Le Queux William

This House to Let

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Содержание

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Prologue

Very early on a July morning in 1919 Constable Brown was on his beat in Kensington, in the immediate neighbourhood of Cathcart Square.

Cathcart Square was an old-fashioned backwater of this highly respectable suburb. It had not been built on any regular lines. Small, narrow houses nestled comfortably by the side of what might be called mansions. At the entrance to the Square itself, a narrow-fronted milk-shop stood next door to a palatial residence. The dairy was very old, and the Square, with its strange agglomeration of houses, had been built round it.

Constable Brown, a tall, strapping young fellow, took his duties easily. He was quite contented with his lot, and not thirsting for promotion; he had no overweening sense of his own abilities. He was friendly with all the cooks on his beat, and from them he received very choice tit-bits. In his case, the policeman's lot was a fairly happy one.

The morning was a very bright one, a somewhat powerful summer sun had just risen, and flooded the streets with light.

He had no need of his lantern, early in the morning as it was.

He strolled slowly round the Square, turning observant eyes on all the houses. In his patrol, he met nobody. The busy world of commerce was not yet astir. Only from afar he heard the distant rumbling of market-carts on their way to Covent Garden, market-carts laden with fruit and vegetables.

The Square was sleeping. In a few more hours it would wake to vigorous life. The dairy shop would take down its shutters, and show signs of animation. And when the dairy shop took down its shutters, Constable Brown would be relieved, and go home to enjoy his well-earned rest.

All was quiet in the Square. Brown had patrolled it several times in his nightly vigil, and had discovered no signs of marauders.

He paused opposite Number 10, one of the few big houses. He looked contemplatively at the board announcing in large type – THIS HOUSE TO LET: FURNISHED – with the agent's name displayed prominently at the foot of the bill.

"Only house to let in the Square," ruminated Brown, as he stood reading the bill for perhaps the hundredth time. "It's been empty now for over three months. It ought to have been snapped up long ago."

He was right. Houses in Cathcart Square did not wait long for tenants. Mr Brown ruminated further, and provided his own solution.

"Old Miles, the caretaker, has got too comfortable quarters, he doesn't want to flit. When people come to view, he talks to them

about damp, or ghosts or beetles, and chokes them off. Artful old devil, Miles, and a bit too fond of drink."

Having finished his patrol of the Square itself, he passed along the backs, abutting on a somewhat mean street, for a rather undesirable neighbourhood had built itself around these somewhat stately houses.

His perambulations brought him to the back of Number 10, the house to let. His trained eye, accustomed to take in the smallest details, noticed a broken pane of glass in the scullery window. He climbed over the low railing which shut off the back premises from the mean street on which they looked, and peered at the broken window-pane. From a general point of view there was not much in it. Window-panes are broken every day. But this was an empty house, looked after by a somewhat bibulous caretaker of the name of Miles. A hundred chances to one that Miles had stumbled against it, and broken it with his elbow.

But although Constable Brown was not very brilliant, he was painstaking and methodical; his mind was slow but tenacious. He did not accept facts at their face value.

After peering through the broken pane, he proceeded to further experiments. He lifted the window, and it went up easily. He drew his deductions swiftly. Somebody had entered the empty house. That somebody had smashed the pane in order to get at the latch, had entered the house, later emerged through the window and forgotten to fasten it.

But why enter an empty house, where there was nothing to

steal except the heavy furniture left by the late tenant, a Mr Washington, who was abroad? Brown knew for a fact from the caretaker that all silver and plate had been lodged at Mr Washington's bank. It was a puzzle.

One thing was clear: his duty lay straight before him. He must go over that empty house. A careful examination might reveal something or nothing.

But he was a very cautious man, and with no great belief in his own powers. He would not make the examination alone. He blew his whistle for further assistance.

In a few seconds, a fellow constable, a smart young fellow, hurried up to him. Brown pointed to the broken pane, the uplifted window. The smart young man projected himself through the open space. Brown followed, explaining as he went.

They searched the basement, the ground floor, and the floor above – with no result.

"Now for the caretaker," said the younger and the more quick-witted of the two policemen.

"He sleeps up at the top," answered Brown. "He generally comes home half-seas over. If a regiment was hammering at the door he would not wake till his sleep was done."

They went up to the caretaker's room on the top floor. The bed was empty. Miles had evidently taken a holiday.

The young constable grunted. "Seems a reliable sort of chap, doesn't he? I wonder how long he has been away? The house agents can tell us if they have sent any clients to view the house

during the last twenty-four hours, and whether they have been able to get in or not. Anyway, for the present, he seems out of this job."

Brown assented. He did not talk as much as his quicker-witted colleague, but his rather slow mind was working at its normal speed.

"We've got to examine the other floors, you know. I've made up my mind to one thing – whoever came in here, robbery wasn't the object."

"There I quite agree," remarked the younger man.

They made their way down from the top floor, which consisted of three attics. On the floor beneath this, they searched every room and found nothing.

But on the floor underneath their search was rewarded. In a small dressing-room, leading off the bedroom which fronted the square, they found a gruesome sight – the lifeless body of a man, comparatively young, somewhere about thirty-five or so, a deep gash in his throat, in his stiffened hand a razor.

The two men gazed, horrified. It was an early summer morning, the sun was shining through the windows, the birds were twittering in the trees. Shortly the whole world would be astir. And here, in the small room, lay the senseless clay, oblivious of all these signs of awakening life and vigour.

Brown was the first to speak. "Suicide!" he said hoarsely. "The poor devil wanted to make an end of it, and crept in here, knowing it was an empty house."

The younger man spoke less convincingly. “It looks like it. Suicide, as you say.” He paused a moment, and then spoke slowly: “I think it’s suicide, but it might be – mind you, I only say might be – a very carefully planned murder. And now, let us overhaul his pockets, we may find something to establish identification.”

Together they bent down, and rummaged the dead man’s pockets. They found plenty of material for identification.

As they were engaged in their gruesome task, they heard the sound of a latch-key being put in the front-door. They heard the door banged to, and heavy footsteps ascended the staircase.

“Miles come back after his spree,” whispered Constable Brown to the younger man.

Miles, all unsuspecting of what had taken place during his absence, came heavily up the stairs. It could not be said that he was by any means drunk, but he was not absolutely sober. He was slowly recovering from the previous night’s debauch.

Arrived on the floor where the two policemen were conducting their investigations, absolute sobriety came back to him. He saw the open door of the dressing-room, two men in uniform kneeling by the side of an inanimate object. His brain cleared as if by magic. He recognised in one of the kneeling constables his old friend Brown.

He indulged in a little profanity, born of his emotion, which need not be set down here. Shorn of certain expletives, natural to a man of his class, he inquired of Brown what was the matter.

Brown on his side was cool and explicit, and instead of

answering the caretaker's questions, he preferred to put a few of his own.

"Nice sort of caretaker you are," he said in a contemptuous voice. "You're paid to look after this house, aren't you? Where were you all last night I should like to know? You can see what has happened. Somebody has got in through the back, either to commit suicide, or with a companion who brought him here to murder him. That's got to be found out before the Coroner."

Miles pulled himself together. He was by no means a fool when sober, and in sight of this ghastly object the fumes of last night's intoxication had absolutely cleared.

"I can show an alibi right enough," he said doggedly.

The younger and readier-witted of the two constables looked up and spoke sharply. "So far, my friend, we have not accused you, but you may as well tell us the details of your alibi."

Miles's explanation, delivered in the somewhat halting way of his class, bore the ring of truth. An old acquaintance of his, whose name and address he gave, had looked him up the day before and asked him to spend a day with him at Shepperton, where the said acquaintance kept a small shop. Miles had succumbed to the temptation.

"It drives a man fair off his blooming chump to be tied by the leg in a hole like this," he interpolated in the midst of his narrative, "waiting for would-be tenants who never call. I daresay you chaps do your eight or ten hours a day, but you're out in the open air, not looking on four walls. You see a bit of life, I don't."

Constable Brown cut across his narrative swiftly.

"Never mind your grievances, Miles. If you could get a better job, I guess you would take it. Where did you spend the night?"

"At the same old show, down at Shepperton," replied the unabashed Miles. "My old pal's a sport, I can tell you. When he shut up his shop, he plied me with some of the best. I wasn't backward, I admit. I missed the last train back, and slept on the sofa in the back room. When I woke, I remembered things a bit, and got an early train home. Here I am. My old pal Jack will tell you I'm speaking gospel truth."

Neither of the two men listening to him had any doubt that his narrative was a true one. He was a poor, weak, bibulous creature, but by no stretch of the imagination could he be an accessory to the gruesome happenings at Number 10.

Even had he been at his post, as he should have been on this particular night, he would have been sunk in a stertorous sleep, and have heard nothing.

But to make everything sure, Constable Brown pulled him along and forced him to look at the dead man.

"You have never seen him before, Miles? I mean he has not called to look over the house or anything?"

"No." Miles, looking shudderingly at the ghastly sight, was ready to swear he had never seen him before.

He turned his frightened gaze away: "It will be all over the town to-night," he said ruefully. "We shall never let the house after this."

"It will still be a soft job for you, Miles," retorted Brown, a little spitefully. "You won't have to play up the damp and the beetles. You are here for life, old man."

"I know," said Miles in a gloomy tone. "But I shall see him staring at me every minute of the day and night."

The body was removed to the mortuary. The evening newspapers had flaring headlines: "Gruesome Discovery in Number 1 °Cathcart Square." An enterprising journalist had got hold of Miles, and speedily discovering his weakness, had taken him to the nearest public-house, and plied him plentifully with liquor, with a view to a sensational article.

The enterprising reporter made the best of his material, but it did not amount to much. The caretaker knew nothing about the dead man, he was armed at all points with his alibi. As regards the house itself, invested with so much tragedy, the present tenant was a Mr Washington, a man of considerable means, now abroad. Mr Washington was prepared to let it furnished. The furniture was very valuable.

To a public greedily anxious for the smallest details, the astute journalist served up a nice little article, describing the expensive furniture, and adding a short life-history of Mr Washington, as supplied by the reminiscent Miles. The public swallowed this article eagerly and awaited further developments.

These came with the inquest, and there was a somewhat tame ending to what had promised to be a very sensational case.

Some three months previously, a certain man named Reginald

Davis had been suspected of committing a murder while driving a motor-car in Cornwall. The evidence, although circumstantial, had been very convincing. The police had been on his track, but not quickly enough. The man had eluded their vigilance, and rim to earth somewhere.

On the body of the dead man in Cathcart Square, the two constables had found three letters addressed to Reginald Davis. Also a letter, signed Reginald Davis, addressed to the Coroner in which he avowed his intention of committing suicide at the earliest opportunity.

It was fairly evident from this that the wretched man, hunted by the police, and recognising that capture was imminent in the course of a few days, had resolved upon the fatal step, had effected his entrance into the lonely house in Cathcart Square, had found it even more deserted than he imagined, and in that little dressing-room cheated the law.

But, in addition to this overpowering evidence, there was added the fact of identification.

A tall, handsome young woman, giving the name of Caroline Masters, had been to the mortuary, and identified the body as that of her brother, Reginald Davis.

She gave her evidence before the Coroner with commendable composure, broken now and again with a little natural grief. Her disclosures were briefly as follows.

Reginald had always been the black sheep of the family, not naturally vicious, but impetuous, fiery-tempered and

ungovernable. If he was guilty of the murder in Cornwall, it had been due to no natural criminal instinct, but to a fit of unbridled passion. Her theory was that remorse had weighed upon him for this unpremeditated crime, and that, through remorse and the fear of justice overtaking him, he had crept into this lonely house and passed sentence on himself.

She made a very great impression on the Court by the calm and dignified way in which she gave her evidence. The Coroner put to her a few questions. She was quite certain that the body was that of her brother, Reginald Davis? Were there any other members of the family who could support her in her identification?

No, there were no other members of the family alive. There was another brother dead, and a sister of whose whereabouts she knew nothing. Her father had been a strange man, he had quarrelled with all the members of his family, and she had never known one of them. Her mother had died some years ago. Her voice broke a little as she related these touching circumstances of her domestic life, more especially when she added she was a widow, her husband having been killed in the Great War.

There seemed but one possible verdict. The dead man, it was clearly established, was Reginald Davis, first by the letters found upon him, secondly by his sister's identification.

It was also clear that Reginald Davis, hunted by the police, and knowing that it was only a question of days or weeks before he would be rim to earth, had considered the two alternatives of

self-destruction or the extreme penalty of the law – and that he had chosen the former.

The verdict was recorded. Mrs Masters was complimented on the way in which she had given her evidence. The Coroner assured her that the sympathy of the Court was with her. The tears welled into her eyes as she listened to the Coroner's well-chosen phrases. She bowed her grateful thanks.

Constable Brown was waiting in the corridor as she came out. Beside him stood the younger policeman who had assisted him on that very well-remembered night in Cathcart Square.

Brown touched his helmet. "A very trying time for you, ma'am," he said, "a very trying time. You went through it bravely."

She smiled wanly. "My poor brother! He had so many good points. But it is better as it is. I shudder to think of what might have been, if he had not done this dreadful thing."

"Much the best way, ma'am, much the best way," corroborated Brown.

She went out, a graceful figure, and Brown turned to his younger colleague.

"A remarkable case, old chap. As we said all along, suicide."

The younger man paused a little before he replied. It may be mentioned that a few months later he was promoted to the detective force in consequence of some rather clever work connected with a gang of coiners in an obscure corner of the West End.

"It looks like it, but I'm not quite as sure as you are," he said laconically.

Brown stared, but made no comment. A verdict was a verdict. His young colleague had the inexperience and the vanity of youth, and thought he was more clever than other people, perhaps!

But on one thing the young constable had made up his mind, and that was that Miles, the bibulous caretaker, had not told the truth when in the witness-box. He came to this conclusion from his demeanour. Miles swore that he had no knowledge of the dead man, but the constable believed this to be a lie.

And with the tame ending of the Coroner's inquest, the mystery of Number 1 °Cathcart Square ceased to hold the public interest. Plenty of other things came on to attract their attention.

Chapter One

In the year before the Great War, when to all appearance there was not a cloud upon the horizon, when only a few statesmen felt "profoundly uneasy," the secret of that uneasiness being carefully locked away in their own breasts, and hidden from the general public – in that year of 1913, in the month of March, the Twenty-fifth Lancers were quartered at the town of Blankfield, in Yorkshire.

The Twenty-fifth was a crack regiment. Most of the officers were members of the aristocracy, a few of the plutocracy, that portion of the plutocracy which on account of its wealth had been adopted into a superior world by marriage with its aristocratic daughters.

They were a fine set of clean-minded, healthy living, sporting young fellows. They rode to hounds, they played polo when there was any going, they shot over the coverts of their friends, they made love to all the pretty girls they came across in a gallant and desultory fashion, loving and riding away.

It cannot be said that they took their professional duties in too serious a fashion. But they were brave as lions, and when the time came to prove their mettle, none of their relatives had cause to blush for their record. The memories of most of them were enshrined deeply in the hearts of wailing mothers and weeping sweethearts, when the great holocaust came.

Foremost amongst this band of gay spirits and resolute sportsmen was a certain Captain Murchison, "Hughie," as he was always called by his intimates.

"Hughie" was not a pure aristocrat. His father, a man of fabulous wealth, was the head of the great brewing firm of Murchison, Delaroyd and Co., the fourth in succession, for the big brewery had been founded over a hundred years ago.

It is supposed, in the case of self-made men, that it requires three generations to make a gentleman. Anyway, the present Sir Hugh had won his spurs by the fact of belonging to the fourth. And he had further firmly established his position by marrying Lady Gertrude Marchmont, a daughter of the Earl of Mounthaven. The Marchmonts had blue blood in profusion, they were one of the oldest families in the Kingdom, only just being beaten by such superior people as the Howards, the Talbots, and the Nevilles.

Captain Murchison was, therefore, plutocrat on the father's side, aristocrat of aristocrat on the mother's. But he did not owe his popularity to these adventitious circumstances. The fact that he was the most popular man in his regiment was due to his own sterling qualities.

In the first place, he was a man of the most unbounded generosity and the most serene good-humour. He had captained the Eleven at Eton, and he was one of the best shots, also one of the best polo-players, in England. Needless to say that he was a man's man. The fact that he was also equally a Woman's man

can be easily explained. He boasted more than ordinary good looks, and he had a charming, deferential way with Women that captivated them at once.

The Twenty-fifth had a very good time at Blankfield, on the whole. The houses of the "county" were, of course, open to such a distinguished regiment, but perhaps they had a rather jollier time amongst the rather limited circle of rich townsfolk whom they condescended to visit: the people who, at the best, had only a nodding acquaintance with the "county."

Murchison was a born sportsman. Hunting, polo, shooting, cricket, occupied nearly all his Waking thoughts, except those few that were claimed by his professional duties. Popular as he was with women, not a single member of the weaker and more charming sex had made any real impression on him up to the present.

He had had several flirtations with charming girls, of course: he might have indulged in a few sentimental passages with certain more or less detached, or semi-detached, married women. The latter very rarely, for although by no means a saint he was a very clean-minded young man, and held rather rigid notions as to what might be done, and what ought not to be done. Anyway at this particular moment he was quite heart-whole.

And then, one day, in this rather sleepy town of Blankfield, an adventure befell him. It was not strictly a common or garden adventure, for more than one reason.

The woman, or rather girl, who was concerned in it, for

looking at her in a severe light she did not appeal to be more than twenty, bore upon her no marks of the shameless adventuress. It was easy to see that she was not a member of his own World, the World of plutocracy mingled into aristocracy by judicious intermarriage. The "county" would not, of course, open their doors to her. According to her own account, the respectable "villadom" of the sleepy old town had not called upon her, on account of the absence of convincing credentials.

The meeting happened in this way. Hugh found himself with a blank afternoon, an afternoon that had not been filled up. He could call at lots of houses and get tea. But, at this period, he was becoming a little fed-up with the Blankfield teas, the simpering girls, the astute mothers who Wanted to take the heir of the Murchison millions off his guard, and hook him for a son-in-law.

Coming from a long line of successful tradesmen, Hugh had rather less brains than he ought to have acquired by heredity. Still, he was no fool. As long as a proposition was not too complex, he could size it up pretty accurately. And he sized up the Blankfield hospitality at its true worth.

He walked down the High Street, and turned into the first tea-shop. It was a well-known establishment, and the dashing members of the Twenty-fifth were wont to invite hither for tea some of the Blankfield maidens who were not too particular as to chaperonage.

He expected to find here a good few of his brother officers. To his surprise, he did not see one. But the room was very full.

To a casual observer, every table seemed occupied. He was about to turn away, when a waitress, who knew him well, touched him on the arm.

"It's quite all right, Captain Murchison," – Hugh had arrived at seniority very early: "there's a table up there at the far end. There's only a young lady there, and she has very nearly finished her tea."

The young lady in question was quite young; Hugh decided from the first swift glance at her that she could not be more than twenty. She was exceedingly pretty, with wavy light hair and soft brown eyes. She wore an air of composure remarkable in one so youthful.

The young man knew her well by sight, as did his brother officers. She was frequently to be seen in the High Street, flitting in and out shops, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by a rather common-looking person, some ten years her senior. It was said they were brother and sister and their name was Burton.

They had arrived in Blankfield about a couple of months ago, and taken a moderate-sized house on the London Road, a little in the outskirts of the town. But though they had been here for these two months, they knew nobody. Not a soul had called upon them: for the villadom of Blankfield was very select, and had to know something about newcomers before it stretched out a Welcoming hand. About the Burtons nothing seemed to be known, and until some reliable information was forthcoming, they would be ostracised.

The shop was very crowded, and most girls of her age might have felt embarrassed by her loneliness. But, although many admiring glances were levelled at her from the few masculine occupants, she seemed quite unperturbed and unconscious, looking neither to the right nor the left, but taking in everything that was going on, under lowered eyelids veiling those pretty brown eyes.

She gave him one swift glance as he sat down, and then went on composedly with her tea. There was nothing in the glance that was either provocative or inviting. Of the two, Hugh felt much more embarrassed than she did. He wondered if she was as stand-offish as she looked. If he addressed a remark to her, would she snub him?

Anyway he determined to put it to the proof. "I do hope I am not intruding, but it was Hobson's choice, you know; this is the only vacant table."

No, she was not going to snub him. On the contrary, she gave him a very pleasant smile, and he noted with satisfaction that her voice was a refined and pleasant one.

"There is hardly any question of intruding in a public place like this. I cannot expect them to turn customers away in order that I may sit by myself."

It was not a bad beginning, thought Hugh. It was evident she was not disinclined to enter into a little desultory conversation with a man who she knew was a gentleman, and not likely to take undue advantage of her absence of conventionality.

Hugh went on with growing boldness. He had often said to his great chum Jack Pomfret that it was a thousand pities this pretty girl was not in Blankfield Society, she seemed so much more attractive than the other girls who were in it.

"We haven't been introduced, of course, but I know you very well by sight. There is hardly a day that I do not meet you about here. And I know your name, too. You are Miss Burton, are you not? And you live with your brother at that nice little house on the London Road."

"Quite right." Miss Burton nodded her pretty head. She added with a little silvery laugh: "We can't be introduced, unless the waitress took the kind office upon herself, for I don't know a soul in the place. We have been here two months, and we have been let severely alone. I suppose if we stayed here for twenty years it would be the same. Of course, we didn't expect to get into 'county' Society, but we must be quite as good as heaps of people in the town and outskirts."

Hugh was a little embarrassed by these very frank remarks. He observed lamely that it was a shame, and indulged in some rather inane remarks on the snobbishness of provincial towns.

"You must find it awfully dull," he ventured after a brief pause. During the short silence, Miss Burton had ordered herself some more tea. It was evident that she was not desirous of abruptly terminating this pleasant *tête-à-tête*. The waitress drew her own conclusions from the further order, and smiled a little as she turned away.

"I should be a hypocrite if I pretended the contrary. Of course, housekeeping takes up a good bit of my time, and I read a good deal, and do a lot of fancy-work. But all the same, it is a state of isolation, not an outside person to speak to from one week-end to the other. Of course I hear all that is going on from the tradespeople, and I know the names of the principal persons here whom I constantly meet and never speak to. I know, for instance, that you are Captain Murchison. I think I know the names of all your brother officers."

"What made you come here, if it is not a rude question?" asked Hugh bluntly. "It was surely a risky experiment, landing yourself in a town like this, without any introductions."

"I told my brother so when he first proposed it," replied Miss Burton calmly. "But, although he is one of the best fellows in the world, he is frightfully obstinate. He had stayed at an hotel here for a few days some years ago, and he had taken a violent fancy to the place. He was quite sure everybody would make a rush for us, the moment we arrived."

Miss Burton proceeded to draw on her gloves. During this explanatory conversation, she had consumed her second cup of tea. She called the waitress and paid her bill.

"I must be going now," she said. "I have quite enjoyed this little chat, although I am sure you will think very badly of me for having confided so much to a stranger. I really don't know what made me do it – I suppose I got tired of having kept silence for so long."

Yes, he could understand that. Poor, pretty little girl, just at an age when all the pleasures of youth should be open to her, and to have to pass her life in the society of that rather common-looking brother, good fellow as she declared him to be.

"I have enjoyed the meeting immensely, too," said Hugh heartily. "I only wish we could come across each other at some of these Blankfield houses, stupid and dull as they generally are."

And then, the pretty Miss Burton fired her last shot as she rose to leave:

"I have been unconventional enough from the beginning, and if I can do it without blushing, I am going to be more unconventional still. If you cared to come up to Rosemount one afternoon, I am sure my brother would be pleased to see you."

Murchison was very embarrassed by the suggestion, although she did not proffer it in any bold fashion.

"I shall be delighted," he stammered. "I will run up one afternoon." Of course when he said this he had very little intention of keeping his promise. To enjoy a mild sort of flirtation with an exceedingly pretty girl was one thing. To go to her house and make the acquaintance of her brother, who he was certain was not a gentleman, was quite a different proposition, and might land him in all sorts of unpleasant complications.

He also had an uneasy conviction that Miss Burton was remarkably self-assured for such a young woman. She had spoken of blushing when she gave him the invitation, but she had not done so. Not the faintest colour showed on her cheek,

and the glance that met his was perfectly steady and unwavering. She must either be very innocent, or, young as she was, she had acquired the experience and self-possession of a much older woman. He would like to think it all out.

The girl nodded in a friendly fashion, and tripped away, leaving Hugh Murchison to finish his tea, and ponder over what had happened.

Chapter Two

When Hugh got back to his quarters the first thing he did was to hunt up his great friend Jack Pomfret. He found that young gentleman stretched in front of a blazing fire – it was a very chilly March – and smoking a cigar nearly as big as himself. Jack Pomfret, it may be said, was quite a small man, of about the size and weight that would be associated with the coxswain of a 'Varsity boat.

Next to Murchison, perhaps Pomfret was the most popular man in the regiment. He was certainly the poorest, for although he came of an aristocratic family, the said family had very little to bless themselves with.

If it had been left to his immediate relatives, Jack would have had to enter a line regiment, and subsist on his pay, supplemented by more or less regular small remittances from his hard-up father.

But fortune had smiled on Jack when he was in his cradle. A rich great-aunt had been his godmother, and from the date of his christening had taken him under her wing. She had been crossed in love when quite a girl, and would never marry. Jack Pomfret had a handsome, but not an extravagant, allowance now, and he would come into his great-aunt's fortune when she died.

Jack always complained that his aunt was a bit thrifty, and did not fully understand the imperative necessities of a young subaltern in an expensive regiment like the Twenty-fifth.

As a matter of fact, Miss Harding, his mother's youngest sister, suffered from acute indigestion, existed principally on soda-water and biscuits, lived in a comparatively small house with one manservant and two maids, and saved a great deal every year out of a large income. She loved Jack very much, but she had little or no sympathy with the follies and indiscretions of youth. She had a hazy sort of idea that an officer should live within his pay, as she lived well within her income. Needless to say that Jack had long disabused her of this silly idea.

"Great tidings, old man," cried Murchison, breaking in upon the meditative little man, blowing great clouds of smoke. "I'll give you six guesses."

"Not in a guessing mood," returned Jack shortly. "All my brain-power is used up. I am trying to concoct a letter to the dear old aunt – God bless her, she is one of the best! – insinuating gently that a cheque for a couple of hundred would be very convenient at the present moment."

Murchison took a seat. "Silly old ass," he said in a kindly tone, "if you want a couple of hundred have it from me, and don't worry about the aunt. You can pay me when she stumps-up. From what you have told me about your respected relative, it might be a lengthy business. I suppose you will plead debts. She might offer to discharge them, and ask the names of the creditors. In that case, old chap, you wouldn't handle much personally, would you?"

Pomfret laughed genially. He was always very hard-up, but

he was never depressed for very long. There was always a silver lining to every cloud.

"She's the sweetest, dearest soul on God's earth," he said in a tone of conviction. "But you know, Hughie old man, she doesn't understand – I say emphatically, she doesn't understand – you know what I mean. She is early Victorian. As to your suggestion, I appreciate it very much, but emphatically, no." He added, with a whimsical smile: "Yours is a loan, I should have to pay back; Heaven knows when I could do so. The dear old aunt, well, it is a gift, no question of paying back. I haven't thought it all out yet, but in the early cool of to-morrow morning, I shall write her a beautiful and touching letter. I know by experience it will bring a cheque."

"You're an artful young devil, I know," said Murchison. Straight as a die himself, he was not too appreciative of his friend's diplomatic methods.

On the other hand, was he justified in criticising? He had a magnificent allowance from his opulent father. Poor Jack, with a somewhat puritanical and niggardly aunt at his back, had just to worry along, and live in this expensive regiment from hand to mouth.

There was no more to be said on this subject.

"Well, Jack, are you in a mood to listen to my news?"

Pomfret leaned forward, and flicked the ash off his cigar. "Yes, I think I am. Begone dull care! I shall write that letter the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Well, I have made the acquaintance of that pretty Burton girl, whom nobody in Blankfield visits."

Mr Pomfret emitted a little chuckling sound. "Lucky devil. How did you do it? I thought she was unapproachable. She walks down the High Street, 'with a haughty stare, and her nose in the air,' and looks neither to left nor right. How did you manage it, old man?" Hugh laughed. "Oh, as easy as anything. Just dropped in to Winkley's, expecting to see a lot of you fellows with your best girls. Not a soul there I knew. Room full – every table full, save for one at which Miss Burton was sitting alone – sat at the one table, *vis-à-vis* with Miss Burton. There it is in a nutshell."

Mr Pomfret grinned broadly. "Oh, Hughie, what I would have given for your chance. You know I am awfully gone on that girl, she is so sweet and dainty, far and away the prettiest girl in Blankfield. What did you make of your chance?"

"As much as could be made in five or ten minutes. She told me a lot about things, her disappointment in finding that the Blankfield people would not call upon her, and that, excepting her brother, she had not a soul to speak to."

"Poor little soul!" said Mr Pomfret, in a voice of the deepest sympathy. "Poor little soul!" he repeated.

"Well, we talked for some little time, some ten minutes perhaps, I don't think it could have been much longer. And then – then – you will never believe it, Jack – she asked me to call, and be introduced to her brother."

Mr Pomfret was quite young, in fact he was the baby of the

regiment. But having been educated at a public school, he had learned a certain amount of worldly wisdom rather early. He gave expression to it now.

"If she were living with her mother, or a maiden aunt, Hughie, the thing would be so easy. But the brother, we have seen him walking beside that lovely girl. It would be difficult to class him. It would be perhaps too much to say he was either a bounder or a cad – he's not boisterous enough for the one or common enough for the other. But clearly, he's not a gentleman or the imitation of one."

"No," answered Hugh. "Your description of the brother quite fits. He is neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red-herring, as the old saw has it. Then the girl is so different. She is, to an extent, frank and unconventional."

"She must be, or she wouldn't have asked you to call upon her," interrupted the astute Mr Pomfret.

"Quite so, I perfectly agree. But upon my soul, Jack, she has the most perfect manners. She does these sort of things in such a way that you cease to wonder why she does them."

"I understand." Mr Pomfret looked very wise. "There's a wonderful fascination about the girl. She radiates it, even when you pass her in the street. By Gad, there's not a young woman in Blankfield who can hold a candle to her. Well, Hughie, what are you going to do about the invitation?"

"I'm in two minds, old man, to go or stay away. There's the brother, you see."

"There's the brother," repeated Mr Pomfret, "and a dashed disappointing sort of a brother, too. If it had only been a mother, or a maiden aunt! What a priceless opportunity! And yet it seems a bit too good to be lost."

"But the brother, what about him?" Hugh insisted.

"The brother is, of course, a stumbling-block. You can't ask him to Mess. 'Old Fireworks' will stand more from you than anybody, but he would never stand Burton. He would be calling him 'Your Grace' or 'Your Worship' or something."

"Old Fireworks," it may be explained, was the nickname of the respected Colonel of the gallant Twenty-fifth Lancers. It had been conferred upon him, on account of his explosive temper. He was also a rigid disciplinarian.

"I shall not go," said Hugh after a brief pause.

Mr Pomfret was thinking deeply. He pulled at his big cigar in a meditative fashion. Then at length, out of his wisdom, he spoke:

"Let us reason this out, my well-beloved friend. A very pretty girl asks you to go and see her, she is unfortunately hampered by an undesirable brother. You accept their hospitality, but you know he is not a man you can ask to Mess. But you can take him to an hotel, and feed him up there. Tell him the Colonel's kicked up rough about guests, any lie you like, to save his *amour propre*."

"A good idea, Jack. Have you anything more to say? Don't forget that if I go to Rosemount, the news will be all over Blankfield in five minutes."

Mr Pomfret snapped his fingers. "Who cares a fig for the

Blankfield people? Everybody knows, or ought to know, that a soldier loves and rides away. And the Blankfield girls are dull enough, Heaven knows, I wouldn't give a thought to them."

"Then you advise me to call, and be introduced to the brother, eh?"

"Of course. We shall be off in another two months, and leave only tender memories behind us." Mr Pomfret was a practical person, if ever there was one. "Let us seize the passing day. By the way, have you any objection to taking me up to call with you, when you go? Say no, if you have the slightest objection."

Hugh Murchison looked at him squarely. "No, old chap, not the slightest. The girl interests me in a way, chiefly, I think, because I can't quite make her out, can't determine whether she is very cunning or very simple, but I am not attracted in the ordinary sense. I take it you are."

Pomfret's look of indifference changed to one of gravity. "Yes, Hughie, I am. I would like to see that girl at close quarters."

Hugh rose. "Right. We will call together, and in the meantime we will keep it from the other fellows?"

"Good Heavens, I should think so. We should be chaffed to death," was Jack's fervent answer.

A few days later, the two young men walked to Rosemount. It was a villa sort of house, set in a small garden, very carefully kept. The windows were ornamented with boxes of flowers. Small as the establishment was, there was an air of elegance about it, an elegance perhaps of restricted means but of refined taste.

Pomfret nudged his senior officer. “I say, they’ve turned it into a very decent sort of little crib, haven’t they? I should say that is due to the girl.”

Hugh laughed. “Perhaps it is the brother after all. He might be an artist, you know. Artists are often very rum-looking chaps.”

“Artist be hanged,” said Pomfret emphatically. “I’ll bet you a fiver he isn’t an artist, whatever he is. A ‘bookie’ or a ‘bookie’s’ tout, more likely.”

At the end of this short colloquy, they had reached the hall door. A very smart maidservant, in a becoming cap and apron, opened it. In answer to their inquiry, Miss Burton was in.

They were shown into the drawing-room. The young mistress of the house was reclining in an easy-chair; an open book lay on her lap.

She advanced towards them with that peculiar air of self-possession which had so impressed Hugh on his first meeting in the tea-shop. A hostess with years of social experience could not have been more at her ease than this young girl.

“How nice of you to come, after that very vague invitation,” she said, in her clear, silvery voice.

She addressed Murchison first, and then turned swiftly to Pomfret, in whose eyes she doubtless recognised frank admiration of her peculiar attractiveness.

“I know your friend is going to introduce you in proper form. But it is really quite unnecessary. I know you are Mr Pomfret. I have learned the names of all the officers from the tradespeople,

also, my only friends in Blankfield. Perhaps Captain Murchison has told you what I confided to him the other day, that we are as isolated here as if we were on a desert island."

Mr Pomfret sat down beside her on a small Chesterfield. From his vantage point he could gaze into the beautiful eyes, he could note the lustre of that fair, wavy hair.

"A beastly shame," growled the young subaltern, at a loss for appropriate words to express the enormities of Blankfield Society.

She turned away lightly, as if the subject interested her no further.

"I think we will have tea. My brother is engaged in scientific pursuits. When he can tear himself away, he will join us. Captain Murchison, will you kindly ring the bell?"

Truly, she had the manners of a woman of the world. She took the homage of the two men as an accomplished fact. The villadom of Blankfield could not produce such a hostess, so free from fussiness or exaggerated hospitality. You would have to go to the "county" to find her parallel. The two men exchanged appreciative glances. Whatever her origin, Miss Burton could shine in any circle in which she found herself permanently, or temporarily, located.

The tea was served, and over the tea-cups they chatted in desultory fashion. Then the drawing-room door opened, and Mr Burton appeared. From the moment of his appearance, the atmosphere seemed to be changed. He advanced towards them

with outstretched hands. His manner was extremely cordial, but it went beyond the limits of good taste. His tones were breezy but blusterous. There was a rasping and a vulgar ring in his voice.

"Welcome to our humble abode, gentlemen. It is very brave of you to come and visit the boycotted ones."

Hugh and Jack Pomfret fidgeted in their chairs. This common-looking young man was a bit too communicative about his private affairs. They had a slight suspicion that he had been indulging in alcohol, his manner was so unrestrained.

Mr Burton sank down in his chair, and took a cup of tea from the hands of his attentive sister. The visitors did not see it, but she shot a warning glance at him, and in face of that warning glance, Mr Burton, by a strong effort, pulled himself together.

"You see, gentlemen, I feel very sore about this matter; my sister has a calmer temperament, and she takes things as they come. Here we came from the North of Ireland, from a little town where we were highly looked up to, where we knew every man, woman and child in the place. We came here, and, as I say, we are boycotted."

Miss Burton looked at him severely. "George, I do not think it is very good taste of you to inflict your grievances upon these gentlemen, who have just come to make an afternoon call. Don't you think you could soothe your nerves better by getting back to your laboratory, or whatever you call it?"

Mr Burton accepted the hint, and rose. He waved a genial hand towards the visitors.

"You will excuse me for a few moments. I have a most important experiment on. But I shall be back very shortly: I shall see you again before you leave."

The two young men devoutly wished that they might not see him again. The man was a confirmed and innate vulgarian. Both he and his sister, no doubt, felt very sore about their social ostracism, but how different were the methods of expression indulged in by the two. She explained the situation with a proud dignity, hiding her chagrin with a show of indifference. He was exposing his gaping wounds to the public eye with an air of ostentation.

"I must ask you to excuse my brother," said Miss Burton when her ebullient relative had left the room. "He has the true Irish temperament, it is impossible for him to conceal his feelings. He would like to go down the High Street, trailing his coat behind him, and inviting the residents to tread upon it, in real Irish fashion, so that he could indulge in a free fight with them."

The young men laughed cordially. They felt that a somewhat awkward situation had been saved by her ready tact, her rather humorous explanation.

But Murchison, the more level-headed of the two, looked at her very fixedly, as he said, "But you are Irish, too. How is it that you have learned to control your feelings so successfully?"

At such a direct question, he would have expected her to flush a little; at any rate, show some slight symptoms of embarrassment. But this remarkably self-possessed girl of

twenty or thereabouts was as cool as a cucumber. She laughed her little silvery laugh.

"My brother and I are as wide apart as the North and South Poles," she said lightly. "Many people have commented on the fact. Would you like to know the reason?"

She directed a rather challenging glance in the direction of Pomfret, whom she rightly judged to be more susceptible to feminine influence than his friend.

"I should like to very much," was the subaltern's answer. That eloquent glance had completely subjugated the young man.

"Well, listen. My father was a hard-riding, gambling, hard-drinking Irish squire, who squandered his money and left little but debts behind him. My brother takes after him in certain qualities, thank Heaven not his least desirables ones. My mother was an Englishwoman, rather a puritanical sort of woman, who fell in love, perhaps a little injudiciously, and I think wore her life out in the attempt to curb my father's unhappy propensities. I take after my mother. You understand? George is really my half-brother by my father's first wife."

Pomfret nodded his head gravely. "I quite understand," he said, and his tone was one of conviction. Murchison preserved a benevolent attitude of neutrality. He was still thinking it all out.

Miss Burton was very pretty, nay, more than pretty, very charming, very attractive, gifted with a marvellous self-possession, very clever, very adroit. But was she as genuine and frank as she seemed? Pomfret evidently thought so, but

Murchison was not quite sure.

Mr George Burton, who took after his Irish father in several respects, according to his sister's account, made a re-appearance before the visitors left. There had been just a little suspicion at first that he had been indulging in the hard-drinking habits of his male parent. If so, that suspicion must be at once removed. He was bright, breezy and blusterous, but he was certainly master of himself. He advanced with the most cordial air.

"Gentlemen, I feel I owe you an apology. I had no right to intrude my private grievances upon you, even although I am very possessed with them. Please put it down to my Irish temperament. You will forgive me, I am sure."

He stretched out appealing hands, the hands of the plebeian as Murchison was quick to notice, nails bitten to the quick, coarse fingers and thumbs.

Murchison quietly ignored the outstretched hand. So did Pomfret, subjugated as he was with the charm and attractiveness of Miss Burton. He did not quite feel that he wanted to shake hands with this very terrible brother, who took after his Irish father.

"I apologise most sincerely, gentlemen," he repeated, "for my outburst just now. I had no right to inflict upon you a recital of my private grievances against the inhabitants of this wretched town. But I am a wild, excitable Irishman, whatever is in my mind has to come out. Please forgive me; I know my sister Norah never will."

He looked appealingly at the girl who sat there, calm and self-possessed as always, with a slight expression of contempt upon her charming face.

"I have already made excuses for you to Captain Murchison and Mr Pomfret," she said coldly.

The visitors were very much embarrassed. What could they say to this dreadful person who seemed so utterly lacking in all the qualities of good breeding? Hugh remained silent, Pomfret opened his lips and murmured something about the whole affair being very regrettable.

But these somewhat incoherent remarks were quite enough to restore Mr Burton to his normal state of easy buoyancy. He smiled affably.

"So that is all over. Well, I am delighted to see you, and it will not be my fault if your first visit is your last. Now, I propose you come round and have a little bit of dinner with us soon, so that we may get to know each other better. Any night that you are at liberty will suit us. *We* are not overwhelmed with invitations, as you can understand from what I have told you."

If Murchison had been by himself, he would have politely shelved the invitation. Miss Burton, who took after her English mother, was quite decent and ladylike. The brother was insufferable. Vulgarity, so to speak, oozed from him. He was offensive even in his geniality. In short, he was impossible.

But Pomfret took the wind out of his senior's sails.

"Sorry we are quite full up this week, but hardly anything on

next. Shall we say Monday?"

Miss Burton took the matter out of her brother's hands by turning directly to Murchison.

"Monday, of course, will suit us. Will it suit you?" she asked him pointedly.

Taken by surprise, the unhappy young man could only mutter a reluctant affirmative. A few minutes later they left, pledged to partake of the Burtons' hospitality on the following Monday.

When they were safely outside, Murchison spoke severely to his brother officer.

"You've let us in for a nice thing. If you had left it to me, I would have got out of that dinner somehow."

"But I didn't want to get out of it," replied the unabashed junior. "We knew the brother was pretty bad all along. I don't know that on the whole he is much worse than we imagined. But she's a ripping girl. I want to see more of her."

"You silly young ass," growled Murchison; "I believe you've fallen head over ears in love with her."

And Pomfret, one of the most mercurial and light-hearted of subalterns, answered quite gravely:

"I rather fancy I have. I've never met a girl who appealed to me in quite the same sort of way."

Chapter Three

As a result of his visit to Rosemount, Hugh Murchison was very perturbed in his mind. He blamed himself severely for having been tempted into that rather intimate conversation at the tea-shop. Miss Burton was attractive enough, and ladylike enough, to excuse any man for taking advantage of his obvious opportunities, but he had been a fool to go farther. He ought never to have set his foot in the house of people of whom he knew nothing.

It was all Jack Pomfret's fault, he decided hastily. It was his influence, his keen desire to make the girl's acquaintance, that had weighed down his friend's prudence. For, if left to himself, Hugh was quite sure that he would have dallied and dallied till all inclination to call at Rosemount had died down.

And Pomfret had owned to being greatly impressed with the fair young châtelaine. He had admitted that he had never met a girl who had appealed to him in quite the same sort of way. In fact, it was easy to see he had fallen desperately in love with her.

And Jack was just one of those light-hearted, susceptible sort of chaps who have not an atom of common-sense in their composition, who will obey their impulses, regardless of consequences.

And he was not his own master. His career was practically at the disposal of his somewhat puritanical aunt. It was just on the

cards that Jack would be mad enough to propose to this girl who had so bewitched him. One could imagine how the aunt would receive such a communication.

There was one little ray of hope, however. If Jack did commit such a crowning folly, he would be far too honourable not to acquaint Miss Burton with his circumstances. Hugh was fairly convinced that the young lady knew how to take care of herself. And, even if she did fall in love with Jack, as he had done with her, and be inclined to make a fool of herself, there was the objectionable brother to be reckoned with. He would certainly not allow his sister to engage herself to a man, except with the consent of that man's family.

All the same, it was as well to avoid any embarrassing entanglements, if possible. It is easy to retrace your steps when you have only just started.

With this object in view, Murchison sought his friend on the Sunday preceding the day on which they were to present themselves at Rosemount.

"Jack, old man, I have been thinking – " he began.

Mr Pomfret lifted a warning finger. "My dear friend and mentor, don't indulge in such violent processes. It's very bad for you."

"Don't be an ass, Jack. You are not really funny when you say that sort of thing. I've been thinking over this business to-morrow, and, frankly, I don't relish the prospect. We had better cut it out."

Pomfret's face took on an obstinate expression. "You are speaking for yourself, of course. For my part, I don't intend to break my appointment. In my opinion, it would be an awfully low-down thing to do. If you didn't want to go, you shouldn't have accepted."

It was evident the young man was not in a very reasonable frame of mind, equally evident he would require very careful handling.

"Now, Jack, don't get off the handles. You know you are an awfully impetuous chap, and that I have much the cooler head of the two. I have been thinking it all out the last day or two, and I don't like the look of it."

"You informed me just now that you had been thinking," replied Mr Pomfret in the same sarcastic strain. "There is no need to dwell upon the fact. It is obvious."

But the elder man was not to be ruffled. If anything unpleasant came of this sudden acquaintance he would lay the blame on himself for having mentioned that little incident of the tea-shop, and inspired the mercurial Jack's love of the daring and adventurous.

"I don't know that I did accept, as a matter of fact, except by implication. I was about to return an evasive answer, leave it in the air, so to speak, when you cut in and jumped at the invitation for both."

This was true, and Mr Pomfret's air lost a little of its jaunty confidence. "Well, if you think I lugged you in, get out of it

yourself. Of course you will have to tell some beastly lie that they will see through at once. Anyway I am going, and that's flat."

"If you go, I shall go," said Hugh firmly. "But I would like you to listen to me for a few moments, and put things before you as they present themselves to me."

"Fire away, then," was Pomfret's answer, but it was delivered in a very ungracious tone.

"Of course we are both agreed about the brother," began Hugh mildly.

The other interrupted impatiently: "The brother be hanged. We are not going to the house for the brother's sake, but because of the sister. What's the use of blinking the fact? If you had met him in the tea-shop instead of her, I don't suppose you would have wasted a word on him, no more should I. But I don't see why that pretty girl should be ostracised because of him."

"I don't quite see, under the circumstances, how you can separate them," pursued the obstinate Hugh. "I should like to turn off, just for a moment to the sister, and consider her."

"Go ahead," said Mr Pomfret in a somewhat sullen tone. He was keeping his impulsive and fiery nature under control, out of his great respect for his friend. But it was very doubtful if he would stand much criticism even from one so respected.

"I have not a word to say against her appearance or her manners. I will go further, and say there is not a girl in Blankfield, or for the matter of that in the 'county' itself, who gives the impression of a thorough gentlewoman more convincingly than

she does." Pomfret's face brightened at these words. "Oh, then you admit that, and you have knocked about the world a few years longer than I have. I am of the same opinion, but if you say it, it must be so."

"I do say it unhesitatingly, but mind you, I am only judging from outside appearances. Now, how comes it that such a refined and ladylike girl as that should have such a bounder of a brother? There is a mystery there."

Jack Pomfret prepared to argue. "I don't quite agree that he is a bounder, he is not quite boisterous enough for that. Let us agree on a common definition – namely, that he is bad form. That fits him, I think."

"And the sister is very good form. You can't deny that there is a mystery."

But the young subaltern developed a quite surprising ingenuity in argument.

"She just simply calls him her brother," sharply, "but she has told you he is her half-brother by a first marriage – father a gentleman, mother a common person, hence the bad form. A second time, the father married a woman of his own class, hence Norah Burton. Norah knows him for a good sort, if a bit rough, and sticks to him. That's a reasonable theory, anyway."

"More ingenious than reasonable perhaps," commented Murchison with an amused smile.

Pomfret went on, warming to his subject. "And, hang it all, if we speak of bounders – and mind you, I won't admit he is

a bounder in the strict sense of the term – is there a family in England without them?"

"Quite the same sort, do you think?" was Hugh's question.

"Look here, I'm not going to be impertinent, and ask if you can point to any amongst your own connections, but I know something of my own family. I've got a cousin, good blood on both sides. He's been a bounder from the time he learned to talk, sets your teeth on edge; as some fellow said, every time he opens his mouth he puts his foot into it. By Gad, this fellow Burton is a polished gentleman to him. If George showed his nose in this regiment they would send him to Coventry in five minutes."

"As they did that chap last year," remarked Hugh, alluding to an offensive young man who had been compelled to send in his papers, owing to the fact that his general demeanour had not come up to the somewhat exalted standard of the gallant Twenty-fifth.

"Precisely," assented Pomfret. "But you were going to give me some views about the girl. Again I say, fire away."

"Well, to go back to that meeting in the tea-shop. It was, to say the least, a little unconventional for a young girl to invite an utter stranger to call upon her."

"You were not an utter stranger," retorted Jack doggedly. "She had heard who you were, perhaps from the tradespeople. She knew you were a gentleman, she knew your name, Captain Murchison. Hang it all, if you had met her in one of these dull Blankfield houses, and she had been introduced by a hostess

about whom you both knew precious little, and asked you to call, being the mistress of her brother's house, you would have thought it quite the correct and proper thing. So would every man in the barracks. Don't people strike up acquaintances in hotels, and sometimes trains?"

"They generally find out something about each other before they pursue the acquaintance," suggested Murchison. "Look here, old man, you know as well as I do, you are arguing all round the point. It would be precious easy for the Burtons to say who and what they were, and furnish some proper credentials. If they did that, I daresay all Blankfield would call upon them, and swallow the brother for the sake of the very charming sister."

"Well, I'll pump her to-night, and get out all you want to know," retorted Mr Pomfret confidently. "I don't go so far as to say they will be able to refer us to Burke or Debrett. Decent middle-class people, I expect."

It was useless to argue with such an optimist. "You've accounted for the brother, I remember, by your ingenious theory. Well, you've made up your mind to go then?"

"Most certainly I have. You do as you like, but while we are on the subject of good form, it is not a pretty thing to accept an invitation, and then excuse yourself at the eleventh hour by an obvious lie."

"Under ordinary circumstances, you would be quite right. It has not occurred to you that we were rather rushed into this dinner, then – that we were, so to speak, jumped at?"

"It might look like it at first blush," admitted Mr Pomfret reluctantly. "But here are two poor devils, marooned, as it were, in this snobbish town, and they naturally jump at the first people who show them the slightest civility. They must simply be aching to exchange a word with their fellow-creatures. Well, I am going to exchange several with them, I promise you."

Hugh felt it was useless. When Pomfret got in these moods, it was waste of time to reason with him. He felt uneasy, however. He had promised his family to look after him, and he felt a certain responsibility. It was to be hoped the sudden infatuation for a pretty face would expire as quickly as it had been born.

Perhaps a closer association with the bounder brother would produce a chastening influence. But then Jack seemed bounder-proof. Had he not alluded to a well-born cousin, beside whom Burton shone as a polished gentleman?

Anyway, he must not desert his young and very impulsive friend. But it was with considerable reluctance that he accompanied him to Rosemount on the Monday night.

Chapter Four

Eight o'clock was the hour appointed for dinner, this fact scoring in the Burtons' favour, as evincing a knowledge of the habits of good society. Even a few of the most select hostesses in Blankfield, who ought to have known better, made a base compromise with half-past seven.

The two men arrived about five minutes before the time. The young hostess was awaiting them in the drawing-room, attired in some filmy creation that made her look very charming and ethereal. Soft lights from shaded lamps played about her, and lent a touch of perfection to the picture.

Mr Burton was attired in the usual conventional evening dress of the English gentleman. One would have guessed him the sort of man who would wear a ready-made tie. Not at all. He had tied the bow himself, and with a masterly hand. Pomfret even, who was admitted to be the Beau Brummel of his regiment, could not have done it better.

It is generally supposed that a common man looks more common still when he dons evening attire. "George" was an exception to the rule. His black clothes became him, and lent him a certain air of dignity, which was wanting when he assumed everyday garments. Even Murchison, prejudiced as he was against him, was forced to admit to himself that the "bounder" for once looked quite respectable. Pomfret, ever leaning to the

charitable side, felt quite enthusiastic over him, and contrasted him favourably with his own cousin, who could boast blue blood on both sides.

Norah Burton played the hostess as to the manner born, greeting the visitors with just the right degree of cordiality, quite free from the effusiveness of most of the Blankfield hostesses. And Burton, taking his cue from her, was hearty without boisterousness.

The young subaltern's heart warmed to her, she was so gracious, so sweet, and about her there hovered such an air of calm dignity. Rosemount, no doubt, was honoured by the introduction of such distinguished visitors, viewed merely from the social point of view, but she did not permit a suspicion of this to escape her. Rather, judging by her demeanour, the visitors were honoured by being admitted to Rosemount.

"Rather reminds me of a young queen entertaining her subjects," Pomfret remarked afterwards to his friend in a rather enthusiastic outburst. "I'm not speaking of the 'county' of course, but these Blankfield women make you feel they are overwhelmed with your condescension in coming to their houses, that they are hardly fit to sit at the same table with you."

The dinner was plain, but well-cooked. The appointments were perfect, snowy napery, elegant glass and cutlery. One neat-handed maidservant waited, and waited well. Mr Burton carved the dishes that were carvable, there was no pretence at an *à la Russe* banquet. Their small establishment could not cope with

that, and they did not attempt it. There was a generous supply of wines: hock, burgundy and champagne.

And Mr Burton, strangely subdued, was quite a good host, hospitable but not pressing. Murchison thought he must have been having some lessons from his sister, who seemed intuitively to do the right thing Still suspicious, he was sure that she had been steadily coaching him how to comport himself on this important night.

For, after all, it must be a feather in their caps, that after having been coldly cast aside by the *élite* of Blankfield, they had captured for their dining acquaintance two of the most popular officers of the exclusive Twenty-fifth.

And Murchison, ever on the watch for any little sign or symptom to confirm his suspicions, had to admit the pair were behaving perfectly. Not the slightest sign of elation at the small social triumph manifested itself in the demeanour of either. Dinner-parties like this might be a common occurrence for all they showed to the contrary.

The substantial portion of the meal was over. Dessert was brought in, with port, claret and sherry, all of the most excellent vintage. The house was a small one, and not over-staffed, but there was no evidence of lack of means. Perhaps the Burtons were wise people in not keeping up a great show, but spending the greater part of their income on their personal enjoyments.

While the men were still lingering over their dessert, Miss Burton rose.

"There are no ladies to support me, so I shall feel quite lonely by myself," she said in her pretty, softly modulated voice. "Shall we have coffee in the drawing-room? You men can smoke. It is quite Liberty Hall here. My brother smokes in every room of the house."

Murchison noted the subtle difference between the brother and sister. If Burton had given the invitation, he would certainly have said, "you gentlemen." The beautiful Norah would not make a mistake like that.

Five minutes afterwards, the three men trooped into the pretty drawing-room with its subdued, shaded lights. Norah was sitting at a small table, on which were set the coffee equipage with an assortment of liqueurs. Decidedly, the Burtons knew how to do things when they received guests.

The "bounder" brother, as Hugh always called him to himself, had drunk very heavily at dinner of every wine: hock, burgundy and champagne. But evidently he could carry a big quantity. It would take more than a small dinner-party like this to knock him over. When he entered the drawing-room his mien was as subdued as when he had first received his visitors.

They drank their coffee round the fair-sized octagonal table, and then they broke up. Miss Burton retired to a Chesterfield, whither Pomfret followed her, as he was bound to do.

Burton bustled out of the room, and returned with a huge box of expensive cigars. He offered the box to Hugh, who took one with a deprecating look at the young hostess.

"We dare not, Miss Burton. Think of your curtains in the morning."

"Don't trouble, Captain Murchison," she said, with her charming smile. "The curtains have to take what comes in this house. George doesn't often sit in this room, but when he does he always smokes cigars. I told you this was Liberty Hall, you know."

The box was offered to Pomfret, who took one. "Do you smoke, Miss Burton?" he asked.

"Once in a blue moon. I think I will have one to-night, as a little treat. It is terribly tempting, when I see all you men smoking." The enamoured Pomfret fetched her a cigarette, hovered over her with a match, till it was properly lighted, and settled himself again on the Chesterfield. If that silly old Hugh didn't butt in, he was going to have a nice little chat with this charming girl, who had played the young hostess to such perfection.

But Hugh was safely out of the way. Burton had piloted him to a comfortable easy-chair at the extreme end of the drawing-room, and these two antipathetic persons were apparently engaged in an interesting conversation. Anyway, Murchison's laugh rang out frequently.

Pomfret, it must be confessed, was not very great at conversation. If the ball were opened, he could set it rolling, but he lacked initiative. He looked at Miss Burton with admiring eyes, but although he had got her comfortably to himself on that

convenient Chesterfield, he could think of nothing to say to her.

And then a brilliant inspiration came to him. "I say, how gracefully you smoke." The young woman burst into a pleasant peal of quite spontaneous laughter. She always had a ready smile at command, but her laughter was generally a little forced. This time it was perfectly genuine.

"Oh, you are really comical," she cried. "How can any girl smoke a cigarette gracefully? In the first place, it is a most unfeminine thing to do. All people must smoke them in the same way, and there can never be anything graceful in the act."

"Women don't smoke them the same way," replied the young subaltern, with the air of a man who has observed and learned. "Most of them chew them, and hold them at arm's length, as if they were afraid of being bitten."

"It's because they don't like smoking, really, and only do it to be in the fashion. Now, when I am quite in the mood, I actually revel in a cigarette. I am in the mood to-night."

Pomfret leaned forward, with a tender expression on his rather homely, but good-humoured, countenance.

"That means that you feel happy to-night, eh?"

She nodded brightly. "Oh, ever so happy! It is seeing new faces, you know, after weeks of isolation," she added with a touch of almost girlish gaiety. "It seems such ages since we gave a dinner-party. And you and Captain Murchison are so nice. It seems almost like a family gathering."

"You like my friend Murchison, then? I am glad, because it is

to him I owe the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"I think he is a dear, he seems so honest, straightforward, and so reliable." She spoke with apparent conviction. "Were you not dreadfully shocked when he told you, for of course he must have told you, how we got to know each other?"

"Not in the least," said Mr Pomfret stoutly. "I explained to him that people can become acquainted, without being properly introduced in the conventional sort of way."

"Ah, then, he had some doubts himself?" flashed Miss Burton. "I expect he was a little shocked, if you were not."

"Not in the slightest, I assure you," replied Mr Pomfret easily. He was not above telling a white lie upon occasions. He remembered too well the remarks that his friend had made upon the girl's unconventional behaviour, but he was not going to admit anything.

Miss Burton spoke softly, after a brief pause.

"You and Captain Murchison are very great friends, are you not?"

"Awful pals," was the genuine response. "You see, he knows all my family. And when I joined the regiment, they deputed him to look after me. He has got a hard task," he added with a laugh.

"Oh, not so very hard really, I am sure of that." Norah's voice was very sweet, very caressing. "But you and your friend are of very different temperaments."

"In what way?"

She smiled. "Oh, in half a hundred ways. Captain Murchison

is as true as steel, but also as hard as steel. You, now, are not in the least hard. You are very kind and compassionate, you think the best of everybody."

"Don't flatter me too much, please," interjected the bashful Pomfret.

"Oh, pardon me, I know just the kind of man you are." The sweet face was very close to his own, the beautiful, rather sad eyes were looking steadily into his. "You are a rich man, or you would not be in this expensive regiment. But, if you were a poor man, and you had only ten pounds in your pocket, you would lend an impecunious friend five of them, and not trouble whether he repaid you or not."

"I think you have fitted me, Miss Burton. My dear old chum Hugh is never tired of telling me I am an awful ass."

"You are both right, really," answered Miss Burton.

"You see, we look at life from two different standpoints."

"I fancy you come from two different classes?" queried the charming young woman.

Pomfret felt a little embarrassed. He did not want to give away his particular chum. But there were no doubt certain inherited commercial instincts in Hugh that sometimes offended the descendant of a more careless and aristocratic family.

"You see, Hugh has come from the trading class, originally. His ancestors, no doubt, were close-fisted people. Hugh is not close-fisted himself: he is, in a certain way, the soul of generosity, but sometimes the old Adam peeps out in little

things."

He had a swift pang of remorse when he had said this. For he suddenly remembered Hugh's generous offer of the two hundred which Pomfret, by a very diplomatic letter, was going to cajole out of the octogenarian great-aunt.

"Believe me," added he fervently, "Hugh is one of the best. He is a little peculiar sometimes in small things. I ought not to have spoken as I have done. I am more than sorry if I have conveyed a wrong impression of him."

"But you have not," cried Norah Burton swiftly. "He would be hard in some things: I am sure – for instance – he would never forgive a really dishonourable action, even in the case of his best friend."

"No, I am sure he would not," assented Pomfret. "But I don't fancy he has been much tried that way. We don't get many 'rotters' amongst our lot."

"*Noblesse oblige*," quoted Miss Burton, lightly. Then she added more seriously: "And I am sure he is very kind-hearted and thoughtful. I was impressed with his reluctance to smoke because of the curtains. Of course, he did not remember that it did not matter in the least, as we never have callers."

She was getting on the theme of their social isolation, but Pomfret was sure that, unlike her brother, strangely subdued to-night from his usual boisterousness, she would handle the subject with her customary tact and good taste.

"Ah, of course, all that is very regrettable. It is not so much

your loss, as the loss of Blankfield. I suppose you won't stay very long here."

For a moment there came a blazing light in the soft, beautiful eyes. "A few days ago, I advised my brother to pack up and clear out. The snobbish plutocracy of Blankfield had beaten us, made up of retired shopkeepers and merchants. To-night, with you and Captain Murchison as our guests, I think we have beaten Blankfield with its fat mothers and plain daughters."

She looked superb, as she drew her slender form up to its full height, the glow of indignant triumph blazing on her cheek. At the moment she was extremely beautiful. If Pomfret had been attracted before, he was infatuated now.

"I will help you to beat the Blankfield people, for whom I don't care a row of pins. I will come, whenever you want me."

"And your friend Captain Murchison, will he come, too?"

Pomfret smiled whimsically. "Oh yes, he will come, if I make a point of it. Old Hugh thinks he leads me, but I really lead him." She leaned forward eagerly. "Can you bring some of your brother officers, Mr Pomfret? Please don't think I am bold and forward and presumptuous. But I do long to be even with these Blankfield people. I would love to make a little sort of *salon* of my own. I know it is useless to expect the women at present, but they might come in time. Mind you, I don't want them."

"I will try," said Pomfret slowly. "I think I may say that Hugh and I are the two most popular men in the regiment; I say it without vanity. And I don't suppose we care a snap of the fingers

about the Blankfield people. Still, I don't want to raise hopes that may never be fulfilled. I can only say, I will try." There was a pause. Then she spoke, and there was a far-away look in her eyes. "You hesitate, I see. Oh, I quite believe you when you say you will try. But there is some stumbling-block in the way, isn't there?" Pomfret had perforce to dissemble. "There is no stumbling-block that I know of, except running the risk of offending Blankfield. That is not a great one, as we shall be out of here in about two months."

She leaned closer to him, and her voice sank to a whisper. "There is a stumbling-block, I know. You are too kind and generous to state what it is, you could not, as to-night he is your host. It is my brother."

And then poor, infatuated Pomfret sought no further refuge in subterfuge. He blurted out the truth. "Some of our chaps wouldn't stand him, you know," he said simply.

There was a little convulsive movement of the delicate hands. "And he is such a dear good fellow at heart, wanting I know in the little delicacies that mark a real gentleman. You see a great difference between us, don't you?"

"A very distinct difference," assented Pomfret.

"I will explain it to you in a few words. My father was a harum-scarum sort of person, as I told you last time you were here, hard-riding and hard-drinking. When he was a boy of twenty-five he married a woman out of his own class, a shopgirl or a barmaid, I am not quite sure which. George is many years older than myself,

as I told you he is really my half-brother. The first wife died, my father married again, this time a lady. I am the daughter of the second marriage. Now, I think you understand."

Pomfret was delighted at this avowal, it proved his own prescience.

"I am so glad you told me, but as it happens, it was just what I guessed."

Miss Burton looked at him with admiring eyes. "You are really very clever, you know. Well, I will not exactly say this is a secret, but you will whisper it about discreetly. You need not be quite so frank as I have been about details, but you can hint at a *mésalliance*. I hate to have to tell you so much, for my brother has been so good to me."

"Ah!" Mr Pomfret's air plainly showed that he was eager for further information.

And Miss Burton was quite willing to gratify him. The young man was a pleasant, comfortable sort of person to talk to. He was an admirable listener, and never broke in with unnecessary, or irritating interruptions.

"When my father died he left little behind him but debts; my mother had preceded him some ten years. Poor George had gone into a stockbroker's office, through the good offices of a distant connection. His salary was very small, but he made a home for me. He would not hear of my earning my own living."

"That could not have been very long ago," remarked Pomfret, "because you are not very old now."

"No, it was not long," answered the girl, not committing herself to any definite dates. "Well, we had a very hard time, as you can imagine. Then suddenly our luck changed. An uncle of George's on his mother's side had gone out to Australia as a boy, and amassed, we won't say a fortune from your point of view, but what we should look upon as wealth. He had never married, and when he died, a will was found in which he left all he was possessed of to his sister's children. George was the only child, so he took it all."

"So he threw up business and went in for a country life."

"Well, he has thrown it up for a time. I am not quite certain he will not get tired of inactivity, and go back to it. Now that he has capital, it would be easy for him to embark in something that would keep him occupied, and pay him well."

"Not a sportsman, I suppose, he doesn't care for hunting or shooting? The country is slow for a man if he doesn't do something in that line."

The pretty girl smiled; there was a faint touch of humour in the smile. "Oh, he's not rich enough to indulge in luxuries of that sort. Besides," she added hastily, "he has such wretched sight, he would be no good at sport." Pomfret thought it had been a very pleasant, enlightening conversation. Norah seemed to have been perfectly frank about their past and their present position. She did not pretend to be anything but what she was, the daughter of a spendthrift father, living on what was practically the charity of a good-hearted brother. And that brother was indebted for

his good fortune to a relative who must have been a man of the people.

While the two young people were having this confidential chat, Mr Burton was making himself agreeable to the other guest, in his doubtless well-meant, but somewhat undiplomatic, fashion.

"I do envy you young fellows when I see you walking about as if the world belonged to you."

Hugh drew himself up stiffly. "I was not in the least aware that any one of us conveyed that impression."

"No offence meant, I assure you." Hugh's tone showed him that he had been guilty of bad taste: a blessing Norah had not heard – she would have given him a bad quarter of an hour later on. "But all army men, I think, get a certain kind of swagger. Oh, nothing overbearing or unpleasant about it, of course. They are made so much of that there is no wonder if they do fancy themselves a bit. I'm sure I should if I were one of them." Murchison made no comment on this frank statement, and the other man rambled on in desultory fashion.

"It's the life I wanted. As a boy I longed to grow up quickly and go into the army. There was a fair chance of it then, when the old man had still got a bit of money left. But by the time I was old enough the idea had to be knocked on the head. I had to go into a dingy stockbroking office instead."

Hugh pricked up his ears at the announcement. He had not suspected that the man would be so communicative about his past. Of course he had gone as a clerk. If his father was not well-

off enough to put him in the army neither could he have afforded to buy him a share in a business.

"Yes," pursued Mr Burton, "it was an awful come down after the dreams I had indulged in."

"It must have been a very bitter disappointment," assented Hugh politely, in spite of his firm conviction that the army was the very last profession in the world suited to a man of his host's obvious peculiarities.

"I should have been awfully keen on soldiering," pursued Mr Burton, under the impression that he had discovered a sympathetic listener. "Don't you consider it a splendid life?"

"There are many things in its favour, certainly," was the rather frigid reply.

"But, after all, I don't think I should have cared to be in the line; there's not the same glamour about it, is there? You fellows in the cavalry, in a crack regiment like yours, must see the rosy side of life." He heaved a sigh. "And, of course, you've all got pots of money to grease the wheels."

Hugh fidgeted perceptibly. How very vulgar the man was, with an innate vulgarity that nothing would ever eradicate. But his host, absorbed in his own reflections, did not observe the movement.

"Of course, we know all about you, about the great house of Murchison, you are tiled-in all right." He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper: "What about that young chap yonder? I suppose he's rolling in money, too?"

It was growing insufferable. For two pins Hugh would have got up and bidden him good night then and there, but he shrank from making a scene. What a fool he had been to come here, to allow his kindly feeling for that susceptible young donkey of a Pomfret to expose him to such an ordeal as this.

"Really, Mr Burton," he said in a cutting voice, "I do not discuss the private affairs of my friends on such a brief acquaintance. If you are really anxious to know, I believe Mr Pomfret has considerable expectations from an old aunt who is fairly wealthy. Those expectations depend, I understand, upon his conforming generally to her wishes in all respects."

"Ah, I understand," said the unabashed Burton. "Sorry if my question gave you offence. What really put it in my head was the difference between his position and mine when I was his age."

There was silence for some little time, while the two men applied themselves steadily to their cigars. Then Burton jumped up suddenly.

"This must be a bit slow for you and your friend, and the night is young. What do you say to a game at bridge?"

Yes, Captain Murchison would welcome a game of bridge, anything as a relief to this vulgarian's conversation.

They played for over two hours, Murchison keenly alert from certain suspicions that had been forming in his mind. At present there was no foundation for these vague suspicions. They played for small stakes, but the visitors rose up the winners, not by a great amount, but still winners.

It was a fine night, the two men walked back to their quarters.

"How did you get on with the charmer? I saw you seemed very confidential together," asked the older man.

"Splendidly, old chap. She told me a lot about her history." Pomfret related all he had been told in full. "And how did you get on with the brother?"

"Don't ask me," replied Hugh with a groan. "He's the most insufferable creature I ever came across. I don't really think I can go there again. At the beginning of the evening he started fairly well, but later he reverted to type."

"Well, I may as well tell you straight, I shall. The next time we go I'll take a share of the brother."

When Pomfret spoke in that tone he meant what he said, and Hugh knew he would have his own wilful way.

There was one piece of information which the young subaltern had not imparted to his friend.

It was this – that after much pressing, and more than one refusal, Miss Burton had agreed to meet him to-morrow afternoon at a very sequestered spot about a mile and a half from Blankfield, with the view of pursuing their acquaintance.

Chapter Five

From the night of that dinner-party Murchison noted a subtle difference in his young friend's demeanour. Pomfret had always been a harum-scarum sort of young fellow, accustomed to follow erratic and injudicious impulses, not absolutely devoid of brains of a certain order, but of imperfect and ill-balanced mentality.

But in his wildest escapades he had always been frank and above-board. And he was ever the first, when he had overstepped the border-line, to admit that he was in the wrong. And on such occasions, far from justifying his exploits, he had been ready to deplore them.

But his frankness seemed to have departed from that night. He seemed rather to avoid than seek the society of his old friend and mentor. When Hugh brought up the subject of the Burtons, Pomfret seemed anxious to avoid it, to say as little as possible. He seemed to shut himself up within his own soul.

Hugh, of course, was profoundly uneasy. Such a transparent creature as Pomfret would not be likely to retire within his own shell unless there were cogent reasons for the withdrawal. And the reasons were inspired by the attractive personality of the fascinating siren at Rosemount, the charming young woman who explained the presence of an undesirable brother by the narrative of her father's first unfortunate marriage.

Pomfret had invited the brother and sister to a dinner at the

principal hotel in the place, and Hugh had been his friend's guest. Ladies, of course, could not be asked to the Mess. It had been a happy solution of a somewhat awkward position. Mr Burton no doubt understood, but he accepted the situation with alacrity.

From the dinner they had adjourned to Rosemount. Here they had played cards as before, but they left off fairly even. Hugh's suspicions about card-sharping were dissipated as before. At the same time, he was still resolved to keep a watchful eye upon the pair. It was firmly engrained upon his mind, and only, of course, from the purest instinct, that he did not trust either of them.

Much to his surprise, they left without having been asked to a return dinner. It was the turn of the Burtons. And judging from the haste with which Burton had jumped at them on the first visit, the omission was a little noticeable. It could not be that these new isolated dwellers in Blankfield wanted to shelve an acquaintance which must have brightened their dull and unvisited existence.

Another fact presented itself to Murchison's rather acute intelligence. There seemed already established between Pomfret and the attractive Norah a certain kind of freemasonry, a certain sort of easy relations. And once in the course of the evening he was sure that he heard the young man, in the course of a whispered conversation, address her by her Christian name. They had been sitting together on the Chesterfield, and their remarks to each other had been addressed in a very low tone. But Hugh's hearing was wonderfully acute, and he had surprised a sudden expression of rebuke in Miss Burton's eyes when Pomfret made

the slip.

And here, for a moment, this story must leave Hugh Murchison with his honest doubts and suspicions, while it follows the fortunes of his young friend and the attractive Norah Burton.

For, truth to tell, at this particular juncture, young Pomfret, for all his apparent guilelessness, was pursuing a double game. Madly, overwhelmingly, in love with Norah, he was meeting her clandestinely, sometimes at her own house, sometimes in sequestered spots in the surrounding neighbourhood. And of these visits and meetings Hugh knew nothing.

Pomfret was not free from a few pangs of self-reproach, from the fact that he was not running quite straight with good old Hugh, to whom he had always, hitherto, confessed all his difficulties and troubles.

But then Hugh, although one of the best, was such a practical old stick. And if he told him the whole truth, there was no knowing what course Hugh might not think it was his duty to take. He might write to his family and bring them down in an avalanche on him, or even to the octogenarian aunt.

Love taught him deep cunning, and what he lacked in this subtle quality was ably supplemented by Miss Burton, this young girl with the rather sad expression, and the candid eyes that always met your gaze unfalteringly.

From the first clandestine meeting, arranged in whispers on the night of the dinner at Rosemount, Pomfret had made the running very fast. He had given Norah to understand that he

thought her the most desirable girl he had ever met, that no other woman had appealed, would or could appeal, to him as she did. There was a good drop of Irish blood in his own veins, and he certainly made a most fervent lover.

Norah listened with a modest bashfulness that enchanted him. He was sure from her demeanour that she had never been made love to before. She seemed so overwhelmed that she could hardly say a word. If one were not so much in love, one might almost have thought she was stupid.

She was not so stupid, however, as not to preserve her wits sufficiently to make another appointment, this time at Rosemount. Pomfret consented gladly, but he made a certain stipulation, which his companion was more than pleased to agree to.

"We mustn't let old Hugh know about this, though, or he'll think he's left out in the cold. You see, it was really through him I knew you. You must tell your brother not to let it out."

Miss Burton promised that, so far as she and her brother were concerned, Captain Murchison would be none the wiser. It only remained for Mr Pomfret – although entreated to do so, she could not at this early stage address him as "Jack" – to surround his movements with a proper degree of mystery.

When the two parted, and the meeting had been rather a brief one, for it was always a little dangerous lingering long about the environs of Blankfield, in case of unexpected intruders, Miss Burton made a significant remark.

"I am quite sure your friend Captain Murchison does not like me. In fact, I think his real feeling is one of dislike."

Mr Pomfret was young enough to blush; he did so upon this occasion. He guessed the real truth, that Murchison did not dislike her at all, on the contrary, he rather admired her – but he had a certain distrust of her.

"Fancy on your part, fancy, I'm quite sure," he answered glibly. "I expect he is a little bit sore, you know, about the whole thing, thinks I have cut him out with you."

"Perhaps," assented Norah, easily. But in her own heart she knew it was nothing of the kind. She recognised at once the difference between the two men. Murchison was a thorough gentleman, kind and chivalrous, but he was a man of the world, with a certain hard strain in him, a man who would submit everything to the test of cold, practical reasoning, not to be hoodwinked or led astray.

This poor babbling boy, with his unrestrained impulses, that Celtic leaven in his blood, would fall an easy prey to any woman who was clever enough to cast her spells over him. He would never reason, he would only feel.

After that first meeting, the precursor of many others, the affair progressed briskly. Pomfret made love with great ardour, Norah received his advances with a shy sort of acquiescence that inflamed him the more. He was sure, oh very sure, he was the first who had touched that innocent heart.

From these delightful confidences Murchison was shut out. It

would not be wise to ignore him altogether, for such a course of action would have intensified his suspicions. But the invitations to Rosemount from either host or hostess were few and far between.

He was not, however, so easily gulled as the three conspirators thought. Pomfret's preoccupied mood, the air of a man who had much on his mind, his frequent and unexplained absences, gave to his friend much food for thought. He felt certain that the easy-going, irresponsible young man was entangling himself. But in such a state of affairs he felt powerless. Short of invoking the influence of the Colonel, or writing to the elderly aunt, he could do nothing.

It cannot be said that the course of true love was running very smoothly, even from the point of view of the ardent and enamoured suitor himself. In spite of his impulsive temperament, his disinclination to look hard facts squarely in the face, there was in him a slight leaven of common-sense.

Save for the bounty and goodwill of this generous, if somewhat narrow-minded, aunt he was an absolute pauper. There was no hope of marrying without her consent. And he was quite sure that in a case like this her consent would never be given. A *fiancée*, to be received by her with approval, must present some sort of credentials.

And there was the difficulty. Poor Jack had exhausted all his simple cunning to extract from them some convincing details of their antecedents. But even he, infatuated as he was, had to admit that they had parried inquiries with great adroitness. They

maintained a persistent reticence as to names and places. Even he was forced to conclude that, for some reason or another, they did not choose to be frank about their past.

These obvious facts, however, did not lessen his infatuation. To marry her was the one dominating object of his life, in spite of all that his few remaining remnants of common-sense could urge against such a step.

More than once the rash idea occurred to him that he would marry her in secret, and when the marriage was an accomplished fact, throw himself upon his aunt's forgiveness.

He mooted the idea to Norah, to whom, of course, he had already made a frank statement of his position, as befitted the honourable gentleman he was. But she did not receive the suggestion with enthusiasm, although she professed to fully reciprocate his ardent affection.

"If I were a selfish girl, and only thought of my immediate happiness, I should say 'Yes,'" she said with a little tremulous smile, that made her look more desirable than ever in her lover's eyes. "But I could not allow *you* to run such a terrible risk. Old people are very strange and very touchy when they think they have been slighted. Suppose she cast you off."

"I suppose I could work, as thousands have to do," replied Jack, with a touch of his old doggedness.

She shook her head. "My poor Jack! It is easy to talk of working, but you have got to find an employer. And you have been brought up to an idle life. What could you turn your hand

to?" She paused a moment, and then added as an after-thought: "And besides, my brother would never sanction it."

Even to Pomfret's slow revolving mind, the worldly taint in her just peeped forth in those sensible remarks.

"If I am prepared to risk my aunt's displeasure, you can surely afford to risk your brother's?" he queried angrily.

But Norah disarmed him with one of her sweetest smiles.

"Be reasonable, dearest; we must not behave like a pair of silly children. And besides, there is a certain moral obligation on both sides. You owe everything to your aunt. I owe everything to my brother. It would be very base to ignore them."

Jack was touched by the nobility of these last sentiments. "You are much better than I am, Norah, much less selfish."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.