

ANTHONY HOPE

A SERVANT
OF THE PUBLIC

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Hope A.

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CHAPTER I MUDDOCK AND MEAD

The social birth of a family, united by a chain of parallel events with the commercial development of a business, is a spectacle strange to no country but most common among the nation of shopkeepers; it presents, however, interesting points and is likely to produce a group of persons rather diverse in character. Some of the family breathe the new air readily enough; with some the straw of the omnibus (there was straw in omnibuses during the formative period) follows on silken skirts into the landau. It takes, they say, three generations to make a gentleman; the schools ticket them – National or Board, Commercial or Grammar, Eton or Harrow. Three generations, not perhaps of human flesh, but of mercantile growth, it takes to make a great Concern. The humble parent-tree in the Commercial Road puts forth branches in Brixton, Camberwell, Stoke Newington, wherever buyers are many and "turnover" quick: here is the second period, when the business is already large and lucrative, but not yet imposing. Then a new ambition stirs and works in the creator's mind; there is still a world to conquer. Appearance is added to reality, show to substance. A splendid block rises somewhere within the ken of fashion; it is red, with white facings, a tower or two, perhaps a clock. First and last, a good deal is said about it in talk and in print. Possibly a luncheon is given. Now there are points of policy to be practised, not directly productive of hard money, but powerful in the long run. For example, the young ladies and gentlemen who serve the counters should be well treated, and carefully looked after in regard to their morals. And if this be done, there is no reason against having the fact stated with the utmost available publicity. For this service, sections of an all-embracing Press are ready and willing. In the eye of the polite world this big block is now the business: the branches are still profitable, but the ledgers alone sing their virtues; men cease to judge the position or the purse of the family by their humble fronts. For the family too has been on the move; it has passed, in orderly progression, in an ascent of gentility, from Putney to Maida Vale, from Maida Vale to Paddington, from Paddington to Kensington Palace Gardens. At each stopping-place it may acquire members, at some it will lose them; the graves where those lie who have dropped from the ranks are themselves milestones on the march. The survivors have each some scent, some trace, of their place of origin. To the architect of fortune the Commercial Road is native and familiar; he lost his first love there and buried her down East. His second wife dates from the latter end of the Maida Vale time and is in all essentials of the Middle, or Paddington, Period. The children recollect Paddington as childhood's home, have extorted information about Maida Vale, talk of Putney with a laugh, and seem almost of true Kensington Palace Gardens' blood. Yet even in them there is an element which they are hardly conscious of, an element not to be refined away till the third generation of human flesh has run. Then comes the perfect product; a baronetcy is often supposed to mark, but sometimes may be considered to precede, its appearance. Indeed – for it is time to descend to the particular – Sir James Muddock was hardly the perfect product; nay, he still strove valiantly to plume himself on not being such. But with a wife and children it is hard to go on exulting in a lowly origin. It is also rather selfish, and was certainly so in Sir James' case, since Lady Muddock was very sensitive on the subject. It would seem that being of the Middle Period is apt to produce a sensitiveness of this sort; the pride of achievement is not there, the pride of position is still new and uneasy.

Somewhat in this vein, but with a more malicious and humorous turn of speech, Ashley Mead ran through the history of the firm of Muddock and Mead for Lady Kilnorton's pleasure and

information. She was interested in them as phenomena and as neighbours; they were hardly more than across the road from her house in Queen's Gate. Ashley spoke with full knowledge; both business and family were familiar to him; he himself represented an episode in the career of the concern which survived only in its name. He used to say that he had just missed being a fit figure for romance; his father had not been a scatter-brained genius bought out of a splendid certainty of wealth for fifty pounds, but a lazy man who very contentedly and with open eyes accepted fifteen thousand pounds and leisure in preference to hard work and an off-chance of riches. This elder Mead had come into the business with three thousand pounds when capital was wanted for the Stoke Newington branch, and had gone out when ambition began to whisper the name of Buckingham Palace Road. He had not felt aggrieved at losing opulence, but had lived on his spoil – after all, a good return for his investment – and died with it in cheerfulness. But then he had not been born a trader. He came of the professions; money-making was not in his blood nor bone of his bone, as it must be in the frame of one who is to grow gradually by his own labour to the status of a millionaire. The instinct of gain was not in his son either; Ashley laughed with unreserved good-nature as he said:

"If my father hadn't gone out, I should have had half the business, I suppose, instead of starving along on four hundred a year."

"You've your profession," observed Lady Kilnorton, hardly seriously. "The Bar, you know."

"My profession?" he laughed, as he leant against the mantel-piece and looked down at her. "I'm one of five thousand names on five hundred doors, if that's a profession!"

"You might make it one," she suggested, but not as though the subject interested her or were likely to interest him. The little rebuke had all the perfunctoriness of duty and convention.

"The funny thing is," he went on, "that old Sir James would like to get me back now; he's always hinting about it. Shall I go and sell the ribbons?"

"Why can't Mr. Robert sell the ribbons?"

"Well, in the family we don't think Bob very bright, you see."

"Oh! Alice is bright, though; at least she's very clear-headed."

"More brains than any of them. And what did you think of My lady?"

"Of My lady?" Irene Kilnorton laughed a little, raised her brows a little, and paused before she said: "Well, her hair's too fluffy, isn't it? They don't beat her, do they? She looks rather like it."

"No, they don't beat her; but she's not quite sure that she's got the grand manner."

"Isn't she?" said Lady Kilnorton, laughing again.

"And then Sir James insists on referring to Putney, especially by way of acknowledging the goodness of God in family prayers. The servants are there, of course, and – you understand?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Mead. In such a case I shouldn't like it myself."

"Lady Muddock has no objection to being thankful privately, but she doesn't like it talked about."

"You go there a great deal?" she asked, with a glance at him.

"Yes, a good deal."

"And the girl – Alice – is very fond of you?"

"Not the least, I believe."

"Oh, you're bound to say that! Would she go with – with selling the ribbons?" But she went on without waiting for an answer, perhaps because she had risked a snub. "I was received with immense *empressement*."

"You're a bit of a swell, aren't you?"

"A poverty-stricken Irish widow! No, but I took some swells with me."

"Lord Bowdon, for instance?"

"Yes, Lord Bowdon. And a greater swell still – Miss Ora Pinsent."

A pause followed. Ashley looked over his hostess' head out of the window. Then Lady Kilnorton added, "Lord Bowdon drove Miss Pinsent to her house afterwards."

Another pause followed; each was wondering what the other's point of view might be.

"Fancy Ora Pinsent at the Muddocks!" reflected Ashley presently. "She went to please you?"

"How do I know why she went? I don't suppose she knew herself."

"You're great friends, though?"

"I admire and despise, love and most bitterly hate, Ora Pinsent," said Lady Kilnorton.

"All at once?" asked Ashley with a smile, and brows raised in protest.

"Yes, all at once, and successively, and alternately, and in all sorts of various combinations."

"And Lord Bowdon drove her home?" His tone begged for a comment from his companion.

"I told you so," she answered with a touch of irritation, which was as significant as any comment.

The servant came in, bringing tea; they were silent while the preparations were made. Ashley, however, covertly regarded his friend's trim figure and pretty, small features. He often felt rather surprised that he had no inclination to fall in love with, or even to make love to, Irene Kilnorton. Many men had such an inclination, he knew; among them he ranked this same Lord Bowdon who had driven Miss Pinsent to her house. Lady Kilnorton was young, she was pretty, she had, if not wit, at least the readiness of reply which is the common substitute provided by the habit of conversing with wideawake people. It was, though, very pleasant to have so charming a friend and to be in no danger of transforming her into the doubtful and dangerous character of a woman he loved; so he told himself, having no disposition to love her.

"She's got a husband, hasn't she?" he asked, as the door closed behind the footman.

"Ora? Oh, yes, somewhere. He's a scamp, I think. He's called – oh, I forget! But his name doesn't matter."

"They've always got a husband, he's always a scamp, and his name never matters," remarked Ashley between mouthfuls of toast.

"Fenning! That's it! Fenning."

"Just as you like, Lady Kilnorton. It's the fact, not what you call it, that's the thing, you know."

As he spoke the door was opened again and Lord Bowdon was announced. He came in almost eagerly, like a man who has something to say, shook hands hastily, and, the instant that he dropped into a chair, exclaimed, "What a glorious creature!"

"I knew exactly what you were going to say before you opened your lips," remarked Lady Kilnorton. "You haven't been long, though." There was a touch of malice in her tone.

"It wasn't left to me to fix the length of the interview. And she said she liked driving fast. Well, Ashley, my boy, how are you?"

"I'm all right, Lord Bowdon."

"I've got a job for you. I'll write to you about it presently. It's a Commission they've put me on, and I thought you might like to be secretary."

"Anything with a stipend," agreed Ashley cheerfully.

"What a lot men think of money!" said Lady Kilnorton.

"I don't think I ever met a more fascinating creature," Lord Bowdon mused.

"It's awfully good of you," continued Ashley. "I'm uncommonly hard-up just now."

"Do you know her?" asked Bowdon.

"Met her once or twice," Ashley answered very carelessly. Bowdon seemed to fall into a reverie, as he gently stirred his tea round and round. Lady Kilnorton leant back and looked at the mantel-piece. But presently he glanced at her, smiled pleasantly, and began to discuss the Muddocks. Ashley left them thus engaged when he took his leave ten minutes later.

Lord Bowdon had lived a full and active life which now stretched over forty-three years. In spite of much sport and amusement he had found time for some soldiering, for the duties of his station, and for proving himself an unexpectedly useful and sensible Member of Parliament. But he had not found time to be married; that event he used to think of in his earlier days as somehow connected with his father's death; when he became Earl of Daresbury, he would marry. However, about a year

back, he had made Lady Kilnorton's acquaintance, had liked her, and had begun to draw lazy and leisurely plans about her. He had not fallen in love with her, any more than Ashley Mead had, but he had drifted into a considerable affection for her. His father had lived to be old; he himself had already grown more middle-aged than was desirable in a bridegroom. During the last few weeks he had considered the project seriously; and that he had assumed this attitude of mind could hardly have escaped the lady's notice. He had detected, with some pleasure, her hidden consciousness of his purpose and commended her for a gracefully easy treatment of the position. She did not make at him, nor yet run away from him, she neither hurried nor repulsed him. Thus by degrees the thing had become very pleasant and satisfactory in imagination. It was not quite what in by-gone years he had meant by being in love – he thanked heaven for that, after reflection – but it was pleasant and satisfactory. "Let it go on to the end," he would have said, with a contentment hardly conscious of an element of resignation.

To-day there was a check, a set-back in his thoughts, and he was uncomfortable lest it might shew in his manner. He talked too long about the Muddocks, then too long about Ashley Mead, then about something quite uninteresting. There was an unexplained check; it vexed and puzzled him. Lady Kilnorton, with her usual directness, told him what it was before they parted.

"You've been thinking about Ora Pinsent all the time," she said. "It would have been better to have the courage of your ingratitude and go on talking about her." The gay, good-humoured words were accompanied by a rather nervous little smile.

"Who is she?" asked Bowdon bluntly and with undisguised curiosity.

"She's Mrs. Jack Fenning. I don't know and I don't care who Jack Fenning is, only –"

"Only what?"

"Only he's not dead. I know you think that's the one thing he ought to be."

"I'm not sure about that," he answered, looking in her face. The face had suddenly become charming to him in its now apparent mixture of annoyance and merriment. "Well, I must be going," he added with a sigh. Then he laughed; Lady Kilnorton, after an instant's hesitation, joined in his laugh.

"She liked me to drive as fast as I could, and straight home!" said he. "Good-bye, Lady Kilnorton."

"Good-bye. I wonder you aren't a little more sensible at your age."

"She carries you off your feet, somehow," he murmured apologetically, as he made for the door. He was feeling both rude and foolish, confessing thereby the special relation towards his hostess which he had come to occupy.

Left alone, Irene Kilnorton sat down and attempted a dispassionate appraisal of herself. She was twenty-nine, a widow of four years' standing. The world, which had seemed ended when her young husband died, had revived for her; such is the world's persistent way. She was pretty, not beautiful, bright, not brilliant, pleasant, but hardly fascinating. She was pleased with the impartiality which conducted her so far. But at this point the judgment of herself began to drift into a judgment of Ora Pinsent, who seemed to be all that she herself had just missed being; in assessing Ora the negatives fell out and the limitations had to be discarded. Yet her mood was not one of envy for Ora Pinsent. She would not be Ora Pinsent. Among those various feelings which she had for Ora, there was one which she had described by saying "I despise her." The mood, in truth, hung doubtful between pity and contempt; but it was enough to save her from wishing to be Ora Pinsent. She would sooner put up with the negatives and the limitations. But she might wish, and did wish, that other people could take her own discerning view of her friend. She did not call herself a jealous woman; but after all Lord Bowdon had become in a rather special sense her property; now he was, as he put it graphically enough, carried off his feet. That condition would not last; he would find his feet and his feet would find the ground again soon. Meanwhile, however, she could hardly be expected exactly to like it. Men did such strange things – or so she had been told – just in those brief spaces of time when the feet were off the ground; perhaps women too did things rather strange in a similar case.

"And poor Ora's feet," she said to herself, "are never really on the ground."

She was vaguely conscious that her mingled admiration and contempt reflected in a rather commonplace fashion the habitual attitude of good-sense towards genius. Not being in love with commonplace good-sense as an intellectual ideal, she grew impatient with her thoughts, flung the window open, and sought distraction in the sight of the people who passed up and down the hill through the cool kindliness of the June evening. The wayfarers caught her idle interest, and she had almost lost herself in wondering whether the boy and girl at the corner would kiss before they parted when she was recalled to her own sphere by seeing two people whom she knew breasting the slope on bicycles. A dark young man inclining to stoutness, very elaborately arrayed for the exercise on which he was engaged, rode side by side with a dark young woman inclining to leanness, plainly clad, with a face that a man might learn to think attractive by much looking, but would not give a second thought to in a London drawing-room. "The young Muddocks," said Irene, drawing back and peering at them from behind her curtains. "Recovering themselves after the party, I suppose."

She watched them till they were out of sight; why, she did not ask herself. Of course there was the interest of wealth, perhaps a vulgar, but seemingly an unavoidable, sensation which pounds much multiplied enable their possessors to create. There was more; the Muddocks had come somehow into her orbit. They were in the orbit of her friend Ashley Mead; the girl might become the most important satellite there. Irene's own act had perhaps brought them into Ora Pinsent's orbit – where storms were apt to rage. Curiosity mingled with an absurd sense of responsibility in her. "It's such a risk introducing Ora to anybody," she murmured, and with this her thoughts flew back to Bowdon and the condition of men who are carried off their feet.

"It's simply that I'm jealous," she declared petulantly, as she shut the window. But she was not yet to escape from Ora Pinsent. There on the mantel-piece was a full-length photograph, representing Ora in her latest part and signed with her autograph, a big O followed by a short sprawl of letters, and a big P followed by a longer sprawl. Though not a professed believer in the revelation of character by handwriting, Irene found something significant in this signature, in the impulse which seemed to die away to a fatigued perfunctory ending, in the bold beginning that lagged on to a conclusion already wearisome. Her eyes rose to the face of the portrait. It shewed a woman in a mood of audacity, still merry and triumphant, but distantly apprehensive of some new and yet unrealised danger. Exultation, barely yet most surely touched with fear, filled the eyes and shaped the smile. It seemed to Irene Kilnorton that, if Ora knew herself and her own temper, such reasonably might be her disposition towards the world and her own life as well as her pose in the play to which she now drew all the town; for her power of enjoying greatly in all likelihood carried with it its old companion, the power greatly to suffer. Yet to Irene a sort of triviality affected both capacities, as though neither could be exactly taken seriously, as though the enjoyment would always be childish, the suffering none too genuine. Good-sense judged genius again; and again the possessor of good-sense turned impatiently away, not knowing whether her contempt should be for herself or for her friend.

Then she began to laugh, suddenly but heartily, at the recollection of Lady Muddock. When Ora had passed on after the introduction, and Irene was lingering in talk with her hostess, Lady Muddock had raised her timid pale-blue eyes, nervously fingered that growth of hair which was too fluffy for her years, and asked whether Miss Pinsent were "nice." This adjective, maid-of-all-work on women's lips, had come with such ludicrous inadequacy and pitiful inappropriateness that even at the moment Irene had smiled. Now she laughed. Yet she was aware that Lady Muddock had no more than this one epithet with which to achieve a classification of humanity. You were nice or you were not nice; it was simple dichotomy; there was the beginning, there the end of the matter. So viewed, the question lost its artlessness and became a singularly difficult and searching interrogation. For if the little adjective were given its rich fulness of meaning, its widely representative character (it had to sum up half a world!), if it were asked whether, on the whole, Ora Pinsent were likely to be a good element in the world, or (if it might be so put) a profitable speculation on the part of Nature, Irene Kilnorton would

have been quite at a loss to answer. In fact – she asked, with a laugh still but now a puzzled laugh – was she nice or wasn't she? The mixture of feelings which she had described to Ashley Mead forbade any clear and definite response on her own behalf. On Lady Muddock's, however, she owned that the verdict must be in the negative. By the Muddock standards, nice Ora was not.

And what was this absent Jack Fenning like? There seemed no materials for a judgment, except that he had married Ora Pinsent and was no longer with Ora Pinsent. Here was a combination of facts about him remarkable enough to invest him with a certain interest. The rest was blank ignorance.

"And," said Irene with another slight laugh, "I suppose I'm the only person who ever took the trouble to think about him. I'm sure Ora never does!"

CHAPTER II

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

It was an indication of the changed character of the business that the big block in Buckingham Palace Road closed early on Saturdays, surrendering the hours in which the branches continued to do their most roaring trade. The day after the party was a Saturday; Sir James and his son were making their way back through the Park, timed to arrive at home for a two o'clock luncheon. The custom was that Lady Muddock and Alice should meet them at or about the entrance of Kensington Gardens, and the four walk together to the house. There existed in the family close union, modified by special adorations. Sir James walked with his daughter, Bob with his stepmother; this order never varied, being the natural outcome of the old man's clinging to Alice, and of Lady Muddock's pathetic fidelity to Bob. She had no child of her own; she looked up to Alice, but was conscious of an almost cruel clear-sightedness in her which made demonstrations of affection seem like the proffer of excuses. There are people so sensible that one caresses them with an apology. Bob, on the other hand, was easy to please; you had to look after his tastes, admire his wardrobe, and not bother about the business out of hours; he asked no more, his stepmother did no less. Thus while they crossed the Gardens Lady Muddock talked of yesterday's party, while Sir James consulted his daughter as to the affairs of the firm. Alice detected here and there in what he said an undercurrent of discontent with Bob, on the score of a lack not of diligence but of power, not of the willingness to buckle to, but of that instinct for the true game – the right move, the best purchase, the moment to stand for your price, the moment to throw all on the market – whence spring riches. Sir James expressed his meaning clumsily, but he ended clearly enough by wishing that there were another head in the business; for he grew old, and, although he was now relieved from Parliament, found the work heavy on him. Nothing of all this was new to the listener; the tale was an old one and led always to the same climax, the desire to get Ashley Mead back into the business. If Alice objected that he was ignorant and untrained in commercial pursuits, Sir James pushed the difficulty aside. "He's got the stuff in him," he would persist, and then look at his daughter in a questioning way. With this look also she was familiar; the question which the glance put was whether she would be willing to do what Lady Kilnorton called "going with selling the ribbons."

Such was the suggestion; Alice's mood (she treated herself with the candour which she bestowed on others) towards it was that she would be willing to go – to go to Ashley Mead, but not to go with selling the ribbons. The point was not one of pride; it was partly that she seemed to herself to be weary of the ribbons, not ashamed (she was free from that little weakness, which beset Bob and made him sensitive to jokes about his waistcoats being acquired at cost price), but secretly and rather urgently desirous of a new setting and background for her life, and of an escape from surroundings grown too habitual. But it was more perhaps that she did not wish Ashley to sell ribbons or to make money. She was touched with a culture of which Sir James did not dream; the culture was in danger of producing fastidiousness. Ashley was precious in her life because he did not sell ribbons, because he thought nothing or too little of money, because he was poor. The children of the amassers are often squanderers. Alice was no squanderer, but she felt that enough money had been made, enough ribbons sold. With a new aim and a new outlook life would turn sweet again. And she hated the thought that to Ashley she meant ribbons. She did not fear that he would make love to her merely for her money's sake; but the money would chink in her pocket and the ribbons festoon about her gown; if she went to him, she would like to leave all that behind and start a new existence. Yet the instinct in her made the business sacred; a reverence of habit hung about it, causing these dreams to seem unholy rebels which must not shew their heads, and certainly could not be mentioned in answer to her

father's look. Moreover she wished Ashley to shew himself a man who, if he took to ribbon-selling, would sell ribbons well; the qualities remained great in her eyes though the pursuit had lost its charms.

At lunch they talked of their guests. Lady Kilnorton had pleased them all; Lord Bowdon's presence was flattering to Lady Muddock and seemed very friendly to her husband. Minna Soames, who had come to sing to the party, was declared charming: hard if she had not been, since she spent her life trying after that verdict! Lady Muddock added that she was very nice, and sang only at concerts because of the atmosphere of the stage. Ora Pinsent excited more discussion and difference of opinion, but here also there was a solid foundation of agreement. They had all felt the gulf between them and her; she might not be bad – Bob pretended that he would have heard all about any scandal had there been one – but she was hopelessly alien from them. They were not sorry that Lady Kilnorton had brought her, for she had added to the *éclat*, but they could not feel sure (nor perhaps eager to be sure) that they had secured a permanent acquaintance, much less a possible friend. And then she had told her hostess, quite casually, that Lord Bowdon (whom she had never met before) was going to drive her home. Lord Bowdon was not an old man, Miss Pinsent was quite a young woman; he was a lord and she was an actress; of suspected classes, both of them. Every tenet and preconception of the Middle Period combined to raise grave apprehension in Lady Muddock's mind. Sir James nodded assent over his rice pudding. The son and daughter shared the feeling, but with self-questioning; was it not narrow, asked Alice, was it not unbecoming to a man of the world, asked Bob. But there it was – in brother and sister both.

"Ashley knows her, I think," Alice remarked.

"That doesn't prove anything," said Bob with a laugh. Lady Muddock looked a little frightened. "I mean, Ashley knows everybody," he added rather enviously.

"Ashley can take care of himself," the old man decided, as he pushed his plate away.

"Anyhow I don't suppose we shall see much of her," said Alice. Her tone had some regret in it; Ora Pinsent was at least far removed from the making of money and the selling of ribbons; she was of another world.

With this the subject passed; nobody made mention of Mr. Jack Fenning because nobody (not even well-informed Bob) had heard of him, and gloves had hidden the unobtrusive wedding ring on Miss Pinsent's finger. Indeed at all times it lay in the shadow of a very fine sapphire; the fanciful might be pardoned for finding an allegory here.

The still recent fatigues of entertaining made Lady Muddock disinclined to drive, and Alice went alone to the Park in the afternoon. The place was very full, and motion slow and interrupted. Getting fast-set in a block, she leant back resignedly, wondering why in the world she had chosen this mode of spending a summer afternoon. Suddenly she heard her name called and, turning round, found a small and unpretentious victoria wedged close to the carriage. A lady sat in the victoria; Alice was conscious of little more than a large hat, eyes, and a smile; when she thought of the meeting later on, she was surprised to find herself ignorant of what Ora Pinsent was wearing. But the smile she remembered; it was so cordial and radiant, a smile quite without reserve, seeming to express what was, for the instant at least, the whole and unclouded happiness of a human being. Thus to smile is in itself a talent.

"Miss Pinsent!" she exclaimed in a flutter for which she had not time to rebuke herself.

"I wasn't quite sure it was you," Ora explained. "But I thought I'd risk it. Isn't it dull?" Her eloquent hands accused the whole surroundings.

"This block's so tiresome," observed Alice; she felt the obviousness of the remark.

"Oh, I don't mind whether we move or not. I mean driving alone. But perhaps you do it from choice. I don't. But he didn't come."

Alice looked at her and laughed.

"I should have thought he would," she said. She began to be amused.

"Yes, wouldn't you?" asked Ora. "But he didn't."

"I'm very sorry."

"Oh, I've stopped wanting him now. It's quite unsafe not to keep appointments with me. You miss the time when you're wanted! Have you seen Irene Kilnorton anywhere?"

"Not since yesterday."

There was a pause. Some way ahead a carriage crawled a few paces on; the pack was going to break up. Ora's victoria got a start first; as it moved she turned her head over her shoulder, saying:

"I suppose you wouldn't like to come and see me some day?"

Alice said that she would be delighted, but she felt that her expression of pleasure in the prospect sounded purely conventional. In reality she was amazed, inclined to be apprehensively gratified, and certainly interested.

"Then do," smiled Miss Pinsent as she was borne away.

"I wonder who didn't come!" said Alice to herself, smiling; but the next moment criticism revived. "How curious she should tell me about it!" she reflected. "She doesn't know me a bit." Frown and smile stood on her face together.

The way was cleared. Alice accomplished another round at a fairly quick trot. Then she saw Miss Pinsent's victoria again. This time Miss Pinsent was not alone; the victoria stood by the path and Lord Bowdon's foot was on the step. He was talking to Ora; Ora leant back, looking past him with an expression of utter inattention. Was he the man who didn't come? Or was she inattentive because he was not? Alice gave up the riddle; she had a sudden consciousness that generalisations which had hitherto seemed tolerably trustworthy might prove most fallacious if applied to Ora Pinsent. But there was a distinct regret in her mind when she lost sight of the little victoria with the big man by its step. She had her invitation; but in retrospect her invitation seemed woefully vague.

Ashley dropped in to dinner that evening, pleasant and talkative as usual, but rather less alert and a trifle absent in manner. However he had good news; he was to be secretary to Lord Bowdon's Commission; it would last a long while, was probably meant to last as long as the Government did (the grounds for this impression would be tedious to relate, and open to controversy), and would enable him to pay bills.

"I suppose," he said to Alice, "you don't know what it is not to be able to pay a bill?"

"I hardly ever have one," she said; "they're just sent in to father."

"It must be rather slow never to be hard-up," he remarked; he hardly meant what he said, and was quite unaware how true his remark seemed to Alice Muddock. "Then you never write cheques?" he went on.

"For charity I do."

"Good heavens, what a base use of a cheque book!"

Lady Muddock happened to hear this observation. She had failed to accustom herself to remarks not meant for literal acceptance; the Middle Period treats language seriously.

"We all ought to give a certain proportion," she remarked. "Oughtn't we, James?" But Sir James had gone to sleep.

As Ashley sat and talked lightly about the secretaryship, his shifts to live comfortably beyond his means, and the welcome help Lord Bowdon had afforded, Alice felt a surprise at him growing in her. Had she been placed as he was, she might not have married for money, but she would inevitably have thought of such a step, probably have had a severe struggle about it, and certainly have enjoyed a sense of victory in putting it on one side. The money-taint had bitten so far into her; she could disregard wealth but could not forget it. She hardly understood Ashley; she felt curious to know what he would say if she stood before him and offered herself and her thousands freely, unconditionally, the money without the ribbons. Did he know that she was ready to do it? Did he want her? There was an only half-occupied look in his eyes. She never expected to see admiration gleam in the eyes of men, but she often, indeed generally, excited interest and chained attention. To-night there was hardly attention, certainly not whole-hearted engrossed interest. All at once, for the first time in her

simple sincere life, there came over her a bitter regret that she was not pretty. It was a small thing to be; small in itself, very small in the little changes of shape and colour that made it. But how rich in consequences! Yes, she meditated, how unfairly rich!

Pressed by thought, she found herself lapsing into long silences. She started another line of talk, but the new topic sprang from the previous meditation.

"I met Miss Pinsent in the Park to-day," she said. "She was looking so beautiful. And what do you think, she asked me to go and see her! I was very flattered."

Ashley smiled as he observed:

"She's asked me to go and see her too."

"Shall you go?" asked Alice, with a grave interest.

She was puzzled at the heartiness of his laugh over her question.

"Great heavens, of course I shall go," he said, laughing still.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Why, my dear Alice, there isn't a man in London who wouldn't go."

"Oh, I see," she said in a disappointed, almost irritable tone. She had somehow expected a better explanation than lay in that, something that might apply to herself, to a girl. She was even sure that there ought to be something more about Miss Pinsent, that it was a man's fault if he saw only what all men must see. Her tone did not escape the quick wit of her companion.

"You must see that she's tremendously interesting?" he said. "Lady Kilnorton says that Ora Pinsent's the most interesting person in the world – except one."

"Except who?"

"Her husband," he answered, laughing again. "You look surprised. Oh, yes, he exists. His name's Fenning."

"She – she's married?" Alice was leaning forward now; here was another problem.

"Incredible, but true. You may let Bob meet her without the least danger of spoiling that great match he's going to make."

"I'd no idea she was married."

Ashley was obviously amused at her wonder, perhaps at the importance she attached to the circumstance which he had brought to her knowledge.

"Lady Kilnorton will have it that he must be a remarkable man," he went on. "But it doesn't follow in the least, you know, rather the contrary. Some women have unimpeachable taste in everything except marriage; or perhaps we must all have our share of the ordinary, and they take theirs out in their husbands. Anyhow, he's at the other end of the world somewhere."

They talked a little while longer about Ora, Alice incidentally mentioning Bowdon's appearance by the step of the victoria. Then Ashley said good-night, and started to walk home to his rooms in one of the streets which run down from the Strand to the Thames Embankment. Here he dwelt humbly, commanding modest comforts and, if he craned his neck, a sidelong view of a bit of the river by Charing Cross bridge. As he walked, he was pleasantly and discursively thoughtful. His evening had disposed him to reflexion on the very various types of people who inhabited the world and flocked, one and all, to London. He knew many sorts; yet within the limits of his acquaintance the Muddocks were peculiar. And now, right at the other end of the scale, came this Miss Pinsent. He thought about Miss Pinsent for a little while, and then drifted idly into a trivial classification of women according to their external advantages. Perhaps he had dimly discerned and caught something of Alice Muddock's train of ideas. There were those beautiful to all, those pretty to some, those plain to most. Miss Pinsent, Lady Kilnorton, Alice Muddock, were the instances on which his generalities depended. Superficial as the dividing principle was, he gained a hint of what had come home to Alice while he talked to her, of the immense difference it made to the persons divided. (That it made an immense difference to him was in no way such a discovery as needed midnight meditation.) To them the difference would surely become more than a source of greater or less homage, attention, pleasure,

or excitement. These immediate results must so influence and affect life as to make the woman in the end really a different being, a different inner as well as a different outer creature, from what she would have been had she occupied a place in another class than her own. It would be curious to take twin souls (he allowed himself the hypothesis of souls), put them into diverse kinds of bodies, leave them there ten years, from eighteen to twenty-eight, say, then take them out and record the observed variations. But that was hopeless; the experimental method, admirable for all sorts of dull subjects, broke down just where it would become of absorbing interest.

In Pall Mall he met Lord Bowdon coming out of the Reform Club. Bowdon's family had always been Whigs; people might argue that historical parties had changed their policies and their principles; Bowdon was not to be caught by any such specious reasoning. The Liberals were heirs to the Whigs; he was heir to his fathers; his conservative temperament preserved his Liberal principles. But he did not seem to be occupied by such matters to-night. He caught Ashley by the arm, turned him round the Athenæum corner, and began to stroll gently along towards the steps. Ashley thanked him again for procuring him the Secretaryship; Bowdon's only answer was to nod absently. What Alice Muddock had told him recurred to Ashley's mind.

"I hear you had an audience in the Park to-day," he said, laughing. "Her Majesty distinguished you?"

"I did a most curious thing," said Bowdon slowly. "I had an appointment to drive with her. I didn't go. Half-an-hour later I walked up to the Park and looked for her till I found her. Doesn't that strike you as a very silly proceeding?"

"Very," said Ashley with a laugh.

"In a man of forty-three?" pursued Bowdon with a whimsical gravity.

"Worse and worse. But where do you put the folly, in missing the appointment or – ?"

"Oh, in the combination! The combination makes it hopeless. You said you knew her, didn't you?"

"Yes. I shouldn't miss the appointment."

Ashley had long been aware of his companion's kindness for him, one of those partialities that arise without much apparent reason but are of unquestionable genuineness. But Bowdon was considered reserved, and this little outbreak of self-exposure was a surprise. It shewed that the man was at least playing with a new emotion; if the emotion grew strong the play might turn to earnest. Moreover Bowdon must know that his confidant was a frequent visitor at Lady Kilnorton's. Bowdon stopped suddenly, standing still on the pavement, and looking full in Ashley's face.

"Don't think I'm going to make a fool of myself, my boy," he said with remarkable emphasis and energy. "Good-night;" and, hailing a cab, he was off in an instant.

Ashley properly considered his friend's last remark an indication that he was feeling rather inclined to, and just possibly might, make or try to make (for often failure is salvation) a fool of himself. The man of unshaken sobriety of purpose needs no such protests. Ashley strolled on to his rooms, decidedly amused, somehow also a little vexed. Nothing had happened except a further and needless proof that he had been right in putting Ora in the first division of his classification. The vexation, then, remained unaccounted for, and it was not until he had reached home, lit his pipe, mixed his whiskey and water, and settled in his arm-chair, that he discovered that he was a little annoyed just because Lord Bowdon was apparently afraid of making a fool of himself. It was a thing that Bowdon or any other man had a perfect right to do, so far as the rest of the world was concerned. This sounded like a platitude; Ashley was surprised to find in his own soul an indefinite but not weak opposition to it. The instinct of exclusive possession was stirring in him, that resentment of intrusion which is the forerunner of a claim to property. Well, he was not forty-three but just thirty. His theory of life did not forbid a certain amount of making a fool of himself; his practice had included a rather larger quantity. Perturbation had been the ruling factor in Bowdon, in Ashley a pleasurable anticipation was predominant. In his case there were no very obvious reasons why he should not make

a fool of himself again, if he were so disposed; for, dealing dispassionately with the situation and with his own standards, he could not treat this Jack Fenning as a very obvious reason. He went to bed with a vague sense of satisfaction; the last few days had brought to birth a new element in life, or at least a new feature of this season. It was altogether too soon to set about measuring the dimensions of the fresh arrival or settling to what it might or might not grow.

His anticipation would have been much heightened and the development of his interest quickened had he been able to see what was at this time happening to the lady who had made so abrupt and resolute an entry into his thoughts as well as into Lord Bowdon's. Her distress would have been sun and water to the growth of his feelings. For Mr. Sidney Hazlewood, an accomplished comedian and Ora Pinsent's Manager, had urged that she should try, and indeed must force herself, to regard a certain business arrangement from a purely business point of view. To Ora, still charged with the emotions of her performance in addition to her own natural and large stock of emotions, this suggestion seemed mere brutality, oblivious of humanity, and dictated solely by a ruthless and unhallowed pursuit of gain. So she burst into tears, and a weary wrinkle knitted itself on Mr. Hazlewood's brow. Lady Kilnorton had been blaming herself for judging genius from the stand of common-sense; Mr. Hazlewood did not theorise about the matter; that eloquent wrinkle was his sole protest against the existence and the ways of genius. The wrinkle having failed of effect, he observed that an agreement was an agreement and spoke, as a man who contemplates regrettable necessities, of his solicitor. Ora defied Mr. Hazlewood, the law, and the world, and went home still in tears. She was not really happy again until she had got into her dressing-gown, when quite suddenly she chanced on the idea that Mr. Hazlewood had a good deal to say for himself. Then she began to laugh merrily at the scene which had passed between them.

"He's very stupid, but he likes me and he's a good old creature," she ended in a charitable way.

CHAPTER III

AN ARRANGEMENT FOR SUNDAY

"Elizabeth Aurora Pinsent; that's it. But Elizabeth was too solemn, and Betty was too familiar, and Aurora too absurd. So I'm just Ora."

Lord Bowdon nodded gravely.

"And I think," she went on, lying back on the sofa, "that the world's rather dull, and that you're rather like the world this afternoon."

He did not dispute the point. A man who wants to make love, but is withheld by the sense that he ought not, is at his dullest. Bowdon's state was this or even worse. Ora was a friend of Irene Kilnorton's; how much had she guessed, observed, or been told? Would she think loyalty a duty in herself and disloyalty in him a reproach? That would almost certainly be her mood unless she liked him very much; and she gave no sign of such a liking. On all grounds he was clear that he had better go away at once and not come back again. He thought first of Irene Kilnorton, then of his own peace and interest, lastly of Mr. Jack Fenning; but it must be stated to his credit that he did think quite perceptibly of Jack Fenning. Yet he did not go away immediately.

"You live all alone here?" he asked, looking round the bright little room.

"Yes, I can, you see. That's the advantage of being married."

"I never looked at marriage in that light before."

"No," she laughed. "You've not looked at it in any light, you know; only from the outer darkness."

As his eyes rested on her lying there in graceful repose, he felt a grudge against the way fate was treating him. He wished he were ten or fifteen years younger; he wished he had nothing to lose; he wished he had no conscience. Given these desirable things, he believed that he could break down this indifference and banish this repose. Ora had done nothing to create such a belief; it grew out of his own sturdy and usually justifiable self-confidence.

"Have you a conscience?" he asked her suddenly.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "afterwards."

"That's a harmless variety," he said wistfully.

"Tiresome, though," she murmured with her eyes upturned to the ceiling as though she had forgotten his presence. "Only, you see, something else happens soon and then you don't think any more about it." Ora seemed glad that the cold wind of morality was thus tempered.

Such a remedy was not for the solid-minded man: he did think more about it, notwithstanding that many things happened; and his was not merely the harmless variety of conscience. Ora nestled lower on her cushions, sighed and closed her eyes; she did not treat him with ceremony, if any comfort lay in that. He rose, walked to the window, and looked out. He felt intolerably absurd, but the perception of his absurdity did not help him much. Again he complained of fate. This thing had come just when such things should cease to come, just also when another thing had begun to seem so pleasant, so satisfactory, so almost settled. He was ashamed of himself; as he stood there he regretted his midnight confidence to Ashley Mead a fortnight before. Since then he had made no confidences to Ashley; he had not told him how often he came to this house, nor how often he wished to come. Ora Pinsent's name had not been mentioned between them, although they had met several times over the initial business of launching their Commission.

He turned round and found her eyes on him. She began to laugh, sprang up, ran across the room, laid a hand lightly on his sleeve, and looked in his face, shaking her head with an air of determination.

"You must either go, or be a little more amusing," she said. "What's the matter? Oh, I know! You're in love!"

"I suppose so," he admitted with a grim smile.

"Not with me, though!"

"You're sure of that? Nothing would make you doubt it?"

"Well, I thought it was Irene Kilnorton," she answered; her eyes expressed interest and a little surprise.

"So it was; at least I thought so too," said Bowdon.

"Well, if you think so enough, it's all right," said Ora with a laugh.

"But I'm inclined to think differently now."

"Oh, I shouldn't think differently, if I were you," she murmured. "Irene's so charming and clever. She'd just suit you."

"You're absolutely right," said Bowdon.

"Then why don't you?" She looked at him for a moment and he met her gaze; a slight tint of colour came on her cheeks, and her lips curved in amusement. "Oh, what nonsense!" she cried a moment later and drew back from him till she leant against the opposite shutter and stood there, smiling at him. The next moment she went on: "It is quite nonsense, you know."

Lord Bowdon thought for a moment before he answered her.

"Nonsense is not the same as nothing," he said at last.

"You're not serious about it?" she asked with a passing appearance of alarm. "But of course you aren't." She began to laugh again.

He was relieved to find that he had betrayed nothing more decisive than an inclination to flirt. It would be an excellent thing to sail off under cover of that; she would not be offended, he would be safe.

"Tragically serious," he answered, smiling.

"Oh, yes, I know!" she said. Then she grew grave, frowned a little and looked down into the street. "You talk rather like Jack used to. You reminded me of him for an instant," she remarked. "Though you're not like him really, of course."

"Your husband?" His tone had surprise in it; she had never mentioned Jack before; both the moment and the manner of her present reference to him seemed strange.

"Yes. You never met him, did you? He used to be about London five or six years ago."

"No, I never saw him. Where is he now?"

A shrug of her shoulders and a slight smile gave her answer.

"Why did he go away?"

"Oh, a thousand reasons! It doesn't matter. I liked him, though, once."

"Do you like him now?"

A moment more of gravity was followed by a sudden smile; her eyes sparkled again and she laughed, as she answered,

"No, not just now, thank you, Lord Bowdon. What queer questions you ask, don't you?"

"The answers interest me."

"I don't see why they should."

"Don't you?"

"I mean I don't see how they ought."

"Quite so."

"You're really getting a little bit more amusing," said Ora with a grateful look.

He felt an impulse to be brutal with her, to do, in another sphere of action, very much what Mr. Hazlewood had done when he insisted that a business arrangement must be regarded in a business-like way. Suppose he told her that questions of morals, with their cognate problems, ought to be regarded in a moral way? He would perhaps be a strange preacher, but surely she would forget that in amazement at the novelty of his doctrine!

"How old are you?" he asked her, aghast this time at his question but quite unable to resist it.

She glanced at him for a moment, smiled, and answered simply,

"Twenty-seven last December."

He was remorseful at having extracted an answer, but he bowed to her as he said,

"You've paid me a high compliment. You're right, though; it wasn't impertinence."

"Oh, no, you're all right in that way," she murmured with a careless cordiality. "But why did you want to know?"

"I want to know all about you," he said in a low voice.

Again she looked at him for a moment, growing grave as she looked. Then she laid her hand on his arm again and looked up in his face with a pleading coaxing smile.

"Don't," she said.

There was silence for a moment. Then Lord Bowdon took her hand, kissed it, smiled at her, and asked a prosaic question.

"Where's my hat?" said he.

But that prosaic question made it impossible to sail off under cover of an inclination to flirt; it was not at all in that manner; it lacked the colour, the flourish and the show. As he walked away, Bowdon was conscious that whatever happened to the affair, good or evil, whether it went on or stopped, it must be stamped with a certain genuineness. It could not pass at once from his thoughts; he could not suppose that it would be dismissed immediately from hers.

That he occupied her attention for a little while after he went away happened to be the case, although it was by no means the certain result he imagined. A mind for the moment vacant of new impressions allowed her to wonder, rather idly, why she had said "Don't" so soon; he had done nothing to elicit so direct a prohibition; it had put a stop to a conversation only just becoming interesting, still far from threatening inconvenience. Perhaps she was surprised to find her injunction so effective. She had said the word, she supposed, because she was not much taken with him; or rather because she liked him very definitely in one way, and very definitely not in another, and so had been impelled to deal fairly with him. Besides he had for a moment reminded her of Jack Fenning; that also might have something to do with it. The remembrance of her husband's love-making was not pleasant to her. It recalled the greatest of all the blunders into which her trick of sudden likings had led her, the one apparently irrevocable blunder. It brought back also the memory of old delusions which had made the blunder seem something so very different at the time it was committed. She walked about the room for a few minutes with a doleful look, her lips dragged down and her eyes woeful. It was only five; she did not dine till six. She was supposed to rest this hour; if resting meant thinking of Jack Fenning and Lord Bowdon and of the general harshness of the world, she would have none of it. It occurred to her, almost as an insult, that here was an hour in which she was at leisure and yet nobody seemed to desire her society; such treatment was strange and uncomplimentary.

A ring at the bell scattered her gloom.

"That must be somebody amusing!" she cried, clasping her hands in the joyful confidence that fate had taken a turn. "I wonder who it is!"

The visitor thus favoured by a prejudice of approbation proved to be Ashley Mead. He had come once before, a week ago; three days back Ora had in her own mind accused him of neglect and then charitably congratulated him on indifference. Now she ran to him as though he were the one person in the world she wished to see.

"How charming of you!" she cried. "I was bored to death. I do like people who come at the right time!"

Ashley held her hand for a moment in sheer pleasure at the feel of it; they sat down, she again on her sofa, he in a low chair close by.

"Tea?" she said.

"Goodness, no. Don't move from where you are, Miss Pinsent. I met Lord Bowdon walking away."

"I sent him away."

"What delightful presentiments you have!"

"Indeed I'd no idea that you'd come. I don't think he wanted to stay, though." She smiled meditatively. Lord Bowdon's prompt acceptance of her "Don't" seemed now to take on a humorous air; his hesitation contrasted so sharply with the confident readiness of her new visitor.

"I've come on business," said Ashley.

"Business?" she echoed, with an unpleasant reminiscence of Mr. Sidney Hazlewood and his views as to the nature of an agreement.

"I want you to help me to organise something."

"Oh, I couldn't. I hate all that sort of thing. It's not a bazaar, is it?"

"No. Perhaps we might call it a *fête*. It's a day in the country, Miss Pinsent."

"Oh, I know! Children! You mean those children?"

He leant back in his chair and looked at her before he replied. She seemed a little hurt and regretful, as though his visit were not proving so pleasant as she had expected; a visit should be paid, as virtue should be practised, for its own sake.

"No," he said. "Not those children. These children."

She took an instant to grasp the proposal; then her eyes signified her understanding of it; but she did not answer it.

"Why not?" he urged, leaning forward.

She broke into a light laugh.

"There's no reason why not – "

"Ah, that's right!"

"Except that I'm not sure I want to," continued Ora. She put her head a little on one side, with a critical air. "I wonder if you'd amuse me for a whole day," she said.

"You quite mistake my point of view," he replied, smiling. "I never expected to amuse you. I want you to amuse me. I'm quite selfish about it."

"That's just making use of me," she objected. "I don't think I was created only to amuse you, you know."

"Perhaps not; but let me have the amusement first. The trouble'll come soon enough."

"Will it? Then why – "

"Oh, you understand that well enough really, Miss Pinsent."

"What would that nice serious girl you're going to marry say if she heard of our outing?"

"I haven't received the news of my engagement yet."

"Irene says you're certain to marry her."

"Well, at any rate she doesn't say I've done it yet, does she?"

"No," admitted Ora, smiling.

"And that's the point, isn't it? Will you come on Sunday?"

Sunday had looked rather grey; there was nothing but a lunch party, to meet a Dean who thought that the stage might be made an engine for good, and therefore wished to be introduced to Miss Pinsent. Oh, and there was a dinner to celebrate somebody's birthday – she had forgotten whose. Yes, Sunday was quite a free day. The sun shone here; it would shine merrily in the country. In short she wanted to go.

"Oh, well, I don't mind trying to prevent you being bored for just one day," she said, with her eyes merry and mocking.

"That's very kind of you," observed Ashley in a composed tone. "I'll call for you at eleven and carry you off."

"Where to?"

"I shall settle that. It's entirely for my sake we're going, you know, so I shall have my choice."

"It sounds as if you might enjoy yourself, Mr. Mead."

"Yes, quite, doesn't it?" he answered, laughing. Ora joined in his laugh; the world was no longer harsh; Lord Bowdon was nothing; there were no more reminiscences of the way Jack Fenning used to talk. There was frolic, there was a touch of adventure, a savour of mischief.

"It'll be rather fun," she mused softly, clasping her hands on her knee.

Behind the man's restrained bearing lay a sense of triumph. He had carried out his little campaign well. He did not look ahead, the success of the hour served. No doubt after that Sunday other things would happen again, and might even be of importance; meanwhile except that Sunday there was nothing. Merely that she came was not all – with her was not even very much. But he knew that her heart was eager to come, and that the Sunday was a joy to her also.

"It's dinner-time," she said, springing up. "Go away, Mr. Mead."

He was as obedient as Bowdon had been; enough had been done for to-day. But a farewell may be said in many ways.

"Sunday, then," he said, taking both her hands which she had held out to him in her cordial fashion. Lady Kilnorton said that Ora always seemed to expect to be kissed. "Just manner, of course," she would add, since Ora was her friend.

"Yes, Sunday – unless I change my mind. I often do."

"You won't this time." The assertion had not a shred of question about it; it was positive and confident.

She looked up in his face, laughing.

"Good-bye," she said.

Bowdon had kissed her hand, but Ashley did not follow that example. They enjoyed another laugh together, and he was laughing still as he left her and took his way downstairs.

"Oh, dear!" she said, passing her hand over her eyes, as she went to get ready for dinner. She felt a reaction from some kind of excitement; yet what reason for excitement had there been?

With regard to the theatre the Muddock family displayed a variety of practice. Sir James never went; Bob frequented with assiduity those houses where the lighter forms of the drama were presented; Lady Muddock and Alice were occasional visitors at the highest class of entertainment. Neither cared much about evenings so spent as a rule; but Lady Muddock, having entertained Miss Pinsent, was eager to see her act. Ora was the only member of her profession whom Lady Muddock had met; to be acquainted with one of the performers added a new flavour. Lady Muddock felt an increased importance in herself as she looked round the house; there must be a great many people there who knew nobody on the stage; she knew Miss Pinsent; she would have liked the fact mentioned, or at any rate to have it get about in some unobtrusive way. Before the first act was over she had fully persuaded herself that Ora had noticed her presence; she had looked twice quite directly at the box! The little woman, flattered by this wholly fictitious recognition, decided audaciously that Sir James' attitude towards the stage was old-fashioned and rather uncharitable; everybody was not bad on the stage; she felt sure that there were exceptions. Anyhow it was nice to know somebody; it gave one a feeling of what Bob called – she smiled shyly to herself – "being in it." She was very careful never to talk slang herself, but sometimes it expressed just what she wanted to say. She pulled out her pink silk sleeves to their fullest volume (sleeves were large then) and leant forward in the box.

Between the acts Babba Flint came in. He was a club acquaintance of Bob's, and had met the ladies of the family at a charity bazaar. It was a slender basis for friendship, but Babba was not ceremonious. Nobody knew why he was called Babba (which was not his name), but he always was. He was a small fair man, very smartly dressed; he seldom stopped talking and was generally considered agreeable. He talked now, and, seeing the bent of Lady Muddock's interest, he made Ora his theme. Lady Muddock was a little vexed to find that Babba also knew Ora, and most of her colleagues besides; but there was recompense in his string of anecdotes. Alice was silent, looking and wondering at Babba – strange to be such a person! – and yet listening to what he was saying. Babba lisped a little; at least when he said "Miss Pinsent," the S's were blurred and indistinct. He had met

her husband once a long while ago; "a fellow named Denning, no, Fenning; a good-looking fellow." "A gentleman?" Babba supposed so, but deuced hard-up and not very fond of work. She led him no end of a life, Babba had heard; so at last he bolted to America or somewhere. Babba expressed some surprise that Mr. Fenning did not now return – he knew the amount of Ora's salary and mentioned it by way of enforcing this point – and declared that he himself would put up with a good deal at the hands of a lady so prepossessing as Miss Pinsent. Then Lady Muddock asked whether Miss Pinsent were really nice, and Babba said that she wasn't a bad sort to meet about the place but (Here he broke into a quotation from a song popular in its day), "You never know what happens downstairs." Lady Muddock tried to look as though she had received information, and Babba withdrew, in order to refresh himself before the rise of the curtain.

Ora played well that night, indeed played Mr. Hazlewood off the stage, according to his own confession and phraseology. There was a ring in her laugh, a rush in her passion, a triumph in her very walk. Alice found herself wondering whether what happened to the woman herself had much effect on her acting, how complete or incomplete the duality of person was, how much was put on and put off with the stage dresses and the stage paint. But, after all, the woman herself must be there before them, the real creature, full of life and yet straining her great gift of it to the full. Alice had heard men described as "living hard." That phrase generally meant something foolish or disreputable; but you could live hard without dissipation or folly, at least in the ordinary sense of those words. You could take all there was in every hour out of it, put all there was of you into every hour, taste everything, try everything, feel everything, always be doing or suffering, blot out the uneventful stretches of flat country so wide in most lives, for ever be going up or down, breasting hills or rattling over the slopes. It must be strange to be like that and to live like that. Was it also sweet? Or very sweet when not too bitter? And when it was very bitter, what came of it? Surely the mightiest temptation to lay it all aside and go to sleep? Alice drew back with a sudden sense of repulsion, as though there were no health or sanity in such lives and such people. Then she looked again at the beautiful face, now strained in sorrow, with hands stretched out in such marvellous appeal, the whole body a prayer. Her heart went out in pity, and, with a sudden impulse, cried to go out in love. But she could come to no final conclusion about Ora Pinsent, and, vexed at her failure, was thinking when the curtain fell, "What does it matter to me?"

The arrangement for a Sunday in the country, had she known of it, might have made the question seem less simple to answer.

CHAPTER IV

BY WAY OF PRECAUTION

For some days back Irene Kilnorton had been finding it difficult to have amiable thoughts about Ora. That they are attractive, that they make a change where they come, that they are apt to upset what seemed to be settling itself very comfortably before their arrival, are not things which can reasonably be imputed as faults to the persons to whom they are attached as incidents; but neither do they at all times commend them. It could not be denied – at this moment Irene at least could not deny – that there was a wantonness about Ora's intrusions; she went where she might have known it was better that she should stay away, and pursued acquaintances which were clearly safer left in an undeveloped state. She was irresponsible, Lady Kilnorton complained; the grievance was not unnatural in her since she felt that she was paying part of the bill; it was Ora's debt really, but Ora was morally insolvent, and made her friends unwilling guarantors. The pleasant confidence with which she had awaited Bowdon's approaches and received his attentions was shaken; she found that she had wanted him more than she had thought, that she was less sure of getting him than she had supposed. He had been to see her two or three times; there was no falling off in his courtesies, no abrupt break in his assiduity. But a cloud hung about him. Being there, he seemed half somewhere else; she suspected where the absent half of his thoughts might be found. He wore an air almost remorseful and certainly rather apologetic; Lady Kilnorton did not wish to be courted by way of apology. She knew it was all Ora Pinsent, and, although she was quite aware that there was a good deal to be pleaded on Ora's side of the question, she itched to say something – no matter what, provided it were pointed and unpleasant – about Jack Fenning. Babba Flint, with whom she was acquainted, had once described some young lady to her as his "second-best girl." Babba was deplorable, most deplorable; yet her anger borrowed from his strange vocabulary. She did not want to be anybody's "second-best girl." "Not," she added, "that I'm a girl at all. No more is Ora, for that matter." The pleasure of the hit at Ora outweighed the regret in her admission about herself.

With regard to Ashley Mead her mood was much lighter, and, as a consequence, much less repressed. Since she did not care greatly whether he came or not, she reproached him bitterly for not coming; being tolerably indifferent as to how he managed his life, she exhorted him not to be silly; having no concern in the disposal of his affections, she gave him the best possible advice as to where he should bestow them. This conversation happened at Mrs. Pocklington's, where everybody was, and it seemed to amuse Ashley Mead very much. But it was Friday night and Sunday was near, so that everything seemed to amuse and please him. She told him that Alice Muddock was somewhere in the rooms; he said that he had already paid his respects to Alice. Irene's glance charged him with the blindest folly. "How women are always trying to give one another away!" he exclaimed. "Oh, if you won't see, you won't," she answered huffishly and leant back in her chair. The baffled mentor harboured a grievance! He looked at her for a moment, smiled, and passed on.

Presently Minna Soames came and sat down by her. Minna was one of those girls to whom it is impossible to deny prettiness and impossible to ascribe beauty; she sang very well and lived very comfortably by her concerts; she might, of course (or so she said), have made more on the stage, but then there was the atmosphere. Irene did not like her much and was inclined to think her silly. What matter? She began to exercise a circumscribed power of sarcasm on Ora Pinsent; in spite of a secret sense of shame, Irene became more and more gracious. Praise be to those who abuse whom we would abuse but cannot with propriety!

"I was quite surprised to see her at Lady Muddock's," observed Miss Soames with prim maliciousness.

Irene cast a glance at her companion; the remark was evidently innocent, so far as she was concerned; the malice was purely for Ora, not for her. Miss Soames was not aware how Ora had come to be at the Muddocks'! Irene reached the depths of self-contempt when, after ten minutes, Minna Soames went away still in ignorance of this simple fact. "I'm a mean wretch," Irene Kilnorton thought; and so at the moment she was – as the best of us at certain moments are.

These same moments, in which we see ourselves as we are most careful that others shall not see us, are not so pleasant that we seek to prolong them. Irene plunged into the moving throng with the idea of finding somebody to talk to her and take her to supper. With some surprise, some pleasure, and more excitement than she was willing to admit, she chanced to meet Bowdon almost immediately. Her temper rose to the encounter as though to a challenge. She suggested supper. She began to find herself in high spirits. The idea was in her that she would not surrender, would not give up the game, would not make Ora irresistible by shirking a fight with her. When they had secured a little table and sat down she began to talk her best; in this she was helped by the consciousness of looking her best; she did not fear to pin his eyes to her with keenest attention. But the expression of the watching eyes puzzled and annoyed her; they were eager and yet doubtful, appreciative but wistful. Was he trying to think her all he had been on the point of thinking her, still to see in her all that he wanted? Was he unhappy because he could not so think and so see? He almost gave her that impression. She was very gay and felt herself now almost brilliant; her contest was with that most gay and brilliant shape which came between his eyes and what she offered for their allurements. People passing by, in the usual ignorance and the usual confidence of passers-by, summed up the situation in a moment; Bowdon was only waiting for her leave to speak, she was absolutely confident of him. They envied her and said that she should not parade her captive quite so openly. She guessed what they thought; she was glad and was fired to new efforts. She alone would know how incomplete was the victory; for all the world she would be triumphant. Even Ora might think herself defeated! But why was he changed, why was she less charming to him, why must she strive and toil and force? In the midst of her raillery and gaiety she could have put her hands before her face, and hidden tears.

He was almost persuaded, he was eager to be persuaded. At this moment she seemed all he wanted; he told himself angrily and persistently that she was all that any man could or ought to want, that she stood for the best and most reasonable thing, for sure happiness and stable content. If he left her, for what would he leave her? For utter folly and worse. She would be a wife to be proud of; there would be no need to apologise for her. Even had there been no Jack Fenning, he knew that a marriage with Ora Pinsent would seem even to himself to need some apology, that he would fear to see smiles mingled with the congratulations, and to hear a sunken murmur of sneers and laughter among the polite applause. He cursed himself for a fool because he did not on that very instant claim her for his. Why, the other woman would not even let him make love to her! He smiled bitterly as he recollected that it was not open to him to make a fool of himself, even if he would. He wanted the bad and could not have it, but because he wanted it vainly, now he was refusing the good. No raw boy could have sailed further in folly. Coming to that conclusion he declared he would take a firm hold on himself. Failing that, his danger was imminent.

They went up together from the supper-room. Now she was set to win or for ever to lose; she could not play such a game twice. "Don't leave me," she said, boldly and directly. "Everybody here is so tiresome. Let's go to the little room at the end, it's generally empty." He appeared to obey her readily, even eagerly, indeed to be grateful for her invitation; it shewed that he had not betrayed himself. The little room was empty and they sat down together. Now he was inclined to silence and seemed thoughtful. Irene, in inward tumult, was outwardly no more than excited to an unusual brightness. After one swift searching glance at him, she faced the guns and hazarded her assault against the full force of the enemy. She began to speak of Ora, dragging her name into the conversation and keeping it there, in spite of his evident desire to avoid the topic. Of Ora her friend she said nothing untrue, nothing scandalous, nothing malicious; she watched her tongue with a jealous

care; conscience was awake in her; she would have no backbiting to charge herself with. But she did not see why she should not speak the truth; so she told herself; both the general truths that everybody knew and the special truths which intimacy with Ora Pinsent had revealed to her. Ora spoke plainly, even recklessly, of others; why should she not be spoken about plainly, not recklessly, in her turn? And, no, she said nothing untrue, nothing that she would not have said to Ora's face, in the very, or almost the very, same words.

"Yes, she's a strange creature," assented Bowdon.

"Now Ashley Mead's mad about her! But of course he's only one of a dozen."

Here was dangerous ground; she might have stirred a jealousy which would have undone all that was begun; with many men this result would have been almost certain. But with Bowdon there was wisdom in her line of attack; she roused pride in him, the haughtiness which was in his heart though never in his bearing, the instinct of exclusiveness, the quiet feeling of born superiority to the crowd, the innate dislike of being one of a dozen, of scrambling for a prize instead of reaching out to accept a proffered gift. Ashley Mead, the secretary of his Commission, his *protégé*— and a dozen more! The memory of his confidence to Ashley became very bitter; if Ashley were favoured, he would laugh over the recollection of that talk! He felt eager to shew Ashley that it was all no more than a whim, hardly more than a joke. Well, there was a ready way to shew Ashley that — and, he told himself, to shew it to himself too, to convince himself of it, at least to put it out of his own power henceforth to question it by word or deed. The great and the little, the conviction of his mind and the prick of his vanity, worked together in him.

He was persuaded now that to go forward on this path would be wise, would make for the worthiness and dignity of his life, save him from unbecoming follies, and intrench him from dangers. If only he could again come to feel the thing sweet as well as wise! There was much to help him — his old impulses which now revived, her unusual brilliancy, the way in which she seemed to draw to him, to delight in talking to him, to make of him a friend more intimate than she had allowed him to consider himself before. He had meant the thing so definitely a few weeks ago; it seemed absurd not to mean it now, not to suppose it would be as pleasant and satisfactory now as it had seemed then. He had been in a delusion of feeling; here was sanity coming back again. He caught at it with an eager, detaining hand.

Suddenly Irene felt that the battle was won; she knew it clearly in an instant. There was a change in his manner, his tones, his eyes, his smile. Now he was making love to her and no longer thinking whether he should make love to her; and to her he could make love thus plainly with one purpose only, and only to one end. She had what she had striven for, in a very little while now it would be offered to her explicitly. For an instant she shrank back from plucking the fruit, now that she had bent the bough down within her reach. There was a revulsion to shame because she had tried, had fought, had set her teeth and struggled till she won. What she had said of Ora Pinsent rose up against her, declaring that its truth was no honest truth since it was not spoken honestly. Babba Flint and his horrible phrase wormed their way back into her mind. But she rose above these falterings; she would not go back now that she had won — had won that triumph which all the world would suppose to be so complete, and had avoided that defeat the thought of whose bitterness had armed her for battle and sustained her in the conflict. In view of Bowdon's former readiness it would be grossly unfair, surely, to speak of hers as the common case of a woman leading a man on; his implied offer had never been withdrawn; she chose now to accept it; that was the whole truth about the matter.

He asked her to be his wife with the fire and spirit of a passion seemingly sincere; she turned to him in a temporary fit of joy, which made her forget the road by which she had travelled to her end. Her low-voiced confession of love made him very glad that he had spoken, very glad for her sake as well as for his own; it was a great thing to make her so happy. If he had refrained, and then found out the anticipations he had raised in her and how he had taught her to build on him, he must have acknowledged a grave infraction of his code. She was, after the first outburst of fearful delight,

very gentle and seemed to plead with him; he answered the pleading, half unconsciously, by telling her that he had been so long in finding words because she had encouraged him so little and kept him in such uncertainty. When she heard this she turned her face up to his again with a curiously timid deprecatory affection.

He was for announcing the engagement then and there, as publicly as possible. His avowed motive was his pride; a desire to commit himself beyond recall, to establish the fact and make it impregnable, was the secret spring. Irene would not face the whole assembly, but agreed that the news should be whispered to chosen friends.

"It'll come to the same thing in a very little while," he said with a relieved laugh.

Before the evening ended, the tidings thus disseminated reached Ashley Mead, and he hastened to Irene. Bowdon had left her for the moment, and he detached her easily from the grasp of a casual bore. His felicitations lacked nothing in heartiness.

"But it's no surprise," he laughed. "I was only wondering how long you'd put it off. I mean 'you' in the singular number."

That was pleasant to hear, just what she wanted to hear, just what she wished all the world to say. But she burned to ask him whether he had continued in the same state of anticipation during the last week or two. Suddenly he smiled in a meditative way.

"What's amusing you?" she demanded rather sharply.

"Nothing," he answered. He had been thinking of Bowdon's midnight confidence. He reflected how very different men were. Some day, no doubt, he himself would make a proper and reasonable choice; but he could not have gone so straight from the idea (however foolish the idea) of Ora Pinsent to the fact of Irene Kilnorton. It was to lay aside a rapturous lyric and take up a pleasantly written tale. He found several other such similes for it, the shadow of Sunday being over his mind. He was in great spirits and began to talk merrily and volubly, making fun of his companion, of love, of engaged folk, and so on. She listened very contentedly for awhile, but then began to wonder why Bowdon did not come back to her; she would have risked absurdity to be sure that he could not keep away. She knew men hated that risk above all; but surely he could come back now and talk to her again? She looked round and saw him standing alone; then he wanted to come. With her eyes she gave him a glad invitation; but as he approached there was a sort of embarrassment in his manner, a shamefacedness; he was too much a man of the world to wear that look simply because he had become a declared lover. And although Ashley was both cordial and sufficiently respectful there was a distant twinkle in his eye, as if he were enjoying some joke. Her apprehensions and her knowledge of the nature of her triumph made her almost unnaturally acute to detect the slightest shade of manner in either of the men. Men knew things about one another which were kept from women; had Ashley a knowledge which she lacked? Did it make her triumph seem to him not incomplete perhaps, but very strange? The glow of victory even so soon began to give place to discomfort and restlessness.

Ashley looked at his watch.

"I shall go," he announced. "I've been betrayed." He spoke with a burlesque despair. "A certain lady – you can't monopolise the tender affections, Lady Kilnorton – told me she would be here – late. It's late, in fact very late, and she's not here."

"Who was she?" asked Irene.

"Can you doubt? But I suppose she felt lazy after the theatre."

"Oh, Ora?"

"Of course," said Ashley.

"How silly you are! Isn't he?" She turned to Bowdon.

"He's very young," said Bowdon, with a smile. "When he comes to my age –"

"You can't say much to-night anyhow, can you?" laughed Ashley.

"Ora never comes when she says she will."

"Oh, yes, she does sometimes," Ashley insisted, thinking of his Sunday.

"You have to go and drag her!"

"That's just what I should do."

No doubt Bowdon took as small a part in the conversation as he decently could. Still it seemed possible to talk about Ora; that to Irene's present mood was something gained. Nobody turned round on her and said, "He'd rather have had Ora, really," a fantastic occurrence which had become conceivable to her.

"Your Muddocks have gone, haven't they?" she asked Ashley.

"Yes, my Muddocks have gone," said Ashley, laughing. "But why 'my' Muddocks? Am I responsible for them?"

"They ought to be your Muddocks. I try to get him to be sensible." The last sentence she addressed to Bowdon with a smile. "But men won't be."

"None of them?" asked Bowdon, returning her smile.

"Oh, don't say you're being sensible," she cried, half-laughing, half-petulantly. "I don't want you to be; but I think Mr. Mead might."

"Marriage as a precautionary method doesn't recommend itself to me," said Ashley lightly, as he held out his hand in farewell. They both laughed and watched him as he went.

"Silly young man!" she said. "You'll take me to my carriage, won't you?"

Ashley might be silly; they were wise. But Wisdom often goes home troubled, Folly with a light heart. The hand of the future is needed to vindicate the one and to confound the other. No doubt it does. The future, however, is a vague and indefinite period of time.

CHAPTER V

A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

When Ashley Mead called for her at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning Miss Pinsent was not dressed. When she made her appearance at a quarter to twelve she was rather peevish; her repertory embraced some moods quite unamiable in a light way. She did not want to go, she said, and she would not go; she wondered how she had come to say she would go; was he sure she had said so?

"Oh, you must go now," said Ashley cheerfully and decisively.

"Why must I, if I don't want to?"

"Honour, justice, kindness, pity; take your choice of motives. Besides – " he paused, smiling at her.

"Well, what besides?"

"You mean to go." The stroke was bold, bold as that of Lady Kilnorton's about Ashley being one of a dozen.

"Are you a thought-reader, Mr. Mead?"

"A gown-reader on this occasion. If that frock means anything it means the country."

Ora smiled reluctantly, with a glance down the front of her gown.

"It's quite true I didn't mean to go," she said. "Besides I didn't think you'd come."

"A very doubtful truth, and a quite unnecessary fiction," said he. "Come along."

She came, obedient but still not gay; he did not force the talk. They went to Waterloo and took tickets for a quiet village. He gave her all the Sunday papers and for a time she read them, while he leant back, steadily and curiously regarding the white smooth brow which shewed itself over the top of the sheet. He was wondering how she kept the traces of her various emotions (she was credited with so many) off her face. For lines she might have been a child; for eyes too, it seemed to him sometimes, while at other moments all possibilities of feeling, if not of knowledge, spoke in her glance. After this, it seemed a poor conclusion to repeat that she was interesting.

Presently she threw away her paper and looked out of the window with a grave, almost bored, expression. Still Ashley bided his time; he took up the discarded journal and read; its pleasant, discursive, unimportant talk was content with half his mind.

"I suppose," she said absently, "that Irene and Lord Bowdon are spending the day together somewhere."

"I suppose so; they ought to be, anyhow."

A long pause followed, Ashley still reading his column of gossip with an appearance of sufficient attention. Ora glanced at him, her brows raised a little in protest. At last she seemed to understand the position.

"I'm ready to be agreeable as soon as you are," she announced.

"Why, then, it's most delightful of you to come," was his answer, as he leant forward to her; the paper fell on the floor and he pushed it away with his foot. "Will they enjoy themselves, that couple?"

"She wrote to me about it yesterday, quite a long letter."

"Giving reasons?"

"Yes; reasons of a sort, you know."

"I thought so," he nodded. "Somehow both of them seemed anxious to have reasons, good sound reasons."

"Oh, well, but she's in love with him," said Ora. "I suppose that's a reason."

"And he with her?"

"Of course."

It had been Ora's firm intention not to refer in the most distant manner to what had passed between Bowdon and herself. But our lips and eyes are traitors to our careful tongues; and there are people who draw out a joke from any hiding-place.

"He's done a very wise thing," said Ashley, looking straight into her eyes. She blushed and laughed. "I admire wise things," he added, laughing in his turn.

"But don't do them?"

"Oh, sometimes. To-day for example! What can be wiser than to refresh myself with a day in the country, to spend a few hours in fresh air and – and pleasant surroundings?"

She looked at him for a moment, then settled herself more luxuriously on the seat as she murmured, "I like being wise too."

The one porter at the little station eyed Ora with grave appreciation; the landlady of the little inn where they procured a plain lunch seemed divided between distrust of the lady and admiration of her garments. Ashley ordered an early dinner and then invited his friend to come out of doors.

He had brought her to no show view, no famous prospect. There was only a low slow stream dawdling along through the meadows, a belt of trees a quarter of a mile away behind them, in front a stretch of flat land beyond the river, and on the water's edge, here and there, a few willows. She found a convenient slope in the bank and sat down, he lying beside her, smoking a cigar. The sun shone, but the breeze was fresh. Ora had been merry at lunch but now she became silent again. When Ashley Mead threw the stump of his cigar into the stream, she seemed to rouse herself from a reverie and watched it bob lazily away.

"Sleepy after lunch?" he asked.

"No, I'm not sleepy," she answered. "I was letting things pass through my head." She turned to him rather abruptly. "Why did you bring me here to-day?" she asked, with a touch of protest in her voice.

"Purely a desire for pleasure; I wanted to enjoy myself."

"Are you like that too? Because I am." She seemed to search his face. "But there's something else in you."

"Yes, at other times," he admitted. "But just then there wasn't, so I brought you. And just now there isn't."

She laughed, rather nervously as it seemed to him.

"And what do the other things, when they're there, say to it?" she asked.

"Oh, they're sure of their innings in the end!" His tone was careless, but his eyes did not leave her face. He had meant not to make love to her; he would not have admitted that he was making love to her. But to have her face there and not look at it had become impossible; it chained him with its power of exciting that curiosity mingled with attraction which is roughly dubbed fascination. He felt that he must not only see more of her but know more of her; there was a demand of the brain as well as a craving of the emotions. She seemed moved to tell him nothing; she made no disclosures of her past life, where she had been born or bred, how she had fared, how come where she was, how become Mrs. Jack Fenning, or how now again turned to Ora Pinsent. She left him to find out anything he wanted to know. Her assumption that there was nothing to tell, or no reason to tell anything, spurred him to further study of her. That he studied at his peril he knew well and had known from the first; it was but another prick of the spur to him.

She had been gazing across the stream, at the meadows and the cattle. Now her eyes returned to him and, meeting his glance, she laughed again in that half-amused, half-embarrassed way.

"Shall I make up a life for you?" he asked. "Listen now. You weren't pretty as a young girl; you were considered very naughty, rather good-for-nothing; I think they were a bit down on you, tried to drill you into being like other people, to – what's the word? – eradicate your faults, to give you the virtues. All that made you rather unhappy; you'd a good deal rather have been petted. But you weren't drilled, your faults weren't eradicated, you never got the virtues."

She was listening with a smile and amused eyes.

"The training broke down because you began to grow beautiful and coaxing; they couldn't drill you any more; it wasn't in their hearts. They began to see that they'd got something uncommon; or perhaps they just despaired. They said it was Ora's way. – "

"Lizzie's way," she corrected with a merry nod.

"Oh, no. Hang Lizzie! They said it was Ora's way, and that it was no use bullying the girl. Your father said it first and had some trouble in convincing your mother. But he did at last. Then you grew up, and everybody made love to you. And I expect somebody died and home wasn't so comfortable. So some time or other you took a flight away, and the stage became a reality. I suppose it had been a dream. And at some time or other you took a certain step. Then I don't know anything more except what's written in the Chronicles of Queen Ora Pinsent." He ended the story, which had been punctuated by pauses in which he gathered fresh information from her face.

"You've done well to find out so much. It wasn't very unlike that. Now tell me the future. What's going to happen to me?"

"You're going to be young and beautiful for ever and ever."

She laughed joyfully.

"Oh, yes!" she cried. "Let me see. I shall be young – young enough – for ten years more, and with the proper appliances beautiful for twenty."

His laugh was reluctant; the mention of the proper appliances jarred on him a little. She saw it in an instant and answered with a defiance: "I rouge now when I want it."

"Are you rouged to-day?"

"You can look and see."

"I can look, but perhaps I can't see."

She rubbed her cheek hard with her hand and then showed him the palm.

"I hope that's proof," he said, "but these contrivances are so cunning now-a-days."

"Men think them even more cunning than they are," laughed Ora. "And what have you done?" she went on. "What's your life been?"

"The deplorably usual – preparatory school, public school, Oxford, Bar. I'm a full-blown specimen of the ordinary Englishman of the professional classes."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know. As little work as I must and as little harm as I can, I suppose."

She laughed as she said: "At any rate you aren't doing much work to-day, are you? And no harm at all! But you've left out what you put in for me – a certain step."

"Well, you've taken it, and I haven't."

"You will. Oh, Irene Kilnorton has told me all about it. It seems you can't help it, Mr. Mead. I liked her; I asked her to come and see me, but she's never been."

He made a little grimace, wrinkling brow and nose. Ora laughed again. "You won't be able to help it," she declared, nodding her head. "And then no more Sundays out with actresses!"

"Even as matters stand, it's not a habit of mine," he protested.

She smoked a cigarette of his, investing the act of luxury with a grace which made it meritorious; as she blew out the last of the smoke, she sighed, saying,

"I wish to-day would last for ever."

"Do you?" he asked in a low voice. The tone startled her to a sudden quick glance at his face. Her words had given expression to his longing that this simple perfection of existence should never pass.

"Just the meadows, and the river, and the sunshine."

"You leave me out?"

"No," she said, "you may be somewhere in it, if you like. Because if nothing was going to change, I shouldn't change either; and I like you being here now, so I should like you being here always."

"Do you always expect to change to people?"

"It's not altogether me. They change to me, I think."

"If I don't change to you, will you promise not to change to me?" He laughed as he spoke, but he looked at her intently. She turned away, saying,

"I should be rather afraid never to change to a person. It would make him mean so terribly much to one, wouldn't it?"

"But you married?" he whispered, whether in seriousness or in mockery he himself could hardly tell.

"Yes," she said. She seemed to agree that there was a puzzle, but to be unable to give any explanation of it. The fact was there, not to be mended by theorising about it.

In long intimate talk the hours were wearing away. His impulse was delicately to press her to reveal herself, to shew her mind, her way of thought, her disposition towards him. But side by side with his interest came the growing charm of her; he hardly knew whether to talk to her or to be silent with her, to elicit and trace the changes animation made, or to admire the dainty beauty of her features in repose. Movement and rest alike became her so well that to drive out either for the other seemed a gain burdened with an equal loss; her quick transitions from expression to expression were ruthless as well as bountiful. She appeared very happy, forgetful now of the puzzle that he had called to her mind, of the distrust that had afflicted her, entirely given over to the pleasure of living and of being there. Then she liked him; he was no jar, no unwelcome element. But there was still a distance between them, marked by her occasional nervousness, her ignoring of a remark that pressed her too closely, her skirting round topics which threatened to prove too serious. She seemed to ask him not to compel her to any issue, not to make her face any questions or attempt any determination, to let her go on being happy as long as might be possible without driving her to ask why she was happy or how long she would be. Happy she was; as they rose reluctantly to go back to the inn she turned to him, saying:

"I shall never forget the day you've given me."

But, arrived at the inn, she forgot her love of the meadows. Now she was glad to be in the snug parlour, glad dinner was near, glad to sit in a chair again. She went upstairs under the escort of the questioning admiring landlady, and came down fresh and radiant. In passing she gave him her hand, still cool and moist from water. "Isn't that nice?" she asked, and laughed merrily when he answered, "Oh, well, nice enough." The window opened on a little garden; she flung it wide. "There's nobody to spy on how much we eat," she said, "and the evening smells sweet. Oh, do let's begin!" And she clapped her hands when the meal came. Ashley found a sort of pity mingling with his other feelings for her, compassion for the simplicity and readiness of emotion which expose their possessor to so many chances of sorrow as well as to a certainty of recurrent joys. But he fell in with her mood and they joined in a childish pretence that they were at a great banquet, dignifying the simple chicken with titles they recollected from *menu* or constructed from imagination, while the claret, which could make no great claims on intrinsic merit, became a succession of costly vintages, and the fictitious bill, by which she declared she would measure his devotion to her, grew by leaps and bounds. It was strange to realise that in twenty-four hours she would be back in her theatre, a great, at least a notorious, personage, talked of, stared at, canvassed, blamed, admired, the life she herself made so simple a thing given over to a thousand others for their pleasure and curiosity. A touch of jealousy made itself felt in his reflexions.

"I'm beginning rather to hate your audiences," he said.

A shrug and a smile sent the audiences to a limbo of inexpressible unimportance.

"You'll think differently about that to-morrow," he warned her.

"Be content with what I feel to-night; I am."

They had finished dinner; both again had smoked cigarettes.

"How long before the train?" she asked.

"An hour and a half," he answered with a hint of triumph in his voice; the end was not yet; even after the time for the train there was the journey.

Evening fell slowly, as it seemed with a sympathetic unwillingness to end their day. She moved to an arm-chair by the side of the window and he sat near her. Talk died away unmissed and silence came unnoticed. She looked a little tired and leant back in her seat; her face shewed pale in the frame of dark hair that clustered round it; her eyes were larger and more eloquent. The fate that he had braved, or in truth invited, was come; he loved her, he so loved her that he must needs touch her. Yet there was that about her which made his touch timid and light; a delicacy, an innocence which he was inclined to call paradoxical, the appeal of helplessness, a sort of unsubstantiality that made her seem the love for a man's soul only. One of her hands lay on the arm of her chair; he laid his lightly on it and when she turned smiled at her. She smiled back at him with deprecation but with perfect understanding. She knew why he did that; she did not resent it. She turned her hand over and very lightly grasped his fingers in a friendly tender pressure; she gazed again into the little garden while their hands were thus distantly clasped. She seemed to yield what she must and to beg him to ask no more. He longed to be able to do her will as it was and not to seek to change it, to offer her no violence of entreaty and to bring her into no distress. But the sweetness of love's gradual venturing allured him; it might be still that she only tolerated, that she gave a return for her day's happiness, and allowed this much lest she should wound a man she liked. With that he was not content, he was hotly and keenly discontent. She had become everything to him; he must be everything to her; if it must be, everything in sorrow and renunciation, but everything; if not for always, at least for now, for the end of this golden day, everything. He could not go home without the memory of her lips. He leant forward towards her; she turned to him. For a moment she smiled, then grew grave again; she let him draw her nearer to him, and with averted face and averted eyes suffered his kiss on her cheek. In the very midst of his emotion he smiled; she preserved so wonderfully the air of not being responsible for the thing, of neither accepting nor rejecting, of being quite passive, of just having it happen to her. He kissed her again; after much entreaty, once she kissed him lightly, shyly, under protest as it were, yet with a sincerity and gladness which called out a new tenderness in him; they seemed to say that she had wanted to do it very much long before she did it, and would want to do it again, and yet would not do it again. The kiss, which from many women would have levelled all barriers, seemed to raise new ones round her. He was ashamed of himself when his love drove him to besiege her more. Even now she was not resentful, she did not upbraid or repel him; she broke into that little nervous laugh of hers, as she lay back passive in the chair, and murmured so low that he hardly caught the words, "Don't. Don't make love to me any more now."

Her prohibition or request had availed with Bowdon's hesitating conscience-ridden impulse; perhaps there was small cause to wonder at that. It availed now no less with Ashley Mead's impetuous passion. Her low whisper protected her absolutely; the confession it hinted disarmed him; he caught both her hands and held them in a long clasp, looking the while into her appealing eyes. But he entreated her no more and he kissed her no more. A moment later he rose, went and sat on the window-sill, and lit a cigarette; the glow seemed a tiny beacon of fire to shew the harbour, that danger was past, that her orders were understood and accepted. She lay very quiet, looking at him with steady, grateful, loving eyes, acknowledging a kindness that she had not doubted and yet found fine in him. His transgression – perhaps she hardly counted it one – was forgiven because he stayed his steps at her bidding. He knew that she trusted him; and in spite of her prohibition he believed that she loved him.

Now one of the riddles about her seemed to find an explanation. He understood how she had passed through the dangers and the ordeal, and had come out still with her freshness and her innocence; how her taste had saved her from those who would have been deaf to the appeal that had arrested him, how powerful and sufficing a shield that appeal was to any man whom her taste would allow to come close to her in comradeship. You could not be false to a confidence like that; if you were a man who could, you would never have the chance. Thus Ashley summed up a case which a

little while ago had seemed to him very strange. It seemed strange and unusual still, with a peculiar charm of its own. It was weakness breeding strength, surrender made security. It put a man on his honour; it took away the resistance which might make honour forget itself in the passion of victory. It was like being made guardian of another's treasure; you were careful of it, however heedless you were of your own.

As they journeyed home, she was mirthful and joyous. This day was done, but she did not despair of the world; there should be other days, and the work of this day should endure. She made plans by which they were to meet, to be much together, to unite their lives by many ties. She let him see how much he had entered into her schemes; she told him plainly again and again that he had become to her quite different from all other men. She revealed to him her little habits, her tempers, her ways, her manœuvres, her tricks; she had plenty of all of them. She shewed an open delight in the love which she had won from him and made no pretence of concealing anything of what he was to her. Of Jack Fenning she said not a word; of caution in the externals of her own behaviour, of what people might think or say, of any possible difficulties in their relation to one another, not a word. She was happy and she was grateful. He took her to the door of her own house; she was not hurt but seemed a little surprised that he would not go in. He did not offer to kiss her again, but could not avoid thinking that she would have been neither angry nor grieved if he had. His last memory was of her looking round her door, smiling delightedly and nodding to him, her eyes full of a thousand confidences. "Come soon," she called at last before she hid herself from his sight.

When he reached his own rooms, he found awaiting him a note from Sir James Muddock, begging him to come to the office at Buckingham Palace Road at eleven the next morning. "I have had an interview with my doctor," the old man wrote, "which makes it necessary for me to consider very seriously certain immediate steps. I hope that I shall be able to rely on your assistance." The note was sent by hand and marked "Immediate." Its meaning was plain enough. The long-expected verdict had come; Sir James must be relieved; another head was wanted in the firm of Muddock and Mead. With his brain still full of Ora Pinsent the matter of the message seemed remote to Ashley, but he forced himself to descend to it. He was to have the offer of a partnership, the offer of great wealth, the opportunity of a career limited only by his own talents and no longer clogged by poverty. Would the offer be free, or hampered by a tacit unacknowledged understanding? He knew well enough Sir James' mind about his future. How strange that future looked in the after-glow of this day! Yet what future had this day? Here was a question that he could not bring himself to discuss patiently. Future or no future, this day had altered his life, seemed at this moment to have altered it so completely that on it and on what had happened in it would turn his answer to the offer of great wealth and the prospect of a career. Even in his own thoughts he observed that reticence about Alice Muddock which would have governed his tongue in speaking of her to another; but, affect as he would, or thought himself obliged to, he knew that she formed a factor in the situation, that she was in her father's mind when he wrote, no less than that other object of the old man's love, the great firm in Buckingham Palace Road.

"It's strange," he thought, "that the thing, after dragging on so long, should come to a head now, to-night, just when – ." He broke off his reflexions and, going to the window, looked out on the lights of the bridge and listened to the lessening noise of the town. He was dimly conscious that in this day of long idleness, by the slow low river and in the little inn, he had done more to draw the lines and map the course of his life than in any hour of labour, however successful and however strenuous. Fate had surprised him with a point-blank question, the Stand-and-deliver of a direct choice. Saying he would think it all over, he sat late that night. But thoughts will not always be compelled and disciplined; his vigil was but a pictured repetition of the day that he had lived. The day had been Ora's day. Hers also was the night.

CHAPTER VI

AWAY WITH THE RIBBONS!

Few things make the natural man, a being who still occupies a large apartment in the soul of each of us, more impatient than to find people refusing to conform to his idea of the way in which they ought to seek and find happiness. So far as sane and sensible folk are concerned – there is no need to bring the Asylums into the argument – his way is the way; deviations from it, whether perversely deliberate or instinctive and unreasoned, are so many wanderings from the only right track. He likes money – then only fools omit to strive for it. Stability of mind is his ideal – what more wretched than to be tossed from mood to mood? A regular life is the sole means of preserving health in stomach and brain – it is melancholy to see persons preferring haphazard and ill-regulated existences. Nay, it makes this natural man rather vexed if we do not like his furniture, his favourite vegetable, his dentist, and so forth; his murmured "*De gustibus*" has a touch of scorn in it. He conceives a grudge against us for upsetting established standards of excellence in matters of life, conduct, upholstery, and the table. Our likings for people in whom he sees nothing puzzle and annoy him equally; the shrug with which he says, of a newly married couple for instance, "They seem very happy," adds quite clearly, "But on no reasonable grounds have they a right to be, and in my heart I can't quite believe they are."

Sir James Muddock – once again the occasion of generalisations – had never been able to understand why Ashley Mead did not jump at the chance of Alice Muddock's hand and a share in Buckingham Palace Road. The lad was poor, his prospects were uncertain, at the best they could not yield wealth as Sir James had learnt to count it; the prejudice against trade is only against trade on a small scale; any ambitions, social or political, would be promoted, not thwarted, by his entry into the firm. As for Alice, she was the best girl in the world, clever, kind, trustworthy; she was very fond of him; he was fond of her and appreciated her company. Ashley was turned thirty; he was not asked to surrender the liberty of early youth. He had had his fling, and to sensible men this fling was a temporary episode, to be enjoyed and done with. It was time for him to get into harness; the harness offered was very handsome, the manger well filled, the treatment all that could be desired. When Sir James summed up the case thus, he had no suspicion of what had passed during one Sunday in the country; it is fair to add that it would have made no difference in his ideas, if he had known of it. The day in the country with Ora Pinsent would have been ticketed as part of the fling and thus relegated to after-dinner memories. Sir James did not understand people to whom the fling was more than an episode, to whom all life went on being a series of flings of ever-changing dice, till at last and only in old age the box fell from paralysed fingers. Therefore he did not understand all that was in the nature of Ashley Mead; he would have understood nothing at all of what was in Ora Pinsent's.

Ashley's decision had taken itself, as it seemed, without any help or effort on his part. Here was the warrant of its inevitability. He thought, when he first read the old man's summons, that he was in for a great struggle and faced with a hard problem, with an anxious weighing of facts and a curious forecast of possibilities, that he must sit down to the scrutiny in idleness and solemnity. But somehow, as he slept or dressed or breakfasted, between glances at his paper and whiffs of his pipe, he decided to refuse many thousands a year and to ignore the implied offer of Alice Muddock's hand. In themselves thousands were good, there was nothing to be said against them; and of Alice he had been so fond and to her so accustomed that for several years back he had considered her as his most likely wife. She and the thousands were now dismissed from his life – both good things, but not good for him. He sighed once with a passing wish that he could be different; but being what he was he felt himself hopelessly at war with Sir James' scheme as a whole, and with every part of it. Contrast it with the moods, the thoughts, the atmosphere of life which had filled his yesterday! And yesterday's

was his native air; thus it seemed to him, and he was so infected with this air that he did not ask whether but for yesterday his decision would have been as easy and unfaltering.

The old man was hurt, grieved, and, in spite of previous less direct rebuffs, bitterly disappointed; he had not thought that his offer would be refused when expressly made; he had not looked to see his hints about his daughter more openly ignored the more open they themselves became. His anger expressed itself in an ultimatum; he flung himself back in his elbow chair, saying,

"Well, my lad, for the last time, take it or leave it. If you take it, we'll soon put you through your facings, and then you'll be the best head in the business. But if you won't have it, I must take in somebody else."

"I know, Sir James. Don't think I expect you to go on giving me chances."

"If it's not you, it's got to be Bertie Jewett." Bertie Jewett was Herbert, son of Peter Jewett who had served through all the changes and lately died as Manager in Buckingham Palace Road. "He won't refuse, anyhow." The tone added, "He's not such a fool."

"No, he's not such an ass as I am," said Ashley, answering the tone and smiling at poor Sir James with an appealing friendliness.

"That's your word, not mine; but I'm not going to quarrel with it," said Sir James without a sign of softening. "What you're after I can't see. What do you want?"

Ashley found himself unable to tell the Head of the Firm what he wanted.

"I can get along," he said lamely. "I make a bit writing for the papers, and there's a brief once in a blue moon; and of course I've got a little; and this secretaryship helps for the time."

This beggarly catalogue of inadequate means increased Sir James' scorn and bewilderment.

"Are you above it?" he asked with sudden heat.

"Good God, sir, don't think me a snob as well as an ass," prayed Ashley.

"Then I don't know what you do want."

Matters seemed to have reached a standstill. But Sir James had a last shot in his locker.

"Go up and lunch in Kensington Palace Gardens," he said. "Talk it over with the ladies, talk it over with Alice."

Ashley wanted to refuse; on this day he had no desire to see Alice. But refusal seemed impossible.

"All right, Sir James, I will," he said.

"Take a week, take a week more. If you say no then, it's Bertie Jewett – and your chance is gone for ever. For Heaven's sake don't make a fool of yourself." Affection mingling with wrath in the entreaty made it harder to resist.

Ashley walked off with the last words ringing in his ears; they recalled Lord Bowdon and the Athenæum corner. After reflexion and against inclination Bowdon had determined not to make a fool of himself, and had intrenched his resolution with apparent security against the possibility of a relapse into a less sensible course. Here was Ashley's example; but he shied at it.

"And how the devil am I to talk to Alice about it?" he exclaimed petulantly, as he struck across the front of Buckingham Palace and headed up Constitution Hill. There had been a general impression that he would marry Alice Muddock, and a general impression about us assumes to ourselves a vaguely obligatory force. We may not justify it, but we feel the need for some apology if we refuse. Besides Ashley had, up to a certain point, shared the impression, although in a faint far-off way, regarding the suggested alliance not as the aim of his life but as a possible and not unacceptable bourn of his youth. His entrance into the firm was a topic so closely connected that he felt much awkwardness in discussing it with Alice Muddock. Of her feelings he thought less than of his own; he was not by nature a selfish man, but he had now fallen into the selfishness of a great pre-occupation. The smallest joy or the lightest sorrow for Ora Pinsent would have filled his mind. It is difficult to feel in anything like this way towards more than one person at a time. His sympathy for Alice Muddock was blunted and he excused its want of acuteness by an affected modesty which questioned her concern in him.

It chanced that Lady Kilnorton was at lunch. She seemed in high spirits and talked vigorously. Her theme was the artistic temperament; she blamed its slavishness to the moment. Lady Muddock showed an anxiety to be furnished with details for purposes of increased disapproval; Alice was judicial. One man among three women, Ashley would have been content to listen, but, when appealed to, he defended the aspersed disposition. He felt the conversation approaching Ora Pinsent, step by step; she was in all their minds; the only case in point known to Lady Muddock, the instance most interesting to Alice, an unwelcome persistent presence to Irene, to him a subject to be neither encouraged nor avoided without risk of self-betrayal. It was curious how she had come into the circle of their lives, and having entered seemed to dominate it. But presently he grew sure of his face and, for the rest, preferred that they should abuse her rather than not speak of her; he grudged every abstraction of his thoughts which banished her image.

The discussion brought its trials. Irene's well-restrained jealousy and Lady Muddock's inquisitive disapproval were merely amusing; it was Alice's judicial attitude which stirred him to resentment. To assess and assay with this cold-blooded scientific accuracy seemed inhuman, almost from its excess of science unscientific, since it was a method so unsuited to the subject.

"Now take Ora," said Irene, at last grasping the nettle. "There's nothing she wouldn't do for you at one moment, the next she wouldn't do anything at all for you."

"For her acquaintances, you mean?" Alice asked.

"Oh, no, my dear. For anybody, for her best friend. You can't call her either good or bad. She's just fluke, pure fluke."

"Well, I know it's the thing to pretend not to like flukes – " Ashley began. The thin jocularity served for a shield.

"Oh, what's the use of asking a man? He just sees her face, that's all. Nobody's denying her looks." Lady Kilnorton seemed petulant.

"Of course a life like hers," observed Lady Muddock, "is very demoralising."

"My dear Lady Muddock, why?" asked Ashley, growing exasperated.

"Well, I only know what Minna Soames says, and – "

"Mother dear, Minna Soames is a goose," Alice remarked. Ashley was grateful, but still with reservations as to the judicial tone.

Irene Kilnorton, engaged in her secret task of justifying herself and taking a rosy view of Bowdon's feelings, talked more for her own ends than for those of the company.

"That sort of people suit one another very well," she went on. "They know what to expect of each other. Harm comes only when people of a different sort get entangled with them."

"You're vague," said Ashley. "What different sort?" He had partly fathomed her mood now, and his eyes were mischievous as he looked at her.

"Sensible people, Mr. Mead." There was a touch of asperity in the brief retort, which made a thrust from him seem excusable.

"Suppose Lord Bowdon had never seen you," he said with plausible gravity, "and, being in that state of darkness, had fallen in love with Miss Pinsent; would it have been so very surprising?"

"Very," said Irene Kilnorton.

"And dreadful?"

"Well, bad for him. He'd never have got on with her and – "

"There's Mr. Fenning," interposed Alice with a quiet laugh. A moment's pause ensued. Ashley had been startled at the introduction of the name, but he recovered himself directly.

"Oh, well," he said, "of course there's Mr. Fenning. I'd forgotten him. But he's quite accidental. Leave him out. He's not part of the case."

"But there's so often a Mr. Fenning," Alice persisted. "Can he be considered quite accidental?"

Ashley had made much the same remark in different words to Irene Kilnorton a few weeks before; but remarks do not bear transplanting.

"Isn't that rather a traditional view?" he asked.

"You mean a prejudiced one?"

"Well, yes."

"I suppose so. But prejudices start somehow, don't they?" Her smile was very gentle, but still, to his mind, horribly aloof and judicial. Could she not understand how a woman might be carried away, and blunder into a Mr. Fenning, *per incuriam* and all in a minute (so to speak)? In such a case was it to be expected that the Mr. Fenning in question should be all in all to her? In some ways perhaps she must acknowledge his existence; but at any rate she needn't Darby-and-Joan it with him!

"Poor dear Ora!" said Irene Kilnorton after a pause. Yet she was not naturally malicious any more than Ashley Mead was naturally selfish. If we are responsible for the moods we raise in others Miss Pinsent's account was mounting up. Ashley allowed himself the retort of a laugh as Lady Muddock rose from the table.

"I came to talk to you," he said to Alice, as she passed him.

"Then drink your coffee quick, and come into the garden," she answered with her usual frank kindness. When she looked at him her aspect and air became less judicial.

In the garden he opened the subject of Sir James' proposal; his eyes were set straight in front of him, hers on the ground. Her answer would have dismayed Sir James, and it surprised Ashley. She was energetically, almost passionately, opposed to his entering the business.

"It's not your line, or your taste, or your proper work," she said. "What's the good of being rich if you're doing what you hate all the time?"

"I felt just like that," he said gratefully, "but I was afraid that I felt like it because I was a fool."

"You can make your own way. Don't sell yourself to the business."

He glanced at her stealthily; her colour had risen and her lip trembled. Did she think of anything besides the business when she bade him not sell himself? A moment later she laughed uneasily, as, with a reference to the conversation at lunch, she said,

"You've too much of the artistic temperament for Buckingham Palace Road."

"I? I the artistic temperament?" He accepted the trite phrase as a useful enough symbol of what they both meant.

"Yes," she answered steadily. "A good deal of it."

"Then I come under Irene Kilnorton's censures?"

"Under a good many of them, yes."

Something in her manner again annoyed and piqued him. She was judging again, and judging him. But she was interesting him also. She spoke of him; she knew him well: and just now he was in some doubt about himself.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, seeking to draw her out.

"Oh, things carry you away; and you like it. You don't want to get to a comfortable place and stay there. I'm not saying anything you mind?"

"No. I don't think so, at least."

She glanced at him full for a moment as she said,

"I never think anything you'd mind, Ashley." Then she went on hastily. "But you must be prepared to see Bertie Jewett in great prosperity – a big house and so on – and to know it might all have been yours."

"I'm prepared for that," he said absently. He did not at all realise the things he was abandoning.

"But of course you'll get on. You'll be something better than rich."

"Perhaps, if I don't – don't play the fool."

"You keep calling yourself a fool to-day. Why do you? You're not a fool."

"It's only a way of speaking and not quite my own way, really," he laughed. "It means if I don't enjoy life a little instead of spoiling it all by trying to get something that isn't particularly well worth having; it means, in fact, if I don't allow scope to my artistic temperament." It meant also if he did

not spend more days in the country with Ora Pinsent; for though he did not (as he had hinted) call that folly to himself, he was now on his defence against a world which would call it folly with no doubtful voice, and would exhort him earnestly to imitate Lord Bowdon's decisive measures of self-protection. It was in the power of this clear-sighted girl thus to put him on his defence, even in the full swing of his attraction towards Ora Pinsent; better than anyone, she could shew him the other side of the picture. He fell into a silence occupied with puzzled thoughts. She grew grave, except for a sober little smile; she was thinking that it was easy to be wise for others, for all the world except herself; while she was playing the judicial prudent friend to him, the idea of another part was in her head. There may be hope without expectation; it would not have been human in her to hope nothing from this talk in the garden, to build no fancies on it. But she rebuked her imagination; whatever it was that filled his mind – and his occasional air of distraction had caught her notice – she had little share in it, she knew that well.

"The talk at lunch was *à propos*," she said presently. "I'm going to call on Miss Pinsent this afternoon."

"You're going to call – ?" The surprise was plain in his voice. This sudden throwing of the two together seemed an odd trick of circumstances! His tone brought her eyes quickly round to him and she looked at him steadily.

"Why not? She asked me. I told you so," she said. Ashley could not deny it; he shrugged his shoulders. "Shan't I like her?"

"Everybody must like her, I think," he answered, awkward, almost abashed. But then there came on him a desire to talk about Ora, not so much to justify himself as to tell another what she was, to exhibit her charm, to infect a hearer with his own fever. He contrived to preserve a cool tone, aiming at what might seem a dispassionate analysis of a fascination which everybody admitted to exist; but he was at once too copious and too happy in his description and his images. The girl beside him listened with that little smile; it could not be merry, she would not let it grow bitter, but schooled it to the neutrality of polite attention. She soon saw the state of his mind and the discovery was hard for her to bear. Yet it was not so hard as if he had come to tell her of an ordinary attachment, of a decorous engagement to some young lady of their common acquaintance, and of a decorous marriage to follow in due course. Then she would have asked, "Why her and not me?" With Ora Pinsent no such question was possible. Neither for good nor for evil could any comparison be drawn. And another thought crept in, although she did not give it willing admittance. Ora was not only exceptional; she was impossible. Impossibility might be nothing to him now, but it could not remain nothing forever. The pain was there, but the disaster not irrevocable. Among the somewhat strange chances which had marked the life of Mr. Fenning there was now to be reckoned a certain shamefaced comfort which he all unwittingly afforded to Alice Muddock. But Alice was not proud of the alliance.

Ashley broke off in a mixture of remorse and embarrassment. His description could not be very grateful to its hearer; it must have come very near to betraying its utterer. Alice did not pretend that it left her quite in the dark; she laughed a little and said jokingly:

"One would think you were in love with her. I suppose it's that artistic temperament again. Well, this afternoon I'll look and see whether she's really all you say. The male judgment needs correction."

As their talk went on he perceived in her a brightening of spirits, a partial revival of serenity, a sort of relief; they came as a surprise to him. The lightness with which she now spoke of Ora appeared, to a large degree at least, genuine. He did not understand that she attributed to him, in more sincerity than her manner had suggested, the temper which had formed the subject of their half-serious half-jesting talk. Her impression of him did not make him less attractive to her; he was not all of the temper she blamed and feared; he had, she persuaded herself, just enough of it to save him from the purely ribbon-selling nature and (here came the point to which she fondly conducted herself) to give her both hope and patience in regard to her own relations with him. She could not help picturing herself as the fixed point to which he would, after his veerings, return in the end; meanwhile his share

of the temperament excused the veerings. Lady Kilnorton had forced the game with entire apparent success, but Alice's quick eyes questioned the real completeness of that victory. She would play a waiting game. There was no question of an orthodox marriage with the young lady from over the way or round the corner, an arrangement which would have been odious in its commonplace humiliation and heart-breaking in its orderly finality. But Ora Pinsent was not a finality, any more than she was the embodiment of an orderly arrangement. That fortunate impossibility which attached to her, by virtue of Jack Fenning's existence, forbade despair, just as her fascination and her irresistibility seemed to prevent humiliation and lessen jealousy. The thing was a transient craze, such as men fell into; it would pass. If she joined her life to Ashley Mead's she was prepared (so she assured herself) for such brief wanderings of allegiance, now and then; as time went on, they would grow fewer and fewer, until at last she conquered altogether the tendency towards them. "And she must be ten years older than I am," her reflections ended; that the real interval was but seven did not destroy the importance of the point.

Having offered Ashley a lift to Piccadilly, she went off to get ready, and presently Bowdon, who had called to pick up Irene, strolled into the garden for a cigarette.

"Hullo, what are you doing here? You ought to be making your living," he cried good-humouredly.

"I've been throwing it away instead," said Ashley. "Should you like to be a partner in Muddock and Mead?"

"A sleeping one," said Bowdon with a meditative pull at his moustache.

Ashley explained that he would have been expected to take an active part. Bowdon evidently thought that he ought to have been glad to take any part, and rebuked him for his refusal.

"Take the offer and marry the girl," he counselled. "She'd have you all right, and she seems a very good sort."

"I don't feel like settling down all of a sudden," said Ashley with a smile.

They walked side by side for a few paces; then Bowdon remarked,

"Depend upon it, it's a good thing to do, though."

"It's a question of the best date," said Ashley, much amused at his companion. "Now at your age, Lord Bowdon –"

"Confound you, Ashley, I'm not a hundred! I say it's a good thing to do. And, by Jove, when it means a lump of money too!"

A pause followed; they walked and smoked in silence.

"Good creatures, women," remarked Bowdon.

Ashley did not find the remark abrupt; he traced its birth. Alice had left much the same impression behind her in his mind.

"Awfully," he answered; there was in his voice also a note of remorse, of the feeling that comes when we cannot respond to a kindness so liberally as it deserves.

"Of course they aren't all alike, though," pursued Bowdon, as though he were reasoning out an intricate subject and coming on unexpected conclusions. "In fact they differ curiously, wonderfully."

His thoughts had passed, or were passing, from Irene Kilnorton to Ora Pinsent; obedient to this guidance Ashley's followed in a parallel track from Alice Muddock to Ora Pinsent.

"They're charming in different ways," said he with a slight laugh. Bowdon shewed no signs of mirth; he was frowning a little and smoked rather fast.

"And men are often great asses," he observed a few moments later. Again Ashley had kept pace, but his face was more doubtful than his companion's and there was hesitation in his voice as he replied,

"Yes, I suppose they are."

This subterranean conversation, shewing above ground only faint indications of what it really meant to each of the talkers, had carried them to the end of the garden. Turning round at the fence,

they saw Irene and Alice walking towards them, side by side. Both ladies were well dressed, Irene rather brilliantly, Alice with quiet, subdued good taste; both seemed attractive, Irene for her bright vivacity and merry kindness, Alice for her strength of regard and a fine steady friendliness. A man who was fortunate enough to gain either of them would win a wife of whom he might justly be proud when he talked with the enemy in the gate, and moreover would enjoy an unusually good prospect of being happy in his own house. The man who had won one, and the man who could, if he would, win the other, approached them in a slow leisurely stroll.

"Yes, great asses," repeated Bowdon in a reflective tone.

"I didn't say we weren't," protested Ashley Mead with an irritated laugh.

They would have found a most heartfelt endorsement of the view which they reluctantly adopted, had Sir James Muddock known how small a share of Ashley's visit had been honestly devoted to a consideration of the advantages of a partnership in Muddock and Mead, and how much larger a part had been given to a subject concerning which Sir James could have only one opinion.

CHAPTER VII

UNDER THE NOSEGAY

When Alice Muddock reached Ora's little house in Chelsea and was shewn into the drawing-room, she found herself enjoying an introduction to Mr. Sidney Hazlewood and forced to shake hands with Babba Flint. Hazlewood struck her favourably; there was a repressed resolution about him, a suggestion of being able to get most of what he might happen to want; no doubt, though, his desires would be limited and mainly professional. Babba was, as usual, quite inexplicable to her and almost intolerable. The pair had, it seemed, come on business, and, after an apology, Ora went on talking business to them for fully a quarter of an hour. She was in a businesslike, even a commercial money-grubbing mood; so were the men; amid a number of technical terms which fell on Alice's ignorant ears the question of what they would make was always coming uppermost. There was indeed a touch of insincerity in Ora's graspingness; it did not seem exactly affectation, but rather like a part for which she was cast on this occasion and into which she threw herself with artistic zeal. She had to play up to her companions. There was in her neither the quiet absorption in the pecuniary aspect which marked Mr. Hazlewood, nor the tremulous eagerness with which Babba counted imaginary thousands, the fruit of presupposed successes. Hazlewood, a clean-shaven hard-lined man of close on fifty, and Babba with his long moustache, his smooth cheeks, his dandiness, and his youth, treated Ora exactly in the same way – first as a possible partner, then as a possible property. They told her what she would make if she became a partner and how much they could afford to pay her as a property if she would hire herself out to them. Ora had her alternative capacities clearly grasped and weighed their relative advantages with a knowing hand. Alice thought it a strange scene by which to make her first more intimate study of the irresistible impossible Miss Pinsent, the Miss Pinsent of uncontrollable emotions and unknowable whims. What images the world made of people! Yet somehow, in the end, had not the world a way of being just right enough to save its credit?

At last the conference appeared to be about to break up. Alice was almost sorry; she could have gone on learning from it.

"Only remember," said Mr. Hazlewood, "that if we do make a deal, why, it is a deal!"

Ora began to laugh; an agreement was an agreement, she remembered, and a deal, by parity of reasoning, a deal. Hazlewood's wrinkle clamoured for seriousness; hard money was at stake, and over that surely even genius could look grave.

"Oh, she won't want to cry off this," said Babba with a sagacious nod.

Alice had never known how Babba lived (any more than she knew why). It appeared now that he supported himself by speculations of this description; she fancied that he asserted himself so much because the other two seemed to consider him, in the end, rather superfluous; more than once he had to remind them that he was indispensable; they yielded the point good-naturedly. She was interrupted in her thoughts by Hazlewood, who made a suave remark to her and held out his hand with a low bow. Ora was chaffing Babba about a very large flower in his buttonhole.

"Is Miss Pinsent a good woman of business?" Alice asked in an impulse of curiosity.

Hazlewood glanced at Ora; she was entirely occupied with Babba.

"Miss Pinsent," said he, with his overworked but still expressive smile, "is just exactly what you happen to find her. But if you call often enough, there'll come a time when you'll find her with a good head on her shoulders."

Alice felt vaguely sorry for Mr. Hazlewood; it must be wearing to deal with such unstable quantities. She could imagine herself exchanging sympathy with him on the vagaries of the artistic temperament; would she grow a wrinkle, of brow or of heart, over Ashley Mead? Or had she grown one?

"Well, you've had a lot of experience of her, haven't you?" she asked, laughing, and wondering what he thought of Ora. His answer expressed no great affection.

"Good Lord, yes," he sighed, furrowing his brow again.

Ora darted up to him, put an arm through his, and clasped her hands over his sleeve.

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