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Author: Archibald Marshall

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THE ELDEST SON

BY

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

Author of "Exton Manor"

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To
KATHLEEN

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CHAPTER

CHAPTER I

THE SQUIRE IS INFERNALLY WORRIED

"Nina," said the Squire, "I'm most infernally worried." He was sitting in his wife's morning-room, in a low chair by the fire. In front of him was a table set for tea for one—himself. There were buttered toast and dry toast and preserves, a massive silver teapot, milk jug, cream jug, and sugar basin, a breakfast cup of China tea, and two boiled eggs, one of which he was attacking, sitting forward in his chair with his legs bent. He had come in from hunting a few minutes before, at about six o'clock, and it was his habit thus to consume viands which most men of his age and bulk might have been afraid of, as likely to spoil their dinner. But he was an active man, in spite of his fifty-nine years and his tendency to put on flesh, and it would have taken more than a tea that was almost a meal to reduce his appetite for dinner at eight, after a day in the saddle and a lunch off sandwiches and a flask of sherry. When his tea was over he would indulge himself in half an hour's nap, with the *Times* open at the leader page on his knee, and go up to dress, feeling every inch of him a sportsman and an English country gentleman.

His tea was generally brought to him in his library. This evening a footman had followed him into that room immediately upon his entering the house, as usual, had unbuckled his spurs, pulled off his boots for him, and put on in their place a pair of velvet slippers worked in silk, which had been warming in front of the fire. Only when his coat was wet or much splashed with mud did the Squire change that. He considered smoking-jackets rather effeminate, and slippers, on ordinary occasions, "sloppy." It was only in his dressing-room or on these evenings after hunting that he wore them. Otherwise, if he had to change his boots during the daytime he put on another pair. He was particular on little points like this. All his rules were kept precisely, by himself and those about him.

This evening he had told the footman, and the butler who had followed him into the room with the tray, that he would have his tea in Mrs. Clinton's room, and he had marched across the hall with a firm and decisive step, in his red coat and buckskin breeches, between which and his hand-knitted heather-mixture socks showed a white expanse of under-drawers round a muscular calf.

Mrs. Clinton sat opposite to him in another low chair, at work on a woollen waistcoat. He always wore waistcoats made by her, thick for the winter, light for the summer, and she knitted his socks for him, of which he required a large number, for he hated them to be darned. He liked to see her working for him like this. He was a rich man, but a woman ought to work with her hands for her husband, whether he was rich or poor. It was her wifely duty, and incidentally it kept her out of mischief. Mrs. Clinton, at the age of fifty-four, with her smooth yellow-grey hair and her quiet and composed face, did not look as if she would be up to serious mischief, even if this and other restrictions were removed from her. She looked up when her husband addressed her, and marked the furrow between his heavy eyebrows. Then she looked down again at her work and waited for him to unbosom himself further.

"How old is Dick?" asked the Squire, leaning forward to put a spoonful of yolk of egg into his mouth with one hand, while he shielded his grey beard with the other.

She knew then the subject upon which he had expressed himself as infernally worried, for he was not accustomed to keep the first stirrings of discontent to himself.

"He was thirty-four last April," she said.

"Thirty-four," he repeated. "Yes; and I was *twenty*-four when I married you. That's early. I shouldn't advise any young man to marry at that age, unless, perhaps, he was the only one to keep a name going—as I was, of course—at least in my immediate family. But thirty-four! It's really time Dick thought about it. He's the eldest son. It's his duty. And as far as I can see he never gives the matter a thought. Eh?"

"As far as I can see he is not thinking about it," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Well, if *I* couldn't see *you* couldn't see. I say it is time that he did begin thinking about it. I'm getting on now—good for another twenty years, I should hope, but I want to see the succession assured. Walter is the only one of the boys that's married, and he's only got two girls. Of course, he may have a son—they're coming pretty quick—but I've never got over that doctoring business. I shouldn't like the heir of Kencote to be brought up in a place like Melbury Park, and I say so freely—to you."

This was the echo of an old disturbance. The Squire's third son had refused to take Orders, with a view of occupying the family living, but had studied medicine, and was now practising in a suburb of London, and not one of the most genteel suburbs either. That furrow always appeared faintly in the Squire's brow when he was forced to mention the distasteful words Melbury Park.

"I think it would be a good thing if Dick were to marry," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Good thing? Of course it would be a good thing. That's just what I'm saying. There's Humphrey; he doesn't look much like marrying, either. In fact, if he doesn't pick up a wife with a pot of money, I'd rather he didn't. He spends quite enough as it is. I've no opinion of that London life, except for a bit when a man's young and before he settles down. Dick has been in the Guards now for—what?—twelve years. I never meant that he should take up soldiering as a profession. Just a few years spent with a good regiment—as I had myself, in the Blues—that's all right for a young fellow who has a good property to succeed to. But an eldest son ought to settle down, *on* the property, and get married, and have sons to succeed *him*."

"Dick comes here a good deal," said Mrs. Clinton, "and he takes an interest in the property."

"Well, I should hope he did," responded the Squire. "The property will belong to him when my time's over. What do you mean?"

"I only mean that Dick is not wrapped up in London life and all that goes with it, as Humphrey seems to be."

"Oh, Humphrey! I've no patience with Humphrey. If Kencote isn't good enough for him let him stay away. Only I won't pay any more bills for him. He has a good allowance and he must keep within it. I've told him so. Now if I'd put *him* into the army, instead of the Foreign Office, he might have stuck to it and made a profession of it. I wish I had—into a working regiment. It would have done him all the good in the world. However, I don't want to talk about Humphrey. I don't expect an heir to come from him; and Frank is too young to marry yet. Besides—a sailor! It's better for him to marry later. Dick *ought* to marry, and there's an end of it. And when he comes down to-morrow I shall tell him so."

Mrs. Clinton made no immediate reply, but after a pause, during which the Squire came to the end of his eggs and began to attack the buttered toast, she said, "I have to tell you something, Edward, which I am afraid will disturb you."

"Besides," pursued the Squire in his loud, resolute voice, "there's the dower-house standing empty now. If Dick were to get married soon I need not bother about finding a tenant for it. I don't *want* to let it; it's too near here. If we got people there we didn't like it would be an infernal nuisance. Eh, Nina? What were you saying?"

"I am sorry to say," said Mrs. Clinton, "that Miss Bird is going to leave us."

The Squire was just about to put a piece of toast into his mouth, which was half open for its reception. It remained half open while he looked at his wife, the toast arrested halfway. "Miss Bird! Leave us!" he exclaimed when he had found his voice. He could hardly have been more astounded if his wife had announced that *she* was going to leave him, and indeed Miss Bird had lived at Kencote nearly as long as Mrs. Clinton, and had initiated into the mysteries of learning all the young Clintons, from Dick, who was now thirty-four, down to the twins, Joan and Nancy, who were fifteen.

"She has talked about it for some time," said Mrs. Clinton. "She has felt that the children were getting beyond her, and ought to have better teaching than she can give them."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the Squire. "I don't want the children turned into blue-stockings. I'm quite satisfied with what Miss Bird is doing for them, and if she wants telling so, for goodness' sake tell her, and let's have no more of such rubbish. Miss Bird indeed! Who's she to upset the whole house?"

"I am afraid she has determined to go, Edward," said Mrs. Clinton in her equable voice. "Her invalid sister, you know, has lost her husband, and there is no one else to look after her."

The Squire grunted. "Well, if that's the reason," he said, rather grudgingly, "I suppose we can't complain, although it's a most infernal nuisance. I've got used to Miss Bird. She's a silly old creature in some respects, but she's faithful and honest. Now we shall have to get used to somebody else. Really, when one thing goes wrong, everything goes wrong. Life is hardly worth living with all these worries. One never seems to get a moment's peace. I'm going into my room now, Nina, to read the paper for a bit."

"I should like to talk to you for a few minutes longer about the children," said Mrs. Clinton. "As a change has to be made, I want to make a thorough one. It is quite true that they are beyond Miss Bird, even if she could have stayed. I should like to send them to a good school for two or three years, and then to France or Germany for a year."

The Squire bent his brows in an amazed frown. "What on earth can you be thinking of, Nina?" he exclaimed. "France or Germany? Nice healthy English girls—teach 'em to eat frogs and horse-sausage—pick up a lot of affected nonsense! You can put that idea out of your head at once."

Mrs. Clinton's calm face flushed. "There is no need to talk of that for two or three years," she said. "I should like them now—when Miss Bird leaves us—to go to a really good school in England, where they can learn something."

"Learn something? What do you mean—learn something? Haven't they been learning something all their lives—at least since Miss Bird began to teach them? What does a girl want to learn, except how to read and write a good hand and add up accounts? I don't want any spectacled, short-haired, flat-chested females in *my* house, thank you. The children are very well as they are. They're naughty sometimes, I've no doubt, but they're good girls on the whole. Girls ought to be brought up at home under their mother's eye. I can't think what you want to send them away from you for, Nina. It isn't like you. I should have thought you would have missed them. I know *I* should, and they're not going to school."

"I should miss them very much," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Very well, then, let them stop at home. It's quite simple."

Mrs. Clinton was silent, bending her head over her work.

"You would miss them and *I* should miss them," pursued the Squire, after a pause. "No, there's no sense in it."

There was another pause, and then the Squire asked, "Why do you want to send them to school?"

Mrs. Clinton laid down her work and looked at him. "I should be satisfied," she said, "if they could get the teaching they ought to have at home. Perhaps I should prefer it. But it would mean a first-class governess living here, and——"

"Well, there's no objection to that," interrupted the Squire. "I dare say old Miss Bird is a little out of date. Get a good governess by all means; only not a blue-stocking, mind you."

Mrs. Clinton smiled. "I'm afraid she would have to be what you would call a blue-stocking," she said. "But she needn't show it. Clever girls don't wear spectacles and short hair necessarily nowadays."

"Oh, don't they?" said the Squire good-humouredly. He was leaning back in his chair now, looking at the fire. "How are you going to set about getting one?"

"I should ask Emmeline to help me." Emmeline was Lady Birkett, the wife of Mrs. Clinton's brother, the judge.

"Not a bad idea," said the Squire. "But I won't have any of your suffragettes. Herbert is a very good fellow, but he's a most pestilent Radical."

"You would let me offer a good salary, I suppose."

"What do we pay Miss Bird?"

"Only thirty pounds a year. She has never asked for more."

"She's a good old creature. I'm sorry for her sister. Is she well off, do you know?"

"I'm afraid very badly off."

"Then how will they get on? I suppose Miss Bird has saved a bit. She's had no expenses here except her clothes for many years."

"She told me she had saved about four hundred pounds."

"*Has she*? Out of thirty pounds a year! It's extraordinary. Still, that won't give her much, capitalised, poor old creature. I'll tell you what, Nina, I'll talk it over with Dick and see if we can't fix up a little annuity for her. She's served us well and faithfully all these years, and we ought to do something for her."

"Oh, Edward, I am so glad," said Mrs. Clinton. "I hoped you might see your way to helping her. She will be so very grateful."

The Squire lifted himself out of his chair. "Oh yes, we'll do something or other," he said. "Well, get another governess then, Nina, and pay her—what do you want to pay her?—forty?"

Mrs. Clinton hesitated a moment. "I want to get the best I can," she said. "I want to pay her eighty at least."

The Squire, in his moods of good humour, was proof against all annoyance over other people's follies. He laughed. "Oh, I should make it a hundred if I were you," he said.

"When the boys had Mr. Blake in their holidays," said Mrs. Clinton, "he had five pounds a week, and only had to teach them for an hour a day."

"That's a very different thing," said the Squire. "Blake was a University man and a gentleman. You have to pay a private tutor well."

"I want to get a lady," said Mrs. Clinton, "and I should like one who had been to a University."

"Oh, my dear girl," said the Squire, moving off down the room, "have it your own way and pay her what you like. Now is there anything else I can do for you before I go and write a few letters?"

"You are very kind, Edward, in letting me have my way about this. There is one more thing. If the children went to school they would have extra lessons for music and drawing or anything else that they might show talent in. Joan and Nancy have both got talent. I want to be able to have masters for them, from Bathgate—or perhaps even from London—for anything special that their governess cannot teach them."

The Squire was at the door. "Well, upon my word!" he said, nodding his head at her. Then he went out of the room.

CHAPTER II

A QUESTION OF MATRIMONY

Dick Clinton, the eldest son, arrived at Kencote at a quarter to eight, and went straight up to his room to dress. This young man—for, with his spare, upright frame, sleek head, and well-fitting clothes, he looked less than his thirty-four years—was as well served as his father, although he did not get his will by the same means; and the little wrongs of life, each of which the Squire, as they came along, dealt with as "a most infernal nuisance," he took more equably. He had brought his own servant with him, but had no need of him for the time, for his evening clothes were laid out for him, his shirt, with studs in and a collar attached, was hung over the back of a chair in front of the piled-up fire, and he had only to slip out of one suit and into another as if he had been in the house all day instead of having just reached the end of a journey of over three hours. These things were all a matter of course to him. The warm bright room, red-curtained, and quiet from the deep stillness of the country, gave him no particular sensation of pleasure when he entered it, except that he was cold from his journey and there was a good fire; nor, consciously, did the fact that this was his home, which he liked better than any other place, although he was more often than not away from it. He was thinking, as he began immediately in his quick neat way to change his clothes, that there was no apparent sign of the frost yielding, and fighting off his annoyance—for he hated to feel annoyed—at the stoppage of the morrow's hunting. He had very much wanted to hunt on the morrow, more than he usually wanted anything.

And yet he was, though he hardly knew it, pleased to be at home, and in this room, which had been his ever since he had left the nursery. The little iron bedstead was the one on which he had slept as a boy; the flat tin bath, standing against a wall with the bath-mat hung over it, was only rather the worse for wear since those days; the worn carpet, now more worn, was the same; and the nondescript paper on the walls, which were hung with photographs of his "house" at Eton, showing him amongst the rest in five stages, from the little fair-haired boy in his broad collar sitting cross-legged on the grass, to the young man with folded arms in a place of honour by his

tutor. There were later Cambridge groups too, exhibiting him as Master of the Drag, in the eighteenth-century dress of the True Blue Club, and in other conjunctures of pursuits and companions, but nothing to mark a later date than his University days, unless it were the big photographs in silver or tortoise-shell frames on the mantelpiece and writing-table. Probably nothing had been added to the decoration of the room for a dozen years, only a few things for use—a larger wardrobe and dressing-table from another room in the house, a big easy-chair, a fur rug by the bed. The room contained everything he needed in such a room, and since he needed nothing there to please the eye, it had received nothing all these years, and would receive nothing until he should leave it for good, when he should be no longer the eldest son, but in his turn the head of the house.

He had nearly finished dressing when there was a knock at the door, and a voice, "Are you there, Dick? Can we come in?"

His rather expressionless face changed a little, pleasantly. "Yes, come along," he called out, and his young sisters came in in their fresh muslin frocks, their masses of fair hair tied back with big blue ribbons. They had that prim air of being dressed, which is different in the case of girls not quite grown up from that of their elder sisters. They were remarkably alike and remarkably pretty, and Dick, who stood at the dressing-table in his shirt sleeves tying his tie, although he did not turn round to greet them, noticed their appearance with approval through the glass.

"Well, Twankies," he said affably, as they went up to the mantelpiece and stood one on either side of the fire, "what's the news with you?"

"We are to have a new preceptress," said Joan, the elder, "*vice* the old Starling, seconded for service elsewhere."

Dick turned and stared at her. "Old Miss Bird leaving!" he exclaimed. "Surely not!"

"You can't be more surprised than we were," said Nancy—the twins generally spoke alternately. "She broke it to us in floods of tears this afternoon. Joan cried too."

"So did you," retorted Joan. "You blubbered like a seal."

"And it did me credit," said Nancy, accepting the charge with complete equanimity.

"What is she going for?" asked Dick.

"She has to go and look after her sister, poor old thing!" said Joan. "And she doesn't think she knows enough to take us on any further."

"We denied it hotly, to comfort her," continued Nancy. "But it's quite true. We have the brains of the family, and are now going to leave childish things behind us. I wish you'd make your watch ring, Dick."

Dick pressed the spring of his repeater, and the twins listened to its tinkle in silence. Nancy sighed when he put it into his pocket. "Even that isn't the treat that it used to be," she said. "We are getting too old for these simple pleasures. Joan is beginning to take an interest in dress, and I am often to be seen absorbed in a book. Dick, shall you kiss Miss Bird when you say good-bye? There's nothing she would love better."

"When is she going?" asked Dick, ignoring the question.

"In about a week," Joan replied. "Dick, I think you ought to kiss her, if you possibly can. You are the eldest, and nearer her heart than any of us. She told us so."

"I'll give you both a kiss and you can pass it on," said Dick, with an arm round each. "Come along down."

They went down to the morning-room, and on the stroke of eight Dick led his mother into dinner, the Squire following.

The twins settled themselves each in a corner of the big sofa in front of the fire. They usually read during the half-hour before they were summoned to dessert, but this evening they had something to talk about.

"I wonder what she'll be like," Nancy began.

"If Aunt Emmeline chooses her I should think she would be all right," said Joan.

Nancy considered this. "Yes," she said. "But she will have to be kept in her place. Of course we have always been able to do exactly as we like with the old Starling. Joan, we must conserve our liberties."

"Oh, I think we shall be able to do that," said Joan. "We must remain calm and polite."

"And keep up our reputation for eccentricity," added Nancy. Then they both giggled.

"You know, Joan, I think it's rather fun," Nancy proceeded. "I shan't a bit mind learning things now. I should have hated it a year or two ago. But you can't deny that it is rather slow at home."

"That's why Cicely ran away," said Joan. "She simply couldn't stand it any longer. But it doesn't worry me like that. We have a pretty good time on the whole."

"Yes, we see to that. But, of course, Cicely was much older. And after all, she didn't run very far—only to London, to see Walter and Muriel. And she soon came back."

"She had to. I believe there was more in that than we knew about."

Nancy looked up sharply. "Do you? Why?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I believe it had something to do with her engagement to Jim. She was married pretty soon after, anyhow, and there was no talk of it at the time."

"I wonder if we could find out."

"What's the good? And it's over two years ago now. I wonder if Dick would drive us over to Mountfield to see the babies to-morrow. He won't be able to hunt."

"He won't want to see the babies. Men are so silly in that way. They pretend they don't care for them."

"Father doesn't. He's just as silly about them as we are."

"It isn't silliness in us. We are women, and we understand. If a man does like a baby it's just as a toy."

"All the same, I think it does father credit liking his grandchildren. I should hardly have expected it of him."

"He's getting softer in his old age. Nancy, I wonder how mother persuaded him to let us have a really good governess. He'd think it quite absurd that girls should want to learn anything."

"My dear child, you could get anything you wanted out of father if you tackled him in the right way."

"Only some things."

"Anything, I said."

"I'll bet you four weeks' pocket-money that you couldn't get him to let us hunt."

"Oh, well! that's part of his religion. 'I may be old-fashioned—I dare say I am—but to see a pack of women scampering about the country and riding over the hounds—eh, what? No, thank you!' I didn't mean I could make him become a Roman Catholic, or anything of that sort. But I'll bet you what you like I'll get him to let us have a pony."

"Four shillings?"

"Right."

"Do you think you really can, Nancy? It would be jolly."

"I don't see why he shouldn't. Cicely always rode old Tommy, and so did we till he died."

"Only surreptitiously, and bare-backed. We should have to have habits and all that, now."

"Mother would see to that. Anyhow, I'll tackle him."

"How shall you manage it?"

"I shall think out a scheme."

"Dick might help. Nancy, I'll bet you eight weeks' pocket-money you can't get two ponies."

"I'll begin with one, and see how I get on. Now I think I'll immerse myself in a book."

Presently they were called into the dining-room and sat, one on each side of their father, cracking and peeling walnuts for him and eating grapes on their own account, demure and submissively responsive to his affectionate jocularity. "What big girls you're both getting!" he said. "And going to be turned into blue-stockings, eh, what! Have to buy you a pair of spectacles each next time I go to Bathgate." He laughed his big laugh, drank half a glass of port, and beamed on them. He thought they were the prettiest pair of young feminine creatures he had ever seen, and so little trouble too! It was a good thing for a man to have sons to carry on his name, but young girls were an attractive addition to a family, and to the pleasures of a big house. He had thought it rather ridiculous of his wife to present him with the twins fifteen years before,

and seven years after his youngest son was born, but he had long since forgiven her, and would not now have been without them for anything.

When he and Dick were left alone over their wine there was a short pause, and then he cleared his throat and began: "I want to talk to you about something, Dick."

Dick threw a glance at him and took a puff at his cigarette, but made no reply.

The Squire seemed a little nervous, which was not usual with him. "Of course I don't want to interfere with you in any way," he said. "I've always given you a pretty free hand, even with the property, and all that sort of thing. I've consulted you, and you've had your way sometimes when we've differed. That's all right. It will belong to you some day, and you're—what?—thirty-four now."

"Yes," said Dick. "Thirty-four. Time to think of settling down, eh?"

The Squire brightened. "Yes, that's just it," he said. "Time to think of settling down. You've had enough soldiering—much more than I had. I never expected you would stick to it so long."

"I don't want to leave the service yet," said Dick calmly. "I'm down here pretty often—almost all my leave."

"Yes, yes, I know," said the Squire. "But if—if—— Well, look here, Dick—no use beating about the bush—why can't you get married?"

Dick smiled. "It wouldn't be a bad scheme," he said.

The Squire was pleased. He was getting on splendidly. "You feel that," he said. "Well, I haven't liked to say anything, but it's been on my mind for a long time." He then recapitulated the reasons why he thought Dick should marry, as he had enunciated them to Mrs. Clinton—his position as eldest son and heir to a fine property, his advancing age, the inadvisability of looking to Melbury Park as the cradle for a successor to the emoluments and amenities of Kencote, or of leaving it to Humphrey, the second son, to provide an heir. "The fact is, you ought to do it for your own sake," he wound up, "as well as for the sake of the place."

"Whom do you want me to marry?" asked Dick, with a shade of flippancy.

"Oh, well, I'd leave that to you," the Squire conceded handsomely. "You've a lot to offer. I should think you could pretty well take your pick—must have had plenty of opportunities all these years. You needn't look for money, though it's always useful. Any nice girl of good birth—of course you wouldn't want to marry one who wasn't. Good heavens! there must be a score of them presented every year, and you have been about London now for ten or twelve years. Do you mean to say you haven't got one in your mind?"

"Haven't you?" asked Dick.

"Well, if you like to consult me, why not Grace Ettien? Old Humphrey Meadshire would be delighted. She is his favourite granddaughter, and I'm sure he would like to see her married before he goes."

"Grace is a charming girl," replied Dick. "But I don't want to marry my cousin."

"Cousin! My dear fellow, old Humphrey and your grandfather were first cousins. You're surely not going to let that stand in the way."

"I've known her ever since she was a baby. She's a baby now. It would be like marrying one of the Twankies."

The Squire began to get fussed. "You're talking nonsense, Dick," he said. "She must be at least twenty-one. The fact is you have left it so long that an ordinary girl of a marriageable age seems a child to you. You'll be taking up with a widow next."

There was an appreciable pause before Dick asked, "Well, should you object so much to that?"

"Of course I should," said the Squire, "—for you. I shouldn't mind in the case of Humphrey, if she wasn't too old, and had enough money for the pair of them. I'm not going to pay any more of his debts. I'm sick of it."

Dick allowed the conversation to travel down this byroad for a time, and when the Squire brought it back to the original track, said, "Well, I'll think over what you say. But I don't know that I should care, now, about marrying a young girl."

The Squire turned this over in his mind, looking down on his plate, and his brows came together. "What do you mean?" he asked shortly. "You wouldn't want to marry an old woman."

Dick took his cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it.

"When I marry," he said decisively, "it will probably be a woman of nearer thirty than twenty."

The Squire made the best of it. "Oh, well—as long as she's not over thirty," he said. "Girls don't marry so young as they used to. But—well, you must think of an heir, Dick."

Dick made no reply to this, and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER III

EXIT MISS BIRD

Miss Bird arose on the next morning to find her window glazed with frost, and it was characteristic of her and of the house in which she had lived for over thirty years that her first thought was, "No hunting to-day"; although the deprivation could not be expected to hold any disappointment for herself, or indeed to affect her in any way.

Her second thought marked a drop to the sombre uneasiness in which she had spent wakeful hours during the night. She would not rise many more times in this familiar room, nor look out on to a scene which she had come to know so well at all seasons of the year that she could not help loving it. She would have liked to see the trees of the park, for a farewell, in their early June dress, the grass about them powdered with the yellow of buttercups. But she hoped so to see them again. She had been made to feel that she was parting from friends, that she was by virtue of her long and faithful service part of the family, that she would not lose them altogether. The Squire had said the day before, when he had made known to her that he had heard of her projected departure, "You must come and see us, you know, Miss Bird. The house won't be like itself without you."

Could anything be more gratifying—and from such a man? Mrs. Clinton, of course, had been kindness itself, had said just the right things to make a person feel herself valued, and said them as if she meant them, as no doubt, dear lady, she did, for she was always sincere. And the darling children had cried—she should never forget that as long as she lived—when she had told them that she was going. Here the simple lady found a tear trickling down her own sharp nose, and put a hairpin in her mouth while she wiped it away.

It seemed impossible that she should really be going. It was just upon thirty years since she had first come to Kencote, and it seemed like yesterday. She summoned up a rueful little smile when she recalled, in the light of her now assured position as "a member of the family," her palpitating nervousness on her introduction to the great house, so different from anything she had known. She had never been "out" before. She had had a good education, for those days, in the day school that her mother, the doctor's widow, and her elder sister had carried on in a little town in which she had been born, and had taught in it till she was twenty-eight. Then, after deep consultation, she had answered Mrs. Clinton's advertisement, and, her references having proved satisfactory, had been engaged to impart the rudiments of education to a child of five, which she had modestly thought she was as capable of doing as anybody, and at a salary that seemed to her munificent.

She remembered arriving at Kencote on a spring evening and being received by Mrs. Clinton, the pretty young wife and mother, who had been almost as shy as herself, but had been so anxious that everything should be "nice" for her that she had soon lost her awe of the big house and the many servants; and even the figure in the background from which all the splendour around her emanated lost some of its imaginative terror, since the lady of the house had proved so accessibly human. She had thought the little boy, whom she had been taken to see in bed, a darling, and so quaint when he asked her solemnly if she could jump a pony over a log, because he could. She had liked his quiet, elderly nurse, who had come to talk to her in her schoolroom when he had gone to sleep. She had called her "miss," and shown that she had no wish to "presume," but only the wish to be friendly, and they had, in fact, remained friends for years. She had been greatly pleased with the size and comfort of her schoolroom, which she had entirely to herself, to read or write or play the piano in, outside hours of lessons, which were at first as short as was conceivably possible. And she had not in the least expected that there would be a maid for the schoolroom, who was, as she wrote to her sister, practically her own maid, calling her in the morning and bringing her a cup of tea, lighting a fire for her every evening in her bedroom as a matter of course, and indeed treating her as if she might be the mistress of the house.

She had been happy at Kencote from the first, although she had been a good deal alone, for until her little pupil had grown bigger she had had all her meals sent up to her in the schoolroom, except on Sundays, when she lunched downstairs in charge of little Dick. Those were nervous occasions, for it took her a long time to get used to the Squire—the young Squire, as he was then—with his loud laugh and hearty ways, who used to chaff her at table in a way to cause her uneasiness, although he was never anything but kind, and she was assured, even when she blushed deepest, that his manner was only intended to put her at her ease and make her feel

"one of the family."

She had soon lost any awe she may have started with of Mrs. Clinton, although her respect for that lady's character had only grown with the passage of time. Mrs. Clinton used to sit with her sometimes in the schoolroom, and in the summer time they would work under the big lime in the garden while little Dick played about on the lawn. Miss Bird's simple gaiety of heart had had play, and her rather breathless volubility had never been checked by any stiffness on the part of Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Beach, the Rector of Kencote, and the Squire's half-brother, had always treated her with consideration, and his wife had made her feel at home in the rectory, and expected her to visit there occasionally on her own account. The Squire's six maiden aunts at the dower-house, all but one of whom were now dead, had also treated her kindly, but in a rather more patronising manner. She had not minded that. She had quite agreed with the opinion which underlay everything they said and did, though it was seldom expressed in words, that the Clintons of Kencote were great people in the land, and her native humility had led her to accept gratefully the attentions paid to her by them and their neighbours, and to "presume" on it no more than little Dick's nurse had presumed on her own mild gentility.

She had found little Dick rather a handful as he grew older, but she had coped successfully with him, by the expenditure of much energy of speech and action, and had courageously beaten the beginnings of learning into his brain, so that he took a good place at his first school, and she was not disgraced. By that time Humphrey was ready for her guiding hand, and then Walter, and a few years later, Cicely, hailed with joy as a pupil whom she might train up to the fine finish; for there could be no talk of school for a girl Clinton, and Miss Bird's success with Dick had given her a high place as an instructress in the Squire's estimate of her abilities, so that there was never any idea of her being some day superseded, and the years at Kencote stretched happily in front of her.

Cicely was nine, and Frank, the sailor, seven, when the twins arrived. The day of their birth was a good day in Miss Bird's annals. It meant more years still at Kencote, and by this time the idea of living with any other family would have been most distressing to her. And yet she would have had to seek another situation but for the arrival of the twins, for when she should have finished with Cicely she would be fifty only, and would not have put by enough money to enable her to retire. These are the hardships of a governess's lot, and Miss Bird had them fully in her mind, saving and skimping all through the fruitful years for a time when not only the opulences of existence in a house like Kencote should be hers no longer, but it might be difficult to make ends meet at all. The twins lifted a weight off her mind, which, with all her daily cheerfulness and courage, had never been quite absent from her; for another nine or ten years would just enable her to provide for her old age, and she knew that those nine or ten years would be hers if she could only keep her health, of which there seemed no reasonable doubt. "It is not many women in my position who are as fortunate as I," she had written to her sister at the time. "The Squire, who *roared* with laughter when he heard of the birth of the darling babies, said to me the first time he saw me afterwards, 'Well, that fixes *you* for another twenty years, Miss Bird.' And he added in a way which you might think profane if you had not heard him say it, 'Thank God, eh?'"

Well, here was the end of those happy years, which seemed to have sped like a week or two since the birth of the twins. She had seen Walter and Cicely married and had dandled their babies. She had shared Mrs. Clinton's daily anxiety during the long months Dick had served in South Africa, and had taken his award of a D.S.O. almost as a personal compliment. She had been glad at all the joys of the family and saddened with their sorrows. She had seen the Squire grow from a handsome young man to an elderly one, and Mrs. Clinton's hair turn nearly white. She had boxes and drawers full of the presents she had received at Christmas and on her birthdays, which had never been forgotten, and the photographs of Clintons of all ages from babyhood upwards were displayed on every available standing place in her room. They were more to her than her sister or her sister's children, but the call had come to her to leave them and to go to a place where she would have to work hard and anxiously for the rest of her life on a very small pittance and in very narrow surroundings, and it had never occurred to her to shirk it. It had all fitted in—she felt that she had been "guided." The teaching which she had never doubted that she was able to give to Cicely now seemed to her inadequate for the finish of the twins' education, but she did doubt, now that her departure had been settled for her on other grounds, whether she would have had the strength to say so and cut herself adrift of her own accord. Here was matter for thankfulness—that she had been led to see what her duty was, and to do it. She would always have Kencote to look back to, and she was indeed fortunate to have spent the best part of her life in such a place, and with such people.

The twins came in as she was finishing her toilette, to take her down to breakfast. This was a reversal of the procedure of the past, when it had been the first of her daily duties to hunt them out of whatever spot out of doors or in to which their vagrant fancy had led them, and see that they appeared to the public eye duly washed, combed, and brushed. They embraced her, enveloping her wizened form with their exuberant youth, like flowers round a peastick, and she was moved to the depths of her being, though all she said was, "Now, Joan 'n' Nancy, don't be rough. You can love a person without untidying her hair."

"Are your nails quite clean, Starling darling?" asked Joan, taking one of her hands and examining it.

"And are you quite sure you've brushed your teeth properly?" enquired Nancy.

"Now don't *tease*, Joan 'n' Nancy," said Miss Bird, disengaging herself. "I shall only be here another week and you must try and be *good* girls and let me go away remembering that."

"Joan was saying this morning as we were dressing," said Nancy, "that she was very sorry now to think of all the trouble she had given you, Starling darling, and if she could have the time over again she would behave very differently."

"Idiot!" retorted Joan. "It's you who have given the trouble. Starling has often said that if it weren't for your example I should be a very good girl, haven't you, Starling darling?"

"You would *both* be good girls if it wasn't for the other's example," replied Miss Bird. "And you can be dear good girls as good as gold and I hope you will when the new governess comes to teach you."

"I hope we shall, but I doubt it," said Joan.

"You see, Starling darling, what we would do for you we couldn't be expected to do for a stranger whom we didn't love, could we?" said Nancy.

Miss Bird was moved by this, and would have liked to embrace the speaker, with words of endearment. But she had grown rather wary of exhibiting affection towards her pupils, who were apt to respond so voluminously as to leave her crumpled, if not actually dishevelled.

"Well, if you love me as much as you say you do," she said, "you will remember all the things I have told you; now are you *quite* ready for breakfast, because it is time to go down?"

"We told Dick you would like him to kiss you before you went, and I think he will," said Joan innocently, as they went down the broad staircase all three abreast.

"Now, Joan, if you *really* said a thing like that—oh, take care! take care!" Miss Bird had tried to stop on the stairs and withdraw her arm from Joan's, who, assisted by Nancy on the other side, had led her on so that she tripped over the next step, and would have fallen but for the firm grasp of the twins. She was led into the dining-room, protesting volubly, until she saw that Mrs. Clinton and Dick were there, when the episode ended.

When breakfast was over the Squire surprised her by asking her immediate attendance in his room, to which she followed him across the hall in a flutter of apprehension. It would not be quite true to say that she had never been into this room during the thirty years of her sojourn at Kencote, but it was certainly the first time she had entered it on the Squire's invitation. He did not ask her to take a seat, nor did he take one himself, but stood in front of the fire with his coat tails over his arm and his hands in his pockets.

"There's a little matter of business I should like to settle with you, Miss Bird," he said. "You've lived here a considerable number of years, and you've done remarkably well by us and the children. If everybody did their duty in life as well as you, Miss Bird, the world 'ud be a better place than it is, by George! Now I want to do a little something for you, as you've done so much for us, and I've talked it over with Dick, and we are going to buy you a little annuity of fifty pounds a year, which with what my wife tells me you've saved will put you out of anxiety for the future; and I'll tell you this, Miss Bird, that I never—Eh, what! Oh, my good woman ... God's sake ... here, don't take on like that ... Gobblessme, what's to be done?"

For Miss Bird, overcome by this last great mark of esteem, had broken down and was now sobbing into her handkerchief. Knowing, however, the Squire's dislike of a scene she succeeded in controlling herself, and addressed him with no more than an occasional hiccup. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Clinton; I couldn't help it and it's too much and I thank you from the bottom of my heart and shall never forget it as long as I live and it's just like all the rest of the kindness I've received in this house which I could never repay if I lived to be a hundred."

"Well, I'm very glad it meets your views, Miss Bird," said the Squire, greatly relieved at the subsidence of emotion, and anxious to escape further thanks. "And I assure you the obligation's still on our side. Now, I must write some letters, and I dare say you've got something to do, too."

Miss Bird retired to her bedroom where, unrebuked, she shed her tears of thankfulness, then wiped her eyes and sponged her face and went about the duties of the day.

These did not, this morning, include lessons for the twins, for it was Saturday, which was for them a holiday, when complete freedom was tempered only by the necessity of "practising." Dick had refused to drive them over to Mountfield to see their sister and her babies, but had offered them a walk to the dower-house during the course of the morning.

"I wonder what he wants to go there for?" said Joan, as they went upstairs.

"There's more in this," said Nancy, "than meets the eye."

There did not, however, seem to be more in it than a natural desire to see a house empty which one has always known occupied, and this desire the twins shared. They found Dick in an affable mood as they walked across the park together—the sort of affectionately jovial mood of

which they had occasionally taken advantage to secure a temporary addition to their income. Indeed, it seemed to have brought Dick himself a reminder of his young sisters' financial requirements, for he asked them, "Have you saved up enough money for your camera yet, Twankies?"

Neither of them replied for the moment, then Joan said rather stiffly, "We shan't be able to buy that for some time."

"Why, you only wanted twenty-five shillings to make it up a month ago, and I gave you a sovereign towards it," said Dick.

Another short pause, and then Nancy said, "You gave it us!"

"Yes," said Dick, "to buy a camera. I'm not certain you didn't screw it out of me. I never quite know whether it's my idea or yours when I tip you Twankies. Come now, what have you done with that sovereign?"

"We have spent it on a good object," said Joan. "But we do want the camera most frightfully badly, and if you would like to contribute to the fund again it would save us many weary months of waiting."

"To say nothing of a severe economy painful to our generous natures," added Nancy.

"Not till I know what you spent the last contribution on," said Dick. "You're getting regular young spendthrifts. I shall have to look into this, or you'll be ruining me by and by."

"Won't you give us anything more unless we tell you?" enquired Joan; and Nancy amended the question: "Will you give us something more if we do tell you?"

"I'll see," said Dick. "Come, out with it!"

"Well, it's nothing to be ashamed of," said Joan. "We wanted to buy the old Starling a really good present, and out of our own money."

"It took the form of a pair of silver-backed brushes with cupids' heads on them, and cost three pounds seventeen and sixpence," added Nancy.

"They are not cupids, but angels," said Joan, "which are much more adapted to Starling's tastes."

"Well—cupids or angels—it cleaned us entirely out," concluded Nancy.

Dick put an arm round the shoulders of each and gave them a squeeze as they walked. "You're a pair of topping good Twankies," he said. "I'll start your new camera fund. I'll give it you now."

"Thanks awfully, Dick," said Joan, as he took out his sovereign purse, "but I think we'd rather you didn't. You see, it's rather a special occasion—the poor old Starling going away—and we wanted to give her something that would really cost us something."

"I agree with my sister," said Nancy. "But thanks awfully all the same, Dick. You're always a brick."

"Well, I respect the delicacy of your feelings, Twanks," said Dick. "But isn't anybody ever going to be allowed to contribute to the camera fund? How long does the embargo last?"

"There's a good deal in that," said Joan thoughtfully. "Of course we can't refuse tips for ever, can we, Nancy?"

Nancy thought not. "Let's say in a month from to-day," she suggested. "If Dick likes to give us something then and happens to remember it—of course, we shan't remind him—then I think we might accept without feeling pigs."

"I'll make a note of that," said Dick gravely, "when I get home."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOWER-HOUSE

Surrounded by its winter woods and an over-thick growth of evergreens, the little Jacobean hall, which had for centuries been the second home of the Clintons of Kencote, had an air slightly depressing as Dick and the twins came to it through the yew-enclosed garden at the back. White blinds were down behind all the leaded mullioned windows, only one thin thread of smoke rose

into the sky from the carved and twisted chimney-stacks.

Forty years before, when the Squire had succeeded his grandfather, his six spinster aunts had left him in undisturbed possession of the great house and taken up their abode here, very seldom to leave, until one by one they had been carried off to their grave in Kencote churchyard. Aunt Ellen, the eldest of them all, had died at a great age a few months before, and Aunt Laura, the youngest, who was now seventy-eight, had removed herself and her belongings to a smaller house in the village. Neither Dick nor, of course, the twins had ever known the dower-house unassociated with the quiet lives of the old ladies, and they shared in their different degree the same feeling of strangeness as they stood under the porch and listened to the bell echoing in the empty house. It was like a human body from which life had departed, but with its age and many memories it still kept a soul of its own which could be revivified by fresh occupancy.

They went through all the rooms. There was a great deal of fine old furniture in them, things which Clintons of past centuries had bought new, never thinking that they would some day acquire merit as antiquities. There were few such things in the great house, which had been rebuilt after a fire in the reign of Queen Anne and refurnished later still, in the reign of Queen Victoria. Nor had the beautiful things of which the dower-house was full been valued in the least by their owners until long after the six maiden aunts had gone to live there. They had been simply old-fashioned in the eyes of the Squire, their owner, and were so still, for he had no knowledge of such things, and no appreciation of them. Dick knew a little more, and as he looked at one fine old piece of furniture after another, standing forlorn on the carpetless floors, or against the dark panelling of the walls, he said, "By Jove! Twankies, there's some good stuff in this old shanty."

"Who is going to live in it?" asked Joan.

"Ah, that's the question!" replied Dick. "Tell you what, Twankies, let's play a game. Supposing I ever got married, *I* should live here, you know. Let's see how the rooms would pan out."

The twins were quite ready to play this or any other game, although it did not promise much excitement, because there were only quite a limited number of rooms, and most of them were more or less obviously labelled. It seemed, however, that Dick was prepared to play the game seriously, for after they had fixed the dining-room, drawing-room, morning-room, and smoking-room, and a tiny oak parlour which the aunts had used for garden chairs and implements and Dick said would do for his guns if a baize-lined glass cupboard were put up in a recess by the fireplace, he inspected the kitchen premises with some thoroughness.

"I say, Dick, *are* you going to get married and come and live here?" asked Joan, as he began to make notes on the back of an envelope.

"There's more in this than meets the eye," observed Nancy.

"Small Twankies mustn't ask impertinent questions," replied Dick. "But I'll tell you exactly how it stands, and you mustn't let it go any further."

"Oh, rather not," said Joan.

"Our ears are all agog," said Nancy.

"You see, Twankies, *some*body has got to live in this house, haven't they? Well, then, it must be done up, eh? And if *I* come and live in it some day, I don't want to have to do it up again—see? So there you have it all in a nutshell."

"Yes, I see," said Joan; "but it's a little disappointing."

"It all sounds very reasonable," said Nancy, "but I still think there's more in it than meets the eye."

They were in the great stone-floored kitchen, which still retained its cavernous hearth and open chimney.

"You could roast an ox here," said Dick. "We'll turn this into a servants' hall, Twankies, and rig up the other place for cooking. The cellar's all right, so is the pantry—and big enough for two. We'll divide it up, eh? and one part will do for a brushing-room. There's nowhere at present where a servant can brush your clothes."

"What wonderful domestic knowledge you display, Dick!"' observed Nancy. "Where are the maids to brush their mistresses' clothes? In here with the valets?"

"Yes, of course," said Dick. "This isn't a palace. People who come to stay must expect some inconveniences. I don't see any place for a game larder. We must see about that outside. Now we'll go upstairs."

They went up the broad shallow stairs of age-worn oak, and through the hive of rooms, which opened into one another, and led out into little passages, closets, and stairways in the most confusing way, and made you wonder what scheme of daily life the old builder had in mind when

he planned them. He had certainly wasted a great deal of room. The main corridor opened out here and there into broad spaces, where there was perhaps a bookcase, or a low seat under a latticed window, or only the rich emptiness of the square of oak panelling, the polished floor, and the plastered ceiling. Whatever his aims, he had gained his effect of gracious ease and warm shelter. However varied might be the needs of its occupants through the succeeding years, the dower-house would be as much of a home as on the day it was first built.

"A man might make himself very comfortable here, Mr. Copperfield," quoted Nancy, as they stood at a window of the biggest bedroom, which had panels of linen pattern, with a plastered frieze and an oak-beamed ceiling. There was also a heavy carved oak bed, in which Aunt Ellen had recently looked her last upon surroundings that had continually reminded her of the age and importance of the family of which she was a member.

"I shall have all these beastly laurels grubbed up, and some of the trees cut down," said Dick. "The place is like a family vault. And I'm not sure that I won't have this woodwork painted white."

Joan looked doubtfully round her. She knew nothing of the value of old good things, but she felt dimly that the carved panelling, dark with age, ought to remain as it was. Nancy felt so still more strongly. "It would be wicked to do that," she said. "This is a lovely room, and tells you stories. If you like I'll give you a rhapsody."

Joan grinned. "Have you ever heard one of Nancy's rhapsodies, Dick?" she asked. "They're awfully good."

Dick had not, but expressed himself willing to listen to whatever foolishness might be in store for him for the space of one minute precisely. Nancy stood against the dark woodwork on the other side of the room. Her pretty, mischievous face was framed in the thick fall of her fair hair and the fur round her throat. She wore a little fur cap and a red coat, and a big muff hung from her shoulders. Dick, always affectionately disposed towards his young sisters, thought he had never seen a girl of her age look prettier, and put his arm vicariously round Joan, who was exactly like her, as they sat on the window-seat.

"In this old house," began Nancy, using her right hand for gesticulation and keeping the other in her muff, "lots of old Clintons have died, and lots of new Clintons have been born. Think, my children, of the people who have come here to live. Some of them were gallant young men Clintons who had just taken to themselves fair young brides, and they were full of hope for the future, and pleasure in having such a jolly house to live in with her they loved best in the world. A few years would pass and the rooms would echo with the voices and steps of little children, and all would be gaiety and mirth. Then a change would come over the spirit of the scene. The young couple would go with their family to the great house, and in their stead would come a sad-faced figure in deep black, a Clinton widow, who had had her day of glory, and would now spend the rest of her years here in peace and seclusion. But all would not be dark to her. She would have great fun in suiting the dear old house to her taste, she would be cheered by the constant visits of the younger members of her family, and she could do a good deal more what she liked than she had done before."

"Well, upon my word!" interposed Dick.

Nancy held up her hand. "Hear, all ye Clintons!" she concluded. "Old men and women, young men and maidens, and especially the gallant warrior knight and the sweet young maiden I see before me—ye belong to a race which has its roots far back in history, and has been distinguished for many things, but not particularly for brains, as far as I can make out from my recent researches. But at last there has arisen one who will make up for that deficiency. You now behold her in the person of Nancy Caroline Clinton, who addresses you. See that ye cherish her and tip her well, or ye will be eternally disgraced in the eyes of posterity."

She ended with a ripple of laughter, shaking back her hair.

"Well, you're the limit," said Dick, with a grin. "Come on, let's go and look at the stables. Is it true that you suddenly find yourself possessed of brains, Twanky? I never suspected it of you."

"My dear Dick," said Joan, as they went down the stairs, "she has been talking about nothing but her brains for the last month, ever since Uncle Herbert last came here to shoot."

"They were always there," explained Nancy, "but he put the match to the tinder. I'm going to write books when I get a little older. But of course I must be properly educated first. I suppose you know we're going to have a really up-to-date, top-hole governess, Dick?"

"Yes, I've heard that," said Dick, "although I don't admire your way of describing her. Lord, what a place to put a horse!"

"If it is the expression 'top-hole' you object to, I learnt it from you," said Nancy. "My ears are receptive."

"Two loose-boxes and three stalls," said Dick. "We can make that do, but they're all on the slant. We'd better begin by altering this at once; the house can wait for a bit."

"Of course the stables are more important than the house," said Joan. "I say, Dick, there is something we want to ask you. Do be a brick and say, yes."

Dick was pursuing his investigations. "Coach-house isn't bad," he said. "Harness-room wants refurnishing. Let's see what the rooms upstairs are like."

They climbed up the steep staircase. "Dick, will you persuade father to do something?" asked Joan.

"What?" asked Dick. "This would be all right for an unmarried groom."

"We want a pony. We've never had anything to ride since poor old Tommy died."

They were clattering down the stairs again. "You want—you want—you want everything," said Dick. "You'll want a four-in-hand next. I don't know whether you want a pig-stye, by any chance. I'll give you this one if you do—ridiculous place to put it! This is where we'll build the game larder. Come on, Twankies, we'll go and look up old Aunt Laura. I want to see what she's taken away from here."

He set off at a smart pace, the twins on either side of him. "I don't know why *you* want to go putting your oar in about the pony," said Nancy. "I was to tackle father about that."

"Tackle father!" repeated Dick. "Look here! that's not the way to talk about the governor, Nancy."

"Oh, Dick darling, don't call me Nancy. I feel that I'm trembling under the weight of your displeasure."

Joan hastened to her relief. "When she said 'tackle,' she only meant that I betted her four weeks' pocket-money that father wouldn't let us have a pony," she said.

"You mean well, but you've done it now," said Nancy.

"Really, it's about time that you two had somebody to look after you," said Dick. "Who on earth taught you to bet, I should like to know?"

"Humphrey," replied Nancy promptly. "We were standing by him, and he betted us a shilling each that he would bring down the next bird that came over. He didn't, and he paid up promptly."

"We wanted him to bet again, but he refused," said Joan.

"But it gave us a taste for speculation which we shall probably never overcome," said Nancy.

Dick grunted. "Humphrey oughtn't to have done it," he said. "You are not to bet with each other, you two. And that bet about the pony—which was infernal cheek to make, anyhow—is off. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Dick dear," said Joan obediently. "But what does a bet being 'off' mean, exactly?"

"Is it the same as hedging?" asked Nancy.

"It means—well, it means it's off. You know what it means as well as I do. And I don't like your arranging with each other to get things out of the governor, either—or anybody else. You get plenty given you, and it isn't nice for girls of your age to be always on the make."

"But, Dick darling," expostulated Joan, "there are such lots of horses about the place. I think we might be allowed to ride now. Of course, we didn't mean a pony, really. We are big enough to stick on a horse, and father wouldn't have to buy another one for us."

"We are about to embark on an arduous course of study," said Nancy, "and horse exercise would be the best possible thing for us."

"You stick to your golf," said Dick. "We spent a lot of money making those links in the park, and you get more fun out of them than anybody."

"Then you won't help us about riding?" asked Joan.

"No," said Dick. "All the nags are wanted for hunting, and I'm not going to advise the governor to increase the stables."

Nancy breathed a deep sigh. "It's all your fault, Joan," she said. "You don't know how to treat a man. You must never blurt things out that you want. You must remember women are a subject race."

"But you won't mind our asking father, Dick, will you?" pleaded Joan.

Dick gave his ultimatum. "You'd better give up the idea," he said. "And remember what I told you about being on the make. You're nice kids, but you want keeping in order. I hope the new lady will do it."

"I hope she will," said Nancy; "but she's got a hard row to hoe. I can't help feeling a little sorry for her."

Aunt Laura had taken up her abode in a little old house on the village street, with a square, brick-walled garden behind it. The agent had occupied it before the death of Aunt Ellen, but had now removed to a farm which was in hand.

They found the old lady sitting by the fire in her parlour, knitting. She was frail and shrunken, and looked as if she might not long survive her transplantation. Mrs. Clinton or the twins came to see her every day, but a visit from the Squire or one of his sons, and especially Dick, was an honour which never failed mildly to excite her. She was now in a flurry, and told the elderly maid who had shown her visitors in to bring wine and cake, in the fashion of an earlier day. The men of the family never refused this entertainment, either because they were averse to wounding Aunt Laura's susceptibilities, or because they liked it.

"Well, I hope you've made yourself pretty comfortable, Aunt Laura," said Dick in a loud, clear voice, for the old lady was rather deaf, although she did not like to acknowledge it. He was looking round the room as he spoke. Its panelled walls were painted light green, and were hung with coloured prints. A recessed cupboard was full of beautiful old china; but there was nothing else of much value in the room, which was furnished with a Victorian drawing-room suite and a round rosewood table. The old lady had a pretty modern French table by her side with conveniences for her work and her books. She had also her old cottage piano, with a front of fluted red silk, upon which she sometimes played. A canary hung in the window, which faced south and let in, between the curtains, a stream of wintry sunshine.

"It is a bright little house," said Aunt Laura. "I sometimes wish that your dear Aunt Ellen had spent the last few years of her life here after your dear Aunt Anne died. The dower-house was a very dear home to us, and we were greatly attached to it, but in the winter it was dark, and this is much more cheerful. It is cold to-day, and I am sitting over the fire, as you see. But I often sit by the window and see the people going by. You could not do that in the dower-house, for nobody did go by."

"Did you bring all the furniture you wanted to make you comfortable, Aunt Laura?" asked Dick.

Aunt Laura looked up over her spectacles. "I am quite comfortable, I thank you, Dick," she replied, "although I have not got quite used to things yet. It is not to be expected that I should, all at once, at my age, and after having lived with the same things round me for close upon forty years. But your dear father has been kindness itself, as he always is, and allowed me to have all my bedroom furniture brought here, so that in my room upstairs I feel quite at home. And for the downstairs rooms he told me that any pictures or china and so forth that I had a fancy for I might have, and I hope I have not taken advantage of his generosity. I shall not want the things for very long, and they are being well taken care of. He did not want me to take any of the furniture, as he said this house was furnished already, but he wanted me to feel at home here."

Dick seemed to consider for a moment. "If there's anything special you want in the way of furniture, Aunt Laura," he said, "anything you've got attached to and like to use, we'll see if we can't get it brought down for you."

"Well, of course, I got attached to it all," replied Aunt Laura. "But I can't expect to have it all, and what is here will do for me very well. Hannah is making some pretty loose chintz covers for the chairs and sofa in this room, which will give it a more home-like appearance. I do not like the carpet, which is much worn, as you see, and was never a very good one, but I have half formed a plan of going over to Bathgate when the spring comes and seeing if I can get one something after the pattern of that in the morning-room at the dower-house, which your aunts and I used much to admire. It was old and somewhat faded, but its colours were well blended, and I have heard that it was brought straight from Persia, where they have always made excellent carpets, for my grandfather, who was in business in the city of London. He would be your great-great-grandfather, and they used to call him 'Merchant Jack,' even after he succeeded to Kencote."

If Dick had known the true value of the carpet in question he might not have offered to have it sent down for Aunt Laura's use, but he immediately did so, and the old lady's gratitude ought sufficiently to have rewarded him. "Now is there anything else, Aunt Laura?" he asked.

"Well, as you are so extremely kind, Dick," she said, "—and I hope your dear father will not mind, or think that I have been grasping, which I should not like after all his generosity—I think if I might have the use of the old bureau upon which your aunts and I used to write our letters and in which we used to keep our few business papers—for there was a very good lock—not that there was any necessity to lock things up at the dower-house, for everything was under Hannah's charge, and, although she is apt to be a little flighty in her dress, and your dear Aunt Ellen sometimes rebuked her for that, but always kindly, she was quite reliable, and *anything* might have been left about in perfect safety.—As I was saying, if I might have the use of the old bureau for as long as I live—I should not want it longer—I do not think I should regret anything, except of course that your dear aunts are all gone now, and I am the last of them left."

Dick had prepared himself, during the foregoing speech, to promise, immediately it came to

an end, that Aunt Laura should have the old bureau, although it was a very fine specimen of Dutch marquetry, and the piece of furniture that had struck him as the most desirable of all he had just seen in the dower-house. "Oh, of course, Aunt Laura," he said. "You shall have the bureau and the carpet sent down this afternoon. Then you'll feel quite at home, eh?"

"Well, perhaps not this afternoon, Dick," replied Aunt Laura. "It might upset the house for Sunday to make a change, and I should not be quite ready to superintend it. But on Monday, or even Tuesday—I am not particular—I could make ready. There is no immediate hurry. It is enough for me to know that I am to have the things here, and I shall think upon them with very great pleasure. I'm sure I cannot thank you enough, dear Dick, for your kindness. It is of a piece with all the rest. Why, I do not believe you have yet seen my beautiful table. Children dear, see here! Is it not convenient? I can place my favourite book here by my side, and when I am tired of reading, without moving from my seat, I can lay it down, and there is my work ready for me underneath, and in this pocket, as you see, are all sorts of conveniences, such as scissors, little tape-measure in the form of a silver pig, and so on; and here an ivory paper-knife. It is indeed a handsome present, is it not?"

"It's lovely, Aunt Laura," said Joan. "Who did it come from?"

"On Thursday," replied Aunt Laura. "Thursday morning. No, I am telling you a story. It was Thursday afternoon, for Hannah was just about to bring in the tea."

"Who gave it you, Aunt Laura?" asked Joan again.

"Did I not tell you?" said Aunt Laura. "It was dear Humphrey. He sent it down from London. He came in to see me when he was last at Kencote and described to me such a table as this, which I admit I *did* say I should like to possess, but certainly with no idea that he would purchase one for me. But there! all you dear boys and girls are full of kind thoughts for your old aunt, and I am sure it makes me very happy in my loss of your dear Aunt Ellen to think I have so much left to be thankful for."

When the twins were in their bedroom getting ready for luncheon Joan said, "I wonder why Humphrey is so attentive all of a sudden to Aunt Laura."

"There's more in it than meets the eye," said Nancy. "Did you notice how surprised Dick looked when she said Humphrey gave it her? And then he frowned."

"I expect Dick thinks Humphrey is too extravagant. It must have been an expensive table. And I know Humphrey has debts, because he asked me to open a tailor's bill that came for him and tell him the 'demnition total,' as he was afraid to do it himself. It was more than a hundred pounds, and he said, 'I wish that was the only one, but if it was I couldn't pay it.'"

"Poor old Humphrey!" said Nancy. "I say, Joan, do you think he is making up to Aunt Laura, so that she will pay his bills for him?"

"What a beastly thing to say, Nancy!" replied Joan. "Of course, none of the boys would do a thing like that. Besides, Aunt Laura hasn't got any money."

"No, I don't suppose so," said Nancy reflectively. "I expect father gives her an allowance, poor old darling!"

But Aunt Laura had money. She had the thirty-six thousand pounds which her father had left to her and her sisters, and she had, besides, the savings of all six ladies through a considerable number of years.

CHAPTER V

LADY GEORGE

The Squire had a touch of rheumatism, and was annoyed about it, but also inclined to give Providence due credit for so visiting him, if he must be visited at all, at a time of hard frost. "If I coddle myself up to-day and perhaps to-morrow," he said over the luncheon table, "I shall be able to hunt all right on Monday, if the frost breaks. I suppose you wouldn't care to go over those Deepdene Farm figures this afternoon, Dick, eh?"

"We might have an hour with them before dinner," replied Dick. "I thought of riding over to Mountfield to see Jim this afternoon. I want a little exercise."

"I don't know whether you will find Jim in," said Mrs. Clinton. "Muriel, and I think Mrs. Graham, are coming over here this afternoon."

"I'll take my chance," said Dick.

The twins saw him off from the hall door. He rode a tall bay horse, which danced with impatience on the hard gravel of the drive as he looked him over, drawing on his gloves.

"Dear old Cicero! doesn't he look a beauty?" said Nancy. "What was his figure, Dick?"

"You will never be able to get on him," said Joan. "Shall I bring a chair?"

But Dick was up and cantering over the crisp grass of the park, managing his nervous powerful mount as if he and the horse were of one frame and as if nothing could separate them.

"He does look jolly," said Joan admiringly.

"He's a good man on a horse," acquiesced Nancy.

"All the boys are. So they ought to be. They think about nothing else."

"You know, I think Dick is just the sort of man a girl might fall in love with," said Joan. "He's very good-looking, and he has just that sort of way with him, as if he didn't care for anybody."

"I expect lots of girls have fallen in love with him. The question is whether he is ever going to fall in love with them. I'm inclined to think he's turning it over in his mind. I dare say you were blinded by all that business at the dower-house this morning. I wasn't. You mark my word, Joan, Dick is going to get married."

"I shouldn't wonder. He's grown softer somehow. See how interested he was in the kitchen. Who do you think it is, Nancy?"

"My dear! Don't you know that? It's Grace Ettien. Didn't you notice what a fuss father made of her when she last come over? Took her all round, and almost *gave* her the place. He doesn't treat girls like that as a rule."

"You didn't say so at the time."

"No; but I've put two and two together since. You see if I'm not right. By this time next year the dower-house will be occupied by Captain and Lady Grace Clinton—and oh, Joan! perhaps there'll be another baby in the family!"

The ecstasy of the twins at this prospect was broken into by Miss Bird, who appeared behind them in the doorway and promised them their deaths of cold if they did not come indoors *at once*.

In the meantime Dick was trotting along the hard country lanes, between the silent silvered winter woods and the frozen fields, always with an eye about him to see what things of fur and feather might share with him the winter solitude, what was doing in the hard-bound soil, and what in the clear spaces of the air. He had the eye of the countryman, trained from boyhood to observe and assimilate. He had lived for years the life of court and camp, had adapted himself as readily to the turmoil of London gaieties as to regimental duties in other stations at home and abroad, or to months of campaigning in Egypt and South Africa. He had skimmed the cream of all such experiences as had come in his way, but here in the depths of the English country, just here where his ancestors had lived for generation after generation, were placed the foundations of his life. Here he was at home, as nowhere else in the world. All the rest was mere accident of time and place, of no account as compared with this one spot of English soil. Here alone he was based and firmly rooted.

Mountfield lay about four miles from Kencote, and the two estates marched, although the one was small as compared with the other. Two years before, Jim Graham, the owner of Mountfield, had married Cicely Clinton, and his only sister just before that had married Walter Clinton, the doctor of Melbury Park, where the Squire was so averse to looking for an heir. So the Clintons and the Grahams were bound together by close ties, and there was much coming and going between the two houses.

Cicely's carriage was before the door as Dick rode up, and she herself came out as he dismounted. She looked very pretty in her thick furs, young and fresh, and matronly at the same time.

"Oh, Dick, I'm so glad to see you," she said. "Have you come to see Jim? I'm afraid he's gone over to Bathgate, and won't be back for some time."

"H'm! That's a bore," said Dick. "You're going over to Kencote, aren't you, Siskin?"

"Yes. I'm going to fetch Mrs. Graham and drive her over. But do come in for a minute or two."

"Oughtn't to keep the horses long in this weather," said Dick. "Drive 'em about for a few minutes, Carter. I'll just come in and throw my eye over the babies, Siskin."

Cicely's face brightened. She led the way into her morning-room, and turned to kiss her brother, her hands on his shoulders. "Dear old Dick!" she said. "Do you really want to see the babies?"

"Of course I do," he replied. "You've given us the taste for them over at Kencote. The Twankies foam at the mouth with pleasure whenever the babies are mentioned, and even the governor looks as if a light were switched on in his face when anything is said about them."

Cicely rang the bell. "He is a doting grandfather," she said, with a smile. "I would take them over this afternoon, but it's too cold."

"Nice room, this!" said Dick, looking round him. "Are you glad to be settled down in the country again, Sis?"

"Yes. Awfully glad," she said. "I hated London, really. At least, I liked meeting the people, but you can only feel at home in the country."

"There was a time," said Dick.

She blushed. "Oh, don't talk about that, Dick," she said, in some distress. "I was all wrong. I didn't know what I wanted. I know now. I want just this, and Jim, and the babies. I was overjoyed when our two years in London were up, and Jim said we could come back here if we kept quiet and lived carefully. Here they are—the darlings!"

The tiny morsels of lace and silk-clad humanity—Dick, the boy, Nina, the baby girl—who were brought into the room in charge of a staid elderly smiling nurse, looked as happy babies ought to look—as if they belonged to the house and the house belonged to them. Dick took up his namesake and godson in his arms and his keen face softened. "He's getting a great little man," he said. "When are you going to cut his hair, Cicely?"

Cicely scouted the idea. "Men are always in such a hurry," she said. "Dick, you ought to marry and have babies of your own."

"Ah, well! perhaps I shall some day," said Dick. "Now I must be pushing on, and you oughtn't to keep the horses waiting, Sis. Good-bye, little chap."

"Aren't you coming back to Kencote?" Cicely asked.

"Not just yet. Going to hack a few more miles. I haven't been on a horse for three weeks."

So Cicely got into her carriage and Dick's horse was brought round, and they went off in different directions.

Cicely picked up her mother-in-law at her house just outside the park. Mrs. Graham was waiting for her at her garden gate, in company with a deerhound, a spaniel, and an Irish terrier. She had on a coat and skirt of thick tweed, and a cloth hat with a cock's feather.

"I suppose there won't be a tea-party," she said, as she got into the carriage. "I did intend to put on smart clothes, but I found I couldn't be bothered when the time came. They must take me in my rags or not at all. *You* look smart enough, my girl."

"If I had your figure," said Cicely, "I should never want to wear anything but country clothes."

"Ah! now that's very nice of you," said Mrs. Graham. "I do wear well for fifty-three, and I'm not going to deny it. My face is a bit battered, of course. I must expect that, riding and tramping about in all weathers. But I'm as fit as if I were thirty years younger, and I don't know what more you can ask of life—unless it's to have your own people round you instead of a pack of molly-coddles."

Cicely laughed. Jim Graham had let Mountfield for two years after their marriage to a rich and childless couple, who spent most of their time in working at embroidery, and motoring about the country in a closed-in car, for neither of which pursuits Mrs. Graham had found it in her heart to forgive them.

"Well, *they're* gone," she said. "And thank goodness for it. I should have let the Lodge and gone away myself if they had stayed here any longer. Cumberers of the ground, I call them, and what they wanted with a country house beats me. But you never know who you're going to get for neighbours nowadays. By the by, have you heard that old Parson Marsh has let Blaythorn Rectory for the hunting season?"

Blaythorn was about three miles from Mountfield, on the opposite side to Kencote. Cicely had not heard this piece of news.

"Yes," said Mrs. Graham, "and to a lady of title, my dear—Lady George Dubec—no less. I haven't the ghost of an idea who she is. But no doubt your father will know. He is a regular walking peerage—knows who everybody is and whom everybody has married to the third and fourth generation. What accommodation poor old Parson Marsh has for hunters I don't know. I should think the lady must have been done in the eye. And as for the house—the last time I was in it it smelt so of dogs and tobacco-smoke that even I couldn't put up with it, and Lord knows I'm not particular."

"Where is Mr. Marsh going to live?" asked Cicely.

"Oh, I believe he has sacked his curate on the strength of it, and has taken his rooms. I don't know why he should have wanted a curate at all, except that he's so bone-idle, and I'm sure he can't afford one. He owes Joynes the butcher over forty pounds. But, good gracious, Cicely, don't encourage me to gossip. I'm getting a regular old hag. It's the influence of your late tenants, my dear. They *loved* village tittle-tattle, and I had to join in with it whenever we met, because there was nothing else in the wide world I could talk to them about. The worst of it is I was acquiring quite a taste for scandal. But I've turned over a new leaf. So has old Marsh I suppose, and is going to pay up all his debts. I wish him well over his difficulties."

With such sprightly talk did Mrs. Graham pass away the time till they reached Kencote, when she began all over again with Mrs. Clinton as audience. Cicely had gone upstairs to see the twins and Miss Bird, and Mrs. Graham asked point-blank that Mr. Clinton might be informed of her arrival. "I have lots to tell him," she said, "and I want to ask him some questions besides."

Mrs. Clinton rang the bell, without saying anything, and a footman was sent with a message to the Squire, who presently came in, bluff and hearty, but walking with a slight list.

"Ah, Mrs. Graham!" he said as he shook hands. "Come to cheer us up with a little gossip—what? But where are the grandchildren?"

"Dear me! I forgot to ask," said Mrs. Graham. "I suppose it is too cold for them. But I've brought the dogs, Mr. Clinton."

"Oh, the dogs!" said the Squire, with his loud laugh. "No dogs in *this* house."

"I know," said Mrs. Graham. "And it's such a mistake. Kencote is the only country house I know where there isn't a dog indoors. I never feel that it's properly inhabited."

"It was swarming with them in my grandfather's time," said the Squire, "and I dare say would be now if that mongrel hadn't gone for Dick when he was a little fellow. Always kept 'em outside since. Outside is the place for a dog."

"I don't agree with you," said Mrs. Graham. "And it isn't like a sportsman to say so. However, we needn't quarrel about that. Who is Lady George Dubec, Mr. Clinton?"

"Lady George Dubec?" repeated the Squire. "I suppose she's the wife—or the widow rather—of George Dubec, the Duke of Queenstown's brother, and a pretty good rascal *he* was. Got killed in a railway accident in America two or three years ago, and it was the best thing that could have happened to him. Wish they'd kill off a few more like him. I didn't know he was married. Why do you ask?"

"She has taken Blaythorn Rectory to hunt from. She came down yesterday or the day before."

"Blaythorn Rectory! To hunt from!'" exclaimed the Squire. "Well, that's the most extraordinary thing! Are there any stables there? I never heard of Marsh keeping anything but an old pony, and the whole place must be in the depths of dilapidation."

"Well, I don't know. But there she is. And you don't know *who* she is. I thought you knew who everybody was, Mr. Clinton."

"Wait a minute," said the Squire, and he went over to a table where there were books of reference. "No, there's no marriage here," he said, turning over the pages of one of them, "except his first marriage thirty years ago. Poor Lady Bertha Grange that was, and he drove her into her grave within five years. The fellow was a brute and a blackleg. I was at school with him, and he was sacked. And I was at Cambridge with him and he was sent down, for some disgraceful business, I forget what. Then he was in the Guards, and had to clear out of the service within a year for some precious shady racing transaction. The fellow had every possible chance, and he *couldn't* run straight. He went abroad after that, but used to turn up occasionally. Nobody would have anything to do with him. I believe he settled down in America, if he could ever be said to settle down anywhere. I know he was in some scandalous divorce case. One used to hear his name come up occasionally, and always in an unsavoury sort of way. He was a wrong 'un, through and through, but a good-looking blackguard in his young days, and women used to stick up for him."

"Well, he seems to be better out of the world than in it," said Mrs. Graham. "But what about his widow? You say she isn't down there."

"No, but this book is out of date. I've got a later one in my room. I'll send for it."

The new book gave the information required. Lord George Dubec had married five years before Miss Virginia Vanreden, of Philadelphia.

"Oh, an American!" said Mrs. Graham. "Well, I suppose I must go and call on her. Even if I don't like her I shall be doing my duty to my neighbours in providing them with gossip. Not that I like gossip—I detest it. Still, one must find *some*thing to talk about. Shall you call on her, Mrs. Clinton?"

The Squire answered. "Oh, I think not," he said. "I don't like hunting—er! hum! ha!"

"You don't like hunting women," said Mrs. Graham imperturbably. "I know you don't, Mr. Clinton. That's another point between us. But we're very good friends all the same."

"Oh, of course, of course," said the Squire. "Nearly put my foot in it that time, Mrs. Graham, eh? Ha! ha! Well, with such old friends one can afford to make a mistake or two. No, I think we'll leave Lady George Dubec alone. She won't be here long, and I've no wish to be mixed up with anybody belonging to George Dubec—alive or dead. I had the utmost contempt for the fellow. Besides, I don't like Americans, and any woman who would have married him after the life he'd led ... well, she may be all right, but I don't want to know her—that's all. I *should* like to know, though, how she got hold of Blaythorn Rectory, of all places, or why she has come to Meadshire to hunt. The country pleases *us* all right, and we're quite content with our sport, but we're not generally honoured by strangers in that way."

"I dare say I can find out all about it," said Mrs. Graham. "And when I do I'll let you know."

Cicely was sitting on the great roomy shabby sofa in the schoolroom, with a twin on either side of her, and Miss Bird upright in the corner, alternately tatting feverishly a pattern of lace thread and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. For the subject of conversation was her approaching departure, and, as she said, with all the kindness that had been showered on her and the affection that she felt she never would lose, it was no use pretending that she was glad she was going away, for she was not, but, on the contrary, very sorry.

"Nancy and I are going to write to her once a week regularly," said Joan. "We did think of writing every day at first, but we probably shouldn't keep it up."

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh might be weak," said Nancy. "And there's no sense in overdoing things. Anyhow, we have promised that we will never love Miss Prim half as much as we love our darling Starling, and she is pleased at that, aren't you, Starling darling?"

"Of course I am pleased to be loved," replied Miss Bird; "but indeed, Nancy, I should not like you to set yourself against your new governess on my account; it is not necessary and you can love one person without visiting it on another and I do not like you to call her Miss Prim."

"She is sure to be," said Nancy elliptically. "We must call her something, and that's as good a name as any till we see what she is like."

"If you don't treat her respectfully she won't stay," said Cicely.

"We haven't treated Starling respectfully, but *she* has stayed all right," said Joan. "I suppose you know we are going to have lessons besides, Sis—drawing, and music, and deportment, and all sorts of things."

"Oh, we're going to be well finished off while we're about it," said Nancy. "We shall be ready to fill *any* position, from the highest to the lowest."

"We shall be the ornament of every drawing-room to which we are introduced," said Joan. "I think we're worth polishing off handsomely, don't you, Sis? Have you noticed how awfully pretty we're getting?"

"Now that is a thing," broke in Miss Bird, "that no well-brought-up girl ought to say of herself, Joan."

"But, Starling darling, it's true, and you can't deny it," replied Joan. "We must tell the truth, mustn't we?"

"The new booking-clerk at the station casts admiring glances at us," said Nancy. "At first it made us uncomfortable; we thought we must have smuts on our noses. But at last we tumbled to it. Cicely, we are loved, not only for our worth, but our beauty."

"You are a couple of donkeys," said Cicely, laughing. "Well, I'm glad you're going to apply yourselves to learning, although it's a dreadful thing to be losing our dear old Starling. Kencote will be quite changed."

"There are many changes coming about at Kencote," said Nancy. "Joan and I can feel them in the air. We'll let you know when there's anything more to tell you, Cicely."

"Thank you very much," said Cicely. "I think I had better go downstairs now."

The twins went with her, and on the stairs Cicely said, "I didn't like to say it before Starling, but I think you're awfully lucky children, to be going to be taught things. *I* never was. I do hope you'll take advantage of it."

"Oh, I *do* hope we shall," said Joan. "It is such a chance for us. We feel that."

"Deeply," acquiesced Nancy. "If we don't we shall never forgive ourselves—never."

CHAPTER VI

BLAYTHORN RECTORY

Dick, when he had left Mountfield, trotted on at a slightly faster pace than he had hitherto come, in the direction of Blaythorn, and did not draw rein until he came to that rectory concerning whose occupancy his relations and connections were so exercised. It was a dull house, with a short, weed-grown drive behind a rather shabby brick wall and an overgrown shrubbery, on the outskirts of the village. He got off his horse and rang the bell, which was presently answered by a smart parlourmaid, who gave him a discreet smile of welcome, and whisked off at his request, with a flourish of petticoats, to fetch a groom from the stableyard hard by. Then she showed him into the drawing-room, where two women were sitting by the fire, one of whom rose to greet him with an exclamation of pleasure, while the other gathered up her work deliberately and prepared to leave the room.

Lady George Dubec was a tall, slender woman in the early thirties, or possibly only in the late twenties. Her face was a little worn, but her eyes were deep and lustrous, and her features delicate. When she smiled she was beautiful. Her dark hair was elaborately braided; her slim figure looked well in a black gown of soft folds. She had thin, almost transparent hands, covered with jewels. She moved gracefully, and her voice was low, but clear and musical, with only the suspicion of an un-English intonation.

"Oh, Dick, what a godsend you are," she said as she gave him both her hands. "Toby and I were wondering how on earth we were going to get through the rest of the afternoon and evening."

"I wasn't wondering at all," said the other lady, who had now also risen and shaken hands with the visitor. "I knew you would come. So did Virginia, really. We were talking about you. I will now retire to another apartment and leave you alone."

"Indeed you'll do no such thing," said Virginia Dubec, taking her by the shoulders and pushing her back into her chair. "We will have the lights and tea—although it is early—and a talk of three together. We're all friends, and you're not going to sit alone."

"Of course not," said Dick. "A nice sort of state you'd work yourself up into against me! I know you, Miss Dexter."

She took her seat again and unrolled her work. She was short and rather plain, with sandy-coloured hair and square-tipped fingers. She had not smiled since Dick had entered the room.

"Oh, I don't deny that I'm jealous," she said. "I've had her to myself for three years, and you have come and stolen her away from me. But it's a harmless sort of jealousy. It doesn't make me object to you. It only makes me wonder sometimes."

"What do you wonder?" asked Dick, standing up before the fire and looking down at her with a glance that immediately transferred itself to her companion, on whom his eyes rested with an expression that had a hint of hunger in it.

Virginia answered for her. "She wonders what there is in a man for a woman to cling to—and especially after *my* experience. She thinks a woman's friendship ought to be enough. *She* wants no other. We talk over these things together, but we don't quarrel. She knows that I shall always love her, don't you, Toby?"

"Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't," said Miss Dexter. "But we needn't discuss these matters before Captain Dick. I'll ring for the lights and the tea."

Dick breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. He was not at home in the discussions of abstract questions. "How do you find yourself here, Virginia?" he asked, looking round him. "You have made this room very jolly, anyhow."

"That's what Mr. Marsh said, in his own particular way," she said, with a smile. "He said, 'If I'd known a woman could do this sort of thing to a house, I'd have married a wife years ago.'"

"And of course Virginia immediately suggested he should marry me," said Miss Dexter. "She is so generous with her belongings."

"It made us very good friends," said Lady George. "A joke of that sort always does. We shall carry it on till the end of my tenancy, and then he will propose to Toby. You'll see, Dick."

"I shouldn't blame him," said Dick. "The stables aren't so very bad, are they?"

"Oh, Wilson says they'll do. But I wish you had been able to get me a brighter house, Dick. It is rather depressing, in spite of all my furbishing and knick-knacks."

"My dear girl, it was absolutely the only one within reach. We don't let houses for hunting hereabouts. You wait till you see the dower-house. I was there this morning, and really I'd no idea what a jolly little place it is. With the few alterations I'm going to make, and all the jolly old furniture, it will be a topping place. You'll fall in love with it, Virginia."

She sighed. "There are some fences to take before we land up there," she said. "I'm rather frightened about it all, Dick. When will your mother come and see me? Have you told her I am here yet?"

"No," he said shortly. "I shall tell them this evening."

Miss Dexter dropped her work in her lap with a gesture of impatience, and looked up at him. "*Why* haven't you told them?" she asked. "Are you ashamed of her?"

Dick's face flushed and his lips tightened. "That isn't a proper question to ask, Miss Dexter," he said. "I know what I'm about, and so does Virginia."

"My dear Toby, for goodness' sake don't make him angry," said Lady George. "I'm frightened of him when he looks like that."

Dick forced a smile. "My father is a good sort, but he wants managing," he said. "I'll state the case quite plainly once more, as Miss Dexter sees fit to question my action."

"Oh, good gracious!" put in that lady, "I'm not worth all these heavy guns."

"Toby! Toby!" expostulated her friend.

The maid came in at that moment with a lamp and stayed to draw curtains and light candles. Dick dislodged himself from his stand in front of the fire and took a chair, but left it to the two women to carry on a desultory conversation until they were left alone again. Then he rose once more. "Look here," he said. "We've got to have this out once for all. I'm not going to be twitted for my actions, Miss Dexter."

"Well, please have it out," she said. "I'm listening."

"You are the most tiresome creature in the world," said Lady George.

"I don't want to say anything to hurt you, Virginia," Dick went on, "but the name you bear would set my father against you—violently."

"Oh, my dear Dick!" she said, "you don't hurt me in the least, but why go into all that? We understand each other. Toby, I feel as if I could beat you."

"Well," said Dick. "I won't say any more about that, but you have got to remember it. But there are prejudices to get over besides. He wants me to make the usual sort of marriage with a —oh, you know the sort of female child fellows like me are supposed to marry—his mind is running on it now, and he actually tackled me about it last night. He's got the young person all ready—that's the sort of man he is—my cousin, Grace Ettien. I said, No, thank you, and I told him I didn't want to marry a youngster—wouldn't, anyway. It's no good beating about the bush, Virginia—until he sees you—*until* he sees you, mind—you don't fill the bill."

"That's a pleasant way of putting it," said Miss Dexter.

"I won't have another word," said Lady George decisively. "You two are just annoying each other. Dick, my dear, I think it's just sweet of you to put all your faith in that seeing of me. I adore you for it. It eases all my spiritual aches and pains. Toby, you irritating creature, can't you see how lovely it is of him? If he were all wrong about having me come down here, I shouldn't care. He has done it because he believes in his heart of hearts that his people have only got to set eyes on me and all their objections will vanish into thin air."

"I don't say that quite—I don't know," said Dick.

"Well, you needn't go and spoil it," said Miss Dexter. "I was just going to say that it did make up for a good deal."

"Look here, Miss Dexter," said Dick. "If I were to go and tell my father straight off that I am going to marry Virginia he would be all over bristles at once. All the things that don't matter a hang beside what she is, and what every one can see she is who knows her, would be brought up, and he'd put himself into a frantic state about it. He wouldn't let me bring her to Kencote; he'd fight blindly with every weapon he could use. I'm heir to a fine property, and I'm as well off as I need be, even while my father is alive, as long as I don't set myself against all his dislikes and prejudices. If I do, he can make me a poor man, and he'd do it. He'd do anything by which he thought he could get his way. I shouldn't even be able to marry, unless I lived on my wife's money, which I won't do."

"No, you're too proud for that," said Miss Dexter.

"Put it how you like. I won't do it. I'll take all a wife can give me except money. That I'll give.

If there were no other way, I'd break down his opposition. I know how to treat him, and I could do it; but it would take time; I should cut myself off from Kencote until I had brought him under, and Virginia's name would be bandied about here, in the place where we are going to live all our lives, in a way that would affect us always, and in a way I won't subject her to. He'd do that, although he might be sorry for having done it afterwards, and I don't think I should be able to put up with it. We might quarrel in such a way that we shouldn't be able to come together again, and the harm would be done. As I say, if there were no other way I would run the risk. But there is another way, and I'm taking it. You asked me a foolish question just now—if I was ashamed of Virginia. It is because I am so far from being ashamed of her—because I'm so proud of her—that I asked her to come down here, where he can get to know her before he has any idea that I'm going to marry her. *She* can make her way, and make him forget all the rest. Now, what have you got against that? Let's have it plainly."

"Dear Dick!" said Virginia softly. "I have had many compliments paid me, but that is the best of all. Answer him, Toby, and don't keep up this tiresome irritation any longer. It spoils everything."

"Well, I'll give in," said Miss Dexter. "But in my inmost soul I'm against all this policy, and if your father isn't quite blind, Captain Dick, he will see through it, and you will be worse off than before."

"My father can't see through anything," said Dick. "Besides, there's nothing to see through. I shouldn't mind telling him—in fact, I *shall* tell him—that it was I who advised Virginia to come down here. He knows I have heaps of friends all over the place that he doesn't know of. Virginia is one of them, for the present."

"I hope everything will turn out well," said Miss Dexter after a slight pause. "I won't say I think you're right, but I'll say you may be, and I hope you are. And I won't worry you with any more doubts."

Virginia Dubec rose from her chair impulsively and kissed her. "My darling old Toby!" she said. "You are very annoying at times, but I couldn't do without you."

After tea Miss Dexter went out of the room, and they did not try to stop her. When they were left alone Dick held Virginia in his arms and looked into her eyes. "What have you done to me," he asked her, with a smile, "after all these years?"

"Am I really the first, Dick?" she asked him.

"You are the first, Virginia—and the only one. You have changed everything. I have always thought I had everything I wanted. Now I know I've had nothing."

"And I have had nothing, either," she said. "Every morning I wake up wondering what has happened to me. And when I remember I begin to sing. To think that at my age, and after my bitter experience, *this* should come to me! Oh, Dick, you don't know how much I love you."

"I know how much I love *you*," he said. "If there were no other way I would give up Kencote and everything else for you. I love you enough for that, Virginia, and the things I would give up for you are the only things I have valued so far. But we won't give up anything, my girl. My good old obstinate old father will fall at your feet when he knows you."

"Will he, Dick?"

"*I* have fallen at your feet, Virginia, and I'm rather like my father, although I think I can see a bit further into things, and I have a little more control over my feelings—and my speech."

They had sat down side by side on a sofa, and Dick was holding her slender hand in his brown one.

"I used to think you had so much control over yourself that it would be impossible ever to get anything out of you," she said. "You are so frightfully and terrifyingly English."

He laughed. "That gnat-like friend of yours has the power to make me explain myself," he said. "I've never tried to talk over any one to my side as I do her. I have always taken my own way and let people think what they like."

"I think it is sweet of you to put yourself—and me—right with her, Dick. She has been the best friend that I ever had, except you, dear Dick. She stood by me in the worst days, and put up with untold insults without flinching, so that she could stay with me. Of course, at first, she was terrified lest I should make another mistake. She is like a grim watch-dog over me. But she likes you, and trusts you. You must put up with her little ways."

"Oh, I do, my dear, and I will. She's a good sort."

"Dick, will your mother like me? You have never told me very much about her. I think I feel more nervous about her than about your father."

"You needn't, Virginia. She is one of the best of women. I think she is perhaps a little difficult

to know. She is rather silent and keeps her thoughts to herself; but I know we shall have her on our side. She has only to know you. But in any case she wouldn't give us any trouble."

"That sounds rather hard, Dick. Don't you love your mother? I loved mine."

"Of course I do. But she doesn't interfere with us. She never did. It was my father we had to consider, even when we were boys."

"Interfere with you! I don't like the sound of it. Dick, I don't think I will talk to you about your mother. I will wait until I have seen her. You don't help me to know what she is like. I hope I shall get on with her. I shall know soon. Will she be at the meet on Monday, if there is one?"

"No. But my father will. I shall introduce him to you then. I told you he had a foolish prejudice against women hunting, didn't I? It won't be quite the most propitious of times. But we can't help that."

"Well, I won't hunt on Monday, then. I will drive Toby to the meet instead, and follow on wheels."

"H'm. Perhaps it would be better—just at the first go off. And I don't believe you really care as much about hunting as you think you do, Virginia."

She looked into his face with her dark, sweet eyes. "I don't care about anything, except to please you, Dick," she said. "As for hunting—it was the excitement—to keep my mind off. It was the only thing he let me do, over here. I believe he would have liked me to kill myself, and sometimes I used to try to."

He put his hand before her mouth. "You are not to talk about those bad times," he said.

She kissed his hand, and removed it. "I like to, sometimes," she said. "It is such a blessed relief to think of them as quite gone—it is like the cessation of bad neuralgia—just a sense of peace and bliss. Perhaps I didn't really try to kill myself, but certainly I shouldn't have cared if I had. It was not caring that gave me my reputation, I suppose, for I didn't mind where I went or what I did. I do care now. I don't think I should very much mind giving it up altogether."

"Well, you mustn't do that for this winter, at any rate. You shall do what you like afterwards. And as for your reputation, my dear, I'm afraid we are so out of the smart hunting world in South Meadshire that you will find very few of us aware of it. So you needn't run any risks in trying to keep it up."

"Very well, Dick. But I expect when the hounds begin to run I shall forget that I have to be cautious. Yes, I do love it. I don't want to give up hunting. And there won't be much for me to do here outside that, will there?"

"I'm afraid I am condemning you to a dull three months, my poor Virginia. But I want you to get to know the country, and love it, as I do. Kencote means a lot to me. I want it to mean a lot to you too."

"So it shall. I love it already, for your sake, and it seems a wonderful thing to me that you and all the people you have sprung from should have been settled down just in this little spot in the world for all those centuries. Dick dear, I know you are giving up a lot for me. I know, although I wasn't brought up in all these traditions, that your father is right, really, and that it is not a woman like me you ought to choose for your wife."

Dick raised her hand and let it fall with his own. "I have chosen you for my wife, Virginia, out of all the women I have known. I love and honour you, and I wouldn't have you different—not in the smallest particular. No Clinton of Kencote has ever chosen a wife more worthy to bear his name. Let that be enough for you, and don't worry your pretty head about anything, except to make love to my old father when you meet him."

When Dick had ridden away, in the gloaming, and the two women were left to themselves for the long evening, Virginia Dubec said to Miss Dexter, "Toby, tell me the truth; don't you think I am the most fortunate woman in the world?"

"If all goes well," said the other soberly and decisively, "I think you will be happy. But your Dick, Virginia, is the sort of man who will want to rule, and to rule without question. He is very much in love with you now—that is quite plain, although he is one of those men who hold themselves in. But you won't get your way, my dear, when you are married, unless it is his way too—any more than you did before."

"Oh, my own way! What do I care about that? My way shall be his way. I love him and I can trust him. He is a strong man, and tender too. Toby, I adore him. I will do everything in the world that I can to make him happy. He has raised me out of the dust, and given me to myself again. When I am married to him I shall forget all the pain and misery. It's a new life he is giving me, Toby, and the old unhappy life will fall from me and be as if it had never been."

"You are expecting a great deal, Virginia," said Miss Dexter; "I hope some part of it will be

realised."

CHAPTER VII

THE SQUIRE PUTS HIS FOOT DOWN

Kencote was three hours' journey from London by a fast train, and it had always been the custom of the sons of the family—those of them whose avocations made it necessary for them at any time to live in town—to come down whenever they pleased, to spend a night or a few nights, without announcing their arrival. Their rooms were there ready for them. Kencote was their home. Dick or Humphrey, and, in the days before he was married, Walter, would often walk into the house unexpectedly and go upstairs and dress without any one but the servants knowing they were there until dinner-time. The Squire liked them to come and go in that way. It seemed to give him, in his retired, bucolic life, a tie with the world. He would always give them a hearty welcome, even if he had to object to something they had done, or had left undone, before they left again.

It was Humphrey who arrived on this Saturday afternoon, reaching Kencote by the half-past four train, and walking up from the station and into the morning-room, for his cup of tea. The Squire's greeting was a shade less hearty than it would have been in the case of his other sons. Humphrey had given him a good deal of trouble in the way of money. It is true that there had never been any big catastrophe, no sudden demand for a large sum to meet a debt of honour, from racing or cards, as fathers were sometimes confronted with by extravagant sons. Humphrey was too cautious to run those sorts of risks. The Squire, perhaps, would have preferred that the demands upon him should have come in that way rather than from the constant, rather cold-blooded exceeding of an allowance which he told himself, and Humphrey, was as large as any younger son had a right to expect, and a good deal larger than most of them got. Humphrey did not deny this. He simply said, whenever he did ask his father for more money, that he had not been able to do on it, but if his father would clear off his debts for him and give him a fresh start, he would try to do on it for the future. He had made the endeavour three times, and each time with less success than before, for the debts had been bigger. And now the Squire was getting angry about it. It had always been the same. Humphrey's debts after he had left Cambridge had been about twice as large as Dick's, although Dick had been Master of the Drag and had had expenses that Humphrey had not. Walter had left Oxford with no debts at all. And since their University days, Humphrey had actually had more money than either of the others, although Dick was the eldest son and a considerable sum had been paid to buy Walter his practice.

Now it was not the Squire's way to bear malice or to let any annoyance rankle when once it had been met and dealt with. In the ordinary course he would have expressed himself very strongly and felt very strongly on the subject when one of Humphrey's periodical crises of debt was disclosed to him, but when he had so relieved his mind he would have paid up and forgotten all about it. He had done so the first time, and even the second, after a rather stronger explosion. It was the third, now nearly two years ago, which had rankled; and the reason was not only that Humphrey, as seemed quite obvious, was living in just such a way as had brought him to exceed his income and get into trouble before, with the consequence that a new crisis and a new demand would probably arise before long. It was so much in the air that the Squire was continually calling the gods to witness that *he* was not going to pay any more of Humphrey's debts. But he would not have felt so sore, when he did think about it, if it had not been for Humphrey's attitude towards him in particular, and towards Kencote and all that it represented in general.

The fact was that Humphrey, from the serene heights of his career as a very smart young man about town, patronised them. It is to be supposed that he could not help it, that it was an attitude which he would have corrected if he had been aware of it, for it was quite certain that, when once his father became aware of it, it would not help him in any plan he might have to make for further pecuniary assistance. The Squire merely had a feeling of irritation against Humphrey, which slumbered while he was away and always became sharper during his somewhat rare visits to Kencote. It was not yet formulated, but was nearer to getting to a head every time they came together. The young man, if he had had an adviser, might have been told that if he acted in such a way as to bring it to a head, it would be time for him to look out.

Humphrey walked into the morning-room with a cool air, as if he had come from another room in the house instead of from London. He was the only one of all the Clintons who was dark. He was not so good-looking as Dick, but he was well set up, and his clothes were always the perfect expression of the requirements of the moment. So were Dick's, but Dick wore old clothes sometimes, Humphrey never. He was a young man of the highest fashion, whenever and wherever he appeared.

The Squire was standing in front of the fire, as his habit was, Mrs. Clinton sitting behind her tea-table and Mrs. Graham near her. The twins were on the sofa on either side of Cicely. Humphrey kissed his mother, shook hands with his father and Mrs. Graham, and sat down by his sisters. "The frost is going to break," he said.

"Is it?" said the Squire. "Well, that's the best news you could have brought. Look here, we were talking of Lady George Dubec. Do you know anything about her?"

"Virginia Dubec?" said Humphrey. "She is a very beautiful lady."

"Well, but who is she? Who *was* she? An American they say. Is she all right?"

"She was an actress. Musical comedy, or something of the sort. But that was some years ago. Old George Dubec married her in New York, and led her an awful life. She used to hunt with the Quorn. Went like a bird, and didn't care how she went or where she went. People used to say she wanted to break her neck and get away from George Dubec. But Dick knows her better than I do. He'll tell you all about her."

Mrs. Clinton looked up from the teacups, Mrs. Graham arched her brows and her mouth twitched, the twins caught the sense of surprise and gazed open-eyed at their father.

"Dick knows her!" exclaimed the Squire. "Then why on earth——! Does he know she has settled down here?"

"*Has* she settled down here?" asked Humphrey. "Where has she settled, and what for?"

"Taken old Marsh's rectory at Blaythorn," said Mrs. Graham. "Going to hunt with the South Meadshire."

"That seems an odd proceeding for one of the brightest ornaments of the Shires," said Humphrey.

The Squire knit his heavy brows. "We can show her very good sport," he said, "if that's what she wants. But I should like to know why she came here, all the same."

"There's more in this than meets the eye," said Nancy, very unwisely, for she and Joan were instantly sent out of the room.

"What are you children doing here?" asked the Squire sharply. "Why aren't you with Miss Bird? Run along now; you've got lessons to do, or something."

"We don't have lessons on Saturday. Can't we stay with Cicely, father?" asked Joan.

"I must be going directly," said Cicely, rising. "But I'll come with you and pay a last farewell to the dear old Starling."

So the three of them retired, and directly they got out of the room Joan fell upon Nancy. "What an idiot you are!" she said. "If you had kept quiet we should have heard everything. When you get hold of a new speech you must always be poking it in. We've had enough of 'There's more in this than meets the eye.' I wish you'd get hold of a new one."

"I own it was foolish of me," said Nancy. "I'm at the mercy of a phrase. Still, it was quite true. We know who Dick is in love with now. Of course he got her down here. Humphrey said she was very beautiful."

"You are not to talk like that, children," said Cicely. "You know nothing about these things."

"Darling!" said Joan, squeezing her arm. "Don't be so frightfully grown-up. We are not children any longer, and we know a good deal more than you think."

"We are a force to be reckoned with now," said Nancy, "and it's no use trying to keep family secrets from us, sending us out of the room, and all that. It's too transparent, and makes us talk all the more."

There was a pause in the morning-room when the three sisters had left. Humphrey's quick brain was adjusting many things. He knew Dick admired Virginia Dubec, although it had not hitherto occurred to him that that admiration betokened anything serious. He suspected also, that since somebody must have suggested to the lady that she should spend a season hunting in Meadshire instead of in Leicestershire, that somebody was probably Dick. But if his brother had not seen fit to disclose that fact at Kencote, not even the fact of his acquaintanceship with Lady George Dubec, it was not for him to do so. Therefore, when his father asked him whether Dick knew that she had come to Blaythorn, and why she had come, he said, "I don't know in the least. He'll tell you if you ask him."

The Squire bent his brows on him. "You said he knew her very well."

"I didn't say he knew her very well. I said he knew her better than I did. Lots of people know her. She goes about everywhere in London."

"She was an actress, you say?"

"Well, that's what I've heard. It may not be true."

"It is true," said Mrs. Graham. "Virginia Vanreden. I remember quite well now. I saw her when I was in New York with my husband ten years ago. And a lovely creature she was. I shall go and call on her at once."

The Squire frowned again. "What sort of an actress was she?" he asked. "Was she a chorus girl?"

"It was a play called *The Flower of Florida*," replied Mrs. Graham, "a very silly play with catchy music, only it didn't catch me, because I hate music, and I was bored to tears. No, she wasn't a chorus girl, and she wasn't the Flower of Florida either—I remember the Flower, an exuberant lady with gold teeth, who seemed to be very popular, but I should have said she was past her job. This girl danced—oh, I remember her very well; she was the best of the bunch, and the Flower grinned at her with her teeth and scowled at her with her eyes while she was performing. When we got back to New York on our way home she had caught on, and all the richly gilded youth was crowding to see her. The Flower had departed, mad with jealousy."

"A dancing girl!" said the Squire. "Of course! Just the sort that George Dubec would have married. Well, you may call on her if you like, Mrs. Graham, but——"

"Oh, I shall," said Mrs. Graham. "Perhaps she will dance for me. I liked her immensely. She was certainly beautiful, and I like beauty. She was quite young too. She can't be very old now."

"What I want to know is what brings her to Blaythorn," said the Squire, which closed the discussion, for Cicely's carriage was announced at that moment, and the welfare of the Mountfield horses being of paramount importance it was not many minutes before she and Mrs. Graham had driven away.

Dick returned shortly after six o'clock, and when he had changed his clothes, came into the library where his father was sitting at his big writing-table looking over papers, his gold-rimmed glasses perched on his straight nose.

"Oh, here you are," he said, looking over them at his son. "I say, what's this about Lady George Dubec taking the rectory at Blaythorn?"

Dick took a cigarette out of his case and went over to the smoking-table by the fire to get a match. "I've just been to see her," he said; "she's a friend of mine."

"Well, but——" The Squire was puzzled, vaguely uneasy, though he could not have told why. "What on earth has she come *here* for? Who brought her? You didn't, I suppose?"

Dick sat down with rather elaborate unconcern in one of the big easy-chairs facing his father, who had turned round sideways in his seat. "I suppose you may say I did bring her, in a way," he said. "She wanted to do a bit of mild hunting somewhere, and I told her she'd better try the South Meadshire."

"But they tell me she's well known with the Quorn and all that sort of thing."

"Now I should like to know who told you that," said Dick to himself, but he did not ask. "She hasn't hunted there for two seasons," he said. "She wanted something a bit quieter. I said I'd see if I could find her a smallish house, and I wrote to Wylie, the agent at Bathgate. Blaythorn Rectory was the only place he could get hold of, and the stables there aren't much."

"I should think not."

"They are better than you'd think, though, and she has only brought three horses."

"Why didn't you tell us you were springing this strange lady upon us?" asked the Squire, as a beginning out of all the questions he wanted to ask.

"I haven't been home for a month," said Dick, "and I'm not much of a correspondent."

"You didn't say anything about it last night, and you didn't say you were going over to see her this afternoon." The Squire's uneasiness was beginning to take shape, and Dick realised with annoyance that he had given it something to feed on.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But we were talking about other things. The poor lady had a brute of a husband—I expect you knew him, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, I knew him. A pretty sort of rascal he was too."

"I've always heard so, though I never met him. He behaved like a swine to her, at any rate, and she's a very charming woman. I think you'll like her, father. I want to ask the mater to go over and see her as soon as she can. She doesn't know any one hereabouts, and it's a bit lonely for her."

He could not keep the note of appeal, rarely heard from him, out of his voice, but it escaped the Squire, who only saw himself at issue with his eldest son—a position he exceedingly disliked.

"Oh, my dear boy!" he said. "A woman that blackguard George Dubec picked up off the music-hall stage! You can't be serious."

"That's not true," said Dick sharply. "Who said she was on the music-hall stage?"

"Well, on the stage, anyhow—dancing on the stage—it's the same thing."

"Who told you that?"

"Humphrey said she had been on the stage, and Mrs. Graham remembered seeing her when she was in America."

"Is Humphrey here?"

"Yes, he came this afternoon. An American dancer, you know, Dick, and a woman who would marry George Dubec—really, you might have thought twice before you brought a person of that sort here; and as for your mother calling on her—that's out of the question. Surely you can see that."

The Squire's tone was conciliatory. He would not have spoken in that way, upon a subject on which he felt strongly, to any one else in the world, and when he had spoken he threw a glance at his son, whose face betokened nothing of all he was thinking at that moment.

Dick did not speak at once. When he did he said quietly, "When I suggested to Lady George, who has been a friend of mine for some time, that she should spend a month or two in this part of the country, I told her that my people would be glad to see her and do what they could for her. It never crossed my mind that you would refuse to acknowledge a friend of mine. It is not my habit to make friends of women I couldn't introduce you or my mother to."

"But, my dear boy!" expostulated the Squire. "A woman who has danced on the stage, the widow of a notorious profligate and swindler—George Dubec was a swindler, and he wasn't received latterly even in men's society—decent men. *I* wouldn't have received him, for one."

"You can say what you like about George Dubec," replied Dick. "It was the way he had treated her that made me sorry for her, first of all. Then I found she was a good woman, as well as a very charming one. There isn't a soul who knows her—and lots of people know her—who could have a word to say against her. It isn't generally known that she was on the stage—it was for a very short time—and I wish to goodness Humphrey had minded his own business and kept that to himself. Her father was a planter in the South, and lost everything he had in the war. She had to support her mother, and that was the only way. She was very young. I honour her for what she did."

"Yes, oh yes, that's all right," said the Squire, who was coming more and more to feel that it was all wrong. "But it's no good, Dick. Plenty of people in their different lines of life do things that you can honour them for, as you say, but you don't welcome them to houses like Kencote. We live a quiet enough life here, I know that. We're not one of the modern smart country houses, thank God, and never will be as long as I'm alive. But we're of some account in this part of the world, and have been for generations. And the long and the short of it is, Dick, that if you want to make friends with ladies of that sort, I can't stop you—I don't want to—it's your affair and you're old enough to look after yourself—but I won't have them at Kencote."

Inwardly, Dick was raging, and it needed all his self-control to keep his feelings from showing themselves in his face or in his speech. But he knew that if he did so everything was lost. It had been no vain boast that he had made to Virginia Dubec, that he could manage his father. He had the advantage over him that a man who controls his speech and his temper always has over a man who habitually controls neither. For many years past the Squire, who pictured himself as the wise but undisputed autocrat of his household, had gone to his eldest son for advice upon any matter that bothered him, and had always taken his advice. In questions of estate management he had never taken a step of any importance without consulting Dick, and Dick had been the virtual ruler of the estate, although the Squire did not know it. In his father's eyes Dick was a model son. He had never once had to exercise his paternal authority over him since his schooldays. He knew that Kencote, which was the apple of his own eye, was also the apple of Dick's, and that he would have as worthy a successor as any head of an old-rooted family ever had. In course of years he had come to treat his eldest son with a respect and consideration which he gave to no other being alive. Except that none but an eldest son who was some day to step into his place could have aroused the feelings he had towards him, his attitude towards Dick was what he might have felt towards a brother, almost, it might be said, towards an elder brother.

Now Dick was quite aware of all this, and he knew also that in his last speech his father had crossed a line that had never yet been crossed between them. He had done what he did almost every day of his life with some member or other of his family or household, but had never done with him since he was a child, because he had never given him the opportunity. He called it putting his foot down, and although in reference to other matters Dick had frequently, by the exercise of his peculiar gift of cool tact, caused the taking up again of a foot that was announced to have been put down, and by no means despaired of being able to do so in this instance, he knew that this was not the time to undertake the removal. Something of his moral supremacy had

already disappeared if his father could take it into his hands to give an ultimatum against his expressed wishes. There was no knowing how much further it would be damaged if he were encouraged, as he would be by opposition now that he had once delivered himself, to back up his revolt by strong speech. It was what he always fortified himself with either before or after the process of putting his foot down, and Dick had no mind to undergo it.

"Very well," he said quietly. "If you feel like that about it, there's no more to be said. It's damned awkward for me, but I suppose I took too much on myself."

The Squire immediately recrossed the line, on the other side of which only opposition could possibly make him wish to keep his footing. "Oh, well," he said, "of course I don't say—in this instance—what I mean is—well, look here, Dick, I don't say anything one way or the other. I'll say this, my boy, you've never given me the slightest trouble, and we've always seen eye to eye in pretty well everything, and where we haven't at first you have always come to see that I was right in the end—eh? Better let me think the question over—what? I don't want you to feel you can't ask your friends to this house, which will be your own some day."

"I can hardly help feeling that, can I?" said Dick, with a short laugh.

"Eh? Well, I must think it over, and talk it over with your mother. You'd better think it over too, old boy. I can't help thinking you'll feel you haven't been very wise. We're Clintons of Kencote, you know. We owe something to ourselves."

But Dick could stand no more. "All right," he said, rising. "I think I'll go up and have a bath before dinner. I'm a bit stiff."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SQUIRE FEELS TROUBLE COMING

Dick went out of the room angry with himself, angry with his father, and still more angry with his brother. He wanted to meet Humphrey and have it out with him, and he knew that Humphrey at that hour—about seven o'clock—would be in the smoking-room. But he went upstairs, not because he wanted a bath before dinner as he had told his father, and certainly not because he was stiff after trotting a dozen miles or so along the roads, but because he knew that it was not wise to have anything out with anybody unless you had complete command over yourself. So he went into his big comfortable bedroom, where a bright fire was burning, lit some candles, and threw himself into an easy-chair to think matters out.

That his father would give way, that he was already in process of giving way, he was well assured. He knew how to work that all right, and he had taken no false step, as far as he could remember, in dealing with him. But that little fact of Virginia's having once danced on the stage, of which she had told him in the early days of their friendship, as she had told him everything else about her varied, unhappy life, he had never thought that he—and she—would have to face. If it had not been for that, his father, so he told himself, would have given way already. Knowing it, it was surprising that he had left anything to be said on the subject at all. He need never have known it; so few people did know it, even in London, where Virginia was beginning to be well known, or in Leicestershire, where she was very well known indeed. Of course, Humphrey knew it—he knew all that sort of gossip about everybody—and Dick's anger against him began to burn as he imagined the way in which he would have let it out. He was like a spiteful old woman, fiddling about in drawing-rooms, whispering scandal into other old women's ears and receiving it into his own in return.

At this point Humphrey came into the room. "Hullo, old chap!" he said. "What on earth are you doing up here? It isn't time to dress yet."

Dick got up quickly out of his chair and faced him. He had better have gone to him in the smoking-room at once before he had begun to think things over. "What the devil do you mean by meddling with my affairs?" he said angrily.

Humphrey stopped short and stared as if he had held a pistol to his head. He and Dick and Walter had been closer friends than most brothers are. Their ways for some time had begun to diverge, but they had remained friends, and since their boyhood they had never quarrelled. Such a speech as Dick's was in effect more than a pistol held to his head. It was a pistol shot.

"I suppose you mean what I told them downstairs about Virginia Dubec," he said.

"Virginia Dubec? Who gave you the right to call her Virginia?" said Dick hotly, and could have bitten out his tongue for saying it the moment after, for of course it told Humphrey everything.

But Humphrey was too deeply astonished at the moment to take in anything. He thought he knew his brother; he had always rather admired him, and above all for his coolness. But if this

was Dick, passionate and indiscreet, he did not know him at all, and it was difficult to tell how to deal with him.

But Humphrey was cool too, in his own way, hating the discomfort of passion, and he certainly did not want to have a row with his elder brother. "I don't know why you're up against me like this," he said. "I should have thought we knew each other well enough by this time to talk over anything that wants talking over, sensibly. I'm quite ready to talk over anything with you, but hadn't we better go and do it downstairs? They'll be up here putting out your clothes directly."

"We'll go down to the smoking-room," said Dick, not sorry to have a minute or two in which to pull himself together.

So they went downstairs without a word, and along a stone passage to a big room which had been given over to them as boys, because it was right away from the other rooms, and in which they knew no one would disturb them.

Neither of them spoke at once, but both took cigarettes from a box on a table, and Humphrey offered Dick a match, which he refused, lighting one for himself.

"Lady George Dubec," said Dick—"Virginia Dubec, if you like to call her so—I've no objection—is a friend of mine, as you know. She wanted a quiet place to hunt from for a month or two, and I said I would try to find her a house here. Of course I told her that they would make friends with her from here. I went to see her this afternoon, and I come back to find you have been talking scandal about her, and giving the governor the impression that she's an impossible sort of creature for respectable people to know. Upon my word, Humphrey, you ought to be kicked."

Humphrey grew a shade paler, but he asked quietly, "What scandal do you accuse me of spreading about her?"

"Well, it isn't scandal in the sense that it's untrue; but I don't suppose a dozen people know that she was ever on the stage. It was only for a few months, and the circumstances of it did her credit. But if it gets about, it will do her harm. As far as the governor goes, of course, it puts him up on his hind legs at once, and here am I in the position of getting this quite charming lady, against whom nobody can say a word, down here, and my own people refusing to go near her. It's too bad. If you happened to know that about her, which, of course, is just the sort of thing you would find out and remember and talk about, out of all the other things you might say about a woman like that, you ought to have kept it to yourself. And you would have done if you had had a spark of decent feeling."

"I *should* have kept it to myself if I had had any idea it was through you she came here."

"You ought to have kept it to yourself in any case. You know her, you know what she is, and the first thing you find to blurt out about her when you hear she has come down here is the very thing that you know will put everybody against her!"

"Look here, Dick, there's no sense in you going on blackguarding me like this. I hadn't a ghost of a notion she was anywhere near here when I told them what I did. The moment I came into the room the governor said, 'We've been talking about Lady George Dubec. Do you know her?' I said, 'Yes, she's a very charming lady.' That was the very first thing I said. Then I said, 'She was an actress once upon a time.' There's nothing in that. You say very few people know it. You're quite wrong. Lots of people know it. Why, even Mrs. Graham knew it, and had seen her. Nobody thinks anything the worse of her for it. Why should they? And anyhow it wasn't until afterwards that they told me that she had come down here. Then I said, 'Dick knows her better than I do; he'll tell you all you want to know.' Really, old chap, you're a bit unreasonable."

Both of them had been standing so far, but now Humphrey, feeling perhaps that the crisis had been disposed of, threw himself into a chair.

So it was, on the surface. Dick stood for a time looking down on the floor. If it was as Humphrey had said, and he had not known that Virginia Dubec was in the neighbourhood until after he had let out that fact about her, it was impossible to carry the attack further. But Dick was no more satisfied with him than before. The hostility he had felt remained, and was destined to grow. From that moment the common ground of easy, tolerant brotherhood upon which they had both stood for so long was left behind. Dick had begun to criticise, to find cause for dislike; Humphrey had received an affront, and he did not easily forgive an affront.

But the cement of their years of frictionless companionship still held, and could not be broken in a moment. Dick also took a chair. "Well, if you didn't know——" he said rather grudgingly.

"No, I didn't know, and I'm sorry," said Humphrey; "the governor won't hold out, Dick; he's only got to see her."

It was the best thing he could have said. Dick was inwardly gratified, and some of his resentment departed. "You needn't say anything unless he opens the subject," he said. "But——"

"Oh, I know what to say if he does," said Humphrey. "I say, Dick, old chap, is it a case?"

Dick was not at all ready for this—from Humphrey, although if Walter had asked him he might have admitted how much of a case it was, and gained some contentment by talking it over. "I like her, of course," he said, somewhat impatiently; "I've never disguised it. I suppose one is permitted to make friendship with women occasionally?"

"Oh yes," said Humphrey, with rather elaborate unconcern. Then Dick said he was going up to dress, and left the room without further word, while Humphrey sat a while longer looking at the fire and turning things over in his mind.

Over the dinner-table that evening there was talk of the forthcoming Hunt Ball, and the one or two others which made the week after Christmas a short season of gaiety in South Meadshire. The Birketts were coming to stay for them, the Judge and his wife and unmarried daughter, and his other daughter, Lady Senhouse, with her husband. These were the only guests invited so far, and the Squire, who liked a little bustle of gaiety about him now and again, said that they must ask one or two more people.

"We shall be unusually gay this year," he said, "with the ball for Grace at Kemsale, which is sure to be well done. We must take a good party over from Kencote. Who can we ask?"

It was a somewhat extraordinary thing that a question like that could not easily be answered at Kencote. The Squire very seldom left home, Mrs. Clinton practically never, and in the course of years the families from whom they could draw for visitors had dwindled down to those of relations and county neighbours. The Squire was quite satisfied with this state of things. There were plenty of people about him with whom he could shoot, and who would shoot with him; and an occasional dinner party was all or more than he wanted in the way of indoor sociability—that, and this yearly little group of balls, the Hunt Ball, the Bathgate Ball, and whatever might be added to them from one or other of the big houses round. Kencote had never been one of those houses. Its women had never been considered of enough importance to make the trouble and expense of ball-giving worth while, and the men could get all the balls they wanted elsewhere. Before Cicely was married her brothers had generally brought a few men down for these local gaieties, but for the past two years there had been no party from Kencote.

"I think Lady Aldeburgh would bring Susan Clinton if you were to ask her," said Humphrey. "In fact, I'm pretty sure she would."

Now the Countess of Aldeburgh was a person of some importance in the social world, and her husband was sprung from the same race as the Squire, sprung, in fact, some distance back, from Kencote, and represented, as the Squire not infrequently pointed out, a junior branch of the family of which he himself was the head. He was accustomed to speak rather patronisingly of the Aldeburgh Clintons on that account, although not to them, for he did not know them, the present Lord Aldeburgh having been a small boy at school at that period of the Squire's life when he had been about London and known everybody.

"Are they friends of yours?" he asked, not displeased at the idea.

"Yes," said Humphrey. "I told Susan Clinton that she ought to see the home of her ancestors—I was lunching with them—and Lady Aldeburgh said they couldn't see it unless they were asked."

"No difficulty about asking them," said the Squire. "Very pleased to see them, and show them what there is, although I dare say they won't think much of it after the sort of thing they're accustomed to. They must take us as they find us. Did you say anything about these balls?"

"Well, yes, I did—threw out feelers, you know. I think they would come if mother were to ask them."

"Oh, write by all means, Nina," said the Squire. "Include Aldeburgh, of course."

"Oh, *he* won't come," said Humphrey. "He never goes where they do. He doesn't like them."

The Squire frowned. He knew there were people like that, but he didn't want to hear about them. According to his old-fashioned ideas, husbands and wives, if they went visiting at all, ought to go visiting together. Of course it was different where a man might have to go up to London for a day or two. There was no necessity always to take his wife along with him. Or he might perhaps go to a house to shoot. That was all right. But for women to make a point of going about by themselves—why, they had much better stop at home and look after their household duties. "Well, ask him, of course," he said. "He can refuse if he likes. We can do very well without him. Are either of you boys going to ask any men?"

Dick had thought of bringing a friend, Captain Vernon, who had been to Kencote before and would be very welcome. And Humphrey was going to ask Lord Edgeware.

"What, that young fool who lost all his money racing?" asked the Squire.

"He didn't lose it all," said Humphrey, "and he's had a lot more left to him."

"We don't want that sort of person here," said the Squire decisively.

"All right," said Humphrey. "But he's a very good chap all the same, and has finished sowing his wild oats."

"He's an absolute rotter," said Dick. "I quite agree; we don't want that sort of fellow here."

Humphrey threw a glance at him and flushed with annoyance, but he said lightly, "I beg to withdraw his candidature. Is there any objection to Bobby Trench? He hasn't spent money racing because he has never had any to spend."

Dick was silent. The Squire enquired if Mr. Trench was one of Lord So-and-so's sons, and being informed that he was, said that he had known his father and should be pleased to see him at Kencote. So the party was made up, and the men went on to talk about pheasants and hounds, until the twins came in for dessert, when they went on talking about pheasants and hounds.

The Squire and Dick went into the library to go over their farm papers together almost immediately after dinner, leaving Humphrey with his mother and the girls in the morning-room. When they had finished they betook themselves to easy-chairs to talk, as their custom was in the evening. They were very good friends, and had enough in common to make their conversation mutually agreeable. Neither of them read much, and when Dick was at Kencote they usually spent their evenings talking. But Dick was rather silent to-night, and the Squire was uneasily conscious of the shadow that had fallen on their intercourse. And when he was uneasy about anything his uneasiness always found expression.

"I say, my boy, I hope you don't take it amiss what I said about this Lady George Dubec this afternoon," he said. "You see my point all right, don't you?"

"I see your point well enough," said Dick. "Only I don't think it's much of a point."

He was accustomed thus to address his father on equal terms, and the Squire liked to have it so. He was now only anxious, while having his own way, to avoid the unpleasantness of leaving a grudge against himself in Dick's mind.

"Well, we needn't go all over it again," he said. "I haven't made up my mind yet. I don't say your mother shan't call and I don't say she shall. I must think it over. Of course it's a bit awkward for you."

"It's more than a bit awkward for me," said Dick uncompromisingly. "When you do think it over you might consider how particularly awkward it is, after having helped this lady to a house here, to have to tell her that my people don't consider her respectable enough to know."

"H'm! Ha!" grunted the Squire, at a loss how to meet this. Then he made a clutch at his authority. "Well, I think you ought to have asked me first, Dick," he said, "and not taken things for granted. If I'm putting you in an awkward position now, it's because you have put me in an awkward position first."

There was reason in this, perhaps more than the Squire usually displayed in discussing a subject in which his feelings were already engaged, and Dick did not want to go over the ground again until matters had advanced themselves a stage.

"She will be at the meet on Monday—driving," he said. "You will see what she is like, and that she isn't in the least like what you probably think she is. I should like to introduce you to her, but that shall be as you please."

The Squire did not reply to this. He sat looking at the fire with a puzzled frown on his face. Then he turned to his son and said, "There's nothing between you and this lady, Dick, is there? You hadn't got her in your mind last night when you said that you did not want to marry a young girl?"

Dick cursed himself inwardly for having made that unlucky speech. He was not cut out for however mild a conspiracy, and he hated to have to fence and parry. But he must answer quickly if suspicion, which would be disastrous at the present stage, were not to rest on him. He gave a little laugh. "Is that what you have been thinking of?" he asked. "Is that why you don't want mother to call on Lady George?"

The Squire had only to push his question, and he would have learnt everything, for Dick would not have denied Virginia. But he did not do so. "No, of course not," he said. "But if it were so—if that's how the land lay——"

Dick did not tell him that that was not how the land lay. He said nothing, and the Squire relinquished the subject, not to open it up again until he was alone with his wife that night. Then his disquietude came out, for Dick's reply to his question had not satisfied him, and putting two and two together, as he said, and impelled towards dreadful conclusions by his habit of making the most of vague fears, he had now fully convinced himself that the land did indeed lie in the direction of Lady George Dubec, now settled within a mile or two, at Blaythorn, and that, unless he could do something to stop it, a most dreadful catastrophe was about to overtake the house of Clinton.

Mrs. Clinton could do little to calm his fears. Privately she thought that he was making a mountain out of a mole-hill, and that Dick was as little likely as the Squire himself to marry such a woman as she imagined Lady George Dubec to be. For she knew how much alike her husband and her son were in all the essential aims and ambitions of their lives, although she knew also that Dick had a far cooler head and a better brain than his father's. For that very reason he was the less likely to make a marriage which would be beneath the dignity of his family. She said what she could to persuade her husband that Dick might be trusted in a matter of this sort, but he was in that stage of alarm when however much a man may desire to find himself mistaken he resists all attempts to prove him so. "I tell you, Nina," he said, "that he told me himself that when he did marry it would be a middle-aged woman, or words to that effect. And he gets this woman down here without saying a word to us about it, and they say she's good-looking—you heard Humphrey say that yourself, and Mrs. Graham too—and he goes over there this afternoon without mentioning it.—By Jove! didn't he say he wanted to go and see Jim at Mountfield? Yes, he did,—you remember—at luncheon. Nina, I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. Can't you *see* what a dreadful thing it would be, and that we *must* stop it at any cost?"

"I hope it will not come about," said Mrs. Clinton. "Dick is level-headed, and he sees questions of this sort in much the same light as you do, Edward."

"It would be intolerable," wailed the poor Squire. "And Dick of all people! I'd have trusted him anywhere. And now I shall have to stand up against him, and it will be one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. But I won't let him throw himself away and drag the old name in the dust if I can possibly prevent it. And, God helping me, I will prevent it, whatever it costs me. Nina, you are not to go near this woman. The only way is to keep her at arm's-length. If we stand firm the affair will fade out, and Dick will forget all about it. He has always been a good boy. I've been proud of my son. He will thank me some day for saving him from himself. Good-night, Nina, God bless you. There's a difficult time coming for us at Kencote, I'm afraid."

So night and silence fell on the great house. Its master, always healthily tired after his day, spent mostly in the open, soon forgot his troubles in sleep; its mistress lay awake for a long time, wondering if trouble were really going to befall her first-born, who had gone so far from her since she had first hugged him to her breast. And in other rooms in the house there were those who lay awake and wearied themselves with the troubles of life or slept soundly without a care, some of them of account in the daily comings and goings, some of very little, but one and all acting and reacting on one another, concerned in some degree in a common life.

CHAPTER IX

DICK PAYS A SUNDAY VISIT

It did not take Dick long to find out on that next (Sunday) morning that his diplomacy had failed, that his father, urged by his fears, had discovered what he would have hidden from him for a time, or thought he had discovered it, which came to the same thing, since it was true, and that he might just as well have announced his intention of marrying Virginia Dubec, and entered at once upon the struggle which was now bound to come in any case.

Nothing was said on either side, and the Squire did his best to behave as usual. But the attempt was too much for him, and there was no one who did not know before breakfast was over that there was a disturbance in the air. He would enter upon a course of conversation with gaiety, and relinquish it immediately to frown upon his plate. He grumbled at everything upon the table, and testily rebuked the twins for fidgeting. They took the rebuke calmly, knowing quite well what it portended, and were only anxious to discover the cause of the upset.

"It's this Lady George Dubec," said Joan, when they were alone together. "There's something fishy about her; it must have come out after we were sent away yesterday. Father thinks he's Emperor of this part of Meadshire, and he doesn't like her coming here without his being consulted."

"I don't think it's that at all," said Nancy. "I believe it's Humphrey's debts. Father has got pots of money, but he hates shelling it out. He was snappy with Humphrey this morning."

"So he was with everybody but Dick. That proves nothing. A week's pocket-money that it's this Lady George."

"Dick said we weren't to bet."

"Oh, well, perhaps we'd better not, then. He was a brick about the camera. I don't suppose he's concerned in it, whatever it is. With father, Dick does no wrong."

"I'm not sure. Joan, supposing Dick has fallen in love with Lady George and father is upset about it!"

"Oh, my dear, do talk sense. Dick in love with a widow!"

"Stranger things have happened. Anyhow, we'll leave no stone unturned to find out what it is."

"Oh, we'll ferret it out all right. It will add to the interest of life."

There was one thing that the Squire always did on the rare occasions on which he found himself in a dilemma, and that was to consult his half-brother, the Rector. Consequently when, after church, meeting Mrs. Beach, the Rector's wife, in the churchyard, he asked her if she and Tom would come up to luncheon, Dick, overhearing him, smiled inwardly and a little ruefully, and pictured to himself the sitting that would be held in the afternoon, when the Rector would be invited into the library and the Squire would unbosom himself of his difficulties. Dick himself had often joined in these conclaves. "Let's see what Tom has to say about it," his father would say. "He has a good head, Tom." Dick would be left out of this conclave, but as he thought of the line that his uncle was likely to take, he half wished that he had had a conclave with him himself beforehand. The Rector was a man of peace, a lovable man, who hated to see any one uncomfortable, and perhaps, for a churchman, hated a little too much to run the risk of discomfort himself. Probably he would have sympathised. Certainly he would have brought no hard judgment to bear on Virginia, whatever she had done and whatever she had been. However, it was too late to think of that now, and when Joan asked him at luncheon if he would go for a walk with them in the afternoon, he took the bull by the horns and said that he was going to drive over to Blaythorn.

"By the by," said Mrs. Beach, not noticing the Squire's sudden frown, "have you heard that Mr. Marsh has let his rectory to a hunting lady?"

"Yes," said Dick, "Lady George Dubec. She is a friend of mine, and I'm going over to see her."

Never had the Squire spoken with more difficulty. But it behoved him to speak, and to speak at once. "I am very sorry she has come," he said. "She is a friend of Dick's in London, but we can't recognise her here at Kencote."

Except that the servants were not in the room it was a public throwing down of the gage of battle. It amounted on the Squire's part to an affront of his son, the being beloved best in the world, and he would have put it on him if the whole household had been present. But what it cost him to do so could be told from his moody fits of silence during the rest of the meal, his half-emptied plate and his twice-emptied glass.

Dick took the blow without flinching, although he was inwardly consumed with anger, not at the affront to himself, but to Virginia. "We are a little behind the times at Kencote," he said lightly. "But we shall probably fall into line by and by."

The Squire made no answer. He had shot his bolt and had none of the ammunition of repartee at hand. The awkward moment was covered by the immediate flow of conversation, but he took little or no part in it, and it was a relief when the meal was over.

When the Squire had led the way into the library and shut the door upon himself and the Rector, he broke out at once. "Tom, you heard what happened. Dick is out of his mind about this woman. Unless something can be done to stop it, a dreadful day is coming to Kencote."

The Rector, tall, fleshy, slow in movement, mild of speech, was astonished. "My dear Edward!" he exclaimed. "I did not gather from what passed that—that this meant anything serious."

"Oh, serious!" echoed the Squire, half distraught. "It's as serious as it can be, Tom." And he told him in his own decisive manner exactly how serious it seemed to him to be. "A hunting woman!" he ended up. "I could have forgiven that. I can't deny that women do hunt, now, who wouldn't have done in our young days. An American! Well, people do marry them nowadays—but an American at Kencote after all these generations! Think of it, Tom! And if that were only the worst! But a stage dancer! A woman who has shown herself before the public—for money! And a widow!—a woman who has been married to one of the worst blackguards in England. You remember him, Tom—at Eton."

"No," said the Rector. "He was before my time."

"Before your time—yes, and three or four years older than I am. He'd have been an old man if he'd been alive now. And it's the widow of that man my son wants to marry. Isn't it too shameful, Tom? What can have come over him? He has never acted in this sort of way before. My boy Dick! In everything that has ever happened to annoy me, he has always behaved just exactly as I would have my son behave. And now he brings this trouble on me. Oh, Tom, tell me what on earth I'm to do."

The poor gentleman was so overcome with distress that it was pitiful to witness. The Rector knew how he took things—hard at first, and bringing his heaviest weight of resistance to bear upon the lightest obstacles, but calming down after he had been humoured a bit, accepting the inevitable like a sensible man, and making the best of it. But this was beyond the point at which

he could be humoured. It struck at all that he held dearest in life, the welfare of his son, the dignity of his house. He would not give way here, whatever distress it cost him to hold out.

"Have you seen this lady, Edward?" asked the Rector.

"Oh, seen her! No," replied the Squire. "Why should I want to see her? She may be good-looking. They say she is. I suppose Dick wouldn't have fallen in love with her if she were not, and at any rate women who are not good-looking don't become pets of the stage, as I'm told this woman was. Pah! It's beyond everything I could have believed of Dick. I would rather he had married the daughter of a farm-labourer—a girl of clean healthy English stock. To bring a creature from behind the footlights and make her mistress of Kencote—a soiled woman—that's what she is, even if she has never sold herself—and who knows that she hasn't? She *did* sell herself—to a broken-down *roué*, a man old enough to be her father—for his wretched title, I suppose. And now she wants to buy Kencote, and my son, Dick, the straightest, finest fellow a father ever had reason to be proud of. I tell you, Tom, the world ought to be delivered of these harpies. They ought to be locked up, Tom, locked up, and the wickedness whipped out of them."

"Has Dick said that he wanted to marry her?" asked the Rector, anxious to bring this tirade, which was gathering in intensity, to an end.

"It's as plain as it can be. He has brought her down here, and he wants us to take her up."

"Well, but is that all, Edward? Surely you have more to go on than that, if you have made up your mind that he wants to marry her."

"I *have* more to go on. He told me only two nights ago that he was quite ready to marry, and that he wouldn't marry a girl. That's plain English, isn't it? And this comes just on top of it. Why, he had her down here—fixed it all up for her—and never said a word to us till after we'd heard from outside that she was there. There are a lot of things. I can put two and two together as well as anybody, and I haven't a doubt of it. And I asked him definitely, yesterday, and he didn't deny it."

"He didn't acknowledge it, I suppose."

"I tell you he didn't deny it. He gave me an evasive answer. That isn't like Dick. She has had a bad influence on him already. Don't waste time in trying to persuade me that black is white, Tom. Tell me how I am to stop this."

The Rector could not tell him how to stop it. He knew very well that Dick was a stronger man than his father, and that if he had made up his mind to do a thing he would do it. But he still doubted whether he had made up his mind to do this particular thing. He thought that the Squire was probably alarming himself needlessly, and with all the art that lay in his power he tried to persuade him that it was so. "Young men," he ended, "do make friends with women they wouldn't want to marry. You know that is so, Edward. It is no use shutting your eyes to facts."

"Yes, but they don't bring them down to their homes for their mothers and sisters to make friends with," retorted the Squire. "It's the last thing Dick would do, and I'd rather he did what he's doing now, bad as it is, than do a thing like that. He's hypnotised—that's what it is—he thinks she's a good woman—everything she ought to be——"

"And perhaps she *is* a good woman, Edward, and everything she ought to be," interrupted the Rector, speaking more emphatically than was his wont, for in his simple unworldliness it had not occurred to him that his last words could bear the interpretation the Squire had put upon them, and he was rather scandalised. "I say that you ought to hold your judgment until you have seen her, and know something of her at first hand. I do not believe that Dick would expect his family to make friends with a lady who was not above reproach, and I certainly never meant for a moment to imply that he would do such a thing as make love to a woman he did not intend to marry. When I said that men make friends with women, I meant no more than I said."

"Well, you're a parson," said his brother, "and you've got to keep your eyes shut to certain things that go on, I suppose."

"No, Edward, that is not the duty of a parson," returned the Rector. "I shut my eyes to nothing. It seems to me that you do. It seems to me that you shut your eyes to what you know of Dick's character. You picture to yourself a vulgar, scheming adventuress. I say that if Dick is in love with this lady, as you say he is, she is not that, but something very different, and I say again that you ought to withhold your judgment until you have seen her."

"As far as seeing her goes," grumbled the Squire, "there's nothing easier than that. I shall see her at the covert-side, and I dare say I shall see her scampering all over the county covered with mud, and getting in the way of the hounds. Women are an infernal nuisance in the hunting-field. Well, you don't give me much comfort, Tom. Still, it does one some good to talk over one's troubles. I'm afraid this is going to be a big trouble—the biggest I've ever had in my life."

"Then don't meet it half-way," said the Rector. "You don't know for certain that Dick wants to marry her, and if he does she can't be anything like you have imagined her. I'm afraid I must go now, Edward. I have to look in at the Sunday-school."

"Well, good-bye, Tom, my dear fellow. Tell 'em in the Sunday-school to obey their parents. Yes, for this is *right*, by George! the Bible says. And so it is; if children would obey their parents, half the trouble in the world would disappear."

Dick was not best pleased, when he drove up to the door of Blaythorn Rectory, to hear that her ladyship had gone for a walk with Miss Dexter, and would not be back for an hour or more. He had not told her that he was coming over, and had not intended to do so. Horses were not taken out of the Kencote stables on Sundays without necessity. He said he would wait, and went into the drawing-room to get what consolation he could out of his own thoughts until Virginia should return.

He had been there about half an hour, sometimes walking up and down the room, sometimes reading a few pages of a book and throwing it impatiently on one side, sometimes sitting staring moodily into the fire, when he heard voices in the hall. A look of relief came over his face and he got up, prepared to greet Virginia, when the door was opened and Mrs. Graham was shown into the room. She was dressed in her usual serviceable walking clothes and had a dog-whip in her hand, although she had left her dogs for the time being outside.

"Good gracious, Dick!" she exclaimed. "They told me there was nobody here."

"The other maid let me in," said Dick. He could not for the life of him prevent himself feeling and looking shamefaced.

Mrs. Graham took no notice of it. She walked straight to a little writing-table in the corner of the room and sat down. "As I suppose you are wondering what on earth I am doing here," she said, "I'll tell you. I had a letter this morning from Anne Conyers, who asked me to come and see Lady George, as she didn't know a soul in the county. I'm only too pleased to; we're such a set of rustics here that it does us good to get somebody new, if they're not nincompoops like those people we've just got rid of at Mountfield. I thought I would drop in this afternoon. If she's sensible she won't mind my coming in these clothes. If she isn't I don't want to know her. You know her; you don't think she'll mind, eh?"

"Oh, of course not."

"I'm just going to write her a note asking her to dine to-morrow. Jim and Muriel are coming, and Roddy Buckstone. Will you and Humphrey come, Dick? We don't want too many women."

"I don't know about Humphrey. I shall be pleased to."

"Well, that's all right. You might take a message from me to Humphrey."

"I'd rather you wrote a note to him—and posted it."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Graham in a voice that invited explanation.

But Dick gave none.

"Lady George has a friend staying with her—Miss Dexter," he said. "You'd better ask her too, I think."

"Oh, of course. Thank you for telling me. Miss Dexter."

She wrote her note, fastened and directed it, dwelling rather deliberately on the process as she neared its completion. She seemed as if she were turning over in her mind something to say, but finally rose, and said, "Well, I suppose she'll get that when she comes in. I'll take myself and the dogs back to Mountfield now."

"Why don't you wait and see her?" asked Dick, rather grudgingly, for he didn't want Mrs. Graham to stay. "She can't be long now."

Mrs. Graham looked at him shrewdly. "I don't think I will," she said. "She'll be out with the hounds to-morrow, I suppose. Look here, Dick, I don't know whether I'm a fool to say anything or not, and I don't want to mix myself up in other people's business, but Anne Conyers told me that Lady George was a friend of yours, and that you had got her this house. We'll see that she gets on here all right."

She gave him a knowing nod which made him reply—

"Oh, you mean that there's likely to be trouble at Kencote. Well, I don't mind telling you that there *is* trouble. My father announced to-day before Tom and Grace and the whole family that Lady George Dubec might be good enough for me to know in London, but she wasn't good enough for him or anybody to know at Kencote." He spoke bitterly, and as Mrs. Graham, who knew him well, had never heard him speak of his father.

"Did he?" she said. "Well, that's what, if I were a man, I should call rather thick. Still, he'll probably come round, and if he doesn't he is not the only person in South Meadshire, though he sometimes behaves as if he thought he was. Good-bye, Dick; to-morrow at eight o'clock, then. I'll write to Humphrey, though I shan't break my heart if he doesn't come."

Dick let her out at the front door, where she was vociferously greeted by her pack, and then returned to the drawing-room. "And I wonder what *she'll* be thinking as she goes home," he said to himself.

Virginia came into the room alone when she and Miss Dexter returned. Dick could hear her glad little cry of surprise outside when she was told he was there, and it made him catch his breath with a queer mixture of sensations. She brought a cool fresh fragrance into the room with her, and he thought he had never seen her look sweeter, with her rather frail beauty warmed into sparkling life by the exercise she had taken in the sharp winter air and her pleasure at finding him there on her return.

Sitting by her side on the sofa he told her what had happened, and she took the news thoughtfully and sadly. "He must be rather terrible, your father," she said, "and cleverer than you thought too, Dick, if he suspects already what is between us."

"Oh, I suppose it's I who am not so clever as I thought myself," he said. "When he asked me point-blank I couldn't tell him a lie. But I own I never thought he would ask me. It was from something I had said to him the night before, about not wanting to marry a youngster. I don't know why on earth I was fool enough to say it, and put him on the scent. I suppose I was thinking such a lot of you, my girl. I can't get you out of my head, you know. But the fact is I'm not cut out for a conspirator, Virginia, and now that all my carefully laid plans have come to nothing, I'm not sure that I'm not rather relieved."

"You think they have quite come to nothing, Dick?"

"It looks like it. We shall know to-morrow. I still think—what I've always thought and built upon—that if he once sees you——"

"Dear Dick! But it's rather late for that now, if he has heard all about me, and has made a picture of me in his mind."

"Well, it's such a preposterous picture, that the reality can't help striking him. We won't do anything until after we know what has happened at the meet. And by the by, there's a dinner invitation for you for to-morrow evening." He told her about Mrs. Graham and gave her her note.

"That is very kind of Mrs. Graham," she said. "I forgot to tell you that I knew her sister-in-law. I'm afraid we shan't have much opportunity of talking there, Dick."

So they talked where they were for a long time, until the dusk fell and the maid came in with the lights and the tea, and Miss Dexter after her, and the result of their talk was that they felt things were not as bad as they looked. Dick's father would relent some day, and until he did they had each other.

CHAPTER X

THE MEET AT APTHORPE COMMON

The meet on Monday was at Apthorpe Common, a distance of nine miles from Kencote, and the three men appeared at breakfast in boots and breeches. The Squire always did so, and donned his red coat, with the yellow collar of the South Meadshire Hunt, when he dressed for the day. Dick came to breakfast in a tweed jacket, and Humphrey in a quilted silk smoking-coat, and both had linen aprons tied round their waists to preserve their well pipe-clayed breeches. But the Squire belonged to an older generation, having been born when boots and breeches still lingered as the normal dress of country gentlemen, and a red coat was as easy in the wearing as any other coat. He looked a fine figure of a man, as he stood up at the end of the table to read prayers to his household, and ready to go with the best if he got a horse up to his weight.

At a quarter to ten punctually the Squire stood at the front door enveloped in a heavy ulster, a serviceable but not very shiny hat on his head, a cigar in his mouth, drawing on his gloves, and looking over the handsome pair of greys in his phaeton. Humphrey, whose hat lacked nothing in polish, stood by him in a fur coat. As the stable clock chimed the quarter, the Squire turned to the butler, who stood behind him with a rug, and asked where Captain Clinton was.

"Dick is driving himself," said Humphrey. "He started five minutes ago."

The Squire's face darkened, but he climbed up to his seat and took the reins. Humphrey got up by his side, and with a clatter and jingle they started, while the groom swung himself into his seat behind.

If Humphrey's thoughts had not been taken up with his own affairs he might have felt sorry for his father. It was an unfailing custom at Kencote that when there were only three to go to a meet far enough off to necessitate a drive, they should go in the phaeton. The Squire enjoyed

these drives, with his eldest son sitting by his side, especially on such a morning as this, soft and mild, and holding out every prospect of a good day at the sport that he loved. Now he drove along at his usual steady pace without saying a word. The brightness had gone out of his day's pleasure before it had begun, and he would just as soon as not have turned his horses' heads and gone home again. There had been constraint between him and Dick since the day before, but not unfriendliness, and he had thought that perhaps they might have come as closely together as usual during this drive, or at any rate have buried for a time the thought of what lay between them in the prospect of the day's sport. But Dick had gone off alone without a word, and his heart was sore within him. Dick might have spared him this, he thought. It meant, as nothing else he could have done would have meant, that their pleasant, almost brotherly, intimacy was to cease. Each was to go his own way, until one or the other of them gave in. And the Squire knew, although he may not have said as much to himself, that Dick could support this sort of estrangement better than he could. Dick had his friends, scores of them, and when he came down to Kencote he was only leaving them behind him; while to him, surrounded by his family, but very much alone as far as the society of men of his own interests was concerned, Dick's visits to his home were the brightest times in his life, when everything that was to be done seemed better worth the doing, because so much of it was done in his company, and the pleasures of life were redoubled in value because they shared them and could talk about them, beforehand and afterwards.

His mind too was turned to what lay before him, which he had thought about as little as possible. He was going to where he could see this woman who had enslaved Dick. She was to be there, spoiling for him even the pursuit he liked best. And Dick no doubt would be at her side, piloting her, making himself conspicuous by his attentions to the whole county, providing food for gossip, perhaps for scandal. If this creature was to be hanging to his coat-tails, his son, who had followed hounds since his childhood, and whom he had always taken a pride in seeing well mounted and going with the best of them, would be pointed at as a man who had always been in the first flight until he had been caught by a woman, but was now of no account in the field. The Squire had seen that happen before, and it covered him with shame and anger to think that it would happen to Dick.

His anger was directed against Virginia alone. He felt none against his son, but only a kind of thwarted tenderness, which would have led him to do anything, short of allowing him to throw himself away and spoil his life, to bring back the old happy state of feeling between them. It crossed his mind that he might even be obliged to let him have his way in this matter. He knew that he would be sorely tried if he were to hold out, and that he might not have the power to do so. He thought that perhaps he would do as Tom had advised and see this woman first, see if there were any saving grace in her which would enable him to give way, and comfort himself with the idea that things might have been worse. At any rate, he was bound to see her shortly, and without making any decision he could dismiss the subject from his mind now and prepare to enjoy himself as much as possible under the circumstances. He sat up straighter, drew the reins more firmly and laid his whip lightly across the flanks of the greys. "Well, Humphrey," he said as the horses quickened their pace, "I think we shall have a good day. Scent ought to lie well, and we're sure to find a fox in that spinney of Antill's. I've never known it draw blank yet."

"Yes, we ought to get off pretty quick," said Humphrey, also rousing himself. "I say, I'm in rather a quandary."

"Well, what is it?" asked the Squire rather shortly. Humphrey's quandaries were generally of a financial nature, and he had no wish to add one of them to his present troubles.

"Mrs. Graham has asked me to dine to-night."

"Well, why not? You can have something to take you over."

"Oh yes. Dick is going. It is to meet Lady George Dubec."'

The Squire's face darkened instantly. Here he was, plunged straight into it again, when he wanted to free his mind for the time being of Lady George Dubec and anything that had to do with her.

"Mrs. Graham seems to have lost no time," he said. "She hadn't called on her on Saturday. I suppose she must have done so yesterday. And she knows perfectly well that I don't want to have anything to do with the woman. Are Jim and Cicely going?"

"I don't know. She only mentions Dick."

"If she mixes Cicely up with—with this lady, I shall be very much annoyed. Not that I can say anything, I suppose, now she's married, but I think Mrs. Graham might respect my wishes a little more. Well, you can do as you like. I suppose the modern way is to disregard the wishes of the head of the house entirely."

"I don't want to disregard your wishes," said Humphrey. "I think as long as one remains at home one ought to respect them."

The Squire was mollified at this, but he only said rather gruffly, "Well, if you can put up with eating your dinner at home this evening, I'd rather you should. Dick has taken the bit between his

teeth, and he certainly doesn't think that my wishes should be respected. Apparently nothing that I can say will influence him. He seems to me to be heading straight for the nastiest kind of fall. What sort of a woman is this, Humphrey? You said you knew her, didn't you?"

"Oh, I've met her," said Humphrey. "She's a very pretty woman. Nobody can deny that."

"People who have made a success on the stage generally are," said the Squire; "at least, they used to be in my time. Is she—well, is she a lady?"

"Oh Lord, yes," said Humphrey. "I'm sorry I let out that about her having been on the stage. You couldn't possibly guess it to look at her. Dick tackled me about it yesterday and said that nobody knew it. People do know it, but there's no necessity to spread it all over the place."

The Squire thought for a moment. Then he put his question point-blank. "Does Dick want to marry this woman, or doesn't he?"

"If you had asked me that two days ago," replied Humphrey glibly, "I should have smiled at the idea. Now, I believe he does."

"What has made you change your mind, then?"

"Well, his getting her down here, for one thing. Then, as I told you, he was furious with me for letting out what I did about her. In fact, if I hadn't kept my head we should have had a devil of a row about it; and Dick and I have never had a row since we were kids."

The Squire digested this information. It confirmed his worst fears and made his heart the heavier. "Can't you help to stop it?" he asked shortly. "You and he have always been pretty good friends."

"I can't do any more than the twins could," replied Humphrey. "As I told you, we nearly had a row about it as it is. If I tried to interfere we should have one without a doubt."

"I suppose you don't want a thing like that to happen in the family?" asked the Squire, throwing him a side glance.

"Of course I don't want it," said Humphrey. "I've nothing against the lady as she is, but I don't want her for a sister-in-law."

"I should think not," said the Squire emphatically. "Well, I suppose *I'm* the only person who can stop it, and by George! I will."

Again he stroked the greys with his whip, and their pace quickened. "Look here, Humphrey," he said, "tell me how on earth I *can* stop it."

Humphrey smiled into his thick fur collar. It was so like his father, to issue a bold statement of his intentions and then immediately to ask for advice as to how to act. But he had not been accustomed to ask advice of Humphrey.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be a very difficult matter," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked the Squire shortly. "He's not paying much regard to my wishes now."

"I dare say you can't stop him amusing himself with the lady," said Humphrey. "I don't know why you should want to. If you make it awkward for him he'll be all the keener; if you give him his head he's quite likely to come to his senses. But it will be a different thing if it comes to marrying."

"Why?"

"Well, what's he to marry on—his pay as a captain in the Guards? What can any of us marry on if you don't see us through?"

The Squire's attitude towards his eldest son was such that, through all his anxiety and all his cogitations, he had never yet thought of this. He was a rich man, and he gave all his sons good allowances and Dick a very handsome one. He did this as a matter of course, and never looked upon it otherwise than as rightly due from him. And, equally of course, he was prepared largely to increase the allowance when Dick should marry. But it was quite true that there was nothing to prevent him from stopping it altogether. If the worst came to the worst he could exercise the power of the purse, but it would be extremely repugnant to him to do it, and the suggestion struck him like a temptation to act unworthily. "What on earth put that into your head?" he asked.

Humphrey was a little taken aback by his tone. He was annoyed with Dick, as he had never been annoyed with him since their childhood, although he had often been jealous of his seniority. But they had been on such good terms together that he could not feel quite comfortable in putting a spoke in his wheel, as he felt he was now doing.

"It doesn't want much putting there," he said. "The idea of marriage does cross one's mind occasionally, and one naturally wonders what you would do to make it possible. It wouldn't be possible at all without you."

"Well, I should be very sorry to have to take a step like that," said the Squire after further consideration. "And I don't want to talk about it."

Now they came to the foot of a long hill, bounded on one side by a deep wood, on the other by open grass-land, which fell away gradually, and some distance off swelled again into a long undulating rise, dotted with pieces of woodland, arable fields, and farms here and there, and ended in the far distance in a range of hills lying mistily under parallels of soft grey clouds. It was the best bit of country the South Meadshire could boast, and to the Squire surveying it largely, as he walked his horses up the hill, every square mile within reach of the eye spoke of some remembered episode in the long course of years during which he had enjoyed his best-loved sport.

There—a line of grey at the bottom of the green valley—was the brook into which he and his pony had soused head over ears when as a small boy he had thought to follow his grandfather over a place which that redoubtable sportsman himself had felt some qualms about taking. The old man, warned by the shouts, had looked round and trotted back to the brook, where he must have made up his mind that neither the small boy nor the small pony was in danger of drowning, for he had said, "Well, if you're such a fool as to get in, let's hope you're not too much of a fool to get out," and had turned his horse's head and galloped off without further ado. There was the covert from which a cunning old dog fox had been hunted three times in two seasons, and had given them three separate runs, which were talked of still when the old stagers of the South Meadshire got together at one end of the table over the port, although it was nearly thirty years ago. There was the fence over which, as a hard-riding subaltern, at the end of a season during which he had hunted for the most part in Leicestershire, he had broken the back of the best mare he had ever owned, through over-anxiety to show his neighbours what riding straight to hounds really meant, and nearly broken his own neck into the bargain. There was the grass field in which, many years before, although it seemed like yesterday, hounds had pulled their fox down, and Dick, riding his first pony, had been in at the death, had won his first brush, and had been duly blooded. He smiled within himself and remembered how his little boy had ridden home at his side with the smears on his face and shown himself proudly to his mother, and how, forgetting his new-found manhood, he had howled when it was proposed to wash them off.

There were other exploits of Dick's and of his other sons', who had all taken to the sport as he would have had sons of his take to it, which this wide stretch of country recalled. In fact, Dick and he, driving up this long hill to a meet at Apthorpe, or beyond it, had been wont to recall episodes which they both remembered, pointing out this and that spot, near or far. He liked best to recall the doings of his boys, although his own and those of his hard-bitten, redoubtable old grandfather had not been forgotten in the long tale. It was as if a sudden chill had struck him when the thought came to him, that if he and Dick were to be kept apart by what had come between them, they would perhaps never drive together again up the Apthorpe Hill. The hoarse note of a motor-horn behind him, and the necessity of drawing to the side of the road as the machine swirled by, enabled him to relieve his feelings by an expression of abhorrence stronger than he usually allowed himself, although his ordinary language on the use of motor-cars in connection with hunting did not lack vigour. And this particular motor-car contained the Master of the South Meadshire himself, who waved to him as he passed, and received no very warm greeting in return. The Squire had had a grudge against Mr. Warner during the greater part of his life. His grandfather had kept the hounds for forty years, hunted them himself, and spent money lavishly on the upkeep of kennels and general equipment. When he had died the Squire had been too young to follow him, and Mr. Warner, who had made his money in trade as the Squire averred, although he had actually inherited it, and was but recently come into the county, had taken them. He was now an old man getting on for eighty, and had kept them ever since, hunting with them as regularly and riding as straight as he had ever done—a wonderful old man, already beginning, in his lifetime, to pass into a proverb, as the Squire's grandfather, Colonel Thomas Clinton, had done. But the Squire had never had a good word for him. Of all the positions in life which he might have filled, he felt it hard that the Mastership of the South Meadshire should have been kept out of his hands. And that was his grudge against Mr. Warner, carefully nourished by that gentleman's late acceptance of mechanical traffic, and sundry other causes which need not be enquired into.

Other motor-cars passed them before they got to the top of the hill, and the Squire had a word or two of condemnation to spare for each, as they forced him to draw aside and control his horses, which shared his dislike of the new-fangled things.

At the top of the rise the wood curved away to the right, and there was nothing before them but the wide gorse-speckled common, with the broad highroad running through it. They drove on for a mile and came to a high-lying inn by the roadside, appropriately named the "Fox and Hounds," with a sign-post and a water-trough in front of it, and a broad piece of grass, which was now the centre of the best of all English country sights in the winter. The hounds were grouped about their huntsman, George Winch, a grey-whiskered, weather-tanned man sitting upright on his tall bay horse, the two of them quiet and unmoved, ready for what was to come, but not unduly excited over it, and his three young Whips, two of them his sons and the other his nephew. The Master had already hoisted himself on to his horse and sat as straight as his

huntsman, although he was twenty years his senior. And all round were the faithful followers of the South Meadshire, some of whom had ridden with those hounds for as long as, or longer than, the Squire himself, some of whom had only begun that season. The men were mostly in pink, with the yellow collar, and dressed for work and not for show, their breeches spotless, their boots well polished and their tops of the right mellow shade, but their coats not of the newest, and their hats lacking the mirror-like shine which was imparted to those of the young bloods such as Humphrey. There was a sprinkling of ladies, amongst whom was Mrs. Graham, in a workmanlike habit that had seen better days, but many more of them had come on wheels than on horseback. There were boys on ponies, their round hats jammed on to their heads, their round legs in wrinkled cloth gaiters, and the Master's two little granddaughters riding astride. On the outskirts of the loosely knit crowd was a good sprinkling of farmers, solid elderly men in hard felt hats, drab coats, corduroys and brown gaiters, and slim, active young men in smarter editions of the same attire, but not always so well mounted.

The Squire drove up to the front of the inn, where his horse and Humphrey's were being walked up and down by their grooms, and climbed down from his seat with a side-look that was half a frown at the crowd. Amongst the women on horseback he saw none that he did not know, and hoped that the dreaded lady had not come; but immediately he had satisfied himself that she was not riding he caught sight of Dick, already mounted, standing by a smart little pony-cart which contained two women, and his frown deepened. When he was on his horse and had seen that his flask and sandwich-case were in place, he had another moment of indecision. Through all his discomfort and annoyance, his heart yearned towards his son, and he was alternately and from minute to minute swayed by opposite impulses, to hold out firmly for Dick's sake or to give way for his own. As he walked his horse on to the green it was in his mind to cross over to where Dick was standing by the pony-cart and, with what graciousness he could, end it all.

But he was stopped by one of his old friends, who had something quite unnecessary to say about the weather and the prospect of the day's sport, and before he could disengage himself he saw Dick leave the pony-carriage and the two ladies, and come towards him. He did not pay much attention to his friend, but sat on his horse facing his son. He saw Dick also stopped, and waited impatiently, hoping that he was coming to speak to him. Then he saw a very smartly attired young man trot up to the pony-carriage, arms and legs akimbo, to be greeted, as it seemed to him, with complete cordiality by the lady who held the reins, but not so effusively by the lady by her side. This young man was his pet abomination, the vacuous, actress-hunting, spendthrift son of a rich father, already notorious for his "goings-on," and likely to be more so if he continued as he had begun. He heard his loud foolish laugh over something he had said to the lady, or something she had said to him, and saw, although he could not hear, her laugh in reply. Then he saw him take out his cigarette-case and offer it to her, and at that he wrenched round his horse's head and exclaimed, apparently in answer to a question which he had not heard addressed to him, much to his friend's surprise, "No, I'm damned if I do."

He had seen enough. If that vicious young fool was the sort of person the woman was on terms of intimacy with, then she was just what he had pictured, and there was no saving grace in her. A cigarette-smoking, loose-tongued, kind-to-everybody creature of the stage! He would rather be at enmity with his son all his days, he would rather see him dead, than married to such a woman.

He walked his horse, not knowing where he was going to, except that he wanted to get as far as possible away from Lady George Dubec, to the outskirts of the crowd and beyond them, his mind in a ferment of disgust. He heard the creak of saddlery and the thud of a horse's hoofs on the hard turf behind him. Dick trotted up to him, and said, as he reined up his horse, "I wish you'd let me introduce you to Lady George." He spoke as if there had been no controversy between them on the subject. He knew his father, and he was giving him his chance. Two minutes earlier and the Squire would have taken it. Now he turned round sharply, his face red. "I have no wish to be introduced to Lady George, now or at any time," he said.

"Oh, all right!" said Dick coldly, and turning his back on him, trotted off again.

CHAPTER XI

DICK LEAVES KENCOTE AND MAKES A DISCOVERY

There was not much pleasure for the Squire that day, although they found a fox without delay, and with one check hunted him across the best of the South Meadshire country and killed him in the open after a fast run of forty minutes. The hounds got him out of the spinney where he was known to reside, in no time, but he immediately took refuge in another and a larger one half a mile or so off. The hunt straggled after him, those who had been on the wrong side of the covert when the music of the hounds first announced their prompt discovery riding hard to make up for lost time, the carts and carriages streaming along the road. Then there was a pause while the hounds worked to and fro through the wood, and the groups formed again and waited for what should happen. The Squire, more by instinct than design, for his thoughts were on far other

matters, edged down the skirts of the wood to where he could see the fox break cover if he behaved as his experience told him most foxes would behave in like circumstances, and keeping well under cover he soon saw the cunning nose poking out of the brushwood and the furtive red form steal out to cross the road and make a bold bid for freedom. Just at that moment, as he was preparing to give the view-hulloa when my gentleman should have taken irrevocably to the open, a cart drove smartly round the opposite corner of the wood and pulled up, but not before the fox had seen it and slunk cautiously back into shelter. The Squire smothered a strong exclamation of disgust, but gave it vent and added something to it when he recognised the cart and its driver. If Lady George Dubec had come into the South Meadshire country to head the South Meadshire foxes, as well as to annoy him grossly in other ways, then good-bye to everything. But she should be told what she had done. With rage in his heart and a black scowl on his face he cantered along the strip of grass by the roadside, and lifting his hat and looking the offending lady straight in the face, said in an angry voice, "Would you mind keeping behind the hounds, madam? You have just turned the fox back into covert." Then he turned his back and rode off, leaving Virginia and Miss Dexter looking at each other with horrified faces.

However, Reynard's caution did not save him long. He was bustled out of shelter again within ten minutes, and realising that his only chance of escape was to run for it, run he did and gave the hounds all they knew to catch him. The Squire was away with the first, and, riding hard and straight, did for what would have been otherwise a blissful forty minutes succeed in losing the sharp sense of his unhappiness, although black care was perched all the time behind him, and when the fox had been killed, seized on him with claws so sharp that he had no heart left for anything further, and leaving the hounds to draw a gorsy common for another fox turned his horse's head round and rode off home.

Humphrey, not far away at the start, had been in at the finish, with half a dozen more, but he had seen nothing of Dick, and no one who had set out to follow on wheels had been anywhere within sight for the last half-hour. The Squire felt a grim satisfaction in the thought of Lady George Dubec left hopelessly out of it, but he also thought of Dick missing the best run, so far, of the season to keep behind with her, and his satisfaction turned into sad disgust. His long ride home was the most miserable he had ever taken, and he wished before it was ended that he had seen out the day, on the chance of another burst of excitement which for the time would have eased his pain.

He reached Kencote about three o'clock, and expected to find the house empty, for he knew that Mrs. Clinton had been going to lunch at Mountfield and he did not expect her to be back yet. But she met him in the hall and said, "I thought you might be home early, Edward, so I did not go out."

Now the Squire was never home early. He always saw out the day's sport, however bad it might be, and the number of times he had returned from hunting before dark during the last thirty years might have been counted on his ten fingers. He looked at his wife apprehensively and followed her into the morning-room, where she turned to him.

"Dick has gone," she said.

He stared at her, not understanding.

"He came back about twelve," she went on, "and changed his clothes. His servant was out, but he left word for him to pack and follow him to Blaythorn. He wrote you a letter before he went."

"Where is it?" asked the Squire. "Didn't you see him before he went? Didn't you speak to him?" He went out of the room and into his own, and Mrs. Clinton followed him.

"I did see him," she said, as the Squire went to his writing-table where an envelope was lying on the silver-mounted blotting-pad. "He said that you had made it impossible for him to remain at home, and he bade me good-bye, but he did not tell me anything more."

But the Squire was not listening to her. He turned the page of the letter and then put it into her hand. "Read that," he said.

"Dear Father" [it ran],

"I had hoped at least that you would have consented to meet the woman I am going to marry. If you had you would have seen how unlike she is to your ideas of her and that I am doing myself honour by my choice. You have made the situation impossible now, and I cannot return to Kencote until you consent to receive my affianced wife with the respect due to her.

"Your affectionate son,
"RICHARD CLINTON."

The Squire's face was purple, but he controlled the violent expression of his anger. "His

affianced wife!" he exclaimed scornfully. "So now we have it all, and I was right from the beginning. Well, if he waits till I receive her he may wait till I'm in my coffin. I told him this morning I would not recognise her, now or at any time, and I'll stick to my word. He has chosen to fight me, and he will find that I'm ready." He spoke bitterly, but firmly, and as if he meant everything that he said.

Mrs. Clinton laid the letter on the table. Her face was serious, and paler than its wont. "Have you seen her, Edward?" she asked. "Is she so impossible?"

"Seen her! Impossible!" echoed the Squire, with a return to the unbridled violence he usually showed when he was disturbed. "Yes, I've seen her, and she's as impossible as a wife for the heir of Kencote as any woman on the face of the earth—a painted hussy, hand in glove with the worst sort of vicious loafer, puffing cigarettes in the face of a whole crowd of respectable people, shamelessly breaking up sport—oh, I've seen her, and seen enough of her. To my dying day I'll never willingly see her again, and if that means breaking with Dick I'll break with him till he comes to his senses. I mean it. If she is going to stay here to hunt with the South Meadshire, then I'll go and hunt somewhere else until she's gone; or I won't hunt at all. Yes, she's impossible. You've spoken the right word. I shouldn't be doing my duty if I left any stone unturned to put an end to Dick's unaccountable folly. He'll thank me for it some day, and I'll put up with all and every unhappiness until that day comes."

He had calmed down during the course of his speech, as he often did, beginning on a note of unreasonable violence and ending on one completely different. But he did not usually end on a note of strong determination, as now, and Mrs. Clinton looked at him as if she hardly recognised him, with lines of perplexity and trouble in her smooth, comely face. She did not ask him what he was going to do, such questions being apt to provoke him to impatient anger and seldom bringing a direct reply. She said hesitatingly, "If he says definitely that he is going to marry her——" and left him to supply the end of her sentence.

"I shall not let him marry her," he said quietly. "He can't marry on his pay, and I shall stop his allowance from to-day."

This statement, revolutionary of all fixed notions that had their rise in Kencote, affected Mrs. Clinton as nothing before in her married life had affected her. It showed her her husband as she had never known him, bent on a course of action, not ready to take advice about it, but prepared to turn his back on the most cherished principles of his life in order to carry it out. She had nothing to say. She could only look down and wonder apprehensively what her world was coming to.

"I don't think I should have thought of doing such a thing," the Squire admitted. "It gives me more pain to take a course like that than anything else could have done. It was Humphrey who suggested it. He said, quite truly, that none of them could marry unless I saw them through. And I won't see Dick through this. I'll do anything to stop it, however much I suffer by what I have to do. Don't you think I'm right, Nina?"

This was more what Mrs. Clinton was accustomed to. She could not say that she thought he was right, nor that he was wrong. She could only say, as she did, that such a proceeding would be distressing to him.

"I know that," said the Squire, with a new simplicity. "I'm not thinking of myself. I'm thinking of Dick. I love the boy, Nina. He's got himself into trouble and I've got to help him out of it."

"Do you think this is the best way?" was all that she could find to say.

"It's the only way. If there were any other I would take it. If it doesn't bring him to his senses at once, I shall keep the money for him till it does. God knows *I* don't want to touch it."

"He will have to give up the Guards," said Mrs. Clinton.

The Squire had not thought of this, and he digested the statement. "He's not an absolute fool," he said, "although he has lost his head over this. As far as the service goes, I shouldn't mind if he did give it up. I never meant him to go on soldiering so long. Still, if he does give it up, what's he to do, poor fellow, till he comes round? He wouldn't have a penny. I shall tell him that I will continue his allowance as long as he remains unmarried." He brightened up as this idea struck him. "Yes," he said, "that will be the best way, and just as effective. I couldn't bear to think of Dick hard up. I'll write now."

He sat down to his table, muddy boots, spurs, and all, and Mrs. Clinton left him, a little relieved in her mind that he saw a gleam of light, but otherwise solicitous for his sake and unhappy on her own. She loved her firstborn too, although it was very long since she had been able to show it. She would have liked to have helped him now, but he had not asked for her help, had told her nothing, and had left her with scarcely more than a formal word of farewell.

The Squire, left to himself, wrote quickly, and sealed up his letter after he had read it over once, as if first thoughts were best, and he was uncertain to what second would lead him.

"My dear Dick" [his note ran],

"I can only repeat that nothing will induce me to give my consent to the marriage you propose. If you marry in a way to please me I shall provide for you handsomely, as I have always intended to do, but if you persist in the course you have begun on I shall withdraw your allowance entirely. It will be paid to you for the present, but only as long as you remain unmarried. I am very sorry to have to take this course, but you leave me nothing else to do.

"Your affectionate father,
"EDWARD CLINTON."

When he had closed and directed the envelope an unpleasant thought struck him, and he leant back in his chair and looked out of the window while he considered it. "I suppose she must have *some* money," he said to himself; and then after a time, "But Dick would never do that."

The note was taken over to Blaythorn, as all notes were that were despatched from Kencote, by a groom on horseback. The Squire was impatient of the workings of the penny post, except for distances impossible for a horse, and he would not ask if Dick's soldier-servant had yet left the house with his master's belongings. "Tell one of the grooms to take that over," were his curt instructions, and so well was the letter of his orders always obeyed that a groom rode off with it within a quarter of an hour, although another one was already harnessing a horse to the cart that was to take Dick's servant to Blaythorn as soon as he should be ready. But having got safely outside the park gates he dawdled till his fellow caught him up, and the three of them then continued the journey together and discussed the situation.

Dick's servant was loyal to his master, but it was not in human nature that he should have refrained from speculating upon what was doing, and between them they managed to attain to a fairly clear idea of what that was, their unanimous conclusion being that if the Captain had made up his mind to marry the lady the Squire might take what steps he liked, but he would not stop him. In this way began the rumours that presently spread all over the county and thence all over England, or to such of its inhabitants as are interested in the affairs of its Captain Clintons and Lady Georges.

Dick and Virginia were alone together when the note was brought in, the mounted groom having ridden on when he got within a mile of his destination. "That means war," said Dick, laconically, when he had read it; "but I didn't think he would use those tactics quite so soon. I wonder who put him up to it." He thought for a moment. "Humphrey wouldn't have done it, I suppose," he said reflectively.

Virginia's eyes were serious as she looked up from the note written in the Squire's big, rather sprawling hand on the thick white paper. "I wonder why he hates me so," she said a little plaintively. "Is it because I headed the fox, Dick?"

Dick took her chin between his thumb and finger and his face grew tender as he looked into her eyes. "You were a very foolish girl to do that, Virginia," he said. "I should have thought you would have known better."

"I didn't know there was such a sharp turn," she said. "I pulled up the moment I got round the corner."

"Oh, well! never mind about that," said Dick. "It was unfortunate, but it wouldn't have made him want to disinherit me. He can't disinherit me, you know. It's just like him to go blundering into a course like this, which he hasn't got the firmness to keep up."

"That letter doesn't look as if he lacked firmness," Virginia said. "Dick dear, what shall you do?"

Dick did not answer this question directly. He had his father's habit of following out his own train of thought and ignoring, or rather not noticing, interruption. "He must know perfectly well," he said, "that I can raise money quite easily on my prospects. I dare say he hasn't thought of that, though. He never does think a thing thoroughly out. He wouldn't be happy if I threatened to do it."

"Oh, Dick, Dick!" exclaimed Virginia, "why do you want to worry about money? I have plenty for both of us."

"My dear, I've told you that's impossible," said Dick a little impatiently. "Don't keep harping on it."

It gave her a thrill of delight to be spoken to in that way—by him. She had been used to being ordered to do something or not to do something by a man, but not by the man she loved. She kept obedient silence, but gave Dick's arm a little squeeze.

"I'm not going to do it, though," he went on. "I should hate it as much as he would. Let's sit down, Virginia. I'll tell you what I'm going to do."

They sat down on the sofa, and Dick took a cigarette out of his case. Virginia held it open. "Couldn't I have just one?" she pleaded.

"No," said Dick, taking it from her. "You promised you would give it up when you came down here."

"So I have," she said. "I think you are very cruel."

Dick put the case back into his pocket. "Of course I'm not unprepared for this," he said, "though I hoped it wouldn't come to it. I shall have to give up the service and get some work."

"Oh, Dick!" she said. "You don't want to give up the service."

"No, I don't want to. I should have got my majority next year, and I wanted to go on till I commanded the regiment, though I never told *him* so. But it's got to be done, and it's no use grizzling about it."

"And you're doing this for me!" she said softly.

"I am doing a great deal more than that for you," he said. "I'm giving up Kencote, at least for a time."

"Do you think I'm worth it?" she asked drily.

He looked down at her, and then took her hand in his. "You must get used to my little ways," he said, with a kind smile. "I must be able to say to you what is in my mind."

"Oh, I know," she said repentantly. "It was horrid of me. But I do know what you're giving up, and I love you for it. I hope it won't be for long—Kencote, I mean. I suppose if you give up the army you won't be able to go back to it. I hate to think of that because it's your career. And what else can you work at, dear Dick? Fancy you in an office!"

"The idea of me in an office needn't disturb you," said Dick. "I don't intend to go into an office. There are two things I know about. One is soldiering, the other is estate management. If I'm to be prevented from managing the estate that's going to be my own some day, then I'll manage somebody else's in the meantime. There are lots of landowners who would be only too glad to give me a job."

"Tell me what it means exactly, Dick. Have you got to be a sort of steward to some rich person? I don't think I should like that."

He laughed and patted her hand. "You must get rid of some of your American ideas," he said. "The 'rich person' wouldn't want to treat me as a servant. And it isn't necessary that he should be very rich. I might not be able to get a big agency all at once. I don't know that I should want to, as long as there was enough work to do. As far as your money goes, Virginia, I shouldn't have any feeling about using it to help run the show. What I won't do is to live on it and do nothing. There ought not to be any difficulty in finding a place that would give us a good house, and enough money to run the stables on, and for my personal expenses, which wouldn't be heavy, as we would stick there and do our job. It would be just what I hoped we should be doing at Kencote from the dower-house. With luck, if there happened to be a vacancy anywhere, I could do better than that. But that much, at any rate, it won't be difficult to get, with a month or so to look round in."

"Then all our difficulties are done away with!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Dick, why didn't you tell me before? I thought, if your father held out, we should have a terrible time, and you would be as obstinate as possible about my money. I'll tell you what I have. I have——"

"I don't want to know what you have—yet," he interrupted her. "I didn't tell you before because I hoped it wouldn't come to that. I didn't want to face the necessity of giving up the service, and still less of having to give up Kencote. But now there's no help for it; well, we must just let all that slide and make the best of things."

She still thought his scruples about using her money to do what he wanted to do, and his absence of scruples about using it to do what he didn't want, needed more explanation. But she gave up that point as being only one more of the inexplicable tortuosities of a man's sense of honour. She was only too glad that the question could be settled as easily as that. But Dick must have felt also that it needed more explanation, for he said, "When I said that I had no feeling about letting you help run the house—of course, I really hate it like poison. But there is just the difference."

"Oh, of course there is—all the difference in the world," she made haste to reply, terrified lest they should be going to split, after all, on this wretched simulacrum of a rock. Then she had a bright thought. "But, Dick dear, you told me once how lucky your ancestors had been in marrying heiresses—not that I'm much of an heiress!"

"You're not an heiress at all," he said impatiently. "I suppose everything you've got comes from—from that fellow. Can't you see the difference? I hate touching his beastly money. And I

won't, longer than I can help."

"But, Dick!" she exclaimed wonderingly. "Didn't you know? He never left me a cent. He hadn't a cent to leave."

He stared at her. "Then where *did* it come from?" he asked.

"Why, from pigs—from Chicago," she said, laughing. "My father was of an old family, my mother wasn't, and one of her brothers made a fortune in a bacon factory. Unfortunately, he did not make it until after she was dead and I was married, or it might have stopped—oh, many things. But he left it to me—the bacon factory—and I sold it for—— But you won't let me tell you how much."

"Oh, you can tell me if it's yours," he said.

"Well, they told me I had been cheated. But what was I to do with a bacon factory? And I sold it for as much as I wanted to live comfortably on. I sold it for a quarter of a million dollars."

Dick's stare was still in evidence. "A quarter of a million! Dollars!" he repeated. "That's—what? Fifty thousand pounds. By the Lord, Virginia, you're an heiress after all."

CHAPTER XII

THE HOUSE PARTY

"My dear Emmeline," said the Judge, "if I hadn't such a profound contempt for Edward's intellect and for everything represented or misrepresented by him, I could feel it in my heart to be very sorry for him."

"My dear Herbert," replied Lady Birkett, "if you weren't as deeply sorry for him as you actually are, you wouldn't be your own kind, sympathetic, would-be-cynical self."

Sir Herbert and Lady Birkett with their two daughters and their son-in-law had arrived at Kencote that afternoon to make part of the company gathered there for the South Meadshire Hunt Ball. Other guests had arrived by a later train, but there had been an interval during which the Judge had been closeted with his brother-in-law, the Squire, and heard from him everything that had taken place within the past month, which was the interval that had elapsed since Dick had abruptly left Kencote. He had now come into his wife's bedroom, where she was in the later stages of dressing for dinner, although dinner was as yet half an hour off.

"I know you want to tell me everything," she said, "and although the lady who is doing my hair does not understand a word of English as yet, you will probably be able to talk more freely if she is not present. If you will come back in five minutes she will have gone to Angela."

So the Judge went into his dressing-room and, finding his clothes already laid out, dressed and repaired again to his wife, not quite in five minutes, but in little more than ten.

"I suppose you have heard all about it from Nina?" he said, taking up the conversation where he had left it. "Have you seen this Lady George Dubec?"

"Yes," said Lady Birkett. "She is not in the least what Edward pictures her, according to Nina. As far as her looks tell one anything, I should say she was a charming woman."

"Edward paints her as a voluptuous siren of the ballet. I suppose one may put that down as one of his usual excursions of imagination."

"She certainly isn't that, and it was news to me that she had ever been on the stage. Poor Nina is very distressed about it. She says that they have had no word from Dick since he left the house, that Edward has only heard through Humphrey that he has sent in his papers, but even Humphrey doesn't know where he is or what he is doing."

"I had the same news from Edward, with the additions which might be expected of him. He takes it hard that after all he has done for Dick he should be treated in that way, and I don't know that I shouldn't take it hard in his place. It makes me increasingly thankful that I haven't any sons."

This was a polite little fiction on the Judge's part which his wife respected. It was the chief regret of his life that he had no son.

"Nina says he is fretting himself into a fever," said Lady Birkett, "lest Dick should be raising money on his expectations."

"Fretting himself into a fever," replied the Judge, "is not the expression I should use of

Edward. But he certainly feels deep annoyance, and expresses it. He had not thought of that when he delivered his ultimatum, and, as he says, it would be the easiest possible thing for Dick to do. But I was mercifully able to relieve his mind on that point. I did not exactly tell him that Dick, although he has more brains in his little finger than his father has in his head, is so much like him that he would shrink from taking so sensible a step as much as Edward himself would; but I gave him the gist of it. My dear Emmeline, to men like Edward and Dick, land—landed property—is sacrosanct. Dick would give up *any* woman rather than embarrass an acre of Kencote. Kencote is his religion, just as much as it is Edward's. Edward gained comfort from my assuring him of the fact. He said that Dick was behaving so badly that right and wrong seemed to have no distinction for him for the time being, but probably there were crimes that he would not commit, and this might be one of them."

"I am glad you told him that," said Lady Birkett. "I should think it is probably true. But what is he doing, or thinking of doing?"

"He may be thinking of doing a little honest work," said the Judge, who had sat for some time in the House of Commons as a wicked Radical. "I put the suggestion to Edward for what it was worth, but he scouted it. As he indicated, there is nothing that a man who has been through a public school and university training, and has been for ten or fifteen years in a position of responsibility in His Majesty's army, can do. He has no money value whatever. I did not contradict him."

"*She* has money, I suppose," said Lady Birkett.

"She must have some. But there again I felt able to reassure Edward. I know the Dicks of the world pretty well. They are not without their merits, and there are certain things they don't do. Of course, if he were working, and making some sort of an income, with his prospects it would be different."

Lady Birkett let this go by. "Will Edward hold out, do you think?" she asked.

"Well," said the Judge reflectively, "I'm bound to say it surprises me, but there is every sign of his holding out till Doomsday, or, which puts a more likely period to it, till something unforeseen happens."

"Till he hears that Dick has married her, for instance."

"There wouldn't be much object in his holding out after that. But there is seldom much object in Edward's divagations. He is swayed by his prejudices and by the impulses of the moment. Still, I'll do him justice: he is acting as sensibly as he knows how in this crisis. I believe he loves Dick better than any being upon earth, with the possible exception of himself. I really believe he loves him better than himself. Of course Dick represents Kencote, and the family, and the line, and all the whole clamjamphrie, which partly accounts for it. At any rate he is causing his stupid old self an infinity of worry and annoyance, and all for the sake of what he considers a principle. I should say that Dick is acting foolishly in holding off altogether. I dare say Nina told you he has not answered a single letter. It has always struck me that he had Edward completely under his thumb, and I should have said that he had only to hang on here and play his cards well and Edward would have given way. Now he is stiffening himself up."

"I suppose they are both stiffening themselves up."

"You put it in a nutshell. Fancy Edward giving up his season's hunting so that he shan't be obliged to set eyes on his aversion! That impresses me. He is in dead earnest. He will stop this marriage if he can."

"But Dick is just as obstinate."

"It is the case of the irresistible body and the immovable force."

"Didn't you make any suggestion?"

"Yes, I did. I suggested that he should stipulate for a year's delay. I pointed out that if the lady was the bad character he supposes her to be, Dick, with the sense he has inherited from his father—I said that, God forgive me—would come to see it in that time."

"Did he take to the idea?"

"Not at all. When did Edward ever take to any idea at first sight? But it will sink in, and I shall give Tom Beach a hint to follow it up."

"I believe it will be the best way, and Nina is going to try and see Dick when she comes up with me next week."

The Judge stroked his chin. "H'm!" he said. "I'm afraid Nina has very little power to help matters."

"I am much more sorry for Nina than I am for Edward."

"Oh, so am I," interpolated the Judge.

"It is the thing I can least forgive Dick—his treating his mother practically in the same way as Edward treats her—as if she were of no account. It doesn't promise well for the happiness of this Lady George, or whoever he does come to marry."

"Let's hope for her own sake that she won't make Nina's mistake."

"You mean——"

"Oh, Nina laid herself down to be trampled on from the very first. She had plenty of character. She could have stood out. Now, whatever character she has has been buried under a mountain weight of stolid stupidity. She can't call her soul her own."

"I think she would act—and against Edward—if she saw her way to act effectively."

"She would be laying up a pretty bad time for herself if she did act against Edward in any way."

"Oh, but she wouldn't mind that if she thought it was her duty."

"Well, she can try. And she might put that idea of mine to Dick. Let him promise not to marry the lady for a year. He has been a bachelor for thirty-five or so, and he can stand another. I believe it might be the solution. I suppose we had better be going down now."

It was an unusually large party for Kencote that assembled at dinner. The Squire took in Lady Aldeburgh, who must have been five-and-forty if a day, but either by a special dispensation of Providence, or by mysterious arts marvellously concealed, was still enabled to present herself to the world as eight-and-twenty. The Squire did not quite approve of this, but the illusion was so complete that he found himself talking to her as if she were a girl. She was beautifully gowned in blue and silver, and wore the Aldeburgh diamonds, which sparkled on the clear white skin of her neck, on her corsage, and in the smooth ripples of her hair. She was attractive enough to the eye to make it possible for her to indulge in moods for the heightening of her charm. Sometimes she was all childish gaiety and innocence; sometimes the deep melancholy of her soul looked out of her violet eyes, which were so good that they had to be given their chance; sometimes she was ice. This evening she had begun on a pouting note, which she had often found effective with elderly gentlemen, but finding the Squire impervious to its appeal and plainly puzzled by it, remembering also that she had on her diamonds, she had exchanged it for the air of a *grande dame*, humanised by maternal instinct.

"Mother is telling Mr. Clinton how she has devoted herself to my bringing-up," whispered Lady Susan to Humphrey. "Is he likely to be impressed at all, do you think?"

"He is likely to be bowled over by the result," replied Humphrey gallantly, and Lady Susan, who was not so pretty as her mother, and only slightly more sensible, told him not to be an idiot.

Of Lady Birkett's two daughters, Beatrice, the elder, had been accompanied by her husband, Sir George Senhouse, the rising young politician, whose handsome, intellectual head would have made him remarked anywhere, but whose bent shoulders, grey temples, and carelessness of dress made him seem older than his years. The younger, Angela, sat by the man she was going to marry, Hammond-Watt, the youngest K.C. at the Bar. The inclusion of these two men in the party had caused Bobby Trench, Humphrey's friend, to ask if he had come to Kencote for a ball or a political meeting, and to suggest the advisability of clearing out again before he should be asked for a speech. This young gentleman, to whom the accident of birth had brought the privilege of taking in his hostess, and whose other neighbour had been Beatrice Birkett, asked himself before dinner was over what he had come for, ball or no ball. He was accustomed to shine in smart country houses, and Kencote was not at all smart. He had found Mrs. Clinton unresponsive to his light chatter, and Angela Birkett so taken up with the conversation of her K.C. that she had little attention to spare for him. George Senhouse, who sat opposite to him, made no effort to follow his lead, and, in fact, ignored him as far as possible, which secretly annoyed him. Lady Aldeburgh, who would have permitted him to flirt with her, was beyond his reach, and her daughter was too much taken up with Humphrey to do more than exchange a light sally or two with him. He was reduced to eating his dinner, which was a very good one, and, in large intervals of silence, to gazing around upon the company and inwardly ejaculating, "Never again!"

When the ladies had left the room the Squire, with old-fashioned courtesy, brought the decanters down to his end of the table and engaged him in conversation about his father.

"I recollect very well," said the Squire, in his loud, confident tones, "when Cane Chair won the Derby at thirty-to-one, by George!—dear me, I should be afraid to say how many years ago. He belonged to your grandfather, and of course we were all on him. Your father and I——"

"Oh yes, he's told me that story dozens of times," said Bobby Trench.

"Oh!" said the Squire, somewhat disconcerted. "Yes, I suppose he has."

"We haven't heard it dozens of times," said George Senhouse. "What was the story, Mr.

Clinton?"

The Squire turned towards him and his face lightened. "I haven't thought about it for years," he said. "It's just come back to me. Jim Trench and I made up our minds we would go and see the horse run, so we got out of a window at four o'clock in the morning—did I say it was when we were at Cambridge together?—and drove tandem to Hitchin, where we got a train to London. I recollect we had sent on a change of horses to—to some place half-way. We slunk about amongst the crowd, as Jim's father was particular—wouldn't bet even on his own horses and all that sort of thing, and I don't blame him; I haven't had a bet on a horse since I was in the Blues;—and he wouldn't have taken it well to see Jim at Epsom when he ought to have been at Cambridge. Well, we saw the horse win, and, by George! I should be afraid to say how much money your father"—here he turned again towards Bobby Trench—"took off the bookies."

"Pots," said Bobby laconically. "But he lost it all over the Leger."

"Ah, well, the best thing he could have done," said the Squire. "I had put on a tenner, and both of us had had a little ready-money transaction on the course after we'd seen the horse canter; so we went back to London with a pocketful each, and by George!"—here the Squire laughed his great laugh—"we'd dropped it all to a pack of card-sharpers before we got there. We were pretty green in those days, and it was all our own fault, so we didn't quarrel with the fellows—we'd tried to have them, and they'd had us instead. We made 'em show us how it was done, so that we shouldn't be had again, and I recollect they said we were a couple of good sportsmen and gave us a sovereign or two back to get us to Cambridge, or we should have had to walk there, by George!

"But that wasn't the end of it," proceeded the Squire after he had done justice to his youthful memories with a hearty laugh. "We celebrated the occasion with a supper of the True Blue Club, in your father's rooms—has he told you that?"

"I don't know whether he's ever told me the truth about it," admitted Bobby Trench.

"Weil, it's a long time ago," said the Squire, "and we were all young and foolish. It was a lively supper, and your father went out for a little fresh air. They used to keep the college buttery stores in barges on the river in those days, and after wandering about a bit and climbing a few fences and gates for purposes of his own he found himself on the St. John's barge. Then he thought he'd like a bath, and it didn't somehow occur to him to go in over the side, so he knocked a hole in the bottom of the barge and sank her, by George!"

Here the Squire interrupted himself to laugh again. "He had all the bath he wanted, and the wonder is he wasn't drowned," he concluded. "Well, we had some pretty lively times in those days, and it doesn't do you any harm to recall them occasionally. I should like to see your father again. It must be thirty years since I set eyes on him. Wonder if he'd care to come and shoot one of these days?"

Bobby Trench said he was sure he would be delighted, and undertook to deliver a message, which he fulfilled later on by informing his father that his one-time friend had developed into a regular old turnip-hoer, and if he wanted to sit and listen to long-winded yarns about nothing Kencote was the place to go to.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HUNT BALL

The Assembly Room of the Royal Hotel at Bathgate had been the scene of many fashionable gatherings in days gone by, when London had not been so easy of access, and the rank and fashion of South Meadshire had been wont to meet there for their mutual enjoyment, on nights when the moon was round and roads not too deep in mire. The Regent had once shown his resplendent presence there, having been entertained at Kencote by Beau Clinton, who hated the place and spent its revenues in London, but had furbished it up at rare expense—to the tradesmen who did the work—for the reception of his royal patron. The Prince had expressed himself pleased with what had been done, and told his host that it was surprising what you could do with a damned dull hole like that when you tried; but he had not repeated his visit, and Beau Clinton's extravagance had soon after been redeemed by his brother the merchant, who succeeded him as Squire of Kencote, and just in time, or there would have been nothing to succeed to.

The royal visit to the Assembly at Bathgate was still to be recalled by the lustre chandelier in the middle of the room which was surmounted by the Prince of Wales's feathers. The landlord of those days had followed the example of Beau Clinton, except in the matter of forgetting to pay his tradespeople, and spent a large sum in decorating the room; and he thought himself well repaid when the princely patron of the arts had remarked that it was "devilish chaste." It had hardly been touched since. The red silk panels on the walls were faded, and here and there frayed, and

the white paint which surrounded them was much the worse for wear. Of the Sheraton settees that had once surrounded the walls only one remained, on the daïs at the end of the room. It was that on which the royal form had reposed, and the present landlord had refused, it was reported, a large sum for it. There was a musicians' gallery at the opposite end of the room, and sconces for candles between the panels. It was still a handsome room, and on the annual occasion of the South Meadshire Hunt Ball, its shabbiness disguised with flowers, it had quite an air. But it was small for these latter days, and, for the dancers, apt to be inconveniently crowded. Bobby Trench, after he had had his toes trodden on and his shirt-front crumpled, inwardly repeated his ejaculations of dinner-time, "Never again!"

But he was, fortunately, in a minority. The bulk of the healthy open-air-looking young men and the pretty country-bred girls who footed it to the strains of a brisk and enlivening string band were not so particular as he. They smiled at the mishaps of others and laughed at their own, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, as young men and women do who are not surfeited with pleasure. Their elders looked on from the rout seats placed round the room, or from their place of vantage on the daïs, and in the intervals of the babel of talk—for nearly all of them knew one another and had a great deal to say—thought of their own young days and were pleased to see their pleasure repeated by their sons and daughters. There is no ball like a country ball, not too overwhelmingly invaded from London or elsewhere. It has the essence of sociability, where people meet who do not meet too often, and there is something for the young ones to do and the old ones to look on at. If the Bobby Trenches who happen upon it compare it unfavourably with more splendid entertainments, it is to be doubted if those entertainments are so much enjoyed by those who take part in them, except perhaps by the novices, to whom all gaiety is glamour.

The Squire, sitting on the daïs as became a man of his position in the county, scanned the assembly after having conducted Lady Aldeburgh through the mazes of the opening quadrille, and the frown which had left his face for the past few hours, but had sat there almost invariably during the past month, appeared again. Lady Aldeburgh was talking to old Lord Meadshire, his kinsman, who in spite of age and chronic asthma was still an inveterate frequenter of local festivities, and he had a moment's interval in which his trouble rolled back upon him. He had had a dim hope that Dick, who for the first time in his life, except when he was in South Africa, had not come home for Christmas, might show up at Bathgate for this occasion. It had been a very small hope, for nothing had been heard from him, and he had even left them to take it for granted that he had put off Captain Vernon, the friend whom he had asked to stay at Kencote for the balls. And, furthermore, if he should be there it would be as a guest of Lady George Dubec, who was known still to be at Blaythorn. But even that disagreeable condition did not entirely do away with the Squire's desire to set eyes on his son, for whose presence he longed more and more as the days went on. But there was no Dick to be seen amongst the red-coated men in the room, and as yet there was no Lady George Dubec.

But as he looked over the moving crowd of dancers, and the bordering rows of men and matrons sitting and standing, his bushy brows contracted still more, for he saw her come in beneath the musicians' gallery at the other end of the hall with Miss Dexter, and, which caused him still further disquietude, saw her instantly surrounded by a crowd of men. He turned his head away with an impatient shrug and broke into the conversation between Lady Aldeburgh and Lord Meadshire. But this did not save him, for Lord Meadshire, whose old twinkling eyes were everywhere, said in his low husky voice, "There's the lady I met driving yesterday. Tell me who she is, my dear Edward, and relieve my curiosity."

The Squire, mumbling inaudibly, got up from his seat and, turning his back upon the hall, entered into a conversation with the wife of the Master of the South Meadshire, whom he disliked, but who happened to be the only lady disengaged at the moment. But she said, when she had answered his first remark, "There is Lady George. She looks handsomer than ever"; and turning his back again he went out into a room where there was a buffet and swallowed a glass of champagne, although he knew that a tablespoonful would have brought him discomfort.

Virginia was dressed in a gown of shimmering blue green which had the effect of moonlight. She had a row of turquoises round her slim neck. Her colour was higher than usual and her eyes sparkled. No one of those who pressed round her admiring her beauty and gay charm could have guessed that it was excitement of no pleasurable sort that brought the light to her eyes and the laughter to her lips. But Miss Dexter, standing demurely by her side, dressed in black, her light hair combed unbecomingly back from her broad forehead, and receiving with equanimity the crumbs of invitation that fell from her friend's richly spread table, knew with what shrinking Virginia had brought herself to make her appearance here. Both of them knew very well why the Squire had no more been seen in the hunting field since that first day; both of them had been aware of him the moment they had entered the room, had seen his movements, and interpreted them correctly.

Virginia was soon dancing with Bobby Trench, who had drawn her impatiently away from her suitors, telling her that the valse was half over and that she could fill up her card later.

"Jove!" he said, when they had danced once round the room in silence, "it's a relief to come across a friend amongst all these clodhoppers. How on earth do you find yourself here?"

"I'm living near here at present," she said. "How do you?"

"Oh, I'm a visitor—a non-paying guest in a house like a Hydropathic Establishment, or what I imagine one to be like. Fine house, but mixed company."

"Then if you are a guest you ought not to say so," said Virginia, whose thoughts so ran on Kencote that it was the first house that occurred to her as possibly affording him hospitality.

"Oh, they're all right, really," he said, "only they're the sort of people who take root in the country and grow there, like cabbages—except the chap who asked me. He's one of the sons, and he'd smarten 'em up if he had his way. Humphrey Clinton! Do you know him?"

"No," said Virginia. "Well, yes, I've met him in London. I don't like him."

"Eh? Why not? I'll tell him."

"Very well. Let's go and sit down. The room is too crowded."

But Bobby Trench, who saw the end of the dance in sight, and knew that directly Virginia sat down other men would come up to her, continued to dance. "I haven't bumped you yet," he said. "We'll steer through somehow. Are you going to Kemsale on Monday?"

"No," said Virginia, and left off dancing, having come to the end of the room, where Miss Dexter was still standing. As her partner had foreseen, she was immediately besieged again, and as for some, to him, unaccountable reason, she refused to book another engagement with him, he went away and left her in a huff.

He came across Humphrey, who was partnerless for the moment. "Let's go and get a drink," he said. "I'm dry. I say, you didn't tell me that Virginia Dubec lived in these parts."

"She doesn't," replied Humphrey as they made their way towards the room with the buffet. "She has taken a house here for a few months. My brother Dick got it for her."

"Oh, I thought she said she didn't know your people. Where is your brother, by the by?"

Humphrey considered for a moment as to whether he should enlighten him as to the state of the case, and decided not to, but wished almost immediately that he had, for as they went into the refreshment-room they met his father coming out, and Bobby Trench, who always spoke what was passing through his mind to the nearest available person, said, "I've found a friend, Mr. Clinton—Lady George Dubec. Didn't know she was in your part of the country."

The Squire scowled at him, and went out of the room without a word.

"Nice manners!" commented Bobby Trench to himself.

"The fact is," said Humphrey, "that the governor won't know the lady."

"Why not? What's the matter with her?" asked his friend. "I should have thought she'd have been a godsend in a place like this. I thought you said your brother got her down here."

"So he did," said Humphrey, making a clean breast of it. "That's what the row's about. Governor wouldn't have anything to do with her, and so Dick has retired from the scene for a time. But don't say anything about it, old chap. Little family disturbance we don't want to go any further."

"Course not," said Bobby Trench, delighted to get hold of the end of a piece of gossip and determined to draw out the rest as soon as possible. "So that's how the land lies, is it? Now I see why she didn't want to have any more truck with this engaging youth. Well, your brother's taste is to be commended. Why does your father object to her?"

"Oh, I don't know. Old-fashioned prejudice, I suppose; and he knew George Dubec."

"And he was a daisy, from all accounts. Come on, we'd better be getting back."

Old Lord Meadshire, who had been Lord-Lieutenant of the county from which his title came for over forty years, and took an almost fatherly interest in its inhabitants, learnt from Mrs. Graham who the unknown lady was.

"Oh, I can tell you all about her," she said. "She's making a fine disturbance in this little duck-pond."

"Well, she's pretty enough to make a disturbance anywhere," said the old lord, whose kindly eye for youth and beauty was not dimmed by his eighty years. "And if there is anything going on, I know I can trust you to tell me all about it."

"There it is again," replied Mrs. Graham. "I'm getting the reputation of a tale-bearer, and there's nothing I hate more. Still, I think *you* ought to know." And she told him who Virginia was, and what was happening because she was what she was.

The old man grew rather serious as the story was unfolded to him. "Edward Clinton was

always headstrong," he said, "but it's unlike him to quarrel with Dick. I think he ought to have waited to see what she was like first."

"Of course he ought," said Mrs. Graham. "I've no patience with him. He had the impudence to take me to task for asking her to dinner, and Jim and Cicely to meet her. But he didn't get much change out of me."

"You told him what you thought about him—what?"

"I told him what I thought about her, and left him to infer the rest. There's nothing wrong about her, if she did marry Lord George Dubec, and all the rest of it. I like her, and I told him so. And if I can't ask my own son and daughter-in-law to meet whom I like in my own house without being hauled over the coals by Mr. Clinton—well, he'll be expecting me to ask him what I'm to wear next."

"He couldn't improve on that," said Lord Meadshire, with an appreciative glance at her pretty gown of pale blue silk under brown net.

"Thank you," returned Mrs. Graham. "I hate clothes, but I can get myself up if I'm flattered enough beforehand. Cicely does that for me. I've no complaint to make of her as a daughter-in-law."

"Well, you had better introduce me to Lady George," said Lord Meadshire. "She must be asked to Kemsale on Monday. And I'll find an opportunity of dropping a word of common sense into Edward's ear, eh?"

"It will go out at the other. There's nothing to stop it," said Mrs. Graham. "But it will be a good thing to show him he's not going to have it all his own way."

The introduction was duly made, and Virginia, palpitating under her air of assured ease, talked to him for some little time, sitting with him on the daïs. She knew that this kind old man who chatted pleasantly with her, making feeble little jokes in his asthmatic voice, which his eyes, plainly admiring her, asked her to smile at, was the most important of all Dick's relations, besides being the most important man in the county, and that if she could win him to like her his influence might well avail to ease her lover's path. That he did like her and was prepared to accept her in friendly wise as a neighbour was plain. But she had a moment of fright when he said, "We are dancing at Kemsale on Monday night. You must come. Where is Eleanor, I wonder?" And he looked round for Lady Kemsale, his widowed daughter-in-law, who kept house for him.

"I am not sure," she said hurriedly. She did not know in the least how much he knew, or whether he knew anything. "Captain Clinton found me my house here, but——" She did not know how to go on, and feared she had already said too much in her confusion, but he turned towards her.

"Oh, I know, I know," he said kindly, and then beckoned to his daughter-in-law, a stout, rather severe-looking lady in steely grey, who greeted Virginia without smiling and gave the required invitation rather coldly.

"I will send you a card," she said, "and please bring any friends you may have with you."

Lady Kemsale had just heard the story of his troubles from the Squire, who had found in her a sympathetic listener, and she had heard that Virginia had once danced on the stage. She would have preferred to have ignored her, but Lord Meadshire's commands must be obeyed, and even as she obeyed them and gave the invitation her sympathy with the Squire's troubles began to wane and she said to herself that he must have made a mistake. There was nothing of the stage-charmer about this woman, and Lady Kemsale thought she knew all about that class of temptress, for her own nephew had recently married one of them. She preserved her stately, unsmiling air as she turned away, but she was already softened, if Virginia had only known it.

But Virginia's sensibilities had already taken renewed fright at her manner, and in a way the exhibition of which now somewhat disturbed old Lord Meadshire. She rose to her feet, and her air was no less stately than that of Lady Kemsale. "It is very kind of you to ask me to your house," she said, "but I think under the present circumstances I would rather not come." Then she made him a bow and stepped off the daïs, and was immediately seized by her partner of the dance that was then in progress. She was angry, but did not speak to him until they had circled the room twice. She was willing to pay court to the people amongst whom she was going to marry if they treated her properly. She was willing to do even more than that for Dick's sake, and to run the risk of slights, and she had done so by staying at Blaythorn, as he had asked her to do, and by coming here to-night. But she was not going to put up with slights from women who chose to treat her as of no account and as if she were anxious at all costs to obtain their countenance. There might be women who would be glad to gain entrance to a house like Kemsale even after such an invitation as Lady Kemsale had given her, but she was not one of them. The invitation, if it came after what she had said to Lord Meadshire, should be refused. The woman whom Dick was going to marry would not be recognised on those terms. She would wait until she could go to Kemsale as an equal, and if that time never came she would not go at all. In the meantime she was spending a very wearing evening, and had an impulse to cut it all short and summon Miss

Dexter to accompany her home. But the thought that she was going through it for Dick's sake sustained her, and she said to herself that since she had wrought up her courage to come she would not run away.

The person who did run away, before the dancing was half over, was the Squire. He could stand it no longer. He could not remain in the refreshment-room all the evening, and, as he hated cards, the solace of the tables, set out quite in old Assembly-room style in another room, did not avail him. If he led out a dowager to take his part in a square dance there was always the haunting fear that Virginia might be brought into the same set, and if he sat and looked on at the round dances the hateful sight of her dark head and slender form was always before him. Moreover, he had not yet talked to any one who had not either made some remark about her or asked him why Dick was not there, or, worse still, maintained an ominous silence on the subject of both of them, showing plainly that he or she was aware of the disturbance in his household, which galled him exceedingly, although to sympathetic and assumedly secret ears like those of Lady Kemsale he was ready to talk his fill, and gain relief from doing so. He could not keep what he felt out of his face, and he saw people looking at him with furtive amusement as he sat there glowering at the assembly, or trying his best to talk as if he had nothing on his mind. He felt instinctively that the story was being put all about the room, as indeed it was, for rumour was already in the air, and had gained impulse by Dick's absence and his own behaviour.

And then Lord Meadshire—Cousin Humphrey, as he had called him ever since he was a child, and called him still—had talked to him about Dick and about Virginia, coupling their names together, as he disgustedly said to himself, showing plainly that he knew what was on foot, and inviting confidences if the Squire felt disposed to give them. He did not feel so disposed. He was angry with his kinsman for so publicly giving his countenance to Virginia, flouting him in the face—so he felt it—making it appear as if he, in the place where he had all his life cut a distinguished figure, and his wishes, were not worth regarding. "I don't know the lady and don't want to," he said, one might say petulantly. "And as for Dick—she wanted to come here and he told her of a house. Considering he has scarcely been near the place since she came, it's most annoying to hear him talked about as if there was something between them. I hope you'll do what you can to contradict that report. You can do a lot if you want to."

Lord Meadshire glanced at him quizzically. He knew well enough his ostrich-like habit of burying one fact in a Sahara of words and leaving a dozen for all the world to see. "Come now, my dear Edward," he said persuasively, "why not make friends with the lady? You will find her everything she ought to be, and a charming woman into the bargain. If Dick is a little struck with her charms, I don't wonder at it, and there's nothing to be alarmed at. The best thing you can do is to keep your eye on her while he is away."

But this was a little too much. Cousin Humphrey had been his boyhood's idol, and was the only member left of an older generation of his family with the exception of Aunt Laura, but if he thought that he could treat him as an obstinate child who was to be coaxed into good behaviour, he was mistaken. "Nothing will induce me to make friends with her or to recognise her in any way," he said, with decision. "Where's Nina? I'm going home. I can't stand this any longer."

Mrs. Clinton, who was enjoying herself in a quiet way, talking to people whom she seldom saw, and infinitely relieved in her mind to find Virginia what she was, and not what she had feared she might be, even a little fascinated by her grace and beauty, and watching her all the time even when she was talking, was disagreeably surprised at the curt request of her lord and master that she should instantly accompany him home. "But, Edward!" she exclaimed, "we have not ordered the carriage until one o'clock, and it is not yet eleven. Aren't you well?"

"We can get a fly," snapped the Squire. "Yes, I'm quite well. But I can't put up with any more of this."

Still she hesitated. There were her guests to think of. How could she go off and leave them?

"If you like I will go home with Uncle Edward," said Angela Senhouse, to whom she had been talking. "I think it would make people uneasy if you were to go." She looked at the Squire with her calm, rather cold eyes, and he suddenly grew ashamed of himself. "I'll get a fly and go by myself. You had better stay here, Nina." And he took himself off without further ado.

CHAPTER XIV

A SHOOT

On the morning after the Hunt Ball the Clinton twins rose, as usual with them in the winter, about half-past eight o'clock. In the summer they were up and out of doors at all sorts of unorthodox hours, but in the cold long nights they slept like young hibernating animals, snuggling amongst their warm coverings, and occasionally having to be extricated by all the powers of persuasion, moral and physical, possessed by Miss Bird. Miss Bird had now departed

and the new governess had not yet arrived, so they were their own mistresses within limits, and responsible for their own tidy and punctual appearance at the breakfast-table.

Hannah, the schoolroom maid, brought in their tea and bread and butter at eight o'clock, drew up their blinds, set out their bath (for there were no bathrooms at Kencote), and then applied herself to the task of arousing them. "Now, Miss Joan and Miss Nancy," she said in a loud, confident voice, as if she had only to tell them to get up and they would get up immediately. "I've brought your 'ot water. Miss Joan! Miss Nancy! Eight o'clock! Time to get up! Miss Joan! Miss Nancy!"

Joan stirred, opened her eyes, closed them again, turned over and buried herself in the bedclothes again. "Now, Miss Joan," said Hannah, quick to pursue her advantage, "don't go dropping off to sleep again. 'Ere's yer tea all ready and yer 'ot water gitting cold. Miss Nancy! Time to get up!"

"Go away," said Joan in a sleepy voice. "I'm awake."

"Yes, and you'll be asleep again in a minute if you don't set up and drink yer tea. Now, Miss Joan, you don't want me to stand 'ere all the morning wasting me time with the whole 'ouse full and me wanted to 'elp."

"Then go and 'elp, and don't bother," replied Joan sleepily.

"Miss Nancy!" cried Hannah. "I know you ain't asleep. Set up and drink yer tea. Miss Nancy! Lor'! the trouble I 'ave now Miss Bird's gone, and only me to see that everything's right up 'ere and you ain't late downstairs, which you know I should be blamed and not you if you wasn't down in time."

This roused Joan, who opened her eyes again and said, "It's nothing to do with you whether we're late or not. You're always full of your own importance. I'm quite awake now and you can clear out," and she sat up in bed, and took her cup from the table between the two beds.

"Not till Miss Nancy sets up I won't," said Hannah. "I know she's awake and it's only contrariness as makes her pretend not to be."

"Nancy, do sit up and let her go," entreated Joan, "or she'll go on jabbering like a monkey for hours. My nerves won't stand it at this time of the morning."

Nancy sat up suddenly and reached for her cup. "Depart, minion!" she commanded.

"Now you won't go to sleep again after you've 'ad yer tea," said Hannah. "I shall come back in 'alf an hour to do yer 'airs, and if you ain't up and ready for me, I shall acquaint Mrs. Clinton, for reelly the trouble I 'ave in this very room every morning as sure as the sun rises, no young ladies as calls theirselves young ladies wouldn't be'ave so."

"Parse that sentence," said Nancy, and Hannah, with a toss of the head, left the room.

"Hannah's getting above herself," said Joan. "She seems to think now Starling's gone she's been promoted to her place."

"We'll let her go a little further," said Nancy, "and then we'll pull her off her perch. What's the weather like? Not raining, is it? I say, we ought to have some fun to-day, Joan. Who shall you stand with?"

The Kencote coverts were to be shot over that day, and the twins were allowed to accompany the guns on such occasions as these.

"I don't know; Uncle Herbert, I think. He's the most amusing."

"Joan, you know quite well I bagged Uncle Herbert in the schoolroom yesterday," said Nancy.

"Did you? I'd forgotten. You can have him in the morning and I'll go with him in the afternoon. I think I shall go with Bobby Trench, and see if he's as clever as he thinks he is."

"You can't, my dear; you're too old. It would be considered forward. Besides, he's an awful little ass."

"That's what I wanted to convey to him. But I think I'll go with Humphrey. He hasn't tipped us for ages, and *one* of us must attend to business."

"You can't do that either. He'll want that simpering Lady Susan. Joan, I believe there's more in that than meets the eye."

"Penny, please," said Joan, holding out her hand. "You said you would if I caught you saying that again."

"All right, when I get up. I forgot. Why don't you go with George Senhouse?"

"He's too serious, and this is a holiday. Besides, he doesn't hit them. I hate bloodshed, but I like to see *something* done. I wish dear old Dick were here. He'd bowl them over all right."

"I wonder," said Nancy, "when all that bother is going to stop. Dear papa will have to give way in the end, you know. He might just as well do it now and save time."

"If I were Dick I should just marry her and let him make the best of it. I wish he'd do something. Father has really been too tiresome for words for the last month. If you and I behaved like he does we should be sent to bed, and serve us right. I wonder what happened last night. I expect she was at the ball."

"He wouldn't take any notice of her if she was. I wish we could set eyes on her. I should like to see what she's really like."

"Cicely says she's very pretty."

"Well, I suppose she'd have to be that if Dick wants to marry her. Aren't men funny about women, Joan? Now I suppose you'd call that silly little Bobby Trench good-looking, but I should no more want to marry him than the ugliest man in the world."

"That isn't much of a discovery. You needn't have lived very long to find out that women are much more sensible than men."

With this aphorism Joan rose and proceeded to her toilette, and Nancy, after indulging in another short nap, followed her example.

The Squire, refreshed by his night's slumber, rose determined to do his duty by his guests and put from him for the day all thoughts of Lady George Dubec and, what was more difficult, of his son Dick. Mrs. Clinton, when she had returned from the ball, very late, had found him in a deep sleep in the great canopied bed which she had shared with him for so many years. He had not awakened during her long muffled process of undressing, nor when she slipped, careful to make no noise and as little movement as possible, into bed by his side. But before she slept he had turned over and, half asleep still, murmured, "Good-night, Nina. God bless you." It had been his nightly farewell of her for nearly forty years, uttered often with no special meaning, sometimes even without interval at the end of some unreasonable expression of annoyance. But last night the words had come softly and affectionately, as if, returning for a moment from the pleasant land of oblivion, where he had been wandering and to which he was immediately returning, he had been glad to find her waiting for him, his close companion, valued above others. She had put her hand softly on to his, and lain for a long time, in the deep silence of the night, in that light contact.

The common life of the household at Kencote began with family prayers at a quarter-past nine, at which, on this Saturday morning, Lady Aldeburgh and her daughter, Sir Herbert Birkett, Bobby Trench, and Humphrey failed to put in an appearance. The Judge had been up at seven, reading in his bedroom, and appeared with the breakfast dishes, but Humphrey did not arrive until five minutes later, and the presence of guests did not avert from him the invariable rebuke of unpunctuality. "I wish you'd manage to get up in decent time when you're here," said the Squire. "Where's young Trench?"

"In his bedroom, I suppose," replied Humphrey coolly, inspecting the dishes on the side-table.

The Squire said nothing further, but when he, with most of the party, was leaving the room half an hour later, and met Bobby Trench, to whom the morning light had apparently brought a renewal of self-content, entering it, he greeted him with an earnest enquiry after his health.

"Oh, I'm as bobbish as possible, thank you," replied Bobby Trench brightly.

"I'm glad of that," said the Squire, passing on. "I thought as you didn't come down at the proper time you must have been feeling poorly."

Bobby Trench stared at his broad retreating back in amazement. "Lor'! What a house!" was his inward exclamation, as he went on into the dining-room.

Humphrey, who was deliberate in his meals, was still at the table, and Joan was leaning on the back of his chair. She was making some suggestion as to pecuniary profit to herself and Nancy from the day's sport, which yet should not amount to a bet.

"Hullo, old man!" said Humphrey. "Joan, ring the bell. Everything must be cold by this time."

Joan hesitated. Such a proceeding was unheard of at Kencote, where, if people came down late for breakfast, they must expect it to be cold. But Bobby Trench politely anticipated her. "Don't you trouble, Miss Joan," he said, going to the bell himself. "I say, are you going to stand with me to-day and see me shoot?"

If Nancy had been there to support her she would have asked innocently, "Can you shoot?" for although she liked being addressed as "Miss Joan," she did not like Bobby Trench's free and easy air. But maiden modesty replied for her, "I think I'm going with Humphrey."

"She wants me to give her a shilling for every bird I miss, and she'll give me sixpence for every one I knock over. How does that strike you for a soft thing?"

A footman came in at that moment, and looked surprised at the order that was given him.

"Do you want heverythink cooked, sir, or only some fresh tea?" he asked, with a glance at the table where the lamps were still sizzling under the hot dishes.

"We live a life of rigid punctuality in this house," Humphrey apologised, when he had retired with his order. "They don't understand renewing the supplies."

"Sorry to give so much trouble," replied Bobby Trench, "but I'm pretty peckish, to tell you the truth. Dancing always gives me a twist. Look here, Miss Joan, I'll bet you half a dozen pair of gloves I kill more birds than Humphrey."

"Take him, Joan; it's a certainty," said Humphrey.

Joan was secretly enchanted at being treated as of a glovable age, but she answered primly, "Thank you, Mr. Trench, I'm not allowed to bet."

"Oh, ho!" jeered Humphrey. "What about that shilling you and Nancy got from me?"

"Dick said we ought not to have done it, and we weren't to do it any more," said Joan.

Humphrey was silent. Bobby Trench, who was good-natured enough to take pleasure in the innocent conversation of extreme feminine youth, especially when it was allied to beauty, as in the case of the twins, said, "Well, of course, you must always do what you're told, mustn't you? But I'll tell you what, we won't call it a bet, but if I don't kill more birds than Humphrey I'll give you six pairs of gloves—see? Only you'll have to stand by me half the time and him half the time, to count."

"Oh, she doesn't want gloves," said Humphrey, with some approach to his father's manner. "Cut along upstairs, Joan, or you'll have Miss Bird after you."

"Miss Bird has departed," said Joan, but she went out of the room, somewhat relieved at the conclusion of what might have developed into an embarrassing episode.

At half-past ten the big shooting-brake appeared at the door, and the whole party, men and women, got into it, with the exception of Mrs. Clinton, and Lady Aldeburgh and her daughter, who had not yet made an appearance. The Squire had been extremely annoyed at this. "She's as strong as a horse," he had said of his kinsman's wife, "and when she stays in other people's houses she ought to keep their hours. And as for the girl, if she can't get up to breakfast after a ball, she oughtn't to go to balls. I'll tell you what, Nina, I'm hanged if I'm going to keep the whole party waiting for them. We start at half-past ten sharp, and if you can't rout 'em out by then, you must wait and bring 'em on afterwards in the carriage."

Mrs. Clinton had not felt equal to the task of routing out her guests, and the brake had driven off, within three minutes of the half-hour, without them.

It was a deliciously mild morning. The sun, shining palely in a sky of misty blue, gave it an illusive air of spring; blackbirds whistled in the copses; the maze of tree-twigs in distant woods showed purple against the wet green of the meadows; the air was virginally fresh, and had the fragrance of rich moist earth and a hint of wood smoke. Brown beech leaves still clung to the hedges on either side of the deep muddy country lanes, and blackberries, saturated with dew, on the brambles.

Servants and dogs and guns had been sent on a quarter of an hour before. The Squire, on these important occasions, when he took the cream of his preserves and began at an outlying wood, to finish up just before dark with the home coverts, liked to drive up to the place appointed and find everything ready for an immediate start. Beaters must be in place ready for the whistle on the instant. Guns must be posted for the first drive with no delay whatever. There was a lot to get through before dusk, and no time must be wasted. If those who were asked to shoot at Kencote on the big days did their parts, he—and Dick—and the keepers would do theirs and show them as pretty a succession of drives, with an occasional walk over stubble or a field of roots to vary the proceedings, as they would get anywhere in England. Only there must be no dawdling, and the women who were permitted to look on must subordinate their uncontrolled natures to the business in hand.

All the arrangements necessary to make the machinery run without a hitch, so that none of the full day's programme should be hurried, meant a great deal of preliminary consultation and adjustment. Bunch, the head-keeper, admirable in his capacity for generalling his little army of beaters and for faithfully carrying out instructions, had no initiative of his own, and the Squire had always relied upon Dick—and relied on him much more than he knew—for arranging the plan of campaign. This time he had had to do it alone, with much consequent irritation to himself and bewilderment and head-scratching to honest, velveteen-clad Bunch. And he had relied on Dick's coolness—also much more than he knew—to get the guns posted expeditiously and with as little friction of talk and enquiry as possible. To-day he would have to rely on Humphrey to help him,

and Humphrey was as yet untried in this capacity. He was anxious and worried as he drove, sitting on the high box-seat beside his coachman, and itching to handle his horses himself as he always did except on shooting days, when he wanted to save his hands. Usually he sat behind, but this morning he felt he could not take his part in the talk and laughter that went on in the body of the brake. He was not at all sure how the day would turn out. There were several points at which a hitch might occur. Following a light suggestion of Dick's, he had arranged to take High Beach Wood the opposite way to that in which it had always been taken, and he was not at all sure that Bunch had fully understood his testily given instructions—or, indeed, that he fully understood them himself. Nor was he quite certain of his guns, and he wanted to kill a respectable head of game. The two local notabilities whom he had invited, old Mr. Wilkinson, of Birfield, and Colonel Stacey, who lived in a villa in Bathgate, and shot steadily through the season within a radius of forty miles, he could rely on. Humphrey was a good shot, though not so good as Dick. Sir Herbert Birkett was surprisingly good, for a Londoner, on his day, but when it wasn't his day he was surprisingly bad, and didn't even care enough about it to make the usual lamentations. George Senhouse enjoyed it thoroughly, but never touched a feather. Hammond-Watt and Bobby Trench he knew nothing whatever about, but it was unlikely that either of them would turn out above the average. He could only hope that they would not turn out very much worse. At any rate, at the best, it was not a team that could be expected to create a record in the Kencote preserves, and at the worst might bring disgrace on them.

He could not help thinking of these things and worrying about them. If Dick had been there he would have calmed those uneasy tremors. He would have told him that the birds would show up well, even if the guns didn't, that the experts were at least equal to the duffers and the doubtfuls, putting everything in a hopeful light, not anticipating any possible hitch, but quite ready to deal with it if it should come. Dick never lost sight of the fact that they were out for a day's sport; the Squire fussed and worried so about trifles that all such sense of pleasure was apt to leave him. He had an uneasy, half-defined feeling that his temperament caused him to err in this way, and it made him want Dick, who could relieve him of the weight of small anxieties, all the more. He was learning how much he had been wont to depend on his son. One of the impulses of appeal and affection, which continually shot across the stiff web of his obstinate determination, came to him now, and if Dick could have appeared at that moment he would have welcomed him with open arms, and given way in everything. But Dick was away, he did not know where, and with a sigh he resigned himself to the prospect of a day of anxiety.

They came to an open gate by the roadside and drove in through a strip of wood until they came to an open space in front of a keeper's cottage. It stood, backed by trees, facing a wide sloping meadow, which was completely surrounded by a wood of oak and beech, intermixed with spruce and some firs. The little group of loaders with their masters' guns and cartridge-bags stood ready by the palings, the glossy coated retrievers waved welcoming tails as the brake drove up, the hoof-beats of the horses muffled on the thick grass. The beaters were already in line at the other end of the wood, far out of sight, waiting for Bunch's signal. There was nothing to do but place the guns and prepare for the stream of pheasants which would presently begin to fly over them. Except that neither Mr. Wilkinson nor Colonel Stacey had yet arrived.

It was the first check to the prompt orderly proceedings of the day. The Squire, taking his gun from the hands of an under-keeper and filling the pockets of his wide shooting-jacket with cartridges, gave vent to a forcible expression of irritation. "Now there we are, held back at the very start!" he exclaimed. "'Pon my word, it's too bad of those fellows. I told 'em eleven o'clock sharp, and they've shot here dozens of times before and know the place as well as I do."

"It's only just five minutes to eleven," said Humphrey, and as he spoke Mr. Wilkinson's dog-cart drove in from the wood, bringing himself and Colonel Stacey, all ready for immediate business. Before eleven o'clock struck from the cuckoo-clock in the keeper's kitchen the whole party was walking down the meadow to line the borders of the wood and do what execution they might.

Humphrey showed himself efficient in translating the Squire's intentions as to the placing of the guns, from the notes he had jotted down on a sheet of letter paper. He knew that inextricable confusion would arise later if those notes were to be followed literally, but trusted to be able to arrange things by word of mouth when the time came, as most people were content to do.

So they stood and waited. From the keeper's cottage up the hill you could have seen the eight little groups, standing expectantly on the grass at a short distance from the wood, following the curve of its line. Behind each stood a gaitered loader with another gun ready to hand to his master. The women, in clothes not distinguishable in colour from those of the men, stood with them; the dogs squatted by the side of their masters or tugged at leashes held by the men. Blackbirds popped in and out of the wood, and thrushes, but there were few sounds of life. There was a hush of expectancy, and otherwise only the deep winter stillness of nature, and the pale sun, and the wet odour of the soil.

CHAPTER XV

Nancy stood with her uncle, as she had announced her intention of doing. Sir Herbert, in a Norfolk jacket of voluminous tweed and a green Tyrolean hat, would hardly have been recognised by those who had only seen him in his Judge's robes. He asked Nancy as they were waiting whether she thought he was properly attired. "I like to do the thing thoroughly while I'm about it," he said. "I notice that nobody but myself is wearing these buttoned things—spats I think they call them. I think you might have written, Nancy, to tell me they had gone out of fashion. Do you think I could take them off and throw them away presently? I don't know what good they are. It is only a passion for being correctly dressed that induced me to put them on."

"I think they look very nice," said Nancy. "And as for your hat, Uncle Herbert, I'm sure it's the very latest thing, because Humphrey has got one just like it. But it wants a woodcock's feather in it."

"Oh, does it? Thank you for telling me. I shall direct my attention to-day to shooting a woodcock if one turns up, and robbing him of his feather. It is very unpleasant and takes away your conceit of yourself not to have everything exactly right. With your intelligence you no doubt understand that."

"Joan understands it better than I do," replied Nancy. "She likes to be well dressed. I don't care about it one way or the other."

"Ah! but that's such a mistake," said Sir Herbert, "especially for a female, if I may call you so. When your body is well dressed your mind is well dressed. You should look into that."

"I have," said Nancy. "It's all a question of buttons."

What she meant by this aphorism did not appear, for a shot from the right of the line made Sir Herbert spring to attention, and immediately after, with a sudden whir, a high pheasant shot like a bullet over his head, and flying straight into the charge from his gun, turned over in the air and fell with a thud on the grass far behind him.

"Glorious!" exclaimed the Judge. "I'm in form." But although he fired many barrels during the next few minutes, in which a hot fusillade was going on on the right and on the left, and birds were falling, clean shot, or sliding to the ground with wings outspread, or continuing their swift flight unshaken, he brought only one down, with a broken wing, which ran off into the shaugh at the top of the hill.

"Now that is most disappointing," he said, when the tap-tap of the beaters' sticks could be heard, and they began to emerge from the wood one by one. "I really did think I was going to shoot well to-day. Life is full of such delusive hopes."

"I'm glad you didn't shoot too many," said Nancy. "They're such pretty things, and I like to see them get away."

"So do I, in theory," said Sir Herbert. "In practice, no. Do you think it is the lust for killing, as some people say?"

"Oh no," said Nancy. "I have thought about that. If it were, I shouldn't want to come out. It is the skill."

"I think you're right, Nancy. That, and what remains of the primitive instinct of the chase. You had to kill your food, and you kept your health by doing so. You killed two birds with one stone."

"And now you don't even kill one bird with two barrels," said Nancy, with a side-glance at his eye.

He met her mischievous gaze. "Nancy," he said, "if you had said that on the bench they would have put it in the papers—with headlines; as it is, I've a good mind to commit you for contempt of court."

The divided groups began to congregate. The Squire came round the corner very well pleased with himself. In spite of his preoccupation he had shot quite up to his form. And his good-humour was confirmed at the discovery that Hammond-Watt could be classed as a doubtful no longer, for he had killed more birds than anybody, and killed them clean, and that Bobby Trench had also given a fair account of himself. The day had begun well, and the fact that Sir Herbert had only shot two pheasants, one of which had got away, and George Senhouse had shot none, although, as is the unaccountable way of driven birds, they had come over him more thickly than over any one else, did not avail to dash his satisfaction. He led the way to the next stand, down a woodland ride, in high good-humour, walking with great strides, which Lady Birkett, who accompanied him, found some difficulty in keeping up with. "I hope Herbert will pick up," he said, laughing good-humoredly at his brother-in-law's misfortune. "Now I'm never very much away from my form, either above or below. Funny thing—form! Even when I'm worried to death about things it don't seem to make much difference to my eye."

But when the next drive was over, and he had only shot two pheasants, neither of them clean, and a rabbit, he said, "It's all this infernal worry. No man on earth, I don't care who he is, can shoot straight if he's got something weighing on his mind."

Lady Birkett was consolatory. "My dear Edward, don't think about it," she said. "It will all come right."

"I wish I thought so," said the Squire. "I think if I had that woman here I'd put a charge of shot into her."

During the course of the morning the twins came together to compare notes. "Humphrey is shooting quite well," said Joan, "but, all the same, if he had fallen in with my suggestion we should have scooped twenty-four shillings. I reckon it up after every drive and tell him the result. I am hoping that he will be so pleased with himself that he will offer to settle up at the end of the day of his own accord."

"Don't make it too much," advised Nancy. "Ten shillings in our pockets are better than twenty in his."

"Bobby Trench offered to take over the arrangement," said Joan.

Nancy threw back her fair hair. "It's a pity to waste an opportunity," she said, "but of course you can't accept a tip from him."

"My dear, as if I would!" exclaimed Joan. "But he's very pushing. It's difficult to keep him at a distance. I think I shall go and stand with Mr. Wilkinson. He's a dear old thing, and I think he'd be flattered."

"Oh, don't forsake Humphrey, for goodness' sake, if he's in a good temper," advised Nancy.

"Well, Bobby Trench is such a nuisance. He comes over and talks to us while we're waiting."

"If you stick on till lunch-time I'll change with you after. Uncle Herbert is shooting very badly, but he's full of conversation. And I didn't tell you—he asked after the camera fund. I don't know who can have told him—Dick, I suppose. Dear old Dick; I wish he was here!"

"So do I," said Joan. "Did Uncle Herbert show any signs of contributing?"

"I expect he will. But I didn't want to appear too mercenary; I skilfully changed the subject."

"That ought to do the trick," observed Joan. "I don't mind a bit taking it from relations. They ought to be encouraged to do their duty."

"All old people ought to tip all young ones," said Nancy largely. "You might convey that truth delicately to Mr. Wilkinson."

"I might, but I'm not going to."

"Or Colonel Stacey. Why not try him? He's old enough."

"You can do your own dirty work," said Joan, preparing to leave her. "Colonel Stacey is very poor. He lives in a tiny little house. I shall sit next to him at luncheon, and see that he gets a jolly good one."

The Squire shot worse and worse as the morning went on, and through over-anxiety and confused instructions the birds were not driven properly out of High Beech Wood, which ought to have afforded the best drive of the day. They streamed away to the right of where the Squire was standing, where there was neither a gun nor a stop, or went back over the heads of the keepers. Humphrey had suggested placing a gun where those that were got out of the wood eventually came over, and because he had pooh-poohed the suggestion the Squire was furious with him. Dick would have put a gun there without asking him. But Humphrey now could do nothing right. After this fiasco he suggested sending to the keeper's cottage, where luncheon was to be served, to tell them to set the tables outside. There was a warm grove of beeches at the back of it, where they sometimes did lunch earlier in the season, and to-day it was fine and sunny enough to have made it more pleasant to sit in the open than in a crowded room in a cottage. But the Squire said, "For God's sake, don't be altering arrangements now, and throwing everything out," so Humphrey had retired and told Bobby Trench that his governor was like a bear with a sore head.

"I thought he seemed rather passionate," said Bobby Trench pleasantly. "Not pulling 'em down, I suppose. It does put you out, you know."

"He'd better manage for himself," said Humphrey sulkily. "If he likes to make a mess of it, let him."

Joan, who was with them, grew red at this discussion. "Father has had a lot of worries," she said. "I think you ought to help him all you can, Humphrey."

Humphrey stared at her, and Bobby Trench said, "Bravo, Miss Joan, you stick up for your

own."

"I'm going to," said Joan, and turned back to join Beatrice Senhouse, who was just behind them. At the next stand, the last of the morning, she went up to her father and said, "I'm going to count your birds, daddy, and I'll give you a kiss for every one you let off."

The Squire's worried face brightened. "I thought you'd forsaken your poor old father," he said. "Well, I'm letting plenty of them off, but we'll see what we can do this time."

Whether encouraged or not by his prospective reward, he acquitted himself well during the ensuing drive, in the course of which he got two high birds with a right and left, and another one going away with a quick change of guns; and when the drive was over he handed his gun to his loader, and put his hand on Joan's shoulder to walk towards the cottage, with a face all smiles.

Mrs. Clinton, with Lady Aldeburgh and her daughter, met them at the garden gate. "I have told them to put the table outside," she said, as they came up, and the Squire said, "Capital idea, Nina, capital idea!" and turning to Lady Aldeburgh twitted her on her late appearance. "You've missed some good sport," he said. "But we'll see what we can show you this afternoon."

Lady Aldeburgh, in a costume of Lincoln green with a short skirt bound in brown leather, looked younger than her own daughter, and felt no older than a child. "Oh, do let me stand by you, Mr. Clinton, and see you shoot," she said, clasping her hands appealingly. "I'll promise not to chatter."

"That woman's a fool," said Joan, who had withdrawn from the group to join Nancy.

She sat next to Colonel Stacey at luncheon, as she had undertaken to do, and was assiduous in attending to his bodily wants. He was of the skeleton-like, big-moustached order of retired warrior, and looked very much as if he suffered from a lack of nutriment, although as a matter of fact he was accustomed to "do himself" remarkably well, shirking nothing in the way of food and drink that other men of his age were apt to look askance at. He made an extremely good meal, and Joan took credit to herself for his doing so, although he did not repay her attentions with much notice, being well able to forage for himself. Mr. Wilkinson, who sat on her other side, was far more communicative and friendly, in a sort of pleasant, grandfatherly way; and as the three of them were standing together when luncheon was over, he took half a sovereign out of his pocket and said, "Now if I know anything of young women of your age, and I ought to by this time, I dare say you and Nancy will find some use for that."

Joan accepted it with gratitude. Her mind was at ease; she had not worked for it in any way. It was a most acceptable windfall. "Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Wilkinson," she said. "Now we shall be able to buy our camera. We have been saving up for it for a long time."

"That's capital," said old Mr. Wilkinson, patting her on the shoulder and moving off.

Colonel Stacey, now that he had satisfied the claims of appetite, had some attention to spare for his late neighbour, who was really a very nice-mannered child, and not greedy as most children are, but well-behaved towards her elders. He in his turn pulled out a well-worn leather purse and extracted half a sovereign from it. Joan, seeing what was coming, had a moment of panic, and turned quickly away. But he stopped her and said, "There, take that; that makes one for each of you."

Joan's face was scarlet. "Oh, thanks most awfully," she said hurriedly. "But we've got quite enough now," and then she fairly ran away, leaving Colonel Stacey, surprised at the curious ways of young girls, to put his half-sovereign philosophically back into his purse.

Lady Aldeburgh accompanied the Squire during most of the afternoon, and by a judicious use of flattery and girlish charm kept him in so good a humour with himself that he shot much better than in the morning, and fussed considerably less over details of arrangement than he would otherwise have done.

He could not have told how it came to pass, although Lady Aldeburgh might have been able to enlighten him, that as they were walking together down a muddy country lane, with the rest of the party straggling after them, he poured into her sympathetic ear the story of what he was now accustomed to call Dick's entanglement.

Lady Aldeburgh bounded mentally over five-and-twenty or thirty years and became matronly, even maternal.

"I have heard something about it, dear Mr. Clinton," she said, "and have been longing to tell you how much I sympathised with you. But I hardly liked to until you had spoken first. Of course one's children do give one trouble in many ways, and an old married woman like myself who has had a long experience can often help, with sympathy if not with advice. So I am very glad you have told me."

The Squire found this attitude right, and soothing besides. "Well, of course, it's an impossible idea," he said. "I shan't give in about it. Have you seen this woman, by the by?"

"I saw her last night," said Lady Aldeburgh, "and of course I've heard of her. She is not the sort of woman that I should care for a son of mine to marry. She seemed to me an affected, underbred minx."

"You thought that, did you?" exclaimed the Squire, his eyes brightening. "Now it's the most extraordinary thing that the people round here can't see that. Even my cousin, old Humphrey Meadshire, seemed to be quite taken in by her."

"Oh, well—men!" said Lady Aldeburgh meaningly.

"Ah, but it isn't only men," said the Squire. "It's the women too. They're all ready to take her in as if she was one of themselves. Now I saw at once, the first time I set eyes on her, what sort of a woman she was. I don't profess to be more clear-sighted than other people, but—but, still, there it is. You saw it, and of course you go about more than the women do here, most of 'em, and know more of the world."

"I should hope I do, the frumps!" was Lady Aldeburgh's inward comment, but she said, "I know your Dick—not so well as I do Humphrey, but pretty well—and I say that he is much too fine a fellow to throw himself away like that. Still, if he has made up his mind about it, what can you do?"

He told her what he could do, and to some extent had done—withdraw or threaten to withdraw supplies, and she commended this course warmly. "That ought to bring him to his senses," she said. "And if it doesn't—well, you have other sons."

The Squire did not quite like this implication. He had never yet faced the question of what he would do after Dick got married, if he should get married in spite of him. But certainly, the prospect of disinheriting him had never crossed his mind.

"I have never met your second son, I think," said Lady Aldeburgh. "He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"Oh, that's Walter," said the Squire. "You'll see him this evening. He's the third. Humphrey comes next to Dick."

"Oh!" said Lady Aldeburgh, who had the same means of access to works of reference dealing with the County Families of England as other people, and used them not less frequently.

"You know we had to stop the same sort of thing with Clinton a few years ago," said Lady Aldeburgh. "He was wild to marry one of the Frivolity girls—pretty creature she was too, I must admit that, and quite respectable, and it really went to my heart to have to stop it. But of course it would never have done. And what made it so difficult for a time was that we had no hold over Clinton about money and that sort of thing. He *must* come in for everything."

"Oh, well," said the Squire airily, "I couldn't cut Dick out of Kencote eventually, whatever he did. But he wouldn't find things very easy if Kencote were all there was to come into."

Lady Aldeburgh took this, and took it rightly, as meaning that there was a good deal of unsettled property which the Squire could leave as he liked, which may or may not have been what she had wanted to find out. "Then you have an undoubted hold over him," she said. "Of course, I know it must be very unpleasant for you to have to exercise it, but, if I may say so, it seems to me that simply to threaten to withdraw his allowance if he should marry against your wishes won't stop him if he can look forward to having everything by and by."

"He wouldn't have everything, anyhow," said the Squire.

"Well, whatever he is going to have besides the place. You don't mind my talking of all this, do you? I've not the slightest desire to poke into affairs that don't concern me."

"Very good of you to take such an interest in it all," said the Squire. "I don't mind telling you in the least—it's quite simple. Kencote has always been entailed, but there's a good deal of land and a considerable amount of other property which doesn't go with it. Dick won't be as well off as I was when I succeeded my grandfather, because there was nobody but me, except some old aunts, and I've got a large family to provide for. Still, he'll be a good deal better off than most men with a big place to keep up, and there'll be plenty left for the rest."

"That's if he does as you wish," said Lady Aldeburgh.

"Well, I hadn't thought of it in that way," admitted the Squire.

"But, my dear man," she exclaimed, "you are not using your best weapon—your only weapon. If he is infatuated with this woman do you think he will be prevented from marrying her by your stopping his allowance? Of course he won't. He can get what money he wants for the present, and she has some, I suppose. He only has to marry and sit down and wait."

"Then what ought I to do?" asked the Squire grumpily. He knew what she meant, and hated the idea of it.

"Why, tell him that if he makes this marriage you won't leave him a penny more than you're

obliged to."

"If I said that I should commit myself."

"You mean if you threatened it, you'd have to do it. Well, I think you would. Yours—ours, I should say—is one of the oldest families in England, and you are the head of it. You can't see it let down like that."

This was balm to the Squire, but it did not relieve the heaviness of his heart. "I believe I shall have to do something of that sort," he said, "or threaten it anyhow," and having arrived at the place for the next drive, he turned with a sigh to the business in hand.

The short winter day came to an end, and at dusk they found themselves on the edge of the park, after having shot the birds out of the last covert. They strolled home across the frosty grass, under the darkening sky already partly illumined by a round moon, merry or quiet, pleased or vexed with themselves, according to their several natures and the way they had acquitted themselves in the day's sport, and the warm, well-lighted house swallowed them up.

Joan and Nancy went up to their room. "You haven't been near me all the afternoon," said Nancy. "Here's half a crown from Humphrey. It's disappointing. Did you do any business with Uncle Herbert?"

For answer Joan burst out crying. "I hate all this beastly cadging for money," she said through her tears, "and I won't do it any more."

"Well, don't howl," said Nancy, "or you'll look awful when we go downstairs. What has happened?"

"Mr. Wilkinson gave me ten b—bob," sobbed Joan. "I didn't ask him for it. And then poor old Colonel Stacey thought he must do the same, so he took out a sh-shabby old purse and offered me another one, and I believe it was the only one in it. And I wouldn't take it."

"Do pull yourself together, old girl," entreated Nancy. "Well, if he's so hard up, I think it was rather a delicate action."

Joan turned on her, and her tears were dried up by the heat of her indignation. "You're always talking about your brains," she said, "and you can't see anything. Of course, I should have felt a beast anyhow, but I feel much more of a beast for taking Mr. Wilkinson's tip and refusing his."

"Why?" asked Nancy.

"Because he'd know I thought he was too poor," said Joan, her tears breaking out afresh.

Nancy considered this. "I dare say he didn't think much about it," she said. "But why didn't you go and make up to him afterwards, if you felt like that? Do leave off blubbering."

Joan took no heed of this advice. A physically tiring day and the distress she had kept down during the afternoon had been too much for her, and now she was lying on her bed sobbing unrestrainedly. "I w-would have gone to stand with him," she said. "P-poor old d-darling, he looked so lonely standing there all by himself, for no one went near him, except m-mother, once. B-but I thought he'd think I wanted the t-tip after all, so I d-didn't. Here's Mr. Wilkinson's half-sovereign. You can take it. I don't want it."

"Well, if you don't, I don't," said Nancy, picking up the coin which Joan had thrown on to the floor, nevertheless, and putting it on to the dressing-table. "I don't know why you're always trying to make me out more hard-hearted than you are. Shall I fetch mother?"

"N-no. Y-yes," said Joan.

So Mrs. Clinton was fetched, and heard the story, sitting on the bed, while Joan sobbed on her shoulder. Nancy leant on the rail and helped to explain matters. She now felt like crying herself. "We have a sort of joke with the boys," she said. "They understand it all right, but, of course, we wouldn't go asking everybody for money, mother."

"I think you are getting rather too old to accept money presents from any one outside the family," Mrs. Clinton said, "although it was very kind of Mr. Wilkinson to give you one, and I don't mind your having taken it in the least. And I'm sure Colonel Stacey didn't think anything of your refusing, Joan dear. So I shouldn't worry any more about that; and I think you had better have some tea up here and lie down till dinner-time."

So Joan's tender heart was comforted, and Colonel Stacey kept his half-sovereign, which if he could not have afforded to lose he would never have thought of offering.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MONEY QUESTION

Walter Clinton, with his wife and two little girls, arrived at Kencote an hour or so before dinner-time, and the Squire instantly seized upon him for a confabulation. "George Senhouse is in my room," he said, "and the rest are playing pool. Come into the smoking-room. I want to speak to you."

Walter followed him through the baize door and down the stone passage. He was not so handsome as Dick nor so smart-looking as Humphrey, but he was tall and well set up, with an air of energy and good-humour that was attractive. "It's jolly to be here for a bit again," he said. "I've been working like a nigger. We've got a regular plague of influenza at Melbury Park."

The Squire grunted. He was pleased enough to see his son, but he always shied at the words Melbury Park, and rather disliked mention of Walter's profession, which had been none of his choosing.

"Well, I suppose you've heard of this wretched business of Dick's," he said, as he lighted a big cigar.

Walter filled his pipe, standing by the fire. "Yes. I've seen him," he said.

The Squire held the match in his hand as he exclaimed, "You've seen him, eh?"

"Yes, he spent Christmas with us," said Walter.

The Squire threw the match, which had begun to burn his fingers, into the grate. "Why on earth didn't you let me know?" he asked.

"He didn't want me to," replied Walter, taking his seat in one of the shabby easy-chairs.

The Squire thought this over. It affected him disagreeably, making him feel very far from his son. "Was he all right?" he asked.

"Of course, he was worried," said Walter. "He was all right otherwise."

"Well, now, don't you think he's behaving in a most monstrous way?" asked the Squire, anxious to substitute a mood of righteous anger for one of painful longing.

"Well, I can't say I do," replied Walter.

"Oh, he's talked you over. But I'll tell you this, Walter, he shall *not* marry this woman, and drag us all in the mud. You ought to be doing what you can to stop it, too, instead of encouraging him."

"I'm not encouraging him," said Walter. "It wouldn't make any difference whether I encouraged him or discouraged him, either. He has made up his mind to marry her and he's going to do it."

"I tell you he is *not* going to do it." The Squire hitched himself forward out of the depths of his chair to give more weight to his pronouncement.

Walter remained silent, with a mental shrug, and the Squire was rather at a loss to know how to proceed. "Do you know what this woman is like?" he asked.

"I've seen her photograph and heard what Dick has to say about her," said Walter.

"Oh, Dick! Dick's infatuated, of course. I should have thought you would have had more sense than to swallow his description of her blindly. She's—oh, I can't trust myself to say what she is. But I'll tell you this. I'd rather Kencote passed out of the Clinton family altogether than that she came to be mistress of it."

"Well, that won't happen for a great many years, I hope," said Walter.

"It will *never* happen," said the Squire, with immense emphasis.

Again Walter was silent, and his father slightly embarrassed. "How is he going to get married, I should like to know," he asked presently, "if I don't help him? I've told him that the moment he does marry I shall help him no longer. I don't suppose he's got a couple of hundred pounds in the world. He can marry with that, but he can't live on it. He's not going to live on her money, I suppose."

"No, he's got a job," said Walter calmly.

Again the Squire stared. "Got a job!" he repeated. "What sort of a job?"

"Quite a good one. Agent to John Spence up in Norfolk—the chap who was in his regiment."

The Squire's surprise, and what must be called, in view of his thwarted diplomacy, discomposure, were indicated by his dropped jaw. Walter went on in even tone. "He's to get six hundred a year and a house. There's a place in Warwickshire too, which he'll have to look after. He was just going to take quite a small thing in Ireland, but Spence heard he was available and rushed up and booked him. You see, he knows his job well."

Of course he knew his job well. Hadn't the Squire taken a pride ever since he had been the smallest of small boys in initiating him into it? Hadn't he seen to it that if he learned nothing else during his long and expensive school and university education, he should learn all that could be learnt about the land and the intricacies of estate management? And hadn't he rejoiced in seeing him take kindly to it ever since? He had been quite content to spend the greater part of his leave at home, often working as hard as if he were a paid agent, even taking papers up to London, working at them there, and writing long letters. He had not been content to take a general interest in the property to which he was one day to succeed, riding or walking about the place and leaving details to the agent and the estate staff. Why, it had been possible, ten years before, when the old agent had been superannuated, to dispense with one altogether for six months, nobody suitable having come forward; and the present one, Mr. Haydon, was hardly more than a bailiff. And more convincingly still, lately, had the Squire discovered that Dick knew his job. He thought he knew it himself, but he had been lost without him, and if Dick continued to keep away from Kencote, he would have to make new arrangements altogether, and get some one in the place of Mr. Haydon to help him.

And now all Dick's knowledge and experience were to be used to thwart him. It would no longer be available for the benefit of Kencote. That was bad enough in itself, but it was far worse to know that it had made Dick independent of him and himself powerless. For the first time in this unhappy business he felt an impulse of pure anger against his son. Hitherto he had been grieved about him, and only angry against others. Now, as these thoughts passed through his mind, he broke out, "That's the most disgraceful thing I've heard of yet. Going to throw the whole place over, is he, and leave me to do the best I can, while he goes and takes service under somebody else? Very well, then. If he is going to throw Kencote over, Kencote will throw him over. I've had as much as I can stand. Now I'll act, and act in a way that will surprise him."

Walter looked up in alarmed surprise. He thought he knew his father, and exactly how far he would go. He had known in discussing matters with Dick that he would make a fuss, and go on making it, until things were accomplished which would make it useless for him to fuss any further. But he had always taken it for granted that Dick had the cards in his hand, and that in the long run he must win the game. But this looked as if they had both miscalculated Dick's hand, and that a trump they had thought to be in his possession was really in his father's.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," said the Squire boldly, "that if Dick persists in the course he is taking, I shall make a new will, and I shan't leave him a penny or an acre of land beyond what he gets under the entail."

This was plain enough, but Walter could scarcely believe his ears as he heard it, so entirely subversive was it of all ideas in which he had been brought up. He had never bothered himself much about money. He knew that he would have something by and by, something probably more substantial than the average younger son's portion, that there was, indeed, plenty of money for all of them. But he had taken it for granted, in the same way that he took the daily rise of the sun for granted, that the bulk of it would go with the place—go, that is, to Dick. And, knowing his father as he did, and the principles that guided him, he could not, even now, believe that he really meant to act in a way so destructive of all Kencote ideals as he had indicated.

"Surely you're not going to break the place up!" he said.

"If Dick doesn't come to his senses that's what I will do," said the Squire. "And if I once do it I shan't alter it. I shall have the will prepared, and the day Dick marries this woman I shall sign it. You can tell him that. I'll have nothing more to do with him, directly. He has behaved disgracefully to me, never sending a line for over a month, and letting me know his plans through you. Now you can tell him mine, and you can tell him I'm in earnest." He marched out of the room without further words, leaving Walter with the feeling of a man who has just passed through an earthquake.

Late that night when everybody had gone up to bed Walter went into Humphrey's room. They had not had a chance of speaking together before. He told him of what had happened, of what Dick had told him at Melbury Park, and the Squire that evening downstairs.

Humphrey received the news in silence, and with mixed sensations. "I didn't know Dick had been with you," he said presently.

"He won't come here," said Walter. "He doesn't say much about the governor, but he's furious with him."

"I'm afraid he's furious with me too," said Humphrey. "And really it's rather unreasonable."

"He didn't say much about you," replied Walter perfunctorily.

"Well, I can't help it. I've done nothing I'm ashamed of, as far as he's concerned. And as for Virginia Dubec, I don't care if he marries her to-morrow."

Walter was busy with his own thoughts. "I say, do you think the governor can really mean it?" he asked.

Humphrey gave rather an unpleasant little laugh. "I hope he does, for our sakes," he said.

Walter looked at him uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose if Dick doesn't get whatever it is, we shall. I could do with it very well."

Walter eyed him askance. "I never thought of that," he said rather coldly. "I should be very sorry to have Dick cut out for my sake."

"It's all very well for you," Humphrey said. "You have your job, which you like, and plenty to get on with. And you're married."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't get married if you want to," said Walter.

"I don't know whether it would surprise you to know that I do want to," replied Humphrey.

Walter looked at him in surprise. "My dear chap," he said, "I'm awfully glad. Who is it?"

"Well, I hadn't meant to say anything until I saw how the land lay, so keep it to yourself for the present. It's Susan Clinton."

Walter looked a little blank. He had not been particularly charmed either with Lady Aldeburgh or her daughter, and he was too straightforward to feign an enthusiasm which he did not feel. "Will she have you?" he asked.

"Oh, I think so," said Humphrey. "We're very good pals. But, of course, there's Aldeburgh to settle with, or rather her ladyship, because he lets 'em go their own way and he goes his. It can't be said to be much of a match. Still, there are four other girls, two of them out and about, and if the governor sees his way to greasing the wheels, I ought to be able to pull it off."

There was something about this speech which displeased Walter. He knew Humphrey's way of talking and he knew that his dwelling on the financial side of a marriage, even before he was engaged, might possibly hide a feeling which he would not want to express. But somehow he found it difficult to believe that this speech did hide any particular feeling for Lady Susan Clinton, and equally difficult to infuse any particular warmth into his congratulations.

"Well, I'm glad you told me," he said. "If you want to pull it off I hope you will, and I shouldn't think there would be much difficulty about money. Besides, you want far less when you're married than you'd think. Muriel and I aren't spending anything like what we've got, and we're as happy as possible. I'd advise every fellow to get married, if he finds a girl who'll fit in with him."

"Susan and I will fit in together all right," replied Humphrey, "but we've both been used to crashing about a good deal, and I'm afraid we shouldn't save much on your income. Besides, Muriel brought you something, and I don't think Aldeburgh will be likely to cough up much with Susan. We shall be as poor as church mice, anyhow. But if she don't mind that I don't particularly, as long as we have enough to get along on."

Walter knew well enough that Humphrey hated above all things to feel poor, and decided that if he was not wishing to marry Susan Clinton for what she could bring him, he must really love her, in spite of his mercenary speech. "Well, old chap," he said, with more warmth, "I'm sure I hope you'll be happy. I haven't spoken to her much, but she seems a jolly good sort, and she's a sort of relation already, I suppose. So we ought all to get on with her. Well, I think I'll go and lie down for a bit before breakfast."

But Humphrey still had something to say, something which he seemed to find it rather difficult to say. "Dick and I are not particularly good friends now," he began.

"Oh, he was annoyed at your letting out something or other about his Lady George," said Walter. "But he's all right, really."

"I shouldn't like him to think," said Humphrey, "that I was working against him with the governor. But, of course, if he does marry her, and the governor does what he's threatened to do —well, it would make a lot of difference to me."

"He's not likely to think you worked that," said Walter rather coldly. "And I hope it won't happen. Good-night."

The next morning the whole party went to church, with the exception of Lady Aldeburgh, who was averse to making engagements as early as eleven o'clock. The Squire was displeased at this defection on her part, and when Bobby Trench came into the hall, as they were setting out, on his way to the smoking-room, with a pipe in his mouth and a novel under his arm, he said to him, "Haven't you got a watch? It's ten minutes to eleven. You'll be late for church."

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't thinking of going," replied Bobby Trench. "Still, I may as well. I can write my bits of letters afterwards."

The Squire grunted and went out. "I'll see that that young cub behaves himself as long as he's here, at any rate," he said to Mrs. Clinton.

Bobby Trench winked at Lady Susan, who was standing alone in the hall. "Cheery sort of place to come to, isn't it?" he said. "Makes you think yourself back at school again."

She turned away from him without smiling. "I'm enjoying myself very much," she said.

"The deuce you are," said Bobby Trench to himself as he went to deposit his pipe and his book in the smoking-room. "Sits the wind in that quarter? But never again, Robert, never again!"

After church Humphrey said to Susan Clinton, "Come and see old Aunt Laura with me. She can't get out much in the winter, but she likes to see people."

So they went to the little house in the village and found Aunt Laura nursing the fire, with a Shetland shawl round her bent old shoulders and a large Church Service on the table by her side.

She was flattered by the visit of Lady Susan, but a little anxious lest she should be carrying about any false impression of the relative importance of the various families of Clinton. "It must be very nice for you to come to Kencote, my dear," she said. "I dare say you have often thought about it and wished to see the place. Your great-grandfather—oh, but I suppose he was much more than that, great-great-great, very likely—did not behave at all well, but that is all forgiven and forgotten now, and I am sure there is nobody at Kencote now who is not pleased to see you."

"What did my great-great-grandfather do, Miss Clinton?" enquired Lady Susan indulgently. "I'm sorry he didn't behave well."

"Oh, my dear, haven't you read about it? It is all in the book about the Clintons—a very interesting book indeed. He was a younger son and he fought for the Dissenters against King Charles the First, and when King Charles was beheaded Oliver Cromwell turned his eldest brother, who of course was a Royalist, out of Kencote and gave it to your ancestor. When King Charles the Second came to the throne he gave it back to its rightful owner, but your ancestor had made a good deal of money, I'm sure I don't know how, and he was ennobled in the reign of King William and Queen Mary, but I don't know what for. I dare say the Clintons of Kencote could have been ennobled many times over if they had liked, but for my part I am glad they never were. There are very few commoners' families in England who have gone on for so many years in one place."

"Oh, I know," said Lady Susan, with an arch glance at Humphrey. "I have been told that."

"Only once by me," replied Humphrey. "I thought you had better know where you stood once for all. You belong to quite the junior branch, you know, and you must be properly humbled when you come to Kencote."

"Oh, there is no necessity for humility," said Aunt Laura, who so long as she felt that matters were thoroughly understood was anxious that her visitor should not be unduly cast down. "There are other good families in England besides the Clintons, and of course you do belong to us in a way, my dear."

"We like her to feel that she belongs to us, don't we, Aunt Laura?" said Humphrey, looking at the girl and not at the old lady.

Lady Susan blushed. "Oh, of course I belong to you," she said hurriedly, not meeting his gaze. "And I think Kencote is a lovely place, much better than Thatchover, where we live."

"Ah, I have never seen that," said Aunt Laura. "I have seen Kemsale, my cousin Humphrey's place. I hear there is to be a ball there to-morrow night, and I suppose you are all going. I shall not be able to be present, although I have received an invitation. It was very thoughtful of Eleanor Kemsale to send me one. She must have known that my advanced age would make it impossible for me to accept, but she knew also that I should feel it if I were left out, for for a number of years there was no entertainment of that sort at Kemsale to which I and my dear sisters, who are now all dead, were not invited."

Lady Susan had been looking round the room. "What lovely old prints you have!" she said.

"They are old-fashioned things," replied Aunt Laura, "but I like them. They do not actually belong to me. I brought them from the dower-house, where I and my sisters lived for a number of years. But wait—if you will come into the dining-room, where there is a fire and you need not be afraid of catching cold, I will show you something that does belong to me, and very pleased I am to have it."

"Oh, I think we'd better stay here, Aunt Laura," said Humphrey.

But Aunt Laura had already risen. "No, Humphrey," she said. "I must show Lady Susan the present you gave me, which has afforded me the greatest pleasure."

So they followed her into the little square, panelled dining-room, where she led them to an old engraving of "Kencote Park, Meadshire, the Seat of John Clinton, Esq.," which showed, besides the many-windowed, rectangular house, a large sheet of water with a Grecian temple on its banks, and certain gentlemen in tall hats and ladies with parasols feeding swans and apparently refusing the invitation of one of their number, who was seated in a boat, to go for a nice row.

"That is the house," explained Aunt Laura, "as it was when my grandfather altered it, and made the lake, which is now all grown round with rhododendrons and other trees, so that you cannot see it, as it is represented there. But I think it is a fine picture."

She put her little grey head crowned by its cap of lace and ribbons on one side, bird-like, as if she were trying to judge how the house might strike a stranger. "It was not in that house your ancestor lived," she told Lady Susan. "That was burnt down, more's the pity, for I believe it was still larger and finer than the present one. I should like to possess a picture of it, but that is impossible because none exists. At any rate, it was very kind of Humphrey to find this one for me and have it well framed, as you see, and give it to me for a Christmas present. It is such little attentions as that that people value, my dear, when they come to my age."

As they walked away along the village street Lady Susan said to Humphrey, "I do think it was nice of you to give the old lady that picture. It seems to have pleased her very much."

"Oh, it was nothing," said Humphrey. "And she's worth pleasing."

"Yes, I think she's very nice," Lady Susan agreed.

"I'm glad you like her," said Humphrey, "and I think she's disposed to like you. I say, I wish you'd go and look her up with the twins some time to-morrow—without me, I mean. They go to see her every day, and she'd take it as a compliment if you went again of your own accord."

"Oh, certainly I will," said Lady Susan.

CHAPTER XVII

SUNDAY AND MONDAY

On Monday some of the party assembled at Kencote hunted, but the Squire, who had given up hunting for the season for reasons we know of, went out with Sir Herbert Birkett and George Senhouse to walk up partridges, and shoot whatever else came to their guns in an easy, pottering way. Although he would not have admitted it, he was getting quite reconciled to the loss of his favourite sport. His wide lands afforded him plenty of game, and he enjoyed these small days with a few guns, walking for miles through roots and over grass, and watching his dogs work, descendants of the famous breed of pointers which had been the pride of his sporting old grandfather. He thought they had not been given half enough to do of late years, and now that his mind was turned in another direction he had begun to feel keenly interested and to follow it up with vigour. "Driven birds are all very well," he said to his brother-in-law as they set out. "They're more difficult to hit and you get more shooting. But you don't get so much sport. Any cockney who's got the trick of it can bring 'em down."

"Well, I can't, and I'm a cockney," said Sir Herbert. "Still, I agree with you. This is the sort of day for pleasure."

So they spent the whole of the mild winter day in the open, lunched simply on the warm side of a hedge, and came back at dusk, having thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The Squire had been at his best, the country gentleman, busying himself in the open air with the pursuits his forefathers had found their pleasure in for generations, allied to his lands, simple in his enjoyment of what they provided for him, companionable, master of field-craft, perfect as a host. "I haven't had such a day for a long time," he said as they stood before the hall door being relieved of their paraphernalia. "I've forgotten all my troubles."

Sir Herbert was touched. He found the man tiresome in so many aspects of life, stupid and overbearing. But he had also something of the appealing simplicity of a child. He was in trouble, and he had been able to forget it all while he had amused himself.

"It's the best day I've had for a long time too," he said. "You've given me a great deal of pleasure, Edward."

But once in the house, the Squire's worries rolled back on him—not the big trouble, which he had no time to brood over just now, although it was always present in the background of his mind, but the little annoyances incident to his entertaining a lot of people whose ways were not his ways, and who interfered with the settled course of his life.

Lady Aldeburgh had given him great annoyance, and as for Bobby Trench, it was as much as he could do to be civil to him. On the other hand, he was more pleased with his son Humphrey than he had been for a long time, and he had also come to feel that his son Walter was a man to be relied on, in spite of his obstinate choice of a profession unsuitable for a son of his, and his management of his life since he had taken up that profession. If it had not been for this new-found satisfaction in his younger sons, perhaps he would not have been able to prevent the thoughts of his eldest son spoiling his day, and he would certainly have been far more actively annoyed with Lady Aldeburgh and Bobby Trench.

For neither of those gay butterflies of fashion had been able or cared to adjust themselves to the Sabbath calm of a house managed in the way that Kencote was. Lady Aldeburgh, having spent the morning in her room, written her letters and done her duty to privacy for the day, came down to luncheon ready and willing to be amused. And there was no amusement provided for her. After luncheon she had played a game of running round the billiard-table and knocking balls into pockets with the bare hand with Bobby Trench, and fortunately the Squire, at rest in his room, with the *Spectator* on his knee, had not known what they were doing. But this mild amusement had soon palled, and the problem was to find something for two active young things to do in its place. "Have you *ever* stayed in a house like this before, Bobby dear?" asked Lady Aldeburgh.

Bobby dear said that he never had, and the powers above being favourable, never would again.

"It's perfectly deadly," said Lady Aldeburgh. "What on earth are the rest of them doing?"

"Slumbering on their beds," replied Bobby Trench; "and in half an hour or so they will all appear, rubbing their eyes, and we shall go for a nice long walk."

"Not me," said her ladyship, with a glance at the leaden sky outside and the bare leafless trees shaking in a cold wind. "Do let's get somewhere by a cosey fire and have a rubber of bridge."

"Who's the four?" asked Bobby Trench. "Shall we wake up old Clinton, and ask him? There are risks. It might be amusing to see somebody in an apoplectic fit, and again it might not."

"Don't be foolish," said Lady Aldeburgh, patting him on the arm. "Humphrey would play, and I'll tell Susan she's wanted."

"They are going out for a walk together. It's a case," said Bobby Trench boldly.

"Whatever put that into your head?" enquired her ladyship, with wide-open eyes. "It's quite absurd."

"Oh, I think Susan's a very nice girl," replied Bobby Trench. "Though I admit it's absurd to take much notice of her while you're about."

Lady Aldeburgh hit his sleeve again with her jewelled hand. "If you talk like that I shall go away," she said. "When I said it was absurd I meant that neither of them has a shilling."

"Humphrey ought to have a good many shillings if he plays his hand well with old Papa Beetroot just now," replied Bobby Trench. "There's a deuce of an upset. I should hold for a rise if I were you."

"You shouldn't talk so disrespectfully. You are disrespectful to me, and to Mr. Clinton, who is a relation of mine—and the head of our family, or so he says. And as for Humphrey, he's a nice boy—certainly the pick of this particular bunch—but Susan wouldn't look at him."

"Why not? He's civilised, if his people aren't."

"She could do much better, and I shouldn't allow it. Of course they are friends, and I don't mind that. You must remember that they are cousins."

"Is it fifty-sixth or fifty-seventh cousins?" asked Bobby Trench innocently. "Well, you know best, of course, but you've got other girls besides Susan to look after, and if you don't take care she'll get left. No, my dear lady, it's no use trying to deceive me. You're quite ready to let Susan marry Humphrey if Papa Mangel-Wurzel will put up the stakes. Aren't you, now? Confess."

"I shan't confess anything so ridiculous," said Lady Aldeburgh petulantly. "What I want to do is to play bridge, and relieve myself of this frightful boredom. I shouldn't have come here if I'd known what it was like. *Can't* we get a four?"

"I'll see about it later on," said Bobby Trench. "Perhaps after tea. Why not picquet in the meantime?"

"It's a stupid game," said Lady Aldeburgh. "But if you make the stakes high enough it would be better than nothing."

"I'll make the stakes what you like," said Bobby Trench. "I'll pay you if I lose, and if you lose

you must pay me."

Lady Aldeburgh having consented to this not unreasonable arrangement, Bobby Trench rang the bell and asked the servant who answered it to bring a card-table and some cards. Although somewhat surprised at the order he presently fulfilled it, and the game proceeded until tea-time.

All the members of the house party met over the tea-table, and afterwards Lady Aldeburgh, having whispered to her daughter, went out of the room followed by Bobby Trench. Lady Susan then whispered something to Humphrey, who looked rather disturbed, and then also went out of the room with her. Now the whispers had not been in the least obtrusive, or of the nature to arouse comment, but the Squire happened to have observed them both, and told Joan as he went back into his room to find Humphrey and send him to him, not anticipating hearing of anything wrong, but thinking that he might as well know what was going on as not.

Joan was delighted with the errand. She also had observed the whispers, and was at least as eager as her father to find out what was on foot. She went to several rooms before she opened the door of the billiard-room, which was little used, and never on a Sunday. There she found Lady Aldeburgh and Bobby Trench seated at a card-table, and Humphrey standing by them with Susan Clinton at his side. "Humphrey, father wants to speak to you for a minute," she said, and then ran away to find Nancy and tell her of the terrible thing that was happening.

"Well, if you don't mind, then," said Humphrey, preparing to obey the summons, and Lady Aldeburgh said, "Oh no, not in the least. I didn't know there would be any objection."

Joan, passing through the hall, was again stopped by the Squire, who was standing at the door of his room. "I told you to fetch Humphrey," he said irritably. "Why have you been so long? I want to speak to him."

"I couldn't find him, father," said Joan.

"Where was he?" asked the Squire.

"He's just coming," replied Joan.

"I asked you *where* he was," persisted the Squire, and when she said he had been in the billiard-room, asked her what he was doing there.

"Talking to Lady Aldeburgh," said Joan; and the Squire asked her what *she* was doing.

Then it came out. "Playing at cards with Mr. Trench," said Joan, who disliked Lady Aldeburgh and Bobby Trench equally, and didn't see why she shouldn't answer a plain question in plain terms.

Then the Squire went into his room, shutting the door decisively, and Humphrey went in after him, Joan having escaped for the second time.

Inside the Squire's room there was an outbreak. "I will not have it in this house. I simply *will not* have it," was the burden of his indignant cry.

"Well, look here, father," said Humphrey quietly. "I didn't know what was happening, and directly I did I stopped them. They gave it up at once when I said you wouldn't like it. They couldn't tell, you know. Everybody does it now."

The Squire spluttered his wrath. "I call it disgraceful," he said. "I don't know what the world's coming to. Cards on Sunday in a respectable God-fearing house! And you defend it!"

"No, I don't," said Humphrey. "I told you that I had stopped them."

The Squire looked at him. "Did they want you to play?" he asked. "You and a girl like Lady Susan! You don't mean to tell me her mother wanted her to play? Is the girl accustomed to that sort of thing, I should like to know?"

Humphrey did not want to give Lady Aldeburgh away, but rather her than Susan, and rather Bobby Trench than either of them.

"Susan doesn't care about it," he said. "Lady Aldeburgh—well, you can see what she is, can't you?—nothing like as sensible as her daughter. She'll do what anybody wants her to."

"Oh, then it's Master Trench I'm to thank for making my house a gambling saloon on a Sunday!" exclaimed the Squire. "If he wasn't my guest, I would say something to that young cub that would surprise him. Anyhow, he'll never come into this house again, and I must say, seeing what he is, that I wonder at your asking him at all."

"I'm sorry I did," said Humphrey. "But I hope you won't say anything to him about this. I'll take charge of them and see that they behave themselves."

"Then you'll have your work cut out for you," said the Squire grumpily. "You'd better set about doing it at once. I wish to goodness I'd never consented to people like that coming into the

house. I may be old-fashioned—I dare say I am—but I don't understand their ways, and I don't want to."

That had been the end of it as far as he was concerned.

If he could have heard what passed between Lady Aldeburgh and Bobby Trench when deprived of their legitimate amusement—but that thought is too painful. What had happened further on that Sunday evening was that feeling vaguely the need of some sort of comfort in the anxieties that beset him he had suddenly taken it into his head to go to church to the evening service, a thing he hardly ever did, and striding with firm and audible steps into the chancel pew during the saying of the Psalms, he had found, as well as most of the ladies from the house and George Senhouse, assembled there, Humphrey and Susan Clinton sitting together, and had come to the conclusion, during the sermon, that it was creditable on Humphrey's part to have stopped the card-playing on his behalf, instead of joining in it, as might have been expected of him, and that he seemed to be turning over a new leaf, and was probably exercising a good influence over the harmless daughter of a foolish mother.

So he was pleased with Humphrey, but displeased with Lady Aldeburgh, who had shown herself perverse at the dinner-table and in the drawing-room afterwards, had refused to talk more than was necessary, and had gone up to her room on the stroke of ten; and furious with Bobby Trench, who had made no effort to disguise his yawns throughout the evening, and fallen openly asleep in the library after the ladies had retired.

As for Walter, he had talked to him very sensibly later still in the evening about Dick. "Don't do anything," he had said, "till I have seen him again. I don't know what can be done, or if anything can be done. But it's quite certain that if you threaten him you will drive him straight into doing what you don't want him to do." So he had consented to Walter acting as his ambassador, and felt that he could rely on him in that capacity, and even take some comfort in the hope that he might do something to lighten the state of gloom and depression in which most of his waking hours were now passed.

It was with a feeling of relief that he saw the whole party, with the exception of Sir Herbert Birkett, set out later in the evening on their ten-mile drive to Kemsale. It had been his intention to go with them, but the thought that Virginia, with whom he had seen Lord Meadshire colloguing, would almost certainly have received an invitation, and would no doubt eagerly have accepted it, deterred him. When his wife's carriage, containing herself, Lady Birkett, and Lady Aldeburgh, who would far rather have been with the younger members of the party, had driven off, and the omnibus, with the rest of them, had followed it, he breathed a sigh of relief. "To-morrow we shall be able to settle down again, thank God!" he said to himself as the door was shut behind him.

Kemsale Hall, towards which carriages from every country house in South Meadshire within driving distance, and motor-cars from far beyond, were converging, was a very fine place, and the ball which Lord Meadshire gave that evening was a very fine ball. Amongst the numerous guests, whose names were all chronicled in the *Bathgate Herald and South Meadshire Advertiser*, were Lady George Dubec and Miss Dexter.

Virginia had gone home from the Hunt Ball vowing that nothing would induce her to accept the invitation which Lady Kemsale had given her so patronisingly when it should be confirmed by the promised card, and Miss Dexter had backed her up in her own dry way, while professing to combat her resolution.

"I don't know what you can be thinking of, Virginia," she said. "Refuse an invitation to a house like Kemsale—the house of a Marquis, a Lord-Lieutenant! Why, lots of women would commit hari-kari to-morrow—or at least the day after the ball—if they could get an invitation."

"Well, I'm not one of them," said Virginia. "To think that I would go anywhere on sufferance! Lord Meadshire's an old darling, but as for his daughter-in-law, I should very much like to tell her what I think of her."

The opportunity of doing so occurred no later than the following afternoon, when Lady Kemsale came to Blaythorn Rectory to call, but Virginia did not take it.

Lady Kemsale's manners were naturally stiff, but she did her best to soften them when she was shown into Virginia's drawing-room. "I thought I would come over before Monday," she said, with a smile, "so as to put everything on the most approved basis of etiquette. We don't often get new people in this part of the world, and when we do we must make haste to show that we appreciate them."

This was handsome enough, and it rather took Virginia's breath away. When Lady Kemsale had been announced she had jumped to the conclusion that Lord Meadshire had sent her, which was true; but what was also true was that she had been quite pleased to come, and to have the opportunity of making amends for her frigidity at the Hunt Ball, which had been caused by the Squire's tale and thawed again by her own observations. When she drove away half an hour later Virginia said with a rare lapse into the American tongue, "Why, she's a perfectly lovely woman, after all, Toby. Now you can't say that I was wrong to say I'd go, after the way she behaved."

"Just a little soft-sawder, and you fall at her feet," said Miss Dexter. But she was pleased, all the same, that Virginia should be going to Kemsale, and that one more of Dick's people should have acknowledged her charm and her worth. She was pleased also to be going herself, for she had a little scheme of her own, which she had not imparted to her friend.

She had, in fact, made up her mind to speak to Mrs. Clinton, if she could find an excuse to do so, unobserved by the Squire. She had watched her in the Bathgate Assembly Room, and she had seen her in her turn watching Virginia with eyes whose meaning, whatever it was, was not one of hostility. "Now there's a woman with sense," she had said to herself. "*She* wouldn't be tiresome. I wonder how much she is under the influence of her old bear of a husband?"

This was what she was going to find out, if she could, and she waited her opportunity, refusing invitations to dance, and wandering about the great string of rooms at Kemsale, stalking her prey, with a whole-hearted indifference as to what might be thought of a single lady so apparently friendless and partnerless.

It was Lord Meadshire himself, who, coming across her passing through one of the smaller drawing-rooms, did what she wanted. "What! not dancing?" he asked in his friendly way; and with a searching glance at his kind old face she said, "I have something else to do. I want to speak to Mrs. Clinton, but I don't know her."

He looked at her in return with a momentary seriousness. "Want to gain a convert, eh?" he asked. He liked her plain sensible face, and the way she stood, square to him and to the world. "Tell me now, is this a serious business?"

She did not answer him directly. "She's one of the best women in the world," she said. "Perhaps I'm the only person who really knows what she's been through and how she has taken it. She has come out of her troubles pure gold. And anybody can see for themselves that she is beautiful and has a charm all her own."

"Oh yes, anybody can see that," said Lord Meadshire. "She's a sweet creature. And Dick Clinton wants to marry her. *He's* serious, eh?"

"I think he has proved it," said Miss Dexter.

Lord Meadshire considered this. He had heard that Dick had retired from the army, but not about his having taken an estate agency. "I suppose he is," he said.

"They ought to know her," said Miss Dexter. "People ought not to hug prejudices that have no reason."

Lord Meadshire looked at her with his mischievous smile. "A matter of abstract right and wrong—what?" he said. "Well, come along, and I'll introduce you. But you must tell me your name, which I'm afraid I have forgotten, although I know quite well who you are, you know."

"Yes. I'm Lady George Dubec's companion, and my name is Dexter," she said.

Lord Meadshire loved a little conspiracy. His eyes twinkled at her as he said, "This dance is coming to an end, and people will be here in a minute. You would like to talk to her by yourselves. Go into the conservatory there, and leave it all to me."

So Miss Dexter went and deposited herself on one of two chairs under a palm. Couples in search of privacy wondered, sometimes audibly, why on earth the woman couldn't find some other place to sit and mope in, but she sat on undisturbed. A man whom she had danced with before, also unattached, mooned in with his hands in his pockets, and showed a disposition to take the vacant chair. "Please go away," she said. "I have got toothache, and anybody who talks to me will have his head snapped off," and he, being of a diffident nature, went. Presently the lilting sweep of strings and the sweet penetrating sound of horns came sweeping in from the distant orchestra, and she was left alone once more, except for one couple, who still sat on in a distant corner. But by and by she heard voices approaching. These were from Lord Meadshire and Mrs. Clinton, whom he had brought in to look at the flowers, which were banked up in gay, scented masses underneath the spreading branches of the great palms. They came to where she was sitting, and Lord Meadshire said again, "What! not dancing?" She rose and stood before them. "I'm having a little rest," she said, with a smile; and then he made the introduction. "Do you know Miss Dexter, Nina?" he asked. "She has come to live here for a time, Mrs. Clinton."

Mrs. Clinton acknowledged the introduction not without stiffness. She was taken by surprise, as was intended, but she was a woman whom it was not wise to take by surprise, if you wanted her to show you what was in her mind.

Lord Meadshire had intended to leave her with Miss Dexter, slipping away on some excuse with a promise to return, but when he had borne the brunt of a light conversation for a little time he perceived that he could not do so. He paused in some bewilderment, and Miss Dexter said, "May I have a few words with you, Mrs. Clinton?"

"Ah yes," he said, visibly relieved. "I'll leave you both here together, and come back."

But Mrs. Clinton said at once, "If it is about Lady George Dubec, I would rather not hear anything. I think I will go back to the ballroom, Cousin Humphrey." Then she turned resolutely, with a bow to Miss Dexter, who had plumped herself into her seat again and did not return it, and Lord Meadshire had nothing to do but to go away with her. "But you mustn't sit here all the evening," he said kindly, over his shoulder, to Miss Dexter. "I shall come back and fetch you."

But when he returned five minutes later she was not there, and he saw her dancing vigorously, and apparently anxious to avoid him.

But she could not dance the whole evening, owing to a lack of partners, and he had an opportunity of speaking to her later. "I'm afraid our little scheme miscarried," he said, with some concern.

She showed him a pink, angry face. "I wish to goodness I had left it alone," she said. "I don't like being snubbed."

"She won't go behind her husband," he said rather lamely.

"I thought, to look at her, she had a good deal more sense than he," said Miss Dexter uncompromisingly. "It seems I was mistaken."

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. CLINTON CHOOSES A GOVERNESS

Mrs. Clinton sat in Lady Birkett's drawing-room prepared to interview, one by one, twenty or more of the ladies who had answered her advertisement for a governess for the twins. She expected to devote two consecutive mornings to her task, and was prepared to listen, to weigh, and to judge with all her faculties alert. On the table by her side was an orderly pile of letters, most of them running to two or three sheets of notepaper. They were the residuum of some scores, and she had read the contents of each several times over.

Punctually on the stroke of ten entered Miss Winifred Player, twenty-five, French, German, and Italian, elementary Hebrew, music, drawing, thorough English and composition, botany, physiology, dancing and calisthenics, needlework, swimming, elementary bookkeeping and typewriting; daughter of a clergyman of the Church of England; bright, persevering, and makes friends with pupils (see testimonials); bicycles, good walker, tennis. It was astonishing that she should have acquired so much learning during her short term of life, and also spent eight years in imparting it. She proved to be a self-confident young woman with a voluble tongue, and Mrs. Clinton had only to sit and listen to her while she made it quite plain that she would not do at all. But by way of gaining experience which might be useful in dealing with further applicants, Mrs. Clinton asked her a few questions when a lull in the storm of words allowed her an opportunity, going through her list of "subjects" from the letter she held in her hand.

Miss Player, it seemed, had not studied the languages she offered abroad. She had been neither to France, Germany, Italy, nor Syria. French she had learned at school, German and Italian she had taught herself in spare moments. Hebrew—well, she had hardly supposed Hebrew would be wanted, but she had put that in because she had learnt the letters and helped her father by copying. She knew the Greek alphabet too. Thorough English meant that she was fond of reading, and had once reviewed a novel for a parish magazine. She had the article in her little handbag, and offered it as corroborating evidence. Botany and physiology she had "studied." But she seemed rather anxious to get away from her "subjects." "I always get on with my pupils," she said, "and I don't mind making myself useful in the house. In fact, I enjoy doing so, and feeling that I am one of the family. How old are your little girls, Mrs. Clinton?"

"They are fifteen," replied Mrs. Clinton. "I am afraid your accomplishments are not quite what I want."

There came a sudden droop. Miss Player was "bright" no longer, but plainly dejected.

"You offer a very high salary," she said somewhat inconsequently.

"Yes, you see I want a lady of high education."

"I'm bright in the house," said the girl.

Mrs. Clinton could not repress a smile. "I hope you will get a good place where your qualities will be valued," she said, and Miss Player left her.

The interview had only lasted five minutes, and Mrs. Clinton had allowed fifteen for each. She went to find her sister-in-law. "I think you had better come and support me," she said, "and I think you will be amused." So when Miss Janet Phipp was shown in she found herself confronted

by two ladies instead of one, and both of them asked her questions.

Miss Phipp was thirty, very plain—there was no denying that—but also on her own showing very competent. She had been educated at a High School, and had taken the degree of Bachelor of Arts at the London University. She had taught in a High School ever since, but the work was rather too hard for her. Her doctor had advised her to go into the country and avoid the strain of night as well as day work. "I am not an invalid," she said quietly, "and my health would give you no trouble."

There was no doubt about her capacity, but she was quite uninspiring. Mrs. Clinton hesitated. "Have you been used to living in the country?" she asked.

"Oh no," said Miss Phipp. "I told you—I have been at the High School for eight years. In my holidays I went abroad mostly, or to my home in Manchester, as long as my parents were alive."

"I am afraid you would find it very dull," said Mrs. Clinton.

"I think not," she said. "But it wouldn't much matter if I did, would it, as long as I did my work well? I can teach, and I like teaching."

"My daughters are active young persons," said Mrs. Clinton. "They are out of doors a great deal. Do you play golf, or lawn tennis, or anything of that sort?"

Miss Phipp's face hardened a little. "I don't care about games," she said. "I have always put work first. I would undertake to make your girls work, and if I were to look after them in their play-time—wouldn't that be all that would be wanted?"

"I think not," said Mrs. Clinton. "I want them to work, but I want some one who would be a pleasant companion for them too, out of lesson hours."

"Did you find it easy to make friends with your pupils at the school?" asked Lady Birkett.

"A few of them," said Miss Phipp. "The ones who wanted to get on. I used to have them in my rooms to help them. With the others I found it best to keep to work alone. I got more out of them that way. After school hours they went their own way and I went mine."

"But that is just what you couldn't do in a private family," urged Mrs. Clinton. "You wouldn't have to be always with the children, but you would be much more with them than with girls you taught in a school."

"Yes. I know that," said Miss Phipp. "Only I don't want to give you a wrong impression of myself. I would do my best to make friends with your girls, only I fancy it would rest with them more than with me. Some teachers find it quite easy to have girls hanging on to them and adoring them, and my experience is that work suffers on account of it. I wouldn't go anywhere where work wasn't the chief thing."

When she had gone out Mrs. Clinton said, "It is really very puzzling. I'm not at all sure that she wouldn't do, although she is far from being the sort of governess I had pictured."

"We shall do better," said Lady Birkett. "There are plenty more to see yet."

The next to arrive was Miss Judith Gay, twenty-three, pretty and rather shy, daughter of an admiral deceased, perfect French, good piano and singing, otherwise not up to the mark scholastically.

"If it were only a companion we wanted!" said Mrs. Clinton when she had gone out.

"The twins would love her," said Lady Birkett, "but they would twist her round their little fingers."

Miss Ella Charman was the next arrival. She was thirty-four, well dressed, and talked after the manner of a lady of fashion. It was apparently her object to set both Mrs. Clinton and Lady Birkett thoroughly at their ease, and establish intimate relations before coming to business. "I have never been in that part of the world," she said when she had enquired where Mrs. Clinton lived, "but I know the Palmers very well. I think they live in Meadshire, don't they?"

"Not in our part of Meadshire," replied Mrs. Clinton. "At least I do not know the name."

"Oh, you would know them, I should think, if they lived near you," said Miss Charman. "She was a daughter of Sir James Farley. Lady Farley was a sister of Mrs. Bingham, with whom I lived. Mr. Bingham, you know, is a brother of Lord Howley's. Little Edward, whom I taught until he went to school, will be Lord Howley some day. I was sorry to leave the Binghams, but Edward was the only child, and had to be sent to school, of course. Do you know Lord Dorman, Mrs. Clinton?"

"No," said that lady, taking up a letter, "you have not mentioned——"

"I thought you might," interrupted Miss Charman. "He is only a new creation, of course. He

was Sir John Thompson, the engineer or contractor or something; Mrs. Cottering told me that he had paid a hundred thousand pounds into the funds of the Liberal Party, and got his peerage in that way. The Dormans were very anxious that I should go to them and take sole charge of their adopted niece. They have no children living of their own. Mrs. Dappering told me that it was a great sorrow to them. Their only son was killed in the war. Do you know Lady Edith Chippering?"

"No," said Mrs. Clinton. "Are you still thinking of going to——"

"She was a daughter of the Earl of Havering. I thought you might. She was staying with the Binghams just before I left them. She did say something about my going to her. Of course the Dormans would be more—— By the way, do you know the Lodderings? Don't they live in Meadshire?"

Mrs. Clinton did not answer this question. "I have a good many people to see, Miss Charman," she said. "I think we had better talk about—about our business, hadn't we?"

"Oh, certainly," said Miss Charman. "Should I have my meals with the family or not? That is rather a point with me. At the Cotterings' I had everything sent up and lived entirely in the schoolroom, which I don't think a good arrangement. One gets dull and mopy, you know. At the Binghams' I was one of the family, and used to help Mr. Bingham with his farm accounts after dinner; in fact, he used to call me his secretary. He *would* look after everything on his property himself. Would there be anything of that sort I could help Mr. Clinton in, do you think? I don't know whether he has landed property or not, but I should be delighted to do anything I could to help him."

"You were asking about meals," said Mrs. Clinton. "You would have breakfast and luncheon with us, and you would dine upstairs. Now will you kindly tell me what subjects you can teach?"

"Oh, the usual subjects," said Miss Charman. "I am a Bachelor of Arts of London University, you know, honours in French and mathematics. And there are the training certificates. You have all that, haven't you? I got Hilda Cottering into Girton. Her father didn't want her to go. With all that money coming he thought it was waste of time. But she was a clever girl, and we used to do a great deal of work, and have a great deal of fun besides. She married young Spencer-Morton, you know, the nephew of Lord Pickering. Do you know the Pickerings, by any chance?"

And so it went on, and would have gone on interminably had not Mrs. Clinton at last risen and held out her hand as token of dismissal. Miss Charman retired affably, saying that she supposed she should hear in a day or two. She knew Mrs. Clinton must get through her list first, but she should be glad to come to her, and she would no doubt let her know the date later on.

When she had left them the two ladies looked at one another and laughed. "How delighted Edward would be with that flow of conversation!" said Lady Birkett. "It would be worth while engaging her if only to see his face when she asked him if he knew the Potterings."

"Miss Phipp is the only possible one so far," said Mrs. Clinton.

Miss Margaret Cunningham was the next. Twenty-five, with an excellent record, nice-mannered and good-looking, but the unfortunate possessor of a cockney accent of remarkably pungency. She had been a "dyly" governess only, in "Straoud" Green, where she lived, but her father had married again and she was not happy at home. Her father was Scotch. "I don't think I've got his accent, though," she said, with a smile. If she had she might have beaten Miss Phipp out of the field. Her own made her impossible.

Miss Clara Weyerhauser was young, but spectacled, short-haired and mannishly clothed. "Edward would roar the house down if I took her to Kencote," said Mrs. Clinton, when the tale of her numerous attainments had been extracted from her and she had stamped out of the room.

"It seemed odd that she should keep her hat on in the house," said Lady Birkett.

Miss Mary Mansell was too nervous, Miss Gladys Whiting too delicate-looking to make it likely that they could cope successfully with the twins. Then came Miss Jessie Barton. She was forty-two, and looked older, a lady by birth and in speech and manner, but poorly dressed, thin and worn. She had been teaching for over twenty years in good families, and had the best of references to show from each, but admitted, with a flush on her pale cheeks, that she had left her last place, over a year before, because the girls she had taught wanted a finishing governess.

"But that is just what I want for my girls," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Ah, but they are younger," she said eagerly. "Really, I am sure I could get them on well, Mrs. Clinton. And I am as strong and active as ever I was, and much more experienced. I am just coming to the time when it will be difficult to get work, and if I don't get work I must starve. I have no home to go to now, and very few friends."

"I know those are the hardships of your calling," said Mrs. Clinton gently. "But I can't let them weigh with me, can I? I must do the best I can for my children."

"Well, I think a woman of my age can do better for them than a younger one with less

experience," said the poor lady. "I *do* hope you won't let my age stand in the way, Mrs. Clinton. I haven't taken a day off, as some women do. I am no older than I say."

"If I hadn't been ready to take a woman of your age, other things being equal, I shouldn't have asked you to come and see me," said Mrs. Clinton. "But I cannot decide anything until I have seen every one I have written to."

"Ah well!" she said, with a sigh. "I know you won't choose me, or you would have told me more about the children, and what you wanted. I suppose I must go on with the weary round until I drop."

"It is very depressing, poor thing!" said Mrs. Clinton when she had gone. "But I can't possibly engage a governess out of motives of pity."

"She would be all right for younger children," said Lady Birkett. "It is hard that she should begin to find it difficult to get work at that age."

Miss Gertrude Wilson, twenty-nine, was brisk and business-like. She would have made an excellent commercial traveller, taking it cheerfully for granted when she entered a shop that she was going to get an order, and not leaving it until she had got one. It was she who asked the questions, not in the manner of Miss Player, obsessed by her own personality and experiences, but rather like a doctor, anxious thoroughly to diagnose a case so that he might do the best he could for his patient.

"Now I should like to know, first of all," she said, "what the characters of your girls are like, Mrs. Clinton. Then one can form some idea as to how to treat them."

"They are physically active," said Mrs. Clinton; "mentally too, especially Nancy, who has developed greatly within the last year. She is a clever child, and is beginning to take a great interest in books, and I think one might say in everything she finds inside them."

"Ah, a student!" said Miss Wilson. "One ought not to let her overdo that at her age, although one must take pains to encourage her in anything she wants to take up, and try and concentrate her upon it. I don't believe much in desultory reading. I should feel inclined to curb that. But that is not quite what I want to know. I can deal with all that when I see the girls. It is their dispositions I want to get at. Are they bright as a general rule, or inclined to be subdued?"

"Not at all inclined to be subdued," said Lady Birkett, with a laugh.

"Not spoilt, I hope?" asked Miss Wilson. "If they are, please say so. I can deal with them all right."

"I don't think they are spoilt," said Mrs. Clinton. "They are both affectionate, and easily managed by any one they love. They are apt to be mischievous, perhaps, although they are growing out of that now. They are rather overfond of making fun of people, but I think no one would call them ill-natured."

"Well, that is a very satisfactory report on the whole," said Miss Wilson. "I expect I shall get fond of them. I generally do get fond of my pupils, and they of me. May I ask what other members of your family there are, Mrs. Clinton—brothers or sisters, older or younger?"

"Joan and Nancy are the only ones regularly at home," replied Mrs. Clinton.

"Oh! No brothers at school coming home for the holidays?"

"No," said Mrs. Clinton.

"It is apt to make things difficult sometimes. Girls get out of hand. Are there older brothers, may I ask?"

"Yes, but you would see little of them, Miss Wilson. You need not take them into account."

By the look of Miss Wilson's face, it might have been gathered that she would have preferred to take them into account, at any rate to the extent of hearing a little more about them. But her momentary dejection disappeared. She had to keep her control of the situation. "And now as to hours," she said. "My plan would be to work the *whole* of the morning, with perhaps a quarter of an hour off for a glass of milk and a rock cake or something of that sort—say from nine o'clock to lunch time; exercise and games in the afternoon, till four. Then three hours' work, with tea in between, and I should expect the girls to do an hour or so's preparation later in the evening. They do not dine with you, of course."

"They come down to dessert," said Mrs. Clinton.

"That would be about eight o'clock, I suppose. We can just fit in the other hour before they go to bed. I should like them to go to bed not later than half-past nine, and——"

"I like them to go to bed at nine," Mrs. Clinton managed to break in. "And they would not do any work after they have come downstairs; there would not be time."

"Oh, well, we can settle all that later," Miss Wilson handsomely conceded. "I shall do my very best to get them on, Mrs. Clinton. Wednesdays and Saturdays I suppose we shall have half-holidays, or do you prefer a whole holiday on Saturday? Perhaps we had better settle that later too; it is all one to me. I shall do my best to fit in with the ways of the house. Shall you wish me to take my meals downstairs?"

"Breakfast and luncheon, yes," said Mrs. Clinton. "You would dine in the schoolroom."

Miss Wilson's face again fell. But she said, "That will suit me very well. I shall have time for my own reading when the children have gone to bed. When shall you wish me to come?"

"If I engage you, about the tenth. Now I should like to ask you a few questions, if you are ready to answer them."

The cross-examination Miss Wilson underwent as to her scholastic attainments and previous experience, at the hands of both ladies, was somewhat searching, and she came through it admirably. She was, in fact, the ideal governess, as far as could be seen. And yet, neither of them liked her, and they would have been pleased rather than regretful to find some flaw which would give them an excuse to reject her. "Well," said Mrs. Clinton at last, "I have others to see, but I will take up your references and write to you in a few days. You have given me all the addresses, I suppose?" She took up Miss Wilson's letter, which was shorter than the rest, confining itself to one sheet of note-paper.

"Yes, you will find them there," said Miss Wilson, rising a little hurriedly. "Then I shall hope to hear from you, and I will say good-morning, Mrs. Clinton."

Mrs. Clinton ignored her outstretched hand. "I will just pencil the dates at which you were with these three families," she said. "Mrs. Waterhouse was the first."

"Oh, I am very bad at dates," said Miss Wilson. "But they are all in order. You will have no difficulty."

Mrs. Clinton looked at her in mild surprise. "Surely you remember the number of years you were with each family," she said.

"Oh, I dare say I can remember that," she said, with a rather nervous laugh. "I was with Mrs. Waterhouse about three years, Mrs. Simkinson one and a half, I think it was."

"That is all I wanted to know," said Mrs. Clinton, but Lady Birkett asked, "Are those three all the posts you have filled?"

Miss Wilson, who was still standing, drew herself up stiffly. "I was with some other people for about a year," she said. "But they were intensely disagreeable people, and I should be very sorry to have to rely on a testimonial from them. They behaved atrociously to me."

"In what way?" asked Mrs. Clinton.

"I prefer not to say," said Miss Wilson firmly. "I have no wish to talk about those people at all. I only wish to forget them. If you will take up the references I have given you I think you will know everything about me that you have a right to ask, and you will find it thoroughly satisfactory; and anything else I shall be pleased to tell you."

"I think, then, I must ask why you left these people. Were they the last you were with?"

"Yes," said Miss Wilson, "they were; and the whole subject is so painful to me that I must refuse to go into it."

"You will not give me the name, so that I can at least hear their side of the story?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Clinton," replied Miss Wilson indignantly. "If those are the only conditions on which I may accept your offer, then I must refuse it altogether."

"I haven't made you an offer yet," said Mrs. Clinton, "and of course, under the circumstances, I cannot do so. So I will wish you good-morning."

Miss Wilson seemed about to say something more, but changed her mind and left the room with her head in the air.

The two ladies looked at one another. "What on earth can it have been?" asked Mrs. Clinton.

"Carrying on," replied Lady Birkett, with a laugh. "I can see it now. She's the sort that carries on. The details we must leave to the imagination, but we're well rid of her."

CHAPTER XIX

MRS. CLINTON IN JERMYN STREET

It was about seven o'clock in the evening. Mrs. Clinton stood for a moment on the pavement, on which the light of a street lamp shone and was reflected from the wet stone, and paid her cabman. Then she turned to the tall dull house and rang the bell. In this house, in one of the narrow streets just off St. James's, Dick had had rooms for many years, but his mother had not been able to correct the cabman when he had first stopped at a wrong number. She had time to reflect on this fact before the door was opened to her. Captain Clinton was not in, said the man, but he generally came in to dress not later than half-past seven; and she said she would go to his room and wait.

The hall was narrow and dimly lighted. On a table under a tiny gas-jet were a dozen or so of bedroom candlesticks, and hanging on the wall a rack for letters and telegrams. The stairs were darkly druggeted. The man opened a door on the first floor, turned on the light and retired, and she found herself in a furnished apartment such as is occupied by men of fashion in London. There was nothing to mark it off from superior furnished apartments anywhere. The furniture was of the solid Victorian type, the paper on the walls ugly, the carpet of a nondescript colour. There was a gilt clock on the mantelpiece and two coloured glass vases. The pictures had no value or beauty. On a marble-topped sideboard were a collection of gloves, caps, and hats, the silk ones beautifully ironed and brushed, and on the sofa were two or three carefully folded overcoats. These were all that spoke of Dick's occupancy of the rooms, on which otherwise he had made no sort of personal impress in a tenancy ranging over twelve years. There were no books, and not even a photograph belonging to him. Yet he paid the rent of a good house for this room and a bedroom behind the grained and varnished folding-doors, and was quite content with them. There was no bathroom in the house, and he had to go out for all his meals except breakfast; but he was valeted as well as if he had been at home.

Mrs. Clinton sat down in an easy-chair before the fire and looked around her once, her gaze resting for a minute on the closed doors between the two rooms. She might have wished to see what sort of bedroom Dick occupied, but she did not do so. She sat still and waited for half an hour, and then Dick came in. She heard him humming an air as he ran upstairs, but when he entered the room and saw her, half risen from her chair to receive him, he stopped short in utter surprise. "Why, mother!" he exclaimed, and for a moment his face was not welcoming. Then he came forward and kissed her. "Whatever wind blows you here?" he asked lightly.

"I am staying with Eleanor Birkett," she said. "I have come up to engage a governess for the children."

"Time to break them in, eh?" he said. "How are the young rascals? Still raking in coins for their camera?"

She allowed herself a faint smile. "They are very well," she said.

"Well, shall we go and have a little dinner somewhere together, or are you dining in Queen's Gate?"

"I said I might not be back to dinner," she said. "I didn't know whether you would be engaged or not."

"No, I was going to dine at the club. That's capital. I'll just go and shift, if you don't mind waiting, and in the meantime you consider what Epicurean haunt you would like to go to." He went into his bedroom, giving her no time to say anything further if she had wished to, and left her to sit by the fire again and wait for him.

He came out again in a quarter of an hour, during which time she had heard splashings and movements, but no further humming of airs. "Verrey's, I think," he said. "You'll want to go somewhere quiet, eh?"

"Dick," she said, "I should like to have a little talk with you before we go out."

He was already putting on his scarf. "Let's dine first, mother," he said. "It's just upon eight, and I'm hungry. We can come back here afterwards, if you like."

Perhaps it was better that he should dine first, especially if he was hungry. "Very well," she said, and rose to go with him.

Driving through the streets, sitting over their dinner for an hour, and driving back again, nothing was said between them of what was certainly occupying Mrs. Clinton's mind, and must have been in Dick's. It was difficult for her to talk; they had so little in common besides the externals of home life, and at every turn in the conversation something came up that must not be said if there was to be no mention yet of the only thing that mattered at Kencote. But Dick seemed determined that there should be no mention of it, and by and by they got on to the subject of the twins and their new governess, and then the conversation was easier. She told him about the ladies she had interviewed, and he laughed at her descriptions of them. "Capital, mother!" he said. "You ought to write it all down." He was pleased with her. She was entertaining him, where he had thought she would be a drag on his well-meant efforts to entertain her. And

because he was very well disposed towards her, it was gratifying to be able to feel that they were getting on happily together. His manner became warmer as the dinner proceeded, reflecting his feelings, which also became warmer. They had some quite sensible conversation about the twins and their education. Dick thought that the governess who had taught in the High School—Miss Phipp—was the right one. "They want discipline," he said. "That's what's missing in girls' education, especially when they are taught at home. It won't do those young women any harm to be made to grind at it. I'm for the school-marm, mother."

As they waited for a minute for a cab to be called up to take them back to Jermyn Street, Dick said, looking at her appreciatively, "What a pretty gown that is, mother! I've never seen it before." She flushed with pleasure, but said nothing. He handed her into the cab, and took his seat beside her. "We must have another little evening together before—— When are you going back, by the by?"

"To-morrow," she said.

"What a pity! Can't you stay till the next day, and come and do a play? I've got to-morrow night free."

But she said she must go back, and he did not press her further.

When they reached Dick's rooms and got out of the cab he told the man to wait and then turned to the door with his latch-key in his hand. "Please send him away," said Mrs. Clinton. "I came on purpose to have a talk with you, Dick."

"You needn't hurry away, mother," he said. "But you will want a cab by and by to go home in."

"I shan't feel comfortable while the minutes are ticking away," she said. "You can get me another one presently."

Dick laughed at her, but he paid the cabman, and they went up to his room together.

"Now, then, little mother," he said, as he took off his overcoat and scarf, "let's have it out. I'll mix myself a little liquid refreshment, and if you don't mind my smoking a cigar, I shall be in a mood to give you my whole attention."

Now that the time had come to speak she was nervous, and did not know how to begin. Dick, apparently thoroughly at his ease, good-humoured with her, but not prepared, it seemed, to take her very seriously, lit another cigar, poured himself out whisky and undid the wire of a soda-water bottle before she spoke, and as she was beginning he spoke himself. "I'm going to be married next month," he said; "will you come to my wedding?" As he spoke the cord of the soda-water bottle flew out with a pop, and he said, "Steady now, steady!"

There was a pause, filled only with the sound of the water gurgling into the glass. Then Mrs. Clinton spoke. "Oh, Dick!" she said, "why do you treat me like this?"

He threw a glance at her, half furtive. He had never heard her speak in that tone. She was looking at him with hurt eyes. "I am your mother," she said. "Do you think I have no feeling for my children? Have I been such a bad mother to you that it is right to put me aside as if I were of no account when a crisis comes in your life?"

He walked to the chair on the opposite side of the fire to hers, his glass in his hand, and sat down. There was a frown on his face. Like his father, he hated a scene, unless it was one of his own making, and especially he hated a scene with a woman. But it was true that he had treated his mother as if she were of no account. In the presence of the pain which her face and her voice had shown, he felt a sense of shame at the easy mastery he had displayed towards her during the evening, putting her wishes and her feelings aside, thinking only that it was rather tiresome of her to have intruded herself into his plans, and that her intrusion must be repelled with as little disturbance as possible.

She spoke again before he could reply to her. "You are always very charming to me, Dick—on the surface. You treat me with the greatest possible politeness, always, as you have done this evening. I know that many young men do not behave with such courtesy towards their mother, especially those who do not live in the same world as they do. But that charming behaviour is a very poor return for what a mother does for her children when they are wholly dependent on her. You used to come to me with all your troubles when you were a little boy, Dick. Am I so changed that you must shut me out of your life altogether, now?"

Conflicting emotions caused him intense discomfort. "No, mother, no," he said. "But——"

She took him up. "But you don't want me any longer," she said, "and you haven't enough kindness in you to think that I may want you."

Underneath her smooth-flowing speech there was bitterness, almost cruelty; certainly cruelty, if deliberately to pierce self-satisfaction is cruel. For if there were any qualities in Dick against which he might have thought that no accusation could lie, they were his attitude towards women and the essential kindness of his heart. But she had shown him that external courtesy

towards her had only hidden a deep discourtesy, and his kindness was base metal, not kindness at all.

But she had aroused, if not resentment, opposition. Her words had stung. If she wanted anything from him, that was not the way to get it. "Oh, come now, mother," he said, with some impatience. "I——"

But she would not let him go on until she had said all that she had to say. "If you don't care for me, Dick, if you have lost all the love you had for me when you were a child, then I know it is of no use saying these things. Words can't bring back love, nor reproaches. And after all, it wasn't about myself that I came here to speak to you. Your indifference has caused me pain, but I should not have taxed you with it now; I should have kept silence as I have done for many years, if it had not been that my love for you has been there ready for you if you had ever wanted it, and I thought you might want it now. But I can do nothing to help you if you won't let me a little way into your heart. I must just stand aside and see the breach between you and your father widen, when it might be healed, and you could restore him to happiness as well as take your happiness yourself."

Dick's face became harder as she mentioned his father, who had not been mentioned between them during the evening. "What can you do with him?" he asked, with a shade of scorn in his voice. "He is utterly unreasonable. He gets an idea into his head, and nothing will get it out."

Her voice was softer as she replied. "Dick dear, you know that isn't true."

He stirred uneasily in his chair. "It is true in this case," he said. "I suppose you mean that as a rule if you give him his head about anything you can pull him up and make him go the other way if you treat him carefully. I know you can, as a rule. This is an unfortunate exception to the rule."

"You have driven him into opposition by everything you have done," she said. "If you had been a little patient——"

"Oh, I was as patient as possible, at first," he interrupted her. "But he went beyond everything. The only thing was to go away until he had come to his senses. From what I have heard, through Walter, he is worse than ever. He is going to cut me off with a shilling. Well, let him. I can't imagine anything that will bother him more during the rest of his life than to have the prospect of Kencote divided up after his death. I can't imagine him thinking of such a thing. I'm not thinking of myself and what I'm going to get when I say it's a wicked thing to do. He's always looked upon the place as a sort of trust. It *is* a trust, and he is going to betray it for the sake of scoring off me. He must know that a threat of that sort would be the last thing to move me. It is spite, and spite that hurts him as much as it hurts me."

"Oh, Dick! Dick!" she said.

He gave another uneasy hitch to his body. Her gentle admonition showed him as no argument could have shown him from what source his speech had come.

"Of course I'm sore," he said, answering her implied reproach. "Any man would be sore in such a case. I believe you have seen Virginia. I ask you plainly, mother, if you are on his side—the sort of mud he throws at her—you know. Because if you are——"

"No, Dick dear," she said. "I have seen her, and I am not—not on his side, in that."

Her words, and the tone in which they were spoken, softened his anger. "You would welcome her as my wife?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I would," she said. "And I will, Dick, when this trouble is over. If she will love me I will love her. Yes, I have seen her, twice."

"Thank you very much, mother," he said quietly, after a short pause.

"Dick," she began again, "you know your father. You know how unhappy it must make him to be parted from you. You are bearing very hardly on him."

"And he on me, mother," said Dick. "What do you want me to do? Give up Virginia? You haven't come here to ask me to do that?"

"No, not that, Dick."

"Or to wait for a year? That's Walter's scheme—at least, I believe it's Herbert Birkett's. Very kind of him to take a hand in the discussion. But I'm not going to wait a year. I'm not going to wait any time. Why should I? If I make concessions of that sort I'm giving away my case, I'm admitting that there's some sense in the objections made—some reason in them. There's none. I won't submit Virginia to the indignity. I'm sorry now I ever got her down to Meadshire. I did that because I knew what—what his prejudices would be, and I thought he should have a chance of getting over them."

"Then you did think, at first, that there was something to be said for his prejudices."

"Er—yes—to the extent that if I had put it baldly that I was going to marry a widow, an American, who had been for a time on the stage—years ago—although I confess I didn't think that would be known—there might be trouble. I thought then, and I think now, that if he had given her a fair chance—if he had got to know her, he *couldn't* possibly take the line he has. There isn't a soul down there—I've heard all about it—who isn't at her feet. It makes me furious—I hardly let myself think about it—that he should behave as he does. No, mother, it has gone too far. There is nothing I can do now, after all that has happened, that wouldn't be an admission of weakness."

She did not speak immediately. "Have you made up your mind," she asked, "to cut yourself off from all of us—never to come to Kencote again until your father dies—never to see him again?"

"When I am married," he said, rather sullenly, "he will come round—sooner or later."

"Not to make the first advance, Dick. If you marry now, without his consent, definitely against his wishes, he will make the alteration as to the succession that he has threatened. That will be between you. He will be very unhappy—for the rest of his life—but he will have taken a step that will make it ten times more difficult for you to come together than it is now, and——"

"As far as the alteration in his will goes," Dick broke in on her, "I have thought all that over. As I say, it's a step he has no right to take under the circumstances, but if it is to come, if I am to come into the place—or what's left of it—with my wings clipped for money, then I say I'm ready to face it, and I don't mind as much as I thought I should. Perhaps I've thought too much about money—having everything cut and dried, and nothing to do for it. It was that that made me make the mistake of getting Virginia to go down to Blaythorn. I was afraid of what might happen—what he might do. It was rather mean, in a way. I don't care what he does. At least, I care, but it isn't a thing one ought to think too much about. Other fellows work to give their wives a home. I'm going to do that, and I like the idea of it."

"I think that is a good thing to do," she said rather slowly. "But—well, you mustn't mind my speaking, plainly, Dick—I think, too, that in your case you may make too much of it. I mean that your mind is probably full of it now, and it is a great relief to you that you have found a way out of what might have been a serious difficulty, and that you are not dependent on your father in your marriage. But there is Kencote to be thought of. You are the eldest son, and your natural place in the world is there. At present, with your new happiness coming to you, you are able to detach your mind from it. But when the novelty of your new life has worn off——"

"Oh, mother, I am not a child," he interrupted her. "I know there is Kencote to be thought of, but not for many years yet—at least, I hope so. And if I am to be partially disinherited, you know"—he looked at her with a smile—"I think I had better detach my mind from it as much as possible, don't you?"

Again she was silent for a time, and then she said, "Do you remember when you were a little boy, Dick, and we were together in the garden one summer evening, and I was telling you about the Clintons, who had lived at Kencote for so many hundreds of years, and you asked me why some people lived in beautiful places like that and others were poor and had no nice homes? And your father had come out to join us—he was a young man then—and he answered your question, and told you that things were arranged like that, and some day Kencote would be yours, and you must learn to love every acre of it, and know all the people who lived about you and do the best you could for them when you were grown up and were the master of Kencote."

"Yes, I remember quite well," said Dick. "It was the first lesson I had in the duties of a landowner."

"We were very happy then," she said. "We used to talk over things together, and father took a pride in you, and did all he could to make your childhood happy and make you take a pride in Kencote."

"Yes, he did," said Dick. "He gave me a very good time as a boy. And so did you, mother. I remember our talks in the garden and in the old schoolroom, and going to church with you, and about the village. I shall never forget those days."

"You grew up at Kencote," she said. "I know you have always loved it, and have come home to us whenever you could. Dick, you can't give it up, and give us up, your parents who both love you. You will make yourself unhappy, as well as us."

He was thoughtful and uneasy. "Of course, it's a blow," he said. "I do love the place."

"And us too, Dick, don't you—a little?"

"Oh, mother!" he said. "You have always been very good to me. Perhaps I've been rather a brute to you—taking things for granted, and not showing that I remembered. I do remember, you know. I had a good time as a child, and I owe a lot to you."

"And to father too," she said. "Think of all he did for you and how proud he has always been of you. He has made a mistake now—I think he has, and I tell you so—but, Dick, you are not going to punish him—and me and yourself—by destroying, for always, everything that keeps us united as a family?"

Again he moved uneasily. "Well, what on earth am I to do?" he asked. "I've told you what I feel about it all."

"Well, don't you feel exactly as your father does? Aren't you acting just as you blame him for acting? Don't you see how like you are to him in many ways?"

"The poor old governor!" said Dick. "I'm sorry for him in a way. But I hope I don't act with quite such disregard for common sense as he does."

"You act from pique. He thinks you are in the wrong, and won't give way, although he would like to. And you think he is in the wrong and you won't move towards him. There's something better even than common sense, Dick, which he shows and you don't. It is love."

"I don't think you can reasonably say he has shown me much of that lately, mother," said Dick.

"You keep away from him," she said. "If you were to come home you would see how he has been longing for you, and you would be sorry for him. Even if people wrong us, if they love us and we see it, it is not difficult to forgive them. If you would come home I think all your anger would disappear, however much you may think you are justified in it. I have never seen your father so unhappy and so troubled. For his sake, Dick, for the sake of all that he has done for you, come home to us. That was what I came here to ask of you."

He was silent for some time, struggling with himself. "I'll come," he said shortly, "but you must tell him, mother, that I am going to be married soon. I can't come to enter into that question again with him. It is settled."

"Very well," she said quietly, and there was silence between them for a time.

"And now tell me of your plans, Dick," she said presently in a lighter tone. "You must remember that I have heard nothing, and I want to hear everything."

"Oh, I'm going up to Yorkshire next week to get the house ready. Virginia is coming with me and we are going to stay with Spence. It is a nice old stone house with a big garden and a view of the moors, and the sea beyond. Look here, mother, can't you do anything? You have brought *me* round, you know. I'm going to do what you want, against my own inclinations. I shan't be very comfortable at Kencote. Can't you go and see Virginia? It's rather hard luck for her, poor girl, to be treated as if she were a pariah by all my people. Something's owing to her, and a good deal, I think."

"I should like very much to know her," she said. "Whether I can go definitely against your father's wishes, whether I should do any good by doing so, is a difficult question to decide."

"Well, I suppose I can see that," he said. "You have got to live with him. But if we are to make it up at all, he and I, which I own I haven't much hope of, there'll have to be give and take on both sides. You ought not to get me down to Kencote and then take his part against me."

"We must wait a little," she said. "What I can do I will do. Oh, Dick dear, I am so glad you are going to be happy. I have thought about you such a lot."

He came over to her and kissed her. "You're a good little mother," he said. "I wish I'd carried you off bodily to see Virginia when she first went down there. You would have got on well together."

"Oh, and we shall," she said, "as soon as these unhappy difficulties are over. Now I shall go back home with a quiet mind. I'm sure, Dick, if you are patient with your father, all the difficulties will melt away. It rests with you, dear boy, and I'm sure you will act wisely. Now I must be going back, if you will send for a cab for me."

"I'll take you back," said Dick. "I want to tell you all about everything, mother."

CHAPTER XX

AUNT LAURA INTERVENES

For an old lady who did not enjoy the best of health, who had lived all her life in an atmosphere of congenial companionship and now lived alone, who had no place of importance to fill in the world, and small occupation except what she made for herself, Aunt Laura passed her days in unusual contentment.

The life of an old maid blessed with a sufficiency of this world's goods is a cheerful if rather pathetic object of contemplation. You would think they missed so much, and they seem to miss so little. There is nothing that seems much worth their doing, unless they are particularly gifted,

and yet they are always busy. If you had paid a visit to Aunt Laura at any time of the day you would never have found her sitting with her hands in her lap, idle, unless it happened to be at those times, after a meal or, as she would say, between lights, when a short period of contemplation was as ordered a part of the day's duties as any more active occupation. After breakfast she would be busy with household duties, "ordering," or passing in review some or other of her possessions, one of her three servants in attendance, giving her whole mind to it, although the weakness of her ageing body made it incumbent on her now chiefly to superintend from her habitation in front of the parlour fire. Sometimes she was induced to stay in bed until the morning was well advanced, but it was a great trial to her. "If the mistress is not about," she would say, "all the house goes to pieces. And although I have good and trustworthy servants, who have been with me a long time, things go wrong if they are left too much to themselves." So even when in bed, she would sit propped up by pillows with a dressing-jacket round her shrunken old shoulders, giving her orders for the meals of the day to the stout, friendly cook, who stood by her bedside with her head on one side and made suggestions, which were sometimes accepted and sometimes overruled, and after that important duty was over, go through the linen with Hannah, the parlour-maid, or arrange with Jane, the housemaid, what room should be "turned out," and when, or other matters of like moment.

Then she had her letters to write, quite a number of them, considering that she had always lived at Kencote and knew very few people outside it. When she was quite well, and the weather was quite fine, she would dress carefully and potter about her garden, giving minute directions to the gardener, who followed her about slowly, and took all she said in good part, although he went his own way afterwards. Or she would walk out into the village, leaning on Hannah's arm, sometimes go up to the great house, or to the Rectory, sometimes into the cottages of her friends amongst the villagers, who were always pleased to see her, for she was of a charitable disposition, gave what rare financial aid was required of her in a community where no one was poor, and, what was valued more, ready sympathy and interest in trials or pleasures.

After luncheon she had her nap and her needlework, or a book from the library at Bathgate—one a week sent over to her by post—to occupy her. Sometimes she played thin little pieces of music on the thin old piano. Tea was an event, requiring much manipulation of old silver teapots, one for the leaves and one for the brew, and when she had company much pressing of dainty, unsubstantial viands. After tea there were needlework and reading again until it was time for her supper-tray. She had given up dining; her luncheon was her dinner, and a fairly substantial one. She talked a good deal, in quite a ladylike way, about her food. Her state of health was gauged by whether she could "fancy" it or not. She always changed her gown in the afternoon, and wore a silken shawl instead of the Shetland one without which she was never seen in the morning. In the evening she spent some time over her devotions, and with Hannah's help made a long disrobing, beginning at a quarter to ten and ending about half-past. Then at last she lay buried in the down of her great cumbrous bed, her night-light in the basin, her glass of milk and her biscuits on the table by her side, all ready for those long dead hours during which she might, if she were in perfect health, sleep quietly, but of which she was more likely to spend some patiently waiting for the blissful state of unconsciousness which was so soon to close down on her for all eternity.

She had much to think of during those hours—scenes in the long-past years of her life when she had been young and active and had lived in her father's house with her sisters, or during the later but still far-off years when they had all lived together at the dower-house; of the quick passage of time which had brought age to them and robbed her of one after the other; of those she loved at the great house; of her nephew's early career, which seemed to her a most distinguished one; of his marriage; and of the coming of the dear babies, and of their growth and the things that had happened to them. Here was abundance of incident to provide food for a mind pasturing on memories—as much as if she had known the great world and taken part in its many activities, instead of passing her blameless days in a small, secluded sameness.

Sometimes, if sleep was very long in coming, she would say over to herself some of the poetry she had learnt by heart, or some of her favourite passages in the Bible. And sometimes she would pray. Her faith was simple enough. God was her Father, who knew best what was good for her, and had a sublime tenderness for her, and for all whom she loved. Soon she would be with Him, praising Him with voice and harp in Elysian fields and in endless happiness, joined to those who had gone before, who were waiting for her, and probably knew all that she was doing or thinking. Life, for as long as she was spared, was a precious gift, and she did not want to die; but she looked forward with no dread to dying when her time should come. She was quite convinced that death was only a passing over, and her experience of death-beds had taught her that nothing very terrible took place when the spirit parted from the body. She would cease to be, and she would join her sisters in heaven; and whatever pain or weakness should come to her before her departure she would have strength given to her to bear, as her sisters had borne it.

Since she had come to live alone in the little old house in the village Aunt Laura's wealth had considerably increased. It did, now, amount to wealth, for she lived on less than half her income, which at the time of her sister's death had amounted to something like two thousand pounds a year.

Her father had left her and her sisters six thousand pounds apiece, and there had been six of them when they had first moved down to the dower-house. He had committed this rather extraordinary piece of generosity because shortly before his death he had inherited intact the considerable fortune of his brother, who had been a merchant in the City of London, as his father

had been before him. Merchant Jack, of whom Aunt Laura had spoken to Susan Clinton, had inherited Kencote as a younger son, had passed on the estates and his own acquired store of money to his eldest son, Colonel Thomas, and his business to his younger son, John Clinton, who had lived and died a bachelor, having little use for the wealth he amassed, beyond that part of it which enabled him to live in solid comfort in his old house in Bloomsbury and lay down a cellar of fine wine, the remainder of which still shed a golden glow over the cobwebby bins at Kencote. The thirty-six thousand pounds with which Colonel Thomas portioned his daughters had still left the great bulk of this windfall to go with the estate, to go rather to the next heir, who was Edward, our Squire.

The Squire had succeeded at the age of nineteen to a large fortune, as well as to many thousands of acres of land, and was a much richer man than even his sons suspected. He cared little about money, or if he cared for it, it was not for the aggrandisement it might have brought him. He had an income far in excess of what was required to keep up his establishment and his property in the way he wanted to keep it up, and what was left over he had no further use for. He had simply allowed it to accumulate, investing the overplus of year after year in gilt-edged securities on the advice of his old-established firm of stockbrokers, whose forebears had also advised his, and not giving it a thought when it was once so disposed of. The bulk of his funded property came from the money which his great-uncle had bequeathed to his grandfather, and some of it was still invested in the securities which the shrewd old merchant had himself selected. It was this money out of which, after his widow and younger children had been handsomely provided for, Dick would inherit the sum necessary to enable him to live at Kencote as he himself had done—if Dick behaved as he should behave. Otherwise it would go—well, he had not yet made up his mind where it would go.

Now, if the jointure of the six maiden aunts had been chargeable on the estate, as it would have been but for the old merchant's bequest, only on a much lower scale, the Squire would no doubt have busied himself about it, would have known exactly what proportion of it was being spent and what saved, and might have had some suggestion to make as to the disposal of what should remain after the death of the last sister had caused it to revert to the estate. As it was, he hardly ever gave it a thought. He knew that his aunts were well off, but he did not know what sum had been left to them, although he could easily have informed himself of it if he had cared to. Nor did he know how Aunt Laura, in whose frail hands the whole of it had now come to lie, proposed to leave it. It would not be quite true to say that he had never given the matter a thought, but it would not be far from the truth. He had so much more than sufficed for his own needs that although he would be gratified if after Aunt Laura's death he found himself richer by several thousand pounds, the legacy would not actually do for him more than slightly increase his lightly borne business cares. It would go eventually to the children, and the amount of speculation he had ever expended on the subject was as to whether it would come first to him, or, by Aunt Laura's direct bequest, to them, as to which he did not care either the one way or the other. The possibility of its being left outside the family altogether never so much as crossed his mind, because he knew Aunt Laura quite well enough to know that, as to the bulk of it, there was no such possibility.

Happy Aunt Laura, to have been permitted to escape the siege which is not seldom laid against rich maiden aunts! And happy Clintons, to have escaped, both in youth and age, those complications which the lack of plentiful coin brings into the lives of so many of their fellow-creatures!

But perhaps they had not altogether escaped them. It was doubtful, as yet, whether the Squire, who was now thinking of using his riches as a weapon in a way in which he had never had to think of using them before, was the happier for having that weapon ready to his hand. Money was for the first time playing its part in Dick's life in a way the outcome of which was still to be seen. Humphrey, at least, had never had enough of it to do what he wished to do, and was becoming increasingly hungry for more. And Aunt Laura, lying sometimes for hours on a sleepless bed, was beginning to be a little worried about her responsibilities as the steward of a considerable fortune, concerning whose disposition she had to come to a decision before she could peaceably leave this world for a better one, in which money and the anxiety attendant on it would play no part.

She was surprisingly innocent about money, although amongst the six sisters she had been considered the financial genius, and from the first had kept all the accounts. "Dear Laura," Aunt Ellen had been used to say, "has a wonderful head for pounds, shillings, and pence. Her accounts are never out by so much as a farthing, and she would be an ideal wife for a poor man, such as a clergyman, with a fixed but limited income."

She remembered this as she lay, now, in the night, turning over in her mind this question of money, and remembered it with pride. She remembered how upon their father's death old Mr. Pauncey, the Bathgate solicitor, who was so old-established, and had had such a long connection with Kencote that he might be regarded almost as an equal, and only treated with the merest shade more of consideration than one of the county neighbours, had explained to them all in conclave exactly what their financial position was, and how the sum that had been left to each of them was invested. He had had a sheet of paper with him, from which, after taking snuff, he had read out a long list of securities, and figures, and percentages, and left them at the end of it mentally gasping for breath, and no wiser at all than they had been before.

Then it was she, the youngest of them all, who had summoned up courage to say, "I think, Mr. Pauncey, if you would tell us exactly what sum of money is brought in by all those—those things, we could make our arrangements accordingly."

She could see now, in the darkness, the admiring looks of her sisters bent upon her, and hear the ready acquiescence of Mr. Pauncey, as, with gold pencil-case in his hand, he made some rapid calculations, and gave her the figures required.

After that it was she who, with pencil in hand, secretary and treasurer to a most serious committee, had set down on paper exactly how the comfortable income they had had secured to them should be spent—so much for the housekeeping, so much for wages, so much for stables, garden, dress, charity, and so on—a delightfully interesting occupation, as she well remembered, although readjustments had had to be made later, and it required a good many hours a week with account-books and paper ruled in money columns to keep unflinchingly to the course laid down. "Laura is busy with accounts; she must not be disturbed. The amount of trouble she gives herself to keep all our affairs in perfect order you would hardly credit." She remembered as if it were yesterday sitting in the oak parlour on a warm September morning with the casement open and a scent of mignonette coming through it, and overhearing her eldest sister talking to the old Rector, so many years since in his grave, and the thrill of happiness that the words had brought to her, struggling with her task and with rows of recalcitrant figures which would not add up twice alike.

And it had been she who had been the medium of all arrangements with old Mr. Pauncey, who had been most attentive in coming over himself at frequent intervals to explain any little matter that wanted explanation, and had never changed an investment for them without explaining exactly why he thought it ought to be changed, and, what was perhaps more important still, giving her the exact alteration that would be made in the figures, so that she should have no further trouble with her accounts than was necessary.

After a bit it was young Mr. Pauncey who had attended to their affairs, and she remembered very well that on the occasion of his first visit her sister Ellen had considered it advisable to sit in the room while he disclosed the business upon which he had come over.

"He is a very well-behaved *young* man, my dear," Miss Clinton had said, "although perhaps not the equal of his father, who is one of nature's gentlemen. But in case he should presume——"

Young Mr. Pauncey never had presumed, and he looked after Aunt Laura's property to this day, and would continue to "attend on her" until her death, if he survived her, although he had long since devised all his other professional cases to his son and grandson. She relied greatly on young Mr. Pauncey's advice, and had long since forgiven him for the slight disturbance he had once made in objecting to carry out certain of their decisions. It had been necessary for Aunt Anne, upon whom it had always devolved to say the word that would put people in their places when that word had to be said, to end the discussion with a speech that shook a little in the middle: "Mr. Pauncey, we have asked you to come here to take our instructions. It will save time if you will kindly write them down at once."

How splendid dear Anne had been on that occasion—quite polite, but quite firm! And young Mr. Pauncey, it had afterwards been agreed, had behaved admirably too. With a courteous smile he had said, "Very well, ladies, I will say no more," and had then helped them most lucidly to put their decision into proper form, and had since admitted handsomely that their carefully considered plan had worked well, adding that he had felt himself obliged to criticise it, entirely in their own interest.

A trust had been formed with young Mr. Pauncey, in whom, as they assured him, they had complete confidence, as sole trustee. The six separate estates were pooled and the income from the whole capital could be drawn on by the cheque of any of the six beneficiaries. The disadvantage of this scheme, as young Mr. Pauncey had ventured to point out at the time, was that if any one of them quarrelled with the other five, or got married, it was in her power to cause them considerable inconvenience by appropriating more than her share of the income, or, if she wrote her cheques at the right moment, the whole of it. It was at this point that Aunt Anne had interposed with her famous speech, and young Mr. Pauncey had ceased to make objections, probably consoling himself with the reflection that, as trustee, he could put an end to the inconvenience at any time that it should arise.

But the sisters had never quarrelled and none of them had married, and young Mr. Pauncey at the age of seventy-five was obliged to admit to himself that the most highly irregular arrangement he had ever legalised had also turned out to have worked with the least possible amount of friction. No further adjustments had had to be made as one sister after the other had died; none of them had made a will or had needed to; and Aunt Laura, the last survivor, was now in automatic possession of the whole, as all the sisters had wished that the last survivor should be. "We are agreed," Aunt Ellen had said in conclave, "that the bulk of the money shall go back to dear Edward, or to his children if he marries and has any; let the last of us who is left alive carry out our joint wishes without being tied up by promises or papers. That to my mind is the ideal arrangement. Circumstances may arise which we cannot now foresee. Let the one of us who is spared longest have power to deal with them, under the kind advice of young Mr. Pauncey, if he also is spared so long, and not be hampered by what is called red tape."

And so the passing away of one sister after another had not been harassed by questions of property, and it was not until Aunt Ellen the eldest and Aunt Laura the youngest had been left alone together that any discussion at all had arisen as to the disposal of the money which they shared. They had talked of it together, and had called young Mr. Pauncey into advice.

Young Mr. Pauncey, now a little deaf and a little feeble in body, though not in brain, and as courteous and helpful as ever, had advised that the money should be equally divided amongst the Squire's younger children. "There are six of them," he had said very happily, "just as there were six of you ladies. Mr. Clinton would probably dispose of it in that way if you were to leave it to him, and I shall not be betraying confidence if I say that Captain Clinton is already very handsomely provided for."

So it had been agreed upon provisionally, but the question of making a will had been left in abeyance, and later on it had been thought that Cicely might possibly have rather more than the others, because Jim was not too well off, owing to those wicked death duties, and later still that Dick, perhaps, ought to have some, because they were not supposed to know what would be done for him, and they would not like him to feel himself left out in the cold; and by and by that it might be better, after all, to ask Edward to decide the matter himself. But nothing had been done. Aunt Ellen had died, and Aunt Laura had postponed coming to a decision at all for two years past, thinking over the matter occasionally, but never finding herself, as she expressed it, "guided."

Now she had begun to feel that she must come to a decision, and the guidance, in a dim sort of way, seemed to be making itself felt. She had never had any particular favourite amongst her nephew's children. Cicely would have been the favourite if she had not been a girl, for she had been much with her aunts before her marriage, and there had been more community of interest with her than with the rest. But it was impossible to put a girl Clinton before a boy Clinton, and her claim bulked no larger than those of Dick, Humphrey, Walter, or Frank. And hitherto, except in the case of Dick, there had seemed to be no reason for preferring one of the boys before the other.

But lately Aunt Laura had become considerably attached to Humphrey, whom, in the past, she had perhaps liked least of all the boys, although she would not have admitted as much to herself. He had been much away from Kencote, and had seemed so "grand" in his ways and ideas that she had been a little nervous of him on the rare occasions on which he had visited her. But lately, she thought, he had "softened." He must have felt, she told herself with a tremulous gratification, that she was the last of all his great-aunts left, that she would not be much longer with them, and that attention to her, although it could not bring him anything, would be deeply appreciated, as indeed it had been. He had been so very kind, cheering up her rather lonely days with constant visits, whenever he had been at home, making her those little presents which, because they showed real appreciation of what would give her pleasure, had meant so much to her, and latterly taking her into his confidence and telling her things about himself of a sort which no man, young or old, amongst her relatives, or indeed outside of them, had ever confided to her before.

It was this which had caused her such intense gratification. Throughout the whole of their lives she and her sisters had had to fight against the feeling that, although they were kindly treated, and even deferred to, by the members of their little world, they were of no real account. Slights, which had not been intended for slights, had sometimes distressed them, and they had had on occasions to assure each other that nothing could have been further from the intention of those who had wounded them than to do so. To ask their advice, to prove that they were not unimportant members of a family to which they had given a life-long allegiance—this was the straight way to their hearts, and it had seldom been taken. All the kindnesses that could be heaped on them would have been outweighed by one cry for succour or sympathy.

That cry had never come—perhaps there had been nothing in the even lives of their relations to bring it; but of all the talks she had ever had with any of her great-nieces and nephews Aunt Laura had most enjoyed those which she had lately had with Humphrey, for they had come nearest to it.

He had, indeed, shared a secret with her. He was in love, and nobody in the family knew it but she. And he was in love with that dear nice girl who had come once or twice to see her, had shown her more than friendliness, almost affection, and made for herself a warm little corner in a warm heart. Susan Clinton also had confided in her a little. At any rate she had permitted her to see that Humphrey's feelings for her were returned. And when she had bid her farewell she had kissed her and said, "I have loved these talks with you, Aunt Laura"—yes, she had called her that, although, of course, the relationship was a very distant one—"it is so nice to feel that one has a friend at Kencote."

But falling in love is one thing and getting married—the natural result of falling in love—is another; and Humphrey had confided to her that there were obstacles in the way of his getting married.

Of course, although Susan Clinton did not belong to the elder branch of the family, facts must be looked squarely in the face, and the daughter of an earl, even of an earl of no great wealth, had a right to expect something more elaborate in the setting up of married life than a girl of

lesser lineage. Humphrey very sensibly saw that. "I can't very well ask for her, you see, Aunt Laura," he had said, "unless I know that I can give her the sort of thing, more or less, that she has been accustomed to."

Aunt Laura had quite seen it, and he had put it still more clinchingly when he had said on another occasion, "You see, it wouldn't do for them to think she was taking a step downward in marrying me."

Good gracious, no! A Clinton of Kencote was good enough to marry anybody, short of royalty. Rich enough too—or ought to be—even a younger son, if the marriage was a desirable one, as this undoubtedly seemed to be. "I think your dear father would be pleased," she had said. "He would wish that all of you should marry in your own rank in life, and he would be well aware that that cannot be done, in these days when married life seems so much more expensive than it used to be, without an adequate income. I think, dear Humphrey, that I should tell him if I were you, and throw yourself on his generosity, which I have no reason whatever for thinking would fail you."

Yes, Humphrey had supposed that he would do that sooner or later; in fact, he would have to, because his profession was not one out of which a satisfactory income could be made, at any rate in its early stages. Of course, if the worst came to the worst he could give up his profession, and take to something else out of which money could be made.

Aunt Laura had resolutely combated this idea. His profession was a dignified and honourable one. She was sure that he would make his name at it and rise very high. It seemed unfair that the country should pay so badly for such important work, but it was an undoubted advantage in these radical days to have men of family serving their country, and she supposed that if diplomacy was a career out of which money could be made it would be thrown open to everybody. It was better as it was, and at any rate if his father had not been willing to provide for him he would not have put him where he was. She saw nothing for it but a frank opening up to him. He could not possibly intend that Humphrey should never marry. He was of the age to marry, and the marriage he proposed was satisfactory in every way.

Humphrey had again acquiesced, but lukewarmly, and had said no more at the time.

Later on the reason of his lukewarmness and air of depression had come out, not without pressure on Aunt Laura's part. "Well, I'll tell you how it is, Aunt Laura," he had said, "as you are so kind and have listened to everything I've told you. One likes unburdening one's self occasionally, as long as one knows it doesn't go any further."

Of course it would go no further, Aunt Laura had told him, and then came his story. He had been extravagant. He was in debt, rather heavily, and not for the first time. He blamed himself very much, especially now he wanted to make an alteration in his life altogether, and saw how important it was to keep strictly within one's income. His father had been good about it—over the other two crises—but she would see that when a thing like this had happened twice, with promises of amendment each time, which he must confess had not been kept, the third time there was likely to be a considerable disturbance. She knew what his father was. He would be much upset—naturally—he shouldn't blame him. He would most likely pay his debts and start him again, but he would not be likely to pass immediately from such an undertaking to the discussion of a large increase in Humphrey's allowance, such as would enable him comfortably to contemplate married life with a wife who had a right to expect as much as Susan. He thought his father would not be displeased with the marriage and not averse, eventually, to make it possible for him. If only these wretched debts had not been hanging round his neck like a millstone—if he were a free man—he would go to him at once. As it was—well, he was in a mess, and, frankly, he funked it.

Aunt Laura, listening to this rigmarole, and gathering from it only that the poor boy was in trouble, not of a disgraceful sort, but in the way that young men of good birth and necessarily expensive habits did get into trouble, felt a warm pleasure rise, increase, and spread itself in a glow all over her. She had been deemed worthy of this affectionate confidence, which in itself would have caused her joy. How much more so when she felt herself capable of putting an end to it! With a flush on her withered cheeks and a light in her old eyes she had said, "I am so sorry for you, dear Humphrey. Could you tell me—do you mind—how much money your debts amount to?"

"Oh!" Humphrey had said in an offhand manner, "I suppose about seven hundred pounds—no, more—nearer eight hundred. It's a lot, I know, considering that I was whitewashed a couple of years ago; but—oh, well, I won't make excuses. I've been very extravagant, and now I've got to pay for it."

Then Aunt Laura had offered to pay his debts for him, and he had at first refused, laughing at her, but expressing his surprise and deep gratitude at the same time, then, taking the offer a little more seriously, said that it was out of the question, because his father would be annoyed, and finally when she had told him that his father need not know, that it would be a little secret between them two, had accepted with the most heartfelt expressions of gratitude, which touched her, now, whenever she thought of them.

She had written him a cheque there and then—for eight hundred pounds—and he had joked

with her in his amusing way about her having such a large sum at her immediate disposal, asking if she was quite sure that the cheque would be honoured, because it would never do for a Clinton to run any risks of that sort. He had seemed, she remembered, really surprised that she *should* be able to draw a cheque for so large a sum, without ever, as he had expressed it, turning a hair, and she had explained that for the past two years she had not spent half her income, and that a large balance was lying in the bank to her credit, which young Mr. Pauncey had lately written to her about investing. "I have not been quite well enough to want to talk business with him for some time," she had said, "kind and considerate as he is, and I think it must have been ordained that I should not do so, for when I did say that I should be able to see him on such a morning—oh, I suppose now a fortnight ago, or perhaps three weeks—he was not well himself and went away afterwards, and so it got put off. I shall tell him now there will not be so much to invest as he had thought, knowing as he does about what my expenditure is, and I need not say, dear Humphrey, how glad I am that it is so, for I do not want a larger income, and I *do* want to help those who are dear to me."

So that little episode was over and had been most agreeable to all parties concerned. Humphrey had not yet told his father about his matrimonial projects, because, as he had explained to her, his debts would take a week or two to settle up, and he did not want to make a move until he was quite clear. But he had come down to Kencote again in the meantime, and had amused and pleased her by his accounts of his debt-paying experiences, and of how he had told Susan of what she had done, and of how grateful Susan was to her—for they had fixed it up between them now. "Whatever the governor does for us," Humphrey had said, "we shall be able to get along somehow. *You* have made that possible, Aunt Laura. We may have to be very economical, but with a clear run ahead of us we don't mind that. She is just as keen now to keep out of debt as I am."

And the end of their talks so far had been on a note of still further possibility. "I should like to know," Aunt Laura had said, "exactly what your dear father is prepared to do for you, Humphrey, when you tell him. When I know, I should like a little talk with him. For I may be able to help matters."

CHAPTER XXI

AN ENGAGEMENT

Mrs. Clinton reached Kencote in the dusk of the January afternoon and found the twins on the platform awaiting her. With the station staff and the other passengers in the train as audience, they gave her an all-embracing and, indeed, somewhat vociferous welcome, and led her to the carriage, one on each side of her, with little squeezings of the arms and continued expressions of joy.

"We shan't let you out of our sight again, mother," said Joan as they drove off. "It has been perfectly awful without you. We haven't known what to do at all."

"I hope you haven't been getting into mischief," said Mrs. Clinton, with an indulgent smile.

"We have been as good as gold," said Nancy. "You would hardly have recognised us. Haven't you noticed our gardenias? Humphrey gave them to us. He said they were the white flowers of a blameless life."

"Is Humphrey still at home?" Mrs. Clinton asked.

"Yes," said Joan; "and something has happened, mother; we don't quite know what, but we think he has got engaged."

"Engaged!" exclaimed their mother.

"Yes. Of course you know who it is."

Mrs. Clinton thought for a moment. "What has put the idea into your heads?" she asked.

"Father is very pleased with him," explained Joan. "And that is the only thing we can think of to account for it. But we have seen it coming for a long time."

"Well, for about a fortnight," corrected Nancy. "It's Susan Clinton, of course. Do you like her, mother?"

Mrs. Clinton did not reply to this question, and Joan said, "We are prepared to give her a sisterly welcome."

"If she treats us well we'll treat her well," said Nancy. "And we like the idea of Mr. Humphrey and Lady Susan Clinton. It's so Morning Posty."

"I think you are running ahead a little fast," said their mother. "Don't you want to hear about your new governess?"

"Oh yes! What is she like?" exclaimed the twins in one breath.

"She is very learned, and rather severe," said Mrs. Clinton. "You will have to work very hard with her."

"We are quite ready to do that," said Nancy. "Is she ornamental?"

"Not at all," replied Mrs. Clinton. "And her name is Miss Phipp. She is coming in ten days, so you must make the best of your holidays until then."

Nancy sighed. "Our happy childhood is over," she said. "No more will the house ring with our careless laughter. In ten days' time we shall become fevered students."

"I hope it won't be quite so bad as that," said Mrs. Clinton.

The Squire was waiting at the door. He had never before kissed his wife before the servants, but he did so now. If they liked to go away and talk about it they might. "We'll have no more of this gadding about," he said jovially. "We want you at home, don't we, children?"

"Rather," said the twins, renewing their embraces; and Mrs. Clinton felt that there was nothing lacking in the warmth of her welcome.

They went into the morning-room where the tea-table was already set and the kettle boiling over its spirit-lamp. "I told 'em to bring up tea," said the Squire; "I want a word with you. Now run along, children. You can talk to your mother afterwards."

The twins obediently retired. "He's full of it," said Joan. "What a childish pleasure he takes in a piece of news!"

"If it is as we believe," said Nancy, "we mustn't call her Silky Susan any more."

"She's all right, really," said Joan, "if you get her away from her awful old mother."

The Squire, left alone with his wife, took up his favourite attitude in front of the fire. "I've got a piece of news for you, Nina," he said. "What would you think of another marriage in the family?"

Mrs. Clinton, busy with her tea-making, looked up at him.

"I'm pleased about it," said the Squire, who, warming himself in the Englishman's citadel, and keeping away the fire from his wife, who was cold after her journey, looked thoroughly pleased. "She's a nice girl, although I can't say I took much to her mother, and don't want to see more of her than is necessary. It's Humphrey, Nina—Humphrey and Susan Clinton. It seems they've taken to each other, and if I can make it all right for them, they want to get married. I'm quite ready to do my part. I'm quite glad that Humphrey wants to settle down at last. And if things are going wrong in other quarters, as unfortunately they seem to be, this will make up for it a little. They can have the dower-house, and if an heir to Kencote comes from this marriage—well, it will be a very satisfactory arrangement."

This was going ahead with a vengeance. Mrs. Clinton thought of Dick. Was he, then, to be finally shouldered out of his place, and Humphrey installed in it, securely, instead? "Would he give up his profession?" she asked.

"We haven't talked about it yet," said the Squire. "But that is my idea. I want somebody here to help me, and if Dick has decided to cut the cable, then we had better face facts and arrange matters accordingly."

His face changed as he mentioned his eldest son. That wound still rankled, but it was plain that the salve was already working. "I have done my best," he said, "and it has all been no good. Now what we have to do is to forget all about it and do what we can in other directions. Walter's a good boy, although a bit headstrong and obstinate. Still, he's made his own life and is happy in it, and I will say for him that he's never given me any serious trouble. I've had that with Humphrey. He has been extremely tiresome about money matters, and I own that I thought there was another storm of that sort blowing up, and haven't been quite so friendly towards the boy as I might have been. I'm sorry for it now, and I'll make up for it; for he tells me he doesn't owe a single penny."

Mrs. Clinton looked up in surprise. "Did he tell you that definitely?" she asked.

"Why, don't you believe him?' asked the Squire rather sharply.

"I should believe him if he said it plainly," she replied.

"Well, he did say it plainly. 'I don't owe anybody a penny,' he said, 'although I can't say I have much of a balance in the bank.' I never supposed he would have that. If the boys keep out of debt

on what I allow them, that's all I ask. But I'll own it surprised me, as it seems to have surprised you, that he *has* kept out of debt since the last time, and I put it to him again. 'If there's anything to settle up,' I said, 'you had better let me know now. You don't want to begin married life with anything hanging over you!' And he said again, 'There's nothing at all. I don't owe anybody a penny.' So there it is, Nina. The boy's a good boy at heart, and I'm pleased with him. And as for the girl, I think she'll turn out well. Get her away from all that nonsense she has been brought up to, and settle her down here, in a pretty place like the dower-house, with a good income to keep things going as they ought to be kept going—I'll do that for them—and I believe she'll turn out trumps, and I hope we shan't be wanting a grandson long. That's what pleases me, Nina"—his face beamed as he said it. "I'm an active man, but I'm getting on a bit now, and I should like to see my grandson growing up before I have to go and leave it all. That's been at the bottom of half I've felt about this wretched affair of Dick's; and it made me more annoyed than perhaps I need have been about Walter settling down in a place like Melbury Park. To see a boy growing up at Kencote, as I grew up, and taking to it from the time he's a baby—that'll be a great thing, Nina, eh?"

He was exalted by his rosy dream. He saw himself leading a tiny child by the hand, very tender with his littleness, showing him this and that, hearing his prattle about familiar things, putting him later on a pony, and later still teaching him to shoot, watching him grow, sending him off to school, perhaps as an old man hearing of his doings at the University or in the service, —a fine, tall, straight young Clinton, fortunate inheritor of generations of good things, and made worthy of them, largely through his own guidance. So he had thought about Dick, years before, sitting before the fire, or pacing his room downstairs, while his wife and his little son, the centre of all his hopes, lay sleeping above, or out of doors as he had followed his favourite pursuits, and found new zest in them. But in those days he had been young, and his own life stretched immeasurably before him, with much to do and many things to be enjoyed. His own life was still strong in him, to hold and enjoy, but what should come after it was far more important now than it had been then, and he desired much more ardently to see its beginnings. And Dick had foiled his hopes. This was to be a new start, out of which better things should come. He wanted it keenly, and because he had had most things that he wanted in life, it seemed natural that it should be coming to him, and coming from a quarter whose signs he had not previously examined. "Nina," he said again, "I want to see my grandson grow up at Kencote."

She paused a moment before she said quietly, "As you saw Dick grow up years ago."

His sunny vision was clouded. He frowned. "We must make up our minds to do without Dick," he said; "he won't come here. He has practically thrown us off."

"No," she said. "I have seen him, and he is coming here on Friday."

He stared at her, the frown still on his face. He was moved by her news, but not altogether to pleasure. His mind was running on new desires, and it was an effort to adjust it to old ones.

"You've seen him?" he said. "What did you say to him? You didn't make him think that I was going to give way?"

"No. He does not expect that, or, I think, hope for it now."

"Is *he* going to give way, then?"

"No. Not that, either. He is going to be married very soon."

"Then what does he want to come here for? I won't receive that woman, whether he marries her or not. And if he marries her I'll disinherit him as far as I'm able to. I don't go back from my word. If he thinks he's going to turn me—if he's coming here with that idea—he'd better stop away."

"He doesn't think that," said Mrs. Clinton. "I don't think he will want to speak of anything that has been between you. He knows, and he has made up his mind to it. Don't you want to see him, Edward? He is coming because he wants to see you."

The Squire's face showed a flush, and he looked down. "I shall be very glad to see him," he said, and went out of the room.

The next morning at breakfast time a note was handed to the Squire from Aunt Laura, asking him if he could make it quite convenient to come and see her during the day, as she wished to consult him upon matters of business.

"Matters of business!" he echoed, reading out the note. "Now it's a remarkable thing that none of the old aunts has ever wished to consult me on matters of business before, though I should always have been ready to do what I could for them. I wonder what the old lady wants."

"I think I know," said Joan.

Humphrey looked at her sharply from across the table. "You can't possibly know anything about it," he said.

"She wants to keep guinea-pigs," pursued Joan, unmoved. "She told me about some she had when she was little, and said she should like to have them again."

"Humphrey might give her a hutch for a Christmas present," suggested Nancy.

"Don't talk nonsense, children," ordered the Squire. "You might run down to her after breakfast and say I will come and see her at eleven o'clock."

At the hour mentioned he marched into Aunt Laura's parlour, bringing with him into the rather close atmosphere a breath of the cold bright winter day. "Well, Aunt Laura," he said in his hearty voice, "you want me to help you settle your affairs, eh? What about Mr. Pauncey? Shan't I be making him jealous?"

Aunt Laura, with thoughts of "refreshment" filling her mind, did not reply to this question until he was sitting opposite to her with a glass of sherry and a dry biscuit by his side. Then she said, "It will be a matter for Mr. Pauncey by and by, Edward. It is about Humphrey. I wished to consult you about doing something for dear Humphrey and the nice girl he is going to marry."

"Oh, you've heard about that already, have you?" exclaimed the Squire. "Good news travels fast, eh? Well, it isn't a bad thing, is it? Another young couple settling down—what? Who let you into the secret, Aunt Laura?"

"Dear Humphrey has told me all about it," said the old lady, with some pride. "I was the first to know. And he brought the nice girl to see me when she was here at Christmas time, and she came by herself afterwards. I liked her very much, Edward, and I hope you do too."

"Oh yes, I like her," said the Squire. "It's an engagement that promises well. So you want to give them a wedding present, eh? Well, now, if I might suggest, and you cared to spend the money, how about a smart little pony dogcart, with harness and everything, and a pony, which I'd look out for you and take some trouble about it?—very pleased to. That would be a very handsome present. I don't know whether you'd care to go up to it. It would cost you about—about ——"

"Thank you, Edward," Aunt Laura interrupted him. "I think that might be a good idea for one of my presents, and I will think it over and very likely accept your very kind offer. But it was not exactly a wedding present that I had in my mind when I asked you to come and see me, which you have so kindly and promptly done. As you know, I have an income far above my needs, and there is a considerable sum of money belonging to me which will go to the children after my death. How much it is I could not tell you exactly without consulting Mr. Pauncey, which I propose to do when I am better and he is better. But what I should wish to do is to make Humphrey an allowance to supplement what you yourself propose to allow him, and in my will I should like—but this I will not settle upon against your wishes, not by any means—I should like to —well, if you understand what I mean—to make Humphrey, as it were, more my heir, perhaps, than the other children."

Probably Aunt Laura had never before addressed a speech so long to her nephew without being interrupted, but his surprise at the disclosure of her wishes had kept him silent until she had finished.

"Well, that is certainly a generous proposal of yours, Aunt Laura," he said; "the allowance, I mean. As for the other——"

But it was Aunt Laura who interrupted now. "You see, Edward," she said eagerly, "it is like this—I have thought it over carefully—Humphrey seems to me to want the money more than the others. Dick, I take it—but of course I do not want to pry in the very least into your concerns—will be so well provided for that any little extra sum I left to him would be more in the nature of a compliment." She went on through the others, explaining why she thought Humphrey might fairly be preferred to them, and emphasising the fact that they would all get *something*; but the Squire was not listening to her. He was thinking about Dick. Dick, if he carried out his intentions, would not be well provided for. He would be, as the Squire thought, a poor man. Here were complications. He did not want Aunt Laura to make Dick her heir to the exclusion of the rest; but the weight of his own apparently now fruitless threat to disinherit him was always growing heavier on him, and he certainly did not want her to deny him his share under a false conception of the true state of affairs. He regretted now that all news of what had been happening lately with regard to Dick had been kept from Aunt Laura. Must he give her a hint as to how the land lay? He could not make up his mind, on the spur of the moment, to do so. He shirked the laborious explanations that would be necessary, the surprise, and all that would follow. And even when she had adjusted her mind to the news, he did not know what he should advise her to do.

"As far as that goes," he said, "—making Humphrey your heir, as you say,—I should like to think that over a bit. Of course, you can do what you like with your own money, but——"

"Oh, but I should not think of acting against your wishes, Edward," said Aunt Laura.

"No, you're very good about that," he said kindly. "I've always known you would do what was right, and I haven't interfered with you in any way, and don't want to. But let's leave that for a bit. Don't make any decision till we've had another talk. As far as the allowance goes, I'm going to

treat the boy generously. I haven't made up my mind yet about the exact sum, but of course I needn't say it wouldn't be altered by anything you liked to add. That would be an extra bit of spending for them, and I've no doubt they would make good use of it. What was it you thought of, Aunt Laura?"

"Well," said the old lady slowly, "I think, Edward—if you don't mind—you won't be offended with me, I do hope—I have no wish in the *least* to make it conditional—but I should take it as a great compliment if you would tell me first—when you have made up your mind—what allowance you yourself had thought of."

The Squire stared at her, and then burst out laughing. In an unwonted flash of insight he saw what she would be at, the diffident, submissive, gentle old woman, to whom he and everything he did or said were above all admitted criticism. "Well, if you must push me into a corner, Aunt Laura," he said, "I may as well settle the figure with you now. I'll start them with fifteen hundred a year and a house. There now. What are you going to put to that?"

"I will put to that," replied Aunt Laura, equally prompt, "another five hundred a year, and the dear young people will be very well off."

The Squire stared again. "By Jove!" he said in astonishment, "I'd no idea you meant to do anything of that sort."

"But you said it would make no difference to what you would do," she said a little anxiously.

The Squire leant forward in his chair and touched her knee. "Aunt Laura," he said, "you are a very clever old lady."

"Oh, Edward," she expostulated, "I hope you don't think——"

"Oh, you knew," he said, leaning back again in great good-humour, "you knew well enough. If you had told me you were going to that figure at first, you knew that I should be thinking that twelve hundred a year from me instead of fifteen would do very well. And that's just what I should have thought, by Jove! Any man would. However, I have no wish to save my pocket at the expense of yours, and we'll let it stand at what I said. But I say, are you sure you can manage it all right? It's a good deal of money, you know. You won't be narrowing yourself, eh? I shouldn't like to feel that you weren't every bit as comfortable as you ought to be—what?"

Aunt Laura assured him that she would remain every bit as comfortable as she ought to be, and finally he left her and walked home, whistling to himself every now and then as he went over the points of their conversation, and once or twice laughing outright at his memories. "By Jove! she had me," he said to himself, after he had gained the comparative seclusion of his park and could stop in the road to give vent to his merriment. "Who'd have thought it of old Aunt Laura?"

CHAPTER XXII

DICK COMES HOME

As the time came near for Dick's visit the Squire's mood changed from one of genial satisfaction to a nervous irascibility, which, as Joan said to Nancy, made him very difficult to live with.

"I know," Nancy agreed. "It is really rather degrading to have to try and keep him in a good temper."

"Good temper!" repeated Joan. "It is as much as one can do to keep him from snapping off one's head for nothing at all; in fact, one can't do it."

"I think," said Nancy reflectively, "that a time will come when we shall have to take father in hand and teach him how to behave. That's darling mother's mistake—that she's never done it. My view is that a woman has got to keep a man in order, or he will tyrannise over her. Don't you think that is so, Joan?"

"From what I have observed," replied Joan—they were sitting on the big sofa before the schoolroom fire—"I should say it was. And it's a bad thing for men themselves. Of course, we know quite well that father is frightened to death of what Dick will say to him when he comes, but if we were old enough—and mother cared to do it—to make him hide it up when he's with us, it wouldn't have nearly such a bad effect on him. He would have to forget it sometimes; now he never does."

Whether or no the Squire was frightened to death of what Dick would say to him when he came, he was certainly upset at the idea of what lay before him. Although he had as yet taken no definite steps, he had come to the decision that Dick, as far as was possible, should be

disinherited, if he made the marriage that now seemed inevitable. The news of Humphrey's desirable engagement had made the other look still more undesirable, and it had taken off the edge of his strong aversion to act in a way so opposed to all his life-long intentions. It seemed almost to have justified his decision, and it had certainly softened to himself the sting of it.

But it was one thing to allow his mind to dwell on the unhoped-for compensations of his decision, when Dick by his own choice had cut himself off from Kencote and remained away from it, and it was quite another to contemplate his coming back, before the decision was made irrevocable, on a footing so different from the one he had hitherto occupied. The Squire was made intensely uncomfortable at the thought of how he should bear himself. He did now want to see his eldest son again, and to be friends with him. That desire had been greatly weakened while his mind had occupied itself with Humphrey's affair, but he saw, dimly, that it had only been sleeping, that he would always want Dick, however much he might have reason to be pleased with Humphrey, and that he was laying up for himself unhappiness in the future in working to put Humphrey into Dick's place, as he had rashly promised himself that he would do.

Humphrey, perhaps unwisely as regards his own interest, had announced his departure for London soon after it was known that Dick was coming down, and the Squire was left to turn things over in his mind with the distraction of Humphrey's affairs and Humphrey's presence withdrawn from him.

The twins went in the carriage to meet Dick at the station. They squeezed in on either side of him and made their pleasure at seeing him both vocal and tangible.

"Dear, darling old Dick," said Joan, trying to seize his hand under the bearskin rug, "it is very wrong of you to stay away from home. We've missed you awfully."

"You seem more of a fluffy angel than ever now we have got you back," said Nancy. "How true it is what the old Starling used to say, that we don't know our blessings till they have left us."

"Thanks very much," replied Dick. "What's this I hear about Humphrey being engaged? But I suppose they wouldn't have told you yet."

"Told us!" echoed Joan.

"We told *them*!" said Nancy.

"Oh, you did! Trust you for nosing out a secret."

"It wasn't much of a secret," said Joan. "Silky Susan—oh, I beg her pardon, we mustn't call her that now—I mean sweet Sue, was all eyes—big round ones."

"And she took a great deal of trouble to ingratiate herself with us," said Nancy. "We're not considered worth it as a rule, and of course we see through it in a moment, because we're not really her sort."

"But we're going to be," said Joan. "Humphrey told us that we ought to copy her in the way we behave, and we said we would."

"Jolly glad to get the chance," added Nancy. "We want to be sweet girls, but nobody has ever shown us how, before."

"Oh, you're all right," said Dick. "You needn't try to alter."

"Thank you, dear Dick," replied Joan. "You are blind to our faults, and it is very sweet of you. But there is room for improvement, and what with Miss Phipp to train our brains and sweet Sue Clinton to improve our manners, we feel we're getting a tremendous chance, don't we, Nancy?"

"Rather!" acquiesced Nancy; "the chance of a life time. We lie awake at night thinking about it."

Dick let them chatter on, and retired into his own thoughts. He would have liked to know how his father had taken the news of his coming, but was unwilling to question them, and he had never allowed them to exercise their critical faculties on their father before him; so they were not likely now to volunteer enlightenment. As the carriage rolled smoothly over the gravel of the drive through the park, he too, like his father, felt some discomfort at the thought of the meeting that lay before him.

Except that he had come out of his room and was waiting in the hall to receive his son, which had not been his usual custom, there was nothing in the Squire's greeting which could arouse comment amongst the servants who were present at it. This was always a great point at Kencote. "For God's sake, don't let the servants talk," was a phrase often on the Squire's lips; but he himself, in any crisis, provided them with more food for talk than anybody else.

"How are you, Dick?" he said, shaking hands. "We were beginning to think we should never see you again." (This was for the benefit of the servants.) "The meet's at Horley Wood to-morrow, but I'm not going out. I've got a touch of rheumatism. Come in and have a cup of tea."

They all went into the morning-room. "Mother, can't we begin to have tea downstairs now?" asked Joan. "We're quite old enough. We don't make messes any more."

Thus by a timely stroke a long-desired concession was won, for the only obstacle hitherto in the way had been the Squire's firm pronouncement that children ought to be kept in their proper place as long as they were children, and the proper place for Joan and Nancy at tea-time was the schoolroom. But he was now so greatly relieved at having them there to centre conversation on that he said with a strong laugh, taking Joan by the shoulder and drawing her to him, "Now, there's impudence for you! But I think we might let them off the chain now, mother, eh?"

"In holiday time," acquiesced Mrs. Clinton, "and on the days when they're not at lessons."

"But if they get sticky with jam," said Dick, "they lose their privilege for a week."

"And any one who drops crumbs on the carpet must have tea with us in the schoolroom for a week," said Nancy.

The subject was discussed at some length on those lines until Mrs. Clinton sent the twins up to take off their hats, when their elders still went on discussing them.

"So you've chosen the blue-stocking, mother," said Dick.

"Yes; she is coming next week," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Mother didn't want anybody dangerously attractive about the house," said the Squire, hastening to take up that subject, which was continued until the twins returned, when they were allowed to dominate the conversation to an unusual degree.

But at last the time came when the Squire had always been accustomed to say, "Well, we'll go into my room and have a cigar," or to go out without saying anything, with the certainty of Dick's following him. He could not now go out of the room without saying anything, for that would have amounted to a declaration made before the children that he did not want Dick's company, and he shirked the usual formula which would precipitate the "talk" that he dreaded.

Dick relieved him for the time being. "I'll go into the smoking-room and write a few letters," he said.

"Ah, well, I'll go into my room and smoke a cigar," said the Squire, making a move.

Mrs. Clinton asked Joan to ring the bell. "They may not have lit the fire in the smoking-room," she said.

The Squire looked back. "Eh? What!" he said sharply. "Of course they've lit it, if one of the boys is at home."

But it appeared that they had not lit it, and "they," in the person of a footman, were instructed to repair the oversight immediately. It was a disturbing episode. Dick had used the smoking-room less than the others, having usually shared the Squire's big room with him as if it were his own, and they had probably omitted to light the smoking-room fire when he only of the boys was at home, on occasions before, without the omission being noticed. But it looked as if differences were beginning to be made, as if the dread "they" had begun to talk; and the Squire hated the suspicion of their talk like poison. At any rate, it drew attention to Dick's announcement that he would write his letters in the smoking-room instead of in the library, and that would be food for talk. He said with a frown, "Hadn't you better come into my room? You can write your letters there. You generally do."

So Dick followed him, and the door was shut on them.

The spurt of annoyance had brought the Squire up to the point of "tackling the situation." After all, it had to be talked out between them, and it was useless to put off the moment and pretend that things were as usual.

"I suppose your mind is still made up?" he said, with his back to his son.

"Yes," replied Dick. "We needn't go over all that again."

"I don't want to," said the Squire. "Only we had better have things plain. I won't receive her, either before marriage or after."

Dick put constraint on himself, but his face grew red. "If you are going to talk like that," he said after a pause, "I had better not have come."

The Squire turned and faced him. The frown was still on his face, but it was one of trouble. "Oh, my dear boy," he said, "I'm glad enough to see you. I wish you had never gone away. I wish to God you'd drop it all and come back, and let us be as we were before. But if you won't change, I won't change, and if we're to be comfortable together these few days, let's know at the beginning where we stand. That's all I meant."

"All right," said Dick rather ungraciously. "But I should like to know how I stand in other matters as well. You've sent me messages. You're going to make me pay pretty heavily for marrying the woman I've chosen. I'm not complaining and I'm not asking you to change your mind. But I think I've a right to know exactly where I stand."

"Well, then, sit down," said the Squire, "and I'll tell you."

They were confronted in a way neither of them had been prepared for. Certainly Dick had not come home to ask for explanations, nor had his father meant to open up the now closed dispute. Some underling in the back regions, with his mouth full of bread and butter and tea and his mind relaxed from his duties to his own insignificant enjoyments, was responsible for what was now going to be said in his master's sanctum. A match struck and put to the smoking-room fire would have altered the course of affairs at Kencote, perhaps only for an hour or two, perhaps for Dick's lifetime. Now, at any rate, there was to be a discussion which would otherwise have been deferred, and for their own future comfort neither the Squire nor Dick was in the most tractable mood for discussion.

"You know how the property stands and what goes with it?" the Squire began.

"Yes, I know all that," said Dick. "There's about eight thousand acres, and a rent-roll in good times of perhaps a couple of thousand a year. Then there are a couple of livings to present to, a house which might be let with the shooting by a fellow who couldn't afford to live in it for, let's say, a thousand a year. So I shall be fairly comfortably off somewhere else as long as I do let, and I dare say there won't be much difficulty about that. There are plenty of rich manufacturers who would like to take a place like Kencote."

Although his mind had been on other plans, and he had no sort of intention of living anywhere but at Kencote after he should have succeeded his father, still, in the background of his thoughts there had lain great bitterness at this preposterous punishment that his father was preparing for him; and the bitterness now showed plainly enough in his speech.

It aroused in the Squire a curious conflict of emotions. The picture of a rich outsider settled in the house which had sheltered none but Clintons for unnumbered years appalled him, and, if Dick had presented it for his inspection without heat, must have turned him from his purpose then and there; for that purpose had never been examined in its ultimate bearings, and would not have been formed except with the view of bending Dick to his will. But, already ruffled, he became more so at Dick's tone, and his uneasiness at the fearful idea which had been evolved, although it was rejected for the moment, translated itself into anger.

"You've no right to talk like that," he said hotly. "If you would come to your senses you could be as well off living here as I am."

"I know I could," said Dick more quietly, "if I were blackguard enough to give up a woman for the sake of money. But there's no use at all in talking about that. I'm quite prepared for what you are going to do, and I haven't come here, as I told you, to ask you to change your mind. It's your affair; only if you haven't looked what you're going to do in the face yet, I'm interested enough to say that I think you ought to."

"You'll have enough money," snapped the Squire, not at all mollified by this speech, "to make it possible for you to live at Kencote—you'll have much more than enough money, as I told you—if you give up this marriage. You say you won't give it up. Very well, then, you can go and live somewhere else and Humphrey can take your place here."

Dick's astonished stare recalled him to his senses. He had spoken out of his anger. He had never meant to go so far as this. But having gone so far he went on to make his position good.

"Now we won't beat about the bush any more," he said judicially. "As far as I'm concerned—what I'm going to leave him, I mean—Humphrey couldn't afford to live at Kencote. I'm not going to rob others to put him in your place, although I tell you this, he's going to be put in your place as soon as you get married, until my death. I dare say you have heard he's going to be married himself, and it's a marriage I'm pleased with. She won't bring him much money, I dare say, but that will be put right in another quarter. He'll be well off from the first, and I shouldn't wonder if he weren't better off still before long. He'll live at the dower-house and work with me at the management of the place, just as you have always done. And when you succeed, you'll probably find him a richer man than you are."

Dick rose from his chair. "Thank you," he said. "I know where I stand now. And as there doesn't seem to be much more to stop here for, I'll get back to London."

It was the Squire's turn now to stare. "What do you mean?" he gasped. "You're not going!"

But Dick had already left the room.

The Squire remained sitting forward in his chair looking into the fire. His face, which had been red and hard, gradually changed its colour and expression. He looked a tried and troubled old man. He had burnt his boats now. He had allowed his anger to dictate words which he would not have used in cold blood. He had insulted his son, as well as injured him. Dick was going out of

his father's house in anger, and he would not return to it. As long as he lived he would not see him again.

These thoughts were too much for him. His own anger had disappeared. He could not let his son go away from him like that. He had not meant what he had said—at least, he had not meant to say it in that way. He rose quickly and went out of the room.

When Dick had left him he had gone into the smoking-room, where the belated fire was burning briskly, summoned his servant and ordered his cart. His intention was to drive straight over to Bathgate and wait there for a train to London. Virginia was not at Blaythorn, or he would have gone there. He had told her that he was going down to Kencote to make one last effort at reconciliation with his father, and she had said that she would pay an overdue weekend visit at the same time, so that he should not complicate matters by coming over to see her from Kencote. "For I'm sure you won't be able to keep away if you are so close to me," she had said, holding him by the lapels of his coat and smiling up in his face. It had been an old engagement between them that he should have spent this particular week-end with her at Blaythorn, and he now wished heartily that he had not changed his plans. "Kicked out of the house within ten minutes!" he said to himself, standing in front of the fire, when he had given his orders. He was consumed with anger against his father, and had an impulse to get away from the house at once, to start on foot, and let his cart catch him up. But it was raining hard, and there were a couple of notes that he had to write for the evening post. He might as well write them now, and he sat down at the table to do so.

The door opened, and Mrs. Clinton came in. "Dick dear," she said in her quiet voice, which hardly betokened the trouble that could be seen in her face, "you are not going to leave us like this!"

He turned in his seat and faced her. "I'm going in a few minutes," he said, "and I'm not coming back again. It's good-bye this time, mother."

"Oh, why can't you be a little patient with him?" she cried. "He wanted so to see you here again. If he has said anything to offend you he will be very sorry for it. Dick, don't go like this. It will be the end of everything."

He got up from the table and put his arm round her shoulder, leading her up to the hearth. "You and I will see each other," he said kindly. "It isn't the end of everything between us, mother. But with him, and with Kencote, it is. There's no help for it. He's definitely against me now. He's told me he's going to put Humphrey in my place—straight out. I can't stand that, you know. If he's going to say things like that—and do them—what's the good of my staying here?"

"He can't mean it," she pleaded. "He is pleased with Humphrey now, but he has always loved you best of all his sons. It isn't in his power to put any one in your place."

"I dare say he'll be sorry for having done it," he said, "but he's going to do it, all the same. I can put up with the idea, mother, as long as I'm not at Kencote, but it's a bit too much to stay here and have that sort of thing said to you."

He dropped his arm and turned round sharply, for the door had opened again, and now it was his father who came into the room.

"Dick," he said, shutting the door and coming forward, "I said too much just now. For God's sake forget it!"

There was a moment's pause. Then Dick said in a hard voice, "What am I to forget?"

The Squire looked at him with his troubled, perplexed frown. "Can't you give it up, my boy?" he asked.

Dick turned away with an impatient shrug of the shoulders.

"God knows I don't want to make any changes," said his father. "It's worse for me than it is for you, Dick. Humphrey won't be to me what you have been. If you would only meet me half-way, I——"

Dick turned suddenly. "Yes, I'll meet you half-way," he said. "It is what I came here to say I would do, only you went so far beyond everything that there was nothing left for me to say. If you are going to set yourself to make Humphrey a richer man than I, as you said—well, that is beyond anything I had thought of—that you should be thinking of it in that way, I mean."

"Dick, I've never thought of it in that way," said his father. "And you must forget that I said it."

Mrs. Clinton spoke. "You have heard of Humphrey's engagement," she said. "Your father's idea is that he shall live here, at the dower-house, and help him with the estate management."

"That's it," said the Squire. "It was either that or getting a regular agent in the place of Haydon. I can't do it all myself. But if you would only come back, Dick——"

"I can't do that," said Dick, "at least, not now. I'm tied. And I can't object to your getting Humphrey in, if you think he'll take to the job. It isn't that. And it isn't that I mind much your leaving money to the others instead of to me—as long as you don't leave it all to one of them."

"I told you I wasn't going to do that," said the Squire. "I'd never thought of it. What I said about Humphrey I said on the spur of the moment, and I'm sorry for it."

"Oh, all right," said Dick; "we needn't worry about that any more. Do what you like for Humphrey. I've no wish to put a spoke in his wheel, and I wish I thought he felt the same about putting one in mine. I'll tell you what I told you at the beginning—I've more or less reconciled myself to the change you're going to make. At any rate, I shan't grumble at it. It'll only mean doing a bit more for myself instead of looking to you for everything."

The Squire did not like this. "You couldn't do much," he said, "to make up for the loss of the unsettled property, if I left it away from you."

"I could do something," replied Dick, "and I'm going to."

"Let us sit down," Mrs. Clinton said. "Dick, if you have anything to tell us, if you are going to meet us half-way, as you say, let us hear."

They sat down, and Dick considered for a moment, and then looked up at his father. "Neither of us has given way an inch yet," he said.

The Squire frowned. "There can be no giving way on the point of your marriage," he said.

Dick was about to reply, but Mrs. Clinton put her hand on his knee. "Let him tell us what he has in his mind, Edward," she said.

"I was going to say," said Dick, with a gulp, "that I am quite prepared to give way on the question of the property. I wanted you to receive Virginia, and to give me everything you were going to give me. I don't ask that now. Do what you have said you would do. I shan't grouse about it. I shan't let it make any difference between you and me. I promise you that. That's where I'll give way."

The Squire felt very uncomfortable. Conciliation was in the air, and he was prepared to be conciliatory. But how was he to meet this?

"What do you want me to do, then?" he asked, "short of——"

Dick took him up. "I'm going to marry Virginia Dubec," he said decisively. "That is settled, and you can't stop me. You haven't been fair either to me or to her about it. You have never given her a chance to prove to you, as she could prove, that she is as unlike the woman you take her for as any woman on earth could be. And you have gone to greater lengths in trying to stop me doing what I'm going to do than I think you were justified in going."

The Squire broke in on him. "Oh, if you're going to open up——" he began; but Mrs. Clinton said, "Edward, let Dick finish what he has to say"; and Dick went on quickly, "It's the last time I need mention all that. I'm ready to forget it, every bit of it, and you'll never hear a single word more about it, if—if——"

The words that rose to his lips were, "If you'll undertake to behave yourself from now onwards," but since he had to find other words to express his meaning, and paused for a moment, the Squire put in, "Well, if what? I'm waiting to hear."

"You can't stop my marriage," said Dick. "The only thing you can do is to recognise it now, unless you deliberately choose that this shall be the last time we are to see one another."

The Squire's frown of perplexity became a frown of displeasure. "If those are your terms——" he began; but again Mrs. Clinton interrupted him.

"When Dick has been married some time," she said, "you will not want to keep him at arm's length. You will make the best of it. It is senseless for either you or him to talk of an estrangement that will last a lifetime. Such a thing could not happen. There would be no grounds for it. Edward, you have done what you could to prevent Dick from following his will. Now you must accept his decision, and not go on to make further unhappiness."

He turned on her a reproachful eye. "What, you on his side, against me!" he exclaimed.

"As long as there was a chance of your having your way," she said, "I would not act in any way against you. But now I say that I have seen for myself, and I do not believe that you have anything to fear. Dick has chosen for himself, and we ought now to respect his choice."

Dick put out his hand and pressed his mother's. The Squire, faced with decision, almost with authority, from a quarter in which he had hitherto expected and obtained nothing but submission, showed neither surprise nor resentment. He sat looking on to the ground, his frown of displeasure now once again changed into a frown of perplexity.

In a moment or two he looked up and spoke, but without indignation. "You want me, now, after all I've said and done," he said, "to give in altogether and receive this Lady George Dubec as my daughter-in-law?"

"I think," said Mrs. Clinton, "that the time has come when you must."

"Oh, for God's sake, let's have an end of it, father," said Dick. "Give her a chance. It's all I ask of you. Let me bring her here. If you haven't changed your mind after her visit—then both of us will have done what we can for each other—and you need never see her again as long as you live."

The Squire sat without replying for a long time. Then he got up and turned to leave the room. "Very well, Dick," he said, "you may bring her here."

CHAPTER XXIII

HUMPHREY COUNTS HIS CHICKENS

Humphrey went from Kencote to Thatchover, where Lady Aldeburgh was for the time being residing with her numerous family. This did not include her husband, who preferred to play a Box and Cox game with her in respect of his two houses; but on his way through London Humphrey called on his prospective father-in-law to gain formal authorisation of his suit.

Lord Aldeburgh had fitted himself up a suite of bachelor chambers on the top floor of his great house in Manchester Square, and had installed a lift, which no one was allowed to use without his permission, as its rumbling disturbed him in his chosen occupations. The chief of these was the collection of portraits of people and pictures of places, which he cut out of illustrated papers and magazines and pasted into large albums, indexing them up very thoroughly as he went on. He was also an ardent attender of plays and concerts and a persistent but indifferent bridge-player. He had found a club where the stakes were half a crown a hundred, and there was always a rubber to be had in the afternoon. So in the winter, which he spent mostly in London, his days were fully occupied. Early in the year he went to the Riviera or to Egypt, and about the time that his family came up to London for the season he installed himself at Thatchover and enjoyed his garden. In the autumn he went abroad again or travelled about England. He was not a rich man, but he was an entirely happy and contented one.

"His lordship is very busy this morning and I don't think he would like to be disturbed," said the servant who opened the door.

"Well, take up my name and say I won't keep him long," said Humphrey. "I'll come up with you."

"I don't think his lordship will see you, sir," said the man; but Humphrey climbed the four flights of stairs after him and waited in the hall of Lord Aldeburgh's self-contained flat until he was admitted to the presence.

Lord Aldeburgh was in what he called his work-room. It was a large light room furnished chiefly with deal tables, each devoted to a particular pursuit. One had paste-pots and scissors and knives and rulers and a sheet of glass and a pile of papers and albums. Another was for the making of jig-saw puzzles, a third for their elucidation, a fourth was for typewriting; and there was a reduplicating apparatus, and another table with materials for illuminating. The walls were covered with rubbings of monumental brasses, all ingeniously overlaid with colour and gilding. Lord Aldeburgh had hundreds more of these rubbings rolled up and put away in labelled drawers, and hoped before he died to have acquired one of every brass in England.

He was standing by his scissors-and-paste table when Humphrey went in, and there was a slight frown of annoyance on his otherwise amiable face. He was a big man, clean-shaven except for the rudiments of a pair of whiskers, and looked like an intelligent family solicitor, preoccupied with affairs of moment. His appearance had sometimes caused him to be taken for a serious politician and had caused him some annoyance. "I'm all for the constitution and that sort of thing," he was accustomed to say, "and my vote's safe enough when it's wanted. But I will *not* take the chair at political meetings. It interferes with my work. Besides, if they interrupt I don't know what to say." He had on a voluminous apron with bib and pockets over his tweed suit, which rather detracted from his habitual air of weight; but paste was sticky, and Lord Aldeburgh was careful of his clothes, which it was his custom to wear until they were hardly worth passing on to his valet.

"Always pleased to see you," he said, shaking hands, his habitual courtesy struggling with his annoyance at being disturbed. "But if you hadn't come straight up I should have asked you to call again to-morrow. Friday is a very busy day with me. I have all these papers to get through, and there are so many of them now that if I don't clear them up at once the next week's are on me before I know where I am."

"I'm sorry," said Humphrey, looking with interest at the pile of cut-out pictures on the table and the pile of disjointed papers on the floor. "But I'm going down to Thatchover this afternoon and I had to see you first."

"Oh, you're going down to Thatchover!" repeated Lord Aldeburgh. "I wish I could get down. There's a good deal of replanting being done, and my gardener is such a fool that if I'm not on the spot something's bound to go wrong, though I type him out the most detailed instructions. But I really can't get away at present. I'll tell you what you might do. Just see whether he's put glass over the Androsaces and things in the rock-garden, will you? My wife's no good at that sort of thing; she don't care about it. I don't believe she knows the difference between a saxifrage and a sedum; and you can't trust to servants. If you'll do that, like a good fellow, I shall be very much obliged to you."

"Certainly I will," said Humphrey, taking out his pocketbook. "Better give me the name of the things."

"I'll type out a list from my garden book and send it down to you," said Lord Aldeburgh. "They're all properly labelled, and if you'll just go through them—— Thanks very much; you've relieved me of an anxiety. I very nearly threw everything up to go down for a day. But I'm glad I didn't now. Well, if you don't mind I'll get on with my work now that's settled."

He held out his hand with an engaging smile, but Humphrey said, "I haven't told you what I came about yet. I want to marry Susan. She's game, and Lady Aldeburgh doesn't object. But I wanted to know what you thought about it before we went ahead."

A frown of perplexity showed itself on Lord Aldeburgh's face. "Marry Susan!" he repeated. "Well, I don't see any objection, if you think she's old enough. But——"

"She's twenty-four," interpolated Humphrey.

"Twenty-four! Is she really? Well, it shows what I've always said, that time flies quicker than you think it does. Twenty-four! My goodness! Well, then, of course she's old enough, and I rather wonder my wife hasn't seen to it before. And what I was going to say was that my wife looks after all that sort of thing, and I'm much too busy a man to be worried about details. If I give my consent, which you're quite right in coming to ask for, I hope I shan't have any more bother about it. That's all I meant."

"I don't see why you should be bothered," said Humphrey. "There'll be questions of settlements, I suppose. But the lawyers will fix up all that."

"Oh, my goodness, yes!" said Lord Aldeburgh. "Thank heaven all that sort of thing was fixed up when I was married myself. I don't want ever to go through it again. It was sign, sign, sign from morning to night. I've forgotten what the girls were to have when they married, but I know it wasn't much, and I'm not in a position to increase it. The rock-garden cost me an infernal lot of money last year, and I'm going to enlarge it. I suppose you don't know where I can get good blocks of limestone fairly cheap, do you? I don't care much about the sandstone I've got. At least, I don't want any more of it."

"No, I don't know," said Humphrey. "You had better give me the name of your solicitors, and we can get on to them. I suppose I can settle all the other points with Lady Aldeburgh."

"Oh, my goodness, yes!" said Lord Aldeburgh. "I'm much too busy to attend to it. Look here, I'll show you an interesting thing. It just proves what we were talking about just now, how time flies. You see this picture of Miss Enid Brown, of Laurel Lodge, Reigate, who is going to marry this fellow, Mr. Bertie Pearson, of the Cromwell Road?"

"Yes, I see," said Humphrey. "I don't particularly envy Mr. Bertie Pearson."

"Oh, I think she's a very nice-looking girl," said Lord Aldeburgh. "But that isn't the point. Now twenty-two years ago, when I first began to make my collection, one of the first photographs I got was of a Mr. Horace Brown, of Petersfield House, Reigate, who married—here he is—I was just looking it up when you came in—see?—Miss Mary Carter, of Croydon—turn to the C book for her—it's all carefully cross-indexed—here she is. Now you've only got to compare these two faces—Miss Enid Brown and Mrs. Horace Brown—Miss Carter that was—taking Reigate into consideration—to make it quite plain that they are mother and daughter. You see it at once, don't you?"

"Yes," said Humphrey. "Same silly sort of simper."

"Oh, well, I don't know about that. But that isn't the point. The point is that this particular work of mine, which I just took up five-and-twenty years or so ago to amuse myself with, is developing into something that will be of the greatest importance to the nation by and by. When I die I've a jolly good mind to leave it to the British Museum; or if I could get some fellow to leave some money and have it carried on—why, there's no telling what it wouldn't come to. Here you're beginning to have an illustrated register of every single soul in the country that amounts to anything. If you're good enough to have your portrait in some paper you're good enough to go down to posterity in my collection. I tell you, it's monumental. Already I've got thousands and

thousands of portraits—not only of people like ourselves that you can look up in a book, but of thousands of others—quite respectable people—and at all stages. Why, if I were to begin to publish the whole thing in parts I should make a fortune, and I've a jolly good mind to see some publisher and get it done. There isn't a soul whose name was represented who wouldn't buy it. I can tell you it's turning into a jolly big thing."

"Well, it is rather interesting," said Humphrey. "What have you got about the Clintons?"

"Oh, of course, I've got a separate book about the Clintons. Like to see it? You'll find some pictures of your little lot there."

"Well, if I may, some other time," said Humphrey. "My train goes in half an hour, and I must be getting off. Then you've no objection to my urging my suit? I believe that's the correct expression."

"Not a bit in the world, my dear fellow," replied Lord Aldeburgh. "I'm not much of a family man. I'm too busy. But from what I've seen of her I should say Susan would make you a good wife, and I'm sure you'll make her a good husband. So I wish you every sort of good luck. And now I must get to work again."

So, blessed with Lord Aldeburgh's approval, Humphrey went down to Thatchover, and found a party of considerable size assembled there, all bent on extracting as much amusement as possible out of the passing hours.

He arrived at dusk and found the family and its guests assembled in the big hall of the house. The men had been shooting, the women playing bridge, for the weather was too raw for them to care about leaving the warmth of the house. Humphrey received a somewhat vociferous welcome, for there was no one in the house with whom he was not on terms of intimacy, and felt cheered by the warmth of social intercourse into which he was plunged. "This really is rather jolly," he said to Susan Clinton, with whom he found himself presently sitting a little apart from the noisy central group. "I don't know that I ever want anything better than a big house in the country and to have it filled with jolly people."

"I shouldn't like to live in the country all the year round," said Susan. "You'd soon get out of touch."

"Oh, lor', yes," said Humphrey. "I didn't mean that. Look at my people at Kencote. It's jolly enough there every now and then in the winter when there's something to do, although it isn't exactly gay. But to settle down there year in and year out for ever—I'd just as soon emigrate. And that's what I want to talk to you about. Things are going all right for us. We shall have enough to get along on. I tell you, I'm in high favour. But the idea is that we shall set up in the dower-house, and——"

"Oh, but that will be delightful!" Susan interrupted him. "With all those jolly old things! And the presents we shall have! Humphrey, how ripping! And there's plenty of room to have people there. If we can afford to do things well——"

"Yes, that'll be all right," said Humphrey. "But the idea is that we shall cut all the rest. I'm to give up my job, which I don't care about either one way or the other, except that it keeps me about where I want to be, and I'm to be sort of head bailiff. That's the scheme, as it's shaping itself out. Question is whether it's good enough."

"Do you mean we shouldn't be allowed to go to London at all?"

"Oh, allowed! We could go up for a day or two now and again—though if I know my respected parent there would be black looks even at that, if we did it too often—but as for anything more than that—— No, it's meant and it's intended to mean that I join the governor in business. He's really, if you look at it properly, a farmer in a big way, and he's not very good at it, though he thinks he is. It's where I come in over Dick that he must have somebody to help him out of the muddles he makes, and that will be a pretty stiff job, and there won't be much running away from it."

"Then you mean we can't even pay visits?"

"Precious few of 'em. We shall be expected to stay at home and lead the domestic life. Are we cut out for it, Susan?"

She smiled at him, and slipped her hand into his. "I shan't mind very much, Humphrey," she said.

Humphrey returned her pressure. "Good girl!" he said. "I don't know that I shall either for a few years. But we'd better look it all in the face. We shall feel cut off, there's no doubt of it. But there's this to be said, it won't last for ever. If we're submissive now—well, in the long run we shall come off all right. Question is, can you make up your mind to stand it for as long as may be necessary?'

"I can if you can," said Susan.

"Oh, I shall be better off than you. I'm afraid there's no doubt you'll be dull at times. We'll have our own friends to stay with us, but there won't be much going on at home to enliven us. It isn't like other big houses in the country. Still, there are the kids. They're growing up, and they're pretty bright. You ought to get some fun out of them, and it'll be a godsend to them to have somebody like you about the place."

"I'm not certain that they care for me much," said Susan; "and I'm a little afraid of them. In fact, I'm rather afraid of all your family, Humphrey. Do you think Mrs. Clinton likes me?"

"Oh, of course she does," said Humphrey. "You'll get on well with the whole bunch of them. And as for the governor, you've only got to flatter him a bit and avoid treading on his corns, and you can live in his pocket—if you want to. I say, Susan, excuse my asking, but is your own papa all there?"

Susan laughed. "He has never grown up. That's all," she said. "But his tastes are harmless enough. Think what it would be if he had a taste for running after—well—er—you know—like Clinton. He doesn't really spend much money. There are worse fathers."

Humphrey digested this point of view. "Well, I think I would rather have mine," he said, "tiresome as he can be, and is, sometimes. Anyhow he's going to do the right thing by us. I needn't go into details, but you'll be able to have some pretty frocks, old girl; and you may find yourself in a big house before you've done, yet."

Their conversation was interrupted by the breaking up of the tea-party and the setting up of the bridge tables. Bridge was the serious pursuit at Thatchover, and it was only, so to speak, at off times that the household indulged in their tastes for romps. There was never any paltering with the valuable hours between five o'clock and eight o'clock in the evening, and there were few of the present party who showed any inclination to shirk their duty, even to the extent of sitting out a rubber. But as the total number of players was divisible by two, but not by four, two of them were obliged to sit out, and Lady Aldeburgh suggested to Humphrey that he and she should have a little talk and cut in later. "I hate doing it," she said, "because there's a certain sense of satisfaction in sitting down to begin, which you miss if you wait till everything is in full swing. Still, it would look well for me to appear self-sacrificing, and if you don't mind we'll get our little chat over now, for I'm dying to hear what you've managed to fix up."

Humphrey, sitting with her in a corner by the fire away from the green tables, put her in possession of the state of affairs. "There'll be at least fifteen hundred a year, and probably more," he concluded, "and that ought to make it good enough."

"If that were all, it wouldn't be good enough," said Lady Aldeburgh decisively. "You and Susan couldn't live on fifteen hundred a year or anything like it. I shouldn't consider it for a moment."

"Oh yes, you would," said Humphrey calmly. "Still, it isn't all. We're to have a house, for one thing—a house more than half furnished, and there'll be all sorts of perquisites. I'm to go in for the land agency business; and by and by, if I behave myself, as I mean to, and Susan behaves herself, as *she* means to do, we shall be very well off."

"What on earth are you talking about?" enquired Lady Aldeburgh, thoroughly bewildered. "The land agency business——'

"We are to live at the dower-house at Kencote," said Humphrey. "I don't think you saw it, but it's a topping little house. And I'm to help the governor look after things. That's the scheme."

"My *dear* Humphrey! What absolute nonsense!" exclaimed Lady Aldeburgh. "You and Susan burying yourselves in the country! Why, you'd be bored stiff in a week, and you'd get sick to death of one another in a month. You can't seriously consider such a ridiculous scheme."

"Why ridiculous?" enquired Humphrey. "We're in the country at this moment, and we're not bored stiff—far from it."

"That's entirely different, a big house, with crowds of people whenever you want them—and in winter, when there's something for the men to do. To settle down for good! and at a place like Kencote! Well, I don't want to be rude to your people, but I ask you, are they alive or dead?"

Humphrey flushed. "My people are all right," he said, keeping his voice level. "And Susan will get on with them. You needn't worry yourself about that side of the question."

"I can't help it if you are angry with me," said Lady Aldeburgh, with a slight recurrence to her infantile manner. "I say what I think, and although I have the greatest possible respect for your people, it would drive me crazy to live in the way they do. And I'm not going to let Susan be killed and buried and made miserable for life."

"All right," said Humphrey. "Then I'd better pack up and clear off."

"Oh, don't be silly. If you can screw a couple of thousand a year out of your father, with the little bit that Susan will have, which will pay for her frocks, you could take a nice little flat and be

fairly comfortable. I shouldn't mind your waiting for the rest to come later."

"If I do that, the rest won't come later; it won't come at all. Dick has kicked over the traces, and I'm to take his place—to a certain extent. I don't want to think too much about all that, but you force me to say it. You understand the situation well enough if you'd give your mind to it. I don't want to bury myself in the country all the year round any more than you would; but, hang it! isn't it worth making some sacrifice for a time? Besides, it's such nonsense to talk as if living in the country, and living comfortably too, within three hours of London, were the same thing as going off to Siberia or somewhere. Anyhow, we're going to live at Kencote. I'm game and Susan's game. We don't ask you to come and live with us."

"Now you're positively insulting," said Lady Aldeburgh, entirely recovering her good-humour, for this was the way she liked to be treated by good-looking young men. It implied that she appeared as young as she felt. "Of course if you have made up your mind to hoe turnips for the rest of your life, you naturally wouldn't expect me to come and hoe them with you, and I shouldn't come if you did. The question is, will Susan be happy hoeing turnips? That's what I have to look at."

"I dare say you will be pleased to do an occasional week-end's hoeing," replied Humphrey. "And as for Susan, I've already told you she's ready to hoe as long as is necessary. Please don't upset her about it. We are going to eat our bread and butter quite contentedly for a few years, and we shall get the jam by and by. If you put your oar in and try and upset things, we shan't get nearly so much bread and butter, and we shall miss the jam altogether. After all, it's a question for us to decide; and we've already decided. We're going to be a good little boy and girl, and if all goes well, by and by we shall be little county magnates. I believe that's the proper expression."

"What is your father going to do?" asked Lady Aldeburgh. "Let's put it quite plainly, as we are talking confidentially. Is he going to make an eldest son of you? Is Dick finally out of the way? I know he's going to marry Virginia Dubec in spite of everything. Does your father still refuse to see him—or to see her, which is more to the point, for I'm not a cat like some women, and I'll say this, that I believe if he were to see her she would get round him; for she's a beautiful creature and could turn any man round her little finger if she cared to try."

"She won't have a chance of trying with him," replied Humphrey. "You may make your mind easy as to that. As for Dick, I suppose he's seeing him at this moment. He was going down to Kencote this afternoon."

"What! Oh, then they've made it up?"

"No, they haven't. Neither side budges. Dick is going to marry Virginia, as you say, and Dick's father has sworn to leave all he can away from him if he does. Both of them will keep their word, for they're both as obstinate as the devil. But they are going to patch up a sort of peace, and I'm not altogether sorry. Dick hasn't behaved particularly well to me, and I should be a humbug if I pretended that I wanted him to get back what's now coming my way. But I don't want him to feel left out in the cold altogether."

"How very sweet and forgiving! Are you sure that he won't persuade your father to change his mind?"

"He won't try."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know Dick."

"I suppose you wired to say you were coming down here because you didn't want to meet him?"

"I suppose I did. We might have had a row. I haven't done anything to persuade the governor to alter his will, as he's going to do, but it's going to be altered in my favour, and Dick might not feel inclined to do me justice over the matter. I don't want a row with him. We've been fairly good pals so far, and I don't want to be open enemies with him. Besides, Kencote will belong to him some day, and——"

"Well, when it does you won't be there any longer."

"Yes, I shall. I'm to have Partisham—that's pretty well settled. There would be an explosion of wrath and surprise if I intimated that I knew that and was counting on it; but you can see the governor's brain working all the time. He lets everything out, and he's let out that. It's only a question of one farm at present. I may get it with the rest, or it may go to Walter, for there's an old manor-house on it, and he thinks it would do for Walter to do up and live in when he gets tired of doctoring. He can't quite make up his mind, but it's only a hundred and fifty acres out of about two thousand, and it doesn't much matter one way or the other."

"Well, you seem pretty sure about it. I hope you may not be making a mistake. If I were Dick I should certainly have a try at getting back what he's lost. Where is this place you're going to have?"

"The house is about four miles from Kencote, and the property adjoins. My great-grandfather bought it with money his brother left him, and some of it is good building land on the outskirts of Bathgate. I've never been inside the house; it's let to a doctor and used as a private lunatic asylum."

"That's pleasant!"

"It's a fine house, and the property is rising in value every year. I shall be a richer man than Dick before I've done."

"How mercenary you are! Well, I suppose it's all right, as you say so, and I must give my consent. Oh, look, there's a table up. Come on! I feel as if I'm going to win stacks."

CHAPTER XXIV

VIRGINIA GOES TO KENCOTE

"My dear Lady George Dubec" [wrote Mrs. Clinton], "My husband and I will be glad if you will come to us here when you return to Meadshire, which Dick tells me will be next Wednesday. We shall be pleased to welcome you at Kencote and to make your acquaintance. We shall be pleased also to see Miss Dexter, and perhaps you will kindly tell her so, and let me know if she will accompany you.

"With kindest regards to yourself and to her,

"Believe me,
"Very sincerely yours,
"NINA CLINTON."

"There!" said Virginia, tossing this missive over to her companion. She had opened Dick's much longer letter, which had come by the same post, first of all, and half-way through its perusal had searched for Mrs. Clinton's amongst the rest. Now she returned to Dick's, while Miss Dexter read Mrs. Clinton's.

"What on earth does it all mean?" asked Miss Dexter. "Has the world come to an end, or has that preposterous old bear come to his senses at last?"

"It means, my dear Toby," said Virginia, looking up at her with a happy smile, "that all this horrible business is at an end. Dick has fought, and Dick has won. And we owe everything to the help that his dearest of dear mothers has given us. I knew I should love that woman from the first time I set eyes on her, and now I adore her. Three cheers for Mrs. Clinton."

She waved Dick's letter over her head. Miss Dexter looked down again at Mrs. Clinton's, and then again in dry surprise at her friend. "And do you really mean to tell me," she asked, "that you are satisfied with *this* as an atonement for everything they have made you go through? I never read such a letter—as cold and unwilling as she is herself. I'll tell you what will happen, Virginia, if you go to Kencote. You will simply be insulted. Do you think people like that can change? Not a bit of it. 'Kindest regards,' indeed! She may keep her kindest regards to herself as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh, Toby, don't be so tiresome!" Virginia adjured her. "You know you're just as pleased as I am—or very nearly. Shall we go straight to Kencote from London, or go to Bathgate and leave some things at Blaythorn and pick up some others? I think we'll do that. I must take my smartest frocks, and so must you. For you are really quite presentable if you would only give yourself a chance."

"You may leave me out of it," said Miss Dexter. "I'm as likely to go to Kencote as I am to Windsor Castle. If *you* like to put your head into the bear's den and say 'Thank you for having tried to eat me up, and now by all means finish me off,' you can. I have a little more self-respect, and nothing would induce me to go near those people."

"Ah!" said Virginia, "you are still huffy because Mrs. Clinton snubbed you. Quite right of her! You are a dear, loyal, faithful creature, and I know you would follow me to much more terrible places than Kencote, where you will find yourself in a week's time; but you had no business to go interfering without consulting me about it. I'm too fond of you to snub you, as you so often deserve, so I'm quite pleased when other people do it for me."

"Yes, that's all I get for trying to help you," said Miss Dexter. "What do you suppose has happened? Has Captain Dick told them that you have money? That's the only thing I can think of that would make that purse-proud old lunatic change his mind."

"He doesn't say anything about that, and I'm sure he hasn't told them. *I* shall tell Mr. Clinton, and it will make him love me even more than I'm going to make him as it is. I know I'm talking nonsense, but in the state of mind I find myself in at present that can't be helped. No, Toby dear, it is Mrs. Clinton who has done it all. My Dick says so. She was always on our side. She liked the look of me, Toby, odd as it may seem to you; and if she could have got round the old bear's prejudices—but I mustn't call him that any longer—she would have done so before. I knew I was right about her. It was the only thing I didn't *quite* like about Dick—that he seemed always to think she was of no account. Now he has come round, and my cup of happiness is brimming over. Oh, Toby, I've never been so happy in my life before." She put her handkerchief to her eyes, but she smiled gaily through her tears.

"Quite so," returned Miss Dexter, unmoved by this show of emotion. "You're all for the moment. Next week, when you are alone amongst them all, and they show you what they really think of you, you will never have been so miserable in your life. People like that don't change. They haven't got it in them. And you are laying up a most uncomfortable time for yourself. I give you solemn warning. I know what I'm talking about. I'm not carried away by sentiment as you are. Don't go, Virginia. Don't make yourself cheap."

"My dear," said Virginia in gentle seriousness, "if I were really making myself cheap by going to Kencote, I would go, if Dick asked me to. I can never be cheap to him. He'll be there, and nothing that can happen will touch me. But nothing will happen—nothing disagreeable. Why should you think so?"

Miss Dexter threw out her hands. "Oh, when you talk like that!" she said. "Well, go, my dear, and good luck go with you."

"*You* are my good luck, and you will go with me," said Virginia. "Now, Toby darling, don't say no. You have done so much for me. Surely you can do this."

"I suppose I can," said Miss Dexter after a short pause. "But if Mrs. Clinton thinks I'm going to fall into her arms after her treatment of me, she'll find herself mistaken. And if the worst comes to the worst I can tell Mr. Clinton what I think of him. I should like an opportunity of doing that. Yes, I'll come, Virginia."

They went straight to Kencote from London, the state of Virginia's travelling wardrobe having been decided to be capable of answering all necessary calls on it, and Miss Dexter having declared that if she appeared as a dowdy, she would find others to keep her company at Kencote in spite of the airs they gave themselves.

At the railway terminus Humphrey Clinton came up to them. "Hulloa!" he said in the somewhat off-hand manner he adopted towards most ladies of his acquaintance. "Going back to Blaythorn?"

"No," said Virginia. "We are going to Kencote. So are you, I suppose? We will travel down together, and you shall smoke to me."

Miss Dexter's sharp eyes were upon him, and she saw him flinch, although Virginia did not. It was the merest twitch of a muscle, and he had recovered himself instantly. "That's first class," he said. "And this seems to be First Class too. Shall we get in here?"

"That nice-looking porter with the grey beard has found us a carriage," said Virginia. "If we all three spread ourselves over it nobody will come in, and you can smoke when once the train has started."

"You had better sit at the other end of the carriage, then," said Humphrey, "and pull your veil down, or else *everybody* will want to come in."

"Now, Toby, don't you call that a perfectly lovely speech?" asked Virginia.

Miss Dexter emitted a sound indicative of scorn, but made no verbal reply, and they walked down the platform. A lady with spectacles, an unbecoming felt hat and a short skirt, was coming towards them, and as they approached one another she and Miss Dexter exclaimed, simultaneously, and then shook hands with expressions of pleasure. Miss Dexter then introduced the lady with the spectacles to Virginia, as an old schoolfellow, Janet Phipp, whom she had not met for years and years, and who had not changed in the least in the meantime, and asked her where she was going.

"I am going to a place called Kencote," said Miss Phipp; "as governess," she added uncompromisingly, with an eye on Virginia's fur and feathers and Humphrey's general air of opulence.

"Oh, but that's where we are all going!" cried Virginia. "How jolly! And this is Mr. Humphrey Clinton, the brother of your pupils."

Humphrey shook hands with Miss Phipp. "You'll find them a rare handful," he said.

"That won't worry me in the least," said Miss Phipp.

"We'll all travel down together," said Virginia, "and you shall be told all about the twins. I've never met them, and I'm dying to."

"I'm going second class," said Miss Phipp, and Miss Dexter said, "I'll go with you. Virginia, I shall just have time to change my ticket." She dashed off to the booking-office.

"That's so like Toby," said Virginia. "Always impulsive. She might have thought of changing Miss Phipp's ticket. What was she like at school, the dear thing?"

"Excellent at mathematics," replied Miss Phipp. "Languages weak, as far as I remember."

The train slipped off on its two hours' non-stop run, with Virginia and Humphrey in one carriage and Miss Dexter and Miss Phipp in another. The two ladies had much to say to one another as to the course of their respective lives since they had last met. Miss Phipp's career had been one of arduous work, punctuated by continental trips and an occasional period of bad health. "I suppose I have worked too hard," she said. "The doctors all say so, although I can't say I've ever been aware of it while I've actually been working. If I can't work I'd just as soon not live, and I've always had just the work that suited me. It's a blow to have to give it up. If it hadn't been for my health I should have been head-mistress of a big school long ago, and I'd have shown them what women's education could be. Now I've got to settle down to take two girls instead of two hundred, and I suppose if I try to teach them anything I shall be thwarted at every turn. Girls ought to be sent to school. I've no opinion of home education, and these two don't seem to have been taught anything. I'm low about it, Margaret. Still, I've got to do it, for a bit anyhow, and if they've got any brains I'll knock something into them, if I'm allowed to. However, we needn't worry ourselves about all that now. What have you been doing? Leading a life of luxury and gaiety, I suppose."

The smile with which she asked her question was affectionate. She had been a big girl at the school when Margaret Dexter had been a little one, and had mothered her. Margaret Dexter's father had been a consulting physician with a large practice. She had lived in different surroundings from most of her school-fellows.

"I've always had rather more luxury than I cared about," replied Miss Dexter. "As for gaiety, I don't care about that at all. I'm not cut out for it."

Her companion regarded her with more attention than she had yet bestowed. "You have grown to look very sensible," she said.

"Thanks," replied Miss Dexter. "That means that my appearance is not prepossessing. I've always known that, and it doesn't bother me a bit."

Miss Phipp laughed. "It is all coming back to me," she said. "At first, except that your face is much the same, I should hardly have recognised you for the little girl I used to be so fond of. But you haven't altered, Margaret. You are just as direct as ever. I believe I first taught you to be direct."

"If you did, you had easy ground to work on," replied Miss Dexter.

"I suppose I had. But aren't you doing anything, Margaret? You're not just spending your life like other rich people—going about and amusing yourself? You weren't like that as a child."

"I'm not rich," returned Miss Dexter. "My father died too young to make a lot of money. And as for doing something, I'm companion to Lady George Dubec."

Miss Phipp was visibly taken aback. "Oh!" she exclaimed; and after a pause said, "I'm sorry. Still, if you're obliged to earn your living, I should have thought you might have done something more useful than going out as a companion to a lady of fashion."

Miss Dexter coloured and then laughed. "It's all coming back to me too," she said. "That's what you used to call talking straight, and we used to call Janet's manners. If it is any comfort to you to know it, I don't have to earn my own living—I only said I wasn't rich. I live with Virginia Dubec because I love her, and I share some of the expenses. I'll tell you how much I pay if you like."

"Oh, don't be silly," said Miss Phipp. "You said you were her companion, and I took that to mean what anybody would. Then you're *not* doing anything, and I'm sorry for it. However, we needn't quarrel about that. What are these people like I'm going to? I've seen Mrs. Clinton, and on the whole I like her."

"Well, I don't," said Miss Dexter, "and if I weren't such a fool as to follow Virginia about wherever she wants to go to, as if she were a baby, I shouldn't go within a mile of Mrs. Clinton. I don't mind telling you, as you're bound to find out for yourself directly you get to Kencote, that Virginia is going to marry Captain Clinton, the eldest son, and the whole family have hitherto turned up their stupid noses at her. Now he seems to have persuaded them to inspect her and see whether she'll do, after all. She's worth a hundred of the whole lot of them put together, except, perhaps, Captain Clinton himself, who has behaved fairly well. No, I'll do him justice—he's behaved quite well. He's all right. But Mrs. Clinton—well, you say you like her, but you'll see;

as for Mr. Clinton, he's the most odious, purse-proud, blood-proud, ignorant old pig you'll find anywhere."

"H'm!'" commented Miss Phipp drily. "Seems a nice sort of family I'm going to. What's that youth travelling with your Lady Virginia, or whatever her name is—what's *he* like?"

"What he looks like," replied Miss Dexter shortly.

"And the girls I'm going to teach?"'

"I don't know them, and don't want to."

"But you will, if you're going to stay in the house. And you must have heard about them."

"Well, I believe they're rather fun," admitted Miss Dexter grudgingly. "And they're reported to be clever. Still, they've been boxed up at home all their lives, and can't know much. I expect you'll have your work cut out."

"They'll have their work cut out," returned Miss Phipp grimly, "and they'll have to do it too. I do hate having to go out as a governess, Margaret."

Miss Dexter glanced at her friend, who was so plain as to be almost unfeminine, and looked jaded and unwell besides; she had her eyes fixed on the suburban landscape now flying past at sixty miles an hour, and something in her aspect caused Miss Dexter's heart to contract. "Poor old Janet," she said, "I don't suppose it will be as bad as you expect. I'm a brute to be trying to put you against them. You won't see much of Mr. Clinton, and he probably won't bother you when you do. As for Mrs. Clinton, if you want the truth, she once gave me a snub, and I feel catty about her; so you needn't take any notice of what I say. The children are real characters, with any amount of brains, and you'll have a great opportunity with them if you can keep them in order."

Miss Phipp brightened up. "Ah, that's better hearing," she said. "As for keeping them in order, after a class of thirty High School girls, that's child's play."

"Well, I don't want to paint *too* bright a picture," said Miss Dexter, "and from what I've heard of them I don't think that it will be quite that."

In the meantime Virginia and Humphrey were getting on very well in their more luxurious compartment. Humphrey had expressed his pleasure at the opening up of the home of his fathers to his brother's expectant bride, and in such a fashion that Virginia had warmed to him and told him exactly how things stood.

"You see, I'm going on what the shops call 'appro,'" she said. "If they don't like me they can turn me out again."

"And if they *do* like you," said Humphrey, "which, of course, they will——"

"Then all will be well," concluded Virginia.

He looked out of the window before he asked, carelessly, "I suppose Dick's there?"

"Of course Dick's there," said Virginia. "You don't suppose I should venture into the lion's den without my Dick to support me, do you? Dear old Dick! I'm glad he's made it up with your father."

"So am I," said Humphrey, after the minutest pause. "Family quarrels are the devil and all. And there was no sense in this one. I suppose he's chucked the idea of Yorkshire, and he's returned to the bosom of the fold."

"Oh, good gracious, no!" said Virginia. "At least he hasn't said so. Why should he, anyway? I guess we shall want all the dollars we can grab at. A wife's an expensive luxury, you know, Mr. Humphrey."

"Especially a wife like you," returned Humphrey genially. "Still, I shouldn't be surprised if you find Yorkshire 'off' when you get to Kencote. If the governor has come round about you, he'll probably come round about—about other things."

"You mean money?" said Virginia. "We're not bothering ourselves about that."

"*You're* not, perhaps."

"You mean that Dick is? I don't know anything about it, and I don't care. That's not what I'm going to Kencote for. Why do men always think such a lot about money, I wonder?"

"Ah, I wonder," said Humphrey.

The four travellers joined up at Bathgate, where they had to change, and travelled to Kencote together in a second-class carriage, on Virginia's decision, which Humphrey accepted with some distaste, but did not combat.

Dick and the twins were on the platform at Kencote. The twins were inveterate train-meeters,

whenever they were allowed to be, and Dick had brought them this evening with the idea of packing them and Miss Dexter and Miss Phipp into one carriage and accompanying Virginia in the other. But Humphrey had not been expected, and the greeting between the brothers was not particularly cordial. However, he grasped the situation when he saw a landau and a brougham in waiting outside instead of the station omnibus, which he had expected to see, and solved it by announcing his intention of walking.

"We would come with you, darling," said Joan in an aside, "but we must see it out with our image. What's she like, Humphrey?"

"Oh, most lovable—as you can see," replied Humphrey, disengaging his arm and setting out into the darkness.

When the carriage into which the twins had packed themselves with Miss Phipp and Miss Dexter had rolled off in the wake of the other, Miss Phipp said, "Well, girls, I hope we shall get on well together. You're not afraid of hard work, I suppose?"

"Oh no," replied Joan readily; "we're looking forward to it immensely."

"You will find our diligence one of our best points," said Nancy. "If at first we don't succeed we always try, try, try again."

There was a moment's silence, except for the sharp trot of the horse's hoofs and the wheels rolling on the frosty road. Then Miss Dexter laughed suddenly. "There, you're answered," she said to Miss Phipp. "Let's put them through an examination. What do you know of mathematics?"

"Don't be foolish, Margaret," said Miss Phipp sharply. "They must not begin by making fun of their lessons."

"Oh, but we shouldn't think of doing that," said Joan.

"They're far too serious, and we have been taught not to make fun of serious things," said Nancy.

Miss Dexter laughed again. "What do you know of mathematics?" she asked.

"Nancy is not good at them," replied Joan. "She got as far as the asses' bridge in Euclid, with the starling, our last governess, and then she struck, as you might expect. Her strong point is literature. She writes poems that bring tears to the eyes."

"Joan's weak point is history," said Nancy. "She thought Henry the Eighth was a widower when he married Anne Boleyn, and Starling made her learn all his wives in order before she went to bed."

"That will do, girls," said Miss Phipp firmly. "And if Miss Starling was the name of your last governess, please call her so."

The ensuing silence was broken by a smothered giggle from Joan, which Nancy covered up by asking in a rather shaky voice of Miss Dexter whether she and Miss Phipp had known each other before.

"Yes," said Miss Dexter, "we were at school together—oh, years ago—and have never seen each other since, until we met on the platform. Funny, wasn't it? I say, is there a ghost at Kencote?"

"Oh, no, it isn't old enough," replied Joan. "But there's one at the dower-house—an old man in one boot who goes about looking for the other one."

"That's a jolly sort of ghost," said Miss Dexter. "Do you know who he was?"

"He is supposed to have been an ancestor in the time of Charles the Second—he's dressed like that—who kicked his servant to death, and——"

"We've got some topping ancestors," put in Nancy. "There's a book about them. Joan and I read it the other day. One of them was called Abraham, and he said if he had a name like that he must live up to it, so he called his sons Jacob and Esau——"

"He only had one and he called him Isaac," interrupted Joan. "You have got it wrong."

"That will do," said Miss Phipp decisively, and just then the carriage clattered under the porch and came to a standstill.

The Squire had not been able to bring himself to meet his guests in the hall, as was the hospitable custom at Kencote. He had meant to do so. He had given in on the main point on which he had held out so long, and honestly intended to behave well about it. He had gone to and fro between his room and the morning-room across the hall, standing first before the fire near which his wife was sitting, and then reading the *Times* for a few minutes in his own easy-chair, and when the wheels of the first carriage had been heard, and Mrs. Clinton had put aside her

work and risen according to custom, he had gone out with her into the hall. But when the servants came through to the door he thought that they cast curious looks at him, as possibly they did, and he bolted suddenly back to the shelter of his room, and stood there listening, until the door of the morning-room was shut and the noises outside had ceased.

Then he grew ashamed of himself. What would Dick think of him? If he delayed any longer it would look as if he were holding off, after all—refusing to put at her ease and make welcome a guest in his own house. So he gathered up his courage, settled his waistcoat, and walked boldly into the morning-room, and straight up to Miss Dexter, who was nearest to the door, and with whom he shook hands warmly, somewhat to her confusion, before he distinguished Virginia, who had risen when he came in.

Her colour was high, and her eyes sparkling, but she smiled in his face, and said, as Americans do on an introduction, "Mr. Clinton," and then waited for him to speak, still standing and looking straight into his eyes, with the smile that invited friendliness.

The Squire turned away from her somewhat confused, and said, "Tea ready, Nina? Lady George must be cold after her journey. What sort of weather was it in London?"

Miss Dexter replied to the question, as his brows had been bent upon her when it was asked. She said it was rather raw, and the answer seemed to satisfy him, for he left that subject and remarked that the Radicals seemed to be making a disgraceful mess of it as usual, and if this sort of thing went on we should all be driven out of the country.

This led nowhere, and that awful pause seemed likely to ensue where people ill at ease with one another search for topics to hide up their discomfort. But Virginia, who had sat down again, said, "Mr. Clinton, have you ever forgiven us for heading back the fox?"

"Eh! What!" asked the Squire, with a lively recollection of the rebuke he had administered on the occasion referred to.

Virginia laughed. "You were terrible," she said. "But you had every right to be terrible. I'd never done such a thing before, and I hope I shall never do such a thing again. I feel like getting under the sofa every time I think of it."

The Squire thought the last statement just slightly verging on indelicacy, but its effect on his mind was only momentary, so relieved was he at having a subject held out to him. Deep down in his heart he held to his aversion to Virginia, and nothing in her appearance or attitude had in the least softened it. But, externally, it had to be covered up, and because she offered him a covering he was grateful, and for the moment well disposed towards her.

"Ladies who come into the hunting-field," he said, with a near approach to a smile, "and turn foxes, must expect to be spoken sharply to."

This was enough for Virginia to go on with, but not for Miss Dexter, who had heard the words, but missed the smile. "It is like interfering with a child's toys," she said. "He forgets his manners for the moment."

The Squire bent a look of puzzled displeasure on her, but before her words could sink in, Virginia said, "Toby, don't be tiresome. You don't know anything whatever about hunting, and you are so absurdly vain that you can't bear to be corrected when you've done wrong."

Dick laughed and said to his mother, "Miss Dexter gets a good deal of correction and puts up with it like an angel. She's not in the least vain, really."

"Nothing much to be vain of," said Miss Dexter, with complete equanimity.

The Squire was still looking at her as if adjusting his mind to her presence and potentialities, and she looked up at him and said, "Miss Phipp, your children's governess, is an old friend of mine. We were at school together." Then she looked down again and took a sip of tea.

The Squire seemed at a loss to know what use to make of this piece of information, but Dick said, "She looks as if she would be able to handle them all right."

"You mean that she is plain," said Miss Dexter.

"You seem to be in a very bad humour," Dick retorted.

"She's in an atrocious humour," said Virginia. "She always is when she's been travelling. She will pick up and be thoroughly amiable when she's had two cups of tea."

"Do let me give you another one," said Mrs. Clinton, with a kind smile, and everybody laughed, including the Squire, a second or two late.

Conversation went fairly easily after that, and by and by Mrs. Clinton took Virginia and Miss Dexter up to their rooms. Never very ready of speech, she had little to say as they went up the staircase and along the corridors, but when she had shown them their rooms, which were adjoining, she asked, "Would you like to come and see the children in their quarters? I hope they

are making Miss Phipp feel at home."

"I should love to," said Virginia; and Miss Dexter said, "They ought to have come to some understanding by now."

Joan and Nancy were sitting one on either side of Miss Phipp at the tea-table. Their demure air, which did not quite correspond to the look in their eyes, probably warned Mrs. Clinton that if any understanding had been come to it was of a one-sided nature, but Miss Phipp looked comfortable both in mind and body, and said, as she rose from the table, "We have been having a good talk about our future plans. We are going to do a great deal of hard work together, and put all our minds into it."

The twins, for once, forbore to add to a statement of that nature. Their bright eyes were fixed full upon Virginia, who smiled radiantly on them and said, "What a lovely schoolroom you have! I shouldn't mind working in a room like this."

"It *is* rather nice," said Joan. "Miss Starling, our last governess, taught us to keep it in order."

"Miss Starling seems to have taught them some very useful things," said Miss Phipp, with firm complacency. "She was with you for a good many years, was she not, Mrs. Clinton?"

"Her name was 'Miss Bird,'" said Mrs. Clinton. "We were all very fond of her, and the boys gave her a nickname out of affection."

"Oh!" said Miss Phipp, casting a glance of disapproval on the twins, who met it with eyes of blameless innocence.

Later on when the twins went to their room to change their frocks they dismissed Hannah from attendance on them. "We have something to talk over," said Joan, "and we can do without you this evening."

"You had better wait outside on the mat and we'll call you if we want you," said Nancy.

"Indeed, Miss Nancy, I should demean myself by doing no such thing," said the indignant Hannah. "If you wish to talk between yourselves as well I know what you want to talk about, though deny it you may, straight downstairs do I go, and you may do your 'airs yourself, for I shall not come up again till it's time to tidy."

"Hurry up," said Nancy. "We'll ring if we want you."

When Hannah had departed Joan said, "Well, what do you think of her"

"Who do you mean—Virginia, or Pipp, or Toby?"

"Virginia, of course. I think she's rather sweet. She's worth ten of sweet Sue Clinton, anyhow."

"That's not saying much for her. I think she's all right, though. But I haven't seen any signs of the chocolates yet."

"What chocolates?"

"I thought she'd be sure, to bring us a great big expensive box tied up with pink ribbons, so as to make friends with us and get us on her side."

"I shouldn't have thought nearly so much of her if she had. What I like about her is that she doesn't toady. She knows she's got to make a good impression, but she doesn't show she's trying. I'm sure mother likes her."

"We haven't seen her with father yet."

"We shall at dinner. I really think she's rather a darling, Nancy. I think I shall give in."

Nancy announced her intention of holding out a little longer just to make sure. "She's just the merest trifle too sweet for my taste," she said. "I must be quite certain that it's part of her first."

"I'm sure it's part of her," said Joan. "She isn't any sweeter than Aunt Grace, and you like her."

"Aunt Grace is too sweet for my taste, although it is part of her, and isn't put on. I like people with more character. Toby, now—she's a ripper."

"Yes, I like her," admitted Joan. "She likes us too. I think she wants to egg us on to deal with Pipp."

"We shan't want much egging. We've got her a bit puzzled already. I don't think she's a bad sort, you know, Joan. I thought she'd give us bread and water when mother went away."

"She's not quite sure of herself yet. We'll go on playing at being High School girls for a bit.

It's rather fun. Don't they wear their hair in pigtails?"

"We might plait our hair after breakfast to-morrow. And they always say 'Yes, Miss Phipp,' 'No, Miss Phipp.' You know that story we read?"

"We'll go through it again. We'll do all the proper things at lesson time, and outside the schoolroom we'll be our own sweet selves. It will be rather a bore going for walks with her."

"She can't be allowed to be instructive then."

"Rather not. She'll want firm handling, but I think we shall be equal to it."

"It may come to a tussle. But we've only got to keep our heads. There are two of us, and there's only one of her. We'll be kind but firm, and when she's learnt her place I dare say we shall get on all right, and everything will go swimmingly. What *has* Hannah done with my hair-ribbon? Ring the bell loud, Joan, and go on ringing till she comes up."

CHAPTER XXV

A LAWN MEET

The Squire may have forgotten, when he gave his consent to Virginia being asked to Kencote on this particular date, that on the following day the hounds would meet at Kencote, and there was to be a hunt breakfast. He had his due share of stupidity, but he was clever enough to see, when he did realise what had happened, that Virginia's presence at Kencote on so public an occasion would spread abroad the fact of his surrender as nothing else could do so pointedly.

He did not half like it. He was not quite sure in his mind exactly what he had surrendered by consenting to receive her, but he was quite sure that he had never meant to give up his right to make her first visit her last if he did not approve of her, and when the mild January day dawned and he went into his dressing-room it was with a mind considerably perplexed, for he did not know whether he approved of her or not, and yet here were all these people coming, who would see her there, and possibly—the more officious of them—actually go so far as to congratulate him on the approaching marriage in his family.

He had gone as far as that. He recognised that, whatever he thought about the matter himself, the rest of the world, as represented by the people amongst whom he lived, would, undoubtedly, hold that there was cause for congratulation. He even went a little further, without admitting it to himself: he accepted the general verdict of his neighbours, that Virginia was a very beautiful and a very taking person. Only he had not taken to her himself. She had tried him hard, during the previous evening, and several times, especially after his first glass of port, he had nearly allowed himself to fall a victim to her charm. But he had just managed to hold out, and in the cold light of morning, and removed from her presence, thinking also of the company that was presently to assemble, he frowned when he thought of her, and said aloud as he brushed his hair, which he always did the first thing in the morning, even before he looked at the weather-glass, "Confound the woman! Infernal nuisance! I wish the day was well over."

Presently, however, his thoughts grew rather lighter. It was a perfect day for his favourite sport, and he was going to hunt once more. He felt as eager as a schoolboy for it. Having received Virginia in his house, there was no object in seeking to avoid her in the field, and the relief to his mind in having nothing before him actually to spoil his pleasure in a day with the hounds was so great that it reacted on his view of Virginia, and he said, also aloud, as he folded his stock, "I wonder if she'll do after all."

But no; that was too much. Of course she wouldn't do. She was an American—well, perhaps that could be forgiven her: she was not glaringly transatlantic. She had been a stage-dancer. You had to remind yourself of the fact, but there was no doubt that it was a fact. Ugh! She was the widow of a rascal, living on the money he had left her, which had been got, probably, by the shadiest of courses, if not dishonestly. That was positively damning, and he could not understand how Dick could complaisantly accept such a situation and prepare to live partly upon it. But perhaps she had very little money and was deeply in debt, and there would be difficulty about that later on. He had not thought of that before, and slid away from the thought now, as quickly as possible. He did not want to spoil his day's pleasure. But a gloomy tinge was imparted to his thoughts, and again he frowned at the idea of what lay before him when the neighbours for miles round would be collected and he would have his difficult part to play before them.

Virginia came down to breakfast in her riding habit, which is a becoming costume to no woman unless she is on a horse. The Squire had an old-fashioned grudge against hunting-women in general, and he was not cordial to Virginia, although he made every effort to act conformably to his duties as her host. Whatever inroads she might have made on his prejudice against her on the previous evening when, in a dress of black chiffon with touches of heliotrope about her neck and in her lustrous hair, she had looked lovely and surprisingly young, she held small charm for

him now, and it was with difficulty that he brought himself to be polite to her, as she sat at his right hand during breakfast.

Fortunately some distraction was afforded to him by the presence of Miss Phipp, to whom he had just been introduced for the first time. He found her astonishingly plain, and he was the sort of man who finds food for humour in the contemplation of a plain woman. But in his present mild state of discomfort he found no food for humour in Miss Phipp's obvious disregard of her proper position in the house. Miss Bird had never spoken at the breakfast table unless spoken to. She would have considered it immodest to do so. Miss Phipp bore a leading part in the conversation, and as she had only one subject—the education of the young, in which the Squire possessed no overmastering interest—by the end of the meal he was seriously considering the necessity of giving her a snub.

Miss Phipp's thesis, which she developed with considerable force, and a wealth of illustration drawn from her previous experience, was that a woman's brains were every bit as good as a man's, and that she could do just as much in the way of scholarship if her training began early and was carried on on the right lines.

"What do *you* think about it?" Miss Dexter asked of Nancy, who was sitting next to her.

"I think," replied Nancy, with a side glance at Miss Phipp, "that it depends a great deal on the teacher," at which Miss Dexter laughed, thus giving the answer a personal application.

"*Of course* it depends a great deal upon the teacher. That is exactly what I said," Miss Phipp went on. "When I was at the High School there was a girl who had taken the highest possible honours at London University, but she was of no more use as a teacher than—than anything. Teaching is a gift by itself, and sometimes the best scholars do not possess it."

"I think we shall find a fox in Hartover," said the Squire. "I believe that fellow they lost a month ago has taken up his quarters there."

"At the same time," said Miss Phipp, "for the higher forms of a school you *must* have women who are good scholars as well as with a gift for teaching."

When breakfast was over the twins went out of the room one on each side of Miss Dexter, to whom they had taken a warm fancy, and invited her to visit their animals with them. But Miss Phipp said at once, "Oh, but I shall want you in the schoolroom, girls. We are not to begin lessons until Monday, but we must lose no time then, and I want to find out beforehand exactly where you are."

The twins looked at one another. They were all standing in the hall. "Saturday is a whole holiday," said Joan.

"That I know," replied Miss Phipp, "but it is important that we should begin work on Monday without any delay. You can spare an hour. I shall probably not keep you longer."

The twins looked at one another again, and then at Miss Dexter, who preserved a perfectly passive demeanour. "I think, if you don't mind," said Joan, "we would rather get up an hour earlier on Monday. We always feed the animals ourselves on Saturdays, directly after breakfast."

"Are you going to begin with me by showing disobedience?'" asked Miss Phipp. "I must insist now that you shall come upstairs with me."

The High School girls would have recognised this tone and quailed before it. But Nancy said, "We'll come if mother says we must," and Miss Phipp lost patience, and without another word walked into the morning-room, into which she had seen Mrs. Clinton go with Virginia.

The twins looked at one another once more, and then at Miss Dexter, who received their glance with a twinkle in her eyes. "Now you're in for it," she said.

But the twins were rather alarmed. "We weren't rude to her, were we?" asked Joan.

"Hadn't we better go in to mother?" asked Nancy.

"No, it's all right; we'll wait here," said Miss Dexter, and they waited in silence until Miss Phipp marched out of the morning-room, passed them without a word, and went upstairs.

"Now we'll go and put our hats on and go out and see the animals," said Miss Dexter; but just then Mrs. Clinton came out to them, looking rather concerned, and Miss Dexter left them and joined Virginia in the morning-room.

"What happened?" she asked eagerly.

"My dear Toby," replied Virginia, "are you going to foment a quarrel between those darling children and the bosom friend of your childhood?"

"No, I'm not," replied Miss Dexter. "I'm going to put her in the way of settling down here. What happened?"

"What happened? Why, she came in looking as red as a tomato, and said, 'Mrs. Clinton, I want the children to come into the schoolroom for an hour, and they refuse. Is it your wish that they shall disobey me?' or something like that."

"They didn't refuse. What did Mrs. Clinton say?"

"She said, 'Oh, surely not, Miss Phipp,' and it turned out, as you say, that they had only said that they would rather not. Then Mrs. Clinton said that she didn't want them to work on Saturdays, especially to-day, because of the meet, and the friend of your childhood flounced out of the room without another word. Toby, that good lady is as hot as pepper."

Then Mrs. Clinton came in again, and said, "I want the children to take Miss Phipp out to see their animals too. They have gone up to her. Will you go too?"

But Miss Phipp was not in the schoolroom. "You go and put on your hats, and I'll go and find her," said Miss Dexter.

"Mother wasn't annoyed with us," said Joan. "We said we were quite polite. We were, weren't we?"

"Your manners were a lesson to us all," said Miss Dexter.

Miss Phipp was in her bedroom, and Miss Dexter proffered the invitation, of which she took no notice. "It's perfectly preposterous," she said, turning an angry face upon her. "If this is the sort of thing that is to happen my position here will be impossible."

"My dear girl, you shouldn't lose your temper," said Miss Dexter. "They were quite right. You've no right to expect them to work in their playtime. Besides, you shouldn't have told Mrs. Clinton that they were disobedient. Come out and see their rabbits and guinea-pigs."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," said Miss Phipp. "I shall reconsider my position. I will not stay and teach girls who are encouraged to set my authority at naught."

"Look here, Janet," said Miss Dexter firmly. "You are going the wrong way to work here. You have every chance of having a real good time, and doing something useful besides, but you can't behave in a private family as if you were in a school."

For answer Miss Phipp burst into most feminine tears. "I'm not well," she sobbed. "I've got a splitting headache after yesterday's journey, and I've lost control over myself."

"Well, lie down for a bit," advised Miss Dexter. "You'll have the whole day to yourself, and you needn't begin to think about work until Monday. I'll put a match to your fire. Is there anything you'd like? If there is I'm sure you can have it."

"I'm a fool," said Miss Phipp, drying her eyes. "For goodness' sake don't let those two know I broke down. I dare say I was wrong, but I do want to do all I can to get them on quickly."

"I know you do. And you'll have no difficulty when the proper time comes. They're clever girls, and nice ones too. They are quite upset at the idea of having upset *you*."

"Are they?" said Miss Phipp drily. "Well, I think I *will* lie down for a bit and take some Phenacetin. No, I don't want anything else. If I do, I can ring the bell."

So she was left to herself, and Miss Dexter accompanied the twins in their various errands of mercy, and expressed unbounded admiration of the breeding and intelligence of the rodents submitted to her inspection, after which they took her for a walk round the rhododendron dell.

They, were a little less ready with their conversation than usual, for the late episode had been something quite new in their experience and given them occasion for thought. At last Miss Dexter said, "If you are worrying about Janet Phipp, I shouldn't, if I were you. She's a good sort, and you'll get on with her all right."

"I hope we shall," said Joan, "but I'm inclined to doubt it. She's so *very* different to the old starling. We had any amount of fun with her, but then, we loved her."

"Well, you'll love Miss Phipp when you know her. I've known her for—well, I won't tell you how many years, but we're neither of us chickens, as you can see."

"And do you love her?" asked Nancy.

"I used to, and I should again if I saw anything of her."

"Well, that's something in her favour," said Joan. "But Nancy and I will have to talk it over and settle our course of action."

"Well, talk it over now. I shan't repeat anything you say."

"We like you very much," said Nancy. "But as you're a friend of hers, we might not like to

speak quite plainly. It's rather a serious situation."

"Oh, you can talk quite plainly before me. I can see the situation well enough, and it isn't as serious as you think. She has never been in a private family before, and has had no experience except with a horde of schoolgirls. Of course you have to keep a tight hand over them, and when they're at school nobody has authority over them except the teachers. She'll soon tumble to it that your mother has more say in things than she can have. But you mustn't always be appealing to your mother against her."

"Of course we shouldn't do that," said Joan indignantly. "We never did with Starling, except in fun."

"Besides, we are quite capable of controlling the situation by ourselves, when once we've settled on a course of action," said Nancy.

Miss Dexter laughed. "I've no doubt you are," she said. "Only give her a chance. That's all I ask."

"I suppose you don't object to our exercising our humour on her?" asked Nancy. "We have our reputation to keep up. And you must admit that she was rather trying this morning."

"Look here," said Miss Dexter. "She's been ill, and she's not well now. You may think it funny, but when I went in to see her just now she cried."

"Oh, poor darling!" exclaimed Joan. "Of course we'll be kind to her, won't we, Nancy?"

"We'll think it over," said Nancy. "We mustn't be sentimental. You're rather inclined to it, Joan. She may have shed tears of rage at being thwarted."

"You're a beast," said Joan uncompromisingly. "I hate to think of people being unhappy."

"You see," Miss Dexter put in, "she's suffering under a great disappointment. She's a splendid teacher and was getting on awfully well, and then she broke down and has had to take a private job. Many people would much prefer to live in a place like this, and have a good time, instead of toiling hard at a school. But, for her, it's good-bye to a career in life, and she can't help feeling rather sore about it."

"Poor darling!" exclaimed Joan again. "We'll take her to our hearts and make up for it. Don't you be afraid, Toby dear—you don't mind us calling you that, do you?—if Nancy misbehaves I know how to deal with her."

"I don't want to misbehave," said Nancy, "and if I did you couldn't stop me. If she treats us well we'll treat her well. I shan't make any rash promises. I think we'd better be getting back now. People will begin to turn up soon, and it's such fun to see them."

They went back to the house, and presently there came riding up the drive two men in pink, and immediately after there came a dogcart and then a carriage and then more men on horses and a lady or two, and after that a constant succession of riders and people on wheels and on foot, until the open stretch of park in front of the house was full of them.

And at last the huntsman and whips came trotting slowly along the drive and on to the grass, and the hounds streaming along with them waving their sterns, a useful, well-matched pack, much alike in the mass, but each with as much individuality as the men and women who thronged around them.

Then the members of the hunt began to drift by twos and threes into the house and into the dining-room, where the Squire was very hospitable and hearty in pressing refreshments on them —"just a sandwich, or something to keep out the draught," he kept on repeating, full of pleasure at being able to feed dozens of people who didn't want feeding, and quite forgetting for the time being his fears as to the effect of Virginia's presence.

Virginia, not wishing any more than he to make herself a centre of the occasion, was on her horse already, and Dick was with her, and a handsome pair they made. So thought old Aunt Laura who had had herself drawn up by the porch in her Bath chair, as far away as possible from "the horses' hoofs." She had just heard that a marriage was about to take place in the family and was full of twittering excitement at the news.

"My nephew," she said, meaning the Rector, "told me the glad news only this morning, my dear. I am overjoyed to hear it, and to have the opportunity of seeing you so soon. Please do not bring your horse too close, if you do not mind. I am somewhat nervous of animals."

"I'll bring her to see you this evening, Aunt Laura," said Dick, "or, if she's too tired, to-morrow morning."

"I shan't be too tired," said Virginia, smiling at the old lady. "Dick has often told me about you, Miss Clinton, but you know I have never been in Kencote before."

The Rector had given Aunt Laura some hint of the difficulty there had been over the

engagement, and she said soothingly, "I know, my dear, I know. But I have no doubt you will be here very often now, and I am sure nobody will be more pleased to see you than I shall. Dear me, what with Walter and Cicely being married two years ago and Dick and Humphrey about to be married, one feels one belongs to a family in which things are always happening. I only wish that my dear sisters had been alive to take part in it all. They would have been so pleased. But the last of them died last year, as no doubt Dick has told you, and I am no longer able to welcome you in our old home. But I have a very nice little house in the village, and if you will come and drink a cup of tea with me I shall feel great gratification, and I will show you some of my treasures. Tell me, Dick, for my eyes are not quite what they were, is that our Cousin Humphrey?"

It was, in fact, Lord Meadshire, who in spite of a cold, which made him hoarser than ever, had driven over with his daughter, and now, looking frail and shrunken in his heavy fur coat, but indomitably determined to make the best of life, came slowly across the gravel to greet once again the only member of his own generation left alive amongst all his relations.

"Well, Laura," he said, "this is like old times, eh?" and then he recognised Virginia, and showed, although he did not say so, that he was pleasantly surprised to see her there.

"You have heard, I suppose, Humphrey," said Aunt Laura, with obvious pride in being first with the news, "that we are shortly to have yet another wedding in the family. I have not seen dear Edward yet; I have no doubt he is busy indoors, but will be out soon—and I shall be able to tell him how glad I am that everything is happily settled."

Lord Meadshire's sharp old eyes twinkled up at Virginia, and at Dick, who said, "Don't you say anything to him about it yet, Aunt Laura. He's not quite ready for it"; and Lord Meadshire added, "You've been given early news, Laura. We must keep it to ourselves until it is published abroad—what? My dear"—this to Virginia—"I needn't tell you how glad I am, and I wish you every possible happiness and prosperity."

He stayed to chat for a few minutes with Aunt Laura after Virginia and Dick had moved away. "It seems but yesterday," said Aunt Laura, "that my dear father, who, of course, kept these hounds, entertained his friends here in just such a way as this, and I was a little girl with all my dear sisters, and you were a young man, Humphrey, very gay and active, riding over and talking and laughing with everybody. And it is just the same pretty scene now as it was then, although all the people who took part in it are dead, except you and I."

"My dear Laura," wheezed Lord Meadshire, "I'm gay and active now, if it comes to that, and so are you, in your heart of hearts. Come, let us forget that tiresome number of years that lies behind us and go and amuse ourselves with the rest. If I stand out here in the cold, I shall have Emily after me—what?"

So Aunt Laura was helped out of her Bath chair, and they went into the house together slowly, and arm in arm.

The Squire hastened to meet them and find chairs for them, rather uncomfortably near the fire. He was loud in his expressions of pleasure at seeing his kinsman there, and not unmindful, either, of the comfort of Aunt Laura. He would have been beyond measure scandalised at the charge of treating her with increased consideration since he had learnt of her wealth, and indeed he had shown himself, as has been said, indifferent to the possibility of her being wealthy, but there was no doubt that she had increased in importance in his eyes during the last week or two, and she was accordingly treated more as a personage at Kencote than she had ever been before in her life.

Lord Meadshire accepted a glass of champagne. It was a festive occasion, and he loved festive occasions of all sorts. Everybody in the room came up and talked to him, and he was pleased to talk to everybody and said the right thing to each. But presently he found the opportunity of a word apart with the Squire.

"So you've given in, Edward—eh, what?" he remarked, with a mischievous look in his old face, and before he could be answered, said, more seriously, "Well, you were right to stick out if you thought it wouldn't do—to stick out as long as you could—but you must be glad all the bother's over now, and I feel sure you'll come to think it isn't so bad as you thought it would be. Come now, weren't all the rest of us right? Isn't she a dear creature?"

"I haven't given in," said the Squire shortly. "I don't know yet what I'm going to do. Of course, if Dick has made up his mind, I'm not going to keep him at arm's length all the rest of my life, however much I may object to what he's doing. That's why he's here, and why she's here."

"Ah!" said Lord Meadshire wisely. "That's the way to talk. When you say that you're nearly at the end of your troubles."

As he drove off a little later with Lady Kemsale he told her that Edward was conquered, although he wouldn't acknowledge it. "He's an obstinate fellow," said Lord Meadshire, "and from what Nina told me I should say that he's having hard work to hold out against the dear lady. Well, she's only got to keep on being herself and he'll be at her feet like all the rest of us."

"Dear papa," said Lady Kemsale, "Lady George has bewitched you."

"My dear," said Lord Meadshire, "I admit it fully. And if she can bewitch me she can bewitch Edward. She's half-way on the road already."

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT MISS PHIPP SAW

Miss Phipp lay quite still on her bed for half an hour with her eyes closed, while the pain in her head grew and became almost insupportable, as she had known it would, and then, under the influence of the drug, slowly ebbed away until, exhausted as she was, her state was one of such relief as to amount to bliss. She could not afford to be angry, if she was to escape the punishment of these short-lived but agonising bursts of pain, and she had been very angry. Now she told herself that she had been foolish to upset herself about nothing. Her friend's words had borne fruit in her robust and sensible mind. It was quite true that she could not expect to exercise the same undivided authority in a private house as in a school, and she must find compensations elsewhere, which she very speedily did. At the school she had herself been under authority, and had not been able to carry out unchecked her favourite theories of education. Here she would be free of that check, for she did not suppose that Mrs. Clinton would desire to interfere with her in her teaching. And the children were bright enough. Surely there was opportunity here for doing something in a small way, which she had never been able to do at all as yet! They were nice children too, with some character. They had not given in to her, but they had held out without being in the least rude, and it was good of them, after what had happened, to want her to go with them to see their odious animals.

At this point Mrs. Clinton, who had been told of her bad headache, knocked at her door and asked if she wanted anything. She thanked her and said "No," and Mrs. Clinton further asked if she would like to drive with her, for, if she was well enough, it might do her good.

She got off her bed and opened the door, and when Mrs. Clinton saw the dark circles under her eyes she exclaimed in sympathy, and insisted upon fetching eau-de-Cologne, and performing various little services for her, which, although she now scarcely needed them, made her feel that she was cared for. She was instructed to lie still for a while longer, and something should presently be sent up to her. Then she was to lunch quietly by herself, and in the afternoon, if she was well enough, to take a short walk in the park. "It is so fine," said Mrs. Clinton, "that I expect we shall be out all day, and you will have the whole house to yourself, and can be as quiet as you like. And mind you ask Garnett—my maid, you know—for anything you want. I will tell her to keep an eye on you."

Then she went away, and left Miss Phipp in a more comfortable frame of mind and body than before. She was not used to being looked after in illness, for she had lived a lonely life, and her near relations were long since dead. She felt extraordinarily grateful to this kind, thoughtful, sensible woman, who treated her as if she were a human being and not like a mere teaching machine, and the thought began to dawn upon her, that perhaps she might come to look upon Kencote as a home, such as she had never hitherto had, and in the days of her health had scarcely missed.

Her bedroom was in the front of the house, and she had heard, without much heeding them, the wheels and the beat of horse-hoofs and the voices outside. Now she began to be a little curious as to what was going on, and rose and drew up her blind and looked out.

The scene was quite new to her, and in spite of herself she exclaimed at it. Immediately beyond the wide gravel sweep in front of the house was the grass of the park, where the whole brave show of the South Meadshire Hunt was collected. It is doubtful if she had ever seen a pack of hounds in her life, and she watched them as if fascinated. Presently, at some signal which she had not discerned, the huntsman and the whips turned and trotted off with them, and behind them streamed all the horsemen and horsewomen, the carriages and carts, and the people on foot, until the whole scene which had been so full of life and colour was entirely empty of all human occupation, and there was only the damp grass of the park and the big bare trees under the pearly grey of the winter sky. She saw the Squire ride off on his powerful horse, and admired his sturdy erect carriage, and she saw Dick and Virginia, side by side, Humphrey, the pink of sartorial hunting perfection, Mrs. Clinton in her carriage, with Miss Dexter by her side and the twins opposite to her, and for a moment wished she had accepted her invitation to make one of the party, although she did not in the least understand where they were going to, or what they were going to do when they got there. All this concourse of apparently well-to-do and completely leisured people going seriously about a business so remote from any of the interests in life that she had known struck her as entirely strange and inexplicable. She might have been in the midst of some odd rites in an unexplored land. The very look of the country in its winter dress was strange to her, for she was a lifelong Londoner, and the country to her only meant a place where one spent summer holidays. Decidedly it would be interesting—more interesting than she had thought—to gain some insight into a life lived apparently by a very large number of people in England, if this one little corner could produce so many exponents of it, but curiously unlike any

life that she had lived herself or seen other people living.

She went through the course prescribed for her by Mrs. Clinton, and enjoyed the quiet of the big house and the warm airy seclusion of the schoolroom, where she read a book and wrote a little, and after lunch went to sleep on the sofa before the fire. Then at about half-past three, although she hated all forms of exercise and would have much preferred to stay indoors, she went out for a little walk.

She went down the drive and through the village, and was struck by the absence of humanity. If she had to take a walk on a winter afternoon she would have wished to take it on pavements and to feel herself one of a crowd. Here everybody she did meet stared at her, wondering, obviously, who she was, which rather annoyed her. But when she got out on to the country road and met nobody at all, she liked it still less, and walked on from a sheer sense of duty. She had no eyes for the mild beauty of the winter evening, nor ears for the breathing of the sleeping earth. She plodded doggedly on, hating the mud, and only longing to get back again to her book by the fireside. When she met a slow farm cart jogging homewards, she made no reply to the touch of the hat accorded her by the carter, but showed unfeigned terror at the friendly inquisitiveness of his dog. In her soft felt hat, black skirt, and braided jacket, she was as much out of place in the wide brooding landscape as if she had been in the desert of Sahara, and disliked the one as much as she would have disliked the other.

As she was going up the drive on her return, she felt a little glow at the sight of the lighted windows of the house. If she had thought of it she would have known that it was her first experience of the pleasures of the country in winter, for a house in a city does not arouse exactly that feeling of expectant warmth, however much one may desire to get inside it. But, even if she had been prepared to examine the causes of the impulse, she would not have been able to, for it was immediately ejected from her mind by one of terror. It was caused by the sudden sharp trot of a horse on the gravel immediately behind her. She turned round, terribly startled and prepared for instant annihilation. But the horse had only crossed the drive, and was now cantering across the turf away from her. It was riderless, the stirrups swinging against its flanks, the reins broken and trailing.

At first she did not, so entirely ignorant was she of such things, attach any meaning at all to the empty saddle. For all she knew, horses without riders might roam the wilds of the country, adding greatly to its dangers, as a matter of recognised habit. But when she had recovered from her shock, some connection between what she had just seen and something she had read or heard of or seen in a picture formed itself in her mind, and it occurred to her that probably the horse had got rid of its rider, and there might conceivably have been an unpleasant accident. Then she made a further rapid and brilliant induction, and came to the conclusion that a riderless horse which made his way home to his stable at Kencote had probably set out from Kencote with some one on his back, and, as his saddle had no pommels, that either the Squire or Dick or Humphrey had been thrown. She knew nothing about grooms and second horses, and narrowed her convictions still further by the recollection of Dick's having ridden a grey. The riderless horse was brown—it was really a bright bay, but it was brown to her. Therefore either the Squire or Humphrey must have been thrown from his horse in the hunting-field, and from scraps of recollection of old novels in which hunting scenes had occurred the outcome of such accidents presented itself to her alarmed mind as probably fatal.

She stood at the door after having rung the bell—it did not occur to her to open it and walk in—a prey to the liveliest fears, and when she had waited for some time and rung again and then waited some time more, she was not at all relieved by the face of the servant who opened it to her. "The horse!" she said quickly. "Whose horse?"

"I'm afraid it's Mr. Clinton's, miss," said the man. "Mrs. Clinton and the young ladies are in the morning-room and nobody's told 'em yet. We don't know what to do."

It was not the grave and decorous butler who had answered the bell, but the same young footman who had omitted to see to the smoking-room fire a week or so before, or Miss Phipp would not have had the unpleasant duty thrust upon her of breaking the news to Mrs. Clinton. But she accepted it at once, and went straight into the morning-room, where Mrs. Clinton, still in her furs, and Miss Dexter and the twins were drinking tea.

"Oh, Miss Phipp, I do hope you are better," said Mrs. Clinton. "Sit down and have some tea and tell me how you have been getting on."

"May I speak to you for a moment?" said Miss Phipp, standing at the door, and Mrs. Clinton rose from her seat and came out into the hall with her, where some of the servants were beginning to collect. Their scared faces did not reassure her, and she put her hand to her heart as she turned to Miss Phipp for an explanation.

"I saw Mr. Clinton's horse galloping across the park," said Miss Phipp. "I am afraid he must have had an accident."

Mrs. Clinton showed no further signs of weakness, but asked at once for Porter, the butler; and when it was explained to her that he was in his cottage in the park, but had been sent for, she asked for Probyn, the head coachman, who came pushing through the group by the service

door as she spoke. He had already done what she would have ordered, sent out grooms on horseback, and got a carriage ready to go to any point on the receipt of further news.

"Then there is nothing more to do," said Mrs. Clinton after a moment's consideration, "and we must wait. Send Garnett to me upstairs."

She asked a few more questions and then made a step towards the staircase, but turned again towards the morning-room. "I must tell the children," she said. "Please come in and have some tea."

Miss Phipp followed her, in admiration of her calm self-control. Mrs. Clinton said, "I am afraid your father has had a fall, as Bay Laurel has come back to the stable without him. But he has fallen before and not hurt himself, so there is no need to be frightened. I am just going upstairs for a minute and then I will come down again."

The twins looked at one another and at their two elders with frightened eyes. "Bay Laurel was father's second horse," said Joan. "He rode Kenilworth this morning and we passed him coming home, so it can't have been the groom."

Nancy got up from her chair. "Oh, I wish mother would come down," she said.

"Sit down, dear," said Miss Dexter. "Your mother told you not to be frightened."

But Nancy went to the window, and Joan followed her. They drew aside the curtains and looked out on the park, lying still and empty in the now fading light. "Isn't that something near the gate?" asked Joan. "No, it is only a tree. Bay Laurel is as quiet as any horse in the stable, Nancy. He must have fallen at a fence."

"I should have thought he would have stood until father got up," said Nancy.

"It looks as if he had been too much hurt to get up," said Joan, and then began to cry.

Miss Dexter came over to them and drew the curtains again firmly. "Don't make a fuss," she said, "or you will make your mother anxious. Pull yourselves together and come and sit down. Joan, give Miss Phipp some tea."

Joan did as she was told, still crying softly. Nancy said, "Father has never had a bad fall, and he has been hunting all his life. He knows how to take a toss. Don't be a fool, Joan. I expect it will be all right."

"Don't talk like that," said Miss Phipp sharply, her nerves on edge, "and, Joan, stop crying at once."

Upon which Joan cried the more. "I'm sure he's badly hurt," she said, "and he's lying out in the c-cold, or they'll b-bring him home on a shutter."

Mrs. Clinton came in, looking much the same as usual, except that she was paler. She sat down at the tea-table and said, "Don't cry, Joan dear. Probyn says that there are no signs of Bay Laurel's having come down, so it was probably not a bad fall, and I expect father will be home soon."

But Joan knew too much to be comforted in this way, and her imagination was working. She threw herself on her mother and sobbed, "If f-father had fallen and B-bay Laurel hadn't, he'd have kept hold of the reins, unless he was too b-badly hurt."

Mrs. Clinton said nothing, but drew her to her, and they sat, for the most part in silence, and waited, for a long time.

Presently Joan, who had been sitting with her head on Mrs. Clinton's shoulder, started up and said, "There! there! I heard wheels." Then she began to sob uncontrollably.

Mrs. Clinton got up. The sound of wheels was now plain outside. Joan clung to her, and cried, "Oh, don't go, mother. You don't know what you may see. Oh, please don't go."

Her cries frightened the rest. They heard the clang of the heavy bell in the back regions and voices and steps in the hall outside. None of them knew what would be brought into it. Even Mrs. Clinton was paralysed in her movements for a moment, and did not know what to do with the terrified child clinging to her. The door opened and Joan shrieked. Then the Squire walked into the room with his hat on and his arm bound up in a black sling over his red coat. "Hulloa! What's this?" he exclaimed in a voice not quite so strong as ordinary. "Nothing to make a fuss about. I took a nasty toss, and I've broken my collar-bone."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RUN OF THE SEASON

The breaking of a collar-bone is not a very serious matter. Men have been known to suffer the mishap and continue for a time the activity that brought it about without being any the worse. But to a man of the Squire's age and weight the shock he had sustained was not altogether a light one, and when he had reassured his anxious family as to his comparatively perfect safety, he retired to his bed and kept to it for a few days. It was the first time in his life that such a thing had happened to him, and he did not take kindly to the confinement. But it was eased of some of its rigour, after the first day, during which he suffered from a slight fever, by his making his big bedroom an audience chamber, in the manner of a bygone age, and most people in the house, as well as a good many from outside it, were bidden to sit with him and entertain him in turn.

Amongst the most welcome of his visitors was Virginia, for it was she who had, by good fortune, released him from what might have been a far worse predicament than was indicated by the slight damage he had sustained, and although she would have done what she had for any other member of the hunt, still, she had done it, and his gratitude to her had the effect of removing from his mind the last vestiges of the prejudice he had nursed against her, which in its latest stages had been far weaker than he knew. What had happened was as follows.

A stout fox had been turned out of Hartover Copse within a few minutes of the hounds being put into it, and had made off straight across country with a business-like determination that seemed to show that he knew exactly where safety lay and was going to lose no time in making for it.

The Squire, old in his knowledge of the ways of a fox and the lie of the South Meadshire country, had posted himself hard by the point where the fox broke covert, and was one of the first away. For fifteen minutes it was straight hard going, leaving little chance for those who had not secured a good start to make up their distance, and none at all for those who were following on wheels and hoped by taking short cuts to come up with the hounds again at some point or other. When the score or so who were in front obtained a minute of breathing space, while the hounds, which had been running so straight that they overran the line where the fox had turned hard by Gorsey Common, five miles from Kencote, were casting about to recover the scent, there was little of the main field to be seen. The Squire, with joy and exhilaration in his breast, reined up and looked behind him. They had come down a long slope and up another, and in all the mile-wide valley across which they had ridden there were not more than a dozen others to be seen, and some of them very far away. But amongst them were Virginia and Dick, who were even now breasting the grassy, gorsey slope, at the top of which he sat on his horse. Taken unawares, he could not but admire Virginia's slim, graceful figure, swaying so lightly to every move of the mare under her, and he had ready some words to call out to her when she should reach him.

But before that happened the deep note of Corsican, the oldest and wisest hound in the South Meadshire pack, and the thrilling chorus which immediately answered it, warned him that the hounds had found what they had been looking for, and immediately he was off again, with all thought of those behind him forgotten, and nothing in his mind but that baying dappled stream that was leading him, now as fast as before, straight across a country as well grassed as any in the Shires.

Right through the middle of it too; and when he had galloped across half a dozen wide meadows, and Kenilworth had landed him, without the least little vestige of hesitation or clumsiness, on the other side of a stiffish bullfinch, his heart went up in a pæan of gratitude to whatever power directs these matters, at the thought that he had taken chances and had his second horse sent on to Beeston Holt, which lay midway between Kencote and Trensham Woods, to which he now began greatly to hope that this brave fox was leading them.

Only once before, during all the long years in which he had hunted over this country, had such a thing happened. The line between Kencote and Trensham, a distance of twenty-five miles at least, pierced lengthwise this stretch of low-lying grazing country, which, intersected by a brook or two, by stout fences of post and rail, and thick hedges which had no need of barbed wire to aid their defence, was like the fairway of a golf-course, perfect while you were on it, but beset with hazards on either side. Only the most determined of foxes would keep to it for the whole distance. There was Pailthorpe Spinney to the left, before you got to the first brook, and no stopping of earths there could prevent Master Reynard from poking his nose amongst them to try, if he were so minded. And although he could always be bustled out again, it was unlikely that, having once turned aside, he would take to the grass again. He might make for Greenash Wood across heavy ploughs, or for Spilling, where thick orchards made it impossible to follow the hounds, and you had to take one or two wide circuits.

But this fox had already scorned the delusive shelter of Pailthorpe Spinney, and if he was not bending all his attention on the Trensham Woods, where he probably would find safety, if he got there in time, he was at least bound to lead them over grass for another four miles, to where, at Beeston Holt, he might possibly decide to turn aside and cross the river and the railway and try for the first of a long chain of coverts which circled round towards Blaythorn. In that case the best of the day would be over, but if they could keep him on the move there would be something to look forward to before they ran into him, and the run would still be a memorable one. Yes, he was most likely to do that. It was too much to hope for that that glorious day of five-and-thirty

years before would be repeated, when the high-stomached ancestor of countless good Meadshire foxes had travelled straight as an arrow, scorning all lesser chances of safety, for the high deep woods of Trensham, and the Squire, not long since married, and in the very flower of his tireless youthful vigour, mounted on his great horse Merrydew, with no change, had kept with the hounds all the way and shaken off master, huntsman, whips, and all, when they ran into him at last within two fields of safety.

And yet!—there was that quick determined start, the sudden turn on Gorsey Common, which meant contempt of the line pointing to the coverts at Mountfield, the passing of Pailthorpe Spinney, and now this direct, rattling run across brook and fence and hedge down the very middle of the grasslands. It might happen—the run of a lifetime repeated. His only fear now was that his second horse would not be up at Beeston Holt in time, for there wasn't a horse in the country or in the wide world which could carry his weight through to Trensham at the pace hounds were running.

Beeston Holt lay on the bank of the river with the railway beyond it. It was a straggling village, facing a stretch of common land, and there was a wide space in front of its chief inn, where the Squire expected to see his second horse waiting for him, if his groom had reached the point. The hounds swept across the common no farther than a couple of hundred yards away, going as strong as ever, and even the time lost in riding that distance away from their line and changing horses might lose him the good place he had hitherto kept.

But there was no horse waiting for him, and with angry despair settling down on him he sat and saw the hounds disappear out of sight and the few who still kept with or near them following at ever-increasing intervals. Dick was one of them. He was riding Roland, the best horse, not a weight carrier, in the Kencote stables, who was quite capable of carrying him to the end of the great run that now seemed certain; for the fox had not turned aside towards the nearer coverts and must have had Trensham in his cunning mind since he had first set out. Dick waved a hand to him as he galloped past. There was no sign of Virginia; on such an occasion as this women, even the best beloved, must look after themselves.

The Squire fussed and fumed, and Kenilworth, his blood thoroughly up, could hardly be held, so anxious was he to go on with what he had begun. In another second he would have let him have his way, but just as he was about to do so he saw his man coming up the road, controlling as best he could the antics of his horse, which had got wind somehow of the passing of the hounds, in spite of the silence in which they were now running. The Squire beckoned him to hurry his pace and as he came up jumped off Kenilworth and on to Bay Laurel with all the activity he might have shown on that memorable run of five-and-thirty years before, and was off on to the turf in a twinkling. But not before he had seen, out of the corner of his eye, Virginia, sailing gaily along on her black mare, just behind him.

In a moment he had forgotten her; Bay Laurel was as fresh as if he had just left his stable, for the groom had brought him along steadily according to instructions, the fulfilment of which, however, had been like to have cost him his place. The Squire felt the spring and lift of the powerful frame under him, as, keeping him well in hand, and riding as if he had been five stone lighter and had not forsaken the hunting saddle for weeks past, he pounded the short, springy turf and sent it flying now and again far behind him. There was a brook to take just beyond the village, wide enough to have given him at his age occasion for thought if it had come earlier in the day, and set him casting about in his mind for the whereabouts of the nearest bridge. But he went straight at it, and Bay Laurel took it like a skimming swallow. Then came a five-barred gate—the only way from one field into another, unless valuable time was to be wasted—and the Squire had not jumped a five-barred gate since he had ridden thirteen stone. But he jumped it now, and felt a fierce joy, as he galloped across the meadow grass, at the surging up in him of his vanished youth, and all the fierce delights that such days as this had brought him in years gone by. He was as good as ever. His luck was in. There must be some check before long, and a check, however short, would bring him within sight of them.

A sudden memory born of his long past experience came to him. In a field or two he would come to a footpath which led across stiles through what had then been a peninsula of plough-land sticking out into the pastures. The old mid-Victorian fox had stuck to the grass and gone round the heavy land in a wide circle. If the Edwardian fox should take the same line, that footpath would cut off half a mile, and he made up his mind to follow it.

Ah! There it was—the path across the crest of the field, the stile, and, beyond the hedge to the left, the dark plough ribbons and the footway running down them. He jumped the stile and cantered carefully down the narrow path, well content to go slow for the advantage to be gained. Bay Laurel hopped over another stile and they were on grass again and galloping freely, still keeping to the line of the scarcely discernible field path. They topped a short rise, and the Squire just caught sight of the hounds topping another away to the right. His heart gave another bound of gratitude. He would be up with them yet. There was the next stile and he knew the line to take. He was already in front of some of those who had passed him waiting before the inn.

But his time had come. The last stile was flanked by a high thick fence, on the other side of which, although he could not see it, was a ditch wider and deeper than ordinary. There was nothing formidable about the stile itself; it was no higher than the two Bay Laurel had just hopped over in his stride, but looked rather more dilapidated. Just as the horse was rising to it,

he saw that the ditch on the other side ran right along and was crossed by a plank, and although the horse saw it too and was preparing for it, he instinctively checked him, and then saw that it was too late. Bay Laurel blundered into the rotten woodwork, and the Squire pitched forward over his shoulder, and the next moment had rolled into the ditch with the stile, but fortunately not the horse, on top of him.

The ditch was newly dug and nearly dry, or he might have been drowned, for he was wedged closely in and could hardly stir. Bay Laurel had jammed the timbers down upon him, and without waiting to consider the damage he had done was now off in the wake of the hounds, which he also had seen topping the distant rise. The Squire was left alone, powerless to extricate himself, in the remote stillness of the fields.

He had heard a crack, different somehow from the crack of the timbers, as he fell, but did not at first connect it with broken bones of his own. It was not until he realised that his left arm and shoulder were lying under a beam in a very strange and uncomfortable position, and tried to move them, that he knew what had happened to him and began to feel any pain. Then he felt, suddenly, a good deal, not only in his shoulder, but in his side, upon which a corner of the stile was pressing, and thought he had broken every bone in his body.

The pain and the shock and the loneliness frightened him. Unless help came he was likely to die at the bottom of this ditch, and he had a moment of blind terror before he lifted up his voice and called for help most lustily.

There was an instant answer. Virginia, who had followed his lead across the plough, at some little distance, because she knew he would not like her riding in his pocket, came through the gap, and drew rein by his side. She was off her horse in a moment and trying her hardest to lift the heavy timbers off him. But she only succeeded in shifting their weight from one part of his body to another, and under his agonised expostulations soon desisted. She stood up, white and terror-stricken, the reins of her mare over her arm, and cried, "Oh, I must get the weight off you, and then I will go for help."

Then she tried again, and did succeed in easing him a trifle, whereupon he fainted, but soon came to again, to find her with her hat full of water sprinkling his forehead. "I'm all right now for a bit," he said. "Go and get somebody. Can you mount?"

"Yes, if you don't look," she said.

She led her horse a little way out into the field, threw herself across the saddle, and scrambled up somehow. Then she set off at a gallop towards the chimneys of a farm peeping above a grove of trees a quarter of a mile away.

The Squire lay still, and looked up into the sky. Except for the aching in his neck he was now free from pain, and having tested by movement all the muscles of his body, was relieved to find that he had got off rather lightly after all. It was an awkward, and rather an absurd predicament to be in, but with the certainty of getting free very shortly, he was not overmuch disposed to grumble at it. Virginia's appearance had been providential, and she had been as concerned for him as he was for himself. The stile was an old and very solid one, and had come down on him *en masse*. It was doubtful whether a man could have done more with it, single-handed, than she had done, and a man might not have thought of loosening his stock and fetching water when he had fainted. He had never fainted before. It was a curious, not wholly unpleasant, sensation. He allowed his thoughts to dwell on it, idly, as he lay still, staring up at the sky, not now in great discomfort.

He became aware of something soft under his head. When he had first fallen into the ditch he had lain with his head in the mud and had had to raise it to see what he could now see comfortably. His right arm had been disengaged, and he put up his hand to feel what it was that was beneath him. He felt warm silk and the smooth hardness of Melton cloth, and then he remembered that Virginia had looked rather curious as to her attire when he had come to himself after his little fainting fit. She had taken off her jacket and propped up his head with it. At that discovery he arrived definitely at the point of liking her.

It was not long before he heard her calling to him, and then the trot of her horse across the grass. "They are coming in a moment," she cried out as she rode up to him; "two men from the farm, and they will get you free in no time."

He looked at her a little curiously, and she blushed as she met his gaze. When a woman has taken off the coat of her riding habit she has begun to undress, and whatever comes next to it is not meant for the public gaze. But she had not cared about that. If she had he would not have been lying with a pillow under his head and she looked down upon him, so to speak, in her shirt sleeves.

"Put on your coat before they come," said the Squire. "I'm all right now; and thank you."

The two farm labourers who came running up the meadow made short work of pulling the stile off him, and Virginia helped him to rise and to climb out of the ditch. He stood on the grass stiff, and rather dazed, with his left arm hanging uselessly, and she supported him for a moment, until he said, "I'm all right now. I'll walk over to the farm, and perhaps they'll lend me something

to take me home in."

"The farmer has gone for the doctor," she said, "and they are going to send a pony carriage up for you. See, I've brought a rug for you to sit on till they come."

She spread it on the ground, and he sat down heavily, giving an exclamation of pain as he jarred the broken bone. Virginia knelt beside him and put the handkerchief she had already damped to his brow. But he hitched himself away from her. He did not want the men, now staring at him with bovine concern, to see him dependent on a woman. "Don't bother any more," he said. "I'm all right now."

She got him to the farm, the doctor, who happened to be in the village, bound up his arm, a fly was procured, and he set off for home, Virginia, who had left her horse at the farm, by his side. By the time they had gone, half-way, his accident now being known, a neighbour's motor-car was sent to meet him, and in it they performed the rest of the journey. But he refused to allow Virginia to send a telegram. "It'll only upset 'em," he said, "and there's nothing the matter with me now."

And that was why he arrived in on his wife and daughters and himself brought the news that there was nothing to make a fuss about.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PROPERTY

It may be imagined that the high favour in which Virginia was now held was extremely gratifying to Dick. "I knew you could do it if you tried," he said, smiling down on her, his arm round her shoulder, "and, by Jove, you've done it to some tune. He wouldn't have any one else now for a daughter-in-law, if I were to offer him his pick of the royal princesses of Europe."

"He's an old dear," said Virginia. "You didn't give me in the least a true picture of his character."

Dick laughed. He could afford to let this feminine charge go by. "He wants me to talk business with him this evening, after dinner," he said. "But he wants to talk to you again first, in spite of the fact, that he's been talking to you nearly all day. Mind you keep calm, my girl. We're not going to throw up our job yet awhile. If he wants us here he'll have to wait for us."

Virginia went up with Mrs. Clinton to the big room, in the big bed of which the Squire was sitting propped up with pillows, in a camel's-hair dressing-gown, the seams of which had been slit up and tied again over his bound-down arm.

"Ah, here you are," he said in his usual hearty tone. "Nina, I want a word or two with Virginia. She'll call you when she goes."

Mrs. Clinton took her dismissal and Virginia her seat in a low chair by the bed, facing him.

"Look here," he said; "no good beating about the bush any longer. We're very good friends now, and I hope we shall remain so all our lives. But there's no good disguising that we've been at cross-purposes, and I want all that put right now. Let's look facts in the face. It was more my fault than yours, I dare say, but there have been faults on both sides, and we shan't gain anything by pretending that we've all behaved as we ought to have done."

"You're quite right," said Virginia, smiling at him. "I'll listen to anything you have to say, and you might begin by telling me where my fault has been."

"Eh! what!" exclaimed the Squire. "Well, I suppose you won't deny that you came down here to steal a march on me?"

"I wanted to know you," said Virginia sweetly. "I knew I should love you if I did. And I was quite right. I do know you now, and I do love you, better than any other man, except Dick."

The Squire thought this a very pretty speech, and, as it came from a very pretty woman, its effect on him was beneficial. "Well, you have taken a liking to me," he said, "and I have taken a liking to you. So we're quits, and it's a pity both of us didn't do it before, for I tell you frankly I have made certain promises which I shouldn't have made if I had felt about you as I do now, and I don't quite see how I can get out of them."

"You mean about money?" said Virginia. "Dear Mr. Clinton, please don't worry any more about that. Dick and I have got over whatever disappointment we may have felt about it—*I* never felt any at all except for his sake—long ago. He has been lucky in getting this job, and we shall be as comfortable as possible."

"This job!" repeated the Squire, with much distaste of the word. "Dick oughtn't to be wanting a job at all, and he won't be wanting one now. He must give it up."

"I don't think he will do that at once," said Virginia. "He will consider himself bound, for a time at least, to Mr. Spence. However, that needn't worry you. We shall hope to be here a good deal, if you want us, and later on we may be able to be here, or hereabouts, altogether, if you still want us."

"Of course I want you," said the Squire. "I've wanted Dick all along, in the place to which he belongs; I've never felt comfortable about Humphrey taking his place, and as for my Lady Susan, I shall be very pleased to welcome her as a daughter-in-law, but, if you want the truth, my dear, you're worth six of her, and if *you* can't live here, well, I won't have *her*, and that's flat. I'll keep the place empty."

"Oh, but surely!" exclaimed Virginia. "You've promised, haven't you? Humphrey told me it was arranged that he should live in the dower-house when he was married."

"He did, did he? Seems to me Master Humphrey is counting his chickens before they are hatched. No, I never promised. I never promised him anything. At least, I believe I did promise him a certain allowance, which is to be increased from another quarter. But beyond that nothing was said definitely."

"No, but it was implied. Oh, Mr. Clinton, please don't make us the cause of disappointment to others. We don't want it. We shall be very well off as it is. We don't want any more, really we don't. Dick has a fine position, handsomely paid, and I have money of my own too, you know, and a good deal of it."

For the first time the Squire frowned. "I suppose you have," he said shortly. "But to tell you the plain truth, I don't like the quarter it comes from, and I very much doubt if Dick does either."

"I don't much, either," said Virginia, smiling to herself.

"I'm glad of that, at any rate. No, you're loyal enough to Dick. You'll be able to forget the past; it hasn't soiled you. That's what I was afraid of, and I see I was wrong. Still, this money—it's stuck in my throat as much as anything."

"Well, then," said Virginia, "it need not stick in your throat any longer. I know what you think as to where it came from. Dick thought the same, and it stuck in his throat too, till I told him the truth. Now I'll tell it to you. It's my own money, every cent of it, and it came to me after—after my husband died. I have nothing that comes from him. I wouldn't keep it if I had. I'm an heiress, Mr. Clinton—not a very heavily gilded one, it's true, and the money my uncle left me was made out of pork-packing, which is a dreadful thing to talk about in this house. Still, you must forget that. Only the capital sum comes from pork, and it's all invested in nice clean things like railways."

The Squire stared at her during this recital as if fascinated. The moment was almost too solemn for words. "Well, my dear," he said after a short pause, "you lifted one weight from me yesterday, and now you've lifted another, and a bigger one. Go away, and leave me to think about it."

He thought about it for some time after she had left him, propped up on his pillows, his mind growing ever lighter. In the midst of all his perversities, his dislike of the thought of his son living, in part, on money that had come from "that blackguard" had been an honourable and unselfish feeling, and the removal of the fear swept away with it every other trace of his long-nurtured objections to Virginia as a wife for Dick. Now all he desired was that Dick should return to his honoured place at Kencote, and all should be as it had been before, with only the addition of Virginia's charming presence to complete the happiness of the tie. He did not think at all about Humphrey, nor of the new interests on which, a week or so before, he had been anxious to pin his anticipations.

But Humphrey had to be thought of, all the same. Mrs. Clinton, coming into his room, said that Humphrey would like to come and see him and have a talk, and asked if he felt well enough to talk to him.

"Oh, well enough? Yes," he said. "Never felt better in my life. I've a good mind to get up for dinner. Nina, Virginia has just told me something that I wish I had known before. It has pleased me beyond measure."

He imparted to her Virginia's disclosure, and she expressed herself pleased too, wondering a little at the ways of men about money, that potent disturber of lives.

"That removes every difficulty," he said. "And I'm very glad of it, for Dick's sake. I don't know how much it is and I haven't asked her, but she must be pretty well off. Dick won't need it, but it's always useful."

"It will make it easier to do what you promised for Humphrey," said Mrs. Clinton.

"For Humphrey?" he echoed. "Oh yes. Fifteen hundred a year is a pretty big allowance for a

younger son. He's a lucky fellow, Master Humphrey. Did you say he wanted to see me? Well, send him up."

Humphrey came in, and stood by his father's bedside.

"Well, my boy!" said the Squire pleasantly.

"Picking up all right, I hope?" said Humphrey. "Might have been a nasty business."

"Sit down," said the Squire. "I've just heard a thing that has pleased me amazingly. Funny how one gets an idea into one's head when there's no foundation for it!" Then he told Humphrey about Virginia's money.

Humphrey had not much to say in answer to the information, but sat thinking.

"Well, now," said the Squire, with the air of one turning from thoughts of pleasure to thoughts of business. "Of course, all this makes a difference. Dick and I have had a row—you may put it like that if you please—and we've made it up. He'll come back here, I hope, and settle down, and things will be as they were before. I don't think you're cut out for a country life altogether, and dare say you won't be sorry for the change. So it will suit us all pretty well, taking one thing with another, eh?"

Humphrey said nothing for a moment. Then he asked shortly, "Do you mean that I'm not to have the dower-house, after all?"

"Have the dower-house?" repeated the Squire, as if that were the last thing that had ever crossed his mind. "When did I ever say that you were to have the dower-house? It isn't mine to give you. It goes with the property—to Dick eventually; you know that perfectly well."

"Oh yes, I know that," said Humphrey, with some impatience. "I meant, have it to live in. That's what was arranged, and I told Susan so, and Lady Aldeburgh."

"Then I think you were in a bit of a hurry," said the Squire. "I told you I should settle nothing till Dick's marriage."

Humphrey found it difficult to keep his temper. "If you'll excuse my saying so," he said, with a slight tremor in his voice, "we've been talking of nothing else for weeks past, and as to what part I was to take in the management of the place. I'd every right to tell them that at Thatchover."

"Well, perhaps you had," assented the Squire tolerantly. "And I don't go so far as to say that you can't live there for a bit either. I want Dick and Virginia to live there, and I tell you so plainly, and I shall do all I can to persuade him to. But he may think he's bound to this fellow, Spence, for six months or so, and if you get married in time, and care to occupy the house for a bit and keep it warm for him, well, you'll be very welcome. But, on the whole, I think you'd be wiser to settle down where you're going to stay. With the very handsome allowance I'm going to make you, and what old Aunt Laura has promised to add to it, and whatever Susan brings you, though I dare say that won't be much, you'll be exceptionally well off, and can live pretty well where you like."

Humphrey choked down his anger. "What about Partisham?" he asked, but it was an unwise question, for whatever definite arrangement the Squire had had in his mind and allowed to be talked about, Partisham had not come into it, although it was true that he had let it be seen what was in his mind.

"Do you mean to say you want me to leave Partisham away from Dick, and give it to you?" he asked.

"I want you to keep to your promises," replied Humphrey doggedly. "You've been feeding me up for the last month with all sorts of statements as to what you were going to do for me; then you suddenly make it up with Dick, and want to kick me out altogether, and expect me to take it all without a word, and consider myself lucky. I call it grossly unfair. I haven't only myself to think of. You even want to chuck the arrangement that you say I'd a perfect right, relying on what you said, to tell Susan about."

"I think you're most infernally ungrateful," said the Squire angrily. "Point me out another younger son in England who is given two thousand a year to set up house on."

"That doesn't all come from you," said Humphrey, "and there are plenty of younger sons whose fathers are as rich as you who would get that. Besides, that isn't the point. If that's all you'd said you'd do for me, I'd have said thank you and cut my coat according to my cloth. But you know quite well it isn't all. The dower-house was a definite understanding at any rate, and if you didn't mean that Partisham was to come to me eventually, and Checquers come either to me or go to Walter, then your words don't mean anything at all."

The accusation had too much truth in it even for the Squire to contradict it altogether. "Partisham is likely to be one of the best bits of the whole estate," he said. "In ten years' time half of it will be building land, and even with these wicked taxes, it will be a very valuable piece of property. It isn't likely, now Dick has come to reason, that I'm going to leave it away from him,

and you oughtn't to expect it."

"Now Dick has come to reason!" repeated Humphrey bitterly. "Dick stands exactly where he's always stood. It's you who've changed your mind, and you expect me to fall in and take it smiling. I say again, it's grossly unfair."

"That's not the way to talk to me," said the Squire hotly. "You're forgetting yourself. If you're not precious careful you won't get the money I'd put aside for you, let alone anything else."

Humphrey got up from his chair. "I'd better go," he said. "If your word means nothing at all, I may as well break off my engagement. I thought it was good enough to get married on," and he left the room.

The Squire lay and fumed. A pretty return he was getting for all he had promised to do for Humphrey! Was ever such ingratitude? His mind dwelt wholly on the very handsome provision that was to be made for his immediate marriage, and he grew more and more indignant as he asked himself, again and yet again, what younger son of a plain country gentleman could possibly expect more. At last he rang his bell and told his servant to ask Captain Clinton to come to him.

But before Dick arrived Mrs. Clinton came in again, and to her he unburdened himself of some of his indignation at Humphrey's ingratitude.

She heard him without comment, and then said slowly, "I think Humphrey and Susan ought to have the dower-house, Edward."

"What!" exclaimed the Squire. "Turn Dick out of the place that has always been his, and put a younger son into it! You say I ought to do that, Nina? What can you be thinking of?"

"*Has* Dick's place always been his, Edward?" she asked, with her calm eyes on his.

"What do you mean?" he snapped at her; and then went on quickly in his loud, blustering tone, "Dick and I fell out, it's true, and if he had married without my sanction I should have acted in a way I'm not going to act now. I've come round—I don't deny I've come round—to be in favour of his marriage, and I'm not going to make him suffer for the misunderstanding."

At this point Dick came into the room, and the Squire said, "Well, I'll talk to you later, Nina. I want to get things settled up with Dick now."

But Dick looked at her kindly. "Mother may as well stay and take a hand in the discussion," he said. "We owe it to her that we're all friends again, and I think she's got a better head than any of us."

"Your mother was just saying," said the Squire, "that I ought to let Humphrey and Susan have the dower-house. I'm not going to do anything of the sort. There *was* a sort of an understanding that they should live there when I thought you and I weren't coming together again. I had to make *some* arrangements. But even if I didn't want you there, I don't know that I should consent to it now. Humphrey has taken up a most extraordinary attitude, and I'm very much annoyed with him. He's going to be most handsomely treated, more handsomely than he could ever have expected. Yet he's just been up here and flung out of the room in a rage because I won't promise to leave him Partisham, if you please."

"Leave him what?" asked Dick.

"Partisham; and all the land that came in with it; and Checquers too. No, I'm wrong; I'm instructed to leave that to Walter. I say it's a scandalous position for a son to take up. I'm not an old man, and I hope I've got a good many years to live yet, and I'm to have my sons quarrelling already about what I'm to do with my property after I'm dead."

"I suppose he saw his chance when I was out of favour," said Dick, "and is wild because what he hoped for didn't come off. What did you actually promise to do for him?"

"I promised to make him an allowance of fifteen hundred a year, and I'm prepared to keep my word, of course."

"Well, that's pretty good to begin with."

"But, good gracious me, that isn't all of what he's going to have. Old Aunt Laura is going to give him another five hundred, and she's consulted me about leaving him the bulk of her money when she goes."

"Aunt Laura! Five hundred a year!" exclaimed Dick, in utter surprise. "Can she do it?"

The Squire gave a short laugh. "I might have known that the old ladies had saved a good deal," he said, "but I never thought much about it. At any rate that's a definite offer from her—the allowance, I mean. Whether I let her make a will almost entirely in his favour, is another matter; and if he doesn't behave himself I shall do all I can to stop it."

"He must have been pretty clever in getting round her," said Dick. "I know he's been working

hard at it. Rather a dirty trick, to my mind—working on an old woman for her money. Still, different people have different ideas. Did you promise him the dower-house?"

The Squire began humming and hahing, and Mrs. Clinton broke in. "It was a very definite understanding," she said. "I must take Humphrey's part there. It was understood that he should give up the Foreign Office as soon as possible, and settle down here to help look after the property."

"*If* things had been as we then feared they would be," said the Squire. "That was always understood."

Mrs. Clinton was silent, and Dick said, rather unwillingly, "You'd better let him have the dower-house—say for two years. I can't throw Spence over now, and I can't do my best for him under that."

The Squire expostulated loudly. He wanted Dick and Virginia near him. He was getting on in years. He might be in his grave in two years' time. But Dick remained firm. "I don't want to rake up old scores," he said. "But you mustn't forget that until a week or so ago you were going to cut me off with a shilling. I had to find a job, and I was precious lucky to get this one. I owe something to the fellow who gave it to me."

"I think you do," Mrs. Clinton said before the Squire could speak; "and, Edward, I think you must remember, in justice to Humphrey, that what applies to Dick applies to him too. You took a certain course, very strongly, and both Dick and Humphrey acted on it."

"I don't want to hear any more about Humphrey," said the Squire. "I don't want him in the dower-house, nor Susan either."

"Well, you must settle that with him," said Dick. "I dare say he'll be quite ready to make a bargain with you. He seems rather good at it. He hasn't concerned himself much with my side of the question, and I'm not going to stick up for his, especially as he comes off so well, anyhow."

That was practically the end of the discussion, and the Squire was left lamenting the frowardness of human nature.

CHAPTER XXIX

BROTHERS

When Dick went downstairs again he said to Virginia, "Put on your hat and let's go and have tea with old Aunt Laura." She went obediently upstairs, and presently they were walking down the drive together in the gathering dusk.

"Is everything going to be all right?" Virginia asked him. "Are we quite forgiven, and is our own to be restored to us?"

"I don't think we shall have much difficulty in getting all we're entitled to," replied Dick.

Virginia put her arm into his. "It's nearly dark and nobody's about," she said in apology. "Dear Dick, it is nice to be here on these terms. I do really feel that I belong to you, now—and to Kencote."

Dick pressed her hand to his side. "I nearly had to give up Kencote to get you," he said. "Now I've got you *and* Kencote, and I've nothing left to ask for. My experience in life is that you generally get all you want if you go to work in a straightforward way."

"Then your experience in life is a very fortunate one," replied Virginia. "I've never had what I wanted before, although I think I've been fairly straightforward. But I've got it now, dear Dick, and *I* won't ask for anything further, either. I feel very happy and comfortable, and if we weren't near the lodge I should lift up my voice in song."

Aunt Laura was, it is needless to say, both flattered and genuinely pleased at their visit, for this modest old lady liked company, but was diffident of her own powers of attracting it. "This is the nicest thing that could have happened," she said, when she had settled down in close proximity to her tea-table. "The dear children came in this morning with their new governess—a very competent person, I should say, though not quite so respectful in her manner as Miss Bird used to be—not that she was in any way *rude*, I don't mean that, but Miss Bird was always cheerful and bright, and yet knew her place; and Humphrey paid me a visit this afternoon; so I said to myself as I sat down to tea, 'I have had two very pleasant visits to-day and can hardly hope for a third. I must drink my tea by myself.' However, here you both are, and I am very pleased indeed to see you, very pleased indeed. Your dear father is none the worse since I last had word, I hope, Dick?"

"He's as well as can be, and talks about getting up for dinner," replied Dick.

"Oh, indeed, he must not do that," said Aunt Laura earnestly. "It would be the greatest mistake. He has such courage and vitality that he cannot realise what a terrible shock he has undergone. His only chance, if he is to escape all ill effects from it, is to keep as quiet as possible for a long time yet. I am sure when I think of what *might* have happened to him, if you, my dear, had not been, so mercifully, on the spot, I go cold all over. Indeed, his escape was, in the highest sense of the word, providential, and I am sure we are all deeply grateful for it, and can lift up our hearts in thanksgiving. Humphrey told me the whole story, in the most graphic way, and while it made me shudder it also made me rejoice, that you were there, my dear, to give such ready assistance. He made much of it."

"That was very kind of him," said Virginia. "But it was nothing to make much of. I only went for help. And I've been well rewarded, you know. Mr. Clinton didn't like me much before, and now he likes me very much indeed. That makes me very happy."

"Of course it does," said Aunt Laura kindly. "Edward is a man whose good opinion is worth having, for he does not give it without reason, but, once given, it can be depended on. Well, as I say, it is very good of you to come and see me. I'm sure the kind and thoughtful way in which I am treated by one and all is highly gratifying. You have not met Susan Clinton, I think, dear Humphrey's bride that is to be? She also visited me frequently while she was at Kencote, and Humphrey comes to see me every day. Since you are unable to live here, Dick, I am very glad that we shall have him and his wife in our old home. I shall be very glad to see the dear place lived in again, for I spent many happy years of my life there."

"Has he settled how he's going to arrange the rooms?" asked Dick, in a tone that made Virginia look at him, although Aunt Laura noticed nothing unusual in the question.

"Yes, he has talked a good deal about it," she said, "and I have given him advice upon the matter, some of which he thinks it quite likely that he will take."

"I hear you've been very generous to him, Aunt Laura," Dick said.

"Oh, but there was no need for him to have said anything to you about that," said Aunt Laura. "I wanted to help him to marry the girl he loved, and it was quite true that a girl of her rank—not that her branch of the family is better than ours, but they have rank and we have not, although I have no doubt that we *could* have had it if we had wished—would expect rather more in her marriage than other girls, and I told Humphrey that I quite understood that, as he seemed rather low about his prospects. I didn't want your dear father to have all the burden, and he has responded wonderfully to my offer. I am only glad that it was possible for me to help Humphrey in his desire, and that it should be possible for me to do so without doing *you* or any of the others an injustice, Dick; for I know you are well provided for, and will not grudge your brother his share of good things."

"I don't grudge him anything that he's entitled to have," replied Dick. "Now I want you to tell Virginia about Kencote in the old days, when my great-grandfather was alive. She wants to hear all about Kencote that she can."

Aunt Laura was nothing loath, and poured forth a gentle stream of reminiscence until it was time for Dick and Virginia to go.

As they let themselves out of the house and walked down the dark village street, Dick said, "Humphrey ought to be kicked. Fancy sponging on that simple old woman! and getting her to leave the bulk of her money to him, and away from the rest of us; because that's what it means. I'll have it out with him as soon as I get home."

"Oh, my dear!" said Virginia. "Money, money, money! What does it matter to us? We shall have plenty."

"We shouldn't have had plenty, or anything like it, if he'd had his way. It isn't only old Aunt Laura he's been working on. He's taken advantage of my being out of favour to get the governor to consider leaving the best part of the property to him. He was actually at it this afternoon. He tried to get a definite promise out of him to leave him Partisham, which will be worth all the rest put together some day."

"But, Dick dear! you knew all that. It was your father's own decision. You told me so."

"Humphrey had no right to take advantage of his threats to work against me. That's what he's been doing. It wasn't like the governor. I can see a good deal more daylight now. I thought I'd only got his obstinacy to fight against. Now I see I've had an enemy at court, who's been playing the sneak all along."

"I don't think so," Virginia said boldly. "Humphrey isn't bad. He has been very nice to me. He told me he was glad that all this quarrelling was at an end."

"I dare say he did," said Dick, unsoftened. "Now he sees that we can't be kept out of it any longer he'd like to curry favour."

"Oh, what an uncharitable Dick! That's not like you, Dick. We're going to be happy together, aren't we, my own beloved?" She was walking with her hands clasped over his arm.

"I hope so," said Dick.

"Well, then, think of him a little too. *He* loves a woman, and wants to be happy with her."

"Oh, love! I don't believe he loves her the least in the world. I know her well enough. She's an insipid clothes-peg. I don't believe he'd look at her if she hadn't got a title. He's like that. I don't know where he gets it from. The governor likes a title too, but not in that rotten way."

"You didn't choose me for *my* title, did you?" asked Virginia.

He laughed at her. "Your title will disappear when you marry me," he said. "Mrs. Richard Clinton will have to do for you, my girl, for the present."

"You never told me that," she said. "And I do love being called 'my lady.' Americans do. However, I would rather be Mrs. Richard Clinton than what I am now. But, Dick dear, please don't have a row with Humphrey. Please don't. Let's try and make everybody happy. He must be feeling disappointed, and perhaps angry. We can afford to be generous."

"I'll tell him what I think of him," said Dick.

"Then tell him what you really think of him. He's your brother. You have been friends all your lives. Tell him, if you must, that you don't think he has behaved well. But don't tell him that you think it isn't in his nature to behave well. There's a good deal to be said for him. Let him say it. And, even if there wasn't——"

"Well, I don't think there is. He's behaved in a selfish, underhand way."

"Supposing he has, Dick! Make allowances for him. He's done himself more harm than he's done you. We ought to be sorry for people who have done wrong. That's what I believe Christianity means."

"Oh, well, yes; if they're sorry for it themselves."

"You can make them so; but not by being angry with them. It isn't hard to forgive people when they admit they're in the wrong. It is hard, otherwise, but that doesn't make it any less right to do it. I'm preaching, but we're going to be always together, Dick, and you must put up with a little sermon sometimes."

"You're a sweet saint, Virginia, but what on earth are you asking me to do? Am I to go to Humphrey and say, 'You've acted like a cur, but I forgive you; take all that you can get that has always been looked upon as mine, and let's say no more about it'?"

"Oh, don't talk about the money or the property at all. Let that look after itself. Only remember that you were little boys together, and were very fond of each other, as I'm sure you were; and remember that you have been made happy, and he has been disappointed. That ought to make you kind. And you can be so kind, Dick."

"I believe you think I can be everything that's good."

"I know you can. And it will make me love you even more than I do now, if that's possible, if you make friends with Humphrey, instead of quarrelling with him for good. After all, we're rather tired of quarrels, aren't we?"

"I think we are," said Dick.

He did not see Humphrey alone until the women had gone to bed. He had gone up to his father when they had left the dining-room, and Humphrey had avoided speaking to him, if he could help it, all the evening. Otherwise he had taken his part in the mild gaiety of the conversation and hidden his wounds gallantly. He was going upstairs with his candle when Dick said to him, "Are you coming into the smoking-room?"

He looked at him with a momentary hostility. "Yes, when I've changed my coat," he said.

"Mine's down here," said Dick, turning away.

When his servant had helped him on with his smoking-jacket and gone away, he stood in front of the fire and filled a pipe. He was ready to do Virginia's bidding and make friends with Humphrey, but he disliked the job, and didn't know exactly how he was going to begin. And he was going to speak plainly too. Humphrey had behaved badly, and he was going to tell him so—kindly.

Humphrey came in and lit a cigarette before either of them spoke. As he threw the match into the fire he said, "I suppose you want to have it out."

His tone was not conciliatory. He was both angry and nervous. Dick's brain cleared as if by

magic. He had a situation to control.

"Well, I think we ought to have a talk," he said. "Things have been going wrong with me, and now they've come right, and you don't appear to be quite as much rejoiced at it as you might be."

"If you put it like that, I'm not rejoiced at all," said Humphrey, "and I'm not going to pretend to be."

"But you told Virginia you were," Dick put in.

Humphrey was for a moment disconcerted. "I'm glad as far as she's concerned," he said. "She oughtn't to have been treated as she has been, and I've always said so."

"Oh, have you?" commented Dick.

Humphrey flushed angrily. "If you think I've been working against you," he said, "it's quite untrue."

"Well, you've been working for your own hand, and it comes to much the same thing."

"I haven't even been doing that. The governor made me a lot of promises, and I didn't ask him to make one of them."

"What about Partisham?"

"You know as well as I do that he'd definitely made up his mind to leave as much away from you as he could, and that was the chief thing he had to leave away. I didn't ask him to do it, but ——"

"It didn't occur to you to ask him not to do it, I suppose? Because it's a pretty stiff thing to do —to leave away most of what keeps up the place."

"No, it didn't occur to me, and it wouldn't have occurred to you if you'd been in my place. I tell you I didn't ask for anything, except for enough to get married on. But when it came to having it chucked at me—well, if you want the plain truth, it happened to suit my book."

"Yes, I dare say it did. And what about Aunt Laura? You've been doing pretty well out of her too, haven't you?"

Humphrey flushed again. "Look here," he said, "I'm not going to talk to you any longer. You stand there sneering because you've got everything you want now, and you think you can amuse yourself by baiting me. I'm going upstairs, and you can do your sneering by yourself. Only I'll tell you this before I go. I'm going to play my hand, and I don't care whether I've got you up against me or not. I consider I've been precious badly treated. I'm encouraged to go and tell the Aldeburghs all sorts of things about what's going to be done for me when I'm married, and I come back and am told coolly that none of it's going to happen at all, and I'm to consider myself d——d lucky to get just enough to live on."

"Well, you're going to have a bit more than enough to live on, and you're welcome to it as far as I'm concerned. And the dower-house too—for a bit."

"Thanks very much. I'm likely to take that on—live in a house by your kind permission and get kicked out the moment you want it for yourself!"

"You won't get kicked out, as you call it, for two years at least. I should think that's good enough."

Humphrey threw a glance at him. He was standing, looking down on the carpet, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"Look here," he said, looking up suddenly. "We've had enough of this. I don't think you've acted straight, and I was bound to say so before I said anything else. And now I've said it, I've said it for the last time. Let's forget all about it. We've been pretty good pals up to now, and there's no reason why we shouldn't go on being good pals up to the end of the chapter."

Humphrey sat down and looked into the fire. "Perhaps I haven't behaved very well," he said slowly. "It's precious easy to behave well when you've got everything you want, as you've always had."

"It may be," said Dick. "Anyhow, you're not going to do so badly now. If you haven't got all you want, you'll have a good slice of it."

There was silence between them for a time, and then Humphrey said, "If you don't want to quarrel, I'm hanged if I do. Only, I must confess I feel a bit sore. The way the governor swings round from one position to another's enough to make anybody sick. You've had a dose of it yourself; you know how you felt before you made it up with him."

Dick's self-esteem received nourishment from the recollection that he had not behaved in the

same way as Humphrey had, but he did not bring forward the statement in that form. "It was awkward," he admitted. "It made him think of doing things that he'd never thought of doing, and I don't think he'd any right to think of doing. That's why I haven't the slightest hesitation now in taking back whatever he may have made use of to offer to—to, well, let's say to you, as a means of getting his own way. They have always been looked on as coming to me eventually, and if this disturbance hadn't come about nobody would have thought of their being disposed of in any other way. So you're really no worse off than you were before; in fact, you're a good deal better off, and I'm quite agreeable, as far as it rests with me, that you should be. Can't you manage to settle it with yourself that what you're going to have is as much as you could have expected, and give up trying for the rest?"

"I dare say I can manage that feat," said Humphrey, "especially as I suppose I've got to. Still, when you look at it all round, there's a good deal of difference in my expectations and yours. Two thousand a year on the one side, and—well, I don't know what, but say ten thousand a year and a big property on the other."

"Oh, if you're going to kick against the law of primogeniture—!" said Dick. "Question is, would you kick at it if you happened to be the eldest son? If not, you oughtn't to bring it in."

Humphrey was silent. They had been talking quietly. Hostility had gone out of their talk, but friendliness had not yet come in.

Dick seated himself and began again. "Perhaps it isn't for me to say, now that I've got everything I want, but I do say it all the same, because I found it out when I didn't think I was going to have everything I wanted. Money isn't everything. If you have as much as you can live comfortably on, and something to do, you've just as much chance of happiness as the next fellow. 'Specially if you're going to marry the right woman."

"I dare say you're right," said Humphrey. "If you're disappointed of something you can always fall back on philosophy. But it's just because I am going to marry the right woman that I am disappointed. I'd told her all sorts of things, and she was as ready as I was to chuck the fun we've both had in London and other places, and settle down here quietly."

"Well, my dear good chap!" exclaimed Dick. "If you looked upon it in that light, what on earth is there to grumble at if you're free now to live as you like, and anywhere you like? I don't know much about your young woman, but I should imagine she'd rather settle herself in London on a couple of thousand a year, which will give you enough to go about with too, than bury herself down here."

"I don't think you do know much about her," said Humphrey. "I believe the general opinion here is that I'm going to marry her without knowing much about her myself, though what I shall gain by it, considering that she hasn't got a *sou*, isn't quite clear. However, the general opinion happens to be wrong."

Dick felt a little uncomfortable. "She's the one girl in the world for you, eh?" he said lightly.

"That's about what it comes to. I know her mother's a fool; and she suffers by it. But she's quite different herself, and I know what a jolly good sort she is, if others don't."

Dick was touched. Humphrey's "poor thing but mine own" opinion of the girl he was going to marry was so different from the pride he felt in Virginia. "Well, old chap," he said, "we'll do our best to make her feel one of the family. We're not a bad lot, take us all round, and if she wants to, I dare say she'll get to like us. We ought to be able to have some fun together when we all meet. I like her all right—what I've seen of her—and now things have been more or less settled up I should like to see more of her, and so would Virginia. I believe in a family sticking together, even after they begin to marry off, and new-comers ought to get a warm welcome. You've been very decent to Virginia, and she likes you; and I should like to have an opportunity of ingratiating myself with Susan."

Humphrey was conquered by this. "You're a jolly good sort, Dick," he said. "I didn't know you were going to behave like that, or perhaps I wouldn't have behaved as I have done. I'm not proud of myself, exactly, now I look back on it, and if you'll forget all about it, as you said you were ready to do, I'll chuck the whole beastly business, and we'll go back to where we used to be."

"There won't be any difficulty about that, old boy," said Dick. "Peace and goodwill is all *I* want, and we may as well have it all round."

CHAPTER XXX

MISS BIRD HEARS ALL ABOUT IT

The twins were meeting a train, but the train was late. They walked up and down the

platform, by the side of which the station-master's arabis and aubrietia, primroses and daffodils, were making a fine show. It was the Thursday before Easter, which Miss Bird was coming to spend at Kencote, Miss Phipp having already departed for a week in lovely Lucerne; and the twins, out of the innumerable trains they had met, had never met one with greater pleasure. They had spent an arduous term with Miss Phipp, with whom they had established relations amicable on the whole, but not marked by the affection they had felt for Miss Bird; and although they had rather liked working hard, they had had enough of it for the present, and enough of Miss Phipp.

"I wish the train would hurry up. I do want to see the sweet old lamb," said Joan. "Let's ask Mr. Belper when it's coming."

The station-master, jovially respectful, told them that she was signalled, and they wouldn't have long to wait.

"But I think you ought to see that your trains are up to time," said Nancy. "Didn't you learn at school that punctuality was a virtue?"

"Ah! I see you want to have one of your jokes with me, miss," said the station-master. "I don't know what it's about, but, bless you, have your laugh. I like to see young ladies enjoying themselves."

"Thank you very much," said Joan. "But there's nothing to laugh at in a train being *always* unpunctual. We want very much to see Miss Bird, who is coming, and you keep her on the line somewhere between here and Ganton. You ought to turn over a new leaf, and see that people don't get disappointed like that."

"Well, it isn't my fault, miss, and here she comes," said Mr. Belper, snatching up a metal instrument in shape something between a sceptre and a door-scraper and hurrying up the platform, as the engine fussed up the last incline and snorted itself to rest.

Miss Bird—diminutive, excited, voluble—cast herself out of her carriage and into the arms of the twins, who gave vent to their affection in a series of embraces that left her breathless and crumpled, but blissfully happy. "That will do Joan 'n' Nancy for the present," she said. "Let me get my things out and then we can have a nice long talk. Oh dear to find myself at Kencote again it is almost too good to be true the umbrella on the rack porter and the hat-box my precious pets how you have grown a brown box with 'E.B.' in the van and that is all. How do you do Mr. Belper you see I have come back again once more like a bad penny as they say and how is Mrs. Clinton darlings and your father and all I have *such* a lot to hear that I'm sure we shall never leave off talking until I go away again."

"Precious lamb!" said Joan tenderly. "*You* won't leave off talking, and I could listen to you for ever, like the brook. You're such a relief after Pipp."

"We didn't know when we were well off," said Nancy. "We often lie awake at night and cry for you."

They were now walking towards the booking-office. "But surely Miss Phipp isn't *cruel* to you my pets Mrs. Clinton would never allow that oh my ticket Mr. Belper now I *know* I put it somewhere here it is in my bag and I give up this half and retain the other, good-afternoon ah to see these nice horses again it is like coming home indeed I have not ridden in a private carriage since I left Kencote. *Good*-afternoon William I see you are still here and promoted to the box one more of the old faces."

Thus expressing her pleasure, Miss Bird got into the carriage and the twins after her, and they drove off.

"Well my pets," she began, "let me take a good look at you many's the time I've longed to set eyes on you, and you have not altered at all just a *trifle* pale I do hope that you have not been working *too* hard."

Joan and Nancy exchanged glances, and then heaved a simultaneous sigh. They acted habitually so much in accord that the acceptance of an idea striking them simultaneously could be indicated by a look. "You were often unkind to us, Starling darling," said Joan plaintively, "although we've quite forgiven you for it; but in your most headstrong moments you were never actually cruel."

"Don't cry, Joan," said Nancy. "We have nearly three weeks' holiday, and with Starling here we shall be able to forget everything, and be as happy as possible."

Miss Bird's face showed perplexed horror. "But surely it isn't possible——" she began.

Nancy interrupted her. "I don't mind so much for myself, because I'm not so tender-hearted as Joan and don't feel things so much, and—oh, Starling darling, please don't press that arm."

She winced realistically, and Joan took her up immediately.

"Nancy, I wonder if there's time to get long sleeves put into our frocks for to-night. Mother

will ask what the marks are, and we *can't* tell her a lie, and if we tell her the truth—— Oh, Starling darling, *don't* go away from us again. We can't *bear* it any more;" and she wept audibly on Miss Bird's inadequate shoulder.

Miss Bird was too overcome for the moment to give words to her horror, but she put her arm round Joan, who winced in her turn, and said, "Not that shoulder," through her convulsive sobs.

"Don't be silly, Joan," said Nancy firmly. "William will wonder what is the matter, and you know what you will get if you let it out. Starling darling, you *won't* say anything to anybody, will you? It will be much worse for us if you do, and after all when a bruise gets blue and green it doesn't hurt so very much."

"Do you mean to say that she *beats* you?" exclaimed Miss Bird, her eyebrows almost up to her hat-brim. "Then I shall go *at once* to Mrs. Clinton the *moment* I get into the house and tell her that——"

Joan threw her arms round her neck and laughed. "Angel lamb!" she said, "it's too bad to tease her. She's just as green and sweet as ever."

"Oh, why do you spoil everything?" exclaimed Nancy. Then she too relented and added her embraces to Joan's. "Oh, you're too priceless," she said. "Are you really glad to see us again?"

"Well I suppose I must not be angry and I know your naughty ways too well," said Miss Bird, "but you gave me quite a *turn* and I suppose really Miss Phipp is all she should be and you love her very much as you ought to do and it is only natural that those who are near should take the place of those who are far."

"I believe she's really disappointed that Pipp doesn't beat us black and blue," said Joan. "But she'll never take *your* place, Starling, my own. You're the one and only. I suppose you know we're aunts again. Walter and Muriel have got a boy."

"A boy!" exclaimed Miss Bird, enraptured. "Now that *is* good news and how *delighted* your father will be the pet how I should like to see him."

"Starling *darling*," expostulated Nancy. "You *will* see him directly, but father won't like your calling him a pet."

Miss Bird blushed. "You know very well I should say no such thing, Nancy," she said; "it was the baby I meant if you repeat that untruth in the house I shall go *straight* back where I came from."

The twins laughed. "Isn't she pathetic and cherubic?" said Joan. "*We* haven't seen him yet, though we're going to to-morrow. He was only born yesterday. We'll take you over."

"Isn't everybody very pleased?" asked Miss Bird, meaning by "everybody" the Squire, but not liking to mention his name again.

"*We* are," replied Joan, "and so is mother. Father isn't quite certain about it, although he is glad that he was born at Mountfield—at the Lodge, you know—instead of at Melbury Park. Unless Dick or Humphrey have sons he'll succeed to the property, you see, and it is very important that he should be touched by nothing common or unclean. We've got such a lot to tell you—all about the weddings and the rows. Everything is made up now, but we had the very deuce of a time since you left."

"Now, Joan," said Miss Bird sharply, "if you talk like that I shall be sorry I came and I am sure Miss Phipp would be very angry you must act while she is away as if she were *present*, here we are and I declare there is dear Mrs. Clinton at the door how pleased I am to see her once more oh it is almost too much." And she began waving her hand and bobbing up and down and saying, "Oh how do you do how do you do," until the carriage drew up under the porch, when she hopped out of it and received a greeting from Mrs. Clinton which put the seal on her happiness.

The Squire came out of his room as they were going into the morning-room. "Why, Miss Bird!" he exclaimed heartily, "here's a sight for sore eyes! How de do, Miss Bird, how de do! 'Pon my word, it looks so natural to see you here that I wonder we ever allowed you to go. We've got a very learned lady in your place, and a dangerously attractive one, by George—ha, ha!—but we don't forget you, Miss Bird, and we often wish you were back again."

Now could anything have been handsomer than this! as Miss Bird asked of her sister when she went back home again. From such a man too! who had so many important things and people to think of.

"I'm sure Mr. Clinton all your kindness I never shall forget and never *can* forget," she began; but Joan and Nancy stopped her by pushing her into a chair, and the Squire laughed and said, "They don't play tricks like that with Miss Phipp, the young monkeys! How do you think they're looking, Miss Bird? Pretty good specimens for Kencote air, eh? Well, I suppose you've heard all our news—Dick married, and Humphrey going to be. You've never seen Mrs. Dick, I think; she was after your time."

"No but she wrote me the kindest possible letter Mr. Clinton when I sent a small gift to Dick and there was really no necessity for *anybody* to write but Dick wrote at once and *she* wrote too and said she should hope to see me soon which touched me very deeply and made me feel that I *knew* her though I had never seen her."

"Ah, yes," said the Squire complacently; "she thinks of everybody and identifies herself with all Dick's interests, and you're not the *least* of them, Miss Bird. You'll see her to-night, for they're dining here, and if you don't take to her out of hand, Miss Bird, I shall be very much surprised. We're all in love with her here—eh, children?"

"Rather!" said the twins in one breath; and Mrs. Clinton said, "They are at the dower-house for a week or two. Dick is looking after some other properties, but he has arranged it so that it does not take up all his time. They live chiefly in Yorkshire, but they will be able to live at the dower-house for a week or two every now and then, and by and by we hope that they will be able to live there altogether."

"And where is Humphrey going to live?" enquired Miss Bird, who had gathered certain facts from her correspondence with the twins, and had no wish to be indiscreet, but did wish to know.

"Oh, he'll settle down in London," said the Squire. "It will suit him and Lady Susan better; and he's getting on well with his work and has to be near it," and Miss Bird was too discreet to indicate that she had heard that he had been going to give up his work.

"We hope that they will come here often," said Mrs. Clinton. "The idea was that they should go to the dower-house when Dick and Virginia didn't want it, but there is plenty of room here, as you know, and they chose not to have the responsibility of another house."

Miss Bird was well posted in the general hang of family affairs when she presently went upstairs with the twins, but it remained for them to enlighten her on the events that had led up to the existing state of things.

They took her to her old room, which had been in the occupancy of Miss Phipp. "We told mother we were sure you would like to sleep here," said Joan, "and we've cleared all her things out, and made it just like it used to be for you."

"Darlings!" said Miss Bird. "It will be like old times and I shall scarcely be able to sleep for happiness oh, look at the daffodils under the trees."

"We didn't think you'd want to be bothered up with her books," said Nancy, "so we've put the ones you like instead. *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Longfellow and *The Wide, Wide World*. You'll be able to cry over that to-morrow before you get up."

Miss Bird was nearly overcome again by these thoughtful preparations for her happiness. "Now I'll just take off my things pets and then we'll have a cosey time in the schoolroom I'm so looking forward to seeing it again you go and take off your things too and I'll come in a minute."

"If you would like to look through her photographs," said Nancy, as they were leaving the room, "they're all in this drawer; but they're not very interesting. Hullo, here's Hannah—always on the spot when she isn't wanted, and never there when she is."

"Indeed, Miss Nancy," said Hannah, "and I suppose I may come and see Miss Bird without stepping out of my place, which unwilling I should be to do, and Miss Bird always treating me as a perfect lady, and very pleased all are to see her back again, high and low."

"You treat her as a perfect lady, Starling darling, for a minute while we go and take our things off," said Nancy, "and try and persuade her to do her work better, or she'll have to go."

Hannah was left indignantly spluttering something about working her fingers to the bone and getting small thanks for it, while Miss Bird soothed her ruffled spirits, and told her that if she didn't know how to put up with her young ladies' nonsense by this time she wasn't as sensible as she had thought, but she was delighted to see her again, and was sure that she was doing her duty as she always had done it.

A little later she was sitting between the twins on the schoolroom sofa, having duly expressed her rapture at finding herself once more in that dear old room.

"Now we'll tell you all about everything," began Joan. "You heard father say how much he liked Virginia, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Miss Bird, "and Mrs. Clinton too and very pleasant it is when some one comes into a family to be welcomed so *lovingly* and I hope you and Nancy are equally fond of her Joan for I am sure she deserves it so kind and considerate as she has shown herself."

"We adore her," said Nancy. "It is very easy for people to make us like them if they take a little trouble. We are very simple-minded."

"It's a question of chocolates judiciously administered," said Joan. "But we could do without them from her, because we like her immensely. Well, you'd hardly believe, from the way father

talked, that he threatened to cut Dick off with a shilling if he married her, could you?"

"Now Joan I don't want to listen to any nonsense," said Miss Bird. "You have taken me in *once* this evening and let that be enough."

"But, Starling darling, it's *true*. It wasn't till she saved his life out hunting that he would put up with her at all. Of course, now he thinks he always liked her, but that's what he is."

"I don't wish to hear any more of that tell me about the wedding," said Miss Bird.

"Well, if you won't believe it, you won't," said Nancy. "And it doesn't much matter now, because it is all over, and we are a united family once more; but you have no idea of the trouble Joan and I had with them all. Except mother, we were the only ones who kept our heads."

"At one time"—Joan took up the tale—"Humphrey was going to be put in to lord it over us, and sweet Sue Clinton; but directly Dick turned up and took father in hand we didn't hear any more about that, and they are going to have a scrumptious flat in town, and we are going up, one at a time, to stay with them, because they only have one spare room."

"Sue isn't bad," said Nancy. "We didn't care for her at first, but she's got a horrible old painted dragon of a mother, and when she's away from her she's quite decent, and I dare say we shall be able to make something of her."

"Now I don't want to hear any more gossip about people Joan 'n' Nancy," said Miss Bird, "tell me about Dick's wedding."

"Ivory satin," said Joan, "with sable hats and stoles and muffs, which Dick gave us, and shower bouquets of violets. We were the admired of all beholders."

"Toby Dexter acted as sort of best man to Virginia," said Nancy. "She's up in Yorkshire now, keeping the house warm for them."

The twins gave the rest of their news in alternate sentences.

"Cousin Humphrey gave Virginia away. He was very sweet, and made a lot of jokes afterwards."

"It was a very quiet wedding—at Blaythorn. Uncle Tom married them, and made several mistakes in the service. I suppose he was overcome. Humphrey was Dick's best man. They hadn't been very good friends at one time, but they had made it up, and now they like each other very much."

"We only had relations staying here for the wedding, except Mr. Spence, Dick's friend, whose property he is looking after. He was such fun. We simply loved him. He used to roar at all our jokes, especially at Nancy's rhapsodies, and we egged him on to make love to Miss Phipp."

"She was immensely flattered. She said he was a true gentleman, and when we told him we thought he'd have had a fit."

"He didn't really make love to her. He was too kind. He used to pay her a lot of attention, and asked her to teach him to spell."

"He wrote us a letter when he'd gone back and spelt appearance with one 'p.'"

"And other mistakes too. But we did adore him."

"Old Mr. Marsh was at the wedding. We *think* he proposed to Toby Dexter afterwards, but she would never tell us. He drank too much champagne."

"Now Nancy you are not to say things like that," said Miss Bird, quite in her old authoritative manner.

Nancy embraced her warmly. "You're too sweet for words," she said. "Uncle Herbert and Aunt Emmeline and Angela came. Angela is going to be married in June at Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, and we're to be bridesmaids; and to sweet Sue Clinton, too, at St. George's, Hanover Square. Our portraits will be in the papers, and we'll send you copies. We shall be much admired."

"Uncle Herbert was very angelic. He talked about Ibsen to Miss Phipp, and when she found out that he had been a Liberal member of Parliament she almost wept for joy. We didn't know she was a Radical before, but if Uncle Herbert was one, they can't be as bad as father makes out."

"She's a suffragette too, but she has never been able to answer father's question, 'Who would cook the dinner on polling-day?'"

"Well, she's answered it, but father won't listen to her."

"Aunt Laura is ill. We'll take you to see her to-morrow. She made us promise to."

"Oh dear Miss Clinton," broke in Miss Bird, "I do hope it is nothing serious."

"She's very old. She can't live much longer, I'm afraid. She remembers the Battle of Trafalgar, or the Crimean War—I forget which."

They talked for some time longer, and when Miss Bird went to her room to dress for dinner it was with a heart full of thankfulness to find herself still so much beloved, and with a lively curiosity as to what Virginia would be like when she should presently meet her.

She and the twins were together in the morning-room when Dick and Virginia arrived. While the twins were throwing themselves upon Virginia, Dick came forward grinning and gave her a resounding kiss on either cheek. "There, old lady," he said. "That's what you deserve and what you'll get from me now I'm married. Virginia, come and do likewise."

Miss Bird, once more, was overcome almost to the point of tears. "I'm sure this is a very happy day for me," she twittered, but could get no further.

"They're all happy days for all of us," said Virginia, who looked radiant, and not much older than her young sisters-in-law. "The twins are to bring you down to see me early to-morrow morning, when Dick is out. I want to hear all about him when he was a little boy, and I'm sure a very naughty one."

"Oh indeed," said Miss Bird; "he was high-spirited but as for naughtiness what I call real naughtiness no child could have been freer from it."

"If you think you're going to get anything against me out of Miss Bird, you may save yourself the trouble and enquire elsewhere," said Dick. "She thinks there was never such a family as the Clintons, don't you, Starling?"

"I think they're rather nice too," said Virginia, with her hands on the shoulders of Joan and Nancy and her eyes on Dick.

The Squire coming in at this moment with Mrs. Clinton greeted Virginia as if she were his daughter, and it being on the stroke of eight immediately led her in to dinner. He was in the best of spirits, and talked and laughed, during the whole of the meal, in his old, rather boisterous fashion. Gone were the moody silences and the frowning perplexity of a few months back. He had not, apparently, a care in the world, and, with his healthy, rubicund visage, and active, though massive form, looked as if he were prepared to enjoy the good things with which his life was filled for a further indefinite number of years.

There was only one little shadow of a cloud. As he got into bed that night, he said, "I'm very glad you asked old Miss Bird here, Nina. She's a faithful old soul, and it does me good to see her about the place. She seems to belong to it, and it brings us back to where we were before all this infernal worry came to us."

"We are better off than we were then," said Mrs. Clinton, "for you were worrying about Dick getting married, and now his marriage has come about and you need worry over it no longer."

"Ah, yes," said the Squire. "I remember I did say something to you, and to him too, just before he sprang it on us—what was in his mind. If I had known Virginia then it would have saved us months of bother. I've never quite forgiven Dick for not introducing me to her at first. I should have given way at once, of course. However, we needn't think about that now; but now this little chap of Walter's has come—I must go over and have a look at him to-morrow—it does make me wish that we were in the way of looking forward to a son of Dick's. I suppose, Nina——"

"There is plenty of time to hope for that," said Mrs. Clinton.

"I suppose there is, and we mustn't be impatient. Still, I shan't be quite easy in my mind about the succession until there are children at the dower-house. However, the matter is in higher hands than ours, and there's never failed an heir to Kencote yet. How long was Virginia married before?"

"Seven years, I think," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Ah, well, if the worst comes to the worst, there's a boy Clinton sleeping over at Mountfield now, and we must put up with our disappointment. Good-night, Nina. God bless you!"

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