

FREDERIC HAROLD

MRS ALBERT GRUNDY—
OBSERVATIONS IN
PHILISTIA

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Mrs Albert Grundy—Observations in Philistia

Presenting in Outline the Comfortable and Well-Regulated Paradox over which She Presides, and showing its Mental Elevation

I suppose about the name there is no doubt. For sixty years we have followed that gifted gadabout and gossip, Heine, and called it Philistia. And yet, when one thinks of it, there may have been a mistake after all. Artemus Ward used to say that he had been able, with effort, to comprehend how it was possible to measure the distance between the stars, and even the dimensions and candle-power, so to speak, of those heavenly bodies; what beat him was how astronomers had ever found out their names. So I find myself wondering whether Philistia really is the right name for the land where She must be obeyed.

If so, it is only a little more the region of mysterious paradox and tricky metamorphosis. We think of it always and from all time as given over to Her rule. We feel in our bones that there was a troglodyte Mrs Grundy; we imagine to ourselves a British matron contemporary with the cave bear and the woolly elephant. But her very antiquity only makes it more puzzling.

There is an old gentleman who always tries to prove to me that the French are really Germans, that the Germans are all Slavs, and that the Russians are strictly Tartars: that is to say, that in keeping-count of the early races as they swarmed Westward we somehow skipped one, and have been wrong ever since. There must be some such explanation of how the domain which She sways came to be called Philistia.

I say this, because the old Philistia was tremendously masculine. It was the Jews who struck the feminine note. They used to swagger no end when they won a victory, and utilise it to the utmost limit of merciless savagery; but when it came their turn to be thrashed they filled the very heavens with complaining clamour. We got no hint that the Philistines ever failed to take their medicine like men.

Consider those splendid later Philistines, the Norsemen. In all their martial literature there is no suggestion of a whine. They loved fighting for its own sake; next to braining their foes, they admired being themselves hewn into sections. They never blamed their gods when they had the worst of it. They never insisted that they were always right and their enemies invariably wrong. They cared nothing about all that. They demanded only fun. It was their victims, the Frankish and Irish monks, who shed women's tears and besought Providence to play favourites.

And here is the paradox. The children of these Berserker loins are become the minions of Mrs Grundy. By some magic she has enshrined Respectability in their temples. In one division of her empire she makes Mr Helmer drink tea; in another she sets everybody reading the *Buchholz Family*; in her chosen island home her husband on the sunniest Sundays carries an umbrella instead of a walking-stick. Fancy the wild delirium of delight with which the old Philistines would have raided her homestead, chopping down her Robert Elsmere, impaling her Horsleys, and making the skies lurid with the flames of her semi-detached villa! Yet we call her place Philistia!

I know the villa very well. It is quite near to the South Kensington Museum. The title "Fernbank" is painted on the gate-posts. How well-ordered and comfortable does life beyond those posts remain! Here are no headaches in the morning. Here white-capped domestics move with neat alertness along the avenues of gentle routine, looking neither to the policeman on the right nor fiery-jacketed Thomas Atkins on the left. Here my friend Mr Albert Grundy invariably comes home by the Underground to dinner. Here his three daughters – girls of a type with a diminishing upper lip, with sharper chins

and greater length of limb than of old – lead deeply washed existences, playing at tennis, smiling in flushed silence at visitors, feeding contentedly upon Mudie’s stores, the while their mamma spreads the matrimonial net about the piano or makes tours of inspection among her outlying mantraps on the lawn. Here simpers the innocuous curate; here Uncle Dudley, who has seen life in Australia and the Far West, watches the bulbs and prunes the roses, and, I should think, yawns often to himself; here Lady Willoughby Wallaby’s card diffuses refinement from the summit of the card-basket in the hall.

To this happy home there came but last week – or was it the week before – a parcel of books. There were four complete novels in twelve volumes – fruits of that thoughtful arrangement by which the fair reader in Philistia is given three distinct opportunities to decide whether she will read the story through or not. Mrs Albert is a busy woman, burdened with manifold responsibilities to Church and State, to organised charities, to popularised music, to art-work guilds and the Amalgamated Association of Clear Starchers, not to mention a weather-eye kept at all times upon all unmarried males: but she still finds time to open all these packets of new books herself. On this occasion she gave to her eldest, Ermytrude, the first volume of a novel by Mrs – . It doesn’t matter what fell to the share of the younger Amy and Floribel. For herself she reserved the three volumes of the latest work of Mr – .

She tells me now that words simply can *not* express her thankfulness for having done so. It seems the selection was not entirely accidental. She was attracted, she admits, by the charmingly dainty binding of the volumes, but she was also moved by an instinct, half maternal prescience, half literary recollection. She thought she remembered having seen the name of this man-writer before. Where? It came to her like a flash, she says. Only a while ago he had a hook called *A Bunch of Patrician Ladies* or something of that sort, which she almost made up her mind not to let the girls read at all, but at last, with some misgivings, permitted them to skim hastily, because though the morals were rocky – perhaps that wasn’t her word – the society was very good. But this new book of his had not even that saving feature. Respectable people were only incidentally mentioned in it. Really it was quite *too* low. The chief figure was a farm-girl who for the most part skimmed milk or cut swedes in a field, and at other times behaved in a manner positively unmentionable. Mrs Albert told me she had locked the volumes up, after only partially perusing them. I might be sure *her* daughters never laid eyes on them. They had gone back to the library, with a note expressing surprise that such immoral books should be sent into any Christian family. What made the matter worse, she went on, was that Ermytrude read in some paper, at a friend’s house, that this man, whoever he may be, was the greatest of English novelists, and that this particular book of his was a tragic work of the noblest and loftiest order, which dignified the language. She was sure she didn’t know what England was coming to, when reporters were allowed to put things like that in the papers. Fortunately she only took in *The Daily Tarradiddle*, which one could always rely upon for sound views, and which gave this unspeakable book precisely the contemptuous little notice it deserved.

It was a relief, however – and here the good matron visibly brightened up – to think that really wholesome and improving novels were still produced. There was that novel by Mrs – . Had I read it? Oh,

I must lose no time! Perhaps it was not altogether so enchanting as that first immortal work of hers, which had almost, one might say, founded a new religion. True, one of the girls in it worked altar-cloths for a church, and occasionally the other characters broke out into religious conversation; but there were no clergymen to speak of, and the charm of the other’s ecclesiastical mysticism was lacking. “To be frank, the first and last volumes were just a bit slow. But oh! the lovely second volume! A young Englishman and his sister go to Paris. They stumble right at the start into the most delightful, picturesque, artistic set. Think of it: Henri Régnault is personally introduced, and delivers himself of extended remarks – ”

“I met an old friend of Regnault’s at the Club the other day,” I interposed, “who complained bitterly of that. He said it was insufferable impudence to bring him in at all, and still worse to make him talk such blather as is put into his mouth.”

Mrs Albert sniffed at this Club friend and went on. That Paris part of the book seemed to her to just palpitate with life. It was Paris to the very letter – gay, intellectual, sparkling, and oh! so free! The young Englishman at once set up a romantic establishment in the heart of Fontainebleau Forest with a French painter-girl. His sister was almost as promptly debauched by an elderly French sculptor. But you never lost sight of the fact that the author was teaching a valuable moral lesson by all this. Indeed, that whole part of the book was called “Storm and Stress.” And all the while you saw, too, how innately superior the national character of the young Englishman was to that of the French people about him. One *knew* that in good time *he* would have a moral awakening, and return to England, marry, settle down, and make money in his business. Side by side with this you saw the entire hopelessness of any spiritual regeneration in the French painter-girl or any of her artistic set. And this was shown with such delicate art – it was so *perfect* a picture of the moral contrast between the two nations – that the girls saw it at once.

“Then the girls,” I put in – “that is to say, you didn’t lock *this* book up?”

Mrs Albert lifted her eyebrows at me.

“How do you mean?” she asked. “Do you know who the author is? The idea! Why, the papers print whole columns about *anything* she writes. Every day you may see paragraphs about the mere prospect of books she hasn’t even begun yet. I suppose such blatant publicity must be very distressing to her, but the public simply insist upon it. *The Daily Tarradiddle* devoted an entire leader to this particular book. I assure you, all my friends are talking of nothing else – many of them people, too, whom you would not suspect of any literary tastes whatever, and who *never* read novels as a rule. But they don’t regard *this* as a novel. They think of it – I quote Lady Willoughby Wallaby’s exact words – as an exposition of those Christian principles which make our England what it is.”

Setting forth the Untoward Circumstances under which the Right Tale was Unfolded in the Wrong Company

Much has been written about that variety of “cab-wit” which occurs to a man on his way home from dinner: the brilliant sallies he might have made, the smart retorts which would so bravely have reversed the balance of laughter had they only come in time. We are less frank about the other sort. No one dwells in type upon the manner in which we marshal our old jokes and arrange our epigrams as we drive along to the house of feasting.

No doubt the practice of getting up table-talk is going out. The three-bottle men took it to the grave with them, along with the snuff-box, and the toupee, and the feather-bed, and other amenities of the Regency. There never was but one diner-out in the London of my knowledge who was at pains to prepare his conversations, each for its special occasion and audience, and he, poor man, broke down under the strain and disappeared from view. The others are too lazy, too indifferent, too cocksure of themselves, to go to all this bother. The old courtly sense of responsibility to the host is perished from among them. But none the less, the least dutiful and diligent of all their number does ask himself questions as the whirling rubber tyres bear him onward, and the cab-mirror shows him the face of a man to whom people ought to listen.

The question I asked myself, as I drove past the flaring shop windows of Old Brompton Road the other evening, was whether the Grundys would probably like my story of Nate Salsbury and the Citizen of South Bend, Indiana. A good deal depended upon the decision. It was a story which had greatly solidified my position in other hospitable quarters; it could be brought in *apropos* of almost anything, or for that matter of quite nothing at all; it had never been printed, so far as I know, in any of those American comic papers which supply alike the dining-rooms of Mayfair and the editorial offices of Fleet Street with such humour as they come into possession of; and I enjoyed telling it. On the other hand, the Grundys were old friends of mine, who would never suspect that they had missed anything if I preserved silence on the subject of South Bend, and who would go on asking me to dinner whether I told new tales or not; moreover, their attitude towards fresh jokes was always a precarious quantity, and I had an uneasy feeling that if I told my story to them and it failed to come off, so to speak, I should never have the same confidence in it again.

When I had entered the drawing-room of Fernbank, shaken hands with Mrs Albert Grundy and Ermytrude, and stolen a little glance about the circle as I walked over to the fireplace, it had become clear that the story was not to be told. Beside the half-dozen of the family, including the curate, there was a tall young man with a very high collar, shoulders that sloped down like a Rhine-wine bottle, and a stern expression of countenance. Uncle Dudley whispered to me, as we held our hands over the asbestos, that he was a literary party, and the son of old Sir Watkyn Hump, who was a director in one of Albert’s companies. The other guests were a stout and motherly lady in a cap and a purplish smile, and a darkling young woman with a black velvet riband around her thin neck, and a look of wearied indifference upon her face. This effect of utter boredom did not visibly diminish upon my being presented to Miss Wallaby.

I have an extremely well-turned little brace of sentences with which to convey the intelligence to a young lady that the honour of taking her down to dinner has fallen upon me – sentences which combine professions of admiring pleasure with just a grateful dash of respectful playfulness; they brought no new light into Miss Wallaby’s somewhat scornful *pince-nez*. Decidedly I would not tell my South Bend story *that* night!

But all the same I did. What led up to it I hardly know. It was at the ptarmigan stage, I remember – or was it a capercailzie? – and young Mr Hump had commented upon the great joy of living in England, where one could enjoy delicious game all the year round, instead of in a country like

America, where the inhabitants notoriously had nothing but fried salt pork to eat for many months at a time. Perhaps it was not worth while, but I ventured the correcting remark that there was no season of the year when one couldn't have eighteen edible varieties of wild birds in America for every one that England has ever heard of. Mr Hump preened his chin about on the summit of his collar and smiled with superior incredulity. The others looked grave. Mrs Grundy whispered to me warningly, over her left shoulder, that Mr Hump had made America his special subject, and wrote most vigorous and comminatory articles about it almost every week. I was painfully conscious that Miss Wallaby's cold right shoulder had been still further withdrawn from me.

Well, it was at this grotesquely inauspicious moment that I told my story. It is easy enough now to see that it was sheer folly, madness if you like, to do so. I was only too bitterly conscious of that when I reviewed the events of the evening in my homeward cab. It was *apropos* of nothing under the wide sky. But at the moment, I suppose, I hoped that it would relieve the situation. In one sense it did.

Baldly summarised, this is the tale. Years ago the admirable Nate Salisbury was on a "one-night-stand" tour with his bright little company of comedians through the least urban districts of Indiana, and came upon South Bend, which is an important centre of the wagon-making industry, but is not precisely a focussing point of dramatic traditions and culture.

In the vestibule of the small theatre that evening there paced up and down a tall, middle-aged, weasel-backed citizen, his hands plunged deep in his pockets, doubt and irresolution written all over his face. As others paid their money and passed in he would watch them with obvious longing; then he would go and study once more the attractive coloured bill of the Company, with its bevy of pretty girls in skirts just short enough to disclose most enticing little ankles; then once more he would resume his perplexed walk to and fro. At last he made up his mind, and approached Salisbury with diffidence. "Mister," he said, "air you the boss of this show?" "What can I do for you?" asked Nate. "Well – no offence meant – but – can I – that is to say – will it be all right to bring a lady to your show?" "That, sir, depends!" responded the manager firmly. "Well," the citizen went on, "what I was gittin' at is this – can I be perfectly safe in bringin' *my wife* here?"

"Sir," said Salisbury with dignity, and an eye trained to abstain from twinkling, "it is no portion of my business to inquire whether she is your wife or not, but if she comes in here she's got to behave herself!"

A solitary note of laughter fell upon the air when I had told this story, and on the instant Uncle Dudley, perceiving that he had made a mistake, dropped his napkin, and came up from fishing for it on the floor red-faced and dumb. All else was deadly silence.

"I – I suppose they really weren't married at all?" said the curate, after a chilling pause.

"Marriage, I regret to say, means next to nothing in most parts of America," remarked Mr Hump, judicially. "The most sacred ties are there habitually made the subject of ribald jests. I have been assured by a person who spent nearly three weeks in the United States some years since that it is an extremely rare experience to meet an adult American who has not been divorced at least once. This fact made a vivid impression on my mind at the time, and I – ahem! – have written frequently upon it since."

"I suppose the trouble arises from their all living in hotels – having no home life whatever," said Mrs Albert, with a kindly air of coming to my rescue.

"Who on earth told you that?" I began, but was cut short.

"I confess," broke in Miss Wallaby, with frosty distinctness of tone and enunciation, "that the assumption upon which the incident just related is based – the assumption that the la – woman referred to would probably misconduct herself in a place of public resort – seems to me startlingly characteristic of the country of which it is narrated. It has been truly said that the most valuable test of a country's actual, as distinct from its assumed, worth, is the respect it pays to its women. Both at Cheltenham and at Newnham the idea is steadily inculcated – I might say insisted upon as of paramount importance – that the nation's real civilisation rests upon the measure, not alone of

chivalrous deference, but of esteem and confidence which my sex, by its devotion to duty, and its intellectual sympathy with broad aims and lofty purposes, is able to inspire and command.”

“But I assure you,” I protested feebly, “the story I told was a joke.”

“There are some subjects,” interposed Lady Willoughby Wallaby, the fixed smile lighting up with an angry, winter-sunset glow her inflamed countenance – “there are some subjects on which it is best not to joke.” As she spoke she wagged a mitted thumb at her hostess, and on the instant the ladies rose. Mr Hump hastened round to hold the door open as they filed out, their heads high in air, their skirts rustling indignantly over the threshold. Then he followed them, closing the door with decision behind him.

“Gad, Albert,” said Uncle Dudley, reaching over for the port, “I don’t wonder that the pick of our young fellows go in for marrying American girls.”

“Pass it along!” remarked the father of Mrs Albert’s three daughters, in a voice of confirmed dejection.

Annotating Sundry Points of Contact found to exist between the Lady and Contemporary Art

Scene. —*Just inside the door of a studio.*

Time. —*Last Sunday in March, 5 p.m.*

1st Citizeness. O, thank you *so* much!

2nd do. *So* good of you to come!

1st do. I *so* dote upon art!

2nd do. So kind of you to say so!

1st do. Thank you *so* much for asking us!

2nd do. Delighted, I'm sure! Thank *you* for coming!

1st Citizeness. Not at all! Thank you for – for thanking me for – Well —*good-bye.* (*Exit – with family group.*)

Husband of 2nd Citizeness (*with gloom*). And who might *those* thankful bounders be?

2nd Citizeness (*wearily*). O, don't ask *me!* I don't know! From Addison Road way, I should think.

1st Citizeness (*outside*). Well! If *that* thing gets into the Academy!

Family Group. Did you notice the ridiculous way her hair was done? Did you ever taste such tea in your life? How yellow Mrs. General Wragg is getting to look in the daylight. Yes – there's our four-wheeler. (*Exeunt omnes.*)

The above is not intended for presentation upon any stage – not even that of the Independent Theatre. It has been cast into the dramatic mould merely for convenience' sake. It embodies what I chiefly remember about Picture Sunday.

It has come to be my annual duty – a peculiarly hardy, not to say temerarious, annual – to convoy Mrs Albert Grundy and her party about sections of Chelsea and Brompton on the earlier of the two Show Sabbaths. I drifted into this function through having once shared an attic with a young painter, whose colleagues used to come to borrow florins of him whenever one of his pictures disappeared from any shop window, and so incidentally formed my acquaintance. My claim nowadays upon their recollection is really very slight. I just know them well enough to manage the last Sunday in March: even that might be awkward if they were not such good-natured fellows.

But it would be difficult to persuade Mrs Albert of this. That good lady is wont, when the playfully benignant mood is upon her, to describe me as her connecting link with Bohemia. She probably would be puzzled to explain her meaning; I certainly should. But if she were provided with affidavits setting forth the whole truth – viz., that my entire income is derived from an inherited part-interest in an artificial-ice machine; that there are two clergymen on the committee of my only club; that I am free from debt; and that I play duets on the piano with my sister – still would she cling to the belief that I am a young man with an extremely gay, rakish side, who could make thrilling revelations of Bohemia if I would. Of course, I am never questioned on the subject; but I can see that it is a point upon which the faith of Fernbank is firmly grounded. Often Mrs Albert's conversation cuts figure-eights on very thin ice when we are alone, as if just to show me that *she* knows. More than once I have discovered Ermytrude looking furtively at me, as the wistful shepherd-boy on the plains of Dura might have gazed at the distant haze overhanging bold, unspeakable Babylon. I rarely visit the house but Uncle Dudley winks at me. However, nothing is ever asked me about the dreadful things with which they suppose me to be upon intimate terms.

It seemed for a long time, on Sunday, as if an easy escape had been arranged for me by Providence. At two o'clock, the hour appointed for our crusade, a heavy fog overhung everything.

Looking out from the drawing-room windows, only the very nearest of the neatly trimmed firs on the lawn were to be distinguished. The street beyond was utter blackness.

At three o'clock the ladies took off their bonnets. It was really too bad. Uncle Dudley, strolling in from his nap in the library, suggested that with a lantern we might visit some of the nearer studios: "not necessarily for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith." Mrs Albert turned a look of tearful vexation upon him, before which he fled.

"There's this consolation," she remarked presently, holding me with an unwavering eye: "if we are to be defrauded out of our expedition to-day, that will furnish all the more reason why you should take us next Sunday —*the* Sunday. You have often talked of having us see the Academicians at home – but we've never been."

"I remember that there has been talk about it," I said; "but hardly that the talk was mine. Truth is, I don't know a single Academician, even by sight."

It was clear that they did not believe me. Mrs Albert continued: "Lady Wallaby expressed surprise, only last evening, that we should consent to go about among the outsiders. She and her daughter *never* do."

"Outsiders!" I was tempted into saying. "Why, they can paint the head off the Academy!"

Miss Timby-Hucks simpered outright. "You do say such droll things!" she remarked, somewhat obscurely. "Mamma always declares that you remind her of the *Sydney Bulletin*."

"Whom *do* you take to the Academy Show Sunday? – or perhaps I oughtn't to ask," came from Ermytrude.

"No, we have no right to inquire," said Mrs Albert; and I turned to the window and the enshrouded lawn once more.

All at once the fog lifted. The bonnets were produced again. Nearly three hours of daylight remained to us. Tidings that the horse was too lame to be taken out only staggered Mrs Albert for the briefest fraction of time. There were still four-wheelers in Gilead. Besides, if the driver happened to be sober, he would know the streets so much better than their stupid coachman. This would be of advantage, because time was so limited. We should have to just run in, say "How-d'ye-do," take a flying look round, and scamper out again, Mrs Albert said. By firmly adhering to this rule, she estimated that we might do sixteen or seventeen studios.

Heaven alone knows how many we did "do." Nor have I any clear recollections of what we saw. A confused vision remains to me of long hall-ways lined with frames and packing-cases; half-an-acre, more or less, of painted canvas, out of which only here and there a pair of bright eyes, a glowing field of poppies, or the sheen from a satin gown, fixed itself disconnectedly on the memory; hordes and hordes of tall young women helping themselves to tea and cakes; and always the pathetic figure of the artist's wife, or sister, tired to very death, standing by the door with a wearied smile on her lips, and the polite falsehood, "So good of you to come!" on her tongue. I wondered, I remember, if she never forgot herself and said instead, "So kind of you to go!" But under Mrs Albert's system there was no time to wait and see.

Once, indeed, we dallied over our task. Mrs Albert encountered a lady from Wormwood Scrubs of her acquaintance, who was indiscreet enough to mention that she had been asked to stop here for supper. The news spread through the petticoated portion of my group as by magic. Miss Timby-Hucks came over and asked me, so audibly that the artist-host had to blush and turn away, if I didn't think it would be a deliciously romantic experience to sup in one of these lofty studios, with the gaslight on the armour, and the great, solemnly silent pictures looking down upon us as we ate. Mrs Albert lingered for some time looking at this artist's work with her head on one side, and eyes filled with rapt, dreamy enjoyment – but nothing came of it.

It was after we had been back in Fern-bank for an hour or more – our own cold repast nearly over – that Mrs Albert thought of something. She laid down her fork with a gesture of annoyance.

“It has just occurred to me,” she said; “we never went to that Mr Whistler’s, whose pictures are on exhibition in Bond Street. Everybody’s talking about him, and I did so want not to miss his studio.”

“I don’t think he has a Show Sunday,” I said. “I never heard of it, if he has.”

“O no, it is only these last few weeks that anybody has heard of him,”

Mrs Albert replied. “I read the first announcement about his beautiful pictures in *The Daily Tarradiddle* only the other day.”

“Whistler? Whistler?” put in Uncle Dudley. “Why, surely *he’s* not new. Why – I remember – he was mixed up in a law-suit, wasn’t it, years ago?”

“O no, Dudley,” responded Mrs Albert; “I was under that same impression, till Lady Wallaby set me right. It seems that was another man altogether – some foreign adventurer who pretended to be able to paint and imposed upon people – don’t you recall how *The Tarradiddle* exposed him? – and Mr Burnt-Jones had him arrested, or something – O, quite a dreadful person. But *this* Mr Whistler is an Englishman. I read in *The Illustrated London News* that he represented modern British Art. That alone would make it quite clear it was a different man. I did so want to see him! Lady-Wallaby tells me she has heard he is extremely amusing in his conversation – and quite presentable manners, too.”

“Why don’t you ask him to dinner?” said Mr Albert Grundy. “If he’s amusing it’s more than most of the men you drum up are.”

“You seem to think *everybody* can be asked to dinner, Albert,” the lady of the house replied. “Artists don’t dine – unless they are in the Academy, of course. Tea, yes – or perhaps supper; but one doesn’t ask people to meet them at dinner. It’s like actors – and – and non-commissioned officers.”

Affording a Novel and Subdued Scientific Light, by which divers Venerable Problems may be Observed Afresh

It is my opinion,” said Uncle Dudley, stretching out his slippers feet, and thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat – “it is my opinion that women are different from men.”

“Several commentators have advanced this view,” I replied. “For example, it has been noted that the gentle sex cross a muddy street on their heels, whereas we skip over on our toes.”

“That is interesting if true,” responded Uncle Dudley. “What I mean is that all this talk about the human race is humbug. There are *two* human races! And they are getting wider apart every few minutes, too!”

“Have you mentioned this to any one?” I asked.

Uncle Dudley went on developing his theme. “I daresay that for millions of years after the re-separation of the sexes this difference was too slight to be noticed at all. The cave man, for instance – the fellow who went around hunting the Ichthyosaurus with a brick tied on the end of an elm club, and spent the whole winter underground sucking the old bones, and then whittling them up into Runic buttons for the South Kensington Museum: I suppose, now, that his wife and sister-in-law, say, didn’t strike him as being specially different from himself – except, of course, in that they only got plain bones and gristle and so on to eat, whereas all the marrow and general smooth-sailing in meats went his way. *You*, can’t imagine *him* saying to himself: ‘These female people here are not of my race at all They are of another species. They are in reality as much my natural enemies as that long-toed, red-headed, brachycephalous tramp living in the gum-tree down by the swamp, who makes offensive gestures as I ride past on my tame *Ursus spelous*’ – now, can you?”

I frankly shook my head. “No, I don’t seem to be able to imagine that. It would be almost as hard as to guess off-hand where, when, and how you caught this remarkable scientific spasm.”

Uncle Dudley smiled. He rose, and walked with leisurely lightness up and down in front of the chimney-piece, still with his palms spread like little misplaced wings before his armpits. He smiled again. Then he stopped on the hearth-rug and looked down amiably upon me.

“Well – what d’ye think? There’s something in it, eh?”

“My dear fellow,” I began, “what puzzles me is – ”

“O, I don’t mean to say that I’ve worked it all out,” put in Uncle Dudley, reassuringly. “Why, I get puzzled myself, every once in a while. But I’m on the right track, my boy; and, as they say in Adelaide, I’m going to hang to it like a pup to a root.”

“How long have you been this way?” I asked, with an affectation of sympathy.

Uncle Dudley answered with shining eyes. “Why, if you’ll believe me, it seems now as if I’d had the germs of the idea in my mind ever since I came back to England, and began living here at Fernbank. But the thing dawned upon me – that is to say, took shape in my head – less than a fortnight ago. It all came about through being up here one evening with nothing to read, and my toe worse than usual, and Mrs Albert having been out of sorts all through dinner. Somehow, I felt all at once that I’d got to read scientific works. I couldn’t resist it. I was like Joan of Arc when the cows and sheep took partners for a quadrille. I heard voices – Darwin’s and – and – Benjamin Franklin’s – and – lots of others. I hobbled downstairs to the library, and I brought up a whole armful of the books that Mrs Albert bought when she expected Lady Wallaby was going to be able to get her an invitation to attend the Hon. Mrs Coon-Alwyn’s Biological Conversaciones. Look there! What do you say to that for ten days’ work? And had to cut every leaf, into the bargain!”

I gazed with respect at the considerable row of books he indicated: books for the most part bound in the scarlet of the International Series or the maroon of Contemporary Science, but containing also brown covers, and even green “sport” varieties.

“Well, and what is it all about?” I asked. “Why have you read these things? Why not the reports of the Commission on Agricultural Depression, or Lewis Morris’s poems, or even –” but my imagination faltered and broke.

“It was instinct, my boy,” returned Uncle Dudley, with impressive confidence. “There had been a thought – a great idea – growing and swelling in my head ever since I had been living in this house. But I couldn’t tell what it was. As you might say, it was wrapped up in a cocoon, like the larvæ of the lepidoptera – ahem! – and something was needed to bring it out.”

“When I was here last you were trying Hollands with quinine bitters,” I remarked casually.

“Don’t fool!” Uncle Dudley admonished me. “I’m dead in earnest. As I said, it was pure instinct that led me to these books. They have made everything clear. I only wanted their help to get the husk off my discovery, and hoist it on my back, us it were, and bring it out here in the daylight. And so now you know what I’m getting at when I say: Women are different from Men.”

“That is the discovery, then?” I inquired.

Uncle Dudley nodded several times. Then he went on, with emphasised slowness: “I have lived here now for four years, seeing my sister-in-law every day, watching Ermytrude grow up to womanhood and the little girls peg along behind her, and meeting the female friends who come here to see them – and, sir, I tell you, they’re not alone a different sex: they’re a different animal altogether! Take my word for it, they’re a species by themselves.”

“Miss Timby-Hucks is certainly very much by herself,” I remarked.

My friend smiled. “And not altogether her own fault either,” he commented. “But, speaking of science, it’s remarkable how, when you once get a firm grip on a big, central, main-guy fact, all the little facts come in of their own accord to support it. Now, there’s that young simpleton you met here at dinner a while ago: I mean Eustace Hump. Do you know that both Ermytrude and the Timby-Hucks, and even Miss Wallaby, think that that chap is a perfect ideal of masculine wit and beauty? You and I would hesitate about using him to wad a horse-pistol with: but there isn’t one of those girls that wouldn’t leap with joy if he began proposing to her; and as for their mothers, why, the old ladies watch him as a kingfisher eyes a tadpole.”

“Your similes are exciting,” I said; “but what do they go to show?”

“My dear fellow, science can show anything. I haven’t gone all through it yet, but I tell you, it’s wonderful! Take this, for instance” – he reached for a green book on the mantel, and turned over the leaves – “now listen to this. The book is written by a man named Wallace – nice, shrewd-looking old party by his picture, you can see – and this is what he says on page 285: ‘Some peahens preferred an old pied peacock; a Canada goose paired with a Bernicle gander; a male widgeon was preferred by a pintail duck to its own species; a hen canary preferred a male greenfinch to either linnet, goldfinch, siskin, or chaffinch.’ Now, do you see that? The moment my eyes first lighted on that, I said to myself: ‘Now I understand about the girls and Eustace Hump.’ Isn’t it clear to you?”

“Absolutely,” I assented. “You ought to read a paper at the Royal Aquarium – before the Balloon Society, I mean.”

“And then look at this,” Uncle Dudley went on, with animation. “Now, you and I would ask ourselves what on earth such a gawky, spindling, poor-witted youngster as that thought he was doing among women, anyhow. But you turn over the page, and here you have it: ‘Goat-suckers, geese, carrion vultures, and many other birds of plain plumage have been observed to dance, spread their wings or tails, and perform strange love-antics.’ Doesn’t that fasten Hump to the wall like a beetle on a pin, eh?”

“But I am not sure that I entirely follow its application to your original point,” I suggested.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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