

Hope Anthony

The Great Miss Driver



Anthony Hope
The Great Miss Driver

«Public Domain»

Hope A.

The Great Miss Driver / A. Hope — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	23
CHAPTER V	29
CHAPTER VI	35
CHAPTER VII	42
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Hope Anthony

The Great Miss Driver

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS SHE LIKE?

"Perhaps you won't believe me," said I, "but till yesterday I never so much as heard of her existence."

"I've not the least difficulty in believing you. That was old Nick's way. It wasn't your business – was it? – so he didn't talk to you about it. On the other hand, when a thing was your business – that's to say, when he wanted your services – he told you all about it. But I believe I'm the only person he did tell. I'm sure he didn't tell a soul down in Catsford. Finely put about they'll be!"

Mr. Cartmell, of Fisher, Son, & Cartmell (he was the only surviving representative of the firm), broke off to hide a portion of his round red face in a silver tankard; Loft, the butler, had brought it to him on his arrival without express orders given; I had often seen the same vessel going into Mr. Driver's study on the occasion of the lawyer's calls.

He set the tankard – much lightened it must have been – on the mantelpiece and walked to the window, taking a pull at his cigar. We were in my room – my "office" it was generally called in the household. He stood looking out, talking to me half over his shoulder.

"A man's mind turns back at times like these. I remember him hard on forty years ago. I was a lad then, just gone into the business. Mr. Fisher was alive – not the one you remember – not poor Nat – but the old gentleman. Nat was the junior, and I was in the last year of my articles. Well, Nick Driver came to the old gentleman one morning and asked him to act for him – said he thought he was big enough by now. The old gentleman didn't want to, but poor Nat had an eye for a man and saw that Driver meant to get on. So they took him, and we've acted for him ever since. It wasn't many years before he – " Cartmell paused a moment, laying the finger-tips of his right hand against the finger-tips of his left, and straightening his arms from the elbow like a swimmer – "before he began to drive his wedge into the county."

The good man was fairly launched on his subject; much of it was new to me, in detail if not in broad outline, and I listened with interest. Besides, there was nothing else to do until the time came to start. But the story will bear a little summarizing, like a great many other stories; Cartmell was too fond of anecdotes. Thus summarized then:

Nicholas Driver began life as a tanner in Catsford. He was thrifty and saved money. With the money he bought land and built some villas; with the rent of the villas – more land. He had faith in the development of Catsford. He got early news of the coming of the railway; he pledged every house and every inch of land – and bought more land. So the process went on – detailed by Mr. Cartmell, indicated here. Nicholas Driver became moderately rich – and, by the way, his Catsford property had never ceased to rise in value and was rising still. Then, as it seemed (even Mr. Cartmell spoke conjecturally), an era of speculation followed – first in England, then in America. "That," Cartmell interjected, "was when he picked up this girl's mother, not that she was American, but he met her about that time." He must have speculated largely and successfully, or he could not have made all that money – so stood the case. The money made, the process of "driving his wedge into the county" began. "The county" must, here and henceforward, be carefully distinguished from "the town." Geographical contiguity does not bridge a social chasm.

First he bought Hatcham Ford, a small but beautiful Jacobean house lying on the banks of the river, some mile and a half out of Catsford at that time, now caught in the lengthening fringe of the

town. While in residence there, he spread his territory to the north and west, acquiring all the outlying farms which the Lord Fillingford of the day was free to sell; then, too, he made his first audacious bid for Fillingford Manor itself – the first of many, it appeared. Though the later no longer seemed audacious, all had been fruitless; Lord Fillingford could not sell without his son's consent, and that was withheld. The family struggled on in perpetual financial straits, hating Nicholas Driver, but envying him his money, never coming to an open rupture with him for fear of his power or apprehension of its own necessities; never sparing a sneer or a secret thrust when either was safe. For his part, baffled in that quarter, he turned to the east and approached Mr. Dormer of Breysgate Priory. It was a beautiful place. Down by the lake lay the old Cistercian monastery; the original building was in ruins, but a small house had been built on in the days of Elizabeth, and this was still habitable. High on the hill stood the big, solidly handsome, Georgian mansion, erected by the Dormer of the day when the estate came into the hands of the family. From the hilltop the park rolled out and out in undulating curves of rich grass-land and spreading woods. To Nicholas Driver's joy and surprise – he had anticipated another struggle and feared another rebuff – Mr. Dormer was ready to sell – for a price. He was elderly, his wife middle-aged, his only heir a cousin toward whom he was indifferent and who, though heir of entail to the property, would be unable to keep it up, unless his predecessor left him money for the purpose. In these circumstances matters were soon arranged. The cousin was bought off, his consent given, and the Dormers retired to a smaller place, properly the dower house – Hingston Hall, situated fifteen miles from Catsford. Behold Nicholas Driver a country gentleman on a distinctly large scale!

"And with how much ready money to his name besides you'll get some idea about when the will is proved," Mr. Cartmell ended impressively.

His impressiveness impressed me; I do not know why I should be ashamed to confess it. A great deal of anything impresses ordinary people; a great deal of hill is a mountain, a great deal of water is an ocean, a great deal of brain is a genius; and so on. Similarly, a great deal of money has its grandeur – for ordinary people.

"It might be a million and a half – a million and a half sovereigns, Austin! – and it's growing every night while you sleep! And now – he's dead!"

"You do die just the same – that's the worst of it."

"And not an old man either!"

"Sixty-three!"

"Tut – I shall be that myself in three years – and you can't tire me yet!"

"Perhaps making millions and driving wedges is – rather exhausting, Cartmell. You split the tree; don't you blunt the wedge in time, too?"

"The end came easy, did it?"

"Oh, yes, in his sleep. So the nurse tells me. I wasn't there myself."

"I'm glad it was easy. After all, he was a very old friend of mine – and a very valuable client. Let's see, how long have you been with him?"

"Four years."

"Going to stay?"

I rose and began to brush my hat. "If you come to that," said I, "are you going to stay either, Cartmell? I gather that she can do as she pleases about that?"

"Every rod of ground and every farthing of money – bating decent charities! It's a great position."

"It's a very unexplored one so far as we're concerned," I made bold to remark.

"Have you seen him since – since the end, Austin?"

"Yes. Would you like to?"

"No, I shouldn't," he answered bluntly. "Perhaps it's brutal. I know it's cowardly. But I don't like death."

"Nonsense! You make half your income out of it. I say, I suppose we might as well start?"

"Yes," he assented absently. "I wonder how she's turned out!"

I looked at him with quickened interest. "Turned out? That sounds almost as if you'd seen her."

"I have seen her. Come along. I'll tell you about it as we drive down."

We traversed the long corridor which leads from my office to the hall. Loft was waiting for us, with an attendant footman. Loft addressed me in a muffled voice; his demeanor might always be relied on for perfection – he would not once unmuffle his voice till his master was buried.

"The landau is waiting, sir. The omnibus for Miss Driver's maid and the luggage has gone on." Wonderful man! He spoke of "Miss Driver" as if she had lived for years in the house.

Cartmell gave him a queer look and emitted a low chuckle as we got into the landau, behind the big grays. Mr. Driver always drove grays, and he liked them big, so that he could rattle up the hill to his house.

"Maid! Luggage!" muttered Cartmell. "The bus'll hold 'em, I think, with a bit to spare! By his orders I sent her twenty pounds on Tuesday; that's all she's had as yet. I only had time to telegraph about – the rest."

"Interesting wire to get! But about your seeing her, Cartmell?"

In honor of the occasion Cartmell, like myself, had put on a black frock coat and a silk hat, properly equipped with a mourning band of respectful width. But he wore the coat with a jaunty air, and the hat slightly but effectively cocked on one side, so that the quiet yet ingrained horsiness of his aspect suffered little from the unwonted attire. The confidential wink with which he now turned his plump rubicund face toward me preserved his general harmony. With the mournful atmosphere of Breysgate Priory, however, I could not help feeling that my own lank jaws and more precisely poised head-gear consorted better.

"You can hold your tongue, Austin?"

"A very shrewd man has paid me four hundred a year for four years past on that understanding."

"Then what happened at the Smalls, at Cheltenham?"

"Isn't that beginning the story at the wrong end?" I asked.

"That was where she was" – he searched for a word – "where she was planted. She lived at three or four different places altogether, you know."

"And the mother?"

"Mother died – vanished anyhow – early in the proceedings. Well, word came of trouble at Cheltenham. Small, though of my own profession, was an ass. He wrote a bleating letter – yes, he was more like a sheep, really – to old Nick. Nick told me I must go and put it to rights. So I went."

"Why didn't he go himself?"

"I think," said Cartmell cautiously, "that he had some kind of a feeling against seeing the girl. Really that's the only thing that accounts for his behavior all through."

"Did he never see her?"

"Never – since she was quite a child. So he told me. But let me finish the story – if you want to hear it. Being ordered, I went. They lived in a beastly villa and were, to speak generally, a disgrace to humanity by their utter flabbiness. But there was a flashy sort of a gentleman, by the name of Powers." He stopped and looked at me for a minute. "A married flashy gentleman named Nelson Powers. She was sixteen – and she wrote to Powers. A good many letters she'd written to Powers. Small was such a fool that Powers guessed there was money in it. And she, of course, had never thought of a Mrs. Powers. How should she? Sixteen and –"

"Hopelessly innocent?"

"I really think so," he answered with an air, rather odd, of advancing a paradox. "She let him worm out of her all that she knew about her father – which was that he paid the bills for her and that Small had told her that he was rich. She didn't know where he lived, but Powers got that out of Small without much trouble, and then it was blackmail on Mr. Driver, of course."

"Did you get at Powers? Had to pay him something, I suppose?"

"I got at Mrs. Powers – and paid her. Much better! We had the letters in twenty-four hours. Powers really repented that time, I think! But I had orders to take her away from the Smalls. The same man never failed Nick Driver twice! I sent her under escort to Dawlish – at least near there – to a clergyman's family, where she's been ever since. But it can't be denied that she left Cheltenham rather – well, rather under a cloud. If you ask me what I think about it – "

I had been growing interested – yet not interested in precisely the point about which Mr. Cartmell conjectured that I might be about to inquire.

"Did she say anything about it herself?" I interrupted.

He stroked his chin. "She said rather a curious thing – she was only sixteen, you know. She said that we might have given her credit for being able to take just a little care of herself."

"That sounds like underrating your diplomacy, Cartmell."

"I thought myself that it reflected on the bill I proposed to send in! Funny, wasn't it? From a chit like that!"

"What did you say?"

"Asked her if she'd like a foot-warmer for the journey to Dawlish."

"Capital! You were about to tell me what you thought about it?"

"The folly of a young ignorant girl, no doubt. Powers was an insinuating rascal – and a girl doesn't know at that age the difference between a gentleman and a cad. He moved too soon, though. We were in lots of time to prevent real mischief – and Mrs. Powers came up to the scratch!" He drummed his fingers on the window of the landau, looking thoughtful and, as it seemed to me, retrospectively puzzled.

"And did all go smoothly with the clergyman's family?"

"She's been there ever since. I've heard of no trouble. The governess's reports of her were excellent, I remember Mr. Driver telling me once."

"Well then, we can forget all about Powers."

"Yes, yes," said Cartmell, drumming his fingers still.

"And what was she like?"

Cartmell looked at me, a smile slowly breaking across his broad face. "Here's the station. Suppose you see for yourself," he suggested.

We had ten minutes to wait before Miss Driver's train was due – we had been careful to run no risk of not being on the spot to receive her. Cartmell was at no loss to employ the time. I left him plunging into an animated discussion of the points of a handsome cob which stood outside the station: on the handsome cob's back was a boy, no less handsome, fresh of color and yellow-haired. I knew him to be young Lord Lacey, heir to the Fillingford earldom, but I had at that time no acquaintance with him, and passed on into the station, where I paced up and down among a crowd of loiterers and hasteners – for Catsford was by now a bustling center whence and whither men went and came at all hours of the day and most hours of the night. Driver had foreseen that this would come about! It had come about; he had grown rich; he lay dead. It went on happening still, and thereby adding to the piles of gold which he could no longer handle.

Instead of indulging in these trite reflections – to be excused only by the equal triteness of death, which tends to evoke them – I should have done well to consider my own position. A man bred for a parson but, for reasons of his own, averse from adopting the sacred calling, is commonly not too well fitted for other avocations – unless perhaps he would be a schoolmaster, and my taste did not lie that way. In default of private means, an easy berth at four hundred pounds a year may well seem a godsend. It had assumed some such celestial guise to me when, on the casual introduction of my uncle one day in London, Mr. Driver had offered it to me. As his private secretary, I drew the aforementioned very liberal salary, I had my "office" in the big house on the hill, I dwelt in the Old Priory (that is to say, in the little dwelling house built on to the ruinous remains of the ancient

foundation), I was seldom asked for more than three hours' work a day, I had a horse to ride, and plenty of leisure for the books I loved. It would be very unfortunate to have to give up all that. Verily the question "What is she like?" had a practical, an economic, importance for me which raised it far above the sphere of mere curiosity or the nonsense of irrelevant romance. Was she a sensible young woman who would know a good secretary when she saw one? Or, on the other hand, was she not? A secretary of some sort she would certainly require.

Nay, perhaps, she wouldn't. The one utterance of hers which had been, so far, credibly reported to my ears was to the effect that she could take care – just a little care – of herself. This at sixteen! This on the top of circumstances which at first sight indicated that she had taken particularly bad care of herself! Letters to a man like Powers! My imagination, forsaking my own position and prospects, constructed a confident picture of Powers, proceeded to sketch Mrs. Powers – strong lights here! – and to outline the family of the Smalls of Cheltenham. It ended by rejoicing that she had been removed from the influence of Powers and the environment of the Smalls of Cheltenham. Because, look at the matter how one might or could, there was no denying that it was the sort of incident which might just as well – or even better – not have happened at all. At the best, it was not altogether pleasant. Surely that was the truth – and not merely the abortive parson talking again? Well, even the abortive parson was sometimes right.

Cartmell clapped me on the shoulder. The handsome boy had, it appeared, departed, after receiving from an obsequious porter the copy of *Country Life*, in quest of which he had ridden to the station from Fillingford Manor.

"Here comes the train! I wonder if I shall know her again!"

Two minutes later, that observation of Cartmell's seemed to me plainly foolish. A man might like her or dislike her, trust her or not trust her – oh, away with these fatal alternatives, antitheses, or whatever they are! They confine judgment, and often falsify it. He might do all these things at once – and I fancied that she might welcome his perplexity. He would not be very likely to forget her – nor she to be pleased if he did.

That was only a first impression of her, as she got out of the train.

CHAPTER II

MAKING AMENDS

Cartmell's talk, as we drove back, was calculated to give her an almost overwhelming idea of her possessions and (if her temperament set that way) of her responsibilities. Big commercial buildings, blocks of shops, whole streets of small houses, drew from the lawyer a point of the finger and a brief, "That's yours" – or sometimes he would tell how her father had bought, how built, and how profited by the venture. Every time she would turn her head to look where his finger pointed, and nod slightly, gravely, composedly. She seemed to be reserving her opinion of it all. The only time she spoke was when we were emerging from the town and he showed her Hatcham Ford, saying, as usual, "That's yours," but adding that it was let furnished to Mr. Leonard Octon, who was abroad just now. Then her nod of understanding was accompanied by a low murmur, "It's very pretty."

She said nothing when we drove into the park of Breysgate Priory itself: yet I saw her eyes fixed intently on the great house on the hill, which comes into view directly the drive is entered, and certainly looks imposing enough. After the first formal greeting she did not speak to me, nor I to her, until her reception at the house was over and we had sat down to luncheon. But she had smiled at me once – when we were still standing by the door, on the terrace at the top of the steps, and Cartmell was showing her what he called "the lie of the land." The omnibus with its pair of big horses and its pair of big men came trotting up the hill, and on its big roof lay one small battered trunk. Loft was waiting to give orders to his footmen for the disposal of her luggage: when he saw the solitary and diminutive article, he advanced and, with pronounced graciousness, received it from the omnibus himself. She watched, and then gave me the smile that I have mentioned; evidently Loft – or Loft in conjunction with that humble box – appealed to her sense of humor.

Cartmell was soon at his ease with her: he called her "My dear" twice before we got to the sweets. The second time he apologized for taking the liberty – on the first occasion, I suppose, the words slipped out unnoticed by himself.

"But I like it," she said. "My father spoke so warmly about you in his letter."

Cartmell looked at me for a moment; we neither of us knew of a letter.

"He told me never to part with Mr. Cartmell because an honest lawyer was worth his weight in gold."

"I ride fourteen-seven," said Cartmell with a chuckle.

"And he said something about you, too," she added, looking at me, "but perhaps I'd better not repeat that."

"Shall I try to guess it?" I asked. "Did he say I was a scholar?"

"Yes."

"And a gentleman?"

"Yes."

"But confoundedly conceited?"

"No – well, not quite. Something like it, Mr. Austin. How did you know?"

"It's what he use to say to me himself three times a week?"

Her face had lit up in merriment during this little talk, but now she grew thoughtful again. I might well have looked thoughtful, too; so far as had appeared at present, there was no injunction against parting with me – no worth-his-weight-in-gold appraisalment of the secretary!

"I expect he liked the scholar-and-gentleman part," she reflected. "He wasn't at all a scholar himself, I suppose?"

"He'd had no time for that," said Cartmell.

"Nor a gentleman?"

It was an embarrassing question – from a daughter about her father – addressed to Cartmell who owed him much and to me who had eaten his bread. Besides – he was lying there in his room upstairs. Cartmell faced the difficulty with simple directness.

"He wasn't polished in manner; when he was opposed or got angry, he was rough. But he was honest and straight, upright and just, kind and – "

"Kind?" she interrupted, a note of indignation plain to hear in her voice. "Not to me!"

That was awkward again!

"My dear Miss Driver, for what may have been amiss he's made you the best amends he could." He waved his arm as though to take in all the great house in which we sat. "Handsome amends!"

"Yes," she assented – but her assent did not sound very hearty.

A long silence followed – an uncomfortable silence. She was looking toward the window, and I could watch her face unperceived. From our first meeting I had been haunted by a sense of having seen her before, but I soon convinced myself that this was a delusion. I had not seen her, nor anyone like her (she was not at all like her father), in the flesh, but I had seen pictures that were like her. Not modern pictures, but sixteenth- or seventeenth-century portraits. Her hair was brown with ruddy tips, her brows not arched but very straight, her nose fine-cut and high, her mouth not large but her lips very red. Her chin was rather long, and her face wore the smooth, almost waxy, pallor which the pictures I was reminded of are apt to exhibit. Her eyes were so pronounced and bright a hazel that, seeing them on a canvas, one might have suspected the painter of taking a liberty with fact for the sake of his composition.

Cartmell broke the silence. "Since he wrote you a letter, may I venture to ask – ?" He stopped and glanced at me. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind giving us five minutes to ourselves, Austin?"

I thought the request not unnatural, and rose promptly from my chair. But we had reckoned without our host – our new host.

"Why do you tell him to go?" she demanded of Cartmell with a sudden sharpness. "I don't ask him to go. I don't want him to go. Sit down, please, Mr. Austin."

Cartmell had his two elbows on the table; he bit his thumb as he glanced up at her from under raised brows. He was not often called to book so sharply as that. I thought that she would make apology, but she made none. As I obediently – and, I fear, hastily – sat down again, she took a letter from a little bag which hung at her waist.

"What did you want to ask?" she said to Cartmell in a tone which was smooth but by no means overconciliatory.

Cartmell's manner said "Have it if you want it!" as he inquired bluntly, "Does your father say anything about your mother?"

She took the letter from its envelope and unfolded it. "About my mother he says this: 'It is necessary for me to say a few words about your mother. Mr. Cartmell is in possession of all proofs necessary to establish your position as my daughter, and there is no need for you to trouble your head about that, as not the smallest difficulty can arise. The personal aspect of the case is that on which I must touch. Three years after your birth your mother left me under circumstances which made it impossible for me to have any further communication with her. She went to Australia, and died five years later in Melbourne from an attack of typhoid fever. I caused constant inquiry to be made as to her position and took measures to secure that she should suffer no hardship. The circumstances to which I have referred made it imperative that I should remove you from her charge. As she consented to give up all claim on you, I did not go to the trouble of obtaining a divorce – which she did not desire either, as matters had been kept quiet. You will ask, and with reason, why I did not bring you up myself, and why I have delayed publicly acknowledging you as my daughter till the hour of my death. I can give no reason good to the world. I can give none good to my own conscience, unless it is a good one to say that a man is what God made him and that there are some things impossible to some men. It will seem a hard saying, but I could not endure to have you with me. I know myself,

and I can only assure you that, if your childhood has not been a very happy one as it is, it would have been no happier if spent under my roof. Now we have been only strangers – you would have been worse than a stranger then."

Miss Driver, who had read in a low but level and composed voice, paused here for a moment – perhaps in doubt whether to read more. Then she went on: "With that much excuse – for I have none other – I must now, my daughter, say good-by, for I am dying. Though of my own choice I have not seen you since your infancy. I have not been without thought for you. I hesitated long before throwing on your shoulders all the burden which I have created for my own and carried on them. But in the end nature has seemed to say to me – and to speak more strongly as I grow weaker – that you are the person to whom it should belong and that, if things go wrong, it will be nature's fault, not mine. Don't spend more than two-thirds of your income – the other third should go back to work and bring in more. Give handsomely when you give, but don't be always dribbling out small sums; they mount up against you without aiding the recipients. Go to church unless you really dislike it. Be independent, but not eccentric. You have a great position; make it greater. Be a power in your world. About love and marriage, remember always that being sensible in general matters is no guarantee that you will act sensibly there. So be doubly on your guard. Suspect and fear marriage, even while you seek the best alliance you can find. Be you man or woman, by marriage you give another a power over you. Suspect it – suspect your lover – suspect yourself. You need fear no man except the man to whom you have given yourself. With earnest wishes for your welfare, I remain your affectionate father – Nicholas Driver."

During the reading Cartmell's face had been disturbed and sad; once or twice he fidgeted restively in his chair. I had listened intently, seeming again to hear the measured full voice, the hard clean-cut counsels, to which I had listened almost daily for the last four years. Fine sense! And a heart somewhere? I was inclined to answer yes – but how deep it lay, and what a lot of digging to get there! He had never given his daughter one chance of so much as putting her hand to the spade.

She tucked the letter away in her little bag; she was smiling again by now. I had smiled myself – my memories being so acutely touched; but she must have smiled for discernment, not for memory.

"Now I think I should like to go and see him."

Cartmell excused himself, as I knew he would.

"I've never seen him, that I can remember, you know," she said.

The meeting of the Catsford Corporation (the town had become a borough ten years before – largely owing to Mr. Driver's efforts) could not wait. But Cartmell had one thing to say before he went; it was not on business, nor arising out of the letter; he was to have a full business discussion with her on the morrow. He took her hand in both of his and pressed it – forgetful apparently of her sharp rebuke.

"You can't live in this great house all alone," he said. "I wonder your father said nothing about that!"

"Oh, that's all right. Chat's coming in a week. She'd have come with me, but Mrs. Simpson wouldn't let her go till a new governess could be got. Four girls, you see, and Mrs. Simpson thinks she's an invalid. Besides, Chat wouldn't come without a new black silk dress. So I had to give her most of that money – and she'll be here in a week – and I haven't got a new dress."

I noticed that her black dress was far from new. It was, in fact, rather rusty. Her black straw hat, however, appeared to be new. It was a large spreading sort of hat.

"Yes, Mr. Austin, the hat's new," she remarked.

The girl seemed to have a knack of noticing where one's eyes happened to be.

"I can give you lots of money," Cartmell assured her. "And – er – 'Chat' was governess at the Simpsons', was she?"

"Yes, she's been there for years, but she's very fond of me, and agreed to come and be my companion. She taught me all I know. I'm sure you'll like Chat."

"You can only try her," said he, rather doubtfully. I think that he would have preferred, Miss Driver, to cut loose from the old days altogether. "But, you know, we can't call her just 'Chat.' It must be short for something?"

"Short for Chatters – Miss Chatters. And she says Chatters is really – or was really – Charteris. That's pronounced Charters, isn't it?" She addressed the last question to me, and I said that I believed she was right. "I shall get on very well by myself till she comes." She questioned me again. "Do you live in the house?"

"No, I live down at the Old Priory. But I have my office in the house."

"Oh, yes. Now, if Mr. Cartmell must go, will you take me up?"

She stopped a moment, though, to look at the pictures – old Mr. Driver had bought some good ones – and so gave me one word with Cartmell.

"Depend upon it," he whispered. "Chat's a fool. People who keep telling you their names ought to be spelt like better names, when they aren't, are always fools. Why don't they spell 'em that way, or else let it alone?"

There seemed to be a good deal in that.

Cartmell gone, we went together up the broad staircase which sprang from the center of the hall. As we passed a chair, she took off her hat and flung it down. The rich masses old brown hair, coiled about her head, caught the sun of a bright spring afternoon; she ran swiftly and lightly up the stairs. "Nice, soft, thick, carpet!" she remarked. I began to perceive that she would enjoy the incidental luxuries of her new position – and that she did enjoy the one great luxury – life. I fancied that she enjoyed it enormously.

We trod another "nice, soft, thick, carpet" for the length of a long passage and came to his door. I opened it, let her pass in, and was about to close it after her. But as we reached his room, a sudden shadow of trouble or of fear had fallen upon her – grief it could hardly be.

"No," she said. "Come in, too. Remember – he's a stranger."

To be in the room with the dead seems to be itself a partaking of death; it is at least, for a moment, a suspension of life. Yet the still welcome is not unfriendly.

She walked toward the bed alone, but in an instant beckoned to me to follow her. She bent down and moved the covering. His broad strong face looked resolute and brave as ever. It looked – to speak truth – as hard as ever also.

Her eyes were set on him; suddenly she caught hold of my hand; "Don't go." I pressed her hand, for I heard her breathing quickly. I just caught her next words: "He might have given me a chance!"

"I believe he was sorry about that at the end." She shook her head. "He's given you a big chance now."

She nodded, but absently. "How strange to – to be his doing – and he there! And then – all this!" She let go my hand, took a step forward, bent and kissed his brow quickly. "How cold!" she murmured and grasped my hand tightly again. To my fancy she seemed surprised – and relieved – that the sleeper did not stir.

We were – as I say – out of the world; we were just two creatures, living for a little while, by the side of a third who lived no more.

"You shouldn't kiss him unless you forgive," I said.

She kissed him again and drew the sheet over his face.

"He must have been a fine man. I forgive. Come, let's go."

Outside, the world was with us – and I wondering whether that was what I had really said.

At least she seemed to bear me no ill-will. "Are you free to come for a walk?" she asked. "I should like some fresh air."

"Would you like to see the gardens?"

"No – that means pottering. Take me for a good spin."

By a happy thought I remembered Tor Hill and took her there. The hill lies at the extremity of the Priory park, looking down on the road which separates our dominions from the Fillingford country; beyond the road the Manor itself can be seen by glimpses through the woods which surround it. Catsford lies in the valley to the left; away to the right, but not in sight, lay Oxley Lodge, and Overington Grange, the seat of Sir John Aspenick. Here she could take a bird's-eye view of her position and that of her nearest neighbors.

"I'm glad to see Fillingford," she remarked. "My father mentioned it – in the earlier part of that letter. He said that he had wanted to buy it, but Lord Fillingford couldn't or wouldn't sell."

"His son's consent was necessary – that's the present man – and he wouldn't give it. Indeed the story runs that he hated Mr. Driver for trying to buy."

She seemed to take as careful a view of Fillingford Manor as the distance and the trees allowed.

"My father seems to have been sorry he couldn't buy it. He seemed to think it might still be sold."

"Surely you've got enough! And, for my part, I should much prefer the Priory. It's muggy down there in the valley – though I believe it's a very fine house."

"You've not been there?"

"No. We of the Priory have had small dealings with Fillingford lately. We've kept up the forms of civility – but it's been very distant. Underneath, there's been a kind of silent feud – well, more or less silent; but I daresay that'll be all over now."

"My father wrote 'Possibly you in your way may succeed better than I in mine.'"

"Fillingford wouldn't sell. He's hard up, but he can get along. And there's always the chance of a rich marriage for his son – or even for himself."

I really spoke without any thought of a personal reference, but I perceived, directly afterward, that I might well seem to have made one; a marriage with Miss Driver would be undoubtedly rich. She gave no sign, however, of taking my remark in that sense, unless any inference can be drawn from her saying, "Oh, he's a widower?"

"He's a widower of forty, or a year or two more – and he's got a son of about seventeen – a very good-looking lad. His sister, Lady Sarah Lacey, keeps house for him, and according to local gossip is a bit of a shrew."

She began to laugh as she said with a mock sigh, "One's too old for me, and the other's too young – they must look somewhere else, I'm afraid! And then – how should I get on with the shrew? I'm rather a shrew myself – at least I've been told so."

"You'd better let them alone," I counseled her with a smile.

"Oh, no, I shan't do that," she rejoined with a decisiveness which I began to recognize as an occasional feature of her speech. "It'll be more amusing to see what they're like – presently. And what of the Dormers? My father mentioned them."

"A very nice old couple – but I fear he's failing."

A slight grimace dismissed the Dormers as not holding much interest for her.

"Oh, you won't want for neighbors. There are plenty of them, and they'll all be tremendously excited about you and will flock to call as soon as you can receive them."

"It must seem funny to them. I suppose they'd never heard of me?"

"I don't believe any of them had. Your father had no intimates, unless Mr. Cartmell can be called one. Besides – well, I'd never heard of you myself!"

"And here we are old friends!" she said graciously.

"That's very kind – but you mustn't think yourself bound to take over the secretary with the rest of the furniture."

She looked steadily in my face for several seconds, seeming to size me up – if I may be allowed the expression. Then she smiled – not gayly, yet again by no means sadly. It was the smile which I came to call later her mystery smile; and, as a general rule, it meant – in plain language – mischief. Of

course, on this first day I did not attach these associations to it. It struck me as merely rather curious; as a man talks to himself, so she seemed to smile to herself, forgetting her interlocutor.

"Oh, well – stay and see how you like me," she said.

CHAPTER III

ON THE USE OF SCRAPES

We were settling down. It was a week since the funeral. The borough and the neighborhood had survived their first stupefaction at the apparition of Miss Driver; the local journals had achieved their articles, organs of wider circulation and greater dignity their paragraphs; the charities which received legacies had given thanks, those which did not were turning resigned but hopeful eyes to the future. The undertaker sent in his bill, and the Town Council discussed the project of a Driver Memorial Hall – with a hardly disguised anticipation of the quarter from which the bulk of the money was to come.

There was really not much more to do till Miss Driver's first days of mourning were over, and the fascinating speculations as to her personal gifts and qualities could look to find some satisfaction from her appearances on public and private occasions. Only Cartmell still was – and would be for weeks – busy on the labors attendant on the transfer of a great estate, and the rearrangements necessitated by the loss of an able and experienced man – a masterly worker – and the succession of a girl ignorant of business. For the rest we were, as I say, settling down. Even Cartmell's activity caused us at Breysgate no sense of bustle, for it took him to London the day after the funeral and kept him there for above a fortnight.

When I say that "we" were settling down I mean the trio formed by Miss Driver, myself – and Miss Emily Chatters. It is my duty to introduce Miss Chatters with proper formality, and I will introduce her presently – but let us take people in their order. Miss Driver had inspected her property (except the wine cellar which, to Loft's dismay, she declined to enter); she had chosen her own set of rooms and given orders for them to be entirely refurnished; she had announced her intention – and small blame to her – of extending the refurnishing process to all the sitting-rooms – at least to the sitting-rooms; she had chosen her own hack from the stables – and I have no doubt that she had done what was immediately requisite as regards her wardrobe. At any rate, an air of achievement dwelt about her. For my part I performed my duties, and began to find that I had less work to do – and more time occupied in doing it. In Mr. Driver's day we worked as few men except Mr. Driver understood work from ten to one; then, as a rule, I was free. Under the new *régime* we worked at a gentler pressure – a much gentler pressure – for the same morning hours; but I stayed to lunch always, I came back to tea frequently, and I returned to dinner two or three evenings in the week. My duties as secretary grew lighter, but I seemed to be assuming the functions of a companion. I may do myself the incidental justice of saying that I rather resented this tendency to transform my office; but it was not easy to resist. She was paying for my whole time as her father had paid for it; it was her right, within wide limits, to say to what uses it should be put. Or – I could go. The liberty – perhaps it is rather theoretical – of "chucking my job" remained to me as to every free-born Englishman – who sees his way to getting another whereby to live. Not that I wished to surrender mine; I was interested and – to tell the truth – I grew, within our jurisdiction, important. She approached the assumption of her power cautiously, and at first would return almost any answer to almost any letter at my suggestion. I did not expect this to last, but so it was for the moment. For instance it was I, in ultimate reality, who offered that ten thousand pounds toward the Memorial Hall. I had a great difficulty in fixing the proper figure. If I may judge from the language employed by the Mayor (Councillor Bindlecombe) in public, I exceeded all possible anticipations of munificence; in private, I am told, he confessed to having entertained a hope of fifteen thousand. I imagine that my figure was not, on a balancing of considerations, far wide of the mark. Cartmell thought five thousand would have served – but old Cartmell was a screw with other people's money. I remembered "Give handsomely when you give." So, I think, did Jenny Driver. All the same, Bindlecombe did, in my opinion, open his mouth a bit too wide.

Miss Chatters came two days after the funeral – in the new black silk dress: it rustled powerfully. She was tall, had pale-brown hair with a broad parting in the middle, a very long inquiring nose, faded blue eyes, an absolutely flat chin, and – inconceivable gentility. If we others were settling she settled far quicker. She took the bedroom next to Jenny Driver's; she annexed a small sitting-room for her own – next but one to Jenny Driver's; she had a glass of the best port every day at eleven. ("She came down to the cellar and chose the bin herself, sir," Loft informed me with a wry smile of grudge for his dearest possessions.) Yet all these acts of proprietorship – for they pretty nearly came to that – were performed with a meekness, a deprecation, a ladylikeness (I can find no other word) that made opposition seem unkind and criticism ungenerous. It was only "Poor Chat!" She had a habit of talking to Jenny in a kind of baby-language, and used to refer to herself as "Poor Chat." "Poor Chat doesn't know!" "Poor Chat's not wise!" Also she did keep talking about her name and the respectability of her descent. In fact she was a woman of a number of silly affectations and one or two exasperating foibles, and Cartmell never varied from his impromptu judgment – expressed before he had seen her – that she was a fool. It is my deliberate opinion that she wished to be thought more of a fool than she was – partly from an idea that little sillinesses and affectations were genteel, partly with the notion that they were disarming. She seemed always bent on showing you that she was not the sort of person from whom any opposition need be feared, nor any undue exercise of influence apprehended. It could only be supposed that she had found this line of conduct useful in her relations toward her employers; by contrast it flattered both their superior brains and their superior positions. I allow for her natural taste, for her standards of gentility. But she was a snob, too, "Poor Chat," and a time-server.

No harder words than those need be used about her – and they are too hard perhaps; for there is one thing to be said on the other side – and it is a thing of weight. Chat was fifty; as a governess she was hopelessly out of date; I do not suppose that she saw her daily bread secure for three months ahead. For a hundred pounds a year certain – secure from the caprice of employers or of fate – she would probably have done or been anything – even, so far as she could, honest.

But honesty alone, as she may well have reflected, does not breed security of tenure in subordinate positions. I am far from saying that it ought; on the whole I consider it to be a commoner, and therefore a cheaper and more easily obtainable – and replaceable – commodity than either a good brain or an agreeable demeanor. At any rate how easily it may come near to costing a man his place I was very soon to discover by my own experience. Well, perhaps, to honesty I ought to add a lack of diplomacy and a temper naturally hot. But I am not sure: I cannot see how any man could have done anything very different – given that he was barely honest.

"There's a person in the drawing-room with the ladies, sir," said Loft one day when I came up to tea at four o'clock.

Loft's social terminology was exact. When he said a "person" he did not mean a "gentleman" – who was a gentleman – nor a "man" – who was a member of the definitely lower orders of the community; he meant somebody in between, one of the doubtful cases.

"A Mr. Powers, sir. He's been here perhaps half an hour."

It may readily be supposed that I had not forgotten the name of Powers; the name and the incident were irrevocably – and uncomfortably – fixed in my mind. This "person" might not be the same Powers, but in overwhelming probability he was. Even if Jenny had not been in communication with him – and I did not believe that she had – the paragraphs would easily have brought about this visit – or visitation. He came scenting prey – he had read of the heiress! But why had she let him in?

"Did he give you a card, Loft?"

"Yes, sir. I took it in, and Miss Driver told me to ask the person to come in."

If it were not material, neither was it necessary to ask what Loft thought about the matter. Plainly Mr. Powers was not up to his standard for drawing-room visitors.

"Have you got the card?"

He took it from the hall table. "Mr. Nelson Powers." There was no address.

"All right, Loft. But before I join them, I want to telephone to London." Of course Mr. Driver had installed a telephone, and many a day we had kept it very busy.

By luck I got into speedy communication with Cartmell at his hotel. He heard my news. His answer was to the point: "Kick him out."

"But if I try to do that, it gives you away. You're not supposed to have told me."

"Then give me away," came back instantly. "Only get him out. He's a dangerous rascal – and not fit for any decent man or woman to talk to. How in Heaven's name she can –"

"Perhaps she's frightened," I pleaded. He answered only "Kick him out," and cut off communication.

She did not look at all frightened when I went in. She was standing opposite Powers, smiling gayly and mischievously. Powers was apparently just taking his leave. So much gained! I determined to go to the hall with him and give him a hint, on Cartmell's behalf, that he need not come again. But things were not to be as easy as that.

"Well, then, we shall see you at eight o'clock," said Jenny, giving him her hand.

"Delighted," said he, bowing low. "Good afternoon. Good afternoon, Miss Chatters." Chat was sitting by, tating. She habitually tatted.

"This is my old friend Mr. Nelson Powers," said Jenny. "Mr. Powers – Mr. Austin." We bowed – neither of us cordially. The man's eyes were wary and very alert; he looked at me as though I might be a policeman in plain clothes; possibly my expression gave him some excuse.

Jenny rang the bell. "Mr. Powers is coming back to dinner. You'll come, of course? We shall have a pleasant little party of four!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm engaged to dinner to-night."

Jenny gave me a quick look, Chat gave me a long one. Loft appeared. "*Au revoir*, Mr. Powers!" With a pronounced bow over his hat Powers was out of the room. I made no effort to follow. Jenny's face told me that the battle was to be fought where we were.

She poured out a cup of tea and gave it to me. Then, as she sat down, she said, "I'm sorry you can't come to-night. Where are you going?"

I did not want Chat there – but I remembered what happened to Cartmell when he did not want me there.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

Her pallid face flushed a little, but she smiled. Chat looked at her and got up; no, Chat was not altogether a fool! "Yes, please, Chat," said Jenny very quietly. Chat left us. I finished my tea – it was cold, and easy to gulp down – and waited for the storm.

"You've nothing to add to your polite excuses?" she inquired.

"Does that gentleman come from Cheltenham?"

"Yes, from Cheltenham, Mr. Austin. But how did you come to know that? Did my father mention him?" She was not embarrassed – only very angry.

"No."

"It was Mr. Cartmell?"

"Yes. He had no right, I daresay, but I'm glad he did – and so will he be."

"If both my solicitor and my secretary are glad – !" She broke off with a scornful laugh. "I'm not going to discuss the matter with you, but I like people who are about me to receive my invitations with politeness."

"This isn't easy for me, Miss Driver, but – that man oughtn't to come to this house. He oughtn't to be allowed to see you."

She rose from her chair, her eyes set unmovingly on my face. Her voice was low. "How dare you say that? How dare you? Am I to take orders from you – my secretary – my servant?"

"You called me your friend the other day."

"I seem to have been hasty. A kind friend indeed to listen to stories against me!"

"The story is against the man – not against you."

"Are you dining with any other friends to-night?"

"I've told you that I'm not."

"Then I request – I desire – that you will make it convenient to give me the pleasure of your company – to meet my friend, Mr. Powers."

My temper went suddenly. "I won't sit at meat with the blackguard – above all, not in your company."

I saw her fist clench itself by her side. "I repeat my request," she said.

"I repeat my refusal, but I can do no less than offer you my resignation."

"You won't accept my offer – but I accept yours very gladly."

"It will be kind of you to relieve me from my duties as soon as possible."

"To-morrow." She turned her back on me and walked off to the window. I stood there a minute, and then went to the door. She turned round, and our eyes met. I waited for a moment, but she faced round to the window again, and I went out.

I walked quickly down the hill. I was very unhappy, but I was not remorseful. I knew that another man could have done the thing much better, but it had been the right thing to do and I had done it as well as I could. She had made no attempt to defend Powers, nor to deny what she must have known that Cartmell had said about him. Yet, while tacitly admitting that he was a most obnoxious description of blackguard, she asked him to dinner – and ordered me to sit by and see them together. If her service entailed that sort of thing, then indeed there must be an end to service with her. But grieved as I was that this must be so – and the blow to me was heavy on all grounds, whether of interest or of feeling – I grieved more that she should sit with him herself than that she bade me witness what seemed in my eyes her degradation. What was the meaning of it? I was at that time nowhere near understanding her.

My home was no more than a cottage, built against the south wall of the Old Priory. The front door opened straight into my parlor, without hall or vestibule; a steep little stair ran up from the corner of the room itself and led to my bedroom on the floor above. Behind my parlor lay the kitchen and two other rooms, occupied by my housekeeper, Mrs. Field, and her husband, who was one of the gardeners. It was all very small, but it was warm, snug, and homely. The walls were covered almost completely with my books, which overflowed on to chairs and tables, too. When fire and lamp were going in the evening, the little room seemed to glow with a studious cheerfulness, and my old leather arm-chair wooed me with affectionate welcome. In four years I had taken good root in my little home. I had to uproot myself – to-morrow.

With this pang, there came suddenly one deeper. I was about to lose – perforce – what was now revealed to me as a great, though a very new, interest in my life. From the first both Cartmell and I had been keenly interested in the heiress – the lonely girl who came to reign over Breysgate and to dispose of those millions of money. We had both, I think, been touched with a certain romantic, or pathetic, element in the situation. We had not talked about it, much less had we talked about what we felt ourselves or about what we meant to do; but it had grown into a tacit understanding between us that more than our mere paid services were due from us to Jenny Driver. No man had been very near her father, but we had been nearest; we did not mean that his daughter should be without friends if she would accept friendship. Nay, I think we meant a little more than that. She was young and ignorant; Nick Driver's daughter might well be willful and imperious. We meant that she should not easily escape our service and our friendship; they should be more than offered; they should be pressed; if need be, they should be secretly given. It had been an honest idea of ours – but it seemed hard to work in practice. Such service as I could give was ended well-nigh before it had begun. I thought it only too likely that Cartmell's also would soon end, save, at least, for strictly professional purposes. And I could not see how this end was to be avoided in his case any more than it had been found possible to avoid it in mine. With the best will in the world, there were limits. "Some things are impossible to

some men," old Mr. Driver had said in that letter; it had been impossible to me – as it would, I think, have been to most men – to see Powers welcomed by her as a gentleman and a friend.

Yet I began almost to be sorry – almost to ask why I had not swallowed Powers and accepted the invitation to dinner. Might I, in that way, have had a better chance of getting rid of Powers in the end? It would have been a wrong thing to do – I was still quite clear about that – wrong in every way, and very disgusting, to boot; quite fatal to my self-respect, and an acquiescence in a horrible want of self-respect in Jenny. But I might have been useful to her. Now I could be of no use. That evening I first set my feet on what I may perhaps call a moral slope. It looked a very gentle slope; there did not appear to be any danger in it; it did not look as though you could slip on it or as if it would be difficult to recover yourself if slip you did. But, in fact, at the bottom of that moral slope – which grew steeper as it descended – lay a moral precipice. Nothing less can I call the conclusion that anything which might be useful to Jenny Driver became, by the mere force of that possible utility, morally right – conduct, so to speak, becoming to an officer and a gentleman. I was not, of course, at all aware that my insidious doubt – or, rather, my puzzling discontent with myself – could lead to any such chasm as that.

I ate my chop and tried to settle down to my books. First I tried theology, the study of which I had by no means abandoned. But I was not theologically inclined that night. Then I took up a magazine; politics emphatically would not do! I fell back on anthropology, and got on there considerably better. Yet presently my attention wandered even from that. I sat with the book open before me, at a page where three members of the Warramunga tribe were represented in adornments that, on an ordinary evening, would have filled me with admiration. No, I was languid about it. The last thing I remembered was hearing the back door locked – which meant that the Fields were going to bed. After that I fail to trace events, but I imagine that I speedily fell sound asleep – with the book open before me and my pipe lying by it on the table.

I awoke with a little shiver, pretended to myself that I had never stopped reading, gave up the pretence, pushed back my chair from the table, rose, and turned to the fire behind me.

In my old leather arm-chair sat Jenny Driver.

She wore a black evening dress, with a cloak of brown fur thrown open in front – both, no doubt, new acquisitions. The fire had died down to a small heap of bright red embers. When first I saw her, she was crouching close over it – the night was chilly – and her face was red with its glow.

"Miss Driver! I – I'm afraid I've been asleep," I stammered. "Have you been here long?"

She glanced at the clock; it was half-past ten. "About twenty minutes. I've had a good look round – at your room, and your books, and that queer picture which seems to have sent you to sleep. Your room's very comfortable."

"Yes, it's a jolly little room," I agreed. "But what – ?"

"And I've had a good look at you, too," she continued. "Do you know, Mr. Austin, you're really rather handsome?"

"I daresay I look my best by lamplight," I suggested, smiling.

"No, really I think you are – in the thin ascetic style. I like that – anyhow for a change. Well, I wanted a word with you, so I waited till Chat went to bed, and then slipped down."

It was on the tip of my tongue to observe that it was rather late; but a smile on Jenny's lips somehow informed me that she expected just such an objection. So I said nothing.

"Chat and I are going to London to-morrow – to shop. Perhaps we may go on to Paris. I thought you might like to say good-by."

"That's very kind of you. I'm glad we're not to part in – well, as we parted this afternoon."

"If you regretted that, you might have done something to prevent it. Light your pipe again; you'll be able to think better – and I want you to think a little."

I obeyed her direction, she sitting for the moment silent. I came and stood opposite to her, leaning my elbow on the mantelpiece.

"When I first knew Mr. Powers, I was sixteen, and I'd been with the Smalls since I was eleven. You didn't get very discriminating, living with the Smalls. I met him at a subscription dance: I didn't know anything about his wife. He was clerk to an architect, or surveyor, or something of that sort. I met him a good many times afterwards – for walks. He was good-looking in his way, and he said he was in love with me. I fell in love with him and, when I couldn't get away to meet him, I wrote letters. Then I heard about the wife – and I wrote more letters. You know the sort – very miserable, and, I suppose, very silly – that I didn't know what to do, only the world was over for me – and so on. You can imagine the sort of letter. And I saw him – once or twice. He told me that he was in great trouble; he'd been racing and playing cards and couldn't pay; he'd be shown up, and lose his place – and what would become of his wife and child? I flared up and said that I was the last person who was likely to care about his wife and child. Then he suggested that I should get money from my father – he knew all about my father – by saying that I was in some trouble. I told him I couldn't possibly; I was never allowed to write and should only get an answer from a lawyer if I did – and certainly no money. He persisted – and I persisted. He threatened vaguely what he could do. I told him to do as he liked – that I'd done with him for good. I never wrote again – and I never saw him till to-day."

"When you asked him to dinner!"

She smiled, but took no more heed. "Well, I was in a scrape, wasn't I? I saw that clearly – rather a bad scrape. I didn't see what to do, though I did a lot of thinking. Being in a scrape does teach one to think, doesn't it? Then suddenly – when I was at my wits' end – it flashed across me that possibly it might all have happened for the best. My great object all through my girlhood was, somehow or other, to get into touch with my father. I believed that, if I could get a fair chance, I could win him over and persuade him to let me pay him a visit – even live with him perhaps. That was my great dream – and I was prepared to go through a lot for the hope of it. Well, it didn't come off. I don't know what Mr. Powers did – but it was not my father who came, it was Mr. Cartmell. I was taken away from the Smalls, but not allowed to come here. I was sent to the Simpsons. My father never wrote one word, good or bad, to me. Mr. Cartmell gave me a lecture. I didn't mind that. I was so furious with him for coming that I didn't care a straw what he said."

"His coming upset your brilliant idea?"

"Yes – that time. One can't always succeed. Still it's wonderful how often a scrape can be turned to account, if you think how to use it. You're in a corner: that sharpens your brains; you hit on something."

"Perhaps it does. You seem to speak from experience."

"Well, nobody means to get into them, of course, but you get drawn on. It's fun to see how far you can go – and what other people will do, and so on."

"Rather dangerous!"

"Well, perhaps that's part of the fun. By the by, I suppose I might get into a little scrape if I stayed here much longer. Chat would be very shocked – Loft, too, I expect!"

"It is getting on for eleven o'clock."

"Yes." She rose and drew her cloak round her. "Mr. Powers didn't come to dinner," she said. "On reflection, I wrote to him and told him that it was better not to renew our acquaintance, and that he must accept that as my final decision."

"That's something gained, anyhow," said I, with a sigh of relief.

"Something gained for you?" she asked quickly and suspiciously.

"I don't believe I was thinking of myself at the moment."

She looked at me closely. "No, I don't think you were – and there's no real reason why it should make any difference to you. Well, that depends on yourself! Mr. Powers is of no consequence one way or the other. The question is – are we two to try and get on together."

"I got on with your father," said I.

"You didn't tell my father what he was to do and not to do."

"Yes, sometimes – in social matters. It may surprise you to hear it, but your father was always ready to learn things that other people could tell him."

"Well, here are my concessions. Never mind what I said this afternoon – I was in a rage. I won't call you a servant again; I won't make you come to dinner when you don't want to; I won't demand that you meet my friends if you don't want to."

"That's very kind and handsome of you."

"Wait a minute. Now for my side. Mr. Austin, if you're not a servant here, neither are you a master. Oh, I know, you disclaim any such idea, but still – think over this afternoon! You can't stay here as a master. I daresay you think I want a master. I don't think so. If I do, I suppose I can marry!"

"For my own part I venture to hope you will marry – soon and very happily."

"But my father? 'Suspect and fear marriage.' 'You need fear no man except the man to whom you have given yourself.'"

"Your father's experience was, you know, unhappily not fortunate."

Her face clouded to melancholy. "I don't believe mine would be," she murmured. Then she raised her voice again and smiled. "Neither servant nor master – but friend, Mr. Austin?" And she held out her hand to me.

"I accept most heartily, and I'll try to keep the bargain." I put out my hand to take hers, but, as if on a sudden thought, she drew hers back.

"Wait a moment still. What do you mean by a friend? One who likes me, has my happiness at heart?"

"Yes."

"Gives me the best advice he can, speaking his mind honestly, without fear and in friendship?"

"Yes."

A touch of mockery in her eyes warned me neither to take the questions too seriously nor to make my answers too grave. The mockery crept into her tone with the next interrogation.

"When I don't take his advice and get into a scrape, says, 'I told you so. I'm all right – you get out of your scrape in the best way you can?'"

"Call me no friend when I say that," I answered.

"Ah!" she whispered and gave me the hand which she before had withdrawn. "Now really!" she cried gayly, with a glance at the clock. "You go back to sleep – I have to get ready for a journey. No, don't come with me. I'll run up to the house by myself. Good night, my – friend!"

I opened the door for her, answering, "Good night." But she had one more word for me before she went, turning her face to me, merry with a smile and twinkling eyes —

"I suppose you haven't got a wife anywhere, have you, Mr. Austin?" She ran off, not waiting for an answer.

The appearance of Mr. Powers had not cost me my place: but it had defined my position – to Jenny's complete satisfaction! It had also elicited from her some interesting observations on the value of scrapes – the place they hold in life, and how a man – or woman – may turn them to account. I felt that I knew Jenny better for our quarrel and our talk.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNPOPULAR MAN

Miss Driver stayed away longer than her words had led me to expect. London and Paris – the names are in themselves explanation enough. The big world was entirely new to Jenny; though she could not yet take – shall I say storm? – her place in society, much instruction, and more amusement, lay open to her grasp even in the days of her obligatory mourning. On the other hand that same period could not but be very tedious to her if passed at Breysgate. In regard to her father's memory she felt a great curiosity and displayed a profound interest; for the man himself she could have had little affection and could entertain no real grief; in fact, though she professed and tried to forgive, she never shook herself quite clear of resentment, even though she, if anybody, ought to have come nearest to understanding his stern resolve. That nobody should ever again come so near to him, or become so much to him, as to be able sorely to wound him – that was how I read his determination. Jenny ought to have been able to arrive at some appreciation of that. I think she did – but she protested in her heart that his daughter should have been the one exception. No good lay in going back to the merits of that question. In the result they had been – strangers: her mourning, then, was a matter of propriety, not the true demand of her feelings. Viewed in this light, London and Paris, surveyed from the decent obscurity of a tourist, offered a happy compromise – and bridged a yawning gulf – between duty and the endurable.

Meanwhile the Great Seal was in Commission; Cartmell, Loft, and I administered the Kingdom – Cartmell Foreign Affairs, Loft the Interior, I the Royal Cabinet. Cartmell's sphere was the largest by far – all the business both of the estate and of the various commercial interests; Loft's territory was merely the house, but his sense of importance magnified the weight of his functions; to me fell such of Miss Driver's work as she did not choose to transact herself. In fact I was kept pretty busy and was in constant communication with her. In reply to my letters I received a few notes – very brief ones – and many telegrams – very decisive ones. As I expected, it was not long before she took the reins into her own hands. In matters of business she always knew her mind – even if she did not always tell it; indecision was reserved for another department. But neither in notes, nor in telegrams did she disclose anything of her doings, except that she was well and enjoying herself.

So time rolled on; we came to the month of June – and to the Flower Show. The great annual festivity of the Catsford Horticultural and Arboricultural Association had always, of recent years, been held in the grounds of Breysgate Priory, and at the Mayor's request (Councillor Bindlecombe was also President of the Association) I had obtained Miss Driver's consent to the continuance of this good custom. In Jenny's absence the Show was to be opened by Lady Sarah Lacey. I have mentioned that no open rupture had taken place between Fillingford and Breysgate – there was only a very chilly feeling. Lady Sarah came, with her brother Lord Fillingford and his son. Sir John and Lady Aspenick from Overington Grange, the Dormers from Hingston, Bertram Ware – our M.P. – from Oxley Lodge, and many others – in fact all one side of the county – graced the occasion, mingled affably with the elect of Catsford, and made themselves distantly agreeable to the non-elect. (This statement does not, for obvious reasons, apply in all its exactitude to the M.P. If the bulk of the male guests were not elect, they were electors.) Everybody was hospitably entertained, but there was a Special Table, where, in years gone by, Mr. Driver himself had welcomed the most distinguished guests. His death and his daughter's absence – I fear I must add, Cartmell's also (he would have taken place of me, I think) – elevated me to this august position. In fact I had to play host, and so came for the first time into social relations with our august neighbors. I was not without alarm.

Lady Sarah questioned me about Jenny with polite but hostile curiosity. Her inquiries contrived to suggest that, with such a father and such a childhood, it would be wonderful if Miss Driver had

really turned out as well as Lady Sarah hoped. I was not surprised, and set the attitude down to a natural touch of jealousy: between the two ladies titular precedence and solid power would very likely not coincide. Lord Fillingford talked to the Mayor – who sat between him and me – with a defensively dignified reserve. He was slightly built, and walked rather stiffly; he wore small whiskers, and inclined to baldness. Indisputably a gentleman, he seemed to be afflicted with an unreasonable idea that other people would not remember what he was; a good man, no doubt, and probably a sensible one, but with no gift for popularity. His handsome son easily eclipsed him there. At this time young Lacey was bordering on eighteen; he out-topped his father in stature as in grace. He was a singularly attractive boy with a hearty gayety, a flow of talk, and an engaging conviction that everybody wanted to listen. Childless old Mrs. Dormer was delighted to listen, to feast her eyes on his comeliness, and to pet him to any extent he desired.

As a whole the company was a little stiff, and the joints of conversation rather in want of oiling, until they struck on that most fruitful and sympathetic subject – a common dislike. The victim was our neighbor and tenant at Hatcham Ford, Leonard Octon. I knew him, for he had been something of a friend of old Mr. Driver's, and had been accorded free leave to walk as he pleased in the park; I had understood – and could well understand – that he was not generally liked, but never before had I realized the sum of his enormities. He had, it seemed, offended everybody. Charitable young Lacey did indeed qualify the assertion that he was a "bounder" by the admission that he was afraid of nobody and could shoot. All the other voices spoke utter condemnation. He had got at odds with town, county, and church. His opinions were considered detestable, his manners aggressive. On various occasions of controversy he had pointed out to the Rector of Catsford that the pulpit was not of necessity a well of truth, to the Mayor that a gilt chain round his neck had no effect on the stuff inside a man's head, to Sir John Aspenick that one might understand horses and fail to understand anything else, to a large political meeting that of all laws mob-law was the worst, to Lord Fillingford that the rule of intelligence (to which Octon wished to revert) was no more the rule of country gentlemen than of their gardeners – perhaps not so much – and so on. These outrages were not narrated by the victims of them: they were recalled by sympathetic questions and reminders, each man tickling the other's wound. It could not be denied that they made up a sad catalogue of social crimes.

"The fellow may think what he likes, but he needn't tread on all our toes," Sir John complained.

"A vulgar man!" observed Lady Sarah with an acid finality.

Here, somewhat to my surprise, Fillingford opposed. He was a dry man, but a just one, and not even against an enemy should more than truth be said.

"No, I don't think he's that. His incivility is aggressive, even rough sometimes, but I shouldn't call it vulgar. I don't know what you think, Mr. Mayor, but it seems to me that vulgarity can hardly exist without either affectation in the man himself or cringing to others. Now Octon isn't affected and he never cringes."

Bindlecombe was a sensible man, and himself – if Fillingford's definition stood – not vulgar.

"You know better than I do, Lord Fillingford," he said. "But I should call him a gentleman spoiled – and perhaps that's a bit different."

"Meant for a gentleman, perhaps?" suggested Lady Aspenick, a pretty thin woman of five-and-thirty, who looked studious and wore double glasses, yet was a mighty horsewoman and whip withal.

I liked her suggestion. "Really, I believe that's about it," I made bold to remark. "He is meant for a gentleman, but he's rather perverse about it."

Lady Sarah looked at me with just an involuntary touch of surprise. I do not think that, in the bottom of her heart, she expected me to speak – unless, of course, spoken to.

"I intensely dislike both his manners and his opinions – and what I hear of his character," she observed.

"I mean," Lady Aspenick pursued, "that he's been, to so many queer places, and must have seen such queer things –"

"And done 'em, if you ask my opinion," interposed her husband.

"That he may have got – what? Rusty? Well, something like that. I mean – forgotten how to treat people. He seems to put everybody down as an enemy at first sight! Well, I'm irritable myself!"

Bertram Ware joined in for the first time. "At the clubs they say he's really a slave-driver in Central Africa, and comes over here when the scent gets too hot after him."

"Really," said Lady Sarah, "it sounds exceedingly likely. But if he teaches his slaves to copy his manners, they'll get some good floggings."

"That's what the fellow wants himself," growled unappeasable Sir John.

"You take it on, Johnny," counseled young Lacey. "He's only a foot taller and four stone heavier than you are. You take it on! It'd be a very sporting event."

This extract – it is no more – from our conversation will show that it was going on swimmingly. In the pursuit of a common prey we were developing a sense of comradeship which leveled barriers and put us at our ease with one another. No doubt our nascent cordiality would have sprung to fuller life – but it suffered a sudden check.

"Well, how have you all got on without me?" said a voice behind my chair.

I turned round with a start. The man himself stood there, his great height and breadth overshadowing me. His face was bronzed under his thick black hair; his mouth wore a wicked smile as his keen eyes ranged round the embarrassed table. He had heard the last part of Lacey's joking challenge to Aspenick.

"What's Sir John Aspenick got to take on? What's the event?"

The general embarrassment grew no less – but then it had never existed in young Lacey. He raised his fearless fresh blue eyes to the big man.

"To give you a thrashing," he said.

"Ah," said Octon, "I'm too old. I'm not like you." Lacey flushed suddenly. "And perhaps I'm a bit too big – and you're hardly that yet, are you?"

Perhaps he was too big! I noticed again his wonderful hands. They were large beyond reasonable limits of size, but full of muscle – no fat. They were restless too – always moving as if they wanted to be at work; if the work were to strangle a bull, I could imagine their being well pleased. He might need a thrashing – but, sturdy as the sons of Catsford were, there was none in the park that day who could have given him one.

Young Lacey was very red. I was a little uneasy as to what he would say or do; Fillingford saved the situation. He stood up and offered his hand to Octon, saying, "We're always glad to welcome a neighbor safely back. I hope your trip was prosperous?"

It was the right thing wrongly said – at least, inadequately said. It was civil, not cordial. They made a contrast, these men. Fillingford was too negative, Octon too positive. One defended where none attacked, the other attacked where no offense had been given. Unnecessary reserve against uncalled-for aggression! Fillingford was not popular – Octon was hated. Octon did not mind the hatred – did Fillingford feel the lack of liking? His reserve baffled me: I could not tell. With all Octon's faults, friendship with him seemed easier – and more attractive. The path might be rough – but the gate was not locked.

"Sure, Mr. Austin, it's time for the prizes?" said Lady Sarah.

It was not time, but I hastily said that it was, and with some relief escorted her to the platform. The rest followed, after, I suppose, a formal greeting to the unwelcome Prodigal; he himself did not come with us.

When Lady Sarah had distributed the prizes, I made a little speech on my chief's behalf – a speech of welcome to county and to town. Fillingford replied first, his speech was like himself – proper, cold, composed. Then Bindlecombe got up, mopping his forehead – the Mayor was apt to get hot – but making no mean appearance with his British solidity of figure, his shrewd face, and his sturdy respect for the office he exercised by the will of his fellow-citizens.

"My lords, ladies, and gentlemen – as Mayor of Catsford I have just one word to say on behalf of the borough. We thank the generous lady who has welcomed us here to-day. We look forward to welcoming her when she's ready for us. All Catsford men are proud of Nicholas Driver. He did a great deal for us – maybe we did something for him. He wasn't a man of words, but he was proud of the borough as the borough was proud of him. From what I hear, I think we shall be proud of Miss Driver, too – and I hope she'll be proud of the borough as her father was before her. We wish her long life and prosperity."

Bravo, Bindlecombe! But Lady Sarah looked astonishingly sour. There was something almost feudal in the relationship which the Mayor's words suggested. Jenny as Overlord of Catsford would not be to Lady Sarah's liking.

I got rid of them; I beg pardon – they civilly dismissed me. Only young Lacey had for me a word of more than formality. He did me the honor to ask my opinion – as from one gentleman to another.

"I say, do you think Octon had a right to say that?"

"The retort was justifiable – strictly."

"He need hardly – "

"No, he needn't."

"Well, good-by, Mr. Austin. I say – I'd like to come and see you. Are you ever at home in the evenings?"

"Always just now. I should be delighted to see you."

"Evenings at the Manor aren't very lively," he remarked ingenuously. "And I've left school for good, you know."

The last words seemed to refer – distantly – to Leonard Octon. Without returning to that disturbing subject I repeated my invitation and then, comparatively free from my responsibilities, repaired alone to the terrace.

Octon was still there – extended on three chairs, smoking and drinking a whisky and soda. I asked him about his travels – he was just back from the recesses of Africa (if there are, truly, any recesses left) – but gained small satisfaction. His predominant intellectual interest was – insects! He would hunt a beetle from latitude to latitude, and by no means despised the pursuit of a flea. My interest in the study of religion assorted ill with this: when I questioned on my subject, he replied on his. All other incidents of his journeys he passed over, both in talk and in writing (he had written two books eminent in their own line), with a brevity thoroughly Cæsarean. "Having taken the city and killed the citizens" – Cæsar invaded another tribe! – That was the style. Only Octon's tribes were insects, Cæsar's patriots. It was, however, rumored – as Bertram Ware had hinted in a jocose form – that Octon's summaries were, sometimes and in their degree, as eloquent as Cæsar's own.

"Hang my journeys!" he said, as I put one more of my futile questions. "I got six bugs – one indisputably new. But I didn't hurry up here – I only got home this morning – to talk about that. I hurried up here, Austin – "

"To annoy your neighbors – knowing they were assembled here?"

"That was a side-show," he assured me. "Though it was entertaining enough. And, after all, young Lacey began on me! No – I came to bring you news of your liege lady. I've been in Paris, too, Austin."

"And you met her?"

"I met her often – with her cat."

"Miss Chatters?"

"Precisely. And sometimes without her cat. How do you like the change from old Driver?"

"I hold no such position, either in county or borough, as need tempt you – to say nothing of entitling you – to ask impertinent questions, Octon."

He chuckled out a deep rumbling laugh of amusement. "Good!" he said. "Well-turned – almost witty! Austin, I've my own pursuits – but I'm inclined to wish I had your position."

"You're very flattering – but my position is that of an employé – at a salary which would hardly command your services."

"You can be eyes and ears and hands to her. If I had your position, I'd" – one of his great hands rose suddenly into the air – "crunch up this neighborhood. With her resources she could get all the power." His hand fell again, and he removed his body from two of the three chairs, shifting himself with easy indolent strength. "Then you'd have it all in your own control."

"She'd have it in her own control, you must mean," said I.

"Come, you're a man!" he mocked me. But he was looking at me closely, too – and rather inquisitively, I thought.

"Since you've met her often, I thought you might understand better than that." To answer him in his own coin, I infused into my tone a contempt which I hoped would annoy him.

He was not annoyed; he was amused. In the insolence of his strength he mocked at me – at Jenny through me – at me through Jenny. Yet, pervading it all, there was revealed an interest – a curiosity – about her that agreed ill with his assumed contemptuousness.

"She's given you her idea of herself – and you've absorbed it. She thinks she's another Nick Driver – and you're sure of it! It's all flim-flam, Austin."

"Have it your own way," said I meekly. "It's no affair of mine what you choose to think."

"Well, that's a more liberal sentiment than one generally hears in this neighborhood."

He rose and stretched himself, clenching his big fists in the air over his head. "At any rate she's told me I may take my walks about here as usual. I'll drop in and have a pipe with you some day."

Another guest proposed himself! I hoped that the company might always prove harmonious.

"As for Chat," he went on, "I don't want to boast of my conquests – but she's mine."

"My congratulations are untouched by envy."

"You may live to change your mind about that. Anyhow I hold her in my hand."

The truth about him was that, as he loved his strength, so, and no less, he loved the display of it. A common, doubtless not the highest, characteristic of the strong! Display is apt to pass into boast. He was not at all loath to hint to me – to force me to guess – that his encounters in Paris had set him thinking. (If they had set him feeling, he said nothing about that.) Hence – as I reasoned it – he went on, with a trifle more than his usual impudence, "Your goose will be cooked when she marries, though!"

After all, his impudence was good-humored. I retorted in kind. "Perhaps the husband won't let you walk in the park either!"

"If Fillingford were half a man – Lord, what a chance!"

"You gossip as badly as the women themselves. Why not say young Lacey at once?"

"The boy? I'd lay him over my knee – at the first word of it."

"He'd stab you under the fifth rib as you did it."

The big man laughed. "Then my one would be worse than his sound dozen! And what you say isn't at all impossible. He's a fine boy, that! After all, though, he's inherited his courage. The father's no coward, either."

We had become engrossed in our interchange of shots – hostile, friendly, or random. One speaks sometimes just for the repartee, especially when no more than feeling after the interpretation of a man.

Moreover Loft's approach was always noiseless. On Octon's last words, he was by my side.

"I beg pardon, sir, but Miss Driver has telephoned from London to say that she'll be down tomorrow and glad to see you at lunch. And I was to say, sir, would you be so kind as to send word to Mr. Octon that she would be very pleased if he would come, too, if his engagements permitted."

"Oh – yes – very good, Loft. This is Mr. Octon."

"Yes, sir," said Loft. The tone was noncommittal. He knew Octon – but declared no opinion.

I was taken aback, for I had received no word of her coming; I had been led not to expect her for four or five weeks. Octon's eye caught mine.

"Changed her mind and come back sooner? Well, I did just the same myself."

By themselves the words were nothing. In connection with our little duel – backed by the man's broad smile and the forceful assertion of his personality – they amounted to a yet plainer boast – "I've come – and I thought she would." That is too plain for speech – even for Octon's ill-restrained tongue – but not too plain for his bearing. But then I doubted whether his bearing were toward facts or merely toward me – were proof of force or effort after effect.

"Clearly Miss Chatters can't keep away from you!" I said.

"Clearly we're going to have a more amusing time than we'd been hoping," he answered and, with a casual and abrupt "Good-by," turned on his heel, taking out another great cigar as he went.

Perhaps we were – if amusing should prove to be the right word about it. So ran my instinct – with no express reason to be given for it. Why should not Jenny come home? Why should Octon's coming have anything to do with it? In truth I was affected, I was half dominated for the moment, by his confidence and his force. I had taken the impression he wanted to give – just as he accused me of taking the impression that Jenny sought to give. So I told myself consolingly. But I could not help remembering that in those countries which he frequented, where he got his insects and very probably his ideas, men were said as often to win or lose – to live or die – by the impression they imparted to friends, foes, and rivals as by the actual deeds they did. I could not judge how far that was true – but that or something like it was surely what they called prestige? If a man created prestige, you did not even try to oppose him. Nay, you hastened to range yourself on his side – and your real little power went to swell his asserted big power – his power big in assertion but in fact, as against the present foe, still unproved. Had the prestige been brought to bear on Chat – so that she was wholly his? Was it being brandished before my eyes, to gain me also – for what I was worth?

After all, it was flattering of him to think that I mattered. I mattered so very little. If he were minded to impress, if he were ready to fight, his display and his battle must be against another foe – or – if the evidence of that talk at the Flower Show went for anything – against several. If an attack on Breysgate Priory were really in his mind, he would find no ally – outside its walls.

CHAPTER V

RAPIER AND CLUB

Any account of Jenny Driver's doings is in danger of seeming to progress by jumps and jerks, and thereby of contradicting the truth about its subject. Cartmell, her principal man of business, scoffed at the idea that Jenny was impulsive at all; after six months' experience of her he said that he had never met a cooler, saner, more cautious judgment. That this was true of her in business matters I have no reason to doubt, but (I have noted this distinction already) if the remark is to be extended to her personal affairs it needs qualification – yet without admitting of contradiction. There she was undoubtedly impetuous and impulsive on occasion; a certain course would appeal to her fancy, and she made for it headlong, regardless, or seeming regardless, of its risks. But even here, though the impulses prevailed on her suddenly in the end, they were long in coming to a head, long in achieving mastery, and preceded by protracted periods either of inaction or of action so wary and tentative as not to commit her in any serious degree. She would advance toward the object, then retreat from it, then stand still and look at it, then walk round and regard it from another point of view. Next she was apt to turn her back on it and become, for a time, engrossingly interested in something else; it seemed essential to her ease of mind that there should be an alternative possible and a line of retreat open. All this circumspection and deliberation – or, if you like, this dawdling and shilly-shallying (for opinions of Jenny have differed very widely on this and on other matters) – had to happen before the rapid and imperious impulse came to set a limit to them; even then it is doubtful whether the impulse left her quite unmindful of the line of retreat.

These characteristics of hers were exhibited in her treatment of the question of the Institute. Although this was a public matter, it was (or she made it) closely connected with certain private affairs which inevitably had a profound interest for all of us who surrounded her. My own belief is that a lift of Lady Sarah Lacey's brows started the Institute. When she called – this necessary courtesy was punctually forthcoming from the Manor to the Priory – she heard from Jenny about the proposed Driver Memorial Hall, how it was to look, where it was to be, and so forth. She put a question as to funds; Jenny owned to the ten thousand pounds. All Lady Sarah said was, "Do you feel called upon to do as much as that?" But she also lifted her brows – conveying thereby (as Jenny confidently declared) that Miss Driver was taking an exaggerated view of her father's importance and of her own, and was assuming a position toward the borough of Catsford which properly belonged to her betters (perhaps Lady Sarah was recollecting the Mayor's feudal speech!) At any rate from that day forward Jenny began to hint at bigger things. The Memorial Hall by itself no longer sufficed. She made a great friend of Mr. Bindlecombe, and he often came up to Breysgate. Where his beloved borough was concerned, Bindlecombe was openly and avowedly unscrupulous; he meant to get all he could out of Miss Driver, and made no concealment about it. Jenny delighted in this attitude; it gave her endless opportunities of encouraging and discouraging, of setting up and putting down, the hopes of Bindlecombe. Between them they elaborated the idea – Jenny was great at elaborating it, but careful to insist that it was no more than an idea – of extending the Memorial Hall into a great Institute, which was to include a memorial hall but to comprise much besides. It was to be a Driver Literary, Scientific, and Technical Institute on the handsomest scale. Bindlecombes' patriotic and sanguine mind hardly hesitated to see in it the nucleus of a future University for the City of Catsford. (Catsford was in the future to be promoted to be a "city," though I did not see how Jenny could have anything to do with that!) The notion of this great Driver Institute pleased Jenny immensely. How high it would lift Lady Sarah's eyebrows! It made Cartmell apprehensive about the expense – and she liked to tease him by suggested extravagance. Finally, it would, she declared, provide me with a splendid post – as librarian, or principal, or something – which would give me a worthier scope for my abilities and

yet (Jenny looked at me almost tenderly) let me stay in my dear little home – near Breysgate – "and near me, Mr. Austin." She played with the idea – as she played with us. Some gossip about it began to trickle through Catsford. There was much interest, and Jenny became quite a heroine. Meanwhile plans for the poor old Memorial Hall were suspended.

According to Bindlecombe the only possible site for the visible realization of this splendid idea – the only site which the congested condition of the center of the borough allowed, and also the only one worthy of the great Institute – was the garden and grounds of Hatcham Ford. The beautiful old house itself was to be preserved as the center of an imposing group of handsome buildings; the old gardens need not be materially spoiled – so Bindlecombe unplausibly maintained. The flavor of antiquity and aristocracy thus imparted to the Institute would, Bindlecombe declared, give it a charm and a dignity beyond those possessed by any other Institute the world over. I was there when he first made this suggestion to Jenny. She looked at him in silence, smiled, and glanced quickly at me. The look, though quick, was audacious – under the circumstances.

"But what will Mr. Octon say to that?"

Bindlecombe deferentially hinted that he understood that Mr. Octon's lease of Hatcham Ford expired, or could be broken, in two or three years. He understood – perhaps he was wrong – that Mr. Driver usually reserved a power to break leases at the end of seven years? Mr. Cartmell would, of course, know all about that.

"Oh, if that's so," said Jenny, "of course it would be quite simple. Wouldn't it, Mr. Austin?"

"As simple as drawing a badger," I replied – and Bindlecombe looked surprised to hear such a sporting simile pass my lips. It was by no means a bad one, though, and Jenny rewarded it with a merry little nod.

At this point, then, her public project touched her private relations – and her relations with Octon had been close ever since her return from Paris. He had been a constant visitor at Breysgate, and my belief was that within a very few weeks of her arrival he had made a direct attack – had confronted her with a downright proposal – demand is a word which suits his method better – for her hand. I did not think that she had refused, I was sure that she had not accepted. She was fond of referring, in his presence, to the recent date of her father's death, to her own immersion in business, to the "strangeness" of her new life and the necessity of "finding her feet" before doing much. These references – rather pathetic and almost apologetic – Octon would receive with a frown of impatience – sometimes even of incredulity; but he did not make them an occasion of quarrel. He continued to come constantly to the Priory – certainly three or four times a week. There is no doubt that he was, in his way, very much in love with Jenny. It was an overbearing sort of way – but it had two great merits: it was resolute and it was disinterested. He was quite clear that he wanted her; it was quite clear that he did not care about her money, though he might envy her power. And if he tried to dominate her, he had to submit to constant proofs of her domination also. She could, and did, make him furiously angry; he was often undisguisedly impatient of her coynesses and her hesitations: but he could not leave her nor the hopes he had of her. And she, on her side, could not – at least did not – send him away. For that matter she never liked sending anybody away – not even Powers; it seemed to make her kingdom less by one – a change in quite the wrong direction. Octon would have been a great loss, for he had, without doubt, a strong, and an increasingly strong, attraction for her. She liked at least to play at being subjugated by his masculine force; she did, in fact, to a great extent approve and admire his semi-barbaric way (for her often mitigated by a humor which he kept for the people he liked) of speaking of and dealing with women. Down in her heart she thought that attitude rather the right thing in a man, and liked to think of it as a power before which she might yield. At the theater she was always delighted when the rebellious maiden or the charming spitfire of a wife, at last, in the third act, hailed the hero as her "master." So far she was primitive amidst all her subtlety. But to Jenny's mind it was by no means the third act yet; even the plot of the play was not laid out so far ahead as that. If this masterful, quick, assertive way of wooing were proper to man, woman had her weapons;

she had her natural weapons, she had the weapons a civilized state of society gave her, and she had those which casual chance might add to her arsenal. Under the last of these three categories fell the project of the Driver Institute, to be established at Mr. Octon's present residence, Hatcham Ford.

It was a great chance for Jenny. Institutes as such, and all similar works, Octon hated – why educate people who ought to be driven? The insolence not of rank but of intellect spoke in him with a strong voice. Bindlecombe he hated, and it was mainly Bindlecombe's idea. Catsford he hated, because it was gradually but surely spreading to the gates of his beautiful old house. Deeper than this, he hated being under anybody's power; it was bitter to him that, when his mind was to stay, anybody – whether Jenny or another – should be able to tell him to go. Finally, his special position toward Jenny made the mere raising of the question of his future residence a rare chance for her – a chance of teasing and vexing, of coaxing and soothing, or of artful pretense that there was no underlying question at all.

She told him about the project – it was nothing more, she was careful to remark – after dinner one evening, in her most artless manner.

"It's a perfect idea – only I hope you wouldn't mind turning out?"

He had listened sullenly, pulling hard at his cigar. Chat was watching him with alarmed eyes; he had cast his spell on Chat, that was certain; there his boast did not go beyond truth.

"Being turned out, you mean, I imagine! I'd never willingly turn out to make room for any such nonsense. Of all the humbugs – "

"It's my duty to do something for the town," she urged – very grave.

"Let them do their work by day and drink their beer by night. Fancy those fellows in my house!"

"I'm sorry you feel like that. I thought you'd be interested – and – and I'd try to find you a house somewhere else. There must be some other houses, Mr. Austin?"

"One or two round about, I fancy," said I.

"Nice little ones – to suit a single man?" she asked, her bright eyes now seeking, now eluding, a meeting with his.

"I suppose I can choose the size of my house for myself," Octon growled. "I don't want Austin's advice about it."

"Oh, it wasn't poor Mr. Austin who – who spoke about the size of the house." A sudden thought seemed to strike her. "You might stay on and be something in the Institute!"

"I'd burn the house over my head sooner."

"Burn my pretty house! Oh, Mr. Octon! I should be so hurt – and you'd be sent to prison! What a lot of police it would need to take you there!"

The last sentence mollified him – and it was clever of her to know that it would. He had his primitive side, too. He was primitive enough to love a compliment to his muscles.

"I'd be out of the country before they came – with you under my arm," he said, with a laugh.

"That would be very forgiving – but hardly proper, would it, Chat? Unless we were – Oh, but what nonsense! Why don't you like my poor Institute?"

He relapsed into ill-humor, and it developed into downright rudeness.

"It's nothing to me how people make fools of themselves," he said.

Jenny did not always resent his rudeness. But she never compromised her right to resent it. She exercised the right now, rising with instantaneous dignity. "It's time for us to go, Chat. Mr. Austin, will you kindly look after Mr. Octon's comfort for the rest of the evening?" She swept out, Chat pattering after her in a hen-like flutter. Octon drank off his glass of wine with a muttered oath. Excellent as the port was, it seemed to do him no good. He leaned over to me – perfectly sober, be it understood (I never saw him affected by liquor), but desperately savage. "I won't stand that," he said. "If she sticks to that, I'll never come back to this house when I've walked out of it to-night."

I was learning how to deal with his tempests. "I shall hope to have the pleasure of encountering you elsewhere," I observed politely. "Meanwhile I have my orders. Pray help yourself to port."

He did that, but at the same moment hurled at me the order – "Take her that message."

"There's pen and ink behind you, Octon."

Temper is a terrible master – and needs looking after even as a servant. He jumped up, wrote something – what I could only guess – and rang the bell violently. I could imagine Jenny's smile – I did not ring like that.

"Take that to your mistress," he commanded. "It's the address she wanted." But he had carefully closed the envelope, and probably Loft had his private opinion.

We sat in silence till the answer came. "Miss Driver says she is much obliged, sir, for the address," said Loft as, with a wave of his hand, he introduced a footman with coffee, "and she needn't trouble you any more in the matter – as you have another engagement to-night."

Under Loft's eyes he had pulled himself together; he received the message with an appearance of indifference which quite supported the idea that it related to some trifle and that he really had to go away early; I had not given him credit for such a power of suddenly regaining self-control. He nodded, and said lightly to me, "Well, since Miss Driver is so kind, I'll be off in another ten minutes." The presence of servants must, in the long run, create a great deal of good manners.

When Loft was out of the room Octon dropped his disguise. He brought his big hand down on the table with a slap, saying, "There's an end of it!"

"Why shouldn't she build an Institute? If you take a lease for only seven years, how are you aggrieved by getting notice to quit at the end of the term?"

"Don't argue round the fringe of things. Don't be a humbug," he admonished me, scornfully enough, yet for once, as I fancied, with a touch of gentleness and liking. "You've damned sharp eyes, and I've something else to do than take the trouble to blind them."

"No extraordinary acuteness of vision is necessary," I ventured to remark.

He rose from his chair with a heavy sigh, leaving his coffee and brandy untouched. I felt inclined to tell him that in all likelihood he was taking the matter too seriously: he was assuming finality – a difficult thing to assume when Jenny was in the case. He came to me and laid his hand on my shoulder. "They manage 'em better in Africa," he said with a sardonic grin. "Of course I'd no business to say that to her – but hadn't she been trying to draw me all the time? She does it – then she makes a shindy!"

"I'll see you a bit on your way," I said. He accepted my offer by slipping his hand under my arm. I opened the door for us to pass out. There stood Chat on the threshold. Octon regarded her with an ill-subdued impatience. Chat was fluttering still.

"Oh, Mr. Octon, she's – she's so angry! Might I – oh, might I take a message to her room? She's gone upstairs and forbidden me to follow."

"Thank you, but there's no message to take."

"If you would just say something – !"

"There's no message to take." Again his tone was not rough – it was moody, almost absent: but, as he left Chat behind in her useless agitation, he leaned on my arm very heavily. Though I counted his whole great body as for me less than her little finger, yet a subtle male freemasonry stirred in me. He had behaved very badly – for a man should bear a pretty woman's pin-pricks – yet he was hard hit; all against him as I was, I knew that he was hard hit. Moreover, he had summed up Jenny's procedure pretty accurately.

We put on our coats – it was now September – undid the big door, and went out, down the steps, into a clear frosty night. We had walked many yards along the drive before he spoke. At last he said, very quietly —

"You're a good chap, Austin, and I'm sorry I've made a row to-night. Yes, I'm sorry for that. But whether I'm sorry I've been kicked out or not – well, that's a difficult question. My temper – well, sometimes I'm a bit afraid of it."

"Oh, that's nothing. You've both got tempers. You'll make it up."

He spoke with a calm deliberation unusual with him. "I don't think I'd better," he said. "I don't quite trust myself: I might do something – queer."

In my opinion that possibility about him attracted Jenny; but it needed no artificial fostering, and I held my peace.

There were electric lights at intervals down the drive: at this moment I could see his face plainly. I thoroughly agreed with what he said and understood his judgment of himself. But it was hard to see him look like that about it. Suddenly – as I still looked – his expression changed. A look of apprehension came over him – but he smiled also, and gripped my arm tightly. A figure walked out of the darkness into the light of the lamp.

I recalled how I had found her sitting by my hearth one night – in time to make me recall my resignation. Was she here to make Octon unsay his determination?

She came up to us smiling – with no air of surprise, real or affected, and with no explanation of her own presence.

"Both of you! What luck! I didn't think you'd come away from the house yet."

"I've come away from the house, Miss Driver," said Octon – rather grimly.

"In fact you've – 'walked out of the house' – ?" asked Jenny, smiling. The dullest ears could not miss the fact that she was quoting.

"Yes," answered Octon briefly, leaving the next move with her. She had no hesitation over it.

"Let not the sun go down upon your wrath!" she cried gayly. "The sun is down, but the moon will be up soon, and if you won't quarrel any more I'll keep you company for a little bit of the way." She turned to me, "Do you mind waiting at the house a quarter of an hour? I've had a letter from Mr. Cartmell that I want to consult you about."

Octon had not replied to her invitation and did not now. As I said, "All right – I'll smoke a pipe outside and wait for you," she beckoned lightly and merrily to him. After an almost imperceptible pause he moved slowly after her. Gradually their figures receded from the area of lamplight and grew dim in the darkness. The moon peeped over the hill but gave no light yet by which they could be seen.

I had never believed in the permanence of that quarrel. Though it was a strong instance, yet it was hardly more than a typical instance of their quarrels – of the constant clashing of his way against hers – of the play between her rapier and his club. If their intimacy went on, they might have worse quarrels than that. For me the significance of the evening lay not in another proof that Jenny, while saving her pride and scoring her formal victory, would still not let him go – and perhaps would go far to keep him; that was an old story, or, at least, a bit of discernment of her now months old; rather it lay in Octon's account of his own disposition toward her proceedings – in his puzzle whether he were glad or sorry to be "kicked out" – in that fear of himself and of his self-restraint which made him relieved to go, even while his face was wrung with the pain of going. In view of that, I felt that I also should have been relieved if he had really gone – gone not to return – not to submit himself again to the variety of Jenny's ways – to the quick flashing alternation of her weapons, natural, conventional, casual, or whatsoever they might be. He was right about himself – he was not the man for that treatment. He could not appreciate the artistic excellence of it; he felt, even if he deserved, its cruelty. Moreover, it might prove dangerous. What if he beat down the natural weapons – and ignored the rest? One thing at least was clear; he would not again tell me – or even pretend to me – that her power was "all flim-flam."

She came back in half an hour, at a leisurely pace, looking much pleased with herself.

I was smoking on the steps by the hall door.

"That's all right," she assured me with a cheerful smile. "We're quite friends, and he's not going to be such a bear any more – if he can help it, which, Mr. Austin, I doubt."

"How did you manage it?" I asked – not that there was much real need of inquiry.

"Of course I told him that the Institute was nothing but an idea, and that, even if it were built, its being at Hatcham Ford was the merest idea, and that, even if it had to be at Hatcham Ford –

well, I pointed out that two years are two years – (You needn't take the trouble to nod about that – it was quite a sensible remark) – that two years are two years and that very likely he wouldn't want the house at all by then."

"I see."

"So, of course, he apologized for his rudeness and promised not to be so foolish again, and we said good night quite friends. What have you been thinking about?"

"I don't think I could possibly tell you."

I was just opening the door for her. She paused on the threshold, lifting her brows a little and smiling as she whispered, "Something uncomplimentary?"

"That depends what you want to be complimented on," I answered.

"Oh, as long as it's on anything!" she cried. "You'll admit my compliments to-night have been terribly left-handed?"

"I don't know that mine hasn't a touch of that. Well – I think it's very brave to play games in the crater of an active volcano – exceedingly brave it is!"

"Brave? But not very – ?"

"Let's leave it where it is. What about Cartmell's letter?"

"That'll do to-morrow." (Of course it would – it had been only an instrument of dismissal.) "I'm tired to-night." Her face grew grave: she experienced another mood – or touched another note. "My friend, you must believe that I always listen to what you say. I mayn't see things just as you seem to, sometimes, but what you say always makes me think. By the bye, are you very busy, or could you ride to-morrow?"

"Of course!" I cried eagerly. "Seven-thirty, as usual?"

"A quarter to eight sharp. Good night." She gave me a contented friendly smile, with just a hint of triumph about it, and went upstairs.

It shows what a good thing life is that I, too, in spite of my questionings and apprehension, repaired home forgetful of them for the time and full of exultation. I loved riding; and Jenny on horseback was a companion for a god.

On reflection it might have occurred to me that it was easier for her to invite me to ride than to listen too exactly to my counsels – quite as easy and really as well calculated to keep me content. Happily the youth in me found in her more than the subject of fears or the source of questionings. She could also delight.

CHAPTER VI

TAKING TO OPEN SEA

On her morning rides Jenny wore a habit of russet brown and a broad-brimmed hat to match; her beautiful mare was a golden chestnut; the motive and the crown of all the scheme showed in her brilliant hazel eyes. On this fine morning – there was a touch of autumn frost, slowly yielding before the growing strength of the sun, but the ground was springy under us – Jenny bore a holiday air; no cares and no schemes beset her. To my poor ability I shared and seconded her mood, though my black coat and drab breeches were a sad failure in the matter of outward expression. She made straight for the north gate of the Priory park; we passed through it, crossed the road, and entered, by a farm-gate, on to Fillingford territory. "I almost always come here," she told me. "There's such a splendid gallop. Now and then I meet Lord Lacey, and we have a race."

Not being an habitual party to these excursions – it was my usual lot to lie in wait for the early post and reduce the letters to order for our after-breakfast session – I had seen and heard nothing of her encounters with young Lacey. I conceived that the two houses were still on the terms of distant civility to which Lady Sarah's passive resistance had endeavored to confine them. A formal call from each lady on the other – a no less formal visit to Jenny from Lord Fillingford (who left his son's card also) – there it had seemed to stop, the Mayor of Catsford and the Memorial Hall perhaps in some degree contributing to that result. Fine mornings a-horseback and youthful blood had, however, sapped Lady Sarah's defenses. I was glad – and I envied Lacey. He had much to be thankful for. True, they talked of sad financial troubles at Fillingford Manor, but you may hear many a fine gentleman rail at the pinch of poverty, as he pours, in no ungenerous measure, his own champagne down his throat at half-a-crown a glass. Perhaps at Fillingford that luxury did not rule every day; but at any rate Lacey had a good horse to ride – to say nothing of pleasant company.

Well, all he had he deserved, if only because he looked what he was so splendidly. If Providence, or nature, or society makes a scheme of things, it is surely a merit in us poor units to fit into it? Let others attack or defend the country gentleman. Anyhow, if you are one, look it! And for such an one as does look it I have a heartfelt admiration, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot – with a special affection for his legs in perfect boots and breeches. Young Lacey was such a consummate type; I did not wonder that Jenny's ever liberal appreciation smiled beams of approval as he appeared over the crest of a rising hillock and rode on to meet us. Excellent, too, were the lad's manners; he appeared really glad to see me – which in the nature of the case he hardly can have been in his heart.

"I'm going to win this morning!" he cried to Jenny. "I feel like winning to-day!"

"Why to-day? You don't win very often."

"That's true," he said to me. "Miss Driver's won two to my one, regular. At sixpence a race I owe her three shillings already."

I had a feeling that Jenny glanced at me, but I did not look at Jenny. I did not even do the sum, though it was easy arithmetic.

"But to-day – well, in the first place I've got my commission – and in the second Aunt Sarah's gone to London for a week."

"I congratulate you on the commission."

"And you're loftily indifferent about Aunt Sarah?" he asked, laughing. "I say, though, come along! Are you a starter, Mr. Austin?"

I declined the invitation, but I managed to keep them well in sight – and my deliberate opinion is that Jenny pulled. She could have won, I swear it, if she had liked; as it was, she was beaten by a length. The lad was ingenuously triumphant. "Science is beginning to tell," he declared. "You won't hold your lead long!"

"Sometimes it's considered polite to let a lady win," Jenny suggested.

"Oh, come! If she challenges she must take her chance in fair fight."

"Then what chance have we poor women?" asked deceptive Jenny – who could have won the race.

"You beat us in some things, I admit. Brains, very often, and, of course, charm and all that sort of thing." He paused a moment, blushed a little, and added, "And – er – of course – out of sight in moral qualities."

I liked his "moral qualities." It hinted that reverence was alive in him. I am not sure it did not indicate that the reverence due to woman in the abstract was supremely due to the woman by his side.

"Out of sight in moral qualities?" she repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose even a woman may hope that that's true. Don't you think so, Mr. Austin?"

"It has always been conceded in civilized communities," I agreed.

"What I hate about that fellow Octon – Oh, I beg pardon – isn't he a friend of yours?"

"I know him pretty well. He's rather interesting."

"I hate the fellow's tone about – about that sort of thing. Cheap, I call it. But I don't suppose he does it to you; you wouldn't stand it."

"I'm very patient with my friends," said Jenny.

"Friends! You and that – ! Oh, well, let's have another gallop."

The gallop brought us in full view of Fillingford Manor; it lay over against us in the valley, broad expanses of meadow and of lawn leading up to a formal garden, beyond which rose the long low red-brick façade half covered with ivy, and a multitude of twisting chimneys.

"Jolly old place, isn't it?" cried Lacey. "I say, wouldn't you like to see over it? I don't expect Aunt Sarah showed you much!"

"I should like to see over it very much, if your father would ask me."

"Oh, he will – he'll be delighted. I say, come this week – while we're by ourselves?"

"Yes, if he invites me."

"He'll invite you. He likes you very much – only he's not exactly expansive, you know, the governor!"

"Never mind, you are. Now Mr. Austin and I must go back to breakfast and to work."

"By Jove, I must be getting back, too, or I shall keep the governor waiting, and he doesn't like that."

"If you do, tell him it's my fault."

The boy looked at her, then at me, again blushed a little, and laughed. The slightest flush appeared on Jenny's smiling face. I took the opportunity to light a cigarette. The morning races had not been talked about at Fillingford!

"Well no – you mustn't put it on the woman, must you?" said Jenny, as she waved a laughing farewell.

On our way home she was silent and thoughtful, speaking only now and then and answering one or two remarks of mine rather absently. One observation threw some light on her thoughts.

"It's very awkward that Mr. Octon should make himself so unpopular. I want to be friends with everybody, but – " She broke off. I did no more than give a nod of assent. But I knew – and thought she must – how Octon stood. He was considered to have made himself impossible. He was not asked to Fillingford; Aspenick had bluntly declared that he would not meet him on account of a rude speech of Octon's, leveled at Lady Aspenick; Bertram Ware and he were at daggers drawn over some semipolitical semiprivate squabble in which Octon's language had been of more than its usual violence. The town loved him no better than the county. Jenny wanted to be popular everywhere – popular, influential, acclaimed. She was weighted by this unpopular friendship – which yet had such attraction for her. The cares of state had fastened on her again as we jogged homeward.

Well, they were the joy of her life – it would have needed a dull man not soon to see that. The real joy, I mean – not what at that moment – nay, nor perhaps at any moment – she would herself have named as her delight. Her joy in the sense in which we creatures – and the wisest among us long ago – come nearest to being able to understand and define the innermost engine or instinct whose working is most truly ourselves – the temptation to live and life itself which pair nature has so cunningly coupled together. Effective activity – the reaching out to make of external things and people (especially, perhaps, things and people that obstinately resist) part of our own domain – their currency coinage of ours, with the stamp of our mint, bearing our superscription – causing the writ of our issuing to run where it did not run before – is not this, however ill-expressed (and bigger men than I have failed, and will fail, fully to express it), something like what the human spirit attempts? Or is there, too, a true gospel of drawing in – of renouncing? In the essential, mind you! – It is easy in trifles, in indulgences and luxuries. But to surrender the exercise and expansion of self?

If that be right, if that be true – at any rate it was not Jenny Driver. She was a strong, natural-born swimmer, cast now for the first time into open sea – after the duck ponds of her Smalls and her Simpsons. It was not the smooth waters which tested, tried, or in innermost truth delighted her most.

All this in a very tiny corner? Of course. Will you find me anywhere that is not a corner, please? Alexander worked in one, and Cæsar. "What does it matter then what I do?" "No more," I must answer, being no philosopher and therefore unprepared with a theory, "than it matters whether or not you are squashed under yonder train. But if you think – on your own account – that the one matters, why, for all we can say, perhaps the other does."

That duck pond of the Simpsons! By apparent chance – it may be, in fact, by some unusual receptivity in my own bearing – that very day Chat talked to me about it. I had grown friendlier toward Chat, having perceived that the cunning in her – (it was there, and refuted Cartmell's charge of mere foolishness) – ran to no more than a decent selfishness, informed by years of study of Jenny, deflected by a spinsterish admiration of Octon's claim to unquestioned male dominion. Her reason said – "We are very well as we are. I am comfortable. I am 'putting by.' Jenny's marriage might make things worse." The spinster added, "But this must end some day. Let it end – when it must – in an irresistible (perhaps to Chat's imagination a rather lurid) conquest." Paradoxically her instinct (for if anything be an instinct, selfishness is) squared with what I had deciphered of Jenny's strategy – in immediate action at least. Chat would not have Octon shown the door; neither would she set him at the head of the table – just yet. Being comfortable, she abhorred all chance of convulsions – as Jenny, being powerful, resented all threat of dominion. But if the convulsion must come – as it must some day – Chat wanted it dramatic – matter for gossip and for flutters! To her taste Octon fulfilled that æsthetic requirement.

Naturally Chat saw Jenny at the Simpsons' from her own point of view – through herself – and by that avenue approached the topic.

"Of course things are very much changed for the better in most ways, Mr. Austin – if they'll only last. The comforts! – And, of course, the salary! Well, it's not the thing to talk about that. Still I daresay you yourself sometimes think – ? Yes, of course, one must consider it. But there were features of the rectory life which I confess I miss. We had always a very cheerful tea, and supper, too, was sociable. In fact one never wanted for a chat. Here I'm thrown very much on my own resources. Jenny is out or busy, and Mrs. Bennet – the housekeeper, you know – is reserved and, of course, not at her ease with me. And then there was the authority!" (Was Chat also among the Cæsars?) "Poor Chat had a great deal of authority at the rectory, Mr. Austin – yes – she had! Mrs. Simpson an invalid – the rector busy or not caring to meddle – the girls were left entirely to me. My word was law." She shook her head regretfully over the change in her position.

"We all like that, Miss Chatters, when we can get it!"

"Jenny, of course, was different – and that made it difficult sometimes. Besides being the eldest, she was very well paid for and, although not pampered and, I must say, considering all things as I

now know them, very ill-supplied with pocket money, there were orders that she should ride every day. Two horses and the hostler from the Bull every day – except Sundays! It couldn't but make a difference, especially with a girl of Jenny's disposition – not altogether an easy one, Mr. Austin. It had to be give-and-take between us. If she obeyed me, there were many little things I could do – having, as I say, the authority. If she would do her lessons well – and her example had great influence on the others – I didn't trouble to see what books she had in her bedroom (with the other girls I did), nor even ask questions if she stayed out a little late for supper. Of course we had to be very much on our guard; it didn't do to make the Simpson girls jealous."

"You had a little secret understanding between yourselves?"

"Never, Mr. Austin! I wouldn't have done such a thing with any of my pupils. It would be subversive of discipline."

"Of course it would; I beg your pardon." (Here a little "homage to virtue" on both our parts!)

"She knew how far she could go; she knew when I must say 'Stop!' She never put me to it – though I must say she went very near the line sometimes. She came to us very raw, too, with really no idea of what was ladylike. What those Smalls can have been like! You see what she is now. I don't think I did so badly."

I saw what she was now – or some of it. And I seemed to see it all growing up in that country rectory – the raw girl from the Smalls (those deplorable Smalls!) at Cheltenham, learning her youthful lessons in diplomacy – how far one can go, where one must stop, how keen a bargain can be struck with Authority. Chat had been Authority then. There was another now. Yet where the difference in principle?

"I can't have managed so very badly, because they were all broken-hearted to lose me – I often think how they can be getting on! – and here I am with Jenny! Well, poor Chat would have had to go soon, anyhow. They were all growing up. That time comes. It must be so in my profession, Mr. Austin. Indispensable to-day, to-morrow you're not wanted!"

"That sounds sad. You must be glad, in the end, that you didn't stay?"

"It'll be the same here some day. For all you or I know, it might be to-morrow. The only thing is to suit as long as we can, and to put by a little."

I vowed – within my breast – that henceforth Chat's little foibles – or defenses? – her time-serving, her cowardice, her flutters, her judgment of Jenny's concerns from a point of view not primarily Jenny's, her encroachments on the port and other stolen (probably transient!) luxuries – all these should meet with gentle and sympathetic appraisal. She was only trying to "suit" – and meanwhile to put by a little. But I was not sure what she had done, or helped to do, to Jenny, nor that her ex-pupil's best course would not lie in presenting her with her *congé* and a substantial annuity.

An invitation came from Fillingford in which Chat and I were courteously included. Jenny, however, found work for poor Chat at home (alas, for the days of Authority!) and made me drive her over in the dog-cart. As we drove in at the gates, she asked suddenly, "How am I to behave?"

"Don't look at anything as if you wanted to buy it," was the best impromptu advice I could hit on.

"I might do it tactfully! Don't you remember what my father said? – 'You may succeed in your way better than I in mine.'"

"I remember. And you think he referred to tact?"

Jenny took so long to answer that there was no time to answer at all; we were at the door, and young Lacey was waiting.

The house was beautiful and stately; I think that Jenny was surprised to find that it was also in decent repair. There was nothing ragged, nothing poverty-stricken; a grave and moderate handsomeness marked all the equipment. The fall in fortune was rather to be inferred from what was absent than rudely shown in the present condition of affairs. Thus the dining-room was called the Vandyke Room – but there were no Vandykes; a charming little boudoir was called the Madonna Parlor – but the Madonna had taken flight, probably a long flight across the Atlantic. In giving us

the names Lord Fillingford made no reference to their being no longer applicable – he seemed to use them in mechanical habit, forgetful of their significance – and Jenny, mindful perhaps of the spirit of my warning, refrained from questions. But for what was to be seen she had a generous and genuine enthusiasm; the sedate beauty and serenely grand air of the old place went to her heart.

But one picture did hang in the Madonna Parlor – a half-length of a beautiful high-bred girl with large dark eyes and a figure slight almost to emaciation. Lacey and I, who were behind, entered the room just as the other two came to a stand before it. I saw Jenny's face turn toward Fillingford in inquiry.

"My wife," he said. "She died thirteen years ago – when Amyas was only five." His voice was dry, but he looked steadily at the picture with a noticeable intentness of gaze.

"This was mother's own room, Miss Driver," Lacey interposed.

"Yes. How – how it must have suited her!" said Jenny in a low voice.

Fillingford turned his head sharply round and looked at her; with a slight smile he nodded his head. "She was very fond of this room. She had it furnished in blue – instead of yellow." Then he moved quickly to the door. "There's nothing else you'd care to see here, I think."

After lunch Lacey carried Jenny off to the garden – his father seemed to think that he had done enough as host and to acquiesce readily in the devolution of his duties – and I sat awhile with Fillingford, smoking cigarettes – well, he only smoked one. It seemed to me that the man was like his house; just as the state of its fortune was not rudely declared in anything unbecoming or shabby, but had to be gathered from the gaps where beauties once had figured, so the essence of him, and the road to understanding him, lay in his reserves, his silences, his defensiveness. What he refrained from doing, being, or saying, was the most significant thing about him. His manners were irreproachable, his courtesy cast in a finer mold than that of an ordinary gentleman, yet he did not achieve real cordiality and remained at a very long arm's length from intimacy. His highest degree of approval seemed to consist in an absence of disapprobation; yet, feeling that this negative reward of merit was hard to win, the recipient took the unsubstantial guerdon with some gratification. My own hope was to escape from his presence without having caused him to think that I had done anything offensive; if he had nothing against me, I should be content. I wondered whether he were satisfied to have the like measure meted out to him. His son had said he was "not expansive": that was like denying silkiness to a porcupine. Yet there was that about him which commanded respect – at least a respect appropriately negative; you felt certain that he would do nothing sordid and touch nothing unclean; he would always be true to the code of his class and generation.

We heard laughter from Jenny and Lacey echoing down the long passages as they returned from the garden; from the noise their feet made they seemed to be racing again. The sounds interrupted a rather perfunctory conversation about Nicholas Driver and the growth of Catsford. Rather to my surprise – I must confess – his face lit up with a smile – a smile of pensive sweetness.

"That sounds cheerful," he said. "More like old days!" Then he looked at me apprehensively, as though afraid that he had proffered an uninvited confidence. He went on almost apologetically. "It's very quiet here. My health doesn't fit me for public life, or even for much work in the county. We do our duty, I hope, but we tend rather to fall out of the swim. It wasn't so in my wife's time. Well, Amyas will bring all that back again some day, I hope."

"I'm glad to hear that he's got his commission," said I.

"Yes, he must go and do some work, while I hold the fort for him at home. Landed property needs a great deal of attention nowadays, Mr. Austin." Again he smiled, but now wearily, as though his stewardship were a heavy burden.

The laughing pair burst into the room. Amyas was flushed, Jenny seemed out of breath; they had a great joke to tell.

"We've found a picture of Miss Driver in the West Gallery," cried Amyas. "Really it must be her – it's exactly like!"

"Fancy my picture being in your house all this time, Lord Fillingford – and you never told me!"

Fillingford was looking intently at Jenny now. He raised his brows a little and smiled, as the result of his survey.

"Yes – I'm afraid I know which picture Amyas means, though I don't often go to the West Gallery. The one on the right of the north door, Amyas?"

"Yes – in a wonderful gown all over pearls, you know."

"Who is she – besides me?" asked Jenny. "Because I believe she has a look of me really."

"She's an ancestress – a collateral ancestress at least – of ours. She was one of Queen Elizabeth's ladies. But we're not proud of her – and you mustn't be proud of the likeness – if there is one, Miss Driver."

"But I am proud of it. I think she's very pretty – and some day I'll have a gown made just like that."

"Why aren't we proud of her, father?" asked young Lacey.

"She got into sad disgrace – and very nearly into the Tower, I believe. Elizabeth made her kinsman Lord Lacey – one of my predecessors – take her away from Court and bring her down to the country. Here she was kept – in fact more or less imprisoned. But it didn't last many years. Smallpox carried her off, poor thing – it was very bad in these parts about 1590 – and, unluckily for her, before the queen died.

"What was her name?"

"Mistress Eleanor Lacey."

"And what had she done?" pursued Jenny, full of interest.

"Ah, well, what was the truth about it – who can tell now? It was never important enough to get put on record. But the family tradition is that the Queen was jealous of her place in Leicester's affections." He smiled at Jenny. "I wish Amyas had found you a more acceptable prototype!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jenny thoughtfully. "I like her looks. Do you believe that what they said was true?"

"I'm sorry to say that, again according to the family tradition, it was."

Our dog-cart had been ready for some minutes. Jenny said good-by, and both father and son escorted her to the door.

"I hope we shall see you at dinner as soon as my sister comes back," said Fillingford, as he helped her to mount into the cart. "We must have a little festivity for Amyas before he joins."

Jenny was all thanks and cordiality, and drove off smiling and waving her hand gayly.

"Isn't that really rather interesting about Eleanor Lacey? Mind you go and see the picture next time you're there! It's really very like."

I promised to see the picture, and asked her how she had got on with Fillingford.

"Oh, I like him well enough, but –" She paused and smiled reflectively. "Down at the Simpsons' there was a certain young man – boy he really was – whom we called Rabbit. That was only because of the shape of his mouth, and has nothing to do with the story! I used sometimes to walk home with Rabbit – from evening church, or lawn-tennis parties, and so on, you know." (Were these the occasions on which she was rather late for supper – without incurring Chat's rebuke?) "We girls used to laugh at him because he always began by taking great pains to show you that he didn't mean to flirt – well, at all events, didn't mean to begin the flirtation. If you wanted to flirt, you must begin yourself – that was Rabbit's attitude, and he made it perfectly plain in his behavior.

"Rabbit can't have been a very amusing youth to walk home with in the gloaming?" I ventured to suggest.

"He wasn't, but then there wasn't much choice down at the Simpsons', you know. Besides, it could be made rather funny with Rabbit. You see, he wouldn't begin because he had such a terror of being snubbed." She laughed in an amused reminiscence. "I think I shall call Lord Fillingford Rabbit," she ended.

"It'll be very disrespectful."

"Oh, you can't make all the nicknames for yourself!" She paused and added, apparently with a good deal of satisfaction – "Rabbit – and Volcano – yes!"

CHAPTER VII

THE FLICK OF A WHIP

Jenny spent a large part of the winter in Italy, Chat being with her, Cartmell and I left in charge at home. But early in the New Year she came back and then, her mourning being over, she launched out. Without forgetting her father's injunction against spending all her income, she organized the household on a more extensive scale; new carriages and more horses, a couple of motors, and a little electric launch for the lake were among the additions she made. The out-of-doors staff grew till Cartmell had to ask for an estate-steward to take the routine off his shoulders, while Mrs. Bennet and Loft blazed with pride at the swelling numbers of their subordinates in the house itself. Jenny's taste for splendor came out. She even loved a touch of the gorgeous; old Mr. Driver's dark blue liveries assumed a decidedly brighter tint, and I heard her express regret that postilions and four horses were in these days thought ostentatious except for very great national or local potentates. "If I were a peeress, I would have them," she declared rather wistfully. If that were the condition and the only one, after all we might perhaps live to see the four horses and the postilions at Breysgate before we were many months older. By now, there was matter for much speculation about her future; the closer you were to her, the more doubtful any speculation seemed.

This was the time of her greatest glory – when she was fresh to her state and delighting in it, when all the neighborhood seemed to be at her feet, town and county vying in doing her honor – and in accepting her hospitality.

Entertainment followed entertainment; now it was the poor, now it was the rich, whom she fed and fêted. The crown of her popularity came perhaps when she declared that she would have no London house and wanted no London season. Catsford and the county were good enough for her. The *Catsford Herald and Times* printed an article on this subject which was almost lyrical in its anticipation of a return of the good old days when the aristocracy found their own town enough. It was headed "Catsford a Metropolis – Why not?" And it was Jenny who was to imbue the borough with this enviable metropolitan character! This was *Redeunt Saturnia regna* with a vengeance!

To all outward appearance she was behaving admirably – and her acquaintance with Fillingford had reached to as near intimacy as it was ever likely to get while it rested on a basis of mere neighborly friendship. Lady Sarah had been convinced or vanquished – it was impossible to say which. At any rate she had withdrawn her opposition to intercourse between the two houses and appeared to contemplate with resignation, if not with enthusiasm, a prospect of which people had now begun to talk – not always under their breath. Fillingford Manor and Breysgate were now united closely enough for folk to ask whether they were to be united more closely still. For my own part I must admit that, if Lord Fillingford were wooing, he showed few of the usual signs; but perhaps Jenny was! I remembered the story of Rabbit – without forgetting the subject of the other nickname!

Old Cartmell was a great advocate of the Fillingford alliance. House laid to house and field to field were anathema to the Prophet; for a family lawyer they have a wonderful attraction. An estate well-rounded off, spacious, secure from encroachment and, with proper capital outlay, returning three per cent. – he admires it as the rest of us a Velasquez – well, some of us – or others, a thoroughbred. Careful man as he was, he declined to be dismayed at Jenny's growing expenditure. "The income's growing, too," he said. "It grows and must grow with the borough. Old Nick Driver had a very long head! She can't help becoming richer, whatever she does – in reason." He winked at me, adding, "After all, it isn't as if she had to buy Fillingford, is it?" I did not feel quite sure that it was not – and at a high price; but to say that would have been to travel into another sphere of discussion.

"Well, I'm very glad her affairs are so flourishing. But I wish the new liveries weren't so nearly sky-blue. I hope she won't want to put you and me in them!"

Cartmell paid no heed to the liveries. He took a puff at his cigar and said, "Now – if only she'll keep straight!" That would have seemed an odd thing to say – to anyone not near her.

Yet trouble came – most awkwardly and at a most awkward moment. Octon himself was the cause of it, and I – unluckily for myself – the only independent witness of the central incident.

He had – like Jenny – been away most of the winter, but I had no reason to suppose that they had met or even been in communication; in fact, I believe that he was in London most of the time, finishing his new book and superintending the elaborate illustrations with which it was adorned. He did, however, reappear at Hatcham Ford close on the heels of Jenny's return to Breysgate, and the two resumed their old – and somewhat curious – relations. If ever it were true of two people that they could live neither with nor without one another, it seemed true of that couple. He was always seeking her, and she ever ready and eager to welcome him; yet at every other meeting at least they had a tiff – Jenny being, I must say, seldom the aggressor, at least in the presence of third persons: perhaps her offenses, such as they were, were given in private. But there was one difference which I perceived quickly, but which Octon seemed slower to notice: I hoped that he might never notice it at all, or, if he did, accept it peaceably. Jenny preferred, if it were possible, to receive him when the household party alone was present; when the era of entertaining set in, he was bidden on the off-nights. No doubt this practice admitted of being put – and perhaps was put by Jenny – in a flattering way. But it was impossible to be safe with him – there was no telling how his temper would take him. So long as he believed that Jenny herself best liked to see him intimately, all would go well; but if once he struck on the truth – that she was yielding deference to the wishes of his enemies, her neighbors – there might very probably be an explosion. "Volcano" would get active if he thought that "Rabbit" and company – Jenny had concealed neither nickname from him – were being consulted. Or he might get just a wayward whim; if his temper were out, he would make trouble for its own sake – or to see with how much he could make her put up; each was always trying the limits of his or her power over the other.

The actual occasion of his outburst was, as usual, trivial, and perhaps – far as that was from being invariably the case – afforded him some shadow of excuse. Neither did Chat help matters. He had sent up from Hatcham Ford a bunch of splendid yellow roses, and, when he came to dinner the same evening, he naturally expected to see them on the table. "Where are my roses?" he asked abruptly, when we were half-way through dinner.

"I love them – they're beautiful – but they didn't suit my frock to-night," said Jenny, smiling. She would have managed the matter all right if she had been let alone, but Chat must needs put her oar in.

"They'll look splendid on the table to-morrow night," she remarked – as though she were saying something soothing and tactful.

"Oh, you've got a dinner-party to-morrow?" he asked – still calm, but growing dangerous.

"Nobody you'd care about," Jenny assured him; she had given Chat a look which immediately produced symptoms of flutters.

"Who's coming?"

"Oh, only Lord Fillingford and Lady Sarah, the Wares, the Rector, the Aspenicks, and one or two more."

"H'm. My roses are good enough for that lot, but I'm not, eh?"

Jenny's hand was forced; Chat had undermined her position. Not even for the sake of policy did she love to do an unhandsome thing – still less to be found out in doing one. To use the roses and slight the donor would not be handsome. She knew Aspenick's objection to meeting Octon, but probably she thought that she could keep Aspenick in order.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.