

ANTHONY HOPE

LUCINDA

Anthony Hope

Lucinda

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Anthony Hope Lucinda

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.

“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 Cragfoot, to see Sir Paget, tell him about my last trip, and console him for the loss of Waldo’s society.

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 Cragfoot 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 *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 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 Cragfoot 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 Cragfoot 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 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 Cragfoot.

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 other side, 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. 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 Cragfoot, 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 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 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 every way 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.”

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.

“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?”

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 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: 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 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 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 Cragfoot, 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 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 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?"

"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.

"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 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 Cragfoot.” 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 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, 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 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 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 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 Cragfoot 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 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?”

“‘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.”

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. 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 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 Cragfoot tomorrow. 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 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 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.”

“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.

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 Cragfoot. 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 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 Cragfoot, when the runaways had been of the party. Tall, slim, and fair, a girl on the verge of womanhood, ingenuous, open, and 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 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 Cragfoot 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 Cragfoot 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 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 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. Cragfoot, 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 Cragfoot, 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 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. 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 Cragfoot. 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 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 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 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 Cragfoot, haven’t they, Nina? And your cousin Waldo – Mr. Waldo taught you billiards, didn’t he?” (There was no billiard room at Cragfoot; 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. 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 was no feast, was there, Mr. Rillington?”

When I got back to Cragfoot, 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.

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.

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, 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 – made without any embarrassment, – I told her what Cragfoot 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 Cragfoot; 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. “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 Cragfoot – 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.”

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 Cragfoot 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.”

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 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 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 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 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 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 Cragfoot 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?”

“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.”

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 Cragfoot – 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 Cragfoot; 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. Cragfoot 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 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 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 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 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 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 Cragfoot 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 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 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 Cragfoot, 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 return her glance; he was scowling. The invitation to Cragfoot (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 Cragfoot 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 Cragfoot!” 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 Cragfoot! Waldo!”

“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 Cragfoot. 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 Cragfoot 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.

“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.

“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 Cragfoot! 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 Cragfoot.”

“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 Cragfoot! 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 Cragfoot. 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 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 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 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. 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 Cragfoot. 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 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 Cragfoot made to me – I should love to live at Cragfoot. 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 first, perhaps, mainly because I wasn't Nina Frost! Indeed, I came to believe that my being at Cragfoot 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, 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 Cragfoot 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 Cragfoot, 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 Mother. That was against his code, you know.

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