

Marsh Richard

A Master of Deception



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CHAPTER I

THE INCLINING OF A TWIG

When Rodney Elmore was eleven years old, placards appeared on the walls announcing that a circus was coming to Uffham. Rodney asked his mother if he might go to it. Mrs. Elmore, for what appeared to her to be sufficient reasons, said "No." Three days before the circus was to come he went with his mother to Mrs. Bray's house, a little way out of Uffham, to tea. The two ladies having feminine mysteries to discuss, he was told to go into the garden to play. As he went he passed a little room, the door of which was open. Peeping in, as curious children will, something on a corner of the mantelpiece caught his eye. Going closer to see what it was, he discovered that there were two half-crowns, one on the top of the other. The desire to go to the circus, which had never left him, gathered sudden force. Here were the means of going. Whipping the two coins into the pocket of his knickerbockers, he ran from the room and into the garden.

During the remainder of the afternoon the half-crowns were a burden to him. Not because he was weighed down by a sense

of guilt; but because he feared that their absence would be discovered; that they would be taken from him; that he would be left poor indeed. He kept down at the far end of the garden, considering if it would not be wiser to conceal them in some spot from which he would be able to retrieve them at the proper time. But Mrs. Bray's was at, what to him was, a great distance from his own home; he might not be able to get there again before the eventful day. When the maid came to fetch him the coins were still in his pocket; they were still there when he left the house with his mother.

On the eventful day his mother had to go to London. Before she went she told Rodney that she had given the servant money to take him to the circus. This was rather a blow to the boy, since he found himself possessed of money which, for its intended purpose, was useless. He had hidden the half-crowns up the chimney in his bedroom. Aware that it might not be easy to explain how he came to be the owner of so much cash, there they remained for quite a time. So far as he knew, nothing was said by Mrs. Bray about the money which had gone; certainly no suspicion attached to him.

Later he went to a public school. During the third term he went with the school bicycle club for a spin. The master in charge had a spill. As he fell some coins dropped out of his pocket. Rodney, who was the only one behind him, saw a yellow coin roll into a rut at the side of the road. Alighting, he pressed his foot on it, so that it was covered with earth. Then, calling to the others,

who, unconscious of what had happened, were pedalling away in front, he gave first aid to the injured. The master had fallen heavily on his side. He had sprained something which made it difficult for him to move. A vehicle was fetched, which bore him back to school, recovery having first been made of the coins which had been dropped. It was only later he discovered that a sovereign was missing. The following day a search-party went out to look for it, of which Rodney Elmore was a member. They found nothing. As they were starting back Rodney perceived that his saddle had worked loose. He stayed behind to tighten it. When he spurted after the others the sovereign was in his pocket. Mr. Griffiths was reputed to be poor. It was Elmore who suggested that a subscription should be started to reimburse him for his loss. When Mr. Griffiths heard of the suggestion-while he laughingly declined to avail himself of the boy's generosity-he took Elmore's hand in a friendly grip. Then he asked the lad if he would oblige him by going on an errand to the village. While he was on the errand Rodney changed the sovereign, which he would have found it difficult to do in the school.

At the end of the summer term in his last year Elmore was invited by a schoolboy friend named Austin to spend part of the holidays with him in a wherry on the Broads. Mrs. Elmore told him that she would pay his fare and give him, besides, a small specified sum which she said would be sufficient for necessary expenses. Her ideas on that latter point were not those of her son. Rodney's notions on such subjects were always liberal.

Good at books and games, he was one of the most popular boys in the school. Among other things, he was captain of cricket. At the last match of the season he played even unusually well, carrying his bat through the innings with nearly two hundred runs to his credit, having given one of the finest displays of hard hitting and good placing the school had ever seen. He was the hero of the day; owing to his efforts his side had won. Flushed with victory, with the plaudits of his admirers still ringing in his ears, he strolled along a corridor, cricket-bag in hand. He passed a room, the door of which was open. A room with an open door was apt to have a fatal fascination for Rodney Elmore; if opportunity offered, he could seldom refrain from peeping in. He peeped in then. On a table was a canvas bag, tied with a string. He recognised it as the bag which contained the tuck-shop takings. Since the tuck-shop had had a busy day, the probability was that the bag held quite a considerable sum. He had been wondering where the money was coming from to enable him to cut a becoming figure during his visit to Austin. Stepping quickly into the room, he emptied the canvas bag into his cricket-bag; then, going out again as quickly as he had entered, he continued his progress.

He was on his way to one of the masters, named Rumsey, who edited the school magazine, his object being to hand him a corrected proof of certain matter which was to appear in the forthcoming issue. He took the proof out of his cricket-bag, which he opened in the master's presence. Having stayed to have

a chat, he returned with Mr. Rumsey along the corridor. As they went they saw one of the school pages come hurriedly out of the room in which, as Rodney was aware, there was an empty canvas bag. Mr. Rumsey commented on the speed at which the youth was travelling.

"Isn't that young Wheeler? He seems in a hurry. I wish he would always move as fast."

"Perhaps he's tearing off on an errand for Mr. Taylor."

As he said this Rodney carelessly swung his cricket-bag, being well aware that the coins within were so mixed up with his sweater, pads, gloves, and other accessories that they were not likely to make their presence audible. At the end of the corridor they encountered Mr. Taylor himself. Mark Taylor was fourth form master and manager of the tuck-shop. Nodding, he went quickly on. Mr. Rumsey was going one way, Rodney the other. They lingered at the corner to exchange a few parting words. Suddenly Mr. Taylor's voice came towards them down the corridor.

"Rumsey! Elmore! Who's been in my room?"

"Been in your room?" echoed Mr. Rumsey. "How should I know?" Then added, as if it were the result of a second thought: "We just saw Wheeler come out."

"Wheeler?" In his turn, Mr. Taylor played the part of echo. "He just came rushing past me; I wondered what his haste meant. You saw him come out of my room? Then- But he can't have done a thing like that!"

"Like what? Anything wrong?"

"There seems to be something very much wrong. Do you mind coming here?"

Retracing their steps, Mr. Rumsey and Elmore joined the agitated Mr. Taylor in his room. He made clear to them the cause of his agitation.

"You see this bag? It contained to-day's tuck-shop takings—more than ten pounds. I left it, with the money tied up in it, on the table here while I went to Perrin to fetch a memorandum I'd forgotten. Now that I've returned, I find the bag lying on my table empty and the money apparently gone. That's what's wrong, and the question is, who has been in my room since I left it?"

"As I told you, Elmore and I just saw Wheeler making his exit rather as if he were pressed for time."

"And I myself just met him scurrying along, and wondered what the haste was about; he's not, as a general rule, the fastest of the pages. The boy has a bad record; there was that story about Burge minor and his journey money, and there have been other tales. If he was in my room—"

"Perhaps he was sent on an errand to you."

"I doubt it, from the way he was running when I met him. And, so far from stopping when he saw me, if anything, he went faster than ever. It looks very much as if—"

He stopped, leaving the sentence ominously unfinished.

"Master Wheeler may be a young rip, but surely he wouldn't do a thing like that."

This was Rodney, who notoriously never spoke ill of anyone. Mr. Taylor touched on his well-known propensity.

"That's all very well, Elmore; but you'd try to find an excuse for a man who snatched the coat off your back. This is a very serious matter; ten pounds are ten pounds. The best thing is for you to bring Wheeler here, and we'll have it out with him at once."

Rodney started off to fetch the page. It was some little time before he returned. When he did he was without his cricket-bag, and gripped the obviously unwilling page tightly by the shoulder. That the lad's mind was very far from being at ease Mr. Taylor's questions quickly made plain.

"Wheeler, Mr. Rumsey and Mr. Elmore just saw you coming out of my room. What were you doing here?"

Wheeler, looking everywhere but at his questioner, hesitated; then stammered out a lame reply.

"I-I was looking for you, sir."

"For me? What did you want with me? Why did you not say you wanted me when you met me just now?"

Wheeler could not explain; he was tongue-tied. Mr. Taylor went on:

"When I went I left this bag on the table full of money. As you were the only person who entered the room during my absence, I want you to tell me how the bag came to be empty when I returned?"

"The bag was empty when I came in here," blurted out

Wheeler. "I particularly noticed."

To that tale he stuck-that the bag was empty when he entered the room. His was a lame story. It seemed clear that he had gone into the room with intentions which were not all that they might have been-possibly meaning to pilfer from the bag, which he knew was there. The discovery that the bag was empty had come upon him with a shock; he had fled. As was not altogether unnatural, his story was not believed. The two masters accused him point-blank of having emptied the bag himself. A formal charge of theft would have been made against him had it not been for his tender years, also partly because of the resultant scandal, perhaps still more because not a farthing of the money was ever traced to his possession, or, indeed, to anyone else's. What had become of it was never made clear. Wheeler, however, was dismissed from his employment with a stain upon his character which he would find it hard to erase.

Rodney Elmore had an excellent time upon the Broads, towards which the tuck-shop takings, in a measure, contributed. The Austins, who were well-to-do people, had a first-rate wherry; on it was a lively party. There were two girls-Stella Austin, Tom Austin's sister, and a friend of hers, Mary Carmichael. Elmore, who was nearly nineteen, had already had more than one passage with persons of the opposite sex. He had a curious facility in gaining the good graces of feminine creatures of all kinds and all ages. When he went he left Stella Austin under the impression that he cared for her very much indeed; while,

although conscious that Tom Austin, believing himself to be in love with Mary Carmichael, regarded her as his own property, he was aware that the young lady liked him-Rodney Elmore-in a sense of which his friend had not the vaguest notion. Altogether his visit to the Austins was an entire success; he had won for himself a niche in everyone's esteem before they parted.

When he was twenty Rodney Elmore entered an uncle's office in St. Paul's Churchyard. Soon after he was twenty-one his mother died. On her deathbed she showed an anxiety for his future which, under other circumstances, he would have found almost amusing. "Rodney," she implored him, "my son, my dear, dear boy, promise me that you will keep honest; that, under no pressure of circumstances, you will stray one hair's breadth from the path of honesty."

This, in substance, though in varying forms, was the petition which she made to him again and again, in tones which, as the days, and even the hours, went by, grew fainter and fainter. He did his best to give her the assurance she required, smilingly at first, more seriously when he perceived how much she was in earnest.

"Mother, darling," he told her, "I promise that I'll keep as straight as a man can keep. I'll never do anything for which you could be ashamed of me. Have you ever been ashamed of me?"

"No, dear, never. You've always been the best, cleverest, truest, most affectionate son a woman could have. Never once have you given me a moment's anxiety. God keep you as you

have always been-above all, God keep you honest."

"Mother," he said in earnest tones, which had nearly sunk to a whisper, "God helping me, and He will help me, I swear to you that I will never do a dishonest thing, never! Nor a thing that is in the region of dishonesty. Don't you believe me, darling?"

"Of course, dear, I believe you-I do! I do!"

It was with some such words on her lips that she died; yet, even as she uttered them, he had a feeling that there was a look in her eyes which suggested both fear and doubt. In the midst of his heart-broken grief the fact that there should have been such a look struck him as good.

CHAPTER II

HIS UNCLE AND HIS COUSIN

Mrs. Elmore's income died with her. She had sunk her money in an annuity because, as she had explained to Rodney, that enabled her to give him a much better education than she could have done had they been constrained to live on the interest produced by her slender capital. But her son was not left penniless. She had bought him an annuity, to commence when he was twenty-one, of thirty shillings a week, to be paid weekly, and had tied it up in such a way that he could neither forestall it nor use it as a security on which to borrow money. As clerk to his uncle he received one hundred pounds a year. Feeling that he could no longer reside in Uffham, he sold the house, which was his mother's freehold, and its contents, the sale producing quite a comfortable sum. So, on the whole, he was not so badly off as some young men.

On the contra side he had expensive tastes, practically in every direction. Among other things, he had a partiality for feminine society, mostly of the reputable sort; but a young man is apt to find the society of even a nice girl an expensive luxury. For instance, Mary Carmichael had a voice. Her fond parents, who lived in the country, suffered her to live in town while she was taking singing lessons. Tom Austin, although still an

undergraduate at Oxford, made no secret of his feelings for the maiden, a fact which did not prevent Mary going out now and then with Rodney Elmore to dinner at a restaurant, and, afterwards, to a theatre, as, nowadays, young men and maidens do. On these occasions Rodney paid, and where the evening's entertainment of a modern maiden is concerned a five-pound note does not go far. Then, although Miss Carmichael might not have been aware of it, there were others. Among them Stella Austin, who had reasons of her own for believing that Mr. Elmore would give the world to make her his wife, being only kept from avowing his feelings by the fact that he was, to all intents and purposes, a pauper. Since she was the possessor of three or four hundred a year of her own, with the prospect of much more, she tried more than once to hint that, since she would not mind setting up housekeeping on quite a small income, there was no reason why they should wait an indefinite period, till Rodney was a millionaire. But Rodney's delicacy was superfine. While he commended her attitude with an ardour which made the blood grow hot in her veins, he explained that he was one of those men who would not ask a girl to marry him unless he was in a position to keep her in the style a husband should, adding that that time was not so distant as some people might think. In another twelve months he hoped-well, he hoped! As at such moments she was apt to be very close to him, Stella hoped too. The young gentleman was living at the rate of at least five or six hundred a year on an income of a hundred and eighty. He

did not bother himself by keeping books, but he quite realised that his expenditure bore no relation to his actual income. Of course, he owed money; but he did not like owing money. It was against his principles. He never borrowed if he could help it, and he objected to being at the mercy of a tradesman. He preferred to get the money somehow, and pay; and, somehow, he got it. Very curious methods that "somehow" sometimes covered. He was fond of cards; liked to play for all sorts of stakes; and, on the whole, he won. His skill in one so young was singular; sometimes, when opportunity offered, it was shown in directions at which one prefers only to hint. His favourite games were bridge, piquet, poker, and baccarat, four games at which a skilful player can do strange things, especially when playing with unsuspecting young men who have looked upon the wine when it was red.

Rodney's dexterity with his fingers was almost uncanny. He could do wonderful card tricks, though he never did them in public, but only for his own private amusement. When reading "Oliver Twist," he had been tickled by the scene in which Fagin teaches his youthful pupils how to pick a pocket. He had made experiments of his own in the same direction upon parties who were not in the least aware of the experiments he was making. His success amused him hugely, while the subjects of his experiments never had the dimmest notion as to how or where their valuables had gone. In very many ways Rodney Elmore obtained sufficient money to enable him to keep his credit at a surprisingly high standard. Everyone spoke well of him; he was a

general favourite. Nor was it strange; he looked a likeable fellow—indeed, ninety-nine people out of a hundred liked him at first sight. Over six feet in height, slightly built, he did not look so strong as he was in reality. Straight as an arrow, head held well up, there was something almost feminine in the lightness with which he seemed to move. Many girls and women had told him to his face that he was the best dancer they had ever had for partner. Indeed, in a sense, he flattered his partners, having a knack of making a girl who danced badly think she danced well. He had light brown hair, which seemed as if it had been dusted with golden sand; grey eyes, which, with the pleasantest expression, looked you right in the face; an Englishman's clear skin; mobile lips, which parted on the slightest pretext in a sunny smile; just enough moustache to shade his upper lip. Altogether as agreeable looking a young gentleman as one might hope to meet. And his manners bore out the promise of his appearance. Always cool, easy, self-possessed, ready to perform little services for women, the aged, the infirm, in a fashion which, so far as our present-day young men are concerned, is a little out of date. With the pleasantest voice and trick of speech, no chatterer, it seemed impossible for him to say a disagreeable or an unkind thing either to or of anyone. It was a standing joke among his intimates that, when scandal-mongering was in the air, Elmore would spoil the fun by pointing out the good qualities of those attacked and refusing to see anything else but them. He had ever an excuse to offer for the most notorious sinner. It was not wonderful

that everybody liked him. On his part, he seemed incapable of disliking anyone. He might rob his friend of all that he had, but he would not regard him as less his friend on that account. To this rule, so far as he knew, there was only one exception, and as time went on this exception surprised him more and more. There was only one person who he felt sure disliked him, and why he disliked him was beyond his comprehension. This person was the uncle in whose office he was a clerk-Graham Patterson. Mr. Patterson was Mrs. Elmore's brother. Rodney quite understood that his uncle had not offered him the position he held, but had only received him at his mother's particular request. There had been that in his uncle's manner which had struck him as peculiar from the first, as if he were prejudiced against him before they met, regarding him with suspicion and dislike. As, for some reason which he would have liked to have had explained, he had never seen his uncle till he entered his office, his relative's attitude struck him as distinctly odd; but, in his light-hearted way, he told himself that he would gain his uncle's esteem before they had been acquainted long. However, they had been acquainted now nearly three years, and he was conscious that his uncle esteemed him as little as ever. He wondered why.

Mr. Patterson's appearance was against him; he was big and bloated. A City merchant of the old school, he was addicted to the pleasures of the table and fond-for one of his habit of body unduly fond-of what he called a "glass of wine." He liked half a pint of port with his luncheon and a pint for his dinner, he being

just the kind of person who never ought to have touched port at all. Nor, when his health permitted, was his daily allowance of stimulants by any means confined to his pint and a half of port. The result was that he suffered both in mind and body. The "governor's temper" was a byword in the office. When, to use his own phrase, he was "a little below par" he would fly into such fits of passion about the merest trivialities that those about him used to regard his "paddies" as part of the daily routine; so soon as he was out of his "paddy" he had forgotten all about it.

Although his methods were a little old-fashioned, he was still an excellent man of business. The staple of his trade was silk, but latterly he had added other lines. In these days of shoddy the quality of his goods was above suspicion; he did a remunerative trade in everything he touched. In the trade no man's commercial integrity stood higher than Graham Patterson's; whoever dealt with him could be sure that everything would be all right. His books showed every year a comfortable turnover at fair rates of profit. There were those in his employ who were of opinion that if only a younger and more pushing man could have a voice in the management of affairs, the business might rapidly become one of the finest in the city of London.

Rodney Elmore had not been long in his uncle's office before this opinion became emphatically his. He was conscious of commercial abilities of the most unusual kind, and was convinced that if he could only get a chance he would double both the turnover and the profits in so short a space of time that

his uncle could not fail to be gratified. Since he was the nephew of his uncle, and, indeed, his only male relative, he did not see why he should not have a chance. When he first went to St. Paul's Churchyard he had hopes, but these hopes had grown dimmer. His perceptions on such matters were keen; few persons, no matter what their age, could see farther into a brick wall than he. He felt certain that his uncle only kept him at all because Mrs. Elmore had wrung from him a promise that he should have a place, of sorts, in his office. So far from having an eye to his nephew's advancement, it seemed to Rodney that his uncle even went out of his way to let him have as little as possible to do with the conduct of his business. It was true that he had a room for his separate use, and, though it was but a tiny one, on this foundation, at the beginning, he built much. But before long he understood that what he had reared were castles in the air. It seemed to Rodney before long that it must have been Mr. Patterson's intention to keep him apart from the others in order that he might know nothing of what was going on. His own work was of the simplest clerical kind; occasionally he was sent on an errand of no importance. He seemed free to come when he liked, and leave when he chose; nobody appeared to care what he did, or left undone. For these onerous labours he had been paid the first year eighty pounds, the second a hundred, then a hundred and twenty; now, after three years, he wondered what was going to happen next. Obviously an office boy could do what he had to do for five shillings a week. Under the circumstances,

the fact that he had acquired such an insight into the ins and outs, the pros and cons, of his uncle's business transactions spoke volumes for his keenness and acumen. He often smiled to himself as he pictured the expression which would come on his uncle's rubicund countenance if he guessed what an intimate knowledge his office boy had of his affairs. Rodney was perfectly aware that the expression would not be one of pleasure; that his knowledge would not be regarded as the fruit of promising zeal, but as something which could only be adequately described by a flood of uncomplimentary adjectives. What was at the back of Graham Patterson's mind the young man, with all his shrewdness, had still no notion. He was one of the few men he had met who puzzled him. But of this much he was clear-that, while for his sister's sake Mr. Patterson was willing that his nephew should have a seat in his office, the less active interest the young man took in the duties he was, presumably, paid to perform the better pleased his employer would be. Elmore was of a hopeful disposition, willing to persevere if he saw even a remote chance of ultimate gain. But so convinced was he that his uncle, if he could help it, would never, on his own initiative, advance him to a position of trust that, before this, he would have cast about for a chance of improving his prospects-had it not been for a young lady.

He had already been more than two years in his uncle's employment, and was meditating leaving it at a very early date, when one afternoon, Mr. Patterson being out, he heard an unknown feminine voice speaking in the outer office, and

unexpectedly the door of his own den was opened, and someone entered—a girl. Slipping the papers he was assiduously studying into his desk with lightning-like rapidity, he rose to greet her.

"Are you Rodney Elmore?" He smilingly owned that he was. "Then you're my cousin. How are you?"

His cousin? He did not know that he had such a relative in the world. She held out her hand. Almost before he knew it he had it in his; whether willingly or not, she left it in his quite an appreciable space of time. He admitted his ignorance.

"I didn't know I had such a delightful thing as a cousin."

"Isn't that queer? I didn't till the other day. I'm Gladys Patterson; your uncle's my father."

For once in his life Rodney was taken by surprise. His researches into his uncle's affairs had been confined to their commercial side. He knew practically nothing of his private life. He had never heard it spoken of, and had asked no questions. He had a vague idea that his uncle was a bachelor. He knew that he lived in rooms, and—accidentally—had learnt that he had relations with certain ladies of a kind which one does not associate with a family man. That he had ever had a wife and, still less, a daughter he had never guessed. Even in the midst of his surprise he reproached himself for his stupidity that such an important point should have escaped him! As he regarded the girl in front of him he perceived that she was her father's child.

She was about his height, he being short and fat. One day, if appearances were not misleading, she also would be plump.

Already she had something of her father's rubicund countenance; her cheeks were red, even a trifle blotchy. She had dark hair and eyes, both her mouth and nose were a little too big. Yet he did not find her disagreeable to look at. On the contrary, there was something about her which appealed to him, just as he was conscious that there was something about him which appealed to her. Where a girl was concerned it was strange how some subtle instinct told him these things. He was moved to audacity.

"If you're my cousin, oughtn't I to kiss you?"

Her eyes lit up. Her lips parted, showing her beautiful teeth; if they were a little large, they were very white and even.

"As I've had no experience of cousins, how can I say?"

"I shouldn't like you to feel that I'm beginning by evading what, for aught either of us can tell, might be my duty."

Stooping, he kissed her on the mouth. Though it was little more than a butterfly's kiss, her lips seemed to meet his with a gentle pressure which he found agreeable.

"You are a cousin!" she exclaimed.

"I'm glad you are," he replied.

"Didn't you really know you had a cousin?" He shook his head. "Nor I; isn't it queer? I only found it out the other day by the merest accident; in some respects dad is the most secretive person. I've been abroad for the last five years. How old do you think I am?"

There was a frankness, a friendliness about this cousin which amused him. In that sense she could not have been more unlike

her sire.

"Twenty-two."

"I'm twenty-five-isn't it awful? How old are you?"

"I regret to say that I am only twenty-three. I'm afraid you'll regard me as only a kid."

"Shall I? I don't think I shall. You don't look as if you were 'only a kid.' I've been what papa calls 'finishing my education.' Fancy! at my time of life! If my mother had been living I shouldn't have stood it; but, as you know, she died when I was only a tiny tot; and I knew dad-so I lay, comparatively, low. I've been living here and there and everywhere with the queerest duennas, though they really have been dears; and now and then I have had a good time, though I've had some frightfully dull ones. But at last I have struck. You know we've got a house in Russell Square?" Again he shook his head. "What do you know?"

"So far as you are concerned-nothing. I know that I'm clerk to my uncle, and that's all."

"Well, we have got a house in Russell Square. It's been shut up all these years-papa's been living in rooms. But I've made him refurbish it, and he's made it really nice-when he does undertake to do a thing he does it well-and I'm installed in it as mistress. Of course, I know Russell Square's out of the way, but they are good houses, and, if I can only manage dad, I'm going to have a real good time."

"Did he tell you about me?"

"Not he. Don't I tell you that I only discovered your existence

by the merest accident? Do you remember a boy named Henderson who was at school with you?"

"Alfred Henderson-very well; we moved together from form to form."

"I know his sister Cissie; we were at school together, years ago, and she knows you. She told me the other day that you were in your uncle's office in St. Paul's Churchyard, and that his name was Graham Patterson, and was he any relation of mine. I nearly had a fit. When dad came home I bombarded him with questions-What have you done to offend him?"

"Nothing of which I'm conscious. Ever since I've been in the office I've been aware that he dislikes me, though I assure you that I've done my best to please him and give him no cause of complaint."

"Well, he does not like you, and that's a fact. He as good as forbade me to make your acquaintance; but, as he wouldn't give any reasons, I decided to find out for myself what sort of person you were, and-then be guided by circumstances. The truth is, I've had enough of obeying dad, and that's another fact. If I'm not careful I shall end my days in a convent, and the conventual life has not the slightest attraction for me. I've got a will of my own, and when a girl is twenty-five it's about time that she should let such a very unreasonable parent as mine seems to be know it. I'm sure Cissie Henderson is a girl who knows what she is talking about, and as she said all sorts of nice things about you, and nothing else but nice things, I made up my mind that, since

I had a cousin, I'd find out for myself what kind of cousin my cousin was. There is dad. Now you see how I manage him."

A heavy step and a loud voice were heard without; then the door was thrown back upon its hinges.

"Gladys! What does this mean?"

"I've come to see my cousin, dad, as I told you I should do."

"Come into my room."

"Directly, dad. I want Rodney to come and dine with us to-night."

Her father perceptibly winced at his daughter's use of the Christian name.

"To-night? Impossible! I'm engaged."

"Are you? Then in that case he can come and keep me company while you are out. We ought to have heaps of things to say to each other. Do you mind?"

The question was put to Elmore. Mr. Patterson glared.

"Gladys, I want you to come with me to the theatre to-night."

"My dear dad, this is the first time I've heard of it-and, if you don't mind, I'd much rather not. One can go to the theatre any night, but one can't discover that one has a cousin, and meet him for the first time, every day. I'd much rather Rodney would come to dine. Won't you?"

Again the question was put to Elmore.

"I'd be very glad to come-with Mr. Patterson's permission."

"You hear, dad? He'll come, with your permission. Nothing would please you more than that he should come, would it?"

The father looked into the daughter's eyes, seeming to see something in them which kept him from uttering words which were at the tip of his tongue. He spoke gruffly.

"Perhaps he has an engagement."

"Have you?"

"Not any."

"And if you had, you'd throw it over to dine with us, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly would."

"You see, papa, what a compliment he pays you. Come, since it seems that he doesn't regard my invitation as sufficient, will you please ask him to dine with us to-night?"

Again the father eyed his daughter. The observant youth, as he glanced from one to the other, was struck by the unmistakable evidence that this young woman was her father's child. He did not doubt that she had more than a touch of the paternal temper. He saw that Mr. Patterson, fearful of an exhibition of it then and there, as the lesser of two evils, yielded, not gracefully.

"He can come if he likes."

"Thank you, papa. You haven't a very pretty way-has he? – but as my invitation couldn't possibly be warmer, I'm sure you'll regard dad's endorsement as more than sufficient. So you will come?"

"I shall be only too delighted."

"Now, then, Gladys, come to my room. I want to speak to you."

"Coming, dad. Remember, Rodney, our address is 90, Russell Square, and we dine at eight; but if you come any time after half-past seven you'll find me ready. You can't think how dad and I will look forward to your coming."

CHAPTER III

RODNEY ELMORE THE FIRST

That was a curious dinner party. Elmore quite expected that when he had rid himself of his daughter his uncle would come and tell him that he was not to regard the invitation as having been seriously intended, and that he was not to present himself in Russell Square. But nothing of the sort occurred. He saw and heard no more of Mr. Patterson until he quitted the office, and just before a quarter to eight he entered the drawing-room at No. 90. Miss Patterson, who was its sole occupant, rose as he entered.

"It's very good of you," she said, while she continued to allow her hand to remain in his, "to take the hint, and come early. Dad never shows till dinner's served, so that I shall have a chance of finding out before he comes what is the meaning of the extraordinary attitude he is taking up towards you. He simply poses as the father who has got to be obeyed, and as that sort of thing appears to be ridiculous, as I ventured to tell him, I expect you to tell me all about it."

He told her all he had to tell, which was very little, in such fashion that inside fifteen minutes they were on terms almost of intimacy. He was one of those men who have a natural attraction for contrasting types of women; emphatically for that type of which Gladys Patterson was an example. The master of the house

did not enter till dinner was served, and by the time they were seated at table Elmore was already aware that his cousin offered a pleasant and promising field for such experiments as he might choose to devise.

Conversation was almost entirely confined to the two younger members of the party, the initiative being taken by Gladys, Elmore acting as a sort of chorus. The meal was of the solid, plentiful, well-cooked order, which one felt would appeal to the host. Beyond replying shortly to an occasional inquiry addressed to him by his daughter, Mr. Patterson's whole attention was given to his food, and wine. When dessert was on the table his daughter asked him:

"Going out to-night, dad-as usual?"

"No," he responded briefly, "I'm not."

The young woman looked at her cousin with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Dad follows the good old-fashioned custom of sitting over his wine. He thinks that a glass of port gives a proper finish to a meal. If you don't think so you can come into the drawing-room with me."

"He'll stay here," observed the sire succinctly.

But the damsel was equal to the occasion.

"Very well, dad; then I'll stay too. And since this table really is too big for three, I think, Rodney, it would be more comfy if I were to bring my chair closer to yours. Are you fond of the theatre?"

Having brought her chair to within a foot of Elmore's she entered with him into an animated discussion on the subject of favourite plays and players, while the host, practically speechless, sat at the head of his board drinking more port than was good for him. Elmore, who could be abstemious enough when he liked, had followed his cousin's lead, and drank nothing but mineral water. At last the young lady used his self-denial as a pivot to gain her own ends.

"Really, dad, as Rodney won't join you in drinking, it's absurd our stopping here, especially as I want some music, so please, sir, will you come with me at once into the drawing-room?"

Before the slow-witted host, whose brains had not been rendered more active by his libations, had awoke to the meaning of his daughter's proposition, she had borne the guest with her from the room. They were alone together in the drawing-room for more than half an hour. If the music of which Gladys had spoken was not much in evidence, their acquaintance moved at a rate which was only possible in the case of a young man who was willing-nay, eager-to take advantage of the peculiarities of a young woman's temperament. So that when his uncle did appear, with eyes a little dulled and feet a little unsteady, Rodney was quite ready to make his adieux and his cousin to excuse him. The acquaintance, thus commenced, not only continued, but advanced by leaps and bounds. Mr. Patterson's habits being those of a bachelor of a not too strait-laced kind rather than those of a family man, he did not find his daughter's society so

congenial and satisfying as he might have done. Being desirous of doing as he liked, he left her with more freedom than he himself was perhaps aware of. She would even have not been without justification had she chosen to regard herself as neglected. But for what seemed to her to be sufficient reasons, she was content that her parent should amuse himself as he liked, though his doing so resulted in his practically overlooking her altogether.

Rodney Elmore never went again to the house in Russell Square as his uncle's guest, but he went there more than once as his daughter's, and that sometimes at hours and under circumstances which were, to say the least, unconventional. More frequently their meetings were not in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. Mr. Patterson had a fondness for week-ending, without informing his daughter with whom he spent his time or where. It was not strange if, during such absences, his daughter did her best to avoid being too much alone. More than one such Sunday she and Rodney spent together from quite an early hour to quite a late one. Before long they were on terms which certainly could not have been more intimate had they been an engaged couple. But they were not, on that point they supposed that they understood each other thoroughly. Gladys had less than two hundred a year of her own, left her by her mother; and Rodney was pretty sure that if she married him her means would not be materially increased for many a day to come-if ever. He was by no means sure that he cared for her enough to marry her if all he got with her in marriage was her person; no one could

be clearer than he was that she would not make the sort of wife who would be likely to be in any way whatever of assistance to a struggling husband. Her attitude was almost equally practical. That she liked him much more than he liked her was sure; there was hardly anything he could ask of her which she would not be willing to give. She believed in him much more than he believed in her; in her eyes he was nearly a hero. But, not being quite blind, she realised that, as things were, marriage for them was out of the question. She knew her father, and was aware that while up to a certain point she could do with him as she liked, if on a matter of capital importance he bade her not to do such and such a thing, and she did it, he would cut her as completely out of his life as if she had not been in it, and never miss her. She was conscious that she was as unfitted for love in a cottage as Elmore was; was, perhaps, even dimly alive to the fact that in such a position her plight would be worse than his was. So that their association was based on that quite up-to-date article of faith which sets forth that though a young man and a young woman can never be husband and wife, they may still be "pals."

Elmore's position in the office was not improved by the incident of his having been a guest in Russell Square. Though his uncle never spoke to him upon the subject-nor, indeed, if he could help it, on any other-his nephew's acute perception realised that he had not grown to like him any more. As time went on a doubt began to grow up within him as to whether his uncle had not some inkling of the relations which existed between him and

his daughter. That his doubt was well founded he was ultimately to learn. One morning, soon after his uncle's arrival, a request came to him to go to him at once in his room. When he went in he was struck, not by any means for the first time, by certain points about his uncle's appearance. He felt convinced that his relative's was not, from the insurance point of view, a good life. Rodney Elmore knew little of medicine, yet he hazarded a private opinion that Graham Patterson was a promising subject for an apoplectic stroke—the kind of man who, at any moment of undue stress, might have cerebral trouble from which he might not find it easy to recover. He caught himself wondering whether if, by any mischance, his uncle became the victim of such a catastrophe, it might not be worth his while to marry his cousin, if, indeed, that would not be the lady's own point of view. Were Graham Patterson to have such a stroke, it was at least within the range of possibility that he might never again be in a condition to manage his own affairs; in which case who would be so likely to be appointed administrator as the husband of his only child?

While such gruesome imaginings occupied his mind, the subject of them continued to regard him with a stolid silence which at last struck him as singular.

"I was told, sir, that you wished to speak to me."

He said this with the little air of pleasant deference of which he was such a master and which became him so well. His uncle still said nothing, but continued to glare at him with his bloodshot eyes as if he were some strange object in an exhibition. He really

looked so odd that Rodney began to wonder if that stroke was already in the air. He tried again to move him to speech.

"I trust, sir, that nothing disagreeable has happened."

Yet some seconds passed before his uncle did speak. When he did it was with a hard sort of ferocity which his listener felt accorded well with the singularity of his appearance.

"You took my daughter to the Palace Theatre last night."

Rodney wondered from whom he had learned the fact, being convinced that it was not from his daughter. However, since he could scarcely ask, he tried another line, one which he was conscious went close to the verge of insolence.

"I hope, sir, that the Palace is not a theatre to which you object. Just now it has one of the best entertainments in London."

Only in a very narrow sense could his uncle's response be regarded as a reply to his words.

"You're an infernal young scoundrel!"

Rodney did not attempt to feign resentment he did not feel. His quickly-moving wits told him that he was at last brought face to face with a position which he had for some time foreseen, and that for him the best attitude would probably be one of modest humility-at least, to begin with.

"I don't think, sir, you are entitled to use such language to me on such slight grounds."

"Don't you? You-you-beauty!"

Obviously Mr. Patterson had substituted a different word for the one he had intended to use. Taking a slip of paper out of the

drawer of the writing-table at which he was seated, he held it out towards Rodney.

"You see that?"

"I do, sir."

"You know what it is?"

"It appears to be a cheque."

"You know what cheque it is."

"If you will allow me to examine it more closely I shall perhaps be able to say."

"You can examine it as closely as you please so long as it is in my hands. I wouldn't trust it in your hands for a good deal."

"Why do you say that?"

"You impudent young blackguard!"

"And that, sir?"

"I say it, you brazen young hypocrite, because that cheque happens to be a forgery, and you are the man who forged it."

"Sir! I know that you are used to allow yourself a large license in the way of language, but this time, although you are my uncle, you go too far."

"I intend to go much farther before I've done-and don't you throw the fact that I'm your uncle in my face, the most decent men have blackguards for relatives. This cheque was originally made out for eight pounds. I told you to ask young Metcalf to get cash for it. Between this room and Metcalf's desk you altered it to eighty pounds. It was easily done-especially by an expert like you. He brought you eighty pounds; you gave me eight, and

kept seventy-two. You were aware that Metcalf was leaving the office that day to join his brother in Canada; you calculated that probably before the thing was discovered he would be on the high seas, and that, therefore, since everyone knew how much he was in want of cash, I should lay the guilt at his door-you dirty cur! But I didn't, never for one instant; the instant I saw the cheque I recognised your hand."

"You recognised my hand? What do you mean by that, sir?"

Mr. Patterson took something else out of his writing-table drawer, which, this time, he handed to his nephew.

"Look at that."

It was a portrait-the photograph of a man in the early prime of life.

"Don't you think it might be yours?"

Rodney felt that, allowing for the changes made by a few superimposed years, the resemblance to himself was striking, so striking that it was startling. The eyes looked at him out of the portrait with an expression which he recognised as so like his own that it bewildered him.

"That's the portrait of your father. You don't remember him?"

"Not at all."

"I knew him all his life. You are so like what he was at your age that more than once when I have looked at you I have had an uncomfortable feeling that he had come back again to haunt me. Never was son more like his father, in all things."

Rodney winced, scarcely knowing why. His uncle went on.

"Your mother never spoke to you of him?"

"Never."

"She had what she supposed to be sufficient reasons for her reticence; she wished to hide from you, if possible, the knowledge of what manner of man your father was, thinking that the knowledge of the heritage of shame which he had left behind might drive you to walk in his footsteps. I was of a different opinion. I held that if you had in you any of the makings of a decent man, the knowledge of the sort of man your father was would serve you as a warning to keep off the path he'd followed. However, you were your mother's child, not mine, thank God; she had her way, though I warned her that the time would probably come when I should have to tell you the story she would rather have bitten off her tongue than tell."

Mr. Patterson paused, keeping his eyes fixed on the young man in front of him. There was a quality in his gaze which made Rodney conscious of a sense of discomfort to which he had been hitherto a stranger.

"You are so like your father that you even have his Christian name. Rodney Elmore the first was one of those creatures who sometimes come into the world, who could not run straight if they tried-and they never try. He was one of Nature's thieves; a born scamp; a lifelong blackguard. Your mother was my only sister; the only relative I had. I did not understand him so well before she married him as I did afterwards, but I understood him well enough to have kept her from marrying him if I could. But

he was one of those hounds who, if they cannot get what they want by fair means, will not hesitate to get it by foul; he even won his wife by foul means, taking advantage of her girlish innocence so that she had to become his wife to save her good name. She lived for six years with him in hell. Then he was detected in a series of frauds which would probably have resulted in his being sent to penal servitude for life. Rather than face the music, he committed suicide."

Again Mr. Patterson paused, and his nephew, on his side, kept still. It seemed to him that his uncle's voice was the voice of doom; he was aware of a sensation of actual physical pain as he listened, as if sentence had not only been pronounced, but punishment also begun. He had wondered vaguely more than once what manner of man his father was, and, since she had volunteered no information, had put questions on the subject to his mother. But she had staved them off in a fashion which suggested—since even in the days of his boyhood his mental processes were sufficiently acute—that there was not much to be told about him which redounded to his credit. So, as years brought wisdom, his curiosity became less and less; a feeling grew up in his bosom that perhaps the less he knew about his father the better it might be. Never, however, had his most pessimistic imaginings come near the reality as portrayed by his uncle. He, the son of a lifelong rogue, who had only escaped the penalty of his misdeeds by self-destruction! He began to apprehend the meaning of the attitude his uncle had taken up

towards him. His uncle did his best to assist him to a clearer comprehension.

"I never would have anything to do with you. I had suffered too much from your father to be willing by any overt act to acknowledge your existence, especially as a relative of mine. I resented your existence. I am not more superstitious than the average man, but I had a strong conviction that with you it would be a case of like father like son. The paternal qualities were too strong, too ingrained, too much the very essence of his being not to be transmitted. When your mother came and begged me to take you into my office I asked her point-blank if you were not your father's son. She denied it. I believed then that she lied; now I know it. I have no doubt that she had detected you over and over again in acts which recalled your father."

Rodney wondered if that really was the case. She had never hinted anything of the sort to him. He understood now why, with her dying breath, she had entreated him to be honest. Did she realise at the very portals of death what a broken reed his promise was? He shivered at the thought.

"So soon as you came into this office I knew that I had been right, and that you were every inch your father's son. You are clever; don't suppose that I don't appreciate the fact. I am not so clever, which fact you have taken rather too much for granted. You have overlooked one quality I have, and that is-a nose for a thief. I owe to it a good deal of such success as I have had-in a sense, I can smell a thief so soon as he comes near me. Of

course, in your case I had your father's record to help me; but I think that, without it, I should have scented you, your odour was so pungent. You had not been in the place a month before you began to play your little tricks. I do not flatter myself that I found you out in all of them, but I did in a good many. I said nothing, but I made a note of each, and have the complete record in a certain volume which will possibly be produced one day in a court of assize. Then there came the incident of the cheque—the eight pounds which you turned into eighty. When I saw that cheque I realised that immunity had given you courage, and that you were beginning to fly at higher game. I am, as I believe you and other gentlemen in the office are aware, a regular old fogey, a dray-horse sort of man. I never, if I can help it, arrive at a hasty decision. I put that cheque aside and waited; you see, although you live to the age of Methuselah, a thing like this is always up against you—you can never get away from it. I was in no hurry." Again Mr. Patterson paused. Leaning back in his chair, he smiled. Rodney told himself that he resembled an ogre who was enjoying, in anticipation, the meal he proposed to make of him.

"After all, my lad, although you are so clever, you're a fool—indeed, your cleverness is folly. If you had to be dishonest, hadn't you sense enough to gratify your instincts on less dangerous lines? You have made a serious mistake in underrating me; perhaps that's because your experience of men is small. I've been watching you; you've been living in a fool's paradise—your

conscience has never pinched you because you have never feared discovery. Yet, if you had troubled yourself to think, you must have known that, sooner or later, discovery was bound to come, and that, when it did, I had you. You were a fool, my lad, a fool."

The speaker's smile grew more pronounced. To his nephew's thinking it became more and more like an ogre's grin. But when he went on it not only vanished, but its place was taken by something which was unpleasantly like a snarl.

"Then my daughter came on the scene. There, again, you were at fault, because it so happens that I understand my daughter almost as well as you do. She may think herself romantic, but she isn't-there's no more romance about her than there is about me. She's a healthy, vigorous female animal, with her father's blood in her veins, and her father's fondness for the good things of this life of all sorts and kinds. She's seen little of men, especially young men, and I quite appreciate the fact that you're just the sort of young man at whose head she would fling herself-with a little delicate encouragement from you. But she won't, don't you make any mistake, my lad. I haven't forgotten how your father won your mother; and I promise you you shan't win my daughter in the same way. On the day on which I suspected you of any such intention you'd be branded as a gaol bird, and for the whole remainder of your life you'd be passing in and out of prison gates. I'm asking for no promise, being aware that you're one of Nature's liars, I know that not the least reliance is to be placed on any word you utter, but I'm giving you a promise. You

can make any excuse to her you like-I'm sure you're a whale at excuses; if you ever speak to her again, even to tell her that you're not to speak; if you ever write to her; if you ever hold any communication with her whatever, you'll pass into the hands of the police, and I'll tell her your story and your father's. My girl has another thing in common with her father-she's honest, she hates a rogue. And if she knew that you were a common kennel thief, as your father was before you, she'd have no more truck with you if you were twenty times her husband, and I don't believe she'd move a finger to save you from penal servitude. I'm not going to turn you away; you're going to continue to occupy your present position in my office, so that I can keep my eye on you, so don't you try to turn tail and run. Now we understand each other. I have my morning letters to attend to, but I thought I'd better have this little explanation with you first. Now you can go; take my advice-if you can-steal no more. If you keep along the same path you'll find at the end what your father found, he was no more anxious to find it than you are-suicide."

CHAPTER IV

THE THREE GIRLS AND THE THREE TELEGRAMS

His uncle's words were in Rodney's ears for days afterwards. Was it conceivable that he, to whom life was so sweet a thing, could under any circumstances seek refuge in a suicide's grave? It was horrid that his father should have been that sort of man; it was hard on him. His mother ought to have told him; at least he would have been on his guard. No wonder his uncle had been prejudiced against him; had his mother not been so unkindly silent, he might-well, he might have framed his conduct, so far as his uncle was concerned, on different lines. How could he have guessed that his uncle was observing him with almost unnatural keenness; while, all the time, he supposed him to be purblind? It was a most unfortunate position for a young fellow to be placed in; a word from his mother would have been of such assistance. He was always reluctant to blame anyone; yet he could not but feel that his parents had not used him well; with that moral colour-blindness, which was one of his most striking characteristics, he was already beginning to lump them together, though he knew perfectly well, of his own knowledge, that, in all things, his mother had been the soul of honour. He was most awkwardly placed as regards his cousin; he had engagements

with her which he was aware she would resent his breaking; and her father had even forbidden him to explain. Not that he could think of any explanation which would meet the case from her point of view; she was apt to be quick-tempered where he was concerned, and he was most anxious to keep in with her; one never knew what might happen. He had been cramming up the subject of apoplexy, both from books, and from the lips of medical acquaintances; and he felt sure, from certain little things he had noticed, that it was quite possible that his uncle might have a stroke at any second; and, of course, if he did, the situation would be entirely altered. But, at the same time, that could not be counted on; and, in the meanwhile, there was Gladys both to consider and conciliate. Still, he managed; his dexterity in such matters was remarkable. He contrived that a communication should reach his cousin to the effect that her father had forbidden him to meet her, on pain of instant dismissal, and that, to save her from the paternal anger, he had promised that he would not even write to her. He counselled her, however, to be patient, expressing his conviction that this state of things was not likely to continue, and that before long they would be more than compensated for the brief period during which they would be separated one from the other.

Then he went to his uncle in his room at the office, and telling him, what was quite true, that Gladys had written asking for an explanation of his sudden cessation of their intimacy, requested him, for everybody's sake, since he had ordered him not to write

to her, to inform her himself of the prohibition he had laid upon his nephew. This, grimly enough, Mr. Patterson undertook to do, and doubtless did. And for more than a fortnight Rodney Elmore had quite a dull time. Then a sequence of events came crowding on him so rapidly that within a period of some eight-and-forty hours the whole course of his life was changed.

The sequence began on a certain Saturday morning. Before he was yet out of his bedroom he was informed that Mr. Austin had called; and, indeed, the words were hardly spoken before Tom showed himself in. Rodney was unfeignedly glad to see him. He had always liked Tom, who was the antipodes of himself; a red-headed, freckle-faced, simple-minded youth, who was not likely to set the Thames on fire, and who, in fact, had no desires in that direction. He had "cut" college for a few days, but had to hurry back by an early train; which explained the matutinal hour he had chosen for a call. He brought news that Stella was in town, staying with some people over Kensington way; and suggested, as he rather thought that Stella found it dullish, that he should look her up, if possible that very afternoon, and take her somewhere. Rodney declared that he would be only too glad to have the chance; he would get away early from the office, and go straight to her, and would let her have a wire at once to let her know that he was coming.

Then, when they adjourned to breakfast, a meal at which the visitor expressed his readiness to assist, Tom volunteered the information that he had been down to see Mary Carmichael, who

was staying with an aunt at Hove. She was quite well, was Mary, and, if anything, prettier than ever; and he rather thought that, at last, he had fixed things up with her. As he said this he flushed a red which was not at all the same shade as his hair.

"You know," he observed, "how she's always refused to take me seriously, and what a job I've had to get her to do it, and how she's always ragged me, pretending that I was too young to know my own mind, and all that sort of rot. Well, this time I rather fancy that I've convinced her that I do know my own mind; and, what's more, I fancy that I've found out what's in hers too. You know, she's always stuck out that she'd have nothing to say to me about-you know what, till I'd taken my degree. Of course, I ought to have taken the beastly thing ages ago; there's no need for anyone to tell me that; but this time I am going to do the trick-you see. Everyone will tell you that I've been working like blazes, and even my tutor has hopes. Mary as good as told me last night that if I once got the thing the banns could go up inside three months-honestly, she did. Of course, she was only laughing; you know how she does laugh at a fellow; but I believe she meant it, all the same. I say, this ham of yours is top hole; I'll have another whack."

While Tom helped himself to the other "whack," his friend said with a sigh:

"You're a lucky beggar to be able to think of marriage at your time of life."

"Don't I know it? For that I've got the pater to thank; he's

been making more piles. All he really wants is that I should settle down; nothing would please him better than to see me married; he'd be almost as glad as I should to have Mary as a member of the family. Isn't it queer that while I've liked Mary all her life I've liked her more and more as time went on, until-well, if I do get her I shall have got all I want."

"Then, with all my heart, I hope you get her."

"I've decided hopes, old man-decided. I say, you know, Stella's not a bad sort, although I am her brother."

"Do you think that I don't know it?"

"You're the best pal I have in the world, and-I don't think she objects to you."

"Tom, dear old chap, don't say another word-please. I'm never going to ask a girl to marry me until I'm in a position to keep her as my wife should be kept."

"That's sound enough in a general way; but as regards this particular case it's all tuppence. Stella has money, and the pater, if properly worked, would supply more; I happen to know that he's quite willing she should marry anyone she likes, so long as it's a decent chap-and he knows you're that. Why, if it comes to that, he could slip you, as easy as winking, into a much better berth than the one you have at your uncle's."

"Tom, I know you're the best chum a man ever had, and one day I'm going to prove it. I haven't your happy knack of baring my heart, even to myself; I'm a more secretive kind of brute; but, like you, I have my dreams, and before very long I hope

to have good news for you. But now, please, don't say anything more about it."

And Tom said nothing; he changed the subject to Oxford gossip, chattering away light-heartedly while Rodney glanced at the letters which the morning post had brought. Among them was one in a bold, slashing hand, which he knew well.

"90, Russell Square.

"Friday.

"Dear Old Boy, – The dad's gone off weekending without notice, and I never found out what he was going to do till it was too late to get at you, or I would have got; so here am I in this great mausoleum of a house all on my lonesome. To-morrow, early, I've an engagement with Cissie Henderson, but in the evening – and no nonsense, sir! – you'll have to dine me in some quiet place, where there are no prying eyes; and afterwards you can amuse me as you like. No excuse will be accepted; I want to spend to-morrow evening in your society, and I'm going to – and the dad can go hang! So mind you send me a wire directly you get this to let me know where I'm to meet you – at seven, sir! – and don't let there be any mistake about it. Until we do meet,

"Yours, G."

As he read this characteristic note of an up-to-date young woman a chord was touched somewhere in Rodney's being which made him conscious of a pleasant little thrill. Even while Austin chattered he was telling himself that he also would let the lady's

"dad go hang," and that she should spend the evening in his society, be the consequences what they might.

When the visitor departed it was understood that Rodney would send a wire on his way to the office to let Stella know at what time she might expect him. Scarcely had Austin left the house than there came a telegram for Elmore. He opened it, supposing it to be from the impatient lady in Russell Square; but he was wrong. The message ran:

"Do come down to-morrow and cheer me up. Aunt is going out. I shall be alone. I have had Tom as companion for three whole days, so am in need of a tonic. Wire train. Be sure and come.

"Mary."

Mary? For a moment he wondered who Mary was. Then he saw that the message had been handed in at a Brighton post-office, and he understood. Mary? Mary was Mary Carmichael. At the thought of her his eyes sparkled and his spirits rose. After a fashion Mary Carmichael was the feminine creature in all the world that he liked best. Not only was she pretty, and dainty, and bright, and smart and clever, but just as Gladys Patterson appealed to him in one direction so Mary Carmichael did in another. Her telegram suggested what that direction was; in a way they were birds of a feather. Tom Austin had been her life-long admirer, slave, her avowed wooer; quite probably one day she would become his wife; yet she was not averse to being "cheered up" by his bosom friend, after confessing, by telegram, that she

had been bored by three days of his society. Rodney chuckled at the thought of it; the thing seemed to him to be so amusing. Just now Tom had been telling him, with boyish candour, in single-hearted confidence in his integrity, that he had come away from Brighton under the impression that he was shortly to be made the happiest of men; and here was the girl who was to make him happy so anxious for an antidote to his society, begging him to do what Tom clearly had not done-cheer her up-and adding, as a peculiar inducement, that she would be alone. Poor old Tom! what a fool he was-and what a little minx was pretty Miss Mary!

On his way to the office Rodney sent three telegrams. One to Stella Austin, at Kensington, to say that he would be with her as near to two o'clock as possible, and that he hoped she would come out with him; one to Gladys Patterson, in Russell Square, asking her to meet him at a restaurant in Jermyn Street at seven sharp; one to Mary Carmichael, at Hove, informing her that he would arrive in Brighton to-morrow morning by the train due at noon. It was a female clerk to whom he handed these three messages; when she had scanned them she glanced up at him, as he felt, with a species of curiosity; he had a suspicion that she smiled.

CHAPTER V

STELLA

On the whole, Rodney Elmore spent a pleasant afternoon with Stella Austin. He took her to the Zoological Gardens, which was a place she liked. Beyond doubt she enjoyed herself immensely. She was very fond of animals, even of the most savage kind. In the wild-beast house, confronting the lions and the tigers, with Rodney at her side, she wondered, with a little shudder, what would happen if the creatures all got out. Drawing her arm in his, he pressed it closely; she liked that, too.

From his point of view, the pleasure with which she greeted him on his arrival at the house in Kensington was almost pathetic. He reproached her gently for not having told him she was coming to town. She replied that it had only been decided at the last moment, and that she was just going to write to him when Tom, appearing on the scene, offered to take the news in person. The way in which she took it for granted that he was as glad to see her as she was to see him appealed to his sympathy so strongly that he was nearly moved to take her in his arms and kiss her there and then. But he refrained. He never had kissed Stella, even in the old days. He had always had a feeling that a kiss would mean so much more to her than it did to him; indeed, that was one of her faults in his eyes, that everything meant so much more

to her than it did to him. Often he would have liked to kiss her; having brought matters to a point at which a kiss was the next thing which might have been expected, he felt sure that she had expected it. But he kept himself sufficiently in hand to stop on the very edge, having it in his mind that it might be as well for him to be able, some day, if need be, to assert with truth that he had never gone beyond it. Ordinarily he would have had no scruples on such a point. Oddly enough, in a sense, he was afraid of Stella, recognising in her an essential purity with which he himself had nothing in common. Her standard of life was so infinitely above his own that he was always conscious of a sense of strain after being some time in her company; it came from his attempting to sustain himself in the rarefied atmosphere in which she moved with ease. He would have been willing to hold her in his arms; he would have loved to; but he would not have liked to know that she was his superior in all essentials; and he would have to know. Sooner or later she might discover what kind of creature he was; but, though he believed that in such a plight she would keep her own counsel, none the less he would resent the discovery she had made.

Then, again, his taste in women was fastidious; he was not sure that she filled all his requirements. She was pleasant enough to look at; had pretty eyes, a fresh complexion, a tender smile—sometimes when she smiled he loved her so that it was all he could do to keep from committing himself utterly. But she was short and broad for her height; to his thinking her figure lacked

dignity. He had the modern young man's notion that if you look at the mother you will see what the daughter is going to be. Mrs. Austin was plump and matronly; he feared that before long Stella would be the same. He did not care for matronly women; he liked them tall and slim. Then he was particular about the way in which a woman dressed; he liked those whom he favoured with his society, as he put it, to do him credit. He had felt, only too often, that Stella was almost dowdy; she was never really smart. Her clothes were good of their kind, but they suggested the provinces; or she had not the knack of showing them off to advantage. He liked a girl's foot to be cased in what he called a pretty stocking, and a smart shoe with a Louis heel; Stella wore serviceable shoes with low heels, and the plainest of stockings. With these things in his mind he had ventured, once, to hint that he would like to have the dressing of her. She had been silent for some seconds, and had then replied, scarcely above a whisper, and with downcast eyes:

"Perhaps one day you will."

He was perfectly conscious that that "one day" was the day of which she was always dreaming. He was not sure that he was so willing it should come as she was. But that afternoon he was not disposed to be critical. He was really glad to see her. It was some time since they had met; he was nearly surprised to find what a jolly girl she was; her smile was unusually tender. As they quitted the monkey-house she spoke of Tom and Mary.

"Did Tom tell you that he has nearly brought that hard-hearted

Mary of his to the promising point?"

"He did seem to be sanguine."

"Poor old Tom! I believe if she'd promise quite he'd pass straight off; it's anxiety which causes him to be ploughed. I've written to Mary telling her just what I think, and informing her that she's to keep him no longer suspended between heaven and earth, but that she's to marry him at once. Mamma wants it, papa wants it, I want it, Tom wants it-everybody wants it. She's the dearest girl in the world; but she's a goose."

"Because she hesitates?"

"Why should she? Tom will make her the best husband in the world-you know he will."

"Perhaps every girl doesn't want 'the best husband in the world.'"

"Are you trying to say something clever? If she has a husband, of course she does. Do look at those two in front; I've been watching them. She keeps putting out her hand to feel for his, or he puts out his to feel for hers. Do you think they're newly married?"

class="normal""Is that how you mean to behave when you're newly married?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Oh, it depends."

"You said that before. On what does it depend?"

Suddenly a glimpse he caught of the smile which lighted up

her face started him off at a tangent-without waiting for her answer.

"It seems ages since I saw you last; it's awfully nice to see you again-especially as you're looking prettier than ever."

"Do you like this frock that I've got on? You ought to, I had it made specially for you-you are so critical about my clothes."

"Oughtn't a man to be critical about the girl he-he cares for?"

"Do you care for me?"

"You know I do."

"How much?"

"More than I-dare tell you."

"Rodney."

"Stella."

"I hope one day, before very long, you'll find courage enough."

The challenge was a direct one. In such matters he was such a creature of impulse that it set his pulses galloping. They had reached a spot where they had for sole society some queer-looking birds who peered at them through the wires which confined them to their runs.

"Stella, you mustn't tempt me. If you only knew what I'd give to be able to take you in my arms."

"Rodney, it isn't fair of you to talk like that. You say that sort of thing, and make me feel as if the world were whirling round and round, and then you go no farther."

"You know why I go no farther."

"I don't! I don't!"

As she turned and looked at him he saw how her cheeks were flushed; that tears were in her pretty eyes; how her lips were twisted as by physical pain. He really was so fond of her that the sight of her suffering moved him almost beyond endurance. Careless of spectators who might come at any moment to look at the birds, he took both her hands in his.

"Stella!"

He paused; he was conscious how pregnant with meaning the pause was to her, how she waited for his words. He let them come.

"Stella, will you be my wife?"

"You know I will! How long have you known it, sir? How long have you been aware that you had only to ask to have? I go all over shame when I think of it. I don't-I really don't-think you've used me quite fairly, sir. Because, you know, you oughtn't to keep on telling a girl that you care for her, and-then say nothing more. I've even sometimes wondered if you were playing with me-I have! Were you?"

"Never. How could you think it?"

"I had to think something, hadn't I? And-what could I think? Then you do really and truly care for me?"

"With the whole force of my being." She drew a long breath, as if it were a sigh of pleasure.

"And you really and truly want me to be your wife?"

"As Tom said of Mary-if I get you I get all that I want in the world."

"Then, why didn't you try to get me before?"

"Stella, every man has his own standard. You have money; perhaps one day you'll have more; I have no money; perhaps I never may have. Under those circumstances, though I worshipped the ground you stood on, I had, and have, no right to ask you to be my wife. I have held out against the temptation to do so over and over again, but-I could hold out no longer. You must forgive me."

"For what? For having what you call 'held out'? I am not sure that I do. You can't have wanted me so very, very much, or you wouldn't have held out so long. That's what I feel."

"Stella, if you only knew!"

"And if you only knew!"

"The days I've thought of you, and the nights I've dreamed!"

"And do you suppose that I can't think-and dream?"

"Sometimes, after I've left you with the words unuttered, and thought of what I should feel if I had you in my arms, it was pretty hard to bear."

"Rodney! – I wonder if anyone is coming? After all your holding out, you have-chosen a funny place."

Heedless of anyone coming, he put his arm about her waist and drew her quickly to the comparative shelter of a fairly grown tree.

When Rodney Elmore had started out with Stella Austin nothing had been farther from his mind than any intention of asking her to be his wife. He was amazed to find, now that the

thing was done, how pleasant it had been. The whole episode had been delightful-so delightful that he was loth to bring it to a close. The rubicon being passed, another Stella was revealed. The simple question he had put to her might have been some magic formula, so great a change had it wrought in the maiden. He had never credited her with the capacity to be so delicious; for she was delicious in a dozen unsuspected ways. He had been fond of her before he asked her to be his wife; in less than half an hour! afterwards he was in love with her. The new Stella had bewitched him; to such a degree that he would have been willing to stay with her in the Zoological Gardens for an indefinite period of time, had he not had a previous engagement. It was with a feeling of distinct disgust that he realised that he would have to tear himself away. Nor was the parting rendered easier by the lady's attitude. She could not be brought to see that any engagement was of such importance that, on that day of all days, he was forced to leave her so summarily. Nor would he have left her, could he have helped it. He assured her, with perfect truth, that he would have only been too happy to spend the evening with her at the house of her friends in Kensington, had he dared, but he did not dare. She asked him why, being now entitled to ask such questions. He did not tell her that it was because he was conscious that it might be almost more dangerous to disappoint his cousin than to rob her father. He fabricated instead an ingenious lie, which convinced her against her will.

Then there arose the question of the morrow. Being Sunday,

of course he would be able to spend the whole of it with her. There, again, a previous engagement blocked the way. He explained that, never having anticipated the delightful footing on which he stood with her, he had made the engagement long ago. Would she have him break his word? It depended, she said, to whom his word was pledged; she did think that he might spend that first Sunday with her. Then he spun a yarn about an old friend of his mother who had begged him again and again to visit her, to whom he had promised to go at last. He knew that she had made all sorts of preparations for his reception; now, if he were to throw her over she would feel, with justice, that he had treated her very badly. He could not bear that she should feel that. She was his mother's dearest friend. Her name was Staples. She lived in a little village the other side of Dorking. Stella supposed that, anyhow, he would not have to stay there late. As to that, he could not say. The Sunday trains to Dorking were very awkward. But this he promised, at the earliest moment at which with decency he could get away, he would; and if the hour of his return to town were not frightfully late he would rush over to Kensington, if it were only for half a dozen words. But of this she might be quite certain; he would spend the whole of Monday evening with her if she would let him; he would come straight to her from the office.

So, finally, on that understanding, they parted; that he would come to her on Sunday, if only for a minute or two, and that, anyhow, he would revel in her dear society for so much of Monday as was left after his office work was done. But, for him,

between that and Monday, the world was to be turned upside down.

CHAPTER VI

GLADYS

Hurry as he might, it was nearly half-past seven before Rodney Elmore reached that restaurant in Jermyn Street at which he was due at seven. The fault was Stella's. Had she not spun out the parting to such an unconscionable length, he would have been able to be there in time. But he could not explain this to Gladys Patterson, who had never heard of the girl. She rose, as he came in, from a seat in the vestibule, with a face which mirrored the anxiety she had felt.

"Whatever is the matter? I thought that something had happened, and you weren't coming."

"My dearest child, I've been the victim of a series of accidents; I was beginning to wonder myself if I should ever get here."

Then he told another lie-invented on the spur of the moment. He had not troubled to prepare one on the way; he was not sure of the mood in which he might find her; one story might suit one mood another another. With him, to lie was as easy as to breathe; he himself was often hardly conscious he was lying, he lied so like truth.

"So you see, I've been half off my head, and in a deuce of a stew. Perhaps you'll tell me what you'd have done in my position. But, thank goodness, I'm here at last. The worst of it is, I haven't

ordered dinner, or reserved a table; we shall have to take pot-luck; let's hope that the *table d'hôte* is worth eating." It so chanced that there was a table, and that the *menu* of the set dinner read quite well. Presently they were fronting each other at a little table in a corner of the room, each in the best possible frame of mind. She had forgotten the strain of waiting in her delight that he had come, while he was charmed to find her in so good a temper. Indeed, he seemed to be in the very highest spirits, and when he was that no one could be better company. Then the food was good; that was a point on which they both were excellent judges. On the occasion of that first dinner in Russell Square each had played on the other a pleasant comedy; to make a good impression on the strange cousin, who might have views on such matters, Gladys had drunk nothing but water, and, for some similar reason, Rodney had done the same. It was only when, later, they were on more intimate terms, that they learned that neither was a teetotaller. It was rather funny. As a matter of fact, so far as the pleasures of the table were concerned, Gladys was in very truth her father's child; not only could she appreciate good food well cooked, but she was by way of being a connoisseur of certain wines; and in such respects Rodney was an excellent second.

Before the dinner was half way through she was looking at him with something in her eyes which spoke to a similar something which was in his. He had forgotten the episode of the afternoon as if it had never been. This was the sort of girl he loved to have

in front of him on the other side of a table—one who would eat what he ate, drink what he drank, do as he did; to whom he could say whatever he pleased. They joked on the subject of the absent Mr. Patterson.

"I wonder," she said, "what would happen if he walked in here at this very moment."

Rodney also wondered, for a second, in silence.

"For one thing, he'd spoil our evening, because he'd start you straight away off home."

"Would he? I should take some starting. I never am particularly afraid of him, and I'm not in the least when I've had two glasses of Montebello-rattling good bottle, this is. Thank you; that's the third. What beats me is why you're afraid of him. You don't strike me as being a person who's afraid of much. What would it matter if he did give you the key of the street, so far as his office is concerned? You'd easily find a better one. There's a mystery somewhere. Don't imagine, my dear old man, that I don't know so much. Why has he such an objection to you? And why are you so much in awe of him? Now's your time-out with it. Make a clean breast of it-between this glass and the next."

class="normal""I can't tell you why he objects to me, but I can assure you that I don't stand in awe of him."

"Rubbish! If you don't, why have you kept away from me in the way you have done? – you exasperating boy! I console myself with the reflection that if I'm losing your society you're losing mine; because I'll bet a trifle that you're just as fond of seeing

me every other day or so as I am of seeing you."

"You're right there. If I saw you all day and every day I shouldn't mind."

"I'm not so sure of that; there's a limit. It might be all right for a time; but, my hat! wouldn't you get bored after a month of nothing else but my society!"

"What price you-after a month of nothing else but me?"

She seemed to reflect before she answered.

"You see, it's like this; if you and I were alone together for a month, or longer-

"I'd be willing to make it longer."

"Would you?"

She looked at him with shining eyes.

"Rodney, you're a dear. If we were to be alone together for so long as that, we should have to alter the pace. I fancy that where a man and a woman are concerned it's the pace that kills."

"What do you mean by that, oh, wise one?"

"If you had one pound of chocs to eat you might gobble them down as fast as you please, and no harm would be done."

"You've tried it?"

"Perhaps! But if you had a ton you would have to go, oh so carefully, or you would be so sick. But we meet so seldom that when we do we want to gobble; I know that, so far as I am concerned, I want to get as much of you as I possibly can during the short time we are together."

"Same here-only more so."

They smiled at each other across the little table. Then, glancing down, she transferred her attention to what was on her plate.

"But, of course, if we weren't to part for a month-or more-it would be different."

"True, oh, queen! And suppose we were to marry!"

"I don't think I'd mind."

"I'm pretty nearly sure I shouldn't."

"That's very sweet of you to say so. Only-there's dad!"

"There's very much dad!"

"He can forbid my seeing you, and that kind of thing, if he pleases; and if he finds out that I've been disobedient he'll make himself extremely disagreeable. Still, I fancy I could manage him. But if I were to marry you against his wishes, I don't believe I'd ever get another penny from him, living or dead; and as you have no immediate promise of becoming a millionaire, that would be awkward for both of us."

"It would. All the same, don't you think it would be comfy if we were secretly engaged-in the event of anything happening to him?"

class="normal""What's going to happen?"

"Anything-living the sort of life he does."

"Are you hinting that there's anything the matter with his health?"

"My dear girl, you've only to use your eyes to be aware that a doctor would tell him that he's the kind of man who ought to

swear off everything. And does he?"

"You make me feel all shivery. You talk as if you expected him to die right off."

"We've all had sentence of capital punishment pronounced against us, and, though we don't know when it will be put into execution, in such a case as his it's possible to guess that it mayn't be very long postponed."

"Rodney! I don't like to hear you talk like that. He's fond of asking me questions about you; I hate telling lies; if we were engaged, and he were in one of his cross-examining moods, I might find myself in a fix."

He played with his knife while a waiter was bringing another course.

"Consider something else. Let me put a hypothetical case. Suppose a girl were to make a dead set at me, I might like to be able to tell her that I'm engaged already."

"Who's the girl?"

"The girl, like the case, is hypothetical; but I can conceive of circumstances in which I should like to feel that we were engaged."

class="normal""You've changed your mind. A short time ago you were all the other way."

"I've been considering matters. Say, for example, that your father puts his foot down, and that we don't see each other again for an indefinite period. Do you not think that then I should not like to feel that we were engaged?"

"You can feel that we're engaged all you want to, without our setting it down in black and white. Aren't you as sure of me as if I were your wife already? Don't you know that if circumstances permitted I would become your wife? Do you wish me to understand that I'm not as sure of you?"

"Gladys, you're a goose. So far as I'm concerned, I'm inclined to the opinion that I'd like you to be my wife to-night."

"It's you who are the goose. As if we didn't understand each other far too well to render it necessary to have things placed on a ceremonious footing. We can do without formulas."

CHAPTER VII

MARY

On the Sunday Rodney Elmore kept his engagement with the third young woman, with the punctiliousness on which, in such matters, he prided himself. He went down to Brighton on the Pullman, Limited, and was met at the station by Mary Carmichael. He exclaimed, at sight of her:

"You angel! – to come and meet me!"

"I'm not quite sure that I did come to meet you, in the strict sense. I'd nothing to do; I've always a feeling that the queerest lot of people come by this train, the oddest sort of week-enders—didn't you notice how the platform reeked of perfume? – so that its arrival's generally worth seeing. Besides, between ourselves, I'd a kind of notion that Tom might come by it. If he had I should have ignored you utterly, and should have explained that something within told me he was coming, and that was why I was here. Wouldn't he have been enraptured?"

As he listened—and, in his observant way, took in the details of her appearance—Rodney was conscious, not for the first time, of how beneficent Providence had been in making girls in such variety. Stella, emblematic of the domestic virtues; Gladys, for physical pleasure; Mary, suggestive of the arch in the sky, which, though a man may walk for many days, he shall never

find the end of. To his thinking she was as many-tinted as a rainbow; as beautiful, as elusive. He doubted if the average man were her husband whether he would have any but the dimmest comprehension of her at the finish; she had a knack of surprising even him. He had known her a good long time, yet he admitted to himself that in many respects she was still wholly beyond his comprehension, and he prided himself, not without reason, on his gift for understanding persons of the opposite sex.

They went down towards the Hove lawns in a fly, and were still in Queen's Road when she said:

"So you've done it at last."

He turned towards her as if a trifle startled.

"Done what?"

"Asked Stella to be your wife."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"My simple-minded babe, aren't I the very dearest friend Stella has in the world? And didn't she, directly you left her yesterday afternoon, send me a telegram conveying the news? Do you think she would keep it a moment longer than she could help from me, especially as she is perfectly well aware that I've been on tip-toe for it for goodness alone knows how long? And aren't I expecting a letter of at least half a dozen pages to-morrow morning to tell me all about it? I wired my congratulations to her at once, and I almost wired them to you; then I thought I'd keep them till you came this morning. My congratulations, Rodney, dear."

He was more taken aback than he would have cared to own. What an idiot he had been! Had he had his senses about him he would have given Stella to understand that the new relationship between them must be kept private till it suited him to make it public. That she should have telegraphed to Mary the moment he had left her! Could anything be more awkward? If to Mary, why not to others? To her mother, her father, her brother, her cousins, and her aunts; and she had crowds of dearest friends. Possibly by now the news was known to fifty people; they would spread it over the face of the land. Had he foreseen such a state of things he would have torn his tongue out rather than have said what he did in Regent's Park. Imbecile that he was; he had forgotten altogether that that was just the tale a girl of a sort loves to tell. Had he had his wits about him he might have known that she would be all eagerness to proclaim her happiness to her friends. To have had a private understanding with Stella might have been fun. He might have lied to her; played the traitor; done as he pleased-it would not have mattered if her heart was broken so long as she suffered in silence. But the affair assumed quite a different complexion if her confounded relations were to have their parts in it. He would have to endure all kinds of talkee-talkie from her mother. That oaf Tom might want to thrust his blundering foot into what was no concern of his. Worst of all, there was her father. Rodney was quite certain that he would want to regularise the position at once; that he himself would be helpless in his hands. Mr. Austin would require a clear statement

of his intentions; having got it, he would see that it was adhered to. Being opposed to long engagements, he would want to fix the wedding day-and he would fix it. Rodney was uncomfortably conscious that he had made such a conspicuous ass of himself that, being delivered into her father's strong hands, almost before he knew it he might find himself the husband of Stella Austin.

He shuddered at the thought-a fact which was observed by the young lady at his side.

"Whatever is the matter? You shook the fly! You haven't thanked me for my congratulations, nor do you seem so elated as I expected. You know I'm not sure that it was quite nice of you to propose to another girl on the very day before the one on which you knew you were coming down to me. For all you could tell, I was expecting you to propose to me."

"If I'd only thought there was the slightest chance, wouldn't I have loved to."

"I suppose for the sake of practice."

"Well-there are girls with whom one would like to practise love-making."

"That's a nice thing to say, and you an engaged man of less than four-and-twenty hours' standing. There's a taximeter-stop him! Pay the driver of this silly old cab and let's get into the taxi."

The transfer was effected, the driver of the "silly old cab" expressing himself on the subject with some frankness. When they were in the taxi the lady set forth the idea which had been in her mind.

"I don't want to go on to the horrid lawns and see the stupid people in their ugly dresses; I can't take you to aunt's house, because, as you know, she's away, and I don't want the servants to talk; I don't want to lunch at either of the hotels, because I hate them all; I do want to go where we can be all by ourselves, so I suggest the Devil's Dyke. This taxi will romp up; it's the most vulgar place I know, so we go where we please and do as we choose-everybody does up there."

So it was the Devil's Dyke. The taxi did "romp up." They had lunch at the hotel, and afterwards went out on to the downs, Rodney carrying a rug which he had borrowed from the hotel over his arm. They had not to go far over the slopes before they had left the few people who were up there behind, and were as much alone as if they had the world to themselves. Rodney spread the rug on the grass at the bottom of one of those little hollows shaped like cups which are to be found thereabouts by those who seek. On it they reclined; the gentleman lit a cigar, the lady a cigarette. They were as much at home with each other as either could desire. Their conversation was frankness itself.

"When I feel like liking it," observed the lady, "this is just the sort of thing I do like. You're engaged, and I'm engaged, so we ought to be nice to each other. Do you mind my kissing you?"

"Not a bit."

She leaned over and kissed him on the lips, he removing his cigar to enable her to do it. Then she blew her cigarette smoke in his face and laughed. He said nothing; he was thinking that there

was a good deal to be said for being on such terms with three nice girls. After all, there might be something in the Mohammedan's idea of paradise. She was silent for a moment; then inquired:

"Why did you ask Stella after all? Because you knew she'd like you to?"

He considered his reply.

"No; not altogether. Of course, at the beginning I never meant to, then all of a sudden I felt as if I had to. I had a sort of feeling that it would be such fun."

"And was it fun?"

"Distinctly; I wouldn't mind going through it all over again."

"Wouldn't you? Now you'll have to marry her."

"Shall I?"

"Don't you want to marry her?"

"I do not."

"That's unfortunate, because you certainly will have to."

"We'll see."

"Stella'll see-or, rather, her family will. If it were any other but the Austin family I should have said that a person of your eel-like slipperiness-"

"Thank you."

"Might have wriggled away; but if you wriggle away it will be out of the frying-pan into the fire. For ever so long the family has been expecting you to ask Stella to marry you; you've fostered the expectation, and now that you have asked her, if you try to sneak out of your engagement, Mr. Austin will make things so

uncomfortable that you'll find it easier to make Stella Mrs. E."

"And do you want to marry Tom?"

"I do not. All the same, I expect I shall."

"Why? If you don't want to?"

Miss Carmichael sent a cloud of smoke up into the air.

"A girl's position is so different from a man's. I must marry someone, and, so far as I can see, it may as well be Tom."

"Why must you marry someone?"

"Don't be absurd! Can you conceive me as a spinster? Rather than be an old maid I'd-marry you; I can't say anything stronger."

"You've a friendly way of paying compliments."

"My dear young fellow; as a-chum, when I'm in the mood, you're ripping, simply ripping; but as a husband-good Lord, deliver us! If Stella understood you only a quarter as well as I do she'd be only too glad to let you go the very first moment you showed the faintest inclination to bolt."

class="normal""And, pray, what sort of wife do you think you'll make?"

Again a pause, while more cigarette smoke went into the air.

"Depends on the man."

"I presume to what extent you can fool him."

"I can imagine a man to whom I would be all that a wife could be, the whole happiness of his whole life."

"I can't."

"That's because you don't understand me as well as I do you."

"What sort of wife do you think that you'll make Tom?"

"Oh, he'll be content."

"Poor devil!"

"I'm not so sure; it's a good thing to be content. Each time I put my arms about his neck he'll forgive me everything."

"So far as I gather, the difference between me as a husband and you as a wife consists in this: that while I'm going to be found out, you're not. I don't see why you should be so sure of the immunity you refuse to me."

"I admit that in this world one never can be sure of anything. I quite credit you with as much capacity to throw dust in a woman's eyes as I have to throw dust in a man's. Still, there is a difference between us of which I'm conscious, though just now I'm too lazy to attempt an exact definition. I really can't see why you object to Stella; she'll make you a good wife."

"Hang your good wives!"

"My child! Do you want a bad one? You should have no difficulty in being suited."

"Is a sinner likely to be happy if mated to a saint?"

"Would he be happier if mated to another sinner? In that case you might do well to marry me-which I doubt."

"I don't. I'm disposed to think that ours would be an ideal union."

"I wonder."

"Neither would expect the other to be perfect; each would allow the other a wider range of liberty for purely selfish reasons."

"I say, wouldn't it be rather a joke if you were to throw over Stella and I were to throw over Tom and we were to marry each other?"

"I'd do it like a shot if it weren't for one drawback-that we both of us are penniless."

"That is a nuisance, since we are both of us so fond of what money stands for. If you had five thousand a year perhaps I might marry you after all."

"I'm sure you would."

"Pray why are you sure? You've a conceit!"

"I am sure."

"If-I say if-I were to marry you, would you give me a good time?"

"The very best-a time after your own heart."

"Would you? Lots of frocks?"

"All the frocks your soul desired."

"Everything I wanted?"

"That's a tall order. I'm only human."

"That certainly is true. I shouldn't be surprised if you were more generous even than Tom."

"I don't call that sort of thing generosity. A man gives things to a woman he cares for because he has a lively sense of favours to come."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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