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### Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation has been regularized.

The following typographical corrections were made:

[p. 517](#) "dumurely" changed to "demurely"

[p. 536](#) "that's he" changed to "that he's"

[p. 539](#) "thing" changed to "think"



# SECOND STRING

By ANTHONY HOPE



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## **SECOND STRING.**

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### **Chapter I.**

#### **HOME AGAIN.**

Jack Rock stood in his shop in High Street. He was not very often to be seen there nowadays; he bred and bought, but he no longer killed, and rarely sold, in person. These latter and lesser functions he left to his deputy, Simpson, for he had gradually developed a bye-trade which took up much of his time, and was no less profitable than his ostensible business. He bought horses, "made" them into hunters, and sold them again. He was a rare judge and a fine rider, and his heart was in this line of work.

However to-day he was in his shop because the Christmas beef was on show. Here were splendid carcasses decked with blue rosettes, red rosettes, or cards of "Honourable Mention;" poor bodies sadly unconscious (as one may suppose all bodies are) of their posthumous glories. Jack Rock, a

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spruce spare little man with a thin red face and a get-up of the most "horsy" order, stood before them, expatiating to Simpson on their beauties. Simpson, who was as fat as his master was thin, and even redder in the face, chimed in; they were for all the world like a couple of critics hymning the praise of poets who have paid the debt of nature, but are decorated with the insignia of fame. Verily Jack Rock's shop in the days before Christmas might well seem an Abbey or a Pantheon of beasts.

"Beef for me on Christmas Day," said Jack. "None of your turkeys or geese, or such-like truck. Beef!" He pointed to a blue-rosetted carcass. "Look at him; just look at him! I've known him since he was calved. Cuts up well, doesn't he? I'll have a joint off him for my own table, Simpson."

"You couldn't do better, sir," said Simpson, just touching, careful not to bruise, the object of eulogy with his professional knife. A train of thought started suddenly in his brain. "Them vegetarians, sir!" he exclaimed. Was it wonder, or contempt, or such sheer horror as the devotee has for atheism? Or the depths of the first and the depths of the second poured into the depths of the third to make immeasurable profundity?

A loud burst of laughter came from the door of the shop. Nothing startled Jack Rock. He possessed in perfection a certain cheerful seriousness which often marks the amateurs of the horse. These men are accustomed to take chances, to encounter the unforeseen, to endure disappointment, to withstand the temptations of high success. *Mens Aequa!* Life, though a pleasant thing, is not a laughing matter. So Jack turned slowly and gravely round to see whence the irreverent interruption proceeded. But when he saw the intruder his face lit up, and he darted across the shop with outstretched hand. Simpson followed, hastily rubbing his right hand on the under side of his blue apron.

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"Welcome, my lad, welcome home!" cried Jack, as he greeted with a hard squeeze a young man who stood in the doorway. "First-rate you look too. He's filled out, eh, Simpson?" He tapped the young man's chest appreciatively, and surveyed his broad and massive shoulders with almost professional admiration. "Canada's agreed with you, Andy. Have you just got here?"

"No; I got here two hours ago. You were out, so I left my bag and went for a walk round the old place. It seems funny to be in Meriton again."

"Come into the office. We must drink your health. You too, Simpson. Come along."

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He led the way to a back room, where, amid more severe furniture and appliances, there stood a cask of beer. From this he filled three pint mugs, and Andy Hayes' health and safe return were duly honoured. Andy winked his eye.

"Them teetotallers!" he ejaculated, with a very fair imitation of Simpson, who acknowledged the effort with an answering wink as he drained his mug and then left the other two to themselves.

"Yes, I've been poking about everywhere—first up to have a look at the old house. Not much changed there—well, except that everything's changed by the dear old governor's not being there any more."

"Ah, it was a black Christmas that year—four years ago now. First, the old gentleman; then poor Nancy, a month later. She caught the fever nursin' him; she would do it, and I couldn't stop her. Did you go to the churchyard, Andy?"

"Yes, I went there." After a moment's grave pause his face brightened again. "And I went to the old school. Nobody there—it's holidays, of course—but how everything came back to me! There was my old seat, between Chinks and the Bird—you know? Wat Money, I mean, and young Tom Dove."

"Oh, they're both in the place still. Tom Dove's helpin' his father at the Lion, and Wat Money's articled to old Mr. Foulkes the lawyer."

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"I sat down at my old desk, and, by Jove, I absolutely seemed to hear the old governor talking—talking about the Pentathlon. You've heard him talk about the Pentathlon? He was awfully keen on the Pentathlon; wanted to have it at the sports. I believe he thought I should win it."

"I don't exactly remember what it was, but you'd have had a good go for it, Andy."

"Leaping, running, wrestling, throwing the discus, hurling the spear—I think that's right. He was talking about it the very last day I sat at that desk—eight years ago! Yes, it's eight years since I went out to the war, and nearly five since I went to Canada. And I've never been back! Well, except for not seeing him and Nancy again, I'm glad of it. I've done better out there. There wasn't any opening here. I wasn't clever, and if I had been, there was no money to send me to Oxford, though the governor was always dreaming of that."

"Naturally, seein' he was B.A. Oxon, and a gentleman himself," said Jack.

He spoke in a tone of awe and admiration. Andy looked at him with a smile. Among the townfolk of Meriton Andy's father had always been looked up to by reason of the letters after his name on the prospectus of the old grammar school, of which he had been for thirty years the hard-worked

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and very ill-paid headmaster. In Meriton eyes the letters carried an academical distinction great if obscure, a social distinction equally great and far more definite. They ranked Mr. Hayes with the gentry, and their existence had made his second marriage—with Jack Rock the butcher's sister—a *mésalliance* of a pronounced order. Jack himself was quite of this mind. He had always treated his brother-in-law with profound respect; even his great affection for his sister had never quite persuaded him that she had not been guilty of gross presumption in winning Mr. Hayes' heart. He could not, even as the second Mrs. Hayes' brother, forget the first—Andy's mother; for she, though the gentlest of women, had always called Jack "Butcher." True, that was in days before Jack had won his sporting celebrity and set up his private gig; but none the less it would have seemed impossible to conceive of a family alliance—even a posthumous one—with a lady whose recognition of him was so exclusively commercial.

"Well, I'm not a B.A.—Oxon. or otherwise," laughed Andy. "I don't know whether I'm a gentleman. If I am, so are you. Meriton Grammar School is responsible for us both. And if you're in trade, so am I. What's the difference between timber and meat?"

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"I expect there's a difference between Meriton and Canada, though," Jack Rock opined shrewdly. "Are you goin' to stay at home, or goin' back?"

"I shall stay here if I can develop the thing enough to make it pay to have a man on this side. If not, pack up! But I shall be here for the next six months anyway, I expect."

"What's it worth to you?" asked Jack.

"Oh, nothing much just now. Two hundred a year guaranteed, and a commission—if it's earned. But it looks like improving. Only the orders must come in before the commission does! However it's not so bad; I'm lucky to have found a berth at all."

"Yes, lucky thing you got pals with that Canadian fellow down in South Africa."

"A real stroke of luck. It was a bit hard to make up my mind not to come home with the boys, but I'm sure I did the right thing. Only I'm sorry about the old governor and Nancy."

"The old gentleman himself told me he thought you'd done right."

"It was an opening; and it had to be taken or left, then and there. So here I am, and I'm going to start an office in London."

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Jack Rock nodded thoughtfully; he seemed to be revolving something in his mind. Andy's eyes rested affectionately on him. The two had been great friends all through Andy's boyhood. Jack had been "Jack" to him long before he became a family connection, and "Jack" he had continued to be. As for the *mésalliance*—well, looking back, Andy could not with candour deny that it had been a surprise, perhaps even a shock. It had to some degree robbed him of the exceptional position he held in the grammar school, where, among the sons of tradesmen, he alone, or almost alone, enjoyed a vague yet real social prestige. The son shared the father's fall. The feeling of caste is very persistent, even though it may be shamed into silence by modern doctrines, or by an environment in which it is an alien plant. But he had got over his boyish feeling now, and was delighted to come back to Meriton as Jack Rock's visitor, and to stay with him at the comfortable little red-brick house adjoining the shop in High Street. In fact he flattered himself that his service in the ranks and his Canadian experiences had taken the last of "that sort of nonsense" out of him. It was, perhaps, a little too soon to pronounce so confident a judgment.

Andy was smitten with a sudden compunction. "Why, I've never asked after Harry Belfield!" he cried.

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He was astonished at his own disloyalty. Harry Belfield had been the hero of his youth, his ideal, his touchstone of excellence in all things, the standard by which he humbly measured his own sore deficiencies, and contemptuously assessed the demerits of his schoolfellows. Of these Harry had not been one. No grammar school for him! He was the son of Mr. Belfield of Halton Park—Harrow and Oxford were the programme for him. The same favourable conditions gave him the opportunity—which, of course, he took—of excelling in all the accomplishments that Andy lacked and envied—riding, shooting, games of skill that cost money. The difference of position set a gulf between the two boys. Meetings had been rare events—to Andy always notable events, occasions of pleasure and of excitement, landmarks in memory. The acquaintance between the houses had been of the slightest. In Andy's earliest days Mr. and the first Mrs. Hayes had dined once a year with Mr. and Mrs. Belfield; they were not expected to return the hospitality. After Andy's mother died and Nancy came on the scene, the annual dinner had gone on, but it had become a men's dinner; and Mrs. Belfield, though she bowed in the street, had not called on the second Mrs. Hayes—Nancy Rock that had been. It was not to be expected. Yet Mr. Belfield had recognized an equal in Andy's father; he also, perhaps, yielded some homage to the B.A. Oxon. And Harry, though he undoubtedly drew a line between himself and Andy, drew another between Andy and Andy's schoolfellows, Chinks, the Bird, and the rest. He was rewarded—and to his worship-loving nature it was a reward—by an adoration due as much, perhaps, to the first line as to the second. The more definite a line, the more graciousness lies in stepping over it.

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These boyish devotions are common, and commonly are short-lived. But Andy's habit of mind was stable and his affections tenacious. He still felt that a meeting with Harry Belfield would be an

event.

"He's all right," Jack Rock answered, his tone hardly responding to Andy's eagerness. "He's a barrister now, you know; but I don't fancy he does much at it. Better at spendin' money than makin' it! If you want to see him, you can do it to-night."

"Can I? How?"

"There's talk of him bein' candidate for the Division next election, and he's goin' to speak at a meeting in the Town Hall to-night, him and a chap in Parliament."

"Good! Which side is he?"

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"You've been a good while away to ask that!"

"I suppose I have. I say, Jack, let's go."

"You can go; I shan't," said Jack Rock. "You'll get back in time for supper—and need it too, I should say. I never listen to speeches except when they put me on a jury at assizes. Then I do like to hear a chap fight for his man. That's racin', that is; and I like specially, Andy, to see him bring it off when the odds are against him. But this politics—in my opinion, if you put their names in a hat and drew 'em blindfolded, you'd get just as good a Govern'ment as you do now, or just as bad."

"Oh, I'm not going for the politics. I'm going to hear Harry Belfield."

"The only question as particularly interests me," said Jack, with one of his occasional lapses into doubtful grammar, "is the matter of chilled meat. But which of 'em does anything for me there? One says 'Free Trade—let it all come!' The other says, 'No chilled meat, certainly not, unless it comes from British possessions'—which is where it does come from mostly. And it's ruin to the meat, Andy, in my opinion. I hate to see it. Not that I lose much by it, havin' a high-class connection. Would you like to have another look in the shop?"

"Suppose we say to-morrow morning?" laughed Andy.

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Jack shook his head; he seemed disappointed at this lack of enthusiasm. "I've got some beauties this Christmas," he said. "All the same I shan't be lookin' at 'em much to-morrow mornin'! I've got a young horse, and I want just to show him what a foxhound's like. The meet's at Fyfold to-morrow, Andy. I wish I could mount you. I expect you ride fourteen, eh?"

"Hard on it, I fancy—and I'm a fool on a horse anyhow. But I shall go—on shanks' mare."

"Will you now? Well, if you're as good on your legs as you used to be, it's odds you'll see a bit of the run. I recollect you in the old days, Andy; you were hard to shake off unless the goin' was uncommon good. Knew the country, you did, and where the fox was likely to make for. And I don't think you'll get the scent too good for you to-morrow. Come along and have tea. Oh, but you're a late-dinner man, eh?"

"Dinner when, where, and how it comes! Tea sounds capital—with supper after my meeting. I say, Jack, it's good to see you again!"

"Wish you'd stay here, lad. I'm much alone these days—with the old gentleman gone, and poor Nancy gone!"

"Perhaps I shall. Anyhow I might stay here for the summer, and go up to town to the office."

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"Aye, you might do that, anyhow." Again Jack Rock seemed meditative, as though he had an idea and were half-minded to disclose it. But he was a man of caution; he bided his time.

Andy—nobody had ever called him Andrew since the parson who christened him—seemed to himself to have got home again, very thoroughly home again. Montreal with its swelling hill, its mighty river, its winter snow, its Frenchness, its opposing self-defensive, therefore self-assertive, Britishness, was very remote. A talk with Jack Rock, a Conservative meeting with a squire in the chair (that was safely to be assumed), a meet of the hounds next morning—these and a tide of intimate personal memories stamped him as at home again. The long years in the little house at the extreme end of Highcroft—Highcroft led out of High Street, tending to the west, Fyfold way—in the old grammar school, in the peace of the sleepy town—had been a poignant memory in South Africa, a fading dream in the city by the great river. They sprang again into actuality. If he felt a certain contraction in his horizon he felt also a peace in his mind. Meriton might or might not admire "hustlers;" it did not hustle itself. It was a parasitic little town; it had no manufactures, no special industry. It lived on the country surrounding it—on the peasants, the farmers, the landowners. So it did not grow; neither did it die. It remained much as it had been for hundreds of years, save that it was seriously considering the introduction of electric light.

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The meeting was rather of an impromptu order; Christmas holidays are generally held sacred from such functions. But Mr. Foot, M.P., a rising young member and a friend of Harry Belfield's, happened to be staying at Halton Park for shooting. Why waste him? He liked to speak, and he spoke very well. The more Harry showed himself and got himself heard, the better. The young men would enjoy it. A real good dinner beforehand would send them down in rare spirits. A bit of

supper, with a whisky-and-soda or two, and recollections of their own "scores," would end the evening pleasantly. Meriton would not be excited—it was not election time—but it would be amused, benevolent, and present in sufficiently large numbers to make the thing go with *éclat*.

There was, indeed, one topic which, from a platform at all events, one could describe as "burning." A Bill dealing with the sale of intoxicating liquor had, the session before, been introduced as the minimum a self-respecting nation could do, abused as the maximum fanatics could clamour for, carried through a second reading considerably amended, and squeezed out by other matters. It was to be re-introduced. The nation was recommended to consider the question in the interval. Now the nation, though professing its entire desire to be sober—it could not well do anything else—was not sure that it desired to be made sober, was not quite clear as to the precise point at which it could or could not be held to be sober, and felt that the argument that it would, by the gradual progress of general culture, become sober in the next generation or so—without feeling the change, so to say, and with no violent break in the habits of this generation (certainly everybody must wish the next generation to be sober)—that this argument, which men of indisputable wisdom adduced, had great attractions. Also the nation was much afraid of the teetotallers, especially of the subtle ones who said that true freedom lay in freedom from temptation. The nation thought that sort of freedom not much worth having, whether in the matter of drink or of any other pleasure. So there were materials for a lively and congenial discussion, and Mr. Foot, M.P., was already in the thick of it when Andy Hayes, rather late by reason of having been lured into the stables to see the hunters after tea, reached the Town Hall and sidled his way to a place against the wall in good view of the platform and of the front benches where the big-wigs sat. The Town Hall was quite two-thirds full—very good indeed for the Christmas season!

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Andy Hayes was not much of a politician. Up to now he had been content with the politics of his *métier*, the politics of a man trying to build up a business. But it was impossible not to enjoy Mr. Foot. He riddled the enemy with epigram till he fell to the earth, then he jumped on to his prostrate form and chopped it to pieces with logic. He set his audience wondering—this always happens at political meetings, whichever party may be in power—by what odd freak of fate, by what inexplicable blunder, the twenty men chosen to rule the country should be not only the twenty most unprincipled but also the twenty stupidest in it. Mr. Foot demonstrated the indisputable truth of this strange fact so cogently before he had been on his legs twenty minutes that gradually Andy felt absolved from listening any longer to so plain a matter; his attention began to wander to the company. It was a well-to-do audience—there were not many poor in Meriton. A few old folk might have to go to "the house," but there were no distress or "unemployment" troubles. The tradesfolk, their families, and employees formed the bulk. They were presided over by Mr. Wellgood of Nutley, who might be considered to hold the place of second local magnate, after Mr. Belfield of Halton. He was a spare, strongly built man of two or three and forty; his hair was clipped very close to his head; he wore a bristly moustache just touched with gray, but it too was kept so short that the lines of his mouth, with its firm broad lips, were plain to see; his eyes were light-blue, hard, and wary; they seemed to keep a constant watch over the meeting, and once, when a scuffle arose among some children at the back of the hall, they gave out a fierce and formidable glance of rebuke. He had the reputation of being a strict master and a stern magistrate; but he was a good sportsman, and Jack Rock's nearest rival after the hounds.

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Beside him, waiting his turn to speak and seeming rather nervous—he was not such an old hand at the game as Mr. Foot—sat Andy's hero, Harry Belfield. He was the pet of the town for his gay manner, good looks, and cheery accessibility to every man—and even more to every woman. His youthful record was eminently promising, his career the subject of high hopes to his family and his fellow-citizens. Tall and slight, wearing his clothes with an elegance free from affectation, he suggested "class" and "blood" in every inch of him. He was rather pale, with thick, soft, dark hair; his blue eyes were vivacious and full of humour, his mouth a little small, but delicate and sensitive, the fingers of his hands long and tapering. "A thoroughbred" was the only possible verdict—evidently also a man full of sensibility, awake to the charms of life as well as to its labours; that was in keeping with all Andy's memories.

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The moment he rose it was obvious with what favour he was regarded; the audience was predisposed towards all he said. He was not so epigrammatic nor so cruelly logical as Mr. Foot; he was easier, more colloquial, more confidential; he had some chaff for his hearers as well as denunciation for his enemies; his speech was seasoned now by a local allusion, now by a sporting simile. A veteran might have found its strongest point of promise in its power of adaptation to the listeners, its gift of creating sympathy between them and the speaker by the grace of a very attractive personality. It was a success, perhaps, more of charm than of strength; but it may be doubted whether in the end the one does not carry as far as the other.

On good terms as he was with them all, it soon became evident to so interested an onlooker as Andy Hayes that he was on specially good terms, or at any rate anxious to be, in one particular quarter. After he had made a point and was waiting for the applause to die down, not once but three or four times he smiled directly towards the front row, and towards that part of it where two young women sat side by side. They were among his most enthusiastic auditors, and Andy presently found himself, by a natural leaning towards any one who admired Harry Belfield, according to them a share of the attention which had hitherto been given exclusively to the hero himself.

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The pair made a strong contrast. There was a difference of six or seven years only in their ages, but while the one seemed scarcely more than a child, it was hard to think of the other as even a girl—there was about her such an air of self-possession, of conscious strength, of a maturity of faculties. Even in applauding she seemed also to judge and assess. Her favour was discriminating; she let the more easy hits go by with a slight, rather tolerant smile, while her neighbour greeted them with outright merry laughter. She was not much beyond medium height, but of full build, laid on ample lines; her features were rather large, and her face wore, in repose, a thoughtful tranquillity. The other, small, frail, and delicate, with large eyes that seemed to wonder even as she laughed, would turn to her friend with each laugh and appear to ask her sympathy—or even her permission to be pleased.

Andy's scrutiny—somewhat prolonged since it yielded him all the above particulars—was ended by his becoming aware that he in his turn was the object of an attention not less thoroughgoing. Turning back to the platform, he found the chairman's hard and alert eyes fixed on him in a gaze that plainly asked who he was and why he was so much interested in the two girls. Andy blushed in confusion at being caught, but Mr. Wellgood made no haste to relieve him from his rebuking glance. He held him under it for full half a minute, turning away, indeed, only when Harry sat down among the cheers of the meeting. What business was it of Wellgood's if Andy did forget his manners and stare too hard at the girls? The next moment Andy laughed at himself for the question. In a sudden flash he remembered the younger girl. She was Wellgood's daughter Vivien. He recalled her now as a little child; he remembered the wondering eyes and the timidly mirthful curl of her lips. Was it really as long ago as that since he had been in Meriton? However childlike she might look, now she was grown-up!

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His thoughts, which carried him through the few sentences with which the chairman dismissed the meeting, were scattered by the sudden grasp of Harry Belfield's hand. The moment he saw Andy he ran down from the platform to him. His greeting was all his worshipper could ask.

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"Well now, I am glad to see you back!" he cried. "Oh, we all heard how well you'd done out at the front, and we thought it too bad of you not to come back and be lionized. But here you are at last, and it's all right. I must take Billy Foot home now—he's got to go to town at heaven knows what hour in the morning—but we must have a good jaw soon. Are you at the Lion?"

"No," said Andy, "I'm staying a day or two with Jack Rock."

"With Jack Rock?" Harry's voice sounded surprised. "Oh yes, of course, I remember! He's a capital chap, old Jack! But if you're going to stay—and I hope you are, old fellow—you'll want some sort of a place of your own, won't you? Well, good-night. I'll hunt you up some time in the next day or two, for certain. Did you like my speech?"

"Yes, and I expected you to make a good one."

"You shall hear me make better ones than that. Well, I really must—All right, Billy, I'm coming." With another clasp of the hand he rushed after Mr. Foot, who was undisguisedly in a hurry, shouting as he went, "Good-night, Wellgood! Good-night, Vivien! Good-night, Miss Vintry!"

Miss Vintry—that was the other girl, the one with Vivien Wellgood. Andy was glad to know her name and docket her by it in her place among the impressions of the evening.

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So home to a splendid round of cold beef and another pint of that excellent beer at Jack Rock's. What days life sometimes gives—or used to!

## Chapter II.

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### A VERY LITTLE HUNTING.

If more were needed to make a man feel at home—more than old Meriton itself, Jack Rock with his beef, and the clasp of Harry Belfield's hand—the meet of the hounds supplied it. There were hunts in other lands; Andy could not persuade himself that there were meets like this, so entirely English it seemed in the manner of it. Everybody was there, high and low, rich and poor, young and old. An incredible coincidence of unplausible accidents had caused an extraordinary number of people to have occasion to pass by Fyfold Green that morning at that hour, let alone all the folk who chanced to have a "morning off" and proposed to see some of the run, on horseback or on foot. The tradesmen's carts were there in a cluster, among them two of Jack Rock's: his boys knew that a blind eye would be turned to half an hour's lateness in the delivery of the customers' joints. For centre of the scene were the waving tails, the glossy impatient horses, the red coats, the Master himself, Lord Meriton, in his glory and, it may be added, in the peremptory mood which is traditionally associated with his office.

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Andy Hayes moved about, meeting many old friends—more, indeed, than he recognized, till a reminiscence of old days established for them again a place in his memory. He saw Tom Dove—the Bird—mounted on a showy screw. Wat Money—Chinks—was one of those who "happened to be passing" on his way to a client's who lived in the opposite direction. He gave Andy a friendly greeting, and told him that if he thought of taking a house in Meriton, he should be careful about his lease: Foulkes, Foulkes, and Askew would look after it. Jack Rock was there, of course,

keeping himself to himself, on the outskirts of the throng: the young horse was nervous. Harry Belfield, in perfect array, talked to Vivien Wellgood, her father on a raking hunter close beside them. A great swell of home-feeling assailed Andy; suddenly he had a passionate hope that the timber business would develop; he did not want to go back to Canada.

It was a good hunting morning, cloudy and cool, with the wind veering to the north-east and dropping as it veered. No frost yet, but the weather-wise predicted one before long. The scent should be good—a bit too good, Andy reflected, for riders on shanks' mare. Their turn is best served by a scent somewhat variable and elusive. A check here and there, a fresh cast, the hounds feeling for the scent—these things, added to a cunning use of short cuts and a knowledge of the country shared by the fox, aid them to keep on terms and see something of the run—just as they aid the heavy old gentlemen on big horses and the small boys on fat ponies to get their humble share of the sport.

pg 29

But in truth Andy cared little so that he could run—run hard, fast, and long. His powerful body craved work, work, and work yet more abundantly. His way of indulging it was to call on it for all its energies; he exulted in feeling its brave response. Fatigue he never knew—at least not till he had changed and bathed; and then it was not real fatigue: it was no more than satiety. Now when they had found—and they had the luck to find directly—he revelled in the heavy going of a big ploughed field. He was at the game he loved.

Yes, but the pace was good—distinctly good. The spirit was willing, but human legs are but human, and only two in number. Craft was required. The fox ran straight now—but had he never a thought in his mind? The field streamed off to the right, lengthening out as it went. Andy bore to his left: he remembered Croxton's Dip. Did the fox? That was the question. If he did, the hunt would describe the two sides of a triangle, while Andy cut across the base.

pg 30

He was out of sight of the field now, but he could hear the hounds giving tongue from time to time and the thud of the hoofs. The sounds grew nearer! A thrill of triumph ran through him; his old-time knowledge had not failed him. The fox had doubled back, making for Croxton's Dip. Over the edge of yonder hill it lay, half a mile off—a deep depression in the ground, covered with thick undergrowth. In the hope of catching up, Andy Hayes felt that he could run all day and grudge the falling of an over-hasty night.

"Blown," indeed, but no more than a rest of a minute would put right, he reached the ledge whence the ground sloped down sharply to the Dip. He was in time to see the hunt race past him along the bottom—leaders, the ruck, stragglers. Jack Rock and Wellgood were with the Master in the van; he could not make out Harry Belfield; a forlorn figure looking like the Bird laboured far in the rear.

They swept into the Dip as Andy started to race down the slope. But to his chagrin they swept out of it again, straight up a long slope which rose on his left, the fox running game, a near kill promising, a fast point-to-point secured. The going was too good for shanks' mare to-day. Before he got to the bottom even the Bird had galloped by, walloping his showy screw.

pg 31

To the left, then, and up that long slope! There was nothing else for it, if he were so much as to see the kill from afar. This was exercise, if you like! His heart throbbed like the engines of a great ship; the sweat broke out on him. Oh, it was fine! That slope must be won—then Heaven should send the issue!

Suddenly—even as he braced himself to face the long ascent, as the last sounds from the hunt died away over its summit—he saw a derelict, and, amazed, came to a full stop.

The girl was not on her pony; she was standing beside it. The pony appeared distressed, and the girl looked no whit more cheerful. With a pang to the very heart, Andy Hayes recognized a duty, and acknowledged it by a snatch at his cap.

"I beg your pardon; anything wrong?" he asked.

He had been interested in Vivien Wellgood the evening before, but he was much more than interested in the hunt. Still, she looked forlorn and desolate.

pg 32

"Would you mind looking at my pony's right front leg?" she asked. "I think he's gone lame."

"I know nothing about horses, but he does seem to stand rather gingerly on his—er—right front leg. And he's certainly badly blown—worse than I am!"

"We shall never catch them, shall we? It's not the least use going on, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I know the country; if you'd let me pilot you—"

"Harry Belfield was going to pilot me, but—well, I told him not to wait for me, and he didn't. You were at the meeting last night, weren't you? You're Mr. Hayes, aren't you? What did you think of the speeches?"

"Really, you know, if we're to have a chance of seeing any more of the—" It was not the moment to discuss political speeches, however excellent.



"I don't want to see any more of it. I'll go home; I'll risk it."

"Risk what?" he asked. There seemed no risk in going home; and there was, by now, small profit in going on.

She did not answer his question. "I think hunting's the most wretched amusement I've ever tried!" she broke out. "The pony's lame—yes, he is; I've torn my habit" (she exhibited a sore rent); "I've scratched my face" (her finger indicated the wound); "and here I am! All I hope is that they won't catch that poor fox. How far do you think it is to Nutley?"

pg 33

"Oh, about three miles, I should think. You could strike the road half a mile from here."

"I'm sure the pony's lame. I shall go back."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

During their talk her eyes had wavered between indignation and piteousness—the one at the so-called sport of hunting, the other for her own woes. At Andy's question a gleam of welcome flashed into them, followed in an instant by a curious sort of veiling of all expression. She made a pathetic little figure, with her habit sorely rent and a nasty red scratch across her forehead. The pony lame too—if he were lame! Andy hit on the idea that it was a question whether he were lame enough to swear by: that was what she was going to risk—in a case to be tried before some tribunal to which she was amenable.

"But don't you want to go on?" she asked. "You're enjoying it, aren't you?" The question carried no rebuke; it recognized as legitimate the widest differences of taste.

"I haven't the least chance of catching up with them. I may as well come back with you."

pg 34

The curious expression—or rather eclipse of expression—was still in her eyes, a purely negative defensiveness that seemed as though it could spring only from an instinctive resolve to show nothing of her feelings. The eyes were a dark blue; but with Vivien's eyes colour never counted for much, nor their shape, nor what one would roughly call their beauty, were it more or less. Their meaning—that was what they set a man asking after.

"It really would be very kind of you," she said.

Andy mounted her on the suppositiously lame pony—her weight wouldn't hurt him much, anyhow—and they set out at a walk towards the highroad which led to Nutley and thence, half a mile farther on, to Meriton.

She was silent till they reached the road. Then she asked abruptly, "Are you ever afraid?"

"Well, you see," said Andy, with a laugh, "I never know whether I'm afraid or only excited—in fighting, I mean. Otherwise I don't fancy I'm either often."

"Well, you're big," she observed. "I'm afraid of pretty nearly everything—horses, dogs, motor-cars—and I'm passionately afraid of hunting."

"You're not big, you see," said Andy consolingly. Indeed her hand on the reins looked almost ridiculously small.

pg 35

"I've got to learn not to be afraid of things. My father's teaching me. You know who I am, don't you?"

"Oh yes; why, I remember you years ago! Is that why you're out hunting?"

"Yes."

"And why you think that the pony—?"

"Is lame enough to let me risk going home? Yes." There was a hint of defiance in her voice. "You must think what you like," she seemed to say.

Andy considered the matter in his impartial, solid, rather slowly moving mind. It was foolish to be frightened at such things; it must be wholesome to be taught not to be. Still, hunting wasn't exactly a moral duty, and the girl looked very fragile. He had not arrived at any final decision on the case—on the issue whether the girl were silly or the father cruel (the alternatives might not be true alternatives, not strictly exclusive of one another)—before she spoke again.

"And then I'm fastidious. Are you?"

"I hope not!" said Andy, with an amused chuckle. A great lump of a fellow like him fastidious!

"Father doesn't like that either, and I've got to get over it."

"How does it—er—take you?" Andy made bold to inquire.

pg 36

"Oh, lots of ways. I hate dirt, and dust, and getting very hot, and going into butchers' shops, and

—"

"Butchers' shops!" exclaimed Andy, rather hit on the raw. "You eat meat, don't you?"

"Things don't look half as dead when they're cooked. I couldn't touch a butcher!" Horror rang in her tones.

"Oh, but I say, Jack Rock's a butcher, and he's about the best fellow in Meriton. You know him?"

"I've seen him," she admitted reluctantly, the subject being evidently distasteful.

For the second time Andy Hayes was conscious of a duty: he must not be—or seem—ashamed of Jack Rock, just because this girl was fastidious.

"I'm related to him, you know. My stepmother was his sister. And I'm staying in his house."

She glanced at him, a slight flush rising to her cheeks; he saw that her lips trembled a little.

"It's no use trying to unsay things, is it?" she asked.

"Not a bit," laughed Andy. "Don't think I'm hurt; but I should be a low-down fellow if I didn't stand up for old Jack."

"I should rather like to have you to stand up for me sometimes," she said, and broke into a smile as she added, "You're so splendidly solid, you see, Mr. Hayes. Here we are at home—you may as well make a complete thing of it and see me as far as the stables." pg 37

"I'd like to come in—I'm not exactly a stranger here. I've often been a trespasser. Don't tell Mr. Wellgood unless you think he'll forgive me, but as a boy I used to come and bathe in the lake early in the morning—before anybody was up. I used to undress in the bushes and slip in for my swim pretty nearly every morning in the summer. It's fine bathing, but you want to be able to swim; there's a strong undercurrent, where the stream runs through. Are you fond of bathing?"

Andy was hardly surprised when she gave a little shudder. "No, I'm rather afraid of water." She added quickly, "Don't tell my father, or I expect I should have to try to learn to swim. He hasn't thought of that yet. No more has Isobel—Miss Vintry, my companion. You know? You saw her at the meeting. I have a companion now, instead of a governess. Isobel isn't afraid of anything, and she's here to teach me not to be."

"You don't mind my asking your father to let me come and swim, if I'm here in the summer?"

"I don't suppose I ought to mind that," she said doubtfully. pg 38

The house stood with its side turned to the drive by which they approached it from the Meriton road. Its long, low, irregular front—it was a jumble of styles and periods—faced the lake, a stone terrace running between the façade and the water; it was backed by a thick wood; across the lake the bushes grew close down to the water's edge. The drive too ran close by the water, deep water as Andy was well aware, and was fenced from it by a wooden paling, green from damp. The place had a certain picturesqueness, but a sadness too. Water and trees—trees and water—and between them the long squat house. To Andy it seemed to brood there like a toad. But his healthy mind reverted to the fact that for a strong swimmer the bathing was really splendid.

"Here comes Isobel! Now nothing about swimming, and say the pony's lame!"

The injunction recalled Andy from his meditations and also served to direct his attention to Miss Vintry, who stood, apparently waiting for them, at the end of the drive, with the house on her right and the stables on her left. She was dressed in a business-like country frock, rather noticeably short, and carried a stick with a spike at the end of it. She looked very efficient and also very handsome. pg 39

Vivien told her story: Andy, not claiming expert knowledge, yet stoutly maintained that the pony was—or anyhow had been—lame.

"He seems to be getting over it," said Miss Vintry, with a smile that was not malicious but was, perhaps, rather annoyingly amused. "I'm afraid your having had to turn back will vex your father, but I suppose there was no help for it, and I'm sure he'll be much obliged to—"

"Mr. Hayes." Vivien supplied the name, and Andy made his bow.

"Oh yes, I've heard Mr. Harry Belfield speak of you." Her tone was gracious, and she smiled at Andy good-humouredly. If she confirmed his impression of capability, and perhaps added a new one of masterfulness, there was at least nothing to hint that her power would not be well used or that her sway would be other than benevolent.

Vivien had dismounted, and a stable-boy was leading the pony away, after receiving instructions to submit the suspected off fore-leg to his chief's inspection. There seemed nothing to keep Andy, and he was about to take his leave when Miss Vintry called to the retreating stable-boy, "Oh, and let Curly out, will you? He hasn't had his run this afternoon."

Vivien turned her head towards the stables with a quick apprehensive jerk. A big black retriever, released in obedience to Isobel Vintry's order, ran out, bounding joyously. He leapt up at Isobel, pawing her and barking in an ecstasy of delight. In passing Andy, the stranger, he gave him another bark of greeting and a hasty pawing; then he clumsily gambolled on to where Vivien stood.

"He won't hurt you, Vivien. You know he won't hurt you, don't you?" The dog certainly seemed to warrant Isobel's assertion; he appeared a most good-natured animal, though his play was rough.

"Yes, I know he won't hurt me," said Vivien.

The dog leapt up at her, barking, frisking, pawing her, trying to reach her face to lick it. She made no effort to repel him; she had a little riding-whip in her hand, but she did not use it; her arms hung at her side; she was rather pale.

"There! It's not so terrible after all, is it?" asked Isobel. "Down, Curly, down! Come here!"

The dog obeyed her at her second bidding, and sat down at her feet. Andy was glad to see that the ordeal—for that was what it looked like—was over, and had been endured with tolerable fortitude; he had not enjoyed the scene. Somewhat to his surprise Vivien's lips curved in a smile.

"Somehow I wasn't nearly so frightened to-day," she said. Apparently the ordeal was a daily one—perhaps one of several daily ones, for she had already been out hunting. "I didn't run away as I did yesterday, when Harry Belfield was here."

"You are getting used to it," Isobel affirmed. "Mr. Wellgood's quite right. We shall have you as brave as a lion in a few months." Her tone was not unkind or hard, neither was it sympathetic. It was just extremely matter-of-fact. "It's all nerves," she added to Andy. "She overworked herself at school—she's very clever, aren't you, Vivien?—and now she's got to lead an open-air life. She must get used to things, mustn't she?"

Andy had a shamefaced feeling that the ordeals or lessons, if they were necessary at all, had better be conducted in privacy. That had not apparently occurred to Mr. Wellgood or to Isobel Vintry. Indeed that aspect of the case did not seem to trouble Vivien herself either; she showed no signs of shame; she was smiling still, looking rather puzzled.

"I wonder why I was so much less frightened." She turned her eyes suddenly to Andy. "I know. It was because you were there!"

"You ran away, in spite of Mr. Harry's being here yesterday," Isobel reminded her.

"Mr. Hayes is so splendidly big—so splendidly big and solid," said Vivien, thoughtfully regarding Andy's proportions. "When he's here, I don't think I shall be half so much afraid."

"Oh, then Mr. Wellgood must ask him to come again," laughed Isobel. "You see how useful you'll be, Mr. Hayes!"

"I shall be delighted to come again, anyhow, if I'm asked—whether I'm useful or not. And I think it was jolly plucky of you to stand still as you did, Miss Wellgood. If I were in a funk, I should cut and run for it, I know."

"I thought you'd been a soldier," said Isobel.

"Oh, well, it's different when there are a lot of you together. Besides—" He chuckled. "You're not going to get me to let on that I was in a funk then. Those are our secrets, Miss Vintry. Well now, I must go, unless—"

"No, there are no more tests of courage to-day, Mr. Hayes," laughed Isobel.

Vivien's eyes had relapsed into inexpressiveness; they told Andy nothing of her view of the trials, or of Miss Vintry, who had conducted the latest one; they told him no more of her view of himself as she gave him her hand in farewell. He left her still standing on the spot where she had endured Curly's violent though well-meant attentions—again rather a pathetic figure, in her torn habit, with the long red scratch (by-the-by Miss Vintry had made no inquiry about it—that was part of the system perhaps) on her forehead, and with the background, as it were, of ordeals, or tests, or whatever they were to be called. Andy wondered what they would try her with to-morrow, and found himself sorry that he would not be there—to help her with his bigness and solidity.

It was difficult to say that Mr. Wellgood's system was wrong. It was absurd for a grown girl—a girl living in the country—to be frightened at horses, dogs, and motor-cars, to be disgusted by dirt and dust, by getting very hot—and by butchers' shops. All these were things which she would have to meet on her way through the world, as the world is at present constituted. Still he was sorry for her; she was so slight and frail. Andy would have liked to take on his broad shoulders all her worldly share of dogs and horses, of dust, of getting very hot (a thing he positively liked), and of butchers; these things would not have troubled him in the least; he would have borne them as easily as he could have carried Vivien herself in his arms. As he walked home he had a vision of

her shuddering figure, with its pale face and reticent eyes, being led by Isobel Vintry's firm hand into Jack Rock's shop in High Street, and there being compelled to inspect, to touch, to smell, the blue-rosetted, red-rosetted, and honourably mentioned carcasses which adorned that Valhalla of beasts—nay, being forced, in spite of all horror, to touch Jack Rock the butcher himself! Isobel Vintry would, he thought, be capable of shutting her up alone with all those dead things, and with the man who, as she supposed, had butchered them.

pg 44

"I should have to break in the door!" thought Andy, his vanity flattered by remembering that she had seen in him a stand-by, and a security which apparently even Harry Belfield had been unable to afford. True it was that in order to win the rather humble compliment of being held a protection against an absolutely harmless retriever dog he had lost his day's hunting. Andy's heart was lowly; he did not repine.

## Chapter III.

pg 45

### THE POTENT VOICE.

After anxious consultation at Halton it had been decided that Harry Belfield was justified in adopting a political career and treating the profession of the Bar, to which he had been called, as nominal. The prospects of an opening—and an opening in his native Division—were rosy. His personal qualifications admitted of no dispute, his social standing was all that could be desired. The money was the only difficulty. Mr. Belfield's income, though still large, was not quite what it had been; he was barely rich enough to support his son in what is still, in spite of all that has been done in the cause of electoral purity, a costly career. However the old folk exercised economies, Harry promised them, and it was agreed that the thing could be managed. It was, perhaps, at the back of the father's mind that for a young man of his son's attractions there was one obvious way of increasing his income—quite obvious and quite proper for the future owner of Halton Park.

pg 46

For the moment political affairs were fairly quiet—next year it would be different—and Harry, ostensibly engaged on a course of historical and sociological reading, spent his time pleasantly between Meriton and his rooms in Jermyn Street. He had access to much society of one kind and another, and was universally popular; his frank delight in pleasing people made him pleasant to them. With women especially he was a great favourite, not for his looks only, though they were a passport to open the door of any drawing-room, but more because they felt that he was a man who appreciated them, valued them, needed them, to whom they were a very big and precious part of life. He had not a shred of that indifference—that independence of them—which is the worst offence in women's eyes. Knowing that they counted for so much to him, it was as fair as it was natural that they should let him count for a good deal with them.

But even universal favourites have their particular ties. For the last few months Harry had been especially attached to Mrs. Freere, the wife of a member of Parliament of his own party who lived in Grosvenor Street. Mr. Freere was an exceedingly laborious person; he sat on more committees than any man in London, and had little leisure for the joys of home life. Mrs. Freere could take very good care of herself, and, all question of principles apart, had no idea of risking the position and the comforts she enjoyed. Subject to the limits thus clearly imposed on her, she had no objection at all to her friendship with Harry Belfield being as sentimental as Harry had been disposed to make it; indeed she had a taste for that kind of thing herself. Once or twice he had tried to overstep the limits, elastic as they were—he was impulsive, Mrs. Freere was handsome—but he had accepted her rebuke with frank penitence, and the friendship had been switched back on to its appointed lines without an accident. The situation was pleasant to her; she was convinced that it was good for Harry. Certainly he met at her house many people whom it was proper and useful for him to meet; and her partiality offered him every opportunity of making favourable impressions. If her conscience needed any other salve—it probably did not feel the need acutely—she could truthfully aver that she was in the constant habit of urging him to lose no time in looking out for a suitable wife.

pg 47

"A wife is such a help to a man in the House," she would say. "She can keep half the bores away from him. I don't do it because Wilson positively loves bores—being bored gives him a sense of serving his country—but I could if he'd let me."

pg 48

Harry had been accustomed to meet such prudent counsels with protests of a romantic order; but Mrs. Freere, a shrewd woman, had for some weeks past noticed that the protests were becoming rather less vehement, and decidedly more easy for her to control. When she repeated her advice one day, in the spring after Andy Hayes came back from Canada, Harry looked at her for a moment and said,

"Would you drop me altogether if I did, Lily?" He called her Lily when they were alone.

"I'm married; you haven't dropped me," said Mrs. Freere with a smile.

"Oh, that's different. I shouldn't marry a woman unless I was awfully in love with her."

"I don't think I ought to make that a reason for finally dropping you, because you'll probably be awfully in love with several. Put that difficulty—if it is one—out of your mind. We shall be

friends."

"And you wouldn't mind? You—you wouldn't think it—?" He wanted to ask her whether she would think it what, on previous occasions, he had said that he would think it.

Mrs. Freere laughed. "Oh, of course your wife would be rather a bore—just at first, anyhow. But, you know, I can even contemplate my life without you altogether, Harry." She was really fond of him, but she was not a woman given to illusions either about her friends or about herself. pg 49

Harry did not protest that he could not contemplate his life without Mrs. Freere, though he had protested that on more than one of those previous occasions. Mrs. Freere leant against the mantelpiece, smiling down at him in the armchair.

"Seen somebody?" she asked.

Harry blushed hotly. "You're an awfully good sort, Lily," he said.

She laughed a little, then sighed a little. Well, it had been very agreeable to have this handsome boy at her beck and call, gracefully adoring, flattering her vanity, amusing her leisure, giving her the luxury of reflecting that she was behaving well in the face of considerable temptation—she really felt entitled to plume herself on this exploit. But such things could not last—Mrs. Freere knew that. The balance was too delicate; a topple over on one side or the other was bound to come; she had always meant that the toppling over, when it came, should be on the safe side—on to the level ground, not over the precipice. A bump is a bump, there's no denying it, but it's better than a broken neck. Mrs. Freere took her bump smiling, though it certainly hurt a little. pg 50

"Is she very pretty?"

He jumped up from the armchair. He was highly serious about the matter, and that, perhaps, may be counted a grace in him.

"I suppose I shall do it—if I can. But I'm hanged if I can talk to you about it!"

"That's rather nice of you. Thank you, Harry."

He bowed his comely head, with its waving hair, over her hand and kissed it.

"Good-bye, Harry," she said.

He straightened himself and looked her in the face for an instant. He shrugged his shoulders; she understood and nodded. There was, in fact, no saying what one's emotions would be up to next—what would be the new commands of the Restless and Savage Master. Poor Harry! She knew his case. She herself had "taken him" from her dear friend Rosa Hinde.

He was gone. She stood still by the mantelpiece a moment longer, shrugged shoulders in her turn—really that Savage Master!—crossed the room to a looking-glass—not much wrong there happily—and turned on the opening of the door. Mr. Freere came in—between committees. He had just time for a cup of tea.

"Just time, Wilson?" pg 51

"I've a committee at five, my dear."

She rang the bell. "Talk of road-hogs! You're a committee-hog, you know."

He rubbed his bald head perplexedly. "They accumulate," he pleaded in a puzzled voice. "I'm sorry to leave you so much alone, my dear." He came up to her and kissed her. "I always want to be with you, Lily."

"I know," she said. She did know—and the knowledge was one of the odd things in life.

"Goodness, I forgot to telephone!" He hurried out of the room again.

"Serves me right, I suppose!" said Mrs. Freere; to which of recent incidents she referred must remain uncertain.

Mr. Freere came back for his hasty cup of tea.

The Park was gay in its spring bravery—a fine setting for the play of elegance and luxury which took place there on this as on every afternoon. Harry Belfield sought to occupy and to distract his mind by the spectacle, familiar though it was. He did not want to congratulate himself on the thing that had just happened, yet this was what he found himself doing if he allowed his thoughts to possess him. "That's over anyhow!" was the spontaneous utterance of his feelings. Yet he felt very mean. He did not see why, having done the right thing, he should feel so mean. It seemed somehow unfair—as though there were no pleasing conscience, whatever one did. Conscience might have retorted that in some situations there is no "right thing;" there is a bold but fatal thing, and there is a prudent but shabby thing; the right thing has vanished earlier in the proceedings. Still he had done the best thing open to him, and, reflecting on that, he began to pg 52

pluck up his spirits. His sensuous nature turned to the pleasant side; his volatile emotions forsook the past for the future. As he walked along he began to hear more plainly and to listen with less self-reproach to the voice which had been calling him now for many days—ever since he had addressed that meeting in the Town Hall at Meriton. Meriton was calling him back with the voice of Vivien Wellgood, and with her eyes begging him to hearken. He had "seen somebody," in Mrs. Freere's sufficient phrase. Great and gay was London, full of lures and charms; many were they who were ready to pet, to spoil, and to idolize; many there were to play, to laugh, and to revel with. Potent must be the voice which could draw him from all this! Yet he was listening to it as he walked along. He was free to listen to it now—free since he had left Mrs. Freere's house in Grosvenor Street.

Suddenly he found himself face to face with Andy Hayes—not a man he expected to meet in Hyde Park at four o'clock in the afternoon. But Andy explained that he had "knocked off early at the shop" and come west, to have a last look at the idle end of the town—everybody there seemed idle, even if all were not.

pg 53

"Because it's my last day in London. I'm going down to Meriton to-morrow for the summer. I've taken lodgings there—going to be an up-and-downer," Andy explained. "And I think I shall generally be able to get Friday to Monday down there."

To Meriton to-morrow! Harry suffered a sharp and totally unmistakable pang of envy.

"Upon my soul, I believe you're right!" he said. "I'm half sick of the racket of town. What's the good of it all? And one gets through the devil of a lot of money. And no time to do anything worth doing! I don't believe I've opened a book for a week."

"Well, why don't you come down too? It would be awfully jolly if you did."

"Oh, it's not altogether easy to chuck everything and everybody," Harry reminded his friend, who did not seem to have reflected what a gap would be caused by Mr. Harry Belfield's departure from the metropolis. "Still I shall think about it. I could get through a lot of work at home." The historical and sociological reading obligingly supplied an excellent motive for a flight from the too-engrossing gaieties of town. "And, of course, there's no harm in keeping an eye on the Division." The potent voice was gathering allies apace! Winning causes have that way. "I might do much worse," Harry concluded thoughtfully.

pg 54

Andy was delighted. Harry's presence would make Meriton a different place to him. He too, for what he was worth (it is not possible to say that he was worth very much in this matter), became another ally of the potent voice, urging the joys of country life and declaring that Harry already looked "fagged out" by the arduous pleasures of London life.

"I shall think about it seriously," said Harry, knowing in himself that the voice had won. "Are you doing anything to-night? I happen for once to have an off evening."

"No; only I'd thought of dropping into the pit somewhere. I haven't seen 'Hamlet' at the—"

"Oh lord!" interrupted Harry. "Let's do something a bit more cheerful than that! Have you seen the girl at the Empire—the Nun? Not seen her? Oh, you must! We'll dine at the club and go; and I'll get her and another girl to come on to supper. I'll give you a little fling for your last night in town. Will you come?"

pg 55

"Will I come? I should rather think I would!" cried Andy.

"All right; dinner at eight. We shall have lots of time—she doesn't come on till nearly ten. Meet me at the Artemis at eight. Till then, old chap!" Harry darted after a lady who had favoured him with a gracious bow as she passed by, a moment before.

Here was an evening-out for Andy Hayes, whose conscience had suggested "Hamlet" and whose finances had dictated the pit. He went home to his lodgings off Russell Square all smiles, and spent a laborious hour trying to get the creases out of his dress coat. "Well, I shall enjoy an evening like that just for once," he said out loud as he laboured.

"I've got her and another girl," Harry announced when Andy turned up at the Artemis. "The nuisance is that Billy Foot here insists on coming too, so we shall be a man over. I've told him I don't want him, but the fellow will come."

"I'm certainly coming," said the tall long-faced young man—for Billy Foot was still several years short of forty—to whom Andy had listened with such admiration at Meriton. In private life he was not oppressively epigrammatic or logical, and not at all ruthless; and everybody called him "Billy," which in itself did much to deprive him of his terrors.

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The Artemis was a small and luxurious club in King Street. Why it was called the "Artemis" nobody knew. Billy Foot said that the name had been chosen just because nobody would know why it had been chosen—it was a bad thing, he maintained, to label a club. Harry, however, conjectured that the name indicated that the club was half-way between the Athenæum and the Turf—which you might take in the geographical sense or in any other you pleased.

Andy ate of several foods that he had never tasted before and drank better wine than he had ever drunk before. His physique and his steady brain made any moderate quantity of wine no more than water to him. Harry Belfield, on the contrary, responded felicitously to even his first glass of champagne; his eyes grew bright and his spirit gay. Any shadow cast over him by his interview with Mrs. Freere was not long in vanishing.

They enjoyed themselves so well that a cab had only just time to land them at their place of entertainment before the Nun, whose name was Miss Doris Flower, came on the stage. She was having a prodigious success because she did look like a nun and sang songs that a nun might really be supposed to sing—and these things, being quite different from what the public expected, delighted the public immensely. When Miss Flower, whose performance was of high artistic merit, sang about the baby which she might have had if she had not been a nun, and in the second song (she was on her death-bed in the second song, but this did not at all impair her vocal powers) about the angel whom she saw hovering over her bed, and the angel's likeness to her baby sister who had died in infancy, the public cried like a baby itself.

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"Jolly good!" said Billy Foot, taking his cigar out of his mouth and wiping away a furtive tear. "But there, she is a ripper, bless her!" His tone was distinctly affectionate.

But supper was the great event to Andy: that was all new to him, and he took it in eagerly while they waited for the Nun and her friend. Such a din, such a chatter, such a lot of diamonds, such a lot of smoke—and the white walls, the gilding, the pink lampshades, the band ever and anon crashing into a new tune, and the people shouting to make themselves heard through it—Andy would have sat on happily watching, even though he had got no supper at all. Indeed he was no more hungry than most of the other people there. One does not go to supper there because one is hungry—that is a vulgar reason for eating.

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However supper he had, sitting between Billy Foot and the Nun's friend, a young woman named Miss Dutton, who had a critical, or even sardonic, manner, but was extremely pretty. The Nun herself contrived to be rather like a nun even off the stage; she did not talk much herself, but listened with an innocent smile to the sallies of Billy Foot and Harry Belfield.

"Been to hear her?" Miss Dutton asked Andy.

Andy said that they had, and uttered words of admiration.

"Sort of thing they like, isn't it?" said Miss Dutton. "You can't put in too much rot for them."

"But she sings it so—" Andy began to plead.

"Yes, she can sing. It's a wonder she's succeeded. How sick one gets of this place!"

"Do you come often?"

"Every night—with her generally."

"I've never been here before in my life."

"Well, I hope you like the look of us!"

Harry Belfield looked towards him. "Don't mind what she says, Andy. We call her Sulky Sally—don't we, Sally?—But she looks so nice that we have to put up with her ways."

Miss Dutton smiled reluctantly, but evidently could not help smiling at Harry. "I know the value of your compliments," she remarked. "There are plenty of them going about the place to judge by!"

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"Mercy, Sally, mercy! Don't show me up before my friends!"

Miss Dutton busied herself with her supper. The Nun ate little; most of the time she sat with her pretty hands clasped on the table in front of her. Suddenly she began to tell what proved to be a rather long story about a man named Tommy—everybody except Andy knew whom she meant. She told this story in a low, pleasant, but somewhat monotonous voice. In truth the Nun was a trifle prolix and prosy, but she also looked so nice that they were quite content to listen and to look. It appeared that Tommy had done what no man should do; he had made love to two girls at once. For a long time all went well; but one day Tommy, being away from the sources of supply of cash (as a rule he transacted all his business in notes), wrote two cheques—the Nun specified the amounts, one being considerably larger than the other—placed them in two envelopes, and proceeded to address them wrongly. Each lady got the other lady's cheque, and—"Well, they wanted to know about it," said the Nun, with a pensive smile. So, being acquaintances, they laid their heads together, and the next time Tommy (who had never discovered his mistake) asked lady number one to dinner, she asked lady number two, "and when Tommy arrived," said the Nun, "they told him he'd find it cheaper that way, because there'd only be one tip for the waiter!" The Nun, having reached her point, gave a curiously pretty little gurgle of laughter.

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"Rather neat!" said Billy Foot. "And did they chuck him?"

"They'd agreed to, but Maud weakened on it. Nellie did."

"Poor old Tommy!" mused Harry Belfield.

It was not a story of surpassing merit whether it were regarded from the moral or from the artistic point of view; but the Nun had grown delighted with herself as she told it, and her delight made her look even more pretty. Andy could not keep his eyes off her; she perceived his honest admiration and smiled serenely at him across the table.

"I suppose it was Nellie who was to have the small cheque?" Billy Foot suggested.

"No; it was Maud."

"Then I drink to Maud as a true woman and a forgiving creature!"

Andy broke into a hearty enjoying laugh. Nothing had passed which would stand a critical examination in humour, much less in wit; but Andy was very happy. He had never had such a good time, never seen so many gay and pretty women, never been so in touch with the holiday side of life. The Nun delighted him; Miss Dutton was a pleasantly acid pickle to stimulate the palate for all this rich food. Billy Foot and Harry looked at him, looked at one another, and laughed.

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"They're laughing at you," said Miss Dutton in her most sardonic tone.

"I don't mind. Of course they are! I'm such an outsider."

"Worth a dozen of either of them," she remarked, with a calmly impersonal air that reduced her compliment to a mere statement of fact.

"Oh, I heard!" cried Harry. "You don't think much of us, do you, Sally?"

"I come here every night," said Miss Dutton. "Consequently I know."

The pronouncement was so confident, so conclusive, that there was nothing to do but laugh at it. They all laughed. If you came there every night, "consequently" you would know many things!

"We must eat somewhere," observed the Nun with placid resignation.

"We must be as good as we can and hope for mercy," said Billy Foot.

"You'll need it," commented Miss Dutton.

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"Let's hope the law of supply and demand will hold good!" laughed Harry.

"How awfully jolly all this is!" said Andy.

He had just time to observe Miss Dutton's witheringly patient smile before the lights went out. "Hullo!" cried Andy; and the rest laughed.

Up again the lights went, but the Nun rose from her chair.

"Had enough of it?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said the Nun with her simple, candid, yet almost scornful directness. "Oh, it's been all right. I like your friend, Harry—not Billy, of course—the new one, I mean."

When they had got their cloaks and coats and were waiting for the Nun's electric brougham, Harry made an announcement that filled Andy with joy and the rest of the company with amazement.

"This is good-bye for a bit, Doris," he said. "I'm off to the country the day after to-morrow."

"What have we done to you?" the Nun inquired with sedate anxiety.

"I've got to work, and I can't do it in London. I've got a career to look after."

The Nun gurgled again—for the second time only in the course of the evening. "Oh yes," she murmured with obvious scepticism. "Well, come and see me when you get back." She turned her eyes to Andy, and, to his great astonishment, asked, "Would you like to come too?"

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Andy could hardly believe that he was himself, but he had no doubt about his answer. The Nun interested him very much, and was so very pretty. "I should like to awfully," he replied.

"Come alone—not with these men, or we shall only talk nonsense," said the Nun, as she got into her brougham. "Get in, Sally."

"Where's the hurry?" asked Miss Dutton, getting in nevertheless. The Nun slapped her arm smartly; the two girls burst into a giggle, and so went off.

"Where to now?" asked Harry.



Andy wondered what other place there was.

"Bed for me," said Billy Foot. "I've a consultation at half-past nine, and I haven't opened the papers yet."

"Bed is best," Harry agreed, though rather reluctantly. "Going to take a cab, Billy?"

"What else is there to take?"

"Thought you might be walking."

"Oh, walking be ——" He climbed into a hansom.

"I'll walk with you, Harry. I haven't had exercise enough."

Harry suggested that they should go home by the Embankment. When they had cut down a narrow street to it, he put his arm in Andy's and led him across the road. They leant on the parapet, looking at the river. The night was fine, but hazy and still—a typical London night.

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"You've given me a splendid evening," said Andy. "And what a good sort those girls were!"

"Yes," said Harry, rather absently, "not a bad sort. Doris has got her head on her shoulders, and she's quite straight. Poor Sally's come one awful cropper. She won't come another; she's had more than enough of it. So one doesn't mind her being a bit snarly."

Poor Sally! Andy had had no idea of anything of the sort, but he had an instinct that people who come one cropper—and one only—feel that one badly.

"I'm feeling happy to-night, old fellow," said Harry suddenly. "You may not happen to know it, but I've gone it a bit for the last two or three years, made rather a fool of myself, and—well, one gets led on. Now I've made up my mind to chuck all that. Some of it's all right—at any rate it seems to happen; but I've had enough. I really do want to work at the politics, you know."

"It's all before you, if you do," said Andy in unquestioning loyalty.

"I'm going to work, and to pull up a bit all round, and—" Harry broke off, but a smile was on his lips. There on the bank of the Thames, fresh from his party in the gay restaurant, he heard the potent voice calling. It seemed to him that the voice was potent enough not only to loose him from Mrs. Freere, to lure him from London delights, to carry him down to Meriton and peaceful country life; but potent enough, too, to transform him, to make him other than he was, to change the nature that had till now been his very self. He appealed from passion to passion; from the soiled to the clean, from the turgid to the clear. A new desire of his eyes was to make a new thing of his life.

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## Chapter IV.

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### SETTLED PROGRAMMES.

Mark Wellgood of Nutley had a bugbear, an evil thing to which he gave the name of sentimentality. Wherever he saw it he hated it—and he saw it everywhere. No matter what was the sphere of life, there was the enemy ready to raise its head, and Mark Wellgood ready to hit that head. In business and in public affairs he warred against it unceasingly; in other people's religion—he had very little of his own—he was keen to denounce it; even from the most intimate family and personal relationships he had always been resolved to banish it, or, failing that, to suppress its manifestations. Himself a man of uncompromising temper and strong passions, he saw in this hated thing the root of all the vices with which he had least sympathy. It made people cowards who shrank from manfully taking their own parts; it made them hypocrites who would not face the facts of human nature and human society, but sought to cover up truths that they would have called "ugly" by specious names, by veils, screens, and fine paraphrases. It made men soft, women childish, and politicians flabby; it meant sheer ruin to a nation.

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Sentimentality was, of course, at the bottom of what was the matter with his daughter, of those things of which, with the aid of Isobel Vintry's example, he hoped to cure her—her timidity and her fastidiousness. But it was at the bottom of much more serious things than these—since to make too much fuss about a girl's nonsensical fancies would be sentimental in himself. Notably it was at the bottom of all shades of opinion from Liberalism to Socialism, both included. Harry Belfield, lunching at Nutley a week or so after his return to Meriton, had the benefit of these views, with which, as a prospective Conservative candidate, he was confidently expected to sympathise.

"I've only one answer to make to a Socialist," said Wellgood. "I say to him, 'You can have my property when you're strong enough to take it. Until then, you can't.' Under democracy we count heads instead of breaking them. It's a bad system, but it's tolerable as long as the matter isn't worth fighting about. When you come to vital issues, it'll break down—it always has. We, the governing classes, shall keep our position and our property just as long as we're able and willing to defend them. If the Socialists mean business, they'd better stop talking and learn to shoot."

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"That might be awkward for us," said Harry, with a smile at Vivien opposite.

"But if they think we're going to sit still and be voted out of everything, they're much mistaken. That's what I hope, at all events, though it needs a big effort not to despair of the country sometimes. People won't look at the facts of nature. All nature's a fight from beginning to end. All through, the strong hold down the weak; and the strong grow stronger by doing it—never mind whether they're men or beasts."

"There's a lot of truth in that; but I don't know that it would be very popular on a platform—even on one of ours!"

"You political fellows have to wrap it up, I suppose, but the cleverer heads among the working men know all about it—trust them! They're on the make themselves; they want to get where we are; gammoning the common run helps towards that. Oh, they're not sentimental! I do them the justice to believe that."

"But isn't there a terrible lot of misery, father?" asked Vivien.

"You can't cure misery by quackery, my dear," he answered concisely. "Half of it's their own fault, and for the rest—hasn't there always been? So long as some people are weaker than others, they'll fare worse. I don't see any particular attraction in the idea of making weaklings or cowards as comfortable as the strong and the brave." His glance at his daughter was stern. Vivien flushed a little; the particular ordeal of that morning, a cross-country ride with her father, had not been a brilliant success.

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"To him that hath shall be given, eh?" Harry suggested.

"Matter of Scripture, Harry, and you can't get away from it!" said Wellgood with a laugh.

Psychology is not the strong point of a mind like Wellgood's. To study his fellow-creatures curiously seems to such a man rather unnecessary and rather twaddling work; in its own sphere it corresponds to the hated thing itself, to an over-scrupulous worrying about other people's feelings or even about your own. It had not occurred to Wellgood to study Harry Belfield. He liked him, as everybody did, and he had no idea how vastly Harry's temperament differed from his own. Harry had many material guarantees against folly—his birth, the property that was to be his, the career opening before him. If Wellgood saw any signs of what he condemned, he set them down to youth and took up the task of a mentor with alacrity. Moreover he was glad to have Harry coming to the house; matters were still at an early stage, but if there were a purpose in his coming, there was nothing to be said against the project. He would welcome an alliance with Halton, and it would be an alliance on even terms; for Vivien had some money of her own, apart from what he could leave her. Whether she would have Nutley or not—well, that was uncertain. Wellgood was only forty-three and young for his years; he might yet marry and have a son. A second marriage was more than an idea in his head; it was an intention fully formed. The woman he meant to ask to be his wife at the suitable moment lived in his house and sat at his table with him—his daughter's companion, Isobel Vintry.

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Isobel had sat silent through Wellgood's talk, not keenly interested in the directly political aspect of it, but appreciating the view of human nature and of the way of the world which underlay it. She also was on the side of the efficient—of the people who knew what they wanted and at any rate made a good fight to get it. Yet while she listened to Wellgood, her eyes had often been on Harry; she too was beginning to ask why Harry came so much to Nutley; the obvious answer filled her with a vague stirring of discontent. An ambitious self-confident nature does not like to be "counted out," to be reckoned out of the running before the race is fairly begun. Why was the answer obvious? There was more than one marriageable young woman at Nutley. Her feeling of protest was still vague; but it was there, and when she looked at Harry's comely face, her eyes were thoughtful.

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Though Wellgood had business after lunch, Harry stayed on awhile, sitting out on the terrace by the lake, for the day was warm and fine. The coming of spring had mitigated the grimness of Nutley; the water that had looked dreary and dismal in the winter now sparkled in the sun. Harry was excellently well content with himself and his position. He told the two girls that things were shaping very well. Old Sir George Millington had decided to retire. He was to be the candidate; he would start his campaign through the villages of the Division in the late summer, when harvest was over; he could hardly be beaten; and he was "working like a horse" at his subjects.

"The horse gets out of harness now and then!" said Isobel.

"You don't want him to kill himself with work, Isobel?" asked Vivien reproachfully.

"Visits to Nutley help the work; they inspire me," Harry declared, looking first at Vivien, then at Isobel. They were both, in their different ways, pleasant to look at. Their interest in him—in all he said and did, and in all he was going to do—was very pleasant also. "Oh yes, I'm working all right!" he laughed. "Really I have to, because of old Andy Hayes. He's getting quite keen on politics—reads all the evening after he gets back from town. Well, he's good enough to think I've read everything and know everything, and whenever we meet he pounds me with questions. I don't want Andy to catch me out, so I have to mug away."

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"That's your friend, Vivien," said Isobel, with a smile and a nod.

"Yes, the solid man."

"Oh, I know that story. Andy told me himself. He thought you behaved like a brick."

"He did, anyhow. Why don't you bring him here, Harry?"

"He's in town all day; I'll try and get him here some Saturday."

"Does he still stay with the—with Mr. Rock?" asked Vivien.

"No; he's taken lodgings. He's very thick with old Jack still, though. Of course it wouldn't do to tell him so, but it's rather a bore that he should be connected with Jack in that way. It doesn't make my mother any keener to have him at Halton, and it's a little difficult for me to press it."

"It does make his position seem—just rather betwixt and between, doesn't it?" asked Isobel.

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"If only it wasn't a butcher!" protested Vivien.

"O Vivien, the rules, the rules!" "Nothing against butchers," was one of the rules.

"I know, but I would so much rather it had been a draper, or a stationer, or something—something clean of that sort."

"I'm glad your father's not here. Be good, Vivien!"

"However it's not so bad if he doesn't stay there any more," Harry charitably concluded. "Just going in for a drink with old Jack—everybody does that; and after all he's no blood relation." He laughed. "Though I dare say that's exactly what you'd call him, Vivien."

Just as he made his little joke Vivien had risen. It was her time for "doing the flowers," one of the few congenial tasks allowed her. She smiled and blushed at Harry's hit at her, looking very charming. Harry indulged himself in a glance of bold admiration. It made her cheeks redder still as she turned away, Harry looking after her till she rounded the corner of the house. In answering the call of the voice he had found no disappointment. Closer and more intimate acquaintance revealed her as no less charming than she had promised to be. Harry was sure now of what he wanted, and remained quite sure of all the wonderful things that it was going to do for him and for his life.

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Suddenly on the top of all this legitimate and proper feeling—to which not even Mark Wellgood himself could object, since it was straight in the way of nature—there came on Harry Belfield a sensation rare, yet not unknown, in his career—a career still so short, yet already so emotionally eventful.

Isobel Vintry was not looking at him—she was gazing over the lake—nor he at her; he was engaged in the process of lighting a cigarette. Yet he became intensely aware of her, not merely as one in his company, but as a being who influenced him, affected him, in some sense stretched out a hand to him. He gave a quick glance at her; she was motionless, her eyes still aloof from him. He stirred restlessly in his chair; the air seemed very close and heavy. He wanted to make some ordinary, some light remark; for the moment it did not come. A remembrance of the first time that Mrs. Freere and he had passed the bounds of ordinary friendship struck across his mind, unpleasantly, and surely without relevance! Isobel had said nothing, had done nothing, nor had he. Yet it was as though some mystic sign had passed from her to him—he could not tell whether from him to her also—a sign telling that, whatever circumstances might do, there was in essence a link between them, a reminder from her that she too was a woman, that she too had her power. He did not doubt that she was utterly unconscious, but neither did he believe that he was solely responsible, that he had merely imagined. There was an atmosphere suddenly formed—an atmosphere still and heavy as the afternoon air that brooded over the unruffled lake.

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Harry had no desire to abide in it. His mind was made up; his heart was single. He picked up a stone which had been swept from somewhere on to the terrace and pitched it into the lake. A plop, and many ripples. The heavy stillness was broken.

Isobel turned to him with a start.

"I thought you were going to sleep, Miss Vintry. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I threw a stone into the water. I'm afraid you were finding me awfully dull!"

"You dull! You're a change from what sometimes does seem a little dull—life at Nutley. But perhaps you can't conceive life at Nutley being dull?" Her eyes mocked him with the hint that she had discovered his secret.

"Well, I think I should be rather hard to please if I found Nutley dull," he said gaily. "But if you do, why do you stay?"

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"Perpetual amusement isn't in a companion's contract, Mr. Harry. Besides, I'm fond of Vivien. I should be sorry to leave her before the natural end of my stay comes."

"The natural end?"

"Oh, I think you understand that." She smiled with a good-humoured scorn at his homage to pretence.

"Well, of course, girls do marry. It's been known to happen," said Harry, neither "cornered" nor embarrassed. "But perhaps"—he glanced at her, wondering whether to risk a snub. His charm, his gift of gay impudence, had so often stood him in stead and won him a liberty that a heavy-handed man could not hope to be allowed; he was not much afraid—"Perhaps you'd be asked to stay on—in another capacity, Miss Vintry."

"It looks as if your thoughts were running on such things." She did not affect not to understand, but she was not easy to corner either.

"I'm afraid they always have been," Harry confessed, a confession without much trace of penitence.

"Mine don't often; and they're never supposed to—in my position."

"Oh, nonsense! Really that doesn't go down, Miss Vintry. Why, a girl like you, with such—"

"Don't attempt a catalogue, please, Mr. Harry."

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"You're right, quite right. I'm conscious how limited my powers are."

Harry Belfield could no more help this sort of thing than a bird can help flying. In childhood he had probably lisped in compliments, as the poet in numbers. In itself it was harmless, even graceful, and quite devoid of serious meaning. Yet it was something new in his relations with Isobel Vintry; though it had arisen out of a desire to dispel that mysterious atmosphere, yet it was a sequel to it. Hitherto she had been Vivien's companion. In that brief session of theirs—alone together by the lake—she had assumed an independent existence for him, a vivid, distinctive, rather compelling one. The impressionable mind received a new impression, the plastic feelings suffered the moulding of a fresh hand. Harry, who was alert to watch himself and always knew when he was interested, was telling himself that she was such a notable foil to Vivien; that was why he was interested. Vivien was still the centre of gravity. The explanation vindicated his interest, preserved his loyalty, and left his resolve unshaken. These satisfactory effects were all on himself; the idea of effects on Isobel Vintry did not occur to him. He was not vain, he was hardly a conscious or intentional "lady-killer." He really suffered love affairs rather than sought them; he was driven into them by an overpowering instinct to prove his powers. He could not help "playing the game"—the rather hazardous game—to the full extent of his natural ability. That extent was very considerable.

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He said good-bye to her, laughingly declaring that after all he would prepare a catalogue, and send it to her by post. Then he went into the house, to find Vivien and pay another farewell. Left alone, Isobel rose from her chair with an abrupt and impatient movement. She was a woman of feelings not only more mature but far stronger than Vivien's; she had ambitious yearnings which never crossed Vivien's simple soul. But she was stern with herself. Perhaps she had caught and unconsciously copied some of Wellgood's anti-sentimental attitude. She often told herself that the feelings were merely dangerous and the yearnings silly. Yet when others seemed tacitly to accept that view, made no account of her, and assumed to regard her place in life as settled, she glowed with a deep resentment against them, crying that she would make herself felt. To-day she knew that somehow, to some degree however small, she had made herself felt by Harry Belfield. The discovery could not be said to bring pleasure, but it brought triumph—triumph and an oppressive restlessness.

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Wellgood strolled out of the house and joined her. "Where's Harry?" he asked.

"He went into the house to say good-bye to Vivien; or perhaps he's gone altogether by now."

Wellgood stood in thought, his hands in his pockets.

"He's a bit inclined to be soft, but I think we shall make a man of him. He's got a great chance, anyhow. Vivien seems to like him, doesn't she?"

"Oh, everybody must!" She smiled at him. "Are you thinking of match-making, like a good father?"

"She might do worse, and I'd like her to marry a man we know all about. The poor child hasn't backbone to stand up for herself if she happened on a rascal."

Isobel had a notion that Wellgood was over-confident if he assumed that he, or they, knew all about Harry Belfield. His parentage, his position, his prospects—yes. Did these exhaust the subject? But Wellgood's downright mind would have seen only "fancies" in such a suggestion.

"If that's the programme, I must begin to think of packing up my trunks," she said with a laugh.

He did not join in her laugh, but his stern lips relaxed into a smile. "Lots of time to think about that," he told her, his eyes seeming to make a careful inspection of her. "Nutley would hardly be

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itself without you, Isobel."

She showed no sign of embarrassment under his scrutiny; she stood handsome and apparently serene in her composure.

"Oh, poor Nutley would soon recover from the blow," she said. "But I shall be sorry to go. You've been very kind to me."

"You've done your work very well. People who work well are well treated at Nutley; people who work badly—"

"Aren't exactly petted? No, they're not, Mr. Wellgood, I know."

"You'd always do your work, whatever it might be, well, so you'd always be well treated."

"At any rate you'll give me a good character?" she asked mockingly.

"Oh, I'll see that you get a good place," he answered her in the same tone, but with a hint of serious meaning in his eyes.

His plan was quite definite, his confidence in the issue of it absolute. But "one thing at a time" was among his maxims. He would like to see Vivien's affair settled before his own was undertaken. His idea was that his declaration and acceptance should follow on his daughter's engagement.

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Isobel was not afraid of Mark Wellgood, as his daughter was, and as so many women would have been. She had a self-confidence equal to his own; she added to it a subtlety which would secure her a larger share of independence than it would be politic to claim openly. She had not feared him as a master, and would not fear him as a husband. Moreover she understood him far better than he read her. Understanding gives power. And she liked him; there was much that was congenial to her in his mind and modes of thought. He was a man, a strong man. But the prospect at which his words hinted—she was not blind to their meaning, and for some time back had felt little doubt of his design—did not enrapture her. At first sight it seemed that it ought. She had no money, her family were poor, marriage was her only chance of independence. Nutley meant both a comfort and a status beyond her reasonable hopes. But it meant also an end to the ambitious dreams. It was finality. Just this life she led now for all her life—or at least all Wellgood's! He was engrossed in the occupations of a country gentleman of moderate means, in his estate work and his public work. He hardly ever went to London; he never travelled farther afield; he visited little even among his neighbours. Some of these habits a wife might modify; the essentials of the life she would hardly be able to change. Yet, if she got the chance, there was no question but that she ought to take it. Common sense told her that, just as it told Wellgood that it would be absurd to doubt of her acceptance.

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Common sense might say what it liked. Her feelings were in revolt, and their insurrection gathered fresh strength to-day. It was not so much that Wellgood was nearly twenty years her senior. That counted, but not as heavily as perhaps might be expected, since his youthful vigour was still all his. It was the certainty with which his thoughts disposed of her, his assumption that his suit would be free from difficulty and from rivalry, his matter-of-course conclusion that Harry could come to Nutley only for Vivien's sake. If these things wounded her woman's pride, the softer side of her nature lamented the absence of romance, of the thrill of love, of being wooed and won in some poetic fashion, of everything—she found her thoughts insensibly taking this direction—that it would be for Harry Belfield's chosen mistress to enjoy. Nobody—least of all the man who was content to take her to wife himself—seemed to think of her as a choice even possible to Harry. He was, of course, for Vivien. All the joys of love, all the life of pleasure, the participation in his career, the moving many-coloured existence to be led by his side—all these were for Vivien. Her heart cried out in protest at the injustice; she might not even have her chance! It would be counted treachery if she strove for it, if she sought to attract Harry or allowed herself to be attracted by him. She had to stand aside; she was to be otherwise disposed of, her assent to the arrangement being asked so confidently that it could hardly be said to be asked at all. Suppose she did not assent? Suppose she fought for herself, treachery or no treachery? Suppose she followed the way of her feelings, if so be that they led her towards Harry Belfield? Suppose she put forth what strength she had to upset Wellgood's plan, to fight for herself?

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She played with these questions as she walked up and down the terrace by the lake. She declared to herself that she was only playing with them, but they would not leave her.

Certainly the questions found no warrant in Harry Belfield's present mood. He had made up his mind, his eager blood was running apace. That very evening, as his father and he sat alone together after dinner, in the long room graced by the two Vandykes which were the boast of Halton, he broached the matter in confidence. Mr. Belfield was a frail man of sixty. He had always been delicate in health, a sufferer from asthma and prone to chills; but he was no acknowledged invalid, and would not submit to the *rôle*. He did his share of county work; his judgment was highly esteemed, his sense of honour strict and scrupulous. He had a dryly humorous strain in him, which found food for amusement in his son's exuberant feelings and dashing impulses, without blinding him to their dangers.

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"Well, it's not a great match, but it's quite satisfactory, Harry. You'll find no opposition here. I like her very much, and your mother does too, I know. But"—he smiled and lifted his brows—"it's a trifle sudden, isn't it?"

"Sudden?" cried Harry. "Why, I've known her all my life!"

"Yes, but you haven't been in love with her all your life. And, if report speaks true, you have been in love with some other women." Mr. Belfield was a man of the world; his tone was patient and not unduly severe as he referred to Harry's adventures of the heart, which had reached his ears from friends in London.

"Yes, I know," said Harry; "but those were only—well, passing sort of things, you know."

"And this isn't a passing sort of thing?"

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"Not a bit of it; I'm dead sure of it. Well, a fellow can't tell another—not even his father—what he feels."

"No, no, don't try; keep all that for the lady. But if I were you I'd go a bit slow, and I wouldn't tell your mother yet. There's no particular hurry, is there?"

Harry laughed. "Well, I suppose that depends on how one feels. I happen to feel rather in a hurry."

"Go as slow as you can. Passing things pass: a wife's a more permanent affair. And undoing a mistake is neither a very easy nor a very savoury business."

"I'm absolutely sure. Still I'll try to wait and see if I can manage to get a little bit surer still, just to please you, pater."

"Thank you, old boy; I don't think you'll repent it. And, after all, it may be as well to give the lady time to get quite sure too—eh?" His eyes twinkled. He was fully aware that Harry would not think a great deal of time necessary for that. "Oh, by-the-bye," he went on, "I've a little bit of good news for you. I've interceded with your mother on Andy Hayes' behalf, and her heart is softened. She says she'll be very glad to see him here—"

"Hurrah! That's very good of the mater."

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"—when we're alone, or have friends who we know won't object." He laughed a little, and Harry joined in the laugh. "A prudent woman's prudent provisoes, Harry! I wish both you and I were as wise as your mother is."

"Dear old Andy—he's getting quite the fashion! I'm to take him to Nutley too."

"Excellent! Because it looks as if Nutley would be coming here to a certain extent in the immediate future, and he'll be able to come when Nutley does." He rose from his chair. "My throat's bothersome to-night; I'll leave you alone with your cigarette."

Harry smoked a cigarette that seemed to emit clouds of rosy smoke. All that lay in the past was forgotten; the future beckoned him to glittering joys.

"Marriage is his best chance, but even that's a considerable chance with Master Harry!" thought his father as he sat down to his book.

The one man who had serious fears—or at least doubts—about Harry Belfield's future was his own father.

"I probably shan't live to see the trouble, if any comes," he thought. "And if his mother does—she won't believe it's his fault."

## Chapter V.

pg 87

### BROADENING LIFE.

"Five all, and deuce!" cried Wellgood, who had taken on himself the function of umpire. He turned to Isobel and Vivien, who sat by in wicker armchairs, watching the game. "I never thought it would be so close. Hayes has pulled up wonderfully!"

"I think Mr. Hayes'll win now," said Vivien.

An "exhibition single" was being played, by request, before the audience above indicated. Andy Hayes had protested that, though of course he would play if they wished, he could not give Harry a game—he had not played for more than a year. At first it looked as if he were right: Harry romped away with the first four games, so securely superior that he fired friendly chaff at Andy's futile rushes across the court in pursuit of a ball skilfully placed where he least expected it. But in the fifth game the rallies became very long; Andy was playing for safety—playing deadly safe. He did not try to kill; Harry did, but often committed suicide. The fifth, the sixth, the seventh

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game went to Andy. A flash of brilliancy gave Harry the eighth—five, three! The ninth was his service—he should have had it, and the set. Andy's returns were steady, low, all good length, possible to return, almost impossible to kill. But Harry tried to kill. Four, five. Andy served, and found a "spot"—at least Harry's malevolent glances at a particular piece of turf implied a theory that he had. Five all! And now "Deuce"!

"He's going to lick me, see if he isn't!" cried Harry Belfield, perfectly good-natured, but not hiding his opinion that such a result would be paradoxical.

Andy felt terribly ashamed of himself—he wanted to win so much. To play Harry Belfield on equal terms and beat him, just for once! This spirit of emulation was new to his soul; it seemed rather alarming when it threatened his old-time homage in all things to Harry. Where was ambition going to stop? None the less, eye and hand had no idea of not doing their best. A slashing return down the side line and a clever lob gave him the game—six, five!

Harry Belfield was the least bit vexed—amusedly vexed. He remembered Andy's clumsy elephantine sprawlings (no other word for them) about the court when in their boyhood he had first undertaken to teach him the game. Andy must have played a lot in Canada.

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"Now I'll take three off you, Andy," he cried, and served a double fault. The "gallery" laughed. "Oh, damn it!" exclaimed Harry, indecorously loud, and served another. Andy could not help laughing—the first time he had ever laughed at Harry Belfield. Given a handicap of thirty, the game was, barring extraordinary accidents, his. So it proved. He won it at forty-fifteen, with a stroke that a child ought to have returned; Harry put it into the net.

"Lost your nerve, Harry?" said the umpire.

"The beggar's such a sticker!" grumbled Harry, laughing. "You think you've got him licked—and you haven't!"

"I'm glad Mr. Hayes won." This from Vivien.

"Not only defeated, but forsaken!" Harry cried. "Andy, I'll have your blood!"

Andy Hayes laughed joyously. This victory came as an unlooked-for adornment to a day already notable. A Saturday half-holiday, down from town in time to lunch at Nutley, tennis and tea, and the prospect (not free from piquant alarm) of dinner at Halton—this was a day for Andy Hayes! With an honest vanity—a vanity based on true affection—he thought how the account of it would tickle Jack Rock. His life seemed broadening out before him, and he would like to tell dear old Jack all about it. Playing lawn-tennis at Nutley, dining at Halton—here were things just as delightful, just as enlightening, as supping at the great restaurant in the company of the Nun and pretty sardonic Miss Dutton. He owed them all to Harry—he almost wished he had lost the set. At any rate he felt that he ought to wish it.

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"It was an awful fluke!" he protested apologetically.

"You'd beat him three times out of five," Wellgood asserted in that confident tone of his.

Harry looked a little vexed. He bore an occasional defeat with admirable good-nature: to be judged consistently inferior was harder schooling to his temper. Triumphant in whatever the contest might be had grown into something of a custom with him. It brooked occasional breaches: abrogation was another matter. But "Oh no!" cried both the girls together.

Harry was on his feet again in a moment. Women's praise was always sweet to him, and not the less sweet for being open to a suspicion of partiality—which is, after all, a testimony to achievement in other fields.

Such a partiality accounted for the conviction of Harry's superiority in Vivien's case at least. She had grown up in the midst of the universal Meriton adoration of him as the most accomplished, the kindest, the merriest son of that soil, the child of promise, the present pride and the future glory of his native town. Any facts or reports not to the credit of the idol or reflecting on his divinity had not reached her cloistered ears. Wellgood, like Harry's own father, had heard some, but Wellgood held common-sense views even more fully than Mr. Belfield; facts were facts, and all men had to be young for a time. Now, if signs were to be trusted, if the idol's own words, eyes, and actions meant what she could not but deem they meant (or where stood the idol's honesty?), he proposed to ask her to share his throne; he, the adored, offered adoration—an adoration on a basis of reciprocity, be it understood. She did not grumble at that. To give was so easy, so inevitable; to receive—to be asked to accept—so wonderful. It could not enter her head or her heart to question the value of the gift or to doubt the whole-heartedness with which it was bestowed. It was to her so great a thing that she held it must be as great to Harry. Really at the present moment it was as great to Harry. His courtship of her seemed a very great thing, his absolute exclusive devotion a rare flower of romance.

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But she had been glad to see Andy win. Oh yes, she was compassionate. She knew so well what it was not to do things as cleverly as other people, and how oppressive it felt to be always inferior. Besides Andy had a stock of gratitude to draw on; somehow he had, by his solidity, caused Curly to appear far less terrible. With a genuine gladness she saw him pluck one leaf from Harry's

wreath. It must mean so much to Mr. Hayes; it mattered nothing to Harry. Nay, rather, it was an added chance for his graces of manner to shine forth.

They did shine forth. "Very good of you, ladies, but I think he holds me safe," said Harry.

"I shouldn't if you'd only play steady," Andy observed in his reflective way. "Taking chances—that's your fault, Harry."

"Taking chances—why, it's life!" cried Harry, any shadow of vexation utterly gone and leaving not the smallest memory.

"Well, ordinary people can't look at it like that," Andy said, with no touch of sarcasm, amply acknowledging that Harry and the ordinary were things remote from one another.

Was life taking chances? To one only of the party did that seem really true. Harry had said it, but he was not the one. He was possessed by a new triumphant certainty; Wellgood by the thought of a mastery he deemed already established, and waiting only for his word to be declared; Vivien by a dream that glowed and glittered, refusing too close a touch with earth; Andy by a stout conviction that he must not think about chances, but work away at his timber (he still called it lumber in his inner mind) and his books, pausing only to thank heaven for a wonderful Saturday holiday.

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But life was taking chances! Supine in her chair, silent since her one exclamation in championship of Harry Belfield, Isobel Vintry echoed the cry. Life was taking chances? Yes, any life worth having perhaps was. But what if the chances did not come one's way? Who can take what fate never offers?

All the present party was to meet again at Halton in the evening. It seemed hardly a separation when Harry and Andy started off together towards Meriton, Harry, as usual, chattering briskly, Andy listening, considering, absorbing. At a turn of the road they passed two old friends of his, Wat Money, the lawyer's clerk, and Tom Dove, the budding publican—"Chinks" and "The Bird" of days of yore.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harry! Hullo, Andy!" said Chinks and the Bird. When they were past, the Bird nudged Chinks with his elbow and winked his eye.

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"Yes, he's getting no end of a swell, isn't he?" said Chinks. "Hand-and-glove with Harry Belfield!"

"I suppose you don't see much of those chaps now?" Harry was asking Andy at the same moment. There was just a shadow of admonition in the question.

"I'm afraid I don't. Well, we're all at work. And when I do get a day off—"

"You don't need to spend it at the Lion!" laughed Harry. "As good drink and better company in other places!"

There were certainly good things to drink and eat at Halton, and Andy could not be blamed if he found the company at least as well to his liking. He had not been there since he was quite a small boy—in the days before Nancy Rock migrated from the house next the butcher's shop in High Street to preside over his home—but he had never forgotten the handsome dining-room with its two Vandykes, nor the glass of sherry which Mr. Belfield had once given him there. Mrs. Belfield received him with graciousness, Mr. Belfield with cordiality. Of course he was the first to arrive, being very fearful of unpunctuality. Even Harry was not down yet. Not being able, for obvious reasons, to ask after her guest's relations—her invariable way, when it was possible, of opening a conversation—Mrs. Belfield expressed her pleasure at seeing him back in Meriton.

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"My husband thinks you're such a good companion for Harry," she added, showing that her pleasure was genuine, even if somewhat interested.

"Yes, Hayes," said Mr. Belfield. "See all you can of him; we shall be grateful. He wants just what a steady-going sensible fellow, as everybody says you are, can give him—a bit of ballast, eh?"

"Everybody" had been, in fact, Jack Rock, but—again for obvious reasons—the authority was not cited by name.

"You may be sure I shall give him as much of my company as he'll take, sir," said Andy, infinitely pleased, enormously complimented.

Placidity was Mrs. Belfield's dominant note—a soothing placidity. She was rather short and rather plump—by no means an imposing figure; but this quality gave her a certain dignity, and even a certain power in her little world. People let her have her own way because she was so placidly sure that they would, and it seemed almost profane to disturb the placidity. Even her husband's humour was careful to stop short of that. Her physical movements were in harmony with her temper—leisurely, smooth, noiseless; her voice was gentle, low, and even. She seemed to Andy to fit in well with the life she lived and always had lived, to be a good expression or embodiment of its sheltered luxury and sequestered tranquillity. Storms and stress and struggles—these things had nothing to do with Mrs. Belfield, and really ought to have none; they would be

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quite out of keeping with her. She seemed to have a right to ask that things about her should go straight and go quietly. There was perhaps a flavour of selfishness about this disposition; certainly an inaccessibility to strong feeling. For instance, while placidly assuming Harry's success and Harry's career, she was not excited nor what would be called enthusiastic about them—not half so excited and enthusiastic as Andy Hayes.

The dinner in the fine old room, under the Vandykes, with Mrs. Belfield in her lavender silk and precious lace, the girls in their white frocks, the old silver, the wealth of flowers, seemed rather wonderful to Andy Hayes. His life in boyhood had been poor and meagre, in manhood hard and rough. Here was a side of existence he had not seen; as luxurious as the life of which he had caught a glimpse at the great restaurant, but far more serene, more dignified. His opening mind received another new impression and a rarely attractive one.

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But the centre of the scene for him was Vivien Wellgood. From his first sight of her in the drawing-room he could not deny that. He had never seen her in the evening before, and it was in the evening that her frail beauty showed forth. She was like a thing of gossamer that a touch would spoil. She was so white in her low-cut frock; all so white save for a little glow on the cheeks that excitement and pleasure brought, save for the brightness of her hair in the soft candle light, save for the dark blue eyes which seemed to keep watch and ward over her hidden thoughts. Yes, she was—why, she was good enough for Harry—good enough for Harry Belfield himself! And he, Andy, Harry's faithful follower and worshipper, would worship her too, if she would let him (Harry, he knew, would), if she would not be afraid of him, not dislike him or shrink from him. That was all he asked, having in his mind not only a bashful consciousness of his rude strength and massive frame—they seemed almost threatening beside her delicacy—but also a haunting recollection that she could not endure such a number of things, including butchers' shops.

No thought for himself, no thought of trying to rival Harry, so much as crossed his mind. If it had, it would have been banished as rank treachery; but it could not, for the simple reason that his attitude towards Harry made such an idea utterly foreign to his thoughts. He was not asking, as Isobel Vintry had asked that afternoon, why he might not have his chance. It was not the way of his nature to put forward claims for himself—and, above all, claims that conflicted with Harry's claims. The bare notion was to him impossible.

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He sat by her, but for some time she gave herself wholly to listening to Harry, who had found, on getting home, a letter from Billy Foot, full of the latest political gossip from town. But presently, the conversation drifting into depths of politics where she could not follow, she turned to Andy and said, "I'm getting on much better with Curly. I pat him now!"

"That's right. It's only his fun."

"People's fun is sometimes the worst thing about them."

"Well now, that's true," Andy acknowledged, rather surprised to hear the remark from her.

"But I am getting on much better. And—well, rather better at riding." She smiled at him in confidence. "And nobody's said anything about swimming. Do you know, when I feel myself inclined to get frightened, I think about you!"

"Do you find it helps?" asked Andy, much amused and rather pleased.

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"Yes, it's like thinking of a policeman in the middle of the night."

"I suppose I do look rather like a policeman," said Andy reflectively.

"Yes, you do! That's it, I think." The vague "it" seemed to signify the explanation of the confidence Andy inspired.

"And how about dust and dirt, and getting very hot?" he inquired.

"Isobel says I'm a bit better about courage, but not the least about fastidiousness."

"Fastidiousness suits some people, Miss Wellgood."

"It doesn't suit father, not in me," she murmured with a woeful smile.

"Doesn't thinking about me help you there? On the same principle it ought to."

"It doesn't," she murmured, with a trace of confusion, and suddenly her eyes went blank. Something was in her thoughts that she did not want Andy to see. Was it the butcher's shop? Andy's wits were not quick enough to ask the question; but he saw that her confidential mood had suffered a check.

Her confidence had been very pleasant, but there were other things to listen to at the table. Andy was heart-whole and intellectually voracious.

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They, the rest of the company, had begun on politics—imperial politics—and had discussed them not without some friction. No Radical was present—*Procul, O procul este, profani!*—but Wellgood

had the perversities of his anti-sentimental attitude. A Tory at home, why was he to be a democrat—or a Socialist—at the Antipodes? Competition and self-interest were the golden rule in England; was there to be another between England and her colonies? The tie of blood—one flag, one crown, one destiny—Wellgood suspected his bugbear in every one of these cries. Nothing for nothing—and for sixpence no more than the coin was worth—with a preference for five penn'orth if you could get out of it at that! He stood steady on his firmly-rooted narrow foundation.

All of Harry was on fire against him. Was blood nothing—race, colour, memories, associations, the Flag, the Crown, and the Destiny? A destiny to rule, or at least to manage, the planet! Mother and Daughters—nothing in that?

Things were getting hot, and the ladies, who always like to look on at the men fighting, much interested. Mr. Belfield, himself no politician, rather a student of human nature and addicted to the Socratic attitude (so justly vexatious to practical men who have to do something, good, bad, or if not better, at least more plausible, than nothing) interposed a suggestion.

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"Mother and daughters? Hasn't husband and wives become a more appropriate parallel?" He smiled across the table at his own wife. "No personal reference, my dear! But an attitude of independence, without any particular desire to pay the bills? Oh, I'm only asking questions!"

Andy was listening hard now. So was Vivien, for she saw Harry's eyes alight and his mouth eager to utter truths that should save the nation.

"If we could reach," said Harry, marvellously handsome, somewhat rhetorical for a small party, "if only we could once reach a true understanding between ourselves and the self-governing—"

"Oh, but that's going beyond my parallel, my dear boy," his father interrupted. "If marriage demanded mutual understanding, what man or woman could risk it with eyes open?"

"Doesn't it?" Isobel Vintry was the questioner.

"Heavens, no, my dear Miss Vintry! Something much less, something much less fundamentally impossible. A good temper and a bad memory, that's all!"

"Well done, pater!" cried Harry, readily switched off from his heated enthusiasm. "Which for the husband, which for the wife?"

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"Both for both, Harry. Toleration to-day, and an unlimited power of oblivion to-morrow."

"What nonsense you're talking, dear," placidly smiled Mrs. Belfield.

"I'm exactly defining your own characteristics," he replied. "If you do that to a woman, she always says you're talking nonsense."

"An unlimited supply of the water of Lethe, pater? That does it?"

"That's about it, Harry. If you mix it with a little sound Scotch whisky before you go to bed—"

Andy burst into a good guffaw; the kindly mocking humour pleased him. Vivien was alert too; there was nothing to frighten, much to enjoy; the glow deepened on her cheeks.

But Wellgood was not content; he was baulked of his argument, of his fight.

"We've wandered from the point," he said dourly. ("As if wanderings were not the best things in the world!" thought more than one of the party, more or less explicitly.) "We give, they take." He was back to the United Kingdom and the Colonies.

"Could anything be more nicely exact to my parallel?" asked Belfield, socratically smiling. "Did you ever know a marriage where each partner didn't say, 'I give, you take'? Some add that they're content with the arrangement, others don't."

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"Pater, you always mix up different things," Harry protested, laughing.

"I'm always trying to find out whether there are any different things, Harry." He smiled at his son. "Wives, that's what they are! And several of them! Harry, we're in for all the difficulties of polygamy! A preference to one—oh no, I'm not spelling it with a big P! But—well, the ladies ought to be able to help us here. Could you share a heart, Miss Vintry?"

Isobel's white was relieved with gold trimmings; she looked sumptuous. "I shouldn't like it," she answered.

"What has all this got to do with the practical problem?" Wellgood demanded. "Our trade with the Colonies is no more than thirty per cent—"

"I agree with you, Mr. Wellgood. The gentlemen had much better have kept to their politics," Mrs. Belfield interposed with suave placidity. "They understand them. When they begin to talk about women—"

"Need of Lethe—whisky and Lethe-water!" chuckled Harry. "In a large glass, eh, Andy?"

Wellgood turned suddenly on Andy. "You've lived in Canada. What do you say?"

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Andy had been far too much occupied in listening. Besides, he was no politician. He thought deeply for a moment.

"A lot depends on whether you want to buy or to sell." He delivered himself of this truth quite solemnly.

"A very far-reaching observation," said Mr. Belfield. "Goes to the root of human traffic, and, quite possibly, to that of both the institutions which we have been discussing. I wonder whether either will be permanent!"

"Look here, pater, we're at dessert! Aren't you starting rather big subjects?"

"Your father likes to amuse himself with curious ideas," Mrs. Belfield remarked. "So did my father; he once asked me what I thought would happen if I didn't say my prayers. Men like to ask questions like that, but I never pay much attention to them. Shall we go into the drawing-room, Vivien? It may be warm enough for a turn in the garden, perhaps." She addressed the men. "Bring your cigars and try."

The men were left alone. "The garden would be jolly," said Harry.

Mr. Belfield coughed, and suddenly wheezed. "Intimations of mortality!" he said apologetically. "We've talked of a variety of subjects—to little purpose, I suppose. But it's entertaining to survey the field of humanity. Your views were briefly expressed, Hayes."

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"Everybody else was talking such a lot, sir," said Andy.

Belfield's humorous laugh was entangled in a cough. "You'll never get that obstacle out of the way of your oratory," he managed to stutter out. "They always are! Talk rules the world—eh, Wellgood?" He was maliciously provocative.

"We wait till they've finished talking. Then we do what we want," said Wellgood. "Force rules in the end—the readiness to kill and be killed. That's the *ultima ratio*, the final argument."

"The women say that's out of date."

"The women!" exclaimed Wellgood contemptuously.

"They'll be in the garden," Harry opined. "Shall we move, pater?"

"We might as well," said Belfield. "Are you ready, Wellgood?"

Wellgood was ready—in spite of his contempt.

## Chapter VI.

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### THE WORLDS OF MERITON.

The garden at Halton was a pleasant place on a fine evening, with a moon waxing, yet not obtrusively full, with billowing shrubberies, clear-cut walks, lawns spreading in a gentle drabness that would be bright green in to-morrow's sun—a place pleasant in its calm, its spaciousness and isolation. They all sat together in a ring for a while; smoke curled up; a servant brought glasses that clinked as they were set down with a cheery, yet not urgent, suggestion.

"I suppose you're right to go in for it," said Wellgood to Harry. "It's your obvious line." (He was referring to a public career.) "But, after all, it's casting pearls before swine."

"Swine!" The note of exclamation was large. "Our masters, Mr. Wellgood!"

"A decent allowance of bran, and a ring through their noses—that's the thing for them!"

"Has anybody got a copy—well, another copy of 'Coriolanus'?" Harry inquired in an affectation of eagerness.

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"Casting pearls before swine is bad business, of course," said Belfield in his husky voice—he was really unwise to be out of doors at all; "but there are degrees of badness. If your pearls are indifferent as pearls, and your swine admirable as swine? And that's often the truth of it."

"My husband is sometimes perverse in his talk, my dear," said Mrs. Belfield, aside to Vivien, to whom she was being very kind. "You needn't notice what he says."

"He's rather amusing," Vivien ventured, not quite sure whether the adjective were respectful enough.

"Andy, pronounce!" cried Harry Belfield; for his friend sat in his usual meditative absorbing silence.

"If I had to, I'd like to say a word from the point of view of the—swine." Had the moon been stronger, he might have been seen to blush. "I don't want to be—oh, well, serious. That's rot, I know—after dinner. But—well, you're all in it—insiders—I'm an outsider. And I say that what the swine want is—pearls!"

"If we've got them?" The question, or insinuation, was Belfield's. He was looking at Andy with a real, if an only half-serious, interest.

"Swine are swine," remarked Wellgood. "They mustn't forget it. Neither must we."

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"But pearls by no means always pearls?" Belfield suggested. "Though they may look the real thing if a pretty woman hangs them round her neck."

Their talk went only for an embellishment of their general state—so comfortable, so serene, so exceptionally fortunate. Were not they pearls? Andy had seen something of the swine, had perhaps even been one of them. A vague protest stirred in him; were they not too serene, too comfortable, too fortunate? Yet he loved it all; it was beautiful. How many uglies go to make one beautiful? It is a bit of social arithmetic. When you have got the result, the deduction may well seem difficult.

"It doesn't much matter whether they're real or not, if a really pretty woman hangs them round her neck," Harry laughed. "The neck carries the pearls!"

"But we'd all rather they were real," said Isobel Vintry suddenly, the first of the women to intervene. "Other women guess, you see."

"Does it hurt so much if they do?" Belfield asked.

"The only thing that really does hurt," Isobel assured him, smiling.

"Oh, my dear, how disproportionate!" sighed Mrs. Belfield.

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"I'd never have anything false about me—pearls, or lace, or hair, or—or anything about me," exclaimed Vivien. "I should hate it!" Feeling carried her into sudden unexpected speech.

Very gradually, very tentatively, Andy was finding himself able to speak in this sort of company, to speak as an equal to equals, not socially only, but in an intellectual regard.

"Riches seem to me all wrong, but what they produce, leaving out the wasters, all right." He let it out, apprehensive of a censoring silence. Belfield relieved him in a minute.

"I'm with you. I always admire most the things to which I'm on principle opposed—a melancholy state of one's mental interior! Kings, lords, and bishops—crowns, coronets, and aprons—all very attractive and picturesque!"

"We all know that the governor's a crypto-Radical," said Harry.

"I thought Carlyle, among others, had taught that we were all Radicals when in our pyjamas—or less," said Belfield. "But that's not the point. The excellence of things that are wrong, the narrowness of the moral view!"

"My dear! Oh, well, my dear!" murmured Mrs. Belfield.

"I've got a touch of asthma—I must say what I like." Belfield humorously traded on his infirmity. "A dishonest fellow who won't pay his tradesmen, a flirtatious minx who will make mischief, a spoilt urchin who insists on doing what he shouldn't—all rather attractive, aren't they? If everybody behaved properly we should have no 'situations.' What would become of literature and the drama?"

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"And if nobody had any spare cash, what would become of them, either?" asked Harry.

"Well, we could do with a good deal less of them. I'll go so far as to admit that," said Wellgood.

Belfield laughed. "Even from Wellgood we've extracted one plea for the redistribution of wealth. A dialectical triumph! Let's leave it at that."

Mrs. Belfield carried her husband off indoors; Wellgood went with them, challenging his host to a game of bezique; Harry invited Vivien to a stroll; Isobel Vintry and Andy were left together. She asked him a sudden question:

"Do you think Harry Belfield a selfish man?"

"Selfish! Harry? Heavens, no! He'd do anything for his friends."

"I don't mean quite in that way. I daresay he would—and, of course, he's too well-mannered to be selfish about trifles. But I suppose even to ask questions about him is treason to you?"

"Oh, well, a little bit," laughed Andy. "I'm an old follower, you see!"

"Yes, and he thinks it natural you should be," she suggested quickly.

"Well, if it is natural, why shouldn't he think so?"

"It seems natural to him that he should always come first, and—and have the pick of things."

"You mean he's spoilt? According to his father, that makes him more attractive."

"Yes, I'm not saying it doesn't do that. Only—do you never mind it? Never mind playing second fiddle?"

"Second fiddle seems rather a high position. I hardly reckon myself in the orchestra at all," he laughed. "You remember—I'm accustomed to following the hunt on foot."

"While Harry Belfield rides! Yes! Vivien rides too—and doesn't like it!"

She was bending forward in her chair, handsome, sumptuous in her white and gold (Wellgood had made her a present the quarter-day before), with her smile very bitter. The smile told that she spoke with a meaning more than literal. Andy surveyed, at his leisure, possible metaphorical bearings.

"Oh yes, I think I see," he announced, after an interval fully perceptible. "You mean she doesn't really appreciate her advantages? By riding you mean—?"

"Oh, really, Mr. Hayes!" She broke into vexed amused laughter. "I mustn't try it any more with you," she declared.

"But I shall understand if you give me time to think it over," Andy protested. "Don't rush me, that's all, Miss Vintry."

"As if I could rush any one or anything!" she said, handsome still, now handsomely despairing.

To Andy she was a problem, needing time to think over; to Wellgood she was a postulate, assumed not proved, yet assumed to be proved; to Harry she was—save for that subtle momentary feeling on the terrace by the lake—Vivien's companion. She wanted to be something other than any of these. Follow the hounds on foot? She would know what it was to ride! Know and not like—in Vivien's fashion? Andy, slowly digesting, saw her lips curve in that bitter smile again.

From a path near by, yet secluded behind a thick trim hedge of yew, there sounded a girl's nervous flutter of a laugh, a young man's exultant merriment. Harry and Vivien, not far away, seemed the space of a world apart—to Isobel; Andy was normally conscious that they were not more than twenty yards off, and almost within hearing if they spoke. But he had been getting at Isobel's meaning—slowly and surely.

"Being able to ride—having the opportunity—and not caring—that's pearls before—?"

"I congratulate you, Mr. Hayes. I can imagine you making a very good speech—after the election is over!"

Andy laughed heartily, leaning back in his chair.

"That's jolly good, Miss Vintry!" he said.

"Ten minutes after the poll closed you'd begin to persuade the electors!" She spoke rather lower. "Ten minutes after a girl had taken another man, you'd—"

"Give me time! I've never thought about myself like that," cried Andy.

No more sounds from the path behind the yew hedge. She was impatient with Andy—would Harry never come back from that path?

He came back the next moment—he and Vivien. Vivien's face was a confession, Harry's air a self-congratulation.

"I hope you've been making yourself amusing, Andy?" asked Harry. His tone conveyed a touch of amusement at the idea of Andy being amusing.

"Miss Vintry's been pitching into me like anything," said Andy, smiling broadly. "She says I'm always a day after the fair. I'm going to think it over—and try to get a move on."

His good-nature, his simplicity, his serious intention to attempt self-improvement, tickled Harry intensely. Why, probably Isobel had wanted to flirt, and Andy had failed to play up to her! He burst into a laugh; Vivien's laugh followed as an applauding echo.

"A lecture, was it, Miss Vintry?" Harry asked in banter.

"I could give you one too," said Isobel, colouring a little.

"She gives me plenty!" Vivien remarked, with a solemnly comic shake of her head.

"It's my business in life," said Isobel.

Just for a second Harry looked at her; an impish smile was on his lips. Did she think that, was she honest about it? Or was she provocative? It crossed Harry's mind—past experiences facilitating the transit of the idea—that she might be saying to him, "Is that all a young woman of my looks is good for? To give lectures?"

"You shall give me one at the earliest opportunity, if you'll be so kind," he laughed, his eyes boldly conveying that he would enjoy the lesson. Vivien laughed again; it was great fun to see Harry chaffing Isobel! She liked Isobel, but was in awe of her. Had not Isobel all the difficult virtues which it was her own woeful task to learn? But Harry could chaff her—Harry could do anything.

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"If I do, I'll teach you something you don't know, Mr. Harry," Isobel said, letting her eyes meet his with a boldness equal to his own. Again that subtle feeling touched him, as it had on the terrace by the lake.

"I'm ready to learn my lesson," he assured her, with a challenging gleam in his eye.

She nodded rather scornfully, but accepting his challenge. There was a last bit of by-play between their eyes.

"It's really time to go, if Mr. Wellgood has finished his game," said Isobel, rising.

The insinuation of the words, the by-play of the eyes, had passed over Vivien's head and outside the limits of Andy's perspicacity. To both of them the bandying of words was but chaff; by both the exchange of glances went unmarked. Well, the whole thing was no more than chaff to Harry himself; such chaff as he was very good at, a practised hand—and not ignorant of why the chaff was pleasant. And Isobel? Oh yes, she knew! Harry was amused to find this knowledge in Vivien's companion—this provocation, this freemasonry of flirtation. Poor old Andy had, of course, seen none of it! Well, perhaps it needed a bit of experience—besides the temperament.

Indoors, farewell was soon said—hours ruled early at Meriton. Soon said, yet not without some significance in the saying. Mrs. Belfield was openly affectionate to Vivien, and Belfield paternal in a courtly way; Harry very devoted to the same young lady, yet with a challenging "aside" of his eyes for Isobel; Andy brimming over with a vain effort to express adequately but without gush his thanks for the evening. Belfield, being two pounds the better of Wellgood over their bezique, was in more than his usual good-temper—it was spiced with malice, for the defeat of Wellgood (a bad loser) counted for more than the forty shillings—and gave Andy his hand and a pat on the back.

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"It's not often one has to tell a man not to undervalue himself," he remarked. "But I fancy I might say that to you. Well, I'm no prophet; but at any rate be sure you're always welcome at this house for your own sake, as well as for Harry's."

Getting into the carriage with Isobel and her father, Vivien felt like going back to school. But in all likelihood she would see Harry's eyes again to-morrow. She did not forget to give a kindly glance to solid Andy Hayes—not exciting, nor bewildering, nor inflaming (as another was!), but somehow comforting and reassuring to think of. She sat down on the narrow seat, fronting her father and Isobel. Yes—but school wouldn't last much longer! And after school? Ineffable heaven! Being with Harry, loving Harry, being loved by—? That vaulting imagination seemed still almost—nay, it seemed quite—impossible. Yet if your own eyes assure you of things impossible—well, there's a good case for believing your eyes, and the belief is pleasant. Wellgood sore over his two pounds, Isobel dissatisfied with fate but challenging it, sat silent. The young girl's lips curved in sweet memories and triumphant anticipations. The best thing in the world—was it actually to be hers? Almost she knew it, though she would not own to the knowledge yet.

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Happy was she in the handkerchief flung by her hero! Happy was Harry Belfield in the ready devotion, the innocent happy surrender, of one girl, and the vexed challenge of another whom he had—whom he had at least meant to ignore; he could never answer for it that he would quite ignore a woman who displayed such a challenge in the lists of sex. But there was a happier being still among those who left Halton that night. It was Andy Hayes, before whom life had opened so, who had enjoyed such a wonderful day-off, who had been told not to undervalue himself, had been reproached with being a day after the fair, had undergone (as it seemed) an initiation into a life of which he had hardly dreamt, yet of which he appeared, in that one summer's day, to have been accepted as a part.

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Yes, Andy was on the whole the happiest—happier even than Harry, to whom content, triumph, and challenge were all too habitual; happier even than Vivien, who had still some schooling to endure, still some of love's finicking doubts, some of hope's artificially prudent incredulity, to overcome; beyond doubt happier than Wellgood, who had lost two pounds, or Isobel Vintry, who had challenged and had been told that her challenge should be taken up—some day! Mrs. Belfield was intent on sleeping well, as she always did; Mr. Belfield on not coughing too much—as he generally did. They were not competitors in happiness.

Andy walked home. Halton lay half a mile outside the town; his lodgings were at the far end of High Street. All through the long, broad, familiar street—in old days he had known who lived in well-nigh every house—his road lay. He walked home under the stars. The day had been wonderful; they who had figured in it peopled his brain—delicate dainty Vivien first; with her, brilliant Harry; that puzzling Miss Vintry; Mr. Belfield, who talked so whimsically and had told him not to undervalue himself; Wellgood, grim, hard, merciless, yet somehow with the stamp of a man about him; Mrs. Belfield serenely matching with her house, her Vandykes, her garden, and the situation to which it had pleased Heaven to call her. Soberly now—soberly now—had he ever expected to be a part of all this?

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High Street lay dark and quiet. It was eleven o'clock. He passed the old grammar school with a thought of the dear old father—B.A. Oxon, which had something to do with his wonderful day. He passed the Lion, where "the Bird" officiated, and Mr. Foulkes' office, where "Chinks" aspired to become "gentleman, one etc"—so runs the formula that gives a solicitor his status. All dark! Now if by chance Jack Rock were up, and willing to listen to a little honest triumphing! It had been a day to talk about.

Yes, Jack was up; his parlour lights glowed cosily behind red blinds. Yet Andy was not to have a clear field for the recital of his adventures; it was no moment for an exhibition of his honest pride, based on an unimpaired humility. Jack Rock had a party. The table was furnished with beer, whisky, gin, tobacco, and clay pipes. Round it sat old friends—Chinks and the Bird; the Bird's father, Mr. Dove, landlord of the Lion; and Cox, the veterinary surgeon. After the labours of the week they were having a little "fling" on Saturday night—convivially, yet in all reasonable temperance. The elder men—Jack, Mr. Dove, and Cox—greeted Andy with intimate and affectionate cordiality; a certain constraint marked the manner of Chinks and the Bird—they could not forget the afternoon's encounter. His evening coat too, and his shirt-front! Everybody marked them; but they had a notion that he might have caught that habit in London.

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Andy's welcome over, Mr. Dove of the Lion took up his tale at the point at which he had left it. Mr. Dove had not Jack Rock's education—he had never been at the grammar school but he was a shrewd sensible old fellow, who prided himself on the respectability of his "house" and felt his responsibilities as a publican without being too fond of the folk who were always dinning them into his ears.

"I says to the girl, 'We don't want no carryings-on at the Lion.' That's what I says, Jack. She says, 'That wasn't nothing, Mr. Dove—only a give and take o' nonsense. The bar between us too! W'ere's the 'arm?' 'I don't like it, Miss Miles,' I says, 'I don't like it, that's all.' 'Oh, very good, Mr. Dove! You're master 'ere, o' course; only, if you won't 'ave that, you won't keep up your takings, that's all! That's the way she put it, Jack."

"Bit of truth in it, perhaps," Jack opined.

"There's a lot of truth in it," said the Bird solemnly. "Fellers like to show off before a good-looking girl—whether she's behind a bar or whether she ain't."

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"If there never 'adn't been barmaids, I wouldn't be the one to begin it," said Mr. Dove. "I knows its difficulties. But there they are—all them nice girls bred to it! What are ye to do with 'em, Jack?"

"A drink doesn't taste any worse for being 'anded—handed—to you by a pretty girl," said Chinks with a knowing chuckle.

"Then you give 'er one—then you stand me one—then you 'ave another yourself—just to say 'Blow the expense!' Oh, the girl knew the way of it—I ain't saying she didn't!" Mr. Dove smoked fast, evidently puzzled in his mind. "And she's a good girl 'erself too, ain't she, Tom?"

Tom blushed—blushed very visibly. Miss Miles was not a subject of indifference to the Bird.

"She's very civil-spoken," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"That she is—and a fine figure of a girl too," added Jack Rock. "Know her, Andy?"

Well, no! Andy did not know her; he felt profoundly apologetic. Miss Miles was evidently a person whom one ought to know, if one would be in the world of Meriton. The world of Meriton? It came home to him that there was more than one.

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Mr. Cox was a man who listened—in that respect rather like Andy himself; but, when he did speak, he was in the habit of giving a verdict, therein deviating from Andy's humble way.

"Barmaids oughtn't to a' come into existence," he said. "Being there, they're best left—under supervision." He nodded at old Dove, as though to say, "You won't get any further than that if you talk all night," and put his pipe back into his mouth.

"The doctor's right, I daresay," said old Dove in a tone of relief. It is always something of a comfort to be told that one's problems are insoluble; the obligation of trying to solve them is thereby removed.

Jack accepted this ending to the discussion.

"And what have you been doing with yourself, Andy?" he asked.

Andy found a curious difficulty in answering. Tea and tennis at Nutley, dinner at Halton—it seemed impossible to speak the words without self-consciousness. He felt that Chinks and the Bird had their eyes on him.

"Been at work all the week, Jack. Had a day-off to-day."

Luckily Jack fastened on the first part of his answer. He turned a keen glance on Andy. "Business doin' well?"

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"Not particularly," Andy confessed. "It's a bit hard for a new-comer to establish a connection."

"You're right there, Andy," commented old Mr. Dove, serenely happy in the knowledge of an ancient and good connection attaching to the Lion.

"Oh, not particularly well?" Jack nodded with an air of what looked like satisfaction, though it would not be kind to Andy to be satisfied.

"Playing lawn-tennis at Nutley, weren't you?" asked Chinks suddenly.

All faces turned to Andy.

"Yes, I was, Chinks," he said.

"Half expected you to supper, Andy," said Jack Rock.

"Sorry, Jack. I would have come if I'd been free. But—"

"Well, where were you?"

There was no help for it.

"I was dining out, Jack."

Andy's tone became as airy as he could make it, as careless, as natural. His effort in this kind was not a great success.

"Harry Belfield asked me to Halton."

A short silence followed. They were good fellows, one and all of them; nobody had a jibe for him; the envy, if envy there were, was even as his own for Harry Belfield. Cox looked round and raised his glass.

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"'Ere's to you, Andy! You went to the war, you went to foreign parts. If you've learned a bit and got on a bit, nobody in Meriton's goin' to grudge it you—least of all them as knew your good father, who was a gentleman if ever there was one—and I've known some of the best, consequent on my business layin' mainly with 'orses."

"Dined at Halton, did you?" Old Jack Rock beamed, then suddenly grew thoughtful.

"Well, of course, I've always known Harry Belfield, and—" He was apologizing.

"The old gentleman used to dine there—once a year reg'lar," Jack reminded him. "Quite right of 'em to keep it up with you." But still Jack looked thoughtful.

Eleven-thirty sounded from the squat tower of the long low church which presided over the west end—the Fyfold end—of High Street. Old Cox knocked out his pipe decisively. "Bedtime!" he pronounced.

Nobody contested the verdict. Only across Andy's mind flitted an outlandish memory that it was the hour at which one sat down to supper at the great restaurant—with Harry, the Nun, sardonic Miss Dutton, Billy Foot, and London at large—and at liberty.

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"You stop a bit, my lad," said Jack with affection, also with a touch of old-time authority. "I've something to say to you, Andy."

Andy stayed willingly enough; he liked Jack, and he was loth to end that day.

Jack filled and pressed, lit, pressed, and lit again, a fresh clay pipe.

"You like all that sort of thing, Andy?" he asked. "Oh, you know what I mean—what you've been doin' to-day."

"Yes, I like it, Jack." Andy saw that his dear old friend—dear Nancy's brother—had something of moment on his mind.



"But it don't count in the end. It's not business, Andy." Jack's tone had become, suddenly and strangely, persuasive, reasonably persuasive—almost what one might call coaxing.

"I've never considered it in the light of business, Jack."

"Don't let it turn you from business, Andy. You said the timber was worth about two hundred a year to you?"

"About that; it'll be more—or less—before I'm six months older. It's sink or swim, you know."

"You've no call to sink," said Jack Rock with emphasis. "Your father's son ain't goin' to sink while Jack Rock can throw a lifebelt to him."

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"I know, Jack. I'd ask you for half your last crust, and you'd soak it in milk for me as you used to—if you had to steal the milk! But—well, what's up?"

"I'm gettin' on in life, boy. I've enough to do with the horses. I do uncommon well with the horses. I've a mind to give myself to that. Not but what I like the meat. Still I've a mind to give myself to the horses. The meat's worth—Oh, I'll surprise you, Andy, and don't let it go outside o' this room—the meat's worth nigh on five hundred a year! Aye, nigh on that! The chilled meat don't touch me much, nor the London stores neither. Year in, year out, nigh on five hundred! Nancy loved you; the old gentleman never said a word as showed he knew a difference between me and him. Though he must have known it. I'm all alone, Andy. While I can I'll keep the horses—Lord, I love the horses! You drop your timber. Take over the meat, Andy. You're a learnin' chap; you'll soon pick it up from me and Simpson. Take over the meat, Andy. It's a safe five hundred a year!"

So he pleaded to have his great benefaction accepted. He had meant to give in a manner perhaps somewhat magnificent; what he gave was to him great. The news of tea and tennis at Nutley, of dinner at Halton, induced a new note. Proud still, yet he pleaded. It was a fine business—the meat! Nor chilled meat, nor stores mattered seriously; his connection was so high-class. Five hundred a year! It was luxury, position, importance; it was all these in Meriton. His eyes waited anxiously for Andy's answer.

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Andy caught his hand across the table. "Dear old Jack, how splendid of you!"

"Well, lad?"

For the life of him Andy could say nothing more adequate, nothing less disappointing, less ungrateful, than "I'd like to think it over. And thanks, Jack!"

## Chapter VII.

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### ENTERING FOR THE RACE.

Andy Hayes had never supposed that he would be the victim of a problem, or exposed to the necessity of a momentous choice. Life had hitherto been very simple to him—doing his work, taking his pay, spending the money frugally and to the best advantage, sparing a small percentage for the Savings Bank, and reconciling with this programme the keen enjoyment of such leisure hours as fell to his lot. A reasonable, wholesome, manageable scheme of life! Or, rather, not a scheme at all—Andy was no schemer. That was the way life came—the way an average man saw it and accepted it. From first to last he never lost the conception of himself as an average man, having his capabilities, yet strictly conditioned by the limits of the practicable; free in his soul, by no means perfectly free in his activities. Andy never thought in terms of "environment" or such big words, but he always had a strong sense of what a fellow like himself could expect; the two phrases may, perhaps, come to much the same thing.

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In South Africa he had achieved his sergeant's stripes—not a commission, nor the Victoria Cross, nor anything brilliant. In Canada he had not become a millionaire, nor even a prosperous man or a dashing speculator; he had been thought a capable young fellow, who would, perhaps, be equal to developing the English side of the business. Andy might be justified in holding himself no fool: he had no ground for higher claims, no warrant for anything like ambition.

Thus unaccustomed to problems, he had expected to toss uneasily (he had read of many heroes who "tossed uneasily") on his bed all night through. Lawn-tennis and a good dinner saved him from that romantic but uncomfortable ordeal; he slept profoundly till eight-thirty. Just before he was called—probably between his landlady's knock and her remark that it was eight-fifteen (she was late herself)—he had a brief vivid dream of selling a very red joint of beef to a very pallid Vivien Wellgood—a fantastic freak of the imagination which could have nothing to do with the grave matter in hand.

Yet, on the top of this, as he lay abed awhile in the leisure of Sunday morning, with no train to catch, he remembered his father's B.A. Oxon; he recalled his mother's unvarying designation of old Jack as "the butcher;" he recollected Nancy's pride in marrying "out of her class"—it had been her own phrase, sometimes in boast, sometimes in apology. Though Nancy had a dowry of a hundred pounds a year—charged on the business, and now returned to Jack Rock since Nancy

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left no children—she never forgot that she had married out of her class. And into his father's? And into his own? "I'm a snob!" groaned Andy.

He grew a little drowsy again, and in his drowsiness again played tennis at Nutley, again dined at Halton, again saw Vivien in the butcher's shop, and again was told by Mr. Belfield not to undervalue himself. But is to take nigh on five hundred pounds a year to undervalue yourself—you who are making a precarious two? And where lies the difference between selling wood and selling meat—wood from Canada and meat in Meriton? Andy's broad conception of the world told him that there was none; his narrow observation of the same sphere convinced him that the difference was, in its practical bearings, considerable. Nay, confine yourself to meat alone: was there no difference between importing cargoes of that questionable "chilled" article and disposing of joints of unquestionable "home-bred" over the counter? All the argument was for the home-bred. But to sell the home-bred joints one wore a blue apron and carried a knife and a steel—or, at all events, smacked of doing these things; whereas the wholesale cargoes of "chilled" involved no such implements or associations. Once again, Canada was Canada, New Zealand New Zealand, Meriton Meriton. With these considerations mingled two pictures—dinner at Halton, and Jack Rock's convivial party.

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"I'll get up," said Andy, too sore beset by his problem to lie abed any more.

Church! The bells rang almost as soon as Andy—he had dawdled and lounged over dressing and breakfast in Sunday's beneficent leisure—was equipped for the day. In Meriton everybody went to Church, except an insignificant, tolerated, almost derided minority who frequented a very small, very ugly Methodist chapel in a by-street—for towns like Meriton are among the best preserves of the Establishment. Andy always went to church on a Sunday morning, answering the roll-call, attending parade, accepting the fruits of his fathers' wisdom, as his custom was. "Church, and a slice of that cold beef, and then a jolly long walk!" he said to himself. He had a notion that this typical English Sunday—the relative value of whose constituents he did not, and we need not, exactly assess—might help him to settle his problem. The cold beef and the long walk made part of the day's character—the "Church" completed it. This was Andy's feeling; it is not, of course, put forward as what he ought to have felt.

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So Andy went to church—in a cut-away coat and a tall hat, though it drizzled, and he would sooner have been in a felt hat, impervious to the rain. He sat just half-way down the nave, and it must be confessed that his attention wandered. He had such a very important thing to settle in this world; it would not go out of his mind, though he strove to address himself to the issues which the service suggested. He laboured under the disadvantage of not being conscious of flagrant iniquity, though he duly confessed himself a miserable offender. He looked round on the neighbours he knew so well; they were all confessing that they were miserable offenders. Andy believed it—it was in the book—but he considered most of them to be good and honest people, and he was almost glad to see that they did not look hopelessly distressed over their situation.

The First Lesson caught and chained his wandering attention. It was about David and Jonathan; it contained the beautiful lament of friend for friend, the dirge of a brotherly love. The Rector's voice was rather sing-song, but it would have needed a worse delivery to spoil the words: "How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places! I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished!" Thus ended the song, so rich in splendour, so charged with sorrow.

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"Clinking!" was Andy's inward comment. Then in a flash came the thought, "Why, of course, I must ask Harry Belfield; he'll tell me what to do all right."

The reference of his problem to Harry ought to have disposed of it for good, and left Andy free to perform his devotions with a single mind. But it only set him wondering what Harry would decide, wondering hard and—there was no escaping from it—jealously. His service in the ranks, his residence in communities at least professedly democratic, had not made him a thorough democrat, it seemed. He might have acquired the side of democracy the easier of the two to acquire; he might be ready to call any man his equal, whatever his station or his work. He stumbled at the harder task of seeing himself, whatever his work or station, as any man's equal—at claiming or assuming, not at according, equality. And in Meriton! To claim or assume equality with any and every man in Meriton would, if he accepted Jack Rock's offer, be to court ridicule from equals and unequals all alike, and most of all from his admitted inferiors. Surely Harry would never send him to the butcher's shop? That would mean that Harry thought of him (for all his kindness) as of Chinks or of the Bird. Could he risk discovering that, after all, Harry—and Harry's friends—thought of him like that? A sore pang struck him. Had he been at Nutley—at Halton—only on sufferance? He had an idea that Harry would send him to the butcher's shop—would do the thing ever so kindly, ever so considerately, but all the same would do it. "Well, it's the safe thing, isn't it, old chap?" he fancied Harry saying; and then returning to his own high ambitions, and being thereafter very friendly—whenever he chanced to pass the shop. Andy never deceived himself as to the quality of Harry's friendship: it lay, at the most, in appreciative acceptance of unbounded affection. It was not like Jonathan's for David. Andy was content. And must not acceptance, after all, breed some return? For whatever return came he was grateful. In this sphere there was no room even for theories of equality, let alone for its practice.

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For some little time back Andy had been surprised to observe a certain attribute of his own—that

of pretty often turning out right. He accounted for it by saying that an average man, judging of average men and things, would fairly often be right—on an average; men would do what he expected, things would go as he expected—on an average. Such discernment as was implied in this Andy felt as no endowment, no clairvoyance; rather it was that his limitations qualified him to appreciate other people's. He would have liked to feel able to except Harry Belfield who should have no limitations—only he felt terribly sure of what Harry Belfield would say: Safety, and the shop!

By this time the church service was ended, the cold beef eaten, most of the long walk achieved. For while these things went straight on to an end, Andy's thoughts rolled round and round, like a squirrel in a cage.

"A man's only got one life," Andy was thinking to himself for the hundredth time as, having done his fifteen miles, he came opposite the entry to Nutley on his way home after his walk. What a lot of thoughts and memories there had been on that walk! Walking alone, a man is the victim—or the beneficiary—of any number of stray recollections, ideas, or fancies. He had even thought of—and smiled over—sardonic Miss Dutton's sardonic remark that he was worth ten of either Billy Foot or—Harry Belfield! Well, the poor girl had come one cropper; allowances must be made.

pg 136

Cool, serene, with what might appear to the eyes of less happy people an almost insolently secure possession of fortune's favour, Harry Belfield stood at Nutley gate. Andy, hot and dusty, winced at being seen by him; Harry was so remote from any disarray. Andy's heart leapt at the sight of his friend—and seemed to stand still in the presence of his judge. Because the thing—the problem—must come out directly. There was no more possibility of shirking it.

Vivien was flitting—her touch of the ground seemed so light—down the drive, past the deep dark water, to join Harry for a stroll. His invitation to a stroll on that fine still Sunday afternoon had not been given without significance nor received without a thousand tremblings. So it would appear that it was Andy's ill-fortune to interrupt.

Harry was smoking. He took his cigar out of his mouth to greet Andy.

"Treadmill again, old boy? Getting the fat off?"

"You're the one man I wanted to see." Then Andy's face fell; it was an awful moment. "I want to ask your advice."

pg 137

"Look sharp!" said Harry, smiling. "I've an appointment. She'll be here any minute."

"Jack Rock's offered to turn the shop over to me, as soon as I learn the business. I say, I—I suppose I ought to accept? He says it's worth hard on five hundred a year. I say, keep that dark; he told me not to tell anybody."

"Gad, is it?" said Harry, and whistled softly.

Vivien came in sight of him, and walked more slowly, dallying with anticipation.

"Splendid of him, isn't it? I say, I suppose I ought to—to think it over?" He had been doing nothing else for what seemed eternity.

Harry laughed—that merry irresponsible laugh of his. "Blue suits your complexion, Andy. It seems damned funny—but five hundred a year! Worth that, is it now, really? And he'd probably leave you anything else he has."

Silently-flitting Vivien was just behind Harry now. Andy saw her, Harry was unaware of her presence. She laid her finger on her lips, making a confidant of Andy, in her joy at a trick on her lover.

"Of course it—well, it sort of defines matters—ties you down, eh?" Harry's laugh broke out again. "Andy, old boy, you'll look infernally funny, pricing joints to old Dove or Miss Pink! Oh, I say, I don't think you can do it, Andy!"

pg 138

"Don't you, Harry?" Andy's tone was eager, beseeching, full of hope.

"But I suppose you ought." Harry tried to be grave, and chuckled again. "You'd look it uncommon well, you know. You'd soon develop the figure. Old Jack never has—doesn't look as if his own steaks did him any good. But you—we'd send you to Smithfield in no time!"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Vivien suddenly.

"Oh, there you are at last! Why, the funniest thing! Old Andy here wants to be a butcher."

"I don't want—" Andy began.

"A butcher! What nonsense you do talk sometimes, Harry!" She stood by Harry's side, so happy in him, so friendly to Andy.

"Fact!" said Harry, and acquainted her with the situation.

Vivien blushed red. "I—I'm very sorry I said what—what I did to you. You remember?"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Andy.

"Of course I—I never knew—I never thought—Of course, somebody must—Oh, do forgive me, Mr. Hayes!"

Harry raised his brows in humorous astonishment. "All this is a secret to me."

pg 139

"I—I told Mr. Hayes I didn't like—well—places where they sold meat—raw meat, Harry."

"What do you think really, Harry?" Andy asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Your choice, old man," he said. "You've looked at all sides of it, of course. It's getting latish, Vivien."

Andy would almost rather have had the verdict which he feared. "Your choice, old man"—and a shrug of the shoulders. Yet his loyalty intervened to tell him that Harry was right. It was his choice, and must be. He found Vivien's eyes on him—those distant, considering eyes.

"I suppose you couldn't give me an opinion, Miss Wellgood?" he asked, mustering a smile with some difficulty.

Vivien's lips drooped; her eyes grew rather sad and distinctly remote. She gave no judgment; she merely uttered a regret—a regret in which social and personal prejudice (it could not be acquitted of that) struggled with kindness for Andy.

"Oh, I thought you were going to be a friend of ours," she murmured sadly. She gave Andy a mournful little nod of farewell—of final farewell, as it seemed to his agitated mind—and walked off with Harry, who was still looking decidedly amused.

pg 140

That our great crises can have an amusing side even in the eyes of those who wish us well is one of life's painful discoveries. Andy had expected to be told that he must accept Jack Rock's offer, but he had not thought that Harry would chaff him about it. He tried, in justice to Harry and in anxiety not to feel sore with his hero, to see the humorous side for himself. He admitted that he could not. A butcher was no more ridiculous than any other tradesman. Well, the comic papers were rather fond of putting in butchers, for some inscrutable reason. Perhaps Harry happened to think of some funny picture. Could that idea give Andy a rag of comfort to wrap about his wound? The comfort was of indifferent quality; the dressing made the wound smart.

He was alone in the road again, gay Harry and dainty Vivien gone, thinking little of him by now, no doubt. Yes, the choice must be his own. On one side lay safety for him and joy for old Jack; on the other a sore blow to Jack, and for himself the risk of looking a sad fool if he came to grief in London. So far the choice appeared easy.

But that statement of the case left out everything that really tugged at Andy's heart. For the first time in his existence he was, vaguely and dimly, trying to conceive and to consider his life as a whole, and asking what he meant to do with it. Acutest self-reproach assailed him; he accused himself inwardly of many faults and follies—of ingratitude, of snobbishness, of a ridiculous self-conceit. Wasn't it enough for a chap like him to earn a good living honestly? Oughtn't he to be thankful for the chance? What did he expect anyhow? He was very scornful with himself, fiercely reproving all the new stirrings in him, yet at the same time trying to see what they came to; trying to make out what they, in their turn, asked, what they meant, what would content them. He could not satisfy himself what the stirrings meant nor whence they came. When he asked what would content them he could get only a negative answer; keeping the shop in Meriton would not. In regard neither to what it entailed nor to what it abandoned could the stirrings find contentment in that.

pg 141

He had been walking along slowly and moodily. Suddenly he quickened his pace; his steps became purposeful. He was going to Jack Rock's. Jack would be just having his tea, or smoking the pipe that always followed it.

Jack sat in his armchair. Tea was finished, and his pipe already alight. When he saw Andy's face he chuckled.

"Ah, that's how I like to see you look, lad!" he exclaimed joyfully. "Not as you did when you went away last night."

pg 142

"Why, how do I look?" asked Andy, amazed at this greeting.

"As if you'd just picked up a thousand pound; and so you have, and better than that."

All unknown to himself, Andy's face had answered to his feelings—to the sense of escape from bondage, of liberty restored, of possibilities once more within his reach. The renewed lightness of his heart had made his face happy and triumphant. But it fell with a vengeance now.

"Well?" asked Jack, to whom the change of expression was bewildering.

"I'm sorry—I've never been so sorry in my life—but I—I can't do it, Jack."

Jack sat smoking silently for a while. "That was what you were lookin' so happy about, was it?" he asked at last, with a wry smile. "I've never afore seen a man so happy over chuckin' away five hundred a year. Where does the fun come in, Andy?"

"O lord, Jack, I can't—I can't tell you about it. I—"

"But if it does do you all that good, I suppose you've got to do it."

Andy came up to him, holding out his hand. Jack took it and gave it a squeeze.

pg 143

"I reckon I know more about it than you think. I've been goin' over things since last night—and goin' back to old things too—about the old gentleman and Nancy."

"It seems so awfully—Lord, it seems everything that's bad and rotten, Jack."

"No, it don't," said old Jack quietly. "It's a bit of a facer for me—I tell you that straight—but it don't seem unnatural in you. Only I'm sorry like."

"If there was anything in the world I could do, Jack! But there it is—there isn't."

"I'm not so sure about that." He was smoking very slowly, and seemed to be thinking hard. Andy lit a cigarette. His joy was quenched in sympathy with Jack.

"You've given me a disappointment, Andy. I'm not denyin' it. But there, I can't expect you to feel about the business as I do. Comin' to me from my father, and havin' been the work o' the best years of my life! And no better business in any town of the size o' Meriton all the country through—I'll wager that! No, you can't feel as I do. And you've a right to choose your own life. There's one thing you might do for me, Andy, though."

"Well, if there's anything else in the world—"

pg 144

"I loved Nancy better than anybody, and the old gentleman—well, as I've told you, he never let me see a difference. I've got no kin—unless I can call you kin, Andy. If you want to make up for givin' me this bit of—of a facer, as I say, I'll tell you what you can do. There's times in a young chap's life when bein' able to put up a bit o' the ready makes all the difference, eh? If so be as you should find yourself placed like that, I want you to promise to ask me for it. Will you, lad?" Jack's voice faltered for a moment. "No call for you to go back across half the world for it. It's here, waitin' for you in Martin's bank in High Street. If you ever want to enter for an event, let me put up the stakes for you, Andy. Promise me that, and we'll say no more about the shop."

Andy was touched to the heart. "I promise. There's my hand on it, Jack."

"You'll come to me first—you won't go to any one before me?" old Jack insisted jealously.

"I'll come to you first—and last," said Andy.

"Aye, lad." The old fellow's eyes gleamed again. "Then it'll be our race. We'll both be in it, won't we, Andy? And if you pass the post first, I shall have a right to throw up my hat. And why shouldn't you? The favourite don't always win."

"I'm not expecting to do anything remarkable, Jack. I'm not such a fool as that."

pg 145

"You're no fool, or you'd never have been put to the trouble of refusin' my shop," observed Jack with emphasis. "And in the end I'm not sure but what you're right. I've never tried to rise above where I was born; but I don't know as there's any call for you to step down. I don't know as I did my duty by the old gentleman in temptin' you. I'm not sure he'd have liked it, though he'd have said nothing; he'd never have let me see—not him!" He sighed and smiled over his reverential memories of the old gentleman, yet his eyes twinkled rather maliciously as he said to Andy, "Dinin' at Halton again to-night?"

"No," laughed Andy, "I'm not. I'm coming to supper with you if you'll have me. What have you got?"

"Cold boiled aitch-bone, and apple-pie, and a Cheshire in good condition."

"Oh, that's prime! But I must go and change first. I've walked fifteen or sixteen miles, and I must get into a clean shirt."

"We don't dress for supper—not o' Sundays," Jack informed him gravely.

"Oh, get out, Jack!" called Andy from the door.

"Supper at nine precise, carriages at eleven," Jack called after him, pursuing his joke to the end with keen relish.

pg 146

Andy walked back to his lodgings, in the old phrase "happy as a king," and infinitely the happier because old Jack had taken it so well, had understood, and, though disappointed, had not been

hurt or wounded. There was no breach in their affection or in their mutual confidence. And now, he felt, he had to justify himself in Jack's eyes, to justify his refusal of a safe five hundred pounds a year. The refusal became, as he thought over it, a spur to effort, to action. "I must put my back into it," said Andy to himself, and made up his mind to most strenuous exertions to develop that rather shy and coy timber business of his in London.

Yet, after he had changed, as he sat listening to the church bells ringing for evening service, a softer strain of meditation mingled with these stern resolves. Memories of his "Saturday-off" glided across his mind, echoes of this evening's encounter with Harry and Vivien sounded in his ears. There was, as old Jack Rock himself had ended by suggesting, no call for him to step down. He could take the place for which he was naturally fit. He need not renounce that side of life of which he had been allowed a glimpse so attractive and so full of interest. The shop in Meriton would have opened the door to one very comfortable little apartment. How many doors would it not have shut? All doors were open now.

pg 147

"I thought you were going to be a friend of ours." Andy, sitting in the twilight, listening to the bells, smiled at the echo of those regretful words. He cherished their kindness, and smiled at their prejudice. The shop and Vivien were always connected in his mind since the first day he had met her. Her words came back to him now, summing up all that he would have lost by acceptance, hinting pregnantly at all that his refusal might save or bring.

He stretched his arms and yawned; mind and body both enjoyed a happy relaxation after effort.

"What a week-end it's been!" he thought. Indeed it had—a week-end that was the beginning of many things.

## Chapter VIII.

pg 148

### WONDERFUL WORDS.

Fully aware of his son's disposition and partly acquainted with his experiences, Mr. Belfield had urged Harry to "go slow" in his courting of Vivien Wellgood. An opinion that marriage was Harry's best chance was not inconsistent with advising that any particular marriage should be approached with caution and due consideration, that a solid basis of affection should be raised, calculated to stand even though the winds of time carried away the lighter and more fairy-like erections of Harry's romantic fancy. To do Harry justice, he did his best to obey the paternal counsel; but ideas of speed in such matters, and of cautious consideration, differ. What to Harry was sage delay would have seemed to many others lighthearted impetuosity. He waited a full fortnight after he was absolutely sure of—well, of the wonderful thing he was so sure of—a fortnight after he was absolutely sure that Vivien was absolutely sure also. (The fortnights ran concurrently.) Then he began to feel rather foolish. What on earth was he waiting for? A man could not be more than absolutely sure. Yet perhaps, in pure deference to his father, he would have waited a week longer, and so achieved, or sunk to, an almost cold-blooded deliberation. (He had known Mrs. Freere only a week before he declared—and abjured—a passion!) He was probably right; it was no good waiting. No greater security could be achieved by that. Whether the pursuit were deliberate or impetuous, an end must come to it. It was afterwards—when the chase was over and the quarry won—that the danger came for Harry and men like him. Sage delay and a solid basis of affection could not obviate that peril; the born hunter would still listen to the horn that sounded a new chase. Somewhere in the world—so the theory ran—there must live the woman who could deafen Harry's ears to a fresh blast of the horn. On that theory monogamy depends for its personal—as distinguished from its social—justification. So Mr. Belfield reasoned, with a smile, and counselled delay. But there were no means of ransacking the world, and even the theory itself was doubtful. Harry was an eager advocate of the theory, but thought that there was no need to search beyond little Meriton for the woman. At any rate, if Meriton did not hold her, she did not exist—the theory stood condemned. Still he would wait one week more—to please his father.

pg 149

pg 150

A thing happened, a word was spoken, the like of which he had never anticipated. To defend himself laughingly against comparisons with the proverbial Lothario, to protest with burlesque earnestness against charges of susceptibility, fickleness, and extreme boldness of assault—Harry played that part well, and was well-accustomed to play it. But to suffer a challenge, to endure a taunt, to be subjected to a sneer, as a slow-coach, a faint-heart, a boy afraid to tell a girl he loved her, afraid to snatch what he desired! This was a new experience for Harry Belfield, new and unbearable. And when he had only been trying to please his father! Hang this pleasing of one's father, if it leads to things like that!

He dashed up to Nutley one fine afternoon on his bicycle; he was teaching Vivien the exercise, and she was finding that even peril had its charms. But he was late for his appointment. Isobel Vintry sat alone on the terrace by the water.

"How are you, Miss Vintry? I say, I'm afraid I'm late. Where's Vivien?"

"You're nearly half an hour late."

"Well, I know. I couldn't help it. Where is she?"

pg 151

"She got tired of waiting for you, and went for a walk in the wood."

"She might have waited."

"Well, yes. One would think she'd be accustomed to it by now," said Isobel. Her tone was lazily indolent, but her eyes were set on him in mockery.

Harry looked at her with a sudden alertness. He looked at her hard. "Accustomed to waiting for me?"

"Yes." She was exasperating in her malicious tranquillity, meaning more than she said, saying nothing that he could lay hold of, quite grave, and laughing at him.

"Any hidden meanings, Miss Vintry?" For, as a fact, Harry had generally been punctual, and knew it.

"Nothing but what's quite obvious," she retorted, dexterously fencing.

"Or ought to be, to a man not so slow as I am?"

"You slow, Mr. Harry! You're Meriton's ideal of reckless dash!"

"Meriton's?"

"That's the name of the town, isn't it? Or did you think I said London's?"

Harry laughed, but he was stung; she put him on his mettle. "Oh no, I understood your emphasis." pg 152

"You needn't keep her waiting any longer—while you talk about nothing to me. You'll find her in the west wood—if you want to. She left you that message."

Harry had no doubt of what she meant, yet she had not spoken a word of it. The saying goes that words are given us to conceal our thoughts; has anybody ever ventured to say that lips and eyes are? Her meaning carried without speech; understanding it, Harry took fire.

"I won't be late again, Miss Vintry," he said. "It would be a pity to disappoint Meriton in its ideal!"

He would have liked to speak to her for a moment sincerely, to ask her if she really thought—But no, it could not be risked. She would make him feel and look ridiculous. Asking her opinion about the right moment to—to—to come up to the scratch (he could find no more dignified phrase)! Her eyes would never let him hear the end of that.

"Still lingering?" she said, stifling a yawn. "While poor Vivien waits!"

There are unregenerate atavistic impulses; Harry would dearly have liked to box her ears. "Meriton's ideal" rankled horribly. What business was it of hers? It could not concern her in the least—a conclusion which made matters worse, since disinterested criticism is much the more formidable. pg 153

"I can find her in a few minutes."

"Oh yes, if you look! Shall you be back to tea?"

"Yes, we'll be back to tea, Miss Vintry. Both of us—together!"

Isobel smiled lazily again. "Come, you are going to make an effort. Nothing of the laggard now!"

"Oh, that's the word you've been thinking suits me?"

"It really will if you don't get to the west wood soon."

"I'll get there—and be back—in half an hour."

The one thing he could not endure was that any woman—above all, an attractive woman—should find in him, Harry Belfield, anything that was ridiculous. She might chide, she might admire; laugh she must not, or her laugh should straightway be confounded. Isobel's hint that he had been a laggard in love banished, in a moment, the uncongenial prudence which he had been enforcing on himself.

She watched him with a contemptuous smile as he strode off on his quest. Why had she mocked, why had she hinted? In part for pure mockery's sake. She found a malicious pleasure in giving his complacency a dig, in shaking up his settled good opinion of himself. In part from sheer impatience of the simple obvious love affair, to which she was called by her situation to play witness, chaperon, and practically accomplice. It was quite clear how it was going to end—better have the end at once! Her smile of contempt had been not so much for Harry as for the business on which he was engaged; yet Harry had his share of it, since her veiled banter had such power to move him. But that same thing in him had its fascination; there was a great temptation to exercise her power when the man succumbed to it so easily. In this case she had used it only to pg 154

send him a little faster whither he was going already; but did that touch the limits of it?

So she speculated within herself, yet not quite candidly. Her feeling for Harry was far from being all contempt. She mocked him with her "Meriton ideal," but she was not independent of the Meriton standard herself. To her as to the rest of his neighbours he was a bright star; to her as to them his looks, his charm, his accomplishments appealed. In her more than in most of them his emotions, so ready and quick to take fire, found a counterpart. To her more than to most of them indifference from him seemed in some sort a slight, a slur, a mark of failure. Unconsciously she had fallen into the Meriton way of thinking that notice from Harry Belfield was a distinction, his favour a thing marking off the recipient from less happy mortals. She had received little notice and little favour—a crumb or two of flirtation, flung from Vivien's rich table!

pg 155

To Vivien, after all the person most intimately concerned, Harry had seemed no laggard; she would have liked him none the worse if he had shown more of that quality. Nothing that he did could be wrong, but some things could be—and were—alarming. Her fastidiousness was not hurt, but her timidity was aroused. She feared crises, important moments, the crossing of Rubicons, even when the prospect looked fair and delightful on the other side of the stream.

To-day, in the west wood, the crossing had to be made. It by no means follows that the man who falls in love lightly makes love lightly; he is as much possessed by the feeling he has come by so easily as though it were the one passion of a lifetime. In his short walk from Isobel Vintry's side to Vivien's, Harry's feelings had found full time to rise to boiling-point. Isobel was far out of his mind; already it seemed to him inconceivable that he should not, all along, have meant to make his proposal—to declare his love—to-day. How could he have thought to hold it in for an hour longer?

pg 156

"I know I was late, Vivien," he said. "I'm so sorry. But—well, I half believe I was on purpose." He was hardly saying what was untrue; he was coming to half-believe it—or very nearly.

"On purpose! O Harry! Didn't you want to give me my lesson to-day?"

"Not in bicycling," he answered, his eyes set ardently on her face.

She was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, which had been stripped of its bark and shaped into a primitive bench. He sat down by her and took her hand.

"Your hand shakes! What's the matter? You're not afraid of me?"

"Not of you—no, not of you, Harry."

"Of something then? Is it of something I might do—or say?" He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

It was no use trying to get answers out of her; she was past that; but she did not turn away from him, she let her eyes meet his in a silent appeal.

"Vivien, I love you more than all my life!"

"You—you can't," he could just hear her murmur, her lips scarcely parted.

"More than everything in the world besides!"

What wonderful words they were. "More than everything in the world besides!" "More than all my life!" Could there be such words? Could she have heard—and Harry uttered them? Her hands trembled violently in his; she was sore afraid amidst bewildering joy. Anything she had foreshadowed in her dreams seemed now so faint, so poor, against marvellous reality. Surely the echo of the wonderful words would be in her ears for all her life!

pg 157

She had none wherewith to answer them; her hands were his already; for the tears in her eyes she could hardly see his face, but she turned her lips up to his in mute consent.

"That makes you mine," said Harry, "and me yours—yours only—for ever."

She released her hands from his, and put her arm under his arm. Still she said nothing, but now she smiled beneath her dim eyes, and pressed his arm.

"Not frightened now?" he asked softly. "You need never be frightened again."

She spoke at last just to say "No" very softly, yet with a wealth of confident happiness.

"The things we'll do, the things we'll see, the times we'll have!" cried Harry gaily. "And to think that it's only a month or two ago that the idea occurred to me!" He teased her. "Occurred to us, Vivien?"

"Oh no, Harry. Well, then, yes." She laughed lightly, pressing his arm again. "But never that it could be like this."

pg 158

"Is this—nice?" he asked in banter.



"Is it—real?" she whispered.

"Yes, it's real and it's nice—real nice, in fact," laughed Harry.

"Don't talk just for a little while," she begged, and he humoured her, watching her delicate face during the silence she entreated. "You must tell them," she said suddenly, with a return of her alarm.

"Oh yes, I'll do all the hard work," he promised her, smiling.

She fell into silence again, the wonderful words re-echoing in her ears—"More than everything in the world besides!" "More than all my life!"

"I promised Miss Vintry we'd be back to tea. Do you think you can face her?" asked Harry.

"Yes, with you. But you've got to tell. You promised."

"You'll have somebody to help you over all the stiles—now and hereafter."

The suggestion brought a radiant smile of happiness to her lips; it expressed to her the transformation of her life. So many things had been stiles to her, and her father's gospel was that people must get over their own stiles for themselves; that was the lesson he inculcated, with Isobel Vintry to help him. But now—well, if stiles were still possible things at all, with Harry to help her over they lost all their terrors.

pg 159

"We'll remember this old tree-trunk. In fact I think that the proper thing is to carve our initials on it—two hearts and our initials. That's real keeping company!"

"Oh no," she protested with a merry little laugh. "Keeping company! Harry!"

"Well, I'll let you off the hearts, but I must have the initials—very, very small. Do let me have the initials!"

"Somewhere where nobody will look, nobody be likely to see them!"

"Oh yes; I'll find a very secret place! And once a year—on the anniversary, if we're here—we'll come and freshen them up with a penknife."

He had his out now, and set about his pleasant silly task, choosing one end of the tree-trunk, near to the ground, where, in fact, nobody who was not in the secret would find the record.

"There you are—a beautiful monogram; 'H' and 'V' intertwined. I'm proud of that!"

"So am I—very proud, Harry!" she said softly, taking his arm as they moved away. Was she not blessed among the daughters of women? To say nothing of being the envy of all Meriton!

And for Harry the past was all over, the dead had buried its dead. The new life—and the life of the new man—had begun.

pg 160

Wellgood was back from a ride round his farms—a weekly observance with him. He had been grimly encouraging the good husbandmen, badly scaring the inefficient, advising them all to keep their labourers in order, and their womankind as near to reason as could be hoped for. Now he had his hour of relaxation over tea. He was a great tea-drinker—four or five cups made his allowance. Tea is often the libertinism of people otherwise severe. He leant back in his garden-chair, his gaitered legs outstretched, and drank his tea, Isobel Vintry replenishing the swiftly-emptied cup. She performed the office absent-mindedly—with an air of detachment which hinted that she would fulfil her duties, routine though they might be, but must not be expected to think about them.

"Where's Vivien?" he asked abruptly.

"In the west wood—with Mr. Harry. He said they'd be back for tea."

"Oh!" He finished his third cup and handed the vessel over to her to be refilled. "Things getting on?"

"Yes, I think so. Here's your tea."

"Why do you think so? Give me another lump of sugar."

"Sugar at that rate'll make you put on too much weight. Well, I gave him a hint that the pear was ripe."

pg 161

"You did? Well, I'm hanged!"

"You think I'm very impudent?"

"What did you say? But I daresay you said nothing. You've a trick with those eyes of yours, Isobel."

"I've devoted them solely to supervising your daughter's education, Mr. Wellgood."

"Oh yes!" he chuckled. He liked impudence from a woman; to primitive man—Wellgood had a good leaven of the primitive—it is an agreeable provocation.

"I'll bet you," she said—with her challenging indolence that seemed to say "Disturb me if you can!"—"I'll bet you we hear of the engagement in ten minutes."

"You know a lot about it! What'll you bet me?"

"Anything you like—from a quarter's salary downwards!" said Isobel. She sat facing the path from the west wood. On it she saw two figures, arm in arm. Wellgood had his back turned that way. The situation was favourable for Isobel's bet.

A light hand in flirtation could not be expected from a man to whom the heavy hand—the strong decisive grip—was gospel in matters public and private. Besides, he had grown impatient; his affair waited on Harry's.

pg 162

"From a quarter's salary downwards? Will you bet me a kiss?"

"Yes," she smiled, "if losing means the kiss. Because I know I shall win, Mr. Wellgood."

Harry and Vivien came near, still exalted in dreams, the new man and the girl transformed. Wellgood had not noticed them, perhaps would have forgotten them anyhow.

"If winning meant the kiss?" he said.

"I don't bet as high as that, except on a certainty," smiled Isobel. "Another cup?"

"No, but I tell you, Isobel—" He leant over the table towards her.

"Don't tell me, and don't touch me! They're just behind you, Mr. Wellgood."

He swore under his breath. A plaguy mean trick this of women's—defying just when they are safe! He had to play the father—and the father-in-law to be; to seem calm, wise, benevolent, paternally affectionate, patronizing to young love from the sage eminence of years that he was just, a second ago, forgetting.

Since she had come into his house, to be Vivien's companion and exemplar, a year ago, they had had many of these rough defiant flirtations. He was not easily snubbed, she not readily frightened. They had worked together over Vivien's rather severe training in a matter-of-fact way; but there had been this diversion for hours of leisure. Why not? Flirtation of this order was not the conventional thing between the girl's father and the girl's companion. No matter! They were both vigorously self-confident people; the flirtation suited the taste of at least one of them, and served the ends of both.

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The near approach of the lovers—the imminence of a declared engagement—made a change. Wellgood advanced more openly; Isobel challenged and repelled more impudently. The moment for which he had waited seemed near at hand; she suffered under an instinctive impulse to prove that she too had her woman's power and could use it. But, deep down in her mind, the proof was more for Harry's enlightenment than for Wellgood's subjugation. She had an overwhelming desire not to appear, in Harry's conquering eyes, a negligible neglected woman. She mocked the Meriton standard—but shared it.

"Look round!"

He obeyed her.

"Arm in arm!"

He started, and glowered at the approaching couple. Vivien hastily dropped Harry's arm.

"Oh, that's nothing—she's just afraid! It's settled all the same. And within my ten minutes!"

pg 164

"Aye, you're a—" He smiled in grim fierce admiration.

"Shall I take three months' notice, Mr. Wellgood?" She was lying back in her chair again, insolent and serenely defiant. "I might have betted after all, and been quite safe," she said.

Harry victorious in conquest, Vivien with her more precious conquest in surrender, were at Wellgood's elbow. He had to wrench himself away from his own devices.

"Well, what have you got to say, Vivien?" he asked his daughter rather sharply. She was looking more than usually timid. What was there to be frightened at?

"She hasn't got anything to say," Harry interposed gaily. "I'm going to do the talking. Are you feeling romantic to-day, Mr. Wellgood?"

Wellgood smiled sourly. "You know better than to try that on me, Master Harry."

"Yes! Well, I'll cut that, but I just want to mention—as a matter of business, which may affect your arrangements—that Vivien has promised to marry me."

Vivien had stolen up to her father and now laid her hand lightly on his shoulder. He looked at her with a kindly sneer, then patted her hand. "You like the fellow, do you, Vivien?"

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"Yes, father."

"Then I daresay we can fix matters up. Shake hands, Harry."

Vivien kissed his forehead; the two men shook hands.

"I daresay you're not exactly taken by surprise," said Harry, laughing. "I've been calling rather often!"

"It had struck me that something was up."

Wellgood was almost genial; he was really highly pleased. The match was an excellent one for his daughter; he liked Harry, despite a lurking suspicion that he was "soft;" and the way now lay open for his own plan.

"You haven't asked me for my congratulations, Vivien," said Isobel.

Vivien went over to her and kissed her, then sat down by the table, her eyes fixed on Harry. She was very quiet in her happiness; she felt so peaceful, so secure. Such was the efficacy of those wonderful words!

"And I wish you all happiness too, Mr. Harry," Isobel went on with a smile. "Perhaps you'll forgive me if I say that I'm not altogether taken by surprise either?"

Harry did not quite like her smile; there seemed to be a touch of ridicule about it. It covertly reminded him of their talk before tea, before he went to the west wood.

pg 166

"I never had much hope of blinding your eyes, so I didn't even try, Miss Vintry."

"I was thinking it must come to a head soon," she remarked.

Harry flushed ever so slightly. She was hinting at the laggard in love again; it almost seemed as if she were hinting that she had brought the affair to a head. In the west wood he had forgotten her subtle taunt; he had thought of nothing but his passion, and how impatient it was. Now he remembered, and knew that he was being derided, even in his hour of triumph. He felt another impulse of anger against her. This time it took the form of a desire to show her that he was no fool, not a man a woman could play with as she chose. He would like to show her what a dangerous game that was. He was glad when, having shot her tiny sharp-pointed dart, she rose and went into the house. "You'll want to talk it all over with Mr. Wellgood!" He did not want to think of her; only of Vivien.

"Poor Isobel!" said Vivien. "She's very nice about it, isn't she? Because she can't really be pleased."

Both men looked rather surprised; each was roused from his train of thought. Both had been thinking about Isobel, but the thoughts of neither consorted well with Vivien's "Poor Isobel!"

pg 167

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"It means the loss of her situation, Harry."

"Of course! I never thought of that."

"Don't you young people be in too great a hurry," said Wellgood, with the satisfied smile of a man with a secret. "You're not going to be married the day after to-morrow! There's lots of time for something to turn up for Isobel. She needn't be pitied. Perhaps she may be tired of you and your ways, young woman, and glad to be rid of her job!"

"Lucky there's somebody ready to take her place, then, isn't it?" laughed Harry.

Wellgood laughed too as he rose. "It seems very lucky all round," he said, smiling again as he left them. He was quite secure that they would spend no time in thinking about good luck other than their own.

The lovers sat on beside the water till twilight fell, talking of a thousand things, yet always of one thing—of one thing through which they saw all the thousand other things, and saw them transfigured with the radiance of the one. Even the bright hues of Harry's future grew a hundredfold brighter when beheld through this enchanted medium, while Vivien's simple ideal of life seemed heaven realized. Visions were their only facts, and dreams alone their truth. Neither from without nor from within could aught harm the airy fabric that they built—Vivien out of ignorance, Harry by help of that fine oblivion of his.

pg 168

For a long while Isobel Vintry—fled to her room lest Wellgood should seek her—watched them from her window with envious eyes. For them the dreams; for her, most uninspiring reality! At last she turned away with a weary impatient shrug.

"Well, it's a good thing to have it over and done with, anyhow!" she exclaimed, and smiled once more to think how she had stung Harry Belfield with her insinuations and her "Meriton ideal." If we cannot be happy ourselves, it is a temptation to make happy people a little uncomfortable. In that lies an evidence of power consolatory to the otherwise unfortunate.

## Chapter IX.

pg 169

### "INTERJECTION."

Settling the question of the butcher's shop had seemed to Andy Hayes like a final solution of life's problems. Therein he showed the quality of his mind. One thing at a time, settle that. As he had learnt to say 'on the other side,' "Don't look for trouble!" He had yet to realize what the man of imagination knows instinctively—that the problems of life end only with life itself.

An eight-ten train to town is not, however, favourable to such a large and leisurely survey as a consideration of life in its totality. It involved a half-hour's race for the station. And this morning the Bird—standing at the door of his father's hostelry—delayed a hard-pressed man who had absolutely no time to stop.

"Heard the news about Mr. Harry?" cried the Bird across the street.

Andy slowed down. "About Harry?"

"Engaged to Miss Wellgood!" shouted the Bird.

pg 170

"No, is he?" yelled Andy in reply. "Hurrah!"

It was but two days after the great event had happened. Recently Andy had seen nothing of his Meriton friends. He had been working early and late in town; down at seven-thirty, up to work again at eight-ten. He had been a very draught-horse, straining at a load which would not move—straining at it on a slippery slope. Business was so "quiet." Could not work command success? At present he had to be content with the meagre consolation proffered to Sempronius. He must be at the office not a second later than nine. If the American letters came in, replies could get off by the same day's mail.

Yet the news of the engagement—he wished he could have had it from Harry's own lips—cut clean across his personal preoccupations. How right! How splendid! Dear old Harry! And how he would like to congratulate Miss Vivien! All that on Saturday afternoon or Sunday. Andy was one of the world's toilers; for them works of charity, friendship, and love have for the most part to wait for Saturday afternoon or Sunday; the other five days and a half—it's the struggle for life, grimly individual.

He loved Harry Belfield, and stored up untold enthusiasm for Saturday afternoon or Sunday—those altruistic hours when we have time to consider our own souls and other people's fortunes. But to-day was only Thursday; Thursday is well in the zone of the struggle. Andy's timber business was—just turning the corner! So many businesses always are. Shops expensively installed, hotels over-built, newspapers—above all, newspapers—started with a mighty flourish of heavy dividends combined with national regeneration—they are all so often just turning the corner. The phrase signifies that you hope you are going to lose next year rather less than you lost last year. If somebody will go on supplying the deficit—in that sanguine spirit which is the strength of a commercial nation—or can succeed in inducing others to supply it in a similar spirit, the corner may in the end be turned. If not, you stay this side of the magical corner of success, and presently find yourself in another—to be described as "tight." A life-long experience of questions—of problems and riddles—was not, for Andy Hayes, to stop short at the felicitous solution of the puzzle about Jack Rock's butcher's shop in Meriton High Street.

pg 171

Andy had to postpone reflection on Harry Belfield's happiness and Vivien's emancipation. Yet he had a passing appreciation of the end of ordeals—of Curly, cross-country rides, and the like. Would the mail from Montreal bring a remittance for the rent of the London office? The other business men in the fast morning train were grumpy. Money was tight, the bank rate stiff, times bad. No moment to launch out! There were sounded all the familiar jeremiads of the City train. What could you expect with a Liberal Government in office? The stars in their courses fought against business. Nobody would trust anybody. It was not that nobody had the money—nobody ever has—but hardly anybody was believed to be able, in the last resort, to get it. That impression spells collapse. The men in the first-class carriage—Andy had decided that it was on the whole "good business" to stand himself a first-class "season"—seemed well-fed, affluent, possessed of good cigars; yet they were profoundly depressed, anticipative of little less than imminent starvation. One of them explicitly declared his envy of a platelayer whom the train passed on the line.

pg 172

"Twenty-two bob a week certain," he said. "Better than losing a couple of hundred pounds, Jack.

Not much longer hours either, and an open-air life!"

"Well, take it on," Jack, who had a cynical turn of humour, advised. "He (the platelayer he meant) couldn't very well lose more than you do; and you'll never make more than he does. Swap!"

pg 173

The first speaker retired behind the *Telegraph* in some disgust. It is hard to meet a rival wit as early as eight-thirty in the morning.

The American mail was not in when Andy reached Dowgate Hill, in which important locality he occupied an insignificant attic. A fog off the coast of Ireland accounted for the delay. But on his table, as indicated by the small boy who constituted his staff—the staff would, of course, be larger when that corner was turned—lay a cable. There was no other correspondence. Things were quiet. Andy could not suppress a reflection that a rather later train would have done as well. Still there was a cable; no doubt it advised the remittance. The remittance was a matter of peremptory necessity, unless Andy were to empty his private pocket.

"Incontestable—Incubation—Ineffective." So ran the cable.

Andy scratched his nose and reached for the code.

If ever a digression were allowable, if expatiation on human fortune and vicissitudes were still the fashion, what a text lies in the cable code! This cold-blooded provision for all emergencies, this business-like abbreviation of tragedy! "Asbestos" means "Cannot remit." "Despairing" signifies "If you think it best." (Could despair sound more despairing?) "Patriotic—Who are the heaviest creditors?" Passing to other fields of life: "Risible—Doctor gives up hope." "Refreshing—Sinking steadily; prepare for the worst." "Resurrection—There is no hope of recovery." "Resurgam—Realization of estate proceeding satisfactorily."

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The cable code is a masterly epitome of life.

However Andy Hayes was not given to digression or to expatiation. Patiently he turned the leaves to find the interpretation of his own three mystic words.

The result was not encouraging.

"Incontestable—Incubation—Ineffective."

Which being interpreted ran: "Most essential to retrench all unnecessary expense. Cannot see prospects of your branch becoming paying proposition. Advise you to close up and return as soon as possible."

There was a fourth word. The "operator"—Andy still chose in his mind the transatlantic term—had squeezed it into a corner, so that it did not at first catch the reader's notice. "Infusoria." Andy turned up "Infusoria." It was a hideously uncompromising word, as the code rendered it; the code makes a wonderful effort sometimes. "Infusoria" meant: "We expect you to act on this advice at once, and we cannot be responsible for expenditure beyond what is strictly necessary to wind up."

pg 175

Andy did not often smoke in his office in business hours, but he had a cigarette now.

"Well, that's pretty straight," he thought. The instructions were certainly free from ambiguity. "Made a failure of it!" The cigarette tended to resignation. "Needed a cleverer fellow than I am to make it go." This was his usual sobriety of judgment. "Rather glad to be out of it." That was the draught-horse's instinctive cry of joy at being released from a hopeless effort. They were right on the other side—it was not a "paying proposition." He was good at seeing facts; they did not offend him. So many people are offended at facts—really a useless touchiness.

"All right!" said Andy, flinging the end of the cigarette into the grate, and taking up that fateful code again.

"Passionately" met his need: "Will act on instructions received without delay and with all possible saving of expense."

"Yes," said Andy, his stylograph moving in mid-air. He turned over the pages again, seeking another word, thinking very hard whether he should send that other word when he found it.

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The word was "Interjection." It meant: "My personal movements uncertain. Will advise you of them at the earliest moment possible."

To cable "Interjection" would mean an admission of considerable import, both to his principals in Montreal and to himself. It would imply that he was thinking of cutting adrift. Andy was thinking terribly hard about it. It might cause his principals to consider that he was taking too much on himself. Andy was not a partner; he was only on a salary, with a small contingent profit from commissions. It seemed complimentary—and delusive—now to call the profit contingent; the salary was all he had in the world. Such an independently minded word as "Interjection" incurred a risk. Before he had done thinking about cutting adrift, he might find himself cut adrift. The principals were peremptory men. In view of his failure to make the London branch a "paying proposition," perhaps he was lucky in that he had not been cut adrift already. There was a code

word for that—"Seltzer." It meant, "We shall be able to dispense with your services on the — prox."

"Seltzer thirtieth" would have thrown—and might still throw—Andy on the mercy of the world. Turning up the code (if you are not thoroughly familiar with it) may be interesting work—"as exciting as any novel," as reviewers kindly say of books of travel.

pg 177

Andy had suddenly, and with some surprise, become aware how very much he wished not to go back to Montreal, pleasant city as it is. When he was puzzling about the Meriton shop, Canada had stood for freedom, scope, and opportunity. Why should it not stand for them still, just as well as, or better than, London? Canada and London had ranked together then, in sharp opposition to the narrow limits of his native town. Nobody could deny the scope and the opportunities of Canada. But Andy did not want to go back. He was profoundly apologetic to himself about the feeling; he would not have ventured to justify it; it was wrong. But, after his long exile, his native land had laid hold on him—England with her ripe rich sweetness, London baited with a thousand lures. He had no pluck, no grit, no go; so he said to himself. There were fortunes to be made over there—a mighty nation to help in building up. That was all true, but he did not want to go. The stylograph hung longingly over the cable form; it wanted to write "Interjection."

The fog had apparently been very persistent in the Irish Channel, for no mail came; the principals in Montreal seemed quite right about the London branch, for no business offered. At half-past twelve Andy determined to go out for lunch and a walk. By the time he got back the mail might have come—and he might have made up his mind whether or not to cable "Interjection."

pg 178

A man who has it in mind to risk his livelihood often decides that he may as well treat himself liberally at lunch or dinner. Monte Carlo is a terribly expensive place to stay at if you do not gamble; if you do, it costs nothing—at least, what it costs does not matter, which comes to the same thing. Andy decided that, having two hours off, he would go west for lunch. His thoughts were on the great restaurant by the river. If he were really leaving London in a week (obedient to "Infusoria"), it would be interesting to go there once again.

Entering the grill-room, on his left as he came in from the Strand (at the last moment the main restaurant had struck him as absurd for his chop), he was impressed by the air of habituality worn by his fellow-guests. What was humdrum to them was a treat to him, their routine his adventure. They knew the waiters, knew the maître d'hôtel, and inquired after the cook. They knew one another too, marking who was there to-day, who was an absentee. Andy ate his chop, with his mouth healthily hungry, with his eyes voracious of what passed about him.

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He sat near a glass screen some six or seven feet high, dividing the room in two. Suddenly from the other side of it came a voice:

"Hallo, is that you, Hayes? Come and have your coffee with us. Where have you been all this time?"

There they sat—and there they might have been sitting ever since Andy parted from them, so much at home they looked—Billy Foot, the Nun, and Miss Dutton. Another young man was with them, completing the party. He was plump, while Billy was thin—placid, while Billy always suggested a reserve of excitement; but he had a likeness to Billy all the same.

"Oh, I say, may I come?" cried Andy, boyishly loud; but the luck of meeting these friends again was too extraordinary. He trotted round the glass screen with his tumbler in his hand; he had not quite finished his lager beer.

"Chair and coffee for Mr. Hayes," said Billy Foot. "You remember him, girls? My brother, Hayes—Gilly, Mr. Hayes. How did you leave Harry?"

"How awfully funny I should meet you!" gasped Andy.

"It's not funny if you ever come here," observed Miss Dutton; "because we come here nearly every day—with somebody." She was more sardonic than ever.

pg 180

The Nun—she was not, by the way, a Nun any longer, but a Quaker girl ("All in the same line," her manager said, with a fine indifference to the smaller theological distinctions), and now sang of how, owing to her having to wear sombre garments (expressed by a charming dove-tinted costume that sent the stalls mad), she had lost her first and only love—the Nun smiled at Andy in a most friendly fashion.

"I'd quite forgotten you," she remarked, "but I'm glad to see you again. Let's see, you're—?"

"Harry Belfield's friend."

"Yes, you're Mr. Hayes. Oh, I remember you quite well. Been away since?"

"No, I've been here. I mean—at work, and so on."

"Oh, well!" sighed the Nun (Andy ventured to call her the Nun in his thoughts, though she had changed her persuasion). She seemed to express a gentle resignation to not being able to keep

track of people; she met so many, coming every day to the restaurant.

"I ask five, I want four, but with just the right fellow I'd take three," said Billy's brother Gilly, apparently continuing a conversation which seemed to interest nobody but himself; for the Nun was looking at neighbouring hats, Miss Dutton had relapsed into gloomy abstraction, and Billy was thoughtfully revolving a small quantity of old brandy round a very large glass. Gilly had an old brandy too, but his attitude towards it was one of studied neglect. His favourite vintage had given out the year before, so his life was rather desolate.

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"Harry's engaged," Andy volunteered to the Nun, glad to possess a remark of such commanding interest.

"To a girl?" asked the Nun, absently and without turning her face towards him.

"Well, of course!" said Andy. What else could one be engaged to?

"Everybody comes to it," said Billy Foot. "Take three, if you must, Gilly."

"At a push," said his brother sadly.

"I hate that hat on that woman," said the Nun with a sudden vehemence, nodding her head at a fat woman in a large purple erection. Hats moved the Nun perhaps more than anything else in the world.

"Rot, Doris," commented Miss Dutton. "It's what they're wearing."

"But they aren't all as fat as that," the Nun objected.

"Flourishing, Hayes?" asked Billy Foot.

pg 182

"Well, I rather think I've just lost my job," said Andy.

"If you're looking out for a really sound way of investing five thousand pounds—" Gilly began.

"Four to a gentleman," said Billy.

"Three to a friend," corrected the Nun.

"Oh, what the devil's the good of trying to talk business here?" cried Gilly in vexation. "Only a chance is a chance, you know."

Billy Foot saw that Andy was puzzled. "Gilly—my brother, you know—I suppose I introduced you?—has unfortunately come here with a problem on his mind. I didn't know he had one, or I wouldn't have asked him, because problems bore the girls."

"No, they don't. It interests me to see you trying to think." This, of course, from Miss Dutton. The Nun, now imbibing an iced green fluid through a straw, was sublimely abstracted.

"My brother," Billy resumed, with a glance of protest towards his interruptor, "has, for some reason or another, become a publisher. That's all right. Not being an author, I don't complain. Having done pretty badly—"

"The public's no good," said Gilly gloomily.

"He wants to drag in some unfortunate person to be his partner. I understand, Gilly, that, if really well recommended, your accepted partner can lose his time, and the rest of his money, for no more than three thousand pounds—paid down on the nail without discount?"

pg 183

"You've a charming way of recommending the project to Mr. Hayes' consideration," said Gilly, in reproachful resignation.

"To my consideration," Andy exclaimed, laughing. "What's it got to do with me?"

"It's a real chance," Gilly persisted. "And if you're out of a job, and happen to be able to lay your hands on five—"

"Three!" whispered Billy.

"—thousand pounds, you might do worse than look into it. Now, I must go," and with no more than a nod to serve as farewell to all the party he rose and sauntered slowly away. He had not touched his brandy; his brother reached over thoughtfully and appropriated it. "I may as well, as I'm going to pay for it," he remarked.

Suddenly Andy found himself telling the Nun all about his cable and his affairs. The other two listened; all three were very friendly and sympathetic; even Miss Dutton forbore to sneer. Andy expanded in the kindly atmosphere of interest. "I don't want to go back, you know," he said with a smile that appealed for understanding. "But I must, unless something turns up."

"Well, why not talk to Gilly?" the Nun suggested.

pg 184

"Yes, you go round and talk to Gilly," agreed Billy. "Rotting apart, he's got a nice little business, and one or two very good schemes on, but he wants a bit more capital, as well as somebody to help him. He doesn't look clever, but in five years he's built up—yes, a tidy little business. You wouldn't come to grief with Gilly."

"But I haven't got the money, or anything like it. I've got nothing."

The Nun and Billy exchanged glances. The Nun nodded to Billy, but he shook his head. Miss Dutton watched them for a moment, then she smiled scornfully.

"I don't mind saying it," she observed, and to Andy's astonishment she asked him, "What about your old friend the butcher?"

"How did you hear of that?"

"Harry Belfield was up one day last week lunching here, and—"

"We were awfully amused," the Nun interrupted, with her pretty rare gurgle. "If you'd done it, we were all coming down to buy chops and give you a splendid send-off. I rather wish you had." The imagined scene amused the Nun very much.

"Jack Rock? Oh, I couldn't possibly ask him, after refusing his offer!"

"What did you say his name was?" the Nun inquired.

pg 185

Andy repeated the name, and the Nun nodded, smiling still. Andy became portentously thoughtful.

"We have sown a seed!" said Billy Foot. "I'll drop a word to Gilly to keep the offer open. Now you must go, girls, because I've got some work to do in the world, though you never seem to believe it."

"Heavens, I must go too!" cried Andy, with a horrified look at his watch.

"All right, you go," said Miss Dutton. "We promised to meet a man here at half-past three and go motoring."

"Did we? I don't believe we did," objected the Nun. "I don't think I want to go."

"Then don't," said Miss Dutton. "I shall go anyhow."

"Well, I'll wait and see the car," the Nun conceded. She did not appear to have any curiosity about its owner. "You really must come and see me—and don't go back to Canada!" she called after Andy. Then, when she was alone with her friend, she said, "No, I shan't come motoring, Sally, I shall go home and write a letter. So much trouble is caused in this world by people being afraid to do the obvious thing. Now I'm never afraid to do the obvious thing."

"That's just what you said the night you found me—and took me home with you," said Miss Dutton. She spoke very low, and her voice was strangely soft.

pg 186

"It was the obvious thing to do, and I did it," the Nun pursued, shaking her head at Sally in mild rebuke of an uncalled-for touch of sentiment. "I shall do the obvious thing now. I shall write to Mr. Jack Rock."

"You'll get yourself into a row, meddling with other people's business."

"Oh no, I shan't," said the Nun serenely. "I shall insist on a personal interview before my action is condemned. I generally come out of personal interviews all right."

"Arts and tricks!" said Sally scornfully.

"Just an innocent and appealing manner," smiled the Nun. "At any rate, this very afternoon I write to Mr. Rock. He'll produce three thousand pounds, Gilly will get a good partner, Andy Hayes can stay in England, I shall feel I've done a sensible thing. All that just by a letter!" A thought struck her. "I may as well write it here." She called a waiter and asked for notepaper and the A B C railway guide. "Don't wait for me, Sally. This letter will take some time to write."

"Not going to take it down yourself, are you?" asked Sally, pointing to the A B C.

"Oh no. Messenger boy. With any luck, it'll get there before Andy Hayes does. Rather fun if Jack Rock plays up to me properly!"—and she allowed herself the second gurgle of the afternoon.

pg 187

Sally stood looking at her with an apparently unwilling smile. She loved her better than anybody in the world, and would have died for her at that or any other moment; but nothing of that sort was ever said between them. They were almost unsentimental enough to please Mark Wellgood himself. Only the Nun did like her little plans to be appreciated. Sally gave her all she wanted—a sharp little bark of a laugh in answer to the gurgle—before she walked away. The Nun settled to her task in demure serenity, seeming (yet not being) entirely unconscious of the extreme



slowness with which most of the young men passed her table as they went out.

Billy Foot had walked with Andy as far as the Temple and had reasoned with him. Yet Billy himself admitted that there was great difficulty in the case. Asked whether he himself would do what he advised, he was forced to admit that he would hesitate. Still he would not give up the idea; he would see Gilly about it; perhaps the payment could be "spread."

"It would have to be spread very thin before I could pay it," smiled Andy ruefully. He gave Billy Foot's hand a hearty squeeze when they parted. "It's so awfully good of you to be so interested—and of those nice girls too."

pg 188

"Well, old chap, if we can help a pal!" said Billy with a laugh. "Besides, it's good business for Gilly too."

Andy went back to Dowgate Hill and climbed up to his attic. The staff reported no callers in his absence; the baleful cable lay still in possession of the table. But Andy refused to be depressed. His lunch had done him good. Steady and sober as his mind was, yet he was a little infected by the gay confidence that had reigned among his company. They seemed all so sure that something would turn up, that what they wanted would get itself done somehow. Spoilt children of fate, the brothers Foot and the Nun! Things they wanted had come easily to them; they expected them to come easily to their friends. The Nun in particular appeared to treat fortune absolutely as a slave; she was not even grateful; it was all too much a matter of course that things should happen in the way she wanted. He did not appreciate yet the way in which the Nun assisted the course of events sometimes.

Well, his reply to the cable must go. He took up the form and read "Passionately." It was significant of his changed mood—of what the atmosphere of the lunch-party had done for him—that he hesitated hardly more than one minute before he added the possibly fateful "Interjection," and sent off the despatch before he had time again to waver.

pg 189

"If they choose to take offence—well, I can make a living somehow, I suppose."

Andy's confidence in himself was slowly but steadily ripening.

## Chapter X.

pg 190

### FRIENDS IN NEED.

Old Jack Rock was, in his own phrase, "fair tickled to death" at the whole thing. The messenger boy reached him soon after five, just as he was having his tea. It was not long before the boy was having tea too—such a tea as seldom came his way. Butter and jam together—why, jam on cake, if he liked—and cream in his tea! Something in that letter pleased the old gentleman uncommon, thought the boy, as he watched Jack chuckling over it, his forgotten bread-and-butter half-way between plate and mouth.

"Doris Flower! Well now, that's a pretty name," murmured Jack. "And I'll lay she's a pretty girl!" He asked the boy whether she was a pretty girl.

"'Er? Why, they're all mad about 'er," the boy told him. "She's out o' sight, she is!"

"Writes a pretty letter too," said Jack, and started to read it all afresh. It was, indeed, a persuasive letter:—

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"DEAR MR. ROCK,—I have heard so much that is nice about you from our friends Harry Belfield and your nephew (isn't he?) Mr. Hayes, that I feel quite sure you will not mind my writing to you. I know it is rather an unusual thing to do, but I don't mind doing unusual things when they're sensible, do you? Mr. Hayes was lunching with us to-day, and he told us that something had gone wrong with his business, and that he would have to go back to Canada. I'm sure you don't want him to go back to Canada any more than we do. We like him so much, and you must be very fond of him, aren't you? Well, by the most wonderful chance, Billy Foot's brother (you know Billy, don't you? He has been down to Meriton, I know) was at lunch too—Gilly Foot. Gilly has got a most tremendously good business as a publisher, and he wants a partner. Wasn't it lucky? Just as Mr. Hayes wants a new business, Gilly Foot wants a partner! It might have been arranged on purpose, mightn't it? And they took to one another directly. I'm sure Gilly will be delighted to take Mr. Hayes (That does sound stiff—I think I shall say 'Andy'), and Andy (!) would be delighted to join Gilly. There's only one thing—Gilly must have a partner with some money, and Andy says he hasn't got any. We knew about you and all you had wanted to do for him, so of course we said he must ask you to give it to him or lend it to him; but he said he couldn't possibly, as he had refused your previous offer. But I'm sure you don't feel like that about it, do you? I'm sure you would like to help him. And then we could keep him here instead of his going back to Canada; we should all be so pleased with that, and so would you, wouldn't you? Do please do it, dear Mr. Rock!

pg 192

"I wonder if you know who I am. Perhaps you've seen my picture in the papers? I'm generally done as a Nun. Have you? I wonder if you would ever care to hear me sing? If you would, *do* let me know when you can come, and I will send you a box. And you won't forget to come round and see me in my dressing-room afterwards, will you? It is so pleasant to see one's friends afterwards; and I'll sing, oh, ever so much better than usual for you!

"I told the boy to wait—just in case you wanted to send an answer. I'm very excited and anxious! It's three thousand pounds Gilly wants. It seems to me an awful lot, but I don't know much about publishing. Do forgive me, dear Mr. Rock, but I was sure you would like to know, and I don't believe Andy would have told you himself. Mind, when you come to town—don't forget!—I am, dear Mr. Rock, yours very sincerely,

pg 193

"DORIS FLOWER.

*P.S.*—Some day soon, when I'm out motoring, I may stop and see you—if you've been nice!"

Jack Rock's heart was very soft; his vanity was also tickled. "Excited and anxious, is she? Bless her! There'll be a rare talk in Meriton if she comes to see old Jack!" He chuckled. "Me go and sit in a box, and hear her sing! Asked to her dressing-room too!"

The novel picture of himself was altogether too much for Jack.

"As soon as you've done your tea, my lad, you can take an answer."

Jack's epistolary style was of a highly polite but rather unpractised order. He struggled between his punctilious recognition of his own station and the temptation of the Nun's friendliness—also (perhaps by consequence) between the third, second, and first grammatical persons:—

"Mr. John Rock presents his respectful compliments to Miss Doris Flower. Mr. Rock has the matter of which Miss Flower is good enough to write under his careful consideration. Mr. Rock begs to assure you that he will do his best to meet Miss Flower's wishes. There is nothing I would not do for Andy, and I am sure that the boy will prove himself deserving of Miss Flower's kind interest. When next visiting London, Mr. Rock will feel himself highly honoured by availing himself of Miss Flower's much-esteemed invitation. If Miss Flower should visit Meriton, he would be very proud to welcome you at his house, next door to the shop in High Street—anybody in Meriton knows where that is; and I beg to remain, dear madam, your most obedient servant to command,

JOHN ROCK."

pg 194

"You can take it," said Jack to the messenger boy. "And here's half a crown for yourself."

The messenger boy was a London boy; his professional belt was tight with tea; and half a crown for himself! He put on his cap and stood on the threshold. Escape was easy; he indulged his native humour.

"From this"—he exhibited the half-crown—"and your looks, gov'nor," he said, "I gather that she's accepted ye! My best wishes for yer 'appiness!"

"Damn the boy!" said Jack, charging for the door in an explosion of laughter. The boy was already half-way down the street. "Hope my letter was all right," Jack reflected, as he came back, baulked of his prey. "May stop and see me, may she! Bless her heart!"

pg 195

Jack Rock felt that he had the chance of his life. He also felt that he would like to obliterate what, in his humility, he now declared to have been a sad blunder—the offer of his butcher's shop. A man like Andy, a lad with friends like that—Mr. Harry Belfield, Mr. Foot, M.P., Mr. and Miss Wellgood, above all this dazzling Miss Doris Flower—to be the Meriton butcher! Perish the thought! Publishing was a gentleman's business. Aye, and his Andy should not go back to Canada. If he did, old Jack felt that the best part of his own life would be carried far away across the seas.

The thing should be done dramatically. "I'd like Andy to have a story to tell her!" It was not at all doubtful whom he meant by "her."

Nearly six—the bank was shut long ago. But George Croton was a friend as well as a bank manager; he would just have had tea. Jack crossed the street and dropped in.

"Why, of course I can, Jack," said Mr. Croton, wiping his bald head with a red handkerchief. "You've securities lodged with us that more than cover it. Draw your cheque. We won't wrong you over the interest till you adjust the account. Going to buy a Derby winner?"

"I ain't so sure I'm not goin' to enter one," said Jack. He wrote his cheque. "That'll be all right to-morrow morning?"

pg 196

"Unless our shutters are up, it will, Jack," Mr. Croton jestingly replied.

"Thank God I've been a careful man," thought old Jack. "One that knows a horse too! Her talkin' about 'Andy'!" The Nun continued to amuse and delight him immensely. Why, he'd seen her picture on the hoardings last time he went up to Tattersall's, to sell that bay filly! Lord, not to have thought of that! That was her—the Nun! He thought much more about Miss Flower than about Andy as he took his way to Andy's lodgings.

Andy was at home; he had been back from town nearly an hour. But his own concerns were quite out of his head. Harry Belfield had been waiting for him—actually waiting, Harry the Great!—and had hailed him with "I had to come and tell you all about it myself, old fellow!"

In Andy's great devotion to Harry there was mingled an element which seemed to himself absurd, but which held its place obstinately—dim and denied, yet always there. It was a sense of something compassionate, something protective, not diminishing his admiration but qualifying it; making him not only believe that all would, but also urgently pray that all might, go well with

pg 197

Harry, that Harry might have everything that he wished, possibly that Harry might wish the things that he ought to have, though Andy's conscious analysis of the feeling did not reach as far as this. He would not only set his hero on a pedestal, he would have the pedestal securely fenced round, barricaded against danger, ensured against bombs; even a screen against strong and sudden winds might be useful to the statue.

The statue, it now appeared, had taken all these precautions for itself. Vivien Wellgood was each and all of these things—fence, screen, and barricade. And many other things besides, such as an ideal, an incentive, an inspiration. It was among Harry's attractions that he was not in the least ashamed of his emotions or shy about them.

"With the girls one meets in town it's a bargain," said Harry. "With her—oh, I can talk to you, old man!—it really does seem a sort of sacrament."

"I know. I mean I can imagine."

"Not things a fellow can talk about to everybody," Harry pursued. "Too—well, sacred, you know. But when for absolutely the first time in your life you feel the real thing, you know the difference. The pater told me not to be in a hurry about it; but a thing like that's just the same now or a thousand years hence. It's there—and that's all about it!"

pg 198

Andy felt a little out of his depth. He had had one fancy himself, but it had been nothing like so wonderful as this. It was Harry's privilege to be able to feel things in that marvellous way. Andy was not equal even to commenting on them.

"When are you going to be married?" he asked, sticking to a matter-of-fact line of sympathy.

"Going to wait till October—rather a bore! But here it's nearly July, and I've got my tour of the Division fixed for September. After all, things aren't so bad as they might be. And when I'm through with the campaign—a honeymoon in Italy! Pretty good, Andy?"

"Sounds all right," laughed Andy. "I expect I shall have to send you my blessing from Montreal."

"From Montreal? What—you're not going back?"

"The business is a frost in London, Harry; and I've nothing else to look to."

"Lord, now, what a pity! Well, I'm sorry. We shall miss you, Andy. Still, it's a ripping fine country, isn't it? Mind you cable us congratulations!"

"I'm not quite certain about going yet," said Andy. He felt rather like being seen off by the train—very kindly.

"Oh, well, I hope you won't have to, old chap, I really do. But it'll be better than the shop! I say—I told Billy and the girls about that. They roared."

pg 199

"I know they did—I met them at lunch to-day."

"Had they heard about me?" Harry asked rather eagerly. "Or did you tell them? What did they say?"

"Oh—er—awfully pleased," said Andy, rather confused. It seemed strange to remember how very little had been said on the wonderful topic. Somehow they had wandered off to other things.

"I must give them all one more dinner," said Harry, smiling, "before I settle down."

"Foot's brother was there—Gilly Foot—and—"

"Did they ask what she was like?"

"I—I don't quite remember—everybody was talking. Gilly Foot—"

"I expect they were a bit surprised, weren't they?"

"Oh yes, they seemed surprised." Andy was really trying to remember. "Yes, they did."

"I don't think I've got the character of a marrying man," smiled Harry. "I hope you told them I meant business?" Harry rose to his feet with a laugh. "They used to rot a lot, you know."

Harry was not to be got off the engrossing subject of himself, his past, and his future; evidently he could not imagine that the lunch-party had kept off these subjects either. With a smile Andy made up his mind not to trouble him with the matter of Gilly Foot.

pg 200

"I'll walk back with you as far as Halton gates," he said.

"No, you won't, old chap," laughed Harry. "Vivien's been in the town and is going to call for me here, and I'm going to walk with her as far as Nutley gates—at least."

Voices came from outside. "Wish you good evenin', miss!"—and a very timid "Good evening, Mr.

Rock." Vivien and Jack! How was Vivien bearing the encounter?

"There she is!" cried Harry, and ran out of the house, Andy following.

"Ah, Jack, how are you? Why, you're looking like a two-year-old!"

Jack indeed looked radiant as he made bold to offer his congratulations. He gave Harry his hand and a hearty squeeze, then looked at Vivien tentatively. She blushed, pulled herself together, and offered Jack her hand. The feat accomplished, she glanced quickly at Andy, blushing yet more deeply. He knew what was in her mind, and nodded his head at her in applause. In Harry's cause she had touched a butcher.

"I like to see young folks happy. I like to see 'em get what they want, Mr. Harry."

pg 201

"You see before you one at least who has, Jack. I wonder if I may say two, Vivien? And I wish I could say three, Andy."

"Maybe you wouldn't be so far wrong, Mr. Harry," chuckled Jack. "But that's neither here nor there, and I mustn't be keepin' you and your young lady."

With blithe salutations the lovers went off. Andy watched them; they were good to see. He felt himself their friend—Vivien's as well as Harry's, for Vivien trusted him with her shy confidences. They were hard to leave—even as were the delights of London with its lunch-parties and the like.

"Going for a walk, Jack?"

"No, I want a talk with you, Andy." He led the way in, and sat down at the table. "I've been thinkin' a bit about you, Andy; so have some others, I reckon. Mr. Belfield—he speaks high of you—and there's others. There's no reason you shouldn't take your part with the best of 'em. Why, they feel that—they make you one of themselves. So you shall be. I can't make you a rich man, not as they reckon money, but I can help a bit."

"O Jack, you're always at it," Andy groaned affectionately.

The old fellow's eyes twinkled as he drew out a cheque and pushed it across the table.

pg 202

"Put that in your pocket, and go and talk to Mr. Foot's brother," he said.

Andy's start was almost a jump; old Jack's pent-up mirth broke out explosively.

"But this—this is supernatural!" cried Andy.

"Looks like it, don't it? How did I find out about that? Well, it shows, Andy, that it's no use you thinkin' of tryin' not to keep a certain promise you made to me—because I find you out!"

"Dear old Jack!" Andy was standing by him now, his hand on his shoulder. "I don't believe I could have kept the promise in this case. I think I should have gone back—since the thing's no go in London."

"Yes, you'd have gone back—just like your obstinate ways. But I found out. I've my correspondents."

"But there's been no time! Well, you are one too many for me, Jack!"

Jack's pride in his cunning was even greater than his delight in his benevolence. "Perhaps I've had a wireless telegram?" he suggested, wagging his head. "Or a carrier pigeon? Who knows?"

"But who was it told you?"

"You've got some friends I didn't know of, up there in London. Havin' your fling, are you, Andy? That's right. And very good taste you seem to have too." He nodded approvingly.

pg 203

"Oh, I give it up," said Andy. "You're a wizard, Jack."

"If you talk about a witch, you'll be a bit nearer the point, I reckon. Not meanin' me, I need hardly say! Well, I must let you into the secret." With enormous pride he produced Miss Doris Flower's letter. "Read that, my lad."

"The Nun!" cried Andy, as his eye fell on the signature. "Who'd have thought of that?"

He read the letter; he listened to Jack's enraptured story of how it had arrived. "And you're not goin' to shame her by refusin' the money now, are you?" asked cunning Jack. "If you do, you'll make her feel she's been meddlin'. Nice thing to make her feel that!"

Andy saw through this little device, but he only patted Jack's shoulder again, saying quietly, "I'll take the money, Jack." All the kindness made his heart very full—whether it came from old-time friends or these new friends from a new world who made his cause theirs with so ready a sympathy.

"You're launched now, lad—fair launched! And I know you'll float," said old Jack, grave at last, as he took his leave, his precious letter most carefully stowed away in his breast-pocket. It had been a great day for Jack, great for what he had done, great for the way in which his doing it had come about.

pg 204

Within less than twenty-four hours Montreal had been written to, Gilly Foot had been written to—and Andy was at the Nun's door.

She dwelt with Miss Dutton in a big block of flats near Sloane Street, very high up. Her sitting-room was small and cosy, presenting, however, one marked peculiarity. On two of the walls the paper was red, on the other two green. Seeing Andy's eyes attracted by this phenomenon, the Nun explained: "We quarrelled over the colour to such an extent that at last I lost my temper, and, when Sally was away for a day, had it done like this—to spite her. Now she won't let me alter it, because it's a perpetual warning to me not to lose my temper. But it does look a little queer, doesn't it?"

She had received him with her usual composure. "I knew you'd come, because I knew Mr. Jack Rock would do as I wanted, and I was sure he couldn't keep the letter to himself. Well, that's all right! It was only that the obvious thing wanted doing."

"But I don't see—well, I don't see why you should care."

She looked at him, a lurking laugh in her eye.

"Oh, you needn't suppose that it was life and death to me! It was rather fun, just on its own account. You'll like Gilly; he's a good sort, though he's rather greedy. Did you notice that? Billy's really my friend. I'm very fond of Billy. Are you ambitious? Billy's very ambitious."

pg 205

"No, I don't think I am."

The Nun lay back on a long chair; she was certainly wonderfully pretty as she smiled lazily at Andy.

"You look a size too large for the room," she remarked. "Yes, Billy's ambitious. He'd like to marry me, only he's ambitious. It doesn't make any difference to me, because I'm not in love with him; but I'm afraid it's an awfully uncomfortable state of affairs for poor Billy."

"Well, if he'd have no chance anyhow, couldn't you sort of let him know that?" Andy suggested, much amused at an innocent malice which marked her description of Billy's conflict of feeling.

"No use at all. I've tried. But he's quite sure he could persuade me. In fact I don't think he believes I should refuse if it came to the point. So there he is, always just pulling up on the brink! He can't like it, but he goes on. Oh, but tell me all about Harry Belfield. Now I've got you off" my mind, I'm awfully interested about that."

Andy was not very ready at description. She assisted him by a detailed and skilful cross-examination, directed to eliciting full information about Vivien Wellgood's appearance, habits, and character—how old she was, where she had been, what she had seen. When the picture of Vivien had thus emerged—of Vivien's youth and secluded life, how she had been nowhere and seen nothing, how she was timid and shy, innocent and trustful, above all, how she idolized Harry—the Nun considered it for a moment in silence.

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"Poor girl!" she said at last. Andy looked sharply at her. She smiled. "Oh yes, you worship Harry, don't you? Well, he's a very charming man. I was rather inclined to fall in love with him once myself. Luckily for me I didn't."

"I'm sure he'd have responded," Andy laughed.

"Yes, that's just it; he would have! When did you say they were going to be married?"

"October, I think Harry said."

"Four months! And he dotes on her?"

"I should think so. You should just hear him!"

"I daresay I shall. He always likes talking to one girl about how much he's in love with another."

The Nun's matter-of-fact way of speaking may have contributed to the effect, but in the end the effect of what she said was to give the impression that she regarded Harry Belfield's present passion as one of a series—far from the first, not at all likely to be the last. The inflection of tone with which she had exclaimed "Four months!" implied that it was a very long while to wait.

pg 207

"You'd understand it better if you saw them together," said Andy, eager, as always, to champion his friend.

"You're very enthusiastic about her, anyhow," smiled the Nun. "It almost sounds as if you were a little in love with her yourself."

"Such a thing never occurred to me." Then he laughed, for the Nun was laughing at him. "Well, she would make every man want to—well, sort of want to take care of her, you know."

"Well, there's no harm in your doing that—in moderation; and she may come to want it. Have you ever been in love yourself?"

"Yes, once," he confessed; "a long while ago, just before I left South Africa."

"Got over it?" she inquired anxiously.

"Yes, of course I have, long ago. It wasn't very fatal."

"Fickle creature!"

Andy gave one of his bursts of hearty laughter to hear himself thus described.

"I like you," she said; "and I'm glad you're going in with Gilly, because we shall often see you at lunch-time." pg 208

"Oh, but I can't afford to lunch at that place every day!"

"You'll have to—with Gilly; because lunch is the only time he ever gets ideas—he always says so—and unless he can tell somebody else he forgets them again, and they're lost beyond recall. He used to tell them to me, but I always forgot them too. Now he'll tell you; so you'll have to be at lunch, and put it down as office expenses."

Andy had risen to go. The Nun sat up. "I can only tell you once again how grateful I am for all your kindness," he said.

She gave him a whimsically humorous look. "It's really time somebody told you," she said; "and as I feel rather responsible for you, after my letter to Mr. Jack Rock, I expect I'm the proper person to do it. If you're not told, you may go about doing a lot of mischief without knowing anything about it. Prepare for a surprise. You're attractive! Yes, you are. You're attractive to women, moreover. People don't do things for you out of mere kindness, as they might be kind to a little boy in the street or to a lost dog. They do them because you're attractive, because it gives them pleasure to please you. That sort of thing will go on happening to you; very likely it'll help you a good deal." She nodded at him wisely, then broke suddenly into her gurgle. "Oh, dear me, you do look so much astonished, and if you only knew how red you've got!" pg 209

"Oh, I feel the redness all right; I know that's there," muttered Andy, whose confusion was indeed lamentable. "But when a— a person like you says that sort of thing to me—"

"A person, like me?" She lifted her brows. "What am I? I'm the fashion for three or four seasons—that's what I am. Nobody knows where I come from; nobody knows where I'm going to; and nobody cares. I don't know myself, and I'm not sure I care. My small opinion doesn't count for much. Only, in this case, it happens to be true."

"Where do you come from?" asked Andy, in a sudden impulse of great friendliness.

She looked him straight in the face. "Nobody knows. Nobody must ask."

"I've got no people belonging to me either. Even Jack Rock's no relation—or only a 'step.'"

Her eyes grew a little clouded. "You mustn't make me silly. Only we're friends now, aren't we? We don't do what we can for one another out of kindness, but for love?" She daintily blew him a kiss, and smiled again. "And because we're both very attractive—aren't we?" pg 210

"Oh, I'll accept the word if I'm promoted to share it with you. But I can't say I've got over the surprise yet."

"You've stopped blushing, anyhow. That's something. Good-bye. I shall see you at lunch, I expect, to-morrow."

Andy was very glad that she liked him, but he was glad of it because he liked her. His head was not turned by her assurance that he was attractive in a general sense: in the first place, because he remained distinctly sceptical as to the correctness of her opinion, sincere as it obviously was; in the second, because the matter did not appear to be one of much moment. No doubt folks sometimes did one a good turn for love's sake, but, taking the world broadly, a man had to make his way without relying on such help as that. That sort of help had given him a fair start now. He was not going to expect any more of it. It seemed to him that Jack Rock—or Jack and the Nun between them?—had already given him more than his share. It was curious to associate her with Jack Rock in the work; a queer freak of chance that she had come into it! But she had come into it—by chance and her own wilful fancy. Odd her share in it certainly was, but it was not unpleasant to him. He felt that he had gained a friend, as well as an opening in Gilly Foot's publishing house. pg 211

"But I wish," he found himself reflecting as he travelled back in the Underground, "that she understood Harry better."

Here he fell into an error unusual with him; he overrated his own judgment, led thereto by old love and admiration. The Nun had clear eyes; she had seen much of Harry Belfield, and no small amount of life. She had had to dodge many dangers. She knew what she was talking about. In all the side of things she knew so well, Andy, with his one attachment before he left South Africa long ago, was an innocent. Perhaps it was some dim consciousness of this, some half-realized feeling that he was on strange ground where she was on familiar, which made him find it difficult to get what she had said or hinted out of his head. It was apt to come back to him when he saw Vivien Wellgood; an unlooked-for association in his mind of people who seemed far remote from one another. Thus the Nun had come into the old circle of his thoughts; henceforward she too belonged, in a way, to the world of Meriton.

## Chapter XI.

pg 212

### THE SHAWL BY THE WINDOW.

Vivien and Isobel were alone at Nutley. It had been Wellgood's custom to go every summer to Norway by himself, leaving his daughter at school, to the care of her governess, or, for the last year or two, of her companion. He saw no reason against following his practice this year; indeed he was glad to go. The interval before the wedding dragged for him, as perhaps it did for others. He had carried matters with Isobel as far as he well could, unless he meant to carry them to the end—and it was not his intention to do that just yet. A last bachelor excursion—he told himself confidently that it was to be his last—had its attraction. Early in July he packed his portmanteau and went, leaving instructions with Isobel that her chaperonage was to be vigilant and strict. "Err on the safe side," he said. "No harm in that."

"I shall bore them very much," Isobel suggested.

"That's what you're here for." He added, with his hard confident smile, "Later on we'll try to give you a change from it."

pg 213

She knew well what he meant, and was glad to see the last of him for a while; nay, in her heart would have been glad to see the last of him for ever. She clung to what his words and acts promised, from no affection for him, but because it saved her from the common fate which her pride despised—being dismissed, turned off, now that she was to become superfluous. She had been in effect Vivien's governess, her schoolmistress, invested with power and authority. She hated to step down; it was open to her to step up. (A case not unlike Andy's.) Here was the secret which maintained her pride. In the strength of it she still ruled her charge with no lessening of prestige. It was no more in Vivien's nature than in her position to wonder at that; her eyes were set on a near sure liberty. Temporary restraint, though it might be irksome, seemed no more than a natural passing incident. Harry noticed and was amused. He thought that Wellgood must have said a word to Isobel; hinted perhaps that Vivien was wax in her lover's hands, and that her lover was impetuous. That Wellgood, or Isobel herself, or anybody else, should harbour that idea did not displease Harry Belfield; not to be able to resist him would be a venial sin, even in Vivien.

pg 214

It was an empty season in the little circle of Meriton society. Harry's father and mother were away, gone to Switzerland. Andy came down for week-ends generally; all the working days his nose was close to the grindstone in the office of Messrs. Gilbert Foot and Co. He was learning the business, delighting in his new activity. Harry would not have been in Meriton either, had he not been in love in Meriton. As it was, he had his early ride, then read his books, then went over to Nutley for lunch, and spent all the rest of the day there. Often the curate would come in and make a four at tennis, but he did not stay to dinner. Almost every evening the three were alone, in the house or on the terrace by the water. One night in the week Harry might be in town, one night perhaps he would bring Andy. Four or five nights those three would be together; and the question for Isobel was how often, for how long, how completely she was to leave the engaged couple to themselves. To put it more brutally—how much of a bore was she to make herself?

To be a spy, a hindrance, a clog, to know that joy waited on the closing of the door behind her back, to listen to allusions half-intelligible, to turn a blind ear to words too tender, not to notice a furtive caress, to play the dragon of convention, the old-maid duenna—that was her function in Vivien's eyes. And the same in Harry's? Oh yes! the same in Harry Belfield's handsome, mischievous, deriding eyes! He laughed at her for what she did—for what she did in the discharge of her duty, earning her bread-and-butter. Earning more than he thought, though! Because of the derision in Harry's eyes, again she would not let Wellgood go. Vivien should awake to realize that she was more than a chaperon, tiresome for the moment, soon to be dismissed; Harry should understand that to one man she was no old-maid duenna, but the woman he wanted for wife. While she played chaperon at Nutley she wrote letters to Wellgood—letters keeping his passion alive, playing with his confidence, transparently feigning to ignore, hardly pretending to deny. They were letters a lover successful in the end would laugh at. If in the issue the man found himself jockeyed, they would furnish matter for fury as a great deceit.

pg 215

Harry Belfield was still looking forward to his marriage with ardour; it would not be fair even to say that he was getting tired of his engagement. But he would have been wise to imitate Wellgood—take a last bachelor holiday, and so come back again hungry for Vivien's society. Much as he liked the fare, he could not be said to hunger for it now, it came to him so easily and

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so constantly. The absence of his parents, the emptiness of the town, his own want of anything particular to do, prevented even the small hindrances and interruptions that might have whetted appetite by thwarting or delaying its satisfaction. Love-making became the business of his days, when it ought to have been the diversion. Harry must always have a diversion—by preference one with something of audacity, venture, or breaking of bounds in it. His relations with Vivien, legitimate though romantic, secure yet delightful, did not satisfy this requirement. His career might have served, and would serve in the future (so it was to be hoped), but the career was at a temporary halt till the autumn campaign began. He took the diversion which lay nearest to hand; that also was his way. Isobel Vintry possessed attractions; she had a temper too, as he knew very well. He found his amusement in teasing, chaffing, and challenging her, in forcing her to play duenna more and more conspicuously, and in laughing at her when she did it; in letting his handsome eyes rest on her in admiration for a second before he hastily turned them back to a renewed contemplation of their proper shrine; in seeming half-vexed when she left him alone with Vivien, not altogether sorry when she came back. He was up to a dozen such tricks; they were his diversion; they flavoured the sweetness of his love-making with the spice of mischief.

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He saw that Isobel felt, that she understood. Vivien noticed nothing, understood nothing. There was a secret set up between Isobel and himself; Vivien was a stranger to it. Harry enlarged his interests! His relations with Vivien were delightful, with Isobel they had a piquant flavour. Well, was not this a more agreeable state of things than that Isobel should be simply a bore to him, and he simply a bore to Isobel? The fact of being an engaged man did not reconcile Harry Belfield to being simply a bore to a handsome woman.

Among Wellgood's orders there was one that Vivien should go to bed at ten o'clock sharp, and Harry depart at the same hour. Wherever they were, in house or garden, the lovers had to be found and parted—Vivien ordered upstairs, Harry sent about his business. Isobel's duty was to enforce this rule. Harry found a handle in it; his malice laid hold of it.

"Here comes the strict governess!" he cried. Or, "Here's nurse! Bedtime! Won't you really let us have ten minutes more? I believe you sit with your watch in your hand."

Vivien rebuked him. "It's not poor Isobel's fault, Harry. She's got to."

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"No, she likes doing it. She's a born martinet! She positively loves to separate us. You've no sympathy with the soft emotions, Miss Vintry. You're just a born dragon."

"Please come, Vivien," Isobel said, flushing a little. "It's not my fault, you know."

"Do you never break rules, Miss Vintry? It's what they're made for, you know."

"We've not been taught to think that in this house, have we, Vivien?"

"No, indeed," said Vivien with marked emphasis.

Harry laughed. "A pattern child and a pattern governess! Well, we must kiss good-night. You and I, I mean, of course, Vivien. And I'm sent home too, as usual?"

"You don't want to stay here alone, do you?" asked Isobel.

"Well, no, that wouldn't be very lively." His eyes rested on her a moment, possibly—just possibly—hinting that, though Vivien left him, yet he need not be alone.

One evening, a very fine one—when it seemed more absurd than usual to be ordered to bed or to be sent home so early—Harry chaffed Isobel in this fashion, yet with a touch of real contempt. He did feel a genuine contempt for people who kept rules just because they were rules. Vivien again interceded. "Isobel can't help it, Harry. It's father's orders."

pg 219

"Surely some discretion is left to the trusty guardian?"

"It's no pleasure to me to be a nuisance, I assure you," said Isobel rather hotly. "Please come in, Vivien; it's well past ten o'clock."

Vivien rose directly.

"You've hurt Isobel, I think," she whispered to Harry. "Say something kind to her. Good-night, dear Harry!"

She ran off, ahead of Isobel, who was about to follow, with no word to Harry.

"Oh, wait a minute, please, Miss Vintry! I say, you know, I was only joking. Of course I know it's not your fault. I'm awfully sorry if I sounded rude. I thought you wouldn't mind a bit of chaff."

She stood looking at him with a hostile air.

"Why does it amuse you?" she asked.

The square question puzzled Harry, but he was apt at an encounter. He found a good answer. "I suppose because what you do—what you have to do—seems somehow so incongruous, coming



from you. I won't do it again, if you don't like it. Please forgive me—and walk with me to the gate to prove it. There's no rule against that!"

For half a minute she stood, still looking at him. The moonlight was amply bright enough to let them see one another's faces.

pg 220

"Very well," she said. "Come along."

Harry followed her with a pleasant feeling of curiosity. It was some little while before she spoke again. They had already reached the drive.

"Why do you say that it's incongruous, coming from me?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that without being impertinent again," laughed Harry.

She turned to him with a slight smile. "Risk that!"

It was many days since he had been alone with her—so devoted had he been to Vivien. Now again he felt her power; again he did not know whether she put it forth consciously.

"Well, then, you playing sheep-dog when you ought to be—" He broke off, leaving his eyes to finish for him.

"So your teasing is to be considered as a compliment?"

"I'll go on with it, if you'll take it like that."

"Does Vivien take it like that, do you think?"

"I don't believe she thinks anything about it—one way or the other. She's partial to my small efforts to be amusing, that's all."

"Well, if it's a compliment, I don't want any more of it. I think you'd better, under the circumstances, keep all your compliments for Vivien—till you're married, at all events!"

pg 221

Harry lifted his brows.

"Rules! Oh, those rules!" he said with mock ruefulness.

"Is there any good in breaking them—for nothing?"

He turned quickly towards her. She was smiling at him. "For nothing?"

"Yes. Here we are at the gate. Good-night, Mr. Harry."

"What do you mean by—?"

"I really can't stay any longer." She was doing the mockery now; his eagerness had given her the advantage. "You can think over my meaning—if you like. Good-night!"

Harry said good-night. When he had gone fifty yards he looked back. She was still there, holding the gate half open with her hand, looking along the road. After him? As he went on, his thoughts were not all of Vivien. Isobel Vintry was a puzzling girl!

The next evening he brought Vivien into the drawing-room punctually at ten.

"We're good children to-night!" he said gaily. "We've even said good-night to one another already, and Vivien's ready to run up to bed."

"There, Isobel, aren't we good?" cried Vivien, with her good-night kiss to Isobel.

pg 222

"Any reward?" asked Harry, as the door closed behind his *fiancée*.

"What do you ask?"

"A walk to the gate. And—perhaps—an explanation."

"Certainly no explanation. I don't mind five minutes' walk to the gate."

This time very little was said on the way to the gate. A constraint seemed to fall on both of them. The night felt very silent, very still; the lake stretched silent and still too, mysteriously tranquil.

At last Harry spoke. "You've forgiven me—quite?"

"Oh yes. Naturally you didn't think how—how it seemed to me. It isn't always easy to—" She paused for a moment, looking over the water. "But it's my place in life—for the present, at all events."

"It won't be for long. It can't be." He laughed. "But I must take care—compliments barred!"

"From you to me—yes."

Again her words—or the way she said them—stirred him to an eager curiosity. She half said things, or said things with half-meanings. Was that art or accident? She did not say "from an engaged man to his *fiancée's* companion," but "from you to me." Was the concrete—the personal—form significant?

pg 223

No more passed, save only, at the gate, "Good-night." But with the word she gave him her hand and smiled at him—and ever so slightly shook her head.

The next day, and the next, and the next, she left Vivien and him entirely to themselves, save when meals forced her to appear; and on none of the three nights would she walk with him to the gate, though he asked twice in words and the third time with his eyes. Was that what the little shake of her head had meant? But the two walks had left their mark. Harry chaffed and teased no more.

Vivien praised his forbearance, adding, "I really think you hurt her feelings a little, Harry. But it was being rather absurdly touchy, wasn't it?"

"She seems to be sensitive about her position."

Vivien made a little grimace. She was thinking that Isobel's position in the house had been at least as pleasant as her own—till Harry came to woo.

"Oh, confound this political business!" Harry suddenly broke out. "But for that we could get married in the middle of August—as soon as your father and my people are back. I hate this waiting till October, don't you? Now you know you do, Vivien!"

She put her hand on his and pressed it gently. "Yes, but it's pleasant as it is. I'm not so very impatient—so long as I see you every day."

pg 224

But Harry was impatient now, and rather restless. The days had ceased to glide by so easily, almost imperceptibly, in the company of his lover. There was a feeling in him which did not make for peace—a recrudescence of those impulses of old days which his engagement was utterly to have banished. Marriage was invoked to banish them utterly now. The sooner marriage came, the better! Harry was ardent in his love-making that afternoon, and Vivien in a heaven of delight. If there was no chaff, there was no appeal to Isobel for a walk to the gate either.

"I wish she wasn't there," he said to himself as he walked down, alone, to the gate at a punctual ten o'clock. Somehow his delight in his love for Vivien, and in hers for him, was being marred. Ever so little, ever so faintly, yet still a little, his romance was turning to duty. A delightful duty, of course, one in which his whole heart was engaged, but still no longer just the one thing—the spontaneous voluntary thing—which filled his life. It had now an opposite. Besides all else that it was, it had also—even now, even before that marriage so slow in coming—taken on the aspect of the right thing. In the remote corners of his mind—banished to those—hovered the shadowy image of its opposite. Quite impossible that the image should put on bones and flesh—should take life! Yes, Harry was sure of that. But even its phantom presence was disturbing.

pg 225

"I thought I'd got rid of all that!" Some such protest, yet even vaguer and less formulated, stirred in his thoughts. He conceived that he had become superior to temptation. Had he? For he was objecting to being tempted. Who tempted him? Did she—or only he himself, the man he was? The question hung doubtful, and thereby pressed him the closer. He flattered himself that he knew women. What else had he to show for a good deal of time—to say nothing of wear and tear of the emotions? Here was a woman whose meaning, whose feeling towards himself, he did not know.

Andy Hayes was free the next afternoon—his half-holiday. Harry picked him up at his lodgings and carried him with him to Nutley. Harry was glad to have him, glad to hear all about Gilbert Foot and Co., even more glad to see his own position through Andy's eyes. Andy's vision was always so normal, so sane, so simple; his assumptions were always so right. A man really had only to live up to Andy's assumptions to be perfectly right. He assumed that a man was honest, straight, single-minded—unreservedly and exclusively in love with the girl he was going to marry. Why, of course a man was! Or why marry her? Even foolishly in love with her? Rather spoonily, as some might think? Andy, perhaps, went so far as to assume that. Well, it was a most healthy assumption—eminently right on the practical side; primitive perhaps, but tremendously right.

pg 226

"I'll take Miss Vintry off your hands. Don't be afraid about that!" laughed Andy.

"I don't know that you'll be allowed to. You're no end of a favourite of Vivien's. She often talks about you. In fact I think I'm a bit jealous, Andy!"

Andy's presence seemed to restore his balance, which had seemed shaken—even if very slightly. He found himself again dwelling on the charms of Vivien, recalling her pretty ways and the shy touches of humour that sometimes ornamented her timidity.

"I asked her the other day—I was playing the fool, you know—what she would do if I forsook her. What do think she said?"

Andy was prepared for anything brilliant, but, naturally, unable to suggest it.

"She said, 'Drown myself in the lake, Harry—or else send for Andy Hayes.'"

"Did she say that?" cried Andy, hugely delighted, blushing as red as he had when the Nun told him that he was attractive. pg 227

If Andy's simplicity and ready enthusiasm were congenial to some minds and some moods, to others they could be very exasperating. To have it assumed that you are feeling just what you ought to feel—or even rather more than could in strictness be expected from you—may be a strain on your patience. Harry had welcomed in Andy an assumption of this order; at the moment it helped him. Isobel gave a similar assumption about her feelings a much less hearty welcome. While Harry and Vivien took a stroll by themselves after lunch, Andy sat by her and was enthusiastic about them; he had forgotten the Nun's unjust hints.

Isobel chafed. "Oh, yes, it's all very ideal, I daresay, Mr. Hayes. Let's hope it'll last! But Mr. Harry's been in love before, hasn't he?"

"Most people have had a fancy or two." (Even he himself had indulged in one.) "This is quite different to him, I know. And how could anybody help being fond of her?"

"At any rate she's pretty free from the dangers of competition down here." She looked at Andy with a curious smile.

He laughed heartily. "Yes, that's all right, anyhow! Not that it would make any difference, I'm sure." pg 228

"If it were only to show this simpleton—" The angry thought was in her heart. But there was more. Harry's devotion was seeming very whole-hearted that day. Had she lost her power to disturb it? Was Andy in the end right in leaving her utterly out of consideration? Every day now and every hour it hurt her more to see Harry's handsome head ever bowed to Vivien, his eyes asking her love and receiving the loving answer. A wave of jealousy and of defiance swept over her. Andy need not know—she could afford to leave him in his folly. Vivien must not know—that would be too inconvenient. But Harry himself—was he quite to forget those two walks to the gate? She burned to use her power. A letter from Wellgood had reached her that morning; it was not a proposal of marriage, but by his talk of future plans—of what was to happen after Vivien left them—it assumed that she was still to be at Nutley. The implication was definite; matters only awaited his return.

"I haven't had a single word with you—by ourselves—all day," said Vivien to Andy after dinner. "You'll walk with me, won't you?"

"For my part I don't think I want to walk at all," said Harry. "It's rather chilly. Will you keep me company indoors, and forgive my cigar, Miss Vintry?" pg 229

Isobel assented rather coldly, but her heart beat quicker. Now that the chance came—by no contrivance of hers and unexpectedly—she was suddenly afraid of it, and afraid of what seemed a sudden revelation of the strength of her feeling for Harry. She had meant to play with him, to show him that, if she was to be left out of the reckoning, it was by her own choice; to make him see her power fully for once before she hid it for ever. Could she carry out her dangerous programme? Harry had been at his gayest that night, just in the mood which had carried him to most of his conquests—gaily daring, skirting topics of gallantry with defiant ease, provoking, yet never offending. If his eyes spoke true, he was in the mood still.

"Only a week more!" he said. "Then papa-in-law comes back, and I go electioneering. Well, I suppose we've had enough of what they call dalliance." He sank into an armchair by the fireplace, sighing in pleasant indolence, lolling gracefully.

The long windows were open to the terrace; the evening air came in cool and sweet. She looked out on the terrace; Vivien and Andy had wandered away; they were not in sight. Vivien's wrap lay on a chair close to the window.

"Vivien ought to have taken her wrap," said Isobel absently, as she came back and stood by the mantelpiece opposite Harry. Her cheeks were a little flushed and her eyes bright to-night; she responded to Harry's gaiety, his mood acted on hers. pg 230

"What are you going to do after we're—after the break-up here?" he asked suddenly.

She smiled down at him, pausing a moment before she answered. "You seem quite sure that there will be a complete break-up," she said.

He looked hard at her; she smiled steadily. "Well, I know that Vivien won't be here," he said.

"Oh, I know that much too, Mr. Harry. But I suppose her father will."

"I suppose that too. Which leaves only one of the party unaccounted for."

"Yes, only one of us unaccounted for."

"One that may be Miss Wellgood's companion, but could hardly be Mr. Wellgood's. He can scarcely claim the privileges of old age yet."

"You think I ought to be looking out for another situation? But supposing—merely supposing—Mr. Wellgood didn't agree?"

Harry flung his cigar into the grate. "Do you mean—?" he said slowly. She gave a little laugh. He laughed too, rather uneasily. "I say, you can't mean—?"

pg 231

"Can't I? Well, I only said 'supposing.' And I think you chaffed me about it yourself once. You forget what you say to women, Mr. Harry."

"Should you like it?"

"Beggars mustn't be choosers. We can't all be as lucky as Vivien!"

"Was I serious? No—I mean—are you? Wellgood!"

"Why shouldn't I be? Or why shouldn't Mr. Wellgood? It seems absurd?"

"Not in Wellgood, anyhow."

"Beggars mustn't be choosers."

"You a beggar! Why, you're—"

"What am I?"

"Shall I break the rules?"

She gave him a long look before answering. "No, don't." Her voice shook a little, her composure was less perfect.

Harry was no novice; the break in the voice did not escape him. He marked it with a thrill of triumph; it told him that she was not merely playing with him; he was holding his own, he had his power. The fight was equal. He rose to his feet and stood facing her, both of them by the mantelpiece.

"I don't want you to say anything about this to Vivien, because it's not definite yet. If the opportunity were offered to me, don't you think I should be wise to accept?"

pg 232

"Are you in love with him?" He looked in her eyes. "No, you can't be!"

"Your standard of romance is so high. I like him—and perhaps I don't like looking out for another situation." Her tone was lighter; she seemed mistress of herself again. But Harry had not forgotten the break in her voice.

"Have you considered that this arrangement—"

"Which we have supposed—"

"Would make you my mother-in-law?"

"Well, your stepmother-in-law. That doesn't sound quite so oppressive, I hope?"

"They both sound to me considerably absurd."

"I really can't see why they should."

Their eyes met in confidence, mirthful and defiant. They fought their duel now, forgetful of everybody except themselves. His old spirit had seized on Harry; it carried him away. She gave herself up to the delight of her triumph and to the pleasure that his challenge gave her. Out of sight, out of mind, were Vivien and Andy.

"But relationship has its consolations, its privileges," said Harry, leaning towards her, his face alight with mischievous merriment. He offered her his hand. "At all events, accept my congratulations."

pg 233

She gave him her hand. "You're premature, both with congratulations and with relationship."

"Oh, I'm always in a hurry about things," laughed Harry, holding her hand. He leant closer yet; his face was very near hers now—his comely face with its laughing luring eyes. She did not retreat. Harry saw in her eyes, in her flushed cheeks and quickened breath, in her motionlessness, the permission that he sought. Bending, he kissed her cheek.

She gave a little laugh, triumphant, yet deprecatory and nervous. Her face was all aflame. Harry's gaze was on her; slowly he released her hand. She stood an instant longer, then, with a shrug of her shoulders, walked across the room towards the windows. Harry stood watching her, exultant and merry still.

Suddenly she came to a stand. She spoke without looking round. "Vivien's shawl was on that chair."

The words hardly reached his preoccupied brain. "What? Whose shawl?"

She turned round slowly. "Vivien's shawl was on that chair, and it's gone," she said.

Harry darted past her to the window, and looked out. He came back to her on tiptoe and whispered, "Andy! He's about two-thirds of the way across the terrace with the thing now."

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"He must have come in just a moment ago," she whispered in return.

Harry nodded. "Yes—just a moment ago. I wonder—!" He pursed up his lips, but still there was a laughing devil in his eye. "Lucky she didn't come for it herself!" he said. "But—well, I wonder!"

She laid her finger on her lips. They heard steps approaching, and Vivien's merry voice. Harry made a queer, half-puzzled, half-amused grimace. Isobel walked quickly on to the terrace. Inside the light fell too mercilessly on her cheeks; she would meet them beneath the friendly cover of the night.

## Chapter XII.

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### CONCERNING A STOLEN KISS.

A stolen kiss may mean very different things—almost nothing (not quite nothing, or why steal it?), something yet not too much, or well-nigh everything. The two parties need not give it the same value; a witness of it is not, of necessity, bound by the valuation of either of them. It may be merely a jest, of such taste as charity can allow in the circumstances; it may be the crown and end of a slight and passing flirtation; it may be the first visible mark of a passion destined to grow to fierce intensity. Or it may seem utterly evasive in its significance at the moment, as it were indecipherable and imponderable, waiting to receive from the future its meaning and its weight.

The last man to find his way through a maze of emotional analysis was Andy Hayes; his mind held no thread of experience whereby to track the path, his temperament no instinct to divine it. He could not assign a value—or values—to the incident of which chance had made him a witness; what Harry's impulse, Isobel's obvious acceptance of it, the intensity and absorption that marked the bearing of the two in the brief moment in which he saw them as he lifted Vivien's shawl, stood looking for a flash of time, and quickly turned away—what these things meant or amounted to he could not tell. But there was no uncertainty about his feelings; he was filled with deep distaste. He was not a man of impracticable ideals—his mind walked always in the mean—but he was naturally averse from intrigue, from underhand doings, from the playing of double parts. They were traitors in this thing; let it mean the least it could, even to mere levity or unbecoming jocularity (their faces rose in his mind to contradict this view even as he put it), still they were so far traitors. The first brunt of his censure fell on Isobel, but his allegiance to Harry was also so sorely shaken that it seemed as though it could never be the same again. The engagement had been to Andy a sacrosanct thing; it was now sacrilegiously defaced by the hands of the two most bound to guard it. "Very low-down!" was Andy's humble phrase of condemnation—at least very low-down; how much more he knew not but that in the best view of the case. At the moment his heart had gone out to Vivien in a great pang of compassion; it seemed such a shame to tamper with, even if not actually to betray, a trust like hers. His face, like Isobel's, had been red—but red with anger—under the cover of the night. He was echoing the Nun's "Poor girl!" which in loyalty to his friend he had before resented.

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His first impulse had been to shield Vivien from any suspicion; it taught him a new cunning, an hypocrisy not his own. If Isobel delayed their return to the brightly lighted room, he did not hurry it—let all the faces have time to recover! But his voice was calm and unmoved; for him he was even talkative and exuberant. When they went in, he met Harry with an unembarrassed air. Relief rose in Isobel; yet Harry doubted. So far as Harry could reason, he must have all but seen, probably had actually seen. And in one thing there was significance. He went on devoting himself to Vivien; he did not efface himself in Harry's favour, as his wont was. He seemed to make his presence a fence round her, forbidding her lover's approach. Harry, now talking trifles to Isobel, watched him keenly, hardly doubting, hardly venturing to hope.

pg 237

"Till lunch to-morrow, Harry," said Vivien gaily, when the time for good-night came. "You'll come too, won't you, Mr. Hayes?"

"Thanks awfully, but I'm off for a big tramp."

pg 238

"To dinner then?" asked Isobel very graciously.

"Thanks awfully, but I—I really must sup with old Jack."

The quickest glance ran from Harry to Isobel.

What was to be done? Take the chance—the bare chance—that he had not seen anything, or not seen all? Or confess the indiscretion and plead its triviality—with a vow of penitence, serious if

Andy must be serious over such a trifle, light if he proved man of the world enough to join in laughing it off? No, Harry would take the chance, poor as it was. Even if Andy had seen, how could he interfere? To confess, however lightly, would be to give him a standing in the case, a right to put his oar in. It would be silly to do that; as matters stood now, his title could be denied if he sought to meddle. He knew Andy well enough to be sure that he would do nothing against him without fair warning. If he meant to tell tales to Vivien or to Wellgood, he would warn Harry first. Time enough to wrestle with him then! Meanwhile they—he was coupling Isobel with himself—would stand on the defensive; nothing should be admitted, everything should be ignored.

So much for Andy! He was assessed—a possible danger, a certain cause for vigilance, also, it must be confessed, rather an uncomfortable presence, an embarrassing witness of his friend's orthodox love-making, as he had been an unwilling one of his heterodox. Meanwhile Harry's tact was equal to the walk back to Meriton, Andy proving inclined to silence but not unfriendly or morose, still less actively aggressive or reproachful. And he would not be at Meriton to-morrow. The word could be passed to Isobel—be careful but say nothing! Very careful in Andy's presence—but no admissions to be made!

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Aye, so much for Andy! But besides the witness there are the parties. Besides the person who catches you kissing, there is the person you kiss. There is also you, who kiss. All questions of value are not decided by the impression you chance to make on the witness. The bystander may see most of the game; the players settle the stakes.

"Perverse!" was Harry's verdict on the whole affair, given from his own point of view; not only perverse that he should have been caught—if he had been—but no less perverse that he should have done the thing, that he should have wanted to do it, and that he should feel as he now did about it. Perhaps the last element was really the most perverse of all, because it set up in his mind an opposition to what was plainly the only course open to him from Isobel's point of view. (Here the question of the third value came in.) That was surely open and avowed penitence—a sincere apology, as serious or as light as was demanded or would be accepted. She could not pretend that she felt outraged. In truth they had shared in the indiscretion and been partners in the peccadillo. An apology not too abject, a hint at the temptation, gracefully put, to serve for excuse, a return to the safe ground of friendship—and a total oblivion of the incident! Or, if they must think of it at all, it would be without words—with a smile, maybe, in a few days' time; that is how we feel about some not serious, by no means unpleasant, little scrape that is well over. Harry had been in a good many such—perverse but not fatal, annoying at the time, not necessarily things on which the memory dwelt with pain in after days; far from it sometimes, in fact.

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That was the right thing to do, and the right way to regard the episode. But Harry was conscious of a complication—in the circumstances and in his own feelings. Owing to his engagement with Vivien he must go on frequenting Isobel's society; owing to the memory of his kiss the necessity was not distasteful. Well, these little complications must be unravelled; the first difficulty faced, the second ignored or overcome. He arrived at so clear, sound, and prudent a resolution thus to minimise the effects of his indiscretion that he felt almost more virtuous than if he had been discreet.

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So the parties, as well as the witness, were assessed. But who had put into his hand the standard whereby to assess Isobel? She might measure by another rule.

The confession—and absolution—thus virtuously and comfortably planned did not take place the next day, for the simple reason that Miss Vintry afforded no opportunity for them; she was ill and invisible. On the following day she was on a sofa. Immediately on his appearance, Harry was sent home again, Vivien declaring that she must be in unremitting attendance on her friend. The third day matters seemed back on their usual footing; but still he got no private word with Isobel. Once or twice he caught her looking at him in what seemed a thoughtful way; when observed, she averted her glance, but without embarrassment. Perhaps this avoidance of all chance of private talk—of all possibility of referring to the incident—was her way of treating it; perhaps she meant to dispense with apology and go straight to oblivion. If that were her intention, she misjudged Harry's feelings. He felt baulked of his scheme of confession and absolution—baulked and tantalized. He felt almost insulted—did she not think him gentleman enough to apologise? He felt curious—did she not feel the desire for an apology herself? He felt amazed—had she no anxiety about Andy? The net result was that he could think of little else than of her and of the incident. And under these circumstances he had to carry on his orthodox love-making! The way of transgressors is said to be hard; at moments Harry felt his worse than that; it had a tendency to become ridiculous.

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Against this abhorred peril he struck back vigorously and instinctively on effective lines. He could hold his own in a duel of the sexes. His court of Vivien not only seemed but became more ardent—in these matters the distinction between being and seeming runs very thin, since the acting excites the reality. If one woman teased him, occupying his thoughts without satisfying his desire, he turned to the adoration of another, and gave her of his own that hers might be more complete. Adoring Vivien found herself adored; Harry's worship would break out even in Isobel's presence! He who had been rather too content to accept now asked; she could not do enough to witness her love. Half-unconsciously fighting for a victory he less than consciously desired, he struck at Isobel through Vivien—and made Vivien supremely happy. Happiness gave her confidence; confidence gave her new charm, a new vivacity, a daring to speak her gay and loving thoughts. Who should

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not listen if Harry loved to hear? Her growth in power to allure made Harry wonder that he could not love single-heartedly, why his recollection of the incident remained so fresh and so ever-present. If Isobel would give him a chance to wind it up! It was troublesome now only because it hung in a mystery created by her silence, because the memory of it was irritated by a curiosity which her evasion of him maintained. Did she think it nothing? Or could she not bear to speak of it, because it was so much more? At any rate she should see how he loved Vivien!

The three had this week to themselves—Andy engulfed in town and Gilbert Foot and Co., Wellgood not due back till the Saturday. So they passed it—Vivien in a new ecstasy; Harry ardent, troubled, wondering; Isobel apart, thoughtful, impossible to read. Thus they came to the Friday. To-morrow Wellgood would be back. Harry, thinking on this, thought suddenly of what had led up to the incident—what had been the excuse, the avenue, for his venture. It had been absorbed in the incident itself. Wellgood's coming gave it back to independent life. If what Isobel had said were true, another lover entered on the scene—Isobel's!

That night—when Harry had gone—Vivien came to Isobel and kissed her, saying, "It's wonderful, but to-night I'm sure!"

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Isobel was looking at an illustrated paper. She let her hand rest in Vivien's, but she did not raise her eyes from the pictures. "Silly child, you've been sure all along!"

"Not as I am to-night. I've been sure I pleased him, that he liked me, that he liked my love. I've never been sure that he really wanted it till the last two or three days." She paused a moment, and added softly, "Never sure he must have it, as much as I must have his!"

Isobel's paper slipped from her knees on to the floor, but still she did not look at Vivien.

"It's a wonderful feeling that," the girl went on; "to feel he must have it—that he must have my love as I must have his. Before he seemed to be doing all the giving—and I could hardly believe! Now I'm giving too—we're sharing. Somehow it makes a woman of me." She playfully caressed Isobel's hand, running fingers lightly over fingers. "I don't believe I'm afraid even of you any more!" Her tone was gay, affectionately bantering.

Now Isobel looked up at her as she leant over her shoulder. "It makes you look very pretty."

"It makes me feel prettier still," laughed Vivien. She put her face close to her friend's and whispered, blushing, "He kisses me differently now."

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Isobel Vintry sharply drew her hand away. Vivien's blush grew painfully bright.

"Oh, I—I oughtn't to have said that. You're right, Isobel. It's—it's too sacred. But I was so happy in it. Do forgive me, dear. I've got no mother to talk to, Isobel. Not even a sister! I know what you felt, but you must forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, child. I meant nothing when I took my hand away. I was going to pick up the paper."

"Then kiss me, Isobel."

Isobel slowly turned her head and kissed the girl's cheek. "I know what you mean, Vivien," she said with a smile that to the girl seemed wistful, almost bitter.

"You dear!" she whispered. "Some day you must be very happy too." Her voice carolled in song as she sped upstairs.

"The good which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." That—and possibly one other—reminiscence of the Scriptures came back to Isobel Vintry when, with a kiss, she had dismissed Vivien to her happy rest. There was another law, warring against the law of her mind—the law of the Restless and Savage Master. He broke friendship's power and blurred the mirror of loyalty. He drove her whither she would not go, commanded her to set her hand to what she would not touch, forced love to mate with loathing. "The child is so beautifully happy," her spirit cried. "Aye, in Harry Belfield's kisses," came the Master's answer. "Wouldn't she be? You've tasted them. You know." She knew. They were different now! From those he had given Vivien before? Yes. From the one he had given her? Or like that one? Her jealousy caught fresh flame from Vivien's shy revelation—fresh flame and new shame. Harry was repenting—with smiles of memory. She was sinning still, with groans, with all her cunning, and with all her might. Pass the theory that it is each man for himself in this fight, and each woman for her own hand. No doubt; but should not the fight be fair? The girl did not so much as know there was a fight, and should not and must not, unless and until it had gone irrevocably against her. "All's fair in love—and war." Yet traitors suffer death from their own side and the enemy's contempt.

pg 246

His kisses were different now—that set her aflame. Aye, and to mark how under their new charm Vivien opened into new power and took hold on new weapons! The new kisses somehow made a woman of her! It might be tolerable to see him make his marriage of convenience, doing no more than somewhat indolently allowing himself to be adored. But to see him adoring this other—that was to be worsted on the merits—not merely to be impossible, but to be undesired. Was that coming about? Had it come about—so soon after the stolen kiss? Then the kiss had been all

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failure, all shame; he had mocked while he kissed. She was cheapened, yet not aided. The cunning of the last six days had been bent to prove that she had been aided—her value not cheapened but enhanced.

Looking again out of the window whence she had watched the pair at their love-making, looking over the terrace, now empty, across the water (water seems ever to answer to the onlooker's mood), she exclaimed against the absence of safeguards. Were she a wife—or were Vivien! That would be a fence, making for protection—a sturdy fence, which to break down or to leap over would be plain trespassing, a profanation, open offence. Were she—or were Vivien—a mother! The Savage Master himself must own a worthy foe in motherhood—one that gave him trouble, one that he vanquished only after hard fighting, and then saw his victory bitterly grudged, piteously wept over, deplored in a heart-rending fashion; you could see that in the morning's paper. She chanced to have read such a case a day or two before. The letter of confession was signed "Mother the outcast." To have to sign like that—if you let the Master beat you—was a deterrent, a safeguard, a shield. Such defences she had not. Vivien was neither wife nor mother; no more was she. The engagement seemed but victory in the first bout; was it forbidden to try the best of three? Nothing was irrevocable yet—on either side. "At lovers' vows—" Or a stolen kiss! Or a stolen victory?

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Suddenly she remembered, and with the same quality of smile as Vivien had marked, that she had been an exemplary child, ever extolled, never punished; a pattern schoolgirl, with the highest marks, Queen on May-day (a throne not to be achieved without the Principal's *congé d'élire!*), a model student at Cambridge. Hence the unexceptionable credentials which had introduced her to Nutley, had made her Vivien's preceptress, Vivien's bulwark against fear and weakness, Vivien's shield—and destined to be a shield to successive young ladies after Vivien. Who first had undermined that accepted view of destiny, had disordered that well-schooled, almost Sunday-schooled, scheme of her life? Vivien's father, who came back to-morrow. At whose challenge was the shaken fortress like to fall? Vivien's lover, who came yesterday and the day before, to-morrow and the day after, every day till he went out of life with Vivien.

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As with minds greatly preoccupied, the ordinary traffic of the hours passed unnoticed; bed, sleep, breakfast, were a moment. She found herself greeting Wellgood, newly arrived, ruddy and robust, confident, self-satisfied—as she saw in a moment, eager. His kiss to his daughter was carelessly kind, and with it he let her go, she not unwilling; Harry was due at the gate. Wellgood's real greeting was for the woman whom to see was his home-coming. He led her with him into his study; he laid his hand on her arm as he made her sit down near him.

"Well, have the lovers bored you to death with their spooning since I've been away?"

"There's been a good deal of it, and not much relief. Only Andy Hayes now and then."

"Rather tiresome to be the onlooker all the time. Wouldn't you like a little on your own account?"

"I'm in no hurry." She looked him straight in the face, rather defiantly.

"I've made up my mind since I've been away. I'm not a good hand at speeches or at spooning, but I'm fond of you, Isobel. I'll make you a good husband—and it's for you to consider whether you'll ever get a better chance."

"I should like more time to think it over."

"Oh, come, don't tell me you haven't been thinking it over for weeks past. What's the difficulty?"

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"I'm not in love with you—that's all."

"I don't expect to inspire a romantic passion, like young Harry."

"Can't you leave Harry Belfield out of it?" she asked irritably.

"I see he has bored you," chuckled Wellgood. "But you like me? We get on together?"

"Yes, I like you, and we get on together. But I don't want to marry yet."

"No more do I—just yet!" He rose and went to the mantelpiece to choose a pipe. "Have you got any friends you could stay a month with?"

His back was to her; he was busy filling the pipe. He saw neither the sudden stiffening of her figure nor the fear in her eyes. Was he going to send her away—now? But she answered coolly, "Yes, I think I could arrange it, if you wish."

"Somehow a man feels rather a fool, being engaged himself while his girl's getting married. We should have all the idiots in the neighbourhood buzzing about with their jokes and congratulations. I've made a plan to avoid all that. We keep it quite dark till Vivien's wedding; then you go off, ostensibly for good. I stay here and give the place an overhauling; then I'll join you in town, we'll be married there, and go for a jaunt. By the time we come back they'll have cooled down—and they'll be jolly glad to have shirked their wedding presents." By now he had turned round; the strain and the fear had passed from Isobel; the month's visit to friends was not

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to come now. "How do you like the scheme?" he asked.

"I like the scheme very much, and I'm all for keeping it quiet till Vivien is disposed of."

He stood before her, smoking his pipe, his hands in his pockets. "Shall we call it settled?"

"I don't want to call it settled yet."

He put down his pipe. "Look here, Isobel, because I can't make pretty speeches, don't you think I don't feel this thing. I want you, and I want the thing settled. You ought to know your mind by now. If you want to say no, you can say it now, but I don't believe you do. Then why can't you say yes? It's devilishly uncomfortable to go on living in the house with you while the thing's unsettled."

Would the visit come into play after all, unless she consented? Isobel sat in thought.

"Just understood between ourselves—that's what I mean. I shan't bother you with much love-making, as I daresay you can guess."

She had cried out for a fence, a protection. Did not one offer itself now? It might prove of service. She saw that the man loved her in his rough way; his love might help her. For the time, at least, his honest sincerity of affection touched her heart. His "I want you" was grateful to her. That other thing—the thing to which the stolen kiss belonged—was madness. Surely she had resolution to withstand it and to do what was wise? Surely she could be honest? If only because, in all likelihood, dishonesty led nowhere.

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"Suppose I said yes—and changed my mind?" She was trying to be honest—or perhaps to put herself in a position to maintain that she had been honest, if need arose.

"I must take my chance of that, like other men," laughed Wellgood. "But, like other men too, I don't suppose I should be very pleasant about it. Especially not if there was another fellow!"

"No, I don't suppose you would." She smiled at him for a moment; he showed there a side of him that she liked—his courage, his self-confidence, his power to stand up for himself.

"You leave it to me to keep you when once I've got you," he went on, smiling grimly. "That's my affair; you'll find I shall look after it."

She smiled back at him—defiance in return for his grimness. "Very well, I'll leave it to you to keep me. After all, there's no reason to expect competition."

"Not in Meriton, perhaps! But what of London, Miss Isobel? I must keep an eye on you there!" He took hold of her hands and pulled her to her feet. "It's a promise?"

pg 253

"In the way I've told you—yes."

"Oh, that's good enough for me!" He drew her to him and kissed her. "We shan't have many chances of kissing—or we should give the thing away. But give me one now, Isobel!"

She did as she was bid in a very friendly fashion. His kiss had been hearty but not passionate, and hers was an adequate response. It left Wellgood entirely content.

"That's all right! Gad, I feel ten years younger! You shan't repent it. I'll look after you well—while I'm alive and after I'm gone too. Don't be afraid about that. Perhaps there'll be somebody else to look after you, by the time I get notice to quit. I'd like to leave a Wellgood of Nutley behind me."

"Do you know, that's sentimental?" said Isobel. "Mere sentiment!"

"Not a bit of it, miss. It's a sound natural instinct, and I'm proud of it." He kissed her again. "Now be off, there's a good girl. I've got a thousand things to do, and probably everything's been going to the devil while I've been away."

"I rather pity everybody now you've come back!"

pg 254

"Don't you worry. I know I shall find your department in good order. Be off!" He took her by the shoulders in a rough playfulness and turned her towards the door. She left him chuckling to himself. He was very content with the issue of his suit.

Was her department in good order? Her lips twisted in a wry smile.

As she approached the drawing-room door, Harry Belfield came out of it. He started a little to see her—not that it was strange she should be there, but because he had not seen her alone since the night of the stolen kiss. He closed the door behind him and came to her.

"Vivien"—a jerk of his head told that Vivien was in the drawing-room—"has sent me to say 'How do you do?' to Mr. Wellgood."

"He's in his study, Mr. Harry. Don't stay long. He's very busy." She drew aside, to let him pass, but Harry stood still.

"Are you never going to give me an opportunity?" he asked in a low voice.

"An opportunity for what?"

Harry jumped at the chance of his confession and absolution. "Why, of saying how awfully sorry and—and ashamed I am that I yielded—"

"What's the use of saying anything about it? It's best forgotten." pg 255

"Now Wellgood's back?" he whispered, with a flash of his eyes.

"Certainly best forgotten, now that Vivien's father is back."

He shook his head at her with a smile, owning her skilful parry. "You won't give me one chance?"

"Does the dashing Mr. Harry Belfield need to have chances given him? I thought he made them for himself."

Harry's eyes gleamed. "I'll take you at your word in that!"

"You've been in no hurry about it up to now—and you seem in none to say 'How do you do?' to Mr. Wellgood." She motioned him to go on, adding, "It was very silly, but no harm's done. We'll forget."

Harry gave her a long look. She met it with a steady smile. He held out his hand.

"Thank you. We'll forget. There's my hand on it."

She gave a little laugh, shook her head, and put her hands behind her back.

"I seem to remember it began that way before," she said, and darted past him swiftly.

That was how they set about forgetting the stolen kiss.

## Chapter XIII.

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### A LOVER LOOKS PALE.

It speedily appeared that Gilly Foot had other than pecuniary reasons for wanting a partner; he wanted a pair of hands to work for him. He was lazy, at times even lethargic; nothing could make him hurry. He hated details, and, above all other details, figures. His work was to hatch ideas; somebody else had to bring up the chickens. Andy could hardly have allowed the cool shuffling-off of all the practical business work on to his shoulders—which was what happened as soon as he had learnt even the rudiments of it—had it not been that the ideas were good. The indolent young man would sit all the morning—not that his morning began very early—apparently doing nothing, then spend two hours at lunch at the restaurant, come back smoking a large cigar, and after another hour's rumination be delivered of an idea. The budding business—Andy wondered how it had even budded under a gardener who no doubt planted but never watered—lay mainly with educational works; and here Gilly's ingenuity came in. He was marvellously good at guessing what would appeal to a schoolmaster; how or whence he got this instinct it was impossible to say; it seemed just a freak of genius. The prospectus of a new "series," or the "syllabus" of a new course of study (contained in Messrs. Gilbert Foot and Co.'s primers) became in his hands a most skilful bait. And if he hooked one schoolmaster, as he pointed out to Andy, it was equivalent to hooking scores, perhaps hundreds, conceivably thousands, of boys. Girls too perhaps! Gilly was all for the higher education of girls. Generations of the youth of both sexes rose before his prophetically sanguine eye, all brought up on Gilbert Foot and Co.'s primers. pg 257

"A single really good idea for a series may mean a small fortune, Andy," he would say impressively. "And now I think I may as well go to lunch."

Andy accepted the situation and did the hard work. He also provided his partner with a notebook, urging him to put down (or, failing that, to get somebody else to put down) any brilliant idea which occurred to him at lunch. For himself he made a rule—lunch at the restaurant not more than once a week. Only ideas justified lunch there every day. Lunch there might be good for ideas; it was not good for figures. pg 258

So Andy was working hard, no less hard than when he was trying to drag his poor timber business out of the mud, but with far more heart, hope, and zest. He buckled to the figures; he bargained with the gentlemen who wrote the primers, with the printers, and the binders, and the advertisement canvassers; he tracked shy discounts to their lairs, and bagged them; his eye on office expenses was the eye of a lynx. The chickens hatched by Gilly found a loving and assiduous foster-mother. And in September, after the new primers had been packed off to meet the boys going back to school, Andy was to have a holiday; he was looking forward to it intensely. He meant to spend it in attending Harry Belfield on his autumn campaign in the Meriton Division—an odd idea of a holiday to most men's thinking, but Harry was still Harry, and Andy's appetite

for new experiences had lost none of its voracity. Meanwhile, for recreation, there was Sunday with its old programme of church, a tramp, and supper with Jack Rock; there was lunch on Friday at the restaurant with the Nun—she never missed Andy's day—and other friends; and on both the Saturdays which followed the Belfields' return home he was bidden to dine at Halton.

That the Nun had taken a fancy to him he had been informed by that candid young woman herself; her assurance that he was "attractive" held good as regarded Belfield at least; even Andy's modesty could not deny that. Belfield singled him out for especial attention, drew him out, listened to him, advised him. It was at the first of the two evenings at Halton that he kept Andy with him after dinner, while the rest went into the garden—Wellgood and Vivien were there, but not Isobel, who had pleaded a cold—and insisted on hearing all about his business, listening with evident interest to Andy's description of it and of his partner, Gilly Foot.

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"And in your holiday you're going to help Harry, I hear?"

"Help him!" laughed Andy. "I'm going to listen to him."

"I recommend you to try your own hand too. You couldn't have a better opportunity of learning the job than at these village meetings."

"I could never do it. It never entered my head. Why, I know nothing!"

"More than your audience; that's enough. If you do break down at first, it doesn't matter. After a month of it you wouldn't mind Trafalgar Square."

"The—the idea's absolutely new to me."

"So have a lot of things been lately, haven't they? And they're turning out well."

pg 260

A slow smile spread over Andy's face. "I should look a fool," he reflected.

"Try it," said Belfield, quite content with the reception of his suggestion. He saw that Andy would turn it over in his mind, would give it full, careful, impartial consideration. He was coming to have no small idea of Andy's mind. He passed to another topic.

"You were at Nutley two or three times when we were away, Harry tells me. Everything seems going on very pleasantly?"

Andy recalled himself with a start from his rumination over a possible speech.

"Oh, yes—er—it looks like it, Mr. Belfield."

"And Harry's not been to town more than once or twice!" He smiled. "He really seems to have said farewell to the temptations of London. An exemplary swain!"

"I think it's going on all right, sir," said Andy.

Belfield was a little puzzled at his lack of enthusiasm. Andy showed no actual signs of embarrassment, but his tone was cold, and his interest seemed perfunctory.

"I daresay you've been too busy to pay much attention to such frivolous affairs," he said; but to Andy's ears his voice sounded the least bit resentful.

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"No; I—I assure you I take the keenest interest in it. I'd give anything to have it go all right."

Belfield's eyes were on him with a shrewd kindness. "No reason to suppose it won't, is there?"

"None that I know of." Now Andy was frowning a little and smoking rather fast.

Belfield said no more. He could not cross-examine Andy; indeed he had no materials, even if he had the right. But Andy's manner left him with a feeling of uneasiness.

"Ah, well, there's only six weeks to wait for the wedding!"

The next Saturday found him again at Halton. One of the six weeks had passed; a week of happy work, yet somewhat shadowed by the recollection of Belfield's questions and his own poor answers. Had he halted midway between honest truth and useful lying? In fact he knew nothing of what had been happening of late. He had not visited Nutley again—since that night. Suddenly it struck him that he had not been invited. Then—did they suspect? How could they have timed his entrance so exactly as to suspect? He did not know that Harry had seen his retreating figure. Still it would seem to them possible that he might have seen—possible, if unlikely. That might be enough to make him a less desired guest.

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The great campaign was to begin on the following Monday, though Andy would not be at leisure to devote himself to it till a week later. The talk ran on it. Wellgood, who seemed in excellent spirits, displayed keen interest in the line Harry meant to take, and was ready to be chairman whenever desired. Even Mrs. Belfield herself showed some mild excitement, and promised to attend one meeting. The girls were to go to as many as possible, Vivien being full of tremulous

anticipation of Harry's triumph, Isobel almost as enthusiastic a partisan. She had met Andy with a perfection of composure which drove out of his head any idea that she suspected him of secret knowledge.

"I'm afraid Harry's been overworking himself over it, poor boy," said Mrs. Belfield. "Don't you think he looks pale, Mr. Wellgood?"

"I don't know where he's found the time to overwork," Wellgood answered, with a gruff laugh. "We can account for most of his time at Nutley."

Harry burst into a laugh, and gulped down his wine. He was drinking a good deal of champagne.

"I sigh as a lover, mother," he explained.

"That's what makes me pale—if I am pale." His tone turned to sudden irritation. "Don't all look at me. There's nothing the matter." He laughed again; he seemed full of changes of mood to-night. "The speeches won't give me much trouble."

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"I'm sure you need have no other trouble, dear," said Mrs. Belfield, with an affectionate glance at Vivien.

"He'll have much more trouble with me, won't he?" Vivien laughed.

Andy stole a look at Isobel. He was filled with admiration; a smile of just the right degree of sympathy ornamented her lips. A profane idea that she must be in the habit of being kissed crossed his mind. It was difficult to see how she could be, though—at Nutley. Kissing takes two. He did not suspect Wellgood, and he was innocent himself.

Another eye was watching—shrewder and more experienced than Andy's—watching Harry, watching Isobel, watching while Andy stole his glance at Isobel. It was easy to keep bluff Wellgood in the dark; his own self-confidence hoodwinked him. Belfield was harder to blind; for those who had anything to conceal, it was lucky that he did not live at Nutley.

"Well, waiting for a wedding's tiresome work for all concerned, isn't it?" he said to Isobel, who sat next him.

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"Yes, even waiting for other people's. It's such a provisional sort of time, Mr. Belfield."

"You've forsworn one set of pleasures, and haven't got the other yet. You've ceased to be a rover, and you haven't got a home."

"You don't seem to consider being engaged a very joyful period?" she smiled.

"On the whole, I don't, Miss Vintry, though Vivien there looks pretty happy. But it's telling on Harry, I'm sure."

She looked across at Harry. "Yes, I think it is a little," came apparently as the result of a scrutiny suggested by Belfield's words. "I hadn't noticed it, but I'm afraid you're right."

"If there's anything up, she's a cool hand," thought Belfield. "You must try to distract his thoughts," he told her.

"I try to let them see as little of me as possible."

"Too complete a realization of matrimonial solitude *à deux* before marriage—Is that advisable?"

"You put too difficult questions for a poor spinster to answer, Mr. Belfield."

He got nothing out of her, but from the corner of his eye he saw Harry watching him as he talked to Isobel. Turning his head sharply, he met his son's glance full and straight. Harry dropped his eyes suddenly, and again drank off his champagne. Belfield looked sideways at the composed lady on his right, and pursed up his lips a little.

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Wellgood stayed with him to-night after dinner, the young men joining the ladies in the garden for coffee.

"Our friend Miss Vintry's in great good looks to-night, Wellgood. Remarkably handsome girl!"

"That dress suits her very well. I thought so myself," Wellgood agreed, well-pleased to have his secret choice thus endorsed.

Belfield knew nothing of his secret, nothing of his plans. He was only trying to find out whether Vivien's father were fully at his ease; of Isobel's lover and his ease he took no account.

"Upon my word," he laughed, "if I were engaged, even to a girl as charming as your Vivien, I should almost feel it an injury to have another as attractive about all day. 'How happy could I be with either—!' you know. The unregenerate man in one would feel that good material was being wasted; and my boy used to be rather unregenerate, I'm afraid."

Wellgood smiled in a satisfied fashion. "Even if Master Harry was disposed to play tricks, I don't think he'd get much encouragement from—"

"'T'other dear charmer?' Of course you've perfect confidence in her, or she wouldn't be where she is."

pg 266

"No, nor where she's going to be," thought Wellgood, enjoying his secret.

"My licentious fancy has wronged my son. I must have felt a touch of the old Adam myself, Wellgood. Don't tell my wife."

"You wouldn't tell me, if you knew a bit more," thought triumphant Wellgood.

"I think Harry's constancy has stood a good trial. Oh, you'll think I don't appreciate Vivien! I do; but I know Harry."

Wellgood answered him in kind, with a bludgeon-like wit. "You'll think I don't appreciate Harry. I do; but I know Miss Vintry, and she doesn't care a button about him."

"We proud parents put one another in our places!" laughed Belfield.

Wellgood saw no danger, and he had been home a fortnight! True, he had, before that, been away six weeks. But such mischief, if it existed, would have grown. If it had been there during the six weeks, it would have been there, in fuller growth, during the fortnight. Belfield felt reassured. He had found out what he wanted, and yet had given no hint to Vivien's father. But one or two of his remarks abode in the mind of Isobel's lover, to whom he did not know that he was speaking. Wellgood's secret position towards Isobel at once made Belfield's fears, if the fears were more than a humorous fancy, absurd, and made them, even though no more than a fancy, stick. He recked nothing of them as a father; he remembered them as a lover, yet remembered only to laugh in his robust security. He thought it would be a good joke to tell to Isobel, not realizing that it is never a good joke to tell a woman that she has been, without cause and ridiculously, considered a source of danger to legitimate affections. She may feel this or that about the charge; she will not feel its absurdity. She is generally right. Few women pass through the world without stirring in somebody once or twice an unruly impulse—a fact which should incline them all to circumspection in themselves, and to charity towards one another, if possible, and at any rate towards us.

pg 267

"And what," asked Belfield, with an air of turning to less important matters, "about the life of this Parliament?"

Wellgood opined that it would prove much what a certain philosopher declared the life of man to be—nasty, short, and brutish.

In the garden Mrs. Belfield, carefully enfolded in rugs, dozed the doze of the placid. Isobel and Harry whispered across her unconscious form.

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"You shouldn't drink so much champagne, Harry."

"Hang it, I want it! I said nothing wrong, did I?"

"You don't keep control of your eyes. I think your father noticed. Why look at me?"

"You know I can't help it. And I can't stand it all much longer."

"You can end it as soon as you like. Am I preventing you?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Vintry? I'm afraid I'm drowsy."

"I was just saying I hoped I wasn't preventing Mr. Harry from strolling with Vivien, Mrs. Belfield."

"Oh yes, my dear, of course!" The placid lids fell over the placid eyes again.

"End it? How?"

"By behaving as Vivien's *fiancé* ought."

"Or by not being Vivien's *fiancé* any longer?"

"What, Harry love? What's that about not being Vivien's *fiancé* any longer?" Mrs. Belfield was roused by words admitting of so startling an interpretation.

"Well, we shall be married soon, shan't we, mother?"

"How stupid of me, Harry dear!" Sleep again descended. Harry swore softly; Isobel laughed low.

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"This is ridiculous!" she remarked. "Couldn't you take just one turn with Vivien's companion? Your mother might hear straight just once."

"I'll be hanged if I chance it to-night," said Harry. "I'll take Wellgood on at billiards."

"Yes, go and do that; it's much better. It may bring back your colour, Harry."

Harry looked at her in exasperation—and in longing. "I wish there wasn't a woman in the world!" he growled.

"It's men like you who say that," she retorted, smiling. "Go and forget us for an hour."

He went without more words—with only such a shrug as he had given when he said good-bye to Mrs. Freere. Isobel sat on, by dozing Mrs. Belfield, the picture of a dutiful neglected companion, while Wellgood and Harry played billiards, and Belfield, wheezing over an unread evening paper, honoured her with a tribute of distrustful curiosity. Left alone in the flesh, she could boast that she occupied several minds that evening. Perhaps she knew it, as she sat silent, thoughtfully gazing across to where Vivien and Andy sat together, their dim figures just visible in enshrouding darkness. "He saw—but he won't speak!" she was thinking.

"How funny of Harry to say he sighed as a lover!" Vivien remarked to Andy.

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Andy had the pride and pleasure of informing her that her lover was indulging in a quotation from another lover, more famous and more temperate.

"'I sighed as a lover. I obeyed as a son.' I see! How funny! Do you think Gibbon was right, Mr. Hayes?"

"The oldest question since men had sons and women had lovers, isn't it?"

"Doesn't love come first—when once it has come?"

"After honour, the poet tells us, Miss Wellgood."

Vivien knew that quotation, anyhow. "It's beautiful, but isn't it—just a little priggish?"

"I think we must admit that it's at least a very graceful apology," laughed Andy.

Their pleasant banter bred intimacy; she was treating him as an old friend. He felt himself hardly audacious in saying "How you've grown!"

She understood him—nay, thanked him with a smile and a flash, revealing pleasure, from her eyes, often so reticent. "Am I different from the days of the lame pony and Curly? Not altogether, I'm afraid, but I hope a little." She sat silent for a moment. "I love Harry—well, so do you."

"Yes, I love Harry." But he had a sore grudge against Harry at that moment. Who at Halton had once talked about pearls and swine? And in what connection?

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"That's why I'm different." She laughed softly. "If you'd so far honoured me, Mr. Hayes, and I had—responded, I might never have become different. I should just have relied on the—policeman."

"The Force is always ready to do its duty," said Andy.

"Take care; you're nearly flirting!" she admonished him merrily; and Andy, rather proud of himself for a gallant remark, laughed and blushed in answer. She went on more seriously, yet still with her serene smile. "First I've got to please him; then I've got to help him. He must have both, you know."

"Please him, oh, yes! Help him, how?"

"I'm sure you know. Poor boy! His ups and downs! Sometimes he comes to me almost in despair. It's so hard to help then. Isobel can't either. He's not happy, you know, to-night."

She had grown. This penetration was new; should he wish that it might become less or greater? Less for the sake of her peace, or greater for her enlightenment's?

"It seems as if a darkness swept over him sometimes, and got between him and me." Her voice trembled a little. "I want to keep that darkness away from him; so I mustn't be afraid."

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"Whether you're afraid or not, you won't run away. Remember Curly!"

She turned to him with affectionate friendliness. "But you'll be there in this too, so far as you can, won't you? Don't forsake me, will you? It's sometimes—very difficult." Her face lit up in a smile again. "I hope it'll make a man of me, as father used to say of that odious hunting."

It had, at least, made an end of the mere child in her. The discernment of her lover's trouble, the ignorance of whence it came, the need of fighting it—she faced these things as part of her work. Her engagement was no more either amazement merely, or merely joy. She might still be afraid of dogs, or shrink from a butcher's shop. She knew a difficulty when she saw one, and for love's sake faced it. Andy thought it made the love dearer to her; with an inward groan he saw that it did. For he was afraid. What she told of Harry told more than she could fathom for herself.

Andy was a partisan. He cried whole-heartedly, "The pity for Vivien!" He could say, "The pity for Harry!" for old Harry's sake, and more for Vivien's. No, "The pity for Isobel!" was breathed in his heart. The case seemed to him a plain one there; and he was not of the party who would have the Recording Angel as liberal with tears as with ink, sedulously obliterating everything that he punctiliously wrote—in the end, on that view, a somewhat ineffectual registrar, who might be spared both ink and tears, and provided with a retiring pension by triumphant believers in Necessity. It may come to that.

"I think Harry may be wanting me." She rose in her slim grace, and held out a hand to him—not in formal farewell, but in an impulse of good-will. She had come into her heritage of womanhood, and bore it with a shy stateliness. "Thank you"—a pause rather merry than timid—"Thank you, policeman Andy."

"No, but I thank you—and you seem to me rather like the queen of the fairies."

She smiled, and sighed lightly. "If I can make the king think so always!"

Then she was gone, a white shadow gliding over the grass—a woman now, still in a child's shape. She flitted past Isobel Vintry, kissing her hand, and so passed in to where "Harry wanted her."

Politeness dictated that Andy, thus left to himself, should join his hostess; he did not know that she was asleep, quite sound asleep by now.

Having sat down before he discovered this state of affairs, he found himself committed to a virtual *tête-à-tête* with Isobel Vintry, quite the last thing he desired. He did not find it easy to open the conversation.

"Oh, we can talk! We shan't disturb her," Miss Vintry hastened to assure him with a smile. "You've been quite a stranger at Nutley. Did you find the atmosphere too romantic? Too much love-making for your taste?"

"I did feel rather in the way now and then."

"Perhaps you were once or twice! When you attached yourself to Vivien after dinner, and left Mr. Harry no resource but poor me!"

Surely if she spoke like that—actually recalling the critical occasion—she could have no suspicion? Either she must never have noticed the shawl at all, or feel sure that it had been removed before her talk with Harry reached the point of danger.

"I'm sure you entertained him very well. I don't think he'd complain."

"Well, sometimes people like talking over their affairs with a third person for a change—as I daresay Vivien has been doing with you just now! And, after all, because you're engaged, everybody else in the world needn't at once seem hopelessly stupid."

Certainly Isobel Vintry could never seem hopelessly stupid, thought Andy. Rather she was superbly plausible.

"And perhaps even Mr. Harry may like a rest from devotion—or will you be polite enough to suggest that a temporary change in its object is a better way of putting it?"

Precisely what it had been in Andy's mind to suggest—but not exactly by way of politeness! It was disconcerting to have the sting drawn from his thoughts or his talk in this way.

"That might be polite to you—in one sense; it might sound rather unjust to Harry," he answered.

"Am I the first person who has ever dared to make such an insinuation? How shocking! But I've even dared to do it to Mr. Harry himself, and he hardly denied that he was an incorrigible flirt."

Andy knew that he was no match for her. For any advantage he could ever win from her, he must thank chance or surprise.

"Don't be so terribly strict, Mr. Hayes. If you were engaged, would you like every word—absolutely every word—you said to another girl to be repeated to your *fiancée*?"

Andy, always honest, considered. "Perhaps I shouldn't—and a few pretty speeches hurt nobody."

"Why, really you're becoming quite human! You encourage me to confess that Mr. Harry has made one or two to me—and I've not repeated them to Vivien. I'm relieved to find you don't think me a terrible sinner."

She was skilfully pressing for an indication of what he knew, of how much he had seen—without letting him, if he did know too much, have a chance of confronting her openly with his knowledge. Must he be considered in the game she was playing, or could he safely be neglected?

Andy's temper was rather tried. She talked of a few idle words, a few pretty speeches—ordinary gallantries. His memory was of two figures tense with passion, and of a lover's kiss accepted as

though by a willing lover.

"How far would you carry the doctrine?" he asked dryly.

There was a pause before she answered; she was shaping her reply so that it might produce the result she wanted—information, yet not confrontation with his possible knowledge.

"As far as a respectful kiss?" Peering through the darkness, she saw a quick movement of Andy's head. Instantly she added with a laugh, "On the hand, I mean, of course!"

"You won't ask me to go any further, if I admit that?" asked Andy.

"No. I'll agree with you on that," she said.

Mrs. Belfield suddenly woke up. "Yes, I'm sure Harry's looking pale," she remarked.

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Isobel had got her information; she was sure now. The sudden movement of Andy's head had been too startled, too outraged, to have been elicited merely by an audacious suggestion put forward in discussion; it spoke of memories roused; it expressed wonder at shameless effrontery. Andy had revealed his knowledge, but he did not know that he had. He had parted with his secret; yet it had become no easier for him to meddle. If he had thought himself bound to say nothing, not to interfere, before, he would seem to himself so bound still. And if he tried to meddle, at least she would be fighting now with her eyes open. There might be danger—there could be no surprise.

When Harry Belfield put on her cloak for her in the hall, she whispered to him: "Take care of Andy Hayes! He did see us that first night."

## Chapter XIV.

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### SAVING THE NATION.

On a fine afternoon Jack Rock stood smoking his pipe on the pavement of High Street. His back was towards the road, his face turned to his own shop-window, where was displayed a poster of such handsome dimensions that it covered nearly the whole of the plate glass, to the prejudice of Jack's usual display of mutton and beef. He took no account of that; he was surveying the intruding poster with enormous complacency. It announced that there would be held, under the auspices of the Meriton Conservative and Unionist Association, an open-air Public Meeting that evening on Fyfold Green. Chairman—The Rt. Hon. Lord Meriton (his lordship was rarely "drawn;" his name indicated a great occasion). Speakers—William Foot, Esq., K. C., M. P. (very large letters); Henry Belfield, Esq., Prospective Candidate etc. (letters not quite so large); and Andrew Hayes, Esq. (letters decidedly smaller, but still easily legible from across the street). Needless to say that it was the sight of the last name which caused Mr. Jack Rock's extreme complacency. He had put up the stakes; now he was telling himself that the "numbers" were up for the race. Andy was in good company—too good, of course, for a colt like him on the present occasion; but in Jack's mind the race comprised more than one meeting. There was plenty of time for the colt to train on! Meanwhile there he was, on a platform with Lord Meriton, with Mr. Foot, King's Counsel, Member of Parliament (Jack's thoughts rehearsed these titles—the former of which Billy had recently achieved—at full length, for all the world like the toastmaster at a public dinner), and Mr. Henry Belfield, Prospective Candidate etc. Mr. Rock hurled at himself many contemptuous and opprobrious epithets when he recollected the career which he had once offered for the grateful acceptance of Andrew Hayes, Esq. To him the poster was a first and splendid dividend on the three thousand pounds which Miss Doris Flower had so prettily extracted from his pocket. Here was his return; he willingly left to Andy the mere pecuniary fruits of the investment.

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Thus immensely gratified, Jack refused to own that he was surprised. The autumn campaign had now been in progress nearly three weeks, and, although Andy had not been heard before in Meriton, reports of his doings had come in from outlying villages with which Jack had business dealings. Nay, Mr. Belfield of Halton himself, who had braved the evening air by going to one meeting to hear his son, found time to stop at the shop and tell Jack that he had been favourably impressed by Andy.

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"No flowers of rhetoric, Jack," he said with twinkling eyes, "such as my boy indulges in, but good sound sense—knows his facts. I shouldn't wonder if the labourers like that better. He knows what their bacon costs 'em, and how many loaves a week go to a family of six, and so on. I heard one or two old fellows saying 'Aye, that's right!' half a dozen times while he was speaking. I wish our old friend at the grammar school could have heard him!"

"Yes, Mr. Belfield; the old gentleman would have been proud, wouldn't he?"

"And you've a right to be proud, Jack. I know what you've done for the lad."

"He's a good lad, sir. He comes to supper with me every Sunday, punctual, when he's in Meriton."

"You've every reason to hope he'll do very well—a sensible steady fellow! It'd be a good thing if



there were more like him."

Then Chinks and the Bird had made an excursion on their bicycles to hear Andy, and brought back laudatory accounts—this though Chinks was suspected of Radical leanings, which he was not allowed by his firm to obtrude. And old Cox had heard him and pronounced the verdict that, though he might be no flyer like Mr. Harry, yet he had the makings of a horse in him. "Wants work, and can stand as much as you give him," said Mr. Cox.

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Immersed in a contemplation of the placard and in the reflections it evoked, Mr. Rock stepped backwards into the road in order to get a new view of the relative size of the lettering. Thereby he nearly lost his life, and made Andy present possessor of a tidy bit of money for which, in the natural course, he would have to wait many years. (This is trenching on old Jack's darling secret.) The agitated hoot of a motor-car sent him on a jump back to the pavement, just in time. The car came to a standstill.

"I didn't come all this way on purpose to kill you, Mr. Rock!"

Jack had turned round already, in order to swear at his all but murderer, who might reasonably have pleaded contributory negligence. Angry words died away. A small figure, enveloped in a dust cloak, wrapped about the head with an infinite number of yards of soft fabric, sat alone in the back of the car. The driver yawned, surveying Meriton with a scornful air, appearing neither disturbed by Mr. Rock's danger nor gratified by his escape.

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"It's so convenient," the small figure proceeded to observe, "when people have their names written over their houses. Still I think I should have known you without that. Andy has described you to me, you see."

"Why, it's never—?" The broadest smile spread on Jack Rock's face.

"Oh yes, it is! I always keep my word. I'm taking a holiday, and I thought I'd combine my visit to you with—" She suddenly broke off her sentence, and gave a gurgle. Jack thought it a curiously pleasant sound. "Why, there it is!" the Nun gurgled, pointing a finger at the wonderful placard in Jack's window.

"You're—you're Miss Flower?" gasped Jack.

"Yes, yes—but look at it! Those three boys! Billy, and Harry—and Andy! Andy! Well, of course, one knows they do do things, but somehow it's so hard to realise. I shall certainly stay for the meeting! Seymour, let me out!"

Seymour got down in a leisurely fashion, hiding a yawn with one hand and a cigarette in the other. "I suppose there isn't a hotel in this place, Miss Flower?" he remarked. (Seymour always called the Nun "Miss Flower," never merely "Miss.")

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"Oh yes; the Lion, Seymour. Excellent hotel, isn't it, Mr. Rock? Kept by Mr. Dove, who's got a son named the Bird; and the Bird's got a friend named Chinks, and—"

"Well, you do beat creation!" cried Jack. "How do you—?"

"Secret sources of information!" said the Nun gravely. "Have I got to go to the Lion, Mr. Rock? Or—or what time do you have tea?"

"You'll have tea with me, miss?" cried Jack.

"At what hour will you require the car, Miss Flower?" asked Seymour.

"You're goin' to the meetin', miss? Tell the young chap to be round at six, and mind he's punctual."

"Do as Mr. Rock says, Seymour," smiled the Nun. It was part of the day's fun to hear Seymour ordered about—and called a young chap!—by the butcher of Meriton. But she could not get into the house without another look at the poster. "Billy, Harry—and Andy! I wonder if those boys really imagine that what they say or think matters!"

Miss Flower was already a privileged person. Jack had no rebuke for her profanity. She took his arm, saying,

"I want to see the shop. You wanted Andy to have the shop, didn't you?"

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"I was an old fool. I—I meant it well, Miss Flower."

The Nun squeezed his arm.

"Were these nice animals when they were alive, Mr. Rock?"

"Prime uns, alive or dead!" chuckled Jack. "You come back to supper, after the meetin', miss, and taste; but maybe you'll be goin' back to London, or takin' your supper at Halton?"

"I'm sorry, but I've promised to take Billy Foot back to town. Oh, but tea now, Mr. Rock!"

Not even the messenger boy whom she had sent enjoyed Jack Rock's tea more than the Nun herself. For a girl of her inches, she ate immensely; even more heartily she praised. Jack could hardly eat at all, she was so daintily wonderful, her being there at all so amazing. Seeking explanation of the marvel, the simple affectionate old fellow could come only on one. She must be very fond of Andy! She had written to plead for Andy; she came and had tea with the old butcher—because he had given Andy help. And now she was lauding Andy, telling him in her quiet way that his lad was much thought of by her and her smart friends in London. Jack had, of course, a very inadequate realisation of what "smartness" in London really meant—a view which some might have called both inadequate and charitable.

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"Yes, he's a fine lad, miss. I say, the girl as gets Andy'll be lucky!" (That "as" always tripped Jack up in moments of thoughtlessness.)

The Nun deliberately disposed of a piece of plum cake and a sip of tea—the latter to wash the former down.

"I don't fall in love myself," she observed, in a tone decided yet tolerant—as though she had said, "I don't take liqueurs myself—but if you like to risk it!"

"You miss the best thing in life, miss," Jack cried.

"And most of the worst too," added the Nun serenely.

"Don't say it, miss. It don't come well from your pretty lips."

"Have I put you on your mettle? I meant to, of course, Mr. Rock."

Old Jack slapped his thigh, laughing immensely. Now wasn't this good—that she should be here, having tea, getting at him like that?

It was a happy conjuncture, for the Nun was hardly less well pleased. She divided her life into two categories; one was "the mill," the other was "fun." The mill included making a hundred and eighty pounds by singing two silly songs eight times each every week, being much adored, and eating meals at that restaurant; "fun" meant anything rather different. Having tea with Jack Rock, the Meriton butcher, was rather different, and Miss Flower (as Seymour called her—almost the only person who did) was enjoying herself.

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"I should like to take a walk along the street before we go to the meeting, Jack."

"Jack," casually dropped, with no more than a distant twinkle, finished Mr. Rock.

"Your letter was pretty good, but you, miss—!"

"I'm considered attractive on a postcard. It costs a penny," said the Nun, rising, fully refreshed, from the table. "Take me to the Lion, please. I must see that Seymour isn't dissatisfied. He's a gentleman by birth, you know, and a chauffeur by profession. So he rather alarms me, though his manner is always carefully indifferent." This remark of hers suddenly pleased the Nun. She gurgled; her own rare successes always gratified her—witness that somewhat stupid story about the two ladies and Tommy, told a long while ago.

Accompanied by proud Jack Rock, she traversed Meriton High Street, greatly admiring the church, the grammar school, and that ancient and respectable hostelry, the Lion. Indeed she fell so much in love with the Lion that she questioned Jack as to the accommodation it provided, and was assured that it boasted a private sitting-room, with oak panelling and oak beams across the ceiling (always supposed to be irresistible attractions to London visitors), and bedrooms sufficient in case she and Miss Dutton should be minded to spend a part of their holiday there. Room also for a maid—and for Seymour and the motor. "It's rather a nice idea. I'll think it over," she said.

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Then it was time to think about the meeting; and Jack must come with her in the car, sit with her, and tell her all about it. "Oh yes, you must!"

"I shall never hear the last of it, long as I live!" Jack protested, half in delight, half in a real shyness.

Behold them, then, thus installed on the outskirts of the meeting, with a good view of the platform where "the boys" were seated, together with Wellgood, supporting the great Lord Meriton. Vivien and Isobel also had chairs at the back. The Nun produced a field-glass from a pocket in the car, and favoured these ladies with a steady inspection. "Which did you say was Harry's?" she asked.

"The fair one, miss—that's Miss Wellgood."

"The other's quite good-looking too," the Nun pronounced.

The salient features of Mr. Foot's oratory have been indicated on a previous occasion. This

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evening he surpassed himself in epigram and logic; no doubt he desired to overcome the Nun's obstinate scepticism as to his career, no less than to maintain his popularity in Meriton. For the Nun he had a special treat—a surprise. He told them her story of Tommy and the two ladies, slightly adapting it to the taste of a general audience; the cheques were softened down to invitations to *tête-à-tête* dinners, couched in highly affectionate language. In Billy's apologue the Ministry was Tommy, one of the ladies was Liberalism, the other Socialism. The apologue took on very well; Billy made great play with Tommy's double flirtation, and the Ministry's double flirtation, ending up, "Yes, gentlemen, there will be only one tip to pay the waiter, but that'll be a tip-over, if I'm not much mistaken!" (Cheers and laughter.)

The Nun was smiling all over her face. "That really was rather clever of Billy." She felt herself shining with reflected glory.

But Billy—astute electioneer—meant to get more out of the Nun than just that Tommy story. When he had finished a wonderful peroration, in which he bade Meriton decide once and for all—it would probably never have another chance before it was too late—between Imperial greatness and Imperial decay, he slipped from the platform, and made his way round the skirts of the meeting to her motor-car. Lord Meriton's compliments, and would Miss Flower oblige him and delight the meeting by singing the National Anthem at the close of the proceedings? The Nun was so agitated by this request that she lost most of Andy's speech; he was sandwiched in between the more famous orators. As Andy—from what she did hear—appeared to be talking about loaves, and sugar, and bacon, and things of that sort, she was of opinion that she was not missing very much, and was surprised to see the men listening and the bareheaded women nodding approvingly and nudging one another in the ribs. "He's jolly good! Upon my word, he is," said Billy Foot suddenly, and old Jack chuckled delightedly. When Andy sat down, without any peroration, she said to Billy, "Was he good? It sounded rather dull to me. Yours was fine, Billy!"

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"Awfully glad you liked it. But they'll forget my jokes; they'll talk about old Andy's figures when they get home. Every woman in the place'll want to prove 'em right or wrong. Gad, how he must have mugged all that up!"

Then came Harry; to him she listened, at him she looked. Whatever the difficulties of his private life might be, they did not avail to spoil his speaking; it is conceivable that they improved it, since nerves on the strain sometimes result in brilliant flashes. And he looked so handsome, with pale, eager, excited face. He could fall in love with a subject almost as deeply, almost as quickly, as with a woman, and for the moment he hardly less devoted to it, heart and soul. Perhaps he was a little over the heads of most of his audience, but they knew that it was a fine performance and were willing to take for granted some things which they did not understand.

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"That's talking, that is!" said a man near the car. "Mr. Harry's the one to give ye that."

Of course the Nun was persuaded in the matter of the National Anthem. Billy led her round to the platform, where Lord Meriton welcomed her, and introduced her to the meeting as Miss Doris Flower, the famous London singer, who had kindly consented to sing the National Anthem. For once in her life the Nun was very nervous, but she sang. Her sweet voice and her remarkable prettiness stormed the meeting. They would have another song. The applause brought back her confidence. Before she had become a nun or a Quaker she had once been, in early days, a Cameron Highlander. A couple of martial and patriotic ditties remained in her memory; she gave them one, and excited enthusiasm. They cried for more—more! An encore was insisted upon. In spite of the brilliant speakers, the Nun was the heroine of the evening. She bowed, she smiled, she fell altogether in love with Meriton. Thoughts of the Lion rose strongly in her mind.

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"A great success, and we owe a great deal of it to you, Miss Flower," said the noble chairman. "You just put the crown on it all. I wish we could have you here at election time!"

The whole platform besought the Nun to come down at election time with more patriotic songs. Most urgent was the pretty, slight, fair girl who was Harry Belfield's *fiancée*. Her eyes were so friendly and gentle that the Nun could refuse her nothing.

"At one bound, Doris, you've become a personage in Meriton," laughed Billy Foot.

"She's a personage wherever she goes," said Andy in frank and affectionate admiration.

The Nun gurgled happily. But where was her old friend Harry with his congratulations? He had greeted her, but not with much enthusiasm; he was now talking to the other girl—Miss Vintry—in a low voice, with a frown on his face; he looked weary and spent. She moved over to him and laid her hand on his arm; he started violently.

"I'll never laugh at you about your speeches again, Harry. But, poor old fellow, how done up you look!"

"Doing this sort of thing every night's pretty tiring."

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"Besides all the other things you have to do just now! I think I must come and stay at the Lion and look after you."

Harry looked at her with an expression that puzzled her; it almost seemed like resentment,

though the idea was surely absurd. Miss Vintry said nothing; she stood by in silent composure.

"You're thinking of—of coming to Meriton?"

"I had an idea of it, for a week or two. I'm doing nothing, you know. Sally would come with me."

"I should think you'd find it awfully dull," said Harry.

The Nun could not make him out. Was he ashamed of her? Did he not want her to know Miss Wellgood, his *fiancée*? It almost looked like that. The Nun was a little hurt. She was aware that certain people held certain views; but Harry was an old, old friend. "Well, if I do come and find it dull, you needn't feel responsible. You haven't pressed me, have you?" and with a little laugh she went back to more expansive friends.

"That'd make another of them, and she's infernally sharp!" Harry said to Isobel Vintry, in that low careful voice to which he was nowadays so much addicted.

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"Oh well, we can't keep it up this way long anyhow," she answered, and sauntered off to join Vivien.

With Billy, with Andy, as with old Jack, the Nun found enthusiasm enough and to spare.

"How perfectly ripping an idea!" cried Billy. "Because Harry's governor had asked me to stay a fortnight at Halton, and do half a dozen more meetings; and I'm going to. And Andy'll be down here too. Why, we shall all be together! You come, Doris!"

Her hurt feelings found expression. "Harry didn't seem to want me when I spoke to him about it."

Billy Foot looked at her curiously. "Oh, didn't he?" Andy had moved off with Jack Rock. "It's a funny thing, but I don't think he wants me at Halton. He was far from enthusiastic. If you ask me, Doris, there's something wrong with him. Overworked, I suppose. Oh, but he can't be; these little meetings are no trouble."

"If I want to come, I shall. Only one doesn't like the idea that one's friends are ashamed—"

"Oh, rot, it can't be that! That's not a bit like Harry."

"He's engaged now, you know."

"Well, I can't see why that should make any difference. He's got the blues over something or other; never mind him. You come, you and Sally."

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She lowered her voice. "Can it be because of poor old Sally?"

"Oh, I don't think so. He's always been awfully kind about that wretched old business."

"It's something," she persisted with a vexed frown.

Vivien Wellgood came up to them with Andy. "Mr. Hayes tells me you may possibly come to Meriton for a stay, Miss Flower. I do hope you will. The Lion's quite good, and we'll all do all we can to amuse you, if only you'll sing to us just now and then. Do say you'll come; don't only think about it!"

"Your being so kind makes me want to come more," said the Nun. "Oh, and I do congratulate you, Miss Wellgood. I hope you'll be ever so happy."

"Thank you. I hope so," said Vivien softly, her eyes assuming their veiled look.

The car was waiting; Seymour was yawning and looking at his watch. The Nun said her farewells, but not one to Harry Belfield, who had already strolled off along the road. Not very polite of Harry!

"Did you like the speeches, Seymour?" she inquired.

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"Mr. Foot, of course, is a good speaker. The other gentlemen did very well for such a meeting as this, Miss Flower. Mr. Belfield is very promising."

"Was I in good voice?"

"Very fair. But you had better not use it much in the open air. Not good for the chords, Miss Flower."

Meanwhile he had skilfully tucked her in with Billy Foot, and off they went, Billy comforting himself after his labours with a pull at his flask and a very big cigar.

"I've made you do some work for the good cause to-night, Doris," he remarked. "A song or two goes jolly well at a meeting."

"Thinking of enlisting me in your own service?" she asked.

"You'd be uncommon valuable. The man they're putting up against me has got a pretty wife." Billy allowed himself a glance; it met with inadequate appreciation.

"Oh, I'll come and sing for you if you ask me, Billy." Her voice sounded absent. She was enjoying the motion and the air, but her thoughts were with Vivien Wellgood, the girl who had been so kind, and whose eyes had gone blank when the Nun wished her happiness.

"Yes, Harry's off colour," said Billy, puffing away with much enjoyment. "He can't take anything right; didn't even like your story!"

pg 296

"Why, you brought it in so cleverly, Billy!"

"Harry asked me what I thought they'd make of that kind of rot. It seemed to me they took it all right. Rather liked it, didn't they?"

The Nun turned to him suddenly. "That girl isn't happy."

"There's something up!" Billy concluded.

"Do you know that Miss Vintry well?"

Billy took his cigar out of his mouth and looked at her. "You do jump to conclusions."

"Oh, I know Harry better than any of you."

"Do you?" he asked, seeming just a little disturbed.

The Nun marked his disturbance with a side glance of amusement, but she was not diverted from the main line of her thoughts. "He doesn't want me to come to Meriton—"

"I say, Doris, did Harry Belfield ever try to—?"

"Tales out of school? I thought you knew me, Billy."

The reproach carried home to Billy. There had been one occasion when, over-night, his career had seemed not so imperative, and Doris had seemed very imperative indeed, demanding vows and protestations of high fervour, bearing only one legitimate interpretation. This happened long before Billy was K.C. or M.P., and when his income was still meagre. The morning had brought back counsel, and thoughts of the career. Billy had written a letter. The next time they met, she had taken occasion to observe that she always burnt letters, just as she never fell in love. The episode was not among Billy's proudest recollections. In telling Andy that Billy had always pulled himself up on the brink, the Nun had been guilty of just this one suppression. No tales out of school was always her motto.

pg 297

"If he does come to grief, it'll be over a woman," said Billy. He took a big puff. "That's the only thing worth coming to grief over, either," he added, looking into his companion's eyes.

"What about the great cause I sang for?" she asked, serenely evasive. Sentiment in a motor-car at night really does not count.

Billy laughed. "I do my best for my client."

"But you believe it?"

"Honestly, I believe we've got, say, seven points out of ten. So we ought to get the verdict."

"I suppose that's honest enough. You leave the other side to put their three points?"

"That oughtn't to be over-straining them," Billy opined.

"Politics are rather curious. I might go to another meeting or two while I'm at Meriton; but I won't sing out of doors any more. Seymour doesn't approve of it."

pg 298

"You're really going to take rooms there?"

"Yes, if Sally consents." She turned round to him. "Do you know what it is to see somebody asking for help?"

"To me they always call it temporary assistance."

"Yes. Well, I think I saw that to-night." She was silent a minute, then she gurgled. "And really they're all great fun, you know."

"I look forward to our stay at Meriton with the gravest apprehension," said Billy Foot.

The Nun looked at him, smiled, looked away, looked back once more.

"Well, I shall have nothing else to do—in the way of recreation," she said.

A long silence followed. Billy threw away the stump of his cigar.

"Hang it, he's got the style, that fellow has!"

"Who's got what style?" asked the Nun. Her voice sounded drowsy.

"What the House likes—Andy."

"What house?" drawled the Nun, terribly and happily sleepy.

"Oh, you're a lively girl to drive home with in a motor at night!"

Her eyes were closed, her lips ever so little parted. Half asleep, still she smiled. He made a trumpet of his hands and shouted into her ear. "The House of Commons, stupid!"

pg 299

"Don't tickle my ear," said the Nun. "And try if you can't be quiet!"

## Chapter XV.

pg 300

### LOVE AND FEAR.

Well might Harry Belfield be subject to fits of temper and impatience! Well might he show signs of wear and tear not to be accounted for by the labours of a mild political campaign, carried on under circumstances of great amenity! He had fallen into a state of feeling which forbade peace within, and made security from without impossible. He was terribly at war in his soul. If he could have put the case so simply as that, being pledged to one girl, he had fallen in love with another, he would have had a plain solution open to him: he could break the engagement, facing the pain that he gave and the discredit that he suffered. His feelings admitted of no such straightforward remedy. The beliefs and the aspirations with which he had wooed Vivien were not dead; they were struggling for life against their old and mighty enemy. For him Vivien still meant happiness, and more than happiness—a haven for anything that was good in him, a refuge from all that was bad. With all his instincts of pure affection, of loyalty and chivalry, still he loved her and clung to her. She it was still who had power to comfort and soothe him, to send him forth able to do his work again. She was the best thing in his life; she seemed to him well-nigh his only chance against himself. Was he to throw the last chance away?

pg 301

Then why not be true? Why deceive when he loved? Every day, nay, every hour, that question had to be asked in scorn and answered in bitterness. His happiness lay with one; the present desire of his eyes was for another. His mind towards Isobel was strange: often he hardly liked her; sometimes his hatred for what she was doing to his life made him almost hate her; always his passion for her was strong and compelling. Since the stolen kiss had set it aflame, it had spread and spread through him, fed by their secret interviews, till it seemed now to consume all his being in one fierce blaze. How could affectionate and loyal instincts stand against it? Yet he hated it. All the good of his nature his kindness, his amiability, his chivalry—hated it. He was become as it were two men; and the one reviled the other. But when he reviled the passion in him as the murderer of all his happiness, it answered with a fell insinuation. Why these heroics and this despair? Why talk of happiness being murdered? There was another way. "Don't murder happiness for me," passion urged slyly. "I am violent, but I am a passing thing. You know how often I have come to you, and raged, and passed by. There's another way." That whisper was ever in his ears, and would not be silenced. That it might gain its end, his passion subtly minimized itself; it sought to enter into an unnatural alliance with his better part; it prayed in aid his purer love, his tottering loyalty, his old-time chivalry. A permanent reconciliation with these it could not, and dared not, ask; but a *modus vivendi* till it, transitory thing as it was, should pass away? So the tempter tempted with all his cunning.

pg 302

Avoiding plain words for what that way was, he was seduced into asking whether it were open. He could not answer. Through all the stolen interviews, through other stolen kisses, he had never come to the knowledge of Isobel's heart and mind. He could read no more than she chose to let him read. She allowed his flirtation and his kisses, but almost scornfully. When he declared his state to be intolerable, she told him it was easy to end it—easy to end either the engagement or the flirtation at his option. She had not owned to love. A certain sour amusement seemed to lie for her in the affair. "We're a pair of fools," her eyes seemed to say when he embraced her, "but it doesn't much matter; nothing can come of it, and it'll soon be all over." When he saw that look, his old desire for conquest came over him; he was impelled at any cost to break down this indifference, to make his sway complete. Of her relations towards Wellgood she had flatly refused to say another word. "The less we talk about that just now the better." In some such phrase she always forbade the topic. There again he was left in an uncertainty which stung his pride and bred a fierce jealousy. By what she gave and what she withheld, by her silence no less than by her words, she inflamed his passion. She yielded enough to fill him with desire and hope of a full triumph; but even though she yielded, though her voice might falter and her eyes drop, she did not own love's mastery yet.

pg 303

Thus torn and rent within, from without he seemed ringed round with enemies. Eyes that must needs be watchful were all about him. There was Andy Hayes with his chance knowledge of the first false step; Wellgood, who must have a jealous vigilance for the woman whom he had at least

thought of making his wife; his own father, with his shrewd estimate of his son and acquaintance with past histories; Vivien herself, to whom he must still play devoted lover, with whom most spare hours must still be spent. To add to all these, now there came this girl from London! She had knowledge of past histories too; she had the sharpest of eyes; he feared even the directness of her tongue. Andy had seen, but not spoken; he did not trust Doris, if she saw, not to speak. He was terribly afraid of her. Small wonder that the suggestion of her stay at the Lion had called forth no enthusiasm from him! She took rank as an enemy the more. And Billy Foot was to be at Halton! She and Billy would lay their heads together and talk. Out of talk would come suspicion, out of suspicion more watchfulness. It was no business of theirs, but they would watch.

Political campaigning amidst all this! Well, in part it was a relief. The speeches and their preparation perforce occupied his mind for the time; on his platforms he forgot. Yet to go away—to leave Nutley for so many hours—seemed to his overwrought fancy a sore danger. What might happen while he was away? To what state of things might he any evening come back? Vivien might have revealed suspicions to Wellgood, or Wellgood might have challenged Isobel and compelled an answer. Once when Andy did not come to the meeting, he made sure that he had stayed behind on purpose to reveal his knowledge to Vivien or her father, and the evening was a long torture which no speeches could deaden, no applause allay.

In this fever of conflict and of fear his days passed. At this cost he bought the joy of the stolen interviews—that joy so mixed with doubt, so tainted by pain, so assailed by remorse. Yet for him so tense, so keen, so surcharged with the great primitive struggle. Ten minutes stolen once a day—it seldom came to more than that. Now and then, when he had no political excursion, a second ten, late at night, after his ostensible departure from Nutley. When he had "gone home," when Vivien had been sent to bed, and Wellgood had repaired to his pipe in the study, Isobel would chance to wander down the drive, looking into the waters of the lake, and he, lingering by the gate, see her and come back. Whether she would saunter out or not he never knew. Waiting to see whether she would seemed waiting for the fate of a lifetime.

One night—a week after the Fyfold Green meeting, a day after the Nun had taken possession of her quarters at the Lion—Harry had dined at Nutley and—gone home.

Isobel stole stealthily out; she had a quarter of an hour before doors would be locked. She strolled down the drive, a long dark cloak hiding the white dress which would have shown too conspicuously. As she went she dropped a letter; coming back she would pick it up. If any one asked why she had come out, the answer was—to find that letter, accidentally dropped. There had never been need of the excuse yet; it was still available.

Harry came swiftly, yet warily, back from the gate. For a fleeting instant all his being seemed satisfied. But she stretched out her arms, holding him off.

"No, I want to say something, Harry. This—this has gone on long enough. To-morrow I want you to know—only Miss Vintry!" There was the break in her voice; it was too dark to see her eyes.

"That's impossible," he answered, very low.

"Everything else is impossible, you mean." Her voice faltered again—into a tenderness new to him, filling him with rapture. "You're dying of it, poor boy! End it, Harry! I watched you to-night. Oh, you're tired to death—do you ever sleep? End it, Harry—because I can't."

So she had broken at last, her long fencing ended, her strong composure gone. "I can't bear it for you any longer. Have the strength. Go back to—" She broke into tremulous laughter. "Go back to duty, Harry—and forget this nonsense."

"Come to me, Isobel!"

"No, I daren't. From to-morrow there is—nothing."

He caught the arms that would have defended her face. "You love me?"

Her smile was piteous. "Not after to-night!"

His triumph rose on the crest of passion. "Ah, you do!" He kissed her.

"That's good-bye," she said. "I shall go through it all right, Harry. You'll see no signs. Or would you rather I went away?"

"What made you tell me you loved me to-night?"

"So many things are tormenting you, poor boy! Must I go on doing it? Oh, I have done it, I know. It was my self-defence. Now my self-defence must be forgetfulness." The clock over the stables struck a quarter past ten. "I must go back. I've told you."

"Do you see Wellgood before you go to bed?"

"Yes, always."

"What happens?"

"Don't, don't, Harry! What does it matter?"

"Are you going to marry him?"

"You're going to marry Vivien! I must go—or the door will be locked." A smile wavered at him in the darkness. "It's back to the house or into the lake!"

pg 308

"Swear you'll manage to see me to-morrow!"

"Yes, yes, anything. And—good-bye."

He let her go—without another kiss. His mind was all of a whirl. She sped swiftly up the avenue. He made for the gate with furtive haste.

Isobel came to a stop. As the shawl had gone once, the letter had gone. Whither? Had the wind taken it? She had heard no tread, but what could she have heard save the beating of her own heart? No use looking for it.

"Ah, miss," said the butler, who had just come to lock up, "so you'd missed it? I saw it blowing about, and went and picked it up. And you've been searching for it, miss?"

"Yes, Fellowes. Thanks. I must have dropped it this afternoon. Good-night."

She went in; the hall door was bolted behind her. The letter had served its purpose, but she was hardly awake to the fact that anything had happened about the letter. She had told Harry! The great secret was out. Oh, such bad tactics! Such a dangerous thing to do! But everybody had a breaking-point. Hers had been reached that night—for herself as well as for his sake. Nobody could live like this any longer.

Now it was good-night to Wellgood; another ten minutes there—the one brief space of time in which he played the lover, masterfully, roughly, secure from interruption.

pg 309

"I can't do it to-night!" she groaned, leaning against the wall of the passage between drawing-room and study, as though stricken by a failure of the heart.

There she rested for minutes. The lights were left for Wellgood to find his way by when he went to bed; Fellowes would not come to put them out. And there the truth came to her. She could not play that deep-laid game. She could no more try for Harry, and yet keep Wellgood in reserve. It was too hard, too hideous, too unnatural. She dared not try any more for Harry; she had lost confidence in herself. She could not keep Wellgood—it was too odious. Then what to do? To tell Wellgood, too, that from to-morrow there was only Miss Vintry? Yes! And to try to tell Harry so again to-morrow? Yes!

She had sought to make puppets and to pull the strings. Vivien, Wellgood, Harry—all the puppets of her cool, clever, contriving brain. It had been a fine scheme, bound to end well for her. Now she was revealed as a puppet herself; she danced to the string. The great scheme broke down—because Harry had looked tired and worried, because Wellgood's rough fondness had grown so odious.

pg 310

"I won't go to him to-night. He can't follow me if I go straight upstairs." The thought came as an inspiration; at least it offered a reprieve till to-morrow.

The study door opened, and Wellgood looked out. Isobel was behind her time; he was waiting for his secret ten minutes, his stolen interview.

"Isobel! What the deuce are you doing there? Why didn't you come in?"

The part she had been trying to play, and had backed herself to play, seemed to have become this evening, of a sudden on this evening, more than hopeless. It had turned ridiculous; it must have been caught from some melodrama. She had been playing the scheming dazzling villain of a woman, heartless, with never a feeling, intent only on the title, or the money, or the diamonds, or whatever it might be, single in purpose, desperate in action, glitteringly hard, glitteringly fearless. What nonsense! How away from human nature! She was now terribly afraid. Playing that part, which seemed now so ridiculous because it assumed that there was no real woman in her, she had brought herself into a perilous pass—between one man's love and another man's wrath. She knew which she feared the more; but she feared both. Somehow her confession to Harry had taken all the courage out of her. She felt as if she could not stand any more by herself. She wanted Harry.

pg 311

She could not tell Wellgood that henceforth there was to be only his daughter's companion, only Miss Vintry; she could not tell him that to-night. Neither could she play the old part to-night—suffer his fondness, and defend herself with the shining weapons of her wit and her provocative parries.

"I—I think I turned faint. I was coming in, but I turned faint. My heart, I think."

"I never heard of anything being the matter with your heart." His voice sounded impatient rather than solicitous.



"Please let me go straight to bed to-night. I'm really not well."

He came along the passage to her. He took her by the shoulders and looked hard in her face. Now she summoned her old courage to its last stand and met his gaze steadily.

"You look all right," he said with a sneer, yet smiling at her handsomeness.

"Oh, of course, yes! At least I shall be to-morrow morning. Let me go now." Really, at the moment, to be let go was her only desire.

"Be off with you, then," he said, smartly tapping—almost slapping—her cheek. "But you'll have to give me twice as long to-morrow." pg 312

He turned on his heel. With a smarting cheek she fled down the passage.

Though disappointed of his ten minutes, Wellgood was on the whole not ill-pleased. The calm composure, the suppression of emotion which he admired so much in theory—and as exhibited in Vivien's companion—he had begun to find a little overdone for his taste in his own lover. To-night there was a softness about her, a gentleness—signs of fear. The signs of fear were welcome to his nature. He felt that he had taken a step towards asserting his proper position, and she one towards acknowledging it. He was also more than ever sure that he need pay no heed to Belfield's silly hints. The old fellow seemed to assume that his precious son was irresistible! Wellgood chuckled over that. He chuckled again over the thought that, if Isobel were going to be like this, they might have a difficulty in keeping their secret till the proper time.

Isobel's confession to Harry was a confession to herself also. If it left her with one great excuse, it stripped her of all others. She could no longer say that she was making her woman's protest against being reckoned of no account, or that she was merely punishing Harry for daring to think that he could play with her and come off scathless himself. Even the great excuse found its force impaired, because she had brought her state upon herself. Led by those impulses of pride or of spite, she had set herself to tamper with Vivien's happiness; in the attempt she had fatally involved her own. pg 313

Some of her old courage—her old hardness—remained, not altogether swept away by the new current. "I shall get over it in time," she told herself impatiently. "These things don't last a lifetime." True, perhaps! But meanwhile—the time before the wedding? To-morrow, when she had promised to meet Harry? Every day after that—when he must come to woo Vivien? There had been protection for her in pretences. Pretences were over with Harry; they had to go on with Vivien and with Wellgood. On both sides of her position she felt herself now in a sore peril; it had become so much harder to blind the others, so infinitely harder to hold Harry back, if it were his mind to advance. Tasks like these perhaps needed the zest of pride and spite to make them possible—to make them tolerable anyhow. She loathed them now.

Next day she kept her room. Courage failed. Wellgood grumbled about women's vapours, but in his caution asked no questions and showed no concern. Harry, coming in the afternoon, in his caution risked no more than a polite inquiry and a polite expression of regret. Yet he had come hot of heart, resolved—resolved on what? To break his engagement? No, he was not resolved on that. To know in future only Vivien's companion, Miss Vintry? No. He had been resolved on nothing, save to see Isobel again, and to hear once more her love. To what lay beyond he was blind; his heart was obstinately set on the one desire, and had eyes for nothing else. But Isobel was not to be seen; he accused her of her old tactics—making advances, then drawing back. The whole thing had begun that way; she was at it again! Was he never to feel quite sure of her? She paid the price of past cunning, she who now lay in simple fear. pg 314

Vivien watched her lover's pale face and fretful gestures. Harry seemed always on a strain now, and the means he adopted to relieve it would not be permanently beneficial to his nerves; whisky-and-soda and cigarettes in quick succession were his prescription this afternoon. In vain she tried to soothe him, as she still sometimes could. He was now merry, now moody, often amusing, gay, gallant. He was everything except the contented man he had been in the early days.

"The dear old Rector's a little tiresome, Harry, isn't he? He won't fix the date of his return within a week. And I couldn't be married by anybody else, he'd be so hurt. Naturally he doesn't think a few days one way or the other matter. He doesn't think of my frocks!" pg 315

"Nor of my feelings either," said Harry, gallantly kissing her hand.

"Do you mind very much?" she asked shyly.

"I'll do anything you like about it." He caressed her hand gently, kindly. He had at least the grace to feel shame for himself, pity for her—when he was with her.

"Harry, are you quite—quite happy?"

He made his effort. "I should be as happy as the day's long if it weren't for those wretched meetings that take up half my time." His voice grew fretful. "And they worry me to death."

"They'll soon be over now, and then we can have all the time to ourselves together." She looked

at him with a smile. "If only you won't get tired of that!"

He made his protest. Suddenly a memory of other protests swept over him—of how they had begun by being wholehearted and vehement, and had sunk first to weakness, then to insincerity, at last to silence. He hoped his present protest sounded all right.

"Oh, you needn't be too vehement!" she laughed, with a little shake of her head. "I know myself, and I believe I know more about you than you think. I'm quite aware that you'll sometimes be bored with me, Harry."

pg 316

"Who's put that idea in your head?" he asked rather sharply. His mind was on those enemies, that ring of watching eyes.

"Nobody except yourself—who else should?" she asked in surprise. "After all I've seen of you, I ought to know that you have your moods—I suppose clever men have—and that I don't suit all the moods equally well." She squeezed his hand for a second. "But I'm going to be very wise—Isobel's taught me to be wise, among other things, you know—I'm going to be very wise, and not mind that!"

The true affection rose in him. "Poor little sweetheart!" he murmured. "I'm afraid you haven't taken on an easy job."

"No, I don't think I have," she laughed. "All the more credit if I bring it off! There'd be nothing to be proud of in making—oh, well, Andy Hayes, for instance—happy. He just is happy as long as he can be working at something or walking somewhere—it doesn't matter where—at five miles an hour—in the dust by preference. A girl would have nothing to do but just smile at him and send him for a walk. But you're different, aren't you, Harry?"

pg 317

"By Jove, I am! Andy's one of the best fellows in the world."

"Yes, but I think—oh, it's only my view—that you're more interesting, Harry. Only, when you are bored, I want you—"

"Now don't say you want me to tell you so! Do let us be decently polite, even if I am your husband."

She laughed. "I won't strain your manners so far as that; I'm proud of their being so good myself. No, I want you just to go away and amuse yourself somewhere else till the fit's over. You may even flirt just a little, if you feel it really necessary, Harry! You needn't be quite so religiously strict all your life as you've been lately."

"Religiously strict? How do you mean?"

"Well, all this time I don't believe you've allowed yourself one good look at Isobel, though she's very good-looking; and I know you haven't called at the Lion yet, though Miss Flower has been there two days, and she such an old friend of yours in London."

"Have you called there?"

"Yes, I went yesterday. I like her so much, and I like that odd friend of hers too."

"Oh, Sally Dutton! I suppose she got her knife into me, didn't she?"

pg 318

"She got her knife, as you call it, into everybody who was mentioned. Oh yes, including you!" Vivien laughed merrily.

"It's rather a bore—those girls coming down here. I hope we shan't see too much of them." He rose. "I'm afraid I must go, Vivien. We're due at Medfold Crossways to-night, and it's a good long drive, even with the motor. I've got to have some abominable hybrid of a meal at five."

She too rose and came to him, putting her hands in his. Her laughing face grew grave and tender.

"Dear, you really are happy?" she asked softly, yet rather insistently.

He looked into her eyes; they were not veiled or remote for him. "Honestly I believe you're the only chance of happiness I've got in the world, Vivien. Is that enough?"

"I think it's really more than being happy, or than being sure you will be happy." She smiled. "It gives me more to do, at all events."

"And if I made you unhappy?"

"Don't be hurt, please don't be hurt, but just a little of that wouldn't surprise me. Oh, my dear, you don't think I should change to you just because of a little unhappiness? When you've given me all the happiness I've ever had!"

"All you've ever had? Poor child!"

pg 319

"It wasn't quite loyal to let that slip out. And it was my own fault, of course, mostly. But they—they were sometimes rather hard on me." She smiled piteously. "For my good? Perhaps it was. Without it, you mightn't have cared for me."

"Is it as much to you as that?" he asked, a note of fear, almost of distress, in his voice.

She marked it, and answered gaily, "It wouldn't be worth having if it wasn't, Harry!"

He kissed her fondly and tenderly, praying in his heart that he might not turn all her happiness to grief.

Her presence had wrought on him at last in its old way; if it had not given him peace, yet it had shown him where the chance of peace lay, if he would take it. It had again made him hate the thing he had been doing, and himself for doing it; again it had made him almost hate the woman whom and whom only he had, in truth, that day come to see. It had made the right thing seem again within his reach, made the idea of giving up Vivien look both impossibly cruel to her and impossibly foolish for himself. Yet he was, like Isobel, in great fear—in almost hopeless fear. These two, with their imperious desire for one another, became, each to the other, a terror—in themselves terrors, and the source of every danger threatening from outside.

pg 320

"She gave me the chance of ending it last night. If only I could take her at her word!"

"Not after to-night!" she had said. He remembered the words in a flash of hope. But he remembered also that his answer had been, "Ah, you do!" and a kiss. If she said again, "Not after to-night!"—aye, said it again and again—would not the answer always be, "Ah, but to-night at least!" Such words ever promised salvation, but brought none; they were worse than useless. Under a specious pledge of the future, they abandoned the present hour.

## Chapter XVI.

pg 321

### A CHOICE OF EVILS.

The best parlour—the private sitting-room—at the Lion was on the ground floor, just opposite the private bar, and boasted a large bay window, commanding a full view of High Street. A low broad bench, comfortably cushioned, ran round the window, and afforded to Miss Flower a favourable station from which to observe what was doing in the town. On fine days, such as ruled just now, when the window was thrown up, the position also served as a rendezvous to which her growing band of friends and admirers could resort to exchange compliments, to post her in the latest news, or just to get a sight of her. Jack Rock would stroll across from his shop three or four times a day; Andy would stop a few minutes on his way to or from his lodgings; Billy would stretch his long legs over the sill and effect an entry; Vivien ask if she might come in for a few minutes; Chinks cast an eye as he hurried to his office; the Bird find an incredible number of occasions for passing on his daily duties. There the Nun sat, surveying the traffic of Meriton, and fully aware that Meriton, in its turn, honoured her with a flattering attention. Within the Lion itself she already reigned supreme; old Mr. Dove was at her feet, so was old Cox and the other *habitués* of the private bar; the Bird, as already hinted, was "knocked silly"—this contemptuous phrase for a sudden passion was Miss Miles'. Yet even Miss Miles was affable, and quite content to avenge herself for the Bird's desertion (which she justly conceived to be temporary) by a marked increase in those across-the-counter pleasantries which she had once assured her employer were carried on wholly and solely for the benefit of his business. The fact was that Miss Miles had once officiated at the bar of a "theatre of varieties," and this constituted a professional tie between the Nun and herself, strong enough to defy any trifling awkwardness caused by a wavering in the Bird's affections.

pg 322

But the Nun's most notable and complete conquest was over Mr. Belfield. Billy Foot had brought him—not his son Harry—and speedily thereafter he called on his own account, full of courtly excuses because his wife, owing to a touch of cold, was not with him; he hoped that she would be able to come very soon. (Mr. Belfield was engaged on another small domestic struggle, such as had preceded Andy Hayes' first dinner at Halton.) Serenely indifferent to the minutiae of etiquette, Miss Flower allowed it to appear that she would just as soon receive Mr. Belfield by himself.

pg 323

He interpreted her permission as applying to more than one visit; somehow or other, most days found him by the bay window, and generally, on being pressed, at leisure to come in and rest. They would chat over all manner of things together, each imparting to the other from a store of experiences strange to the listener; or together they would discuss their common friends in Meriton. She liked his shrewd and humorous wisdom; her directness and simplicity charmed him no less than the extreme prettiness of her face.

"Well, Miss Flower," he said one morning, "the boys finish their speechifying to-morrow, and then they'll be more at liberty to amuse you, instead of leaving it so much to the old stagers."

"And then you'll all be getting busy about the wedding. In three weeks now, isn't it?"

"Just a few days over three weeks. Individually I shall be glad when it's over."

"Have they done well with their speeches?" she asked. "After all my good intentions, I only went once."

pg 324

"They think they've made the seat absolutely safe for Harry. Parliament and marriage—the boy's taking on responsibilities!"

"It seems funny, when one's just played about with them! It's a funny thing to be just one of people's amusements—off the stage as well as on it."

"Oh, come!" He smiled. "Is that all you claim to be—to any of those boys?"

"That's the way they look at me—in their sober moments. Except Andy; he's quite different. He's never been about town, you see. For him girls and women are all in the same class."

"I was once about town myself," Belfield remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, and you take your son's view—and Billy Foot's." He smiled again, and she smiled too, meeting his glance directly. "Oh yes, Billy too—though he may have his temptations! Squarely now, Mr. Belfield, if—for the sake of argument—your son treated Miss Wellgood badly, or even Miss Vintry, it would seem a different thing from treating Sally or me badly, wouldn't it?"

"You do put it pretty squarely," said Belfield, twisting his lips.

"A glass of beer gives you the right to flirt with poor Miss Miles. It's supposed to be champagne with us. When you were about town—don't you remember?"

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"I suppose it was. It's not a tradition to be proud of."

"There are compensations—which some of us like. If Sally or I behave badly, who cares? But if Miss Wellgood or Miss Vintry—! Oh, dear me, the heavens would fall in Meriton!"

"By the way, I'm afraid I drive your friend away? Miss Dutton always disappears when I call."

"She generally disappears when people come. Sally's shy of strangers. Well, you know, as I was saying, Andy Hayes hasn't got that tradition. I think if I ever fell in love—I never do, Mr. Belfield—I should fall in love with a man who hadn't that tradition. But they're very hard to find."

"Let's suppose it's one of those thousand things that are going to change," he suggested, with his sceptical smile.

"Do things between men and women change much, in spite of all the talk? You've read history, I haven't."

"Yes, I have to a certain extent. I don't know that I'm inclined to give you the result of my researches. Not very cheerful! And, meanwhile, there's Andy Hayes!"

"I never do it," the Nun repeated firmly. "Besides, in this case I've not been asked. I'm not the sort of girl he would fall in love with."

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"Will you forgive an old man's compliment, Miss Flower, if I say I don't know the sort of man who wouldn't—I'll put it mildly, I'll say mightn't—fall in love with the sort of girl you are?"

"I forgive it, but it's not as clever as you generally are. Andy always wants to help. Well, I don't want anybody to help me, you see."

"The delight of the eyes?" he suggested. "What? That doesn't count? Only such as you can afford to say so!"

"I don't think it counts much with Andy. He appreciates, oh yes! He almost stared me out of countenance the first time we met; and that's supposed to be difficult—in London! But I don't think it really counts for a great deal. Andy's not a love-making man; he's emphatically a marrying man."

"You draw that distinction? But the love-making men marry?"

"In the end perhaps—generally rather by accident. They haven't the instinct."

"You've thought about these things a good deal, Miss Flower."

"I live almost entirely among men, you see," she answered simply. "And they show me more than they show girls of—of that other class. Shall I call again on your reminiscences?" She smiled suddenly and brightly. "Miss Wellgood's being awfully nice to me. She's been here twice, and I'm going to tea at Nutley to-morrow."

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"She's one of the dearest girls in the world," said Belfield. "Harry's a lucky fellow." He glanced at the Nun. "I hope he appreciates it properly. I believe he does."

She offered no comment, and a rather blank silence followed. If Belfield had sought a reassurance, he had not received it. On the other hand she gave away no secrets. She, like the

silence, was blank, looking away from him, down High Street.

The Bird passed the window; Jack Rock trotted by on a young horse; one of his business equipages clattered along not far behind him; the quiet old street basked and dozed in the sun.

"What a dear rest it is—this little town!" said the Nun softly. "Surely nothing but what's happy and peaceful and pleasant can ever happen here?"

Sally Dutton came by, returning from a stroll to which she had betaken herself on Belfield's arrival.

"Well, Sally, been amusing yourself?" the Nun called.

"The streets present their usual gay and animated aspect," observed Miss Dutton, as she entered the Lion.

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"There are the two sides of the question," laughed Belfield. "The line between peace and dullness—each man draws it for himself—in pencil—with india-rubber handy! I'm really afraid we're not amusing Miss Dutton?"

"Oh yes, she's all right. That's only her way." She smiled reflectively; Sally always amused her.

Belfield rose to take leave. "We can't let Nutley beat us," he said. "We must have you at Halton too!" He was led into assuming that his little domestic struggle would end in victory.

She looked at him, still smiling. "Wait and see how I behave at Nutley first. If Harry gives a good report of me—I suppose he'll be there?—ask me to Halton!"

He laughed, and so let the question go. After all, it would not do to be too sudden with his wife.

"You needn't be afraid of Harry. But Wellgood's rather a formidable character."

"And Miss Vintry? Is she alarming?"

He pursed up his lips. "I think she might be called a little—alarming."

"I'll have a good look at her—and perhaps I'll let you know what I think of her," said the Nun, with no more than the slightest twinkle in her eyes. It was enough for Belfield's quickness; it was much more informing than the blank silence—though even that had set him thinking.

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But the Nun's account of her first visit to Nutley chanced—or perhaps it was not chance—to be rendered not to Belfield, but to Andy Hayes. After the last meeting of the campaign, he had gone round to smoke a pipe with Jack Rock. Leaving him hard on midnight—there had been much to be wormed out of Andy concerning his speeches, their reception, the applause—he saw a light still burning in the window at the Lion. As he drew near, he perceived that the window was open, and he heard a voice crooning softly. He made bold to look in. The Nun was alone; she sat in the window, doing nothing, singing to herself. "Boo!" said Andy, putting his big head in at the window.

"Andy!" she cried, her face lighting up. "Jump in! You've come to scare the devils! There are a hundred of them, and they won't go away for all my singing. And Sally's gone to bed, prophesying a breaking of at least six out of the Ten Commandments! And only yesterday I told Mr. Belfield that nothing unpleasant could happen in Meriton! Where is one to go for quiet if things happen in Meriton?"

An outburst like this was most unusual with the Nun. It produced on Andy's face such a look of mild wonder as may be seen on a St. Bernard's when a toy-terrier barks furiously.

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"What's happened?"

"I've been at Nutley."

"Oh yes! Harry came on from there in the car—got to the meeting rather late."

"Something's happened—or is happening—in that house." She looked at him sharply. "You've been here longer than I have—do you know anything? Go on with your pipe."

Andy considered long, smoking his pipe.

"You do know something!" she exclaimed.

"I've ground for some uneasiness," he admitted.

She nodded. "It was all sort of underground," she said. "Really most uncomfortable! They'd try to get away from it, and yet come back to it—those three—Mr. Wellgood, Harry, and that Miss Vintry. Poor Vivien seemed quite outside of it all, but somehow conscious of it—and unhappy. She saw there was—what shall I say?—antagonism, you know. And she didn't know why. Have you seen anything that would make Mr. Wellgood savage if he saw it?"

"He didn't see what I saw."

"Not that time anyhow!" she amended quickly.

Andy frowned. "That time, I mean, of course. If he's seen anything of that sort, or suspected it, naturally, as Vivien Wellgood's father—"

"Vivien's father!" Her tone was full of impatience for his stupidity. "I suppose no woman has ever been to Nutley lately? Oh, Vivien's not one; she's a saint—and that's neither male nor female. Vivien's father!"

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"I've been there off and on," said Andy.

"You! Have you ever seen—not that I suppose you'd notice it—a woman keeping two men from one another's throats, trying to make them think there's nothing to quarrel about, trying to say things that one could take in one way, and the other in the other—and third persons not take in any way at all? Oh, it's a pretty game, and I'm bound to say she plays it finely. But she's on thin ice, that woman, and she knows it. Vivien's father!"

"Why do you go on repeating 'Vivien's father'?"

"I won't." She leant forward and laid her small hand on his arm. "Isobel Vintry's lover, then! The man's in love with her, Andy, as sure as we sit here. In love—and furious!"

"I'd never thought of that. Do you feel sure of it?"

"You have thought of the other thing—and you're sure of that?"

"You know Harry. I hoped it would all—all come to nothing. How much do you think Wellgood knows, or suspects?"

"Hard to say. I think he's groping in the dark. He's had a check, I expect, or a set-back. Men always think that's due to another man—I suppose it generally is. Well, it's not you, and it's not Billy. Who else sees her—who else goes to Nutley?"

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"But he'd never suspect his own daughter's—"

"You do!"

"I had the evidence of my eyes."

"Jealousy's quicker than the eyes, Andy." She leant forward again. "What did you see?"

"It seems disloyal to tell—disloyal to Harry."

"My loyalty's for Vivien!" she said. "What about yours?"

"Take it that what I saw justifies your fears about Harry," said Andy slowly. "I think—I'm not sure—I think he suspects I saw. I don't know whether she does." He was not aware that Isobel had made herself quite certain of his knowledge. "But it's nearly a month ago. You know Harry. I hoped it was all over. Only he seemed a little—queer."

"'Come and spend a quiet afternoon in the garden'—that was her invitation. Poor girl!"

"That's what you called her the first time I told you of their engagement."

"A nice quiet afternoon—sitting on the top of a volcano! With an eruption overdue!"

"It isn't possible to feel quite comfortable about it, is it?" said Andy.

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The Nun laughed a little scornfully. "Not quite. Going to do anything about it?"

Andy raised his eyes to hers. "I owe almost everything I value most in the world to Harry, directly or indirectly; even what I owe to you and Jack came in a way through him."

"And he's never taken ten minutes' real trouble about you in his life."

"I'm not sure that makes any difference—even if it's true. He stands for all those things to me. As for Miss Vintry—" He shrugged his ponderous shoulders.

"Oh, by all means to blazes with Miss Vintry!" the Nun agreed pleasantly.

Miss Dutton put her head in at the door—her hair about her shoulders. "Ever coming to bed?"

"Not yet. I'm talking to Andy. Don't you see him, Sally?"

"It's not respectable."

"The window's open, there's a street lamp opposite, and a policeman standing under it. Good-

night."

"Well, don't come into my room and wake me up jawing." Miss Dutton withdrew.

The Nun looked at Andy. "I wonder if it's quite fair to say 'To blazes with Miss Vintry!'"

"You said it with a good deal of conviction a moment ago. What makes you—?" His eyes met hers.

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"Who told you about Sally? I never did," the Nun exclaimed.

"Harry, after our first supper."

"Here was rather the same case—only, of course, she never knew the other girl. I think that makes a difference. And she never really had a chance. That makes no difference, I suppose. The policeman's gone. I expect you'd better go too, Andy."

Andy swung his legs over the window-sill. "Are you going to try and put your oar in?" he asked.

"Would you think me wrong if I did?"

Andy sat quite a long while on the window-sill, dangling his legs over the pavement of High Street.

"I've thought about it a good deal," he answered. "Especially lately."

She knelt on the broad low bench just behind him. "Yes, and the result—when you're ready?"

"I think a row would be the best thing that could happen." He turned his face round to her as he spoke.

The Nun gasped. "That's thorough," she remarked. "So much for your opinion about Harry!"

"Yes, so much for that," Andy admitted.

"If there is a row, I hope you'll be there."

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"Oh, I don't!" exclaimed Andy with a natural and human sincerity.

"To prevent bloodshed!" She laid her hand on his arm. "I'm not altogether joking. I didn't like Mr. Wellgood's eyes this afternoon." She patted his arm gently before she withdrew her hand. "Good-night, dear old Andy. You're terribly right as a rule. But about this—" She broke off, impatiently jerking her head.

With a clasp of her hand and a doleful smile, Andy let his legs drop on the pavement and departed.

So that was his verdict, given with all his deliberation, with all the weight of his leisurely broad-viewing judgment. The real thing to avoid was not the "row;" that was his conclusion. There was a thing, then, worse than the "row"—the thing for which Halton and Nutley—nay, all Meriton, would soon be making joyful preparation. His calm face had not moved even at her word "bloodshed." Oh yes, Andy was thorough! Not even that word swayed his mind. Perhaps he did not believe in her fears. But his look had not been scornful; it had been thoughtfully interrogative. He had possessed that knowledge of his for a long while; he had never used it. At first from loyalty to Harry—even now that would, she thought, be enough to make him very loth to use it. But another reason was predominant, born of his long silent brooding. He had come to a conclusion about his hero; the court had taken time for consideration; the judgment was advised. There was no helping some people. They must be left to their own ways, their own devices, their own doom. To help them was to harm others; to fight for them was to serve under the banner of wrong and of injustice. Friendship and loyalty could not justify that.

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The conclusion seemed a hard one. She stood long at the big window—a dainty little figure thrown up by the light behind her—painfully reaching forward to the understanding of how what seems hardness may be a broader, a truer, a better-directed sympathy, how it may be a duty to leave a wastrel to waste, how not every drowning man is worth the labour that it takes to get him out of the water—for that once. At all events, not worth the risk of another, a more valuable life.

And that was his conclusion about his hero, the man to whom he owed, as he had said, almost everything he prized? Had he, then, any right to the conclusion, right in the abstract though it might be? It was a hard world that drove men to such hard conclusions.

The case was hard—and the conclusion. But not, of necessity, the man who painfully arrived at it. Yet the man might be biassed; sympathy for the deceived might paint the deceiver's conduct in colours even blacker than the truth demanded. Doris did not think of this, in part because the judgment had seemed too calm and too reluctant to be the offspring of bias, more because, if there were any partiality in it, she herself had become a no less strong, and a more impetuous, adherent of the same cause. Vivien had won all her fealty. The one pleasant feature of the afternoon had been when Vivien walked home with her and, wrought upon by the troubled atmosphere of Nutley even though ignorant of its cause, had opened her heart to Harry's old

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friend, to a girl who, as she felt, must know more of the world than she did, and perhaps, out of her experience, could comfort and even guide. With sweet and simple gravity, with a delicacy that made her confidence seem still reserved although it was well-nigh complete, she showed to her companion her love and her apprehension—a love so pure in quality, an apprehension based on so rare an understanding of the man she loved. She did not know the things he had done, nor the thing he was now doing; but the man himself she knew, and envisaged dimly the perils by which he was beset. Her loving sympathy tried to leap across the wide chasm that separated her life and her nature from his, and came wonderfully little short of its mark.

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"I really knew hardly anything about him when I accepted him; he was just a girl's hero to me. But I have watched and watched, and now I know a good deal."

An excellent mood for a wife, no doubt—or for a husband—excellent, and, it may be, inevitable. But for a lover yet unmated, a bride still to be, a girl in her first love? Should she not leave reverend seniors to prate to her—quite vainly—of difficulties and dangers, while her fancy is roaming far afield in dreamy lands of golden joy? To endeavour, by an affectionate study of and consideration for your partner, to avoid unhappiness and to give comfort—such is wont to be the text of the officiating minister's little homily at a wedding. Is it to be supposed that bride and bridegroom are putting the matter quite that way in their hearts? If they were, a progressive diminution in the marriage-rate might be expected.

So ran the Nun's criticism, full of sympathy with the girl, not perhaps quite so full of sympathy for what seemed to her an over-saintly abnegation of her sex's right. The bitterest anti-feminist will agree that a girl should be worshipped while she is betrothed; he will allow her that respite of dominion in a life which, according to his opponents, his theories reduce, for all its remaining years, to servitude. Vivien was already serving—serving and watching anxiously—amid all her love. At this Doris rebelled—she who never fell in love. But she was quicker to grow fond of people than to criticize their points of view. Vivien's over-saintliness did sinful Harry's cause no service. If this were Vivien's mood in the light of her study of what her lover was, how would she stand towards the knowledge of what he did?

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Yet Andy Hayes thought that the best thing now possible was that she should come to the knowledge of it—that was what he meant by there being a "row." That opinion of his was a mightily strong endorsement of Vivien's anxiety.

"Don't you now and then feel like backing out of it?" the Nun had asked with her usual directness.

Vivien's answer came with a laugh, suddenly scornful, suddenly merry, "Why, it's all my life!"

The Nun shook her sage little head; these things were not all people's lives—oh dear, no! She knew better than that, did Doris! But then the foolish obstinate folk would go on believing that they were, and thereby, for the time, made the trouble just as great as though their delusion were gospel truth.

Then Vivien had turned penitent about her fears, and remorseful for the expression of them. By an easy process penitence led to triumph, and she fell to singing Harry's praises, to painting again that brightly coloured future—the marvellous things to be seen and done by Harry's side. She smiled gently, rather mysteriously; the sound of the wonderful words was echoing in her ears. Doris saw her face, and pressed her hand in a holy silence.

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The result of her various conversations, of her own reflections, and of her personal inspection of the situation at Nutley was to throw Miss Doris Flower into perhaps the gravest perplexity under which she had ever suffered. When you are accustomed to rule your life—and other people's, on occasion—by the simple rule of doing the obvious thing, it is disconcerting to be confronted with a case in which there appears to be no obvious thing to do, where there is only a choice of evils, and the choice seems balanced with a perverse and malicious equality. From Vivien's side of the matter—Doris troubled herself no more with her old friend Harry's—the marriage was risky far beyond the average of matrimonial risks; but the "row" was terribly risky too, with the girl in that mood about "all her life." If she had that mood badly upon her, she might do—well, girls did do all sorts of things sometimes, holding that life had nothing left in it.

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Though there was nothing obvious, there must be something sensible; at least one thing must be more sensible than the other. Was it more sensible to do nothing—which was to favour the "row"—or to attempt something—which was to work for the marriage? Her temperament asserted itself, and led her to a conclusion in conflict with Andy's. She was by nature inclined always to do something. In the end the "row" was a certain evil; the marriage only a risk. Men do settle down—sometimes! (She wrinkled her nose as she propounded, and qualified, this proposition.) The risk was preferable to the certainty. After all, her practical sense whispered, in these days even marriage is not wholly irrevocable. Yes, she would be for the marriage and against the "row"—and she would tell Andy that.

Something was to be done then. But what? That seemed to the Nun a much easier question—a welcome reappearance of the obvious thing.

"I must find out what the woman really wants. Until we know that, it's simply working in the dark."



So she concluded, and at last turned on her side and went to sleep.

## Chapter XVII.

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### REFORMATION.

In very truth the atmosphere at Nutley was heavy with threatening clouds; unless a fair wind came to scatter them, the storm must soon break. Isobel had fled within her feminine barricades—the barricades which women are so clever at constructing and at persuading the conventions of life to help them to defend. A woman's solitudes may not be stormed; with address she can escape private encounters. In sore fear of Harry because sore afraid of herself, she gave him no opportunity. In sore fear of Wellgood, she shrank from facing him with a rupture of their secret arrangement. Both men were tricked out of their stolen interviews—Wellgood out of his legitimate privilege, Harry out of his trespassing. Each asked why; in each jealousy harked back to its one definite starting-point—Harry's to her suggestions about her relations with Vivien's father, Wellgood's to Belfield's hints that, as a companion, Isobel was needlessly good looking. To each of them matter of amusement at the time when they were made, they took on now a new significance; so irony loves to confront our past and present moods. But Wellgood held a card that was not in Harry's hand—a card which could not win the game, but could at least secure an opening. He was employer as well as lover. Vivien's father could command the presence of Vivien's companion—not indeed late at night, for that would be a scarcely judicious straining of his powers, but at any reputable business-transacting hour of the day. For two nights—and that day of which the Nun had been a witness—he suffered the evasion of his rights; then, with a suavity dangerous in a man so rough, he prayed Miss Vintry's presence in the study for ten minutes (the established period!) before dinner; there were ways and means to be discussed, he said, matters touching the *trousseau* and the wedding entertainment. Vivien was bidden to run away and dress. "We're preparing one or two surprises for you, my dear," he said to her, with a grim smile which carried for Isobel a hidden reference.

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Thus commanded in Vivien's presence, Isobel was cleverly caught between the duty of obedience and the abandonment of her ostensible position in the house. Her barricade was being outflanked; she was forced into the open.

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She was in fear of him, almost actual physical fear; whether more of his fondness or of his roughness she could not tell; she felt that she could hardly bear either. Since her avowal to Harry, her courage had never returned, her weapons seemed blunted, she was no more mistress of all her resources. Yet in the end she feared the fondness more, and would at all costs avoid that. She summoned the remnants of her once brilliant array of bravery.

Alone with her, he wasted no time on the artifice which had secured him privacy.

"What's this new fad, Isobel? You're wilfully avoiding me. One evening you turn faint; another you dodge me, and are off to bed! Though I don't think I've ever made exacting claims on your time, considering!"

"I've been afraid—you'd better hear the truth—to speak to you."

"I should like the truth, certainly, if I can get it. What have you been afraid to speak to me about?"

"Our engagement." She made the plunge, her eyes fixed apprehensively on his face. "I—I can't go on with it, Mr. Wellgood."

He had schooled himself for this answer; he made no outburst. His tone was mild; the cunning of jealousy gave him an alien smoothness.

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"Sit down, my dear, and tell me why."

She sat facing him, his writing-table between them.

"My feelings haven't—haven't developed as I hoped they would."

"Oh, your feelings haven't developed?" he repeated slowly. "Towards me?"

"I reserved the right to change my mind—you remember?"

"And I the right to be unpleasant about it." He smiled under intent eyes.

"I'll leave the house to-morrow, if you like," she cried, eager now to accept a banishment she had once dreaded.

"Oh, no! I'm not going to be unpleasant. We needn't do things like that."

"I—I think I should prefer it."

"I'm sorry you should feel that. There's no need; you shan't be annoyed."

"That's good of you. I thought you'd be very, very hard to me."

"Would that be the best way to win you back? I don't know—at any rate I don't feel like following it. But really you can't go off at a moment's notice—and just now! What would Vivien think? What are we to say to her? What would everybody think? And how are Vivien and I to get through all this business of the wedding?"

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"I know it would be awkward, and look odd, but it might be better. Your feelings—"

"Never mind my feelings; you know they're not my weak spot. Come, Isobel, you see now you've no cause to be afraid of me, don't you?"

"You're behaving very kindly—more kindly than perhaps I could expect." Down in her mind there was latent distrust of this unwonted uncharacteristic kindness. Yet it looked genuine enough. There was no reference to the name she dreaded; no hint, no sneer, about Harry Belfield. She rose to a hope that her tricks and her fencing had been successful, that he was quite in the dark, that the issue was to his mind between their two selves alone, with no intruder.

Wellgood's jealousy bade him be proud of his effort, and encouraged him to persevere. The natural temper of the man might be raging, almost to the laying of hands on her; it must be kept down; the time for it was not yet. Rudeness or roughness would give her an excuse for flight; he would not have her fly. A plausible kindness, a considerate smoothness—that was the card jealousy selected for him to play.

"You shan't be troubled, you shan't be annoyed. I'll give up my evening treat. We'll go back to our old footing—before I spoke to you about this. I'll ask nothing of you as a lover—well, except not to decide finally against me till the wedding. Only three weeks! But as my friend, and Vivien's, I do ask you not to leave us in the lurch now—at this particular moment—and not to risk setting everybody talking. If you insist on leaving me, go after the wedding. That means no change in our plan, except that you won't come back. That'll seem quite natural; it's what they all expect."

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Still never a word of Harry, no hint of resentment, nothing that could alarm her or give her a handle for offence! Whether from friend or lover, his request sounded most moderate and reasonable. Not to leave the friend in the lurch, not to decide with harsh haste against a patient lover who had been given cause for confident hope, almost for certainty! He left her no plausible answer, for she could adduce no grievance against him. He had but taken what for her own purposes she had been content to allow—first in his bluff flirtation, then in his ill-restrained endearments. There was no plausibility in turning round and pretending to resent these things now. She dared not take false points in an encounter so perilous; that would be to expose herself to a crushing reply.

"If you go now—all of a sudden, at this moment—I can't help thinking you'll put yourself under a slur, or else put me under one. People know the position you've been in here—practically mistress of the house, with Vivien in your entire charge. Very queer to leave three weeks before her wedding! You may invent excuses, or we may. An aunt dying—something of that sort! Nobody ever believes in those dying aunts!"

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It was all true; people did not believe in those dying aunts, not when sudden departures of handsome young women were in question. People would talk; the thing would look odd. His plausible cunning left her no loophole.

"If you wish it, I'll stay till the wedding, on our old footing—as we were before all this, I mean. But you mustn't think there's any chance of my—my changing again."

"Thank you." He put out his hand across the table. She could not but take it. Though he seemed so cool and quiet, the hand was very hot. He held hers for a long while, his eyes intently fixed on her in a regard which she could not fathom, but which filled her anew with fear. She fell into a tremble; her lips quivered.

"Let me go now, please," she entreated, her eyes unable to meet his any longer.

He released her hand, and leant back in his chair. He smiled at her again, as he said, "Yes, go now. I'm afraid this interview has been rather trying to you—perhaps to us both."

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Of all the passions, the sufferings, the undergoings of mankind, none has so relentlessly been put to run the gauntlet of ridicule as jealousy. It is the sport of the composer of light verses, the born material of the writer of farce—especially when it is well founded. It is perhaps strange to remark—could any strangeness outlast familiarity—that the supreme study of it treats of it as utterly unfounded, and finds its highest tragedy in its baselessness. Ridiculous when justifiable, tragic when all a delusion! Is that nature's view, even as it is so often art's? Certainly the race is obstinate in holding real failure in the conflict of sex as small recommendation in a hero, imagined as the opportunity for his highest effect. King Arthur hardly bears the burden of being deceived; on the baseless suspicion of it the Moor rides through murder to a triumphant death—and a general sympathy—unless nowadays women have anything to say on the latter point.

Yet this poor passion—commonly so ridiculous, even more commonly, among the polite, held ill-bred—must be allowed its features of interest. It is remarkably alert, acute, ingenious, even

laborious, in its sweeping of details into its net. It works up its brief very industriously, be the instructions never so meagre—somehow it invites legal metaphor, being always plaintiff in the court of sex, always with its grievance to prove, generally faced with singularly hard swearing in the witness box. It has its successes, as witnessed by notable phrases; there is the "unwritten law," and there are "extenuating circumstances." The phrases throw back a rather startling illumination on the sport of versifiers and the material of farce. But the exceptional cases have a trick of stamping themselves on phraseology. Most of us are jealous with no very momentous results. We grumble a little, watch a little, sulk a little, and decide that there is nothing in it. Often there is not. Likewise we are ambitious without convulsing the world—or even our own family circle. So with our lives, our loves, our deaths—history, poetry, elegy find no place for them. Only nature has and keeps a mother's love for the ordinary man, and holds his doings legitimate matter for her interest, nay, essential to her eternal unresting plan. She may be figured as investing the bulk of her fortune in him, as in three per cents.—genius being her occasional "flutter."

Mark Wellgood was an ordinary man, and he was proud of the fact; that must, perhaps, be considered a circumstance of aggravation. He refused the suggestions of civilization to modify, and of sentiment to soften, his primitive instincts; he was proud of them just as they were. If any man had come between him and his woman—primitive also were the terms his thoughts used—that man should pay for it. If there were any man at all, who could it be but Harry Belfield? If it were Harry Belfield, Wellgood refused to hold him innocent of an inkling of how matters stood between Isobel and Vivien's father—he must have pretty nearly guessed, even if she had not told him. At least there were relations between Vivien herself and the suspected trespasser. Did they not give cause enough for a father's anger, deep and righteous, demanding vengeance? They gave cause—and they gave cover. The jealous suitor could use the indignant father's plea, the indignant father's weapons. The lover's revenge would make the father's duty sweet. He was not indifferent to the wrong done to Vivien; yet he almost prized it for the advantage it gave him in his own quarrel. It was not often that jealousy could plume itself on so honourable and so useful an ally!

Single-hearted concern for Vivien would have let Isobel go, as she prayed, and given Harry either his dismissal or the chance to mend his ways in the absence of temptation. Jealousy imperiously vetoed such suggestions. Isobel should not go. Harry should neither be dismissed nor given a fair chance and a fresh start. If he could, Wellgood would still keep Isobel; at least he would punish Harry, if he caught him. For the sake of these things he compromised his daughter's cause, and made her an instrument for his own purposes. And he did this with no sense of wrong-doing. So masterful was his self-regarding passion that his daughter's claim fell to the status of his pretext.

So he smoothed his face and watched.

But Isobel too was now on the alert. She was no longer merely resolved that she would behave herself because she ought; she saw that perforce she must. At least, no more secret dealings! Harry must be told that. The hidden hope that his answer would be, "Open dealings, then, at any cost," beat still in her heart, faintly, yet without ceasing. But if that answer came not, then all must be over. Word must go to him of that before he next came to Nutley. Such consolation as lay in knowing that she would not marry Wellgood should be his also. Then, perhaps, things would go a little easier, and these terrible three weeks slip past without disaster. Terrible—yes; but, alas, the end of them seemed more terrible yet.

Even had the post seemed safe, there was none which could reach Harry before he was due at Nutley again. She had to find a messenger. She decided on Andy Hayes. He was a safe man; he would not forget to fulfil his charge. The very fact of that bit of knowledge he possessed made him in her eyes the safest messenger; if he had not talked about that other thing, he was not likely to talk about the letter; unlikely to mention it in malice, certain not to refer to it in innocence or inadvertence. And she knew where to find him. Andy had, with Wellgood's permission, resumed his practice of bathing before breakfast in Nutley lake. The stripes of his bathing-suit were a familiar object to her as he emerged from the bushes or plunged into the water; from her window she could watch his powerful strokes. His hour was half-past seven; before eight nobody but servants would be about.

Andy, then, emerging from the shrubbery dressed after his dip, found Miss Vintry strolling up and down.

"You're surprised to see me out so early, Mr. Hayes? But I know your habits. My window looks out this way."

"I'm awfully careful to keep well hidden in the bushes."

"Oh yes!" she laughed. "I've not come to warn you off. Are you likely to see Mr. Harry this morning?"

"I easily can; I shall be passing Halton."

"I specially want this note to reach him early in the morning. It's rather important. I should be so much obliged if you'd take it; and will you give it to him yourself?"

Andy stood silent for a moment, not offering to take the letter from her hand. She had foreseen that he might hesitate, knowing what he did; she had even thought that his hesitation might give her an opportunity. Feigning to notice nothing in his manner, she went on, "I must add that I shall be glad if you'll give it to him when he's alone, and if you won't mention it. It relates to a private matter."

Andy spoke slowly. "I'm not sure you'd choose me to carry it if you knew—"

"I do know; at least I never had much doubt, and I've had none since a talk we had together at Halton. Do you remember?"

"I didn't say anything about it then, did I?" asked Andy.

She smiled. "Not in so many words. You saw a great piece of foolishness—the first and last, I need hardly tell you. I'm very much ashamed of it. In that letter I ask Mr. Harry to forget all about it, and to remember only that I am, and want to go on being, Vivien's friend."

It sounded well, but Andy was not quite convinced.

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"It's some time ago now. Mightn't you just ignore it?"

"As far as he's concerned, no doubt I might; but I rather want to get it off my own conscience, Mr. Hayes. It'll make me happier in meeting him. I shall be happier in meeting you too, after this little talk. Somehow that wretched bit of silliness seems to have made an awkwardness between us, and I want to leave Nutley good friends with every one."

She sounded very sincere; nay, in a sense she was sincere. She was ashamed; she did want to end the whole matter—unless that unexpected answer came. At any rate she was—or sounded—sincere enough to make Andy hold out his hand for the letter.

"I'll take it and give it to him as you wish, Miss Vintry. I'm bound to say, though, that, if apologies are being made, I think Harry's the one to make them."

"We women are taught to think such things worse in ourselves than in men. Men get carried away; they're allowed to, now and then. We mustn't."

The appeal to his chivalry—another wrong to woman!—touched Andy. "That's infernally unfair!"

"It sometimes seems so, just a little. I'm sincerely grateful to you, Mr. Hayes." She held out her hand to him. "You won't think it necessary to mention to Mr. Harry all I've told you? I don't think he was so sure as I was about—about your presence. And somehow it makes it seem worse if he knew that you—"

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"I shall say nothing whatever, if he doesn't," said Andy, as he shook hands.

"Thank you again. I don't think I dare risk asking you to be friends—real friends—yet; but I may, perhaps, on the wedding day."

"I've never been your enemy, Miss Vintry."

"No; you've been kind, considerate"—her voice dropped—"merciful. Thank you. Good-bye."

She left Andy with her letter in his hands, and her humble thanks echoing in his ears—words that, in thanking him for his silence, bound him to a continuance of it. Andy felt most of the guilt suddenly transferred to his shoulders, because he had told the Nun—well, very nearly all about it! That could not be helped now. After all, it was Miss Vintry's own fault; she should have done sooner what she had done now. "All the same," thought chivalrous Andy, "I might give Doris a hint that things look a good bit better."

Certainly Isobel Vintry had cause to congratulate herself on a useful morning's work—Harry safely warned, Andy in great measure conciliated. She felt more able to face Wellgood over the teapot.

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The first round had gone in her favour; the zone of danger was appreciably contracted. Her courage rose; her conscience, too, was quieter. She felt comparatively honest. With Wellgood she had gone as near to absolute honesty as the circumstances permitted. She had broken the engagement; she had even prayed to be allowed to go away, with all that meant to her. Wellgood made her stay. Then, so far as he was concerned, the issue must be on his own head. If that unexpected answer should come in the course of the weeks still left for it, it would be Wellgood's own lookout. As for Vivien—well, she was perceptibly more honest even in regard to Vivien. If she fought still, in desperate hope, for Vivien's lover, she fought now in fairer fashion, by refusing, not by accepting, his society, his attentions, his kisses. She would be nothing to him unless he found himself forced to cry, "Be everything!" She would abide no longer on that half-way ground; there were to be no more sly tricks and secret meetings. The kisses, if kisses came, would not be stolen, but ravished in conquest from a rival's lips. If sin, that was sin in the grand manner.

At lunch-time a note came for Vivien, brought by a groom on a bicycle.

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"Oh, from Harry!" she exclaimed, tearing it open.

Isobel, sitting opposite Wellgood, set her face. She had expected a note to come for Vivien from Harry. She was on her mettle, fighting warily, risking no points. No note should come to her from Harry, to be opened perhaps under Wellgood's eyes; he had been known to ask to see letters, in his matter-of-course way assuming that there could be nothing private in them. Harry's answer to the note Andy delivered was to come to Isobel through Vivien, and to come in terms dictated by Isobel, terms that she alone would understand. She could always contrive to see Vivien's letters; generally they were left about.

"He's so sorry he can't bring Mr. Foot to tennis with him this afternoon; they're going to play golf," Vivien announced, rather disappointed. But she cheered up. "Oh well, it's rather hot for tennis; and I shall see him to-night, at dinner at Halton."

"Does he say anything else?" asked Isobel carelessly.

"Only that he's bored to death with politics." She laughed. "What's worrying him, I wonder?"

For a moment Isobel sat with eyes lowered; then she raised them and looked across to Wellgood. He was not looking at her; he was carving beef. Then it did not matter if her face had changed a little when she heard that Harry was bored with politics. Neither Wellgood nor Vivien had seen any change there might possibly have been in her face.

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That trivial observation about politics was the answer—the expected answer, not that unexpected one. It meant, "I accept your decision."

Oddly enough her first feeling, the one that rose instinctively in her mind, was of triumph over Wellgood. Had she expressed it with the primitive simplicity on which he prided himself, she would have cried, "Sold again!" She had got out of her great peril; she had settled the whole thing. He had not scored a single point against her. She had regained her independence of him, and without cost. There was no longer anything for him to discover. He had no more rights over her; he had to renew his wooing, again to court, to conciliate. He had no way of finding out the past; Andy Hayes was safe. The future was again in her hands. Her smile at Wellgood was serene and confident. She was retreating in perfect order, after fighting a brilliantly successful rearguard action.

Even of the retreat itself she was, for the moment at least, half glad. Fear and longing had so mingled in her dreams of that unexpected answer. To be free from that crisis and that revelation! They would have meant flight for her, pursued by a chorus of condemning voices. They would have meant at least days, perhaps weeks, of straining vigilance, of harrowing suspense—never sure of her ground, never sure of herself; above all, never sure of Harry. Who, if not she, should know that you never could be sure of Harry? Who, if not she, should know that neither his plighted word nor his hottest impulse could be relied upon to last? Yes, she was—half glad; almost more than half glad, when she looked at Vivien. In the back of her mind, save maybe when passion ran at full flood for those rare minutes, the stolen ten that had come for so few days, had been the feeling that it would be a terrible thing to be—to be "shown up" to Vivien. The sage adviser, the firm preceptress, the model of the virtues of self-control—how would she have looked in the eyes of Vivien, even had the open, the triumphant victory come to pass? Really that hardly bore thinking of, if she had still any self-respect to lose.

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She walked alone in the drive after lunch—where she had been wont to meet him. Let it all go! At least it had done one thing for her—it had saved her from Wellgood. It had taught her love, and made the pretence of love impossible—the suffering of unwelcome caresses a thing unholy. Then it was not all to the bad? It left her with a dream, a vision, a thing unrealized yet real; something to take with her into that new, cold, unknown world of strange people into which, for a livelihood's sake, she must soon plunge—must plunge as soon as she had seen Harry married to Vivien!

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The sun was on the lake that afternoon; the water looked peaceful, friendly, consoling. She sat down by the margin of it, and gave herself to memories. They came thick and fast, repeating themselves endlessly out of scant material—full of shame, full of woe; but also full of triumph, for she had been loved—at least for the time desired—by the man of her love and desire. Bought at a great cost? Yes. And never ought to have been bought? No. But now by no means to be forgotten.

She was alone; everything was still, in the calm of a September afternoon. She bowed her head to her hands and wept.

The Nun walked up the drive and saw the figure of a woman weeping.

## Chapter XVIII.

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### PENITENCE AND PROBLEMS.

The Nun stopped, walked on a few paces, came to a stand again. She was visiting Nutley in pursuance of her plan of doing, if not that undiscoverable obvious, yet the more sensible thing—

of preventing the "row" and, incidentally thereto, of finding out "what the woman really wanted."

Here was the woman. Whatever she might really want, apparently she was very far from having got it yet. She also looked very different from the adversary with whom Miss Flower had pictured herself as conducting a contest of wits—quite unlike the cool, wary, dexterous woman who had played her difficult game between the two men so finely, and who might be trusted to treat her opponent to a very pretty display of fencing. The position seemed so changed that the Nun had thoughts of going back. To discover a new, and what one has considered rather a hostile, acquaintance in tears is embarrassing; and the acquaintance may well share the embarrassment.

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Fortunately Isobel stopped crying. She dried her eyes and tucked away her handkerchief. The Nun advanced again. Isobel sat looking drearily over the lake.

"Dropped your sixpence in the pond, Miss Vintry?" the Nun asked.

Isobel turned round sharply.

"Because—I mean—you're not looking very cheerful."

Isobel's eyes hardened a little.

"Have you been there long?"

"I saw you were crying, if that's what you mean. I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. People should cry in their own rooms if they want to keep it quiet."

"Oh, never mind; it doesn't matter whether you saw or not. Every woman is entitled to cry sometimes."

"I don't cry myself," observed the Nun, "but of course a great many girls do."

"I daresay I shouldn't cry if I were the great Miss Doris Flower."

The Nun gurgled. That ebullition could usually be brought about by any reference to the greatness of her position, not precisely because the position was not great—rather because it was funny that it should be. She sat down beside Isobel.

"Please don't tell Vivien what you saw. I don't want her to know I've been crying. She's remorseful enough as it is about her marriage costing me my 'place.'"

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"Was that what you were crying about?"

"It seems silly, doesn't it? But I've been happy here, and—and they've got fond of me. And finding a new one—well, it seems like plunging into this lake on a cold day. So quite suddenly I got terribly dreary."

"Well, you've had it out, haven't you?" suggested the Nun consolingly.

"Yes; and much good it's done to the situation!" laughed Isobel ruefully. "Oh, well, I suppose my feelings are the situation—at any rate there's no other."

"Then if you feel better, things are better too."

The Nun did not feel that she was getting on much with the secret object of her visit; she even felt the impulse to get on with it weakened. She was more inclined just to have a friendly, a consoling chat. However business was business. To get on she must take a little risk. She dug the earth on the edge of the pond with the point of her sunshade and observed carelessly, "If you very particularly wanted to stay at Nutley, I should have thought you might have the chance."

"Oh, are people gossiping about that? Poor Mr. Wellgood!"

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"It was the observation of my own eyes," said the Nun sedately. "Oh, of course you can deny it if you like, though I don't see why you should—and I shan't believe you."

"If you've such confidence in your own eyes as that, Miss Flower, it would be wasting my breath to try to convince you. Have it your own way. But even that would be—a new place. And I've told you that I'm afraid of new places."

"All plunges aren't into cold water," the Nun observed reflectively.

"That one would be colder, I think, than a quite strange plunge—away from Nutley."

"It's a great pity we're not built so as to fall in love conveniently. It would have been so nice for you to stay—in the new place."

"I'm only letting you have it your own way, Miss Flower. I've admitted nothing."

"All that appears at present is that you needn't go if you don't like—and yet you cry about going!"

Isobel smiled.

"I might cry at leaving all my friends, especially at leaving Vivien, without wanting to stop—with Mr. Wellgood, as you insist on having it. Is that comprehensible?"

"Well, I expect I've asked enough questions," said the cunning Nun, wondering hard how she could contrive to ask another—and get an answer to it. "But in Meriton there's nothing to do but gossip to and about one's friends. That's what makes it so jolly. Why, this wedding is simply occupation for all of us! What shall we do when it's over? Oh, well, I shall be gone, I suppose."

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"And so shall I—so we needn't trouble about that."

The Nun was baffled. A strange impassivity seemed to fall on her companion the moment that the talk was of Harry's wedding. She tried once again.

"I do hope it'll turn out well."

Isobel offered no comment whatever. In truth she was not sure of herself; her agitation was too recent and had been too violent—it might return.

"I've known Harry for so long—and I like Miss Wellgood so much." She gave an interrogative a note as she could to her remarks—without asking direct questions. "I think he really is in love at last!" Surely, that ought to draw some question or remark—that "at last"? It drew nothing. "But—well, we used to say one never knew with poor Harry!" ("Further than that," thought the Nun, "without telling tales, I cannot go.")

Isobel sat silent.

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The result was meagre. Isobel would talk about Wellgood, evasively but without embarrassment; references to Harry Belfield reduced her to silence. It was a little new light on the past; its bearing on the future, if any, was negative. She would not, it seemed, stay at Nutley with Wellgood. She would not talk of Harry. She had been crying. The crying was the satisfactory feature in the case.

The Nun rose.

"I must go in and see Miss Wellgood."

"She's gone out with her father, I'm afraid. That's how I happen to be off duty."

"And able to cry?"

"Oh, I hope you'll forget that nonsense. I'm quite resigned to everything, really." She too rose, smiling at her companion. "Only I rather wish it was all over—and the plunge made!"

The Nun reported the fact of her interview—and the results, such as they were—to Miss Dutton when she returned home.

"Her crying shows that she doesn't think she's got much chance," said the Nun hopefully.

"It shows she'd take a chance, if she got one," Miss Dutton opined acutely.

"You mean it all depends on Harry, then?"

"In my opinion it always has."

That indeed seemed the net result. It all depended on Harry—not at first sight a very satisfactory conclusion for those who knew Harry. However, Andy, who came into the Lion later in the afternoon, was hopeful—nay, confident. He had mysterious reasons for this frame of mind—information which he declared himself unable to disclose; he could not even indicate the source from which it proceeded, but he might say that there were two sources. He really could not say more—which annoyed the Nun extremely.

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"But I think we may consider all the trouble over," he ended.

For had not Harry, when he got his note, dealt quite frankly with Andy—well, with very considerable frankness as to the past, with complete as to the future? He admitted that he had "more or less made a fool of himself," but declared that it had been mere nonsense, and was altogether over. Absolutely done with! He gave Andy his hand on that, begged his pardon for having been sulky with him, and told him that henceforward all his thoughts would be where his heart had been all through—with Vivien. If Isobel had convinced Andy, Harry convinced him ten times more. Andy had such a habit of believing people. He was not, indeed, easily or stupidly deceived by a wilful liar; but he fell a victim to people who believed in themselves, who thought they were telling the truth. It was so hard for him to understand that people would not go on feeling and meaning what they were sincerely feeling and meaning at the moment. They could convince him, if only they were convinced themselves.

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"Let's think no more about it, and then we can all be happy," he said to the Nun. It really made a

great difference to his happiness how Harry was behaving.

After all, it was rather hard—and rather hard-hearted—not to believe in Harry, when Harry believed so thoroughly in himself. The strongest proof of his regained self-confidence was the visit he paid to the Nun—a visit long overdue in friendship and even in courtesy. Harry asked for no forgiveness; he seemed to assume that she would understand how, having been troubled in his mind of late, he had not been in the mood for visits. He was quite his old self when he came, so much his old self that he scarcely cared to disguise the fact that he had given some cause for anxiety—any more than he expected to be met with doubt when he implied that all cause for anxiety was past. He had quite got over that attack, and his constitution was really the stronger for it. Illnesses are nature's curative processes, so the doctors tell us. Harry was always more virtuous after a moral seizure. The seizure being the effective cause of his improvement, he could not be expected to regard it with unmixed regret. If, incidentally, it witnessed to his conquering charms, he could not help that. Of course he would not talk about the thing; he did not so much mind other people implying, assuming, or hinting at it.

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If the Nun obliged him at all in this way, she chose the difficult method of irony—in which not her greatest admirer could claim that she was very subtle.

"My dear Harry, I quite understand your not calling. How could you think of me when you were quite wrapped up in Vivien Wellgood? I was really glad!"

Now that Harry had come, he found himself delighted with his visit.

"Country air's agreeing with you, Doris. You look splendid." His eyes spoke undisguised admiration.

"Thank you, Harry. I know you thought me good-looking once." The Nun was meek and grateful.

Harry laughed, by no means resenting the allusion. That had been an illness, a curative process, also—though her curative measures had been rather too summary for his taste.

"Whose peace of mind are you destroying down here?"

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"I've a right to destroy peace of mind if I want to. It's not as if I were engaged to be married—as you are. I think Jack Rock's in most danger—or perhaps your father."

"The pater inherits some of my weaknesses," said Harry. "Or shares my tastes, anyhow."

"Yes, I know he's devoted to Vivien."

"You never look prettier than when you're trying to say nasty things."

"I'll stop, or in another moment you'll be offering to kiss me."

"Should you object?"

"Hardly worth while. It would mean nothing at all to either of us. Still—I'm not a poacher."

"You don't seem to me to be able to take a joke either." Harry's voice sounded annoyed. "But we won't quarrel. I've been through one of my fits of the blues, Doris. Don't be hard on a fellow."

"It would be so much better for you if people could be hard on you, Harry. Still you'll have to pay for it somehow. We all have to pay for being what we are—somehow. Perhaps you won't know you're paying—you'll call it by some other name; perhaps you won't care. But you'll have to pay somehow."

The Nun made a queer figure of a moralist; she was really far too pretty. But her words got home to Harry—the new, the recovered, Harry.

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"I have paid," he said. "Oh yes, you don't believe it, but I have! The bill's paid, and receipted. I'm starting fair now. But you never did do me justice."

"I've always done justice to what you care most about—Harry the Irresistible!"

"Oh, stop that rot!" he implored. "I'm serious, you know, Doris."

"I know all the symptoms of your seriousness. The first is wanting to flirt with somebody fresh."

Harry's laugh was vexed—but not of bitter vexation. "Give a fellow a chance!"

"The whole world's in league to do it—again and again!"

"This time the world is going to find me appreciative. You don't know what a splendid girl Vivien is! If you did, you'd understand how—how—well, how things look different."

The Nun relented. "I really think it may last you over the wedding—and perhaps the honeymoon," she said.



The extraordinary thing to her—indeed to all his friends who did not share his most mercurial temperament—was that this change of mood was entirely sincere in Harry, and his satisfaction with it not less genuine. For two painful hours—from his receipt of Isobel's note to his dispatching of that sentence about being bored with politics—he had struggled, keeping Andy in an adjoining room solaced by newspapers and tobacco, in case counsel should be needed. Then the right had won—and all was over! When all was over, it was with Harry exactly as if nothing had ever begun; his belief in the virtue of penitence beggared theology itself. What he had been doing presented itself as not merely finished, not merely repented of, but as hardly real; at the most as an aberration, at the least as a delusion. Certainly he felt hardly responsible for it. An excellent comfortable doctrine—for Harry. It rather left out of account the other party to the transaction.

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What a right he had to be proud of his return to loyalty! Because Isobel Vintry was really a most attractive girl; it would be unjust and ungrateful to deny that, since she had—well, it was better not to go back to that! With which reflection he went back to it, recovering some of the emotions of that culminating evening in the drive; recovering them not to any dangerous extent—Isobel was not there, the thrill of her voice not in his ears, nor the light of her eyes visible through the darkness—but enough to make him pat his virtue on the back again, and again excuse the aberration. Oh, they had all made too much of it! A mere flirtation! Oh, very wrong! Yes, yes; or where lay the marvel of this repentance? But not so bad as all that! They had been prejudiced to think it so serious—prejudiced by Vivien's charms, her trust, her simplicity, her appeal. Yes, he certainly had been a villain even to flirt when engaged to a girl like that. However he thoroughly appreciated that aspect of the case now; it had needed this little—adventure—to make him appreciate it. Perhaps it had all been for the best. Well, that was going too far, because Isobel felt it deeply, as her words in the drive had shown. Yet perhaps—Harry achieved his climax in the thought that even for her it might have been for the best if it stopped her from marrying Wellgood. By how different a path, in how different a mood, had poor Isobel attained to laying the same unction to her smarting soul!

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Wellgood did not know at all how quickly matters had moved. He was still asking about the sin—the aberration; he was not up to date with Isobel's renunciation or Harry's comfortable penitence. Nor was he of the school that accepts such things without sound proof. "Lead us not into temptation" was all very well in church; in secular life, if you suspected a servant of dishonesty, you marked a florin and left it on the mantelpiece. Had Isobel been already his wife, he would have locked her up in the nearest approach to a tower of brass that modern conditions permit; if Vivien had been already Harry's wife, he would no doubt have been in favour of Harry's being kept out of the way of dangerous seductions. But now, whether as father or as lover—and the father continued to afford the lover most valuable aid, most specious cover—he had first to know, to test, and to try. He had to leave his marked florin on the mantelpiece.

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It must not, however, be supposed that Meriton lacked problems because Harry Belfield seemed, for the moment at all events, to cease to present one. For days past Billy Foot had been grappling with a most momentous one, and Mrs. Belfield's mind was occupied, and almost disturbed, by another of equal gravity. Curiously enough, the two related to the same person, and were to some degree of a kindred nature. Both involved the serious question of the social status—or perhaps the social desirability would be a better term—of Miss Doris Flower.

In the leisure hours and the autumn sunshine of Meriton—an atmosphere remote from courts, whether of law or of royalty, and inimical to ambition—Billy was in danger of forgetting the paramount claims of his career and of remembering only the remarkable prettiness of Miss Flower. He was once more "on the brink"; the metaphor of a plunge found a place in his thoughts as well as in Isobel Vintry's; some metaphors are very maids-of-all-work. He was deplorably perturbed. Now that the great campaign was over he abandoned himself to the great question. He even went up to London to talk it over with Gilly, entertaining his brother to lunch—by no means a casual or haphazard hospitality, for Gilly's meals were serious business—in order to obtain his most inspired counsel. But Gilly had been abominably, nay, cruelly disappointing.

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"I shouldn't waste any more time thinking about that, old chap," said Gilly, delicately dissecting a young partridge.

"You're not going out of your way to be flattering. It appears to me at least to be a matter of some importance whom I marry. I thought perhaps my brother might take that view too."

"Oh, I do, old chap. I know it's devilish important to you. All I mean is that in this particular case you needn't go about weighing the question. Ask the Nun right off."

"You really advise it?" Billy demanded, wrinkling his brow in judicial gravity, but inwardly rather delighted.

"I do," Gilly rejoined. "Ask her right off—get it off your mind! It doesn't matter a hang, because she's sure to refuse you." He smiled at his brother across the table—a table spread by that brother's bounty—in a fat and comfortable fashion.

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Billy preserved his temper with some difficulty. "Purely for the sake of argument, assume that I am a person whom she might possibly accept."

"Can't. There are limits to hypothesis, beyond which discussion is unprofitable. I merely ask you to note how much time and worry you'll be saved if you adopt my suggestion."

"You'll look a particular fool if I do—and she says yes."

"Are you quite sure they brought the claret you ordered, Billy?—What's that you said?"

"I'm sure it's the claret, and I'm sure you're an idiot!" Billy crossly retorted.

His journey to London, to say nothing of a decidedly expensive lunch, brought poor Billy no comfort and no enlightenment, since he refused his brother's plan without hesitation. His problem became no less harassing when brought into contact with Mrs. Belfield's problem at Halton. She also discussed it at lunch, Harry being an absentee, and Andy Hayes the only other guest. She had forgotten by now that a similar question had once arisen about Andy himself; his present position would have made the memory seem ridiculous; it had become indisputably equal to dinner at Halton, even in Mrs. Belfield's most conservative eyes.

pg 378

"I have written the note you wished me to, my dear," she remarked to her husband. "To Miss Flower, you know, for Wednesday night. And I apologized for my informality in not having called, and said that I hoped Miss—Miss—well, the friend, you know, would come too."

"Thank you, my dear, thank you." Belfield sounded really grateful; the struggle had, in fact, been rather more severe than he had anticipated.

"It's not that I'm a snob," the lady went on, now addressing herself to Billy Foot, "or prejudiced, or in any way illiberal. Nobody could say that of me. But it's just that I doubt how far it's wise to attempt to mix different sections of society. I mean whether there's not a certain danger in it. You see what I mean, Mr. Foot?"

Belfield winked covertly at Andy; both had some suspicion of Billy's feelings, and were maliciously enjoying the situation.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Belfield, I—er—see what you mean, of course. In ordinary cases there might be—yes—a sort of—well, a sort of danger to—to—well, to something we all value, Mrs. Belfield. But in this case I don't think—"

"So Mr. Belfield says. But then he's always so adventurous."

pg 379

Belfield could not repress a snigger; Andy made an unusually prolonged use of his napkin; Billy was rather red in the face. Mrs. Belfield gazed at Billy, not at all understanding his feelings, but thinking that he was looking very warm.

"Well, Harry's engaged!" she added with a sigh of thanksgiving. Billy grew redder still; the other two welcomed an opportunity for open laughter.

"They may laugh, Mr. Foot, but I'm sure your mother would feel as I do."

A bereavement several years old saved Billy from the suggested complication, but he glared fiercely across the table at Andy, who assumed, with difficulty, an apologetic gravity.

"All my wife's fears will vanish as soon as she knows the lady," said Belfield, also anxious to make his peace with Billy.

"I always yield to Mr. Belfield, but you can't deny that it's an experiment, Mr. Foot." She rose from the table, having defined the position with her usual serene and gentle self-satisfaction.

Billy rose too, announcing that he would finish his cigar in the garden. His face was still red, and he was not well pleased with his host and Andy. Why will people make our own most reasonable thoughts ridiculous by their silly way of putting them? And why will other stupid people laugh at them when so presented? These reflections accompanied poor Billy as he walked and smoked.

pg 380

Belfield smiled. "More sentimental complications! I hope Billy Foot keeps his face better than that when he's in court. Do you think he'll rush on his fate? And what will it be?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir," Andy answered. "I really haven't thought about it. I don't think she cares for him in that sort of way, though they're awfully good friends."

"You seem to manage to keep heart-whole, Andy?"

"Oh, I've no time to do anything else," he laughed.

"Take care; Cupid resents defiance. I've a notion you stand very well with the lady in question yourself."

"I? Oh, the idea's never entered my head."

"I don't say it's entered hers. The pretty rogue told me she never fell in love, and made me wish I was thirty years younger, and free to test her. But she's very fond of you, Andy."

"I think what she told you about herself is true. She said something like it to me too. But I'm glad you think she likes me. I like her immensely. Outside this house, she's my best friend, I think, not counting old Jack Rock, of course."

pg 381

"I believe Vivien would dispute the title with her. She thinks the world of you."

"I say, Mr. Belfield, you'll turn my head. Seriously, I should be awfully happy to think that true. There's nobody—well, nobody in the world I'd rather be liked by."

"Yes, I think I know that," said Belfield. "And I'm glad to think she's got such a friend, if she ever needs one."

A silence followed. Belfield was thinking of Vivien, thinking that she would have been in safer hands with Andy than with his son Harry; glad, as he had said, to know that she would have such a friend left to her after his own precarious lease of life was done. Andy was thinking too, but not of Vivien, not of sentimental complications—not even of Harry's. Yet the thought which he was pursuing in his mind was not altogether out of relation to Harry, though the relation was one that he did not consciously trace.

"Back to work next week, sir!" he said. "Gilly's clamouring for me. I've had a splendid holiday."

"You've put in some very good work in your holiday. Your speeches are thought good."

"I somehow feel that I'm on my own legs now," said Andy slowly. "I hope I've not grown bumptious, but I'm not afraid now to think for myself and to say what I think. I often find people agree with me more or less."

pg 382

"Perhaps you persuade them," Belfield suggested; he was listening with interest, for he had watched from outside the growth of Andy's mind, and liked to hear Andy's own account of it.

"Well, I never set out to do that. I just give them the facts, and what the facts seem to me to point to. If they've got facts pointing the other way, I like to listen. Of course lots of questions are very difficult, but by going at it like that, and taking time, and not being afraid to chuck up your first opinion, you can get forward—or so it seems to me at least."

"Chucking up first opinions is hard work, both about things and about people."

"Yes, but it's the way a man's mind grows, isn't it?" He spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "Unless you can do that, you're not really your own mental master, any more than you're your own physical master if you can't break off a bad habit."

"You've got to be a bit ruthless with yourself in both cases, and with the opinions, and—with the people."

"You've got to see," said Andy. "You must see—that's it. You mustn't shut your eyes, or turn your head away, or let anybody else look for you."

pg 383

"You've come into your kingdom," said Belfield with a nod.

"Perhaps I may claim to have got my eyes open, to be grown up."

He was grown up; he stood on his own legs; he sat no more at Harry's feet and leant no more on Harry's arm. Harry came into his life there, as he had in so many ways. Harry's weakness had thrown him back on his own strength, and forced him to rely on it. Relying on it in life, he had found it trustworthy, and now did not fear to rely on it in thought also. His chosen master and leader had forfeited his allegiance, though never his love. He would choose no other; he would think for himself. Looking at his capacious head, at his calm broad brow, and hearing him slowly hammer out his mental creed, Belfield fancied that his thinking might carry him far. The kingdom he had come into might prove a spacious realm.

## Chapter XIX.

pg 384

### MARKED MONEY.

So far as she could and dared, Isobel Vintry withdrew herself from the company of Harry Belfield. She relaxed her supervision of the lovers when they were together; she tried to avoid any risk of being alone with Harry. She knew that Wellgood was watching her, and was determined to give no new handle to his suspicion. Her own feelings agreed in dictating her line of action. In ordinary intercourse she was sure of herself; she was not anxious to seek extraordinary temptation. She had more resolution than Harry, but not the same power of self-delusion, not the same faculty of imagining that an enemy was finally conquered because he had been once defeated or defied. She was careful not to expose herself to danger, either from herself or from Wellgood. Harry had decided that all chance of danger was over; he laughed at it now, almost literally laughed. Yet while he derided the notion of peril, he liked the flavour of memory. He kept turning the thing over in a mood nicely compounded of remorse and self-esteem; of penitence for the folly, and self-congratulation over the end that had been put to it; of wonder at his aberration,

pg 385

and excuse of it in view of Isobel's attractions. Gone as it all was in fact, it was not banished from retrospect.

Wellgood grew easier in his mind. He had marked some florins—opportunities for private meetings rather clumsily offered; they had not been taken. His suspicions of the past remained, but he thought that he had effectually frightened Isobel. He had good hopes for his own scheme again. If she did not come round before the wedding—now only a fortnight off—he believed that she would afterwards. Harry finally out of reach, his turn would come. He continued his smoothness, and did not relax his vigilance; but, as the days passed by, his hopes rose to confidence again.

The dinner-party at Halton in the Nun's honour went off with great success; she comported herself with such decorum and ease that Mrs. Belfield felt her problem solved, while Billy Foot found his even more pressing. Vivien was the only representative of Nutley. Wellgood had gone to the county town to attend a meeting of the County Council; the trains ran awkwardly, and, unless the business proved very brief, he would have to dine at the hotel, and would not reach home till late at night. Isobel had excused herself, pursuant to her policy of seeing as little as possible of Harry. But the party was reinforced by Gilly Foot, who had come down for a couple of days' rest, and was staying at the Lion—the great publishing house being left to take care of itself for this short space.

pg 386

The party was pleasant—Belfield flirting with the Nun, Gilly discoursing in company with Mrs. Belfield, who thought him a most intelligent young man (as he was), Harry and Billy both in high spirits and full of sallies, for which Vivien and Andy, both ever choosing the modest *rôle*, made an applauding audience. Yet for most of the company dinner was but a prelude to the real business of the evening. The Nun had no opinion of evenings which ended at ten-thirty. For this reason, and in order to welcome Gilly and, if possible, please his palate, she had organized a supper at the Lion, and exhorted Mr. Dove, and Chinks, and the cook—in a word, everybody concerned—to a great effort. One thing only marred the anticipations of this feast; Vivien had failed to win leave to attend it.

"What do you want with supper after a good dinner?" asked Wellgood brusquely. "Come home and go to bed, like a sensible girl."

pg 387

So Harry was to take Vivien home, and come back to supper with all reasonable speed. The Nun pressed Mr. Belfield to join her party after his own was over, but gained nothing thereby, save a disquisition on the pleasures appropriate to youth and age respectively. "Among the latter I rank going early to bed very high."

"Going to bed early is a low calculating sort of thing to do," said Harry. "It always means that you intend to try to take advantage of somebody else the next morning."

"In the hope that he'll have been up late," said Billy.

"And eaten too much," added Gilly sadly.

"Or even drunk too much?" suggested Belfield.

"Anyhow, being sent to bed is horrid," lamented unhappy Vivien.

"You've a life of suppers before you, if you choose," Billy assured her consolingly.

"When I was a girl, we always had supper," said Mrs. Belfield.

"Quite right, Mrs. Belfield," said Gilly, in high approval.

"Instead of late dinner, I mean, Mr. Foot."

Gilly could do no more than look at her, finding no adequate comment.

"Supper should be a mere flirtation with one's food," said Billy.

pg 388

"A post-matrimonial flirtation?" asked Belfield. "Because dinner must be wedlock! We come back to its demoralizing character."

"Having established that it's wrong, we've given it the final charm, and we'll go and do it," laughed Billy. Mrs. Belfield had already looked once at the clock.

Amid much merriment Vivien and Harry were put into the Nutley brougham, and the rest started to walk to the Lion, no more than half a mile from the gates of Halton. Belfield turned back into the house, smiling and shaking his head. The old, old moralizing was upon him again, in its hoary antiquity, its eternal power of striking the mind afresh. How good it all is—and how short! Elderly he said good-night to his elderly wife, and in elderly fashion packed himself off to bed. He was "sent" there under a sanction stronger, more ruthless, less to be evaded, than that which poor Vivien reluctantly obeyed. He chid himself; nobody but a poet has a right to abandon his mind to universal inevitable regrets, since only a poet's hand can fashion a fresh garland for the tomb of youth.

Half Harry's charm lay in—perhaps half his dangers sprang from—an instinctive adaptability; he was seldom out of tune with his company. With the bold he was bold; towards the timid he displayed a chivalrous reserve. This latter had always been his bearing towards Vivien, even in the early days of impulsive single-hearted devotion. It did not desert him even to-night, although there was a stirring in his blood, roused perhaps by the mimic reproduction of old-time gaieties with which the Nun proposed to enliven Meriton—a spirit of riot and revolt, of risk and adventure in the realm of feeling. He had little prospect of satisfying that impulse, but he might find some solace in merry revelry with his friends. Somehow, when more closely considered, the revelry did not satisfy. Good-fellowship was not what his mood was asking; for him at least the entertainment at the Lion offered no more, whatever tinge of romance might adorn it for Billy Foot.

But he talked gaily to Vivien as they drove to Nutley—of the trip they were to make, of the house they were to hire for the winter and the ensuing season (he would in all likelihood be in Parliament by then), of their future life together. There was no woman save Vivien in his mind, neither Isobel nor another. He had no doubts of his recovered loyalty; but he was in some danger of recognizing it ruefully, as obligation and necessity, rather than as satisfaction or even as achievement.

Vivien had grown knowing about him. She knew when she, or something, or things in general, did not satisfy his mood. "I'm glad you're going to have a merry evening to-night," she said. "And I'm almost glad I'm sent to bed! It'll do you good to forget all about me for a few hours."

"You think I shall?" he protested gallantly.

"Oh yes!" she answered, laughing. "But I shall expect you to be all the more glad to see me again to-morrow."

He laughed rather absently. "I expect those fellows will rather wake up the old Lion."

They had passed through Nutley gates and were in the drive. Harry was next to the water, and turned his head to look at it. Suddenly he gave the slightest start, then looked quickly round at his companion. She was leaning back, she had not looked out of the window. Harry frowned and smiled.

When they stopped at the door, the coachman said, "Beg pardon, sir, but I've only just time to take you back, and then go on to the station to meet Mr. Wellgood. He didn't come by the eight-o'clock, so I must meet the eleven-thirty."

For one moment Harry considered. "All right. I'll walk."

"Very good, sir. I'll start directly and take the mare down quietly." The station lay on the other side of Meriton, two miles and a half from Nutley. The man drove off.

"Oh, Harry, you might as well have driven, because I daren't ask you in! Father's not back, and Isobel is sure to have gone to bed." The rules were still strict at Nutley.

For a moment again Harry seemed to consider. "I thought a walk would do me good. I may even be able to eat some supper!" he said with a laugh. "I shall get you into trouble if I come in, shall I? Then I won't. Good-night."

"Father won't be here for an hour, nearly—but he might ask."

"And you're incorrigibly truthful!"

"Am I? Anyhow I rather think you want to go back to supper."

She would have yielded him admission—risking her father's questions and perhaps her own answer to them—if he had pressed. Harry did not press; in his refraining she saw renewed evidence of his chivalry. She gave him her cheek to kiss; he kissed it lightly, saying, "Till to-morrow—what there's left of me after a night of dissipation!"

She opened the door with her key, waved a last good-night to him, and disappeared into the dimly lighted hall.

She was gone; the carriage was gone; Wellgood would not come for nearly an hour. Harry had not told what he had seen in the drive, nor disputed Vivien's assurance that Isobel Vintry would have gone to bed. Chance had put a marked florin on the mantelpiece for Wellgood; what were the chances of its being stolen, and of the theft being traced?

To have moods is to be exposed to chances. Many moods come and go harmlessly—free, at least, from external consequences. Sometimes opportunity comes pat on the mood, and the mood is swift to lay all the blame on opportunity.

"Well, it's not my fault this time," thought Harry. "And if I meet her, I can hardly walk by without saying good-night."

The little adventure, with its sentimental background, had just the flavour that his spirit had been asking, just what the evening lacked. A brief scene of reserved feeling, more hinted than said, a

becoming word of sorrow, and so farewell! No harm in that, and, under the circumstances, less from Harry would be hardly decent.

Isobel did not seem minded even for so much. She came up to him with a quick resolute step. She wore a low-cut black gown, and a black lace scarf twisted round her neck. She bent her head slightly, saying, "Good-night, Mr. Harry."

He stepped up to her, holding out his hand, but she made no motion to take it.

pg 393

"I've no key—I'll go in by the back door. It's sure to be open, because Fellowes is up, waiting for Mr. Wellgood."

"He won't be here for ever so long. Won't you give me just three minutes?"

The lamp over the hall door showed him her face; it was pale and tense, her lips were parted.

"I think I'd sooner go in at once."

"I want you to know that I didn't send that answer lightly. It—it wasn't easy to obey you."

"Please don't let us say a single word more about it. If you have any feeling, any consideration for me, you'll let me go at once."

The moment was a bad one for her too. She had spent an evening alone with bitter thoughts; she had strolled out in a miserable restlessness. Seeing the carriage pass, feeling sure that Harry was in it, she had first thought that she would hide herself till he had gone, then decided to try to reach the house before he had parted from Vivien. Her wavering landed her there at the one wrong minute.

Harry glanced up at the house; every window was dark. Vivien's room looked over the lake, the servants' quarters to the back. There was danger, of course; somebody might come; but nobody was there to see now. The danger was enough to incite, not enough to deter. And what he had to say was very short.

pg 394

"I only want to tell you how deeply sorry I am, and to ask you to forgive me."

"That's soon said—and soon answered. I forgive you, if I have anything to forgive."

Her voice was very low, it broke and trembled on the last words of the sentence.

"I had lost the right to love you, and I hadn't the courage to regain my freedom, with all that meant to—to poor Vivien and—others. But at least I was sincere. I didn't pretend—"

"Please, please!" Her tones sank to a whisper; he strained forward to catch it. "Have some mercy on me, Harry!"

The old exultation and the old recklessness seized on him. He suffered a very intoxication of the senses. Her strength made weakness, her stateliness turned to trembling for his sake—the spectacle swept away his good resolves as the wind blows the loose petals from a fading rose. Springing forward, he tried to grasp her hands. She put them behind her back, and stood thus, her face upturned to his, her eyes set on him intently. He spoke in a low hoarse voice.

"I can't stand any more of it. I've tried and tried. I love Vivien in a way, and I hate to hurt her. And I hate all the fuss too. But I can't do it any more. You're the girl for me, Isobel! It comes home to me—right home—every time I see you. Let's face it—it'll soon be over! A minute with you is worth an hour with her. I tell you I love you, Isobel." He stooped suddenly and kissed the upturned lips.

pg 395

"You think that to-night. You won't to-morrow. The—the other side of it will come back."

"Face the other side with me, and I can stand it. You love me—you know you do!"

The trees swayed, murmured, and creaked under the wind; the water lapped on the edge of the lake. The footsteps of a man walking up the drive passed unheard by the engrossed lovers. The man came to where he could see their figures. A sudden stop; then he glided into the cover of the bushes which fringed the lake, and began to crawl cautiously and noiselessly towards the house. To save Wellgood from kicking his heels for an idle hour after dinner in the hotel, and again for an idle half-hour at the station where he had to change, Lord Meriton had performed, at the cost of a *détour* of seven or eight miles, the friendly office of bringing his colleague home in his motor-car. It is to little accidents like this that impetuous lovers are exposed. So natural when they have happened—this thing had even happened once before—so unlikely to be thought of beforehand, they are indeed florins marked by the cunning hand of chance.

pg 396

Isobel made no effort to deny Harry's challenge.

"Yes, I love you, and you know it. If I didn't, I should be the most treacherous creature on earth, and the worst! Even as it is, I've nothing to boast about. But I love you, and if there were no to-morrow I'd do anything you wish or ask."

"There is no to-morrow now; it will always be like to-night." He bent again and softly kissed her.

"I daren't think so, Harry! I daren't believe it." Unconsciously she raised her voice in a little wail. The words reached Wellgood, where he was now crouching behind a bush. He dared come no nearer, lest they should hear his movements.

Harry had lost all hold on himself now. The pale image of Vivien was obliterated from his mind. He had no doubt about to-morrow—how had he ever doubted?—and he pleaded his cause with a passion eloquent and infectious. It was hard to meet passion like that with denial and doubt; sorely hard when belief would bring such joy and triumph!

"If you do think so to-morrow—" She slowly put her hands out to him, a happy tremulous smile on her face.

pg 397

But before he could take her to his arms, a rapid change came into her eyes. She held up a hand in warning. The handle of the door had turned. Both faced round, the door opened, and Vivien looked out.

"Oh, there you are, Isobel!" she exclaimed in a tone of relief. "I couldn't think what had become of you. I went into your room to tell you about the dinner."

"I saw the carriage pass as I was strolling in the drive, but when I got to the door you'd gone in." Her voice shook a little, but her face was now composed.

"It's my fault. I kept Miss Vintry talking on the doorstep."

"I must go in now," said Isobel. "Good-night, Mr. Harry."

Vivien looked at them in some curiosity, but without any suspicion. A thought struck her. "I believe I caught you talking about me," she said with a laugh. "And not much good about me either—because you both look a little flustered."

Wellgood stepped out from behind his bush.

"I think I can tell you what they've been talking about, Vivien, and I will. I've had the pleasure of listening to the last part of it."

He stood there stern and threatening, struggling to keep within bounds the rage that nearly mastered him—the rage of the deceived lover trying still to masquerade as a father's indignation. The father should have sent his daughter away; the lover was minded at all costs to heap shame and humiliation on his favoured rival and on the woman who had deceived him.

pg 398

"Not before Vivien!" Harry cried impulsively.

Vivien turned eyes of wonder on him for a moment, then the old look of remoteness settled on her face. She stood holding on to the door, for support perhaps, looking now at none of them, looking out into the night.

"This man, your lover, was making love to this woman, whom I employed to look after you." He laughed scornfully. "Oh yes, a rare fool I look! But don't they look fools too? They're nicely caught at last. I daresay they've had a good run, a lot of 'I love you's,' a lot of kisses like the one I saw to-night. But they're caught at last."

Vivien spoke in a low voice. "Is it true, Isobel?" For Harry she had neither words nor eyes.

"It's true," said Isobel; now her voice was calm. "There's no use saying anything about it."

"And you let him do it!" cried Wellgood, his voice rising in passion. "You her friend, you her guardian, you who—" His words seemed nearly to choke him. He turned his fury on to Harry. "You scoundrel, you shall pay for this! I'll make Meriton too hot to hold you! You try to swagger about this place as you've been doing, you try to open your mouth in public, and I'll be there with this pretty story! I'll make an end of your chances in Meriton! You shall find out what it is to make a fool of Mark Wellgood! Yes, you shall pay for it!"

pg 399

From the beginning Harry had found nothing to say; what was there? His face was sunk in a dull despair, his eyes set on the ground. He shrugged his shoulders now, murmuring hoarsely, "You must do as you like."

Suddenly Isobel spoke out. "This is your doing. If you had let me go, as I wanted to, this wouldn't have happened. You suspected it, and yet you kept me here. I begged you to let me go. You wouldn't. I tried to do the honest thing—to end it all and go. You wouldn't let me—you know why."

"You wanted to go, Isobel?" asked Vivien gently. "And father wouldn't let you?"

"Yes. If he likes to tell you the reason, he can. But I say this is his doing—his! He's been waiting and watching for it. Well, he's got it now, and he must deal with it."

pg 400

Her taunts broke down the last of Wellgood's self-control. "Yes, I'll deal with it!" The lover forgot the father, the father forgot his daughter. "And I'll deal with him—the blackguard who's interfered between me and you!"

Vivien turned her head towards her father with a quick motion. His eyes were set on Isobel in a furious jealousy. Vivien gave a sharp indrawing of her breath. Now she understood.

"He shall pay for it!" cried Wellgood, and made a dart towards Harry, raising the stick which he had in his hand.

In an instant Vivien was across his path, and caught his uplifted arm in both of hers. "Not that way, father!"

"Go into the house, Vivien."

"For my sake, father!"

"Go into the house, I say. Let me alone."

"Not till you promise me you won't do that."

He looked down into her pleading face. His own softened a little. "Very well, my girl, I promise you I won't do that."

Neither Isobel nor Harry had moved; they made no sign now. Vivien slowly loosed her grasp of her father's arm and turned back towards the door. Suddenly Harry spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm sorry, Vivien, awfully sorry."

pg 401

Then she looked at him for a moment; a smile of sad wistfulness came on her lips.

"Yes, I'm sure you're awfully sorry, Harry."

She passed into the house, leaving the door open behind her. Harry heard her slow steps crossing the hall.

"There's no more to be said to-night," said Isobel, and moved towards the door. Wellgood was beforehand with her; he barred the way, standing in the entrance.

"Yes, there's one more thing to be said." He was calmer now, but not a whit less angry or less vicious. "From to-night I've done with both of you—I and my house. If you want her, take her. If you can get him, take him—and keep him if you can. Let him remember what I've said. I keep my word. Let him remember! If he doesn't want this story told, let him make himself scarce in Meriton. If he doesn't, as God's above us, he shall hear it wherever he goes. It shall never leave him while I live." He turned back to Isobel. "And I've done with you—I and my house. Do what you like, go where you like. You've set your foot for the last time within my threshold."

Harry looked up with a quick jerk of his head. "You don't mean to-night?"

A grim smile of triumph came on Wellgood's face. "Ah, but I do mean to-night. You're in love with her—you can look after her. I'll leave you the privilege of lodging her to-night. Rather late to get quarters for a lady, but that's your lookout."

pg 402

"You won't do that, Mr. Wellgood?" said Isobel, the first touch of entreaty in her voice.

With an oath he answered, "I will, and this very minute."

He stood there, with his back to the door, a moment longer, his angry eyes travelling from one to the other, showing his teeth in his vicious smile. He had thought of a good revenge; humiliation, ignominy, ridicule should be the portion of the woman who had cheated him and of the man who took her from him. There was little thought of his daughter in his heart, or he might have shown mercy to this other girl.

"I wish you both a pleasant night," he said with a sneering laugh, then turned, went in, and banged the door behind him. They heard the bolt run into its socket.

Isobel came up to Harry. Stretching out her arms, she laid her hands on his shoulders. Her composure, so long maintained, gave way at last. She broke into hysterical sobbing as she stammered out, "O Harry, my dear, my dear, I'm so sorry! Do forgive!"

Harry Belfield took her face between his two hands and kissed it; but under her embracing hands she felt his shoulders give a little shrug. It was his old protest against those emotions. They had played him another scurvy trick!

pg 403

The bolt was shot back again, the door opened. Fellowes, the butler, stood there. He held a hat and a long cloak in his hand.

"Miss Vivien told me to give you these, miss, and to say that she wasn't allowed to bring them herself, and that she has done her best."



Harry took the things from him, handed the hat to Isobel, and wrapped her in the cloak.

Fellowes was an old family servant, who had known Harry from a boy.

"I dare do nothing, sir," he said, and went in, and shut the door again.

"It was good of Vivien," said Isobel, with a choking sob.

Harry shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, we must go—somewhere," he said.

## Chapter XX.

pg 404

### NO GOOD?

At supper the fun waxed fast and harmlessly furious. The party had received an unexpected accession in the person of Jack Rock. He had been caught surveying the "spread" in company with Miss Dutton (she had declined the alarming hospitality of Halton), old Mr. Dove, and the Bird—a trio who had been working for its perfection most of the day and all the evening. Having caught Jack, the Nun would by no means let him go. She made him sit down by her in Harry's vacant place, declaring that room could be found for Harry somewhere when he turned up, and in this honourable position Jack was enjoying himself—honestly, simply, knowing that they were "up to their fun," neither spoilt nor embarrassed. Old Mr. Dove, the Bird, and Miss Miles (when the bar closed she condescended to help at table, because she too had been in the profession) humoured the joke, and served Jack with a slyly exaggerated deference. Billy Foot referred to him as "the eminent sportsman," and affected to believe that he belonged to the Jockey Club. Gilly, who knew not Jack, perceiving the sportsman but missing the butcher, had a success the origin of which he did not understand when he proceeded to explain to Jack what points were of really vital importance in a sweetbread.

pg 405

"You gentlemen from London seem to study everything!" exclaimed Jack admiringly.

"This one does credit to the local butcher," said Gilly solemnly, and looked round amazed when all glasses were lifted in honour of Jack Rock.

"Food is the only thing Gilly studies," remarked Miss Dutton. The supper proving satisfactory, she felt at liberty to indulge her one social gift of a sardonic humour.

"Quite right, Sally," Billy agreed. "Food for his own body and for the minds of children. What he makes out of the latter he spends on the former. That both are good you may see at a glance."

"I find myself with something like an appetite," Gilly announced.

"That's how I likes to see folks at the Lion," said old Mr. Dove, easily interposing from behind his chair. "A trifle more, sir?—Miss Miles, your eye seems to have missed Mr. Gilbert Foot's glass."

"La, now, I was looking at Miss Flower's frock!"

pg 406

"Why, you helped to put it on me! You ought to know it."

"It sets that sweet on you, Miss Flower."

All was merry and gay and easy—a pleasant ending to a pleasant holiday. They all hoped to come back for the wedding, to run down for that eventful day, but work claimed them on the morrow. London clamoured for the Nun—new songs to be rehearsed now and sung in ten days. Billy Foot had a heavy appeal at Quarter Sessions; Gilbert Foot and Co. demanded the attention of its constituent members.

"Harry's a long time getting back," Andy remarked, looking at his watch.

"He's dallying," said Billy. "I should dally myself if I had the chance."

"Perhaps he found Wellgood back; I know he wanted to speak to him—something about the settlements."

"And what might you be going to sing in London next, miss?" asked Jack, gratefully accepting a tankard of beer which Mr. Dove, in silent understanding of his secret wishes, had placed beside him.

"I'm going to be Joan of Arc," said the Nun. "Know much about her, Mr. Rock?"

"Surely, miss! Heard of her at school. The old gentleman used to talk about her too, Andy. Burnt to death for a witch, poor girl, wasn't she?"

pg 407

"It seems a most appropriate part for our hostess," remarked Billy Foot.

"Silly!" Miss Dutton shot out contemptuously.

"It's rather daring, but the Management put perfect reliance in my good taste," the Nun pursued serenely. "In the first song I'm just the peasant girl at—at—well, I forget the name of the village, somewhere in France—it'll be on the programme. In the second I'm in armour—silver armour—exhorting the King of France. They wanted me to be on a horse, but I wouldn't."

"The horse might be heard neighing?" Billy suggested. "Off, you know."

"Then the horse would be where I was afraid of being," said the Nun, and suddenly gurgled.

"Silver armour! My! Don't you want to take me up to see her?" This came, in a perfectly audible aside, from Miss Miles to the Bird. Old Mr. Dove coughed, yet benevolently.

"Much armour?" asked Gilly, suddenly emerging from a deep attention to his plate. His hopes obviously running towards what may be styled a classical entertainment, the question was received with merriment.

"Completely encased, Gilly. I shall look like a lobster. Still, Mr. Rock will come and see me, if the rest of you don't."

pg 408

"There are possibilities about Joan of Arc," Gilly pursued. "Not at all bad to lead off with Joan of Arc. Andy, you might make a note of Joan."

"If a frontispiece is of any use to you, Gilly—?" the Nun suggested politely.

"What can have become of Harry?" Again it was Andy Hayes who asked.

The Nun turned to him and, under cover of Billy's imaginative description of the frontispiece, said softly, "Can't you be happy unless you know Harry Belfield's all right?"

"He's a very long time," said Andy. "And they're early at Nutley, you know. Perhaps he's decided to go straight home to bed."

She looked at him for a moment, but said nothing. The tide of merry empty talk—gone in the speaking, like the wine in the drinking, yet not less pleasant—flowed on; only now Miss Flower to some degree shared Andy's taciturnity. She was not apprehensive or gloomy; it seemed merely that some sense of the real, the ordinary, course of life had come back to her; the hour of careless gaiety was no longer, like Joan of Arc, "completely encased" in silver armour.

Jack Rock turned to her, bashful, humble, yet sure of her kindness. "I must be goin', miss; I've to be up and about by seven. But—would you sing to us, miss, same as you did at that meetin'?"

pg 409

It was against etiquette to ask the Nun to sing on private occasions; if she chose, she volunteered. But Jack was, naturally, innocent of the etiquette.

"Of course I'll sing for you. Any favourite song, Jack?"

"What pleases you'll please me, miss," said old Jack.

"I'll sing you an old Scotch one I happen to know."

Silence obtained—from Billy Foot with some difficulty, since he had got into an argument with Sally Dutton—the Nun began to sing:—

"My Jeany and I have toiled  
The livelong Summer's Day:  
Till we were almost spoil'd  
At making of the Hay.  
Her Kerchy was of holland clear,  
Tied to her bonny brow,  
I whispered something in her ear;  
But what is that to you?"

The Bird, who had been dispatched to get Gilly Foot a whisky-and-soda, came in, set it down, and moved towards Andy. "Be still with you, Tom!" said Jack Rock imperiously.

"Her stockings were of Kersey green,  
And tight as ony silk;  
O, sic a leg was never seen!  
Her skin was white as milk.  
Her hair was black as ane could wish,  
And sweet, sweet was her mou'!  
Ah! Jeany daintily can kiss;  
But what is that to you?"

pg 410

"She has a way of giving those two wretched last lines which is simply an outrage," Billy Foot complained to the now silent Sally Dutton.

Again the Bird tried to edge towards Andy. Jack Rock forbade.

"But I've a message," the Bird whispered protestingly.

"Damn your message! She's singin' to us!"

"The Rose and Lily baith combine  
To make my Jeany fair;  
There is no Benison like mine,  
I have a'maist no care,  
But when another swain, my fair,  
Shall say 'You're fair to view,'  
Let Jeany whisper in his ear,  
'Pray, what is that to you?'"

There was loud applause.

"I only sang it for Mr. Rock," said the Nun, relapsing into a demureness which had not consistently marked her rendering of the song.

Released from Jack's imprisoning eye, the Bird darted to Andy and delivered his delayed message. "Mr. Harry—Andy, if you'd step into the street, sir—Andy, I mean—(the Bird was confused as to social distinctions)—he's waiting—and looking infernally put out!"

pg 411

"He wants me—outside? Why doesn't he come in? Well, I'll go." Andy rose to his feet.

"You've fired his imagination!" remarked Gilly to the Nun. "He goes to seek adventures. Yet your song was that of a moralist."

"A moralist somewhat too curious about a stocking," Billy opined.

"Oh, well, I never think anything of a girl who lets her stockings get into wrinkles," the Nun observed, as she resumed her seat. "Do you, Jack?"

Her eyes had followed Andy as he went out. To tell the truth, they had chanced to fall on him once or twice as she sang her song. But Andy had looked a little preoccupied; that fact had not made her sing worse—and at last Andy had gently drummed three fingers on the table.

"You've a wonderful way of puttin' it, miss," said old Jack Rock.

She laid her hand on his arm, saucily affectionate. "Pray what is that to you?" she asked.

"I'm off, miss. Thank you kindly. It's been an evenin' for me!"

She let him go, with the kindest of farewells. A salvo of applause from the company honoured his exit. She rested her chin in her hands, her elbows on the table. Jack Rock was to be heard saying his good-nights—merry chaff with old Dove, with the Bird, with Miss Miles. Why had Andy gone out—and Harry Belfield not come in?

pg 412

Billy Foot rose, moved round the table, and sat by her. "Where did you find it?"

"In an old book a friend gave me."

"I like it." Billy sounded quite convinced of the song's merit.

"It has got a little bit of—of the feeling, hasn't it?"

"The feeling which I've always understood you never felt?"

She was securely evasive. "It's supposed to be a man who sings it, Billy."

"That accounts for the foolishness of the sentiments?"

"Makes them sound familiar, anyhow," said the Nun, preferring experience to theory.

Andy came in. He went quickly to the Nun and bent down over her chair.

"Harry's outside—with Miss Vintry. He wants to know if he may bring her in," he said, speaking very low.

Surprise got the better of the Nun's discretion. Her voice was audible to them all, as she exclaimed:

pg 413

"Miss Vintry with him! At this time of night!"

"I think perhaps—as we've finished supper—we'd better break up," said Andy, apologetically addressing the company.

"Why? Has anything happened?" asked Billy Foot.

"I think so." He bent down to the Nun again. "Miss Vintry has got to sleep here to-night." His

voice was low, but they were all very still, and the voice carried.

"There's no room for her—with Gilly here as well as us," the Nun protested rather fretfully.

"You must make room somehow," he returned firmly. "I'm going to bring them in now." He looked significantly at Billy Foot. "We're rather a large party."

Billy turned to his brother. "I'm off home. Will you stroll with me as far as Halton?"

Gilly nodded in a bewildered fashion—he was not up in Meriton affairs—and slowly rose.

"And when I come back I'll go straight to bed," he said, looking at Andy to see whether what he suggested met with acceptance.

Andy nodded approval; Gilly would be best in bed.

With the briefest farewell the brothers passed out. As they went, they saw Harry Belfield, with a woman on his arm, walking slowly up and down on the other side of the street.

pg 414

Sally Dutton rose. "I'll go to bed too." As she reached the door she turned round and said, "At least I'll wait in my room. She—she can come in with me, if she likes, Andy."

"Thank you," said Andy gravely.

"What is it, Andy?" the Nun asked.

"A general break-up," he answered briefly, as he followed Sally Dutton out of the room.

The Nun sat on amidst the relics of her feast—the fruit, the flowers, the empty bottles. Somehow they all looked rather ghastly. She gave a little shiver of disgust.

Andy came in with Isobel Vintry clinging to his arm, Harry following and carefully closing the door.

Andy made Isobel sit down at the table and offered her some wine from a half-emptied bottle. She refused with a gesture and laid her head between her hands on the table. Harry threw his hat on a chair and stood helplessly in the middle of the room. The Nun sat in a hostile silence.

"She'd better go straight to bed," said Andy.

"She can have my room. I'll go in with Sally."

He looked at her. "She'd better have somebody with her, I think. Will you call Sally?"

pg 415

The Nun obeyed, and Sally came. As she passed Harry, she smiled in her queer derisive fashion, but her voice was kind as she took hold of Isobel's arm and raised her, saying, "Come, you're upset to-night. It won't look half so bad in the morning."

Harry met Isobel and clasped her hands. Then she and Sally Dutton went out together.

Harry sat down heavily in a chair by the table and poured out a glass of wine.

"Do you two men want to be alone together?" the Nun asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'm just off home."

"It's all arranged," said Andy. "Harry goes to London by the early train to-morrow. I shall get her things from Nutley directly after breakfast and bring them here. You and Sally will look after her till twelve o'clock. Then I'll take her to the station. Harry will meet her at the other end, and—well, they've made their plans."

Harry lit a cigarette and smoked it very quickly, between gulps of wine. Andy had begun to smoke too. His air was calm, though grave; he seemed to have taken charge of the whole affair.

"Are you going to marry her?" the Nun suddenly inquired, with her usual directness.

"You might have gathered that much from what Andy said," Harry grumbled in an injured tone.

pg 416

"Does Vivien know yet?"

He dropped his cigarette-end into his emptied glass.

"Yes," he answered, frowning. "For God's sake, don't put me through a catechism, Doris!" He rose from his chair, looking round for his hat.

"Shall I walk back with you?" Andy asked.

"No, thanks. I'd rather be alone." His tone was still very injured, as though the two were in league with one another, and with all the world, to persecute him. He came up to the Nun. "I

shan't see you again for a bit, I expect. Good-bye, Doris." He held out his hand to her. The Nun interlaced her hands on the table in front of her.

"I won't!" she said. "I won't shake hands with you to-night, Harry Belfield. You've broken the heart of the sweetest girl I ever met. You've brought shame and misery on her—you who aren't fit to black her shoes! You've brought shame on your people. I suppose you've pretty well done for yourself in Meriton. And all for what? Because you must philander, must have your conquests, must always be proving to yourself that nobody can resist you!"

Harry looked morosely resentful at the indictment. "Oh, you can't understand. Nobody can understand who—who isn't made that way. You talk as if I'd meant to do it!"

pg 417

"I think I'd rather you had meant to do it. That'd be rather less contemptible, I think."

"Gently, gently, Doris!" Andy interposed.

She turned on him. "Oh yes, it's always 'Gently, gently!' with Harry Belfield. He's to be indulged, and excused, and forgiven, and all the rest of it. Let him hear the truth for once, Andy. Even if it doesn't do him any good to hear it, it does me good to say it—lots of good!"

"You'd better go, Harry. You won't find her good company to-night. I'll be at the station to see you off to-morrow—before I see about the things at Nutley."

"I'm going; and I'm much obliged to Doris for her abuse. She's always been the same about me—sneering and snarling!"

"I've never made a fool of myself about you. That's what you can't forgive, Harry."

"Go, my dear fellow, go," said Andy. "What's the use of this?"

Harry moved off towards the door. As he went out, he said over his shoulder, "At any rate you can't say I'm not doing the square thing now!"

They heard the "Boots" open the door of the inn for him; a moment later his step passed the window. Andy came and sat down by the Nun; she caught his big hand in hers.

pg 418

"I'm trying hard not to cry. I don't want to break my record. How did it all happen?"

"Wellgood came back before they expected him. Harry met her—by chance, he says—after he'd left Vivien, and he was carried away, he says. Somehow or other—I don't quite understand how—Vivien came on the scene again. Then Wellgood was on to them, and had the whole thing out, before his daughter. It seems that he's in love with Miss Vintry himself—so I understood Harry. That, of course, didn't make him any kinder."

"It's cruel, cruel, cruel!"

"Yes, but do you remember a talk we had about it once?"

"Yes. You thought this—this sort of thing would really be the best."

"I was thinking of Miss Wellgood. Of course, for poor Harry—Wellgood's a dangerous enemy!" He paused a moment. "And the thing's so bad. He wasn't square with either of them, and they're both in love with him, I suppose!"

"This woman here in love with him? Really? Not only for the match?"

"I think so."

"I'm sorry for her then. She'd much better not be! Oh, I daresay he'll marry her. How much will that mean with Harry Belfield?"

pg 419

Feeling in less danger of breaking her record, she loosed her hold of Andy's hand. He rose.

"I must be off. I've a lot to do to-morrow. Gilly'll have to look after the office. I've got to see Mr. Belfield among other things; and Harry wants me to see Vivien Wellgood—and, well, try to say something for him."

"Just like him! He breaks the pitcher and leaves you to sweep up the pieces!"

"Well, he can't see her himself, can he?"

"He'd make love to her again if he did. You may be sure of that!"

The door opened, and Sally Dutton came in in her dressing-gown, with her pretty hair all about her shoulders.

"She's asleep—sound asleep. So I—may I stay a few minutes with you, Doris? I—I've got the blues awfully badly." She came to the Nun and knelt down beside her. Suddenly she broke into a torrent of sobs. Andy heard her say through them, "Oh, it reminds me—!"

Doris looked at him and nodded. "I shall see you soon in London, Andy?"

He pressed her hand and left the two girls together.

Gilly Foot was smoking a reflective pipe outside the door; he had possessed himself of the key and sent the sleepy "Boots" to bed. Andy obtained leave of absence for the morrow.

pg 420

"Rather a disturbed evening, eh, Andy?" said Gilly, smoking thoughtfully. "Lucky it didn't happen till we'd done supper! Fact is one doesn't like to say it of an old friend—but Harry Belfield's no good."

Andy had a whimsical idea that at such a sentiment the stones of Meriton High Street would cry out. The pet and the pride of the town, the man of all accomplishments, the man who was to have that wonderful career—here he was being cavalierly and curtly dismissed as "no good."

"Come, we must give him another chance," Andy urged.

Gilly knocked out his pipe with an air of decision.

"Rotten—rotten at the core, old boy, that's it," he said, as with a nod of good-night he entered the precincts of the Lion.

Andy Hayes was sore to the heart. He had thought that a catastrophe such as this, a "row," would be the best thing—the best for Vivien Wellgood. He was even surer of it now—even now, when to think of the pain she suffered sent a pang through his heart. But what a light that increased certainty of his threw on Harry Belfield! And, as he said to himself, trudging home from the Lion, Harry had always been a part of his life—in early days a very big part—and one of the most cherished. Harry's hand had been the source whence benefits flowed; Harry's example had been an inspiration. Whatever Harry had done now, or might do in the future—that future now suddenly become so much less assured, so much harder to foresee—the great debt remained. Andy did not grudge "sweeping up the pieces." Alas, that he could not mend the broken pitcher! Sore as his heart was for the blow that had fallen on Vivien—on her so frail that the lightest touch of adversity seemed cruel—yet his sorest pain was that the blow came from Harry Belfield's hand. That filled him with a shame almost personal. He had so identified himself with his friend and hero, he had so shared in and profited by the good in him—his kindness, his generosity, his championship—that he could not rid himself of a feeling of sharing also in the evil. In the sullying of Harry's honour he saw his own stained—even as by Harry's high achievements he would have felt his own friendship glorified.

pg 421

"Without Harry I should never have been where or what I am." That was the thought in his mind, and it was a sure verity. Harry had opened the doors, he had walked through. Whatever Harry had done or would do with his own life, he had done much for his friend's, and done it gaily and gladly. Doris Flower might chide and despair; Gilly Foot's contemptuous verdict might dismiss Harry to his fate. That could not be Andy's mood nor Andy's attitude. Gratitude forbade despair; it must be his part still to work, to aid, to shelter; always, above all, to forgive, and to try—at least to try—to comprehend.

pg 422

Love or friendship can set no higher or harder task than in demanding the comprehension of a temperament utterly diverse, alien, and incompatible. That was the task Andy's heart laid on his brain. "You must not give up," was its command. Others might take their pleasure in Harry's gifts, might enjoy his brilliance, or reap benefit from his ready kindness—and then, when trouble came, pass by on the other side. There was every excuse for them; in the common traffic of life no more is asked or expected; men, even brilliant men, must behave themselves at their peril. Andy did not stand so. It was his to try to assess Harry's weakness, and to see if anywhere there could be found a remedy, a buttress for the weak wall in that charming edifice. Such a pity if it fell down, with all its beauties, just because of that one weak wall! But, alas, poor Andy was ill-fitted for this exacting task of love's. He might tell himself where his duty lay; he might argue that he could and did understand how a man might have a weak spot, and yet be a good man—one capable of useful and high things. But his instinct, the native colour of his mind, was all against these arguments. The shame that such a man should do such things was stronger. The weak spot seemed to spread in ever-widening circles; the evil seemed more and more to invade and infect the system; the weak wall doomed the whole edifice. Reason, argue, and pray for his friend as he might, in his inmost mind a voice declared that this day had witnessed the beginning of the end of the Harry Belfield whom he had loved.

pg 423

"Harry Belfield's no good!" "How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished!"

## Chapter XXI.

pg 424

### THE EMPTY PLACE.

Belfield rubbed his hands against one another with a rueful smile. "Yes, yes, he's a hard fellow. He's hard on us; hard in taking a course that makes scandal inevitable. Meriton High Street will be breast-high in gossip about the midnight expulsion in a few hours. And hard in this—I suppose I'm not entitled to call it persecution—this punishment with which he threatens Harry. Still, if a

man had treated my daughter in that way, and that daughter Vivien—" He spread out his hands, and added, "But then he's always been as hard as nails to the poor girl herself. You think there's that other motive? If you're right there, I put my foot in it once." He was thinking of certain hints he had given Wellgood at dinner one evening.

"There's no doubt about it, I think, sir, but it doesn't help us much. It may show that Wellgood's motives aren't purely paternal, but it doesn't make matters better for Harry." pg 425

"It's terribly awkward—with us at one end of the town and Nutley at the other. Most things blow over, but"—he screwed up his face wryly—"meeting's awkward! And there's the politics! Wellgood's chairman of his Association. Oh, Harry, Harry, you have made a mess of it! I think I'll go and talk it over with Meriton—make a clean breast of it and see what he says. He might be able to keep Wellgood quiet. You don't look as if you thought there was much chance of it."

"I don't know whether Harry would come back and face it, even if Wellgood were managed. A tough morsel for his pride to swallow! And if he did, could he bring her—at all events so long as Miss Wellgood's at Nutley? Yet if they marry—and I suppose they will—"

"I think we may take it that he'll marry her. The boy's ungoverned and untrustworthy, but he's not shabby, Andy." A note of pleading for his son crept into his voice.

"It's the right thing for him to do, but it'll make it still more difficult to go on as if nothing had happened. However I hope you will see Lord Meriton and get his opinion."

"I should like you to talk to Wellgood and find out what his terms really are. I can't ask favours of him, but I want to know exactly where we stand. And Vivien—no, I must write to her myself, poor dear girl. Not a pleasant letter to write." He paused a moment and asked, with an air of being rather ashamed of the question, "Is the sinner himself very desperate?" pg 426

"Last night he was, I think; at any rate terribly angry with himself, and—I'm afraid I must add—with his bad luck. When I saw him off this morning he was in one of his defiant moods, saying he could get on without Meriton's approval, and wishing the whole place at the devil."

"Yes, yes, that's Harry! Because he's made a fool—and worse—of himself, you and I and Meriton are to go to the devil! Well, I suppose it's not peculiar to poor Harry. And you saw him off? I can't thank you for all your kindness, Andy."

"Well, sir, if a man can feel that way, I'd almost rather have done the thing myself! I've got to ask her to see me on his behalf."

Belfield shook his head. "Not much to be said there. And I've got to tell my wife. Not much there either."

"I'm afraid Mrs. Belfield will be terribly distressed."

"Yes, yes; but mothers wear special spectacles, you know. She'll think it very deplorable, but it's quite likely that she'll find out it's somebody else's fault. Wellgood's, probably, because she never much liked him. If it helps her, let her think so." pg 427

"It was partly his fault. Why didn't he own up about Miss Vintry?"

"Not much excuse, even if you'd been the trespasser. With Harry engaged to Vivien, no excuse at all. How could it be in any legitimate way Harry's business what Wellgood wanted of Isobel Vintry? Still it may be that the argument'll be good enough for his mother."

"Well, sir, I'll see Wellgood to-day, and let you know the result. And Miss Wellgood too, if she'll see me. I positively must go to London to-morrow."

"Yes, yes. You go back to work, Andy. You've your own life. And that pretty girl, Miss Flower—does she go back too?"

"She goes this afternoon. And Billy Foot with them, I think."

"Yes, so he does. I forgot. Give her my love. I'd come and give her a nosegay at the station, only I don't feel like facing people to-day." He sighed wearily. "A man's pride is easily hit through his children. And I suppose we've cracked Harry up to the skies! Nemesis, Andy, Nemesis! There, good-bye. You're a thorough good fellow." pg 428

Billy Foot waylaid Andy as he left Halton. Billy's view of the matter was not ideal or exalted, but it went to a practical point.

"Did you ever know such a fool?" cried Billy. "What does he want to do it down here for? He's got all London to play the fool in, if he must play the fool! Nobody knows there, or if they do they don't care. Or if A cares B doesn't, and B's just as amusing to dine with—probably more so. But in this little hen-roost of a place! All the fowls'll cackle, and all to the same tune. I'll lay you six to four he's dished himself for good in Meriton. Where are you off to?"

"I've got to see Miss Vintry off, then I'm going to Nutley. By-the-bye, how did you hear about it?"

"It wasn't hard to guess, last night, was it? However, to inform my mind better, Andy, I took occasion to call at the Lion. I didn't see Miss Vintry, but I did see Miss Flower. Also I saw old Dove, and young Dove, and Miss Miles, all with faces as long as your arm—and enjoying themselves immensely! You can no more keep it dark in a place like this than you can hide the parish church under your pocket-handkerchief. They'll all know there was a row at Nutley; they'll all know Miss Vintry was turned out and slept at the Lion; they'll all know that Harry and she have gone to London, and, of course, they'll know the engagement's broken. They're not clever, I admit—I've made speeches to them—but I suppose they're not born idiots! They must have a rudimentary inductive faculty."

pg 429

The truth of these words was clearly shown to Andy's mind when he called at the Lion to pick up Isobel. She was alone in the Nun's sitting-room; the two girls had already said good-bye to her and gone out for a last walk in Meriton. When she came into the hall to meet him she was confronted by a phalanx of hostile eyes—Miss Miles', old Dove's, the Bird's, two chambermaids', the very "Boots" who had officiated at the door on the previous night. Nobody spoke to her. Her luggage, sent down from Nutley in answer to Andy's messenger, was already on the cab. Andy was left himself to open the door. Nobody even wanted a tip from her. Could unpopularity go further or take any form more glaring?

Before the hostile eyes (she included Andy's among them) Isobel was herself again—calm, haughty, unabashed, her feelings under full control. There were no signs of the tempest she had passed through; she was again the Miss Vintry who had given lessons in courage and the other manly virtues. Andy was unfeignedly glad that this was her condition; his practical equipment included small aptitude for dealing with hysterics.

pg 430

For the better part of the way to the station she said nothing. At last she looked across at Andy, who sat opposite to her, and remarked, "Well, Mr. Hayes, you saw the beginning; now you see the end."

"Since it has happened, I can only hope the end will be happy—for you and for him."

"I'm getting what I wanted. If you want a thing and get it, you can hardly complain, whatever happens."

"That sounds very reasonable, but—"

"The best thing to hope about reason is to hope you won't need it? Yes!"

It seemed that the news had not yet spread so far afield as to reach the station. The old stationmaster was friendly and loquacious.

"Quite a break-up of you all to-day, sir," he said. "Mr. 'Arry gone by the first train, the stout gentleman by the next, now Miss Vintry, and a carriage engaged for Miss Flower's party and Mr. Foot this afternoon! A real break-up, I call it!"

"That's about what it comes to, Mr. Parsons," said Andy, as he handed Isobel into the train.

"Well, 'olidays must 'ave an end. A pleasant journey and a safe return, miss."

pg 431

Isobel smiled at Andy. "You'd stop at the first part of the wish, Mr. Hayes?"

Andy put out his hand to her. With the slightest air of surprise she took it. "We must make the best of it. Do what you can for him."

"I'll do all he'll let me." Her eyes met his; she smiled. "I know all that as well as you do. Surely I, if anybody, ought to know it?" It seemed to Andy as if that were what her eyes and her smile said. "I want you to deliver one message for me," she went on. "Don't be alarmed, I'm not daring to send a message to anybody who belongs to Meriton. But when you next see Miss Dutton, will you tell her I shan't forget her kindness? I've already thanked Miss Flower for the use of her sitting-room. Ah, we're moving! Good-bye!"

She was smiling as she went. Andy was smiling too; the degree of her gratitude to Sally Dutton and to the Nun respectively had been admirably defined.

The fire of Wellgood's wrath was still smouldering hotly, ready to break out at any moment if the slightest breath of passion fanned it. He received Andy civilly enough, but at the first hint that he came in some sort as an ambassador from Harry's father, his back stiffened. His position was perfectly clear, and seemed unalterable. So far as it lay in his power he would banish Harry Belfield from Meriton and put an end to any career he might have there. He repeated to Andy more calmly, but not less forcibly, what he had shouted in his fury the evening before.

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"Of course I want it kept as quiet as possible; but I don't want it kept quiet at the cost of that fellow's going unpunished—getting off scot-free! We've nothing to be ashamed of. Publicity won't hurt us, little as we may like it. But it'll hurt him, and he shall have it in full measure—straight in the face. Is it a possible state of things that he should be here, living in the place, taking part in our public affairs, being our Member, while my daughter is at Nutley? I say no, and I think Belfield—his father, I mean—ought to be able to see it for himself. What then? Are we to be



driven out of our home?"

"That would be absurd, of course," Andy had to admit.

"It seems to me the only alternative." He rose from his chair, and walked up and down like an angry tiger. He faced round on Andy. "For a beginning, the first step he takes in regard to the seat, I shall resign from the committee of the Association, and state my reasons for my action in plain language—and I think you know I can speak plainly. I shall do the same about any other public work which involves meeting him. I shall do the same about the hunt, the same about everything. And I'll ask my friends—I'll ask decent people—to choose between Harry Belfield and me. To please my daughter, I didn't break his head, as I should have liked to, but, by heaven, I'll spoil his game in Meriton! I'm afraid that's the only message I can give you to take to Halton."

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"In fact you'll do your best to get him boycotted?" Andy liked compendious statements.

"That's exactly what I mean to do, Hayes. A man going to be married to my daughter in a fortnight—parted from her the moment before on the footing of her lover—found making violent love to another inmate of my house, her companion, almost within my very house itself—sounds well, doesn't it? Calculated to recommend him to his friends, and to the constituency?"

Andy tried a last shot. "Is this action of yours really best for Miss Wellgood, or what she would wish?"

Wellgood flushed in anger, conscious of his secret motives, by no means sure that he was not suspected of them. "I judge for my daughter. And it's not what she may wish, but what is proper in regard to her that I consider. On the other hand, if he lets Meriton alone, he may do what he likes. That's not my affair. I'm not going to hunt him over the whole country."

pg 434

"Well, that's something," said Andy with a patient smile. "I'll communicate your terms to Mr. Belfield." He paused, glancing doubtfully at his most unconciliatory companion. "Do you think it would be painful to Miss Wellgood to see me?"

He stopped suddenly in his prowling up and down the room. "That's funny! She was just saying she would like to see you."

"I'm glad to hear that. I want to be quite frank. Harry has asked me to express to her his bitter regret."

"Nothing more than that?"

"Nothing more, on my honour."

"She wants to say something to you." He frowned in hesitation. "If I thought there was the smallest chance of her being induced to enter into direct communication with him, I'd say no at once. But there's no chance of that. And she wants to see you. Yes, you can see her, if you like. She's in the garden, by the lake, I think. She's taken this well, Hayes; she's showing a thousand times more pluck than I ever thought she had." His voice grew gentle. "Poor little girl! Yes, go! She wants to see you."

Andy had taken nothing by his first mission; he felt quite hopelessly unfit for his second. To offer the apologies of a faithless swain was no more in his line than to be a faithless swain himself; the fleeting relics of Harry's authority had imposed a last uncongenial task. Perhaps his very mum-chancenness was his saving. Glib protestations would have smacked too strongly of the principal to commend the agent. Vivien heard his stammering words in silence, seeming wrapped in an aloofness that she took for her sole remaining protection. She bowed her head gravely at the "bitter regret," at the "unguarded moment," at the "fatal irresolution"—Andy's memory held fast to the phrases, but refused to weld them into one of Harry's shapely periods. On "fatal irresolution" he came to a full stop. He dared not look at her—it would seem an intrusion, a brutality; he stared steadily over the lake.

pg 435

"I knew he had moods like that," she said after a long silence. "I never realized what they could do to a man. I daresay it would be hard for me to realize. I'm glad he wanted to—to say a word of regret. There's one thing I should like you to tell him; that's why I wanted to see you."

Now Andy turned to her, for her voice commanded his attention.

"How fagged-out you look, Miss Wellgood!" he exclaimed impulsively.

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"Things aren't easy," she said in a low steady voice. "If I could have silence! But I have to listen to denunciation. You'll understand. Did he tell you what—what passed?"

"The gist of it, I think."

"Then you'll understand that I mayn't have the power to stop the denunciations, or—or the other steps that may be threatened or taken. I should like him to know that they're not my doing. And I should like him to know too that I would a thousand times sooner this had happened than that other thing which I believe he meant to happen—honestly meant to happen—but for—this accident."

"I'm with you in that, Miss Wellgood. It's far better."

"I accept what he says—an unguarded moment. But I—I thought he had a guard." She sat silent again for a minute. "There's one other thing I should like to say to him, through you. But you'll know best whether to say it or not, I think. I should like to tell him that he can't make me forget—almost that he can't make me ungrateful. He gave me, in our early days together, the first real joy I'd ever had—I expect the only perfect joy I ever shall have. What he gave then, he can't wholly take away." She looked at Andy with a faint melancholy smile. "Shall you tell him that?"

pg 437

"If you leave it to me, I shan't tell him that."

"Why not?"

"You want it all over, don't you?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!"

"Then don't tell Harry Belfield that. Think it, if you like. Don't tell him."

A look of sheer wonder came into her eyes. "He's like that?" she murmured.

"Yes, like that. That's the trouble. He'd better think you're—hopelessly disgusted."

"I'm hopelessly at sea, anyhow," she said, turning her eyes to the lake again. But she turned back to him quickly, still with her faint smile. "Disgusted? Oh, you're thinking of the fastidiousness? Ah, that seems a long time ago! You were very kind then; you're very kind now." She laid her hand lightly on his arm; for the first time her voice shook. "You and I can sometimes talk about him as he used to be—just we two together!"

"Or as we thought he was?" Andy's tones were blunt still, and now rather bitter.

"Or as we thought he was—and, by thinking it, were so happy! Yes, we'd better not talk about him at all. I don't think I really could. You'll be seeing Mr. Belfield soon? Give him my dear love, and say I'll come and see him and Mrs. Belfield as soon as they want me. He sent me a note this morning. I can't answer it just yet."

pg 438

"I'll tell him." Andy rose to go.

"Oh, but must you go just yet? I don't want you to." She glanced up at him, with a sad humour. "Curly's out, you know, and terribly big and rampageous!"

"But you're not running away now, any more than you did then."

"I'm trying to stand still, and—and look at it—at what it means about life."

"You mustn't think all life's like that—or all men either."

"That's the temptation—to think that."

"Men are tempted to think it about women too, sometimes."

She nodded. "Yes, of course, that's true. I'm glad you said that. You are good against Curly!"

They had Wellgood in their minds. It was grievance against grievance at Nutley; the charge of inconstancy is eternally bandied to and fro between the sexes—*Varium et mutabile semper Femina* against "Men were deceivers ever"—*Souvent femme varie* against the sorrowfully ridiculous chronicles of breach of promise of marriage cases. Plenty of matter for both sides! Probably both sides would be wise to say as little as possible about it. If misogyny is bad, is misandry any better? At all events the knowledge of Wellgood's grievance might help to prevent Vivien's from warping her mind. Hers was the greater, but his was of the same order.

pg 439

The world incarnated itself to her in the image of the big retriever dog, being so alarming, meaning no harm consciously, meaning indeed affection—with its likelihood of paws soiling white raiment. Andy again stood dressed as the guardian, the policeman. He was to be "good against Curly."

"And Isobel?" she asked.

"I saw her off all right by the twelve-fifteen, Miss Wellgood—to London, you know."

"Yes, to London." To both of them London might have been spelt "Harry."

"She was never really unkind to me," said Vivien thoughtfully. "I expect it did me good."

"Never a favourite of mine—even before this," Andy pronounced, rather ponderously.

She shot a side glance at him. "I believe you thought she beat me!"

"I think I thought that sometimes you'd sooner she had done that than stand there smiling."

"Oh, you're prejudiced! She wasn't unkind; and in this thing, you see, I know her temptation. Surely that ought to bring sympathy? Tell me—you saw her off—well—how?" She spoke in jerks, now seeming agitated.

"Very calm—quite her own mistress—seeming to know what her job was. Confound it, Miss Wellgood, I'd sooner not talk about her any more!"

"Shall you see Harry?"

"I don't want to till—till things have settled down a bit. I shall write about what you've said."

"About part of what I've said," she reminded him. "You've convinced me about that."

Andy rose again, and this time she did not seek to hinder him.

"I'm off to town to-morrow; back to work." He paused a moment, then added, "If I get down for a week-end, may I come and see you?"

"Do—always, if you can. And remember me to Miss Flower and to Billy Foot; and tell them that I am"—she seemed to seek a word, but ended lamely—"very well, please."

Andy nodded. She wanted them to know that her courage was not broken.

On his way out he met Wellgood again, moodily sauntering in the drive by the lake.

"Well, what do you think of her?" Wellgood asked abruptly.

"She's feels it terribly, but she's taking it splendidly."

Wellgood nodded emphatically, saying again, "I never thought she had such pluck."

"I should think, you know," said Andy, in his candid way, "that you could help her a bit, Mr. Wellgood. It does her no good to be taken over it again and again. Least said, soonest mended."

Wellgood looked at him suspiciously. "I'm not going back on my terms."

"Wait and see if they are accepted. Let him alone till then. She'd thank you for that."

"I want to help her," said Wellgood. His tone was rather surly, rather ashamed, but it seemed to carry a confession that he had not helped his daughter much in the past. "You're right, Hayes. Let's be done with the fellow for good, if we can!"

From all sides came the same sentiment: from Wellgood as a hope, from Vivien as a sorrowful but steadfast resolution, from Billy Foot as a considered verdict on the facts of the case. Andy's own reflections had even anticipated these other voices. An end of Harry Belfield, so far as regarded the circle of which he had been the centre and the ornament! Would Harry accept the conclusion? He might tell Meriton to "go to the devil" in a moment of irritated defiance; but to abandon Meriton would be a great rooting-up, a sore break with all his life past, and with his life in the future as he had planned it and his friends had pictured it for him. Must he accept it whether he would or not? Wellgood's pistol was at his head. Would he brave the shot, or what hand would turn away the threatening barrel?

Not Lord Meriton's. When Belfield, possessed of Wellgood's terms, laid them before him, together with an adequate statement of the facts, the great man disclaimed the power. Though he softened his opinion for Harry's father, it was very doubtful if he had the wish.

"I'm sorry, Belfield, uncommon sorry—well, you know that—both for you and for Mrs. Belfield. I hope she's not too much cut up?"

"She's distressed; but she blames Wellgood and the other woman most. I'm glad she does."

Meriton nodded. "But it's most infernally awkward; there's no disguising it. You may say that any man—at any rate, many a man—is liable to come a mucker like this. But happening just now—and with Wellgood's daughter! Wellgood's our right hand man, in this part of the Division at all events. And he's as stubborn a dog as lives! Said he'd resign from the hunt if your boy showed up, did he? By Jove, he'd do it, you know! That's the deuce of it! I suppose the question is how much opinion he'd carry with him. He's not popular—that's something; but a father fighting in his daughter's cause! They won't know the other side of it you've told me about; and if Harry marries the woman, he can't very well tell them. Then is she to come with him? Awkward again if Wellgood, or somebody put up by him, interrupts! If she doesn't come, that's at once admitting something fishy."

"The woman's certainly a serious added difficulty. Meriton, we're old friends. Tell me your own opinion."

"I don't give an opinion for all time. The affair will die down, as all affairs do. The girl'll marry somebody else in time, I suppose. Wellgood will get over his feelings. I'm not saying your son can't succeed you at Halton in due course. That would be making altogether too much of it. But

now, if the moment comes anywhere, say, in the next twelve months—well, I question if a change of air—and another constituency—wouldn't be wiser."

"I think so too—in his own interest. And I rather think that I, at least, owe it to Vivien to throw my weight on the side that will save her from annoyance."

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"That was in my mind too, Belfield; but I knew you'd think of it without my saying it."

"I believe—I do really believe—that he will look at it in that light himself. Any gentleman would; and he's that, outside his plaguy love affairs."

"I know he is; I know it. They bring such a lot of good fellows to grief—and pretty women too."

"Well, I must write to him; and you must look out for another candidate."

"By Jove, we must, and in quick time too! Apart from a General Election, I hear old Millington's sadly shaky. Well, good-bye, Belfield. My regards to your wife." He shook hands warmly. "This is hard luck on you; but he's got lots of time to pick up again. He'll end in the first flight yet. Cheer up. Better have a Prodigal than no son at all, like me!"

"I imagine a good deal might be said on both sides in that debate."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense! You wouldn't dare to say that to his mother!"

"No; and I don't suppose I really think it myself. But this sort of thing does make a man a bit nervous, Meriton."

"If the lady's attractions have led him astray, perhaps they'll be able now to keep him straight."

pg 445

"They won't be so great in one particular. They won't be forbidden fruit."

"Aye, the best fox is always in the covert you mayn't draw. Human nature!"

"At all events, my boy Harry's."

And for that nature Harry had to pay. The present price was an end of his career in Meriton. One more voice joined the chorus, a powerful voice. Belfield bowed his head to the decision. It was final for the moment; in his depression of spirit he felt as though it were final for all time, as though his native town would know Harry no more. At any rate, now his place was vacant—the place from which he by transgression fell. It must be given to another. Only in Vivien's memory had he still his niche.

## Chapter XXII.

pg 446

### GRUBBING AWAY.

Gilly Foot's mind was so inventive, and his demand for ministerial assistance in carrying out his inventions so urgent, during the next three weeks that Andy had little leisure for his own or anybody else's private affairs. The week-ends at Meriton had to be temporarily suspended, and Meriton news reached him now by a word from Billy, who seemed to be in touch with Belfield, now through Jack Rock. Thus he heard from Billy that Harry Belfield was married and had gone abroad; while Jack sent him a copy of the local paper, with a paragraph (heavily marked in blue pencil) to the effect that Mr. Harry Belfield, being advised by his doctor to take a prolonged rest, had resigned his position as prospective candidate for the Meriton Division. Decorous expressions of regret followed, and it was added that probably Mr. Mark Wellgood, Chairman of the Conservative Association, would be approached in the matter. Jack had emphasized his pencil-mark with a large note of exclamation, in which Andy felt himself at liberty to see crystallized the opinion of Harry's fellow-citizens.

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Still, though Meriton had for the time to be relegated mainly to memory, there it had a specially precious pigeon-hole. It had regained for him all its old status of home. When he thought of holidays, it was of holidays at Meriton. When his thoughts grew ambitious—the progress of Gilbert Foot and Co. began to justify modest ambitions—they pictured a small house for himself in or near Meriton, and a leisure devoted to that ancient town's local affairs. To himself he was a citizen of Meriton more than of London; for to Andy London was, foremost of all, a place of work. Its gaieties were for him occasional delights, rather than a habitual part of the life it offered. Talks with Jack Rock and other old friends, visits to Halton and Nutley, completed the picture of his future life at home. He was not a man much given to analysing his thoughts or feelings, and perhaps did not realize how very essential the setting was to the attractiveness of the picture, nor that one part of the setting gave the picture more charm than all the rest. Yet when Andy's fancy painted him as enjoying well-earned hours of repose at Meriton, the terrace by the lake at Nutley was usually to be seen in the foreground.

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Let Gilly clamour never so wildly for figures to be ready for him by the next morning, in order that he might know whether the latest child of his genius could be reared in this hard world or must be considered merely as an ideal laid up in the heavens, an evening had to be found to go

and see the Nun as Joan of Arc—first as the rustic maid in that village in France (its name was on the programme), and then, in silver armour, exhorting the King of France (who was supposed to be on horseback in the wings). The question of the Nun's horse was solved by an elderly white animal being discovered on the stage when the curtain rose—the Nun was assumed to have just dismounted (voluntarily)—and being led off to the blare of trumpets. This was for the second song, of course, and it was the second song which brought Miss Doris Flower the greatest triumph that she had ever yet achieved. Its passing references to the favour of Heaven were unexceptionable in taste—so all the papers declared; its martial spirit stirred the house; its tune caught on immensely; and, by a happy inspiration, Joan of Arc had (as she was historically quite entitled to have) a prophetic vision of a time when the relations between her own country and England would be infinitely happier than they were in the days of Charles VII. and Henry VI. This vision having fortunately been verified, the public applauded Joan of Arc's sentiments to the echo, while the author and the management were very proud of their skill in imparting this touch of "actuality" to the proceedings. Finally, the Nun was in excellent voice, and the silver armour suited her figure prodigiously well.

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"Yes, it's a great go," said Miss Flower contentedly, when Andy went round to her room to see her. She draped a Japanese dressing-gown over the silver armour, laid her helmet on the table, and lit a cigarette. "It knocks the Quaker into a cocked hat, and makes even the Nun look silly. The booking's enormous; and it's something to draw them here, with that Venus-rising-from-the-foam girl across the Square. I'm told, too, that she appears to have chosen a beach where there are no by-laws in force, Andy."

Andy explained that he had not much leisure for even the most attractive entertainments.

"Do you know," she proceeded, "that something very funny—I shan't want you for ten minutes, Mrs. Milsom" (this to her dresser, who discreetly withdrew)—"has happened about Billy Foot? I don't mind telling you, in confidence, that at Meriton I thought he was going to break out. With half an opportunity he would have. Since we came back I've only seen him twice, and then he tried to avoid me. His usual haunts, Andy, know him only occasionally, and then in company which, to my mind, undoubtedly has its home in Kensington."

pg 450

"What's the matter with him, I wonder? Now you remind me, I've hardly seen him either."

"He was here the other night, in a box, with Kensington; but he didn't come round. Took Kensington on to supper, I suppose."

"What have you against Kensington?" Andy inquired curiously.

"Nothing at all. Only I've observed, Andy, that taking Kensington out is a prelude to matrimony. I could tell you a dozen cases in my own knowledge. You hadn't thought of that? In certain fields my experience is still superior to yours."

"Oh, very much so! Do you suspect any particular Kensingtonian?"

"There was a tall dark girl, rather pretty; but I couldn't look much. Well, we shall miss Billy if it comes off, but I imagine we can rely implicitly on Gilly."

"You've heard that Harry's married to Miss Vintry?"

"Serve her right!" said the Nun severely. "I never had any pity for that woman."

pg 451

"And he's chucked the candidature. So our great campaign was all for nothing!"

"Well, Billy must always be talking somewhere, anyhow. And I should think it did you good?"

"Oh yes, it did. I was thinking of Harry."

"In my opinion it's about time you got out of that habit. Now you must go, or you'll make me too late to get anything to eat. As you may guess, wearing this shell involves a fundamental reconstruction before I can present myself at supper."

Andy took her hand and pressed it. "I'm so jolly glad you've got such a success, Doris. And the armour's ripping!"

There followed three weeks of what Gilly Foot, over his lunch at the restaurant and his dinner at the Artemis, used to describe as "incredible grind for both of us." Then a day of triumph! The outcome of the latest brilliant idea, the new scientific primer, was accepted as the text-book in the County Council secondary schools. Gilly wore a *Nunc Dimittis* air.

"Eton and Harrow! Pooh!" said he. "A couple of hundred copies a year apiece, perhaps. Give me the County Council schools! The young masses being bred on Gilbert Foot and Co.—that's what I want. The proletariat is our game! If this spreads over the country, and I believe it will, we shall be rich men in no time, Andy."

pg 452

Andy was smiling broadly—not that he had any particular wish to be rich, but because successful labour is marvellously sweet.

"Do you happen to remember that it was you who gave me the germ of that idea?"

"No, surely I didn't? I don't remember. I can't have, Gilly."

"Oh yes, you did. That arrangement of the tables of comparison?"

"Oh, ah! Yes—well, I do remember something about that. But that's only a trifle. You did all the rest."

"That's what's fetched them, though; I know it is." He gave a sigh. "Andy, I shall grudge you that all the rest of my life." He put his head on one side, and regarded his partner with a peaceful smile. "You're a remarkable chap, you know. Some day or other I believe you'll end by making me work! Sometimes I kind of feel the infection creeping over me. I distinctly hurried lunch to-day to come back and talk about this."

"I believe we have got our foot in this time," said Andy.

"I shan't, however, do anything more to-day," Gilly announced, rising and putting on his hat. "My nerves are somewhat over-stimulated. A walk in the park, a game of bridge, and a quiet little dinner are indicated. You'll attend to anything that turns up, won't you, old chap?"

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Slowly and gradually Andy Hayes was growing not only into his strength but also into the consciousness of it. He was measuring his powers—slowly, suspiciously, distrustfully. His common sense refused to ignore what he had done and was doing, but his modesty ever declined to go a step beyond the facts. All through his life this characteristic abode with him—a sort of surprise that the simple qualities he recognised in himself should stand him in such good stead, combined with an unwillingness rashly to pledge their efficacy in the greater labours of the future. Thus it came about that he was, so to say, a day behind the world's estimate in his estimate of himself. When the people about him were already sure, he was gradually reaching confidence—never the imperious self-confidence of commanding genius, which makes no question but that the future will be as obedient to its sway as the past, but a very sober trust in a proved ability, a trust based on no inner instinct of power, but solely on the plain experience that hitherto he had shown himself equal to the business which came his way—equal to it if he worked very hard at it, took it seriously, and gave all he had to give to it. The degree of self-confidence thus achieved was never sufficient to make him seek adventures; by slow growth it became enough to prevent him from turning his back on any task, however heavy, which the course of his life and the judgment of his fellows laid upon him. So step by step he moved on in his development and in his knowledge of it. He recognised now that it would have been a pity to pass his life as a butcher in Meriton—that it would have been waste of material. But he was still quite content to regard as a sufficient occupation, and triumph, of that life the building-up of Gilbert Foot and Co.'s educational publishing connection; and he was still surprised to be reminded that he had contributed anything more than hard work to that task, that it owed to him even the smallest scintilla of original suggestion. Still there it was. Perhaps he would never do a thing like that again. Very likely not. Still he had done it once. It passed from the impossibles to the possibles—a possible under strict and distrustful observation, but a possible that should be put to the proof.

pg 454

Nothing in the business line turned up after Gilly had departed to recruit his nerves. Having made one bold and successful leap, the educational publishing concern of Gilbert Foot and Co. seemed disposed to sit awhile on its haunches. Andy was the last man to quarrel with it for that; he had all the primitive man's fear of things looking too rosy. Things had looked too rosy with Harry. And "Nemesis! Nemesis!" old Belfield had cried. By all means let the educational publishing concern rest on its haunches for awhile; the new scientific primer, with the quite original arrangement of its comparative tables, supplied a comfortable cushion. It was five o'clock; Andy made bold to light his pipe.

pg 455

"Mr. Belfield!" announced the office-boy, twisting his head between the door and the jamb with a questioning air.

What brought Belfield to town? "Oh, show him in!" said Andy, laying down his pipe.

Not Harry's father, as Andy had concluded, but Harry himself was the visitor—Harry radiantly handsome, in a homespun suit of delicate gray with a blue stripe in it, a white felt hat, a light blue tie—a look of perfect health and happiness about him.

"I was passing by—been in the City—and thought I must look you up, old chap," said Harry, clasping Andy's hand in unmistakably genuine affection. "Seems years since we met! Well, a lot's happened to me, you see. You didn't know I was in town, did you? Only passing through; Isobel and I have been in Paris—went there after the event, you know—and we're off to Scotland to-morrow for some golf. She's got all the makings of a player, Andy. And how are you? Grubbing away?"

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"Grubbing away" most decidedly failed to express Gilbert Foot and Co.'s idea of what had happened in their office that day, but Andy found no leisure to dwell on any wound to his firm's corporate vanity. Here was the old Harry! Harry as he had been in the early days of his engagement! The Harry of that brief spell of good resolution, after Andy had delivered to him a certain note! There was no trace at all—by way either of woe or of shame—of the Harry who had

come to the Lion, seeking a place where Isobel Vintry might lay her head, craving for her the charity of a night's lodging, and no questions asked!

Andy's intelligence was brought to a full stop—sheer up against the difficult question of whether it is worth while to worry about people who are not worrying about themselves. Theologically, socially, politically, it is correct to say yes; faced with an individual case, the affirmative answer seems sometimes almost ridiculous; rather like pressing an overcoat—or half your cloak, after the example of St. Martin of Tours—on a vagabond of exceptionally caloric temperament. He is naked, and neither ashamed nor cold. Must you shiver, or blush, for him?

pg 457

"I—er—ought to congratulate you, Harry."

"Thanks, old chap! Yes, it's very much all right. Things one's sorry for, of course—oh, don't think I'm not sorry!—but the right road found at last, Andy! I suppose a fellow has to go through things like that. I'm not justifying myself, of course; I know I'm apt to—well, to put off doing the necessary thing if it's likely to cause pain to anybody. That's a mistake, though an amiable one perhaps. But all that's over—no use talking about it. When we get back to town, you must come and see us."

Andy remembered an old-time conversation about Lethe water. Harry seemed disposed to stand treat for a bottle.

"I'm awfully sorry about—about the seat, Harry," he said.

A faint frown of vexation marred Harry's comely contentment. "Yes, but I don't know that one isn't best out of it. A lot of grind, making yourself pleasant to a lot of fools! Oh, perhaps it's a duty; but it'll wait a bit."

"You're not looking out elsewhere?" Andy asked.

"Give a fellow time!" Harry expostulated. "I've only been married a fortnight! You must let me have a bit of a holiday. Oh, you needn't be afraid I shan't tackle it again soon—Isobel's awfully keen! And I hope to find a rather less dead-alive hole than Meriton." The faint frown persisted on his face; it seemed to hint that his mind harboured a grudge against Meriton—something unpleasant had happened there. A perceptible, though slight, movement of his shoulders dismissed the ungrateful subject. In a moment he had found a more pleasant one—a theme for his kindness to play on, secure from perturbing recollections. His old friendly smile of encouragement and patronage beamed on Andy.

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"So you and Gilly are making it go? That's right! He's a lazy devil, Gilly, but not a fool. And you're a good plodder. You remember I always said you'd make your way? I thought you would, even if you'd taken on old Jack's shop. But I expect you've got a better game here. Gilly pleased with you?" He laughed in his pleasantly conscious impudence.

"He hasn't given me the sack yet," said Andy.

"You did a lot of work for me, old fellow," Harry pursued. "Sorry that, owing to circumstances, it's all wasted! Still it taught you a thing or two, I daresay?"

"That's just what the Nun was saying the other night, when I went to see her show."

Harry's faint frown showed again. His recollection of Miss Flower's behaviour at Meriton accused her of a want of real sympathy.

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"Ah yes! I don't know who they'll get; but I must have made the seat safe. Just the way one works for another fellow sometimes! It doesn't do to complain."

The office-boy put his head in again—and his hand in front of his head. "Wire just come, sir," he said to Andy, delivered the yellow envelope, and disappeared.

"Open it, old fellow," said Harry, putting an exquisitely shod foot on the table. "Yes, another fellow will take my place; I've done the work, he'll reap the reward. And he'll probably think he's done it all himself!"

Andy fingered his telegram absently, not in impatience; nothing very urgent was to be expected, the great *coup* had already been made. He laid it down and listened again to Harry Belfield.

"Upon my soul," Harry went on, "I rather envy you your life. A good steady straight job—and only got to stick to it. Now I'm no sooner out of one thing—well out of it—than they begin to kick at me to start another. The pater and Isobel are in the same story about it."

Harry's face was now seriously clouded and his voice peevish. He had been through a great deal of trouble lately; he seemed to himself to be entitled to a rest, to a reasonable interval of undisturbed enjoyment. And he was being bothered about that career of his!

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"Well, I suppose you oughtn't to miss the next election. The sooner you go in the better, isn't it?"

"It's not so easy to find a safe seat." Harry assumed that the constituency which he honoured

should be one certain properly to appreciate the compliment. "I sometimes think I'd like to chuck the whole thing, and enjoy my life in my own way. Oh, I'm only joking, of course; but when they nag, I jib, you know."

Andy nodded, relit his pipe, and opened his telegram.

"That's why I think you're rather lucky to have it all cut and dried for you. Saves a lot of thinking!"

Andy had been reading his telegram, not listening to Harry for the moment. "I beg pardon, Harry?" he said.

"Oh, read it. I'm only gassing," said Harry good-humouredly.

Andy read again; he always liked to read important documents twice. He laid it down on the office table, looking very thoughtful. "That's funny!" he observed. "It's from your father."

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"Well, I don't see why the pater shouldn't send you a telegram, if he wants to," smiled Harry.

"Asking me to go down to Meriton on Saturday and meet Lord Meriton, Wigram, and himself." He took up the telegram and read the rest of the message—"to discuss important suggestion of public nature affecting yourself. Personal discussion necessary."

"To meet Meriton and Wigram?" Wigram was the Conservative agent in the Division. "What the devil can they want?"

"I don't know," said Andy, "unless—unless it's about the candidature."

"About what?" Harry sharply withdrew the shapely foot from the table and sat upright in his chair.

"Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Still I don't see what else it can be about. What else can there be of a public nature affecting me? 'Affecting yourself' doesn't sound as if they only wanted my advice. Besides, why should they want my advice?"

"Let's see the thing." Harry took it, read it, and flung it down peevishly. "Why the deuce can't he say what he means?"

"Well, a wire's not always absolute secrecy in small towns, is it? And I daresay they'd want the matter kept quiet till it was settled."

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Harry's mood of gay contentment, clouded once or twice before, seemed now eclipsed. He sat tapping his boot impatiently with his stick. His father's telegram—or Andy's interpretation of it—clearly did not please him. In the abstract, of course, he had known that he would have a successor in the place which he had given up, or from which he had fallen. It had never entered his head that anybody would suggest Andy Hayes, his old-time worshipper and humble follower. He was not an ungenerous man, but this idea demanded a radical readjustment of his estimate of the relative positions of Andy and himself. If Andy were to succeed to what he had lost, it brought what he had lost very sharply before his eyes.

"Well, if that is the meaning of it, it certainly seems rather—rather a rum start, eh, Andy? New sort of game for you!" He tried to make his voice pleasant.

"It is—it would be—awfully kind of them to think of it," said Andy, now smiling in candid gratification. "And Wigram, as well as your father, was highly complimentary about some of my speeches. But it would be quite out of the question. I've neither the time nor the money."

"It's a deuced expensive game," Harry remarked. "And, of course, no end of work, especially in the next few months. And when you're in, it's not much good in these days, unless you can give all your time to it."

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"I know," said Andy, nodding grave appreciation of all these difficulties. "It seems to me quite out of the question. Still, if that is what they mean, I can hardly refuse to discuss it. You see, it's a considerable compliment, anyhow."

He was thinking the idea over in his steady way, and had not paid heed to Harry's altered mood. The objections Harry put forward were so in tune with his own mind that it did not strike him as at all odd that his friend should urge them even zealously. "In any event," he added, "I should have to be guided entirely by what Gilly Foot thought."

"What Gilly thought?"

"I mean whether he thought it would be compatible with the claims of the business."

"What, you'd really think of it?"

There was such unmistakable vexation, even scorn, in his voice now that Andy could not altogether miss the significance of the tone. He looked across at Harry with an air of surprise.



"There's no harm in thinking a thing over. I always like to do that."

"Well, of all the men I thought of as likely to step into my shoes, I never thought of you."

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"It's the last thing I should ever have thought of either. You've something in your mind, haven't you? I hope you'll say anything you think quite candidly."

"Oh well, since you ask me, old fellow, from the party point of view I think there are—er—certain objections. I mean, in a place like Meriton family connections and so on still count for a good deal—on our side, anyhow."

Andy nodded, again comprehending and admitting. "Yes, I'm nobody; and my father was nobody, from that point of view." He smiled. "And then there's Jack Rock!"

"Don't be hurt with me, but I call myself a Tory, and I am one. Such things do count, and I'm not ashamed to say I think they ought to. I've never let them count in personal relations."

"I know that, Harry. You may be sure I recognise that. And you're right to mention them now. I suppose they must have reckoned with them, though, before they determined—if they have determined—to make me this offer."

"Well, thank heaven I'm out of it, and I wish you joy of it," said Harry, rising and clapping on his hat.

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"Oh, it's not at all likely it'll come to anything. Must you go, Harry?"

"Yes, I'm off." He paused for a moment. "If it is what you think, you'd better look at it carefully. Don't let them persuade you against your own judgment. I consider Wigram an ass, and old Meriton is quite out of touch with the Division." He forbore to comment on his own father, and with a curt "Good-bye" departed, shutting the door rather loudly behind him.

This great day—the day which had both witnessed the triumph of the new text-book and brought the telegram from Meriton—was a Thursday. Andy sent his answer that he would be at Halton on Saturday afternoon. He could find no other possible interpretation of the summons, surprising as his first interpretation was. He was honestly pleased; it could not be said that he was much puzzled. His answer seemed pretty plain—the thing was impossible. What did surprise him rather was the instinctive regret with which he greeted this conclusion. Such an idea had never occurred to his mind; when it was presented to him, he could not turn away without regret—nay, not without a certain vague feeling of self-reproach. If he seemed to them a possible leader, ought he to turn his back on the battle? But of course they did not know his private circumstances or the business claims upon him. Harry had been quite right about those, just as he had been about the desirability of family connections—but not of family connections with Jack Rock.

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It was quite out of the question; but, Andy being human and no more business offering itself, he indulged in half an hour's reverie over it. He shook his head at himself with a reproving smile for this vanity. But it would be pleasant to have the offer, and pleasant if they let him mention it to one or two friends. Jack Rock would be proud of it, and he could not help thinking that perhaps Vivien Wellgood would be pleased. His brow knit when he remembered that Harry Belfield had not seemed pleased. Well, could he be expected to be pleased? "To step into my shoes" had been his phrase. Well, if men choose to take off fine new shoes and leave them lying about? Somebody will step into them. Why not a friend? So he argued. A friend in regard to whom Harry had never allowed anything to interfere with his personal relations. That was just it. If a friend, he had also been a *protégé*, the recipient of a kindly generous patronage, an equal by grace and not by right. Credit Harry Belfield with a generosity above the average, and yet he might feel a pang at the idea of his former humble friend stepping into his shoes, taking his place, becoming successor to what his folly had left vacant. Andy understood; and from that point of view he felt it was rather a relief that the thing was in itself an impossibility. There was a triple impossibility—the money, the time—and Gilly Foot!

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Still the text-book and the telegram had given him an interesting day.

## Chapter XXIII.

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### A STOP-GAP.

Andy felt that he ought not to go to Meriton without having possessed himself of his partner's views. Any reluctance—even a reluctant assent—from Gilly would put an immediate end to the project. He was rather nervous about bringing the matter forward, fearing lest the mere idea of it, entertained by the junior partner, might seem treason in the eyes of his senior in the growing business of Gilbert Foot and Co.

The interview held one or two surprises for him. In this affair Andy was to learn the worth of a band of resolute friends, and to begin to understand how much men will do for a man who has convinced them that he can do things for himself also. For such a man the way is cleared of all

but inevitable difficulties. There is a conspiracy, partly self-interested, partly based on appreciation, to set him free to do the work for which he is fitted; the conspirators both want the work done and are glad to help a fine worker.

The first surprise was that Gilly Foot was not at all surprised when Andy put before him a contingent case—in terms carefully hypothetical. Indeed his first words went far to abolish any contingent or hypothetical character in the discussion.

"So they've done it, have they?" he drawled out. "I thought they would, from something Billy said."

"What does Billy know about it?"

"Oh yes, Billy knows. I expect they consulted him, in fact."

"I want to be able to tell them that you agree with me; that's why I've spoken to you about it."

"By all means tell them I agree with you," yawned Gilly; he seemed more than ordinarily lazy that morning—the reaction from the triumph of the text-book still on him, no doubt. Yet there was a lurking gleam of amusement in his eye.

"Apart from the money—and I haven't got it—it would take far too much time. I'm pretty hard worked as it is, with the business opening up in this way. I'm quite clear that it wouldn't be fair to the business—and not fair to you either. I've slept on it, and I'm quite clear about it."

"Oh, are you? Then by no means tell them I agree with you."

Surprise the second! "You don't?" Andy ejaculated; there was a note of pleasure in his voice.

"I'm a lazy hound, I know," Gilly pursued. "If there is another fellow to do the work, I let him do it. Perhaps some day, if we go on booming, we can take in another fellow. If so, I shall certainly incite him to do the work. Meanwhile I'm not such a lazy beast as to let you miss this chance on my account. My word, I should get it hot from Billy—and Doris!" He stretched himself luxuriously. "There's a perfectly plain way out of this; I must work." He looked up at his partner humorously. "Though you mayn't believe it, I can work, when I want a thing very much."

"But what is there for you to want here?" asked Andy.

"Well, in the first place, we believe in you—perhaps we're wrong, but we do. In the second—and there's no mistake about this—we think you're a good chap, and we want you to have your chance. I shouldn't forgive myself if I stood in your way here, Andy—and the others wouldn't forgive me either."

Andy was standing by him; he laid his hand on his shoulder. "You're a good chap yourself, Gilly."

"So, as far as Gilbert Foot and Co. are concerned, you may consider the matter settled. It's for you to tackle the other end of it—the Meriton end. And since you are here to-day, at all events, perhaps you won't take it ill if I linger a little longer than usual over lunch—for which meal it seems to me to be nearly time? I feel to-day a barely perceptible stirring of the brain which, properly treated, encouraged by adequate nourishment, might produce an idea. You wouldn't like to come too?"

"No, no. I've really got more than enough to do here."

Gilly strolled off, smiling serenely. He was ready to do himself violence in the way of work when the time came, but there was really no need to anticipate matters.

Gilly's knowledge and assent—it was more than assent; it was advocacy—made the project real and present. Only the question of ways and means and of his own inclination remained. As to the latter Andy was no longer able to doubt. His pleasure at Gilly's attitude was indeed due in part to the affection for himself which it displayed, but it had been too eager to be accounted for wholly by that. His heart rejoiced because Gilly set him free, so far as the business was concerned, to follow his desire. Only that little book from the bank still held up its finger in its wonted gesture of cautious admonition. When it reckoned the figures involved, the little white book might be imagined to turn paler still.

At Meriton—where Andy arranged to spend the Saturday night with Jack Rock—the conspiracy ruled, even as in London. Lord Meriton, Belfield, and Wigram met him with the air of men who had already considered and overcome all difficulties.

"The fact is, Mr. Hayes," said his lordship, "we were fools over this business, till Foot put us right. We tried the three or four possible men in the Division, and for one reason or another none of them could accept. So, much against my will—indeed against my vote; I hate a carpet-bagger—it was decided to approach headquarters and ask for a man. Luckily Belfield wrote first to Foot—"

"And Billy Foot wrote back, asking what the dickens we wanted a man from London for, when we had the very man for the job under our noses down here!" He smiled rather sadly. "Meriton has more than one string to its bow, Andy."

"I've taken every pains to sound opinion, Mr. Hayes," said Wigram. "It's most favourable. Your speeches made an excellent impression. There will be no difficulty in obtaining adoption by the Association, if you come forward under the proper auspices."

"Oh, we'll look after the auspices," said Meriton. "That'll be all right."

"But I've no influence, no connections, no standing—"

"We haven't flattered you, Mr. Hayes," Meriton interrupted, smiling. "We've told you that we made efforts in other quarters."

"If it pleases you, Andy, you shall regard yourself as Hobson's choice," said Belfield, with a chuckle.

"Better than an outsider, anyhow!" Mr. Wigram chimed in.

Andy's modesty was again defeated. The Jack Rock difficulty, which had seemed so serious to Harry Belfield, was acknowledged—but acknowledged only to be brushed on one side by a determined zeal.

"But I—I can't possibly afford it!" Andy was in his last ditch, but then it was a wide and formidable one. The conspirators, however, attacked it without the least dismay.

"Ah, now we can get down to business!" said Belfield in a tone of relief. "This conversation is, of course, entirely confidential. We've looked at matters from that point of view, and—er—taken some advice. Wigram here says it can be done comfortably for twelve hundred—that's two hundred within the maximum. You needn't shake your head before I've finished! We think you ought to put up some of it, and to guarantee a certain sum annually towards Wigram's expenses. I'll tell you what we've decided to ask you for—two-fifty for the contest, and a hundred a year."

"Now just think it over, Mr. Hayes, and tell us if you see your way to that."

"But the rest?" asked Andy, half-bewildered; for the last great ditch looked as if it were being stormed and crossed. Because—yes, he might be able to—yes, with care, and prosperity at Gilbert Foot and Co.'s, he could manage that!

Belfield wrote on a bit of paper: "Meriton, £250; Rock, £250; Belfield, £500." He pushed it across the table. "That leaves a little margin. We can easily raise the balance of the annual expenses."

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly—!"

"My dear Andy, it's constantly being done," Belfield expostulated.

"Our friend Belfield, for reasons that you'll appreciate, feels that he would like to bear a share of the expenses of this fight, which under—well, other circumstances—would naturally have fallen entirely on him. My contribution is given for public reasons, Mr. Hayes, though I'm very glad that it should be of service to you personally." Meriton broke into a smile. "I expect I needn't tell you why old Jack Rock's name is there. We should have got into pretty hot water if we hadn't let him into it!"

Belfield leant over to Andy, and said in a lowered voice, "Atonement's too strong a word, Andy, but I don't want the party to suffer through anything that's occurred. I don't want it left in the lurch. I think you'd like to help me there, wouldn't you?"

Harry's father was against Harry. Harry's father urged him to step into Harry's shoes.

"I think we've made you a practical proposition; it tides us over the next election anyhow, Mr. Hayes. By the time another Parliament has run its course, I hope you'll be in a position where ways and means will present no difficulty. Soon enough to think about that when the time comes, anyhow."

"I think I can guarantee you success, Mr. Hayes," said Wigram.

All the difficulties seemed to have vanished—if only he could take the offered help.

"I feel rather overwhelmed," he said slowly.

Meriton shrugged his shoulders. "We must hold the seat. If you don't let us do this for you we shall probably have to do it for some fellow we never saw, or else put up with some boulder who's got nothing to recommend him except his money. I don't want to press you unduly, Mr. Hayes, but in my opinion, if your private affairs don't make it impossible, it's your duty to accept. Would you like time to consider?"

"Just five minutes, if you don't mind, Lord Meriton."

Belfield winked at Meriton. If he had asked for a week! Five minutes meant a favourable answer.

All the factors were before him; they could be judged in five minutes. It was a venture, but

Meriton said it was his duty. Nobody could tell where it would lead, but it was honourable work, for which responsible men thought him fitted. It was Harry's shoes, but they were empty. That last thought made him speak.

"If I accept, and win, I hold the seat at the disposal of those who've chosen me for it." Half-consciously he addressed himself especially to Belfield. "If at any time—"

"I knew you'd feel that way about it; but at present, at all events, it's not a practical question, Andy."

"I'm grateful for your confidence," Andy said, now turning to Meriton. "Since you think me fit for it, I'll take it and do my best with it, Lord Meriton."

"Capital!" his lordship exclaimed. Wigram's face was wreathed in smiles. Belfield patted Andy on the shoulder affectionately.

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"I don't believe either party to the bargain will regret it."

"I know Mr. Hayes will have an honourable, and I believe he will have a distinguished, career," Meriton said, and, rising from his chair, broke up the council.

Andy lingered for a little while alone with Belfield, to thank him again, to make some arrangements for the future, to tell him that he had seen Harry, and that Harry was well and in good spirits.

"You saw him on Thursday? After you got my wire? Did you say anything about it?"

"It came while he was there, and I showed it to him. He was surprised."

"You mean he wasn't pleased?"

"I can understand how he must feel. I feel just the same thing myself—terribly strongly sometimes."

Belfield pressed his arm. "You mustn't give way to that feeling. It's loyal, but it's not reasonable. Never let that weigh with you in anything."

The feeling might not be reasonable; it seemed to Andy inevitable. It must weigh with him. Yet it could not outweigh his natural and legitimate satisfaction that day. His mind reached forth to the new work, fortified by the confidence that his friends gave him. The thought of Harry seemed now rather a sobering reminder that this thing had come to him, in part at least, by accident. He was the more bound to do well with it, that the evil effects of the accident might be minimized.

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He made for Jack Rock's house in High Street, where he was to lodge. Jack had just got off his horse at the door, and was standing facing his shop, apparently regarding his sign. Andy came up and clapped him on the back.

"I know what you've been doing," he said. "At it again, Jack!"

"You've not refused?"

"No; I've accepted."

Jack wrung his hand hard. "That takes a weight off my mind," he said with a sigh.

"But it seems a low-down thing to take all that money—more of yours too!"

Jack smiled triumphantly. "Well, I happen to be a bit flush o' cash just now—that's the truth, Andy—so you needn't mind. D'ye see that sign?"

"Of course I do, Jack. What's the matter with it?"

"Well, in a month that sign'll come down." He cocked his head on one side as he regarded it. "Yes, down in a month! Seems strange, don't it? Been there sixty year." His sigh was evenly compounded of sorrow and pride.

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"What, are you going to retire, Jack?"

"No, I'm not pressin' it on you again! Don't be afraid. To think of my havin' done that! You as are goin' to Parliament! Lord, it's a great day, Andy! Come in and have a glass o' beer." He led the way to his back room, and the cask was called upon to do its duty. "I've sold out, Andy," Jack announced. "Sold out to a concern that calls itself the National, Colonial, and International Purveyors, Limited. That'll look well on the sign, won't it? Four thousand pound they're payin' me, down on the nail, besides pensionin' off old Simpson. Well, it's worth the money, if they can do as well with it as I've done. The house here is thrown in—they mean to enlarge the shop."

"But where are you going to set up house, Jack?"

Jack winked in great enjoyment. "Know of a certain house where a certain old gentleman used to

live—him as kept the grammar school—Mr. Hayes. B.A. Oxon? The old house in Highcroft, Andy! It's on the market, and I'm goin' to buy it—to say nothin' of a nice range of stablin' opposite. And there, if you'll accept of 'em, Andy, you'll have your own pair o' rooms always ready for you, when you're down at Meriton over your politics. Parlour and bedroom, there they'll be, and I shan't disturb you. And when I'm gone, there's the old house for you. There's nobody poor Nancy would have been so glad to see in it."

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There was a lump in Andy's throat, and he was not ashamed of it. The regard and love of his friends seemed to have been very much with him in the last few days, and to have done great things for him. Old Jack Rock's affectionate cunning touched him closely.

"I really think I'm the luckiest beggar alive!" he exclaimed.

"Folks mostly make their luck," said Jack. "You've made yours. There was no call on any of us to fret ourselves about you. You could have gone back to Canada and made your way for yourself—if it hadn't been that we got to want to keep you, Andy." He paused, drank his beer, and added, "Aye, but I shall feel a bit strange the day that sign comes down, and I've no more to say to the meat—only the horses! I've lived with the meat, man and boy, nigh on sixty year."

With a promise to return in good time for supper—for no risks must be run with what might be one of the last of Mr. Rock's own joints of beef that he would ever be privileged to eat—Andy left him and took the road to Nutley. He remembered Vivien's invitation; he looked forward to telling her his news, the great things that had been happening to him in the last three days. But he wanted yet more to meet her again; he had not seen her since the day after the catastrophe. Harry he had seen, and Harry had been happy, in high spirits, quite self-contented, until that untoward telegram eclipsed his gaiety. Would the interval of a few brief weeks have wrought a like change in her? It could not be looked for. Harry effected such transformations with a celerity peculiar to himself. Still there was room to hope for some lightening of her sorrow. Andy hoped to find it, and would approve of it. His mind was for the mean, for moderation, in all emotions. If he resented Harry's gaiety, unending unlifting woe was hardly more congenial to his temper, and certainly much more troublesome to deal with tactfully. Harry's implicit negation of responsibility had at least the merit of inviting other people not to make too much of his mischances.

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What his changing moods—his faculty of emotional oblivion—did in truth for Harry, pride effected in outward seeming for Vivien. Some credit, too, must be given to Wellgood's training and Isobel's able co-operation. The discipline of the stiff upper lip redeemed some of its harshness by coming to her rescue now. Never had she held her head so high in Meriton as in the days that followed the announcement of Harry Belfield's marriage with Isobel Vintry. A poor, maimed, stunted announcement, compared with the column and a half of description, guests, presents, and felicitations which would have chronicled her wedding! Five lines in the corner of the local paper—an item of news for such of the population as did not see the London papers—it was enough to make Vivien fence herself about against any show of pity. To do Meriton justice, it understood which of the pair had suffered the greater loss. That Miss Wellgood was "well out of it," but that Mr. Harry had "done for himself," was the prevailing verdict; somewhat affected, it is to be feared, by the adventitious circumstance that Isobel was "the companion"—a drop to obscurity for brilliant Mr. Harry!

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But the marriage dug deeper than to affect mere seeming. Besides erecting the useful barrier of impossibility, it raised the fence of an inward pride—or, rather, of that fastidiousness which Wellgood and Isobel had striven to eradicate. In that matter it was good for Vivien that they had failed. To allow herself to remember, to muse, to long—for whom? No more simply for Harry Belfield. In that name there were allurements for musing and for longing. But the bearer of it had contracted for himself now a new designation. It did him and his memory no good. Isobel Vintry's husband! The new character did much to strip him of his romantic habiliments. He was brought down to earth; he could no more float before the eyes, a dazzling though unprofitable figure, proceeding in a brilliant callousness to the wrecking of other hearts. There is always a touch of the ridiculous about Don Juan married, or Sir Gawain Light-of-Love bound in chains in whose forging the Church has lent a hand to Cupid. And married to Isobel Vintry, who had stolen kisses behind the door! In a moral regard perhaps it is sad to say, but we easier forgive our own romantic wrongs when they may be supposed to form but a link in a series. She would have found it harder to despise Harry, if he had served Isobel after the same fashion as he had served herself. She knew it not, but perhaps Harry was entitled to ask her to wait for just a little while! As the case stood—to weep for Isobel's husband! The stiff upper lip which had been inculcated joined forces with the fastidiousness that had never been uprooted. She chid herself for every memory of Harry; every pang of envy for Isobel demanded from herself a discipline more stern than Isobel's own had ever supplied to meet Wellgood's theories of a manly training.

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Wellgood was proud of his daughter and of his theories, readily claiming for his system of education the joint result of its success and of its failure—of the courage and of the fastidiousness alike. But the plague of it was that the thought of the training brought with it the memory of the preceptress who had so ably carried out his orders. Wellgood admired his daughter—and envied her. He burned still with a fierce jealousy; for him no appeasement lay in the marriage.

Yet between Vivien and Andy Hayes silence about the past could be no more than silence—merely a refraining from words, no real forgetfulness, no true putting aside. For with that past would go their old relationship to one another; its roots had grown from that soil, and it

flourished still by the strength of it. At the start their common memories could envisage no picture without Isobel's face finding a place on the canvas; later, Harry was inevitably the central figure of the composition. If Andy had pitied and sought to comfort, if Vivien had given confidence and accepted sympathy, it had always, in some sort or another, been in regard to one of these two figures—in the later days, to both of them. Still they met, as it were, encumbered by these memories, she to him Isobel's pupil, Harry's lover, he to her Harry's follower, even though her own partisan against Isobel. It was hard to get their relations on to an independent footing; to be interested in one another for one another's sake, without that outside reference, which had now become mere matter of memory—and best not remembered; to find in one another and not elsewhere the motive of their intercourse and the source of a new friendship. The old kindness must be transplanted to a fresh soil if it were to blossom into a life self-sufficient and underived.

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The line of thought was hers rather than his, at least more explicit and realized for her than for him. When he thought of Harry—or of Isobel and Harry—it was with intent to avoid giving pain by an incautious reference; her mind demanded a direct assertion that the pair of them were done with, and that she and he met on the ground of a new and strictly mutual interest.

She had no thought, no dream, of more than friendship. The past was too recent, her heart still too sore. Yet the sore heart instinctively seeks balm; the wounded flower of pride will raise its head in grateful answer to a gleam of sunshine or a drop of rain. Andy's shy surety that she would rejoice in his luck, because aforesaid he had grieved for her tribulation, struck home to a heart hungry for comradeship.

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Thus by her pride, and by her will answering the call of her pride, she was different. She no longer merely suffered, was no longer passive to, kindness or cruelty. He knew the change as soon as she came to him, in that very room which had witnessed the first stolen kiss, and, holding her hand out to him, cried, "Mr. Andy, you've not refused? There's no welcome for you in this house if you've refused. Father and I are quite agreed about it!"

Andy pressed her hand—Harry would have kissed it. "You know? I couldn't refuse their kindness. If I had, yours would have made me sorry."

"It's good of you to spare time to come and tell us."

Andy's answer had the compelling power of unconscious sincerity. "That seemed about the first thing to do," he said, with a simple unembarrassed laugh.

The girl blushed, a faint yet vivid colour came on her cheeks. She drew back a little. Andy's words were, in their simplicity, bolder far than his thoughts. Yet in drawing back she smiled. But Andy had seen the blush. Successful man as he had now become—big with promise as he was, at all events—in this field he was a novice. His blush answered hers—and was of a deeper tint. "I'm afraid that's awfully presumptuous?" he stammered.

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"Why, we've all been waiting to hear the news! Father had the offer—you know that? But he couldn't stand London. Then they asked Mr. Foot's advice. He said it ought to be you. You do your best to prevent people thinking of you, but as soon as you're suggested—why, it's obvious."

"You really think I shan't make a fool of myself?" asked Andy.

The delicate flush was still on her cheeks. "You'll make me very much ashamed of myself if you do," she answered. "Is my opinion to be as wrong as all that? Haven't I always trusted you?"

His surroundings suddenly laid hold on him. It was the very room—she stood on the very spot—where he had witnessed Harry's first defection, her earliest betrayal.

"It seems—it seems"—he stammered—"it seems treason."

She was silent for a minute. The colour glowed brighter on her cheeks.

"I don't care to hear you say that," she told him, daintily haughty. "I was waiting here to congratulate you—yes, I hoped you'd come. I've nothing to do with anybody except the best candidate! They say you're that. I had my good wishes ready for you. Will you take them—without reserve?"

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"I—I say things wrong," pleaded poor Andy. "I'll take anything you'll give."

Her face flashed into a smile. "Your wrong things are—well, one can forgive them. It's all settled then—and you're to be the M.P.?"

Andy was still apologetic. "They know what to do, I suppose. It seems curious. Wigram says it's a certainty too. They've all joined in to help—Lord Meriton, Mr. Belfield, and old Jack. I'm much too poor by myself, you know."

"The man who makes friends makes riches." She gave a light laugh. "May I be a little bit of your riches?"

Andy's answer was his own. "Well, I always remember that morning—the hunt and Curly."

"I'm still that to you?" she asked quickly, her colour rising yet.

He looked at her. "No, of course not, but I had a sort of idea that then you liked me a bit."

She looked across the room at him—Andy was a man who kept his distance. "You've been a refuge in time of trouble," she said. Her voice was soft, her eyes bright. "We won't talk of the old things any more, will we?"

Wellgood stood in the window. "Well, is it all right?" he asked.

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"He's said yes, father!" she cried with a glad merriment.

"I thought he would. It's a change for the better!"

His blunt words—in truth they were brutal according to his brutality—brought silence. Andy flushed into a painful red—not for his own sake only.

"I've got to try to be as good a stop-gap as I can," he said.

"Something better than that!" Vivien murmured softly.

## Chapter XXIV.

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### PRETTY MUCH THE SAME!

In the spring of the following year Miss Doris Flower returned from an extensive professional tour in America. She had enjoyed great success. The Nun and the Quaker proved thoroughly to the taste of transatlantic audiences; Joan of Arc did not at first create the same enthusiasm in the United States as she had in London, the allusion to the happier relations between France and England naturally not exciting quite equal interest. However an ingenious gentleman supplied the Maid with a vision of General Lafayette instead; though not quite so up-to-date, it more than answered expectations. Across the Canadian border-line the original vision was, of course, restored, and went immensely. It was all one to Miss Flower what visions she had, so that they were to the liking of the public. She came back much pleased with herself, distinctly affluent, and minded to enjoy for awhile a well-earned leisure. Miss Sally Dutton returned with her, charged with a wealth of comment on American ways and institutions, the great bulk of which sensible people could attribute only to the blackest prejudice.

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The lapse of six months is potent to smooth small causes of awkwardness and to make little changes of feeling or of attitude seem quite natural. Billy Foot had undoubtedly avoided the Nun for the last few weeks before her departure; he saw no reason now why he should not be among the earliest to call and welcome his old friend. It was rather with a humorous twinkle than with any embarrassment that, when they settled down to talk, he asked her if she happened to know the Macquart-Smiths.

"Of Kensington?" asked the Nun in a tone of polite interest.

"Yes, Kensington Palace Gardens," Billy replied, tranquilly unconscious of any other than the obvious bearing of the question. "I thought you must have heard of them." (The Nun never had, though she had seen at least one of them.) "The old man made a pile out in Mexico. They're very good sort of people."

"You brought one of the girls to hear me one night, didn't you?"

"Yes. Well, she's the only girl, in fact—Amaranth's her name. Rather silly, but that's not her fault, is it?" He seemed anxious to forestall criticism.

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"You can call her Amy—or even Aimée," suggested the Nun consolingly.

Billy laughed. "Have you heard it, or did you guess, Doris?"

"Guessed it. I can guess any conundrum, however baffling. I'm awfully glad, Billy. I'm sure you'll be tremendously happy. When did it happen—and when is it going to happen?"

"About a month ago—and in about three months' time. Didn't you think her pretty?"

"Very pretty," said the Nun, presuming on a somewhat cursory inspection of Miss Amaranth. "And I suppose that since the old man made his pile—?"

"Oh, well, there are two sons. Still—yes, that's all right."

"It all sounds splendid. I don't fall in love myself, as I've told you—"

"Oh, I know that very well," said Billy. "Nobody knows it better."

Her eyes danced as she shook her head at him demurely. "But I like to see young people settling down happily."

"You are rather a queer girl in that way, Doris. Never feel that way?"

The Nun considered. "I might go so far as to admit that I've an ideal."

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"Rather a silly thing to have in this world, isn't it?"

"Happiness makes you unsympathetic, Billy. There's no harm in an ideal if you're careful to keep it as an ideal. Of course if you try to make it practical there are awful risks."

"And what, or who, is your ideal?"

"Pray what is that to you?" the Nun quoted, under the circumstances rather maliciously. "I find having an ideal a most comfortable arrangement. It doesn't worry either him or me—and Sally can't possibly object to it. How are things at Meriton? Andy wrote me his great news, and of course I never answered. But isn't it splendid?"

"I haven't had time to go down lately."

"Oh, of course not—now!"

"But I hear he's doing magnificently. Sure to get in. But Gilly's the best fun. When Andy is off electioneering, Gilly works like a horse. Sandwiches in the office for lunch, with a glass of sherry from the pub round the corner! I caught him at it once; he was awfully disgusted."

"Gilly lunching on sandwiches and a glass of sherry from the pub!" Her voice was full of wondering amazement.

"Yes, he won't hear the last of that in a hurry! When he did come to lunch the other day, we all went early and had a nice little pile of ham sandwiches and a liqueur glass of Marsala ready for him when he came in. You should have seen his face—and not heard his language!" The unnatural brother laughed. "You see, Andy didn't want to stand because of neglecting the business, and Gilly backed himself to take on the work so as not to stand in Andy's way. And he's doing it."

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"But that's awfully fine of Gilly, I think."

"So it is, of course. That's why he gets so riled when anybody says anything about it."

The Nun nodded in understanding. "And Harry?" she asked.

"They were abroad or in Scotland all the winter; came back to town about a month ago. They've taken a flat in Clarges Street for the season, I believe."

"Have you been to call on Mrs. Harry Belfield?"

"Well, no, I haven't. I don't know what he wants. I think I'll leave him to begin. It seems to be the same old game with him. One sees him everywhere."

"With her?"

"Sometimes with her. I don't think he's doing anything about another constituency; seems to have chucked it for the present. But he does appear to be having a very good time in London."

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"Is he friendly when you meet?"

"Yes, he's friendly and jolly enough." Billy smiled. "It's true that he's generally in a hurry. When I met him with her once, he was in too much of a hurry to stop!"

"It's very sad, but I'm afraid his memories of us are not those of unmixed pleasure."

"I'm afraid not. Andy says he never goes down to Meriton."

"Well, really I don't very well see how he could—with her!"

"I suppose he and his people have some understanding about it. One's sorry for them, you know."

"I think I shall go down to Meriton again this autumn. Any chance of your being there—as a family man?"

"I've promised to speak for Andy, so we may put in a few days there. Most of the time I shall have to be preaching to my own flock. I say, will you come and meet Amaranth?"

"Of course I will. But really I think I should make it 'Amy'!"

"It's worth considering; but I don't know how she'll feel about it," said Billy cautiously.

"Oh, said in the way you'll say it, it'll sound sweet," remarked the Nun flippantly.

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Billy still looked doubtful; perhaps "Amaranth" already sounded sweet.



When left alone, Miss Flower indulged herself for awhile in a reverie of a pensive, hardly melancholy, character—not unpleasant, rather philosophical. Billy Foot's new state was the peg from which it hung, its theme the balance of advantage between the single and the married state. It was in some degree a drawback to the former that other people would embrace the latter. Old coteries were thus broken up; old friendships, if not severed, yet rendered less intimate. New comrades had to be found, not always an easy task. There was a danger of loneliness. On the other hand, there were worse things than loneliness; enforced companionship, where companionship had become distasteful, seemed to her distinctly one of them. Being so very much in another person's hands also was a formidable thing; it involved such a liability to be hurt. The balance thus inclined in favour of the single life, in spite of its liability to loneliness. The Nun gave her adhesion to it, with a mental reservation as to the case of an ideal. And even then—the attempt to make it practical? She shook her head with a little sigh, then smiled. "I wonder if Billy had any idea whom I had in my head!" she thought.

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Sally Dutton came in and found her friend in this ruminative mood. Doris roused herself to communicate the news of Billy Foot's engagement. It was received in Sally's usual caustic manner. "Came to tell you about it, did he? I wonder how much he's told her about you!"

"I can't complain if my want of responsiveness hasn't been emphasised, Sally. You couldn't expect him to."

"I've been having a talk with Mrs. Harry Belfield," said Sally, taking off her hat.

This announcement came rather pat on the Nun's reflections. She was interested.

"Well, how is she? What happened?"

"In my opinion it's just another of them," Sally pronounced.

Being engaged in shopping at certain "stores" which she frequented, she had gone into the tea-room to refresh her jaded energies, and had found herself at the next table to Isobel. Friendly greetings had passed; the two had drunk their tea together—with other company, as presently appeared.

"What made you think that?" There was no need to inquire what it was that Sally thought when she spoke of "another of them;" she did not refer to ideally successful unions.

Sally wrinkled her brow. "She said they'd had a delightful winter, travelling and so on, and that she was having a very gay time in London, going everywhere and making a heap of friends. She said they liked their flat, but were looking out for a house. She said Harry was very well and jolly."

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"Well, that sounds all right. What's the matter, Sally? Not that I pretend to be particularly anxious for her unruffled happiness. I don't want anything really bad, of course, but—"

"Set your mind at ease; she won't be too happy to please you—and she knows it." Miss Dutton considered. "At least she's a fool if she doesn't know it. Who do you think came in while we were at tea?"

"Harry?" suggested the Nun, in an obviously insincere shot at the answer.

"Harry at Harrod's! Mrs. Freere! You remember Mrs. Freere?—Mrs. Freere, and a woman Mrs. Freere called 'Dear Lady Lucy.'" Sally's sarcastic emphasis on the latter lady's title—surely a harmless social distinction?—was absolutely savage.

"Did they join you?" asked the Nun, by now much interested.

"Join us? They swallowed us! Of course they didn't take much notice of me. They'd never heard of 'Miss Dutton,' and I didn't suppose I should make a much better impression if I told them that I lived with you."

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"No, of course not, Sally," said the Nun, and drew up on the edge of an ill-timed gurgle. "Mrs. Freere's an old story. Who's Lady Lucy? One of the heap of friends Mrs. Harry is making?"

"Lady Lucy's young—younger than Isobel. Mrs. Freere isn't young—not so young as Isobel. Mrs. Freere's the old friend, Lady Lucy's the new one."

"Did you gather whether Lady Lucy was a married woman?"

"Oh yes. She referred to 'our money troubles,' and 'my motor-car.' She's married all right! But nobody bothered to tell me her name. Well, as I say, Mrs. Freere's the old friend, and she's the new friend. They're fighting which of them shall run the Belfields—I don't know what else they may be fighting about! But they unite in sitting on Isobel. Harry's given her away, I gathered—told them what she was before he married her. So, of course, she hasn't got a chance! The only good thing is that they obviously hate one another like poison. In fact I don't think I ever sat at a table with three women who hated one another more—though I've had some experience in that line."

"She hates them both, you think? Well, I shouldn't have thought she was the kind of woman to like being sat upon by anybody."

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"Oh, she's fighting; she's putting up a good fight for him."

"Well, we know she can do that!" observed the Nun with a rather acid demureness.

"I'm not asking you to sympathise. I'm just telling you how it is. 'Harry likes this,' says Mrs. Freere. 'He always did.' 'Did he, dear? He tells me he likes the other now,' says Lady Lucy. 'I don't think he's really fond of either of them,' says Isobel. 'Oh yes, my dear. Besides, you must, if you want to do the right thing,' say both of them. I suppose that, when they once get her out of the way, they'll fight it out between themselves."

"Will they get her out of the way? It's rather soon to talk about that."

"They'll probably both of them be bowled over by some newcomer in a few months, and Isobel go with them—if she hasn't gone already."

"Your views are always uncompromising, Sally."

"I only wish you'd heard those two women this afternoon. And, in the end, off they all three went together in the motor-car. Going to pick up Harry somewhere!"

"Rather too much of a good thing for most men. And it might have been Vivien!"

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"It's a woman, and one of God's creatures, anyhow," said Sally with some temper.

"Yes," the Nun agreed serenely. "And Mrs. Freere's a woman—and so, I presume from your description, is Lady Lucy. And I gather that they have husbands? God's creatures too, we may suppose!"

Sally declined the implied challenge to weigh, in the scales of an impartial judgment, the iniquities of the two sexes. Her sympathies, born on the night when she had given shelter to Isobel at the Lion, were with the woman who was fighting for her husband, who had a plain right to him now, though she had used questionable means to get him. If Doris asked her to discern a Nemesis in Isobel's plight—as Belfield had in the fall of his too well admired son—to see Vivien avenged by Mrs. Freere and Lady Lucy, Sally retorted on the philosophic counsel by declaring that Doris, a partisan of Vivien's, lacked human pity for Vivien's successful rival, whose real success seemed now so dubious.

Whatever the relative merit of these views, and whatever the truth as to the wider question of the iniquities of the sexes, Sally's encounter at least provided for her friend's contemplation an excellent little picture of the man whose name had been so bandied about among the three women at the tea-table. Her dislike of Isobel enabled the Nun to contemplate it rather with a scornful amusement than with the hot indignation with which she had lashed Vivien's treacherous lover. Her feelings not being engaged in this case, she was able to regain her favourite attitude of a tolerant, yet open-eyed, onlooker, and to ask what, after all, was the use of expecting anything else from Harry Belfield. What Mrs. Freere—nay, what prehistoric Rosa Hinde—had found out, what Vivien had found out, what Isobel was finding out, that, in due time, Lady Lucy would find out also. Perhaps some women did not much mind finding out. Vivien had renounced him utterly, but here was Mrs. Freere back again! And no doubt Lady Lucy had her own ideas about Mrs. Freere—besides the knowledge, shared by the world in general, of the brief engagement to Vivien and the hurried marriage with Isobel. Some of them did not mind, or at least thought that the game was worth the candle. That was the only possible conclusion. In some cases, perhaps, they were the same sort of people themselves; in others, Harry's appeal was too potent to be resisted, even though they knew that sorrow would be the ultimate issue.

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That was intelligible enough. For the moment, to the woman of the moment, his charm was well-nigh irresistible. His power to conquer lay in the completeness with which he was conquered. He had the name of being a great flirt; in the exact sense of words, he did not flirt save as a mere introduction of the subject; he always made love—to the woman of the moment. He did not pay attentions; he was swept into a passion—for the woman of the moment. It was afterwards, when that particular moment and that particular woman had gone by, that Harry's feelings passed a retrospective Act by which the love-making and passion became, and were to be deemed always to have been, flirtation and attention. Amply accepting this legislation for himself, and quite convinced of its justice, he seemed to have power to impose it—for the moment—on others also. And he would go on like that indefinitely? There seemed no particular reason why he should stop. He would go on loving for a while, being loved for a while; deserting and being despaired of; sometimes, perhaps, coming back and beginning the process over again; living the life of the emotions so long as it would last, making it last, perhaps, longer than it ought or really could, because he had no other life adequate to fill its place. The Nun's remorseless fancy skipped the years, and pictured him, Harry the Irresistible, Harry the Incurable, still pursuing the old round, still on his way from the woman of the last moment to the woman of the next; getting perhaps rather gray, rather fat, a trifle inclined to coarseness, but preserving all his ardour and all his art in wooing, like a great singer grown old, whose voice is feeble and spent, but whose skill is still triumphant over his audiences—still convinced that each affair was "bigger" than any of the others, still persuading his partner of the same thing, still suffering pangs of pity for

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himself when he fell away, still responding to the stimulus of a new pursuit.

A few days later chance threw him in her way; in truth it could scarcely be called chance, since both, returned from their wanderings, had resumed their habit of frequenting that famous restaurant, and had been received with enthusiasm by the presiding officials. Waiting for her party in the outer room, suddenly she found him standing beside her, looking very handsome and gay, with a mischievous sparkle in his eye.

"May I speak to you—or am I no better than one of the wicked?" he said, sitting down beside her.

"You're looking very well, Harry. I hope Mrs. Belfield is all right?"

"Oh yes, Isobel's first-rate, thank you. So am I. How London agrees with a man! I was out of sorts half the time down at Meriton. A country life doesn't agree with me. I shall chuck it."

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"You seemed very well down there—physically," the Nun observed.

"Sleepy, wasn't it? Sleepy beyond anything. Now here a man feels alive, and awake!"

It was not in the least what he had thought about Meriton, it was what he was feeling about Meriton now. He had passed a retrospective Act about Meriton; it was to be deemed to have been always sleepy and dull.

"No," he pursued, "when I come into Halton—I hope it won't be for a long while—I think I shall sell it. I can't settle down as a country squire. It's not my line. Too stodgy!"

"What about Parliament? Going to find another place?"

"If I do, it'll be a town constituency. When I think of those beastly villages! Really couldn't go through with it again! The fact is, I'm rather doubtful about the whole of that game, Doris. No end of a grind—and what do you get out of it? More kicks than ha'pence, as a rule. Your own side doesn't thank you, and the other abuses you like a pickpocket."

She nodded. "I think you're quite right. Let it alone."

He turned to her quite eagerly. "Do you really think so? Well, I'm more than half inclined to believe you're right. Isobel's always worrying me about it—talks about letting chances slip away, and time slip away, and I don't know what the devil else slip away—till, hang it, my only desire is to imitate time and chances, and slip away myself!" He laughed merrily.

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The old charm was still there, the power to make his companion take his point of view and sympathise with him, even when the merits were all against him.

"You see now what it is to give a woman the right to lecture you, Harry!"

"Oh, it's kind of her to be ambitious for me," said Harry good-naturedly. "I quite appreciate that. But—" His eyes twinkled again, and his voice fell to a confidential whisper. "Well, you've been behind the scenes, haven't you? My last shot in that direction has put me a bit off."

It was his first reference to the catastrophe; she was curious to see whether he would develop it. This Harry proceeded to do.

"You were precious hard on me about that business, Doris," he said in a gentle reproach. "Of course I don't justify what happened. But my dear old pater and Wellgood pressed matters a bit too quick—oh, not Vivien, I don't mean that for a moment. There's such a thing as making the game too easy for a fellow. I didn't see it at the time, but I see it now. They had their plan. Well, I fell in with it too readily. It looked pleasant enough. The result was that I mistook the strength of my feelings. That was the beginning of all the trouble."

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Vastly amused, the Nun nodded gravely. "I ought to have thought of that before I was so down on you."

He looked at her in a merry suspicion. "I'm not sure you're not pulling my leg, Doris; but all the same that's the truth about it. And at any rate I suppose you'll admit I did the right thing when—when the trouble came?"

"Yes, you did the right thing then."

"I'm glad you admit that much! I say—I suppose you—you haven't heard anything of Vivien Wellgood?"

"I hear she's in excellent health and spirits."

"I've never been so cut up about anything. Still, of course, she was a mere girl, and—well, things pass!"

"Luckily things pass. I've no doubt she'll soon console herself."

"He'll be a very lucky fellow," said Harry handsomely. After all, he himself had admired Vivien,

and his taste was good.

"He will. In fact I think I know only one man good enough for her—and that's Andy Hayes."

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Harry's face was suddenly transformed to a peevish amazement.

"My dear girl, are you out of your mind? Don't say such silly things! Old Andy's a good chap, but the idea that Vivien would look at him! He's not her class; and she's the most fastidious little creature alive—as dainty and fastidious as can be!" He smiled again—probably at some reminiscence.

"I don't see why her being fastidious should prevent her liking Andy."

Harry broke into open impatience. "I like old Andy—well, I think I've done something to prove that—but, upon my soul, you all seem to have gone mad about him. You all ram him down a man's throat. It's possible to have too much of him, good fellow as he is. He and Vivien Wellgood! Well, it's simply damned ridiculous!" He took out his watch and, as he looked at it, exclaimed with great irritation, "Why the devil doesn't this woman come?"

"I thought Mrs. Belfield was always so punctual?"

"It's not Mrs. Belfield," Harry snapped out.

"Well, don't be disagreeable to the poor woman simply because I said something you didn't like."

"Something I didn't like? That's an absurd way of putting it. It's only that to be for ever hearing of nobody but—"

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"That tall young woman over there seems to be staring rather hard at you and me, Harry."

"By gad, it is her! I must run." His smiles broke out again. "I say, Doris, I shall get into trouble over this! You're looking your best, my dear, and she's as jealous as—I must run! Au revoir!"

"It's not Mrs. Freere—so I suppose it's Lady Lucy," thought the Nun. She was in high good temper at the result of her casual allusion to Andy Hayes. The shoe pinched there, did it? She was not vicious towards Harry; she wished him no harm—indeed she wished him more good than he would be likely to welcome—but the extreme complacency of his manner in the earlier part of their talk stirred her resentment. Her suggestion about Andy Hayes put a quick end to that.

Lady Lucy had an impudent little face, with an impudent little turned-up nose. She settled herself cosily into her chair on the balcony and peeled off her gloves.

"I'm so glad we're just by ourselves—I mean, since poor Mrs. Belfield wasn't well enough to come. I was afraid of finding Lily Freere!"

"What made you afraid of that?" asked Harry, smiling.

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"Well, she is about with you a good deal, isn't she? Does your wife like being managed so much? Or is it your choice?"

"Mrs. Freere's an old friend."

"So I've always understood!"

"You mustn't listen to ill-natured gossip. Just an old friend! But it's not very likely I should have asked her to come to-day."

The Nun and her party entered, and sat down at the other end of the balcony.

"There's that girl you were talking to. Look round; she's sitting facing me."

"Oh yes, Doris Flower!"

"An old friend too? You seemed to be having a very confidential conversation at least."

"On the most strictly unsentimental footing. Really there you may believe me!" Harry's voice fell to an artistic whisper. "Did you come only to tease me?"

"I don't think you care much whether I tease you or not," said Lady Lucy.

He was helping her to wine; he held the bottle, she held the glass. Somehow it chanced that their hands touched. Lady Lucy blushed a little and glanced at Harry. "How shall I persuade you that I care?" asked Harry.

The Nun's host—at the other end of the balcony—turned to her. "You're not very talkative to-day, Miss Doris!"

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"Oh, I'm sorry: There's always so much to look at at the other tables, isn't there?"

"Pretty much the same old lot!" remarked the host—an experienced youth.

"Pretty much!" agreed the Nun serenely.

## Chapter XXV.

pg 512

### THE LAST FIGHT.

On a fine Sunday evening in the following autumn Belfield and Andy Hayes sat over their wine, the ladies having, as usual, adjourned to the garden. Among their number were included the Nun and Sally Dutton; a second stay at Meriton had broken down Sally's shyness. Belfield and his wife were just back from London, whither they had gone to see their grandchild, Harry's first-born son. All had gone well, and Belfield was full of impressions of his visit. His natural pleasure in the birth of the child was damped by Harry's refusal to promise to take up his residence at Halton when his turn came.

"But I did get him to promise not to sell—only to let; so his son may live here, though mine won't." He looked older and more frail; his mind moved in a near future which, near as it was, he would not see.

"I sometimes think," he went on, "that the professional moralists, all or most of our preachers of one sort and another—and who doesn't preach nowadays?—take too narrow a view. Their table of virtues isn't comprehensive enough. Now my boy Harry, with all his faults, is never disagreeable. What an enormous virtue! Negative, if you like, but enormous! What a lot of pain and discomfort he doesn't give! All through this domestic business his behaviour has been admirable—so kind, so attentive, so genuinely concerned, so properly gratified. Upon my word, seeing him in his own home, you'd think he was a model! That's a good deal. His weakness comes in to save him there; he must be popular—even in his own house!"

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"Oh, this event'll do them no end of good, sir," said Andy, ever ready to clutch again at the elusive skirts of optimism.

"Some, no doubt," Belfield cautiously agreed. "And she's a brave woman—I'll say that for her. She understands him, and she loves him. When I saw her, we had a reconciliation on that basis. We let the past alone—I wasn't anxious to meet her on that ground—and made up our minds to the future. Her work is to keep things going, to prevent a smash. She must shut her eyes sometimes—pretty often, I'm afraid. He'll always be very pleasant to her, if she'll do that. In fact, the worse he's behaving the pleasanter the rogue will be. I know him of old in that."

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"Has he any plans?" asked Andy.

Belfield smiled. "Oh yes. He's got a plan for wintering in Algeria; they'll go as soon as she's well enough, stopping in Paris *en route*. Yes, he's really full of plans—for enjoying himself and meeting friends he likes. There's a Lady Lucy Somebody who's got the finest motor-car on earth. She's going to be in Paris. Oh, well, there it is! Plans of any other sort are dropped. He's dropped them; she's had to drop them—after a good deal of fighting, so she told me. He makes no definite refusals; he puts her off, laughs it off, shunts it, you know, and goes on his own way. One didn't understand how strong that had grown in him—the dislike of any responsibilities or limits. Being answerable to anybody seems to vex him. I think he even resents our great expectations, though we go out of our way to let him see that we've honestly abandoned them! A pleasant drifting over summer seas, with agreeable company, and plenty of variety in it! That's the programme. We shall probably be wise to add a few storms and a good many minor squalls to get a true idea of it."

"It doesn't seem to lead to much."

"Oh, the mistake's ours! For many men I say nothing against the life. I'm not one of the preachers, and there's something to be said for it for some people. We made our own idol, Andy; it's our fault. We saw the capacities, we didn't appreciate the weakness. I can't be hard on poor old Harry, can you? We parted capital friends, I'm glad to say—though he was distinctly in a hurry to keep an appointment at a tea-shop. Somebody passing through London, he said—and through his fancy too, I imagine." He looked across at Andy. "I suppose it all seems uncommon queer to you, Andy?"

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"It's a bit of a waste, isn't it?"

"So we think, we at Meriton. That's our old idea, and we shan't get over it. Yes, a bit of a waste! But it's nature's way, I suppose. A fine fabric with one unsound patch! It does seem a waste, but she's lavish; and the fabric may be very pleasing to the eye all the same, and serve all right—so long as you don't strain it!"

In the garden Mrs. Belfield discoursed placidly to Miss Doris Flower; it was perhaps fortunate that the veil of night rendered that young lady's face hard to read.

"Yes, my dear, we must let bygones be bygones. I took a very strong view, a stronger view than I

generally take, of her conduct down here—though I can't acquit Mr. Wellgood of a large part of the blame. But now she's trying to be a good wife to him, I'm sure she is. So I made up my mind to forgive her; it's a very fine boy, and like my family, I think. As for the politics and all that, I'm sure Harry is right, and his father is wrong to regret his withdrawal. Harry is not fit for that rough work; both his mind and his feelings are too fine and sensitive. I hope he will be firm and keep out of it all. Mr. Hayes is much more fit for it, much coarser in fibre, you know, dear Miss Flower; and though, of course, we can't expect from him what we did from Harry—if only his health had stood it—Mr. Wigram tells me he is doing really very well. The common people like him, I understand. Oh, not in the way they thought of Harry! That was admiration, almost worship, my dear. But they think he understands them, and naturally they feel on easy terms with him. His stepmother was an excellent woman, and I'm sure we all respect Mr. Rock. Of course in my young days he'd never have done for a county member; but we must move with the times, and I'm really glad that he's got this chance."

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The Nun listened to the kindly patronizing old dame in respectful silence. It was really a good thing that she could look at the matter like that—evidently aided by the fine boy and the fine boy's likeness to her family. It was hard to grudge Harry his last worshipper; yet Miss Flower's smile had not been very sympathetic under the veil of night.

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"Of course there's poor Vivien—such a sweet girl, and so nice to us! She's never let it make any difference as far as we're concerned. I am sorry for her, and her father's very wrong in keeping her all alone there at Nutley to brood over it. He ought to have given her a season in London or taken her abroad—somewhere where she could forget about it, and have her chance. What chance has she of forgetting Harry here at Meriton?"

"You can never tell about that, can you, Mrs. Belfield? These things happen so oddly."

"Oh, but, my dear, the poor child never sees anybody! Now you see quite a number of young men, I daresay?"

"Yes, quite a number, Mrs. Belfield," the Nun admitted demurely.

"She sees absolutely nobody, except Mr. Hayes and Mr. Gilly Foot. I don't think she's very likely to be taken with Mr. Gilly Foot! Oh no, my dear, it's a sad case."

"You ought to talk to Mr. Wellgood about it."

"I never talk to Mr. Wellgood at all now, my dear, if I can help it. I don't like him, and I think his attitude has been very hard—quite unlike dear Vivien's own! Well, Harry did no more than hint at it, and Isobel, of course, said nothing; but we may have our own opinions as to whether it's all for Vivien's sake!" Mrs. Belfield almost achieved viciousness in this remark. "And—it may seem selfish of me to say it—if she married and went away, Harry might be more inclined to come down here. As it is, he feels it would be awkward. He's so sensitive!"

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Belfield and Andy came out—the old man muffled in shawls and, even so, fearing his wife's rebuke, Andy drawing the fresh air eagerly into his lungs. He had dined for the first time since the Sunday before; the miles he had covered, the speeches he had made, defied calculation. He had hardly any voice left. His work was nearly done; the polling was on the morrow. But he was due in a neighbouring constituency the day after that—for one more week. Then back to Gilbert Foot and Co., to make up arrears. Surveying the work he had done and was about to do, he rejoiced in his strength, as formerly he had rejoiced to follow Lord Meriton's hounds on his legs and to anticipate the fox's wiles.

He sat down by Mrs. Belfield. Vivien and Sally, who had been strolling, joined the group, of which he made the centre.

"Yes, it looks all right," he said, continuing his talk with Belfield. "Wigram promises me a thousand. A strong candidate would get that. I hope for about six hundred."

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"You think it's safe, though, anyhow?" asked Vivien.

"Yes, I think it's safe." He broke into a laugh. "If anybody had told me this!"

They discussed the fight in all its aspects, especially the last great meeting in the Town Hall the night before. The Nun mimicked Andy's croaking notes with much success, and Miss Dutton commented on popular institutions with some severity. They were full of excitement as to the morrow, when the three girls meant to follow Andy's progress through the Division. Mrs. Belfield gave tokens of an inclination to doze. Belfield sat listening to the girls' voices, to their eager excited talk, and their constant appeals to the hero of the day.

The hero of the day! It was Andy Hayes, son of old Mr. Hayes of the Grammar School, *protégé*, for his stepmother's sake, of Jack Rock the butcher. He had nearly gone back abroad in failure; he had nearly taken on the shop. He stood now the winner in the fight, triumphant in a contest which he had never sought, from the idea of which he would have shrunk as from rank folly and rank treason. Into that fight he had been drawn unconsciously, insensibly, irresistibly, by another man's doings and by his own, by another man's character and by the character that was his. His conscious part had always been to help his adversary; his adversary unconsciously worked all the

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while for him. What his adversary had bestowed in ready kindness stood as nothing beside what he had given unwittingly, by accident, never thinking that the results of what he did would transcend the limits of his own fortunes, and powerfully mould and shape another's life. Whom Andy loved he had conquered; whom he followed he had supplanted. The cheers and applause which had rung out for him last night had, a short year ago, been the property of another. His place was his by conquest.

So mused Belfield, father of the vanquished, as he sat silent while the merry voices sounded in his ears. A notable example of how each man finds his place, in spite of all the starts, or weights, or handicaps with which he enters on the race! These things tell, but not enough to land an unsound horse at the post before a sound one. The unsound falters; slowly and surely the sound lessens the gap between them. At last he takes the lead. Then the cry of the crowd is changed, and he gallops on to victory amidst its plaudits. Jack Rock had made no mistake when he entered his horse and put up the stakes.

The hero of that day, the victor in that fight, yes! Against his wishes, without premeditation, so he stood. There was another day of strife, another fight to be waged, one that could not be unmeant or unconscious. Here the antagonism must come into the open, must be revealed to the mind and heart of the fighter. Here he must not only follow, he must himself drive out; he must not only supplant, he must strive to banish, nay, to annihilate. There was a last citadel which, faithful to faithlessness and true against desertion, still flew the flag of that loved antagonist. Would the flag dip and the gates open at his summons? Or would the response to his parley be that, though the faithless might be faithless, yet the faithful must be faithful still? Before that answer his arm would be paralyzed.

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"Well, I'm sure you'll deserve your success, Mr. Hayes," said Mrs. Belfield, rising and preparing to retreat indoors. "I hear you've worked very hard and made an extremely good impression."

A quiet smile ran round the circle. The speech, with its delicate, yet serenely sure, patronage would have sounded so natural a year before. In the darkness Andy found himself smiling too. A sense of strength stirred in him. The day for encouragement was past; he did not need it. Save for that last citadel! There still he feared and shrank. With his plain mind, in his strenuous days, he had done little idealising. Only two people had he ever treated in that flattering exacting fashion. His idealising stood in his path now. The weak spot of his sturdy common-sense had always been about Harry; it was so still, and he had an obstinate sense of trying to kick his old idol, now that it was overthrown. And for her—how if his approach seemed a rude intrusion, the invasion of a desolate yet still holy spot, sacrilege committed on a ruined shrine? On the one side was Harry, or the memory of Harry, stronger perhaps than Harry himself. On the other he himself stood, acutely conscious of his associations for her, remembering ever the butcher's shop, recollecting that what favour he had won had been in the capacity of a buffer against the attack of others. How if the buffer, forsaking its protective function, encroached on its own account?

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Yet in the course of the months past they had grown into so close a friendship, so firm an alliance. On his part there had been no wooing, on hers neither coquetry nor sentiment displayed. To Harry Belfield their relations to each other would have appeared extremely dull, unpermissibly stagnant, reflecting no credit on the dash of the man or the sensibility of the lady. Sally Dutton, suspecting Andy's hopes, had a caustic word of praise for his patience—the sort of remark which, repeated to Harry about himself, would have sent him straight off to a declaration (the like had happened once by the lake at Nutley). But through these long days, as Andy came and went on his twofold work, from Division to business, from business to Division, they had become wonderfully necessary to one another. For her not to expect him, for him not to find her, would have taken as it were half the heart out of life. Who else was there? Vivien had drawn a little nearer to that dour father of hers, but nearness to him carried the command for self-repression, for reticence. Andy seemed to have no other with whom to talk of himself and his life, as even the strongest feel a craving to talk sometimes. Perhaps there was one other ready to serve. He did not know it; she ranked for him among the cherished friends of his lighter hours. He craved an intimate companionship for the deeper moments, and seemed to find it only in one place.

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At his own game, his speciality, Harry Belfield could give away all the odds, and still be a formidable opponent. The incomparable love-maker could almost overcome his own treasons; he left such a memory, such a pattern. Isobel loved still; Mrs. Freere was ready to come back; Lady Lucy owned to herself that she was in danger of being very silly. Even the Nun was in the habit of congratulating herself on a certain escape, with the implication that the escape was an achievement. To resist him an achievement! To forget him—what could that be? To Andy it seemed that for any woman it must be an impossibility. In the veiled distance of Vivien's eyes, when the talk veered towards her unfaithful lover, he could find no dissent. Was oblivion a necessity? Here he was—in Harry's place. Did he forget?

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They let him rest—with his thoughts; they saw that the big fellow was weary. The old Belfields conducted one another into the house; Vivien took Sally off again with her. Only Doris Flower sat on by him, silent too, revolving in her mind the chronicles of Meriton, the little town with which her whim had brought her into such close touch, from which she was not now minded wholly to separate herself. It seemed like an anchorage in the wandering sea of her life. It offered some things very good—a few firm friends, a sense of home, a place where she was Doris Flower, not merely the Nun, the Quaker, or Joan of Arc. Did she wish that it offered yet more? Ah, there she

paused! She was a worker born, as Andy himself was. No work for her lay in Meriton. Perhaps she desired incompatibles, like many of us; being clear-eyed, she saw the incompatibility. And she was not subjected to temptation. She was taken at the valuation which she so carefully put on herself—the good comrade of the lighter hours. No cause of complaint then? None! She did not cry, she did not fall in love. She did not break her records. There is small merit in records unless they are hard to make, and sometimes hard to keep.

She stretched out her hand and laid it on his arm. He turned to her with a start, roused from his weariness and his reverie.

"Dear Andy, have you learnt what we have, I wonder? Not yet, I expect!"

"What do you mean, Doris?"

"Trust in you. A certainty that you'll bring it off!" She laughed—a little nervously. "I've a professional eye for a situation. Try for a double victory to-morrow! Make a really fine day for yourself—one to remember always!" She drew her hand away with another nervous laugh; her clear soft voice had trembled.

Andy's inward feelings leapt to utterance. "Have you any notion of what I feel? I—I'm up against him in everything! It's almost uncanny. And I think he'll beat me in this. At least I suppose you mean—?"

"Yes, I mean that." Her voice was calm again, a little mocking. "But I shall say no more about it."

Andy pressed her hand. "I like to have your good wishes more than anybody's in the world," he said, "unless, perhaps, it were his, Doris. Don't say I told you, but he grudges me the seat. He'd grudge me the other thing worse, much worse."

"Oh, but that's quite morbid. It's all his own fault."

"Yes, I suppose so. But he's never been to you what he has to me." He smiled. "We at Meriton still have to please Harry, and to have him pleased with us. The old habit's very strong."

"Heavens, Andy, you wouldn't think of sacrificing yourself—and perhaps her—to an idea like that?"

"No, that would be foolish, and wrong—as you say, morbid. But it can't be—whatever she says to me—it can't be as if he had never existed—as if it all hadn't happened."

"Some people feel things too little, some feel them too much," the Nun observed. "Both bad habits!"

"I daresay the thing's a bit more than usual on my mind to-night—because of to-morrow, you know." He was silent for a moment; then he broke into one of his simple hearty laughs. "And I am such an awful duffer at making love!"

"You certainly have no great natural talent for it and, as you've told me, very little practice. Oh, I wonder how big your majority will be, Andy!"

Andy readily turned back to the election. Yet even here the attitude she had reproved in him seemed to persist. "I expect, as I said, about six hundred. Harry would have got a thousand easily."

Andy escorted Vivien back to Nutley. He had it in mind to speak his heart—at least to sound her feeling for him; but she forestalled his opening.

"Mr. Belfield's been talking to me about Harry to-night, for the first time. He wrote me a letter once, but he has never spoken of him before. He was rather pathetic. Oh, Andy, why can't people think what they are doing to other people? And poor Isobel—I'm afraid she won't be happy. I used to feel very hard about her. I can't any more, now that the little child has come. That seems to make it all right somehow, whatever has happened before. At any rate she's got the best right now, hasn't she?" She was silent a moment. "It was like this that I came home with him that last evening. He was so gay and so kind. Then—in a flash—it happened!"

"I've been thinking about him too to-night. It seemed natural to do it—over this election."

They had reached Nutley, but Andy pleaded for a walk on the terrace by the lake before she bade him good-night.

"Yes," she said, "I know what you must feel, because you loved him. I loved him, and I feel it too. But we must neither of us think about it too much. Because it's no use. What Mr. Belfield told me makes it quite clear that it's no use." She spoke very sadly. They had not to do with an accident or an episode; they had to recognise and reckon with the nature of a man. "When once we see that it's no use, it seems to me that there's something—well, almost something unworthy in giving way to it." She turned round to Andy. "At least I don't want you to go on doing it. You've made your own success. Take it whole-heartedly, Andy; don't have any regrets, any searchings of heart."



"There may be other things besides the seat at Meriton that I should like to take. When I search my heart, Vivien, I find you there."

Through the darkness he saw her eyes steadily fixed on his.

"I wonder, Andy, I wonder! Or is it only pity, only chivalry? Is it the policeman again?"

"Why shouldn't it be the policeman?" he asked. "Is it nothing if you think you could feel safe with me?"

"So much, so much!" she murmured. "Andy, I'm still angry when I remember—still sore—and angry again with myself for being sore. I oughtn't still to feel that." pg 529

"You'd guessed my feelings, Vivien? You're not surprised or—or shocked?"

"I think I've known everything that has been in your heart—both about him and about me. No, I'm not surprised or shocked. But—I wonder!" She laughed sadly. "How perverse our hearts are—poor Harry's, and poor mine! And how unlucky we two should have hit on one another! That for him it should be so easy, and for me so sadly difficult!"

"I won't ask you my question to-night," said Andy.

"No, don't to-night." She laid her hand on his arm. "But you won't go away altogether, will you, Andy? You won't be sensible and firm, and tell me that you can't be at my beck and call, and that you won't be kept dangling about, and that if I'm a silly girl who doesn't know her own luck I must take the consequences? You'll go on being the old Andy we all know, who never makes any claims, who puts up with everybody's whims, who always expects to come last?" Her voice trembled as she laughed. "You won't upset all my notions of you, because you've become a great man now, will you, Andy?"

"I don't quite recognise myself in the picture," said Andy with a laugh. "I thought I generally stood up for myself pretty well. But, anyhow, I've no intention of going away. I shall be there when—I mean if—you want me." pg 530

She gave him her hand; he gripped it warmly. "You're—you're not very disappointed, Andy? Oh, I hate to cloud your day of triumph to-morrow!" Her voice rose a little, a note almost of despair in it. "But I can't help it! The old thing isn't gone yet, and, till it is, I can do nothing."

Andy raised the hand he held to his lips and kissed it lightly. "I see that I'm asking for an even bigger thing than I thought," he said gently. "Don't worry, and don't hurry, my dear. I can wait. Perhaps it's too big for me to get at all. You'll tell me about that at your own time."

They began to walk back towards the house, and presently came under the light of the lamp over the hall door. Her face now wore a troubled smile, amused yet sad. How obstinate that memory was! It was here that Harry had given her his last kiss—here that, only a few minutes later, she had seen him for the last time, and Isobel Vintry with him! Their phantoms rose before her eyes—and the angry shape of her father was there too, denouncing their crime, pronouncing by the same words sentence of death on the young happiness of her heart. pg 531

"Good-night, Andy," she said softly. "And a great triumph to-morrow. Over a thousand!"

A great triumph to-morrow, maybe. There was no great triumph to-night, only a long hard-fought battle—the last fight in that strangely-fated antagonism. Verily the enemy was on his own ground here. With everything against him, he was still dangerous, he was not yet put to the rout. The flag of the citadel was not yet dipped, the gates not opened, allegiance not transferred.

Andy Hayes squared his shoulders for this last fight—with good courage and with a single mind. The revelation she had made of her heart moved him to the battle. It was a great love which Harry had so lightly taken and so lightly flung away. It was worth a long and a great struggle. And he could now enter on it with no searchings of his own heart. As he mused over her words, the appeal of memory—of old loyalty and friendship grew fainter. Harry had won all that, and thrown all that away—had been so insensible to what it really was, to what it meant, and what it offered. New and cogent proof indeed that he was "no good." The depths of Vivien's love made mean the shallows of his nature. He must go his ways; Andy would go his—from to-morrow. With sorrow, but now with clear conviction, he turned away from his broken idol. From the lips of the girl who could not forget his love had come Harry's final condemnation. The spell was broken for Andy Hayes; he was resolute that he would break it from the heart of Vivien. Loyalty should no more be for the disloyal, or faith for the faithless. There too Andy would come by his own—and now with no remorse. At last the spell was broken. pg 532

But no double victory to-morrow! The loved antagonist retreated slowly, showing fight. The next day gave Andy a victory indeed, but did not yield the situation which the Nun's professional eye had craved for its satisfaction.

## Chapter XXVI.

## TALES OUT OF SCHOOL FOR ONCE.

The inner circle of Andy Hayes' friends, who were gradually accustoming themselves to see him described as Mr. Andrew Hayes, M.P., included some of a sportive, or even malicious, turn of wit. It cannot be denied that to these the spectacle of Andy's wooing—it never occurred to him to conceal his suit—presented some material for amusement. All through his career, even after he had mounted to eminences great and imposing, it was his fate to bring smiles to the lips even of those who admired, supported, and followed him. To the comic papers, in those later days when the Press took account of him, he was always a slow man, almost a stupid man, inclined to charge a brick wall when he might walk round it, yet, when he charged, knocking a hole big enough to get through. For the cartoonists—when greatness bred cartoons, as by one of the world's kindly counterbalances it does—he was always stouter in body and more stolid in countenance than a faithful photograph would have recorded him. The idea of him thus presented did him no harm in the public mind. That a career is open to talent is a fact consolatory only to a minority; flatter mere common-sense with the same prospect, and every man feels himself fit for the Bench—of Judges, Bishops, or Ministers.

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But as a lover—a wooer? Passion, impetuosity, a total absorption, great eloquence in few words, the eyes beating the words in persuasion—such seemed, roughly, the requisites, as learnt by those who had sat at Harry Belfield's feet and marked his practical expositions of the subject. Andy was neither passionate nor eloquent, not even in glances. Nor was he absorbed. Gilbert Foot and Co. from nine-thirty to two-thirty: the House from two-thirty to eleven, with what Gilly contemptuously termed "stoking" slipped in anywhere: there was hardly time for real absorption. He was as hard-worked as Mr. Freere himself, and, had he married Mrs. Freere, would probably have made little better success of it. He was not trying to marry Mrs. Freere; but he was trying to win a girl who had listened to wonderful words from Harry Belfield's lips and suffered the persuasion of Harry Belfield's eyes.

In varying fashion his friends made their jesting comments, with affection always at the back of the joke; nay more, with a confidence that the efforts they derided would succeed in face of their derision—like the comic papers of future days.

pg 535

"He wants to marry, so he must make love; but I believe he hates it all the time," said the Nun compassionately.

"That shows his sense," remarked Sally Dutton.

"He's a natural monogamist," opined Billy Foot, "and no natural monogamist knows anything about making love."

"He ought to have been born married," Gilly yawned, "just as I ought to have been born retired from business."

Mrs. Billy (*née* Amaranth Macquart-Smith) was also of the party. Among these sallies she spread the new-fledged wings of her wit rather timidly. To say the truth, she was not witty, but felt bound to try—a case somewhat parallel to his at whom her shaft was aimed. She was liked well enough in the circle, yet would hardly have entered it without Billy's passport.

"He waits to be accepted," she complained, "as a girl waits to be asked."

"Used to!" briefly corrected Miss Dutton.

Billy Foot cut deeper into the case. "He's never imagined before that he could have a chance against Harry. He's got the idea now, but it takes time to sink in."

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"Harry's out of it anyhow," drawled Gilly.

"Out of what?" asked the Nun.

Billy's nod acknowledged the import of the question. Out of reason, out of possibility, out of bounds! Not out of memory, of echo, of the mirror of things not to be forgotten.

"He still thinks he can't compete with Harry," she went on, "and he's right as far as this game is concerned. But he'll win just by not competing. To be utterly different is his chance." With a glance round the table, she appealed to their experience. "Nobody ever begins by choosing Andy—well, except Jack Rock perhaps, and that was to be a butcher! But he ends by being indispensable."

"You all like him," said Amaranth. "And yet you all give the impression that he's terribly dull!" Her voice complained of an enigma.

"Well, don't you know, what would a fellow do without him?" asked Gilly, looking up from his *paté*.

"Gilly has an enormous respect for him. He's shamed him into working," Billy explained to his wife.

"That's it, by Jove!" Gilly acknowledged sadly. "And the worst of it is, work pays! Pays horribly well! We're getting rich. I've got to go on with it." He winked a leisurely moving eyelid at the Nun. "I wish the deuce I'd never met the fellow!"

"I must admit he points the moral a bit too well," Billy confessed. "But I'm glad to say we have Harry to fall back upon. I met Harry in the street the other day, and he was absolutely radiant."

"Who is she?" asked Sally Dutton.

"Not a bit, Sally! He's just given up Lady Lucy. Going straight again, don't you know? Off to the seaside with his wife and kid."

"How long has Lady Lucy lasted?" asked Gilly.

The Nun gurgled. "I should like to have that set to music," she explained. "The alliteration is effective, Gilly, and I would give it a pleasing lilt."

"I don't wish to hear you sing it," said Billy, in a voice none too loud. Amaranth was looking about the room, and an implied reference to by-gones was harmlessly agreeable.

"With his wife and his kid, to the Bedford at Brighton," Billy continued, after his aside. "From something he let fall, I gathered that the Freeres were going to be at the Norfolk."

Amaranth did not see the point. "I don't know the Freeres," she remarked.

"We do," said Gilly. "In fact we're in the habit of turning them to the uses of allegory, Amaranth. I may say that we are coming to regard Mrs. Freere as a comparative reformation—as the irreducible minimum. If only Harry wouldn't wander from Freere's wife!"

"But the man's got a wife of his own!" cried Amaranth.

"Yes, but we're dealing with practical possibilities," Gilly insisted. "And, from that point of view, his own wife really doesn't count."

"And yet Vivien Wellgood—!" The Nun relapsed into a silence which was meant to express bewilderment, though she was not bewildered, having too keen a memory of her own achievement.

"Oh, you really understand it better than that, Doris," said Billy. "Harry can make it seem a tremendous thing—while it lasts. Andy's fault is that he never makes things seem tremendous. He just makes them seem natural. His way is safer; it takes longer, but it lasts longer too. Neither of them is the ideal man, you know. Andy wants an occasional hour of Harry—"

"Dangerously long!" the Nun opined.

"And Harry ought to have seven years' penal servitude of Andy. Then you might achieve the perfectly balanced individual."

"I think you're perfectly balanced, dear," said Amaranth, and thereby threw her husband into sorest confusion, and the rest of the company into uncontrolled mirth. Moreover the Nun must needs add, with her most innocent expression, "Just what I've always found him, Amaranth!"

"Oh, hang it—when I was trying to talk sense!" poor Billy expostulated.

His bride's remark—admirably bridal in character—choked Billy's philosophising in its hour of birth. The trend of the conversation was diverted, the picture of the perfectly balanced man never painted. Else there might have emerged the interesting and agreeable paradox that the perfectly balanced man was he who knew when to lose his balance, when to kick the scales away for an hour, when to stop thinking of anybody except himself, when to sink consideration in urgency, pity in desire, affection in love. All this, of course, only for an hour—and in the right company. It must be allowed that the perfect balance is a rare phenomenon.

Isobel Vintry had not sought it; it is to her credit that she refrained from accusing fate because she had not found what she did not seek. Forgiving Harry over the Lady Lucy episode—his penitence was irresistibly sincere—and accepting Mrs. Freere as an orderly and ordinary background to married life, almost a friend, certainly an ally (for Mrs. Freere was now, as ever, a prudent woman), she recalled the courage that had made her a fit preceptress for Vivien, and Wellgood's ideal woman. She saw the trick her heart had played her, and knew—with Harry himself—that hearts would always be playing tricks. The poacher was made keeper, but the poaching did not stop. The thief was robbed, the raider raided. All a very pretty piece of poetical justice—with the unusual characteristic of being quite commonplace, an everyday affair, no matter of melodrama, but just what constantly happens.

She and Wellgood had so often agreed that Vivien must be trained to face the rubs of life, its ups and downs, its rough and smooth; timidity and fastidiousness were out of place in a world like this. The two had taught the lesson to an unwilling pupil; they themselves had now to aspire to a greater aptitude in learning it. Wellgood conned his lesson ill. The gospel of anti-sentimentality fits other people's woes better than a man's own; his seem so real as to defeat the application of

the doctrine. The first and loudest to proclaim that no man or woman is to be trusted, that he who does not suspect invites deception and has himself to thank if he is duped—that is the man who nurses bitterest wrath over the proving of his own theories. Aghast at having yourself the honour of proving your own theories! The world does funny things with us. To be taken at your word like that; really to find people about you as bad as you have declared humanity at large to be; to stumble and break your knees over a justification of your cynicism—it would seem a thing that should meet with acquiescence, perhaps even with a sombre satisfaction. Yet it does not happen so. The optimist fares better; he falls from a higher chair but on to a thicker carpet; and he himself is far more elastic. "With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again." Hard measure for hard people seems to fulfil the saying, and is not a just occasion for grumbling—even for internal grumbling, which is the hard man's only resource, since he has accustomed sympathy and confidence to hide their faces from his ridicule, and their tender hands to shrink from the grip of his contempt.

pg 541

Isobel Belfield possessed just what Isobel Vintry had stolen. Neither Church nor State, no, nor the more primitive sanction of the birth of a son, availed to give a higher validity to her title. In rebuking inconstancy she was out of court; she was estopped, as the lawyers call it. How could she refuse to forgive the thing which alone gave her the right to be aggrieved? Her possession was tainted in its origin. Or was she to arrogate to herself the privilege of being the only thief? Harry Belfield confessed new crimes to an old accomplice; severity would have merited a smile. Stolen kisses acknowledged recalled stolen kisses that had been a secret. Condemned by the tribunal of the present, Harry's offences appealed to the past. "See yourself as Vivien—see her (Lady Lucy, Mrs. Freere, or another) as yourself!" Harry's deprecatory smile seemed to threaten some such disarming suggestion. Church and State and the little boy might say, "There's all the difference!" Neither State nor Church nor little boy could deafen the echo of Wellgood's denunciation or blur the image of Vivien's stricken face. They were a pair of thieves; the court of conscience would not listen to her plea if she complained of an unfair division of the plunder. Hands held up in petition for justice must be clean—an old doctrine of equity; an account will not be taken between two highwaymen on Hounslow Heath.

pg 542

Origins are obstinate, leaving marks whatever variations time may bring. She had begun as one of two—and not the legitimate one. She was to be one of two always, so it appeared, through all the years until the Nun's pitiless vision worked itself out, and even Harry Belfield ceased to suffer new passions—or, at least, to inspire them; perhaps the latter ending of the matter was the more likely.

pg 543

He did nothing else than suffer passions and inspire them; that was the hardest rub. Where was the brilliant career? Where the great success of which Vivien had been wont to talk shyly? Isobel was a woman of hard mettle, of high ambition. She could have endured to be official queen, though queens unofficial came and went. But there was to be no kingdom! There was abdication of all realms save Harry's own. He grew more and more contented to specialise there. Irregularity in private conduct is partially condoned in useful men; as a discreetly hidden diversion, it is left to another jurisdiction—*deorum injuriae dis curae*—but as the occupation of a life? The widest stretch of philosophic contemplation of the whole is demanded to excuse or to justify.

He made a strange thing of her life—a restless, unpeaceful, interesting, and unhappy thing. The old idea of reigning at Nutley, of skilfully managing stubborn Wellgood, of the seeming submission that was really rule (perhaps woman's commonest conception of triumph), did not serve the turn of this life. It was stranger work—living with Harry! Being so well treated—and so well deceived! So courted and so flouted! The change was violent from the days when Vivien's companion stole kisses that belonged to her unsuspecting charge. A pretty irony to find herself on the defensive! A prettier, perhaps, to see her best resource in an alliance with Mrs. Freere! But it came to that. Never in words, of course—tacitly, in lifted brows and shoulders shrugged. So long as there was nobody except Mrs. Freere—so long as there was nobody besides his wife—things were not very wrong for the allies. A sense of security regained, precariously regained—a current of silent but mutual congratulations—ran between the Bedford and the Norfolk hotels at Brighton when Lady Lucy had received her *congé*. Harry's degrees of penitence and of confession at the two houses of entertainment must remain uncertain; at both he was no doubt possessed by the determination to lead a new life; he had been possessed by that when first he heard the potent voice calling him to Meriton.

pg 544

Harry Belfield—the admired Harry of so many hopes—was in process of becoming a joke! It was the worst fate of all; yet what other refuge had the despair of his friends? Even to condemn with gravity was difficult; gravity seemed to accuse its wearer of making too much of the ridiculous—which was to be ridiculous himself. In old days they had laughed at Harry's love affairs as at his foible; he seemed all foible now—there was nothing else. His life and its possibilities had narrowed and dwindled down to that. Billy Foot had tried to be serious on the subject. What was the use, when there was only one question to be asked about him—who was the latest woman? An atmosphere of ridicule, kindly, tender, infinitely regretful, yet still ridicule, enveloped the figure of him who once had been a hero. This was a different quality of jest from that which found its occasion in Andy Hayes' patient wooing. Andy could afford to be patient; once again his opponent was doing his work for him.

pg 545

Spring saw the Nun installed in a hired house of her own at Meriton, Seymour being kept busy conveying her to and fro between her new home and London, as and when the claims of her

profession called her. But Sunday was always marked by a gathering of friends—the Foots if they were at Halton, Andy, Vivien Wellgood from Nutley; often Belfield would drop in to see the younger folk. Jack Rock had his audiences to himself, for he sturdily refused to intrude on his "betters"—aye, even though his sign was down, though the National, Colonial, and International Purveyors reigned in his stead, though the Member for the Division occupied rooms in his house. To Jack life seemed to have done two wonderful things for him—one was the rise and triumph of Andy; the other was his friendship with Miss Doris Flower. He was, in fact, hopelessly in love with that young lady; the Nun was quite aware of it and returned his affection heartily. Jack delighted to sit with her, to look and listen, and sometimes to talk of Andy—of all that he had done, of all that he was going to do. Jack's hard-working, honest, and, it may be added, astute life was crowned by a very gracious evening.

pg 546

The Nun's new home stood in High Street, with a pretty little front garden, where she loved to sit and survey the doings of the town, even as had been her wont from her window at the Lion. Here she was one morning, and Jack Rock with her. She lay stretched on a long chair, with her tiny feet protruding from her white frock, her hair gleaming in the sun, her eyes looking at Jack with a merry affection.

"You do make a picture, miss; you fair do make a picture!" said Jack.

"Don't flirt, Jack," said the Nun in grave rebuke. "You ought to know by now that I don't go in for flirtation, and I can't let even you break the rules. Though I confess at once that you tempt me very much, because you do it so nicely. It's funny, Jack, that both you and I should have chosen the single life, isn't it?"

Jack shook his head reproachfully. "Ah, miss, that's where you're wrong! I'm not sayin' anythin' against Miss Vivien—she's a sweet young lady."

pg 547

"What has Vivien got to do with single lives?"

"Well, miss, no offence, I hope? But if it had been so as you'd laid yourself out—so to speak—for Andy."

The Nun blushed just a little, and laughed just a little also. "Oh, that's your idea, Jack? You are a schemer!"

"I've got nothin' to say against Miss Vivien. But I wish it had been you, miss," Jack persisted.

"Oh, Jack, wouldn't you have been jealous? Do say you'd have been jealous!"

"Keepin' him waitin' too the way she does!" Jack's voice grew rather indignant. "It don't look to me as if she put a proper value on him, miss."

"Perhaps you're just a little bit partial to Andy?" the Nun suggested.

"And not a proper value on herself either, if she's still hankerin' after Mr. Harry. Him as is after half the women in London, if you can trust all you hear."

The Nun's face was towards the street, Jack's back towards it. The garden gate was open.

"Hush!" said the Nun softly. "Here comes Vivien!"

Poor old Jack was no diplomatist. He sprang to his feet, red as a turkey cock, and turned round to find Vivien at his elbow.

pg 548

"I—I beg your pardon, miss," he stammered, rushing at the conclusion that she had overheard.

Vivien looked at him in amused surprise. "But what's the matter, Mr. Rock? Why, I believe you must have been talking about me!" She looked at the Nun. "Was he?" she asked merrily.

"I don't know that it's much good trying to deny it, is it, Jack?"

Jack was terribly ashamed of himself. "It wasn't my place to do it. I beg your pardon, miss." He stooped and picked up his hat, which he had taken off and laid on the ground by him. "Miss Flower's too kind to me, miss. She makes me forget my place—and my manners."

Vivien held out her hand to him; she was grave now. "But we're all so fond of you, Mr. Rock. And I'm sure you weren't saying anything unkind about me. Was he, Doris?"

Jack took her hand. "It wasn't my place to do it. I ask your pardon." Then he turned to the Nun. "You'll excuse me, miss?"

The Nun smiled radiantly at him. "I hate your going, Jack. Perhaps you'd better, though. Only don't be unhappy. There's no harm done, you know."

pg 549

Jack shook his head again sadly, then put his hat on it with a rueful air. He regarded Vivien for a moment with a ponderous sorrow, lifted his hat again, shook his head again, and walked out of the garden. The Nun gave a short gurgle, and then regained a serene and silent composure. It

was most certainly a case for allowing the other side to take first innings! Vivien sat down in the seat that Jack had vacated in such sad confusion.

"It was about—Harry?" she asked slowly. "You all hear and know! I hear nothing, I know nothing. Nobody mentions him to me. Not Andy, not my father any more. Mr. Belfield said a word or two once—not happy words. Except for that—well, he might be dead! I don't see the use of treating me like that. I think I've a right to know."

"What Jack said was more about you really. There's no fresh news about Harry."

While saying these words, the Nun allowed her look at Vivien to be very direct. "You must accept that as final," the look seemed to say.

"Lots of men, good men, make a mistake, one mistake, about things like that. He'll be all right now—with his boy."

"He's had a love affair, repented of it—and probably started another since that event. The child, if I remember, is about five months old." Still with her gaze direct, the Nun laughed. Vivien flushed. "There's no other way to take it," the Nun assured her.

pg 550

Vivien spoke low; her cheeks red, her eyes dim. "I gave him all my heart, oh, so readily—and such trust! Doris, did he ever make love to you?"

"As a general rule I don't tell tales. In this case I feel free to say that he did."

Vivien's smile was woeful. "What, he wanted to marry you too once?"

"Oh no, he never wanted to marry me, Vivien."

It was drastic treatment—and the doctor paid for it as well as the patient.

"But you went on being friends with him!"

"I became friends with him again—presently," the Nun corrected. "I suppose I don't come well out of it, according to your views. I know the difference there is between us in that way. Look at your life and mine! That's bound to make a difference. Besides, it would have been taking him much too seriously."

"I think you're rather hard, Doris."

"Thank God, I am, my dear! I need it."

"It's a terrible thing to make the mistake I did."

"It's worse to go on with it."

"I should have liked to go on with it. I feel as people must who've lost their religion."

pg 551

"Is that so sad, if the religion is proved not to be true?"

"Yes, terribly sad." Vivien's back was to the street. She wept silently; none saw her tears save Doris. "I thought I had lost everything. It's worse to find that you never had anything, and have lost nothing."

"It's good to find that out, when it's true," Doris persisted stoutly. "But I hope he won't happen on any more girls like you. With the proper people—his Mrs. Freeres and Lady Lucies—the thing's a farce. That's all right!"

Her bitter ridicule pierced the armour of Vivien's recollection. With the proper people it was all a farce. She had taken it as a tragedy. Her tears ceased to flow, but her colour came hot again.

"I don't know anything about those women—I never heard their names—but he seems to have insulted me almost as much as he insulted you."

The Nun was relentless. "In both cases he considered, and still considers, that he paid a very high compliment. And he'll find lots of women to agree with him."

"Doris, be kind to me. I've nobody else!"

"The Lord forgive you for saying so! You've the luck of one girl in ten thousand." Now the Nun's colour grew a little hot; she raised herself on her elbow. "Here are your two men. One's going to lead a big life, while the other's chasing petticoats!"

pg 552

"You think the world of Andy, don't you, Doris?"

"I'd think the universe of him if he'd give you a shaking."

Vivien smiled, rose, came to the Nun, and kissed her. The Nun's lips quivered. "He's coming down at the end of the week," said Vivien. Her voice fell to a whisper. "He's not quite so patient

as you think." With another kiss she was swiftly gone.

The Nun sat on, gazing at Meriton High Street. Sally Dutton came out of the house and regarded the same prospect with an air of criticism or even of disfavour.

"I think it's all coming right about Vivien and Andy," the Nun remarked.

Sally turned her critical eyes on her friend. "Have you been helping?"

"Just a little bit perhaps, Sally." She paused a moment. "I shall be rather glad to have it settled."

The motor-car drew up at the door.

"You'll not have more than enough time for lunch before your *matinée*, Miss Flower," Seymour observed, with his usual indifferent air. Not his business whether she were in time, but he might as well mention the matter!

pg 553

"My hat and cloak!" cried the Nun, springing up. She took Sally's arm and ran her into the house with her. "Hurrah for work, Sally!"

Suddenly Sally threw her arms round her friend's neck and exclaimed, with something very like a sob, "Oh, my darling, if only you could have everything you want!"

The Nun's lips quivered again; her bright eyes were a little dim. "But, Sally dear, I never fall in love!"

Miss Dutton relapsed, with equal abruptness, into her habitual demeanour.

"Well, he's a man—and a fool like all the rest of them!" she remarked.

The Nun gurgled. A record was saved—at the last moment. Because she did not cry—any more than she fell in love.

The Nun came out, equipped for the journey. She was smiling still. "Do I look all right, Seymour?"

"At the best of your looks, if I may say so, Miss Flower."

"Thank you very much, Seymour. Get in with you, Sally! You are a slow girl, always!"

She pressed Sally's hand as the car started. "Much better like this, really. I have always Seymour's admiration."

pg 554

His name caught Seymour's ear. "I beg your pardon, Miss Flower?"

"I only said you were an admirable driver, Seymour."

"Naturally I drive carefully when you're in the car, Miss Flower."

"There!" said the Nun triumphantly. "I told you so, Sally!"

## Chapter XXVII.

pg 555

### NOT OF HIS SEEKING.

Andy Hayes' *début* in the House of Commons was not, of course, sensational; very few members witnessed it, and nobody outside took the smallest heed of it. Moreover, like other beginnings of his, it was unpremeditated, in a manner forced upon him. He had not intended to speak that afternoon, or indeed at all in his first session, but in Committee one day an honourable gentleman opposite went so glaringly astray as to the prices ruling for bacon in Wiltshire in the year nineteen hundred and something—which Andy considered a salient epoch in the chequered history of his pet commodity—that he was on his feet before he knew what he was doing, and set the matter right, adding illustrative figures for the year before and the year after, with a modestly worded forecast of the run of prices for the current year. Engrossed in the subject, he remembered that the House was a formidable place only after he had sat down; then he hurried home to his books, found that his figures were correct, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction. It was no small thing to get his maiden speech made without meaning to make it—and to find the figures correct! He attempted nothing more that session. He only listened. But how he listened! A man might talk the greatest nonsense, yet Andy's steady eyes would be on him, and Andy's big head untiringly poised at attention. What was the use of listening to so much nonsense? Well, first you had to be sure it was nonsense; then to see why it was nonsense; thirdly, to see how, being nonsense, it was received; fourthly, to revolve how it should be exposed. There were even other things that Andy found to ponder over in all the nonsense to which he listened—and many more, of course, in the sense.

pg 556

But even Andy took a holiday from public affairs sometimes, nay more, sometimes from the fortunes of Gilbert Foot and Co. He was in the office this morning—the Saturday before Whitsunday—finishing up some odd jobs which his partner had left to him (Gilly had still a trick

of doing that), but his thoughts were on Meriton, whither he was to repair in the afternoon. As he mused on Meriton, he slowly shook the big head, thereby indicating not despair or even despondency, but a recognition that he was engaged on rather a difficult job, perhaps on a game that he was not very good at, but which had to be won all the same. This particular game certainly had to be won; his whole heart was in it. Yet now he was accusing himself of a mistake; he had been impatient—impatient that Vivien should still be less than happy, that she should still dwell in gloom with gloomy Wellgood, that she would not yet come into the sunshine. Well, he would put the mistake right that very day, for Vivien was to lunch with him, attended by the Nun, with whom she had been spending a night or two in town; and then the three of them were to go to Meriton in the motor-car together. The Nun was not singing at this time.

"I must go slow," concluded Andy, whose friends were already smiling at the deliberate gait with which he trod the path of love. "Hullo, there's an hour before lunch! I may as well finish some of these accounts for Gilly."

This satisfaction he was not destined to enjoy. He was interrupted by a visitor.

Harry Belfield came in, really a vision to gladden an artist's eyes, in a summer suit of palest homespun—he affected that material—with his usual blue tie unusually bright—shirt and socks to match; a dazzlingly white panama hat crowned his wavy dark locks. He looked immensely handsome, and he was gay, happy, and affectionate.

"Thought I might just find you, old chap, because you're always mugging when everybody else is having a holiday. Look here, I want you to do something for me, or rather for Isobel. I'm off yachting for three or four months—rather a jolly party—and Isobel's going to take a house in the country for herself and the boy. She doesn't know much about that sort of business, and I wanted to ask you to let her consult you about the terms, and so on, to see she's not done, you know. That'll be all right, won't it? Because I really haven't time to look after it."

"Of course. Anything I can do—please tell her. She's not going with you?"

"No," said Harry, putting his foot on the table and regarding it fondly, as he had at a previous interview in Andy's office. "No, not this trip, Andy. She doesn't care much for the sea." The slightest smile flickered on his lips. "Besides, it's 'Men only' on board." The smile broadened a little. "At least we're going to start that way, and they're taking me—a respectable married man—along with them to help them to keep their good resolutions. Well, old boy, how do you like it in the House? I haven't observed many orations put down to you!"

"I've only spoken once—hardly a speech. But I'm working pretty well at it."

"I'll bet you are! And at it here too, I suppose? Lazy beggar, Gilly Foot!"

"Gilly's woken up wonderfully. You'd hardly know him."

Harry yawned. "Well, I'm wanting a rest," he said. "I've had one or two worries lately. Oh, it's all over now, but I shall be glad to get away for a bit. By Jove, Andy, the great thing in life is to be able to go where you like, and when you like"—his smile flashed out again—"and with whom you like, isn't it? Are you off anywhere for Whitsuntide?"

"Only down to Meriton."

"Quiet!" But Harry had not always found it so; it was the quieter for his absence.

"I like being there better than anywhere else," was Andy's simple explanation of his movements.

A clerk came in and handed him a card. "I told the lady you had somebody with you, and asked her to take a seat in the outer room for a moment."

Andy read the card. "I'll ring," he said absently, and looked across at Harry.

"Lady? Eminent authoress? Or is this not business? Have her in—don't hide her, Andy!"

"It's Vivien Wellgood."

Harry turned his head sharply. "What brings her here?"

"I don't know. I was to meet her and Doris Flower for lunch, and go down with them to Meriton afterwards. Perhaps something's happened to stop it, and she's come to tell me."

A curious smile adorned Harry's handsome features. He looked doubtful, yet decidedly interested.

"I'd better go out and see her," said Andy. "I mustn't keep her waiting."

Harry broke into a laugh, half of amusement, half of impatience. "You needn't look so infernally solemn over it! It won't kill her to bow to me—or even to shake hands."

Andy came to a sudden resolution. Since chance willed it this way, this way it should be.



"As you please!" he said, and rang the bell.

Harry rose to his feet, and took off the panama hat, which he had kept on during his talk with Andy. His eyes were bright; the smile flickered again on his lips. He had not seen Vivien since that night—and that night seemed a very long way off to Harry Belfield.

In the brief space before the door reopened, a vision danced before Andy's eyes—a vision of Curly the retriever, and of a girl standing motionless in fear, and yet, because he was there, not so much afraid. In his mind was the idea which had suddenly taken shape under the impulsion of chance—that she had better face the present than dream of the past, better see the man who was nothing to her, than pore over the memory of him who had been everything. She might—nay, probably would—resent an encounter thus sprung upon her. Andy knew it; in this moment, with the choice suddenly presented, he chose to act for himself. Perhaps, for once in his life, he yielded to a sort of superstition, a feeling that the chance was not for nothing, that they three would not meet together again without result. Mingled with this was anger that Harry should take the encounter with his airy lightness, that his eyes should be bright and his lips bent in a smile. Andy was ready for the last round of the fight—and ready to take his chance. Suddenly under the pressure of his thoughts—perforce, as it were—he spoke out to Harry.

pg 561

"None of this has been of my seeking," he said.

"None of what? What do you mean, old fellow?"

There was no time for answer. Vivien was in the room, and the clerk closed the door after she had entered.

She stood for a moment on the threshold and then moved quickly to Andy's side.

"I knew," she said. "I heard your voices."

pg 562

"I'm just going," said Harry. "I won't interrupt you. I had a hope that you wouldn't mind just shaking hands with an old friend. I should like it—awfully!" His smile now was pleading, propitiatory, yet with the lurking hint that there was sentimental interest in the situation; possibly, though he could not be convicted of this idea—it was too elusively suggested—that there was, after all, a dash of the amusing.

She paused long on her answer. At last she spoke quietly, in a friendly voice. "Yes, I'll shake hands with you, Harry. Because it's all over." She smiled faintly. "I'll shake hands with you if Andy will let me."

"If Andy—?"

"Yes; because my hand belongs to him now. I came here to tell him so this morning." She passed her left arm through Andy's and held out her right hand towards Harry. Her lips quivered as she looked up for a moment at Andy's face. He patted her hand gently, but his eyes were set on Harry Belfield.

The hand she offered Harry did not take. He stretched out his for his hat, and picked it up from the table in a shaking grip. The smile had gone from his lips; his eyes were heavy and resentful; he found no more eloquent, appropriate words.

"Oh, so that's it?" he said with a sullen sneer.

pg 563

"It's none of it been of my seeking," Andy protested again. In this last moment of the fight the old feeling came strong upon him. He pleaded that he had been loyal to Harry, that he was no usurper; it had never been in his mind.

Harry stood in silence, fingering his hat. He cast a glance across at them—where they stood opposite to him, side by side, her arm in Andy's. Very fresh across his memory struck the look on her face—the trustful happiness which had followed on the tremulous joy evoked by his wonderful words. It was not his nor for him any more, that look. He hated that it should be Andy's. He gave the old impatient protesting shrug of his shoulders. What other comment was there to make? He was what he was—and these things happened! The Restless Master plays these disconcerting tricks on his devoted servants.

"Well, good-bye," he mumbled.

"Good-bye, Harry," said both, she in her clear soft voice, Andy in his weightier note, both with a grave pity which recognised, even as did his shrug of the shoulders, that there was no more to be said. It was just good-bye, just a parting of the ways, a severing of lives. Even good wishes would have seemed a mockery; from neither side were they offered.

With one more look, another slightest shrug, Harry Belfield turned his back on them. They stood without moving till the door closed behind him.

pg 564

He was gone. Andy gave a deep sigh and dropped into the arm-chair by his office desk. Vivien bent over him, her hand on his shoulder.

"Why did you let me meet him, Andy?"

Andy was long in answering. He was revolving the processes of his own mind, the impulse under which he had acted, why he had exposed her to such an ordeal as had once been in the day's work at Nutley.

"It was a chance, your coming while he was here, we three being here together. But since it happened like that"—he raised his eyes to hers—"well, I just thought that neither of us ought to funk him." The utterance seemed a simple result of so much cogitation.

But Vivien laughed softly as she daintily and daringly laid her hand on Andy's big head.

"If I 'funked him' still, I shouldn't have come at all," she said. "I think I'm just getting to know something about you, Andy. You're like some big thing in a dim light; one only sees you very gradually. I used to think of you as fetching and carrying, you know."

Andy chuckled contentedly. "You thought about right," he said. "That's what I'm always doing, just what I'm fit for. I shall go on doing it all my life, fetching and carrying for you."

pg 565

"Not only for me, I think. For everybody; perhaps even for the nation—for the world, Andy!"

He caught the little hand that was playing over his broad brow. "For you first. As for the rest of it—!" He broke into a laugh. "I say, Vivien, the first time I saw you I was following the hounds on foot! That's all I can do. The hunt gets out of sight, but sometimes you can tell where it's going. That's about my form. Now if I was a clever chap like Harry!"

With a laugh that was half a sob she kissed his upturned face. "Keep me safe, keep me safe, Andy!" she whispered.

Andy slowly rose to his feet, and, turning, faced her. He took her hands in his. "By Jove, you kissed me! You kissed me, Vivien!"

She laughed merrily. "Well, of course I did! Isn't it—usual?"

Andy smiled. "If things like that are going to be usual—well, life's looking a bit different!" he said.

Suddenly there were wild sounds in the outer office—a door slammed, a furious sweet voice, a swish of skirts. The door of the inner office flew open.

pg 566

"What about lunch?" demanded the Nun accusingly.

"I'd forgotten it!" Vivien exclaimed.

"So had I, but I'm awfully hungry, now I come to think of it," said Andy. "The usual place?"

"No," said the Nun. "Somewhere else. Harry's there—lunching alone! The first time I ever saw him do that!" She looked at the pair of them. Her remark seemed not to make the least impression. It did not matter where or how Harry Belfield lunched. She looked again from Vivien to Andy, from Andy to Vivien.

"Oh!" she said.

"Yes, Doris," said Vivien meekly.

The Nun addressed Andy severely. "Mrs. Belfield will consider that you're marrying above your station, Andy."

Andy scratched his big head. "Yes, Doris, and she'll be quite right," he said apologetically. "Of course she will! But a fellow can only—well, take things as they come." He broke into his hearty laugh. "What'll old Jack say?"

The Nun knew what old Jack would say—very privately. "I wish it had been you, miss!" But she had no envy in her heart.

"For people who do fall in love, it must be rather pleasant," she observed.

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"The worst of it is, I've got so little time," said Andy.

The two girls laughed. "I only want you to have time to be in love with one girl," Vivien explained reassuringly.

"And, perhaps, just friends with another," the Nun added.

Andy joined in the laughter. "I shall fit those two things in all right!" he declared.

The afternoon saw them back at Meriton; it was there that Andy Hayes truly tasted the flavour of his good fortune. There the winning of Vivien seemed no isolated achievement, not a bit of luck standing by itself, but the master-knot among the many ties that now bound him to his home. The old bonds held; the new came. In the greetings of friends of every degree—from Chinks, the Bird,

and Miss Miles, up to the great Lord Meriton himself—in Wellgood's hard and curt, yet ready and in truth triumphant, endorsement of an arrangement that banned the very thought of the man he hated, in old Jack's satisfaction in the vision of Andy in due time reigning at Nutley itself (his bit of sentiment about the Nun was almost swallowed up in this)—most of all perhaps in Belfield's cordial yet sad acceptance of his son's supplanter—he found the completion of the first stage of his life's journey and the definition of its future course and of its goal. His face was set towards his destination; the love and confidence of the friends of a lifetime accompanied, cheered, and aided his steady progress. No high thoughts were in his mind. To find time for the work of the day, his own and what other people were always so ready to leave to him, and to move on a little—that was his task, that bounded his ambition. Anything else that came was, as he had said to Harry Belfield, not of his seeking—and never ceased rather to surprise him, to be received by him with the touch of simple wonder, which made men smile at him even while they admired and followed, which made women laugh, and in a sense pity, while they trusted and loved. He saw the smiles and laughter, and thought them natural. Slowly he came to rely on the love and trust, and in the strength of them found his own strength growing, his confidence gradually maturing.

"With you beside me, and all the dear old set round me, and Meriton behind me, I ought to be able to get through," he said to Vivien as they walked together in the wood at Nutley before dinner.

She stopped by a bench, rudely fashioned out of a tree trunk. "Lend me your knife, Andy, please."

He gave it to her, and stood watching while she stooped and scratched with the knife on the side of the bench. Certain initials were scratched out.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to the spot where they had been.

"Only a memorandum of something I don't want to remember any more," she answered. She came back to him, blushing a little, smiling, yet with tears in her eyes. "Yes, Meriton, and the old friends, and I—we're all with you now—all of us with all our hearts now, dear Andy!"

Andy made his last protest. "I'd have been loyal to him all my life, if he'd have let me!"

"I know it. And so would I. But he wouldn't let us." She took his arm as they turned away from the bench. "The sorrow must be in our hearts always, I think. But now it's sorrow for him, not for ourselves, Andy."

In the hour of his own triumph, because of the greatness of his own joy, tenderness for his friend revived.

"Dear old chap! How handsome he looked to-day!"

Vivien pressed his arm. "You can say that as often as you like! There's no danger from him now!"

The shadow passed from Andy Hayes' face as he turned to his own great joy.

## THE END.

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### *Descriptive Notes on the Volumes for 1910:—*

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#### **FORTUNE.**

*J. C. Snaith.*

Mr. J. C. Snaith is already known to fame by his historical novels, his admirable cricketing story, his essay in Meredithan subtlety "Brooke of Covenden," and his most successful Victorian comedy "Araminta." In his new novel he breaks ground which has never before been touched by an English novelist. He follows no less a leader than Cervantes. His hero, Sir Richard Pendragon, is Sir John Falstaff grown athletic and courageous, with his imagination fired by much adventure in far countries and some converse with the knight of La Mancha. The doings of this monstrous Englishman are narrated by a young and scandalized Spanish squire, full of all the pedantry of chivalry. Sir Richard is a new type in literature—the Rabelaisian Paladin, whose foes flee not only from his sword but from his Gargantuan laughter. In Mr. Snaith's romance there are many delightful characters—a Spanish lady who dictates to armies, a French prince of the blood who has forsaken his birthright for the highroad. But all are dominated by the immense Sir Richard, who rights wrongs like an unruly Providence, and then rides away.

#### **THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY.**

*H. G. Wells.*

If the true aim of romance is to find beauty and laughter and heroism in odd places, then Mr. Wells is a great romantic. His heroes are not knights and adventurers, not even members of the quasi-romantic professions, but the ordinary small tradesmen, whom the world has hitherto neglected. The hero of the new book, Mr. Alfred Polly, is of the same school, but he is nearer Hoopdriver than Kipps. He is in the last resort the master of his fate, and squares himself defiantly against the Destinies. Unlike the others, he has a literary sense, and has a strange fantastic culture of his own. Mr. Wells has never written anything more human or more truly humorous than the adventures of Mr. Polly as haberdasher's apprentice, haberdasher, incendiary, and tramp. Mr. Polly discovers the great truth that, however black things may be, there is always a way out for a man if he is bold enough to take it, even though that way leads through fire and revolution. The last part of the book, where the hero discovers his courage, is a kind of saga. We leave him in the end at peace with his own soul, wondering dimly about the hereafter, having proved his manhood, and found his niche in life.

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#### **DAISY'S AUNT.**

*E. F. Benson.*

It is Mr. Benson's chief merit that, without losing the lightness of touch which makes good comedy, he keeps a firm hold upon the graver matters which make good fiction. The present book is a tale of conspiracy—the plot of a beautiful woman to save her young niece from a man whom she regards as a blackguard. None of Mr. Benson's women are more attractive than these two, who fight for long at cross-purposes, and end, as all honest natures must, with a truer understanding.

#### **THE OTHER SIDE.**

*H. A. Vachell.*

In this remarkable book Mr. Vachell leaves the beaten highway of romance, and grapples with the deepest problems of human personality and the unseen. It is a story of a musical genius, in whose soul worldliness conquers spirituality. When he is at the height of his apparent success, there comes an accident, and for a little soul and body seem to separate. On his return to ordinary life he sees the world with other eyes, but his clearness of vision has come too late to save his art. He pays for his earlier folly in artistic impotence. The book is a profound moral allegory, and none the less a brilliant romance.

#### **SIR GEORGE'S OBJECTION.**

*Mrs. W. K. Clifford.*

Mrs. Clifford raises the old problem of heredity, and gives it a very modern and scientific answer. It is the story of a woman who, after

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her husband's disgrace and death, settles with her only daughter upon the shore of one of the Italian lakes. The girl grows up in ignorance of her family history, but when the inevitable young man appears complications begin. As it happens, Sir George, the father of the lover, holds the old-fashioned cast-iron doctrine of heredity, and the story shows the conflict between his pedantry and the compulsion of fact. It is a book full of serious interest for all readers, and gives us in addition a charming love story. Mrs. Clifford has drawn many delightful women, but Kitty and her mother must stand first in her gallery.

**PRESTER JOHN.** *John Buchan.*

This is a story which, in opposition to all accepted canons of romance, possesses no kind of heroine. There is no woman from beginning to end in the book, unless we include a little Kaffir serving-girl. The hero is a Scottish lad, who goes as assistant to a store in the far north of the Transvaal. By a series of accidents he discovers a plot for a great Kaffir rising, and by a combination of luck and courage manages to frustrate it. From the beginning to end it is a book of stark adventure. The leader of the rising is a black missionary, who believes himself the incarnation of the mediæval Abyssinian emperor Prester John. By means of a perverted Christianity, and the possession of the ruby collar which for centuries has been the Kaffir fetish, he organizes the natives of Southern Africa into a great army. But a revolution depends upon small things, and by frustrating the leader in these small things, the young storekeeper wins his way to fame and fortune. It is a book for all who are young enough in heart to enjoy a record of straightforward adventure.

**LADY GOOD-FOR-NOTHING.** *"Q."*

Sir Oliver Vyell, a descendant of Oliver Cromwell, is the British Collector of Customs at the port of Boston in the days before the American Revolution. While there he runs his head against New England Puritanism, rescues a poor girl who has been put in the stocks for Sabbath-breaking, carries her off, and has her educated. The story deals with the development of Ruth Josselin from a half-starved castaway to a beautiful and subtle woman. Sir Oliver falls in love with his ward, and she becomes my Lady and the mistress of a great house; but to the New Englanders she remains a Sabbath-breaker and "Lady-Good-for-Nothing." The scene moves to Lisbon, whither Sir Oliver goes on Government service, and there is a wonderful picture of the famous earthquake. The book is a story of an act of folly, and its heavy penalties, and also the record of the growth of two characters—one from atheism to reverence, and the other from a bitter revolt against the world to a wiser philosophy. The tale is original in scheme and setting, and the atmosphere and thought of another age are brilliantly reproduced. No better historical romance has been written in our times.

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**PANTHER'S CUB.** *Agnes and Egerton Castle.*

This is the story of a world-famed prima donna, whose only daughter has been brought up in a very different world from that in which her mother lives. When the child grows to womanhood she joins her mother, and the problem of the book is the conflict of the two temperaments—the one sophisticated and undisciplined, and the other simple and sincere. The scenes are laid in Vienna and London, amid all types of society—smart, artistic, and diplomatic. Against the Bohemian background the authors have worked out a very beautiful love story of a young diplomatist and the singer's daughter. The book is full of brilliant character-sketches and dramatic moments.

**TREPANNED.** *John Masefield.*

Mr. Masefield has already won high reputation as poet and dramatist, and his novel "Captain Margaret" showed him to be a romancer of a higher order. "Trepanned" is a story of adventure in Virginia and the Spanish Main. A Kentish boy is trepanned and carried off to sea, and finds his fill of adventure among Indians and buccaneers. The central episode of the book is a quest for the sacred Aztec temple. The swift drama of the narrative, and the poetry and imagination of the style, make the book in the highest sense literature. It should appeal not only to all lovers of good writing, but to all who care for the record of stirring deeds.

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**THE SIMPKINS PLOT.** *George A. Birmingham.*

"Spanish Gold" has been the most mirth-provoking of Irish novels published in the last few years, and Mr. Birmingham's new book is a worthy successor. Once more the admirable red-haired curate, "J. J.," appears, and his wild energy turns a peaceful neighbourhood into a hotbed of intrigue and suspicion. The story tells how he discovers in a harmless lady novelist, seeking quiet for her work, a murderess whose trial had been a *cause célèbre*. He forms a scheme of marrying the lady to the local bore, in the hope that she may end his career. Once started on the wrong tack, he works out his evidence with convincing logic, and ties up the whole neighbourhood in the toils of his misconception. The book is full of the wittiest dialogue and the most farcical situations. It will be as certain to please all lovers of Irish humour as the immortal "Experiences of an Irish R. M."

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