

WILLIAM MAUGHAM

CÆSAR'S WIFE: A
COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

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Cæsar's Wife: A Comedy in Three Acts:

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АСТ I

6

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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William Somerset Maugham

Cæsar's Wife: A

Comedy in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

Sir Arthur Little, K.C.B., K.C.M.G.

Ronald Parry.

Henry Pritchard.

Richard Appleby, M.P.

Osman Pasha.

Violet.

Mrs. Etheridge.

Mrs. Pritchard.

Mrs. Appleby.

**An English Butler; Native
Servants; an Arab Gardener**

**The scene is laid in Cairo, in the house
and garden of the British Consular**

Agent

ACT I

Scene: The morning-room in the Consular Agent's house at Cairo. The windows are Arabic in character and so are the architraves of the doors, but otherwise it is an English room, airy and spacious. The furniture is lacquer and Chippendale, there are cool chintzes on the chairs and sofas, cut roses in glass vases, and growing azaleas in pots; but here and there an Eastern antiquity, a helmet and a coat of mail, a piece of woodwork, reminds one of the Mussulman conquest of Egypt; while an ancient god in porphyry, graven images in blue pottery, blue bowls, recall an older civilisation still. When the curtain rises the room is empty, the blinds are down so as to keep out the heat, and it is dim and mysterious. A Servant comes in, a dark-skinned native in the gorgeous uniform, red and gold, of the Consular Agent's establishment, and draws the blinds. Through the windows is seen the garden with palm-trees, oranges and lemons, tropical plants with giant leaves; and beyond, the radiant blue of the sky. In the distance is heard the plaintive, guttural wailing of an Arab song. A Gardener in a pale blue gaberline passes with a basket on his arm.

Servant

Es-salâm 'alêkum (Peace be with you).

Gardener

U'alêkum es-Salâm warahmet Allâh wa barakâta (And with you be peace and God's mercy and blessing).

[The Servant goes out. The Gardener stops for a moment to nail back a straggling creeper and then goes on his way. The door is opened. Mrs. Appleby comes in with Anne Etheridge and they are followed immediately by Violet. Anne is a woman of forty, but handsome still, very pleasant and sympathetic; she is a woman of the world, tactful and self-controlled. She is dressed in light, summery things. Mrs. Appleby is an elderly, homely woman, soberly but not inexpensively dressed. The wife of a North-country manufacturer, she spends a good deal of money on rather dowdy clothes. Violet is a very pretty young woman of twenty. She looks very fresh and English in her muslin frock; there is something spring-like and virginal in her appearance, and her manner of dress is romantic rather than modish. She suggests a lady in a Gainsborough portrait rather than a drawing in a paper of Paris fashions. Luncheon is just finished and when they come in the women leave the door open for the men to follow.]

Mrs. Appleby

How cool it is in here! This isn't the room we were in before

lunch?

Anne

No. They keep the windows closed and the blinds drawn all the morning so that it's beautifully cool when one comes in.

Mrs. Appleby

I suppose we shan't feel the heat so much when we've been here a few days.

Anne

Oh, but this is nothing to what you'll get in Upper Egypt.

Violet

[*As she enters.*] Is Mrs. Appleby complaining of the heat? I love it.

Anne

Dear Violet, wait till May comes and June. You don't know how exhausting it gets.

Violet

I'm looking forward to it. I think in some past life I must have been a lizard.

Mrs. Appleby

I dare say the first year you won't feel it. I have a brother settled in Canada, and he says the first year people come out from England they don't feel the cold anything like what they do later on.

Anne

I've spent a good many winters here, and I always make a point of getting away by the fifteenth of March.

Mrs. Appleby

Oh, are you staying as late as that?

Anne

Good gracious, no. You make Lady Little's heart positively

sink.

Violet

Nonsense, Anne, you know we want you to stay as long as ever you can.

Anne

I used to have an apartment in Cairo, but I've given it up now and Lady Little asked me to come and stay at the Agency while I was getting everything settled.

Mrs. Appleby

Oh, then you knew Sir Arthur before he married?

Anne

Oh, yes, he's one of my oldest friends. I can't help thinking Lady Little must have great sweetness of character to put up with me.

Violet

Or you must be a perfect miracle of tact, darling.

Mrs. Appleby

My belief is, it's a little of both.

Anne

When Arthur came to see me one day last July and told me he was going to marry the most wonderful girl in the world, of course I thought good-bye. A man thinks he can keep his bachelor friendships, but he never does.

Mrs. Appleby

His wife generally sees to that.

Violet

Well, I think it's nonsense, especially with a man like Arthur who'd been a bachelor so long and naturally had his life laid out before ever I came into it. And besides, I'm devoted to Anne.

Anne

It's dear of you to say so.

Violet

I came here as an absolute stranger. And after all, I wasn't very old, was I?

Mrs. Appleby

Nineteen?

Violet

Oh, no, I was older than that. I was nearly twenty.

Mrs. Appleby

[*Smiling.*] Good gracious!

Violet

It was rather alarming to find oneself on a sudden the wife of a man in Arthur's position. I was dreadfully self-conscious; I felt that everybody's eyes were upon me. And you don't know how easy it is to make mistakes in a country that's half Eastern and half European.

Anne

To say nothing of having to deal with the representatives of half a dozen Great Powers all outrageously susceptible.

Violet

And, you know, there was the feeling that the smallest false step might do the greatest harm to Arthur and his work here. I had only just left the schoolroom and I found myself almost a political personage. If it hadn't been for Anne I should have made a dreadful mess of things.

Anne

Oh, I don't think that. You had two assets which would have

made people excuse a great deal of inexperience, your grace and your beauty.

Violet

You say very nice things to me, Anne.

Mrs. Appleby

Your marriage was so romantic, I can't see how anyone could help feeling very kindly towards you.

Violet

There's not much room for romance in the heart of the wife of one of the Agents of the foreign Powers when she thinks she hasn't been given her proper place at a dinner party.

Mrs. Appleby

I remember wondering at the time whether you weren't a little overcome by all the excitement caused by your marriage.

Violet

I was excited too, you know.

Mrs. Appleby

Everyone had always looked upon Sir Arthur as a confirmed bachelor. It was thought he cared for nothing but his work. He's had a wonderful career, hasn't he?

Violet

The Prime Minister told me he was the most competent man he'd ever met.

Anne

I've always thought he must be a comfort to any Government. Whenever anyone has made a hash of things he's been sent to put them straight.

Violet

Well, he always has.

Mrs. Appleby

Mr. Appleby was saying only this morning he was the last man one would expect to marry in haste.

Violet

Let's hope he won't repent at leisure.

Anne

[*Smiling.*] Mrs. Appleby is dying to know all about it, Violet.

Mrs. Appleby

I'm an old woman, Lady Little.

Violet

[*Gaily.*] Well, I met Arthur at a week-end party. He'd come home on leave and all sorts of important people had been asked to meet him. I was frightened out of my life. The duchesses had strawberry leaves hanging all over them and they looked at me down their noses. And the Cabinet Ministers' wives had

protruding teeth and they looked at me up their noses.

Anne

What nonsense you talk, Violet!

Violet

I was expecting to be terrified of Arthur. After all, I knew he was a great man. But you know, I wasn't a bit. He was inclined to be rather fatherly at first, so I cheeked him.

Anne

I can imagine his surprise. No one had done that for twenty years.

Violet

When you know Arthur at all well you discover that when he wants anything he doesn't hesitate to ask for it. He told our hostess that he wanted me to sit next to him at dinner. That didn't suit her at all, but she didn't like to say no. Somehow people don't say no to Arthur. The Cabinet Ministers' wives looked more like camels than ever, and by Sunday evening, my dear, the duchesses'

strawberry leaves began to curl and crackle.

Anne

Your poor hostess, I feel for her. To have got hold of a real lion for your party and then have him refuse to bother himself with anybody but a chit of a girl whom you'd asked just to make an even number!

Mrs. Appleby

He just fell in love with you at first sight?

Violet

That's what he says now.

Mrs. Appleby

Did you know?

Violet

I thought it looked very like it, you know, only it was so improbable. Then came an invitation from a woman I only just

knew for the next week-end, and she said Arthur would be there. Then my heart really did begin to go pit-a-pat. I took the letter in to my sister and sat on her bed and we talked it over. "Does he mean to propose to me," I said, "or does he not?" And my sister said: "I can't imagine what he sees in you. Will you accept him if he does?" she asked. "Oh, no," I said. "Good heavens, why he's twenty years older than I am!" But of course I meant to all the time. I shouldn't have cared if he was a hundred, he was the most wonderful man I'd ever known.

Mrs. Appleby

And did he propose to you that week-end, when he'd practically only seen you once before?

Violet

I got down in the afternoon and he was there already. As soon as I swallowed a cup of tea he said: "Come out for a walk." Well, I'd have loved a second cup, but I didn't like to say so, so I went. But we had a second tea in a cottage half an hour later, and we were engaged then.

[Appleby comes in with Osman Pasha. Mr. Appleby is a self-made man who has entered Parliament; he is about sixty, grey-bearded, rather short and stout, with some accent in his speech, shrewd, simple and good-natured. He wears a

blue serge suit. Osman Pasha is a swarthy, bearded Oriental, obese, elderly but dignified; he wears the official frock-coat of the Khedivial service and a tarbush.]

Appleby

Sir Arthur is coming in one moment. He is talking to one of his secretaries.

Violet

Really, it's too bad of them not to leave him alone even when he's snatching a mouthful of food.

Osman Pasha

Vous permettez que j'apporte ma cigarette, chère Madame.

Violet

Of course. Come and sit here, Pasha.

Appleby

I wanted to tell his Excellency how interested I am in his

proposal to found a technical college in Cairo, but I can't speak French.

Violet

Oh, but his Excellency understands English perfectly, and I believe really he talks it as well as I do, only he won't.

Osman Pasha

Madame, je ne comprends l'anglais que quand vous le parlez, et tout galant homme sait ce que dit une jolie femme.

Anne

[*Translating for the Applebys.*] He says he only understands English when Lady Little speaks it, and every nice man understands what a pretty woman says.

Violet

No one pays me such charming compliments as you do. You know I'm learning Arabic.

Osman Pasha

C'est une bien belle langue, et vous, madame, vous avez autant d'intelligence que de beauté.

Violet

I have a Copt who comes to me every day. And I practise a little with your brother, Anne.

Anne

[*To Mrs. Appleby.*] My brother is one of Sir Arthur's secretaries. I expect it was he that Mr. Appleby left with Sir Arthur.

Violet

If it is I shall scold him. He knows quite well that he has no right to come and bother Arthur when he's in the bosom of his family. But they say he's a wonderful Arabic scholar.

Osman Pasha

Vous parlez de M. Parry? Je n'ai jamais connu un Anglais qui avait une telle facilité.

Anne

He says he's never known an Englishman who speaks so well as Ronny.

Violet

It's a fearfully difficult language. Sometimes my head seems to get tied up in knots.

[Two Saises come in, one with a salver on which are coffee cups and the other bearing a small tray on which is a silver vessel containing Turkish coffee. They go round giving coffee to the various people, then wait in silence. When Sir Arthur comes in they give him his coffee and go out.]

Anne

It's wonderful of you to persevere.

Violet

Oh, you know, Ronny's very encouraging. He says I'm really getting on. I want so badly to be able to talk. You can't think how enthusiastic I am about Egypt. I love it.

Osman Pasha

Pas plus que l'Égypte vous aime, Madame.

Violet

When we landed at Alexandria and I saw that blue sky and that coloured, gesticulating crowd, my heart leapt. I knew I was going to be happy. And every day I've loved Egypt more. I love its antiquities, I love the desert and the streets of Cairo and those dear little villages by the Nile. I never knew there was such beauty in the world. I thought you only read of romance in books; I didn't know there was a country where it sat by the side of a well under the palm-trees, as though it were at home.

Osman Pasha

Vous êtes charmante, madame. C'est un bien beau pays. Il n'a

besoin que d'une chose pour qu'on puisse y vivre.

Anne

[*Translating.*] It's a beautiful country. It only wants one thing to make it livable. And what is that, your Excellency?

Osman Pasha

La liberté.

Appleby

Liberty?

[*Arthur has come in when first Violet begins to speak of Egypt and he listens to her enthusiasm with an indulgent smile. At the Pasha's remark he comes forward. Arthur Little is a man of forty-five, alert, young in manner, very intelligent, with the urbanity, self-assurance, tact, and resourcefulness of the experienced diplomatist. Nothing escapes him, but he does not often show how much he notices.*]

Arthur

Egypt has the liberty to do well, your Excellency. Does it need

the liberty to do ill before it loses the inclination to do it?

Violet

[*To Mrs. Appleby.*] I hope you don't mind Turkish coffee?

Mrs. Appleby

Oh, no, I like it.

Violet

I'm so glad. I think it perfectly delicious.

Arthur

You have in my wife an enthusiastic admirer of this country, Pasha.

Osman Pasha

J'en suis ravi.

Arthur

I've told Ronny to come in and have a cup of coffee. [*To Anne.*] I thought you'd like to say how d'you do to him.

Anne

Are you very busy to-day?

Arthur

We're always busy. Isn't that so, Excellency?

Osman Pasha

En effet, et je vous demanderai permission de me retirer. Mon bureau m'appelle.

[*He gets up and shakes hands with Violet.*]

Violet

It was charming of you to come.

Osman Pasha

Mon Dieu, madame, c'est moi qui vous remercie de m'avoir donné l'occasion de saluer votre grâce et votre beauté.

[He bows to the rest of the company. Arthur leads him towards the door and he goes out.]

Anne

You take all these compliments without turning a hair, Violet.

Arthur

[Coming back.] You know, that's a wonderful old man. He's so well-bred, he has such exquisite manners, it's hard to realise that if it were possible he would have us all massacred to-morrow.

Appleby

I remember there was a certain uneasiness in England when you recommended that he should be made Minister of Education.

Arthur

They don't always understand local conditions in England. Osman is a Moslem of the old school. He has a bitter hatred of the English. In course of years he has come to accept the inevitable, but he's not resigned to it. He never loses sight of his aim.

Appleby

And that is?

Arthur

Why, bless you, to drive the English into the sea. But he's a clever old rascal, and he sees that one of the first things that must be done is to educate the Egyptians. Well, we want to educate them too. I had all sorts of reforms in mind which I would never have got the strict Mohammedans to accept if they hadn't been brought forward by a man whose patriotism they believe in and whose orthodoxy is beyond suspicion.

Anne

Don't you find it embarrassing to work with a man you distrust?

Arthur

I don't distrust him. I have a certain admiration for him, and I bear him no grudge at all because at the bottom of his heart he simply loathes me.

Appleby

I don't see why he should do that.

Arthur

I was in Egypt for three years when I was quite a young man. I was very small fry then, but I came into collision with Osman and he tried to poison me. I was very ill for two months, and he's never forgiven me because I recovered.

Appleby

What a scoundrel!

Arthur

He would be a little out of place in a Nonconformist community. In the good old days of Ismael he had one of his wives beaten to death and thrown into the Nile.

Appleby

But is it right to give high office to a man of that character?

Arthur

They were the manners and customs of the times.

Mrs. Appleby

But he tried to kill you. Don't you bear him any ill will?

Arthur

I don't think it was very friendly, you know, but after all no statesman can afford to pay attention to his private feelings. His duty is to find the round peg for the round hole and put him in.

Anne

Why does he come here?

Arthur

He has a very great and respectful admiration for Violet. She chaffs him, if you please, and the old man adores her. I think she's done more to reconcile him to the British occupation than all our diplomacy.

Mrs. Appleby

It must be wonderful to have power in a country like this.

Violet

Power? Oh, I haven't that. But it makes me so proud to think I

can be of any use at all. I only wish I had the chance to do more. Since I've been here I've grown very patriotic.

[Ronald Parry *comes in. He is a young man, very good-looking, fresh and pleasant, with a peculiar charm of manner.*]

Arthur

Ah, here is Ronny.

Ronny

Am I too late for my cup of coffee?

Violet

No, it will be brought to you at once.

Ronny

[*Shaking hands with Violet.*] Good morning.

Violet

This is Mr. Parry. Mr. and Mrs. Appleby.

Ronny

How d'you do?

Arthur

Now, Ronny, don't put on your Foreign Office manner. Mr. and Mrs. Appleby are very nice people.

Mrs. Appleby

I'm glad you think that, Sir Arthur.

Arthur

Well, when you left your cards with a soup ticket from the F.O. my heart sank.

Appleby

There, my dear, I told you he wouldn't want to be bothered with us.

Arthur

You see, I expected a pompous couple who knew all about everything and were going to tell me exactly how Egypt ought to be governed. A Member of Parliament doesn't inspire confidence in the worried bosom of a Government official.

Violet

I don't know if you think you're putting Mr. and Mrs. Appleby at their ease, Arthur.

Arthur

Oh, but I shouldn't say this if I hadn't been most agreeably disappointed.

Mrs. Appleby

I never forget the days when Mr. Appleby used to light the kitchen fire himself and I used to do the week's washing every Monday morning. I don't think we've changed much since then, either of us.

Arthur

I know, and I'm really grateful to the Foreign Office for having given you your letter.

Mrs. Appleby

It's been a great treat to us to come and see you. And it's done my heart good to see Lady Little. If you don't mind my saying so she's like a spring morning and it makes one glad to be alive just to look at her.

Violet

Oh, don't!

Arthur

I'm inclined to feel very kindly to everyone who feels kindly towards her. You must enjoy yourselves in Upper Egypt and when you come back to Cairo you must let us know.

Appleby

I'm expecting to learn a good deal from my journey.

Arthur

You may learn a good deal that will surprise you. You may learn that there are races in the world that seem born to rule and races that seem born to serve; that democracy is not a panacea for all the ills of mankind, but merely one system of government like another, which hasn't had a long enough trial to make it certain whether it is desirable or not; that freedom generally means the power of the strong to oppress the weak, and that the wise statesman gives men the illusion of it but not the substance – in short, a number of things which must be very disturbing to the equilibrium of a Radical Member of Parliament.

Anne

On the other hand, you'll see our beautiful Nile and the temples.

Arthur

And perhaps they'll suggest to you that however old the world is it's ever young, and that when all's said and done the most permanent on the face of the earth is what seems the most transitory – the ideal.

Appleby

Fanny, it looks to me as though we'd bitten off as big a piece of cake as we can chew with any comfort.

Mrs. Appleby

Oh, well, we'll do our best. And though I never could do arithmetic I've always thought perhaps one might be saved without. Good-bye, Lady Little, and thank you for having us.

Violet

Good-bye.

[There are general farewells and they go to the door. Ronny opens it for them. They go out.]

Ronny

I forgot to tell you, sir, Mrs. Pritchard has just telephoned to ask if she can see you on a matter of business.

Arthur

[*With a grim smile.*] Say I'm very busy to-day, and I regret exceedingly that it will be quite impossible for me to see her.

Ronny

[*With a twinkle in his eye.*] She said she was coming round at once.

Arthur

If she's made up her mind to see me at all costs she might have saved herself the trouble of ringing up to find out if it was convenient.

Anne

Your sister is a determined creature, Arthur.

Arthur

I know. I have some authority in the affairs of this country, but none over dear Christina. I wonder what she wants.

Violet

Let us hope for the best.

Arthur

I've noticed that whenever anyone wants to see me very urgently it's never to give me anything. When Christina wants to see me urgently my only safety is in instant flight.

Violet

You must be nice to her, Arthur. If you're not she'll only take it out of me.

Arthur

It's monstrous, isn't it?

Violet

After all, she kept house for you for ten years. Admirably, mind you.

Arthur

Admirably. She has a genius for order and organisation in the house. Everything went like clockwork. She never wasted a farthing. She saved me hundreds of pounds. She led me a dog's life. I've come to the conclusion there's nothing so detestable as a good housekeeper.

Violet

How fortunate you married me, then! But you can't expect her to see that point of view. It's very hard for her to be turned out of this very pleasant billet, and it's natural that when you won't do something she asks you she should put it down to my influence.

Anne

It must have been a very difficult position for you.

Violet

I did all I could to make her like me. I did feel rather like a usurper, you know. I tried to make her see that I didn't at all want to put on airs.

Arthur

Fortunately she's taken it very well. I confess I was a little nervous when she told me she meant to stay on in Egypt to be near her son.

Anne

It would be a detestable person who didn't like Violet, I think.

Arthur

Detestable. I should have no hesitation in having him deported.

Ronny

I think I'd better be getting back to my work.

Anne

Oh, Ronny, would you like me to come and help you with your packing?

Violet

[*To Ronny.*] Are you going somewhere?

Ronny

I'm leaving Cairo.

Anne

Didn't you know? Ronny has just been appointed to Paris.

Violet

Is he going to leave Egypt for good?

[*She is taken aback by the news. She clenches her hand on the rail of a chair; Arthur and Anne notice the little, instinctive motion.*]

Ronny

I suppose so.

Violet

But why was it kept from me? Why have you been making a secret of it?

Arthur

Darling, no one's been making a secret of it. I – I thought Anne would have told you.

Violet

Oh, it doesn't matter at all, but Ronny has been in the habit of doing all sorts of things for me. It would have been convenient if I'd been told that a change was going to be made.

Arthur

I'm very sorry. It was only arranged this morning. I received a telegram from the Foreign Office. I thought it would interest

Anne, so I sent Ronny along to tell her.

Violet

I hate to be treated like a child.

[There is a moment's embarrassment.]

Anne

It was stupid of me. I ought to have come and told you. I was so pleased and excited that I forgot.

Violet

I don't quite know why you should have been so excited.

Anne

It will be very nice for me to have Ronny so near. You see, now I've given up my flat I shan't come to Egypt very often and I should never have seen Ronny. I can run over to Paris constantly. Besides, it's a step, isn't it? And I want to see him an Ambassador before I die.

Violet

I don't see what good it will do him in Paris to speak Arabic like a native.

Arthur

Oh, well, that is the F.O. all over. The best Persian scholar in the Service has spent the last six years in Washington.

Ronny

It's been a great surprise for me. I expected to remain in Egypt indefinitely.

Violet

[*Recovering herself.*] I expect you'll have a very good time in Paris. When do you go?

Ronny

There's a boat the day after to-morrow. Sir Arthur thought I'd better take that.

Violet

[*Scarcely mistress of herself.*] As soon as that! [*Recovering, gaily.*] We shall miss you dreadfully. I can't imagine what I shall do without you. [*To Anne.*] You can't think how useful he's been to me since I came here.

Ronny

It's very kind of you to say so.

Violet

He's invaluable at functions and things like that. You see, he knows where everyone should sit at dinner. And at first he used to coach me with details about various people so that I shouldn't say the wrong thing.

Arthur

If you had you'd have said it so charmingly that no one would have resented it.

Violet

I'm so afraid that the man who takes Ronny's place will refuse to write my invitations for me.

Arthur

It's not exactly the duty of my secretaries.

Violet

No, but I do hate doing it myself. And Ronny was able to imitate my handwriting.

Arthur

I'm sure he could never write as badly as you.

Violet

Oh, yes, he could. Couldn't you?

Ronny

I managed to write quite enough like you for people not to notice the difference.

Violet

You know, there are thirty-two invitations to do now.

Anne

Why don't you send cards?

Violet

Oh, I think a letter is so much more polite. Somehow I don't feel old enough to ask people to dine with me in the third person.

Ronny

I'll come and do them the moment Sir Arthur can let me go.

Arthur

You'd better do them before Violet goes out.

Violet

That'll be very soon. The Khedive's mother has asked me to go and see her at half-past three. I'll get the list now, shall I? I don't think I'll wait for Christina. If she wants to see you on business I dare say she'd rather I wasn't there.

Arthur

Very well.

Violet

[*To Ronny.*] Will you come here when you're ready?

Ronny

Certainly.

[*She goes out.*]

Arthur

Have you finished that report yet?

Ronny

Not quite, sir. It will be ready in ten minutes.

Arthur

Put it on my desk.

Ronny

All right, sir.

[Exit. Arthur and Anne are left alone. He looks at her reflectively.]

Arthur

Violet is very sensitive to anything that might be considered a slight.

Anne

It's very natural, isn't it? A high-spirited girl.

Arthur

She likes me to tell her my arrangements. It gives her a little feeling of importance to know things before other people.

Anne

Oh, of course. I quite understand. I should do the same in her place.

Arthur

I ought to have remembered and told her that Ronny was going. She was just a little vexed because she thought I'd been fixing things up behind her back.

Anne

Yes, I know. It would naturally put her out for a moment to learn on a sudden that one of the persons she'd been thrown in

contact with was going away.

Arthur

[*With a twinkle in his eye.*] I'm wondering if I must blame you for the loss of an excellent secretary.

Anne

Me?

Arthur

I don't know why the F.O. should suddenly have made up their minds that your brother was wanted in Paris. Have you been pulling strings?

Anne

[*Smiling.*] What a suspicious nature you have!

Arthur

Anne, own up.

Anne

I thought Ronny was getting into a groove here. There didn't seem to be much more for him to do than he has been doing for some time. If you *will* have the truth, I've been moving heaven and earth to get him moved.

Arthur

How deceitful of you not to have said a word about it!

Anne

I didn't want to make him restless. I knew he'd be mad to go to Paris. I thought it much better not to say anything till it was settled.

Arthur

D'you think he's mad to go to Paris?

Anne

[*Fencing with him.*] Any young man would be.

Arthur

I wonder if he'd be very much disappointed if I made other arrangements.

Anne

What do you mean, Arthur? You wouldn't prevent him from going when I've done everything in the world to get him away.

Arthur

[Abruptly.] Why should you be so anxious for him to go?
[She looks at him for an instant in dismay.]

Anne

Good heavens, don't speak so sharply to me. I told Violet just now. I wanted him to be more get-at-able. I think he stands a much better chance of being noticed if he's in a place like Paris.

Arthur

[With a smile.] Ah, yes, you said you were coming less

frequently to Egypt than in the past. It might be worth while to keep Ronny here in order to tempt you back.

Anne

Egypt isn't the same to me that it was.

Arthur

I hope my marriage has made no difference to our friendship, Anne. You know how deeply I value it.

Anne

You used to come and see me very often. You knew I was discreet and you used to talk over with me all sorts of matters which occupied you. I was pleased and flattered. Of course I realised that those pleasant conversations of ours must stop when you married. I only came here this winter to collect my goods and chattels.

Arthur

You make me feel vaguely guilty towards you.

Anne

Of course you're nothing of the sort. But I don't want Violet to feel that I am making any attempt to – to monopolise you. She's been charming to me. The more I know her the more delightful I find her.

Arthur

It's very nice of you to say so.

Anne

You know I've always had a great admiration for you. I'm so glad to see you married to a girl who's not unworthy of you.

Arthur

I suppose it was a dangerous experiment for a man of my age to marry a girl of nineteen.

Anne

I think one can admit that. But you've always been one of the

favourites of the gods. You've made a wonderful success of it.

Arthur

It needs on a husband's part infinite tact, patience, and tolerance.

Anne

You have the great advantage that Violet is genuinely in love with you.

Arthur

I suppose only a fatuous ass would confess that a beautiful girl was in love with him.

Anne

You make her very happy.

Arthur

There's nothing I wouldn't do to achieve that. I'm more desperately in love with Violet even than when I first married her.

Anne

I'm so glad. *I* want nothing but your happiness.

Arthur

Here is Christina.

[The door opens as he says these words and an English Butler ushers in Mrs. Pritchard. She is a tall, spare woman, with hair turning grey, comely, upright in her carriage, with decision of character indicated by every gesture; but though masterful and firm to attain her ends, she is an honest woman, direct, truthful and not without humour. She is admirably gowned in a manner befitting her station and importance.]

Butler

Mrs. Pritchard.

[Exit.]

Arthur

I knew it was you, Christina. I felt a sense of responsibility descend upon the house.

Christina

[*Kissing him.*] How is Violet?

Arthur

Lovely.

Christina

I was inquiring about her health.

Arthur

Her health is perfect.

Christina

At her age one's always well, I suppose. [*Kissing Anne.*] How d'you do? And how are you, my poor Arthur?

Arthur

You ask me as though I was a doddering old gentleman, crippled with rheumatism. I'm in the best of health, thank you very much, and very active for my years. [*Christina has seen a flower on the table that has fallen from a bowl, and picks it up and puts it back in its place.*] Why do you do that?

Christina

I don't like untidiness.

Arthur

I do.

[*He takes the flower out again and places it on the table.*]

Christina

I was expecting to find you in your office.

Arthur

Do you think I'm neglecting my work? I thought it more

becoming to wait for you here.

Christina

I wanted to see you on a matter of business.

Arthur

So I understood from your message. I feel convinced you're going to put me in the way of making my fortune.

Anne

I'll leave you, shall I?

Christina

Oh, no, pray don't. There's not the least reason why you shouldn't hear what it's all about.

Arthur

You're not going to make my fortune after all. You're going to ask me to do something.

Christina

What makes you think that?

Arthur

You want a third person present to be witness to my brutal selfishness when I refuse. I know you, Christina.

Christina

[*Smiling.*] You're much too sensible to refuse a perfectly reasonable request.

Arthur

Let us hear it. [*She sits down on the sofa. The cushions have been disordered by people sitting on them and she shakes them out, and pats them and arranges them in their place.*] I wish you'd leave the furniture alone, Christina.

Christina

I cannot make out what pleasure people take in seeing things

out of their proper place.

Arthur

You're very long in coming to the point.

Christina

I hear that the Khedive has quarrelled with his secretary.

Arthur

You're a marvellous woman, Christina. You get hold of all the harem gossip.

Christina

It's true, isn't it?

Arthur

Yes. But I only heard of it myself just before luncheon. How did it come to your ears?

Christina

That doesn't matter, does it? I have a way of hearing things that may be of interest to me.

Arthur

I'm afraid I'm very dense, but I don't see how it can be of any particular interest to you.

Christina

[*Smiling.*] Dear Arthur. The Khedive has asked you to recommend him an English secretary.

Anne

Has he really? That's a change. He's never had an English secretary before.

Arthur

Never.

Anne

It's a wonderful opportunity.

Arthur

If we get the right man he can be of the greatest possible help. If he's tactful, wise, and courteous, there's no reason why in time he shouldn't attain very considerable influence over the Khedive. If we can really get the Khedive to work honestly and sincerely with us, instead of hampering us by all kinds of secret devices, we can do miracles in this country.

Anne

What a splendid chance for the man who gets the job!

Arthur

I suppose it is. If he has the right qualities he may achieve anything. And after all, it's a splendid chance to be able to render such great service to our own old country.

Christina

Has the Khedive given any particulars about the sort of man he wants?

Arthur

He naturally wants a young man and a good sportsman. It's important that he should be able to speak Arabic. But the qualifications which will satisfy the Khedive are nothing beside those which will satisfy me. The wrong man may cause irreparable damage to British interests.

Christina

Have you thought that Henry would be admirably suited?

Arthur

I can't say I have, Christina.

Christina

He's young and he's very good at games. He speaks Arabic.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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