

Le Queux William

Whither Thou Goest



William Le Queux
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Preface.

What This Story is About

The Earl of Saxham was vastly annoyed when his son, Guy, fell in love with a “penniless nobody,” and announced that he would marry her against all opposition. He determined to separate the lovers; to which end he persuaded an influential friend in the Foreign Office to secure an appointment for Guy in the Embassy at Madrid. He little knew that he was sending his son into the centre of a hotbed of anarchism, that Guy’s footsteps were to be dogged by a vindictive and revengeful woman, that his life was to hold many a thrilling moment and not a few narrow escapes.

Mr Le Queux has written a thrilling story of anarchism and its deadly secret plotting, a story through which there runs, nevertheless, a rich vein of romance.

Prologue

A hot July evening on the calm Biscayan coast of Spain.

The sun had disappeared like a globe of molten metal into the sapphire sea, and now, in the breathless blood-red afterglow which tinged the unruffled glassy waters away to the Atlantic, the whole populace of the peaceful old-world town of Fonterrabia had come forth from their houses to breathe again after the intense heat and burden of the blazing day.

Dusty green sun-shutters were being opened everywhere, while upon the golden beach the clear waters hardly rippled, for the summer tide was upon the turn. Across the bay lay a cluster of gaily-painted sardine boats in reds and greens, awaiting a breeze, and along the sea-front, so fiercely swept in winter, stood the quaint mediaeval houses, crumbling and sun-blached, with their wide overhanging roofs and many balconies, palpitating with the heat, now rapidly receding. It had been a scorching day in Spain.

In the stunted tamarisks which sprang, dust-covered and twisted, from the yellow, shifting sands the grasshoppers still chirped merrily, though it was sunset, and from the sun-blached sea-front came of a sudden the high, tuneful twanging of a mandoline, and a man's tenor voice singing that ancient love-song which one hears everywhere in the wine lands of the Guipuzcoa.

Pasé cantivo amor entus prisiones.

From the houses came forth the many mixed odours of the evening *cena*, the appetising smell of rich *ollas*, mostly flavoured with garlic, be it said, while from the shops which sold eatables there emanated that faint and peculiar perfume which only those who have lived in hot climates can know, and can justly appreciate.

Of a sudden the ancient bells of Santa Gadea, the old incense-laden, Gothic church above the town, clanged forth again, as they had done so many times a day through centuries, summoning the good people of Fonterrabia to kneel before the high dark altar, with those long candles and the wonderful brass chandelier above.

Now as the bells jangled forth an observer might, perhaps, have noticed two men meet, as though entirely by accident, close to that obscure little café "The Concha," which faces the sea.

On the pavement before the little place sat several men in their blue *bérets*, drinking wine and gossiping as all Spaniards must do.

The pair who had met were of quite different stamp.

One, who was about forty, of a refined but rather parvenu type, was dressed in a well-cut suit of thin, dark grey material, and wore a straw hat much ripened by the sun. He was idly smoking a long *valenciano*, and betrayed surprise, though feigned, at the meeting. The other was a typical fisherman in the blue blouse and blue *béret*, the national headdress of all the Basque people. He still wore his heavy sea-boots, in which, however, he walked jauntily, for his age was not more than thirty, and his dark, handsome countenance was bright, enthusiastic, and well bronzed.

On meeting, the man in the sun-ripened straw hat, and of much superior class, turned quickly and walked beside him.

As he did so a tall Jesuit priest, a man with a swarthy, sinister face and a long, rather shabby cassock – Father Gonzalo by name – chanced to pass.

Carlos Somoza, the fisherman, saluted him reverently, but beneath his breath he exclaimed in Spanish:

"May the Holy Madonna curse him for ever!"

"Why?" inquired the man in grey, whose name was Garcia Zorrilta, a native of Toledo, who had come in secret from Madrid in order to meet his fisherman friend.

"Because he may recognise you. There may be a hitch."

“Bah! There will be no hitch. There cannot be. You people here in the country are so often faint-hearted. We in the capital are not. All goes well, and success must be ours. It is but a simple matter of waiting – waiting in patience.”

“Yes – but Father Gonzalo is a man whom I do not like.”

“Why? He looks really quite harmless. Who is he?”

“Nobody exactly knows,” was the fisherman’s reply, as they turned up the narrow Calle Mayor, that old-world street of high, handsome houses, mostly adorned with the crumbling coats-of-arms of the ancient proprietors, and with balconies of wrought iron, and wide, projecting roofs across the narrow footway. “He has been here for about four months, yet he is not attached to Santa Gadea. Sometimes he visits the sick, and all speak well of him. But both Cardona and Cienfuegos agree with my suspicions that he is a Government agent, and that he is here to find out all he can.”

His companion grunted.

“*Dios!* If that is really so, then we must discover more about him,” he said. “I trust, however, you are wrong, for, as you say, he might recognise me again. And that would certainly be most awkward in my position – as Deputy-Governor of the Province of Navarre.”

“Yes, Excellency, that is why I cursed him,” replied the intelligent fisherman, with a smile. “At our meeting last Thursday, we discussed whether Father Gonzalo should not meet with – well, meet with an accident.”

“No, no!” replied the other quickly, raising his voice because at the moment a heavy cart, with its great wood disc wheels, drawn by two white bulls and laden with wine barrels, rumbled past them slowly over the cobbles. “Not here – that would never do, never! It would upset all our plans! We must be cautious —*always cautious*. Watch him, and report to me in the usual way – a letter to the Poste Restante in Madrid. I will at once inquire all about this mysterious Father, and the reason he has come to Fonterrabia. He may, as you suspect, be an agent of the Ministry in disguise.”

“We are quite certain that he is.”

“If so, he must not remain here,” declared the stranger decisively. “It would certainly be extremely dangerous for you, and for all your friends. The success of our *coup* depends upon entire secrecy. Your little circle here have ever been loyal and undaunted. There must be no betrayal, as there was, you recollect, in Barcelona before the war.”

“Barcelona is a city, Fonterrabia is only a little town, and hence it should escape suspicion,” was the educated young fisherman’s remark. “Ours we know to be a just and honest cause, and we all, as sons of Spain, are each of us prepared willingly to sacrifice our lives if necessary.”

“Well said, Carlos! Our gallant leader, Ferdinand Contraras, who has lately sacrificed most of his great fortune to secure the salvation of Spain, is aware of your loyalty,” Zorrilita assured him. “A little time ago I was with him at one of our secret sessions at Toledo, and he mentioned you, and your friends here – and praised you for your patriotism as a true son of Spain.”

“But the Englishman! What of him?” asked Carlos, as, strolling slowly, they were approaching the great old church.

“That Englishman? Oh, yes, I know. You have serious and perhaps foolish apprehensions in that direction,” was the reply of the Deputy-Governor of Navarre. “But, Carlos, you can rest assured that we shall have no real trouble from that quarter. He will die – as the others have done. And he will die very soon!”

“*You are quite certain of that?*” asked the fisherman eagerly.

“Quite. It is all arranged – an accident – a mystery – and nothing more,” laughed the man from Madrid.

“The Englishman is our most serious enemy,” declared Carlos, as yet only half convinced.

“One by one the enemies of our own Spanish people have been swept away. He will very soon follow them – rest assured. *De los enemigos los menos*– the fewer enemies the better.”

“But he may go back to England. We discussed it all here at our secret meeting last Thursday.”

“Well, and suppose he is in England, it does not matter. The avenging hand of our great Contraras – who may *Dios* protect – will strike him there, never fear. Wherever he is, he cannot escape us. He will die, and his death will be a mystery to the English police – as so many deaths have been.”

At that moment the pair found themselves passing the great old Gothic door of Santa Gadea, which the sacristan had thrown open to the air for an hour to clear the atmosphere of incense before closing for the night. In the deep, cavernous silence the eternal red lamp showed before the figure of the Virgin crowned, while far beyond were the long candles burning before the altar, with its many steps.

The sight of those candles impelled the pious and enthusiastic Carlos to suggest that they should enter the church, and there pray for the success of their plans.

The Deputy-Governor of Navarre in the shabby straw hat smiled, and at once agreed.

In all Latin countries the lower class have a habit of kneeling before their favourite altar and craving blessings of the most paltry character. In Italy, the *contadini* ask that the winning numbers of the *lotto* or Government lottery may be revealed to them, or beg that their attempt at theft may be successful. In Spain they implore divine grace for a big catch of fish, or a fat harvest, so that they may enrich themselves.

Cupidity is, alas, the mainspring of most of the prayers of Southern Europe.

Garcia Zorrilta, political adventurer and wire-puller, who by reason of his cunning and unscrupulousness had risen from clerk in a flour-mill in Toledo to be Deputy-Governor of the Province of Navarre, knew how pious was his friend the young fisherman, and, mock piety being part of his profession, he was compelled to enter that great dark, over-ornamented church, and there kneel with his companion before the altar.

What Zorrilta, one of the lieutenants of the great Contraras, prayed for one does not know, but the prayer of Carlos the fisherman was for the speedy death of the one man he most greatly feared, the man to whom he had referred as “the Englishman.”

But as he rose from his knees, he whispered under his breath:

“*Cuando no puede uno vestirse la piel del leon, vestase de la vulpeja*– when you cannot clothe yourself in the lion’s skin, put on that of the fox.”

Chapter One

The evening shadows were falling softly as the Earl of Saxham stepped into one of the small drawing-rooms of that palatial residence, Ticehurst Park, in the county of Sussex.

Ticehurst Park was a magnificent domain, deeply mortgaged. Out of its fair revenues, there were two or three heavily-pensioned dowagers who had to be provided for, there were a heap of relations who had to draw their small annual stipends.

On paper, the Earl of Saxham was a very wealthy nobleman. When he had deducted the interest on mortgages, and the yearly stipends and marriage settlements, he was quite poor. Out of every sovereign he received, he retained about ten shillings.

A less even-tempered man would have cursed his bad luck, that he should have been saddled with three dowagers, and a host of other cormorants.

Archibald, tenth Earl of Saxham, was a delightful optimist. He had come into the title by a series of fortunate accidents, and he was disposed to think that, on the whole, Providence had arranged things very agreeably. Before he took up the mantle of his fathers he had been trying to make both ends meet on a small private fortune of seven hundred a year, with but indifferent success. He had now, those irksome deductions apart, several thousands a year – in fact, a still very considerable income.

He fitted into the position as easily as a glove. His wife, a woman of noble birth like himself, assisted him ably. They speedily became the most popular couple in Sussex, a county which boasts of many noble families.

He came into his inheritance at the age of thirty. Ten years after his beautiful and beloved wife died, leaving him with three children, Eric Viscount Ticehurst, Guy Rossett, and Mary Rossett. He was so devoted to the memory of his wife that he did not marry again.

Mary Rossett, the youngest of the three, was sitting in the small drawing-room when he entered this particular evening.

She was a handsome young woman of about twenty-five years, tall and slender. Her demeanour was a little staid, suggesting a woman some five years her senior.

Truth to tell, Mary Rossett had experienced a bitter romance when she was at the age of twenty. Her heart was buried in the grave of a young officer of the Guards, who had died suddenly a few days before the date of their wedding.

From that fatal day, she had said good-bye to love, in a measure to youth. No other man would ever charm back the lovelight into the eyes of Mary Rossett.

But fate, which had stricken her so sorely, did not deprive her of her sweet and womanly qualities. She was the beloved companion of her brothers, the idol of her widowed father; and she was adored by all the villagers on the estate, to many of whom she was often a ministering angel.

The Earl of Saxham, as he entered the small drawing-room, was smiling in a peculiar manner. His daughter recognised that peculiar smile. Her father was very pleased with himself over something. But she knew what that something was.

“So Guy has come,” he cried cheerfully. “Well, Mary, don’t you give it away when he tells us the good news, or it will spoil it all.”

Lady Mary rose, and laid an affectionate hand on his arm.

“No need to caution me, dearest. You know I never give myself away. Keep a guard on yourself. Don’t smile too much, or look at me too meaningly when he is telling us, or he’ll spot it. You know, you are a little indiscreet at times.”

The Earl smiled genially.

“I know, I know, Mary. There is no fool like an old fool, they say. But this is really a great thing. I wrung it out of old Greatorex. And, once in Spain, we shall get him out of the reach of that young minx, Isobel Clandon.”

Mary's brows contracted into a slight frown: Love had left her stranded, but she was still very sympathetic to young lovers.

"Why are you so hard on poor Isobel, father?" she asked in her clear, kind voice. "I know she is poor, but she is a lady and well-born."

Her voice faltered a little, as she added, "Hugh was poor, when you gave your consent that I should marry him. Why do you make this distinction with Guy?"

The Earl looked a little embarrassed.

"My dear Mary, you are a sensible girl, and you must see that the circumstances are totally dissimilar. Hugh was the younger son of a house as noble as our own. True he was poor, but I could have helped you."

"And if you were ready to help me, you can help Guy and Isobel," flashed Lady Mary quickly.

The Earl spoke a little irritably.

"It is very strange you can't see it. Isobel Clandon is, I admit, quite a lady in the technical sense of the term. But Guy must look beyond that. He must marry in his own rank. Failing that, he must marry a woman with money."

Lady Mary spoke with an equal irritation.

"You are unjust, father, unjust both to Guy and Isobel. You have no right to ruin these two young lives with your prejudices and your old-world notions." Her voice dropped into a half-sob as she concluded. "What is there in the world better than real love? And these two love each other devotedly."

The Earl was about to reply angrily, for he was a somewhat obstinate old man, and hated being thwarted. But, before he could utter a word, the door opened to admit Guy Rossett.

Guy was a very handsome young fellow, with a winning and genial expression. He advanced and shook his father's hand warmly, and kissed his sister with equal affection.

The Earl beamed upon him. Guy was his favourite of the two sons. Ticehurst was a languid young man about town, who did not appeal greatly to his more robust father.

"Well, Guy, my dear boy, delighted to see you. Have you brought us any news?"

Mary shot a warning glance at her father. Lord Saxham was always preaching reticence to other people, but he never observed it himself. If Guy had been just a little more subtle than he was, he would have smelt a rat at once.

Guy spoke in his frank, almost boyish voice.

"Splendid news, sir, but so good that I want to keep it to myself for a little bit. Shall we say till after dinner, when the servants have gone, and we are quite by ourselves?"

"By all means." It was Mary's sweet, gentle voice that answered. "I am sure I should like to keep very good news to myself for a time; hug it as it were. After dinner, Guy!"

Later on, they went into the dining-room. The meal was a somewhat tedious and long repast. Lord Saxham, who was a bit of a gourmet, liked to take a small portion of several dishes. Guy was a hearty trencherman.

Poor Lady Mary, whose thoughts inclined towards a convent, would have been satisfied with a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter, but she had to preside over these prolonged meals.

When the ponderous banquet – no lesser word could describe it – had drawn to a close, the footman withdrew. It was a family party, the two men sat round the table and smoked. Lady Mary waited to hear the great news. And then Guy unburdened himself.

"The biggest stroke of luck in the world, sir. After fooling about in the Foreign Office for all these years, Greatorex sent for me to go into his private room. A very short interview: Greatorex doesn't waste words. I am to go to the Embassy at Madrid."

Lady Mary preserved her sweet calm. The Earl did not move an eyelid. He lifted his glass of port.

"Success to you, my boy. You have got a chance now. And I am sure you will make good."

The young man drained his glass also.

“Yes, I think I shall make good. What I just wanted was a chance.”

Mary shot a warning glance at her father. It was just on the cards that he might have blurted out something that would have hurt his son’s pride, led him to understand that it was his father’s secret influence that had got him this post.

But, fortunately, at this stage the Earl’s mental faculties were not very acute. He was already beginning to nod over his port.

A few moments later, Lord Saxham’s somnolent faculties became more fully developed. Mary pointed to the terrace which was approached by the dining-room windows. She leaned across the table and whispered.

“Shall we take a stroll? I would like to talk all this over with you.”

Guy nodded and rose. They went noiselessly to the terrace, and sat down on one of the numerous seats, overlooking the lovely gardens beneath.

Mary opened the conversation at once.

“Is this – this good news – going to make any difference to you, Guy?”

There was just a note of anxiety in her voice.

Guy looked at her squarely.

“What do you mean, Mary? Difference in what way?”

“Difference between you and Isobel?” answered Mary, in a voice that shook a little. “You love each other so dearly. I would hate to think that anything could come between you.”

Guy laughed his hearty, boyish laugh.

“Dear old girl, you know I have always told the truth to you. I would sooner go to the devil with Isobel Clandon, than to heaven with some delightful bride that our dear old dad had chosen for me. As soon as I am on my feet, Isobel will be my wife.”

Mary patted his hand affectionately.

“I am so delighted to hear you say that. But one never quite knows men. There is father, in a way sentimental, but on certain things he can be as hard as granite.”

Guy Rossett frowned.

“Oh, I know. He hates the idea of my marrying Isobel. I suppose when I do he will forbid me the house, and cut me off with a shilling, eh?”

Mary looked at him, with a soft gleam in her kind, beautiful eyes.

“Oh, no, he will not do that. And if he wanted to, I should not let him. You know, I have more influence over him than anybody.”

“Except, perhaps, Ticehurst?” suggested Guy, in a tone that was not quite free from bitterness. He was not over-fond of his elder brother.

Mary shook her head.

She was fond of both her brothers, but she was not oblivious of Ticehurst’s faults.

“Don’t worry about that, dear old boy. Eric has no influence over him at all. And when the dreadful deed is done, and Isobel is your wife, dear old dad will rage and fume, and all that. But he will come round in the end, and finish by loving Isobel as much as he does me. Don’t worry. Go on with it.”

Guy kissed her.

“By Jove, you are a pal, Mary. Then I can count on you to back me up.”

“Of course,” was Mary’s confident reply.

There was silence between them for a little while, while Guy puffed at his cigarette, and his sister was cogitating as to her next method of attack. Brought up in a household of three men, she knew it was somewhat difficult to storm the masculine citadel.

Presently she spoke.

“And what about finance, Guy? Are things easy there?”

The boyish look disappeared from the young man's face. Her question had seemed to disturb his equanimity. He was quite frank.

"That's the devil of it, Mary. You know my old friend Jackson?"

Mary gave a little sigh. Yes, she had heard of Jackson from both brothers. He was a high-class moneylender, who accommodated young men of good family.

"Yes, I know all about Jackson. How much do you owe him?"

Her brother reflected.

"Something between five and six hundred," he said, after a pause.

Mary spoke decidedly.

"You must clear that off before you go to Spain – you must have a clean sheet."

She reflected also, before she spoke again.

"I can let you have two hundred and fifty out of what I have saved."

Guy interrupted.

"You sweet little soul, you never spend anything except in charities."

"I know," answered his sister quietly. "Anyway, there is my two hundred and fifty, and I must coax the rest out of dad. You must go to Spain with a clean sheet. That is absolutely essential."

Guy answered with his boyish laugh and with his boyish exuberance.

"It is too awfully dear and kind of you, and you can guess how I appreciate it. But I am not going to let my sister waste her money on two graceless scamps like Ticehurst and myself. And I don't sponge on my father, either."

Mary protested gently.

"Oh, Guy, how unjust of both yourself and Eric. You know that is not my opinion of either of you." Guy took her slender hand in his own.

"You dear old girl, you are only just a little bit lower than the angels; you have always had wings growing since you were a wee toddler. But I am going to see this thing through on my own. Jackson is an old scoundrel of course, but he never presses one very hard. I shall square him all right."

Mary said no more on the subject. Both her brothers inherited the paternal obstinacy. When they had once made up their minds, nothing could move them.

But she sighed a little. It would have been so much better if Guy could have got rid of this odious moneylender, and have landed in Spain with a clean sheet. He would have been free from any pecuniary worries, and, therefore, in a better mood to attend to his work.

Jackson was done with, but there was another subject which she wanted to broach before this interview was ended. And it was a rather delicate one. It was some little time before she spoke again.

"And how about that woman, Violet Hargrave? Are you quite clear of her? It is not fair to Isobel that you should keep up even a semblance of friendship with such an odious person."

Guy laughed, but this time his laugh did not ring clear and boyish; it betrayed uneasiness.

"Oh, come, Mary, you are a bit uncharitable, aren't you. Violet Hargrave is generally considered a charming, not an odious, person."

His sister spoke a little sternly for her.

"I don't pretend to have a man's knowledge of the world, but I have not been brought up in a nursery. I know her type, and it is one from which any pure woman, and any decent man, ought to shrink. Have you given her up?"

Guy looked her squarely in the face.

"Honestly, Mary, I have, just after I met Isobel. Of course, a man can't throw a woman over in a second, but I have cooled down gradually. At the present moment, I think the fascinating widow hates me."

Mary rose and spoke decidedly.

"I am glad to have your assurance of that. If it had not been so, I might have felt it my duty to warn Isobel. She is too sterling a girl to be played with."

Her brother rose too, half resentful, half admiring. It was not the first time that Lady Mary had spoken salutary words of wisdom to him.

“By Jove, Mary, you are uncompromising. Do you mean to say you would give me away to Isobel – me, your own brother?”

“Of course,” answered Mary firmly. “To Isobel, or any other woman, if I thought you were unworthy of her.”

Admiration conquered. He tucked her arm in his, as they returned to the house.

“You dear old girl, you are one out of a million. But you know you are a little uncomfortable at times, and when you are inclined that way, you have a knack of making a fellow feel a bit of a worm.”

Mary laughed pleasantly.

“So good for you feeling that, dear old boy, and equally good for Eric. I expect dad has woken up by now, and wondering where we have got to.” They found the Earl wide-awake. The doze of a few minutes over his port had refreshed him immensely. He fell at once to discussing Spain, a country he knew well.

In his youth, Lord Saxham had been an attaché at the Spanish Court, and he knew the ropes. Guy listened respectfully to his father.

The old man concluded his somewhat rambling remarks with a final exhortation.

“And remember, my dear boy, always to keep on the right side of Greatorex. He *is* the Foreign Office. Secretaries, mere figure-heads, come and go with different Governments. Greatorex remains there, permanent, unchangeable. Get into his good graces, and your fortune is made.”

Guy promised that he would do his best to propitiate the all-powerful Greatorex. Two days later he left. He undertook to pay them a farewell visit before he started for Spain.

The Earl and his daughter watched the car flying down the avenue. The old man turned to his daughter with a grunt.

“Might have given us another couple of days, I think. But I know what’s in his mind. He is running down to Eastbourne after that minx.”

He always alluded to Isobel Clandon as “that minx,” owing to his unreasonable prejudice against her.

Mary spoke with spirit.

“Very natural under the circumstances, I should think. He would want to see something of the girl he loves before he left.”

Lord Saxham turned on her angrily.

“Mary, I have always thought you a sensible woman. Do you mean to tell me you are going to aid and abet him in his folly.”

Lady Mary answered him in a few words.

“I don’t call it folly, father.”

She walked out of the room, with a resolute expression on her face, and uplifted chin. She would have been the last to admit it, but she had inherited no small share of the family obstinacy.

Chapter Two

Mrs Hargrave sat in her pretty flat in Mount Street, absorbed in deep thought. On her lap lay an open letter, and it was a passage in that letter just received which accounted for her preoccupation.

She was a pretty woman, *petite* and slender, with clear-cut, refined features and delicate colouring. She had soft, candid blue eyes, and a wealth of fair hair which was always arranged in the most becoming fashion.

In a strong and searching light, a keen judge would have guessed her real age, just a little over the wrong side of thirty. But she was quite a clever person, and she always avoided strong lights as much as possible. Under favourable conditions, most people took her to be at least four or five years younger. She owned herself to twenty-six.

There was no getting at the truth of the matter. Since she first came to London, four years ago, having been married abroad to her husband, Jack Hargrave, a young man of good family, but a bit of a *mauvais sujet*, she had made many acquaintances. But she appeared to have no old friends who could throw any light on her real age or her antecedents.

Her husband's relatives received her with scant cordiality, there was too much reticence about her previous history to incline them in her favour. As a matter of fact, they were not over-fond of Jack himself. There had been certain early episodes in his career which had not endeared him to right-thinking persons.

It was well-known that he was in no sense of the word a wealthy man. Yet he kept an expensive flat, he was always immaculately dressed, and his wife, to judge by her costly costumes, must have had a very liberal allowance.

They entertained a great deal, and they had bridge parties every night when they were at home. Knowing people whispered amongst themselves that it was their winnings at bridge which enabled them to make such a brave show. They were certainly both very skilful players. Not a few persons thought they were a bit too skilful, too uniformly successful.

Two years after their marriage, Jack Hargrave died suddenly of pneumonia, the result of a neglected chill. Strange to say, he left no will. His widow explained this by the fact that he had made all his property over to her, by deed of gift, soon after their marriage, as he did not want her to be burdened with death duties.

Things were not altered in any way by Jack's death. His widow kept on the expensive flat in Mount Street. When a decent period of mourning had elapsed, she appeared in her usual tasteful costumes, and resumed her bridge parties.

There was nothing to wonder at in this. If Jack Hargrave had made over all his property to her, she was as well-off after his death as before. Rather better, as there was only one to spend the income instead of two.

A certain thing, however, did occur which made some people suspicious. Her husband's relatives, who had never been more than coldly civil during Jack's lifetime, now dropped her altogether.

Jack, who was a few years younger than his wife, had been at Eton and Oxford with Guy Rossett, and they were old friends. When Hargrave returned from abroad with his pretty bride, he had hunted up Guy and induced him to become a frequent visitor in Mount Street.

Guy was considerably attracted by the young hostess. Of course, he knew that his friend was looked at askance by many people, and he knew nothing more than the rest about Mrs Hargrave's antecedents.

When the fair young widow resumed her normal existence, and her bridge parties, young Rossett again became a frequent visitor. And now that there was no obstacle in the shape of a husband, he allowed her to see that her attraction for him had grown very considerably.

She met him more than half-way. There was no doubt that the attraction was mutual. But there were other reasons that weighed strongly with her. Guy had a small allowance from his father, but it was supplemented by a very handsome one from his great-aunt, an old lady of eighty, who would also leave him her very considerable private fortune.

In every sense, he was a most eligible person. He was handsome, distinguished-looking and charming, with the perfect manners of the young diplomatist. And one day, and it could not be a very long one now, he would be a rich man by the death of Lady Henrietta.

For many months, Guy Rossett went to the flat in Mount Street, losing a considerable sum of money at bridge to his hostess and various members of her circle.

There was a certain strain of caution in him, a certain recognition of the fact that he would require to know a good deal more than he did about the charming widow's past, before he committed himself definitely, that kept the sense of attraction on his side within reasonable bounds.

Still, there is no knowing what might have happened, but for the occurrence of a certain event. Mrs Hargrave was very charming, very subtle, equipped with all the wiles of a clever and experienced woman. One day, his self-control might have given way, her fascination might have overpowered his prudence, and he would have committed himself beyond recall.

Then something happened which switched away his thoughts for ever from the flat in Mount Street and its fascinating owner. At a certain country house he met Isobel Clandon, the daughter of a retired general, a widower who lived at Eastbourne.

He took her in to dinner the first night of his arrival, and he knew he had found the woman of his dreams. Isobel was a lovely girl of twenty-two, a little above the middle height, a vision of beauty and grace.

Her fresh and virginal charm, her spontaneous gaiety, drove out all recollection of the more artificial attractions of the older woman. The one suggested the brightness and freshness of spring, the other fading tints of summer.

It was love at first sight on both sides, and Guy knew that he had never really loved before. And Isobel had not even flirted with a man before she saw him. She came to him whole-hearted, and he came as little scarred as a man might be who has lived twenty-seven years in the world, and seen and known many women.

Mrs Hargrave roused herself from her reverie, and took up the letter for the second time. It was from an intimate acquaintance, and the envelope bore the Eastbourne post-mark. Again she read that particular paragraph which had so perturbed her.

“I have at last succeeded in meeting your Miss Clandon at a garden-party. I made myself as pleasant as I could, and you know I can make myself pretty well liked when I try. I think she has taken a fancy to me, and that we shall be great friends presently. I am going to tea with her to-morrow, and will let you know if I can get anything definite out of her.

“She is twenty-two, and certainly a lovely girl, also a very charming one. I introduced Mr Rossett's name, of course, and she just looked a little shy. But I could not get her to say much, only this, that he is coming down to Eastbourne directly, and that he has just secured an important appointment abroad, at the British Embassy in Spain.

“She wears no engagement ring, so they are not publicly betrothed. But I am sure there is a very good understanding between them.”

The widow threw the letter down on her lap, with a fierce exclamation.

“Twenty-two, and a lovely girl,” she muttered angrily. “Some pink and white beauty, I suppose, immature, knowing nothing of life. And these are the women who catch men of the world with their youth and innocence.”

Her face grew hard, she looked almost plain, and for the moment her thirty years showed themselves unmistakably.

She tore the offending note into fragments, and threw them into a dainty little waste-paper basket – everything about the flat was dainty.

“But I will get even with Mr Guy Rossett before long,” she cried vindictively, as she returned to her seat.

It was somewhere about ten o’clock in the morning when she indulged in these bitter reflections, when she had to admit, in the face of that letter, that her ambitious schemes had gone astray.

At the same hour, a tall and corpulent gentleman, attired in an elegant morning coat and silk hat, descended the steps of his house at Walton, stepped into the Rolls-Royce car waiting for him, drove to the station, and took the train to London.

He was known in his business, and in the neighbourhood, as Mr Jackson, although his foreign appearance and swarthy complexion gave the direct lie to his English name.

Not for him the easy bowler or soft hat, and the lounge suit. He had an idea that to be successful in business it was necessary to preserve the old traditions. Financial stability was suggested by the frock coat and the topper.

He described himself as a financier, and so in a certain sense he was. But in spite of the name of Jackson, he was a Spaniard by birth, and his real cognomen was Juan Jaques. As regards his business, he was a moneylender, pure and simple.

He had a spacious suite of offices in one of the most private-looking houses in Dover Street. His staff was small, consisting of a confidential woman secretary who typed his letters, generally suave, but occasionally menacing; an equally confidential clerk who kept his accounts; and a smart office boy.

From this agreeable point of vantage, he accommodated young men of good family, and equally good prospects, when they were temporarily hard up. He had a very select *clientèle*, and, to do him justice, for a moneylender, he was not extortionate. “Treat your clients fairly, and they will come again. You make regular customers of them. They don’t go buzzing off to Tom, Dick, and Harry.” These were the principles on which he conducted his very lucrative business.

He was in a very good humour this morning, as he got out of the taxi which had brought him from Waterloo to his office.

There were very few letters, but their contents pleased him; they suggested good business. The last one was from Guy Rossett, who intimated that he would call about twelve o’clock, as he wanted to have a short chat.

The astute Spaniard, known to all but a very few as the naturalised Englishman, Jackson, smiled.

He had not enjoyed the pleasure of Guy’s acquaintance very long. Mrs Hargrave had brought the two men together, and the introduction had been effected through the following circumstances.

At a certain period, Guy had found himself very short of money, practically due to bridge losses at the flat in Mount Street. He had rather hesitatingly asked the charming widow if she knew of any decent moneylender, who would finance him at a rate of interest that was not too extortionate.

Violet had raised her candid blue eyes – they were her best asset – to his, with a world of pity in them.

“Oh, Mr Rossett, I am so sorry to hear of this. It is all this horrible bridge. I always seem lucky, but such a lot of my friends have bad luck. I think I shall give up these parties, if they are going to embarrass the people I like.”

There was a soft mist in her eyes, as she gave utterance to these noble sentiments. Guy felt a little thrill pass through him. She was not a mere worldling, she had her full share of real kindness, of real womanliness.

“One’s own fault, you know,” he answered lightly. “I suppose I ought to be old enough to take care of myself. I needn’t play bridge if I don’t want to, need I?”

Mrs Hargrave did not answer for a moment. She seemed struggling with her remorseful thoughts. Then, after a brief space, inspiration came to her, and she played a strong and winning card. She laid her hand upon his arm, and her voice trembled ever so little as she spoke.

“Mr Rossett, we have been very good friends, have we not? And you were a pal of dear old Jack’s long before I met him.”

Rossett nodded. At the moment he had no idea what she was driving at, or what she was leading up to. And he was pretty quick too.

“Then I want you, for the moment, to think of me as a pal. Fancy for the time I am Jack, your old friend. What I want to say is this, don’t go to these horrible people. They are sure to rook you. I have a little money put by – dear old Jack left me comfortably off – and I make quite a small income out of my winnings. Let me be your banker. Now, don’t be proud.”

Guy was profoundly touched, and he thanked her in no measured terms. But the idea of borrowing money from a woman, even if she were a dear friend, was too horrible to contemplate for a second. Had there been no alternative, he would sooner have blown his brains out.

He told her this, and she sighed regretfully, as one amazed at the obstinacy of a certain type of man. She knew, could she once have got him to accept this loan, she would be sure of him.

“You see, it is quite impossible,” he ended, rather awkwardly. It is not a pleasant thing to refuse the kindness thrust upon you in the most graceful way by a charming woman. “Do you happen to know of any of these sharks?”

Frustrated in her clever little scheme, the fair Violet reflected for a few seconds. Then she spoke in a hesitating voice, as if she were trying to recall certain memories of the past.

“Yes, I do know a man who, I believe, is a decent specimen of his kind. You know, a lot of people wonder that Jack was so well-off. Well, in the first place, he was awfully clever, and he had two or three good friends in the City who gave him tips. But he wanted a bit of capital. He found out this man Jackson, who has offices in Dover Street. Jackson believed in him, and financed him, of course taking a good share. That was only natural.”

Rossett pricked up his ears. The thing that had puzzled so many people was already partly explained. Jack had been, as his wife said, a clever fellow, and a bit of a dark horse. He had been making money in the City in a subterranean way, with the help of the philanthropic Mr Jackson, who, no doubt, had looked after his own share of the profits. But why the deuce had not Jack Hargrave told this openly to his intimates? Then all *innuendos* and suspicions would have been silenced at once.

Mrs Hargrave went on in her sweet, low voice. “I don’t think I have ever told this to a soul. You will respect my confidence. I always thought it a little silly of Jack, but he made a point of keeping the secret to himself.”

“Need you ask the question?” queried Guy Rossett reproachfully.

“No, I am sure I can trust you. Well, this man Jackson; by the way, that is not his real name, he is a naturalised Spaniard. I see him sometimes on a few matters in which he is still interested, and which he looks after for me. I will give you a note to him, and ask him to treat you very gently.”

But, before she moved to her writing-table, she again looked pleadingly at him.

“Are you sure you will not reconsider my suggestion? Surely you would rather be indebted to me than to a mere sordid moneylender?”

Again Guy repeated his thanks. But on this point he was adamant; nothing would move him.

He took the letter of introduction to Mr Jackson. This gentleman was affability itself. Mrs Hargrave’s introduction was quite sufficient. Guy was too much a gentleman to put searching questions as to Jackson’s private knowledge of the Hargraves, husband and wife.

On his side, Mr Jackson had the private *dossier* of every eligible young man, from the moneylender’s point of view, entered in his reference book. He knew all about the Earl of Saxham, and the Lady Henrietta. Young Mr Rossett was quite a desirable client. He was pleased to add him to his list.

As a matter of fact, the loan was quite a small one, and was granted on reasonable terms. There was no speculative element in the transaction. Guy was a young man who might make a mistake now and again, but he would never kick over the traces for long, and he was as straight as a die.

On this particular morning, Mr Jackson received him with the greatest affability.

“Delighted to see you, Mr Rossett. Too early for a drink, I am afraid, but have a cigar.”

He pushed across a box of cigars that even a Spanish Jew could not have bought under half a crown apiece.

“Now, what is it, Mr Rossett? Just a little more ready, I suppose?”

Guy bit off the end of the very excellent cigar with a composed air. He had not the appearance of a suppliant for financial favours.

“Not quite as bad as that, Mr Jackson. But I have a bill for six hundred due next month. It would be a great convenience to me if you would renew half when it falls due, of course on the usual terms.”

For a moment, Mr Jackson’s face fell. He had hoped he was going to get deeper into the young man’s ribs, looking forward to that blessed day when Lady Henrietta’s fortune would wipe off all arrears.

Then, the next moment, he cheered up. Guy was not going to be a very big customer, but he was a safe one. A young man who could pay off half of his indebtedness was to be trusted. Not much waiting, just quick profits.

It took them a few moments to discuss the details of the extension of the loan. When these had been settled, Mr Jackson consulted his watch.

“I think, Mr Rossett, we might venture upon a small bottle now, what do you think?”

Guy really did not want anything to drink at this comparatively early hour of the morning. But, in view of further favours, it would not be politic to check his host’s hospitable impulses.

The moneylender produced a very excellent small bottle of *veuve cliquot*. The two men sat chatting for some time. Suddenly, the telephone bell rang.

What was whispered down it seemed to agitate Mr Jackson a little. Rossett could, of course, only catch his disjointed replies.

“Actually left the house, you say, on the way. Ought always to give me notice. Might be too busy. Well, it can’t be helped. Good-bye.”

As a matter of fact, it was Mrs Hargrave’s maid who had rung up to tell him that her mistress was on her way to his office. He knew enough to be sure that a meeting between Violet and Rossett would be very disturbing to both, hence his discomfiture.

Mount Street to Dover Street in a taxi is not a very far cry. If Guy Rossett did not swallow his champagne and clear out in a few seconds, the meeting was inevitable. The only apartments were the outer office, the waiting-room, and his own sanctum, and they all led into each other.

Guy, not being thirsty, drank his wine very leisurely. Then he rose to go, but some minutes had elapsed, and at the moment he rose the office boy brought in a slip of folded paper, on which was written Mrs Hargrave’s name.

“Many thanks for meeting me in this little matter, Mr Jackson. Well, for the present, good-bye.” And poor Guy Rossett, fondly thinking that he had laid the ghosts of the past, emerged from Jackson’s room to be confronted with Violet Hargrave, seated in one of those luxurious easy chairs which the hospitable foreigner provided for his waiting clients.

He put the best face he could on the situation, and advanced with outstretched hand.

“An unexpected pleasure, Mrs Hargrave,” he cried in a very uncertain voice. A more embarrassed specimen of a budding diplomatist could not have been observed.

The pretty widow ignored the outstretched hand. She looked at him steadily, and the blue eyes were no longer soft and limpid, but hard as steel.

“I think,” she said in a voice that was as hard as her glance, “you are indulging in the language of diplomacy, which is usually used to disguise one’s real thoughts.”

Rossett turned red, and began, in his agitation, to stammer forth lame and foolish excuses.

“I have been awfully busy lately, you know, not had time for anything in the social line. The truth is, Mrs Hargrave, I have just woke up to the fact that I have been wasting a good part of my life. I am really going in now for work, hard work, and ambition.”

She swept him with a contemptuous glance.

“Is this supposed to be an apology for your despicable conduct as regards myself?”

“As you please to take it, Mrs Hargrave.” Knowing he was utterly in the wrong, he took refuge in a sort of sullen dignity.

Her voice grew more scornful as she answered in her clear, vibrant tones.

“I should not like to detain you even for a moment, when you have such a laudable object in view. If you are going to atone for those wasted years, you will have a tremendous lot of leeway to make up. You cannot spare a second. Good day.” He could not rally under her sharp tongue and keen woman’s wit. He bowed, and was about to move away when she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

“One moment of your valuable time, if you please, Mr Rossett. You are fond of running away when the situation becomes a little inconvenient to yourself. But on this, I hope, our last meeting, I wish to say a few words to you, which it is well you should hear. May I presume to trespass on your time for a few seconds longer?”

There was still in her tones the same bitter note of sarcasm. But by this time, Guy had recovered himself a little, and was able to muster a remnant of dignity.

“My time is at your disposal,” he replied quietly.

“You have not acted the part of a gentleman, Mr Rossett. You were supposed to be my husband’s friend; you pretended to be mine. Certain events occurred, the nature of which it is easy to guess, which caused you to think my friendship was no longer desirable. That is the truth, is it not? Be frank for once, if a diplomatist can ever be frank.”

She dominated the situation. Rossett could only stammer forth a shamefaced admission that it was the truth.

“You admit it. Would you not have played a more manly part, if you had come to me with a frank and proper explanation of those events?”

“That is just what I ought to have done,” said Guy Rossett humbly. He had never admired her more than now. Up to the present moment he had no idea that this dainty, slender woman, more or less of a butterfly, had such spirit in her fragile frame.

“Instead of that,” pursued Violet Hargrave in her inflexible, vibrating tones, “you adopt a device pursued by many men I know, by the type of man who lacks moral courage. I am afraid I shall hurt you a little now, but I don’t mind because you have hurt me, and I want to cry quits. You adopted the coward’s device of running away from the woman to whom you were afraid to tell the truth.”

Rossett was utterly beaten. He could not say a word in self-defence. He stood speechless under the lash of her scorn, her not unjustifiable indignation. She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

“I will keep you no longer, Mr Rossett. For some years we were rather intimate friends. To-day we are strangers. As a stranger, I will bid you good-bye.”

And Guy Rossett was happy to escape. He had never felt more humiliated in his life.

He put himself into a taxi, and drove straight to the St. James’s Club, beloved of diplomatists. He ruminated ruefully over his discomfiture at the hands of the sharp-tongued Mrs Hargrave.

“Some women have the knack of making a man feel like a worm,” he thought bitterly. “Mary has it in her quiet, incisive way. Violet has it to perfection.”

The young widow entered the sanctum of the moneylender. Outwardly, her demeanour was calm, but in her breast a volcano was raging. Her pride had been humbled, her hopes ruthlessly crushed. She was raging with all the resentful impotence of the woman scorned.

Jackson met her with outstretched hands, and took both of hers.

“My poor little Violet,” he said kindly. “I can see you are very upset; at least, it is plain to me who have known you from a baby. If you had only told your maid to ’phone me up before you started, I would have delayed you, and prevented this.”

She sank down on a chair with a little weary sigh. “You have always been my best friend, Juan. Heaven knows what I should have done or where I should have been without you.”

“Tut, tut.” The “financier” was very human where women were concerned. “And you are fond of this fellow, eh, apart from other considerations?”

“I was, Juan, but now I hate him,” was the uncompromising reply. “Still, on the whole, I am not sure I would have missed that little talk with him. Clever young man of the world as he is, ready and quick as he was, I cut him to the quick. I made him feel very small.”

Jackson chuckled. “I will wager you gave him a good dressing down, when you once started. Well now, my child, I guess you want to see me on something important.”

“Something very important,” was the reply.

The two drew their chairs closely together, and conversed in low tones, using the Spanish language.

Chapter Three

To a man of Lord Saxham's ancient lineage and broad acres, although those same broad acres were somewhat heavily encumbered, General Clandon was a mere nobody. He was just one of the many thousands of persons who are entitled to be called gentlemen, as a matter of courtesy, but have no claim to rank in the same category with pure aristocracy.

All the same, the General came of very respectable stock, from that section of the small landowning class which is the backbone of the territorial interest. His forbears had been settled in Kent for some six generations. His eldest brother, Hugh Clandon, who had ruled over Clandon Place, had a rent roll of some five thousand a year clear.

To an ordinary person, in a lower walk of life, this would seem by no means a despicable income. But Clandon Place was a large house, and cost a good deal to keep up, even on an economical scale. And all the Clandons, with the solitary exception of the General himself, were exceedingly prolific.

His brother Hugh had eight children. He was one of ten. Daughters had to be portioned off, sons had to be educated and started in the world. Geoffrey Clandon inherited a few thousands on his father's death; he always thought his father must have been a wonderful man to leave so much, considering the calls upon him. The General contrived to live upon the modest income derived from this small capital, plus his half-pay.

He now lived at Eastbourne upon the somewhat slender revenue. When he died, his only child, Isobel, would have a few hundred pounds a year to call her own.

In his youth, he had been exceedingly handsome, and, had he been of a more worldly turn of mind, he might easily have married money. Instead, he married for love, and never repented it. His wife brought him no fortune, but she brought him other things beyond price.

Mrs Clandon died when Isobel was sixteen, and all the intense love which the General had borne his wife was transferred to his daughter, who fully reciprocated her father's devotion.

She was a very sweet and lovable girl, perhaps just a little wiser and older than her actual years, as is often the case with only children, who have been brought up in close companionship with their parents.

She looked after his house admirably, saw that his meals were well cooked and daintily served. As for herself, thanks to an admirable figure, and a knack of knowing how to wear her clothes, she always looked smartly turned out on a most slender allowance.

They lived on the outskirts of Eastbourne, in an unpretentious house, a cottage which had been turned into a half villa. All the added rooms were spacious, with the original low ceilings, which gave a picturesque effect.

There was over an acre of garden, and half of that was devoted to the cultivation of flowers. Isobel adored flowers, and loved to see bowls of them in the different rooms. She was no mean gardener herself, and often worked hard in conjunction with the rather ancient person who attended to the small domain.

County society did not have anything to say to General Clandon and his daughter, they were too small fry, but in the selecter circles of strictly Eastbourne residents they were considerable figures.

The General had preferred not to settle down in his native place, near his brother. His means were too small to allow him to compete on equal terms with the local magnates who were his contemporaries. He was a very proud man, and he was still more sensitive on Isobel's account.

From all she had heard of small county society, of which her uncle was a specimen, she did not think she had missed much. She was quite happy in her little circle at Eastbourne; it was more amusing, and not at all stiff or pretentious.

Once a year, since she was eighteen, she had a brief glimpse of a more fashionable world. The General had kept up a life-long intimacy with an old and wealthy friend, Sir William Glanville, who

owned a large estate in Kent. Every autumn an invitation came for the shooting, and in that invitation Isobel was included.

Here she met people, men and women of quite a different calibre, spoiled children of the world, used to luxury from their cradle. Yet she was not sure that she enjoyed these visits very greatly. The profusion of wealth contrasted too sharply with their own daily mode of life.

If her father by some miracle should come into a fortune, and she smiled at the absurd thought, no doubt she would bear herself as bravely as these other girls she met.

But that last visit, that delicious last visit, she had thoroughly enjoyed. Guy Rossett had taken her into dinner, and danced attendance on her for the best part of a delightful week. At last she had met a man who seemed to stand a head and shoulders above his fellows.

But for a little time much sadness was mingled with her joy.

On more than one night, when Guy's glance had thrilled her, when Guy's gentle pressure of the hand, as he bade her good night, had set her heart fluttering, she had cried herself to sleep.

She had heard all about him from her hostess, a kind-hearted, gossiping soul. He was the second son of a wealthy peer of ancient lineage. With his father's influence, he would be sure to obtain eminence in the diplomatic field. And he would inherit a big fortune from his grand-aunt, the Lady Henrietta.

Poor Isobel felt a very lonely maiden as she listened to this splendid recital. As a mere man, with his good looks and charm, he could choose where he liked. With these advantages in addition, he could pick from the noblest in the land.

Of course, she was a little fool, and the sooner she said good-bye to her vain dreams the better. Guy Rossett was attracted by her for the moment, no doubt. But it was impossible a man in his position, with his prospects, could mean anything serious. Could a man, in whose veins ran the blood of a dozen earls, choose for his wife the descendant of paltry squires?

And then had come that wonderful day, a day in her life ever to be marked with a white stone, when Guy had overtaken her as she was indulging in a solitary ramble in the now leafless park.

In impassioned words he had told her how he loved her, how she was the one woman in the world he wanted for his wife. He loved her. Did she care for him? Dazed, and overjoyed with her happiness, her lovely dark eyes half suffused with tears, she faltered forth a trembling yes.

He took her in his arms, and gave her her first lover's kiss.

Then, when her brain had ceased to whirl, when she could recover from the great shock of her newly-found joy, she began to think.

"But it is all a dream," she murmured. "It is impossible."

"Impossible!" repeated Guy. "Why do you use the word?"

"But, of course, you can see. You are the son of an aristocrat, big even amongst aristocrats. I am a nobody. Lady Glanville tells me you are going to be an ambassador, or something dreadfully big and awe-inspiring."

Guy laughed genially. "Oh, you sweet little soul. Has that dear old woman been filling you with all that sort of stuff? Haven't brains enough, my darling. And, if it should turn out true, and I do become an ambassador, you will grow up with me, and you'll find the part of ambassador's wife fit you like a glove."

But, presently, after the first rhapsodies had passed, they began to talk soberly.

Guy had to state that his father, splendid old fellow as he was, none better, was very prejudiced and, as his son put it with more than filial frankness, "as obstinate as a mule."

Isobel nodded her pretty dark head. "I understand quite. He will want you to marry in your own station of life, choose a girl who has been brought up in the same world."

Guy nodded. "You've hit it. A sort of girl who would know, by inherited instinct, all the sort of tricks that are expected from an ambassador's wife. You see, I take it for granted I am going to be an ambassador."

Isobel looked at him fondly. In her present rapturous mood, she thought he could be anything he liked, if he gave his mind to it.

Then Guy spoke quite gravely and seriously.

“Now, we have got to consider the two fathers, yours and mine. We will take yours first, because I think he’ll do whatever you tell him.”

“He generally does,” replied Isobel, with a smile that showed all her dimples.

“Good. I leave to-morrow, you are off the day after. Don’t tell him anything till you get back to Eastbourne. Then let him know exactly what has passed between us to-day, that I have admitted frankly I shall have a hard job on my part. I want to get my father’s consent, because I wish you to be welcomed by the family. Dear old Aunt Henrietta will never interfere with me, she’s too good a sort.”

“Yes,” answered Isobel happily. “I will tell him all that.”

“And please add that I should wish to come down to Eastbourne, as soon as convenient to him, and put all the facts before him. I want first to get his consent, and I know I am asking it under peculiar circumstances.”

A slight cloud gathered over the girl’s lovely face. “I am quite sure of my darling old dad,” she said. “I’m a little afraid of yours.”

“There’s nothing to be frightened of, sweetheart,” said her lover confidently. “Whether he gives his consent or not, you are going to be my wife. I’m quite independent of him. But, as I said just now, I would prefer to bring him round before, instead of after.”

“But do you think that possible?” inquired Isobel anxiously.

Guy reflected. “It’s a pretty even chance,” he said presently. “And, you see. I’ve got Mary on my side.”

Isobel lifted questioning eyes. “You have never spoken of Mary before. Who is she? I suppose your sister?”

“Yes, my sister, and the sweetest, dearest girl in the wide world. Just an angel without the wings, and they are growing, I believe. Not that she is meek and mild, and all that sort of thing. She can hit out as straight from the shoulder as a man when she chooses. But tell her a tale of two true lovers, and she will never be happy till she brings them together.”

“What a darling!” cried Isobel, in deep admiration. “How I should love to meet her.”

“No difficulty about that,” answered Guy easily. “As soon as I have arranged matters with the General, we will fix up a little lunch in London. You bring your father up; I’ll bring Mary up.”

“How lovely!” sighed Isobel. Truly, a new world, a delightful world, was opening to her.

The Clandons returned to their modest little nest at Eastbourne. On the first evening of their return, Isobel, sitting on a low footstool close to the General’s chair, told him the wonderful story of Guy Rossett’s love for her, of her love for Guy.

Her father listened sympathetically. He was intensely proud that his beloved daughter had chanced upon a wooer worthy of her. He had never dared to hope for such an alliance. Isobel was deserving of any Fairy Prince, but where was the Fairy Prince to come from?

But he was wise and experienced. It would not be all fair sailing, there were rocks ahead. Guy had himself admitted that the Earl of Saxham would prove a formidable obstacle. The General agreed that, were he in Lord Saxham’s place, he would not give his consent too readily.

He kissed his daughter tenderly, half pleased, half regretful to see the intense lovelight in her eyes as she spoke of her adored lover.

“Yes, tell Guy to come and see me as soon as he likes, and we will talk over the difficulties,” he said kindly. “I liked the young fellow very much, from the little I saw of him. I am sure he is a gentleman, and I believe him to be straight.”

Isobel looked up a little reproachfully. Her father’s guarded words seemed to convey very faint praise of her peerless lover.

“Oh, dad,” she cried reproachfully. “Guy is the soul of honour.”

Rossett came down, and had a long interview with General Clandon. He was quite frank and manly. He would marry Isobel whether his father consented or not; so far as financial matters stood, he was perfectly independent. Still, for many reasons, it was better to exercise a little prudence, and coax the Earl into agreement.

The General agreed. "Much better, Rossett. The question of her being received by your family or not will make a great difference to her at the start. In the years to come, it may make a great difference to you. You don't want to cut yourself off from your kith and kin."

Rossett was of the same opinion. The General agreed to a private engagement. Guy gave his betrothed a beautiful ring which she did not dare openly to display. She looked at it several times a day, and kissed it every night before she went to sleep.

Guy had lost no time in approaching his father, and the Earl had received the news in the worst spirit. He had stormed, and broken out into one of his furious, ungovernable rages.

"You are simply an idiot. With my influence with the Government, there is no knowing where I can push you to." He seemed to take it for granted that his son could not help himself. "You must marry a woman in your own class, a woman who can help you in your career. And then you propose to me some obscure chit of a girl, who lives in a cottage at Eastbourne."

Guy argued calmly that Isobel was a lady, and of good family. Certainly her father was not a rich man, this much he had to admit.

The Earl would not listen to reason. He brushed aside all his son's pleadings. He recovered from his first rage, but he wound up the discussion in a voice of deadly calm.

"You can do as you choose, Guy. You are quite independent, and I daresay if you married a shop girl it would make no difference to your aunt. But please understand this. From the day you make Isobel Clandon your wife, all is over between us. I wash my hands of you. Not a penny of my money, not an atom of my influence. You understand."

"I quite understand, sir. You force me to choose between yourself and Isobel. Well, if you persist in your determination, I shall choose Isobel. But I am in hopes you will change your mind."

"Never," snapped out the Earl viciously. "Go to the devil your own way, as soon as you like. Fancy a manlike you being caught by a baby face." But Guy smiled to himself. Lord Saxham was a very obstinate man, also a very irritable one. But his bark was worse than his bite. He had often climbed down before. And there was Lady Mary to be reckoned with, who, as a rule, could twist her father round her little finger, even if the process involved some time.

Lord Saxham betook himself next day to the all-powerful Mr Greatorex. He hinted to that impassive gentleman that he wanted to get his son abroad. Mr Greatorex elevated his finely arched eyebrows. "The usual thing, I suppose? An entanglement of some sort?"

"Wants to marry a woman who will ruin his career," answered the Earl tersely.

"A chorus-girl or something of that sort?" queried Greatorex. He knew that Guy Rossett had mixed in a somewhat fast set, and was prepared to expect the worst of him. "Or, perhaps, a doubtful widow?" He had heard rumours of him and Violet Hargrave.

Lord Saxham shook his head. "No, neither; but just as bad from my point of view. A girl, technically a lady, but no family to speak of, no fortune. He'd marry for love, and tire of her in six months, misery for her as well as for him."

The Honourable Rupert Greatorex was the scion of a very ancient family himself. He had a proper detestation of *mésalliances*.

"I will do my best," he said cordially. "He shall have the first thing going."

He had watched the career of young Rossett, as he had watched the career of every young man in the Foreign Office. Guy had not shown himself, up to the present, very zealous. He was more inclined to play than to work, and he foregathered with some very queer people.

But he did not lack brains. From some of the strange people with whom he associated, he had gleaned some rather valuable information which he had placed at Mr Greatorex's disposal.

If he was sent to Spain, he might turn out a useful member of the vast diplomatic corps, and he would be separated from this charming young woman, of no family to speak of, and no fortune. And Greatorex would be obliging a staunch supporter of the Government. Hence the appointment which Guy fondly believed he had secured through his own merits.

While his father was scheming to thwart what he considered his son's ill-advised wooing, Guy had enlisted Mary for an ally.

Mary, the friend of all true lovers, only asked two questions. First, Was she a lady? Second, Were they quite sure they really loved each other?

Her brother was able to answer both questions in the affirmative. And she was sure, this time, he was in earnest. She had been the recipient of previous confidences, hence a little caution on her part.

"I should like to meet her, and judge for myself," said Mary decidedly. She knew, of course, of her father's obstinate refusal to entertain the idea. She would like to meet Isobel, to be sure if she was justified in opposing the Earl. For Mary was, above all things, conscientious. She adored Guy, but she also loved her father, and she had a duty towards him. She must be certain that Isobel was worthy, no mere adventuress, luring a sorely love-stricken man.

Guy unfolded his cunning little plan.

"Run up to London one day for some shopping. I'll get up Isobel and her father, and we can all lunch together. Where shall we go? The Ritz for preference, but we should meet too many people we knew, and it might get to the Governor's ears. We'll lunch at the Savoy."

So that was arranged. There came that delightful day when the General and his daughter travelled up from Eastbourne, and met Guy and his sister in the vestibule of the famous London restaurant.

Isobel was dreadfully nervous, but quite excitedly happy. What a lovely new life! The tepid gaieties of Eastbourne paled their ineffectual fires in comparison with the present festivity.

The two women took to each other at once. It did not take the shrewd Mary long to discover that this beautiful girl was genuinely in love with the equally good-looking Guy, that here was no artful and designing maiden.

The General, simple and dignified, made an equally good impression upon her. In manner and bearing he was the true type of aristocrat, as much so as Lord Saxham himself. Fortunately for others, he lacked the Earl's somewhat explosive qualities.

They lingered in the lounge some time after lunch, and here the two women had a little private chat together, with the view of cementing their acquaintance.

Mary promised to be their friend, and to use all her influence to wear down her father's opposition.

Isobel thanked her warmly. "It seems an unkind thing to say," she added, at the conclusion of her little outburst of gratitude. "But I almost wish that Guy were a poor man."

Mary looked at her questioningly; she did not, for the moment, catch the drift of her thoughts.

"There couldn't, then, be all this fuss and trouble," explained Isobel, with a little catch in her voice. "People wouldn't be able to think that I had run after him, they would know I only cared for him for himself. Now, whatever happens, they will always think the worst of me."

Mary whispered back the consoling answer, "There are two people who will never think that, myself and Guy."

The happy hours passed. They all saw Mary off by her train, and a little later the General and his daughter went back to Eastbourne.

There were many delightful days to follow, days when Guy ran down, dined with the General, and put up for the night at the "Queen's."

And then the time drew near for Guy to take up his new post, to leave London for Madrid. Still, things were not any further advanced. In spite of Lady Mary's powerful and persistent advocacy, the

Earl remained as obdurate as ever. If Guy insisted upon making Isobel Clandon his wife, all friendly relations between father and son would be suspended.

On the night preceding the young diplomatist's departure, there was a farewell dinner, this time at a less public restaurant than the Savoy. The party was the same, Guy and his sister, Isobel and her father.

Lady Mary would have to stay the night in London. This she had arranged to do with an old girl friend, now married, Lady May Brendon.

The Earl, with that uncanny sense which distinguishes some people, suddenly had an inkling of the truth. Guy had said good-bye to them the day before. "I believe it's all a blind," he burst out angrily, a few minutes before Mary's departure. "You may be staying with May Brendon for the night, but she is not the reason of your visit. You are going to meet that wretched girl."

Mary could never bring herself to tell a lie. She had already admitted she had made the acquaintance of Isobel Clandon, and had taken a great liking to her.

"To tell the truth, I am. Guy is giving a dinner to-night, in order to bid her farewell. It is only right he should have the support of some member of his family."

"You deliberately go against my wishes," thundered her father, in his most irate tones.

"In this instance, I fear I must," replied his daughter very quietly and firmly. "I love you very dearly, but I love Guy too. He has chosen for himself, and in my opinion he has chosen wisely."

"I love Guy too," said the Earl in a less aggressive tone. "I would like also to see him happy. But a man in his position must marry according to the traditions of his family. You are a weak sentimentalist, Mary."

A rather sad smile crept over the sweet face.

"Perhaps I am, too much for my own peace of mind. But, what I do feel strongly is this – you have no right to dictate to Guy in this matter. He is a second son, he is independent of you. With Ticehurst, it may be different. He has to transmit the family honours, to maintain the family traditions as you call them. In his case, interference may be justifiable. In Guy's case, I say emphatically not." The Earl began to splutter again. "My word, the world is coming to something. You talk as if a father had no right, no authority over his children. Look what I have done for him. I wrung this appointment from Greatorex, with my own personal influence."

Lady Mary laid a light, cool kiss upon his inflamed cheek.

"Dearest father, do try and be just for once. You did not get this appointment solely for Guy's benefit. You know you don't care a straw whether he succeeds in his profession. Your real motive was to drive him out of England, so that he should be separated from Isobel Clandon."

This was too much for Lord Saxham. He burst into volcanic language, inveighing against ungrateful sons and undutiful daughters, and stamped from the room in a blind rage.

Lady Mary smiled a little when he left. How many of these domestic storms had she witnessed! Her father would give way in the end. But there would be a long period of waiting. She got into the car, and drove to the railway station.

The dinner-party was a great success, even if it was slightly overcast with the sadness of farewell. Two people alone can be quite comfortably sad; there is a luxury in woe. But melancholy cannot be permanently maintained amongst four persons. The lovers would not see each other for some time, but, as Mary cheerfully reminded them, Madrid was not quite as far as the Antipodes, and they could write to each other every day, if they wished.

Half-way through the meal, two men entered and took their seats at a small adjoining table; they were both in evening dress. One was a tall, slim Englishman of the well-groomed type. His companion was short and swarthy, evidently a foreigner.

Isobel was the first to observe them. She leaned across the table, and addressed the General in a low voice.

"Maurice has just come in, father. Just there, on your left, with a foreign-looking man."

The General looked in the direction indicated, and caught the eye of the tall young man, who rose, and advanced hesitatingly to their table.

He shook hands with Isobel and her father. The General effected a hasty introduction.

“My nephew, Mr Farquhar, Lady Mary Rossett, Mr Rossett.”

Lady Mary bowed. Guy half rose and bowed. He felt a little bit churlish. He was of a very jealous disposition. He fancied Isobel’s reception of her cousin was perhaps a little too cordial. Her smile was very welcoming, as she murmured, “Fancy meeting you here, Maurice.”

Farquhar looked at the young diplomatist steadily, as if he were trying to recall a memory. Then he recollected.

“Rossett, Guy Rossett, of course, I remember you now perfectly. You were with me at Harrow for one term. You came into Brogden’s House just as I was leaving.”

And then Guy remembered too. “Of course, I recollect now. I thought your face was familiar to me. You were the head of the house, and I was your fag. A graceless little cub, I fancy.”

Farquhar laughed genially. “No, I fancy you were an awful decent little chap while I was there. I can’t vouch for you after my restraining influence was removed.”

There was a little more conversation, and then Mr Farquhar returned to his foreign friend.

“Who the deuce has he got with him?” growled the General, almost under his breath. “Maurice is an awfully clever fellow, and they say is one of the most rising members of the junior bar, but he is awfully fond of Bohemian society. That long-haired chap he has got with him. Well, he looks like an anarchist.”

Guy Rossett laughed. “I fancy I know who he is, General; in the Foreign Office, like your nephew, we get to know some queer people. He is a Spaniard by birth, but English by adoption. He is a well-known journalist in Fleet Street. But he is by no means an anarchist; he is dead against them.”

The General ruminated. He was the most insular of insular Britons. He hated all persons of other nations. It annoyed him that his nephew should be in the company of this long-haired foreigner.

“It is time this old country of ours closed its doors to this kind of gentry,” he said, in a decided voice, as he drained his glass of champagne.

Lady Mary smiled. How very much he resembled her own father. The same obstinate views, with, at bottom, the same kind heart.

The next morning, the little party of three saw the young diplomatist off at the station. Guy held his sweetheart very close when he gave her his farewell kiss.

“I say, dearest, you will write every day, won’t you?”

And Isobel nodded her dark head.

“Of course, dear, pages and pages.”

“And I say, that good-looking cousin of yours we met last night! He has never made love to you, has he?”

Isobel laughed gaily. “Dear old Maurice! Why he used to carry me about when I was a baby. And dad and I are awfully fond of him. He is just a big, dear elder brother.”

“I don’t quite know that I like a big, dear elder brother, when he happens to be a cousin,” replied Guy, a little grimly.

Isobel smiled her most delightful smile.

“Oh, Guy, I believe you are really jealous, and of poor old Maurice, of all people. My dear boy, he only lives for his work; he is a barrister, you know, and is made up of parchment.”

“He looked very human when he shook hands with you,” remarked Guy drily. “I fancy there’s not much parchment where you are concerned.”

“Silly boy, to even think of such things. And what about me, when you get to Madrid? I am told the Spanish ladies are very fascinating. What chance shall I have against them.”

So she turned the tables on Guy, and he had to defend himself against disloyalty in the future.

Then the train steamed off. With a hearty handshake from the General, with the kisses of his sweetheart and sister warm upon his lips and his cheeks, Guy Rossett set out on his journey to Spain. Little could he foresee the adventures that were in store for him.

Chapter Four

“And you think mischief is brewing, eh?”

The speaker was Maurice Farquhar. The man he addressed was Andres Moreno, the black-browed Spaniard who had dined with him on the previous evening at the restaurant where they had met Guy Rossett and his party.

Maurice, a member of the junior bar, with a daily increasing practice, rented a charming suite of rooms in one of the most cloistered courts of the Temple. Certainly, this suite was on the top floor, and it was a stiff climb up those stairs. But Maurice was young and healthy, and the ascent of those few steep stairs did not trouble him in the least.

Apart from his own special legal business, which absorbed his best faculties, he was a man of many interests. During the lean years, when he had waited for briefs, he had supplemented his modest patrimony by journalism. He became a somewhat well-known figure in Fleet Street, specialising more or less upon foreign politics.

Then, when the briefs began to flow in, he had gradually dropped journalism. Now and again, at the earnest request of a persistent editor, he would write an article or a letter on some burning question, in which he could display his particular knowledge of affairs.

In those old journalistic days, happy, careless days, when a dinner at the old “Cheshire Cheese” was accounted something of a luxury, when he never entered the portals of the Ritz or Carlton, save as the guest of some rich friend or relation, he had struck up a great comradeship with Andres Moreno, son of a Spanish father and an English mother, an adroit and clever journalist, who could turn his hand to anything.

Nothing came amiss to Moreno; he was the handy man of journalism. He could write a most flamboyant description of a fashionable bazaar. He could, in a sufficiently well-paid article, penetrate the subtle schemes of European monarchs and statesmen.

His knowledge of London and every other foreign capital was illuminating. He knew every prominent detective, he enjoyed the acquaintance of not a few members of the criminal classes. He was hail-fellow-well-met with staunch monarchists and avowed anarchists. But it was always difficult with this man, who had friends in so many camps, to discover what were his real opinions.

Maurice who, perhaps, knew him better than anybody, on the mental side, always declared that he had no fixed opinions.

“When you are with the good old-fashioned Tory,” he had said once to him laughingly, “you are all for King and Church and State and good Government. When you are with the anarchist, your sympathies go with the poor devils who have got nothing, and want to blow up everybody, in the hopes of getting a bit out of the wreck.”

And Moreno, in the same jocular spirit, had admitted there was a certain element of truth in the description.

“I am so infernally sympathetic, you know, Farquhar. I am like a straw blown by the wind. Any man who can talk to me earnestly for five minutes makes me see eye to eye with him. When I have left him, when the magnetism of his presence is removed, the cold fit succeeds, and I see with the eye of Andres Moreno. On the whole, I think I may say I am on the side of law and order.”

And Farquhar had replied in the same half-jocular vein. “Better stick on that side, old man. Otherwise they will end by taking from you even that little which you have.”

Since those days of early friendship, the two men had prospered exceedingly. Moreno was a very highly paid journalist. Farquhar was one of the rising members of the junior bar.

The young barrister repeated his question.

“And you think mischief is brewing, eh?” Moreno raised himself from what appeared to be a deep reverie. It was a peculiarity of the man that suddenly he would relapse into deep meditation,

and for the moment seem oblivious of what was going on around him. Then, in a flash, his keen intellect would assert itself, and he would pick up, in a very easy fashion the dropped threads of the previous conversation.

“Very serious mischief, old man,” he said, in his deep, rather husky tones. He spoke English perfectly, by the way, without the slightest trace of foreign accent. As a matter of fact, he had been born and bred in the country of his mother.

“Is it a great secret?” questioned Farquhar.

Moreno looked at him kindly. He was very greatly attached to this quiet Englishman, who had taken him by the hand in those early days when some of the brethren of the pen had regarded him as an outsider, and shown their dislike very plainly.

“It is to everybody else, but not to you, my old and tried friend. I can trust you not to suck another man’s brains. Besides, you are out of the business now. Yes, there are great things going on, in Madrid, Barcelona and Seville. There are also great things going on in a little corner in London, I can assure you.”

Farquhar lifted his eyebrows, but he made no comment. Moreno would talk when it pleased him.

The Spaniard laughed softly, and leaned back in his chair. He was a man of deep and subtle humour, and was continually smiling at the ironies and incongruities of life.

“I am going to astonish you now, my good Maurice. To-morrow night I am going to be inducted as a member of an anarchist society in Soho.”

Farquhar, disturbed in his well-balanced mind, gave a violent start.

“Are you mad, Andres? Have you any idea of what you will commit yourself to?”

Moreno shrugged his broad shoulders indifferently.

“I shall know, and size it all up the day after to-morrow; I am a soldier of fortune, my friend. I am an enterprising journalist – anything for sensation, anything for ‘copy.’ I shall put my anarchist friends to good use.”

“And they will kill you while you are doing it, or after you have done it,” said Farquhar grimly.

“You do not pay a very high compliment to my intelligence, my friend. I think I may say that I am clever. Anarchists are very stupid people. They will suspect each other long before they suspect Andres Moreno.”

He was a small man, but he looked quite important as he made this boast. Whatever his failings, a want of confidence in himself was not one of them. But Farquhar still appeared dubious.

“I was a little doubtful till last night when I saw your friends at the restaurant,” went on Moreno, in his slightly husky voice. “You did not introduce me, there was no opportunity for that. I recognised one of them, Guy Rossett, who, I take it, is the fiancé of that charming young lady who, you say, is your cousin.”

Farquhar frowned a little. How quick these foreigners were to guess things.

“I have no idea,” he said stiffly. “General Clandon is my uncle, and I have been on very intimate terms with him and his family since I was a child. If there were any engagement, I think I should have been informed.”

Moreno noticed the frown, the stiffness in the tone. He went on smoothly.

“I may be jumping at conclusions rather too hastily, but I will tell you how I arrived at them. I happen to know that Guy Rossett is appointed to the Embassy at Madrid. With his sister, he dines with this charming girl and a man, obviously her father. It looks to me like a farewell dinner, and at a restaurant which is excellent, but certainly not fashionable. They wanted to escape observation, otherwise a man in Rossett’s position, and he was certainly the host, would have been at the Ritz.”

“And what do you deduce from these profound observations, worthy of Sherlock Holmes himself?” asked Farquhar a little testily.

Moreno answered slowly. He could see that his friend was troubled, but he had gone too far to recede.

“I should say there was a secret understanding between the young people, approved of by the girl’s father, and the man’s sister. Probably they are still waiting for the Earl’s consent to an open engagement.”

Farquhar, to hide his agitation, swallowed his whiskey and soda in one draught, and chewed viciously at the end of his cigar.

“You may be right,” he said, speaking with forced calm. “Well, let us get back to your anarchists. What has made you join them?”

Moreno reflected a moment before he spoke.

“I happen to know that young Rossett was in possession of some very exclusive information about this particular plot. That is one of the reasons why he has been sent to Spain.”

“And where do you come in?” questioned Farquhar.

Moreno smiled. “It is as much curiosity as anything. The anarchists know that Rossett knows a good deal about them. Now, I want to find out how they are going to act when Rossett finds himself in Madrid, you see.”

“And you’ll find it out before you are many hours older, cunning old devil that you are,” said Farquhar, with an appreciative smile. “Well, let me know how you get on. Isobel Clandon is my cousin, and I can’t help feeling interested in all this, especially if what you suggest about her and Rossett is true.”

When Moreno had left, the ambitious young barrister sat thinking deeply. He had loved his cousin for years, not perhaps with any great overmastering passion, but with that steady affection which might be expected from a man of his grave and cautious temperament.

He was prepared to speak when the time was ripe, when his prospects and circumstances permitted him to offer Isobel a proper home. Moreno’s words troubled him, and he had an uneasy suspicion that the Spaniard, with his swift intelligence, had accurately gauged the situation. The fruit which might have been his for the mere stretching out of the hand – had it been plucked by somebody more impetuous, more energetic than himself?

This he must learn as soon as possible. Moreno’s words had suddenly roused him to action. He was now blaming in his mind, those very traits on which he had been wont to pride himself, his scrupulousness, his excessive caution.

He had always thought that Isobel liked him, that she would not be reluctant to entertain his advances, when he had judged the time was right to make them.

And, of course, he had been a fool. He had not looked at the position from the girl’s point of view. A girl, however much she may be inclined towards a man, is not disposed to wait indefinitely while he is making up his mind, nicely balancing pros and cons.

He had never thought of anybody else for his wife. But he had reckoned too surely on the fact that she was waiting quietly in that little home at Eastbourne, till he chose to make love to her.

He wired to General Clandon the next morning, explaining that he had a couple of days’ leisure; might he run down? There came back the cordial reply, “Come at once. Delighted.”

Truth to tell, the General was both proud and fond of his nephew, the son of his favourite sister. He might have thought at times that the young man was a little too grave and serious for his years, he had always seemed singularly free from the follies of youth. But he had the greatest respect for his sterling qualities, for his high principles and character.

Father and daughter met him at the station. Isobel liked him very much. There was a time when liking might have been converted into a warmer feeling. But, speaking in vulgar parlance, Maurice had failed through his over-scrupulousness, his too nice weighing of possibilities and probabilities, to strike while the iron was hot.

And then Guy Rossett, ardent, impetuous, the beau idéal of a lover, had carried her off her feet, and her cousin was hardly a memory, so much did she live in the radiance of the present.

He had a most dainty dinner. Isobel was a wonderful housekeeper, and could accomplish wonders on a very limited income. Maurice, his desire sharpened by his forebodings, thought what a perfect wife she would make, uniting the decorative with the practical.

After dinner she left the men alone to their wine and cigars. Farquhar was not long in coming to the point. It was typical of his rather staid and old-fashioned way of regarding things that, even in the delicate matter of love, the correct method was to approach the parent first.

“I wonder, uncle, if you have ever thought of me in the light of a future son-in-law?”

The General looked a little embarrassed. Not very long ago, that aspect of his nephew had presented itself to him, and the prospect was not unpleasing. He had a shrewd notion that Maurice was very attached to his pretty cousin, and was marking time for some quite honourable and justifiable reasons.

Of Isobel he was not at all sure. Maurice had every good quality from a man’s point of view, but he was not quite the stuff out of which romantic and compelling lovers are made. And her father was certain that Isobel was full of romance.

The General answered slowly, and with a caution worthy of Maurice himself. “I might have thought about it some time ago, my boy. I fancied then that you were greatly attached. Let me see, it was some three or four years ago that I formed that opinion, I think.”

“Yes,” said Maurice, speaking with a quiet bitterness. “I suppose it was about then that I showed my feelings, as far as I am capable of showing them, plainly. But there were reasons why I did not speak then, reasons that I still think good ones.”

“I am sure of that, my dear boy,” said the uncle kindly. He guessed now the reason of this visit, that sudden telegram.

“At that time I was making headway, it is true, but my position was by no means assured. You know the smallness of my patrimony, and what I earned outside was inconsiderable. I did not feel justified in asking a girl to wait, on the chance of prospects that might never come to fruition.”

“Quite right, quite honourable!” murmured the poor General, dreading the inevitable end of this discourse. Maurice was stating the case, rather as if he were addressing a jury, but there was no doubt he meant business. Even a man of his cautious temperament could now safely allow himself the luxury of matrimony, that was evident from this preamble.

“It has always been my one thought to marry Isobel, assuming that she would have me, the moment I was in a position to take a wife. That moment has now arrived; I have no fears of the future. The question arises, am I too late?”

The General was terribly embarrassed by this direct question. He was a most straightforward man, he loathed subterfuge.

But what was he to do? The engagement of his daughter to Guy Rossett was a secret one. He was, in honour bound, to give neither of them away.

He temporised weakly. “Have you spoken to Isobel about this?”

“No,” came the answer. “I thought it was right to approach you first.”

“Exactly, exactly,” stammered the poor father. “Very right and proper, of course. But you had better put it to Isobel, and see what she says. Of course, you understand there is no opposition on my part.”

Farquhar looked at him keenly. Yes, Moreno’s suspicions were justified. There was a secret engagement. The General had thrown the onus on his daughter. She could tell as much or as little as she pleased.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. “I will speak to Isobel to-morrow morning.”

The next day, in a little sheltered arbour in the not too extensive garden, he asked his cousin to marry him. He explained to her, as he had explained to her father, the reasons which had held him back.

She listened to him with composure. She was dimly aware that, a few years ago, this declaration of love would have set her cheeks aflame, her heart beating. To-day, it left her regretful, but cold.

“I am dreadfully sorry, Maurice. I am very, very fond of you, but not in that way. I look upon you as a brother, a very dear brother.”

There was decision and finality in the low, gentle tones. It was a bitter disappointment. He had always fancied in his masculine optimism that Isobel was waiting ready to fall into his arms, when he had made up his mind to ask her.

It was a bitter disappointment, but he bore it with his usual stoicism. Ambition was the greater factor in his life; love would always play a subordinate part. Still, Isobel’s refusal had taken something away that could never be replaced.

There was a long pause. He was the first to break the silence.

“Your affections are engaged. You are in love with somebody else?”

A vivid flush overspread the fair face. “It is quite true, I love somebody else.”

“The man you were dining with, Guy Rossett?” replied Farquhar quietly.

“Ah, you have guessed! But it is quite a secret. My father knows. His sister knows. His father is obstinate and prejudiced; he wants him to marry a woman in his own world. We are waiting for his consent.”

“I quite understand,” said Farquhar gloomily. “I am too late, I can see. Honestly, Isobel, had I asked you, say, a year ago, would your answer have been different?”

Her frank and candid gaze met his steadfast glance. “I fancy I should have said yes, Maurice. But I am not certain it would have been real love; you see, I have known so few men. Guy has revealed a new world to me.”

Farquhar sighed. He was eloquent enough in the courts, but he was dumb in the presence of women. This handsome young diplomatist had spoken to her in a language that she readily understood.

He silently said good-bye to his dream, the fair dream of the future which was to be glorified by Isobel Clandon’s gracious presence.

“So that is all over. Well, Isobel, I hope you will always allow me to be your very good friend.” She reached out her hand impulsively and laid it on his.

“Oh, yes, please, Maurice. You will always be a dear, kind brother, won’t you?”

“Perhaps some day I may be able to help you. I have just learned there is some danger threatening Guy Rossett.”

Her face blanched. She turned to him an imploring glance.

“Danger threatening Guy. Oh, please tell me, quickly.”

With a bitter pang, he realised in that anguished utterance a full sense of the love which he had lost, of the youthful heart which he had allowed another man to capture.

In a few brief sentences, he told her what Moreno had related to him.

Chapter Five

At the period at which this story opens, there stood in Gerrard Street, Soho, a small, unpretentious restaurant, frequented almost exclusively by foreigners. Over the front was written the name of Maceda.

Luis Maceda, a tall, grave man of dignified aspect, with carefully trimmed beard and moustache, was the proprietor. He was a Spaniard, with the suave and courteous manners of that picturesque nation. The majority of his customers were his compatriots. The few Englishmen who found their way there spoke highly of him and the cuisine. At the same time, one or two of the prominent officials of the Secret Service kept a wary eye upon Maceda and his friends.

It was about half-past six on the evening following the interview between Moreno and Farquhar that Maceda, grave, upright, and dignified, looking younger than his fifty years, stood near the entrance door of the small restaurant, awaiting the arrival of early diners.

He was one of the old-fashioned type of restaurant keepers who kept a vigilant eye on his subordinates, went round to every table, inquiring of his patrons if they were well served. In short, he made his customers his friends.

Through the open doors entered Andres Moreno. He lunched and dined at a dozen different places, but usually twice a week he went to Maceda's. The cuisine was French, to suit all tastes, but there were always some special Spanish dishes, to oblige those who were still Spaniards at heart.

The pair were old friends. Moreno extended his hand.

"How goes it, Maceda? But it always goes well with you. You look after your patrons so well."

For a few moments the two men conversed in Spanish, which Moreno, through his father, could speak perfectly. Then, after a pause, the journalist spoke a single word – it was a password, that Maceda understood instantly.

A sudden light came into the proprietor's eyes. He smiled genially, but gravely, as was his wont.

"So you are with us, at last," he said. "A thousand welcomes, my friend. We want men like you. I was told there would be a new member to-night, but the name was not divulged. This way."

The restaurant keeper led him up a narrow staircase – the house was a very old one – to a big room on the second floor. A long table stood in the middle of the apartment, on which were set bowls of flowers and dishes of fruit. Moreno looked around gratefully. As far as creature comforts went, he was going to have a pleasant evening. Maceda was evidently going to do his best.

Maceda pointed to a little side-room.

"It is there the initiation will be performed at seven. At half-past, dinner will be served. After dinner, the business of the meeting will take place. You are a bit early. I know this much, that you are here on the introduction of Emilio Luçue."

"Quite right," answered Moreno easily. "It was Luçue who persuaded me to the right way."

Maceda raised his hands in admiration at the mention of that name.

"Ah, what a man, what a genius!" he cried in fervent tones. "If our cause ever triumphs, if the world-wide revolution is ever brought about – and sometimes, my friend, I feel very disheartened – it is men like Luçue who will make it a possibility."

"Trust to Luçue," answered Moreno, in his easy way. "If he can't do it, nobody can."

Maceda moved towards the door. "Excuse me that I can no longer keep you company. But business is business, you know. I must be there to welcome my patrons. Maceda's restaurant is nothing without Maceda. You know that. My subordinates are good, and do their best, but it is my personality that keeps the thing going. If I am away for ten minutes, everything hangs fire." Moreno waved a cheerful hand at him.

"Do not stand upon ceremony, my good old friend. I shall be quite happy here till the others arrive. No doubt I shall see you later."

The proprietor walked to the door, with his long, slow stride.

“The three will be here at seven to initiate you. I shall run up for a few moments now and again during the dinner. The two men who will wait upon you are, of course, members of our society. I shall hope to be present, if only for a brief space, at the meeting. Once again, a thousand welcomes.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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