

Hope Anthony

A Young Man's Year



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CHAPTER I

OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, ESQUIRE

It was a dark, dank, drizzly morning in March. A dull mist filled all the air, and the rain drifted in a thin sheet across the garden of the Middle Temple. Everything looked a dull drab. Certainly it was a beastly morning. Moreover – to add to its offences – it was Monday morning. Arthur Lisle had always hated Monday mornings; through childhood, school, and university they had been his inveterate enemies – with their narrow rigorous insistence on a return to work, with the end they put to freedom, to leisure, to excursions in the body or in the spirit. And they were worse now, since the work was worse, in that it was not real work at all; it was only waiting for work, or at best a tedious and weary preparation for work which did not come and (for all that he could see) never would come. There was no reason why it ever should. Even genius might starve unnoticed at the Bar, and he was no genius. Even interest might fail to help a man, and interest he had none. Standing with his hands in the pockets, listlessly staring out of the window of his cell of a room, unable to make up his mind how to employ himself, he actually cursed his means of subsistence – the hundred and fifty pounds a year which had led him into the fatal ambition of being called to the Bar. "But for that it would have been impossible for me to be such an ass," he reflected gloomily, as he pushed back his thick reddish-brown hair from his forehead and puckered the thin sensitive lines of his mouth into a childish pout.

Henry the clerk (of whom Mr. Arthur Lisle owned an undivided fourth share) came into the room, carrying a bundle of papers tied with red tape. Turning round on the opening of the door, Arthur suddenly fell prey to an emotion of extraordinary strength and complexity; amazement, joy, excitement, fear, all in their highest expression, struggled for mastery over him. Had he got a Brief?

"Mr. Norton Ward says, will you be kind enough to protect him in Court III, in case he's on in the Court of Appeal? It's a very simple matter, he says; it's the Divisional Court, sir, third in the list." Henry put the papers on the table and went out, quite disregardful of the storm of emotion which he had aroused. Though keenly interested in the fortunes of his employers, he did not study their temperaments.

It had happened, the thing that Arthur knew he ought always to hope for, the thing that in fact he had always dreaded. He had not got a brief; he had to "hold" one – to hold one for somebody else, and that at short notice – "unhouseled, disappointed, unanealed!" That is to say, with no time to make ready for the fearful ordeal. It was nearly ten o'clock, at half-past he must be in court; at any moment after that the case might come on, its two predecessors having crumpled up, as cases constantly did in the Divisional Court. The fell terrors of nervousness beset him, so that he was almost sick. He dashed at the brief fiercely, but his fingers trembled so that he could hardly untie the tape. Still, he managed a hurried run through the papers and got the point into his head.

Lance and Pretymán, jj., took their seats punctually at ten-thirty. Arthur Lisle, who felt much interest in judges as human beings and would often spend his time in court studying them rather than the law they administered, was glad to see Lance there, but feared Pretymán to the bottom of his heart. Lance was a gentle man, of courtly manners and a tired urbanity, but Pretymán was gruff, abrupt, terribly anxious about saving public time, and therefore always cutting into a man's argument with the Stand-and-deliver of a question to which, in Pretymán's opinion, there was no answer. It would be an awful thing if Pretymán set on him like that! Because then he might be incapable of

speech, although he knew that he was in the right. And he believed that his case was good. "All the worse then, if you lose it!" said a mocking voice within him.

Henry had taken him over to the court and had done everything possible for him – had told the solicitor who had briefed Norton Ward how the matter stood and how very safe he would be in Mr. Lisle's hands if it came to that, had given his name to the usher so that the usher could, if necessary, give it to the Bench, and had even introduced him to Mr. O'Sullivan, who was on the other side, a tall and burly Irishman, famous for defending criminals, but not credited with knowing much law.

As the first two cases proceeded, Arthur read his brief again and again, and, when he was not doing that, he read the reported case which (in the opinion of the pupil who had got up Norton Ward's brief and had made a note of it for him) was decisive in his favour. All the while he was praying that the first two cases might last a long time. They did not. Pretyman, j., smashed the pair of them in three-quarters of an hour. "Brown and Green" called the usher, and O'Sullivan was on his legs – and there was no sign of Norton Ward. Henry nodded to Arthur and left the court; he was going to see how matters stood in the Court of Appeal.

"This is an appeal from the West Hampstead County Court, my lords," began Mr. O'Sullivan, "which raises a question of some importance," and he went on in such a fashion that Arthur hoped he was going to take a long time; for Henry had come back, and, by a shake of his head, had indicated that there was no present hope of Norton Ward's arrival. Mr. O'Sullivan meant to take a decently long time; he wanted his client to feel that he was getting his money's worth of argument; therefore he avoided the main point and skirmished about a good deal. Above all he avoided that case which Norton Ward's pupil had considered decisive. Mr. O'Sullivan knew all about the case too, and had it with him, but he was in no hurry to get to it yet.

Lance, j., was leaning back, the picture of polite acquiescence in a lot assigned to him by Providence, a position wherein dignity was tempered by *ennui*. But Pretyman, j., was getting restive; he was fingering his beard – he committed the solecism of wearing a beard on the Bench; then he picked out a book from the shelf by him, and turned over the leaves quickly. Mr. O'Sullivan came, by a series of flourishes, a little nearer the point. And Norton Ward did not come; and Arthur Lisle felt no better.

"What about Watkins and Chichester?" demanded Pretyman, j., with a sudden violence that made Arthur jump.

"I have that case here, my lord, and – "

"You don't seem in a hurry to cite it, Mr. O'Sullivan. It seems to me dead in your teeth."

"Let us hear the headnote, Mr. O'Sullivan," said Lance, j., suavely.

Then they got to it, and Pretyman, j., and Mr. O'Sullivan had a fine wrangle over it, worrying it up and down, one saying that this was that case, the other that this case was not that case, because in that case that happened and in this case this happened, and so forth. Mr. O'Sullivan "distinguished" valiantly, and Pretyman knocked his distinctions into a cocked hat. Lance, j., sat on smiling in silence, till at last he asked blandly:

"If we think the cases indistinguishable, Watkins and Chichester binds us, I take it, Mr. O'Sullivan?"

That Mr. O'Sullivan had to admit, and on that admission down he sat.

The moment had come – and Norton Ward had not. With an actual physical effort Arthur rose to his feet; a strange voice, which did not seem to belong to him, and sounded quite unfamiliar, said, "My lords – " He saw Lance and Pretyman, j., in the shape of a grotesque, monstrous, two-headed giant; for the latter was leaning over to the former, who sat listening and twice nodded his head.

A slip of paper was handed up to Lance, j. He glanced at it and from it to Arthur. Again that strange voice said, "My lords – " But Lance, j., interposed suavely, "I don't think we need trouble you, Mr. Lisle," and he proceeded to say that not even Mr. O'Sullivan's ingenious arguments could enable

his brother or himself to distinguish Brown and Green from Watkins and Chichester, and therefore the appeal must be dismissed with costs.

"I concur," said Pretyman, j., with contemptuous curttness; in fact he did not say "I" at all; he merely grunted out "Concur."

Of course such a thing happened often, and was quite likely to happen; very probably Norton Ward, after glancing over his pupil's note and at *Watkins v. Chichester*, had seen that it might happen here and had the less scruple about entrusting his case to hands so inexperienced. None the less, Arthur Lisle felt that the gods had played a cruel game with him. All that agony of apprehension, all that tension of desperate coward's courage, endured for nothing and gone for nothing! All to be endured and achieved again – how soon? He got out of court he hardly knew how, and made his way hurriedly across the Strand. He would have that wig and gown off, or somebody else would be tapping him on the shoulder, arresting him with the stern command to hold another brief!

Now, back in chambers, with the strain over, he was furious with himself, savage and furious; that mood follows hard on the paroxysms of the malady. He began to attribute to it all the failures of his past life – quite unjustly, for in most cases, though it had tortured him, he had overcome the outward manifestation of it. He could not see his life as liveable if it were to meet him at every turn. What made him a prey to it? Self-consciousness, silly self-consciousness, his wise elders had always told him. But what made people self-conscious? Self-conceit, the same wise mentors had added. His soul rose in a plain and sincere protest, certain of its truth: "But I'm not conceited." "Yes, but" (he imagined the mentors' argument now) "you really are; you think everybody's looking at you and thinking of you." "Well, but so they are when I'm on my legs speaking; and beforehand I know they're going to be." The mentors did not seem to have anything to say to that.

In the afternoon Norton Ward came into his room to thank him for holding the brief; he was a man of punctilious courtesy, as indeed he was master of most of the arts and gifts that make for success in life. At little more than thirty he had already a fine practice; he was on the edge of "taking silk"; he had married well – the daughter of a peer, with a substantial portion; he was a "prospective" candidate for Parliament. A favourite of nature and of fortune indeed! Moreover he was a kindly man, although a ruthlessly ambitious one. He and Arthur had become acquainted merely through the accident of Arthur's renting the spare room in his chambers, when he had been called to the Bar a twelve-month before; but the landlord had taken to his tenant and would gladly have done him a turn.

"I thought the case quite plain," he said; "but I'm sorry you were done out of your argument."

"I wasn't sorry," Arthur confessed, with a frankness habitual to him.

"You weren't? Oh, I see! Nervous!" He laughed gently.

"Beyond belief. Did you used to be?"

"Just at first. I soon got over it. But they say one oughtn't to get over it. Oh, you've heard the stories about big men, haven't you? Anyhow some men never do. Why, I've sat behind Huntley and seen his hand tremble like our old friend the aspen leaf – and that when he was Attorney-General!"

"Lord!" was Arthur's despairing comment; because a malady which did not spare an Attorney-General must surely be unconquerable by lesser folk.

"But I expect it's not quite the same sort," Norton Ward went on, smiling. "It's rather like falling in love, I expect. A man's excited every time he falls in love, but I don't think it's the same sort of excitement as he suffers when he falls in love for the first time – I mean badly."

Now the last word of this observation so struck Arthur that he forgot all the earlier part of it – nay, he forgot his malady itself, together with the truth or falsity of the parallel Norton Ward suggested.

"Badly? What do you mean by falling in love badly?"

"I'm not speaking with regard to morals, Lisle. I mean severely, or utterly, or passionately, or, if you prefer, idiotically."

Arthur's lips puckered about his pipe-stem; it was a trick he had.

"I think I should call that falling in love well, not badly," he observed gravely.

It was the gravity of the speaker, not the import of the thing spoken, which made Norton Ward laugh again and heartily. His was one of those temperaments – sane, practical, concrete, equable – which regard the affairs of love as a very subsidiary matter in real life, in the real life of any individual, that is, for of course they possess a national and racial importance when reduced to statistics. He did not quarrel with the literary convention which exalted love to the highest place – the convention made good reading and produced exciting plays – but it did not answer to real life as he knew it, to the stern yet delightful fight which filled his days, and really filled his wife's too, since she was a partner wherever she could be, and an eager encourager in all things. But what of the great amorists who were also great men and women? Well, how much of that too was play-acting – to the public and to themselves? That was the question his mind instinctively put about such cases.

As he looked at Arthur Lisle's slight figure and sensitive face, he felt a compassion for him, a pitying doubt whether so frail a vessel could live in the rough sea on which it had embarked. Characteristically this friendly impulse expressed itself in an invitation to dinner, which was received by Arthur with surprise, delight, and gratitude.

"Of course I will, and it really is most awfully kind of you," he said.

Norton Ward went off to a consultation with a smile of mingled pity and amusement still on his lips.

His invitation to dinner really pleased Arthur very much, not only as a sign of friendship, but for its own sake. He had found his early days in London lonely – in depressing contrast with the full social life of school and Oxford. The glowing anticipations with which imagination had invested his coming to the metropolis had not stood the test of experience. For some young men family connections, or notable achievements and high reputation, provide a ready-made place in London. Others possessed of ample means can make a pretty good one for themselves speedily. But Arthur's university career, though creditable and to him delightful in the highest degree from its teeming fulness of interests, had not been conspicuous; he had no powerful friends, and he was very poor. After his chambers were paid for, and his share in Henry, and his lodgings in Bloomsbury Street, there was left not much margin beyond the necessities of life – food, raiment, and tobacco. The theatre, even the pit, could not be indulged in often. He had many solitary evenings. When it was fine, he often walked the streets; when it was wet he read – and often stopped reading to wish that something would happen. His vague and restless longings took no form more definite than that – wanting something to happen. He was in London, he was young, he was ready – and nothing happened! Consequently an invitation to dinner was a prize in the daily lottery of life.

When he got back to his 'diggings' in the evening, he found a letter from home. His mother and sister had continued to live on in the old house at Malvern Wells after the death of his father, who had enjoyed a fairly good practice as a doctor there, but dying comparatively early had left a slender provision for his family. Mrs. Lisle preferred to be poor, since poor she had to be, in a place where she was already known and respected. The school too was a great attraction; there Arthur had been educated as a day boy, and thence had proceeded to Oxford with an exhibition, to which he added a second from his college, thus much easing the family finances, and indeed rendering Oxford possible. There had been talk of his people's migrating to London and making a home for him there, but in fact none of the three had been zealous for the change. Mrs. Lisle was frail and clung to her accustomed hills and breezes; Anna had her friends, her circle, her church work, her local importance; and Arthur was at that time too full of those glowing anticipations of London life to press the project of a family villa somewhere in the suburbs and a season-ticket to take him out of town at the precise hour of the evening when town began to be amusing.

For all that, he was an affectionate son and brother, and he smiled sympathetically over Anna's home gossip. Only the postscript made him frown rather peevishly. It ran: "Mother wants to know whether you have called on the Godfrey Lises *yet!*"

Mother wanted to know that in pretty nearly every one of her own and Anna's letters; hence the italics which distinguished Anna's "yet." And the answer still had to be in the negative. Why should he call on the Godfrey Lises? He knew his mother's answer; a thoroughly maternal answer it was. Godfrey Lisle, though only a distant cousin, was the head of the house, squire of Hilsey Manor, the old family place, and a man of considerable wealth – altogether, in fact, the Personage of the family. Most families have a Personage, to them very important, though varying infinitely in significance or insignificance to the world outside. On the whole the Lisle Personage was above the average from the outside point of view, and Mrs. Lisle's anxiety that her son should pay him proper attention, and reap therefrom such advantage as might accrue, was no more than natural.

But to Arthur all the reasons why he ought to call on his cousin were reasons why he could not do it. Just as, while Mr. O'Sullivan was arguing, his imagination was picturing what a young fool Pretymann, j., would soon be thinking him, so here, whenever the question of this call arose, the same remorselessly active faculty rehearsed for him all the aspects in which he would appear to the Godfrey Lises – a poor relation, a tiresome duty, a country cousin, a raw youth – Oh, in fine and in the end, a Bore of purest quality and great magnitude! That, and nothing else, the Godfrey Lises would think him.

Still, if his mother persisted, the thing might have to happen. He had a vision of himself watching the Godfrey Lises out of their house, and then diving across the road to deposit furtive cards with the butler. A funny vision, but with him quite capable of turning into reality!

His brow cleared as he took up a second letter which awaited him. He knew the hand:

"Dear Mr. Lisle,

"Do drop in to-morrow evening after dinner. We shall be having cards and perhaps a little music. About 9.30. Do as you like about dressing.

"Yours sincerely,

"Marie Sarradet."

The Sarradets lived in Regent's Park – rather far from any Underground station. "I'll dress if it's fine, and not if it's wet," thought Arthur. The balance of profit and loss as between paying a cab-fare on the one hand and taking the shine out of his patent leathers on the other presented a problem of constant difficulty in connection with his evening gaieties.

CHAPTER II

MISS SARRADET'S CIRCLE

A hundred and fifty years ago or thereabouts a certain Jacques Sarradet had migrated from his native Lyons and opened a perfumer's shop in Cheapside. The shop was there still, and still a Sarradet kept it, and still it was much esteemed and frequented by City men, who bought presents or executed commissions for their wives and daughters there. To folk of fashion the Bond Street branch was better known, but which was the more profitable only the master knew. Together, at all events, they were very profitable, and the present Mr. Clement Sarradet was a warm man – warmer than he let the world know, or even his own family, so far as he could keep the knowledge from them. He had preserved his French frugality, and, although his house in Regent's Park was comfortably and hospitably conducted, the style in which he lived was a good deal less sumptuous than English notions would have considered his income to warrant. He had preserved too, in spite of mixed marriages in the family history, something of his French air, of the appearance of a prosperous *bon bourgeois*, with his short thick-set figure, his round paunch, his stiff upstanding white hair (he had married late in life and was now over sixty), his black brows and moustache, and his cheeks where blue and red seemed, after a tussle, to have blended harmoniously into a subdued purple.

Something French, though differently French, survived also in his cherished daughter Marie, writer of the note already set forth, and mistress of the house in Regent's Park since her mother's death five years ago. Here it was manner rather than looks (she was a brunette, but not markedly); she had a vivacity, a provocativeness, a coquetry, which in less favoured races often marks a frivolous or unstable character, but in the French finds no difficulty in blending with and adorning solid good sense, sturdy business-like qualities, and even sometimes a certain toughness of tissue more certainly valuable than attractive.

The evening party to which Arthur Lisle had been bidden was drawing to its close. They had played cards; they had had some music; they had ended up with a couple of "topping" comic songs from Joe Halliday, and they were still laughing over these as they munched sandwiches and sipped, according to sex, lemonade or whisky-and-soda. Mr. Sarradet watched them benevolently, thinking them a very pleasant set of young people, and admiring the way in which his daughter exercised a pretty dominion over this little band of chosen friends. The two girls, Mildred Quain and Amabel Osling, openly acknowledged her leadership; the men deferred to her, not only as the hostess (a position which she generally occupied), but as the centre of attraction and the deviser of pleasures, the organiser of visits to theatres and concerts, and of their lawn-tennis at the Acton ground in the spring and summer. But there was a touch of shrewd anxiety in his watching. Young men were wont to aspire to more than friendship where they found metal attractive to their eyes. Mr. Sarradet was ambitious for his daughter.

"Next Monday, then, we'll all meet at His Majesty's," Marie announced – or commanded. She turned to Joe Halliday. "You get the tickets. And anybody who likes can come back here to supper afterwards."

"Splendid, dear!" said Amabel Osling, a dark girl with large eyes and a rather intense manner; she wore what might be described as an art-frock.

"An evening out, an evening out!" chanted Joe Halliday, a big young fellow with a shock of light brown hair and a manner of exuberant good-nature and heartiness.

"I'm afraid I can't come," said Arthur Lisle apologetically.

"Why not, Mr. Lisle?" Marie's voice sounded certainly disappointed, perhaps rather resentful.

"I'm dining out."

Sidney Barslow looked at him with a smile, in which Arthur detected an ironical flavour. Between these two members of the circle there was, in truth, no love lost. Barslow resented in Arthur a superiority of breeding which all his own vanity could not enable him to ignore. Arthur found this handsome fellow, with his carefully sleek hair, his bold challenging eyes, his lady-killerish airs, in the end a 'bounder' with only a veneer of elegance; all the same he wished he had half Barslow's easy assurance and self-confidence.

"Oh, Learned Counsel is dining out?" In the Sarradet circle, being of the Bar was felt to be enough of a distinction to warrant a little chaff. "May one ask who with? The Lord Chancellor perhaps?"

They all laughed. "Presently, presently!" said Joe, patting Arthur's head. "The lad will make his way in society."

"Don't be an ass, Joe." But Arthur liked Joe as much as he disliked Barslow, and his protest was quite free from annoyance.

"Don't you want to tell us who it is, Mr. Lisle?" asked Amabel.

"Well, I don't suppose you'll be any the wiser; it's the man whose chambers I share – Norton Ward."

Now, as it chanced, Mildred Quain's uncle lived in the suburban constituency which Norton Ward was 'nursing' and was of the same political colour as the prospective candidate. Mildred had heard the candidate speak at the opening of a bazaar – and had seen the Honourable Mrs. Norton Ward perform the ceremony.

"You are among the swells, Mr. Lisle!" said Mildred, and proceeded to describe the extreme political and social eminence of the Norton Wards. Arthur, who had gratefully accepted his invitation as a human kindness, was amused at finding it regarded as a promotion, as a cause for congratulation and envy; he grew afraid that his mention of it might be taken for a boast.

"I think it was pure charity on Norton Ward's part," he laughed. "I expect he thought I was lonely."

"I dare say. He couldn't be expected to know about the likes of us," said Barslow.

"Oh, shut up, Sidney!" cried Joe Halliday. "Can't Arthur go out to dinner without your permission?"

A sudden flush spread over Barslow's face; he glared angrily at Joe. Mr. Sarradet had taken up the evening paper, and noticed nothing; but all the rest were conscious that a storm threatened the serenity of the gathering. On a trivial occasion latent jealousies had leapt to light.

Marie looked round her company with a smile which included all and betrayed no partisanship. "We'll choose another night for His Majesty's," she said. "That's quite simple. Then we can all go. And now shall we have one more song before we break up? One more from you, Joe!" As they moved towards the piano, she contrived to touch the irate Mr. Barslow lightly on the arm, to give him an arch glance, and to murmur – very low – the word "Silly!" Mr. Barslow's brow cleared wonderfully.

She wanted no quarrel and was confident of her ability to prevent one. If one came, she would have to be arbiter; she would have to take sides, and that must almost certainly mean the loss of one of her friends – either Sidney Barslow or Arthur Lisle. She did not want to lose either, for each had an attraction for her – an attraction not of mere solid friendship such as bound her to Joe Halliday, but an appeal of man to woman. Barslow's boldness, his challenge, his powerful virility drew one side of her nature with a strong magnet; to what was 'second-class' and tawdry in him she was not, by birth or breeding, very sensitive herself. On the other hand she knew that Arthur Lisle was, and admired him because he was. Nay, in a sense she was afraid of him because he was; if she did or said anything in his eyes amiss – if she shewed too much favour to Sidney Barslow, for instance – he might feel about her much as he did about the man himself. She knew all about Barslow, and all about what Barslow felt for and about herself; it was very familiar, one might say inherited, ground. With regard to Arthur Lisle all this was different; he was still, in spite of their apparent intimacy,

terra incognita. Though he constantly frequented the house, though from a chance acquaintance of her brother's he had grown into a familiar friend, though they were fast comrades, even though she knew that he admired her, there was so much about him which she vaguely divined to be there, but could not value or analyse – notions, instincts, spots of sensitiveness, to which she remained really a stranger. How strong were they, what was their verdict on her, what their influence on him? Would a tide of admiration or passion sweep them all away? Or would they make such a tide impossible, or, even if it came, dam its course with impalpable insurmountable obstacles? In fine, would he, in spite of any feeling for her that he might have, hold her "out of the question"?

He was the last to leave that night – as he often was, for the solitude of his lodgings had no attraction for him – and she went with him to the door. The stars shone now over Regent's Park, and they lingered a moment in astronomical conversation. Then she gave him her hand, saying:

"I'm so sorry about Monday. But you must tell me all about your party afterwards!"

"I don't suppose there'll be anything to tell. Well, Mildred Quain may be interested, because of her uncle!"

"I shall be interested too – though not because of my uncle," she said with a laugh and a fleet upward glance at him. "I consider I've introduced you to London society, and I take a maternal interest in you, Mr. Lisle."

"Why do you say 'Mr. Lisle' to me? You always say 'Joe' and 'Sidney' to the others."

"So I do. I don't know!"

"Well, then, don't do it," laughed Arthur. "It makes me jealous, you know."

She looked at him for a moment, not now in provocation, rather in thought, perhaps in puzzle. "It needn't do that, anyhow," at last she said.

"Is it then a mark of respect?" he asked banteringly, finding pleasure in the perplexed little frown which persisted on her pretty face.

"Well, I speak of you as I feel about you, and I can't say any more," she answered, half laughing, but protesting too that this sort of inquisition was unfair.

"You shall do as you like then! What you do is always right." He spoke affectionately and held out his hand to her again.

She did not give him hers. She drew back a little, blushing. "Ah, if you really thought that!" After a pause, she said rather sharply, "Why don't you like Sidney Barslow?"

"I don't exactly dislike him, but sometimes he – " He waved his arm, wanting a word.

"Grates?" she suggested briefly.

"Thank you," said Arthur with a laugh. "Just every now and then, perhaps!"

She stood there a moment longer with an expression on her face which was new to him there; she looked as if she wanted to say something or ask him something, but did not dare. Though her lips smiled, there was appeal, almost timidity, in her eyes. But she turned away with no more than "Well, good-night."

Scores of times in the last year-and-a-half, since he had come to know her, he had called her "a good sort" for all the kindness and friendship she had shewn him; he had conceived for her, and her clever capable ways, an amused admiration. After these feelings there had grown up in him, by familiarity, a sort of mental friendship for her face and figure too. He never reckoned her beautiful or even very pretty, but she had a piquancy of face and a grace of figure which had gradually become very pleasant to him. That she was physically attractive had been an after-thought, but, when once it had come, it stayed. To-night he was particularly conscious of it, perhaps because of the air of timidity or self-distrust which softened her, and, softening her, flattered in him the latent masculine pride.

Though not entirely, he had been to a large extent free from boyish flirtations and philandering. The necessity of hard work, shyness and fastidiousness, bodily temperament, had all combined to keep him out of such things. One passion of a glorious Oxford summer term he had counted the real thing and remembered even now with a tender exultation; for the girl's heart had been touched,

though not to the point of defying either prudence or propriety – even had he ventured to urge such courses. Save for this episode, now remote since such age quickly, he was in essence a stranger in the field of love. He did not recognise nor analyse the curious little stir which was in him as he walked home that night – the feeling of a new gaiety, a new joyfulness, a sense of something triumphant and as it were liberated and given wings. He did not even get so far as to associate it explicitly and consciously with Marie Sarradet, though he did know that never had she seemed a dearer friend or a more winning girl than she had that night. He stood by the brink of the spring of love, but had not yet drunk of it nor recognised the hand that had led him there.

The girl had gone back to her father and mixed him his 'night-cap' of hot toddy, as her custom was. While he sipped it, she stood beside him, looking down into the fire, still and meditative. Presently she became aware of his bright beady eyes set on her with a glance half-apprehensive, half-amused; she interpreted it easily.

"A long time saying good-night, was I, Pops? And you think I've been flirting? Well, I haven't, and I couldn't have if I'd wanted to. Mr. Lisle never flirts. Joe pretends to sometimes, and Sidney – does. But Mr. Lisle – never!"

"That needn't mean that a man has no serious intentions," Mr. Sarradet opined.

She smiled. "With the English I think it does. We're not quite English, even after all this time, are we? At least you and I aren't; Raymond is, I think."

"Raymond's a goose, English or not," said the father impatiently. "He's in debt again, and I have to pay! I won't leave my business to a spendthrift."

"Oh, he'll get over it. He is silly but – only twenty-two. Pops!"

"And at twenty you've as shrewd a head as I know on your shoulders! Get over it he must or – !" An indignant gulp of his 'night-cap' ended the sentence.

"If you let him go in for something that he liked better than the business – " she began.

"What business has he not to like the business! It's kept us in comfort for a hundred and fifty years. Isn't it good enough for him? It's been good enough for me and my forefathers. We've known what we were; we've never pretended to be anything else. We're honest merchants – shop-keepers. That's what we are."

"Have patience, dear, I'll talk to him," she promised gently, and soothed the old fellow, whose bark was worse than his bite.

"Well, he'll come to me for a cheque once too often, that's all," he grumbled, as he kissed his daughter and took himself off to bed.

"Honest merchants – shop-keepers. That's what we are." The words echoed through Marie Sarradet's head. It was easy to smile at them, both at their pride and at their humility, easy to call ideas of that kind quite out of date. But what if they did represent a truth, irrelevant perhaps nowadays for public or political purposes, but having its relevance and importance in personal relations, in its influence on mind and feeling? This was the direction her thoughts took, though she found no words, and only dim ideas by which to grope. Presently the ideas grew concrete in the word which she had herself suggested to Arthur Lisle and he had accepted with alacrity. Sidney Barslow 'grated' on Arthur. It was not impossible to see why, though even this she acknowledged grudgingly and with a sense of treachery – she herself found so much to like in Sidney! Exactly! There she seemed to lay her finger on the spot. If she liked Sidney, and Sidney grated on Arthur Lisle so badly – the question which she had not dared to ask at the door rose to her lips again – "Do I grate?" And was that why Arthur Lisle never flirted? Never with her, at least – for that was all she could really know on the subject.

CHAPTER III IN TOUCH WITH THE LAW

Arthur Lisle arrived on the pavement in front of Norton Ward's house in Manchester Square five minutes before the time for which he was invited, and fifteen before that at which he would be expected to arrive. Painfully conscious of this fact, he walked first down Duke Street, and then back up Manchester Street, trying to look as if he were going somewhere else. Nor did he venture to arrive at his real destination until he had seen three vehicles deposit their occupants at the door. Then he presented himself with the air of having hurried a little, lest he should be late. None of this conduct struck him as at all unusual or ridiculous; not only now but for long afterwards it was his habit – the habit of a nervous imaginative man.

The party was not a large one – only twelve – and it was entirely legal in character. Besides host and hostess there were three couples – two barrister couples and one solicitor couple. One of the couples brought a daughter, who fell to Arthur's lot. Arthur got on very well with his girl, who was fortunately an enthusiast about lawn-tennis; she interested without absorbing him; he was able to be polite without ceasing to watch the two people who really arrested his attention, his hostess and – most strangely, most wonderfully! – Mr. Justice Lance. For at half-past eight the old Judge, by his arrival, completed the party.

A catalogue of Mrs. Norton Ward's personal attractions would sound commonplace enough. She had small features, was fair, rather pretty, rather pale, and rather short; there seemed no more to say. But she possessed a gracious candour of manner, an extreme friendliness and simplicity, a ready merriment, and together with these a complete freedom from self-consciousness. Somehow she struck Arthur as a highly refined, feminised, etherealised counterpart of Joe Halliday – they were both such good human creatures, so superlatively free from 'nonsense' of all sorts. He took to her immensely from the first moment and hoped very much that she would talk to him a little after dinner. He felt sure that he could get on with her; she did not alarm or puzzle him; he knew that he had "got her right."

When Norton Ward moved, according to ritual, into his wife's vacant place beside Mr. Justice Lance, he beckoned to Arthur to come and sit on the Judge's other side and introduced him. "You just missed the pleasure of hearing his maiden argument the other morning, Judge," he added, laughing slyly at Arthur, who had not got over the surprise of encountering Lance, j., as a private – and harmless – individual.

"Ah, I remember – a case of yours! But O'Sullivan wouldn't give Mr. Lisle a chance!"

He spoke in the same soft, rather weary voice that he had used in court; with his sparse white hair he looked older than when he was in his wig; he was very carefully dressed, and his thin fine hands wore a couple of rather ornate rings. He had keen blue eyes and a large well-shaped nose.

"I don't know that Lisle was altogether sorry! The first time! Even you remember the feeling, I dare say?"

"Nervous? Was that it, Mr. Lisle?" He smiled faintly. "You must remember that we're much inured to imperfection." He looked on the young man with a pleasant indulgence, and, at the same time, a certain attention.

"You always remember our frailty, but there are others!" said the host.

"Ah, ah! I sat with my Brother Pretyman, so I did! Perhaps he does forget sometimes that one side must be wrong. Hence the unpopularity of litigation, by the way."

Arthur was gaining his ease; the friendliness of both his companions helped him; towards the Judge he was particularly drawn; he felt that he would be all right before Lance, j., in future – if

only Pretzman, j., were elsewhere! But, alas, a question was enough to plunge him back into trouble. Norton Ward had turned to talk to his other neighbour, but Sir Christopher Lance spoke to him again.

"Are you any relation to Godfrey Lisle? Lisle of Hilsey, you know."

"Yes, Sir Christopher, I'm – I'm a distant cousin."

"Well, I thought you had something of the family look. I've not had the pleasure of seeing you at his house – in town, I mean – I haven't been to Hilsey lately."

"I – I've never been there," Arthur stammered. He was blushing very red. Here he was, up against this terrible business of the Godfrey Lisles again – and just as he had begun to get along so nicely!

His confusion, nay, his distress, could not escape the Judge. "I hope I haven't made a *faux pas*, Mr. Lisle? No quarrel, or anything of that sort, I hope?"

"No, sir, but I don't know them. I haven't called yet," Arthur blurted out; he seemed to himself to be always having to blurt it out.

Sir Christopher's eyes twinkled, as, following the host's example, he rose from the table.

"If I were you, I should. You don't know what you're missing."

Upstairs Mrs. Norton Ward was better than Arthur's hopes. She showed him at once that she meant to talk to him and that she expected to like doing it.

"I'm always friends with everybody in Frank's chambers," she said, as she made him sit by her. "I consider them all part of the family, and all the glory they win belongs to the family; so you must make haste and win glory, if you can, for us!"

"I'm afraid I can't win glory," laughed Arthur. "At least it doesn't look like it – at the Bar."

"Oh, win it anyhow – we're not particular how – law, politics, literature, what you like! Why, Milton Longworth was Frank's pupil once – for a month! He did no work and got tipsy, but he's a great poet now – well, isn't he? – and we're just as proud as if he'd become Attorney-General."

"Or – well – at all events, a County Court Judge!" Arthur suggested.

"So just you do it somehow, Mr. Lisle, won't you?"

"I'll try," he promised, laughing. "The other day I heard of you in your glory. You sounded very splendid," he added.

Then he had to tell her all about how he had heard, about Mildred Quain, and so about the rest of the circle in Regent's Park. His shyness vanished; he gave humorous little sketches of his friends. Of course she knew Sarradet's shop, and was amused at this lifting of the veil which had hidden the Sarradet private life. But being the entirely natural creature she was, talking and thinking just as one of her class naturally would, she could not help treating the Sarradets as something out of her ordinary experience, as something rather funny – perhaps also instructive – to hear about, as social phenomena to be observed and studied. Without her own volition or consciousness her mind naturally assumed this attitude and expressed it in her questions and comments; neither were cruel, neither malicious, but both were absolutely from the outside – comments and questions about a foreign country addressed to a traveller who happened to have paid a visit there; for plainly she assumed, again instinctively, that Arthur Lisle was no more a native of that country than herself. Or he might almost have been an author presenting to an alert and sympathetic reader a realistic and vivacious picture of the life of a social class not his own, be it what is called higher or lower, or just quite different.

Whatever the gulf, the difference, might be – broad or narrow, justly felt or utterly exaggerated – Arthur Lisle would have been (at twenty-four) more than human not to be pleased to find himself, for Mrs. Norton Ward, on the same side of it as Mrs. Norton Ward. She was evidently quite genuine in this, as she seemed to be in everything. She was not flattering him or even putting him at his ease. She talked to him as "one of ourselves" simply because that seemed to her what he undoubtedly was – and what his friends undoubtedly, though of course quite blamelessly, were not.

They were thus in the full swing of talk – Arthur doing most of it – when the Judge came across the room and joined them. Arthur at once rose, to make way, and the lady too seemed to treat his audience as finished, although most graciously. But the Judge took hold of his arm and detained him.

"Do you know, Esther," he said, "that this young man has, by right of kinship, the *entrée* to the Shrine? And he doesn't use it!"

"What?" she cried with an appearance of lively interest. "Oh, are you related to the Godfreys, Mr. Lisle?"

Arthur blushed, but this time less acutely; he was getting, as the Judge might have put it, much inured to this matter of the Godfrey Lisles.

"Don't ask him questions about it; for some reason or another he doesn't like that."

"I don't really think my cousin Godfrey would care about –"

"Not the least the point, is it, Esther?" said the Judge with a twinkle.

"Not the least, Sir Christopher. But what's to be done if he won't go?"

"Oh, you must manage that." He squeezed Arthur's arm and then let it go.

Here, plainly, though no less graciously than from the hostess, was his dismissal. Not knowing any of the other women, he drifted back to the girl who was enthusiastic about lawn-tennis.

The Judge sat down and stretched out his shapely thin hands towards the fire; his rings gleamed, and he loved the gleam of them. To wear them had been, from his youth, one of his bits of daring; he had, as it were, backed himself to wear them and not thereby seem himself, or let them seem, vulgar. And he had succeeded; he had been called vain often, never vulgar. By now his friends, old and young, would have missed them sadly.

"What do you make of that boy, Esther?" he asked.

"I like him – and I think he's being wasted," she answered promptly.

"At our honourable profession?"

"You and Frank are better judges of that."

"I don't know. Hardly tough enough, perhaps. But Huntley was just such a man, and he got pretty well to the top. Died, though, not much past fifty. The climb killed him, I think."

"Yes, Frank's told me about him. But I meant wasted in his own life, or socially, or however you like to put it. He's told me about his friends, and –"

"Well, if you like him enough, you can put that right, Esther."

"I like him, but I haven't much time for young men, Sir Christopher. I've a husband, you may remember."

"Then turn him over where he belongs – to Bernadette."

She raised her brows a little, as she smiled at him.

"Oh, the young fellow's got to get his baptism of fire. It'll do him good."

"How easily you Judges settle other people's fortunes!"

"In the end, his not going to his cousin's house is an absurdity."

"Well, yes, so it is, in the end, of course," she agreed. "It shall be done, Sir Christopher."

While his fortunes were thus being settled for him – more or less, and as the future might reveal – Arthur was walking home, well pleased with himself. The lady's friendliness delighted him; if he did not prize the old Judge's so highly, he had the sense to perceive that it was really a more valuable testimonial and brought with it more substantial encouragement. From merely being kind to him the Norton Wards had come to like him, as it seemed, and their liking was backed by Sir Christopher's endorsement. He did not regard these things from a worldly point of view; he did not think of them as stepping-stones, or at any rate only quite indirectly. They would no doubt help him to get rid of, or at least to hold in subjection, his demon of self-distrust; but still more would they comfort him and make him happy. The pleasure he derived from Mrs. Norton Ward's liking, and the Judge's approval, was in quality akin to the gratification which Marie Sarradet's bearing had given him a few nights

ago in Regent's Park; just as that had roused in him a keener sense of Marie's attractiveness, so now he glowed with a warm recognition of the merits of his new friends.

Walking home along Oxford Street, he had almost reached the corner of Tottenham Court Road when his complacent musings were interrupted by the sight of a knot of people outside the door of a public-house. It was the sort of group not unusual at half-past eleven o'clock at night – a man, a woman on his arm, a policeman, ten or a dozen interested spectators, very ready with advice as Londoners are. As he drew near, he heard what was passing, though the policeman's tall burly figure was between him and the principal actor in the scene.

"Better do as she says and go 'ome, sir," said the policeman soothingly.

"'Ome, *Sweet* 'Ome!" murmured somebody in tones of fond reminiscence.

"Yes, do now. You don't really want it, you know you don't," urged the lady in her turn.

"Whether I want it or not – "

At the sound of this last voice Arthur started into quick attention and came to a halt. He recognised the full tones, now somewhat thickened, with their faint but unmistakable suggestion of the Cockney twang.

"Whether I want it or not – " The man spoke slowly, with an effort after distinctness which was obvious but not unsuccessful – "I've a right to have it. He's bound to serve the public. I'm – I'm member of the public."

"'Ad enough for two members, *I* should sye," came in comment from the fringe of the group.

"That's it! Go 'ome now," the policeman suggested again, infinitely patient and persuasive.

The man made a sudden move towards the door of the public-house where an official, vulgarly known as the 'chucker out,' stood smiling on the threshold.

"No, sir, you *don't*!" said the policeman, suave but immensely firm, laying a hand on his arm.

"The officer's quite right. Do come along," again urged the lady.

But the movement towards the public-house door, which revealed to Arthur the face of the obstinate lingerer, showed him to the lingerer also – showed Arthur in his evening uniform of tall hat, white scarf, and silk-faced coat to Sidney Barslow in his 'bowler' hat of rakish cut, and his sporting fawn-coloured coat, with the big flower in his buttonhole and his stick with a huge silver knob. The stick shot out – vaguely in Arthur's direction.

"I'm a gentleman, and, what's more, I can prove it. Ask that gentleman – my friend there – "

Arthur's face was a little flushed. His mind was full of those terrible quick visions of his – a scuffle on the pavement, going bail for Sidney Barslow, giving evidence at the Police Court. "A friend of the prisoner, Mr. Arthur Lisle, Barrister, of Garden Court, Middle Temple" – visions most terrible! But he stood his ground, saying nothing, not moving a limb, and meeting Barslow's look full in the eyes. All the rest were staring at him now. If he remained as he was they would take it as a denial of Barslow's claim to acquaintance. Could he deny it if Barslow challenged him? He answered – No.

But some change of mood came over Sidney Barslow's clouded mind. He let his stick fall back to his side again, and with an angry jerk of his head said:

"Oh, damn it, all right, I'm going! I – I was only pulling your leg."

"That's right now!" applauded the policeman. "You'd better take 'im in a taxi, miss."

"And put a ticket on 'im, in case 'e falls out, miss," some friendly adviser added.

Arthur did not wait to see the policeman's excellent suggestion carried into effect. The moment that Sidney Barslow's eyes were off him, he turned quickly up a by-street, and took a roundabout way home.

He had much to be thankful for. The terrible visions were dissipated. And – he had not run away. Oh, how he had wanted to run away from the danger of being mixed up in that dirty job. He thanked heaven that he had stood his ground and looked Barslow in the face.

But what about the next time they had to look one another in the face – at the Sarradets' in Regent's Park?

CHAPTER IV

A GRATEFUL FRIEND

Marie's remonstrance with her brother was not ill-received – Raymond was too amiable for that – but it was quite unsuccessful. Just emerged from an exhaustive business training on the latest lines at home and abroad, able (as he pointed out in mingled pride and ruefulness) to correspond about perfumes in French, German, Spanish, and Italian, and to talk about them in three of those languages, he declared openly not for a lifetime of leisure but for an hedonistic interval. Further, he favoured a little scattering of money after so much amassing.

"If Pops," he observed, "would only go back to his Balzac, he would see how much harm and sorrow this perpetual money-grubbing causes among the business classes of our beloved France. In England a more liberal spirit prevails, and after a hundred and fifty years we ought to be able to catch it. In fact I have caught it, Marie."

"You have; and you'll catch something else – from Pops – if you don't look out," said Marie, who could not help smiling at the trim, spry, gay little fellow. Like herself, he was dark and lively, but of the two she was the manager, the man of business.

"Besides it does the house good. 'Who's that?' they ask. 'Young Sarradet.' 'What, the scent and soap people?' 'The same.' 'Dashed fine business that!'" He enacted the dialogue with dramatic talent. "As an advertisement I'm worth all my debts, dear sister."

Marie was too much amused to press her point further. "You rather remind me of Bob Sawyer," she remarked. "But, anyhow, be here oftener in the evenings, if you can. That'll go a long way towards pacifying Pops. When you're away, he sits thinking of the money you're spending. Besides, he does like to have you here, you know."

"You tell me when Amabel Osling is coming, and I'll be here."

"I'm glad you like Amabel. She's pretty, isn't she?"

"She's all right. Otherwise I didn't think it was very lively."

"N-no. It was hardly one of our best evenings," Marie admitted reluctantly.

It hadn't been – that first meeting of her circle after Arthur Lisle's dinner party. They had all been there, including Raymond, whose exchanges of wit and chaff with Joe Halliday were generally of themselves enough to make the evening a success. It had not been a success – at least from the moment of Arthur's arrival. Mildred Quain had started off about the party at once; her curiosity concerning the Norton Wards was insatiable – she seemed to be working up a regular cult of them. Marie herself had been benevolently inquisitive too, hoping to hear that Arthur had had a grand time and made a great impression. But the topic had seemed distasteful to Arthur, he tried to get away from it directly; when the persevering Mildred dragged him back, his replies grew short and his manner reserved; he seemed ill at ease. As for Sidney Barslow, as soon as ever Arthur and his party came on the scene, he turned sulky – indecently sulky. It was painful as well as absurd, and it got worse when Joe Halliday, trying (in justice let it be said) to lighten the atmosphere by jocularly suggested, "And, after it all, I suppose some beautiful lady took you to your humble home in her six-cylinder car?" Arthur answered dryly, with a pointed ignoring of the joke, "I walked home by Oxford Street." Joe, still persevering, asked, "No romantic adventures on the way?" "Nothing out of the common," Arthur replied in a cool hard voice which was very rare in his mouth, but meant, Marie knew, serious displeasure. In fact she was just going to make some laughing apology for the catechism through which he had been put when Sidney Barslow, who had been glowering worse and worse every minute, suddenly broke out:

"There's an end of the thing, at all events, at last!" And he looked at Arthur, as it seemed to her, with a curious mixture of anger and fear, a sort of snarling defiance.

"It was not I who introduced the subject or was responsible for its continuance," said Arthur, in the iciest of all his cool voices. "That you must do me the justice to admit, Barslow."

Then an awful pause – even Joe gravelled for a joke – and the most obvious clumsy resort to "a little more music"! The strains failed of soothing effect. On the one side a careful but disdainful courtesy, on the other a surly defiance – they persisted all the evening, making everybody uncomfortable and (as Marie shrewdly guessed) inquisitive. This was something much worse, much more pronounced, than mere 'grating.' There was, on Sidney's side at least, an actual enmity; and Arthur, noting it, treated it with contemptuous indifference.

"Have you had a row with Sidney about anything?" she managed to whisper to Arthur.

"No."

"Have you said anything to annoy him, do you think?"

He looked straight into her eyes. "I haven't spoken to him since we were last here."

Sidney she did not venture to approach in confidence; he was altogether too dangerous that night. She did not know the occasion which had fanned a smouldering hostility into flame, which had changed a mere 'grating' of the one on the other, an uncongeniality, into feelings much stronger and more positive. Even had she known it, perhaps she was not well enough versed in the standards and the moods of men to understand all that it carried with it. Sidney Barslow was not particularly ashamed of what had happened to him in itself: in suitable company he would have found it a story he could tell and be sure of a humorous sympathy; there was nothing to be remorseful or miserable about. As long as a man did his work and earned his 'screw' (and Sidney held a good position in a wholesale linen-merchant's business and was doing well) he was entitled to his amusements – if you like, his dissipations – while he was young at all events. If indiscretions marked them, if one sometimes tumbled over the line, that was in the nature of the case. He would not have minded an encounter with Joe Halliday outside that public-house in the least – no, nor even with young Raymond Sarradet, Marie's brother though he was. Nay, he would not much have minded being seen even by Arthur Lisle himself; for if Arthur had been shocked, Sidney would, in all sincerity, have dubbed him a milksop; the man who would be shocked at a thing like that was certainly a milksop. He was not even afraid of Arthur's betraying him to Marie – not because he thought his enemy above that, but because he had an easy confidence that he could put the matter right with Marie, and a strong doubt whether women objected to that sort of thing so much as they were in the habit of pretending; in their hearts they like a man to be a man, Sidney would have told himself for comfort.

The poison lay elsewhere. Under the influence of his liquor and the stress of his plight – wanting to prove to the policeman, to the 'chucker-out,' to the interested bystanders, that he was not a common tap-room frequenter but a 'gentleman' – he had let himself appeal for his warrant of gentility to the man whom he had derided for thinking himself so much (if you please!) a gentleman. Arthur Lisle's acquaintance was to prove to bystanders, policeman, and chucker-out, that he, Sidney Barslow, though drunk and in queer company, was yet a gentleman! And how had the appeal been received? He could not charge Arthur with cutting him, or leaving him in the lurch. He hated far worse the look he had seen in his enemy's eyes as they gazed steadfastly into his – the fastidious repulsion and the high contempt. True, on the sight of them he had withdrawn his appeal; he had preferred to accept defeat and humiliation at the hands of chucker-out and constable; but the fact of the appeal having been made remained with all its damning admission of inferiority. And that look of contempt he had seen again when Arthur Lisle, in answer to Joe Halliday's clumsy jokes, replied in his cool proud voice that, as he walked home by Oxford Street, he had met with "nothing out of the common." He had met a common fellow with a common woman, and, as was common, the common fellow was drunk. With all the sharpness wherewith humiliation pricks a man, with all the keenness wherewith hatred can read the mind of an enemy, he pointed for himself the meaning of Arthur's careless-sounding words.

He was in a rage, not only with Arthur Lisle, but with himself and his luck – which had indeed been somewhat perverse. Lashing himself with these various irritants, he soon produced another sore

spot – Marie Sarradet's behaviour. He was an older friend than Arthur; she had, he declared, backed Arthur up in his airy insolence; he swore to himself that he had seen her smile at it. At any rate she had not backed him up; to a man in a rage, or several rages, it was enough – more than enough for a man of his temper, to whom the desire for a woman was the desire for a mastery over her. And in the end he could not believe that that fragile whipper-snapper with his hoity-toity effeminate ways (the point of view is Sidney's) could be weighed in the balance against his own manly handsomeness, his dashing gallantry; why, he knew that he was a conqueror with women – knew it by experience!

Marie and Raymond, Amabel Osling and himself had made up a four to play lawn-tennis on the hard courts at Acton. They had enjoyed their game and their tea. He and Marie had won after a close match, and were in a good humour with themselves. He was forgetting his grievance against her. She liked him playing games; he was a finely built fellow and looked really splendid in his white flannels; if he ordered her about the court like a master, it was a legitimate sway; he knew the game and played well. When, after tea, the other two sauntered off – for an open and unashamed flirtation – Marie had never felt more kindly towards him; she had really forgiven the bearishness of his behaviour, and was prepared to tell him so after a little lecture, which, by the way, she quite looked forward to giving; for she too was fond of domination. She started leading up to the lecture.

"You seem to have found something since we last met, Sidney. I'm glad of it."

"What do you mean?" he asked carelessly, as he filled his pipe. He did not see her drift.

"Hadn't you mislaid something the other night?" Her dark eyes were dancing with mockery, and her lips twitched.

Now he looked at her suspiciously. "I don't understand."

"You might. I'm referring to your temper."

"I'm not aware that I said anything rude to you. If I did, I apologise."

"I'm not speaking of myself, but of my friends – my guests."

He leant his arm on the table which stood between them. "Meaning Mr. Arthur Lisle?"

"The smoke of your pipe blows in my face when you lean forward like that."

"Sorry!" He laid his pipe down beside him. "Well, the fact is, I'm about fed up with Lisle."

And Arthur Lisle was much in the same case – allowing for the difference of expression – as to Sidney! Marie smiled, but her brow wrinkled. "Sorry you don't like him, but it costs nothing to be polite."

"Well, all I can say is that I shall be very much obliged if you'll ask us on different evenings."

"That's assuming that I'm going to ask you on any evenings at all."

She thought this smart flick of her whip would bring him to reason.

"Oh, perhaps Lisle's going to be there every evening?"

"Any evening that he likes, Pops and I will be very pleased to see him – with or without an invitation." She relented a little; he looked angry and obstinate, but he looked handsome too. "You too, if you won't be silly. Why do you dislike him so much?"

He could not give her the whole reason; he gave what he could. "I see his game. He's always trying to come the swell over me and the rest of us."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean to; it's just –"

"His naturally aristocratic manner?" he sneered.

Marie sat up straight and looked composedly at him. By now she was angry – and she meant to hurt. "That's exactly it, Sidney," she said, "and it's a pity everybody hasn't got it."

She did hurt sorely. He had no code to keep him from hitting back, and his wrath was fierce. "Where did you learn so much about aristocratic manners? Behind the counter?"

She flushed hotly; tears came in her eyes. He saw what he had done, and was touched to a sudden remorse.

"Oh, I say, Marie, I didn't mean –!"

"I shan't forget that," she said. "Never!"

He shrugged his shoulders and stuck his pipe back in his mouth. He was ashamed, but obstinate still. "You brought it on yourself," he grumbled.

"Yes, I forgot that I wasn't talking to a gentleman."

He made one more effort after reconciliation. "Look here, Marie, you know what I think of you – "

"Yes, I do – you've just told me."

"Damnation!" he muttered, pulling at his pipe. Marie, looking carefully past him, began to put on her gloves. Thus Amabel and Raymond found them – with things obviously very wrong. Amabel diagnosed an offer and a refusal, but Raymond thought there must be even more behind his sister's stormy brow and clouded eyes. The journey back was not cheerful.

Marie was indeed cut to the quick. Even to herself it was strange how deeply she was wounded. The Sarradets had never been ashamed of the shop; rather they had taken an honourable pride in it and in the growth of its fortunes from generation to generation. Yet Sidney Barslow's gibe about the counter was to her now unforgivable. It brought into coarse and vivid relief her secret doubts and fears. It made her ask whether she, having made a friend of the man who had used a taunt like that, must not have something about her to justify it. It set her on fire to put an utter end to her friendship and association with Sidney Barslow – and thereby to prove to herself that, whatever her manners might be they were at least too good for such company as his.

Hitherto pretty equally balanced between the two young men, or at all events wistfully anxious that friendship with Arthur should not make impossible her old and pleasant comradeship with Sidney – in whom she found so much that she liked – she became now Arthur's furious partisan. With him and his cause she identified herself. She declared that it was purely for his sake, and not at all in the interest of her own domination and authority, that she had rebuked Sidney, and for his sake solely that she had suffered insult. By a natural turn of feeling she asked in her heart for a reward from him, a recognition of her championship, gratitude to her for having preferred him to his would-be rival; if he were not at least a little pleased and proud, she would feel disappointment and humiliation.

But he would be. And why? Because that was the right thing for him to be, and now in her eyes, at this moment, he could do no wrong. Sidney was all wrong, therefore Arthur must be all right. She could not bring herself to doubt it. And, being all right, he must do and feel all the right things. So he would – when he knew what she had done and suffered for him. Her heart cried out that somehow (as delicately as possible, of course) he must be made to know, to know the full extent of her service and her sacrifice; he must know the insult she had received; and he must consider it as great and wanton an insult as she did.

So her feelings formulated their claim upon him, with an instinctive cunning. It was a claim to which no chivalrous-minded man could be insensible; it was one that would appeal with commanding force to Arthur Lisle's impulsive generosity.

"For you I have quarrelled with my old friend – for you I have endured insult." What could he answer save that in him she should find a better friend, that his appreciation should efface the insult?

"Don't be afraid to come. There will be nobody here that you don't like this time." With these words her next invitation to Arthur Lisle ended.

He read them with a quick grasp of her meaning – of the essential part of it at least. She was on his side! He was glad. Neither for his own sake, nor for the sake of the idea that he had of her, would he easily have endured that she should be on Sidney Barslow's side and against him. Although she did not know what he knew, and had not seen what he had seen, her instincts and her taste were right! He looked forward eagerly to letting her perceive, in some way or other, that he recognised this, to congratulating her somehow on it, to sealing the pact of a natural alliance between them. How he would do this, or how far he might seem to go in the course of doing it, or what further implications might be involved in such a bond between man and maid, his young blood and his generous impulses did not pause to ask. It was the thing to do – and he wanted to do it.

CHAPTER V

THE TENDER DIPLOMATIST

The coming of the Easter legal vacation set Arthur free for the time from professional hopes and fears. He was due on a visit to his mother and sister at Malvern, but excused himself at the last moment. It was not in him to leave London. The Temple indeed he forsook, but he abode in his lodgings and spent his spare time with the Sarradets. Amabel Osling was staying with them, and Raymond was now in close attendance on her. There were two young couples, then, ready for lawn-tennis, for theatres, for concerts, or any other diversion. Yet pleasantest of all were the walks in Regent's Park on the offdays, when nothing special had been arranged, but Arthur would happen to stroll up to the Broad Walk, and Marie would chance to be giving her dog a run. Then they would saunter about together, or sit on a seat in the spring sunshine, talking of all manner of things – well, except of the particular form which Sidney Barslow's rudeness had taken. Somehow, in the end, Marie never could bring herself to tell him that and ask him to be indignant about it. She left the enormity vague and undefined; it was really none the less effective left like that, just as provocative of reprobation for the sinner and sympathy for the ill-used friend. And it was safer to leave it like that; she could never rid herself of the fear that the actual thing, if revealed, might appear to Arthur rude indeed – rough, ill-mannered, as much of all this as one could conceive – but not so overwhelmingly absurd and monstrous as it ought to seem, as the demands of her uneasy heart required that he should find it.

For she could hardly believe in what looked now like coming to pass. She had known him for a long time – more than a year – as a good friend but rather a reserved one; cordial and kind, but keeping always a certain distance, actually, if without intention, maintaining a barrier round his inner self, refusing to abandon the protective aloofness of a proud and sensitive nature. Was he changing from this to the opposite extreme – to that most open, intimate, exposed, and unprotected creature, a lover? Well as she had known him, she had not thought of him as that. But her mind fastened on the idea eagerly; it appealed to more than one side of her nature.

"As a rule I just can't talk about myself," he said once. "How is it that I can to you?"

"It's because I love you, and in your heart you know it," she wanted to say, but she answered, laughing, "I've always been rather a good listener."

"If you tell most people a single thing about yourself, they bombard you with a dozen silly questions. Now you never do that."

"That's because I'm afraid of you, if you only knew it," she wanted to say, but she answered merrily, "I find out more by my way in the end, don't I?"

For every step forward his feelings had taken, hers had taken ten. She knew it and was not ashamed; she gloried in it. From the moment she had come over to his side, making herself his champion and asking for his gratitude in return, her heart had brooked no compromise. Hers was a mind quick of decision, prompt in action. To romance she brought the qualities of business. A swift rush of feeling had carried her to the goal; she watched him now following in her steps, and was tremulously careful not to anticipate by an iota the stages he had yet to pass. She marvelled that she had not loved him from the beginning, and almost convinced herself that she had. She could scarcely persuade herself to accept even now the signs of his nascent love.

Thus in truth, though all unknown to him, she did the wooing. Her answer was ready before his question. She watched and waited with a passivity that was to a man of his disposition her best lure. Some of this fine caution she learnt from her observation of him, and some of it from Sidney Barslow's taunt. She subdued her natural coquetry lest, even in eyes the most unfriendly and malicious, it should seem forwardness. She gave always just a little, little less than his words and eyes asked.

Schooling herself after this fashion, modelling her behaviour to what she conceived to be his ideals, she sought to win him. If she succeeded she would achieve not only her heart's desire, but a great triumph over those disturbing doubts. His approval would, she felt, set on her the stamp that she longed to wear – the social diploma to which she aspired. A fine slap in the face for Sidney Barslow it would be, for instance!

Arthur's generous impulse, the desire to show himself a warm and grateful friend to his champion, was merged now in a great and absorbing contentment. It prevented him from considering how an engagement and a marriage would consort with his prospects and his career; it narrowed his vision of his own life and mind to the present moment. He had got what he had been pining for – that intimate and (so to say) ministering sympathy which a man perhaps can get, and certainly can ask, from a woman only. That had been a need so great that its satisfaction seemed to satisfy all the needs of his being, and deluded him into thinking that all his instincts and aspirations asked no more than this, that his keen appetite for beauty could be fed on her vivacious prettiness, that all his impulses, wayward, fanciful, sometimes extravagant, could be lulled to sleep by the spell of her shrewd and pleasant common sense. It made him forget that the prime function of a lover and his supreme expression lie in giving, and that the woman truly makes the man in love with her when she makes him give all he has and think that he is giving brass for gold. But if this it is to be a lover, Arthur Lisle was no lover now; if this it is to be a lover, Marie Sarradet had never seen and scarce imagined one.

But the spring sunshine, the impulses of youth, the ministering sympathy blinded his eyes. He seemed to have all because he liked so much that which he had. Gaily and happily, with that fine gallantry which she so admired, on he came, step by step. She grew secure.

By now father and brother were on the alert. They had canvassed the matter in all its bearings. Raymond was Arthur's enthusiastic adherent. Old Mr. Sarradet affected reserve and doubt; he complained that the suitor was far from rich. But in his heart he was delighted at the prospect. He admired Arthur, he believed in his abilities, he thought the marriage would be a "step up" for his darling daughter – and perhaps for her family. Above all he saw the time draw near when he should enjoy the greatest pleasure that he had to look forward to in life – surprising Marie by the handsome dimensions of her dowry. He hugged the thought of it; he loved her, and he knew she was a good woman of business. It would be a great moment when she saw in him, at one and the same moment, a more munificent father and a cleverer man of business than ever she had thought. Incidentally the disclosure might cause Master Raymond to realise what very considerable things he stood to lose if he did not mind what he was about. The old fellow had no real thought of disinheriting his son, but he loved the power his money gave him, and would now and again flourish the sword that he would have been most loth to use.

So all things promised bravely – Marie, the tender diplomatist, held a winning hand and was playing it well. Leave her to the skill that her heart taught her, and the game was won!

Among the accidents of life are relatives appurtenant to but ordinarily outside of the family circle. Mr. Sarradet owned one – an elder sister – in his eyes, by early memory and tradition, exceptionally endowed with the knowledge of the way to look after girls, and the proper things to be done in the interest of their dignity and virtue. She came up from Manchester, where she lived, to have her teeth seen to – not that there were not excellent dentists in Manchester, but her father had always gone to Mr. Mandells of Seymour Street and she had a fancy to go to Mr. Mandells's son (of Seymour Street still) – and stayed with her brother from Friday to Tuesday. Having seen what she saw, and had her doubts, and come to her own conclusions, she sat up late on Monday night, sat up till Arthur Lisle had departed and Marie was between the sheets, and even Raymond had yawned himself on to bed; and then she said abruptly to her brother Mr. Sarradet:

"It's a settled thing, I suppose, though it's not announced yet?"

Mr. Sarradet passed his hand over his hair-brush of a head, and pulled his moustache perplexedly. "I suppose it is," he answered lamely, quite conscious that Mrs. Veltheim possessed knowledge and commanded deference, but conscious also that, up to now, matters had gone on very well without her.

"You suppose!" said the lady. The two words carried home to a conscience hitherto guiltily easy. But Mrs. Veltheim left nothing to chance; she rammed the charge in. "If dear Marie had a mother!"

She alarmed the cautious old *bourgeois*— to the point of protesting that he felt no alarm whatever.

"He's a gentleman." He took a sip at his toddy. "No girl in the world has more self-respect." Another sip ended in "Perfect confidence!" vaguely murmured.

"Young men are young men."

"Not at all! I don't believe it of him for a minute." His protest was against the insinuation which even an identical proposition may carry.

"I rescued my Harriet just in time!"

"Damn your Harriet, and I wish you'd go back to Manchester!" It was not what he said to his respected sister. "Cases differ," was the more parliamentary form his answer took.

But the seed was sown before Mrs. Veltheim did go back to Manchester. It germinated in the cautious suspicious soul of the old shopkeeper, so trustful of a man's credit till the breath of a suspicion blew upon it, then so acute to note every eddying current of the air. He grew minded to confront Arthur Lisle with the attitude of Mrs. Veltheim – a lady for whom Arthur, on the strength of one evening's acquaintance, had conceived a most profound aversion.

She was a fat woman – broad, heavy, fair and florid, married to an exceedingly prosperous German. To Mr. Sarradet her opinion was, like her person, weighty; not always agreeable, but never unimportant. To Arthur she was already – before ever he had conceived of her as having or being entitled to have an opinion about him, his sentiments, or his intentions – an appreciable drawback, though not a serious obstacle, to the alliance which he was contemplating. He was, in fine, extremely glad that she and her husband, whom he defined and incarnated with all his imagination's power of vividness, lived in Manchester. If they too had dwelt in Regent's Park, it would not have been the same place to him. Collateral liabilities would have lurked round every corner.

By now, and notwithstanding a transitory disturbance created by the revelation of Mrs. Veltheim, Arthur's mind had subconsciously chosen its course; but emotionally he was not quite ready. His feelings waited for a spark to set them in a blaze – such a spark as might come any moment when he was with Marie, some special note of appeal sounded by her, some quick intuition of him or his mood, raising his admiration and gratitude, even some especially pretty aspect of her face suddenly striking on his sense of beauty. Any one of these would serve, but one of them was needed to change his present contentment into an impulse towards something conceived as yet more perfect. The tender shrewd diplomatist divined pretty well how things stood; she would not hurry or strive, that way danger lay; she waited, securely now and serenely, for the divine chance, the happy coincidence of opportunity and impulse. It was bound to come, and to come now speedily. Alas, she did not know that clumsy hands had been meddling with her delicate edifice!

Two days after Mrs. Veltheim had gone back to Manchester, old Sarradet left his place of business early, travelled by omnibus from Cheapside to the corner of Bloomsbury Street, and presented himself at the door of Arthur's lodgings. Arthur was at home; Marie had told him that she would not be able to meet him in Regent's Park that afternoon, as some shopping business called her elsewhere, and he was lounging through the hours, not (as it happened, and it does happen sometimes even when a man is in love) thinking about her much, but rather about that problem of his legal career which the waning of the vacation brought again to his mind. The appearance of Mr. Sarradet – who had never before honoured him with a visit – came as something of a surprise.

"As I was passing your corner, I thought I'd look in and see if you were coming up to our place this afternoon," Mr. Sarradet explained. "Because, if so, we might walk together."

Arthur said that he understood that Marie would be out, and therefore had not proposed to pay his friends a visit that day.

"Out, is she? Ah, yes!" He smiled knowingly. "You know what she's doing better than her father does!" He was walking about the little room, looking at Arthur's pictures, photographs, and other small possessions. "Well, you'll be coming again soon, I expect?"

"I expect so, if you'll have me," said Arthur, smiling.

Mr. Sarradet took up a photograph. "That's a nice face!"

"It's my mother, Mr. Sarradet."

"Your mother, is it? Ah, well now! And she lives at – ? Let me see! You did mention it."

"At Malvern – she and my sister."

"Your sister? Ah, yes! Unmarried, isn't she? Have you no other brothers or sisters?"

Under these questions – and more followed, eliciting a good deal of information about his family and its circumstances – Arthur's face gradually assumed its distinctively patient expression. The patience was very closely akin to endurance – in fact, to boredom. Why did the fussy old fellow worry him like that? Instinctively he hardened himself against Sarradet – against Sarradet's implied assertion of a right to ask him all these questions. Perhaps he knew that this resentment was not very reasonable. He felt it, none the less. To put him in any way to the question, to a test or a trial, was so entirely contrary to what had been Marie's way.

"And you're practising at the Bar, Mr. Lisle, eh?"

The infusion of obstinacy in the patience grew stronger. "I'm what is commonly called a briefless barrister."

Now old Sarradet knew that – and did not mind it under the circumstances. But the thought of that dowry was too much for him. He could not resist a little flourish. "Briefless! Oh, come, don't say that!" He pursed up his lips and shook his head humorously.

"It's unfortunately the case, Mr. Sarradet. I hope it won't always be so, of course."

"We must hope that, we must all hope that!" said Sarradet, rubbing his hands slowly together. "And in any case we none of us know what fortune has in store for us, do we?" He smiled, looking at Arthur with an interrogative air. He thought he had given the young man a lead, a good cue on which to speak. Arthur said nothing, and Sarradet's smile gradually vanished, being replaced by a look of some perplexity. He did not know how to go on; Mrs. Veltheim had told him what to do but had not told him how to do it. There was an awkward silence. Sarradet had taken up his hat and stood in the middle of the room, fingering it and eyeing Arthur with an air that seemed almost furtive. "Well, I must be going," he said at last.

Arthur moved towards the door of the room and opened it. Sarradet stepped into the hall, saying, "Perhaps you'll be looking in on us to-night?"

"Thanks awfully, but I've arranged to go to the theatre with a man to-night."

"To-morrow then?" Sarradet's tone sounded persistent.

Arthur had meant to look in to-morrow. It had been a pleasant prospect. Why was the old fellow making an obligation, a duty, of it?

"Yes, I'll come to-morrow," he said, rather curtly.

"Ah, that's right, that's right!" Arthur had opened the hall door by now. Sarradet took his hand and pressed it hard. "That'll be good news for Marie, won't it?" He had at last got a little nearer to what Mrs. Veltheim wanted.

"I'm very much flattered by your putting it like that." Arthur was still distant and defensive.

But Sarradet was desperate now – he must get out what he wanted to say before the door was shut on him. "Oh, nonsense! Come, Mr. Lisle, as man to man, we understand one another?"

The question was out at last. If he had put it a quarter of an hour earlier, Arthur Lisle would have answered it to his satisfaction, however little he relished its being put. But now it was not fated

to have an answer. For on the very moment of its being put, there came interruption in a form which made the continuance of this momentous conversation impossible.

A barouche with a pair of fine bay horses, a barouche on Cee-springs, sumptuously appointed, clattered up the street and to the common amazement of the two men stopped at the door. The footman sprang down from the box and, touching his hat to a lady who occupied the carriage, waited for her instructions. But she paid no heed to him. She leant over the side of the carriage and looked at the two men for a moment. Sarradet took off his hat. Arthur Lisle just stared at the vision, at the entire vision, the lady, the carriage, the footman – the whole of it.

The lady's face broke into a bright smile of recognition.

"I came to call on Mr. Arthur Lisle. You must be Arthur, aren't you?" she said.

No, there was no possibility of Mr. Sarradet's getting his question answered now.

CHAPTER VI

A TIMELY DISCOVERY

When Arthur ran down the step and across the pavement, to take the hand which his visitor held out to him over the carriage door, Mr. Sarradet bowed politely, put his hat on, and turned on his heel. He was consumed with curiosity, but he had no excuse for lingering. He walked up Bloomsbury Street and along the east side of Bedford Square. But then, instead of pursuing a north-westerly course towards his home, he turned sharply to the right and, slackening his pace, strolled along Montague Place in the direction of Russell Square. He went about twenty yards, then turned, strolled back to the corner of Bedford Square and peered round it. He repeated these movements three or four times, very slowly; they consumed perhaps six or seven minutes. His last inspection showed the carriage still at the door, though neither the lady nor Arthur was visible. Evidently she was paying a call, as she had intimated; no telling how long it might last! "Well, I must go home," thought Mr. Sarradet, as he strolled slowly towards the east once more. He turned and walked briskly back. Just as he reached again the corner from which he had taken his observation, he made a sudden backward jump. He was afraid that he was caught! For the barouche dashed by him at a rapid trot, and in it sat the lady and Arthur Lisle. They did not see him; their heads were turned towards one another; they appeared to be engrossed in a lively conversation. The carriage turned westward, across Bedford Square; Sarradet watched it till it disappeared round the corner into Tottenham Court Road.

"That's quick work!" thought Mr. Sarradet; and in truth, if (as the visitor's words implied) she had never seen Arthur Lisle before, the acquaintance was going forward apace. Who could she be? He was vaguely troubled that Arthur Lisle should have – or make – a friend like that. The barouche somehow depressed him; perhaps it put him a little out of conceit with the dimensions of that precious dowry; it looked so rich. And then there had been the reserve, the distance, in Arthur's manner, his refusal to follow up leads and to take cues, and the final fact that the important question had (even though it were by accident) gone unanswered. All these things worked together to dash Mr. Sarradet's spirits.

He told Marie about his visit to Arthur. She was rather surprised at a sudden fancy like that (for so he represented it) taking hold of him, but her suspicions were not roused. When he went on to describe the arrival of the other visitor she listened with natural and eager interest. But the old fellow, full of his perplexities, made a false step.

"She was in the house nearly ten minutes, and then – what do you think, Marie? – they drove away together!"

"In the house ten minutes? Where were you all that time?"

"I was – er – strolling along."

"You must have strolled pretty slowly. Where did they overtake you, Pops?"

He grew rather red. "I can't remember exactly – " he began lamely.

She knew him so well; his confused manner, telling that he had something to conceal, could not escape her notice.

"I believe you waited round the corner to see what happened! Why did you spy on him like that?"

"I don't see any particular harm in being a little curious about – "

But she interrupted him. His spying after the carriage threw suspicion on his motives for his visit too. "Didn't you really go and see Mr. Lisle about anything in particular?"

"Anything in particular, my dear? What do you mean? I asked him to drop in to-morrow – "

"Did you talk about me?"

"Oh, well, you were mentioned, of course."

She leant her arm on the mantelpiece and looked down at him gravely. He read a reproachful question in her glance, and fidgeted under it. "Have you been meddling?" was what her gravely enquiring eyes asked. "Meddling as well as spying, Pops?"

He was roused to defend himself. "You've got no mother, Marie, and – "

"Ah!" she murmured, as a quick flash of enlightenment came. That was Aunt Louisa's phrase! She saw where it came from in a minute; it had always supplied Mrs. Veltheim with a much desired excuse for interfering. She went on in a hard voice – she was very angry – "Did you ask Mr. Lisle his intentions?"

"Of course not. I – I only took the opportunity of finding out something about his people, and – and so on. Really, I think you're very unreasonable, Marie, to object – " and he wandered or maundered on about his paternal rights and duties.

She let him go on. She had no more to say about it – no more that she could say, without revealing her delicate diplomacy. She would do that to nobody alive; she had never stated it explicitly even to herself. There she left the affair, left the last word and a barren show of victory to her father. How much mischief he had done she would find out later – perhaps to-morrow, if Arthur Lisle came. But would he – now? It was the effect of her father's meddling she feared, not that matter of the lady's visit. She knew that he had other friends than themselves. Why shouldn't one of them come and take him for a drive? It was Mrs. Norton Ward, very likely. Her quarrel with her father about his meddling even prevented her from asking what the visitor was like; whatever he might do, she at least would show no vulgar curiosity.

Yet it was the coincidence of the visit with the meddling that did the mischief. Without the first, the second would have resulted in nothing worse than a temporary annoyance, a transitory shock to Arthur's feelings, which a few days' time and Marie's own tact would have smoothed over. As it was, his distaste for old Sarradet's inquisition, an angry humiliation at having the pistol held to his head, a romantic abhorrence of such a way of dealing with the tenderest and most delicate matters, a hideous yet obstinate suspicion that Marie might be privy to the proceeding – all these set his feelings just in time for the unexpected visit.

The visit had been delightful, and delight is an unsettling thing. As Mrs. Godfrey Lisle – or Bernadette, as she bade him call her – purred about his room (so he put it to himself), still more when she declared for sunshine and carried him off to drive with her – in Regent's Park too! – he had felt a sudden lift of the spirit, an exaltation and expansion of feeling. The world seemed wider, its possibilities more various; it was as though walls had been torn down from around him – walls of his own choice and making, no doubt, but walls all the same. This sensation was very vague; it was little more than that the whole atmosphere of his existence seemed fresher, more spacious and more pungent. He owned ruefully that the barouche, the Cee-springs, the bay horses and the liveries, might have had something to do with his pleasure; he knew his susceptibility to the handsome things of material life – the gauds and luxuries – and ever feared to catch himself in snobbishness. But the essential matter did not lie there; his company was responsible for that – Bernadette, and the way she had suddenly appeared, and whisked him off as it were on a magic carpet for a brief journey through the heavens; it seemed all too brief.

"I came as soon as ever I could," she told him. "I got Esther Norton Ward's letter about you after we'd gone to Hilsey for Easter, and we got back only yesterday. But I had terrible work to get leave to come. I had to go down on my knees almost! Cousin Arthur, you're in disgrace, and when you come to see us, you must abase yourself before Godfrey. The Head of the House is hurt because you didn't call!"

"I know. It was awfully wrong of me, but – "

"I understand all about it. But Godfrey's a stickler for his rights. However Sir Oliver and I managed to bring him round ("Who's Sir Oliver?" asked Arthur inwardly), and when you've eaten humble pie, it will be all right. Do you like humble pie, Arthur?"

"No, I don't."

"No more do I." But she was smiling still, and he thought it was little of that stuff she would have to consume. "You see, you made quite an impression on Esther. Oh, and Sir Christopher came down for a week-end, and he was full of your praises too." She put on a sudden air of gravity. "I drove up to your door in a state of considerable excitement, and I had a momentary fear that the fat man with the black moustache was you. However it wasn't – so that's all right." She did not ask who the fat man really was; Arthur was glad – all that could come later.

In fact she asked him no questions about himself. She welcomed him with the glee of a child who has found a new toy or a new playmate. There was no hint of flirtation, no effort to make a conquest; a thing like that seemed quite out of her way. There was no pose, either of languor or of gush. The admiration of his eyes, which he could not altogether hide, she either did not notice or took as a matter of course – something universal and therefore, from a personal point of view, not important. On the other hand he caught her looking at him with interest and critically. She saw that she was caught and laughed merrily over it. "Well, I do feel rather responsible for you, you know," she said in self-defence.

Life does do funny things all of a sudden! He drove with her past the Sarradets' house. He seemed, for the moment, a world away from it. They drove together for an hour; they arranged that he should come to lunch on a day to be fixed after consultation with Godfrey – it appeared that Godfrey liked to be consulted – and then she set him down in the Marylebone Road. When he tried, rather stammeringly, to thank her, she shook her head with a smile that seemed a little wistful, saying "No, I think it's I who ought to thank you; you've given me an afternoon's holiday – all to myself!" She looked back over her shoulder and waved her hand to him again as she turned down Harley Street and passed out of sight. When she was gone, the vision of her remained with him, but vaguely and rather elusively – a memory of grey eyes, a smooth rich texture of skin, mobile changeable lips, fair wavy hair – these in a setting of the richest apparel; an impression of something very bright and very fragile, carefully bestowed in sumptuous wrappings.

He went to the Sarradets' the next evening, as he had been bidden, but he went with laggard steps. He could not do what seemed to be expected of him there – not merely because it was expected, though that went for something considerable, thanks to his strain of fastidious obstinacy, but because it had become impossible for him to – his feelings sought a word and found only a very blunt and ungracious one – to tie himself up like that. His great contentment was impaired and could no longer absorb him. His sober scheme of happiness was crumbling. His spirit was for adventure. Finality had become suddenly odious – and marriage presents itself as finality to those who are not yet married. If he had not been ready for the plunge before, now he was a thousand times less ready.

The evening belied the apprehensions he had of it. There was a merry party – Mildred Quain, Amabel Osling, Joe Halliday, and half-a-dozen other young folk. And Mr. Sarradet was out! Dining at his club with some old cronies, Marie explained. There were games and music, plenty of chaff and a little horseplay. There was neither the opportunity nor the atmosphere for sentiment or sentimental problems. In gratitude to fate for this, and in harmony with what was his true inward mood behind and deeper than his perplexity, Arthur's spirits rose high; he chaffed and sported with the merriest. Marie was easy, cordial, the best of friends with him – not a hint of anything except just that special and pleasant intimacy of friendship which made them something more to one another than the rest of the company could be to either of them. She was just as she had always been – and he dismissed his suspicion. She had known nothing at all of Mr. Sarradet's inquisition; she was in no way to blame for it. And if she were innocent, why, then, was not he innocent also? His only fault could lie in having seemed to her to mean what he had not meant. If he had not seemed to her to mean it, where was his fault, – and where his obligation? But if he acquitted Marie, and was quite disposed to acquit himself, he nursed his grudge against old Sarradet for his bungling attempt to interfere between friends who understood one another perfectly.

Marie watched him, without appearing to watch, and was well content. Her present object was to set him completely at his ease again – to get back to where they were before Mrs. Veltheim interfered and her father blundered. If she could do that, all would be well; and she thought that she was doing it. Had Mrs. Veltheim and Mr. Sarradet been the only factors in the case, she would probably have proved herself right; for she was skilful and tenacious, and no delicacy of scruple held her back from trying to get what she wanted, even when what she wanted happened to be a man to marry. There that toughness of hers served her ends well.

When he said good-night, he was so comfortable about the whole position, so friendly to her and so conscious of the pleasure she had given him in the last few weeks, that he said with genuine ruefulness, "Back to the Temple to-morrow! I shan't be able to play about so much!"

"No, you must work," she agreed. "But try to come and see us now and then, when you're not too busy."

"Oh, of course I shall – and I'm not at all likely to be busy. Only one has to stop in that hole – just in case."

"I mean – just when you feel like it. Don't make a duty of it. Just when you feel inclined for a riot like this, or perhaps for a quiet talk some afternoon."

This was all just what he wanted to hear, exactly how he wanted the thing to be put.

Yes, but Mr. Sarradet would not always be so obliging as to be out! The thought of Mr. Sarradet, whom he had really forgotten, suddenly recurred to him unpleasantly.

"That's what I like – our quiet talks," she went on. "But you've only to say the word, and we'll have company for you."

Her tone was light, playful, chaffing. He answered in the same vein. "I'll send my orders about that at least twelve hours beforehand."

"Thank you, my lord," and, laughing, she dropped him a curtsey.

He left them still at their frolic and went home rather early. He had enjoyed himself, but, all the same, his dominant sense was one of relief, and not merely from the obligation which officious hands had sought to thrust on him, regardless of the fact that he was not ready to accept it and might never be. It was relief from the sense of something that he himself had been doing, or been in danger of doing, to his own life – a thing which he vaguely defined as a premature and ignorant disposal of that priceless asset. Together with the youthful vanity which this feeling about his life embodied, there came to him also a moment of clear-sightedness, in the light of which he perceived the narrow limits of his knowledge of the world, of life, even of himself. He saw – the word is too strong, rather he felt somehow – that he had never really wanted Marie Sarradet to share, much less to be the greatest factor in, that precious, still unexplored life; he had really only wanted to talk to her about it, with her to speculate about it, to hear from her how interesting it was and might become. He wanted that still from her. Or at all events from somebody? From her or another? He put that question behind him – it was too sceptical. He wanted still her interest, her sympathy. But he wanted something else even more – freedom to find, to explore, to fulfil his life.

So it was that Mr. Arthur Lisle, by a fortunate combination of circumstances on which he certainly had no right to reckon, found out, just in time, that after all he had never been in love – unless indeed with his own comely image, flatteringly reflected in a girl's admiring eyes.

Poor tender diplomatist! But possibly she too might make her own discoveries.

CHAPTER VII

ALL OF A FLUTTER

"Bernadette's got a new toy, Esther."

"I know it," said Mrs. Norton Ward, handing her visitor a cup of tea.

"Do you mean that you know the fact or that you're acquainted with the individual?"

"The latter, Judith. In fact I sent him to her."

"Well, it was she who went to him really, though Godfrey made some trouble about it. He thought the young man ought to have called first. However they got round him."

"They? Who?"

"Why, Bernadette and Oliver Wyse, of course. And he came to lunch. But Godfrey was quite on his high horse at first – stroked his beard, and dangled his eye-glass, and looked the other way when he was spoken to – you know the poor old dear when he's like that? Luckily the young man could tell Leeds from Wedgwood, and that went a long way towards putting matters right. Godfrey quite warmed to him at last."

"We like him very much, and I hope you did – even if you won't admit it. He's got a room in Frank's chambers, you know."

"I didn't speak more than six words to him – he was up at the other end of the table by Bernadette. But I liked the look of him rather. Of course he was all of a flutter."

"Oh, I daresay," smiled Esther. "But I thought we ought to risk that – and Sir Christopher felt quite strongly about it."

Judith Arden appeared to reflect for a moment. "Well, I think he ought to be," she said judiciously. "I wouldn't give much for a man who didn't get into a flutter over Bernadette, at first anyhow. She must seem to them rather – well, irresistible."

"She's wonderfully" – Esther Norton Ward sought for a word too – "radiant, I mean, isn't she?"

"And there isn't a bit of affectation about her. She just really does enjoy it all awfully."

"All what?"

"Why, being irresistible and radiant, of course."

"That's looking at it entirely from her point of view."

"What point of view do you suppose she looks at it from? That is, if she ever looks at it at all. And why not? They ought to be able to look after themselves – or keep away."

"I really think you're a very fair-minded girl," laughed Esther. "Very impartial."

"You have to be – living with them as much as I do."

"Do you like it?"

Judith smiled. "The situation is saved just by my not having to do it. If I had to do it for my bread-and-butter I should hate it like poison. But, thank heaven, I've four hundred a year, and if I spend the summer with them, it's because Godfrey and Margaret want me. The winter I keep for myself – Switzerland part of the time, then Rome, or Florence. So I'm quite independent, you see. I'm always a visitor. Besides, of course, nobody could be more gracious than Bernadette; graciousness is part of being irresistible."

"I really do think that being pretty improves people," said Esther.

"Well, as far as I can see, without it there wouldn't *be* any Bernadette," Judith remarked, and then laughed gently at her own extravagance. "At any rate, she'd be bound to turn into something absolutely different. Something like me even, perhaps!" She laughed again, a low, pleasant, soft laugh, rather in contrast with the slightly brusque tone and the satiric vein which marked her speech. The laugh seemed to harmonise with and to belong to her eyes, which were dark, steady, and reflective; the tone and manner to fall into line with the pertness of her nose, with its little jut upwards, and with

the scornful turn of her upper lip. Her figure and movements perhaps helped the latter impression too; she inclined to thinness, and her gestures were quick and sometimes impatient.

"Come, you're not so bad," said Esther with her pleasant cordial candour. "Now I'm quite insignificant."

"No, you're not. You've got the grand manner. I heard Godfrey say so."

Esther laughed both at the compliment and at the authority vouched in support of it.

"Oliver Wyse was at lunch too on the occasion, was he? How is he getting on?"

"Sir Oliver is still his usual agreeable, composed, competent, and, I'm inclined to think, very wilful self."

"Patient, though?" The question came with a mischievous glance. Judith's retort was ironic, both with eyes and tongue.

"I permit myself any amount of comment on character but no conjecture as to facts. That's the distinction between studying human nature and gossiping, Esther."

"Don't snub me! And the distinction's rather a fine one."

"No, gossip's all right for you, living outside the house. I live so much inside it that I think it wouldn't be fair in me. And above all, owing to the footing on which I'm there – as I've told you – I am emphatically not a watch-dog."

"Where's the child?"

"She's down at Hilsey – with the old housekeeper Mrs. Gates – by doctor's orders."

"Again! Have you any comment to make on the doctor's character?"

"I think you're being malicious. It's really better for the child to be in the country. We're very busy, all of us, and very gay – a bustle all the time. If she were here, she'd only be with a nurse in the Park or in the nursery. And we're only just back from three weeks at Hilsey ourselves."

"Yes, I think I was being malicious," Esther admitted. "I suppose we're all jealous of Bernadette in our hearts, and talk like cats about her! Well, you don't!"

"It would be ungrateful of me. She affords me a very great deal of pleasure. Besides, she's my aunt."

"Well – by marriage."

"Oh yes, entirely by marriage," Miss Arden agreed with one of her fleeting smiles. She implied that no other form of auntship would be, as the advertisements say, "entertained" by Bernadette. "And even as to that I have, by request, dropped the titles, both for her and Godfrey," she added.

Though Judith Arden was only just out of her teens, she was older in mind and ways; she ranked herself, and was accepted, as contemporary with women in the middle and later twenties, like Bernadette and Esther Norton Ward. She had had to face the world practically by herself. An epidemic of fever in an Italian town had carried off father and mother when she was fifteen. She had got them buried, herself quarantined and back to England, unaided, as she best could. That was a developing experience. At home she came under the guardianship of her uncle, Godfrey Lisle, which was much the same thing as coming under her own. Godfrey was not practical; the care of a growing girl was hopelessly beyond him. Judith put herself to school at Paris; that finished with, she tried Cambridge for a term, and found it too like going back to school. She kept house for a while with an old school-comrade, an art-student, in Paris. The friend married, and she was by herself again. A visit to Hilsey led to the sort of semi-attachment to the Godfrey Lisle household which she described to Esther; from the position of a "poor relation" she was saved by her four hundred pounds a year – her mother's portion; the late Mr. Arden, author of books on art, and travel in the interests of art, had left nothing but some personal debts behind. To the maturity of her world-experience there was one exception; she had never been in love; the transitory flirtations of ball-rooms and studios had left her amused but heart-whole.

Her guardian had come by degrees to let himself be looked after by her a good deal. The inheritor of an old family estate worth some ten thousand pounds a year, Godfrey Lisle had been

bred for a country squire, a local man of affairs, or (given aptitude for the wider sphere) a politician; such were the traditions of the Lises of Hilsey. In him they found no continuance. He was a shy quiet man, tall but rather awkward in person, and near-sighted; his face was handsome and refined and, when he was not embarrassed (he often was), his manner was pleasant, if too soft. But he did not like society, and was shy with strangers; he would fumble with the black ribbon from which his glasses hung, and look the other way, as Judith had described. He was fond of beautiful things – pictures, china, furniture – but had not the energy to make himself a real amateur of any of them. His nature was affectionate – calmly affectionate, and the affections were constant. Once, and once only, he had blazed into a flame of feeling – when he courted Bernadette and in the early days of his marriage with her. The beautiful penniless girl – she would have stirred even a fish to romance; and it would not have been fair to call Godfrey fish-like. But ardours were not really in his line; too soon the rapturous lover subsided into the affectionate husband. Bernadette had shown no signs of noticing the change; perhaps she did not wish to check it. It may be that it coincided with a modification of her own feelings. At any rate, thus acquiesced in, it had gone further. Little of affection survived now, though they treated one another with the considerate politeness of an extinct passion. He gave her everything that she desired – even to the straining of his income; he was the only person for whom she ever "put herself out." Here were reciprocal, if tacit, apologies for a state of affairs which neither of them really regretted.

She had loved him, though, once. She did not claim it as a merit; there it was, a curious fact in her past life at which, in her rare moments of introspection, she would smile. She had loved not only all that he brought – ease, wealth, escape from sordidness; she had also loved him for bringing them. Even now sometimes she would love the memory of him as he had seemed in those days; then the considerate politeness would be coloured by a pretty tenderness, a sort of compassionate affection as for a man who had fallen from high estate, inevitably fallen but blamelessly. However these recrudescences on the whole embarrassed Godfrey Lisle, and Bernadette, laughing at herself, withdrew to a safe distance and to her real interests. Godfrey was not one of the interests of her life; he was only one of its conditions.

Into this household – though not, of course, below the surface of it – Arthur Lisle now made joyful and tremulous entry. His eyes were in no state to see clearly or to see far; they were glued to the central light, and for him the light burned bright to dazzling. Behold the vision that he saw – the vision of a Reigning Beauty!

It is a large party. There is no getting near her – at least no staying near. The crush forces a man away, however politely. But perhaps a far-off corner may afford a view, for a dexterous servant keeps clear a space just in front of her, and the onlooker is tall. They all come and speak to her, by ones and twos – ex-beauties, would-be beauties, rival beauties; for the last she has a specially cordial greeting – sometimes, if she knows them well, a word of praise for their gowns, always a quick approving glance at them. The great ladies come; for them a touch of deference, a pretty humility, a "Who am I that you should come to my house?" air, which gracefully masks her triumphant sense of personal power. The men come – all the young men who would adore if they might, and are very grateful for their invitations; they pass quickly, each with his reward of an indolent smile of welcome. The choice young men come; them she greets with a touch of distance lest they should grow proud in their hearts. No favour in them to come – far from it! Then an old man, a friend. Mark now the change; she is daughter-like in her affection and simplicity. Then perhaps a little stir runs through the company, a whisper, a craning of necks. A great man is coming – for beauty can draw greatness. There comes a massive white head – a ribbon and star perhaps, or the plain black that gives, not wears, such ornaments. He stays with her longer: there is no jostling now; the dexterous servant delays the oncoming stream of guests. Royal compliments are exchanged. It is a meeting between Potentates.

In some such dazzling colours may the ardent imagination of youth paint the quite ordinary spectacle of a pretty woman's evening party, while an old lady on one side of him complains that

"everybody" is there, and an old man on the other says that it is a beastly crush, or damns the draught from a window behind him – lucky, perhaps, if he does not damn the Potentates too, the one for keeping him from his bed, the other for marching through rapine to dismemberment, or some such act of policy plainly reprehensible.

Strange to think – it is Youth that holds the brush again – strange and intoxicating – that this is the woman with whom he drives in the Park, of whose family luncheon he partakes, with whom he had tea yesterday, who makes a friend of him. She talked to him an hour yesterday, told him all about that hard childhood and girlhood of hers, how she had scanty food and coarse, had to make her own frocks and wash her own handkerchiefs; she said that she feared the hard training had made her hard, yet hoped with a sigh that it was not so, and seemed to leave the question to his sovereign arbitrament. She had made the little narrow home she came from real to him with cunning touches; she had made her leap of escape from it so natural, so touching. Of what the leap had brought her she had made light, had spoken with a gentle depreciation of the place her beauty had won – "Such looks as I have helped, I suppose, besides Godfrey's position" – and let him see how much more to her taste was a quiet talk with a friend than all the functions of society. How much better than the receiving of Beauties and Potentates was a quiet hour in the twilight of her little den with Cousin Arthur!

Could it be the same woman? Yes, it was. There was the wonder and the intoxication of it. He was quite unknown to all that throng. But to himself he stood among them, eminent and superior. See, hadn't she thrown him a glance – right across the room? Well, at any rate he could almost swear she had!

Arthur Lisle – in the flesh at his cousin's evening party, in the spirit anywhere you like – felt a hand laid on his arm. He turned to find Sir Christopher Lance beside him.

"Ah, Mr. Lisle, aren't you glad you took my advice? I told you you were missing something by not coming here. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, sir, but you see, I didn't know – I didn't quite understand what you meant."

"You might have thought it worth while to find out," said the old man, smiling. "As it was, I'm told you had to be fetched."

Arthur laughed shamefacedly but happily. That was already a standing joke between him and Bernadette; hence the associations of it were altogether pleasant.

Sir Christopher's way was not to spoil joy in the name of wisdom nor to preach a safety that was to be won through cowardice. He saw the young man's excitement and exaltation, and commended it.

"Take as much of this sort of thing as you can get," he counselled, nodding his head towards the crowd and, incidentally, towards Bernadette. "Take a good dose of the world. It'll do you good. Society's an empty thing to people with empty heads, but not to the rest of us. And the more you go about, and so on – well, the fewer terrors will my Brother Pretyman possess for you."

Arthur Lisle caught at the notion eagerly. "Just what I've had in my own mind, sir," he said gravely.

"I thought from the look of you that you had some such wise idea in your head," said Sir Christopher with equal seriousness.

Arthur blushed, looked at him rather apprehensively, and then laughed. The Judge remained grave, but his blue eyes twinkled distantly. *O mihi praeteritos* – that old tag was running in his head.

"It's getting late; only bores stay late at large parties. Come and say good-night to our hostess."

"Do you think we might?" asked Arthur.

Certainly he was all of a flutter, as Judith Arden said.

CHAPTER VIII

NOTHING VENTURE, NOTHING HAVE!

Arthur Lisle sat in his chambers with a copy of the current number of the Law Reports (K.B.D.) before him and with utter discouragement in his heart. This mood was apt to seize him in the mornings, after the nights of gaiety which (obeying Mr. Justice Lance's advice) he eagerly sought. To-day it was intensified by the fact that Bernadette had gone to Paris for a fortnight. She bade him an affectionate, almost a tender, farewell, but she went, and was obviously glad to go. Though he asked nothing from her except to let herself be adored with a dog-like adoration, a shamefaced wonder that she should be so glad to go hid in his heart; mightn't she feel the loss of the adoration just a little more? However there it was. And he had nothing to do. Also he was hard up. The men he met at his parties had things to do and were doing them – interesting things that they could talk to women about, things they were actually doing, not mere hopes and dreams (such as had, not so long ago, been good enough to talk to Marie Sarradet about). They were making their marks, or, at least, some money. Talking of money, it was annoying, indeed humiliating, not being able to ask Bernadette to lunch at the resorts and in the style to which she was accustomed. He had done this once, and the same afternoon had suddenly been confronted with an appalling shininess in the back of his dress-coat; the price of the lunch would pretty well have paid for a new coat. But there – if you gave parties you could not have new coats; and what was the good of new coats unless you could give parties? A vicious circle!

Stagnation! That was what his life was – absolute stagnation. No avenues opened, there were no prospects. Stagnation and Vacancy – that's what it was!

A strange contrast is this to the young man at the evening party? Nay, no contrast at all, but just the other side of him, the complement of the mood which had pictured Potentates and thrilled over the Reigning Beauty. The more ardently youth gives one hand to hope, the more fiercely despair clutches the other.

Suddenly – even as Martin Luther flung his inkpot at Satan – Arthur Lisle with an oath seized the Law Reports (K.B.D.) and hurled them violently from him – across the room, with all his force, at this Demon of Stagnation and towards the door which happened to be opposite. They struck – not the door – but the waistcoat of Henry who at that moment opened it. Henry jumped in amazement.

"Beg your pardon, Henry. It slipped from my hand," said Arthur, grinning in ill-tempered mirth.

"Well, I thought no other gentleman was with you," remarked Henry, whose ideas of why one should throw books about were obviously limited. "A Mr. Halliday is here, sir, and wants to know if you'll see him."

"Of course I will. Show him in directly." As Henry went out, Arthur ejaculated the word "Good!"

Anybody would have been welcome – even Luther's Antagonist himself, perhaps – to Arthur in that black mood of his. Joe Halliday was a godsend. He carried cheerfulness with him – not of the order commended by moralists and bred by patience out of trouble, but rather a spontaneous hilarity of mind, thanks to which he derided the chances of life, and paddled his canoe with a laugh through the rapids of fortune. Joe had no settled means and he scorned any settled occupation. He preferred to juggle with half a dozen projects, keeping all of them in the air at once. He had something to sell and something to buy, something to find or something to get rid of; something had just been invented, or was just going to be; somebody needed money or somebody had it to invest. And all the Somebodies and Somethings were supposed to pay a toll to Joe for interesting himself in the matter. Generally they did; when they failed to, he paddled gaily on to another venture – Cantabat vacuus. But on the whole he was successful. The profits, the commissions, the "turns" came rolling in – and were rolled out again with a festive and joyous prodigality that took no thought for a morrow which,

under the guidance of an acute and sanguine intelligence, should not have the smallest difficulty in providing for itself.

He bustled in and threw his hat on Arthur's table. "Morning, old chap. Sorry to interrupt! I expect you're awfully busy? Yes, I see! I see! Look at the briefs! Mr. Arthur Lisle – with you the Right Hon. Sir Richard Finlayson, k. c., m.p. – 300 guineas! Whew! Mr. Arthur Lisle – With you – " He fingered the imaginary briefs, rolling his eyes at Arthur, and scratching his big hooked nose with the other hand.

"Go to the devil, Joe," said Arthur, smiling, suddenly able to smile, at the Demon of Stagnation as represented by his empty table. "Have a cigarette?"

"The subject of my call demands a pipe," and he proceeded to light one. "Have you got any money, Arthur?"

"I think you're roughly acquainted with the extent of my princely income."

"Income isn't money. Capital is. Turn your income into capital, and you've got money!"

"It sounds delightfully simple, and must work well – for a time, Joe."

"I've got a real good thing. No difficulty, no risk – well, none to speak of. I thought you might like to consider it. I'm letting my friends have the first chance."

"What is it? Gold, rubber, or a new fastener for umbrellas?" Arthur was not a stranger to Joe's variegated ventures.

"It's a deal safer than any of those. Did you ever see *Help Me Out Quickly*?"

"Yes. I saw it at Worcester once. Quite funny!"

"Well, a fellow who put five hundred into *Help Me Out Quickly* drew seventeen thousand in eighteen months and is living on it still. Arthur, I've found a farce compared to which *Help Me Out Quickly* is like the Dead March in Saul played by the vicar's wife on a harmonium."

"And you want money to produce it?"

"That's the idea. Two thousand or, if possible, two thousand five hundred. We could get the Burlington in the autumn – first-rate theatre. Lots of fun, and mints of money! The thing only wants seeing, doesn't it?"

"What's the use of talking to me, Joe? I haven't got – "

"We're all of us going in – quite a family affair! Raymond's in it, and old Pa Sarradet has put a bit in for Marie. And Mildred's governor has come in; and Amabel has begged a pony of her governor, and put it in – just for a lark, you know. I'm in – shirt, and boots, and all. We're all in – well, except Sidney. That chap's got no spunk."

The inference about Arthur, if he did not "come in," was sadly obvious to himself, though Joe had not in the least meant to convey it. But that did not much affect him. The idea itself filled him with a sudden, a delicious, tingle of excitement. Lots of fun and mints of money! Could there be a programme more attractive? Vacancy and Stagnation could not live in the presence of that.

"Just for curiosity – how much more do you want, to make it up?" asked Arthur.

"A thousand." Joe laughed. "Oh, I'm not asking you to put down all that. Just what you like. Only the more that goes in, the more comes out." He laughed again joyfully; his prophetic eyes were already beholding the stream of gold; he seemed to dip that beak of his in it and to drink deep.

Arthur knew what his income was only too well – also what was his present balance at the bank. But, of course, his balance at the bank (twenty-six pounds odd) had nothing to do with the matter. His mind ran back to *Help Me Out Quickly*. How Mother, and Anna, and he had laughed over it at Worcester! One or two of the "gags" in it were household words among them at Malvern to this day. Now Joe's farce was much, much funnier than *Help Me Out Quickly*.

"I know just the girl for it too," said Joe. "Quite young, awfully pretty, and a discovery of my own."

"Who is she?"

Joe looked apologetic. "Awfully sorry, old fellow, but the fact is we're keeping that to ourselves for the present. Of course, if you came in, it'd be different."

The Law Reports still lay on the floor; Joe Halliday sat on the table – Sacred Love and Profane, Stern Duty and Alluring Venture.

"I'm putting up five hundred. Be a sport, and cover it!" said Joe.

Something in Arthur Lisle leapt to a tremendous decision – a wild throw with Fortune. "You can put me down for the thousand you want, Joe," he said in quite a calm voice.

"Christopher!" Joe ejaculated in amazed admiration. Then a scruple, a twinge of remorse, seized him for a moment. "That's pretty steep, old chap – and nothing's an absolute cert!" Temperament triumphed. "Though if there's one on God's earth we've got it!"

"In for a penny, in for a pound! Nothing venture, nothing have!" cried Arthur, feeling wonderfully gleeful.

"But, I say, wouldn't you like to read it first?" Conscience's expiring spark!

"I'd sooner trust your opinion than my own. I may read it later on, but I'll put down my money first."

"Well, I call you a sport!" Joe was moved and put out his hand. "Well, here's luck to us!"

Arthur had plunged into deep water, but it did not feel cold. He suffered no reaction of fear or remorse. He was buoyant of spirit. Life was alive again.

"Of course I shall have to sell out. I haven't the cash by me," he said, smiling at the idea. The cash by him indeed! The cash that ought to keep him, if need be, for six or seven years, pretty near a quarter of all he had in the world, representing the like important fraction of his already inadequate income. Why, now the income would be hopelessly inadequate! His mind was moving quickly. What's the use of trying to live on an inadequate income? While Joe was yet in the room, Arthur formed another resolution – to realise and spend, besides Joe's thousand (as his thoughts called it), another five hundred pounds of his money. "By the time that's gone," said the rapidly moving mind, "either I shall have made something or I shall have to chuck this – and thank heaven for it!"

But all this while, notwithstanding his seething thoughts, he seemed very calm, gently inhaling his cigarette smoke. Joe thought him the finest variety of "sport" – the deadly cool plunger. But he also thought that his friend must be at least a little better off than he had hitherto supposed – not that he himself, having the same means as Arthur, would not have risked as much and more without a qualm. But that was his temper and way of living; he had never credited Arthur with any such characteristics. However his admiration remained substantially unchanged; many fellows with tons of money had no spunk.

"May I tell them in Regent's Park?" he asked. "It'll make 'em all sit up."

"Tell them I'm in with you, but not for how much."

"I shall let 'em know you've done it handsome."

"If you like!" laughed Arthur. "How are they? I haven't seen them just lately."

"They're all right. You have been a bit of an absentee, haven't you?"

"Yes, I must go one day soon. I say, Joe, who are your stockbrokers?"

Joe supplied him with the name of his firm, and then began to go. But what with his admiration of Arthur, and his enthusiasm for the farce, and the beauty and talent of the girl he had discovered, it was, or seemed, quite a long time before he could be got out of the room. Arthur wanted him to go, and listened to all his transports with superficial attention; his real mind was elsewhere. At last Joe did go – triumphant to the end, already fingering thousands just as, on his entrance, he had so facetiously fingered Arthur's imaginary briefs. Arthur was left alone with the Law Reports – still on the floor where they had fallen in rebound from Henry's waistcoat. Let them lie! If they had not received notice to quit, they had at least been put very much on their good behaviour. "Prove you're of some use, or out you go!" – Arthur had delivered to them his ultimatum.

So much, then, for his Stern Mistress the Law – for her who arrogated the right to exact so much and in return gave nothing, who claimed all his days only to consume them in weary waiting, who ate up so much of his means with her inexorable expenses. She had tried to appease him by dangling before his eyes the uncertain distant prospect that in the space of years – some great, almost impossible, number of years – he would be prosperous – that he would be even as Norton Ward was, with briefs rolling in, "silk" in view, perhaps a candidature. It seemed all very remote to Arthur's new impatience. He set his mistress a time-limit. If within the time that it took him to spend that five hundred pounds – he did not decide definitely how long it would be – she did something to redeem her promises, well and good, he would be prepared to give her a further trial. If not, he would be take himself, with his diminished income, to fresh woods and pastures new, lying over the Back of Beyond in some region unexplored and therefore presumed to be fertile and attractive. He would indeed have no choice about the matter, since the diminished income would no longer meet her exactions, and yet enable him to live. A break with the Stern, and hitherto ungrateful, Mistress would be a matter of compulsion. He was very glad of it.

What of that other – the Mistress of his Fancy, delicate sumptuous Cousin Bernadette? Vaguely, yet with a true instinct, he felt that she was at the back of this mood of his and the impulses it inspired. She was the ultimate cause, Joe Halliday's sanguine suggestions but the occasion. Had he not outbid Joe's daring with a greater of his own? She it was who had stirred him to discontent, be it divine or a work of the Devil's; she it was who braved him to his ventures. She showed him the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them – or, at least, very tempting glimpses thereof; would she not herself be his guide through them, conferring on them thereby a greater glory? In return he was ready enough to fall down and worship, asking for himself nothing but leave to kneel in the precincts of the shrine, not touching so much as the hem of her garment.

In response to her beauty, her splendour, the treasure of her comradeship, he offered a devotion as humble and unselfish as it was ardent. But he burned to have an offering to lay at her feet – a venture achieved, the guerdon of a tournament. The smaller vanities worked with these high-flying sentiments. For her sake he would be comely and well-equipped, point-de-vice in his accoutrements; not a poor relation, client, or parasite, but a man of the world – a man of her world – on equal terms with others in it, however immeasurably below herself. If she thought him worthy of her favour, others must think him worthy too; to which end he must cut a proper figure. And that speedily; for a horrible little fiend, a little fiend clever at pricking young men's vanity to the quick, had whispered in his ear that, if he went shabby and betrayed a lack of ready cash, Cousin Bernadette might smile – or be ashamed. Adoration must not have her soaring wings clipped by a vile Economy.

All these things had been surging in him – confusedly but to the point of despair – when he threw the Law Reports across the room and hit Henry in the waistcoat; he had seemed caught hopelessly in his vicious circle, victim beyond help to the Demon of Stagnation. Not so strange, then, his leap for life and freedom, not so mad could seem the risks he took. Joe Halliday had come at a moment divinely happy for his purpose, and had found an audacity greater than his own, the audacity of desperation. Arthur himself wondered not at all at what he had done. But he admired himself for having done it, and was deliciously excited.

Before he left the Temple – and he left that day for good at one o'clock, being by no means in the mood to resume the Law Reports – he wrote two letters. One was to the firm whose name Joe had given him; it requested them to dispose of so much of his patrimony as would produce the sum of fifteen hundred pounds. The other was to his mother. Since it contained some observations on his position and prospects, an extract from it may usefully be quoted: —

"Since I last wrote, I have been considering what is the wisest thing to do with regard to the Bar. No work has appeared yet. Of course it's early days and I am not going to be discouraged too easily. The trouble is that my necessary expenses are heavier than I anticipated; chambers, clerk, circuit, etc., eat into my income sadly, and even with the strictest economy it will, I'm afraid, be necessary

to encroach on my capital. I have always been prepared to do this to some extent, regarding it as bread cast upon the waters, but it clearly would not be wise to carry the process too far. I must not exhaust my present resources unless my prospects clearly warrant it. Of course I shall come to no hasty decision; we can talk it all over when I'm with you in the summer. But unless some prospects do appear within a reasonable time, I should be disposed to turn to something else while I still have enough capital to secure an opening." ... "You were quite right, dear Mother, about my calling on the Godfrey Lisles, and I was quite wrong – as usual! I'm ever so glad I've made friends with them at last. They are both delightful people, and they've got a charming house. I've been to several parties there, and have met people who ask me to other houses, so I'm getting quite gay. Cousin Godfrey is quiet and reserved, but very kind. Cousin Bernadette is really awfully pretty and jolly, and always seems glad to see me. She says she's going to launch me in society! I don't object, only, again, it all costs money. Well, I think it's worth a little, don't you?"

And there was a postscript: "Don't worry over what I've said about money. I'm all right for the present, and —*between ourselves*– I've already something in view – apart from the Bar – which is quite promising."

"What a wise, prudent, thoughtful boy it is!" said the proud mother.

CHAPTER IX

A COMPLICATION

Bernadette Lisle's foray on the shops of Paris, undertaken in preparation for the London season, was of so extensive an order as to leave her hardly an hour of the day to herself; and in the evenings the friends with whom she was staying – Mrs. and Miss Stacey Jenkinson, Europeanised Americans and most popular people – insisted on her society. So it was with the greatest difficulty that she had at last got away by herself and was able to come to lunch.

"Though even now," she told Oliver Wyse, as they sat down together at the Café de Paris, "it's a secret assignation. I'm supposed to be trying on hats!"

"All the sweeter for secrecy, and I suppose we're not visible to more than two hundred people."

He had a fine voice, not loud but full and resonant. There were many things about him that Bernadette liked – his composure, his air of being equal to all things, his face and hands browned by the sun in southern climes, his keen eyes quickly taking in a character or apprehending a mood. But most of all to her fancy was his voice. She told him so now with her usual naturalness.

"It is pleasant to hear your voice again." She gave him a quick merry glance. "Do you mind my saying that?"

"Yes, I hate compliments."

"I'm sorry." She was chaffing him, but she did it with a subtle little touch of deference, quite unlike anything in her manner towards either her husband or her new toy, Cousin Arthur. In this again she was, while pretty, natural. Oliver Wyse was a dozen years her senior, and a distinguished man. He had a career behind him in the Colonial Service, a career of note, and was supposed to have another still in front of him in the directorate of a great business with world-wide interests. To take up this new work – very congenial and promising much wealth, which had not hitherto come his way – he had bade farewell to employment under Government. Some said his resignation had been hailed with relief since he did not count among his many virtues that of being a very docile subordinate. His representations were apt to be more energetic, his interpretation of orders less literal, than official superiors at the other end of the cable desired. So with many compliments and a Knight Commandership of the appropriate Order he was gracefully suffered to depart.

"But a jolly little lunch like this is worth a lot of meetings at squashes and so on, isn't it? By the way, you didn't come to mine the other day, Sir Oliver." (She referred to the party which Mr. Arthur Lisle had attended.)

"I don't like squashes."

"Compliments and squashes! Anything else? I want to know what to avoid, please." She rested her chin on her hand and looked at him with an air of wondering how far she could safely go in her banter.

"I'm not sure I like handsome young cousins very much."

"I haven't any more – at least I'm afraid not! Even Arthur was quite a surprise. I believe I should never have known of him but for Esther Norton Ward."

"Meddling woman! For a fortnight after his appearance I was obviously *de trop*."

"I was afraid he'd run away again; he's very timid. I had to tie him tight at first."

"Suppose I had run away? You don't seem to have thought of that."

Her changeful lips pouted a little. "I might run after you, I shouldn't after Arthur – and then I could bring you back. At least, could I, Sir Oliver? Oh, dear, I've very nearly paid you another compliment!"

"I didn't mind that one so much. It was more subtle."

"I don't believe you mind them a bit, so long as they're – well, ingenious enough. You've been spoilt by Begums, or Ranees, or whatever they're called, I expect."

"That's true. You must find me very hard to please, of course."

"Well, there's a – a considering look in your eyes sometimes that I don't quite like," said Bernadette. She laughed, sipped her wine, and turned to her cutlet with good appetite.

She spoke lightly, jestingly, but she laid her finger shrewdly on the spot. She charmed him, but she puzzled him too; and Oliver Wyse, when he did not understand, was apt to be angry, or at least impatient. A man of action and of ardour, of strong convictions and feelings, he could make no terms with people who were indifferent to the things he believed in and was moved by, and who ordered their lives – or let them drift – along lines which seemed to him wrong or futile. He was a proselytiser, and might have been, in other days, a persecutor. Not to share his views and ideals was a blunder bordering on a crime. Even not to be the sort of man that he was constituted an offence, since he was the sort of man of whom the Empire and the World had need. Of this offence Godfrey Lisle was guilty in the most heinous degree. He was quite indifferent to all Oliver's causes – to the Empire, to the World, to a man's duty towards these great entities; he drifted through life in a hazy æstheticism, doing nothing, being profoundly futile. His amiability and faithful affections availed nothing to save him from condemnation – old maids' virtues, both of them! Where were his feelings? Had he no passion in him? A poor, poor creature, but half a man, more like a pussy-cat, a well-fed old pussy-cat that basks before the fire and lets itself be stroked, too lazy to catch mice or mingle in affrays at midnight. An old house-cat, truly and properly contemptible!

But inoffensive? No, not to Oliver's temper. Distinctly an offence on public and general grounds, a person of evil example, anathema by Oliver's gospel – and a more grievous offender in that, being what he was, he was Bernadette's husband. What a fate for her! What a waste of her! What emptiness for mind and heart must lie in existence with such a creature – it was like living in a vacuum! Her nature must be starved, her capacities in danger of being stunted. Surely she must be supremely unhappy?

But to all appearances she was not at all unhappy. Here came the puzzle which brought that "considering look" into his eyes and tinged it with resentment, even while he watched with delight the manifold graces of her gaiety.

If she were content, why not leave her alone? That would not do for Oliver. She attracted him, she charmed his senses. Then she must be of his mind, must see and feel things as he did. If he was bitterly discontented for her, she must be bitterly discontented for herself. If he refused to acquiesce in a stunted life for her, to her too the stunted life must seem intolerable. Otherwise what conclusion was there save that the fair body held a mean spirit? The fair body charmed him too much to let him accept that conclusion.

"Enjoying your holiday from home cares?" he asked.

"I'm enjoying myself, but I haven't many home cares, Sir Oliver."

"Your husband must miss you very much."

She looked a little pettish. "Why do you say just the opposite of what you mean? You've seen enough of us to know that Godfrey doesn't miss me at all; he has his own interests. I couldn't keep that a secret from you, even if I wanted to; and I don't particularly want. You're about my greatest friend and – "

"About?"

"Well, my greatest then – and don't look as if somebody had stolen your umbrella."

He broke into a laugh for an instant, but was soon grave again. She smiled at him appealingly; she had been happier in the light banter with which they had begun. That she thoroughly enjoyed; it told her of his admiration, and flattered her with it; she was proud of the friendship it implied. When he grew serious and looked at her ponderingly, she always felt a little afraid; and he had been doing it more and more every time they met lately. It was as though he were thinking of putting some question

to her – some grave question to which she must make answer. She did not want that question put. Things were very well as they stood; there were drawbacks, but she was not conscious of anything very seriously wrong. She found a great deal of pleasure and happiness in life; there were endless small gratifications in it, and only a few rubs, to which she had become pretty well accustomed. Inside the fair body there was a reasonable little mind, quite ready for reasonable compromises.

They had finished their meal, which Bernadette at least had thoroughly appreciated. She lit a tiny cigarette and watched her companion; he had fallen into silence over his cigar. His lined bronzed face looked thoughtful and worried.

"Oh, you think too much," she told him, touching his hand for an instant lightly. "Why don't you just enjoy yourself? At any rate when you're lunching with a friend you like!"

"It's just because I like the friend that I think so much."

"But what is there to think so much about?" she cried, really rather impatiently.

"There's the fact that I'm in love with you to think about," he answered quietly. It was not a question, but it was just as disconcerting as the most searching interrogatory; perhaps indeed it differed only in form from one.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured half under her breath, with a frown and a pout. Then came a quick persuasive smile. "Oh, no, you're not! I daresay you think me pretty and so on, but you're not in love." She ventured further – so far as a laugh. "You haven't time for it, Sir Oliver!"

He laughed too. "I've managed to squeeze it in, I'm afraid, Bernadette."

"Can't you manage to squeeze it out again? Won't you try?"

"Why should I? It suits me very well where it is."

She made a little helpless gesture with her hands, as if to say, "What's to be done about it?"

"You're not angry with me for mentioning the fact?"

"Angry? No. I like you, you see. But what's the use?"

He looked her full in the eyes for a moment. "We shall have to discuss that later."

"What's the use of discussing? You can't discuss Godfrey out of existence!"

"Not out of existence – practically speaking?"

"Oh, no! Nonsense! Of course not!" She was genuinely vexed and troubled now.

"All right. Don't fret," he said, smiling. "It can wait."

She looked at him gravely, her lips just parted. "You do complicate things!" she murmured.

"You'd rather I'd held my tongue about it?"

"Yes, I would – much."

"I couldn't, you see, any longer. I've been wanting to say it for six months. Besides, I think I'm the sort of fellow who's bound to have a thing like that out and see what comes of it – follow it to the end, you know."

She thought that he probably was; there lay the trouble. The thing itself was pleasant enough to her, but she did not want to follow it out. If only he would have left it where it was – under the surface, a pleasant sub-consciousness for them both, blending with their friendship a delightful sentiment! Dragged into the open like this, it was very hard to deal with.

"Can't you try and forget about it?" she whispered softly.

"Oh, my dear!" he muttered, laughing in a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

She understood something of what his tone and his laugh meant. She gave him a quick little nod of sympathy. "Is it as bad as that? Then my question was stupid," she seemed to say. But though she understood, she had no suggestion to offer. She sat with her brows furrowed and her lips pursed up, thoroughly outfaced by the difficulty.

"You go back home to-morrow, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes. And you?"

"In a few days. I've not quite finished my business. Do you want me to come to the house as usual?"

"Oh yes," she answered quickly, her brow clearing.

"In the hope that I shall get over it?"

"Yes."

"I shan't, you know."

"You can never tell. Godfrey was in love with me once. I was in love with him too." Her expression plainly added what her lips refrained from: "Isn't that funny?"

He shrugged his shoulders, in refusal to consider so distasteful a subject. Her mind appeared to dwell on it a little, for she sat smiling reflectively. She had recovered quickly from her alarmed discomfort; in fact she seemed so at ease, so tranquil, that he was prompted to say – saying it, however, with a smile – "I didn't introduce the topic just to pass the time after lunch, you know." He paused and then added gravely but simply, "I want you to look back on this as the greatest day in your life."

Ever so slightly she shook her head. The room was nearly empty now; the few who lingered were no less absorbed than themselves. He put his hand on the top of her right hand on the table. "There's my pledge for life and all I'm worth – if you will," he said.

At this she seemed moved by some feeling stronger than mere embarrassment or discomfort. She gave a little shiver and raised her eyes to his with a murmured "Don't!" It was as though she now, for the first time, realised to some extent not only what he meant but what he felt, and that the realisation caused her a deeper alarm. She sighed as though under some weight and now, also for the first time, blushed brightly. But when they were going to the door, she put her arm inside his for a moment, and gave him a friendly little squeeze. When he looked round into her face, she laughed rather nervously. "We're dear friends, anyhow," she said. "You can walk with me to my hat shop, if you like."

"I won't come in," he protested, in a masculine horror that she liked.

"Nobody asked you. I expect to find Laura Jenkinson waiting for me there. As it's your fault I'm so late, she'd be very cross with you."

They walked up the street together in silence for a little way. Then his attention was caught by a wonderful gown in a shop-window and he turned to her to point it out, with a laugh; he had determined to press her no further that day. To his surprise he saw that her eyes were dim; a tear trickled down her cheek.

"Why, Bernadette – !" he began in shocked remorse.

"Yes, I know," she interrupted petulantly. "Well, you frightened me. I'm – I'm not used to things like that." Then she too saw the startling frock. "Look at that, Sir Oliver! I don't believe I should ever dare to wear it!"

"I fancy it's meant to appeal to ladies of another sort."

"Is it? Don't they wear just what we do? Well, just a little more so, perhaps!" She stood eyeing the gown with a whimsical smile. "It is rather naughty, isn't it?" She moved on again. He watched her face now. She had wiped away the tear, no more came; she was smiling, not brightly, but yet with a pensive amusement. Presently she asked him a question.

"By what you said there – in the café, you know – did you mean that you wanted me to run away with you?"

He was rather surprised at her returning to the subject. "I meant that I wanted to take you away with me. There'd be no running about it."

"What, to do it, – openly?"

"Anything else wouldn't be at all according to my ideas. Still – " He shrugged his shoulders again; he was not sure whether, under stress of temptation, he would succeed in holding to his point.

She began to laugh, but stopped hastily when she saw that he looked angry. "Oh, but you are absurd, you really are," she told him in a gentle soothing fashion.

"I don't see that anybody could call it absurd," he remarked, frowning. "Some good folk would no doubt call it very wicked."

"Well, I should, for one," said Bernadette, "if that's of any importance."

She made him laugh again, as she generally could. "I believe I could convince you, if that's the obstacle," he began.

"I don't suppose it is really – not the only one anyhow. Oh, here's the shop!"

She stopped, but did not give him her hand directly. She was smiling, but her eyes seemed large with alarm and apprehension.

"I do wish you'd promise me never to say another word about this." There was no doubt of her almost pitiful sincerity. It made him very remorseful.

"I wish to God I could, Bernadette," he answered.

"You're very strong. You can," she whispered, her face upturned to his.

He shook his head; now her eyes expressed a sort of wonder, as if at something beyond her understanding. "I'm very sorry," he muttered in compunction.

She sighed, but gave him her hand with a friendly smile. "No, don't be unhappy about it – about having told me, I mean. I expect you couldn't help it. *Au revoir*– in London!"

"Couldn't we dine, or go to the play, or something, to-night?" It was hard to let her out of his sight.

"I'm engaged, and – " She clasped her hands for a moment as though in supplication. "Please not, Oliver!" she pleaded.

He drew back a little, taking off his hat. Her cheeks were glowing again as she turned away and went into the shop.

CHAPTER X

THE HERO OF THE EVENING

That same afternoon – the day before Bernadette was to return from Paris – Marie Sarradet telephoned to Arthur asking him to drop in after dinner, if he were free; besides old friends, a very important personage was to be there, Mr. Claud Beverley, the author of the wonderfully funny farce; Marie named him with a thrill in her voice which even the telephone could not entirely smother. Arthur was thrilled too, though it did cross his mind that Mr. Claud Beverley must have rechristened himself; authors seldom succeed in achieving such suitable names as that by the normal means. Though he was still afraid of Mr. Sarradet and still a little embarrassed about Marie herself, he determined to go. He put on one of his new evening shirts – with pleats down the front – and one of his new white evening waistcoats, which was of extremely fashionable cut, and sported buttons somewhat out of the ordinary; these were the first products of the five hundred pounds venture. He looked, and felt, very well turned-out.

Old Mr. Sarradet was there this time, and he was grumpy. Marie seized a chance to whisper that her father was "put out" because Raymond had left business early to go to a race-meeting and had not come back yet – though obviously the races could not still be going on. Arthur doubted whether this were the whole explanation; the old fellow seemed to treat him with a distance and a politeness in which something ironical might be detected; his glance at the white waistcoat did not look wholly like one of honest admiration. Marie too, though as kind and cordial as possible, was perhaps a shade less intimate, less at ease with him; any possible sign of appropriating him to herself was carefully avoided; she shared him, almost ostentatiously, with the other girls, Amabel and Mildred. Any difference in Marie's demeanour touched his conscience on the raw; the ingenious argument by which he had sought to acquit himself was not quite proof against that.

Nothing, however, could seriously impair the interest and excitement of the occasion. They clustered round Mr. Beverley; Joe Halliday saw to that, exploiting his hero for all he was worth. The author was tall, gaunt, and solemn-faced. Arthur's heart sank at the first sight of him – could he really write anything funny? But he remembered that humorists were said to be generally melancholy men, and took courage. Mr. Beverley stood leaning against the mantelpiece, receiving admiration and consuming a good deal of the champagne which had been produced in his special honour. Joe Halliday presented Arthur to him with considerable ceremony.

"Now we're all here!" said Joe. "For I don't mind telling you, Beverley, that without Lisle's help we should be a long way from – from – well, from standing where we do at present."

Arthur felt that some of the limelight – to use a metaphor appropriately theatrical – was falling on him. "Oh, that's nothing! Anything I could afford – awfully glad to have the chance," he murmured, rather confusedly.

"And he did afford something pretty considerable," added Joe, admiringly.

"Of course I can't guarantee success. You know what the theatre is," said Mr. Beverley.

They knew nothing about it – and even Mr. Beverley himself had not yet made his bow to the public; but they all nodded their heads wisely.

"I do wish you would tell us something about it, Mr. Beverley," said impulsive Amabel.

"Oh, but I should be afraid of letting it out!" cried Mildred.

"The fact is, you can't be too careful," said Joe. "There are fellows who make a business of finding out about forthcoming plays and stealing the ideas. Aren't there, Beverley?"

"More than you might think," said Mr. Beverley.

"I much prefer to be told nothing about it," Marie declared, smiling. "I think that makes it ever so much more exciting."

"I recollect a friend of mine – in the furniture line – thirty years ago it must be – taking me in with him to see a rehearsal once at the – Now, let's see, what was the theatre? A rehearsal of – tut – Now, what was the play?" Old Mr. Sarradet was trying to contribute to the occasion, but the tide of conversation overwhelmed his halting reminiscences.

"But how do you get the idea, Mr. Beverley?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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