saying to himself, than that big dullard, the Honourable Balder. It filled him with a new pleasure to remember that Alfred had visiting cards presenting his name as D'Aubigny, which everybody of education knew was what the degenerate Dabney really stood for. The lad and his sister had united upon this excellent change long ago at Cheltenham, and oddly enough they had confessed it to their uncle, at the beginning of the trip, with a show of trepidation, as if they feared his anger. With radiant gayety he had relieved their minds by showing them his card, with “Mr. Stormont Thorpe” alone upon it. At the dinner table, in the proudest moment of his life, he had made himself prouder still by thinking how distinguished an appearance his and Alfred's cards would make together in the apartment below next day.

But next day, the relations between the two parties had already become too informal for cards. Julia went down to see them; they came up to see Julia. Then they all went for a long walk, with luncheon at Vevey, and before evening Alfred was talking confidently of painting Miss Madden. Next day they went by train to St. Maurice, and, returning after dark, dined without ceremony together. This third day—the weather still remaining bright—they had ascended by the funicular road to Glion, and walked on among the swarming luegers, up to Caux. Here, after luncheon, they had wandered about for a time, regarding the panorama of lake and mountains. Now, as the homeward descent began, chance led the two young people and Miss Madden on ahead.

Thorpe found himself walking beside Lady Cressage. He had upon his arm her outer wrap, which she said she would put on presently. To look at the view he must glance past her face: the profile, under the graceful fur cap, was so enriched by glowing colour that it was, to his thought, as if she were blushing.

“How little I thought, a few months ago,” he said, “that we should be mountaineering together!”

“Oh, no one knows a day ahead,” she responded, vaguely. “I had probably less notion of coming to Switzerland then than you had.”

“Then you don't come regularly?”

“I have never seen either Germany or Switzerland before. I have scarcely been out of England before.”

“Why now”—he paused, to think briefly upon his words—“I took it for granted you were showing Miss Madden around.”

“It 's quite the other way about,” she answered, with a cold little laugh. “It is she who is showing me around. It is her tour. I am the chaperone.” Thorpe dwelt upon the word in his mind. He understood what it meant only in a way, but he was luminously clear as to the bitterness of the tone in which it had been uttered.

“No—it didn't seem as if it were altogether—what I might call—YOUR tour,” he ventured. They had seen much of each other these past few days, but it was still hard for him to make sure whether their freedom of intercourse had been enlarged.

The slight shrug of the shoulders with which, in silence, she commented upon his remark, embarrassed him. For a moment he said nothing. He went on then with a renewed consciousness of risk.

“You mustn't be annoyed with me,” he urged. “I've been travelling with that dear little niece of mine and her brother, so long, that I've got into a habit of watching to notice if the faces I see round me are happy. And when they're not, then I have a kind of fatherly notion of interfering, and seeing what's wrong.”

She smiled faintly at this, but when he added, upon doubtful inspiration—“By the way, speaking of fathers, I didn't know at Hadlow that you were the daughter of one of my Directors”—this smile froze upon the instant.

“The Dent du Midi is more impressive from the hotel, don't you think?” she remarked, “than it is from here.”

Upon consideration, he resolved to go forward. “I have taken a great interest in General Kervick,” he said, almost defiantly. “I am seeing to it that he has a comfortable income—an income suitable to a gentleman of his position—for the rest of his life.”

“He will be very glad of it,” she remarked.

“But I hoped that you would be glad of it too,” he told her, bluntly. A curious sense of reliance upon his superiority in years had come to him. If he could make his air elderly and paternal enough, it seemed likely that she would defer to it. “I'm talking to you as I would to my niece, you know,” he added, plausibly.

She turned her head to make a fleeting survey of his face, as if the point of view took her by surprise. “I don't understand,” she said. “You are providing an income for my father, because you wish to speak to me like an uncle. Is that it?”

He laughed, somewhat disconsolately. “No—that isn't it,” he said, and laughed again. “I couldn't tell, you know, that you wouldn't want to talk about your father.” “Why, there's no reason in the world for not talking of him,” she made haste to declare. “And if he's got something good in the City, I'm sure I'm as glad as anyone. He is the sort that ought always to have a good deal of money. I mean, it will bring out his more amiable qualities. He does not shine much in adversity—any more than I do.”

Thorpe felt keenly that there were fine things to be said here—but he had confidence in nothing that came to his tongue. “I've been a poor man all my life—till now,” was his eventual remark.

“Please don't tell me that you have been very happy in your poverty,” she adjured him, with the dim flicker of a returning smile. “Very likely there are people who are so constituted, but they are not my kind. I don't want to hear them tell about it. To me poverty is the horror—the unmentionable horror!”

“There never was a day that I didn't feel THAT!” Thorpe put fervour into his voice. “I was never reconciled to it for a minute. I never ceased swearing to myself that I'd pull myself out of it. And that's what makes me sort of soft-hearted now toward those—toward those who haven't pulled themselves out of it.”

“Your niece says you are soft-hearted beyond example,” remarked Lady Cressage.

“Who could help being, to such a sweet little girl as she is?” demanded the uncle, fondly.

“She is very nice,” said the other. “If one may say such a thing, I fancy these three months with her have had an appreciable effect upon you. I'm sure I note a difference.”

“That's just what I've been saying to myself!” he told her. He was visibly delighted with this corroboration. “I've been alone practically all my life. I had no friends to speak of—I had no fit company—I hadn't anything but the determination to climb out of the hole. Well, I've done that—and I've got among the kind of people that I naturally like. But then there came the question of whether they would like me. I tell you frankly, that was what was worrying the heart out of me when I first met you. I like to be confessing it to you now—but you frightened me within an inch of my life. Well now, you see, I'm not scared of you at all. And of course it's because Julia's been putting me through a course of sprouts.”

The figure was lost upon Lady Cressage, but the spirit of the remarks seemed not unpleasant to her. “I'm sure you're full of kindness,” she said. “You must forget that I snapped at you—about papa.” “All I remember about that is,” he began, his eye lighting up with the thought that this time the opportunity should not pass unimproved, “that you said he didn't shine much in adversity—-any more than you did. Now on that last point I disagree with you, straight. There wouldn't be any place in which you wouldn't shine.”

“Is that the way one talks to one's niece?” she asked him, almost listlessly. “Such flattery must surely be bad for the young.” Her words were sprightly enough, but her face had clouded over. She had no heart for the banter.

“Ah”—he half-groaned. “I only wish I knew what was the right way to talk to you. The real thing is that I see you're unhappy—and that gets on my nerve—and I should like to ask you if there wasn't something I could do—and ask it in such a way that you'd have to admit there was—and I don't know enough to do it.”

He had a wan smile for thanks. “But of course there is nothing,” she replied, gently.

“Oh, there must be!” he insisted. He had no longer any clear notions as to where his tongue might not lead him. “There must be! You said I might talk to you as I would to Julia.”

“Did I?”

“Well, I'm going to, anyway,” he went on stoutly, ignoring the note of definite dissent in her interruption. “You ARE unhappy! You spoke about being a chaperone. Well now, to speak plainly, if it isn't entirely pleasant for you with Miss Madden—why wouldn't you be a chaperone for Julia? I must be going to London very soon—but she can stay here, or go to Egypt, or wherever she likes—and of course you would do everything, and have everything—whatever you liked, too.”

“The conversation is getting upon rather impossible grounds, I'm afraid,” she said, and then bit her lips together. Halting, she frowned a little in the effort of considering her further words, but there was nothing severe in the glance which she lifted to him as she began to speak. “Let us walk on. I must tell you that you misconceive the situation entirely. Nobody could possibly be kinder or more considerate than Miss Madden. Of course she is American—or rather Irish-American, and I'm English, and our notions and ways are not always alike. But that has nothing to do with it. And it is not so much that she has many thousands a year, and I only a few hundreds. That in itself would signify nothing—and if I must take help from somebody I would rather take it from Celia Madden than anybody else I know—but this is the point, Mr. Thorpe. I do not eat the bread of dependence gracefully. I pull wry faces over it, and I don't try very much to disguise them. That is my fault. Yes—oh yes, I know it is a fault—but I am as I am. And if Miss Madden doesn't mind—why”—she concluded with a mirthless, uncertain laugh—“why on earth should you?”

“Ah, why should I?” he echoed, reflectively. “I should like desperately to tell you why. Sometime I will tell you.”

They walked on in silence for a brief space. Then she put out her hand for her wrap, and as she paused, he spread it over her shoulders.

“I am amazed to think what we have been saying to each other,” she said, buttoning the fur as they moved on again. “I am vexed with myself.”

“And more still with me,” he suggested.

“No-o—but I ought to be. You've made me talk the most shocking rubbish.”

“There we disagree again, you know. Everything you've said's been perfect. What you're thinking of now is that I'm not an old enough friend to have been allowed to hear it. But if I'm not as old a friend as some, I wish I could make you feel that I'm as solid a friend as any—as solid and as staunch and as true. I wish I could hear you say you believed that.”

“But you talk of 'friends,'” she said, in a tone not at all responsive—“what is meant by 'friends'? We've chanced to meet twice—and once we barely exchanged civilities, and this time we've been hotel acquaintances—hardly more, is it?—and you and your young people have been very polite to me—and I in a silly moment have talked to you more about my affairs than I should—I suppose it was because you mentioned my father. But 'friends' is rather a big word for that, isn't it?”

Thorpe pouted for a dubious moment. “I can think of a bigger word still,” he said, daringly. “It's been on the tip of my tongue more than once.”

She quickened her pace. The air had grown perceptibly colder. The distant mountains, visible ever and again through the bare branches, were of a dark and cheerless blue, and sharply defined against the sky. It was not yet the sunset hour, and there were no mists, but the light of day seemed to be going out of the heavens. He hurried on beside her in depressed silence.

Their companions were hidden from view in a convolution of the winding road, but they were so near that their voices could be heard as they talked. Frequently the sound of laughter came backward from them.

“They're jolly enough down there,” he commented at last, moodily.

“That's a good reason for our joining them, isn't it?” Her tone was at once casual and pointed.

“But I don't want to join them!” he protested. “Why don't you stay with me—and talk?” “But you bully me so,” she offered in explanation.

The phrase caught his attention. Could it be that it expressed her real feeling? She had said, he recalled, that he had made her talk. Her complaint was like an admission that he could overpower her will. If that were true—then he had resources of masterfulness still in reserve sufficient to win any victory.

“No—not bully you,” he said slowly, as if objecting to the word rather than the idea. “That wouldn't be possible to me. But you don't know me well enough to understand me. I am the kind of man who gets the things he wants. Let me tell you something: When I was at Hadlow, I had never shot a pheasant in my life. I used to do tolerably well with a rifle, but I hardly knew anything about a shot-gun, and I don't suppose I'd ever killed more than two or three birds on the wing—and that was ages ago. But I took the notion that I would shoot better than anybody else there. I made up my mind to it—and I simply did it, that's all. I don't know if you remember—but I killed a good deal more than both the others put together. I give you that as an example. I wanted you to think that I was a crack shot—and so I made myself be a crack shot.”

“That is very interesting,” she murmured. They did not seem to be walking quite so fast.

“Don't think I want to brag about myself,” he went on. “I don't fancy myself—in that way. I'm not specially proud of doing things—it's the things themselves that I care for. If some men had made a great fortune, they would be conceited about it. Well, I'm not. What I'm keen about is the way to use that fortune so that I will get the most out of it—the most happiness, I mean. The thing to do is to make up your mind carefully what it is that you want, and to put all your power and resolution into getting it—and the rest is easy enough. I don't think there's anything beyond a strong man's reach, if he only believes enough in himself.”

“But aren't you confusing two things?” she queried. The subject apparently interested her. “To win one's objects by sheer personal force is one thing. To merely secure them because one's purse is longer than other people's—that's quite another matter.”

He smiled grimly at her. “Well, I'll combine the two,” he said.

“Then I suppose you will be altogether irresistible,” she said, lightly. “There will be no pheasants left for other people at all.”

“I don't mind being chaffed,” he told her, with gravity. “So long as you're good-natured, you can make game of me all you like. But I'm in earnest, all the same. I'm not going to play the fool with my money and my power. I have great projects. Sometime I'll tell you about them. They will all be put through—every one of them. And you wouldn't object to talking them over with me—would you?”

“My opinion on 'projects' is of no earthly value—to myself or anyone else.”

“But still you'd give me your advice if I asked it?” he persisted. “Especially if it was a project in which you were concerned?”

After a moment's constrained silence she said to him, “You must have no projects, Mr. Thorpe, in which I am concerned. This talk is all very wide of the mark. You are not entitled to speak as if I were mixed up with your affairs. There is nothing whatever to warrant it.”

“But how can you help being in my projects if I put you there, and keep you there?” he asked her, with gleeful boldness. “And just ask yourself whether you do really want to help it. Why should you? You've seen enough of me to know that I can be a good friend. And I'm the kind of friend who amounts to something—who can and will do things for those he likes. What obligation are you under to turn away that kind of a friend, when he offers himself to you? Put that question plainly to yourself.”

“But you are not in a position to nominate the questions that I am to put to myself,” she said. The effort to import decision into her tone and manner was apparent. “That is what I desire you to understand. We must not talk any more about me. I am not the topic of conversation.”

“But first let me finish what I wanted to say,” he insisted. “My talk won't break any bones. You'd be wrong not to listen to it—because it's meant to help you—to be of use to you. This is the thing, Lady Cressage: You're in a particularly hard and unpleasant position. Like my friend Plowden”—he watched her face narrowly but in vain, in the dull light, for any change at mention of the name—“like my friend Plowden you have a position and title to keep up, and next to nothing to keep it up on. But he can go down into the City and make money—or try to. He can accept Directorships and tips about the market and so on, from men who are disposed to be good to him, and who see how he can be of use to them—and in that way he can do something for himself. But there is the difference: you can't do these things, or you think you can't, which is the same thing. You're all fenced in; you're surrounded by notice-boards, telling you that you mustn't walk this way or look that way; that you mustn't say this thing or do the other. Now your friend down ahead there—Miss Madden—she doesn't take much stock in notice-boards. In fact, she feeds the gulls, simply because she's forbidden to do it. But you—you don't feed any gulls, and yet you're annoyed with yourself that you don't. Isn't that the case? Haven't I read you right?”

She seemed to have submitted to his choice of a topic. There was no touch of expostulation in the voice with which she answered him. “I see what you think you mean,” she said.

“Think!” he responded, with self-confident emphasis. “I'm not 'thinking.' I'm reading an open book. As I say, you're not contented—you're not happy; you don't try to pretend that you are. But all the same, though you hate it, you accept it. You think that you really must obey your notice-boards. Now what I tell you you ought to do is to take a different view. Why should you put up all this barbed wire between yourself and your friends? It doesn't do anybody else any good—and it does you harm. Why, for example, should Plowden be free to take things from me, and you not?”

She glanced at him, with a cold half-smile in her eye. “Unfortunately I was not asked to join your Board.”

He pressed his lips tightly together, and regarded her meditatively as he turned these words over in his mind. “What I'm doing for Plowden,” he said with slow vagueness meanwhile, “it isn't so much because he's on the Board. He's of no special use to me there. But he was nice to me at a time when that meant everything in the world to me—and I don't forget things of that sort. Besides, I like him—and it pleases me to let him in for a share of my good fortune. See? It's my way of enjoying myself. Well now, I like you too, and why shouldn't I be allowed to let you in also for a share of that good fortune? You think there's a difference, but I tell you it's imaginary—pure moonshine. Why, the very people whose opinion you're afraid of—what did they do themselves when the South African craze was on? I'm told that the scum of the earth had only to own some Chartered shares, and pretend to be 'in the know' about them—and they could dine with as many duchesses as they liked. I knew one or two of the men who were in that deal—I wouldn't have them in my house—but it seems there wasn't any other house they couldn't go to in London.”

“Oh yes, there were many houses,” she interposed. “It wasn't a nice exhibition that society made of itself—one admits that,—but it was only one set that quite lost their heads. There are all kinds of sets, you know. And—I don't think I see your application, in any event. The craze, as you call it, was all on a business basis. People ran after those who could tell them which shares were going up, and they gambled in those shares. That was all, wasn't it?”

Still looking intently at her, he dismissed her query with a little shake of the head. “'On a business basis,'” he repeated, as if talking to himself. “They like to have things 'on a business basis.'”

He halted, with a hand held out over her arm, and she paused as well, in a reluctant, tentative way. “I don't understand you,” she remarked, blankly.

“Let me put it in this way,” he began, knitting his brows, and marshalling the thoughts and phrases with which his mind had been busy. “This is the question. You were saying that you weren't asked to join my Board. You explained in that way how I could do things for Plowden, and couldn't do them for you. Oh, I know it was a joke—but it had its meaning—at least to me. Now I want to ask you—if I decide to form another Company, a very small and particular Company—if I should decide to form it, I say—could I come to you and ask you to join THAT Board? Of course I could ask—but what I mean is—well, I guess you know what I mean.”

The metaphor had seemed to him a most ingenious and satisfactory vehicle for his purpose, and it had broken down under him amid evidences of confusion which he could not account for. All at once his sense of physical ascendancy had melted away—disappeared. He looked at Lady Cressage for an instant, and knew there was something shuffling and nerveless in the way his glance then shifted to the dim mountain chain beyond. His heart fluttered surprisingly inside his breast, during the silence which ensued.

“Surely you must have said everything now that you wished to say,” she observed at last. She had been studying intently the trodden snow at her feet, and did not even now look up. The constraint of her manner, and a certain pleading hesitation in her words, began at once to restore his self-command. “Do not talk of it any further, I beg of you,” she went on. “We—we have been lagging behind unconscionably. If you wish to please me, let us hurry forward now. And please!—no more talk at all!”

“But just a word—you're not angry?”

She shook her head very slightly.

“And you do know that I'm your friend—your solid, twenty-four-carat friend?”

After a moment's pause, she made answer, almost in a whisper—“Yes—be my friend—if it amuses you,”—and led the way with precipitate steps down the winding road.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO days later, Thorpe and his young people took an early morning train for Geneva—homeward bound.

It was entirely easy to accept their uncle's declaration that urgent business summoned him to London, yet Julia and Alfred, when they chanced to exchange glances after the announcement, read in each other's eyes the formless impression that there were other things beside business. Their uncle, they realized, must be concerned in large and probably venturesome enterprises; but it did not fit with their conception of his character that commercial anxieties should possess the power to upset him. And upset he undeniably was.

They traced his disturbance, in a general way, to the morning following the excursion up to Glion and Caux. He told them then that he had slept very badly, and that they must “count him out” of their plans for the day. He continued to be counted out of what remained of their stay at Territet. He professed not to be ill, but he was restless and preoccupied. He ate little, but smoked continuously, and drank spirits a good deal, which they had not seen him do before. Nothing would induce him to go out either day.

Strangely enough, this disturbance of their uncle's equanimity synchronized with an apparent change in the attitude of their new friends on the floor below. This change was, indeed, more apparent than definable. The ladies were, to the nicest scrutiny, as kindly and affable as ever, but the sense of comradeship had somehow vanished. Insensibly, the two parties had ceased to have impulses and tastes in common. There were no more trips together—no more fortuitous luncheons or formal dinners as a group.

The young people looked up at the front of the big hotel on this morning of departure, after they had clambered over the drifts into the snow-bedecked train, and opened the window of their compartment. They made sure that they could identify the windows of Miss Madden's suite, and that the curtains were drawn aside—but there was no other token of occupancy discernible. They had said good-bye to the two ladies the previous evening, of course—it lingered in their minds as a rather perfunctory ceremony—but this had not prevented their hoping for another farewell glimpse of their friends. No one came to wave a hand from the balcony, however, and the youngsters looked somewhat dubiously at each other as the train moved. Then intuitively they glanced toward their uncle—and perceived that he had his hat pulled over his eyes, and was staring with a kind of moody scowl at the lake opposite.

“Fortunately, it is a clear day,” said Julia. “We shall see Mont Blanc.”

Her voice seemed to have a hollow and unnatural sound in her own ears. Neither her uncle nor her brother answered her.

At breakfast, meanwhile, in the apartment toward which the young people had turned their farewell gaze in vain, Miss Madden sipped her coffee thoughtfully while she read a letter spread upon the table beside her.

“It's as they said,” she observed. “You are not allowed to drive in the mountains with your own horses and carriage. That seems rather quaint for a model Republic—doesn't it?”

“I daresay they're quite right,” Lady Cressage replied, listlessly. “It's in the interest of safety. People who do not know the mountains would simply go and get killed in avalanches and hurricanes—and all that. I suppose that is what the Government wishes to prevent.”

“And you're on the side of the Government,” said the other, with a twinkle in her brown eyes. “Truly now—you hated the whole idea of driving over the Simplon.”

Lady Cressage lifted her brows in whimsical assent as she nodded.

“But do you like this Russian plan any better?” demanded Celia. “I wish for once you would be absolutely candid and open with me—and let me know to the uttermost just what you think.” “'For once'?” queried the other. Her tone was placid enough, but she allowed the significance of the quotation to be marked.

“Oh, I never wholly know what you're thinking,” Miss Madden declared. She put on a smile to alleviate the force of her remarks. “It is not you alone—Edith. Don't think that! But it is ingrained in your country-women. You can't help it. It's in your blood to keep things back. I've met numbers of English ladies who, I'm ready to believe, would be incapable of telling an untruth. But I've never met one of whom I could be sure that she would tell me the whole truth. Don't you see this case in point,” she pursued, with a little laugh, “I could not drag it out of you that you disliked the Simplon idea, so long as there was a chance of our going. Immediately we find that we can't go, you admit that you hated it.”

“But you wanted to go,” objected Lady Cressage, quietly. “That was the important thing. What I wanted or did not want had nothing to do with the matter.”

Celia's face clouded momentarily. “Those are not the kind of things I like to hear you say,” she exclaimed, with a certain vigour. “They put everything in quite a false light. I am every whit as anxious that you should be pleased as that I should. You know that well enough. I've said it a thousand times—and have I ever done anything to disprove it? But I never can find out what you do want—what really will please you! You never will propose anything; you never will be entirely frank about the things I propose. It's only by watching you out of the corner of my eye that I can ever guess whether anything is altogether to your liking or not.”

The discussion seemed to be following lines familiar to them both. “That is only another way of saying what you discovered long ago,” said Lady Cressage, passively—“that I am deficient in the enthusiasms. But originally you were of the opinion that you had enthusiasms enough for two, and that my lack of them would redress the balance, so to speak. I thought it was a very logical opinion then, and, from my own point of view, I think so now. But if it does not work in practice, at least the responsibility of defending it is not mine.”

“Delightful!” cried Celia, smiling gayly as she put down her cup again. “You are the only woman I've ever known who was worth arguing with. The mere operation makes me feel as if I were going through Oxford—or passing the final Jesuit examinations. Heaven knows, I would get up arguments with you every day, for the pure enjoyment of the thing—if I weren't eternally afraid of saying something that would hurt your feelings, and then you wouldn't tell me, but would nurse the wound in silence in the dark, and I should know that something was wrong, and have to watch you for weeks to make out what it was—and it would all be too unhappy. But it comes back, you see, to what I said before. You don't tell me things!”

Edith smiled in turn, affectionately enough, but with a wistful reserve. “It is a constitutional defect—even national, according to you. How shall I hope to change, at this late day? But what is it you want me to tell you?—I forget.”

“The Russian thing. To go to Vienna, where we get our passports, and then to Cracow, and through to Kief, which they say is awfully well worth while—and next Moscow—and so on to St. Petersburg, in time to see the ice break up. It is only in winter that you see the characteristic Russia: that one has always heard. With the furs and the sledges, and the three horses galloping over the snow—it seems to me it must be the best thing in Europe—if you can call Russia Europe. That's the way it presents itself to me—but then I was brought up in a half-Arctic climate, and I love that sort of thing—in its proper season. It is different with you. In England you don't know what a real winter is. And so I have to make quite sure that you think you would like the Russian experiment.”

The other laughed gently. “But if I don't know what a real winter is, how can I tell whether I will like it or not? All I do know is that I am perfectly willing to go and find out. Oh yes—truly—I should like very much to go.”

Miss Madden sighed briefly. “All right,” she said, but with a notable absence of conviction in her tone.

A space of silence ensued, as she opened and glanced through another note, the envelope of which had borne no postmark. She pouted her lips over the contents of this missive, and raised her eyebrows in token of surprise, but as she laid it down she looked with a frank smile at her companion.

“It's from our young friend,” she explained, genially—“the painter-boy—Mr. D'Aubigny. It is to remind me of a promise he says I made—that when I came to London he should paint my portrait. I don't think I promised anything of the kind—but I suppose that is a detail. It's all my unfortunate hair. They must have gone by this time—they were to go very early, weren't they?”

Lady Cressage glanced at the clock. “It was 8:40, I think—fully half an hour ago,” she answered, with a painstaking effect of indifference.

“Curious conglomeration”—mused the other. “The boy and girl are so civilized, and their uncle is so rudimentary. I'm afraid they are spoiling him just as the missionaries spoil the noble savage. They ought to go away and leave him alone. As a barbarian he was rather effective—but they will whitewash him and gild him and make a tame monstrosity of him. But I suppose it's inevitable. Having made his fortune, it is the rule that he must set up as a gentleman. We do it more simply in America. One generation makes the fortune, and leaves it to the next generation to put on the frills. My father, for example, never altered in the slightest degree the habits he formed when he was a poor workman. To the day of his death, blessed old man, he remained what he had always been—simple, pious, modest, hard-working, kindly, and thrifty—a model peasant. Nothing ever tempted him a hair's-breadth out of the path he had been bred to walk in. But such nobility of mind and temper with it all! He never dreamed of suggesting that I should walk in the same path. From my earliest childhood I cannot remember his ever putting a limitation upon me that wasn't entirely sensible and generous. I must have been an extremely trying daughter, but he never said so; he never looked or acted as if he thought so.—But I never stop when I begin talking of my father.”

“It's always very sweet to me to hear you talk of him,” Lady Cressage put in. “One knows so few people who feel that way about their fathers!”

Celia nodded gravely, as if in benevolent comment upon something that had been left unsaid. The sight of the young artist's note recalled her earlier subject. “Of course there is a certain difference,” she went on, carelessly,—“this Mr. Thorpe is not at all a peasant, as the phrase goes. He strikes one, sometimes, as having been educated.”

“Oh, he was at a public school, Lord Plowden tells me,” said the other, with interest. “And his people were booksellers—somewhere in London—so that he got a good smattering of literature and all that. He certainly has more right to set up as a gentleman than nine out of ten of the nouveaux riches one sees flaunting about nowadays. And he can talk very well indeed—in a direct, practical sort of way. I don't quite follow you about his niece and nephew spoiling him. Of course one can see that they have had a great effect upon him. He sees it himself—and he's very proud of it. He told me so, quite frankly. But why shouldn't it be a nice effect?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Celia replied, idly. “It seemed to me that he was the kind of piratical buccaneer who oughtn't to be shaved and polished and taught drawing-room tricks—I feel that merely in the interest of the fitness of things. Have you looked into his eyes—I mean when they've got that lack-lustre expression? You can see a hundred thousand dead men in them.”

“I know the look you mean,” said Lady Cressage, in a low voice.

“Not that I assume he is going to kill anybody,” pursued Miss Madden, with ostensible indifference, but fixing a glance of aroused attention upon her companion's face, “or that he has any criminal intentions whatever. He behaves very civilly indeed, and apparently his niece and nephew idolize him. He seems to be the soul of kindness to them. It may be that I'm altogether wrong about him—only I know I had the instinct of alarm when I caught that sort of dull glaze in his eye. I met an African explorer a year ago, or so, about whose expeditions dark stories were told, and he had precisely that kind of eye. Perhaps it was this that put it into my head—but I have a feeling that this Thorpe is an exceptional sort of man, who would have the capacity in him for terrible things, if the necessity arose for them.”

“I see what you mean,” the other repeated. She toyed with the bread-crumbs about her plate, and reflectively watched their manipulation into squares and triangles as she went on. “But may that not be merely the visible sign of an exceptionally strong and masterful character? And isn't it, after all, the result of circumstances whether such a character makes, as you put it, a hundred thousand dead men, or enriches a hundred thousand lives instead? We agree, let us say, that this Mr. Thorpe impresses us both as a powerful sort of personality. The question arises, How will he use his power? On that point, we look for evidence. You see a dull glaze in his eye, and you draw hostile conclusions from it. I reply that it may mean no more than that he is sleepy. But, on the other hand, I bring proofs that are actively in his favour. He is, as you say, idolized by the only two members of his family that we have seen—persons, moreover, who have been brought up in ways different to his own, and who would not start, therefore, with prejudices in his favour. Beyond that, I know of two cases in which he has behaved, or rather undertaken to behave, with really lavish generosity—and in neither case was there any claim upon him of a substantial nature. He seems to me, in fact, quite too much disposed to share his fortune with Tom, Dick, and Harry—anybody who excites his sympathy or gets into his affections.” Having said this much, Lady Cressage swept the crumbs aside and looked up. “So now,” she added, with a flushed smile, “since you love arguments so much, how do you answer that?”

Celia smiled back. “Oh, I don't answer it at all,” she said, and her voice carried a kind of quizzical implication. “Your proofs overwhelm me. I know nothing of him—and you know so much!”

Lady Cressage regarded her companion with a novel earnestness and directness of gaze. “I had a long, long talk with him—the afternoon we came down from Glion.”

Miss Madden rose, and going to the mantel lighted a cigarette. She did not return to the table, but after a brief pause came and took an easy-chair beside her friend, who turned to face her. “My dear Edith,” she said, with gravity, “I think you want to tell me about that talk—and so I beg you to do so. But if I'm mistaken—why then I beg you to do nothing of the kind.”

The other threw out her hands with a gesture of wearied impatience, and then clasped them upon her knee. “I seem not to know what I want! What is the good of talking about it? What is the good of anything?”

“Now—now!” Celia's assumption of a monitor's tone had reference, apparently, to something understood between the two, for Lady Cressage deferred to it, and even summoned the ghost of a smile.

“There is really nothing to tell,”—she faltered, hesitatingly—“that is, nothing happened. I don't know how to say it—the talk left my mind in a whirl. I couldn't tell you why. It was no particular thing that was said—it seemed to be more the things that I thought of while something else was being talked about—but the whole experience made a most tremendous impression upon me. I've tried to straighten it out in my own mind, but I can make nothing of it. That is what disturbs me, Celia. No man has ever confused me in this silly fashion before. Nothing could be more idiotic. I'm supposed to hold my own in conversation with people of—well, with people of a certain intellectual rank,—but this man, who is of hardly any intellectual rank at all, and who rambled on without any special aim that one could see—he reduced my brain to a sort of porridge. I said the most extraordinary things to him—babbling rubbish which a school-girl would be ashamed of. How is that to be accounted for? I try to reason it out, but I can't. Can you?”

“Nerves,” said Miss Madden, judicially.

“Oh, that is meaningless,” the other declared. “Anybody can say 'nerves.' Of course, all human thought and action is 'nerves.'”

“But yours is a special case of nerves,” Celia pursued, with gentle imperturbability. “I think I can make my meaning clear to you—though the parallel isn't precisely an elegant one. The finest thoroughbred dog in the world, if it is beaten viciously and cowed in its youth, will always have a latent taint of nervousness, apprehension, timidity—call it what you like. Well, it seems to me there's something like that in your case, Edith. They hurt you too cruelly, poor girl. I won't say it broke your nerve—but it made a flaw in it. Just as a soldier's old wound aches when there's a storm in the air—so your old hurt distracts and upsets you under certain psychological conditions. It's a rather clumsy explanation, but I think it does explain.”

“Perhaps—I don't know,” Edith replied, in a tone of melancholy reverie. “It makes a very poor creature out of me, whatever it is.”

“I rather lose patience, Edith,” her companion admonished her, gravely. “Nobody has a right to be so deficient in courage as you allow yourself to be.”

“But I'm not a coward,” the other protested. “I could be as brave as anybody—as brave as you are—if a chance were given me. But of what use is bravery against a wall twenty feet high? I can't get over it. I only wound and cripple myself by trying to tear it down, or break through it.—Oh yes, I know what you say! You say there is no wall—that it is all an illusion of mine. But unfortunately I'm unable to take that view. I've battered myself against it too long—too sorely, Celia!”

Celia shrugged her shoulders in comment. “Oh, we women all have our walls—our limitations—if it comes to that,” she said, with a kind of compassionate impatience in her tone. “We are all ridiculous together—from the point of view of human liberty. The free woman is a fraud—a myth. She is as empty an abstraction as the 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' that the French put on their public buildings. I used to have the most wonderful visions of what independence would mean. I thought that when I was absolutely my own master, with my money and my courage and my free mind, I would do things to astonish all mankind. But really the most I achieve is the occasional mild surprise of a German waiter. Even that palls on one after a time. And if you were independent, Edith—if you had any amount of money—what difference do you think it would make to you? What could you do that you don't do, or couldn't do, now?”

“Ah, now”—said the other, looking up with a thin smile—“now is an interval—an oasis.”

Miss Madden's large, handsome, clear-hued face, habitually serene in its expression, lost something in composure as she regarded her companion. “I don't know why you should say that,” she observed, gently enough, but with an effect of reproof in her tone. “I have never put limits to the connection, in my own mind—and it hadn't occurred to me that you were doing so in yours.”

“But I'm not,” interposed Lady Cressage.

“Then I understand you less than ever. Why do you talk about an 'interval'? What was the other word?—'oasis'—as if this were a brief halt for refreshments and a breathing-spell, and that presently you must wander forth into the desert again. That suggestion is none of mine. We agreed that we would live together—'pool our issues,' as they say in America. I wanted a companion; so did you. I have never for an instant regretted the arrangement. Some of my own shortcomings in the matter I have regretted. You were the most beautiful young woman I had ever seen, and you were talented, and you seemed to like me—and I promised myself that I would add cheerfulness and a gay spirit to your other gifts—and in that I have failed wofully. You're not happy. I see that only too clearly.”

“I know—I'm a weariness and a bore to you,” broke in the other, despondingly.

“That is precisely what you're not,” Celia went on. “We mustn't use words of that sort. They don't describe anything in our life at all. But I should be better pleased with myself if I could really put my finger on what it is that is worrying you. Even if we decided to break up our establishment, I have told you that you should not go back to what you regard as poverty. Upon that score, I had hoped that your mind was easy. As I say, I think you attach more importance to money than those who have tested its powers would agree to—but that's neither here nor there. You did not get on well on 600 pounds a year—and that is enough. You shall never have less than twice that amount, whether we keep together or not—and if it ought to be three times the amount, that doesn't matter.

“You don't seem to realize, Edith”—she spoke with increased animation—“that you are my caprice. You are the possession that I am proudest of and fondest of. There is nothing else that appeals to me a hundredth part as much as you do. Since I became independent, the one real satisfaction I have had is in being able to do things for you—to have you with me, and make you share in the best that the world can offer. And if with it all you remain unhappy, why then you see I don't know what to do.”

“Oh, I know—I behave very badly!” Lady Cressage had risen, and with visible agitation began now to pace the room. “I deserve to be thrown into the lake—I know it well enough! But Celia—truly—I'm as incapable of understanding it as you are. It must be that I am possessed by devils—like the people in the New Testament. Perhaps someone will come along who can cast them out. I don't seem able to do it myself. I can't rule myself at all. It needs a strength I haven't got!”

“Ah!” said Celia, thoughtfully. The excited sentences which Edith threw over her shoulder as she walked appeared, upon examination, to contain a suggestion.

“My dear child,” she asked abruptly, after a moment's silence, “do you want to marry?”

Lady Cressage paused at the mantel, and exchanged a long steadfast glance with her friend. Then she came slowly forward. “Ah, that is what I don't know,” she answered. Apparently the reply was candid.

Miss Madden pursed her lips, and frowned a little in thought. Then, at some passing reflection, she smiled in a puzzled fashion. At last she also rose, and went to the mantel for another cigarette. “Now I am going to talk plainly,” she said, with decision. “Since the subject is mentioned, less harm will be done by speaking out than by keeping still. There is a debate in your mind on the matter, isn't there?”

The other lady, tall, slender, gently ruminative once more, stood at the window and with bowed head looked down at the lake. “Yes—I suppose it might be called that,” she replied, in a low voice.

“And you hesitate to tell me about it? You would rather not?” Celia, after an instant's pause, went on without waiting for an answer. “I beg that you won't assume my hostility to the idea, Edith. In fact, I'm not sure I don't think it would be the best thing for you to do. Marriage, a home, children—these are great things to a woman. We can say that she pays the price of bondage for them—but to know what that signifies, we must ask what her freedom has been worth to her.”

“Yes,” interposed the other, from the window. “What have I done with my freedom that has been worth while?”

“Not much,” murmured Celia, under her breath. She moved forward, and stood beside Edith, with an arm round her waist. They looked together at the lake.

“It is Lord Plowden, is it not?” asked the American, as the silence grew constrained.

Lady Cressage looked up alertly, and then hesitated over her reply. “No,” she said at last. Upon reflection, and with a dim smile flickering in her side-long glance at Celia, she added, “He wants to marry you, you know.”

“Leave that out of consideration,” said Celia, composedly. “He has never said so. I think it was more his mother's idea than his, if it existed at all. Of course I am not marrying him, or anybody else. But I saw at Hadlow that you and he were—what shall I say?—old friends.”

“He must marry money,” the other replied. In an unexpected burst of candour she went on: “He would have asked me to marry him if I had had money. There is no harm in telling you that. It was quite understood—oh, two years ago. And I think I wished I had the money—then.”

“And you don't wish it now?”

A slight shake of Edith's small, shapely head served for answer. After a little, she spoke in a musing tone: “He is going to have money of his own, very soon, but I don't think it would attract me now. I like him personally, of course, but—there is no career, no ambition, no future.”

“A Viscount has future enough behind him,” observed Celia.

“It doesn't attract me,” the other repeated, vaguely. “He is handsome, and clever, and kind and all that—but he would never appeal to any of the great emotions—nor be capable of them himself He is too smooth, too well-balanced, too much the gentleman. That expresses it badly—but do you see what I mean?”

Celia turned, and studied the beautiful profile beside her, in a steady, comprehending look.

“Yes, I think I see what you mean,” she said, with significance in her tone.

Lady Cressage flushed, and released herself from her companion's arm. “But I don't know myself what I mean!” she exclaimed, despairingly, as she moved away. “I don't know!—I don't know!”

CHAPTER XIV

ON the last day of February, Mrs. Dabney was surprised if not exhilarated by a visit from her two children in the little book-shop.

“It's the last day in the world that I should have thought you'd 'a' come out on,” she told them, in salutation—and for comment they all glanced along the dark narrow alley of shelves to the street window. A gloomy spectacle it was indeed, with a cold rain slanting through the discredited remnants of a fog, which the east wind had broken up, but could not drive away, and with only now and again a passer-by moving across the dim vista, masked beneath an umbrella, or bent forward with chin buried in turned-up collar. In the doorway outside the sulky boy stamped his feet and slapped his sides with his arms in pantomimic mutiny against the task of guarding the book-stalls' dripping covers, which nobody would be mad enough to pause over, much less to lift.

“I don't know but I'd ought to let the boy bring in the books and go home,” she said, as their vague gaze was attracted by his gestures. “But it isn't three yet—it seems ridiculous to close up. Still, if you'd be more comfortable upstairs—”

“Why, mamma! The idea of making strangers of us,” protested Julia. She strove to make her tone cheerful, but its effect of rebuke was unmistakable.

The mother, leaning against the tall desk, looked blankly at her daughter. The pallid flicker of the gas-jet overhead made her long, listless face seem more devoid of colour than ever.

“But you are as good as strangers, aren't you?” she observed, coldly. “You've been back in town ten days and more, and I've scarcely laid eyes upon either of you. But don't you want to sit down? You can put those parcels on the floor anywhere. Or shall I do it for you?”

Alfred had been lounging in the shadowed corner against a heap of old magazines tied in bundles. He sprang up now and cleared the chair, but his sister declined it with a gesture. Her small figure had straightened itself into a kind of haughty rigidity.

“There has been so much to do, mamma,” she explained, in a clear, cool voice. “We have had hundreds of things to buy and to arrange about. All the responsibility for the housekeeping rests upon me—and Alfred has his studio to do. But of course we should have looked in upon you sooner—and much oftener—if we had thought you wanted us. But really, when we came to you, the very day after our return, it was impossible for us to pretend that you were glad to see us.”

“Oh, I was glad enough,” Mrs. Dabney made answer, mechanically. “Why shouldn't I be glad? And why should you think I wasn't glad? Did you expect me to shout and dance?”

“But you said you wouldn't come to see us in Ovington Square,” Alfred reminded her.

“That's different,” she declared. “What would I be doing in Ovington Square? It's all right for you to be there. I hope you'll be happy there. But it wouldn't add anything to your happiness to have me there; it would be quite the other way about. I know that, if you DON'T. This is my place, here, and I intend to stick to it!”

Julia's bright eyes, scanning the apathetic, stubborn maternal countenance, hardened beyond their wont. “You talk as if there had been some class war declared,” she said, with obvious annoyance. “You know that Uncle Stormont would like nothing better than to be as nice to you as he is to us.”

“Uncle Stormont!” Mrs. Dabney's repetition of the words was surcharged with hostile sarcasm. “But his name was Stormont as much as it was Joel,” broke in Alfred, from his dark corner. “He has a perfect right to use the one he likes best.”

“Oh, I don't dispute his right,” she replied, once more in her passionless monotone. “Everybody can call themselves whatever they please. It's no affair of mine. You and your sister spell your father's name in a way to suit yourselves: I never interfered, did I? You have your own ideas and your own tastes. They are quite beyond me—but they're all right for you. I don't criticize them at all. What I say is that it is a great mercy your uncle came along, with his pockets full of money to enable you to make the most of them. If I were religious I should call that providential.”

“And that's what we DO call it,” put in Julia, with vivacity. “And why should you shut your doors against this Providence, mamma? Just think of it! We don't insist upon your coming to live at Ovington Square at all. Probably, as you say, you would be happier by yourself—at least for the present. But when Uncle St—when uncle says there's more than enough money for us all, and is only too anxious for you to let him do things for you—why, he's your own brother! It's as if I should refuse to allow Alfred to do things for me.”

“That you never did,” interposed the young man, gayly. “I'll say that for you, Jule.”

“And never will,” she assured him, with cheerful decision. “But no—mamma—can't you see what we mean? We have done what you wanted us to do. You sent us both to much better schools than you could afford, from the time we were of no age at all—and when uncle's money came you sent us to Cheltenham. We did you no discredit. We worked very well; we behaved ourselves properly. We came back to you at last with fair reason to suppose that you would be—I won't say proud, but at least well satisfied with us—and then it turned out that you didn't like us at all.”

“I never said anything of the sort,” the mother declared, with a touch of animation.

“Oh no—you never said it,” Julia admitted, “but what else can we think you mean? Our uncle sends for us to go abroad with him, and you busy yourself getting me ready, and having new frocks made and all that—and I never hear a suggestion that you don't want me to go——”

“But I did want you to go,” Mrs. Dabney affirmed.

“Well, then, when I come back—when we come back, and tell you what splendid and generous plans uncle has made for us, and how he has taken a beautiful furnished house and made it our home, and so on,—why, you won't even come and look at the house!”

“But I don't want to see it,” the mother retorted; obstinately.

“Well, then, you needn't!” said Alfred, rising. “Nobody will ask you again.” “Oh yes they will,” urged Julia, glancing meaningly from one to the other. All her life, as it seemed, she had been accustomed to mediate between these two unpliable and stubborn temperaments. From her earliest childhood she had understood, somehow, that there was a Dabney habit of mind, which was by comparison soft and if not yielding, then politic: and set over against it there was a Thorpe temper full of gnarled and twisted hardnesses, and tenacious as death. In the days of her grandfather Thorpe, whom she remembered with an alarmed distinctness, there had existed a kind of tacit idea that his name alone accounted for and justified the most persistent and stormy bad temper. That old man with the scowling brows bullied everybody, suspected everybody, apparently disliked everybody, vehemently demanded his own will of everybody—and it was all to be explained, seemingly, by the fact that he was a Thorpe.

After his disappearance from the scene—unlamented, to the best of Julia's juvenile perceptions—there had been relatively peaceful times in the book-shop and the home overhead, yet there had existed always a recognized line of demarcation running through the household. Julia and her father—a small, hollow-chested, round-shouldered young man, with a pale, anxious face and ingratiating manner, who had entered the shop as an assistant, and remained as a son-in-law, and was now the thinnest of unsubstantial memories—Julia and this father had stood upon one side of this impalpable line as Dabneys, otherwise as meek and tractable persons, who would not expect to have their own way.

Alfred and his mother were Thorpes—that is to say, people who necessarily had their own way. Their domination was stained by none of the excesses which had rendered the grandfather intolerable. Their surface temper was in truth almost sluggishly pacific. Underneath, however, ugly currents and sharp rocks were well known to have a potential existence—and it was the mission of the Dabneys to see that no wind of provocation unduly stirred these depths. Worse even than these possibilities of violence, however, so far as every-day life was concerned, was the strain of obstinacy which belonged to the Thorpe temper. A sort of passive mulishness it was, impervious to argument, immovable under the most sympathetic pressure, which particularly tried the Dabney patience. It seemed to Julia now, as she interposed her soothing influence between these jarring forces, that she had spent whole years of her life in personal interventions of this sort.

"Oh yes they will," she repeated, and warned her brother into the background with a gesture half-pleading half-peremptory. "We are your children, and we're not bad or undutiful children at all, and I'm sure that when you think it all over, mamma, you'll see that it would be absurd to let anything come between you and us."

"How could I help letting it come?" demanded the mother, listlessly argumentative. "You had outgrown me and my ways altogether. It was nonsense to suppose that you would have been satisfied to come back and live here again, over the shop. I couldn't think for the life of me what I was going to do with you. But now your uncle has taken all that into his own hands. He can give you the kind of home that goes with your education and your ideas—and what more do you want? Why should you come bothering me?"

"How unjust you are, mamma!" cried Julia, with a glaze of tears upon her bright glance.

The widow took her elbow from the desk, and, slowly straightening herself, looked down upon her daughter. Her long plain face, habitually grave in expression, conveyed no hint of exceptional emotion, but the fingers of the large, capable hands she clasped before her writhed restlessly against one another, and there was a husky-threat of collapse in her voice as she spoke:

"If you ever have children of your own," she said, "and you slave your life out to bring them up so that they'll think themselves your betters, and they act accordingly—then you'll understand. But you don't understand now—and there's no good our talking any more about it. Come in whenever it's convenient—and you feel like it. I must go back to my books now."

She took up a pen at this, and opened the cash-book upon the blotter. Her children, surveying her blankly, found speech difficult. With some murmured words, after a little pause, they bestowed a perfunctory kiss upon her unresponsive cheek, and filed out into the rain.

Mrs. Dabney watched them put up their umbrella, and move off Strandward beneath it. She continued to look for a long time, in an aimless, ruminating way, at the dismal prospect revealed by the window and the glass of the door. The premature night was closing in miserably, with increasing rain, and a doleful whistle of rising wind round the corner. At last she shut up the unconsidered cash-book, lighted another gas-jet, and striding to the door, rapped sharply on the glass.

"Bring everything in!" she called to the boy, and helped out his apprehension by a comprehensive gesture.

Later, when he had completed his task, and one of the two narrow outlets from the shop in front was satisfactorily blocked with the wares from without, and all the floor about reeked with the grimy drippings of the oilskins, Mrs. Dabney summoned him to the desk in the rear.

"I think you may go home now," she said to him, with the laconic abruptness to which he was so well accustomed. "You have a home, haven't you?"

Remembering the exhaustive enquiries which the Mission people had made about him and his belongings, as a preliminary to his getting this job, he could not but be surprised at the mistress's question. In confusion he nodded assent, and jerked his finger toward his cap.

"Got a mother?" she pursued. Again he nodded, with augmented confidence.

"And do you think yourself better than she is?"

The urchin's dirty and unpleasant face screwed itself up in anxious perplexity over this strange query. Then it cleared as he thought he grasped the idea, and the rat-eyes he lifted to her gleamed with the fell acuteness of the Dials. "I sh'd be sorry if I wasn't," he answered, in swift, rasping accents. "She's a rare old boozer, she is! It's a fair curse to an honest boy like me, to 'ave—" "Go home!" she bade him, peremptorily—and frowned after him as he ducked and scuttled from the shop.

Left to herself, Mrs. Dabney did not reopen the cash-book—the wretched day, indeed, had been practically a blank in its history—but loitered about in the waning light among the shelves near the desk, altering the position of books here and there, and glancing cursorily through others. Once or twice she went to the door and looked out upon the rain-soaked street. A tradesman's assistant, opposite, was rolling the iron shutters down for the night. If business in hats was over for the day, how much more so in books! Her shop had never been fitted with shutters—for what reason she could not guess. The opened pages of numerous volumes were displayed close against the window, but no one had ever broken a pane to get at them. Apparently literature raised no desires in the criminal breast. To close the shop there was nothing to do but lock and bolt the door and turn out the lights. At last, as the conviction of nightfall forced itself upon her from the drenched darkness outside, she bent to put her hand to the key. Then, with a little start of surprise, she stood erect. Someone was shutting an umbrella in the doorway, preparatory to entering the shop.

It was her brother, splashed and wet to the knees, but with a glowing face, who pushed his way in, and confronted her with a broad grin. There was such a masterful air about him, that when he jovially threw an arm round her gaunt waist, and gathered her up against his moist shoulder, she surprised herself by a half-laughing submission.

Her vocabulary was not rich in phrases for this kind of emergency. "Do mind what you're about!" she told him, flushing not unpleasurably.

"Shut up the place!" he answered, with lordly geniality. "I've walked all the way from the City in the rain. I wanted the exertion—I couldn't have sat in a cab. Come back and build up the fire, and let's have a talk. God! What things I've got to tell you!"

"There isn't any fire down here," she said, apologetically, as they edged their way through the restricted alley to the rear. "The old fireplace took up too much room. Sometimes, in very sharp weather, I have an oil-stove in. Usually the gas warms it enough. You don't find it too cold—do you?—with your coat on? Or would you rather come upstairs?"

“Never mind the cold,” he replied, throwing a leg over the stool before the desk. “I can't stay more 'n a minute or two. What do you think we've done today?”

Louisa had never in her life seen her brother look so well as he did now, sprawling triumphantly upon the stool under the yellow gas-light. His strong, heavily-featured face had somehow ceased to be commonplace. It had acquired an individual distinction of its own. He looked up at her with a clear, bold eye, in which, despite its gloss of good-humour, she discerned a new authority.

The nervous and apprehensive lines had somehow vanished from the countenance, and with them, oddly enough, that lethargic, heavy expression which had been their complement. He was all vigour, readiness, confidence, now. She deemed him almost handsome, this curious, changeable brother of hers, as he beat with his fist in a measured way upon the desk-top to emphasize his words, and fastened his commanding gaze upon her.

“We took very nearly twenty thousand pounds to-day,” he went on. “This is the twenty-eighth of February. A fortnight ago today was the first settlement. I wasn't here, but Semple was—and the working of it is all in his hands. He kept as still as a mouse that first day. They had to deliver to us 26,000 shares, and they hadn't got one, but we didn't make any fuss. The point was, you see, not to let them dream that they were caught in a trap. We didn't even put the price up to par. They had to come to Semple, and say there didn't seem to be any shares obtainable just at the moment, and what would he carry them over at? That means, to let them postpone delivery for another fortnight. He was as smooth as sweet-oil with them, and agreed to carry them over till today without any charge at all. But today it was a little different. The price was up ten shillings above par. That is to say, Semple arranged with a jobber, on the quiet, d'ye see? to offer thirty shillings for our one-pound shares. That offer fixed the making-up price. So then, when they were still without shares to-day, and had to be carried over again, they had to pay ten shillings' difference on each of twenty-six thousand shares, plus the difference between par and the prices they'd sold at. That makes within a few hundreds of 20,000 pounds in cash, for one day's haul. D'ye see?”

She nodded at him, expressively. Through previous talks she had really obtained an insight into the operation, and it interested her more than she would have cared to confess.

“Well, then, we put that 20,000 pounds in our pockets,” he proceeded with a steady glow in his eyes. “A fortnight hence, that is March 14th, we ring the bell on them again, and they march up to the captain's office and settle a second time. Now what happens on the 14th? A jobber makes the price for Semple again, and that settles the new sum they have to pay us in differences. It is for us to say what that price shall be. We'll decide on that when the time comes. We most probably will just put it up another ten shillings, and so take in just a simple 13,000 pounds. It's best in the long run, I suppose, to go slow, with small rises like that, in order not to frighten anybody. So Semple says, at any rate.”

“But why not frighten them?” Louisa asked. “I thought you wanted to frighten them. You were full of that idea a while ago.”

He smiled genially. “I've learned some new wrinkles since then. We'll frighten 'em stiff enough, before we're through with them. But at the start we just go easy. If they got word that there was a 'corner,' there would be a dead scare among the jobbers. They'd be afraid to sell or name a price for Rubber Consols unless they had the shares in hand. And there are other ways in which that would be a nuisance. Presently, of course, we shall liberate some few shares, so that there may be some actual dealings. Probably a certain number of the 5,000 which went to the general public will come into the market too. But of course you see that all such shares will simply go through one operation before they come back to us. Some one of the fourteen men we are squeezing will snap them up and bring them straight to Semple, to get free from the fortnightly tax we are levying on them. In that way we shall eventually let out say half of these fourteen 'shorts,' or perhaps more than half.”

“What do you want to do that for?” The sister's grey eyes had caught a metallic gleam, as if from the talk about gold. “Why let anybody out? Why can't you go on taking their money for ever?”

Thorpe nodded complacently. “Yes—that's what I asked too. It seemed to me the most natural thing, when you'd got 'em in the vise, to keep them there. But when you come to reflect—you can't get more out of a man than there is in him. If you press him too hard, he can always go bankrupt—and then he's out of your reach altogether, and you lose everything that you counted on making out of him. So, after a certain point, each one of the fourteen men whom we're squeezing must be dealt with on a different footing. We shall have to watch them all, and study their resources, as tipsters watch horses in the paddock.

“You see, some of them can stand a loss of a hundred thousand pounds better than others could lose ten thousand. All that we have to know. We can take it as a principle that none of them will go bankrupt and lose his place on the exchange unless he is pressed tight to the wall. Well, our business is to learn how far each fellow is from the wall to start with. Then we keep track of him, one turn of the screw after another, till we see he's got just enough left to buy himself out. Then we'll let him out. See?”

“It's cruel, isn't it?” she commented, calmly meditative, after a little pause.

“Everything in the City is cruel,” he assured her with a light tone. “All speculative business is cruel. Take our case, for example. I estimate in a rough way that these fourteen men will have to pay over to us, in differences and in final sales, say seven hundred thousand pounds—maybe eight hundred. Well, now, not one of those fellows ever earned a single sovereign of that money. They've taken the whole of it from others, and these others took it from others still, and so on almost indefinitely. There isn't a sovereign of it that hasn't been through twenty hands, or fifty for that matter, since the last man who had done some honest work for it parted company with it. Well—money like that belongs to those who are in possession of it, only so long as they are strong enough to hold on to it. When someone stronger still comes along, he takes it away from them. They don't complain: they don't cry and say it's cruel. They know it's the rule of the game. They accept it—and begin at once looking out for a new set of fools and weaklings to recoup themselves on. That's the way the City goes.”

Thorpe had concluded his philosophical remarks with ruminative slowness. As he lapsed into silence now, he fell to studying his own hands on the desk-top before him. He stretched out the fingers, curved them in different degrees, then closed them tight and turned the bulky hard-looking fists round for inspection in varying aspects.

“That's the kind of hand,” he began again, thoughtfully, “that breaks the Jew in the long run, if there's only grit enough behind it. I used to watch those Jews' hands, a year ago, when I was dining and wining them. They're all thin and wiry and full of veins. Their fingers are never still; they twist round and keep stirring like a lobster's feelers. But there aint any real strength in 'em. They get hold of most of the things that are going, because they're eternally on the move. It's their hellish industry and activity that gives them such a pull, and makes most people afraid of them. But when a hand like that takes them by the throat”—he held up his right hand as he spoke, with the thick uncouth fingers and massive thumb arched menacingly in a powerful muscular tension—“when THAT tightens round their neck, and they feel that the grip means business—my God! what good are they?”

He laughed contemptuously, and slapped the relaxed palm on the desk with a noise which made his sister start. Apparently the diversion recalled something to her mind.

“There was a man in here asking about you today,” she remarked, in a casual fashion. “Said he was an old friend of yours.”

“Oh, yes, everybody's my 'old friend' now,” he observed with beaming indifference. “I'm already getting heaps of invitations to dinners and dances and all that. One fellow insisted on booking me for Easter for some salmon fishing he's got way down in Cumberland. I told him I couldn't come, but he put my name down all the same. Says his wife will write to remind me. Damn his wife! Semple tells me that when our squeeze really begins and they realize the desperate kind of trap they're in, they'll simply shower attentions of that sort on me. He says the social pressure they can command, for a game of this kind, is something tremendous. But I'm not to be taken in by it for a single pennyworth, d'ye see? I dine with nobody! I fish and shoot and go yachting with nobody! Julia and Alfred and our own home in Ovington Square—that'll be good enough for me. By the way—you haven't been out to see us yet. We're all settled now. You must come at once—why not with me, now?”

Louisa paid no heed to this suggestion. She had been rummaging among some loose papers on the top of the desk, and she stepped round now to lift the lid and search about for something inside.

“He left a card for you,” she said, as she groped among the desk's contents. “I don't know what I did with it. He wrote something on it.”

“Oh, damn him, and his card too,” Thorpe protested easily. “I don't want to see either of them.”

“He said he knew you in Mexico. He said you'd had dealings together. He seemed to act as if you'd want to see him—but I didn't know. I didn't tell him your address.”

Thorpe had listened to these apathetic sentences without much interest, but the sum of their message appeared suddenly to catch his attention. He sat upright, and after a moment's frowning brown study, looked sharply up at his sister.

“What was his name?” he asked with abruptness.

“I don't in the least remember,” she made answer, holding the desk-top up, but temporarily suspending her search. “He was a little man, five-and-fifty, I should think. He had long grey hair—a kind of Quaker-looking man. He said he saw the name over the door, and he remembered your telling him your people were booksellers. He only got back here in England yesterday or the day before. He said he didn't know what you'd been doing since you left Mexico. He didn't even know whether you were in England or not!”

Thorpe had been looking with abstracted intentness at a set of green-bound cheap British poets just at one side of his sister's head. “You must find that card!” he told her now, with a vague severity in his voice. “I know the name well enough, but I want to see what he's written. Was it his address, do you remember? The name itself was Tavender, wasn't it? Good God! Why is it a woman never knows where she's put anything? Even Julia spends hours looking for button-hooks or corkscrews or something of that sort, every day of her life! They've got nothing in the world to do except know where things are, right under their nose, and yet that's just what they don't know at all!”

“Oh, I have a good few other things to do,” she reminded him, as she fumbled again inside the obscurity of the desk. “I can put my hand on any one of four thousand books in stock,” she mildly boasted over her shoulder, “and that's something you never learned to do. And I can tell if a single book is missing—and I wouldn't trust any shopman I ever knew to do that.”

“Oh of course, you're an exception,” he admitted, under a sense of justice. “But I wish you'd find the card.”

“I know where it is,” she suddenly announced, and forthwith closed the desk. Moving off into the remoter recesses of the crowded interior, she returned to the light with the bit of pasteboard in her hand. “I'd stuck it in the little mirror over the washstand,” she explained.

He almost snatched it from her, and stood up the better to examine it under the gas-light. “Where is Montague Street?” he asked, with rough directness.

“In Bloomsbury—alongside the Museum. That's one Montague Street—I don't know how many others there may be.”

Thorpe had already taken up his umbrella and was buttoning his coat. “Yes—Bloomsbury,” he said hurriedly. “That would be his form. And you say he knew nothing about my movements or whereabouts—nothing about the Company, eh?” He looked at his watch as he spoke. Evidently the presence of this stranger had excited him a good deal.

“No,” she assured him, reflectively; “no, I'm sure he didn't. From what he said, he doesn't know his way about London very well, or anywhere else, for that matter, I should say.”

Thorpe nodded, and put his finger to his forehead with a meaning look. “No—he's a shade off in the upper story,” he told her in a confidential tone. “Still, it's important that I should see him,”—and with only a hasty hand-shake he bustled out of the shop.

By the light of the street lamp opposite, she could see him on the pavement, in the pelting rain, vehemently signalling with his umbrella for a cab.

CHAPTER XV

“We've got a spare room here, haven't we?” Thorpe asked his niece, when she came out to greet him in the hall of their new home in Ovington Square. He spoke with palpable eagerness before even unbuttoning his damp great-coat, or putting off his hat. “I mean it's all in working order ready for use?”

“Why yes, uncle,” Julia answered, after a moment's thought. “Is someone coming?”

“I think so,” he replied, with a grunt of relief. He seemed increasingly pleased with the project he had in mind, as she helped him off with his things. The smile he gave her, when she playfully took his arm to lead him into the adjoining library, was clearly but a part of the satisfied grin with which he was considering some development in his own affairs.

He got into his slippers and into the easy-chair before the bright fire and lit a cigar with a contented air.

“Well, my little girl?” he said, with genial inconsequence, and smiled again at her, where she stood beside the mantel.

“It will be such a lark to play the hostess to a stranger!” she exclaimed. “When is he coming?—I suppose it is a 'he,'” she added, less buoyantly.

“Oh—that fellow,” Thorpe said, as if he had been thinking of something else. “Well—I can't tell just when he will turn up. I only learned he was in town—or in England—a couple of hours ago. I haven't seen him yet at all. I drove round to his lodgings, near the British Museum, but he wasn't there. He only comes there to sleep, but they told me he turned in early—by nine o'clock or so. Then I went round to a hotel and wrote a note for him, and took it back to his lodgings, and left it for him. I told him to pack up his things as soon as he got it, and drive here, and make this his home—for the time being at least.”

“Then it's some old friend of yours?” said the girl. “I know I shall like him.”

Thorpe laughed somewhat uneasily. “Well—yes—he's a kind of a friend of mine,” he said, with a note of hesitation in his voice. “I don't know, though, that you'll think much of him. He aint what you'd call a ladies' man.”

He laughed again at some thought the words conjured up. “He's a curious, simple old party, who'd just like a comfortable corner somewhere by himself, and wouldn't expect to be talked to or entertained at all. If he does come, he'll keep to himself pretty well. He wouldn't be any company for you. I mean,—for you or Alfred either. I think he's a Canadian or West Indian,—British subject, at all events,—but he's lived all his life in the West, and he wouldn't know what to do in a drawing-room, or that sort of thing. You'd better just not pay any attention to him. Pass the time of day, of course, but that's all.”

Julia's alert, small-featured face expressed some vague disappointment at what she heard, but her words were cheerful enough. “Oh of course—whatever he likes best,” she said. “I will tell Potter to make everything ready. I suppose there's no chance of his being here in time for dinner?”

Thorpe shook his head, and then lifted his brows over some new perplexity. “I guess he'd want to eat his meals out, anyway,” he said, after some thought. “I don't seem to remember much about him in that respect—of course, everything was so different in camp out in Mexico—but I daresay he wouldn't be much of an ornament at the table. However, that'll be all right. He's as easy to manage as a rabbit. If I told him to eat on the roof, he'd do it without a murmur. You see it's this way, Julia: he's a scientific man—a kind of geologist, and mining expert and rubber expert—and chemical expert and all sort of things. I suppose he must have gone through college—very likely he'll turn out to have better manners than I was giving him credit for. I've only seen him in the rough, so to speak. We weren't at all intimate then,—but we had dealings together, and there are certain important reasons why I should keep close in touch with him while he's here in London. But I'll try and do that without letting you be bothered.” “What an idea!” cried Julia. “As if that wasn't what we had the house for—to see the people you want to see.”

Her uncle smiled rather ruefully, and looked in a rather dubious way at his cigar. “Between you and me and the lamp-post, Jule,” he said, with a slow, whimsical drawl, “there isn't a fellow in the world that I wanted to see less than I did him. But since he's here—why, we've got to make the best of it.”

After dinner, Thorpe suffered the youngsters to go up to the drawing-room in the tacit understanding that he should probably not see them again that night. He betook himself then once more to the library, as it was called—the little, cozy, dark-panelled room off the hall, where the owner of the house had left two locked bookcases, and where Thorpe himself had installed a writing-desk and a diminutive safe for his papers. The chief purpose of the small apartment, however, was indicated by the two big, round, low-seated easy-chairs before the hearth, and by the cigar boxes and spirit-stand and tumblers visible behind the glass of the cabinet against the wall. Thorpe himself called the room his “snuggery,” and spent many hours there in slippered comfort, smoking and gazing contentedly into the fire. Sometimes Julia read to him, as he sat thus at his ease, but then he almost invariably went to sleep.

Now, when he had poured out some whiskey and water and lit a cigar, the lounging chairs somehow did not attract him. He moved about aimlessly in the circumscribed space, his hands in his pockets, his burly shoulders rounded, his face dulled and heavy as with a depression of doubt. The sound of the piano upstairs came intermittently to his ears. Often he ascended to the drawing-room to hear Julia play—and more often still, with all the doors open, he enjoyed the mellowed murmur of her music here at his ease in the big chair. But tonight he had no joy in the noise. More than once, as he slouched restlessly round the room, the notion of asking her to stop suggested itself, but he forbore to put it into action. Once he busied himself for a time in kneeling before his safe, and scrutinizing in detail the papers in one of the bundles it contained.

At last—it was after ten o'clock, and the music above had ceased—the welcome sounds of cab-wheels without, and then of the door-bell, came to dispel his fidgeting suspense. On the instant he straightened himself, and his face rearranged its expression. He fastened upon the door of the room the controlled, calm glance of one who is easily confident about what is to happen.

"Quaker-looking" was not an inapt phrase for the person whom the maid ushered into the room through this door. He was a small, thin, elderly man, bowed of figure and shuffling in gait. His coat and large, low-crowned hat, though worn almost to shabbiness, conveyed an indefinable sense of some theological standard, or pretence to such a standard. His meagre face, too, with its infinity of anxious yet meaningless lines, and its dim spectacled eyes, so plainly overtaxed by the effort to discern anything clearly, might have belonged to any old village priest grown childish and blear-eyed in the solitude of stupid books. Even the blotches of tell-tale colour on his long nose were not altogether unclerical in their suggestion. A poor old man he seemed, as he stood blinking in the electric light of the strange, warm apartment—a helpless, worn old creature, inured through long years to bleak adverse winds, hoping now for nothing better in this world than present shelter.

"How do you do, Mr. Thorpe," he said, after a moment, with nervous formality. "This is unexpectedly kind of you, sir."

"Why—not at all!" said Thorpe, shaking him cordially by the hand. "What have we got houses for, but to put up our old friends? And how are you, anyway? You've brought your belongings, have you? That's right!" He glanced into the hall, to make sure that they were being taken upstairs, and then closed the door. "I suppose you've dined. Take off your hat and coat! Make yourself at home. That's it—take the big chair, there—so! And now let's have a look at you. Well, Tavender, my man, you haven't grown any younger. But I suppose none of us do. And what'll you have to drink? I take plain water in mine, but there's soda if you prefer it. And which shall it be—Irish or Scotch?"

Mr. Tavender's countenance revealed the extremity of his surprise and confusion at the warmth of this welcome. It apparently awed him as well, for though he shrank into a corner of the huge chair, he painstakingly abstained from resting his head against its back. Uncovered, this head gained a certain dignity of effect from the fashion in which the thin, iron-grey hair, parted in the middle, fell away from the full, intellectual temples, and curled in meek locks upon his collar. A vague resemblance to the type of Wesley—or was it Froebel?—might have hinted itself to the observer's mind.

Thorpe's thoughts, however, were not upon types. "Well"—he said, from the opposite chair, in his roundest, heartiest voice, when the other had with diffidence suffered himself to be served, and had deferentially lighted on one side the big cigar pressed upon him—"Well—and how's the world been using you?"

"Not very handsomely, Mr. Thorpe," the other responded, in a hushed, constrained tone.

"Oh, chuck the Misters!" Thorpe bade him. "Aren't we old pals, man? You're plain Tavender, and I'm plain Thorpe."

"You're very kind," murmured Tavender, still abashed. For some minutes he continued to reply dolefully, and with a kind of shamefaced reluctance, to the questions piled upon him. He was in evil luck: nothing had gone well with him; it had been with the greatest difficulty that he had scraped together enough to get back to London on the chance of obtaining some expert commission; practically he possessed nothing in the world beyond the clothes on his back, and the contents of two old carpet-bags—these admissions, by degrees, were wormed from him.

"But have you parted with the concession, then, that you bought from me?" Thorpe suddenly asked him. "Help yourself to some more whiskey!"

Tavender sighed as he tipped the decanter. "It isn't any good," he answered, sadly. "The Government repudiates it—that is, the Central Government at Mexico. Of course, I never blamed you. I bought it with my eyes open, and you sold it in perfect good faith. I never doubted that at all. But it's not worth the paper it's written on—that's certain. It's that that busted me—that, and some other things."

"Well—well!" said Thorpe, blankly. His astonishment was obviously genuine, and for a little it kept him silent, while he pondered the novel aspects of the situation thus disclosed. Then his eyes brightened, as a new path outlined itself.

"I suppose you've got the papers?—the concession and my transfer to you and all that?" he asked, casually.

"Oh, yes," replied Tavender. He added, with a gleam of returning self-command—"That's all I have got."

"Let's see—what was it you paid me?—Three thousand eight hundred pounds, wasn't it?"

Tavender made a calculation in mental arithmetic. "Yes, something like that. Just under nineteen thousand dollars," he said.

"Well," remarked Thorpe, with slow emphasis, "I won't allow you to suffer that way by me. I'll buy it back from you at the same price you paid for it."

Tavender, beginning to tremble, jerked himself upright in his chair, and stared through his spectacles at his astounding host. "You say"—he gasped—"you say you'll buy it back!"

"Certainly," said Thorpe. "That's what I said."

"I—I never heard of such a thing!" the other faltered with increasing agitation. "No—you can't mean it. It isn't common sense!"

"It's common decency," replied the big man, in his most commanding manner. "It's life and death to you—and it doesn't matter a flea-bite to me. So, since you came to grief through me, why shouldn't I do the fair thing, and put you back on your legs again?"

Tavender, staring now at those shrunken legs of his, breathed heavily. The thing overwhelmed him. Once or twice he lifted his head and essayed to speak, but no speech came to his thin lips. He moistened them eventually with a long deliberate pull at his glass.

"This much ought to be understood, however," Thorpe resumed, reflecting upon his words as he went along. "If I'm to buy back a dead horse, like that, it's only reasonable that there should be conditions. I suppose you've seen by this time that even if this concession of ours was recognized by the Government there wouldn't be any money in it to speak of. I didn't realize that two years ago, any more than you did, but it's plain enough now. The trade has proved it. A property of rubber trees has no real value—so long as there's a wilderness of rubber trees all round that's everybody's property. How can a man pay even the interest on his purchase money, supposing he's bought a rubber plantation, when he has to compete with people who've paid no purchase money at all, but just get out as much as they like from the free forest? You must know that that is so.”

Tavender nodded eloquently. “Oh yes, I know that is so. You can prove it by me.”

Thorpe grinned a little. “As it happens, that aint what I need to have you prove,” he said, dryly. “Now WE know that a rubber property is no good—but London doesn't know it. Everybody here thinks that it's a great business to own rubber trees. Why, man alive, do you know”—the audacity of the example it had occurred to him to cite brought a gratified twinkle to his eyes as he went on—“do you know that a man here last year actually sold a rubber plantation for four hundred thousand pounds—two millions of dollars! Not in cash, of course, but in shares that he could do something with—and before he's done with it, I'm told, he's going to make twice that amount of money out of it. That'll show you what London is like.”

“Yes—I suppose they do those things,” remarked Tavender, vaguely.

“Well—my point is that perhaps I can do something or other with this concession of yours here. I may even be able to get my money back on it. At any rate I'll take my chances on it—so that at least you shan't lose anything by it. Of course, if you'd rather try and put it on the market yourself, why go ahead!” There was a wistful pathos in the way Tavender shook his head. “Big money doesn't mean anything to me any more,” he said, wearily. “I'm too old and I'm too tired. Why—four—five—yes, half a dozen times I've had enough money to last me comfortably all my life—and every time I've used it as bait to catch bigger money with, and lost it all. I don't do that any more! I've got something the matter with me internally that takes the nerve all out of me. The doctors don't agree about it, but whatever its name is I've got it for keeps. Probably I shan't live very long”—Thorpe recalled that the old man had always taken a gloomy view of his health after the third glass—“and if you want to pay me the nineteen thousand dollars, or whatever it is, why I shall say 'God bless you,' and be more than contented.”

“Oh, there's something more to it than that,” observed Thorpe, with an added element of business-like briskness in his tone. “If I let you out in this way—something, of course, you could never have dreamed would happen—you must do some things for me. I should want you, for example, to go back to Mexico at once. Of course, I'd pay your expenses out. Or say, I'd give you a round four thousand pounds to cover that and some other things too. You wouldn't object to that, would you?”

The man who, two hours before, had confronted existence with the change of his last five-pound note in his pocket, did not hesitate now. “Oh no, that would be all right,” with reviving animation, he declared. He helped himself again from the cut-glass decanter. “What would you want me to do there?”

“Oh, a report on the concession for a starter,” Thorpe answered, with careful indifference. “I suppose they still know your name as an authority. I could make that all right anyway. But one thing I ought to speak of—it might be rather important—I wouldn't like to have you mention to anybody that the concession has at any time been yours. That might tend to weaken the value of your report, don't you see? Let it be supposed that the concession has been my property from the start. You catch my point, don't you? There never was any such thing as a transfer of it to you. It's always been mine!”

Tavender gave his benefactor a purblind sort of wink. “Always belonged to you? Why of course it did,” he said cheerfully.

The other breathed a cautious prolonged sigh of relief “You'd better light a fresh one, hadn't you?” he asked, observing with a kind of contemptuous tolerance the old man's efforts to ignite a cigar which had more than once unrolled like a carpenter's shaving in his unaccustomed fingers, and was now shapelessly defiant of both draught and suction. Tavender laughed to himself silently as he took a new cigar, and puffed at the match held by his companion. The air of innocence and long-suffering meekness was falling rapidly away from him. He put his shabby boots out confidently to the fender and made gestures with his glass as he talked.

“My mistake,” he declared, in insistent tones, “was in not turning down science thirty years ago and going in bodily for business. Then I should have made my pile as you seem to have done. But I tried to do something of both. Half the year I was assaying crushings, or running a level, or analyzing sugars, for a salary, and the other half I was trying to do a gamble with that salary on the strength of what I'd learned. You can't ring the bell that way. You've got to be either a pig or a pup. You can't do both. Now, for instance, if I'd come to London when you did, and brought my money with me instead of buying your concession with it——”

“Why, what good do you suppose you would have done?” Thorpe interrupted him with good-natured brusqueness. “You'd have had it taken from you in a fortnight! Why, man, do you know what London is? You'd have had no more chance here than a naked nigger in a swamp-full of alligators.”

“You seem to have hit it off,” the other objected. “This is as fine a house as I was ever in.”

“With me it's different,” Thorpe replied, carelessly. “I have the talent for money-making. I'm a man in armour. The 'gators can't bite me, nor yet the rattle-snakes.”

“Yes—men are made up differently,” Tavender assented, with philosophical gravity. Then he lurched gently in the over-large chair, and fixed an intent gaze upon his host. “What did you make your money in?” he demanded, not with entire distinctness of enunciation. “It wasn't rubber, was it?”

Thorpe shook his head. “There's no money in rubber. I'm entirely in finance—on the Stock Exchange—dealing in differences,” he replied, with a serious face.

The explanation seemed wholly acceptable to Tavender. He mused upon it placidly for a time, with his reverend head pillowed askew against the corner of the chair. Then he let his cigar drop, and closed his eyes.

The master of the house bent forward, and noiselessly helped himself to another glass of whiskey and water. Then, sinking back again, he eyed his odd guest meditatively as he sipped the drink. He said to himself that in all the miraculous run of luck which the year had brought him, this was the most extraordinary manifestation of the lot. It had been so easy to ignore the existence of this tiresome and fatuous old man, so long as he was in remote Mexico, that he had practically forgotten him. But he should not soon forget the frightened shock with which he had learned of his presence in London, that afternoon. For a minute or two, there in his sister's book-shop, it had seemed as if he were falling through the air—as if the substantial earth had crumbled away from under him. But then his nerve had returned to him, his resourceful brain had reasserted itself. With ready shrewdness he had gone out, and met the emergency, and made it the servant of his own purposes.

He could be glad now, unreservedly glad, that Tavender had come to London, that things had turned out as they had. In truth, he stood now for the first time on solid ground. When he thought of it, now, the risk he had been running all these months gave him a little sinking of the heart. Upon reflection, the performance of having sold the same property first to Tavender in Mexico and then to the Rubber Consols Company in London might be subject to injurious comment, or worse. The fact that it was not a real property to begin with had no place in his thoughts. It was a concession—and concessions were immemorially worth what they would fetch. But the other thing might have been so awkward—and now it was all right!

For an hour and more, till the fire burnt itself out and the guest's snoring became too active a nuisance, Thorpe sat lost in this congratulatory reverie. Then he rose, and sharply shaking Tavender into a semblance of consciousness, led him upstairs and put him to bed.

Three days later he personally saw Tavender off at Waterloo station by the steamer-train, en route for Southampton and New York. The old man was in childlike good spirits, looking more ecclesiastical than ever in the new clothes he had been enabled to buy. He visibly purred with content whenever his dim eyes caught sight of the new valise and steamer trunk, which belonged to him, on the busy platform.

“You've been very kind to me, Thorpe,” he said more than once, as they stood together beside the open door of the compartment. “I was never so hospitably treated before in my life. Your attention to me has been wonderful. I call you a true friend.”

“Oh, that's all right! Glad to do it,” replied the other, lightly. In truth he had not let Tavender stray once out of his sight during those three days. He had dragged him tirelessly about London, showing him the sights from South Kensington Museum to the Tower, shopping with him, resting in old taverns with him, breakfasting, lunching, aud dining with him—in the indefatigable resolution that he should strike up no dangerous gossiping acquaintance with strangers. The task had been tiresome in the extreme—but it had been very well worth while.

“One thing I'm rather sorry about,” Tavender remarked, in apologetic parenthesis—“I ought to have gone down and seen that brother-in-law of mine in Kent. He's been very good to me, and I'm not treating him very well. I wrote to tell him I was coming—but since then I haven't had a minute to myself. However, I can write to him and explain how it happened. And probably I'll be over again sometime.”

“Why, of course,” said Thorpe, absently. The allusion to the brother-in-law in Kent had escaped his notice, so intent was he upon a new congeries of projects taking vague shape in his mind.

“Think of yourself as my man out there,” he said now, slowly, following the clue of his thoughts. “There may be big things to do. Write to me as often as you can. Tell me everything that's going on. Money will be no object to me—you can have as much as you like—if things turn up out there that are worth taking up. But mind you say nothing about me—or any connection you've ever had with me. You'll get a letter from the Secretary of a Company and the Chairman asking for a report on a certain property, and naming a fee. You simply make a good report—on its merits. You say nothing about anything else—about me, or the history of the concession, or its validity, or anything. I mustn't be alluded to in any way. You quite understand that?”

“Trust me!” said the old man, and wrung his benefactor's hand.

It was indeed with a trustful eye that Thorpe watched the train draw out of the station.

CHAPTER XVI

THE week following the August Bank Holiday is very rarely indeed a busy or anxious time in the City. In the ordinary course of things, it serves as the easy-going prelude—with but casual and inattentive visits eastward, and with only the most careless glances through the financial papers—to the halcyon period of the real vacation. Men come to the City during this week, it is true, but their thoughts are elsewhere—on the moors, on the blue sea, on the glacier or the fiord, or the pleasant German pine forests.

To the great mass of City people; this August in question began in a normal enough fashion. To one little group of operators, however, and to the widening circle of brokers, bankers, and other men of affairs whose interests were more or less involved with those of this group, it was a season of keen perturbation. A combat of an extraordinary character was going on—a combat which threatened to develop into a massacre. Even to the operators who, unhappily for themselves, were principals in this fight, it was a struggle in the dark. They knew little about it, beyond the grimly-patent fact that they were battling for their very lives. The outer ring of their friends and supporters and dependents knew still less, though their rage and fears were perhaps greater. The “press” seemed to know nothing at all. This unnatural silence of the City's mouthpieces, usually so resoundingly clamorous upon the one side and the other when a duel is in progress, gave a sinister aspect to the thing. The papers had been gagged and blindfolded for the occasion. This in itself was of baleful significance. It was not a duel which they had been bribed to ignore. It was an assassination.

Outwardly there was nothing to see, save the unofficial, bald statement that on August 1st, the latest of twelve fortnightly settlements in this stock, Rubber Consols had been bid for, and carried over, at 15 pounds for one-pound shares. The information concerned the public at large not at all. Nobody knew of any friend or neighbour who was fortunate enough to possess some of these shares. Readers here and there, noting the figures, must have said to themselves that certain lucky people were coining money, but very little happened to be printed as to the identity of these people. Stray notes were beginning to appear in the personal columns of the afternoon papers about a “Rubber King” of the name of Thorpe, but the modern exploitation of the world's four corners makes so many “kings” that the name had not, as yet, familiarized itself to the popular eye.

City men, who hear more than they read, knew in a general way about this “Rubber King.” He was an outsider who had come in, and was obviously filling his pockets; but it was a comforting rule that outsiders who did this always got their pockets emptied for them again in the long run. There seemed nothing about Thorpe to suggest that he would prove an exception to the rule. He was investing his winnings with great freedom, so the City understood, and his office was besieged daily by promoters and touts. They could clean out his strong-box faster than the profits of his Rubber corner could fill it. To know such a man, however, could not but be useful, and they made furtive notes of his number in Austin Friars on their cuffs, after conversation had drifted from him to other topics.

As to the Rubber corner itself, the Stock Exchange as a whole was apathetic. When some of the sufferers ventured cautious hints about the possibility of official intervention on their behalf, they were laughed at by those who did not turn away in cold silence. Of the fourteen men who had originally been caught in the net drawn tight by Thorpe and Semple, all the conspicuous ones belonged to the class of “wreckers,” a class which does not endear itself to Capel Court.

Both Rostocker and Aronson, who, it was said, were worst hit, were men of great wealth, but they had systematically amassed these fortunes by strangling in their cradles weak enterprises, and by undermining and toppling over other enterprises which would not have been weak if they had been given a legitimate chance to live. Their system was legal enough, in the eyes alike of the law and of the Stock Exchange rules. They had an undoubted right to mark out their prey and pursue it, and bring it down, and feed to the bone upon it. But the exercise of this right did not make them beloved by the begetters and sponsors of their victims. When word first went round, on the last day of February, that a lamb had unexpectedly turned upon these two practised and confident wolves, and had torn an ear from each of them, and driven them pell-mell into a “corner,” it was received on all sides with a gratified smile.

Later, by fortnightly stages, the story grew at once more tragic and more satisfactory. Not only Rostocker and Aronson, but a dozen others were in the cul de sac guarded by this surprising and bloody-minded lamb. Most of the names were well-known as those of “wreckers.” In this category belonged Blaustein, Ganz, Rothfoere, Lewis, Ascher, and Mendel, and if Harding, Carpenter, and Vesey could not be so confidently classified, at least their misfortune excited no particular sympathy. Two other names mentioned, those of Norfell and Pinney, were practically unknown.

There was some surprise, however, at the statement that the old and respected and extremely conservative firm of Fromentin Bros. was entangled in the thing. Egyptian bonds, minor Levantine loans, discounts in the Arabian and Persian trades—these had been specialties of the Fromentins for many years. Who could have expected to find them caught among the “shorts” in Mexican rubber? It was Mexico, wasn't it, that these Rubber Consols purported to be connected with?

Thorpe's Company, upon its commercial merits, had not been considered at all by the gentlemen of the Stock Exchange, at the time of its flotation. Men vaguely and with difficulty recalled the fact of its prospectus, when the “corner” in its shares was first talked about. They looked it up in their lists and files, later on, but its terms said nothing to them. Nobody discussed the value of the assets owned by this Company, or the probability of its paying a dividend—even when the price bid for its shares was making the most sensational upward leaps. How Thorpe stood with his shareholders, or whether he had any genuine shareholders behind him at all, was seen by the keen eyes of Capel Court to be beside the question. Very likely it was a queer affair, if the truth were known—but at least it had substance enough in it to be giving the “wreckers” a lively time.

By the end of July it was understood that the fight was better worth watching than anything that had been seen in a long time. The only trouble was that there was so little to see. The papers said nothing. The sufferers were the reverse of garrulous. The little red Scotchman, Semple, who was the visible avenging sword of the “corner,” was more imperturbably silent than anybody else. His fellow-members in the “House” watched him now, however, with a new respect. They discovered unsuspected elements of power in his thin, tight mouth, in the direct, cold glances of his brown-grey eyes, in the very way he carried his head and wore his hat. He came to be pointed out, and nodded about behind his back, more than anyone else in the “House,” and important men sought his acquaintance, with an awkward show of civility, who were notorious for their rude exclusiveness.

It might be, of course, that his “corner” would break under him at any fortnightly settlement, but already he had carried it much further than such things often went, and the planning of the coup had been beyond doubt Napoleonic.

Had this small sandy Scot planned it, or was he merely the weapon in Thorpe's hand? Both views had their supporters on the Exchange, but after the wrench of August 1st, when with an abrupt eighty-shilling rise the price of Rubber Consols stood at 15 pounds, and it was to be computed that Semple had received on that single day nearly 75,000 pounds in differences and “backwardation,” a story was set afloat which gave Thorpe the undivided credit of the invention. It was related as coming from his own lips that he had schemed it all out to be revenged upon a group of Jewish operators, against whom he had a grievance. In confirmation of this tale, it was pointed out that, of the seven men still held pinned in the fatal “corner,” six were Jews—and this did, upon first glance, look significant. But then it was objected, upon reflection, that Blaustein and Ascher had both been permitted to make their escape, and this hardly justified the theory of an implacable anti-Semitic vendetta. The objection seemed reasonable, but it was met in turn by the point that Blaustein and Ascher had been bled white, as Bismarck's phrase went, before they were released, whereas the five Christians had been liberated with relatively moderate fines. Upon the whole, a certain odour of the Judenhetze clung thereafter about the “corner” in Rubber Consols.

On an afternoon of the following week, Mr. Stormont Thorpe was alone in the Board Room of the offices in Austin Friars. He had risen from the great roller-topped desk over between the windows, and walked now with a lethargic, tired step to and fro before the empty fireplace, yawning more than once, and stretching out his arms in the supreme gesture of fatigue. After a dozen listless rounds, something occurred to him. He moved with a certain directness of purpose to the cabinet in the corner, unlocked it, and poured out for himself a tumbler of brandy and soda. He drank it without a pause, then turned again, and began pacing up and down as before, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent in thought.

The intervening six months had effected visible changes in the outer man. One noted most readily that the face had grown fuller in its lower parts, and was far less browned than formerly. The large, heavy countenance, with its square jaws masked now under increased flesh, its beginnings of a double-chin, and its slightly flabby effect of pallor, was no longer lacking in individual distinction. It was palpably the visage of a dictator. The moustache had been cut down to military brevity, and the line of mouth below it was eloquent of rough power. The steady grey eyes, seemingly smaller yet more conspicuous than before, revealed in their glance new elements of secretiveness, of strategy supported by abundant and confident personal force.

The man himself seemed scarcely to have grown stouter. He held himself more compactly, as it were; seemed more the master of all his physical expressions. He was dressed like a magnate who was also a person of taste. There was a flower in the lapel of his well-shaped frock-coat, and the rustle of his starched and spotless white waistcoat murmured pleasantly of refined toilets.

“The Marquis of Chaldon—and a gentleman, with him.”

The announcement, from a clerk who had noiselessly opened the door, imposed itself with decorum upon Thorpe's reverie.

“Who is the gentleman with him?” Thorpe began austerely to ask, after an instant's hesitation. But this briefest of delays had brought the callers into plain view behind the clerk, and with a slight gesture the master assented to their entrance.

This large apartment was no longer called the Board Room by anybody. By tacit processes, it had become Mr. Thorpe's room. Not even the titular Chairman of the Company, the renowned and eminent Lord Chaldon, ex-Ambassador and ex-Viceroy, entered this chamber now with any assumption of proprietorship in it. No hint of a recollection that there were such things as the Company and the Board, or that he was nominally the head of both, expressed itself in his Lordship's demeanour as he advanced, his hand a little extended.

The noble Chairman was white of beard and hair, and extremely courteous of manner—a small, carefully-clad, gracious old gentleman, whose mild pink countenance had, with years of anxiety about ways and means, disposed itself in lines which produced a chronic expression of solicitude. A nervous affection of the eyelids lent to this look, at intervals, a beseeching quality which embarrassed the beholder. All men had liked him, and spoken well of him throughout his long and hard-worked career. Thorpe was very fond of him indeed, and put a respectful cordiality into his grasp of the proffered hand. Then he looked, with a certain thinly-veiled bluntness of enquiry, past the Marquis to his companion.

“You were very kind to give me the appointment,” said Lord Chaldon, with a little purring gloss of affability upon the earnestness of his tone. “I wish very much to introduce to you my friend, my old friend I may say, Monsieur Alexandre Fromentin. We slept together under the same tent, in the Persian country beyond Bagdad—oh, it must have been quite forty years ago. We were youngsters looking to win our first spurs then—I in my line, he in his. And often since we have renewed that old friendship—at many different places—India, and Constantinople, and Egypt. I wish heartily to commend him to your—your kindness.”

Thorpe had perfunctorily shaken hands with the stranger—a tall, slender, sharp-faced, clean-shaven, narrow-shouldered man, who by these accounts of his years ought not to have such excessively black hair. He bowed in a foreign fashion, and uttered some words which Thorpe, though he recognized them as English in intent, failed to follow. The voice was that of an elderly man, and at a second glance there were plenty of proofs that he might have been older than the Marquis, out there in Persia, forty years ago. But Thorpe did not like old men who dyed their hair, and he offered his visitors chairs, drawn up from the table toward his desk, with a certain reserve of manner. Seating himself in the revolving chair at the desk itself, he put the tips of his fingers together, and looked this gentleman with the Continental name and experience in the face.

“Is there something you wish me to do?” he asked, passively facilitating the opening of conversation.

“Ah, my God! 'Something'!”—repeated the other, with a fluttering gesture of his hands over his thin, pointed knees—“everything, Mr. Thorpe!”

“That's a tolerably large order, isn't it?” Thorpe asked, calmly, moving a slow, inscrutable glance from one to the other of his callers.

“I could ask for nothing that would be a greater personal favour—and kindness”—Lord Chaldon interposed. His tone bore the stress of sincerity.

“That means a great deal to me, as you know, my Lord,” replied Thorpe, “but I don't in the least understand—what is it that your friend wants?”

“Only that I shall not be buried in a bankrupt's grave,” the suppliant answered, with a kind of embittered eagerness of utterance. “That I shall not see disgraced the honoured name that my father and his father bequeathed to my care!”

Thorpe's large, composed countenance betrayed a certain perplexity. “There must be a mistake,” he observed. “I don't even know this name of yours. I never heard it before.”

The other's mobile face twisted itself in a grimace of incredulity. He had a conspicuously wide mouth, and its trick of sidelong extension at this moment was very unpleasant. “Ah, Herr Je! He never heard it,” he ejaculated, turning nervously to the Marquis. “Would to the good God you never had!” he told Thorpe, with suppressed excitement.

Lord Chaldon, his own voice shaken a little, interposed with an explanation. “My friend is the head—the respected head—of the firm of Fromentin Brothers. I think you have—have dealings with them.”

Thorpe, after a furtive instant of bewilderment, opened his mouth. “Oh! I see,” he said. “I know what you mean now. With the French pronunciation, I didn't recognize the name. I've always heard it called 'Fromen'-tin' here in London. Oh, yes, of course—Fromen'tin Brothers.”

His lips shut tight again at this. The listeners had caught no helpful clue from the tone of his words. They exchanged a glance, and then M. Fromentin spoke.

“Mr. Thorpe,” he began, slowly, with an obvious effort at self-repression. “It is a very simple story. Our house is an old one. My father's grandfather organized the finance of the commissariat of General Bonaparte in Egypt. He created the small beginnings of the carpet and rug importation from Asia Minor. His son, and in turn his son, followed him. They became bankers as well as importers. They helped very greatly to develop the trade of the Levant. They were not avaricious men, or usurers. It is not in our blood. Your Chairman, Lord Chaldon, who honours me so highly by calling me his friend—he will assure you that we have a good name in the East. Our banks have befriended the people, and never oppressed or injured them. For that reason—I will say perhaps for that reason—we have never become a very rich house. It is possible to name bankers who have made large fortunes out of Egypt. It was different with us. Lord Chaldon will tell you that of our own free will—my two brothers and I—of our own choice we consented to lose a fifth of all our possessions, rather than coin into gold by force the tears and blood of the wretched fellaheen.”

“Yes—I have never known a more honourable or humane action,” put in the Marquis, fervently.

“And then my brothers die—Polydor, who lived mostly at Smyrna, and whose estate was withdrawn from the business by his widow, and Augustin, who lived here in London after 1870, and died—it is now six years ago. He left a son, Robert, who is my nephew, and my partner. He is now of an age—perhaps thirty years. He was a small child when he came to London—he has become more English than the English themselves. His activity and industry are very great; he forms plans of such magnitude and numbers that they would compel his grandfather to turn in his coffin. I am in indifferent health. I live much at Homburg and Marienbad and at Cairo. Practically speaking, I have retired from business. There remain branches of our house—in several places—but the London house has become the centre of all things—and Robert has become the London house. This I make plain to your mind, do I, Mr. Thorpe?”

The other, with his chin sunk within the collar of his white waistcoat, and scrutinizing the narrator with a steadfast though impassive glance, made the faintest possible nod of assent.

“I had great confidence in Robert,” the old man went on. His eyes were dimming with tears, and his voice quavered uncertainly. “His plans seemed wise, even if they risked more than formerly. The conditions of business are wholly altered since my youth—and it was best, I thought, to make Robert free to act under these conditions, which he understood much better than I could pretend to do. Thus it was that when he said it was necessary for Fromentin Brothers to belong to the Stock Exchange, I did not object. He was active and bold and clever, and he was in the thick of the fight. Therefore he should be the judge in all things. And that is our ruin. In the time of the South African excitement, he won a great deal of money. Then he lost it all and more. Then gambling began, and his fortunes went now up, now down, but always, as his books show to me now—sinking a little on the average. He grew more adventurous—more careless. He put many small counters upon different numbers on the table. You know what I mean? And in an accursed moment, because other gamblers were doing the same, he sold two thousand of your shares, without having them in his hands. Voila! He wishes now to put a bullet through his brain. He proposes that as the fitting end of Fromentin Freres.”

Thorpe, his chin on his breast, continued to regard the melancholy figure opposite with a moody eye. It seemed a long minute before he broke the tense silence by a sigh of discomfort. “I do not discuss these things with anybody,” he said then, coldly. “If I had known who you were, I don't think you'd have got in.”

The Marquis of Chaldon intuitively straightened himself in his chair, and turned toward the speaker a glance of distressed surprise.

“Or no—I beg your pardon,” Thorpe hastened to add, upon the instant hint of this look—“that doesn't convey my meaning. Of course, our Chairman brings whom he pleases. His friends—as a matter of course—are our friends. What I should have said was that if this had been mentioned beforehand to me, I should have explained that it wasn't possible to discuss that particular business.”

“But—pardon me”—said Lord Chaldon, in a quiet, very gentle, yet insistent voice, which seemed now to recall to its listeners the fact that sovereigns and chancellors had in their day had attentive ears for its tones—“pardon me, but why should it not be possible?”

Thorpe frowned doubtfully, and shifted his position in his chair. “What could I say, if it were discussed?” he made vague retort. “I'm merely one of the Directors. You are our Chairman, but you see he hasn't found it of any use to discuss it with you. There are hard and fast rules about these things. They run their natural course. You are not a business man, my Lord——”

“Oh, I think I may be called a 'business man,'” interposed the nobleman, suavely. “They would tell you so in Calcutta, I think, and in Cairo too. When one considers it, I have transacted a great deal of business—on the behalf of other people. And if you will permit me—I do not impute indirection, of course—but your remark seems to require a footnote. It is true that I am Chairman of the Board on which you are a Director—but it is not quite the whole truth. I as Chairman know absolutely nothing about this matter. As I understand the situation, it is not in your capacity as a Director that you know anything about it either. Yet——”

He paused, as if suddenly conscious of some impropriety in this domestic frankness before a third party, and Thorpe pounced through his well-mannered hesitation with the swiftness of a bird of prey.

“Let me suggest,” he said roundly, lifting his head and poising a hand to hold attention, while he thought upon what it was he should suggest—“this is what I would say. It seems rather irregular, doesn't it? to debate the matter in the presence of an outsider. You see it yourself. That is partly what I meant. Now I have met Mr. Fromentin,” he gave the name its English vowels with an obstinate emphasis, “and I have heard his statement. You have heard it too. If he wishes to lay more facts before us, why, well and good. But then I would suggest that he leave the matter in our hands, to discuss and look into between ourselves. That seems to you the proper course, doesn't it, Lord Chaldon?”

The French banker had been studying with strained acuteness the big lymphatic mask of the Director, with sundry sharp glances aside at the Chairman. The nervous changes on his alert, meagre old face showed how intently he followed every phase of their talk. A certain sardonic perception of evil in the air curled on his lip when he saw the Marquis accede with a bow and wave of the hand to Thorpe's proposition. Then he made his bow in turn, and put the best face possible upon the matter.

“Naturally I consult your convenience—and the proprieties,” he said, with an effect of proud humility. “There are but a few other facts to submit. My nephew has already paid, in differences upon those accursed two thousand shares, a sum of nearly 30,000 pounds. I have the figures in my pocket—but they are fixed in my head as well. Twenty-eight thousand five hundred, those differences already amount to, not to speak of interest. At the last settlement, August 1st, the price per share was 15 pounds. That would make 30,000 pounds more, if we bought now—or a total of practically 60,000 pounds. Eh bien! I beg for the privilege of being allowed to buy these shares now. It is an unpleasant confession to make, but the firm of Fromentin Freres will be made very poor by this loss of 60,000 pounds. It was not always so, but it is so now. My nephew Robert has brought it into that condition. You see my shame at this admission. With all my own means, and with his sister's marriage portion, we can make up this sum of 30,000 pounds, and still enable the firm to remain in existence. I have gone over the books very painstakingly, since I arrived in London. It can be kept afloat, and it can be brought back to safe and moderately profitable courses—if nothing worse happens. With another six weeks like the last, this will not be at all possible. We shall have the cup of dishonour thrust between our teeth. That will be the end of everything.”

M. Fromentin finished in tremulous, grave tones. After looking with blurred eyes for a moment into Thorpe's face, he bowed his head, and softly swayed the knees upon which his thin, dark hands maintained their clutch. Not even the revelation of hair quite white at the roots, unduly widening the track of parting on the top of his dyed head, could rob this movement of its mournful dignity.

Thorpe, after a moment's pause, took a pencil and paper from the desk, and made a calculation. He bit his lips and frowned at the sight of these figures, and set down some others, which seemed to please him no more. Then, with a sudden gesture as of impatience, he rose to his feet.

“How much is that sister's marriage portion you spoke of?” he asked, rather brusquely.

The French gentleman had also risen. He looked with an air of astonishment at his questioner, and then hardened his face. “I apologize for mentioning it,” he said, with brevity. “One does not speak of family affairs.”

“I asked you how much it was,” pursued Thorpe, in a masterful tone. “A man doesn't want to rob a girl of her marriage portion.”

“I think I must not answer you,” the other replied, hesitatingly. “It was the fault of my emotion to introduce the subject. Pray leave the young lady out of account.”

“Then I've nothing more to say,” Thorpe declared, and seated himself again with superfluous energy. He scowled for a little at the disorder of his desk, and then flung forth an angry explanation. “If you evade fair questions like that, how can you expect that I will go out of my way to help you?”

“Oh, permit me, Mr. Thorpe”—the Marquis intervened soothingly—“I think you misapprehend. My friend, I am sure, wished to evade nothing. He had the idea that he was at fault in—in alluding to a purely domestic matter as—as a—what shall I say?—as a plea for your consideration.” He turned to the old banker. “You will not refuse to mention the sum to me, will you, my friend?”

M. Fromentin shrugged his shoulders. “It is ten thousand pounds,” he replied, almost curtly.

Thorpe was seemingly mollified. “Very well, then,” he said. “I will sell you 2,000 shares at ten pounds.”

The others exchanged a wondering look.

“Monsieur,” the banker stammered—“I see your meaning. You will forgive me—it is very well meant indeed by you—but it was not my proposition. The market-price is fifteen pounds—and we were prepared to pay it.” Thorpe laughed in a peremptory, gusty way. “But you can't pay more than I ask!” he told him, with rough geniality. “Come, if I let you and your nephew in out of the cold, what kind of men-folk would you be to insist that your niece should be left outside? As I said, I don't want her money. I don't want any woman's money. If I'm going to be nice to the rest of the family, what's the objection to my being nice to her?”

“Monsieur,” said the Frenchman, after an instant's reflection, “I offer none. I did not at the moment perceive the spirit of your words, but I recognize now that it was delicacy itself. I tender you the most profound thanks—for ALL the family.”

After some further conversation the elder Fromentin took his departure. Lord Chaldon apparently proposed to accompany him, but Thorpe begged him to remain, and he put aside his hat once more and resumed his seat.

Thorpe walked about a little, with his hands in his pockets, in a restless way. “If it isn't unpleasant to you, I think I'll light a cigar,” he said suddenly, and moved over to the cabinet. He poured out a drink of neat brandy, as well, and furtively swallowed it. Then he came back, preceded by a cloud of smoke.

“It went terribly against the grain,” he said, with a rueful laugh. “I'd sworn to let no Jew off with an inch of hide left on him—and here three of them have been wheedled out of my grip already.”

“Jews?” exclaimed the Marquis, much puzzled. “Did you—did you think Fromentin was a Jew? God bless me! he's no more one than I am! Why, not even so much, for there IS a Herschell in my pedigree. Why, dear man, they were Crusaders!”

Thorpe smiled somewhat sheepishly. “I never noticed much,” he said. “It was a foreign-looking name. I took it for granted.”

Lord Chaldon bent his brows a little. “Yes-s”—he murmured, meditatively. “I've heard it mentioned that your enterprise was suspected of an anti-Semitic twist. Do you mind my talking a little with you about that?”

“Oh, not at all,” the other answered with languid acquiescence, as he seated himself.

CHAPTER XVII

LORD CHALDON'S instructive little monologue on the subject of the Hebrew in finance afforded Thorpe a certain pleasure, which was in its character, perhaps, more social than intellectual.

It was both a flattering and striking experience to have so eminent a man at the side of one's desk, revealing for one's guidance the secrets of sovereigns and cabinets. Great names were mentioned in the course of this dissertation—mentioned with the authoritative ease of one who dined with princes and prime ministers—and Thorpe felt that he shared in the distinction of this familiarity with the august. He was in the position of paying a salary to this courtly old nobleman and statesman, who could tell him of his own intimate knowledge how Emperors conversed with one another; how the Pope fidgeted in his ornate-carved chair when the visitor talked on unwelcome topics; how a Queen and an opera-bouffe dancer waged an obscure and envenomed battle for the possession of a counting-house strong box, and in the outcome a nation was armed with inferior old muskets instead of modern weapons, and the girl got the difference expressed in black pearls.

These reminiscences seemed to alter the atmosphere, and even the appearance, of the Board Room. It was almost as if the apartment itself was becoming historic, like those chambers they pointed out to the tourist wherein crowned heads had slept. The manner of the Marquis lent itself charmingly to this illusion. He spoke in a facile, mellifluous voice, and as fluently as if he had been at work for a long time preparing a dissertation on this subject, instead of taking it up now by chance. In his tone, in his gestures, in the sustained friendliness of his facial expressions, there was a palpable desire to please his auditor—and Thorpe gave more heed to this than to the thread of the discourse. The facts that he heard now about the Jewish masters of international finance were doubtless surprising and suggestive to a degree, but somehow they failed to stimulate his imagination. Lord Chaldon's statesmanlike discussion of the uses to which they put this vast power of theirs; his conviction that on the whole they were beneficent; his dread of the consequences of any organized attempt to take this power away from them, and put it into other and less capable hands—no doubt it was all very clever and wise, but Thorpe did not care for it.

At the end he nodded, and, with a lumbering movement, altered his position in his chair. The fixed idea of despoiling Rostocker, Aronson, Ganz, Rothfoere, Lewis, and Mendel of their last sixpence had been in no wise affected by this entertaining homily. There appeared to be no need of pretending that it had been. If he knew anything of men and their manners, his titled friend would not object to a change of topic.

“Lord Chaldon,” he said abruptly, “we've talked enough about general matters. While you're here, we might as well go into the subject of the Company. Our annual meeting is pretty nearly due—but I think it would be better to have it postponed. You see, this extraordinary development of dealing in our shares on the Stock Exchange has occupied my entire attention. There has been no time for arranging the machinery of operations on our property in Mexico. It's still there; it's all right. But for the time being, the operations in London are so much more important. We should have nothing to tell our shareholders, if we brought them together, except that their one-pound shares are worth fifteen pounds, and they know that already.”

The Marquis had listened with a shrewdly attentive eye upon the speaker's face. The nervous affection of his eyelids gave him now a minute of blinking leisure in which to frame his comment. “I have not heard that my shares are worth fifteen pounds,” he said then, with a direct, meaning little smile.

“No,” Thorpe laughed, leaning comfortably back in his chair. “That's what I want to talk to you about. You see, when the Company was started, it was impossible to foresee that this dealing in our ordinary shares would swamp everything else. If things had taken their usual course, and we had paid our attention to Mexico instead of to the London Stock Exchange, my deferred vendor's shares, two thousand of which you hold, would by this time be worth a good bit. As it is, unfortunately, they are outside of the deal. They have nothing to do with the movement of the ordinary shares. But of course you understand all that.”

Lord Chaldon assented by an eloquent nod, at once resigned and hopeful.

“Well—that is contrary to all my expectations—and intentions,” Thorpe resumed. “I don't want you to suffer by this unlooked-for change in the shape of things. You hold two thousand shares—only by accident they're the wrong kind of shares. Very well: I'll make them the right kind of shares. I'll have a transfer sent to you tomorrow, so that you can return those vendor's shares to me, and in exchange for them I'll give you two thousand fully-paid ordinary shares. You can sell these at once, if you like, or you can hold them on over one more settlement, whichever you please.”

“This is very munificent,” remarked Lord Chaldon, after an instant's self-communion. His tone was extremely gracious, but he displayed none of the enthusiastic excitement which Thorpe perceived now that he had looked for. The equanimity of Marquises, who were also ex-Ambassadors, was evidently a deeper-rooted affair than he had supposed. This elderly and urbane diplomat took a gift of thirty thousand pounds as he might have accepted a superior cigar.

A brief pause ensued, and was ended by another remark from the nobleman: “I thought for the moment of asking your advice—on this question of selling,” he continued. “But it will be put more appropriately, perhaps, in this way: Let me leave it entirely in your hands. Whatever you do will be right. I know so little of these things—and you know so much.”

Thorpe put out his lips a trifle, and looked away for an instant in frowning abstraction. “If it were put in that way—I think I should sell,” he said. “It's all right for me to take long chances—it's my game—but there's no reason why you should risk things. But let me put it in still another way,” he added, with the passing gleam of a new thought over the dull surface of his eye. “What do you say to our making the transaction strictly between ourselves? Here are shares to bearer, in the safe there. I say that two thousand of them are yours: that makes them yours. I give you my cheque for thirty thousand pounds—here, now, if you like—and that makes them mine again. The business is finished and done with—inside this room. Neither of us is to say anything about it to a soul. Does that meet your views?”

The diplomat pondered the proposition—again with a lengthened perturbation of the eyelids. “It would be possible to suggest a variety of objections, if one were of a sophistical turn of mind,” he said at last, smilingly reflective. “Yet I see no really insuperable obstacle in the path.” He thought upon it further, and went on with an enquiring upward glance directed suddenly at Thorpe: “Is there likely to be any very unpleasant hubbub in the press—when it is known that the annual meeting has been postponed?”

Thorpe shook his head with confidence. “No—you need have no fear of that. The press is all right. It's the talk of the City, I'm told—the way I've managed the press. It isn't often that a man has all three of the papers walking the same chalk-line.”

The Marquis considered these remarks with a puzzled air. Then he smiled faintly. “I'm afraid we're speaking of different things,” he suggested. “Apparently you refer to the financial papers. I had scarcely given them a thought. It does not seem to me that I should mind particularly what they said about me—but I should care a great deal about the other press—the great public press.”

“Oh, what do they know about these things?” said Thorpe, lightly. “So far as I can see, they don't know about anything, unless it gets into the police court, or the divorce court, or a court of some kind. They're the funniest sort of papers I ever saw. Seems as if they didn't think anything was safe to be printed until it had been sworn to. Why anybody should be afraid of them is more than I can see.”

“Nevertheless,” persisted his Lordship, blandly, “I should greatly dislike any public discussion of our Company's affairs. I hope it is quite clear that that can be avoided.”

“Absolutely!” Thorpe told him, with reassuring energy. “Why, discussions don't make themselves. Somebody has to kick before anything gets discussed. And who is to kick here? The public who hold the shares are not likely to complain because they've gone up fifteen hundred or two thousand per cent. And who else has any interest in what the Company, as a Company, does?”

“Ah, that is a question which has occurred to me,” said Lord Chaldon, “and I shall be glad if it is already answered. The only people likely to 'kick,' as you put it so simply, would be, I take it, Directors and other officers of the Company who find themselves holding a class of shares which does not participate in the present rise. I speak with some confidence—because I was in that position myself until a few minutes ago—and I don't mind confessing that I had brought myself to contemplate the contingency of ultimately being compelled to—to 'kick' a little. Of course, so far as I am concerned, events have put me in a diametrically different frame of mind. If I came prepared—I won't say to curse, but to—to criticize—I certainly remain to bless. But you see my point. I of course do not know what you have done as regards the other members of the Board.”

“I don't care about them,” said Thorpe, carelessly. “You are the one that I wished to bring in on the ground-floor. The others don't matter. Of course, I shall do something for them; they shan't be allowed to make trouble—even supposing that it would be in their power to make trouble, which isn't the case. But it won't be done by any means on the same scale that—” he paused abruptly, and the two men tacitly completed his sentence in the glance they exchanged.

The Marquis of Chaldon rose, and took up his hat and stick. “If you will post it to me—in a registered letter—my town house—please,” he remarked, with a charmingly delicate hesitation over the phrases. Then he put out his hand: “I need not say how fully I appreciate your great kindness to my old friend Fromentin. It was a noble action—one I shall always reflect upon with admiration.”

“I hope you won't mention it, though,” said Thorpe, as they shook hands; “either that or—or anything else.”

“I shall preserve the most guarded—the most diplomatic secrecy,” his Lordship assured him, as they walked toward the door.

Thorpe opened this door, and stepped aside, with a half bow, to facilitate the exit of the Marquis, who bent gracious acknowledgment of the courtesy. Then, with an abrupt start of surprise, the two men straightened themselves. Directly in front of them, leaning lightly against the brass-rail which guarded the entrance to the Board Room, stood Lord Plowden.

A certain sense of confusion, unwelcome but inevitable, visibly enveloped this chance meeting. The Marquis blinked very hard as he exchanged a fleeting hand-shake with the younger nobleman, and murmured some indistinguishable commonplaces. Then, with a graceful celerity, which was more than diplomatic, he disappeared. Thorpe, with more difficulty, recovered a sort of stolidity of expression that might pass for composure. He in turn gave his hand to the newcomer, and nodded to him, and achieved a doubtful smile.

“Come in!” he said, haltingly. “Where did you drop from? Glad to see you! How are all your people?”

A moment later the young Viscount was seated in the chair which the elderly Marquis had vacated. He presented therein a figure which, in its way, was perhaps as courtly as the other had been—but the way was widely different. Lord Plowden's fine, lithe form expressed no deference in its easy postures. His handsome face was at no pains to assume conciliatory or ingratiating aspects. His brilliant brown eyes sparkled a confident, buoyant gaze full into the heavy, lethargic countenance of the big man at the desk.

“I haven't bothered you before,” he said, tossing his gloves into his hat, and spreading his frock-coat out by its silk lapels. He crossed his legs, and sat back with a comfortable smile. “I knew you were awfully busy—and I kept away as long as I could. But now—well, the truth is—I'm in rather of a hole. I hope you don't mind my coming.”

“Why not at all,” said Thorpe, laconically. After a momentary pause he added: “The Marquis has just been consulting me about the postponement of the annual meeting. I suppose you agree with us—that it would be better to put it off. There's really nothing to report. Of course, you know more about the situation than he does—between ourselves. The shareholders don't want a meeting; it's enough for them that their shares are worth fifteen or twenty times what they paid for them. And certainly WE don't need a meeting, as things stand now.”

“Ah yes—how do things stand now?” asked Lord Plowden, briskly.

“Well,”—Thorpe eyed his visitor with a moody blankness of gaze, his chin once more buried in his collar—“well, everything is going all right, as far as I can see. But, of course, these dealings in our shares in the

City have taken up all my time—so that I haven't been able to give any attention to starting up work in Mexico. That being the case, I shall arrange to foot all the bills for this year's expenses—the rent, the Directors' fees and clerk-hire and so on—out of my own pocket. It comes, all told, to about 2,700 pounds—without counting my extra 1,000 pounds as Managing Director. I don't propose to ask for a penny of that, under the circumstances—and I'll even pay the other expenses. So that the Company isn't losing a penny by our not getting to work at the development of the property. No one could ask anything fairer than that.—And are your mother and sister quite well?”

“Oh, very well indeed, thanks,” replied the other. He relapsed abruptly into a silence which was plainly preoccupied. Something of the radiant cheerfulness with which his face had beamed seemed to have faded away.

“I'm in treaty for a house and a moor in the Highlands”—Thorpe went on, in a casual tone—“in fact, I'm hesitating between three or four places that all seem to be pretty good—but I don't know whether I can get away much before the twentieth. I hope you can contrive to come while I'm there. I should like it very much if you would bring your mother and sister—and your brother too. I have a nephew about his age—a fine young fellow—who'd be company for him. Why can't you say now that you'll all come?”

Lord Plowden emerged from his brown study with the gleam of some new idea on his face. “I might bring my sister,” he said. “My mother hates Scotland. She doesn't go about, either, even in England. But I daresay Winnie would enjoy it immensely. She has a great opinion of you, you know.”

“I only saw her that once,” Thorpe remarked. Some thought behind his words lent a musing effect to the tone in which they were uttered. The brother's contemplative smile seemed a comment upon this tone.

“Women are curious creatures,” he said. “They take fancies and dislikes as swiftly and irresponsibly as cloud-shadows shift and change on a mountain-side in April. But I happen to know that my sister does like you immensely. So does my mother,” he added, with another little smile. He continued to regard Thorpe's face, but there was an increasing uncertainty in his glance. “You've put on flesh, haven't you?” he ventured, after a brief pause. There was the implication in his voice and manner that he observed changes which disconcerted him.

“Not much, I guess,” replied the other, carelessly. “I've been sticking to the City pretty closely. That's all. There's nothing that a fortnight's rest won't put right. I should like it first-rate to have you and your sister come. I'll let you know which place I decide upon. Very likely you can manage to bring her at the same time that some other ladies will be there. I expect Lady Cressage and Miss Madden, you know.”

Lord Plowden stared at his friend. “Are they back? Have they returned to England?” he asked, confusedly.

“Oh, didn't you know?” Thorpe pursued, with an accession of amiability. He visibly had pleasure in the disclosure of the other's ignorance. “They've been in London for two or three weeks. That is, Miss Madden has been taking flying trips to see cathedrals and so on, but Lady Cressage has stayed in town. Their long journeyings have rather done her up.” He looked Plowden straight in the eye, and added with an air of deliberation: “I'm rather anxious about her health.”

The nobleman frankly abandoned his efforts to maintain an undisturbed front. “You—are—anxious,” he repeated, frowning in displeased wonderment.

“Why yes—why not?” demanded Thorpe, with a sudden growl in his voice. As he covered the handsome Viscount with his heavy, intent gaze, impulses of wrath stirred within him. Why should this fop of a lordling put on this air of contemptuous incredulity? “What is there so amazing about that? Why shouldn't I be anxious?”

The peremptory harshness of his manner, and the scowl on his big, lowering face, brought a sort of self-control back to the other. He shrugged his shoulders, with an attempt at nonchalance. “Why not indeed!” he said, as lightly as he could. With hands on knees, he bent forward as if to rise. “But perhaps I'd better come in another day,” he suggested, tentatively. “I'm interrupting you.”

“No—sit still,” Thorpe bade him, and then, with chin settled more determinedly than ever in his cravat, sat eyeing him in a long, dour silence.

Lord Plowden found it impossible to obtain from this massive, apathetic visage any clue to the thoughts working behind it. He chanced to recall the time when he had discussed with Thorpe the meaning and values of this inscrutable expression which the latter's countenance could assume. It had seemed interesting and even admirable to him then—but then he had not foreseen the possibility that he himself might some day confront its adamantine barrier with a sinking heart. All at once he could bear this implacable sphinx-gaze no longer.

“I'm sure some other day would be better,” he urged, with an open overture to propitiation in his tone. “You're not in the mood to be bothered with my affairs today.”

“As much today as any other,” Thorpe answered him, slowly.

The other sat suddenly upright—and then upon a moment's reflection rose to his feet. “I don't in the least know what to make of all this,” he said, with nervous precipitancy. “If I've offended you in any way, say so, and I will apologize at once. But treatment of this sort passes my comprehension.”

Thorpe in truth did not himself comprehend it much more clearly. Some strange freak of wilfulness impelled him to pursue this unintelligible persecution. “I've said nothing about any offense,” he declared, in a hard, deliberate voice. “It is your own word. All the same—I mention the name of a lady—a lady, mind you, whom I met under your own roof—and you strike attitudes and put on airs as if—as if I wasn't good enough!”

“Oh, upon my word, that's all rubbish!” the other broke in. “Nothing could have been further from my thoughts, I assure you. Quite naturally I was surprised for the moment at a bit of unexpected news—but that was all. I give you my word that was all.”

“Very well, then,” Thorpe consented grudgingly to mutter.

He continued his sullen scrutiny of the man standing before him, noting how the vivacity of his bearing had deteriorated in these few minutes. He had cut such a gallant figure when he entered the room, with his sparkling eye and smile, his almost jaunty manner, his superior tailor's plumage—and now he was such a crestfallen and wilted thing! Remembering their last conversation together—remembering indeed how full of liking for this young nobleman he had been when they last met—Thorpe paused to wonder at the fact that he felt no atom of pity for him now. What was his grievance? What had Plowden done to provoke this savage hostility? Thorpe could not tell. He knew only that unnamed forces dragged him forward to hurt and humiliate his former friend. Obscurely, no doubt, there was something about a woman in it. Plowden had been an admirer of Lady Cressage. There was her father's word for it that if there had been money enough he would have wished to marry her. There had been, as well, the General's hint that if the difficulty of Plowden's poverty were removed, he might still wish to marry her—a hint which Thorpe discovered to be rankling with a sudden new soreness in his mind. Was that why he hated Plowden? No—he said to himself that it was not. He was going to marry Lady Cressage himself. Her letter, signifying delicately her assent to his proposal, had come to him that very morning—was in his pocket now. What did he care about the bye-gone aspirations of other would-be suitors? And, as for Plowden, he had not even known of her return to London. Clearly there remained no communications of any sort between them. It was not at all on her account, he assured himself, that he had turned against Plowden. But what other reason could there be? He observed his visitor's perturbed and dejected mien with a grim kind of satisfaction—but still he could not tell why.

"This is all terribly important to me," the nobleman said, breaking the unpleasant silence. His voice was surcharged with earnestness. "Apparently you are annoyed with something—what it may be I can't for the life of me make out. All I can say is"—and he broke off with a helpless gesture which seemed to imply that he feared to say anything.

Thorpe put out his lips. "I don't know what you mean," he said, brusquely.

"What I mean"—the other echoed, with bewildered vagueness of glance. "I'm all at sea. I don't in the least grasp the meaning of anything. You yourself volunteered the declaration that you would do great things for me. 'We are rich men together'—those were your own words. I urged you at the time to go slowly—to consider carefully whether you weren't being too generous. I myself said to you that you were ridiculously exaggerating what you called your obligation to me. It was you who insisted upon presenting me with 100,000 shares."

"Well, they are here ready for you," said Thorpe, with calculated coldness. "You can have them whenever you please. I promised them to you, and set them aside for you. You can take them away with you now, if you like. What are you kicking up this fuss for, then? Upon my word!—you come here and suggest to me that I made promises to you which I've broken!"

Plowden looked hard at him, as he turned over in his mind the purport of these words. "I see what you are doing," he said then. "You turn over to me 100,000 vendor's deferred shares. Thanks! I have already 1,000 of them. I keep them in the same box with my father's Confederate bonds."

"What the hell do you mean?" Thorpe broke in with explosive warmth, lifting himself in his chair.

"Oh, come now, Thorpe," Plowden retorted, "let's get this talk on an intelligent, common-sense footing." He had regained something of his self-control, and keenly put forward now to help him all his persuasive graces of eye and speech. He seated himself once more. "I'm convinced that you want to be good to me. Of course you do! If I've seemed here for a minute or two to think otherwise, it was because I misunderstood things. Don't let there be any further misunderstandings! I apologize for doing you the momentary injustice of suspecting that you were going to play off the vendor's shares on me. Of course you said it—but it was a joke."

"There seems to be a joke somewhere, sure enough," said Thorpe, in dryly metallic tones—"but it isn't me who's the joker. I told you you should have 100,000 of my 400,000 shares, didn't I? I told you that in so many words. Very well, what more do you want? Here they are for you! I keep my promise to the letter. But you—you seem to think you're entitled to make a row. What do you mean by it?"

"Just a little word"—interposed Plowden, with strenuous calmness of utterance—"what you say may be true enough—yes, I admit it is true as far as it goes. But was that what either of us had in our minds at the time? You know it wasn't! You had just planned a coup on the Stock Exchange which promised you immense rewards. I helped you to pass a bogus allotment through our Board—without which your coup wouldn't have been worth a farthing. You were enthusiastically grateful to me then. In the excitement of the moment you promised me a quarter of all you should make. 'WE ARE BOTH RICH MEN!' I remember those very words of yours. They have never been out of my mind. We discussed the things that we would each do, when we came into this wealth. It was taken for granted in all our talk that your making money meant also my making money. That was the complete understanding—here in London, and while you were at my house. You know it as well as I do. And I refuse to suppose that you seriously intend to sit there and pretend that you meant to give me nothing but an armful of waste paper. It would be too monstrous!"

Thorpe rapped with his nails on the desk, to point the force of his rejoinder: "How do you account for the fact, my Lord"—he gave his words a chillingly scornful precision of utterance—"that I distinctly mentioned 400,000 vendor's shares of mine, 100,000 of which I promised to turn over to you? Those were the specific terms, were they not? You don't deny it? Then what are you talking about?"

"I account for it in this way"—said Plowden, after a moment's baffled reflection: "at that time you yourself hadn't grasped the difference between the two classes of shares. You thought the vendor's shares would play a part in the game. Ah! I see I've hit the mark! That was the way of it!—And now here, Thorpe! Let all that's been said be bye-gones! I don't want any verbal triumph over you. You don't want to wrong me—and yourself too—by sticking to this quibble about vendor's shares. You intended to be deuced good to me—and what have I done that you should round on me now? I haven't bothered you before. I came today only because things are particularly rotten, financially, just now. And I don't even want to hold you to a quarter—I leave that entirely to you. But after all that's been said and done—I put it to you as one man to another—you are morally bound to help me out."

"How do you mean?—'all that's been said and done'?" Thorpe asked the question in some confusion of moods. Perhaps it was the ethical force of Lord Plowden's appeal, perhaps only a recurring sense of his earlier affection for the man—but for the moment he wavered in his purpose.

The peer flushed a little, as he looked at the floor, revolving possible answers to this query. His ear had been quick to seize the note of hesitation in Thorpe's tone. He strove anxiously to get together considerations which should tip the fluttering balance definitely his way.

“Well,” he began slowly, “I hardly know how to put it. Of course there was, in the first place, the immense expectation of fortune which you gave me, and which I'm afraid I've more than lived up to. And then, of course, others shared my expectations. It wasn't a thing one could very well keep to oneself. My mother and my sister—especially my sister—they were wonderfully excited about it. You are quite the hero in their eyes. And then—you remember that talk we had, in which you said I could help you—socially, you know. I did it a little, just as a start, but of course there's no end to what could be done. You've been too busy heretofore, but we can begin now whenever you like. I don't mind telling you—I've had some thoughts of a possible marriage for you. In point of blood and connections it would be such a match as a commoner hasn't made before in my memory—a highly-cultivated and highly-bred young lady of rank—and settlements could be made so that a considerable quantity of land would eventually come to your son. I needn't tell you that land stands for much more than money, if you happen to set your mind on a baronetcy or a peerage. Of course—I need scarcely say —I mention this marriage only as something which may or may not attract you,—it is quite open to you to prefer another,—but there is hardly anything of that sort in which I and my connections could not be of use to you.”

Even more by the tone and inflection of these words than by the phrases themselves, Thorpe divined that he was being offered the hand of the Hon. Winifred Plowden in marriage. He recalled vividly the fact that once the shadow of some such thought had floated through his own brain; there had been a moment—it seemed curiously remote, like a dream-phantom from some previous state of existence—when he had dwelt with personal interest upon her inheritance from long lines of noblemen, and her relation to half the peerage. Then, swiftly, illogically, he disliked the brother of this lady more than ever.

“All that is talking in the air,” he said, with abrupt decision. “I see nothing in it. You shall have your vendor's shares, precisely as I promised you. I don't see how you can possibly ask for anything more.” He looked at the other's darkling face for a moment, and then rose with unwieldy deliberation. “If you're so hard up though,” he continued, coldly, “I don't mind doing this much for you. I'll exchange the thousand vendor's shares you already hold the ones I gave you to qualify you at the beginning—for ordinary shares. You can sell those for fifteen thousand pounds cash. In fact, I'll buy them of you now. I'll give you a cheque for the amount. Do you want it?”

Lord Plowden, red-faced and frowning, hesitated for a fraction of time. Then in constrained silence he nodded, and Thorpe, leaning ponderously over the desk, wrote out the cheque. His Lordship took it, folded it up, and put it in his pocket without immediate comment.

“Then this is the end of things, is it?” he asked, after an awkward silence, in a voice he strove in vain to keep from shaking.

“What things?” said the other.

Plowden shrugged his shoulders, framed his lips to utter something which he decided not to say, and at last turned on his heel. “Good day,” he called out over his shoulder, and left the room with a flagrant air of hostility.

Thorpe, wandering about the apartment, stopped after a time at the cabinet, and helped himself to a drink. The thing most apparent to him was that of set purpose he had converted a friend into an enemy. Why had he done this? He asked himself the question in varying forms, over his brandy and soda, but no convincing answer came. He had done it because he had felt like doing it. It was impossible to trace motives further than that.

CHAPTER XVIII

“EDITH will be down in a very few moments,” Miss Madden assured Thorpe that evening, when he entered the drawing-room of the house she had taken in Grafton Street.

He looked into her eyes and smiled, as he bowed over the hand she extended to him. His glance expressed with forceful directness his thought: “Ah, then she has told you!”

The complacent consciousness of producing a fine effect in evening-clothes had given to Mr. Stormont Thorpe habitually now a mildness of manner, after the dressing hour, which was lacking to his deportment in the day-time. The conventional attire of ceremony, juggled in the hands of an inspired tailor, had been brought to lend to his ponderous figure a dignity, and even something of a grace, which the man within assimilated and made his own. It was an equable and rather amiable Thorpe whom people encountered after nightfall—a gentleman who looked impressive enough to have powerful performances believed of him, yet seemed withal an approachable and easy-going person. Men who saw him at midnight or later spoke of him to their womenkind with a certain significant reserve, in which trained womankind read the suggestion that the “Rubber King” drank a good deal, and was probably not wholly nice in his cups.

This, however, could not be said to render him less interesting in any eyes. There was indeed about it the implication of a generous nature, or at the least of a blind side—and it is not unpleasant to discover these attributes in a new man who has made his half-million, and has, or may have, countless favours to bestow.

It was as if his tongue instead of his eyes had uttered the exclamation—“Ah, then she has told you!”—for Miss Madden took it as having been spoken. “I'm not disposed to pretend that I'm overjoyed about it, you know,” she said to him bluntly, as their hands dropped, and they stood facing each other. “If I said I congratulated you, it would be only the emptiest form. And I hate empty forms.”

“Why should you think that I won't make a good husband?” Thorpe asked the question with a good-natured if peremptory frankness which came most readily to him in the presence of this American lady, herself so outspoken and masterful.

“I don't know that I specially doubt it,” she replied. “I suppose any man has in him the makings of what is called a good husband—if the conditions are sufficiently propitious.”

“Well then—what's the matter with the conditions?” he demanded, jocosely.

Miss Madden shrugged her shoulders slightly. Thorpe noted the somewhat luxuriant curves of these splendid shoulders, and the creamy whiteness of the skin, upon which, round the full throat, a chain of diamonds lay as upon satin—and recalled that he had not seen her before in what he phrased to himself as so much low-necked dress. The deep fire-gleam in her broad plaits of hair gave a wonderful brilliancy to this colouring of brow and throat and bosom. He marvelled at himself for discovering only now that she also was beautiful—and then thrilled with pride at the thought that henceforth his life might be passed altogether among beautiful women, radiant in gems and costly fabrics, who would smile upon him at his command.

“Oh, I have no wish to be a kill-joy,” she protested. “I'm sure I hope all manner of good results from the—the experiment.”

“I suppose that's what it comes to,” he said, meditatively. “It's all an experiment. Every marriage in the world must be that—neither more nor less.”

“With all the experience of the ages against its coming out right.” She had turned to move toward a chair, but looked now over her shoulder at him. “Have you ever seen what seemed to you an absolutely happy marriage in your life?”

Upon reflection he shook his head. “I don't recall one on the spur of the minute,” he confessed. “Not the kind, I mean, that you read about in books. But I've seen plenty where the couple got along together in a good, easy, comfortable sort of way, without a notion of any sort of unpleasantness. It's people who marry too young who do most of the fighting, I imagine. After people have got to a sensible age, and know what they want and what they can get along without, why then there's no reason for any trouble. We don't start out with any school-boy and school-girl moonshine.”

“Oh, there's a good deal to be said for the moonshine,” she interrupted him, as she sank upon the sofa.

“Why certainly,” he assented, amiably, as he stood looking down at her. “The more there is of it, the better—if it comes naturally, and people know enough to understand that it is moonshine, and isn't the be-all and end-all of everything.”

“There's a lover for you!” Miss Madden cried, with mirth and derision mingled in her laugh.

“Don't you worry about me,” he told her. “I'm a good enough lover, all right. And when you come to that, if Edith is satisfied, I don't precisely see what——”

“What business it is of mine?” she finished the sentence for him. “You're entirely right. As you say, IF she's satisfied, no one else has anything to do with it.”

“But have you got any right to assume that she isn't satisfied?” he asked her with swift directness—“or any reason for supposing it?”

Miss Madden shook her head, but the negation seemed qualified by the whimsical smile she gave him. “None whatever,” she said—and on the instant the talk was extinguished by the entrance of Lady Cressage.

Thorpe's vision was flooded with the perception of his rare fortune as he went to meet her. He took the hand she offered, and looked into the smile of her greeting, and could say nothing. Her beauty had gathered to it new forces in his eyes—forces which dazzled and troubled his glance. The thought that this exquisite being—this ineffable compound of feeling and fine nerves and sweet wisdom and wit and loveliness—belonged to him seemed too vast for the capacity of his mind. He could not keep himself from trembling a little, and from diverting to a screen beyond her shoulder a gaze which he felt to be overtly dimmed and embarrassed.

“I have kept you waiting,” she murmured.

The soft sound of her voice came to his ears as from a distance. It bore an unfamiliar note, upon the strangeness of which he dwelt for a detached instant. Then its meaning broke in upon his consciousness from all sides, and lighted up his heavy face with the glow of a conqueror's self-centred smile. He bent his eyes upon her, and noted with a controlled exaltation how her glance in turn deferred to his, and fluttered beneath it, and shrank away. He squared his big shoulders and lifted his head. Still holding her jewelled hand in his, he turned and led her toward the sofa. Halting, he bowed with an exaggerated genuflection and flourish of his free hand to Miss Madden, the while he flashed at her a glance at once of challenge and of deprecation. Through the sensitized contact of the other hand, he felt that the woman he held bowed also, and in his own spirit of confused defiance and entreaty. The laugh he gave then seemed to dispel the awkwardness which had momentarily hung over the mocking salutation.

Miss Madden laughed too. “Oh, I surrender,” she said. “You drag congratulations from me.”

Some quality in the tone of this ungracious speech had the effect of putting the party at its ease. Lady Cressage seated herself beside her friend on the sofa, and gently, abstractedly, patted one of her hands. Thorpe remained on his feet, looking down at the pair with satisfied cheerfulness. He tool, a slip of paper from his pocket, to support a statement he was making.

“I'm forever telling you what a strain the City is on a man in my position,” he said—“and today I had the curiosity to keep an account of what happened. Here it is. I had thirty callers. Of those, how many do you suppose came to see me on my own business? Just eight. That is to say, their errands were about investments of mine, but most of them managed to get in some word about axes of their own to grind. All the rest made no pretence at all of thinking about anybody but themselves. I've classified them, one by one, here.

“First, there were six men who wanted me to take shares of one sort or another, and I had to more or less listen to what they tried to make out their companies were like. They were none of them any good. Eight different fellows came to me with schemes that haven't reached the company stage. One had a scheme for getting possession of a nigger republic in the West Indies by raising a loan, and then repudiating all the previous loans. Another wanted me to buy a paper for him, in which he was to support all my enterprises. Another wanted to start a bank—I apparently to find the money, and he the brains. One chap wanted me to finance a theatrical syndicate—he had a bag full of photographs of an actress all eyes and teeth and hair,—and another chap had a scheme all worked out for getting a concession from Spain for one of the Caroline Islands, and putting up a factory there for making porpoise-hide leather.

“Then there were three inventors—let's see, here they are—one with a coiled wire spring for scissors inside a pocket-knife, and one with a bottle, the whole top of which unscrews instead of having a cork or stopper, and one with an electrical fish-line, a fine wire inside the silk, you know, which connects with some battery when a fish bites, and rings a bell, and throws out hooks in various directions, and does all sorts of things.

“Well then, there was a man who wanted me to take the chairmanship of a company, and one who wanted me to guarantee an overdraft at his bank, and two who wanted to borrow money on stock, and one parson-fellow who tried to stick me for a subscription to some Home or other he said he had for children in the country. He was the worst bounder of the lot.

“Well, there's twenty-seven people—and twenty of them strangers to me, and not worth a penny to me, and all trying to get money out of me. Isn't that a dog's life for one?”

“I don't know,” said Miss Madden, contemplatively. “A lady may have twice that number of callers in an afternoon—quite as great strangers to all intents and purposes—and not even have the satisfaction of discovering that they had any object whatever in calling. At least your people had some motive: the grey matter in their brain was working. And besides, one of them might have had something to say which you would value. I don't think that ever happens among a lady's callers; does it, Edith?”

Edith smiled, pleasantly and yet a little wistfully, but said nothing.

“At any rate,” Thorpe went on, with a kind of purpose gathering in his eyes, “none of those fellows cost me anything, except in time. But then I had three callers, almost in a bunch, and one of them took out of me thirty thousand pounds, and another fifteen thousand pounds, and the third—an utter stranger he was—he got an absolute gratuity of ten thousand pounds, besides my consent to a sale which, if I had refused it, would have stood me in perhaps forty or fifty thousand pounds more. You ladies may thank your stars you don't have that kind of callers!”

The sound of these figures in the air brought a constrained look to the faces of the women. Seemingly they confronted a subject which was not to their liking. The American, however, after a moment's pause, took it up in an indifferent manner.

“You speak of an 'absolute gratuity.' I know nothing of London City methods—but isn't ten thousand pounds a gratuity on a rather large scale?”

Thorpe hesitated briefly, then smiled, and, with slow deliberation, drew up a chair and seated himself before them. “Perhaps I don't mind telling you about it,” he began, and paused again. “I had a letter in my mail this morning,” he went on at last, giving a sentimental significance to both tone and glance—“a letter which changed everything in the world for me, and made me the proudest and happiest man above ground. And I put that letter in my pocket, right here on the left side—and it's there now, for that matter”—he put his hand to his breast, as if under the impulse to verify his words by the production of the missive, and then stopped and flushed.

The ladies, watching him, seemed by their eyes to condone the mawkishness of the demonstration which had tempted him. There was indeed a kind of approving interest in their joint regard, which he had not experienced before.

“I had it in my pocket,” he resumed, with an accession of mellow emotion in his voice, “and none of the callers ever got my thoughts very far from that letter. And one of these was an old man—a French banker who must be seventy years old, but dyes his hair a kind of purple black—and it seems that his nephew had got the firm into a terrible kind of scrape, selling 2,000 of my shares when he hadn't got them to sell and couldn't get them—and the old man came to beg me to let him out at present market figures. He got Lord Chaldon—he's my Chairman, you know—to bring him, and introduce him as his friend, and plead for him—but I don't think all that, by itself, would have budged me an atom. But then the old man told how he was just able to scrape together money enough to buy the shares he needed, at the ruling price, and he happened to mention that his niece's marriage portion would have to be sacrificed. Well, then, do you know, that letter in my pocket said something to me....And—well, that's the story. The girl' s portion, I wormed it out of him, was ten thousand...and I struck that much off the figure that I allowed him to buy his shares, and save his firm, for....It was all the letter that did it, mind you!”

He concluded the halting narrative amid a marked silence. The ladies looked at him and at each other, but they seemed surprised out of their facility of comment. In this kind of flustered hush, the door was opened and dinner was announced.

Miss Madden welcomed the diversion by rising with ostentatious vigour. “I will take myself out,” she declared, with cheerful promptness leading the way. Lady Cressage took the arm Thorpe offered her, and gave no token of comprehending that her wrist was being caressingly pressed against his side as they moved along.

At the little table shining in the centre of the dark, cool dining-room, talk moved idly about among general topics. A thunderstorm broke over the town, at an early stage of the dinner, and the sound of the rushing downpour through the open windows, and the breath of freshness which stirred the jaded air, were pleasanter than any speech. Thoughts roved intuitively country-ward, where the long-needed rain would be dowering the landscape with new life—where the earth at sunrise would be green again, and buoyant in reawakened energy, and redolent with the perfumes of sweetest summer. They spoke of the fields and the moors with the longing of tired town-folk in August.

“Oh, when I get away”—said Thorpe, fervently, “it seems to me that I don't want ever to come back. These last few weeks have got terribly on my nerve. And really—why should I come back? I've been asking myself the question—more today than ever before. Of course everything has been different today. But if I'm to get any genuine good out of my—my fortune—I must pull away from the City altogether sometime—and why not now? Of course, some important things are still open—and they have to be watched night and day—but after all, Semple—that's my Broker—he could do it for me. At the most, it won't last more than another six weeks. There is a settlement-day next week, the 15th, and another a fortnight after, on the 29th, and another on September 12th. Well, those three days, if they're worked as I intend they shall be, and nothing unforeseen happens, will bring in over four hundred thousand pounds, and close the 'corner' in Rubber Consols for good. Then I need never see the City again, thank God! And for that matter—why, what is six weeks? It's like tomorrow. I'm going to act as if I were free already. The rain fills me full of the country. Will you both come with me tomorrow or next day, and see the Pellesley place in Hertfordshire? By the photographs it's the best thing in the market. The newest parts of it are Tudor—and that's what I've always wanted."

"How unexpected you are!" commented Miss Madden. "You are almost the last person I should have looked to for a sentiment about Tudor foundations."

Thorpe put out his lips a trifle. "Ah, you don't know me," he replied, in a voice milder than his look had promised. "Because I'm rough and practical, you mustn't think I don't know good things when I see them. Why, all the world is going to have living proof very soon"—he paused, and sent a smile surcharged with meaning toward the silent member of the trio—"living proof that I'm the greatest judge of perfection in beauty of my time."

He lifted his glass as he spoke, and the ladies accepted with an inclination of the head, and a touch of the wine at their lips, his tacit toast. "Oh, I think I do know you," said Celia Madden, calmly discursive. "Up to a certain point, you are not so unlike other men. If people appeal to your imagination, and do not contradict you, or bore you, or get in your way, you are capable of being very nice indeed to them. But that isn't a very uncommon quality. What is uncommon in you—at least that is my reading—is something which according to circumstances may be nice, or very much the other way about. It's something which stands quite apart from standards of morals or ethics or the ordinary emotions. But I don't know, whether it is desirable for me to enter into this extremely personal analysis."

"Oh yes, go on," Thorpe urged her. He watched her face with an almost excited interest.

"Well—I should say that you possessed a capacity for sudden and capricious action in large matters, equally impatient of reasoning and indifferent to consequences, which might be very awkward, and even tragic, to people who happened to annoy you, or stand in your road. You have the kind of organization in which, within a second, without any warning or reason, a passing whim may have worked itself up into an imperative law—something you must obey."

The man smiled and nodded approvingly: "You've got me down fine," he said.

"I talk with a good deal of confidence," she went on, with a cheerless, ruminative little laugh, "because it is my own organization that I am describing, too. The difference is that I was allowed to exploit my capacity for mischief very early. I had my own way in my teens—my own money, my own power—of course only of a certain sort, and in a very small place. But I know what I did with that power. I spread trouble and misery about me—always of course on a small scale. Then a group of things happened in a kind of climax—a very painful climax—and it shook the nonsense out of me. My brother and my father died—some other sobering things happened...and luckily I was still young enough to stop short, and take stock of myself, and say that there were certain paths I would never set foot on again—and stick to it. But with you—do you see?—power only comes to you when you are a mature man. Experiences, no matter how unpleasant they are, will not change you now. You will not be moved by this occurrence or that to distrust yourself, or reconsider your methods, or form new resolutions. Oh no! Power will be terrible in your hands, if people whom you can injure provoke you to cruel courses——"

"Oh, dear—dear!" broke in Lady Cressage. "What a distressing Mrs. Gummidge-Cassandra you are, Celia! Pray stop it!"

"No—she's right enough," said Thorpe, gravely. "That's the kind of man I am."

He seemed so profoundly interested in the contemplation of this portrait which had been drawn of him, that the others respected his reflective silence. He sat for some moments, idly fingering a fork on the table, and staring at a blotch of vivid red projected through a decanter upon the cloth.

"It seems to me that's the only kind of man it's worth while to be," he added at last, still speaking with thoughtful deliberation. "There's nothing else in the world so big as power—strength. If you have that, you can get everything else. But if you have it, and don't use it, then it rusts and decays on your hands. It's like a thoroughbred horse. You can't keep it idle in the stable. If you don't exercise it, you lose it."

He appeared to be commenting upon some illustration which had occurred to his own mind, but was not visible to his auditors. While they regarded him, he was prompted to admit them to his confidence.

"There was a case of it today," he said, and then paused.

"Precisely," put in Miss Madden. "The fact that some Frenchwoman, of whom you had never heard before, was going to lose her marriage portion caught your attention, and on the instant you presented her with $10,000, an exercise of power which happens to be on the generous side—but still entirely unreasoning, and not deserving of any intellectual respect. And here's the point: if it had happened that somebody else chanced to produce an opposite impression upon you, you would have been capable of taking $50,000 away from him with just as light a heart."

Thorpe's face beamed with repressed amusement. "As a matter of fact it was that kind of case I was going to mention. I wasn't referring to the girl and her marriage portion. A young man came to me today—came into my room all cock-a-whoop, smiling to himself with the notion that he had only to name what he wanted, and I would give it to him—and——"

He stopped abruptly, with a confused little laugh. He had been upon the brink of telling about Lord Plowden's discomfiture, and even now the story itched upon his tongue. It cost him an effort to put the narrative aside, the while he pondered the arguments which had suddenly reared themselves against publicity. When at last he spoke, it was with a glance of conscious magnanimity toward the lady who had consented to be his wife.

“Never mind,” he said, lightly. “There wasn't much to it. The man annoyed me, somehow—and he didn't get what he came for—that's all.”

“But he was entitled to get it?” asked Celia Madden. Thorpe's lips pouted over a reply. “Well—no,” he said, with a kind of reluctance. “He got strictly what he was entitled to—precisely what I had promised him—and he wrung up his nose at that—and then I actually gave him 15,000 pounds he wasn't entitled to at all.”

“I hardly see what it proves, then,” Edith Cressage remarked, and the subject was dropped.

Some two hours later, Thorpe took his departure. It was not until he was getting into the hansom which had been summoned, that it all at once occurred to him that he had not for a moment been alone with his betrothed. Upon reflection, as the cab sped smoothly forward, this seemed odd to him. He decided finally that there was probably some social rule about such things which he didn't understand.

In the drawing-room of the house in Grafton Street which he had quitted, the two ladies sat with faces averted from each other, in constrained silence.

Edith Cressage rose at last, and took a few aimless steps, with her hands at her hair. “Well—I'm embarked—fairly under way!” she said, in clear-cut, almost provocative tones.

“I don't at all know what to say,” her companion replied, slowly. “I fancy that you exaggerate my disapproval. Perhaps it ought not even to be called disapproval at all. It is only that I am puzzled—and a little frightened.”

“Oh, I am frightened too,” said the other, but with eagerness rather than trepidation in her voice. “That is why I did not give you the signal to leave us alone. I couldn't quite get up the nerve for it. But would you believe it?—that is one of the charms of the thing. There is an excitement about it that exhilarates me. To get happiness through terror—you can't understand that, can you?”

“I'm trying. I think I'm beginning to understand,” said Miss Madden, vaguely.

“Did you ever set yourself to comprehending why Marie Stuart married Bothwell?” asked Edith, looking down upon the other with illuminating fixity. “You have it all—all there. Marie got tired of the smooth people, the usual people. There was the promise of adventure, and risk, and peril, and the grand emotions with the big, dark brute.”

“It isn't a happy story—this parallel that you pick out,” commented Celia, absently.

“Happy! Pah!” retorted Edith, with spirit. “Who knows if it wasn't the only really happy thing in her life? The snobs and prigs all scold her and preach sermons at her—they did it in her lifetime: they do it now——”
“Oh come, I'm neither a snob nor a prig,” put in Celia, looking up in her turn, and tempering with a smile the energy of her tone—“I don't blame her for her Bothwell; I don't criticize her. I never was even able to mind about her killing Darnley. You see I take an extremely liberal view. One might almost call it broad. But if I had been one of her ladies—her bosom friends—say Catherine Seton—and she had talked with me about it—I think I should have confessed to some forebodings—some little misgivings.”

“And do you know what she would have said?” Edith's swift question, put with a glowing face and a confident voice, had in it the ring of assured triumph. “She would have answered you: 'My dearest girl, all my life I have done what other people told me to do. In my childhood I was given in marriage to a criminal idiot. In my premature widowhood I was governed by a committee of scoundrels of both sexes until another criminal idiot was imposed upon me as a second husband. My own personality has never had the gleam of a chance. I have never yet done any single thing because I wanted to do it. Between first my politician-mother and her band of tonsured swindlers, and then my cantankerous brother and his crew of snarling and sour-minded preachers, and all the court liars and parasites and spies that both sides surrounded me with, I have lived an existence that isn't life at all. I purport to be a woman, but I have never been suffered to see a genuine man. And now here is one—or what I think to be one—and I'm given to understand that he is a pirate and a murderer and an unspeakable ruffian generally—but he takes my fancy, and he has beckoned to me to come to him, and so you will kindly get me my hat and jacket and gloves.' That's what she would have said to you, my dear.”

“And I”—said Celia, rising after a moment's pause, and putting her hand upon Edith's arm—“I would have answered, 'Dearest lady, in whatever befalls, I pray you never to forget that I am to the end your fond and devoted and loyal servant.'”

CHAPTER XIX

AUGUST wore itself out in parched tedium, and a September began which seemed even more unbearable in town,—and still Thorpe did not get away from London.

So far as the payment of an exorbitant rent in advance, and the receipt of innumerable letters from a restless and fussy steward whom he had not yet seen, went as evidence, he knew himself to be the tenant in possession of a great shooting in Morayshire. He had several photographs of what was called the lodge, but looked like something between a mansion and a baronial castle, on the mantel of the Board Room. The reflection that this sumptuous residence had been his for a month, and that it daily stood waiting for him, furnished and swept and provisioned for his coming, did nothing to help the passing of time in the hot, fagged City. More than once he had said resolutely that, on the morrow, or at the worst the next day, he would go—but in the event he had not gone. In the last week of August he had proceeded to the length of sending his niece and nephew Northward, and shutting up the house in Ovington Square, and betaking himself to the

Savoy Hotel. This had appeared at the time to be almost equivalent to his getting away himself,—to be at least a first stage in the progress of his own journey. But at the hotel he had stuck fast,—and now, on the tenth of September, was no nearer the moors and the deer-forest than he had been a month before.

A novel sense of loneliness,—of the fatuity of present existence,—weighed grievously upon him. The ladies of Grafton Street had left town upon a comprehensive itinerary of visits which included the Malvern country, and a ducal castle in Shropshire, and a place in Westmoreland. There was nothing very definite about the date of their coming to him in Scotland. The lady who had consented to marry him had, somehow, omitted to promise that she would write to him. An arrangement existed, instead, by which she and his niece Julia were to correspond, and to fix between themselves the details of the visit to Morayshire.

Thorpe hardly went to the point of annoyance with this arrangement. He was conscious of no deep impulse to write love-letters himself, and there was nothing in the situation which made his failure to receive love-letters seem unnatural. The absence of moonshine, at least during this preliminary season, had been quite taken for granted between them, and he did not complain even to himself. There was even a kind of proud satisfaction for him in the thought that, though he had all but completed the purchase of the noble Pellesley estate for Edith Cressage, he had never yet kissed her. The reserve he imposed upon himself gave him a certain aristocratic fineness in his own eyes. It was the means by which he could feel himself to be most nearly her equal. But he remained very lonely in London, none the less.

It is true that a great deal of society was continually offered to him, and even thrust upon him. In the popular phrase, London was empty, but there seemed to be more people than ever who desired Mr. Stormont Thorpe' s presence at their dinner-tables, or their little theatre or card or river parties. He clung sullenly to his rule of going nowhere, but it was not so simple a matter to evade the civilities and importunities of those who were stopping at the hotel, or who came there to waylay him at the entrance, or to encounter him in the restaurant. He could not always refuse to sit down at tables when attractively-dressed and vivacious women made room for him, or to linger over cigars and wine with their husbands and escorts later on.

An incessant and spirited court was paid to him by many different groups of interested people who were rarely at the pains to dissemble their aims. He formed a manner for the reception of these advances, compounded of joviality, cynicism, and frank brutality, which nobody, to his face at least, resented. If women winced under his mocking rudenesses of speech and smile, if men longed to kill him for the cold insolence of his refusal to let them inside his guard, they sedulously kept it from him. The consciousness that everybody was afraid of him,—that everybody would kneel to him, and meekly take insult and ignominy from him, if only hope remained to them of getting something out of him,—hardened like a crust upon his mind.

It was impossible to get a sense of companionship from people who cringed to him, and swallowed his affronts and cackled at his jokes with equal docility. Sometimes he had a passing amusement in the rough pleasantries and cruelties which they drew from him. There were two or three bright Jewish women, more gayly clever and impudent, perhaps, than beautiful, with whom he found it genuine fun to talk, and concerning whom he was perpetually conceiving projects which could not have been discussed with their husbands, and as perpetually doing nothing to test their feasibility. But these diversions were in their essence unsubstantial. There was not even the semblance of a real friendship among them,—and loneliness became an increasing burden.

His sister at the old book-shop exasperated him nowadays to a degree which often provoked within him the resolution to have done with her. He had a score of projects for her betterment, each capable of as many variations and eager adaptations to suit her fancy, but to them all and sundry she opposed a barrier of stupidly passive negation. There was nothing she wanted done for her. She would not exchange the work she had been brought up in for a life of idleness. She did not want, and would not know what to do with, a bigger shop than she had. An augmentation of her capital would be of no use, because there was no room in the crowded little shop for a larger stock than it contained. She was entirely satisfied with the dingy home overhead, and declined to think even of moving elsewhere. Over and over again she met his propositions with a saying which he could recall having particularly hated on their father's lips,—“It's ill teaching an old dog new tricks.”

“You ought to have them taught you with a stick,” he had told her roundly, on the last occasion.

She had merely shrugged her gaunt shoulders at him. “You think you can bully everybody and make them crawl to you,—but there's no good your trying it on with me,” she had told him, and he had pushed his way out of the shop almost stamping his feet. It was clear to him at that moment that he would never darken her door again.

Yet now, on this afternoon of the tenth, as he lounged with a cigar and a City paper in his apartment at the hotel after luncheon, wondering whether it were too hot to issue forth for a walk to the Park, the irrelevant idea of going round to see his sister kept coming into his mind. He seated himself and fastened his attention upon the paper,—but off it slipped again to the old book-shop, and to that curious, cross-grained figure, its mistress. He abandoned himself to thinking about her—and discovered that a certain unique quality in her challenged his admiration. She was the only absolutely disinterested person he knew—the only creature in the world, apparently, who did not desire to make something out of him. She was not at all well-off,—was indeed rather poor than otherwise,—and here was her only brother a millionaire, and in her dumb way she had a sisterly affection for him, and yet she could not be argued or cajoled into touching a penny of his money. Surely there could be no other woman like her.

Thorpe realized that it was a distinction to have such a sister,—and behind this thought rose obscurely the suggestion that there must be wonderful blood in a race which had produced such a daughter. And for that matter, such a son too! He lifted his head, and looked abstractedly before him, as if he were gazing at some apotheosis of himself in a mirror.

He beheld all at once something concrete and personal, obtruded into the heart of his reverie, the sight of which dimly astounded him. For the moment, with opened lips he stared at it,—then slowly brought himself to comprehend what had happened. An old man had by some oversight of the hotel servants been allowed to enter the room unannounced. He had wandered in noiselessly, and had moved in a purblind fashion to the centre of the apartment. The vagueness of the expression on his face and of his movements hinted at a vacant mind or too much drink,—but Thorpe gave no thought to either hypothesis. The face itself—no—yes—it was the face of old Tavender.

"In the name of God! What are you doing here?" Thorpe gasped at this extraordinary apparition. Still staring, he began to push back his chair and put his weight upon his feet.

"Well—Thorpe"—the other began, thrusting forward his head to look through his spectacles—"so it is you, after all. I didn't know whether I was going to find you or not. This place has got so many turns and twists to it——"

"But good heavens!" interposed the bewildered Thorpe. He had risen to his feet. He mechanically took the hand which the other had extended to him. "What in hell"—he began, and broke off again. The aroma of alcohol on the air caught his sense, and his mind stopped at the perception that Tavender was more or less drunk. He strove to spur it forward, to compel it to encompass the meanings of this new crisis, but almost in vain.

"Thought I'd look you up," said the old man, buoyantly. "Nobody in London I'd rather see than you. How are you, anyway?"

"What did you come over for? When did you get here?" Thorpe put the questions automatically. His self-control was returning to him; his capable brain pushed forward now under something like disciplined direction.

"Why I guess I owe it all to you," replied Tavender. Traces of the old Quaker effect which had been so characteristic of him still hung about his garb and mien, but there shone a new assurance on his benignant, rubicund face. Prosperity had visibly liberalized and enheartened him. He shook Thorpe's hand again. "Yes, sir—it must have been all through you!" he repeated. "I got my cable three weeks ago—'Hasten to London, urgent business, expenses and liberal fee guaranteed, Rubber Consols'—that's what the cable said, that is, the first one and of course you're the man that introduced me to those rubber people. And so don't you see I owe it all to you?"

His insistence upon his obligation was suddenly almost tearful. Thorpe thought hard as he replied: "Oh—that's all right. I'm very glad indeed to have helped you along. And so you came over for the Rubber Consols people, eh? Well—that's good. Seen 'em yet? You haven't told me when you landed."

"Came up from Southampton this morning. My brother-in-law was down there to meet me. We came up to London together." "Your brother-in-law," observed Thorpe, meditatively. Some shadowy, remote impression of having forgotten something troubled his mind for an instant. "Is your brother-in-law in the rubber business?"

"Extraor'nary thing," explained Tavender, beamingly, "he don't know no more about the whole affair than the man 'n the moon. I asked him today—but he couldn't tell me anything about the business—what it was I'd been sent for, or anything."

"But he—he knew you'd been sent for," Thorpe commented upon brief reflection.

"Why, he sent the second cable himself——"

"What second cable?"

"Why it was the next day,—or maybe it was sent that same night, and not delivered till morning,—I got another cable, this time from my brother-in-law, telling me to cable him what ship I sailed on and when. So of course he knew all about it—but now he says he don't. He's a curious sort of fellow, anyway."

"But how is he mixed up in it?" demanded Thorpe, impatiently.

"Well, as nearly as I can figure it out, he works for one of the men that's at the head of this rubber company. It appears that he happened to show this man—he's a man of title, by the way—a letter I wrote to him last spring, when I got back to Mexico—and so in that way this man, when he wanted me to come over, just told Gafferson to cable to me."

"Gafferson," Thorpe repeated, very slowly, and with almost an effect of listlessness. He was conscious of no surprise; it was as if he had divined all along the sinister shadows of Lord Plowden and Lord Plowden's gardener, lurking in the obscurity behind this egregious old ass of a Tavender.

"He's a tremendous horticultural sharp," said the other. "Probably you've heard tell of him. He's taken medals for new flowers and things till you can't rest. He's over at—what do you call it?—the Royal Aquarium, now, to see the Dahlia Show. I went over there with him, but it didn't seem to be my kind of a show, and so I left him there, and I'm to look in again for him at 5:30. I'm going down to his place in the country with him tonight, to meet his boss—the nobleman I spoke of."

"That's nice," Thorpe commented, slowly. "I envy anybody who can get into the country these days. But how did you know I was here?" "The woman in the book-store told me—I went there the first thing. You might be sure I'd look you up. Nobody was ever a better friend than you've been to me, Thorpe. And do you know what I want you to do? I want you to come right bang out, now, and have a drink with me."

"I was thinking of something of the sort myself," the big man replied. "I'll get my hat, and be with you in a minute."

In the next room he relinquished his countenance to a frown of fierce perplexity. More than a minute passed in this scowling preoccupation. Then his face lightened with the relief of an idea, and he stepped confidently back into the parlour.

"Come along," he said, jovially. "We'll have a drink downstairs, and then we'll drive up to Hanover Square and see if we can't find a friend of mine at his club."

In the office below he stopped long enough to secure a considerable roll of bank-notes in exchange for a cheque. A little later, a hansom deposited the couple at the door of the Asian Club, and Thorpe, in the outer hallway of this institution, clicked his teeth in satisfaction at the news that General Kervick was on the premises.

The General, having been found by a boy and brought down, extended to his guests a hospitality which was none the less urbane for the evidences of surprise with which it was seasoned. He concealed so indifferently his inability to account for Tavender, that the anxious Thorpe grew annoyed with him, but happily Tavender's perceptions were less subtle. He gazed about him in his dim-eyed way with childlike interest, and babbled cheerfully over his liquor. He had not been inside a London club before, and his glimpse of the reading-room, where, isolated, purple-faced, retired old Empire-makers sat snorting in the silence, their gouty feet propped up on foot-rests, their white brows scowling over the pages of French novels, particularly impressed him. It was a new and halcyon vision of the way to spend one's declining years. And the big smoking-room—where the leather cushions were so low and so soft, and the connection between the bells and the waiters was so efficient—that was even better.

Thorpe presently made an excuse for taking Kervick apart. “I brought this old jackass here for a purpose,” he said in low, gravely mandatory tones. “He thinks he's got an appointment at 5:30 this afternoon—but he's wrong. He hasn't. He's not going to have any appointment at all—for a long time yet. I want you to get him drunk, there where he sits, and then take him away with you, and get him drunker still, and then take a train with him somewhere—any station but Charing Cross or that line—and I don't care where you land with him—Scotland or Ireland or France—whatever you like. Here's some money for you—and you can write to me for more. I don't care what you say to him—make up any yarn you like—only keep him pacified, and keep him away from London, and don't let a living soul talk to him—till I give you the word. You'll let me know where you are. I'll get away now—and mind, General, a good deal depends on the way you please me in this thing.”

The soldier's richly-florid face and intent, bulging blue eyes expressed vivid comprehension. He nodded with eloquence as he slipped the notes into his trousers pocket. “Absolutely,” he murmured with martial brevity, from under his white, tight moustache.

With only a vague word or two of meaningless explanation to Tavender, Thorpe took his departure, and walked back to the hotel. From what he had learned and surmised, it was not difficult to put the pieces of the puzzle together. This ridiculous old fool, he remembered now, had reproached himself, when he was in England before, for his uncivil neglect of his brother-in-law. By some absurd chance, this damned brother-in-law happened to be Gafferson. It was clear enough that, when he returned to Mexico, Tavender had written to Gafferson, explaining the unexpected pressure of business which had taken up all his time in England. Probably he had been idiot enough to relate what he of course regarded as the most wonderful piece of good news—how the worthless concession he had been deluded into buying had been bought back from him. As likely as not he had even identified the concession, and given Thorpe's name as that of the man who had first impoverished and then mysteriously enriched him. At all events, he had clearly mentioned that he had a commission to report upon the Rubber Consols property, and had said enough else to create the impression that there were criminal secrets connected with its sale to the London Company. The rest was easy. Gafferson, knowing Lord Plowden's relation to the Company, had shown him Tavender's letter. Lord Plowden, meditating upon it, had seen a way to be nasty—and had vindictively plunged into it. He had brought Tavender from Mexico to London, to use him as a weapon. All this was as obvious as the nose on one's face.

But a weapon for what? Thorpe, as this question put itself in his mind, halted before a shop-window full of soft-hued silk fabrics, to muse upon an answer. The delicate tints and surfaces of what was before his eyes seemed somehow to connect themselves with the subject. Plowden himself was delicately-tinted and refined of texture. Vindictiveness was too plain and coarse an emotion to sway such a complicated and polished organism. He reasoned it out, as he stood with lack-lustre gaze before the plate-glass front, aloof among a throng of eager and talkative women who pressed around him—that Plowden would not have spent his money on a mere impulse of mischief-making. He would be counting upon something more tangible than revenge—something that could be counted and weighed and converted into a bank-balance. He smiled when he reached this conclusion—greatly surprising and confusing a matronly lady into whose correct face he chanced to be looking at the instant—and turning slowly, continued his walk.

At the office of the hotel, he much regretted not having driven instead, for he learned that Semple had twice telephoned from the City for him. It was late in the afternoon—he noted with satisfaction that the clock showed it to be already past the hour of the Tavender-Gafferson appointment,—but he had Semple's office called up, upon the chance that someone might be there. The clerk had not consumed more than ten minutes in the preliminaries of finding out that no one was there—Thorpe meanwhile passing savage comments to the other clerks about the British official conception of the telephone as an instrument of discipline and humiliation—when Semple himself appeared in the doorway.

The Broker gave an exclamation of relief at seeing Thorpe, and then, apparently indifferent to the display of excitement he was exhibiting, drew him aside.

“Come somewhere where we can talk,” he whispered nervously.

Thorpe had never seen the little Scotchman in such a flurry. “We'll go up to my rooms,” he said, and led the way to the lift.

Upstairs, Semple bolted the door of the sitting-room behind them, and satisfied himself that there was no one in the adjoining bedroom. Then, unburdening himself with another sigh, he tossed aside his hat, and looked keenly up at the big man. “There's the devil to pay,” he said briefly.

Thorpe had a fleeting pride in the lethargic, composed front he was able to present. “All right,” he said with forced placidity. “If he's got to be paid, we'll pay him.” He continued to smile a little.

“It's nah joke,” the other hastened to warn him. “I have it from two different quarters. An application has been made to the Stock Exchange Committee, this afternoon, to intervene and stop our business, on the ground of fraud. It comes verra straight to me.”

Thorpe regarded his Broker contemplatively. The news fitted with precision into what he had previously known; it was rendered altogether harmless by the precautions he had already taken. “Well, keep your hair on,” he said, quietly. “If there were fifty applications, they wouldn't matter the worth of that soda-water cork. Won't you have a drink?”

Semple, upon reflection, said he would. The unmoved equipoise of the big man visibly reassured him. He sipped at his bubbling tumbler and smacked his thin lips. “Man, I've had an awful fright,” he said at last, in the tone of one whose ease of mind is returning.

“I gave you credit for more nerve,” observed the other, eyeing him in not unkindly fashion over his glass. “You've been so plumb full of sand all the while—I didn't think you'd weaken now. Why, we're within two days of home, now—and for you to get rattled at this late hour—you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The Scotchman looked into the bottom of his glass, as he turned it thoughtfully round. “I'm relieved to see the way you take it,” he said, after a pause. With increased hesitation he went dryly on: “I've never enquired minutely into the circumstances of the flotation. It has not seemed to be my business to do so, and upon advice I may say that the Committee would not hold that such was my business. My position is quite clear, upon that point.”

“Oh, perfectly,” Thorpe assented. “It couldn't possibly be any of your business—either then, or now.” He gave a significant touch of emphasis to these last two words.

“Precisely,” said Semple, with a glance of swift comprehension. “You must not think I am asking any intrusive questions. If you tell me that—that there is no ground for uneasiness—I am verra pleased indeed to accept the assurance. That is ample information for my purposes.”

“You can take it from me,” Thorpe told him. He picked up a red book from a side table, and turned over its pages with his thick thumb. “This is what Rule 59 says,” he went on: “'NO APPLICATION WHICH HAS FOR ITS OBJECT TO ANNUL ANY BARGAIN IN THE STOCK EXCHANGE SHALL BE ENTERTAINED BY THE COMMITTEE, UNLESS UPON A SPECIFIC ALLEGATION OF FRAUD OR WILFUL MISREPRESENTATION.' Shall be entertained, d'ye see? They can't even consider anything of the sort, because it says 'specific,' and I tell you plainly that anything 'specific' is entirely out of the question.”

The Broker lifted his sandy brows in momentary apprehension. “If it turns upon the precise definition of a word,” he remarked, doubtingly.

“Ah, yes,—but it doesn't,” Thorpe reassured him. “See here—I'll tell you something. You're not asking any questions. That's as it should be. And I'm not forcing information upon you which you don't need in your business. That's as it should be, too. But in between these two, there's a certain margin of facts that there's no harm in your knowing. A scheme to blackmail me is on foot. It's rather a fool-scheme, if you ask me, but it might have been a nuisance if it had been sprung on us unawares. It happened, however, that I twigged this scheme about two hours ago. It was the damnedest bit of luck you ever heard of——”

“You don't have luck,” put in Semple, appreciatively. “Other men have luck. You have something else—I don't give it a name.”

Thorpe smiled upon him, and went on. “I twigged it, anyway. I went out, and I drove the biggest kind of spike through that fool-scheme—plumb through its heart. Tomorrow a certain man will come to me—oh, I could almost tell you the kind of neck-tie he'll wear—and he'll put up his bluff to me, and I'll hear him out—and then—then I'll let the floor drop out from under him.”

“Aye!” said Semple, with relish.

“Stay and dine with me tonight,” Thorpe impulsively suggested, “and we'll go to some Music Hall afterward. There's a knock-about pantomime outfit at the Canterbury—Martinetti I think the name is—that's damned good. You get plenty of laugh, and no tiresome blab to listen to. The older I get, the more I think of people that keep their mouths shut.”

“Aye,” observed Semple again.

CHAPTER XX

IN the Board Room, next day, Thorpe awaited the coming of Lord Plowden with the serene confidence of a prophet who not only knows that he is inspired, but has had an illicit glimpse into the workings of the machinery of events.

He sat motionless at his desk, like a big spider for who time has no meaning. Before him lay two newspapers, folded so as to expose paragraphs heavily indicated by blue pencil-marks. They were not financial journals, and for that reason it was improbable that he would have seen these paragraphs, if the Secretary of the Company had not marked them, and brought them to him. That official had been vastly more fluttered by them than he found it possible to be. In slightly-varying language, these two items embedded in so-called money articles reported the rumour that a charge of fraud had arisen in connection with the Rubber Consols corner, and that sensational disclosures were believed to be impending.

Thorpe looked with a dulled, abstracted eye at these papers, lying on the desk, and especially at the blue pencil-lines upon them, as he pondered many things. Their statement, thus scattered broadcast to the public, seemed at once to introduce a new element into the situation, and to leave it unchanged. That influence of some sort had been exerted to get this story into these papers, it did not occur to him for an instant to doubt. To his view, all things that were put into papers were put there for a purpose—it would express his notion more clearly, perhaps, to say for a price. Of the methods of Fleet Street, he was profoundly ignorant, but his impressions of them were all cynical. Upon reflection, however, it seemed unlikely to him that Lord Plowden had secured the insertion of these rumours. So far as Thorpe could fathom that nobleman's game, its aims would not be served by premature publicity of this kind.

Gradually, the outlines of a more probable combination took shape in his thoughts. There were left in the grip of the “corner” now only two victims,—Rostocker and Aronson. They owed this invidious differentiation to a number of causes: they had been the chief sellers of stock, being between them responsible for the delivery of 8,500 Rubber Consols shares, which they could not get; they were men of larger fortune than the other “shorts,” and therefore could with safety be squeezed longest; what was fortunate for him under the circumstances, they were the two men against whom Thorpe's personal grudge seemed able to maintain itself most easily.

For these reasons, they had already been mulcted in differences to the extent of, in round numbers, 165,000 pounds. On the morrow, the twelfth of September, it was Thorpe's plan to allow them to buy in the shares they needed, at 22 or 23 pounds per share—which would take from them nearly 200,000 pounds more. He had satisfied himself that they could, and would if necessary, pay this enormous ransom for their final escape from the “corner.” Partly because it was not so certain that they could pay more, partly because he was satiated with spoils and tired of the strain of the business, he had decided to permit this escape.

He realized now, however, that they on their side had planned to escape without paying any final ransom at all.

That was clearly the meaning of these paragraphs, and of the representations which had yesterday been made to the Stock Exchange Committee. He had additional knowledge today of the character of these representations. Nothing definite had been alleged, but some of the members of the Committee had been informally notified, so Semple had this morning learned, that a specific charge of fraud, supported by unanswerable proof, was to be brought against the Rubber Consols management on the morrow. Thorpe reasoned out now, step by step, what that meant. Lord Plowden had sought out Rostocker and Aronson, and had told them that he had it in his power ignominiously to break the “corner.” He could hardly have told them the exact nature of his power, because until he should have seen Tavender he did not himself know what it was. But he had given them to understand that he could prove fraud, and they, scenting in this the chance of saving 200,000 pounds, and seeing that time was so terribly short, had hastened to the Committeemen with this vague declaration that, on the morrow, they could prove—they did not precisely know what. Yes—plainly enough—that was what had happened. And it would be these two Jew “wreckers,” eager to invest their speculative notification to the Committee with as much of an air of formality as possible, who had caused the allusions to it to be published in these papers.

Thorpe's lustreless eye suddenly twinkled with mirth as he reached this conclusion; his heavy face brightened into a grin of delight. A vision of Lord Plowden's absurd predicament rose vividly before him, and he chuckled aloud at it.

It seemed only the most natural thing in the world that, at this instant, a clerk should open the door and nod with meaning to the master. The visitor whom he had warned the people in the outer office he expected, had arrived. Thorpe was still laughing to himself when Lord Plowden entered.

“Hallo! How d'ye do!” he called out to him from where he sat at his desk.

The hilarity of the manner into which he had been betrayed, upon the instant surprised and rather confused him. He had not been altogether clear as to how he should receive Plowden, but certainly a warm joviality had not occurred to him as appropriate.

The nobleman was even more taken aback. He stared momentarily at the big man's beaming mask, and then, with nervous awkwardness, executed a series of changes in his own facial expression and demeanour. He flushed red, opened his lips to say “Ah!” and then twisted them into a doubting and seemingly painful smile. He looked with very bright-eyed intentness at Thorpe, as he advanced, and somewhat spasmodically put out his hand.

It occurred to Thorpe not to see this hand. “How are you!” he repeated in a more mechanical voice, and withdrew his smile. Lord Plowden fidgeted on his feet for a brief, embarrassed interval before the desk, and then dropped into a chair at its side. With a deliberate effort at nonchalance, he crossed his legs, and caressed the ankle on his knee with a careless hand. “Anything new?” he asked.

Thorpe lolled back in his arm-chair. “I'm going to be able to get away in a few days' time,” he said, indifferently. “I expect to finally wind up the business on the Stock Exchange tomorrow.”

“Ah—yes,” commented Plowden, vacantly. He seemed to be searching after thoughts which had wandered astray. “Yes—of course.”

“Yes—of course,” Thorpe said after him, with a latent touch of significance.

The other looked up quickly, then glanced away again. “It's all going as you expected, is it?” he asked.

“Better than I expected,” Thorpe told him, energetically. “Much better than anybody expected.”

“Hah!” said Plowden. After a moment's reflection he went on hesitatingly: “I didn't know. I saw something in one of the papers this morning,—one of the money articles,—which spoke as if there were some doubt about the result. That's why I called.”

“Well—it's damned good of you to come round, and show such a friendly interest.” Thorpe's voice seemed candid enough, but there was an enigmatic something in his glance which aroused the other's distrust.

“I'm afraid you don't take very much stock in the 'friendly interest,'” he said, with a constrained little laugh.

“I'm not taking stock in anything new just now,” replied Thorpe, lending himself lazily to the other's metaphor. “I'm loaded up to the gunnels already.”

A minute of rather oppressive silence ensued. Then Plowden ventured upon an opening. “All the same, it WAS with an idea of,—perhaps being of use to you,—that I came here,” he affirmed. “In what way?” Thorpe put the query almost listlessly.

Lord Plowden turned his hands and let his dark eyes sparkle in a gesture of amiable uncertainty. “That depended upon what was needed. I got the impression that you were in trouble—the paper spoke as if there were no doubt of it—and I imagined that quite probably you would be glad to talk with me about it.”

“Quite right,” said Thorpe. “So I should.”

This comprehensive assurance seemed not, however, to facilitate conversation. The nobleman looked at the pattern of the sock on the ankle he was nursing, and knitted his brows in perplexity. “What if the Committee of the Stock Exchange decide to interfere?” he asked at last.

“Oh, that would knock me sky-high,” Thorpe admitted.

“Approximately, how much may one take 'sky-high' to mean?”

Thorpe appeared to calculate. “Almost anything up to a quarter of a million,” he answered.

“Hah!” said Lord Plowden again. “Well—I understand—I'm given to understand—that very likely that is what the Committee will decide.”

“Does it say that in the papers?” asked Thorpe. He essayed an effect of concern. “Where did you see that?”

“I didn't see it,” the other explained. “It—it came to me.”

“God!” said Thorpe. “That'll be awful! But are you really in earnest? Is that what you hear? And does it come at all straight?”

Lord Plowden nodded portentously. “Absolutely straight,” he said, with gravity.

Thorpe, after a momentary stare of what looked like bewilderment, was seen to clutch at a straw. “But what was it you were saying?” he demanded, with eagerness. “You talked about help—a minute ago. Did you mean it? Have you got a plan? Is there something that you can do?”

Plowden weighed his words. “It would be necessary to have a very complete understanding,” he remarked.

“Whatever you like,” exclaimed the other.

“Pardon me—it would have to be a good deal more definite than that,” Plowden declared. “A 'burnt child'—you know.”

The big man tapped musingly with his finger-nails on the desk. “We won't quarrel about that,” he said. “But what I'd like to know first,—you needn't give anything away that you don't want to,—but what's your plan? You say that they've got me in a hole, and that you can get me out.” “In effect—yes.”

“But how do you know that I can't get myself out? What do you know about the whole thing anyway? Supposing I tell you that I laugh at it—that there's no more ground for raising the suspicion of fraud than there is for—for suspecting that you've got wings and can fly.”

“I—I don't think you'll tell me that,” said Plowden, placidly.

“Well then, supposing I don't tell you that,” the other resumed, argumentatively. “Supposing I say instead that it can't be proved. If the Committee doesn't have proof NOW,—within twenty-one or twenty-two hours,—they can't do anything at all. Tomorrow is settling day. All along, I've said I would wind up the thing tomorrow. The market-price has been made for me by the jobbers yesterday and today. I'm all ready to end the whole business tomorrow—close it all out. And after that's done, what do I care about the Stock Exchange Committee? They can investigate and be damned! What could they do to me?”

“I think a man can always be arrested and indicted, and sent to penal servitude,” said Lord Plowden, with a certain solemnity of tone. “There are even well-known instances of extradition.”

Thorpe buried his chin deep in his collar, and regarded his companion with a fixed gaze, in which the latter detected signs of trepidation. “But about the Committee—and tomorrow,” he said slowly. “What do you say about that? How can they act in that lightning fashion? And even if proofs could be got, how do you suppose they are to be got on the drop of the hat, at a minute's notice?”

“The case is of sufficient importance to warrant a special meeting tomorrow morning,” the other rejoined. “One hour's notice, posted in the House, is sufficient, I believe. Any three members of the Committee can call such a meeting, and I understand that seven make a quorum. You will see that a meeting could be held at noon tomorrow, and within half an hour could make you a ruined man.”

“I don't know—would you call it quite ruined?” commented Thorpe. “I should still have a few sovereigns to go on with.”

“A criminal prosecution would be practically inevitable—after such a disclosure,” Plowden reminded him, with augmented severity of tone.

“Don't mix the two things up,” the other urged. There seemed to the listener to be supplication in the voice. “It's the action of the Committee that you said you could influence. That's what we were talking about. You say there will be a special meeting at noon tomorrow——

“I said there could be one,” Plowden corrected him.

“All right. There CAN be one. And do you say that there can be proof,—proof against me of fraud,—produced at that meeting?”

“Yes—I say that,” the nobleman affirmed, quietly.

“And further still—do you say that it rests with you whether that proof shall be produced or not?”

Lord Plowden looked into the impassive, deep-eyed gaze which covered him, and looked away from it again. “I haven't put it in just that form,” he said, hesitatingly. “But in essentials—yes, that may be taken as true.”

“And what is your figure? How much do you want for holding this proof of yours back, and letting me finish scooping the money of your Hebrew friends Aronson and Rostocker?”

The peer raised his head, and shot a keenly enquiring glance at the other. “Are they my friends?” he asked, with challenging insolence.

“I'm bound to assume that you have been dealing with them, just as you are dealing with me.” Thorpe explained his meaning dispassionately, as if the transaction were entirely commonplace. “You tell them that you're in a position to produce proof against me, and ask them what they'll give for it. Then naturally enough you come to me, and ask what I'll be willing to pay to have the proof suppressed. I quite understand that I must bid against these men—and of course I take it for granted that, since you know their figure, you've arranged in your mind what mine is to be. I quite understand, too, that I am to pay more than they have offered. That is on account of 'friendly interest.'”

“Since you allude to it,” Lord Plowden observed, with a certain calm loftiness of tone, “there is no harm in saying that you WILL pay something on that old score. Once you thrust the promise of something like a hundred thousand pounds positively upon me. You insisted on my believing it, and I did so, like a fool. I came to you to redeem the promise, and you laughed in my face. Very well. It is my turn now. I hold the whip-hand, and I should be an ass not to remember things. I shall want that entire one hundred thousand pounds from you, and fifty thousand added to it 'on account of the 'friendly interest,' as you so intelligently expressed it.”

Thorpe's chin burrowed still deeper upon his breast. “It's an outrage,” he said with feeling. Then he added, in tones of dejected resignation: “When will you want it?”

“At the moment when the payments of Rostocker and Aronson are made to you, or to your bankers or agents,” Lord Plowden replied, with prepared facility. He had evidently given much thought to this part of the proceedings. “And of course I shall expect you to draw up now an agreement to that effect. I happen to have a stamped paper with me this time. And if you don't mind, we will have it properly witnessed—this time.”

Thorpe looked at him with a disconcertingly leaden stare, the while he thought over what had been proposed. “That's right enough,” he announced at last, “but I shall expect you to do some writing too. Since we're dealing on this basis, there must be no doubt about the guarantee that you will perform your part of the contract.”

“The performance itself, since payment is conditional upon it—” began Plowden, but the other interrupted him.

“No, I want something better than that. Here—give me your stamped paper.” He took the bluish sheet, and, without hesitation, wrote several lines rapidly. “Here—this is my promise,” he said, “to pay you 150,000 pounds, upon your satisfactory performance of a certain undertaking to be separately nominated in a document called 'A,' which we will jointly draw up and agree to and sign, and deposit wherever you like—for safe keeping. Now, if you'll sit here, and write out for me a similar thing—that in consideration of my promise of 150,000 pounds, you covenant to perform the undertaking to be nominated in the document 'A'—and so on.”

Lord Plowden treated as a matter of course the ready and business-like suggestion of the other. Taking his place at the desk in turn, he wrote out what had been suggested. Thorpe touched a bell, and the clerk who came in perfunctorily attested the signatures upon both papers. Each principal folded and pocketed the pledge of the other.

“Now,” said Thorpe, when he had seated himself again at the desk, “we are all right so far as protection against each other goes. If you don't mind, I will draw up a suggestion of what the separate document 'A' should set forth. If you don't like it, you can write one.”

He took more time to this task, frowning laboriously over the fresh sheet of foolscap, and screening from observation with his hand what he was writing. Finally, the task seemed finished to his mind. He took up the paper, glanced through it once more, and handed it in silence to the other.

In silence also, and with an expression of arrested attention, Lord Plowden read these lines:

“The undertaking referred to in the two documents of even date, signed respectively by Lord Plowden and Stormont Thorpe, is to the effect that at some hour between eleven A.M. and three P.M. of September 12th, instant, Lord Plowden shall produce before a special meeting of the Committee of the Stock Exchange, the person of one Jerome P. Tavender, to explain to said Committee his share in the blackmailing scheme of which Lord Plowden, over his own signature, has furnished documentary evidence.”

The nobleman continued to look down at the paper, after the power to hold it without shaking had left his hand. There came into his face, mingling with and vitiating its rich natural hues of health, a kind of grey shadow. It was as if clay was revealing itself beneath faded paint. He did not lift his eyes.

Thorpe had been prepared to hail this consummation of his trick with boisterous and scornful mirth. Even while the victim was deciphering the fatal paper, he had restrained with impatience the desire to burst out into bitter laughter. But now there was something in the aspect of Plowden's collapse which seemed to forbid triumphant derision. He was taking his blow so like a gentleman,—ashen-pale and quivering, but clinging to a high-bred dignity of silence,—that the impulse to exhibit equally good manners possessed Thorpe upon the instant.

“Well—you see how little business you've got, setting yourself to buck against a grown-up man.”

He offered the observation in the tone of the school-teacher, affectedly philosophical but secretly jubilant, who harangues a defeated and humiliated urchin upon his folly.

“Oh, chuck it!” growled Lord Plowden, staring still at the calamitous paper.

Thorpe accepted in good part the intimation that silence was after all most decorous. He put his feet up on the corner of the desk, and tipping back his chair, surveyed the discomfited Viscount impassively. He forbore even to smile.

“So this swine of a Tavender came straight to you!” Lord Plowden had found words at last. As he spoke, he lifted his face, and made a show of looking the other in the eye.

“Oh, there are a hundred things in your own game, even, that you haven't an inkling of,” Thorpe told him, lightly. “I've been watching every move you've made, seeing further ahead in your own game than you did. Why, it was too easy! It was like playing draughts with a girl. I knew you would come today, for example. I told the people out there that I expected you.”

“Yes-s,” said the other, with rueful bewilderment. “You seem to have been rather on the spot—I confess.”

“On the spot? All over the place!” Thorpe lifted himself slightly in his chair, and put more animation into his voice.

“It's the mistake you people make!” he declared oracularly. “You think that a man can come into the City without a penny, and form great combinations and carry through a great scheme, and wage a fight with the smartest set of scoundrels on the London Stock Exchange and beat 'em, and make for himself a big fortune—and still be a fool! You imagine that a man like that can be played with, and hoodwinked by amateurs like yourself. It's too ridiculous!”

The perception that apparently Thorpe bore little or no malice had begun to spread through Plowden's consciousness. It was almost more surprising to him than the revelation of his failure had been. He accustomed himself to the thought gradually, and as he did so the courage crept back into his glance. He breathed more easily.

"You are right!" he admitted. It cost him nothing to give a maximum of fervid conviction to the tone of his words. The big brute's pride in his own brains and power was still his weakest point. "You are right! I did play the fool. And it was all the more stupid, because I was the first man in London to recognize the immense forces in you. I said to you at the very outset, 'You are going to go far. You are going to be a great man.' You remember that, don't you?"

Thorpe nodded. "Yes—I remember it."

The nobleman, upon reflection, drew a little silver box from his pocket, and extracted a match. "Do you mind?" he asked, and scarcely waiting for a token of reply, struck a flame upon the sole of his shoe, and applied it to the sheet of foolscap he still held in his hand. The two men watched it curl and blacken after it had been tossed in the grate, without a word.

This incident had the effect of recalling to Thorpe the essentials of the situation. He had allowed the talk to drift to a point where it became almost affable. He sat upright with a sudden determination, and put his feet firmly on the floor, and knitted his brows in austerity.

"It was not only a dirty trick that you tried to play me," he said, in an altered, harsh tone, "but it was a fool-trick. That drunken old bum of a Tavender writes some lunatic nonsense or other to Gafferson, and he's a worse idiot even than Tavender is, and on the strength of what one of these clowns thinks he surmises the other clown means, you go and spend your money,—money I gave you, by the way,—in bringing Tavender over here. You do this on the double chance, we'll say, of using him against me for revenge and profit combined, or of peddling him to me for a still bigger profit. You see it's all at my fingers' ends."

Lord Plowden nodded an unqualified assent.

"Well then—Tavender arrives. What do you do? Are you at the wharf to meet him? Have you said to yourself: 'I've set out to fight one of the smartest and strongest men in England, and I've got to keep every atom of wits about me, and strain every nerve to the utmost, and watch every point of the game as a tiger watches a snake'? Not a bit of it! You snooze in bed, and you send Gafferson—Gafferson!—the mud-head of the earth! to meet your Tavender, and loaf about with him in London, and bring him down by a slow train to your place in the evening. My God! You've only got two clear days left to do the whole thing in—and you don't even come up to town to get ready for them! You send Gafferson—and he goes off to see a flower-show—Mother of Moses! think of it! a FLOWER-show!—and your Tavender aud I are left to take a stroll together, and talk over old times and arrange about new times, and so on, to our hearts' content. Really, it's too easy! You make me tired!"

The nobleman offered a wan, appealing shadow of a smile. "I confess to a certain degree of weariness myself," he said, humbly.

Thorpe looked at him in his old apathetic, leaden fashion for a little. "I may tell you that if you HAD got hold of Tavender," he decided to tell him, "he shouldn't have been of the faintest use to you. I know what it was that he wrote to Gafferson,—I couldn't understand it when he first told me, but afterwards I saw through it,—and it was merely a maudlin misapprehension of his. He'd got three or four things all mixed up together. You've never met your friend Tavender, I believe? You'd enjoy him at Hadlow House. He smells of rum a hundred yards off. What little brain he's got left is soaked in it. The first time I was ever camping with him, I had to lick him for drinking the methylated spirits we were using with our tin stove. Oh, you'd have liked him!"

"Evidently," said Lord Plowden, upon reflection, "it was all a most unfortunate and—ah—most deplorable mistake." With inspiration, he made bold to add: "The most amazing thing, though—to my mind—is that you don't seem—what shall I say?—particularly enraged with me about it."

"Yes—that surprises me, too," Thorpe meditatively admitted. "I was entitled to kill you—crush you to jelly. Any other man I would. But you,—I don't know,—I do funny things with you."

"I wish you would give me a drink, now—as one of them," Plowden ventured to suggest, with uneasy pleasantry.

Thorpe smiled a little as he rose, and heavily moved across the room. He set out upon the big official table in the middle, that mockingly pretentious reminder of a Board which never met, a decanter and two glasses and some recumbent, round-bottomed bottles. He handed one of these last to Plowden, as the latter strolled toward the table.

"You know how to open these, don't you?" he said, languidly. "Somehow I never could manage it."

The nobleman submissively took the bottle, and picked with awkwardness at its wire and cork, and all at once achieved a premature and not over-successful explosion. He wiped his dripping cuff in silence, when the tumblers were supplied.

"Well—here's better luck to you next time," Thorpe said, lifting his glass. The audacious irony of his words filled Plowden with an instant purpose.

"What on earth did you round on me in that way for, Thorpe—when I was here last?" He put the question with bravery enough, but at sight of the other's unresponsive face grew suddenly timorous aud explanatory. "No man was ever more astounded in the world than I was. To this day I'm as unable to account for it as a babe unborn. What conceivable thing had I done to you?"

Thorpe slowly thought of something that had not occurred to him before, and seized upon it with a certain satisfaction.

"That day that you took me shooting," he said, with the tone of one finally exposing a long-nursed grievance, "you stayed in bed for hours after you knew I was up and waiting for you—and when we went out, you had a servant to carry a chair for you, but I—by God!—I had to stand up."

"Heavens above!" ejaculated Plowden, in unfeigned amazement.

"These are little things—mere trifles," continued Thorpe, dogmatically, "but with men of my temper and make-up those are just the things that aggravate and rankle and hurt. Maybe it's foolish, but that's the kind of man I am. You ought to have had the intelligence to see that—and not let these stupid little things happen to annoy me. Why just think what you did. I was going to do God knows what for you—make your fortune and everything else,—and you didn't show consideration enough for me to get out of bed at a decent hour—much less see to it that I had a chair if you were going to have one.”

“Upon my word, I can't tell how ashamed and sorry I am,” Lord Plowden assured him, with fervent contrition in his voice.

“Well, those are the things to guard against,” said Thorpe, approaching a dismissal of the subject. “People who show consideration for me; people who take pains to do the little pleasant things for me, and see that I'm not annoyed and worried by trifles—they're the people that I, on my side, do the big things for. I can be the best friend in the world, but only to those who show that they care for me, and do what they know I'll like. I don't want toadies about me, but I do want people who feel bound to me, and are as keen about me and my feelings and interests as they are about their own.”

“It is delightfully feudal—all this,” commented the nobleman, smilingly addressing the remark to nobody in particular. Then he looked at Thorpe. “Let me be one of them—one of the people you speak of,” he said, with directness.

Thorpe returned his look with the good-natured beginnings of a grin. “But what would you be good for?” he queried, in a bantering tone. “People I have about me have to be of some use. They require to have heads on their shoulders. Why—just think what you've done. I don't mean so much about your letting Tavender slip through your fingers—although that was about the worst I ever heard of. But here in this room, at that desk there, you allowed me to bounce you into writing and signing a paper which you ought to have had your hand cut off rather than write, much less sign. You come here trying to work the most difficult and dangerous kind of a bluff,—knowing all the while that the witness you depended entirely upon had disappeared, you hadn't the remotest idea where,—and you actually let me lead you into giving me your signature to your own declaration that you are blackmailing me! Thinking it all over—you know—I can't see that you would be of much help to me in the City.”

Lord Plowden joined perforce in the laughter with which the big man enjoyed his own pleasantry. His mirth had some superficial signs of shamefacedness, but it was hopeful underneath. “The City!” he echoed, with meaning. “That's the curse of it. What do I know about the City? What business have I in the City? As you said, I'm the amateur. A strong man like you can make me seem any kind of a ridiculous fool he likes, with the turn of his hand. I see that right enough. But what am I to do? I have to make a shot at something. I'm so rotten poor!”

Thorpe had retired again behind the barrier of dull-eyed abstraction. He seemed not to have heard this appealing explanation.

The other preserved silence in turn, and even made a pretence of looking at some pamphlets on the table, as a token of his boundless deference to the master's mood.

“I don't know. I'll see,” the big man muttered at last, doubtfully.

Lord Plowden felt warranted in taking an optimistic view of these vague words. “It's awfully good of you”—he began, lamely, and then paused. “I wonder,”—he took up a new thought with a more solicitous tone,—“I wonder if you would mind returning to me that idiotic paper I signed.”

Thorpe shook his head. “Not just now, at any rate,” he said, still musingly. With his head bowed, he took a few restless steps.

“But you are going to—to help me!” the other remarked, with an air of confidence. He had taken up his hat, in response to the tacit warning of his companion's manner.

Thorpe looked at him curiously, and hesitated over his answer. It was a surprising and almost unaccountable conclusion for the interview to have reached. He was in some vague way ashamed of himself, but he was explicitly and contemptuously ashamed for Plowden, and the impulse to say so was strong within him. This handsome young gentleman of title ought not to be escaping with this restored buoyancy of mien, and this complacency of spirit. He had deserved to be punished with a heavy hand, and here he was blithely making certain of new benefits instead.

“I don't know—I'll see,” Thorpe moodily repeated—and there was no more to be said.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the noon hour of the following day was enacted the brief final scene in the drama of the “Rubber Consols corner.”

For long weeks, Mr. Stormont Thorpe had given much thought to this approaching climax of his great adventure—looking forward to it both as the crowning event of his life, and as the dawn of a new existence in some novel, enchanted world. It was to bring his triumph, and even more, his release. It was at once to crown him as a hero and chieftain among City men, and transfigure him into a being for whom all City things were an abomination. In his waking hours, the conflict between these aims did not specially force itself upon his attention: he mused upon, and spun fancies about, either one indifferently, and they seemed not at all irreconcilable. But his dreams were full of warfare,—wearily saturated with strife, and endless endeavour to do things which could not be done, and panic-stricken terrors before the shadow of shapeless calamities,—until he dreaded to go to sleep. Then he discovered that an extra two glasses of whiskey-and-water would solve that particular difficulty, and send him into prompt, leaden slumber—but the early mornings remained as torturing as ever. In the twilight he awoke oppressed and sick at heart with gloom—and then dozed at intervals through fantastic new ordeals of anguish and shame and fear, till it was decently possible to get up.

Then, indeed, the big cold sponge on his head and spine scattered these foolish troubles like chaff, and restored to him his citizenship among the realities. He dressed with returning equanimity, and was almost cheerful by the time he thrust his razor into the hot water. Yet increasingly he was conscious of the wear and strain of it all, and increasingly the date, September twelfth, loomed before him with a portentous individuality of its own.

This day grew to mean so much more to him than had all the other days of the dead years together that he woke in the darkness of its opening hours, and did not get satisfactorily to sleep again. His vigil, however, was for the once free from grief. He drowsily awaited the morning in vague mental comfort; he had recurring haphazard indolent glimpses of a protecting fact standing guard just outside the portals of consciousness—the fact that the great day was here. He rose early, breakfasted well, and walked by the Embankment to the City, where at ten he had a few words with Semple, and afterward caused himself to be denied to ordinary callers. He paced up and down the Board Room for the better part of the ensuing two hours, luxuriating in the general sense of satisfaction in the proximity of the climax, rather than pretending to himself that he was thinking out its details. He had provided in his plans of the day for a visit from Messrs. Rostocker and Aronson, which should constitute the dramatic finale of the “corner,” and he looked forward to this meeting with a certain eagerness of expectation. Yet even here he thought broadly of the scene as a whole, and asked himself no questions about words and phrases. It seemed to be taken for granted in his mind that the scene itself would be theatrically impressive, even spectacular.

In the event, this long-awaited culmination proved to be disappointingly flat and commonplace. It was over before Thorpe had said any considerable proportion of the things he saw afterward that he had intended to say. The two men came as he had expected they would—and they bought their way out of the tragic “corner” at precisely the price he had nominated in his mind. But hardly anything else went as he had dimly prefigured it.

Mr. Rostocker was a yellow-haired man, and Mr. Aronson was as dark as a Moor, and no physical resemblance of features or form suggested itself to the comparing eye, yet Thorpe even now, when they stood brusquely silent before him, with their carefully-brushed hats pulled down over their eyes, stuck to it in his own mind that it was hard to tell them apart. To the end, there was something impersonal in his feeling toward them. They, for their part, coldly abstained from exhibiting a sign of feeling about him, good, bad, or indifferent.

It was the man with the fair hair and little curly flaxen beard who spoke: “How do you do! I understand that we can buy eight thousand five hundred Rubber Consols from you at 'twenty-three.'”

“No—twenty-five,” replied Thorpe.

The dark man spoke: “The jobbers' price is twenty-three.”

“To carry over—yes,” Thorpe answered. “But to buy it is twenty-five.”

The two sons of the race which invented mental arithmetic exchanged an alert glance, and looked at the floor for an engrossed instant.

“I don't mind telling you,” Thorpe interposed upon their silence, “I put on that extra two pounds because you got up that story about applying to the Stock Exchange Committee on a charge of fraud.”

“We didn't get up any story,” said Rostocker, curtly.

“You tried to plant it on us,” Aronson declared.

“One of your own Directors put it about. I thought it was a fake at the time.”

This view of the episode took Thorpe by surprise. As it seemed, in passing, to involve a compliment to his own strategic powers, he accepted it without comment. “Well—it is twenty-five, anyway,” he told them, with firmness.

“Twenty-four,” suggested Aronson, after another momentary pause.

“Not a shilling less than twenty-five,” Thorpe insisted, with quiet doggedness.

“We can always pay our creditors and let you whistle,” Rostocker reminded him, laconically.

“You can do anything you like,” was the reply, “except buy Rubber Consols under twenty-five. It doesn't matter a fig to me whether you go bankrupt or not. It would suit me as well to have you two 'hammered' as to take your money.” Upon the spur of a sudden thought he drew out his watch. “In just two minutes' time to a tick, the price will be thirty.”

“Let's be 'hammered' then!” said Aronson to his companion, with simulated impulsiveness.

Rostocker was the older and stronger man, and when at last he spoke it was with the decision of one in authority. “It is your game,” he said, with grave imperturbability. “Eight thousand five hundred at twenty-five. Will you deliver at the Credit Lyonnais in half an hour?”

Thorpe nodded, impassively. Then a roving idea of genial impertinence brought a gleam to his eye. “If you should happen to want more Rubber Consols at any time,” he said, with a tentative chuckle, “I could probably let you have them at a reduced price.”

The two received the pleasantry without a smile, but to Thorpe's astonishment one of them seemed to discern something in it beside banter. It was Rostocker who said: “Perhaps we may make a deal with you,” and apparently meant it.

They went out at this, ignoring ceremony upon their exit as stolidly as they had done upon their entrance, and a moment later Thorpe called in the Secretary, and despatched a messenger to bring Semple from Capel Court. The formalities of this final transfer of shares had been dictated to the former, and he had gone off on the business, before the Broker arrived.

Thorpe stood waiting near the door, and held out his hand with a dramatically significant gesture when the little Scotchman entered. “Put her there!” he exclaimed heartily, with an exuberant reversion to the slang of remote transatlantic bonhomie.

“Yeh've done it, then!” said Semple, his sharp face softening with pleasure at the news. “Yeh've pulled it off at twenty-three!”

The other's big countenance yielded itself to a boyish grin. “Twenty-FIVE!” he said, and laughed aloud. “After you left this morning, it kind o' occurred to me that I'd raise it a couple of pounds. I found I was madder about those pieces in the newspapers than I thought I was, and so I took an extra seventeen thousand pounds on that account.”

“God above!” Semple ejaculated, with a satisfaction through which signs of an earlier fright were visible. “It was touch-and-go if you didn't lose it all by doing that! You risked everything, man!”

Thorpe ponderously shrugged his shoulders. “Well—I did it, anyhow, and it came off,” was his comment. Then, straightening himself, he drew a long, long breath, and beamed down at the little man. “Think of it! God! It's actually all over! And NOW perhaps we won't have a drink! Hell! Let's send out for some champagne!” His finger was hovering over the bell, when the Broker's dissuading voice arrested it. “No, no!” Semple urged. “I wouldn't touch it. It's no fit drink for the daytime—and it's a scandal in an office. Your clerks will aye blab it about hither and yon, and nothing harms a man's reputation more in the City.”

“Oh, to hell with the City!” cried Thorpe, joyously. “I'm never going to set foot in it again. Think of that! I mean it!”

None the less, he abandoned the idea of sending out for wine, and contented himself with the resources of the cabinet instead. After some friendly pressure, Semple consented to join him in a brandy-and-soda, though he continued to protest between sips that at such an hour it was an indecent practice.

“It's the ruin of many a strong man,” he moralized, looking rather pointedly at Thorpe over his glass. “It's the principal danger that besets the verra successful man. He's too busily occupied to take exercise, and he's too anxious and worried to get his proper sleep—but he can always drink! In one sense, I'm not sorry to think that you're leaving the City.”

“Oh, it never hurts me,” Thorpe said, indifferently accepting the direction of the homily. “I'm as strong as an ox. But all the same, I shall be better in every way for getting out of this hole. Thank God, I can get off to Scotland tomorrow. But I say, Semple, what's the matter with your visiting me at my place there? I'll give you the greatest shooting and fishing you ever heard of.”

The Broker was thinking of something else. “What is to be the precise position of the Company, in the immediate future?” he asked.

“Company? What Company?”

Semple smiled grimly. “Have you already forgotten that there is such a thing?” he queried, with irony. “Why, man, this Company that paid for this verra fine Board-table,” he explained, with his knuckles on its red baize centre.

Thorpe laughed amusedly. “I paid for that out of my own pocket,” he said. “For that matter everything about the Company has come out of my pocket——”

“Or gone into it,” suggested the other, and they chuckled together.

“But no—you're right,” Thorpe declared. “Some thing ought to be settled about the Company, I suppose. Of course I wash my hands of it—but would anybody else want to go on with it? You see its annual working expenses, merely for the office and the Board, foot up nearly 3,000 pounds. I've paid these for this year, but naturally I won't do it again. And would it be worth anybody else's while to do it? Yours, for example?”

“Have you had any explanations with the other Directors?” the Broker asked, thoughtfully.

“Explanations—no,” Thorpe told him. “But that's all right. The Marquis has been taken care of, and so has Plowden. They're game to agree to anything. And let's see—Kervick is entirely my man. That leaves Watkin and Davidson—and they don't matter. They're mere guinea-pigs. A few hundreds apiece would shut them up, if you thought it was worth while to give them anything at all.”

“And about the property,—the rubber plantation,—that the Company was formed to acquire and develop. I suppose there really is such a plantation?”

“Oh, yes, it's all there right enough,” Thorpe said, briefly.

“It's no good, though, is it?” the Broker asked, with affable directness.

“Between ourselves, it isn't worth a damn,” the other blithely assured him.

The Scotchman mused with bent brows. “There ought still to be money in it,” he said, with an air of conviction.

“By the way,” it occurred to Thorpe to mention, “here's something I didn't understand. I told Rostocker here, just as a cheeky kind of joke, that after he and Aronson had got their eight thousand five hundred, if they thought they'd like still more shares, I'd let 'em have 'em at a bargain—and he seemed to take it seriously. He did for a fact. Said perhaps he could make a deal with me.”

“Hm-m!” said Semple, reflectively. “I'll see if he says anything to me. Very likely he's spotted some way of taking the thing over, and reorganizing it, and giving it another run over the course. I'll think it out. And now I must be off. Aren't you lunching?”

“No—I'll have the boy bring in some sandwiches,” Thorpe decided. “I want my next meal west of Temple Bar when I get round to it. I've soured on the City for keeps.”

“I wouldn't say that it had been so bad to you, either,” Semple smilingly suggested, as he turned to the door.

Thorpe grinned in satisfied comment. “Hurry back as soon as you've finally settled with Rostocker and the other fellow,” he called after him, and began pacing the floor again.

It was nearly four o'clock when these two men, again together in the Board Room, and having finished the inspection of some papers on the desk, sat upright and looked at each other in tacit recognition that final words were to be spoken.

“Well, Semple,” Thorpe began, after that significant little pause, “I want to say that I'm damned glad you've done so well for yourself in this affair. You've been as straight as a die to me,—I owe it as much to you as I do to myself,—and if you don't think you've got enough even now, I want you to say so.”

He had spoken in tones of sincere liking, and the other answered him in kind. “I have more than I ever dreamed of making in a lifetime when I came to London,” he declared. “If my father were alive, and heard me tell him that in one year, out of a single transaction, I had cleared over sixty-five thousand pounds, he'd be fit to doubt the existence of a Supreme Being. I'm obliged to you for your good words, Thorpe. It's not only been profitable to work with you, but it has been a great education and a great pleasure as well.”

Thorpe nodded his appreciation. “I'm going to ask a favour of you,” he said. “I want to leave the general run of my investments and interests here in your hands, to keep track of I don't want to speculate at all, in the ordinary meaning of the word. Even after I bury a pot of money in non-productive real estate, I shall have an income of 50,000 pounds at the very least, and perhaps twice as much. There's no fun in gambling when you've got such a bank as that behind you. But if there are good, wise changes to be made in investments, or if things turn up in the way of chances that I ought to know about, I want to feel that you're on the spot watching things and doing things in my interest. And as it won't be regular broker's work, I shall want to pay you a stated sum—whatever you think is right.”

“That will arrange itself easily enough,” said Semple. “I shall have the greatest pleasure in caring for whatever you put in my hands. And I think I can promise that it will be none the worse for the keeping.”

“I don't need any assurance on that score,” Thorpe declared, cordially. “You're the one sterling, honest man I've known in the City.”

It was the Broker's turn to make a little acknowledging bow. His eyes gleamed frank satisfaction at being so well understood. “I think I see the way that more money can be made out of the Company,” he said, abruptly changing the subject. “I've had but a few words with Rostocker about it—but it's clear to me that he has a plan. He will be coming to you with a proposition.”

“Well, he won't find me, then,” interposed Thorpe, with a comfortable smile. “I leave all that to you.”

“I suspect that his plan,” continued Semple, “is to make a sub-rosa offer of a few shillings for the majority of the shares, and reconstitute the Board, and then form another Company to buy the property and good-will of the old one at a handsome price. Now if that would be a good thing for him to do, it would be a good thing for me to do. I shall go over it all carefully, in detail, this evening. And I suppose, if I see my way clear before me, than I may rely upon your good feeling in the matter. I would do all the work and assume all the risk, and, let us say, divide any profits equally—you in turn giving me a free hand with all your shares, and your influence with the Directors.”

“I'll do better still,” Thorpe told him, upon brief reflection. “Reconstitute the Board and make Lord Plowden Chairman,—I don't imagine the Marquis would have the nerve to go on with it,—and I'll make a free gift of my shares to you two—half and half. You'll find him all right to work with,—if you can only get him up in the morning,—and I've kind o' promised him something of the sort. Does that suit you?” Semple's countenance was thoughtful rather than enthusiastic. “I'm more skeptical about Lords than you are,” he observed, “but if he's amenable, and understands that his part is to do what I tell him to do, I've no doubt we shall hit it off together.”

“Oh, absolutely!” said Thorpe, with confidence. “I'll see to it that he behaves like a lamb. You're to have an absolutely free hand. You're to do what you like,—wind the Company up, or sell it out, or rig it up under a new name and catch a new set of gudgeons with it,—whatever you damned please. When I trust a man, I trust him.”

The two friends, their faces brightened and their voices mellowed by this serene consciousness of their mutual trust in each other's loyalty and integrity, dwelt no further upon these halcyon beginnings of a fresh plan for plundering the public. They spoke instead on personal topics—of the possibility of Semple's coming to Scotland during the autumn, and of the chance of Thorpe's wintering abroad. All at once Thorpe found himself disclosing the fact of his forthcoming marriage, though he did not mention the name of the lady's father, and under the gracious stress of this announcement they drank again, and clinked glasses fervently. When Semple at last took his leave, they shook hands with the deep-eyed earnestness of comrades who have been through battle and faced death together.

It was not until Thorpe stood alone that the full realizing sense of what the day meant seemed to come to him. Fruition was finally complete: the last winnowing of the great harvest had been added to the pile. Positively nothing remained for him but to enter and enjoy!

He found it curiously difficult to grasp the thought in its entirety. He stood the master of unlimited leisure for the rest of his life, and of power to enrich that life with everything that money could buy,—but there was an odd inability to feel about it as he knew he ought to feel.

Somehow, for some unaccountable reason, an absurd depression hovered about over his mind, darkening it with formless shadows. It was as if he were sorry that the work was all finished—that there was nothing more for him to do. But that was too foolish, and he tried to thrust it from him. He said with angry decision to himself that he had never liked the work; that it had all been unpleasant and grinding drudgery, tolerable only as a means to an end; that now this end had been reached, he wanted never to lay eyes on the City again.

Let him dwell instead upon the things he did want to lay eyes upon. Some travel no doubt he would like, but not too much; certainly no more than his wife would cheerfully accept as a minimum. He desired rather to rest among his own possessions. To be lord of the manor at Pellesley Court, with his own retinue of servants and dependents and tenants, his own thousands of rich acres, his own splendid old timber, his own fat stock and fleet horses and abundant covers and prize kennels—THAT was what most truly appealed to him. It was not at all certain that he would hunt; break-neck adventure in the saddle scarcely attracted him. But there was no reason in the world why he should not breed racing horses, and create for himself a distinguished and even lofty position on the Turf. He had never cared much about races or racing folk himself, but when the Prince and Lord Rosebery and people like that went in for winning the Derby, there clearly must be something fascinating in it.

Then Parliament, of course; he did not waver at all from his old if vague conception of a seat in Parliament as a natural part of the outfit of a powerful country magnate. And in a hundred other ways men should think of him as powerful, and look up to him. He would go to church every Sunday, and sit in the big Squire's pew. He would be a magistrate as a matter of course, and he would make himself felt on the County Council. He would astonish the county by his charities, and in bad years by the munificence of his reductions in rents. Perhaps if there were a particularly bad harvest, he would decline all over his estate to exact any rent whatever. Fancy what a noble sensation that would make! A Duke could do no more.

It was very clear to him now that he desired to have children of his own,—say two at least, a son and a daughter, or perhaps a son and two daughters: two little girls would be company for each other. As he prefigured these new beings, the son was to exist chiefly for purposes of distinction and the dignity of heirship, and the paternal relations with him would be always somewhat formal, and, though affectionate, unexpansive. But the little girls—they would put their arms round their father's neck, and walk out with him to see the pigs and the dogs, and be the darlings of his heart. He would be an old man by the time they grew up.

A beatific vision of himself took form in his mind—of himself growing grey and pleasurably tired, surrounded by opulence and the demonstrative respect of everybody, smiling with virtuous content as he strolled along between his two daughters, miracles of beauty and tenderness, holding each by a hand.

The entrance of a clerk broke abruptly upon this daydream. He had a telegram in his hand, and Thorpe, rousing himself with an effort, took the liver-coloured envelope, and looked blankly at it. Some weird apprehension seized upon him, as if he belonged to the peasant class which instinctively yokes telegrams and calamities together. He deferred to this feeling enough to nod dismissal to the clerk, and then, when he was again alone, slowly opened the message, and read it:

“Newcastle-on-Tyne, September 12. Our friend died at Edinboro this morning. See you at hotel this evening.—Kervick.”

What Thorpe felt at first was that his two daughters had shrunk from him with swift, terrible aversion: they vanished, along with every phase of the bright vision, under a pall of unearthly blackness. He stood in the centre of a chill solitude, staring stupidly at the coarse, soft paper.

The premonition, then, had justified itself! Something had told him that the telegram was an evil thing. A vaguely superstitious consciousness of being in the presence of Fate laid hold upon him. His great day of triumph had its blood-stain. A victim had been needful—and to that end poor simple, silly old Tavender was a dead man. Thorpe could see him,—an embarrassing cadaver eyed by strangers who did not know what to do with it,—fatuous even in death.

A sudden rage at Kervick flamed up. He clearly had played the fool—clumsily over-plying the simpleton with drink till he had killed him. The shadow of murder indubitably hung over the thing. And then—the crass witlessness of telegraphing! Already, doubtless, the police of Edinborough were talking over the wires with Scotland Yard. A reference to a death in Edinborough, in a telegram from Newcastle—it was incredible that this should escape the eye of the authorities. Any minute might bring a detective through that door there—following into the Board Room with his implacable scent the clue of blood. Thorpe's fancy pictured this detective as a momentarily actual presence—tall, lean, cold-eyed, mysteriously calm and fatally wise, the omniscient terror of the magazine short-stories.

He turned faint and sick under a spasm of fright. The menace of enquiry became something more than a threat: he felt it, like the grip of a constable upon his arm. Everything would be mercilessly unravelled. The telegram of the idiot Kervick would bring the police down upon him like a pack of beagles. The beliefs and surmises of the idiot Gafferson would furnish them with the key to everything. He would have his letter from Tavender to show to the detectives—and the Government's smart lawyers would ferret out the rest. The death of Tavender—they could hardly make him responsible for that; but it was the dramatic feature of this death which would inspire them all to dig up everything about the fraud. It was this same sensational added element of the death, too, which would count with a jury. They were always gross, sentimental fools, these juries. They would mix up the death and the deal in Rubber Consols, and in their fat-headed confusion would say “Penal Servitude—fourteen years.” Or no, it was the Judge who fixed that. But the Judges were fools, too; they were too conceited, too puffed up with vanity, to take the trouble to understand. He groaned aloud in a nightmare of helplessness.

The sound of his own voice, moaning in his ears, had a magical effect upon him. He lifted his head, gazed about him, and then flushed deeply. His nerveless cowardice had all at once become unbelievable to himself. With a shamed frown he straightened himself, and stood thus for a long minute, engrossed in the definite task of chasing these phantoms from his mind. Once a manly front was displayed to them, they slunk away with miraculous facility. He poured out some brandy, and sipped it neat, and laughed scornfully, defiantly, aloud.

He had over half a million—with power and force and courage enough to do with it what he liked. He had fought luck undauntedly, unwearyingly, during all those years when his hands were empty. Was he to tremble and turn tail now, when his hands were full, when he was armoured and weaponed at every point? He was amazed and hurt, and still more enraged, at that fit of girlish weakness which had possessed him. He could have beaten himself with stripes for it. But it could never happen again—never, never!

He told himself that with proud, resolute reiteration, as he got his hat and stick, and put in his pockets one or two papers from the desk, and then glanced about the Board Room for what was, most likely, the last time. Here he had won his great victory over Fate, here he had put his enemies under his feet, and if innocent simpletons had wandered into the company of these foes, it mattered not a whit to him that they also had been crushed. Figuratively, he turned his back upon them now; he left them, slain and trampled, in the Board Room behind him. They no longer concerned him.

Figuratively, too, as he walked with firmness to the door, he stepped over the body of old Tavender, upon the threshold, and bestowed upon it a downward mental glance, and passed on. By the time he reached the street, the memory of Tavender had become the merest shred of a myth. As he strode on, it seemed to him that his daughters came again, and took his hands, and moved lovingly beside him—lovingly and still more admiringly than before.

CHAPTER XXII

BY the autumn of the following year, a certain small proportion of the people inhabiting the district in Hertfordshire which set its clocks by the dial over the stable-tower of Pellesley Court had accustomed themselves to give the place its new name of High Thorpe. These were for the most part the folk of peculiarly facile wits and ready powers of adaptation, like pushing small tradesmen, and the upper servants in county houses. An indolent and hazy compromise upon Pellesley Thorpe had drifted into use by perhaps a larger number. To the puzzled conservatism of the abiding huge majority nearest to the soil—the round-backed, lumpish men who tie strings round their corduroys under the knee, and the strong, cow-faced women who look at passers-by on the road from the doors of dark little cottages, over radiant patches of blossoming garden—it seemed safest to drop family names altogether, and call it merely the Court.

It stood proudly upon what was rather a notable elevation for those flat parts—a massive mansion of simple form, built of a grey stone which seemed at a distance almost white against the deep background of yews and Italian pines behind it. For many miles seaward this pale front was a landmark. From the terrace-walk at its base, one beheld a great expanse of soft green country, sloping gently away for a long distance, then stretching out upon a level which on misty days was interminable. In bright weather, the remote, low-lying horizon had a defining line of brownish-blue—and this stood for what was left of a primitive forest, containing trees much older than the Norman name it bore. It was a forest which at some time, no doubt, had extended without a break till it merged into that of Epping—leagues away to the south. The modern clearance and tillage, however, which separated it now from Epping had served as a curiously effective barrier—more baffling than the Romans and Angles in their turn had found the original wildwood. No stranger seemed ever to find his way into that broad, minutely-cultivated fertile plain which High Thorpe looked down upon. No railway had pushed its cheapening course across it. Silent, embowered old country roads and lanes netted its expanse with hedgerows; red points of tiled roofs, distinguishable here and there in clusters among the darker greens of orchards, identified the scattered hamlets—all named in Domesday Book, all seemingly unchanged since. A grey square church-tower emerging from the rooks' nests; an ordered mass of foliage sheltering the distant gables and chimneys of some isolated house; the dim perception on occasion that a rustic waggon was in motion on some highway, crawling patiently like an insect—of this placid, inductive nature were all the added proofs of human occupation that the landscape offered.

Mr. Stormont Thorpe, on an afternoon of early October, yawned in the face of this landscape—and then idly wondered a little at the mood which had impelled him to do so. At the outset of his proprietorship he had bound himself, as by a point of honour, to regard this as the finest view from any gentleman's house in England. During the first few months his fidelity had been taxed a good deal, but these temptations and struggles lay now all happily behind him. He had satisfactorily assimilated the spirit of the vista, and blended it with his own. Its inertia, when one came to comprehend it, was undeniably magnificent, and long ago he had perceived within himself the growth of an answering repose, a responsive lethargy, which in its full development was also going to be very fine. Practically all the land this side of the impalpable line where trees and houses began to fade into the background belonged to him; there were whole villages nestling half-concealed under its shrubberies which were his property. As an investment, these possessions were extremely unremunerative. Indeed, if one added the cost of the improvements which ought to be made, to the expenditure already laid out in renovations, it was questionable if for the next twenty years they would not represent a deficit on the income-sheet. But, now that he had laid hold of the local character, it pleased him that it should be so. He would not for the world have his gentle, woolly-minded, unprofitable cottagers transformed into “hustlers”; it would wound his eye to see the smoke of any commercial chimney, the smudge of any dividend-paying factory, staining the pure tints of the sylvan landscape. He had truly learned to love it.

Yet now, as he strolled on the terrace with his first after-luncheon cigar, he unaccountably yawned at the thing he loved. Upon reflection, he had gone to bed rather earlier the previous evening than usual. He had not been drinking out of the ordinary; his liver seemed right enough. He was not conscious of being either tired or drowsy. He looked again at the view with some fixity, and said to himself convincingly that nothing else in England could compare with it. It was the finest thing there was anywhere. Then he surprised himself in the middle of another yawn—and halted abruptly. It occurred to him that he wanted to travel.

Since his home-coming to this splendid new home in the previous January, at the conclusion of a honeymoon spent in Algiers and Egypt, he had not been out of England. There had been a considerable sojourn in London, it is true, at what was described to him as the height of the Season, but looking back upon it, he could not think of it as a diversion. It had been a restless, over-worked, mystifying experience, full of dinners to people whom he had never seen before, and laborious encounters with other people whom he did not particularly want to see again. There had been no physical comfort in it for him, and little more mental satisfaction, for Londoners, or rather people in London, seemed all to be making an invidious distinction in their minds between him and his wife. The fact that she continued to be called Lady Cressage was not of itself important to him. But in the incessant going about in London, their names were called out together so often that his ear grew sensitive and sore to the touch of the footmen's reverberations. The meaning differentiation which the voices of the servants insisted upon, seemed inevitably reflected in the glance and manner of their mistresses. More than anything else, that made him hate London, and barred the doors of his mind to all thoughts of buying a town-house.

His newly-made wife, it is true, had not cared much for London, either, and had agreed to his decision against a town-house almost with animation. The occasion of their return from the hot bustle of the metropolis to these cool home shades—in particular the minute in which, at a bend in the winding carriage-way down below, they had silently regarded together the spectacle uplifted before them, with the big, welcoming house, and the servants on the terrace—had a place of its own in his memory. Edith had pressed his arm, as they sat side by side in the landau, on the instant compulsion of a feeling they had in common. He had never, before or since, had quite the same assurance that she shared an emotion with him.

He was very far, however, from finding fault with his wife. It was in the nature of the life he chose to lead that he should see a great deal of her, and think a great deal about her, and she bore both tests admirably. If there was a fault to be found, it was with himself for his inability to altogether understand her. She played the part she had undertaken to play with abundant skill and discretion and grace, and even with an air of nice good-fellowship which had some of the aspects of affection. He was vaguely annoyed with himself for having insight enough to perceive that it was a part she was playing, and yet lacking the added shrewdness to divine what her own personal attitude to her role was like. He had noticed sometimes the way good women looked at their husbands when the latter were talking over their heads—with the eager, intent, non-comprehending admiration of an affectionate dog. This was a look which he could not imagine himself discovering in his wife's eves. It was not conceivable to him that he should talk over her head. Her glance not only revealed an ample understanding of all he said, but suggested unused reserves of comprehension which he might not fathom. It was as if, intellectually no less than socially, she possessed a title and he remained an undistinguished plebeian.

He made no grievance, however, even in his own thoughts, of either inequality. She had been charmingly frank and fair about the question of the names, when it first arose. The usage had latterly come to be, she explained, for a widow bearing even a courtesy title derived from her late husband, to retain it on marrying again. It was always the easiest course to fall in with usage, but if he had any feelings on the subject, and preferred to have her insist on being called Mrs. Thorpe, she would meet his wishes with entire willingness. It had seemed to him, as to her, that it was wisest to allow usage to settle the matter. Some months after their marriage there appeared in the papers what purported to be an authoritative announcement that the Queen objected to the practice among ladies who married a second time, of retaining titles acquired by the earlier marriages, and that the lists of precedency at Buckingham Palace would henceforth take this into account. Lady Cressage showed this to her husband, and talked again with candour on the subject. She said she had always rather regretted the decision they originally came to, and even now could wish that it might be altered, but that to effect a change in the face of this newspaper paragraph would seem servile—and in this as in most other things he agreed with her. As she said, they wanted nothing of Buckingham Palace.

She wanted equally little, it seemed, of the society which the neighbouring district might afford. There was a meagre routine of formal calls kept in languid operation, Thorpe knew, but it was so much in the background that he never came in contact with it. His own notions of the part he ought to take in County affairs had undergone a silent and unnoted, yet almost sweeping, change. What little he saw of the gentry and strong local men with whom he would have to work, quietly undermined and dismantled all his ambitions in that direction. They were not his sort; their standards for the measurement of things were unintelligible to him. He did not doubt that, if he set himself about it, he could impose his dominion upon them, any more than he doubted that, if he mastered the Chinese language, he could lift himself to be a Mandarin, but the one would be as unnatural and unattractive an enterprise as the other. He came to be upon nodding terms with most of the “carriage-people” round about; some few he exchanged meaningless words with upon occasion, and understood that his wife also talked with, when it was unavoidable, but there his relationship to the County ended, and he was well pleased that it should be so. It gave him a deep satisfaction to see that his wife seemed also well pleased.

He used the word “seemed” in his inmost musings, for it was never quite certain what really did please and displease her. It was always puzzling to him to reconcile her undoubted intellectual activity with the practical emptiness of the existence she professed to enjoy. In one direction, she had indeed a genuine outlet for her energies, which he could understand her regarding in the light of an occupation. She was crazier about flowers and plants than anybody he had ever heard of, and it had delighted him to make over to her, labelled jocosely as the bouquet-fund, a sum of money which, it seemed to him, might have paid for the hanging-gardens of Babylon. It yielded in time—emerging slowly but steadily from a prodigious litter of cement and bricks and mortar and putty, under the hands of innumerable masons, carpenters, glaziers, plumbers, and nondescript subordinates, all of whom talked unwearyingly about nothing at all, and suffered no man to perform any part of his allotted task without suspending their own labours to watch him—an imposing long line of new greenhouses, more than twenty in number. The mail-bag was filled meanwhile with nurserymen's catalogues, and the cart made incessant journeys to and from Punsey station, bringing back vast straw-enwrapped baskets and bundles and boxes beyond counting, the arrival and unpacking of which was with Edith the event of the day. About the reality of her engrossed interest in all the stages of progress by which these greenhouses became crowded museums of the unusual and abnormal in plant-life, it was impossible to have any suspicion. And even after they were filled to overflowing, Thorpe noted with joy that this interest seemed in no wise to flag. She spent hours every day under the glass, exchanging comments and theories with her gardeners, and even pulling things about with her own hands, and other hours she devoted almost as regularly to supervising the wholesale alterations that had been begun in the gardens outside. There were to be new paths, new walls with a southern exposure, new potting sheds, new forcing pits, new everything—and in the evenings she often worked late over the maps and plans she drew for all this. Thorpe's mind found it difficult to grasp the idea that a lady of such notable qualities could be entirely satisfied by a career among seeds and bulbs and composts, but at least time brought no evidences of a decline in her horticultural zeal. Who knew? Perhaps it might go on indefinitely.

As for himself, he had got on very well without any special inclination or hobby. He had not done any of the great things that a year ago it had seemed to him he would forthwith do—but his mind was serenely undisturbed by regrets. He did not even remember with any distinctness what these things were that he had been going to do. The routine of life—as arranged and borne along by the wise and tactful experts who wore the livery of High Thorpe—was abundantly sufficient in itself. He slept well now in the morning hours, and though he remained still, by comparison, an early riser, the bath and the shaving and slow dressing under the hands of a valet consumed comfortably a good deal of time. Throughout the day he was under the almost constant observation of people who were calling him “master” in their minds, and watching to see how, in the smallest details of deportment, a “master” carried himself, and the consciousness of this alone amounted to a kind of vocation. The house itself made demands upon him nearly as definite as those of the servants. It was a house of huge rooms, high ceilings, and grandiose fireplaces and stairways, which had seemed to him like a royal palace when he first beheld it, and still produced upon him an effect of undigestible largeness and strangeness. It was as a whole not so old as the agents had represented it, by some centuries, but it adapted itself as little to his preconceived notions of domesticity as if it had been built by Druids. The task of seeming to be at home in it had as many sides to it as there were minutes in the day—and oddly enough, Thorpe found in their study and observance a congenial occupation. Whether he was reading in the library—where there was an admirable collection of books of worth—or walking over the home-farms, or driving in his smart stanhope with the coachman behind, or sitting in formal costume and dignity opposite his beautiful wife at the dinner-table, the sense of what was expected of him was there, steadying and restraining, like an atmospheric pressure.

Thus far they had had few visitors, and had accepted no invitations to join house-parties elsewhere. They agreed without speaking about it that it was more their form to entertain than to be entertained, and certain people were coming to them later in the month. These were quite wholly of Edith's set and selection, for Thorpe had no friends or acquaintances outside her circle for whose presence he had any desire—and among these prospective guests were a Duke and a Duchess. Once, such a fact would have excited Thorpe's imagination. He regarded it now as something appropriate under the circumstances, and gave it little further thought. His placid, satisfied life was not dependent upon the stir of guests coming and going, even though they were the great of the earth. He walked on his spacious terrace after luncheon—a tall, portly, well-groomed figure of a man, of relaxed, easy aspect, with his big cigar, and his panama hat, and his loose clothes of choice fabrics and exquisite tailoring—and said to himself that it was the finest view in England—and then, to his own surprise, caught himself in the act of yawning.

From under the silk curtains and awning of a window-doorway at the end of the terrace, his wife issued and came toward him. Her head was bare, and she had the grace and fresh beauty of a young girl in her simple light gown of some summery figured stuff.

“What do you say to going off somewhere—tomorrow if you like—travelling abroad?” he called out, as she approached him. The idea, only a moment old in his mind, had grown to great proportions. “How can we?” she asked, upon the briefest thought. “THEY are coming at the end of the week. This is Monday, and they arrive on the 12th—that's this Saturday.”

“So soon as that!” he exclaimed. “I thought it was later. H-m! I don't know—I think perhaps I'll go up to London this evening. I'm by way of feeling restless all at once. Will you come up with me?”

She shook her head. “I can't think of anything in London that would be tolerable.”

He gave a vague little laugh. “I shall probably hate it myself when I get there,” he speculated. “There isn't anybody I want to see—there isn't anything I want to do. I don' t know—perhaps it might liven me up.”

Her face took on a look of enquiring gravity. “Are you getting tired of it, then?” She put the question gently, almost cautiously.

He reflected a little. “Why—no,” he answered, as if reasoning to himself. “Of course I'm not. This is what I've always wanted. It's my idea of life to a 't.' Only—I suppose everything needs a break in it now and then—if only for the comfort of getting back into the old rut again.”

“The rut—yes,” she commented, musingly. “Apparently there's always a rut.”

Thorpe gave her the mystified yet uncomplaining glance she knew so well in his eyes. For once, the impulse to throw hidden things up into his range of view prevailed with her.

“Do you know,” she said, with a confused half-smile at the novelty of her mood for elucidation, “I fancied a rut was the one thing there could be no question about with you. I had the notion that you were incapable of ruts—and conventional grooves. I thought you—as Carlyle puts it—I thought you were a man who had swallowed all the formulas.”

Thorpe looked down at his stomach doubtfully. “I see what you mean,” he said at last, but in a tone without any note of conviction.

“I doubt it,” she told him, with light readiness—“for I don't see myself what I mean. I forget indeed what it was I said. And so you think you'll go up to town tonight?”

A sudden comprehension of what was slipping away from his grasp aroused him. “No—no,” he urged her, “don't forget what it was you said! I wish you'd talk more with me about that. It was what I wanted to hear. You never tell me what you're really thinking about.” She received the reproach with a mildly incredulous smile in her eyes. “Yes—I know—who was it used to scold me about that? Oh”—she seemed suddenly reminded of something—“I was forgetting to mention it. I have a letter from Celia Madden. She is back in England; she is coming to us Saturday, too.”

He put out his lips a trifle. “That's all right,” he objected, “but what has it got to do with what we were talking about?”

“Talking about?” she queried, with a momentarily blank countenance. “Oh, she used to bully me about my deceit, and treachery, and similar crimes. But I shall be immensely glad to see her. I always fight with her, but I think I like her better than any other woman alive.”

“I like her too,” Thorpe was impelled to say, with a kind of solemnity. “She reminds me of some of the happiest hours in my life.”

His wife, after a brief glance into his face, laughed pleasantly, if with a trace of flippancy. “You say nice things,” she observed, slightly inclining her head. “But now that Celia is coming, it would be as well to have another man. It's such dreadfully short notice, though.”

“I daresay your father could come, all right,” Thorpe suggested. “I'd rather have him than almost anyone else. Would you mind asking him—or shall I?”

An abrupt silence marked this introduction of a subject upon which the couple had differed openly. Thorpe, through processes unaccountable to himself, had passed from a vivid dislike of General Kervick to a habit of mind in which he thoroughly enjoyed having him about. The General had been twice to High Thorpe, and on each occasion had so prolonged his stay that, in retrospect, the period of his absence seemed inconsiderable. The master now, thinking upon it in this minute of silence, was conscious of having missed him greatly. He would not have been bored to the extremity of threatening to go to London, if Kervick had been here. The General was a gentleman, and yet had the flexible adaptability of a retainer; he had been trained in discipline, and hence knew how to defer without becoming fulsome or familiar; he was a man of the world and knew an unlimited number of racy stories, and even if he repeated some of them unduly, they were better than no stories at all. And then, there was his matchless, unfailing patience in playing chess or backgammon or draughts or bezique, whatever he perceived that the master desired.

“If you really wish it,” Edith said at last, coldly.

“But that's what I don't understand,” Thorpe urged upon her with some vigour. “If I like him, I don't see why his own daughter——”

“Oh, need we discuss it?” she broke in, impatiently. “If I'm an unnatural child, why then I am one, and may it not be allowed to pass at that?” A stormy kind of smile played upon her beautifully-cut lips as she added: “Surely one's filial emotions are things to be taken for granted—relieved from the necessity of explanation.”

Thorpe grinned faintly at the hint of pleasantry, but he did not relinquish his point. “Well—unless you really veto the thing—I think I'd like to tell him to come,” he said, with composed obstinacy. Upon an afterthought he added: “There's no reason why he shouldn't meet the Duke, is there?”

“No specific reason,” she returned, with calm coolness of tone and manner. “And certainly I do not see myself in the part of Madame Veto.”

“All right then—I'll send him a wire,” said Thorpe. His victory made him uneasy, yet he saw no way of abandoning it with decorum.

As the two, standing in a silence full of tacit constraint, looked aimlessly away from the terrace, they saw at the same instant a vehicle with a single horse coming rather briskly up the driveway, some hundreds of yards below. It was recognizable at once as the local trap from Punsey station, and as usual it was driven by a boy from the village. Seated beside this lad was a burly, red-bearded man in respectable clothes, who, to judge from the tin-box and travelling-bags fastened on behind, seemed coming to High Thorpe to stay.

“Who on earth is that?” asked Thorpe, wonderingly. The man was obviously of the lower class, yet there seemed something about him which invited recognition.

“Presumably it's the new head-gardener,” she replied with brevity.

Her accent recalled to Thorpe the fact that there had been something disagreeable in their conversation, and the thought of it was unpleasant to him. “Why, I didn't know you had a new man coming,” he said, turning to her with an overture of smiling interest.

“Yes,” she answered, and then, as if weighing the proffered propitiation and rejecting it, turned slowly and went into the house.

The trap apparently ended its course at some back entrance: he did not see it again. He strolled indoors, after a little, and told his man to pack a bag for London, and order the stanhope to take him to the train.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN the early morning, long before any of the hotel people had made themselves heard moving about, Thorpe got up.

It was a long time since he had liked himself and his surroundings so little. The bed seemed all right to the eye, and even to the touch, but he had slept very badly in it, none the less. The room was luxuriously furnished, as was the entire suite, but it was all strange and uncomfortable to his senses. The operation of shaving and dressing in solitude produced an oppression of loneliness. He regretted not having brought his man with him for this reason, and then, upon meditation, for other reasons. A person of his position ought always to have a servant with him. The hotel people must have been surprised at his travelling unattended—and the people at High Thorpe must also have thought it strange. It flashed across his mind that no doubt his wife had most of all thought it strange. How would she explain to herself his sudden, precipitate journey to London alone? Might she not quite naturally put an unpleasant construction upon it? It was bad enough to have to remember that they had parted in something like a tiff; he found it much worse to be fancying the suspicions with which she would be turning over his mysterious absence in her mind.

He went downstairs as speedily as possible and, discovering no overt signs of breakfast in the vicinity of the restaurant, passed out and made his way to the Embankment. This had been a favourite walk of his in the old days—but he considered it now with an unsympathetic eye. It seemed a dry and haggard and desolate-looking place by comparison with his former impressions of it. The morning was grey-skied, but full of a hard quality of light, which brought out to the uncompromising uttermost the dilapidated squalor of the Surrey side. The water was low, and from the mud and ooze of the ugly opposite shore, or perhaps from the discoloured stream itself, there proceeded a smell which offended his unaccustomed nostril. A fitful, gusty wind was blowing from the east, and ever and again it gathered dust in eddying swoops from the roadway, and flung it in his face.

He walked on toward the City, without any conscious purpose, and with no very definite reflections. It occurred to him that if his wife did impute to him some unworthy motive in stealing off to London, and made herself unhappy in doing so—that would at least provide the compensation of showing that she cared. The thought, however, upon examination, contained very meagre elements of solace. He could not in the least be sure about any of the workings of her mind. There might be more or less annoyance mixed up this morning with the secret thoughts she had concerning him—or she might not be bothering her head about him at all.

This latter contingency had never presented itself so frankly to him before. He looked hard at it, and saw more semblances of probability about it than he liked. It might very well be that she was not thinking about him one way or the other.

A depressing consciousness that practically nobody need think about him pervaded his soul. Who cared what he said or did or felt? The City had forgotten his very existence. In the West End, only here and there some person might chance to remember his name as that of some rich bounder who had married Lady Cressage. Nowhere else in England, save one dull strip of agricultural blankness in a backward home county, was there a human being who knew anything whatever about him. And this was his career! It was for this that he had planned that memorable campaign, and waged that amazing series of fortnightly battles, never missing victory, never failing at any point of the complicated strategy, and crowning it all with a culminating triumph which had been the wonder and admiration of the whole financial world! A few score of menials or interested inferiors bowed to him; he drove some good horses, and was attentively waited upon, and had a never-failing abundance of good things to eat and drink aud smoke. Hardly anything more than that, when you came to think of it—and the passing usufruct of all these things could be enjoyed by any fool who had a ten-pound note in his pocket!

What gross trick had the fates played on him? He had achieved power—and where was that power? What had he done with it? What COULD he do with it? He had an excess of wealth, it was true, but in what way could it command an excess of enjoyment? The very phrase was a paradox, as he dimly perceived. There existed only a narrow margin of advantage in favour of the rich man. He could eat and drink a little more and a little better than the poor man; he could have better clothes, and lie abed later in the morning, and take life easier all round—but only within hard and fast bounds. There was an ascertained limit beyond which the millionaire could no more stuff himself with food and wine than could the beggar. It might be pleasant to take an added hour or two in bed in the morning, but to lie in bed all day would be an infliction. So it ran indefinitely—this thin selvedge of advantage which money could buy—with deprivation on the one side, and surfeit on the other. Candidly, was it not true that more happiness lay in winning the way out of deprivation, than in inventing safeguards against satiety? The poor man succeeding in making himself rich—at numerous stages of the operation there might be made a moral snap-shot of the truly happy man. But not after he had reached the top. Then disintegration began at once. The contrast between what he supposed he could do, and what he finds it possible to do, is too vast to be accepted with equanimity.

It must be said that after breakfast—a meal which he found in an Italian restaurant of no great cleanliness or opulence of pretension, and ate with an almost novel relish—Thorpe took somewhat less gloomy views of his position. He still walked eastward, wandering into warehouse and shipping quarters skirting the river, hitherto quite unknown to him, and pursuing in an idle, inconsequent fashion his meditations. He established in his mind the proposition that since an excess of enjoyment was impossible—since one could not derive a great block of happiness from the satisfaction of the ordinary appetites, but at the most could only gather a little from each—the desirable thing was to multiply as much as might be those tastes and whims and fancies which passed for appetites, and thus expand the area of possible gratification.

This seemed very logical indeed, but it did not apply itself to his individual needs with much facility. What did he want to do that he had not done? It was difficult for him to say. Perhaps it was chandlers' signs and windows about him, and the indefinable seafaring preoccupation suggested by the high-walled, narrow streets, which raised the question of a yacht in his mind. Did he want a yacht? He could recall having once dwelt with great fondness upon such a project: doubtless it would still be full of attractions for him. He liked the water, and the water liked him—and he was better able now than formerly to understand how luxurious existence can be made in modern private ships. He decided that he would have a yacht—and then perceived that the decision brought no exhilaration. He was no happier than before. He could decide that he would have anything he chose to name—and it would in no whit lighten his mood. The yacht might be as grand as High Thorpe, and relatively as spacious and well ordered, but would he not grow as tired of the one as he had of the other?

He stopped short at this blunt self-expression of something he had never admitted to himself. Was he indeed tired of High Thorpe? He had assured his wife to the contrary yesterday. He reiterated the assurance to his own mind now. It was instead that he was tired of himself. He carried a weariness about with him, which looked at everything with apathetic eyes, and cared for nothing. Some nameless paralysis had settled upon his capacity for amusement and enjoyment, and atrophied it. He had had the power to expand his life to the farthest boundaries of rich experience and sensation, and he had deliberately shrunk into a sort of herbaceous nonentity, whom nobody knew or cared about. He might have had London at his beck and call, and yet of all that the metropolis might mean to a millionaire, he had been able to think of nothing better than that it should send old Kervick to him, to help beguile his boredom with dominoes and mess-room stories! Pah! He was disgusted with himself.

Striking out a new course, with the Monument as his guide, he presently came into a part of the City which had a certain familiarity for him. He walked up St. Swithin's Lane, looking at the strange forms of foreign fruit exposed at the shop-doors, and finding in them some fleeting recurrence of the hint that travel was what he needed. Then he stopped, to look through the railings and open gateway at an enclosure on the left, and the substantial, heavily-respectable group of early Victorian buildings beyond. Some well-dressed men were standing talking in one of the porches. The stiff yellowish-stucco pilasters of this entrance, and the tall uniformed figure of the porter in the shadow, came into the picture as he observed it; they gave forth a suggestion of satisfied smugness—of orderly but altogether unillumined routine. Nothing could be more commonplace to the eye.

Yet to his imagination, eighteen months before, what mysterious marvels of power had lurked hidden behind those conventional portals! Within those doors, in some inner chamber, sat men whose task it was to direct the movements of the greatest force the world had ever known. They and their cousins in Paris and Frankfort, or wherever they lived, between them wielded a vaster authority than all the Parliaments of the earth. They could change a government, or crush the aspirations of a whole people, or decide a question of peace or war, by the silent dictum of their little family council. He remembered now how he had stood on this same spot, and stared with fascinated gaze at this quadrangle of dull houses, and pondered upon what it must feel like to be a Rothschild—and that was only a little over a year ago!

There was no sense of fascination whatever in his present gaze. He found himself regarding instead, with a kind of detached curiosity, the little knot of men in frock-coats and silk-hats who stood talking in the doorway. It was barely ten o'clock, yet clearly business was proceeding within. One of these persons whom he beheld might be a Rothschild, for aught he knew; at any rate, it was presumable that some of them were on the premises. He had heard it said that the very head of the house listened to quotations from the tape while he ate his luncheon, and interrupted his conversations with the most important of non-commercial callers, to make or refuse bargains in shares offered by brokers who came in. What impulse lay behind this extraordinary devotion to labour? Toward what conceivable goal could it be striving?

To work hard and risk great things for the possession of a fortune, in order to enjoy it afterward—he could understand how that attracted men. But to possess already the biggest of human fortunes, and still work—that baffled him. He wished he knew some of those men in there, especially if they belonged to the place. It would be wonderfully interesting to get at the inner point of view of New Court.

A little later, in Colin Semple's office, he sat down to await the coming of that gentleman. “Then he doesn't get here so early nowadays?” he suggested to the head-clerk who, with instant recognition and exaggerated deference, had ushered him into this furthermost private room. It pleased him to assume that prosperity had relaxed the Scotchman's vigilance.

“Oh yes, sir,” the clerk replied. “A bit earlier if anything, as a rule. But I think he is stopping at his solicitors on his way to the City. I hope you are very well, sir.”

“Yes—I'm very fit—thanks,” Thorpe said, listlessly, and the other left him.

Mr. Semple, when at last he arrived, bustled into the room with unaffected gratification at the news he had heard without. “Well, well, Thorpe man!” he cried, and shook hands cordially. “This is fine! If I'd only known you were in town! Why wouldn't you have told me you were coming? I'd never have kept you waiting.”

Thorpe laughed wearily. “I hardly knew I was in town myself. I only ran up last night. I thought it would amuse me to have a look round—but things seem as dull as ditchwater.”

“Oh no,” said Semple, “the autumn is opening verra well indeed. There are more new companies, and a better public subscription all round, than for any first week of October I remember. Westralians appear bad on the face of things, it's true—but don't believe all you hear of them. There's more than the suspicion of a 'rig' there. Besides, you haven't a penny in them.”

“I wasn't thinking of that,” Thorpe told him, with comprehensive vagueness. “Well, I suppose you're still coining money,” he observed, after a pause.

“Keeping along—keeping along,” the broker replied, cheerfully. “I canna complain.” Thorpe looked at him with a meditative frown. “Well, what are you going to do with it, after you've got it?” he demanded, almost with sharpness.

The Scotchman, after a surprised instant, smiled. “Oh, I'll just keep my hands on it,” he assured him, lightly.

“That isn't what I mean,” Thorpe said, groping after what he did mean, with sullen tenacity, among his thoughts. His large, heavy face exhibited a depressed gravity which attracted the other's attention.

“What's the matter?” Semple asked quickly. “Has anything gone wrong with you?”

Thorpe slowly shook his head. “What better off do you think you'll be with six figures than you are with five?” he pursued, with dogmatic insistence.

Semple shrugged his shoulders. He seemed to have grown much brighter and gayer of mood in this past twelvemonth. Apparently he was somewhat stouter, and certainly there was a mellowed softening of his sharp glance and shrewd smile. It was evident that his friend's mood somewhat nonplussed him, but his good-humour was unflagging.

“It's the way we're taught at school,” he hazarded, genially. “In all the arithmetics six beats five, and seven beats six.”

“They're wrong,” Thorpe declared, and then consented to laugh in a grudging, dogged way at his friend's facial confession of puzzlement. “What I mean is—what's the good of piling up money, while you can't pile up the enjoyments it will buy? What will a million give you, that the fifth of it, or the tenth of it, won't give you just as well?”

“Aye,” said Semple, with a gleam of comprehension in his glance. “So you've come to that frame of mind, have you? Why does a man go on and shoot five hundred pheasants, when he can eat only one?”

“Oh, if you like the mere making of money, I've nothing more to say,” Thorpe responded, with a touch of resentment. “I've always thought of you as a man like myself, who wanted to make his pile and then enjoy himself.”

The Scotchman laughed joyously. “Enjoy myself! Like you!” he cried. “Man, you're as doleful as a mute at a laird's funeral! What's come over you? I know what it is. You go and take a course of German waters——”

“Oh, that be damned!” Thorpe objected, gloomily. “I tell you I'm all right. Only—only—God! I've a great notion to go and get drunk.”

Colin Semple viewed his companion with a more sympathetic expression. “I'm sorry you're so hipped,” he said, in gentle tones. “It can't be more than some passing whimsy. You're in no real trouble, are you?—no family trouble?”

Thorpe shook his head. “The whole thing is rot!” he affirmed, enigmatically.

“What whole thing?” The broker perched on the edge of his desk, and with patient philosophy took him up. “Do you mean eighty thousand a year is rot? That depends upon the man who has it.”

“I know that well enough,” broke in the other, heavily. “That's what I'm kicking about. I'm no good!”

Semple, looking attentively down upon him, pursed his lips in reflection. “That's not the case,” he observed with argumentative calmness. “You're a great deal of good. I'm not so sure that what you've been trying to do is any good, though. Come!—I read you like large print. You've set out to live the life of a rich country squire—and it hasn't come off. It couldn't come off! I never believed it would. You haven't the taste for it inbred in your bones. You haven't the thousand little habits and interests that they take in with their mother's milk, and that make such a life possible. When you look at a hedge, you don't think of it as something to worry live animals out of. When you see one of your labourers, you don't care who his father was, or which dairymaid his uncle ought to have married, if he had wanted to get a certain cottage. You don't want to know the name of everybody whose roof you can see; much less could you remember them, and talk about them, and listen to gossip about them, year after year. It isn't a passion in your blood to ride to hounds, and to shoot, and all that. It doesn't come to you by tradition—and you haven't the vacancy of mind which might be a substitute for tradition. What are you doing in the country, then? Just eating too much, and sitting about, and getting fat and stupid. If you want the truth, there it is for you.”

Thorpe, putting out his lips judicially, inclined upon reflection to the view that this was the truth. “That's all right, as far as it goes,” he assented, with hesitation. “But what the hell else is there?”

The little Scotchman had grown too interested in his diagnosis to drop it in an incomplete state. “A year ago,” he went on, “you had won your victories like a veritable Napoleon. You had everything in your own hands; Napoleon himself was not more the master of what he saw about him than you were. And then what did you do? You voluntarily retired yourself to your Elba. It wasn't that you were beaten and driven there by others; you went of your own accord. Have you ever thought, Thorpe, of this? Napoleon was the greatest man of his age—one of the greatest men of all ages—not only in war but in a hundred other ways. He spent the last six years of his life at St. Helena—in excellent health and with companions that he talked freely to—and in all the extraordinarily copious reports of his conversations there, we don't get a single sentence worth repeating. If you read it, you'll see he talked like a dull, ordinary body. The greatness had entirely evaporated from him, the moment he was put on an island where he had nothing to do.”

“Yes-s,” said Thorpe, thoughtfully. He accepted the application without any qualms about the splendour of the comparison it rested upon. He had done the great things, just as Semple said, and there was no room for false modesty about them in his mind. “The trouble is,” he began, “that I did what I had always thought I wanted to do most. I was quite certain in my mind that that was what I wanted. And if we say now that I was wrong—if we admit that that wasn't what I really wanted—why then, God knows what it is I DO want. I'll be hanged if I do!”

“Come back to the City,” Semple told him. “That's where you belong.”

“No—no!” Thorpe spoke with emphasis. “That's where you're all off. I don't belong in the City at all. I hate the whole outfit. What the devil amusement would it be to me to take other men's money away from them? I'd be wanting all the while to give it back to them. And certainly I wouldn't get any fun out of their taking my money away from me. Besides, it doesn't entertain me. I've no taste at all for it. I never look at a financial paper now. I could no more interest myself in all that stuff again than I could fly. That's the hell of it—to be interested in anything.”

“Go in for politics,” the other suggested, with less warmth.

“Yes, I know,” Thorpe commented, with a lingering tone. “Perhaps I ought to think more about that. By the way, what's Plowden doing? I've lost all track of him.”

“Abroad somewhere, I fancy,” Semple replied. His manner exhibited a profound indifference. “When his mother died he came into something—I don't know how much. I don't think I've seen him since—and that must have been six months and more ago.”

“Yes. I heard about it at the time,” the other said. “It must be about that. His sister and brother—the young Plowdens—they're coming to us at the end of the week, I believe. You didn't hit it off particularly with Plowden, eh?”

Semple emitted a contemptuous little laugh. “I did not quarrel with him—if you mean that,” he said, “but even to please you, Thorpe, I couldn't bring myself to put my back into the job of making money for him. He was treated fairly—even generously, d'ye mind. I should think, all told, he had some thirty thousand pounds for his shares, and that's a hundred times as much as I had a pleasure in seeing him get. Each man can wear his own parasites, but it's a task for him to stand another man's. I shook your Lord Plowden off, when the chance came.”

“THAT'S all right,” Thorpe assured him, easily. “I never told you that he was any good. I merely felt like giving him a leg up—because really at the start he was of use to me. I did owe him something....It was at his house that I met my wife.”

“Aye,” said Semple, with dispassionate brevity.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN he had parted with Semple, at a corner where the busy broker, who had walked out with him, obviously fidgeted to get away, Thorpe could think of no one else in the City whom he desired to see. A call upon his bankers would, he knew, be made an occasion of extremely pleasant courtesy by those affable people, but upon reflection it seemed scarcely worth the trouble.

He was in a mood for indolent sauntering, and he made the long stretch of the Holborn thoroughfare in a leisurely fashion, turning off when the whim seized him into odd courts and alley-ways to see what they were like. After luncheon, he continued his ramble, passing at last from St. Giles, through avenues which had not existed in the London of his boyhood, to the neighbourhood of the Dials. Here also the landmarks seemed all changed, but there was still enough ostentatious squalor and disorder to identify the district. He observed it and its inhabitants with a certain new curiosity. A notable alteration for the better had come over his spirits. It might be the champagne at luncheon, or it might be the mere operation of a frank talk with Semple, that had dissipated his gloom. At all events it was gone—and he strolled along in quite placid contentment, taking in the panorama of London's more intimate life with the interest of a Londoner who has obtained a fresh country eye.

He who had seen most of the world, and not cared much about the spectacle, found himself now consciously enjoying observation as he had not supposed it possible to do. He surrendered himself to the experience with a novel sense of having found something worth while—and found it, moreover, under his very nose. In some dull, meaningless fashion he had always known this part of London, and been familiar with its external aspects. Now suddenly he perceived that the power had come to him of seeing it all in a different way. The objects he beheld, inanimate and otherwise, had specific new meanings for him. His mind was stirred pleasurably by the things they said to him.

He looked at all the contents of the windows as he passed; at the barrows of the costers and hawkers crowding up the side-streets; at the coarse-haired, bare-headed girls and women standing about in their shawls and big white aprons; at the weakling babies in their arms or about the thick, clumsy folds of their stained skirts; at the grimy, shuffling figures of their men-folk, against the accustomed background of the public-house corner, with its half-open door, and its fly-blown theatre-bills in the windows; at the drivers of the vans and carts, sleepily overlooking the huge horses, gigantic to the near view as some survival from the age of mammoths, which pushed gingerly, ploddingly, their tufted feet over the greasy stones; at foul interiors where through the blackness one discerned bent old hags picking over refuse; at the faces which, as he passed, made some special human appeal to him—faces blurred with drink, faces pallid with under-feeding, faces worn into masks by the tension of trouble, faces sweetened by resignation, faces aglow with devil-may-care glee...he looked, as it were, into the pulsing heart of something which had scarcely seemed alive to him before.

Eventually, he found himself halting at the door of his sister's book-shop. A new boy stood guard over the stock exposed on the shelf and stands outside, and he looked stonily at the great man; it was evident that he was as far from suspecting his greatness as his relationship. It pleased Thorpe for a little to take up one book after another, and pretend to read from it, and force the boy to watch him hard. He had almost the temptation to covertly slip a volume into his pocket, and see what the lad would do. It was remarkable, he reflected with satisfaction—this new capacity within him to find drama in trifles.

There floated into his mind the recollection of some absurd squabble he had had with his sister about the sign overhead. He stepped back a few paces and looked up at it. There were the old words—“Thorpe, Bookseller”—right enough, but they seemed to stand forth with a novel prominence. Upon a second glance, he saw that the board had been repainted. At this he laughed aloud. The details of the episode came back to him now. For some reason, or no reason at all—he could not now imagine what on earth could have prompted him—he had last spring caused his sister to be informed of his wish that her own name, Dabney, should be substituted for that of Thorpe on her sign. It was to Julia that he had confided this mission, and it was Julia who, in a round-about way, had disclosed to him presently her mother's deep resolution to do nothing of the sort. He laughed again at the added defiance that this refurbishing of the old sign expressed, and still was grinning broadly as he entered the shop and pushed his way along to the rear.

She stood beside her desk as she seemed to have stood ever since he could remember her—tall, placid, dull-eyed, self-sufficient, exhaling as it were a kind of stubborn yet competent listlessness. Her long, mannish countenance expressed an undoubted interest in his presence, when she recognized him, but he had no clear perception whether it was pleased or otherwise. In their infrequent latter-day encounters he had dropped the habit of kissing her, and there was certainly no hint in her manner of expecting, much less inviting, its renewal now—but upon a sudden impulse he drew her to him with an arm flung round her gaunt waist, smacked his lips with effusion upon her cheek.

Her surprise, as she withdrew herself somewhat forcefully from his embrace, was plain enough. “Well!” she exclaimed vaguely, and then looked at him. “You're getting fatter.”

“No I'm not,” he rejoined, with the earnestness belonging to an important topic. “People think I am—but it's merely the looseness of these clothes. There's really no difference since I was here last.”

The glance they exchanged was so full of the tacit comment that this last visit was a long time ago, that Thorpe put it into words. “Let's see—that was just before Christmas, wasn't it?” he said.

“Something like that,” she responded. “You were going to get married in a week or two, I remember, and THAT was in January, wasn't it? I was taking stock, I know.”

He nodded in turn. The thought that his only sister recalled his marriage merely as a date, like a royal anniversary or a bank-holiday, and held herself implacably aloof from all contact with his domestic life, annoyed him afresh. “You're an awful goat, not to come near us,” he felt impelled, in brotherly frankness, to tell her.

She put out her lips, and wagged her head a little, in a gesture which it flashed across him his own mirror might often have recorded. “I thought that was all settled and done with long ago,” she said, moodily.

“Oh, I won't worry you with it, Lou,” he observed, with reassuring kindness of tone. “I never felt so much like being nice to you in my life.”

She seemed surprised at this, too, and regarded him with a heavy new fixity of gaze. No verbal comment, apparently, occurred to her.

“Julia and Alfred all right?” he queried, cheerfully.

“I daresay,” she made brief answer.

“But they write to you, don't they?”

“SHE does—sometimes. They seem to be doing themselves very well, from what she says.”

“She'd write oftener, if you'd answer her letters,” he told her, in tones of confidential reproach.

“Oh, I don't write letters unless I've got something to say,” she answered, as if the explanation were ample.

The young people were domiciled for the time being at Dusseldorf, where Alfred had thought he would most like to begin his Continental student-career, and where Julia, upon the more or less colourable pretext of learning the language, might enjoy the mingled freedom and occupation of a home of her own. They had taken a house for the summer and autumn, and would do the same in Dresden or Munich, later on, for the winter.

“What I would really have liked,” Thorpe confided to his sister now, “was to have had them both live with me. They would have been as welcome as the day is long. I could see, of course, in Alfred's case, that if he's set on being an artist, he ought to study abroad. Even the best English artists, he says, do that at the beginning. So it was all right for him to go. But Julia—it was different with her—I was rather keen about her staying. My wife was just as keen as I was. She took the greatest fancy to Julia from the very start—and so far as I could see, Julia liked her all right. In fact, I thought Julia would want to stay—but somehow she didn't.”

“She always spoke very highly of your wife,” Mrs. Dabney affirmed with judicial fairness. “I think she does like her very much.”

“Well then what did she want to hyke off to live among those Dutchmen for, when one of the best houses in England was open to her?” Thorpe demanded.

“You mustn't ask me,” her mother responded. Her tone seemed to carry the suggestion that by silence she could best protect her daughter's interests.

“I don't believe you know any more about it than I do,” was his impulsive comment.

“I daresay not,” she replied, with indifference. “Probably she didn't fancy living in so big a house—although heaven knows her ideas are big enough about most things.”

“Did she say so?” Thorpe asked abruptly.

The widow shook her head with dispassionate candour. “She didn't say anything to me about it, one way or the other. I formed my own impressions—that's all. It's a free country. Everybody can form their impressions.”

“I wish you'd tell me what you really think,” Thorpe urged her, mildly persuasive. “You know how fond I am of Julia, and how little I want to do her an injustice.”

“Oh, she wouldn't feel THAT way,” Louisa observed, vaguely. “If you ask me plain, I think it was dull for her.”

“Well,” said Thorpe, upon reflection, “I shouldn't be surprised if it was. I hadn't thought of that. But still—why she and my wife could be company for each other.”

“You talk as if life was merely a long railway journey,” she told him, in an unexpected flight of metaphor. “Two women cooped up in a lonesome country house may be a little less lonely than one of them by herself would be—but not much. It's none of my business—but how your wife must hate it!”

He laughed easily. “Ah, that's where you're wrong,” he said. “She doesn't care about anything but gardening. That's her hobby. She's crazy about it. We've laid out more in new greenhouses alone, not counting the plants, than would rebuild this building. I'm not sure the heating apparatus wouldn't come to that, alone. And then the plants! What do you think of six and eight guineas for a single root? Those are the amaryllises—and if you come to orchids, you can pay hundreds if you like. Well, that's her passion. That's what she really loves.”

“That's what she seizes upon to keep her from just dying of loneliness,” Louisa retorted, obstinately, and at a sign of dissent from her brother she went on. “Oh, I know what I'm talking about. I have three or four customers—ladies in the country, and one of them is a lady of title, too—and they order gardening books and other books through me, and when they get up to town, once a year or so, they come here and they talk to me about it. And there isn't one of them that at the bottom of her heart doesn't hate it. They'd rather dodge busses at Charing Cross corner all day long, than raise flowers as big as cheeses, if they had their own way. But they don't have their own way, and they must have something to occupy themselves with—and they take to gardening. I daresay I'd even do it myself if I had to live in the country, which thank God I don't!”

“That's because you don't know anything about the country,” he told her, but the retort, even while it justified itself, had a hollow sound in his own ears. “All you know outside of London is Margate.”

“I went to Yarmouth and Lowestoft this summer,” she informed him, crushingly.

Somehow he lacked the heart to laugh. “I know what you mean, Lou,” he said, with an affectionate attempt at placation. “I suppose there's a good deal in what you say. It is dull, out there at my place, if you have too much of it. Perhaps that's a good hint about my wife. It never occurred to me, but it may be so. But the deuce of it is, what else is there to do? We tried a house in London, during the Season——”

“Yes, I saw in the papers you were here,” she said impassively, in comment upon his embarrassed pause.

“I didn't look you up, because I didn't think you wanted much to see me”—he explained with a certain awkwardness—“but bye-gones are all bye-gones. We took a town house, but we didn't like it. It was one endless procession of stupid and tiresome calls and dinners and parties; we got awfully sick of it, and swore we wouldn't try it again. Well there you are, don't you see? It's stupid in Hertfordshire, and it's stupid here. Of course one can travel abroad, but that's no good for more than a few months. Of course it would be different if I had something to do. I tell you God's truth, Lou—sometimes I feel as if I was really happier when I was a poor man. I know it's all rot—I really wasn't—but sometimes it SEEMS as if I was.”

She contemplated him with a leaden kind of gaze. “Didn't it ever occur to you to do some good with your money?” she said, with slow bluntness. Then, as if fearing a possible misconception, she added more rapidly: “I don't mean among your own family. We're a clannish people, we Thorpes; we'd always help our own flesh and blood, even if we kicked them while we were doing it—but I mean outside, in the world at large.”

“What have I got to do with the world at large? I didn't make it; I'm not responsible for it.” He muttered the phrases lightly enough, but a certain fatuity in them seemed to attract his attention when he heard their sound. “I've given between five and six thousand pounds to London hospitals within the present year,” he added, straightening himself. “I wonder you didn't see it. It was in all the papers.”

“Hospitals!”

It was impossible to exaggerate the scorn which her voice imported into the word. He looked at her with unfeigned surprise, and then took in the impression that she was upon a subject which exceptionally interested her. Certainly the display of something approaching animation in her glance and manner was abnormal.

“I said 'do some GOOD with your money,'” she reminded him, still with a vibration of feeling in her tone. “You must live in the country, if you think London hospitals are deserving objects. They couldn't fool Londoners on that point, not if they had got the Prince to go on his hands and knees. And you give a few big cheques to them,” she went on, meditatively, “and you never ask how they're managed, or what rings are running them for their own benefit, or how your money is spent—and you think you've done a noble, philanthropic thing! Oh no—I wasn't talking about humbug charity. I was talking about doing some genuine good in the world.”

He put his leg over the high stool, and pushed his hat back with a smile. “All right,” he said, genially. “What do you propose?”

“I don't propose anything,” she told him, after a moment's hesitation. “You must work that out for yourself. What might seem important to me might not interest you at all—and if you weren't interested you wouldn't do anything. But this I do say to you, Joel—and I've said it to myself every day for this last year or more, and had you in mind all the time, too—if I had made a great fortune, and I sat about in purple and fine linen doing nothing but amuse myself in idleness and selfishness, letting my riches accumulate and multiply themselves without being of use to anybody, I should be ASHAMED to look my fellow-creatures in the face! You were born here. You know what London slums are like. You know what Clare Market was like—it's bad enough still—and what the Seven Dials and Drury Lane and a dozen other places round here are like to this day. That's only within a stone's throw. Have you seen Charles Booth's figures about the London poor? Of course you haven't—and it doesn't matter. You KNOW what they are like. But you don't care. The misery and ignorance and filth and hopelessness of two or three hundred thousand people doesn't interest you. You sit upon your money-bags and smile. If you want the truth, I'm ashamed to have you for a brother!”

“Well, I'm damned!” was Thorpe's delayed and puzzled comment upon this outburst. He looked long at his sister, in blank astonishment. “Since when have you been taken this way?” he asked at last, mechanically jocular.

“That's all right,” she declared with defensive inconsequence. “It's the way I feel. It's the way I've felt from the beginning.”

He was plainly surprised out of his equanimity by this unlooked-for demonstration on his sister's part. He got off the stool and walked about in the little cleared space round the desk. When he spoke, it was to utter something which he could trace to no mental process of which he had been conscious.

“How do you know that that isn't what I've felt too—from the beginning?” he demanded of her, almost with truculence. “You say I sit on my money-bags and smile—you abuse me with doing no good with my money—how do you know I haven't been studying the subject all this while, and making my plans, and getting ready to act? You never did believe in me!”

She sniffed at him. “I don't believe in you now, at all events,” she said, bluntly.

He assumed the expression of a misunderstood man. “Why, this very day”—he began, and again was aware that thoughts were coming up, ready-shaped to his tongue, which were quite strangers to his brain—“this whole day I've been going inch by inch over the very ground you mention; I've been on foot since morning, seeing all the corners and alleys of that whole district for myself, watching the people and the things they buy and the way they live—and thinking out my plans for doing something. I don't claim any credit for it. It seems to me no more than what a man in my position ought to do. But I own that to come in, actually tired out from a tramp like that, and get blown-up by one's own sister for selfishness and heartlessness and miserliness and all the rest of it—I must say, that's a bit rum.”

Louisa did not wince under this reproach as she might have been expected to do, nor was there any perceptible amelioration in the heavy frown with which she continued to regard him. But her words, uttered after some consideration, came in a tone of voice which revealed a desire to avoid offense. “It won't matter to you, your getting blown-up by me, if you're really occupying your mind with that sort of thing. You're too used to it for that.”

He would have liked a less cautious acceptance of his assurances than this—but after all, one did not look to Louisa for enthusiasms. The depth of feeling she had disclosed on this subject of London's poor still astonished him, but principally now because of its unlikely source. If she had been notoriously of an altruistic and free-handed disposition, he could have understood it. But she had been always the hard, dry, unemotional one; by comparison with her, he felt himself to be a volatile and even sentimental person. If she had such views as these, it became clear to him that his own views were even much advanced.

“It's a tremendous subject,” he said, with loose largeness of manner. “Only a man who works hard at it can realize how complicated it is. The only way is to start with the understanding that something is going to be done. No matter how many difficulties there are in the way, SOMETHING'S GOING TO BE DONE! If a strong man starts out with that, why then he can fight his way through, and push the difficulties aside or bend them to suit his purpose, and accomplish something.”

Mrs. Dabney, listening to this, found nothing in it to quarrel with—yet somehow remained, if not skeptical, then passively unconvinced. “What are your plans?” she asked him.

“Oh, it's too soon to formulate anything,” he told her, with prepared readiness. “It isn't a thing to rush into in a hurry, with half baked theories and limited information. Great results, permanent results, are never obtained that way.”

“I hope it isn't any Peabody model-dwelling thing.”

“Oh, nothing like it in the least,” he assured her, and made a mental note to find out what it was she had referred to.

“The Lord-Rowton houses are better, they say,” she went on, “but it seems to me that the real thing is that there shouldn't be all this immense number of people with only fourpence or fivepence in their pocket. That's where the real mischief lies.”

He nodded comprehendingly, but hesitated over further words. Then something occurred to him. “Look here!” he said. “If you're as keen about all this, are you game to give up this footling old shop, and devote your time to carrying out my plans, when I've licked 'em into shape?”

She began shaking her head, but then something seemed also to occur to her. “It'll be time enough to settle that when we get to it, won't it?” she observed.

“No—you've got to promise me now,” he told her.

“Well that I won't!” she answered, roundly.

“You'd see the whole—the whole scheme come to nothing, would you?”—he scolded at her—“rather than abate a jot of your confounded mulishness.”

“Aha!” she commented, with a certain alertness of perception shining through the stolidity of her mien. “I knew you were humbugging! If you'd meant what you said, you wouldn't talk about its coming to nothing because I won't do this or that. I ought to have known better. I'm always a goose when I believe what you tell me.”

A certain abstract justice in her reproach impressed him. “No you're not, Lou,” he replied, coaxingly. “I really mean it all—every word of it—and more. It only occurred to me that it would all go better, if you helped. Can't you understand how I should feel that?”

She seemed in a grudging way to accept anew his professions of sincerity, but she resisted all attempts to extract any promise. “I don't believe in crossing a bridge till I get to it,” she declared, when, on the point of his departure, he last raised the question, and it had to be left at that. He took with him some small books she had tied in a parcel, and told him to read. She had spoken so confidently of their illuminating value, that he found himself quite committed to their perusal—and almost to their endorsement. He had thought during the day of running down to Newmarket, for the Cesarewitch was to be run on the morrow, and someone had told him that that was worth seeing. By the time he reached his hotel, however, an entirely new project had possessed his mind. He packed his bag, and took the next train for home.

CHAPTER XXV

“I DIDN'T ask your father, after all,” was one of the things that Thorpe said to his wife next day. He had the manner of one announcing a concession, albeit in an affable spirit, and she received the remark with a scant, silent nod.

Two days later he recurred to the subject. They were again upon the terrace, where he had been lounging in an easy-chair most of the day, with the books his sister had bid him read on a table beside him. He had glanced through some of them in a desultory fashion, cutting pages at random here and there, but for the most part he had looked straight before him at the broad landscape, mellowing now into soft browns and yellows under the mild, vague October sun. He had not thought much of the books, but he had a certain new sense of enjoyment in the fruits of this placid, abstracted rumination which perhaps they had helped to induce.

“About your father,” he said now, as his wife, who had come out to speak with him on some other matter, was turning to go away again: “I'm afraid I annoyed you the other day by what I said.”

“I have no recollection of it,” she told him, with tranquil politeness, over her shoulder.

He found himself all at once keenly desirous of a conversation on this topic. “But I want you to recollect,” he said, as he rose to his feet. There was a suggestion of urgency in his tone which arrested her attention. She moved slowly toward the chair, and after a little perched herself upon one of its big arms, and looked up at him where he leant against the parapet.

“I've thought of it a good deal,” he went on, in halting explanation. His purpose seemed clearer to him than were the right phrases in which to define it. “I persisted in saying that I'd do something you didn't want me to do—something that was a good deal more your affair than mine—and I've blamed myself for it. That isn't at all what I want to do.”

Her face as well as her silence showed her to be at a loss for an appropriate comment. She was plainly surprised, and seemingly embarrassed as well. “I'm sure you always wish to be nice,” she said at last. The words and tone were alike gracious, but he detected in them somewhere a perfunctory note.

“Oh—nice!” he echoed, in a sudden stress of impatience with the word. “Damn being 'nice'! Anybody can be 'nice.' I'm thinking of something ten thousand times bigger than being 'nice.'”

“I withdraw the word immediately—unreservedly,” she put in, with a smile in which he read that genial mockery he knew so well.

“You laugh at me—whenever I try to talk seriously,” he objected.

“I laugh?” she queried, with an upward glance of demurely simulated amazement. “Impossible! I assure you I've forgotten how.”

“Ah, now we get to it!” he broke out, with energy. “You're really feeling about it just as I am. You're not satisfied with what we're doing—with the life we're leading—any more than I am. I see that, plain enough, now. I didn't dream of it before. Somehow I got the idea that you were enjoying it immensely—the greenhouses and gardens and all that sort of thing. And do you know who it was that put me right—that told me you hated it?”

“Oh, don't let us talk of him!” Edith exclaimed, swiftly.

Thorpe laughed. “You're wrong. It wasn't your father. I didn't see him. No—it was my sister. She's never seen you, but all the same she knew enough to give me points. She told me I was a fool to suppose you were happy here.”

“How clever of her!” A certain bantering smile accompanied the words, but on the instant it faded away. She went on with a musing gravity. “I'm sorry I don't get to know your sister. She seems an extremely real sort of person. I can understand that she might be difficult to live with—I daresay all genuine characters are—but she's very real. Although, apparently, conversation isn't her strong point, still I enjoy talking with her.”

“How do you mean?” Thorpe asked, knitting his brows in puzzlement.

“Oh, I often go to her shop—or did when I was in town. I went almost immediately after our—our return to England. I was half afraid she would recognize me—the portraits in the papers, you know—but apparently she didn't. And it's splendid—the way she says absolutely nothing more than it's necessary to say. And her candour! If she thinks books are bad she says so. Fancy that!”

He still frowned uneasily as he looked down at her. “You never mentioned to me that you had gone there,” he told her, as if in reproach.

“Ah, it was complicated,” Edith explained. “She objects to knowing me—I think secretly I respect her a great deal for that—and therefore there is something clandestine about my getting to know her—and I could not be sure how it would impress you, and really it seemed simplest not to mention it.”

“It isn't that alone,” he declared, grave-faced still, but with a softer voice. “Do you remember what I said the other day? It would make all the difference in the world to me, if—if you were really—actually my other half!”

The phrase which he had caught at seemed, as it fell upon the air, to impregnate it with some benumbing quality. The husband and wife looked dumbly, almost vacantly at one another, for what appeared a long time.

“I mean”—all at once Thorpe found tongue, and even a sort of fluency as he progressed—“I mean, if you shared things really with me! Oh, I'm not complaining; you mustn't think that. The agreement we made at the start—you've kept your part of it perfectly. You've done better than that: you've kept still about the fact that it made you unhappy.”

“Oh no,” she interposed, gently. “It is not the fact that it has made me unhappy.”

“Well—discontented, then,” he resumed, without pause. “Here we are. We do the thing we want to do—we make the kind of home for ourselves that we've agreed we would like—and then it turns out that somehow it doesn't come up to expectations. You get tired of it. I suppose, if the truth were known, I'm by way of being tired of it too. Well, if you look at it, that fact is the most important thing in the world for both of us. It's the one thing that we ought to be most anxious to discuss, and examine frankly in all its bearings—in order to see if we can't better it—but that's precisely the thing that doesn't get talked about between us. You would never have told me that you were unhappy——”

“You use the word again,” she reminded him, a wan smile softening her protest.

Thorpe stood up, and took a slow step toward the chair. He held her glance with his own, as he stood then, his head bent, gravely regarding her.

“Do you tell me that you are happy?” he asked, with sober directness.

She fluttered her hands in a little restrained gesture of comment. “You consider only the extremes,” she told him. “Between black and white there are so many colours and shades and half-tones! The whole spectrum, in fact. Hardly anybody, I should think, gets over the edge into the true black or the true white. There are always tints, modifications. People are always inside the colour-scheme, so to speak. The worst that can be said of me is that I may be in the blues—in the light-blues—but it is fair to remember that they photograph white.”

Though there was an impulse within him to resent this as trifling, he resisted it, and judicially considered her allegory. “That is to say”—he began hesitatingly.

“To the observer I am happy. To myself I am not unhappy.”

“Why won't you tell me, Edith, just where you are?”

The sound of her name was somewhat unfamiliar to their discourse. The intonation which his voice gave to it now caused her to look up quickly.

“If I could tell myself,” she answered him, after an instant's thought, “pray believe that I would tell you.”

The way seemed for the moment blocked before him, and he sighed heavily. “I want to get nearer to you,” he said, with gloom, “and I don't!”

It occurred to her to remark: “You take exception to my phraseology when I say you always try to be 'nice,' but I'm sure you know what I mean.” She offered him this assurance with a tentative smile, into which he gazed moodily.

“You didn't think I was 'nice' when you consented to marry me,” he was suddenly inspired to say. “I can't imagine your applying that word to me then in your mind. God knows what it was you did say to yourself about me, but you never said I was 'nice.' That was the last word that would have fitted me then—and now it's the only one you can think of.” The hint that somehow he had stumbled upon a clue to the mysteries enveloping him rose to prominence in his mind as he spoke. The year had wrought a baffling difference in him. He lacked something now that then he had possessed, but he was powerless to define it.

He seated himself again in the chair, and put his hand through her arm to keep her where she lightly rested beside him. “Will you tell me,” he said, with a kind of sombre gentleness, “what the word is that you would have used then? I know you wouldn't—couldn't—have called me 'nice.' What would you have called me?”

She paused in silence for a little, then slipped from the chair and stood erect, still leaving her wrist within the restraining curve of his fingers. “I suppose,” she said, musingly—“I suppose I should have said 'powerful' or 'strong.'” Then she released her arm, and in turn moved to the parapet.

“And I am weak now—I am 'nice,'” he reflected, mechanically.

In the profile he saw, as she looked away at the vast distant horizon, there was something pensive, even sad. She did not speak at once, and as he gazed at her more narrowly it seemed as if her lips were quivering. A new sense of her great beauty came to him—and with it a hint that for the instant at least her guard was down. He sprang to his feet, and stood beside her.

“You ARE going to be open with me—Edith!” he pleaded, softly.

She turned from him a little, as if to hide the signs of her agitation. “Oh, what is there to say?” she demanded, in a tone which was almost a wail. “It is not your fault. I'm not blaming you.”

“WHAT is not my fault?” he persisted with patient gentleness.

Suddenly she confronted him. There were the traces of tears upon her lashes, and serenity had fled from her face. “It is a mistake—a blunder,” she began, hurriedly. “I take it all upon my own shoulders. I was the one who did it. I should have had more judgment—more good sense!”

“You are not telling me, are you,” he asked with gravity, “that you are sorry you married me?”

“Is either of us glad?” she retorted, breathlessly. “What is there to be glad about? You are bored to death—you confess it. And I—well, it is not what I thought it would be. I deceived myself. I do not reproach you.”

“No, you keep saying that,” he observed, with gloomy slowness of utterance. “But what is it you reproach yourself with, then? We might as well have it out.”

“Yes,” she assented, with a swift reversion to calm. Her eyes met his with a glance which had in it an implacable frankness. “I married one man because he would be able to make me a Duchess. I married another because he had eighty thousand a year. That is the kind of beast I am. There is bad blood in me. You know my father; that is quite enough. I am his daughter; that explains everything.”

The exaggeration of her tone and words produced a curious effect upon him. He stared at her for a little, perceiving slowly that a new personage was being revealed to him. The mask of delicately-balanced cynicism, of amiably polite indifference, had been lifted; there was a woman of flesh and blood beneath it, after all—a woman to whom he could talk on terms of intimacy.

“Rubbish!” he said, and his big face lightened into a genial, paternal smile. “You didn't marry me for my money at all! What nonsense! I simply came along and carried you off. You couldn't help yourself. It would have been the same if I hadn't had sixpence.”

To his sharp scrutiny there seemed to flicker in her eyes a kind of answering gleam. Then she hastily averted her glance, and in this action too there was a warrant for his mounting confidence.

“The trouble has been,” he declared, “that I've been too much afraid of you. I've thought that you were made of so much finer stuff than I am, that you mustn't be touched. That was all a mistake. I see it right enough now. You ARE finer than I am—God knows there's no dispute about that—but that's no reason why I should have hung up signs of 'Hands off!' all around you, and been frightened by them myself. I had the cheek to capture you and carry you off—and I ought to have had the pluck to make you love me afterward, and keep it up. And that's what I'm going to do!”

To this declaration she offered no immediate reply, but continued to gaze with a vaguely meditative air upon the expanse of landscape spread below them. He threw a hasty glance over the windows behind him, and then with assurance passed his arm round her waist. He could not say that there was any responsive yielding to his embrace, but he did affirm to himself with new conviction, as he looked down upon the fair small head at his shoulder, with its lovely pale-brown hair drawn softly over the temples, and its glimpse of the matchless profile inclined beneath—that it was all right.

He waited for a long time, with a joyous patience, for her to speak. The mere fact that she stood beneath his engirdling arm, and gave no thought to the potential servants'-eyes behind them, was enough for present happiness. He regarded the illimitable picture commanded from his terrace with refreshed eyes; it was once again the finest view in England—and something much more than that beside.

At last, abruptly, she laughed aloud—a silvery, amused little laugh under her breath. “How comedy and tragedy tread forever on each other's heels!” she remarked. Her tone was philosophically gay, but upon reflection he did not wholly like her words.

“There wasn't any tragedy,” he said, “and there isn't any comedy.”

She laughed again. “Oh, don't say that this doesn't appeal to your sense of humour!” she urged, with mock fervour.

Thorpe sighed in such unaffected depression at this, that she seemed touched by his mood. Without stirring from his hold, she lifted her face. “Don't think I'm hateful,” she bade him, and her eyes were very kind. “There's more truth in what you've been saying than even you imagine. It really wasn't the money—or I mean it might easily have been the same if there had been no money. But how shall I explain it? I am attracted by a big, bold, strong pirate, let us say, but as soon as he has carried me off—that is the phrase for it—then he straightway renounces crime and becomes a law-abiding, peaceful citizen. My buccaneer transforms himself, under my very eyes, into an alderman! Do you say there is no comedy in that—and tragedy too?”

“Oh, put it that way and it's all right,” he declared, after a moment's consideration. “I've got as much fun in me as anybody else,” he went on, “only your jokes have a way of raising blisters on me, somehow. But that's all done with now. That's because I didn't know you—was frightened of you. But I aint scared any more. Everything is different!”

With a certain graciousness of lingering movement, she withdrew herself from his clasp, and faced him with a doubtful smile. “Ah, don't be too sure,” she murmured.

“Everything is different!” he repeated, with confident emphasis. “Don't you see yourself it is?”

“You say it is,” she replied, hesitatingly, “but that alone doesn't make it so. The assertion that life isn't empty doesn't fill it.”

“Ah, but NOW you will talk with me about all that,” he broke in triumphantly. “We've been standing off with one another. We've been of no help to each other. But we'll change that, now. We'll talk over everything together. We'll make up our minds exactly what we want to do, and then I'll tuck you under my arm and we'll set out and do it.”

She smiled with kindly tolerance for his new-born enthusiasm. “Don't count on me for too much wisdom or invention,” she warned him. “If things are to be done, you are still the one who will have to do them. But undoubtedly you are at your best when you are doing things. This really has been no sort of life for you, here.”

He gathered her arm into his. “Come and show me your greenhouses,” he said, and began walking toward the end of the terrace. “It'll turn out to have been all right for me, this year that I've spent here,” he continued, as they strolled along. There was a delightful consciousness of new intimacy conveyed by the very touch of her arm, which filled his tone with buoyancy. “I've been learning all sorts of tricks here, and getting myself into your ways of life. It's all been good training. In every way I'm a better man than I was.”

They had descended from the terrace to a garden path, and approached now a long glass structure, through the panes of which masses of soft colour—whites, yellows, pinks, mauves, and strange dull reds—were dimly perceptible.

“The chrysanthemums are not up to much this year,” Edith observed, as they drew near to the door of this house. “Collins did them very badly—as he did most other things. But next year it will be very different. Gafferson is the best chrysanthemum man in England. That is he in there now, I think.”

Thorpe stopped short, and stared at her, the while the suggestions stirred by the sound of this name slowly shaped themselves.

“Gafferson?” he asked her, with a blank countenance.

“My new head-gardener,” she explained. “He was at Hadlow, and after poor old Lady Plowden died—why, surely you remember him there. You spoke about him—you'd known him somewhere—in the West Indies, wasn't it?”

He looked into vacancy with the aspect of one stupefied. “Did I?” he mumbled automatically.

Then, with sudden decision, he swung round on the gravel. “I've got a kind of headache coming on,” he said. “If you don't mind, we won't go inside among the flowers.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THORPE walked along, in the remoter out-of-the-way parts of the great gardens, as the first shadows of evening began to dull the daylight. For a long time he moved aimlessly about, sick at heart and benumbed of mind, in the stupid oppression of a bad dream.

There ran through all his confused thoughts the exasperating consciousness that it was nonsense to be frightened, or even disturbed; that, in truth, nothing whatever had happened. But he could not lay hold of it to any comforting purpose. Some perverse force within him insisted on raising new phantoms in his path, and directing his reluctant gaze to their unpleasant shapes. Forgotten terrors pushed themselves upon his recollection. It was as if he stood again in the Board Room, with the telegram telling of old Tavender's death in his hands, waiting to hear the knock of Scotland Yard upon the door.

The coming of Gafferson took on a kind of supernatural aspect, when Thorpe recalled its circumstances. His own curious mental ferment, which had made this present week a period apart in his life, had begun in the very hour of this man's approach to the house. His memory reconstructed a vivid picture of that approach—of the old ramshackle village trap, and the boy and the bags and the yellow tin trunk, and that decent, red-bearded, plebeian figure, so commonplace and yet so elusively suggestive of something out of the ordinary. It seemed to him now that he had at the time discerned a certain fateful quality in the apparition. And he and his wife had actually been talking of old Kervick at the moment! It was their disagreement over him which had prevented her explaining about the new head-gardener. There was an effect of the uncanny in all this.

And what did Gafferson want? How much did he know? The idea that perhaps old Kervick had found him out, and patched up with him a scheme of blackmail, occurred to him, and in the unreal atmosphere of his mood, became a thing of substance. With blackmail, however, one could always deal; it was almost a relief to see the complication assume that guise. But if Gafferson was intent upon revenge and exposure instead? With such a slug-like, patient, tenacious fool, was that not more likely?

Reasonable arguments presented themselves to his mind ever and again: his wife had known of Gafferson's work, and thought highly of it, and had been in a position to learn of his leaving Hadlow. What more natural than that she should hasten to employ him? And what was it, after all, that Gafferson could possibly know or prove? His brother-in-law had gone off, and got too drunk to live, and had died. What in the name of all that was sensible had this to do with Thorpe? Why should it even be supposed that Gafferson associated Thorpe with any phase of the business? And if he had any notion of a hostile movement, why should he have delayed action so long? Why indeed!

Reassurance did not come to him, but at last an impulse to definite action turned his footsteps toward the cluster of greenhouses in the deepening shadow of the mansion. He would find Gafferson, and probe this business to the uttermost. If there was discoverable in the man's manner or glance the least evidence of a malevolent intention—he would know what to do. Ah, what was it that he would do? He could not say, beyond that it would be bad for Gafferson. He instinctively clenched the fists in the pockets of his jacket as he quickened his pace. Inside the congeries of glazed houses he was somewhat at sea. It was still light enough to make one's way about in the passages between the stagings, but he had no idea of the general plan of the buildings, and it seemed to him that he frequently got back to places he had traversed before. There were two or three subordinate gardeners in or about the houses, but upon reflection he forbore to question them.

He tried to assume an idly indifferent air as he sauntered past, nodding almost imperceptible acknowledgment of the forefingers they jerked upward in salutation.

He came at last upon a locked door, the key of which had been removed. The fact vaguely surprised him, and he looked with awakened interest through the panes of this door. The air inside seemed slightly thickened—and then his eye caught the flicker of a flame, straight ahead. It was nothing but the fumigation of a house; the burning spirits in the lamp underneath the brazier were filling the structure with vapours fatal to all insect life. In two or three hours the men would come and open the doors and windows and ventilate the place. The operation was quite familiar to him; it had indeed interested him more when he first saw it done than had anything else connected with the greenhouses.

His abstracted gaze happened to take note of the fact that the door-key was hanging on a nail overhead, and then suddenly this seemed to be related to something else in his thoughts—some obscure impression or memory which evaded him. Continuing to look at the key, a certain recollection all at once assumed great definiteness in his mind: it came to him that the labels on this patent fumigator they were using warned people against exposing themselves to its fumes more than was absolutely necessary. That meant, of course, that their full force would kill a human being. It was very interesting. He looked through the glass again, but could not see that the air was any thicker. The lamp still burned brightly.

He turned away, and beheld a man, in an old cap and apron, at the further end of the palm-house he was in, doing something to a plant. Thorpe noted the fact that he felt no surprise in seeing that it was Gafferson. Somehow the sight of the key, and of the poison-spreading flame inside the locked door, seemed to have prepared him for the spectacle of Gafferson close at hand. He moved forward slowly toward the head-gardener, and luminous plans rose in his mind, ready-made at each step. He could strangle this annoying fool, or smother him, into non-resisting insensibility, and then put him inside that death-house, and let it be supposed that he had been asphyxiated by accident. The men when they came back would find him there. But ah! they would know that they had not left him there; they would have seen him outside, no doubt, after the fire had been lighted. Well, the key could be left in the unlocked door. Then it could be supposed that he had rashly entered, and been overcome by the vapours. He approached the man silently, his brain arranging the details of the deed with calm celerity.

Then some objections to the plan rose up before him: they dealt almost exclusively with the social nuisance the thing would entail. There was to be a house-party, with that Duke and Duchess in it, of whom his wife talked so much, and it would be a miserable kind of bore to have a suffocated gardener forced upon them as a principal topic of conversation. Of course, too, it would more or less throw the whole household into confusion. And its effect upon his wife!—the progress of his thoughts was checked abruptly by this suggestion. A vision of the shock such a catastrophe might involve to her—or at the best, of the gross unpleasantness she would find in it—flashed over his mind, and then yielded to a softening, radiant consciousness of how much this meant to him. It seemed to efface everything else upon the instant. A profoundly tender desire for her happiness was in complete possession. Already the notion of doing anything to wound or grieve her appeared incredible to him.

“Well, Gafferson,” he heard himself saying, in one of the more reserved tones of his patriarchal manner. He had halted close to the inattentive man, and stood looking down upon him. His glance was at once tolerant and watchful.

Gafferson slowly rose from his slouching posture, surveyed the other while his faculties in leisurely fashion worked out the problem of recognition, and then raised his finger to his cap-brim. “Good-evening, sir,” he said.

This gesture of deference was eloquently convincing. Thorpe, after an instant's alert scrutiny, smiled upon him. “I was glad to hear that you had come to us,” he said with benevolent affability. “We shall expect great things of a man of your reputation.”

“It'll be a fair comfort, sir,” the other replied, “to be in a place where what one does is appreciated. What use is it to succeed in hybridizing a Hippeastrum procera with a Pancratium Amancaes, after over six hundred attempts in ten years, and then spend three years a-hand-nursing the seedlings, and then your master won't take enough interest in the thing to pay your fare up to London to the exhibition with 'em? That's what 'ud break any man's heart.”

“Quite true,” Thorpe assented, with patrician kindliness. “You need fear nothing of that sort here, Gafferson. We give you a free hand. Whatever you want, you have only to let us know. And you can't do things too well to please us.” “Thank you, sir,” said Gafferson, and really, as Thorpe thought about it, the interview seemed at an end.

The master turned upon his heel, with a brief, oblique nod over his shoulder, and made his way out into the open air. Here, as he walked, he drew a succession of long consolatory breaths. It was almost as if he had emerged from the lethal presence of the fumigator itself. He took the largest cigar from his case, lighted it, and sighed smoke-laden new relief as he strolled back toward the terrace.

But a few minutes before he had been struggling helplessly in the coils of an evil nightmare. These terrors seemed infinitely far behind him now. He gave an indifferent parting glance backward at them, as one might over his after-breakfast cigar at the confused alarms of an early awakening hours before. There was nothing worth remembering—only the shapeless and foolish burden of a bad dream.

The assurance rose within him that he was not to have any more such trouble. With a singular clearness of mental vision he perceived that the part of him which brought bad dreams had been sloughed off, like a serpent's skin. There had been two Thorpes, and one of them—the Thorpe who had always been willing to profit by knavery, and at last in a splendid coup as a master thief had stolen nearly a million, and would have shrunk not at all from adding murder to the rest, to protect that plunder—this vicious Thorpe had gone away altogether. There was no longer a place for him in life; he would never be seen again by mortal eye....There remained only the good Thorpe, the pleasant, well-intentioned opulent gentleman; the excellent citizen; the beneficent master, to whom, even Gafferson like the others, touched a respectful forelock.

It passed in the procession of his reverie as a kind of triumph of virtue that the good Thorpe retained the fortune which the bad Thorpe had stolen. It was in all senses a fortunate fact, because now it would be put to worthy uses. Considering that he had but dimly drifted about heretofore on the outskirts of the altruistic impulse, it was surprisingly plain to him now that he intended to be a philanthropist. Even as he mentioned the word to himself, the possibilities suggested by it expanded in his thoughts. His old dormant, formless lust for power stirred again in his pulses. What other phase of power carried with it such rewards, such gratitudes, such humble subservience on all sides as far as the eye could reach—as that exercised by the intelligently munificent philanthropist?

Intelligence! that was the note of it all. Many rich people dabbled at the giving of money, but they did it so stupidly, in such a slip-shod fashion, that they got no credit for it. Even millionaires more or less in public life, great newspaper-owners, great brewer-peers, and the like, men who should know how to do things well, gave huge sums in bulk for public charities, such as the housing of the poor, and yet contrived somehow to let the kudos that should have been theirs evaporate. He would make no such mistake as that.

It was easy enough to see wherein they erred. They gave superciliously, handing down their alms from a top lofty altitude of Tory superiority, and the Radicals down below sniffed or growled even while they grudgingly took these gifts—that was all nonsense. These aristocratic or tuft-hunting philanthropists were the veriest duffers. They laid out millions of pounds in the vain attempt to secure what might easily be had for mere thousands, if they went sensibly to work. Their vast benefactions yielded them at the most bare thanks, or more often no thanks at all, because they lacked the wit to lay aside certain little trivial but annoying pretensions, and waive a few empty prejudices. They went on, year after year, tossing their fortunes into a sink of contemptuous ingratitude, wondering feebly why they were not beloved in return. It was because they were fools. They could not, or they would not, understand the people they sought to manipulate.

What could not a man of real brain, of real breadth and energy and force of character, do in London with two hundred thousand pounds? Why, he could make himself master of the town! He could break into fragments the political ascendency of the snob, “semi-detached” villa classes, in half the Parliamentary divisions they now controlled. He could reverse the partisan complexion of the Metropolitan delegation, and lead to Westminster a party of his own, a solid phalanx of disciplined men, standing for the implacable Democracy of reawakened London. With such a backing, he could coerce ministries at will, and remake the politics of England. The role of Great Oliver himself was not too hopelessly beyond the scope of such a vision.

Thorpe threw his cigar-end aside, and then noted that it was almost dark. He strode up to the terrace two steps at a time, and swung along its length with a vigour and exhilaration of movement he had not known, it seemed to him, for years. He felt the excitement of a new incentive bubbling in his veins.

“Her Ladyship is in her sitting-room, sir,” a domestic replied to his enquiry in the hall. The title arrested his attention from some fresh point of view, and he pondered it, as he made his way along the corridor, and knocked at a door. At the sound of a voice he pushed open the door, and went in.

Lady Cressage, looking up, noted, with aroused interest, a marked change in his carriage. He stood aggressively erect, his big shoulders squared, and his head held high. On his massive face there was the smile, at once buoyant and contained, of a strong man satisfied with himself.

Something impelled her to rise, and to put a certain wistfulness of enquiry into her answering smile.

“Your headache is better then?” she asked him.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then laughed lightly. “Oh—yes,” he answered. Advancing, he caught her suddenly, almost vehemently, in his arms, aud covered the face that was perforce upturned with kisses. When she was released from this overwhelming embrace, and stood panting and flushed, regarding him with narrowed, intent eyes, in which mystification was mellowed by the gleam of not-displeased curiosity, he preferred a request which completed her bewilderment.

“Mrs. Thorpe,” he began, with significant deliberation, but smiling with his eyes to show the tenderness underlying his words—“would you mind if we didn't dress for dinner this evening, and if we dined in the little breakfast-room—or here, for that matter—instead of the big place?”

“Why, not at all, if you wish it,” she answered readily enough, but viewing him still with a puzzled glance.

“I'm full of new ideas,” he explained, impulsively impatient of the necessity to arrange a sequence among his thoughts. “I see great things ahead. It's all come to me in a minute, but I couldn't see it clearer if I'd thought it out for a year. Perhaps I was thinking of it all the time and didn't know it. But anyhow, I see my way straight ahead. You don't know what it means to me to have something to do. It makes another man of me, just to think about it. Another man?—yes, twenty men! It's a thing that can be done, and by God! I'm going to do it!”

She beheld in his face, as she scrutinized it, a stormy glow of the man's native, coarse, imperious virility, reasserting itself through the mask of torpor which this vacuous year had superimposed. The large features were somehow grown larger still; they dominated the countenance as rough bold headlands dominate a shore. It was the visage of a conqueror—of a man gathering within himself, to expend upon his fellows, the appetites, energies, insensibilities, audacities of a beast of prey. Her glance fluttered a little, and almost quailed, before the frank barbarism of power in the look he bent upon her. Then it came to her that something more was to be read in this look; there was in it a reservation of magnanimity, of protection, of entreating invitation, for her special self. He might tear down with his claws, and pull to pieces and devour others; but his mate he would shelter and defend and love with all his strength. An involuntary trembling thrill ran through her—and then she smiled up at him.

“What is it you're going to do?” she asked him, mechanically. Her mind roved far afield.

“Rule England!” he told her with gravity.

For the moment there seemed to her nothing positively incongruous in the statement. To look at him, as he loomed before her, uplifted by his refreshed and soaring self-confidence, it appeared not easy to say what would be impossible to him.

She laughed, after a fleeting pause, with a plainer note of good-fellowship than he had ever heard in her voice before. “Delightful,” she said gayly. “But I'm not sure that I quite understand the—the precise connection of morning-dress and dinner in a small room with the project." He nodded pleased comprehension of the spirit in which she took him. "Just a whim," he explained. "The things I've got in mind don't fit at all with ceremony, and that big barn of a room, and men standing about. What I want more than anything else is a quiet snug little evening with you alone, where I can talk to you and—and we can be together by ourselves. You'd like it, wouldn't you?"

She hesitated, and there was a novel confession of embarrassment in her mantling colour and down-spread lashes. It had always to his eyes been, from the moment he first beheld it, the most beautiful face in the world—exquisitely matchless in its form and delicacy of line and serene yet sensitive grace. But he had not seen in it before, or guessed that there could come to it, this crowning added loveliness of feminine confusion.

"You would like it, wouldn't you?" he repeated in a lower, more strenuous tone.

She lifted her eyes slowly, and looked, not into his, but over his shoulder, as in a reverie, half meditation, half languorous dreaming. She swayed rather than stepped toward him.

"I think," she answered, in a musing murmur,—"I think I shall like—everything."

CHAPTER XXVII

THORPE found the Duke of Glastonbury a much more interesting person to watch and to talk with, both during the dinner Saturday evening and later, than he had anticipated.

He was young, and slight of frame, and not at all imposing in stature, but he bore himself with a certain shy courtliness of carriage which had a distinction of its own. His face, with its little black moustache and large dark eyes, was fine upon examination, but in some elusively foreign way. There lingered a foreign note, too, in the way he talked. His speech was English enough to the ear, it was true, but it was the considered English of a book, and its phrases had a deftness which was hardly native. He looked, if not a sad young man, then one conscious always of sufficient reasons for sadness, but one came, after a time, to see that the mood beneath was not melancholy. It had even its sprightly side, which shone out irregularly in his glance and talk, from a sober mean of amiable weariness.

Thorpe knew his extraordinary story—that of a poor tutor, earning his living in ignorance of the fact that he had a birthright of any sort, who had been miraculously translated into the heir, not only to an ancient title but to vast collateral wealth. He had been born and reared in France, and it was there that the heralds of this stupendous change in his affairs had found him out. There was a good deal more to the story, including numerous unsavoury legends about people now many years dead, and it was impossible to observe the young Duke and not seem to perceive signs that he was still nervously conscious of these legends. The story of his wife—a serene, grey-eyed, rather silent young person, with a pale face of some beauty, and with much purity and intellect—was strange enough to match. She also had earned her own living, as a private secretary or type-writing girl, or something of the sort, and her husband had deliberately chosen her after he had come into his title. One might study her very closely, however, and catch no hint that these facts in any degree disconcerted her.

Thorpe studied her a good deal, in a furtive way, with a curiosity born of his knowledge that the Duke had preferred her, when he might have married his widowed cousin, who was now Thorpe's own wife. How he had come to know this, he could never have told. He had breathed it in, somehow, with the gossip-laden atmosphere of that one London season of his. It was patent enough, too, that his wife—his Edith—had not only liked this ducal youngster very much, but still entertained toward him a considerable affection. She had never dissembled this feeling, and it visibly informed her glance and manner now, at her own table, when she turned to speak with him, where he sat at her right hand. Thorpe had never dreamed of thinking ill of his wife's friendship, even when her indifference to what he thought had been most taken for granted. Now that this was all changed, and the amazing new glory of a lover had enveloped him, he had a distinct delight in watching the myriad charming phases of her kind manner, half-sisterly, half-motherly, toward the grave-faced young man. It was all a part of the delicious change which these past few days had wrought in her, this warm and supple softness of mien, of eye and smile and voice.

But how the Duke, if really he had had a chance to marry Edith, could have taken the type-writer instead, baffled speculation. Thorpe gave more attention to this problem, during dinner, than he did to the conversation of the table. His exchange of sporadic remarks with the young Duchess beside him was indeed an openly perfunctory affair, which left him abundant leisure to contemplate her profile in silence, while she turned to listen to the general talk, of which Miss Madden and the Hon. Winifred Plowden bore the chief burden. The talk of these ladies interested him but indifferently, though the frequent laughter suggested that it was amusing. He looked from his wife to the Duchess and back again, in ever-recurring surprise that the coronet had been carried past Edith. And once he looked a long time at his wife and the Duke, and formulated the theory that she must have refused him. No doubt that was why she had been sympathetically fond of him ever since, and was being so nice to him now. Yes—clearly that was it. He felt upon this that he also liked the Duke very much.

It was by no means so apparent that the Duke liked him. Both he and his Duchess, indeed, were scrupulously and even deferentially polite, but there was a painstaking effect about it, which, seemingly, they lacked the art altogether to conceal. It seemed to Thorpe that the other guests unconsciously took their cue from this august couple, and all exposed somewhat the effort their civility to him involved. At another time the suspicion of this would have stung him. He had only to glance across the table to where his wife sat now, and it was all right. What other people thought of him—how other people liked or disliked him—was of no earthly importance. Whenever he chose to exert himself, he could compel from them the behaviour that he desired. It was their dull inability to read character which prompted them to regard him as merely a rich outsider who had married Edith Cressage. He viewed with a comfortable tolerance this infirmity of theirs. When the time came, if he wanted to do so, he could awaken them to their delusion as by forked lightning and the burst of thunder.

The whim came to him, and expanded swiftly into a determination, to contrive some intimate talk forthwith with the Duke. The young man seemed both clever and sensible, and in a way impressionable as well. Thorpe thought that he would probably have some interesting things to say, but still more he thought of him as a likely listener. It would be the easier to detach him from the company, since the occasion was one of studied informality. The Duke did not go about in society, in the ordinary sense of the word, and he would not have come to High Thorpe to meet a large party. He was here as a kinsman and friend of his hostess for a quiet week; and the few other guests fitted readily enough into the picture of a family gathering. The spirit of domesticity had indeed so obviously descended upon the little group in the drawing-room, an hour or so after dinner, that Thorpe felt it quite the natural thing to put his arm through that of the Duke and lead him off to his personal smoking-room. He even published his intention by audibly bidding the Hon. Balder Plowden to remain with the ladies.

When the two had seated themselves in soft, low easy-chairs, and the host had noted with pleasure that his guest had no effeminate qualms in the matter of large rich cigars, a brief silence ensued.

“I am very anxious to get your views on a certain subject,” Thorpe was inspired to begin, bluntly pushing preliminaries aside. “If a man of fortune wishes to do genuine good with his money, here in England, how should he best go about it?”

The Duke looked up at his questioner, with a sudden flash of surprise on his dark, mobile face. He hesitated a moment, and smiled a little. “You ask of me the sum of human wisdom,” he said. “It is the hardest of all problems; no one solves it.”

Thorpe nodded his big head comprehendingly. “That's all the more reason why it ought to be solved,” he declared, with slow emphasis.

The other expressed by look and tone an augmented consciousness of the unexpected. “I did not know,” he remarked cautiously, “that this was a matter in which you were specially concerned. It pleases me very much to hear it. Even if the solution does not come, it is well to have as many as possible turning the problem over in their minds.”

“Oh, but I'm going to solve it!” Thorpe told him, with round confidence.

The Duke pulled contemplatively at his cigar for a little. “Do not think me a cynic,” he began at last. “You are a man of affairs; you have made your own way; you should be even more free from illusions than I am. If you tell me that these good things can be done, I am the last one to dispute you. But I have seen near at hand experiments of exceptional importance, on a very grand scale, and the result does not encourage me. I come to doubt indeed if money has any such power in these affairs as we think it has—for that matter, if it has any power at all. The shifting of money can always disorganize what is going on at the moment—change it about and alter it in many ways—but its effect is only temporary. As soon as the pressure is released, the human atoms rearrange themselves as they were before, and the old conditions return. I think the only force which really makes any permanent difference is character—and yet about even that I am not sure. The best man I have ever known—and in many respects the ablest—devoted untold energy and labour, and much money, too, to the service of a few thousand people in Somerset, on land of his own, upon a theory wonderfully elaborated and worked out. Perhaps you have heard of Emanuel Torr and his colony, his System?”

Thorpe shook his head.

“He had worked tremendously for years at it. He fell ill and went away—and in a day all the results of his labours and outlay were flat on the ground. The property is mine now, and it is farmed and managed again in the ordinary way, and really the people there seem already to have forgotten that they had a prophet among them. The marvelous character of the man—you look in vain for any sign of an impress that it left upon them. I never go there. I cannot bear those people. I have sometimes the feeling that if it were feasible I should like to oppress them in some way—to hurt them.”

“Oh! 'the people' are hogs, right enough,” Thorpe commented genially, “but they ARE 'the people,' and they're the only tools we've got to work with to make the world go round.”

“But if you leave the world alone,” objected the Duke, “it goes round of itself. And if you don't leave it alone, it goes round just the same, without any reference whatever to your exertions. Some few men are always cleverer or noisier or more restless than the others, and their activity produces certain deviations and peculiarities in their generation. The record of these—generally a very faulty and foolish record—we call history. We say of these movements in the past that some of them were good and some were bad. Our sons very likely will differ totally from us about which were good and which were bad; quite possibly, in turn, their sons may agree with us. I do not see that it matters. We cannot treat anything as final—except that the world goes round. We appear out of the darkness at one edge of it; we are carried across and pitched off into the darkness at the other edge of it. We are certain about nothing else.”

“Except that some of us have to pay for our ride, and others don't,” put in Thorpe. The tone in which he spoke made his meaning so clear that his Grace sat up.

“Ah, you think we do not pay?” he queried, his countenance brightening with the animation of debate. “My dear sir, we pay more than anyone else. Our fares are graduated, just as our death-duties are. No doubt there are some idle and stupid, thick-skinned rich fellows, who escape the ticket-collector. But for each of them there are a thousand idle poor fellows who do the same. You, for example, are a man of large wealth. I, for my sins, carry upon my back the burden of a prodigious fortune. Could we not go out now, and walk down the road to your nearest village, and find in the pub, there a dozen day-labourers happier than we are? Why—it is Saturday night. Then I will not say a dozen, but as many as the tap will hold. It is not the beer alone that makes them happy. Do not think that. It is the ability to rest untroubled, the sense that till Monday they have no more responsibility than a tree-toad. Does the coming of Sunday make that difference to you or to me? When night comes, does it mean to us that we are to sleep off into oblivion all we have done that day, and begin life afresh next morning? No-o! We are the tired people; the load is never lifted from our backs. Ah, do we not pay indeed!”

“Oh-ho!” ejaculated Thorpe. He had been listening with growing astonishment to the other's confession. He was still surprised as he spoke, but a note of satisfaction mounted into his voice as he went on. “You are unhappy, too! You are a young man, in excellent health; you have the wife you want; you understand good tobacco; you have a son. That is a great deal—but my God! think what else you've got. You're the Duke of Glastonbury—one of the oldest titles in England. You're one of the richest men in the country—the richest in the old peerage, at any rate, I'm told. And YOU'RE not happy!”

The other smiled. “Ah, the terms and forms survive,” he said, with a kind of pedagogic affability, “after the substance has disappeared. The nobleman, the prince, was a great person in the times when he monopolized wealth. It enabled him to monopolize almost everything else that was pleasant or superb. He had the arts and the books and the musicians and the silks and velvets, and the bath-tubs—everything that made existence gorgeous—all to himself. He had war to amuse himself with, and the seven deadly sins. The barriers are down now. Everything which used to be exclusively the nobleman's is now within everybody's reach, including the sins. And it is not only that others have levelled up to him; they have levelled him down. He cannot dress now more expensively than other people. Gambling used to be recognized as one of his normal relaxations, but now, the higher his rank, the more sharply he is scolded for it. Naturally he does not know what to do with himself. As an institution, he descends from a period when the only imaginable use for wealth was to be magnificent with it. But now in this business age, where the recognized use of wealth is to make more wealth, he is so much out of place that he has even forgotten how to be magnificent. There are some illustrated articles in one of the magazines, giving photographs of the great historic country-houses of England. You should see the pictures of the interiors. The furniture and decorations are precisely what a Brixton dressmaker would buy, if she suddenly came into some money.”

“All the same,” Thorpe stuck to his point, “you are not happy.”

The Duke frowned faintly, as if at the other's persistency. Then he shrugged his shoulders and answered in a lighter tone. “It hardly amounts to that, I think. I confess that there are alleviations to my lot. In the opinion of the world I am one of its most fortunate citizens—and it is not for me to say that the world is altogether wrong. The chief point is—I don't know if you will quite follow me—there are limits to what position and fortune can give a man. And so easily they may deprive him of pleasures which poorer men enjoy! I may be wrong, but it seems impossible to me that any rich man who has acres of gardens and vineries and glass can get up the same affection for it all that the cottager will have for his little flower-plot, that he tends with his own hands. One seems outside the realities of life—a mere spectator at the show.”

“Ah, but why not DO things?” Thorpe demanded of him. “Why merely stand, as you say, and look on?”

The other leant his head back again. “Pray what do you recommend?” he asked almost listlessly.

“Why—politics, for example.”

The Duke nodded, with an air of according to the suggestion a certain respect. “Unhappily I am too much of a foreigner,” he commented. “I know Englishmen and their affairs too imperfectly. Sometime—perhaps.”

“And philanthropic work—you don't care about that,” pursued the other.

“Oh—we go not so far as that,” said his Grace, with a deprecatory wave of the hands. “My wife finds many interests in it, only she would not like to have you call it philanthropical. She is London-born, and it is a great pleasure to her to be of assistance to poorer young women in London, who have so little done for them by the community, and can do so little for themselves. I am much less skeptical about that particular work, I may tell you, than about philanthropy in general. In fact, I am quite clear that it is doing good. At least it is doing a kindness, and that is a pleasant occupation. We are really not so idle as one might think. We work at it a good deal, my wife and I.”

“So am I London-born,” Thorpe remarked, with a certain irrelevancy. After a moment's pause he turned a sharply enquiring glance upon his guest. “This thing that you're doing in London—does it give you any 'pull' there?” “Pull?” repeated the other helplessly.

“If there was something you wanted the people of London to do, would they do it for you because of what you've been doing for them—or for their girls?”

The Duke looked puzzled for a moment. “But it isn't conceivable that I should want London to do anything—unless it might be to consume its own smoke,” he observed.

“Quite so!” said Thorpe, rising bulkily to his feet, but signifying by a gesture that his companion was to remain seated. He puffed at his cigar till its tip gleamed angrily through the smoke about him, and moved a few steps with his hands in his pockets. “That is what I wanted to get at. Now I'm London-born, I've got the town in my blood. The Thorpes have been booksellers there for generations. The old name is over the old shop still. I think I know what Londoners are like; I ought to. It's my belief that they don't want gifts. They'll take 'em, but it isn't what they want. They're a trading people—one of the oldest in the world. Commercial traditions, the merchant's pride—these are bred in their bones. They don't want something for nothing. They like an honest bargain—fair on both sides. 'You help me and I'll help you.' And it's the only way you can do anything worth doing.”

“Well,” said the Duke, passively.

Thorpe halted, and still with the cigar between his teeth, looked down at him.

“I can go into London, and study out the things that are to be done—that need to be done—and divide these into two parts, those that belong to private enterprise and those that ought to be done publicly. And I can say to Londoners—not in so many words, mind you, but in a way the sharper ones will understand: 'Here, you fellows. I'll begin doing out of my own pocket one set of these things, and you in turn must put yourselves at my back, and stand by me, and put me in a position where I can make the Government do this other set of things.' That will appeal to them. A poor man couldn't lead them any distance, because he could always be killed by the cry that he was filling his pockets. They will believe in a man whose ambition is to win an earldom and five thousand a year out of politics, but they will stone to death the man who merely tries to get a few hundreds a year out of it for his wife and children. And a man like you can't do anything in London, because they can't see that there's anything you want in return—and besides, in their hearts, they don't like your class. Don't forget it! This is the city that chopped off the king's head!”

“Ah, but this is also the city,” retorted the other, with placid pleasure in his argument, “which decked itself in banners and ribbons to welcome back the son of that same king. And if you think of it, he was rather a quaint thing in sons, too.”

“It was the women did that,” Thorpe affirmed with readiness. “They get their own way once in a while, when the men are tired out, and they have their little spell of nonsense and monkey-shines, but it never lasts long. Charles II. doesn't matter at all—but take my word for it, his father matters a great deal. There was a Thorpe among the judges who voted to behead him. I am descended in a straight line from him.”

His Grace shrugged his slight shoulders again. “It happens that my ancestors had extremely large facilities for doing unpleasant things, and, God knows, they did them—but I don't quite see what that goes to prove, now.”

“No, you don't grasp the idea,” said Thorpe, resignedly. After a moment's pause he took the cigar from his lips, and straightened himself “All the same,” he declared roundly, “I am going to do the trick. London has been waiting for an organizer—a leader—for a hundred years. The right kind of a man, going the right way to work, can stand London on its head, as surely as I can burn this cigar. And I'm going to have a try at it.”

“It is very interesting,” remarked the Duke, with vagueness. “But—are the ladies waiting for us? And if so, aren't we keeping them up unconscionably?”

As if in comment upon his words, there was the sound of a faint rap at the door. Then it opened, and through the dense blue haze of the room they saw some shadowed forms softly indistinct save where the light from the ceiling outside shone down upon a group of coiffured heads. A noise of mingled coughing and laughter specifically completed the introduction.

“Oh, I'm—it's unendurable in there,” spoke the voice of the hostess. “We WERE coming in to smoke with you,” she called out through the cloud, “since you wouldn't stop with us.”

“Come along!” answered Thorpe, cheerily. He strode to the end of the room and raised a window. From the same corner he turned on some added lights.

Under this more effective illumination, the lady of the house advanced, with Miss Madden and the Hon. Winifred close behind her. “Frank has gone to bed,” she explained to the Duke, who had risen. Then she turned to her husband a bright-eyed glance: “You don't mind—our coming?” she asked.

“Mind!” he called out, with robust impressiveness. “Mind!” As if to complete the expression of his meaning, he threw his arm loosely about her, where she stood, and brought her to his side. They remained standing thus, before the fireplace, after the others were all seated.

“Mr. Thorpe has been outlining to me the most wonderful plans,” said the Duke, looking from one face to another, with a reserved smile. “It seems that philanthropy fails unless it is combined with very advanced politics. It is a new idea to me—but he certainly states it with vigour. Do you understand it, Edith?”

“Oh, perfectly,” replied the wife, smilingly. “I am his first convert. Behold in me the original disciple.”

“The worst of that is,” commented Thorpe, with radiant joviality, “she would subscribe to any other new doctrine of mine just as readily.” He tightened the arm encircling her by a perceptible trifle. “Wouldn't you, sweetheart?” he demanded.

She seemed in nowise embarrassed by these overt endearments. There was indeed the dimmest suggestion in her face and voice of a responsive mood. “Really,” she began, with a soft glance, half-deprecation, half-pride, bent upon the others, and with thoughtful deliberation,—“really the important thing is that he should pursue some object—have in view something that he is determined to master. Without that, he is not contented—not at his best. He should have been a soldier. He has a passion for battle in his blood. And now that he sees something he is eager to do—I am very glad. It makes it none the less acceptable that good is to come from it.”

“I still maintain,” said Miss Madden, interpolating her words through the task of lighting a cigarette, and contriving for them an effect of drollery which appealed to Thorpe most of all—“I shall always insist, just the same, that crime was his true vocation.”

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