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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

SCARLET AND HYSSOP

A NOVEL

By **E. F. BENSON**

AUTHOR OF DODO

MAMMON & CO.

THE LUCK
OF THE
VAILS
ETC.



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CHAPTER I

[Pg 1]

It has been ordained by the wisdom of Nature that the same fact shall strike the majority of her foolish children almost simultaneously. This phenomenon can hardly have escaped the most casual observer; the majority of swallows, for instance, in any given area will agree, practically in the same week, that our English autumn is no longer tolerable, and with consenting twitterings set their heads southwards; or in the spring, again, one may observe that in any given field daisies and buttercups will determine, only to be nipped by unpunctual frosts, that it is now time to come out, while even man, that most vacillating and least uniform of all created things, has a certain sympathy in his sensations; the sap stirs with moderately equal effervescence in the most dissimilar units; and without further preamble, to take the case in point, London settles without consultation, but with considerable unanimity, when spring may be considered to have stopped and summer to have begun. It is hardly necessary to state that London is, if not always, at any rate very frequently, completely deceived—like the buttercups and daisies—about a point so apparently palpable as even this, and a few biting frosts about mid-May usually send it back to its furs again; but the fact remains that on or about the same day the streets suddenly wear a completely different garb. On all sides the chrysalises burst, and butterflies gay or sober, according to their temperaments, hover and try their wings over a ground strewn, so to speak, with the brown husks of the "winter weeds outworn." Nor is this bursting of the chrysalis confined to externals: the time has come; the tides of vitality turn and flow through the town, and the reopened houses, newly decked window-boxes, and the flush of colour in the streets, are but symptomatic of the inward conviction of their inhabitants that a fresh season for doing a quantity of things they should not do, and as great an opportunity for leaving undone many things that

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they should do, has been turned up by the spade of Time, that irresponsible farmer of years.

Though not usually given to prosing, Lady Alston had been making remarks somewhat to this effect as she sat with Mrs. Brereton after lunch in a balconied window of her drawing-room in Park Lane looking over the haze and warmth of the Park. Being for the moment, at any rate, in a pessimistic mood, she accounted for it by a belittling explanation.

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"We are so obvious; that is why we all do things simultaneously," she said; "and a thing that everybody does is not in itself worth doing at all. I don't suppose there ever was a race so utterly deficient in originality."

The sun was not very hot, and Mrs. Brereton put down her parasol, and pointed dramatically with it down Park Lane.

"What do you call that?" she asked. "Did you ever see anything so wildly and colossally original? You have travelled, dear Marie, and have seen Aztecs and wigwams and the gorgeous East in fee, whatever that may mean. But have you ever seen anything to approach Park Lane?"

Lady Alston laughed.

"I don't call nightmares original," she said.

"I'm sure I don't know why not. I see nothing in the nature of a nightmare which is incompatible with originality. Just look: there we have a Gothic façade, followed by a very plain English erection which reminds me of beef and beer and Sunday. A little further down you will observe a kind of kiosk, and after that the front of the Erechtheum and something from the slums of Nürnberg. If one could look round the corner, we would see a rustic cottage, a bit of Versailles, a slice of Buckingham Palace as *pièce de resistance*, and some Pompeian frescoes by way of a savoury. There's richness for you."

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"Scraps only, scraps from other places. It always reminds me of a dog's dinner," said Lady Alston; "and all of us who live here are like scraps for a dog's dinner, too. Bits of things, remnants, a jumble sale, with everything priced above its proper value."

Mildred Brereton leaned back in her chair, so that the sun did not catch her hair. The particular Titian shade she affected was so difficult to please in a strong light, and she felt sure that at this moment there was a sort of metallic iridescence on it. She would have to go to the hair-dresser's again to-day.

"Dear Marie, what possesses you this lovely morning?" she asked. "Why is the world so stupid?"

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"Probably only because I had a very short night. I am quite aware that when one is dissatisfied with things in general, it means that one's *vie interieure*, shall we say? is dissatisfied with something particular."

"And what form does the dissatisfaction take?"

Lady Alston threw her hands wide with an admirably graceful gesture.

"I despair of the human race of the day," she said, "but I have enough grace to include myself. Do you suppose there ever was such a stupid class of people—especially we, Mildred, the women! We have all, literally all, we should want to make ourselves happy in an animal way—good health, sufficient money, and a deep abiding selfishness. But we can't amuse ourselves; we are not happy; we are like dogs out for a walk, we must continually have sticks thrown for us. We can none of us invent anything ourselves. We can none of us stand solitude, which is in itself a complete confession of our stupidity, our parasitic nature. We go and hear people sing and act, and make music; and go and see horses race; we play cards for hours because we have not got the wit to talk—they say Bridge killed conversation. What nonsense! there was none to kill. Our whole brains, such as they are, are occupied in devising things to do to make the time pass. And we devise very badly: we are always glad when each thing is over. We go to a concert. How long! We live three months in London. How nice it will be to get down to the country again! We play Bridge. Will the rubber never end? We spend the autumn in the country. Will November never be over? On the top of that we do all in our power to make it appear that time has not passed with us. We dye our hair and paint our faces, in order to appear young, but the moment we open our mouths it is obvious we are tired, withered old women! There!"

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Mrs. Brereton moved a little into the shadow.

"Don't mind me, dear," she said, "I am going to have it done again this afternoon; it won't do at all."

Lady Alston laughed; she had noticed the iridescence.

"Now you, Mildred," she said, "you are an excellent case in point. Tell me why you find it worth while to do that. What object is served by your spending hours at your hair-dresser's? Can you find nothing better to do?"

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"You don't know my hair-dresser. He is a small Frenchman with a lack-lustre eye, who sighs over the wickedness of the world. I sigh too; and we find sympathy in each other's eyes. Some day I shall ask him to dinner, and that will be disappointing. Besides, my hair is beginning to be neatly picked out with gray, and when your hair is gray it looks as if you were no longer young. Nor am I. I am thirty-six. But I have still a greedy appetite for pleasure, which is the only real test of youth. Therefore I cut my coat, or rather dye my hair, according to my essential age, and pay no attention to the utterly misleading measure of years."

"But what is the use of being young if it is only to be young?" asked Lady Alston.

"That is a question which you will not ask when you are thirty-six. Most delightful things are of no use whatever, and useful things are seldom delightful. Go on about the want of originality in the world."

"There is really nothing to say about it. It is there, a colossal fact. Nobody is serious—seriousness is considered the greatest of social crimes—and we drift along like thistle-down. We are vicious; we are idle. No one has any dignity or any manners, and there is no object under the sun, except perhaps the avoidance of physical pain, for which we would sacrifice our breakfast or dinner."

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"There is no one under the sun," said Mildred, "for whom many of us would not sacrifice our reputations."

"But not our dinner. Oh, I know I am only really speaking of—well, of people you and I know best, among whom we choose to pass our time. There again you see our utter want of originality. We are bound hand and foot by conventions of our own making. Supposing I happened to go into the country for a fortnight, instead of grilling here in London, every one would say it was quite unheard of. And I have not got sufficient originality to go, although I do think that it is simply silly and absurd to live in a town in the summer."

"Every one would say a great deal more than that," remarked Mrs. Brereton.

"I know they would. They would wonder whom I had gone with, and they would speedily invent several people. I beg the pardon of the people among whom we live. They have one passion, and it is scandal; the more ill-natured the better."

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"No; ill-nature has nothing to do with it," said Mrs. Brereton. "They have a passion for scandal, it is true. What else is there to talk about? I share it; in fact, I have a particularly large helping, but it is the subject-matter of scandal which really interests people. I don't see why you shouldn't call it the study of human nature. It is if you come to think of it."

Lady Alston shook her head.

"No, the study of the worst side of it," she said. "So far, what you say is true. All that most men think about is women, and all that women think about is men. That is the coarse, raw truth of the thing; that is the real indictment. Oh, it is inexplicable to me! All that we want in this world is at our command—at any rate all the beautiful and interesting things in existence can be read or heard or seen by us. But we don't waste two thoughts on them all. We sit in corners and giggle like barmaids with our young men. And, as long as there is no public scandal, no scandal of the wrong sort—you know what I mean—the more people that see us, the better we like it. We put our noses in the air when we see a Harry and a Harriet with their arms round each other's necks, having changed hats, and say, 'How those people *can!*' But we can! And we do!"

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Mrs. Brereton shrieked with laughter.

"Oh, Marie, you are too heavenly!" she said. "And you certainly have a right to say those things, because nobody ever accused you of changing hats with anybody. You don't draw them in, you know, dear. They call you 'Snowflake' and all sorts of things, I am told. And such lots of people offer you their hats. Yet you never take one."

Lady Alston shifted her position slightly, as if something had suddenly made her uncomfortable.

"It is no use talking about wickedness nowadays," she said, "because people simply stare, as if they did not know what you meant. But I made Blanche stare in a different kind of manner the other day, when I asked her if she really had no idea how vulgar she was."

"Surely she did not mind being called vulgar?"

"She did when I explained carefully what I meant by vulgarity. Of course a certain sort of vulgarity is *chic* now. It is very vulgar not to be vulgar, not to talk at the top of one's voice, and eat too much, and laugh very loud at things which ought not to be said; but when I told her what sort of a picture she makes when she sits simpering and ogling Dick all across the room, and, so to speak, spreading herself on the floor for him to walk over, she did not think I was so pleasant. But that's exactly what she does."

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Mrs. Brereton drew on her gloves.

"There is something very successful in your attitude, Marie," she said. "You go about hurling home-truths at people; you hold up looking-glasses to them, and make them see themselves; you point out what brutes they are, and scold them for it; but they never bear you any ill-will, and always want to see you. You really must not go into the country: we cannot get on without you!"

"Ah, if I only was conceited enough to think that, I should go!"

"That is truly amiable. But what I mean is this: you have got somehow the quality of centrality; our parties—I'm sure I don't know why—are brilliant if you are there, and sensibly flatter if you are not. I suppose it is because people are always talking about you, and it is so nice in one's own house to be able to point to the original. At the same time, I always feel about you as if you were the volcano on which we were all dancing."

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"I shan't explode: I am the least likely person in the world to explode," said Marie.

"Ah, you never can tell about volcanoes. That is the joy of them. I snatch a fearful joy from you, dear. I wish I was a volcano. How do you manage it? Do you get very angry inside, and determine not to say anything till the pressure is irresistible? By the way, Jim Spencer has just come back. You know him, I suppose? Anyhow, you will meet him at dinner this evening."

Marie looked up with a sudden vivacity.

"Jim Spencer? Why, of course I do. We were brought up together almost. Then—well, then I married, and I lost sight of him somehow."

"One does," observed Mrs. Brereton. "Marriage often produces a sort of moral cataract."

"Don't be foolish, Mildred. There is nothing cheaper or easier or falser than that sort of innuendo. Besides, he went abroad; he has been away two years, I should think."

"They do go abroad," said Mrs. Brereton.

"Oh, if you want to know, there is no earthly reason why I should not tell you. He proposed to me. But I always liked him very much." [Pg 13]

"I always said so," remarked Mrs. Brereton.

"Then you had no business to. Dear Jim! I shall be delighted to see him again. He is one of the few really reasonable people I know. He has got some sort of plan of his own; he has always known what he meant to do, though he has not always done it. For instance, he wanted impossible things; he had no money and I had none, so he proposed that we should marry and support ourselves by his writings. He has appeared before now in Christmas numbers."

"Then, perhaps you acted wisely. But he rolls in wealth now. A South African millionaire, without anything South African about him: no local colour, in fact. He is also remarkably handsome. Wealth, manners, good looks! A fairy-prince combination."

Lady Alston laughed.

"Dear me! I shall like to see Jim with society at his feet," she said.

"You make certain it will go there?"

Lady Alston raised her eyebrows.

"My dear, how can you ask? He is rich—that is sufficient alone." [Pg 14]

"He must not kick us, then. It is to be understood he gives us halfpence, golden halfpence. And it is very interesting—that story about him and you, I mean."

Lady Alston did not at once reply.

"You give one a bad taste in the mouth sometimes, Mildred," she said at length.

"Very possibly. And you always tell one that one has done so."

"I know. That is why we are friends."

Mrs. Brereton looked doubtful.

"In spite of it, I should say."

"No, because of it. Ah! here is Jack."

Jack Alston was one of those people whom it was quite unnecessary to point out, because he was distinctly visible not only to the outward, but also to the inward eye. He was so large, that is to say, that you could not fail to notice that he had come into a room, and at the same time, he had about him the quality of making himself felt in some subtle and silent manner. As a rule he spoke but little; but his silence, as Mildred Brereton once remarked with more than her usual insight, took up all the time. It could not be described as a rich silence, for it was essentially dry, but somehow it compelled attention. Probably, if he had been short and squat, it would have passed unnoticed, but coming as it did from him, it was charged with a certain force, partaking of his own quality. Also it was doubly unnecessary for his wife to call attention to his entrance, for on no one did it produce such an effect as on her. Thus, on this occasion, having remarked on it, she said no more. [Pg 15]

Jack lounged slowly into the balcony, shook hands with Mrs. Brereton, and sat down on a basket chair sideways to his wife, so that he looked straight at her profile.

"Decent afternoon for once, Mildred," he said. "Summer at last. You look summery, too."

"What there is left of me," said she. "Marie has been taking the hide off us all—skinning us."

Jack considered this a moment.

"Well, you look all right skinned," he said at length. "Bad habit of Marie's, though. What has she been skinning you about?"

"She's been telling me we are all wicked and stupid, and vicious and vulgar."

"That's a hobby of hers. One must have a hobby. Going out this afternoon, Marie?"

Mildred took the hint instantly. [Pg 16]

"I must be off," she said. "Really, Jack, you have the most brutal manner. You send me to the right-about with the least possible ceremony. So I wish to tell you I was going in any case. I've a hundred things to do."

Jack rose.

"When have you not? I'll see you down. Wait a minute, Marie, if you're not in a hurry; I want to have a word with you."

"Oh, don't trouble," said Mildred. "I can find my way."

Jack said nothing, but merely followed her into the house, and when they had passed the

drawing-room, "Has she been cutting up rough about anything in particular?" he asked.

"Oh, no; merely the rigid attitude, fire-works, thunder-storms, what you will."

"I'm rather tired of them. For several reasons she had better stop. I believe most idiots find it amusing."

Mildred took a parasol out of the stand, with the air of a purchaser selecting the one that most struck her fancy. As a matter of fact, it happened to be her own.

"I should take care if I were you," she said in a low voice. "A man like you cannot form the least idea of what a woman like Marie really is. Is my carriage here? Just see, please." [Pg 17]

She stood on the bottom step of the stairs, putting on her rather thick and masculine driving-gloves, while Jack crossed the hall and rang the bell. Then he came back to the bottom of the stairs again.

"Do you mean that she suspects anything?" he asked.

"No, of course not. What I do mean is that she is beginning to see what we all are like. You and I, when we see that, are delighted. It is a nice big playground. But it does not strike Marie as a playground. Also you must remember that she is the—how shall I say it!—the sensation, the latest, the fashion. You've got to be careful. She is capable of exploding some day, and if she did it would be noticeable. It will hardly be worth while picking up the fragments of you and me that remain, Jack, if she does. Because if she does, it will be since something has touched her personally."

"Well?"

"You are extraordinarily slow. Of course the person who is most likely to touch her personally is you."

"I've got to mind my p's and q's, in fact. That's not the way to manage her." [Pg 18]

Mrs. Brereton's face clouded a little as she walked across the hall to the door which was being held open for her.

"Well, *au revoir*," she said. "I shall have more to say to you to-night. You dine with us, you know."

Jack Alston did not appear to be in any particular hurry to go upstairs again after Mrs. Brereton had gone. He waited on the door-step to see her get in, a groom who barely reached up to the horses' heads holding them while she took up the reins, then running stiffly to scramble in behind, as she went off down Park Lane in the most approved fashion, elbows square, a whip nearly perpendicular, and her horses stepping as if there were a succession of hurdles to negotiate, each to be taken in the stride. Her remarks about the importance of taking care had annoyed Jack a little, and still more his own annoyance at being annoyed. He had his own ideas about the management of his affairs, among which, about halfway down, came his wife, and the hint that she might, even conceivably, make matters unpleasant for him was the same sort of indignity as a suggestion that he could not quite manage his own dogs or horses. But after a minute he turned. [Pg 19]

"For what time is her ladyship's carriage ordered?" he asked of the footman.

"Half-past three, my lord."

"Tell them to come round at a quarter to four instead," he said, and went slowly upstairs again.

He found his wife on the balcony where he had left her, with her maid beside her with two hats in her hand.

"Yes, that one will do," she said, "and send the other back. No, I will take it myself this afternoon. It is all wrong. Put it in a box and leave it in the hall. I am going out immediately."

The maid retired with the condemned hat, and while Marie pinned the other on, she turned to her husband.

"You wanted to speak to me?" she said, not lifting her eyes.

Jack looked at her in silence a moment, and lit another cigar.

"Finish pinning on your hat first," he said.

Marie found herself obeying him, with a sense of wanting, just in order to see what happened, not to do as he told her. However, she pinned her hat on. [Pg 20]

"Well?" she said again.

"Jim Spencer has come back," he said.

"I knew that. Mildred told me just now."

"I wanted to say a few words to you about him. I find people have not forgotten that he was very much attached to you once."

She looked up at him with eyes of indifferent wonder, as if he had asked her some inane unanswerable sort of riddle.

"People are quite at liberty to remember or forget what they like, as far as I am concerned," she said. "Is that all you have to say to me? If so, I will go out, I think. The carriage ought to be round."

"Not yet. I told them not to come round till a quarter to four. And I have more to say."

"Please consult me another time," she said, "before you take it upon yourself to alter my arrangements."

Jack did not reply at once. Then in a voice expressive neither of compunction nor annoyance, "It is no use making a fuss," he said. "I wish merely to warn you that people have not forgotten. I wish also to ask you to behave reasonably. People, very likely, will connect your names again: you know what they are." [Pg 21]

She rose flushing.

"So you wanted a quiet quarter of an hour in which to insult me," she said.

He pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Marie," he said.

"Supposing I choose not to?"

"We will not suppose anything so absurd. There! Why not have done it at once? As I was saying, this will inevitably happen, and so I should advise you to accept it. That will entail certain alterations in your—your general style. I have often heard you criticising rather mercilessly the world you live in; Mildred tells me you were doing so this afternoon. I don't mind your doing that: you have a racy sort of way of talking, and no doubt all your criticisms are perfectly true. But with the return of Jim Spencer, I should advise you either to drop that sort of thing, or else not see very much of him."

He paused, and flicked the end of his cigar-ash over the balcony.

"Not that I mind your doing either the one or the other in themselves," he continued, "but to do both will show a want of wisdom."

"Ah, you don't mind what I do, but only what people say!" [Pg 22]

"Exactly. You have quite grasped my meaning."

Again she rose from the chair in which she had sat at his bidding.

"That is all, then, I imagine," she said. "Five minutes was enough."

"Yes, for what I had to say. I thought you might like to talk over it."

"I have not the least desire to."

Jack reached out his hand for an early edition of the evening paper, and unfolded it.

"Perhaps you would tell me what you mean to do."

"I have no intention of doing anything. Certainly I have no intention of discussing the question with you."

Jack did not show the slightest impatience.

"There's no use in being so nettled about it," he observed. "If a woman behaves in a certain way, she gets talked about. That is all. I have indicated to you that if you do certain things you will get talked about; I do not want that."

"From your point of view, I wonder why. Mildred is talked about, so I am told; but I never knew that you considered that a reason for not seeing her a good deal." [Pg 23]

For one moment he looked quickly up, then turned back a fluttering leaf of his paper.

"Quite true. And if you were anybody else's wife, I should not mind how much you were talked about. But you are mine—it happens you are mine."

Marie did not reply.

"Somehow the matter has grown to larger dimensions than I had intended," he added. "I only meant to give you quite a friendly and, in a way, insignificant word of warning. But somehow you have put it all into capital letters. There, go out for your drive. Really, Marie, I had not the slightest conception you would make such an affair of it."

"You think I have been unreasonable."

"I do."

She made a great effort with herself.

"Very well, I will forget all about it. You see, we rub each other up the wrong way, Jack. It is a great pity."

"Yes. But it's not worth bothering about."

The paper appeared to have nothing much in it, and it was only a few moments after his wife had left him that Jack put it down, and finished his cigar without other employment than his own thoughts. This short scene with Marie had disturbed him in the same way as a fall in the barometer may disturb a picnic-giver: it may come to nothing, but there is a hint of the fair weather breaking. At the same time, he was perfectly well accustomed to be utterly at variance with her, and never contemplated any divergence of opinion between them which could result in his having to give way. It is only selfish people who cannot believe that they are selfish, and Jack never passed moral judgments on himself or anybody else. To be critical of any behaviour that did not annoy him personally he held to be an absurd attitude to adopt; it was only behaviour that might prove inconvenient to one's self that could reasonably be criticised, or, rather, not so much [Pg 24]

criticised as corrected. He knew quite well that the small but well-dressed fragment of the world that at all concerned him, was perfectly aware that his marriage with Marie had not been a romantic success, though personally he considered it quite up to the average. To a nature like his, unbroken constancy and devotion to one's wife is not only an achievement never aimed at, but an achievement not even contemplated. He had married, as many men do, simply because many men do marry, and an heir is certainly the natural complement to estates and a title. But no heir had been born, and, in a manner of speaking, Marie had made his estates and title appear ridiculous and lopsided; she had not fulfilled her part of the bargain.

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It is not meant to be understood that he stated these things to himself with the foregoing baldness, but none the less, if he had analyzed the springs of action that determined the course of the life he led, he would have admitted that they represented its ground-motives with sufficient accuracy. But Jack was not in the habit of analyzing anything: inquiry into the reasons for conduct seemed to him a profitless pursuit, since—again to put the matter baldly—he did not care at all whether a person acted wickedly or not. In fact, as his wife had said, there were many people who simply stared if you talked of wickedness. Her husband was among them, but he did not even stare.

It is commonly said that modern life is too full and too complex, but this generalization requires limiting. Certainly to a man, or in particular a woman, not belonging to "the world," a sudden plunge into that frothy mill-race would be complex to the verge of distraction. But there are many ways of simplifying this complexity, and one of the most convenient and efficient is to strike out, without further consideration, all moral obligations, positive and negative. When once one no longer thinks it necessary to reflect whether one ought or ought not to do or to avoid a thing, the saving of time and tissue is quite enormous. For it is not so much doing things as thinking about them which consumes the minutes and the nerves, and once having made an unalterable rule to do a thing if it is pleasant, and refrain from it if it is not, one can get into a single day a number of delightful experiences which would appear to those who do not know the recipe quite incredible. Again, as among wild beasts, so in the world, the weak go to the wall. There is no place for them, and no use for them. Every one has to look out for himself, and fight for his own possessions and those of other people. Not to recognise this spells failure. Such, at any rate, was Lord Alston's experience, and he was generally understood to have had a good deal of it.

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But as he sat now with the stale paper on his knees he had a vague sense of being balked. He knew his own section of the world fairly well, and having broken his rose-coloured spectacles a long time ago, and not having desired to get new ones, he realized that people certainly remembered Jim Spencer's attachment to his wife, and that piecing together with their habitual amiability, their opinion of the ill-success of his own marriage with her, her frankly low opinion of the world, and the possibility of the renewed intimacy of his wife and this man, they would say things which would annoy him personally. He had hoped that Marie would see this, or if not that, at any rate learn it by heart, so to speak, from a few well-chosen remarks of his. But she had done neither the one nor the other; she had taken the well-chosen remarks, so he considered, remarkably ill, and the only *amende* had been to say that she would forget all about it. To Jack's mind this was but poor wifely conduct.

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CHAPTER II

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Andrew Brereton, Mildred's husband, was a man about whom little was known and hardly more conjectured, since he was most emphatically of that type of man who arouses in none the remotest feeling of curiosity. There seemed to be no doubt that he was of humble origin, but his origin, whether humble or haughty, he had completely built over with the tall edifice of his subsequent achievements, which had resulted in the amassing of a fortune large enough to satisfy the requirements even of his wife. It is generally supposed that brains of some kind are necessary in order to make a very large quantity of money, and these must be postulated for him; but having made a fortune, brains—or so a study of this particular millionaire would lead one to suppose—thenceforth become a superfluity. Certainly it appeared that Mr. Brereton, on his retirement from business, either locked his up, or, perhaps, as a concluding bargain, disposed of them, no doubt at a suitable valuation, to his house, which dealt largely and wisely in sound mining concerns in South Africa. Physically he was thin and meagre in build, and habitually wore a harassed and troubled look, especially in his own house, where he sat at the head of the table, and, for all the attention that was usually paid him, might as well have been sitting on the area-steps. But inasmuch as he really had an immense fortune, and his wife had the spending of it, the privilege of being present when she entertained her friends in his house was accorded him without question, and the further advantage of his sitting on the area-steps instead of at his table was never seriously weighed by any one.

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To-night there was only a very small party, all the members of which, with the exception of Jim Spencer, had probably met five or six times a week since they came up to London, and during the winter had been together more often than not in each other's houses. There was, therefore, no sorting and resorting of groups required; conversation could either be general, or in a single moment split up like broken quicksilver and roll away into appropriate corners. For the moment it was general, or rather everybody was listening to Arthur Naseby, a stout young man, fresh-faced, but prematurely bald, who, standing on the hearth-rug, harangued the room in a loud and strident barytone.

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"The most awful party I ever was at," he was saying. "Mrs. Boneman was there, the wife of our eminent artist, wearing a sort of bird's-nest on her head with three Union Jacks and some Easter eggs stuck into it. She was dressed in a sort of Brussels carpet trimmed with what looked like horsehair. I'm sure it was not horsehair really, but probably some rare and precious material, but it looked like it; and she wore what I understood to be the famous Yeere diamonds. They were about as large as pen-wipers, and were plastered round her neck and pinned on to the shoulders; others were scattered about her back. I imagine she stood in the middle of the room, and her maid threw them at her, and they stuck in the horsehair."

Mrs. Brereton shrieked with laughter.

"You are too heavenly!" she cried. "Go on, Arthur. Who else was there?"

"All the people whom one always sees coming out of the door of the Cecil at Brighton, and all those who ask one to supper at the Carlton, in order to inquire apparently who is sitting at the other tables. It is a sort of passion with a certain kind of person to know who is supping at the other tables at the Carlton, and his, or usually her, limitation that he never does. It appears to them of far greater importance than who is supping at their own. Well, they were all there, Princess Demirep, and the Linoleums and Lincrustas. Hosts of them! I assume it was most brilliant."

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"Whom did you go with?" asked Lady Davies, who always wore an air of intent study when Arthur Naseby was talking, because she was trying to remember all he said in order to repeat it as original.

"I went with Blanche Devereux. I was dining with her, and she insisted on my coming. We are both going again on the 16th."

"So am I. Dear Blanche! what did she make of it all?"

"She said she had never felt so humbled in her life. You see, this was a particular party of *intimes*; the 16th is an omnibus. The brilliance of the gathering overwhelmed her, just as it did me. We really knew nobody there, and sat in a corner alone in London, till Mrs. Maxwell herself left her commanding situation at the head of the stairs where she received her guests and came and talked to us. I know she thought she was being kind. So she was, but not in the way she meant."

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"She is too wonderful," said Mildred, "Was she dressed in red satin?"

"I should have said bound, not dressed. Very tightly and neatly bound with silk-markers and gilt edges. She thanked Blanche for coming, and just stopped herself saying she felt much honoured; also she had hoped to see her husband as well. Now, I have heard many tactful things in my life, but I think never anything quite so tactful as that. A strange fatality pursues poor Mrs. Maxwell; she says unerringly and loudly the only thing which it is absolutely impossible to say. Blanche is not a prude, I think we are all agreed, and therefore not easily shocked. Poor Mrs. Maxwell might have said almost anything, however improper, without offending her. Again, Blanche is a woman of the world; she can usually make some sort of reply to the most awful put-your-foot-in-it. But she was completely outclassed by that one simple sentence. Mrs. Maxwell was first, and nobody else anywhere."

Lady Davies was so far carried away by this brilliance as to laugh, and thus completely forgot all she had learned by heart from Arthur's previous conversation.

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"Then poor Mrs. Maxwell turned to me," he went on, "and remarked that I looked far from well. When any one says that to me, I am always ill for the next three days; in fact, I hardly thought I could get here to-night. Of course, that spoiled the rest of my pleasure, and I hardly knew what happened, except that Dick turned up later in the evening, and—and pursued his impetuous path. I fancy that poor Mrs. Maxwell imagined that he was Blanche's husband. But I don't wonder at that."

Marie's nerves were a little on edge to-night, and both what Mr. Naseby said and the roaring volubility with which he said it jarred on them. At this particular moment certainly she was possessed with a longing of an almost passionate kind to cover him up like a canary with a piece of green baize. But, as there was no baize to hand, she got up from where she was sitting in the canary's immediate vicinity, and sought a safe distance in the window-seat. Jim Spencer, who had been sitting at the other side of the room, got up also, and, crossing the hearth-rug where Mr. Naseby stood, followed her into her retreat. The latter, seeing a secession from his audience, cast one pained and pitying glance at them, and then covered their retreat by the continuation of his monologue.

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"So you, like me, find it a little trying, Jim," said Marie, when they were seated together; "but you will have to get used to it."

"Is there much of that sort of man?" asked Jim. "I don't remember anything quite like it when I was in London last."

"No, he is a recent invention. He invented himself, in fact. Mildred thinks she invented him, but she only detected him. The truth is, I think, that on the whole people have grown rather stupider in the last year or two, or perhaps it is only lazier, and Arthur Naseby saves them the trouble of having to talk themselves. In fact, he makes it impossible."

"Is he always like that?"

"As far as I know, always."

"How odd that he doesn't find it fatiguing! Or perhaps it is even odder that other people don't find it fatiguing. Tell me something about him."

"I know nothing whatever about him more than what you can see and hear," said Marie. "Indeed, I don't believe there is any more. He is very rich, and declines to marry." [Pg 35]

"Then the man is a husk, a husk with a tongue," said Jim.

"Probably about that; at least, I never heard that any one had reason to believe there was anything more than the husk. Jim, I wonder how many of us have real people inside. I expect there are lots of husks and nothing more."

"Do you think so? I rather believe that most of us have got something real, though perhaps nothing very wholesome or very pleasant. That being so, one tries to conceal it, though sometimes it pops out like a lizard from a crevice. I think I would give anything to get inside anybody else, just for a minute, to see what he was really like."

"You would be rash to do it. It is quite certain that if you could get inside anybody, as you say, you would never speak to him again. Good gracious! could you imagine writing down all that had been in your mind during a normal half-hour?"

"It depends who was to read it."

"You mean you would let a friend read it?"

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Jim laughed.

"Well, if I am as bad as you think, it would clearly be a dangerously stupid thing to show it to an enemy."

"Ah! you would sooner lose a friend than give a handle to an enemy," said Marie. "I entirely disagree with that. I would choose to make or keep one friend, even at the risk of arming a whole regiment of enemies against myself. Enemies matter so little."

"Certainly friends matter more," said Jim, "and perhaps acquaintances less than either. The worst of having been away from London so long is that one finds so many of the latter and so few of either of the others!"

"What are your general impressions at present?" asked Marie.

The stream of talk from Mr. Naseby was apparently beginning to run dry; the pressure was diminishing, and Jim spoke lower.

"I hardly know what to think at present," he said. "London seems to me to have changed extraordinarily during the last few years. As far as I can make out, it does not matter now how dull and stupid a man is, how vulgar or vicious a woman is, as long as he or she is rich enough." [Pg 37]

Marie raised her eyebrows.

"Why, of course," she said calmly. "What else did you imagine?"

"That is not all. Apparently, also, you can go to a man's house or a woman's house, eat her food and drink her wines. Then you hurry on to the next and tell them that it was *the* most awful party you ever were at. But still, apparently, you can go there again on the 16th."

Mildred Brereton had joined them, and lit a cigarette from a fire-breathing Japanese dragon. She blew out a great cloud of laughter and smoke together, with her mouth very wide.

"Dear Jim, you are too delicious!" she shrieked. "Really, I shall get you to come and talk to me instead of Mr. Naseby, for you amuse me much more. Arthur, you are dropped; Jim is funnier. Of course we are all going on the 16th, because Pagani and Guardina are both going to sing, and they sing too divinely for words. Also, considering what we all know about them, and considering that they know we all know it, it is exceedingly amusing to see them look at each other with frigid politeness. Why, only the other day Mrs. Maxwell introduced them to each other, saying she must make two great artists acquainted. Too screaming! But you are too delightful and old-fashioned. Your idea about the obligations entailed by hospitality is a savage notion, dear Jim, like cannibalism, and vanishes before the march of civilization. I believe there is an excessively native tribe in Java or Japan, or somewhere, which still practises it. If you eat their salt, they stick to you through thick and thin." [Pg 38]

Arthur Naseby had joined them.

"How too dreadful!" he exclaimed. "Fancy having a lot of assorted savages, thick and thin, sticking to one! It sounds as if one was a kind of superior fly-paper."

"Arthur, you mustn't begin talking again, or we shall never get any Bridge," said Mrs. Brereton. "Won't you play, Marie?"

"No, I really haven't got time," she said. "I told you I have to go on at half-past ten. Please what time is it, Jim?"

"Close on eleven."

"Then I must really be moving, Mildred. But Jack will play; he isn't coming on with me."

"Where are you going, Lady Alston?" asked Arthur.

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"To see Blanche Devereux."

Arthur Naseby's face fell.

"I never knew she was giving a party," he said.

Marie laughed, rising.

"She isn't; don't be frightened; it is still possible that she has not dropped you, like Mildred. I'm only going to see her about the soldiers' bazaar. In fact, it is because she isn't giving a party that I am going."

Jim Spencer got up too.

"Will you give me a lift?" he asked. "I am going to Eaton Place also."

"Certainly. Good-night, Mildred. Yes, I know my carriage is here. They told me half an hour ago. Jack is stopping to play, I suppose. Please tell him I have taken the carriage."

The two went out, and Mrs. Brereton and Naseby stood still looking at them. When they had disappeared they looked at each other.

"Dear Marie!" said that lady effusively, "how delighted she evidently is to see Jim Spencer again! Oh, dear, yes, they were very great friends in the old days, very great friends indeed. Come, Arthur, they are waiting for us." [Pg 40]

"You always have such delightful people at your house," said Arthur, "and you always have something interesting to say about them. And that stiff young man is very rich, is he not?"

"Beyond the dreams," said Mrs. Brereton. "I wonder whom he will find to make his money fly for him?"

"One can never tell. He looks to me as if he might spend it on Corots or charity or something of that imperishable kind. Doesn't it strike you as odd that whereas the perishable nature of money is always dinned into one, yet one can apparently purchase imperishable treasure by being charitable with it? No, I can't imagine any one making his money fly. Some one might make it march away, very solemnly and in good order, but not fly. He is a little stiff, is he not?"

"Perhaps a little reserved. But when reserve breaks down, it is so *very* unreserved. I like seeing a reserved person having a real holiday."

"How many days would you say it was to the holidays?" asked Arthur, in a low voice, as they reached the card-table where Jack and another were waiting. [Pg 41]

"I can't tell. I shouldn't wonder—no, I can't tell."

Marie and Jim Spencer meantime were driving down from Grosvenor Square towards the Park. The night was warm, and hosts of stars burned very large and luminous in a sky that was beyond the usual London measure of clearness. After the heat of the rooms, in particular after a certain feverishness of atmosphere, not physical so much as moral, a sense of extreme hurry and pressure, the night air and the cool steadiness of the stars were refreshing, not only physically but morally. Perhaps from their years of early companionship and intimacy, perhaps from a certain more deeply seated sympathy of mind, each was very conscious of the thoughts of the other, and the swift silent motion through the glare of the streets seemed to isolate them from the world. It was with something of this in her mind that Lady Alston spoke to the other.

"Yes, put down my window, Jim," she said, "and your own, too, if you are not afraid of catching cold. We are both outdoor people, I think."

"We used to be," said he. [Pg 42]

"Do you mean you have changed? Or do you find I have?"

"I find you have. But I am quite willing to believe that it may be some change in myself that makes me think so."

Marie unwound the light shawl which she had thrown over her head, and undid the fastening of her gold-thread cloak, so as to let the air play on her uncovered neck. In another woman, he felt, this might have indicated some suspicion of coquetry, but he did her the justice to feel that no such imputation was possible.

"No, if you feel that you are probably right," she said, "for you do not seem to me to have changed at all. We both agree, in fact, about you. There remains then me. How have I changed?"

He looked at her in the dusk of the carriage for a moment without replying.

"You seemed so much in harmony with those people," he said. "I felt that you felt yourself to be one of them. But I, obviously, I am afraid, felt that I was not. That is how I think you have changed; in the old days you would have appeared to yourself as alien to them as I do."

She gave him one glance. [Pg 43]

"Ah, the old days!" she said with some impatience. "It is absurd and ridiculous to want to remain as one was. Indeed, not to change shows that one has a nature incapable of development. It implies a sort of moral torpor, an atrophy of one's nature not to get older as one gets older. And one of the biggest, and perhaps best effects of age is to give one tolerance, to make one realize that it takes all sorts to make a world."

He laughed.

"Why this sudden vehemence?" he asked.

"Oh, for a variety of reasons! One is because you judge me correctly, another because you judge me incorrectly. You are perfectly right to say that I have changed, but perfectly wrong to imply,

even tacitly, that one is the worse for changing. And you do me the grossest injustice when you suppose that I am in harmony with those people. I am not any more than I ever was. But it is absurd to coil one's self up like a hedgehog, and run your spines into everything you come across. As a matter of fact I often do, but it is a mistake."

They drove on some way in silence. At last she spoke again.

"Many of the people with whom I appear to you to be in harmony I consider wicked," she said; "and many of them, I am sure, are vulgar in the largest sense of that wonderful term. England is a plutocracy, let me tell you, Jim. It worships wealth. It will certainly worship you. How will you like it? It will really be very interesting to see how you behave. It is an awful position for you: if you refuse to smile on your worshippers, they will write you down a miser; if you do smile on them, you will make yourself as vulgar as they."

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He laughed.

"You frighten me," he said. "Is there no place in London for a quiet millionaire?"

She leaned forward with a sudden eagerness.

"Ah, Jim, make one, make one!" she said. "That is the root of the matter. Try if you can spend your money without encouraging either vice or vulgarity. It is worth an effort."

She leaned back again, laughing lightly, and drew her cloak round her again.

"Dear me, I have been vehement," she said; "but don't be afraid; I will treat you to no more outbursts. Only this afternoon my husband told me how absurd they were."

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"Well, reserve them for me," he said; "I rather like them. You are an inspiring person, Marie. You know I always found you inspiring."

"Many thanks. But no inspiration will make any one do anything. One's motive has to come from within, not without, if it is worth anything."

"I am not so sure of that."

They stopped at Lady Devereux's house in Eaton Place, and until the bell was answered sat silent. Then, as the footman opened the carriage-door, "I am delighted you have come back, Jim," she said—"I really am delighted. Come and see me often. Come to lunch to-morrow, for instance. Yes! That is right. Thirty-one, you know, and lunch at one-thirty."

CHAPTER III

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Jim Spencer woke next morning with that thrill of quickened anticipation which serves to remind us even before full consciousness has returned, that something new and exciting has come into our lives. He needed but little thought to remember what it was, and as he lay watching with idle but wide-awake eyes his man putting his clothes out, he told over and over again in his mind, like the beads of a rosary, the events of the evening before, always finishing with the pendant, so to speak, the fact that in a few hours he was going to see her again. Frankly and honestly he reminded himself that all romance was over: to begin with, and also to end with, she was another man's wife, and that was sufficient for him, as no doubt it was sufficient for her. Three years ago he had left England because he desired in every fibre of his being to marry her, and since that was impossible, because he entirely refused to waste his life in purposeless dangling after what he could not get. And in this spirit, which is more instinct with manliness than any sacrifice of years and youth to the mere watching of the unattainable shadow on the blind, he had gone out to the Transvaal, farmed there with the same fervour as that which he had thrown into his love-making, and subsequently, by the discovery of the reef on his land, had become, if not one of the richest men who had found colossal fortunes as sheep-farmers, at any rate one of the second rank-millionaire, if not multi-millionaire. But at that point a certain sobriety of nature had reasserted itself; he had not mistaken that full meal of gold for the *hors d'œuvre*, nor sought to duplicate it and reduplicate it. He had not lost sight of the fact that he had enough, but recognising it with all the thankfulness that plenitude gives, and not with the false appetite of the habitual glutton, he had, so to speak, said grace and retired from the dinner-table.

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So now, at the age of thirty, he was temporarily, at any rate, without employment, even as he had been, temporarily also, without employment when Marie decided to marry, not him, but Jack Alston. True, he had plenty of artistic tastes; in music and pictures he could easily have passed the remainder of his life, however long, just as, without ever being bored, he could have shot all the autumn, hunted all the winter, and dozed and dined all the spring and summer, according to the traditional method of the English gentleman, whose obituary notice eventually teems with encomium on his useful and simple life, which means that he has been a J. P. But to pass one's life merely in hearing music and looking at or buying pictures seemed to him as unworthy of a person who called himself a man, as did the recognised round of shooting and hunting appear to him unworthy of a rational being at all. But as to what this temporary abandonment of employment should terminate in, he, as he lay in bed this morning, had no present idea. Anyhow, he was to see Marie again, and he deliberately quenched further reflection.

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The morning had not been foresworn, but fulfilled with liberal generosity the promise of the last few days, and when Mildred Brereton reached the Row on a black mare, which had been

behaving itself as might a crab on hot plates, and would have tried any but the most masterly seat and hands, the broad brown expanse of the Ladies' Mile was plentifully dotted with riders. The little green seats, too, by the side were in high request, and she walked, or rather danced, very slowly up for a hundred yards or so, before letting her chafing mount have a canter, noting with her quick eye a hundred things and people which would have escaped one less trained and less naturally gifted to observe combinations of interest. Jack Alston had joined her, and she kept up a running comment.

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"There's Pagani with that absurd Italian woman," she said. "Why must a man of that kind do that when Guardina is sure to be here? There, I told you so! what a row there will be! She has the temper of a fiend, like me. Jack, if you ever flirt with another woman on the sly, and I see you, there'll be the deuce to pay. Come and tell me frankly if you are going to do that sort of thing. Dear Madame Guardina, how are you? Do walk a little way with us. No, there's not a soul here this morning, is there? I've seen no one, not even the most constant habitués like Pagani. And you sang Lucia last night, I hear, too divinely, and I had some stupid people to dinner and couldn't come. Yes, Lord Alston was one of them; he was the cleverest there. Judge of the rest!"

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The prima donna, a good-natured soul, who had the most perfect vocal chords in the world, absolutely no artistic sense, a passion for Pagani, and an adoration for the particular set to which Mrs. Brereton belonged, was delighted to be seen talking to her, and, turning back, walked along the rails in the opposite direction to that in which Pagani sat.

"Well, I must say you missed something," she said with engaging frankness, "for I never was in better voice. And on Saturday I sing La Tosca. With the open mouth, too, as I've no other engagement for a fortnight."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go to my house on the river and throw sticks for my dogs. You've never been there yet, Mrs. Brereton. Do come down sometimes. I shall drive there on Saturday night after the opera."

Mrs. Brereton made a short calculation.

"I will; I should love to," she said. "I hear it is charming."

"A dozen basket chairs and two dozen dogs," said Madame Guardina.

"I adore dogs. Are you off? Good-bye. About the middle of next week?"

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"Any day."

Mildred gave her a charming smile and turned to Jack.

"That's one good-natured thing this morning already," she said, "and it's barely ten yet. Pagani was just moving when I saw Guardina; he'll be gone before she gets to him."

"I wish you were half as good-natured to me," remarked Jack.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"Tell me how to behave to a hopelessly unreasonable woman, who is one's wife!"

Mildred puckered her lips as if to whistle.

"Explain in five minutes," she said. "I can't really hold this untamed savage any longer. Come on, Jack; we'll canter—shall we call it? up to the end."

Whether Mildred called it a canter or not, it is not doubtful what other people would have called it. But even the heart of the restraining policeman must have been touched by the splendid vision that flew by him, Mildred sitting her horse as no other woman could, sitting a horse also that few could have sat at all, and treating its agitated toe-steps with less concern than a man in an arm-chair gives to a persistent fly on a summer afternoon. The consciousness that hundreds of people were looking at her added, if anything, to her unconcern; certainly also the fact that many who saw her saw also, and remarked, that Jack was with her gave an additional zest to her enjoyment. For her creed was that secrecy in this world was impossible, and the only way to prevent people talking in the way that mattered and was annoying was to do things quite openly. It mattered not in the least if people said, "Oh, we have always known that!" or if they always took it for granted; what did matter was if they said, "We have lately thought there must be something of the kind!" Trespassers can be prosecuted; length of possession constitutes a title.

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They drew up at the top of the mile, and Mildred adjusted her hat.

"There," she said, "the cobwebs have been dispersed for the day. Now we'll go on talking. Explain, Jack. Why do you want treatment for Marie?"

Jack lit a cigarette.

"She makes scenes," he said, "and they bore me. She made one last night."

"What about?"

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"I don't know that it's worth repeating, really," he said.

"Probably not, but you are going to tell me."

He looked at her a moment with his thin eyebrows drawn together in a frown, hit his horse rather savagely for an imaginary stumble, and reined it in again more sharply than was necessary.

"I don't the least like being dictated to, Mildred," he said. "Nobody adopts that tone with me—with any success, that is to say."

She laughed.

"Oh, my excellent friend," she said, "you really speak as if I was afraid of you. For goodness' sake, don't put on schoolmaster airs. You know perfectly well that doesn't go down. Don't hit your horse now; you are behaving like a sulky child that whips its doll. What was the scene about?"

"Did you see the infernal manner in which she walked off with Jim Spencer last night, driving him home in her brougham and saying she was going to Blanche Devereux? That was her way of getting quits with me."

"Quits with you? What for?"

"For a conversation I had with her after lunch yesterday. I told her that if she was seen about with Jim Spencer people would talk, and if they talked it was absurd for her to keep up the sort of attitude she maintains towards society in general, saying that we are both fools and knaves."

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Mildred made a gesture of despair.

"The stupidity of men really exceeds all bounds," she said. "I beg your pardon, that is by the way. You were saying that she walked off with Jim last night. I suppose you commented on that too, did you?"

He flushed angrily.

"If she imagines she is going to make a fool of me before all the world, the sooner she learns her mistake the better," said he.

"You said that to her?" asked Mildred in a tone in which "even despair was mild."

"Of course I did, or rather, I asked her whether she really went to see Blanche. She saw what I meant all right."

"You seem to imagine she is as great a fool as you," remarked Mildred.

He turned half round on his horse.

"I don't stand such language from any one," said he.

"Oh, for God's sake don't be absurd! You stand exactly what language I choose to use to you. Is it really possible, Jack, that you don't see what a dangerous and foolish game you are playing? *Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* you are married to that pearl of a woman, and you think you can treat her like that. You aren't fit to tie her boot-laces, and——"

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"I have no intention of trying."

"Don't be funny. I was saying you weren't fit to tie her boot-laces, but I can't expect you to see that. And you have practically told her you suspect her of an intrigue with Jim Spencer. Now, if she was the sort of woman you seem to think she is, that would be the very way to drive her into it. Personally, I wish she was, but she isn't, and we must make the best of it. But what you have done is to show her, if further demonstration were necessary, your own utter depravity. Of the sickening folly of that, I needn't speak. Go on: what did she say then?"

"She said she didn't care in the slightest degree whether I believed she went to Lady Devereux's or not. She also said that Jim was coming to lunch. So of course I shall go home to lunch."

Mildred laughed outright.

"You have the most wonderful power of choosing the only impossible thing to do or say," she remarked. "That is the one thing out of the question. The impeccable attitude of guardian angel, my dear Jack, is the one attitude that cannot be made to pose well. Nor have you the figure for it."

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They rode on a little while in silence.

"Have your own way, then," he said at length.

"Of course I shall. Poor old Jack, how you do manage to put your foot in it! And I have to pull you out so often. Aren't you grateful to me?"

"Not particularly this moment."

"Well, you will be soon. You needn't tell me when you are. A good action is its own reward, and I am bursting with an approving conscience this morning. I've helped Guardina and Pagani, I've helped you."

"Yourself perhaps?"

"That also is my reward. I didn't think of myself—at least, not much."

She looked at him with a gay and kindled eye; the exercise had brought the blood into her face, and it was impossible to credit her with the six-and-thirty years which she had assured Marie were hers. And looking at her, his smarting ill-humour evaporated.

"How is it one never gets tired of you?" he said.

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She laughed.

"Because I do not let you get accustomed to me," she answered.

Certainly if Jack Alston had, as was generally supposed, the gift of getting his way with other people, Mrs. Brereton had the gift of getting her way with him. This, she knew well, but was far too wise to say, was the true secret of his absolute dependence on her, for there is nothing that a

masterful and brutal mind really enjoys so much as finding some one stronger than itself. At times she was inwardly afraid that she would some day get the worst of it, but knowing that in managing men, as in managing horses, the real secret of their mutiny is not so much fear on their driver's part, as the knowledge of that fear in the driver, she was always, as in this particular instance, more than usually brutal, and was accustomed to make him, so to speak, more resonant under her hand, when she was not quite certain in the depths of her own mind that she was going to win. Then, when the stress was over, she gave him his own head again, with such completeness as to convey to him the impression that he had always been free: there was no reminder, not the faintest strain on the curb to show him that the curb was still there. She used it, in fact, rarely, but in earnest, and never fell into the habit, so common in women of her stamp who are otherwise clever, of nagging, or making a point of getting her way over any matter on which she did not really desire it.

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Nor was her genuine attachment to him less capable of comprehension than his to her. In addition to the immense charm of his extraordinary good looks and his devotion to her, there was added that sense, so dear to an ambitious woman, that she was controlling a figure that bade fair to be one of the most prominent of the day, and could make it dance to her wire-pulling like a marionette on its string. Though Jack was not yet forty, he already held a minor post in the Government, and when the elections came on in the summer or autumn, it was expected in many quarters that he would be made Chief Secretary at the War Office. For the nation had of late begun to wonder whether that serene and unbiased attitude which is the natural outcome of complete ignorance on the affairs of the Department is really the ideal equipment for a statesman. A little knowledge, it has long been agreed, is a dangerous thing, but the nation, in view of recent events, had distinctly formed the suspicion that no knowledge at all was almost as hazardous. Indeed, it was supposed that this idea had gently begun to communicate itself to the Government itself. Anyhow, it was rumoured that more than a mere reshuffling of the old cards would take place, and Jack Alston's name was freely mentioned as a probable occupant of the office in Pall Mall. Until his succession to the title on his father's death six years ago, he had been a soldier of the practical, hard-working order, not content with figures and much polo, but busy with ideas on boots and rifles, and the knowledge he had thus acquired he had since used on more than one occasion with telling effect on discussions in the Upper House about military matters, and the cold, aloof attitude with which anything so out of taste as criticism founded on knowledge, or the discussion of practical questions in a practical manner, is usually treated in that august assembly had not produced the slightest effect on him. He asked awkward questions, and pointed out the absurdity of the answers or the silence they received with such imperturbable pertinacity that it was beginning to be felt that there really might be something in this novel idea of letting a man who knew a good deal about a subject be employed in that capacity. At any rate, he could not then continue to criticise the Department in question if he controlled it. Builders and Government contractors Jack appeared to consider not as masters of the Government, but as their servants, and where a firm vowed that a particular programme could not be completed under six years, he would have no hesitation in demanding to know how they had managed to take foreign orders in the interval. These things shook the immemorial calm of Pall Mall, and produced the sort of gentle perturbation which might be caused by the introduction of a risky topic at a tea-party of elderly maiden ladies. But Jack Alston was without tact in these matters, and continued to be horribly risky.

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So he who should perhaps control so huge an affair as the army, and she who controlled him, rode back towards Hyde Park Corner, a striking-looking pair, at which many gazed. Their friendship was now of several years' standing, and people had begun to find that there was nothing new to say about so well-established a fact. There had never been any scandal, and London is a wonderfully tolerant town. It is, in fact, almost incapable of being shocked except by that which is printed in the daily papers. This constitutes the real power of the press. As long as definite publicity in black type on white or pink paper is not given, a fact, however well known, remains private; it is only truly shocking when the compositor has set it up; then takes place a great and essential change. And this morning half the world looked at them, and remarked on the beauty of their horses and the fine horsemanship of their riders, and shrugged their shoulders now and then, and smiled and talked about something else.

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"So you had better lunch with me, Jack," said Mrs. Brereton, going back to her subject. "You have a Committee at three, I know."

"And what must I say to Marie?" asked he.

"Say? Say you lunched with me. It has also the minor advantage of being perfectly true. Oh, so few people see the extraordinary advantage to be gained by telling the truth. It is so easy, too: you can tell the truth by a mere effort of memory, whereas any—any diplomatic evasion calls the imaginative faculty into play."

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"I don't think I've got the imaginative faculty," said Jack.

"No, you haven't much. That is why, when you evade, you are always so unconvincing. Rich ornamental detail is necessary to the simplest untruth, whereas if you are telling the truth the cruder you are the better. Your very crudity, Jack, is the making of you as a politician."

"I know what I want politically, anyhow," he said. "I want proper rifles and the knowledge among the men as to the right direction in which to fire them off."

"Oh, don't make speeches. That is exactly your oratorical style—in other words, no style at all. The British public likes that. It says there is no nonsense about you. How odd it is that politically you should be a man of such astounding simplicity, and socially—well, a person who savours of

duplicity!"

"I'm straightforward enough," said he.

"Oh—oh! Never mind that. But the British public is odder still. It insists—at least, it wishes to believe—that its public men should be people of blameless private life. Now, what can that matter? But I don't think it has any doubt about you, Jack. It believes you to be a model of domesticity. Also by my advice, you see, you breed pigs and shorthorns. There is something magical about pigs and shorthorns. The public consider them a sort of testimonial to a man's character; I suppose it is the touch of Nature, or the touch of the farmyard."

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"Making the whole world kind!"

"Chestnuts, surely. Well, *au revoir*; go home and dress, and try not to look glum, and tell Marie you are lunching with me. Good-bye, I must hurry: I have some things to do before lunch."

CHAPTER IV

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Mrs. Maxwell was a voluminous woman of gorgeous exterior, who would have been pained to hear herself alluded to as a woman instead of a lady. There was, as she had more than once acutely remarked, a breeding that is altogether independent either of beauty or wit, and Cleopatra herself might have been utterly without it.

"And that," said Mrs. Maxwell, "is what makes the difference between a lady and not a lady."

The inference which she herself drew and meant to be drawn is too obvious to need pointing out, especially when we remember that she certainly had neither beauty nor wit, except in so far as it may be held a proof of ability to have married a money-lender of Jewish extraction and enormous wealth. But Mrs. Maxwell had ambition, and an amazing industry. Years ago when she married her Henry she had made up her mind that, if there was any power whatever in the fact of millions, she would procure whatever was to be procured with them, and in especial she had set her heart on bringing not to her feet, but to her table and her ballroom, all that was noblest and highest in the land. The task had been far less arduous than she had anticipated, and she felt on this night of the 16th of May that the prize had been publicly presented to her. Every one who was any one was going to cross her threshold that night; a favoured three or four dozen were going to dine there first, and the rest would come in afterwards. Earls and Countesses were among them. There was not room for all such nowadays at Mrs. Maxwell's table.

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The form that the entertainment was going to take was a concert, for, as Mrs. Maxwell said, you can dance anywhere for the cost of your shoe-leather and a couple of trumpets; but it meant a prettier penny than most people can find in their purse to hear Pagani and Guardina sitting in a comfortable chair instead of that dreadful draughty opera-house, and having to go to that cold, creepy "foyure" to get a glass of lemonade. There was no nonsense or affectation, it will be remarked, about Mrs. Maxwell's French, which she used ruthlessly in her conversation, and all her epithets ran in well-matched pairs, like her horses.

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The Maxwells' house stood in Piccadilly overlooking the Green Park, and it had been purchased as it stood, glass, plate, china, and books complete, from its owner, who was in straitened circumstances. There were not many books in the bargain, but among them, luckily enough, was the callers' book of the late owner, and for the sake of continuity and general interest Mrs. Maxwell's visitors went on writing their names there without a break, since the book at the time of their taking possession was only about half full. It was curious to observe how at first there was a sort of slump in distinguished names, which now had completely rallied and developed into a boom; in fact, on the last few pages half the names were the same as those on the earlier part of the book.

Among the many other desirable objects in the house were the pictures. These included several very fine Italian pictures by great masters, "Raffle," as Mrs. Maxwell rather familiarly called that eminent artist, being notably represented. They had occasioned a somewhat violent difference between their present master and mistress, Mrs. Maxwell maintaining that it was impossible to feel easy and comfortable beneath such serious-like pictures, Transfigurations and what not, and observing with some heat that you couldn't sit quiet in your chair with St. Stephen stoned and bleeding immediately above your head. Eventually a compromise had been arrived at, and they had been removed from the drawing-room into the corridor. But even more pointed had been the discrepancies arising from the small but exquisite half-dozen of Dutch pictures that had hung in the dining-room. Mr. Maxwell, again, had been disposed to leave everything exactly as they had found it, arguing that a family who had lived in the house for a couple of hundred years knew more about what was suitable to the house than they. This had inflamed his wife.

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"It's a matter of taste, Maxwell," she said; "and I've got as much right to my own taste as any Duke in the kingdom. And I maintain that while you're eating your dinner there's no pleasure in looking at a row of pots and pans hung on the wall, as if to remind you of where your food has been, and cheeses and what not. And as for that picture of old Dutchmen eating I don't know what horror, and smoking their pipes the while, why, it's enough to turn the good wholesome food in your stomach. And that's my opinion, whether you like it or not."

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Mr. Maxwell, who was a just man except in matters of money-lending, realized that he did not feel as keenly as this.

"But if you take them away, my dear, what will you put in their place!"

"Why, the portraits of you and me and Anthony: you and me on each side of the fireplace, and Anthony in the middle."

This suggestion was a happy one, and had been put into effect. The portraits in question were admirable examples of a very eminent painter of the day, and Henry as large as life, with the unmistakable features of his race, sat smoking his cigar, so natural, on one side of the Italian fireplace, while on the other hung Mrs. Maxwell in her crimson gown with all her diamonds on. Both pictures were diabolically clever, and much more like the sitters than the sitters (happily for them) had any idea: for where Mrs. Maxwell saw only the impressionist blurs of coloured light which indicated her priceless stones, the painter had finely observed and faithfully represented an intolerably ostentatious opulence; where Mr. Maxwell saw only that he was, as usual, smoking a cigar, the painter had seen the man who liked to be painted as doing so. Besides, the glowing end of it, smouldering beneath its white ash, was marvellously indicated, and Mr. Maxwell often declared he could almost catch a whiff of it. Between them hung Anthony, a young man of about twenty-three. He was undoubtedly the son of each of his parents. And the two parents were turned fondly, as in life, towards the hope of the house, and the hope of this house, beautifully dressed, also as in life, stared somewhat vacuously in front of him.

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It was, in fact, on Anthony, quite as much as on the mounting of the ladder of social distinction, that his mother's ambitions centred, and Anthony, it must be allowed, was largely that which his mother would have him be; but on the great question of the potency of wealth, its being able to get for you, if you spend it properly, anything you wish, from a wife or an ancestor to a pair of shoes, she did not feel certain of his soundness. There were other things, too, about Anthony which puzzled his mother: he was accustomed to read poetry, and appeared to enjoy Wagner, a curious crookedness, so she thought, in one otherwise honest. But both mother and son were agreed that, wherever he got his shoes, he could not do better than get his wife from Andrew Brereton's house, the prospective bride being Maud Brereton, a young goddess of about eighteen years and six feet of wholesome growth, whom her mother invariably alluded to as "my little girl."

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To-night it certainly seemed that the new patron saint of England, St. Sovereign, received definite canonization. Royalty, stars and garters, wit, talent, beauty, and birth, all came and bowed the knee. Even a stray copy of the menu at dinner was picked up by an enterprising reporter for publication next day in the paper he represented, so that Mr. Maxwell's inimitable *chef* would have the opportunity of living his triumph o'er again. Dinner was not till half-past eight, and a feast that costs five pounds a head necessarily takes time to negotiate, especially since Mr. Maxwell always ate largely and slowly of every dish that was put before him, so that before the gentlemen left the dining-room the less favoured guests had already begun to arrive. Among these was Guardina, who with great good sense had declined her dinner invitation for the very excellent reason that if she dined there she would eat too much, and if she ate too much she would not be able to sing. "And I am here to sing," she added, being without illusions.

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Among the diners there had been Mrs. Brereton and Lady Alston, and the former, following her invariable practice of always paying court to Jack's wife, linked her arm in Marie's as they were going upstairs, to the momentary consternation of Mrs. Maxwell, who clearly saw from her place at the end of the procession of ascending ladies that there were several women of higher rank behind her.

"Dear Marie, I haven't seen you for a whole two days," she said. "Where have you hidden yourself? And I never expected to see you here."

"Why not? Surely the dinner was excellent, and is not Guardina to sing?"

"Yes, of course. Oh, I see, you are laughing at me. Don't be cross, Marie."

"I'm not cross, only frank."

"Oh, but frankness is such a bore, except when you use it as a weapon of concealment. In fact, I was talking to Jack about that very point two days ago. As a means of convincing people that you are not telling the truth, there is nothing so certain as to tell it."

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This Bismarckian but imaginative *résumé* of the conversation in the Park came out quite glibly, and Marie laughed.

"Really, Mildred, you have a way with you," she said. "Jack went out yesterday morning in a vile temper, and came back after riding with you like a drifting angel, all sweetness and smiles. What had you done to him?"

"I forget what we talked about—probably about him, for that always puts a man in a good temper quicker than anything else. I'm so glad it was successful."

Marie sat down on a gilt Louis XV chair upholstered in Genoese velvet.

"I shall send him to you whenever he is in a bad temper, I think," she went on, "with a ticket pinned on to him, 'Please return in good condition.'"

Mildred laughed.

"Dearly as I like Jack," she said, "I am not sure that my affection would quite go to those lengths. Because Jack in an odious temper is like—well, like Jack in an odious temper. I know nothing, indeed, to compare to him."

"Well, I wish you would tell me your secret."

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"My dear, there is none. Besides, another woman can so often put a man in a good temper, when his wife could not possibly."

"That doesn't say much for matrimony."

Mildred looked up a moment, and then fell to fingering her fan again.

"Oh, matrimony is such an excellent institution that a few little disadvantages of that sort really don't weigh. But certainly what I say is true. And you know it is just the same with us. Jack can put me in a good temper when my dear Andrew would assuredly fare pretty badly if he tried."

"I never quite knew why you married him."

"Oh, for a variety of reasons. He was very rich, I liked him, he wanted to marry me. And we have been very happy. One can't look for perfection in one's husband any more than in one's own servants or one's horses. The point is that they should not have any vices, and on the whole suit you."

"Is that the modern theory?" asked Marie.

"No, I don't know that it is exclusively modern. But what's the matter, Marie? What was Jack in a bad temper about?" [Pg 74]

Marie frowned.

"Jack was coarse. I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. Do you remember my going home with Jim two nights ago from your house, when I was going to see Blanche about the bazaar? Well, he hinted that I had not been to see her at all. Now, what are you to do when your husband behaves like that?"

Mildred laughed.

"Dear me! is that all? Men are coarse folk, you will not recognise that, and when they are in a bad temper they say all sorts of things they don't mean. Now, I can tell you how I should deal with that. I should simply have laughed in his face, laughed with a wide mouth. But as for letting it disturb my peace of mind— You, too, of all people, who simply are the most enviable woman in London."

"So you tell me," said Marie; "but I don't quite know why."

"Oh, my dear, if it was not you I should think you were fishing for compliments— Why? Because you have the brains to be sometimes amused and sometimes bored at what absorbs all of us; because you are young; because somehow or other you are *the* person; because you make any woman standing near you look dowdy and coarse——" [Pg 75]

Marie laughed.

"I am stifled in my own perfections," she said. "Let me get a breath of air."

"Guardina is just going to oblige us with one," said Mildred. "She really is like the girl in the fairy stories out of whose mouth drop diamonds and pearls. I suppose she is paid at least a sovereign a note. How pleasant that must be! Look, there is poor Nellie Leighton standing close to her, as if she hoped to be able to pick some of them up. What a wonderful woman! Not a penny of any sort to bless herself with, an insatiable appetite for pleasure, and the most light-hearted and appreciative woman I know. She sees us; she is coming over here."

Mrs. Leighton, in fact, opened her mouth sideways towards one ear, which was her way of smiling, and rustled elaborately across the room. She laid an affectionate hand on Marie's arm, and looked as if she had something very important to say.

"She is going to sing the 'Zitanella,'" she whispered as the accompanist played a brilliant chromatic passage to compel silence. "Quite too divine for words. And I have bought a new house. Rustic." [Pg 76]

But at the moment a sound as faint and far-away as the ring of a musical glass pierced the air. Guardina's lips were hardly parted, but that spear of sound thrilled through the room. Certainly, if she was paid a sovereign a note, that first note of the "Zitanella" was good measure. Then it broke like quicksilver into a thousand perfectly round and shining globules of sound, collected itself again, poised, quavered, trilled, thrilled, perched as it were like a bird on the topmost twig of sound, and vanished like a conjurer's handkerchief into air. Mrs. Leighton again extended her mouth over her right cheek.

"Too delicious!" she said. "And how we are to pay for it all—the house I mean—I haven't got the remotest idea. It is so comfortable having no money at all: you not only don't, but you can't pay for anything, and it's no use thinking about it. Marie, you must come down and see it. There are two spare bedrooms all white and chintz. When I am there I always dream of milk and butter and litters of pigs. Yes, isn't Guardina marvellous? I wish she would lend me her vocal cords for a week. I would willingly lend her anything I have for a fortnight." [Pg 77]

The end of Guardina's song was marked by a sort of general post, and Marie was snapped up by Mr. Maxwell, if such a phrase can properly be used of so deliberate a process. His interpretation of the art of conversation chiefly consisted in opening his mouth as if he was going to speak, and then shutting it again, like a fish in an aquarium. The person with whom he was conversing he stood over in an encompassing manner, with an air of proprietorship. Elsewhere Anthony had cornered Mildred Brereton's little girl, who evidently wanted to go away, but was checked by her mother's eye, which from time to time pinned her like a fluttering butterfly to the spot. She herself was taken possession of by Mrs. Maxwell, who, unlike her husband, was as voluminous in

speech as she was in person. Arthur Naseby, close beside them, was half listening to his hostess's conversation, while he was discussing a quantity of subjects entirely unfit for discussion with Mrs. Leighton.

"Yes, I'm sure she sings beautiful," said Mrs. Maxwell, "and so true. She seems to hit the note every time. What a thing to have a gift like that! and I'm sure she makes the most of it. Why, I remember her first coming out, and she went away in a hansom-cab from the opera. But she can go handsomer than cabs now!"

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Mrs. Brereton again pinned the unfortunate Maud to her seat.

"And what a brilliant party you have got together, Mrs. Maxwell!" she said. "Positively, there is every one here one has ever heard of, and absolutely nobody that one hasn't heard of. That is so clever of you! It is easy enough to get people, but the difficulty is to not have the wrong ones. I'm sure you must find it so."

Mrs. Maxwell sighed.

"It's as much as Anthony and me can do in a week's work to go through the calling-book," she said. "Talk of weeding, you never saw such a deal of it as we have to do. People seem to think they can all come for the calling. But one must be careful, and I try never to ask any one whom a single one of my guests would be sorry to have in their own houses."

Mrs. Brereton smiled a congratulatory smile.

"We should most of us be very glad to see them in ours," she said.

Mrs. Maxwell's mood grew more sublime.

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"And the pushing and the shoving that some people do to get asked to other people's houses," she said, "why, it fair passes belief. Now, Maxwell has no spirit. 'Let 'em all come,' he says, like that horrid vulgar song; but I said, 'No, Maxwell—if they all come, half of them will keep away, and them's the very half you want, and where shall we be then?' There's Guardina going to sing again, with Pagani this time. She's got to sing two solos and two duos. How wonderfully their voices suit! you would say they was made for each other. Excuse me, there's the Duchess of Perth just come, and I must say a word to her."

Arthur Naseby sank into the unoccupied seat.

"Anything more divine I never wish to hear," he said in a shrill whisper. "And the diamonds have caught an added lustre for their brilliant surroundings. To-night Mrs. Maxwell is one coruscation, with a collation to follow."

"How true, too, what she said about Pagani and Guardina," murmured Mrs. Brereton. "It takes that sort of person to say that sort of thing. I am not nervous personally, but"—and her eye caught sight of Maud and Anthony again—"but she is an excellent good kind woman," she added with a very distinct change of tone.

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"And what of the new man, Jim Spencer?" asked Naseby. "Are there developments? I always look on you as a sort of barometer. You can tell what is going to happen before it does happen."

Mildred looked round.

"A little cloud like a man's hand," she said.

"Rising out of South Africa. You mean his head will follow?"

"Hush! That's the worst of having these great people to sing. One cannot talk."

"So unsociable," said Arthur Naseby.

The room where they sat was the ballroom, with six windows overlooking Piccadilly. It would have held certainly a hundred couples on the floor, and, crowded as it was now, it must have contained twice the number. All the world, as Mrs. Brereton had said, was there, and if it was true that, as Mrs. Maxwell hoped, every one present would have been glad to see any of the guests at their houses, the world, it must be confessed, was of very catholic if not apostolic tendencies. It would be, in fact, impossible to imagine a more heterogeneous gathering: here a peer of European reputation, whose very name was considered by the country at large to be synonymous with solid respectability, was being talked to by a woman who in other circles, and in widely different ways, was also of European reputation, and who seemed capable of quite making him forget for the moment, at any rate, the happy colonies which were intrusted to his wise and well-judged care; here a traveller recently returned from regions which were supposed to be impenetrable on account of the cannibal habits of their denizens was relating to two overdressed dowagers the internal horrors which ensued on drinking the only water which could be found in these abandoned spots; here a terrible man with curiously arched eyebrows and carmine-coloured cheeks, who looked like a decadent wax-work, was retailing to a brilliant *débutante*, in discreet whispers, things that made her white shoulders shake with laughter, till she was whisked away by an indignant mother. Princes of royal blood mingled with the crowd, which bobbed as they approached, and straightened itself again to make itself amusing, and all talked and giggled and gabbled together with the utmost freedom and impartiality. But the predominant feature of the entertainment which brought all its heterogeneous components into one harmonious whole was Wealth: Wealth burst from the throat of the singers, Wealth gleamed from the gilded chairs and Genoese upholstery, Wealth beamed from the ropes of pearls and diamonds which encircled lean necks and plump necks, old necks and young necks, and sat enthroned on black and gray and white and brown, and particularly on golden, hair. There were

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no doubt many people there who were not rich, but the wives of such were pretty, or had some *cachet* other than mere good breeding about them; but it is certain that there was no one in London who was very rich who had not at any rate been asked for that night, and but few who had not come. This probably was what Mrs. Maxwell meant when she said there was no one there whom any of her guests would not have liked to have at their own houses, and, with exceptions so few as to be negligible, she was perfectly right. All the plutocracy, in fact, were there, English, American, German, Greek, and Jew, with all the mixtures of religion, race and language which wealth, with its wonderful amalgamating power, can bring together. It was, in fact, a typical English party, for there was there all that money could buy and all those whom the power of money could bring. That is why it was so very full. People of birth and breeding were there, who screamed with unkindly laughter at Mrs. Maxwell and her bevy of quite impossible millionaires, yet they drank her champagne and danced to her fiddles with the greatest goodwill in the world, and had Mrs. Maxwell a hundred sons, each of whom would be as rich as Anthony, they would have hurled two hundred daughters at their heads; and had she a hundred daughters, it is perfectly certain that at least two hundred coronets, prospective or immediate, some with strawberry leaves, some with pearls, some possibly, even with fleur-de-lis, would have been laid at their feet. There were, of course, many people who still were not seen in Mrs. Maxwell's drawing-rooms, and who persisted in looking over her head when they met her elsewhere, but she in her turn called them "stuck-up," so the honours were pretty evenly divided. The world in general, moreover, distinctly agreed with Mrs. Maxwell, and said how absurd it was to give yourself airs.

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Mrs. Maxwell by this time was getting to know the ropes sufficiently well to refrain from telling people how honoured she felt by seeing them at her house; she also was sufficiently well acquainted with the minute appetite the English have for music and the great appetite that our healthy nation has for food. Consequently the concert, at which every item was admirable and performed by first-rate artists, was short, and the supper, also in the hands of first-rate artists, elaborate. Her other preparations also were on the most complete scale, and Bridge-tables were ready in one room, all sorts of nicotine and spirits in another, and in the garden behind, brilliantly illuminated as to its paths and decently obscure as to its seats, there were plenty of opportunities to enjoy the coolness of the night air, which many people seemed to find refreshing and invigorating. In the supper-room, finally, there was a huge sort of bar for the rank and file, and a quantity of small tables for the very elect. "In fact," as Mildred Brereton said to Jack as they strolled about the garden after a violent tussle to get food, owing to the invincible determination of every one to eat without delay, "it is as good as the best restaurant, and there is no bill afterwards."

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Jack laughed.

"You mistake the character of the entertainment," he said. "It is a *salon*; I heard Mrs. Maxwell say so, and not a restaurant. Also, the bill is your presence here."

"I expect many people would like to know another restaurant conducted on the same principle," said Mildred; "but for you to say that sort of thing is absurd, Jack. I believe Marie is making you as old-fashioned as herself."

Jack swore gently.

"Has she been old-fashioned to-night?" he asked.

"Immensely. She told me about her row with you."

"How like a woman! They have to unburden to their friends about everything. What's the good of unburdening?"

"Jack, you are such a pig—so am I; that is why we are friends. But, anyhow, I can see what a pearl she is. Sometimes I've half a mind to finish with the whole affair. Marie makes——"

He turned on her fiercely.

"You don't dare," he said.

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"My good man, it is no use storming. You get your way in the world, I allow, for somehow or other most people are afraid of you. But if you think I am, you are stupendously mistaken. To resume—half a mind, I said. When I have the whole mind you shall be instantly told. I am scrupulously fair in such matters, and I recognise the justice of your knowing first."

She got up as she spoke.

"I shall now go home," she said.

He laid his hand on her arm.

"No, don't go yet, Mildred," he said. "And I wish to Heaven you would not say such horrible things. But never mind that: you don't mean it. Sit down again."

She laughed.

"I mean every word," she said, "also that I must go. Come; Andrew is sure to be playing Bridge. You can just drive me home. I will leave the carriage for him."

Jack rose also.

"Won't he look for you?" he asked.

"Not for long, and then he will play some more Bridge."

Mrs. Brereton, among her many other moral hallucinations, was in the constant habit of remembering that she was an excellent mother, and that, next to her own affairs, it was highly probable that among all others she took most thought for those of her daughter. Consequently, on the afternoon following the Maxwell entertainment she determined to devote herself to Maud and her prospects, and with that end in view drove down with her in a space-annihilating motor-car to their house just above Windsor, in order both to talk with her by the way, and when arrived there see that things were in order for the week-end party that they were giving on Saturday. The summer weather which had begun with such splendour a week ago had by an unparalleled effort kept itself up, and seven days of sunshine had brought out a wealth of fresh green leaf on the trees, in London still varnished and undimmed by dust, and in the country of an exquisite verdure. Overhead the sun was set in a sky of divine purity, and the swift motion through the air she felt to be quite as exhilarating to the senses as would have been the afternoon party to which, had not duty called, she would otherwise have gone. She had never wished to have a daughter, and the abandonment of this party reminded her how often she was sacrificing herself to Maud. Indeed, she seemed to herself a most excellent mother.

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But, notwithstanding that she was generally and justly supposed to be able to spar with the most robust emergencies, Mrs. Brereton did not particularly fancy the task she had set herself, or that, strictly speaking, had been set her; in fact, early this morning there had arrived for her a note from her hostess of last night, saying what sort of communication her dear Anthony had made her before he went to his bed. Under these circumstances it was only right that Maud's mother should be asked whether she sanctioned the step he proposed to take in presenting himself as a suitor for her daughter's hand. The phrasing of the note, as might be expected from so successful a lady as Mrs. Maxwell, was as unimpeachable as its contents, and both filled Mrs. Brereton with joy, for the two odious sons of her husband by his first marriage would inherit the bulk of her husband's fortune, and Maud would have almost nothing. Now, Mrs. Brereton had no desire whatever to see her an impecunious peeress, or, indeed, an impecunious anything, and she had come to the very wise conclusion that money certainly is money, and that where a chance of marrying a huge fortune was presented, it would be distinctly a failure of maternal duty not to put its advantages very distinctly and decidedly before her daughter. But she was never very much at ease with Maud, whom, if she had been another woman's child, she would have described as an uncomfortable kind of girl. But being her own, she spoke of her always as very original and with great opinions of her own. She did not particularly like girls, any more than she liked young men or new wines: they all needed maturing before they were fit for the palate. But she was just, and gave full allowance to the necessity for being young before you can become mellow, though she wished that Maud would be quick about it. Really, when a girl is nearly nineteen, nearly six feet high, with a superb figure, and a face at which men undisguisedly stare, and with reason, it is time for the possessor of such advantages to begin thinking about making her nest. Here was one ready, excellently well-feathered. She only hoped, strongly but somehow remotely, that Maud might see it in that light. But she considered her daughter to combine symptoms of hopeless simplicity with those of the most world-weary cynicism. It was impossible that both could be genuine, but it puzzled her mother to say which was.

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The sun was quite hot, and Mrs. Brereton at once put up her parasol, for a large glass screen sheltered them from the wind.

"Delicious the sun is," she said, as she extinguished it. "And what a delightful drive we shall have, Maud! When one goes into the country like this, I can never understand why we ever live in town. So sensible of dear Nellie, is it not? She has bought a cottage in the country, with an orchard and a dairy and all that, and dreams of butter, she tells me. She probably wakes and finds that it is earwigs. That she doesn't tell me."

"I don't think she would care about it if she couldn't tell every one about it," said Maud. "She doesn't strike me as a real country-lover, does she you?"

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"Oh, I dare say not in the sense you are, dear," said her mother. "I always wonder where you get it from. Fancy your father or I existing in the country!"

"But you said this moment that you couldn't understand why we ever live in town."

This was the kind of thing which frequently occurred when Mrs. Brereton chattered to her daughter. Maud seemed to think that in light conversation people meant what they said, an error so astounding that it seemed almost hopeless to point it out.

"Dear Maud, how literal you are!" she said. "You don't seem to realize that one has moods which may last a year or more, and may only last a minute. That one lasted less than a minute."

Maud laughed.

"How unsettling!" she said. "For how can one know whether one really likes anything? It may only last a minute."

Mrs. Brereton plunged at the opening, a header, so to speak, into the frothy water.

"Ah, that is where wisdom comes in," she said. "You have not only to choose and to do what you like, but to choose that which your reason dictates, that which you know is really advantageous for you. Life would be a very simple matter if one only followed one's inclinations. It is a lesson

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one cannot learn too early."

There was a short pause, in which Mrs. Brereton passed in rapid summary to herself all the occasions she could remember on which she had not followed her inclination. It seemed to her that there were an immense number; she was always doing kind things, and the pause would have been a long one had not Maud broken it.

"I suppose you mean that you want me to marry Anthony Maxwell!" she remarked in a perfectly even voice.

This was an occasion on which her mother was absolutely unable to decide whether Maud's disconcerting directness sprang from internal and childlike simplicity or a brutally frank insight into the diplomacy of others. But she put the best construction possible on it.

"Dear Maud," she exclaimed effusively, "it is too dear of you to meet me halfway like that. To tell you the truth, I was a little shy about opening the subject to you, as I did not know what you thought; but it is much easier for me to talk about it now." [Pg 93]

"Much," said Maud.

"To think that you should have guessed!" said the other; "but you always were so quick."

"It did not need much quickness after my prolonged conversation with him last night."

"So you had a good talk to him," said Mrs. Brereton. "I am so glad."

Maud raised her eyebrows.

"Surely you meant me to," she said. "Whenever I looked up, meaning to go, I always thought I saw you pinning me down again. Did you not?"

Mrs. Brereton was not quite sure that things were going comfortably.

"I don't know what you mean by pinning you down," she said; "but it is, of course, perfectly true that I wanted you to get better acquainted with him. I am sure, Maud, you are a very lucky girl."

The lucky girl put up her parasol; her face was absolutely immobile except for the least curl at the corner of her mouth, which might have expressed almost anything—fatigue, indifference, anything.

"Then he has made formal proposals?" she asked. "His mother wrote to me asking if I sanctioned his doing so." [Pg 94]

"You said yes, I suppose?"

"Naturally I should not forbid it, considering, as I do, that it is an admirable match for you. The young man is amiable, quite without vices I should think (which, after all, is *most* important, as so many marriages are wrecked that way). He is shrewd and clever, quite his father's son, and he is immensely wealthy."

"Those are all very good qualities," said Maud.

"My dear, of course they are. In bare justice to myself, I must say that, when I recommend a thing, I do so not on vague grounds, but on well-defined and cogent reasoning. Or perhaps you would prefer a husband who is a sot, a fool, and a pauper? You could easily find one of those without any great trouble."

Maud laughed; she was one of those people whom temper in others leaves perfectly undisturbed. Then she laid her hand on her mother's.

"Dearest mother," she said, "I really did not mean to be tiresome. Was I? You were saying that he was well-conducted, clever and wealthy." [Pg 95]

"I should have thought that was a good deal to say for any one," said her mother, not yet quite calm. "There are heaps of perfectly well-conducted people in the world who are fools, heaps of very wealthy people who are vicious, and plenty, as I said, who have neither wits, morals, nor money. Which sort do you want? Or do you look forward to spinsterhood in a cottage with a canary? Almost all your father's fortune will go to Otho and Reginald. You will be quite poor."

"I don't love Anthony Maxwell," said Maud, with a deplorable relapse into directness.

"Oh, my dear, have you been reading some sentimental novel? You seem to think that every girl meets the man eternally pre-destined for her, with clear-cut features and a coiffure like a hair-dresser's. That sort of romantic stuff is extinct. It never existed in fact, and it is rapidly disappearing in fiction. If it were true, the world would have come to an end long ago, for we should all have caught such frightful colds by reading Dante and Shakespeare on violet-covered banks that we should have died without children." [Pg 96]

Mrs. Brereton settled herself on the cushions of the carriage, feeling much more comfortable. If only Maud would continue to argue the question, she felt sure of her ground.

"You are not silly, I know, dear," she went on; "in fact, I think you are too much the other way. You like analyzing and picking things to bits, and saying, 'This seems to me faulty here, and that seems to me exaggerated there.' I assure you it is a mistake. And when you say you do not love him, you are using expressions of the meaning of which you have no idea. You don't know what love is—no girl can. You may feel attracted to a handsome face as you can be attracted by a

landscape or a piece of jewellery, but no one with the slightest sense of refinement could marry a man because he was handsome. It is a grossly indelicate idea, and one I am sure which you never entertained."

"I was not proposing to marry any man because of his good looks," said Maud.

"No, dear, I am certain you were not; and I was only saying in the abstract that to do such a thing would be an inconceivable folly. If your husband was Adonis himself, you would forget he was even passably good-looking in a fortnight. Dear me, yes! one gets used to nothing so quickly. And in the same way and with the same speed you get used to the absence of good looks. Anthony Maxwell, I allow, has but small claim to them; and I was only wondering whether, when you said that you did not love him, you did not have a half-conscious idea in your mind that if he was very handsome you might have. Dearest Maud, how wonderfully well you are looking! no wonder Anthony fell in love with you."

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Again the corner of Maud's mouth twitched.

"I hope that was not the cause," she said, "for you have just told me what an absurd reason that is for wanting to marry anybody!"

For the moment Mrs. Brereton had a violent desire to box those eligible ears, but restrained it, and proceeded to propound her philosophy of matrimony with the most admirable lucidity.

"Ah, that is where men are different from us," she said. "It is part of the province of women, as dear Mr. Austin says, to be beautiful, but it is quite outside the province of men. Look at your father now, Maud; he has perhaps less pretensions to good looks than any one I ever saw. But what a happy, what a blessed"—and the word did not stick—"marriage ours has been! Looking back even now, I have never yet seen a man whom I would sooner have chosen. And long, long ago—a year ago at least—I thought that if only dear Anthony would be attracted by you, what a happy thing it would be. It is silly to expect high romance. High romance does not exist for ninety-nine hundredths of the world—luckily, I am sure. And I am sure you are not romantic."

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Maud had listened with the closest attention to what her mother was saying, but she made no reply, and in silence they bowled swiftly along the Bath Road, which seemed to open like torn linen in front of them. Mrs. Brereton also well knew that silence in season is as necessary an equipment to the dialectician as the most eloquent speech, and having said all that she really intended, she had no design of ruining the effect of her words by vain repetition. Once, indeed, she called attention to the loveliness of the clustered pyramids of bloom that covered the horse-chestnut-trees in the gardens round the houses of some small village half buried in blossom, but the tone of Maud's "Lovely!" showed her quite unmistakably that general conversation was for the present a futility. At the same time her daughter's abstraction indicated that her own words were probably sinking in, a process with which Mrs. Brereton had no desire whatever to interfere. At last, as they approached their gates, the girl furled her parasol with a snap which might easily betoken a decision.

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"I have made up my mind," she said—"at least, I have made up my mind not to make up my mind immediately. I suppose you don't expect me to decide at once?"

"No, dear, certainly not," said her mother; "though personally I cannot see why you should hesitate."

"You think it is ideal in every way?"

"Ideal, no! An ideal is realized about once every hundred years. There are disadvantages necessarily attaching to every step, however advantageous. But I consider it most eminently desirable."

The girl looked at her a moment.

"Did you never look out for what seemed to you ideal, mother?" she asked.

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"Yes, dear, once. When I was exactly fifteen I fell passionately in love with the Emperor of Germany, whom I had once seen at a distance. To marry him seemed to me ideal. But whether it would have been or not I was never privileged to know. He and I both married some one else. I was acutely miserable for at least a fortnight. But during that fortnight I learned something, which was that your time can be fully occupied in getting what you can get, without wasting your energy in longing for what you can't."

"Poor mother!" said Maud gravely; and in her voice Mrs. Brereton thought she could detect more of irony than simplicity.

They had no further conversation on the subject for the present, since during the next couple of hours Mrs. Brereton successfully settled a hundred details and arrangements that would have taken a less quick woman half a day to grapple with. The house stood some quarter of a mile from the river-bank, on the reach between Maidenhead and Bray, red-bricked and creeper-covered, but picturesque in a haphazard, bungalow manner, intolerably dank in the winter, when languid, foggy water covered the lower lawn, but ideally adapted for summer Sunday parties. It had long been left to moulder and mildew, but some ten years ago, while the Thames was still only a geographical expression, Mrs. Brereton, in a hunt for some place of the kind near London, but sufficiently remote not to be overrun, had lighted on it, and with her quick eye had seen how admirably it would suit her wants. Inside there were not more than a dozen bedrooms and two or three adequate reception-rooms; but the garden was exquisite, and had now under her guiding hand fulfilled rare possibilities.

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A steep slope of grass, negotiable by three flights of stone steps, led from the gravel path, which bordered the house, on to the lawn, which lay in terraces towards the river, framed with intersections of box hedges, cut into pyramidal and geometric shapes, and bordered by vivid beds of flowers. The entrance of each of these lawns was in line with the centre of the house, and they communicated one with another by broad steps of grass. One was levelled for croquet, another was a rose-garden with a pergola running round it, while that nearest the house was during the summer chiefly occupied by garden and basket chairs. The whole front of the house, again, was, with its gravel path, capable of being roofed in with an awning, carpeted with rugs, and furnished for eating, drinking, card-playing, and other diversions not less diverting. Behind the framing of box hedge which encircled the lawn lay on each side a shrubbery of blossoming trees, lilacs and laburnums, and behind, again, tall elms and beeches shaded the paths that led to the meadow of untamed land below the lawn, and bordered the river itself, where weeping-willows trailed their slow-moving, slender fingers over the tarred roof of the boat-house. Here, also, Mrs. Brereton had caused to be erected a private bathing-place, dug out at great expense in the river. It was remarkable only for the fact that it had never been used, except once by Mr. Brereton by mistake.

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Mildred had not been down here before during the spring, and as she was going to entertain next Sunday, and would not be able to get down again in the interval, it followed that a good deal of method and quickness were required to effect all that had to be done in a couple of hours. Like a wise woman, she knew that in those cases in which, as here, she was quite aware what she wanted, and only required it to be done, the best servants are those who will not be intelligent and have ideas of their own, but simply obey. Consequently she had, as gardeners, a staff of Parsifals, simple blameless fools, who moved tubs of geraniums to such places as she wished and to no others, who planted carnations in beds where she wished carnations to be planted, and did not execute fantasies of their own. The greenhouses which lay on the other side of the house were full and ready with plants to be bedded out, and for the first half-hour she was occupied in choosing exactly what she wanted in each bed. After that there was the upholsterer with his choice of canvases for the awning that lay along the length of the house, and the carpenter who was to erect a small wooden shelter which should be convenient for Bridge-players. Then came the choice of rugs, hangings, and furniture for the marquee which stood on the first lawn, as well as for the awning-shelter close to the house. Persian carpets had to be unrolled, spread out, and examined, the choice of chairs and tables had to be made, palms to be sought for the corners, a piano to be tuned, the croquet to be inspected and set up.

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After an hour, indeed, it seemed as if chaos had resumed its reign, or that some half-dozen London drawing-rooms had been sacked and the contents strewn on the lawn. Here stood a great Chinese vase forlornly alone in the middle of the grass, here two Chippendale tables huddled together for company, here roll upon roll of Persian rugs were gradually creeping like a tide of many-coloured waters over the green, here was a stack of chairs, and here half a hundred lanterns with which the tent was lit. And in the middle of it all, triumphantly ruling chaos, stood Mrs. Brereton, never confused herself and never confusing others, bidding, forbidding, changing, confirming, as she directed simultaneously the struggling gardeners and an army of housemaids, at her best, as she always was, when a great deal of practical business had to be managed in a very short time.

"No, the croquet must be shifted to the right; it gives more margin," she was saying. "Just show them, Maud. The piano opposite the French window from the drawing-room, but it's no use putting it in till you have the carpets down. The scarlet cushions belong to the other sofa; no, there's no answer"—this to a footman with a telegram. "Of course, if there are no nasturtiums out yet it can't be helped. Yes, seven lanterns at least; the electrician must look to the wires, one on each of the supports; we shall dine there as well as lunch next Sunday if it is warm. Bridge-tables? Yes, in the new shelter, two of them, and one in the corner of the long awning. What's that matting doing? It belongs to the conservatory; put it back there. I shall want thick common baize under the rugs; they will get damp otherwise. The big flower-holder in the corner; no, more in the corner than that. Wolland's will send down two palms, one to go behind the piano, the other indoors in the drawing-room."

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But out of chaos by such processes of evolution emerged order, and it was still an hour before sunset when they left again. Mrs. Brereton had to a high degree that most useful gift of being able to banish any one subject completely from her mind when she was occupied with another, and it was not till she was seated with Maud again in the carriage that the question which had occupied them so exclusively driving down reasserted itself. Even then she felt it was the better part of wisdom to let things be. Maud was clearly preoccupied, with what, it was impossible not to guess, and as she was, her mother knew, one who chose to make decisions for herself, she bridled her desire to know what was passing in her daughter's mind. She always found that conversation with Maud was difficult; to-day it was particularly so. But just as they stopped at the Grosvenor Square house this desire mastered her.

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"And what do you think you intend to do?" she asked.

"I think I intend to refuse him, but I am not sure."

And with such cold comfort her mother had to be content.

That evening Mrs. Brereton was dining at Lady Ardingly's, the woman whom she admired and respected more than any one in the world. She had been nobody quite knew who, but, anyhow, Russian and as poor as a church mouse; but she had got, and nobody quite knew how, a position which was in its way unique. She had married Lord Ardingly while quite a girl in the teeth of strenuous opposition, fighting her battle quite unaided, and, instead of his having to live her

down, it had soon become quite clear that it would be his part to toil, faint yet pursuing, in her wake. All her life success had attended her, she always knew what she wanted and always got it, and whoever else rose and shone and passed, Lady Ardingly continued to burn with unabated luminance. To-day, so Mildred Brereton thought, Marie Alston was the star, but she quite realized that this particular star, like those of the music-halls, might some day set; but Lady Ardingly remained swung high in the social heavens, a permanent centrepiece. Marie was the fashion, it is true, but Lady Ardingly was much more than the fashion; that word was far too superficial to describe her.

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She had been, no doubt, once of great personal beauty, but clearly it was not that which gave her the power she possessed, for it had passed years ago, and she was now something over sixty, with splashes of rouge dashed in an impressionist manner on to her face, not from any motive of vanity, but simply from long force of habit; a wig, no more to be mistaken for natural growth than a top-hat, was perched negligently on one side of her head, and to balance it, in the evening, a tiara perched on the other. Her neck was covered with jewels; her hands, which were somewhat lean and knuckly, were crammed with rings; and she dressed superbly. But all these things, like the rouge, were the result of habit; she had been accustomed to that sort of thing, and continued it, and certainly he would have been a bold man who tried to reason with her or alter her. Her husband, for instance, never attempted it. Finally, she was inordinately fond of gossip, card-playing, and other people's business, and was eminently good-natured provided that path did not cross her own. But she had so many private side-paths down which she was liable to wander, that one never knew for certain where she would come out next, or how she would act in any given set of circumstances. But as long as doing a kindness to another did not interfere with what she desired herself, she was always ready, even at the cost of trouble and personal exertion, to help her friends if they approached her in the proper spirit, which implied a good deal of abasement. She had been in her time a very considerable political intriguer, and, following her invariable rule of always getting whatever she wanted, she had built up her husband into the edifice of the Conservative Government. But the game—for it had never been more to her than that—had now ceased to amuse her, and she cared no longer how greatly her poor Ardingly floundered in the spacious halls of the Admiralty. This he seldom failed to do. She was, finally, the very antipodes of those women who, because generals and statesmen tell them things not generally known, consider themselves, in that they are at the centre of things, as wielding some vague political influence, and fly about telling all their friends what everybody has said. Lady Ardingly never flew about; she sat quite still and gave orders. Why people did as she told them they never quite knew; it arose, perhaps, from her habit of always being right.

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Ardingly House was a vast and modern erection in Pall Mall. "So convenient for Ardingly," as his wife used to say in her slow foreign speech, "now that he is at the Admiralty. He can come home to lunch, and tell me all the blunders he has made since breakfast. And there is plenty of time for him to take two steps and make them all over again before dinner." Not long ago, at the time when Mrs. Maxwell was house-hunting, she had heard a vague rumour that there was a possibility of this mansion being in the market, and had had the temerity to call on Lady Ardingly to know if it was so. She heard her in silence, not helping her out at difficult points, and then remarked: "Yes, we are going to sell it, and live at Clapham Junction. So convenient a train service." This Mrs. Maxwell had rightly interpreted to be a denial of the rumour, and had quitted the subject with some precipitation. It was also characteristic of Lady Ardingly that she did not fly about town, making the place ring with the story. Here, perhaps, lay one of the secrets of her effectiveness: she never dissipated her energy.

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It was to this lady that Mrs. Brereton decided to carry her doubts and perplexities. There was only a small dinner-party that night, and before the men left the dining-room she found herself sitting by her on a sofa. Lady Ardingly happened to be in an admirable temper, and the opportunity was golden.

"I have not seen you for very long, dear Mildred," said she. "Tell me your news. How is Jack Alston? Have you seen him lately?"

This kind of frankness even Mildred found a little embarrassing. Lady Ardingly, of course, knew everything about everybody, and never, except when there was something to be got by it, assumed ignorance.

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"Jack Alston? Oh, yes, I constantly meet him, in the way one does meet in London," she said rather foolishly.

"Yes, dear, I know you are great friends. Who does not? Do you hope he will get a Government post after the election? Tell me; I am really asking for news."

"Well, Jack hopes for it, of course. The War Office is what he is running for."

"The War Office? He knows about rifles and powder, does he not? Well, there is a feeling just now for having men who know their work. Ardingly, I find, is reading Nelson despatches. Very nice for him. What is there of news? Never mind politics; they are dull. Some scandal."

"They say Mrs. Alington has made a mess of her affairs," said Mildred. "I always knew she would, dabbling in the mining-market like that. Her husband is furious."

"Ah! Now, I wonder who can have told you that? I saw Alington only this evening. It is not so at all. They are the best of friends. What else?"

"Did you hear about Jim Netson? I am told he was down at Brighton on Sunday with——"

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"Dear Mildred, where can you get these things from?" asked Lady Ardingly. "Jim Netson was

lunching with me on Sunday. What else?"

Mildred found it difficult to bear this sort of thing quite good-naturedly. Like many other women, she repeated what she heard, adding a little here and there, not caring particularly about the truth of a story so long as it amused. But Lady Ardingly contradicted her flat, and, the worst of it was, she was invariably right. She did not in the least care for made-up stories, and Mildred, who was by way of being a well-informed woman on the matter of other people's backyards, was rather nettled. But she swallowed her pique and laughed.

"Dear Lady Ardingly," she said, "it is no use my telling you things. You always know best and most."

Lady Ardingly took some coffee, and as she removed the cup from the tray, the spoon clattered on the floor.

"Clumsy fool!" she said to the footman, and without a pause: "You have got something on your mind, Mildred. What is it? Always get things off your mind, my dear, as soon as possible. It is very enfeebling to worry. Is it"—and her eye fell on Maud, who was talking in a group on the other side of the room—"is it about your daughter? She is getting a big girl. It is time you married her."

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Mrs. Brereton gave a little staccato note of admiration.

"You are too wonderful!" she said. "Yes, it is exactly that. Anthony Maxwell wants to marry her."

"Very nice. The son of the great Mr. Maxwell, you mean?" asked Lady Ardingly, without the slightest inflection of irony.

"Yes."

Lady Ardingly laughed.

"What a pity we did not sell them this house! Maud would have been mistress here," she said. "At present she does not wish to marry him. Is it so? I do not wonder, dear Mildred, at a momentary hesitation. Do you? But it would be a very good marriage for her."

"So I have told her."

"Then, do not tell her so again. Ah, here come the men! Let us play Bridge immediately. Only I will not play with your husband, dear Mildred. I would sooner play with a groom out of the stables. We will have two tables, and he shall be at the other one. Send Maud here a moment. I will speak to her."

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Mrs. Brereton rose with alacrity.

"Dear Lady Ardingly, you are too kind!" she said with heartfelt gratitude.

"And do not put your oar in, my dear," said Lady Ardingly impassively.

Maud, looking very shy and tall, came in obedience to the summons.

"You are too unkind, dear Maud, to an old woman," said Lady Ardingly. "You have not said a word to me all the evening, and now we are going to play Bridge. They all insist on playing Bridge. You would like to play with your father, would you not? We will arrange a table for you. Yes, that will be very pleasant. You must come and talk to me one of these days quite quietly. To-morrow—no, to-morrow will not do. Come to lunch with me on Friday. What a tall girl you are! and, my dear, do you know you are wonderfully handsome? Now they want me to play Bridge."

CHAPTER VI

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It was Sunday afternoon, and Riversdale, by reason of the gaiety gathered there, had eclipsed the gaiety of all other places. Some dozen people were staying in the house, but the most of them had come down from London to spend the afternoon and return after dinner, and the lawns, which the company of blameless fools had caused to wear their most ravishing appearance, were suitably crowded. A set of croquet-hoops had been put up on one, and a game was proceeding in the orthodox Sunday afternoon style; that is to say, a nervous, palpitating little man, to whom at the moment croquet seemed of more importance than his eternal salvation, was busy, with a tea-party of four balls, separating adversaries and making hoops with intolerable precision, while a long, willowy girl, his partner, trailed after him in his triumphal progress and gave faint and languid sounds of sycophantic applause.

"There you see they are separated, Miss Martin," said the zealot at length, "and now I'll mobilize with you. Then you can make your hoop next time, and I ought to go out."

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"Yes, it's quite too beautiful," said Miss Martin; "but I know I'll miss. Oh, it's not my turn, is it? Where are they gone?"

"They" at this moment—a Guardsman of the most pronounced type and a middle-aged woman of the most un-middle-aged type—being weary with this faultless exhibition, had retired to a seat at the far end of the garden, and were talking very low and laughing very loud. They were recalled with difficulty, still lingering on the way, and the unpromising situation was carefully explained to them by the palpitating man in a voice in which the endeavour not to appear jubilant was rather too marked. It being the lady's turn, she chipped her ball sideways at about right angles to the required direction, and, without even affecting to look where it had gone, dropped her mallet in

the middle of the lawn, and instantly retired with her Guardsman again.

Elsewhere other groups were forming and dispersing. In the new wooden shelter Lady Ardingly had taken up her permanent position at the Bridge-table, and, while others cut in and out, kept her seat with tree-like composure, and played rubber after rubber with a success which appeared monotonous to her adversaries. Anthony Maxwell occasionally took a hand at her table, and in the intervals chased Maud Brereton from terrace to terrace with a hunter's pertinacity, conscious of the approving eye both of his mother and of Maud's. The fathers of them both would no doubt have viewed his employment with equal approbation, had they not been deeply engaged in a secluded corner in trying to rook each other at piquet, each, however, finding to his indescribable dismay that he had caught a Tartar. Like many very rich men, they played for very low stakes, and exhibited an inordinate greed for half-crowns, and even smaller coins.

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Jack Alston and his wife had been among the guests who came down from the Saturday till Monday, but he had gone over for the day, rather to Mildred's disgust, to a neighbouring golf-links, and would not be back till dinner. Marie, however, had been, so Mildred considered, at her very best all the afternoon, conferring, as she in some mysterious manner had always the power to do, an air of distinction and success to the party. Wherever she was there was a crowd; wherever she was there was more constant laughter, more animated conversation. She had the gift, rare and inimitable, of making people play up. Dull folk aroused themselves when she talked to them, brilliant people coruscated, for there went from her, an unconscious but pervading emanation, some air of freshness and vitality, which acted like a breath of wind in a close atmosphere, reviving and bracing. At present she was talking to Lady Devereux and Arthur Naseby, who wore a straw hat which was strangely unsuitable to him and appeared stouter than ever, in the comparative privacy of the lower lawn.

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"Ah yes," she was saying, "that is just the fault with us all now. We think we can be amused merely by having people to amuse us. It is not so; being amused depends almost entirely on one's self. Some days nothing amuses one; on others one is amused by the other sort of nothing."

"It's always the other sort of nothing with me," said Arthur Naseby. "And what I like really best of all is the pantomime. You find in the pantomime exactly what you take there. I take there an invincible gaiety. That is why I find it there."

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"That's what I mean," said Marie. "It is the case with everything. I love the pantomime, like you. Everything takes place without the slightest reason. It is so like life; and, like the clowns, we belabour each other with bladders and throw mud at butter belonging to other people. But the audience—the part of it like Mr. Naseby and me—are enormously amused."

"You are horribly unjust, Marie," said Lady Devereux in her sleepy, drawling voice. "We never belabour you. You are a privileged person; you go flying over hedges and ditches, while if I, for instance, as much as look over a hedge, I am supposed to be there for no good purpose. Is it the consciousness of innocence that gives you such license! One can acquire almost anything by practice. I think I shall set about that."

Marie laughed.

"I would, dear. Be innocent for an hour a day, to begin with, and increase it by degrees."

"Ah, it's not innocence, but the consciousness of it, I want," said Blanche. "It is a different matter."

"But it leads to absolutely nothing," said Arthur Naseby, in a discontented voice, "except, perhaps, promotion in the Church; but I have given up all real thought of that."

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"I thought the real way to get on in the Church now was to preach heretical doctrine," remarked Lady Devereux. "Our parson at Rye always casts doubt on things like Jonah and the whale, or tries to explain them by supposing it was not a whale, but an extinct animal with an enormous gullet, which seems to me just as remarkable. They tell me he is certain to be made a Bishop. My grandfather was a Bishop."

"And mine was a draper," said Arthur Naseby. "I am thankful every day that he was such a successful one. Really, nothing matters nowadays except money. That is so convenient for the people who have some. Here is a most convenient person, for instance, just coming."

Jim Spencer entered the tent with the air of looking for somebody. He also had the air of having found somebody when he saw Marie, and sat down in a low chair by her.

"I have been playing croquet," he said; "but I shall never play again."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I remained in sublime inactivity, except when other people used me for their own base ends. I never felt so useful in my life."

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"But that, again, is no use," said Arthur—"like the consciousness of innocence which Lady Devereux means to cultivate. Being simply an opportunity for other people seems to me the very type of a wasted life. I am continually being an opportunity for other people, and the opportunity I give them is to make unkind remarks about me; they constantly take advantage of it."

"What do they say?" asked Marie.

"They say I am idle, and therefore probably vicious. Now, nothing was ever less proved than that; it is a perfect fallacy, entirely due to that pessimistic person who said that Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. That I am idle is, of course, quite true. For thirty years I have

been very busy doing nothing whatever, and every day I live I find more nothing to do, if you understand."

"Then, you allow the world doesn't libel you?" said Lady Devereux.

"Certainly it does. It is that to which I so strongly object. People go about saying all sorts of things about me which are perfectly true. The greater the truth, the greater the libel." [Pg 122]

Marie got up from her chair.

"It is true that the world has a keen grasp of the obvious," she said. "Why don't you disappoint them, Mr. Naseby, and do something?"

"I am ready to do almost anything in the world," said he, "for a suitable inducement; but nobody ever induces me."

"Well, I shall go for a stroll," said Marie, "and expect neither inducement nor companionship unless any one is inclined."

Jim Spencer got up instantly.

"Please let me come," he said.

The two left the tent, but Arthur Naseby and Lady Devereux continued to sit there. There was a moment's pause, and then in a shrill whisper, "Yes, the case certainly presents some points of interest," said he; "and as a consulting doctor, although nobody has shown the slightest desire to consult me, I don't see why I shouldn't give my diagnosis. Briefly it is this: This exceeding warm weather will undoubtedly cause the snowflake to melt; if it does not, it is no true snowflake. But it must be, for anything but a snowflake would have melted long ago; in fact, it is proved." [Pg 123]

Lady Devereux considered this.

"Marie is a great friend of mine," she said; "but I have one criticism to make upon her: Her extraordinarily healthy way of looking at things cannot be genuine; she would not be human if it was. She gave me a lecture the other day about the vulgarity of lying down to be trampled on. Now, any one that was human would know that that is just about the only thing in the world worth doing. Personally, I consider it an instance of the wonderful self-abandonment and self-sacrificing character of love."

"And she wouldn't even call it love," said Arthur.

"No; she would use some perfectly antiquated and shocking word. Now, whatever I am, I am not antique. It is absurd to treat me as if I was Old Testament history. But Marie is a great dear. She has been too sweet about the bazaar, and has promised to hold a stall every day."

"I never can quite make out what people see in her," said Arthur. "Of course I adore her, simply because one has to—it is unheard of not to—but is there anything there after all, except—except what one sees?" [Pg 124]

"Yes, of course there is," said Blanche. "There is in her all that you and I and the rest of us are without. To put it baldly, she is a good woman. You get force from being good if you are clever as well. Yes, you may laugh, but it is so true. Now, the rest of us are not good—neither you, nor I, nor dear Mildred."

"But Andrew is," said Arthur.

"That is why one never knows whether he is in the room or not," said Lady Devereux. "He is, or may be, good; but there is nothing else there whatever. Mere goodness is pretty colourless by itself; but Marie is everything else, and good as well. She is about five times as clever as all of us. She has tact, else she would have made rows long ago; she is a woman of the world, but she is also good."

"I suppose that is probably why I am never quite comfortable with her," said Arthur in a mild, ruminating voice.

"Very likely. It is also why you are quite wrong in your diagnosis just now. Oh, there's Lady Ardingly looking for people to make up her table. She has probably cleaned everybody else out. Come, Arthur, let us go and be cleaned out too." [Pg 125]

They both laughed loudly and went.

Marie and Jim Spencer meantime had strolled away from the crowds on the lawn towards the meadow and the river. Even though he had been only a fortnight or so back in England, he had begun clearly to recognise that his experiment of going away, his self-banishment to South Africa in order to win back freedom from the spell which she had cast on him, had been a failure. He had thought that by filling his mind with other interests, by drugging his soul with the pursuit of gold, as you can drug an aching body into unconsciousness, he would still that pain. So, indeed, he had done for the time, but the opiate, it appeared, was not permanent in its effects; the drowsiness had passed off, and again at the sight of her his love had awoke. It seemed, too, to him now that he loved her with a more devout passion than ever before; all the old longing was there with this added—that his heightened and matured perception could now appreciate how fine she was; how different from the jostling race that swirled round her, who clutched like greedy children with both hands at the two things they alone thought worthy of effort: pleasure, at whatever cost or violation; and money, which was worth any sacrifice except that of pleasure. Like the whole of the rest of London, he knew the intrigue which Jack had been carrying on for years, and which was now so stale that it had almost ceased to form a subject for gossip, and this thought was bitterly poisonous to his mind. Could it be possible, he wondered, that Marie knew [Pg 126]

and condoned it? that she had accepted that for which there was no remedy but divorce, played gooseberry to her husband, and knew what were his relations to the woman whose hospitality she was even now enjoying? That she and Jack had drifted into the apathetic estrangement which so often is the result of childless marriages, he did not doubt; but was the reason for it that which was so well known to everybody else? Again and again during this last fortnight this unworthy and debasing suspicion had assailed him, and, to do him justice, he had as often cast it from him, his trust and whole-hearted belief in her rejecting and strangling it; and as often as it presented itself, he vowed that he would give it no home. But the other alternative, the only other possible, though it left her stainless and unsullied, was hardly less painful; and it was an intolerable thought to him that she alone should be ignorant of that of which all his better mind told him she was ignorant. Three-quarters of the world, no doubt, if they ever gave a thought now to a piece of scandal which had long outlived its first youth, commended her for her admirable common-sense in recognising the folly of making a fruitless public exhibition of her private affairs; the other quarter no doubt wondered idly how long her blissful ignorance would continue, and saw material for drama the moment that enlightenment came. And in this wonder he could not help joining—what would she do if ever she found out? Her worldly wisdom would assuredly indicate a direction completely opposite to that in which her moral sense would point. That there would be a struggle he regarded as inevitable; but even he, knowing her as well as he did, could form no conjecture as to which way it would go. Marie accepting what had happened, and not quarrelling with the irremediable, made a picture unpaintable; but Marie, living the life of a woman who had separated herself from her husband, was almost equally outside possibilities. He had a vague sense of approaching storm and brewing mischief, remote it might be, but marching inevitably nearer, even as in some spell of sultry and oppressive days we know that it is only through thunder and a convulsion of elements that we can get back to cool and dewy mornings, and again regard sunshine as a friend, not as a thing to be shunned and shrunk from.

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It may have been that the vividness with which he was conscious in every fibre of threatening disaster was communicated by some subtle brain-wave to her; in any case, her first words as they walked down the shady path below the full-fledged elms bore very distinctly on that which filled his mind.

"How hot it is!" she said. "There will surely be a storm."

The echo made by her audible voice to his inaudible thought startled him.

"What sort of storm?" he asked quickly, still busy on his own ground.

She laughed.

"So you have been thinking of storms, too," she said. "We often used to think in harness—do you remember, Jim? What sort of storm? Well, I too had other storms than thunder in my mind. You used to dislike real thunder-storms, I remember; but I always loved them. I expect other sorts of storms affect one similarly. I hate compromise, you know. If one is absolutely at cross-purposes with other people, it is much better to have it out fair and square, to upset the furniture and smash the china if necessary, rather than concede a little here and have a little conceded there. That always results in a state of things no better than before, and an added distaste on both sides to open the subject again."

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He did not at once answer; this bore directly on his stifled questionings, and answered them.

"Was anything particular in your mind?" he asked at length.

"No—I mean yes. I can't lie to any purpose, Jim; it's no good my trying. Yes, what was partly in my mind was a disagreement I had with Jack some ten days ago. We patched it up quite beautifully, and agreed that nothing was worth bothering about. I acquiesced, though I should personally have preferred to have it out. At least I am sure of this, that if one differs fundamentally from any one, it is no use arguing, or, as he says, bothering. And fundamentally Jack and I are very different."

She paused a moment and glanced suddenly at him.

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"And that is why we get on so excellently," she added, with just a suspicion of hurry in her words.

Jim longed to applaud her quickness; it had been excellently done. But the most elementary courtesy forbade him to call attention to it. "Asides" are conventionally observed at other places besides the theatres.

"I am glad of that," he said in a perfectly even voice.

This was a turning of the tables; his conventionality was as obvious as hers; she silently noticed it and also passed on.

"Yes, that little patch-up with Jack was in my mind," she said; "but then, as I told you, we have privately settled to have no storms. No, the storm which I mean will be a bigger storm than that. On that subject Jack and I are quite agreed. I mean a national storm, a general upheaval. My goodness! some high towers and steeples will be smashed. And here we all go, meantime, dancing in the middle of the thunder-clouds, with the lightning, so to speak, playing about us."

They had emerged from the wooded walk on to the edge of the meadow bordering the river, and as Marie spoke she pointed across the field to the lawn visible beyond it, filled with gay figures, and bordered with the bright colour of the flower-beds, and set in the sombre green of the yew hedges. Jim followed her finger.

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"Yes, assuredly we are dancing," he said. "But Sunday afternoon in the country is an innocuous

sort of high-dress dance, isn't it?"

"Certainly; but if we dance all and every day we don't get on with our work. And in point of fact, Jim, all our dances are not very high-dress. No; the fact is we are going to the dogs as quick as ever we can. Money, money, money! That is a perfectly sound and legitimate cry if the means you adopt are those that increase wealth. But if I get a tip from a City man and speculate, I am merely snatching at what I want. Did you go to the Maxwells' the other night? I did, because we all do. That is what we all have come to; but it does not spell efficiency. We worship the golden calf, but instead of feeding it we try to cut little pieces off it."

"And Deborah was a prophetess before the Lord," said Jim. "Proceed, Deborah."

"I wish I were," said Marie. "Oh, you should hear the truth if I was! But, Jack, I must tell you, comes pretty near to being a prophet." [Pg 132]

"Then you are the prophet's wife. Tell me what he says about it."

"Ah! he is a prophet in all but the one thing needful—I mean the fire and the burning. The prophet is like the phoenix; he is born from the ashes of a conflagration. In Jack's case all the message is there, but it is delivered—I don't know if it will mean anything to you, but personally I feel it—it is delivered out of cold lips. He needs the touch of the red-hot coal like Isaiah. Did you hear or read his speech last week about the Army Estimates? The First Secretary had given his statement in an apologetic kind of way, apparently wishing to conciliate the Opposition for the estimates being so high. The usual bickering over rounds of ammunition followed, and then Jack got up. Instead of apologizing for their being so high, he fell foul of his own chief for their being so low. He wanted to know why the autumn manœuvres had been curtailed; he wanted to know why the experiments at Lydd had been abandoned in the middle; he wanted to know why the projected battery at Gibraltar had not been constructed: was it because of the expense? Why, in fact, they had not spent twice as much as they had." [Pg 133]

"That would hardly be a popular speech from a member of the Government."

"Popular? No. The prophet is no opportunist, and thank God Jack cares absolutely not one jot what either his own side or the Opposition think of him. The press the next morning was worth reading; he got the most violent abuse from both sides."

"Won't that sort of thing damage him both in and after the next election? I should not think his party would like it, and I am sure the Government will not."

"Ah, I disagree with you there," said Marie. "Jack, I think, is getting a great hold on the people—the masses, if you like. He dislikes them, and he treats them like dirt; but the masses, as you know, are profound snobs, and rather enjoy that. They like a lord to behave in the way they imagine lords do behave. They even like a wicked lord. On the other hand, they are beginning to see that Jack means business. He thinks the army is wholly inadequate, and, judging from the length of the Boer War, would crumple under a great stress. You see, he considers that the walk-over which was anticipated has degenerated into a stroll. So, instead of joining in the hymn of praise to the British Empire which the Government spend their time in singing, rather out of tune with each other, he stands apart, and says bluntly that we must set to and put ourselves in a far greater state of efficiency, otherwise 'Pop goes the Empire.' Now, that is impalatable, but I think people in general are beginning to see that it may be medicinal." [Pg 134]

"I should say it was lucky he's a hereditary legislator," said Jim. "But how about a Government post afterwards?"

"Well, I think the Government may see that, too. They know perfectly well that Jack doesn't care one straw about party questions. He has said as much. What he does care about is the Empire—I think he cares for it more than anything else in the world—and what he knows about is the army. And if this cry for efficiency—which certainly is getting louder—in the country continues, they will have a far better chance of remaining in power if Jack is put at the War Office."

They had come to the far end of the meadow, and Marie paused a moment, looking at the broad, patient stream. Hundreds of pleasure-boats were scattered over its surface, and electric launches and river steamers crowded with roaring Sunday excursionists did their best to make vile one of the most beautiful rivers in the world. Each, indeed, seemed a Bedlam let loose and packed tight. Even the stuffy little cabins were full of feather-hatted girls and amorous young men, who changed hats with each other, without finding the brilliancy of this wit grow the least stale even in endless repetition; took alternate mouthfuls of solid refreshment out of paper bags and of beer out of the same bottle, with shouts of laughter at slightly indelicate suggestions. The poor river was flecked with fragments of bun-bags and floating bottles where trout should have been feeding, and echoes of the music-halls, with absolutely independent wheezings of concertinas, owning no suzerainty, by way of accompaniment, came to Marie and her companion with that curious sharp distinctness with which sound travels over water. For a moment they stood there in silence; then Marie turned quickly in the direction of the lawn behind them, and back to the river again. [Pg 135]

"After all—" she said half to herself.

Jim laughed. It was somehow strangely pleasant to him to find himself, as Marie had said, thinking in harness. [Pg 136]

"Yes, but less loudly so," he answered, replying to that which she had not said.

"So it seems to us. Those good folk on the river don't seem loud to themselves. But—oh dear me, Jim! what an awkward and inconvenient thing it is to be different from the people one moves

among!"

He did not feel that he owed her any mercy on this point. She had refused deliberately the other life he had once offered her.

"Ah, you find that, do you?" he said, his love for her surging up with bitterness in his throat. "Yet you chose it yourself."

They had begun walking back towards the lawn again, but at his words Marie suddenly stopped. From one side came the sound of laughter and talk, from the other, now more remote, fragments of "D'isy, D'isy."

She well knew what was in his mind, and thanked him silently for not putting it into words.

"I know I did," she said; "and no doubt the very fact that I am different to most of my *milieu* is what makes it so entertaining."

At that moment Jim saw where he stood. He knew that his taunt that her lot was of her own choosing had been dictated by that which was bitter within him, and was of the nature of revenge, however ineffectual. And Revenge is a very smoky lamp wherewith to guide one's steps in this world, and he had the justice to quench it without more ado. But he knew also that the void which she might have filled ached horribly, and by the irony of fate he had now in abundance that of which the lack years ago had made it impossible then that she should fill it. She had been but a girl, he but a boy; and in him, he felt now, that which had subsequently flowered into this great bloom of love had been but in bud. But the bud, it was now proved, was authentic, for there was no mistaking the flowers.

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Marie also was troubled. She could not but guess something of what was in his mind, but his taunt seemed to her unworthy of him, and she did not regret the light finality of her answer. But as they walked back by the meadow-side, already growing tall with hay, and redolent with the hundred unprized flowers of English meadows, her mind changed. He had loved her with an honourable love; she on her side had liked him, but it had been impossible—so she told herself rather hurriedly. If she had been free, and he came to her now—but she dismissed such unprofitable conjectures. Meanwhile she had been harsh, though perhaps deservedly, to her old friend. So just as he held the gate into the garden open for her:

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"But I am so glad you have come back, Jim!" she said.

CHAPTER VII

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Tea—or, rather, the modern substitute for tea, which consists of most things except tea, from caviare sandwiches to strawberry ice, and whisky-and-soda to iced coffee—had just been brought out when the two returned to the lawn, and Mildred Brereton's guests had fallen upon it with the most refreshingly healthy appetites, and were fluttering about the tables like a school of gulls fishing. Every one, according to the sensible modern plan, foraged privately and privateerly for himself, and there were no rows of patient women agonizing for things to eat and drink, until some man languidly brought them something they did not want, instead of that which they desired. Nor, on the other hand, were there rows of men parading slowly up the female line, like sightseers at an exhibition, with teacups slipping and gliding over the saucers, and buns being jerked from their plates by neighbouring elbows. Instead, every one flocked to the tables, seized what he wanted, and retired into corners to eat it. Anthony Maxwell in particular, who had a wonderful gift for mimicry, was loading up with great care and solidity. Something in his air might have reminded an observer of a steamer coaling for a trip. He had had, in fact, a little conversation with both Mrs. Brereton and Lady Ardingly during the afternoon.

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"Yes, dear Mr. Anthony," Mildred had said. "You received my note, did you not? And I am delighted you could come here to-day! Of course, it is a dreadful thing to me to think that my little girl will be taken away so soon. But that is what every mother has to go through. Dear me! it seems only yesterday that she came into my room, a little toddling mite, to announce that when she was grown up she was going to marry the groom, because then she could always live among horses."

"Oh, that'll be all right," said Anthony. "She can have plenty of them."

"How generous of you to say that! You have not—ah—spoken to her yet?"

"No. I've been trying to all the afternoon, but I couldn't get an opportunity."

"Dear Maud! She is—how shall I say it? But, anyhow, it is so characteristic of her."

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"She seemed to want to avoid me," said Anthony with a bluntness that rather distressed Mrs. Brereton.

"Yes, it would seem like it," said she; "but indeed— What I wanted to say to you was this: You must be patient with her, and I expect you will need a little perseverance. It is a rare thing, you know, to come and see and conquer, like Julius Cæsar, or whoever it was. Dear Maud perhaps scarcely knows her own mind. I am sure I do not know it. You see, she is young, very young, and I do not think that hers is a nature that expands very early."

The young man's rather heavy, commonplace face flushed; for the moment it was lit up, as it were, by a flame from within.

"Oh, I'm not going to be impatient," he said. "And as for perseverance, why, there's nothing I would not do, nor any number of years I would not wait, to get her."

Mrs. Brereton looked at him critically for a half-moment. "Why, he's in love!" she said to herself. Then aloud, "Dear Mr. Anthony! I am convinced of it," she said. "And bear that in mind when you speak to Maud. Also bear in mind that there is no marriage which either her father or I so much desire. Ah, there is the Duchess of Bolton just come! I must go and speak to her."

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His interview with Lady Ardingly had been briefer, but, he felt, more to the point.

"She will probably refuse you," said that lady. "In that case you had better wait a month and ask her again. You have everything on your side and everybody—except, perhaps, the girl. But eventually she will do what is good for her. Here is a fourth. Let us play Bridge immediately."

This particular game of Bridge had rather taken it out of Anthony, for he had been Lady Ardingly's partner, and had had the misfortune to revoke in playing a *sans-à-tout* hand. Her remarks to him were direct.

"You might just as well pick my pocket of twenty pounds," she said to him, "as do that. Do you not see it so? By your gross carelessness you have lost us the rubber, a mistake which one intelligent glance at your hand would have avoided. Come, there are other pursuits, are there not, in which you wish to be engaged? You will, perhaps, follow them with better attention."

Then, seeing the young man's discomfiture, her admirable good-nature returned. "Croquet, for instance," she added. "I hear you are a great player. Ah! there is Lord Alston. No doubt he will make our fourth."

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Maud, it is true, had spent the hours since lunch in flying before her admirer, but her reasons, it must be confessed, were not those which one would be disposed to think natural on the part of a young girl. There was not, in fact, one atom of shyness or shirking about her; she had not the least objection to hear impassioned speeches or blunt declarations, whichever mode Anthony should choose to adopt, nor did the thought of him in any way fill her with horror. She had listened very attentively to her mother's advice when they drove down to Windsor earlier in the week; she had also listened with the same consideration to Lady Ardingly's far more convincing and sensible remarks when she had lunched with her on Friday, and her only reason for refusing Anthony an opportunity all the afternoon was that she really had not the slightest idea whether she should say yes or no. She did not, as she had told her mother, love him; she did not, either, dislike him. He was merely quite indifferent to her, as, indeed, all men were. Men, in fact, as far as she thought about them at all, seemed to her to be unattractive people; she could not conceive what a girl should want with one permanently in the house. They were for ever either putting tobacco or brandy into their mouths or letting inane remarks out, and they stared at her in an uncomfortable and incomprehensible manner. On the other hand, she knew perfectly well that it was the natural thing for girls to marry; every one always did it, and they were probably right. She supposed that she also would ultimately marry, but was this—this utter absence of any emotion—the correct thing? She was aware that tremblings and raptures were in the world of printed things supposed to be the orthodox signals flown by the parties engaged; she should be a creature of averted eyes and deep blushes. But she did not feel the least inclined to either; there was nothing in Anthony that would make her wish to avert her eyes, nor, as far as she knew, did he ever say things which would make her blush. He was simply indifferent to her, but so, for that matter, were all men. Was she, then, to be a spinster? That was equally unthinkable.

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There were other things as well. A great friend of hers, with whom she had been accustomed to spend long days in the saddle, or in the company of dogs in endless walks over moors, had been married only a month ago, for no other reason, as far as Maud or Kitty Danefield herself knew, but the one that every girl married if possible, that it was the natural thing to do. Maud had seen her again only two days ago for the first time since her marriage, and had found quite a different person. Kitty had become a woman, radiantly happy, with an absorbing interest in life which seemed quite to have eclipsed the loves of earlier days. She still liked horses, dogs, great open country, Maud herself; but all these things which had been the first ingredients of existence had gone into a secondary place, and the one thing that made life now was her husband. To Maud this was all perfectly incomprehensible—would Anthony, if she accepted him, ever fill existence like that? She could not help feeling that existence would be a much narrower thing if he did. Kitty, in fact, had just arrived, and had rushed at Maud.

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"Darling, I am so pleased to see you!" she said, "and we'll have a nice long talk. Where's Arthur! Arthur is really too tiresome; he asked Tom Liscombe to come down with us when I had counted on a nice quiet empty carriage all to ourselves. He didn't want him, nor did I; but that is so like Arthur, to do good-natured things from a sort of vague weakness. He saw Tom, and asked him without thinking what he was doing. You look rather careworn, Maud. What is it now?"

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"Oh, come for a stroll, Kitty," said the other; "I want to talk."

"Very well; I must say good-bye to Arthur."

Maud laughed.

"Oh, you ridiculous person," she said; "you will be away ten minutes. Would you like to make your will, too?"

"Well, if it's only ten minutes—oh, he's looking. There!" and she waved a tiny morsel of a handkerchief to him.

Maud looked at her with grave attention.

"Now, I cannot understand that," she said.

"No, dear, of course not. You're not married. I should have thought it as ridiculous as you before. By the way, Maud—oh, *that's* why you look careworn. Is it true you are going to marry Anthony Maxwell? Darling, how nice, and *simply* rolling!"

"You think that is important?" asked Maud.

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"Why, of course. It's the only crumpled rose-leaf Arthur and I have. It makes us quite miserable; there's always that little ghost in the corner. Can we afford this? Can we spare the money for that? But you haven't answered me. Is it true?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Maud.

Kitty laughed.

"You absurd creature!" she said; "you must know. Has he proposed to you?"

"No, but he has told mother he wants to. And he has been stalking me all the afternoon."

Kitty turned quickly back.

"He shall stalk you no longer," she said. "Really, Maud, you are behaving very unfairly to him. If you are going to marry him, say so; if not—well, if not, you will be a very foolish person, but still say so. He has a mother, I know that, but really his mother matters very much less than the man himself. He's all right, isn't he? Behaves nicely—I mean, hasn't a vice about him—looks decent?"

"Moderately," said Maud.

"Oh, my dear, what do you want? Every one can't be an Adonis, and, as the copybooks used to say, human nature is limited. I dare say he's not a genius; well, no more are you. As for beauty, you've got enough for two, and he's got money enough for three—baby, as well, do you see? Oh yes, I am indelicate, I know, but it's far better than being delicate. Being delicate never pays; on the other hand, you have to pay for it, and I haven't got enough money for it. You are lucky, Maud."

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"Why? I want to talk to you about it."

"My dear girl, there is nothing to say. You will be a fool if you don't marry him, as I told you. There is simply nothing else to talk about. I was in a state of blank indifference about Arthur before I married him. My mother—and I bless her for it—absolutely obliged me to accept him. So will yours do if she has any sense, and I am certain she has heaps. Unless you are a visionary or a fanatic of some kind, you will be glad to be married. Glad? Good gracious! it is much more than that."

She turned sharply on her heel, Maud following.

"Then, why are there so many unhappy marriages?" asked the latter.

"Ah, in books, only. They are there because the author does not know what else to say. 'You can't write about happy marriages,' so an author assured me. 'They are so dull. Happy people have no history.'"

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Maud was silent a moment.

"You have changed very much, Kitty," she said at length.

"Thank goodness, I have! Oh, Maud, I don't mean to be nasty to you. Those old days were really dear days. But one can't always remain a girl, Maud. It is mercifully ordained that girls become women. And the door by which they enter is marriage."

"It means all that?"

"All. More——"

Maud found herself struggling for utterance. The blush and the downcast eye which she had thought Anthony could never have produced in her were hers now.

"You mean a man—the fact of a man?" she said stammeringly.

Kitty laughed the laugh of a newly-married woman, which is as old as Eve.

"Put it that way if you like," she said. "But there is another—the fact of a woman."

"But I am content," she said almost piteously. "Why does everybody—you, mother—want me to marry?"

"You have left out Anthony," remarked Kitty rigorously. "I and your mother, because we are women; he, because he is a man."

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They had come to the populated lawn again, and further intimate conversation would next moment be impossible. Kitty turned to her hurriedly.

"Oh, my dear, it is like having a tooth out," she said. "No doubt it is a shock. But it no longer aches. There is Mr. Anthony; let him ask you, anyhow. That is bare justice; and remember what I have said."

"I shall not forget it," said Maud.

Under no circumstances would Kitty have bitten out her tongue, so it would be a mere figure of speech to say that she would have even been inclined to had she known precisely what effect her volubility would have had on her friend. But it is certain that she would sooner have bitten it very

hard—so that it hurt, in fact—could she have foreseen in how opposite a direction to that intended her words had inclined her. As it was, she left the two together in a small solitude encompassed by company, and went to join her husband with a light heart and an approving conscience—a delicious and rare combination. Anthony, at any rate, was primed and ready.

"Do take me to see the rose-garden," he said to Maud, with a *banalité* that seemed to him unavoidable. He was quite aware of it, and regretted the necessity, for, to do him justice, he had tried many other lures that afternoon. "I hear it is quite beautiful," he went on; "and Mrs. Brereton promised me you should show it me after tea. And it is after tea," he added. [Pg 151]

Maud was slightly taller than he, and had the right to drop her eyelids a little as she looked at him. Of the adventitious advantage she took more than her justifiable measure, and beheld the back of his collar-stud.

"By all means," she said. "A promise is a promise, whoever gave it."

"You are rather hard on me," observed Anthony.

"Hard? Surely not."

"Well, on your mother, then."

Maud thought a moment.

"It is natural for you to think so," she said, "since she agrees with you."

They had left the lawn behind them, and threaded a dusky lane set in rhododendrons. Anthony stopped.

"She agrees with me," he said. "In one thing, anyhow, she agrees with me—we both love you." [Pg 152]

In spite of herself Maud gave him a round of internal applause. She was still so indifferent that she could easily judge him, as if he had been an actor on a stage. Outwardly, with the tongue she could say nothing, and stood, having walked on a pace or two, with her back to him. His voice made her turn round.

"Maud, Maud!" he said. "Maud, they were crying and calling."

"Ah!" she said, with a sudden interest, "you learned that."

He shook his head.

"I read it three months ago," he said. "It has stuck in my memory. Because everything cries 'Maud, Maud!' to me."

The blush and the averted eye were hers. Quite unconsciously she began to know what Lady Ardingly had meant—what Kitty had meant.

"I am sorry," she said. "I ought never to have come here with you. I thought I should laugh at you merely. I do not laugh; I would sooner cry."

"Thank you for that," said he. "I understand that you do not accept my devotion. What I do not understand is whether you definitely refuse it. Do you refuse it?" [Pg 153]

"Do not press me to answer you," she said.

"You postpone your answer!"

"Please."

Meantime dusk had begun to fall, the sounds of rejoicing Cockneys came more faintly from the river, the glow in the western sky faded into saffron, and overhead the vault of velvet blue grew infinitely more infinite. Birds chuckled and scurried through the bushes, bats extended angled wings for the preliminary trials of their nameless ghoulish errands, a nightingale bubbled suddenly, and a large yellow star swung into sight over the dim edge of the earth. But the lawn itself, save for a fine carpet of dew, that was spread without hands on the close-napped turf, reflected none of the evening influences. Servants hurried noiselessly about lighting the lamps that hung in the trees, and soon the tents where dinner was laid began to shimmer with white linen and gleam with silver. Jack was back from his golf, and Mrs. Brereton from an extremely short walk (for she had been recommended plenty of exercise), a few people had left to dine in town, but more people arrived from town to dine here, and Andrew Brereton, having succeeded in wresting four shillings and sixpence from the reluctant Mr. Maxwell, felt that he had earned his dinner. And as night became deeper, the animation of the party grew louder and their laughter more frequent; the moon and the stars everlastingly set in heaven were to them but the whitewash of the ceiling of the rooms where they dined, the trees and infinite soft spaces of the dusk but the paper on the walls of their restaurant, the miracle of the dewy lawn a carpet for unheeding feet. Wine and food concerned them perhaps most, but in a place hardly inferior must have been put the charms of screaming and scandalous conversation. Dinner, in fact, was a great success. By midnight all the guests for the day who were not staying over the Sunday had left, and the stables, which had been a packed mass of broughams, victorias, dogcarts, motor-cars, and bicycles, were once more empty; and Lady Ardingly, whose rubber had most unjustifiably been interrupted by Mrs. Brereton's adieus to her guests, picked up her hand again with some acidity. [Pg 154]

"Now, perhaps, we shall get on with our Bridge," she said. "I have declared no trumps. Nobody [Pg 155]

doubles! That is a very masterly inactivity on our adversaries' part."

The four consisted of the two Breretons, Lady Ardingly, and Jack Alston; at another table were four more, who, however, abandoned their game at about half-past one, again interrupting Lady Ardingly with their superfluous good-nights, for she was having a very good night indeed. Marie and Maud Brereton had long ago gone to bed, but the other four still played on, in silence for the most part. Occasionally the dummy rose, and refreshed his inner self with something from a side-table, and from time to time the note of a cigarette would sound crisply, as it were, on the soft air of the night. At last a strange change began to pass over the sky, from which the moon had now long set, hardly visible there at first, but making the faces of the players look suddenly white and wan. Then the miracle grew; the dark blue of the sky brightened into dove colour, the stars grew pale, and a little wind stirred in the trees.

"You played that abominably, dear Mildred," said Lady Ardingly. "We should have saved it if you had had any sense. What does that make?" [Pg 156]

She pulled her cloak round her neck as Jack added it up.

"The night is growing a little chilly," she said.

Mildred, who had been following the figures, looked up.

"The night?" she said. "Why what is happening? It is day, is it not?"

"Very likely," said Lady Ardingly. "How much is it, Jack? Never mind, tell me to-morrow. I will pay you to-morrow?"

Jack rattled his pencil-case between his teeth.

"Thirty pounds exactly, Lady Ardingly," he said.

They rose and walked across the lawn towards the house, Jack sauntering a little behind, his hands in his pockets, smiling to himself. Mildred dropped behind with him, the other two walking on a few paces ahead.

"The most odious hour in the twenty-four!" said Lady Ardingly, looking ghastly in the dawn.

"Very trying," said Andrew.

"But we have spent the night very well," said the other, as they parted at the foot of the stairs. "A charming Sunday, Mr. Brereton. You and Mildred are great benefactors!" [Pg 157]

And she hurried upstairs, conscious that she was looking awful, and, in that hour of low vitality which comes with the dawn, not wishing to appear thus before anybody, however insignificant.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 158]

It was about a fortnight after this Sunday at Richmond that the list of Birthday honours came out, and it was a surprise to nobody that Mr. Brereton's name appeared as the recipient of a peerage. For respectability and cash are things that in themselves confer such nobility on their fortunate possessor that it is only right and proper to stamp him with a coronet like writing-paper. Respectability no doubt has been, and will again be, dispensed with, but cash cannot be replaced except by exceptional achievements of some kind, of which Andrew was hopelessly incapable. And as it would clearly be absurd to bar a man from his birth from the possibility of attaining to the ranks of hereditary legislators, custom, slowly broadening down, has brought it about that since achievement in great deeds is within the reach but of the few, plenty of good gold, bestowed on plenty of good or party institutions, paves the way, so to speak, to what has been called by politicians who wrangle hotly in another place "the upper snows."

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Marie Alston, who had known of the impending honours some days before, was talking it over with Jim Spencer.

"I don't say I like the principle," she was saying; "but, things being as they are, I think it a most suitable thing. Oh, my dear Jim, you know me sufficiently well to know that I think such a system all wrong from top to bottom. But, after all, it is in a piece with the rest. Plutocracy, not the King nor the Houses of Parliament, rules us, and naturally plutocracy says, 'I will have all that is within reach.' Why not? And peerages are certainly within reach. Of course the list is rather pronounced. Mr. Maxwell, I see, has been made a Baronet. But, after all, who else is there? Can you think of any eminent men whom one would wish to see peers? I can't. And there are few people richer than the Maxwells, I believe. It is no use screaming."

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"At that rate, I could be made a peer," he said.

"Are you rich enough? How nice for you! And *vice versâ*, perhaps, Jack should be made a commoner. No doubt that reform will follow next. At least, perhaps Jack shouldn't because he really has the makings of an eminent man, but half the House of Peers, anyhow, should be made commoners. No doubt they would be if it were not for the innate snobbishness of the average Englishman. The average Englishman knows quite well that there is nothing whatever remarkable or admirable about quantities of peers except their peerages; yet, because they are peers, he loves and reverences them, and reserves them compartments, and incidentally takes [Pg 160]

toll off them as well."

Jim Spencer raised his eyebrows.

"Of course you are right," he said, "but you say these things, and don't take them seriously. You used to be serious, Marie."

"Ah, you do me an injustice," she said quickly. "I am just as serious as ever I was, but I realize that it is no use being serious in public. People have no time to spare from their amusements nowadays for anything serious. But in private I am serious. I was serious in private to-day, for instance."

"Well, be serious now, and tell me what you were serious about."

"Oh, nothing. I beg your pardon, this is not in public. Indeed, it was something—something big, as it seems to me. I am not sure that I shall tell you about it." [Pg 161]

They were both silent a moment—he unwilling to ask a question on a subject where she hesitated, she weighing in her mind whether or not she should tell him. At last she spoke.

"It is about Maud Brereton," she said, "She came to me yesterday, calm as a summer sea, to ask my advice as to whether she should marry Anthony Maxwell, just as I might ask your advice as to whether I should have a picture framed in gold or white. I did not ask her any questions as to whether she loved him, because I believe that there are many girls who have no idea what that means, and I think Maud is one of them."

Jim got up and began to walk up and down the room. He heard Marie with his ear speaking of Maud, but his inward ear translated, so it seemed to him, all she said of Maud into things she was saying about herself.

"Now, I am sufficiently modern," she went on, "not to wish all girls who do not feel passion to abstain from marrying. I believe that quite happy marriages often take place without it. Either the man or the woman may not feel it, yet by marrying they are both happier than they would have been if they had remained single. The ultimate sum of happiness is a large factor, Jim. Do you not think so?" [Pg 162]

Again she seemed to be talking of herself, but now he could not decide whether she was speaking with complete sincerity. Her opinions, at any rate, appeared to him monstrous.

"Finish the exposition first," he said. "After all, whether I agree with you or not is a small matter. Maud Brereton asked your advice, not mine."

Something in his tone startled her for a moment, and instinctively that afternoon walk they had taken down by the river a fortnight ago came into her mind; but she went on without a pause.

"I seem cold-blooded to you," she said; "and I dare say I am—it is highly probable, in fact. Then, there is a further thing to be considered: many girls, I feel sure, have their passion awakened by marriage. Now, that constitutes a great danger, I admit, in passionless marriages. Who can tell—well, that need not be discussed. But it remains certain, I am afraid, that there are many women to whom the becoming as one flesh with their husbands has not meant anything before they married them." [Pg 163]

"And less afterwards," remarked Jim.

"And less afterwards. Their physical nature is awakened, and— But, and here I am less modern than you at present are inclined to give me credit for."

"Credit for?" asked Jim.

"Yes, because you are not modern at all. Oh, Jim, it is a great puzzle! Supposing every girl had to feel that there was absolutely only one man in the world for her, and supposing every man had to feel that here, and here alone was his destiny, before he married, do you think we should have an increase of the marriage returns? I am afraid not. And people being what they are, do you think that this celibacy would have a good effect on morals? It is no use advocating counsels of perfection when you are dealing with the human race and its obvious imperfections. At least, that, I suppose, may eventually come; but for practical purposes the highest motive does not always secure such good results as a lower one."

"So you advised her to marry him," said Jim slowly. [Pg 164]

"No, I advised her not to. All the excellent reasons which I have given you why she should marry him were present in my mind; I even told them her. But at the back of my mind—mind or soul, call it what you will—there was a great 'but.' I dare say it was unreasonable; it was certainly not clear to me what it was. But whatever it was, it said 'No.' It wanted me not to impose what I called my experience of the world on a girl. After all, what does one's experience amount to? The recollection of one's mistakes."

She spoke the last words more to herself than him as she leaned back in her low chair, her violet-coloured eyes looking "out and beyond," focused, not by the limit of her vision, but that of her thoughts. Quick, uneven breaths disturbed the slow rise and fall of her bosom, and the rose she had fastened in her dress shed half its fragrant petals on her lap. And because he was a man, he looked at her with kindled eye; and because he was a man who loved her, his blood also was kindled. More than ever before he knew how idle had been his flight from her; the *cælum non animum* suddenly leaped in his mind from the dingy ranks of truisms to the austere array of the things that are true. He drew his chair a little closer to hers and laid his hand on its arm. [Pg 165]

"Your mistakes, Marie?" he said.

It took her an appreciable fraction of time to recall herself, and realize what was meant by his burning look; but it took her no time at all, when once she had realized that, to answer him.

"Yes, one's mistakes," she said—"all the occasions on which one has failed to grasp the true import of what one was doing, and, in particular, all the mistakes one has seen other people making and their consequences. I always think that one's experience means much more what one has observed in other people than what one has done one's self. Of course, all observation passes through the crucible of one's personality, whether one observes things in one's self or other people, and that certainly transforms it, crystallizes it, what you will. But if one has a grain of imagination, other people's experiences are as vivid to one's self as one's own, and as potentially profitable. Don't you think so?"

She rose as she spoke, trembling slightly, and brushed the fallen petals from her dress. She was just enough not to blame him for what he had said; she was, indeed, just enough to commend him for his reticence, since her words had necessarily for him such a significance, and the need to stop him saying more was imperative. She could see what inward excitement moved him, and in her soul she thanked him for the love he bore her; but that any word of it should pass between them was impossible—merely, it could not be. This being so, she desired with a fervency of desire that she had not known for years not to lose her friend, and words of such a kind as she knew were rising to his lips would have meant this loss. Indeed, at this moment the world seemed to hold for her nothing so desired as that friendship, which a word might rob her of.

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To him, her reply was both sobering and bracing. It showed him how close he had been walking to the edge of a precipice. As Marie had just told him, he was old-fashioned; he believed that "good" and "bad," "noble" and "wicked," were not yet words of obsolete meaning, words like "arquebus," which had no significance in the vocabulary of the day. A temptation had come and gripped him by the throat—the temptation to suggest to her that she should say that her marriage with Jack was, among her experiences, a mistake. He knew also—and was honest enough to confess that his desire to hear her say this was due to the fact that her confession would necessarily open certain vistas—it would be the first step, at any rate, down a path that a certain part of him had during his past fortnight longed to tread with a fervour and a passion that shook his whole nature, as a wind shakes and tosses a curtain. He knew in what sort Jack had kept his marriage vow, and he had begun to ask himself whether such conduct did not give emancipation, so to speak, to the wife—had begun to tell himself that it was no use setting up exceptional codes of morality. One lived in the world, the world did this and that; but this douche of cold water was bracing. It recalled him to sanity, to his better and his normal self, and he replied in a voice still shaken with his own overwhelming though momentary tumult.

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"So you advised her not to marry him?" he asked. "Do you think she will take your advice?"

"Yes; because it showed her clearly what her own bias really was. One often does not know what one really thinks till some one expresses a strong opinion on one side or the other. Then one hears it with strong repugnance or strong sympathy, which reveals to one's self what one's true opinion is."

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Jim smiled, a regurgitation of bitterness swelling up in his breast.

"Have you ever formulated to yourself what your own strongest passion is?" he asked.

"No, never. It is the most difficult thing in the world to say what one likes best until one is forty or thereabouts. All one's youth—which, I take it, extends to about forty—is passed experimentally in determining what one likes best, and one does not know till it is crystallized. By then also it is probably unattainable."

Jim laughed again bitterly.

"Oh, you need not be afraid," he said, his rebuff now beginning to sting. "I tell you that your chief passion is analysis. You do not care so much what people do, as why they do it. If a Hooligan knocked you down and began stamping on you, I can imagine you saying, 'Stop just a moment to tell me why you are doing this. Does giving pain to me give pleasure to you, or do you personally feel a grudge against me?' Then, when he had told you, you would say, 'Thank you very much. Go on stamping again.'"

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Marie had detached the unpetalled rose from her dress, and had taken another from the vase in her hand. But she did not pin it in, but, after listening open-mouthed, sat down again with it in her fingers.

"I am egotistical, no doubt," she said, "and that must account for my burning desire to know why you think that. I suppose you do think that, Jim, or are you irritated with me for any cause?"

The question was unpremeditated, but as soon as she had spoken she could have bitten out her tongue for having said it. Almost certainly, she thought, in the moment's pause that ensued, he would tell her why he was irritated with her. That she knew already, and, of all things in the world, that was the one which she did not wish him to tell her. But his answer came almost immediately.

"I don't think there is anything you could do which would irritate me," he said, "and I do think what I have said. I think you are bloodless, Marie; I think you are like what you imagine Maud Brereton to be. And bloodless people are disconcerting. One does not know how to make them hear, how to make them feel the things that the majority of the race feel."

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Suddenly there rose in her mind a long, far-off, dusty memory. She had been skating one day on a thinly frozen pond, and suddenly felt the ice bend and sway under her, and had said to herself,

"The ice is thinner here." On that occasion she had put both feet down and gone straight for the bank. On this occasion she did exactly the same.

"You are probably right," she said. "The things which many women do, and find absorption in doing, I think stupid, and, what is worse, vulgar, and what is worst, wicked. I am *bourgeoise*, I am *bonne femme*—that is what you really mean, Jim. It is quite true; it is quite, quite true. And, no doubt, if one is not in the habit of spending all one's energies on—on matters of emotion, one disposes of them in other ways. If one does not give one's self up to feeling, one probably has more time for thinking, because one must do something if one has nerves and brains at all. But the Hooligan business you describe is beyond me, I am afraid."

He got up abruptly.

"I must go," he said. "There are a hundred things I must—not do. I must go and not do them." [Pg 171]

At this moment, and for the first time during this interview, he had touched and moved her. His struggle suddenly became pathetic to her—a thing to pity and praise. Like a weir, he spouted at joints in the strong doors of his determination not to speak, but the flood was restrained. She rose also.

"That excuse has the charm of absolute sincerity," she said. "When people say they have a hundred things to do, it seems to me a very bad reason. Yours is better. When shall I see you again?"

"I don't know," said he, and for a moment left her awkwardly placed. But his manliness once more came to his aid—for there could be but one conclusion if he said no more—and he added: "I am away next Sunday; I come back on Wednesday. That night I dine with the Ardinglys."

"I also. Till Wednesday, then, Jim—go and not do all these things you spoke of! Not doing things takes longer than doing them. It takes all the time, in fact. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 172]

It was never denied, even by the stupidest of her enemies, that Mildred Brereton was a woman of the world, and her mode of procedure, when she learned from Maud of her first rejection of Anthony's hand, was perfectly correct from the standpoint of wisdom. She made no fuss or scene of any kind, and only said:

"Dear Maud, I am very, very sorry. But you know, dear, how I trust you."

Maud pondered this remark, in her silent, uncomfortable way, for a moment.

"Do you mean you trust me eventually to accept him?" she asked.

Mrs. Brereton wondered in her own mind where Maud *could* have got her tactlessness from. Aloud she said:

"I trust you in every way, dear—every way. And it shows your good sense that you did not definitely refuse him. I do not wish to force you at all or hurry your decision."

This was all that was said on the subject at the time, but Mildred, after careful thought, was convinced she had done right. This impeccable attitude was completed by her looking rather sad whenever her daughter was observing her, sighing, and constantly calling her "dear child" in well-modulated tones of chastened and uncomplaining affection. This policy—if it is possible to use so cold and calculating a word for a process so tender—had its desired effect, and Maud felt herself touched with a sense of vague contrition. Eventually, not feeling sure of herself, she had decided to confide her difficulty to Marie Alston, for whom she cherished a shy and secret adoration. This interview, however, had not been productive of a result which harmonized with her mother's tender processes; indeed, had Mildred known that her gentle dropping of water on a stone (the tender process) would have led her daughter to ask advice of Marie, she would have adopted quite different methods. Maud told her about the interview the same afternoon. She was not called "dear child," or words to that effect, on this occasion. [Pg 173]

Now, there is a sort of anger which, though it is often seen in combination with irritation and ill-temper, is something very different from either. It is not a quick-burning emotion; it is in no hurry to strike and to hurt, but is quite deliberate, very patient, and at the end, when a favourable opportunity presents itself, strikes hard. It was this quality of anger that entered into Mildred's mind when Maud told her of this interview. Had she been simply irritated with Marie or angry with an anger of the less dangerous and quicker sort, she would probably have rushed round to Park Lane, used the language of a cook to Marie, burst into tears, and probably made it up a day or two later. But she had not the slightest impulse to do any of those things. She was irritated with Maud, called her a fool, and sent her away. Then she sat down and thought about Marie. [Pg 174]

There occurred to her, of course, at once a very obvious method of injuring Marie. All London—every one, that is to say, who mattered at all—except Marie herself, knew that she and Jack had been great friends for a very long time. What would be the effect on Marie if she let her know quietly, drop by drop, as one lets absinthe cloud and embitter water, what had been going on so long, what she had been blind to so long! Mildred knew her to be a woman of a pride and fastidiousness quite beyond not only her own reach, but her own comprehension. This she had never either resented or envied; if people chose to behave in what she called a Holy Land [Pg 175]

manner, it was nothing to her, but she was not jealous of their unattainable Oriental longitudes. It was all very well to sit on a pedestal, but if you did, you had no idea what games went on in the jostling world below. Marie's habitual attitude was to put her nose in the air and draw her skirts away from the crowd; it would really be very humiliating for her to get to learn by degrees what had been going on all these years, to upset the pedestal, in fact, and let her struggle to her feet as best she could, to let her, who always professed to find scandal and gossip of all sorts so uninteresting, know for the first time a bit of it which she could scarcely consider dull.

Mildred got up from the sofa where she was lying in her sitting-room, and, lighting a cigarette, took a turn up and down. At first sight it seemed an excellent plan, diabolical, which suited her mood, and simple as all good plans are; but on second thoughts there were objections. In her present anger she did not value Marie's friendship a straw, while as for her own reputation, she was well aware that for all practical purposes she had none. People, she knew, did not talk about Jack and her any longer, simply because the facts were so stale, "and that," she thought to herself with grim cynicism, "is what one calls living a thing down." No, the danger lay elsewhere. Supposing Marie cut up very rough indeed, supposing in her horror and disgust at Jack she did not hesitate to punish herself as well, and bring the matter if she could into the crude and convincing light of the Divorce Court, it would be both unpleasant for Mildred herself, for she felt that cross-examination was not likely to be amusing, and it would also spell ruin for Jack's career, a thing which now, in the present state of her affections, she cared about perhaps more than Jack. Of course, the matter might be conveyed to Marie in so gradual and vague a manner that such proceedings on her part would be without chance of success as far as getting a divorce was concerned—to possess her mind with suspicions that gradually became moral certainties was the point—but Mildred knew well that in the mind of the great middle class to be mentioned in connection with the Divorce Court is the mischief, not to lose or win your case there. In any case, if she decided on this she would have to think it very carefully over; it must be managed so that Marie could not possibly go to the courts. Besides, ridiculous as Marie would appear even if she adopted the least aggressive attitude of self-defence, yet Mildred felt she must not underrate the strength of her position in society. Perhaps another plan might be found as simple and without these objections. She wanted, in fact, to think of something which would hurt Marie as much as possible, and yet give her no chance of retaliation. Where was Marie vulnerable? Where was she most vulnerable?

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For a moment her irritation and exasperation got the upper hand, and she flung off the sofa with clenched and trembling hands. "How dare she—how dare she persuade Maud not to marry him!" she said to herself. It frankly appeared to her the most outrageous thing to have done. Marie must have known what her own desires for her daughter were—in fact, she had before now told her of them—yet she had done this. Mildred felt a qualm of almost physical sickness from the violence of her rage, and sat down again to recover herself. It soon passed, leaving her again quiet, patient, and implacable, searching about for a weapon. Suddenly she got up, and stood quite still a moment.

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"Most extraordinary that I should not have thought of that before," she said aloud. Then she washed her face and bathed her eyes with some rose-water, examining them a little anxiously as she dried them on her silk face-napkin. They were as red as if she had been crying—red, she must suppose, from anger, just as a mongoose's eyes get red when it sees a cobra. Certainly she had been angry enough to account for the colour. But on the whole she did not like emotions, except pleasant ones—they were exhausting; and she lay down again on her sofa for half an hour to recover herself, and told her maid to bring her a tablespoonful of brandy with an egg beaten up into it. Then she dressed and went out to a small private concert, where Saltsi was going to sing two little French songs, exceedingly hard to understand, but simply screaming when you did so. For herself, she was certain that she would understand quite enough.

She had just come down-stairs when a note was brought her, which proved to be from Marie.

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"Maud has just consulted me," it ran, "about the question of her marriage. Although I knew your views, I could not but advise her in opposition to them. This looks as if I set her against you—as far as that goes, I regret it extremely. But I could not do differently; I wanted to, but could not. I tell you this in case she does not."

Mildred read it and tore it up, not even troubling to question its sincerity. Then, being told the carriage was waiting, she went out.

She was to call on her way to the concert for the person usually known as Silly Billy, who in reality was an ignoble Earl. He was called Silly Billy partly because his name was William, partly because he was exceedingly sharp. His Countess was kept in the country, and was supposed to go to church a great deal. The world was not particularly interested in her, nor was her husband. Once she had had money, but she no longer had any.

Silly Billy himself was now getting on for forty, and looked anything between twenty-five and thirty. Probably he was naturally depraved, for a career of vice seemed to suit him, and he thrived on it as other people thrive on the ordinary rules of health. He had charming manners, a slim attractive appearance, and no morals of any kind whatever. His passion just now was Bridge, which he played regularly from sunset to sunrise; the remaining hours of the twenty-four were occupied in consuming large quantities of food, owing large sums of money, and talking. He was supposed not to stand in need of sleep, which he declared was a sheer waste of time. He was often to be seen in other people's victorias; to-day he was in Lady Brereton's.

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"Yes, we'll just stop for Saltsi's two songs," said she, as they drove from his flat in Berkeley

Mansions, "and then I'll set you down where you like. How has the world been treating you, Silly Billy?"

He considered a moment.

"The world always treats me as I treat it," he said. "Lately I have not had much to say to it; in fact, I have done nothing, and so I have heard nothing. Tell me news. Anybody fresh about?"

"Only Jim Spencer, and he's rather a disappointment. As rich as Cræsus, you know?"

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"That's always an advantage for him and his friends," remarked Silly Billy candidly. "I should like to meet him. Does he play Bridge, or bet, or anything?"

She laughed.

"You are always refreshing," she said, "because you are so very frank. Does it pay?"

"Well, you must do one of two things," said he. "You must be absolutely enigmatical or quite transparent. I am quite transparent. I want other people's money."

"Shall I draw you a small cheque?"

"No, thanks; small cheques would be no good. By the way, I have heard something about Jim Spencer.... Isn't he a friend of Marie Alston?"

Lady Brereton could not help smiling, and her inward anger licked its lips.

"Ah! you have heard that too," she said. "But who cares?"

"Any one may do precisely what they please, so far as I am concerned," said Silly Billy, "so long as it doesn't personally annoy me. So it's true, is it?"

"Dear Marie!" observed Mildred. "You see, they were engaged years and years ago. Marie told me so herself."

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Silly Billy considered a moment.

"What have you quarrelled with her about?" he asked after a short pause.

Mildred turned round.

"Now, how on earth did you guess that?" she asked.

"Pretty simple. You said 'Dear Marie!' in—well, in a tone. So the Snowflake is melting, you think! I'm sure I tried to melt her often enough. But I never had the very slightest success."

Mildred laughed.

"How funny!" she said. "I never knew that. What did Marie do?"

"Looked bored. Merely bored; not shocked, but bored. But Jim Spencer doesn't bore her, you think? I suppose you are telling everybody about it?"

"I haven't told a soul. It seems there is no need."

"Well, thank God, I'm no prude," said Silly Billy, as they stopped at the house.

"Dear Marie!" said Mildred again. "Perhaps I ought never to have discussed it with you. You are such a gossip, Silly Billy."

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He shrugged his shoulders.

"Surely that is what you want," he said, and Mildred did not contradict him. Nor did she feel that she had been wasting time.

So Saltsi sang her little French songs, and the very distinguished company all shrieked with laughter. Some of them did not understand what they meant: those shrieked most, in order that it should appear that they did; the rest shrieked because they did understand. Royalty was there in a quiet little broughamish kind of way, and everything, in fact, went just exactly as it should, and when Mildred stole quietly away to avoid a string quartette and talk to Lady Maxwell, both to congratulate her on her husband's honour and advocate the virtues of patience and perseverance for Anthony, she felt braced and invigorated for the duties that lay before her. She had already wound the clock up, and it pleased her to think that its ticking would soon be audible all over London. For herself, she did not care the slightest how loudly people talked about her. She knew, on the other hand, that Marie would care very much indeed. And the audibility of the ticking was destined to be heard more quickly than even she had hoped or expected.

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It was two afternoons after this that Silly Billy was gently threading his way down Piccadilly. The day was heavenly, a flood of yellow sunshine invaded the streets, and a plum-like bloom hung over the distances. It being so divine out of doors, he was proposing to spend the hours till dinner at a select little club called the Black Deuce, which had been lately founded with the sole and simple aim of Bridge-playing. Just as he was about to cross the street, his way was stopped for a moment by a policeman letting out the pent-up carriages which stood waiting for their turn in Bond Street, just as a lock is opened to let the water out. Among this shining stream of black lacquer and silver harness there passed him a victoria with Marie Alston in it. By her side sat Jim Spencer. And Silly Billy smiled gently to himself all the rest of the way to the club.

There were three men only, all friends and respecters of his, in the card-room, for it was yet early, and he making the fourth, they sat down at once. Silly Billy, having, as usual, won the deal and the seats, established himself with his back to the window. At the angle of the wall, close to the window, was the door, which by reason of the heat was left open. Then the holy silence fell.

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He and his partner went out in the first deal, and Billy cut the cards to his left in great good-humour.

"Met the Snowflake just now," he said, "driving along with her melter."

A paper rustled in the window-seat, and though the deal was not yet finished, silence more awful than the silence of the game itself again fell. Billy gave half a glance round, not to see who it was, for he instinctively felt quite sure, but merely in confirmation of his knowledge.

"Hullo, Jack!" he said. "That you? Didn't see you come in."

"I supposed you hadn't," said Jack.

"Damned good answer!" observed Billy. "What trumps did you say, Martyn?"

It is to be set down to the credit of Billy's nerves, that not only did he not revoke during that hand, but played with quite his usual brilliance. He had often claimed that the game had the advantage of enabling one to forget everything else in the world for the time being, and in this instance he was certainly justified. What was coming afterwards he had not the slightest idea, but for the present it did not concern him. [Pg 186]

In turn his partner dealt, passed, and Billy, after a little consideration, gave him no-trumps. The first card was led, Billy's hand exposed on the table, and at that moment, Billy being unoccupied, Jack rose.

"Can you speak to me a minute without interrupting the game?" he asked.

Silly Billy rose, looking exceedingly small and young.

"Rather. Next room, I should think," he said.

The two passed out, and Martyn spoke.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said, and nobody contradicted him.

The door of the next room shut behind the others, and Jack and Silly Billy found themselves simultaneously taking out their cigarette-cases. In the box on the table there was only one match, which Jack lit, and handed first to the other. Then he spoke.

"I saw whom she was with," he remarked.

"Glad you haven't got to ask me, then," said Silly Billy; "because I couldn't have told you."

Jack threw the match into the fireplace. [Pg 187]

"Ah! you did mean my wife, then?" he said.

Silly Billy, figuratively speaking, threw up his hand.

"Very neatly done," he said. "You had me there. Now, what do you mean to do?"

"Ask you a question or two first. Now, was that lie of your own invention, or did you get it passed on from another liar?"

"You are using offensive language to me," observed Silly Billy.

"I am. If you prefer to come back to the other room, I will use it there."

Silly Billy smiled. The situation was becoming clearer to him.

"As regards your question," he said, "what you call that lie was not of my own invention. I should also advise you for your own sake not to press me to tell who told me. I warn you that if you are offensive again, I shall. At present, I do not tell you by way of *amende* for a speech which was indiscreet on my part. I ought to have looked round to see that you were not in the room. And that's how we stand."

Jack knew perfectly well that Billy was no fool, and he weighed this speech for a moment in silence. [Pg 188]

"I don't understand," he said. "I think you are too crooked for me to follow. Perhaps it will be best and simplest if we go back to the other room. I can then box your ears in the presence of witnesses."

At this Billy laughed outright.

"I shall then bring an action for assault," he said, "for I suppose you are not *vieux jeu* enough to imagine I shall challenge you to fight. What will happen? The reasons for the quarrel will come out in open court. Will you like that? Will you like to pose as the defender of your wife's honour? Are you"—and Billy grew more animated—"are you so dense as not to know that the surest way of dragging it in the dust is to defend it, oh, successfully, I grant you, in the court? We live in an age, my dear Jack, in which violence has altogether ceased, and law, which is meant to take its place, defeats its own object. However successful your defence of both your action and of your wife's honour may be, surely you know that, if such a thing is made public at all, every one instantly says that there must have been something in it."

He paused a moment, Jack saying nothing. [Pg 189]

"You are thinking that I am a cur and a coward," continued Billy. "You have also used offensive language to me. Take this, then. Do you consider yourself a good defender of your wife's honour? It is easy for you to box my ears, as you suggest, and think you have done a fine and manly action, but is all your conduct to her of a piece with that? Do you think that no one will say that it was the most arrant piece of humbug? If you had been beyond reproach in your married life, I do

not say that I might not even have consented to shoot at you and let you shoot at me. But now, good God!"

Jack started up, black and angry, and stood towering over the other.

"Do you think you can speak to me like that?" he said, very quietly.

For the moment Silly Billy expected to find himself on the floor, but not an eyelash quivered. He lounged against the chimney-piece, and flickered his cigarette-ash into the grate.

"If you touch me, you will be sorry for it," he said. "If you say another offensive word to me, you will be sorry for it. I am not in the slightest degree afraid of you. If you had been faithful to your wife, I should say your behaviour was admirable. As it is, it is merely childish. We are rotten folk, you and I; but I have the pull over you because I am not a hypocrite about it. Well, I don't want to call you names. I had better get back, had I not? The hand must be over, and they will be waiting for me."

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Jack sat down.

"Wait a minute," he said.

"Certainly, if you have anything agreeable to say," remarked Billy. "For myself, I have done. And it was rather a weak no-trump. Wonder what my partner had?"

"Oh, damn your game!" said Jack.

"I probably shall, when I get back," conceded Silly Billy. "What do you want to say?"

"This only: We are rotten people, and I have got to think it all over."

Silly Billy moved towards the door.

"Oh, yes; that's all right enough," he said. "Not coming back, I suppose, are you?"

He sauntered back into the card-room, where the hand was only just over.

"Well, what luck?" he asked. "Whisky-and-soda, waiter."

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"Yes, my lord—large or small?"

"Enormous. Two tricks did you say, partner? Thanks. Game, and twenty-four to nothing. How were aces? I only had one."

CHAPTER X

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Jack heard the door of the card-room shut behind Silly Billy, and went slowly down-stairs and out into the hot, crowded thoroughfare. He was still almost powerless to believe in his own impotency, which had been so trenchantly put before him by that gentleman. Half a dozen times he wished himself back in the card-room, or in the other room where their interview had taken place, in order to have the opportunity again of knocking him down or throwing the cards in his face. Yet, so he told himself, that which seemed reasonable to him before would seem reasonable to him again. There was no flaw, so far as he could see, in the deductions which had been put before him, and he was utterly at a loss as to what he should do. The story, he knew well, would be all over London by to-morrow, for when a thing is talked about at a club, as quite assuredly this would be, there is no more stopping it than there is stopping the flight of Time by holding back the hands of a clock. It would assume protean and monstrous forms; but whatever form it assumed, his imagination could not picture one in which his own part could be construed as creditable. What account would Silly Billy give of the interview? A true one, probably, because, from his point of view, it could not be bettered. "Oh, he was violent at first; but I put before him the exact consequences of further violence, and he saw it at once." That would be quite sufficient, and he could almost hear Silly Billy saying it. But paramount in his mind was anger against Marie, for to that class of mind to which Jack's belonged a wife cannot conceivably do anything more awful than get herself talked about. He would have been perfectly indulgent, so he very kindly told himself, to anything she might do but that. That Mildred had been, and probably now was, talked about in connection with him did not concern him, for he was not her husband. To Jack's way of thinking, a flawless reputation was the monopoly of one person, namely, his wife.

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He walked slowly westward through a blur of unrecognised faces, his mind turning aimlessly through what had happened, like a squirrel in a cage, without getting anywhere. He ought to have said nothing at all, he told himself, or, having said something, he should at least have had the temporary satisfaction of insulting Silly Billy. Yet that would not have done; he still saw the force of that reasoning. In fact, nothing would have done. The blame of the whole terribly irritating affair was to be laid on Marie. She had behaved in some foolish manner, and had got talked about. He remembered now that weeks ago he had warned her of this. That made it the more annoying.

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At the corner of Devonshire House his step, more than half automatically, turned northwards. The season and the summer were both at their midmost, and from this side of the street to that the tide of carriages flowed full. Full, too, were the pavements, human life jostled in a race from wall to wall of the gray houses, and just outside the curbstones, like the scum and flotsam in some cross-movement of tides, moved rows of sandwichmen bearing a various burden of advertisement, from strictly private massage establishments to ballets, the more public the

better. But Berkeley Street and the Square following were a back-water of the flooded river-way, and he went with his own volition, not with the dictation of the tides, through into Grosvenor Square. Still without purpose other than that born of habit, he rang the bell of that house he frequented on so many days, and at so many and different hours, and was admitted.

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Mildred was not in the room when he entered, and he walked up and down with a step of caged violence. It was a room, one would have said, which was lived in by a woman of some individuality. The usual signed photographs, bearing royal and distinguished names, were there; but these, instead of being prominently displayed, were obscurely penned, thick as sheep, on a Louis Seize table in a very dark corner, while on the writing-table which was set in the window were only two—those of Jack and his wife—a highly daring and successful arrangement. Otherwise the room was ordered, one felt, in a certain manner, not that it might be like a hundred other rooms, but because the owner wished it so, and no other way. A huge engagement book lay open on the table, with some names written fully out, but here and there an initial only; half a dozen good prints hung on the walls, but there was no attempt to drape anything, nor were there any books, the literature being limited to a heap of periodicals and a hardly lesser heap of letters. Two Dresden ormolu-mounted birds stood on the chimney-piece, two Tanagra figures in daring contrast, an Empire clock, and a programme of a forthcoming race-meeting.

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He had not long been in the room when the door of her bedroom, which communicated with it, was opened, and she entered. At a glance she took in his mood, and guessed, too, with absolute certainty of its cause. The things that would make Jack look like that, she knew, could be numbered on the fingers, and of these none but one could have happened. Thus there was one only left, and for the moment she was afraid of what she had done. Outwardly she showed no sign.

"What is it?" she asked.

Jack did not at once answer, but paused in front of the writing-table where the two photographs stood. Then he took up that of Marie, threw it into the fireplace, and beat it to pieces with the poker.

"Four pounds for the frame," remarked Mildred. "Those Dresden parrots are at least a hundred. It is only right you should know. Be violent, by all means, if it gives you any satisfaction. I want some new things. But would it not be better to explain first and smash afterwards?"

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She had never seen Jack like this—she had never even dreamed he was capable of it—but she found it, though alarming, rather attractive.

"It is always said of women that they like brutality," she thought to herself; "and perhaps it is true."

Jack rose from the fireplace a little flushed.

"They are talking about Marie at the clubs," he said. "The Snowflake has melted, apparently. Jim Spencer is the melter."

"Do you mean you heard that said?" asked Mildred.

"Yes, by Silly Billy."

"Which hospital is he at?" asked she.

Jack sat down.

"Give me a whisky-and-soda," he said; "I'm as dry as dust. May I ring? Thanks. You mean I should have stamped on him? I did not. I talked about it quite quietly with him. He pointed out that I, as a defendant in an action for assault, would not be amused at cross-examination. He adduced reasons."

Mildred looked at him for a moment with a sort of quiet wonder.

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"Do you mean he adduced me as a reason?" she asked.

"Not by name."

"How very forbearing of him! You let that pass, too?"

"Yes."

She reflected.

"You did right," she said at length. "I was at first so much surprised at your having behaved like that, that I could hardly believe it. But you did right. It was, however, quite unnecessary to smash Marie's photograph—or is that a dramatic climax to show your inalienable fidelity to me?"

She laughed.

"There, drink your whisky," she said. "How extraordinary men are! Whenever they have had some powerful and exhausting emotion, a little alcohol always puts them square again. One ought to measure everything by that. A wife talked about—large whisky-and-soda; a friend talked about—small whisky-and-soda; one's self talked about—well, that is a stimulus in itself: say a Lithia Varalette, something lowering, by way of adjustment."

Jack, angry as he was, answered to her voice, as a fretful horse answers to a hand it knows, perhaps from habit, perhaps from the sense of a master astride it.

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"You take it like this?" he said. "You can have no idea what it means to me."

Mildred stood silent a moment, then laughed.

"Surely the English must have made a corner in hypocrisy," she said. "For sheer, genuine hypocrisy give me the frank English gentleman like—well, like you, Jack. You are annoyed that Marie has been, as you say, talked about; you are convinced that it is the chief, if not the only, duty of a wife not to be talked about. Now, what is the reason of that, may I ask you? Is it because you demand virtue of her, fidelity to you? Not a bit of it, and you know it. You do not care in the least what she does, provided only nothing is said about her. But, seriously, is it worth while keeping that sort of thing up with me? Cæsar's wife must be beyond suspicion! Oh, me, what ranting twaddle! But, oh, my poor Cæsar!"

Jack had not been very comfortable when he came in; he was not more comfortable now. The bogieman, who was capable of popping out as on a nervous old lady on a dark night, and frightening Cabinet Ministers with his horrible turnip-ghost of accurate figures and reliable statistics, was more terrified than terrifying here.

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"You are getting quite like Marie," he observed.

"Am I? It would be a singularly awkward position for you if I was, do you not think?"

Jack had no pertinent reply for a moment; then, "I do not know that the censorious attitude suits you very well," he said.

"Ah, the whole question turns on what one is censorious of. I am censorious of your hypocrisy, reasonably I think, because I have no weakness that way. But you as censor of Marie's morals! Oh, does it not make you laugh, simply for fear you should cry? Have more whisky, Jack; you really are not yourself yet. Tell me this, now—what did you come here for? You have said nothing yet which would not have been better left unsaid."

Jack got up.

"You appear to wish to quarrel with me," he said. "I think you had better do it alone."

Mildred made up her mind in a moment; the thing she had long been debating solved itself at this.

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"If you go like a sulky child," she said, "it will be you who quarrel with me. Now, can you afford to quarrel with both me and Marie? Just consider that, and reckon up to yourself exactly what will be left of you if you do. You may do so if you choose, and you can say you have grounds, for it was I who put into Silly Billy's head the idea that made him say what he did about Marie. Dresden birds, a hundred pounds, and please don't touch the Tanagras," she added.

The caution was apparently unnecessary, for Jack did not show the slightest inclination to smash anything. He sat down as good as gold.

"You are a remarkably interesting woman," he said; "and as I never thought you a fool, I should really like to know why you did that."

"The immediate cause was a bad one," she said, "for it was that I was angry with Marie, and wanted to hurt her."

"Then, can you afford to quarrel with Marie—and me?" he asked.

Lady Brereton began to think that she was almost wasting her time. She was aware, however, that her answer was critical, and gave it intense, though rapid, consideration.

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"Easily," she said. "Why not?"

Jack raised his eyes to her face; she saw their frightened appeal, and knew that she had won.

"Ah, you are tired of it all," he said.

"You can make me wish I had never seen you if you behave obtusely," she said.

"What have I done?"

"You have been on the point of quarrelling with me as well as Marie. Surely that is obtuse enough. Quarrel with us one at a time, if you wish. To continue, she interfered unwarrantably in a thing that concerns me alone—I mean Maud's marriage."

Jack smiled faintly.

"I see what you mean," he said apologetically.

"It is sufficiently clear. She interfered, and has seriously embarrassed me. The marriage will not take place as soon as I wished; in anger, I struck at her blindly."

"Without considering me," said he.

"Of course, without considering you. You did not occur to me, and even if you had I should not have considered you, for we settled just now that your attitude on that point was not—well, considerable. But I am glad now—I speak quite calmly—that I have done it. I do not like humbug; we have had a good deal of it. I shall before very long let Marie know what I have heard."

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"Said," interrupted Jack.

"Heard. That will make a coolness between us, for she will be silently scornful of me. Oh, the truth is this, Jack—I am glad, yes, glad, that I am not going to pretend to be friends with Marie much longer. There are many good women who apparently do not mind hypocrisy, but there are many women who have no pretension whatever to be good who do not like being hypocrites. I am one. I shall not go to heaven when I die in any case, but I assure you that if I could by promising

to talk about Sunday-schools to the saints I would refuse it. Now go away and have your row with Marie."

"You advise that?"

"I insist on it, else I should have wasted all my anger. Dear me, we are a sweet couple, you and I!"

There was a ring of sudden bitter sincerity in her tone, and he looked up surprised.

"What is the matter, Mildred?" he asked.

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"Anything, everything, nothing. Perhaps your absurd conduct, Jack; perhaps the thunderstorm which is certainly coming; perhaps reaction from my anger. Perhaps that I have got my way: I have started a scandal about Marie—got it successfully launched. I have the sickness of success. Oh, decidedly the only way to be happy is to want things, not to get them."

"Want, then; it is easy enough."

"I am beginning to wonder whether it is," said she. "I rather think that the faculty of wanting is a faculty which belongs to youth. Dear me! I am getting philosophical, and I beg your pardon. Tell me the news. When is the dissolution?"

"Who knows? Not even the family, I believe, and I have not the honour of belonging to them. But, I imagine, not later than the end of July."

"Then the election will interfere with the grouse-shooting, will it not?"

Jack laughed.

"Yes, but apparently it is decided that Imperial affairs are to rank above grouse-shooting for once in a way!"

Mildred looked at the clock.

"I must go," she said. "I've got a hair-dresser and a dressmaker and a manicurist all waiting, and, for aught I know, a palmist and a dentist, and I'm dining at the Hungarian Embassy, an affair which demands, if not prayer, at any rate fasting. I never get used to that sort of *corvée*."

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"Why do you do it, then?"

"Because it is only by doing that sort of thing with religious regularity that you get to the stage when you need no longer do it unless you choose. Besides, I purpose to say a word for you in an august ear. He is taking an interest, I am told, in the army. He also takes an interest in me. I amuse him. Come to lunch to-morrow, and tell me what has happened."

The thunderstorm predicted by Lady Brereton was already beginning to grumble in the west as Jack left the house, and before he got to Park Lane a few large, warm drops were splashing on the pavements. He asked the man who opened the door whether his wife was at home, and, learning that she was in, went up to her sitting-room. Marie was there, sitting in the balcony overlooking the park, her back turned to the room, so that she did not see Jack as he entered. By her was sitting another figure, whom he recognised. Jack strolled out to join them, lighting a cigarette.

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"Good-evening, Spencer," he said. "Pray don't move. There's a storm coming up."

But Jim Spencer rose.

"I was just going," he said. "I shall just get home before it begins."

He shook hands with them both, and went through the sitting-room and down-stairs. On the sound of the front-door banging behind him Jack spoke.

"Do you remember my warning you that people would talk if you were intimate with that man?" he said.

"Perfectly."

"You have chosen to disregard my warning. The consequence is that people have begun to talk."

Marie got up.

"Who, and where?" she said, facing him.

"It does not matter who. Where? In the clubs. 'So the Snowflake has melted. I saw her driving with the melter.' I heard that said this afternoon."

The rain began to fall heavily, and a blue scribble of light rent the sky. Marie did not reply, but went inside, followed by her husband. The room was very dark, and each could see no more than the form of the other. In the gloom her answer came—very cool and crisp, an extraordinary contrast to the hot, thick darkness.

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"And you tell this to me," she asked—"to me?"

"It concerns you, does it not?"

"As much as that which the gutter press says of the King concerns the King. And you knew it, Jack."

Jack sat down in a chair, his back to what light there was. To her he was almost invisible except for the glowing spark of his cigarette, which, as he drew breath, faintly illuminated his mouth.

"For a woman of the world," he said, "you are more ignorant than I should have thought possible."

Who are the women who are talked about at the clubs? Half a dozen names occur to you, as they do to me. Do you like being the seventh?"

Again there was silence, broken first by a sullen roar of thunder, then by Marie's voice.

"I want to ask you one question, Jack," she said. "Do you not know—you yourself—that to couple my name with that of any man except you, is to utter a foul and baseless calumny?"

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"That is not the point," said he. "The point is that your name has so been coupled."

"Do you not know it?" she repeated.

Again there was silence. The devil, probably, would have betted on Jack's saying "No." If so, he would have lost his money.

"Yes, I know it," he replied; and his tattered flag of honour waved again.

"Then, how dare you repeat such a thing to me?" said Marie, still in the same unnaturally even voice. "For you seem to forget one thing, Jack, and that is that I am your wife!"

"It is exactly that which I remember," he said.

"Then you are beyond me, and I cannot understand you at all. You seem to think—God knows what you think! Anyhow, the standard of honour which is yours is utterly incomprehensible to me. You approach me with a sort of calm gusto to tell me a canard you have picked out of the clubs or out of the gutter, and you seem to think I shall care! What I care about is something quite different, and that is that you should have told me. I suppose your object was to wound me, to punish me—so you put it to yourself, for my having disregarded your warning. It is true that you have wounded me, but not in the way you think. Not long ago you thought good to cast doubts on the way in which I told you I had spent my evening. This is one step worse. And I warn you that another step may take you too far! That is all I have to say."

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She turned round and, with a quick movement of her finger, turned on the electric light and stood in all her splendid beauty before him. Her bosom heaved with her intense suppressed emotion, her eye was kindled, and her mouth, slightly parted with her quickened breath, just showed the white line of her teeth. And sudden amazement at her loveliness seized the man. He looked long, then got up and advanced to her.

"Marie, Marie!" he said with entreaty, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Ah, don't touch me!" she cried.

CHAPTER XI

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Marie was sitting alone under the striped awning which covered the end of the terrace behind their country house in Surrey. The flap at the end was open, and from the bushes beyond came the hot, languid scent of the lilacs, the hot, languid murmur of the bees as they shouldered themselves into the clubs and clusters of the blossoms, the busy chirrup of sparrows intent on some infinitesimal occupation demanding a great deal of discussion. Unseen on the lawn below, a mowing-machine was making its clicking journeys up and down the grass, but no other sound marked the passage of the hot afternoon; no breeze stirred in the level fans of the cedar nor ruffled the lake, where the unwavering reflections of the trees were spread as sharp-cut and immobile as if they had been painted on a silver shield. On Marie's lap lay an unopened book, and she was as motionless as the mirroring lake.

A week had passed since her scene with Jack on the evening of the thunderstorm, and she had left London three days after in obedience to an instinct which she felt she could not disobey. That scene had unfocused her; she had to adjust herself to a new view of things, and the need to go away and be alone for a day or two had been overmastering. For the one thing which she had always regarded as impossible had happened to her: the snowflake—herself—was supposed to have melted. And, from the fact that this slander affected her so deeply, she knew, for the first time fully, how utterly different she was to the rest of the world. Some months ago she had heard Lady Ardingly say in her slow, sensible voice: "Ah, my dear, there are so many people who can lose their reputation, but so few who know how valuable the loss is! They were perfectly capable of valuing it when it existed, but they cannot appreciate its loss at the proper figure." At the time she had laughed, as she would have laughed at any outrageous piece of cynicism in some modern play. Now she choked at it; it was gall to her.

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So, then, according to the world's view, she was in the position of many women who held their heads high, and thought of the world generally as their playground, the place kindly provided for the amusement of their spare time, of which they had twenty-four hours every day. Whether the disrepute of all these was as reliable as that which she had herself just gained was not the immediate point to be considered; but certainly, if one took a man like Arthur Naseby into a corner, he would, with no encouragement at all, tell an intimate and abominable history of half the folk he knew. For herself, she was not in the habit of taking this stout and poisonous gentleman into corners. Scandalous stories did not amuse her, particularly if they were true, and immorality she thought to be a thing not only wicked, but vulgar. Wickedness, as she had once said, seemed to the world in which she lived merely an obsolete term, describing a moral condition which had no appreciable existence; and sometimes she wondered whether vulgarity

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was not passing into the category of words without significance. And now it appeared that people were saying about her what they said about so many others, with no sense of condemnation, but—and here lay the nausea of the thing—with amusement. She could almost hear Arthur's voice stridently declaiming: "After all, poor thing, why shouldn't she amuse herself like everybody else? It was the one thing wanted to make her perfectly charming. But I think we shall hear less about the stupidity and vulgarity of the world. Artistically speaking, she ought to have modulated the change more. Just a shade too abrupt—a little Wagnerian in its change of key;" and roars of laughter would follow.

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But this new condition in her life had by no means constituted the sum of these three days' meditation in the country. With the elasticity inherent in human nature, the moment the new condition had been made, her mental fibres set themselves automatically to adjust themselves to it. Doctors say that any patient adjusts himself to the most fatal sentence in twenty-four hours; the thing becomes a part of life. It was so with her, and now she felt, though not reconciled, at any rate used to the thing. Though highly introspective, she was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, self-conscious, and she no longer believed that the changed glances of the world at her would affect her very seriously. Surely she could manage to take them at their correct and worthless valuation. At first the thought of that had seemed intolerable; but after three days she was beginning to feel she cared very appreciably less.

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So far her solitude had been successful, but beyond that it had been a complete failure. For the larger of the two reasons which had induced her to come here remained, and she could not even now conjecture what in the future should be her attitude to Jim. With this problem she had wrestled and struggled in vain, and it seemed to her, in these first days of her consciousness as to her essential relations to him, that all her life-long consistency of thought and habit on such a point were cancelled and worthless. The truth was that she had not known at all before that she was really capable of passion. Her nature, including something far deeper and stronger than mere physical nature, had till quite lately been dormant; she had been ignorant all her life of what the longing for another meant; all her life she had judged men and women by a blind standard which did not really measure that to which it was applied. All her life she had labelled immorality as vulgar, and, as such, she shrugged her shoulders at it and passed by. But now it was beginning to be burned into her that it was not her fastidiousness that labelled things vulgar, but her ignorance. She had thought Blanche Devereux vulgar because she herself had not understood. Now she was afraid she was beginning to understand, and with the gradual comprehension came growing bewilderment. And step by step with the bewilderment marched an inward tumult of ecstasy, of which she had not known herself capable. A sort of horrified wonder at herself was there, and withal a singing in her heart. It had awoke, and, like the roar of the sea which drowns the idle clatter of the Corniche road, it made a huge soft tumult.

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This, then, was the problem she had brought unsolved from London, and which, she was afraid, she would bring back there without solution. The knowledge of it had burst upon her on the evening when Jack had told her what he had heard said of her, and her first conscious utterance that showed she knew of its existence was when that involuntary cry, "Ah, don't touch me!" came uninvited to her lips. Her long and gradual estrangement from her husband had immeasurably widened at that moment. In an instant his figure had leaped to remote horizons, and she had but to turn her head to see how close beside her stood another, he of whom her husband had spoken. This she had not known before; but the knowledge had come in a flash, staining backwards, as it were, through the past pages of her life, so that it seemed to her that she had loved him since the time when they were boy and girl together, and it made her view her married life with an incredulous horror. And by what sinister revelation had she gained this knowledge? For it was the fact that people spoke of Jim as her lover that had made her definitely aware she loved him. And it had been Jack through whom this knowledge was conveyed.

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It was this knowledge that made her distrust herself as utterly as if her own soul and spirit had just been introduced to her among a crowd of strangers. She had thought she had known herself, and now this thing had started out upon her as if she had been asleep in a dark room, and had been wakened to find the chamber blazing with lights. Whether she had the will or the strength to resist she did not yet know; the purpose alone she could utterly answer for. But she realized that if again she saw him in such sort as she had seen him on the Sunday afternoon by the river, or on that afternoon when she had told him of her conversation with Maud Brereton, it would be a more difficult task to make him keep silence. She felt she could scarcely answer for her own silence. How much less, then, for her power of stopping the speech which a word from her would have even then brought to utterance! And now——

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She rose, feeling that the only hope of victory lay in turning away from thoughts like these, and not, under the specious pretext of consciously fighting them, in reality making them familiar to her mind; for familiarity in such things breeds, not contempt, but acquiescence, half contemptuous it may be, but half consenting, and she knew that in face of certain temptations it is cowardice not to run away. The sun was already off the lawn, and a cooler breeze had begun to stir the intense heat of the afternoon. Tea had long been waiting for her under the cedar, and she walked slowly along the terrace and down the ten steps which led on to the lawn. This terrace had been an expensive whim of Jack's grandfather; it ran the length of the house, and was paved and balustraded with rose-coloured Numidian marble; urns, wreathed in delicate creepers which spilt splashes of vivid colour, stood at intervals along it; and below it blossomed a superb riband flower-bed bordering the lawn where stood the cedar.

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On this restful velvet she walked up and down, again taken up and possessed by the absorption of that which lay before her. Her pride shied and jibbed at the thought of refusing to see any more

of Jim Spencer because some slanderous tongue had started a vile falsehood about her, and she told herself that to do this would but confirm these inventions in the minds of such people as could ever have entertained them. She knew well enough the form the story would take. It would be supposed that the report had got to Jack's ears, and that he forbade her to see him. This would be intolerable; intolerable also was the thing itself, that she should not see him. So much she confessed frankly to herself. But one thing, one thing above all, was certain, and the thought brought to her the glow which is inseparable from all honest endeavour. She had been slandered in a way that touched her with deep resentment, but never should she give that lie a moment's harbourage, even on the threshold of her thoughts. The vileness of it, indeed, was a safeguard, and she could not without shuddering picture herself touching the subject-matter of it.

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She had not walked long before a servant came out and approached her.

"Mr. Spencer wants to know if your ladyship will see him," he said.

Marie paused, feeling suddenly that this had happened before, but was unable to recollect what came next.

"Mr. Spencer?" she repeated.

"Yes, my lady."

Marie turned away from the man without replying, and walked a pace or two from him. Her mind seemed to be making itself up without any volition on her part. Then, without turning her head, "Ask him to come out," she answered, and the sound of the utterly commonplace words conveyed to her the nature of her own decision; for she had yielded, and knew it, not to be the imperative demand of her pride, which insisted that she should show not the smallest change of behaviour towards him, just because people had lied about her, but to her imperative desire to see the man.

She walked back to where the tea-table still stood, with the shining points of sunlight that filtered through the cedar making stars on the silver, and sat there a moment listening with a sort of incredulous wonder to the hammer of her pulse, and observing with the same incapacity for belief that these were her hands which trembled. But the interval was a short one, for in a moment his step sounded crisp on the terrace, and then became noiseless on the lawn. She was sitting with her back to the quarter of advance, but turned her head as he approached.

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"Where in the world have you sprung from?" she asked. "Have some tea, Jim, or whisky-and-soda? I am delighted to see you, though it was not in my programme to see anybody."

"I am an intruder then, I fear," said he. "No sugar, thanks."

"Yes, but not unwelcome. I left London three days ago, and am going back to-morrow. I am eccentric, as you know, and, what is more useful, I have the reputation of being so. Thus, nobody wonders if I disappear for a few days."

To her great relief and her hardly less surprise, Marie found not the slightest difficulty in assuming a perfectly natural manner, and even mentally classed it under the heading of phenomena which show that ordinary people in trying circumstances for the most part behave normally. It was natural to her, in fact, to be natural. But even as she drew these comforting conclusions, she had leisure to observe that Jim, too, was in the grip of some inward struggle. Its nature she did not try to guess, but continued talking under a sense of stress, a fear of silences.

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"You know my gospel, do you not?" she said, "or, rather, I am sure you do not, as I have only formulated it to myself during this last day or two. There are two halves to the world, which make the whole, and each is the antidote to the other. One half is people; the other half is things. Now, the country is the place of things, and London of people. Cows, flowers, hay, all these are a certain antidote to the poisoning which unmixed people give one. In the same way, one flies from the country to town to take the antidote to the poison, a narcotic one, of things. Dipsomaniacs, so to speak, live entirely in London. They die young; it is a quick poison. The opposite dipsomaniacs live entirely in the country; it is a slow poison, and they live, or, at any rate, do not die, until a very advanced age. But oh, Jim, what a difference there is between living and not dying! They sound the same thing, but there is all the difference in the world between them."

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Jim stirred his sugarless tea slowly, then drank it quickly and put down the cup. Being a man, airy nothings were not part of his stock in trade, a deficiency from a merely social standpoint.

"And so you have been poisoned with people?" he said directly. "I feel uncomfortable; I am afraid I have interrupted the cure."

"Not a bit. The treatment is over, and I am going back to London to-morrow. You are the junction, so to speak, where some one gets in, where one first sees the smoke and the sea of houses. But who told you I was here?"

"Jack told me," he said. "Why?"

On his words Marie suddenly became conscious that definite drama had entered. From this point she saw herself as she might see a character in a play, with a feeling of irresponsibility. The author of the play was responsible. It was, in fact, overwhelmingly interesting to know the manner in which Jack had said this.

"When did you see him?" she asked.

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"This morning only, and by accident. He suggested I should come here, in fact, and escort you back to London."

"But I am not going to-day," said Marie.

"No; he expects you back to-morrow. He suggested I should spend the night here, and come back with you then."

"Ah, that is charming!" said she. "You have told them you are stopping?"

"But I am not. I must get back to-night."

Marie felt and knew that the words were wrung from him, that they had been difficult to speak. But, well as she knew it, Jim knew it infinitely better. His tongue, so to speak, he had to tie like a galley-slave to its oar, and it made its monotonous strokes, which, unwilling as they were and mutinously inclined, yet moved the vessel towards its safety in harbour. Then a pause which both dreaded was broken by the crisp sound of the trodden terrace, and the servant again approached Marie.

"Which room shall I put Mr. Spencer's things in, my lady?" he asked, and again the commonplace words had a hideous momentousness.

The temptation in her mind to give him merely the number of a room was almost overwhelming, for she felt morally certain that, had she done so, Jim would have said nothing. Furthermore, Jack had suggested his coming, and within herself she bore the conscious witness of her own rectitude. Only—and this was the reason for her decision—she knew that her desire that he should stop, that events should then take their course, was stronger than could have been accounted for by her desire to have a companion at dinner, even the most desirable, and a companion during her journey the next day. Further, he had come down here with the intention of stopping. But her purpose held.

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"Mr. Spencer will go back to-night," she said. "But you will stop for dinner, Jim!"

"Thanks. I should like to. There is a train back at nine."

"Then, we must dine at eight instead of half-past. Let us have dinner on the terrace. We often dine there when it is warm."

The man took the tea-tray and retired with it. Then Jim leaned forward in his chair.

"Thank you," he said to Marie.

Again her hands so trembled that she had to catch hold of both arms of her chair, lest it should be apparent. And her voice, as she felt to her rebellious impotence, shook as she answered.

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"For the dinner?" she said. "Indeed it will not be much, Jim—soup and a cutlet, I expect."

Great emotion has its moments of calm and hurricane, like the sea. It may lie glassy and level, though deep; again, with the speed of tropical storm, it may have its surface lashed to mountainous billows, against which no ship can make way, but must run before them. And the pitiless and intentional lightness of her words made an upheaval in him of all he was trying to suppress. He had come down here meaning to stop till the next day, but somehow the sight of her, and some deep abiding horror—the root of morality—of that for which his flesh cried out, had revealed to him the grossness of, not his design, but his acquiescence. Thus he had not even told her that he had his luggage with him; but of this blind Fate, in the shape of a liveried servant, had informed her. She knew as well as he what he had intended to do. And looking at her hands as they clutched the wickerwork of her basket chair, he could see that she, too, wrestled with, and tried to throttle, some secret enemy. Then came her light words, interpreted by the quivering of the tense hands, and his passion surged and overwhelmed him.

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"Let me change my mind, Marie," he said, "and stop."

Again she told herself that it was perfectly right and natural that he should do so, but again her clear, clean judgment, recognising the force of the desire that he should, overruled her; but she was tired and nerve-jangled from the struggle, and her voice, pitched high and entreatingly, was no longer under her command.

"No, no, Jim!" she cried. "You must go."

The word she was afraid she would not be able to speak was spoken. The operation was over; she had only to keep quiet and recuperate. But she had betrayed herself to him: both knew it. A barrier had been broken down between them; each soul in its secret place was visible to the other, and in the awe and amazement of that the cries and strivings of the debatable were for the moment stilled. There was no satisfaction in the world that could equal the self-surrender that each had already made; there was nothing that either could do or say which would not spoil and degrade that which had passed between them. Jim, on his part, though he knew why he had asked to change his mind and stop, could not yet regret it, so tremendous and soul-filling was that which lay behind her refusal; and she could not find it in her heart to blame him, since his weakness had ended so gloriously. Thus in silence for a long moment each looked at the other, unashamed, acknowledging by that look, without fear or regret, the great bond that bound them indissolubly together, the great renunciation that irrevocably divided them.

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Marie reached out her hand for her ivory silver-handled stick, which had fallen by her chair.

"Come and stroll for half an hour before dinner," she said. "See whether I am not right about the antidote to people which one can find in the country."

He rose, too.

"But who has been poisoning you in town?" he asked.

"Who? The six million people who live there. No, I will except you. I do not find you are poisonous

here, at least."

"Thank you. But what have you done with yourself these three days?"

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"Ah, that is the secret of the country! In town one has to do things one's self; the country does them all for you. You sit and you walk; you pick long feathery pieces of grass, and chew them like a cow; you think very intently for long periods, and at the end find that you have been thinking about nothing whatever. There is nothing so restful; and I have been wanting rest. I was a good deal worried about a certain matter before I left town."

He looked at her.

"I will subscribe to any institution that will guarantee you freedom from worry," he said.

"That is very kind of you, but the only way your institution could be of use would be by giving me a painless death; and I do not wish to die at all. No, you must spend your money some other way. Talking of that, have you made up your mind to stand for Parliament? It looks as if I accused you prospectively of bribery and corruption. I do not mean to."

"I wanted to talk to you about that. That was—one of the reasons why I came down to-day. I have been asked to stand for East Surrey, but by the Liberals."

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She stopped suddenly.

"By the Liberals?" she said. "That will come as a great surprise to your friends, will it not?"

"Possibly. Of course, rich people are as a rule Conservative; in fact, it seems sufficient for a man that he should acquire a large fortune to make a Conservative of him. Personally I detest party politics, though no doubt they are a necessity. For myself, I only recognise one party just now, whose sole object is efficiency, not effectiveness."

She resumed walking again, with a quicker pace.

"Have you told Jack?" she asked.

"Yes. He approves warmly. He added, however, that he couldn't do anything for me, that he was bound to do all he could against me, in fact, during the election. That must be so. He is the land-owner here and a Conservative, and he does not see sufficient reason for ratting. There is nowhere to rat to, he says."

"I know Jack's view. He thinks both parties are in a hopeless state, but, belonging to one, he has no reason to join the other. Dear me, Jim, this is news! You have a subject in South Africa; so if the Conservatives get in, you will, I suppose, be among those who make it warm for them."

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"I have no intention of taking politics up as a recreation," he said; "it is to be my profession, you understand." He paused a moment. "That is, given I get in."

Instantly her woman's pride in the man awoke.

"Of course you will get in!" she said; and not till she had said it did she know what she said, for no sense of his political fitness had prompted it, only her love for him.

They walked on a little way in silence, past the end of the riband bed, and into the rose-garden beyond.

"Yes, there is a cry for efficiency," he said. "John Bull is touched in his tender point, which is his purse. The tax-payer wants to know what he is getting for his increased income-tax, and the fact that he puts only one lump of sugar instead of two into his two instead of three cups of tea. He accepts the necessity, I believe, quite willingly; but as a shareholder in that very large concern, the British Empire, he wishes to see the balance-sheet, with explanations. So many millions for the South African War seem to him a large item. He does not dispute it, but he wants to have details given him, and through the mouths of his representatives he proposes to see that he gets them."

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"That is called an unpatriotic attitude," remarked Marie with singular acidity.

"Ah, you are a Liberal, too! Of course Jack is."

"Certainly, if you take the utterance of the Conservative leaders as official. Jack, for instance, looks upon the Boer War as a war with a Power that was no Power at all, but the Government officially alludes to it as 'the great Boer War.' There is the party note. Oh, there is no such strong Conservative as the man who has once been a Radical! Conversion is always followed by exaggeration."

Marie stopped, plucked a couple of tea-roses and pinned them into the front of her dress. Then, looking up, she saw his eyes fixed on her face, and though they both had been speaking honestly about a subject that honestly interested them, she knew how superficial their talk had been; speeches had been made correctly, but automatically—no more. She was glad to know about his future plans; he, on his side, liked to speak of them, for, as he said, he was going to make a profession of politics. But they had both been talking "shop"; and as she raised her eyes to his, "shop" became suddenly impossible.

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"Another rose," he said, "and give it me."

She did not answer. Then she drew one from the two she had fastened in her dress.

"Flowers to a friend," she said, holding it out to him. "It is an Italian proverb, Jim. Do you know the response?"

"You will tell it me."

"And honour from the friend," she replied.

He was cut to the quick, yet a phantom of self-justification was up in arms.

"When did I not give you that?" he said.

"You have always given it me," she answered. "Give it me every hour, Jim, until I cease entirely to deserve it."

Thereat he bent and kissed her hand.

CHAPTER XII

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In the course of the next week or so Lady Brereton began to almost believe the slander that she had herself sown over the very congenial soil of London drawing-rooms; but though the town was soon as thick with it as is a cornfield in May with the green springing spears, she was afraid that her amiable object of revenging herself on Marie for the ill turn she had done her in the matter of Maud's marriage had not been blessed with the success which that masterly design deserved. Indeed, had she not known from Jack that he had told his wife what he had overheard at the "Deuce of Spades," Mildred could not have believed that Marie knew anything at all about it, so utterly unaltered was her demeanour to the world at large, and in particular to Jim Spencer. They were constantly together, but, somehow, Marie's attitude to him and his to her seemed in the eyes of people in general to contradict every moment the possibility of there being any *dessous des cartes* at all; in fact, Mildred's springing blades had rather the appearance of having been sown on stony ground: they seemed to her eye to look curiously without stamina. Yet, as already stated, although in less than the traditional nine days the world in general had ceased to concern itself with so misbegotten a scandal, Lady Brereton almost began to believe it herself. Her own invention, in fact, appeared probable to her; but its effect on Marie, from which she had hoped so much, was entirely unfruitful.

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Lady Ardingly about this time, like an old war-horse now turned out to grass, had begun to prick up her ears at the trumpets which resounded through the land on the approach of the General Election. She, like many other people, had a great belief in Jack's powers of awakening the Government from the self-congratulatory torpor which had fallen on them.

"They sit in a somnolent circle," she said to him one day, "and awake at intervals to shake hands with each other; then they go to sleep again. Ardingly, perhaps, is the most sensible. He sleeps as soundly as anybody, but he doesn't congratulate his noble colleagues."

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Jack laughed.

"I almost wish I had always been a Liberal," he said.

"You always have been," said she; "but now is not the time to say so. Get your seat in the Cabinet, Jack; the Conservative Cabinet is the only opening for a Liberal nowadays. That is where Mr. Spencer makes his mistake. To be a Liberal, however prominent, is nowadays to be perfectly ineffective. You are put in a box and locked up, and the key is put in the key-basket at—well, at a certain country-house. But if you are a Conservative you are let out and given your own key. That is your chance."

"And if they don't give me a seat in the Cabinet?"

"There will be no question about that. They do not like you, but they are afraid of you. The country, on the other hand, likes you a good deal. You have a way with plebeians. I don't know how you manage it. They think you are a practical man, and just now they want practical men, and they intend to get them. But you will have to be very careful about certain things. I wanted to talk to you about those; that was why I sent for you to have lunch with me alone. People were coming, but, in fact, I put them off. We will go to my room."

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Lady Ardingly rose, and Jack followed her. He was not quite sure that he would like what was coming, but he was far too sensible to quarrel with her, for he considered her quite the worst person in the world to quarrel with.

"Yes, I am going to speak plainly," she said. "It is, I think, certain that you will be offered the War Office. Now, you have a very clever wife, who will be admirably useful to you; but you have a great friend who is stupider than a mule, with all her *soi-disant* brilliance. She is *au fond* a really vulgar woman, and it is vulgar people who make the stupid mistakes. She has already made one, which might have damaged you seriously, but I do not think it will. Of that presently. I was saying that they will probably give you the War Office; but you cannot with any usefulness retain the post for a day if there is a scandal connected with you—a scandal, that is to say, of the wrong sort."

Jack leaned forward in his chair.

"I don't know why I do not resent this, Lady Ardingly," he said, "or why I do not leave the room; but I do neither."

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"Because you are a selfish, or at any rate an ambitious man," she said. "Every one who is worth his salt is. Now I will put names to my advice."

She paused a moment to take some coffee, and waited till the man had left the room.

"Mildred is a very vulgar woman," she said, "and her vulgarity shows itself in the nature of her mistakes. Silly Billy came here the other day, and I asked him about his scene with you. You did not score there, and if he had not been a clever little fellow in a small sort of bird-like manner, you would have involved yourself in a row of monstrous proportions. He managed you in his microscopical way very successfully. That is so. He also told me that it was Mildred who had suggested that absurd canard to him. There is the stupidity of the woman. There was no grain of sense in it all. Nobody who knows, would believe such things about Marie for ten days together. But supposing some gutter-rag of a paper had got hold of it! The wife of the man who was in the running for the Cabinet prosecuting an intrigue with the Liberal candidate of his division of Surrey! How charming! If I had wanted to ruin you, I should have tried to think of something as damaging as that. If I had thought of that I should have been quite content. Did you not see that, my poor fellow?"

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"We did not know he was standing at the time," said Jack rather feebly.

"Doubtless. But the secret of success in this world is not to make blunders where one does not know. Any one can avoid blunders if he knows everything. In any case, here is the position. It is sedulously circulated that your wife has an intrigue with Jim Spencer. And who circulates it? This cook! Luckily I did something to stop people talking."

"What was that?"

"I told them I happened to know that Mildred had quarrelled with your wife, and had invented this story out of revenge. That is the case, is it not?"

"It certainly happens to be true. But I don't see how you knew."

"I guessed it was so," said Lady Ardingly. "It was the only reasonable supposition. There is not another which holds water. Besides, if it had not been true, what does it matter? Now, this is the first way in which Mildred might have ruined you. The second concerns you also."

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"I don't think we need discuss that," said Jack, who kept his temper only by the knowledge that he would lose a great deal more if he lost it.

"But we had better. You are a decent fellow, Jack; also it will amuse me to see you in the Cabinet, which I shall not, unless you are careful. Now, you have had an affair with Mildred for many years. At least, so we all suppose; that we all suppose it is the important thing. I do not mind that, morally speaking, because I am in no way responsible for your morals. It is your own business. She happens to stimulate you. Everybody knows about it except one person—your wife. Now, why not tell her?"

"For what reason?" asked Jack, far too much surprised to resent anything.

"Simply for fear she should find out, and—and blow your ships out of the water!" said Lady Ardingly. "You have fallen into a grave mistake. You have treated your wife as a negligible quantity, whereas hardly anybody is a negligible quantity, and certainly not she. That is by the way. At present we are considering your career. Now, if Marie finds out, either while you are still not yet in the Cabinet, or even after that, before you have made yourself clearly felt to be indispensable, you go. For if the middle class gets hold of a scandal about a Minister, not yet proven, that man is beyond hope. He cannot weather the storm. The middle class, who are, after all, the people, distrust his public measures because they disapprove of his private life."

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"Idiotic on their part," observed Jack.

"No doubt; but the cause of success is to estimate correctly and to take advantage of the idiocy of others. None of us are clever in the way Napoleon was clever. All we can do is to be slightly less idiotic than the rest of mankind. Now you must go. I have a hundred things to do and a thousand people to see. If I can be of any further help to you, let me know."

Jack got up, then paused, indecisive.

"You mean you will tell Marie?" he asked.

"If you wish me to. But there is a simpler plan."

"What is that?" asked Jack.

"Show Mildred the door—the back-door," she added.

"I can't."

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"Very good; that is your affair," said she. "But make up your mind soon what you will do. Any line is better than none, as it was always."

At the moment a footman entered.

"Ask her to wait in the drawing-room," said Lady Ardingly, before he had spoken. Then, without pausing: "Good-bye, Jack. Send me a line; or we shall meet at Ascot, shall we not?"

Jack hesitated a moment.

"She is very obstinate," he said.

"Your wife?" asked Lady Ardingly.

"No; the person you asked to wait in the drawing-room."

Lady Ardingly laughed. She never minded being found out.

"So am I," she said. "Don't meet her on the stairs."

"Oh, I am not a fool!" said Jack, almost with gaiety.

"That may be true. But do not take your own wisdom as a working hypothesis," said that immovable woman.

After he had left, Lady Ardingly proceeded to take her maximum exercise for the day. This consisted in walking four times up and down the long gallery of portraits which ran by the reception-rooms. It was nearly a hundred yards in length, and as she stopped once to swallow a small digestive pill, which was presented to her with a wine-glass of water by her maid, it was nearly ten minutes before she returned to her room and sent a message that the person who was waiting should be shown up. The interval sufficed to pull her auburn wig straight and settle herself with her back to the light.

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Mildred was more accustomed to be waited for than to wait, and neither Lady Ardingly's message that she wished to see her at 3.30 nor the period of inaction in this drawing-room had improved a naturally irritable temper. Her determination, in fact, when the tardy summons came, was to be very effusive and full of engagements—a delighted-to-see-you—how-well-you-are-looking—such-a-pleasure—must-go attitude. Lady Ardingly often rubbed her up the wrong way, but she more often gave her advice which, when she was cool, she knew to be right. She conjectured, if no more, that the subject which was going to be discussed was Jack, but was more than half decided not to discuss it. In her mind, in fact, she labelled Lady Ardingly as an impotent old meddler. Thus she entered.

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"Ah, my dear," said Lady Ardingly, "you have been kept waiting, I am afraid. It was an idiotic footman, who thought I was engaged, and did not tell me you were here. How are you, Mildred?"

Mildred sat down. Her dress rustled incredulously.

"Driven," she said—"simply driven! How foolish one is to make a hundred engagements a day, and not enjoy any because one is always thinking about the next!"

"Yes, very foolish," said Lady Ardingly, "especially when one does not enjoy them. Now tell me the news, dear Mildred. I do not go out and I see nobody. You are always everywhere. I never saw a woman who sat in the mainspring so much. Tell me all about everybody."

Insensibly Mildred felt mollified. She knew perfectly well that, though Lady Ardingly did not rush about to see everybody, it was only because everybody rushed about to see her; but still there was to her a faint aroma of compliment about the speech. She disentangled a misshapen Yorkshire terrier from her muff.

"Who, for instance?" she said. "Now, Jack—he is a friend of yours, I know."

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"Of both of ours," said Lady Ardingly with an intonation far more confirmatory, than correcting.

"Yes—such a dear, isn't he? Well, people have been talking about him as possibly going to the War Office. Dear Jack! I can scarcely imagine him there."

"Yes, that is interesting," said Lady Ardingly. "So he means to take up politics quite seriously. I am glad you have urged him to do that, and that you have used your influence with him in that direction!"

Mildred continued to melt.

"Yes, Jack really has great talent," she said. "And he knows about guns and smokeless powder, and—and that sort of thing, I believe. There is a craze just now for people managing Departments of which they know something. Quite new, isn't it?"

"Ah, you mean Ardingly," said the other. "How cruel of you!"

The liquefaction progressed.

"Dear Lady Ardingly!" said Mildred, "how can you say such a thing! Of course I did not mean anything of the sort. But, seriously, I think that Jack would do well at the War Office. Do not you?"

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"Oh, he is not a fool! But it is necessary that he should have a wife. Does one count Marie Alston as a wife, do you think?"

Mildred frowned quite naturally, and Lady Ardingly, though accustomed to find her manœuvres successful, was almost surprised at the success of this.

"That reminds me," she said. "I wonder whether you have heard it? There is going about a horrid, horrid scandal about Marie. It started, as far as I know, in that Bridge club—'Deuce of Spades,' is it not? Well, there one afternoon, about ten days ago, Silly Billy remarked that the Snowflake had melted, referring to the matter. Everybody knew what he meant, and Jack, as it happened, was in the room at the time. Was it not awful? And it has gone all over London?"

Lady Ardingly sat up in her chair with the deliberation that characterized all her movements, and took a cigarette from a tray. She lighted it quite slowly without replying. It was time, she felt, to begin taking the ribs out of this poor umbrella.

"Yes, I heard something of it," she said.

"Somebody told me something. But I gathered that it did not quite originate there. I heard, in fact, dear Mildred, that you, driving to that concert the other day, put the notion into Silly Billy's

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head."

"I don't know who can have told you that," she replied.

"Silly Billy did. Oh, I grant you that that is no guarantee at all for its truth. I never see any reason to believe what Silly Billy says. But you must now reckon with the story as it stands—as it reached me, in fact: namely, that you told him the story which he very indiscreetly repeated in Jack's hearing. You who know the world so well know that people will not care if it is true. They will only repeat it as it reached them, as it reached me."

"But I believe the story to be true," exclaimed Mildred, completely off her guard.

"Ah! so you did tell him. The story, then, as I heard it is substantially correct. Poor Silly Billy! How annoyed he would be if he knew that he had been detected telling the truth! It would be deeply humiliating to him. However, do not let us mind him; he is particularly insignificant. Now, dear Mildred, why did you put that into his head? Not that it matters why. But, anyhow, it was not nice of you."

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"I did not intend it to be," said Mildred.

"Now you are talking sensibly. You quarrelled with her, and you wanted to annoy her, I suppose. But is it possible that you do not see that in annoying her you are injuring Jack with both hands?"

"In what way?"

"Perhaps you do not know that Jim Spencer is standing for the East Surrey constituency as a Liberal. And where is Freshfield, the Alstons' place? I have never been there, but I understand it is in East Surrey. The Conservative magnate's wife has an intrigue with the Liberal candidate! I said only just now to"—Lady Ardingly paused a moment—"to myself, How damaging for Jack! How completely fatal for Jack!"

There was a short silence, and Lady Ardingly continued with the driest deliberation.

"Of course, you had not heard that Jim Spencer was standing for that division. There is nothing so dangerous as a complete absence of knowledge. And it was you who started that scandal! It is lucky for you it was such a silly one. If it had been a little cleverer, you might have damaged him irretrievably."

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"But there are lots of stories," began Mildred.

"Thousands. But not of that damaging kind. If you had said she was having an intrigue, say, with the Emperor of Russia, it would have hurt nobody, not even the Emperor. Never mind, dear, the thing is done. We must consider how we can make the best of it. A scandal is always a dangerous thing to touch. If one denies it afterwards, if even the inventor, who believes it to be true—how ridiculous, too, of you, dear Mildred!—denies it, there will always be people who think that the denial merely confirms it. In this case it is peculiarly complicated. The great thing is that the whole invention was so silly from the start. I should have thought, dear Mildred, that you had a better imagination. But you have not. It is not your fault; you cannot help it. What shall we do, do you think?"

This old woman was not so impotent as Mildred had hoped. She had been accustomed to consider herself fairly wide awake, but it appeared that her waking moments were somnolence personified to Lady Ardingly.

"I don't know," she said feebly.

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"Then, I will tell you," said Lady Ardingly. "Start a scandal—you are so good at it—about yourself and Jim Spencer. Nothing circumstantial—only let it be in the air. Let people say things; there is nothing easier. Then it will appear also that you have broken with Jack. That, I tell you, will not injure him. A married man is open to damaging scandals in two ways: one through himself, one through his wife. And in Jack's case, my dear, both these doors are flung wide, and Lady Brereton enters through each, trumpeting like—like an elephant."

Lady Ardingly nodded her head at Mildred, with the air of a nurse scolding a refractory child.

"Now, do not look so disconsolate, my dear," she went on, observing Mildred's face falling as a barometer falls before a cyclone, "but just bestir yourself. You should really in future consult somebody before you embark on these efforts. You have dug a bottomless well, so I may say, at the foot of the ladder by which your friend Jack was preparing to mount. There is room—just room—to get him on to it still. But there is only one way of doing it—that is, by stopping somehow or another that very silly story you made up about his wife, and by taking very great care how you are talked about in connection with him by the wrong people—just now, perhaps, by anybody. You can do both these things by letting it be supposed that you are *intime* with Mr. Spencer. Let us talk of something else."

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Lady Ardingly rose with the air of closing the subject altogether. She knew exactly when to stop rubbing a thing in, the object of that salutary process being to make the place smart sufficiently, but not unbearably. Mildred, she considered, was smarting enough.

"And about your tall daughter?" she said. "How does that go?"

"She is lovable, and he loves her; but he is not lovable, and she does not love him," quoted Mildred, restraining quite admirably her impulse to sulk or lose her temper.

"Ah! you must give her time. If he is really in love with her, he will be very patient. And, since you love her," she added, without any change of voice, "you will be patient with her, too."

Mildred got up.

"I must go," she said. "Thank you very much, Lady Ardingly. I have made a mess of things."

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"Yes, dear," said the other, "and you must wipe it up. Must you be going? Some people are coming in for Bridge almost immediately. Please dine here, if you can, to-day week. I will ask Mr. Spencer, and I will not ask Jack. That is the day before we all go down to Ascot. I hope you have backed Ardingly's horse for the Eclipse Stakes. Good-bye, dear."

Mildred went out, a limp figure, leaving Lady Ardingly looking like a restored sphinx on the hearth-rug. Then she spoke to herself very gently and slowly.

"I cannot bear cooks," she said, "and other people like them so much; but I think I deserve a great many aces at Bridge."

Jack and Mildred went their respective ways full of thoughts, which up to a certain point were very similar. Prominent, at any rate, in the mind of each was that, though they knew each other very well, they would not mention that they had had an interview with Lady Ardingly. Jack here was in the superior position, since he knew that Mildred had succeeded him in audience, and felt sure that, whether Mildred told him so or not, he would find some impress of what had taken place in the next intimate conversation they had together. With regard to his reflection on his own interview, he saw the admirable justice of the greater part of Lady Ardingly's views; he did not, however, see the fitness of telling Marie anything whatever. This appeared to him a heroic remedy for a contingency too remote to reckon with. He knew her, he told himself, well enough to know that he did not know her at all, and she was quite capable, as far as he was aware, of making what Lady Ardingly had called "a row of monstrous proportions." This, as she had herself said just now, at this juncture in his affairs would be fatal to him. She might even petition for a divorce, in which case, as Lady Ardingly said, "he went." There remained, as she had suggested, the other alternative of giving up Mildred, of terminating the whole affair. He had told Lady Ardingly he could not. At any rate, she was an invaluable friend; no false notions of sentiment or altruism ever found their way into her conversation. She advised from a flintily-logical, hard, worldly standpoint.

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At this point his reflections travelled off into ways utterly unknown to her, and till lately unknown to himself; and even now he only groped his path among them in a dim twilight. For he had said "I can't," not from certainty of diagnosis, but from mere incredulity at his own symptoms. His long intrigue with Mildred he had brought himself to believe was necessary to him; he could not clearly picture any other way of life. No less necessary, so he had always thought, was his aloofness from Marie. But lately—dating, in point of fact, from the time of that scene when he had told Marie what he had heard said at the "Deuce of Spades"—he had been conscious of a change in himself as indefinable, but as certain, as the first hint of dawn. Again, a pulse beat in him which had long been dormant—the pulse that had throbbed in his arteries when he was younger by more years than he cared to count, when women had been to him, not the vehicle, but the deity, of passion. He had thrown his earlier convictions in the mud, and in the conduct of his life had trampled them under-foot; and now, at the end, like the trodden seeds of wheat, they were already in ear. Marie's frank and honest contempt for him had begun this process, for it had first jarred and disturbed, then woke to activity some relaxed fibre which had long been overlaid by grosser tissue, but was alive for all that.

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Then, feebly at first, the knowledge of the "might-have-been" dawned on him—that drug always bitter, and only sometimes salutary, producing in some contrition and amendment, in others only recklessness. At present it was bitter; but the bitterness was tonic. He could not yet tell whether the "might-have-been" had passed into the "cannot-be." That depended partly on himself, no doubt, but partly on her. And of her, out of long familiarity, he knew nothing. Then, simultaneously with remorse, or, at any rate, with his appreciation of her scorn for him, came in another factor, his reawakened knowledge of her beauty—a low motive, it may be, on which to base faithfulness or recall the unfaithful, but, as long as men are men, a very real one. Yet for years he had sought another woman, dimming the light of complete desire with the damp of physical satiety. This other had ministered to the demands of the flesh, she had also fulfilled that which lay immediately behind, for she had supplied him always with a ready response to his more carnal ambitions: she had flattered his own self-flattery. He had posed, as it were, before a quantity of mirrors, sometimes convex, sometimes concave, which had showed him himself now taller, now shorter, than he was. But she had never shown him himself, still less any ideal of what he might be. Then, still touching the same spot, had come Lady Ardingly's gentle classification of Mildred as a cook, made, not with the air of discovery, but merely as a passing allusion to what both knew. A cook, that was all.

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Mildred's reflections were far simpler to follow, and far less disquieting. No doubt she had made a mistake about the scandal she had tried to start about Marie, and it was a comfort to think that Lady Ardingly's remarks about the silliness of it being its own doom were true. Meantime it would be amusing to "run" Jim Spencer for a while, and she felt sure that, even if she could not do it, she could easily convey the impression that she was doing it. On the whole, she would not tell Jack she had seen Lady Ardingly (this was unnecessary, for he knew), and the rest of her meditation was composed of a sense of holding Jack's rein, whatever Lady Ardingly might say, and a superb determination to do her unselfish best for him. She was, as a matter of fact, hopelessly incapable of doing anything unselfish, but a benignant Providence having denied her the possibility of altruism, spared her also the humiliation of the knowledge of its absence.

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It so happened that they met the next evening at an omnibus kind of party at Arthur Naseby's, a bachelor host. He was a man of strange and wayward tastes, and you were liable to meet a Sioux

Indian in feathers there one week, and a missionary who had crossed Africa and been eaten, so he would explain, by cannibal tribes, the next. In his way he was an admirable host, and, before introducing any one of his guests to another, hissed into his ear a rapid *précis* of the chief events of the other's life. These were sometimes wildly enigmatical, as when he murmured: "Frightful scandal just five years ago. Her uncle found dead in the Underground—probably blackmail. Cut for years afterwards. Don't allude to first-class carriages. Daughter of old Toby Fairbank—mother a Jewess." But, as a rule, his information was a help to the newly introduced, and he always pronounced their names loudly and distinctly, instead of murmuring inaudibly. To-night the party centred round a gifted French actress, who recited several poems in a most melodious voice and with a childlike air which was quite killing to those who knew what she was talking about. Later on there was Bridge, owing to the repeated demands of Lady Ardingly, and Jack and Mildred having cut out, it was quite natural that they should have a talk together in a somewhat secluded window-seat.

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"You are getting on, Jack," said she. "I should not be the least surprised if there was a boom in you, as Andrew would say. Dear Andrew! he always remembers my birthday, while I always strive to forget it. One has so many. But he gave me these pearls. Are they not pretty? Yes, Jack, you are booming. You are in the air!"

"That is always rather a nuisance," remarked Jack. "One can't help wanting to assure people that a close inspection will not repay them."

"I don't think you need mind much. People are disposed to take a favourable view of you. You must manage to keep it up. The time of pigs and shorthorns is here," she said with a sigh. "Look: there is Silly Billy talking to Marie! She appears completely unconscious of his presence."

"She probably is, for I don't think she ever poses."

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"There is faint praise in your voice," said Mildred.

"Undesignedly. At least, I had no intention of doing the other thing. By the way, I disquieted myself in vain over the Silly Billy episode, I think. It has not caught on."

"Nobody talked about anything else for three days," said Mildred, with a mother's protective instinct for her offspring. "You didn't suppose they would talk to you about it! But I am magnanimous enough to be glad it has dropped, Jack. It is very important—particularly important, I think—that you should have no joint in your harness just now. You will probably get into the Cabinet, upon which the searchlights will be turned on. I feel this strongly. I have meant to say it to you for—for some time."

He looked at her for a moment without replying.

"She caught it hot," he said to himself, not without satisfaction, for he saw vividly the truth of Lady Ardingly's estimate of her folly.

"I feel it, too," he said; and, though they agreed, a discordant note was definitely struck, and vibrated very audibly to the inward ear, with its own-widening harmonics.

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"I am glad! As you implied to me not long ago, Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion. It was not very convincing to me then. But it is now. Also, Jack, it is best that Cæsar should not inspire spicy paragraphs in the gutter press."

Jack felt unreasonably irritated. The cook spoke here.

"Have you some scandal to tell me about myself," he asked, "also invented by you?"

"No. But why show temper?"

"Because you irritate me when you speak like that."

Mildred felt suddenly a little uncomfortable; she had a sense of uncertain grip.

"Really, Jack, you are very ungrateful!" she said. "I am taking all the trouble of sitting with you in the corner, and thinking of a hundred things for your good, which would never have occurred to you, and you merely tell me that I irritate you!"

"Well, what is it?" he replied.

She rose, really annoyed.

"I will leave you to find out for yourself," she said.

"You are sufficiently lucid. You have stated what you mean quite clearly. You will leave me. I have found out for myself. So shall we discuss it?"

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She had made a false move, and knew it. There was some indefinable change about Jack, which she recognised though she could not analyze it. But the prospect of losing him, even temporarily, on his initiative, was quite another matter to doing it on her own.

"Yes, that is what I mean," she said, sitting down again. "I made a mess, or I might have made one, over that other affair, and I see now that it might have been very injurious to you, especially since Jim Spencer is standing as a Liberal for East Surrey. Did you know that, by the way?"

"Oh, yes. He talked to me about it. It was not wise of you."

"Well, luckily there is no harm done. The thing didn't catch on. But the point is to avoid other dangers. And for the present I am dangerous to you, Jack. People won't begin talking again unless they get fresh cause. Do not let us give them fresh cause."

"I quite agree with you," said he.

Mildred liked this less and less. She had imagined that he would want a lot of talking round and reasoning with, and it did not flatter her at all to find him so placidly in accord with her. Yet she had no tangible ground of complaint.

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"So that is all right," she said. "Ah, here is Marie. Marie, whenever I see you in that pink dress, I think it is morning."

"It is nearly," said she. "Jack, I am going home. Are you stopping to play?"

He rose.

"No, I will come with you," he said.

Marie looked a little surprised.

"Stop by all means if you feel inclined," she said. "I will send the carriage back for you."

Mildred laughed.

"Mutual confidence of the very first water," she observed.

Again the cook *motif* sounded, setting his teeth on edge.

"No, I will come with you, Marie," he repeated.

CHAPTER XIII

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Maud Brereton was lying in a hammock underneath a big chestnut-tree in the garden of the house at Windsor. She had been here a fortnight alone, having been sent from London in disgrace by her mother after her refusal, in consequence of her interview with Marie Alston, to accept the riches and devotion of Anthony Maxwell. This fortnight she had spent in sublime inaction, surrounded as she was by all those things which to her made life lovable. Her dogs were here, her pony was here, the meadows were tall with hay, the river brimming, and the garden-beds presented every day some new miracle of unfolding colour. Each morning she had got up early and ridden in the park, while the day was still cool and dewy; she had read, not much; she had played the piano diligently; she had been the centre of an adoring crowd of dogs and gardeners; and for some days—not all this fortnight, indeed, but the bigger and earlier half of it—she had been completely happy in her own mild ruminative manner. It had been a source of great satisfaction to compare the rival merits of the two systems: London on the one hand; on the other, being in disgrace. For the sight of the hot square garden, she had here this cool, green lawn; for the riband of dull wood pavement up Grosvenor Street, the silver line of the Thames; for the companionship of languid and heated mankind, the eager dogs; and for the hopeless tedium of a ball, the cool vast night pouring in through the open windows of the drawing-room.

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This idyllic attitude towards life in general had lasted ten days or so, but during the last four she no longer tried to conceal from herself her mind had changed. The weather, perhaps, became rather hotter, or she more languid; in any case, though she cared no less for the dogs and the riot of vegetable life, she missed something. And that something, she was beginning to be afraid, was people. Again and again she arrived at this same disheartening conclusion, and though, as many times, she went over in her mind the list of the people whom it was possible she might miss, and found none desirable, it was none the less true that she missed them *en masse*. Imagining them with her now, one by one, she would have wished each of them away, but with them all away there was something lacking. "Perhaps they are like a tonic," she said to herself. "One doesn't want to take it, but one is the better for it."

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She sat up in her hammock and surveyed her surroundings. The book she had brought out to read had fallen, crumple-edged, on the grass, and looking at the back, even the very title came as new to her. Dogs in various stages of exhaustion were stretched round her, and at the sound of her movement tails thumped the grass, but otherwise none stirred. Overhead, the chestnut with green five-fingered leaves drooped in the heat, and stars of wavering light fell through the interspaces of foliage on to her dress. To the right the hay, already tall and ripe to die, stood motionless in the dead calm; and the scent of clover and flowering grass, which in the morning had been wafted in flow and ebb of varying scent, hung heavy and stagnant in the air. Southwards the river was a sheet of glass; a centreboard, hopelessly becalmed, lay with flapping sail in the middle, and a splashed line of broken water showed the paddling efforts of its master. To this side lay the lawn; the croquet hoops were up, and leaning against the stick was a mallet; four balls in as uninteresting position lay immobilized here and there, the *débris* of a game, red versus blue, which Maud had begun that morning, but had found her honesty or her interest unable to cope with. Beyond was the house, bandaged as to the windows with green sun-blinds, and empty but for Maud's maid, who was in love with the caretaker, who adored the kitchenmaid-cook, who adored nobody. There was also the caretaker's wife, and nobody adored her.

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The path which led from the lawn to the river was concealed by a lilac-bush from Maud's hammock, and it was with a sudden quickening of the pulse that she heard a crisp step passing along it. It was a man's tread, so much was certain; it was certain also that it did not belong to any of the gardeners, all of whose steps, Maud had noticed, were marked by a sort of drowsy cumbersomeness, like people who are walking about a dark room. Soon the crisp step paused

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and began to retrace itself, left the gravel for the grass, and in another moment Anthony Maxwell came round the lilac-bush.

Maud did not feel in the least surprised; her unconscious self had probably guessed who it was. She rose from her sitting position on the hammock, but gave him no word or gesture of greeting.

"I came down on my motor-car," he said. "It was particularly hot. May I sit here a little while and get cool?"

"By all means," said Maud. Then, after a pause, "Do you think it was right of you to come?" she said.

"I don't think anything about it," he said; "I had to."

Maud hardened and retreated into herself.

"You mean, I suppose, that my mother insisted on it," she said, with a cold resentment in her voice.

"Your mother does not know I have come," said he. "I should have told her, but I thought she would probably have forbidden me."

"Indeed she would not," said Maud. "She would certainly have encouraged you."

"That would have been just as bad," said Anthony.

Suddenly Maud felt stimulated. During all this fortnight neither the gardeners nor the dogs had said anything so interesting. She sat down again. [Pg 267]

"I should like you to explain that," she said, without confessing to herself that explanation was unnecessary or that she wished to hear him explain.

"You are sure?" he said.

"Quite."

"It is this, then," said he—"we have both been put in a false position. We have been urged to marry each other, and you have refused me. It has not been fair on either of us. In spite of the pressure which has been put upon you, you have refused me; in spite of the pressure put upon me, I want nothing else in the world but that you should marry me. Mind, I quite sympathize with you, for if there is anything in the world which would make one wish never to see a person again, it is to have that person persistently hurled at one. I have been hurled at you. That is one of the reasons why I came here, to tell you that I sympathize with you. I am afraid people have made me an uncommon nuisance to you."

Anthony paused, raised his eyes a moment, and saw that Maud was looking at him steadily, with grave consideration in her face. He felt, rightly, that never before had she given him such favourable attention. [Pg 268]

"I am not such a coxcomb as to suppose that you would have given me a different answer if you had not quite naturally been 'put off' by the way in which you have been treated," he continued; "but I do ask you to remember that I have scarcely had a fair chance. Please try to think that it has not been my fault."

"No; it has been my mother's," said Maud.

"Yes, it has been her fault. I suppose she thought that continued perseverance would have some effect. It may or may not have had the opposite effect to what she intended, but certainly not that."

"It has had the opposite effect," said Maud.

"Are you sure?"

"I am now."

"Can you try and banish it from your mind?"

"I will try."

Anthony, again looked at her, and his heart hammered against his ribs. But even though he scarcely felt master of himself, he did not lose his wisdom and press this point further. [Pg 269]

"I do not hope to win you," he said, "by making myself importunate, and perhaps, now I think of it, it was not wise of me to come. But I am not sorry I came; nor do I give up hope. Very likely that is presumptuous of me; but for myself, I am sure that I shall not change."

He sat on the ground playing with the ear of one of the dogs, but as he said these last words his fingers made a sudden violent movement, and the dog whimpered. "There, there!" he said, and fell to stroking it again quietly.

"You said that this was one of the reasons why you came," said Maud. "What was the other?"

"There was only one other. I wanted to see you. I was drawn by cords," he said.

"Poor Mr. Anthony," said she very quietly, and there was no shade of irony in her voice.

"Thank you for that," he said.

Maud lifted her feet off the ground, and swung gently to and fro in the hammock. She was naturally very reserved, and in matters of the emotions still extraordinarily ignorant, and it would have puzzled her to say exactly what she felt now. It was no tearing or violent emotion, no storm, [Pg 270]

but rather the strong, serene press of a flowing tide. Hitherto the human race, whether considered individually or collectively, had not much occupied her, but something now within her quickened and stirred and moved, and she was certainly at this moment not indifferent to this plain young man who was so modest and so self-assured. There was more about him to be learned than she had known, and that book just opening promised to interest her. Of passion she felt no touch, but her "poor Mr. Anthony" had contained authentic pity.

"You are quite right," she said. "Your various advantages have been constantly told me by my mother. All the things which seemed to her such excellent causes why I should marry you seemed to me to be very bad causes indeed; but they were represented to me as most urgent. I did not find them so." She paused, and Anthony said nothing, feeling that some further word was on her lips. "I like you," she said at length. "Come and have tea."

The moment she had said it she was afraid that he would do something stupid, look fervent, even seize her hand. But she need not have been afraid. Anthony rose at once. [Pg 271]

"Oh, do let us have tea," he said; "I am longing for it."

Maud's relief was great.

"It was stupid of me," she said. "Won't you have a whisky-and-soda? You must be awfully thirsty."

"No, I should prefer tea, thanks," he said. "I hate drinks at odd times. How lovely your garden looks!"

"Yes; but it's still rather backward. The chestnut-flowers should be out by now, and they are still hardly budding."

"How can you remember that?"

"Oh, if one takes an interest in things, it is difficult to forget about them," said Maud.

"That is perfectly true," remarked Anthony.

Soon after tea he left again, and took the white riband of the Bath Road back into London. He could not help telling himself that he had prospered beyond all expectation; and if he had been, as he had told Maud, not hopeless before, he was, it may be supposed, on the sunny side of hope now. But he intended to stop, once and for all, the risk of mismanagement on the part of others, and having reached home he went straight to his mother's room. [Pg 272]

"I've been down to Windsor," said he, "and I had tea with Maud Brereton—alone."

"You haven't got a spark of proper pride, Anthony," said his mother with some heat. "To go dangling and mooning after a girl who's refused you flat! I wonder what she sets up to be!"

"I think she sets up to be herself," said Anthony. "It is rather rare. I like it. But I want to manage my own affair in my own way. I particularly wish Lady Brereton not to say a word more of any kind to Maud. I should like you to tell her so if you have an opportunity."

"Why, I'm sure she's been as eager as anybody," said Lady Maxwell.

"I shall not succeed with her because her mother wishes it," said Anthony. "I'll play my hand alone, please."

In London, in the meantime, the fact that Maud had refused him had become generally known, and London, with that admirable substitute for altruism which is so characteristic of it, and consists in vividly concerning one's self with those things that do not in the least concern one, had been very voluble on the subject. There was scarcely any divergence in the views expressed, and everybody was agreed that it was a terrible thing for poor Mildred to find she had for a daughter so obstinate and wrong-headed a girl. "Why, the Maxwells roll, my dear—simply roll! Of course, Maud is wonderfully good-looking, and no doubt lots of other men will be after her, but why not have accepted Anthony provisionally? It is always so easy to let it be understood, if anything else turned up, that a young girl like that hadn't known her own mind——" [Pg 273]

On the top of this there leaked out the fact that Marie Alston had strongly dissuaded her from it, and the world, with the agility and restlessness of monkeys, leaped to the new topic. Really Marie was getting a little too strong! It was all very well to scatter those amusing and general criticisms on people in general, and take the unworldly pose; but when it came to putting her finger in the wheels of the Society watch, so to speak, and stopping them from turning, it was too much. How on earth were struggling mothers to hope to get their daughters happily—yes, happily—married, if idealistic snowflakes were ready to descend upon them at street corners and forbid the banns. Over this Society grinned and showed its teeth for a little while, and then was off again on a fresh tack. How would Mildred behave to Marie? Here there were wheels within wheels, and the upshot was that Society was not at all sure that there had not been a break on one side or the other between Jack and her. Given that certain things had come to Marie's ear, it would account for everything. What an ingenious revenge, too, on Marie's part! Really, she was a person of brains. It required cool thinking to hit upon a *riposte* like that. [Pg 274]

After this, sensation came hard on the heels of sensation. Mildred began to be mentioned in the same breath as Jim Spencer, and, far more remarkable, Jack began to be mentioned in the same breath as his wife. They had dined out together twice last week; they had been together to party after party. How curious and interesting! A complete resorting of the cards, and without any fuss whatever; and the honour, as usual, in Marie's hand. In one *partie* she had recaptured her husband, shunted off her admirer on to Mildred, scored heavily against her, all the time with her nose in the air, as unapproachable and distinguished as ever. But meanwhile Lady Ardingly sat [Pg 275]

like a spider in the middle of her web. The threads had extended farther than even she had originally planned, but she did not object in the least to that. And when people came and told her the news, she was less severe than usual.

"Ah, my dear!" she would say, "how you fly about, and gather honey and all sorts of curious other things! And I sit here. I never know anything except what you are good enough to come and tell me. And so Jack is *amouraché* again of his wife? So charming, is she not? Let us play Bridge immediately."

Mildred, however, did not think that things were quite so satisfactory. At first the idea of Jack and Marie Darby-and-Joaning it together sent her into fits of laughter. But after a week or so the joke began to lose its point—or, to state it more accurately, the point became rather too sharp for her liking. Jack and she had settled that they were to see less of each other, and not give any ground for people to say behind their backs what was perfectly and absolutely true; but she had not bargained for this return to intimacy between husband and wife. Once she had approached Jack on the subject.

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"You are very realistic," she had said, "and have a great respect for detail."

"To what are you referring?" he asked.

"Oh, don't be stupid! You are taking your part very seriously. You see nothing of me—that is all right; but is it necessary to bore yourself quite so much with Marie?"

"I don't bore myself," he had said.

"Bore her, then?"

"I try not to do that," said Jack with curdling equanimity. "But what are you driving at? Do you want me to mourn for you, to watch the shadow on your blind? That would be rather unconvincing to other people, would it not?"

"No; they would say I was tired of you."

Jack considered this.

"I don't want them to say anything about us at all," he answered, and again the sense of imperfect grip haunted the woman, and the sense of having been talking to a cook the man.

Nor was this the sum of Mildred's discomfort. She had amiably proposed not long ago to break with Marie, but now that the opportunity was ripe she felt herself simply unable to do so. There was a deficiency of force in her—moral or immoral, it matters not which—which was unable to stand up to the other. Also, she was dimly aware that people in general were watching her, looking at her rather as they had done when, now years ago, her hair had turned golden in a single night. But now the cause was not so tangible. Was it that she herself, not her hair only, was turning gray? Certainly she was conscious of a failure of power. It was in vain that she ate her many solid meals, or, as the whim took her, lived on varalettes and lean meat, vowing that this treatment made the whole difference to her; it was in vain she slept her solid six hours, drove a great deal in the fresh air, and kept her windows unwontedly open. People, the hundred diverting situations in which her friends daily found themselves, diverted her less, and she wondered whether the truth was, as fashion papers assured her, that the season was not very brilliant, or whether it was she who was losing the power to be amused. The thought of old age, a veritable bogey to one who has always felt young, sat daily by her in the empty seat of the victoria, and flapped in the wind-stirred blind of her bedroom at dark hours.

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After she had left Jack that afternoon she had driven for an hour in the Park. The day was very fine, and the roadway and the path beside the Ladies' Mile were both crowded. She sat up very straight, as her custom was, in her victoria, the anæmic Yorkshire terrier by her side, and put up her veil so as both to see and be seen more distinctly. She was dressed, she knew, with extreme success, and it had been pleasant, at a block entering the Park, to see a gaunt female taking notes of the occupants of the carriages. Her own had by singular good luck paused exactly opposite this journalist, and she had out of the corner of her eye seen her examining and writing down with the facility of long practice the details of her costume: "Many smart people were in the Park, driving and walking last Thursday. Among others, I noticed Lady Brereton driving in her victoria, with her sweet little terrier by her side, extremely stylishly gowned. Her Saturday-till-Monday parties are still the attraction, and no wonder. On this occasion Lady Brereton had a new 'creation,' which I must describe. The bodice was of yellow silk, faced with orange colour; her bonnet," etc.

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After this the crowd claimed her attention. Indeed, as "Diana" would say next week, "all the smart world" was about. Silly Billy, as usual, was taking his daily airing previous to clearing out the company at the "Deuce of Spades" at Bridge, talking to a nameless female, who appeared to want a lot of attention. Mildred just caught his eye, and, full of tact as ever, immediately looked away. Further on was Arthur Naseby, with hands wildly gesticulating, shrilly declaiming something of a clearly screaming nature to Blanche Devereux and a small and select company. He was standing close to the rails, and cried, "Dear lady! how are you?" to her, and the select company smiled their sweetest at her. Then, as her carriage passed at a foot's pace, she again heard his voice—in a different key and much lower. She could not catch the words, but felt sure that he was saying something about her. Then followed Jim Spencer alone. To him she waved her hand and beckoned him to the vacant seat in her victoria. But he, with seeming obtuseness, appeared not to understand, and went on his way. Then came Lady Davies, driving in the opposite direction, who passed without recognising her; soon after Kitty Paget, making violent love to her husband; and presently a tandem, which she recognised while yet some way off as

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Jack's. He was driving himself; a woman was seated by him. At the same moment the muscles of Mildred's face hauled up as by a crane all the paraphernalia of smiles, for the woman was her dear friend and Jack's wife. Immediately afterwards the smile had to be tied to the mast again, for close behind them was Lady Ardingly, "got up to kill," as Mildred angrily said to herself. She looked like a Turner landscape of the later period, with a lopsided sunset of auburn hair perched negligently on the top. Her mouth seemed to crack a little by way of recognition, and she passed in a flash of winking lacquer.

But Marie driving with Jack! That penultimate meeting was the most surprising. Did he really think she—Mildred—or, indeed, Marie, was the sort of woman to stand a *ménage à trois*, especially when one of the three was his wife? Then, like an earthquake wave laden with the dead slime of the stirred depths, the sense of her own impotence came over her. Only a fortnight ago she had airily told Jack that she was glad that concealment was at an end—that she would now break with Marie. But what if something else was at an end? What if her revolt at a *ménage à trois* was altogether ill-founded? Out of three people there were two mathematically possible arrangements *à deux*. In this case one would have to be left out.

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She had put up her veil, and at this moment something line-like crossed the field of her left eye. She put up her hand, and found between her finger and thumb a long hair, golden, but gray near the root. One hair only, and they were all numbered! But this was not number one.... There were certain savage tribes that could only count up to eight. She rather envied them their blissful incapacity.

There came a sudden stop, and she found herself in a queue of carriages at the side of the road. Down the centre came the royal outriders, followed by the carriage. The King and one of the Princesses were seated in it. He took off his hat to some one in the carriage immediately in front of hers, then turned and spoke to his companion. Probably his oversight of her was quite unintentional. But something within her said, "What if—" For some weeks now she had been a little uneasy; she had felt that her case was under consideration. Perhaps her not being recognised was the formal declaration to her of her sentence.

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Then, in a flash, she was herself again, back to the wall, fighting desperately for her position, which was equivalent to her life. She would show everybody if she was done with yet. A gray hair or two! What did that matter, when a woman like Lady Ardingly had no hairs at all, gray or any other colour, and all the world knew it? She had money—any amount of it—which was of more consequence than anything else; she had, what was almost better than wit, a quick and incisive tongue—an instrument, it is true, not to be used except on such occasions as when a man may draw his revolver, to defend himself at close quarters, but as valuable, when people knew you had it, as the revolver. She was selfish, ambitious, greedy of worse things than food, unscrupulous, ready to amuse, and easy to be amused. She had everything, in fact, which was needful to make up the kind of success which she desired, and which, in point of fact, she had hitherto enjoyed. Yet she had industriously and carefully been making a private little hell for herself during this last hour simply because Marie went driving with her husband, and the King happened not to see her!

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Like all wise people, though she would not admit it to any one else, she frankly admitted to herself that she had made a mistake—such a little one, too—when she had allowed Silly Billy to talk about Marie and Jim Spencer, and this mistake, she was aware, had ramified further than she had anticipated. She ought never to have started it. She had not got enough beam, so to speak, to sail against Marie. Yet what a tempting prospect, if only she could have won! Marie really besmirched! How unspeakably convenient! But apparently this was not to be. She confessed that she had failed, and was genuinely sorry she had attempted it. Things had been very happy and comfortable before, and she ought to have been content. She felt, indeed, rather like a person who cannot swim, who has capsized near the bank, but in the first moment of immersion does not know whether he is within his depth or not. In any case, a few floundering plunges towards land would settle the matter, and she would be safe again—not, indeed, on the other bank, which had looked so inviting, but where she was before, and very enjoyable it had been!

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As a matter of fact, one of Mildred's depressed conjectures had been quite correct, and had she known what was being said a mile or so behind her, she would not have found it so easy, perhaps, to brace herself up to make her efforts.

"Busily employed," said Arthur Naseby shrilly, "in taking the plug out of the bottom of her own boat. She exhibits a marvellous dexterity in doing it. What is the use of trying to start a scandal which nobody will believe? It was so stale, too. You and I certainly had done our level best to believe it long before, Lady Devereux. That Sunday down at Windsor—don't you remember?"

"Yes, I tried for a week, with both hands and my eyes shut," said Blanche.

"And I tried with my eyes open," said Arthur; "so we have given ourselves every chance. It, too, had every chance. It was launched without a hitch, and the colours waved madly on the winds of heaven. Silly Billy, the 'Deuce of Spades,' the overhearing of it by Jack! All brilliant accessories! But the piece was damned from the first!"

"It really is too shocking!" said Mrs. Leighton, with her mouth underneath her left ear. "Such a mistake on dear Mildred's part! Gracious powers below! did you see?" she said, pointing with her parasol at Jack and Marie in the tandem. "Yes, too heavenly, is it not?" she screamed at them. "Mildred has just passed, like Solomon in all his glory, with the Yorkshire terrier. And there are the lilies of the field," she continued, looking after Marie. "Poor dear Solomon!"

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"There is a decided flavour of the best French farces in the air," remarked Arthur. "Enter, also, Madame la Marquise."

Lady Ardingly said something violent to her coachman, who drew up with a jerk.

"Ah, my dears!" she said with extreme graciousness. "How are you all? Why do none of you drive with poor Mildred? I have just passed her all alone. I am alone, too—am I not?—but I am used to it."

"Do let me come and drive with you, Lady Ardingly!" cried Arthur.

"And leave these enchanting ladies?" said she. "They would say all sorts of horrible things, and not come to my parties any more, nor tell me the news! What has been happening?"

"Jack and Marie have just passed in the tandem!" said Arthur.

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"Indeed! And Black Care was going in the other direction, not sitting behind them. So much better! Ah, here are the outriders! I am not fit to be seen."

She put up an immense mauve-coloured parasol to shut herself out, and the others rose, as the carriage passed in a whirl of dust.

"And what else?" she continued.

"Well, it is supposed that Black Care has annexed Jim Spencer."

"Ah, you have heard that, too? She has a genius for annexation. Your Government would have saved a world of trouble if they had sent her out to the Transvaal years ago. That is very nice, and we shall all live peaceably again now. Marie and Jack in the tandem, and dear Mildred provided for! Good-bye, my dears; I must get home. I am playing a little Bridge this afternoon. You are all coming to my party to-night, are you not? That is so kind of you! Drive on. What a dolt!" she said to the coachman.

"There is only one Lady Ardingly," said Arthur in a reverent tone; "and I am her devoted admirer. How does she do it?"

Mrs. Leighton considered a moment.

"I would get a wig, and call my coachman fool, and ask everybody for news, in a minute, if it would do any good," she said; "but it wouldn't. People would consider me slightly cracked, and I'm sure I shouldn't wonder."

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Blanche got up with a sigh.

"She takes the taste out of everybody else," she said. "I shall go home and practise doing it before a glass;" and she waved to her footman.

Arthur Naseby rose also.

"I believe she is running this whole show," he said. "She never contradicted us once. But what is she playing at?"

But since collectively they could not have mustered one-third of Lady Ardingly's brains, it was no wonder that none of them could suggest an answer.

But as he handed Blanche into her carriage, Arthur summed up the situation.

"The fact is that it takes four or five of us to understand one-half of what she says," he remarked.

CHAPTER XIV

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The General Election had been definitely fixed to begin in the second week in July, and consequently soon after Ascot politicians of all sorts and shades of opinion were sedulously flying about the country, busy recounting to the wondering provinces how grossly their opponents had misrepresented their aims and tactics, and proving in an array of terms which beggared the dictionary, that the country could only be saved by the united voice of the people declaring that they would record a firm and combined vote. South Africa was, of course, the chosen battlefield of both parties; here each was determined to fight the matter out (this was the only matter on which they were agreed), and the speed with which the opposing armies mobilized out there was as remarkable as their manœuvres when arrived. Some charged through the country already peopled in their minds with the families of reservists, and dotted with happy homesteads, over which waved the fair golden corn, while on the hills of the Witwatersrand the great mills poured out their millions, and those who had been in arms were already spending happy Sunday evenings with their brother Boers, singing hymns to the accompaniment of the vrow's harmonium, and zealously marrying her buxom daughters. Gold paved the streets of Johannesburg, and the curbstones thereof were diamonds, and Paul Kruger and Mr. Leyds fell on their bended knees and, with tears of gratitude in their grateful eyes, blessed the names of Mr. Rhodes and the Colonial Secretary. The Union Jack waved on all the winds of heaven, and every Englishman in that happy land beat his rifle into a pea-shooter for his infant children—half Boer, half British—and ate his roast beef under his fig-tree.

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But oddly enough exactly the same data furnished the Opposition with a picture by no means identical. These gentlemen went mournfully through the land, which was, it appeared, a desert.

Cemeteries and ruined homesteads were the only features that they, for their part, could discern in that desolate landscape, and the cemeteries, they sadly declared, marked, not only the graves of the young British soldier, martyred to gorge the capitalist with gold, but were, to the thoughtful eye, none else than the place where the British Empire died and was buried. Along the ridge of the Witwatersrand rose the grass-grown engines of the mines; the rusty fly-wheels hung cableless in that miasmic air, tainted with rotting corpses. No sound was heard, no sign of life was visible; only from time to time there came from the bowels of the earth the sobbing of those who had once been gorged capitalists. The country was drained of its resources, sir—emptied of its inhabitants. That garden of the Lord was barren and desolate. Who, they asked, with rising passion, had done this? The late Government. Why had they done this? Because they were under the thumb of the capitalists. They had piles and masses of documentary evidence to prove every word they said. And awe fell on the assemblies.

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After this first plain statement of the case delivered in duet by the leader of the Government and the leader of the Opposition, there followed what may be described as a fugual chorus. Everybody else, that is to say, joined in and shouted the same thing over and over again at the top of his voice. There were two conductors, no other than the executants of the opening duet, who, standing back to back, beat away at the chorus for all they were worth, and in the more delirious moments turned round and hit savagely at each other with their batons. The audience comprised nearly all the inhabitants of the round world, and this remarkable chorus lasted day and night without intermission for three weeks. Then they all sang "Britons never, never, never will be slaves," but with totally different expression, and meaning utterly different things, so that the effect of unanimity, which otherwise would no doubt have been extremely striking, was spoiled, and rude things were said in the French journals. That, it is true, for a moment produced a defensive alliance among themselves, and they roared out across the Channel. "How about Dreyfus?" But almost immediately the more ardent spirits—sober politicians they called themselves—began again, and mixed with the renewed chorus-singing were bonfires and other things, and most prominent people were burned in effigy and appeared not to mind it.

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Then, when every one was exhausted and out of breath, they put on their coats again, and sat down for a while to see what the result had been. Europe generally was smiling, and went on much as usual; but in England itself it appeared that certain groups of people were not listening to the beautiful music at all, but puzzling and frowning over some papers of statistics. Also it was observed that some men, who ought to have been singing as hard as anybody, were not singing at all, but talking quietly to those portions of the audience who were willing to listen. Of these, two were immediately concerned with this story, and these were Lord Alston and Jim Spencer. And, although they belonged to opposite parties, they were both saying precisely the same thing.

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This particular evening Jack had returned to London somewhat unexpectedly, having found himself able to catch a late train up, after the meeting he had been addressing in Southampton on behalf of a young Conservative, standing for the first time, who, because he had been nearly all the way to Pretoria, was therefore apparently qualified to say the last word on every measure, from seats for shop girls to seats for Bishops in the Upper House. Marie had just come home from a party when he arrived, and the two talked while Jack had supper.

"I don't suppose I shouted and screamed enough to please him," he said; "but the fact is, I do not think he is necessarily omniscient, nor that he will be Prime Minister at the age of twenty-four. However, I preached the gospel."

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Marie threw back her cloak.

"Talk to me while you eat," she said. "I am getting swept into the vortex, too; this evening we talked about nothing but politics."

"Won't it bore you?"

"I shall enjoy it. I think people believe in you, Jack."

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"The point is that they should believe what I say. It doesn't matter about me."

"Indeed it does. It is you who make them believe it. Besides—well, go on."

"Well, I told them that I thought both Conservatives and Liberals were doing quite wrong in making the South African affair, except in so far as it was a test of our efficiency, the cry of the election. It has been the fashion to speak of it as a great war. It is nothing of the kind, though it is perfectly true that, owing to our own hopeless mistakes, we brought it very near to being a most disastrous war, if not a war fatal to the Empire. Young Campbell's face fell rapidly as I spoke."

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"I can imagine that," said Marie.

"The audience were not too pleased, either; but somehow, Marie, and for the first time, I did not care a rap. You have often told me that I speak without conviction. It is quite true; I believe what I say without feeling it. But to-night I felt it, and I knew I could make them feel it. I had them in my hand, and at first I carefully rubbed them up the wrong way. I went through the disasters of December, 1899—Stormberg, Magersfontein, Colenso. I pointed out that most of these could have been saved, if we had only been decently prepared, instead of going into the war in a blind and idiotic manner, as if the fact of our being the British Empire made it impious and profane for any one to attempt to withstand or, even worse, check us. I touched every sore place that I could put my finger on. Once I thought I had gone too far, for a man shouted out: 'Turn the—well, horrid Radical out!' And having, as well as I could, pulled our policy to bits, I proceeded to pluck the army itself. I assure you there was hardly a feather left on it. Doesn't all this bore you?"

"You know it doesn't," said she.

"And then quite suddenly I assured them that the Empire was far the soundest concern in the world. Well, it may seem conceited, Marie, but it is the fact, that I had them so much in hand by then that a huge sigh of relief went round the hall. I never felt so flattered. But short of that I said everything was about as wrong as it could be. What is wanted is not amiable and excellent noblemen, who talk a great deal and are excessively polite, but people who just work, do things and not say them, pay no attention to party politics whatever—that can be done by the rank and file, all those who get into Parliament simply in order to talk—and buckle to, guided entirely by experts, and insist on having men and officers, mind you, properly trained, given proper guns to handle, and made to use their heads. We have, I believe, the best material in the world out of which to make the army we need. But it is raw, it is untrained; it is no more an army than sheep's wool is a coat. And it was their first duty, I told them, to vote for the Government which they thought would best put the House in order. This was a Conservative meeting, I reminded them, but I would sooner that every man in it voted Liberal than that he should, merely because he was accustomed to call himself a Conservative, vote Conservative, if he believed that the Liberals would be more likely to put these necessary reforms into effect. Then I came down hammer and tongs with Rule, Britannia; there should be only one party in our great, our happy and glorious island, the Party of Efficiency. Efficiency is our first need. I concluded with some amiable remarks about Campbell."

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Marie got up, her eye flashing.

"Well, you've done it now, Jack," she said.

"I know I have. I couldn't help it. And to-morrow I shall find out exactly what I have done."

Marie got up and walked up and down the room for a few moments without replying. Jack's highly original line of conduct for a man whose aim was to get into the Cabinet was extraordinarily attractive to her sense of picturesqueness. He had certainly played a very bold game, but she could not feel satisfied in her own mind whether he had over-stepped the dividing-line between boldness and sheer audacity.

"Also I said that, if the Conservatives got in, it was to be hoped they would clear out the old gang," remarked Jack, in parenthesis to her thoughts.

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Marie frowned.

"Ah, that was not wise, was it?" she said. "Didn't it savour too much of an application for a vacant post?"

"It was meant to," said Jack. "After the rest of my speech, it could not be supposed that I hoped—as I do hope—to get the War Office by ingratiating myself with the old gang. If I get it, I shall get it because I am popularly supposed to be wanted. I do apply for the post. I gave them this afternoon my idea of my duties if I get it. But I apply to the people. Lord, what a treat the morning papers will be!"

Marie's eyes kindled again as she continued to walk up and down the dusky dining-room, her long dress whispering on the carpet.

"I am excited, exhilarated," she said. "It is like getting out of stuffy rooms into the open air to hear you talk, Jack. I can't make up my mind as to whether I think you have done altogether wisely, but you have gone on a big scale. I admire that."

Jack got up. Marie's words thrilled him with a warmth he had not felt for her for years. Already he was beginning to look on the conduct of his married life with a wonder that rose now into a disgusted incredulity. Her splendid contempt for him had begun it; he had been stung into seeing her as she was, and her generosity to him had fostered it. No after-word of reproach had passed her lips for that which now made his ears burn to think of. She had seen with her woman's instinct his deepening contrition for that ugly scene, and, seeing it, did not need or desire a spoken assurance. But what Jack did not know was that his reawakened passion roused in her no answering spark whatever. Passion for him was dead in her. In a moment she went on:

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"I am immensely interested in your aims, Jack, and your method of working for them. If one is not sure of one's self, tact and diplomacy help one to feel one's way; but there is a higher gift than these, and I believe you have it—it is strength."

He turned round, facing the fireplace, feeling suddenly chilled. In the hall a clock struck two, and a weary-faced footman looked suggestively in.

"Good gracious! is it already two?" she said, picking up her unopened post; "and I have not read these yet. They must wait; I know by the feel of them they are uninteresting."

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She turned and faced him, standing in the full blaze of the electric light, her face brilliantly illuminated. She had thrown back her cloak, her white bosom moved slowly and gently to her breathing, and his eyes were dazzled at her incomparable beauty. And all this, the perfect bloom of womanhood, this lily in a leper settlement, had been his. Instead he had preferred outwardly the rouge and the dye, inwardly the vulgar flashiness and tawdry wit of her who had so long been his mistress. At the moment he felt he loathed Mildred. Once he tried to speak and could not, and she had turned again.

"Good-night, Jack," she said over her shoulder. "You must be tired. I shall be excited to see what the unofficial Government organs make of you. Will you tell them to put the lights out when you

go upstairs?"

He stood where he was listening to the diminuendo whisper of her dress. Then, after a moment, he heard the door of her bedroom shut behind her.

Quite a quantity of unknown, though probably not obscure, leader-writers bestowed their distinguished attention on Jack next day. The Daily Chronicle and Daily News announced that they had had the sagacity months before to foresee this split in the Conservative party, and hailed Jack as a prodigal son returning to the depleted homesteads of Liberalism. The Standard, on the other hand, grabbed him as the *homme nécessaire* of the Conservative party; the Times, gently trimming, admitted that to a certain extent, and subject to various conditions, there was something in what he said; the Daily Telegraph clearly did not know what to think, and fell back on generalities about 9.7 guns; while a few hours later the Westminster Gazette had a cartoon entitled "Jack the Ripper," in which he was represented with an impassive face methodically disembowelling the present Cabinet—a signpost indicated Hatfield. The effect on the press, in fact, was very satisfactory; opinions were widely divergent and extremely violent. In fact, as Jack said to Marie when he saw her next morning, he seemed to have "caught on."

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"And what do you suppose they will think?" asked Marie.

"Who? Oh, they! I don't know. But I soon shall, as I'm going down to headquarters now. I think, perhaps, as the papers have taken me up, it may incline them to give me office. Not that they ever read the papers. But office is regarded as a muzzling order, as far as I can make out. They may think me worth muzzling. If so, I see no reason for not taking my muzzle off. I may not be back for lunch; I rather want to see Lady Ardingly."

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"General bureau; central office," said she.

"Precisely. You have the habit of putting things well. Good-bye, Marie." He bent over the low chair where she was sitting and gently kissed her on the forehead. She looked up in genuine astonishment, then flushed slightly, for they had long been strangers to that sort of spontaneous caress, and it seemed to her to come from a stranger. He saw her astonishment and winced at it. "I—I beg your pardon!" he said hurriedly, knowing the moment he spoke that he was ill-inspired.

The bewildered moment of surprise passed, leaving Marie, however, with a glimpse of what might be even more bewildering. She laughed lightly enough, but with a certain nervousness.

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"How original, for a husband to apologize to his wife for kissing her!" she said.

But she got up and did not offer to return the caress.

Marie required a few moments in which to steady herself after he had left her. She had been utterly taken by surprise. If Jack had emptied the contents of the waste-paper-basket over her, he would not have astonished her more. For days now she had had the impression that some change had come over Jack. At first she had put it all down to his regret for his telling her that her name was coupled with Jim Spencer's, but by degrees it had seemed to her that there must be something more. But this possibility she had only glanced at to reject. It could not be. Then he had kissed her.

Suddenly it seemed to her that the place where his lips had been burned her; she felt as if she had been insulted; a fine state of mind for a wife, she told herself angrily. Then, with a remorseless frankness, her conscience told her why she felt thus. It was because she had made herself a stranger to him; her heart was not here, it was with another. And Jack was her husband. Anyhow, she would face it honestly. She had despised and shown her scorn for him when he told her what people said, thinking she was honest in her indignation. But what if he had told her what nobody said, but what she knew, and what she was perfectly well aware Jim Spencer knew? Had she been so faithful, then, as to warrant her cold and burning words to Jack! She had scorned and then ignored the actual falsehood of his words, but what of that which was true, which he did not know—the real essential truth of that which lay behind the falsehood?

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She gave a little frightened gasp as these intimate discoveries, cape after cape, bay after bay, came into vision. And what complaint had she of her husband, but that they had long been at discord? No breath of scandal, even from the gutter, had ever reached her ears about him. She had no reason, absolutely none, for supposing that he had not been far more faithful to her than she to him. But when he kissed her she had shrunk away from him.

Now, since her drive in the Park a few days before, and the discovery attendant thereon that efforts were necessary, a militant spirit had possessed Mildred. She was seen everywhere, at her loudest and most characteristic; she had simply summoned Maud from the retirement at Windsor, she had secured a record party for next Sunday, and for the sake of general completeness she had determined, in spite of Lady Ardingly, to ask Jack and Marie. The notice was very short, and, instead of writing a note, she drove round this morning to Park Lane to deliver her invitation verbatim; she likewise wished, in case Marie was in, to air a few poisonous nothings, scouts, as it were, of her advancing armies. And arriving at this moment, she was admitted and shown upstairs.

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"Dearest Marie, it is ages, simply ages!" she began. "I have come to supplicate. Do come down to Windsor from Saturday till Monday. You shall not be bored; there is Guardina to sing to you, and the place really looks too lovely. Maud has been describing it to me; she came up yesterday. And

there are half the Front Bench coming on Sunday. It might be useful for Jack to be there. My dear, what do you think of Jack's speech? However, about Saturday first."

"I don't think we can," said Marie. "We have already refused two Saturday parties on the plea of — If I only could remember the plea it might be more hopeful. Political plea, I think." [Pg 305]

"That's just right, then," said Mildred. "Jack will have a quiet talk with the old gang. Besides, Marie, if one only saw you on the days when you had not refused an invitation, I should not know you by sight in a year. So you'll come."

"Well, I think 'political' covers it," she said. "I shall be charmed if Jack has made no other arrangement. And his speech. What do you think of it?"

Mildred held up her hands in despairing deprecation.

"I thought I should have died," she said. "It is too sad when you see a clever man industriously digging his own grave. One always does it eventually by mistake, but on purpose like that, and with his eyes open!"

"Did it strike you so?"

"Surely, and the ridiculous point is that Jim said almost precisely the same things down at Freshfield."

"That surely, then, is, as far as it goes, as the Times would say, in favour of both of them," remarked Marie. "To my mind, there is a new party in birth. You may call it Imperial, I suppose. It is far from Jingo. Jack's speech is the antithesis of Jingoism; it is also not—well, Northamptonish. It is beginning to roar as every well-conducted baby should." [Pg 306]

Mildred's appetite for politics was at all times bird-like. She pecked and hopped away. On this occasion she hopped away to a considerable distance.

"I have seen a good deal of Jim lately," she said. "In fact, I am afraid I have been seeing a little too much."

"You mean you are getting tired of him?" asked Marie, who, from having been rather absent, was now intent and alert.

"Dear me, no! not that at all. I delight in him," said Mildred, rapidly adding wings and new courtyards to the structure Lady Ardingly had indicated. "But people talk so easily and without foundation. You know what I mean."

She leaned back a little in the shadow as she spoke, feeling that she was really a very gifted woman, for her speech had many edges. In the first place, it was dramatically amusing to blood her second invention with the life of her first; a sharp edge was that she more than half believed that there was something between Marie and Jim, and what she had said was therefore of the nature of a test question; and, thirdly, granting this, how would Marie meet the claim on her property? [Pg 307]

The paper she had been reading slid rustling to the ground off Marie's lap. It seemed to her as if some dark room familiar to her, though she could not tell how or when she had seen it, had been suddenly illuminated.

"Oh, my dear Mildred," she said, "if one pauses to pick scraps of paper out of the gutter to see what is written on them, one would spend all one's life in the same slum. I should have thought you, of all people, would not have cared an atom what people said, so long, of course, as there was no earthly truth in it."

Mildred settled herself in her chair. There was plenty more, she felt, where this came from.

"But has your experience of the world taught you that?" she asked.

"Taught me not to care what people say?" said Marie—"yes, I may certainly assure you of that. For instance—" and she paused.

Mildred rustled suggestively.

"There is no reason I should not tell you," said Marie. "It is this. Oddly enough, some fortnight or three weeks ago exactly the same thing was said about me as you are afraid will be said about you. I was supposed, in fact, to be much attached to Jim. So I am; we are the greatest friends. But this charming world uses 'friend' in two senses. Probably some cook of a woman, finding nothing to say to some valet of a man, said so. And the kitchen section of London society, I have been told, talked about it. But any perfectly inane piece of fabrication like that soon dies of—of its own inanition." [Pg 308]

"But who on earth started anything so absurd?" asked Mildred.

"I have no idea; I did not even want to know. I was angry, I will allow, for a day or two. Then other things came and swallowed it up. It became merely dull. It simply did not interest me. I assure you I had almost forgotten it. I suppose one has lots of enemies one does not know of. Probably I had made some cook of a woman, as I said, angry without intending it. I—yes, something of that sort."

It was not till these words were on her lips that a sudden idea, wild and preposterous as it might be, occurred to her. It came into her mind quite unbidden, and was wholly unaccountable. Mildred laughed quite naturally. [Pg 309]

"Ah, you are the Snowflake," she said—"our one unsmirchable. It is all very well for you to shrug

your shoulders at what the world says!"

"That is exactly what I am told was said of me," said she quietly. "I was supposed to have melted. Did the story, then, reach you?"

"Some sort of a story did," said she. "It seemed to me not even worth repeating to you."

"Quite right. It wasn't."

Mildred rose.

"I must fly," she said. "Too delightful of you to come on Saturday, Marie! I always think nothing is complete without you."

She went gracefully out, leaving the air heavy with some languid scent, and went down the stairs rather quicker than she had come up. There was something closely resembling a flea in her ear. And everything had looked so well on paper. Unfortunately, Marie did not in the least remind one of paper.

But, leaving out all that was not to her taste in this last interview, her clouds were showing the traditional silver lining. It was, for instance, quite evident to her that Maud's golden lover had not in the least finished with her. She, when questioned on the subject, cultivated a strong reserve, which, as her mother concluded, implied in itself something which admitted of reservation. It was certain, on Maud's own authority, that Anthony had been to Windsor, but with that her nose went into the air quite like Marie's, and it was impossible to talk familiarly with such an icicle. And her mother thanked God that she herself was not of such a temperament.

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Altogether, then, the solid ground had not failed beneath her feet. But it was best to make efforts; either she had been on the verge of a precipice or her nerves had led her to believe that she was. In either case, there was no such tonic as a good dose of the world—that combined soporific to the conscience and astringent to the energies. She had, it is true, applied herself to the wrong bottle when she went to see Marie, but that was easily set right, and by way of antidote she drove on to Lady Ardingly's, who, it appeared, was "up," but about whom there hung at this hour of the morning a veil of mystery, not to be dispelled without further inquiries. These inquiries were favourable, and Mildred was conducted, still by the footman, to her dressing-room.

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Lady Ardingly was seated in a costume that it would be impossible to specify without being prolix, and possibly indelicate, writing notes. An uneasy shadow of a maid hovered near her, to whom she paid no attention. The footman, in obvious perturbation, opened the door and waited, in obedience, it would seem, to a command.

"Ah, my dear, how are you?" said Lady Ardingly, addressing her last note. "One moment, if you will be so kind. Walter, take these, and have them sent at once by hand. They must all wait for answers. In case any are not in, let them be brought back. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Say it, then."

"All to be delivered, and if"—and he glanced at the two letters—"if their lordships isn't in, the notes not to be left."

And he cast a glance of awe and astonishment at his mistress and fled.

Lady Ardingly was, in truth, an astonishing object. Nothing had been done to her; she was, with the exception of certain linen garments, as her Maker had willed she should be. Short and scant gray hair imperfectly covered her head; her face, of a curious gray hue, was arbitrarily intersected by a hundred wrinkles and crow's-feet.

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"I am in dishabille," she said, rather unnecessarily; "but every old woman is in dishabille. You will get used to it, my dear, some day. So you have come to tell me what every one is saying about Jack's speech. Yes, I am ready for you," she threw over her shoulder to her maid.

That functionary took her stand by her mistress and handed the weapons. A powder-puff began the work, followed by an impressionist dusting on of rouge. Lady Ardingly grew beneath the work of her hands. Then a thick crayon of charcoal traced the approximate line where her eyebrows had once been, and a luxuriant auburn wig framed the picture. Mildred, who looked up even from the eyes of her maid such aids as she was accustomed to use, looked on with a sort of shamefacedness. Just as Marie had just now given almost a shock to her instinct of covering up and doing in secret the processes of thought, of showing to the world only the finished and diplomatic product, so Lady Ardingly gave a shock to her body. Each of them—differing by the distance of miles—was alike in this. And the frankness of both was inconceivable to her. Yet both, in their way, possessed calmly and fully what it cost her long effort to catch a semblance of. Neither minded being natural, and both naturally were so. Mildred's naturalness—a rare phenomenon—was the outcome of intense artificiality.

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"And what is every one saying of Jack's speech?" repeated Lady Ardingly, with one eye closed, regarding with some favour a brilliant patch of rouge on her left cheek. "Or what do you say? You can scarcely yet have heard what people think of it."

"Surely he has almost declared himself a Liberal," suggested Mildred.

"So the Daily Chronicle said," remarked Lady Ardingly. "What else?"

"But, on the other hand, the Cabinet would sooner have such a critic on their side than against them."

"Ah, my dear, you have read the Standard too. So have I. Have you not any opinion of your own?"

"Yes; he is on the edge of a precipice."

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Lady Ardingly's decorative hand paused.

"And what is the precipice?" she asked. "You have not forgotten our talk, I see."

Mildred lost patience a little.

"Your advice, you mean," she said.

"My advice, if you prefer. I am so glad you have been behaving with such good sense. And as for Jack's speech, I tell you frankly I was astonished with delight. He seems to me to have hit exactly the right note, and he is in the middle of the right note, like Guardina when she sings. I consider him as having the ball at his feet. He has sprung to the front at a bound. Now his supporters will push him along. He has only got to keep greatly *en évidence*, and he need do nothing more till the first meeting of the Cabinet."

"Has his speech done all that for him?" asked Mildred.

"Yes, certainly, for it is the speech of a man of action, of whom there are fewer in England than the fingers on my hand. He told his audience that speeches are not in his line. That is immensely taking, when at the time he was making a really magnificent one. Yes, Jack is assured, if only you are careful," she added in French, which, if considered a precautionary measure against her maid's comprehension, was not a very tactful move, since the latter was a Frenchwoman.

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Mildred's eye brightened; at the same time she thought she would not tell Lady Ardingly that Marie and he were probably coming to Windsor the next Sunday.

"Dear Jack!" she said, "I have always had an immense belief in him. And now his time has come."

"I feel certain of it, provided he makes no *faux pas*. And what of your other friend, Jim Spencer? He also spoke last night, I see. I have not read his speech yet."

"There is no need. He said what Jack said," replied Mildred.

"Indeed. I am glad, then, you took measures to kill that absurd gossip we spoke of the other day. Otherwise people would say that he had been inspired by Marie."

"You think of everything, I believe," said Mildred.

"I have a great deal of time on my hands. But now you must go, my dear. To-day I happen to be busy."

Lady Ardingly held out a rather knuckly hand. She clearly did not wish that her face, new every morning, should be disturbed just yet.

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"Ah, by the way," she added, "please let me drive down to see you on Sunday afternoon, according to your invitation. I am afraid I forgot to answer it."

Now, no such invitation had ever been given, and Mildred knew it; so, no doubt, did Lady Ardingly. She paused a moment before answering.

"Of course, we shall be charmed!" she said.

"She has asked Jack, and does not want me to come," thought Lady Ardingly. Then aloud: "So sweet of you! Your garden must be looking lovely now. Good-bye, my dear."

CHAPTER XV

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It was Sunday evening, and the lawn at Riversdale was brilliantly crowded. The last returns had come in the day before, and the Conservatives had even increased their already immense majority. Every one in the set that congregated to Mildred's house was delighted, and there was a general sense of relaxation abroad, which might have degenerated into flatness, had there not been so many other amusing things to think about. The season was practically at an end, and, like a flock of birds who have denuded some pasture of its wire-worms, every one was preparing, that feeding-ground finished with, to break up into smaller patches and fly to the various quarters of the globe. Guardina and Pagani had both of them, oddly enough, developed signs—not serious—of an identical species of gouty rheumatism, and had been ordered to Homburg for a fortnight by the same doctor, who was a man not without shrewdness. The Breretons were going a round of Scotch visits in the middle of the month, Jack Alston and his wife were doing the same, and Lady Devereux was consulting Arthur Naseby as to the possibility of being at Cowes and Bayreuth for the same days in the same week. They thought it could be done. Lady Ardingly alone was going to fly nowhere. She proposed to take a rest-cure at her country house for a fortnight, and, with a view to securing herself from all worry and ennui, had engaged four strong people to play Bridge continually, and was on the look-out for a fifth table, who would make her party complete. Amid all these plans for the future there was but little time to look backwards, and all the events of the last month, the last week, the last day even, were stale. The opera was over, and Guardina, instead of living her triumphs o'er again, was only thinking about Homburg, and the various delightful ways in which she could spend the very considerable sum of money she had earned. She was almost as good at spending as she was at earning, and she promised herself an agreeable autumn. The election, similarly, was a stale subject; every one who mattered at all had

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got his seat, including Jim Spencer, and the only thing connected with Parliament which was of any interest was Jack's seat in the Cabinet. Only yesterday he had been semi-officially asked whether he would take the War Office, and he had replied that he had not the slightest objection. He, too, felt agreeably relaxed, and disposed to take things easily. He had slaved at the work and been rewarded; his tendency was to eat, drink, and be merry. Another chain of circumstances also conduced to the propriety of this. He had made a second attempt to enter into more tender relations with his wife, and again she had visibly shrunk from him. And with the bitterness of that, and the relaxation which followed his success, there had come mingled the suggestion of consoling himself.

The day had been very hot, and Marie, between the heat and the struggle that was going on within her about Jack, had suffered all the afternoon from a rather severe headache, and had retired to her room about six with the idea of sleeping it off if possible, and being able to put in her appearance again at dinner. But sleep had not come; her headache, instead of getting better, got distinctly worse, and when her maid came to her at dressing-time, she sent word to Mildred, with a thousand regrets, that she really did not feel equal to appearing. Subsequently, just before dinner, Mildred herself had come to see her, rustling and particularly resplendent, with sympathy and salts and recommendations of antipyrin, a light dinner and bed.

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Marie had all the dislike of a very healthy person for medicines, but the pain was almost unendurable, and before long she took the dose recommended. Soon after came her maid with some soup and light foods, and she roused herself to eat a little, conscious of a certain relief already. Her dinner finished, she lay down again, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

She woke feeling immensely refreshed, her headache already insignificant, and with a strong desire for the cool, fresh air of the night. Her room, baked all day by the sun, was very hot, and the sight of the dim shrubberies outside, and beyond them the misty moonlit field that bordered the Thames, tempted her to go out. She had already told her maid not to sit up, and, turning up her electric light, saw that it was nearly midnight, and that she must have slept close on three hours.

She leaned for a few moments out of her open window, but only the faintest breeze was stirring the tree-tops, and here the air was heavy and motionless. A half-moon, a little smeared with mist, rode high in the southern heavens, making the redder lights from the rows of lanterns on the lawn look tawdry and vulgar. The tents were brilliantly lit, and she could see cards going on in one, while in another the servants were laying out supper for those who would sit late over their Bridge or conversation. Even at this distance she could distinguish Arthur Naseby's shrill tones, and laughter punctuated his sentences. He was evidently having a great success. Up and down the middle of the lawn itself, where moonlight struggled with the lanterns, she could see little groups standing talking, and in the foreground was Mildred saying good-bye to some who were going. "It is so early," Marie could hear her say; "it can hardly be Monday yet." Jack was standing by her.

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Marie turned back into the room and put out the electric light, then went across to the window again. Much as she would have liked a stroll in the cool darkness of the shrubberies, she in no way wished to mingle with the group on the lawn, and receive sympathy for her indisposition and felicitations on her recovery; still less did she desire what Mildred would call a "quiet chat," before going to bed, which in other words meant to be one of a bevy of people all talking loud and listening to nobody. But by degrees the leave-takers went, and those who remained drifted back to the tents and the lights. It would be easily possible, she thought, to slip out, leaving the lawn on her left, and stroll through the trees down towards the river, where she would get the breeze without the fatigues of conversation.

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She slipped a gray dust-cloak over her dress and went quietly down-stairs. The drawing-room was empty, and she passed out of the French-window on to the gravel path. In ten paces more she had gained the shelter of the long shrubbery that ran parallel to the lawn, and was screened by it from all observation. She threw the hood of her cloak back from her head. A breeze, as she had hoped, came wandering and winding up the dusky alleys from the river, laden with the thousand warm and fragrant smells of the summer, and with open mouth and ruffled hair she drank it greedily in. Her headache had ceased, and the deep, tranquillized mood of pain removed occupied her senses. The bushes on each side were gently stirred by the wind, and now a waft of the heavy odour of syringa, or the more subtly compounded impression from the garden beds, saluted her as she passed. She had left the path, and felt with a thrill of refreshment the coolness of dew-laden grass touch her feet. Above her head the leaves of the tree-tops, in the full luxuriance of their summer foliage, let through but little light, but in certain interspaces of leaf she could see from time to time a segment of the crescent riding dimly in the heat-hazed sky, or a more prominent star would now and then look down on her. Then, as she left the garden behind, a fragrance more to her mind came to her—the fragrance not of garden-beds and cultivation, but the finer and more delicate odours of July field-flowers, floating, as it were, on the utterly undefinable smell of running water from the Thames.

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Thus, having passed the lawn and its occupants, she turned through into the more open spaces by a lilac-bush that stood near the path, remembering, so she thought, that there was a seat here, and a hammock much frequented by Maud. She had, it seemed, recollected the position of this to a nicety, for on rounding the lilac-bush she came straight on to the hammock, and gave a little cry of surprise to find it tenanted.

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"Maud, is it you?" she asked gently.

The girl sprang up.

"How you startled me!" she cried, "Why, it is you, Lady Alston."

"Yes, dear. I slept, and my headache was really gone when I awoke, so I determined to have a stroll before going to bed. And you, too, have come away, it seems."

The girl got up.

"And you were looking for my hammock, were you not, to lie down in! Do get in. There is a seat here for me, too. Or shall I go away, if you want to be alone?"

"By no manner of means," said Marie. "Stay with me a quarter of an hour or so, and then I shall go back to bed."

"But you are really better?" asked Maud.

"I am really all right; there is no excuse for me at all stealing away like this. I ought to have gone out and talked to people; but I felt lazy and rather tired, and only just came out for a breath of air. It is cooler here; but how hot for midnight! 'In the darkness thick and hot,'" she said half to herself.

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Marie lay down in the hammock the girl had vacated, and there was a few moments' silence. Then, "Would it tire you to talk a little, Lady Alston?" she said. "About—you know what about."

"No, dear," said Marie. "And one can always talk best about intimate things in the dark. If one is only a voice one's self, and the other person is only a voice, one can say things more easily. Is it not so?"

Maud drew her chair a little closer to the head of the hammock, so that both were in the dense shade of the lilac-bush. Immediately outside the shadow of the bush beneath which they sat was the pearly grayness of the third of the lawns, on which the moon shone full.

"Yes, it is about him," said Maud. "I think—I think I have changed. No, it is not because my mother or anybody has been pressing me; in fact, I think it is a good deal because they have not. I saw him here once a fortnight ago, and I liked him. I did not do that before, you know."

"Did you tell him so?" asked the other voice.

"Yes; in so many words. He asked me to put out of my mind all the prejudice which had been created in it by his being, so he said, thrown at my head. I promised him to try. And I have tried. It makes a great difference," she said gravely.

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"And you have seen him once since," said Marie, with a sudden intuition.

"How did you know?" asked Maud.

"You told me—your tone told me. And what then, dear?"

"I liked him better when I saw him than I did when I remembered him. Is that nonsense?" she asked quickly.

"I feel pretty certain it is not," said Marie.

"I am glad, for it seemed to me a very—how shall I say it!—a very certain sensation. And I want to see him again—oh, I want very much to see him again! It is all changed—all changed," she repeated softly.

"And do you feel happy?" asked Marie, not without purpose.

"Yes, or miserable; I don't know which."

Marie took the soft hand that leaned on the edge of her hammock and stroked it gently.

"Dear Maud," she said, "I am very glad. It is a great privilege"—and her heart spoke—"to be able to fall in love."

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"Is it that?" asked Maud, leaning her face against the other's hand.

"Yes, dear, I expect it is that," said Marie.

They sat thus for some while in silence, for there was no more to be said, yet each—Maud for her own sake, Marie for Maud's and for her own as well—wished to halt, to rest for a little on the oars. Marie was lying back in the hammock, wrapped in it like a chrysalis; the other sat crouched and leaning forward by her side, her hands interlaced with the other's. The wind whispered gently, the stencilled shadows of leaves moved on the grass, and outside on the open was an ever-brightening space of moonshine, for the cool night air was dissolving the last webs of the heat haze. Then suddenly, without warning, came a voice from near at hand.

"I have told you the truth," it said. "I did attempt the renewal. But she does not care for me. I come back to you, if you will take me."

"I take you?" said a woman's voice. "Oh, Jack! Jack!"

The words were quickly spoken, and on the moment two figures came round the lilac-bush and out into the full blaze of the moonlight. There they stopped, and the woman threw her arms round the man's neck and kissed him.

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The thing had happened so quickly that Marie could not have got out of the hammock or betrayed her presence before it was over. But she had just turned her head, half raising it, and saw. And Maud saw too.

Next moment the others had passed behind an intervening bush, and once again there was silence but for the gentle whispering of the wind, and stillness but for the play of stencilled

shadows on the grass. Marie still held Maud's hand; she still lay in the hammock, only her head was a little raised.

A minute perhaps passed thus, and neither moved. Then Marie raised herself and sat on the side of the hammock. Her hand still held that of the other.

"You saw?" she said quietly to Maud.

"Yes, my mother!"

Marie unclasped her hand.

"Maud, dear, go indoors and go to bed," she said.

"No, no!" whispered the girl. "What am I— Oh—oh!" and a long sobbing sigh rose in her throat. [Pg 329]

Marie got up.

"Come, then, we will go together," she said, in a voice which she heard to be perfectly calm and hard.

"What are you going to do?" asked Maud.

"If I knew I would tell you," said Marie.

The lights were still brilliant on the lawn, and as they passed behind the screen of bushes Arthur Naseby's voice was still shrill. Marie found herself noticing and remembering details with the most accurate observation; it was here, at this bend in the path, that there would be a smell of syringa, and a little further on a dim scent of roses. Close to the house a cedar cast a curious pattern of shade; a square of bright light fell on the gravel path from the open drawing-room windows. It was no wonder she remembered, for a very short time had passed since she had been here. But everything not trivial was changed.

In a very few minutes' space they were together in Marie's bedroom. As she went to the window to draw the blinds, she looked out for a moment. The tents were lit; there was Bridge in one, in another the servants had nearly finished laying supper. And looking, she made up her mind as to what she should do in the immediate future. She turned back into the room. [Pg 330]

"I shall drive up to London to-night," she said, "if I can get a carriage. Is that possible?"

"Please let me come with you," said Maud.

Marie thought a moment.

"I do not think that is wise," she said, as if discussing some detail of business.

"It does not matter much what is wise and what is not," said the girl. "If I may not come with you, I shall go by myself. I could not stop! Oh, could you, if you were me?"

Marie's face did not soften.

"Very well," she said. "It is better you should come with me than go alone. You will come to my house, of course. Please see if you can get a carriage to the station; there is a train, I know, about one o'clock. My maid shall follow in the morning. Meanwhile I must leave a note for her, and one — Go at once, dear," she said to Maud.

Marie wrote to her maid, telling her to follow in the morning, then drew another sheet from the writing-case, and paused. Finally, she wrote: [Pg 331]

"I saw by accident and unavoidably a private scene between you and your mistress. I have gone back to town. I shall do nothing whatever till I have seen you. I am going because I am not prepared to see you at once. Maud is with me."

She folded and directed this to her husband, leaving it in a prominent place on her writing-table. Then she took it up and went with it to his dressing-room next door. Afterwards, returning, she began packing a small bag. In the midst of this Maud came back.

"There is a carriage ready," she said. "I saw one myself just outside, and told it to wait. I shall be ready in ten minutes."

Outside supper had begun, and the servants were occupied. The hall was deserted when they came down, and, passing through, the two went out.

Meantime the evening progressed on the garden side of the house with ever-increasing gaiety. Everybody's characteristics, as happens so often at supper-parties which are sundered from the previous dinner only by a short interval of whiskies-and-sodas, became rather more accentuated than before; every one was at philharmonic pitch, at their best, or, at any rate, at their worst. [Pg 332]

Lady Ardingly was slightly drier and more staccato than usual, her husband sleepier; Arthur Naseby was shriller, Jack rather more impressively reticent; Andrew Brereton heavier, and his wife louder, larger, and coarser. She was flushed with triumph and other causes less metaphysical; to-night she seemed to herself at a bound to have vaulted again into the saddle of that willing animal the world, and a glorious gallop was assuredly hers. And Jack, who was certainly the man of the moment, was again in a comfortable little panner on the off-side. At length Lady Ardingly rose.

"I should like to stop here till morning," she said, "and play Bridge. But it is already two, and we must get up to London. To whom can I give a lift? You are staying, I think, Jack. Who else?"

Lady Devereux and Arthur Naseby, it appeared, had already arranged to drive up together in her motor-brougham; the others were all staying in the house. Gradually they drifted there, and on the lawn the lights were extinguished. "Giving the moon a chance at last," as Arthur Naseby observed. As they crossed the lawn Jack saw that Marie's room was still lit. Then the non-residents took their carriages, and the residents their bed-candles. Mildred and Jack were the last to go upstairs.

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"There is still a light in Marie's room," he said. "I will just go in and see how she is."

Mildred lingered outside, and he tapped gently, then entered. The draught between door and window blew the flame of the candle about. But inside the electric light burned steadily, only there was no one there.

He came out again.

"She is not there," he said; "nor has she been to bed."

Mildred frowned.

"She, perhaps, is with Maud," she said. "I have not seen Maud all the evening."

The others had dispersed to their rooms, and while Mildred rustled down the passage to go to Maud, Jack remained where he was, in the doorway of Marie's room, which communicated with his. Suddenly in the hall below he saw a light, and to his annoyance observed Mildred's husband shuffling along in his slippers. He came to the bottom of the stairs, and slowly began to ascend. Simultaneously he heard the rustle of Mildred's dress returning. He beckoned her silently into Marie's room, and closed the door softly.

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"Well?" he said.

"Maud is not there, either," she whispered.

"Are they out, do you think, in the garden?" said he. "Wait; she may be in my room."

He went to the door communicating and opened it. On the table was lying a note addressed to him; he took it up and read it. "Mildred!" he called out, and she appeared in the doorway. "I have found this," he said, and handed it to her.

Then whatever there was of good in the strong and brutal part of the woman came out. She read it without a tremor, and faced him again.

"That is the worst of having scenes out of doors," she said. "What next, Jack?"

He put down his candle; his hand was not so steady as hers.

"What next?" he cried. "It is gone; everything is gone, except you and I."

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He took two rapid steps towards her, when both paused. Some one had tapped at his door, and, without speaking, he pointed to the half-open door into Marie's room. Then he flung off his coat and waistcoat. Just then the tap was repeated.

"Come in," he said.

Lord Brereton entered.

"So sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I must tell them what time you want breakfast. You merely said you wished to go early."

"Oh, half-past eight will do for me," said Jack. "I can get up to town by ten, which is all I want."

Lord Brereton advanced very slowly and methodically across to the table.

"My wife's fan," he said, taking it up.

"She is with Marie," said the other, not pausing, "who I am afraid is very unwell. Mildred came in here just now to speak to me; I did not see she had forgotten it."

Even as he spoke he realized the utter futility of lying, when there was in the world the woman who had written that note which he held crumpled up in his hand. But his instinct was merely to gain time, just as a condemned criminal might wish his execution postponed.

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"I am sorry to hear that," said Andrew. "I will leave the fan in my wife's dressing-room. Good-night."

He went softly out, and Jack opened the other door. The sweat poured from his forehead, and a deadly sickness came over him. He put his bed-candle into Mildred's hand.

"No, nothing has happened yet," he said. "I told him you were with Marie. You with Marie—there's a grim humour about that, though I didn't see it at the time. My God! we'll have a fight for it yet!"

Mildred looked at him.

"Jack, you are ill; you look frightful," she said.

"Very possibly." He paused a moment. "Mildred, you woman, you devil!—which are you?" he whispered. "My God! you have courage. Here am I, trembling; you are as steady as if you were talking to a stranger in a drawing-room full of people!"

She laughed silently, with a horrible gusto of enjoyment, the sense of danger quickening,

intoxicating her.

"What does it matter?" she whispered. "What does anything matter?"

CHAPTER XVI

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Marie was seated alone next morning on the veranda of her room overlooking the Park. She had breakfasted with Maud, and remembered to have talked sufficiently, at any rate, to avoid any awkward pauses about a thousand indifferent subjects, unable as yet to set her mind to that which inevitably lay in front of her. She had felt it impossible to talk out with a girl what she meant to do; it was impossible with that pale suffering face opposite to her, racked as it was with uncomprehended pain, to speak of that which loomed in both their minds as gigantic as a nightmare. Instead, a commonplace little entity, seated in some remote suburb of her brain, dictated commonplace to her tongue, and round her, for the time being, was the calm which is the result of intense emotion, identical in appearance with apathy, and distinguished also by the same fixity and accuracy of observation of trivialities. She had consented last night to take Maud with her, and did not for a moment wish to evade the responsibilities which morally attached to her for that. She would have to think and eventually act for both of them, but she could not even think for herself yet. Soon, she knew, this stunned apathy would leave her; her brain was already growing clearer from the effects of that momentary scene in the garden, which, like some drugged draught, had deprived it of the power of thought, almost of consciousness. At present Maud was not with her, for she had gone round to Grosvenor Square to get clothes which she needed, and Marie was alone.

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As yet she was almost incapable of thought; at least, only that commonplace denizen of her brain could think, and he but fed her with trivial impressions. It was he who had read the paper to her; he had even read her the list of the people at Lady Brereton's Saturday-till-Monday party. As usual, it was all wrong; she and Jack, for instance, were not included in it, and as a matter of fact they had been there. They had also played a somewhat important part there, but naturally the Daily Advertiser knew nothing of that as yet. Yet she had only been there for one night, not the Saturday till Monday; then, she recollected, she had come up, been very drowsy in the train, and on arriving at Park Lane had gone straight to bed and slept dreamlessly. Once during the night, it is true, she had awoke, still drowsy, and had seen the first tired lift of the eyelids of the dawn through her window. Then, for no reason as it seemed now, she had suddenly begun to weep, and had wept long and silently till her pillow was wet. At what she had wept she had only now a dream-like recollection; but in some mysterious way Jack and she had been just married, a new life with its endless possibilities was in front of them. But all had been spoiled, and what had happened had happened. During the night that had seemed to her a matter exceedingly pathetic, worthy of sheer childish tears. But now, fully awake, she was again as hard and as cold as a stone. Then another figure intervened—Jim Spencer. He was coming to lunch, and she had not yet put him off. But he, too, stood separated from her by the same blank blind wall of indifference. She felt nothing, she thought nothing; images only presented themselves to her as external as pictures on a magic-lantern sheet.

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Maud had not yet been gone half an hour, when a man came in.

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"Lady Ardingly is here, my lady," he said, "and wants to know if you can see her."

Marie suddenly woke up. She felt as if she had been dreaming that she was somewhere, and woke to find the dream exactly true.

"Is she alone?" she asked, hardly knowing why she asked it.

The man paused a moment.

"Yes, my lady," he said.

She smiled, knowing she was right.

"I will see her alone," she said. "His lordship will come back later—Lord Alston, I mean."

Lady Ardingly appeared; her face was slightly more impressionist than usual, as the hour was early. Marie stood on the hearth-rug; it occurred to neither of them to shake hands.

"Ah, my dear, it is terrible for you," said Lady Ardingly. "It is quite terrible, and they all ought to be whipped. But"—and she looked at Marie—"but you are marvellous! Long ago something of the same kind happened to me, and I was in tears for days—swollen-eyed, all sorts of ghastly things. Please let me have a cigarette. I am terribly upset."

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Marie handed her the box, Lady Ardingly lit one. The little person in Marie's brain told her that it smelt delicious. But the greater lobes were now beginning to work; the apathetic mist was clearing.

"You have seen Jack?" she said. "He drove with you here, did he not?"

"Yes, my dear. How quick of you to guess! Jack is distraught. But tell me, what did you see or hear? You had a bad headache; you were in your room. What else?"

"I felt better. I went into the garden," said Marie. "I saw—sufficient."

"Ah, what stupid fools!" ejaculated Lady Ardingly, not meaning to say anything of the kind.

"Exactly—what stupid fools!" said Marie. "But not only that, you know."

"Of course, not only that," said Lady Ardingly, annoyed at herself. "Now, Marie, Jack is here. He is waiting to know if you will see him. I will wait, too. I will sacrifice all the day, if between us we can make you see—if between us we can do any good. I ask you in common fairness to listen. There will be plenty of time for all sorts of decrees correspondent—I don't know what they call them—afterwards. Now, which of us will you see first? Him or me?" [Pg 342]

Marie suddenly felt her throat muscles beyond control. She had no idea whether she was going to laugh or cry. Her will was to do neither. The effect was that she did both, and flung herself down on the sofa by the other.

"There, there," said Lady Ardingly, "that is right. I am not a tender woman, but I am sorry for you. It is all terrible. But the sun will rise to-morrow, and the Newmarket autumn meeting will take place, and Christmas Day will come in November—or December, is it not? Be quiet a moment."

But Marie's hysterical outburst ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and she sat up again, drying her eyes. "Give me a minute," she said.

"As many as you wish," said Lady Ardingly. "By the way, is that tall thing here, that daughter?"

Marie began to laugh again, but checked herself.

"Yes," she said. "Maud saw what I saw. She came up with me last night."

"Do the servants know?" asked Lady Ardingly with some anxiety.

"I think not. But my maid knows I went last night. I left a note for her saying so. She came here an hour ago." [Pg 343]

"Tell her you will dismiss her if she says a word," said Lady Ardingly.

"She will not."

"You are certain?"

"Perfectly."

"Then, my dear, will you talk to Jack first, or to me?" said the other.

"To Jack, if you can wait," said Marie. "Yet I don't know why I should keep you. I have got to talk to Jack. I promised him. And that is all, I think."

Lady Ardingly rose with alacrity.

"Then talk to him now," she said. "Afterwards, though perhaps you don't want to talk to me, I want to talk to you. I will send him."

For a moment Marie was alone. The interval she employed in wheeling a chair up to the table where the cigarettes were. She sat herself in it, and on the moment Jack came in, and the two were face to face. He, like her, looked absolutely normal.

"You told Lady Ardingly you wished to see me," he said.

"No; I told her I promised to see you."

She raised her eyes and looked at him. At that the chain was complete; her whole brain worked again. She felt, and knew what she felt. [Pg 344]

"I don't know what good purpose is served by my seeing you," she said; "but here we are. Last night you told Mildred you would come back to her, if she would have you. She assented. That is sufficient, is it not? If you like, I will go on."

"That is sufficient," said Jack.

"She is your mistress, in fact," said Marie. "How long has that gone on?"

"About five years," said he.

Marie drew a long breath, then got up.

"How splendid!" she said. "And after five years you come back to your wife! You said that, too; you said you had attempted a renewal. So you had tired of her, and thought— Oh, my God!"

"Yes, I suppose you may say I had tired of her," said Jack. "That is your point of view. There is another."

"And what can that be?" asked Marie.

"You may not believe it—but——"

"It is true, I may not believe it. What I know is that about a month ago you changed your behaviour to me. You began to pay me little attentions. Once you kissed me; once——" [Pg 345]

Jack's lips compressed a little.

"You may not believe it," he said again, "but what I tell you is true. You may say I tired of her. I say I fell in love—again—with you."

Marie sat down again. The passion for analysis, of which Jim Spencer had accused her, was strong in her. She was intensely interested.

"Let me understand," she said. "You are originally in love with me; then you fall in love with Mildred; then you fall in love with me again. Is that it? We take turns. Were there others? You

have gratified your whims; why may not I gratify my curiosity?"

Jack did not reply for a moment. Then, "I never fell in love with her," he said. "But a man is a man."

"And a woman only a woman," said Marie. "No, I ought not to have said that. That is not what we are here for. I want to know quite simply what you have got to say for yourself."

"This only. Six weeks ago—a short enough time, I grant—I should have come back to you, if you would have had me. You would not. If you had, I should have told you—past history myself. Would that not have made a difference?"

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"Yes, it would," said she. "What then?"

"You are a cold, passionless woman, and will not understand," he said. Then he paused a moment, for a long sigh lay suspended in her breast. "You object to my saying that?" he added.

"No; go on," said she.

"I should have told you. But you would not. And in an hour of moral weakness I fell. Ah, you do not know what such temptations mean!" he cried. "You have no right to judge."

Again Marie got up, and in a sudden restlessness began to pace up and down the room.

"I do know," she said. "I have felt it all. But this is the difference between me and certain others. You—you, I mean—Mildred, anybody, say, 'I desire something; and, after all, what does it matter?' Others and I say, 'It does not signify what I desire, and there is nothing in the world which matters more.' Oh, Jack, Jack!"—and for the second time she looked at him—"there is the vital and the eternal difference between us," she went on, speaking very slowly and weighing her words. "It is in this that there lies the one great incompatibility. If I were as you, if I could conceivably take the same view as you take, and think it possible that I should be able to be to another what Mildred has been to you, I would condone everything, because I should understand it. It would not matter then whether I had reached, as you have, the natural outcome of that possibility. If I could soberly imagine myself in that relation to another man than you, I would confess that there was no earthly reason why we should not continue to live comfortably together. But I cannot. I am not an adulteress. Therefore I will not, in act or in name, live with you any longer."

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Then for one moment she blazed up.

"And it was you, you who have been living like this," she cried, "who could tell me to be careful, for fear people should talk! It was you who told me you had heard an evil, foolish tale about me! Go to your mistress!"

She stood up, pointing with an unsteady hand to the door. Cell after secret cell of her brain caught the fire, and blazed with white-hot indignation. That consuming intensity was rapid. Soon all was burned.

"You had better go, Jack," she said quietly.

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He rose.

"I do not wish to argue with you," he said, "nor shall I now or henceforth put in any defence. But—and I say this not in the least hope of influencing the decision you have made—remember that a certain number of weeks ago I should have come back to you and I should have told you. I am speaking the truth. That is nearly all. You will find it more convenient, no doubt, to stay here for the present. I shall be at the Carlton. And—and—"

His voice for the first time faltered and his lip quivered.

"And I am sorry, Marie. You may not believe it now nor for years to come. But it is true. Good-bye."

He went out of the room without stopping, without even looking at her, and she was left alone again. That moment of passionate outburst had tried her; she felt weary, done for. But almost immediately Lady Ardingly entered again.

"I heard him go down-stairs, my dear," she said, "but I did not see him. I hope you gave it him hot!"

"Yes, I suppose you might call it that," said Marie.

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"Well, my dear, let us talk things over. You have decided to take a very grave step. I know that without your telling me. You ought to consider carefully what will be the result. A woman who has divorced her husband cannot, for some reason, hold her head very high in England. She is, at any rate, always liable to meet people who insist on looking calmly over it, and not seeing her. That cannot be pleasant. She is thus driven into the country or else into philanthropy. I do not think either will suit you."

"I know all that," said Marie. "But neither will it suit me, as you put it, to live with Jack."

"No, my dear; I understand," said Lady Ardingly. "There is a choice of evils——"

"Ah, that is the point," said Marie. "There is no choice."

"So you think at present. I will try to show you that there is. Now think well what you are doing."

You ruin yourself. That weighs nothing with you just now, because you are in pain, and nothing seems to matter when one is in pain. Then, you are utterly ruining Jack. That seems to you to matter less than nothing. Why? Because you are simply thinking about yourself, let me tell you, and your own notions of right and wrong, which are no doubt excellent."

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"Because I am thinking about myself?" said Marie.

"Yes, of course. You do not mind ruining Jack's whole career. He has been offered the War Office. You stop all that, and, what matters more, you annihilate all that he will certainly do for the country. He is not an ordinary man; he is in some ways, perhaps, a great one. It is certain, anyhow, that the country believes in him and that your Empire needs him. But you stop all that like—" and she blew out the match with which she had lit her cigarette.

Marie shook her head.

"I have thought it over," she said. "It means nothing to me. I cannot go on living with him. And I will be legally set free."

Lady Ardingly thought a moment. She never wasted words, and saw clearly that the needs of the Empire were a barren discussion.

"Supposing you had had a child by him, my dear?" she said gently.

"God has spared me that," said Marie. "We need not discuss it."

Next moment Lady Ardingly could have boxed her own ears at her own stupidity.

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"And Maud?" she said. "Have you thought of her?"

Marie pushed away the footstool on which her feet were resting.

"Maud," she said—"Maud Brereton?"

"Yes, my dear. She, too, is burned in your suttee. Oh, you will have a fine blaze!"

For the first moment she had a spark of hope.

"Maud!" said Marie again. "What has she done?"

"She has committed the great crime of being the daughter of your husband's mistress," said Lady Ardingly. "Otherwise I know nothing against her. Andrew, I should imagine, will divorce his wife, if you do anything. It will be pleasant for a young girl just beginning the world! She was, I believe, perhaps going to marry Anthony Maxwell. That, too, will be off, like the British Empire. But they do not matter; only Lady Alston matters!"

"Ah, you pitiless woman!" cried Marie. "Do you not see how it is with me?"

Lady Ardingly patted her hand gently.

"My dear, I am not pitiless," she said; "but it would be cruel of me if I did not put these things before you as they are. It is no time for concealing the truth. You have been thinking only of yourself. All your fastidiousness and your purity has been revolted. You wish to vindicate that insult at whatever cost. I point out to you that the cost is a heavy one."

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"But if I did—if I did," said Marie, her voice quavering, "would it stop Maud's marriage, for instance?"

"Mrs. Maxwell—Lady Maxwell, I beg her pardon—would assuredly forbid the banns."

"But Anthony is of age," said Marie. "He would marry her."

"He could not. Even if he did, she would be the daughter of the divorced woman."

"But I can't help myself," cried Marie. "I could not go on living with Jack."

"You prefer to sacrifice innocent and guilty to sacrificing yourself," said Lady Ardingly. "My dear, we live in the world. It may seem to you that I am putting a low view before you, but I assert that you must take the world into account. Else what is the world for?"

There was a long silence, and the longer it lasted the more hopeful Lady Ardingly became. She would not have broken it even if to let it continue meant the abandonment of Bridge for the rest of her natural life. Of all her triumphs, there was none, given that she gained this, that did not weigh light compared to it. She hardly dared look at Marie for fear of breaking the spell; but once, raising her eyes, she saw that the other was looking straight in front of her, perfectly motionless, her hands on her lap. She knew that she herself had said her last word. Her quiver of arguments was empty; she had nothing more.

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Then Marie rose.

"If you can spare the time, Lady Ardingly," she said, "please take Maud down to Windsor. You will see—that woman, and tell her what you think fit. Please tell Maud from me to do exactly as you bid her. You can make up any story you please about her absence last night, in case Andrew knows. He probably will not, for he breakfasts early alone, and comes up to town always."

She paused a moment.

"And send Jack back to me," she said.

Later on the same day Jack was waiting for Mildred in her room in the Grosvenor Square house.

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Before long she came in radiant.

"Now sit down, Jack," she said, "and tell me all that happened. All I know is that Lady Ardingly brought Maud back before lunch to-day. You may imagine what a relief that was! Andrew had gone up to town early—earlier than you—and he knows nothing about anything. How clever Lady Ardingly is, and how well she has managed everything! Maud, of course, was quite impossible. She would not say a word to me, and stopped down there. But I passed Anthony as I drove up. I said Maud would be charmed to see him. I think things are going all right there, and so Marie's little scheme was not successful."

"We will not speak of Marie's little scheme," said Jack.

She looked at him in surprise, too absorbed at present in her own thick relief of mind to be annoyed.

"How gloomy you are, Jack! I suppose Marie has put you in a bad temper. Did she give it you hot? Poor old man! tell me what she said."

"She said—eventually that is—that she was going to do nothing; that she would continue to live with me, and that I might go my own way and do exactly what I liked." [Pg 355]

Mildred was rapidly stripping off her long suède gloves.

"Now, that is nicer than I expected of her," she said. "Of course one could have objected to nothing, to no condition she chose to impose, for we were absolutely in her power, and she might have bound you never to see me again. Do you think perhaps she has something up her sleeve on her own account?"

Jack leaned back in his chair.

"What do you mean exactly?" he asked.

"Dear Jack, how dull you are! Why, Jim Spencer of course. Has she come round to this policy of mutual tolerance? It is quite the best policy. Honesty is not in it!"

"No," said he. "I feel sure she has not."

Mildred laughed, and poured herself out some tea.

"You think not? You don't half appreciate Marie. Nor did I till to-day. But I think she has got twice as much ordinary work-a-day common-sense as we supposed."

She bit a macaroon with her short sharp teeth and crunched it. [Pg 356]

"It was sensible, very sensible, of her not to make a row of European dimensions," she continued. "No doubt when it came to, she saw how impossible it was. But to make no conditions—it was charming, simply charming of her! And how much more comfortable we shall be now, Jack! Before there was always that one little reservation: 'What if Marie knew?' That is gone now. Why didn't we let her know, oh, ages ago? It would have saved so much trouble."

She laid her finger-tips lightly on Jack's neck as she passed. He moved his head away. But she did not notice it, and passed on to her table.

"This is the photograph of her which you smashed up after the Silly Billy scandal," she said. "Have they not mended the frame well? I told them to send the bill to you. Will you dine here to-night?"

"No, I am dining at home," said Jack.

Mildred paused.

"Ah, you have people, I suppose," she said.

"No, we are dining alone, Marie and I. I have got things I must say to her."

"Indeed! I cannot guess what." [Pg 357]

"I must tell her what I have decided to do. I must tell you also. I shall not see you again, Mildred. Not, at least, in the way you mean, in the way we meant," he added.

She sat down heavily.

"You were saying?" she asked.

"I was saying—that."

"Then what has happened?" she asked, spilling her tea in the saucer as she spoke.

"It has happened that I do appreciate what you do not. I wonder if all things of this sort are so crude. That is by the way. But you are as intolerable to me as I am to Marie. I have fallen in love with her. To-day I know it, fully, completely. But I came here to talk it out. Let me do so, though there is not much to say. Long ago we knew that one of us must get tired first. We settled then that it was impossible for either of us; but supposing the impossible, we should not be sentimental and reproachful. I am sorry it is me. I would sooner that it was you. But it is me."

"And the reason?" asked she.

"I do not know for certain. What I do know is that there is only one woman in the world for me. She is my wife. And she—she does not know of my existence." [Pg 358]

Mildred got up.

"Go, then," she said.

CHAPTER XVII

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It was a warm bright day of early November, so serene and sunny even in London that it seemed as if the promise of spring rather than any threat of winter was in the air. Leaves still lingered thickly on the plane-trees in the Park, and a sun divinely clear flooded the streets and roadways with unusual light. Shop-boys whistled as they went on their errands, the hoops of children were bowled with alacrity, while their nursemaids smiled on the benignant police who piloted them and their charges over perilous crossings. London, moreover, was rather full; that is to say, a few hundreds who would not otherwise have been there had joined the patient millions who were never anywhere else, for Parliament had met, and a three-lined whip had been flogging the laggards back to their places from partridge-drive and pheasant-shoot. For this reason, the columns of "Diana" had been particularly sprightly, and all the world might read with rapture that Lady Ardingly had returned with her husband to Pall Mall; that Lord Alston with his wife, "who looked quite charming in a guipure hat trimmed with sassafras"—or the effect of such words—were in Park Lane; that Lord Brereton with his wife, "whom I saw driving two spirited colts in the Park yesterday," had returned to Grosvenor Square. "Cupid's Bow," also, had reported the marriage of the daughter to Mr. Anthony Maxwell only three days before, and "Diana" had been graciously pleased to express satisfaction at the presents, knew, of course, how delighted everybody was, and what the bride's travelling dress was like; in fact, there was no doubt whatever about it.

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The spirited colt business was also authentic, and the morning after this announcement had appeared it so happened that Mildred was driving them again. The carriage was of a light-phaeton type, with a seat for the groom behind, and the two cobs—"Diana" had miscalled them—took it like a feather. On the whole, Mildred had had a pleasanter autumn than she had thought possible. She had stayed at several entertaining houses, had picked up several new friends and dropped several old ones. Her method of dropping old friends was always admirable. She never hurled them violently away; she merely opened her fingers and let them fall gently to the ground, never quarrelling with them, but just becoming unconscious of their existence. Then she had been at Aix for a fortnight, and had explained matters quite satisfactorily to a person who mattered very much, and altogether had rather a success. Afterwards followed Maud's marriage, which left her freer than before (and she had already persuaded herself that the last two seasons had been bondage); and she had invented and learned by heart a little story of how that very odd woman, Marie Alston, had tried to stop it. In its finished form it was quite a pathetic narrative. "But every one must choose for himself what he means to do," it ended, "and if Marie chooses to be malicious, it is her look-out. Dear Marie! I used to be very fond of her. Yes, she has gone off terribly—quite *passée*, and so young, too. She cannot be more than thirty." This latter was quite true; she was only twenty-six, and Mildred knew it.

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Yes, on the whole Mildred congratulated herself. Her appetite for pleasure had not been diminished by the events of this summer, and there was still plenty to feed it. In her superficial way she missed Jack a good deal, but she had got over it in her hard, practical manner, and all that remained to her now of regret had been transformed into implacable anger against him for his desertion. However, she had some charming new friends, and certainly one crowd was very like another crowd. To have your house full, that was the great thing, and to get plenty of invitations to houses that would also be full. She liked eating, and screaming, and laughing, and intriguing; they were still at her command. Externally, to conclude, she was a shade more pronounced; her hair was slightly more Titianesque, her cheeks a little more highly coloured, her mouth a little redder, her eyebrows a little thicker. Most people thought she looked very well, but Lady Ardingly said to herself, "Poor Mildred is beginning to fight for it."

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The day was rather windy, and as she drove up Park Lane she had her work cut out for her in the matter of management. The cobs had been newly clipped, and all their nerves appeared to be outside their skins. This Mildred thoroughly enjoyed; she was conscious of the mastery over brute strength which makes the fascination of dealing with horses, and she loved to know that Box longed to bolt and could not manage it, and that Cox wanted to shy at every carriage that passed but did not dare, for that his nerves were outside his skin, and he was aware who sat behind him with whip alert. "The heavenly devils!" thought Mildred to herself as they avoided a curbstone on the one hand by a hair-breadth and a bicycle on the other by half that distance.

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Like all fine whips, she infinitely preferred to drive in the streets than in the Park, but to-day they were horribly crowded, and she turned in through Stanhope Gate with the idea of letting the cobs have a good trot through the Park and come out at the Albert Gate. The day was so divine that she thought she would perhaps go out of town, and lunch at Richmond or somewhere, returning in the afternoon. She was dining out that night at Blanche Devereux's, who had a Mexican band coming, which, according to her account, was so thrilling that you didn't know whether you were standing on your head or your heels. This sounded quite promising; she liked a *décolleté* evening.

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So Box and Cox had their hearts' desire, and flew down the road inside the Park parallel to Park Lane. Here a motor-car, performing in a gusty and throbbing manner, was a shock to their sense of decency, and they made a simultaneous dash for the railings, until recalled to their own sense of decency by a vivid cut across their close-shaven backs and a steady pull on their mouths to

show them that the whip was punitive, not suggestive of faster progress. The progress, indeed, was fast enough to satisfy even Mildred, who, however, was enjoying herself immensely. Both cobs had their heads free (she, like the wise woman she was in matters of horseflesh, abominating bearing-reins even for the brougham horses, and knowing that for speed they are death and ruin), necks arched, and were stepping high and long. Then, as they came to the bend of the road of the Ladies' Mile, she indicated the right-hand road, and found that they were a little beyond her control. Simultaneously a wayward gust picked up a piece of wandering newspaper and blew it right across Box's blinkers; from there it slid gradually on to Cox's. The same moment both heads were up, and, utterly beyond her control, they bolted straight for the gate at Hyde Park Corner. It is narrow; outside the double tide of traffic roared and jostled.

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By good luck or bad luck—it did not seem at the moment to matter in the least—they were straight for the opening. If they had not been they would have upset over the posts or against the arch, but as they were they would charge at racing speed into an omnibus. A policeman outside, Mildred could see, had observed what had happened, and with frantic gesticulations was attempting to stem the double tide of carriages and open a lane for her, and it was with a curious indifference that she knew he would be too late. Passers-by also had looked up and seen, and just as they charged through the arch she saw one rush out full into the roadway in the splendid and desperate attempt, no doubt, to avert the inevitable accident. "What a fool!" she thought. "I am done; why should he be done, too?" Then for the millionth part of a second their eyes met, and they recognised each other.

Then, though she had been cool enough before, she utterly lost her head. She knew that she screamed, "Jack, for God's sake get out of the way!" and simultaneously he had met the horses as a man meets an incoming breaker, struggling to reach some wreck on a rocky shore. With one hand he caught something, rein or blinker, God knows which, with the other the end of the pole. Thus, dragging and scraping and impotently resisting, he was borne off his feet, and they whirled into the mid-stream of traffic.

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There was a crash, a cry, the man was jerked off like a fly; one cob went down, and Mildred was thrown out on to the roadway. She still held the reins; she saw a horse pulled up on its haunches just above her, within a yard of her head, and the next moment she had picked herself up unhurt.

On the other side of her wrecked phaeton, jammed against her fallen cob, was an omnibus. Under the centre of it lay the man who had saved her.

Suddenly, to her ears, the loud street hushed into absolute silence. A crowd, springing up like ants on a disturbed hill, swarmed round her, but she knew nothing of them. The omnibus made a half-turn, and slowly drew clear of her own carriage and of that which lay beneath its wheels. And though she had recognised him before in that infinitesimal moment as she galloped through the arch, she might have looked for hours without recognising him now. Hoof and wheel had gone over his head, stamping it out of all semblance of humanity.

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EPILOGUE

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Lady Ardingly was sitting on the veranda of the New Hotel at Cairo, on a clear bright February afternoon of the year following. The coloured life of the East went jingling by, and she observed it with a critical indifference.

"We could all have blue gaberdines if we chose," she thought to herself; "but they are not becoming. Also it would be quite easy to put sepia on one's face instead of rouge."

And having thus dismissed the gorgeous East, she turned to the Egyptian Gazette. There were telegrams to be found in it, anyhow, which came from more civilized parts. She had not played Bridge for twenty-four hours, and felt slightly depressed. But whenever a carriage stopped at the hotel she looked up; it appeared that she expected some one.

At length the expected happened, and she rose from her seat and went to the top of the half-dozen steps that formed the entrance from the street.

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"Ah, my dear," she said, "my dear Marie, I have sat here all afternoon! I did not know when you might come. You are not dusty? You do not want to wash? Let us have immediately the apology for tea which they give one here."

Marie put up her veil and kissed the face that was presented to her. It was fearful and marvellous, but she was extraordinarily glad to see it.

"It was charming of you to wait for me," she said. "The train was very late. I think my maid has lost it. There was a sort of Babel at Alexandria, and the last I saw of her was that she was apparently engaged in a personal struggle with a man with 'Cook' on his cap."

"Then, it will be all right if you give her time," said Lady Ardingly. "But meantime you have no luggage, no clothes? It does not matter. I will lend you all you want. Ah, my dear, you may smile, but I have all kinds of things."

The apology for tea was brought, and both accepted it, talking of trivialities. Then Lady Ardingly

sat in a lower chair.

"And now talk to me, my dear," she said. "Tell me what news there is. I have not seen you since July!" [Pg 370]

Marie paused a moment.

"I hardly know what to tell you," she said, "for I suppose you do not ask me for just the trivial news that I have, as last-comer from England."

"No, my dear; who cares? Anybody can tell me that. About yourself."

"Well, I saw Mildred," said Marie. "I saw her the same day as it happened. We went together to Jack's room. And we shook hands. I have not seen her since."

"Ah, she did her best to ruin him in life, and she succeeded in killing him," said Lady Ardingly very dryly. "I do not want news of her. She is a cook."

Marie bit her lip.

"I also do not want to talk of her," she said. "She is very gay this winter, I believe. She says it would look so odd if she didn't do things, just because of that awful accident. She thinks people would talk."

"She has a horror of that, I know," said Lady Ardingly, "except when they are not talking about her. If they are not talking about her, she joins in it. Did she, in confidence, tell you——" [Pg 371]

"Yes, she told me in confidence that it was she who had started that silly story about me. She told me also that you knew it. So I am not violating her confidence."

Lady Ardingly made a noise in her throat which resembled gargling.

"That is enough," she said. "What else, dear Marie?"

Marie smiled.

"You mean Jim, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes, Jim."

"Well, Jim is coming out here in a week or so. He cannot get away any sooner. I have seen him a good deal."

"And you will in the future see him even oftener," suggested Lady Ardingly.

"Much oftener. I shall see him every day."

"I am very glad of that," she said; "I have a great respect for Mr. Spencer. I see constantly that he is attacking my poor Ardingly. And I respect you also, my dear. You are the nicest good woman I know. Ah! my dear, when you are old like me, you will have pleasant back-pages to turn over."

"And to whom shall I owe them?" asked Marie. [Pg 372]

"To your own good sense. My dear, I am not often sentimental. But I feel sentimental when I think of one morning in last July. You were a good woman always, Marie, I should imagine. That day you were a grand one, too—superb! I admired you, and it is seldom that I admire people."

There was a long silence. With the swiftness of sunset in the South, the colours were struck from the gay crowds, and where ten minutes before had been a riot of blues and reds, there was only a succession of various gray. But overhead the stars burned close and large, and the pale northern heavens were here supplanted by a velvet blue.

"And I admired Jack," said Lady Ardingly at length. "He was weak, if you like, and, if you choose, he was wicked. But there was, how shall I say it? the possibility of the big scale about him. That is the best thing; the next is to know that you are small. The worst is not to know that you are small."

Again Marie made no reply. Outside the patter of bare feet went right and left, donkeys jingled their chains, and the odour of the Southern night got more intense.

"Ah! my dear, we are lepers," said Lady Ardingly. "We are all wrong and bad, and we roll over each other in the gutter like these Arabs scrambling for backshish. We strive for one thing, which is wealth, and when we have got it we spend it on pleasure. You are not so, and the odd thing is that the pleasure we get does not please us. It is always something else we want. I sit and I say 'What news?' and when I am told I say 'What else?' and still 'What else?' and I am not satisfied. Younger folk than I do this, and they do that, and still, like me, they cry, 'What else? what else?' It means that we go after remedies for our *ennui*, for our leprosy, and there is no such remedy unless we become altogether different. Now, you are not so. Tell me your secret. Why are you different? Why can you sit still while we fidget? Why is it you can always keep clean in the middle of that muck-heap?" [Pg 373]

Marie was moved and strangely touched. Her companion's face looked very haggard in the glare of the electric lamp overhead, and her eyes were weary and wistful.

"Dear Lady Ardingly," she said, "why do you say these things? I suppose my nature is not to fidget. I suppose, also, that the pleasures you refer to do not seem to me immensely attractive. I suppose I happen to be simple and not complex." [Pg 374]

"Ah! that is not all," said the other. "Those are only little accidents."

Marie let her eyes wander a moment, then looked straight at Lady Ardingly.

"I believe in God," she said.

THE END

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