

**GEORGE
GISSING**

OUR FRIEND

THE

CHARLATAN

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CHAPTER I

As he waited for his breakfast, never served to time, Mr. Lashmar drummed upon the window-pane, and seemed to watch a blackbird lurching with much gusto about the moist lawn of Alverholme Vicarage. But his gaze was absent and worried. The countenance of the reverend gentleman rarely wore any other expression, for he took to heart all human miseries and follies, and lived in a ceaseless mild indignation against the tenor of the age. Inwardly, Mr. Lashmar was at this moment rather pleased, having come upon an article in his weekly paper which reviewed in a very depressing strain the present aspect of English life. He felt that he might have, and ought to have, written the article himself a loss of opportunity which gave new matter for discontent.

The Rev. Philip was in his sixty-seventh year; a thin, dry, round-shouldered man, with bald occiput, straggling yellowish beard, and a face which recalled that of Darwin. The resemblance pleased him. Privately he accepted the theory of organic evolution, reconciling it with a very broad Anglicanism; in his public utterances he touched upon the Darwinian doctrine with a weary disdain. This contradiction involved no insincerity; Mr. Lashmar merely held in contempt the common understanding, and declined to expose an esoteric truth to vulgar misinterpretation. Yet he often worried about it—as he worried over everything.

Nearer causes of disquiet were not lacking to him. For several years the income of his living had steadily decreased; his glebe, upon which he chiefly depended, fell more and more under the influence of agricultural depression, and at present he found himself, if not seriously embarrassed, likely to be so in a very short time. He was not a good economist; he despised everything in the nature of parsimony; his ideal of the clerical life demanded a liberal expenditure of money no less than unsparing personal toil. He had generously exhausted the greater part of a small private fortune; from that source there remained to him only about a hundred pounds a year. His charities must needs be restricted; his parish outlay must be pinched; domestic life must proceed on a narrower basis. And all this was to Mr. Lashmar supremely distasteful.

Not less so to Mr. Lashmar's wife, a lady ten years his junior, endowed with abundant energies in every direction save that of household order and thrift. Whilst the vicar stood waiting for breakfast, tapping drearily on the window-pane, Mrs. Lashmar entered the room, and her voice sounded the deep, resonant note which announced a familiar morning mood.

"You don't mean to say that breakfast isn't ready! Surely, my dear, you could ring the bell?"

"I have done so," replied the vicar, in a tone of melancholy abstraction.

Mrs. Lashmar rang with emphasis, and for the next five minutes her contralto swelled through the vicarage, rendering inaudible the replies she kept demanding from a half rebellious, half intimidated servant. She was not personally a coarse woman, and her manners did not grossly offend against the convention of good-breeding; but her nature was self-assertive. She could not brook a semblance of disregard for her authority, yet, like women in general, had no idea of how to rule. The small, round face had once been pretty; now, with its prominent eyes, in-drawn lips, and obscured chin, it inspired no sympathetic emotion, rather an uneasiness and an inclination for retreat. In good humour or in ill, Mrs. Lashmar was aggressive. Her smile conveyed an amiable defiance; her look of grave interest alarmed and subdued.

"I have a line from Dyce," remarked the vicar, as at length he applied himself to his lukewarm egg and very hard toast. "He thinks of running down."

"When?"

"He doesn't say."

"Then why did he write? I've no patience with those vague projects. Why did he write until he had decided on the day?"

"Really, I don't know," answered Mr. Lashmar, feebly. His wife, in this mood, had a dazing effect upon him.

"Let me see the letter."

Mrs. Lashmar perused the half-dozen lines in her son's handwriting.

"Why, he *does* say!" she exclaimed in her deepest and most disdainful chord. "He says 'before long.'"

"True. But I hardly think that conveys—"

"Oh, please don't begin a sophistical argument He says when he is coming, and that's all I want to know here's a letter, I see, from that silly Mrs. Barker—her husband has quite given up drink, and earns good wages, sad the eldest boy has a place—pooh!"

"All very good news, it seems to me," remarked the vicar, slightly raising his eyebrows.

But one of Mrs. Lashmar's little peculiarities was that, though she would exert herself to any extent for people whose helpless circumstances utterly subjected them to her authority, she lost all interest in them as soon as their troubles were surmounted, and even viewed with resentment that result of her own efforts. Worse still, from her point of view, if the effort had largely been that of the sufferers themselves—as in this case. Mrs. Barker, a washerwoman who had reformed her sottish husband, was henceforth a mere offence in the eyes of the vicar's wife.

"As silly a letter as ever I read!" she exclaimed, throwing aside the poor little sheet of cheap note-paper with its illiterate gratitude. "Oh, here's something from Lady Susan—pooh! Another baby. What do I care about her babies! Not one word about Dyce—not one word. Now, really!"

"I don't remember what you expected," remarked the vicar, mildly.

Mrs. Lashmar paid no heed to him. With a resentful countenance, she had pushed the letters aside, and was beginning her meal. Amid all the so-called duties which she imposed upon herself—for, in her own way, she bore the burden of the world no less than did the Rev. Philip—Mrs. Lashmar never lost sight of one great preoccupation, the interests of her son. He, Dyce Lashmar, only child of the house, now twenty-seven years old, lived in London, and partly supported himself as a private tutor. The obscurity of this existence, so painful a contrast to the hopes his parents had nourished, so disappointing an outcome of all the thought that had been given to Dyce's education, and of the not inconsiderable sums spent upon it, fretted Mrs. Lashmar to the soul; at times she turned in anger against the young man himself, accusing him of ungrateful supineness, but more often eased her injured feelings by accusation of all such persons as, by any possibility, might have aided Dyce to a career. One of these was Lady Susan Harrop, a very remote relative of hers. Twice or thrice a year, for half-a-dozen years at least, Mrs. Lashmar had urged upon Lady Susan the claims of her son to social countenance and more practical forms of advancement; hitherto with no result—save, indeed, that Dyce dined once every season at the Harrops' table. The subject was painful to Mr. Lashmar also, but it affected him in a different way, and he had long ceased to speak of it.

"That selfish, frivolous woman!" sounded presently from behind the coffee-service, not now in accents of wrath, but as the deliberate utterance of cold judgment. "Never in all her life has she thought of anyone but herself. What right has such a being to bring children into the world? What can be expected of them but meanness and hypocrisy?"

Mr. Lashmar smiled. He had just broken an imperfect tooth upon a piece of toast, and, as usual when irritated, his temper became ironic.

"Sweet are the uses of disappointment," he observed. "How it clears one's vision!"

"Do you suppose I ever had any better opinion of Lady Susan?" exclaimed his wife.

It was a principle of Mr. Lashmar's never to argue with a woman. Sadly smiling, he rose from the table.

"Here's an article you ought to read," he said, holding out the weekly paper. "It's fall of truth, well expressed. It may even have some bearing on this question."

The vicar went about his long day's work, and took with him many uneasy reflections. He had not thought of it before breakfast, but now it struck him that much in that pungent article on the men of to-day might perchance apply to the character and conduct of his own son. "A habit of facile enthusiasm, not perhaps altogether insincere, but totally without moral value . . . convictions assumed at will, as a matter of fashion, or else of singularity . . . the lack of stable purpose, save only in matters of gross self-interest . . . an increasing tendency to verbose expression . . . an all but utter lack of what old-fashioned people still call principle. . . ." these phrases recurred to his memory, with disagreeable significance. Was that in truth a picture of his son, of the boy whom he had loved and watched over and so zealously hoped for? Possibly he wronged Dyce, for the young man's mind and heart had long ceased to be clearly legible to him. "Worst, perhaps, of all these frequent traits is the affectation of—to use a silly word—altruism. The most radically selfish of men seem capable of persuading themselves into the belief that their prime motive is to 'live for others.' Of truly persuading themselves—that is the strange thing. This, it seems to us, is morally far worse than the unconscious hypocrisy which here and there exists in professors of the old religion; there is something more nauseous about self-deceiving 'altruism' than in the attitude of a man who, thoroughly worldly in fact, believes himself a hopeful candidate for personal salvation." Certain recent letters of Dyce appeared in a new light when seen from this point of view. It was too disagreeable a subject; the vicar strove to dismiss it from his mind.

In the afternoon, he had to visit a dying man, an intelligent shopkeeper, who, while accepting the visit as a proof of kindness, altogether refused spiritual comfort, and would speak of nothing but the future of his children. Straightway Mr. Lashmar became the practical consoler, lavish of kindly forethought. Only when he came forth did he ask himself whether he could possibly fulfil half of what he had undertaken.

"It is easier," he reflected, "to make promises for the world to come. Is it not also better? After all, can I not do it with a clearer conscience?"

He walked slowly, worrying about this and fifty other things, feeling a very Atlas under the globe's oppression. Rig way took him across a field in which there was a newly bourgeoned copse; he remembered that, last spring, he had found white violets about the roots of the trees. A desire for their beauty and odour possessed him; he turned across the grass. Presently a perfume guided him to a certain mossy corner where pale sweet florets nestled amid their leaves. He bent over them, and stretched his hand to pluck, but in the same moment checked himself; why should he act the destroyer in this spot of perfect quietness and beauty?

"Dyce would not care much about them," was another thought that came into his mind.

He rose from his stooping posture with ache of muscles and creaking of joints. Alas for the days when he ran and leapt and knew not pain! Walking slowly away, he worried himself about the brevity of life.

By a stile he passed into the highroad, at the lower end of the long village of Alverholme. He had an appointment with his curate at the church school, and, not to be unpunctual, he quickened his pace in that direction. At a little distance behind him was a young lady whom he had not noticed; she, recognizing the vicar, pursued with light, quick step, and soon overtook him.

"How do you do, Mr. Lashmar!"

"Why—Miss Bride!" exclaimed the vicar. "What a long time since we saw you! Have you just come?"

"I'm on a little holiday. How are you? And how is Mrs. Lashmar?"

Miss Bride had a soberly decisive way of speaking, and an aspect which corresponded therewith; her figure was rather short, well-balanced, apt for brisk movement; she held her head very straight, and regarded the world with a pair of dark eyes suggestive of anything but a sentimental nature. Her

grey dress, black jacket, and felt hat trimmed with a little brown ribbon declared the practical woman, who thinks about her costume only just as much as is needful; her dark-brown hair was coiled in a plait just above the nape, as if neatly and definitely put out of the way. She looked neither more nor less than her age, which was eight and twenty. At first sight her features struck one as hard and unsympathetic, though tolerably regular; watching her as she talked or listened, one became aware of a mobility which gave large expressiveness, especially in the region of the eyebrows, which seemed to move with her every thought. Her lips were long, and ordinarily compressed in the line of conscious self-control. She had a very shapely neck, the skin white and delicate; her facial complexion was admirably pure and of warmish tint.

"And where are you living, Miss Bride?" asked Mr. Lashmar, regarding her with curiosity.

"At Hollingford; that is to say, near it. I am secretary to Lady Ogram—I don't know whether you ever heard of her?"

"Ogram? I know the name. I am very glad indeed to hear that you have such a pleasant position. And your father? It is very long since I heard from him."

"He has a curacy at Liverpool, and seems to be all right. My mother died about two years ago."

The matter-of-fact tone in which this information was imparted caused Mr. Lashmar to glance at the speaker's face. Though very little of an observer, he was comforted by an assurance that Miss Bride's features were less impassive than her words. Indeed, the cold abruptness with which she spoke was sufficient proof of feeling roughly subdued.

Some six years had now elapsed since the girl's father, after acting for a short time as curate to Mr. Lashmar, accepted a living in another county. The technical term, in this case, was rich in satiric meaning; Mr. Bride's incumbency quickly reduced him to pauperism. At the end of the first twelvemonth in his rural benefice the unfortunate cleric made a calculation that he was legally responsible for rather more than twice the sum of money represented by his stipend and the offertories. The church needed a new roof; the parsonage was barely habitable for long lack of repairs; the church school lost its teacher through default of salary—and so on. With endless difficulty Mr. Bride escaped from his vicarage to freedom and semi-starvation, and deemed himself very lucky indeed when at length he regained levitical harbourage.

These things had his daughter watched with her intent dark eyes; Constance Bride did not feel kindly disposed towards the Church of England as by law established. She had seen her mother sink under penury and humiliation and all unmerited hardship; she had seen her father changed from a vigorous, hopeful, kindly man to an embittered pessimist. As for herself, sound health and a good endowment of brains enabled her to make a way in the world. Luckily, she was a sole child: her father managed to give her a decent education till she was old enough to live by teaching. But teaching was not her vocation. Looking round for possibilities, Constance hit upon the idea of studying pharmaceuticals and becoming a dispenser; wherein, with long, steady effort, she at length succeeded. This project had already been shaped whilst the Brides were at Alverholme; Mrs. Lashmar had since heard of Constance as employed in the dispensary of a midland hospital.

"Hollingford?" remarked the vicar, as they walked on. "I think I remember that you have relatives there."

"I was born there, and I have an old aunt still living in the town—she keeps a little baker's shop."

Mr. Lashmar, though a philosopher, was not used to this bluntness of revelation; it gave him a slight shock, evinced in a troublous rolling of the eyes.

"Ha! yes!—I trust you will dine with us this evening, Miss Bride?"

"Thank you, I can't dine; I want to leave by an early evening train. But I should like to see Mrs. Lashmar, if she is at home."

"She will be delighted. I must beg you to pardon me for leaving you—an appointment at the schools; but I will get home as soon as possible. Pray excuse me."

"Why, of course, Mr. Lashmar. I haven't forgotten the way to the vicarage."

She pursued it, and in a few minutes rang the bell. Mrs. Lashmar was in the dining-room, busy with a female parishioner whose self-will in the treatment of infants' maladies had given the vicar's wife a great deal of trouble.

"It's as plain as blessed daylight, mum," the woman was exclaiming, "that this medicine don't agree with her."

"Mrs. Dibbs," broke in the other severely, "you will allow me to be a better judge—*what* is it?"

The housemaid had opened the door to announce Miss Bride.

"Miss Bride?" echoed the lady in astonishment. "Very well; show her into the drawing-room."

The visitor waited for nearly a quarter of an hour. She had placed herself on one of the least comfortable chairs, and sat there in a very stiff attitude, holding her umbrella across her knees. After a rather nervous survey of the room, (it had changed very little in appearance since her last visit six years ago), she fell into uneasy thoughtfulness, now and then looking impatiently towards the door. When the hostess at length appeared, she rose with deliberation, her lips just relaxed in a half-smile.

"So it is really you!" exclaimed Mrs. Lashmar, in a voice of forced welcome. "I thought you must have altogether forgotten us."

"It's the first time I have returned to Alverholme," replied the other, in a contrasting tone of calmness.

"And what are you doing? Where are you living? Tell me all about yourself. Are you still at the hospital? You did get a place at a hospital, I think? We were told so."

Mrs. Lashmar's patronage was a little more patronizing than usual, her condescension one or two degrees more condescending. She had various reasons for regarding Constance Bride with disapproval, the least of them that sense of natural antipathy which was inevitable between two such women. In briefest sentences Miss Bride made known that she had given up dispensing two years ago, and was now acting as secretary to a baronet's widow.

"A baronet's widow?" repeated the hostess, with some emphasis of candid surprise. "Row did you manage that? Who is she?"

"An old friend of my family," was the balanced reply. "Lady Ogram, of Rivenoak, near Hollingford."

"Oh! Indeed! I wasn't aware—"

Mrs. Lashmar thought better of her inclination to be trenchantly rude, and smoothed off into commonplaces. Presently the vicar entered, and found his wife conversing with the visitor more amiably than he had expected.

"You have seen Miss Bride already," said Mrs. Lashmar. "I am trying to persuade her to stay over-night with us. Is it really impossible?"

Constance civilly but decidedly declined. Addressing herself to the vicar, she spoke with more ease and friendliness than hitherto; nevertheless, it was obvious that she counted the minutes dictated by decency for the prolongation of her stay. Once or twice her look wandered to a certain part of the wall where hung a framed photograph—a portrait of Dyce Lashmar at the age of one and twenty; she regarded it for an instant with cold fixity, as though it interested her not at all. Just as she was on the point of rising, there came a sound of wheels on the vicarage drive.

"Who's that, I wonder?" said Mrs. Lashmar. "Why—surely it isn't—?"

A voice from without had reached her ears; surprise and annoyance darkened her countenance.

"It's certainly Dyce," said the vicar, who for his part, recognized the voice with pleasure.

"Impossible! He said he was coming in a week's time."

Mr. Lashmar would not have cared to correct this statement, and remark was rendered superfluous by the opening of the door and the appearance of Dyce himself.

"Afraid I'm taking you rather at unawares," said the young man, in a suave Oxford voice. "Unexpectedly I found myself free—"

His eyes fell upon Constance Bride, and for a moment he was mute; then he stepped towards her, and, with an air of peculiar frankness, of comrade-like understanding, extended his hand.

"How do you do, Miss Connie! Delighted to find you here—Mother, glad to see you." He touched Mrs. Lashmar's forehead with his lips. "Well, father? Uncommonly pleasant to be at the vicarage again!"

Miss Bride had stood up, and was now advancing towards the hostess.

"You *must* go?" said Mrs. Lashmar, with her most agreeable smile.

"What, going?" exclaimed Dyce. "Why? Are you staying in the village?"

"No. I must catch a train."

"What train?"

"The six forty-five."

"Why, then you have plenty of time! Mother, bid Miss Connie be seated; I haven't had a moment's talk with her; it's absurd. Six forty-five? You needn't leave here for twenty minutes. What a lucky thing that I came in just now."

For certain ticks of the clock it was a doubtful matter whether Miss Bride would depart or remain. Glancing involuntarily at Mrs. Lashmar, she saw the gloom of resentment and hostility hover upon that lady's countenance, and this proved decisive.

"I'll have some tea, please," cried the young man, cheerfully, as Constance with some abruptness resumed her seat. "How is your father, Miss Connie? Well? That's right. And Mrs. Bride?"

"My mother is dead," replied the girl, quite simply, looking away.

A soft murmur of pain escaped Dyce's lips; he leaned forward, uttered gently a "Pray forgive me!" and was silent. The vicar interposed with a harmless remark about the flight of years.

CHAPTER II

In the moments when Dyce Lashmar was neither aware of being observed nor consciously occupied with the pressing problems of his own existence, his face expressed a natural amiability, inclining to pensiveness. The features were in no way remarkable; they missed the vigour of his father's type without attaining the regularity which had given his mother a claim to good looks. Such a visage falls to the lot of numberless men born to keep themselves alive and to propagate their insignificance. But Dyce was not insignificant. As soon as his countenance lighted with animation, it revealed a character rich in various possibility, a vital force which, by its bright indefiniteness, made some appeal to the imagination. Often he had the air of a lyric enthusiast; often, that of a profound thinker; not seldom there came into his eyes a glint of stern energy which seemed a challenge to the world. Therewithal, nothing perceptibly histrionic; look or speak as he might, the young man exhaled an atmosphere of sincerity, and persuaded others because he seemed so thoroughly to have convinced himself.

He did not give the impression of high breeding. His Oxford voice, his easy self-possession, satisfied the social standard, but left a defect to the finer sense. Dyce had not the self-oblivion of entire courtesy; it seemed probable that he would often err in tact; a certain awkwardness marred his personal bearing, which aimed at the modern ideal of flowing unconstraint.

Sipping the cup of tea which his mother had handed to him, Dyce talked at large. Nothing, he declared, was equal to the delight of leaving town just at this moment of the year, when hedge and meadow were donning their brightest garments and the sky gleamed with its purest blue. He spoke in the tone of rapturous enjoyment, and yet one might have felt a doubt whether his sensibility was as keen as he professed or imagined; all the time, he appeared to be thinking of something else. Most of his remarks were addressed to Miss Bride, and with that manner of intimate friendliness which he alone of the family used towards their visitor. He inquired about the events of her life, and manifested a strong interest in the facts which Constance briefly repeated.

"Let me walk with you as far as the station," he said, when the time came for her departure.

"Please don't trouble," Constance replied, with a quick glance at Mrs. Lashmar's face, still resentful under the conventional smile.

Dyce, without more words, took his hat and accompanied her; the vicar went with them to the garden gate, courteous but obviously embarrassed.

"Pray remember me to your father, Miss Bride," he said. "I should much like to hear from him."

"It's chilly this evening," remarked Dyce, as he and his companion walked briskly away. "Are you going far?"

"To Hollingford."

"But you'll be travelling for two or three hours. What about your dinner?"

"Oh, I shall eat something when I get home."

"Women are absurd about food," exclaimed Dyce, with laughing impatience. "Most of you systematically starve yourselves, and wonder that you get all sorts of ailments. Why wouldn't you stay at the vicarage to-night? I'm quite sure it would have made no difference if you had got back to Hollingford in the morning."

"Perhaps not, but I don't care much for staying at other people's houses."

Dyce examined his companion's face. She did not meet his look, and bore it with some uneasiness. In the minds of both was a memory which would have accounted for much more constraint between them than apparently existed. Six years ago, in the days of late summer, when Dyce Lashmar was spending his vacation at the vicarage, and Connie Bride was making ready to go out into the world, they had been wont to see a good deal of each other, and to exhaust the topics of the time in long conversations, tending ever to a closer intimacy of thought and sentiment. The companionship was not

very favourably regarded by Mr. Lashmar, and to the vicar's wife was a source of angry apprehension. There came the evening when Dyce and Constance had to bid each other good-bye, with no near prospect of renewing their talks and rambles together. What might be in the girl's thought, she alone knew; the young man, effusive in vein of friendship, seemed never to glance beyond a safe borderline, his emotions satisfied with intellectual communion. At the moment of shaking hands, they stood in a field behind the vicarage; dusk was falling and the spot secluded.—They parted, Constance in a bewilderment which was to last many a day; for Dyce had kissed her, and without a word was gone.

There followed no exchange of letters. From that hour to this the two had in no way communicated. Mr. Bride, somewhat offended by what he had seen and surmised of Mr. and Mrs. Lashmar's disposition, held no correspondence with the vicar of Alverholme; his wife had never been on friendly terms with Mrs. Lashmar. How Dyce thought of that singular incident it was impossible to infer from his demeanour; Constance might well have supposed that he had forgotten all about it.

"Is your work interesting?" were his next words. "What does Lady Ogram go in for?"

"Many things."

"You prefer it to the other work?"

"It isn't so hard, and it's much more profitable."

"By the bye, who is Lady Ogram?" asked Dyce, with a smiling glance.

"A remarkable old lady. Her husband died ten years ago; she has no children, and is very rich. I shouldn't think there's a worse-tempered person living, yet she has all sorts of good qualities. By birth, she belongs to the working class; by disposition she's a violent aristocrat. I often hate her; at other times, I like her very much."

Dyce listened with increasing attention.

"Has she any views?" he inquired.

"Oh, plenty!" Constance answered, with a dry little laugh.

"About social questions—that kind of thing?"

"Especially."

"I shouldn't be surprised if she called herself a socialist."

"That's just what she does—when she thinks it will annoy people she dislikes."

Dyce smiled meditatively.

"I should like to know her. Yes, I should very much like to know her. Could you manage it for me?"

Constance did not reply. She was comparing the Dyce Lashmar of to-day with him of the past, and trying to understand the change that had come about in his talk, his manner. It would have helped her had she known that, in the ripe experience of his seven and twentieth year, Dyce had arrived at certain conclusions with regard to women, and thereupon had based a method of practical behaviour towards them. Women, he held, had never been treated with elementary justice. To worship them was no less unfair than to hold them in contempt. The honest man, in our day, should regard a woman without the least bias of sexual prejudice; should view her simply as a fellow-being, who, according to circumstances, might or not be on his own plane. Away with all empty show and form, those relics of barbarism known as chivalry! He wished to discontinue even the habit of hat-doffing in female presence. Was not civility preserved between man and man without such idle form? Why not, then, between man and woman? Unable, as yet, to go the entire length of his principles in every-day life, he endeavoured, at all events, to cultivate in his intercourse with women a frankness of speech, a directness of bearing, beyond the usual. He shook hands as with one of his own sex, spine uncrooked; he greeted them with level voice, not as one who addresses a thing afraid of sound. To a girl or matron whom he liked, he said, in tone if not in phrase, "Let us be comrades." In his opinion this tended notably to the purifying of the social atmosphere. It was the introduction of simple honesty into relations commonly marked—and corrupted—by every form of disingenuousness. Moreover,

it was the great first step to that reconstruction of society at large which every thinker saw to be imperative and imminent.

But Constance Bride knew nothing of this, and in her ignorance could not but misinterpret the young man's demeanor. She felt it to be brusque; she imagined it to imply a purposed oblivion of things in the past. Taken together with Mrs. Lashmar's way of receiving her at the vicarage, it stirred in her heart and mind (already prone to bitterness) a resentment which, of all things, she shrank from betraying.

"Is Lady Ogram approachable?" Dyce asked, when his companion had walked a few paces without speaking. "Does she care to make new acquaintances?"

"It depends. She likes to know interesting people."

"Well"—Dyce murmured a laugh—"perhaps she might think me interesting, in a way. Her subject is mine. I'm working at sociology; have been for a long time. I'm getting my ideas into shape, and I like to talk about them."

"Do you write?" asked the girl, without raising her eyes to his.

"No. People write too much; we're flooded with print. I've grown out of my old ambitions that way. The Greek philosophers taught by word of mouth, and it was better. I want to learn how to talk—to talk well—to communicate what I have to say in a few plain words. It saves time and money; I'm convinced, too, that it carries more weight. Everyone nowadays can write a book, and most people do; but how many can talk? The art is being utterly forgotten. Chatter and gabble and mumble—an abuse of language. What's your view?"

"I think perhaps you are right."

"Come, now, I'm glad to hear you say that. If I had time, I would tell you more; but here's the station, and there's the smoke of the train. We've cut it rather close. Across the line; you'll have to run—sharp!"

They did so, reaching the platform as the train drew up. Dyce allowed his companion to open a carriage-door for herself. That was quite in accord with his principles, but perhaps he would for once have neglected them had he been sure by which class Miss Bride would travel. She entered the third.

"You wouldn't care to introduce me to Lady Ogram?" he said, standing by the window, and looking straight into the girl's eyes.

"I will if you wish," she answered, meeting his look with hard steadiness and a frown as of pain.

"Many thanks! Rivenoak, Hollingford, the address? Suppose I call in a few days?"

"If you like."

The train moved. Dyce bared his head, and, as he turned away, thought how contemptible was the practice.

Walking briskly against a cold wind, he busied his imagination about Lady Ogram. The picture he made to himself of this wealthy and original old lady was very fertile of suggestion; his sanguine temper bore him to heights of brilliant possibility. Dyce Lashmar had a genius for airy construction; much of his time was spent in deducing imaginary results from some half-presented opportunity. As his fancy wrought, he walked faster and faster, and he reached the vicarage in a physical glow which corresponded to his scintillating state of mind.

Of Constance Bride he thought hardly at all. She did not interest him; her proximity left him cold. She might be a useful instrument; apart from his "method," that was the light in which he regarded all the women he knew. Experience had taught him that he possessed a certain power over women of a certain kind; it seemed probable that Constance belonged to the class; but this was a fact which had no emotional bearing. With a moment's idle wonder he remembered the circumstances of their former parting. He was then a boy, and who shall account for a boy's momentary impulses? Constance was a practical sort of person, and in all likelihood thought no more of that foolish incident than he did.

"Why are you so eccentric in your movements, Dyce?" said Mrs. Lashmar, irritably, when he entered the drawing-room again. "You write one day that you're coming in a week or two, and on the next here you are. How could you know that it was convenient to us to have you just now?"

"The Woolstan boy has a cold," Dyce replied, "and I found myself free for a few days. I'm sorry to put you out."

"Not at all. I say that it *might* have done."

Dyce's bearing to his mother was decently respectful, but in no way affectionate. The knowledge that she counted for little or nothing with him was an annoyance, rather than a distress, to Mrs. Lashmar. With tenderness she could dispense, but the loss of authority wounded her.

Dinner was a rather silent meal. The vicar seemed to be worrying about something even more than usual. When they had risen from table, Mrs. Lashmar made the remark which was always forthcoming on these occasions.

"So you are still doing nothing, Dyce?"

"I assure you, I'm very busy," answered the young man, as one indulgent to an inferior understanding.

"So you always say. When did you see Lady Susan?"

"Oh, not for a long time."

"What vexes me is, that you don't make the slightest use of your opportunities. It's really astonishing that, with your talents, you should be content to go on teaching children their A. B. C. You have no energy, Dyce, and no ambition. By this time you might have been in the diplomatic service, you might have been in Parliament. Are you going to waste your whole life?"

"That depends on the view one takes of life," said Dyce, in a philosophical tone which he sometimes adopted—generally after dinner. "Why should one always be thinking about 'getting on'? It's the vice of the time. Why should I elbow and hustle in a vulgar crowd? A friend of mine, Lord Dymchurch—"

"What! You have made friends with a lord?" cried Mrs. Lashmar, her face illumined.

"Why not?—I was going to say that Dymchurch, though he's poor, and does nothing at all, is probably about the most distinguished man in the peerage. He is distinguished by nature, and that's enough for him. You'd like Dymchurch, father."

The vicar looked up from a fit of black brooding, and said "Ah! no doubt." Mrs. Lashmar, learning the circumstances of Lord Dymchurch, took less pride in him, but went on to ask questions. Had his lordship no interest, which might serve a friend? Could he not present Dyce to more influential people.

"I should be ashamed to hint that kind of thing to him," answered Dyce. "Don't be so impatient, mother. If I am to do anything—in your sense of the word the opportunity will come. If it doesn't, well, fate has ordered it so."

"All I know is, Dyce, that you might be the coming man, and you're content to be nobody at all."

Dyce laughed.

"The coming man! Well, perhaps, I *am*; who knows? At all events, it's something to know that you believe in me. And it may be that you are not the only one."

Later, Dyce and his father went into the study to smoke. The young man brought with him a large paperbacked volume which he had taken out of his travelling bag.

"Here's a book I'm reading. A few days ago I happened to be at Williams & Norgates'. This caught my eyes, and a glance at a page or two interested me so much that I bought it at once. It would please you, father."

"I've no time for reading nowadays," sighed the vicar. "What is it?"

He took the volume, a philosophical work by a French writer, bearing recent date. Mr. Lashmar listlessly turned a few pages, whilst Dyce was filling and lighting his pipe.

"It's uncommonly suggestive," said Dyce, between puffs. "The best social theory I know. He calls his system Bio-sociology; a theory of society founded on the facts of biology—thoroughly scientific and convincing. Smashing socialism in the common sense that is, social democracy; but establishing a true socialism in harmony with the aristocratic principle. I'm sure you'd enjoy it. I fancy it's just your view."

"Yes—perhaps so—"

"Here's the central idea. No true sociology could be established before the facts of biology were known, as the one results from the other. In both, the ruling principle is that of association, with the evolution of a directing power. An animal is an association of cells. Every association implies division of labour. Now, progress in organic development means the slow constitution of an organ—the brain—which shall direct the body. So in society—an association of individuals, with slow constitution of a directing organ, called the Government. The problem of civilisation is to establish government on scientific principles—to pick out the fit for rule—to distinguish between the Multitude and the Select, and at the same time to balance their working. It is nonsense to talk about Equality. Evolution is engaged in *cephalising* the political aggregate—as it did the aggregate of cells in the animal organism. It makes for the differentiation of the Select and of the Crowd—that is to say, towards Inequality."

"Very interesting," murmured the vicar, who listened with an effort whilst mechanically loading his pipe.

"Isn't it? And the ideas are well marked out; first the bio-sociological theory,—then the psychology and ethics which result from it. The book has given me a stronger impulse than anything I've read for years. It carries conviction with it. It clears one's mind of all sorts of doubts and hesitations. I always kicked at the democratic idea; now I know that I was right."

"Ah! Perhaps so. These questions are very difficult—By the bye, Dyce, I want to speak to you about a matter that has been rather troubling me of late. Let us get it over now, shall we?"

Dyce's animated look faded under a shadow of uneasiness. He regarded the vicar steadily, with eyes which gathered apprehension.

"It's very disagreeable," pursued Mr. Lashmar, after puffing a pipe unlit. "I'm afraid it'll be no less so to you than to me. I've postponed the necessity as long as I could. The fact is, Dyce, I'm getting pinched in my finances. Let me tell you just how matters stand."

The son listened to an exposition of his father's difficulties; he had his feet crossed, his head bent, and the pipe hanging from his mouth. At the first silence, he removed his pipe and said quietly:

"It's plain that my allowance must stop. Not another word about that, father. You ought to have spoken before; I've been a burden to you."

"No, no, my dear boy! I haven't felt it till now. But, as you see, things begin to look awkward. Do you think you can manage?"

"Of course I can. Don't trouble about me for a moment. I have my hundred and fifty a year from Mrs. Woolstan, and that's quite enough for a bachelor. I shall pick up something else. In any case, I've no right to sponge on you; I've done it too long. If I had had the slightest suspicion—"

A sense of virtue lit up Dyce's countenance again. Nothing was more agreeable to him than the uttering of generous sentiments. Having reassured his father, he launched into a larger optimism.

"Don't Suppose that I have taken your money year after year without thinking about it. I couldn't have gone on like that if I hadn't felt sure that some day I should pay my debt. It's natural enough that you and mother should feel a little disappointed about me, I seem to have done nothing, but, believe me, I am not idle. Money-making, I admit, has never been much in my mind; all the same, I shall have money enough one of these days, and before very long. Try to have faith in me. If it were necessary, I shouldn't mind entering into an obligation to furnish such and such a sum yearly by when I am thirty years old. It's a thing I never said to anyone, but I know perfectly well that a career—perhaps rather a brilliant one—is opening before me. I know it—just as one knows that one is in good health; it's an intimate sense, needing no support of argument."

"Of course I'm glad to hear you speak like that," said the vicar, venturing only a glance at his son's face.

"Don't, I beg, worry about your affairs," pursued Dyce, with kindling eye. "Cut off my supplies, and go quietly on." He stretched out a soothing hand, palm downwards. "The responsibility for the future is mine; from to-night I take it upon myself."

Much more in the same vein did Dyce pour forth, obviously believing every word he said, and deriving great satisfaction from the sound of his praises. He went to bed, at length, in such a self-approving frame of mind that no sooner had he laid his head on the pillow than sweet sleep lapped him about, and he knew nothing more till the sunlight shimmered at his window.

A letter awaited him at the breakfast table; it had been forwarded from his London address, and he knew at a glance that it came from Mrs. Woolstan, the mother of his pupil. The lady, dating from a house at West Hampstead, wrote thus:

"Dear Mr. Lashmar,

"You will be surprised to hear from me so soon again. I particularly want to see you. Something has happened which we must talk over at once. I shall be alone tomorrow afternoon. Do come if you possibly can.

"Sincerely yours,

"IRIS WOOLSTAN."

Dyce had come down in a mood less cheerful than that of over-night. As happened sometimes, he had slept too soundly; his head was not quite clear, and his nerves felt rather unsteady. This note from Mrs. Woolstan, he knew not why, caused him uneasiness; a vague prevision of ill was upon him as he read.

He had intended passing the day at Alverholme, and, on the morrow, travelling to Hollingford. Now he felt no inclination to hazard a call upon Lady Ogram; he would return to London forthwith.

"No bad news, I hope?" said his father, when this purpose was announced.

"Mrs. Woolstan wants me back sooner than I expected, that's all."

His mother's lips curled disdainfully. To be at the beck and call of a Mrs. Woolstan, seemed to her an ignoble thing. However, she had learnt the tenor of Dyce's discourse of the evening before, and tried once more to see a radiance in his future.

CHAPTER III

Hair the hue of an autumn elm-leaf; eyes green or blue, as the light fell upon them; a long, thin face, faintly freckled over its creamy pallor, with narrow arch of eyebrow, indifferent nose, childlike lips and a small, pointed chin;—thus may one suggest the portrait of Iris Woolstan. When Dyce Lashmar stepped into her drawing-room, she had the air of one who has been impatiently expectant. Her eyes widened in a smile of nervous pleasure; she sprang up, and offered her hand before the visitor was near enough to take it.

"So kind of you to come! I was half afraid you might have gone out of town not that it would have mattered. I did really want to see you as soon as possible, but Monday would have done just as well."

She spoke rapidly in a high, but not shrill, voice, with a drawing-in of the breath before and after her speech, and a nervous little pant between the sentences, her bosom fluttering like that of a frightened bird.

"As a matter of fact," cried Lashmar, with brusque cordiality, dropping into a chair before his hostess was seated, "I *had* gone out of town. I got your letter at Alverholme, and came back again sooner than I intended."

"Oh! Oh!" panted Mrs. Woolstan, on her highest note, "I shall never forgive myself! Why *didn't* you telegraph—or just do nothing at all, and come when you were ready? Oh! When there wasn't the least hurry."

"Then why did you write as if something alarming had happened?" cried the other, laughing, as he crossed his legs, and laid his silk hat aside.

"Oh, did I? I'm sure I *didn't* mean to. There's nothing alarming at all—at least—that is to say—well, it's something troublesome and disagreeable and very unexpected, and I'm rather afraid you won't like it. But we've plenty of time to talk about it. I'm at home to nobody else—It was really unkind of you to come back in a hurry! Besides, it's against your principles. You wouldn't have done that if I had been a man."

"A man would have said just what he meant," replied Dyce, smiling at her with kindly superiority. "He wouldn't have put me in doubt."

"No, no! But did I really write like that? I thought it was just a plain little business-like note—indeed I did! It will be a lesson to me—indeed it will! And how did you find your people? All well, I hope?"

"Well in one way; in another—but I'll tell you about that presently."

Dyce had known Mrs. Woolstan for about a couple of years; it was in the second twelvemonth of their acquaintance that he matured his method with regard to women, and since then he had not only practised it freely, but had often discussed it, with her. Iris gave the method her entire approval, and hailed it as the beginning of a new era for her sex. She imagined that her own demeanour was no less direct and unconstrained than that of the philosopher himself; in reality, the difference was considerable. Though several years older than Dyce—her age being thirty-four—she showed nothing of the seniority in her manner towards him, which, for all its impulsiveness, had a noticeable deference, at moments something of subdued homage.

"You don't mean to say you have bad news?" she exclaimed, palpitating. "You, too?"

"Why, then *you* have something of the same kind to tell me?" said Dyce, gazing at her anxiously.

"Tell me your's first—please do!"

"No. It's nothing very important. So say what you've got to say, and be quick about it—come!"

Mrs. Woolstan's bosom rose and fell rapidly as she collected her thoughts. Unconventional as were the terms in which Lashmar addressed her, they carried no suggestion of an intimacy which

passed the limits of friendship. When his eyes turned to her, their look was unemotional, purely speculative, and in general spoke without looking at her at all.

"It's something about Mr. Wrybolt," Iris began, with a face of distress. "You know he is my trustee—I told you, didn't I? I see him very seldom, and we don't take much interest in each other; he's nothing but a man of business, the kind I detest; he can't talk of anything but money and shares and wretched things of that sort. But you know him you understand."

The name of Wrybolt set before Dyce's mind a middle-aged man, red-necked, heavy of eyelid, with a rather punctilious hearing and authoritative mode of speech. They had met only once, here at Mrs. Woolstan's house.

"I'm sure I don't know why, but just lately he's begun to make inquiries about Len, and to ask when I meant to send him to school. Of course I told him that Len was doing very well indeed, and that I didn't see the slightest necessity for making a change at all events just yet. Well, yesterday he came, and said he wanted to see the boy. Len was in bed—he's in bed still, though his cold's much better and Mr. Wrybolt would go up to his room, and talk to him. When he came down again, you know I'm going to tell you the whole truth, and of course you won't mind it—he began talking in a very nasty way—he *has* a nasty way when he likes. 'Look here, Mrs. Woolstan,' he said, 'Leonard doesn't seem to me to be doing well at all. I asked him one or two questions in simple arithmetic, and he couldn't answer.' 'Well,' I said, 'for one thing Len isn't well, and it isn't the right time to examine a boy; and then arithmetic isn't his subject; he hasn't that kind of mind.' But he wouldn't listen, and the next thing he said was still nastier. 'Do you know,' he said, 'that the boy is being taught *atheism*?'—Well, what could I answer? I got rather angry, and said that Len's religious teaching was my own affair, and I couldn't see what *he* had to do with it; and besides, that Len *wasn't* being taught atheism, but that people who were not in the habit of thinking Philosophically couldn't be expected to understand such things. I think that was rather good, wasn't it? Didn't I put it rather well?"

Iris panted in expectation of approval. But merely a nod was vouchsafed to her.

"Go on," said Dyce, drily.

"You're not vexed, I hope? I'm going to be quite frank, you know, just as you like people to be. Well, Mr. Wrybolt went on, and would have it that Len was badly taught and altogether led in the wrong way, and that he'd grow up an immoral and an irreligious man. 'You must remember, Mr. Wrybolt,' I said, rather severely, 'that people's ideas about morality and religion differ very much, and I can't think you have sufficiently studied the subject to be capable of understanding my point of view'—It was rather severe, wasn't it? But I think it was rather well put."

"Go on," said Dyce, with another nod.

"Well now, I'm quite sure you'll understand me. We *do* generally understand each other. You see, I was put into a most difficult position. Mr. Wrybolt is my trustee, and he has to look after Len—though he's never given a thought to him till now—and he's a man of influence; that is to say, in his own wretched, vulgar world, but unfortunately it's a kind of influence one's obliged to think about. Len, you know, is just eleven, and one has to begin to think about his future, and it isn't as if he was going to be rich and could do as he liked. I'm sure you'll understand me. With a man like Mr. Wrybolt—"

"Not so many words," interposed the listener, smiling rather disdainfully. "I see the upshot of it all. You promised to send Len to school."

Mrs. Woolstan panted and fluttered and regarded Lashmar with eyes of agitated appeal.

"If you think I ought to have held out—please say just what you think—let us be quite frank and comradelike with each other—I can write to Mr. Wrybolt."—

"Tell me plainly," said Dyce, leaning towards her. "What was your reason for giving way at once? You really think, don't you, that it will be better for the boy?"

"Oh, how *could* I think so, Mr. Lashmar! You *know* what a high opinion—"

"Exactly. I am quite ready to believe all that. But you will be easier in mind with Len at school, taught in the ordinary way? Now be honest—make an effort."

"I—perhaps—one has to think of a boy's future—"

The pale face was suffused with rose, and for a moment looked pretty in its half-tearful embarrassment.

"Good. That's all right. We'll talk no more of it."

There was a brief silence. Dyce gazed slowly about him. His eyes fell on nothing of particular value, nothing at all unusual in the drawing-room of a small house of middle-suburb type. There were autotypes and etchings and photographs; there was good, comfortable furniture; the piano stood for more than mere ornament, as Mrs. Woolstan had some skill in music. Iris's widowhood was of five years' duration. At two and twenty she had married a government-office clerk, a man nearly twice her age, exasperated by routine and lack of advancement; on her part it was a marriage of generosity; she did not love the man, but was touched by his railing against fate, and fancied she might be able to aid his ambitions. Woolstan talked of a possible secretaryship under the chief of his department; he imagined himself gifted for diplomacy, lacking only the chance to become a power in statecraft. But when Iris had given herself and her six hundred a year, she soon remarked a decline in her husband's aspiration. Presently Woolstan began to complain of an ailment, the result of arduous labour and of disillusion, which might make it imperative for him to retire from the monotonous toil of the Civil Service; before long, he withdrew to a pleasant cottage in Surrey, where he was to lead a studious life and compose a great political work. The man had, in fact, an organic disorder, which proved fatal to him before he could quite decide whether to write his book on foolscap or on quarto paper. Mrs. Woolstan devoted herself to her child, until, when Leonard was nine, she entrusted him to a tutor very highly spoken of by friends of hers, a young Oxford man, capable not only of instructing the boy in the most efficient way, but of training whatever force and originality his character might possess. She paid a hundred and fifty pounds a year for these invaluable services—in itself not a large stipend, but large in proportion to her income. And Iris had never grudged the expenditure, for in Dyce Lashmar she found, not merely a tutor for her son, but a director of her own mind and conscience. Under Dyce's influence she had read or tried to read—many instructive books; he had fostered, guided, elevated her native enthusiasm; he had emancipated her soul. These, at all events, were the terms in which Iris herself was wont to describe the results of their friendship, and she was eminently a sincere woman, ever striving to rise above the weakness, the disingenuousness, of her sex.

"If you knew how it pains me!" she murmured, stealing a glance at Lashmar. "But of course it won't make any difference—between us."

"Oh, I hope not. Why should it?" said Dyce, absently. "Now I'll tell you something that has happened since I saw you last."

"Yes—yes—your own news! Oh, I'm afraid it is something bad!"

"Perhaps not. I rather think I'm at a crisis in my life—probably *the* crisis. I shouldn't wonder if these things prove to have happened just at the right time. My news is this. Things are going rather badly down at the vicarage. There's serious diminution of income, which I knew nothing about. And the end of it is, that I mustn't count on any more supplies; they have no more money to spare for me. You see, I *am* thoroughly independent."

He laughed; but Mrs. Woolstan gazed at him in dismay.

"Oh! Oh! How very serious! What a dreadful thing!"

"Pooh! Not at all. That's a very feminine way of talking."

"I'm afraid it is. I didn't mean to use such expressions. But really—what are you going to do?"

"That'll have to be thought about."

Iris, with fluttering bosom, leaned forward.

"You'll talk it over with me? You'll treat me as a real friend—just like a man friend? You know how often you have promised to."

"I shall certainly ask your advice."

"Oh! that's kind, that's good of you! We'll talk it over *very* seriously."

How many hours had they spent in what Iris deemed "serious" conversation? When Dyce stayed to luncheon, as he did about once a week, the talk was often prolonged to tea-time. Subjects of transcendent importance were discussed with the most hopeful amplitude. Mrs. Woolstan could not be satisfied with personal culture; her conscience was uneasy about the destinies of mankind; she took to herself the sorrows of the race, and burned with zeal for the great causes of civilisation. Vast theories were tossed about between them; they surveyed the universe from the origin to the end of all things. Of course it was Dyce who led the way in speculation; Iris caught at everything he propounded with breathless fervour and a resolute liberality of mind, determined to be afraid of no hypothesis. Oh, the afternoons of endless talk! Iris felt that this was indeed to live the higher life.

"By the bye," fell from Lashmar, musingly, "did you ever hear of a Lady Ogram?"

"I seem to know the name," answered Mrs. Woolstan, keenly attentive. "Ogram?—Yes, of course; I have heard Mrs. Toplady speak of her; but I know nothing more. Who is she? What about her?"

A maidservant entered with the tea-tray. Dyce lay back in his chair, gazing vacantly, until his hostess offered him a cup of tea. As he bent forward to take it, his eyes for a moment dwelt with unusual intentness on the face and figure of Iris Woolstan. Then, as he sipped, he again grew absent-minded. Iris, too, was absorbed in thought.

"You were speaking of Lady Ogram," she resumed, gently.

"Yes. A friend of mine down at Alverholme knows her very well, and thought I might like to meet her. I half think I should. She lives at Hollingford; a rich old woman, going in a good deal for social questions. A widow, no children. Who knows?" he added, raising his eyebrows and looking straight at Iris. "She might interest herself in—in my view of things."

"She might," replied the listener, as if overcoming a slight reluctance. "Of course it all depends on her own views."

"To be sure, I know very little about her. It's the vaguest suggestion. But, you see, I'm at the moment, when any suggestion, however vague, has a possible value. One point is certain; I shan't take any more pupils. Without meaning it, you have decided this question for me; it's time I looked to other things."

"I *felt* that!" exclaimed Mrs. Woolstan, her eyes brightening. "That was what decided me; I see now that it was—though perhaps. I hardly understood myself at the time. No more pupils! It is time that your serious career began."

Lashmar smiled, nodding in reflective approval. His eyes wandered, with an upward tendency; his lips twitched.

"Opportunity, opportunity," he murmured. "Of course it will come. I'm not afraid."

"Oh it will come!" chanted his companion. "Only make yourself known to people of influence, who can appreciate you."

"That's it." Dyce nodded again. "I must move about. For the present, I have read and thought enough; now I have to make myself felt as a force."

Mrs. Woolstan gazed at him, in a rapture of faith. His countenance wore its transforming light; he had passed into a dream of conquest. By constitution very temperate in the matter of physical indulgence, Lashmar found exciting stimulus even in a cup of tea. For the grosser drinks he had no palate; wine easily overcame him; tea and coffee were the chosen aids of his imagination.

"Yes, I think I shall go down to Hollingford."

"Who," asked Iris, "is the friend who promised to introduce you?"

There was a scarcely perceptible pause before his reply.

"A parson—once my father's curate," he added, vaguely. "A liberal-minded man, as so many parsons are nowadays."

Iris was satisfied. She gave the project her full approval, and launched into forecast of possible issues.

"But it's certain," she said presently, in a lower voice, "that after this I shall see very little of you. You won't have time to come here."

"If you think you are going to get quite rid of me so easily," answered Dyce, laughing—his laugh seldom sounded altogether natural—"you're much mistaken. But come now, let us talk about Len. Where are you going to send him? Has Wrybolt chosen a school?"

During the conversation that followed, Dyce was but half attentive. Once and again his eyes fell upon Mrs. Woolstan with peculiar observancy. Not for the first time, he was asking himself what might be the actual nature and extent of her pecuniary resources, for he had never been definitely informed on that subject. He did not face the question crudely, but like a civilised man and a philosopher; there were reasons why it should interest him just now. He mused, too, on the question of Mrs. Woolstan's age, regarding which he could arrive at but a vague conclusion; sometimes he had taken her for hardly more than thirty, sometimes he suspected her of all but ten years more. But, after all, what were these things to him? The future beckoned, and he persuaded himself that its promise was such as is set only before fortune's favourites.

Before leaving, he promised to come and lunch in a day or two, for the purpose of saying good-bye to Leonard. Yet what, in truth, did he care about the boy? Leonard was a rather precocious child, inclined to work his brain more than was good for a body often ailing. Now and then Dyce had been surprised into a feeling of kindly interest, when Len showed himself peculiarly bright, but on the whole he was tired of his tutorial duties, and not for a moment would regret the parting.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a moved voice. "I hoped to make a man of him, after my own idea. Well, well, we shall often see each other again, and who knows whether I mayn't be of use to him some day."

"What a fine sensibility he has, together with his great intelligence!" was Iris Woolstan's comment in her own heart. And she reproached herself for not having stood out against Wrybolt.

As he walked away from the house, Dyce wondered why he had told that lie about the friend at Alverholme. Would it not have been better, from every point of view, to speak plainly of Connie Bride? Where was the harm? He recognised in himself a tortuous tendency, not to be overcome by reflection and moral or utilitarian resolve. He could not, much as he desired it, be an entirely honest man. His ideal was honesty, even as he had a strong prejudice in favour of personal cleanliness. But occasionally he shirked the cold tub; and, in the same way, he found it difficult at times to tell the truth.

CHAPTER IV

In the morning he had a letter from Mrs. Woolstan. Opening it hurriedly, he was pleased, but not surprised, to discover a cheque folded in the note-paper. Iris wrote that, as a matter of course, she wished to pay what was owing to him in respect of his tutorial engagement so abruptly brought to an end. "Even between friends, one must be businesslike. You ought to have received a quarter's notice, and, as it is now nearly the end of April, you must allow me to reckon my debt as up to the quarterday in September. If you say a word about it, I shall be angry, So *no nonsense, please!*"

The phrase underlined was a quotation from Dyce himself, who often used it, in serio-joking tone, when he had occasion to reprove Mrs. Woolstan for some act or word which jarred with his system. He was glad to have the cheque, and knew quite well that he should keep it, but a certain uneasiness hung about his mind all the morning. Dyce had his ideal of manly independence; it annoyed him that circumstances made the noble line of conduct so difficult. He believed himself strong, virile, yet so often it happened that he was constrained to act in what seemed rather a feeble and undignified way. But, after all, it was temporary; the day of his emancipation from paltry necessities would surely come, and all the great qualities latent in him would have ample scope.

Plainly, he must do something. He could live for the next few months, but, after that, had no resources to count upon. Such hopes as he had tried to connect with the name of Lady Ogram might be the veriest dream, but for the moment no suggestion offered in any other quarter. It would be better, perhaps, to write to Connie Bride before going down to Hollingford. Yes, he would write to Connie.

Having breakfasted, he stood idly at the window of his sitting-room. His lodgings were in Upper Woburn Place, nearly opposite the church of St. Pancras. He had read, he knew not where, that the crowning portion of that remarkable edifice was modelled on the Temple of the Winds at Athens, and, as he gazed at it this morning, he suffered from the thought of his narrow experience in travel. A glimpse of the Netherlands, of France, of Switzerland, was all he could boast. His income had only just covered his expenditure; the holiday season always found him more or less embarrassed, and unable to go far afield. What can one do on a paltry three hundred a year? Yet he regretted that he had not used a stricter economy. He might have managed in cheaper rooms; he might have done without this and the other little luxury. To have travelled widely would now be of some use to him; it gave a man a certain freedom in society, added an octave to the compass of his discourse. Acquaintance with books did not serve the same end; and, though he read a good deal, Dyce was tolerably aware that not by force of erudition could he look for advancement. He began to perceive it as a misfortune that he had not earlier in life become clear as to the nature of his ambition. Until a couple of years ago he had scarcely been conscious of any aim at all, for the literary impulses which used to inspire his talk with Connie Bride were merely such as stir in every youth of our time; they had never got beyond talk, and, on fading away, left him without intellectual motive. Now that he knew whither his desires and his abilities tended, he was harassed by consciousness of imperfect equipment. Even academically he had not distinguished himself; he had made no attempt at journalism; he had not brought himself into useful contact with any political group. All he could claim for encouragement was a personal something which drew attention, especially the attention of women, in circles of the liberal-minded—that is to say, among people fond of talking more or less vaguely about very large subjects. For talk he never found himself at a loss, and his faculty in this direction certainly grew. But as yet he had not discovered the sphere which was wholly sympathetic and at the same time fertile of opportunity.

Among the many possibilities of life which lie before a young and intelligent man, one never presented itself to Dyce Lashmar's meditation. The thought of simply earning his living by conscientious and useful work, satisfied with whatever distinction might come to him in the natural order of things, had never entered his mind. Every project he formed took for granted his unlaborious pre-eminence in a toiling world. His natural superiority to mankind at large was, with

Dyce, axiomatic. If he used any other tone about himself, he affected it merely to elicit contradiction; if in a depressed mood he thought otherwise, the reflection was so at conflict with his nature that it served only to strengthen his self-esteem when the shadow had passed.

The lodgings he occupied were just like any other for which a man pays thirty shillings a week. Though he had lived here for two or three years, there was very little to show that the rooms did not belong to some quite ordinary person; Dyce spent as little time at home as possible, and, always feeling that his abode in such poor quarters must be transitory, he never troubled himself to increase their comfort, or in any way to give character to his surroundings. His library consisted only of some fifty volumes, for he had never felt himself able to purchase books; Mudie, and the shelves of his club, generally supplied him with all he needed. The club, of course, was an indispensable luxury; it gave him a West-end address, enabled him to have a friend to lunch or dine in decent circumstances without undue expense, and supplied him with very good stationery for his correspondence. Moreover, it pleasantly enlarged his acquaintance. At the club he had got to know Lord Dymchurch, a month or two ago, and this connection he did not undervalue. His fellow members, it is true, were not, for the most part, men of the kind with whom Dyce greatly cared to talk; as yet, they did not seem much impressed with his conversational powers; but Lord Dymchurch promised to be an exception, and of him Dyce had already a very high opinion.

After an hour or so of smoking and musing and mental vacillation, he sat down to write his letter. "Dear Miss Connie," he began. It was the name by which he addressed Miss Bride in the old days, and it seemed good to him to preserve their former relations as far as possible; for Constance, though a strange sort of girl, nowadays decidedly cold and dry, undeniably had brains, and might still be capable of appreciating him. "Yesterday I had to come back to town in a hurry, owing to the receipt of some disagreeable news, so of necessity I postponed my visit to Hollingford. It occurs to me that I had better ask whether you were serious in your suggestion that Lady Ogram might be glad to make my acquaintance. I know nothing whatever about her, except what you told me on our walk to the station, so cannot be sure whether she is likely to take any real interest in my ideas. Our time together was too short for me to explain my stand-point; perhaps I had better say a word or two about it now. I am a Socialist—but not a Social-democrat; democracy (which, for the rest, has never existed) I look upon as an absurdity condemned by all the teachings of modern science. I am a Socialist, for I believe that the principle of association is the only principle of progress."

Here he paused, his pen suspended. He was on the point of referring to the French book which he had read with so much profit of late, and which now lay on the table before him. It might interest Constance; she might like to know of it. He mused for some moments, dipped his pen, and wrote on.

"But association means division of labour, and that labour may be efficient there must be some one capable of directing it. What the true Socialism has to keep in view is a principle of justice in the balance of rights and duties between the few who lead and the multitude who follow. In the history of the world hitherto, the multitude has had less than its share, the ruling classes have tyrannised. At present it's pretty obvious that we're in danger of just the opposite excess; Demos begins to roar alarmingly, and there'll be a poor look out for us if he gets all he wants. What we need above all things is a reform in education. We are teaching the people too much and too little. The first duty of the State is to make citizens, and that can only be done by making children understand from the beginning what is meant by citizenship. When every child grows up in the knowledge that neither can the State exist without him, nor he without the State—that no individual can live for himself alone—that every demand one makes upon one's fellow men carries with it a reciprocal obligation—in other words, when the principle of association, of solidarity, becomes a part of the very conscience, we shall see a true State and a really progressive civilisation.

"I could point out to you the scientific (biological and zoological) facts which support this view, but very likely your own knowledge will supply them."

He paused to smile. That was a deft touch. Constance, he knew, took pride in her scientific studies.

"We shall talk all this over together, I hope. Enough at present to show you where I stand. Is this attitude likely to recommend itself to Lady Ogram? Do you think she would care to hear more about it? Write as soon as you have time, and let me know your opinion."

On re-reading his letter, Dyce was troubled by only one reflection. He had committed himself to a definite theory, and, should it jar with Lady Ogram's way of thinking, there would probably be little use in his going down to Hollingford. Might he not have left the matter vague? Was it not enough to describe himself as a student of sociology? In which case—

He did not follow out the argument. Neither did he care to dwell upon the fact that the views he had been summarising were all taken straight from a book which he had just read. He had thoroughly adopted them; they exactly suited his temper and his mind—always premising that he spoke as one of those called by his author *L'Elite*, and by no means as one of *la Foule*. Indeed, he was beginning to forget that he was not himself the originator of the bio-sociological theory of civilisation.

Economy being henceforth imposed upon him, he lunched at home on a chop and a glass of ale. In the early afternoon, not knowing exactly how to spend his time, he walked towards the busy streets, and at length entered his club. In the library sat only one man, sunk in an easy chair, busied with a book. It was Lord Dymchurch; at Lashmar's approach, he looked up, smiled, and rose to take the offered hand.

"I disturb you," said Dyce.

"There's no denying it," was the pleasant answer, "but I am quite ready to be disturbed. You know this, of course?"

He showed Spencer's "The Man versus the State."

"Yes," answered Dyce, "and I think it a mistake from beginning to end."

"How so?"

Lord Dymchurch was about thirty, slight in build, rather languid in his movements, conventionally dressed but without any gloss or scrupulous finish, and in manners peculiarly gentle. His countenance, naturally grave, expressed the man of thought rather than of action; its traits, at the same time, preserved a curious youthfulness, enhanced by the fact of his wearing neither moustache nor beard; when he smiled, it was with an almost boyish frankness, irresistible in its appeal to the good will of the beholder. Yet the corners of his eyes were touched with the crow's foot, and his hair began to be brindled, tokens which had their confirmation on brow and lip as often as he lost himself in musing. He had a soft voice, habitually subdued. His way of talking inclined to the quietly humorous, and was as little self-assertive as man's talk can be; but he kept his eyes fixed on anyone who conversed with him, and that clear, kindly gaze offered no encouragement to pretentiousness or any other idle characteristic. Dyce Lashmar, it might have been noticed, betrayed a certain deference before Lord Dymchurch, and was not wholly at his ease; however decidedly he spoke, his accent lacked the imperturbable confidence which usually distinguished it.

"The title itself I take to be meaningless," was his reply to the other's question. "How can there possibly be antagonism between the individual and the aggregate in which he is involved? What rights or interests can a man possibly have which are apart from the rights and interests of the body politic without which he could not exist? One might just as well suppose one of the cells which make up an organic body asserting itself against the body as a whole."

Lord Dymchurch reflected, playing, as he commonly did, with a seal upon his watch-guard.

"That's suggestive," he said.

Dyce might have gone on to say that the suggestion, with reference to this very book of Herbert Spencer's, came from a French sociologist he had been reading; but it did not seem to him worth while.

"You look upon the State as an organism," pursued Lord Dymchurch. "A mere analogy, I suppose?"

"A scientific fact. It's the final stage of evolution. Just as cells combine to form the physiological unit, so do human beings combine to form the social-political unit the State. Did it ever occur to you that the science of biology throws entirely new light on sociological questions? The laws operating are precisely the same in one region as in the other. A cell in itself is blind motion; an aggregate of cells is a living creature. A man by himself is only an animal with superior possibilities; men associated produce reason, civilisation, the body politic. Could reason ever have come to birth in a man alone?"

Lord Dymchurch nodded and mused. From his look it was plain that Lashmar interested, and at the same time, puzzled him. In their previous conversations, Dyce had talked more or less vaguely, throwing out a suggestion here, a criticism there, and, though with the air of one who had made up his mind on most subjects, preserving an attitude of liberal scepticism; to-day he seemed in the mood for precision, and the coherence of his arguments did not fail to impress the listener. His manner in reasoning had a directness, an eagerness, which seemed to declare fervid conviction; as he went on from point to point, his eyes gleamed and his chin quivered; the unremarkable physiognomy was transformed as though from within; illumined by unexpected radiance, and invested with the beauty of intellectual ardour. Very apt for the contagion of such enthusiasm, Lord Dymchurch showed in his smile that he was listening with pleasure; yet he did not wholly yield himself to the speaker's influence.

"One objection occurs to me," he remarked, averting his eyes for a moment. "The organic body is a thing finished and perfect. Granted that evolution goes on in the same way to form the body politic, the process, evidently, is far from complete—as you began by admitting. Won't the result depend on the nature and tendency of each being that goes to make up the whole? And, if that be so, isn't it the business of the individual to assert his individuality, so as to make the State that he's going to belong to the kind of State he would wish it to be? I express myself very awkwardly—"

"Not at all, not at all! In that sense, individualism is no doubt part of the evolutionary scheme; I quite agree with you. What I object to is the idea, conveyed in Spencer's title, that the man as a man can have interests or rights opposed to those of the State as a State. Your thorough individualist seems to me to lose sight of the fact that, but for the existing degree of human association, he simply wouldn't be here at all. He speaks as if he had made himself, and had the right to dispose of himself; whereas it is society, civilisation, the State—call it what you will—that has given him everything he possesses, except his physical organs. Take a philosopher who prides himself on his detachment from vulgar cares and desires, duties and troubles, and looks down upon the world with pity or contempt. Suppose the world—that is to say, his human kind—revenged itself by refusing to have anything whatever to do with him, however indirectly; the philosopher would soon find himself detached with a vengeance. And suppose it possible to go further than that; suppose the despised world could demand back from him all it had given, through the course of ages to his ancestors in him; behold Mr. Philosopher literally up a tree—a naked anthropoid, with a brain just capable of supplying his stomach and—perhaps—of saving him from wild beasts."

Lord Dymchurch indulged a quiet mirth.

"You've got hold of a very serviceable weapon," he said, stretching his legs before him, and clasping his hands behind his head. "I, for one, would gladly be convinced against individualism. I'm afraid it's my natural point of view, and I've been trying for a long time to get rid of that old Adam. Go on with your idea about the organisation of society. What ultimate form do you suppose nature to be aiming at?"

Dyce seemed to reflect for a moment. He asked himself, in fact, whether Lord Dymchurch was at all likely to come upon that French work which, pretty certainly, he had not yet read. The probability seemed slight. In any case, cannot a theory be originated independently by two minds?

His eye lighting up with the joy of clear demonstration—to Dyce it was a veritable joy, his narrow, but acute, mind ever tending to sharp-cut system—he displayed the bio-sociological theory in

its whole scope. More than interested, and not a little surprised, Lord Dymchurch followed carefully from point to point, now and then approving with smile or nod. At the end, he was leaning forward, his hands grasping his ankles, and his head nearly between his knees; and so he remained for a minute when Dyce had ceased.

"I like that!" he exclaimed at length, the smile of boyish pleasure sunny upon his face. "There's something satisfying about it. It sounds helpful."

Help amid the confusing problems of life was what Lord Dymchurch continually sought. In his private relations one of the most blameless of men, he bore about with him a troubled conscience, for he felt that he was living to himself alone, whereas, as a man, and still more as member of a privileged order, he should have been justifying his existence and his position by some useful effort. At three and twenty he had succeeded to the title—and to very little else; the family had long been in decline; a Lord Dymchurch who died in the early part of the nineteenth century practically completed the ruin of his house by an attempt to form a Utopia in Canada, and since then a rapid succession of ineffectual peers, *fruges consumere nati*, had steadily reduced the dignity of the name. The present lord—Walter Erwin de Gournay Fallowfield—found himself inheritor of one small farm in the county of Kent, and of funded capital which produced less than a thousand a year; his ancestral possessions had passed into other hands, and, excepting the Kentish farm-house, Lord Dymchurch had not even a dwelling he could call his own. Two sisters were his surviving kin; their portions being barely sufficient to keep them alive, he applied to their use a great part of his own income; unmarried, and little likely to change their condition, these ladies lived together, very quietly, at a country house in Somerset, where their brother spent some months of every year with them. For himself, he had rooms at Highgate Grove, not unpleasant lodgings in a picturesque old house, where he kept the books which were indispensable to him, and a few pictures which he had loved from boyhood. All else that remained from the slow Dymchurch wreck was down in Somerset.

He saw himself as one of the most useless of mortals. For his sisters' sake he would have been glad to make money, and one way of doing so was always open to him; he had but to lend his name to company promoters, who again and again had sought him out with tempting proposals. This, however, Lord Dymchurch disdained; he was fastidious in matters of honour, as on some points of taste. For the same reason he remained unmarried; a penniless peer in the attitude of wooing seemed to him ridiculous, and in much danger of becoming contemptible. Loving the life of the country, studious, reserved, he would have liked best of all to withdraw into some rustic hermitage, and leave the world aside but this he looked upon as a temptation to be resisted; there must be duties for him to discharge, if only he could discover them. So he kept up his old acquaintances, and—though rarely made new; he strove to interest himself in practical things, if perchance his opportunity might meet him by the way; and always he did his best to obtain an insight into the pressing questions of the time. Though in truth of a very liberal mind, he imagined himself a mass of prejudices; his Norman blood (considerably diluted, it is true) sometimes appeared to him as a hereditary taint, constituting an intellectual, perhaps a moral, disability; in certain moods he felt hopelessly out of touch with his age. To anyone who spoke confidently and hopefully concerning human affairs, Lord Dymchurch gave willing attention. With Dyce Lashmar he could not feel that he had much in common, but this rather loquacious young man certainly possessed brains, and might have an inkling of truths not easily arrived at. To-day, at all events, Lashmar's talk seemed full of matter, and it was none the less acceptable to Lord Dymchurch because of its anti-democratic tenor.

"Not long ago," he remarked, quietly, "I was reading Marcus Aurelius. You will remember that the idea of the community of human interests runs through all his thought. He often insists that a man is nothing apart from the society he belongs to, and that the common good should be our first rule in conduct. When you were speaking about individualism a sentence of his came into my mind. 'What is not good for the beehive cannot be good for the bee.'"

"Yes, yes!" cried Dyce, eagerly. "Thank you very much for reminding me; I had quite forgotten it."

They were no longer alone in the library; two other men had strolled in, and were seated reading; on this account, Lord Dymchurch subdued his voice even more than usual, for he had a horror of appearing to talk pretentiously, or of talking at all when his words might fall upon indifferent ears. Respectful of this recognised characteristic, Lashmar turned the conversation for a minute to lighter themes, then rose and moved away. He felt that he had made an impression, that Lord Dymchurch thought more of him than hitherto, and this sent him forth in buoyant mood. That evening, economy disregarded, he dined well at a favourite restaurant.

On the third day after posting his letter to Constance Bride, he received her reply. It was much longer than he had expected. Beginning with a rather formal expression of interest in Dyce's views, Constance went on to say that she had already spoken of him to Lady Ogram, who would be very glad to make his acquaintance. He might call at Rivenoak whenever he liked; Lady Ogram generally had a short drive in the morning, but in the afternoon she was always at home. The state of her health did not allow her to move much; her eyes forbade much reading; consequently, talk with interesting people was one of her chief resources.

"I say with *interesting* people, and use the word advisedly. Anything that does *not* interest her, she will not endure. Being frankness itself, she says exactly what she thinks, without the least regard for others' feelings. If talk is (or seems to her) dull, she declares that she has had enough of it. I don't think there is any need to warn you of this, but it may be as well that you should know it.

"Whilst I am writing, I had better mention one or two other peculiarities of Lady Ogram. At the first glance you will see that she is an invalid, but woe to you if you show that you see it. She insists on being treated by everyone (I suppose, her doctor excepted, but I am not sure) as if she were in perfect health. You will probably hear her make plans for drives, rides, even long walks about the country, and something more than mere good breeding must rule your features as you listen. Occasionally her speech is indistinct; you must manage never to miss a word she says. She is slightly—very slightly—deaf; you must speak in your natural voice, yet never oblige her to be in doubt as to what you say. She likes a respectful manner, but if it is overdone the indiscretion soon receives a startling reproof. Be as easy as you like in her presence provided that your ease is natural; if it strikes Lady Ogram as self-assertion—beware the lash! From time to time she will permit herself a phrase or an exclamation which reminds one that her birth was not precisely aristocratic; but don't imagine that anyone else is allowed to use a too racy vernacular; you must guard your expressions, and the choicer they are the better she is pleased.

"As you may wish to speak of politics, I will tell you that, until a year or two ago, Lady Ogram was a strong Conservative; she is now on the Liberal side, perhaps for the simple reason that she has quarrelled with the Conservative member of Hollingford, Mr. Robb. I need not go into the details of the affair; sufficient that the name of Robb excites her fury, and that it is better to say nothing about the man at all unless you know something distinctly to his disadvantage—and, in *that* case, you must take your chance of being dealt with as a calumniator or a sycophant; all depends on Lady Ogram's mood of the moment. Detesting Mr. Robb, she naturally aims at ousting him from his Parliamentary seat, and no news could be more acceptable to her than that of a possible change in the political temper of Hollingford. The town is Tory, from of old. Mr. Robb is sitting in his second Parliament, and doubtless hopes to enter a third. But he is nearly seventy years old, and we hear that his constituents would not be sorry if he gave place to a more active man. The hope that Hollingford may turn Liberal does not seem to me to be very well founded, and yet I don't regard the thing as an impossibility. Lady Ogram has persuaded herself that a thoroughly good man might carry the seat. That man she is continually seeking, and she carries on a correspondence on the subject with party leaders, whips, caucus directors, and all manner of such folk. If she lives until the next general election, heaven and

earth will be moved against Mr. Robb, and I believe she would give the half of her substance to anyone who defeated him."

This epistle caused a commotion in Lashmar's mind. The last paragraph opened before him a vista of brilliant imaginings. He read it times innumerable; day and night he could think of nothing else. Was not here the occasion for which he had been waiting? Had not fortune turned a shining face upon him?

If only he had still been in enjoyment of his three hundred a year. There, indeed, was a troublesome reflection. He thought of writing to his father, of laying before him the facts of his position, and asking seriously whether some financial arrangement could not be made, which would render him independent for a year or two. Another thought occurred to him—but he did not care to dwell upon it for the present. Twenty-four hours' consideration decided him to go down to Hollingford without delay. When he had talked with Lady Ogram, he would be in a better position for making up his mind as to the practical difficulty which beset him.

He esteemed it very friendly on Connie Bride's part to have written such a letter of advice. Why had she taken the trouble? Notwithstanding the coldness of her language, Connie plainly had his interests at heart, and gave no little thought to him. This was agreeable, but no matter of surprise; it never surprised Lashmar that anyone should regard him as a man of importance; and he felt a pleasant conviction that the boyish philandering of years ago would stand him in good stead now that he understood what was due to women—and to himself.

CHAPTER V

So next morning he packed his bag, drove to Euston, and by mid-day was at Hollingford. The town, hitherto known to him only by name, had little charm of situation or feature, but Dyce, on his way to a hotel, looked about him with lively interest, and persuaded himself that the main streets had a brisk progressive air; he imagined Liberalism in many faces, and noted cheerfully the publishing office of a Liberal newspaper. If his interview with Lady Ogram proved encouraging, he would stay here over the next day, and give himself time to make acquaintance with the borough.

At his hotel, he made inquiry about the way to Rivenoak, a name respectfully received. Lady Ogram's estate was distant some two miles and a half from the edge of the town; it lay hard by the village of Shawe, which was on the highroad to—places wherewith Dyce had no concern. Thus informed, he ordered his luncheon, and requested that a fly might be ready at three o'clock to convey him to Rivenoak. When that hour arrived, he had studied the local directory, carefully looked over the town and county newspapers, and held a little talk with his landlord, who happened to be a political malcontent, cautiously critical of Mr. Robb. Dyce accepted the fact as of good augury. It was long since he had felt so lighthearted and sanguine.

Through an unpleasant quarter, devoted to manufactures, his vehicle bore him out of Hollingford, and then along a flat, uninteresting road, whence at moments he had glimpses of the river Holling, as it flowed between level fields. Presently the country became more agreeable; on one hand it rose gently to wooded slopes, on the other opened a prospect over a breezy common, yellow with gorse. At the village named Shawe, the river was crossed by a fine old bridge, which harmonised well with grey cottages and an ancient low-towered church; but the charm of all this had been lamentably injured by the recent construction of a large paper-mill, as ugly as mill can be, on what was once a delightful meadow by the waterside. Dyce eyed the blot resentfully; but he had begun to think of his attitude and language at the meeting with Lady Ogram, and the gates of Rivenoak quickly engaged his attention.

The drive wound through a pleasant little park, less extensive, perhaps, than the visitor had preconceived it, and circled in front of a plain Georgian mansion, which, again, caused some disappointment. Dyce had learnt from the directory that the house was not very old, but it was spoken of as "stately;" the edifice before him he would rather have described as "commodious." He caught a glimpse of beautiful gardens, and had no time to criticise any more, for the fly stopped and the moment of his adventure was at hand. When he had mechanically paid and dismissed the driver, the folding doors stood open before him; a man-servant, with back at the reverent angle, on hearing his name at once begged him to enter. Considerably more nervous than he would have thought likely, and proportionately annoyed with himself, Dyce passed through a bare, lofty hall, then through a long library, and was ushered into a room so largely constructed of glass, and containing so much verdure, that at first glance it seemed to be a conservatory. It was, however, a drawing-room, converted to this purpose after having served, during the late Baronet's lifetime, for such masculine delights as billiards and smoking. Here, as soon as his vision focussed itself, Dyce became aware of three ladies and a gentleman, seated amid a little bower of plants and shrubs. The hostess was easily distinguished. In a very high-backed chair, made rather throne-like by the embroidery and gilding upon it, sat a meagre lady clad in black silk, with a silvery grey shawl about her shoulders, and an other of the same kind across her knees. She had the aspect of extreme age and of out-worn health; the skin of her face was like shrivelled parchment; her hands were mere skin and bone; she sat as though on the point of sinking across the arm of her chair for very feebleness. But in the whitish-yellow visage shone a pair of eyes which had by no means lost their vitality; so keen were they, so darkly lustrous, that to meet them was to forget every other peculiarity of Lady Ogram's person. Regarding the eyes alone, one seemed to have the vision of a handsome countenance, with proud lips, and carelessly defiant

smile. The illusion was aided by a crown of hair such as no woman of Lady Ogram's age ever did, or possibly could, possess in her own right; hair of magnificent abundance, of rich auburn hue, plaited and rolled into an elaborate coiffure.

Before this singular figure, Dyce Lashmar paused and bowed. Pale, breathing uneasily, he supported the scrutiny of those dark eyes for what seemed to him a minute or two of most uncomfortable time. Then, with the faintest of welcoming smiles, Lady Ogram—who had slowly straightened herself—spoke in a voice which startled the hearer, so much louder and firmer was it than he had expected.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Lashmar. Pray sit down."

Without paying any attention to the rest of the company, Dyce obeyed. His feeling was that he had somehow been admitted to the presence of a sovereign, and that any initiative on his own part would be utterly out of place. Never in his life had he felt so little and so subdued.

"You have come from town this morning?" pursued his hostess, still closely examining him.

"This morning, yes."

Lady Ogram turned to the lady sitting near her right hand, and said abruptly:

"I don't agree with you at all. I should like to see as many women doctors as men. Doctoring is mostly humbug, and if women were attended by women there'd be a good deal less of that. Miss Bride has studied medicine, and a very good doctor she would have made."

Dyce turned towards Constance, of whose proximity he had been aware, though he had scarcely looked at her, and, as she bent her head smiling, he rose and bowed. The lady whom their hostess had addressed—she was middle-aged, very comely and good-humoured of countenance, and very plainly attired—replied to the blunt remarks in an easy, pleasant tone.

"I should have no doubt whatever of Miss Bride's competence. But—"

Lady Ogram interrupted her, seeming not to have heard what she said.

"Let me introduce to you Mr. Dyce Lashmar, who has thought a good deal more about this kind of thing than either you or me. Mrs. Gallantry, Mr. Gallantry."

Again Dyce stood up. Mr. Gallantry, a tall, loose-limbed, thinly thatched gentleman, put on a pair of glasses to inspect him, and did so with an air of extreme interest, as though profoundly gratified by the meeting. Seldom breaking silence himself, he lent the most flattering attention to anyone who spoke, his brows knitted in the resolve to grasp and assimilate whatever wisdom was uttered:

"Did you walk out from Hollingford?" asked Lady Ogram, who again had her eyes fixed on the visitor.

"No, I drove, as I didn't know the way."

"You'd have done much better to walk. Couldn't you ask the way? You look as if you didn't take enough exercise. Driving, one never sees anything. When I'm in new places, I always walk. Miss Bride and I are going to Wales this summer, and we shall walk a great deal. Do you know Brecknock? Few people do, but they tell me it's very fine. Perhaps you are one of the people who always go abroad? I prefer my own country. What did you think of the way from Hollingford?"

To this question she seemed to expect an answer, and Dyce, who was beginning to command himself, met her gaze steadily as he spoke.

"There's very little to see till you come to Shawe. It's a pretty village—or rather, it was, before someone built that hideous paper-mill."

Scarcely had he uttered the words when he became aware of a change in Lady Ogram's look. The gleam of her eyes intensified; deeper wrinkles carved themselves on her forehead, and all at once two rows of perfect teeth shone between the pink edges of her shrivelled lips.

"Hideous paper-mill, eh?" she exclaimed, on a half-laughing note of peculiar harshness, "I suppose you don't know that *I* built it?"

A shock went through Dyce's blood. He sat with his eyes fixed on Lady Ogram's, powerless to stir or to avert his gaze. Then the courage of despair suddenly possessed him.

"If I had known that," he said, with much deliberation, "I should have kept the thought to myself. But I'm afraid there's no denying that the mill spoils the village."

"The mill is the making of the village," said Lady Ogram, emphatically.

"In one sense, very likely. I spoke only of the picturesqueness of the place."

"I know you did. And what's the good of picturesqueness to people who have to earn their living? Is that your way of looking at things? Would you like to keep villages pretty, and see the people go to the dogs?"

"Not at all. I'm quite of the other way of thinking, Lady Ogram. It was by mere accident that I made that unlucky remark. If anyone with me had said such a thing, it's more than likely I should have replied with your view of the matter. You must remember that this district is quite strange to me. Will you tell me something about it? I am sure you had excellent reasons for building the mill; be so kind as to explain them to me."

The listeners to this dialogue betrayed approval of the young man's demeanour. Constance Bride, who had looked very grave indeed, allowed her features to relax; Mrs. Gallantry smiled a smile of conciliation, and her husband drew a sigh as if supremely edified.

Lady Ogram glanced at her secretary.

"Miss Bride, let him know my 'excellent reasons,' will you?"

"For a long time," began Constance, in clear, balanced tones, "the village of Shawe has been anything but prosperous. It was agricultural, of course, and farming about here isn't what is used to be; there's a great deal of grass and not much tillage. The folk had to look abroad for a living; several of the cottages stood empty; the families that remained were being demoralised by poverty; they wouldn't take the work that offered in the fields, and preferred to scrape up a living in the streets of Hollingford, if they didn't try their hand at a little burglary and so on. Lady Ogram saw what was going on, and thought it over, and hit upon the idea of the paper-mill. Of course most of the Shawe cottagers were no good for such employment, but some of the young people got taken on, and there was work in prospect for children growing up, and in any case, the character of the village was saved. Decent families came to the deserted houses, and things in general looked up."

"Extremely interesting," murmured Mr. Gallantry, as though he heard all this for the first time, and was deeply impressed by it.

"Very interesting indeed," said Lashmar, with his frankest air. "I hope I may be allowed to go over the mill; I should like nothing better."

"You shall go over it as often as you like," said Lady Ogram, with a grin. "But Miss Bride has more to tell you."

Constance looked inquiringly.

"Statistics?" she asked, when Lady Ogram paid no heed to her look.

"Don't be stupid. Tell him what I think about villages altogether."

"Yes, I should very much like to hear that," said Dyce, whose confidence was gaining ground.

"Lady Ogram doesn't like the draining of the country population into towns; she thinks it a harmful movement, with bad results on social and political life, on national life from every point of view. This seems to her to be the great question of the day. How to keep up village life?—in face of the fact that English agriculture seems to be doomed. At Shawe, as Lady Ogram thinks, and we all do, a step has been taken in the right direction. Lots of the young people who are now working here in wholesome surroundings would by this time have been lost in the slums of London or Liverpool or Birmingham. Of course, as a mill-owner, she has made sacrifices; she hasn't gone about the business with only immediate profit in view; children and girls have been taught what they wouldn't have learnt but for Lady Ogram's kindness."

"Admirable!" murmured Mr. Gallantry. "True philanthropy, and true patriotism!"

"Beyond a doubt," agreed Dyce. "Lady Ogram deserves well of her country."

"There's just one way," remarked Mrs. Gallantry, "in which, it seems to me, she could have deserved better. Don't be angry with me, Lady Ogram; you know I profit by your example in saying just what I think. Now, if, instead of a mill, you had built a training institution for domestic service—"

"Bah!" broke in the hostess. "How you harp on that idea! Haven't you any other?"

"One or two more, I assure you," replied Mrs. Gallantry, with the utmost good-humour. "But I particularly want to interest you in this one. It's better that girls should work in a mill in the country than go to swell the population of slums; I grant you that. But how much better still for them to work in private houses, following their natural calling, busy with the duties of domestic life. They're getting to hate that as much as their menfolk hate agricultural labour; and what could be a worse symptom or a greater danger?"

"Pray," cried Lady Ogram, in her grating voice, "how would a servants' school have helped the village?"

"Not so quickly, perhaps, but in time. With your means and influence, Lady Ogram, you might have started an institution which would be the model of its kind for all England. Every female child in Shawe would have had a prospect before her, and the village would have attracted decent poor families, who might somehow have been helped to support themselves—"

Lady Ogram waved her hand contemptuously.

"Somehow! That's the way with your conservative-reform women. Somehow! Always vague, rambling notions—"

"Conservative-reform!" exclaimed Mrs. Gallantry, showing a little pique, though her face was pleasant as ever. "Surely your own ideas are to a great extent conservative."

"Yes, but there's a liberal supply of common sense in them!" cried the hostess, so delighted to have made a joke that she broke into cackling laughter, and laughed until failure of breath made her gasp and wriggle in her chair, an alarming spectacle. To divert attention, Constance began talking about the mill, describing the good effect it had wrought in certain families. Dyce listened with an air almost as engrossed as that of Mr. Gallantry, and, when his moment came, took up the conversation.

"Mrs. Gallantry's suggestion," he said, "is admirable, and the sooner it's carried out, not merely in one place, but all over England, the better. But I rather think that, in the given circumstances, Lady Ogram took the wisest possible step. We have to look at these questions from the scientific point of view. Our civilisation is concerned, before all things, with the organisation of a directing power; the supreme problem of science, and at the same time the most urgent practical question of the day, is how to secure initiative to those who are born for rule. Anything which serves to impress ordinary minds with a sense of social equilibrium to give them an object lesson in the substitution of leadership for anarchy—must be of immense value. Here was a community falling into wreck, cut loose from the orderly system of things, old duties and obligations forgotten, only hungry rights insisted upon. It was a picture in little of the multitude given over to itself. Into the midst of this chaos, Lady Ogram brings a directing mind, a beneficent spirit of initiative, and the means, the power, of re-establishing order. The villagers have but to look at the old state of things and the new to learn a lesson which the thoughtful among them will apply in a wider sphere. They know that Lady Ogram had no selfish aim, no wish to make profit out of their labour; that she acted purely and simply in the interests of humble folk—and of the world at large. They see willing industry substituted for brutal or miserable indolence; they see a striking example of the principle of association, of solidarity—of perfect balance between the naturally superior and the naturally subordinate."

"Good, very good!" murmured Mr. Gallantry. "Eloquent!"

"I admit the eloquence," said Mrs. Gallantry, smiling at Lashmar with much amiability, "but I really can't see why this lesson couldn't have been just as well taught by the measure that I proposed."

"Let me show you why I think not," replied Dyce, who was now enjoying the sound of his own periods, and felt himself inspired by the general attention. "The idea of domestic service is far too familiar to these rustics to furnish the basis of any new generalisation. They have long ceased to

regard it as an honour or an advantage for their girls to go into the house of their social superiors; it seems to them a kind of slavery; what they aim at is a more independent form of wage-earning, and that's why they go off to the great towns, where there are factories and public-houses, work-rooms and shops. To establish here the training institution you speak of would have done many sorts of good, but not, I think, that particular good, of supreme importance, which results from Lady Ogram's activity. In the rustics' eyes, it would be merely a new device for filling up the ranks of cooks and housemaids, to the sole advantage of an upper class. Of course that view is altogether wrong, but it would be held. The paper-mill, being quite a novel enterprise, excites new thoughts. It offers the independence these people desire, and yet it exacts an obvious discipline. It establishes a social group corresponding exactly to the ideal organism which evolution will some day produce: on the one hand ordinary human beings understanding their obligations and receiving their due; on the other, a superior mind, reciprocally fulfilling its duties, and reaping the nobler advantage which consists in a sense of worthy achievement."

"Very striking indeed!" fell from Mr. Gallantry.

"You seem to have made out a fair case, Mr. Lashmar," said his wife, with a good-natured laugh. "I'm not sure that I couldn't debate the point still, but at present I'll be satisfied with your approval of my scheme."

Lady Ogram, sitting more upright against the back of her chair than before her attack of breathlessness, had gazed unwaveringly at the young man throughout his speeches. A grim smile crept over her visage; her lips were pressed together, and her eyes twinkled with subdued satisfaction. She now spoke abruptly.

"Do you remain at Hollingford to-night, Mr. Lashmar?"

"Yes, Lady Ogram."

"Very well. Come here to-morrow morning at eleven, go over the mill, and then lunch with us. My manager shall be ready for you."

"Thank you, very much."

"Miss Bride, give Mr. Lashmar your Report. He might like to look over it."

Mr. and Mrs. Gallantry were rising to take leave, and the hostess did not seek to detain them; she stood up, with some difficulty, exhibiting a figure unexpectedly tall.

"We'll talk over your idea," she said, as she offered her hand to the lady. "There's something in it, but you mustn't worry me about it, you know. I cut up rough when I'm worried."

"Oh, I don't mind a bit!" exclaimed Mrs. Gallantry, gaily.

"But I do," was Lady Ogram's rejoinder, which again made her laugh, with the result that she had to sink back into her chair, waving an impatient adieu as Mr. Gallantry's long, loose figure bowed before her.

Constance Bride had left the room for a moment; she returned with a thin pamphlet in her hand, which, after taking leave of Mr. and Mrs. Gallantry, she silently offered to Lashmar.

"Ah, this is the Report," said Dyce. "Many thanks."

He stood rustling the leaves with an air of much interest. On turning towards his hostess, about to utter some complimentary remark, he saw that Lady Ogram was sitting with her head bent forward and her eyes closed; but for the position of her hands, each grasping an arm of the chair, one would have imagined that she had fallen asleep. Dyce glanced at Constance, who had resumed her seat, and was watching the old lady. A minute passed in complete silence, then Lady Ogram gave a start, recovered herself, and fixed her look upon the visitor.

"How old are you?" she asked, in a voice which had become less distinct, as if through fatigue.

"Seven and twenty, Lady Ogram."

"And your father is a clergyman?"

"My father is vicar of Alverholme, in Northamptonshire."

She added a few short, sharp questions, concerning his family and his education, which Dyce answered succinctly.

"Would you like to see something of Rivenoak? If so, Miss Bride will show you about."

"With pleasure," replied the young man.

"Very well. You lunch with us to-morrow. Be at the mill at eleven o'clock."

She held out her skeleton hand, and Dyce took it respectfully. Then Constance and he withdrew.

"This, as you see, is the library," said his companion, when they had passed into the adjoining room. "The books were mostly collected by Sir Spencer Ogram, father of the late baronet; he bought Rivenoak, and laid out the grounds. That is his portrait—the painter has been forgotten."

Dyce let his eyes wander, but paid Tittle attention to what he saw. His guide was speaking in a dry, uninterested voice, she, too, seeming to have her thoughts elsewhere. They went out into the hall, looked into one or two other rooms, and began to ascend the stairs.

"There's nothing of interest above," said Constance, "except the view from the top of the house. But Lady Ogram would like you to see that, no doubt."

Observing Constance as she went before him, Dyce was struck with a new dignity in her bearing. Notwithstanding her subordinate position at Rivenoak, and the unceremonious way in which Lady Ogram exercised authority over her, Constance showed to more advantage here than on her recent visit to Alverholme; she was more naturally self-possessed, and seemed a freer, happier person. The house garb, though decorous rather than ornamental, became her better than her walking-costume. Her well-shaped head and thoughtful, sensitive, controlled features, had a new value against this background of handsome furniture and all the appointments of wealth. She moved as if breathing the air that suited her.

From the terrace on the roof, their eyes commanded a wide and beautiful prospect, seen at this moment of the year in its brightest array of infinitely varied verdure. Constance, still in an absent tone, pointed out the features of the landscape, naming villages, hills, and great estates. Hollingford, partly under a canopy of smoke, lay low by its winding river, and in that direction Dyce most frequently turned his eyes.

"I felt very much obliged to you," he said, "for your carefully written letter. But wasn't there one rather serious omission?"

Speaking, he looked at Constance with a humorous twinkle of the eye. She smiled.

"Yes, there was. But, after all, it did no harm."

"Perhaps not. I ought to have used more discretion on strange ground. By the bye, do you take an interest in the mill?"

"A good deal of interest. I think that what you said about it was, on the whole, true—though such an obvious improvisation."

"Improvisation? In one sense, yes; I had to take in the facts of the case very quickly. But you don't mean that you doubt my sincerity?"

"No, no. Of course not."

"Come, Miss Connie, we must understand each other—"

She interrupted him with a look of frank annoyance.

"Will you do me the kindness not to call me by that name? It sounds childish—and I have long outgrown childhood."

"What shall I call you? Miss Bride?"

"It is the usual form of address."

"Good. I was going to say that I should like you to be clear about my position. I have come here, not in the first place with a hope of personal advantage, but to see if I can interest Lady Ogram in certain views which I hold and am trying to get accepted by people of influence. It happened that this affair of the mill gave me a good illustration of the theory I generally have to put in an abstract

way. Your word 'improvisation' seems to hint that I shaped my views to the purpose of pleasing Lady Ogram—a plain injustice, as you will see if you remember the letter I wrote you."

Constance was leaning on a parapet, her arms folded.

"I'm sorry you so understood me," she said, though without the accent of penitence, for in truth she seemed quietly amused. "All I meant was that you were admirably quick in seizing an opportunity of beginning your propaganda."

"I don't think you meant only that," remarked Dyce, coolly, looking her in the eyes.

"Is it your habit to contradict so grossly?" asked Constance, with a cold air of surprise.

"I try to make my talk—especially with women as honest as I can. It seems mere justice to them, as well as to myself. And please observe that I did *not* grossly contradict you. I said that you *seemed* to me to have another thought in your mind beyond the one you admitted.—Tell me, please; do you exact courtiership from men? I imagined you would rather dislike it."

"You are right; I do."

"Then it's clear that you mustn't be annoyed when I speak in my natural way. I see no reason in the world why one shouldn't talk to a woman—about things in general—exactly as one does to a man. What is called chivalry is simply disguised contempt. If a man bows and honeys to a woman, he does so because he thinks she has such a poor understanding that this kind of thing will flatter and please her. For my own part, I shall never try to please a woman by any other methods than those which would win the regard and friendship of a man."

Constance wore a look of more serious attention.

"If you stick to that," she said, with a frank air, "you will be a man worth knowing."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so. Now that we've cleared the air, we shall get on better together. Let me tell you that, whatever else I may fall short in, I have the virtue of sincerity. You know well enough that I am naturally ambitious, but my ambition has never made me unprincipled. I aim at distinction, because I believe that nature has put it within my reach. I don't regard myself as an average man, because I can't; it would be practising hypocrisy with myself. There is—if you like—the possibility of self-deception. Perhaps I am misled by egregious conceit. Well, it is honest conceit, and, as it tends to my happiness, I don't pray to be delivered from it."

Constance smiled.

"This is very interesting, Mr. Lashmar. But why do you honour me with such confidence?"

"Because I think you and I are capable of understanding each other, which is a rare thing between man and woman. I want you as a supporter of my views, and, if I succeed in that, I hope you will become a supporter of my ambitions."

"What are they, just now?"

"Your letter contained a suggestion; whether you intended it or not, I don't know. Why shouldn't I be the man Lady Ogram is looking for—the future Liberal member for Hollingford?"

His companion gazed at a far point of the landscape.

"That is perhaps not an impossible thing," she said, meditatively. "More unlikely things have come to pass."

"Then it does seem to you unlikely?"

"I think we won't discuss it just now.—You see, from here, the plan of the gardens and the park. Perhaps you would like to walk there a little, before going back to Hollingford?"

This was a dismissal, and Dyce accepted it. They went downstairs together, and in the hall parted, with more friendliness on Constance's side than she had hitherto shown. Dyce did not care to linger in the grounds. He strolled awhile about the village, glancing over the pamphlet with its report of last year's business at the mill, and the local improvements consequent upon it, then returned on foot to Hollingford, where he arrived with an excellent appetite for dinner.

CHAPTER VI

Wind and rain interfered with Lashmar's project for the early morning. He had meant to ramble about the town for an hour before going out to Shawe. Unable to do this, he bought half-a-dozen newspapers, and read all the leading articles and the political news with close attention. As a rule, this kind of study had little attraction for him; he was anything but well-informed on current politics; he understood very imperfectly the British constitution, and had still less insight into the details of party organisation and conflict. All that kind of thing he was wont to regard as unworthy of his scrutiny. For him, large ideas, world-embracing theories, the philosophy of civilisation. Few Englishmen had a smaller endowment of practical ability; few, on the other hand, delighted as he did in speculative system, or could grasp and exhibit in such lucid entirety hypothetical laws. Much as he talked of science, he was lacking in several essentials of the scientific mind; he had neither patience to collect and observe facts, nor conscientiousness in reasoning upon them; prejudice directed his every thought, and egoism pervaded all his conclusions. Excelling in speciousness, it was natural that he should think success as a politician within his easy reach; possessed by a plausible theory of government, he readily conceived himself on the heights of statesmanship, ruling the nation for its behoof. And so, as he read the London and provincial papers this morning, they had all at once a new interest for him; he probed questions, surveyed policies, and whilst smiling at the intellectual poverty of average man, gravely marked for himself a shining course amid the general confusion and ineptitude.

At ten o'clock there shot a glint of promise across the clouded sky; rain had ceased, the wind was less boisterous. Lashmar set forth briskly on foot, and walked to Shawe, where he arrived in good time for his appointment. The manager of the mill, a very intelligent Scotchman, conscientiously showed him everything that was to be seen, and Dyce affected great interest. Real interest he felt little or none; the processes of manufacture belonged to a world to which he had never given the slightest thought, which in truth repelled him. But he tried to persuade himself that he saw everything from a philosophical point of view, and found a place for it in his system. The folk employed he regarded attentively and saw that they looked healthy, well cared for.

"This must all be very gratifying to Lady Ogram," he remarked, in a voice which struck just the right note of dignified reflection.

"I understand that it is," replied the manager. "And to Miss Bride also, no doubt."

"Does Miss Bride take an active interest in the mill?"

"In the hands, she does. She is an uncommon sort of young lady and, I should say, makes her influence felt."

As this was the most direct statement which the Scotchman had committed himself during their hour together, it correspondingly impressed Lashmar. He went away thinking of Constance, and wondering whether she was indeed such a notable woman. Must he really regard her as an equal, or something like it. Needless to say that Dyce at heart deemed all women his natural inferiors, and only by conscious effort could entertain the possibility that one or other of their sex might view and criticise him with level eyes. Six years ago Connie Bride had looked up to him; he, with his University culture, held undoubted superiority over the country girl striving hard to educate herself and to find a place in the world. But much had changed since then, and Dyce was beginning to feel that it would not do to reckon on any dulness, or wilful blindness, in Constance with regard to himself, his sayings and doings. Their talk yesterday had, he flattered himself, terminated in his favour; chiefly, because of his attitude of entire frankness, a compliment to the girl. That he had been, in the strict sense of the word, open-hearted, it did not occur to him to doubt. Dyce Lashmar's introspection stopped at a certain point. He was still a very young man, and circumstance had never yet shown him an austere countenance.

The sun was shining, the air exquisitely fresh. Lady Ogram had not named the hour of luncheon, but it seemed to Dyce that he could hardly present himself at Rivenoak before one o'clock; so, instead of directing his steps towards the lodge; he struck off into a by-road, where the new-opened leafage of the hawthorn glistened after the morning's showers. Presently there came speeding towards him a lady on a bicycle, and he was sure that it was Constance. She did not slacken her pace; clearly she would not stop.

"Good morning!" sounded cheerfully from her, as she drew near. "Have you seen the mill?—Come up to the house as soon as you like."

She had swept past, leaving in Dyce a sense of having been cavalierly treated.

He turned, and followed towards Rivenoak. When he reached the house, Constance was walking among the flower-beds, in her hand a newspaper.

"Do you cycle?" she asked.

"No. I never felt tempted."

"Lady Ogram is having her drive. Shall we stay in the garden, as the sun is so bright?"

They strolled hither and thither. Constance had a glow in her cheeks, and spoke with agreeable animation. For a few minutes they talked of the mill, and Dyce repeated the manager's remark about Miss Bride's influence; he saw that it pleased her, but she affected to put it carelessly aside.

"How long have you known Lady Ogram?" he inquired.

"A good many years. My father was once a friend of hers—long ago, when he was a curate at Hollingford."

The circumstances of that friendship, and how it came to an end, were but vaguely known to Constance. She remembered that, when she was still a child, her mother often took her to Rivenoak, where she enjoyed herself in the gardens or the park, and received presents from Lady Ogram, the return journey being often made in their hostess's carriage. In those days the baronet's wife was a vigorous adherent of the Church of England, wherein she saw the hope of the country and of mankind. But her orthodoxy discriminated; ever combative, she threw herself into the religious polemics of the time, and not only came to be on very ill terms with her own parish clergyman, but fell foul of the bishop of the diocese, who seemed to her to treat with insufficient consideration certain letters she addressed to him. Then it was that, happening to hear a sermon by the Rev. Mr. Bride in an unfashionable church at Hollingford, she found in it a forcible expression of her own views, and straight way selected Mr. Bride from all the Hollingford clergy as the sole representative of Anglicanism. She spoke of him as "the coming man," prophesied for him a brilliant career, and began to exert herself on his behalf. Doubtless she would have obtained substantial promotion for the curate of St. John's, had not her own vehemence and Mr. Bride's difficult character brought about a painful misunderstanding between them. The curate was not what is known as a gentleman by birth; he had the misfortune to count among his near kinsfolk not only very poor, but decidedly ungentle persons. His only sister had married an uneducated man, who, being converted to some nondescript religion, went preaching about the country, and unluckily, in the course of his apostolate, appeared at Hollingford. Here he had some success; crowds attended his open-air sermons. It soon became known that the preacher's wife, who was always at his side, was a sister of Mr. Bride of St. John's, and great scandal arose in orthodox circles. Mr. Bride took quite another view of the matter, and declared that, in doing so, he behaved simply as a Christian. The debate exasperated Lady Ogram's violent temper, and fortified Mr. Bride in a resentful obstinacy. After their parting, in high dudgeon, letters were exchanged, which merely embittered the quarrel. It was reported that the Lady of Rivenoak had publicly styled the curate of St. John's "a low-born and ill-bred parson;" whereto Mr. Bride was alleged to have made retort that as regards birth, he suspected that he had somewhat the advantage of Lady Ogram, and, as for his breeding, it at all events forbade him to bandy insults. Not long after this, St. John's had another curate. A sequel of the story was the ultimate settling at Hollingford of

Mr. Bride's sister and her husband, where, to this day the woman, for some years a widow, supported herself by means of a little bakery.

"I hadn't seen Lady Ogram for a long time," Constance pursued, "and when I got my place of dispenser at Hollingford hospital, I had no idea of recalling myself to her memory. But one day my friend Dr. Baldwin told me that Lady Ogram had spoken of me, and wished to see me. 'Very well,' said I, 'than let Lady Ogram invite me to come and see her.'—'If I were you,' said the doctor, 'I think I shouldn't wait for that.'—'Perhaps not, doctor,' I replied, 'but you are not me, and I am myself.' The result of which was that Dr. Baldwin told me I had as little grammar as civility, and we quarrelled—as we regularly did once a week."

Dyce listened with amusement.

"And she did invite you?" he asked.

"Yes. A month afterwards, she wrote to the hospital, and, as the letter was decent, though very dry, I went to Rivenoak. I could not help a kindly feeling to Lady Ogram, when I saw her; it reminded me of some of the happiest days of my childhood. All the same, that first quarter of an hour was very dangerous. As you know, I have a certain pride of my own, and more than once it made my ears tingle. I dare say you can guess Lady Ogram's way of talking to me; we'll call it blunt good-nature. 'What are you going to do?' she asked. 'Mix medicines all your life?' I told her that I should like to pass my exams, and practise, instead of mixing medicines. That seemed to surprise her, and she pooh'd the idea. 'I shan't help you to that,' she said. 'I never asked you, Lady Ogram!'—It was a toss up whether she would turn me out of the house or admire my courage: she is capable of one or the other. Her next question was, where did I live? I told her I lodged with my aunt, Mrs. Shufflebotham; and her face went black. Mrs. Shufflebotham, I have been told, was somehow the cause of a quarrel between my father and Lady Ogram. That was nothing to me. My aunt is a kind and very honest woman, and I wasn't going to disown her. Of course I had done the wise, as well as the self-respecting, thing; I soon saw that Lady Ogram thought all the better of me because I was not exactly a snob."

"This is the first I have heard of your aunt," remarked Dyce.

"Is it? Didn't your father let you know of the shocking revelation I made to him the other day?"

"He told me nothing at all."

Constance reflected.

"Probably he thought it too painful. Mrs. Shufflebotham keeps a little shop, and sells cakes and sweetmeats. Does it distress you?"

Distress was not the applicable word, for Lashmar had no deep interest in Constance or her belongings. But the revelation surprised and rather disgusted him. He wondered why Constance made it thus needlessly, and, as it was, defiantly.

"I should be very stupid and conventional," he answered, with his indulgent smile, "if such things affected me one way or another."

"I don't mind telling you that, when I first knew about it, I wished Mrs. Shufflebotham and her shop at the bottom of the sea." Constance laughed. "But I soon got over that. I happen to have been born with a good deal of pride, and, when I began to think about myself—it was only a few years ago—I found it necessary to ask what I really had to be proud of. There was nothing very obvious—no wealth, no rank, no achievements. It grew clear to me that I had better be proud of *being* proud, and a good way to that end was to let people know I cared nothing for their opinion. One gets a good deal of satisfaction out of it."

Lashmar listened in a puzzled and uneasy frame of mind. Theoretically, it should have pleased him to hear a woman talking thus, but the actual effect upon him was repellent. He did not care to look at the speaker, and it became difficult for him to keep up the conversation. Luckily, at this moment the first luncheon bell sounded.

"Lady Ogram has returned," said Constance. They had wandered to the rear of the house, and thus did not know of the arrival of the carriage. "Shall we go in?"

She led the way into a small drawing-room, and excused herself for leaving him alone. A moment later, there appeared a page, who conducted him to a chamber where he could prepare for luncheon. When he came out again into the hall, he found Lady Ogram standing there, reading a letter. Seen from behind, her masses of elaborately dressed hair gave her the appearance of a young woman; when she turned at the sound of a footfall, the presentation of her parchment visage came as a shock. She looked keenly at the visitor, and seemed to renew her approval of him.

"How do you do?" was the curt greeting, as she gave her hand. "Have you been over the mill?"

"Greatly to my satisfaction, Lady Ogram."

"I'm glad to hear it. We'll talk about that presently. I'm expecting a gentleman to lunch whom you'll like to meet—Mr. Breakspeare, the editor of our Liberal paper. Ah, here he comes."

A servant had just opened the hall door, and there entered a slight man in a long, heavy overcoat.

"Well, Mr. Breakspeare!" exclaimed the hostess, with some heartiness. "Why must I have the trouble of inviting you to Rivenoak? Is my conversation so wearisome that you keep away as long as you can?"

"Dear lady, you put me to shame!" cried Mr. Breakspeare, bending low before her. "It's work, work, I assure you, that forbids me the honour and the delight of waiting upon you, except at very rare intervals. We have an uphill fight, you know."

"Pull your coat off," the hostess interrupted, "and let us have something to eat. I'm as hungry as a hunter, whatever *you* may be. You sedentary people, I suppose, don't know what it is to have an appetite."

The editor was ill-tailored, and very carelessly dressed. His rather long hair was brushed straight back from the forehead, and curved up a little at the ends. Without having exactly a dirty appearance, he lacked freshness, seemed to call for the bath his collar fitted badly, his tie was askew, his cuffs covered too much of the hand. Aged about fifty, Mr. Breakspeare looked rather younger, for he had a very smooth high forehead, a clear eye, which lighted up as he spoke, and a pink complexion answering to the high-noted and rather florid manner of his speech.

Walking briskly forward—she seemed more vigorous to day than yesterday—the hostess led to the dining room, where a small square table received her and her three companions. Lady Ogram's affectation of appetite lasted only a few minutes; on the other hand, Mr. Breakspeare ate with keen gusto, and talked very little until he had satisfied his hunger. Whether by oversight, or intentional eccentricity, the hostess had not introduced him and Lashmar to each other; they exchanged casual glances, but no remark. Dyce talked of what he had seen at the mill; he used a large, free-flowing mode of speech, which seemed to please Lady Ogram, for she never interrupted him and had an unusual air of attentiveness. Presently the talk moved towards politics, and Dyce found a better opportunity of eloquence.

"For some thirty years," he began, with an air of reminiscence, "we have been busy with questions of physical health. We have been looking after our bodies and our dwellings. Drainage has been a word to conjure with, and athletics have become a religion—the only one existing for multitudes among us. Physical exercise, with a view to health, used to be the privilege of the upper class; we have been teaching the people to play games and go in for healthy sports. At the same time there has been considerable aesthetic progress. England is no longer the stupidly inartistic country of early Victorian times; there's a true delight in music and painting, and a much more general appreciation of the good in literature. With all this we have been so busy that politics have fallen into the background—politics in the proper sense of the word. Ideas of national advance have been either utterly lost sight of, or grossly confused with mere material gain. At length we see the Conservative reaction in full swing, and who knows where it will land us? It seems to be leading to the vulgarest and most unintelligent form of chauvinism. In politics our need now is of *brains*. A stupid routine, or a rowdy excitability, had taken the place of the old progressive Liberalism, which kept ever in view the prime interests of civilisation. We want men with *brains*."

"Exactly," fell from Mr. Breakspeare, who began to eye the young man with interest. "It's what I've been preaching, in season and out of season, for the last ten years. I heartily agree with you."

"Look at Hollingford," remarked the hostess, smiling grimly.

"Just so!" exclaimed the editor. "Look at Hollingford! True, it was never a centre of Liberalism, but the Liberals used to make a good fight, and they had so much intelligence on their side that the town could not sink into utter dulness. What do we see now?" He raised his hand and grew rhetorical. "The crassest Toryism sweeping all before it, and everywhere depositing its mud—which chokes and does *not* fertilise. We have athletic clubs, we have a free library, we are better drained and cleaner and healthier and more bookish, with all, than in the old times; but for politics—alas! A base level of selfish and purblind materialism—personified by Robb!"

At the name of the borough member, Lady Ogram's dark eyes flashed.

"Ah, Robb," interjected Lashmar. "Tell me something about Robb. I know hardly anything of him."

"Picture to yourself," returned the editor, with slow emphasis, "a man who at his best was only a stolid country banker, and who now is sunk into fatuous senility. I hardly know whether I dare trust myself to speak of Robb, for I confess that he has become to me an abstraction rather than a human being—an embodiment of all the vicious routine, the foul obscurantism, the stupid prejudice, which an enlightened Liberalism has to struggle against. There he sits, a satire on our parliamentary system. He can't put together three sentences; he never in his life had an idea. The man is a mere money-sack, propped up by toadies and imbeciles. Has any other borough such a contemptible representative? I perspire with shame and anger when I think of him!"

Dyce asked himself how much of this vehemence was genuine, how much assumed to gratify their hostess. Was Mr. Breakspeare inwardly laughing at himself and the company? But he seemed to be an excitable little man, and possibly believed what he said.

"That's very interesting," Dyce remarked. "And how much longer will Hollingford be content with such representation?"

"I think," replied Breakspeare, gravely, "I really think, that at the next election we shall floor him. It is the hope of my life. For that I toil; for that I sacrifice leisure and tranquillity and most of the things dear to a man philosophically inclined. Can I but see Robb cast down, I shall withdraw from the arena and hum (I have no voice) my *Nunc dimittis*."

Was there a twinkle in the editor's eye as it met Lashmar's smile? Constance was watching him with unnaturally staid countenance, and her glance ran round the table.

"I'm only afraid," said Lady Ogram, "that he won't stand again."

"I think he will," cried Breakspeare, "I think he will. The ludicrous creature imagines that Westminster couldn't go on without him. He hopes to die of the exhaustion of going into the lobby, and remain for ever a symbol of thick-headed patriotism. But we will floor him in his native market-place. We will drub him at the ballot. Something assures me that, for a reward of my life's labours, I shall behold the squashing of Robb!"

Lady Ogram did not laugh. Her sense of humour was not very keen, and the present subject excited her most acrimonious feelings.

"We must get hold of the right man," she exclaimed, with a glance at Lashmar.

"Yes, the right man," said Breakspeare, turning his eyes in the same direction. "The man of brains, and of vigour; the man who can inspire enthusiasm; the man, in short, who has something to say, and knows how to say it. In spite of the discouraging aspect of things, I believe that Hollingford is ready for him. We leading Liberals are few in number, but we have energy and the law of progress on our side."

Lashmar had seemed to be musing whilst he savoured a slice of pine-apple. At Breakspeare's last remark, he looked up and said:

"The world moves, and always has moved, at the impulse of a very small minority."

"Philosophically, I am convinced of that," replied the editor, as though he meant to guard himself against too literal or practical an application of the theorem.

"The task of our time," pursued Dyce, with a half absent air, "is to make this not only understood by, but acceptable to, the multitude. Political education is our pressing need, and political education means teaching the People how to select its Rulers. For my own part, I have rather more hope of a constituency such as Hollingford, than of one actively democratic. The fatal thing is for an electorate to be bent on choosing the man as near as possible like unto themselves. That is the false idea of representation. Progress does not mean guidance by one of the multitude, but by one of nature's elect, and the multitude must learn how to recognise such a man."

He looked at Lady Ogram, smiling placidly.

"There's rather a Tory sound about that," said the hostess, with a nod, "but Mr. Breakspeare will understand."

"To be sure, to be sure!" exclaimed the editor. "It is the aristocratic principle rightly understood."

"It is the principle of nature," said Lashmar, "as revealed to us by science. Science—as Mr. Breakspeare is well aware—teaches, not levelling, but hierarchy. The principle has always been dimly perceived. In our time, biology enables us to work it out with scientific precision."

Mr. Breakspeare betrayed a little uneasiness.

"I regret," he said diffidently, "that I have had very little time to give to natural science. When we have floored Robb, I fully intend to apply myself to a study of all that kind of thing."

Lashmar bestowed a gracious smile upon him.

"My dear sir, the flooring of Robb—Robb in his symbolic sense—can only be brought about by assiduous study and assimilation of what I will call bio-sociology. Not only must we, the leaders, have thoroughly grasped this science, but we must find a way of teaching it to the least intelligent of our fellow citizens. The task is no trifling one. I'm very much afraid that neither you nor I will live to see it completed."

"Pray don't discourage us," put in Constance. "Comprehensive theories are all very well, but Mr. Breakspeare's practical energy is quite as good a thing."

The editor turned his eyes upon Miss Bride, their expression a respectful gratitude. He was a married man, with abundant offspring. Mrs. Breakspeare rose every morning at half-past six, and toiled at her domestic duties, year in year out, till ten o'clock at night; she was patient as laborious, and had never repined under her lot. But her education was elementary; she knew nothing of political theories, nothing of science or literature, and, as he looked at Constance Bride, Breakspeare asked himself what he might not have done, what ambition he might not have achieved, had it been his fate to wed such a woman as *that!* Miss Bride was his ideal. He came to Rivenoak less often than he wished, because the sight of her perturbed his soul and darkened him with discontent.

"Discourage you!" cried Lashmar. "Heaven forbid! I'm quite sure Mr. Breakspeare wouldn't take my words in that sense. I am all for zeal and hopefulness. The curse of our age is pessimism, a result and a cause of the materialistic spirit. Science, which really involves an infinite hope, has been misinterpreted by Socialists in the most foolish way, until we get a miserable languid fatalism, leading to decadence and despair. The essential of progress is Faith, and Faith can only be established by the study of Nature."

"That's the kind of thing I like to hear," exclaimed the editor, who, whilst listening, has tossed off a glass of wine. (The pink of his cheeks was deepening to a pleasant rosiness, as luncheon drew to its end.) "*Hoc signo vinces!*"

Lady Ogram, who was regarding Lashmar, said abruptly, "Go on! Talk away!" And the orator, to whose memory happily occurred a passage of his French sociologist, proceeded meditatively.

"Two great revolutions in knowledge have affected the modern world. First came the great astronomic discoveries, which subordinated our planet, assigned it its place in the universe, made it a

little rolling globe amid innumerable others, instead of the one inhabited world for whose behalf were created sun and moon and stars. Then the great work of the biologists, which put man into his rank among animals, dethroning him from a fantastic dignity, but at the same time honouring him as the crown of nature's system, the latest product of aeons of evolution. These conquests of science have put modern man into an entirely new position, have radically changed his conception of the world and of himself. Religion, philosophy, morals, politics, all are revolutionised by this accession of knowledge. It is no exaggeration to say that the telescope and the microscope have given man a new heart and soul. *But*—" he paused, effectively,— "how many are as yet really aware of the change? The multitude takes no account of it, no conscious account; the average man lives under the heaven of Joshua, on the earth of King Solomon. We call our age scientific. So it is—for a few score human beings."

Reflecting for a moment, Dyce felt that it would be absurd to charge him with plagiarism, so vastly more eloquent was he than the author to whom he owed his ideas. Conscience did not trouble him in the least. He marked with satisfaction the attentiveness of his audience.

"Politics, to be a living thing, must be viewed in this new, large light. The leader in Liberalism is the man imbued with scientific truth, and capable of applying it to the every day details of government. Science, I said, teaches hierarchic order—that is, the rule of the few, of the select, the divinely appointed. But this hierarchy is an open order—open to the select of every rank; a process of perpetual renewal will maintain the health of the political organism. The true polity is only in slow formation; for, obviously, human reason is not yet a complete development. As yet, men come to the front by accident; some day they will be advanced to power by an inevitable and impeccable process of natural selection. For my own part"—he turned slightly towards the hostess—"I think that use will be made of our existing system of aristocracy; in not a few instances, technical aristocracy is justified by natural pre-eminence. We can all think of examples. Personally, I might mention my friend Lord Dymchurch—a member of the true aristocracy, in every sense of the word."

"I don't know him," said Lady Ogram.

"That doesn't surprise me. He leads an extremely retired life. But I am sure you would find him a very pleasant acquaintance."

Lashmar occasionally had a fine discretion. He knew when to check the flood of his eloquence: a glance at this face and that, and he said within himself: *Sat prata biberunt*. Soon after this, Lady Ogram rose, and led the company into her verdurous drawing-room. She was beginning to show signs of fatigue; seated in her throne-like chair, she let her head lie back, and was silent. Constance Bride, ever tactful, began to take a more prominent part in the conversation, and Breakspeare was delighted to talk with her about ordinary things. Presently, Lashmar, in reply to some remark, mentioned that he was returning to London this evening whereupon his hostess asked:

"When are you coming back again?"

"Before long, I hope, Lady Ogram. The pleasure of these two days—"

She interrupted him.

"Could you come down in a fortnight?"

"Easily, and gladly."

"Then do so. Don't go to Hollingford; your room will be ready for you here. Just write and let me know when you will arrive."

In a few minutes, both men took their leave, and went back to Hollingford together, driving in a fly which Breakspeare had ordered. For the first minutes they hardly talked; they avoided each other's look, and exchanged only insignificant words. Then the editor, with his blandest smile, said in a note of sudden cordiality:

"It has been a great pleasure to me to meet you, Mr. Lashmar. May I, without indiscretion, take it for granted that we shall soon be fighting the good fight together?"

"Why, I think it likely," answered Dyce, in a corresponding tone. "I have not *quite* made up my mind—"

"No, no. I understand. There's just one point I should like to touch upon. To-day we have enjoyed a veritable symposium—for me, I assure you, a high intellectual treat. But, speaking to you as to one who does not know Hollingford, I would suggest to you that our Liberal electors are perhaps hardly ripe for such a new and bracing political philosophy—"

Dyce broke into gay laughter.

"My dear sir, you don't imagine that I thought of incorporating my philosophy in an electioneering address? Of course one must use common sense in these matters. Practical lessons come before theory. If I stand for Hollingford—" he rolled the words, and savoured them—"I shall do so as a very practical politician indeed. My philosophical creed will of course influence me, and I shall lose no opportunity of propagating it: but have no fear of my expounding bio-sociology to Hollingford shopkeepers and artisans."

Breakspeare echoed the speaker's mirth, and they talked on about the practical aspects of the next election in the borough.

Meanwhile, Lady Ogram had sat in her great chair, dozing. Constance, accustomed to this, read for half an hour, or let her thoughts wander. At length overcoming her drowsiness, the old lady fixed a curious gaze upon Miss Bride, a gaze of benevolent meditation.

"We shall have several letters to write to-morrow morning," she said presently.

"Political letters?" asked Constance.

"Yes. By the bye, do you know anything about Lord Dymchurch?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then find out about him as soon as possible.—What are Mr. Lashmar's means?"

"I really can't tell you," answered Constance, slightly confused by the unexpected question. "I believe his father is very well-to-do; I have heard him spoken of as a man of private fortune."

"Then our friend is independent—or at all events not pinched. So much the better."

Again Lady Ogram fell into musing; the countless wrinkles about her eyes, eloquent as wrinkles always are, indicated that her thoughts had no disagreeable tenor.

"Mr. Lashmar impresses you favourably?" Constance at length ventured to ask.

Lady Ogram delayed her answer for a moment, then, speaking thickly in her tired voice, and with slow emphasis:

"I'm glad to know him. Beyond a doubt, he is the coming man."

CHAPTER VII

On his return, Lashmar found a letter from Mrs. Woolstan awaiting him at Upper Woburn Place. The lady wrote in rather an agitated strain; she had to report that Leonard was already packed off to school, the imperious Wrybolt having insisted on sending him away as soon as he had recovered from his cold, on a pretence that the boy ought not to lose any part of the new term. "It is really very hard on me, don't you think? I know nothing whatever about the school, which is a long way off, right away in Devonshire: And it does so grieve me that you couldn't say good-bye to the poor little fellow. He says he shall write to you, and it would be so kind, dear Mr. Lashmar, if you could find a moment to answer him. I know how grateful dear Len would be. But we will *talk* about these things, for of course you will come and lunch all the same, at least I hope you will. Shall we say Thursday? I am not at all pleased with Mr. Wrybolt's behaviour. Indeed it seems to me very high-handed, very! And I told him very plainly what I thought. You can have no idea how galling is a woman's position left at the mercy of a trustee—a stranger too. And now that I am quite alone in the house—but I know you don't like people who complain. It's all very well for *you*, you know. Ah! if I had your independence! What I would make of my life!—Till Thursday, then, and don't, please, be bored with my letters."

This Mrs. Woolstan wrote and posted before luncheon. At three o'clock in the afternoon, just when she was preparing to go out, the servant made known to her that Mr. Wrybolt had called. What, Mr. Wrybolt again! With delay which was meant to be impressive, she descended to the drawing-room, and coldly greeted the gentleman of the red neck and heavy eyelids. Mr. Wrybolt's age was about five and forty; he had the well-groomed appearance of a flourishing City man, and presented no sinister physiognomy; one augured in him a disposition to high-feeding and a masculine self-assertiveness. Faces such as his may be observed by the thousand round about the Royal Exchange; they almost invariably suggest degradation, more or less advanced, of a frank and hopeful type of English visage; one perceives the honest, hearty schoolboy, dimmed beneath self-indulgence, soul-hardening calculation, debasing excitement and vulgar routine. Mr. Wrybolt was a widower, without children; his wife, a strenuous sportswoman, had been killed in riding to hounds two or three years ago. This afternoon he showed a front all amiability. He had come, he began by declaring, to let Mrs. Woolstan know that the son of a common friend of theirs had just, on his advice, been sent to the same school as Leonard; the boys would be friends, and make each other feel at home. This news Mrs. Woolstan received with some modification of her aloofness; she was very glad; after all, perhaps it had been a wise thing to send Leonard off with little warning; she would only have made herself miserable in the anticipation of parting with him. That, said Mr. Wrybolt, was exactly what he had himself felt. He was quite sure that in a few days Mrs. Woolstan would see that all was for the best. The fact of the matter was that Len's tutor, though no doubt a very competent man, had been guilty of indiscretion in unsettling the boy's ideas on certain very important subjects. Well, admitted the mother, perhaps it was so; she would say no more; Mr. Wrybolt, as a man of the world, probably knew best. And now—as he was here, she would use the opportunity to speak to him on a subject which had often been in her mind of late. It was a matter of business. As her trustee was aware, she possessed a certain little capital which was entirely at her own disposal. More than once Mr. Wrybolt had spoken to her about it—had been so kind as to express a hope that she managed that part of her affairs wisely, and to offer his services if ever she desired to make any change in her investments. The truth was, that she had thought recently of trying to put out her money to better advantage, and she would like to talk the matter over with him. This they proceeded to do, Mr. Wrybolt all geniality and apt suggestiveness. As the colloquy went on, a certain change appeared in the man's look and voice; he visibly softened, he moved his chair a little nearer, and all at once, before Mrs. Woolstan had had time to reflect upon these symptoms, Wrybolt was holding her hand and making her an offer of marriage.

Never was woman more genuinely surprised. That this prosperous financier, who had already made one advantageous marriage and might probably, if he wished, wed a second fortune—that such a man as Mr. Wrybolt would think of *her* for his wife, was a thing which had never entered her imagination. She was fluttered, and flattered, and pleased, but not for a moment did she think of accepting him. Her eyes fell, in demurest sadness. Never, never could she marry again; the past was always with her, and the future imposed upon her the most solemn of duties. She lived for the memory of her husband and for the prospects of her child. Naturally, Mr. Wrybolt turned at first an incredulous ear; he urged his suit, simply and directly, with persuasion derived partly from the realm of sentiment, partly from Lombard Street—the latter sounding the more specious. But Mrs. Woolstan betrayed no sign of wavering; in truth, the more Wrybolt pleaded, the firmer she grew in her resolve of refusal. When decency compelled the man to withdraw, he was very warm of countenance and lobster-hued at the back of his neck; an impartial observer would have thought him secretly in a towering rage. His leave-taking was laconic, though he did his best to smile.

Of course Mrs. Woolstan soon sat down to write him a letter, in which she begged him to believe how grateful she was, how much honoured by his proposal and how deeply distressed at not being able to accept it. Surely this would make no difference between them? Of course they would be friends as ever—nay, more than ever? She could never forget his nobly generous impulse. But let him reflect on her broken life, her immutable sadness; he would understand how much she would have wronged such a man as he in taking advantage of that moment's heroic weakness. To this effusive epistle came speedily a brief response. Of course all was as before, wrote Wrybolt. He was wholly at her service, and would do anything she wished in the matter of her money. By all means let her send him full particulars in writing, and he would lose no time; the yield of her capital might probably be doubled.

Mrs. Woolstan, after all, went no further in that business. She had her own reasons for continuing to think constantly of it, but for the present felt she would prefer not to trouble Mr. Wrybolt. Impatiently she looked forward to Thursday and the coming of Dyce Lashmar.

He came, with a countenance of dubious import. He was neither merry nor sad, neither talkative nor taciturn. At one moment his face seemed to radiate hope; the next, he appeared to fall under a shadow of solicitude. When his hostess talked of her son, he plainly gave no heed; his replies were mechanical. When she asked him for an account of what he had been doing down in the country, he answered with broken scraps of uninteresting information. Thus passed the quarter of an hour before luncheon, and part of luncheon itself; but at length Dyce recovered his more natural demeanour. Choosing a moment when the parlour-maid was out of the room, he leaned towards Mrs. Woolstan, and said, with the smile of easy comradeship:

"I have a great deal to tell you."

"I'm so glad!" exclaimed Iris, who had been sinking into a disheartened silence. "I began to fear nothing interesting had happened."

"Have patience. Presently."

After that, the meal was quickly finished; they passed into the drawing-room, and took comfortable chairs on either side of the hearth. May had brought cold, clammy weather; a sky of billowing grey and frequent gusts against the window made it pleasant here by this bright fireside. Lashmar stretched his legs, smiled at the gimcracks shelved and niched above the mantelpiece, and began talking. His description of Lady Ogram was amusing, but not disrespectful; he depicted her as an old autocrat of vigorous mind and original character, a woman to be taken quite seriously, and well worth having for a friend, though friendship with her would not be found easy by ordinary people.

"As luck would have it, I began by saying something which might have given her mortal offence." He related the incident of the paper-mill. "Nothing could have been better. She must be sickened with toadyism, and I could see she found my way a refreshing contrast. It made clear to her at once that I met her in a perfectly independent spirit. If we didn't like each other, good-bye, and

no harm done. But, as it proved, we got on very well indeed. In a fortnight's time I am to go down and stay at Rivenoak."

"Really? In a fortnight? She must have taken to you wonderfully."

"My ideas interested the old lady as I thought perhaps they might. She's very keen on political and social science. It happens, too, that she's looking about for a Liberal candidate to contest Hollingford at the next election."

Dyce added this information in a very quiet, matter-of-fact voice, his eyes turned to the fire. Upon his hearer they produced no less an effect than he anticipated.

"A Liberal candidate!" echoed Iris, a-quiver with joyous excitement. "She wants you to go into Parliament!"

"I fancy she has that idea. Don't make a fuss about it; there's nothing startling in the suggestion. It was probably her reason for inviting me to Rivenoak."

"Oh, this is splendid—splendid!"

"Have the goodness to be quiet," said Dyce. "It isn't a thing to scream about, but to talk over quietly and sensibly. I thought you had got out of that habit."

"I'm very sorry. Don't be cross. Tell me more about it. Who is the present member?"

Dyce gave an account of the state of politics at Hollingford, sketching the character of Mr. Robb on the lines suggested by Breakspear. As she listened, Mrs. Woolstan had much ado to preserve outward calm; she was flushed with delight; words of enthusiasm trembled on her lips.

"When will the election be?" she asked in the first pause.

"Certainly not this year. Possibly not even next. There's plenty of time."

"Oh, you are *sure* to win! How can a wretched old Tory like that stand against you? Go and make friends with everybody. You only need to be known. How I should like to hear you make a speech! Of course I must be there when you do. How does one get to Hollingford? What are the trains?"

"If you leave Euston by the newspaper train to-morrow morning," said Dyce, gravely, "you may be just in time to hear the declaration of the poll.—Meanwhile," he added, "suppose we think for a moment of the trifling fact that my income is nothing a year. How does that affect my chances in a political career, I wonder?"

Mrs. Woolstan's countenance fell.

"Oh—but—it's impossible for that to stand in your way. You said yourself that you didn't seriously trouble about it. Of course you will get an income—somehow. Men who go in for public life always do—don't they?"

She spoke timidly, with downcast eyes, a smile hovering about her lips. Dyce did not look at her. He had thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and crossed his legs; he smiled frowningly at the fire.

"Does Lady Ogram know your circumstances?" Iris asked, in a lower voice.

"I can't be sure. She may have heard something about them from—my friend. Naturally, I didn't tell her that I was penniless."

"But—if she is bent on having you for a candidate don't you think she will very likely make some suggestion? A wealthy woman—"

The voice failed; the speaker had an abashed air.

"We can't take anything of that kind into account," said Lashmar, with masculine decision. "If any such suggestion were made, I should have to consider it very carefully indeed. As yet I know Lady Ogram very slightly. We may quarrel, you know; it would be the easiest thing in the world. My independence is the first consideration. You mustn't imagine that I *clutch* at this opportunity. Nothing of the kind. It's an opening, perhaps; but in any case I should have found one before long. I don't even know yet whether Hollingford will suit me. It's a very unimportant borough; I may decide that it would be better to look to one of the large, intelligent constituencies. I'm afraid—" he became rather severe—"you are inclined to weigh my claims to recognition by the fact that I happen to have no money—"

"Oh, Mr. Lashmar! Oh, don't!" exclaimed Iris, in a pained voice. "How can you be so unkind—so unjust!"

"No, no; I merely want to guard myself against misconception. The very freedom with which I speak to you might lead you to misjudge me. If I thought you were ever tempted to regard me as an adventurer—"

"Mr. Lashmar!" cried Iris, almost tearfully. "This is dreadful. How could such a thought enter my mind? Is *that* your opinion of me?"

"Pray don't be absurd," interposed Dyce, with an impatient gesture. "I detest this shrillness, as I've told you fifty times."

Iris bridled a little.

"I'm sure I wasn't *shrill*. I spoke in a very ordinary voice. And I don't know why you should attribute such thoughts to me."

Lashmar gave way to nervous irritation.

"What a feminine way of talking! Is it impossible for you to follow a logical train of ideas? I attributed no thought whatever to you. All I said was, that I must take care not to be misunderstood. And I see that I had very good reason; you have a fatal facility in misconceiving even the simplest things."

Mrs. Woolstan bridled still more. There was a point of colour on her freckled cheeks, her lower lip showed a tooth's pressure.

"After all," she said, "you must remember that I am a woman, and if women don't express themselves quite as men do, I see no great harm in it. I don't think mannishness is a very nice quality. After all, I am myself, and I can't become somebody else, and certainly shouldn't care to, if I could."

Dyce began to laugh forbearingly.

"Come, come," he said, "what's all this wrangling about? Row did it begin? That's the extraordinary thing with women; one gets so easily off the track, and runs one doesn't know where. What was I saying? Oh, simply that I couldn't be sure, yet, whether Hollingford would suit me. Let us keep to the higher plane. It's safer than too familiar detail."

Iris was not to be so easily composed. She remarked a change in her friend since he had ceased to be Leonard's tutor; he seemed to hold her in slighter esteem, a result, no doubt, of the larger prospects opening before him. She was jealous of old Lady Ogram, whose place and wealth gave her such power to shape a man's fortunes. For some time now, Iris had imagined herself an influence in Lashmar's life, had dreamed that her influence might prevail over all other. In marrying, she had sacrificed herself to an illusory hope; but she was now an experienced woman, able to distinguish the phantasmal from the genuine, and of Lashmar's powers there could be no doubt. Her own judgment she saw confirmed by that of Lady Ogram. Sharp would be her pang if the aspiring genius left her aside, passed beyond her with a careless nod. She half accused him of ingratitude.

"I'm not at all sure," she said, rather coldly, "that you think me capable of rising to the higher plane. Perhaps trivial details are more suited to my intelligence."

Dyce had relieved himself of a slight splenetic oppression, and felt that he was behaving boorishly. He brightened and grew cordial, admitted a superfluous sensitiveness, assured his companion that he prized her sympathy, counted seriously upon her advice; in short, was as amiable as he knew how to be. Under his soothing talk, Mrs. Woolstan recovered herself; but she had a preoccupied air.

"If you regard me as a serious friend," she said at length with some embarrassment, "you can easily prove it, and put my mind at ease."

"How?" asked Dyce, with a quick, startled look.

"You have said more than once that a man and woman who were really friends should be just as men are with each other—plain-spoken and straightforward and—and no nonsense."

"That's my principle. I won't have any woman for a friend on other terms."

"Then—here's what I want to say. I'm your friend call me Jack or Harry, if you like—and I see a way in which I can be of use to you. It happens that I have rather more money than I want for my own use. I want to lend you some—until your difficulties are over—just as one man would to another—"

Her speech had become so palpitant that she was stopped by want of breath; a rosy shamefacedness subdued her; trying to brave it out, she achieved only an unconscious archness of eye and lip which made her for the moment oddly, unfamiliarly attractive. Dyce could not take his eyes from her; he experienced a singular emotion.

"That's uncommonly good of you, Iris," he said, with all the directness at his command. "You see, I call you by your name, just to show that I take our friendship seriously. If I could borrow from anyone I would from you. But I don't like the idea. You're a good fellow—" he laughed—"and I thank you heartily."

Iris winced at the "good fellow."

"Why can't you consent to borrow?" she asked, in a note of persistence. "Would you refuse if Lady Ogram made such a suggestion?"

"Oh, Lady Ogram! That would depend entirely—"

"But you must have money from somewhere," Iris urged, her manner becoming practical. "I'm not rich enough to lend very much, but I could help you over a year, perhaps. Wouldn't you rather go back to Rivenoak with a feeling of complete independence?—I see what it is. You don't really mean what you say; you're ashamed to be indebted to a woman. Yes, I can see it in your face."

"Look at the thing impartially," said Dyce, fidgetting in his chair. "How can I be sure that I should ever be able to pay you back? In money matters there is just that difference a man can go to work and earn; a woman generally can't do anything of the kind. That's why it seems unjust to take a woman's money; that's the root of all our delicacy in the matter. Don't trouble about my affairs; I shall pull through the difficult time."

"Yes," exclaimed Iris, "with somebody else's help. And *why* should it be somebody else? I'm not in such a position that I should be ruined if I lost a few hundred pounds. I have money I can do what I like with. If I want to have the pleasure of helping you, why should you refuse me? You know very well—at least, I hope you do—that I should never have hinted at such a thing if we had been just ordinary acquaintances. We're trying to be more sensible than everyday people. And just when there comes a good chance of putting our views into practice, you draw back, you make conventional excuses. I don't like that! It makes me feel doubtful about your sincerity—Be angry, if you like. I feel inclined to be angry too, and I've the better right!"

Again her panting impulsiveness ended in extinction of voice, again she was rosily self-conscious, though, this time, not exactly shamefaced; and again the young man felt a sort of surprise as he gazed at her.

"In any case," he said, standing up and taking a step or two, "an offer of this kind couldn't be accepted straightaway. All I can say now is that I'm very grateful to you. No one ever gave me such a proof of friendship, that's the simple fact. It's uncommonly good of you, Iris—"

"It's not uncommonly good of *you*," she broke in, still seated, and her arms crossed. "Do as you like. You said disagreeable things, and I felt hurt, and when I ask you to make amends in a reasonable way—"

"Look here," cried Lashmar, standing before her with his hands in his pockets, "you know perfectly well—*perfectly well*—that, if I accept this offer, you'll think the worse of me."

Iris started up.

"It isn't true! I shall think the worse of you if you go down to Lady Ogram's house, and act and speak as if you were independent. What sort of face will you have when it comes at last to telling her the truth?"

Dyce seemed to find this a powerful argument. He raised his brows, moved uneasily, and kept silence.

"I shall *not* think one bit the worse of you," Iris pursued, impetuously. "You make me out, after all, to be a silly, ordinary woman, and it's horribly unjust. If you go away like this, please never come here again. I mean what I say. Never come to see me again!"

Lashmar seemed to hesitate, looked uncomfortable, then stepped back to his chair and sat down.

"That's right;" said Iris, with quiet triumph.

And she, too, resumed her chair.

CHAPTER VIII

Under the roof at Rivenoak was an attic which no one ever entered. The last person who had done so was Sir Quentin Ogram; on a certain day in eighteen hundred and—something, the baronet locked the door and put key into his pocket, and during the more than forty years since elapsed the room had remained shut. It guarded neither treasure nor dire secret; the hidden contents were merely certain essays in the art of sculpture, sundry shapes in clay and in marble, the work of Sir Quentin himself when a very young man. Only one of these efforts had an abiding interest; it was a marble bust representing a girl, or young woman, of remarkable beauty, the head proudly poised, the eyes disdainfully direct, on the lips a smile which seemed to challenge the world's opinion. Not a refined or nobly suggestive face, but stamped with character, alive with vehement self-consciousness; a face to admire at a distance, not without misgiving as one pictured the flesh and blood original. Young Quentin had made a fine portrait. The model was his mistress, and, soon after the bust was finished, she became his wife.

Naturally, Sir Spencer and Lady Ogram were not bidden to the wedding; in fact, they knew nothing about it until a couple of years after, when, on the birth to him of a son and heir, Quentin took his courage in both hands and went down to Rivenoak to make the confession. He avowed somewhat less than the truth, finding it quite task enough to mitigate the circumstances of Mrs. Ogram's birth and breeding. The exhibition of a portrait paved his way. This superbly handsome creature, adorned as became her present and prospective station, assuredly gave no shock at the first glance. By some freak of fate she had for parents a plumber and a washerwoman—"poor but very honest people," was Quentin's periphrase; their poverty of late considerably relieved by the thoughtful son-in-law, and their honesty perhaps fortified at the same time. Arabella (the beauty's baptismal name) unfortunately had two brothers; sisters, most happily, none. The brothers, however, were of a roaming disposition, and probably would tend to a colonial life; Quentin had counselled it, with persuasions which touched their sense of the fitting. So here was the case stated; Sir Spencer and his lady had but to reflect upon it, with what private conjectures might chance to enter their minds. Quentin was an only child; he had provided already for the continuance of the house; being of mild disposition, the baronet bowed his head to destiny, and, after a moderate interval, Arabella crossed the threshold of Rivenoak.

Of course there were one or two friends of Quentin's who knew all the facts of the case; these comrades he saw no more, having promised his wife never again to acknowledge or hold any intercourse with them. With his bachelor life had ended the artistic aspirations to which he had been wont to declare that he should for ever devote himself; Mrs. Ogram (she had been for a year or two a professional model) objected to that ungentlemanly pursuit with much more vigour and efficacy than the young man's parents, who had merely regretted that Quentin should waste his time and associate with a class of persons not regarded as worthy of much respect. Whether the dismissed cronies would talk or keep silence, who could say? Sir Spencer affected to believe that Arabella, when his son came to know her, was leading the life of a harmless, necessary sempstress, and that only by long entreaty, and under every condition of decorum, had she been induced to sit for her bust to the enthusiastic sculptor. Very touching was the story of how, when the artist became adorer and offered marriage, dear Arabella would not hear of such a thing; how, when her heart began to soften, she one day burst into tears and implored Mr. Ogram to prove his love, not by wildly impossible sacrifice, but simply by sending her to school, so that she might make herself less unworthy to think of him with pathetic devotion, and from a great distance, to the end of her days. To school, in very deed, she had been sent; that is to say, she had all manner of teachers, first in England and then abroad, during the couple of years before the birth of her child; and by this instruction Arabella profited so notably that her language made no glaring contrast with that of the civilised world, and her mind seemed if anything more acute, more circumspective, than women's generally in the sphere to which she was

now admitted. Sir Spencer and Lady Ogram did not love her; they made no pretence of doing so; and it may be feared that the lives of both were shortened by chagrin and humiliation. At the age of thirty or so, Quentin succeeded to the baronetcy. In the same year his son died. No other offspring had blessed, or was to bless, the romantic union.

Behold Arabella, erst of Camden Town, installed as mistress of a house in Mayfair and reigning over Rivenoak. Inevitably, legends were rife about her; where the exact truth was not known, people believed worse. Her circle of society was but a narrow one; but for two classes of well-dressed people, the unscrupulous snobs and the cheerily indifferent, her drawing-room would have been painfully bare. Some families knew her because Sir Quentin was one of the richest men in his county; certain persons accepted her invitations because she was not exactly like other hostesses, and could talk in rather an amusing way. The years went on; scandal lost its verdure; Lady Ogram was accepted as a queer woman with a queer history, a rather vulgar eccentric, whose caprices and enterprises afforded agreeable matter for gossip. No one had ever ventured to assail her post-matrimonial reputation; she was fiercely virtuous, and would hold no terms with any woman not wholly above reproach. It had to be admitted that she bore herself with increasing dignity; moreover, that she showed a disposition to use her means and influence for what are called good ends. Towards the year 1870 the name of Lady Ogram began to be mentioned with respect.

Then her husband died. Sir Quentin had doubtless fallen short of entire happiness; before middle-age he was a taciturn, washed-out sort of man, with a look of timid anxiety. Perchance he regretted the visions of his youth, the dreams of glory in marble. When he became master of Rivenoak, and gave up his London house, Arabella wished him to destroy all his sculpture, that no evidence might remain of the relations which had at first existed between them, no visible relic of the time which she refused to remember. Sir Quentin pleaded against this condemnation, and obtained a compromise. The fine bust, and a few other of his best things, were to be transferred to Rivenoak, and there kept under lock and key. Often had the baronet felt that he would like to look at the achievements of his hopeful time, but he never summoned courage to mount to the attic. His years went by in a mouldering inactivity. Once or twice he escaped alone to the Continent, and wandered for weeks about the Italian sculpture-galleries, living in the sunny, ardent past; he came back nerve-shaken and low in health. His death was sudden—'failure of the heart's action,' said doctors, in their indisputable phrase—and Lady Ogram shut herself up for a time that she might not have the trouble of grieving before witnesses.

The baronet had behaved very generously to her in his last will and testament. Certain sums went to kinsfolk, to charities, to servants; his land and the bulk of his personal estate became Lady Ogram's own. She was a most capable and energetic woman of affairs; by her counsel, Sir Quentin had increased his wealth, and doubtless it seemed to him that no one had so good a right as she to enjoy its possession. The sacrifice he had made for her, though he knew it a blight upon his life, did but increase the power exercised over him by his arbitrary spouse; he never ceased to feel a certain pride in her, pride in the beauty of her face and form, pride in the mental and moral vigour which made her so striking an exception to the rule that low-born English girls cannot rise above their native condition. Arabella's family had given him no trouble; holding it a duty to abandon them, she never saw parents or brothers after her marriage, and never spoke of them. Though violent of temper, she had never made her husband suffer from this characteristic; to be sure, Sir Quentin was from the first, submissive, and rarely gave her occasion for displeasure. Over the baronet's grave in the little churchyard of Shawe she raised a costly monument. Its sole inscription was the name of the deceased, with the dates of his birth and death; Lady Ogram knew not, indeed, what else to add.

Fully another ten years elapsed before the widow's health showed any sign of failing. It was whilst passing a winter in Cornwall, that she suffered a slight paralytic attack, speedily, in appearance, overcome, but the beginning of steady decline. Her intellectual activity had seemed to increase as time went on. Outgrowing various phases of orthodox religious zeal, outgrowing an unreasoned

conservatism in political and social views, she took up all manner of novel causes, and made Rivenoak a place of pilgrimage for the apostles of revolution. Yet the few persons who enjoyed close acquaintance with her knew that, at heart, she still nourished the pride of her Tank, and that she had little if any genuine sympathy with democratic principles. Only a moral restlessness, a perhaps half-conscious lack of adaptation to her circumstances, accounted for the antinomianism which took hold upon her. Local politics found her commonly on the Conservative side, and, as certain indiscreet inquirers found to their cost, it was perilous to seek Lady Ogram's reasons for this course. But there came at length a schism between her and the Hollingford Tories: it dated from the initial stage of her great quarrel with their representative Mr. Robb.

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