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LONDON: WM. HEINEMANN.

PARLOUS TIMES

A NOVEL OF MODERN DIPLOMACY

BY

DAVID DWIGHT WELLS

AUTHOR OF

"HER LADYSHIP'S ELEPHANT," "HIS LORDSHIP'S LEOPARD"



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN. 1901

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CHAPTER I

THE CONSPIRACY

"Forty thousand pounds is a pretty sum of money."

"Bribery is not a pretty word."

"No—there should be a better name for private transactions when the amount involved assumes proportions of such dignity." The speaker smiled and glanced covertly at his companion.

"Darcy is our man without doubt. Can you land him? He may hold out for the lion's share and then refuse on the ground of—honour."

"Darcy and honour! That is a far call."

"There is much unsuspected honesty going around."

"Perhaps—but not Darcy."

"But what if he refuse?"

"He cannot."

"Why not?"

"That's my secret. I force Darcy's hand for you, and in return I expect fair recognition."

"You have our promise, but it must be to-night. There is no time to lose. I'll go on to the house. Where will you see Darcy?" [Pg 6]

"Leave that to me. Until morning—*adios*," and he vanished among the deep shadows and dark shrubbery.

The sun had sunk red and fiery below the edge of the waving mesa, and a full tropical moon shed its glory over the landscape, making dark and mysterious the waving fields of cane, which surrounded the whitewashed courts of the palatial hacienda. The building was brilliantly lighted within, and from it came such sounds of discordant merriment as could be produced only by a singularly inferior native orchestra. Through one of the long French windows which gave on to the veranda of the house, there stepped forth the figure of a man. He stood for a moment taking long breaths of the heavy miasmatic air, as if it were grateful and refreshing after the stifling atmosphere of the ballroom. Had he not worn the uniform of a British officer he would still have been unmistakably military in appearance, standing six feet or over, a fine specimen of an animal, and handsome to look upon. But it was a weak face for a soldier, in spite of its bronze and scars, a weakness which was accentuated by the traces of a recent illness. To judge from his pallor it had been severe. The man had a pair of shifty grey eyes, which never by any chance looked you straight in the face, and now expressed ill-concealed ennui and annoyance. Not the countenance of a joyful bridegroom certainly, and yet, he had but that moment left the side of his wife of a few hours, the most beautiful woman in that South American State, and the only child and sole heiress of its most famous planter, Señor De Costa. [Pg 7]

Up to that day the progress of his suit and the many obstacles which might intervene to prevent its successful consummation, had given a certain zest to the game. Now that he had won, he was heartily sick and tired of the whole affair. Seizing a moment when his wife was dancing with one of her relations, he had stolen out on the broad veranda to be alone, and to pull himself together in order that he might play out the rest of what was, to him, a little comedy; and to the woman within—well, time would show. The soft moonlight tempted him. His place was in the ballroom, he knew, but he put one foot off the edge of the piazza, and as it pressed the soft grass under his feet, he fell a willing victim to the spell of the night, and strolled slowly off into the darkness.

His meditations were not, however, destined to remain uninterrupted. He had gone scarcely thirty yards when a lithe figure rose suddenly out of a clump of bushes, and touching him softly on the arm, whispered in perfect English, without the faintest touch of Spanish accent:—

"Hist, Señor Darcy. A word with you, and speak softly." [Pg 8]

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Colonel Darcy, instinctively feeling for his revolver, for in this remote and not over well-governed section, a night encounter did not always have a pleasant termination.

"I mean you no harm," said the stranger, "only good."

"Then why couldn't you come to the house and see me there?" demanded the officer brusquely.

"It was out of consideration for your Excellency," replied the stranger quietly. "I had the honour to serve under your Excellency some years ago, in England."

"Impossible!" said the Colonel. "You are Spanish, but——"

"Of Spanish parents, Señor, but English-born. I joined the regiment at Blankhampton. My roommate was Sergeant Tom Mannis."

Darcy drew in his breath sharply.

"Your Excellency may remember he died of fever."

"I never saw or heard of your friend!"

"Though he was your Excellency's body-servant," suggested the stranger.

Darcy bit his moustache.

"When he died," continued the speaker, "he bequeathed certain papers to me, containing evidence of a ceremony performed over a certain officer of his regiment, then stationed in Ireland, in the month of August three years ago."

"Ah," said the Colonel, "I think I see the drift of your remarks, my friend. You wish to have a little chat with me, eh?" [Pg 9]

The man nodded.

"It is a pleasant night," continued Darcy, "suppose we stroll a trifle farther from the house." He slipped his hand furtively behind him.

"With pleasure," acquiesced the other. "But," he added, as they took their first step forward, "the Señor will find only blank cartridges in his revolver. It is a matter that I attended to personally."

Darcy swore under his breath. Aloud he said, simply:—

"Say what you have to say, and be quick. I shall be missed from the ballroom."

The man nodded again, and plunged abruptly into his narration.

"There is an island at the mouth of the X—River, off the coast of this country, as you have probably heard. It contains large manufactories for the sale of a staple article, which we produce. Owing to an amiable arrangement between the heads of the firm in England and our Government, a monopoly of this article is secured to them, in return for which certain officials in this country receive thousands of pesetas a year. As your Excellency may remember, a treaty is pending between this country and Great Britain, looking to the secession of the island to the latter. If the treaty succeeds, the monopoly, owing to your accursed free-trade principles, will cease, and the island and its products be thrown open to competition." [Pg 10]

"It has been suggested by certain patriotically disposed personages, with a desire for their country's good, that a prearranged disposition of forty thousand pounds in gold among a majority of the members of the Cabinet who are to pass upon the treaty some six months hence, might result in its rejection."

"Well," said Darcy, shortly, "what of that?"

"The only difficulty that remains, is the transportation of the bullion from England to our capital. Those interested in the matter have felt that if an Englishman of undoubted integrity," there was just a suspicion of sarcasm in the speaker's tones, "who is so highly connected in this country that the usual customs formalities would be omitted on his re-entry, I say, if this Englishman could see his way to bringing over the gold, things might be satisfactorily arranged."

"A very interesting little plot," said the officer. "And what would the philanthropic Englishman receive for his services?"

"He would receive at the hands of the president of the company a packet of papers, formally the property of Sergeant Tom Mannis, of her Britannic Majesty's —th Fusiliers, lately deceased."

"And what would prevent the philanthropic but muscular Englishman from wringing the neck of the low-down sneak who has proposed this plan to him, and taking the papers out of his inside pocket?" [Pg 11]

"Because, Excellency, they are now in the safe of the manufacturing company."

"And the president of that company?"

"Is a guest at your Excellency's wedding."

Darcy clenched his hands nervously. He was battling silently, skilfully, not to betray the dread which was unnerving him. The music floated out from the house—fitful and discordant.

"An Englishman," he said slowly, "never gives way to a threat, but of course, if he could be brought to see the purely philanthropic side of the argument, and receive—well, say, five per cent. of the bullion carried, for his travelling expenses, he might see his way to sacrifice his

personal interests for the good of his adopted country."

"Good," said the stranger. "The president will meet you the day after to-morrow, at three o'clock in the afternoon, at the capital in the San Carlos Club."

"Very well," said Darcy. "Go. Someone's coming!"

The figure of the stranger faded into the darkness, and a moment later the soft footsteps of a woman approached.

"Ah, *mia carrissima*," he said, taking her in his arms. "You have missed me."

"Yes," she said, with a little sigh of satisfied relief, as she felt his strong embrace about her. "But why did you leave me? I do not understand." [Pg 12]

"The air of the room oppressed me. I came out to breathe."

"I did not know," she said. "I was frightened." And as she raised her face to him, he saw that she had been crying.

She might well have commanded any man's attention. Tall and slight, lissome in every movement of her exquisitely shaped figure, barely thirty, and very fair withal. Even the tears which sparkled on her long lashes could not obscure the superb black eyes full of a passion which betrayed Castilian parentage as surely as did those finely-chiselled features, and that silky crown of hair which, unbound, must have descended to her feet. Half Spanish, half Greek, she was a woman to be looked upon and loved.

"But, Inez, surely you trusted me?" came the suave tones of expostulation from her husband.

"Trusted you, my knight? Have I not trusted you this day with my soul, with my whole life? You have been so near to death's door, and I have been so near to losing you, that I fear now, every moment you are out of my sight."

"Oh, I don't think there is any danger," he said, laughing. "I am strong enough now, though I daresay I should never have pulled through without such a plucky nurse."

"Ah, yes," she said. "I can shut my eyes and see you now, how frightfully ill and worn you were, when you came to my father's house that night, three months ago, invalided home from India." [Pg 13]

"Yes," he said. "It was the greatest stroke of luck in my life that I should have lost my way and have been obliged to beg your hospitality for the night."

"And then the fever. The next morning you were delirious. For days you knew nothing, understood nothing, yet you talked, talked, always."

Colonel Darcy shifted uneasily.

"One generally does that," he said. "The raving of delirium."

"You said things that meant nothing usually. But one name you were always repeating, a strange English name of a woman."

"And it was?" he murmured, stroking her hair.

"Belle. La Belle, I think you meant. And the other name, I do not remember. It sounded harsh, and I did not like it."

He laughed nervously.

"There is nothing for you to be jealous about, *cara mia*," he said. "It was the name of a playmate of my childhood. I had not heard or thought of it for years. But that is the way in fever. The forgotten things, the things of no importance come uppermost in the mind."

"And then," she went on, "came that happy day when you knew us, and then you grew stronger and better, and I realised that you would be going away from us for ever."

"Did you think?" he asked softly, "that I could ever have forgotten my nurse?"

"I had been unhappy and very lonely. I feared to hope for joy again, till the day that you told me you loved me." And she hid her face on his shoulder to hide her blushes. [Pg 14]

"Come," he said. "We must think of the present. I have a little surprise for you. I have been going over my affairs, and I do not think it will be necessary to take you away from home for so long a time as I had first thought. I hope that in six months we may be able to return."

"Oh!" she cried. "That is indeed good news! I dread your England. It is so far away, and so strange."

"I shall try to teach you to love it. But we must be returning to the house. Our guests will miss us."

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I meant to have told you. The president of some great manufacturing company has arrived to pay his respects, and is anxious to speak with you." [Pg 15]

CHAPTER II

WANTED—A CHAPERON

Aloysius Stanley, Secretary of a South American Embassy, was not happy. Yet he was counted one of the most fortunate young men in London. Of good family, and large fortune, he had attained a social position, which not a few might envy. His rooms faced the park, he belonged to the swellest and most inane club in town, was *ex officio* a member of the Court, and knew at least two duchesses, not perhaps intimately, but well enough to speak to at a crush. He had been christened Aloysius, because his father owned a large plantation in a South American Republic—no, it was a Dictatorship then—and had named his son after the saint on whose day he had been born, out of consideration for the religious prejudices of the community.

His name, then, was Aloysius Stanley, and this was the reason his intimates called him "Jim." His other titles were "my dear colleague," when his brethren in the diplomatic corps wanted anything of him, and "Mr. Secretary" when his chief was wroth.

Having shown no special aptitude for growing sugar he had been early put into diplomacy, under the erroneous impression that it would keep him out of mischief. [Pg 16]

He was, on the evening on which he is first introduced to us, standing in the immaculate glory of his dress suit, on the top step of the grand staircase of the Hyde Park Club.

His party, a very nice little party of six, had all arrived save one, and that one was his chaperon. The two young ladies, safe in harbour of the cloak-room, awaited her coming to flutter forth; the two gentlemen wandered aimlessly about the now nearly deserted reception-room, for dinner was served and most of the brilliant parties had already gone to their respective tables.

Surely she would come, he told himself; something unavoidable had detained her. Lady Rainsford was much too conscientious to leave an unfortunate young man in the lurch without sending at least a substitute—yet, with it all, there was the sickening suspicion that she might have met with a carriage accident in crowded Piccadilly; have received, as she was on the point of starting, the news of some near relative's death; some untoward accident or stroke of fate, which took no count of social obligations, and would leave him in this most awful predicament. Why had he departed from his invariable rule of asking two married ladies—what if it did cramp him in the number of his guests? Anything was better than this suspense! If fate was only kind to him this once, he vowed he would never, as long as he lived, tempt her again in this respect. [Pg 17]

Hark—what was that! a hansom was driving at break-neck speed up to the ladies' entrance. Some other belated guest—Lady Rainsford had her own carriage—no, a man—and— Good Heavens! it, was her Ladyship's—butler. Something had happened. He needed no page to summon him—he rushed down, two stairs at a time.

"No, sir, no message," explained the flustered butler—"I come on my own responsibility—seeing as her Ladyship had fainted dead away as she was just a putting on her opera cloak—and knowing as she was coming to you, sir, as soon as the doctors had been sent for, I jumps into a cab and comes here to let you know as you couldn't expect her no-how—her not having revived when I left—and— Thank you, sir——" as Stanley, cutting short his volubility, pressed a half-sovereign into his hand, to pay him for his cab fare and his trouble—adding as he did so:—

"Pray request her Ladyship not to worry herself about me, I shall be able, doubtless, to make other arrangements—and—express my deep regrets at her indisposition." The man touched his hat and was gone, and the Secretary slowly reascended the stairs.

"Make other arrangements!" Ah, that was easier said than done. What would his guests say when he confessed to them his awkward dilemma? Lady Isabelle McLane would raise her eyebrows, call a cab, and go home, would infinitely prefer to do so than to remain under the present conditions. But Belle? Without doubt Belle Fitzgerald would do the same—not because she wished to, but because Lady Isabelle did. And the two men—they would probably stay and chaff him about it the rest of the evening. Lieutenant Kingsland always chaffed everybody—he could stand that—but Kent-Lauriston's quiet, well-bred cynicism, would, he felt, under the circumstances, simply drive him mad. [Pg 18]

Yet, they must be told. He must face the music, or find a chaperon, and how could he do the latter in a maze of people whom he did not know, and who were all engaged to their own dinner-parties? Outside the Club it was hopeless, for there was no time to send for any lady friend, even were such an one dressed and waiting to come at his behest. A telephone might have saved the situation, but London is above telephones; they are not sufficiently exclusive. No, he must meet his fate, and bear it like a man, and none of his guests would ever forget it or forgive him, or accept any of his invitations again.

Stanley ascended the stairs with the sensations of an early Christian martyr going to the arena—indeed, he felt that a brace of hungry lions would be a happy release from his present predicament. As he reached the top step, a conversation, carried on in the low but excited tones of a man and a woman, reached his ears, which caused him to pause, partly out of curiosity at what he heard, but more because the words carried, in their meaning, a ray of hope to his breast.

"I tell you, I will not dine with those men. It is an insult to have asked me to receive them, they [Pg 19]

are—", but here the man, evidently her husband, interrupted earnestly in a low tone of voice, begging her to be silent, but she did not heed his request.

"I tell you," she continued, as he passed on to the dining-rooms, "I will go back alone. Ugh! how I despise you!" loathing and contempt stung in her words. "If only my father were here, he would never permit—" She turned suddenly, and crossed the hall to the staircase, coming face to face with the Secretary.

"What— Inez? You? I did not know you were in London. But of course— I might have known— Then that was Colonel Darcy? I have never had an opportunity to congratulate him or—to wish you every happiness," he added bitterly.

"Don't, Jim! Don't!" There was something suspiciously like a sob in her low voice. "That is a mockery I cannot stand—at least from you."

"I fail to understand how my wishes, good or otherwise, would mean anything to Madame Darcy."

"No—you do not understand. That is just it. Oh, Jim—it has all been a piteous, horrible mistake. They lied to me—and then you did not come back. They said you were—oh, can't you see?"

The Secretary looked at the beautiful face before him, now flushed and distressed. How well he knew every line of that exquisite profile and the hair parted low and drawn back lightly from the brow. [Pg 20]

"Let me explain," he urged hotly.

Madame Darcy had recovered her self-possession and drew herself up with a gesture of proud dignity.

"No—" she answered gently. "This is neither the time nor place for explanations between us. Will you see me to my carriage—please?"

"Oh, don't go! I need you so. Please stay and help me out of a most embarrassing situation."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, you see it is a most awkward predicament. My chaperon has been taken suddenly ill at the last moment, and is unable to be present," he began, plunging boldly into his subject. "As I am entertaining two young ladies at dinner to-night, you will understand my unfortunate situation. Will you honour me by accepting the vacant place at the head of my table, as my chaperon?"

Madame Darcy said nothing for a moment, but looked intently at the Secretary.

"Who form your party, Mr. Stanley?" she asked presently.

"Do not call me Mr. Stanley, Inez."

"It is better—at least for the present."

"As you wish, Madame Darcy," he acquiesced stiffly.

"I cannot explain now—but believe me it is wiser. And your party consists of—?" [Pg 21]

"Lady Isabelle McLane, daughter of the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur, Miss Fitzgerald, a niece of Lord Axminster, Lieutenant Kingsland, of the Royal Navy, and Lionel Kent-Lauriston—well, everybody knows him."

She smiled.

"Yes," she said, "I have met him; he is most charming." In saying which she but voiced the generally accepted verdict of society.

Everyone knew Kent-Lauriston and everyone liked him. He was a type of the most delightful class of Englishman. With all his insular prejudices strong within him, and combining in his personality those rugged virtues for which the name of Britain is a synonym, he had in addition that rarest of talents, the quality of being all things to all men; for he was possessed of great tact and sympathy flavoured with a cheerful cynicism which hurt no one, and lent a piquancy to his conversation. It was said of him, were he put down in any English shire, he would not need to walk five miles to find a country house where he would be a welcome and an honoured guest.

"Then I may hope that you will do me this great kindness?" continued the Secretary.

"I accept with pleasure."

"And Colonel Darcy—" he began.

"My husband," she replied, not waiting for him to finish his sentence, "cannot possibly have any objection to my dining with my country's diplomatic representative. I will speak to him, however, and tell him when to order my carriage," and she passed into the next room. Though unperceived himself, the Secretary saw reflected in a great mirror the scene that followed; her proud reserve as she delivered her dictum to her husband, his gesture of impatient anger, and the look which attended it; and finally the contempt with which she turned her back on him and swept out of the room. A moment later she was by Stanley's side, saying:— [Pg 22]

"Will you take me to your guests?"

As she entered the reception room on the Secretary's arm, he trembled with evident agitation. Her marvellous beauty, the wonderful charm of her voice and manner brought to mind only too vividly a realising sense of something he had once hoped for—of something which, of late, he had tried to forget. Yet he was about to give a dinner to a lady whose future relations with himself had been a subject of debate for some months, not only in his own mind, but in the minds of his friends.

Miss Fitzgerald was the guest of the evening, and, it must be allowed, was one of the most winsome, heart-wrecking, Irish girls that ever delighted the gaze of a youth. She was tall, fair, and almost too slim for perfection of form, though possessed of a lissomeness of body that more than compensated for this lack, and she had, in addition, the frankest pair of blue eyes, and the most gorgeous halo of golden hair, that could well be imagined.

She was possessed of a legendary family in Ireland, and numerous sets of relations, who, though not very closely connected, were much in evidence in the social world of London. She had, however, no settled abiding place, and no visible means of support. She was sparkling, light-hearted, and perfect dare-devil, and the town rang with the histories of her exploits. All the men were devoted to her, and as a result, she was cordially hated by all the dowagers, because she effectively spoiled the chances of dozens of other less vivacious but more eligible debutantes. The remainder of the guests were brought together rather by circumstance than by design. Kent-Lauriston had been especially invited, because the Secretary knew him to be greatly prejudiced against the fascinating Belle, with regard to any matrimonial intentions she might be fostering. Miss Fitzgerald herself had suggested the Lieutenant, and the Lieutenant had opportunely hinted that his distant connection Lady Isabelle did not know Miss Fitzgerald, and as they were all to meet in a country house in Sussex at the end of the week, perhaps it would be pleasanter to become acquainted beforehand.

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At Madame Darcy's coming, such a feeling of relief was made manifest that her task would have been light, had not her charm of manner served to put all immediately at their ease. The ladies welcomed her warmly as a solution of an embarrassing situation, and with men she was always a favourite, so the little party lost no time in seeking their already belated dinner.

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At first, indeed, there was a little constraint, owing to the fact that Lady Isabelle, a type of the frigid high-class British maiden, was disposed to assume an icy reserve towards Miss Fitzgerald, a young lady of whom she and her mother, a dragon among dowagers, thoroughly disapproved.

The conversation was desultory, as is mostly the case at dinners, and not till the champagne had been passed for the second time did it become general, then it turned upon racing.

"You were at Ascot, I suppose?" asked Miss Fitzgerald of Madame Darcy.

"Oh, yes," she replied, "They are very amusing—your English races."

She spoke with just the slightest shade of foreign intonation, which rendered her speech charming. "I was on half a coach with four horses."

"What became of the other half?" queried the Lieutenant.

"That is not what you call it—it is not a pull——?" she ventured, a little shy at their evident amusement.

"Perhaps you mean a drag," suggested Stanley, coming to the rescue.

"Yes, that is it," she laughed, a bewitching little laugh, clear as a bell, adding, "I knew it was something it did not do."

"I always go in the Royal Enclosure," murmured Miss Fitzgerald languidly, turning her gaze on the Secretary, while she toyed with the course then before her. "It's beastly dull, but then one must do the correct thing."

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It was a very simple game she was playing—quite pathetic in its simplicity—but dangerous in the presence of Lady Isabelle, in whose veins a little of the dragon blood certainly ran, as well as a great deal that was blue, and Miss Fitzgerald's assumption was a gage of battle not to be disregarded.

"Really. I gave up the Enclosure several years ago. It is getting so common nowadays," said her Ladyship, growing a degree more frigid while the Irish girl flushed.

"Perhaps Miss Fitzgerald enjoyed a run of luck to compensate her for the assemblage?" suggested Kent-Lauriston drily.

"No," responded that young lady. "I came a beastly cropper."

"That was too bad for you," he replied.

"Or somebody else," suggested the Lieutenant, and amidst a burst of laughter Miss Fitzgerald regained her good humour.

"Possibly our host had better luck," ventured Kent-Lauriston.

"Oh, His Diplomacy never bets," laughed Miss Fitzgerald. "He is much too busy hatching plots at the Legation."

"I protest!" cried that gentleman. "Don't you believe them, Madame Darcy. I'm entirely harmless."

"Yes?" she said. "I thought one must never believe a diplomat."

[Pg 26]

"Oh, at the present day, and in a country like England, our duties are very prosaic."

"Come now, confess," cried Miss Fitzgerald, laughing. "Haven't you some delightfully mysterious intrigue on hand, that you either spend your days in concealing from your brother diplomats, or are dying to find out, as the case may be?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he replied gravely, "but my duties and tastes are not in the least romantic."

"At least, not in the direction of diplomacy," murmured the Lieutenant, giving the waiter a directive glance towards his empty champagne glass.

"You have a beautiful country, Miss Fitzgerald," came the soft voice of Madame Darcy, who had heard the aside, and was sorry for the young girl at whom it was directed.

"Oh, Ireland, you mean. Yes, I love it."

"We are mostly Irish here," laughed Lieutenant Kingsland. "One of my ancestors carried a blackthorn, and Miss Belle Fitzgerald."

"Belle Fitzgerald!" she said, starting and looking keenly at the Irish girl, who turned towards her as her name was mentioned, "are you the Belle Fitzgerald who knows my husband, Colonel Darcy—so—well—"

"Your husband?" she said slowly, looking Madame Darcy straight in the face. "Your husband? No, I have never met *your* husband. I do not know him."

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Lieutenant Kingsland, seeing the attention of the company diverted from his direction, half closed his eyes, and softly drew in his breath. Just then the orchestra made an *hejira* to the drawing-room, and the little party hastened to follow in its footsteps, in search of more music, liqueurs, coffee, cigarettes, and the most comfortable corner.

"My dear Jim," expostulated his guest of honour, half an hour later, "there is not a drop of green Chartreuse, and you know I never drink the yellow. Do be a good boy and run over to the dining-room, and persuade the steward to give us some."

As he rose and left them, obedient to the Irish girl's request, she leaned over to Kingsland, who was seated next her, and handing him a square envelope, said quietly, and in a low voice:—

"I want this given to Colonel Darcy before Stanley returns—his party is still in the dining-room. Don't let our crowd see you take it."

"Oh, I say," he expostulated, inspecting the missive which was blank and undirected, "it's a risky thing to do, especially in the face of the whopper you just told his wife about not knowing him."

"I had to, 'Dottie'—I had indeed—she's so jealous she would tear the eyes out of any woman who ventured to speak to him."

"I won't do anything for you if you call me 'Dottie.' You know I hate it."

"Well, Jack then—dear Jack—do it to please me and don't stand there talking, Stanley may return any minute."

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"All right, I'll go."

"And don't flourish that envelope, it's most important and—it's too late."

"The Chartreuse is coming," broke in the Secretary. "I met the steward in the hall—a letter to be posted?" he continued, seeing the missive, which the Lieutenant held blankly in his hand. "Give it to me, and I'll attend to it."

A sharper man might have saved the situation, but sharpness was not one of Kingsland's attributes, and dazed by the sudden turn of affairs, he allowed Stanley to take the letter.

"Why, it's not addressed!" he exclaimed, examining the envelope which bore no mark save the initials A. R. in blue, on the flap. "Whom is it to go to?"

"I don't know," replied the Lieutenant, shamefacedly.

"Where did it come from?"

Kingsland looked about for help or an inspiration, and finding neither fell back on the same form of words, repeating, "I don't know."

Miss Fitzgerald had started up on the impulse of the moment, but sank back in her seat as the Secretary said, slipping the missive into the inside pocket of his dress-coat:—

"I am afraid I must constitute myself a dead-letter office, and hold this mysterious document till called for."

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CHAPTER III

PARLOUS TIMES

"We are living in parlous times," said the Chief Confidential Clerk, of the Departmental Head of the South American Section of Her Majesty's Foreign Office.

Mr. Stanley, Secretary of South American Legation, bowed and said nothing. Inwardly, he wondered just what "parlous" meant, and made a mental note to look it up in a dictionary on the first opportunity that offered.

The Chief Confidential Clerk was the most genial of men, who always impressed one with the feeling that, diplomatic as he might be at all other times, this was the particular moment when he would relax his vigilance and unburden his official heart. As a result, those who came to unearth his secrets generally ended by telling him theirs.

In this instance neither of the speakers knew anything of the subject in hand, a treaty relating to the possession of a sand bar at the mouth of a certain South American river. A matter said to have had its rise in a fit of royal indigestion, in the sixteenth century. Somehow it had never been settled. Each new ministry, each new revolutionary government was "bound to see it through," and the treaty was constantly on the verge of being "brought to an amicable conclusion," just as it had been for nearly three hundred years.

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The fate of nations had, in short, drifted on that sand-bar and stuck fast, at least the fate of one nation and the clemency of another.

The Chief Confidential Clerk was not conscious that he was really ignorant of the subject in hand—no true diplomat ever is—the young Secretary was painfully aware of his own unenlightenment.

"You are to understand," his Minister had said, "that you know nothing concerning the status of the Treaty."

"But, I do not know anything, Your Excellency," admitted the Secretary.

"So much the better," replied the Minister, "for then you cannot talk about it."

The result of this state of affairs was, that at the end of half an hour the Chief Confidential Clerk had discovered that the Secretary knew nothing, while the Secretary had discovered—nothing.

"We are living in parlous times," said the English official, "parlous times, Mr. Stanley."

Then his lunch arrived, and the interview closed in consequence.

"I wonder," said the Secretary, half to himself and half to the horse, as he trundled clubwards in a hansom, "I wonder if I could write out a report of that last remark; it might mean so much—or so little."

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Stanley did not worry much over his failure to extract information at the Foreign Office, because he was much more worried over deciding whether he was really in love with Belle Fitzgerald.

That young lady had been the cause of much anxiety to all those friends who had his interests at heart, and from whom he had received advice and covert suggestions, all tending to uphold the joys of a bachelor existence as compared with the uncertainties of married life. They had spoken with no uncertain voice. It was he who had wavered, to-day, believing that she was the one woman on earth for him; to-morrow, sure that it was merely infatuation. Now his decision had been forced. He was invited to a house-party at her aunt's, Mrs. Roberts; Belle would be there, and if he accepted, he would, in all probability, never leave Roberts' Hall a free man.

Miss Fitzgerald and the Secretary had seen a great deal of each other during the season just drawing to a close. At first, as he assured himself and his friends, it was merely "hail, fellow, well met," but when he came to know the Irish girl better, their relations assumed a different significance, as he gradually realised the isolated position she occupied. Interest had changed to pity. He regretted that, for lack of guidance, she seemed to be her own worst enemy, and feared that her really sweet nature might be hardened or embittered from contact with the world. He told himself he must decide at once whether he loved this wilful girl, and should ask her to give him the right to protect her from the world and from herself.

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Yet Stanley was keenly sensitive of the rashness of the step he contemplated. The sweet bells of memory ring out whether land or sea separates us. In spite of much honest effort on his part, the picture of a beautiful face could not be banished from his mind. Now, just when he was convincing himself that he could put the past behind him, Inez crossed his path again.

He grew bitter at the thought. "She did not trust me. She never loved me or she could not have married that scoundrel, Darcy. It is all over now—and Belle needs a protector."

On the other hand, he realised how many reasons opposed such a course of action. His father, his colleagues, and society, demanded something better of him. That very social position which had put him in the way of meeting his inamorata required of him in return that he should not make a mesalliance, while sober common sense assured him with an irritating persistence that the world

could not be persuaded to perceive that Miss Fitzgerald had any of the necessary qualifications for the position which he proposed to give her. But he was young and high-spirited, and these very limitations which society imposed, irritated him into a desire to do something rash. He was still, however, possessed of a substratum of worldly wisdom, and knowing that left to his own devices he would certainly go to Mrs. Roberts', regardless of what might follow, he resolved to give himself one more chance. If he could not guide himself, he might, in this crisis, be guided by the stronger will of another. He determined to ask advice of his friend Kent-Lauriston.

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In a case of this sort, Lionel Kent-Lauriston was thoroughly in his element, having assisted at hundreds of the little comedies and tragedies of life, which do more to determine the future of men and women than any great crisis.

His creed may be summed up in the fact that he loved all things to be done "decently and in order." In a word he was a connoisseur of life, and the good things thereof. Unobtrusive, always harmonious, he knew everyone worth knowing, went everywhere worth going. Lucky the youth who had him for his guide, philosopher and friend. He could show him life's pleasantest paths.

Stanley was one of these favoured few. They had met soon after he came to England, and the younger man had conceived a genuine admiration for the older.

It seems hardly necessary to say, that Kent-Lauriston, though (or because) a bachelor, was an authority on matchmaking. He had reduced it to a fine art. His keen eye saw the subtle distinction between the vulgar buying and selling of a woman, with the consequent desecration of the marriage service, and the blind love, which, hot-headed, sacrifices all the considerations of wisdom to the passion of the hour.

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"Never marry without love," he would say, "but learn to love wisely."

It was to this man that the Secretary determined to make confession. Kent-Lauriston, he was sure, did not approve of the match and would use his strongest arguments to dissuade him from it. Stanley knew this was the moral tonic he needed. He did not believe it would be successful, but he determined to give it a fair trial.

The Secretary reached his decision and his destination at one and the same moment, and feeling that his good resolutions would be the better sustained by a little nutriment, made his way to the luncheon table for which this particular club was justly famous; indeed, few people patronised it for anything else, situated as it was, almost within city limits, and boasting, as its main attraction, an excellent view of the most uninteresting portion of the Thames.

Happening to look in the smoking-room, on his way upstairs, Stanley caught sight of Lieutenant Kingsland.

"Hello!" he said. "You lunching here?"

"I don't know," returned the other, laughing uneasily. "I'm inclined to think not. Viscount Chilsworth asked me to meet him here to-day; but, as he's half an hour late already——"

"You think your luncheon is rather problematical?"

"I was just coming to that conclusion."

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"Make it a certainty, then, and lunch with me."

"My dear fellow, you forget that I dined with you last night."

"What of that? When I first came to London, I was told that an English club was a place where one went to be alone—but I prefer company to custom."

"Yes—but there are limits to imposing on a friend's hospitality. While I'm about it, I might as well share your breakfast and bed."

"Not the latter, in any event, as long as I'm in small bachelor quarters."

The Lieutenant laughed.

"Well, then," he began, "if you'll forgive me——"

"There's one thing I won't forgive you," interrupted the Secretary, "and that is keeping me a moment longer from my lunch, for I'm ravenously hungry. I just want to send a telegram to Kent-Lauriston, asking him to meet me at the club this afternoon, and then I'll be with you."

Once they were settled at the table and the orders given, their conversation turned to general subjects.

"I suppose we'll all meet at the end of the week in Sussex," said the Lieutenant.

"Yes," replied Stanley, "at Mrs. Roberts'."

"Is it to be a large party?"

"I don't imagine so. Sort of house-warming. They've just inherited the estate. Belle Fitzgerald, you and I, and the Port Arthurs— I don't know who else."

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"That reminds me," exclaimed Kingsland, "I must hurry through lunch. I promised the

Marchioness I'd do a picture exhibition with her Ladyship at three, and it's nearly two, now."

"Under orders as usual, I see," said his host, and the Lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and looked sheepish. He was weak, impecunious, handsome and dashing, and rumour said just a bit wild, and, moreover, was known throughout the social world of London as the tame cat of the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur; a very distant relative of his, and as the especially privileged companion of her only daughter, Lady Isabelle McLane, on the tacit understanding that he would never so far forget himself as to aspire to that daughter's hand.

"I say," remarked that officer, who did not relish the turn which the conversation had taken, "tell me something about your country."

"Do you desire a complete geographical and political disquisition?" asked the Secretary, laughing.

"Hardly. What's it like?"

"The climate and Government of my country are both tropical."

"I suppose you mean intense, and subject to violent changes."

The Secretary looked out of the window at the most uninteresting view of the Thames, saying:

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"I think we're going to have a thunderstorm."

"Am I to take that remark in a political sense?" inquired the Lieutenant.

"I don't believe I've told you," said his host abruptly, discontinuing an inopportune subject, "that I'm a South American only by force of circumstances. My parents were born in the States."

"My dear fellow," Kingsland hastened to assure him, "I never had the least intention of prying into your affairs, domestic or diplomatic. I was merely wondering if the country you represent brought forth any staple products, which would yield a profitable return to foreign investment?"

The Secretary mentioned one—which was said to be connected prominently with the treaty which was the subject of his recent visit to the Foreign Office—and so was naturally uppermost in his mind—"but," he added, "that staple is practically a monopoly, controlled by a firm of manufacturers, whose headquarters are in London, and, unless they fail, the outside public would have little chance in the same field."

"I suppose their failure is hardly likely."

"I'm not so sure of that—it all depends on a treaty now pending between your Government and mine. Frankly, if I had any money to invest, I would not expend it in that direction."

"Thank you. By the way, if your land doesn't produce good investments, it certainly brings forth beautiful women. What wonderful beauty that Madame Darcy has, who dined with us last night."

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"Our fathers are old friends," replied Stanley.

"Ah, what a pity," said the Lieutenant.

"I don't understand."

"That she should not have married you, I mean, instead of that boulder Darcy. I have heard his name more than once in official circles, and there's precious little to be said in his favour. But his wife—ah, there's a woman any man might be proud to marry. Such beauty, such refinement, so much reserve. Rather a contrast to our fascinating Belle, eh?"

"I have the greatest respect for Miss Fitzgerald," said the Secretary stiffly.

"Yes, but not of the marriageable quality," said the Lieutenant, speaking *ex cathedra* as one who had also been in the fair Irish girl's train. "Oh no, my dear fellow, a woman of Madame Darcy's type is the woman for you. The Fitzgerald, believe me, would break a man's heart or his bank account, in no time."

"Look here," said Stanley shortly, "I don't like that sort of thing."

"Don't turn nasty, old chap," said Kingsland. "I'm only speaking for your good. I'd be the last man to run down a woman. I love the whole sex, and the little Fitzgerald is no end jolly, to play with, but to marry—! By the way, have you heard of her latest exploit. The town's ringing with it. She —"

"Thanks, I'd rather not hear it," replied the Secretary, who just now was trying to forget some phases of her nature.

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"By Jove!" broke in the Lieutenant—"speaking of angels—there she is now."

"What, down in this section of the city?"

"Yes, in a hansom cab."

"An angel in a hansom!" cried the Secretary, "that's certainly a combination worth seeing," and rising, he stepped to the window, followed by Kingsland. The two men were just in time to see the lady in question dash by along the Embankment, and to note that she was not alone. Indeed, even

the fleeting glimpse which they caught of her companion was sufficiently startling to engrave his likeness indelibly on their minds.

He was an oldish man, of say sixty, clad in a nondescript grey suit of no distinguishable style or date, surmounted by a soft felt hat of the type which distinguished Americans are said to affect in London, while his high cheek bones and prominent nose might have given him credit for having Indian blood in his veins, had not his dead white skin belied the charge. He was possessed, moreover, of huge bushy brows, beneath which a ferret's keen eyes peeped out, and were never for an instant still.

"Gad!" exclaimed the Lieutenant, "this promises to be the strangest escapade of all."

"Who the devil is he?" demanded Stanley, facing around, with almost an accusing note in his voice.

The Lieutenant returned his glance squarely.

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"Why, he's the man who gave her—I mean, who was talking to her last night at the Hyde Park Club."

"Last night? I don't remember seeing him."

"It was when you were waltzing up and down stairs in search of a chaperon."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied the Lieutenant brusquely, lighting a cigarette, and thrusting his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"But you must have some idea?"

"Never saw him before last night, I assure you. Must be off now, old chap. Late for my appointment already. Thanks awfully for the lunch. See you at Lady Rainsford's tea this afternoon? Yes. All right. Hansom!"

And he was gone.

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CHAPTER IV

A LADY IN DISTRESS

After lunch the Secretary returned to the Legation and made out his report to his Minister, concerning the treaty. He had looked up the word "parlous" in the dictionary, and found that it meant, "whimsical, tricky,"—a sinister interpretation he felt, when connected with anything diplomatic; moreover the Foreign Office was distressingly uninformed on the subject, another reason for suspicion. Yet, as far as he knew—only the mere formalities of settlement remained, the ratification by vote of his home Government—the exchange of protocols—and behold it was accomplished—much to the credit of his Minister and the satisfaction of all concerned. Doubtless the visit was nothing more than a bit of routine work, and his private affairs seeming for the time more important, he dismissed it from his mind as not worthy of serious consideration and compiled an elaborate report of three pages, not forgetting to mention the arrival of the Chief Clerk's lunch, as matter which might legitimately be used to fill up space. This done, he was about to leave the office in order to meet his appointment with Kent-Lauriston, when John, the genial functionary of the Legation, beamed upon him from the door, presenting him a visiting card, and informing him that a lady was waiting in the ante-room.

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"An' she's that 'ansome, sir, it would do your eyes good to see 'er."

The Secretary answered somewhat testily that his eyes were in excellent condition as it was, and that the lady did not deserve to be seen at all for coming so much after office-hours, and delaying him just as he was about to keep an appointment—then his eyes happened to fall on the card and his tone changed at once.

"Madame Darcy!" he exclaimed. "Why, what can have brought her to see me!—John, show the lady in at once, and—say my time is quite at her service."

A glance at his fair chaperon of the night before, as she entered the room, told him that she was in great trouble, and he sprang forward to take both her hands in his, with a warmth of greeting which he would have found it hard to justify, except on an occasion of such evident sorrow.

"Inez—Madame Darcy," he said, leading her to his most comfortable arm-chair—"this is indeed a pleasure—but do not tell me that you are in distress."

"I am in very great trouble."

"Anything that I can do to serve you—I need hardly say," he murmured, and paused, fascinated by this picture of lovely grief.

"I was prompted to come to you," she replied, "by your kindness of last evening, for I knew you

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had seen and understood, and were still my friend, and also my national representative in a foreign land, to ask your aid for a poor country-woman who is in danger of being deprived of her freedom, if not of her reason."

"But surely you are not speaking of yourself!"

"Yes, of myself."

The young diplomat said nothing for a moment or two, he was arranging his ideas—adjusting them to this new and interesting phase of his experience with Madame Darcy.

As a Secretary of Legation is generally the father confessor of his compatriots—he had ceased to be surprised at anything. People may deceive their physician, their lawyer, or the partner of their joys and sorrows; but to their country's representative in a strange land they unburden their hearts.

"Tell me," he said finally, breaking the silence, "just what your trouble is."

"I need sympathy and help."

"The first you have already," he replied with a special reserve in his manner, for he felt somehow that it was hardly fair that she should bring herself to his notice again, when he had almost made up his mind to marry a lady of whom all his friends disapproved. Indeed, in the last few minutes the force of Kingsland's remarks had made themselves felt very strongly, and he especially exerted himself to be brusque, feeling in an odd kind of way that he owed it to Miss Fitzgerald. So putting on his most official tone he added, "to help you, Madame Darcy, I must understand your case clearly."

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"Don't call me by that name—give me my own—as you once did. My husband's a brute."

"Quite so, undoubtedly; but unfortunately that does not change your name."

"Would you mind shutting the door?" she replied somewhat irrelevantly. They were, as has been said, in the Secretary's private office, a dreary room, its furniture, three chairs, a desk and a bookcase full of forbidding legal volumes, its walls littered with maps, and its one window looking out on the unloveliness of a London business street.

As he returned to his seat, after executing her request, she began abruptly:—

"You're not a South American."

"No, my father was a Northerner, but, as you know, he owned large sugar plantations in your country, and if training and sympathy can make me a South American, I am one."

"You're a Protestant."

"Yes, so are you."

"It is my mother's faith, and though I was brought up in a convent at New Orleans, I've not forsaken it. I feel easier in speaking to you on that account."

"You may rest assured, my dear, that what you say to me will go no farther. 'Tis my business to keep secrets."

"Two years ago," she began abruptly, plunging into her story, "after our—after you left home, an Englishman, a soldier returning from the East incapacitated by a fever, and travelling for his health, craved a night's rest at my father's house. As you know, in a country like ours, where decent inns are few and far between, travellers are always welcome. It was the hot season, we pressed him to stay for a day or two, he accepted, and a return of the fever made him our guest for months. He needed constant nursing—I—I was the only white woman on the plantation."

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"I see," said Stanley. "You nursed him, he recovered, was grateful, paid you homage."

"Remember I was brought up in a convent. I was so alone and so unhappy. He told me you had married. I believed him—trusted him."

"Quite so. His name was Darcy. He is a liar."

"He is—my husband."

"A gentleman—I suppose?"

"The world accords him that title," she replied coldly.

"I understand— He's a man of means?"

"He has nothing but his pay."

"And you—but that question is unnecessary. Señor De Costa's name and estates are well known—and you are his only child."

"Yes, you're right," she burst out. "It's my money, my cursed money! Why do men call it a blessing! Oh, if I could trust him, I'd give him every penny of it. But I cannot, it's the one hold I have on him, and because I will not beggar myself to supply means for his extravagances he dares—"

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"Not personal violence, surely?"

"To put me away somewhere—in a retreat, he calls it. That means a madhouse."

"My dear Madame Darcy!"

"Call me Inez De Costa, I will *not* have that name of Darcy, I hate it."

"My dear Inez, then; your fears are groundless; they can't put sane people in madhouses any longer in England, except in cheap fiction—it's against the law."

"It's very easy for you to sit there and talk of law. You, who are protected by your office, but for me, for a poor woman whose liberty is threatened!"

"I assure you that you're in no such danger as you apprehend."

"But if I were put away, you would help me?"

"You shall suffer no injustice that we can prevent. You may return home and rest easy on that score."

"I shall never return to that man."

"Why not return to your father?"

"Would that I could!" she exclaimed, her eyes brimming with tears. "But how can I, with no money and no friends?"

"I thought you said——" began the Secretary, but his interruption was lost in the flow of her eloquence.

"I've not a penny. I can cash no cheque that's not made to his order, and to come to you I must degrade myself by borrowing a sovereign from my maid. I've travelled third-class!" [Pg 47]

The Secretary smiled at the ante-climax, saying:

"Many people of large means travel third-class habitually."

"But not a De Costa," she broke in, and then continued her narration with renewed ardour.

"I've no roof to shelter me to-night. No where to go. No clothes except what I wear. No money but those few shillings; but I would rather starve and die in the streets than go back to him. I'm rich. I've powerful friends. You can't have the heart to turn away from me. Have you forgotten the old friendship? You must do something—something to save me——" and in the passion, of her southern nature she threw herself at his feet, and burst into an agony of tears.

Stanley assisted her to rise, got her a glass of water, and had cause, for the second time in that interview, to thank his stars that love had already shot another shaft, because if it were not for Belle, his official position, and the fact that the Señora had one husband already—well—it was a relief to be forced to tell her that legations were not charitable institutions, and that much as he might desire to aid her, neither he nor his colleagues could interfere in her private affairs.

"Then you refuse to assist me—you leave me to my fate!" she cried, starting up, a red flush of anger mantling her cheek. [Pg 48]

"Not at all," he hastened to say. "On the contrary, I'm going to help you all I know how. I can't interfere myself, but I can refer you to a friend of mine, whom you can thoroughly trust, and who's in a position to aid you in the matter."

"And his name?"

"His name is Peter Sanks, the lawyer of the Legation, a gentleman, truly as well as technically. A countryman of yours who has practised both here and at home, and who always feels a keen interest in the affairs of his compatriots. He has chambers in the Middle Temple. I'll give you his address on my card."

"You're most kind— I'll throw myself without delay on the clemency of this Señor——"

"Sanks."

"*Madre de Dios!* What a name!"

"I dare say he was Don Pedro Sanchez at home, but that would hardly go here. I've written him a line on my visiting card, requesting him to do everything he can for you, and, of course, I need hardly say to you, as a friend, not as an official, that my time and service are entirely devoted to your interests. There is nothing that I possess which you may not command."

"And for me, you do this?" she asked, looking up wistfully in his face.

He took her two little hands in his, and bending over, kissed the tips of their fingers.

"I cannot express the gratitude," she began.

"Don't," he said, cutting short her profuse thanks. "It's nothing, I assure you. Here is my card to Sanks. Better go to him at once, or you may miss him. It's nearly three o'clock." And feeling that it was unsafe to trust himself longer in her presence, he touched the bell, saying to the [Pg 49]

confidential clerk who answered it:—

"The door, John."

A moment later she was gone, leaving only the subtle perfume of her presence in the room. Stanley threw himself moodily into the nearest chair. It was too bad that this bewitching woman should be married to a brute. It was too bad that he couldn't do more to help her, and it was—yes, it really was too bad, that she should have come again into his life just at the present moment. She was so exactly like what he had fancied the ideal woman he was to marry ought to be. But she wasn't a bit like Belle, and the reflection was decidedly disturbing. And now, he supposed, she would get a divorce, and—oh, pshaw! it wasn't his affair anyway, and he was late for his appointment with Kent-Lauriston.

He rang his office bell sharply, picking up his hat and gloves as he did so, and saying to the messenger who answered his summons:—

"Give this report to his Excellency, John, and let me have some visiting cards, will you— No, no, not any official ones. Some with my private address on."

"Very sorry Sir, but they're all out. I ordered some more day before yesterday, Sir. They should have come by now."

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"Just my luck, why didn't you attend to them earlier?"

"Isn't there one on your desk, Sir. I'm sure I saw one lying there this morning."

"Why, yes, so there was." And he turned hastily back, only to exclaim after a moment's hopeless rummaging:—

"Confound it! I must have given it to Señora De Costa!"

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CHAPTER V

A GENTLEMAN IN DISTRESS

Kent-Lauriston was prompt to his appointment, and it took but a few moments to establish the Secretary and himself in a private room with a plentiful supply of cigarettes, and two whiskeys and sodas.

Stanley was nervous and showed it. Kent-Lauriston adjusted his monocle, tugged at his long sandy moustache, and surveyed his companion from head to foot.

"Not feeling fit?" he queried. "Suffering from political ennui?"

"Oh, my health is all right, as far as that goes——"

"Yes, I see," this last remark meditatively. Then he added. "Some deuced little scrape?"

Stanley nodded.

"Woman?"

"It concerns a lady—perhaps two."

Kent-Lauriston frowned, and tugged his moustache a trifle harder, to imply that he now understood the affair to be of a more complex order, requiring the aid of skilful diplomacy, in place of the simple directness of five-pound notes.

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"Want my advice, I suppose?"

"Yes," admitted Stanley, "and so I'd better make a clean breast of the matter."

"Decidedly."

"The fact is, I want to marry—or rather, don't want to marry—no, that's not it either— I want to marry the girl bad enough, but I think I'd better not. It would be what the world—what you might call, a foolish match."

"Deucedly hard hit, I suppose?"

"You see," continued the Secretary, ignoring his friend's question, "I know I oughtn't to marry her, but left to myself, I'd do it, and I need a jolly good rowing—only you mustn't be disrespectful to the lady—I—I couldn't stand that."

"I think I know her name."

"Miss Fitzgerald. You dined with her at the Hyde Park Club last evening."

"Daughter of old Fitzgerald of the —th Hussars——"

"I—I believe that was her father's regiment, but now she lives——"

"Lives!" interjected Kent-Lauriston. "No, she doesn't live—visits round with her relatives—old Irish ancestry—ruined castles and no rents—washy blue eyes and hair, at present, golden."

"She is one of the most beautiful Irish girls I've ever seen," cried Stanley. "In repose her face is spirituelle. She is a cousin of Lord Westmoorland."

"Fourteenth cousin—twice removed."

"I don't know her degree of relationship."

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"I do."

"She's splendid vitality and courage," said the Secretary, desirous of turning the conversation, which threatened to drift into dangerous channels. "She's dashing, thoroughly dashing."

"Gad, I'm with you there! I've seldom seen a better horse-woman. I've watched her more than once in the hunting field put her gee at hedges and ditches that many a Master of Hounds would have fought shy of,—and clear 'em, too."

Stanley smiled, delighted to hear a word of commendation from a quarter where he least expected it, but Kent-Lauriston's next remark was less gratifying.

"Little rapid, isn't she? Trifle fond of fizz-water and cigarettes?"

"She's the spirits of youth," said the Secretary, a trifle coldly.

"Let me see," mused his adviser. "How about that Hunt Ball at Leamington?"

"I wasn't there, and I must ask you to remember that you're talking of a lady."

"Um, pity!" said his friend ambiguously, and added, "How far have you put your foot in it?"

"Well, I haven't asked her to marry me."

"Ah. Order me another whiskey and soda, please," and Kent-Lauriston sat puffing a cigarette, and tugging at his moustache till the beverage came. Then he drank it thoughtfully, not saying a word; a silence that was full of meaning to Stanley, who flushed and began to fidget uneasily about the room.

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Having finished the last drop, and disposed of his cigarette, his adviser looked up and said shortly:—

"How did this begin?"

"I met her some months ago—but only got to know her intimately at the races."

"Derby?"

"No, Ascot."

"Royal Enclosure, of course."

"Royal Enclosure, of course. She was visiting her aunt."

"I know. That type of girl has dozens of aunts."

"Her uncle brought her down and introduced us. He left her a moment to go to the Paddock and never came back."

"Um, left you to do the honours."

"Exactly so, and I did them. Saw the crowd, saw the gees, had lunch—you know the programme."

"Only too well. Do any betting?"

"A little."

"Thought it was against your principles. You told me so once."

"I—I didn't bet—that is——"

"Oh, I see. She did."

"Rather—a good round sum."

"You knew the amount?"

"Well, the fact is—she'd given her uncle her pocket-book, and he got lost."

"Clever uncle; so you paid the reckoning."

"She said she knew the winning horse."

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"We always do know the winners."

"This was an exception to prove the rule."

"So you put down—and she never paid up."

"Youth is forgetful, and of course—you can't dun a lady."

"No—you can't dun a *lady!*"

"Look here!" cried Stanley. "I won't stand that sort of thing!"

"Beg your pardon, I was thinking aloud, beastly bad habit, purely reminiscent, I assure you. Go on."

"Well, of course I saw something of her after that. Aunt invited me to call, also to dine."

"What about that trip down the Thames?"

"Why, I'd arranged my party for that before I met Belle—I mean Miss Fitzgerald."

"Oh, call her Belle, I know you do."

"And she happened to mention, quite accidentally, that one of her unaccomplished ideals was a trip down the Thames. I fear she's shockingly cramped for money you know, so as I happened to have a vacant place——"

"You naturally invited her— I wonder how she found out there was a vacant place," mused Kent-Lauriston.

"My dear fellow," reiterated Stanley. "I tell you she didn't even know I was getting it up. Of course if she had, she'd never have spoken of it. Miss Fitzgerald is far above touting for an invitation."

"Of course. Well you must have advanced considerably in your acquaintance during the trip. Had her quite to yourself, as it were, since I suppose she knew none of the party." [Pg 56]

"Oh, but she did. She knew Lieutenant Kingsland."

"To be sure. He was the man who wagered her a dozen dozen pairs of gloves that she wouldn't swim her horse across the Serpentine in Hyde Park."

"And she won, by Jove! I can tell you she has pluck."

"And they were both arrested in consequence. I think the Lieutenant owed her some reparation, and I must say a trip down the Thames was most *à propos*."

"Look here, Kent-Lauriston, if you're insinuating that Kingsland put her up to——"

"Far from it, my boy, how could I insinuate anything so unlikely? Well, what other unattainable luxuries did you bestow?"

"Nothing more to speak of—why, yes. Do you know the poor little thing had never seen Irving, or been inside the Lyceum?"

"So you gave the 'poor little thing' a box party, and a champagne supper at the Savoy afterwards, I'll be bound, and yet surely it was at the Lyceum that——"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, I was becoming reminiscent once more; it's a bad habit. Let's have the rest of it."

"There isn't much more to tell. I've ridden with her sometimes in the Park. Given her a dinner at the Wellington, a few teas at the Hyde Park Club. I think that's all—flowers perhaps, nothing in the least compromising." [Pg 57]

"Compromising! Why, it's enough to have married you to three English girls."

"She's Irish."

"I beg her pardon," and Kent-Lauriston bowed in mock humility.

"What do you think of my case, honestly?"

"Honestly, I think she means to have you, and if I was a betting man, I'd lay the odds on her chances of winning."

"Confound you!" broke in Stanley. "You've such a beastly way of taking the words out of a man's mouth and twisting them round to mean something else. Here I started in to tell you of my acquaintance with Miss Fitzgerald, and by the time I've finished you've made it appear as if her actions had been those of an adventuress, a keen, unprincipled, up-to-date Becky Sharp. Why, you've hardly left her a shred of character. I swear you wrong her, she's not what you've made me make her out,—not at all like that."

"What is she like then?"

"She is a poor girl without resources or near relations, thrown on the world in that most anomalous of positions, shabby gentility; who has to endure no end of petty insults; insults, covert, if not open, from men like you, who ought to know better. I tell you she's good and straight, straight as a die; brave, fearless, plucky—isn't the word for it. A little headstrong, perhaps, and careless of what the world may say, but whom has she had to teach her better? There's no harm in her though. Of that I'm sure. And underneath an exterior of what may seem [Pg 58]

flippancy, her heart rings true; but you're so prejudiced you'll never admit it."

"On the contrary," replied his friend, lighting another cigarette, "I'm perfectly willing to agree to nearly all that you have just said in her favour—all that is of vital importance, at least. I know something of this young lady's career, and I'm prepared to say I don't believe there is anything bad in her. She has to live by her wits, and they must be sharp in consequence; and having to carve out her own destiny instead of having a mother to do so for her, she has become self-reliant, and to some extent careless of the impression she makes, which has given her a reputation for indiscretion which she really does not deserve. She's certainly charming, and undeniably dashing, though whether it arises from bravery or foolhardiness, I'm not prepared to say; but one thing I can state most emphatically—you're not the man to marry her."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because you're too good for her."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"No—matter of fact."

Stanley flushed angrily—but Kent-Lauriston continued:

"No need to fly into a passion; what I say is perfectly true. The only way for Belle Fitzgerald to marry, be happy, and develop the best that is in her, is to have a husband whose methods—forceful or otherwise—she can understand and appreciate. You are too good for her. Her struggle with life has been a hard one, she has seen the seamy side of human nature, and it has taught her to estimate all men at their worst. She'd consider your virtue, weakness. You could never take her to South America and the ancestral plantation; it would bore her to extinction. She'd require to live in London or keep open house in the country, and she'd gather about her the set she goes with now. Her companions, her manner of life, you think unworthy of her; already they grate on your finer sensibilities, blinded as you are; believe me, they'd grate much more when she bore your name. No, the only man who could marry her, be happy, make her happy, and keep his good name untarnished in the future, would be one who knows her world better than she does herself; who has a past that even she would shudder at; who has no ideals, no aspirations, just manly vigour and brute force; who could guide her with a hand of steel in a glove of velvet, and pull her up short at the danger line, because he knows what lies beyond, and she knows that he knows. She'd tire of you in six months; she would not dare to tire of the other man."

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"I think you wrong her," said Stanley wearily. "Indeed, your own criticism of her might be applied to yourself. Your knowledge of the world has caused you unconsciously to misjudge a nature you cannot understand. Yet I know that my friends would all voice your sentiments—that they'd all be disappointed in the match."

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"Exactly so—and they'd be in the right—excuse me for being blunt, but with your wealth and social position you would be simply throwing yourself away."

"I know all that—but—I'm so sorry for her."

"You could serve her better as her friend than as her husband. She must live your life or you must live hers—in either case, one of you would be unhappy."

"I half believe you're right. Confound it! I know you're right, and yet—how am I to get out of it with honour?"

"Don't have any false sentimentality about that, my boy. Believe me, she understands the situation much better than you do. So far you have been chums; if you stop there, she is too much a woman of the world to lay it up against you. You've given her much pleasure during the past season and she appreciates it; but she's quite enough of a philosopher to accept cheerfully the half-loaf."

"But I can't be just a friend."

"Not now, perhaps, but you can a few months later, when other things have supervened."

"If I see her again—it's all over."

"Don't see her then."

"That is just the point. She's going to stay with an aunt in Sussex."

"Another aunt?"

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"Yes, Mrs. Roberts, and I am invited to go down to the house-party to-morrow, and have accepted, and shall come back engaged."

"Send your excuses, by all means, write to-day."

"Yes, I suppose it's for the best, but you know I hate to do it. Somehow I can't think all you imply of her."

"My dear boy," said Kent-Lauriston, "I may be doing the lady gross injustice and keeping you out of a very good thing, but even in that case you must not go to Sussex. For heaven's sake, man, take time to consider! It's too important a matter to be decided in a hurry. If she cares for you

and is worthy of you, she'll give you every fair opportunity of asking her the fateful question and a reasonable amount of time to think it over. Take a fortnight for calm reflection; it's very little to allow for what may be a life's happiness or misery. Meanwhile try and keep your mind off it. Run over to Paris with me. If at the end of our trip you still feel the same towards her, I won't stand in your way, I promise you. Come, is that a fair offer?"

"Most kind," said Stanley, "and to show you my appreciation of all the trouble you've taken, I'll send my regrets to Mrs. Roberts by the first post."

"Good boy!" said his mentor, sententiously.

"I don't know about Paris, as to whether I can get leave, I mean."

"Nonsense, you have already arranged your leave for the house-party, I'll be bound. Dine with me here to-morrow night at eight, and we'll talk it over." [Pg 62]

"Thanks, I will. I must be going now, I have to look in at a tea or two."

"Not to meet our charming enchantress?"

"No, no, trust me, I'll play fair," and he was gone.

Kent-Lauriston puffed meditatively at his cigarette, now that he was alone, and tugged hard at his moustache.

"The little Fitzgerald a pattern of all the virtues, eh?" he said, half to himself, and half to the departing Secretary, and added, under his breath:

"Gad! How she would rook him! Never been to the Lyceum or down the Thames! May she be forgiven!" [Pg 63]

CHAPTER VI

AFTERNOON TEA

The Secretary had stated that he had several calls to make, but they resolved themselves into one, the fact being that the day was disagreeable and the prospect of riding vast distances in hansom cabs, interspersed with short intervals of tea, not alluring. He therefore decided to confine his attentions to one hostess, and selected his missing chaperon, Lady Rainsford, whose indisposition had come so near wrecking his little dinner. Her Ladyship had much to commend her. Her house was central and large, one knew one would meet friends there, and there were plenty of nooks and corners for tête-à-têtes, while, as her circle was most select, and she received frequently, there was a fair chance that her rooms would not be crowded.

Stanley found his hostess quite recovered, and standing by the side of a bright fire in a diminutive fireplace, for the rain had made the day a bit chilly.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary," she cried, as he entered. "I was beginning to think you'd not forgiven me for leaving you in the lurch last night." [Pg 64]

"Don't speak of it, I beg," he said, hastening to deprecate her apologies. "I should have called to enquire the first thing this morning."

"You should most certainly, and I ought to tax you with base desertion," she went on.

"That would be impossible, but I'm a victim of stern necessity. Society demands all my spare time, and I'm forced, as one always is in London, to neglect my friends for my acquaintances."

"You deserve a thorough rating, and if it were not for my duties as hostess, I'd give it to you here and now."

"I claim the protection of your hearth," he rejoined, laughing.

"Oh! But it's such a tiny hearth," she remonstrated.

"And I," he added, "am such an insignificant personage."

"I won't have you run yourself down in that way. I believe you are a great social lion. Come, confess, how many teas have you been to in the last seven days?"

"Fifty-six."

"Good gracious! How do you men stand it, and having something to eat and a cup of tea at every place?"

"Shall I enlighten you as to the professional secrets of the habitual tea-goer? We don't."

"But surely you can't always refuse."

"I never refuse. I always accept the cup—and put it down somewhere."

"For another guest to knock over. You're a hardened reprobate, but this time you shall not escape. You know Miss Campbell, who is pouring tea for me this afternoon? No? Then I'll introduce you. Miss Campbell, this is Secretary Stanley, a member of the Diplomatic Corps, who has just confessed to me that he habitually eludes the trustful hostess and the proffered tea. You'll give him a cup and see that he drinks it before he leaves the room," and the vivacious little woman departed, leaving him no alternative but to accept his fate meekly.

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"How do you like your tea?" inquired Miss Campbell, a young lady deft of hand, but with few ideas.

"Lemon and no sugar."

"How nasty! But then, I forgot you never really drink it, Lady Rainsford says. But this time——"

"This time," he replied, "I'm a lamb led to the slaughter."

Miss Campbell said, "Really?" Then there followed an awkward silence.

Looking around for some means of escape, he saw a face in the crowd, that caused him to start, so utterly unexpected and out of place did it seem, considering what he had heard that afternoon. It was the face of Colonel Darcy.

He did not think the man knew him, and for obvious reasons he did not care to be introduced; so he turned again to Miss Campbell, who, seeing no alternative, rose to the occasion and continued the conversation by remarking:—

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"Is it true that you go to such an enormous number of teas? What do you find to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't find much. I talk about the same thing at every tea. If you meet other people it makes no difference."

"How clever of you!"

"On the contrary it's simply dulness, and because I'm lazy—I——" but he left his sentence unfinished, for Miss Campbell's attention was palpably wavering, and her glance spoke of approaching deliverance. He looked over his shoulder to see Darcy advancing with Lieutenant Kingsland.

The two officers had met in the crush a few minutes before, and the Colonel had lost no time in taking Kingsland to task for his stupidity of the past night.

"I'm no end sorry," the Lieutenant said, in very apologetic tones.

"That doesn't give me my letter," growled the Colonel.

"I know I'm an awful duffer," assented Kingsland, "but when he came up behind me and asked questions about it, I was so staggered I let him take it right out of my hands. It wasn't addressed, you know, and I naturally couldn't say who gave it to me."

"I should hope not indeed."

"Well, what shall I do—ask him for it?"

"No, no, leave it alone; you've blundered enough. You all meet at a country house to-morrow."

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"Yes."

"Well, trust its recovery to her; she'll get it, if he has it with him. If he leaves it behind in London so much the easier for me."

"But I thought you were coming down——"

"You think a great deal too much, and your actions are——"

"Sh!" whispered the Lieutenant, laying his hand on Darcy's arm. "He's looking our way, he'll hear us."

Stanley had not caught a word of the previous conversation, but a whisper sometimes carries much farther than the ordinary tones of the voice, and he heard the caution and saw the gesture which accompanied it, very distinctly.

The Colonel and the Lieutenant were close upon him by this time, and Stanley, who had no wish to be recognised, began to move off, and disappeared in the crowd, determined to make the best of his way to the door. He was terribly bored.

He was not destined to escape quite so easily, however, for Lady Isabelle McLane sighted him in transit, and in a moment more had drawn him into a protecting corner with two seats, and settled down to a serious conversation.

"I hear you're going down to the Roberts'," she said; "I'm invited too."

"Then I'm all the more sorry that I'm not to be there," he replied.

"You surprise me; I supposed your acceptance was of some standing. I hope there's nothing wrong, that your chief hasn't forgotten his position, and turned fractious?"

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"Oh, no, my chief behaves very well," Stanley hastened to assure her, "but the fact is—I, well, I don't find it convenient."

"Or, in other words, you've some reason for not wanting to go."

He assented, having learned by long and bitter experience, that when a woman makes up her mind to exert her faculties of instinct, it is easier by far to acquiesce at once in any conclusion to which she may have jumped, however erroneous.

"Will you be shocked if I say I'm glad of it?"

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders; he thought he knew what was coming.

"It certainly isn't complimentary to me," he replied; "but you've always exercised the prerogative of a friend to tell disagreeable truths."

"Now, that's very unkind, Mr. Stanley. I'm sure I only do it for your good."

"My dear Lady Isabelle, if you'll allow a man who is older than your charming self, and who has seen more of the world than I hope you'll ever do——"

"To tell a disagreeable truth?" she queried, filling out the sentence, as pique prompted her.

"To make a suggestion."

"It's the same thing. Go on."

"It's merely this. That you'll never achieve a great social success till you've realised that the well-being of your friends is your least important consideration."

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"Dear me, Mr. Secretary, I had no idea you were so tender in regard to Miss Fitzgerald."

"Who said anything about Miss Fitzgerald?"

"I did. I don't suppose you knew she was to be at Roberts' Hall."

"Certainly I know it. That is the very reason why I'm not going."

"I'm unfeignedly rejoiced. I've watched your progress in London with much interest, and believe me, Miss Fitzgerald is a stumbling-block in your path."

"All my friends, all the people who have my good at heart," he replied a trifle testily, "seem to think it their duty to warn me against Miss Fitzgerald."

"I should hate to see you become entangled."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's not even the shadow of a chance of such an event coming to pass. Miss Fitzgerald and I are both philosophers in our way. We attend to the serious business of society when we are apart, and indulge in a little mild and harmless flirtation when we occasionally meet, quite understanding that it means nothing, and is merely a means of relaxation, to keep our hands in, as it were."

"You say that so glibly, that I'm sure you must have said it before. It's flippant, and, besides that, it's not strictly true."

"Really!"

"Oh, excuse me if I've said anything rude, but this is a very, very serious matter, according to my way of thinking! and I do wish you'd consent to be serious about it just for once, won't you, to please me?"

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"Certainly, if you wish it, and I'm amazingly honoured that you should have spent so much of your valuable time over my poor affairs."

"That isn't a promising beginning," she said reflectively, "for a man who has agreed to be serious; but really now, you must know that I'm distressed about you. Your attentions to this lady are the talk of London."

"I've told you," he replied, "that I've refused this invitation to the house-party. Isn't that a sufficient answer, and won't it set your mind at rest?"

"Ye-es. Would you object if I asked just one more question? If you think it horribly impertinent you're just to refuse to answer it."

"Ask away."

"Had you, before refusing, previously accepted this invitation of Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes," he replied, a trifle sheepishly.

"Thanks, so much," she said, "I quite understand now."

"Then may we talk on some more congenial subject?"

"No, you must take me back to Mamma."

"What, was I only taken aside to be lectured?"

"Oh, no," she hastened to assure him, naïvely—it was her first season—"but we have been chatting already fifteen minutes, and that's long enough."

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"Oh, dear!" he said regretfully, "I thought I'd left Mrs. Grundy at the tea-table."

"You are so careless yourself that you forget that others have to be careful. Here comes Lieutenant Kingsland to my rescue. You would not believe it, Lieutenant," she continued, as that officer approached them, "this gentleman considers himself abused because I will not talk to him all the afternoon."

"I quite agree with him," said Kingsland, "not that I have ever had that felicity; it's one of my most cherished ambitions."

"You're as bad as he is; take me to Mamma, at once."

"I'll take you to have some tea. Won't that do as well?" and they moved away.

Ten minutes later the Secretary met the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur, who bore down on him at once.

"Mr. Stanley, have you seen my daughter?" she demanded. "I'm waiting to go home, and I can't find her anywhere."

"The last I saw of her she was with Lieutenant Kingsland."

"Oh, you *have* seen her this afternoon, then."

This last remark seemed tempered with a little disapproval.

"I had the pleasure of fifteen minutes' chat with her," continued the Secretary imperturbably. The Marchioness raised her eyebrows.

"At least she said it was fifteen minutes"—he hastened to explain—"it didn't seem as long to me; then Lieutenant Kingsland arrived."

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"I knew his mother," she said, "he comes of one of the best families in the land."

Most young men would have been crushed by the evident implication, but Stanley rose buoyantly to the occasion.

"He proposed——" he began.

The Marchioness started.

"To get her a cup of tea," continued the Secretary, placidly finishing his sentence.

"You may escort me to the tea-table," she replied, frigidly, and added: "We leave town tomorrow."

"Yes, I know," said her companion, as they edged their way through the crowd. "I'm invited myself."

"I should think you would find it difficult to attend to the duties of your office, if you make a practice of accepting so many invitations."

"Oh, I haven't accepted," he returned cheerfully.

The Marchioness was manifestly relieved.

They had by this time reached the tea-table. Lady Isabelle was nowhere in sight.

"I do not see my daughter," said her mother severely. "You told me she was here."

"Pardon me, I told you that Lieutenant Kingsland offered to get her a cup of tea."

"Well."

"But they went in the opposite direction."

"I won't detain you any longer, Mr. Stanley." The Dowager's tone was frigid. "If my daughter is in Lieutenant Kingsland's charge, I feel quite safe about her. She could not be in better hands."

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The Secretary bowed and went on his way rejoicing, and his way, in this instance, led him to his lodgings.

"I wonder why she is so down on me and so chummy with Kingsland," he thought. "If she'd seen him on my launch on the Thames, she might think twice before entrusting her daughter to his charge. Well, it's none of my business, any more than my affairs are the business of Lady Isabelle."

He was just a little annoyed at the persistency with which his friends joined in crying down a woman, who, whatever her faults might be, possessed infinite fascination, and was, he honestly believed, not half so bad as she was painted. He told himself that he must seek the first opportunity that circumstances gave him at Mrs. Roberts' house-party, to have a serious talk with Miss Fitzgerald and warn her, as gently as he could, of what was being said about her. Then he recollected with a start, that he had decided not to go, that he had promised to write a refusal

and—no, that he had *not* written. He would do so at once. His latch-key was in his hand.

He opened the door. There was his valet, Randell, standing in the hall, but with a look on his face which caused Stanley to question him as to its meaning, before he did anything else.

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"Puzzled? I am a bit puzzled. That's a fact, sir," Randell replied to his question. "And it's about that lady," indicating the Secretary's sitting-room with a jerk of his thumb.

"What lady?"

"Why, the lady as come here half an hour ago, with her luggage, and said she was going to stay."

"Randell, are you drunk or dreaming? I know of no lady," cried Stanley, amazed.

"Well, you can see for yourself, sir," replied the valet, throwing open the door.

The Secretary stepped in, and confronted—Madame Darcy.

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CHAPTER VII

AN IRATE HUSBAND

"Madame Darcy!" he exclaimed, too astonished not to betray in some measure his emotions. Then following the direction of her eyes, and noting the interrogatory glance, which she threw at Randell, he signed to his valet to leave them together.

"To what have I the honour——" he began abruptly, his voice showing some trace of the irritation he was not quite able to suppress. Surely, he thought, Inez De Costa, large as the liberty of her youth might have been, must know that in England, worse still in London, a lady cannot visit a bachelor's apartments alone, without running great danger of having her actions misconstrued.

She, with true feminine intuition, was none the less keen to realise the awkwardness of the situation, and to suffer more acutely because of the inconvenience to which she was putting him.

"A thousand pardons for this unwarrantable intrusion," she interrupted, "on one who has already loaded me with favours. It is the result of a stupid—a deplorable blunder—for which I shall never forgive myself. But once it had been committed, it seemed better that I should stay and explain. What letter could ever have made suitable apology—have made clear beyond all doubt, as I must make it clear, that until I had passed your threshold I had no suspicion that these were your lodgings, and not the Legation."

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Stanley bowed, he could not but believe her, every anguished glance of her eyes, every earnest tone of her impassioned voice, carried conviction. But how had this strange mischance come about.

"You've seen Sanks?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Ah, that is it," she exclaimed, thankful for the outlet he had suggested. "That good Señor Sanks, he was so kind, he said I had a case, and could be protected from—him. He has written a letter, I forget what he called it, some legal name, requiring my husband to surrender my goods, my money, and I have written him also to send them to your care at the Legation, as he told me. Then I drive here with what I have— I had nothing when I started, but he advanced me a sum," she flushed, "to buy what was needful till my trunks come. He advised me to stay at some private hotel, known only to you and to himself, till my husband has declared his attitude in the case. I make my purchases, I drive, as I suppose, to the Legation, my luggage is unloaded and carried in. I ask if Señor Stanley, if you are here, they say you will be shortly, I dismiss my cab, I enter, then I find it is not the Legation—it is your private apartments."

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She paused, awaiting his sentence of displeasure—but his tone was rather that of thoughtful wonder.

"How could Sanks have made the mistake in my address? He knew, must have known, them, both."

"It was my fault, all mine," she broke in hastily. "It was undecided where I should have my things sent. I filled in the address myself, from your card."

"Ah, that's it," said Stanley, beginning to see light. "I remember now, I gave you my private card by mistake for my official one. You've nothing to distress yourself about, Inez, this is my blunder, and it is I who must beg your pardon."

"Ah, we will not beg each other's pardon then. It is a foolishness between friends," she returned, with just that little foreign touch which rendered her so irresistible.

"I quite agree with you," he replied heartily. "We've other and more important things to consider."

"But what to do?" she exclaimed.

"Well, you must take Sanks' advice, and go to some quiet, private Hotel,—say X—'s. I know them and will introduce you, send you over with Randell: it's better than going with you myself. You'll find it most comfortable."

She shivered and shrugged her shoulders.

"But of course," he hastened to add, "you'll stay and dine with me first."

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"But Jim!" she said, rising.

"But why not?" he persisted. "It's a beastly night. You're here. It makes little difference whether you stay an hour or two, or the thirty minutes you have already remained. I'll send you over early in the evening."

"But the household——"

"They'd know in any event. The fact is the important thing to them, the details do not matter. Your staying here for dinner in a prosaic manner, as if there was no reason why you shouldn't, would do more to stop tongues from wagging, than your sudden disappearance after a mysterious visit. Believe me, I should not urge this if it were more or less than common sense."

"But your engagements?"

"I should have dined alone in any case."

She stood uncertain whether to go or to remain, one hand upon the table. Then she smiled at him, though there were tears in her eyes, saying;—

"I will stay— I will trust to your judgment. Whom have I to trust but you?"

"Good!" he cried, an air of quick decision taking possession of him, now her consent had been given; "my landlady will put a room at your disposal should you wish to remove the stains of travel before dinner. You'll find her kindly, if inexperienced. I'll go and explain the situation to her and to my valet." And he stepped towards the door.

"Explain?"

"Explain by all means, my dear. In this country it is the greatest of all mistakes to try to deceive your servants, especially where circumstances give the slightest scope for misconstruction."

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"I thought servants were our worst scandal-mongers."

"True, they're only human. But put a well-trained servant on his honour by giving him your confidence, and he's far less likely to betray you, than if you try to blind him to an obvious truth."

She laughed, and he left her to arrange for his impromptu dinner.

When they sat down to table, half an hour later, she was more self-possessed than he had ever before seen her, and chatted away quite gaily on indifferent topics, each taking great care to avoid the one subject which neither could forget.

With the fruit and wine, the valet, who performed the double office of body servant and butler, left them to themselves, having first received careful directions from Stanley in regard to escorting madame to her hotel, half an hour hence.

Once they were alone the reserve, which the servant's presence had called into play, was no longer exerted, and she spoke freely of her own troubles.

"You've no idea," she said, "what a misery my winter in England has been. I shall never look back on it without feeling that this is the most cruel place on earth."

"You mustn't judge the whole country from your own unfortunate experience," the Secretary hastened to interpose. "I've never found more true culture and refinement than I've met with here."

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"Ah," she replied, "but when the Englishman is a brute——! Since I came to this country, I've never written a word to my father that has not been read and—approved!" There was a wealth of scorn in her tones. "Not a word of my sorrows, of the indignities, the insults he had heaped upon me. Any attempt to post a letter on my own account, or to send it by a servant, has resulted in failure, and in the ignominy of having it opened, and destroyed in my presence. My income lies there in the bank. His brother is the banker. I had the choice of drawing cheques to my husband's order, or not drawing them at all."

"Were you then deprived of money? Surely, to keep up outside appearances, and I judge your husband would have desired that, you must have had an allowance?"

"I had unlimited credit in the town," she replied. "I could buy what I pleased and charge it, but not a shilling did I have wherewith to pay. It was my maid, my good Marie, who, when he threatened me with detention, gave me her little all, her savings, and told me to run away—ah, that was bitter! But I knew she meant no disrespect—I accepted it—she shall be repaid a hundred-fold."

"I think you need have no fears of not being restored to all your rights and privileges," he said, "and then?"

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"Then I will be free."

"You mean you will procure a separation?"

"A divorce."

"But surely your husband——"

"Oh, he has not even constancy to commend him; he does not even conceal his preferences. He is always receiving letters from some woman—some old friend, he tells me—calling him to London for an hour, or a day, as the case may be, and no matter what plans I may have made, he goes."

"You know her name?"

"She signs her Christian name only—no wonder—but I have her letters and I'll find her out."

"And when you've found her, what then? Will you plead with her?"

"I?" she cried. "I, a De Costa, degrade myself by pleading with a woman of that class!"

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"I think every woman," he said, "has some good in her, low as she may be, some spark of longing for better things, some element of self-respect that never quite dies out."

"You're right," she admitted. "A man is by nature a brute. A woman, even at her worst, is not quite that. Some extra spark of divinity seems to have been given her in compensation for her weakness."

"I believe no woman is wholly bad," said the Secretary. "The worst women of history have, at some moments in their lives, been very near redemption."

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"I believe that is so," she replied.

"I am very glad to hear you say that. If you can still find charity in your heart for your own sex, surely I may believe, even in the face of my friends' hostile criticism."

"And is there a woman, whom you—shall we say, 'respect' enough to believe in—no matter what is said of her?"

"There is," he replied.

"Then be sure she has some virtues worthy of that respect. I can picture," she went on, "the woman whom you should marry. You must be, to her, an ideal, and she must live her life in terms of you. Gentle and refined, and knowing more of your home than of the world."

The Secretary sighed.

"These are the women," he said, "that we dream of, not that we marry."

"There are many such in the world," she returned. "Is not the woman you are defending one of them?"

"No," he said, "not like that."

"Then she is not worthy of you, she will grate upon you. Does she ever do so?"

"I love her," he said simply.

"Then you will marry her. I'm so glad!" she returned, offering him her hand.

"I don't know. I don't think so," he replied. "I can't tell how I should act."

"Then you do not love her. Love is blind, it does not reason."

"I love her," he repeated, seeking to justify himself. "Certainly I love her, but one should, in this day and generation, love wisely."

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"One should love," she replied, "and that is all, neither wisely nor unwisely—love has no limits. You do not love her—you must not marry her—you will be unhappy if you do. I believe she grates on you, you'll never find the good that is in her. That power has been given to some other man."

Stanley raised his hand in protestation, but at that moment, Randell appeared in the doorway, equipped to take Madame De Costa to her hotel, and their private conversation was at an end.

She made her adieux very prettily, not saying too much in the valet's presence, but enough to show how truly deep was her appreciation of the Secretary's kindness, and left him wishing, wondering. He found time before retiring to re-read all Belle's letters for the first time critically, and seriously caught himself wondering if one could really love a woman who wrote slang and whose spelling was not always above suspicion. Subsequently, he remembered, having dismissed Randell for the night, that he had never written that letter to Mrs. Roberts.

It was certainly an unfortunate oversight, but it was too late now; he would telegraph his regrets in the morning, and he fell asleep while making up his mind that he was very glad he had decided not to go.

He arose refreshed and altogether philosophic, relegated Madame De Costa to past diplomatic experiences, and in the light of that youthful folly which wears the guise of wisdom, told himself, as he walked across the Green Park to his office, that he was glad the incident was over. But nevertheless, while he thought of the fair Señora many times during the morning, the existence of Miss Fitzgerald, or of her aunt, never occurred to him till force of circumstances brought it to his mind.

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Force of circumstances, in this instance, found actual embodiment in the person of Randell, who put in an appearance at the Legation about noon. The valet had never been there before in his life, and his appearance in Stanley's office was assurance in itself that something most unusual must have happened. The instant he set eyes on him, the Secretary was prepared for a fire or the death of a relative—at least.

"Well?" he said. "What is it?"

"A gentleman 'as called to see you, sir, at the house."

"You didn't come all the way down here to tell me that!" he exclaimed, immensely relieved.

"Yes, sir. You see, sir, it was some particular gentleman."

"Who?"

"Colonel Darcy, sir."

"Good Heavens!"

"And very excited, sir."

"Naturally; but how did he know that Madame De Costa—Mrs. Darcy, I mean. That is, why didn't he come to the Legation?"

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"You see, sir, as he told me the story——" and Randell paused uneasily.

"Well, out with it, man: what did he tell you?"

"That the lady had written him—which he got this morning, that she had placed herself in your care, and all her belongings were to be sent to your address."

"What, my private address?"

"Yes, sir. Quite correct, sir. He showed it to me in her letter."

"It's all because I gave her my private card by mistake," and Mr. Stanley cursed a number of people and things under his breath.

"He asked plenty of questions, which I didn't answer, more than I was in duty bound. But when he learned as you was a bachelor, sir, and the lady had been at your rooms last evening, he was that upset——"

The Secretary tilted his office chair back on its hind legs and gave vent to a long, low, meditative whistle.

"I explained to him that there was nothing to be displeased about; but he wouldn't have none of it and said——"

"Yes, yes, what did he say?"

"He said a good many things, some of which I wouldn't repeat, sir, not being respectful; but he asked for your official address, which I wouldn't give him, and said as he'd call you out—and spoke of bringing suit—and called you—wel-l, most everything, sir."

"You need not particularise, Randell."

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"No, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir. Except to my mind, he didn't seem really very much displeased over the matter."

Stanley grunted significantly. He thought he understood. Darcy could have wished for nothing better.

"I took the liberty, sir," continued the valet, serenely, "to bring your bag, ready packed, and your travelling rug and umbrella, thinking as you might be leaving town to-day, sir."

"Confound you, Randell, I believe you think me guilty after all."

"I thought as you were going to Mrs. Roberts' to-day, sir. You spoke of it to me a week ago, and had forgotten to give directions about your things, sir."

"Yes," said Stanley meditatively, and rang his bell. "John," he continued to the functionary who appeared, "did I send Mrs. Roberts of Roberts' Hall, Sussex, a telegram this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Well, please wire her at once that I'll arrive this afternoon. Leave in an hour. Is his Excellency disengaged?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, that will do," and as John departed he added to Randell: "You might go ahead and reserve a corner seat in a first-class carriage for me. Facing the engine. Liverpool Street—you know."

"Yes, sir."

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"Where is Colonel Darcy?"

"Waiting at your rooms for an answer."

"Ah," said Stanley, "that gives me time to explain things to the Chief. If Colonel Darcy is there when you return after seeing me off, tell him I don't know anything about his wife, and if that isn't good enough he can call on his Excellency. Say I'm away in the country for an indefinite time."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't know where."

"Quite right, sir," and Randell departed for the station.

"Quite right!" groaned Stanley as he sought the Sanctum Sanctorum of the Legation. "I only wish it were!"

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CHAPTER VIII

DIPLOMATIC INSTRUCTIONS

Mr. Stanley's Chief was a grey, weazened little man, who had achieved distinction in diplomacy and in his country's councils, largely on account of his infinite capacity for holding his tongue. As a result he let fall little and learned much. His reticence, however, was not the reserve of impotence, but the reserve of power.

On this occasion he was busy at his great desk, which occupied the centre of the room, and merely glancing up at his Secretary's entrance, he resumed the piece of work on which he was engaged. Ten minutes later he put down his pen and gave his waiting subordinate an encouraging smile. It was his official permission to speak.

"I regret to say that I have got into a little scrape, sir, concerning which will you give me leave to clear myself?"

"Leave of absence or my approval, Mr. Stanley?"

"Both, your Excellency."

The Minister leaned back in his chair, rested his elbows on the arms, and bringing the first fingers of each hand together, held them at the level of his face and gazed attentively at their point of contact. It was a favourite attitude which the Secretary understood, and he at once gave a concise account of all the circumstances concerning Madame Darcy.

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The Minister heard him out in perfect silence, and after taking a moment or two to ponder over his words, remarked quietly:

"It's a small world, Mr. Stanley."

"You mean the fact that Señor De Costa and my father were friends before they quarrelled, and that his daughter—"

"No, I do not mean that."

The Secretary thought it better policy not to ask what he did mean, though he much wished to know; and silence again reigned.

Presently the Minister sat up to his desk and ran his hand through the mass of papers upon it; finally unearthing one in particular, which he submitted to a careful scrutiny.

"Your report of your visit to the Foreign Office yesterday," he said—"a very important communication, Mr. Stanley."

If his Chief had a disagreeable trait, and he was on the whole an exceedingly amiable man, it was an assumed seriousness of speech and demeanour, which he intended for sarcasm, and which invariably misled his victims to their ultimate discomfiture.

Stanley, who was aware of this trait and not very proud of the report in question, hastened to

disclaim any inherent excellence it might be supposed to contain.

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"There's nothing in it, your Excellency, except that remark about 'parlous times.'"

"Which was just the thing I was most anxious to hear. It proves that the Foreign Office regards the accomplishment of the treaty as by no means certain."

Stanley, with difficulty, checked an exclamation of surprise, but he had learned to respect his Chief's little fads, and succeeded.

The Minister cleared his throat, an indication that this was one of the rare occasions on which he was about to speak at length, and on which he desired absolute attention and immunity from comment—and proceeded:

"For three hundred years a treaty has been pending between Great Britain and our own country, concerning the possession of an island lying at the mouth of the river X—. At first Spanish distrust of English aggression and, at a later period, the frequent changes of government to which our unfortunate country has been subjected, have prevented the successful termination of the negotiations.

"Matters have never been more favourable for its settlement than at the present time, and the immediate cession of the island to Great Britain, in return for a most satisfactory indemnity. For the last few weeks, however, we have noted an increasing opposition on the part of certain members of our own Ministry, to the acceptance of the English propositions, the cause of which has now been discovered. An influential manufacturing concern, officered and financed by certain unscrupulous persons in this country, owns large mills on the island in question, for the production of an article of which they would be assured a monopoly, did the territory still remain in our hands, but which would be open to competition did it come into the possession of Great Britain. The company, in order to obtain a continuance of the monopoly, have raised £40,000 for distribution among a majority of the committee, who are to pass upon the treaty, thus practically insuring the failure of the negotiations.

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"While there is no reasonable doubt that this unfortunate state of affairs exists, we have not been able to obtain actual proofs of the same, and it is very necessary to do so, in order that the Executive should be able, when the treaty comes up for consideration, six weeks hence, to inform the intending offenders that their intrigue is known. It is not the intention of our government to create any scandal in this matter, it being quite sufficient to insure the passage of the treaty, that the Executive should hold proof of the Minister's guilt, and be in a position to back up the threat of exposure and punishment.

"Now it is known that the English agent intrusted with the financial part of this disgraceful scheme, the man who is to take the money to be used in bribery and corruption from this country to ours, is the worst type of an adventurer, a thorough-going scoundrel, and clever enough to make a fortune in some honest way. His name is Colonel Robert Darcy."

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The Secretary so far forgot himself as to draw in his breath sharply, and his Chief looked at him with a disapproving frown, and then continued:

"This is why I said that the world was small when you told me of your connection with this man. For the past few weeks I have had him carefully watched, and I have learned that he is to go down to Sussex almost at once, to receive the money for this dishonourable purpose from one of the heads of the firm, a silent partner, whose identity we have not yet discovered. This money is to be paid in gold, and after receiving it, and his private instructions, Darcy will return at once to London and sail for the scene of his mission. I cannot watch his course in Sussex personally, and I do not think it wise to risk publicity by putting the affair in the hands of the police. Before you told me of your association with this man and his wife, I had some thoughts of giving you the conduct of this important and delicate matter, now—"

"Now!" burst out the Secretary, unable in his chagrin longer to contain himself, "I have by my stupid blundering rendered myself unfit for the place, and lost a splendid chance!"

The Minister was visibly annoyed.

"I was about to say, sir, when you interrupted me (a very bad habit of yours, Mr. Stanley), that you had unconsciously so perfectly adapted yourself to fill the position, that you have made it impossible for me to give it to anybody else."

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Stanley gasped; he could not help it.

"A diplomat should never express anything," remarked his Chief severely, and continued his statement.

"The greatest triumph of art could never have placed you in the position you now occupy as a result of a fortuitous combination of events. You can go right to the ground where Darcy must operate, and any one of a dozen people can tell him that you have perfectly natural and innocent reasons for being there. Being only human and apparently very angry, he'll certainly seek you out, and you may depend on it that I'll see that he has definite information as to where you have gone and with whom you are staying. All you'll have to do is to associate yourself with him; he'll give you ample opportunity for doing so, and to keep your eyes open.

"I need hardly point out that, should you, during the next fortnight, be able to obtain in any way

the required evidence, you would not only merit my approval but would put yourself in the sure way of promotion, and that for the best of all reasons, as one who has done a signal service to your country.

"Now, just a word of warning. Do not communicate with me unless it is absolutely necessary. Do not try to find out anything about Darcy; do not try to see him. Do not so much as breathe the treaty to anyone. Simply be yourself. He's bound to suspect you at first, and it will only be as time passes and he becomes convinced from your manner of life—that you are young, inexperienced and wholly unfit to be trusted with a diplomatic secret—that he'll put himself off his guard. Then will be your opportunity. Seize it if possible. That's all; now go. No thanks, please; I trust you will deserve mine when you return. I'll manage everything for you here, and the Legation pays your expenses—your leave is for an indefinite period."

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Stanley bowed silently, his heart was too full to speak, and he turned to leave the room.

"Stop!" came his Chief's voice. "You ought to know that Darcy has a confederate. One of the two is a masterhand, probably the Colonel; but see if you can find out the other; I've not been able to do so."

Stanley started, a vivid remembrance flashing through his mind of Kingsland's significant caution to Darcy at the tea. "Sh'. He's looking our way! He'll hear us."

The Ambassador noticed the involuntary movement of his subordinate, and a grim smile played about his lips.

"Deportment, Mr. Secretary, deportment," he said. "A diplomat should always appear at his ease. So; that is better. You can go."

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CHAPTER IX

A HOUSE-WARMING

Much has been written of the blessed state of them that go a house-partying in England, and certain it is that no pleasanter pastime has been devised by civilised man, and that in no other country in the world has it been brought to a like degree of perfection.

Two great canons govern these functions, which it would be exceedingly well did the hostesses of all lands "mark, learn and inwardly digest." The first is that all guests are on speaking terms of intimacy with each other from the time they arrive till they depart. My Lady may not know you next time you meet her in Bond Street, and the Countess perchance will have forgotten to put your name on her visiting list for the remainder of this or any other season, but during the blessed interval of your sojourn at that hospitable Hall in Berks, you knew them both, and they were very gracious and charming. The second rule is none the less framed for your comfort and convenience, and it reads: "Thou shalt be in all things thine own master."

Most admirable of rules. The amusements of the place, and most English country places are framed for some particular amusement, are put unreservedly at your disposal. Are you on the Thames? Boats and boatmen are at your beck and call. Are you North in the shooting season? A keeper waits your orders. Do you hunt? Grooms and horses are yours to command. But none of these things are you ever compelled to do. Should you fear the water, though you are on an island, no one will ever suggest to you the possibility of leaving it. While your ecclesiastical host, Bishop though he be, would never take it for granted that you were predisposed to week-day services and charity bazaars.

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Mrs. Roberts was a perfect hostess, and there was no doubt that her house would shortly be a favourite on many lists.

I say, "would be," advisedly, for she had quite recently come into the possession of her own, which had been another's; a distant cousin, in short, the last of his branch of the family, who had the good sense to drink himself to death, shortly before the opening of this narrative, and leave his fine old Elizabethan manor house to his very charming relative, an action which did him no credit, because the estate was entailed, and he could not help it.

Roberts Hall had more than one attraction: indeed, it was blessed with an unusual number of delightful adjuncts for a country place, which does not pretend to be a demesne. For one thing, a number of miles intervened between the lodge gates and the Hall, and that, in England, is a great consideration. As long as one has plenty of land, the manner of one's habitation is of little account, while in America houses must be as large or larger than one can afford, and if when they are built they cover most of our land, we are none the worse off in our neighbour's estimation.

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The estate, moreover, could boast of many fallow fields, and more than one avenue of fine old oaks, while it had a deer park of which many a larger place might have been proud. There was also a private chapel, for the use of the family and tenantry, boasting a great square family pew, fenced round on two sides with queer little leaden-paned windows, giving a view of the enclosure which contained the family monuments. It was farther enriched by a pretentious piece of carving

in high relief, vigorously coloured, representing the resurrection, wherein generations of defunct Roberts were depicted popping up, with no clothes on, out of a pea-green field, much after the manner of the gopher of the prairie.

The gardens were extensive, including two artificial ponds, which for age and solidity might have been constructed from the beginning, tenanted by a number of swans, all very proud and controversial, and surrounded by an eight-foot hedge of holly which was a crimson glory in winter.

But if the place was fascinating without, it was still more so within. It had a long low entrance hall with a tessellated pavement, panelled to the ceiling with the blackest of oak, and boasting a rail screen of the same material dividing the apartment, which many a church might have envied. There was moreover a library filled with a priceless collection of old volumes, chiefly perused, for some fifty years past, by the rodents of the establishment.

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Mrs. Roberts was in the great hall when Stanley arrived, and so received him in person. She was a most vivacious little woman, to whom a long sojourn on the Continent, coupled with a diplomatic marriage, had given the touch of cosmopolitanism, which was all that had been needed to make her perfect.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, though you are the last comer," she said cordially. "The Marchioness and Lady Isabelle, under the escort of Lieutenant Kingsland, reached here in time for lunch, and Miss Fitzgerald came a few hours later, while Mr. Riddle has just driven over."

"Mr. Riddle," asked the Secretary, "who is he?"

"Oh, Arthur Riddle, don't you know him? He is one of our county magnates and a near neighbour. I hope you'll all like each other, but you must realise that you have come to the veriest sort of pot-luck. I haven't begun to get settled yet, or know where anything is."

"You speak as if you were a visitor," he said, laughing.

"Indeed, I feel so. I'm constantly getting lost in this rambling old house, and having to be rescued by the butler."

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"Have you really never been here before?"

"It's my first appearance. It was quite impossible to visit here during the lifetime of the late owner. Why, I don't even know the traditions of the place, and it positively teems with them. I shall organise you all into an exploring party, with free permission to rummage from garret to cellar."

"I suppose there's plenty to discover?"

"Discover! My dear Mr. Secretary, this place is fairly alive with ghosts, and sliding panels, and revolving pictures; and there's a great tiled, underground passage leading off from the kitchens into the country somewhere, which everyone is afraid to explore, and which the last incumbent had nailed up because it made him nervous."

"I hope you've reserved a nice cork-screwy staircase with a mouldering skeleton at the top, for my especial discovery and delectation."

"First come, first served," she replied; "but there's something in this very hall that's worthy of your mettle, the greatest prize puzzle a hostess ever possessed, only I shan't forgive you if you solve it, for it's one of the standard attractions of the house, and has amused guests innumerable."

"Trot it out forthwith. I'm all impatience."

"I shall do nothing of the kind unless you treat it with more respect. An oaken door, studded with silver nails, that has not condescended to open itself for at least two centuries, cannot be 'trotted out!'"

"I beg its humble pardon," said the Secretary, approaching the door and putting his shoulder against it. "It's as steady as a rock."

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"Oh, yes. Nothing but dynamite or the proper combination could ever move it the fraction of an inch."

Stanley regarded it as it stood framed in its low Saxon portal, a magnificent piece of black oak, sprinkled from top to bottom with at least a hundred huge, silver-headed nails, driven in without any apparent design. Another peculiarity was that neither lock, hinges, nor keyhole were visible.

"Does it lead anywhere?" he asked, greatly interested.

"To an unexplored tower," she replied. "To which this appears to be the only entrance; at least it has no windows."

"How interesting. I wonder how they ever got it open."

"Tradition says that this is the original of our modern combination lock. No human strength can move it; but once exert the slightest pressure on the proper combination of those silver nails, five I believe, one for every digit, and the portal swings open of itself."

"And discloses, what?"

"Open it and see," she answered.

"Are you sure the house won't tumble down if I do, or that you'll never smile again—or that some unpleasant ancestral prognostication isn't only awaiting the opening of that door to fall due and take effect?"

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"I can't insure you," she replied, "and I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense," and she shivered slightly.

"You surely don't believe, in the nineteenth century——" he began; but she interrupted him, saying almost petulantly:

"You'd grow to believe anything if you lived in a place like this. On the whole, I think you'd better leave the door alone," she added, as he began to finger the nails thoughtfully, "you're too clever, you might succeed."

"If I do," he assured her, "I'll promise to keep my discoveries to myself."

"You'd better confine your attentions to the library; it's much more worthy of your consideration," she replied, evidently wishing to change the subject.

"With pleasure," acquiesced Stanley, following her lead. "And what am I to discover there?"

"Nothing. Now I come to think of it, it's already pre-empted."

"Who are our literary lights?"

"Lady Isabelle McLane and Lieutenant Kingsland."

"I should never have suspected it of either of them," he replied, manifestly surprised, for Kingsland's literary tastes, as evidenced on the Thames, had not been of an elevated nature; and Lady Isabelle was too conventional and well-ordered a person to care to read much or widely.

"Nor should I," agreed his hostess; "but they remain glued to the bookcases, and to see them going into raptures over an undecipherable black letter volume, adorned with illustrations that no self-respecting householder would admit to his family circle, is, considering the young lady's antecedents at least, rather amusing. They've the room entirely to themselves."

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"Oh!" said Stanley, and they both laughed.

"But the Marchioness is certain that it is literary enthusiasm," she assured him.

"My dear Mrs. Roberts," said the Secretary, "that is merely the wisdom of age." And they laughed again.

"And now," he added, "if you'll permit, I'll begin my tour of exploration, by finding where my belongings are bestowed."

As he spoke, a footman was at his side, and his hostess, nodding cheerfully to him, left him to his own devices.

Stanley's room was charming, and he was so busy examining its curiosities that the sound of the dressing-bell awoke him to the realities of the situation with a start of surprise that he could have unconsciously idled away so much time.

But then there was a fireplace, almost as large as a modern bedroom, ornamented with blue tiles of scriptural design, blatantly Dutch and orthodox; and the great logs resting on fire-dogs, that happened to be lions, which caused most of the guests to break the tenth commandment in thought, and neglect to break it in deed, only because they were unsuited both by weight and design for surreptitious packing in bags or boxes. Also there was the wall paper, rejoicing in squares of camels, and groves of palm trees, amidst which surroundings fully a hundred Solomons received a hundred blushing Queens of Sheba. Moreover, there was a huge four-poster into which you ascended by a flight of steps, and from the depths of whose feather-beds you were only rescued the following morning by the muscular exertions of your valet, which, as Kingsland aptly remarked at dinner, was a tremendous cinch for the family ghosts, as they could haunt you all night long if they liked, without your ever being able to retaliate.

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Altogether, it is doubtful if Stanley would ever have remembered to dress for dinner, had not his meditations been interrupted by a series of astonishing sounds in the hall, which seemed to betoken the movements of great weights with strenuous exertions. Just at that moment the valet entered with his freshly brushed dress clothes, and a question as to the cause of the disturbance elicited the fact that:

"They was Mr. Riddle's chests, sir," and though it wasn't his place to say it, "he's a mighty queer old gentleman, gives magic lantern shows and entertainments free for charity, sir."

"From his luggage, I should imagine he was supporting an opera troupe."

"They was labelled 'stereopticon,' sir, but they was that heavy——"

"Thanks," broke in the Secretary. "That's quite sufficient."

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CHAPTER X

BEFORE DINNER

The Lieutenant and Miss Fitzgerald were in the billiard-room, and the former was putting in the half-hour which must elapse before dinner by teaching the latter the science of bank-shots.

"I say," queried her instructor, in one of the pauses of the game, "do you know that little diplomatic affair of yours has turned up again? I saw it driving in from the station, half an hour ago.

"Jimsy Stanley, I suppose you mean?"

"The same,—and look here, you won't turn crusty, if I ask you a point-blank question?"

"No, Dottie."

"Don't call me that, you know I hate it."

"Isn't it your naval sobriquet?"

"Never mind if it is."

"But I do mind, and I shall call you what I please, for it suits you perfectly. Well, then, Dottie, I don't mind your asking me anything, if it's for a purpose, and not for idle curiosity."

"Oh, it's for a purpose fast enough."

"Go ahead, then. I'll try and bank that ball into the side-pocket, while you are thinking it out." [Pg 106]

"It doesn't need thinking out. It's just this: Do you mean business with Little Diplomacy?"

"What affair is that of yours?" she asked, pausing in the act of chalking her cue.

"None, thank goodness; but I'd like to do a pal a good turn, and so——"

"Well?"

"If you'll accept a bit of advice."

"Out with it."

"Don't lose any time, if you do mean business. He's being warned against you."

"Aren't you clever enough to know the result of that?"

"Yes, if the advice comes from a woman—but supposing it's from a man?"

"Who?"

"Kent-Lauriston."

Miss Fitzgerald so far forgot herself as to whistle.

"How do you know?"

"Gainsborough told me. He said he overheard an awful long confab between them at the St. James, two days ago, and Diplomacy said he'd write a letter to our hostess, sending his regrets."

"No such letter has been received."

"Probably he changed his mind,—but——"

"Then he'll make a clean breast of it to me, but I'm much obliged just the same, and I won't forget it."

"I'll see he owns up to it."

"You won't do anything of the sort, you'll bungle it, and there's an end of things." [Pg 107]

"Have I generally bungled your affairs with Little Diplomacy?"

"No. You were a trump about that launch party. Now I mustn't keep you from her Ladyship—run along, and remember if I can be of any help—just call on me."

"You can be—and I want you to——"

She broke in with a merry laugh.

"I knew it."

"Why?"

"Because Lieutenant Kingsland doesn't generally put himself out to oblige his friends, unless he expects them to make return with interest."

The gentleman in question looked sheepish and shrugged his shoulders.

"Come now," she continued briskly. "Let me hear it, and don't go blundering about for an explanation; the facts are sufficient. I've been alone with you long enough. I don't wish to set myself up as a rival to Lady Isabelle."

"It's about her I want your help."

"Of course, I know that. Go on."

"You don't ask if I mean business."

"I don't need to. I know the amount in consols which she received from her grandmother."

"Don't be so damned mercenary!"

"Why not say a thing as well as mean it? Let's be honest for once in a way. Besides, you're not to swear at me, Lieutenant Kingsland—please remember I'm not married to you."

"No. By Gad! I wish you were."

"Oh, no, you don't. I haven't silver enough to cross the palm of my hand. But to come to business. [Pg 108] Doesn't your affair progress swimmingly?"

"Why, it has so far—as long as the Dowager fancied there was danger from Little Diplomacy's quarter, I was used as a foil. Now that she learned about your claims she breathes again, and gives me the cold shoulder in consequence."

"I suppose you haven't been wasting your time?"

"Rather not."

"It's all right then?"

"Yes, I think so; but the old lady'll never allow it."

"Marry without consulting her."

"That's what I mean to do."

"Where?"

"Why, here. Haven't we got the parson and the church attached? What could be more convenient?"

"Nothing, if the Marchioness doesn't suspect?"

"But I'm afraid that she does."

"What—not that——"

"Only that my intentions are serious."

"Transfer them to me then—temporarily."

"Won't do. Devotion to Lady Isabelle is the tack. Why won't you lend me your little affair?"

"What, Jimsy?"

"Yes. I fancy the old lady has a mistaken idea that he's poverty-stricken. Of course, I know that can't be the case if you——" [Pg 109]

"Do not finish that sentence, Lieutenant Kingsland; I'm quite willing to oblige you—by mentioning to the Dowager the amount of Mr. Stanley's income—if I know it."

"She'll accept your word for it, even if you don't, and once her attention is turned to him, I'll have a clear field."

"Is that the help you wanted?"

"No, I want you to square the parson."

"Oh, I see; that's a more difficult matter. When do you wish to command his services?"

"If I need 'em at all it'll be in about three days. To-day's Thursday—say Sunday."

"I'll do what I can."

"You're a brick. Oh, by the way, I spoke to Darcy about that letter you gave me at the Hyde Park Club."

"And he told you to keep a still tongue in your head and leave it to me."

"How did you know that?"

"It's good advice," she continued, ignoring his question, "and I'll give you some more. If I make any suggestion after dinner, advocate it warmly—put it through."

"You mean to get that letter to-night?"

"I must get it to-night."

"But suppose he's left it in London?"

"Then I must find it out this evening, and take steps to procure it there."

"You wouldn't have his rooms searched?"

"I must have that letter—that's all," she replied. "You don't know what it means to me?"

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"I don't know anything about it. But why not ask him for it?"

"Tell him it was mine, and that I sent it to Darcy," she exclaimed, incredulously.

"I say," he ventured to expostulate—"you know I am no milksop—but don't you think that you and the Colonel are getting a trifle thick? He's a married man, you know, and——"

She flushed angrily, and then controlling herself, said quietly:

"Oblige me by going to the drawing-room at once, Lieutenant Kingsland. We've been here too long already."

He bit his lip, looked at her, laughed shamefacedly, and thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets, went out.

Having given him time to make his escape, she slowly followed his footsteps.

Stanley dreaded meeting his friends, as a man does who stands convicted of having done something foolish, and while he was wondering whom he had better encounter first, Lady Isabelle settled the question for him by meeting him in the great hall.

"This is indeed unexpected," she said. "After what you told me at Lady Rainsford's tea, it's naturally the last place where I should have thought of seeing you."

"I don't suppose our hostess considered it necessary to mention that I was coming, after all."

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"I believe that she did say something at luncheon about receiving a telegram from you; but as you had assured me that you were not to be here, and as I was much engaged——"

"In literary pursuits with Lieutenant Kingsland," he said, finishing her sentence for her, at which termination her Ladyship flushed, and the Secretary felt that in the first round at least he had given as good as he had received.

"But I want you to understand the reason of my coming," he said, leading her to a seat in a little alcove. "I feel that I owe you some explanation."

"I don't see why you should," she replied coldly. "I'm sure you have a perfect right to do one thing and say another without consulting me."

Lady Isabelle was nettled, for she felt he had trifled with the serious side of her nature. She had offered him good advice which he had pretended to accept, and straightway her back was turned, he had unblushingly belied his words.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly. "I shouldn't have presumed to suppose that you could have felt any real interest in my affairs."

"Oh, but I do," she replied, somewhat mollified. "A deep interest, the interest of a friend."

She made it a point to qualify any statement that might be open to possible misconstruction.

"I see I shall have to throw myself on your mercy, and tell you the whole truth," said Stanley, which he proceeded not to do. "I intended to write a letter."

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"It isn't necessary. I would accept your word——"

"But you'd still have a lingering suspicion of me in your heart. As I was saying—I intended to write to Mrs. Roberts, declining her invitation, and forgot to do so till this morning, and then I made a virtue of necessity, and as it was too late to refuse, telegraphed my hour of arrival."

Had the light been a little stronger, he would have noted the quiet smile which played about Lady Isabelle's face, though her silence was, in itself, suggestive of the fact that she did not believe him.

"I probably shan't stay more than a few days, long enough to do the proper thing, you know."

"Have you seen your friend?"

"Miss Fitzgerald? On my word, I haven't laid eyes on her. The fact is, I've quite decided to follow

your advice. You must be my guardian angel."

Her Ladyship looked dubious at this, though the rôle of guardian angel to an attractive young man has ever been dear to the feminine heart. However that may be, her ultimate decision was perforce relegated to another interview, by the appearance before them of the subject of their conversation—Miss Belle Fitzgerald.

This much discussed lady was dressed in the apparent simplicity which tells of art. Her costume, the very finest of white muslins, suggested the lithe movements of the body it encased, with every motion she made, and her simple bodice was of the fashion of thirty years ago, a fashion which always inspired wonder that the clothes stayed on, and awe at the ingenuity with which that miracle must have been accomplished. A broad frill of the same material, caught with a knot of white ribbon at her breast, framed her dazzling throat and neck, and a yellow sash, whose end nearly touched the floor, encircled her waist; a sash whose colour just matched the tint of that glorious hair, which, astonishing to relate, hung loose down her back, and was surmounted by a very tiny white bow, which was evidently a concession to the demands of conventionality, as it could have been of no possible use in retaining her tresses. That Miss Fitzgerald was able not only to adopt this style, but to carry it off with unqualified success, and the approval of all unprejudiced observers, was its own justification.

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"I always wear my hair like this in the country," she had said at lunch. "It is so much easier, and I'm really not old enough to paste it over my forehead and go in for a bun behind"—this with a glance at Lady Isabelle, which caused the Dowager Marchioness to exclaim, quite audibly, that it was scandalous for that young person—she was sure she had forgotten her name—to wear her hair as if she wasn't yet eighteen. Lady Isabelle, it may be remarked, could lay no claim to anything under twenty.

But certainly in this case, the end justified the deed, and Miss Fitzgerald, rejuvenated, was one of the most simple, blithesome and gay young maidens that the sun shone on.

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Possibly this was the reason that she never saw or comprehended the meaning of Lady Isabelle's uplifted eyebrows and steely glare, as she drew up before the couple and violated the first rule of fair and open warfare by interrupting their tête-à-tête.

"Well, Jimsy," she said, using a form of address that the rack would never have wrung from his companion, "How are you? Feeling fit?"

He smiled uneasily, and, for the sake of saying something, since her Ladyship preserved an ominous silence, remarked:

"There's no need of putting that question to you."

"Rather not. Once I'm in the country, I'm as frisky as a young colt," she rattled on. "I'm going to have such fun with you and Kingsland, and I expect to be, as usual, quite spoiled. Now, how are you going to begin?"

"Really," he faltered, rising in an access of agitation, for Lady Isabelle's expression was fearful to behold.

"You shall run along with me to Mrs. Roberts," she continued, not giving him an opportunity to flounder, "and tell her that she must send us down to dinner together. Because you're a diplomat and will have a post of honour, and the butler has given me the tip that we're to have just one round of '80 champagne before the dessert, and you know we really must have the first of the bottle, there is sure to be sediment farther down."

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"You must excuse me, but you see— Lady Isabelle," and he indicated that stony personage.

"Oh, I beg Lady Isabelle's pardon—it was so dark I didn't see her!" she cried in a fit of demure shyness, and added—"If I have said anything indiscreet, do explain it, there's a dear, good Jimsy."

"It's not necessary," came the icy tones of his companion. "I shouldn't think of keeping you, Mr. Stanley, from such congenial society."

"At least, let me escort you to the drawing-room."

"Don't trouble yourself, I beg. I dare say I shall find some people there who are contented to wait till their proper precedence has been allotted to them," and she turned away.

"Oh, yes," the irrepressible Belle called after her. "I just sent Kingsland up there. He's been showing me bank notes in the billiard-room. I thought I'd never get rid of him."

If her Ladyship heard this information she betrayed no sign of the fact, and Miss Fitzgerald returned to more congenial fields.

"You behaved disgracefully," said Stanley, as they went in search of Mrs. Roberts, "and I shall have to spend most of this evening in trying to make my peace with Lady Isabelle."

"Poor, proper Jimsy! Was he shocked? But I really couldn't help it, you know—she's such a funny old thing."

The Secretary wisely changed the subject.

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When they discovered Mrs. Roberts she assured them that their proposed arrangement at table

suited her exactly, but could not forbear whispering in her niece's ear:

"I shouldn't think you'd have thought it necessary to ask. Of course, I'd arranged it that way."

To which Miss Belle whispered in return:

"Don't be stupid!"

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CHAPTER XI

AFTER DINNER

When the Secretary entered the drawing-room he received a distinct shock of surprise.

The one person in the party unknown to him was Mr. Riddle. Yet those high cheek-bones, that prominent nose between the deep-set, restless eyes, peering out under their shaggy eyebrows, were strangely familiar. He had seen them once before when they and their owner occupied a cab together with his fair dinner partner. He was on the point of saying so to her, but restrained himself, he hardly knew why, in deference, perhaps, to his diplomatic training, which forbade him ever to say anything unnecessary.

Fate placed him next to the Dowager Marchioness, who was manifestly displeased at his presence, and lost no time in making him feel thoroughly uncomfortable.

"I had always supposed," she began, before he was fairly seated at the table, "that at this season of the year there was a great deal of activity in the diplomatic world."

"There is," answered Stanley hastily, scenting danger, and anxious to turn the conversation from his own affairs. "Most countries have a little leisure, and, like Satan, expend the time in making and finding mischief."

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"That is, of course, a matter of which I am no judge, Mr. Stanley, but I should have supposed, under the circumstances, you would naturally be much occupied."

"We are," he replied, a trifle flippantly. Flippancy, he had noticed, was the one thing that drove the Marchioness to the verge of desperation. "My Minister and my colleagues are working like draught-horses."

"While you——" began her Ladyship.

"I'm working also—hard," and he turned himself and the conversation to the fair Miss Fitzgerald, while the Dowager said things in a loud tone of voice about youthful diplomacy to Mr. Lambert, the local incumbent, who had taken her down to dinner.

The Secretary was no more fortunate with his dinner partner. Not that she rated him; far from it; but she was evidently making conversation, and he could not help feeling that the cordial good fellowship which had hitherto existed between them was now lacking, and that a restraint had taken its place, which, to say the least, did not promote their mutual ease. But there, he would have a talk with her when opportunity offered, and they would understand each other and be as good friends as ever; nothing more. He knew himself now. He was sure she had never been so foolish as to suppose for an instant that their intimacy could mean anything further. She would probably laugh at him if he proposed to her—which he would not do, of course—but all the same he must make some sort of an explanation, and—what was she saying?—he had not spoken for a whole course—what must she be thinking of him? He pulled himself together, and rattled on, till his hostess gave the signal for the ladies to leave the table.

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The interval for rest, refreshment, and tobacco promised to be somewhat wearisome, for Kingsland seemed moody and abstracted, and Riddle and the Reverend Reginald Lambert offered, to Stanley's mind, little hope of amusement.

The good pastor was a bit of an archæologist, an enthusiast on the subject of early ecclesiastical architecture, and the nominal duties of his living left him much spare time for the exploitation of this harmless fad. He was possessed of considerable manual dexterity and a certain nicety in the manipulation of whatever he undertook, whether it were the restoration of parchments or the handling of leaden coffins, but apart from his hobby he was as prosy as the most typical member of his calling.

As the Secretary could not tell a nave from a chapter house, a very few minutes served to exhaust his interest in the good old gentleman, and he turned to Mr. Riddle in sheer desperation. Stanley had conceived a dislike for the stranger from the first moment he had heard he was a fellow-guest, either from his reputation for beneficence or his mysterious acquaintance with Miss Fitzgerald. He had at once put him down as a hypocrite, and his attitude towards him was reserved in consequence. This sort of man, he told himself, takes a pride in his good deeds, and can be most easily approached on that subject. Accordingly he drew up his chair and opened the conversation with some allusion to the chests of stereopticon fittings.

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"Yes, they're bulky," replied Mr. Riddle, "and I was almost ashamed to bring them with me— I

trust they've not annoyed you."

"On the contrary, I was hoping we might be favoured with a view of their contents."

"Oh, no," he said, his face lighting up with a frank smile, which appealed to the Secretary in spite of his prejudices. "I never inflict my fads on my friends. I'd promised to send them on to a man in London, and, as I was coming in this direction, brought them part way myself. You see, the average porter cannot understand that a thing may be heavy and yet fragile—if a chest weighs a great deal—and you'd be surprised how heavy a case of slides can be—he bangs it about regardless of labels and warnings; so I generally try to keep an eye on them, or put them in the charge of some trusty friend."

"You are much interested in these things?"

"The slides? Oh, yes,—collecting them becomes quite absorbing, and now these clever scientists of ours are able to photograph directly on them, it increases our field immensely."

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"Of course the good you can do with them must be their chief charm to you——" began the Secretary, sententiously.

The answer surprised him.

"Not at all. On the contrary, my charities, if they *are* charities, are of a very selfish sort. I suppose you've some kind of amusement which you turn to in your hours for relaxation? Golf, tennis, hunting, what not. These little entertainments are—mine. I thoroughly enjoy them. The fact is, I'm passionately fond of children, and not having any of my own, I've adopted everybody else's for the time being. But it's selfish, purely selfish. Some benighted idiots call me a philanthropist—I'd like to have them come pressing their claims for lazy heathen in my bank parlour, they'd find out what sort of business man I was." And this queer specimen doubled up his fists, and broke into a roar of laughter, which was too hearty to have been assumed. "I'll tell you what it is," he continued, "if it wasn't for our good dominie there, I'd admit to you that I hate a real professional philanthropist—ten to one he's a humbug."

The parson held up his hands, and Stanley laughed nervously—the man was actually voicing his own thoughts.

"As for charity— Bah! Charity begins at home. It doesn't go racing over the country with magic lantern shows—that's real downright, selfish egotism."

Then, evidently feeling that the conversation had proceeded far enough in this direction, he broke off suddenly, remarking:

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"They tell me that you're a diplomat."

"Yes," said the Secretary. "Perhaps you know my chief?"

"I've not that honour. Indeed I've never had any dealings with your countrymen but once, and then I'd reason to regret it."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was with a large manufacturing company," he continued, and mentioned the name of the concern which had such a sinister reputation in regard to the treaty.

"Oh," said the Secretary, at once alert for any information he might pick up. "You mustn't judge my countrymen by that concern—anyway I understand that it's really owned in England."

"Ah, is it so? I can't say how that may be, I'm sure; but I know they kept so closely to the letter of their contracts with my bank, that it almost crossed the border line from strict business to sharp dealing."

"I'm sorry you should have been annoyed, but I know nothing about it. We—my father, is interested in sugar, and that, as you see, wouldn't bring us into any connection with their line of business."

"No, of course not. Do you happen to know who *are* the heads of the firm in this country?"

"I haven't any idea," the Secretary answered, very tersely. "I fancy they're in the nature of silent partners. But I dare say they might be known in business circles."

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"Oh, the matter doesn't interest me—except as I've mentioned. It was recalled to my mind by some notice of a treaty I saw the other day in the papers—which I should fancy would rather cripple their resources, if it went through."

The Secretary held his peace, and silence falling upon the room, the Reverend Reginald deposited the butt of his cigar tenderly in the ash-tray, and blew his nose lustily, as a preparatory signal for a retreat to the upper regions. The others obeyed the hint, and a moment later were on their way to the drawing-room.

Miss Fitzgerald's resentment towards the Lieutenant had been short-lived, and she was quite

ready to aid and abet him to the extent of her power, the more so as his success would upset the most cherished plans of the Marchioness, who was, for the time being, the Irish girl's pet detestation. Accordingly she took up her station near that matron, who descended on her forthwith.

"I suppose, my dear," said the Dowager, with an assumption of friendly interest that was even more terrible to behold than the coldness of her wrath, "I *can* only suppose, from what I could not help observing at table this evening, that you are soon to be a subject of congratulations."

"Really I don't understand."

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"Of course, I shouldn't think of forcing your confidence, but when an engagement is unannounced there's a degree of uncertainty."

"Oh, but I think you're mistaken," said Miss Fitzgerald, lifting her liquid blue eyes to the Dowager's face, with an expression of innocence, which was the perfection of art. "I'm much too young to think of such things—besides, who'd have me, with no dower except my beauty, such as it is, which, as your Ladyship knows, is not lasting."

The Marchioness fairly snorted with rage. She had been a Court belle in her time.

"Some country parson, perhaps," continued Miss Fitzgerald reflectively; "but then I fear I should not make a good parson's wife."

"I should doubt it," assented the Dowager with asperity.

"No millionaires would think of me for a moment."

"I did not know there were any such here."

"What, not Mr. Stanley?"

"Mr. Stanley?"

"Why, to be sure. He's worth millions they say. Stanley & Son, South American sugar. Anyone in the city would confirm my statements, but you don't know the city of course— Lieutenant Kingsland could tell you more about him if you cared to hear it," and she moved away as the gentlemen entered the room, and running up to Stanley, exclaimed:—

"You've been an interminable length of time over your cigars. Men are so selfish and I'm simply dying for a game of hearts." [Pg 125]

"You play it so much I should think you would tire of it," he said, smiling.

"Tut! tut! naughty man! This is serious business. Sixpence a heart, and you mustn't win, for I'm quite impoverished. You'll be one of the party, Jack," she continued, turning to Kingsland, who had just come up.

"Nothing I should like better. I always approve of assisting the undeserving," replied the Lieutenant, and added: "I'll get Lady Isabelle to join us." A very valuable piece of assistance, as her Ladyship would hardly have done so on Miss Fitzgerald's unsupported invitation; and since it was manifestly an affair of the young people, this deflection might have ruined all.

The Lieutenant's request, however, had due weight, and she graciously consented to join the party, which was further augmented by Mr. Riddle, who declared that "young people" meant anyone who felt young, and so he did not intend to be excluded.

The cards were accordingly shuffled, but during the deal, Belle discovered that though she had a pencil, no paper for scoring was anywhere obtainable.

"Oh, any old scrap will do," she said. "Surely some of you gentlemen have an old envelope on which we can keep tally. Jack? Mr. Riddle?"

Both gentlemen professed to an utter absence of any available material.

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"You, Jim—then?" she queried, turning to the Secretary.

"I don't generally carry my correspondence round in my evening clothes," he protested, laughing.

"Idiot!" she retorted, with an affected depth of scorn. "How can you tell unless you've looked?"

"Oh well," he replied, "to please you——" and thrust his hand into the pocket of his coat. "Why," he exclaimed, "here is something! I declare, it's that mysterious letter which I intercepted at the Hyde Park Club night before last. Let me see, Kingsland, I think it dropped from the ceiling into your hands."

"The letter belongs to me," came the keen voice of Mr. Riddle.

"To you!" said Stanley, in genuine surprise.

"Yes. I gave it to Lieutenant Kingsland at the Hyde Park Club."

"But surely," contended the Secretary, "Lieutenant Kingsland told me, only that morning, that he didn't know who you were."

Silence fell on the little company. The Lieutenant flushed and moved uneasily in his seat, and Miss Fitzgerald leaned forward with a strained look in her face, while the keen, restless eye of Mr. Riddle swept round the table, taking in all present at a glance.

Then he spoke, with quick decision.

"Quite true. I did not till to-day have the pleasure of *knowing* Lieutenant Kingsland. I saw him leaving the room at the club, however, and though he was a stranger, ventured, as I was unable to leave my party, to ask him to do me the favour to post a letter for me, handing him two-pence for the stamp. I had, it seems, very carelessly forgotten to address it." [Pg 127]

"Yes," broke in the Lieutenant, catching his breath. "You remember I told you I didn't know who had given it to me."

"You will notice," continued Mr. Riddle, "that the envelope is sealed with the initials A. R. inclosed in scroll work. Here"—detaching it from his watch chain—"is the seal with which the impression was made."

A cursory glance assured Stanley that it was the same.

"If you doubt my statement," continued Mr. Riddle affably, "we can procure some wax and make a duplicate——"

The Secretary hastened to disclaim any such intention. Why should he doubt this gentleman's word? Kingsland corroborated his story, and the letter was no concern of his, anyway. Indeed, as he said, in handing it over to its owner, he felt that he owed him an apology for his unwarrantable interference in the matter.

At this point Miss Fitzgerald resumed the conversation.

"There!" she cried. "You and your stupid letter have lost me the deal, for I don't know where I left off. Take the cards and deal for me— I'll run downstairs and get a clean sheet of paper, and come in on the next hand," and suiting the action to the word, she pushed the pack over to Stanley, and ran from the room. [Pg 128]

A moment later the game was in progress. Mr. Riddle was the life and soul of the party, and his irresistible mirth and good humour put every one at his ease.

The impoverished, it is perhaps needless to say, were duly remunerated; and the Secretary, after a round of whiskies and sodas, retired to his room, feeling that the evening had been a triumphant success, and reflecting ruefully that he was yet very young, for a little brief authority had made him suspicious of everybody. Had he not put down Mr. Riddle as a hypocrite, when that gentleman was one of the most open, whole-hearted and mirthful personages in existence? As for the letter it was an unfortunate incident, very successfully brought to a close. Something was wrong with Belle, however. She had left him with a shrug and laugh, saying: "Oh, there is no real gambling in a mere game of cards. Try life!" [Pg 129]

CHAPTER XII

A MORNING CALL

The Dowager was being created for the day. Created seems the only term applicable to the process, for Lily, Marchioness of Port Arthur, as finished by her Maker and her maid, were two entirely distinct and separate articles. Stimson alone was initiated in these mysteries. Even Lady Isabelle had never been allowed to see her mother as she really was, and no one exactly knew how she was put together, though several tradesmen in Bond Street might have been able to make shrewd guesses at her component parts.

The Dowager never appeared in public until lunch time. She had, she told her friends, earned the right to this little luxury now that the struggle of life was nearly over. Doubtless her Ladyship knew best what she had done to deserve such an indulgence. But, be that as it may, her daily retirement gave her a much coveted opportunity for attending to matters in the private life of other people, and one of these affairs claimed her attention after the Secretary's arrival at Roberts' Hall.

Stimson had finished her morning's budget; that is, she had retailed to her Ladyship all those things about which the Dowager declared pathetically she had not the slightest desire to know, but which, had the maid omitted to mention them, would have cost her her place. [Pg 130]

"And so, as I was saying, my Lady," Stimson concluded her recital, "Mr. Stalbridge, the butler, he tells me as there was a strange lady come to Coombe Farm yesterday, a foreigner like."

"I do not know, Stimson, why you worry me with these trivialities," said the Dowager, "in which I can have no possible interest. You say she was a foreigner?"

"Yes, my lady. A Spaniard, Mr. Stalbridge thought, and her name——"

"You needn't trouble me to tell me her name, Stimson."

"No, my Lady. I shouldn't presume, my Lady. But, of course, when I heard as it was Madame Darcy, I couldn't help thinking——"

"I do not employ you to think, Stimson. I understand you to say that the lady's name was Madame Darcy? Surely my daughter met a Madame Darcy the other night, somewhere?"

"Yes, my Lady, at Mr. Stanley's dinner."

"It is quite immaterial to me where Lady Isabelle met this person. But, as you say, it *was* at Mr. Stanley's dinner. So I infer she must be a friend of his."

"She's not staying at the Hall, my Lady."

"No," said the Marchioness. "I shouldn't have supposed she would stay at the Hall. Stimson, you may get me my bonnet and a light shawl." [Pg 131]

"But I thought your Ladyship said as how you was not well enough to go out this morning."

"I said, Stimson, that you could get me my bonnet and a light shawl. Perhaps a little air will do me good."

"If your Ladyship was thinking of taking a little stroll, it's very pretty towards the Coombe Farm, not ten minutes' walk across the Park to the left of the house."

"As you very well know, Stimson," her mistress remarked with asperity, "I am too nearly tottering on the brink of the grave to venture out of the garden. Perhaps there is a side-door by which I can leave the house and be alone. I shouldn't have the strength to talk to anybody."

"No, your Ladyship. I'll show you the way, and if Mrs. Roberts should send to inquire for your Ladyship's health——"

"Say I have been obliged to lie down by a headache, and shall not appear till lunch."

"But if anyone saw your Ladyship——"

"In that case," snapped the Marchioness, "I should be obliged to dismiss you as being untruthful."

In a good cause the Dowager was only too apt to overtax her strength, and this was probably the reason why, half an hour later, she was obliged to sink down on a wooden bench outside the door of Coombe Farm and request the privilege of resting herself for a few minutes. The farmer's wife, who, like most people of her class, took a vast interest in the guests at the Hall, knew intuitively that she was a Marchioness, and having ducked almost to the dust, rushed into the house to get her Ladyship a glass of fresh milk and impart the astounding intelligence to her lodger. A moment later Madame Darcy appeared upon the scene. [Pg 132]

"I am going to take the liberty of introducing myself, as I have the pleasure of knowing your daughter," she said.

Her Ladyship was affable in the extreme.

"This is, indeed, a pleasure, Madame Darcy," she murmured. "Dear Isabelle was so impressed with you the other night that she has done nothing but talk of you since; but, of course, I could not have supposed my walk would have had such a charming termination. Is not your coming into the country rather unexpected?"

"Yes," replied Madame Darcy. "It is what you in this country call a whim, is it not? I am not yet quite sure of your language."

The Marchioness smiled indulgently.

"Yes," she said, "that's quite right. It is very clever of you."

"I do not like your London," pursued the stranger. "It suffocates me, and I wish to run away into the country."

"And how did you know of this charming spot?" said her Ladyship, still angling on general principles.

"Oh, I have heard it mentioned." [Pg 133]

"By Mr. Stanley, perhaps?" suggested the Dowager. "You knew he was to be here."

"Oh, yes," rejoined Madame Darcy, judging it better to be frank. "But I came here to be quite alone. I need rest and quiet."

"I see," said the Marchioness, who was quite bewildered. "But you and Mr. Stanley are very old friends, are you not?"

"Our fathers were. We have not met often recently."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the Marchioness. "Mr. Stanley told me. He's such a nice young fellow. We often see him at our house. I take quite an interest in him. And how pleasantly he is situated, too. Diplomacy is such a delightful profession. But then"—and here she sighed gently—"like other delightful things in this world it must require a very long purse."

If Madame Darcy had had any knowledge of English manners and customs, the Dowager's method of attack would have put her on her guard at once. But being totally unversed in the ways of British matrimonial diplomacy, she took the Marchioness' remarks to mean nothing more than an expression of kindly interest in the young man's welfare, and did not hesitate to inform her that the Secretary was amply able to afford any position he chose to take.

"Oh, yes," said the Dowager. "His father's greatly interested in sugar, I believe. Or is it salt? I am very ignorant about these matters. Which do you grow in your country?"

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Madame Darcy repressed a smile and informed her guest that Mr. Stanley's father grew sugar, and was one of the most wealthy planters in that section of the world.

"Well, I must be going now," said the Marchioness. "I have had such a pleasant little chat, and I shall certainly ask Mrs. Roberts to call on you."

"Oh, pray don't," returned Madame Darcy. "That is—excuse me, I did not mean to be rude—but I have come down here for absolute rest, and do not feel in the mood for any gaiety."

"I quite understand," said the Dowager, "and will respect your feelings. Indeed, I will not mention having met you at all, and then no one need be the wiser. No, thanks. I shall be quite able to go by myself. Perhaps we may meet again in London. You must ask Mr. Stanley to bring you to call on me. Such a nice young fellow! He ought to be married to keep him out of mischief." And the Marchioness returned to her room to complete her headache.

Scarcely fifteen minutes had elapsed since the Dowager's departure, when, just by accident, Stanley strolled by, and lifting his eyes caught sight of Madame Darcy's face at the cottage window.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You here!" and stood silent a moment as a wave of feeling rushed over him, the first pleasure of seeing her sad sweet face being swept away by consternation at the thought of how she had played into her husband's hands by following him to this place.

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She read what was in his mind, saying, with that charming accent which appealed to him so strongly:

"You should not express your thoughts so clearly in your face. You are thinking—but it is not of me—it is of yourself—in this part of the world men think only of themselves—in my country they think of us." And she gave a sigh.

"You are, what you English call 'put out' at my coming—you think it will compromise you—strange country where the men consider that they will be compromised. You do not think of me, not one little bit—eh? I am right?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "You see, nowadays, chivalry doesn't exist far north or south of the equator."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I carry my own climate, my own atmosphere," she said.

The Secretary bowed.

"No? You are not convinced? I had thought better of you."

"You see," he said, feeling it wiser to be blunt, feeling that he must, if possible, bring this wayward, entrancing, fantastic creature within the limits of practical common sense. "You see, your precious husband has been making trumped-up charges against me, on your account, which are highly unpleasant."

"He is a beast!"

"Quite so, but as far as circumstantial evidence goes, he has some cause on his side. Your arrival at my private apartments in London was most unfortunate; but your following me here was simply the worst sort of foolishness."

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The Secretary was aggrieved and showed it; but the result of his plaint was most unexpected.

His fair companion sprang to her feet and gave him a flashing glance, that startled him out of the fancied security of his egotism.

"I come here to follow you! How dare you?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to be rude, really; but I naturally inferred——"

"No!" she cried. "Why should I come for you?— Bah! I come for *her*!"

"For whom?"

"For *her*," she cried, pointing towards the Hall.

"For *her*?" inquired Stanley, somewhat dazed by this unexpected change of base. "But who is she?"

"I do not know. I do not care; but she writes to my husband—she makes appointments with him."

"Oh, the nameless friend."

"Now you understand why I have come?"

"Yes, I see. Still I think it lays you open to misconstruction. You had better return to London. I suppose you know you were followed to my house?"

She snapped her fingers airily.

"I care just that for being followed. What of it?"

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"My dear Inez, you forget that you're not in our native country. We can't fight duels galore in this part of the world, and cut the throats of inconvenient witnesses. People will talk; there are the newspapers; and—the dowagers; and the nonconformist conscience to be considered. You don't know what you are letting me—I mean yourself, in for."

"I tell you, I must confirm my suspicions. I must see your—what you call it—your visitors' book—which they have in great houses— I must compare the handwriting of the guests with the handwriting of these letters. When I have proved my case I will return to London—not one moment before. You are my friend, you will help me."

"Of course I will help you; but I assure you there is no one in the house who could be suspected for a moment."

"At least, you will help me to prove myself wrong?" and she shot at him one of those unsettling glances.

"Of course—with all my heart—and then you'll go back to London and take Mr. Sanks' advice, won't you?"

"You are very anxious to have me go," she said, piqued.

"No, no!" he assured her hastily. "Far from it; but can't you see—that it is for your sake that I urge it. Supposing anyone saw us now; what would they think, what could they think—an early morning rendezvous."

"They would say that you were making a report to me of your progress in discovering the plot against the treaty between England and our country."

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He looked at her dumbfounded and said nothing. Indeed there was nothing he could say without risking some imprudent disclosure.

"Ah," she cried, laughing merrily at his discomfiture. "You see, you diplomats do not know everything. It is true I only write supervised letters home, but that does not prevent my receiving letters from my country first hand, and my father has written much about this treaty. It seems they are going to try and bribe the Senators to defeat it, with money raised here, and some cowardly scoundrel has been engaged as go-between."

Stanley stood looking at her in horrified astonishment. Was it possible that if she knew so much she did not know that she was condemning her own husband? But her next words proved to him that such must be the case.

"My father writes me," she continued, "that on proving the identity of this go-between, the success or failure of the plot depends, and so far, the government have been at a loss to identify him."

The Secretary, who held the key to the situation, could see excellent reasons why the Executive had kept Señor De Costa in the dark; what Madame was saying was evidently what everybody knew. Of the truth she had not the remotest inkling.

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"Well," she cried gaily, "why don't you speak?"

"I have nothing to say," he replied.

"Diplomatic to the end, I see," she retorted. "But you can't expect to share my confidences unless you give me yours. Now tell me, have you discovered any of the conspirators yet?"

"I can truthfully say," he replied, "that as far as I know, there is nobody at Roberts' Hall connected with the conspiracy to which you allude."

"So you've come down here at the busiest season of your year on indefinite leave just to pay a country-house visit."

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"Randell," she replied.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, "you haven't been to my rooms again."

"Naturally not," she returned coldly. "Your servant brought a pair of gloves to my hotel, which I left at your rooms."

The Secretary bit his lips and changed the conversation, and made a mental note of the fact that if Randell was becoming talkative, he would have to go.

"You asked me," he said, "if I had discovered one of the agents of this mysterious treaty of which you seem to know so much. Perhaps you will tell me if you have?"

"Yes," she said, smiling.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Ah!" she cried. "I thought I should break down your reserve."

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"Well," he said sheepishly, "what have you to say?"

"Nothing," she replied. "I only exchange confidences for confidences. Tell me whom you suspect, and I will tell you whom I know."

"What you ask is impossible," he replied, feeling that he could never wound her by admitting his suspicions of her husband.

"So be it," she said gaily, giving him her hand, and added, "Come and see me again when you can spare a little time from your detective work."

The Secretary saw she was laughing at him, and took his leave discomfited. Madame Darcy watched him go, and sighed gently as she turned to re-enter the house. She also had felt that she would not have dared to wound him by mentioning her suspicions.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE SERIOUS SIDE OF MISS FITZGERALD'S NATURE

It may have been contrition for her shortcomings which induced Miss Fitzgerald to offer her services to the Reverend Reginald Lambert to assist in decorating the altar of the little church for the ensuing Sunday, and it may not. At any rate, she did offer them, and they were gratefully accepted.

She was dressed in a garb which would have befitted a postulant for a religious order, and her sweet seriousness, and altogether becoming demeanour, charmed the Reverend Reginald.

The old parson was, it is needless to say, a thorough nonentity, and the skilful attentions of his fair assistant were the more appreciated, because the more rare.

"It's very kind of you, my dear," he said, "to give so much of your time to helping an old man."

"I'm afraid I don't give up half enough. I think we should give ourselves to the serious side of life at least for a little while every week, don't you? We are so apt to devote ourselves to frivolities."

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"I'm very glad to hear you say that. Young people are none too serious nowadays; but I'm sure you're too strong a nature to be wholly frivolous."

"I'm afraid not, but I often do things I don't care for, to keep myself from thinking. My life hasn't been all a bed of roses, Mr. Lambert."

"You surprise me," he said, sitting down in the front pew to get a better view of their united arrangement of potted plants. "That's very pretty, my dear. Now come and sit by me, and tell me all about it, and if an old man's advice——"

"Oh, I *do* so want advice," she said. "You can't realise what the life I lead means to a girl—my parents are both dead, you know."

"Yes, poor child. I remember; Mrs. Roberts told me. How sad!"

"I've no settled home— I knock about. I try my best, I do indeed, Mr. Lambert; but with no one to advise me—no older woman than myself who really cares—it is at times very hard."

"But you've relatives—Mrs. Roberts."

"Yes, of course, they're very kind, and all that; but a young girl needs far more than what she could ask of a remote relative. She needs watchful care, constant protection. You've had a daughter, Mr. Lambert."

"Yes, yes, I know. My dear Mary was a model girl, Miss Fitzgerald; a good child is a great blessing. I see your position."

"I'm sure you do. Try as one may, a young girl has not that experience which comes with age, her best efforts are sometimes misinterpreted— I've suffered keenly myself."

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"My poor child," said the old rector, patting her hand in a fatherly manner. "My poor child! You yourself see the need of a guiding hand."

"I do, I do. Having no one to fight life's battle for me, I've become of necessity self-reliant."

"Of course, of course."

"It has been misinterpreted, misunderstood. I've been called—hard; worse— I've been thought ——" Her voice broke.

"My dear child," said the old man, "you'll forgive my speaking plainly, but you should be married. You need a husband. Someone who will take the responsibility from you."

Miss Fitzgerald breathed a contented little sigh, and her bowed head leaned, oh, so lightly, against his shoulder!

"I hoped you would say that," she murmured.

"Is there someone—then—someone you love? You rejoice me exceedingly."

Resuming a more erect posture, she said earnestly:

"Tell me, Mr. Lambert, would you ever consent to perform a marriage—quietly—very quietly—say, with the knowledge of only the contracting parties and witnesses?"

"If there were good and sufficient reasons. Of course, if the young lady's parents were living, I should wish to be assured of their consent first."

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"Oh!" murmured Miss Fitzgerald.

"But, in your own case, if you really wished it, though it seems unnecessary, I could make some such arrangement as you suggest, because no one would be affected but yourself, though if a large estate or title was involved it would be a very different matter."

His companion thought long and deeply; then, looking up at him, she said:

"Would you, would you, dear Mr. Lambert, accept my word for it that silence is necessary?"

"I—yes. I suppose so. But, Mrs. Roberts?"

"I can assure you that Mrs. Roberts approves of my marrying; but——" and she laid her finger on her lips.

"Well, as you please; but remember the responsibility rests with you; then there would have to be witnesses."

"I could promise that Lady Isabelle McLane would be present, and the best man would be the other."

"Quite so—but—when would you wish the ceremony to take place?"

"Say Sunday."

"But, my dear young lady—there are the fifteen days required by law—unless, of course, you have a special licence."

"Perhaps there *is* a special licence."

"Of course in that case everything is easy—but do nothing rash. Marriage is a most solemn covenant, and I should strongly advise that you speak to Mrs. Roberts. Indeed, I hardly know if I ——"

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"I have your word, Mr. Lambert. I'll come to you to-morrow, may I? and you'll talk to me earnestly, very earnestly, about it all. It will be decided then—and if I should wish it before early service Sunday morning, you would help me, I know. But remember, it's a secret, and oh, you're so kind!" And taking his hand, she kissed it.

"But, my dear," stammered the old man, quite flustered by this unexpected mark of affection, "you haven't even told me the gentleman's name."

Bending over, she whispered softly, "Lieutenant Kingsland," and fled out of the church.

In the light of the events of the morning, Miss Fitzgerald was naturally desirous of becoming better acquainted with the appearance of a special licence, and in the seclusion of the billiard-room, Lieutenant Kingsland was able to gratify her curiosity.

"Quite an expensive luxury, I've been given to understand," she said reflectively, regarding the parchment.

"Yes," admitted Kingsland regretfully, "it means a special messenger to the Archbishop, wherever he may happen to be. He never's by any chance at 'Lambeth' when you want him, and fees all along the line."

"A matter of forty pounds, I've been told."

"Well, call it thirty. I know the crowd."

"I shouldn't have suspected you of being ecclesiastical."

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"It's a long story, and not to the point. Now, what have you done?"

"Considering that you were thoughtful enough to procure that licence, I've done everything."

"Bravo! When can the ceremony take place?"

"Before early service Sunday morning, say a quarter to eight."

"The sooner the better. I'm a thousand times obliged. You're a little brick, and I shall never forget it."

"I shall ask for a return some day," she said.

"And you shall have it, no matter what. Is there nothing more?"

"Only this. You know Mr. Lambert is somewhat aged, very blind—don't forget that—and a trifle deaf; so, though I assure you I never said so, I'm quite sure he is under the impression that you're going to marry—me."

"But I don't understand."

"Mr. Lambert informed me that in the case of a person of importance, or one whose parents were living, he couldn't perform the ceremony privately—that is, as privately as you would wish; but as regarded myself, an orphan—you see?"

"But the name?"

"Are we not both Isabelles? Besides, he is old, and deaf, and nearly blind, and the bride and I will both be closely veiled, under the circumstances. If we should appear to have signed our names in the wrong places in the registry—why, it's a stupid blunder that any one might make on such a trying occasion."

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"But how account for Lady Isabelle's presence?"

"He asked me concerning the witnesses, and I promised that her Ladyship would be there. As for the other?"

"My best man will serve."

"Who is he?"

Kingsland laughed.

"Wait and see," he said. "He's an old friend of yours. Anything else?"

"Yes, two things. Keep a still tongue in your head, and have the bride there to the minute."

"I promise. Belle, you're the best friend a man ever had."

"Not at all. I'm only doing you a service—for a service in return."

"What is that?"

"I don't know, I'm sure; but any woman who lives the life I do is sure, some day, to want a friend who is sufficiently in her debt—to—well, do anything that may be needful. You understand?"

"Done!" he cried, and wrung her hand.

"Oh, by the way," she added, "I've given the Marchioness her tip, and I don't imagine Jimsy's life will be worth living in consequence."

"Couldn't you help to make it a little more bearable—for instance?" insinuated the Lieutenant.

"It takes two to make a bargain of that sort," she returned.

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"All right," he said, laughing. "I'll see that Little Diplomacy gets a steer in your direction," and he started to leave the room.

"No; I forbid you to do anything of the sort," she called after him.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE SERIOUS SIDE OF THE SECRETARY'S NATURE

In virtue of his good resolution to point out to Miss Fitzgerald the error of her ways, the Secretary had been nerving himself to an interview with her on this delicate question, and as result, when he found himself alone with Lieutenant Kingsland in the smoking-room after dinner that evening, both were silent. Each had something to think about, yet each was thinking about the same thing. The Secretary abstractedly wondering how he was to commence the awkward interview which was staring him in the face; while the young officer, relying on the axiom that "a woman never says what she means," was pondering over the best way in which to go to work upon his companion, in order to induce him to open his heart to the lady in question.

"I say, Stanley," he remarked, "do you know Bob Darcy?"

"Darcy? No, I don't think so."

"Why, he's the chap whose wife chaperoned your little dinner that night at the Hyde Park Club, when Lady Rainsford failed you."

"No, I don't know him. Do you?"

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"I—oh, very slightly—I assure you—never exchanged more than half a dozen words with him in my life."

"I thought you seemed pretty well acquainted at Lady Rainsford's tea."

"I"—faltered the young man—"I think you're mistaken."

Stanley smiled quietly, as the nature of the conversation he had overheard came back to his mind—he was getting on.

"I'm afraid," he remarked, "that your friend doesn't attract me. What did you wish to say about him?"

"Only that he's awfully gone on Belle Fitzgerald, means business, and all that—lucky dog—I think he'll win hands down," and Lieutenant Kingsland heaved a sigh.

"But he's married, surely?"

"Oh, yes, I believe he is—but it hasn't been an unqualified success. I understand there's a divorce in the air, and after that—of course——"

"He's treated his wife like a brute!" spluttered Stanley.

"Don't know, I'm sure. He's a jolly good fellow at the club. Any way, he'd put a job with Belle to do the platonic under Mrs. Roberts' protecting roof for a week or two, when what does our hostess do but cut up rusty about his marital infelicities, and refuse to invite him. Rather a sell on the little Fitzgerald, eh?"

"I'll be obliged to you if you'll mention Miss Fitzgerald more respectfully in my presence. She's a lady for whom I have the highest consideration, and who would, I'm sure, if she knew what I know of Colonel Darcy, cut him off from her list of acquaintances immediately. I hope you'll not feel called upon to speak of this more than is necessary," and he rose stiffly and left the room.

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Kingsland rolled over on the divan, on which he was sprawled out, and indulged in a fit of hearty laughter.

"Gad! how he rose to the bait!" he roared. "I supposed Darcy was too old a story to tempt anyone with; but the world's after all a very small place." And this, curiously enough, was precisely the reflection which the Secretary made ruefully to himself, as he sought the captivating Belle.

As can be understood in the light of that interview in the smoking-room, the two gentlemen were late in arriving upstairs, and when Stanley did put in an appearance, Miss Fitzgerald required all her courage to dare to claim him as her exclusive property and carry him off to the comparative seclusion of the conservatory, for black care sat heavy on his brow, and her interview promised to be anything but agreeable. However, she was nothing if not courageous, and opened the attack at once, on the ground that the defensive is always the weakest position.

"What an old bear you are to-night, Jimsy. I couldn't get a word out of you at dinner, and now you look as glum as if you'd lost your last friend."

"I've been talking to Lieutenant Kingsland," he said bluntly.

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"Dear me, if it always has as bad an effect I must contrive to keep you two apart in the future."

"He's been telling me about your relations with Darcy. Confound it, Belle!—it's too bad of you! Why, he's a beastly cad. I wouldn't have him in my house, and to think that the woman I—well, any woman I respect as much as I do you—should be on intimate terms with a man like that, makes my blood boil. Great Heavens, have some consideration for your friends, if you haven't for yourself! Think of what will be said of you; think——"

"Don't do the heroic, Jimsy, it doesn't become you," she interrupted. "Give me a cigarette, and see if you can't talk this matter over without going all to tatters."

"You smoke too much. I don't approve of ladies smoking. It seems so common."

"Nonsense. It's uncommon not to. I'm dying for a whiff, and one never gets a chance in that crowd of old fogies. Thank you—now what's all this disturbance about Colonel Darcy? I declare, I almost believe you are becoming an old foggy yourself."

"I didn't even know you knew him— Darcy, I mean— I object to him strongly."

"Really, Mr. Stanley, I don't run my acquaintances on the lines of your choosing."

"Of course not; but I may claim the privilege of a friend."

"To make yourself uncommonly disagreeable; I suppose you may—and I was feeling so amiable too—just in the mood for an old-time chat. But it can't be helped. Colonel Darcy's an old friend, and was very kind to me at a time when I needed friends and hadn't many. I don't know what he

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has done or not done, and I don't care. I learned that he was to be in this neighbourhood shortly on business, and, wishing to make some return for his past kindness, I proposed to my aunt to invite him here, and she, who's a woman after your own heart, refused—because, forsooth, he didn't get on well with his wife—as if his wife mattered to me— I certainly didn't want to invite her."

"I assure you," burst out the Secretary, "that she's a most charming woman, and that her husband has treated her like the cad and brute he is."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Stanley. I didn't know you were posing as the knight-errant of hysterical wives."

"I'm not; but I can't stand by and see a lovely and innocent woman injured."

"I presume I'm not to defend my friend?" she asked, her small foot tapping the tiled floor in anger.

"You would not wish to do so if you knew his true character."

"I do not wish to prolong this interview, Mr. Stanley. I must remind you that there are limits even to the rights of friendship, and you have overstepped them."

"I fear I've forgotten myself, that I've been too vehement. I humbly beg your pardon. I won't trespass again, believe me. I only spoke for your good—indeed, I wanted to have a serious talk with you about yourself; but the spirit in which you receive my suggestions makes it impossible."

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"You mustn't say that," she replied, more quietly than she had hitherto spoken. "But you can surely understand that my friendship would be of little use to any man if I stood quietly by and let him be denounced without a word of resentment on my part. Are there other of my friends of whom you do not approve?"

"It's partly that, but rather the—you'll pardon me—the things that are said about you, Belle. People—my friends—men as well as women—have said things in my presence—that I did not like to hear. Things that show how easy it is for a careless, easy-going nature like yours to be misinterpreted; in short—"

"In short, they told you I was fast, I suppose, a sordid, scheming, money-making wretch. Is that correct?"

"Really, Belle!"

"Is that correct? Answer me."

"Well, they certainly wouldn't have used such words in my presence."

"But they meant that—or something like it?"

"I'm afraid they did."

Her face, white enough before, flushed red, as she demanded:

"And you! What did you say?"

"I—I don't remember— I refused to listen; but I made up my mind to speak to you— I thought you ought to know."

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"You"—she cried, turning on him in a fury—"you, my friend, as you call yourself, had no answer to make, did nothing, except to decide to lecture me about what you should have known to be a lie! Let me tell you, Mr. Stanley, you'd have done better to defend me—knowing, as you must know, the slights, the buffets, the insults I've had to endure, because I'm unprotected, and men can dare—"

"I assure you I did. I didn't believe it of you for an instant."

"You believed it enough to question me as to the truth of these accusations. It's easy to preach prudence when you've nothing to gain or lose; but were you a woman, thrown on the world and on her own resources, you'd find it a different, a very different, thing, and you'd expect help and encouragement from friends who are stronger and more fortunate than you—not this!" and she burst into tears.

"Miss Fitzgerald!— Belle!" he cried, striving to take her hand, "I wouldn't have pained you in this way for worlds! Believe me, I'm your friend, your true friend!"

"I've friends enough of your sort," she sobbed, "too many."

"But at least let me explain."

"Don't say any more, please—you've said enough. Good night, you must excuse me. I—I'm not myself," and touching her handkerchief to her eyes, with a great effort she controlled herself and left the conservatory.

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CHAPTER XV

THE SECRETARY'S INTENTIONS

Roberts' Hall preserved the good old English custom concerning breakfast—which means that a rambling meal extended from eight to eleven in the morning—at which the butler served you with tea, or coffee and rolls, and you served yourself to the rest, from the cold cuts on the sideboard to the hot viands in copper vessels warmed by alcohol lamps. The cold cuts you had always with you, also the orange marmalade; as for the eggs and bacon, devilled kidneys, etc., their state was dependent on the taste of the guests who had preceded you, and your own ability as an early riser. You came down when you pleased, and ate your meal in solitary state or in any company that might happen to be present, which, if it proved to be congenial, made a very jolly, informal repast, and if it didn't,—well, that was fate, and you had to submit to it. Fate may be kind or it may not, sometimes it sets out to play ponderous practical jokes, which may include something nearly akin to a grim reality in the future for the persons involved.

This was probably the reason why Stanley, on his advent into the breakfast-room, found it tenanted by only one person, and that one, Lady Isabelle.

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At the sight of her, the Secretary felt decidedly sheepish, because Miss Fitzgerald's tears and some subsequent hours of sleepless meditation thereon had convinced him that he was morally, if not actually, capable of all the weakness for which her Ladyship had upbraided him. He told himself that he owed a duty to the fair Belle, that he must save her from herself at all costs, even if it involved the sacrifice of his own future, that he had misjudged her cruelly, and that he was very, very sorry for her, and that, because he was conscience-stricken, he was certainly in love. Indeed he kept assuring himself with feverish insistence, that this must be the real article.

To Lady Isabelle, on the contrary, Stanley's deficiencies were almost lost sight of, in view of the disturbing suspicion that that young gentleman might be led to suppose that her well-meant interference in his affairs had proceeded from an undue regard for himself. A suspicion but a few hours old, and dating from an interview with the Marchioness, who, for some unknown reason, had suddenly assumed a totally different attitude towards the Secretary, and even tried to entrap her daughter into admitting that his attentions might mean something. This made Lady Isabelle most anxious to impress him with the fact that their friendship was purely platonic. Accordingly, to his intense surprise, she was exceedingly gracious, and chatted away all through breakfast in a charmingly easy, if somewhat feverish, manner, even condescending so far as to say something pleasant about Miss Fitzgerald. Under this treatment Stanley simply glowed, and opened out as much as he dared in the presence of the butler and two expressionless footmen, upon that lady's charms. He was a very young diplomat, as the reader will have noticed ere this, or he would not have continued to praise one lady to another; least of all at breakfast time, an hour when the temper of mortals is by no means certain. But in the pleasure of his subject he did not notice the scorn that was suggested by the curl of his vis-à-vis' lip.

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"I do wish," he said in conclusion, "that you'd take a stroll with me this afternoon; the deer park is quite worth seeing, I understand, and besides there are lots of things I want to talk to you about."

It was during this proposition that Lieutenant Kingsland, preceded by the Dowager, entered the breakfast-room.

"Oh, I say," blurted out that officer, "I think we've got an appointment after lunch, haven't we?"

"I think not, Lieutenant Kingsland," replied Lady Isabelle, foreseeing the crisis, and realising the necessity of immediate action. Then turning to Stanley, she added:—

"Thanks, I should enjoy a good walk hugely, and I love deer. It was very kind of you to suggest it. What time shall we start?"

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"Say three o'clock," said the Secretary, immensely rejoiced at his restoration to favour.

"Three, let it be then, if mamma approves."

It was only too evident that mamma did approve; she nodded and smiled, and said that exercise was a splendid thing for young people; till Stanley became frightened at her excessive geniality, and Kingsland looked black as a thunder-cloud.

The Lieutenant was not, however, so easily baffled, and jumped to the conclusion that half of Lady Isabelle was better than no Lady Isabelle at all.

"Three's not company, I know," he said, laughing with attempted gaiety, "but I'm no end fond of deer myself."

"I was about to ask you, Lieutenant Kingsland," interrupted the Dowager, coming promptly to the rescue, "to execute a few commissions for me this afternoon, at Tunbridge Wells. I'm sure our hostess will put a dog-cart at your service, and it's not above fifteen miles."

"Charmed, I'm sure," replied the Lieutenant—but he did not look it. However, he had his reward, for Lady Isabelle had just finished her breakfast, and Kingsland declared he had already had his, which was not true, so they disappeared together and left the Dowager to enjoy her repast in the

company of the Secretary, to whom she was so extremely affable, that, had it not been for his instructions, he would have had serious thoughts of leaving for London, before he was appropriated body and soul.

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"What have you been telling my mother about Mr. Stanley?" asked Lady Isabelle of the Lieutenant, in the seclusion of the library. "I know you had a long conference with her last night—and something must have happened."

"I'm sure I don't know, unless it was that he's a millionaire, and made his money, or had it made for him, in some beastly commercial way—sugar, I think."

Lady Isabelle gave him one look, and remarked with a depth of scorn which even the unfortunate Secretary had not evoked:—

"Oh, you idiot!"

Kingsland was immersed in literature the entire morning in company with Lady Isabelle, who doubtless found the Lieutenant's companionship a great comfort, under the circumstances, since now that she knew the reason of her mother's attitude towards the Secretary, she was as anxious to avoid the walk with him, as she had previously been willing to take it.

Kingsland, however, bore up bravely, for his trip to the Wells gave him an opportunity to settle several little matters of business, which the Dowager, had she known of them, would hardly have approved. Moreover, Belle saw him off, saying as he mounted the dog-cart:—

"Don't be upset by Lady Isabelle's defection this afternoon, Jack; the most trustworthy little mare will sometimes jib, just before taking a desperate leap."

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When two people start out on a long walk together, each with the firm intention of doing his duty by the other, the result is apt to be far from pleasant; but in this case both had so much to talk about that for the first hour of their walk they said nothing, and their arrival at the deer-park was a distinct relief, since it furnished a new and harmless subject for discussion. And, indeed, the pretty animals warranted more than a passing word. They were seen in numbers, peeping out of a fringe of woodland across the width of an uncultivated field, and they were in that delightful state of semi-tameness, when a longing for the bits of bread, with which Stanley and Lady Isabelle were well supplied, battled equally with an impulse, born of natural training, to flee the proximity of the human race.

But there was not much going in the line of food, and so gradually, step by step, the most daring of the herd ventured into the open, and slowly approached the visitors, who were wise enough to throw tempting bits about twelve feet away from them. Watchful to note the slightest movement of a muscle, the bread was at length secured, and the herd scampered away in a panic of fear, only to return for more, thrown nearer the feet of their friends. So it was at last, with advances of six feet and retreats of as many yards, at the crackling of a bush or a change in the wind, that the most adventurous consented, standing as far aloof as possible, and stretching their necks to the last degree of tension, to take the bread from the visitors' hands.

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But finally even the charms of the deer were exhausted, and as they turned about and began slowly to stroll homeward across the park, Lady Isabelle abruptly broached the subject which both of them had nearest at heart.

"I'm afraid," she began, "that I'm very prone to order the lives of my friends, from my own point of view."

"My life, for instance?" he asked.

"Mr. Stanley," she said, "I shan't be really happy till I have apologised for the way I spoke at Lady Rainsford's tea. I'd no right to do so, and I'm sure my judgment was hasty and ill-advised. I've been trusting to my eyes and ears rather than to the reports of other people, and I'm sure I've been mistaken. Do you know how Miss Fitzgerald spent part of yesterday?"

"I have not seen her to speak with to-day."

"Then I'll tell you. She was helping poor old Mr. Lambert trim the church for to-morrow. I think it was very nice of her."

"I'm afraid your commendation has come a trifle late. The fact is, I took it upon myself to counsel the young lady in question against a friend of hers—a Colonel Darcy."

"Not Colonel Robert Darcy?"

"The same."

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"No, but I know how he treats his wife, and his own character is none too good."

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"It's curious," she said, a trifle sadly, "but I'm in just your position in regard to a dear friend of mine, and concerning the same man."

"Concerning Colonel Darcy?"

"Yes."

"And his intimacy with Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"How did you know?"

"He that hath eyes to see——" quoted the Secretary.

"They never even knew each other till a short time ago, but in the last few weeks they've been constantly together. I can't understand it."

Mr. Stanley thought he could, but forbore to say so.

"I don't know why I distrust Colonel Darcy, but I do," she continued, "and his sudden intimacy with Jack—Lieutenant Kingsland—makes me apprehensive. Do you think——"

"I think your friend is of too pliable a nature to be in the hands of so unscrupulous a rascal."

She sighed, and then feeling perhaps that she had said too much, hastened to revert to their original subject, saying:

"Don't tell me there's a misunderstanding between you and Miss Fitzgerald. I'm so sorry. I wouldn't for the world—that is, I almost feel as if I'd been to blame."

"You're not the only one of my friends who has misjudged her— I've done so myself—utterly."

"But surely this little difference will not be lasting—I hoped——"

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"Would you wish me to marry Miss Fitzgerald, Lady Isabelle?"

"Well, perhaps I won't say that—but I should certainly not wish anything I might have said to prevent you from so doing. Of course, my only reason for interfering was prompted by a wish for your happiness."

"Do you think you understand what that comprises?"

"That's just the point I wanted to make clear," she said hastily, determined that he must understand, even at the expense of a slight indiscretion on her part, which she felt would be far preferable to the slightest misunderstanding of their relative positions, in view of any future action of her mother's.

"You see," she continued, "to put it frankly, what could I possibly know of the requirements which, in a woman, would go to make you happy. Of course, you and I are friends, great friends; but just that state of affairs, as far as we're concerned, makes any judgment of mine useless concerning the kind of woman you could love."

Stanley, who could scarcely help drawing his own inferences, was piqued that she should have felt it necessary to batter a self-evident fact into his brain in such a bald manner.

"I wish," he said, "that her Ladyship, your mother, was possessed of the same lucid views on kindred subjects."

"Poor mamma," murmured his companion, "she's a trifle conventional; but, of course, if you're not in sympathy with her, you can easily avoid her."

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There, the cat was out of the bag at last, and both felt easier in consequence. Stanley threw himself into the breach at once, and took the burden of the conversation.

"I'm sure," he said, "I don't believe that half of the people in the world can tell for the life of them why they fall in love with a certain person and not with another. As we're talking confidentially, I don't mind telling you that I've decided that I'm in love with Miss Fitzgerald, and that the best thing I can do is to tell her so as soon as possible, though I'm afraid there is little chance of her having me."

"I can honestly say," rejoined his companion, "that, if that is how the case stands, I do hope you'll be successful."

Having arrived at this amicable and highly satisfactory conclusion, they realised that in the earnestness of their discussion they had not noticed the lapse of time.

"Dear me, it must be getting late. I trust we're not far from the Hall," said Lady Isabelle.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know just where we are," he replied.

They were standing in a thick plantation at the time, through which meandered the little path they were following.

"There's rising ground ahead, however," he continued, "and, I think, a clearing."

This proved to be the case, and when they had gained the little knoll they saw, nearly in front of them, across a slight valley, bordered on either side by wide stretches of fields and pasture-land,

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the Hall.

"It doesn't look to be half a mile distant, but I doubt the wisdom of trying a short cut," he said, "We'd much better keep to our path."

Their prudence had its own reward, for they had not been walking five minutes before they encountered a peasant, who, with more good nature than brevity, directed their steps in a way that was too plainly not a short cut. However, there was nothing for it now but to push on, and though they walked rapidly, it was a long time before they reached the Hall.

Unkind fate prompted them on their arrival to venture into the drawing-room in search of a belated cup of tea, and, to their dismay, they found the apartment, which should have been deserted at this hour, tenanted solely by the Dowager, who had evidently been awaiting their return.

She was much too formally polite to make them feel at their ease, and with a word dismissed her daughter, on the plea of removing her wraps, thus leaving the Secretary to his fate.

Once they were alone, her Ladyship surveyed the young man deliberately through her lorgnettes, and when she had made him sufficiently nervous, remarked in a chilling tone that she trusted her daughter had caught no cold from walking so late in the park.

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The Secretary acquiesced, and then the Marchioness opened the attack in earnest.

"We—my daughter—has had the pleasure of seeing a great deal of you lately, Mr. Stanley."

"Er, yes," he replied, scenting danger. "Of course it's been a great pleasure to me."

"Still," she continued, "it is not usual for a young lady, unchaperoned, to walk in the park with a gentleman at this hour; a gentleman who is, shall we say, a mere acquaintance."

"The matter was one of necessity," he replied shortly. "We lost our way."

"Mrs. Roberts has driven me over her grounds repeatedly, and it appears to me to be quite impossible for anyone to really lose his way."

"Deference to your Ladyship's opinion prevents me from saying more."

"It is certainly not pleasant," resumed the Dowager, ignoring his last remark, "to continue this conversation, and, were my late husband living, I should naturally have left the matter to him; as it is, my duty as a mother and my desire for dear Isabelle's welfare bids me——"

"Really, your Ladyship, am I to understand you to imply——"

"I can only say that I have heard your name associated with my daughter's in a manner—that was not—quite as I could wish. Dear Lady Wintern, a woman most interested in the good of her friends, spoke to me herself, and of course you, as a man of honour and a gentleman——"

"As a man of honour and a gentleman, I deeply regret that anything in my conduct should have led to a misconception in regard to my relations with Lady Isabelle, and in the future——"

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"In the future, Mr. Stanley, you will of course see little or nothing of my daughter—unless——"

She paused, and for a moment neither spoke. Then the Secretary, who, whatever else may be said of him, was not a coward, seeing what was impending, determined to face the situation and have it over as soon as possible.

"Am I to understand," he inquired, "that you're asking me my intentions?"

Her Ladyship raised her eyebrows. If the French shoulder is expressive, the English eye-brow, feminine, speaks volumes.

"You do not make the situation easy for me," she replied. "Of course I speak only for myself. What my daughter may feel——"

"You don't suppose," he exclaimed, "that Lady Isabelle really thinks——"

"I *know*, Mr. Stanley, that my daughter thinks nothing and does nothing that would not be proper in a young lady of her position."

"Then I've only to apologise," he said, rising, "for what you force me to believe is my fault, however unintentional." And, bowing gravely to her, he quietly left the room.

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CHAPTER XVI

MAN PROPOSES

As he dressed for dinner that evening, Stanley was still smarting with irritation at the undeserved attack which had just been made upon him by the Marchioness, and which through no fault of his own placed him in an exceedingly unpleasant and awkward position towards her daughter. The

sooner he proposed to Miss Fitzgerald, and their engagement was announced, the better for all parties concerned. So seeking to justify himself by force of circumstances, he threw prudence to the winds and determined to speak that very night.

If, however, his private affairs had progressed rapidly to a crisis, the official interests which, he assured himself, were the real cause of his presence here, had not progressed at all, and he seemed no nearer the solution of the mystery, and the apprehension of the conspirators, than when he arrived.

True, Lady Isabelle's confession concerning Kingsland only served to strengthen his own conviction that the Lieutenant was Darcy's confederate; but Darcy himself, the prime mover of the plot, had not as yet put in an appearance, and till he arrived there was nothing to be done but to watch and wait.

Five minutes later the Secretary had joined the party in the drawing-room just as dinner was announced, and to his utter consternation his hostess whispered to him: [Pg 170]

"I am sending you down with Lady Isabelle. I hear you and she are great chums."

"Great chums!" Stanley was tempted to plead sudden indisposition, and have his dinner in his room. Then a remembrance of his recent interview caused a wave of adverse feeling to sweep over him. Yes, he would take down Lady Isabelle. Was he to be badgered out of his dinner because a designing old woman could not leave well enough alone?

He could not indeed resist casting a look of amused triumph at the Dowager as he passed her with her daughter on his arm, but his conscience pricked him nevertheless, for he felt that his presence must be distasteful to his fair companion. That she really cared for him at all he could not bring himself to believe in the light of their conversation on the walk. Still, her frankness might have been assumed through pique at unreturned affection, and with a desire born of pride, to blind him to the true state of her feelings. The more he thought of this the more uneasy he became, and he could not help noticing that she was much more pale than he had as yet seen her, and seemed singularly abstracted. Moreover, he was certain that she was incurring her mother's displeasure, which would be to her a grave matter. He tried to make such atonement as lay in his power to make her feel at ease and to divert her mind. He told her his best stories, gave her his most brilliant conversation, but in vain. His endeavours fell hopelessly flat, and at last, after a dreadful pause, they spoke that which was in their hearts. [Pg 171]

"Do you think it was nice of you to take me in to dinner?" she asked in that quiet conversational tone with which so many secrets have been told at dinners without arresting the attention of others.

"Really," he said, "I'd no option. Our hostess——"

"You managed to avoid it last night."

Stanley flushed.

"Do you mind so much?" he asked.

"Oh, no; but mamma."

"She didn't show me much consideration the last time we met."

"I was very sorry for you," she replied, "but as it had to come I thought I was better out of the way."

"Do you mean to say that you deliberately left me to my fate?"

"You mustn't be too hard on mamma. She wouldn't have thought she was doing right if she had not spoken."

"But," he continued relentlessly, "you——"

"Oh! I——?"

"Yes, supposing I had—succumbed."

She paused a minute, and then looked shyly up at him.

"In that case," she began, when Mrs. Roberts rose, and gave the signal for the ladies to retire. [Pg 172]

Stanley cursed the convention, yet perhaps it was fortunate, as the Dowager had been growing dangerously red and puffy in the face, owing to the fact that the two young people had, unconsciously, drawn closer together in the excitement of those unfinished words.

The cigars seemed interminable; but at last they were over, and the gentlemen were at liberty to seek the drawing-room.

There is generally a moment of indecision when the men come up from dinner. The ladies have appropriated the most comfortable and naturally the most isolated chairs, and their lords and masters huddle like sheep in the doorway, uncertain where to flee for refuge and the most desirable companion. The Secretary had studied this peculiarity of his sex, and had learned to choose his goal beforehand. One glance showed him that Lady Isabelle was absent; either she

had retired, her mother was quite capable of ordering her off to bed to keep her out of harm's way, or else she was in the conservatory. He trusted that this last supposition was correct, and disappeared among the palms, when the Marchioness' attention was directed elsewhere.

"And in that case?" he said, as he stood beside her, recalling her last words at the table. "In that case?"

"In that case," she replied, flushing slightly, "I should probably have said something I might have regretted, had not Mrs. Roberts come to my rescue."

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"And now?"

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Stanley. Surely you know that any well-brought-up girl would always obey her mother—and—and you ought to see that this conversation is impossible."

"It's certainly unique."

"Don't you think we had better change the subject?"

"By all means, if you wish it, after I've asked you one more question. I trust you won't think me rude to persist, but—do you care for me, Lady Isabelle?"

"As a friend, yes."

"But in no other way?"

"In no other way."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite, and I'm very sorry you asked me the question. I tried hard to prevent you."

"You've succeeded admirably," he said, laughing. "I was afraid you did care."

He held out his hand, and she took it, saying with a little constraint in her manner:

"You're certainly frank."

He was pleased to see that she was only piqued; the speech had been unfortunate; but Lady Isabelle had plenty of common sense, and she realised that his naïve confession had cleared the atmosphere, and made social intercourse possible.

He made another attempt to interest her in general conversation, this time succeeding admirably. And so an hour slipped by unnoticed, until the stern voice of the Dowager recalled them to the realities of life.

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"Isabelle," she said coldly, "you are surely forgetting your duty to our hostess, and to me also, it seems."

"I'm coming, mamma," she replied, and left him with a quiet "Good-night."

Stanley felt immensely relieved. That was over; Lady Isabelle and he understood each other now, and his path was clear for—was it to be matrimony after all? He told himself he was a weak fool—that Miss Fitzgerald cared nothing for him; would not take him after last night; that he was under no real obligation and that he was a sentimental idiot—yet, he must see her—for his own sake—to justify himself—to— He resolutely shut his eyes to the future, and went in search of the lady in question.

Ten minutes later, Belle and he were alone in the most favourable place in the house for a tête-à-tête, a curious old corner, the two sides of which were converted into a capacious seat to which there was but one approach, screened by a heavy curtain on one side and a suit of armour on the other—safe from all observers.

"What a quaint old house this is!" he said. "We might almost suppose we were back in the sixteenth century."

"Yes," she replied dreamily. "We're out of place in these surroundings."

She was in a strange mood this evening, sad and thoughtful, yet lacking the repose which should have accompanied reverie. It was the only time that the Secretary had ever seen her nervous or *distracte*.

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"What have you been doing all day?" he asked, hoping to lead the conversation to some more cheerful subject.

"Trying to forget myself," she replied.

"Surely it would be a pleasure to remember yourself, I should think."

"Should you? I fear not."

"Your ears must have burned this afternoon," he continued, unheeding her comment. "Pleasant things were being said about you."

"Did you say them?"

"Of course I said them, I always do; but I was referring to someone else—to Lady Isabelle."

"People only patronise me, when they think me unworthy of reproof."

"How can you say that!" he exclaimed. "I—" but she silenced him with a gesture.

"You've said it. That's why. I've never had one friend with whom there did not come a day, that he or she threw me over and cast my failings in my face. I'd believed it was different with you, I believed you trusted me; that you'd have trusted me through good and evil report—but no, you're like the rest. Society points its finger at me, and you accept its verdict, and you're right. You, secure in your social position, powerful, influential, you shall determine what is right and what is wrong, and I,—I must accept it without a murmur—I'm only a woman without a friend."

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"No! no! no!" he cried vehemently. "You wrong me, you do not understand. No one can respect a woman more than I respect you. It's of some of your friends that I disapprove."

"A man is known by the company he keeps—how much more a woman. I'm like my friends—and you—you"—and for the moment she forgot to be meek and suffering, and her eyes blazed with passion—"you are the Pharisee of the nineteenth century, the hem of whose robe we outcasts are unworthy to touch!"

"How can you!" he cried, springing to his feet. "How can you do me so much wrong? It's not that you're like your friends. It is the fear that you may become so that moves me to speak as I do. But since you've seen fit to suspect me, you must allow me to justify myself. I know the affairs of this Colonel Darcy; know them as few others could, by virtue of my diplomatic position, and I assure you he has wronged and brutally treated one of the most beautiful and sweet-natured women I have ever seen. Treated her so badly that she was forced to flee to our Legation for assistance and protection. Imagine my feelings when you tell me that this man is your friend—when I hear your name coupled with his in the idle gossip of the smoking-room."

"I only know that Colonel Darcy was kind to me once upon a time," she replied, interrupting the flow of his eloquence.

"But what's that to do with this?"

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"A man who can be kind to a woman in distress cannot be wholly bad."

"Why do you defend him?"

"Never mind why. Don't let us talk any more about it," she said wearily. "You cannot deny that you think worse of me for defending him; you can't take back your words of last night. I've been thinking it over carefully, and I've make up my mind. I'm of no use to anyone. I make my friends ashamed of me— I'm misunderstood and misjudged. It's the way of the world, but it's hard. My spirit's broken. I no longer have the wish to continue the battle. I'm going away."

"Going away! When?" he cried, in amazement.

"At once."

"And where?"

"I don't know; somewhere where I'm not known, where I've no friends to be annoyed at having to claim me as an acquaintance. Somewhere where people will take me for what I am, not for what I have been, for whom I know, for what I have done or left undone. Oh, I'm so tired, so sick of it all," and she bowed her head and wept.

The effect of all this on Stanley can hardly be over-stated. He supported her, he soothed her, he told her all that was in his heart, or all he thought was there. She should not go away alone; he would go with her; he had shockingly misjudged her; it should be his life task to make her forget that, to proclaim to all the world how great a heritage he had received in her love. They would triumph over all obstacles. He would show the world what a true, noble woman she really was; he would prove it in the best way possible by marrying her, if she would have him, if she would so far honour him. His heart was at her feet. She would be quite right in spurning it, but he besought her to be merciful, to give him his answer, and let that answer be consent.

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And the lady, who, under these ministrations and protestations, had gradually recovered her self-control, ceased her passionate sobbing, rested her head contentedly on his shoulder, and allowed him, with but feeble resistance, to encircle her waist with a protecting arm—in short, everything seemed prepared for her success, when the curtain was pushed aside and there stood before them the figure of a man, which caused them both to spring to their feet, in time, as they fondly hoped, to escape detection; the Secretary with a smothered exclamation of rage; the lady, as she recognised the intruder, with a startled cry of:

"Colonel Darcy!"

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CHAPTER XVII

HER HUSBAND

Even an unobserving man—and Colonel Robert Darcy was not that—could hardly have helped seeing that his presence was unwelcome, and that he had interrupted an important interview.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I fear I've intruded."

The Secretary said nothing, and Miss Fitzgerald came to the rescue by declaring that she was very glad to see him, and that she had no idea he would be in Sussex so soon.

"The fact is, I particularly wanted to see you," he replied bluntly.

Thereupon Mr. Stanley did that most unpardonable thing in good society—lost his temper and gave evidence of the fact; a piece of egotism often noticeable in young men during their first years of social life, before a severe course of snubbing has taught them of how little relative importance they really are.

"Three's an impossible number for a tête-à-tête," he said stiffly, "so if you'll excuse me," and he started to leave her side.

Up to this point Belle had been in some doubt as to how she ought to act; but when the Secretary took the initiative, it at once gave her her cue, and she was quick to save the situation. [Pg 180]

"There are no secrets between friends," she said hastily, "and you're both friends of mine, so I shall expect you to be friends of each other's."

"This is Colonel Robert Darcy, Jimsy—we call him Bob for short," she rattled on, laughing nervously. "And now, Bob, why have you arrived so unexpectedly in Sussex?"

"I think you've forgotten to introduce me to Colonel Darcy, Miss Fitzgerald," suggested Stanley.

"Dear me, I believe I have," replied that lady, calmly. "Bob, this is Jimsy; Jimsy, this is Bob—that'll do for the present. I'll tell you the rest of his names, titles and appurtenances when I've more time and less to talk about. So now we are friends and have no secrets from each other, therefore out with yours."

Darcy laughed.

"You see, Jimsy," continued Miss Fitzgerald, turning to the Secretary, "though I'm young and ignorant, men have always come to me for advice, or, perhaps, for the use of my intuition."

"I'm sure I trust Colonel Darcy will profit by it; but even our well-established friendship gives me no right to play third party to his confidences, and as I promised Kingsland a game of pool——"

"Ah, but you mustn't go; really you mustn't," expostulated the Colonel, "or you'll make me feel I've intruded." [Pg 181]

Stanley felt that it was not his fault if that officer did not already possess those sentiments, and was about to stand to his decision, when Miss Fitzgerald pulled him down beside her, saying:

"Don't talk nonsense, Jimsy. I'm dying to hear Bob's secrets, and he's been here five minutes already, and we haven't allowed him to get a word in edgewise."

Thus admonished, the Secretary had no choice but to be an unwilling listener.

"I'm sure I don't know why I should dignify my affairs by the name of secrets," began Darcy, with ill-attempted nonchalance, "or why I should be reticent about speaking of them, either. It's more than the Press will be in the next few days," and he laughed harshly.

"My dear Bob!" exclaimed Miss Fitzgerald, with a horror that was meant to be assumed, but nevertheless had a touch of reality about it. "My dear Bob! I knew you were bad, but don't tell me you're as bad as all that!"

"I'm afraid so," he replied. Then turning to Stanley, continued, "I suppose you've not the misfortune to be married?"

"I'm a single man," replied the Secretary, who, under the circumstances, felt that a mere statement of fact was infinitely better than an expressed opinion.

"Then of course you can't conceive the pleasures of anticipation which the prospect of the divorce court arouses in the mind of a husband." [Pg 182]

"I can imagine that the point of view would largely depend on his own status in the case."

"You don't mean to tell me, Bob," cried Miss Fitzgerald, "that she's been foolish enough——!"

"Oh, I'm the accused in the present indictment. But, fortunately for me, women are by nature inconsistent."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Why? Because, having run away from my house and secured legal assistance in London to bring suit against me—well, on statutory grounds, she has, as a proof of her injuries, seen fit to take up her residence at the bachelor quarters of her Secretary of Legation."

"What! Is she there now?" cried Miss Fitzgerald, her eyes flashing, as she turned them full on Stanley.

That gentleman, who had foreseen this *dénouement* from the first, half rose to his feet with a view of crushing his defamer, but the Colonel's next statement so staggered him that he sunk back in his seat.

"No," replied that officer, in answer to Miss Fitzgerald's question. "No. London life didn't seem to agree with them, so they've made a little expedition into Sussex together; in fact, they're both here, or hereabouts."

"What do you say?" cried Belle, quite dazed by this astounding declaration.

"Oh, it's quite true. She actually had the effrontery to write me requesting that I send her belongings to his chambers. Of course I got no satisfaction in London, for my young man, with a discretion far beyond his years, promptly left for parts unknown. I didn't search for him, I watched her. I knew I could trust her to put me on the scent, if not to lead me to the quarry. She's quite fulfilled my expectations. When she left town my detective was on hand, followed her to Liverpool Street, watched her while she took her ticket, secured a place in another part of the same train, located her in a farmhouse on this estate, and, as I suspected, found that among the guests at the Hall was my co-respondent, Mr. Secretary Aloysius Stanley."

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The speaker paused, and absolute silence reigned between them; but he did not seem to notice the tense muscles of the man or the flushed anxiety of the woman.

"Well, that's the story," he said shortly. "Not a pretty one, either, is it; but of course I shall have to see it through, and, as a first step, I must ask the assistance of you both in meeting this little cad of a diplomat. After I've settled with him, I shall leave her quite free to——"

"Stop!" cried the Secretary. "Don't say that, Colonel Darcy. Don't you dare to say it!"

"What the devil— I——" began Darcy, completely astonished at the turn affairs had taken.

"Miss Fitzgerald," continued his companion, "neglected to introduce me formally, but I will rectify that error. My name is Aloysius Stanley, and I'm the Secretary of Legation to whom you've presumed to allude in language for which I shall demand an explanation."

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"We'll settle our difficulties at some more appropriate time, sir," replied the Colonel, with repressed anger patent in every tone.

"We'll settle them here and now— I demand a retraction of what you've just said, or intimated, in regard to my relations with your wife."

"I'll give you the only satisfaction you have a right to expect, and I to demand, when and where you please."

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" exclaimed Miss Fitzgerald, fearful of what their anger might lead to. "Pray remember that you're in the presence of a lady."

"You need have no fear," said Stanley, in reply to her request, "*I shall not forget myself.*" Then turning to Darcy, he continued:

"Did not my profession, which is essentially one of peace, prevent me from taking any notice of your absurd challenge, I should still refuse to involve myself in a matter with which I've no concern, merely because you've been enough of a cad to slander your wife in the presence of a third person."

"If I ever meet you outside!" began the Colonel, purple with rage—but the Secretary continued his remarks, oblivious of the interruption.

"There is one thing, however, that I shall do," he said. "Unless you leave this house immediately, I shall inform my hostess, who has already refused to include your name in her party, of what I know of you, and then put you out."

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"Do go, Bob!" cried Belle. "Do, to please me."

"Oh, to please you," said Darcy, sulkily, "I suppose I must. But where I'm to go for a night's lodging, in this God-forsaken place, is quite a problem."

"Oh, there's a good inn just outside the Lodge gates. I know the proprietor of it," said Miss Fitzgerald.

"Perhaps you'll give me a line to him," he suggested, "as you're turning me out, and I've no luggage to insure my respectability."

"Certainly," she replied, "if you've a pencil, and will excuse the back of an old envelope."

The Colonel nodded, and she took an undirected envelope, which seemed to be carrying more than it could conveniently hold, from the pocket of her dress, and hastily scribbled a line on it with the pencil he gave her, handing them both to him nervously.

"Perhaps," suggested the Secretary coldly, who had watched this transaction with growing irritation, "it would be as well to remove the contents of your letter, Miss Fitzgerald. You should be careful to whom you entrust your correspondence."

She faced him, and looked at him steadily, with those great blue eyes of hers, while she said, with

measured force and deliberation:

"I should be quite willing to trust the contents of any of my letters to Colonel Darcy's care."

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The Colonel had, meantime, been nervously twisting the envelope round his fingers, and Stanley caught sight of a well-known monogram composed of the initials A. R. It was the letter he had taken from Kingsland, and restored to Mr. Riddle. How came it in Belle's hands—the seal still unbroken, and why was it given to Darcy? His suspicions, so long lulled by careful artifice, were at once aroused, and he threw the Colonel a glance, the meaning of which was not lost on the woman. Suddenly, her whole manner changing, she became nervous and excitable, once more saying to Darcy:

"Now, go, Bob; go at once, for all our sakes."

He growled a surly reply, and before the Secretary was aware of his intentions, had left the room.

Stanley stood for a moment, dazed; uncertain whether to follow or remain, his breast full of conflicting emotions; bewilderment at the vast field of possibilities opened by the Colonel's receipt of the letter; rage at his cowardly imputations, and dismay at the consequences of the strong circumstantial evidence which Madame Darcy had unwittingly manufactured against him; and at the effect which the Colonel's charges might produce on Miss Fitzgerald.

He was prepared for hysterics, recriminations, stern questions, scorn, anger, and endless tears; but totally unprepared for the ringing burst of laughter which greeted him as soon as the Colonel had left the room; cold, cynical laughter, from the girl he had just asked to be his wife, who threw herself on the couch, her eyes flashing and her whole face twitching with anger or merriment, he was not certain which.

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"Oh dear—oh dear!" she cried, when she could at last control her voice, "this is too funny! too dreadfully funny!"

"I don't see anything amusing about it," he said bluntly. He was angry and sore, and this ill-timed merriment irritated him.

"Don't you? Then you must have lost your sense of humour. This young man," she continued, pointing at him, as if she were exhibiting him to a crowd. "This good young man, who preaches me sermons on self-respect—who is concerned for my good name—who thinks I've been too careless of my reputation, who is cut to the heart because I do not live up to the ideal to which he considers a woman should attain, who has just done me the honour to ask my hand in marriage—not because he loves me—oh dear, no—but because he feels it his duty to save me from myself. This practical young man, who combines pleasure with duty, by conducting an *affaire du cœur*, in a neighbouring farmhouse, with my friend's wife, but whose morality is so outraged at the man who is courteous enough to permit that wife to get the divorce, that he can't bear to be in the same room with him. This superlatively excellent young man, who had almost persuaded me that I was wrong in my estimate of human nature, turns out to be the worst of the lot, a whitened sepulchre of lying and hypocrisy and deceit—or perhaps I should sum it all up and say—a model of diplomacy. Isn't it funny—isn't it cruelly, wickedly humorous? Do you wonder I laugh?"

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"If you can believe this of me, Miss Fitzgerald——" began the Secretary, who had flushed, and then turned as white as a sheet.

"One story's good till another is told, my dear Jimsy; but I was wrong to have laughed. I quite understand, believe me, the painfulness of your position."

"I tell you it's not true——" he began.

"Oh, don't try to improve the situation. You can't"—she continued, rising and towering before him in the majesty of her wrath. "I'd really come to believe that there was one among the hundreds of worthless, vicious, mercenary human beings I know, who called themselves men, who was what he claimed to be; who really believed in the old fallacies of right and duty, and moral cleanliness, and lived up to them; who really kept the ten commandments in thought as well as in act, a strong rock of defence to whom I might cling in time of trouble; but he's a fraud like all the rest, and the man I made a hero turns out to be of clay!"

She paused, and the Secretary, controlling himself, replied coldly:

"After what you've said, it's of course worse than useless for me to repeat the question I asked you just before Colonel Darcy intruded his presence upon us. It had better remain unanswered."

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"No," she said. "I don't think so. It needs an answer, and you shall have it—but not yet. I've been a little fool, and have been punished for my folly; but I don't know any reason why I should make you suffer. You're only as you were made. You can't help it, I dare say."

"You surely can't think of marrying me, believing what you do."

"I don't know. While I thought you were an angel, I was afraid of you. I thought I should have to be constantly living up to you and listening to sermons;— Thank Heavens you can never preach to me again. Even you wouldn't have the face to do it now. But since I've found out that you're only very human, I really don't know but what I might grow to love you. I'll think it over. There," she continued, "don't look so sheepish. I may decide not to take you after all, but until then consider yourself on approval. Don't say anything more, you'd only bore me. I want to be by

myself and get my face straight, if I can," and crossing the room she broke out again into peals of ringing, unmusical laughter.

"This is intolerable!" he cried, but he addressed thin air,—he was alone.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE DOOR WITH THE SILVER NAILS

"ST. JAMES' CLUB,
"PICCADILLY, W.

"MY DEAR STANLEY,

"I am sending this letter to you at Roberts' Hall, because I am certain that you are there.

"I can fancy you drawing a long face, and admitting to yourself that you are certainly in for a sermon from that old bore, Kent-Lauriston, but you are entirely mistaken. I shall neither expostulate with nor upbraid you, for you have done exactly what I expected you would do. Nevertheless I mean to save you from yourself, to which end I trust you are not as yet entangled, as it is less easy gracefully to break than make an engagement.

"The fact is, my dear Mr. Secretary, I do not consider you, under the present circumstances, a responsible creature. The fascinating Miss Fitzgerald has, I can well imagine, driven all other considerations into the background.

"I should probably have let you go to your fate, unchecked by any letter of mine, did I not feel that I had been morally negligent. You came to put your case in my hands, and proved so sweetly rational that, for the last time I swear, I trusted in human nature, and left you to your own devices, instead of watching your every movement until the danger was past.

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"Of course I have heard the little scandal about your escapade with Colonel D——'s wife. All London is ringing with it, thanks to her husband.

"What you most want is change of scene and occupation, to distract you from your present cares. There is only one way to drown care without drowning oneself—and that is by work. So unless I find you grinding away at the Legation to-morrow noon, I shall invite myself to be one of Mrs. Roberts' house-party, and we shall see what may be effected even in the face of overwhelming odds. Give me a fair field and no favour, and I pledge my word to win you to yourself.

"In any event command my humble services.

"Yours as ever,
"KENT-LAURISTON.

"Friday evening."

The Secretary dropped back on the comfortable divan that occupied a recess in one corner of the smoking-room, and gazed vacantly at the letter as it lay in his lap; then he gave a great sigh, and reached for a fresh cigarette. In his own estimation, matters could not be worse, but unfortunately he was not in a position to heed his friend's advice and bolt for London the first thing in the morning—indeed his recognition of Darcy's letter, the possible significance of which he was at last beginning to realise, imperatively demanded his presence and attention.

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Besides, he was now accountable to others. To Belle in the first place—and to Colonel Darcy in the second. For the latter he cared not a whit. It was true that circumstantial evidence had made rather a strong case against him—but the Secretary was sure the Colonel did not really believe the charge he had preferred against his wife to be true, and that he had merely seen, in the unfortunate combination of circumstances, a chance of strengthening his own position.

But while Stanley had little concern for the Colonel's status, he felt a great deal for his own. Fate had treated him badly, very badly, and he owed it to Belle and to Madame Darcy, and to his own good name, to right himself as speedily as possible.

The figure he would cut in Madame Darcy's eyes was bad enough in all conscience. He supposed she would never speak to him again, and, for some reason which he was at a loss to explain satisfactorily to himself, this prospect made him feel uncommonly blue. He even felt no resentment against her, though her innocent rashness had been the font of all his misfortunes. Somehow it seemed an honour to be associated with her, even to his own undoing. And that by any efforts in her behalf, he should have unwittingly injured her, nearly drove him to despair, with chagrin and regret.

But if his position in the eyes of Madame Darcy and of himself was most awkward, the position he held in Miss Fitzgerald's estimation was, he told himself again and again, simply unbearable.

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That it was possible for any good woman to believe—and she certainly did believe—the things that were said about him, and yet find it in her heart to even consider matrimony with such an unscrupulous cad as he must appear to her, revolted him. It was not nice; he was sure Lady Isabelle would never have done so.

Perhaps she did not care, that was worst of all; that she did not care for him, for his good name, his honour, his reputation, only for—the thought was intolerable—he started up and drank off a strong peg of whiskey; he felt that he needed a bracer. In the hopes of distracting his thoughts, he once more took up and re-read Kent-Lauriston's letter, which had arrived before dinner and lain forgotten during the excitement of the evening; and which he had found waiting to greet him, when, at the close of that dreadful interview, he had stolen away to his room without bidding anybody good-night. He remembered that he had hesitated to open it, knowing as he did that it contained a remonstrance against committing a folly, which he had already committed. He had determined to read it calmly, but it awakened within him a scathing self-examination most unsettling in its result.

He recognised it as the dictum of an astute man of the world, a "*connoisseur des grandes passions*" one who knew the symptoms with unfailing accuracy. In short, the Secretary did not for a moment doubt the truth of what his friend had written; but he was equally certain that it did not apply to his own case.

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Miss Fitzgerald had by no means driven all other thoughts from his mind. Indeed, he realised that she had, during the last few days, held a relatively small place in his thoughts. He was not miserable when he was absent from her—he had enjoyed his talk with Madame Darcy and his walk with Lady Isabelle immensely. He had not even decided that he should ask Belle to marry him till the eleventh hour, and was not that decision due, after all, to the pity which, we are told, is akin to love, but which by itself forms such an unsatisfactory substitute? Would his friend have any trouble in winning him to himself, as he expressed it? Was he supremely happy? Was he not rather, in his heart of hearts, wishing himself well out of the whole affair? The words of Madame Darcy came back to him, doubly enforced by these contradictory data.

"You do not love her. Love is blind. Love does not reason."

Had it come to this, then—was he such a weak fool that he did not know his own mind; that he had proposed to a woman who existed only in his imagination; who so little resembled the real one that he had no wish to assimilate the two; that he was already regretting the step before it was half taken? What hope did that hold out for a happy future? He was thoroughly disgusted with himself. In a fit of mortified rage, he crumpled up the letter in his hand, and threw himself down among the cushions of the divan. As he lay there Kingsland entered the room.

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"Why," he said, "I thought you had retired."

This was, indeed, the truth, but the restlessness induced by Kent-Lauriston's note had made the confinement of his chamber seem intolerable, and a rapid survey of the rooms downstairs assured him that the Dowager and Miss Fitzgerald were in full possession; a combination which, under the circumstances, he did not care to face. These facts, however, were hardly to be adduced to a third party, and the Secretary, turning to the resources of diplomacy, reminded the Lieutenant that they had had an appointment for a game of pool, which one of them, at least, had not seen fit to keep.

"Shall we have it now?" suggested Kingsland.

"No," answered Stanley. "I'm not feeling fit."

"Try a drink, then."

"I've just had one."

"Drinking alone? That's a bad sign. What are you so blue about?"

"I'm wondering," said Stanley, "how a man can ever be fool enough to fall in love, or get married."

"Oh," said the Lieutenant, "so she's refused you, eh?"

"Who?"

"Belle Fitzgerald."

"Yes," replied the Secretary, shortly.

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The Lieutenant thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets and paced the room in silence, whistling softly to himself. Finally he remarked:

"Well, I'm sorry, old chap, but I've been more lucky."

"Oh," said the Secretary. "Lady Isabelle, I suppose."

Kingsland nodded.

"Does mamma approve?" inquired Stanley.

The young officer shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm going to postpone entering into that matter," he said, "till after the ceremony."

"Oh," said the Secretary shortly. "An elopement. Well, I don't know that I can conscientiously offer my congratulations—to Lady Isabelle, at least, but I dare say you'll find it worth while."

"You needn't be so nasty, just because you've been disappointed."

"Oh, it isn't that; but, as you say, I've no reason to express an opinion. It isn't the first time a young man's eloped with a lady of means."

"Well," snapped the Lieutenant in reply, "it's a shade above eloping with somebody else's wife who happens to have a large bank account."

Stanley sprang to his feet.

"If that cad of a Darcy," he cried, "has been saying——"

"Oh, you needn't assume the high moral rôle," said Kingsland. "I've just had the story first hand from him."

"It isn't the first time he's told it to-night," snapped the Secretary.

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"What! You don't mean to the fair Belle?"

Stanley nodded, and Kingsland threw himself on the sofa in a paroxysm of laughter.

"But how did you come to see Darcy?" demanded the young diplomat, ignoring his friend's ill-timed merriment. "I ordered him out of the house."

"Yes," replied the Lieutenant, "so he told me. But he's lost a valuable letter in the hall."

"The hall? Why, there doesn't seem to be much chance of losing anything there. There are no draperies and very little furniture."

"Well, it's a queer business," admitted the officer. "But while the Colonel was telling me about your little escapade, he dropped a letter which he had taken from its envelope, and just at that moment the butler came in. He started to pick up the letter for the Colonel, but Darcy jumped forward, and so between them it was pushed under the crack of that old oak door studded with silver nails."

"A letter!" cried the Secretary. "Did you notice what it looked like?"

"No," said Kingsland incautiously, "except that it had an address scrawled across one side in pencil."

Stanley waited to hear no more. Fate seemed playing into his hands at last, and springing to the door he threw it open, and saw to his intense astonishment the figure of Colonel Darcy grovelling on the floor of the hall.

"I thought I told you to leave this house, Colonel Darcy," said Stanley, striving to be calm, but his voice quivering with suppressed emotion.

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"So you did," replied his adversary, rising slowly to his feet, very red in the face and somewhat short of breath.

"Then why haven't you gone? Do you wish me to speak to Mrs. Roberts?"

"I intended to obey your request, out of respect to Miss Fitzgerald. But the fact is, I have lost an important letter."

"So Kingsland tells me, though it seems almost impossible."

"Truth, sir, is often stranger than fiction," replied the Colonel angrily, "as our own relations with each other have already proved. But, as you have given me the lie once this evening, you can, if you see fit, prove the truth of my statement by referring it to the butler."

"I gave you the lie, as you express it, Colonel Darcy," replied the Secretary, "because my own knowledge assured me, that your charges were untrue. In this case, however, I am quite ready to fully accept your statement. But it's a pure waste of time to attempt to recover your letter. For two hundred years they've tried to open that portal, and to this day it remains closed."

"The butler told me some such cock-and-bull story—but of course——"

"It's quite true."

"But I must have my letter. I must have it, I tell you—surely someone knows the secret."

"There's a legend current to the effect that the pressure of five of these silver nails, one by each of the five fingers, will suffice to open the door. But to my way of thinking it's likely to remain closed for two centuries to come."

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"Curse it!" cried the Colonel, throwing himself against the portal in a frenzy. "It has neither handle nor keyhole, and it's as firm as iron! What am I to do?"

"If it's absolutely necessary to recover this document, I'll tell Mrs. Roberts. Though I should doubt if she'd consent to ruin an interesting heirloom for the sake of a gentleman against whom

she already entertains a prejudice."

"I couldn't think of it. Impossible to put Mrs. Roberts to so much inconvenience; I shouldn't consider it for a moment! Let the cursed letter remain where it is!" replied the Colonel, evidently very much upset by this proposition.

"As I'd supposed, Colonel Darcy, you would prefer that the document should remain where it is, rather than it should pass, even temporarily, into any other hands than yours. Might I inquire if it's the one you received from Miss Fitzgerald."

"It is, of course, quite useless to attempt to deceive a diplomat," replied his companion, with a touch of temper which was not lost on Stanley, who answered composedly:

"I think you may be reasonably assured that your letter will never be found till you and it have long been dust, and till not only its importance, but its very meaning, have become unintelligible. You may consider it irrevocably lost, and so, as there's no further excuse for your remaining, Colonel Darcy, I'll wish you—good-night," and the Secretary threw open the great hall door.

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"Good-night, Mr. Stanley," replied the unwelcome guest, with a frown of anger as he passed over the threshold. "Good-night—but not good-bye—remember we've still a score to settle."

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CHAPTER XIX

A MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

Stanley closed the great front door, turned the key, shot the bolts, and lighting his bedroom candle, slowly and thoughtfully betook himself to his chamber.

Kingsland's knowledge of the mysterious letter only served to increase the Secretary's suspicions of that young officer's complicity with Darcy, while the letter itself presented such a bewildering variety of contradictory possibilities, that his mind was dazed. A further consideration of his past experiences in this matter did not make him feel any the easier, and for the first time, under the spur of doubt and mistrust, he recalled Kingsland's story of the reception of the missive, and subjected it to a critical analysis. Mr. Riddle had said, and the Lieutenant had confirmed, that the letter had been handed by the former to the latter at the Hyde Park Club, and that the Lieutenant was then "leaving the room." Yet the Secretary, now he came to think of it, was sure Mr. Riddle had not been of the company at or after dinner, and that Kingsland had not left the drawing-room or attempted to do so. Moreover, if Riddle had given him the money for the stamp, why had he not mentioned the fact at the time? The letter was evidently of importance, and intended for Darcy, a man of whose every action, he had the greatest distrust. Yet the important missive, after being lost for three days, was given by its owner to Miss Fitzgerald, who thought so little of it, that she used the envelope to scribble an address on, before giving it to the Colonel, who now had lost it under the secret door.

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It was certainly a mystery to which he was unable to offer any solution, but which, nevertheless, caused him a vague uneasiness. He drew up an arm-chair beside the table, and lighting his lamp, prepared to seek distraction in a book.

The Secretary had scarcely settled to his reading, however, when he was startled by a sharp click against his window. At first he thought nothing of it, but at a repetition of the noise, plainly produced by a pebble thrown up against the glass, he opened the casement and looked out.

The night was very dark, and he could see nothing; but out of the blackness below him came a voice, which he thought he recognised, calling his name softly.

"Why, John!" he cried, scarcely believing it could be the Legation factotum. "What on earth are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Special message from 'is h'Excellency, sir," came in the familiar cockney of the messenger, with the added caution, "don't speak so loud, please—it's that private—"

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Stanley nodded, quite oblivious of the fact that he was invisible, and added in lowered tones:

"Go round to the front, and I'll come down and let you in."

He cautiously made his way downstairs, pausing at every creaking board in fear that he had awakened the household, and traversing the long hall, opened the great front door, and admitted the shivering John; for the night was cool, and several hours of watching and waiting had chilled the messenger thoroughly.

"How long have you been out there?"

"Since ten, sir."

"Good Heavens! and it's past midnight! Come up to my room, and I'll give you some whiskey."

"Thank ye, sir. I shan't mind a drop—it's that cold, but I'll take off me boots first."

"Take off your boots!"

"'Is h'Excellency was most par-ti'cler, sir, as no one but you should know as I was 'ere."

"Oh, I see. Very well. Leave them at the foot of the stairs. You'll find these flags rather cold for stocking-feet."

A few minutes later John was installed in the Secretary's bedroom, and his inner man was being warmed and refreshed with a copious dram of whiskey—while Stanley, seated at his table, was breaking the seals of the despatch which the messenger had brought him.

"It's most secret, sir."

"Quite so. How did you know which was my room?"

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"The lady of the 'ouse, sir, employs the hinnkeeper's daughter to 'elp the 'ousekeeper day times—and so——"

"I see; very clever, John. Eh! what's this?" and bending forward to the light he read the now opened dispatch. It was short and to the point.

"Dear Mr. Stanley," wrote the Minister. "This is to inform you that we have discovered the silent partner in the firm, who is the chief instrument in putting up the money to defeat the treaty. His name is Arthur Riddle. He is a guest of your hostess, and should be watched. Darcy left for Sussex this afternoon, presumably for your neighbourhood. Kindly report progress, if any, sending letter by John, who should return at once.

"Yours, etc.
"X——."

As the full force of this communication became apparent to the unfortunate Secretary, he sunk back in his chair, groaning in an agony of mortification.

"Dear, dear, sir!" cried John, who had been meditatively regarding the bottom of his empty glass. "You don't mean to tell me as they've got away."

The messenger, it may be remarked, not being supposed, technically, to know any official secrets, knew more than most of his superiors.

"Oh, it isn't that, it's a thousand times worse than that! I'm such an infernal fool! John, I've had those instructions in my possession." [Pg 205]

"You have!" cried the messenger, much excited.

"Yes. Had them for three days in the inside pocket of my dress-suit, and being the greatest idiot in the diplomatic service, I never even suspected what they were, and gave them back to the man who wrote them."

"What, Riddle?"

Stanley groaned, and bowed his head.

"Dear, dear," said John, gravely, "I'm afraid it's a bad business, sir." And noticing that the Secretary was absorbed in his own woes, he judged it a favourable opportunity to replenish his glass, which he thoughtfully consumed, while the unfortunate diplomat poured out to the old messenger, who was distinctly the *deus ex machina* of his Legation, and who had helped him out of many a tight place in the past, the story of the letter. How he had received it, how he had been induced to give it up, and finally how it reached its present destination.

"Well," he said despairingly, in conclusion, "what do you think, John?"

"Hit's hall the woman, sir. Take my word for hit, hit's hall the woman," replied that functionary, with dignity.

"What, Miss Fitzgerald?"

John nodded, with the solemnity befitting so weighty a dictum.

"You old idiot!" cried Stanley. "It's nothing of the sort. Miss Fitzgerald's share in this matter was merely a coincidence." [Pg 206]

"Didn't you tell me has it was she suggested your taking han hold letter to keep score hon, knowing well you 'ad *the letter* in your hinside pocket hall the time?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Secretary. "How could she have known anything about it? She had never laid eyes on the letter till I produced it."

"Mr. Stanley," returned the messenger, with a dignity against which the two glasses he had consumed struggled unsuccessfully, "h'I've fostered young gentlemen, an' got h'em hout hof scrapes, an' taught h'em their ha, b, c's of diplomacy, afore you was weaned, han' I knows whereof h'I speaks, h'I tells yer, hit's the woman!"

"I wish you'd get me out of this scrape. I'd be your friend for life."

"That's heasy enough. You *must* get the letter."

"But how—I tell you——"

"Get it," reiterated the messenger, whose potations had made him optimistic. "Blow this bally hold barn into the next county, hif need be, but open that door and get it."

The Secretary looked despairingly at the despatch, and tossing it to John, said:

"And what am I to answer to this?"

"H'I'll answer it, hif you'll let me come to the table."

"You!"

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"Yes—and you can copy and sign it. Hit won't be the first private note h'I've hanswered, or the first despatch h'I've written, heither," and with this rebuke he composed the following:

"To
"His Excellency,
"The Honourable,
"———"

"SIR:—

"I have the honour to acknowledge your Excellency's private despatch of the 20th inst., and to inform you in reply that the person mentioned in it is now a guest in this house, also that I have discovered the present location of the papers desired, and hope soon to be able to place them in your hands.

"I am, Sir,
"Your obedient servant,
"———."

"Sunday, 12.45 A. M."

The Secretary read and approved, and in a few moments had produced a copy of the same, which was duly signed and sealed.

"And now," he said, "you must be off. There's a train to London about six."

"Yes, sir. Hit's a very cold night, sir."

"No, you've had enough, and you need to keep your wits about you," and he led the way downstairs.

"John," he said, as he let the faithful servitor out, "I believe you're right in what you said."

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"Habout the woman, sir?"

"Of course not. I tell you the lady knows nothing whatever of the matter; pray disabuse your mind of that absurd idea, once and for all. I mean about the letter."

"Yes, sir."

"I've got to get it again, John. Send me the best book you can find on combination locks. I *will* get it! Impossibilities don't count!"

"Yes, sir. Good-night, sir, and remember, hit's the woman!"

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CHAPTER XX

THE WISDOM OF AGE

The Secretary passed one of the worst nights of his life. His pride, self-esteem, and youthful estimation of his abilities as a diplomat had received a crushing blow. He told himself that he was not fit to copy letters in an office, much less to undertake delicate negotiations in which the honour of his country was involved. The conspirators had known him for what he was, a conceited young ass, and had egregiously fooled him to the top of his bent. They had regained the document without half trying; even Kingsland, whose intellect he had looked down on, had completely taken him in. It seemed as if he must die of shame when it became known. He would be disgraced and turned out of the service with ridicule. Then of his despair was born that resolution to *do*, which sets all obstacles at naught, and succeeds because it declares the possibility of the impossible.

He must retrieve himself, he must regain that letter, and hereafter his self-reproaches were mingled with every scheme leading to its recovery, that his brain could concoct.

He was downstairs soon after seven.

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Entering the great hall, he found Lady Isabelle in sole possession, but equipped to go out.

"Whither so early?" he said.

"I'm going away—that is—out."

"Away?" he queried, as he saw her eyes fill with tears, and noted that she was closely veiled "Can I serve you?"

"No—yes," she replied, uncertain how to answer him. "Could I ask you to do me a very great favour?"

"Most certainly."

"But it's something you won't like to do."

"Lady Isabelle," he said quietly, "we've been very good friends, and I may tell you that I've a suspicion of what you intend to do this morning. Won't you trust me, and allow me to help you in any way in my power?"

"Yes," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "I will, because I'm sure you mean what you say, and I'm in desperate straits. You remember the answer I gave to a question of yours last evening?"

"That you did not care for me—yes."

"I might have added," she said shyly, casting down her eyes, "that I cared for someone else."

"Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you're making a wise choice, Lady Isabelle?" he asked, feeling that he ought not to allow this state of affairs to continue when he was almost certain that the young officer was practically a criminal, whom it might be his duty to have arrested any day, yet prevented by his instructions from preferring any charges against him to Lady Isabelle.

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"Don't, please," she said. "You misjudge him."

"I hope I do."

"You do not understand. How should you? Have you ever seen him in his uniform? He is a picture, and you know," sinking her voice, "his family dates from the Conquest."

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders. He'd had enough of warning people for their own good, so he contented himself with remarking that a disregard for the Decalogue seemed compatible with an unbroken descent from the Norman robber.

"Now you're cynical," she cried, "but I shan't argue with you, for I love him, and we're to be married this morning in the chapel. Everything has been arranged, and in fifteen minutes I shall be his wife."

"That's very interesting," said Stanley. "But where do I come in?"

"I need your help."

"Oh, I see. I suppose that if I'd any real interest in your welfare, I ought to refuse, but as you'd do as you please in any event, I'm quite at your service."

"Thanks. Mamma will be here presently. She's announced her intention of attending early service, and if she does——"

"She might interrupt another, and that would be awkward."

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"Dreadfully. She does not wish me to marry Lieutenant Kingsland—I think she would rather I married you."

"Is she so bitter? Well, make your own mind easy, I won't ask her."

"But you must."

"What!!!"

"Nothing short of a proposal would deter her from going to service."

"But, I thought you——!"

"Oh, I'll promise to be unavailable by the time you've finished,— Sh! she's coming. Remember your promise to help me, and wish me luck."

"With all my heart," he cried, as she vanished through the door, and the Dowager entered the hall.

Stanley wished the old lady good-morning which she received with chilling condescension, and neither of them spoke for some moments; a precious gain of time, during which her Ladyship put on her gloves, rearranged her cloak, unrolled and re-rolled her sunshade, paced the long hall, alternated glimpses out of the windows by glances up the great stairway, and betrayed every sign of impatient waiting for a tardy companion. The Secretary stood watching her and counting the minutes, which seemed to pass unusually slowly.

Finally the Dowager's patience got the better of her reserve; she faced round and demanded if he had seen her daughter.

"Yes," he replied, very deliberately. "I believe she was in the hall when I came down."

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"Believe. Do you not know, Mr. Stanley?"

"I certainly caught a glimpse of her," he admitted.

"But she's not here now."

The Secretary made a careful inspection, from his point of vantage on the hearthstone, of every cobweb and corner of the great apartment, and in the end found himself forced to agree with the Marchioness' statement.

"Where has she gone, then?" was her next question.

"Really," he replied, "it is not your daughter's custom to keep me posted as to her movements."

"But you've eyes, haven't you?" she retorted, testily. "At least you know how she left this hall."

The Secretary sighed as he saw the end of his little manœuvre.

"She went out at the front door," he said.

"Why couldn't you have told me that to begin with?"

"You didn't ask me."

"Don't be so distressingly literal. I'm late for the service as it is. My daughter has probably misunderstood our arrangements, and is waiting for me at the church." And the Marchioness showed unmistakable signs of preparing to leave.

Even allowing a most liberal leeway to the maundering old parson, Stanley knew he could not yet have reached that passage beginning, "All ye that are married," and ending in "amazement," for which there is a canonical time-allowance of at least five minutes; it therefore behoved him to play his last trump.

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The Dowager, like a hen preening her feathers, had given the last touches to her garments, and was already half-way to the door, when the Secretary, stepping forward, arrested her progress by remarking:

"I feel that I owe you some explanation of what occurred last night, Lady Port-Arthur."

"Perhaps it's as well that you should explain," she replied, pausing at the door, "though I should have supposed it would have been unnecessary after our last interview."

"I've not forgotten it."

"You appeared to have done so last evening."

"Really, you know," he said, piqued by her rudeness, "I couldn't refuse to escort your daughter down to dinner when my hostess requested me to do so."

"If Mrs. Roberts so honoured you as to permit you to take in Lady Isabelle, naturally——"

"Yes, that is the way I should have put it."

"I do not pretend to say how you should have expressed yourself, but I wish to point out that your place at dinner was no excuse for your place afterwards."

"Oh, in the conservatory. Well, you see, the fact is, I was telling Lady Isabelle——"

"Yes, Mr. Stanley. What were you telling my daughter?"

He glanced at the clock. Seven minutes had elapsed since the Dowager entered the hall. He hoped they would shorten the service.

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"I was asking her a question," he continued.

"Well?"

The Dowager was far below zero.

"I asked her if she cared for me."

"And she naturally referred you to her mother."

"She told me a few minutes ago that you were coming here," he replied, noticing that his companion's mercury was rapidly rising.

"I'm glad," continued the Marchioness, "that you've taken so early an opportunity to explain what I could only consider as very singular conduct. For dear Isabelle's sake I'll consent to overlook what has occurred in the past, and if you can make suitable provision——"

Five minutes only remained before the time of early service. He thought his income large enough to fill the interval, and interrupted with:

"The woman I marry would have—," and then he told the Dowager all about it, in sterling and decimal currency.

"I think," said that lady, with a sigh of relief at the end of his narration, which, it may be remarked, took the best part of half an hour, "I think dear Isabelle's happiness should outweigh any social disparity, and that we may consider her as good as married."

"Yes," he replied, remembering that the church bells had stopped ringing some fifteen minutes before. "Yes, your Ladyship, I think we may."

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A few minutes later Stanley found himself in one of the secluded stretches of the park, breathing in the fresh keen morning air with a new sense of delight, after the inherent stuffiness of the Dowager.

He trusted that Lady Isabelle would break the news to her mother at once, and get it over before he returned; but even then he had an unpleasant interview before him. As an accepted suitor the Marchioness would owe him an apology, which he could not avoid accepting. He hoped he could do the heart-broken and disappointed lover, whose feelings were tempered by the calm repression of high gentility. It was the rôle he had figured for himself, and he thought it excellent.

All his ideas, however, were centred on the problem of recovering the lost document; some means of entry to that secret tower there must be, and he must find it. He could not, of course, be certain that the paper contained Darcy's instructions; but it was admittedly important, and its loss had done him an injury which could only be atoned for by its recovery.

A light footfall interrupted his meditations, and looking up, he saw, standing before him, half screened by the bushes which she was holding back, to give her free access to the main path which he was pursuing, the graceful figure and sad, sweet face of Madame Darcy.

A shade of annoyance passed over his brow as he remembered the scene of the night before, and his companion was quick to interpret his mood. "Ah, Mr. Stanley," she said, "you've seen my husband."

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"Yes," he admitted. "He came up to the Hall last night."

"I hope he didn't make himself a nuisance," she said.

"Well, I'm afraid he did rather," he returned, and added, "but it's nothing," for he felt that it would be impossible for him to tell her what had really occurred.

"I'm so sorry," she cried. "I only bring you trouble."

"No, indeed," he hastened to assure her, "far from it. These little talks with you are a positive rest and refreshment to me. I hate this playing the spy."

"I suppose it won't do for me to ask how you're progressing, and what you've found out?"

"I've found out that I've made an awful fool of myself," he said. "Mr. Riddle——"

"I could have told you who Mr. Riddle was yesterday," she said.

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid that would have been of little use."

"Be very careful," she warned him. "There are others besides Mr. Riddle whom you have to look out for."

Could it be possible, he asked himself, that she suspected her husband? Aloud, he said:

"Whom do you mean?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's not for me to belie my own sex," she retorted, "but——"

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"You mean there is a woman in the case?"

She nodded.

The Secretary drew himself up very stiffly.

"It's an impossibility that we will not discuss," he said. "Your prejudices mislead you."

Yet, in spite of his apparent calmness, he was greatly disturbed, for this was the second time that day that doubt had been cast upon Miss Fitzgerald.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE RESOURCES OF DIPLOMACY

Determined to drive these unjust suspicions from his mind, the Secretary turned the conversation into other channels, and spent a most delightful hour in the park with Madame Darcy, in which they came to understand each other marvellously well. Prompted by that subtle instinct which invariably suggests to the feminine mind the proper course with a man she cares to impress, she relegated her own woes to the uncertain future, and led the conversation into reminiscences of their common country. So time fled by unnoticed, till Stanley had arrived at the dangerous point of wondering why fate had not ordained his life differently before she had married that brute, or he had—no, no, he did not mean that! He was a very lucky dog, and Belle was much too good for him—and, in short, he must go back to the Hall.

To this, however, his fair companion strongly objected. She was lonely, she wished to be diverted. His time was his own. Considering that he was partially engaged to two ladies, the Secretary felt this statement admitted of qualifications. Besides, they were at the entrance of the farmhouse where she was staying—it was a most ideal spot—he must step in and see it. [Pg 220]

But his reasons were of a more solid nature, and he laughingly confided to her that his wish to depart arose not from a desire to avoid her society, but from the fact that he had, as yet, had no breakfast.

"But it is my own case," she cried with a ringing laugh. "I'm starving, actually starving—it is a most droll coincidence."

Stanley assured her he would not detain her a moment longer, but this was equally repugnant to his hostess' views of hospitality. She declared that a breakfast for one was a breakfast for two; if not, more should be ordered. Her appetite was that of a bird; the repast was humble, but it was a sin to go without sampling the housewife's eggs and cream—there were none so good at the Hall, she was sure.

The Secretary told her that he could not dream of staying, and found himself within five minutes ensconced at Madame Darcy's table.

No liquids, other than fresh milk and pure spring water were served at this repast, yet Stanley arose fully assured that they were the most intoxicating beverages he had ever tasted, and betook himself Hall-wards towards noon, through a maze of black eyes, and dazzling flashes of beauty, his brain vibrating with a voice, whose tones were the poetry of sound.

A vision of the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur, placidly seated on the lawn, under a green umbrella, with a book in her lap, and evidently on the borderland of sleeping and waking, brought him to earth once more. [Pg 221]

It would be better to interrupt her matutinal slumbers, and get one of his two dreaded interviews over. She looked rather too composed, he thought, for a disappointed mother, and he was sure she would be that, did she know the truth. He coughed discreetly, and approached, slowly enough to permit her Ladyship to quite recover her senses, before he arrived by her side.

It would not do to appear too downcast before being informed of the hopelessness of his suit, so putting on his best society manner, and reflecting that an adversary disconcerted is an adversary at a disadvantage, he asked, as if it were quite the most ordinary of questions:

"How beautiful are your feet—Lady Port Arthur?"

"Dear me, young man!" exclaimed her Ladyship, now thoroughly awake, "they've always been considered beautiful; but why should you ask?"

"My reference was scriptural, purely scriptural, I assure you— I was referring to the feet of the messengers upon the mountains, who bring good tidings. You'll find it in Isaiah. Are you one of them?"

"There are no mountains in Sussex, and the rising generation knows entirely too much," snapped out the Dowager. "As for you— I've conferred with my daughter——"

She *has* told her, thought the Secretary, preparing to draw down his mouth to the requisite expression of woe. [Pg 222]

"—And it gives me great happiness to tell you——" she continued, beaming on Stanley in spite of his flippancy, at which that gentleman drew down his mouth in good earnest, as he realised that she was still undeceived.

"—It gives me great happiness to tell you, that I believe your suit will have a favourable termination. She has promised to consider it."

"Oh," said the Secretary; and then, recollecting himself, added:

"It's very good of her, I'm sure."

If he had the opportunity, after lunch, he mentally determined to give Lady Isabelle a piece of his mind.

"It's an honest soul," continued her Ladyship, not noticing the interruption, "which refuses the promptings of her heart. Her hesitancy is quite natural, I assure you, and most becoming. When

his Lordship asked the honour of my hand—" The Dowager sighed at the sweetness of reminiscence, and again took up the thread of her discourse.

"My daughter told me that she could not, without reflection, be certain of the state of her affections. Make allowance for her, Mr. Stanley, she is very young. Believe me, I should not speak as I do, were it not for the fact that I have known the world well—in my youthful days—though this you would scarcely believe, I dare say—I was one of the acknowledged leaders of the court." [Pg 223]

"Your Ladyship's wit and beauty are a bye-word in all good society, and one has only to see you, to realise that they have been enhanced by the added grace of years," murmured the Secretary, doing his prettiest.

"You're a deceitful diplomat, and I don't believe you," said the Dowager, giggling and pretending to be very angry, but vastly pleased, none the less; and, giving him a flabby pat with one of her expansive hands, she continued:

"You must not be downhearted, however; leave everything to me."

The Secretary assured her that he felt quite safe to trust his heart in the keeping of one who had held the custody of so many, and was rewarded for his flattery by a further proof of the Dowager's confidence.

"Take my advice, dear James—" she began; but Stanley felt this was a step too far, and hastened to put himself on the defensive.

"That is not my name, Lady Port Arthur," he said, quietly.

"But surely," she continued, pressing her point, "your friends call you by a disrespectful contraction of it.

"Jim?" he asked, laughing. "Oh, that's because my Christian name is quite unfitted for ordinary usage—it's only brought out on state occasions."

"May I inquire what it is?"

"Aloysius."

"Dear me, no, I don't think I could call you that; but as I was saying, if you take my advice you'll see as little as possible of Isabelle to-day. Leave her to herself; it's far wiser." [Pg 224]

The Secretary felt decidedly relieved.

"I quite agree with you," he replied. "You may depend on my following your advice to the letter," and he turned towards the house.

"One point more," she said, detaining him with a gesture, "I strongly disapprove of secret engagements. I don't wish the insinuations made against my daughter that one hears about that impudent young minx, Miss Fitzgerald.— Why, they actually hinted that she was engaged to you!"

"Dear me! Did they?" murmured Stanley.

"If there is the happy issue that we both wish, I should desire that our friends here, if not society in general, should know it immediately."

"My dear lady," said the Secretary impressively, "the moment that your daughter tells you definitely that she accepts my offer of marriage, you may announce it to the whole world; till that time, however, I must insist, that for her sake as well as mine, you be most discreet," and he bowed himself from her presence.

The Marchioness sank back in her chair with a sigh of placid contentment. Her work in life was, she believed, on the eve of successful accomplishment, and that most agonising period to a mother—the time from her daughter's coming out to that young lady's engagement—was safely over. On the whole her child had behaved unusually well; but of late she had suffered some inquietude of spirit, owing to the attentions of Kingsland, whom she, in common with all mothers of the social world, listed as belonging to the most dangerous and formidable class of youths that a girl, who has any pretensions to being a *partie*, can encounter. [Pg 225]

In the case of the Lieutenant, however, Lady Port Arthur flattered herself that she had nipped matters in the bud, by the best of all cures for a romantic, impossible lover, *i.e.* a prospective husband. True, Mr. Stanley was not of noble family, she feared his people might even be called commercial; but he was eminently safe, and possessed of a substantial income wherewith to support the glories of the noble name of Port Arthur. In short, he was an admirable solution of the difficulty.

The Marchioness felt she was justified in taking forty winks, and did so.

Luncheon rather amused the Secretary than otherwise. He obeyed the Dowager's instructions to the letter, sat as far from Lady Isabelle as possible, and by the caprice of fate, found himself next to Miss Fitzgerald, who, with admirable foresight, treated him exactly as if nothing had happened, and that being half engaged to a man was the normal state of her existence. This put Stanley quite at his ease, and even Belle's fictitious claim on his services for the afternoon, based on her unsupported declaration that he had asked her to drive with him in the pony cart at four, a proposition he would never have dreamed of making, was accepted by him as a matter of course. [Pg 226]

A proceeding which elicited an expansive smile from the Dowager, who considered it a deep-laid diplomatic plot, in furtherance of her suggested plan of campaign.

The Secretary's attention was, however, mainly directed to Kingsland and Lady Isabelle, who sat side by side at table, and who acted, in his opinion like a pair of fools, till it seemed as if everyone present must guess the true state of affairs. As a matter of fact, no one did, and Stanley, seeing this, was once more reassured; for he did not wish to play his little part to more of an audience than was absolutely necessary.

Mr. Riddle, towards whom the Secretary, in view of the night's disclosures, felt even a stronger antipathy, was in high spirits, until he was silenced by Mrs. Roberts, who assured the company that she had caught him in the act of aiding and abetting the cottager's children to make mud pies in the public highway.

"I really couldn't help it," he said, excusing himself shamefacedly, "the dear little things were pining for some one to play with, and we did have such fun—and got so grubby;" and there was such a genuine ring of honest pleasure in his tones, that Stanley again found cause to wonder which was the true man.

Something like an hour later, the Secretary emerged on the driveway, to find the pony cart and Belle, got up in faultless style; and as he looked on the technical mistress of his heart, she seemed so exceedingly fair and gracious, that his morbid imaginings vanished away like smoke, under the spell of her presence.

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"I'm afraid you'll be very angry with me," she said, apologetically; "but when I proposed our drive this afternoon, I'd quite forgotten a promise I made to Mr. Lambert to go and see a poor, sick, old woman, a parishioner of his."

"Then I suppose the drive is off?"

"Not at all, if you'll be a dear, good, self-sacrificing Jimsy, and do what you're told."

"What's that?"

"Just jump into the cart and take it round to the north gate—it's a couple of miles I know—but I'll walk straight across the fields, make my visit, and be at our rendezvous almost as soon as you are. I'll promise not to keep you waiting over ten minutes at the longest. Will you do it?"

"Certainly, if I may solace myself with a cigar while I wait."

"Two, if you like; but you won't have time to smoke them. Now off you go," and waving her hand to him, she watched him disappear round the corner of the house.

Once he was out of sight, Miss Fitzgerald lost no time in producing, from the mysterious recesses of her pocket, a telegram, the delivery of which she had intercepted, which she surveyed long and critically.

A telegram is generally regarded as best serving its purpose when most promptly delivered; but in the case of this message, Miss Fitzgerald evidently felt it would improve by keeping, for it had arrived during the morning, and was now some hours old. The time had come, however, when it should be delivered to its proper owner, and she accordingly went in search of Lieutenant Kingsland.

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CHAPTER XXII

A LITTLE COMMISSION

Lady Isabelle and Lieutenant Kingsland sat on the lawn before the old manor house in the soft glow of an English afternoon, contemplating the inevitable. In this case the inevitable was represented by the Dowager, who was enjoying a peaceful nap not fifty feet away. Only fifty feet of faultlessly-kept turf separated them from the vials of a mother's wrath; and in spite of their supreme happiness of the morning, they felt the presence of this gathering storm which must now be faced—as soon as the Marchioness awoke—for to wake her would put her in a bad temper, and her rage promised to be violent enough without any external irritants.

But it happened that while the Dowager slumbered, Miss Fitzgerald, slipping around the corner of the house, appeared in the background, and signalling to the Lieutenant to come to her, where they could talk without awakening the Marchioness, gave him his telegram. He read its contents once, twice, and a third time, word by word, gave a sigh of unutterable relief, and then laughed joyously.

"Good news, apparently," commented Miss Fitzgerald.

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"The best," he replied. "A crusty old relative, who is no good to anybody, lies dying in the north of England, and for some unknown reason has made me his heir— I must leave at once to see him out of this world in proper style—but it means I'm a rich man."

"I'm ever so glad. Must you start to-day?"

"I shall go up to London this afternoon, and on to-morrow."

"You'll spend the night in town, then?"

"Yes. I must go to my bank and draw some funds for my journey."

"Then you can do me a favour."

"A thousand, if you want them, after what you've done for me."

"Will you oblige me by taking charge of several chests of Mr. Riddle's stereopticon views; they're heavy, but fragile and very valuable, and I've promised him I'd find some one to take them up to town for him, and put them in safe keeping. Where do you bank?"

"Bank of England, Victoria Street branch."

"Will you leave it in their charge subject to my order?"

"Certainly. How many cases?"

"Five, and they're rather heavy."

"All right. Have the chests put in the luggage cart, and I'll look out for them. Now I must tell my—why, it's Kent-Lauriston!" and to their mutual astonishment, they beheld that gentleman standing close beside them.

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"Good afternoon," he said. "You didn't expect to see me? I wired Mrs. Roberts."

"I know my aunt will be delighted," said Miss Fitzgerald. "Won't you come into the house?" and she led the way, calling back to the Lieutenant: "I'll see they're ready. Thank you so much."

Once in the hall, she wasted no time over the unexpected, and to her unwelcome, guest, but, consigning him to the butler, sped away to give directions as to the disposition of the chests, and was soon scurrying across the park to join the patient Secretary, who had had ample opportunity to smoke his two cigars.

The Lieutenant had in the meantime shown his despatch to Lady Isabelle, whose face at once assumed an expression very much in contrast to that of her liege lord's; her brows contracted in a frown, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried. "You won't leave me now— I can't spare you. Your poor uncle Benjamin!"

"But you don't understand!" he cried. "You don't see what it means! The Steward writes that I'll inherit his property, and that I should come and protect my interests."

"But he's not dead yet—only very ill," she argued, seeing the possibilities ahead—yet hoping against hope to win her husband from his better judgment.

"It's the same thing—they wouldn't have telegraphed for me if it wasn't the end."

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"But it's so far off—nearly to the Scottish border."

"That's all the more reason for hurrying. I must take the first train for London."

"And leave me!"

"My darling, you must be brave, you must be sensible. If I inherit my uncle's property, I shall be a rich man, and your mother's scruples will be removed. It's vital that I should lose no chances—it means everything to us."

"But is there any danger of your doing so—doesn't the telegram expressly state that he means to make you his heir?"

"Yes, yes, but there are other relatives as near as I. They'll all be there, and if they suspect I'm chosen, will try and get him, at the last, to turn against me."

"But why should you be chosen?"

"Pure cussedness, I think, coupled with the fact that I've never troubled myself to be even civil to him. His other relatives have spent their time in fawning about him, and he has seen through it, and led them a lively dance in consequence. He lived in a beastly old hole of a place—dull as the water in his own moat. I was sent there as a boy, and when he tried to cane me for stealing his fruit, I pelted him with apples. Since I've been old enough to consult my own inclinations, I have entirely ignored him. I never supposed he'd leave me a penny, and I wouldn't have let him lead me a dog's life for it, if I had. Now that he has done so to spite the rest, I shall protect my own interests, never fear."

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"But you'll tell mamma before you go?"

"Most certainly not," replied the Lieutenant, glad of any valid excuse for putting off what promised to be a rather trying interview. "I should have to go at once in any event, and I certainly couldn't leave you to face your mother's wrath alone; besides, now I come to think of it, your late father was one of uncle's pet detestations, politically, and if a rumour of my secret marriage were to reach him before the end, it would be all up with my prospects, and you can easily see what splendid capital it would be for his precious relatives."

"But mamma might be trusted?" queried Lady Isabelle, feeling that she was venturing on untenable ground.

"Those who don't know won't tell; besides, my position will be much stronger as the heir in possession than the heir prospective. Now I must be off to make my excuses to Mrs. Roberts, and to pack up my belongings, or some of them, for I don't expect to be gone more than two or three days at the most, and till then everything depends on keeping the secret."

"But, Mr. Stanley," she expostulated.

"Oh, pshaw! I forgot him."

"But we mustn't forget him. You know we promised him that we would tell at once."

"Circumstances alter cases. You must arrange it between you somehow. You can stave off the evil day with your mother. Say you need time to think it over." [Pg 234]

"You don't know mamma as well as I do, Jack."

"Then refuse absolutely."

"She'd take me away at once, abroad perhaps. She's made up her mind to this match."

"You must hold it off and on, that is all there is about it. Let her think you are going to consent, but that you mustn't be hurried."

"But think of Mr. Stanley's position. How would you feel in his place?"

"Now, what's the use of arguing suppositious cases when I'm pressed for time? Stanley has accepted the position, and he must make the best of it."

"But if he's afraid Miss Fitzgerald may learn of his proposal to me, and misunderstand."

"Not much danger of that, as she saw you married this morning."

"But Mr. Stanley doesn't know that Miss Fitzgerald was present at our wedding. Now, if I could tell him so——"

"Um!" murmured the Lieutenant thoughtfully. "On the whole, I don't think I would. It wouldn't be quite fair to Belle."

"To Miss Fitzgerald?"

"To Miss Fitzgerald. At least you must gain her consent first."

"But why should she object?"

"Well, to speak quite frankly, her own position in the matter was open to question. You see, she had some difficulty in arranging the private marriage, and, out of friendship to me, she did and said certain things of which an over-conscientious person, like our friend the Secretary, might disapprove." [Pg 235]

"Jack!" she cried, frightened. "Tell me the truth. Swear to me that our marriage was a true marriage—was legal."

"I swear it, my darling. Hadn't you the special licence to prove it? My remarks only referred to the means she used to induce the parson to keep his mouth shut. Not discreditable at all, you understand, and some day, when I'm at liberty to explain it, you'll see—but we owe it to her to keep quiet about the whole affair."

"I don't like it, dear—it doesn't sound honest."

"Well, I can't help it. It is all fair and square as far as you are concerned, and if you like you may tell Miss Fitzgerald all about Stanley's position, so that he can't injure himself in her eyes. But to him you must say nothing without her consent—absolutely nothing."

"But this does not settle the matter of the engagement."

"You must manage that as best you can. Stanley can't really be engaged to you, because you are a married woman; and Belle can't be jealous if she knows the truth."

"But poor Mr. Stanley—consider his feelings—how needlessly you are making him suffer. He'll think that Miss Fitzgerald will never forgive him."

"And a good thing, too, for he's treated her very badly; he deserves to be made uncomfortable." [Pg 236]

"What has he done?"

"Never mind. It's not a story for polite society. But he'll deserve all he gets, take my word for it. Now run along to the library and see if you can find our place in that old black letter book of the 'Lives of the Saints.' It'll be positively necessary for me to look up a reference or two before starting, to fortify myself for my journey;" and so saying he entered the house, feeling that in giving Belle the whip hand over the Secretary, he had more than compensated her for all she had done for him. But Lieutenant Kingsland was destined to find out that a whip—especially one with so long a lash—is apt to be a dangerous instrument in unqualified hands, and may even include

the giver in its whistling sting.

Something over an hour later, the Lieutenant having been duly fortified, and dispatched on his journey, Lady Isabelle found herself closeted with her mother in the midst of a most trying scene. The Dowager had placed before her the manifest advantages of a union with the young diplomat, and her daughter, incautiously following her husband's short-sighted advice, had not only seemed to acquiesce in favour of the suit, but had even overdone the part, in the hopes of thereby inducing such amiability in her mother, as would lead her to be lenient concerning the final decision. The result of this was that Lady Isabelle had not, figuratively speaking, left herself a leg to stand on, and having admitted all her mother's arguments with a complaisance which could only argue their ultimate acceptance, came to a standstill the moment a definite answer was demanded. She agreed to all her mother said, but could not of herself say yes—or no.

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Lady Port Arthur could only attribute her daughter's hesitation to one of two reasons, either maidenly modesty which prevented her acceding to her requests—"A most becoming motive, my dear"—the Dowager assured her—"and one that does you infinite credit, but which, in this instance, must give way to my superior wisdom, or else—." Here the Marchioness expressed herself with a heat and bitterness which it would be hardly fair to put on record for cool and sober reading; referring to an "inherited obstinacy," which she assured her daughter had come direct from the late Lord Port Arthur, and had led to a certain amount of friction in her marital life, and concluding by remarking that—"this (obstinacy) I have determined to nip in the bud, and crush out with a stern hand."

She therefore requested an immediate answer. Lady Isabelle, not being of a strong nature, nor daring to brave her mother's wrath by a direct refusal, and feeling the impossibility of assent, replied that she had nothing further to say. This equivocal position proved to be most disastrous—for it left her mother free to lay down the law, which she proceeded to do.

"If," she said, "your refusal to answer is due to a foolish access of modesty, I shall reply in the affirmative for you, and Mr. Stanley will see the propriety of your attitude, and will, I am sure, excuse its apparent childishness. If, on the other hand, your motive is due to obstinacy, I consider myself privileged to interfere in order to save you from the results of your own foolishness, and I shall still accept for you. Should you so far forget yourself as to oppose my wishes, I shall feel that seclusion and rigorous measures will be necessary—we will leave to-morrow for a six months' course of mud baths in Northern Bavaria, which will be highly beneficial to me, and will give you ample time for reflection on the sins of undutifulness and obstinate pride."

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The Dowager paused to watch the effect of her threat. It was all she could have desired.

Lady Isabelle knew Snollenbad by reputation; knew that it was a stuffy, dull, German, provincial town; loathed mud baths; longed for the gaieties of the world as a girl longs who has only had one season; and, worst of all, realised that the settlement of estates and the limitations of leave would make it a six months' exile from her husband. She hesitated, and the Dowager, relying on the proverb, felt that she had won.

"Give me half an hour to consider," she asked.

"There is nothing to consider," replied her mother. "You know what my course of action will be; the future will depend on yours; but you had better retire to your room and think matters over;" and she dismissed her with a gesture.

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In spite of her words, however, the Dowager did not feel perfectly secure, and determined to clinch matters in a manner which, had her daughter suspected it, would have moved even that vacillating nature to rebellion. As it was, Lady Isabelle contemplated a confession to Stanley on his return from the drive, in direct disobedience to her husband's commands; which, at the eleventh hour, would have sealed her mother's lips by apprising her of the truth. But fate ordained otherwise, and the Secretary and Miss Fitzgerald were disgracefully late; giving them barely time to rush to their rooms, hurry into evening clothes, and appear in the drawing-room, flushed and breathless as the butler announced dinner.

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CHAPTER XXIII

FORTY THOUSAND POUNDS

As the Secretary sat in the governess' cart finishing his second cigar, he reflected that if he had any strength of character he would never have lent his aid in countenancing a secret marriage between one of his best friends, and a man, who, he believed, could be proved guilty of something very nearly approaching treason to the Sovereign whose uniform he wore; nor, for that matter, would he be waiting for a girl who had insulted him by her suspicions of the evening before, and who had capped the climax by taking the refusal of him at her own valuation.

However, his reflections were cut short by the appearance of Miss Fitzgerald herself, who had not hurried so much as to be flushed or out of breath, and who had arrived with the fixed intention of keeping the Secretary away from the Hall during the entire afternoon.

"I'm awfully sorry to have kept you waiting so long," she said, mounting to the seat which faced him, he driving under her direction. "But you shall have your reward—for I've two bits of good news for you."

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"That's encouraging," he replied, praying inwardly that one of them was the announcement of Lady Isabelle's marriage.

"In the first place, your friend Mr. Kent-Lauriston has arrived."

The Secretary's face did not express any excess of joy.

"Won't you be glad to see him?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied.

"He's an old friend of yours?"

"My oldest in England."

"How nice that he's here!" she said, a slight frown clouding her brows. "His coming will mean so much to you."

"Yes," said the Secretary meditatively, "I don't know how much," and there was silence between them for a while.

"And your second piece of news?" he asked suddenly, recollecting himself.

"Is, that your pet detestation is going away."

"You refer to Colonel Darcy?"

She nodded.

"Away from here?"

"Away from England."

"Really."

"You know so much about him, I thought you might have heard of it."

"Where is he going?"

"Abroad somewhere."

"Does he take his wife with him?"

She laughed light-heartedly, as though relieved from some oppression.

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"No, I fancy not—in fact I think it is rather to escape her."

"Oh!" he said, and relapsed into silence. Then suddenly reverting to his original train of thought, which Darcy's name suggested, he spoke abruptly:—

"Why did you ask me to drive with you this afternoon?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you—no, I didn't— I wanted you to talk to me."

"About last night?"

"Yes."

"But it's impossible—if you can believe——!" he cried hotly.

"What Bob said, about you and his wife?" she interjected. "I don't, but it made me very angry just the same. You see, up to last night, you had been an ideal to me. Then suddenly you proposed to change all our relations; and just at that moment Bob came in and made those charges, which, though untrue, showed me how very human you would have to be to me if I accepted you, and I was bitter and lost my head."

"But if you didn't believe them, why did you refuse to give me a definite answer?"

"Because you'd brought me face to face with new conditions. I wanted to readjust myself to them."

"But if you love me—— Do you love me?" he said earnestly.

"Yes, Jim," she replied, with a quiet seriousness that carried conviction to him, "I do love you."

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"Really, love me?"

"Really, more than I have loved any man—ever."

"But then, how can you doubt?" and he turned impulsively towards her.

"You'd better keep both hands on the reins—the pony is only just broken. As I was saying—I love you—in my way—but that's not all, it's merely the beginning. If I only had to meet you for the rest of our lives at afternoon tea and dinner, and we had on our best clothes and our company

manners, there would be no question—but you see there are breakfasts and luncheons to be considered. Suppose after our honeymoon was over I was to discover that you wanted to live at West Hempstead, or dined habitually at the National Liberal Club, or wore ready-made suits—it might wreck my life's happiness."

Her sincerity had disappeared, and her change in manner grated on him. He was certain she did not mean what she was saying, but he forced a laugh in replying:—

"Diplomats are not allowed to belong to political clubs, in the first place," he said, "and I've been told that well-cut clothes may be met with even at the N. L. C. Besides, if you loved me, it wouldn't really matter."

"Ah! But it might, and that's just the point. Either I love *you*, the real, imperfect, human *you*—and nothing else counts—or else I love the Secretary of the — Legation, in a frock coat or a dress suit, and everything does count. I've got to determine which. My feminine intuition will tell me that in an instant some day, and then I can answer you."

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"Let us hope that your feminine intuition will make up its mind to act quickly then, for I must be getting back to London in a few days."

"Why?" she cried. "What have you to do?"

What indeed, when the canny old messenger the night before had told him that this beautiful girl was the main spring of the conspiracy he was here to crush? He did not believe that, but the whole conversation had revolted him—it was not decent somehow to discuss the most serious things of life flippantly. His face showed his feelings.

She was quick to take the cue.

"I doubt if you really know yourself," she continued. "Suppose Madame Darcy were unmarried— I have sometimes thought——"

"Suppose the impossible," he interrupted. "Suppose you should decide to drop her husband——"

"I wonder," she said, ignoring his petulant outburst, "if you would mind my asking you a very frank question?"

"About the Colonel?"

"Yes. You see I've been thinking a good deal of what you said the other night, but of course one can't throw over old friends without good cause—merely for marital infelicity—there are always two sides to those stories, you know. I was wondering if there was anything else—anything about him which you knew and I wouldn't be likely to— I've sometimes thought—that perhaps——" she paused and looked inquiringly at him.

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The Secretary longed to tell her the truth; but remembering his Chief's instructions, and chastened by his late reverse, hardened his heart.

"As for that," he replied guardedly, "he doesn't bear an altogether savoury reputation, I've understood, but as my personal knowledge of his affairs dated with his wife's visit to me two or three days ago—my information is comparatively recent."

She smiled contentedly, and changed the subject, by suggesting that they should get out and walk. A long hill was before them, and since from the construction of governess carts the tendency of an up-grade is to put all the weight at the rear, it seemed advisable to descend.

"To give the pony a fighting chance," as the Secretary suggested.

Miss Fitzgerald complained that it was hot, and, barring the fact of cruelty to animals, a nuisance to have to climb the hill; saying which, she took off her hat, giving an unobstructed view of her hair.

If there is any excuse for the fact that the Secretary forgot his good resolutions, it must lie in the heart of the reader, who perhaps has been young some time himself, and had the exquisite pleasure of driving during a long, perfect English afternoon, through glorious wooded lanes, and all the picturesque antiquity which England alone knows, with a winsome Irish girl, with a peaches-and-cream complexion, a ravishing laugh, bewitching blue eyes, and golden hair loose upon her shoulders, which a madcap wind whipped in his face.

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"I think it's glorious," said Stanley, reverting to the landscape, a little later, when the conversation had turned to less serious topics, "There's no country like England—but it's comparable to the little girl of the nursery rhyme—

"When it is good, it is very very good,
And when it is bad, it is horrid."

"I'm glad to see you appreciate it at its true worth. Isn't this scene perfect—but think of it in a November fog," she said.

"Think of those people wasting their afternoon on the lawn at the Hall, drinking bitter tea and eating heavy cake."

"I dare say some of them are above those things," replied Belle.

"Lady Isabelle and the Lieutenant?" queried the Secretary.

"Lady Isabelle and the Lieutenant," she acquiesced. "I wonder if there is really anything serious in that affair?"

She said this to probe Stanley, and, as a result, she put him on his guard.

"What do you think?" he asked cautiously. "I imagine the Dowager could never be induced to approve of it."

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"The Marchioness!" cried Belle scornfully, as, having reached the summit of the hill with a long, downward slope before them, they remounted into the cart. "She doesn't count."

"Oh, doesn't she?" said the Secretary. "She counts a great deal, as"—he added half to himself—"I ought to know."

They had already turned homewards and were rattling down the hill, and at that moment they swung at top speed round a corner, to come upon a wrecked luggage cart, which blocked the whole road. Without hesitation, Stanley pulled the pony up on its haunches, bringing them to a stop with a tremendous jerk, within three feet of the obstacle; nearly throwing them out, and driving, for the time being, all thoughts of their interrupted conversation from the Secretary's head.

"Why, Tim!" he said, recognising the driver as one of Mrs. Roberts' servants. "You've had a spill!"

"Axle broke, sir. That's what it is, and if it hadn't been as the carrier"—indicating a second cart on the further side—"had happened to come up just now, I don't know as Mister Kingsland would have got his luggage."

"Lieutenant—Kingsland—is he going away?"

"Why, didn't you know that, sir? Called sudden on the death of his uncle—Miss Fitzgerald there—she——"

"Don't spend all the afternoon gossiping, Tim," broke in that young lady, sharply—"but attend to your work. Drive round somehow, can't you?"—she continued, addressing the Secretary—"or we shall be late for dinner?"

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"Don't you see it's impossible? Besides I want to help Tim."

"Nonsense, turn round and we'll drive back—some other way. Tim and the carrier can help themselves," she cried petulantly.

"I'm not so sure of that," drawled the driver. "Them chests are powful heavy—for all the Lieutenant said they contained glass picture slides—it's more like lead."

"Mr. Riddle's slides, eh?" said Stanley, jumping down, despite his fair companion's remonstrances. "Then we mustn't let Lieutenant Kingsland go without them;" and he seized the handle of one of the boxes, and pulling it off the partially overturned cart, dragged it along the road, while Miss Fitzgerald sat holding the pony, and biting her lips in ill-disguised vexation.

"Gad! They are heavy!" admitted the Secretary, as, with the carrier's help, he swung it into the cart, and returned for another.

Four were transported safely, but in lifting the fifth chest, whose cover seemed a trifle loose, Stanley turned his foot on a round stone, and losing his grip on the handle, the chest fell to the ground bottom side up.

"No great harm done, we'll hope," he said, righting it, and helping the carrier to lift it beside the others.

"Why, bless me," ejaculated that official, "if there ain't a bran new sovereign lying in the dust!"

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The Secretary regarded it critically, and plunging his hands into his trousers pockets, fished out a lot of loose change, which he examined carefully, saying:

"I must have dropped it in bending over; thank you for finding it. There's a shilling for your trouble." And straightening up, he realised that Miss Fitzgerald was regarding him intently.

Half an hour later the wreck was sufficiently cleared for them to resume their homeward way.

The remainder of the afternoon was not a success, including, as it did, a drive home in the teeth of a wind which had suddenly sprung up; which, finding them hot and dusty, left them at their destination cold and cross, and utterly fagged out; Stanley with a twinge of rheumatism, devoutly hoping that Lady Isabelle had got it over, and Miss Fitzgerald with a splitting headache, realising that she had lost a move in the game.

They both looked forward to dinner as a salve for all evils, though when they entered the drawing-room just in time to go down, they were naturally surprised, Miss Fitzgerald at being committed to the charge of Kent-Lauriston, and the Secretary to Lady Isabelle—for the latter of which arrangements the Dowager was directly responsible—indeed, she had held an interview with her hostess a few minutes before, which had left that lady very much excited.

As soon as they were seated at table, he noticed that he was separated from Miss Fitzgerald as

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far as might be, so he lost no time in putting Lady Isabelle at her ease by engaging her in conversation. Knowing what he did, he felt that to give her a chance to talk about her husband would be most acceptable to her, and probably useful to him; so, noting his absence, he told her of accidentally hearing of his departure.

"I suppose," he said, "that as he was carrying so much of value, he'll stop in London before going north?"

"Of value," she said. "I do not understand."

"Why, five cases of stereopticon slides for Mr. Riddle. I helped the carrier to reload them, and very heavy they were."

"He said nothing to me of it," she replied; "but he certainly is going to stop in London one night."

"I wish I'd known, I'd have asked him to cash a cheque for me. It's so hard to do that sort of thing in the country, and I imagine we bank at the same place."

"He banks at the Victoria Street branch of the Bank of England. I'm sure he would have been glad to have done it for you."

"Thanks, but it really doesn't matter," replied Stanley, who, having thus learned the probable destination of Mr. Riddle's chests of sovereigns was contented to change the subject, saying: "I do hope that the Lieutenant unburdened his soul to your mother before he left."

She then told him all the events of the afternoon, even the interview with her mother, the whole in a conversational tone of voice. The Secretary sat dazed as the magnitude of what he had let himself in for dawned upon him; and her Ladyship's eager explanations and apologies, which presently died down to a whisper, as there came a lull in the conversation, fell unheeded on his ears. Suddenly he became intuitively aware that everyone was looking at him—no, at them. His hostess was making a feeble attempt to smile at him from far down the table—he felt a horrible premonition of coming catastrophe; he looked at Lady Isabelle, she was white to the lips.

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"My friends," came Mrs. Roberts' voice, trembling a little, "Lady Port Arthur has just told me some interesting news, with the request that I would transmit it to you all; so I am going to ask you to drink your first glass of champagne this evening in honour of the engagement of Lady Isabelle McLane and Mr. Aloysius Stanley."

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CHAPTER XXIV

A VERY AWKWARD PREDICAMENT

Had Mrs. Roberts' interests not led her in another direction, she must have felt no small gratification at the effect which her speech produced. It was a great *coup* for any hostess, and of tremendous force, because absolutely unexpected.

A number of guests had been invited for this particular evening to swell the party, making a dinner of sixteen, and it was delightful to witness the manner in which they took the announcement. The men received it in silence, while the women broke instantly into a confused, joyous cackled exclamation, surprise and curiosity.

The Dowager was the person who probably derived the most satisfaction from the scene, for her work was over and she could survey it calmly; but Stanley, though the table and the guests whirled before his eyes, caught some lightning glimpses of various expressions, which he was destined never to forget.

He saw the Marchioness' satisfied smile, which said as plainly as words could: "There, what did I tell you? You see how successfully I have brought about this affair." He caught the glance of sympathy which his hostess shot at Miss Fitzgerald, and he caught the glance of vindictive rage which that young lady bestowed upon him, though he did not see the smile which followed it.

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It needed no one to tell Miss Fitzgerald that she held the whip now, or to teach her how to use it. Her lover should smart for this.

One other glimpse the Secretary caught in that moment—a disgusted shrug of the shoulders from Kent-Lauriston, and this latter hurt him the most keenly of all. He wondered how all these people could be so stupid as not to see the ghastly mistake they were making, the awful position in which they were placing them both; and then he understood that Lady Isabelle's pallor and his own flushed face might as easily be traced to natural embarrassment as to utter confusion. What a shocking complication—but if it was so bad for him, what must it be for her? Thank Heavens, he was not to blame for it—he had only done what she had asked him. What would people say when they learned the truth? What would Inez think—what—Good Heavens! Why were all the men rising from their seats? He must rise too—to drink his health. He felt fairly dazed from agitation. They drained their glasses, he drank with them. The champagne served to steady him; he was himself once more, ready to do battle for his honour and hers. What was that they were saying—some idiot at the far end of the table was crying "Speech—Speech!" Stanley made a mental note

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that, despite laws against duelling, he'd run him through before breakfast to-morrow morning, or know the reason why. Now all the others were taking it up, every one was crying: "Speech! Speech! Speech!" Good Heavens, what could he say! Would it not be better to stand up and tell the truth of this miserable matter? One look at the bent head of Lady Isabelle, and her nervous fingers clutching the tablecloth, determined his course of action—he could not expose her to the criticism of this table of scandal-mongers. She sat there, almost fainting, hanging on his every word; chivalry, honour, manliness, left but one course open—he must sacrifice himself to save her. The future would decide itself—his duty lay clear before him. He saw that he must speak—and that he must by his words deceive the company, and yet not compromise either her or himself. He raised his hand to command attention; the rest sat down—it gave him thirty seconds for reflection, an infinitesimal amount of time in which to take action, but ample space in which to take thought: then he spoke:—

"My friends:—

"You have just done us the honour to drink a toast to our united happiness. I thank you for your kind intention. Those who are already married have, by drinking this toast, very gracefully assured me of my own future happiness, and those who are single have given me the opportunity to express a hearty wish that it may some day be my privilege to drink a similar toast to them."

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Had Mr. Stanley never given other evidence of his fitness for a diplomatic career, this speech alone would have conclusively furnished it. He resumed his seat, and the look of gratitude which his companion gave him was sufficient reward.

How that dinner passed off the Secretary never knew. It was a horrible nightmare, and it seemed interminable; but it did come to an end at last, and he repaired to the smoking-room where even a worse purgatory awaited him. Kent-Lauriston distinctly avoided him, the rest evidently regarded him as their lawful prey. His over-taxed nerves were beginning to give way. He laughed hysterically, threw his cigar into the fireplace, and, begging to be excused, left the room. A burst of laughter followed him. He knew what it meant—every action of his must henceforth be misinterpreted.

His appearance in the drawing-room was the signal for a preparatory giggle, and then an, only too apparent, ignoring of his presence, accompanied by meaning glances towards the conservatory. He took the hint, and went in that direction, to find Lady Isabelle weeping her eyes out on a divan.

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," he said to her, cheerfully; "but you must admit it's a deuce of a mess."

"How can I ever sufficiently thank you, Mr. Stanley?" she exclaimed, looking up at him in undisguised admiration. "You were splendid."

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"Oh, not at all—but I'll admit your mother's announcement rather staggered me."

"I tried to prepare you."

"I'm afraid you didn't succeed," he replied coldly, for he felt that he had been ill-used.

"I assure you," she said, "if I'd had the remotest idea of what mamma intended doing, I would have faced all possibilities and told her the truth, rather than have exposed you to what has occurred. I can never, never forgive myself for it."

"It was really more my fault than yours. I gave your mother permission to announce our engagement whenever you gave your consent."

"I never gave it!" she cried.

"Of course," he continued, "I never supposed that your mother would so far forget herself as to force you."

"You mustn't be too hard on mamma."

"Under the circumstances you could hardly expect me to be lenient; I think we'd better agree to change the subject."

She bowed silently.

"There's one thing, however, that you can do to help me," he continued.

Lady Isabelle shivered as she saw the approach of the dreaded request, and asked:

"What is that?"

"You can go to Miss Fitzgerald and tell her the truth. No statement of mine, unsupported by you, would have any credence in her ears after what has passed. You're the only person whose word can right me in her estimation."

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"Mr. Stanley," she replied slowly, and with evident exertion, "I cannot tell you the pain, the chagrin, which it gives me to refuse your request."

"You won't do it!" he cried, utterly amazed.

"I can't do it."

"But do you realise the position in which you place me with Miss Fitzgerald?" he protested, unwilling to believe his ears.

"Perfectly—only too keenly," she replied. "The knowledge that I've wronged you in her estimation is the bitterest part of the whole matter. I feel it much more than my own position in the affair."

"And knowing this you can still refuse to interfere in my behalf, when a word from you would set all right."

"I deeply regret it, Mr. Stanley, but I must."

He stood looking at her for a moment in the deepest scorn. Had he sacrificed himself for a woman like this?

"Don't think too hardly of me," she pleaded; "believe me, I have reasons."

"I've only this to say, Lady Isabelle," he replied coldly. "Until you absolve me from the unfortunate position in which your foolishness and weakness have placed me, my good name, my honour, and my future prospects are in your hands. Your conscience should tell you how far you have the right to trifle with them," and turning on his heel he left the conservatory.

After the departure of the Secretary, Lady Isabelle lost no time in seeking out Miss Fitzgerald, who had retired to her chamber. [Pg 258]

To pursue a woman who believes that you have cruelly wronged her was a bold undertaking, but if she could not assure the Secretary that she would right him in his lady's eyes, her duty, under the circumstances, was all the more imperative to do so without delay; so summoning all her courage to her aid, she ascended to Miss Fitzgerald's chamber, and knocked timidly; so timidly, indeed, that at first she was not heard, and was compelled to knock again.

"Come in," called Belle.

Her Ladyship partially opened the door.

"It's I," she said.

"Lady Isabelle!" exclaimed Miss Fitzgerald, in unfeigned surprise, rising to receive her visitor. "You're the last person I expected to see!"

"I must beg your pardon for intruding upon your privacy, but I felt I must come to you the first moment that I was able."

"Really?"

"I owe you an explanation, Miss Fitzgerald."

Belle looked at her proudly and coldly, with the air of an insulted queen. It was not often she had the chance to triumph over a lady of title, and she enjoyed it thoroughly.

"You owe me more than an explanation," she said, and indicating a chair for her guest, they both sat down.

"Of course, you're aware that Mr. Stanley cannot be engaged to me," Lady Isabelle began, after some hesitation, in which Belle gave her no help, for she knew this interview was her real punishment. [Pg 259]

"I should hardly have supposed so," replied Miss Fitzgerald, and lapsed into silence.

"I"—Lady Isabelle began, covered with confusion—"I—the fact is—I asked him to propose to me."

"You asked him to propose to you?"

"I don't wonder you are surprised; but the facts of the case are these. My mother asked Mr. Stanley his intentions last evening. Being engaged to you, he naturally had none."

"Mr. Stanley is not engaged to me."

"I beg your pardon, I thought——"

"He has proposed to me, I admit; but I must say his conduct doesn't prejudice me in his favour."

"But you mustn't allow this to injure him, Miss Fitzgerald. Really you must not."

"A man who could accept a lady who had so far forgotten herself as to propose to him——"

"Pray let me state my case before judging me," pleaded her Ladyship, ready to sink through the floor with mortification.

"Proceed, Lady Isabelle," said her tormentor.

"Mr. Stanley told me of his interview with my mother, who, I knew, was very anxious to make a match between us. This morning I discovered that she intended to go to early service. You know what that would have involved."

Miss Fitzgerald nodded.

"I tried every means to deter her, but in vain. Then, as a last resort—I admit it was very wrong to do so—I asked Mr. Stanley to intercept my mother on her way to the church, and make her a proposal for my hand, as I knew this was the only way to detain her, telling him that I was about to be married, and that I would tell her the truth to-day."

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Miss Fitzgerald drew a sharp breath.

"Then he knows that you're a married woman?"

"He knew that I was to be, before the ceremony."

The Irish girl gave a contented little sigh, and murmured to herself—"So he did know after all."

Then waking up to the immediate present, she continued, with exaggerated courtesy:—

"Your Ladyship has not, I think, finished your story. You promised Mr. Stanley that you would tell your mother the truth—but you have not done so."

"No, I have not, and for the following reasons. My husband, as you know, received a telegram apprising him of the fact that a relative, who was dying, intended leaving him a large fortune, and required his immediate presence. He forbade me to speak till he came back, and insisted that I must hold out the prospect of my engagement with Mr. Stanley as a bait to keep my mother here till he could return to me. She, however, pressed me for an answer, and on my refusing to commit myself either way, took matters into her own hands, as we have seen. I assure you entirely without the knowledge of Mr. Stanley or myself."

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"I see. You feel it necessary to continue this bogus engagement, for the present."

"I'm between two fires, Miss Fitzgerald: obedience to my husband's commands, and the reparation I owe to you."

"What does Jimsy say?"

"Mr. Stanley has, of course, behaved like a gentleman, and left the matter for me to decide. I'm in a most dreadful position, either way I must wrong some one."

"I'll spare your conscience, Lady Isabelle. I shan't require you to break your engagement with the Secretary."

"But you'll forgive him, will you not? It was not his fault, really."

"You seem to forget that I've not accepted him as yet."

"But you'll not let this prejudice your ultimate decision. Promise me that?"

"Yes, I'll promise—for I don't think there's anything proved against him in this matter, except that he's weak, and I did not need you to tell me that."

"He's a very large heart, Miss Fitzgerald."

"He has," assented that lady. "Of which I've had ample evidence in the last few days."

"You've been so gracious to me in this matter," continued Lady Isabelle, "that unsuitable as the occasion is, I'm going to venture to ask you a favour."

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"And what is that, your Ladyship?"

"Mr. Stanley doesn't know that you're aware of my marriage, and for some reason which I don't understand, my husband forbade me to tell him of the fact unless I had your permission; so he fancies that he's put himself in a worse position than is really the case. Do allow me to tell him the truth. Poor fellow, he's so unhappy."

"No," replied Miss Fitzgerald, a gleam of triumph lighting up her face, as she realised the power which Kingsland had placed in her hands. "Your husband is quite right; there are excellent reasons why he should not be told; besides he deserves to be miserable, he's treated me very badly."

"In that case," said Lady Isabelle, stiffly, rising to go, "I've nothing more to say."

"Quite right, Lady Isabelle, and may I give you a parting word of caution? When your husband, Lieutenant Kingsland, advises a course of action, follow it blindly."

"Really, Miss Fitzgerald!" exclaimed her Ladyship, bridling up at the Irish girl's remark.

"Good-night, Lady Isabelle," murmured Belle in her silkiest tones, opening the door, and laughing softly to herself, as her visitor rustled away in the distance. Then she leaned over the staircase and listened. No sound met her ears, but her eyes beheld the disconsolate figure of the Secretary, standing alone in the hall below. She tripped noiselessly down, and, arriving within a few paces of him unnoticed, drew herself up haughtily, and said, in her most chilling tones:—

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"Will you kindly permit me to pass, Mr. Stanley?"

"Belle—Miss Fitzgerald," he cried. "I must have a few words with you— I must explain."

"It's not necessary, Mr. Stanley. I've already heard a detailed account of the affair from Lady Isabelle's mother."

On the verity of the statement we will not attempt to pass judgment; suffice it to say, that it simply staggered the young diplomat.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "I—it's not true, believe me, it's not true."

"Do I understand you to insinuate that the Marchioness has prevaricated?"

"No, no, of course not; but it's all a mistake. I can explain—really."

"Mr. Stanley, answer me one question. Did you or did you not give the Marchioness to understand, in your interview with her this morning, that you wished to marry her daughter?"

"Why, yes—I suppose I did—but, then, you see——"

"That is quite sufficient. Good-night."

"If you'd only let me explain!"

"Good-night, Mr. Stanley," she repeated icily, and swept past him into the drawing-room.

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CHAPTER XXV

THE RUSTLE OF A SKIRT

"You graceless young dog!" cried Kent-Lauriston, falling upon Stanley in a half-feigned, half-real burst of anger, as he entered the smoking-room after his encounter with Belle. "Do you know you've caused me to refuse invitations by the score, and dragged me down to this God-forsaken place, at the most impossible season of the year, on false pretences?"

"False pretences! How so?"

"Why? You shameless Lothario! Why? Because what's left of my conscience smote me for leaving a lamb amidst a pack of wolves, and wouldn't let me rest; nearly destroyed my digestion, I give you my word. I came down to pluck your innocence alive from the burning, and I've been a fool for my pains. Why, confound you, I not only find you *épris* with Madame Darcy, but engaged to both the Fitzgerald and Lady Isabelle."

"My dear Kent-Lauriston, pray soothe your ruffled feelings; your logic is excellent, but your premises are one and all false."

"What!"

"I say there's nothing between Madame Darcy and myself, and that I'm neither engaged to Miss Fitzgerald nor Lady Isabelle." [Pg 265]

"But, my dear Stanley, I've heard——"

"But, my dear Kent-Lauriston, you've heard wrongly."

"What—isn't Madame Darcy here?"

"Yes."

"And haven't you seen her?"

"Yes."

"And walked with her early in the morning?"

"Yes."

"And breakfasted with her, *tête-à-tête* at a farmhouse?"

"Yes."

"And hasn't her husband challenged you to a duel on her account?"

"Yes."

"And didn't he, moreover, catch you in the act of proposing to Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Yes."

"And haven't you asked the Marchioness for Lady Isabelle's hand?"

"Yes."

"And in the face of all this—you attempt to deny——"

"In the face of all this—circumstantial evidence—I'm quite prepared to deny everything. Would

you like to hear the *facts* of the case?"

"Rather!"

As will have been inferred, the two men had the smoking-room entirely to themselves, and the best part of an hour passed before the Secretary had finished his account of events with which the reader is familiar. [Pg 266]

Kent-Lauriston heard him out with great interest, and after drawing a long breath, at the close of his recital, remarked:—

"I think I shall be fully repaid for any inconvenience to which I've put myself on your account. This whole affair is most interesting, and, believe me, there's more in it than appears on the surface."

"I feel the same way myself," replied the Secretary; "but let us hear your views on the subject."

"First," replied his friend, "you must assure me of how you yourself stand. Are you still in your unregenerate state, or have you yet begun to see the fruits of your folly?"

The young diplomat was silent for a long time, but finally he said, looking up into Kent-Lauriston's face with an almost appealing glance:

"I'm afraid you would think me awfully caddish if I told you the truth about it."

"About the state of your affections for Miss Fitzgerald, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Of course, I shouldn't think you justified in making a public declaration of a change of sentiment, because it might seem to reflect on the lady, but in my case it's very different. Having spoken so frankly and freely on the subject already, I might almost say that you owe it to me to continue to do so. Certainly I've given you no cause for reticence by anything I've done, and, as certainly, you must confide fully in me if you wish my help in the future." [Pg 267]

"Well, then, the truth is," he blurted out, "that you were right and I was wrong, and I've found it out too late."

"I thought as much."

"But I'm not going back on my word. If I've made a mistake, I must suffer for it; and if Miss Fitzgerald accepts my proposal, which she now has under consideration, I shall live up to my part of the agreement; and if I can prevent it, she shall never suspect that I would have matters otherwise. If she should refuse me, however——"

"You'd make a fool of yourself just the same," continued Kent-Lauriston, "by jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, and marrying Madame Darcy the instant she obtained her divorce."

"Kent-Lauriston," Stanley exclaimed, "you know a d——d sight too much!"

The Englishman laughed softly, and then resumed the thread of his discourse.

"Now that I understand your position——" he began.

"Do you understand it?"

"Better than you do yourself, I fancy; let me see if I can state it. You've proposed to Miss Fitzgerald, and she has taken the question of marrying you into consideration; since which time you have come to the conclusion, for reasons which we will not specify out of consideration for your feelings, that, if she refuses, or could be induced to refuse you, you'd accept the decision without an appeal. Am I correct?" [Pg 268]

The Secretary nodded gloomily.

"Under the circumstances, do you give me permission to do what I can to effect your release?"

"Do what you please."

"I'll do my best. Now what induced you to propose to her against your better judgment? Did she lead you on?"

"No, certainly not—if you suppose——!"

"Well, something must have started you up."

"Charges were made against her. I thought it my duty to tell her what had been said——"

"How did she receive it?"

"She accused me of being a false friend, of not having defended her."

"And you proposed—when—that day?"

"No, the next night."

"I see, the next night; because you thought it your duty to protect her."

"Confound you. You read me like a book."

"An open page is easy reading. Now who made the charges?"

"Kingsland."

"I thought so. Whom did they concern?"

"Darcy."

"Exactly. And at the very moment that you were asking her to give you the right to protect her from men of Darcy's stamp—he turns up and proves you the worst of the lot."

"And she— I wonder she didn't refuse me out of hand."

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"I wonder she didn't accept you—but let that pass. All I wish to point out to you is this:—Kingsland drove you by the charges he made against Darcy to propose to Miss Fitzgerald. What was his motive for doing so?"

"Friendship for Miss Fitzgerald."

"Would that be likely to induce him to make serious charges against her?"

"Friendship for me."

"Nonsense! I know the man. He did it because it paid him to do it."

"How was that possible?"

"I can suggest one motive. The removal of the obstacles preventing Lady Isabelle's secret marriage. Now who could have effected this? Not Lady Isabelle, she never had the audacity to carry out such a scheme; not Kingsland, he hasn't brains enough; our hostess is above suspicion; in fact there's only one person who could have conceived and carried out the plan to its successful conclusion—namely, Miss Fitzgerald."

"What grounds have you for proving it?"

"Was she with the parson at all, before the ceremony?"

"I knew you'd ask that question!"

"Then she was."

"Twice, on the days just preceding—to my knowledge."

"That's sufficient."

"Not for me."

"Then I'll tell you where we can find the missing link of evidence."

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"Where?"

"In the marriage register of the church. Find the names of the witnesses, and you'll find the people who have carried it through. If you'll kindly leave it in my hands, I'll verify my statements to-morrow morning. I'd prefer that you did not do it yourself."

"As you please. But even admitting you're right, it doesn't give the cause for the motive."

"Oh, yes, it does—Miss Fitzgerald's intervention in this matter was the price of Kingsland's egging you on to propose."

"Nonsense!"

"I'll lay you a thousand to one on it."

Stanley shrugged his shoulders, saying:—

"But your own arguments defeat you, my dear fellow. If Miss Fitzgerald was such a calculating person, why should she put herself out, and run the risk of compromising herself, merely to induce the Lieutenant to play upon my jealousy, when, as you've already shown, and I've admitted, I was so weak as to make such strategy unnecessary."

"Perhaps that was not the only favour Miss Fitzgerald looked for, and the Lieutenant's hands——"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, taking five chests for her to London."

"Oh," said the Secretary, much relieved, "I know all about that. I quite assure you it has nothing to do with Miss Fitzgerald."

"But I heard her asking Kingsland to take them up for her this afternoon, and to put them in his bank."

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"Look here, Kent-Lauriston, your dislike for poor Belle must have got the better of your common sense. You certainly misinterpreted what she said. Those chests belong to Mr. Riddle."

Kent-Lauriston changed the subject.

"What is Colonel Darcy here for?"

"He says, to watch his wife."

"What is she here for?"

"She says she has letters written to her husband by some member of this household, which have aroused her suspicions."

"That sounds more promising. Who is this person?"

"A woman of course—but she only knows her Christian name."

"And that is?"

"She will not tell me."

"Ah!" said Kent-Lauriston drily.

"I've sources of information about Darcy, which I'm not at liberty to give you," resumed Stanley, "but you're not on the right track, believe me."

"Time will prove the correctness of some of my theories, at least," replied his mentor, "and I shall be better able to talk when I've seen the marriage register. Now let's have something to drink, and go to bed;" and he pressed the bell.

An interval having elapsed without an answer, he rang again, but no servant appeared.

"It must be later than I thought. We'll have to shift for ourselves. There'll be something going in the billiard-room." [Pg 272]

"Hark!" said Stanley. "There's somebody in the hall; it's probably the butler shutting up for the night."

They both listened, and a peculiar, shuffling, scraping sound became audible.

"That's a curious noise," said the Secretary. "Let's see what it means," and, suiting the action to the word, he threw open the smoking-room door.

The light in the hall was turned out, and the sombre black oak panelling made the great apartment seem darker than it really was. Absolute stillness reigned. It was, to all appearance, empty.

"Must have been rats," said the Secretary. "Everyone seems to have retired."

"Have they?" said Kent-Lauriston.

"Listen!"

And both could have sworn that they heard, far up the hall, the dying rustle of a skirt. But there were some things that Stanley had no wish to know, and he set his face and his steps towards the stairs, continuing:—

"As I was saying, we are the only people up.

"Then we'd better go to bed."

"By all means."

"Shall I turn out the electric lights in the smoking-room?"

"Yes, we're evidently the last." [Pg 273]

A moment later they stood on the upper landing about to separate for the night.

"The woman was behind that screen at the foot of the stairs," said Kent-Lauriston.

"Yes, I know," replied the Secretary.

"Good-night, my dear Stanley."

"Good-night, old man. You possess a rare talent."

"Yes?"

"You know when not to ask questions." [Pg 274]

CHAPTER XXVI

FACE TO FACE

When Kent-Lauriston had disappeared in his bedroom, and closed the door, the Secretary, extinguishing his own candle, turned on his heel, and walked slowly back to the head of the stairs. It was easy to preserve an unruffled demeanour before his friend, but he was far from being as calm as he appeared.

All was not right in the house, he knew. Some mischief was afoot, and he meant to find out what it was, even though he dared not admit to himself some of the possibilities which it suggested.

He softly descended the stairs. Everything was silent. He moved the screen; the space behind it was vacant. Suddenly, his eye fell upon the smoking-room door, and he drew in his breath softly. There was a line of light showing under the crack. Yet he could have sworn that Kent-Lauriston had turned off the switch, and while he stood hesitating as to what it was best to do, a soft breath of wind upon his cheek caused him to make another discovery. The great front door was open. He stepped softly down the hall, and going out under the porte-cochère, cast his eyes over the driveway. No one was in sight. He was about to return to the house when he heard light steps coming down the hall. Drawing back into the shadow to escape observation, he waited. Someone was evidently leaving the house. A moment later, a hand was lightly laid upon the door, and it was closed behind him, before he could realise what was happening. He was shut out into the night.

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His first impulse was to ring sharply for assistance. Second thoughts showed him the foolishness of such an attempt. It would be merely apprising the intruders of his presence, and long before a servant could be aroused and the bell could be answered, they would have made their escape.

The Secretary judged that shutting him out was unintentional. The persons, whoever they were, had hidden somewhere, till he had gone upstairs, had then slipped into the smoking-room, probably to arrange their plans, and coming out while he was on the lawn, and seeing the door ajar, had closed it, quite unconscious that by so doing they were putting their pursuer in a very awkward predicament.

However, the Secretary told himself that there was nothing to prevent him from seeing what was going on in the hall, and he hastened to make his way round to the side of the house where there were several large windows opening into that apartment. He had picked his way across several flower-beds, and was just turning the corner to approach the house when he was startled by seeing a dark figure loom up beside him, and feeling a hand lightly laid on his shoulder, and a whispered word of caution to be silent. Almost involuntarily, however, he exclaimed:—

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"Inez! You here, and at this hour."

"Sh!" she said, "There are listeners. I, like you, am watching."

"Who are you watching?" he asked, softly.

"My husband."

"Your husband?"

"Yes," she replied. "Why has he entered this house secretly every night since he has been here?"

"You amaze me," said the Secretary. "How has it been possible for him to get in?"

"He has been aided by someone who opens the door for him."

"A man?"

"No, a woman."

The Secretary whistled softly.

"Well," he said, "we'll probe this mystery to the bottom. I, too, have heard suspicious noises in the passages to-night, and, coming down, after I had retired, to find out what they were, I was shut out from within, though I don't think they were aware of my presence. We must go round on the outside and see what we can through the windows."

"You can't," she said. "The approaches are protected by an iron fence with spikes."

"But surely there's a gate?"

"Yes, but it's always padlocked."

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"We'll have a look at it, any way," he replied; and they approached and examined it closely.

The Secretary rattled the lock cautiously and found it old and shaky.

"I think I could smash this with a couple of bits of flint," he said, "and if I have a new lock put on at my own expense, my hostess will, under the circumstances, probably forgive me." And suiting the action to the word, he managed, by a few judicious blows, with two bits of stone, picked up from the driveway, to bend the hasp of the lock sufficiently to release it.

There being no further impediment to their progress they hastened through the gardens, and a moment later were standing outside one of the great hall windows whose lower panes were on a level with their faces. They could distinctly see three people, but their glances were riveted on a circle of light farther up the hall, a circle that shifted and danced over the surface of the secret

door, flashing on the heads of the silver nails; a circle that was made by the lens of a small bull's-eye lantern, held in the grasp of a crouching figure whose back was turned towards them. By his side were two others, apparently a man and a woman, who seemed to be directing him at his work. For several minutes the little group presented their backs to the spectators, but at an incautious step of the Secretary's, which caused a dry twig to crackle, they all turned sharply round, the owner of the lantern throwing its rays full on the window outside which they were standing. The watchers drew back, in time evidently to escape detection, for the absence of footsteps and the recurrence, after a moment, of the curious sounds which Stanley had noticed from the smoking-room, assured him that they had once more returned to their work. The lantern, however, though it had failed to discover them, had, for a brief second, illumined the faces of the intruders, and both the Secretary and Madame Darcy recognised the trio. The man at work on the door was the Colonel; his assistants were Mr. Riddle and Miss Fitzgerald. The Secretary's worst suspicions were confirmed, and a smothered sob at his side told him that the discovery had inflicted no less keen a pang on his companion. She slipped down in a little heap on the ground, and he dropped on his knees beside her, whispering such consolation as he could without running the risk of being overheard.

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"I knew it must be so," she said, "and yet I hoped against hope that he was not guilty of this last infamy."

Suddenly another thought seemed to have occurred to her.

"You knew," she said. "You must have known, and yet you did not tell me."

"My dear Inez," he said. "How could I, when my suspicions were directed against your own husband?"

"But why do I think of myself?" she said. "I am nothing. But it is you—you, that my heart bleeds for. I, too, concealed my suspicions for your sake."

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"And you can think of me," he said, "at a time like this?"

"Of course," she replied. "Yours is the greater sorrow. I knew that my husband was bad—worthless—capable of anything. My eyes are only proving what my reason told me must be so. But with you, it is so much harder. This is the woman you loved, and, whom loving, you must have made your ideal. And now to find that she is—this." And she pressed his hand silently.

"Don't talk about it," said the Secretary.

"You don't quite understand."

"But what is to be done?" she said.

"Nothing, unless they show signs of success, and that I do not think likely. If the secret of the door has withstood the ingenuity of generations in the past, it is likely to do so in the future, unless they tried to force it, and that I think they'd hardly dare to do."

"Listen," she said. And the Secretary heard a noise of creaking, straining wood.

"They are trying to force it!" he cried, springing up and looking through the window. And she, following his lead, saw that Darcy was working with might and main with some burglar's tool after the nature of a lever. But though the old oaken door groaned in protest at such treatment, it never gave an inch, and the Colonel, removing his instrument, made a gesture of despair, and stood wiping the sweat from his brow.

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"What does this all mean?" said Madame Darcy, as they slipped down again into their place of concealment.

"It means," said the Secretary shortly, "that your husband's secret instructions are behind that door, and from his eagerness to get them I should say that they contain a cipher of something that cannot be duplicated in the time at his command."

"I do not understand," she said.

"Well, if you must know the truth," he replied, "he's to take over the specie needed to defeat the treaty, and to get there in time he must sail from England in a few days."

She nodded mournfully.

"I supposed it was something like that," she said. "I knew Mr. Riddle had brought the gold. It is here."

"No," he said, "it's in the Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England, in London."

"How was it sent up?"

"Lieutenant Kingsland took it."

"Is he a member of the conspiracy?"

"It appears so—but I am not certain. He may be an innocent dupe," replied the Secretary.

"And you let the specie go?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "When I discovered where they were sending the chests I helped them. It's safer in the Bank than knocking round here, and I can prevent its being drawn out any time I wish."

"By the arrest of the conspirators?" she said.

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"I hope that it won't be necessary to arrest anybody," he replied.

"Then you have some plan?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid you mustn't ask me what that is. Nor must you write a word of all this to your father. But I promise you that if it's possible I'll save your husband from open disgrace, and I think it will be."

"Thank you, thank you," she murmured. "You are indeed my friend," and her hand again sought his, and he quivered under her touch.

"Listen!" she said. "They're moving."

He raised himself cautiously, and looked through the window. The attempt for that night had evidently been given up. The three conspirators shook hands, and Miss Fitzgerald and Mr. Riddle stole softly upstairs, leaving Darcy to put his tools in a bag and let himself out. This he proceeded to do in a leisurely manner. Once his companions were out of sight, he again took out the lever, and made one more attempt to open the secret door, bending all his force to the task. Madame Darcy and the Secretary watched him breathlessly, but he was again unsuccessful, and with a disgusted shrug of his shoulders he relinquished the attempt.

His attacks on the door had, however, evidently marred the wood, and he produced from his receptacle a bottle of varnish and a brush, with which he proceeded to repair the traces of the damage. The Secretary's eyes, wandering from the Colonel, suddenly lighted on the figure of his friend, Kent-Lauriston, who had evidently been awakened by the returning footsteps of Darcy's companions as they sought their bedrooms, and who was now stealing downstairs to intercept the intruder.

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Before Stanley could restrain his friend, Kent-Lauriston had softly approached the recumbent figure, so softly, indeed, that the Colonel, who was intent on trying to repair the door, did not hear him, and was aware of his presence only when a stout arm encircled his neck, throwing him backwards on the floor, where he lay, with his captor's knee upon his chest.

Stanley felt the need of being present also, and exerting his strength on the sash, found, to his great satisfaction, that the butler had neglected to bolt the window. With a quiet good-night to Madame Darcy, who slipped away in the darkness, he swung himself over the sill, and landing on his feet in the hall, joined the group, nodding to his friend as he did so.

"Ah, my fine fellow. Burgling, were you?" said Kent-Lauriston to his captive.

"You're mistaken," said the Secretary, stepping quietly up. "This is not a thief; it's only Colonel Darcy, engaged, if I mistake not, in an attempt to recover his lost property."

"I beg your pardon," returned Kent-Lauriston, releasing his prostrate foe; and turning to Stanley, he continued: "Lacking the fineness of perception bred of diplomatic training, I must confess I didn't see the subtle distinction."

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Darcy rose deliberately, growling a surly something, which might have been equally well an apology or an oath, and snapped to the shutter of his dark lantern.

"Yes, we shan't need that light now, thank you," said Stanley, turning on the central lamp.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked the Colonel, gruffly.

The diplomat was on his best behaviour.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Of course, we did not know you were a caller. The ladies have retired, and I'm sure you don't want to see us; we won't detain you."

"I—" began Darcy, clenching his fist.

"Oh, I'll make your excuses to Mrs. Roberts," pursued the Secretary. "Don't trouble about that."

"I'll be damned if I'll tolerate this interference," burst out the Colonel.

"I'm sure you'll be the first, and will also endure the second, my dear sir," continued Stanley in his most suave tones. "So we'll say no more about it. The *front* door is easy to open, Colonel Darcy, as of course you know. Good-night."

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE MARRIAGE REGISTER

On the morning which succeeded Stanley's midnight vigil, the Reverend Reginald Lambert was

early at the little chapel, which was his great pride in life. The good old gentleman was never so happy as when he could induce any of the visitors at the Hall to give him an hour of their time to listen to his dissertations on the ecclesiastical history of the building; to examine its fragments of "dog-tooth," and discuss the meaning of that one "foliated capital," in a structure otherwise severely Saxon. He was even writing a little book on all these things; a volume which he fondly hoped might some day be given to the world. This morning, however, he must have been engaged on some work of special interest, in which he was so absorbed that time flew by unnoticed till his task was finished. He was just preparing to return to his rectory, when he received an unexpected visit from a lady, who requested permission to examine the marriage register.

The lady was a stranger to him, and was evidently of foreign extraction. She asked to see an old volume of the records, and took the occasion, when his back was turned, to hastily glance at the last matrimonial entry, for the marriage register lay open on the table, comparing the same with a line of handwriting which she had with her, and evincing surprise as well as satisfaction at the knowledge she derived therefrom.

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A moment later, when the old man returned, she was, to all appearances, absorbed in the contemplation of an extremely repellent gargoye.

The entry she desired was not to be found, was probably in some neighbouring parish, she suggested—a fact which the narrator thinks unlikely. She nevertheless passed a profitable hour, allowing the good parson to show her every nook and corner of his precious possession, and displaying an intelligent interest, which was as rare as it was gratifying.

But the morning had not yet revealed all its treasures to Mr. Lambert. Scarcely had the strange lady's footsteps died away, when another visitor, a new arrival at the Hall, put in an appearance; and avowed himself such an ardent enthusiast in all matters ancient and ecclesiastical, and, moreover, substantiated his pretensions to such a degree, that the old parson declared afterwards he had never had such a morning of perfect enjoyment in his life. Kent-Lauriston, for it was none other, exerted himself to interest his *cicerone*, and succeeded admirably. He possessed that rare gift of developing any topic that might be suggested by the person to whom he was talking, of making it his own, and at the same time causing his companion to believe that he was contributing, in no small part, to the brilliancy of the conversation. So, more than an hour slipped by, and Kent-Lauriston found ample opportunity to consult the marriage register unobserved, and to be much surprised at what he saw there—moreover he learned many things besides the subject of Norman decoration and Saxon construction—among the more important of which was the visit of the foreign lady, who wanted to look up old volumes of the records.

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"I have the honour to be invited to dine at the Hall this evening," said Mr. Lambert, in parting with Kent-Lauriston. "I shall look forward to the pleasure of continuing our conversation."

His visitor bowed, and left him.

It cannot be said of most of the members of the house party that they passed the morning as usefully or happily as Kent-Lauriston. In the Secretary's mind the problem was uppermost, of how to be alone from breakfast to lunch. He was aided in the accomplishment of his intent by the connivance of the three ladies whom he was most anxious to avoid. The Dowager sent him a little note saying that she always spent the morning in her room, and that her dear Isabelle would be quite free in consequence. The "dear Isabelle" informed Stanley publicly, that she should spend the morning in the library, and intimated privately, that it would be well if he was supposedly with her, and in reality any where else; while Miss Fitzgerald remarked, that she intended spending the morning in the park, as she wished to be alone. As a result of these obvious suggestions, the Secretary followed Lady Isabella into the library, in full sight of the party at large, and crossing the room, stepped out of one of the long, low windows on to the lawn, and by means of a side staircase quietly gained his own apartment, where he spent the morning in reading and meditation. His reading was confined to a comprehensive volume on "Locks, Ancient and Modern," by Price, received that morning from John. His meditations, on the other hand, were on an entirely different subject.

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The events of the night before, aided by Kent-Lauriston's suggestive comments, had brought him face to face with a question to which he had hitherto avoided giving an answer. *Was Miss Fitzgerald a party to the conspiracy to defeat the treaty?* He put it to himself in so many words.

Repugnant as was the task, the Secretary felt that he must, in the interests of his country, put sentiment aside and face the facts.

It was not to be supposed because he had made the mistake of taking pity for love, in the case of the lady, that he was any the less indifferent to her fate. He still considered himself bound to her, should she ask the redemption of his promise; he had championed her purity and innocence in the face of all opposition; and it was inexpressibly shocking to him to find himself forced to consider even the possibility of her being connected with such a nefarious transaction.

Yet he felt it only just to face the evidence against her, and seek to the best of his ability to rebut it.

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What reasons were there for supposing her to be connected with the plot to defeat the treaty? He placed them in order of their occurrence.

1. He had seen her driving with Mr. Riddle on the day after his dinner.

2. She had denied her acquaintance with Darcy, in his presence, to that gentleman's wife, though she had since been proven to be very intimate with him.
3. She had proposed a game of cards, and suggested Stanley's using an old letter to score on, which proposal and suggestion had led to the restoration of the secret instructions to Mr. Riddle.
4. Kent-Lauriston said she had asked Kingsland to take the chests containing the money to London.
5. She had been in the hall late the night before, assisting Darcy to break open the door.

This was all the evidence against her. Did it prove that she was a partner to the plot?

No, he told himself. It did not.

Did it prove that she was a dupe of these men? An innocent instrument in the furtherance of their vile conspiracy?

He was forced to admit the possibility of this, though he told himself he knew her too well to believe for an instant that she had any knowledge of the plot itself, or the desperate game her friends were playing. It now became his duty to save the Irish girl from the consequences of her own folly; to open her eyes to the true character of her friends. He could only do this by proving their complicity. The destruction of the plot, and her salvation alike, hung on the recovery of that lost letter, for in the light of the events of the past night, it seemed fair to assume that this paper had an important bearing on the conspiracy, and was necessary to its success.

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The money had been sent, the time was short, but Darcy still remained. Why did he do so, unless it was to attempt a recovery of the document? It must, then, be of vital importance.

Having arrived at these conclusions, Stanley found himself committed to one of two courses of action: either to play the spy on the movements of his friends, or to effect the opening of the door with the silver nails. The first was repugnant to his spirit as a gentleman, and he instantly chose the second, believing that within the portal lay the only real clue he had so far obtained. This plan also had the added recommendation of placing in his hand evidence which would not involve the introduction of Miss Fitzgerald's name in the matter.

Having thus mapped out his course of action, and finding there was still an hour before lunch, he descended to the lawn, and made a preliminary inspection of the exterior walls of the old manor house. It might be possible to enter in some other way than by the oaken door which remained so obstinately closed. The building was of stone, and two stories in height, though most irregular in form, having been added to and altered during succeeding generations, as suited the taste of the owner of the period. The north-east end, however, instead of having a corner, was slightly rounded, and above the level of the roof assumed the shape of a circular tower, rising some forty feet higher than the rest of the structure, and surmounted by crumbling battlements. Even an inexperienced eye might detect that the door with the silver nails gave entrance to this tower, which Stanley was sure did not assume, in the lower storey at least, a space commensurate with its diameter above. Probably the door communicated with a narrow winding stair for the first, and perhaps the second, floors, the real space of the structure being contained in the portion which arose detached. This conjecture could easily be verified by measuring. At the first convenient opportunity he determined to make these preliminary investigations. It was said that the tower possessed no windows, and certainly this was the case, unless they gave on the leads; for, from the ground, it presented everywhere a blank wall of solid masonry, to which here and there strands of ivy clung.

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"But they must have got their light from somewhere," he said to himself. "Perhaps from the roof, in which case there is probably some antique form of scuttle by which entrance could be had. If one could only get up there to see—but it's not a likely place for climbing. There should be the remains of an old flag-staff or cresset, or something of that nature—" and he walked slowly backwards across the lawn, hoping to reduce the visual angle sufficiently to see any slight projection above the battlements, but in vain; and he was about to abandon his backward course and return to the house, when a soft voice murmured at his elbow:—

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"Star-gazing by daylight?" and he turned, to find himself close beside Madame Darcy.

"Oh, good-morning," he said, lifting his hat. "I beg your pardon, but I was trying to discover the remains of some superstructure on those battlements."

"Why not go up and see?"

"That is what many people have wished to do for the last two hundred years, but the only door of entrance is shut, and no man knows the secret of the lock."

"And do you mean to discover it?"

"I'm afraid it would only be a waste of time, for probably the whole thing is so disgustingly simple that everyone has overlooked it. However, the present, as represented by you, is infinitely more interesting; let the old tower guard the secret it has kept so long; who wants to know it?"

"My husband!" she replied.

"Quite so," said the Secretary. "And that reminds me, I hope you reached home quite safely last night, and have felt no ill effects from it."

"None in body," she returned sadly, "but, of course, what I saw could not but add to my distress of mind. Tell me what happened after I left." [Pg 292]

"Nothing particular," said Stanley. "We all kept our tempers and were very polite."

"Then there was no disturbance?"

"None whatever; the Colonel was quite amenable to reason and went away quietly."

"But Mr. Kent-Lauriston?"

"Oh, he's too much a man of the world not to know when to hold his tongue."

"You will not tell your hostess? Promise me that. Badly as he has treated me, I am still his wife, and his honour is yet mine."

"I will keep your secret. If he is discovered in the house, someone else must do it."

"Oh, you're indeed my friend!" she cried impulsively. "I can never forget your goodness to me. There are, I'm sure, few men like you in the world."

The Secretary flushed under her praise, and disclaiming any inherent superiority to the other members of his race, hastened to change the subject by saying:—

"Tell me, are you succeeding any better with your proofs against your husband on another charge?"

"I've made a discovery this morning which has greatly disturbed me. I do not know how to act."

"What have you found?"

"I've compared the handwriting of the letters I hold, with the handwriting of the most recent entry in the marriage register of this church." [Pg 293]

"Good Heavens! It surely can't tally——!"

"It does, and with the name of the bride."

The Secretary was simply staggered,—Lady Isabelle—it was impossible on the face of it.

"You're mistaken," he said coldly. "Such charges against the lady to whom you refer are impossible."

"You know of this marriage then?"

"Yes—I'm even popularly supposed to be engaged to the bride!"

"But you are not—tell me you are not."

"Of course I'm not—I've never had the slightest interest in her, except as a friend."

"You relieve me immensely. To lay such charges at the door of one you loved—to break your heart — I could not have done it."

"You could not do it in any event—to a woman of her nature such things would be impossible. I assure you, it is some grievous mistake."

She shook her head.

"Why should my husband be a witness to this secret marriage?"

"Was he——?"

"Sh!" she said, "he is coming," and disappeared so silently into the bushes that she seemed to fade away from his sight. A moment later, the dry leaves crackled under a man's foot, and Colonel Darcy stood before him.

"We have not had our little meeting yet, Mr. Stanley," he said abruptly. [Pg 294]

"When do you leave this vicinity, Colonel Darcy?" asked the Secretary, ignoring the other's remark.

"When you do. Till then I remain here to guard my honour."

"You surely are not trying to live up to that absurd fable!"

"Why not, when my wife has this moment left you?"

"You have sharp eyes, Colonel," replied the Secretary, turning on his heel, and walking towards the house.

"I need to have, Mr. Stanley," remarked the other, as he watched him go.

"Kent-Lauriston," said the Secretary, when they were alone after lunch, "affairs have taken a startling turn since I last saw you."

"I think so myself."

"Have you been making discoveries?"

"I don't know that they can be dignified by that name; but tell me of yours."

"Madame Darcy assures me that the letters which she holds, and on which she bases her case against her husband, are in the same handwriting as the name of Lady Isabelle, in the parish register."

"Lady Isabelle!"

"Yes. It's absurd, isn't it?"

"Perfectly so—you may take my word for it. But do you assure me that she said 'Lady Isabelle'?" [Pg 295]

"We mentioned no names, of course. She said that the bride's signature corresponded—it's the same thing."

"Ah, I see. I think you've made a little mistake about this affair, my boy. I've seen the register myself."

"Good Heavens! You don't mean—you can't—!" exclaimed Stanley, a sickening suspicion dominating his mind.

"I mean," replied Kent-Lauriston, "that the maiden name of the bride, as written there, is not Isabelle McLane, but Isabelle Fitzgerald." [Pg 296]

CHAPTER XXVIII

TWO QUESTIONS

Kent-Lauriston fully realised that the strong hold which he possessed over the Secretary rested, more than anything else, on the fact that his opinions were entirely reliable; and it was most important that Stanley's confidence in his friend's *dicta* should remain unimpaired, if that friend hoped to be able to guide him. Therefore, much as the Englishman would have liked to voice his suspicions for the Secretary's benefit, he determined to keep silence till he had full verification of his conjectures, and for this purpose he sought out Madame Darcy.

He found her at home, and she welcomed him courteously.

"Will you think me very presuming," he said, "to have called on you in the interests of a mutual friend of ours, Mr. Stanley?"

"Any friend of Mr. Stanley's can claim and receive friendship of me," she replied, a beautiful light coming over her expressive face, "for he has done me kindnesses that I can never forget or repay."

"It is in virtue of that, that I've ventured to intrude myself upon you this afternoon. You have, like myself, a great interest in his welfare, I'm sure, and I am come to make common cause with you for his good." [Pg 297]

"You could have come to no one more willing—but will you do me the honour to accept a seat in the garden, where we can chat more at leisure."

"I shall be charmed," he said, and she led the way to a rustic bench, under the spreading branches of a gnarled, old apple-tree.

"Our friend makes no secrets of his own affairs from me, you must understand," Kent-Lauriston began, after assuring himself that they were alone, "and I imagine, from what he's said, that he's given you some inkling of his heart troubles."

"Yes," she said, "he hinted to me in London that he had some affair under consideration; but I do not think he felt deeply—as he should have felt. I trust it's not turned out seriously."

"Not as yet, I'm glad to say—but he's in some danger; and, believe me, you could not be doing him a greater service, than in helping to ward off this peril, which would be the ruin of his life."

"Indeed, yes,—but what means have I?"

"I believe you have it in your power to prove that the woman who has bewitched him, is unworthy of his love. Let him realise this and he is saved."

"But, surely, you're not alluding to the lady who formed our topic of conversation this morning?"

"I fear I am."

"But Mr. Stanley assured me that she was nothing to him." [Pg 298]

"You were talking at cross purposes, and unintentionally deceiving each other."

"How so?"

"Why, there are two versions of the story of that marriage. The version Mr. Stanley had been told runs to this effect:—that Lieutenant Kingsland married Lady Isabelle McLane."

"But the register——"

"Says she didn't. I know, I've seen it; but our young friend has not, or had not when he last saw you."

"Then he thought I was referring to Lady Isabelle?"

"Exactly. No names were mentioned, he told me."

"True—but this is most unfortunate! Do you see my position?"

"Believe me, I'm fully informed on the matter, so that I'll not put you to the pain of relating it."

She bowed her silent thanks, and then continued:—

"The fact of this lady's marriage ties my hands. Deeply as she has wronged me, have I any right to ruin her husband's life by her exposure? If she has reformed——"

"My dear Madame Darcy, pray disabuse your mind of two misconceptions: the lady in question, Miss Fitzgerald, has not reformed, and I doubt if the marriage is legal. There's some trick about it."

"What you've told me leaves me free to act where my own honour is concerned; but I naturally feel a delicacy about interfering in Mr. Stanley's private affairs." [Pg 299]

"Believe me, I fully appreciate your hesitation; but that there may be no misunderstanding between us regarding this important matter, let me tell you something of my friend's present position. I ask you to accept my word for it, that he's not as yet bound himself to Miss Fitzgerald; but his high sense of honour may lead him to do so, if he knows nothing definite against her."

"I see, and you want me to show him these letters?" and she took a little packet from her bosom.

"No, I wouldn't subject you to such a trying ordeal. I ask you to let me show the letters to him. Remember that you've told him that you have them."

"Yes," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "I think you're right. You assure me that he does not love her, and that there's positive danger that he may marry her from a sense of duty."

"I assure you that such is the case."

"Then take them," she said, giving him the letters; "but promise me that no one besides yourselves shall see them, and that they shall be safely returned to me by to-morrow."

"I promise," he replied, "and take my assurance that in doing this you've more than repaid him for any services he may have done you."

"You cannot persuade me to believe that; but I'm thankful to help where I'm able, though it be only a little, and I am even more thankful that he has such a strong champion in you." [Pg 300]

Kent-Lauriston took her extended hand.

"Thank you," he said heartily. "Stanley's a good fellow; too good and too unsophisticated for the people he's thrown with, and I'm going to save him from himself if I can, both now and in the future."

She looked up at him with a wistful light in her eyes, saying:

"Perhaps you'll be wishing to save him from me—who've already one husband too many."

"I don't know," replied Kent-Lauriston, with an English bluntness, of which he was not often culpable.

She laughed merrily, answering:

"I hope you'll do so, if ever I give you cause."

"Madame," he returned, "what can I do? You've disarmed me, even before the first skirmish."

The feelings of Stanley on looking at the marriage register were difficult to describe. In the first shock of the discovery his brain whirled. The mystery had become a maze, and he felt the imperative need of a solution of the subject to steady his mind. Accordingly, he had that evening a fixed purpose in view, which dominated all matters of the moment; and though at dinner he talked about something, he knew not what, during the greater part of the meal his eyes and thoughts were almost continually on the amiable blundering, little old pastor, whom he had marked out as his prey. When the ladies left the table, and the men adjourned to the smoking-room, he never lost sight of him; but the dominie, as if warned by some instinct, contrived to slip out of the Secretary's grasp, to elude him in corners, and, smiling, vanquish him in every attempt

at an interview. At last, however, the opportunity came—a move was made to the drawing-room. In a fatal moment, the parson lingered for one last whiff of his half-smoked and regretfully relinquished cigar, and the Secretary saw, with a sigh of relief, the last coat-tail vanish through the door, which he softly closed.

The click of the latch brought the Reverend Reginald back to the present with an uncomfortable start.

"Oh," he cried, tumbling out of his chair, "I didn't see the others had got away so quickly. Very kind of you to wait for me, I'm sure—very—we must lose no time in joining the ladies, must we, eh?"

"Only a little, a very little time, Mr. Lambert," replied the Secretary, leaning squarely against the closed door, which formed the sole exit from the room. "Just long enough to ask you one question."

"Really, I'm sure," said the little man, becoming flustered. "Another time perhaps— I should have the greatest pleasure——"

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"You have, I know, performed the marriage ceremony in the last few days," began Stanley calmly.

"To be sure—yes, certainly—but this—permit me to suggest, is hardly the place to discuss my parochial duties."

"Of course anyone married from this house would have to be married by you."

"I'm in charge of this living, Mr. Stanley, there is no one else."

"I know that, and also that your nearest colleague—excuse me if I use a professional term—is some distance off."

"Fifteen miles. And now that I've answered all of your questions, let us waste no more time before joining the ladies."

"Excuse me, Mr. Lambert, but I've not as yet asked you a question. I've made a number of statements, and you've furnished me with a good deal of gratuitous information, for which I'm deeply obliged. We now come to the pith of the whole matter, which is simply this. Did you, or did you not, marry Lady Isabelle McLane to Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"What! The lady to whom you're engaged?"

"Could I be engaged to a married woman, Mr. Lambert?"

"My dear sir, you may take my word for it, I did not. I shouldn't think of such a thing. Let me assure you on the honour of my sacred office, that Lady Isabelle is not, and cannot be married to Lieutenant Kingsland."

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"Ah, then Kingsland *is* married."

The parson caught his breath in his relief at the escape from the dreaded question, which he had supposed was inevitable. He had been too confidential.

"I did not say so, sir," he replied with dignity.

"Quite true, Mr. Lambert, you did not say so," persisted his tormentor, opening the door, "and so I suppose you'd prefer not to have me ask if you married Miss Fitzgerald to Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"I would certainly prefer not to answer that question, and now I must really go upstairs;" and without waiting for further parley, the little man scuttled out of the room.

Stanley was preparing to follow him at his leisure, when the door opened, and Kent-Lauriston entered.

"Kent-Lauriston!" he exclaimed. "You're the very man I want! I must speak with you!"

"I know it," replied his friend, "but not before I've had my smoke."

"But this matter admits of no delay."

"Oh yes, it does. That's one of the fallacies of modern civilisation. Every important question *admits* of delay, and most matters are all the better for it."

"But I've seen the register!"

"Of course you have, but you haven't seen a deduction that is as plain as the nose on your face, or you wouldn't now be trying to ruin my digestion. I'll meet you here at ten o'clock this evening and then, and not an instant sooner, will I discuss your private affairs."

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"You English are so irritatingly slow!"

"My dear fellow, we've made our history—you're making yours. You can't afford to miss a few days; we can easily spare a few centuries. Now be a good boy, and leave me to peace and tobacco. Join the ladies, and pay a little attention to one of your *fiancées*."

So it was that Stanley found himself relegated to the drawing-room, and feeling decidedly upset, he good-naturedly determined to see what he could do towards upsetting the equanimity of the rest of the party. In this, however, he was partially forestalled by the good parson, who had not been wasting the few minutes of grace, which the Secretary's conversation with Kent-Lauriston had allotted to him.

No sooner had Mr. Lambert entered the drawing-room, than he sought out Miss Fitzgerald, and confided to her an astonishing discovery he had made in the church register.

"Most careless of me, I assure you," he apologised. "I should have noticed of course—people often make nervous mistakes at times like those; but it was not till this morning that I discovered that Lady Isabelle had written her name in the space reserved for the bride, and you in the space reserved for the witness."

"Well?" asked Miss Fitzgerald, her voice ringing hard and cold as steel.

"Oh, it's all right, my dear," the old man quavered on. "Quite all right, I corrected it myself. I can do a neat bit of work still, even if my hands do tremble a little. I cut out the names, reversed them, and put them back in their proper places, and I'd defy any but an expert to see that they'd been tampered with. I'm sure that none of the people who've seen the book since suspected the change."

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"Who has seen the book?" she asked, frozen with horror.

"After I corrected the register?"

"Yes! Yes! Who?"

"Dear me—let me see! That was this morning. Now who was there? Ah!—I remember. A strange lady in black, very beautiful, and Mr. Kent-Lauriston."

Miss Fitzgerald shuddered.

"Dear, dear!" cried the parson. "You're cold—the draught from the window—let me get you a wrap."

"No, no, I'm quite warm, thank you. You're sure that no one else saw the register?"

"No one—except Mr. Stanley."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Lambert," she said. "I'm not feeling very well."

"You are faint? Is there nothing I can do for you?"

"Nothing more, thank you," and she swept past him across the room, to where Lady Isabelle was seated on a sofa.

"Nothing more," murmured the little man, after she had left him; "but I hadn't begun to do anything; and she seemed quite faint. Dear, dear, she looks strong, but to be so easily upset, I fear something must be wrong—my daughter was never like that," and, shaking his head, he went to join the Dowager, who had a *penchant* for the clergy.

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"You've heard nothing from your husband?" asked Miss Fitzgerald of Lady Isabelle, as she seated herself beside her.

"Nothing beyond a telegram telling me of his safe arrival in London."

"But surely his uncle was *in extremis*. He cannot live long."

"I do not know," she replied, "but it's very awkward. Oh, why won't you let me tell Mr. Stanley the truth?"

"Sh! He's coming," murmured Miss Fitzgerald, and, indeed, the Secretary was advancing deliberately towards them; a thing suggestive in itself, considering how he had striven to avoid them all day long.

"Miss Fitzgerald," he said very quietly, as he stood before them, "will you permit me to ask you a question?"

"If it's a proper question to ask, Mr. Stanley."

"It is eminently proper and fitting," he replied, coldly.

"Would you rather that I went?" suggested Lady Isabelle, half rising.

"I would rather you stayed."

"Don't be so dreadfully mysterious, Jimsy!" cried Miss Fitzgerald, with a forced laugh that grated on the ears of both her hearers. "Out with your dreadful question. What is it?"

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"It is this," he replied. "Are you Jack Kingsland's wife?"

For a moment there was absolute silence. The Secretary stood looking straight in the face of the Irish girl, without moving a muscle. Lady Isabelle gave a smothered exclamation, and gripped her companion's wrist with all her force, flushing red as she did so. Miss Fitzgerald bit her lip, and

stared hard at Stanley for the fraction of a minute; then, breaking into her hard metallic laugh, she cried:

"Why, you foolish boy! What can you be thinking of?"

"You've not answered my question," he replied.

"Why, what is there to answer?"

"I ask you— Are you Lieutenant Kingsland's wife?" he repeated harshly—betraying the first sign of temper he had so far evinced, which Miss Fitzgerald saw and was quick to profit by. Whatever was coming—there was, in Lady Isabelle's presence, but one course open to her—she looked her accuser boldly in the face and said:

"No, I'm not Lieutenant Kingsland's wife."

"You are quite sure of what you are saying?"

"I repeat, I am not his wife. I have not married him, put it how you please. Do you doubt my word? If you're so anxious to know whom Lieutenant Kingsland married, ask your *fiancée*, Lady Isabelle; perhaps she can tell you."

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"It's not necessary to ask Lady Isabelle if she is Lieutenant Kingsland's wife—because——"

"Because she has already told you so," broke in Miss Fitzgerald.

"Because," continued Stanley, in the same colourless, dogged tone, "because Mr. Lambert, the one person who could have made Kingsland and Lady Isabelle man and wife, has solemnly assured me that he did not perform the marriage ceremony between them——" and he turned on his heel and left the room.

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CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH DEATH IS A RELIEF

After Stanley had left them, Isabelle Kingsland and Isabelle Fitzgerald sat silent for a while, looking into each other's faces, the brain of each throbbing with a tumult of agitating thoughts. The Englishwoman voicing to herself a subtle suggestion of coming evil, which had been omnipresent since her marriage day, an instinctive presentiment that all was not well: the Irish girl feeling strongly irritated at this last of the many annoying *contretemps* of the week; and smarting under a sense of injustice that, when she had merely practised a little harmless deception for a friend's sake, that friend should leave the field and the eminently disagreeable explanations to her.

She vented her feelings by a shrug of the shoulders, which broke the tension of the silence.

"Tell me—on your honour, tell me," cried Lady Isabelle, "that he did not speak the truth; that I am married to Lieutenant Kingsland!"

"Of course you're married to Lieutenant Kingsland," replied Miss Fitzgerald, with a little sigh of resignation. "You read your licence, didn't you?"

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"Yes. But——"

"But that's quite sufficient—and there's no occasion for a scene."

"It's not sufficient, not nearly sufficient—there's something that's being kept back from me, and I want to know the truth!" and Lady Isabelle rose, becoming quite queenly in her indignant agitation.

"I've been uneasy from the first about my marriage," she continued, "because it was not open as I should have wished. I knew there was some mystery about it. My husband admitted as much to me from the first, and he did not need to tell me that you were the prime mover in the affair. It is my right to know the truth."

"The assertion of people's rights is responsible for most of the wrong done in the world. Did your husband counsel you to insult his best friend?"

"He didn't wish me to speak to you on the subject, but I've determined to take matters into my own hands. In the face of Mr. Stanley's charges, I must know the truth."

"You had better obey your husband."

"I'm responsible to him for that matter, not to you, Miss Fitzgerald. Now tell me, what did Mr. Stanley mean?"

"He meant what he said."

"But how could Mr. Lambert have told him an untruth?"

"Mr. Lambert told him what he believed to be the truth; and that was, that he had not married you and Jack—Lieutenant Kingsland, I mean."

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"Was that all he told him?"

"I should think it highly probable that he added that he had married your husband to me."

"My husband to you!"

"I told you we'd better let this matter alone."

In a second Lady Isabelle's hands were on Miss Fitzgerald's shoulders, and her eyes blazed into the eyes of the Irish girl.

"The truth, woman, the truth! Is he my husband?"

"Yes."

"Then why does Mr. Lambert——?"

"Because he believes that I was the bride."

"Did you tell him so?"

"No, but when I went to make the arrangements he blundered into the mistake—and—well, I didn't take the trouble to correct him."

"You dared!"

"Yes," she replied. "I'd do a good deal for Jack—we used to care for each other once."

Her Ladyship's eyes flashed dangerously, and Miss Fitzgerald hastened to add:

"Of course that was all over long ago—I know Jack too well."

"How dared you do it?" asked her accuser again.

"It was risky, but our names were the same, and he's half blind and somewhat deaf, and in his dotage. The chances of escaping detection were good, as the event has proved."

"How dared you do it?"

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"Of course it wasn't my affair whether Jack told you or not. It was legal and that's the main thing."

"How dared you do it?"

"You needn't be so nasty about it; it was merely to be obliging. If you think it amusing to be a dummy bride——"

"Be silent!"

The two women stood facing each other, breathing hard, as though resting from physical combat; the face of one expressing infinite contempt, of the other infinite anger. At this juncture a servant brought a telegram to Lady Isabelle.

Thankful for the relief from an awkward pause, she tore it open, and her face lit up as she read its message.

"Still in London. Uncle died this morning, leaving me his heir. As preliminaries take some time to arrange, am returning to you to-morrow.

"JACK."

"There!" she said, showing it to her antagonist. "I suppose it's wicked to rejoice in any one's death; but it's a great relief, for it gives me back my husband—and he shall defend me from you!"

"I don't think your husband will be down on me."

"He'll proclaim the truth about our marriage. It should never have been concealed, least of all by dishonourable means."

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"You forget yourself, Lady Isabelle."

"I remember what is due my position, and so will Mr. Lambert, when he hears how grossly you've deceived him."

"You mustn't tell him."

"It will not be necessary. I've only to ask him to look at the marriage register. That will bear witness to the truth, I know; for I signed in the proper place for the bride."

Miss Fitzgerald drew a quick, sharp breath. She had trusted to be spared this last confession.

"The register has been changed," she said.

"Who has done this?"

"Mr. Lambert, supposing there had been a mistake."

"Then Mr. Lambert will change it back again, to-morrow morning!"

"You mustn't speak to him of this."

"I'll speak to him to-night."

"No."

"You've no right to interfere. You've no right to do anything, but apologise to me for the great wrong you've done me!"

"I forbid you to apprise Mr. Lambert of the true state of affairs till your husband returns to-morrow!"

"I've told you I shall see him to-night."

"I forbid you, in your husband's interests."

"You are insolent."

"I'm in a position to be anything I choose."

"Why?"

"Because I have your husband in my power."

"I do not believe it!"

"If I choose to make public," she said, laughing insolently, "the manner in which your husband is spending his time in London, I could have him cashiered from the navy."

Lady Isabelle drew herself up, and gave her adversary a look of unutterable scorn and contempt, saying:—

"You will probably circulate any falsehood about my husband that you please; it will simply prove to others, as it proves to me, that you still *do* love him, and that when he knew your true character he left you," and turning from her astonished and indignant rival, she quietly crossed the length of the drawing-room, to where the Dowager and the parson were seated.

"Mother," she said, "would you think me very rude if I asked for Mr. Lambert's company for a few moments? I want to have a serious talk with him."

"Not at all, my dear. Just take my place. I promised to show Mrs. Roberts a new embroidery stitch," replied the Dowager, acquiescing joyfully in the proposal.

Satisfactory on the whole as her child's training had been, on the point of her religious convictions, the Marchioness had occasionally felt some disturbing suspicions. I do not mean that Lady Isabelle was not firmly grounded in her belief of the thirty-nine articles; indeed, she was, if anything, a trifle too orthodox for her day and generation; but the Dowager knew to her cost that missions were a tabooed subject. Her daughter had even refused to *slum* with the Viscountess Thistledown, and worse than all, charity bazaars, though patronised by Royalty, were her pet aversions. To the Marchioness, who no longer "sold well," and whose ambition was to see Lady Isabelle tethered in the next stall to a Princess, such heresies were naturally repugnant. Mr. Lambert was very strong on all these points, and had just been suggesting to her a scheme of his own, to raise money for a worthy object, conceived on principles that would have put the authorities of Monte Carlo to the blush. So she patted her daughter's hand, established her in her own place, and murmuring that she was glad Isabelle felt the need of advice, and that she might safely rely on "dear Mr. Lambert's wisdom and—er—commonsense," betook herself to Kensington stitch and a remote corner.

But her daughter's confidences admitted of no publicity.

"Suppose we go to the conservatory, Mr. Lambert," she suggested, "we're quite sure of finding it unoccupied at this hour, and I've a confession to make."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," he replied, following her in the direction she suggested. "Though I'm sure," he added, "that Lady Isabelle would have done nothing which she would not be willing that anybody should know, if need were."

"I hope not," she answered, and a moment later they were alone.

"Come now," he said, "what is this terrible confession; not so great a sin, I'm sure, that we cannot easily find a way for pardon or reformation."

"There's no sin to discuss," she replied, "at least, none that I've committed, unless unconscious participation is a crime. I want to speak to you about my marriage."

"Ah, yes; with Mr. Stanley—a most desirable arrangement, I've been given to understand."

"No—not with Mr. Stanley—I'm speaking of my marriage with Lieutenant Kingsland."

"But, my dear young lady, that's impossible. Lieutenant Kingsland is already married."

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"Yes, he's married to me."

"To you? What? How can he be?"

"Because you married him to me two days ago."

"Nothing of the sort," cried the old man in irritated bewilderment. "I married him to Miss Fitzgerald."

"You married him to me, Mr. Lambert."

"But I ought to know best whom I married, and to whom, Lady Isabelle."

"You ought certainly; but, in this case, it seems you do not."

"But Miss Fitzgerald said——"

"Ah, that's just the point. What did Miss Fitzgerald say?"

"Really, I can't remember the conversation, word for word; she came to make the arrangements, and I inferred——" [Pg 317]

"Did she say that she was going to marry Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"She certainly gave me the impression that such was the case."

"But did she actually *say* so?"

The old man was lost in thought for a moment, striving to recall some direct admission, but at length shook his head sadly, saying:—

"No. I can't remember that she did, in so many words; but she led me to suppose——"

"You've *inferred*; you've been *given the impression*; you've been *led to suppose*, Mr. Lambert, what did not exist. I have, however, held in my hand and carefully examined the special licence under which you performed the ceremony, and which was drawn for a marriage between Lieutenant Kingsland and myself. I was the bride whom you married; it was I who repeated the vows which you gave *me*; my name is Isabelle, also, remember, and it was I who signed that name as 'bride' in your register, where it should be now, if you had not changed it."

"Bless my soul! This is most bewildering! You say I married you to Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"Yes, Mr. Lambert, you did, and Miss Fitzgerald and Colonel Darcy were the witnesses."

"But this is a serious matter, a very serious matter, Lady Isabelle. This wedding seems to have been performed under false pretences." [Pg 318]

"I imagine you would not find it difficult to prove that, Mr. Lambert; but before we discuss the matter farther, I want first to right myself in your eyes, to assure you earnestly and honestly that I was no party to this deception, that I did not know till this evening, till just now indeed, that you were not perfectly cognisant of all the facts. I was informed at the time that all arrangements had been made with you, and I believed of course that you knew everything. I was also told that I must be heavily veiled as, owing to the proximity of the early service, I might otherwise be seen; the signing in the vestry was hurried over as you know, and it was only when, in response to a statement of Mr. Stanley's, I made inquiries, that I discovered the truth. You believe me, do you not, Mr. Lambert?"

"Of course, my dear. I must believe you since you give me your word for it."

"Then set my mind at rest. Tell me this marriage was not illegal."

"I think you may be easy on that score. The licence and the signatures were regular; all the requirements were complied with; and the principals, or you at least, acted in good faith; but the affair is most unfortunate."

"You will be glad to learn that any objection which my mother might have had to my husband has now been removed."

"I do not know what Lady Port Arthur will think of my part in this deplorable matter, certainly very little consideration or courtesy has been shown me," said the poor old man, to whom the Dowager's wrath was a very terrible thing. [Pg 319]

"Have no apprehensions, Mr. Lambert, my mother shall know the truth of this matter, and where the blame rests."

"Then you really think that Miss Fitzgerald——?"

"I'm sure of it, Mr. Lambert. She has confessed to me, that if she did not actually say to you that she was going to marry Lieutenant Kingsland, she purposely allowed you to believe the same; and then assured my husband, whom I believe to be as innocent in the matter as I am, that your consent had been gained, and all arrangements made."

The old parson sat down on a rustic seat beside an elaborately natural, sheet-iron water-fall, seemingly quite crushed by the blow. But the spirit of the church militant was strong within him, and he was filled with righteous anger at his unmerited treatment; so taking his companion's

hand, he rose presently, saying:—

"Come. Let us go to your mother and tell her the truth; we owe it to her and to ourselves."

"To-morrow, Mr. Lambert—pray wait till to-morrow."

The preacher's face hardened; he was in no mood for leniency.

"We have delayed too long already," he said, and took a step forward.

"Believe me," she replied, laying her hand on his arm, "I do not ask it from weakness, but my husband returns to-morrow, and thanks to an inheritance from an uncle who died to-day, comes back a rich man, able to support a wife. When my mother knows this, she will receive our news very differently. See," and she handed him the telegram. [Pg 320]

"I will wait till your husband returns to speak to your mother," he replied, "but as for that unhappy girl—if it is not too late to turn her steps to the right path—I will spare no pains to bring her to a realisation of what she has done. For this, no time is like the present—no time too soon."

"I hope you may succeed," said Lady Isabelle, "but I fear you'll find her much worse than you imagine. However, I do not wish to discourage you."

"I'm not easy to discourage in any good work, I trust, Lady Isabelle Kingsland."

She started, as her new name was pronounced, and laying a detaining hand upon him, as he would have left her, said, her voice breaking:—

"Forgive me, Mr. Lambert. Say you forgive me."

"My poor child," he said sadly, placing one hand on her bowed head. "My poor child, you are too much in need of forgiveness from others for me to withhold mine. It is yours freely; but promise me that you'll show your appreciation of it by coming to me in all your troubles."

She seized his other hand in both of hers, and kissing it, burst into tears. [Pg 321]

"And now," he said sternly, "I will seek out that miserable girl."

But Miss Fitzgerald, dreading the tempest, had sought the haven of her own room.

She was not a picture of contrite repentance as she stood by the open window, looking out into the night.

"Fools all!" she mused. "So I am to blame—it is all my fault!"

An amused sneer played about her lips.

"Ah me! After all it is our faults that make life interesting to us—or us interesting to others," and she tossed away her half-smoked cigarette with a shrug. [Pg 322]

CHAPTER XXX

TWO LETTERS

Precisely as the clock struck ten, Kent-Lauriston entered the smoking-room to find it in sole possession of Stanley, who stood leaning against the mantelpiece, lost in thought—a cigar, long ago gone out, hanging listlessly between his fingers.

"I'm afraid I'm late," said his genial adviser, glancing at the clock, "but I was just finishing a game of cribbage with Mr. Riddle."

"I don't envy you his society," growled the Secretary, whose temper was not improved by recent experiences.

"You misjudge him," replied Kent-Lauriston. "He's a very good fellow, in more senses of the word than one—he's just given Mr. Lambert a thumping big cheque, for the restoration of his little church."

"And made you the recipient of the fact of his generosity?"

"Far from it; our gossiping little parson did that, in direct violation of a pledge of secrecy; for Riddle never wishes his good works to be known—he's not that kind." [Pg 323]

"I consider him a hypocrite," replied Stanley shortly.

"Then you do him a great injustice, my dear boy; and allow me to say, you'll never make a good diplomat till you've arrived at a better knowledge of human nature; it's the keystone of the profession. But, to change the subject, how have you been spending the evening?"

"Oh, making a fool of myself, as usual."

"So I suppose. What particular method did you adopt this time?"

"First, I chivied our amiable parson from pillar to post, in this very room, till I'd forced the admission of an important fact from him, and the practical admission of another."

"And then," continued Kent-Lauriston, "you went and tried the effect of your statements on the young ladies."

"I believe you're equipped with X-rays instead of eyes, Kent-Lauriston, for you were smoking down here and couldn't have seen me!"

"No, but I saw the ladies—afterwards."

"To speak to?"

"Oh, no. One of them at least has a rooted aversion to me. I know too much."

"What were they doing?"

"Pulling each other's hair out, I should judge, or its equivalent in polite society. What did you learn from the parson?"

"That he had not married Kingsland to Lady Isabelle; that Kingsland had been married to somebody; and a refusal to say that that somebody was Miss Fitzgerald, which was tantamount to an admission of the fact."

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"Exactly, and what did you say to the young ladies?"

"I asked Miss Fitzgerald if she was Lieutenant Kingsland's wife?"

"And she denied it?"

"Absolutely."

"What else?"

"I charged Lady Isabelle with not having married Kingsland."

"And what was her answer?"

"I didn't wait to receive it."

"Had you done so, she would have denied it likewise."

"You think so?"

"I am certain of it, and, if it's any satisfaction to you, I can tell you that by your action you ensured Miss Fitzgerald one of the worst quarters of an hour at her Ladyship's hands that she is likely to experience for a very long time."

"But Mr. Lambert assured me solemnly, that he did not perform the ceremony between Lady Isabelle and the Lieutenant."

"He was quite right in doing so."

"But they can't all be right!"

"My dear fellow," said Kent-Lauriston, "it is very seldom, in this complex age, that anyone is wholly right or wholly wrong. All these people, except Miss Fitzgerald, know a part of the truth, and have spoken honestly according to their lights. She alone knows it all, and, believe me, she is much too clever to tell a lie on so important a point. If she told you she was not married to Lieutenant Kingsland, you may implicitly believe her."

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"Do you know that it is the truth?"

"Yes, because I telegraphed to the man who has charge of the issue of special licences, and have received a line from him, to the effect that one has been issued in the last few days, for Lieutenant Kingsland and Lady Isabelle McLane."

"Then you convict Mr. Lambert of deception?"

"Not at all. If he told you he had not married Lady Isabelle to the Lieutenant, he told you what he believed to be the truth."

"But is it possible that he could have married them without knowing it?"

"It seems that it was possible."

"How could he make such a mistake?"

"A man who never makes a mistake makes little or nothing in this world."

"And Miss Fitzgerald signed in the place of the bride, to divert suspicion?"

"It seems impossible to suppose that she would commit herself in that way," said Kent-Lauriston.

"But the register proves that she did," reported Stanley.

"Ye-es. It rather savours of the paradox. Perhaps we'd better content ourselves with the facts that

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Lady Isabelle did marry Kingsland, and Miss Fitzgerald did not. How it was accomplished does not immediately concern us, and, as I fear no very creditable means were used, we'd better not try to find out what they were, especially as we've more serious matters to consider."

"You mean——"

"I mean the charge unconsciously made by Madame Darcy."

"I feared you were going to speak of that."

"True, it is an unpleasant business; but you must remember that you owe it to Miss Fitzgerald to ask her for a definite answer, or to give her some explanation for declining to do so."

"You think there's no escape from it?"

"None that a gentleman can take."

"What do you advise me to do?"

"Find out where you stand in the first place."

"How I stand?"

"Yes. At least one serious charge has been made against the woman whom you propose to make your wife. If true—for your own sake, for your father's sake, you must surrender her. If false, you are equally bound, by honour and chivalry, to disprove it."

"How can I do this?"

"The charge to which I refer is based on the direct evidence of certain letters. See them, and judge for yourself."

"That is easier said than done."

"Here they are," replied Kent-Lauriston, handing him a little packet.

"You have seen Madame Darcy?"

"Yes."

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"And she has given you these letters, knowing they would be shown to me?"

"Yes, on my representation, that if they substantiated her charges, she would be doing you the greatest kindness in her power."

Stanley bowed, and opened the little packet. For a few moments there was silence in the room, broken only by the occasional crackle of paper, as he turned a page. Most of the dozen or so documents he read through quickly, and laid upon the table at his side. A couple he re-read several times. Finally he looked up, saying simply:—

"You've read these letters?"

"Yes. I was given permission to do so."

"What do you think of them?"

"Two of them are suggestive."

"The two most recent?"

"Yes, they bear dates, you will observe, within the last three days."

"And the others——?"

"The others merely show the existence of some relationship between Colonel Darcy and Miss Fitzgerald, which they wished kept secret. I don't remember the exact wording. There's a letter which she writes from London to him at his home, begging him to come to town and 'leave his tiresome wife,' as they have 'matters of more importance' to attend to; and again she writes that she cannot meet him at 5 P. M., 'because she must account for her time to her "dragon,"'—alluding, I infer, to her aunt—but that he must manage to 'meet her accidentally and take her down to supper' at a party she is attending that night, 'so as not to arouse suspicion.'"

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"All this proves nothing."

"Perhaps not—but the extracts are significant. Now take the two most recent."

"They were written from here. How were they obtained?"

"That doesn't concern us if they are genuine."

"One is certainly in Miss Fitzgerald's hand."

"The other was evidently torn from Darcy's letter-book. Read it."

Stanley did so, with evident effort.

"DEAREST BELLE:

"I did not know, till after I had seen you the other night——"

"The night you proposed," interjected Kent-Lauriston.

The Secretary nodded, and resumed his reading.

"—the other night, how cleverly you got my letter out of the Secretary's clutches. It quite retrieves your losing it at the Hyde Park Club, and now I have lost it under the secret door in the Hall, as you will probably have heard. If A. R. cannot get a duplicate, which is doubtful, the door must be opened.

"I have entrusted you with all I hold most dear. You know what that is. If my plans go well, it will mean a happy future for us both.

"Your affectionate old
"BOB."

"Now read the other," commanded Kent-Lauriston; and, sick at heart, the Secretary complied:

"YOU OLD STUPID:

"Is the report really true that you have lost that letter under the secret door? There is no time to duplicate it, so it must be recovered. Why didn't you write and tell me you had lost it?——"

"But he did," commented the reader.

"Both letters were intercepted before delivery, I imagine," said Kent-Lauriston, "but finish the note."

"—Do not try to see me again," read Stanley; "it might arouse suspicion, and you know how necessary it is for me to play the rôle of the innocent. I am more afraid of Inez than anyone else. I am sure she suspects there is something between us. There is no danger in Little Diplomacy; he is young enough to believe he knows everything, and that is a great safeguard. I have found a trusty messenger for our affairs in Jack Kingsland.

"As ever,
"BELLE."

The Secretary stopped reading; his throat was very dry. He took a glass of Apollinaris, and then said:—

"These letters are not incriminating—in the way *you* mean."

"No, perhaps not in so many words; but you must ask yourself two questions concerning them. Are they letters that an honourable or refined woman would write to or receive from a married man, at any time, and particularly when she herself was practically engaged?"

"May I ask to what you imagine Darcy's expression, 'all I hold most dear,' refers?"

"Oh, his heart, or his love, or some such sentimental rubbish."

"So I supposed; it hasn't occurred to you to take it in a more literal sense?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, say that all he holds most dear refers to the five chests of sovereigns."

"You believe this?"

"I know it to be so—and have known it all along—the fact that I tell you confidentially, that I'm acting under secret instructions in this matter, will, I'm sure, suffice not only to seal your lips, but to make you understand that, for the present, you must be contented not to know more."

Kent-Lauriston nodded.

"You'll see, then," continued the Secretary, "that what you supposed was an intrigue turns out to be—shall we say—a commercial transaction."

Kent-Lauriston shrugged his shoulders, remarking:—

"I'd better return the letters to Madame Darcy at once then?"

"No, leave that to me, I shall ask her to let me keep them, if she will; they may be useful—as evidence."

"But, surely, any woman who could connect herself with so dishonourable an affair, as I imagine this to be, is no fit wife for you. Give me your word you'll break with her once and for all."

"I've sources of information about Darcy which, as I have said before, I'm not at liberty to reveal, but forty-eight hours may loose my tongue. If I could tell Miss Fitzgerald what I know, she might throw him over even now, for I still hope she's only his dupe. Give me two days to prove her innocent; if I fail—I'll do what you please."

Kent-Lauriston reluctantly acquiesced, and Stanley, putting the incriminating letters carefully in

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an inside pocket, bade him good-night, and left the smoking-room. In the hall he met Lady Isabelle.

"I don't know what you'll think of me for coming to you, Mr. Stanley," she said, "after what has passed this evening."

"I think myself an infernal ass, for I've found out the truth of the matter since I left you, and I think you're very good to overlook it, and very condescending to speak to me at all."

"Do not let us talk of that," she said.

"Agreed," he replied. "Only permit me to say, I'd the parson's solemn assurance that he'd not married you, and, however unadvisedly I may have spoken, I spoke in good faith."

"I quite understand," she returned. "But now you know the truth."

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"I do, and I'm very much ashamed of myself."

She smiled, a trifle sadly, and changed the subject abruptly, saying:—

"I've come to ask you a great favour. In the face of the past I almost hesitate to do so, but there's no one else to whom I can turn—and so—"

"Anything I can do——" he began.

"I only want to ask you a question."

"Only a question!"

"Yet, I hesitate to ask even that—because it concerns a lady in whom you're interested."

"Miss Fitzgerald?"

"Yes."

"You need have no hesitation," he said coldly.

"I'm sure you will not misunderstand me," she continued.

He bowed silently.

"After you left us, I questioned Miss Fitzgerald about the part she'd played in my marriage."

Stanley nodded.

"You can understand that I was very angry. Whose feelings would not have been outraged at discovering that they'd been so played upon? I'm sure that my husband was as innocent of the deception as I."

She paused a second, but the Secretary did not speak, and she continued, afraid, perhaps, that he might say something to overthrow her theory.

"I dare say I forgot myself—in fact I'm sure I did—and said things that I now regret; but in the heat of the argument she taunted me with the fact that she had it in her power to have my husband cashiered from the navy, if she chose to tell what she knew. Is this true?"

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"Did she specify what he'd done?" asked Stanley, the horrid suspicion that Belle was not innocent once more reasserting itself with increased force.

"No, but she said it was something he'd done in London, during his present absence."

"My God!" murmured the Secretary, as the full force and meaning of this avowal became apparent to him, and he saw that Belle must be fully cognisant of the plot.

"Don't tell me it's true!" cried Lady Isabelle.

"I'm afraid it is," he replied.

"But that my husband could be guilty of——"

"I didn't say that," he interjected. "He may be merely an innocent instrument; but he might have difficulty in proving it, if the charges were made."

"But what are the charges?"

"Ah! That you must not ask me."

"You know?"

"Perhaps, but you must be content to be sure that, had I the right to tell you, I would do so."

"But what is to be done?"

"Nothing. The threat is an empty one. Miss Fitzgerald will make no charges against your husband; I will guarantee that, and it may transpire that the Lieutenant has done nothing worse than deliver some cases, of the contents of which he was ignorant, to oblige a friend."

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"But if she could prove that he *did* deliver them, he might be charged with complicity?"

"Exactly."

"Can I not warn him?"

"No, Lady Isabelle, you owe it to me to keep silence, at least for the next few days. In telling you this, to relieve your anxiety, I have exceeded my instructions, and placed my honour in your hands."

"It shall be held sacred; but who is to warn my husband?"

"I'll do so, if you wish."

"I can never be sufficiently grateful, if you will."

"Then we'll consider that settled," he said.

"You've been a true friend to me," she replied, taking his hand, "and I've ill repaid you for your kindness."

"Don't think of that," he said, and turned away, heavy-hearted; for now he fancied he knew the worst.

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CHAPTER XXXI

MISS FITZGERALD BURNS HER BOATS

"My dear," said the Secretary, as he shook hands with Madame Darcy over the little wicket gate entwined with roses, which gave admittance to her rustic abode, "I want to thank you for those letters."

"To thank me?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Why not? Why, I was almost ashamed to meet you face to face."

"But why should you be?"

"That I should have spoken of them at all, and to you."

"But surely you cannot blame yourself for that. You thought they related to quite a different person."

"Now who would have supposed a man would have given me credit. But why do I stand talking at the gate—come in, you've not perhaps had your breakfast yet this morning?"

"Yes, thanks, and a hearty one. Do you think I come to eat you out of house and home?"

"I think you come only to the gate."

"Unfortunately, beggars must not be choosers—and I've just time for a word. It's my busy day, as they say in the city." [Pg 336]

She was piqued, and showed it.

"Do you not think I would willingly spend all day with you, if——"

"I think," she replied, "that you're engaged to a certain young lady—and you've told me that you're busy."

"It's about her I wished to speak," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "These letters have misled you."

"You mean——"

"I mean that they refer to the plot in which your husband and this young lady are engaged."

She looked at him searchingly.

"You are speaking the truth to me. You know this to be so?"

"On my honour. I am not trying to deceive you. I only ask you to believe that your original suspicions were incorrect."

"But you substitute something quite as bad."

"Well, no—hardly that. In fact it may benefit you greatly."

"How so?"

"That I'm not at liberty to tell you just now; I hope I can in a day or two. Meantime, may I ask you to keep silence about what I've said, and trust your affairs to me—they shall not suffer in my hands."

"Have I not trusted you, my friend?"

"You have indeed, and I've appreciated it; but that you'll understand better a little later—when I've been able to help you more." [Pg 337]

"You have done all for me; you have saved me, and I can never forget it."

"Nonsense, I've done nothing as yet."

"You have given me your sympathy. Is not that something? You have been a true friend to me."

"For old friendship's sake—could I do less?"

She flushed and said hurriedly.

"My father will know how to thank you properly. When I see him——" and she unburdened her heart to the Secretary, who gave her a willing ear. Together they discussed her plans for the future, her return home, her welcome; in short, a thousand and one pleasant anticipations, till Stanley declared, regretfully, that he must go.

"But you have stood already an hour," she murmured, "surely you will come in and rest."

"An hour!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch. "Impossible!"

"No," she said. "Not impossible, I also have stood."

He was overcome at his thoughtlessness, but she silenced his excuses by throwing open the gate and saying:

"Come." And he entered.

Miss Fitzgerald was seated at her ease in a West Indian chair on the lawn. A white parasol shielded her from the sun, and a novel lay unopened in her lap. As she leaned back looking up into the earnest face of a man, with a supercilious smile and a veiled fire in her blue eyes, she seemed to be at peace with herself and with the world. In reality, she was enduring the last of three most disagreeable encounters. [Pg 338]

Her first had been with her aunt, Mrs. Roberts, who, quite justly, ascribed the occurrences which had interrupted the harmony of her house-party to the machinations of her niece.

"I invited you here at your own request," she had said, in a private interview before breakfast, in the course of which much righteous wrath was vented. "You assured me that Mr. Stanley was on the point of asking your hand in marriage, and only needed an opportunity of doing so; which I was the more willing to give, because I saw the extreme advisability of such a step. His actions have belied your words, and moreover, have made you the subject of unpleasant comment in my house, which has greatly annoyed me. I do not wish to be unkind, but you must understand that matters, for the rest of the time we are together, must run more smoothly, or I shall be obliged to suggest your returning to London."

It is hard enough to endure the faulty criticism of an elderly and misguided person, when one is in the right; but when one is in the wrong, and has hanging over one the probability, if not the certainty, of coming disclosures, which will force threats to become realities, such a state of things is unbearable, and Miss Fitzgerald partook of her morning meal feeling that fate had been more than unkind. [Pg 339]

Immediately after breakfast she had been treated to an interview with the outraged Mr. Lambert, of which a detailed account is unnecessary, but which resulted in the unpalatable presentation of those obnoxious criticisms known as "home truths."

With all her faults, Miss Fitzgerald, like the parson, came of fighting stock, and, game to the last, she began the dangerous experiment of burning her boats behind her, by informing her hostess that she should leave to-morrow afternoon in any event, as it was not her wish to stay where she was unwelcome. Then, possessed by the spirit that has always prompted heroic deeds, the determination to do or die, she sought and found an interview with Mr. Stanley. She boldly opened the attack, by calling that young gentleman to account for his neglect of the last twenty-four hours.

"I've hardly seen so much as your shadow, Jimsy, and I've been nearly bored to death in consequence. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Trying to find out to whom you were married."

"Ah! Have you succeeded?"

"Yes, the parson has confirmed your assertions this morning."

"Did you need his confirmation of my word?"

Stanley said nothing, and his companion, considering the silence dangerous, hastened to break it. [Pg 340]

"If I really were to marry you," she asked, "would you desert me as you did yesterday?"

"If you treated me as you've treated me these last few days, I should probably desert you altogether."

The situation was going from bad to worse, and something must be effected or the cause was lost.

"What have I done, Jim?" she asked piteously, taking the bull by the horns, and allowing her eyes to fill with tears.

"What have you done?" he said nonchalantly, with a flippancy which, in the case of women, constituted his most dangerous weapon. "What have you done? Oh, nothing out of the common, I suppose, only, you see, unfortunately, we men are cursed with a certain, though defective, standard of morals; and the amount of—well, prevarication you've practised over this affair has shattered a number of cherished illusions."

"I wish you wouldn't wax so disgustingly moral, Jimsy. It's so easy to be moral—and it bores me. Of course, I don't like saying what's not so, any more than you do, but one must be consistent. I promised Kingsland I'd arrange the match for him, and when that old fool of a parson put obstacles in the way, and then assumed I was the bride,—I'll give you my word I never told him so—why, it offered an easy solution of the difficulty. There was nothing illegal about the marriage. I'm sure I'm not responsible for every man who makes a fool of himself, and since I'd undertaken the affair, I was bound, in common decency, to see it through."

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"Do you consider 'common decency' just the word to apply to the transaction?"

"Don't pick up details and phrases in that way, Jimsy. They're unimportant—but very irritating."

"Do you think so? Details and phrases go far to make up the sum of life. Why does Colonel Darcy still remain here?"

"Why do you still persist in harping upon my friend's name?"

"Because I loathe him, Belle. If you knew his true character, you'd cut him the next time you met."

"Ignorance is the only thing that makes life tolerable."

"Nonsense."

"Jim, answer me this question. If I were your wife, would you permit me to keep up my intimacy with Colonel Darcy?"

"No."

"Then I must choose between you two?"

"Do you love me so little that there can be a question of choice?"

"You don't understand. It's easy for you to say, 'Throw him over'; the reality is a very different matter. He's my oldest friend."

"And I'm the man who has asked you to share his name and his honour. If I could prove to you that Darcy was unworthy—would you give him up, for my sake?"

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"Can you prove this?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

She smiled faintly, and thought hard. She had learned in that last speech what she most wanted to know—the measure of the Secretary's knowledge.

"Well?" he said, interrogatively.

"I don't know how to answer," she replied. "My intuition says no; my heart says—yes."

The Secretary turned cold, as a new phase of the situation presented itself to his view.

"Do you love this man?" he asked.

"Love Darcy—love him!" she cried. "I hate him more than any man in the world, and yet—"

"You're in his power?"

"No!"

"Then accept me."

"Jim," she said earnestly, "you're asking me to decide my whole life. Give me twenty-four hours to think it over."

"Haven't you had sufficient time?"

"To-morrow you shall have your answer."

"Much may happen before to-morrow."

"But you'll grant me this respite. I promise that to-morrow I'll say—yes or no."

"To-morrow I too may be able to speak more clearly; till then, promise me you'll not see this man."

"Can't you trust me, Jim? I trust you, and how little a woman can know of a man's life."

"I don't know," he said, and left her discomfited—praying to Heaven that some power might intervene to reconcile her heart and conscience; for this wild, wayward and desperate woman had a conscience, and so far it had withheld her from committing an unpardonable sin. [Pg 343]

After lunch, as fate willed it, the Irish girl and the Dowager were left a moment alone together. Being both inflammable substances, sparks flew, and a conflagration ensued.

The credit of starting the combustion must be accorded to the Marchioness. She had observed the young lady's earnest conversation with Stanley on the lawn in the morning, and coupling this with the undemonstrative behaviour of that gentleman towards her daughter, had jumped to the conclusion that Miss Fitzgerald was trying to rob her of her rightful prize. Being possessed of this belief, and the circumstances being exaggerated from much thinking, her wrath found expression in the offender's presence, and she gratuitously insulted the Irish girl; a dangerous thing to do, as she presently discovered.

"How are you to-day?" asked the Dowager with irritating condescension.

"Excessively trivial, thank you. An English Sunday is so serious, one has to be trivial in self-defence."

"It is different in your country, then?"

"Rather."

"You seemed nervous and absorbed, at lunch."

"No. Simply absorbed with my luncheon. I find that eating is really important in England. It takes one's mind off the climate." [Pg 344]

"I'm leaving to-morrow," continued Miss Fitzgerald, for the purpose of breaking an awkward silence, which had already lasted several minutes.

"I think it's the wisest thing you can do," replied the Dowager.

Such provocation could not pass unnoticed.

"Why?" queried her companion, outwardly calm, but with a dangerous gleam in her eye.

"Because if you were not leaving the house at once, I should feel it my duty to take Lady Isabelle away—with young girls one must be careful."

"Explain yourself, Lady Port Arthur."

"I do not think it necessary, really; do you? Of course I can quite understand that it's most advisable, perhaps necessary, for you to marry; but common decency would prevent you from thrusting your attentions on a man who——"

"If you're alluding to Mr. Stanley, your Ladyship, I don't mind telling you, if it'll make you feel easier, that I've about decided to refuse him."

"What!"

"He proposed to me some days ago, but, as you say, one has to be careful."

"Impossible!"

"As for marrying," continued her adversary, relentlessly, determined, since Lady Isabelle's marriage must be known, to have the satisfaction of imparting the news herself—"as for marrying—you're hardly qualified to speak on that subject, if you will pardon my saying so, as you don't even know the name of your daughter's husband." [Pg 345]

The Dowager gasped. She had no words to express her feelings.

"You needn't get so agitated, for I shall probably leave you Mr. Stanley to fall back upon, if this present marriage proves *illegal*. Lady Isabelle would be provided with *some* husband in any case."

The Dowager gripped the handle of her sunshade until it seemed as if it must snap, and turned purple in the face.

"Don't tell me I lie," pursued her tormentor, "it's not good form, and besides, if you want confirmation, look in Mr. Lambert's register at the chapel next door, where your daughter was married two days ago."

"Insolence!!!" gasped the Dowager.

"I ought to know," continued Miss Fitzgerald, calmly, "as I was one of the witnesses—you——" but she never finished her sentence, for the Dowager had hoisted her sunshade and got under way for the church door. [Pg 346]

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TOP OF THE TOWER

After his disquieting interview with Miss Fitzgerald, Stanley felt the imperative need of an entire change of subject to steady his mind. This want, the secret of the old tower supplied.

No time could have been better suited for his investigations. Lunch was well over, the members of the house party were in their various rooms for an hour at least.

A few moments spent in measuring on the first floor in the great hall, and the library, which ran parallel to it, proved the correctness of his theory, that the space enclosed was smaller at the bottom than at the top, as only six feet was unaccounted for. Evidently on this floor the tower contained merely a staircase.

He now carried his investigations to the second storey. The room over the library had been assigned to Kent-Lauriston, and as the Secretary's knock elicited no answer, he took the liberty of entering, finding, as he supposed, that his friend had gone out. The inside measurements of this room gave only ten feet, where they should have given twenty-five, and brought up at a large fireplace, which had no existence in the apartment below, and which was apparently much deeper than was really the case. Around and behind this there was a secret chamber of considerable dimensions, but half an hour's experiments brought the Secretary no nearer effecting an entrance. The old blue glazed tiles of the fireplace, and the bricks which composed its floor, were alike immovable. There was only the roof left; if he failed there, he must resign himself to the inevitable, and bend all his energies on trying to open the secret door.

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At the risk of being thought prying and meddlesome, Stanley now proceeded to search for some mode of ascent to the leads, and after many mistakes and much wandering, he discovered at last a worm-eaten ladder. This he climbed, at great bodily risk, and forcing a rusty scuttle, emerged at last, safe and unperceived, on top of the house, amidst a wilderness of peaks and undulations, which attested more to the ingenuity of mediæval builders, than gave promise of comfort to him who attempted to traverse it. At last, however, by dint of much scrambling, and several hair-breadth escapes from an undignified descent to the lawn, he reached the point at which the tower sprang from the roof. It rose sheer above him for almost forty feet, unbroken by any window or excrescence, and thinly covered by ivy which, while it was too scattered to conceal any outlet, at the same time afforded no foothold for ascent.

It was dreadfully tantalising. Once on those crumbling battlements, he persuaded himself he should have no trouble in entering through the roof. The missing letter was then within reach, and the young man saw the road to rapid promotion stretch glitteringly before him; saw that Darcy would be in his power, with all that it implied; but saw that forty feet of frowning masonry, which separated him from his hopes, and cursed his luck.

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A ladder would solve the problem—but for numerous reasons it was a solution not to be thought of. Above all things, he wished his investigations to be absolutely unsuspected. If Darcy for an instant imagined that the truth was known, he would be off like a flash. If the Secretary was to conquer the secret of the tower, he must do it unaided, and he was about to turn back and descend, baffled by the hopelessly smooth surface of the structure, when his eye caught sight of a small iron ring in the side of the tower, about two feet above the roof of the house. Examining closely, he saw a second ring two feet above the first, and others at like distances up, presumably to the top, though the ivy had in some cases concealed them. His first conjecture was that at some time there might have been a rope ladder arranged; but that would have called for pairs of rings at the same level, and the closest scrutiny failed to reveal more than one.

Perhaps, thought Stanley, it might be possible to rig some sort of a contrivance of rope to these, by means of which he might ascend; but it was difficult to procure the necessary material, and still more difficult to attach it to the tower without attracting observation. He caught hold of the ring and gave it a good jerk towards him to be sure it was firmly enough embedded to be of some service, when, to his utter astonishment, not the staple, but the block of stone to which it was attached, pulled out about six inches. Here was an unexpected *dénouement*. If the masonry was as rotten as all this, it was high time, for the safety of the house, that it was pulled down. A moment's examination, however, assured him that the tower was as solid as a rock. Why then should this one stone be loose, and why could he pull it no farther? He pushed it in again and pulled once more with all his strength, but it came only the six inches, and then remained immovable. He bent down and examined it closely. Then, as he perceived there was no trace of mortar on its edges, he gave a shout of exultation, and seizing the second ring, drew it towards him with a similar result. The stone to which it was attached pulled slightly out. Unwittingly, he had stumbled on to one secret of the tower. These stones formed nothing more or less than a concealed staircase; perilous indeed, but quite possible of ascent. Springing up on the first and second stones, he found they bore his weight, and he was thus enabled not only to steady himself by the rings above, but to pull them out in like manner. Having tested three or four and pulled out six, he descended again to the roof, and returned to his room to provide himself with certain necessaries for the trip, among which were a small bicycle lamp and a match-box. He took off his coat and waistcoat, and also his shoes, and set about making the attempt in a more practical manner. For at least half the way up he would be screened from view by the roofs, and for the

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remainder he must take his chance of not being seen. Drawing a long breath, and placing his foot firmly on the first stone, he commenced the ascent. For ten or fifteen feet it seemed an easy matter, but as he cleared the intercepting roof peaks, and the view opened out, he fully realised his perilous position, and a gust of wind which swayed him on his airy perch made him feel all the more insecure. Sternly resisting the temptation to look down, and the no less dangerous desire to hasten his ascent, he kept his face resolutely turned to the wall, and testing carefully each ring before trusting himself to it, climbed slowly up and up. The way seemed endless, and when but six feet remained, two sparrows, with a whir and rush of wings, flew angrily round his head, at what they regarded as an invasion of their nest, and almost caused him to lose his hold in an attempt to drive them away. And now the battlements were just over him, projecting awkwardly from the face of the wall, and proving much higher than he had at first supposed. But he noticed, with relief, that directly in the line of his ascent were a pair of projecting iron stanchions not visible from below, but evidently intended to be used in pulling oneself up and over the battlements; a supposition borne out by the fact that they were placed each side of a break in the stonework, which was ornamented with a lip or step of smooth stone, evidently intended to afford an entrance to the roof of the tower. This lip had a slight slant upwards, and might perhaps have served a double purpose as a drain or broad spout.

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Fortunately Stanley's caution had not entirely deserted him, and he had the good sense to reach up and test one of the stanchions before trusting himself to it. It was well that he did so, for its fastenings proved to be rotten with age, and the bolt giving way, it tore out in his grasp, and flying from his hand fell with a loud clank on the roof, forty feet below. The Secretary swayed out from the tower with the force of the shock, and had not the topmost iron, to which he clung, held firm, this narrative would have come to a sudden and a tragic ending.

Having recovered his equipoise, he found himself face to face with a serious if not an insurmountable obstacle. The natural entrance to the roof was denied him; for even if the other stanchion held firm, he had no mind to trust his entire weight to it, and without its mate it was of little use for lifting himself up. Besides which, the lip or step, which, by its slant towards him, would, with the aid of the stanchions, have made access easy without them, rendered it, by reason of its angle, the more difficult. The only practical way seemed to lean far to one side, and seizing the rough stones of the battlement which projected over his head, swing himself up and through one of the embrasures. The last step would bring him breast high with them, but as they projected nearly a foot beyond the face of the tower, he must bend his body outward, and trust to them alone for support. If the stones of the battlements were strong, his athletic training gave him no reason to suppose that he would have any trouble in accomplishing the feat. Youth, moreover, is apt to be venturesome, and an aerial perch, eighty feet from the ground, is not just the place one would choose for lengthy consideration.

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Therefore, after reaching up and testing the masonry, as thoroughly as he was able, he flung caution to the winds, a full assemblage of which were whistling around him, and, making a desperate effort, clutched the stones above him, and swung his body up and one leg over the battlements.

He was secure after all. Then, looking within, he received one of the worst shocks which the events of his life had ever afforded him. There was no roof in existence; at least, none where he had expected to find it. He discovered that he was seated astride the rim of a circular well, forty feet deep, whose bottom was the roof of the house. In other words, the whole tower above the second story was a shell—a sham. A few moments' observation was sufficient to assure him that there never had been a roof at a higher level. An iron bar corroded with rust, round which was wound a chain, stretched across the diameter of the well, and had evidently furnished at one time support for a flag-staff, to further keep up to the outside world the deception of a roof; but otherwise the inside was perfectly smooth, even the holes where the steps were pulled out not showing, which bore evidence to the fact that they worked in the thickness of the wall.

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Down at the level of the roof two or three little beams of light marked the location of certain gargoyles or antique water-spouts, which Stanley had noticed on the outside, and marvelled that they should have been placed in the middle instead of the top of the tower. These explained the absence of water in the well.

Looking down, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he was able to see something of the nature of the roof, which must enclose the secret chamber. It was covered with dust and debris, but he was positive he could distinguish certain little bumps or lumps, which he shrewdly guessed to be thick diamond panes of glass, set in lead, and which, as he conjectured, furnished light to the room beneath. Entrance to this apartment seemed totally lacking from the roof, or else concealed by the dust of centuries. No staircase could he discover on the inside of the well, and he was about to relegate it to the limbo of unfathomable mystery, when a startling discovery gave him the key to the whole matter. It was, he saw, manifestly impossible to go down inside without falling, after which, if not killed by the shock, he would be left to starve at his leisure, while his friends searched the country-side for him. But if to descend within was impossible, to descend without presented almost as many difficulties. To go over the battlements as he had come, was well-nigh hopeless; but if he could walk along their inner rim for a foot or two, round the next embrasure, to the natural slanting entrance which was directly over the first step, the descent would be, comparatively speaking, easy. To rise from his present posture and assume a standing position on the twelve-inch rim of a structure eighty feet in the air requires a steady head, and though the Secretary was possessed of this, he did not at all relish the undertaking. It had to be done, however; but after his previous experience he determined to take no more risks,

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and reaching out from his position of vantage, he tested carefully every step of the way. At last only the slanting step remained. Reaching far over he touched it with his hand, when, to his horror, it practically revolved, now pointing down into the interior of the tower, its outward end pointing up. He shuddered when he saw the fate which the fortunate accident to the stanchion had caused him to escape. Had he descended in the regular way and stepped upon the slanting plate, the instant his foot passed its centre of equilibrium, it would have revolved, and without a doubt flung him down into the interior of the well. It was a cursed, mediæval trick, a fitting accompaniment to the inquisitorial horrors of those ages—an English *oubliette*. If the fall did not finish the daring invader of the tower—the inhabitants of the secret chamber doubtless had means to insure his end, or perhaps he was merely left to starve.

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Touching the plate once more he pushed it back to its original position, and found that it remained stationary. As long as he kept on the outward side he was safe, and if the Secretary observed this rule he could easily avail himself of the plate to descend by, for the perpetrators of the villainous arrangement had evidently not thought it necessary to make it entirely revolve, as one who had once gone up the tower was never expected to come down the outside again. And now, with great caution, he wormed his way to the treacherous step, and with still greater care placed his foot on its outer edge; it held firm, and he ventured to plant both his feet upon it. But, alas! he has forgotten how slippery a flag of slate, polished by two hundred years' exposure to the elements, may become. His feet slipped from under him, and in striving to save himself he overbalanced the stone. Instantly it revolved, and a second later he found himself suspended over the well, with only the strength of a despairing grasp on the edges of the slate between him and eternity.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SECRET OF THE DOOR

Miss Fitzgerald's disclosures to the Marchioness, as it turned out, rather helped than hindered those principally concerned, for Mr. Lambert met her Ladyship at the church, and his explanations took the keen edge off the wrath which she vented on her daughter a little later, and in the midst of which Lieutenant Kingsland arrived, with ample assurances of worldly prosperity, which overcame her strongest objections, and went far to reconcile her to the inevitable. Her disappointment, however, was keen, and her temper suffered in consequence, so that dinner, at which the Secretary's unaccountable absence formed the chief topic of conversation, was distinctly not a success, and the ladies retired early, leaving the gentlemen to their own devices.

Miss Fitzgerald claimed to join in the general hegira, but her actions belied her words, for shortly after she was supposed to have gone to her room, her figure, its white dinner dress concealed by a long grey cloak, might have been seen gliding across the lawn in the direction of the inn.

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The night was pregnant with great events, though outwardly calm and beautiful, and the great hall in which Mr. Riddle, Kent-Lauriston, and the Lieutenant stood smoking, after having been dismissed from the drawing-room, was flooded with moonlight.

"I say," remarked Kingsland irrelevantly, after a long interval broken only by the conscientious puffing of cigarettes, "how that mediæval prize puzzle shows up in the moonlight."

"The secret door?" asked Kent-Lauriston. "Yes, it does. I heard the butler making his plaint about it yesterday. It appears it's no joke to keep those nails polished."

"I shouldn't think it would be, and I dare say the bulk of the servants wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. I wonder what's behind it, anyway."

Nobody said anything.

"I wonder if Darcy'll ever get his letter?" asked Kent-Lauriston, glancing at Mr. Riddle. "Anyway, it's as safe behind that portal as if it was in the Bank of England. Safer, in fact, for he can't get it out if he wants to."

"I don't think there's much chance of anyone's opening it," said Mr. Riddle. "Cleverer men than Colonel Darcy have tried to solve that problem in the last two centuries, and failed. I imagine, however, if it ever does come to be opened, that a certain theory will be proved correct."

"What is it?" asked Kingsland.

"That the prophecy tells only half the story. To press the nails they must be flexible, but they're firm and immovable."

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"Well?"

"Well, it's evident that there is some catch or spring to be worked first."

"How do you make that out?"

"These five nails we hear so much about are really the key to the lock, but until the movable impediments—or, to give them their technical name, the 'tumblers'—are so arranged as to

release the key, the lock cannot be opened."

"It's a rum sort of key, with no keyhole," said Kingsland.

"The key to open this lock is a mental one, rather than one of steel and iron. In other words, a puzzle lock like this always has certain movable parts, the movement of which constitutes the enigma."

"Ever heard of any locks like this one?"

"Not exactly, but the Russians, Hindoos and the Chinese have their puzzle locks in the shape of birds or animals, and they're locked or unlocked by pressing certain parts of their bodies. You can depend on it, some spring must be worked first, which relieves the nails from their tension and permits one to work the combination."

"But no such catch or spring is visible."

"Of course not. It would be the most carefully concealed of all the mechanism; but some lucky fellow will stumble on it eventually, and if he has presence of mind enough to press the nails also — Presto! your door will fly open."

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"And what will he find?" asked Kent-Lauriston.

"From present appearances," replied Mr. Riddle, "a little pile of dust, which some centuries before was a letter——"

"I shouldn't be satisfied with anything less than a mouldering skeleton in chains," said Kingsland.

"Or a complicated astrological machine, such as one hears about in Bulwer's grewsome ghost story," added Kent-Lauriston.

"The inhabitants of this house are too unfeignedly easy-going and comfortable to admit of such a supposition," replied Kingsland, and turning to Kent-Lauriston, added: "What do you think is inside the Tower?"

"I don't know, and if I did, I shouldn't tell anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because if its contents are so unpleasant, that they had to shut it up for ever, it certainly wouldn't prove a fit subject for conversation."

"Well, anyhow," said the Lieutenant, "I trust the discoverer will be a short man, or he'll hit his head a nasty crack, when he tries to go in."

"Wrong again," said Mr. Riddle. "I think you'll admit that I'm medium height for a man; but if I stood with my back to the door, my head wouldn't hit the top of the arch."

"Nonsense. Let's see."

Riddle took up the position indicated, facing them.

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"You're right!" ejaculated the young officer.

"I'm amazed! I supposed it was much lower. What do you measure?"

"Five feet eight inches. But it is the extreme width of the portal which makes it deceptive; it lowers it. I think, if I stretched out my arms, straight from the shoulder, I should no more than touch the side—see——" and he made a great cross of himself, against the black oak.

"What are you fumbling at?" asked Kingsland sharply.

"My fingers hardly touch—it's a stretch. Ah! now they do."

"You look ghastly in the moonlight; put your arms down and come away."

"I'm very comfortable here, barring my back; those silver nails are rather sharp," and he put his hands behind him.

"Come away," said Kingsland, nervously, seeing something in his face he did not like. "You look as if you'd been walled up a few months ago, by some inquisition, and we'd just unearthed you in your niche."

"By heavens! some of these nails are loose!" cried Riddle.

"Nonsense!" retorted Kingsland. "You've thought so much about it, you'd imagine anything. They're as firm as—well, nails. I tried them myself. That door won't be opened in our lifetime, unless——" but the Lieutenant never finished his sentence, for he had paused suddenly, in open-mouthed astonishment. Without warning, and without a sound, the portal, closed for centuries, swung slowly inward, carrying Riddle with it; who, catching in vain at the sides of the door in an attempt to save himself, fell heavily backwards down three steps into the secret chamber.

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Seeing that he did not immediately rise, but turned over partially on his side, Kingsland recollecting himself, sprang forward to his aid, crying:

"Have you hurt yourself?"

"No, no," he replied, waving him off, and slowly rising from the floor, covered with dust.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Lieutenant. "How did you ever do it?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied Riddle, emerging from the portal, and vigorously brushing himself. "As I told you, the nails, or some of them, felt loose—I pushed them, and the next thing I knew the door revolved and I was on the floor."

"You're a genius!" exclaimed Kingsland. "But," peering down into the darkness of the tower, "where's Darcy's letter?"

"We need a little light on the subject," said Mr. Riddle. Stepping to the fireplace, he lighted an old wrought-iron sconce, full of candles, which stood on the broad mantelshelf, and approached the secret door.

In the light of the candles, all could see that, except for the little space into which he had fallen, the whole interior of the tower was filled by a narrow stone staircase, which, in its ascent, half turned upon itself. Of the missing document, however, there was not a trace. The stillness in the great hall was oppressive. Even their own footsteps on the stones seemed, to the hearers, preternaturally loud.

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Mr. Riddle raised the sconce above his head, and there burst on a sudden a shimmering flash of a thousand prismatic colours from the head of the staircase. He fell back a step, as did the others, and Kingsland murmured in awe-struck tones:—

"What's that?"

Riddle again raised the sconce, and again the burst of light from the head of the stairs overwhelmed him, but this time he stood his ground.

"What is it?" asked Kent-Lauriston.

"I don't know."

"Let us examine."

"As far as I can make out, it's a flexible curtain of chain mail—hung across the staircase."

"I swear it moved," said the Lieutenant.

"No, it was the light which moved," replied the discoverer. "You see," and he swayed the sconce from side to side, making the curtain appear to be moving silently.

"If I take the light away," he continued, "there's nothing to be seen;" and he removed the sconce, leaving only the black mass of the steel curtain visible.

"Nothing to be seen—isn't there? Look there!" whispered Kingsland, and, following the direction of his eyes, the others saw a broad band of blood-red light steal out of the blackness, across the steps at the head of the staircase.

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"That room has been closed for centuries, and yet there is a light burning," he continued hoarsely. "Shut the door, my dear fellow, and let's get away."

"It merely confirms another theory of mine," said Riddle, "which is, that, as there are no windows on the outside of the tower, they must have got their light and ventilation from the roof. I think it's fair to suppose that they used red glass, and that the full moon is shining through it."

"Then you can go and prove it if you like, but if you take my advice, you'd better leave it alone."

"I don't like, my dear Kingsland, though I'm going, just the same. I daresay I shall find something very nasty at the head of the stairs, but it won't be supernatural. If I want you, I'll call you. If not, wait till I come back." Putting down the sconce, he slipped off his dress coat, and crossing the hall, picked up a stout hunting crop, the property of the Lieutenant, while his two companions stood staring at the blood-red band of light which lay across the steps, and which seemed to their excited imagination to grow broader and deeper.

"What do you think he'll find up there?" asked Kingsland.

Kent-Lauriston shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't wish to think," he replied. "But I'm certain that, to this very day, there lie hidden away in some of our old country houses the ghastliest secrets of mediæval times, the fruit of crimes and passions, of which, happily, even the names have perished."

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"What's that?" said the young officer, laying his hand on his companion's arm, and in the silence both distinctly heard the click of a latch, and facing round at the same moment, confronted the white face of Colonel Darcy, framed in the hall door.

In an instant he was at their side, drawing a quick hissing breath and exclaiming:—

"It's open. Where's my letter?"

"There is no letter," said Kingsland gruffly. "But you gave us a jolly good start, creeping in. This ghost business sets one's nerves all on edge."

"Who opened the door?"

"I did," said Mr. Riddle, coming up just at that moment.

"Ah! Then you have my letter."

"No, I haven't seen a trace of it. It may be up aloft."

"I believe there's some living object up aloft," said Kingsland. "If you take my advice, you'll shut the door, and leave it and the letter in perpetual seclusion."

"I don't care whether it's a man or a devil!" cried Darcy, who, whatever else may be said of him, did not know the meaning of fear. And as he spoke, he set one foot upon the lower step.

"Hold on!" cried Kent-Lauriston. "There's something up there, and, what's more, it's coming down." And as he spoke, a sound was heard in the long closed chamber, and as the listeners held their breath, something slowly approached the steel curtain, which swung out noiselessly as if waving in a ghostly wind.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

WITHIN THE TOWER

Stanley's first thought as he hung suspended over the gulf, when the plate had so treacherously revolved, was of self-preservation. And, indeed, he had need to think, for it seemed highly probable that within the next few minutes he might be dashed to pieces on the floor of the secret chamber, forty feet below. To pull himself up over that slippery stone was, he found, a sheer impossibility. To let go of his precarious hold and drop to the bottom of the well was certain death. Yet the sharp edges of the plate were already cutting into his hands, and it could only be a matter of a few moments when his arms would refuse to support any longer the weight of his body. Evidently he must find some means of escape from these two alternatives, and that right speedily, or for him the end of all things would be at hand. Below him the wall stretched smooth as glass. No vine grew upon it to which he might cling, no crevice in which he might put his foot. He cast his eye round in a wild search for some possible means of salvation, and, as he did so, he saw one infinitesimal chance of escape. So slight was it, that no one, in less desperate straits, would have dared to take the risk, but he had no choice.

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He had noticed, when taking his precarious walk along the edge of the battlements, that an old rusty iron chain was loosely twisted round the bar which stretched across the diameter of the well, about on a level with where he hung suspended. It might be possible, springing into the air, to catch the end of this chain, which terminated in a ring. He had done that sort of thing more than once in gymnasiums, though under very much more favourable conditions. Even if he succeeded in catching the ring in his flight, he might only find himself in a worse position. The chain might refuse to unwind from the bar, or the whole contrivance, rusted by years of exposure, might snap under his weight. But even if this were so, he reflected, he could but drop to the bottom of the well, which he was bound to do in any event, if he stayed where he was, while every foot that the chain unrolled before breaking was twelve inches less for him to fall. Evidently there was not an instant to lose, for his fingers were already getting stiff and numb with the tension they were undergoing. So, setting his teeth, he sprang into the air, on this last desperate venture. For one horrid second he felt the ring which his fingers touched, slipping through his grasp. Then with one supreme effort, he crooked his hand through it, and swung suspended by one arm. A moment later, he had brought his other hand to his aid. But scarcely had he steadied himself, when the bar, round which the chain was wound, and which evidently worked in a socket, began to revolve. It was rusty and out of gear, and as it let him down, it gave him the most frightful series of jerks, which seemed to dislocate every bone in his body. It would let out three or four feet of chain at lightning speed, and then, catching in its rusty gearings, would stop with a racking jerk, remaining still perhaps a whole minute, before it moved on again, to repeat the operation. Moreover, as he got farther and farther down the well, and there was a greater length of chain above him, it began to oscillate frightfully, twirling him round in one direction till his head swam, and then reversing the operation. All tortures must come to an end, however, and when he was ten feet from the bottom of the well, a corroded link snapped, and he dropped the remaining distance like a log, bringing down thirty feet of iron chain on top of him.

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The blow which he received rendered him instantly unconscious, and it was hours later before he came to himself. His first knowledge of the world and things in general was a realisation that in some mysterious way the entire firmament was divided in half by a black band, and it was only as his brain became a little clearer that he realised that he was lying on his back looking up at the rim of the well. He sat up, and examined himself critically. He had evidently cut his head slightly, for it was still bleeding. Moreover, he was black and blue from head to foot, but he was rejoiced to find, after a careful examination, that no bones were broken, nor had he even suffered a sprain, and in a few moments he was able to stand upright.

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His position, however, was none the less precarious. The breaking of the chain had ended for ever any chance of his ascending the tower, and he must either effect an entrance through the roof or depend on the very uncertain chance of attracting notice from without, to escape

starvation.

Lying face down on the floor of the roof, he tried to look out of the little holes in the mouths of the gargoyles, but could see nothing, and from the appearance of the sky over his head, he judged that it must be growing dark. This reminded him of his bicycle lamp, which a hasty examination proved to be intact, and feeling that he would at least have light for his investigations, was a great source of comfort to him.

His next procedure was to examine the roof. Here, fate once more befriended him, for he very quickly found a trap-door and, moreover, was able to lift it. Looking down he could see nothing but utter darkness. However, this did not deter him, and he hastily made his arrangements for further investigation, first taking the precaution to light a match and drop it into the opening. It fell, about ten or twelve feet, evidently striking the floor and burning there a minute or two before it went out. It revealed nothing but surrounding darkness, but it apprised him of the fact he was most desirous to know, that the atmosphere was not mephitical. He determined, nevertheless, to take his time about descending, and left the trap-door wide open, so that as much fresh air might get in as possible.

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In the interval he amused himself by taking off one of his socks and unravelling it as best he could. Weaving a cord with the thread thus obtained, he lowered his bicycle lantern, which he had lighted, into the room below, swinging it gently back and forwards. Its glancing rays told him that the apartment was entirely bare and deserted, and showed him also a narrow wooden ladder, black with age, leading up to the trap-door above which he stood. Drawing up the light, he took it in his hand, and being cautious after his recent experience, reached down and tested each round of the ladder most carefully. To his surprise it held his weight, and a moment later he was on the floor of the secret chamber.

The apartment had no secrets to reveal. It was absolutely bare, and empty of anything except a broken old sconce lying in a corner. The whole room, however, was indescribably dusty and musty, and he was very thankful to push aside a curtain of chain mail and descend the staircase.

At its foot he saw lying the coveted papers. Forgetful of everything else, he sat down upon the lowest step, and by the light of his lantern proceeded to examine them. They more than fulfilled his utmost expectations. There was a complete cipher and its key, a full list of the members of the cabinet who were to pass upon the treaty, with comments on each, and a memorandum of the amounts to be given to certain of them, coupled with suggestions as to the attitude which Darcy should take towards others, together with precise instructions as to the carrying out of the plot; the whole signed by Riddle in the interests of the firm. The evidence was complete, and Stanley gasped as he realised the advantage of this tremendous stroke of luck. One fact which his perusal had elicited caused him to draw a long sigh of relief. Miss Fitzgerald's name was not mentioned in the incriminating document, and so much did he wish to believe her innocent, that in spite of all accumulated evidence, he felt a sense of exultation that he could still, if worst came to worst, shield her from the effects of her own folly. He told himself that he might, after all, prove to the satisfaction of his own conscience that she was innocent of criminal intent. Darcy he would have no mercy for. He must be punished for his crime, and the fact of his being the criminal would give Inez her freedom, and then— Ah! but if Belle Fitzgerald was innocent—was he not in honour bound to *her*? And at that moment he realised that he had mistaken pity for love, that Darcy possessed the woman in the world most worth having, and that he was unworthy of her.

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His meditations were interrupted by the sound of voices near him. Somebody laid a hand on the other side of the door. They were tampering with it again, and, for more reasons than one, he wanted the fact of his having gained entrance to the tower to remain a secret. Putting the letter in his inside pocket, he softly retraced his steps to the upper chamber.

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To his consternation, he had scarcely reached there when the door below was opened. How this had been effected, he did not know. He had been so interested in the documents, that he had had no time to examine the mechanism of the portal. At first he heard only the voices of Riddle and Kingsland. Fearing that the conspirators only were present, and that, being three to one, he might be overpowered, and his precious evidence wrested from him, he endeavoured, by the agitation of the steel curtain and the red light of his lamp, to contrive such ghostly illusions, as should serve to deter them from investigating the upper portions of the tower. It can be imagined therefore what a welcome relief Kent-Lauriston's tones were to him, and the instant he knew that his friend was below, he felt perfectly safe from an attack by force. He therefore lost no time in descending, his footsteps producing, as we have seen, a most startling effect on those below.

Kent-Lauriston was the first to recognise him, and seeing at a glance that his clothes were torn and spotted with blood, he sprang forward to assist his friend and helped him into the hall.

"Where's my letter, you thief?" cried Darcy.

"You've come too late," replied the Secretary, recovering himself. "You've come too late. The treaty will go through."

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Darcy growled an oath as the measure of the Secretary's knowledge became known to him.

"I know who's put you on to it," he cried. "It's that cursed Irish——!"

"Go!" cried Stanley, in a burst of wrath at this insult to a woman. "Go, before I knock you down, and as you value your safety, meet me here at eleven to-morrow morning. You've held the whip

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SHORT WAY OUT

"I suppose it's hardly necessary to ask if you found Darcy's letter?" said Kent-Lauriston to the Secretary, as they were returning to the house about an hour later from a trip to the telegraph office, whither Stanley had gone to send a long message in cipher to his Chief.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I have it in my possession."

"Does it give you all the information you required?"

"As a bit of evidence it's overwhelmingly complete—but it gives me some additional information which is not so pleasant," replied the Secretary, who had needed no second glance at the document to assure himself that it was Mr. Riddle's letter and had been once before in his possession.

"I've no desire to pry into your affairs, either private or diplomatic, my dear fellow; but of course I'm able to infer a good deal, and if you felt inclined to assure me, that this made you master of the situation, and placed Darcy completely in your power, it would make me feel very much easier."

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"Then you may be quite easy," returned the Secretary. "I hold all the trumps. I could have the Colonel arrested to-night, if I chose, and my evidence is of such a nature that it will practically banish him from his country and from mine."

"That's very satisfactory, but let me caution you to go slow. Darcy is a man of many expedients. I should keep something in reserve, if I were able."

"My instructions insist on practically that course of action."

"I'm very glad to hear it—as you grow older, you'll discover that the shrewdest policy in the game of life, as in the game of whist, is always to keep in hand a card of re-entry. And you may take my word for it, that Darcy is the pivot on which all these little conspiracies revolve. Hold him, and you can dictate terms to both Kingsland and Miss Fitzgerald. By the way, have you succeeded in receiving your *congé* yet?"

"I haven't yet received a definite answer."

"Answer!—haven't you made it clear to her what that answer is to be?"

"I hope so. In fact, I'm sure she must understand."

"Then if she doesn't refuse you, you'll be quite justified in refusing her."

"I can't be too hard on a woman, Kent-Lauriston."

"But you cannot marry her."

"Not if my suspicions are true, and that my conference with the Colonel to-morrow will prove. Now, don't say any more about it, for I want to go to bed, and try not to think."

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Stanley slept little that night, and the arrival of an early telegram from his Minister was a welcome relief. It contained only a brief word of praise, and the information that John, the messenger, would arrive by the ten o'clock train with a letter of instructions, pending the receipt of which he was to take no action. This necessitated an early breakfast, as the station was some distance away. Before leaving, however, he sealed up the precious document he had found in the secret chamber, and entrusted it to his friend's care; begging him, should he not return, through any foul play of the Colonel's, to see it safely delivered to his Chief in London.

As he drove to the train he had plenty to occupy his thoughts. The letter had been more damaging to the cause of the plotters than he could have hoped. There was sufficient evidence to make out a complete case, and only the intended forbearance of the government could shield the Colonel from well-merited disgrace and condign punishment. In this forbearance Stanley saw, so to speak, his card of re-entry: but he did not see that fate was going to force him to play it in the first round of the game. It was true he was here to bring Darcy to justice for crimes committed against the State, but he must not be judged too harshly for desiring to take advantage of his position to force the Colonel to do justice in quarters not political. He had had great provocation, and the man could be relied on to keep his word only when the penalty for breaking it was actual rather than moral.

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Filled with these thoughts and impulses, he drew up for a moment on his way to the station at Madame Darcy's cottage, but before he could get down from the high dog-cart she came running out to meet him.

"You have good news," she cried, "I can see it in your face."

"Yes," he said. "I got down, or rather fell down, inside the old tower last night, and I have the precious packet in my possession."

"Ah," she said. "I do not know whether I should be glad or sorry. If it contains what I suspect, it must mean so much to me in many ways."

"It is just for that reason that I stopped to see you," he replied. "I wanted to set your mind at rest."

"Then it does not contain incriminating evidence?" she asked.

"On the contrary, it puts everyone connected with the plot completely in my power."

"But then——" she began.

"But then," he continued, taking up her words, "I hope to be able to save your husband from the fruits of his folly."

"But is that possible?"

"I hope so. I shall tell better after I have seen him. We are to have an interview this morning, and all I can say now is, that you must trust implicitly in me and believe that everything will come out all right in the end." [Pg 378]

"I am so selfish that your words make me very happy," said Madame Darcy, "when my heart should be filled with sorrow at the troubles of my friend. This discovery must be a sad blow to you."

"How do you mean?" he said.

"Why, in regard to Miss Fitzgerald."

The Secretary bit his lip.

"It seems impossible," he said tersely, "for us to have a conversation without introducing her name. Surely by this time you must know——"

"I only know what you have told me," she replied.

The Secretary started to say something and then thought better of it, and contented himself by remarking:—

"My eyes have been opened a good deal in the last few days, Inez."

She reached up and took his hand in hers.

"My friend," she said, "I understand."

For a moment there was silence between them, and then pulling himself together, he explained that he was on his way to an appointment. So he left her, smiling at him through her tears, for in these few moments Inez De Costa had found great sorrow and great joy.

The station, a small rustic affair, at which few trains stopped, seemed at first glance to be bare of passengers, and on accosting a porter, the Secretary was informed that he had yet nearly fifteen minutes to wait. [Pg 379]

"She's in a siding in the next station now, sir, waiting for the London express to pass; it goes through here in about five minutes, and as soon as the line's clear she'll be along."

Stanley thanked him for his information, and, after spending a minute or two with the station-master, negotiating for a match, he lighted a cigarette and emerged on the little platform. To his surprise he found it tenanted by a solitary figure, and that none other than Mr. Arthur Riddle. If he had any luggage it must have been in the luggage-room, for he was without sign of impedimenta, excepting a stout stick. He wore a long, black travelling cloak, and his white, drawn face and the dark circles under his eyes gave evidence of either a sleepless night or great mental anxiety, perhaps of both. He held in his mouth an unlighted cigar, which he was nervously chewing to pieces. Both men became aware of each other's presence at the same instant; both unconsciously hesitated to advance, and then both came forward. Stanley was the first to speak.

"I wasn't aware that you were leaving, Mr. Riddle."

The man looked at him, with the expression of a hunted animal driven to bay; a fear of something worse than death in his eyes.

"How could you think I should do otherwise, after your discoveries of last night?" [Pg 380]

"I think you're making a mistake. But I shan't try to prevent you. I've no fear of losing you even in London. I could lay hands on you where I wished."

"My journey is much farther afield than London."

"There are extradition laws."

"Not where I'm going," he said.

A shrill whistle smote the air, and the porter came hurrying out on the platform, crying:—

"The express, gentlemen, the express! Stand back, please!"

Stanley noticed that unconsciously they had drawn rather near the edge.

"Look out!" he said to Mr. Riddle. "The express is coming!"

"In a moment," replied that gentleman. "I've just dropped my cigar," and indeed it was lying at his feet.

"Hurry up, then, the train is on us! You've no time to lose!"

"I've time enough," he replied, bending deliberately forward.

Some grim note in his voice awoke the Secretary to his true intentions. There was only a second's leeway, the iron monster was even then bursting out of the railway arch at the further end of the platform, with the roar and rush of tremendous speed. Mr. Riddle was bending far forward, overreaching his cigar, making no attempt to get it—was—

Stanley flung his arms about his adversary's waist, and made a superhuman effort to drag him back. [Pg 381]

"You meddling fool, let me alone!" shouted the other.

"No!" panted the Secretary.

"Then come too!" he cried, and rising up, he threw his arms about him, and gathered himself to spring on to the rails in front of the train. All seemed over, the cry of the porter rang in Stanley's ears, the rattle of the train deafened him, the hot breath of the engine seemed blowing in his face. Then somehow his foot caught his opponent's, and the next instant they were falling—to death or life—he could not tell.

A second later they lay prone on the platform. The express had passed them, and vanished in a cloud of dust.

In a moment the porter was assisting them to arise.

"A narrow escape for Mr. Riddle," said the Secretary to the porter, as he picked himself up and recovered his hat, which had rolled to one side. "A very narrow escape from what might have been a nasty accident."

"*Accident!*" exclaimed the porter, with a sarcasm which spoke louder than words.

"I said accident," replied Stanley, slipping a sovereign into the man's hand, and looking him straight in the eyes.

"Oh, quite right, sir. *Accident* it was. Thank ye, sir," and the porter shuffled off, leaving them alone. [Pg 382]

"I suppose you think you've been very clever," said Mr. Riddle, when they were by themselves, "but I'll cheat you yet, never fear," and his hand unconsciously sought a hidden pocket.

"You need be under no apprehensions," the Secretary replied calmly. "I shan't interfere to save your life again, or to prevent you from taking it. I was moved to act as I did solely for the reason that I couldn't bear to see any man throw away so priceless a possession, owing to a misapprehension."

"A misapprehension!" he said, startled.

"Yes. You were desperate enough to contemplate committing suicide, because you supposed you would inevitably be disgraced and punished."

Riddle nodded.

"Well, supposing that this were not the case?"

"What do you mean?" he cried, his face lighting up with the return of hope.

"I mean that it's in my power to let you go free."

The man's face fell.

"But there are conditions," he said.

"There are no conditions."

"How about the Company?"

"It will not be proceeded against, out of a desire to avoid publicity. Both governments will be informed confidentially of the true state of affairs, and it will be carefully watched in the future. If the Company is circumspect, it will be safe. We merely wish to ensure the passage of the Treaty. That is done already. Of course, considering the hands to which you have confided it, you will probably lose your £40,000." [Pg 383]

"I should refuse to receive it under the circumstances."

"So I supposed. I'm expecting a messenger with important instructions from London, so must await the arrival of the down train. If you'll take a seat in the dog-cart, I'll join you presently."

Mr. Riddle bowed, took a few steps in the direction desired, and then pausing, swung round and faced the Secretary, saying:—

"What return can I make you for saving my life?"

"I've only followed my instructions," he replied. "You owe me nothing. I admit, though, that my impulse to save you arose strongly from the fact that I believed you were fitted for better things."

"I am, Mr. Stanley, I am. Believe me, with this exception, I've lived a clean life. I was swept into this thing by the force of circumstances, and in the hope of saving a rotten concern, whose downfall might have ruined hundreds of innocent persons."

"I believe you," said the Secretary. "Here comes the train. I shall expect to find you in the dog-cart."

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CHAPTER XXXVI

THE DAY OF RECKONING

Stanley sat in his room. Before him lay an open letter; below in the hall, John and the Colonel sat waiting his call. The faithful Legation messenger being well informed that once Darcy was closeted with his master, he was to receive the precious letter of evidence from Kent-Lauriston, and return with all speed to London.

But first the Secretary wished to read and re-read his Chief's instructions. It was a clear, concise document, occupying only two sheets of note-paper. Not a word wasted, yet all necessary information given, it ran as follows:—

"Your satisfactory message received and telegraphed to the Executive in cipher, without delay. I may inform you that it is not the intention of the government to prosecute, if the case presented is sufficiently strong to warrant submission from the recalcitrant members of the cabinet. I leave it to your discretion to arrest Darcy. Do not do so if you can obtain his confession without it. We do not wish to proceed against the agents, but against the principals. We will do so, however, if you advise. The points we must prove are as follows:—

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"1st. Evidence of the names of members of the cabinet who are to receive bribes.

"2d. Evidence of the amounts to be received.

"3d. Evidence relating to the Company offering the bribes.

"Send proofs by John, at once, and report to me as soon as possible.

"As ever,
"X—"

On a separate sheet of paper was the following:—

"Private and Confidential."

"I have, in the foregoing, written you a letter which you might show, if necessary, to any of the principals in this affair, should such a course seem advisable. If you obtain possession of the money, in round numbers, £40,000, use it as your discretion suggests. We do not care to handle it officially. You may find it useful in obtaining evidence.

"I have also to inform you that your most satisfactory conduct in this affair will certainly gain you immediate promotion, though it seems desirable that you should return home first, and almost at once, in the capacity of witness, if you are needed.

"*Entre nous*, I have received a cable from Señor De Costa, requesting me to send his daughter, Madame Darcy, home, as soon as suitable escort can be provided. I have replied, nominating you for the post, an office which, I imagine, you will not find irksome. Make this known to Madame Darcy, if she is still in Sussex, and use your discretion in this matter as in all other things. Do not act hastily in anything. You have a great responsibility for one so young, but I am confident you will discharge it to my satisfaction.

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"Cordially,
"X—"

Stanley sat idly for a few minutes, fingering the papers before him. He might seem to be wasting valuable time; as a matter of fact he was very hard at work.

Finally he arose, and, with an air of quick decision, as of one who had made up his mind, he stepped to the opposite wall, and touched the bell. A moment later there came a heavy step on the stairs, a knock, and without waiting for an answer, Colonel Darcy entered the room, threw himself into the most comfortable chair, and scrutinised keenly the little bundle of papers, which the Secretary was in the act of putting into an inside pocket.

Stanley noticed the glance, and replied to the unspoken question, by saying abruptly:—

"It may facilitate matters between us, if I tell you that the evidence is no longer in my possession. It has been sent to the Legation."

The Colonel nodded.

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"I should prefer this to be a purely business interview," continued the young diplomat, "and to that end I will state my case and my conditions, after which you can make any answers or comments you think best."

Another nod from his companion was the only answer he received, so he accordingly proceeded.

"The Executive of my government received, some time ago, information of a plot to defeat a treaty, now pending with Great Britain. The subject of this treaty was an island and sand-bar, lying at the mouth of the — river, on which the — Company have erected large mills for the manufacture of a staple product of my country. As long as we held the island, they secured by government contracts a practical monopoly of the article in question; by the cession of it to Great Britain their business would be much impaired. Do I state the case clearly?"

"I've never heard it put better," replied the Colonel, with a calmness that was admirable.

"Very well—we'll now proceed to the next point. The firm considered that my government's grants were worth to them, the round sum of two hundred thousand dollars, or forty thousand pounds."

"In gold, sovereigns," acquiesced Darcy.

"Yes, I've one of them in my possession."

The Colonel nodded as usual. He evidently felt it idle to waste words in the face of such incontrovertible evidence.

"This amount was to be divided among a majority of the committee, who would pass on the treaty, thus insuring its defeat. The names of the members who would receive bribes, and the amount to be given to each, being arranged beforehand—by you."

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Darcy's face was immovable.

"I said by *you*."

"I heard you."

"You've nothing to say?"

"The accused," said the Colonel, "is never required to convict himself."

"You're quite within your rights; we'll let it pass. I make the statement; you neither affirm or deny it."

"Go on," said Darcy.

"You then come to Sussex to receive the funds from Mr. Riddle, the most important shareholder."

"You're mistaken. Miss Fitzgerald received the money from Mr. Riddle," remarked the Colonel.

"You say nothing of your part in the transaction," commented the Secretary, sternly.

"I thought you wanted the truth of the matter."

"I do—go on."

"When the Company found, thanks to your conversation with, and infatuation for, Miss Fitzgerald, that you had in all probability been set to spy upon us, it was deemed better that I should play a subordinate part," continued Darcy. "Accordingly she was selected to do all the dirty work in this country—collect the money and forward it to London."

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"What part did Kingsland play?"

"None whatever, except that of carrier. I sounded him some weeks ago, and found him too loose-tongued for our purposes. It was Belle's scheme to let him take the treasure to town, and he actually believed the cock-and-bull story she told him about the stereopticon slides."

"As soon as you recovered your lost letter of instructions, you intended to go to London, draw out the forty thousand pounds, embark for my country, and distribute the bribes," resumed Stanley, "but, unfortunately for you, your plans are upset entirely. I have in my possession not only your letter of instructions, but also the name of the bank in which the money now lies, and where it can be detained at my orders."

At this point the Colonel's reserve entirely broke down.

"You hold all the trumps, damn you!" he cried. "Give me your terms and conditions."

"It's not the intention of my government to prosecute the corrupt members of the cabinet for a variety of reasons, which, even with your views on the subject of honour, you'll undoubtedly approve."

Darcy flushed, but said nothing.

"In the first place," continued the Secretary, "the Executive has no desire to wash the government's dirty linen in public, and the story is not so creditable that it should be spread abroad. All that is needed is to insure the passage of the treaty; and it is thought, and thought rightly, that a warning to the opposition, if the true facts are known, and can be proved if necessary, would be quite sufficient to remove their obstruction. Of course, the more overwhelming the proof, the more potent the warning; and, while it's not necessary, understand that, I should prefer your signed confession to round out my case."

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"What do you offer in return?"

"Immunity from prosecution."

"Is that all?"

"*All!* Colonel Darcy, I'd have you to know that it's left entirely to my discretion how to proceed against you. I have it in my power to order your arrest, with a certain term of imprisonment at hard labour."

"Would my evidence be used publicly?"

"I think I can assure against that in any case."

"What assurance have I that your government will play me fair if I turn state's evidence?"

Stanley thought a moment, and then handed him the Minister's open letter.

The Colonel perused it, nodded quietly, and said:—

"It will do. I accept the terms. Damn it, I can't do otherwise! Give me pen, ink, and paper. What do you want me to write?"

"In substance what I've said to you."

"Very well."

"Kindly leave out all reference, by name, to Lieutenant Kingsland and Miss Fitzgerald."

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"Ha! I suppose you still think she's an angel."

"I know she is a woman, Colonel Darcy."

For some time there was no sound in the room but the scratching of pen to paper. At length, however, the Colonel raised his head from his work, and, pushing it towards the Secretary, said laconically:—

"Will it do?"

"Quite," replied Stanley, after perusing it. "Will you sign it, please? Thanks, I'll witness."

"There," said the Colonel, rising. "That closes our interview."

"Not quite yet, Colonel. I've still an advantageous offer to make to you, in reward for some further concessions of a different character. The case for the government is closed. Our private affairs yet remain to be settled."

"By Gad! You're right there! They do!"

"There is that little trifle of the forty thousand pounds. Suppose I was to give you that amount."

"What!!!" exclaimed his hearer, petrified with astonishment. "You mean to say that you will give it to me?"

"Never, Colonel, never! I shall go to the Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England in London, say the day after to-morrow, to warn them about the money. If you draw it out before that time, why, it's my misfortune. I'll be perfectly frank with you, Colonel Darcy. My government doesn't want the handling of this coin, its disposal is left to me. You see it's for everybody's interest to lose this large sum. When the cabinet knows that the truth has been discovered—they know it now, by the way—it was cabled in cipher—there's not one of them who would touch a penny of it. The company can't receive it without giving a receipt, which might prove damaging evidence; while neither government can take it without becoming a party to the transaction. I'm willing to give it to you, if you'll do two things in return. Two disagreeable things, I admit, to a conscientious man; but they're each worth twenty thousand pounds."

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"I'd sell my soul for that!" said he with a laugh.

"My dear Colonel, are you sure you have it to sell?"

"What are the conditions?"

"First, that you consent to a divorce from Madame Darcy."

"Humph! That's a nice thing to ask a man. Moreover, it's not worth anything. In fact it's a clear loss. My wife's property, of which I have the use, is worth far more than that."

"But you don't have the use of it, Colonel."

"Well, I should have to pay alimony—then."

"I'll guarantee you against that. Moreover, she'd get her divorce in any event, and then you'd have nothing."

"You're quite right. A pretty woman, who knows how to have hysterics, can get anything in a court of law. My wife's an expert in the latter accomplishment, and she's good-looking enough to corrupt any jury that was ever empanelled. I give in, it's no use playing a losing game. Now for the second."

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"The second is purely confidential."

"Go on."

"I'd like to know exactly what you and Miss Fitzgerald expected to receive for this transaction, and whether these letters," producing the ones Madame Darcy had given him, "do not relate solely to it?"

Darcy laughed.

"You're paying rather a high price for that young lady's character," he said.

"A woman's character should be above any price, Colonel Darcy. We seem to have differing standards of value, which does not, however, alter the main question of whether you will accede to my conditions."

"Certainly I will, and permit me to tell you that you're paying more than either of them is worth."

"That is for me to decide."

"Quite so. Now how do you wish me to aid in my wife's divorce?"

"A statement signed by you, to the effect that you would not contest a suit for divorce—say on the grounds of incompatibility of temper, coupled by your promise of non-interference, would be sufficient. As Madame Darcy is not a Catholic, and her father is a power in his own country, she would have no trouble, legal or religious, in using such evidence."

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"Oh, is that all?" said the Colonel, manifestly relieved. "I supposed you wanted statutory grounds."

"I wish to save your wife as much pain and annoyance as possible, and it would be well if you felt the same."

"Oh!" exclaimed Darcy. "So that's the way the land lies, is it? A very interesting way for a young man who is in love with one of the women, and engaged to the other."

"You'll please attend to business, and not discuss my affairs," broke in the Secretary, sharply.

"Quite right, quite right; pardon me—there, it's only a few lines, but I think it will give my wife her freedom when she requires it," and he handed him a paper, adding:—"Now let me go."

"Two things you've forgotten," said Stanley. "Your promise not to appear against your wife in her suit for divorce—"

"That's understood!"

"Do you give it?"

"Yes. I promise not to appear against my wife in her suit for divorce, or in any way to impede its progress. Does that satisfy you? You'll find I'm a man of my word, Mr. Stanley, when I'm as well paid for it, as in the present case."

"Now what did you expect to receive from this transaction?"

"Ten per cent. on the amount distributed—say four thousand pounds."

"I see. And what did you propose to give to Miss Fitzgerald?"

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"I said I'd share it with her."

"That is, you'd each have two thousand pounds."

"Exactly—but she's such a mercenary, avaricious little baggage, she struck for more; said she had the most dangerous part to perform, and by Gad! they allotted her three-fourths."

"Three thousand pounds. Quite a neat little sum."

"Rather! I was only to receive one thousand pounds."

"Now about those letters?"

Darcy looked them over hurriedly, and remarked:—

"Purely commercial."

"So I supposed. But how do you explain that sentence in your letter, in which you refer to there being a happy future for both of you?"

The Colonel thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked the Secretary squarely in the face.

"See here, Stanley," he said. "I'm not altogether a cad, and I'll be damned if I explain any more."

The Secretary flushed, and there was an awkward silence, which he broke by speaking nervously.

"That's all, I think," he continued, "except—I suppose you'll have no trouble in getting the money?"

Darcy laughed.

"Give me twenty-four hours," he said.

The Secretary nodded.

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"Well, I must be going," remarked the Colonel regretfully, as if he was just bringing to a close a protracted, but delightful, interview. "You've paid a high price for rather indifferent goods, young man, and to show you that I'm dealing fair, I'll throw in a bit of advice. Drop our Irish friend as soon as you know how. Take my word for it, she's a thoroughly bad lot. I don't care what you're worth, she'd run through it in five years, and then——"

"Don't say it!" commanded the Secretary.

"As you like, it's the truth. The money will be in the Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England till day after to-morrow? Yes. Thank you, Mr. Stanley. Trust you're satisfied. I am. Good day."

The door closed. He was gone.

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CHAPTER XXXVII

THE PRICE OF KNOWLEDGE

"I can never thank you sufficiently for all you've done, old man," said Stanley to Kent-Lauriston, as the latter stood beside him, a few moments later.

"Which means," said his friend, "that you are going to ask me to do you another favour."

"How well you understand human nature," replied the Secretary, smiling sadly. "Yes, it's quite true; I want you to go to—*her*—you understand, for me. I meant to go myself, but after what Darcy has told me, it's impossible."

"It's infinitely better to leave the affair in my hands. It will be easier for both of you."

"I'm sure of it. You once said to me, you may remember, that it required more skill to break than to make an engagement, and I'm certain that you'd do this with great tact, and that I should blunder. You'll make it as easy for her as you can, I know—perhaps she'll save you any awkwardness by breaking it off herself. From what she said yesterday, I should think it possible."

"I trust so."

"Here are her letters to me—you'll take them back."

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"I will. Do you feel sure of yourself?"

"You need have no fears on that account. I think Madame Darcy was right when she told me once that she was certain that I'd never loved."

"What reason did she give for that statement?"

"Reason—that's just it, she said I'd reasoned about my love, therefore it couldn't be real."

"Madame Darcy is a very clever woman."

"And a very charming one."

"I fully agree with you, but of course she has her drawbacks."

"You think so?"

"Her present position is, to say the least, equivocal; and as a divorcée——"

"Oh, come, Kent-Lauriston, can't you let anyone alone? I never think of those things in connection with her. She's just Madame Darcy—that's all. She forms her own environment; one is so

completely dominated by her presence, that other circumstances connected with her don't occur to one."

"In other words, you do not reason."

"Kent-Lauriston!"

"There, I won't say it—only you admit that so far I've known you better than you've known yourself.— Yes?— Well, do not forget what I once told you before. You can never love a woman whom you cannot respect, and no woman who respects herself would permit even a hint of a man's affections until she was free to receive them. Any such premature attempt would be fatal to his suit."

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"Thank you," said Stanley, "I won't forget;" and then, with a touch of his old humour, which the responsibilities of the last few days had nearly crushed out, he added: "You're not going to try to save me again?"

"No, thank you, one experience of that sort has been quite enough," replied Kent-Lauriston, laughing.

"Now about this present matter," continued the Secretary. "I don't want you to think me callous or shallow, because I don't appear all broken up; it has hit me very hard. I admit I was a fool, that I took for real passion a sort of sentimentalism born of pity; but, nevertheless, I was honest in my self-deception, and I assure you, even though you may laugh at me, that could I restore her to the innocent girl I believed her to be a few days ago; could I even be assured that she'd join this conspiracy to help a friend, and not as a cold-blooded speculation; I'd gladly marry her with all her faults, and give up my life to leading her into better paths."

"I do not laugh at you, my boy," said Kent-Lauriston. "I respect you for it, I believe you, too; but, as I said in our first interview on this subject, you're too good for her; and she has underrated what she is not fitted to understand."

"There, go now," said the Secretary. "If I talk of this any more, I shall be unnerved, and I've need of all my self-control to-day. Go and do the best you can. Be gentle and tender for my sake. I suppose I ought to face the matter myself, but I can't bear to. I simply can't look her in the face—now I know——" and he bent his head, choking back a sob.

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His friend pressed his hand silently, and left the room.

"Just one moment, if you please, Colonel Darcy," Kent-Lauriston had said, overtaking that officer as he was crossing the park, about an hour after his interview with Stanley.

"I can't stop just now, I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, yes, you can—you can spare me a minute—a minute for an old acquaintance, who knew you when you were only a Lieutenant, like our friend Kingsland; a Lieutenant in Derbyshire, who had aspirations for the hand of Lord ——'s daughter."

"Which you frustrated, damn you! I haven't forgotten."

"Or the evidence which led to such an unfortunate result? Affairs of that sort are not outlawed by the lapse of years; you understand?"

"What do you want of me? Speak! My time is of value."

"Yes, I know—about forty thousand pounds."

"Humph! Go on, will you. I'll tell you what you want, only be quick about it."

"I merely want to know the exact and real truth of Miss Fitzgerald's connection with this bribery and corruption business."

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"I told your friend, the Secretary."

"I know what you *told* him, he's just retailed it to me; but you will pardon me, if I state that, as an observer, of human nature, I don't believe it."

"I've said what I've said," replied the Colonel, surlily.

"Let us see if we can't arrive at a mutual understanding," continued Kent-Lauriston, suavely. "You wish to injure the girl and make her marriage with my friend impossible, because you think she's betrayed you. I wish to render the marriage impossible, because I don't care to see this young man make a fool of himself by marrying a girl who's after his money, and who has nothing to offer in return. Our ends are identical, our motives only are different. Do you follow me?"

The Colonel nodded.

"Now," resumed Kent-Lauriston, "you've told a very clever circumstantial story, which has ruined her in Stanley's eyes, and has stopped the match, as we both wished. Its only flaw lies in the fact that it is not true. If he finds this out, he'll marry her in spite of us; but he is much less likely to find it out if I know the real state of the case, and, as a corollary, the weak points of your

narrative, and so am able to prevent the discovery. Do you believe me?"

"I never knew you to tell a lie—it's not in your line."

"Quite so. Therefore, will you tell *me* the truth?"

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"The truth, then, is that Belle didn't instigate the plot. I got her out of a scrape some years ago, and she was grateful, and lent me a hand with this, purely out of friendship. She doesn't expect to get a penny in reward. It was her idea, however, of using Kingsland to forward the stuff."

"Kingsland knew nothing about it?"

"Nothing at all. He thought the chests contained stereopticon slides."

"That's the real truth then?"

"Yes, but if you blow it to Stanley, I'll tell him your share in this little arrangement."

Kent-Lauriston looked at him, coldly. "You said you were in a hurry, Colonel Darcy," he remarked. "Don't let me detain you."

"I consider it providential," said the Marchioness.

Mrs. Roberts said nothing. It was this trait that rendered her so admirable as a hostess and a friend.

"Of course," continued her Ladyship, "I had long known that there was some sentiment between my dear Isabelle and Lieutenant Kingsland, and if I had supposed there was anything serious, they would at once have had my blessing, and—er—a wedding in St. George's, and—everything that religion requires. Their secret marriage was childish and ridiculous—because it was not opposed."

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Mrs. Roberts still held her peace.

"I say," continued the Dowager, "that it was not opposed; of course Mr. Stanley——"

"Ah," said her hostess, seeing that she was expected to intervene: "Mr. Stanley—what of him?"

"Well, you see, my dear Mrs. Roberts, he's a most excellent young man; but he comes from a Catholic country—and—er—the influence is so insidious, that, on consideration, I didn't really feel—that my duty as a mother would permit me to countenance the match further."

Mrs. Roberts said nothing, she had been ill-used in this particular, she felt, and withheld her sympathy accordingly.

The Dowager appreciated the position, and acted promptly.

"Your dear niece, Miss Fitzgerald, such a charming girl," she continued, "doubtless feels as I do. Her throwing Stanley over unreservedly was most commendable, and reflected much credit on your influence, dear Mrs. Roberts."

Her hostess was mollified, and showed it. The Dowager's position promised to turn defeat into triumph.

"You're most kind, I'm sure," she murmured. "Belle was naturally guided by me," and then changing a dangerous subject, she continued, "It is so sad that Lieutenant Kingsland's honeymoon should be darkened by his uncle's death."

Her Ladyship dried an imaginary tear, and added:—

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"If one believes in Providence, one must of course believe that these things are for the best."

"Here comes the Secretary," said Mrs. Roberts. "Does he know?"

"I must tell him," replied the Dowager. "It's my painful duty."

Mrs. Roberts precipitately left the room.

"Dear Mr. Stanley," murmured the Dowager, "I was just on the point of sending for you; you've come most opportunely. I feel I must speak to you about my dear daughter. She is a sadly wilful girl, and I fear——"

"Don't speak of it, your Ladyship. I know, that is, I've heard; and permit me to offer my congratulations on your daughter's recent marriage to Lieutenant Kingsland," he said, throwing into his voice what he trusted might pass for a note of resignation.

"Dear Mr. Stanley," said the Dowager, infinitely relieved, "you are so tactful, so generous——"

"I hope she'll be happy."

"Oh yes—yes—we must hope so." And her Ladyship sighed deeply. "*You*, of course, know what I wished from my heart."

"I'm going away," he said abruptly, "this afternoon in fact. I'm assigned on a diplomatic service, which, for the present, may take me out of England, so you'll make my adieux to Lady Isabelle, will you not?"

"I—er—trust you do not contemplate doing anything—foolish?"

"You may set your mind at rest on that score."

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"You relieve me immensely—you'll excuse me if I'm too frank. I've come so near being a—er—mother to you, I feel a peculiar interest in your welfare. May I venture to express the hope, that you'll not commit yourself with that young Irish person?"

"Your ladyship may feel quite easy— Miss Fitzgerald and I have never been more than friends, and in the future——"

"Of course one must be kind; but a young man cannot be too careful. I assure you in regard to the young woman in question, that I was told in strict confidence—the most shocking——"

"Pardon me," he interrupted, "but I couldn't think of violating your strict confidence," and he passed by her out of the room.

"That young man," said the Dowager, in summing him up to a friend, "has tact, but lacks reserve."

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE PRICE OF LOVE

"Have you come to insult me, Mr. Kent-Lauriston?"

Isabelle Fitzgerald stood in a wooded recess of the park, beside a young sapling; the one no more fair and tall and glorious with the joy of living than the other. Kent-Lauriston was beside her, hat in hand, with just the trace of a cynical smile about his parted lips; but serious enough with it all, well realising the gravity of the task he had undertaken, and pitying from his heart the fair girl who stood white and scornful before him, her garden hat hanging from its ribbon, unconsciously held in her hand.

"Have you come to insult me, Mr. Kent-Lauriston?" She said it defiantly, as if it were a gage of battle.

"I have come to apologise to you," he replied quietly.

"You tell me that *he* has sent you to me. Well, I know what that means. I *knew* why you came to the Hall, I would have stopped you if I could. You were my enemy, I felt it the moment I saw you. I *knew* you would have your way then. What chance had an unfortunate girl, whose only hope rested in the love of the man she loved, as against one who has made hundreds of matches, and broken hundreds of hearts? You owe me an apology you think—it is very good of you, I appreciate it deeply," and she made him an obeisance.

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"I've not come to apologise to you for any point that I've gained, but for the means I must employ to gain it."

"Really," she said, her eyes blazing. "This *is* a condescension. Are not any means good enough to cope with an adventuress like myself—a young woman who is deterred by no conventions, and no maidenly reserve; whose every art and wile is strained to lure on to their fate weak and unsuspecting young men. Is it possible that such a person has any rights that need be respected?"

"Really, Miss Fitzgerald," said Kent-Lauriston, placidly, "you surprise me. In addition to the numerous virtues, which I'm confident you possess, I'd added in my own mind that paramount one, of cool clear-headedness. This lady, I had told myself, is at all events perfectly free from hysteria or nervous affections; she can discuss an unpleasant subject, if necessary, in its practical bearings, without flying into a fit of rage, and wandering hopelessly from the point. It appears that I was mistaken."

"No," she replied brusquely, "you are not; You've summed up my character very well, but you must remember that you've nothing to gain or lose in this matter. You're merely playing the game—directing the moves of the pawns. The problem is interesting, amusing, if you like, but whether you win or lose, you've nothing wagered on the result. But the pawn! Its very existence is at stake—a false move is made, and it disappears from the board."

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"Quite true! But the pawn has a better chance of life, if the moves are considered calmly, than if played at random; it is then inevitably lost."

"You're right," she said, seating herself on a grassy bank near by: "perfectly right. Let us talk this matter over calmly. I shan't forget myself again."

He seated himself beside her.

"Now frankly," she continued, "before you saw me, or spoke to me, you'd made up your mind to save your friend from my clutches, had you not? I beg your pardon—doubtless, you'd disapprove of such an expression—we'll say, you had determined to prevent him from marrying me."

"Frankly speaking, yes, I had."

"But you knew nothing about me; you could know nothing about me, except on hearsay."

"Pardon me—I knew your late father, and I was at Colonel Belleston's, when you ran off with his heir-apparent, and were not found till half the country-side had been searched, and the dinner quite spoiled."

"But Georgie Belleston was only eight, and I scarcely twelve. We had determined, I remember, to join a circus—no, he wanted to fight Indians; but it was childish nonsense."

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"The spirit was there, nevertheless. But in the present case I was considering Mr. Stanley, I must confess, rather than yourself. The world, my dear young lady, is an open market, a prosaic, mercantile world."

"Don't you suppose I know that?"

"I'm willing to believe it if you wish me to do so. It will help us to understand the commonsense proposition that marriageable young men, like cabbages, have a market value, and that a young man like our friend, who has a great deal to offer, should—shall I be perfectly plain, and say—should expect a pretty handsome return for himself."

"And you didn't think that I'd much to offer," she said, laughing. "In other words, that you'd be selling your cabbages very cheap. Eh?"

Kent-Lauriston said nothing, but she saw the impression she had produced, and bit her lips in mortified rage. She wished at least to win this man's respect, and she was showing herself to him in her very worst light.

"I had, as you say," she continued, "nothing to offer Mr. Stanley but my love; but I dare say you don't believe in love, Mr. Kent-Lauriston."

"Not believe in love? My dear young lady, it forms the basis of every possible marriage."

"Does it never form the *whole* of such a union?"

"Only too often, but these are the impossible marriages, and ninety-nine per cent. of them prove failures, or worse."

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"I can't believe you—if one loves, nothing else counts."

"Quite true for the time being, but God help the man or woman who mistakes the passion aroused by a pretty face or form for the real lasting article, and wagers his life on it."

"You've never married; you can, therefore, talk as you please."

"My dear Miss Fitzgerald, if I'd ever married, I should probably not talk at all."

"You don't regard our affair as serious?"

"Not on Mr. Stanley's side?"

"And on mine?"

"That we shall see later on; but my young friend is in his salad days, and he's not responsible, but he is almost too honest."

"I suppose you'll say I tempted him."

"N-o—but you let him fall."

"However, you were at hand to rescue him. I wonder you should have wasted your valuable time in going through the formality of consulting me over so trivial an affair."

"But it's not trivial. I thought it was till this morning, now I've changed my mind. It's very serious. I've a right to save my friend from making a fool of himself, when he only is the real sufferer; but it's a very different question when the rights of another person are involved, especially when that person is a woman."

"So you've come to me?"

"To persuade you, if possible, to relinquish those rights."

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"For his sake?"

"No, for your own."

"Really—that's a novel point of view to take of the matter."

"You think so. I only want you to see the affair in its true light, to realise that the game isn't worth the candle."

"I think you'll find it difficult to prove that."

"We shall see. Suppose I state the case. Here are you, a charming young lady of good family, but no means, thrown on your own resources; in a word, with the opportunity of marrying a—shall we say, *pliable*—young man, of good official standing, and an undoubtedly large income and principal; who is infatuated—thinks he's fallen in love with you, and whom you really love. There, have I stated the case fairly?"

"So fairly, that you'll find it difficult to prove your point."

"Let me continue. Suppose you're married; grand ceremonial, great *éclat*, delighted friends and relatives, handsome presents, diamonds and all—he'd do the thing well—honeymoon, say, the Riviera—limit, three months—what next? Where are you going to live? London? It won't do. Property—that property you're so interested in—can't take care of itself; the young heir of those broad plantations must go home and learn the business. Your practical mind shows you the necessity of that. Do you know the life of his native country? No? Your nearest neighbours thirty miles away, and deadly dull at that; your climate a damp, sultry fog; your amusements, sleeping in a hammock two-thirds of the day, when the mosquitoes will let you, and your husband's society, as sole company, the rest of the time. After two or three years, or perhaps four or five—long enough to ruin your matchless complexion, and cause you both to be forgotten by all your friends, except those who can't afford to do so—you come back to London for a nice long visit—say three months. How you will enjoy it! Let me see, what do you most like? Horses, riding, hunting? Ever heard the Secretary's ideas on hunting?"

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She laughed nervously, and Kent-Lauriston pursued his subject.

"Then he's so indefatigable at balls and parties; I've known him to stay half an hour, when he's been feeling fit! His friends, too, such dear old fogies, like your esteemed aunt, not like *your* friends—you know how fond he is of them. The Kingslands and Darcys of your acquaintance would simply revel in the house of a man who never plays cards for money, and can't tell an eighty from a ninety-eight champagne—and he'd be master in his own house, too—you received an ultimatum yesterday. A man who will do that to a woman to whom he isn't even quite engaged will command his wife and see that she obeys him. You would have before you the choice of living in an atmosphere and associating with people entirely uncongenial to you, or living wholly apart from your husband; either would be intolerable. Have I proved my point?"

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"You've forgotten to include in your charming sketch that I should still have the comforts of life, and, what is more important, a house to cover me, enough to eat and drink, and clothes to wear—things which I have sometimes in the past found it pretty difficult to obtain."

"True, but you'd be paying too high a price for them, much too high. Take my word for it, again and again you'd long to be back in your present state; yes, and in harder straits than you are now."

"What you say to me could be equally well applied to Mr. Stanley, in reverse."

"Quite so; it sums up in the mere fact, that you two have nothing in common except passion and sentimentality, very frail corner stones on which to build a life's happiness. You're not even companionable. What are you going to talk about for the rest of your lives? It's an appalling prospect. I want to save you both from making a very bad bargain."

"I don't agree with you," she cried vehemently, springing to her feet, "not at all; but what difference does it make? I know well enough I'm not really to be consulted as to the issue; you'd never have had the effrontery to speak to me as you have done, if you were not already sure of the game. To use a commercial phrase, you've cornered the market, and can make what terms you please. I must accede to them."

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"You entirely mistake the situation, Miss Fitzgerald," he said, calmly rising, and facing her. "It is you who have cornered the market, and it is I who must buy at your price."

"Explain yourself! What do you mean?" she cried, a gleam of hope, almost of triumph, lighting up her face.

Kent-Lauriston was now playing a bold game.

"I mean," he replied, "that circumstances have rendered me powerless to prevent Mr. Stanley's marrying you, if you allow him to do so."

"Tell me!—" she exclaimed abruptly.

"It's for that purpose that I've sought you out."

She nodded. She was watching him guardedly.

"I've admitted that our young friend was in love with you. I don't say you encouraged him, but you certainly excited his pity, a very dangerous proceeding with a person of his nature."

"What's all this to do with my position?"

"A great deal," resumed Kent-Lauriston. "You see, I want you to understand your hold over Mr. Stanley—it's really because he pities you." The girl flushed painfully. "Excuse me if I speak things which are unpleasant, but you most understand your weakness, and your strength. You've nearly

ruined yourself by being too clever, and now, by the wildest stroke of luck, you're in a very strong position."

"Would you mind speaking plainly?"

"Certainly. In a word, the situation is just this. Within the last few days, Mr. Stanley has made three discoveries about you, which have gone far to destroy his sympathy for you, and make him believe that his pity or his love, as he chooses to call it, has been misplaced. Two of these discoveries I believe to be true; one—the worst—I know to be false. If he discovers how shockingly you've been maligned, he'll probably forget the past, and, in a burst of contrition at having so misjudged you, will do what his common sense forbids—I mean, marry you."

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"You're really becoming interesting. I had underrated your abilities. Pray be more explicit," she said, quite at her ease at these reassuring words, and putting Kent-Lauriston down, mentally, as a fool for giving the game away, when he need only have kept silent to have had it all in his own hands.

He read her thoughts and smiled quietly, for, by her expression, he could gauge the depth of her subtlety. She was no match for him, if she were innocent enough to believe him capable of such folly.

"You compliment me," he returned, "but to go on—in the first place, he learned of your connection with Lady Isabelle's marriage. It opened his eyes somewhat."

"She told him?"

"She did. You forced her to do so, by your threat against her husband."

Miss Fitzgerald bit her lip, and said nothing.

"Lady Isabelle," continued Kent-Lauriston, "in appealing to the Secretary to save her husband, gave him the clue he was searching for; which resulted in his discovery of the friendly turn you had done the Lieutenant, in making him unconsciously, shall we say, *particeps criminis*?"

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"Ah!"

"Have you seen Colonel Darcy to-day?"

She paused for a moment, considering, and then decided it was better to be straightforward, and replied:

"Not since yesterday morning. I went to see him last evening, but found him out."

"I know you did."

Miss Fitzgerald breathed a sigh of relief. It was well she had decided not to lie to this man.

"You're probably not aware, then," continued Kent-Lauriston, "that Stanley succeeded in opening the secret door last night, and obtained possession of Darcy's letter of instructions."

The Irish girl turned very white, looking as if she were going to faint.

"Then he knows everything," she whispered.

"Everything," replied her tormentor. "The details of the plot he has known for some time, being stationed here by the Legation to watch the Colonel—but it was not till Darcy was brought to book this morning, and in order to save himself, signed a written confession, that he really knew the extent to which *you* were incriminated."

She burst into tears. Kent-Lauriston proceeded unconcernedly with his story.

"The Colonel's chivalry is not of such a nature as would cause him to hesitate in shifting all the responsibility he could, on the shoulders of a woman."

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She dried her tears at that, and her eyes fairly snapped.

"The fact," resumed Kent-Lauriston, "that Stanley had on several occasions tried to help you to clear yourself, and the fact that you'd persistently—well—not done so—made matters all the worse. In short, on these two counts alone, you had given evidence of an amount of deceit and cold-blooded calculation that completely upset even such an optimist as he. Still, I think he would have overlooked it, if properly managed—if that had been the worst."

"Can anything be worse?"

"Yes, for this last charge against you is not true."

"Go on."

"You placed yourself in Darcy's power. A clever woman, a really clever woman, my dear Miss Fitzgerald, would not have done that. It would be easy for him to manufacture circumstantial evidence, to back any lie he might choose to exploit, to your discredit. Say, for instance, that you were the prime mover in this plot, and that you went into it for a financial consideration, for three thousand pounds."

"But Bob never would——"

"Wouldn't he, when he was thirsting for revenge, believing that your careless threat against Lieutenant Kingsland had ruined his hopes."

"Did he do this?"

[Pg 418]

"He did, and that is why I'm here this morning in Mr. Stanley's place—commissioned to return to you your letters," and he handed her the packet.

"It's not true!" she cried. "Before Heaven, Mr. Kent-Lauriston, it is not true!"

"I know it's not true, for Darcy's confessed to me."

"But Mr. Stanley does not know."

"No."

"Then he must be told."

"If you tell him he'll fling prudence to the winds in an agony of remorse, and you'll have won the game."

"You mean he'll keep to his engagement?"

"I mean he'll marry you."

"And you dare to ask any woman to allow such a slander to live when she can deny it?"

"I ask you, for your own sake, for the reasons I've stated, for your future happiness, and as an escape from certain misery—to let him go."

"I tell you I love him."

"Then I ask you for *his* sake. A brilliant diplomatic career is just opening before him, as the result of the discovery of this plot. Is his government likely to repose confidence in him in the future, with you as his wife—a woman who has practised treason? His father would never receive you, and might disinherit him. Do you love this man so little that you wish to ruin him?"

"I tell you I love him—you do not understand."

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"I understand that you love him in one of two ways. If it's a great love it's capable of sacrifice to prove its greatness. Show that it is so by giving him up. If it's any other sort of love it will not stand the strain to which you propose to subject it, and within six months after your marriage you'll realise that you've ruined two lives, and are yourself the chief sufferer. Come, prove that what you say is true, and save him from himself."

"But if I do, I do it at a fearful price. It means social ostracism."

"Not at all. Who will know of this charge against you? Four people at the most, and not one of them will ever speak of it. Darcy, who originated the lie, will, for obvious reasons, keep silent. Stanley's the soul of honour; he'd rather tear his tongue out than speak a word of it. I've proved my discretion through several generations, and Kingsland must be held in check by you."

"Why do you include Lieutenant Kingsland?"

"Because, I believe, he holds the only piece of evidence which could appear to substantiate Darcy's trumped-up lie."

"And that is?"

"The receipt for the forty thousand pounds *in your name*."

"And you wish me to ask Kingsland to proclaim my own shame!"

"I wish you to ask him to give that receipt to the Secretary."

"Now I see why you come to me, why you did not ruthlessly throw me over; your little plot had a weak point, and you needed my co-operation to complete my own degradation!"

[Pg 420]

"Miss Fitzgerald is fast becoming a diplomatist!"

"I'm a fool!"

"Pardon me, you are nearer wisdom than you've ever been in your life."

"If—I—do—this," she said very slowly, "you must help me to reinstate myself in the eyes of the world."

"I've told you it'll not be necessary."

"Bah! I know the world better than you do, with all your cleverness. Mine is a practical, not a theoretical, knowledge."

Kent-Lauriston bowed.

"They'll talk, no matter if it be truth or not. It will be believed. I must have a few questions answered in any event."

"Ask them."

"Who is Mr. Stanley to marry?"

"Madame Darcy."

"But——"

"Her husband has consented to the divorce."

"On what grounds?"

"Incompatibility of temper, I believe."

"So you think the Secretary will marry her?"

"I'll take charge of that matter."

"I know they love each other!" she exclaimed, passionately. "It was love at first sight. Then there was a misunderstanding. Now, one more question. This sum of forty thousand pounds?"

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"Yes, what of it?"

"Who's to have it?"

"Darcy."

"What!"

"The Secretary told him he might draw it from the bank to-morrow, as, well—as compensation for turning State's evidence."

She laughed a harsh, unmusical laugh.

"You've won," she said. "I will do what you wish—for his sake."

"I believed that you would," he replied gravely, but one eyelid raised just a trifle. She saw it, and turned on him like a flash.

"No!" she cried, "it isn't for that reason! I've some good in me yet, some pride! I tell you, it's not your cleverness that has done this! I wouldn't surrender my good name for the sake of any man in the world! I wouldn't allow the breath of suspicion to linger in the minds of my friends, for the love of your friend, or any other weak fool, whom I can turn round my fingers! No! the reason I surrender is because your last words have told me how I can right myself before all the world, save one man; and I'll consent to sacrifice my reputation in his eyes, because I love him. But for all that, Robert Darcy cannot divorce the woman who bears his name."

"Why not?"

"Because she's not his wife."

"Not his wife! Who is his wife, then?"

"I am."

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CHAPTER XXXIX

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

"You are Robert Darcy's wife," he said slowly, trying to adjust his ideas to this altered state of affairs. Then, as some comprehension of the results which would follow this declaration dawned upon him, he continued:—

"Why have you told me this?"

"Because I need your co-operation, and you're the only man I know whom I can trust to keep the secret."

"I've given you no pledge to do so."

"Quite true, and I've asked for none; but I've misread you sadly, if you can't keep a still tongue in your head, when the advantage to all concerned by so doing can be made clear to you."

"Can you prove your point?"

"Yes, even to your satisfaction."

"I'm all attention," he said.

"In the first place," she began, "you must understand that Colonel Darcy and I were secretly married four years ago, in Ireland. I'll show you my marriage certificate, to prove my words, when we return to the house. I always carry it with me in case of an emergency."

"The Colonel married me under the impression that I was an heiress. I married him because I thought I loved him. We both discovered our mistakes within the first few days. No one knew of the step we had taken, so we agreed to separate. This is a practical age. As Miss Fitzgerald I'd hosts of friends; as Mrs. Darcy, a girl who had made a worse than foolish marriage, I should have had none. The Colonel had expected his wife to support him; he was in no condition to support her. His regiment was ordered to India; if he resigned, his income was gone. We decided to keep our secret. I remained Miss Fitzgerald. He went to India. Three years later he was invalided home. Travelling for his health, he returned by way of South America. There he met Inez De Costa, and won her love. She combined the two things he most craved, position and wealth. He had heard nothing from me for many months. He allowed his inclinations to guide his reason, and, trusting that I was dead, or had done something foolish, he married her and returned to England. We met. My natural impulse was to denounce him, but sober second thought showed the futility of such a course. I'd nothing to gain; everything to lose. He sent me money. I returned it. Do you believe that?"

"I believe you implicitly," replied Kent-Lauriston.

"Then he came to see me; for I think he still loved me. He came, I say, fearfully at first, lest I should betray him. Then growing bolder, he threw off all reserve. Believing, fool that he was, because I didn't denounce him, that I could ever forget or forgive the wrong he'd done me. He mistook compliance for forgetfulness, even had the audacity to suggest that I, too, should marry." [Pg 424]

"Then this scheme for defeating the treaty was proposed to him. He was willing enough to undertake it, for his second matrimonial venture had been a pecuniary failure, thanks to the wisdom of Señor De Costa in tying up his daughter's property; but he lacked the brains to carry it out, and, like the fool that he is, came to me for assistance. I had lulled his suspicions, and he needed a confederate. He even held out vague promises of a future for us both, as if I'd believe his attested oath, after what had passed! I consented to help him, and would have brought the matter to a successful issue, if it hadn't been for his stupidity. What did I care about the success or failure of his plot? It had put the man in my power, put him where I wanted to have him. At any time within the last six weeks I could have forced him to publicly recognise me, if need were."

"What prevented you from doing this?"

"I'd fallen in love with your friend. Yes, I admit it. It was weak, pitiably weak. At first I played with him, then too late I understood my own feelings."

"But it could have come to nothing."

"Can you suppose I didn't realise that keenly? Yet I hoped against hope that Darcy would die; that he'd be apprehended and imprisoned, and perish of the rigours of hard labour; anything that would set me free. Then I saw that Stanley loved Inez De Costa. It was an added pang, but it caused me to hesitate; because in taking my revenge, I should wreck both their lives." [Pg 425]

"But you? Had you pity for Inez De Costa?"

"Yes, incomprehensible as it may seem to you; for I'd learned to loathe Darcy before he had committed bigamy. I never met her till that night at the Hyde Park Club, and she asked me if I knew her husband. *Her husband!* I pitied her from that moment. She'd done me no wrong. Why should I wreck her life, if it could be avoided?"

"And now?"

"Now you've solved the problem. Darcy won't dare to contest the suit for divorce. He'll be glad to get rid of her, because he can't control her money. Having the purse-strings, I can force him to recognise me as his wife, after the divorce has been granted. I shall have an assured position, and I can begin to pay back some of my debts," and her eyes flashed.

"And in all this, what is there to compel me to keep your secret?"

"Because the marriage between Inez De Costa and Mr. Stanley might never take place if they knew the truth. I'll keep the secret if you will. She's in no way to blame. At first I hated her; now that I've known her, my hate is turned to pity." [Pg 426]

"You're right," said Kent-Lauriston. "I'll keep your secret inviolate."

"Now about the receipt for the forty thousand pounds."

"Yes?"

"I think Mr. Stanley had better see it, it'll save further awkwardness, but I must have it back. It's my one hold over Darcy, my one chance of righting myself."

"There's a receipt for the amount," said Kent-Lauriston, tearing out a leaf from his note-book, on which he wrote a few lines. "I'll be responsible for its return to you. I can't do less."

"Here comes Lieutenant Kingsland now," she said. "Don't say anything. I'll manage this affair."

"Jack!" she called, "come here a moment."

The young officer approached.

"Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"You needn't hesitate to speak before Mr. Kent-Lauriston," she assured him. "He's one of my *best* friends. You've not forgotten the promise which you made me, when I helped you about arranging your wedding, to do anything I might request?"

"No, and I'd do it if the occasion required," he replied heartily.

"Good," she said, "the occasion is here."

"What must I do?"

"You hold in your possession a receipt from the Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England for the deposit in my name of five chests belonging to Mr. Riddle." [Pg 427]

"Yes, I've been meaning to give it to you."

"I wish you to give it to Mr. Stanley."

"To Mr. Stanley?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"All, except that I charge you, on your honour, never to let him know I asked you to do this. Tell him only that I gave you the chests, and how you disposed of them, and place the receipt in his hands, as coming from yourself. Not a syllable about me, mind!"

"I'll follow your instructions literally; but how am I to have the opportunity of doing this?"

"Mr. Stanley will give you the opportunity, perhaps to-day. Then see that you do it."

"I promise."

"Swear."

"Well, I swear on my honour as an officer and a gentleman."

"Good. One more word. Before to-night you may change your feelings towards me, may feel absolved from all obligations to me; but whatever events occur, do not forget that you have sworn to do this on your honour as an officer and as a gentleman, without any mental reservations whatsoever, and to do neither less nor more than this."

"You can trust me, and if you think that anything my wife——"

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"No! no! I do trust you. Go now, and give Mr. Stanley a chance to see you at once. You'll be serving me best so."

He left them wondering, and, she, turning to Kent-Lauriston, said:—

"I tell you it is the greatest proof of my affection for him; for what he thinks of me is worth all the criticism of the world and more. Oh, you may scoff! I know you think him too good for me!"

"Pardon me," interrupted Kent-Lauriston, taking off his hat, and bowing his head over her hand, which he held, "I have misunderstood you."

It was nearly two hours later that the Secretary found time, amidst the distractions of a hurried departure, for he had made his peace with his hostess and was leaving for town that afternoon, to redeem his promise to Lady Isabelle.

"Is Lieutenant Kingsland in the house?" he asked of the servant, who answered his summons.

"He's in the billiard-room, sir."

"Very well. Will you present my compliments to him, and ask him to be so kind as to come to my room for a few minutes?"

In less time than it takes to tell it, the young officer responded to the summons, saying as he entered:—

"Here I am. Can I do anything for you?"

"Perhaps. But I sent for you primarily for the purpose of doing you a favour."

"That sounds encouraging. By the way, did you know that your especial admiration, Darcy, was planning to vacate at the earliest opportunity?" [Pg 429]

"Yes," replied the Secretary, drily. "I gave him leave to go, but he's to all intents and purposes under arrest."

"The devil!"

"Quite so, there's the devil to pay, and I'm afraid you may have to foot part of the bill, if you're not careful."

"What do you mean?" cried the Lieutenant, starting uneasily.

"I'll explain. That's why I sent for you; but you mustn't resent a certain inquisitiveness on my part. It's only for your good."

"Go on, go on!"

"You went to London a few days ago, and executed a commission for Darcy."

"No—for Belle Fitzgerald."

"It's the same thing."

"I think not. There were some chests containing stereopticon slides, and Belle asked me to put them in a bank for her."

"The Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England."

"Exactly."

"A good many slides, I imagine; rather heavy, weren't they?"

"Gad, I should think they were. It took two porters to lift each chest."

"I suppose you told the bank authorities what was in the chests?"

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"No, I was told there was nothing to say. I was only to surrender them, and a sealed note, which would explain all."

"Did they give you a receipt for it?"

"Yes."

"Can anybody get the chests out?"

"No, only the person mentioned in the receipt."

"Have you still got the receipt?"

"Yes."

"Very good," said the Secretary. "I see your luck has not deserted you."

"And now," said Kingsland, "that I've answered all your questions, perhaps you'll tell me what you mean."

"This is what I mean," replied Stanley, handing him that first part of his Minister's letter which he had shown to Darcy.

The Lieutenant read it once, not understanding its purport; then again, his brow becoming wrinkled with anxiety; and yet again, with a very white face.

"What is it?" he gasped.

"It looks dangerously like treason, doesn't it?" returned the Secretary.

"But what is this bribe?"

"You ought to know that, as you carried it up to London, in sovereigns."

"What—how much was it?"

"Forty thousand pounds in gold."

"Good heavens!" said the Lieutenant, and mopped his brow. "But I didn't know anything about it!"

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"That doesn't prevent you from having participated in one of the most rascally plots of your day and generation; from being a party in an attempt to overthrow, by the most open and shameless bribery, a treaty pending between the government you serve and mine."

"But, if this gets out, I'll be cashiered from the navy."

"Oh, I don't think they'd stop there," said the Secretary reassuringly. "Not with the proof of that receipt."

"Good Lord, I forgot that! Here, take it, will you?"

"Certainly. Suppose we open it and see if it proves my assertion," and, suiting the action to the word, he placed in the Lieutenant's shaking hands a receipt of deposit in the Victoria Street Branch of the Bank of England, by Miss Isabelle Fitzgerald, kindness of Lieutenant J. Kingsland, of forty thousand pounds.

"Can't you help me?" he asked.

"It rests entirely with me."

"Then you will?"

"Tell me all you know."

"But I don't know anything, except what I've told you. I give you my word as an officer and a gentleman, that I've been let into this affair in a most shameful manner, and that I'm entirely innocent, and ignorant of everything connected with it."

"I believe you, Lieutenant Kingsland."

"And you won't prosecute?"

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"Not if you'll promise to drop this gang; they're a bad lot. Promise me you'll cut loose from them as soon as possible, for your wife's sake."

"I will," he said. "I will, old man. I can't thank you enough for what you've done."

"You've nothing to thank me for; I'm sure you are innocent, and so I don't consider the circumstantial evidence; but you might not be as lucky another time. I hope this will be a lesson to you. I need hardly caution you to silence," and he appeared to peruse some papers to ease the young officer's exit from the room.

That evening in the privacy of the library, the Lieutenant confided the news of his lucky escape to his wife, ending up with the question:

"Do you think the Fitzgerald really loves him?"

"My dear Jack," said Lady Isabelle, "a woman of that stamp does not know what love means, she's simply scheming to marry him for his money. How can people do such things?"

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," replied her spouse, yawning. The subject was inopportune, and it bored him.

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CHAPTER XL

THE PRICE OF A LIE

Stanley had made all his adieux, or at least all he wanted to make. He was tired with the exciting events of the day, and longed for a little peace and quiet before the exacting ordeal of a railway ride to London. He had given up the time-table as a Chinese puzzle. "What with the trains that go somewhere and those that don't," he protested, "I'm all at sea!" He, therefore, sent Kent-Lauriston ahead in the trap, and walked across the park to the station.

That gentleman had convinced him of the propriety of restoring the order for the forty thousand pounds to Miss Fitzgerald. He had pointed out that she was the rightful owner of the document, and that Darcy was an infernal rascal. The Secretary had acquiesced in his demand, and promised, should he not see Belle before he left, an interview he much wished to avoid, that he would mail it to her from the station.

He had first, however, a far more pleasant commission to perform, and a few minutes later was seated under the spreading branches of an old apple tree with Inez Darcy.

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"I felt I must come and see you," he said. "I'm going away to-day, to London, on important business."

"Yes," she murmured. "You've been very good to me."

"Some time ago," he continued, "you did me the honour to entrust your affairs to my keeping, or, perhaps, to the keeping of the Legation."

"To your keeping, I should prefer."

"I fear that you may think I've been remiss, that other things have taken my mind off them, that I've, in short, forgotten them, but it is not so."

"I never doubted you."

"I hope to prove to you that you've not misplaced your confidence, in evidence of which I bring you this," and he handed her a paper.

"What is it?" she said.

"A line from your husband," she started, "which gives you your freedom."

"You mean a divorce?"

"Yes."

"But I do not understand."

"He agreed to consent to your obtaining such a decree on any ground you choose. I've decided on 'incompatibility of temper,' as being the least embarrassing to you. He will not appear to contest the suit when it is brought forward. This paper, signed in my presence, promises as much."

"My husband is a bad man, he would never have surrendered unless he was forced to do so; for he believes that by retaining the control of me, he may yet obtain control of my property."

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"Perhaps he has seen the futility of these hopes."

"No, no, his own self-conceit would have blinded him to the possibility of being outwitted. You've forced this from him. How have you done so?"

"I had hoped you would not press me for these reasons. Can't you accept my assurance that whatever I've done, has been done in your interests alone."

"Don't think me ungrateful if I say no, but I've had to endure so many mysteries, that, for once, my great desire is to be clear of them."

"I hesitate to tell you, because it may give you pain."

"I am used to that and can bear it."

"Well, if you will have it. Colonel Darcy, as a result of his own actions, was placed in my power."

"You mean that it was your duty to have him arrested?"

"That was left to my discretion."

"And you forced his consent?"

"No, I gave him a chance to purchase his freedom, and a substantial reward, by a confession, and this——" and he touched the paper.

"But had you a right——?"

"I had a right to make any terms I pleased. I was given unlimited power to impose my own conditions, and I'm sure, had my Chief known, he would have wished you to derive any benefit possible from the transaction."

"It's dearly bought with that man's disgrace. In the eyes of the world, he will still be my husband."

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"There will be no disgrace."

"I do not understand."

"The government doesn't wish to punish Colonel Darcy; it merely wishes for his evidence, to aid in the detection of others."

"But his name will appear."

"It is strictly stipulated that it shall not do so; be assured your secret is safe."

"And he could have sunk so low as to sell himself and those who trusted him."

"They were criminals."

"It doesn't lessen his treachery."

"Don't waste a thought on him, least of all any sentimental emotion. He wasted little enough on you, and would have insulted you in my presence, had I permitted it; he sold your freedom with less compunction than he sold his honour or his friends."

"Enough!" she cried, her eyes sparkling. "He is forgotten. We will speak of something else. Let me use my time to better purpose, by trying to thank you—to begin to thank you, for all you've done for me."

"You can repay me if you like."

"What is the payment, then, for which you ask?"

"My Chief has received a request from your father this morning, that you be put in charge of some responsible person, to come home to him."

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"Ah!" she said, "that is no favour, it is good news."

"You must hear me out. Your father requested the Minister to nominate your escort."

"Well?"

"He has nominated me."

"What, are you going home?"

"Almost at once. Will you trust yourself in my hands?"

"Trust you! I will go with you anywhere! I will trust you always!"

"Perhaps," he said, looking down into her eyes, as he stood before her, "I shall ask you to fulfil those promises some day."

"Perhaps," she replied, rising and standing by his side, "I shall then be free to answer you," and a radiant smile lit up her face.

They took each other's hands, and stood silent for a long time. Then he bade her good-bye, and resumed his walk to the station.

Midway in his path, a figure lying prone in the tall grass roused itself into action at his coming, sprang up and stood facing him, flushed, defiant, and on the verge of tears.

It was the last person in the world Stanley wished to see—Belle Fitzgerald. He had felt it was impossible to meet her again; that she had put herself beyond the pale of his recognition; that it was not even decent that she should face him; that he should have been left to forget; and she, seeing all this in his face, and more—longed to throw her good resolutions to the winds, and cry out against this great injustice. But as they stood there, her subtle woman's instinct told her that, even were her innocence proclaimed with the trumpet, the thought that it had been otherwise would stand between them as an insurmountable barrier for ever, and she hardened her heart for his sake.

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"You are going away," she said.

"Yes," he replied, looking down at the road. She told herself passionately, that he would look anywhere rather than at her.

"Some of your property has come into my possession," he said. "I wish to return it to you," and he handed her the receipt for the forty thousand pounds.

"I'll trust you'll see," he continued, in a strained voice, "that Colonel Darcy has his proper share."

"He shall have what he deserves," she replied coldly; and then she burst out, her words tumbling one over the other, now that she had found speech: "You ought to know, you must know, that when Colonel Darcy is free, we shall be man and wife."

"I'm very glad," he said, and he said it from his heart.

There was an awkward pause, neither seemed able to speak. At length he remarked, more to break the silence than anything:—

"You know, I always thought, that, in your heart, you loved Darcy, before anyone else."

She laughed her hard, cold laugh, saying:—

"You diplomats know everything."

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The Secretary bowed silently and passed on, well satisfied to close the interview; his thoughts full of the brilliant future which was opening before him, unconscious that behind him, face down in the grass, a woman was sobbing her heart out.

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