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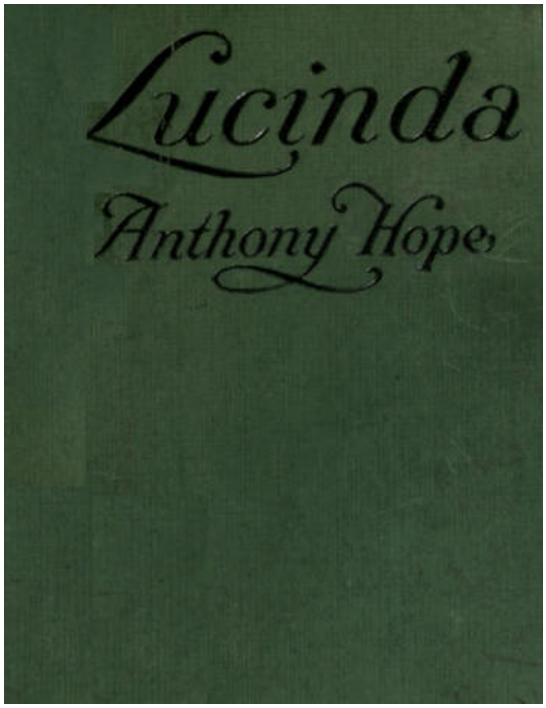
Lucinda
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LUCINDA

BY

ANTHONY HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET OF THE TOWER," "THE PRISONER OF ZENDA," "RUPERT OF HENTZAU," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

THE FACE IN THE TAXI

HIS “Business Ambassador” was the title which my old chief, Ezekiel Coldston, used to give me. I daresay that it served as well as any other to describe with a pleasant mixture of dignity and playfulness, the sort of glorified bag-man or drummer that I was. It was my job to go into all quarters of the earth where the old man had scented a concession or a contract—and what a nose he had for them!—and make it appear to powerful persons that the Coldston firm would pay more for the concession (more in the long run, at all events) or ask less for the contract (less in the first instance, at all events) than any other responsible firm, company, or corporation in the world. Sir Ezekiel (as in due course he became) took me from a very low rung of the regular diplomatic ladder into his service on the recommendation of my uncle, Sir Paget Rillington, who was then at the top of that same ladder. My employer was good enough to tell me more than once that I had justified the recommendation. [2]

“You’ve excellent manners, Julius,” he told me. “Indeed, quite engaging. Plenty of tact! You work—fairly hard; your gift for languages is of a great value, and, if you have no absolute genius for business—well, I’m at the other end of the cable. I’ve no cause to be dissatisfied.”

“As much as you could expect of the public school and varsity brand, sir?” I suggested.

“More,” said Ezekiel decisively.

I liked the job. I was very well paid. I saw the world; I met all sorts of people; and I was always royally treated, since, if I was always trying to get on the right side of my business or political friends, they were equally anxious to get on the right side of me—which meant, in their sanguine imaginations, the right side of Sir Ezekiel; a position which I believe to correspond rather to an abstract mathematical conception than to anything actually realizable in experience.

However, I do not want to talk about all that. I mention the few foregoing circumstances only to account for the fact that I found myself in town in the summer of 1914, back from a long and distant excursion, temporary occupant of a furnished flat (I was a homeless creature) in Buckingham Gate, enjoying the prospect of a few months’ holiday, and desirous of picking up the thread of my family and social connections—perhaps with an eye to country house visits and a bit of shooting or fishing by and by. First of all, though, after a short spell of London, I was due at Cragsfoot, to see Sir Paget, tell him about my last trip, and console him for the loss of Waldo’s society. [3]

Not that anything tragic had happened to Waldo. On the contrary, he was going to be married. I had heard of the engagement a month before I sailed from Buenos Aires, and the news had sent my thoughts back to an autumn stay at Cragsfoot two years before, with Sir Paget and old Miss Fleming (we were great friends, she and I); the two boys, Waldo and Arsenio, just down from Oxford; respectable Mrs. Knyvett—oh, most indubitably respectable Mrs. Knyvett;—myself, older than the boys, younger than the seniors, and so with an agreeable alternation of atmosphere offered to me—and Lucinda! True that Nina Frost was a good deal there too, coming over from that atrocious big villa along the coast—Briarmount they called it—still, she was not of the house party; there was always a last talk, or frolic, after Nina had gone home, and after Mrs. Knyvett had gone to bed. Miss Fleming, “Aunt Bertha,” liked talks and frolics; and Sir Paget was popularly believed not to go to bed at all; he used to say that he had got out of the habit in Russia. So it was a merry time—a merry, thoughtless ——!

Why, no, not the least thoughtless. I had nearly fallen into a [4]
cliché, a spurious commonplace. Youth may not count and calculate. It thinks like the deuce—and is not ashamed to talk its thoughts right out. You remember the Oxford talk, any of you who have been there, not (with submission to critics) all about football and the Gaiety, but through half the night about the Trinity, or the Nature of the Absolute, or Community of Goods, or why in Tennyson (this is my date rather than Waldo's) Arthur had no children by Guinevere, or whether the working classes ought to limit—well, and so on. The boys brought us all that atmosphere, if not precisely those topics, and mighty were the discussions,—with Sir Paget to whet the blades, if ever they grew blunt, with one of his aphorisms, and Aunt Bertha to round up a discussion with an anecdote.

And now Lucinda had accepted Waldo! They were to be married now—directly. She had settled in practice the problem we had once debated through a moonlight evening on the terrace that looked out to sea. At what age should man and woman marry? He at thirty, she at twenty-five, said one side—in the interest of individual happiness. He at twenty-one, she at eighteen, said the other, in the interest of social wellbeing. (Mrs. Knyvett had gone to bed.) Lucinda was now twenty-one and Waldo twenty-six. It was a compromise—though, when I come to think of it, she had taken no part in discussing the problem. "I should do as I felt," had been her one and only contribution; and she also went to bed in the early stages of the [5]
wordy battle. Incidentally I may observe that Lucinda's exits were among the best things that she did—yes, even in those early days, when they were all instinct and no art. From Sir Paget downwards we men felt that, had the problem been set for present solution, we should all have felt poignantly interested in what Lucinda felt that she would do. No man of sensibility—as they used to say before we learnt really colloquial English—could have felt otherwise.

I will not run on with these recollections just now, but I was chuckling over them on the morning of Waldo's and Lucinda's wedding day—a very fine day in July, on which, after late and leisurely breakfast, I looked across the road on the easy and scattered activity of the barracks' yard. That scene was soon to change—but the future wore its veil. With a mind vacant of foreboding, I was planning only how to spend the time till half-past two. I decided to dress myself, go to the club, read the papers, lunch, and so on to St. George's. For, of course, St. George's it was to be. Mrs. Knyvett had a temporary flat in Mount Street; Sir Paget had no town house, but put up at Claridge's; he and Waldo—and Aunt Bertha—had been due to arrive there from Cragsfoot yesterday. Perhaps it was a little curious that Waldo had not been in town for the last week; but he had not, and I had seen none of the Cragsfoot folk since I got home. I had left a card on Mrs. Knyvett, but—well, I suppose that she and her daughter were much too busy [6]
to take any notice. I am afraid that I was rather glad of it; apprehensive visions of a *partie carrée*—the lovers mutually absorbed, and myself left to engross Mrs. Knyvett—faded harmlessly into the might-have-beens.

I walked along the Mall, making for my club in St. James's Street. At the corner by Marlborough House I had to wait before crossing the road; a succession of motors and taxis held me up. I was still thinking of Lucinda; at least I told myself a moment later that I must have been still thinking of Lucinda, because only in that way could I account, on rational lines, for what happened to me. It was one o'clock—the Palace clock had just struck. The wedding was at half-past two, and the bride was, beyond reasonable doubt, now being decked out for it, or, perchance, taking necessary sustenance. But not driving straight away from the scene of operations, not looking out of the window of that last taxi which had just whisked by me! Yet the face at the taxi window—I could have sworn it was Lucinda's. It wore her smile—and not many faces did that. Stranger still, it dazzled with that vivid flush which she herself—the real Lucinda—exhibited only on the rarest occasions, the moments of high feeling. It had come on the evening when Waldo and Arsenio Valdez quarreled at Cragsfoot.

The vision came and went, but left me strangely taken aback, in a way ashamed of myself, feeling a fool. I shrugged my shoulders angrily as I crossed Pall Mall. As I reached the pavement on the [7]
other tide, I took out my cigarette case; I wanted to be normal and reasonable; I would smoke.

"Take a light from mine, Julius," said a smooth and dainty voice.

It may seem absurd—an affectation of language—to call a voice "dainty," but the epithet is really appropriate to Arsenio Valdez's way of talking, whether in Spanish, Italian, or English. As was natural, he spoke them all with equal ease and mastery, but he used none of them familiarly; each was treated as an art, not in the choice of words—that would be tedious in every-day life—but in articulation. We others used often to chaff him about it, but he always asserted that it was the "note of a Castilian."

There he stood, at the bottom corner of St. James's Street, neat, cool, and trim as usual—like myself, he was wearing a wedding garment—and looking his least romantic and his most monkeyish: he could do wonders in either direction.

"Hullo! what tree have you dropped from, Monkey?" I asked. But then I went on, without waiting for an answer. "I say, that taxi must have passed you too, didn't it?"

"A lot of taxis have been passing. Which one?"

"The one with the girl in it—the girl like Lucinda. Didn't you see her?"

"I never saw a girl like Lucinda—except Lucinda herself. Have you lunched? No, I mean the question quite innocently, old chap. [8]
Because, if you haven't, we might together. Of course you're bound for the wedding as I am? At least, I can just manage, if the bride's punctual. I've got an appointment that I must keep at three-fifteen."

"That gives you time enough. Come and have lunch with me at White's." I put my arm in his and we walked up the street. I forgot my little excitement over the girl in the cab.

Though he was a pure-blooded Spaniard, though he had been educated at Beaumont and Christ Church, Valdez was more at home in Italy than anywhere else. His parents had settled there, in the train of the exiled Don Carlos, and the son still owned a small *palazzo* at Venice and derived the bulk of his means (or so I understood) from letting the more eligible floors of it, keeping the attics for himself. Here he consorted with wits, poets, and "Futurists," writing a bit himself—Italian was the language he employed for his verses—till he wanted a change, when he would shoot off to the Riviera, or Spain, or Paris, or London, as the mood took him. But he had not been to England for nearly two years now; he gave me to understand that the years of education had given him, for the time, a surfeit of my native land: not a surprising thing, perhaps.

"So I lit out soon after our stay at Cragsfoot, and didn't come back again till a fortnight ago, when some business brought me over. And I'm off again directly, in a day or two at longest."

"Lucky you've hit the wedding. I suppose you haven't seen [9]
anything of my folks then—or of the Knyvetts?"

"I haven't seen Waldo or Sir Paget, but I've been seeing something of Mrs. Knyvett and Lucinda since I got here. And they were out in Venice last autumn; and, as they took an apartment in my house, I saw a good deal of them there."

"Oh, I didn't know they'd been to Venice. Nobody ever writes to tell me anything when I'm away."

"Poor old chap! Get a wife, and she'll write to tell you she's in debt. I say, oughtn't we to be moving? It won't look well to be late, you know."

"Don't be fidgety. We've got half an hour, and it's not above ten minutes' walk."

"There'll be a squash, and I want a good place. Come on, Julius." He rose from the table rather abruptly; indeed, with an air of something like impatience or irritation.

"Hang it! you might be going to be married yourself, you're in such a hurry," I said, as I finished my glass of brandy.

As we walked, Valdez was silent. I looked at his profile; the delicate fine lines were of a poet's, or what a poet's should be to our fancy. Not so much as a touch of the monkey! That touch, indeed, when it did come, came on the lips; and it came seldom. It was the devastating acumen and the ruthless cruelty of boyhood that had winged the shaft of his school nickname. Yet it had followed him to [10]
the varsity; it followed him now; I myself often called him by it. "Monkey Valdez"! Not pretty, you know. It did not annoy him in the least. He thought it just insular; possibly that is all it was. But such persistence is some evidence of a truthfulness in it.

"Have you been trying a fall with Dame Fortune lately?" I asked.

He turned his face to me, smiling. “I’m a reformed character. At least, I was till a fortnight ago. I hadn’t touched a card or seen a table for above a year. Seemed not to want to! A great change, eh? But I didn’t miss it. Then when—when I decided to come over here, I thought I would go round by the Riviera, and just get out at Monte Carlo, and have a shot—between trains, you know. I wanted to see if my luck was in. So I got off, had lunch, and walked into the rooms. I backed my number everyway I could—*en plein*, *impair*, all the rest. I stood to win about two hundred louis.”

“Lost, of course?”

“Not a bit of it. I won.”

“And then lost?”

“No. I pouched the lot and caught my train. I wasn’t going to spoil the omen.” He was smiling now—very contentedly.

“What was the number?”

“Twenty-one.”

“This is the twenty-first of July,” I observed.

“Gamblers must be guided by something, some fancy, some omen,” he said. “I had just heard that Waldo and Lucinda were to be married on the twenty-first.” [11]

The monkey did peep out for a moment then; but we were already in George Street; the church was in sight, and my attention was diverted. “Better for you if you’d lost,” I murmured carelessly.

“Aye, aye, dull prudence!” he said mockingly. “But—the sensation! I can feel it now!”

We were on the other side of the road from the church, but almost opposite to it, as he spoke, and it was only then that I noticed anything peculiar. The first thing which I marked was an unusual animation in the usual small crowd of the “general public” clustered on either side of the steps: they were talking a lot to one another. Still more peculiar was the fact that all the people in carriages and cars seemed to have made a mistake; they drew up for a moment before the entrance; a beadle, or some official of that semi-ecclesiastical order, said something to them, and they moved on again—nobody got out! To crown it, a royal brougham drove up—every Londoner can tell one yards away, if it were only by the horses—and stopped. My uncle, Sir Paget himself, came down the steps, took off his tall hat, and put his head in at the carriage window for a moment; then he signed, and no doubt spoke, to the footman, who had not even jumped down from the box or taken off his hat. And the royal brougham drove on. [12]

“Well, I’m damned!” said I.

Valdez jerked his head in a quick sideways nod. “Something wrong? Looks like it!”

I crossed the road quickly, and he kept pace with me. My intention was to join Sir Paget, but that beadle intercepted us.

“Wedding’s unavoidably postponed, gentlemen,” he said. “Sudden indisposition of the bride.”

There it was! I turned to Valdez in dismay—with a sudden, almost comical, sense of being let down, choused, made a fool of. “Well, twenty-one’s not been a lucky number for poor Lucinda, at all events!” I said—rather pointlessly; but his story had been running in my head.

He made no direct reply; a little shrug seemed at once to accuse and to accept destiny. “Sir Paget’s beckoning to you,” he said. “Do you think I might come too?”

“Why, of course, my dear fellow. We both want to know what’s wrong, don’t we?”

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CHAPTER II

THE SIGNAL

BY now it was past the half-hour; the arrivals dwindled to a few late stragglers, who were promptly turned away by the beadle; the crowd of onlookers dispersed with smiles, shrugs, and a whistle or two: only a group of reporters stood on the lowest step, talking to one another and glancing at Sir Paget, as though they would like to tackle him but were doubtful of their reception. One did quietly detach himself from the group and walked up to where my uncle stood on the top step. I saw Sir Paget raise his hat, bow slightly, and speak one sentence. The man bowed in return, and rejoined his fellows with a rueful smile; then all of them made off together down the street.

My uncle was a little below middle height, but very upright and spare, so that he looked taller than he was. He had large features—a big, high-peaked nose, wide, thin-lipped mouth, bushy eyebrows, and very keen blue eyes. He bore himself with marked dignity—even with some stiffness towards the world at large, although among intimates he was the most urbane and accessible of men. His long experience in affairs had given him imperturbable composure; even [14] at this moment he did not look the least put out. His manner and speech were modeled on the old school of public men—formal and elaborate when the occasion demanded, but easy, offhand, and familiar in private: to hear him was sometimes like listening to behind-the-scenes utterances of, say, Lord Melbourne or the great Duke which have come down to us in memoirs of their period.

When we went up to him, he nodded to me and gave his hand to Valdez. He had not seen him for two years, but he only said, “Ah, you here, Arsenio?” and went on, “Well, boys, here’s a damned kettle of fish! The girl’s cut and run, by Gad, she has!”

Valdez muttered “Good Lord!” or “Good Heavens!” or something of that kind. I found nothing to say, but the face I had seen at the taxi window flashed before my eyes again.

“Went out at ten this morning—for a walk, she said, before dressing. And she never came back. Half an hour ago a boy-messenger left a note for her mother. ‘I can’t do it, Mother. So I’ve gone.’—That was all. Aunt Bertha had been called in to assist at the dressing-up, and she sent word to me. Mrs. Knyvett collapsed, of course.”

“And—and Waldo? Is he here?” asked Valdez. “I’d like to see him and—and say what I could.”

“I got him away by the back door—to avoid those press fellows: [15] he consented to go back to the hotel and wait for me there.”

“It’s a most extraordinary thing,” said Valdez, who wore an air of embarrassment quite natural under the circumstances. He was—or had been—an intimate of the family; but this was an extremely intimate family affair. “I called in Mount Street three days ago,” he went on, “and she seemed quite—well, normal, you know; very bright and happy, and all that.”

Sir Paget did not speak. Valdez looked at his watch. “Well, you’ll want to be by yourselves, and I’ve got an appointment.”

“Good-by, my boy. You must come and see us presently. You’re looking very well, Arsenio. Good-by. Don’t you go, Julius, I want you.”

Arsenio walked down the steps very quickly—indeed, he nearly ran—and got into a taxi which was standing by the curb. He turned and waved his hand towards us as he got in. My uncle was frowning and pursing up his thin, supple lips. He took my arm and we came down the steps together.

“There’s the devil to pay with Waldo,” he said, pressing his hand on my sleeve. “It was all I could do to make him promise to wait till we’d talked it over.”

“What does he want to do?”

“He’s got one of his rages. You know ‘em? They don’t come often, but when they do—well, it’s damned squally weather! And he looks on her as as good as his wife, you see.” He glanced up at me—I am a [16] good deal the taller—with a very unwonted look of distress and

apprehension. “He’s not master of himself. It would never do for him to go after them in the state he’s in now.”

“After—*them?*”

“That’s his view; I incline to it myself, too.”

“She was alone in the taxi.” I blurted it out, more to myself than to him, and quite without thinking.

I told him of my encounter; it had seemed a delusion, but need not seem so now.

“Driving past Marlborough House into the Mall? Looks like Victoria, doesn’t it? Any luggage on the cab?”

“I didn’t notice, sir.”

“Then you’re an infernal fool, Julius,” said Sir Paget peevishly.

I was not annoyed, though I felt sure that my uncle himself would have thought no more about luggage than I had, if he had seen the face as I had seen it. But I felt shy about describing the flush on a girl’s face and the sparkle in her eyes; that was more Valdez’s line of country than mine. So I said nothing, and we fell into a dreary silence which lasted till we got to the hotel.

I went upstairs behind Sir Paget in some trepidation. I had, for years back, heard of Waldo’s “white rages”; I had seen only one, and I had not liked it. Waldo was not, to my thinking, a Rillington: we [17]
are a dark, spare race. He was a Fleming—stoutly built, florid and rather ruddy in the face. But the passion seemed to suck up his blood; it turned him white. It was rather curious and uncanny, while it lasted. The poor fellow used to be very much ashamed of himself when it was over; but while it was on—well, he did not seem to be ashamed of anything he did or said. He was dangerous—to himself and others. Really, that night at Cragsfoot, I had thought that he was going to knock Valdez’s head off, though the ostensible cause of quarrel was nothing more serious—or perhaps I should say nothing less abstract—than the Legitimist principle, of which Valdez, true to his paternal tradition, elected to pose as the champion and brought on himself a bitter personal attack, in which such words as hypocrites, parasites, flunkeys, toadeaters, etc., etc., figured vividly. And all this before the ladies, and in the presence of his father, whose absolute authority over him he was at all normal moments eager to acknowledge.

“I’m going to tell him that you think you saw her this morning,” said Sir Paget, pausing outside the door of the room. “He has a right to know; and it’s not enough really to give him any clew that might be—well, too easy!” My uncle gave me a very wry smile as he spoke.

Waldo was older now; perhaps he had greater self-control, perhaps the magnitude of his disaster forbade any fretful exhibition of fury. It was a white rage—indeed, he was pale as a ghost—but he [18]
was quiet; the lightning struck inwards. He received his father’s assurance that everything had been managed as smoothly as possible—with the minimum of publicity—without any show of interest; he was beyond caring about publicity or ridicule, I think. On the other hand, it may be that these things held too high a place in Sir Paget’s mind; he almost suggested that, if the thing could be successfully hushed up, it would be much the same as if it had never happened: perhaps the diplomatic instinct sets that way. Waldo’s concern stood rooted in the thing itself. This is not to say that his pride was not hit, as well as his love; but it was the blow that hurt him, not the noise that the blow might make.

Probably Sir Paget saw this for himself before many minutes had passed; for he turned to me, saying, “You’d better tell him your story, for what it’s worth, Julius.”

Waldo listened to me with a new look of alertness, but the story seemed to come to less than he had expected. His interest flickered out again, and he listened with an impatient frown to Sir Paget’s conjectures as to the fugitive’s destination. But he put two or three questions to me.

“Did she recognize you? See you, I mean—bow, or nod, or anything?”

“Nothing at all; I don’t think she saw me. She passed me in a second, of course.”

“It must have been Lucinda, of course. You couldn’t have been [19]
mistaken?”

“I thought I was at the time, because it seemed impossible. Of course, now—as things stand—there’s no reason why it shouldn’t have been Lucinda, and no doubt it was.”

“How was she looking?”

I had to attempt that description, after all! “Very animated; very—well, eager, you know. She was flushed; she looked—well, excited.”

“You’re dead sure that she was alone?”

“Oh, yes, I’m positive as to that.”

“Well, it doesn’t help us much,” observed Sir Paget. “Even if anything could help us! For the present I think I shouldn’t mention it to any one else—except, of course, Mrs. Knyvett and Aunt Bertha. No more talk of any kind than we can help!”

“Besides you two, I’ve only mentioned it to Valdez; and, when I did that, I didn’t believe that the girl was Lucinda.”

“Monkey Valdez! Did he come to the—to the church?” Waldo asked quickly. “I didn’t know he was in London, or even in England.”

“He’s been in town about a fortnight, I gathered. He’d seen the Knyvetts, he said, and I suppose they asked him to the wedding.”

“You met him there—and told him about this—this seeing Lucinda?”

“I didn’t meet him at the church. He lunched with me before and we walked there together.”

“What did he say?” [20]

“Oh, only some half-joking remark that you couldn’t take any other girl for Lucinda. He didn’t seem to attach any importance to it.”

Waldo’s eyes were now set steadily on my face. “Did you tell him at lunch, or as you walked to the church, or at the church?”

“As a matter of fact, before lunch. I mentioned the matter—that was half in joke too—as soon as I met him in the street.”

Sir Paget was about to speak, but Waldo silenced him imperiously. “Half a minute, Father. I want to know about this. Where did you meet—and when?”

“As soon as the taxi—the one with the girl in it—had gone by. I had to wait for it to go by. I crossed over to St. James’s Street and stopped to light a cigarette. Just as I was getting out a match, he spoke to me.”

“Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know; I didn’t see him till he spoke to me.”

“He might have been standing at the corner there—or near it?”

“Yes, for all I know—or just have reached there, or just crossed from the other corner of St. James’s Street. I really don’t know. Why does it matter, Waldo?”

“You’re dense, man, you’re dense!”

“Gently, Waldo, old boy!” Sir Paget interposed softly. He was standing with his back to the fireplace, smoking cigarette after cigarette, but quite quietly, not in a fluster. It was plain that he had begun to follow the scent which Waldo was pursuing so keenly. [21]

“I beg your pardon, Julius. But look here. If he was at either corner of the street, or on the refuge in the middle—there is one, I think—he may well have been there a moment before—standing there, waiting perhaps. The taxi that passed you would have passed him. He would have seen the girl just as you saw her.”

“By Jove, that’s true! But he’d have told me if he had.”

“He didn’t say he hadn’t?”

I searched my memory. “No, he didn’t say that. But if—well, if, as you seem to suggest, he was there in order to see her, and did see her——”

“It was funny enough your happening to see her. It would be a lot funnier coincidence if he just happened to be there, and just happened to see her too! And just as funny if he was there and didn’t see her, eh?”

“But how could he carry it off as he did?”

“My dear chap, the Monkey would carry off a load of bricks that hit him on the head! There’s nothing in that.”

“What’s your theory, Waldo?” Sir Paget asked quietly.

Waldo sat silent for a full minute. He seemed by now to be over the first fit of his rage; there was color in his cheeks again. But his eyes were bright, intent, and hard. He seemed to be piecing together the theory for which his father asked him—piecing it together so as to give it to us in a complete form. Waldo was not [22]

quick-witted, but he had a good brain. If he got hold of a problem, he would worry it to a solution.

"I've written to her every day," he began slowly. "And she's answered, quite affectionately—she's never offensive; she's given me no hint that she meant to go back on me like this. The day before yesterday I wired to her to know if I might come up; she wired: 'For pity's sake don't. I am too busy. Wait till the day.'"

"Nothing much in that," said his father. "She'd put it that way—playfully."

"Nothing much if it stood alone," Waldo agreed. "But suppose she was struggling between two influences—mine and his." For a moment his voice faltered. "He's always been against me—always—ever since that time at Cragsfoot." I heard a swallow in his throat, and he went on again steadily. "Never mind that. Look at it as a case, a problem, impersonally. A girl is due to marry a man; another is besieging her. She can't make up her mind—can't make it up even on the very day before the wedding; or, if you like, won't admit to herself that she has really resolved to break her promise, to be false to the man to whom she is already——" Again there was a falter in [23]
his voice—"already really a wife, so far as anything short of—short of the actual thing itself—can make her——"

He came to a sudden stop; he was unable to finish; he had invited us to a dispassionate consideration of the case as a case, as a problem; in the end he was not equal to laying it before us dispassionately. "Oh, you see, Father!" he groaned.

"Yes," said Sir Paget. "I see the thing—on your hypothesis. She couldn't make up her mind—or wouldn't admit that she had. So she told the other man——"

"Valdez?"

"Yes, Julius. Arsenio Valdez. She told Arsenio to be at a certain spot at a certain time—a time when, if she were going to keep her promise, she would be getting ready for her wedding. 'Be at the corner of St. James's Street at one o'clock.' That would be it, wouldn't it? If I drive by in a taxi, alone, it means yes to you, no to him. If I don't, it means the opposite.' That's what you mean, Waldo?"

Waldo nodded assent; but I could not readily accept the idea.

"You mean, when I saw her she'd just seen him, and when I saw him, he'd just seen her?"

"Wouldn't that account for the animation and excitement you noticed in her face—for the flush that struck you? She had just given the signal; she'd just"—he smiled grimly—"crossed her Rubicon, [24]
Julius."

"But why wasn't he with her? Why didn't he go with her? Why did he come to the wedding? Why did he go through that farce?"

Sir Paget shrugged his shoulders. "Some idea of throwing us off the scent and getting a clear start, probably."

"Yes, it might have been that," I admitted. "And it does account for—for the way she looked. But the idea never crossed my mind. There wasn't a single thing in his manner to raise any suspicion of the sort. If you're right, it was a wonderful bit of acting."

Waldo turned to me—he had been looking intently at his father while Sir Paget expounded the case—with a sharp movement. "Did Monkey ask for me when he came to the church?"

"Yes, I think he did. Yes, he did. He said he'd like to see you and—and say something, you know."

"I thought so! That would have been his moment! He wanted to see how I took it, damn him! Coming to the church was his idea. He may have persuaded her that it was a good ruse, a clever trick. But really he wanted to see me—in the dirt. Monkey Valdez all over!"

I believe that I positively shivered at the bitterness of his anger and hatred. They had been chums, pals, bosom friends. And I loved—I had loved—them both. Sir Paget, too, had made almost a son of [25]
Arsenio Valdez.

"And for that—he shall pay," said Waldo, rising to his feet. "Doesn't he deserve to pay for that, Father?"

"What do you propose to do, Waldo?"

"Catch him and—give him his deserts."

"He'll have left the country before you can catch him."

"I can follow him. And I shall. I can find him, never fear!"

"You must think of her," I ventured to suggest.

“Afterwards. As much as you like—afterwards.”

“But by the time you find them, they’ll have—I mean, they’ll be ——”

“Hold your tongue, for God’s sake, Julius!”

I turned to Sir Paget. “If he insists on going, let me go with him, sir,” I said.

“Yes, that would be—wise,” he assented, but, as I thought, rather absently.

Waldo gave a laugh. “All right, Julius. If you fancy the job, come along and pick up the pieces! There’ll be one of us to bury, at all events.” I suppose that I made some instinctive gesture of protest, for he added: “She was mine—mine.”

Sir Paget looked from him to me, and back again from me to him.

“You must neither of you leave the country,” he said.

CHAPTER III

A HIGH EXPLOSIVE

I HAVE said so much about Waldo's "rages" that I may have given quite a wrong impression of him. The "rages" were abnormal, rare and (if one may not use the word unnatural about a thing that certainly was in his nature) at least paradoxical. The normal—the all but invariable and the ultimately ruling—Waldo was a placid, good-tempered fellow; not very energetic mentally, yet very far from a fool; a moderate Conservative, a good sportsman, an ardent Territorial officer, and a crack rifle-shot. He had an independent fortune from his mother, and his "Occupation" would, I suppose, have to be entered on the Government forms as "None" or "Gentleman"; all the same, he led a full, active, and not altogether useless existence. Quite a type of his class, in fact, except for those sporadic rages, which came, I think, in the end from an extreme, an exaggerated, sense of justice. He would do no wrong, but neither would he suffer any; it seemed to him an outrage that any one should trench on his rights: among his rights he included fair, honorable and courteous treatment—and a very high standard of it. He asked what he gave. It seems odd that a [27] delicacy of sensitiveness should result, even now and then, in a mad-bull rage, but it is not, when one thinks it over, unintelligible.

Sir Paget had spoken in his most authoritative tone; he had not proffered advice; he issued an order. I had never known Waldo to refuse, in the end, to obey an order from his father. Would he obey this one? It did not look probable. His retort was hot.

"I at least must judge this matter for myself."

"So you shall then, when you've heard my reasons. Sit down, Waldo."

"I can listen to you very well as I am, thank you." "As he was" meant standing in the middle of the room, glowering at Sir Paget, who was still smoking in front of the fireplace. I was halfway between them, facing the door of the room. "And I can't see what reasons there can be that I haven't already considered."

"There can be, though," Sir Paget retorted calmly. "And when I tell you that I have to break my word in giving them to you, I'm sure that you won't treat them lightly."

Frowning formidably, Waldo gave an impatient and scornful toss of his head. He was very hostile, most unamenable to reason—or reasons.

At this moment in walked Miss Fleming—Aunt Bertha as we all called her, though I at least had no right to do so. She was actually aunt to Waldo's mother, the girl much younger than himself whom [28] Sir Paget had married in his fortieth year, and who had lived for only ten years after her marriage. When she fell sick, Aunt Bertha had come to Cragsfoot to nurse her; she had been there ever since, mistress of Sir Paget's house, his *locum tenens* while he was serving abroad, guide of Waldo's youth, now the closest friend in the world to father and son alike—and, looking back, I am not sure that there was then any one nearer to me either. I delighted in Aunt Bertha.

She was looking—as indeed she always did to me—like a preternaturally aged and wise sparrow, with her tiny figure, her short yet aquiline nose, her eyes sparkling and keen under the preposterous light-brown "front" which she had the audacity to wear. I hastened to wheel a chair forward for her, and she sank into it (it was an immense "saddlebag" affair and nearly swallowed her) with a sigh of weariness.

"How I hate big hotels, and lifts, and modern sumptuousness in general," she observed.

None of us made any comment or reply. Her eyes twinkled quickly over the group we made, resting longest on Waldo's stubborn face. But she spoke to me. "Put me up to date, Julius."

That meant a long story. Well, perhaps it gave Waldo time to cool off a little; halfway through he even sat down, though with an angry flop.

"Yes," said Aunt Bertha at the end. "And you may all imagine the morning I had! I got to Mount Street at half-past eleven. Lucinda [29] still out for a walk—still! At twelve, no Lucinda! At half-past, anxiety —at one, consternation—and for Mrs. Knyvett, sherry and biscuits.

At about a quarter to two, despair. And then—the note! I never went through such a morning! However, she's in bed now—with a hot-water bottle. Oh, I don't blame her! Paget, you're smoking too many cigarettes!"

"Not, I think, for the occasion," he replied suavely. "Was Mrs. Knyvett—she was upset, of course—but was she utterly surprised?"

"What makes you ask that, Paget?"

"Well, people generally show some signs of what they're going to do. One may miss the signs at the time, but it's usually possible to see them in retrospect, to interpret them after the event."

"You mean that you can, or I can, or the Knyvett woman can?" Aunt Bertha asked rather sharply.

"Never mind me for the minute. Did it affect her—this occurrence—just as you might expect?"

"Why, yes, I should say so, Paget. The poor soul was completely knocked over, flabbergasted, shocked out of her senses. But—well now, upon my word, Paget! She did put one thing rather queerly."

"Ah!" said Sir Paget. Waldo looked up with an awakened, though still sullen, animation. I was listening with a lively interest; somehow I felt sure that these two wise children of the world—what things must they not have seen between them?—would get at something.

"When her note came—that note, you know—what would you have said in her place? No, I don't mean that. You'd have said: 'Well, I'm damned!' But what would you have expected her to say?" [30]

"'Great God!' or perhaps 'Good gracious!'" Sir Paget suggested doubtfully.

"She's gone—gone!" I ventured to submit.

"Just so—just what I should have said," Aunt Bertha agreed. "Something like that. What our friend Mrs. Knyvett did say to me was, 'Miss Fleming, she's done it!'"

"What did you say?" Sir Paget as nearly snapped this out as a man of his urbanity could snap.

"I don't think I said anything. There seemed nothing to——"

"Then you knew what she meant?"

Aunt Bertha pouted her lips and looked, as it might be, apprehensively, at Sir Paget.

"Yes, I suppose I must have," she concluded—with an obvious air of genuine surprise.

"We sometimes find that we have known—in a way—things that we never realized that we knew," said Sir Paget—"much what I said before. But—well, you and Mrs. Knyvett both seem to have had somewhere in your minds the idea—the speculation—that Lucinda might possibly do what she has done. Can you tell us at all why? Because that sort of thing doesn't generally happen."

"By God, no!" Waldo grunted out. "And I don't see much good in all this jaw about it."

A slight, still pretty, flush showed itself on Aunt Bertha's wrinkled cheeks—hers seemed happy wrinkles, folds that smiles had turned, not furrows plowed by sorrow—"I've never been married," she said, "and I was only once in love. He was killed in the Zulu war—when you were no more than a boy, Paget. So perhaps I'm no judge. But—darling Waldo, can you forgive me? She's never of late looked like—like a girl waiting for her lover. That's all I've got to go upon, Paget, absolutely all." [31]

I saw Waldo's hands clench; he sat where he was, but seemed to do it with an effort.

"And Mrs. Knyvett?"

"Nothing to be got out of her just now. But, of course, if she really had the idea, it must have been because of Arsenio Valdez!"

The name seemed a spur-prick to Waldo; he almost jumped to his feet. "Oh, we sit here talking while——!" he mumbled. Then he raised his voice, giving his words a clearer, a more decisive articulation. "I've told you what I'm going to do. Julius can come with me or not, as he likes."

"No, Waldo, you're not going to do it. I love—I have loved—Lucinda. I held my arms open to her. I thought I was to have what I have never had, what I have envied many men for having—a daughter. Well, now——" his voice, which had broken into tenderness, grew firm and indeed harsh again. "But now—what is she now?"

"Monkey Valdez's woman!"

These words, from Waldo's lips, were to me almost incredible. [32] Not for their cruelty—I knew that he could be cruel in his rage—but for their coarse vulgarity. I did not understand how he could use them. A second later he so far repented—so far recovered his manners—as to say, "I beg your pardon for that, Aunt Bertha."

"My poor boy!" was all the old lady said.

"Whatever she may be—even if she were really all that up to to-day you thought—you mustn't go after her now, Waldo—neither you nor Julius with you." He paused a moment, and then went on slowly. "In my deliberate judgment, based on certain facts which have reached me, and reënforced by my knowledge of certain persons in high positions, all Europe will be at war in a week, and this country will be in it—in a war to the death. You fellows will be wanted; we shall all be wanted. Is that the moment to find you two traipsing over the Continent on the track of a runaway couple, getting yourselves into prison, perhaps; anyhow quite uncertain of being able to get home and do your duty as gentlemen? And you, Waldo, are a soldier!"

Waldo sat down again; his eyes were set on his father's face.

"You can't suspect me of a trick—or a subterfuge. You know that I believe what I'm telling you, and you know that I shouldn't believe it without weighty reasons?"

"Yes," Waldo agreed in a low tone. His passion seemed to have [33] left him; but his face and voice were full of despair. "This is pretty well a matter of life and death to me—to say nothing of honor."

"Where does your honor really lie?" He threw away his cigarette, walked across to his son, and laid a hand on his shoulder. But he spoke first to me. "As I told you, I am breaking my word in mentioning this knowledge of mine. It is desirable to confine that breach of confidence to the narrowest possible limits. If I convince Waldo, will you, Julius, accept his decision?"

"Of course, Sir Paget. Besides, why should I go without him? Indeed, how could I—well, unless Mrs. Knyvett——"

"Mrs. Knyvett has nothing to do with our side of the matter. Waldo, will you come out with me for an hour?"

Waldo rose slowly. "Yes. I should like to change first." He still wore his frock coat and still had a white flower in his buttonhole. Receiving a nod of assent from Sir Paget, he left the room. Sir Paget returned to the fireplace and lit a fresh cigarette.

"He will do what's right," he pronounced. "And I think we'd better get him to Cragsfoot to-morrow. You come too, Julius. We'll wait developments there. I have done and said what I could in quarters to which I have access. There's nothing to do now but wait for the storm."

He broke away from the subject with an abrupt turn to Aunt [34] Bertha. "It's a damned queer affair. Have you any views?"

"The mother's weak and foolish, and keeps some rather second-rate company," said the old lady. "Surroundings of that sort have their effect even on a good girl. And she's very charming—isn't she?"

"You know her yourself," Sir Paget observed with a smile.

"To men, I mean. In that particular way, Paget?"

"Well, Julius?"

"Oh, without a doubt of it. Just born to make trouble!"

"Well, she's made it! We shall meet again at tea, Aunt Bertha? I'll pick up Waldo at his room along the passage. And I'd better get rid of my wedding ornament too." He took the rose out of the lapel of his coat, flung it into the fireplace, and went out of the room, leaving me with Aunt Bertha.

"On the face of it, she has just suddenly and very tardily changed her mind, hadn't the courage to face it and own up, and so has made a bolt of it?" I suggested.

"From love—sudden love, apparently—of Arsenio Valdez, or just to avoid Waldo? For there seems no real doubt that Arsenio's taken her. He's only once been to the flat, but the girl's been going out for walks every day—all alone; a thing that I understand from her mother she very seldom did before."

"Oh, it's the Monkey all right. But that only tells us the fact—it [35] doesn't explain it."

"Very often there aren't any explanations in love affairs—no

reasonable ones, Julius. Waldo takes it very hard, I'm afraid."

"She's made an ass of him before all London. It can't really be hushed up, you know."

"Well," Aunt Bertha admitted candidly, "if such an affair happened in any other family, I should certainly make it my business to find out all I could about it." She gave a little sigh. "It's a shock to me. I've seen a lot, and known a lot of people in my day. But when you grow old, your world narrows. It grows so small that a small thing can smash it. You Rillington men had become my world; and I had just opened it wide enough to let in Lucinda. Now it seems that I might just as well have let in a high explosive. In getting out again herself, she's blown the whole thing—the whole little thing—to bits."

"Love's a mad and fierce master," I said—with a reminiscence of my classics, I think. "He doesn't care whom or what he breaks."

"No! Poor Lucinda! I wish she'd a nice woman with her!"

I laughed at that. "The nice woman would feel singularly *de trop*, I think."

"She could make her tea, and tell her that in the circumstances she could hardly be held responsible for what she did. Those are the two ways of comforting women, Julius." [36]

"As it is, she's probably gone to some beastly foreign place where there isn't any tea fit to drink, and Monkey Valdez is picturesquely, but not tactfully, insisting that her wonderful way has caused all the trouble!"

"Poor Lucinda!" sighed Aunt Bertha again.

And on that note—of commiseration, if not actually of excuse—our conversation ended; rather contrary to what might have been expected, perhaps, from two people so closely allied to the deserted and outraged lover, but because somehow Aunt Bertha enticed me into her mood, and she—who loved men and their company as much as any woman whom I have known—never, I believe, thought of them *en masse* in any other way than as the enemy-sex. If and where they did not positively desire that lovely women should stoop to folly, they were always consciously or unconsciously, by the law of their masculine being, inciting them to that lamentable course. Who then (as the nice woman would have asked Lucinda as she handed her the cup of tea) were really responsible when such things came about? This attitude of mind was much commoner with Aunt Bertha's contemporaries than it is to-day. Aunt Bertha herself, however, always praised Injured Innocence with a spice of malice. There was just a spice of it in her pity for Lucinda and in the remedies proposed for her consolation.

My own feeling about the girl at this juncture was much what one may have about a case of suicide. She had ended her life as we had known her life in recent years; that seemed at once the object and the effect of her action. What sort of a new life lay before her now was a matter of conjecture, and we had slender *data* on which to base it. What did seem permissible—in charity to her and without disloyalty to Waldo—was some sympathy for the struggle which she must have gone through before her shattering resolve was reached. [37]

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CHAPTER IV

THE FOURTH PARTY

AS Sir Paget had suggested, we—we three Rillington men and Aunt Bertha—spent the Twelve Days, the ever-famous Twelve Days before the war, at Cragsfoot. On the public side of that period I need say nothing—or only just one thing. If we differed at all from the public at large in our feelings, it was in one point only. For us, under Sir Paget's lead, it was less a time of hope, fear, and suspense than of mere waiting. We other three took his word for what was going to happen; his certainty became ours—though, as I believe (it is a matter of belief only, for he never told me what he told Waldo on that walk of theirs on the afternoon of the wedding day—which was not the day of a wedding), his certainty was based not so much on actual information as on a sort of instinct which long and intimate familiarity with international affairs had given him. But, whatever was his rock of conviction, it never shook. Even Waldo did not question it. He accepted it—with all its implications, public and private.

Yes, and private. There his acceptance was not only absolute; it [39]
was final and—a thing which I found it difficult to understand—it was absolutely silent. He never referred to his project of pursuit—and of rescue, or revenge, or whatever else it had been going to be. He never mentioned Lucinda's name; we were at pains never to pronounce it in his presence. It was extraordinary self-control on the part of a man whom self-control could, on occasion, utterly forsake. So many people are not proof against gossiping even about their own fallen idols, though it would be generally admitted that silence is more gracious; pedestal-makers should be sure that they build on a sound foundation. However, Waldo's silence was not due to delicacy or to a recognition of his own mistake; that, at least, was not how I explained it. He recognized the result of his own decision. The event that was to raise for all the civilized world a wall of division between past and future—whom has it not touched as human being and as citizen?—erected a barrier between Lucinda and himself, which no deed could pass, which no word need describe. Only memory could essay to wing over it a blind and baffled flight.

In spite of the overwhelming preoccupation of that national crisis —Sir Paget remained in close touch with well-informed people in town, and his postbag gave rise to talk that lasted most of the morning—my memory, too, was often busy with those bygone days at Cragsfoot, when the runaways had been of the party. Tall, slim, and fair, a girl on the verge of womanhood, ingenuous, open, and [40]
gay though she was, the Lucinda of those days had something remote about her, something aloof. The veil of virginity draped her; the shadow of it seemed to fall over her eyes which looked at you, as it were, from out of the depths of feelings and speculations to which you were a stranger and she herself but newly initiated. The world faced her with its wonders, but the greatest, the most alluring and seductive wonder was herself. The texture of her skin, peculiarly rich and smooth—young Valdez once, sitting on a patch of short close moss, had jokingly compared it to Lucinda's cheeks—somehow aided this impression of her; it looked so fresh, so untouched, as though a breath might ruffle it. Fancy might find something of the same quality in her voice and in her laughter, a caressing softness of intonation, a mellow gentleness.

What were her origins? We were much in the dark as to that; even Aunt Bertha, who knew everything of that sort about everybody, here knew nothing. The boys, Waldo and Valdez, had met mother and daughter at a Commem' Ball; they came as guests of the wife of one of their dons—a lady who enjoyed poor health and wintered in "the South." There, "in the South," she had made friends with the Knyvetts and, when they came to England, invited them to stay. Mrs. Knyvett appeared from her conversation (which was copious) to be one of those widows who have just sufficient [41]
means to cling to the outskirts of society at home and abroad; she frequently told us that she could not afford to do the things which she did do; that "a cottage in the country somewhere" was all she wanted for herself, but that Lucinda must "have her chance, mustn't she?" The late Mr. Knyvett had been an architect; but I believe that

Lucinda was by far the greatest artistic achievement in which he could claim any share.

So—quite naturally, since Waldo always invited any friends he chose—the pair found themselves at Cragsfoot in the summer of 1912. And the play began. A pleasant little comedy it promised to be, played before the indulgent eyes of the seniors, among whom I, with only a faint twinge of regret, was compelled to rank myself; to be in the thirties was to be old at Cragsfoot that summer; and certain private circumstances made one less reluctant to accept the status of an elder.

Valdez paid homage in the gay, the embroidered, the Continental fashion; Waldo's was the English style. Lucinda seemed pleased with both, not much moved by either, more interested in her own power to evoke these strange manifestations than in the meaning of the manifestations themselves. Then suddenly the squall came—and, as suddenly, passed; the quarrel, the "row," between Waldo and Valdez; over (of all things in the world) the Legitimist principle! The last time I had seen Waldo in a rage—until the day that was to have brought his wedding with Lucinda! It had been a rage too; and [42]
Valdez, a fellow not lacking in spirit as I had judged him, took it with a curious meekness; he protested indeed, and with some vigor, but with a propitiatory air, with an obvious desire to appease his assailant. We elders discussed this, and approved it. Waldo was the host, he the guest; for Aunt Bertha's and Sir Paget's sake he strove to end the quarrel, to end the unpleasantness of which he was the unfortunate, if innocent, cause. He behaved very well indeed; that was the conclusion we arrived at. And poor dear Waldo—oh, badly, badly! He quite frightened poor Lucinda. Her eyes looked bright—with alarm; her cheeks were unwontedly, brilliantly red—with excited alarm. The girl was all of a quiver! It was inexcusable in Waldo; it was generous of Valdez to accept his apologies—as we were given to understand that he had when the two young men appeared, rather stiff to one another but good friends, at the breakfast table the next morning.

How did this view look now—in the light of recent events? Was there any reason to associate the old quarrel of 1912 with the catastrophe which had now befallen Waldo? I had an impulse to put these questions to Aunt Bertha, perhaps to Sir Paget too. But, on reflection, I kept my thoughts to myself. Silence was the *mot d'ordre*; Waldo himself had set the example.

It was on the Saturday—the day on which the question of Belgian [43]
neutrality defined itself, according to my uncle's information, as the vital point—that, wearied by a long talk about it and oppressed by Waldo's melancholy silence, I set out for a walk by myself. Cragsfoot, our family home, lies by the sea, on the north coast of Devon; a cleft in the high cliffs just leaves room for the old gray stone house and its modest demesne; a steep road leads up to the main highway that runs along the top of the cliff from east to west. I walked up briskly, not pausing till I reached the top, and turned to look at the sea. I stood there, taking in the scene and snuffing in the breeze. A sudden wave of impatient protest swept over my mind. Wars and rumors of wars—love and its tragedies—troubles public and private! My holiday was being completely spoilt. A very small and selfish point of view, no doubt, but human, after all.

"Oh, damn the whole thing!" I exclaimed aloud.

It must have been aloud—though I was not conscious that it was—for another audible voice spoke in response.

"That's just what Father said this morning!"

"It's just what everybody's saying," I groaned. "But—well, how are you after all this time, Miss Frost?"

For it was Nina Frost who stood beside me and I felt oddly surprised that, in my retrospect of that earlier summer at Cragsfoot, I had never thought of her; because she had been a good deal with us in our sports and excursions. But the plain fact is that there had [44]
been little about her in those days that would catch a mature man's attention or dwell in his memory. She was a chit of a girl, a couple of years or so younger than Lucinda, much more the school-girl, pretty enough but rather insignificant, attaching herself to the other three rather by her own perseverance than thanks to any urgent pressing on their part. Lucinda had altogether outshone her in the eyes of us all; she had been "little Nina Frost from Briarmount."

But now—she was different. A first glance showed that. She was not only taller, with more presence; she had acquired not merely an

ease of manner; it was a composure which was quite mature, and might almost be called commanding.

"You've changed!" I found myself exclaiming.

"Girls do—between sixteen and eighteen—or nearly nineteen! Haven't you noticed it, Mr. Rillington?" She smiled. "Hasn't Lucinda changed too? I expect so! Oh, but you've been abroad, haven't you? And since she didn't—I mean, since the wedding didn't—Oh, well, anyhow, perhaps you haven't seen her?"

"No, I haven't seen her." I had not—officially. "Are you going towards Briarmount? May I walk with you?"

"Yes, do. And perhaps I haven't changed so much, after all. You see, you never took much notice of me. Like the others, you were dazzled by Lucinda. Are you at liberty to tell me anything, Mr. [45] Rillington? If you aren't, I won't ask."

She implied that she was not much changed. But would any child of sixteen put it like that? I thought it precocious for eighteen; for it cornered me. I had to lie, or admit practically the whole thing. I tried to fence.

"But didn't you go to the wedding yourself?" I asked. "If you did ——"

"No, I didn't. Father wasn't very well, and I had to stay down with him."

As we walked, I had been slyly studying her face: she had grown handsome in a style that was bold and challenging, yet in no way coarse; in fact, she was very handsome. As she gave me her most respectable reason for not having attended—or attempted to attend —Waldo's wedding, she grew just a little red. Well, she was still only eighteen; her education, though I remained of opinion that it had progressed wonderfully, was not complete. She was still liable to grow red when she told fibs. But why was she telling a fib?

She recovered her composure quickly and turned to me with a rather sharp but not unpleasant little laugh. "As it turned out, I'm glad. It must have been a very uncomfortable occasion." She laughed again—obviously at me. "Come, Mr. Rillington, be sensible. There are servants at Cragsfoot. And there are servants at Briarmount. Do you suppose that I haven't heard all the gossip through my maid? Of course I have! And can't I put two and two [46] together?"

I had never—we had never—thought of this obvious thing. We had thought that we could play the ostrich with its head in the sand! Our faithful retainers were too keen-sighted for that!

"Besides," she pursued, "when smart society weddings have to be put off, because the bride doesn't turn up at the last moment, some explanation is put in the papers—if there is an explanation. And she gets better or worse! She doesn't just vanish, does she, Mr. Rillington?"

I made no reply; I had not one ready.

"Oh, it's no business of mine. Only—I'm sorry for Waldo, and dear Miss Fleming." A gesture of her neatly gloved and shapely hands seemed to dismiss the topic with a sigh. "Have you seen anything of Don Arsenio lately?" she asked the next moment. "Is he in England?"

"Yes. He was at the wedding—well, at the church, I mean."

She came to a stop, turning her face full round to me; her lips were parted in surprise, her white teeth just showing; her eyes seemed full of questions. If she had "scored off" me, at least I had startled her that time. "Was he?" she murmured.

At the point to which our walk had now brought us, the cliffs take a great bulge outwards, forming a bold rounded bluff. Here, seeming to dominate, to domineer over, a submissive Bristol Channel, Mr. Jonathan Frost (as he then was—that is, I think, the [47] formula) had built his country seat; and "Briarmount" he had called it.

"Good Heavens," said I, "what's happened to the place? It's grown! It's grown as much as you have!"

"We've built on a bit—a few more bedrooms, and bathrooms. And garages, you know. Oh, and a ballroom!"

"No more than that?"

"Not at present. Come in and have a look—and some tea. Or are you in too deep mourning?"

I found myself not exactly liking the girl, but interested in her, in

her composure—and her impudence. I accepted her invitation.

Since he could very well afford it, no blame need rest on Mr. Frost for building himself a large house and equipping it sumptuously. The only thing was that, when he had got it, he did not seem to care a bit about it. Probably he built it to please Nina—or to enshrine Nina; no doubt he found in his daughter a partial and agreeable solution of the difficulty of how to spend the money which he could not help making. He himself was a man of the simplest ways and tastes—almost of no tastes at all. He did not even drink tea; while we took ours, he consumed a small bowlful of one of those stuffs which, I believe, they call cereals—this is a large domed hall of glass—conservatory, winter-garden, whatever it should be called —full of exotic plants and opening on a haughty terrace with a view [48]
of the sea. He was small, slight, shabby, simple, and rather nervous. Still I gazed on him with some awe; he was portentously rich; Mother Earth labored, and her children sweated, at his bidding; he waved wands, and wildernesses became—no, not quite paradises perhaps, but at all events garden-cities; he moved mountains and where the ocean had been he made dry land. Surely it beseems us to look with some awe on a man like that? I, at least, being more or less in the same line of business, recognized in him a master.

He greeted me very kindly, though I think that it had cost him an effort to “place” me, to remember who I was. He spoke warmly of the kindness which my uncle and Miss Fleming had shown to his motherless girl. “They’ve made you quite at home at Cragsfoot, haven’t they, Nina? And your cousin Waldo—Mr. Waldo taught you billiards, didn’t he?” (There was no billiard room at Cragsfoot; these lessons presumably took place at Briarmount.) “And he made company for your rides, too! I hope he’s very well, Mr. Rillington? Oh, but didn’t you tell me that he was engaged to be married, my dear?”

One must allow for preoccupation with important affairs. Still, this was Saturday; as recently as the preceding Tuesday week, Mr. Frost would have attended Waldo’s wedding, but for his own indisposition. I stole a glance at Nina; she was just a little red again. [49]
I was not far from embarrassment myself—on Waldo’s account; I gave a weak laugh and said: “I’m afraid it’s not quite certain that the event will come off.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he murmured apologetically. “It was the pretty girl who came here with him once or twice—Miss—Miss—yes, Miss Knyvett?”

“Yes, it was, Mr. Frost. But the—well, the arrangement is sort of —of suspended.” With that distinctly lame explanation I rose to take my leave.

I rather thought that Nina, being by now pretty plainly convicted of fibbing, would stay where she was, and thus avoid being left alone with me. However, she escorted me back through Briarmount’s spacious hall—furnished as a sitting-room and very comfortable. She even came out into the drive with me and, as she gave me her hand in farewell, she said, with a little jerk of her head back towards the scene of my talk with her father, “After that, I suppose you’re wondering what was the real reason for my not coming to the wedding?”

“Perhaps I am. Because you seem to have kept up the old friendship since I’ve been away.”

“Sometimes people don’t go to functions because they’re not invited.”

“What, you mean to say——”

“I should have been the skeleton at the feast!” She looked me in the face, smiling, but in a rather set, forced fashion. Then, as she turned away, she added with a laugh, “Only, as it turned out, there [50]
was no feast, was there, Mr. Rillington?”

When I got back to Cragsfoot, I met Waldo in the garden, walking up and down in a moody fashion and smoking his pipe. “Been for a walk?” he asked.

“I started on one, but I met Nina Frost and she took me in to tea.”

He stood still, smoking and staring out to sea. “Did she say anything about me?” he asked.

“Hardly about you yourself. She referred to—the affair. The servants have been chattering, it seems. Well, they would, of course!”

He gave a nod of assent. Then he suddenly burst out in a vehement exclamation: “She wasn’t there to see it, anyhow, thank God!” With that he walked quickly away from me and was soon hidden in the shrubbery at the end of the walk.

How did he know that she had not come to the church? He had not been in the body of the church himself—only in the vestry. Many people had actually gone in—early arrivals; Sir Paget had told me so. Many more had been turned away from the doors. Waldo could not have known from his own observation that Nina Frost was not there. Possibly somebody had told him. More probably he had known beforehand that she would not be there, because she had not been invited. But why should he thank God that she was not at the church?

So there was the coil—unexplained, nay, further complicated by the intrusion of a fourth party, Miss Nina Frost. Unexplained I had to leave it. The next morning—Sunday though it was—Sir Paget carried me off to town, by motor and rail, to interview some bigwig to whom he had mentioned me and who commanded my attendance. I had not even a chance of a private talk with Aunt Bertha, whose silence about Nina now struck me as rather odd. [51]

The war was upon us. It had many results for many people. One result of it was that, instead of the start of hours for which they had schemed, our runaway couple secured a start of years. That made a great difference.

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[52]

CHAPTER V

CATCH WHO CATCH CAN!

I DO not want to say more about the war or my doings during it than is strictly necessary to my purpose. The great man to whom I have referred took a note of my qualifications. Nothing came of this for a good many months, during which I obtained a commission, went through my training, and was for three months fighting in France. Then I was called back, and assigned to non-combatant service (it was not always strictly that, as a nasty scar on my forehead, the result of a midnight "scrap" in a South American seaport where I happened to be on business, remains to testify). My knowledge of various parts of the world and my command of languages made me of value for the quasi-diplomatic, quasi-detective job with which I was entrusted, and I continued to be employed on it throughout the war. It entailed a great deal of traveling by sea and land, and a lot of roughing it; it was interesting and sometimes amusing; there was, of course, no glory in it. I was a mole, working underground; there were a lot of us. For the best part of a year I was out of Europe; I was often out of reach of letters, [53] though now and then I got one from Aunt Bertha, giving me such home news as there was, and copying out extracts from what she described as "Waldo's miserable letters" from France—meaning thereby not unhappy—he wrote very cheerfully—but few, short, and scrappy. Sir Paget, it appeared, had found some sort of advisory job —a committee of some kind—in connection with the Foreign Office.

It was when I came back to Europe, in the spring of 1916, and was staying for a few days at a small town in the South of France—I was at the time covering my tracks, pending the receipt of certain instructions for which I was waiting, but there is no harm in saying now that the town was Ste. Maxime—that I ran into Lucinda Knyvett. That is almost literal. I came round a sharp corner of the street from one direction, she from another. A collision was so narrowly avoided that I exclaimed, "*Pardon!*" as I came to an abrupt stop and raised my hat. She stopped short too; the next moment she flung out both her hands to me, crying, "You, Julius!" Then she tried to draw her hands back, murmuring, "Perhaps you won't——!" But I had caught her hands in mine and was pressing them. "Yes! And it's you, Lucinda!"

It was about midday, and she readily accepted my suggestion that we should lunch together. I took her to a pleasant little restaurant on the sea-front. It was bright, warm, calm weather; we ate our meal out of doors, in the sunshine. In reply to her inquiries— [54] made without any embarrassment,—I told her what Cragsfoot news I had. She, in return, told me that Arsenio—he also was mentioned without embarrassment—had gone to Italy when that country entered the war, and was at this moment on the staff of some General of Division; he wrote very seldom, she added, and, with that, fell into silence, as she sipped a glass of wine.

She had changed from a girl into a woman; yet I did not divine in her anything like the development I had marked in Nina Frost. In appearance, air, and manner she was the Lucinda whom I had known at Cragsfoot; her eyes still remotely pondering, looking inwards as well as outwards, the contour of her face unchanged, her skin with all its soft beauty. But she was thinner, and looked rather tired.

"Arsenio told me that you saw me in the taxi that day," she said suddenly.

"He must have been very much amused, wasn't he? He certainly made a pretty fool of me! And put the cap on it by coming to the—to the church, didn't he?"

"I suppose, when once he'd met you, he was bound to go there, or you'd have suspected."

"He could have made some excuse to leave me, and not turned up again."

She did not pursue her little effort to defend Valdez; she let it go with a curious smile, half-amused, half-apologetic. I smiled back. [55] "Monkey Valdez, I think!" said I. She would not answer that, but her smile persisted. "You were looking very happy and bonny," I added.

"I was happy that day. I had at last done right."

“The deuce you had!” That was to myself. To her I said, rather dryly, “It certainly was at the last, Lucinda.”

“It was as soon as I knew—as soon as I really knew.”

The waiter brought coffee. She took a cigarette from me, and we both began to smoke.

“And it’s true that I didn’t dare to face Waldo. I was physically afraid. He’d have struck me.”

“Never!” I exclaimed, indignant at the aspersion on my kinsman.

“Oh, but yes!—I thought that he would fight Arsenio that night at Cragsfoot—the night Arsenio first kissed me.” She let her cigarette drop to the ground, and leant back in her chair. Her eyes were on mine, but the shadow of the veil was thick. “It all began then—at least, I realized the beginning of it. It all began then, and it never stopped till that day when I ran away. Shall I tell you about it?”

“We were all very fond of you—all of us. I wish you would.”

She laid her hand on my arm for a moment. “I couldn’t have told then—perhaps I can now. But, dear Julius, perhaps not quite plainly. There’s shame in it. Some, I think, for all of us—most, I suppose, for me.” [56]

At this point a vision of Aunt Bertha’s “nice woman” flitted before my mind’s eye; it was a moment for her ministrations—or ought to have been, perhaps. Lucinda was rather ruminative than distressed.

“We were very happy that summer. I had never had anything quite like it. Mother and I went to lunches and teas—and I’d just begun to go to a few dances. But people didn’t ask us to stay in country houses. Three days’ visit to Mrs. Wiseman at Oxford was an event—till Cragsfoot came! I love that old house—and I shall never see it again!—Oh, well——! The boys were great friends; all three of us were. If anything, Waldo and I took sides against Arsenio, chaffing him about his little foreign ways, and so on, you know. Waldo called him Monkey; I called him ‘Don’—sometimes ‘Don Arsenio.’ I called Waldo just ‘Waldo’—and I should have called Arsenio just by his name, only that once, when we were alone, he asked me to, rather sentimentally—something about how his name would sound on my lips! So I wouldn’t—to tease him. I thought him rather ridiculous. I’ve always thought him ridiculous at times. Well, then, Nina Frost took to coming a good deal; Miss Fleming had pity on her, as she told me—her mother wasn’t long dead, you know, and she was all alone at Briarmount with a governess. Do you remember Fräulein Borasch? No? I believe you hardly remember Nina? You hardly ever came on excursions, and so on, with us. The boys told me all that sort of thing bored ‘old Julius.’ Nina rather broke up our trio; we fell into couples—you know how that happens? The path’s too narrow, or the boat’s too small, or you take sides at tennis. And so on. For the first time then the boys squabbled a little—for me. I enjoyed that—even though I didn’t think victory over little Nina anything to boast about. Well, then came that day.” [57]

Lucinda leant forward towards me, resting her arms on the table between us; she was more animated now; she spoke faster; a slight flush came on her cheeks; I likened it to an afterglow.

“Nina had been there all the afternoon, but she went home after tea. We’d been quite jolly, though. But after dinner Waldo whispered to me to come out into the garden. I went—it was a beautiful evening—and we walked up and down together for a few minutes. Waldo didn’t say anything at all, but somehow I felt something new in him. I became a little nervous—rather excited. We were at the end of the walk, just where it goes into the shrubbery. He said, ‘Lucinda!’—and then stopped. I turned sharp round—towards the house, suddenly somehow afraid to go into the shrubbery with him; his voice had sounded curious. And there—he must have come up as silently as a cat—was Arsenio, looking so impishly triumphant! Waldo had turned with me; I heard him say ‘Damn!’ half under his breath. ‘Do I intrude?’ Arsenio asked. Waldo didn’t answer. The moon was bright; I could see their faces. I felt my cheeks hot; Waldo looked so fierce, Arsenio so mischievous. I felt funnily triumphant. I laughed, cried, ‘Catch who catch can!’ turned, and ran down the winding path through the shrubbery. I ran quite a long way. You know how the path twists? I looked back once, and saw Arsenio running after me, laughing: I didn’t see Waldo, but I could hear his footsteps. I ran round another turn. By then Arsenio was quite close. I was out of breath and stopped under a big tree. I put my back against it, and faced Arsenio; I think I put out my hands to keep him off—in fun, you know. But he came and took hold of my [58]

hands, and pulled me to him and kissed me on my lips. ‘Caught!’ he said as he let me go. Then I saw Waldo just a few yards off, watching us. I was trembling all over. I ran away from them, back towards the house; but I didn’t dare to go straight in; I felt that I shouldn’t be able to answer, if anybody spoke to me. I sat down on the bench that stands close by the door, but is hidden from it by the yew hedge. Presently I heard them coming; I heard Waldo speaking angrily, but as they got nearer the house, he stopped talking, so I didn’t hear anything that he said. But Arsenio told me—later on—that he said that English gentlemen didn’t do things like that, though dirty Spaniards might—and so on. I sat where I was, and let [59] them go in. But presently I felt that I must see what was happening. So I went in, and found them quarreling: at least, Waldo was abusing Arsenio—but you know about that; you were there. I thought they’d fight—they would have if you and Sir Paget hadn’t been there—but somehow, by now, I didn’t mind if they did. I wasn’t frightened any more; I was excited. You know how it ended. I didn’t then, because after a good deal of it Sir Paget sent me to bed—don’t you remember? I went to bed, but I didn’t go to sleep for ever so long. I felt that something great had happened to me. Men had tried to kiss me a few times before; one or two had managed just to kiss my cheek in a laughing kind of way. This was different to me. And there was Waldo too! I was very young. I suddenly seemed to myself immensely important. I wondered—oh, how I wondered—what they would do the next morning—and what I should do. I imagined conversations—how I should be very stiff and dignified—and Arsenio very penitent, but protesting his devotion. But I couldn’t imagine how Waldo would behave. Anyhow, I felt that the next morning would be the most awfully exciting moment in my life, that anything might happen.”

Lucinda paused, looking at me with a smile that mocked the girl whose feelings she had been describing. “Nothing did!”

After another pause she went on: “Later on, of course, I heard [60] how that was. I’ve heard it from both of them! Arsenio didn’t really care for me at that time, though Waldo did. And Arsenio was very fond of Waldo; he felt he’d behaved rather badly, and he didn’t bear malice against Waldo for abusing him. Arsenio is malicious in a way; it’s fun to him to make people look and feel silly; but he doesn’t harbor malice. He’s not rancorous. He went to Waldo’s room early in the morning—while Waldo was still in bed—and apologized. He said he must have had a glass too much of champagne, that he hadn’t meant anything, and that if he’d had the least notion how Waldo would feel about it—and so on! In fact, he made light of the whole thing, so far as I was concerned. Waldo listened to it all in silence, and at the end just said, ‘All right, old chap. There’s an end of it.’ But he didn’t really forgive Arsenio—and he didn’t forgive me, though it hadn’t been my fault—had it? In the first-place, between us we’d made him give himself away; he’s very proud, and he hates that. In the second, he’s much better than you’d suppose at seeing into things; he has a sort of instinct; and from that day, right on, he was instinctively afraid of Arsenio; he felt that, if Arsenio chose, he could be dangerous—about me. I know it, from the way he used to speak of him later on—when we were engaged—always trying to probe me, to find out my feelings about Arsenio, whether I was thinking about him, whether I ever heard from him, and things like [61] that. All the time he never had Arsenio out of his mind. Well—he was right.

“But I knew nothing of all that at the time. To me they seemed just a little sulky to one another, and to me, too. Otherwise they ignored what had happened, made nothing of it, never referred to it in any way. I was most frightfully hurt and—and let down. To me it had been a great beginning—of something, though I didn’t know of what. I couldn’t understand how Arsenio could treat it as nothing—that he shouldn’t apologize and abase himself if he’d meant nothing serious, that he shouldn’t speak to me again if he really cared for me. I felt utterly bewildered. Only I had a strange feeling that somehow, in some way, Arsenio had acquired a right over me by kissing my lips. Of that feeling I never got rid.”

From a frown she broke into a smile again, as she went on. “It was a miserable week—till we went. Both the boys avoided me whenever they could. Both have told me why since, but I don’t believe that either of them told me the truth. Arsenio said it was because he couldn’t trust himself not to make love to me, and he had practically promised that he wouldn’t. I think it was because he

thought I would expect to be made love to (I did!), and he didn't want to; he wasn't in love with me then; besides he was afraid of Waldo. Waldo said it was because he was ashamed of himself. I daresay he was ashamed, but it was much more because he was in [62] love with me, but was too proud to seem to compete with Arsenio. Whatever the reasons, the result was—triumph for Nina! She was invited over every day and all day. Both of them tried to keep with her—in order to avoid me. I wasn't exactly jealous, because I knew that they really wanted to be with me—but for the complications. But I was exasperated to see that she thought—as, of course, she must—that she had cut me out. How her manner changed! Before this she had adored me—as younger girls do older ones sometimes; 'Darling Lucinda!' and so on! I'd noticed her trying to imitate me, and she used to ask where I got such pretty frocks. Now she patronized me, told me how I must wish I had a nice home (she knew I hadn't) like Cragsfoot or Briarmount, and said what a pity it was my mother couldn't give me more chances of riding, so that I could improve! She did ride much better than I—which made it worse."

Here I looked at Lucinda, asking leave to laugh. She gave it in her own low-murmuring laughter at herself. "So it ended. We went away, and I was very glad when we did. I went away without either Arsenio or Waldo having said to me a single word that mattered."

"I must have been very dull to have noticed nothing—except just the quarrel; well, the quarrel itself, and how you looked while it was going on—till you were sent to bed."

"How did I look?" [63]

"Just as you did when I saw you in the taxi at the corner by Marlborough House."

"I'm very glad I didn't see you! You'd have brought back what I'd managed to put out of my mind. As though I could put it out of my life!"

Suddenly and abruptly she pushed her chair back from the table. "Aren't we staying here a frightfully long time? That waiter's staring at us."

"But surely I haven't heard all the story yet?"

"All the story? No. Only the prologue. And the prologue's a comedy, isn't it? A children's comedy! The rest isn't quite like that. Pay the bill and let's go. For a walk, if you like—and have time."

"I ought just to call at my hotel—the *Méditerranée*—and see if there's anything for me—any telegrams. If there aren't, I should like to sit by the sea, and smoke, and hear the next chapter."

At the moment Lucinda merely nodded. But as we walked away, she put her arm in mine and said, "The next chapter is called 'Venice,' and it's rather a difficult one for me to tell."

"I hope I'm not a person who has to have all the t's crossed and all the i's dotted. Arsenio has—or had—a 'palazzo' at Venice?"

"Yes. We stayed there."

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[64]

CHAPTER VI

VENICE

THE instructions for which I was waiting did not reach me for three days: I found reason to suspect, later on, that bribery had been at work; they had almost certainly been delayed, copied, and communicated to enemy quarters. The bulk of these enforcedly idle hours I spent with Lucinda—at the restaurant, on the sea-front, once or twice at my hotel, but never in the little house where she had a room: I often escorted her to the door, but she never asked me in. But we grew intimate; she told, I think, all, or almost all, the story, though often still with the air of examining herself, or of rendering an account to herself, rather than of being anxious to tell me: sometimes she would seem even to forget my presence. At other points, however, she would appeal directly to me, even urgently, as though she hung on my verdict. These changes gave variety and life to her story; one saw her living again through all her moods and experiences: on the other hand, it cannot be denied that they lengthened the narrative.

In the spring of 1913—the spring after their visit to Cragsfoot— [65]
her mother and Lucinda went to stay on the top floor but one in Arsenio Valdez's palazzo at Venice, Valdez himself inhabiting the attics immediately above them. Poverty, the satirist remarked long ago, has no harsher incident than that of making people ridiculous; it may have worse moral effects. Mrs. Knyvett had not so much accepted Valdez's invitation as intrigued and cadged for it; and they stayed rent free, though even then Valdez was by no means a well-to-do man. And Mrs. Knyvett could not receive favors in the grand manner. She took, but she took cringingly; she over-acknowledged, constantly by manner and even by word, reminding the donor and herself of the gift, reminding her daughter also. She did not, it is true, know about the kiss in the garden at Cragsfoot; Lucinda kept that to herself; her view was that in her mother's hands it would have been another lever. "Arsenio lodged us free as it was; if mother had known that, she'd have made him board us too!" Even as it was, he seemed to have entertained them a good deal (as was only natural) while he played *cicerone*, showing them the sights and pleasures of the place.

It was by no means Mrs. Knyvett's intention or desire that her daughter should marry Arsenio. Her ambition flew higher. Cragsfoot was to her still the most eligible prospect or project which had so far presented itself; she kept in touch with it by letters to Aunt Bertha; in them she angled for another invitation there, just as she [66]
had cadged for Arsenio's invitation to the palazzo. How many invitations does a charming daughter "make" in the arithmetic of genteel poverty? Arsenio was quite aware of her attitude towards him, but it pleased his monkeyish humor to pretend to believe that she favored a suit which he had himself no intention of pressing. Arsenio could not afford to marry a poor girl, and probably did not want to marry at all. His taste was for a bachelor life, and his affairs were in a precarious state. He could hardly be said to live by gambling; he existed in spite of it—in a seesaw between prosperity and penury; as such men do, he splashed his *lire* about when he had them; when he was "cleaned out," he would disappear from the ken of the Knyvetts for a day or two, engaged in "milking" sundry old and aristocratic friends of his father, who still resided at Venice in a stately and gloomy seclusion, and could be persuaded to open their not very fat purses to help a gentleman of Spain who upheld the Legitimist principle, as we know—from past events—that Arsenio did! No, he certainly did not intend at the beginning of their visit to mate poverty to poverty.

But—there was Lucinda! Lucinda under blue skies by day and soft moonlight by night. There was that secret memory between them, the meeting of their lips; for him an incentive to gallantry, almost an obligation, according to his code; for her, more subtly, a tie, a union that she could not lightly nor wholly disown. He did not [67]
speak of it directly, but he would circle round it in talk, and smile in an impish exchange of the unspoken memory; he would laugh at Waldo, while with feigned sincerity he praised his sterling qualities. "Oh, his reliability, his English steadiness—dear, good, old Waldo! You'd trust him—even in a gondola, Lucinda!"

The gondola! Let it stand for the whole of Venice's romantic paraphernalia; an old theme, a picture painted a thousand times. No need to expatiate on it here. To him it was all very familiar—the nearest thing he had to a home; to her, of course, it was a revelation. They were both susceptible to impressions, to beauty. He retained his sensibility, she developed hers. She saw new things through his eyes; he saw old ones newly reflected in the light of hers. His feelings regained freshness, while hers grew to maturity—a warm ripeness in which the man and the place were fused together in one glowing whole. "Oh, I lived then!" she cried, clasping her hands together and beating them upon her knee.

Yet it must still have been with her own aloofness, delicacy, difficulty of approach; the fires gleamed through the veil, but the veil was round them. He complained, it appeared, of her coldness, of the distance at which she kept him, at relapses into formality after hours of unreserved merriment. Mrs. Knyvett chid her; was he not the friend, the host, the benefactor? Within prudent bounds he [68] should be handsomely encouraged—and rewarded. "Mother told me that well-bred girls knew how to make themselves respected without being prudish." Maternal philosophy of an affectionately utilitarian order—one eye on present amenities, the other on grander prospects in the future!

But was there no fear also in that maternal breast? Did the situation and the actors raise no apprehension? To some people—to how many? Some have maintained to all!—morality is not a master, but a good and ever vigilant servant. It preserves the things that are of real value, the marketable stuff. And it dignifies its watch and ward with such high names, such sacred and binding traditions, that—well, really, what between the august sanctions on the one hand and the enormous material advantages on the other, can it be dreamt of that any reasonable girl will forget herself? So one may suppose that Mrs. Knyvett reasoned. For what, after all, is the "leading article" in a girl's stock-in-trade? Who, properly instructed, would sell that under market price, and so stand bankrupt?

So much may be said in apology for Mrs. Knyvett's blindness to her daughter's peril; for in peril she was. Then an apology is needed for Arsenio? It would show a lack of humor to tender it; it is the last thing which those who have known and liked Monkey Valdez would think of doing. He was a "good Catholic" by tradition, and a [69] gentleman by breeding; but he was an honest man only by fits and starts—when honesty appealed to his histrionic sense, when it afforded him the chance of a *beau geste*, when he felt himself under the eyes of the men with whom he had been brought up, who expect honesty even in dealings with women—at all events, with girls of their own caste; who draw a broad distinction between an intrigue and a seduction; who are, in fact (not to labor the subject), born and trained adepts in the niceties, some of them curious, of the code of honor, which is certainly not a religious rule or an ethical system, but may be considered to embody the laws of sex warfare, to be a Hague Convention between the sexes.

Yet there is no need to picture the poor Monkey as the deliberate villain of the stage. Your true villain must be deliberate and must rejoice in his villainy, or all the salt is out of him. Arsenio was certainly not deliberate, and in no way realized himself as a villain. The event—the course of affairs afterwards—proves that. He probably let his boat drift pleasantly, delightfully, down the river, till the swirl of rapids caught it; it is likely that he was himself surprised; the under-nature stormed the hesitating consciousness.

She gave me no particulars; I asked for none. She shrank from them, as I did. It was after a delightful evening alone together, on the water, that it came. Mrs. Knyvett had gone to bed; they were [70] alone, full of the attraction of each other—and of "it all." So Lucinda summed up the notoriously amatory influences of the Adriatic's Queen. She appealed to me—woman now, to a man of middle age—to understand how it happened. As she told me—well, she hardly told me, she let me see—she laid her hand in mine, her eyes sought mine, straight, in question—yet hardly to me—rather to some tribunal which she blindly sought, to which she made a puzzled but not despairing, not altogether too tragic, appeal: "At Cragsfoot he had kissed my lips, you know; and I wasn't angry. That meant I liked him, didn't it? That meant——? That meant—the same?"

That seemed to me to record—as she, saying it, still seemed to retain—a wonderful freedom from the flesh. She judged things by the spirit. A terribly dangerous criterion; anybody can distort it;

anybody may snigger at it—though I think that it offers more resistance to an honest laugh. There is a sort of pathos about it. Meant the same! Poor dear! The gulf between the two things! Immeasurable! Let speak religion (though there perhaps the voices have varied), morality, prudence, the rest of them! And virgin modesty? Shall we lay its fall most essentially in the less or the greater—in the parley or in the surrender? That's what she seemed to ask. But what answer could a plain man of the world give her?

She had a few—a very few days of happiness, of forgetfulness of [71] everything except their love. Then the clouds gathered. She waited for a word from him that did not come—not the first time that he had kept her thus waiting—yet how different! Arsenio grew fretful, disconsolate, and sometimes sullen. One of his disappearances occurred; he was raising the wind among his long-suffering aristocrats; he was scraping together every coin he could and throwing them all on the gaming table. If fortune smiled, he would do the right thing, and do it handsomely; if she frowned—and there could be no doubt that she was frowning now—what lay before him, before them? A scamped and mean *ménage à trois*, existence eked out with the aid of Mrs. Knyvett's scanty resources, and soured by her laments! No money for gayety, for play, to cut a figure with! He shrank from the prospect. He could not trust his love with it; probably he did not trust hers either. He began to draw away from her; she would not reproach or beseech. "I had taken the chances; I had gambled too," she said.

Unless something had happened which put Arsenio under an even more imperative obligation—one which, as I would fain believe, he must have honored—it seems probable that the affair would in any case have ended as it did; but the actual manner of its ending was shaped by an external incident.

The two were sitting together one morning in the Knyvett *salon*, Lucinda mending her gloves, Arsenio doing nothing and saying [72] nothing, melancholy and fagged after a bout of gambling the night before. Mrs. Knyvett came in, with an air of triumph, holding a letter in her hand. She was still ignorant of the situation; still sure that her daughter was making herself respected—though surely less apprehensive of her prudishness? And, while they had been pursuing their devices, she had had hers also to pursue. Success had crowned her efforts. The letter was from "dearest Miss Fleming"; it invited mother and daughter to pay another visit to herself and Sir Paget as soon as they returned to England; that is, in about six weeks; for they had a stay with friends in Paris arranged in the immediate future—a thing that had already begun to trouble Lucinda.

"It's delightful!" said Mrs. Knyvett. "Won't it help us splendidly through the summer! Any chance of your being there too, Don Arsenio? That would make it perfect!"

The good lady did not stay for an answer. She had her hat on, and was going out to do her marketing. She laid the letter down on the table between them, and bustled out, her face still radiant with the joy of successful maneuver.

So Cragsfoot, completely forgotten of recent days, made its reëntry on the scene.

For a few moments they sat silent still, with the letter between them. Then Lucinda said, "What are we to do, Arsenio?" She raised her eyes from her sewing and looked across at him. He did not [73] return her glance; he was scowling. The invitation to Cragsfoot (he did not know about the French visit, which Mrs. Knyvett could readily have put off if she had preferred to stay on at Venice) brought him up short; it presented him with an issue. It forced Lucinda's hand also. No mere excuse, no mere plea of disinclination, would prevent Mrs. Knyvett from going to Cragsfoot and taking her daughter with her. To stay there was not only a saving and a luxury, in her eyes it was also prestige—and a great possibility!

"Damn Cragsfoot!" she heard him mutter. And then he laid his head between his hands on the table and began positively to sob. How much for unsuccessful gambling, how much for too successful love, Heaven knows! But Monkey Valdez sobbed.

She put down her work, went round to the back of his chair, and put her arms about his neck. "I know, I know, Arsenio. Don't be so miserable, dear. I understand. And—and there's no harm done. You only loved me too much—and if you can't do what—what I know you want to do——"

He raised his head and said (in what she called “a dead voice”), “I’m what he called me, that’s the truth. He called me a dirty Spaniard; he said no English gentleman would do what I did. The night I kissed you at Cragsfoot! Waldo!”

[74] “He said that to you? He told you that? Waldo? Oh, I knew he was very angry; but you’ve never told me that he said that.”

“Then,” said Lucinda, as she told her story to me, “I did something, or said something, that seemed to make him suddenly angry. What he repeated—what Waldo had said—somehow struck me with a queer sense of puzzle. It seemed to put him and Waldo back into the same sort of conflict—or, at least, contrast—that I had seen them in at Cragsfoot. I didn’t, of course, accept the ‘dirty Spaniard’ part; Waldo was just angry when he said that. But the words did bring Waldo back to my mind—over against Arsenio, so to speak. I don’t know whether you’ve ever noticed that I sometimes fall into what they call a brown study? I get thinking things over, and rather forget that I’m talking to people. I wasn’t angry with Arsenio; I was feeling sorry for him; I loved him and wanted to comfort him. But I had to think over what he had told me—not only (perhaps not so much) as it bore on Arsenio, but as it bore on myself—on what I had done and felt, and—and allowed, you know. Well, Arsenio suddenly called out, quite angrily, ‘You needn’t pull your arms away like that!’ I had done it, but I hadn’t been conscious of doing it; I didn’t think about it even then. I was thinking of him—and Waldo. And I know that I was smiling, as the old Cragsfoot days came back to me. I wasn’t thinking in the least about where my arms were! ‘Of course you and Waldo are curiously different,’ I said.

[75] “He jumped to his feet as if I had struck him, and broke out in a torrent of accusation against me. A few minutes before he had himself said that Waldo had told the truth about him. Now he declared that it was I who had said it. I hadn’t said anything of the sort—at all events, meant anything of the sort. I suppose I was sore in my heart, but I should never have said a word. But he would have it that I had meant it. He talked very fast, he never stopped. And—I must tell you the truth, Julius—it all seemed rather ridiculous to me, rather childish. I believe that I listened to most of it smiling—oh, not a merry smile, but a smile all the same. I was waiting for him to work himself out, to run down; it was no good trying to interrupt. And all the time the contrast was in my mind—between him and Waldo, between Waldo’s anger and—this! I felt as I suppose a woman feels towards her naughty child; I wanted to scold and to kiss him both at once. I even thought of that wicked nickname that Waldo has for him! At last—after a great deal of it—he dashed one hand through his hair, thumped the table with the other, and flung out at me, ‘Then go to him! Go to your English gentleman! Leave me in the gutter, where I belong!’ And he rushed out of the room. I heard his steps pattering up the stone stairs to his own floor.”

“You must have been terribly distressed,” I said—or something formal of that kind.

[76] “No. I didn’t believe that anything had really happened. I waited half an hour to let him cool down. But Mother might be back every minute; there was still that question about Cragsfoot! I had to have some answer! I went up to his apartment and knocked. I got no answer. I went down to Amedeo the *portière*, and he told me that Arsenio had gone out ten minutes before—I hadn’t heard his footsteps coming down again, he must have stolen down softly; he was carrying a bag, had a gondola called, and went off in the direction of the station, saying that he would be back in a few days. That was the end of—Venice!”

She came to a stop, gently strumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. On an impulse I leant forward and asked her a question: “Are you Madame Valdez now, Lucinda?”

“Donna Lucinda Valdez, at your service, sir! Since the day after you saw me in the taxi.”

“Then he must have explained—Venice?”

“Never. From the first day that we met again, we have never mentioned Venice.” She touched my arm for a moment. “I rather like that. It seems to me rather a tactful apology, Julius. He began courting me all afresh when he came to England. At least he took it up from where it had stopped at Cragsfoot.”

“It may be tactful; it’s also rather convenient,” I commented gruffly. “It avoids explanations.”

A gleam of amusement lit up her eyes. “Poor Arsenio! He was in

a difficulty—in a corner. And he'd been losing, his nerves were terribly wrong. There was the question of—me! And the question of Cragsfoot! And then Waldo came into it—oh, I'm sure of that. Those two men—it's very odd. They seem fated to—to cross one another—to affect one another sometimes. I wonder whether——!" She broke off, knitting her brow. "He sounded most genuine in that outbreak of his when he mentioned Waldo. I think he was somehow realizing what Waldo would think and say, if he knew about Venice. Perhaps so, perhaps not! As for the rest of it——"

"You think he wasn't quite as angry as he pretended to be?"

She seemed to reflect for a moment. "I didn't say his anger was unreal, did I? I said it was childish. When a child runs heedlessly into something and hurts himself, he kicks the thing and tells his mother that it's horrid. I was the thing, you see. Arsenio's half a child." Again she paused. "He's also an actor. And he contrived, on the whole, a pretty effective exit!"

"That you ever let him come back again is the wonder!" I cried.

"No. It's what happened before he came back that puzzles me," she said.

CHAPTER VII

SELF-DEFENSE

LUCINDA told me nothing about how "the end of Venice" struck or affected Mrs. Knyvett. Some bewilderment of that good lady may be conjectured; whether she wisely asked no questions or, asking them, received the sort of replies which the proverb indicates as the fate of questioners, I did not know. Nor, indeed, did I care—any more than I cared what had become of Mrs. Knyvett at that moment. (In fact, as I learned afterwards, she had quartered herself—it was her one talent!—on an old and wealthy spinster, and was living with her at Torquay.) My interest was where Lucinda's was—centered in Lucinda herself.

Her narrative jumped straight from Venice to Cragsfoot. She did not say anything of her feelings in the interval; she went on to what "puzzled" her—to the relations that came about between her and Waldo Rillington. To those, from the beginning and all through, Valdez and what he had been to her formed a background, and more than that, they were a factor and a contributory, just as Nina Frost was. But it was in that way she treated them. Waldo was now the [79] leading figure; round him centered the main theme, the thing to be explained.

"We arrived in the afternoon before tea. Only Aunt Bertha (I noticed that she still used the name which she had learnt to use during her engagement to Waldo) was in; Sir Paget was in town, Waldo was out riding. She was wonderfully nice to me. 'My dear, you're in great looks!' she said. I like those rather old-fashioned phrases of hers. 'You were a very pretty girl last summer, now you're a beautiful young woman. And you're so grown up. Let's see—you're only two years older than Nina Frost. But she's a school-girl—quite raw—compared to you. She said this as if she were pleased. I didn't understand then why she should be, but I came to, later. You see, Aunt Bertha never liked Nina, and positively hated Briarmount and all its works. We might be shabby, but to her we were gentle folks—and the Briarmount people weren't; and she thought Nina bold and inclined to be impudent—in which she was right. Don't laugh, Julius; if you differ, you can state your views afterwards; you mustn't interrupt.

"Mother was purring over all this—rather taking credit for it, you know, and I was feeling, as you may suppose, rather guilty—a feeling of false pretenses!—and we had settled down to tea, when I heard laughing and talking in the hall. The door opened, and Nina appeared, ushered in by Waldo. They had been riding; she had a [80] good color and was looking prettier, I thought, but her figure was still lumpy and rather awkward. She hesitated by the door for just a moment, giving me a surprised look. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you that Mrs. Knyvett and Lucinda were due to-day,' said Waldo with a laugh. 'I only knew it myself yesterday morning.'

"'I ran no risk of disappointing him,' Aunt Bertha explained. 'I didn't tell him when you were coming till I was quite sure of the date.'

"I thought Waldo gave her a rather amused glance as he passed her, greeted Mother, and then came to me. He sat down by me, after we had shaken hands. Nina took her tea off to the sofa; he didn't seem to treat her with much ceremony—perhaps to him too she was still a school-girl; I was grown up—and, of course, a new arrival. We got talking and, as far as I'm concerned, I forgot her, till I heard her saying, 'I must go home. You'll ride with me, won't you, Waldo?' For just a moment he didn't answer or turn away from me. 'You said you would, when you persuaded me to come in to tea,' she added.

"'Perhaps he's tired. We'll send a groom with you,' said Aunt Bertha.

"'Oh, no, I'll come, Nina. I said I would.' He was quite good-natured about it, but I must admit that his voice sounded a little reluctant. He got up and stretched himself lazily. 'All right, I'm [81] coming, Nina.' She turned on her heel and marched out, not waiting for him to open the door. He followed, with a little shrug. When they were gone I saw Aunt Bertha smiling to herself.

"I've told you that in detail because it—what shall I say?—sets

the scene. I can only tell you generally how things developed. At first I was very happy, and so, I suppose, very gay and cheerful. I seemed, in the end, to have had a great escape and to have got into a safe harbor. My feeling of guiltiness wore off under their kindness. I could see that Waldo liked and admired me—and I've never been indifferent to admiration or unaffected by it. Aunt Bertha petted me, and Sir Paget made much of me too, when he came back. Mother, of course, was all smiles—and enthusiastic about the food! Then, after two or three days, Waldo told me that he had an appointment to ride with Nina, and asked me to come too. I laughed and said I wouldn't spoil their *tête-à-tête*. He looked put out, but didn't press me. The same thing happened again, and he insisted on my coming; otherwise he wouldn't go himself. So we three began to ride, or to walk, together. And Nina Frost began to fight me!

"She had every right and every excuse. That girl, even then, young as she was, had not only made a hero of Waldo—that would have been a thing that one often sees—but she adored him in a jealous, fierce way that I—well, it's not mine; I hardly understand it. [82]
But I could see it in her; she seemed to take little pains to hide it from me, though she did try to hide it from Aunt Bertha. And Waldo —I don't know to this day how much reason he had given her for hoping, but it was evident that they had seen a great deal of one another since my first visit, and that her homage wasn't disagreeable to him. You must remember that I probably don't do justice to her attractions! Well, she made me angry. She assumed from the first that I meant to catch Waldo; I was a female fortune-hunter! She rubbed in our poverty in her old way. And she threw out hints about Arsenio—quite at random, but I'm not sure I always managed to look unembarrassed. Waldo would frown at her then, and try to shut her up; but I caught him looking oddly at me once or twice. I had my secret to keep; I took the obvious way of doing it; I began to flirt with Waldo myself. That was my line of defense, Julius. I've not spared my morals in what I've told you, and I'm not pretending to you that I behaved particularly nicely at Cragsfoot. I had no business to flirt with Waldo, you'll say, not even in self-defense? So be it. But since I make these concessions—*en revanche* I won't spare my modesty either; I had more success than I desired, or at all events deserved. Waldo took fire!"

She had distinctly recollected me for a moment; she had pronounced my name! Now she gave me one of her smiles—never too numerous. "I don't know how much you trust me, Julius, but I [83]
really am trying to tell the truth."

"A difficult and thankless task, Lucinda?"

"Not thankless—somehow—to you." She gave me, this time, a friendly little nod, and went back to her story. We had dined together on this evening; I smoked my cigar and listened; everybody else had finished, and departed; properly speaking, the *salle-à-manger* was shut. I had tipped the waiter to leave us one light. It shone behind her face, throwing it into relief; the rest of the room was in dimness. I had no difficulty at all in understanding that her "line of defense" had proved successful—only too sure and only too successful.

"When I said just now that I didn't desire success—at any rate beyond what was necessary to my self-defense—I spoke too broadly. I feared too much success; if Waldo came to love me, to ask me to marry him, I should have to deal with a situation the thought of which frightened me. But what a lot of things there were to make me desire that success! Some obvious and, if you like, vulgar—the name, the money, the comfort, the end of cadging and scamping. A little higher comes the appeal that dear old Cragsfoot made to me—I should love to live at Cragsfoot. Then I was very fond of all you Rillingtons; it would be in its way wonderful to belong to the family, to be one of you. And Sir Paget and Aunt Bertha wanted me—by this time I was quite sure of that. Especially Aunt Bertha—though at [84]
first, perhaps, mainly because I wasn't Nina Frost! Indeed, I came to believe that my being at Cragsfoot at all just then was a plot of Aunt Bertha's; she had scented the Nina danger and looked round for a weapon against it! All those things influenced me—I suppose, too, poor Mother's obvious delight at the idea. But the chief things I've left to the last. One I can tell you quite simply—Nina Frost! Is that vulgar too? I daresay, but I think it's human. She had declared herself my enemy. Who likes to see his enemy triumph? And she would think that I was beaten on my merits! If Waldo asked me, and I refused him, could I tell her that? Would she believe me if I did?

Besides, my real triumph would be in taking and keeping, not in refusing. If I refused, she would step in—or so I thought. The other thing—the last thing—was, of course, what I felt about Waldo himself, and the way in which I should stand towards him. It was funny. I had had no sense of taking a chance at Venice—though I did take a chance—gambled and, as it had turned out, lost heavily; but there was nothing but just plain being in love in the case at Venice. Don't smile—love of that kind is really very simple. But with Waldo—and in the circumstances—matters were very different. I liked him very much; he was such a change from Arsenio, about whom I was still, of course, very sore—sore, not angry. He was very jolly at that time; if he'd behaved rather badly to Nina, it troubled him, I think, [85] almost as little as it troubled me—which was not at all! But, first and foremost, Waldo was an adventure. Great as my charms were—we've agreed about that, haven't we, Julius?—I knew that they would avail me nothing if Waldo knew the truth. Because I had—gone wrong! That would have been a shock; it would have meant a storm. But—well, who knows? Perhaps——! But Arsenio! With Arsenio! They had been great friends, those two; but in the end—deep down, there was antagonism, aversion. The one despised, the other felt himself despised. Oh, but I know—look what I've been to them both! And now they were rivals! Through me! All through Venice Arsenio had never forgotten Waldo—nor what Waldo called him, as I've told you. All through Cragsfoot Waldo never forgot Arsenio. It was not only Nina who dragged Arsenio in—though she did. Waldo used to bring in his name—and watch me. He said to me once, in a light way, 'I suppose you and our friend Monkey had a picturesque flirtation at Venice—gondolas and concerts on the Grand Canal, and all the rest of it?' I laughed and said, 'Of course we had! But I don't think I found Venice any more intoxicating than—well, than Cragsfoot, Waldo.' That lifted the cloud from his face. He took it to himself—as I meant him to; a bit of self-defensive tactics! That was by no means the only time that he tried to draw me about Arsenio. But he never put a single question—not one—to [86] Mother. That was against his code, you know.

"There it all was: the charm of Cragsfoot, the desire to please, comfort, soreness with Arsenio, anger at Nina, liking for Waldo—and the adventure! I seemed, in the end, to act on an impulse; I suppose that it was really the outcome of all these things. But it seemed impulse, and Nina was the direct—I mean, the immediate—cause of it. How I remember that day!

"She came to lunch at Cragsfoot, and was fairly agreeable—for her. After lunch we three were alone in the smoking room, and she proposed that Waldo should walk back to Briarmount with her and play billiards. It was inclining to rain, not attractive for a long walk. Waldo asked me to come too. The weather didn't tempt me; I said no. By now I was not, of course, in the least afraid of leaving him alone with Nina. However, he went on pressing me, and at last I consented. She kept quiet during the pressing, but I saw the hard look in her eyes that always meant temper. We started off, all in our mackintoshes, for the rain was coming down smartly now. Silence for the first half mile or so; Nina's nose was in the air, Waldo was sullen; I was amused; but I wasn't going to make talk for them if they chose to be sulky. Suddenly she began on Arsenio again. She wished Don Arsenio was here! What jolly times we had when Don Arsenio was here! And so on. Neither of us said anything. Then she [87] said directly to me, across Waldo, who was walking between us, 'Don't you know where he is? Don't you ever hear from him? He was a great admirer of yours.' I answered carelessly that I hadn't heard since he left Venice; but I felt my color rising. Waldo listened silently, but I felt him getting annoyed—I always could. And I was getting afraid. If we'd been alone, I could easily have got away from the topic and smoothed him down. But she was there. 'Don't you miss him too, Waldo? You and he and Lucinda used to have such fun together!' I could see that Waldo was just holding himself in. 'The Monkey's all right,' he said, 'but I can live without him, you know. And I imagine you can too, Lucinda?' There was a look on his face that I didn't like. I saw that, Nina or no Nina, I must do something. 'Perfectly!' I said with a laugh. I put my arm through his and gave him a little squeeze on his wrist. I think we're quite all right as we are, Waldo!'

"We were just at the top of the hill—where you turn along the cliff towards Briarmount. Waldo pressed my arm between his arm and his side, so that I couldn't draw it away. He stopped, and stood

facing Nina like that, making me face her too, with my arm in his like that. 'Now you understand our views, and you can drop the subject,' he said in a low voice; it trembled a little. I felt very excited; I didn't know how she would take it, what she would say; his voice was brusque, angry, contemptuous. But I wasn't the least [88] prepared for what did happen. She stood opposite to us for a minute, smiling sarcastically, or trying to smile; then her mouth began to work, and her lips turned down, and—she began to cry! Quite loudly—like a passionate child. What I'd been through is supposed to be the greatest humiliation a woman can go through—being taken and left. But this that she was going through seemed to me infinitely worse. I whispered, 'Nina!' and tried to draw my arm away from Waldo; I felt that I must go to her. He wouldn't let me; he held my arm in a vise, and himself just stood looking at her, pale as pale, absolutely quiet! She tried to speak, but couldn't get any words out, because of her sobbing. She gave it up, and began to undo her mackintosh, to get her handkerchief. She found it, and wiped her eyes; but she was sobbing still. I clung to Waldo now, for support; my legs were shaking under me; I didn't sob, but I felt tears on my cheeks. At last she threw out her arm towards us, in a threatening sort of gesture, sobbed out, 'You'll be sorry for this!' turned away, and hurried off along the cliff towards Briarmount. Her figure swayed as she walked. It was very pitiful.

"But Waldo watched her without any sign of pity—watched her till she was quite a long way off. Then he turned to me, put his hands under my arms and drew me close to him; he covered my face with kisses—my face wet with both rain and tears. 'You love me, you [89] love me, Lucinda?' he whispered. I didn't speak; I let him kiss me. I think I did love him; at any rate, I was completely overmastered. Now I began to sob myself, just repeating 'Waldo! Waldo!' through my sobs—nothing else—and clinging to him."

Lucinda came to a stop and then turned her eyes to mine—they had been looking into the dimness of the *salle-à-manger*—"So—it happened," she said.

She had brought her scene before my eyes vividly enough—the three wet, drab, mackintoshed figures there on the cliff in the rain; the sudden explosion of misery, spite, and love; the fight between the two girls; the disaster to one, to the other a victory that had brought no abiding peace. Yet, as she talked, there had been also in my mind's eye another, a competing, picture. At the same spot—quite accidentally the same, or did she haunt it?—a tall, stately young woman—her figure quite 'finished' now, no longer lumpy—a young woman composed, ironical, verging indeed on the impudent—yet just vulnerable, prone to flush, tempted to fib, when the wedding of Waldo and Lucinda was the topic. I saw now why she had not been invited to that ceremony. Her presence would have been awkward for all parties. The skeleton at the feast indeed—if the feast had ever happened! But set against her, the sobbing girl, with her pitiful passion, her melodramatic "You'll be sorry for this"—thrown out in the random of fury and spite, but perhaps not without [90] some subtle instinct, some feminine intuition of the truth.

"I saw Nina Frost once when I was last in England," I said after a long pause. "If you ever meet her again, you'll find her a good deal changed. She's quite a woman of the world now."

"She's the last person in the whole world that I wish to meet!"

"I understand that. It couldn't be pleasant for either of you. Well, probably you never will."

"Yes, we shall. It isn't all finished between me and Nina yet. I had my victory; I threw it away. I saw her in her awful humiliation; how will she see me next, I wonder!"

"Isn't that sort of idea very—well, fanciful, Lucinda?"

She made no reply; the veil had fallen over her eyes; she gave a little shiver.

"It's cold here," I said. "Let's go where it's warm and light—to the restaurant—and finish the evening." I smiled as I added, "And the story too, please."

"I can bring it right up to date. I had a letter from Arsenio to-day."

I was conscious of a slight shock of surprise. I had been thinking of Arsenio as a historical figure—an episode in her past. He was, however, also an existing fact; but what sort of a fact? About that I was still ignorant.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEEDLEWOMAN

ON the way home I made Waldo promise not to tell about our engagement till I agreed. He did promise, but I think he must have given a pretty strong hint at home. There was such a wonderful absence of awkward references or questions. My mother never spoke of Arsenio; Aunt Bertha refrained from comment when it became known that Mr. Frost and his daughter had suddenly gone on a holiday, yachting—at the very beginning of what would have been Nina's first season! And Sir Paget, besides petting me more than ever, began to talk to me as if I had a proprietorial interest in Cragsfoot. Waldo himself was very gentle and patient with me; he felt that he had 'rushed' me, I think, and was anxious not to frighten me. I believe that the possibility of something like what did in the end happen was always at the back of his mind; he never felt secure. There was always Arsenio; and I was —unaccountable! So he soothed and smoothed me, and let me put off the announcement of the engagement for nearly six months. We weren't at Cragsfoot all that time, but coming and going between [92] there and London. Mother took the Mount Street flat then; my opinion was—and is—that Sir Paget or Waldo paid for it. But, whether in town or country, Waldo and I were meeting all the time.

"I didn't announce the engagement because I didn't want to burn my boats; and then I did agree to announce it because I did want to burn my boats! That was the kind of person I was then—at all events, the kind of condition I was in. I had got over my fears almost entirely. Nina had thrown up the sponge; Arsenio wouldn't betray me; Waldo dreamt of nothing worse than the picturesque flirtation in a gondola (though he didn't like even that!). Nobody could prove, or even plausibly suggest, anything; unless my own nerve gave way, I was quite safe. So I thought then, anyhow. And I had almost got over my sense of guiltiness too. It came over me now and then; but it didn't any longer seem very real; perhaps I had just exhausted my feelings about it. It wasn't what I had done which troubled me all through those long months, both before the announcement and after it; it was what I was doing and what I was going to do. I liked Waldo enormously, and more and more as I knew him better. In spite of his tempers, he's a great gentleman. But he never kissed me, he never took me in his arms, without my thinking of Arsenio.

"I had the oddest sense that this thing wasn't final, that something would occur to end it. I didn't expect to finish it myself, [93] but I expected that something would. The feeling made me terribly restless; and it often made me cold and wayward with Waldo: then I had to be very affectionate to make him happy again. I liked making him happy, and I could do it. But I always seemed to be playing a part. I suppose I loved Arsenio. Love Arsenio after what had happened! That seemed monstrous. I wouldn't open my eyes to it. I wouldn't have gone to him if I could. And yet I couldn't go happily to Waldo. I felt I was Arsenio's—I wouldn't own it, but I couldn't help it. Julius, I believe that I'm a very primitive woman."

"You've been sounding rather complicated up to now; I don't mean—well, unnatural."

"You've had love affairs, of course. I know you've had one big one. I even know her name; Aunt Bertha told me."

"She shouldn't have done that."

"I was one of the family then, you see. She is—dead?"

"Yes, some few years ago—two years before we met at Cragsfoot."

"That's how you come not to have married?"

"I don't know; many men don't marry. Well—probably. But it's your story we're after, not mine."

"Yes, but your having had an affair like that may help you—may help me to make you understand. What is it that sometimes seems to tie two people together in spite of themselves? Arsenio's coming [94] back to me was just chance—chance on chance. He was in this very place where we are now; in very low water, living in the little house I'm living in now, and employed as clerk to a wine merchant. He had given up all thoughts of me, of coming back to England. He couldn't do it; he hadn't the money. The English papers hardly ever came his

way. One day a man came in, for a bottle of whisky—an Englishman; he had a copy of the *Times* with him, and tore off a sheet of it to wrap the bottle in, and threw the rest on the floor. When he was gone, Arsenio picked it up and read it. And he saw the announcement of the date of my wedding—July the twenty-first."

"He told me, that day in London, that he had already decided to come to England when he saw that."

"He couldn't tell you all the truth that day. This is what happened. Seeing that notice, a queer fancy took him; he would see whether that number—my number he called it—would bring him luck. He scraped together some money, went over to Monte Carlo, and won, won, won! His luck went to his head; everything seemed possible. He came straight to England—to see if the luck held, he said. You can guess the rest."

"Pretty well. You must have had a time of it, though!"

"I think my mind really made itself up the moment I saw Arsenio. The rest was—tactics! I mustn't see Waldo; I invented excuses. [95] Waldo mustn't see Arsenio—that at all costs! He always suspected Arsenio, and Arsenio might give it away—you know his malicious little airs of triumph when he scores! You picture me as miserable? No! I was fearful, terrified. But I was irrepressibly excited—and at last happy. My doubt was done and ended."

"You were not ashamed?" I ventured.

"Yes, I was ashamed too—because of Aunt Bertha and Sir Paget. Because of them, much more than because of Waldo. They loved me; they had taken me to be, as it were, their daughter. Between Waldo and Arsenio it had always been a fight—yes, from that first day at Cragsfoot. I was the prize! But in a way I was also just a spectator. I mean—in the end I couldn't help which won; something quite out of my power to control had to decide that. And that something never had any doubt. How could I go against everything that was real in me?"

"I think you are rather primitive," I said. "It seems to you a fight between the males. You await the issue. Well—and what's happened? I hope things are—flourishing now?"

She looked at me with one of her slow-dawning smiles; evidently, for some reason, she was amused at me, or at the question which I had put.

"I've spent the greater part of the waking hours of three days with you, Julius. I've walked, lunched, and dined with you. I've [96] talked to you interminably. You must have looked at me sometimes, haven't you?"

"I've looked at you, to tell the truth, a great deal."

"And you've noticed nothing peculiar?"

"I shouldn't use the word 'peculiar' to describe what I've noticed."

"Not, for instance, that I've always worn the same frock?" She was leaning her elbows on the table now, her chin resting between her hands. "And what that means to a charming woman—oh, we agreed on that!—invited out by a fine figure of a man——! And yet you ask if things are flourishing!"

"By Jove, I believe you have! It's a very pretty frock, Lucinda. No, but really it is!"

"It's an old friend—and my only one. So let's speak no evil of it." Yet she did speak evil of the poor frock; she whispered, "Oh, how I hate it, hate it, this old frock!" She gave a little laugh. "If it came my way, I wonder whether I could resist splendor! Guilty splendor!"

"Didn't poor old Waldo present himself to you—oddly, I must say—rather in that light? And you resisted!"

"I've changed. You're talking to a different woman—different from the girl I've been boring you about. The girl I've been boring you about wouldn't—couldn't—marry Waldo with Arsenio there; I— [97] the I that am—could and, I think, would."

"Because of your old friend here?" I touched lightly the sleeve of her gown.

"For what it has meant, and does mean—oh, and for itself too! I'm no heroine. Primitive women love finery too."

Her face was untouched by time, or struggle, or disillusion. Her eyes were as they always had been, clear, calm, introspective. Only her figure was more womanly, though still slim; she had not Nina's statuesque quality. But the soul within was changed, it seemed. This

train of thought brought me to an abrupt question: “No child, Lucinda?”

“There was to have been. I fell ill, and——It was one of the times when our luck was out. Arsenio made nothing for months. We soon spent what Number 21 brought us.”

“You don’t mean to say that you were—in want? At that time!”

“Yes. Well, I can’t learn all lessons, but I can learn some. I’ve a trade of my own now.”

I confess that I yielded for a moment to a horrible suspicion—an idea that seemed to make my blood stop. I did not touch her arm this time; I clasped it roughly. I did not speak.

“Oh, no,” she said with a little laugh. “But thank you, dear old Julius. I see that you’d have cared, that you’d have cared very much. Because I shall have a bruise there—and for your sake I’ll kiss it. I’ve neglected my work for your sake—or my pleasure—these last [98]
three days. But I work for Madame—well, shall we say Madame Chose?—because I don’t want you to go and criticize my handiwork in the window. I embroider *lingerie*, Julius—chemises and pants. There’s a demand for such things—yes, even now, on this coast. I was always a good needlewoman. I used to mend all my things. Do you remember that on one occasion I was mending my gloves?”

“But Arsenio?”

“Arsenio pursues Dame Fortune. Sometimes he catches her for a moment, and she pays ransom. She buys herself off—she will not be permanently his. She’s very elusive. A light-o’-love! Like me? No, but I’m not.” She leant forward to me, with a sudden amused gurgle of laughter. “But, you know, he’s as brave as a lion. He was dying to fight from the beginning. Only he didn’t know whom to fight for, poor boy! He wanted to fight for Germany because she’s monarchical, and against her because she’s heavy and stupid and rigid and cruel—and mainly Protestant!—and against France because she’s republican and atheistical—oh, no less!—but for her because she’s chivalrous, and dashing, and—well, the *panache*, you know! He was in a very difficult position, poor dear Arsenio, till Italy came in; and even then he had his doubts, because Austria’s clerical! However, Italy it is!”

“Didn’t England appeal to him?”

“For England, monsieur, Don Arsenio has now an illimitable [99]
scorn.”

“The devil he has!” said I softly.

She laughed again at that, and something of her gayety still illuminated her face as she gave me a warning. “I’ve told you nearly all my secrets—all I’m going to tell! If any of them get to that deplorable England, to that damp, dripping and doleful Devonshire (the epithets are Arsenio’s!) I’ll cut you dead. And if they get to—Briarmount—I’ll kill you!”

“I’ll say that you live in a palace, with seven attendant princes, and seventy-seven handmaids!”

“Yes!” she agreed gleefully. “Who’s that woman looking for?”

The woman in question was a stout person in a sort of official uniform. Her eyes traveled over the few guests at the little restaurant; in her hand she held a blue envelope. “She’s looking for me. She’s been sent on from my hotel, depend upon it,” I said, with a queer sense of annoyance. I, who had been fuming because my instructions did not come!

I was right. The woman gave me the envelope and took my receipt. I made a rapid examination of my package. “I must be off early to-morrow morning,” I said to Lucinda.

She did say, “I’m sorry,” but without any sign of emotion. And the next moment she added, “Because you’ll just miss Arsenio. He [100]
arrives to-morrow evening—to pay me a visit.”

“I think I’m rather glad to miss Arsenio,” I remarked frankly. “Oh, not because he ran away with you, and made fools of us all that day, but because of what you’ve been telling me just now.”

“If you liked him before, you’d like him still. He hasn’t changed a bit, he’s just as he always was—very attractive in his good and gay moods, very naughty and perverse in his bad ones. Yes, just the same. And that’s what makes it so unfair in me to—to feel as I do about him now. That’s one of the difficult things about love, isn’t it? And marriage. The other person may go on being just what he was—what you knew he was; but you may change yourself, and so not like him any more—at least, not be content; because there’s a lot about

Arsenio that I still like." Her eyes now wore their most self-examining, introspective look.

She pushed her chair back from the table. "It's late, and you've got to start early. And I must be early and long at work, to make up for lost time—if it's not rude to call it that."

I raised my glass. "Then—to our next meeting!"

"When will that be, I wonder!"

"Heaven knows! I roam up and down the earth, like the Enemy of Mankind. But, after all, in these days to be on the earth and not under it, is something. And you, Lucinda?"

"I suppose I shall stay here—with Madame—Chose. War or no war, ladies must have *lingerie*, mustn't they?" [101]

"It seems a—well, a drab sort of life!"

"Well—yes," said Lucinda. "But one of us must earn some money, you see. Even if I were that sort of person—and I don't think I am—I couldn't afford to do anything useful or heroic. The pay for that isn't high enough."

I walked to her house with her, according to our custom—now of three days' standing. As we went, I was summoning up courage for a venture. When we reached the door I said, "May I let you know from time to time—whenever it's possible—where I am? So that, if you were in—if real occasion arose, you could write to me and——?"

"Yes, I shall like to hear from you. But I probably shan't answer—unless I've something different to tell you—different from Madame Chose—and better."

"But if it were—worse?"

"I couldn't take money from you, if that's what you mean. Oh, it's not your fault, it's nothing in you yourself. But you're a Rillington."

"Isn't that, again, rather fanciful?"

"You seem to call all my deepest instincts fanciful!" she protested, smiling. "But that one's very deep. Goodness, I could almost as soon conceive of myself accepting Nina Frost's cast-off frocks!"

We smiled together over that monstrous freak of the imagination. [102] And so, still smiling, we parted—she to go back to Madame Chose and her *lingerie*, I to my wanderings and nosing about. I did from time to time send her an address that would probably find me; but, as her words had foreshadowed, I got no answers. So it was still Madame Chose—or worse? I had to suppose that; and I was sorrowful. She had been much to blame, but somewhat to be pitied; the root feeling under which she had in the end acted—fidelity to the man to whom she had first belonged—might be primitive, as she herself suggested; it did not seem to me ignoble. At all events, she had not in the end been worldly; she had not sold herself. No, not yet.

For a while I thought a good deal about her; she had made a vivid impression on me in those three days; her face haunted my eyes sometimes. But—well, we were all very busy; there was a lot to think about—plenty of food both for thought and for emotion, immediate interests too strong for memories and speculations to fight against. The echo of her voice was drowned by the clamor of war. The vision of her face faded.

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[103]

CHAPTER IX

LIKE TO LIKE

IT was in May, 1916, that Waldo got a severe wound in the right shoulder, which put him out of action for the rest of the war and sent him, after two or three months in a hospital, back to Cragsfoot. He had done very well, indeed distinguished himself rather notably; had fortune been kinder, he might have expected to rise to high rank. The letters which I received—I was far away, and was not at the time able to get leave, even had I felt justified in asking for it—reflected the mingled disappointment, anxiety, and relief, which the end of his military career, the severity of his wound, and his return home—alive, at all events!—naturally produced at Cragsfoot.

Sir Paget wrote seldom and briefly, but with a quiet humor and an incisive touch. Aunt Bertha's letters—especially now that she had only me to write to, and no longer spent the larger part of her epistolary energy on Waldo—were frequent, full, vivid, and chatty. But she was also very discursive; she would sandwich in the Kaiser between the cook and the cabbages, Waldo's wound between Bethmann-Hollweg and Mr. Winston Churchill. It was, however, [104] possible to gather from her, aided by Sir Paget, a pretty complete picture of what was going on both at Cragsfoot and at Briarmount.

For at Briarmount too anxiety reigned, and the times were critical. As might be expected of him, Mr. Jonathan Frost had wrought marvels during the war. The whole of his vast establishments had been placed at the disposal of the Ministry of Munitions; he had effected wonders of rapid adaptation and transformation, wonders of organization and output; he "speeded up" a dozen Boards and infused his own restless energy into somnolent offices. But two years of these exertions, on the top of a life of gigantic labor, proved too much even for him. He won a peerage, but he gave his life. In the September of that same year he came back to Briarmount, the victim of a stroke, a dying man. His mind was still clear and active, but he had considerable difficulty in speaking, and was unable to move without assistance. His daughter, who had sedulously nursed him through his labors, was now nursing him through the last stage of his earthly course.

But there was also a newcomer at Briarmount, a frequent visitor there during the last months of its master's life, one in whom both Aunt Bertha and Sir Paget took considerable interest. This was Captain Godfrey Frost. Lord Dundrannan (he took his title from a place he had in Scotland) was old-fashioned enough not to approve [105] of confiding to women the exclusive command of great interests; they lacked the broad view and the balance of mind, however penetrating their intuitions might on occasion be! And too much power was not good for them; he even seemed to have hinted to Sir Paget that they were quite masterful enough already! That he meant to leave his daughter handsomely, indeed splendidly, endowed, was certain; but he was minded to provide himself with an heir male in the person of this young man. It would have been natural, perhaps, to suspect him of planning a match between the cousins, but this did not seem to be in his head—perhaps because such personal matters as marriages held a small place in his mind; perhaps because he suspected that his daughter's ideas on that subject were already settled; perhaps because his nephew was somewhat too young and —from a social point of view—unformed to be a good mate for his accomplished daughter.

Captain Frost was, in fact, inexperienced and backward, shy and rather silent, in society; but unquestionably he had a full share of the family business ability—so much so that, when Lord Dundrannan "cracked up," he was brought back from the front (against his protests, it is only fair to add), and put in charge, actual if not always nominal, of a great part of the important activities on which his uncle had been engaged. His disposition appeared to be simple, amiable, and unassuming. He was pleasantly deferential to Sir [106] Paget, rather afraid of Aunt Bertha's acute eyes, cordial and attentive to Waldo. Towards Nina he was content to accept the position of pupil and *protégé*; he let her put him through his social paces; he regarded her with evident respect and admiration, and thought her worthy to be her father's daughter—more than that he

could not do! There was no trace of any sentiment beyond this, or different in kind from it. There was, in fact, to be detected in Aunt Bertha's letters an underlying note of satisfaction; it might be described in the words, "He's quite nice, but there's nothing to fear!"

But if such a note as that were really to be heard in Aunt Bertha's letters, it could mean only one thing; and it marked a great change in her attitude towards Nina. It meant that she was looking forward with contentment, apparently with actual pleasure, to a match between Nina and Waldo. Other signs pointed in the same direction —her mention of Nina's frequent calls at Cragsfoot, of her kindness to Waldo, of her devotion to her father, of her praiseworthy calm and level-headedness during this trying time. The change had perhaps started from a reaction against Lucinda; after the first impulse of sympathy with the distracted fugitive (a very real one at the time) had died down, Lucinda's waywardness, her "unaccountability," presented themselves in a less excusable light. But the main cause lay, no doubt, in Waldo himself. Aunt Bertha was [107]
—passing impulses apart—for Waldo and on his side. Any shifting of her views and feelings in a matter like this would be certain to reflect a similar alteration in his attitude.

In November a letter from Sir Paget told me of Lord Dundrannan's death, at which, by chance, he was himself present; evidently moved by the scene, he recounted it with more detail than he was wont to indulge in. Hearing that his neighbor was worse, he went to inquire; as he stood at the door, Nina drove up in her car— she had been out for an airing—and took him into the library where her father was, sitting in a chair by the fire. It was very rarely that he would consent to keep his bed, and he had insisted on getting up that day. "Godfrey Frost was there" (my uncle wrote) "and Dr. Napier, standing and whispering together in the window. By the sick man sat an old white-haired Wesleyan minister, whom he had sent for all the way from Bradford, where he himself was born: he had 'sat under' this old gentleman as a boy, and a few days before had expressed a great longing to see him. The minister was reading the Bible to him now. It looked as though he had foreseen that the end was coming. He had had a sort of valedictory talk with Nina and young Frost a week before—about the money and the businesses, what they were to do, what rules they were to be guided by, and so on. That done, he appeared to dismiss worldly affairs, this world itself, from his thoughts, and 'took up' the next. I am not mocking; [108]
yet I can hardly help smiling. He seemed to have 'taken it up' in the same way that he would have inquired into a new, important and interesting speculation; and he got his expert—the old minister from Bradford—to advise him. He was not afraid, or agitated, or remorseful; his feelings seemed, so far as his impaired speech enabled him to describe them to his family, those of a curious and earnest interest in his prospects of survival—he eagerly desired to survive—and in what awaited him if he did survive. The fact that he had neglected religion for a great many years back did not trouble him; nor did 'How hardly shall a rich man——' He seemed confident that, if immortality were a fact, some place and some work would be found for Jonathan Frost. Whether it was a fact was what he wanted to know; he hated the idea of nothingness, of inactivity, of stopping!

"The old minister shut his book when I came in. Nina led me up to her father. He recognized me and smiled. I said a few words, but I doubt if he listened. He pointed towards the book on the minister's knee—he could move his left hand—and tried to say something: I think that he was trying to pursue the subject that engrossed him, perhaps to get my opinion on it. But the next moment he gave a smothered sort of cry—not loud at all—and moved his hand towards his heart. Napier darted across the room to him; Nina put her arm round his neck and kissed him. He gave a sigh, and his head fell [109]
back on her arm. He was gone—all in a minute—gone to get the answer to his question. Then there was a ringing of bells, of course, and they came in and took him way. Nina put her hands in mine for a second before she followed them out of the room: 'My dear father!' she said. Then she put her arm in young Frost's, and he led her out of the room, very gently, in a very gentleman-like way, I must say. I was left alone with the old minister. 'The end of a remarkable life!' I said, or something of that sort. 'I'm glad it came so easily at the end.' He bowed his white head. 'He did great things for his country,' he answered. 'God's ways are not our ways, Sir Paget.' I said good-by, and left him with his book."

A month after Lord Dundrannan's death I got Christmas leave, came to England, and went down to Cragsfoot on the Friday before Christmas Day; it fell on a Monday that year. It was jolly to be there again, and to find old Waldo out of danger and getting on really famously.

But how he was changed! I will not go into the physical changes —they proved, thank God, in the main temporary, though it was a long time before he got back nearly all his old vigor—but I can't help speculating on how much they, and the suffering they brought, had to do with the change in the nature of the man. Perhaps nothing; it is, I suppose, rather an obscure subject, a medical question; but I cannot help thinking that they worked together with his other [110] experiences. At least, they must have made him in a way older in body, just as the other experiences made him older in mind. I never realized till then—though I ought to have—how very little I had really been through, in what had seemed two tolerably exciting and exhausting years, compared to him who had "stuck it through" all the time at the front. I said something of this sort to him as we gossiped together, and it set him talking.

"Well, old chap," he said, laughing, "I don't know how you found it—you were, of course, a grown man, a man of the world, before it all began—but I just had to change. It's no credit to me—I had to! I was a cub, a puppy—I had to become a trained animal. As it was, that infernal temper of mine nearly cost me my commission in the first three months. It would have, by Jove, if Tom Winter—my Company Commander—hadn't been the best fellow in the world; he was killed six months later, poor chap, but he'd got a muzzle on me before that. You will find me a bit better there; I haven't had a real old break-out ever since."

"Oh, I daresay you will, when you get fit!" said I consolingly.

"Thank you," he laughed again. "But I don't want to, you know. They were a bit upsetting to everybody concerned." He smiled as though in a gentle amusement at his old self. "Only father could manage me—and he couldn't always. Lord, I was impossible! I might [111] have committed a murder one fine day!"

I recollected a certain fine day on which murder, or something very like it, was certainly his purpose. Oh, with a good deal of excuse, no doubt!

Perhaps his thoughts had moved in the same direction; seeing me again might well have that effect on him.

"I don't want to exaggerate things. I daresay I've a bit of the devil left in me. And I don't know whether men in general have been affected much by the business. Some have, some haven't, I expect. Perhaps I'm a special case. The war came at what was for me a very critical moment. For me personally it was a lucky thing, in spite of this old shoulder; and it was lucky that my father was so clear about its coming. I was saved from myself, by Jove, I was!"

The "self" of whom he spoke came back to my memory as strangely different and apart from the languid, tranquil man who was talking to me on the long invalid's chair. He reclined there, smiling thoughtfully.

"I bear no malice against the girl," he went on. "It was my mistake. She went to her own in the end; it was inevitable that she should; and better before marriage—even just before!—than after. Like to like—she and Monkey Valdez!"

Though I had my own views as to that, I held my tongue. If once I let out that I had seen Lucinda, one question—if not from Waldo, at [112] any rate from Aunt Bertha—would lead to another, and I should be in danger of betraying the needlewoman's secret. I had made up my mind to lie if need be, but if I kept silence, it was a hundred to one that it would not occur to any one at Cragsfoot to ask whether I had seen Lucinda. Why should I have seen her? It never did occur to any of the three of them; I was asked no questions.

"The best thing to be hoped is that we never run up against one another again. I might still be tempted to give the Monkey a thrashing! Oh, I forgot—I don't suppose I shall ever be able to give anybody a thrashing! Sad thought, Julius! Well, there it is—let's forget 'em!" A gesture of his sound arm waved Lucinda and her Monkey into oblivion.

So be it. I changed the subject. "Very sad about poor old Frost. Dundrannan, I mean."

"Yes, poor old boy! For a week or two it was about even betting

between him and me—which of us would win out, I mean. Well, I have; and he's gone. We didn't half do him justice in the old days. Really a grand man, don't you think?"

I agreed. Lord Dundrannan—Jonathan Frost—had always filled me with the sort of admiration that a non-stop express inspires; and Sir Paget's letter had added a pathetic touch to the recollection of him—made him more of a human being, brought him into relation with Something that he did not create; that, in fact, I suppose, [113] created him. Really quite a new aspect of Lord Dundrannan!

"She's come through it splendidly," said Waldo.

"What, Miss Nina?"

Waldo laughed. "Look here, old chap, you don't seem to be up to date. Been in Paraguay or Patagonia, or somewhere, have you? She's not 'Miss Nina'—she's my Lady Dundrannan."

"Nobody told me that there was a special remainder to her!"

"Well, he'd done wonders. He was old and ill. No son! They could hardly refuse it him, could they? The peerage would have been an empty gift without it."

"Lady Dundrannan! Lady Dundrannan!"

"You've got it right now, Julius. Of Dundrannan in the county of Perth, and of Briarmount in the county of Devon—to give it its full dignity."

"I expect she's pleased with it?"

"We're all human. I think she is. Besides, she was very fond and proud of her father, and likes to have her share in carrying on his fame."

"And she has wherewithal to gild the title!"

"Gilt and to spare! But only about a third of what he had. A third to her, a third to public objects, a third to Godfrey Frost. That's about it—roughly. But business control to Godfrey, I understand."

"Does she like that?" I asked.

He laughed again—just a little reluctantly, I thought. "Not [114] altogether, perhaps. But she accepts it gracefully, and takes it out of the young man by ordering him about! He's a surprisingly decent young chap; she'll lick him into shape in no time."

"From what Aunt Bertha said, you and she have made great friends?"

"Yes, we have now." He paused a moment. "She was a bit difficult at first. You see, there were things in the past——Oh, well, never mind that—it's all over."

There were things in the past; there were: that group of three on the top of the cliffs; the girl sobbing wildly, furiously, shamefully; the man holding the other girl's arm in his as in a vise of iron. Meeting Nina again may well have been a bit difficult at first! It was also a bit difficult to adjust one's vision to Baroness Dundrannan and Madame Chose's needlewoman, to re-focus them. How would they feel about one another now? Lucinda had found some pity for the sobbing girl; would Lady Dundrannan find the like for the needlewoman?

Or would Waldo himself? In spite of the new gentleness that there was in his manner, taken as a whole, there had been an acidity, a certain sharpness of contempt, in his reference to Lucinda. "That girl"—"like to like"—"she and Monkey Valdez." It was natural, perhaps, but—the question would not be suppressed—was it quite the tone of that "great gentleman" whom Lucinda herself still held in her memory?

I was content to drop the subject. "Your father's looking [115] splendid," I remarked, "but Aunt Bertha seems to me rather fagged."

"Aunt Bertha's been fretting a dashed sight too much over me—that's the fact." He smiled as he went on. "Well, I'm out of it for good and all, they tell me—if I need telling—and I suppose I ought to be sorry for it. But really I'm so deuced tired, that——! Well, I just want to lie here and be looked after."

"Oh, you'll get that!" I assured him confidently. There was Aunt Bertha to do it; Aunt Bertha, at all events. Possibly there was somebody else who would do it even more efficiently.

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[116]

CHAPTER X

HER LADYSHIP

"YES," said my uncle, as he warmed himself before the library fire, "a young man of very considerable ability, I think. One might trust old Jonathan Frost to make no mistake about that. He might be led by family feeling—but not led astray! Hard-headed, and ambitious—for himself, I mean, apart from his business, the boy is. He's different from the old man in that; the old man thought of nothing but his undertakings, he was just the most important part of their machinery. This boy's got his eye on politics, he tells me. I've no doubt he'll get on in them. Then, with a suitable wife——"

"Lady Arabella—or something of that sort?"

"Precisely. You catch my train of thought, Julius." Sir Paget smiled his shrewdly reflective smile, as he continued:

"We may regard the Frost family, then, as made—in both its branches. Because my lady, with her possessions and her looks, is undoubtedly made already—indeed, ready-made.

We must move with the times—or at any rate after them. You've [117]
done it; you're a commercial man yourself, and doing very well at it, aren't you?"

"I hope to—after the war. I believe Sir Ezekiel means to keep me at home and put me in charge in London—if London's still standing, I mean, of course. But I don't feel it in my bones to rival the kin of Jonathan Frost."

"Yes—a remarkable family. What do you make of the girl herself?"

"You've seen a lot more of her than I have. What do you?"

"Brain above the average, but nothing wonderful. Will very strong—she's as tenacious as a limpet."

"I should think so. But she's got her feelings too, hasn't she?"

"That's the point on which I have some doubt. Well, study her for yourself. I think she's worth it." He was frowning a little as he spoke, as though his doubt troubled him, although he could give no very good reason for it. "However, she has lots of good qualities—lots," he ended. He gave the impression of a man trying to reconcile himself to something, and finding his task difficult. He praised the Frost family in handsomely general terms, with hardly a reservation; yet with just the hint of one. It was as though Nina—and her cousin too, for that matter—just failed to give him complete satisfaction, just lacked something that his nature or his taste needed. I did not think that it was anything very serious—not anything that could be [118]
called moral, a matter of lack of virtue or presence of vice. It was rather a dourness, too much solidity, too little gayety, humor, responsiveness. The Frosts were perhaps not "out of working harness" enough. Did his mind insist on drawing a contrast? He had loved the girl of whom we did not speak.

Aunt Bertha's attitude was different, as her letters had suggested. Her acute and eminently practical mind wasted no time in pining for ideals, or in indulging delicate dissatisfactions. It preferred to concentrate on the pleasant aspects of the attainable. One can't expect everything in this world! And it may even be doubted whether the softer charms, the insidious fascinations, are desirable attributes in women (men, of course, never possess them, so that the question doesn't arise there); don't they bring more trouble than good to their possessors, or anyhow to other people? (To her dear Waldo?)

Perhaps they do. At any rate, it was by hints of this order that Aunt Bertha, having seen reason herself, sought to overcome the lingering sentimentalities, and perhaps memories, of Sir Paget.

"The kindness of the girl!" said Aunt Bertha. "All through her own trouble—and you know how she loved her father!—she never forgot us and our anxiety. She used to manage to see me almost every day; came with grapes—you know the Briarmount grapes?—or something, for Waldo, and cheered me up with a little talk. She may not gush, she may not splash about, but Nina has a heart of gold, [119]
Julius."

"Then she's gold all through, inside and out," I said, rather

flippantly.

"Men are often fools," Aunt Bertha remarked—and I hope that the observation may be considered irrelevant. "They undervalue the real things that matter in a woman."

"What's the application of that? I'm sure that Waldo likes Lady Dundrannan very much."

"Of course he does. And whatever my remark meant, it didn't mean that Waldo is a fool. Waldo has grown a great deal wiser than he was. And for that very reason you're turning up your nose at him, Julius!"

There her acumen came in. She defined in a single homely sentence the mental attitude against which I was struggling. It was true. I collapsed before Aunt Bertha's attack.

"I'll do my best to fall in love with her myself," I promised.

"It won't make any difference what you try," was the best I got out of her in return for my concession.

All the same, her emotional *volte-face* continued to surprise me. She might, perhaps, well forget that she had loved and pitied Lucinda. Was it—well, decent—so entirely to forget that she had once heartily disliked Nina, and to call me a fool on the score that my feelings were the same as hers had been not much more than [120] two years before? Besides, I did not dislike Nina. I merely failed (as Sir Paget failed) to find in her certain characteristics which in my judgment lend charm and grace to a woman. I tried to explain this to Aunt Bertha; she sniffed and went on knitting.

The young man, Captain Frost, anyhow, I did like; I took to him at once, and he, I think, to me. He was spending a brief Christmas holiday at Briarmount, with a certain Mrs. Haynes, a friend of Nina's, for company or *chaperon* to the cousins. He was a tall, straight fellow, with a bright blue eye and fair curly hair. There was an engaging candor about him; he was candid about things as to which men are often not candid with one another—about his stupendous good luck and how he meant to take advantage of it; his ambitions and how he could best go about to realize them; his extremely resolute purpose to let nothing interfere with his realizing them. He was even candid about his affairs of the heart; and this was supreme candor, because it lay in confessing to me—an elder man to whom he would wish to appear mature at least, if not *rusé*—that he had never had any; a thing, as every man of the world knows (God forgive them!) much harder for any young man to own to than it would be to plead guilty to—or to boast of—half a dozen.

"But why haven't you?" I couldn't help asking. He was himself attractive, and he was not, I fancied, insusceptible to beauty; for example, he admired his cousin—at the respectful distance which [121] her Ladyship set between them.

"Well, up to now I couldn't have afforded to marry," was his reply, given in all seriousness, as though it were perfectly explanatory, perfectly adequate. But it was so highly revealing that comment on it is needless.

"Well, now you can," I said—I am afraid a little tartly.

"Yes; but it's a matter needing careful consideration, isn't it? An awful thing if a man makes a mistake!" His eyes, bright and blue, fixed themselves on mine in a glance which I felt to be "meaning." "Your cousin, for instance, Major Rillington, was very nearly let in, wasn't he?"

"Oh, you know about that, do you? Was it Lady Dundrannan who told you?"

He laughed. "Oh, no! It was Miss Fleming. And she didn't tell me anything about who it was—only just that he'd had a lucky escape from a girl quite unworthy of him. She said I must remember the affair—it was all over London just before the war. But as I was in the works at Dundee at the time, and never read anything in the papers except racing and football, I somehow missed it; and when I asked Nina about it, she shut me up—told me not to talk scandal."

"But I thought that she was fitting you for polite society!"

"That's good—jolly good, Captain Rillington!" he was kind [122] enough to say. "I shall tell Nina that; it'll amuse her."

He seemed disposed to take me for a Mentor—to think that I might supplement the social education which his cousin proposed to give him; that I might do the male, the club side, while she looked after the drawing-room department—or deportment. On the other hand, he instructed me rather freely on business, until he happened

to gather—from Sir Paget—that in the piping times of peace I held a fairly good position in Ezekiel Coldston & Co., Ltd.; after which he treated me, if not with a greater, yet with a more comprehensive, respect. “That’s a big concern,” he remarked thoughtfully. “Of course you and we don’t come into competition at all—quite separate fields, aren’t they?”

“Oh, quite,” said I, tacitly thanking heaven for the fact.

As I have said, an engaging young man, and interesting. I wondered what he and life would make of one another, when they became better acquainted. Meanwhile our intimacy increased apace.

Human nature is, and apparently always has been, prone to poke fun at newly acquired greatness; I suppose that it hangs on the person stiffly, like a frock coat fresh from the tailor’s. If Lady Dundrannan wore her dignity and power rather consciously, she also wore them well. She made an imposing figure in her mourning; but her stateliness was pleasantly and variously tempered to suit the company in which she found herself. For Aunt Bertha and Sir Paget [123] there was an infusion of the daughterly; for Captain Godfrey of the elder-sisterly. I myself still found in her that piquant directness of approach which, in an earlier moment of temerity, I have ventured to call her impudence; it seasoned and animated her grandeur. She was, behind her dignity, mockingly confidential; she shared a half-hidden joke with me. She was naturally impelled to share it, if there were anybody with whom she could; it was to her the spice of the situation. Not the situation itself, of course; that was to her entirely serious and all important; she was attached to Waldo with all her limpet tenacity, with all her solidity of purpose, with all the tenderness, moreover, of which her heart was capable; finally, with an intensity of straight downright passion, of which I know by hearsay, but should hardly have divined from her own demeanor. But the joke, though not the situation itself, was a lively element in it. She could not share it with Waldo, or Aunt Bertha, or Sir Paget; nor would she share it with young Godfrey Frost, since it hardly became the status of an elder sister. But she could and did share it with me. The joke, of course, was Lucinda.

It would have been a still better joke, had she known all that I knew about Madame Valdez, or Donna Lucinda Valdez, or Madame Chose’s needlewoman; she might not have been so ready to share it with me, had she known that I knew about the girl on the cliffs, [124] passionately, shamefully sobbing in wounded love, pride, and spite. As matters stood to her knowledge, the joke was good enough, and yet fit to share. For here was she—the uninvited skeleton at the abortive feast—triumphant, in possession of the field, awaiting in secure serenity the fruition of her hopes. And so placed, moreover, that the attainment of her object involved no stooping; a queen bowing acquiescence from her throne is not said to stoop. Yes, here she was; here she was, with a vengeance; and—where was Lucinda?

Well, that was just what she wanted to know. Not in any uneasiness or apprehension, but in good, straight, honest, human, feminine curiosity and malice. Moreover, that was what, before we had been much together, she came to have a suspicion, an inkling, that I could tell her—if I would. This was no marvel of feminine intuition. It was my fault, or my mischief. It was my side of the joke, without which the joke would have been to me rather a grim one. I could not help playing with her curiosity, inciting and balking her malice.

She used to come to see Waldo almost every day, sitting with him an hour or more. Being a young woman of active habits, she generally came on foot, and, since he could not escort her home, that duty fell to my lot; we had several walks back from Cragsfoot to Briarmount, just as twilight began to fall on those winter evenings, her clear-cut, handsome features still showing up boldly above her rich dark furs. She really looked very much My Lady! [125]

But it is one walk that stands out conspicuous in memory. It was the afternoon on which Waldo had asked her to be his wife—though I did not know it.

Up to now, when I had occasion to pronounce her name, I had called her Lady Dundrannan, and she had not protested, although she continued to use my Christian name, as she always had since Waldo, Arsenio, and Lucinda set the example. But on this day, when her title happened to fall from my lips, she turned to me with an amused smile:

“Don’t you think you might call me Nina? You used to. And, really, mayn’t I almost be considered one of the family now?”

“I don’t care about calling you Nina just because I used to, or just because you’re almost one of the family, Lady Dundrannan——”

“There you go again!” she protested.

“Well, I rather admire the name. It sounds wild, feudal, Caledonian. But I’ll call you Nina if you like me well enough.”

“I’ve always liked you quite well, though I don’t think you used to like me much.”

“Let bygones be bygones, Nina!”

“Well, they are, aren’t they?” she said, with quite undisguised meaning—and undisguised triumph too. I was stupid not to suspect the cause. “But I believe you’re sorry for it!”

“I was sorry for it, of course, at the time it happened. We were all [126]
of us—well, much more than sorry. Stunned! Aghast!”

“You do use big words over that girl,” remarked Lady Dundrannan.

“You’re letting yourself go this evening! Hitherto you’ve been more subtle in trying to get at what I think—or thought—of Lucinda.” Mark my own subtlety here! I substituted “thought” for “think”; and what she had been trying to get at was not what I thought of Lucinda, but what I knew about her—if anything. But I meant to lead her on; I gave her a smile with the words.

“If you felt all that about it, I should have thought you’d have tried to get some explanation out of her—or him. Something to comfort the family! You yourself might have acted as a go-between.”

“But they vanished.”

“Oh, people don’t vanish so completely as all that!”

“There’s the war, you know. We’ve all been busy. No time for useless curiosity.” I did not advance these pleas in a very convincing tone.

She looked at me suspiciously. “You’ve never heard a word from either of them?”

I took it that she meant to ask if I had received any letters. “Never,” said I—upon the assumption, truthfully.

“Where do you suppose Arsenio Valdez is?”

“I don’t know where he is. Fighting for Italy, I suppose. He was [127]
bound to end by doing that, though, of course, he’s by way of being a tremendous Clerical. In with the Black Nobility at Venice, you see.”

“Nobility, indeed! A scamp like that!”

Now she had no particular reason for enmity against Valdez; rather the contrary. But Waldo had, and she reflected Waldo, just as I thought that Waldo’s flavor of bitterness towards Lucinda reflected her quality of mind, the sharp edge of her temper.

“How do you account for what she did?” she asked me, with a touch of irritation and restlessness.

“‘Account for it!’ Love is unaccountable, isn’t it?” I remembered that Lucinda had used the words about herself.

“Doesn’t her mother ever hear from her?”

“I don’t know. I’m not in touch with that excellent woman. She has, I fancy, vanished from the ken of Cragsfoot as completely as her daughter.”

“I expect they’ve just gone under, that pair—Lucinda and Arsenio. Because they were just a pair, weren’t they?”

I seemed to hear an echo of Waldo’s “like to like.” Or more probably Waldo’s “like to like” was an echo of what I now heard.

“Oh, I don’t see why they should have. We may very likely knock up against them some day,” I remarked with a laugh.

It was still light enough for me to see a flash in her eyes as she [128]
turned quickly on me. “If you think I’m——” she exclaimed impetuously; but she pulled herself up, and ended with a scornful little laugh.

But of course she had not pulled herself up in time; I knew that she had been going to say “afraid,” and she knew that I knew it. Lucinda had avowed a feeling that it was not all over between herself and Nina yet. Something of a similar feeling seemed to find a place in Lady Dundrannan’s mind; she contemplated the possibility of another round in the fight—and she was not afraid of it. Or was she? Just a little—in her heart? I did not think that she need be,

seeing the sort of man that Waldo was, knowing (as I now knew) Lucinda's mind; knowing too, alas, Lucinda's fate. But it was curious to find the same foreboding—if one could call it that—in both women.

"I really don't see why you should think any more about Lucinda," I said.

"I don't think I need," she agreed, with a smile that was happy, proud, and confident.

I looked her in the face, and laughed. She stopped, and held out her hand to me. As I took it she went on. "Yes, Waldo is telling the old people down there, and I'll tell you here. We're engaged, Julius; Waldo asked me this afternoon, and I said yes."

"I hope you will believe that I congratulate you and him very [129] sincerely, and, if I may, gladly welcome you into the family."

"Without any *arrière-pensée*?" Her challenge was gay and good-humored.

"Absolutely! Why do you suspect anything else?"

"Well then, because you are—or were—fond of Lucinda."

"Oh, you've got it out at last! But, even supposing so—and I've no reason for denying it—I'm not put to a choice between you, am I? Now at all events!"

"No," she admitted, but with a plain touch of reluctance; she laughed at it herself, perhaps at her failure to conceal it. "Anyhow, you'll try to like me, won't you, Cousin Julius?"

"I do like you, my dear—and not a bit less because you don't like Lucinda. So there!"

By now we were at the gates of Briarmount. I pointed to the house.

"You've got somebody else to tell your news to, in there. And you'd better tell him directly. I hope he's not been cherishing vain hopes himself, poor boy!"

"Godfrey?" She laughed again. "Oh, nonsense! He's just my little brother."

"You've got two men to manage now. Your hands will be full, Nina."

"Oh, I think I shall be equal to the task!"

"And, when you want, you can still unburden your mind to me [130] about Lucinda."

"I think I've done that! I shall take your advice and think no more about her. Good-night, Julius. I—I'm very happy!"

I watched her walk briskly up the Briarmount drive in the dusk. Certainly a fine figure of a girl; and one who improved on acquaintance. I liked her very much that afternoon. But she certainly did not like Lucinda! Put as mildly as possible, it came to that.

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[131]

CHAPTER XI

DUNDRANNANIZATION

THE family history during the rest of the war—up to the Armistice, that is—will go into a brief summary. Waldo was discharged from the army, as permanently unfit for service, early in 1917. His wedding took place in February of that year. It was solemnized not at St. George's, Hanover Square, but in the country, from the bride's seat of Briarmount. I was not present, as I went abroad again almost directly after my Christmas visit to Cragsfoot, the salient features of which have already been indicated. All good fortune waited on the happy pair (here I rely on Aunt Bertha's information, not having had the means of personal observation), and Nina became the mother of a fine baby in December. The child was a girl; a little bit of a disappointment, perhaps; the special remainder did not, of course, go beyond the present Baroness herself, and a prospective Lord Dundrannan was naturally desired. However, there was no need to pull a long face over that; plenty of time yet, as Aunt Bertha consolingly observed.

Finally, Captain Godfrey Frost—who must, I suppose, now be [132] considered a member of the Rillington-cum-Dundrannan family and was certainly treated as one—made such a to-do in the influential quarters to which he had access, that at last he was restored to active service, sent to the Near East, and made the Palestine campaign with great credit. The moment that its decisive hour was over, however, he was haled back again. It may be remembered that there was a Ministry of Reconstruction, and it appeared (from Aunt Bertha again) that no Reconstruction worth mentioning could be undertaken, or at all events make substantial progress, without the help of Captain Frost. If that view be correct, it may help to explain some puzzles; because Captain Frost got malaria on his way home, and had to knock off all work, public and private, for two or three months—just at the time that was critical for Reconstruction, no doubt.

That is really all there is to say, though it may be worth while to let a letter to me from Sir Paget throw a little sidelight on the progress of affairs:

"Our married couple seem in complete tune with one another. Congreve says somewhere—in *The Double Dealer*, if I remember rightly—'Though marriage makes man and wife one flesh, it leaves them still two fools.' Agreed; but he might have added (if he hadn't known his business too well to spoil an epigram by qualifications) that it doesn't leave them quite the same two fools. I have generally observed (I would say always, except that a diplomatist of seventy [133] has learnt never to say always) that when Mr. Black marries Miss White, either she darkens or he pales. The stronger infuse its color into the weaker—or, if you like to vary the metaphor, there is a partial absorption of the weaker by the stronger. Excuse this prosing; there is really nothing to do in the country, you know! And perhaps you will guess how I came by this train of reflection. In fact, I think that Waldo—about the happiest fellow in the world, and how good that he should be, after all he has gone through!—is experiencing a partial process of Dundrannanization. There's a word for you! I made it this morning, and it pleased me! I should like to have suggested it to old Jonathan Frost himself. Don't think it too formidable for what it represents. Not, of course, that the process will ever be complete with Waldo; there will remain a stratum of Christian weakness which it will not reach. But it may go far with him; the Frost (forgive me, Julius!) may be inches deep over his nature! And I am quite convinced that I have acquired a daughter, but not quite sure that I haven't lost a son. No, not lost; half lost, perhaps. Briarmount overpowers Cragsfoot: I suppose it was bound to be so; of course it was; Aunt Bertha says so. She is an admirable herald of the coming day. He loves me no less, thank God; but the control of him has passed into other hands. He is, quite dignifiedly, henpecked; his admiration for her stops only short of idolatry. I [134] don't know that it ought to stop much sooner, for she is a notable girl. I'm very fond of her; if I ever saw her burst into tears, or have hysterics, or do anything really weak and silly, I believe I should love her even more."

Quite so. It was what might have been expected. And Sir Paget's

assessment of his daughter-in-law was precisely in accord with all that he had had the opportunity of observing in that young woman. That she could burst into tears, could have something very like hysterics, could behave in a way that might be termed weak and silly, was a piece of knowledge confined, as I believed, to three persons besides herself. She thought it was confined to two. She had married one of them; did he think of it, did he remember? As for the other—it has been seen how she felt about the other. I was glad that she did not know about the third; if I could help it, she never should. I did not believe that she would forgive my knowledge any more than she forgave Lucinda's. I don't blame her; such knowledge about oneself is not easy to pardon.

There was a postscript to Sir Paget's letter. "By the way, Mrs. Knyvett is dead—a month ago, at Torquay. Aunt Bertha saw it in the *Times*. An insignificant woman; but by virtue of the late Knyvett, or by some freak of nature, she endowed the world with a beautiful creature. Hallo, high treason, Julius! But somehow I think that you [135] won't hang me for it. I hope that poor child is not paying too dearly for her folly."

I remember that, when I had read the postscript, I exclaimed, "Thank God!" Not of course, because Mrs. Knyvett had died a month before at Torquay; the event was not such as to wring exclamations from one. It was the last few words that evoked mine. Lucinda had a friend more in the world than she knew. If I ever met her again, I would tell her. She had loved Sir Paget. If his heart still yearned ever so little after her, if her face ever came before his eyes, it would, I thought, be something to her. The words brought her face back before my eyes, whence time and preoccupation had banished it. Did the face ever—at rare moments—appear to Waldo? Probably not. He would be too much Dundrannanized!

The process for which Sir Paget's reluctant amusement found a nickname was a natural one in the circumstances of the case. If the Dundrannan personality was potent, so was the Dundrannan property. Cragsfoot was a small affair compared even to Briarmount alone; Waldo was not yet master even of Cragsfoot, for Sir Paget was not the man to take off his clothes before bedtime. Besides Briarmount, there was Dundrannan Castle, with its deer and its fishing; there was the Villa San Carlo at Mentone; never mind what else there was, even after "public objects" and Captain Frost had, between them, shorn off so large a part of the Frost concerns and [136] millions. Moreover, another process set in, and was highly developed by the time I returned to England in the autumn of 1918, when my last foreign excursion on Government service ended. Family solidarity, and an identity of business interests in many matters, brought Nina, and, by consequence, Waldo, into close and ever closer association with Godfrey Frost. The young man was not swallowed; he had too strong a brain and will of his own for that; but he was attached. The three of them came to form a triumvirate for dealing with the Frost concerns, settling the policy of the Frost family, defining the Frost attitude towards the world outside. And everybody else was outside of that inner circle, even though we of Cragsfoot might be only just outside. So as Waldo, on his marriage, had shifted his bodily presence from Cragsfoot to Briarmount, his mind and his predominant interests also centered there; and presently to his were added, in great measure, Godfrey Frost's. Nina presided over this union of hearts and forces with a sure tact; she did not seek to play the despot, but she was the bond and the inspiration.

Naturally, then, if the three saw eye to eye in all these great matters, they also saw eye to eye, and felt heart to heart, on such a merely sentimental subject as the view to take of Lucinda—of whom, of course, Godfrey derived any idea that he had mainly from Nina. Probably the idea thus derived was that she was emphatically a person of whom the less said the better! Only—the curious fact [137] crops up again—she was not one of whom Nina was capable of saying absolutely nothing, of giving no hints. Her husband excepted, anybody really near to her was sure to hear something of Lucinda. Besides, there was the information, sketchy indeed, but significant, which he had received from Aunt Bertha, and perhaps that had made him question his cousin; then either her answers or even her reluctance to answer would have been enlightening to a man of his intelligence.

He got home some time in October, and at his request I went to see him in London, while he was convalescent from that malaria

which so seriously impeded Reconstruction. From him I heard the family plans. They were all three going shortly to Nina's villa at Mentone for the winter. For the really rich it seemed that "the difficulties of the times" presented no difficulty at all; a big motor car was to take the party across France to their destination.

"You see, we're largely interested in works near Marseilles, and I'm going out to have a look at them; Waldo's got doctor's orders, Nina goes to nurse him—and the kid can't be left, of course. All quite simple. Why don't you come too?"

"Perhaps I will—if I'm asked and can get a holiday. It sounds rather jolly."

"Top-hole! Besides, the war's going to end. Nina'll ask you all right; and, as for a holiday, you can't do much at your game till the [138] tonnage is released, can you?"

He seemed about right there; on such questions he had a habit of being right. At the back of my mind, however, I was just faintly reluctant about embracing the project, a little afraid of too thick a Dundrannan atmosphere.

"Well, I must go to Cragsfoot first. After that perhaps—if I am invited."

"Jolly old place, Cragsfoot!" he observed. "I don't wonder you like to go there—even apart from your people. It's unlucky that Nina's taken against it, isn't it?"

"I didn't know she had."

"Oh, yes. You'll see that—when the time comes—I hope it's a long way off, of course—she won't live there."

"Waldo'll want to live there, I think."

"No, he won't. He'd want to now, if it fell in. But by the time it does, he'll have had his mind altered." He laughed good-humoredly.

I rather resented that, having a sentimental feeling for Cragsfoot. But it would probably turn out true, if Nina devoted her energies to bringing it about.

"Regular old 'country gentleman' style of place—which Briarmount isn't. Sort of place I should like myself. I suppose you'd take it on, if Waldo didn't mean to live there?"

"You look so far ahead," I protested. "The idea's quite new, I [139] haven't considered it. I've always regarded it as a matter of course that Waldo would succeed his father there—as the Rillingtons have succeeded, son to father, for a good many years."

"Yes, I know, and I appreciate that feeling. Don't think I don't. Still that sort of thing can't last forever, can it? Something breaks the line at last."

"I suppose so," I admitted, rather sulkily. If Waldo did not live at Cragsfoot, if I did not "take it on," I could not help perceiving that Godfrey had fixed his eye—that far-seeing Frost eye—on our ancestral residence. This was a further development of the Dundrannan alliance, and not one to my taste. Instinctively I stiffened against it. I felt angry with Waldo, and irritated with Godfrey Frost—and with Nina too. True, the idea of Cragsfoot's falling to me—without any harm having come to Waldo—was not unpleasant. But everything was in Waldo's power, subject to Sir Paget's life interest; I remembered Sir Paget's telling me that there had been no resettlement of the property on Waldo's marriage. Could Waldo be trusted not to see with the Frost eye and not to further the Frost ambitions?

"It seems queer," Godfrey went on, smiling still as he lit his cigarette, "but I believe that Nina's dislike of the place has something to do with that other girl—Waldo's old flame, you know. She once said something about painful associations—of course, [140] Waldo wasn't in the room—and I don't see what else she could refer to, do you? She's a bit sensitive about that old affair, isn't she? Funny thing—nothing's too big for a really clever woman, but, by Jove, nothing's too small either!"

"Like our old friend the elephant and the pin that we were told about in childhood?"

"Exactly. Nina will hatch a big plan one minute, and the next she'll be measuring the length of the feather on the scullery-maid's hat."

"Well, but—I mean—love affairs aren't always small things, are they?"

"N—no, perhaps not. But when it's all over like that!"

“Yes, it is rather funny,” I thought it best to admit.

Certainly it would be funny—a queer turn of events—if things worked out as I suspected my young friend Godfrey of planning; if Nina persuaded Waldo that he did not want to live at Cragsfoot, and Waldo transferred his old home to his new cousin. And if Nina’s reason were that Cragsfoot had “painful associations” for her! Because then, ultimately, if one went right back to the beginning, it would be not Nina, but that other girl, Waldo’s old flame, who would eject the Rillington family from its ancestral estate! It was impossible not to stand somewhat aghast (big words about that girl again!) at such a trick of fate.

“The fact is, I suppose,” he went on, “that she’s been fond of [141] Waldo longer than she can afford to admit. Then the memory might rankle! And Nina’s not over-fond of opposition at any time. I’ve found that out. Oh, we’re the greatest pals, as you know, but there’s no disguising that!” He laughed indulgently. “Yes, that’s Nina. I often think that I must choose a wife with a meek and quiet spirit, Julius.”

“The Apostle says that it is woman’s ornament.”

“Nina certainly thinks that it’s other women’s. Oh, must you go? Awfully kind of you to have come. And, I say, think about Villa San Carlo! I believe it’s a jolly place, and Nina’s having it fitted up something gorgeous, she tells me.”

“Isn’t it rather difficult to get the work done just now?” I asked.

“Oh, no, not particularly. You see, we’ve an interest in——”

“Damn it all!” I cried, “have you Frosts interests in everything?”

Godfrey’s good humor was imperturbable. He nodded at me, smiling. “I suppose it must strike people like that sometimes. We do bob up rather, don’t we? Sorry I mentioned it, old fellow. Only you see—it does account for Nina’s being able to get the furniture for Villa San Carlo, and consequently for her being in a position to entertain you and me there in the way to which we are accustomed —in my case, recently!”

“Your apology is accepted, Godfrey—if I go there! And I don’t [142] seriously object to you Frosts straddling the earth if you want to. Only I think you might leave us Cragsfoot.”

“I wouldn’t get in your way for a minute, my dear chap—really I wouldn’t. We might live there together, perhaps. That’s an idea!” he laughed.

“With the wife of a meek and quiet spirit to look after us!”

“Yes. But I’ve got to find her first.”

“Sir Paget is very well, thank you. There’s no hurry.”

“But there’s never any harm in looking about.”

He came with me to the door, and bade me a merry farewell. “You’ll get your invitation in a few days. Mind you come. Perhaps we’ll find her on the Riviera! It’s full of ladies of all sorts of spirits, isn’t it? Mind you come, Julius.”

My little fit of irritation over what he represented was not proof against his own cordiality and good temper. I parted from him in a very friendly mood. And, sure enough, in a few days I did get my invitation to the Villa San Carlo at Mentone.

“If you’ve any difficulty about the journey,” wrote Nina, “let us know, because we can pull a wire or two, I expect.”

“Pull a wire or two!” I believe they control the cords that hold the firmament of heaven in its place above the earth!

Besides—so another current of my thoughts ran—if wires had to be pulled, could not Ezekiel Coldston & Co., Ltd., pull them for [143] themselves? Did the Frosts engross the earth? I had no intention of letting Nina Dundrannan graciously provide me with “facilities”; that is the term which we used to employ in H. M.’s Government service.

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[144]

CHAPTER XII

A SECRET VISIT

I STAYED longer at Cragsfoot than I had intended. The old folk there seemed rather lonely and moody; and, if the truth must be told, not quite so fully in harmony with one another as of yore. Aunt Bertha was ailing, showing at last signs of age and feebleness; Sir Paget was suffering from a reaction after his war-time anxieties and activities. A latent opposition of feeling between them occasionally cropped out on the surface. In Sir Paget it showed itself in humorously expressed fears that I too—"the only one of my family left"—should be "swallowed" if I went to Mentone; but Aunt Bertha met the humor peevishly: "What nonsense you talk, Paget!" or "Really, one would think that you regret Waldo's marriage! At all events, things might have been worse." Words like these last skirted forbidden places, and we steered the conversation away. But the opposition was real; when they were alone together, it was probably more open, and therefore worse. I lingered on, with the idea that my presence in the house softened and eased it.

[145] Moreover, I must own to a feeling in myself which seemed ridiculous and yet was obstinate—a reluctance to go to Villa San Carlo. What was the meaning, or the sense, of that? Was I afraid of being "swallowed" there, of being drawn into the Dundrannan orbit and thereafter circling helplessly round the Dundrannan sun? No, it was not quite that. I took leave to trust to an individuality, an independence, in myself, though apparently Sir Paget had his doubts about it. It was rather that going to the Villa seemed a definite and open ranging of myself on Nina's side. But on her side in what, my reason asked. There was no conflict; it was all over; the battle had been fought and won—if indeed there could be said to have been any battle at all, where one side had declined victory and left the prize at the mercy of the other. But here again, however irrationally, the feeling persisted, and, when challenged to show its justification, called to witness the two combatants themselves. In the end it was their words, their tones, hints of some vague foreboding in themselves, which had infected my mind.

What in the end overcame my reluctance and took me to Mentone? Not the attraction of the Villa, nor the lure of a holiday and sunshine. It was, unexpectedly and paradoxically—a letter from Arsenio Valdez! Addressed to my club, it was forwarded to me at Cragsfoot. After a silence of more than four years, he resumed his acquaintance with me in this missive; resumed it without the least embarrassment and with a claim to the cherished privilege of old [146] friendship,—that of borrowing money, of course.

He had, it appeared, joined the Italian Army rather late in the day. Whether he took the step of his free will—having solved his difficulties as to the proper side to champion in the war—or on compulsion, he did not say, and I have never discovered; I was ignorant of Italian legislation, and even of his legal nationality. Perhaps he made no great figure as a soldier, brave as Lucinda had declared him to be; at any rate, before very long he was put on transport work connected with the Italian troops serving on the Western front, with his quarters at Genoa. Even from this form of military service the Armistice appeared now to have freed him. He was for the present "out of a job," he said, and he gave me an address in Nice, to which I was to reply, enclosing the fifty pounds with which he suggested that I should accommodate him. "Number 21 hasn't been quite so good a friend to me lately; hence temporary straits," he wrote. I could imagine the monkeyish look on his face. And that reference to "Number 21" was as near as he approached to any mention of his wife.

I arranged for him to get the money through my bank, and wrote to him saying that possibly I should be in the South of France shortly and that, if so, I would look him up. More precise details of my plans I did not give; it was no business of his with whom I proposed to stay. A week later I set out for Mentone—with, I [147] suppose, treason in my heart; for, during my sojourn at Villa San Carlo, I meant to enter into communication with the enemy, if I could; and I did not intend to ask Lady Dundrannan's permission.

It was just before Christmas that I reached Mentone—without Frost facilities—and joined the Big Three; that nickname developed

a little later (and was accepted by her ladyship with complaisant smiles); I use it now for convenience. They were established, of course, in the height of luxury; there seemed no difficulty about getting anything; the furniture had all come; they had two cars—one to enable Godfrey to visit those works near Marseilles, another to promote the convalescence of Waldo. I gathered that another could be procured for me, if I liked—on what particular false pretense I did not inquire. I said that, what with trams, trains, and legs, I could manage my own private excursions; it was only when I accompanied them that dignity was essential. Nina never objected to sly digs at her grandeur; they were homage, though indirect.

Besides Godfrey and myself, the only guest in the house was Lady Eunice Unthank, a small, fair girl of about nineteen or twenty, younger sister of a friend whom Nina had made at her "finishing" school in Paris, and who had subsequently made what is called a brilliant marriage, so brilliant that it reflected added luster on Lady Eunice's own aristocracy. The latter was a pleasant, simple, unassuming little person, very fond of the baby (as babies go, it was [148] quite a nice one), obedient and adoring to Nina, frankly delighted with the luxury in which she found herself. I understood that her own family was large and not rich. However, Godfrey was rich enough for two. Yes, that was the idea which at once suggested itself. Mr. Godfrey (he had dropped his "Captain" by now) and Lady Eunice Frost! The one thing Godfrey needed. And a gentle, amenable Lady Eunice too, quite satisfying the Apostle! That perhaps was what Lady Dundrannan also desired, that her rule might not be undermined; the far-seeing eye embraced the future. Anybody vulgar enough might have said that Lady Eunice was at Villa San Carlo "on appro." What Lady Dundrannan said was that it was a charity to give the child a good time; she did not get much fun at home. But I think that it was organized charity—on business principles.

What the sultan who had the handkerchief to throw thought about this possible recipient of it, it was too soon to say. He was attentive and friendly, but as yet showed no signs of sentiment, and made no efforts after *solitude à deux*. We were all very jolly together, and enjoyed ourselves famously; for the first ten days or so I quite forgot that Arsenio's letter had had anything to do with bringing me to Mentone! In fact, I had never before encountered Nina in such an entirely benign and gracious mood; her happiness in her husband and baby seemed to spread its rays over all of us. In [149] such a temper she was very attractive; but it also signified that she was well content. In fact, there was, just now, an air of triumph about her good humor and her benevolence; it seemed especially pronounced in some smiles which she gave me as it were, aside, all to myself. What was there about me to excite her triumph? It could hardly be because I came to stay with her; were we not now cousins, and privileged—or doomed—to one another's society all our lives?

"Well, this is a fine time, after all our labors," I said to Waldo one morning as we smoked our pipes after early breakfast. "You look tons better already!"

He smoked on for a moment before he spoke. "I'm a very happy man now," he said, and smiled at me. "I know you laugh a bit, old chap, at the way Nina runs us all. I don't mind that. By Jove, look how well she does it! She's a wonderful girl!"

"She is," I agreed.

"After all, unless a man takes the position that all men are cleverer than any woman——"

"Which is absurd! Yes, Waldo?"

"He may admit that a particular woman is cleverer than himself."

"That seems logical."

"Of course, it's not only her cleverness. I'm much fonder of her than I used to—than I was even when I married her. Anything that there was—well, the least bit too decisive about her—has worn off. [150] She's mellowed."

"So have you," I told him with a laugh.

"My real life seems now to begin with my marriage," he said soberly. It could scarcely be doubted that he meant to convey to me that a certain episode in the past had lost all its importance for him. Was that the explanation of his wife's air of triumph? No doubt a sufficient one in itself, and perhaps enough to account for her liking to share her triumph with me. I had, after all, known her in days when she was not triumphant. However that might be, Waldo's

statement took my mind back to things that had happened before his “real life” began—and incidentally to Arsenio Valdez. I decided to bring off my secret expedition, and on the next day—there being nothing in particular on foot at the Villa—I slipped away directly after *déjeuner*, and caught a train to Nice.

It traveled slowly, but it got me there by two o’clock, and I made my way towards the address which Arsenio had given me. I need hardly add that this was a furtive and secret proceeding on my part. I relied on not being questioned about him, just as I had relied—and successfully—on not being questioned about Lucinda at Cragsfoot.

I had a little difficulty in finding my way. The house was in a back street, reached by several turns, and not everybody I asked knew where it was. But I found it; it was a *pâtisserie* of a humble order. [151] Apparently the shop entrance was the only one, so I went in by that, and asked if Monsieur Valdez lodged there. A pleasant, voluble woman was serving at the counter, and she told me that such was the case. Monsieur Valdez had a room on the second floor and was at home. He had not been out that day; he had not been out for *déjeuner* yet, late as it was. But there, Monsieur had employment which kept him up at nights; he often slept far into the day; it was indeed highly possible that I might find him still in bed.

Was it? And she had spoken of “a room.” I thought it judicious to obtain one more bit of information before I mounted to the room on the second floor.

“And—er—he’s sure to be alone, is he?”

She shook her head at me, her bright black eyes twinkling in an affectation of rebuke.

“Monsieur need not disturb himself. Monsieur Valdez is not married, and for the rest—in my house! *Mais non, Monsieur!*”

“A thousand pardons, Madame,” said I, as I prepared to mount the stairs, which rose from the back of the shop.

“My husband is most scrupulous about my dignity,” she cried to me in a tone of great pride, as I ascended the first steps.

So that explained that; and I went upstairs.

There were only two rooms on the second floor—one to the front, the other to the back of the house. The door of the former was open; [152] it was a bedroom with an obviously “double” appearance. I turned to the latter and tried the door. It opened. I walked in and closed the door softly behind me.

It was a small room, plainly but tidily furnished, and well lighted by a big window above the bed in which Arsenio lay. He was sleeping quietly. I stood by the door, watching him, for quite a long while. He was not greatly changed by the years and whatever experiences he had passed through; his face was hardened rather than coarsened, its lines not obliterated by any grossness of the flesh, but more sharply chiseled. A fallen spirit perhaps, but with the spiritual in him still. His devilry, his malice, would still have the redeeming savor of perception and humor; he might yet be responsive to a picturesque appeal, capable of a *beau geste*, even perhaps, on occasion, of a true vision of himself; but still also undoubtedly prone to those tricks which had earned for him in days of old his nickname of Monkey Valdez.

It was time to rouse him. I advanced towards the bed, took hold of a chair that stood by it, sat down, and forced a cough. He awoke directly, saw me, apparently without surprise, and sat up in bed.

“Ah, it’s you, Julius! You’ve turned up, as you said you might. But you’ve not come for your fifty pounds, I hope? My surroundings hardly suggest any success there, do they? What time is it? I’ve—shall we say lost?—my watch. Never mind. And I’m not going to ask [153] you for another loan—oh, well, only a fiver perhaps—because I’m expecting a remittance any hour.” He looked up at the window. “Ah, I perceive that the day is advanced. I’ll get up. Don’t suppose that I can’t get up! I’ve got two good suits—one for the day, and one for the night; it’s a bad workman who pawns his tools! You smoke while I dress, and we’ll have a talk.”

He jumped lightly out of bed and proceeded to make his toilet, questioning me briskly the while about the state of affairs in England and what had happened to me since our last meeting; he did not refer to any of our common acquaintances. I observed with some surprise that, when the time for it came, the neatly folded suit which he took out of his chest of drawers was evening dress. It was only a little past three in the afternoon. He cast a mocking glance at

me.

"In enforced intervals," he explained, "I pursue an avocation that demands the garb of ceremony from five o'clock in the day onwards till—well, till it's day again sometimes."

"Intervals between what?"

"Between seasons of plenty." He was now in trousers and vest. He looked at his chin in the glass. "Oh, but I must shave! Excuse me a moment."

He ran out of the room, and was back in a minute or two with a jug of steaming water. As he stropped his razor, he went on, as [154] though there had been no interruption: "But on the whole I have much to be thankful for. Brains will tell even—or indeed especially—in a stupid world. Now tell me what you're doing on this pleasant coast. Oh, I know you came to see me—partly. I'm grateful. But—for example—you're not staying with me. Where are you staying?"

"At Mentone. With some old friends of ours."

"Ah, and who may they be?" he asked, as he scraped his chin.

"Lady Dundrannan—as she now is—and her husband."

He stopped shaving for a moment and turned round to me, one side of his face scraped clean, the other still covered with lathered soap. "Oh, are they here? At Mentone?"

"They've got a villa there—Villa San Carlo. We live in great state."

"I won't ask you to forsake them then, and share my quarters. I take an interest in that household; in fact, I feel partly responsible for it. I hope it's a success?" He grinned at me, as he sponged and then toweled his face.

"A very brilliant success," I assured him with a laugh.

"That arrangement was always my idea of what ought to happen —adjoining estates, the old blood mingling with the new. So very suitable! That process has been the salvation of the British aristocracy, hasn't it? So I—er—felt less scruple in interfering with a [155] less ideal arrangement."

Here was a chance for him to refer to his wife. He did not avail himself of it. I did not wish to be the one to introduce that subject; if I showed curiosity, he might turn mischievous and put me off with a gibe or a lie.

He had finished his dressing by putting on a dinner jacket. He sat down on the bed—I still occupied the only chair in the room—and lit a cigarette.

"Did you mention at Villa—Villa what did you say it was?"

"San Carlo."

"Yes, of course! Did you mention at Villa San Carlo that you were coming to see me?"

"No, I didn't. It's about the last thing I should think of mentioning there," I said.

"Quite right. Better not!" he said with an approving nod and, I fancied, an air of relief. "An awkward topic! And a meeting would be more awkward still. I must avoid Mentone, I think—at all events, the fashionable quarter of it!"

At this moment the woman whom I had talked to in the shop knocked at the door, opened it, and ushered in another woman—the bearer of a registered letter. "Aha!" cried Arsenio joyfully, as he took it, hastily signed the receipt, and tore the envelope open. Then he called his landlady back just as she was closing the door: "Pray, Madame, have the kindness to send word to my—er—office that [156] indisposition will prevent my attendance this evening."

"Ah, Monsieur, for shame!" said she, with the same indulgent affectation of reproof as that which she had bestowed on me.

"Gentlemen of means don't go to offices," he said, waving his envelope. With a smile and a shrug Madame left us.

"Now, Julius, if you're returning to Villa—Villa—?—yes, San Carlo!—this afternoon, I'll do myself the pleasure of accompanying you as far as Monte Carlo. That will enable me to see more of you, my friend, and—who knows but that Number 21 may be kind to me to-night?"

"Monte Carlo is very near Mentone," I remarked.

"True, true! But delicacy of feeling, however desirable and praiseworthy, must not interfere with the serious business of life. We must take our chance, Julius. If any unlucky meeting should

occur, I authorize and indeed implore you to cut me dead! They will cut me, I shall cut them, I shall cut you, you will cut me! We shall all cut, and all be cut! And no harm will be done, no blood shed. *Voilà*, Julius! See how, as they say in French, at the very worst the thing will arrange itself!”

CHAPTER XIII

AN INTRODUCTION

ARSENIO VALDEZ was in the highest of spirits that evening—the effect of the registered letter, no doubt! His fun and gayety brought back, or even bettered, the boy that he had been at Cragsfoot; and he assumed a greater, a more easy, intimacy with me: we had been boy to man then; we were both men now. He was very friendly; whatever his feelings might be about encountering my kindred, evidently he found nothing awkward in meeting me. As we walked up from the station at Monte Carlo, he put his arm in mine and said, "You must dine with me to-night. Yes, yes, it's no good shaking your head." He smiled as he added, "You may just as well dine with me as with Lady Dundrannan. But if you feel any scruples, you may consider the dinner as taken out of your fifty, you know!"

It was a polite way of telling me that I had seen the last of my fifty.

"I didn't send that money altogether for you alone," I ventured to observe.

He looked at me. "You remind me, Julius! Let me do it before we [158] dine, or I might forget. Half of this little windfall that I have had goes to Lucinda. Half of it! Ah! there's a post office. Wait for me, I won't be a minute." And he darted into the place. When he rejoined me, he wore an air of great self-satisfaction. "Now I shall enjoy my evening," he said; "and all the more when I think of what I should otherwise have been doing."

"And what's that?" I asked; the question did not seem impertinent in view of his own introduction of the subject.

"Do you ever frequent what are pharisaically known as 'hells'? For my part, I should sooner call them 'heavens.' If you do, you'll remember a little bureau, or sometimes just a table, under the care of a civil official, by whose kind help you change notes that you had not meant to change, and cash checks that you had never expected to have to write? My suave and distinguished manners, together with my mastery of several languages, enable me to perform my functions in an ideal way—so much so that even an occasional indisposition, such as overtook me this evening, is sure to be benevolently overlooked. Yes, I'm a cashier in a gambling den, Julius."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said I, as we entered the *Café de Paris*.

We sat down, and Arsenio ordered the best dinner that was to be had. This done, he proceeded: "You see, I'm a man who prizes his independence. In that I resemble Lucinda; it's one of our points of [159] union. She insists on pursuing her own occupation, and accepts an occasional present from me—such as I've just had the pleasure of sending her—only under protest. When I'm in funds, I insist. So with me. I also like to have my own occupation; it gives me the sense of independence that I like."

"But occasionally you have recourse to——?"

His eyes sparkled at me over his glass of wine. "My dear Julius, an occasional deviation from one's ruling principle—what is it? To err is human, to forgive divine. And since you've forgiven me that fifty, I shall be positively hurt if you don't make an excellent dinner!"

"It's difficult to over value the privilege of being your guest," I observed rather grimly.

He laughed, and went on with his merry chatter. I tried to take stock of him, as I listened and threw in a remark here and there. Was he trying to deceive himself with his talk of independence, or was he merely trying to deceive me? Or was it that he did not really care a straw about deceiving either of us? He might like to puzzle me; that would be in his monkey vein. Evidently he had given none of my fifty pounds to Lucinda. Had he really sent her anything when he went into the post office this evening? And, if anything, what proportion of his "windfall"? As much as half? Did Lucinda take money from him—under protest? Or did she never get the chance? And did she give him money? If his object were to puzzle me—he did [160] it! But I believed what he told me about his occupation; there was the evidence of his dress suit, and of Madame's playful rebuke.

Besides, it was in character with him. When he lacked the wherewithal to play himself, he would be where others played. At least he got the atmosphere. Perhaps, too, his suave manners and linguistic services were worth the price of a stake to him now and then.

"Yes," he went on, with a laugh, after describing one or two odd shifts to which he had been put, "the war may have paid my dear adopted country all right—*sacro egoismo*, you know, Julius!—but it played the devil with me. Zeppelins and 'planes over Venice! All the tenants bolted from my *palazzo*, and forgot to leave the rent behind them. Up to now they've not come back. Hence this temporary fall in my fortunes. But it'll all come right."

"It won't, if you go on gambling with any money that you happen to get hold of."

He became serious; at least, I think so. At all events, he looked serious.

"Julius, I have no more doubt about it than I have about the fact that I sit here, on this chair, in this restaurant. Some day—some day soon—I shall bring off a great *coup*, a really great *coup*. That will reëstablish me. And then I shall have done with it." The odd creature's face took on a rapt, an almost inspired look. "And that *coup* will be made, not at *trente-et-quarante*, not at baccarat, but at [161] good old roulette, and by backing Number 21. It happened once before—you know when. Well, it'll happen again, my friend, and happen even bigger. Then I shall resume my proper position; I shall be able to give Lucinda her proper position. Our happy days will come again." His voice, always a melodious one, fell to a soft, caressing note: "We haven't lost our love for one another. It's only that things have been difficult. But the change will come!" His voice rose and grew eager again. "It nearly came with your fifty. It was coming. I actually saw it coming. But a fellow with a damned ugly squint came and backed my play, the devil take him! Oh, you may smile, but I know a *jettatore* when I see one! Of course every blessed penny went!"

"Yes, here he was sincere. It was perhaps his one sincerity, his only faith. Or could the love he spoke of—his love for his wife—also be taken as sincere? Possibly, but there I felt small patience with him. As to his faith in his gambler's star, that was in its way pathetic. Besides, are not we all of us prone to be somehow infected by a faith like that, however ridiculous our reason tells us that it is?

"That's a rum idea of yours about Number 21," I said (I apologize for saying it thoughtfully!); "you somehow associate it with——?"

"There's really no need of your diplomacy," he mocked me. "What I didn't tell you about it, Lucinda did. Number 21 won me Lucinda." He paused, gave a pull to his cigarette—we had by now [162] begun smoking—and added, "Won me Lucinda back, I mean. But you know, I think, all about us."

"And you know, it seems, about my meeting with her—it must be nearly three years ago. I mean—at Ste. Maxime?"

"She told me about it. She had been so delighted to see you. You made great friends, you and she? Well, she always liked you. I think you liked her. In fact"—he smoked, he sipped his coffee, then his cognac—"in fact, I've always wondered why you chose to consider yourself out of the running that summer at Cragsfoot long ago. You chose to play the fogy, and leave Waldo and me to do battle."

"She was a child, and I——"

"As for a child—well, I found her more than that. So did Waldo. As for your venerable years—a girl is apt to take a man's age at his own reckoning. Short of a Methuselah, that is. Well, if you ever had a chance—I think you had—you've lost it. You'll never get her now, Julius!"

"How much more damned nonsense are you going to talk to-night, you—you Monkey?"

"Yes, yes, I'm still Monkey Valdez, aren't I? The Monkey that stole the fruit! But I got it, and I shall keep it. After what she's done for me, could I ever distrust her?" His voice sounded as it had when he spoke of Number 21.

"I certainly think that you've tried her pretty high already," I [163] remarked dryly.

"And you're very angry with me about it?"

"What would be the good? Only I wish the devil you'd pull yourself together now."

“Remember Number 21!” And now his voice sounded as it had when he spoke of Lucinda!

“Where is she now, Arsenio? Still at Ste. Maxime?”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you where she is without her permission.”

“Oh, stuff! If you think that she and I are such friends—I hope we are—surely——?”

“I don’t think that she would care to receive visits from a member of Lady Dundrannan’s house party.”

“Good Lord, I forgot that!”

“And I certainly wouldn’t take the responsibility of concealing that fact about you—with the chance of her discovering it afterwards. As for you, wouldn’t you get into hot water with both ladies, if your duplicity happened to be discovered? As regards one another, aren’t they a trifle sensitive?” He leaned back in his chair, with an air of amusement at the situation which he had suggested. “Even your little visit to me you thought it judicious to make on the quiet,” he reminded me with a chuckle.

I sat silent; if the truth must be told, I was rather abashed. On reflection—and on a reflection prompted by Monkey Valdez!—what I had been proposing to do seemed not quite the square thing. [164] Anyhow, a doubtful case; it is a good working rule not to do things that you would not like to be found out in.

“Then I suppose I oughtn’t to have come to see you either?”

“Oh, I don’t matter so much. Nina has no animosity against me.” His eyes twinkled. “Still, don’t mention it, there’s a good fellow. You see, she’d question you, and I am rather down on my luck. Lucinda and I both are. I daresay you’ll understand that we shouldn’t care for that to get round through Nina to Waldo?”

That feeling seemed natural and intelligible enough. The contrast between splendor and—well—something like squalor—in view of the past they would hardly wish Lady Dundrannan and her husband to be in a position to draw it.

“Oh, well, what’s done’s done; but you and I had perhaps better not meet any more just for the present.”

“I’ve roused your scruples?” he laughed. “I, the moralist! Just as you like, old fellow. I’m glad you happened to hit on a lucky night—hope you’ve enjoyed the dinner?”

“Immensely, thanks. But I’d better be getting back now, I think.”

“Well, it’s about time I got to business.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the Casino. “Let me pay, and we’ll be off.”

In another five minutes we should have parted company, and my [165] indiscretion in visiting Arsenio Valdez from Villa San Carlo would have had no consequences. But things were not fated to end that way. While my host was paying the bill—he put down very openly, perhaps with some slight flourish, a note for five hundred francs—I felt a hand laid on my shoulder. I looked up, and saw Godfrey Frost.

“Ah!” said he, with a laugh, “you’re not the only truant! I got a little bored myself, and thought I’d run over here and have a flutter. We’ll go back together, shall we? May I sit down at your table? I’m late, but they say they can give me something cold.”

Arsenio’s eyes were upon me; with his infernal quickness the fellow must have detected an embarrassment on my face; his own puckered into a malicious smile. He settled back into the chair which he had been about to vacate—and waited.

What could I do? With fate and Monkey Valdez both against me? He divined that for some reason I did not want to introduce him. Therefore I must be made to! Godfrey also waited—quite innocently, of course, just expecting the proper, the obvious thing. I had to do it; but, with a faint hope that they might not identify one another, I said merely, “Sit down, of course. Mr. Frost—my friend, Mr. Valdez.”

The Monkey twisted his face; I believe that he was really vexed. (Had not Lucinda said that he had taken against all things English?) [166] “I’m not *Mr.* Valdez, Julius. I’m Monsieur Valdez, if you like, or, more properly, Don Arsenio Valdez.”

“Delighted to meet you, Don Arsenio,” said young Frost, composedly taking his seat. “I think I’ve heard of you from my cousin, Lady Dundrannan.”

“An old acquaintanceship,” said the Monkey. “One of the many that, alas, the war interrupted! I hope that your cousin is well?”

“First class, thank you,” answered Godfrey. “Ah, here’s my cold

chicken!”

With the arrival of the stranger Arsenio had assumed his best manner, his most distinguished air; he could do the high style very well when he chose, and if his dress suit was a trifle shabby, there was always the war to account for a trifle like that. He was evidently bent on making a favorable impression. The talk turned on the tables, where Godfrey had been trying his luck with some success. But Arsenio was no longer the crazy gambler with a strange hallucination about Number 21; he was a clear-sighted, cool-minded gentleman who, knowing that the odds against him must tell in the end, still from time to time risked a few louis for his pleasure.

“After all, it’s one of the best forms of relaxation I know. Just enough excitement and not too much.”

“I never play for more than I can afford to lose,” said Godfrey. “But I must confess that I get pretty excited all the same.”

“It can’t make much difference to you what you lose,” I growled. [167]
This meeting, for which I felt responsible, somehow put me out of temper. What was the Monkey up to? He was so anxious to make a good impression!

“It would be affectation to pretend not to know that you can afford to treat the freaks of fortune with composure,” he said to Godfrey with a smile.

Godfrey looked pleased. He was still fresh to his position and his money; he enjoyed the prestige; he liked to have the Frost greatness admired, just as his cousin Nina did.

“When I played more than I do now,” Arsenio pursued, “I used to play a system. I don’t really believe in any of them, but I should like to show it to you. It might interest you—though I’ve come now to prefer a long shot—a bold gamble—win or lose—and there’s an end of it! Still my old system might——”

I got up. I had had enough of this—whatever Arsenio’s game might be. “It’s time we were getting back,” I said to Godfrey. “Have you your car here?”

“Yes, and we’ll go. But look here, Don Arsenio, I should like to hear about your system. If you’re free, lunch with me here to-morrow, and afterwards we’ll drop in and try it—in a small way, just for fun, you know.”

“To-morrow? Yes, I shall be delighted. About half-past twelve? Shall I see you, too, Julius?”

“No; systems bore me to death,” I said gruffly. “Besides, those [168]
Forrester people are coming to lunch at the Villa to-morrow, Godfrey.”

“All the more reason for being out!” laughed Godfrey. “We’ll meet, then, Don Arsenio, whether this old chap comes or not. That’s agreed?”

Arsenio assented. We left him outside the *café*, waving his hand to us as the car started. At the last moment he darted one of his mischievous glances at me. At least, he was thoroughly enjoying the situation; at most—well, at most he might be up to almost anything. He had told us that he did not, after all, feel like playing that night, since we had to leave him; he would go straight home, he said. That probably meant that he was saving up his money for something!

Godfrey was silent on the way home, and did not refer to Arsenio till we found ourselves in the smoking room at the Villa: we had it to ourselves; the others had gone to bed.

“I was interested to meet that fellow,” he then remarked. “Where did you run into him?”

I told him of my visit. “For the sake of old times I just wanted to see how he was getting on,” I added apologetically. “But I doubt whether I did right, and I don’t mean to see any more of him at present.”

“Why do you doubt whether you did right?”

“Well, I’m Nina’s guest just now; frankly, I don’t think she’d like it.”

“There’s no reason to tell, is there?” [169]

“As a matter of fact, I didn’t mean to tell her. But you turned up!”

He laughed. “Oh, I won’t tell her either. We’ll keep it dark, old fellow.”

“But you’ve arranged to meet him at lunch again to-morrow.”

“Nina will be lunching here—with the Forresters, so that will be all right, though it’s a doubtful point whether affording us bed and

board gives Nina a right of control over the company we keep outside the house."

"I just had a feeling——"

"Yes. Well, perhaps you're right." He was standing before the fire, smoking a cigar; he seemed to ponder the little question of morals, or etiquette, for a moment. Then he smiled. "So that's the dashing lover who cut out poor Waldo and ran away with the famous Lucinda, is it? But where's the lady, Julius?"

"I haven't any idea. She wasn't at the place where I found him to-day. Why do you want to know where she is?"

I suppose that my tone was irritable. He raised his brows, smiling still. "Don't you think that a little curiosity is natural? She is, after all, an important figure in the family history. And she is, so far as I'm aware, the only woman who's ever got the better of Nina. I should like to see her." He paused a moment, his lips set in the firm and resolute smile with which I was familiar on Lady Dundrannan's [170] lips—the Frost smile. "Yes, I should certainly like to see her. And I'm not really much interested in roulette systems. That for your information, Julius!"

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[171]

CHAPTER XIV

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

I AWOKE the next morning with my head full of Lucinda; the thought of her haunted me. My desire to see her, to know how she fared, had been constant since I came to Mentone; it had really prompted my visit to Arsenio Valdez; it had made me restless under the gilded hospitality of Villa San Carlo—a contrast was always thrusting itself under my eyes. But it was brought to a sharper point by the events of the day before, by the mode of living in which I had found Valdez, by his concealment of her and reticence about her. I felt now simply unable to go on faring sumptuously at Villa San Carlo every day, while she was in all likelihood suffering hardship or even want.

There was another strain of feeling, which developed now, or came to the surface. As I drank my morning coffee and smoked a cigar, my memory traveled back through my acquaintance with her—back through my intercourse with her at Ste. Maxime, with all its revelation of her doings, feelings, and personality; back through all that to the first days at Cragsfoot which seemed now so long ago, on [172] the other side of the barrier which her flight had raised and the war had made complete. It was Arsenio who had set me on the line of thought. I recalled my mood in those days, the state of mind in which I had been, and saw how justly his quick wits had then divined it and had yesterday described it. I had chosen to play the fogy, to consider myself out of the running. It was quite true. He had paid me the compliment of saying that he did not know why I should have done this. He did not know. I do not think that I knew myself at the time. We see our feelings most clearly when they possess us no longer. The woman who had been more than any one else in the world to me was still alive in my heart in those days, and still mistress of my thoughts, though she walked the earth no longer and her voice was forever silent. It was still seeming to me, as it does to a man in such a case, that my story was told and finished, that I was done. Beside the fresh young folk at Cragsfoot, I might well feel myself a fogy. What could Lucinda seem to me then but a charming child playing with her fellows?

If Arsenio's words set me thus smiling—even if half in melancholy over a vanished image that rose again from the past, and flitted transiently across a stage that she had once filled—smiling at the memory of how old—how "finished" for affairs of the heart—I had once seemed to myself, there was a danger that they might make [173] me forget how old I was, in sad fact, at the present moment.

Towards this mistake another thing contributed. Combativeness is usually a characteristic of youth; Godfrey Frost had stirred it up in me. In spite of the plea of "family history" which he had put forward (with a distinct flavor of irony in his tone), my feelings acknowledged no warrant for his claim to a just curiosity and interest about Lucinda, and resented the intimation, conveyed by that firm and resolute Frost smile, that he intended to take a hand in her affairs, on the pretext of studying a roulette system under her husband's tuition. Such an attitude, such an intention, seemed somehow insulting to her; if the Rillingtons had a right to treat her with less respect than that which is due to any lady—even if Nina based a right to do so on what had happened in the past—Godfrey had none. If she chose to remain hidden, what business was it of his to drag her into the light? There seemed something at least ungallant, unchivalrous in it. I ought to have remembered that he had only the general principles of chivalry to guide him, whereas I had the knowledge of what Lucinda was, of her reserve and delicate aloofness. In the end his curiosity might find itself abashed, rebuked, transformed. I did not think of that, and for the time anger clouded my liking for him.

Coincidently there came over me a weariness, an impatience, of Villa San Carlo. It was partly that Lady Dundrannan created—quite [174] unintentionally, of course—the atmosphere of a Court about her; there was always the question of what would please Her Majesty! This was amusing at first, but ended by growing tedious. But, deeper than this, there was the old conflict, the old competition. Some unknown and dingy lodging, somewhere on the Riviera coast, was matching its lure against all the attractions of magnificent Villa

San Carlo. That was the end of it with me—and with Godfrey Frost!

I sought out Nina before lunch in her boudoir, a charming little room opening on the garden, with Louis Quinze furniture on the floor and old French Masters on the walls; really extremely elegant.

Her ladyship sat at her writing table (a "museum piece," no doubt), sorting her letters. She was not looking her most amiable, I regretted to observe, but, as soon as I came in, she spoke to me.

"Isn't this too bad? Godfrey's had to go over to the works. Some trouble's arisen; he doesn't even tell me what! He went off at ten o'clock, before I was downstairs, merely leaving a note to say he'd gone, and might not be back for two or three days. He took his man and a portmanteau with him in the car, Emile tells me. And to-morrow is Eunice's birthday, and he'd delighted the child by promising to take us for a long drive and give us lunch somewhere. It's so seldom that he puts himself out to give her pleasure, that I [175]
was—that it seems a shame."

"A disappointment, certainly, Nina."

"It knocks the whole thing on the head. The day would be too long for Waldo, and what would she care about going with you and me? Oh, I beg your pardon, but——"

"Of course! Two's company; four can move in companies; but three's hopeless!"

"I'm really vexed." She looked it. "I wonder if he's really gone on business!"

"You could telephone the works and find out if he's there," I suggested rather maliciously. To tell the truth, I did not think that he would be—not much there, at all events.

"My dear Julius, I'm not quite an idiot in dealing with young men whom I want to—whose friendship I like and value. Do you suppose he'd like me telephoning after him as if I was his anxious mother?"

A wise woman! But just at the moment she was irritated, so that she had nearly put the relations which she wished to maintain between herself and Godfrey too bluntly. However, her amendment was excellent.

"Well, there it is! I must explain it to poor Eunice as well as I can. After all, you might take her to Monte and let her have a little gamble. I'll give her a present. That'll be better than nothing."

"Thank you, Nina! But—well, the fact is——" [176]

"Oh, do you want to go off on your own, too?" she asked rather sharply. "Well, I suppose it is dull here. Waldo and I are too conjugal, and Eunice—well, she's a dear, but——"

"It's not a bit dull here. It never could be where you are" (I meant that), "and anyhow old Waldo would be enough for me. And I'm not out for sprees, if that's what you mean. But—may I smoke?"

"Of course! Don't be silly!"

I began to smoke. She rose and came to the fireplace, where she stood with her arm resting on the mantelpiece, looking down at me, for I had sat down on one of her priceless chairs; it seemed rather a liberty, but I did it—a liberty with the chair, I mean, not with its owner.

She was looking very vexed; she hated her schemes to go awry. She had been kind to me; I liked her; and she was one of us now—the wife of a Rillington, though she bore another name. More than ever it seemed that I ought to play fair with her—for those reasons; also because it appeared likely that she was not meeting with fair play elsewhere—at all events, not with open dealing.

"I'm your guest," I began, with some difficulty, "and your—well, and all the rest of it. And I want——"

"To do something that you think I mightn't like a guest and friend of mine to do?"

"That's it." I gratefully accepted her quick assistance. It was [177]
quick indeed, for the next instant she added: "That means that you want to go and see Lucinda Valdez? It's the only thing you can mean. What else is there which you could think would matter to me?"

"Yes, I do. I want to find out where she is, what she's doing, and whether she's in distress. I hope you won't think that wrong, or unnatural, or—or disloyal to Waldo or to you?"

I looked up at her as I spoke. To my surprise her air of vexation, her thwarted air, gave place to that sly, subtle look of triumph which I had marked on her face before. She seemed to consider for a

moment before she answered me.

"Go, of course, if you like. I have no possible claim to control your actions. I shan't consider that you're doing anything unfriendly to Waldo, much less to me—though I do think it would be better not to mention it to Waldo. But if all you want is to know where Lucinda is, and whether she's in distress, I'm in a position to save you trouble by informing you on both those points."

"The deuce you are!" I exclaimed. She had really surprised me this time. She saw it; her lips curved in a smile of satisfaction.

"She's living with her husband at Nice, and, whatever may have been the case before, she isn't at present in distress, because for the last two months or so—since soon after we came out—I have had [178] the privilege of supplying her wants."

I nearly fell out of the priceless chair. I did stare at her in sheer astonishment. Then the memory flashed into my mind—Arsenio's remittance, his dinner at the *Café de Paris*, his remark that I might just as well dine with him as with Lady Dundrannan. It did come to much the same thing, apparently!

"I did it for Auld Lang Syne," said Nina gently, softly. Oh, so triumphantly!

Now I understood her sly, exultant glances at me in the preceding days. She had always suspected me of being on the enemy's side, one of Lucinda's faction (it was small enough). What would I have to think of Lucinda now? Nina had been conceiving of herself as the generous benefactress of a helpless and distressed Lucinda. A grateful Lucinda, eating from her hand all but literally! That was her revenge on the girl who had cut her out with Waldo, on the girl who had seen her sobbing on the cliff. It was not a bad one.

"One would not like to think of her being in want, and so exposed to temptation," Nina remarked reflectively. "Because, of course, she is pretty; she was, anyhow."

I smiled at that—though I fancy that she meant to make me angry.

"You must excuse me, Nina, but I don't believe it."

"Oh, all right!" She walked across to her desk, unlocked a [179] drawer, took out a letter, and brought it back with her. She gave it to me. "Read that, then, Julius."

It was from Arsenio. I read it hastily, for it disgusted me. It sent to Madame la Baronne (he wrote in French) the grateful thanks of his wife and himself for her most generous kindness, once again renewed. In a short time he hoped to be independent; might he for one week more trespass on her munificence? It was not for himself; it was simply to enable his wife to make a decent appearance, until an improvement in her health, now, alas, *very* indifferent, made it possible for her to seek some suitable employment——So far I read, and handed the letter back to Nina; she would not take it.

"Keep it," she said. "I've several more; he says the same thing every week—oh, that about the 'decent appearance' is new; it's been rent and food before. Otherwise it's the same as usual."

I looked at the date of the letter; it had been written three days before.

"When did you last send him money?"

"The day before yesterday, if you want to know."

Yes, I had dined on it. And Arsenio had sent half of it to Lucinda; so he had told me, at least. And the rest he was keeping, in order to show Godfrey Frost the working of his system.

"I was with him when he got it."

"You were with him? When? Where?" she asked quickly.

I told of my afternoon with Monkey Valdez; surely he had now [180] doubly, trebly earned the name! She listened with every sign of satisfaction and amusement.

"You didn't see his wife? She was out at her work, I suppose?"

"He's living in a single room. There was no sign of her, and the—er—furniture did not suggest——"

"Really, Julius, I'm not interested in their domestic arrangements," said Lady Dundrannan. "And you left him at Monte Carlo?"

I assented; but I kept Godfrey's secret. It was not my affair to meddle in that; the more so inasmuch as his meeting with Arsenio had not been his fault at all, but my own. To give him away would be

unpardonable in me. Nor did I tell her that Arsenio had at least professed to send half the money to Lucinda; I was not convinced that he had really done it; and—well, I thought that she was triumphant enough already.

I folded Arsenio's letter and put it in my pocket, with no clear idea of what I meant to do with it, but with just a feeling that it might give me a useful hold on a slippery customer. Then I looked up at Nina again; she had the gift of repose, of standing or sitting still, without fidgets. She stood quite still now; but her exultant smile had vanished; her face was troubled and fretful again.

"Of course I've told you this in confidence," she said, without looking at me. "I've not bothered Waldo with it, and I shan't until [181] he's stronger, at all events."

"I quite understand. But I'm not in the least convinced."

Then she turned quickly towards me. "The letter speaks for itself —or do you think I've forged it?"

"The letter speaks for itself, and it convicts Arsenio Valdez. But there's nothing to show that Lucinda knows where the money comes from. He probably tells her that he earns it, or wins it, and then lies to you about it."

"Why should he lie to me about it?"

"He thinks that you'd be more likely to send it for her than for him, I suppose. At any rate, I'm convinced that she would rather starve than knowingly take money from you."

"Why?"

I retorted her own phrase on her. "Because of Auld Lang Syne, Nina."

"You don't know much about that," she remarked sharply.

"Yes, a good deal. Some you've told me yourself. Some Lucinda has told me. I met her down here—not at Mentone, but on the Riviera,—about three years ago."

"What was she doing then?"

"I can tell you nothing of that. She did not wish you or the people at Cragsfoot to know."

"I daresay not!" Then she went on, quietly but with a cold and [182] scornful impatience. "What do all you men find in the woman? You, Julius, won't believe the plainest evidence where she's concerned. Waldo won't hear her name mentioned; he does recognize the truth about her by now, of course—what she really was—but still he looks as if I were desecrating a grave if I make the most distant reference to the time when he was engaged to her—and really one can't help occasionally referring to old days! And now even Godfrey seems eaten up with curiosity about her; he's been trying to pump me about her. I suppose he thinks I don't see through him, but I do, of course."

"She's an interesting woman, Nina. Don't you think so yourself?"

"How can she be interesting to Godfrey, anyhow? He's never seen her. Yet I shouldn't be a bit surprised if at this moment he's hunting the Riviera for her!"

How sharp she was, how sharp her resentful jealousy made her!

"It's as if you were all in a conspiracy to prevent me from getting that woman out of my head! Well—you don't make any answer!"

"About what?"

"About what Godfrey's doing."

"I know nothing about what he's doing. There's what he said in the note he left for you."

She gave an impatient shrug. "Oh, the note he left for me! Why didn't he tell me face to face? I suppose he could have waited half [183] an hour!"

It was plain that Godfrey's departure—sudden and certainly unceremonious compared with the deference which he had been (indeed, which all of our party were) in the habit of showing towards her—had upset her seriously. She showed me more of her inner mind, of a secret uneasiness which possessed her. It had been lulled to rest by that picture of a helpless and grateful Lucinda; I had shaken her faith in that, or at least my obstinate skepticism had made her faith angry rather than serene, eager to convince the skeptic and thereby to confirm itself anew.

After a long pause she spoke again in a much more composed fashion, and even smiling.

“Well, Julius, go and see; go and find her, and find out the truth about it. That’ll be the best thing. And you can come back and tell me. In view of Arsenio Valdez’s letter I’m entitled to know their real circumstances, anyhow. Into her secrets I don’t want to pry, but I’ve sent them money on the strength of his letters.”

“What I expect is to be able to tell you not to send any more.”

“Yes, I know you expect that. But you’ll find yourself wrong about it.”

“That’s the ‘issue to be tried,’” I said with a laugh, as I rose from my chair. I was glad to be able to obey the impulse within me without quarreling with Nina. I hoped to be able to carry the whole thing through—wherever it might lead—without that. [184]

“You’re off directly?” she asked.

“Oh, not this minute. After lunch will be time enough, I think.”

“It wasn’t time enough for Godfrey,” she reminded me quickly. But the next moment she flushed a little, as though ashamed. “Oh, never mind that! Let’s stick to business. What you’re going to find out for me is whether Arsenio Valdez—yes, Arsenio—is a proper object for charitable assistance, whether he makes a proper use of what I send him, and whether I ought to send more.”

“That, so far as you’re concerned, is it precisely.”

On which polite basis of transparent humbug Nina and I parted for the moment. We were to meet again at lunch. But Waldo would be there; so no more of our forbidden subject.

Alas! here was to be the end of the subject altogether for some little while. At lunch a very crestfallen man, though he tried to wear an unconcerned air, informed Lady Dundrannan that Sir Ezekiel Coldston had wired him a peremptory summons to attend an important business conference in Paris; so there was an end of the Riviera too for the time being. The order must be obeyed at once. Waldo came into the room just as I achieved this explanation; somehow it sounded like a confession of defeat.

“Oh, well, the Riviera will wait till you come back,” said Her Ladyship, with an unmistakable gleam of satisfaction in her eye. [185]

She had tactfully agreed to the search for Lucinda, but she had not liked it. It was at any rate postponed now.

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[186]

CHAPTER XV

THE SYSTEM WORKS

I WAS in Paris for full four weeks, representing Sir Ezekiel (who was laid up with asthma) on the International Commercial Conference on the Regulation and Augmentation of the World's Tonnage, a matter in which our company was, of course, deeply interested. It was the best chance I had yet secured of distinguishing myself in the business world. The work, besides being important and heavy, was also interesting. The waking intervals between our sessions and conferences were occupied by luncheons, banquets, and *conversaziones*; if we dealt faithfully with one another at the business meetings, we professed unlimited confidence in one another on the social occasions. In fact, if we had really believed all we said of one another after lunch or after dinner, each of us would have implored his neighbor to take all the goods, or tonnage, or money that he possessed and dispose of it as his unrivaled wisdom and unparalleled generosity might dictate. We did not, however, make any such suggestions in business hours; the fact that we did quite the opposite prolonged the negotiations.

All of which brings me to the ungallant confession that the two [187]
ladies, who had occupied so much of an idle man's thoughts at Mentone, occupied considerably less of a busy man's at Paris. They were not forgotten, but they receded into the background of my thoughts, emerging to the forefront only in rare moments of leisure; even then my mental attitude was one of greater detachment. I had a cold fit about the situation, and some ungracious reflections for both of them. Absence and preoccupation blunted my imagination, even when they did not entirely divert my thoughts. My mind was localized; it did not travel far or for long outside my daily business.

It was when our deliberations had almost reached a conclusion, as the official report put it—when our agreement had gone to the secretaries to be drafted in proper form—that I got a telegram from Godfrey Frost, telling me that he would be in Paris the next day and asking me to dine with him. Putting off some minor engagement which I had, I accepted his invitation.

It was not till after dinner, when we were alone in his sitting room at the hotel, that he opened to me what he had to say. He did it in a methodical, deliberate way. "I've something to say to you. Sit down there, and light a cigar, Julius."

I obeyed him. Evidently I was in for a story—of what sort I did not know. But his mouth wore its resolute look, not the smile with which
he had chaffed me after our meeting with Arsenio Valdez at Monte [188]
Carlo.

"The system worked," he began abruptly.

"You won?" I asked, astonished.

"I don't want you to interrupt for a little while, if you don't mind. Of course, I didn't win; I never supposed I should. But the system worked. I found Madame Valdez. Be quiet! After two nights of the system, I politely—more or less politely—intimated that I was sick of it; also that I didn't see my way to finance any further the peculiarly idiotic game which he played on his own account, in the intervals of superintending the system. The man's mad to think that he's got a dog's chance, playing like that! He'd stayed with me in Monte those two days. I said that I was afraid his wife would never forgive me if I kept him from her any longer. He said that, having for the moment lost *la veine*, he was not in a position to return my hospitality; otherwise he and his wife would have been delighted to see me at Nice. Well, with the usual polite circumlocutions, he conveyed to me that there was a pleasant, quiet little hotel in Nice where he generally stayed—when he was in funds, he meant, I suppose—and that, although Madame Valdez was not staying there at present, she might be prevailed upon to join him there, and certainly we should make a pleasant party. 'I am *le bienvenu* at a very cozy little place in Nice, if we want an hour's distraction in the evening. My wife goes
to bed early. She's a woman with her own profession, and it takes [189]
her out early in the morning.' So that seemed all right, only—you can guess! I smoothed over the difficulty. At that little hotel, at dinner on the next Sunday, I, Valdez's welcome guest, had the privilege of being presented to Madame Valdez—or, as he called

her, Donna Lucinda."

"Yes, the system worked, Godfrey," I observed.

He did not rebuke my interruption, but he took no heed of it. His own story held him in its grip, whatever effect it might be having on his auditor.

"She came just as if she were an invited guest, and rather a shy one at that; a timid handshake for Valdez, a distant, shy bow for me. He greeted her as he might have a girl he was courting, but who would generally have nothing to do with him—who had condescended just this once, you know. Only she said to him—rather bashfully—'Do you like the frock I bought, Arsenio?' It was a pretty little frock—a brightish blue. Quite inexpensive material, I should say, but very nicely put together; and it suited her eyes and hair. What eyes and hair she has, by Jove, Julius!"

He had told me not to interrupt; I didn't.

"Why didn't you tell me what she was like?" he asked suddenly and rather fiercely.

"It was what you told me you meant to find out for yourself, Godfrey."

"Well, we sat there and had dinner. She seemed to enjoy herself very much; made a good dinner, you know, and seemed to accept [190] his compliments—Valdez's, I mean—with a good deal of pleasure; he was flowery. I didn't say much. I was damned dull, in fact. But she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye now and then. Look here, Julius, I'm an ass at telling about things!"

"I've known better *raconteurs*; but get on with it, if you want to."

"Want to? I must. As a matter of fact, I've come to Paris just to tell you about it. And now I can't."

"She isn't exactly easy to describe, to—to give the impression of. But remember—I know her."

He had been walking up and down; he jerked himself into a chair, and relit his cigar—it had gone out. "I don't much remember what we talked about at first—oh, except that she said, 'I don't like your gambling, and I should hate to be dependent on your winnings, Arsenio.'—My God, his winnings! He leant across the table towards her—he seemed to forget me altogether for the minute—and said, 'I never make you even a present out of them except when I back Number 21.' She blushed at that, like a girl just out of the schoolroom. Rather funny! Some secret between them, I suppose. The beggar was always backing twenty-one; though he very seldom brings it off. What's his superstition? Did he meet her when she was twenty-one, or marry her when she was, or was it the date when they got married, or what?"

"It's the date—the day of the month—when she and Waldo didn't [191] get married," I explained.

"By Jove! Then they're—they're lovers still!" The inference which Godfrey thus drew seemed to affect him considerably. He sat silent for a minute or two, apparently reflecting on it and frowning sullenly. Then he went on. "Then Valdez said, with one of his grins, 'Mr. Frost can give you news of some old friends, Lucinda.' She wasn't a bit embarrassed at that, but she didn't seem interested either. She was just decently polite about it—hoped they were all well, was sorry to hear of Waldo's wound, wished she had happened to meet you and asked if you were coming back—I'd mentioned that you'd gone to Paris on this job of yours. In fact, she didn't shirk the subject of the family, but she treated it as something that didn't matter to her; she looked as if she was thinking of something else all the time. She often gives you that kind of impression. Valdez had never referred again to her joining us at the hotel—staying there with us, I mean; and he said nothing about it at this meeting. I could only suppose that she had refused. And now, when she got up to go, he didn't propose that we, or even he himself, should escort her. I made some suggestion of the kind, but she just said, 'Oh, no, thank you, I'd rather go by myself.' And off she went—about half-past nine. We finished the evening playing baccarat—at least I did—at the little hell to which he had already taken me. He seemed very much [192] at home there; all the people of the place knew him, laughed and joked with him; but he didn't often play there; he doesn't much care about baccarat. He used to sit talking with the proprietor, a fat old Jew, in the corner, or chatting with the fellow who changed your money for you, with whom he seemed on particularly friendly terms. All that part of it was a bore, but she always went away early, and

one had to finish the evenings somewhere."

"Oh, then she came again, did she?" I asked.

"She came to dinner the next three nights; once again to dine with Arsenio; he'd got some funds from somewhere and actually insisted on paying for those two dinners—I was footing the general hotel bill, of course; twice as my guest. She was always much the same; cool, quiet, reserved, but quite pleasant and amused. Presently I got the idea that she was amused at me. I caught her looking at me sometimes with a smile and a sort of ruminative look in her eyes; once, when I smiled back, she gave a little laugh. The fact is, I suppose, she saw I admired her a good deal. Well, that brought us to the Thursday. I had to go over to the works that day, and I spent the night with our manager. I didn't get back till Friday evening, and then I found that Valdez, getting bored, I suppose, and having some money in his pocket, had gone off to Monte Carlo. Rather cool, but I expect he couldn't help it. He left word that he'd be back next day. I spent an infernally dull evening by myself at that [193] dreary little hole of a hotel. I almost had the car out again and went back to Villa San Carlo, It would have saved a lot of trouble if I had!

"I'm not going to tell you what I felt; I'm not good at it. I'll tell you what I did, and you can draw your own conclusions. I was quit of Valdez for a bit; I spent all the next day on my feet, prowling about the town, looking for her; because, after all, she must be somewhere in the place. And I knew that she had a job. So I reckoned the likeliest chance to happen on her in the streets was during the *déjeuner* hour. So I didn't lunch, but prowled round all that hour. My next best chance would be the going home hour; you see that?"

"The business mind applied to gallantry is wonderful," I replied. "Now a mere poet would have lain on the sofa and dreamt of Donna Lucinda!"

"But I had to put in the time in between—always with the off-chance, of course. I got pretty tired, and, when I found myself up at Cimiez about four o'clock, I felt like a cup of tea, so I turned into the first hotel I came to. One of those big affairs, with palm gardens and what not; the 'Imperial Palace' it called itself, I think. I pushed through one of those revolving doors and came into a lounge place—you know the sort of thing?

"I sat down at a table about halfway down the lounge and ordered tea. Then I lit a cigarette and looked about me. Round about the door there were a lot of showcases, fitted on to the wall, [194] with jewelry, silver plate, and so on, displayed in them. There was another large one, full of embroidered linen and lace things; it was open, and at it, sampling the goods and chattering away like one o'clock, were Mrs. Forrester and Eunice Unthank—no, not Nina too, thank Heaven! Because the neat girl who was selling, or trying to sell, the stuff, was Madame Valdez! I picked up a copy of the day before yesterday's *Temps* from the next table, held it before my face, and peered at them over it. She wasn't in her blue frock now; she wore plain black, with a bit of white round the neck; short skirt and black silk stockings. They brought my tea; I drank it with one hand and held the *Temps* up with the other; naturally I didn't want Mrs. Forrester and Eunice to see me!

"They were the deuce of a time—Lord, I could buy or sell half Europe in the time a woman takes over a pocket-handkerchief!—but I didn't mind that; I had my plan. At last they went; she did up their parcel and went with them to the door, with lots of 'Thank you' and 'Good-by' (they spoke English) on both sides. It was past five; I waited still, and meanwhile finished and paid for my tea. I saw her making entries in a ledger; then she went through the case, checking her stock, I suppose; then, just as a clock struck five-thirty, she shut the case with a little bang and turned the key; then she disappeared into a cupboard or something, and came back in her [195] hat and jacket. By that time I was by the door, with my hat and stick in my hand. We met just by her case—which, by the way, had on it in large gilt letters, *Maison de la Belle Étoile*, Nice.

"'Good-evening,' I said. 'May I have the pleasure of walking home with you, Madame Valdez?'

"She didn't seem surprised. 'I'm Mademoiselle Lucie here,' she said, smiling. 'Oh, yes, if you like. Take me down to the Promenade—by the sea. I'm half stifled.'

"We said hardly anything on the way down—at any rate, nothing of any importance; and it was dusk; I could see her face only dimly.

When we got to the Promenade, and the wind from the sea caught us in the face, she sighed, 'Ah!' and suddenly took my arm. 'Was it a fluke, or did you come to look for me? Did Arsenio tell you?'

"'No, he didn't. I've hunted the town all day for you. And I've found you at last. Arsenio's gone to Monte Carlo.'

"'I know he has. Why did you want to find me? You needn't worry about me. I'm all right. I've got a very good situation now. I find it's easier work to sell things than to make them, Mr. Frost. And the *patrons* are pleased with me. They say I have an ingratiating way that produces business! I wonder whether I was ingratiating with that woman and girl just now! They spent three hundred francs!'

"Do you know the sudden change that comes in her voice when [196] she means to be extra friendly? I can't begin to describe it—something like the jolliest kitten in the world purring! No, that's absurd——Oh, well! What she said was, 'I like you and I like your dinners. But aren't you rather silly to do it?' Yes, she was very friendly, but just a bit contemptuous too. 'Because you're a great young man, aren't you? And I'm a *midinette*! Besides, you know about me, I expect. And so you'll know that Arsenio and I are married. Ask your cousin, Mr. Frost.'

"All I said was, 'I'm glad you like me.' She laughed. 'And you like me? Why?'

"Then I made a most damned fool of myself, Julius. I don't really know how I came to do it, except that the thing's true, of course. I've laughed at the thing myself ever since I laughed at anything—in revues, and *Punch*, and everywhere. I said,—yes, by Jove, I did!—I said, 'You're so different from other women, Donna Lucinda!'

"What an ass! Of course you can't help laughing too, Julius! But, after all, I'm glad I did make such an ass of myself, because she just burst into an honest guffaw—and so did I, a minute later. We became a thousand times better friends just in that minute."

Godfrey paused in his narrative and gazed at me. I am afraid that a smile still lingered on my face. "You didn't do yourself justice; you [197] tell the story very well," I said.

"Of course I wasn't quite such an ass as I sounded," said he. "What I really meant, but couldn't exactly have said, was——"

"I know exactly what it was, Godfrey. But I think it was much cleverer of you to know you meant it than it is of me to know that you meant it. You meant that Donna Lucinda Valdez has a personality markedly different from that possessed by Lady Dundrannan?"

"I don't suppose that I did know that I meant it—at that moment."

"But you know that you mean it now?"

"That—and more," he said.

"Your idea of seeing whether Arsenio's system worked seems to have led you a little further than you contemplated," I observed. He had chaffed me that evening, after my dinner at Arsenio's—or Nina's—expense; he had aired his shrewdness. I seemed entitled to give him a dig.

"Are you surprised?" he asked, after a pause, suddenly, taking not the least heed of my gibe.

There were a hundred flippant answers that I might have given him. But I gave him none of them. His young, strong face wore a dour look—the look of a man up against something big, determined to tackle it, not yet seeing how. The animation which had filled him, as he warmed to his story, had for the moment worked itself out. He [198] looked dull, heavy, tired.

"No, I'm not surprised," I said. "But what's the use? You know her story."

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, rather peremptorily.

"She threw up everything in the world for Arsenio Valdez; she still blushes like a school-girl when Arsenio backs Number 21. They're lovers still, as you yourself said a little while ago. Well, then ——! Besides—there's Nina. Are you going to—desert?"

"Nina?" He repeated the name half-absently; perhaps the larger share of his attention was occupied by the other part of my remarks. "Yes, Nina, of course!" But, as he dwelt on the thought of Lady Dundrannan (suddenly, as it seemed, recalled to his mind), his look of depression disappeared. He smiled in amusement—with an element of wonder in it; and he spoke as if he were surprising me

with a wonderful discovery.

“I say, Julius, Lucinda positively laughs at Nina, you know!”

CHAPTER XVI

PURPLE—AND FINE LINEN

THAT Lucinda had once got the better of Nina had been the thing about her which most stirred Godfrey's curiosity; that Lucinda now laughed at Nina evidently aroused in him an almost incredulous wonder. Perhaps it was calculated to surprise any one; to a Frost it must have seemed portentous; for Frosts, father, daughter, and nephew, judged by what you did and, consequently, had, not by what you were. Judged by their standards, Lucinda's laughter was ridiculous, but in Godfrey's fascinated eyes also sublime: such a sublime audacity as only a supremely attractive woman dare and can carry. The needlewoman, the *midinette*, the showcase girl, laughing at Lady Dundrannan! But there it was. I think that it shook to its foundations something that was very deeply set in Godfrey Frost.

"Well, I suppose Lucinda knew that you were seeing her on the sly," I suggested.

He flushed a little. "I don't particularly like that way of putting it. I'm not responsible to Nina for my actions."

I shrugged my shoulders. He lit another cigarette, and suddenly [200]
resumed his story.

"Well, this is what happened. Arsenio didn't come back; I suppose he won a bit, or kept his head above water somehow. I stayed in Nice, seeing a lot of Lucinda, for about another week. I used to go up to that hotel for lunch or tea, and put in the time somehow till she knocked off work. Then we had our walk; once or twice she dined with me, but she was rather difficult about that. She always kept just the same as she was at the beginning, except that, as I say, she liked to hear about Nina, and seemed a lot amused at what I told her—Nina's sort of managing ways, and—and dignity, and so on. By the way, she asked about you too sometimes; what you'd been doing since she last heard from you, and so on. Apparently you used to write to her?"

"Just occasionally—when I was on my travels. I hope she spoke kindly of me?"

"Oh, yes, that was all right," he assured me carelessly. "Well, then came her weekly afternoon off; it was on a Friday she had it; she got off at half-past twelve. I had managed to persuade her to lunch with me, and I went up to the hotel to fetch her. I was a bit early, and I walked up and down just outside the hotel gardens, waiting for her. Nobody was further from my thoughts at that moment than Nina, but just at a quarter past twelve—I'd looked at my watch the moment before—I saw a big car come up the road. I [201]
recognized it directly. It was Nina's."

"Rather odd! How did she find out that——?"

"This is what must have happened, so far as I've been able to piece it together. Those two women—Mrs. Forrester, you know, and Eunice Unthank—went back to Villa San Carlo with their three hundred francs' worth of stuff, and told Nina about Mademoiselle Lucie; described her, I suppose, as something out of the common; they naturally would, finding a girl of her appearance, obviously English, and a lady, doing that job. Nina's as sharp as a needle, and it's quite possible that the description by itself was enough to put her on the scent; though, for my own part, I've always had my doubts whether she didn't know more about the Valdez's than she chose to admit; something in her manner when I brought the conversation round to them—and I did sometimes—always gave me that impression. Anyhow, there she was, and Eunice Unthank with her."

"That must have been a week—or nearly—since she'd heard about Mademoiselle Lucie from the two women. Had you heard anything from her in the interval?"

"Yes, I'd had two letters from her, addressed to our works and forwarded on—I had to leave an address at the works—saying they missed me at the Villa and asking when I expected to be back; but I hadn't answered them. I didn't exactly know what to say, you see, so [202]
I said nothing. As a matter of fact, I felt bored at the idea of going back; but I couldn't have said that, could I?"

"Certainly not. And so—at last—she had to come?"

“What do you mean by ‘at last’? And why had she to come?”

There was in my mind a vivid imagining of what that week had been to Lady Dundrannan; a week of irresolution and indecision, of pride struggling against her old jealousy, her old memory of defeat and shame. To seem to take any interest in the woman was beneath her; yet her interest in the woman was intense. And if an encounter could seem quite accidental——? Why shouldn’t it? Just the two women’s report—no hasty appearance after it—quite a natural thing to motor over to Cimiez for lunch! And, given that the encounter was quite accidental, it admitted no interest; it would satisfy curiosity; she had the power of turning it into a triumph. And Godfrey—her *protégé*, her property—had been missing a week and had left two letters unanswered. My own talk with her—just before I came away—returned to my mind.

“I suppose that Lady Eunice—or Mrs. Forrester—kept on worrying her. Was that it?” My attempt to explain away the form of my question was not very convincing. Godfrey disposed of it unceremoniously.

“If you were really such a damned fool as you’re trying to appear, [203]
I shouldn’t be here talking to you,” he remarked. “There was more in it than that of course.”

“Well, tell me what happened. We can discuss it afterwards,” I suggested.

“Just what happened? All right—and soon told. Nina saw me walking up and down, smoking. She smiled what they call brightly; so did Lady Eunice. One or other of them pulled the string, I suppose; the car stopped; the chauffeur lay back in his seat in the resigned sort of way those chaps have when they’re stopped for some silly reason or other—most reasons do seem to appear silly to them, don’t they? Really superior chauffeurs, I mean, such as Nina’s bound to have. I took off my hat and went up to the car. ‘Why, it’s Mr. Frost!’ said Eunice, just as surprised as you’d have expected her to be.”

“I certainly acquit Lady Eunice of malice aforethought,” said I.

“‘And who’d have thought of meeting him here?’ said Nina. You know that smile of hers?”

“Have I found thee, O my enemy?”

“Exactly. I must say that you do know a thing or two about Nina. ‘I thought you were in Nice all the time!’ she went on—oh, quite pleasantly. ‘We’ll take him in to lunch and make him give an account of himself, won’t we, Eunice? He’s deserted us disgracefully!’ You never saw anybody more amiable. And Lady Eunice was awfully cordial too—‘Oh, yes, you must lunch with us, Mr. Frost, and tell us [204]
what you’ve been doing. We’ve been very dull, haven’t we, Lady Dundrannan?’ The thing seemed going so well”—here Godfrey gave one of the reflective smiles which witnessed to the humor that lay in him, though it was deeply hidden under other and more serviceable qualities—“that the chauffeur, after a yawn, got down from his seat and opened the door of the car for me to get in. And I was just going to get in—hypnotized or something, I suppose—when down the drive from the hotel came Donna Lucinda. She came along with that free swinging walk of hers, as independent and unconcerned as you please, in her neat, plain, black frock, and carrying one of those big, round, shiny black boxes that you see the *midinettes* with. Only her stockings looked a shade smarter than most of them run to. Of course she didn’t know the car by sight as I did—some people think that yellow too showy, but I like it myself, provided you’ve got a good car to show it off on—and I suppose I was hidden, or half hidden by it. At any rate, she came sailing down the hotel drive all serene. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen her looking more splendid in all my life!”

“You’d known her for just about a week.”

“Well, then, damn it, in all the week that I had known her. I do wish you wouldn’t interrupt me, Julius!”

“I don’t interrupt you half as much as you interrupt yourself. I [205]
want to know what happened. What’s the good of gassing about the chauffeur and the color of the car?”

“Well, to me that’s all part of the picture—I suppose I can’t make it for you. The big yellow car—a three thousand wouldn’t nearly cover it nowadays, you know—and Jefferson, a tall, slim chap, dark; been a company sergeant-major—oh, damned genteel!—Lady Eunice quite out of the situation—as she would be—but—what do you call

it?—a little patrician all over—and Nina—at her most stately! Over against all that—and it was rather overpowering; I can tell you I felt it—the *midinette* with her box walking down the drive. That girl—she didn't look more than a girl, I swear, though I suppose she's five-and-twenty——"

"And who were you going to lunch with?" I interrupted again. I could not help it. I think that I laughed, shortly and rather harshly. A ridiculous little *impasse* it seemed for him. He had told his story clumsily, but somehow he had brought the scene before my eyes. Memory helped me, I imagine; it put more into the figure swinging down the drive, more into her stately ladyship seated in that challenging, possibly too showy, yellow car. "Which of them did you lunch with?" I laughed on the question, but I was rather excited.

He had stopped smoking; he sat in a rather odd attitude—upright, with his legs so close together that they left only just room for him to thrust his hands, held together as if he were saying his prayers, between them just above the knees. [206]

"After all—was it a matter of so much importance? A lunch!" I mocked.

He didn't pay attention to that, and he did not change his position. "Then Nina saw her. Things are funny. She'd come on purpose to see her, of course. Still, when she did, her mouth suddenly went stiff—you know what I mean? She didn't move, though; it was just her mouth. And I stood there like a fool—actually with one foot on the ground and one on the step of the car, I believe; and Jefferson stifling another yawn beside me!

"Donna Lucinda came through the gate of the drive and up to where the car was standing; it was sideways on to the gate; Lady Eunice sat on the side near the gate, I was on the other side, with Nina between us. Lucinda seemed to see Eunice first, and to recognize her; she made a very slight formal little bow—as she would to a customer. The next second her eyes fell on Nina and on me. She stopped short, just by the car. Her cheeks flushed a little, and she gave a little low exclamation—'Oh!' or 'Ah!'—I hardly heard it. Then, 'It's Nina!' That was hardly louder. I just heard it. Eunice, of course, must have and Nina; I doubt whether Jefferson could. Then she gave a queer little laugh—what you'd call a chuckle coming from an ordinary person—as if she were laughing to herself, inwardly amused, but not expecting anybody else to share her amusement. She didn't look a bit put out or awkward. But the next moment she smiled directly at me—across the other two—and shook her head—sympathizing with me in my predicament, I think. [207]

"Nina made her a stately bow. She was very dignified, but a little flushed too. She looked somehow disturbed and puzzled. It seemed as if she really were shocked and upset to see Lucinda like that. The next moment she leant right across Eunice, throwing out her hand towards the bandbox that Lucinda was carrying.

"'Surely there's no need for you to do that?' she said, speaking very low. 'And—I hope you're better?'

"Lucinda spoke up quite loud. 'I like it, thank you. There's every need for me to earn my living; and I've never been better in my life, thank you.'

"Nina turned her head round to the chauffeur. 'I'll call you, Jefferson.' He touched his hat and strolled off along the road, taking out a cigarette case. Nina turned back to Lucinda, leaning again across Lady Eunice, who was sitting back in her seat, looking rather frightened; I don't know whether she knew who Lucinda was; I don't think so; but it must have been pretty evident to her that there was thunder in the air.

"'How long have you been doing this? Does your husband know you're doing it?'

"Her questions sounded sharp and peremptory; Lucinda might well have resented them.

"'Of course he knows; he's known it for three months. It's just that I like to be independent.' She gave a little bow with that, as if she meant to end the conversation, but before she could walk on—if that was what she meant to do—Nina flung herself back on the cushions, exclaiming in a low voice, but passionately, 'How dare he tell me lies like that!' [208]

"'What do you mean——?' Lucinda began. But Nina would not wait for her. 'Call Jefferson,' she told me. 'Are you coming with us, Godfrey?'

“I called Jefferson, and then answered her question. ‘Thanks awfully, but I’m afraid I can’t. I’m engaged to lunch.’ And I shut the door of the car which Jefferson had left still open.

“She looked from me to Lucinda, and back again to me. It *was* a look that I got, I can tell you! But if you’re going to stand up to Nina, you must do it thoroughly. I looked her full in the eye; of course she saw that I meant I was going to lunch with Lucinda. ‘Drive on—to the hotel, Jefferson,’ she said in that dry voice of hers that means she’s furiously angry. Off the car went, in at the gates—and I was left standing on the road opposite Donna Lucinda.”

Godfrey got up from his seat and walked across to the fireplace; he appeared to have exhausted his matches, for he searched for a box there, and found one at last, hidden under a newspaper on the mantelpiece.

“So, in the end, you lunched with Lucinda, after all?” I asked. [209]

“No,” he answered, “I didn’t lunch with Lucinda, as it happened. When I took a step up to her, she seemed absolutely lost in her own thoughts, hardly aware of my being there, at least realizing that I was there with a sort of effort; her eyes didn’t look as if they saw me at all. ‘You must let me off to-day, Mr. Frost,’ she said in a hurried murmur. ‘I—I’ve got something to do—something I must think about.’ Her cheeks were still rather red; otherwise she was calm enough, but obviously entirely preoccupied. It would have been silly to press her; I mean, it would have been an intrusion. ‘All right, of course,’ I said. ‘But when are we to meet again, Donna Lucinda?’

“‘I don’t know. In a few days, I hope. Not till I send you word to the hotel.’

“‘Try to make it Sunday.’ I smiled as I added, ‘Then I shall see you in the blue frock; that’s the one I like best.’

“‘The blue frock!’ she repeated after me. Then she suddenly raised her free arm—she’d been holding that infernal bandbox all the time, you know—clenched her fist and gave it a little shake in the air. ‘If he’s really done that, I’ll have no more to do with him in this world again!’ she said. And off she went down the road, without another word to me or a glance back. I believe she’d forgotten my very existence.”

“Did she turn up on Sunday—in the blue frock?” [210]

“I’ve never set eyes on her since—nor on Arsenio either. They both appear to have vanished into space—together or separately, Heaven only knows! I hunted for Valdez in all the likely places. I tried for her at the hotel at Cimiez, at her shop, at her lodgings. I’ve drawn blank everywhere. I got thoroughly sick and out of heart. So I thought I’d run up here and see what you thought about it.”

“I don’t know why I should make any mystery about it,” said I. “Anything that puzzles you will be quite plain in the light of that letter.”

I took the letter from Arsenio Valdez, which Nina had given me, out of my pocket, and flung it down on the table. “Read it—and you’ll understand why she repeated after you ‘The blue frock!’ That was what gave her the clew to Nina’s meaning!”

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[211]

CHAPTER XVII

REBELLION

THERE was the situation; for Godfrey was quick enough to see what had happened as soon as he had read Arsenio's letter; he finished it, which was more than I had done, and so found more lies than I had. We discussed the situation far into the night, Godfrey still doing most of the talking. He had come to Paris to see me about it, to ask my advice or to put some question to me; but he had not really got the problem clear in his mind. On subsidiary points—or, perhaps, one should rather say, on what seemed such to him—his view was characteristic, and to me amusing. He thought that most of Nina's anger was due to the fact that she had been "done" by Arsenio, that he had got her money for Lucinda and for himself on false pretenses; whereas Nina was really furious with Lucinda herself for not having consciously accepted her charity, and made comparatively little of friend Arsenio's roguery. He was much more full of admiration of Lucinda for not minding being discovered carrying a bandbox—and for laughing at her encounter with Lady Dundrannan while she was doing it—than of [212] appreciation of her indignation over the blue frock; he thought she made a great deal too much of that. "Since she didn't know, what does it come to?" he asked. And he wasted no reprobation on Arsenio. He had known Arsenio for a rogue before—a rogue after his money, and willing to use his wife as a bait to catch it; that he now knew that Arsenio was more completely a rogue all round—towards Nina as well as towards him—was merely a bit of confirmatory evidence; he saw nothing in the fact that Arsenio had, after all, given Lucinda the blue frock, though he would have been quite safe—as safe, anyhow—if he had given her nothing. His whole analysis, so far as it appeared in disjointed observations, of the other parties to the affair, ran on lines of obvious shrewdness, and was baffled only where they appeared—as in Lucinda's case—to diverge from the lines thus indicated. Lucinda was a puzzle. Why had she hidden herself from him? She could "have it out" with Valdez, if she wanted to, without doing that!

But he was not immensely perturbed at her temporary disappearance; he could find her, if he wanted to. "It's only a matter of trouble and money, like anything else." And if she were furious with Valdez, no harm in that! Rather the reverse! Thus he gradually approached his own position, and the questions which he was putting to himself, and had found so difficult that he had been [213] impelled to come and talk them over. These really might be reduced to one, and a very old one, though also often a very big one; it may be variously conceived and described as that between prudence and passion, that between morality and love, that between will and emotion, between the head and the heart. For purposes of the present case it could be personified as being between Nina and Lucinda. As a gentleman, if as nothing more, he had been obliged to own up to his engagement to lunch with Lucinda and to stand by it. But that act settled nothing ultimately. The welcome of a returning Prodigal would await him at Villa San Carlo, though the feast might perhaps be rather too highly peppered with a lofty forgiveness; he was conscious of that feature in the case, but minded it less than I should have; Nina's pupil was accustomed to her rebukes, and rather hardened against her chastisement. But if arms were open to him elsewhere—soft and seducing arms—what then? Was he to desert Nina?

Her and what she stood for? And really, in this situation, she stood for everything that had, up to now, governed his life. She stood (she would not have felt at all inadequate to the demand on her qualities) for prosperity, progress, propriety, and—as a climax—for piety itself. Godfrey had been religiously brought up (the figure of the white-haired Wesleyan Minister at Briarmount rose before my eyes) and was not ashamed to own that the principles thus [214] inculcated had influenced his doings and were still a living force in him. I respected him for the avowal; it is not one that men are very ready to make where a woman is in question; it had been implicit in his reason for knowing nothing of women, given to me a long time ago—that he had not been able to afford to marry.

Piety was the highest impersonation which Nina was called upon

to undertake. Was it the most powerful, the most compelling? There were so many others, whose images somehow blended into one great and imposing Figure—Regularity, with her cornucopia of worldly advantages, not necessarily lost (Godfrey was quite awake to that) by a secret dallying with her opposite, but thereby rendered insincere—that counted with him—uneasy, and perpetually precarious. He was a long-headed young man; he foresaw every chance against his passion—even the chance that, having first burnt up all he had or hoped for, it would itself become extinct. Then it was not true passion? I don't know. It was strong enough. Lucinda impersonated too; impersonated things that are very powerful.

He spoke of her seldom and evasively. In the debate which he carried on with himself—only occasionally asking for an opinion from me—he generally indicated her under the description of "the other thing"—other (it was to be understood) from all that Nina represented. Taken like that, the description, if colorless, was at least comprehensive. And it did get Lucinda—bluntly, yet not [215] altogether wrongly. He saw her as an ideal—the exact opposite of the ideal to which he had hitherto aspired, the ideal of regularity, wealth, eminence, reputation, power, thirty per cent., and so on (including, let us not forget, piety). So seen, she astonished him in herself, and astonished him more by the lure that she had for him. Only he distrusted the lure profoundly. In the end he could not understand it in himself. I do not blame him; I myself was considerably puzzled at finding it in him. To say that a man is in love is a summary, not an explanation. Jonathan Frost—old Lord Dundrannan—had been a romantic in his way; Nina too in hers, when she had sobbed in passion on the cliffs—or even now, when she cherished disturbing emotions about things and people whom she might, without loss of comfort or profit, have serenely disregarded. There was a thread of the romantic meandering through the more challenging patterns of the family fabric.

Half a dozen times I was on the point of flying into a rage with him—when he talked easily of "buying Valdez," when he assumed Lucinda's assent to that not very pretty transaction, when he hinted at the luxury which would reward that assent, and so on. But the genuineness of his conflict, of his scruples on the one hand, of his passion on the other, made anger seem cruel, while the bluntness of his perception seemed to make it ridiculous. Perhaps on this latter [216] point I exaggerated a little—asking from him an insight into the situation to which I was helped by a more intimate knowledge of the past and of the persons; but at all events he was, as I conceived, radically wrong in his estimate of the possibilities. At last I was impelled to tell him so.

It was very late; in disregard of his "Don't go yet, I haven't finished," I had actually put on my coat, and taken my hat and stick in my hand. I stood like that, opposite to where he sat, and expounded my views to him. I imagine that to a cool spectator I should have looked rather absurd, for by now I too was somehow wrought up and excited; he had got me back into my pre-Paris state of mind, the one in which I had been when I intimated to Nina that I must hunt the Riviera for Lucinda and find out the truth about her at all costs. The Conference on Tonnage was routed, driven pell-mell out of my thoughts.

"You can't buy Valdez," I told him, "not in the sense that you mean. He'll sell himself, body and soul, for money—to you, or me, or Nina, or all of us, or anybody else. But he won't sell Lucinda. He sells himself for money, but it's because of her that he must have the money—to dazzle her, to cut a figure in her eyes, to get her back to him. He used her to tempt you with, to make you shell out—just as he did, in another way, with Nina. But he knew he was safe; he knew he'd never have to deliver what he was pretending to sell. [217] She's not only the one woman to him, she's the one idea in his head, the one stake he always plays for. He'd sell his soul for her, but he wouldn't sell her in return for all you have. You sit here, balancing her against this and that—now against God, now against Mammon! He doesn't set either of them for a moment in the scales against her."

If what I said sharpened his perception, it blunted his scruples. The idea of Valdez's passion was a spur to his own.

"Then it's man against man," he said in a sullen, dogged voice. "If I find I can't buy her, I'll take her."

"You can try. If she lets you, she's a changed woman. That's all I

can say. I need hardly add that I shall not offer you my assistance. Why, hang it, man, if she's to be got, why shouldn't I have a shot at her myself?"

He gave a short gruff laugh. "I don't quite associate the idea with you, but of course you'd be within your rights, as far as I'm concerned."

I laughed too. "There's fair warning to you, then! And no bad blood, I hope? Also, perhaps, enough debate on what is, after all, rather a delicate subject—a lady's honor—as some scrupulous people might remind us. By way of apology to the proprieties, I'll just add that in my private opinion we should neither of us have the least chance of success. She may not be Valdez's any more—as to [218] that I express no opinion, though I have one—but I don't believe she'll be any one else's."

"What makes you say that?" he grumbled out surlily.

"She herself makes me say it; she herself and what I know about her. And, considering your condition, it seems common kindness to tell you my view, for what it's worth. Now, my friend, thanks for your dinner, and—good-night!"

"Are you staying here—in Paris—much longer?"

"I shall be for a week—possibly a fortnight—I expect."

"Then good-by as well as good-night; I shall go back to-morrow."

"To Villa San Carlo?"

"No, I don't know where I shall go. It depends."

"To where you can test the value of my view, perhaps?" He had now risen, and I walked across to him, holding out my hand. He took it, with another gruff laugh.

"This sort of thing plays hell with a man; but there's no need for us to quarrel, Julius?"

"Not at present, at all events. And it looks as if you had a big enough quarrel on your hands already."

"Nina? Yes." It was on that name, and not on the other, that at last we parted. And I suppose that he did "go back" the next day; for I saw him no more during the rest of my stay in Paris.

But a week later—our "labors" being "protracted" to that extent [219] and longer—I had an encounter that gave me indirect news of him, as well as direct news of other members of the Rillington-cum-Dundrannan family. To my surprise, I met my cousin Waldo in the Rue de la Paix. Nina and he—and Eunice—were on their way home. In the first place, Sir Paget had written that Aunt Bertha was seedy and moping, and wondering when they would be back. In the second, Nina had got restless and tired of Mentone, while he himself was so much better that there was no longer any reason to stay there on his account.

"In fact, we got a bit bored with ourselves," Waldo confessed as he took my arm and we walked along together, "after we lost you two fellows. Dull for the ladies. Oh, I know you couldn't help yourself, old fellow; this job here was too big to miss. But we lost Godfrey too." His voice fell to a confidential pitch, and he smiled slyly as he pressed my arm. "Well, you know, dear Nina is given to making her plans, bless her! And she's none too pleased when they don't come off, is she? I rather fancy that she had a little plan on at the Villa—Eunice Unthank, you know—and a nice girl she is—and that Godfrey didn't feel like coming up to the scratch. So he tactfully had business at the works that kept him away from the Villa. Do you see what I mean?"

"Well, I suppose he was better away if he didn't mean to play up. [220] If he'd stayed, it might have put ideas in the girl's head that——"

"Exactly, old chap. Though we were awfully sorry he went, still that was the view Nina took about it. I think she was right."

Facts had supplied a sufficient explanation of my disappearance from Villa San Carlo; here plainly was the official version of Godfrey's. In order to cover a great defeat, Lady Dundrannan, with her usual admirable tactics, acknowledged a minor one. It was a quite sufficient explanation to offer to unsuspecting Waldo; and it was certainly true, so far as it went; the Eunice-Godfrey project had miscarried.

"I liked the girl and I'm sorry," said Waldo. "But there's lots of time, and of course, the world being what it is, he can always make a good marriage." He laughed gently. "But I suppose women always like to manage a man's future for him, if they can, don't they?"

His ignorance of the great defeat was evidently entire; his wife had looked after that. But it was interesting to observe that—as a concomitant, perhaps, of his returning physical vigor—his mind gave hints of a new independence. He had not ceased to love and admire his wife—there was no reason why he ever should—but his smile at her foible was something new—since his marriage, I mean. The limit thus indicated to his Dundrannanization was welcome to me, a Rillington. What the smile pointed to was, the next moment, [221] confirmed by the sigh with which he added, pursuing what was to him apparently the same train of thought, “Nina’s against our living at Cragsfoot when I succeed.”

“Well, if you will marry thumping heiresses, with half a dozen palaces of their own——”

“Yes, I know, old man. Still—well, I can’t expect her to share my feeling about it, can I?” He smiled again, this time rather ruefully. “In fact, she’s pressing me to settle the matter now.”

“What do you mean? Sir Paget’s still alive! Is she asking for a promise, or what?”

“She wants me to sell my remainder—subject to my father’s life-interest. Nina likes things definitely settled, you see. She doesn’t like Cragsfoot.” To my considerable surprise, he accompanied these last words with a very definite wink. A smile, a sigh, a wink—yes, Waldo was recovering some independence of thought, if not of action. But in this affair it was his action that mattered, not his thoughts. Still, the fact remained that his wink was an unmistakable reference to the past—to Lucinda.

“Sir Paget wouldn’t like it, would he?” I suggested.

“No, I’m afraid not—not the idea of it, at first. But a man is told to cleave to his wife. After all, if I have a son to inherit it, he wouldn’t be Rillington of Cragsfoot, he’d be Dundrannan.”

“Of course he would. I’d forgotten. But does it make much [222] difference?”

“And amongst all the rest of it, Cragsfoot wouldn’t be much more than an appendage. I love Nina, Julius, but I wish sometimes that she wasn’t quite so damned rich! Don’t think for an instant that she ever rams it down my throat. She never would.”

“My dear chap, I know her. I’m sure she’d be incapable of——”

“But there the fact is. And it creates—well, a certain situation. I say, I’m not keeping you? My ladies are shopping, and I’ve an hour off, but if you——”

“I’ve time to hear anything you want to say. And you’re not tired?”

“Strong as a horse now. I enjoy walking. Look here, old chap. Of course, there are lots of these ‘new rich,’ as the papers call them, who’d pay a long price for Cragsfoot, but——”

“Thinking of anybody in particular?” I put in.

“Never mind!” He laughed—almost one of his old hearty laughs. “Well, yes. Have you ever had any reason——? I mean, it’s funny you should ask that.”

“Something a certain friend of ours once let fall set me thinking.”

“Well, if that idea took shape, if Nina wanted it——”

Perhaps in the end she wouldn’t! I was thinking that possibly the [223] course of events might cause Lady Dundrannan not to wish to see her cousin—and his establishment—at Cragsfoot.

“If she did—and he did,” Waldo went on, “well, I should be in a tight corner. Because, of course, he could outbid practically everybody, if he chose—and what reason for objecting could I give?”

“You seem to have something in your mind. You’re looking—for you—quite crafty! Out with it!”

“Well, supposing I’d promised that, if I sold, I’d give you first offer?”

Waldo had delivered himself of his idea—and it seemed nothing less than a proposal to put a spoke in the wheel of his wife’s plans as he conceived them! Decidedly rebellion was abroad—open and covert! It worked mightily in Godfrey; it was working even in Waldo.

“I don’t like your selling,” I said. “You’re the chief—I’m a cadet. But if you’re forced—I beg your pardon, Waldo! If you decide”—he pressed my arm again, smiling at my correction, but saying nothing —“to go, there’s nothing I should like so much as to settle down there myself. But I can’t outbid——”

“A man doesn’t ask his own kinsman more than a fair price, when

the deal's part of a family arrangement," said Waldo. "May I speak to my father, and write you a proposal about it? And we'll let the matter stand where it does till we know what he thinks and till you've had an opportunity of considering." [224]

"All right," said I, and we walked on a little way in silence. Then I felt again the slight pressure on my arm. "Well, here's where we're staying. I promised to meet them at tea. Will you come in?"

I shook my head, murmuring something about business. He did not press the point. "We're off again early to-morrow, and dining with some friends of Eunice's to-night. See you again soon at Cragsfoot—we're going to Briarmount. Good-by!"

But that was not quite his last word. He gave my arm a final squeeze; and he smiled again and again a little ruefully. "I rather think that, in his heart, the old pater would prefer what I've suggested even to our—to any other arrangement, Julius."

It was quite as much as it was diplomatic to say about his father's feelings on that point. Like the one which had been discussed by Godfrey and myself, it might be considered delicate.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE WINNING TICKET

THEN came the astonishing turn of fortune's wheel—that is almost fact, scarcely metaphor—which seemed to transform the whole situation. It came to my knowledge on the very day on which those protracted labors of ours reached a conclusion at last.

We had had a long and tedious final session—for this time there was not only business to wind up, but compliments to be exchanged too—and I came out of it at half-past six in the evening so exhausted that I turned into the nearest *café* at which I was known, and procured a whisky-and-soda. With it the waiter brought me a copy of *Le Soir*, and, as I sipped my "refresher" and smoked a cigar, I glanced through it, hoping (to be candid) to find some complimentary notice of the achievements of my Conference. I did not find that—perhaps it was too soon to expect it—but I did find something which interested me a great deal more. Among the miscellaneous items of "intelligence" I read the following:

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> "The first prize in yesterday's draw of the Reparation Lottery Loan has been won by M. Arsenio Valdez of Nice. The amount of the prize is three million francs. The number of the winning ticket was two hundred and twelve thousand, one hundred and twenty-one. We understand that the fortunate winner purchased it for a trifling sum from a chance acquaintance at Monte Carlo."

I re-read the winning number; indeed, I took my pencil out of my pocket and wrote it down—in figures—on the margin of the newspaper. I believe that I said softly, "Well, I'm damned!" The astonishing creature had brought it off at last, and brought it off to some tune. Three million francs! Pretty good—for anybody except the Frosts of this world, of course!

Aye, Arsenio would buy that ticket from a chance acquaintance (probably one of the same kidney as himself) if he had the coin, or could beg, borrow, or steal it! Number 212, 121! There it was three times over—21—21—21. He would have seemed to himself absolutely mad if he had let that ticket escape him, when chance threw it in his way. It was, indeed, as though Fortune said, "I have teased you long enough, O faithful votary, but I give myself to you at last!" And she had—she actually had. Arsenio's long quest was accomplished.

What would he do with it, I pondered, as I puffed and sipped. I saw him resplendent again as he had been on that never forgotten Twenty-first, and smiling in monkeyish triumph over all of us who had mocked him for a fool. I even saw him paying back Nina and Godfrey Frost, though possibly this was a detail which might be omitted, as being a distasteful reminder of his days of poverty. I saw him dazzling Lucinda with something picturesquely extravagant, a pearl necklace or a carpet of banknotes—what you will in that line. I heard him saying to her, "Number twenty-one! Always twenty-one. *Your* number, Lucinda!" And I saw her flushing like a girl just out of the schoolroom, as Godfrey had seen her flush at Nice.

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Ah, Godfrey Frost! This event was—to put the thing vulgarly—one in the eye for him, wasn't it? He had lost his pull; his lever failed him. He could no longer pose, either to himself or to anybody else, as the chivalrous reliever of distress, the indignant friend to starving beauty. And Nina's gracious, though sadly unappreciated, bounty to a fallen rival—that went by the board too.

These things were to the good; but at the back of my mind there lurked a discontent, even a revolt. Godfrey had proposed to buy Valdez; to buy Lucinda from Valdez, he had meant. Now Arsenio himself would buy her with his winning ticket, coating the transaction with such veneer of romance as might still lie in magic Twenty-one, thrice repeated. One could trust him to make the most of that, skillfully to eke it out to cover the surface as completely as possible. Would it be enough? His hope lay in what that flush represented, the memories it meant, that feeling in her which she herself, long ago, had declared to be hers because she was a primitive woman.

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I did not, I fear, pay much attention to the speeches—though I made one of them—at the farewell dinner of our Conference that night; and next day, my first free day, was still filled with the

thought of Arsenio and his three million francs; my mind, vacant now of pressing preoccupations, fell a prey to recollections, fancies, images. A restlessness took possession of me; I could not stay in Paris. I was entitled to a holiday; where should I pass it? I did not want to go to Cragsfoot; I had had enough of the Riviera. (There was possibly a common element, ungallant towards a certain lady and therefore not explicitly confessed to myself, in my reluctance to turn my steps in either of those directions.) Where should I go? Something within me answered—Venice!

Why not? Always a pleasant place for a holiday in times of peace; and one read that "peace conditions" were returning; the pictures, and so on, were returning too, or being dug up, or taken out of their sandbags. And the place was reported to be quite gay. Decidedly my holiday should be passed at Venice.

Quite so! And a sporting gamble on my knowledge of Arsenio, of his picturesque instinct, his eye for a situation! As a minor [229] attraction, there were the needy aristocrats, his father's old set, whom he had been wont to "touch" in days of adversity; it would be fine to flaunt his money in their eyes; they would not sniff, Frost-like, at three million francs. Here I felt even confident that he would speak gracefully of repayment, though with care not to wound Castilian pride by pressing the suggestion unduly. But the great thing would be the association, the memory, the two floors at the top of the *palazzo*. Surely she would go there with him if she would go anywhere? Surely there, if anywhere, she would come back to him? That, beyond all others, was the place to offer the pearl necklace, to spread the carpet of bank notes. If the two were to be found anywhere in the world together, it would be at Venice, at the *palazzo*.

So to Venice I went—on an errand never defined to myself, urged by an impulse, a curiosity, a longing, to which many things in the past united to give force, which the present position sharpened. "I must know; I must see for myself." That feeling, which had made me unable to rest at Villa San Carlo, now drove me to Venice. Putting money in my pocket and giving my Paris bankers the name of my hotel, I set out, on a road the end of which I could not see, but which I was determined to tread, if I could, and to explore.

In spite of my "facilities"—I had them again, and certainly this time Lady Dundrannan, if she knew my errand, would not have [230] offered to secure them—my journey was slow, and interrupted at one point by a railway strike. When I arrived at my hotel on the Grand Canal—Arsenio's *palazzo* was just round the corner by water, to be reached by land through a short but tortuous network of alleys with a little high stone bridge to finish up the approach to its back door—a telegram had been waiting forty-eight hours for me, forwarded from Cragsfoot by way of Paris. In it Waldo told me of Aunt Bertha's death; influenza had swooped down on the weakened old body, and after three days' illness made an end. It was hopeless to think of getting back in time for the funeral; I could have done it from Paris; I could not from Venice. I despatched the proper reply, and went out to the Piazza. My mind was for the moment switched off from what I had come about; but I thought more about Sir Paget than about poor old Aunt Bertha herself. He would be very lonely. Would Briarmount allay his loneliness?

It was about eleven o'clock on a bright sunny morning. They were clearing away the protective structures that had been erected round the buildings—St. Mark's, the Ducal Palace, the new Campanile. I sat in a chair outside Florian's and watched. There on that fine morning the war seemed somehow just a bad dream—or, rather, a play that had been played and was finished; a tragedy on which the curtain had fallen. See, they were clearing away the [231] properties, and turning to real ordinary life again. So, for a space, it seemed to a man seduced by beauty into forgetfulness.

They came and went, men, women and children, all on their business and their recreations; there were soldiers too in abundance, some draggled, dirty, almost in rags, some tidy, trim and new, but all with a subtle air of something finished, a job done, comparative liberty at least secured; even the prisoners—several gangs of them were marched by—had that same air of release about them. Hawkers plied their wares—women mostly, a few old men and young boys; baskets were thrust under my nose; I motioned them away impatiently. I had traveled all night, and uncomfortably, with little sleep. Here was peace; I wanted peace; I was drowsy.

Thus, half as though in a dream, half as if it were an answer to what my mood demanded,—beauty back into the world, that was it—she came across the Piazza towards the place where I sat. Others sat there too—a row of them on my left hand; I had taken a chair rather apart, at the end of the row. She wore the little black frock—the one she had worn at Ste. Maxime, the one Godfrey had seen her in at Cimiez, or the fellow of it. On her left arm hung an open basket; it was full of fine needlework. I saw her take out the pieces, unfold them, wave them in the air. She found customers; distant echoes of chaff and chaffering reached my ears. From chair to chair [232]
she passed, coming nearer to me always.

I had upon me at this moment no surprise at seeing her, no wonder why she, wife of the now opulent Don Arsenio Valdez, was hawking fine needlework on the Piazza. The speculation as to the state of affairs, with which my mind had been so insatiably busy, did not now occupy it. I was just boyishly wrapped up in the anticipation of the joke that was going to happen—that must happen unless—horrible thought!—she sold out all her stock before she got to me. But no! She smiled and joked, but she stood out for her price. The basket would hold out—surely it would!—As she came near, I turned my head away—absorbed in the contemplation of St. Mark's—just of St. Mark's!

I felt her by me before she spoke. Then I heard, "Julius!" and a little gurgle of laughter. I turned my head with an answering laugh; her eyes were looking down at my face with their old misty wonder.

"You here! I can't sit down by you here. I'll walk across the Piazzetta, along to the quay. Follow me in a minute. Don't lose sight of me!"

"I don't propose to do that," I whispered back, as she swung away from me. I paid my account, and followed her some fifty yards behind. I did not overtake her till we were at the Danieli Hotel. "Where shall we go to talk?" I asked.

"Once or twice I've done good business on the Lido. There's a [233]
boat just going to start. Shall we go on board, Julius?"

I agreed eagerly and followed her on to the little boat. She set me down in the bows, went off with her basket, and presently came back without it. "I've left it with the captain," she explained; "he knows me already, and will take care of it for me. No more work to-day, since you've come! And you must give me lunch, as you used to at Ste. Maxime. Somewhere very humble, because I'm in my working clothes." She indicated the black frock, and the black shawl which she wore over her fair hair, after the fashion of the Venetian girls; I was myself in an uncommonly shabby suit of pre-war tweeds; we matched well enough so far as gentility was concerned. I studied her face. It had grown older, rather sharper in outline, though not lined or worn. And it still preserved its serenity; she still seemed to look out on this troublesome world, with all its experiences and vicissitudes, from somewhere else, from an inner sanctum in which she dwelt and from which no one could wholly draw her forth.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her, as the little steamboat sped on its short passage across to the Lido.

"Oh, about a fortnight or three weeks. I like it, and I got work at once. I'd rather sew than sell, but they sew so well here! And they tell me I sell so well. So selling it mainly is!"

"Then you came before the—the result of the lottery?" [234]

"Oh, you've heard about the lottery, have you? From Arsenio, or ——?"

"No. I just saw it in the papers."

The mention of the lottery seemed to afford her fresh amusement, but she said nothing more about it at the moment. "You see, I wanted to come away from the Riviera—never mind why!"

"I believe I know why!"

"How can you? If you've not heard from Arsenio!"

"I've been in Paris—and there I saw Godfrey Frost."

"Oh!" The exclamation was long drawn out; it seemed to recognize that my having seen Godfrey Frost might explain a good deal of knowledge on my part. But she went on with her explanation. "Since the air raids have stopped, Arsenio has managed to let one floor of the *palazzo*—the *piano nóbile*; and I suggested to him that I might come and live on the top floor. I'd saved enough money for the journey, and I pay Arsenio rent. I'm entirely independent."

“As you were at Ste. Maxime—and at Nice—or Cimiez?”

“I believe you do know all about it!”

“Shall I mention a certain blue frock?”

She flushed—for her, quite brightly—and slowly nodded her head. Then she sat silent till we reached the Lido, and had [235] disembarked. Now she seemed unwilling to talk more of her affairs; she preferred to question me on mine. I told her of Aunt Bertha’s death.

“Ah, she liked me once. Poor Sir Paget!” was her only comment. “I think he likes you still,” I suggested. She shook her head doubtfully, and insisted on hearing about what I had been doing in Paris.

It was not till after we had lunched and were sitting drinking our coffee—just as in old days at Ste. Maxime—that I brought her back to her own affairs—to the present position.

“And you’re alone here—on the top floor of the *palazzo*?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered, smiling. “Alone—alone on the top floor. I came here alone; we had had a quarrel over—over what we’ll call the blue frock. Arsenio promised not to follow me here unless I gave him leave—which I told him I never should do. ‘Oh, yes, you will some day,’ he said; but he gave me the promise. Oh, well, a promise from him! What is it? Of course he’s broken it. He arrived here the day before yesterday. He’s now at the *palazzo*—on the floor below mine. It’s just like Arsenio, isn’t it?”

She spoke of him with a sharper bitterness than she had ever shown at Ste. Maxime, though the old amusement at him was not entirely obscured by it. Her tone made me—in spite of everything—feel rather sorry for him. The dream of his life—was it to come only [236] half true? Was the half that had come true to have no power to bring the other half with it? However little one might wish him success, or he deserve it, one pang of pity for him was inevitable.

“Well, perhaps he had some excuse,” I suggested. “He was naturally—well, elated. That wonderful piece of luck, you know!”

“Oh, that!” she murmured contemptuously—really as if winning three million francs, on a million to one chance or something like it, was nothing at all to make a fuss about! And that to a man who had spent years of his life, and certainly sacrificed any decency and self-respect that he possessed, in an apparently insane effort to do it.

Her profile was turned to me now; she was looking over the sands towards the Adriatic. I watched her face as I went. “And he won on his favorite number! On twenty-one, three times repeated! That must have seemed to him——” There was no sign of emotion on her face. “Well, he called it your number, didn’t he?”

She knew what I meant, and she turned to me. But now she did not flush like a girl just out of the schoolroom. There was no change of color, no softening of her face such as the flush must have brought with it.

“You’re speaking of a dead thing,” she told me in a low calm [237] voice. “Of a thing that is at last quite dead.”

“It died hard, Lucinda.”

“Yes, it lived through a great deal; it lived long enough—obstinately enough—to do sore wrong to—to other people,—better people than either Arsenio or me; long enough to make me do bad things—and suffer them. But now it’s dead. He’s killed it at last.”

At the moment I found nothing to say. Of course I was glad—no use in denying that. Yet it was grievous in its way. The thing was dead—the thing that so long, through so much, had bound her to Arsenio Valdez. The thing which had begun with the kiss in the garden at Cragsfoot, years ago, was finished.

“He put me to utter shame; he made me eat dirt,” she whispered with a sudden note of passion in her voice. She laid her arm on mine, and rose from her chair. “It spoils my meeting with you to think of it. Come back; I can do some work before it’s dark, and you can go and see him—he’ll be at the *palazzo*. There’s no reason you shouldn’t be friends with him still.”

“I don’t quite know about that,” I observed cautiously.

“I’m willing enough to be friendly with him, for that matter. But that’s—that’s not enough. Come along, we shall just about catch a boat, I think.”

We began to walk along to the quay where we were to embark. [238]

“So he says he’s going to kill himself!” Lucinda added with a

scornful laugh.

CHAPTER XIX

VIEWS AND WHIMS

SUCH, then, was Lucinda's state of mind with regard to the matter. Her encounter with Nina at Cimiez had opened her eyes; after that, no evasions or lies from Arsenio could avail to blind her. The keys of the fort had been sold behind her back. The one thing that she had preserved and cherished out of the wreck of her fortunes, out of the sordid tragedy of her relations with her husband, had been filched from her; her proud and fastidious independence had been bartered; Arsenio had sold it; Nina Dundrannan had bought it. It was in effect that wearing of Nina's cast-off frocks which, long ago at Ste. Maxime, she had pictured, with a smile, as an inconceivable emblem of humiliation. Arsenio had brought her to it, tricked her into it by his "presents" out of his "winnings."

A point of sentiment? Precisely—and entirely; of a sentiment rooted deep in the nature of the two women, and deep in the history of their lives, in the rivalry and clash that there had been between them and between their destinies. The affair of the blue frock (to [240] sum up the offense under that nickname—there had probably been other "presents") might be regarded as merely the climax of the indignities which Arsenio had brought upon her—the proverbial last straw. To her it was different in kind from all the rest. In her *midinette's* frock, in her Venetian shawl, she could make or sell her needlework contentedly; if on that score Nina felt exultation and dealt out scorn, Nina was wrong; nay, Nina was vulgar, and therefore a proper object for the laughter which had amazed and impressed Godfrey Frost. But she had been made Nina's dependent, the object of her triumphant contemptuous bounty. That was iron entering her soul, a sharp point piercing to the very heart of it. This deadly stroke at her pride was fatal also to the last of her tenderness for Arsenio. The old tie between them—once so strong, so imperious, surviving so much—was finally broken. She was willing to be friendly—if friendliness can co-exist with undisguised resentment, with a sense of outrage bitter as death itself. But, in truth, how could it?

That same afternoon I made my way to the *palazzo*, rather a gloomy, ruinous-looking old building, on a narrow side canal, facing across it on to the heavy blank bulk of a convent. This, then, was the scene of "Venice," of the old romance. To this they had come back—not indeed quite in the manner that I had imagined their return in my musings at Paris, but still, I could not doubt, on his part at least with something of the idea and the impulse which my fancy had [241] attributed to him. How was he now finding—and facing—the situation as it stood?

I climbed up the stone staircase—past the *piano nóbile*, now let, as I had learnt, past another apartment *al secondo*—to the third floor. There I knocked. The door was opened by a small wizened man, dressed in seedy black. He looked like a waiter or a valet, run to seed. I asked for Valdez. Yes, Monsieur was in, and would no doubt see Monsieur. He himself was Monsieur Valdez's servant—might he take my hat and stick? He talked while he did it; he had come with Monsieur from the Riviera—from Nice; he had been—er—in the same business establishment with Monsieur at Nice before—before Monsieur's great *coup*. In fact—here he smiled proudly and detained me in the passage, laying one grimy finger on my arm—Monsieur considered him a mascot; it was from him that Monsieur had purchased ticket 212,121. Imagine that! "A pity you didn't keep it!" said I. He just shrugged his shoulders, a weary smile acquiescing in that bit of bad luck. "However, Monsieur is very good to me," he ended as he—at last—opened an inner door. Apparently Monsieur's wonderful luck gave him a sort of divinity in a fellow-gambler's eyes.

I found myself in a long narrow room, with three windows facing on the canal and the convent. The furniture was sparse, and looked old and rickety, but it had the remains of elegance; only a small rug [242] or two mitigated the severity of the stone floor; one could see by dirty marks where pictures had once hung on the walls, but they hung there no more; altogether a depressing apartment.

Arsenio Valdez was sitting at a big bureau between two of the

windows, with his back towards the door. He turned round a dreary-looking face as he heard my entrance. But the moment he saw who I was, he sprang up and greeted me warmly, with evident pleasure. He even held my hand while I accounted for my presence as best I could. I had a holiday, I thought that perhaps the change in his fortunes would bring him back to Venice, and I couldn't resist the chance of congratulating him. I tried to make a joke of the whole business, and ended by squeezing his hand and felicitating him anew on his magnificent luck. "It took my breath away when I read it in the papers," I said.

"Oh, but I knew, I knew!" he declared, as he led me to where a couple of armchairs were placed by a small table in the third window, and made me sit down. "It was a question of time, only of time. If I could keep afloat, it was bound to come! That was what nobody would believe. People are so queer! And when Louis, that poor little chap who showed you in, offered me the ticket—he worked at that little den in Nice—when he offered me that ticket—well, it was growing dark, and I had to spell out the figures one by one—two one, two one, two one! You see! There it was. I was as [243] certain as if I had the prize in my pocket. Hard luck on him? No—he'd never have won with it—though the little fool may think he would. That number would never have won except for me. It was my number—and again my number—and once again!"

He poured this out in a torrent of excited triumph, every bit of him from top to toe full of movement and animation. It was a great vindication of himself, of his faith, that he was putting before the skeptic's eyes. He stood justified by it in all that he had done and suffered, in all that he had asked others to do and to endure. He was more than justified. It was a glorification of him, Arsenio Valdez, who had never doubted or faltered, who had pursued Fortune for years, unwearied, undaunted. He had caught her by the mantle at last. *Voilà!* He ended with a last tumultuous waving of both his hands.

"Well, you're entitled to your crow, old chap," I said, "even if it doesn't alter the fact that you were a damned fool."

"Ah, you never had any poetry, romance, imagination in you!" he retorted, now with his old mocking smile. "You haven't got it, you Rillingtons—neither you, nor yet Waldo. That was why I——" He stopped, looking monkeyish.

"Why Twenty-one became your lucky number? Exactly; I remember the day very well myself. By the way, I ought to tell you [244] that I've already seen Lucinda."

He listened to a brief account of our meeting and excursion in silence, seeming to watch my face keenly. "You and she have always been very good friends," he remarked thoughtfully at the end. He seemed to be considering—perhaps whether to take me into his confidence, to consult me. I did not, of course, feel entitled—or inclined!—to tell him of the confidences that Lucinda had reposed in me.

"Meanwhile," I observed, "beyond acquiring a manservant——"

"Louis? Oh, well, I should have been a fool not to keep him about me, shouldn't I?"

"Yes! Didn't Roman Generals at their triumphs carry a slave along, whose business it was to remind them that they were mortal? If you look at the unfortunate Louis from that point of view——"

"That fellow will bring me luck again," he asserted positively and seriously.

"Rot! What I was going to say was that you don't seem to have launched out much on the strength of your three millions." I cast a glance round the faded room.

He jerked his head towards the big bureau at which I had found him seated. "The money's all in there. I haven't touched a penny of it. I shan't—just yet." Again he was watching me; he was, I think, wondering how much Lucinda had said to me. "I've got a tenant for the first floor, and get along on the rent of that. And Lucinda——" [245] He gave what may be called an experimental smile, a silent "feeler"——"Well, she persists in her whim, as you've seen. Whatever may be said of it down at Nice, it's purely a whim now, isn't it?"

"Whims are powerful things with women," I remarked. And platitudes are often useful conversational refuges.

He sat frowning for a minute, with the weary baffled air that his

face had worn before he caught sight of me. “Perhaps you don’t care for such a short let, but, if it suits you, I’ll take the second floor for a month certain,” I continued.

In an instant his face lit up. “You, Julius! Why, that’s splendid! You’ll have to rough it a bit; but Louis will look after you. He’s really very good. Will you actually do it?”

“Of course I will—and glad to get it.”

“Well now, that is good!”

I knew that he was friendly towards me, but this seemed an excess of pleasure. Besides, his face, lately so weary and dreary, had assumed now the monkey smile which I knew so well—the smile it wore when he was “doing” somebody, getting the better of somebody by one of his tricks. But whom could he be doing now? Me? Lucinda? We two seemed the only possible victims. That we were victims—that we fitted into his plan—appeared clear, later on. But it was a mistake to suppose that we only were concerned. His [246] next words enlightened me as to that.

“I should be most delighted to have you for a neighbor, under my roof, in any case. I’m sure you know that. Oh, yes, I’m grateful to you. You might have cut me! I know it. But you’ve taken a broad view. You’ve allowed for the heart—though not for the imagination, for the certainties that lie beyond probability. Besides all that—which I feel deeply—by taking that floor you relieve me of a little difficulty.”

“I’m glad to hear it. How’s that?”

“Since I came here, I have naturally paid some visits among my old friends. You smile! Oh, yes, I’m human enough to like congratulations. Some of them are people of rank, as you know—you used to chaff me about my grandees! Their names appear in the papers—those society paragraphs—the Paris editions of American papers—Oh, my Lord! My name appeared—an item—‘Don Arsenio Valdez has returned to Palazzo Valdez!” He rose, went to the big bureau, and came back with a telegram. “Received to-day,” he added, as he put it into my hands.

I read it, looked across at him, and laughed. It was what I had expected; the only surprise was that Godfrey had taken rather long to track them. Scruples still obstinate, perhaps!

“So he wants to take an apartment in your *palazzo*, does he?”

“I’ve been under some obligations to him; it would be difficult to [247] refuse. We’re good friends, but—I didn’t want him here. It wouldn’t be—convenient.” Now he was looking furtive and rather embarrassed, as if he were uncertain how much truth and how much lie he had better administer to me.

“I saw him in Paris,” I remarked, “the other day, and from what he said it seemed that he’d made very good friends both with you and with your wife.”

He smiled; having no such shame as ordinary mortals have, he accepted exposure easily. He relapsed into the truth quite gracefully. “I don’t know how the devil Lucinda feels about him,” he confessed. “I wish he wouldn’t come at all, but I can’t help that. At all events he needn’t be in the house with us now!”

“Have you any reason to suppose she doesn’t like him?” I asked.

His restlessness returned, and with it his dreary look. He got up and began to wander about the long room, fingering furniture and ornaments, then drifting back to me at the window, and the next moment away again. Suddenly, from the other end of the room, he came out with, “What have they told between them? Godfrey at Paris, and Lucinda here to-day?”

“Well, pretty nearly everything, I fancy. If you mean the money and Nina Dundrannan, and so forth. He described that meeting at [248] Cimiez, for example.”

“Yes, they’ve told you everything—everything that matters. Well, what do you think?”

“If we’re to be friends, I’d sooner not offer an opinion.”

He flashed out at me. “There’s your code—your damned code! Didn’t I learn it in England? Didn’t I have it literally drubbed into me—thrashed into me—at school? And you keep it even when you love a woman!”

“H’m! Not always in that case, I’m afraid, Arsenio.”

“If you ever do love a woman,” he went on contemptuously. “For my part, I don’t believe any of you know how!” He came to a stand

before me. “Why didn’t Waldo come after me and shoot me through the head?”

“There was the greatest difficulty in stopping him, I honestly assure you. But the war came, you know, and it was his duty——”

“His duty! Oh, my Lord, his duty!” He positively groaned at the point of view. “I give you my word, if he had come after me, I would have never returned his fire. I would have bared my breast—so!” A rapid motion of his hands made as though to tear the clothes from his chest; it was a very dramatic gesture. “But when he didn’t come —pooh!”

“He was fighting for his country,” I suggested mildly. [249]

“And even you might have taken up the quarrel with great propriety,” he said gravely.

“I apologize for not having shot you. Try not to be such an ass, Arsenio.”

“You and he can sit down under such an affront as I put on you and your family, and shelter yourselves under duty. Duty! But up go your noses and down go your lips when I, adoring the adorable, milk a couple of vulgar millionaires of a few pounds to make her happy, splendid, rich as she ought to be. Yes, yes, about that you—offer no opinion! And these people—my dupes, eh?”

“The word’s rather theatrical—as you’re being, Arsenio. But let it pass.”

“Oh, yes, theatrical! I know! If a man doesn’t love just like, and no more than, a bull, in England, he’s theatrical. Well, what about my dupes? The woman with her moneybags, meanly revengeful—Ah, you give her up to me! You haven’t a word to say, friend Julius! And the young man? Let us forgive the good God for creating the young man! He would buy my wife! Ah, would he? And buy her cheap! All I’ve had of him would perhaps buy her a fur coat! For the rest, he relied on his fascinations. Cheaper than cash! I would have cashed a million pounds and flung them at her feet!”

“But that’s just as vulgar,” I protested, rather weakly. I was a little carried away by Arsenio’s eloquence; it was at least a point of [250] view which I had not sufficiently considered.

“Not from him! It would be giving what he loves best!” He laughed in a bitter triumph, then suddenly flung himself down into his chair again. “I had ten louis left—five of hers, five of his. With hers I bought the ticket; on his I starved till the draw came. Am I not revenged on the woman who would humiliate my wife, on the man who would buy the honor of Donna Lucinda Valdez?”

“It’s about the oddest kind of revenge I ever heard of,” was all I found to say. “You’ll complete it, I suppose, by dazzling Godfrey, when he arrives, with the spectacle of Luanda’s virtuous splendor? Or is he to find her still selling needlework on the Piazza?”

He leant across the little table and laid his hand on my arm. I imagined that it must be the table at which Lucinda had once sat, mending her gloves—most skillfully no doubt, for had she not proved herself a fine needlewoman?

“You too are against me?” he asked in a low voice. “Bitterly against me, Julius?”

“Once you took her—yes, here. Then you forsook her. Then you took her again. And you’ve dragged her in the dirt.”

“But now I can——!”

“That to her would be dirt too,” I said. “I suppose she won’t touch that money? That’s why she’s still peddling her wares on the Piazza?”

He made a despairing gesture of assent with his hands— [251] despairing, uncomprehending. Then he raised his head and said proudly, “But if she doesn’t yet understand, I shall make her!” Then, with a sudden change of manner, he added, “And you’ll move into the floor below to-morrow? That’s capital! You might ask us both to dinner—give a housewarming! Louis will look after your marketing and cooking.”

“With the greatest of pleasure,” I agreed, but with some surprise. It would have seemed more natural in him to invite me on the first night.

He saw my surprise; what didn’t he see when he exercised his wits?

“It must be that way; because she never comes into my apartment,” he said, but now quietly, cheerfully, as if he were

mentioning another of those whims which are so powerful with women.

CHAPTER XX

LIVING FUNNILY

THE “housewarming” so adroitly suggested by Arsenio duly took place; it was followed by other meetings of the same kind. Louis had evidently received his instructions; every evening at half-past seven he laid dinner for three in my *salon*; and this without any apology or explanation. When his table was spread, he would say, “I will inform Madame and Monsieur that dinner is served.” Presently Madame and Monsieur would arrive—separately; Madame first (I think Arsenio listened until he heard her step passing his landing), Monsieur completing the party. I played host—rather ostentatiously; there had to be no mistake as to who was the host; and every morning I gave Louis money for the marketing.

Except for this evening meeting, we three saw little of one another. Arsenio was either out or shut up in his own apartment all day; Lucinda went punctually to her work in the morning and did not return till six o’clock; I did the sights, went sailing sometimes, or just mooned about; I met Lucinda now and then, but beyond a nod and a smile she took no notice of me; there were no more excursions [253] to the Lido. Perhaps the claims of business did not permit them to her; perhaps she thought them unnecessary, in view of our opportunities for conversation in the evening.

For we had many. Arsenio’s views on the position in which he found himself had appeared pretty clearly from what he had said. By an incomprehensible perversity—of fate, of woman, of English temperament and morals—his grand *coup* had proved a failure; he would not accept that failure as final, but neither for the moment could he alter it. He always seemed to himself on the brink of success; every day he was tantalized by a fresh rebuff. She was friendly, but icily cold and, beyond doubt, subtly, within herself, ridiculing him. The result was that, in the old phrase, he could live neither with her nor without her. The daily meeting which he had engineered, with my aid (and at my expense), was a daily disappointment; his temper could endure only a certain amount of her society in the mood in which she presented herself to him. After that, his patience gave; he probably felt that his self-control would. So always, soon after our meal was finished, he would go off on some pretext or another; sometimes we heard him above in his own apartment, walking about restlessly; sometimes we heard him go downstairs past my landing—out somewhere. He seldom came back before ten o’clock; and his return was always the signal for Lucinda [254] to retire to her own quarters at the top of the house.

During his absence she and I sat together, talking or in silence, I smoking, she sewing; if the evening was fine and warm, we sat in the armchairs by the little table in the window; if the weather was chilly—and in that dingy stone-floored room it was apt to seem chillier than it was—Louis made us a little fire of chips and logs, and we sat close by it. The old fleeting intimacy of Ste. Maxime renewed itself between us. After five or six evenings spent in this fashion, it almost seemed as though Arsenio were a visitor who came and went, while she and I belonged to the establishment.

“The atmosphere’s quite domestic,” I said to her with a smile. It was cold that night; we were close by the fire; her fingers were busy with her work under the light of the one lamp which showed up her face in clear outline—just as it had been defined against the gloom of the dark *salle-à-manger* at Ste. Maxime.

“Well, you see, you’re a restful sort of person to be with,” she answered, smiling, but not looking up, and going on with her sewing.

We had not talked much more about her affairs, or Arsenio’s. She seemed to think that enough had been said as to those, on the Lido; her conversation had been mostly on general matters, though she also took pleasure in describing to me the incidents and humors of her business hours, both here at Venice and in the past at Ste. [255] Maxime and Nice. To-night I felt impelled to get a little nearer to her secret thoughts again.

“Wasn’t Waldo restful—barring an occasional storm?”

“Yes; but then—as I’ve told you—at that time I wasn’t. Never for

an hour really. Now I am. I should be quite content to go on just as we are forever." She looked up and gave me a smile. "I include you in 'we', Julius. You give me a sense of safety."

"You can't sell needlework on the Piazza all your life," I expostulated.

"Really I could quite happily, if only I were let alone—otherwise. But I shan't be, of course. Arsenio will get tired of his present tactics soon—the ones he's followed since you came. We shall either go back to storms and heroics again, or he'll discover something else. Just now he's trying the patient, the pathetic! But he won't stick to that long. It's not in his nature."

How calmly now she analyzed and dissected him! With amusement still mingled with her scorn, but—it must be repeated—with the old proportions terribly reversed. It cannot be denied that there was something cruel in the relentless vision of him which she had now achieved.

"He'll try something spectacular next, I expect," she pursued, delicately biting off a thread.

"You don't mean—what you referred to on the Lido?" I asked, [256]
raising my brows and passing my hand across my jugular vein.

"Oh, no! That would be something real. His will be a performance of some sort. It's ten days since he poured all his bank notes on the table before me, and swore he'd burn them and kill himself if I didn't pick them up. Of course he hasn't done either! He's locked them up again, and he's trying to get you to persuade me to see reason—in the way he sees it!"

"But I've told him that—I've told what I think of him—or as good as!"

"Well, as soon as he's convinced this plan won't work, he'll try another. You'll see!" She smiled again. "I shouldn't wonder if the arrival of Godfrey Frost were to produce some manifestation, some change in his campaign."

It was almost the first—I am not sure that it was not absolutely the first—time that she had referred to Godfrey. Though I felt considerable curiosity about her feelings with regard to that young man, I had forborne to question her. Whatever he might be in himself, he was friend, partner, kinsman to Nina Dundrannan. The subject might not be agreeable.

"What's that young man coming here for?" I asked.

Something in my tone evidently amused her. She laid her work down beside her, drew her chair nearer the fire, and stretched out her legs towards the blaze. She was thoughtful as well as amused, [257]
questioning herself as well as talking to me; it was quite in her old fashion.

"I liked him; he amused me—and it amused me. He's Nina, isn't he? Nina writ large and clumsily? What she is delicately, he is coarsely. Oh, well, that's rather a hard word, perhaps. I mean, obviously, insistently. Where she carries an atmosphere, he works an air pump. Still I liked him; he was kind to me; he gave me treats—as you did. And it was fun poaching on Nina's preserves. After all, she didn't have it all her own way when we met at Cimiez!"

"She's not having it now, I should imagine—since he's coming to Venice."

"I like treats, and I like being admired, and I liked the poaching," Lucinda pursued. "He gave me all that. And he really was generously indignant at my having to earn an honest living—no, having to earn a poor living, I mean."

"He gave Arsenio money too, didn't he?" Of course I knew the answer, but I had my reason for putting the question.

"Yes; I didn't know it, but I suspected it—or Arsenio wouldn't have been so accommodating to him. But he really wanted to help me, to make things easier for me. That wasn't her motive!"

Remembering what I did of Lady Dundrannan's attitude and demeanor during my stay at Villa San Carlo, I did not feel equal to arguing that it was.

"So—altogether—I let him flirt with me a good deal. I don't think [258]
you know much about flirtation, do you, Julius? Oh, I don't mean love! Well, it's a series of advances and retreats, you see." (She entered on this exposition with a feigned and hollow gravity.) "When the man advances, the woman retreats. But if the man retreats, the woman advances. And so it goes on. Do you at all see, Julius?"

“I’m disposed to believe that you’re giving me a practical demonstration—of the advance!”

She laughed gaily. “Pure theory—for the moment, at all events! But he didn’t always advance at the proper moment. Never you dare to tell Nina that! But he didn’t. I’m not a vain woman, am I, or I shouldn’t tell even you! Something always seemed to bring him up short. Fear of Nina, do you think? Or was he too big a man? Or had he scruples?”

“A bit of all three, perhaps.” I had had the benefit of another version of this story—at Paris.

“Anyhow he never did, or suggested, anything very desperate. And so—I’m rather wondering what’s bringing him to Venice. Because now we’re rich—we have at least a competence. We’re respectable. Monsieur Valdez can afford to be honest; Madame Valdez can afford to keep straight. Desperation might have had its chance at Nice. Oh, yes, it might easily! It hasn’t surely got half such a good chance now? I mean, it couldn’t seem to have—to Godfrey Frost.” [259]

“I’m not quite sure about that. He saw the famous meeting at Cimiez. He’s told me about it—I told you I’d seen him since, didn’t I? I fancy he understands your feelings better than you think. He has a good brain and—plenty of curiosity.”

“Then if he does understand—and still comes to Venice——?” She looked at me with her brows raised and a smile on her lips. “Looks serious, doesn’t it?” she ended. She broke into low laughter. “It would be such glorious fun to become Mrs. Godfrey Frost!”

“You’ve got a husband still, remember!”

“That’s nothing—now. Or do you set up Arsenio as morality?”

“Oh, no! If Arsenio’s morality, why, damn morality!” I said.

“And there’s just the piquant touch of uncertainty as to whether I could do it—whether I could become even so much as an unofficial Mrs. Godfrey—whom Nina didn’t know, but whom she’d think about! Still—he is coming to Venice. It’s rather tempting, isn’t it, Julius?”

“Does a revenge on Arsenio come into it at all?”

Her smile disappeared, her face suddenly grew sad. “Oh, no, I’m having that already. I don’t want to have—not as revenge—but I can’t help it. It is so with me—no credit to me, either.”

“All the same, Arsenio isn’t pleased at our friend coming to Venice. He was very glad when I took this apartment—mainly because then Godfrey couldn’t.” [260]

“If you hadn’t come, and he had—I wonder!”

“Do you care for him in the very least?” I asked, perhaps rather hotly.

“No,” she answered with cool carelessness. “But is that the question?” She dropped out of her chair on to her knees before the fire, holding out her hands to warm them. Her face, pale under the lamp, was ruddy in the blaze of the logs. “You’re a silly old idealist, Julius. You idealize even me—me, who did, in this very place, what shouldn’t be done—me who ran away from a good marriage and a better man—me who have knocked about anyhow for years—knowing I was always on sale—I’m on sale every afternoon on the Piazza—if only I chose to make the bargain. But you choose to see me as I was once.” She laughed gently. “Well, I think you’ve saved my life—or my reason—twice—here and at Ste. Maxime—so I suppose I must put up with you!”

“You’ll never go to a man unless you love him,” I said obstinately.

Suddenly she flung her hands high above her head. “Oh, what does one keep in this wicked world, what does one keep?”

Her hands sank down on to her knees—as though their reluctant fall pictured the downward drag of the world on the spirit. In that posture she crouched many minutes without moving; and I, not stirring either, watched her. [261]

“I had my one virtue,” she said at last. “My primitive virtue. I was faithful to my man—even when I tried not to be, still I was. Now I’ve lost even that. It wouldn’t cost me an hour’s sleep to deceive or desert Arsenio. I should, in fact, rather enjoy it, just for its own sake.”

“I daresay. But you’re not for sale—in marriage or out of it. And, as you said, isn’t your revenge complete?”

“That’s the worst of revenge; is it ever, in the end, really

complete?” She turned round on me suddenly and laid a hand on my knee. “Yes—that’s what has been in my mind. But it’s only just this minute that I’ve seen it. I daresay you’ve seen it, though, haven’t you? I’m becoming cruel; I’m beginning to enjoy tormenting him. I’ve read somewhere that people who have to punish do sometimes get like that, even when it’s a just punishment. But it’s rather an awful idea.”

Her face was full of a horrified surprise. “I do get things out so, in talking to you,” she added in a hurried murmur. “Oh, not words; thoughts, I mean. You let me go on talking, and I straighten myself out before my own eyes. You know? Till now, I’ve never seen what I was coming down to. Poor old Arsenio! After all, he’s not a snake or a toad, is he?” She laughed tremulously. “Though why should one be cruel even to toads and snakes? One just leaves them alone. That’s [262] what I must do with Arsenio.”

“An illogical conclusion—since he isn’t snake or toad,” I said, as lightly as I could.

“Oh, you know! That’s it! Yes, I’ve been saying that I was very just, and fine, and all that! And I’ve really been enjoying it! Julius dear, has my honest work been all just viciousness—cattiness, you know?”

“God bless you, no! Why do you round on yourself like this? You’ve come through the whole thing splendidly. Oh, you’re human! There’s Nina, and all that, of course. But it’s nonsense to twist the whole thing like that.”

“Yes, it is,” she decided—this time quickly, even abruptly. “It hasn’t been that—not most of it anyhow. But it’s in danger of being it now. It almost is it, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes, at dinner, I’ve thought you a little cruel.”

“Yes—I have been.” She rose to her feet almost with a jump. “If I have to go—to rescue myself from that—will you help me, Julius? Because I’ve no money to go far—to take myself out of his reach.”

As—on this question—we stood opposite to one another, she just murmuring “Yes, that’s it,” I nonplussed at her question, at the whole turn her talk had taken—we heard the tramp of steps on the stone staircase. She flung me a glance; more than one person was [263] coming up. “It’s just like Arsenio not to have told us!” she whispered with a smile.

“You mean——?” I whispered back.

“He’s been to meet him at the station, of course! Julius, how shall I behave?”

We heard the door of the apartment opened. The next moment Arsenio opened the door of the room, and ushered in Godfrey Frost, in a big fur coat, fresh from the train evidently.

“Here he is!” Arsenio cried, almost triumphantly.

Godfrey stood on the threshold, obviously taken aback. It was clear that Arsenio had not told him that he was to meet the pair of us.

Arsenio wore his most characteristic grin. I could not help smiling at it. Lucinda laughed openly. Godfrey, caught unawares as he was, carried the position off bravely.

“Delightful to see you both! But where am I? Whose charming room is this?”

“It’s the devil and all to know that! We live so funnily,” said Monkey Valdez.

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CHAPTER XXI

PARTIE CARRÉE

WHEN I awoke the next morning, it was with the memory of one of the queerest hours that I had ever spent in my life. After I had drunk my coffee, I lay late in bed, reviewing it, smiling over Arsenio's malicious gayety, over Godfrey's surly puzzlement, over myself struggling between amusement and disgust, over Lucinda's delicate aloofness and assumed unconsciousness of anything peculiar in the situation.

For the devil and all—to use his own phrase—took possession of Monkey Valdez. Lucinda was not the only one to whom the infliction of pain and punishment might become a joy. Arsenio had been powerless to prevent Godfrey from coming to Venice; he meant to make him pay for having come; to make him pay, I suppose, for having sought to take advantage of Arsenio's need, for having dared to think that he could buy Lucinda—from a husband who all but told him that he was willing to sell her! Great crimes in the eyes of Arsenio, now no more in need, now grown rich, yet with his riches turned to useless dross, because of him, and of them, Lucinda would have nothing.

He could not pose as the happy husband. That would not be [265] plausible; Lucinda would not second it, and Godfrey knew too much. But by every means within the range of his wonderful and impish ingenuity, by insinuation and innuendo, by glances, smiles, and gestures, he pointed Godfrey to the inference that I was the favored man, the aspiring, perhaps already the successful, lover. In that Godfrey was to find the explanation of the "funny" way in which we lived—an apartment for each of us, husband and wife meeting only at my board, her cool defensive demeanor towards him, my friendly toleration of his presence, which I must dislike, but also must endure because it was a cover and a screen. None of this, of course, in words, but all acted—admirably acted, so that it was equally impossible for Godfrey not to accept it, and for either Lucinda or myself to repudiate it. Had we tried, he would have made us appear ridiculous; there was not a definite word on which we could fasten, not a peg on which to hang the denial.

Lucinda did not want to deny, to judge by her demeanor; but neither did she do anything or show any signs that could be construed into an admission. She behaved just as a woman of the world would behave in such a situation—with a husband so unreasonable, so ill-bred as to let his jealousy appear in the presence of an outsider! To see nothing of what he meant, not to consider it possible that he could mean it—that would be the woman of the world's cue; it was perfectly taken up in Lucinda's cool and [266] remote self-possession, the aloofness of her eyes as she listened to Arsenio, her easy cordiality towards both myself and Godfrey, her absolute ignoring of the "funniness" of our way of living. No, she did not want to deny, any more than she meant actively to aid, the impression. It was Arsenio's game—let him play it. If to behave naturally tended to strengthen it, that was not her fault. Meanwhile she enjoyed the comedy; not a single direct glance at me told that—only an occasional faint smile at Arsenio's adroitest touches.

She might be pardoned for enjoying the comedy; it was good. Perhaps for not sharing the distaste that mingled with my own appreciation—for not feeling the disgust that I felt at this cheapening of her. In her eyes Arsenio had already cheapened her to the uttermost; he could do nothing more in that direction. He could still give her pleasure—of a kind; by suffering cruelty himself, as it seemed, or by being cleverly cruel to others. He could no longer give her pain; he had exhausted his power to do that.

He knew what he could do and what he could not. If she was a character in his comedy, she was his audience too. He played to her for all he was worth; he saw the occasional smile and understood it as well as I did. His eyes sought for any faint indications of her applause.

And the victim? As I said, he carried off the meeting well at first; [267]
the Frost composure stood him in good stead; he was not readily to be shaken out of it. But at last, under Arsenio's swift succession of pricks, he grew sullen and restive. His puzzled ill-humor vented itself on me, not on his dexterous tormentor.

"When did you make up your mind to come here? You said nothing about anything of the sort in Paris!"

The half-smothered resentment in his tone accused me of treachery—of having stolen a march on him. Arsenio smiled impishly as he listened—himself at last silent for a minute.

"The news of our friends' good fortune encouraged me to join them," I said. It was true—roughly; and I was very far from acknowledging any treachery.

This was the first reference that any one had made to the grand *coup*—to the winning ticket—a reticence which had, no doubt, increased Godfrey's puzzle. He could not put questions himself, but I had seen him eyeing Lucinda's black frock; Arsenio too was uncommonly shabby; and, as the latter had incidentally mentioned, I was paying rent: "I can't afford not to charge it," he had added with a rueful air, ostentatiously skirting the topic. Now he took it up, quite artificially. "Ah, that bit of luck! Oh, all to the good! It settles our future—doesn't it, Lucinda?" (Here came one of her rare faint smiles.) "But we're simple folk with simple tastes. We haven't [268]
substantially altered our mode of living. Lucinda has her work—she likes it. I stick on in the old ancestral garrets." ("Ancestral" was stretching things a bit—his father had bought the *palazzo*, and re-christened it.) "But we shall find a use for that windfall yet. Still, now you've come, we really must launch out a bit. Julius is one of the family—almost; but you're an honored guest. Mustn't we launch out a little, Lucinda?"

"Do as you like. It's your money," she answered. "At least, what you don't owe of it is."

Then, at that, for a sudden short moment, the real man broke through. "Then none of it's mine, because I owe it all to you," he said. The words might have been a continuation of his mockery; they would have borne that construction. But they were not; his voice shook a little; his mind was back on Number Twenty-one and what that meant—or had meant—to him. But he recovered his chosen tone in an instant. "And behold her generosity! She gives it back to me—she won't touch a penny of it!"

At that a sudden gleam of intelligence shot into Godfrey's eyes. He fixed them inquiringly on Lucinda. She was in great looks that evening—in her plain, close-fitting, black frock, with never an ornament save a single scarlet flower in her fair hair; he might well look at her; but it was not her beauty that drew his gaze at that moment. He was questioning more than admiring. She gave him back his look steadily, smiling a little, ready to let him make what he [269]
could of her husband's exclamation.

"Let me give one dinner party out of it," implored Arsenio. "Just we four—a perfect *partie carrée*. If I do, will you come to it, Lucinda?"

She gave him an amused little nod; he had touched her humor. "Yes, if you give Mr. Frost a dinner, I'll come," she said. "What day?"

"Why, the first on which we can eat a dinner! And that's to-morrow! Upstairs—in my apartment?"

"No—here—if Julius will let us," she said mildly, but very firmly. "You accept, Mr. Frost? And we'll all dress up and be smart,—to honor Mr. Frost, and Arsenio's banquet."

So the arrangement was made, and it promised, to my thinking, as I lay in bed, another queer evening. Somebody, surely, would break the thin ice on which Arsenio was cutting his capers! What if we all began to speak our true thoughts about one another? But the evening that I was recalling held still something more in it—the most vivid of all its impressions, although the whole of it was vivid enough in my memory.

Godfrey rose to take his leave. "Till to-morrow, then!" he said, as he took Lucinda's hand, bowing slightly over it; he pressed it, I think, for her fingers stiffened and she frowned—Arsenio standing by, smiling.

"See him down the stairs, Arsenio," she ordered. "The light's [270]
very dim, and two or three of the steps are broken."

The two went out! I heard Arsenio's voice chattering away in the distance as they went down the high steep stairs. Lucinda stood where she was for a minute, and then came across to the chair on which I had sat down, after saying good-night to Godfrey. She dropped on her knees beside it, laying her arms across my knees, and looking up at me with eyes full of tears.

"I do pity him," she murmured, "I do! And I'd be kind to him. I don't want him to go on being as bitter and unhappy as he is—oh, you saw! One can't help being amused, but every time he hit Godfrey, he hit himself too—and harder. But what's the use? Nothing's any use except the thing that I can't do!"

I laid my hand on hers—they lay side by side on my knee. "It's rather a case of 'God help us all!' I think."

"You too?"

"Yes—when you're unhappy."

I felt her hands rise under my hand, and I released them. She took mine between hers and raised it to her lips. Then a silence fell between us, until I became conscious that Arsenio was standing on the threshold, holding the knob of the opened door. He had stolen back with the quietness of a cat; we had neither of us heard a sound of him.

Lucinda saw him, and slowly rose to her feet; she was without a [271]
trace of embarrassment. She walked across to the door; he held it wide open for her to pass—she always went upstairs alone—But to-night—against the custom of their nightly parting during the last week—she stopped and took his hand. Her back was towards me now; I could not see her eyes, but there must have been an invitation in them, for he slowly advanced his head towards hers. She did not need to stoop—she was as tall as he was. She kissed him on the forehead.

"If you will be content with peace, peace let it be," she said.

He made no motion to return the kiss—the invitation could not have carried so far as that; he stood quite still while she passed out and while her footsteps sounded on the stairs.

There came the noise of a door opening and shutting, up above us, on the top floor. He shut the door that he had been still holding, and came slowly up to the hearthrug, by which I sat.

I lit a cigarette. All the while that it took me to smoke it he stood there in silence, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. His impishness had dropped from him, exorcised, as it seemed, by Lucinda's kiss. His face was calm and quiet.

"Well, that's finished!" he said at last, more to himself than to me. I did not speak; he looked down at me and addressed me more directly. "You saw her? You saw what she meant by that? It was—good-by!"

"I'm afraid I think so too, old friend—especially in view of what [272]
she'd just been saying to me. She's greatly distressed about it, but ——" At that moment I myself was greatly distressed for him, indeed for both of them; but the next he spoilt my feeling (so to say) as far as he was concerned, and made Lucinda's distress look overdone, or even gratuitous. He drew himself up pompously and spread his arms out on either side of him, holding his hands palms uppermost, rather as if he were expounding an argument to a public meeting.

"Very well! I accept. Whatever her future feelings may be, I take her at her word, and accept—once and for all! It is not consonant with my dignity, my self-respect——" I sighed. He gave me a short, sharp look, but then went on in just the same fashion—"to prolong this situation, to persecute, to trouble. I will relieve her of my presence, of the thought of me. She is still young—almost a girl. She will find another life to live. She will find love again—though not the love I gave her. And if ever she thinks of Arsenio Valdez, let it be with charity and forgiveness!"

It seemed rather cruel to recognize the fact,—but a fact it obstinately and obviously was—that Lucinda's future thinking of him formed part of the program; relieving her of the thought of him was a mere flourish; whatever he proposed to do with himself, he did not propose to do that.

"Time softens bitter memories, the mind dwells on what is sweet [273]
in the past. So may it be with her, when I am gone, Julius!"

"Where do you propose to go?'" I asked irritably. His pomposity and sentimentality seemed to me transpontine. The man could not be sincere for five minutes; he was cutting a figure again.

“Ah! that, my friend, need not be put in words. There is one course always open to a gentleman who has staked his all and lost.”

It occurred to me that Arsenio had very often staked his all and lost, and that his course had been to borrow some more from other people. But what was the good of saying that to him when he was on his high horse—a very prancing steed? In a different mood, though, he would have laughed at the reminder himself.

Of course I knew what he meant me to understand. But, frankly, I did not at the time believe a word of it; and now, as I lay thinking it over, I believed in it even less, if possible. I took it for another flourish, and smiled to myself at it, as Lucinda had laughed at the threat when she mentioned it to me on the Lido.

“Sleep on it, old fellow,” I advised him. “You’ll feel better about it, perhaps, in the morning. If you so decide to give her a separation or a divorce, it can all be arranged in a friendly way. She wants to be as kind and friendly as she can to you.”

“As I say, I trust that her memory of me will be that,” he said in [274] his most solemn sepulchral voice. “And you, my friend, you too——”

“Oh, damn it all, let my memories of you alone, Arsenio! I assure you that talking this sort of stuff won’t improve them.” I got up from my chair. “Go to bed now—think it over to-morrow. At any rate, you’ve got your dinner to-morrow evening; you can’t do anything till after that.”

“Yes,” he agreed thoughtfully. “Yes, I’ve got my dinner to-morrow.” He seemed to meditate on the prospect with a gloomy satisfaction. I meditated on the same prospect now with considerable apprehension. He had finally left me the night before still in his tragic vein, still on his high horse. But who in the world could tell in what mood this evening would find him? On whom might he not turn? What outrage on the social decencies might he not commit? Last night we had been presented with an extensive selection from his *répertoire*, ranging from schoolboy naughtiness to the *beau geste*—the insufferable *beau geste*—of a romantically contemplated suicide. What might we not be treated to to-night? And I did not feel at all sure how much Lucinda could stand—or how much Godfrey Frost would.

With a knock at the door, Louis came in, in his usual sleek and deferential fashion. He laid a little bundle of letters on the table by the bed, and inquired whether Monsieur would take *déjeuner* at home to-day—or would he perhaps prefer to go out? It was obvious, [275] from the way the question was put, which Louis himself preferred. And the next moment he murmured the humble suggestion that there were the preparations, for dinner to-night, of course.

“Are there? Special preparations, do you mean, Louis?”

“Monsieur Valdez is, I understand, with your permission, Monsieur, intending to provide a few decorations for the *salon*. He tells me that he entertains to-night in honor of the arrival of his friend Monsieur Frost.” (Froost, he called it).

“Oh, all right! I’ll certainly lunch out, if it makes things easier for you, Louis.”

When he was gone, I opened my letters. Among them was one from Waldo, and another from Sir Paget, both of some length, touching the family arrangement which Waldo had suggested with regard to Cragsfoot. I decided to put them in my pocket and read them later—while I had my lunch. I had lain already overlong in bed, my thoughts busy with the events of the *partie carrée* of last night.

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CHAPTER XXII

SUITABLE SURROUNDINGS

WALDO'S was a business letter; any feelings that might be influencing the proposed transaction, any sentiment that might be involved—whether of Nina's, of his own, of his father's, or of mine—he appeared to consider as having been adequately indicated in our talk at Paris, and accorded them only one passing reference. He assumed that I should be bearing all that—he had a habit of describing the emotions as "all that," I remembered—in mind; what remained was to ask me whether I were favorably disposed to the arrangement, the value of his remainder—which must, alas, before many years were out, become an estate in possession—to be fixed by a firm of land agents selected by himself and me—"from which price I should suggest deducting twenty-five per cent. in consideration of what I believe the lawyers call 'natural love and affection'; in other words, because I'd much sooner sell to you than to a stranger—in fact, than to *anybody else*." The underlining of the last two words clearly asked me to substitute for them a proper name with which we were both well acquainted. [277] He added that he thought the land agents' valuation would be somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty thousand pounds, timber included—and so, with kindest remembrances from Nina, who was splendidly fit, *considering* (another underlining gave me news of possible importance for the future of the Dundrannan barony), he remained my affectionate cousin.

Though I suspect that son and father, at the bottom of their hearts, felt much the same about the matter, Sir Paget's letter was expressed in a different vein. Leaving the business to Waldo, he dealt with the personal aspect:

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you that I hadn't always hoped and expected that the heir of my body and the child of my dear wife should succeed me here. That's nature; but *Dis aliter visum*. The All-Highest herself decides otherwise." (I saw in my mind the humorous, rather tired, smile with which he wrote that.) "But I should be an ungrateful churl indeed if I repined at the prospect of being succeeded at Cragsfoot by you, who bear the old name (and, I am told, are to get a handle to it!)—you who are and have been always son of my heart, if not of my body—a loyal, true son too, if you will let me say it. So, if it is to be, I receive it with happiness, and the more you come to your future dominions while I—*brevis dominus*—am still here to welcome you, the better I shall be pleased. But, prithee, Julius, remember that you provide, in your [278] own person, only for the next generation. When your turn comes for the doleful cypresses, what is to happen? You must look to it, my boy!"

After a touching reference to his old and now lost companion, Aunt Bertha, and to his own loneliness, he went on more lightly: "But Waldo comes over every day from Briarmount when they are 'in residence,' and the aforesaid All-Highest herself pays me a state visit once or twice a week. The Queen-Regent expects an Heir-Apparent. Oh, confidently! I think she can't quite make out how fate, or nature, or the other Deity dared to thwart her, last time! I confess I am hypnotized—I too have no doubt of the event! So, as to that, all is calm and confidence—the third peer of the line is on his way! But is there anything wrong in her outlying dominions? Villa San Carlo, though it sounds like a charming winter palace, doesn't seem to have been an unqualified success. 'Rather tiresome down there!' she said. I asked politely after the cousin. Very well, when she had seen him last, but she really didn't know what he was doing; it seemed to her that he was taking a very long holiday from business—'Our works down there are of only secondary importance.' I remarked that you had written saying how much you were enjoying yourself at Villa San Carlo, and how you regretted being detained in Paris. 'Oh, he meant to leave us anyhow, I think!' I fancied somehow that both of you gentleman had incurred the royal displeasure. What have you been up to? Rebellion, *lèse-majesté*, [279] treason? You are bold men if you defy my Lady Dundrannan! Well, she's probably right in thinking that Cragsfoot is too small for her, and not worth adding to her dominions!"

Though the purchase would need some contriving, the price that

Waldo's letter indicated was not an insuperable difficulty, thanks to the value which Sir Ezekiel was now kind enough to put on my services; I could pay it, and keep up the place on a footing of frugal decency when the time came. For the rest, the prospect was attractive. Cragsfoot had always been an integral part of my life; my orphaned childhood had been spent there. If it passed to a stranger, I should feel as it were dug up by the roots. If I did not fall in with the arrangement, pass to a stranger it would; I felt sure of that; the All-Highest had issued her command. "So be it!" I said to myself—half in pleasure, still half in resentment at the Dundrannan fiat, which broke the direct line of the Rillingtons of Cragsfoot. I also made up my mind to obey Sir Paget's implied invitation as soon as ——

As soon as what? The summons from Cragsfoot—the call back to home and home life (my appointment to our London office was now ratified)—brought me up against that question. I could answer it only by saying—as soon as Lucinda's affair had somehow settled itself. She could not be left where she was; as a permanency, the present situation was intolerable. She must yield or she must go; [280] Valdez would never let her alone, short of her adopting one of those alternatives; he would keep on at his pestering and posturing. She had no money; her mother had lived on an annuity, or an allowance, or something of that kind, which expired with the good lady herself. Clearly, however, she was able to support herself. She must not sell flowers on the Piazza all her life; I thought that she would consent to borrow enough money from me to set herself up in a modest way in business, and I determined to make that proposal to her on the morrow—as soon as we had got through the ordeal of this evening's dinner. I fervently hoped that we might get through it without a flare-up between Arsenio and his honored guest Godfrey Frost. Out of favor at Briarmount was he, that young man? I could easily have told Sir Paget the reason for that!

The only one of the prospective party whom I encountered in the course of the afternoon—though I admit that I haunted the Piazza in the hope of seeing Lucinda—was the host himself. I met him in company with a tall, lean visaged, eminently respectable person, wearing a tall hat and a black frock coat. Arsenio stopped me, and introduced me to his companion. He said that Signor Alessandro Panizzi and I ought to know one another; I didn't see why, and merely supposed that he was exhibiting his respectable friend, who was, it appeared, one of the leading lawyers in Venice and, indeed, [281] an ex-Syndic of the city. Signor Panizzi, on his part, treated Arsenio with the greatest deference; he referred to him, in the course of our brief conversation, as "our noble friend," and was apparently hugely gratified by the familiar, if somewhat lordly, bearing which Arsenio adopted towards him. But, after all, Arsenio was now rich—notoriously so, thanks to the way in which wealth had come to him; one could understand that he might be regarded as a highly-to-be-valued citizen of Venice. Perhaps he was going to run for Mayor himself—one more brilliant device to dazzle Lucinda!

There it was—in thinking of him one always expected, one always came back to, the bizarre, the incongruous and ridiculous. It was the overpowering instinct for the dramatic, the theatrical, in him, without any taste to guide or to limit it. That was what made it impossible to take him, or his emotions and attitudes, seriously; Waldo's "all that" seemed just the applicable description. I walked away wondering just what particular line his bamboozlement of Signor Alessandro Panizzi might be taking. Moreover, that he could find leisure in his thoughts to posture to somebody else—besides Lucinda and myself—was reassuring. It made his hints of the night before seem even more unreal and fantastic.

That same last word was the only one appropriate to describe what I found happening to my unfortunate *salon*, when I got back early in the evening. Half a dozen men, under the superintendence [282] of Louis and the fat old *portière* who lived in a sort of cupboard on the ground floor, opening off the hall, were engaged in transforming it into what they obviously considered to be a scene of splendor. The old *portière* was rubbing his plump hands in delight; at last Don Arsenio was launching out, spending his money handsomely, doing justice to Palazzo Valdez; the rich English nobleman (this was Godfrey Frost—probably after Arsenio's own description) would undoubtedly be much impressed. Very possibly—but possibly not quite as old Amedeo expected! The table groaned—or at all events I groaned for it—under silver plate and silver candlesticks. The latter

were also stuck galore in sconces on the walls. Table and walls were festooned with chains of white flowers; the like bedecked the one handsome thing that really belonged to the room—the antique chandelier in the middle of the ceiling; I had never put lights in it, but they were there now. And the banquet was to be on a scale commensurate with these trappings. “Prodigious! Considering the times, absolutely prodigious!” Amedeo assured me; he, for his part, could not conceive how Don Arsenio and Signor Louis had contrived to obtain the materials for such a feast. Signor Louis smiled mysteriously; tricks of the trade were insinuated.

It seemed to me that Arsenio had gone stark mad. What were we in for this evening?

[283] Just as this thought once again seized on my mind, I saw something that gave me a little start. The butt of a revolver or pistol protruded from the side-pocket of Louis’s jacket, and the pocket bulged with the rest of the weapon.

“What in the world are you carrying that thing about for?” I exclaimed.

“Monsieur Valdez told me to clean it,” he answered quietly. “He gave it to me for that purpose—out of his bureau.”

“He didn’t tell you to carry it about with you while you did your work, did he?”

“No, he didn’t,” said Arsenio’s voice just behind me. The door stood open for the workers, and he had come in, in his usual quiet fashion. I turned round, to find him grinning at me. “Give it here, Louis,” he ordered, and slipped the thing into his own pocket. “The room looks fine now, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“What do you want with your revolver to-day?” I asked.

He looked at me with malicious glee. “Aha, Julius, I did frighten you last night then, after all! You pretended to be very scornful, but I did make an impression! Or else why do you question me about my revolver?”

“I didn’t believe a word of that nonsense you hinted at last night,” I protested. “But what do you want with your revolver?”

[284] “My dear fellow, I don’t want to boast of my wealth, but there’s a considerable sum of money in my bureau—very considerable. No harm in being on the safe side, is there?”

That seemed reasonable: his manner too changed suddenly from derision to a plausible common sense. “Possessing a revolver—as most of us who served do—doesn’t mean that one intends to use it—on oneself or on anybody else, does it?”

I felt at a loss. When he wanted me to believe, I didn’t. When he wanted me not to believe, I did—or, at all events, half did. With Arsenio the plausible sensible explanation was always suspect; to be merely sensible was so contrary to his nature.

The busy men had apparently finished their ridiculous work. Louis came in and looked round with a satisfied air.

“Splendid, Louis!” said Arsenio. “Here, take this thing and put it on the bureau in my room.” As Louis obediently took the revolver and left us alone together, Arsenio added to me: “Don’t spoil your dinner—a good one, I hope, for these hungry days—by taking seriously anything I said last night. Perhaps in the end I did mean—No, I didn’t really. I was wrought up. My friend, wasn’t it natural?”

Well, it was natural, of course. On a man prone to what Lucinda had called “heroics” the hour in which she had given him that kiss—the kiss of farewell, as we had both interpreted it to be—would naturally induce them. I should have been disposed to accept his [285] disclaimer of any desperate intentions, except for the fact that somehow he still seemed to be watching me, watching what effect his words had on me, and rather curiously anxious to efface the impression which the sudden appearance of the revolver had made upon me.

“Last night—yes!” He dropped into a chair. “Her action affected me strangely. It is long since she kissed me. And then to kiss me like that! Can you wonder that I gave way?” He smiled up at me. “One doesn’t easily part from Lucinda. Why, you told me that Waldo—our old Waldo—went nearly mad with rage when I took her from him.” His brows went up and he smiled. “It needed a European War to save me, you said! Well, if my excitements are not as tremendous as Waldo’s, I must admit that they are more frequent. But to-day I’ve come to my senses. Pray believe me, my dear Julius—and don’t let any absurd notion spoil your dinner.”

He was very anxious to convince me. My mind obstinately urged the question: Was he afraid that I might watch him, that I might interfere with his plan? I tried to shake off the notion—not quite successfully. I had a feeling that "heroics" might be like strong drink; a man could indulge in a lot of them, and yet be master of them—and of himself. But there might come a point where they would gain the mastery, and he would be a slave. In which case——

"You think this dinner of mine a mad affair?" I found Arsenio [286] saying. "Well, think so, in your stolid English fashion!" He shrugged his shoulders scornfully. "You don't see what it means? Oh, of course you don't! I suppose you love Lucinda as well—I said, Julius, that you loved Lucinda as well—and the one merit of the English language is, that 'love' is a tolerably distinctive word when applied to a woman—in that damned black frock as if she were dressed as her beauty deserves? Well, I don't; I know—we know, we Southerners—how the setting enhances the jewel. By my cunning incitements—you heard, but you had no ears—she will dress herself to-night; you'll see!" He waved his hands to embrace the room. "And I have given her suitable surroundings!"

"I suppose it's about time that we bedecked ourselves," I suggested, rather wearily.

"Yes—but one moment!" He leant forward in his chair. "What's to become of her, Julius?"

I answered him rather fiercely, brutally perhaps. "I think you've lost the right to concern yourself with that."

"I have, I know. Hence the occasion of this evening. But you, Julius?"

"I shall always be at her service, if she needs help. As you know, she's very independent."

He nodded his head. Then he smiled his monkey smile. "And there's Godfrey Frost, of course. Entirely in a position to assist her! A sound head! A good business man! Wants his price, but——!" [287]

"Oh, damn you, go and dress for your infernal dinner!"

The devil was in him. He got up with a grin. "I doubt whether you'll be very good company! Oh, let's see, where's that revolver? Oh, I gave it back to Louis, so I did! Our esteemed friend ought to be here in half an hour. Do you happen to know that he and Lucinda have been to the Lido together this afternoon? No, you don't? Oh, yes! My friend Alessandro and I saw them embarking. Doesn't that fact add a further interest to this evening? But look at the room—the table! Shall we not outshine the Frost millions to-night—you and I, Julius?"

"It isn't my affair, thank God!"

"Oh, that's as it may turn out! *Au revoir*, then, in half an hour!"

He succeeded in leaving me in about as bewildered a state of mind as I have ever been in in all my life; I, who have often had to decide whether a politician was an honest man or not!——

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE BANQUET

SINCE I was not to play host that evening, I decided to let Arsenio be first on the gaudy scene which he had prepared. He should receive the other guests; he should take undivided responsibility for the decorations. I waited until I heard him come down and speak to Louis, and even until I heard—as I very well could, in my little bedroom adjoining the *salon*—Louis announcing first "Monsieur Froost," and then—no, it was fat old Amedeo who effected the second announcement, arrogating to himself the rights of an old family servant—that of the most excellent and noble Signora Donna Lucinda Valdez. Thereupon I entered, Amedeo favoring me with no laudatory epithets, but leaving me to content myself with Louis' brief "Monsieur Reelinton."

Lucinda was in splendor; she was—as I, at least, had never before seen her—a grown woman in a grown woman's evening finery. Through all her wanderings she must have dragged this gown about, a relic of her pre-war status—for all I knew, part of the *trousseau* of the prospective Mrs. Waldo Rillington! But it did not [289] look seriously out of fashion. (If I remember right, women dressed on substantially the same lines just before the war as they did in the first months after it.) It was a white gown, simple but artistic, of sumptuous material. She wore no ornaments—it was not difficult to conjecture the reason for that—only her favorite scarlet flower in her fair hair; yet the effect of her was one of magnificence—of a restrained, tantalizing richness, both of body and of raiment.

Whether she had arrayed herself thus in kindness or in cruelty, or in some odd mixture of the two, indulging Arsenio's freak with one hand, while the other buffeted him with a vision of what he had lost, I know not; but a glance at her face showed that her tenderer mood was now past. Arsenio's decorations had done for it! She was looking about her with brows delicately raised, with amusement triumphant on her lips and in her eyes. If Arsenio's frippery had been meant to appeal to anything except her humor, it had failed disastrously. It had driven her back to her scorn, back to her conception of him as a trickster, a mountebank, a creature whose promises meant nothing, whose threats meant less; an amusing ape —and there an end of him!

But perhaps the plate and the festoons might impress the third guest, who completed Arsenio's party. Godfrey Frost did not, at first sight, seem so much as to notice them, to know that they were there. His eyes were all for Lucinda. Small wonder, indeed! but they [290] did not seek or follow her in frank and honest admiration, nor yet in the chivalrous though sorrowful longing of unsuccessful love. There was avidity in them, but also anger and grudge; rancor struggling with desire. He was not looking amiable, the third guest. He set me wondering what had passed on the Lido that afternoon.

Arsenio sat down with the air of a man who had done a good day's work and felt justified in enjoying his dinner and his company. He set Lucinda to his right at the little square table, Godfrey to his left, myself opposite. He gave a glance round the three of us.

"Ah, you're amused," he said to Lucinda, with his quick reading of faces. "Well, you know my ways by now!" His voice sounded good-humored, free from chagrin or disappointment. "And, after all, it's my first and last celebration of the bit of luck that Number Twenty-one at last brought me."

"The first and last bit of luck too, I expect," she said; but she too was gay and easy.

"Yes, I shall back it no more; its work is done. Not bad champagne, is it, considering? Louis got it somehow. I told you he'd bring luck, Julius! Louis, fill Mr. Frost's glass!" He sipped at his own, and then went on. "The charm of a long shot, of facing long odds—that's what I've always liked. That's the thing for us gamblers! And who isn't a gambler—willingly or *malgré lui*? He who lives gambles; so does he who dies—except, of course, for the saving [291] rites of the Church."

"You were a little late with that reservation, Arsenio," I remarked.

"You heretics are hardly worthy of it at all," he retorted, smiling.

“But, to gamble well, you must gamble whole-heartedly. No balancing of chances, no cutting the loss, no trying to have it both ways. Don’t you agree with me, Frost?”

“I don’t believe that Mr. Frost agrees with you in the least,” Lucinda put in. “He thinks it’s quite possible to have it both ways. Don’t you, Mr. Frost? To win without losing is your idea!”

He gave her a long look, a reluctant sour smile. She was bantering him—over something known to them, only to be conjectured by Arsenio and me; something that had passed on the Lido? She had for him a touch of the detached scornful amusement which Arsenio’s decorations had roused in her, but with a sharper tang in it—more bite to less laughter.

“I’m not a gambler, though I’m not afraid of a business risk,” he answered.

She laughed lightly. “A business risk would never have brought the splendor of to-night!” She smiled round at the ridiculously festooned walls.

We were quickly disposing of an excellent, well-served dinner; Louis was quick and quiet, fat Amedeo more sensible than he looked, undoubtedly a good cook was in the background. Growing physically very comfortable, I got largely rid of the queer apprehensions which had haunted me; I paid less heed to Arsenio, [292] and more to the secret subtle duel which seemed to be going on between the other two. Arsenio played more with his topic—birth, death, life, love—all gambles into which men and women were involuntarily thrown, with no choice but to play the cards or handle the dice; all true and obvious in a superficial sort of way, but it seemed rather trifling—a mood in which life can be regarded, but one in which few men or women really live it. That he was one of the few himself, however, I was quite prepared to concede; the magnitude of his gains—and of his loss—as convincing.

Louis and Amedeo served us with coffee and Louis set a decanter of brandy in front of Arsenio.

Then they left us alone. Arsenio poured himself out a glass of brandy, and handed the decanter round. Holding his glass in his hand, he turned to Lucinda. “Will you drink with me—to show that you forgive my sins?”

Her eyes widened a little at the suddenness of the appeal; but she smiled still, and answered lightly, “Oh, I’ll drink with you——” She sipped her brandy—“in memory of old days, Arsenio!”

“I see,” he said, nodding his head at her gravely. She had refused to drink with him on his terms; she would do it only on her own. “Still—you shall forgive,” he persisted with one of his cunning smiles. Then he turned suddenly to Godfrey Frost with a change of manner—with a cold malice that I had never seen in him before, a malice with no humor in it, a straightforward viciousness. “Then let [293] us drink together, my friend!” he said. “It was with that object that I brought you here to-night. We’ll drink together, as we have failed together, Godfrey Frost! A business risk you spoke of just now! It wasn’t a bad speculation! A couple of hundred or so—Oh, I had more from your cousin, but her motives were purely charitable, eh?—just a beggarly couple of hundred for a chance at that!” A gesture indicated Lucinda. His voice rose; it took on its rhetorical note, and the words fell into harmony with it. “To buy a man’s honor and beauty like that for a couple of hundred—not a bad risk!”

Godfrey looked as if he had been suddenly hit in the face; he turned a deep red and leant forward towards his host—his very queer host. He was too shaken up to be ready with a reply. Lucinda sat motionless, apparently aloof from the scene. But a very faint smile was still on her lips.

“What the devil’s the use of this sort of thing?” I expostulated—in a purely conventional spirit, with one’s traditional reprobation of “scenes.” My feeling somehow went no deeper. It seemed then an inevitable thing that these three should have it out, before they went their several ways; the conventions were all broken between them.

“Because the truth’s good for him—and for me; for both of us who trafficked in her.”

Lucinda suddenly interposed, in a delicate scorn, an unsparing truthfulness. “It’s only because you’ve failed yourself that you’re [294] angry with him, Arsenio. Let him alone; he’s had enough truth from me this afternoon—and a lot of good advice. I told him to go home—

to Nina Dundrannan. And for Heaven's sake don't talk about 'trafficking,' as if you were some kind of a social reformer!"

She turned to me, actually laughing; and I began to laugh too. Well, Godfrey looked absurd—like a dog being whipped by two people at once, not knowing which he most wanted to bite, not sure whether he dared bite either—possibly thinking also of a third whipping which would certainly befall him if he followed Lucinda's good advice. And Arsenio, cruelly let down from his heroics, looked funnily crestfallen too. He was not allowed to be picturesquely, rhetorically indignant—not with Godfrey, not even with himself!

"Besides," she added, "he did offer to stick to his engagement to lunch with me that day at Cimiez!"

The mock admiration and gratitude with which she recalled this valiant deed—to which she might, in my opinion, well have dedicated a friendlier tone, since it was no slight exploit for him to beard his Nina in that fashion—put a limit to poor Godfrey's tongue-tied endurance.

"Yes, you were ready enough to take my lunches, and what else you could get!" he sneered.

Lucinda gave me just a glance; here was a business reckoner indeed! Of course he had some right on his side, but he saw his [295]
right so carnally; why couldn't he have told her that they'd been friends—and who could be only a friend to her? That was what, I expect, he meant in his heart; but his instincts were blunt, and he had been lashed into soreness.

Still, though I was feeling for him to that extent, I could not help returning Lucinda's glance with a smile, while Arsenio chuckled in an exasperating fashion. It was small wonder really that he pushed back his chair from the table and, looking round at the company, groaned out, "Oh, damn the lot of you!"

The simplicity of this retort went home. I felt guilty myself, and Lucinda was touched to remorse, if not to shame. "I told you not to come to-night," she murmured. "I told you that he only wanted to tease you. You'd better go away, perhaps." She looked at him, and his glance obeyed hers instantly; she put out her hand and laid it on one of his for just a moment. "And, after all, I did like the lunches. You're quite right there! Arsenio, can't we part friends to-night—since we must part, all of us?"

"Oh, as you like!" said Arsenio impatiently. A sudden and deep depression seemed to fall upon him; he sat back, staring dejectedly at the table. He reminded one of a comedian whose jokes do not carry. This banquet was to have been a great, grim joke. But it had fallen flat—sunk now into just a wrangle. And at last his buoyant [296]
malice failed to lift it—failed him indeed completely. We three men sat in a dull silence; I saw Lucinda's eyes grow dim with tears.

Godfrey broke the silence by rising to his feet, clumsily, almost with a stumble; I think that he caught his foot in the tablecloth, which hung down almost to the floor.

"I'll go," he said. "I'm sorry for all this. I've made a damned fool of myself."

Nobody else spoke, or rose.

"If it's any excuse"—he almost stumbled in his speech, as he had almost stumbled with his feet—"I love Lucinda. And you've used her damnably, Valdez."

"For what I've done, I pay. For you—go and learn what love is." This, though as recorded it sounds like his theatrical manner, was not so delivered. It came from him in a low, dreary voice, as though he were totally dispirited. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece; it had gone ten o'clock; he seemed to shiver as he noted the hour. He looked across at me with a helpless appeal in his eyes. He looked like an animal in a trap; a trap bites no less deeply for being of one's own devising.

Godfrey was staring at him now in a dull, uncomprehending bewilderment. Lucinda put her elbows on the table, and supported her chin in her hands, her eyes set inquiringly on his face. I myself [297]
stretched out my hand and clasped one of his. But he shook off my grasp, raised his hands in the air and let them fall with a thud on the table; all the things on it rattled; even the heavy plate that he had bought or hired—I didn't know which—for his futile banquet. Then he blurted out, in the queerest mixture of justification, excuse, defiance, bravado: "Oh, you don't understand, but to me it means damnation! And I can't do it; now—now the time's come, I can't!"

There was no doubt about his actual, physical shuddering now.

Lucinda did not move; she just raised her eyes from where he sat to where Godfrey stood. “You’d better go,” she said. “Julius and I must manage this.” Her tone was contemptuous still.

I got up and took Godfrey’s arm. He let me lead him out of the room without resistance, and, while I was helping him on with his hat and coat, asked in a bewildered way, “What does it mean?”

“He meant to go out in a blaze of glory—with a *beau geste*! But he hasn’t got the pluck for it at the finish. That’s about the size of it.”

“My God, what a chap! What a queer chap!” he mumbled, as he began to go downstairs. He turned his head back. “See you to-morrow?”

“Lord, I don’t know! I’ve got him to look after. He might find his courage again! I can’t leave him alone. Good-night.” I watched him down to the next landing, and then went back towards the *salon*. I did not think of shutting the outer door behind me. [298]

Just on the threshold of the *salon* I met Arsenio himself in the act of walking out of the room, rather unsteadily. “Where are you going?” I demanded angrily.

“Only to get some whisky. I’ve a bottle in my room. I want a whisky-and-soda. It’s all right; it really is now, old fellow.”

“I shall come with you.” I knew of a certain thing that he had in his own room upstairs, and was not going to trust him alone.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, but made no further objection. “We’ll be back in a minute,” I called out to Lucinda, who was still sitting at the table, her attitude unchanged. Then Arsenio and I passed through the open door and went up the stairs together. As we started on our way, he said, with a curious splutter that was half a sob in his voice, “Lucinda knows me best, and you see she’s not afraid. She didn’t try to stop me.”

“She’s never believed you meant it at all; but I did,” I answered.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE MASCOT

ARSENIO opened the door of the apartment with his latchkey and stood aside to let me pass in first. The door of his sitting room, the long, narrow room which I have described before, stood slightly ajar, and a light shone through it. I advanced across the passage—the hall could hardly be called more—and flung the door wide open as I entered, Arsenio following just behind.

There, in the middle of the room, two or three paces from the big bureau, one side of which flapped open, showing shelves and drawers, stood Louis the valet, the waiter from that "establishment" of Arsenio's at Nice, the seller of the winning ticket, the author of Arsenio's luck. In his left hand he held, clasped against his body, a large black leather portfolio or letter case; in his right was the revolver which his master had given him to clean.

He stood quite still, frightened, as it seemed, into immobility, glaring at us with a terrified face. He had thought that we were safely bestowed, round the table downstairs, for some time to come. Our footsteps on the stairs had disturbed him when his work was [300] almost finished; our entrance cut off his retreat. Even if he had had the presence of mind to bar the door, it would have given him only a brief respite; escape by the window was impossible; but he did not look as if he were capable of reckoning up the situation, or his chances, at all. He was numb with fear.

"Drop that thing, you scoundrel!" I cried; and it is my belief to this day that he would have obeyed me, put down his weapon, and meekly surrendered, if he had been let alone. He was certainly not built for a burglar or for deeds of violence, though I suppose the possession of the revolver had nerved him to this enterprise of his.

But Arsenio did not let him alone, or wait to see the effect of my order. Even as I spoke, he dashed forward in front of me, uttering a wild cry; it did not sound like fear—either for his money or for his life—or even like rage; really, it sounded more like triumph than anything else. And he made straight for the armed man, utterly regardless of the weapon that he held.

Thus put to it, Louis fired—once, twice. Arsenio ran, as it were, right on to the first bullet. I had darted forward to support his attempt to rush the thief—if that really was what he had in his mind—and he fell back plump into my arms, just as the second bullet whizzed past my head. Then with a yell of sheer horror—at what he had done, I suppose—Louis dropped the revolver with a bang on the [301] floor, dropped the fat portfolio too with a flop, and, before I, cumbered with Arsenio's helpless body, could do anything to stop him, bolted out of the room like a scared rabbit. I heard his feet pattering down the stairs at an incredible pace.

Arsenio was groaning and clutching at his chest. I supported him to his shabby old sofa, and laid him down there. Then I violently rang the bell which communicated with the ground floor where Amedeo abode.

The next moment Lucinda came into the room—very quickly, but calmly. "Did he do it himself, after all?"

"No, Louis; he'd been rifling the bureau; and the revolver——"

"Ah, it was Louis that I heard running downstairs! I'll look after him. Go for a doctor." There were no telephones in the old *palazzo*; the owner had not spent his precarious gains in that fashion!

"I thought of sending Amedeo——"

"You'll be quicker. Go, Julius." She knelt down by Arsenio's sofa.

As I went on my errand—I knew of a doctor who lived quite close—I met old Amedeo, lumbering upstairs, half-dressed, and told him what had happened. "He looks very bad," I added.

Amedeo flung up his hands with pious ejaculations. "As I go by the *piano nobile* I'll call Father Garcia, and take him up with me. [302] Don Arsenio's a good Catholic."

Yes! That fact perhaps had something to do with the course which events had ultimately taken that night!

When I got back with the doctor—he had gone to bed, and kept me waiting—Arsenio had been moved into his bedroom. The priest was still with him, but, when he was informed of the doctor's

arrival, he came out and Amedeo took the doctor in to the patient, on whom Lucinda was attending.

Father Garcia was a tall, imposing old ecclesiastic, of Spanish extraction, and apparently a friend of the Valdez family, for he spoke of "Arsenio" without prefix. "I have done my office. The doctor can do nothing—Oh, I've seen many men die in the war, and I can tell! He's just conscious, but he can hardly speak—it hurts him to try. Poor Arsenio! His father was a very worthy man, and this poor boy was a good son of the Church. For the rest——!" He shrugged his ample shoulders; he was probably reflecting the opinions of the aristocratic and antiquated coterie which Arsenio had been in the habit of laying under requisitions when he was in Venice. "But a curious event, a curious event, just after his prodigious luck!" Father Garcia's eyes bulged rather, and they seemed to grow bulgier still as, between sniffs at a pinch of snuff, he exclaimed slowly, "Three million francs! Donna Lucinda will be rich!"

[303] The old fellow seemed disposed to gossip; there was nothing else to do, while we awaited the verdict.

"A gamester, I'm afraid, yes. His father feared as much for him—and a good many of my friends had reason to suspect the same. You're a friend of his, Mr.—er——?"

"My name's Rillington, sir," I said.

He raised his brows above his bulging eyes. "Oh!—er—let me see! Wasn't Donna Lucinda herself a Rillington—or am I making a mistake?"

"Only just," said I. I couldn't help smiling. "Donna Lucinda all but became a Rillington——"

"Ah!" he interrupted. "Now I remember the story. Some visitors from London brought it over in the early days of the war—I think they were propaganda agents of your nation, in fact. It was before Italy made the mis——it was before Italy joined in the war."

"Donna Lucinda's maiden name was Knyvett. Her mother and she once rented this very apartment from Arsenio, I believe."

"Yes, and I think I remember that too." However, he did not seem to remember too much about it, for he went on. "And so the romance started, I suppose! She's a very beautiful woman, Mr. Rillington."

The expression in his eyes justified my next remark. "Whatever else one may say about the poor fellow, he was a devoted lover to his wife, and she was—absolutely true to him."

[304] "I'm old-fashioned enough to think that that covers a multitude of sins. She's not, I gather, a Catholic?"

"No, I believe not."

"A pity!" he said meditatively; whether he was thinking of Lucinda's soul or of her money, I didn't know—and I will forbear from speculating. If he was thinking about the money, it was, of course, only with an eye—a bulging eye—on other people's souls—as well as Lucinda's.

"Pray, sir," I asked, on a sudden impulse, "do you know anything of a friend of Arsenio's here—Signor Alessandro Panizzi?"

"I know what everybody knows," he replied with a sudden fierceness—"that he's a pestilent fellow—a radical, a freemason, an atheist! Was he a friend of Arsenio's?"

"Oh, well, I really don't know. I happened to meet them walking together on the Piazza this afternoon, and Arsenio introduced me."

"Then he kept worse company than any of us suspected," the old priest sternly pronounced. If the opinion thus indicated was a just one, Signor Panizzi must be a very bad man indeed! I was just adding hastily that I knew nothing of the man myself (he had looked the acme of respectability) when Lucinda opened the door of the room and beckoned to me. With a low bow to Father Garcia, who was still looking outraged at the thought of Signor Panizzi, I obeyed her summons.

[305] "He has only a few minutes to live," she whispered hurriedly, as we crossed the passage. "He seems peaceful in mind, and suffers little pain, except when he tries to speak. Still I'm sure there's something he wants to say to you; I saw it in his eyes when I mentioned your name."

He was in bed, partly undressed. The end was obviously very near. The doctor was standing a yard or two from the bed, not

attempting any further ministration. I bent over Arsenio, low down, nearly to his pale face, and laid my hand gently on one of his. He did look peaceful; and, as he saw me, the ghost of his monkeyish smile formed itself on his lips. He spoke, with a groan and an effort: “I told you—Julius—that fellow would—bring me luck. But you never believed—you never believed—in my——” His voice choked, his words ended, and his eyes closed. It was only a few minutes more before we left him to the offices of old Amedeo and the old wife whom he summoned from their cupboard of a place on the ground floor.

By this time the police were on the scene; there is no need to detail their formalities, though they took some time. The case appeared a simple one, but Lucinda and I were told that we must stay where we were, pending investigations, and the arrest and trial of Louis; we knew him by no other name, and knew about him no more than what Arsenio had told me. They let Lucinda retire to her apartment soon after midnight, and me to mine half an hour later; [306] one of them remained on duty in the hall of the *palazzo*; and, of course, they took that portfolio away with them.

In the end the formalities proved to be just that, and no more. Two days later a body was found in the Grand Canal, having been in the water apparently about thirty hours. Amedeo and I identified it. The inference was that, although Louis had no stomach for fighting, he had that form of courage in which his master had at the last moment failed; it is probable that he was not a good Catholic. I felt indebted to him for the manner of his end; it saved us a vast deal of trouble. Poor wretch! I do not believe that he had any more intention of killing Arsenio than I had myself. The knowledge of all that money overcame his cupidity; perhaps he felt some proprietary right in it! The possession of the revolver probably screwed him up to the enterprise. But the actual shooting was, I dare swear, an instinctive act of self-defense; Arsenio’s furious, seemingly exultant, rush terrified him. Anyhow, there was an end of him; the mascot had brought the luck and, having fulfilled its function, went its appointed way.

But by no means yet an end of Don Arsenio Valdez! That remarkable person had prepared posthumous effects, so characteristic of him in their essence, yet so over-characteristic, that he seemed to be skillfully burlesquing or travestying himself: in those last days he must have been in a state of excitement almost [307] amounting to light-headedness (he had seemed barely sane at the banquet), a complete prey to his own vanity and posturing, showing off on the brink of the grave, contriving how to show off even after it had closed over him; and speculating—I do not in the least doubt—how all the business would impress Lucinda. One thing fails to be said about it: he succeeded in stamping it with that vinegary comedy which was the truest hall mark of Monkey Valdez.

Quite early on the morning after the catastrophe—if that be the right word to use—I was sitting in my room, musing over it and awaiting a summons from Lucinda, when I was favored with a call from that eminently respectable (?), most pestilent (?) person, Signor Alessandro Panizzi. After elaborate lamentations and eulogies (it would have warmed Arsenio’s heart to hear them), and explanations of how he, in his important position, was in close touch with the police authorities, and so heard of everything directly it happened, and consequently had heard of this atrocious crime as soon as he was out of his bed—he approached the object of his visit. I was, he had understood from the deceased gentleman, his confidential friend; also an intimate family friend of Donna Lucinda; was I aware that Don Arsenio had made a disposition of his property on the afternoon of the very day of his death?—“a thing which might impress foolish and superstitious people,” Signor Panizzi remarked [308] with a sad but superior smile. He himself, as a notary, had drawn up the document, which Don Arsenio had executed in due form; it was in his custody; he produced from his pocket a copy, or rather an abstract, of the operative part of it. To sum up this instrument as briefly as possible, Arsenio bequeathed: First, ten thousand lire to the Reverend Father Garcia, in trust to cause masses to be said for his soul, should Holy Church so permit (it sounded as if Arsenio had his doubts, whether well-founded or not, I do not know, and, as things had turned out, immaterial); secondly, the entire residue of his estate to his wife, the most excellent Signora Donna Lucinda Valdez, his sole surviving near relative; but, thirdly, should the said most excellent Lady, being already fully provided for (!), accept only

the *palazzo*—as it was his earnest wish that she should accept it, his ancestral residence—and renounce the inheritance of his personal estate, then and in that case, he bequeathed the whole of that personal estate to Signor Alessandro Panizzi and two other gentlemen (I forgot their names, but they were both, I subsequently learnt from Father Garcia, "pestilent" friends of Panizzi's, one may suppose, and naturally pestilent), on a trust to apply the same, in such ways as the law permitted, to the use and benefit of the City of Venice and its inhabitants, which and who were so dear to the heart of the adopted but devoted son of the said City, Arsenio Valdez.

"It is prodigious!" said Signor Alessandro Panizzi. He handed me [309]
the abstract, adding, "You will perhaps like to show it to the Excellent Lady?" He paused. "It is, of course, a question what course she will adopt. The sum is a large one, I understand."

The anxiety that showed itself in his voice was natural and creditable to a Venetian patriot—and quite intelligible too in a gentleman who saw himself with the chance of handling an important public trust. There would be *kudos* to be got out of that! But I did not pay much attention to his anxiety.

"You're right. It is prodigious," I said, smiling broadly in spite of myself. How Arsenio must have enjoyed giving those instructions! No wonder he had looked complacent when I met him with Panizzi on the Piazza; and no wonder that Panizzi had been so deferential. A foretaste for Arsenio of the posthumous praise which he was engineering—the talk of him after his death, the speculation about him! Because, of course, he was quite safe with Lucinda—and he knew it. He was obliged, I believe, though I do not profess to know the law, to leave her part of his property. But it was handsome, more gallant and chivalrous, to give it all to her—in the sure and certain knowledge that she would not take the money brought by the winning ticket! And, next to her in his heart came his dear City of Venice! If not beloved Lucinda, then beloved Venice! The two [310]
Queens of his heart! What a fine flourish! What an exit for himself he had prepared! The plaudits would sound loud and long after he had left the stage.

"It is, of course, possible," I found Signor Panizzi saying, "that our lamented friend had discussed the matter with his wife and that they had——"

"Well, that's not at all unlikely. You'd like me to tell her about this?"

"It would, no doubt, be convenient to have, as soon as possible, an indication of her——"

"Naturally. I'll speak to her, and let you know her views as soon as possible. It is a large sum, as you say. She may desire to take time for consideration." I knew that she would not take five minutes.

"I may tell you—without breach of confidence, I think—that our lamented friend was at first disposed to confine his benefaction, in the event of its becoming operative by his wife's renunciation, to distinctly ecclesiastical charities. I allowed myself the liberty—the honor—of suggesting to him a wider scope. 'Why be sectional?' I suggested. 'The gratitude, the remembrance, of all your fellow citizens—that would be a greater thing, Don Arsenio,' I permitted myself to say. And the idea appealed to him."

"Really, then," I remarked, "Venice is hardly less indebted to you [311]
—Venice as a whole, I mean—than to poor Arsenio himself!"

"No, no, I couldn't allow that to be said. But I'm proud if I, in any way, had a humble——"

"Exactly. And if that comes out—and surely why shouldn't it?—everybody will be very grateful to you—except perhaps the distinctly ecclesiastical charities! By the way, do you know this Father Garcia? He's living in this house, on the first floor, and we called him in to see Arsenio—last night, you know,—before he died."

"I don't know Father Garcia personally," he said stiffly, "but very well by repute." He paused; I waited to see what he would say of Father Garcia. "An utter reactionary, a black reactionary, and none too good an Italian." He lowered his voice and whispered, "Strongly suspected of Austrian sympathies!"

"I see," I replied gravely. He had almost got even with the old priest's "pestilent."

He rose and bade me a ceremonious farewell. As he went out, he said, "This bequest—and whether it comes into operation or not, it must receive publicity—coming from a member of the old

reactionary nobility—from a Spanish Catholic—may well be considered to mark a stage in the growing solidarity of Italy.”

That seemed as much as even Arsenio himself could have expected of it!

CHAPTER XXV

HOMAGE

LUCINDA'S mental idiosyncrasy resisted any attempt at idealization; for all that she had accused me of making the attempt. Though she would not persist in cruelty, and would remove herself from the temptation to it when once she had realized what it was, yet she could be, and had been, cruel. In like manner she could be hard and callous, very inaccessible to sentimentality, to that obvious appeal to the emotions which takes its strength from our common humanity, with its common incidents—its battle, murder, and sudden death—and so on. She did not accept these things at their face value, or in what one may call their universal aspect. In her inner mind—she was not very articulate, or at all theoretical, about it—but in her inner mind she seemed to re-value each of such incidents by an individual and personal standard which, in its coolness and intellectual detachment, certainly approached what most of us good human creatures—so ready to cry, as we are so ready to laugh—would call a degree of callousness. There was a considerable clear-sightedness in this disposition of hers, but also [313] fully that amount of error which (as I suppose) our own personality always introduces into our judgments of people. We see them through our own spectacles, which sometimes harden and sometimes soften the outlines of the objects regarded—among which is included the wearer of the spectacles.

She had loved Arsenio once; she had cleaved unto him with a fidelity to which—in these days—her own word "primitive" must be allowed to be the most obviously applicable; remorse had smitten her over her cruelty to him. All the same, in a measure she erred about him, judging his love solely by the standard of his conduct, his romance in the light of his frivolity and shamelessness, his sensibility by his failure adequately to understand a subtle and specialized sensibility in herself. That, at least, was the attitude to which her years of association with him—now intimate, now distant and aloof—had brought her. It was not, of course, to be attributed in anything like its entirety to the girl whom he had kissed at Cragsfoot, or whom he had loved at Venice, or carried off from Waldo. Her final judgment of him was the result of what is called, in quite another connection, a progressive revelation.

Thus it happened that his tragic death was—to put it moderately—no more tragic to her than it was to me his friend rather by circumstances than choice or taste, by interest and amusement more than by affection. She took him at his word, so to say, and [314] accepted the note of ironical comedy which he himself was responsible for importing into the occurrence. Keen-eyed for that aspect, and in a bitter way keenly appreciative of it, she was blind to any other, and indeed reluctant to try to see it—almost afraid that, even dead, he might befool her again, still irremediably suspicious that he was deceiving her by lies and posturings. As a result, she was really and truly—in the depths of her soul—unmoved by the catastrophe, and not unamused by the trappings with which Arsenio had be-draped it—or, rather, his previously rehearsed but never actually presented, version of it.

For the outside observer—comparatively outside, anyhow—and for the amateur of comedy and its material—human foibles, prejudices, ambitions—there was amusement to be had. As soon as Lucinda's decision to renounce the inheritance—except the *palazzo* which, as she observed to me, had been honestly come by, and honestly preserved by being let out in lodgings—Arsenio's last will and testament became an animated topic of the day—and a rather controversial one. The clericals and their journals—Signor Panizzi's black reactionaries and pro-Austrians—paid lip-service to the ten thousand lire for masses, but could not refrain from some surprise at the choice of trustees which the lamented Don Arsenio—a good Catholic and of old noble stock—had made (the trustees were all pestilent, as I had suspected); while the other side—the patriots, the [315] enlightened, the radicals, the pestilents, while most gratefully acknowledging his munificence, and belauding the eminent gentlemen to whom he had confided his trust, pointed out with satisfaction how the spirit of progress and enlightenment had proved too strong in the end even for a man of Don Arsenio's

clerical antecedents and proclivities. As for Signor Panizzi, both sides agreed that his finger had been in the pie; his position as first and dominating trustee was for the one a formidable menace to, and for the other a sufficient guarantee of, a wise, beneficial, and honest administration of the fund.

Under the spur of this public interest and discussion, Don Arsenio's funeral assumed considerable dimensions, and was in fact quite an affair—with a sprinkling of "Blacks," a larger sprinkling of "pestilents," a big crowd of curious Venetian citizens, a religious service of much pomp conducted by Father Garcia, followed at the graveside (the priests and the "Blacks" having withdrawn with significant ceremony) by a fiery panegyric from Signor Panizzi. Altogether, when I next go to Venice, I shall not be surprised to see a statue of Arsenio there; I hope that the image will wear a smile on its face—a smile of his old variety.

Lucinda did not attend the ceremony; it would have been too much for her feelings—for some of her feelings, at all events. But to my surprise I saw Godfrey Frost there. I had been thrust, against my [316] will, into the position of one of the chief mourners; he kept himself more in the background, and did not join me until the affair was finished. Then we extricated ourselves from the crowd as soon as we could, and made our way back together, ending up by sitting down to a cup of coffee on the Piazza. I had seen and heard nothing of him since his disordered exit from my apartment, just before the catastrophe. I had indeed been inclined to conclude that he had left Venice and, not thinking that his condolences would be well received, had left none behind him. But here he was—and in a gloomy and disgruntled state of mind, as it seemed. He had been thinking things over, no doubt—with the natural conclusion that he had not got much profit or pleasure out of the whole business, out of that acquaintance with the Valdez's, which he had once pursued so ardently.

"I didn't choose to seem to run away," he told me, "in case there was any investigation, or a trial, or anything of that kind. Besides"—he added this rather reluctantly—"I had a curiosity to see the last of the fellow. But they tell me I shan't be wanted, as things have turned out, and I'm off to-morrow—going home, Julius."

There was evidently more that he wanted to say. I smoked in silence.

"I don't want to see Lucinda—Madame Valdez," he blurted out, after a pause. "But I wish you'd just say that I'm sorry if I annoyed her. I've made a fool of myself; I'm pretty good at business; but a [317] fool outside it—so far, at least. I don't understand what she was up to, but—well, I'm willing to suppose——"

I helped him out. "You're willing to give a lady the benefit of the doubt? It's usual, you know. I've very little doubt that she'll make friends with you now, if you like."

He turned to me with a smile, rather sour, yet shrewd. "Would you think that good enough yourself?"

At first I thought that he was questioning me as to the state of my own affections. But the words which he immediately added—in a more precise definition of his question—showed that he was occupied with his own more important case. "In my place—situated as I am, you know?"

As a result of shock, or of meditation thereupon, or of contemplation of the lamentable life and death of Arsenio Valdez, Mr. Godfrey Frost was becoming himself again! I do not think that the Wesleyan strain had anything to do with the matter at this stage. It was the Frost business instinct that had revived, the business view. Godfrey might have counted the world well lost for Lucinda's love—at all events, well risked; business-risked, so to put it. But not for the mere friendship, the hope of which I had held out to him. "In my place—situated as I am." The phrases carried a good deal to me, a tremendous lot to him. The world—such a world as his [318] —was not to be lost, or bartered, for less than a full recompense. After all, whoever did talk of losing his world for friendship? Most people think themselves meritorious if they lose a hundred pounds on that score. And Godfrey had in all likelihood—the precise figures were unknown—already dropped a good deal more than that, and had taken in return little but hard words and buffeting. No wonder the Frost instinct looked suspiciously at any further venture! Not of actual money, of course; that stood only as a symbol; and to be even an adequate symbol would have required immense multiplication. If

a symbol were to be used in any seriousness, the old one served best—the old personification of all that he, in an hour of urgent impulse, had been willing to lose or to risk for Lucinda.

"Well, my dear fellow," I said urbanely, "there were always circumstances, to which we needn't refer in detail, that made any intimate acquaintance between you and the Valdez's—well, difficult. Affectation to deny it! I've even felt it myself; of course in a minor degree."

"Why a minor degree?" he asked rather aggressively. "If I'm Nina's cousin, you're Waldo's!"

"There's all the difference," I said decisively, though I was not at all prepared to put the difference into words. However, I made a weak and conventional effort: "Old Waldo's so happy now that he can't bear any malice——"

He cut across the lame inadequacy of this explanation (not that [319]
there wasn't a bit of truth in it).

"I'm damned rich," he observed moodily, "and everybody behaves to me as if I was damned important—except you and the Valdez's, of course. But I'm not free. Let's have a liqueur to wash down that coffee, shall we?"

I agreed, and we had one. It was not a moment to refuse him creature comforts.

"I'm part of the concern," he resumed, after a large sip. "And jolly lucky to be, of course—I see that. But it limits what one may call one's independence. It doesn't matter a hang what you do, Julius (This to me, London representative of Coldston's!)—Oh, privately, I mean, of course. But with me, private life—well, family life, I mean—and business are so infernally mixed up together. Nina can't absolutely give me the sack, but it would be infernally inconvenient not to be on terms with her." He paused, and added impressively: "It might in the end break up the business."

One might as well think of breaking up the great Pyramid or Mount Popocatepetl! Too large an order even for an age of revolution!

"But you and Nina have nothing to quarrel about," I expostulated —dishonestly.

He eyed me, again smiling sourly. "Oh, come, you know better than that!" his smile said, though his tongue didn't. "And, besides, it would upset that idea that she and I talked over, and that rather [320]
particularly attracted me. I think I spoke to you about it? About Cragsfoot, you know."

"Have you heard from Lady Dundrannan lately?" I inquired.

"No—not since I left the Villa." He made this admission rather sulkily.

"Ah, then you're not up-to-date! Cragsfoot's all arranged. I'm to have it." And I told him about the family arrangement.

Here I must confess to a bit of malicious triumph. The things envisaged itself to me as a fight between Rillington and Frost, and Rillington had won. Waldo's old allegiance had resisted complete absorption. But my feeling was—at the moment—rather ungenerous; he was a good deal humbled already.

He took the disappointment very well. "Well, it was a fancy of mine, but of course you ought to have the first call, if Waldo sells out. So you'll be living at Cragsfoot after Sir Paget's death?" He appeared to ruminate over this prospect.

"Yes—and I hope to be there a good deal of my time, even before that."

"With Nina and Waldo for your neighbors at Briarmount?"

"Of course. Why not? What do you mean? I shall see you there too sometimes, I hope."

"I hope you'll get on well with her." He was smiling still, though in a moody, malicious way—as one is apt to smile when contemplating the difficulties or vexations of others. "You and your [321]
family," he added the next moment. And with that he rose from his chair. "No good asking you to dine to-night, I suppose?" I shook my head. "No, you'll have to be on hand, of course! Well, good-by, then. I'm off early to-morrow." He held out his hand. "It'll interest Nina to hear about all this." He waved his hand round Venice, but no doubt he referred especially to the death and burial of the eminent Don Arsenio Valdez.

"Pray give her my best regards. Pave the way for me as a

neighbor, Godfrey!”

“Taking everything together, it’ll need a bit of smoothing, perhaps.” He nodded to me, and strolled away across the Piazza.

His words had given me material for a half-amused, half-scared reflection—the mood which the neighborhood of Lady Dundrannan—and much more the possibility of any conflict with Lady Dundrannan—always aroused in me. Sir Paget’s letter had reflected—in a humor slightly spiced with restiveness—the present relations between Cragsfoot and Briarmount. What would they be with me in residence, and presently in possession? With me and my family there, as Godfrey Frost said? My family which did not exist at present!

But I did not sit there reflecting. I paid for our refreshments—Godfrey, in his preoccupation, had omitted even to offer to do so—and went back to the *palazzo*. Old Amedeo waylaid me in the hall and told me that Donna Lucinda had requested me to pay her a visit [322] as soon as I returned from the funeral; but he prevented me from obeying her invitation for a few minutes. He was in a state of exultation that had to find expression.

“Ah, what a funeral! You saw me there? No! But I was, of course. A triumph! The name of Valdez will stand high in Venice henceforth! Oh, I don’t like Panizzi and that lot, any more than Father Garcia does. My sympathies are clerical. None the less, it was remarkable! Alas, what wouldn’t Don Arsenio have done if he hadn’t been cut off in his youth!”

That was a question which I felt—and feel—quite incapable of answering, save in the most general and non-committal terms. “Something astonishing!” I said with a nod, as I dodged past the broad barrier of Amedeo’s figure and succeeded in reaching the staircase.

Right up to the top of the tall old house I had to go this time—past Father Garcia and his noble “Black” friends, past the scene of the banquet and the scene of the catastrophe. I think that Lucinda must have been listening for my steps; she opened the door herself before I had time to knock on it.

She was back in the needlewoman’s costume now—her black frock, with her shawl about her shoulders. Perhaps this attire solved the problem of mourning in the easiest way; or perhaps it was a declaration of her intentions. I did not wait to ask myself that; the [323] expression of her face caught my immediate attention. It was one of irrepressible amusement—of the eager amusement which seeks to share itself with another appreciative soul. She caught me by the hand, and drew me in, leading me through the narrow passage to the door of her sitting room—much of a replica of Arsenio’s on the floor below, though the ceiling was less lofty and the windows narrower.

Then I saw what had evoked the expression on her face. Between the windows, propped up against the discolored old hangings on the wall, stood the largest wreath of *immortelles* which I have ever seen on or off a grave, in or out of a shop window; and, occupying about half of the interior of the circle, there was a shield, or plaque, of purple velvet—Oh, very sumptuous!—bearing an inscription in large letters of gold:

“To the Illustrious Donna Lucinda Valdez and to the Immortal Memory of the Illustrious Señor Don Arsenio Valdez, the City and Citizens of Venice offer Gratitude and Homage.”

“Isn’t it—tremendous?” whispered Lucinda, her arm now in mine.

“It certainly is some size,” I admitted, eyeing the creation ruefully.

“No, no! The whole thing, I mean! Arsenio himself! Oh, how I should like to tell them the truth!”

“The funeral too was—tremendous,” I remarked. “But I suppose [324] Amedeo’s told you?”

“Yes, he has! Also Father Garcia, who paid me a visit of condolence. And a number of Arsenio’s noble friends have sent condolences by stately, seedy menservants. Oh, and those trustees have left their cards, of course! Panizzi and the others!”

All this time we had been standing arm in arm, opposite the portentous monument of grief, gratitude, and homage. Now Lucinda withdrew her hand from my arm, and sank into a chair.

“I’m having fame thrust upon me! I’m being immortalized. The munificent widow of the munificent Arsenio Valdez! I’m becoming a

public character! Oh, he is having his revenge on me, isn’t he? Julius, I can’t stand it! I must fly from Venice!”

My attention stuck on the monstrous wreath. “What are you going to do with that?”

“I wonder if there would ever be a dark enough night to tie a flat-iron to it, steal out with it round our necks, and drop it in the Grand Canal!” Lucinda speculated wistfully.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE AIR ON THE COAST

"AND did a dark enough night ever come, Julius?" Sir Paget asked with a chuckle.

It was late summer. I had arrived that day to pay him a visit and, incidentally, to complete the transaction by which Waldo was to convey to me the reversion to Cragsfoot. My uncle and I sat late together after dinner, while I regaled him with the story of the last days of Arsenio Valdez—of his luck, his death, and his glorification.

"Alas, sir, such things can't actually happen in this world. They're dreams—Platonic ideas laid up in heaven—inward dispositions towards things which can't be literally translated into action! We did it in our souls. But, no; the wreath doesn't, in bare and naked fact, lie at the bottom of the Grand Canal. It hangs proudly in the hall of Palazzo Valdez, the apple of his eye to fat old Amedeo, with whom Lucinda left it in charge—a pledge never likely to be demanded back—when she leased the *palazzo* to him. He undertakes the upkeep and expenses, pays her about two hundred a year for it, and expects to do very well by letting out the apartments. He considers that the [326]
wreath will add prestige to the place and enhance its letting value. Besides, he's genuinely very proud of it, and the Valdez legend loses nothing in his hands, I assure you."

"It's a queer story. And that's the end of it, is it? Because it's nearly six months since our friend the Monkey, as you boys used to call him, played his last throw—and won!"

"There's very little more to tell. As you know, Sir Ezekiel's death sent me on my travels once again—to the States and South America; I was appointed Managing Director, and had to go inspecting, and reorganizing, and so forth. That's all settled. I'm established now in town—and here, thank God, I am—at old Cragsfoot again!"

"You've certainly been a good deal mixed up in the affair—by fate or choice," he said, smiling, "but you're not the hero, are you? Arsenio claims that *rôle*! Or the heroine! What of her, Julius?"

"She came back to England four or five months ago. She's living in rooms at Hampstead. She's got the *palazzo* rent, and she still does her needlework; she gets along pretty comfortably."

"You've seen her since you came back, I suppose?"

"Yes, pretty nearly every day," I answered. "She was the first person I went to see when I got back to London; she was the last person I saw before I left London this morning."

He sat rubbing his hands together, and looking into the bright [327]
fire of logs that his old body found pleasant now, even on summer evenings; the wind blows cold off the sea very often at Cragsfoot.

"You're telling me the end of the story now, aren't you, Julius?"

"Yes, I hope and think so. Indeed, why shouldn't I say that I know it? I think that we both knew from the hour of Arsenio's death. We had been too much together—too close in spirit through it all—for anything else. How could we say good-by and go our separate ways after all that? It would have seemed to us both utterly unnatural. First, my head had grown full of her—in those talks at Ste. Maxime that I told you we'd had; and, when a woman's concerned, the heart's apt to follow the head, isn't it?"

"I don't wonder at either head or heart. She was a delightful child; she seems to have grown into a beautiful woman—yes, she would have—and one that might make a man think about her. There was nothing between you while he lived? No, I don't ask that question, I've no right to—and, I think, no need to."

"With her there couldn't have been; it was as impossible as it proved in the end for her to marry Waldo. For her it was a virtue in me that I knew it."

"She wasn't married to Arsenio Valdez when she ran away from Waldo?"

"In her own eyes she was, and when he called her—called her [328]
back—well, she had to go."

"Ah, I've sometimes fancied that there might have been some untold history like that."

"She now wishes that you and Waldo—just you two—should know

that there was. Will you tell him, sir? I'd rather not. She thinks it may make you and him feel more gently to her; she's proud herself, you know, and was sorry to wound others in their pride."

"It's generous of her. I'll tell him—what I must; and you need tell me no more than you have. I shouldn't wonder if the idea isn't quite new to him either. There are—quarters—from which something of the sort may have been suggested, eh, Julius?"

"I know nothing as to that, but, as you say, it's very possible. You'll have gathered how the feelings of these two ladies towards one another runs through the whole business. And we're not finished with them yet. Before Waldo sets his hand to that agreement, he must know that the arrangement which is to bring me to Cragsfoot will bring Lucinda there too."

"Yes, as its mistress; even in my lifetime, if she so pleases; after me, in any case." He looked across to me, smiling. "And the moment so difficult—the more difficult because it's otherwise so triumphant! The Heir-Apparent is born—a month ago—I wrote you about it. The dynasty is assured; Her Majesty is at her grandest and—I will add— [329]
her most gracious. I saw her about again for the first time the day before yesterday, and she said to me, 'Now I'm really content, Sir Paget!'—implying, as it seemed to me, that the subject world ought to be content also. All the Court was there—the Heir itself, our dear old Prince Consort, the Grand Vizier—forgive me mixing East and West, but that seems to be the sort of position which she assigns to young Godfrey Frost; an exalted but precarious position, with a throne on one hand, and a bowstring on the other! Oh, yes, and there was a Lady-in-Waiting into the bargain, a pretty girl called Eunice Something-or-other."

"Oh, yes, she was at Villa San Carlo—Eunice Unthank," said I, smiling. Nina—pertinacious as a limpet!

"And now we're to come breaking in on this benevolent despotism! Our schemes border on conspiracy, don't they?" He grew graver, though he still smiled whimsically. "A reconciliation possible?" he suggested doubtfully.

I laughed. "There's a crowning task for your diplomacy, Sir Paget!"

"If I could change the hearts of women, I should be a wizard, not a diplomatist. Their feuds have a grand implacability beside which the quarrels of nations are trivial and transient affairs. In this matter, I'm a broken reed—don't lean upon me, Julius! And could [330]
you answer for your side—for your fair belligerent?"

"Lucinda makes war by laughing," said I, laughing myself. "But—well, I think she would go on laughing, you know."

"Just what my Lady Dundrannan always hates, and occasionally suspects—even in me!"

"I wish to blazes that Waldo would have one of his old rages, and tell her it's not her business!"

"I daresay he may wish you hadn't taken so much interest in his runaway *fiancée*," was Sir Paget's pertinent retort. "No, he'll have no rages; like you, I sometimes regret it. If she vetoes, he'll submit." He shook his head. "Here are we poor men up against these grand implacabilities; they transcend our understanding and mock our efforts. Even Arsenio, the great Arsenio, though he made use of them, tripped up over them in the end! What can you and I, and poor Waldo, do?" He got up. "I'll write a line to Waldo on the point—on the two points—to-night; and send it up by the car to-morrow; he can let us know his answer before Stannard is due here, with the deeds, in the afternoon. There might even be time to telephone and stop him from starting, if the answer's a veto!"

Diplomatist though Sir Paget was, man of affairs as I must assume myself to be—or where stands the firm of Coldston's?—our judgments were clumsy, our insight at fault; we did no justice to the fine quality of Lady Dundrannan's pride. It was not to be outdone by [331]
the pride of the needlewoman of Cimiez—outwardly, at all events; and do not many tell us that wholly to conquer, or even conceal, such emotions as fear and self-distrust is a moral triumph, where not to feel them is a mere fluke of nature—just the way one happens to be concocted? The only answer that came to Sir Paget's no doubt very delicately, diplomatically expressed note, came over the telephone (Sir Paget had not trusted its secrecy!), from butler to butler. Marsden at Briarmount told Critcher at Cragsfoot that he was to inform Sir Paget that Colonel Rillington said it was all right about this afternoon. Critcher delivered the message as Sir Paget

and I were sitting in the garden before lunch—on that bench by the garden door whereon Lucinda had once sat, listening fearfully to the quarrel of angry youths.

"Very well, Critcher," said Sir Paget indifferently. But when the man had gone, he turned to me and said, with a tremor in his voice, "So you can come, you see—you and Lucinda, Julius." I had not known till then how much he wanted us. "I say, what would poor old Aunt Bertha have said? She went over, bag and baggage!"

"She'd have come back—with the same *impedimenta*," I declared, laughing.

There was a stateliness in Lady Dundrannan's assent, given by her presence and countenance to the arrangement which the allied family of the Rillingtons had—well, I suppose Waldo had—submitted [332] to her approval. The big Briarmount car—even bigger, more newly yellow, than the car of Cimiez—brought down the whole bunch—all the Court, as Sir Paget had called it. Briarmount's approval was almost overwhelmingly signified. It was not, of course, the thing to mention Lucinda—that was unofficial; perhaps, moreover, slightly shameful. Godfrey, at least, wore an embarrassed air which the ostensible character of the occasion did not warrant; and little Lady Eunice—I suspected that the information had filtered down to her through the other three of them—seemed to look at me with something of the reproachful admiration one reserves for a dare-devil. Waldo, for his part, gave my hand a hard, though surreptitious, squeeze, smiling into my eyes with his old kindness, somehow conveying an immense deal to me about how he for his part felt about the implacabilities, and the way they had affected his life—and now mine. Of course I was myself in the mood to perceive—to exaggerate, or even to imagine—such thoughts in him; but there it was—his eyes traveled from my face to his lady's shapely back (she was putting Mr. Stannard, the lawyer, at his ease—he was a cadet of an old county family, and one of the best known sportsmen in the neighborhood), and back to my face again, and—well, certainly the situation was not lost on Waldo. But it was only after our business was finished—a short recital of the effect of the deeds from Stannard—didn't we know more than he did about that? [333] But no doubt it was proper—and then the signatures ("Dundrannan" witnessing in a fine, bold, decisive hand!)—that he said a word to me. "God give you and yours happiness with the old place, Julius!" The pang of parting from it spoke there, as well as kindliness and forgiveness for us.

Sir Paget insisted—certainly not to the displeasure of Mr. Stannard—on "wetting the signatures" with a bottle of his Pommery 1900. Nina just wetted her lips—even to that vintage she could condescend. Then we all strolled out into the garden, while tea was preparing. There was the old place—the high cliffs above it, one narrow wooded ledge fronting the sea; scant acres, but, as it were, with all our blood in them. I felt like a usurper (in spite of the honest money that I was paying), the younger branch ousting the elder, even through an abdication. But I was a usurper happy and content—as, I daresay, they often are, in spite of the poets and the dramatists. Sir Paget and Stannard paired off; Godfrey and Eunice; Waldo sat down on the bench by the door and lit his pipe; I found myself left with Nina Dundrannan. With the slightest motion of her hand she invited me to accompany her along the walk towards the shrubbery. At once I knew that she meant to say something to me, though I had not the least idea on what lines her speech might run. She could be very candid—had she not been once, long ago, she the [334] "skeleton at the feast"? She could also put the truth very decisively in its proper place—a remote one. Fires burnt in her—I knew that; but who could tell when the flames would show?

There was a seat placed where a gap in the trees gave a view of the sea; here we sat down together. With her usual resoluteness she began at once with what she had made up her mind to say.

"Waldo didn't show me Sir Paget's note, but he told me a piece of news about you which it gave him; he gave me to understand that you and Sir Paget thought that I, as well as he himself, should know it. He told me that the arrangement was no longer repugnant to his own feelings, although it once would have been; he felt both able and willing to ignore the past, and start afresh on terms of friendship with Madame Valdez—with Lucinda. He asked me what my feelings were. I said that in my view that was hardly the question; I had married into the Rillington family; any lady whom Sir Paget and he, the heads of the family, were prepared to accept and

welcome as a member of it, would, as a matter of course, be accepted by me; I should treat her, whenever we met, with courtesy, as I should no doubt be treated by her; a great degree of affection, I reminded Waldo, was not essential or invariable between relations-in-law." Here Lady Dundrannan smiled for a moment. "Least of all should I desire that any supposed feelings of mine should interfere with the family arrangement about Cragsfoot which you all three [335] felt to be desirable; the more so as it had in a way originated with myself, since, if I had wished to make this place our principal residence, the present plan would never have been thought of at all. So I told him to put me entirely out of the question; he would be quite safe in feeling sure that I should accept the situation with a good grace."

She paused, and I took occasion to say: "I think we're all much indebted to you—and myself most of all. Any other attitude on your part would have upset an arrangement which I have come to have very much at heart. I'm grateful to you, Nina."

"You know a great deal—indeed, you probably know pretty well everything—that has happened between Lucinda and me. You wouldn't defend all that she did; I don't defend all I did. When I'm challenged, I fight, and I suppose Jonathan Frost's daughter isn't dainty as to her weapons—that's your point of view about me, anyhow, isn't it? You've always been in her camp. You've always been a critic of me."

"Really I've regretted the whole—er—difficulty and—well, difference, very much."

"You've laughed at it even more than you've regretted it, I think," she remarked drily. "But I've liked you better than you've liked me—though you did laugh at me—and I'm not going to make things difficult or uncomfortable for you. When I accept a state of things, I [336] accept it without reservation. I don't want to go on digging pins in."

"If I have ever smiled—as you accuse me of having done—as well as regretted, it was because I saw your qualities as well as hers. The battle was well joined. You've both had your defeats and your victories. I should like you to be friends now."

"Yes, I believe you would; that's why I'm talking like this to you. But"—her voice took on a sudden ring of strong feeling—"it's impossible. There are such memories between us."

I did not urge the point; it would be useless with her, very likely also with Lucinda. I let it go with a shrug.

She sat for a moment in the stately composed silence that so well became her.

"It's probable that we shall divide our time mainly between London, Dundrannan, and Villa San Carlo in future. It's even likely that if Godfrey settles matters with Eunice Unthank, as I think he will, he'll take a lease of Briarmount. That would not be disagreeable to you, would it?"

"Not the least in the world," I answered, smiling. "I like them both very much."

She turned to me with a bland and simple sincerity of manner. "The doctor thinks that the air on this coast is too strong for baby."

I seemed to be hearing an official bulletin—or *communiqué*, as for some occult reason—or pure love of jargon—they used to call it. [337] There was no question of a reverse at the hands of the enemy; but climatic conditions rendered further operations undesirable; the withdrawal was being effected voluntarily, in perfect order, and without loss. That the enemy was taking possession of the evacuated territory was a circumstance of no military significance whatever—though, to be sure, it might make some little difference to the inhabitants.

"It won't do to run any risks with that precious boy!" I observed, with an approving smile, and (as I flatter myself) with just the artistic shade of jocosity—as if I were gently chaffing her on a genuine but exaggerated maternal solicitude.

"Well, when the doctor says that, what can one do?" asked Lady Dundrannan.

"Oh, one must follow his advice, of course!" I murmured, with a nod of my head.

The bark of our conversation (another metaphor may well be employed to illustrate her skill) being thus piloted through the shoals of truth into the calm deep waters of humbug, its voyage ended prosperously. "I should never forgive myself, and Waldo

would never forgive me, if I took the slightest risk," Nina concluded, as she rose from the seat.

But as we stood there, facing one another—before we began to stroll back to the house—as we stood facing one another, all alone, we allowed ourselves one little relapse into reality.

"Do you think of being off soon?" I asked, with a smile. [338]

She gave me one sharp glance and a contemptuous smile. "Before your wedding—whenever that may be, Julius!"

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[339]

CHAPTER XXVII

IN FIVE YEARS

WINTER had set in again when Lucinda and I came together to Cragsfoot. The picture of her on her first evening there stands out vivid in my memory.

Sir Paget had received her with affectionate, but perhaps somewhat ceremonious, courtesy; there was a touch of ratifying a treaty of peace in his manner. She was minded to come closer in intimacy; for in these recent days—before and just after our wedding—a happy confidence seemed to possess her. Self-defense and the hardness it has to carry with it were necessary to her no longer; she reached out more freely for love and friendship, and broke the bounds of that thoughtful isolation which had so often served to keep the woman herself apart from all about her. She was not on guard now; that was the meaning of the change which had come over her; not on guard and not fighting.

After dinner she drew a low stool up beside the old man's big armchair before the fire, and sat down beside him, laying one arm across his knees; I sat smoking on the other side of the hearth. Sir Paget laid his hand on hers for a moment, as though to welcome her [340] bodily presence thus in touch with him.

"You'll be wondering how it happened," she began, "and Julius won't have been able to tell you. Probably it never occurred to him to try, though I suppose he's told you all the actual happenings—the outward things, I mean, you know. It was at Ste. Maxime that we—began to be 'we' to one another. I knew it in him then—perhaps sooner than he did—but I don't know; he's still rather secretive about himself, though intolerably inquisitive about other people. But I did know it in him; and I searched, and found it in myself—not love then, but a feeling of partnership, of alliance. I was very lonely then. Well, I can stand that. I was standing it; and I could have gone on—perhaps! I wonder if I could! No, not after I found out about Arsenio's taking that money! That would have broken me—if it hadn't been for Ste. Maxime."

She paused for a moment; when she spoke again, she addressed me—on the other side of the fireplace.

"You went away for a long while; but you remembered and you wrote. I'm not a letter-writer, and that was really the reason I didn't answer. I have to be with people—to feel them—if I'm to talk with them to any purpose—to ask then questions and get answers, even though they don't say anything." (I saw her fingers bend in a light pressure on old Sir Paget's knee.) "I should have sounded stupid in my letters. Or said too much! Because the only thing was to say [341] nothing about it, wasn't it? You knew that as well as I did, didn't you? If once we had talked—in letters or when you came back——! I did nearly talk when you suddenly appeared there on the Piazza at Venice. It was pretty nearly as good as a declaration, wasn't it, Julius?"

She gave a low merry laugh; but then her eyes wandered from my face to the blaze of the fire, and took on their self-questioning look.

"I think it's rare to be able to see the humor of things all by yourself—I mean, of course, of close things, things very near to you, things that hurt, although they're really funny. You want a sympathizer—somebody to laugh with. Oh, well, it goes deeper than that! You want to feel that there's another world outside the miserable little one you're living in—outside it, different from it—a place where you yourself can be different from the sort of creature which the life you're leading forces you to be—at least, unless you're a saint, I suppose; and I never was that! You want a City of Refuge for your heart, don't you, Sir Paget? For your heart, and your feelings; yes, and your humor; for everything that you are or that you've got, and want to go on being or having. Because the worst thing that anybody or any state of things can do to you, or threaten you with, is the destruction of yourself—whether it's done by assault or by starvation! In the world I lived in—the actual one as it had come to be for Arsenio and me—I was done for! There was [342] hardly anything left of me!" She suddenly turned her face up to Sir Paget, with a murmur of laughter. "It was like the Cheshire cat!

Nothing left but a grin and claws! A grin for his antics, claws to protect myself. That's what I had come to in my own world—the little world of Arsenio and me! Claws and a grin—wasn't I, Julius?"

"I would not hear your enemy say so, but——"

"You know it's true; I knew at the time that you felt it, but I couldn't alter myself. Well, I told you something about it at Venice—trying to change, not succeeding! Even his love for me had become one more offense in him—and that was bad. The only thing that carried me through was the other world you gave me—outside my own; where you were, where he wasn't—though we looked at him from it, and had to!—where I could take refuge!"

She went on slowly, reflectively, as though she were compelled reluctantly to render an account to herself. "I have escaped; I have gained my City of Refuge. But I bear the marks of my imprisonment—even as my hands here bear the marks of my work—of my sewing and washing and ironing. I'm marked and scarred!"

Sir Paget laid his hand on hers again. "We keep a salve for those wounds at Cragsfoot," he said gently. "We've stored it up abundantly for you, Lucinda."

She turned to him, now clasping his arms with her hands. "You! [343]
Yet I put you to shame; I betrayed you; I was false—Oh, and cruel to Waldo!" For the first time in all my knowledge of her I saw tears running down her cheeks. Sir Paget took her hands into his and kissed her upturned face.

"Waldo's as happy as a king—or, at least, a Prince Consort," he said, smiling, though I think that his voice shook a little. "And, since it's an evening of penitence and confession, I'll make my confession too. I've always been a bit of a traitor, or a rebel, myself. You know it well enough, Julius!" He smiled. "Sitting here, under the sway of Briarmount, I'm afraid that I have, before now, drunk a silent toast to the Queen over the Water. Because I remembered you in old days, my dear."

The mention of Briarmount brought the smiles back to Lucinda's face. She rose from her stool and stood on the hearthrug between us, looking from one to the other. She gave a defiant toss of her fair head. "Guilty, my lords! I can't abide her. And I'm glad—yes, I am—that she's not here at Cragsfoot!"

"Moreover, she has retreated even from Briarmount before you," chuckled Sir Paget.

"When I advanced in strength, she always retreated," said Lucinda with another toss. "The fact is—I had the least bit more effrontery. I could bluff her, whatever was in my heart. She couldn't bluff me."

"Reconciliation, I suppose, impossible?" hazarded the diplomatist [344]
en ratraite, not able to resist the temptation of plying his trade, of getting round the grand implacability; what a feather in his cap it would be!

"Looking down the vista of years," said Lucinda, now gayly triumphant in her mastery over the pair of us, "a thing I used to do, Julius, oftener than I need now—I see two old ladies, basking somewhere in the sun—perchance at Villa San Carlo—which I have not, up to now, visited, though I know the surrounding district. From under their wigs, in old squeaky voices——"

"I thank God for my mortality," murmured old Sir Paget as he looked at her.

"They're telling one another that they must both of them have been very wonderful, clever, attractive, beautiful! Or else they'd never have made so much trouble, and never squabbled so much. And I shouldn't wonder if they said—both of them—that nothing in the whole business was their fault at all; it was only the men who were so silly. But then they made the men silly. What men wouldn't they make silly, when they were young and beautiful so long ago?"

"How much of this is Lady Dundrannan—and how much more is you?"

"Mostly me, Julius. Because I have, as I told you, the least bit more effrontery. But her ladyship agrees, and the two old gossips sip their tea and mumble their toast, with all the harmony and happiness of superannuated sinners. I'm sure I needn't explain that [345]
feeling to men—they knew all about it!"

"This picture, distant though it is, saps my conception of Lady Dundrannan," I protested. "Perhaps of you too; do you mind if I call you a good hater?"

A smile hung about her lips; but her voice passed from the gay to the gentle, and the old inward-looking gaze took possession of her eyes. “No, I don’t mind, I like my hatreds; even for me there never failed to be something amusing in them. I wonder if I do myself too much credit in saying—something unreal? Did I play parts—like poor Arsenio? But still they seemed very real, and they kept my courage up. I suppose it’s funny to think that one behaves well—honorably—sometimes, just to spite somebody else. I’m afraid it is so, though—isn’t it, Sir Paget?”

“The Pharisee in the Temple comes somewhere near your notion.”

She came and sat herself down on the arm of my chair, and threw her arm round my neck. “Yes, hatreds serve their turn. But they ought to die; being of the earth earthy, they ought to, oughtn’t they? And they do. Do any of us here hate poor Arsenio now?” Suddenly she kissed me. “You never did, because you’re so ridiculously understanding—and I thank you for that now, because it helped me to try not to, to try to remember that he loved me, and [346] that he couldn’t help being what he was. But where’s all my anger gone? Why, you and I often talk of him, and enjoy his tricks, don’t we? They can’t hurt us now; they’re just amusing, and we’re grateful to the poor man, and don’t feel hard to him any more, do we?” She fell silent for a moment, and then, with a broader smile, and with one hand uplifted in the air, she said, “And so, Sir Paget, very, very dear Sir Paget, I back myself to make friends with Nina in —well, say five years!”

The prudently calculated audacity of this undertaking made us laugh. “And with Waldo—how soon?” asked Sir Paget.

“Oh, to-morrow! But if I do that, I must take ten years, instead of five, for Nina!”

“You’d better arrange the time-table in your own way, my dear,” Sir Paget admitted discreetly. “Now I’ll go off to bed and leave you to have a talk together.”

He rose from his chair and advanced towards her, to give her his good-night greeting. Quicker than he was, she met him almost before he had taken a step. Catching his hands in hers, she fell on her knees before him. “Have you a blessing left for the sinner that repenteth—for your prodigal daughter?”

She was not in tears now, nor near them. She was just wonderfully and exultantly coaxing.

The old man disengaged his hands, clasped her face with them, turned it up to him, and gallantly kissed it. “Your sunshine warms [347] my old bones,” he said. “I’m glad you’re back at Cragsfoot, Lucinda.” He turned away quickly and left us.

I went to her and raised her from her knees.

“That’s all right!” she said, with a tremulous but satisfied little laugh. “And I love him even more than I’ve tried to make him love me—and that’s saying a good deal to you, who’ve seen me practice my wiles! Are the tricks stale to you, Julius?”

“Yes. Try some new ones!”

“Ah, you’re cunning! The old ones are, I believe—I do believe—good enough for you.”

“The new ones had better be for Nina!”

“In five years, Julius, as sure as I live—and love you!”

“How do you propose to begin?” I asked skeptically. I knew my Nina! I knew Lucinda. It seemed, at the best, a very even bet whether she could bring it off.

Lucinda laughed in merry confidence and mockery. “Why, by giving her to understand that you make me thoroughly unhappy, of course. How else would you do it?”

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LUCINDA ***

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