Hocking Joseph

The Man Who Rose Again

Joseph Hocking
The Man Who Rose Again

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23169467
The Man Who Rose Again:

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	19
CHAPTER III	34
CHAPTER IV	50
CHAPTER V	67
CHAPTER VI	84
CHAPTER VII	100
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	115

Hocking Joseph
The Man Who Rose Again

CHAPTER I
A CYNIC'S CHALLENGE

Four men sat in the smoking-room of a London club. They were alone. That is scarcely to be wondered at, for it was far past midnight. Moreover, it was not a large club, and even when the place was most frequented large numbers were seldom present. Three of the men were chatting cursorily about a defeat of the Government which had taken place that night, but the fourth, by far the most striking looking man of the quartette, sat almost by himself, moody and silent.

They were all young men. The oldest had barely reached his thirty-fifth year, while the youngest was evidently less than thirty. All of them gave evidence of being young men of leisure, and each of them could claim to belong to that class which is vaguely termed English gentlemen.

"Will the Government resign, think you?" said one.

"No," another replied.

"Why? It could hardly be called a snatch division."

"No, but governments do not resign unless the country is

against them."

"Which it is."

"In a sense, yes; but in another sense, no. The question to-night was a brewer's question. Well, if they resigned and went to the country, they would be returned again. The brewers, for whom the Government has been fighting, would be sufficiently strong at the polls to secure the return of their supporters."

"Which is a strong reason why the Government will resign."

They went on discussing the question, neither saying anything worthy of record. They seemed to be deeply interested, however; perhaps because two of them were Parliamentary candidates. The man who sat apart, however, took no note of the conversation. He could by listening carefully have heard all that was said, but his mind seemed elsewhere. Neither did he speak to the others, although he knew each one intimately. Of what he was thinking it would be difficult to tell. There was a strange, vacant look in his eyes, and his face was very pale.

He seemed utterly oblivious of the time, and although a waiter hovered near, as if to remind the party that he was very sleepy, this young man especially took no note of his presence.

Presently he aroused himself, and rang a bell which stood on the table at his elbow.

The waiter came towards him sleepily.

"Whisky," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"A large one."

"Yes, sir."

"And make haste about it."

The waiter left the room, while the others glanced at each other significantly.

"How many is that to-night?" said one in a low voice.

"Heaven knows, I don't. He's on the drink again."

"If I'd taken half he's had, I should have to be carried to bed."

"Pity, isn't it? He's ruining his career."

"I don't know. He never shows he's been drinking. He's always at his best when he's drunk."

"He's never drunk."

"Well, you know what I mean. He can never do himself justice now, unless he's had what would make any one of us incapable."

"Yes, but that kind of thing can't last. No constitution could stand it. In time it'll destroy his nerves, and then – "

"Yes, it's a pity."

The waiter brought the young man a large measure of whisky and a bottle of soda-water. He poured a small quantity of soda into the whisky. His hand was steady and he did not seem to be in the least affected by what he had drunk.

He lifted the glass to his lips and nearly drained it. Then he sat back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"I should think he will soon be asleep, now," whispered one.

"Not he."

"It's an awful pity. Don't you think one ought to try and warn him?"

"Try it. I would not like to."

"But he's ruining his life. A fellow of such brilliance, too. Do you remember that speech he made at the Eclectic?"

"Remember! Who doesn't? You know the constituency he's candidate for? Well, the story of his adoption for that constituency by the general committee is worth telling. I don't quite know how it was, but through a misunderstanding two men were invited on the same night to come and address them with a view to adoption. Well, the other man was young Lord Telsize, an able, capable fellow, by no means a bad speaker, and as rich as a money-lending Jew. Each had to address the meeting in turn, and Telsize came first. He made a rattling speech; he voiced all their pet opinions, and every one was made to understand that if he were adopted it would not cost them a penny to fight the election. The meeting wanted to vote straight away and adopt Telsize without hearing Leicester, especially when they heard that he would contribute practically nothing to the funds. However, the chairman overruled this. He said it would not be courteous to ask a man down and not hear him speak; so they called him in. Leicester saw at a glance how things stood, and that put him on his mettle. In three minutes the meeting was at a white heat, and before half an hour was over he was unanimously invited to fight their battles. A man who was there told me that Leicester's speech was the most remarkable thing he'd ever heard."

"I don't care, he's ruining himself. The truth about him is sure to come out, and then he'll be drummed out of the place."

"I suppose Miss Blackstone refused him because she had heard about this habit of his."

"Oh, it wasn't that only. Miss Blackstone is a very religious young lady, and, as you know, Leicester is an agnostic. Not only that, but his views about marriage would not be likely to commend themselves to her. Fancy Radford Leicester being accepted by a girl like Miss Blackstone!"

They had been speaking in low tones, although they thought the young man was too much under the influence of whisky to take any notice of them, even although the sound of their voices could reach him plainly. They were greatly surprised, therefore, when he to whom they had referred as Radford Leicester rose from his chair and came close to them. He looked at them quietly, glancing first at one and then at the other. Each returned his glance, as if wondering what he would say.

"I was in doubts," he said, "as to whether I was in one of Moody and Sankey's meetings or whether some strange fate had thrown me into the midst of a Dorcas society."

"Why, old man?"

"Because at first I heard of some scheme for snatching a brand from the burning, and afterwards I heard some gossip which was as full of lies as the gossip of a Dorcas society usually is. When I opened my eyes I was a bit surprised. I found I was in the smoking-room of my club, where women are not admitted. Am I mistaken? For the plan for my salvation was essentially feminine, while the gossip was scarcely up to the level of a woman's charity

meeting."

He drew a chair into the circle and sat down, each man looking rather uncomfortable as he did so.

"Don't you feel like a word of prayer?" he said mockingly. "I am rather in the humour for it. What is the process? First conviction, and then conversion, isn't it?"

There was no thickness in his voice, each word was carefully articulated. He gave no sign of drinking, if we except the peculiar look in his eyes.

"Your father is a parson, isn't he, Purvis?" he went on. "He will be pleased to know that his son is walking in his father's footsteps, while Sprague's mother is great at women's meetings. Sprague has evidently inherited his mother's gifts."

Sprague turned towards him angrily.

"Steady, steady, old man," said Leicester, with a mocking smile on his lips. "You can't deny that you assist your mother at her drawing-room meetings, neither can you deny that the story of Miss Blackstone's refusal of me was born in one of them."

"It might have been mentioned there," said Sprague, thrown off his guard.

"It originated there," said Leicester lightly.

"Why do you say that?" asked Sprague.

"Because it is safe to assume that, when a story without any foundation in fact is afloat, especially if it is a trifle malicious, it was born in a religious meeting run by women. Besides, I know your mother started this gossip."

Each of the three men looked more uncomfortable. They had no idea that the quick ears of the man had heard every word.

"I'm a sad case," went on Leicester, mockingly. "I'm ruining my career, my nerves are breaking down, and I shall soon be drummed out of my constituency. Let's see, how many whiskies have I had to-night? Surely, surely, you fellows, who are so immaculate, should have a few words of prayer. Come now, Purvis, a few words of exhortation. I will listen patiently."

"We said nothing wrong, Leicester," said Purvis, "and we meant nothing wrong. We only said what those who know you best, and like you best, are thinking. You may keep the fact of your hard drinking from the public a little longer, but not much. Such things are bound to leak out."

"Especially when I have such loyal friends."

"That isn't fair, Leicester. Not one of us would ever dream of saying outside what we say among ourselves. We can't close our eyes or our ears. We've heard you order whisky after whisky to-night, and we've seen you drink them."

"And what then?"

"What then?"

"Yes, what then? I am as sober as you. I say, hold out your hands as I am holding out mine. Are yours steadier than mine? I tell you, no whisky that was ever distilled could bowl me over."

"All nonsense, Leicester; all nonsense. Whisky is whisky, and nerves are nerves, and whisky will beat you, if you go on drinking so. It may be unpleasant for you to hear us say so, but truth is

truth."

"I know when to stop," said Leicester. "While my head and my heels are steady I know I'm all right."

"All the same, you can't stop people talking, and there is some truth in the Blackstone story."

"How much?"

"You know."

"Yes, I know," said Leicester quietly; "and as you chaps are so deeply interested in my soul, I'll tell you. I never proposed to Miss Blackstone; I never thought of proposing to her."

"Then why did you cease going to her father's house?"

Leicester laughed.

"Because her father has ceased to invite me," he replied. "Do you know why? I'll tell you. The devil got hold of me one night and I trod on the old man's moral and religious corns. I knocked the sawdust out of his dolls. I was feeling a bit cynical, and I attacked the motives and morals of religious people. Now, then, you know. But I never proposed to Miss Blackstone; if I had, I should have been accepted."

"It's good to have a high opinion of one's self."

"Or a poor opinion of women," replied Leicester.

"What has that to do with the question?"

"Only this. Women don't trouble about morals. What women want in a husband is a man that shall be talked about; a man who is courted and petted; a man who is quoted in the papers. Given position, and notoriety on the lines I have mentioned, and women

don't trouble about the other things."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know."

"How do you know?"

"I am thirty years of age, and I have kept my eyes open during these last ten years – that's all. You talk about my religious views and my ideas on marriage, and what you call my cynicism generally. But let the best of the women believe that a man will give them the position they covet and then he can believe what he likes and do what he likes. No, my dear, pious friends, you need not fear either about me or my future as long as you believe in your views about what is called my abilities."

"That's a libel on women," said Sprague.

"I'm willing to put my views to a test," replied Leicester.

"What do you mean?"

"My language is pretty plain," replied Leicester.

Each of the other men felt the influence of Leicester's stronger personality, and each of them resented it at the same time. They felt almost angry that the man whom they had been pitying as a drunkard should so coolly hold them at bay.

"It is a poor thing to say you'll put your views to the test, when you know it cannot be done," remarked Sprague.

"Look here, my dear, exemplary friends, who are so anxious for my moral reclamation," said Leicester in his quiet, mocking tone, "I've made a statement, and I'll stand by it. I'm not a marrying man, as you know; still I am willing to sacrifice my

own feelings for the good of my fellows. So, then, pick out your most pious and high-principled young woman; Sunday-school teacher preferred, warranted to be sound in doctrine, and having a proper horror of men like myself. Choose her carefully, and I'm prepared to prove my words."

"If she'll have you."

"That's the point. I maintain that neither orthodoxy of life nor conduct weigh with women as long as the suitor has the qualifications I have mentioned. Now it is believed, rightly or wrongly, that I am going to have what is commonly called a brilliant career. Well, choose your most pattern young woman – she must be what is called a lady, of course, and I must stipulate that she is passably good-looking and is not penniless."

"And then?"

"I am prepared to put my views to the test. Of course, model young men like you would not think of a wager; but if I don't succeed – well, I'll give a hundred pounds to any religious cause you like to mention."

The man's eyes flashed with a new light. The plan he had sketched seemed to amuse and excite him.

"It's all nonsense," said Sprague.

"Test it," laughed Leicester.

He had apparently imbued the others with his own spirit. For the moment they were eager to see what would happen.

"Name your woman," went on Leicester. "What, are you afraid? Will you not support your doctrine of the nobility of

women? I give it as my opinion that women are uniformly selfish, vain, and sordid. I maintain that what they want is a man who will give them position, name, prominence. Given that, and everything goes by the board. And I stand by it. I place a hundred pounds upon it. All I ask you to do is to name your woman."

There was a wild gleam in his eye, and he was evidently prepared to stand by his words. As for the others, they yielded more and more to his stronger personality.

"No," said Sprague presently, "it is not fair. If either of us had a sister we would not like to make her the subject of such a proposition."

"But if you are right, my dear, good friends," went on Leicester, "no harm can be done. I propose to the lady, and I am refused. What then? It is only another illustration of the downfall of Radford Leicester, the atheist, the cynic, the drunkard. But I am willing to risk it. All I say is, name the woman. Let her be the best you can think of; let her be the most exemplary, the most high-minded, the most orthodox, and I maintain that she'll not care a fig about all my failings, if she believes in the brilliance of my career."

"If you hadn't drunk so much whisky you'd not propose such a thing," said Purvis.

"Oh, you are backing out, are you?" sneered Leicester. "It is always the same. Fellows like you utter pious platitudes; you proclaim the glory of women; you hold up your hands with horror at a man who dares tell the truth, and then you back out

like cowards. I say there is no woman but who has her price. You quote that lying gossip about Miss Blackstone refusing me because of my heresies and my whisky drinking. I tell you it is a lie invented by Sprague's mother, and I go further and I say that there is no woman who really cares a fig for these things, provided you can satisfy her ambition. And I'm prepared to stand by it. All I say is, name your woman."

"Miss Olive Castlemaine."

The man who had taken no part in the conversation spoke this time, and as the name escaped his lips both Purvis and Sprague gave a start. Even Leicester was silent for a moment. He looked from one to another suspiciously, then he burst out laughing.

"You've made a bold bid, Winfield," he said. "You make even me tremble. Miss Olive Castlemaine is, so I suppose, the most sought-after heiress in London. She fulfils all my conditions, and, more than that, she has refused both Sprague and Purvis. I suppose, from what I am told, that she looked upon Sprague as a bit of a hypocrite, and Purvis as – well, not likely to have a great future."

He evidently stung both these men by his words. It was perfectly true that both of them had been refused by Miss Olive Castlemaine, it was just as true that she had been sought after by a number of other eligible marriageable men, and had refused them all.

Miss Olive Castlemaine was known to be a young lady of more than ordinary beauty, of good social standing, and,

what was more, an heiress to great wealth. But she was not a society woman. Some women laughed at her because she preferred seeking to do good in the world to living the life of a butterfly. She worked among the poor, she taught a class of ragged children, and she was known to have strong opinions both about men and things. She had taken a degree at St. Andrews University, she was a Girton girl, and had attained to a high position there. Without being a "blue stocking" she was a cultured woman, and was acquainted with the language and literature of more than one country. But, more than all, she had caused many society women to raise their eyebrows at the mention of her name, because she was, to use their expression, "pious." She belonged to no set, and was rarely seen at receptions. She loved London because it was the centre of English life – life intellectual, political, religious: but society functions had no attractions for her. Some had called her a female prig, but few regarded her as such – she was too healthy-minded, too natural, too real.

Her mother had died when she was quite a child, and thus she became the one earthly delight and pride of her father, who was managing director of, and chief shareholder in, one of the most prosperous and respectable firms in London. She lived with her father in one of those fine old houses, surrounded by a large tract of park-lands, a few of which yet remain within the precincts of Larger London, in spite of the ravages of the speculative builder.

She was at the time of the commencement of this history

about twenty-three years of age. She was a perfectly womanly woman. She hated much of the foolish flippancy which characterised many of the women she knew, and had a healthy disgust for those who talked lightly about not being bound by those great social institutions which lie at the basis of our national greatness and purity. Nevertheless, she dared to think for herself, and had an almost masculine way of defending her opinions.

Being the only child of John Castlemaine, who occupied not only a high position in the City of London, but owned more than one fine estate in England, she had all that money could buy, while her father's integrity and honourable reputation made her the envy of those who, socially, would regard her as an inferior. For John Castlemaine, while bearing a name known in English history, and possessed of great wealth, was still a member of what is called the "middle classes." He simply stood high up in his own class. He was not of those who mingled freely with the men who guide the destinies of the nation. Rich men came to his house, men great in the world of finance; but men great in the world of politics and science and letters were unknown to him. Perhaps this was his own fault, or perhaps it was because his tastes were simple and because he did not possess the qualities which would attract men of influence and power to his house. For John Castlemaine was a plain man. He belonged to the merchant class, and he prided himself on the position he held.

As we have said, his daughter, Olive Castlemaine, had had many suitors for her hand, but she had refused them all. Among

those who had been unfortunate were Harold Sprague and Herbert Purvis. They were both mediocre but respectable young men. Both had been in love with her, and both were wounded at her refusal. Perhaps this was why the mention of her name made them start as if with pain.

"Do you accept?" said Winfield.

"What do our pattern young men say?" sneered Leicester, and he looked from one to another as if awaiting their answer.

CHAPTER II
THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

For a minute there was a silence. In spite of the fact that Radford Leicester had instilled his own spirit into the party, there was something in his cynicism that repelled them as well as fascinated them. They were not bad young men. Not that they had high ideals, or were filled with lofty enthusiasms. But they had been reared on conventional lines, and although neither of them would have admitted it, they were influenced by the conventions which had surrounded their lives. To them there was something sordid, something repellent, in the thought of a man coolly offering to marry any one in order that he might prove the truth of a cynical statement to which he had given utterance. Nevertheless, they longed to accept his challenge. Radford Leicester's spirit possessed them; the man's cool and confident cynicism attracted them. The very daring of the proposal broke down their conventional ideas. Besides, in spite of Leicester's confidence, they did not believe that his opinions were true. Especially was this true of Purvis and Sprague. They had proposed to Miss Olive Castlemaine and had been refused. Other very eligible young men had also suffered the same fate. Was it likely, then, that Leicester, whose reputation was so peculiar, would be more fortunate than they?

More than all this, both of them felt somewhat bitter towards the woman who had refused them, and although they would not confess it even to themselves, they would rejoice if she should suffer something of the humiliation which they had felt. Such a feeling is natural to weak men. The sting of disappointment made them eager to fasten on anything which promised them a kind of revenge. They had a feeling that Miss Castlemaine was proud of her conquests, and they would rejoice if her pride could be humbled.

"What do our pattern young men say?" repeated Leicester. He emptied his glass as he spoke, and then turned towards them. "Why, think, my dear Moody and Sankey," he went on. "You were longing to save me from the error of my ways a few minutes ago; now here is your chance. It is true I only know this young lady by sight, but I have heard of her religious proclivities. Why, she might convert me. She might snatch the brand from the burning. She is such a pattern young woman, so high-principled, so good. Besides, I am told that she belongs to the Nonconforming order of pious people. She is a Wesleyan, or an Independent, or a Presbyterian, I don't know which; but being one of them, her principles will be more pronounced than those who belong to the worldly State Church. Here is your opportunity, not only of proving your belief in the nobility of women, but of bringing me under religious influences."

He spoke quietly and composedly, yet no doubt he was influenced by the whisky he had been drinking.

"Besides," he continued, "here is your chance of proving that the woman who refused you would also refuse me. Come, now, what do you say?"

"I accept," said Purvis.

"And you, too, Sprague?"

"Miss Castlemaine would not give you a second thought."

"Then you accept my offer? Look here, if I am rejected I give a hundred pounds to – what shall we say – Guy's Hospital? While if I am accepted you give the same sum. Is it a bargain?"

"I tell you she would not look at you. If she is not already acquainted with what those who know you think about you, she would soon become acquainted, and then – well, you would be driven from the house."

"Exactly; then you agree?"

"Oh yes, if you like."

"Good; as for Winfield, his only part in the business is naming the lady. Gentlemen, I am really much obliged to you. I have not felt so interested in life for a long time. You are really benefactors. But come, now, we must go into this affair in a business-like way, and, 'pon my word, I'll have another glass in order to drink success to the enterprise."

He rang the bell and the waiter appeared.

"Four whiskies, waiter," he said.

"I don't like this," said Sprague.

"What, the whisky? I'll complain to the management."

"No, the whole business. It isn't right."

"Not right? Why, it gives me a new interest in life, man. Already my moral sentiments are being elevated. I see myself going to that Nonconformist church with a hymn-book and Bible under my arm. I even see myself a deacon, or an elder, or something of that sort. Not right, when it is having such a regenerating influence?"

"Stick to your guns, you chaps," remarked Winfield quietly, who had been the silent member of the party.

"But I must have fair play," said Leicester. "I want a fair field and no favour. All I demand is that you chaps shall hold your tongues. This conversation must not go beyond these walls. That's fair, isn't it?"

"That's nothing but just," said Winfield.

"But how are you to get an introduction?" said Sprague. "Old John Castlemaine is very particular as to whom he has at his house, and although I have consented to this business, I'll take no part in it."

"Nor I," said Purvis; "and now I come to think about it, I withdraw from it altogether."

"Except to pay your hundred pounds if I succeed," said Leicester.

"You can't back out from that," remarked Winfield.

"Still, I'll be a party to nothing," he said weakly. "Of course I know it'll end in nothing. Miss Castlemaine is one of the cleverest women I know, and she'll see through everything at a glance."

"Then I'm to have fair play?"

"Oh yes, I shall not interfere with you. There will be no need."

"That is to say, not a whisper of this conversation goes outside this room."

"Of course that is but fair," urged Winfield again.

"Very well," said Purvis, "I shall say nothing; but mind you, I do not believe in the business. It's wrong, it's not – well, it's not in good form. But there, it doesn't matter. It'll end in nothing."

"Exactly," said Leicester; but there was a strange light in his eyes. "And you, Sprague, you'll act straight, too?"

"Oh, certainly," said Sprague. "I shall say nothing; all the same, I don't like it. But Leicester'll give up the whole idea to-morrow. He'd never have thought of it to-night if he hadn't been drunk."

"I drunk, my friends! I am as sober as the Nonconforming parson of the church that Miss Castlemaine attends. I'm as serious as a judge. No, no, I stand on principle – principle, my friends. I have a theory of life, and I stand by it, and I am ready to make sacrifices."

"But how are you to get an introduction?" asked Sprague. Evidently he was uneasy in his mind.

"Leave that to me; I ask you to do nothing but to hold your tongues, and that you've promised to do. I stand alone. I'm like your Martin Luther of old times. Against me are arrayed conventions and orthodoxy, pride and prejudice, thunders temporal and spiritual, but I fear them not. I – I, a poor solitary cynic, am stronger than you all, because I stand on the truth,

and you stand on sentiment, convention, orthodoxy. Gentlemen, I drink to you in very mediocre club whisky; nay, I don't drink to you, I drink to the man who stands on the truth – truth, gentlemen, truth!"

Again he lifted a glass of whisky to his lips and set it down empty.

"I'm going to bed," said Sprague.

"And I," said Purvis.

"And I, gentlemen," said Leicester, "remain here. Like all men who undertake great enterprises, I must make my plans. As a champion of truth I must vindicate it. I live to rid the world of lies, of sham, of hypocrisy. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night."

The whisky was beginning to show its effects at last, although his voice was still clear, his hand still steady. An unhealthy flush had come to his cheeks; the strange look in his eyes had become more pronounced.

And yet had a stranger entered the room at that moment, that stranger would have been struck by his tall, stalwart figure and his striking face. For Radford Leicester was no ordinary-looking man. Compared with him the others were commonplace. Neither was his face a bad face. It suggested lack of faith and lack of hope, but it did not suggest evil. Moreover, the well-shaped head, the broad forehead, the finely formed features, suggested intellectuality and force of character. It also told of a man whom nothing could daunt when his mind was made up. But it was not the face of a happy man. No man who is without faith and hope

can be.

Radford Leicester had come into the world handicapped. His father was a hard drinker before him, and he had inherited the love for alcohol. But more, he had been educated in a bad school. His mother had died when he was a child, and thus he became entirely under his father's influence. His father was a clever man, but a man whom life had embittered. He had been embittered by the death of his wife; he had been embittered because he had never obtained the success he had coveted. He saw men who did not possess half the brains or half the scholarship which he possessed, leap into fame, while he remained obscure. Perhaps this was because his theory of life was so utterly hopeless, and his faith in men and women was so little. Young Radford was naturally influenced by his father's views and his father's character, and thus by the time he was old enough to go to a public school he was, like Shelley, an atheist.

Presently his father, who was ambitious for his son's future, sent him to Oxford. He became a student at Magdalen College, where he obtained, not only a reputation as a scholar and a debater, but he became notorious pretty much on the same lines that Shelley became notorious. He became more and more imbued with the materialistic philosophy which was accepted by a certain section of the men there; indeed, he became their leader and spokesman. He professed an utter contempt for life. He regarded men and women as so many worthless things spawned upon the shores of time, to be presently swept away

into nothingness. He had little or no faith in the nobility of human nature. Men were mostly sordid, selfish, and base. Trace men's motives to their source, and they were in the main selfish. Women were, if possible, worse than men. When he was about twenty-four he altered his opinion for a time. He fell in love with a girl who fascinated him by her wit, her beauty, and what he believed to be her goodness. For a time his love made him cast off his father's hopeless philosophy. He formed plans for the future. Through his mother he possessed an income which, while not large, placed him in a position of affluence. It was large enough to enable him to enter Parliament, where he believed he could make for himself a brilliant future.

He proposed to the girl with whom he had become enamoured, and was accepted. He had barely become a happy accepted lover, however, when a young barrister who had won a great deal of praise at the Bar, and had also entered Parliament, where he was spoken of as a man with a great future, also proposed to her. Without hesitation this girl, Blanche Bridgetown by name, cast Leicester aside and accepted the man who had made a reputation, rather than keep her faith with one whose future was uncertain. In this decision Blanche Bridgetown was largely influenced by her mother.

Radford Leicester soon recovered from the wound he had received in his heart, but he did not recover from the blow which was struck at his faith. All his old cynicism and hopelessness reasserted themselves. Whenever he spoke of women he spoke

bitterly, his outlook on life became less cheerful than ever.

Then another element entered his life. Up to this time he had not been a hard drinker; but now the taste which he had inherited grew stronger. Drink made him forget his wounded pride; and, confident in his boast that no distilled spirits could ever affect him outwardly, he indulged in this evil habit more and more freely.

Still, pride was not dead. Professing, as he did, that life was a miserable sort of affair at the best, he still had ambition. He wanted to carve out for himself a place of position and power. His party had found a constituency for him, and he had contested it. At the time of the contest, however, the political opinions which Radford had adopted were not popular. His opponent won the seat.

Again he was embittered, again his pride was wounded, and the habit which had been gaining in strength now seemed to have obtained a complete mastery over him. Thus Radford Leicester, who had never been known to be drunk, was a drunkard. He had no faith in man; he had no faith in God.

There was one power in his life, however – ambition. He wanted to be renowned. He knew that he possessed unusual abilities; his career in Oxford had proved it; his friends had admitted it a hundred times in a hundred ways. Moreover, the vice which had mastered him had not degraded him in the eyes of men. Only a very few knew that he was a hard drinker. He always dressed well, spoke clearly, and walked steadily. Of his cynicism

he made no secret, of his repudiation of the Christian story and of Christian morals he almost boasted; nevertheless, nearly every one spoke of him as a man who would make a great name.

Besides, to weaker men he had a kind of fascination. He inspired others with his own recklessness, and many almost admired his scorn of conventional beliefs. In a way, moreover, he was liked. While repudiating accepted morality in theory, he was in many respects most punctilious about points of honour. When he gave his word he never broke it. In his political speeches he never pandered to popular cries. He did not say things because they were popular, and even while he declared that all men had their price, he was never known to sell himself.

At the present time many eyes were turned towards him. He had become a great favourite in his constituency. The leader of his party had come to speak at a great gathering, and when, as the accepted candidate, he had also to address the meeting, the great man had been simply carried away by his speech. As he remarked afterwards to his colleagues, it was the speech of a statesman and an orator. It might have been Macaulay, or Burke, who had come to life again.

At times Leicester pretended to despise all this, but at heart he was proud of it. Indeed, as I have said before, ambition was the one thing which kept him from being a wastrel.

No doubt Radford Leicester's story has been repeated many times in many ways; nevertheless, it is necessary to tell it again, in order to understand something of the complex character whom

I have introduced to my readers.

The club in which they had met was situated in the region of Pall Mall, and while not in the strict sense political, it was mostly frequented by those who were of Leicester's way of thinking. As I have said, it was not a large club; nevertheless, it provided a limited number of beds. These young men had come up to listen to a debate at the House of Commons, and preferred spending the night at the club to going to an hotel.

"Going to carry this thing through, Leicester?" said Winfield when the others had gone.

"If only to knock the nonsense out of those prigs," replied the other.

"Marriage is a dear price to pay."

"Then why are fellows so eager for it?"

"I don't know. Men are mostly fools, I suppose."

"Yes; but then it was not a question of marriage. It was only a question of being accepted as a possible husband."

"The same thing. No man of honour can win a woman's promise to be his wife and then jilt her."

"A great many do it. Besides, women don't care."

"Don't they? Why do you think so?"

"Because women are women. And it isn't as though this Miss Castlemaine had fears of being placed on the shelf."

"You are very cool about it, old man."

"Quite the reverse. I am quite excited. Just fancy my scheming to be the promised husband of a beautiful heiress, a sort of

glorified Quakeress, rich, pious, and high-minded. Winning an election will be a small thing compared with winning her."

"But surely you'll not try and carry the thing through?"

"Why?"

"Because you don't love her."

Leicester gave a significant whistle.

"Love," he said: "does that come in?"

"It's supposed to."

"It's one of the many illusions which still exist among a certain number of people. As for its reality – "

He shrugged his shoulders significantly, and then became quiet.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Winfield presently.

"A man's secret thoughts are sacred," replied Leicester mockingly. "Do you think my pious sentiments are for public utterance?"

Winfield rose and held out his hand.

"Good-night Leicester," he said.

"What, going to bed?"

"Yes, it's past one o'clock."

"Well, what then? You've no wife to regulate your hours."

"No, but I have work to regulate them. A journalist is a slave to the public."

"Stay half an hour longer."

"What's the good?"

"I can't sleep, and it's horrible to go to bed and lie awake.

Besides, I believe I've a touch of D.T."

"Nonsense. You who boast that your nerves are steel, and that no whisky can bowl you over."

"That's true, and yet – look here, Winfield, you are not one of these whining sentimentalists, and one can speak to you plainly. I was never drunk in my life; that is, I was never in a condition when I couldn't walk straight, and when I couldn't express my thoughts clearly. Nevertheless, it tells, my son, it tells. I don't get excited, and I don't get maudlin. Perhaps it would be better for me if I did."

"Why?"

"Then I should be afraid. As it is, I am afraid of nothing. And yet, I tell you, I have a bad time when I am alone in the dark. It's hell, man – it's hell!"

"Then give it up."

"I won't. Because it's all the heaven I have. Besides, I can do nothing without it. Without whisky my mind's a blank, my brains won't act. With it – that is, when I take the right quantity – nothing's impossible, man – nothing. Only – "

"What?"

"The right quantity increases – that's all. Good-night. When I come to remember, I shan't have the blues to-night."

"Why?"

"Why? Have I not to make my plans for conquest? I must win my wager!"

"Nonsense. You don't mean that?"

"But I do. Good-night, old man. Let me dream."

Radford Leicester remained only a few minutes after Winfield had left the room. Once he put his hand upon the bell, as if to ring for more whisky, but he checked himself.

"No," he said aloud, "I have had too much to-night already."

He walked with a steady step across the room, and the waiter, who had hovered around, prepared to turn out the lights.

"Good-night, Jenkins," said Leicester, as the man opened the door.

"Good-night, sir."

"Every one gone to bed except you?"

"Nearly every one, sir."

"Then I'll leave it to you to arrange for my bath in the morning. Half-past nine will do."

"Yes, sir. Hot or cold?"

A cold blast of air came along the passage. He was about to say "Cold," but he changed his mind.

"Hot, Jenkins," he said. "Good-night."

When he got to his bedroom and turned on the lights he looked at the mirror, long and steadily.

"Thirty," he said presently, "only thirty, and I'm ordering a hot bath at half-past nine in the morning. It's telling."

He wandered around the room aimlessly, but with a steady step.

"Yes," he said aloud presently, "I'll do it, if only to have the laugh out of those puppies. What's the odds? Blanche

Bridgewater or Olive Castlemaine? Women are all alike – mean, selfish, faithless. Well, what then? I'm in the mood for it."

He threw himself in a chair beside the bed and began to think.

"Yes," he said presently, "that plan will work."

CHAPTER III
THE MAN AND THE WOMAN MEET

"Olive," said John Castlemaine, after reading the letters which had come to his house one morning, "I am expecting two men here to dinner to-night."

"All right, father," said the girl, who was intent on a letter of her own, "I'll tell Mrs. Bray."

John Castlemaine went to the sideboard and cut a slice of ham, and then returned to the table again. His daughter was still intent on her letter, although she occasionally took a sip of coffee.

"Letter interesting, Olive?"

"Very."

Mr. Castlemaine looked steadily at his daughter and sighed. He was not a sad-looking man, even although he sighed. There was a merry twinkle in his keen grey eyes and a smile played around his mouth. Perhaps he sighed because his daughter reminded him of her mother, who was dead. Perhaps he remembered the fact that she was his only child, and that if she married he would be all alone. That he was proud of her there could be no doubt. No one could see the look he gave her without being sure of it; that he loved her very dearly was just as certain.

And indeed it was no wonder that this should be so, for Olive

Castlemaine had for years been his only earthly joy and comfort. Especially was this so since she had left school. He had bestowed all his affection on her as a child, but when she returned home from Germany, after having received many honours both at St. Andrews and Girton, pride was added to his love.

When one goes amongst a large concourse of people there is generally one face, one personality that stands out clearly and distinctly from the rest. The great majority are commonplace, unnoteworthy; but there is generally one, if not more, who strikes the attention, and claims the interest of the observer. When you see such a one you begin to ask questions. You want to know his or her history, antecedents, or achievements. If you learn nothing of importance you are disappointed. You feel that you have been defrauded of something.

"With such a face, such a personality," you say, "he or she should do and be something out of the ordinary."

Olive Castlemaine was always the one in a crowd. People seldom passed her without wanting to have a second look. When she went into society, which was seldom, many questions were invariably asked about her. There might be more beautiful women present; there might be women who were noteworthy because of some book they had written or some picture they had painted, but they did not excite the interest which Olive Castlemaine excited. It was not because of any exceeding beauty of form or face. Not that nature had dealt niggardly towards her in this direction – quite the contrary; she had a finely

formed face, and there were those who raved about the purity of her complexion and the glory of her "nut-brown hair." She was tall, and well formed too, and carried herself with grace. But it was not beauty of face and form that singled her out from the crowd. What it was I will not try and tell. I should only fail if I attempted. Beauty rightly understood is a spiritual thing, and is not dependent on contour of features or a brilliant complexion – it is in truth indefinable. A doll may be pretty, but it is not beautiful. Beauty is suggested rather than portrayed – it is something which lies behind the material. I have on rare occasions seen plain women who are beautiful. What has made them so I cannot tell, except that there has been what I call, for want of a better term, a spiritual essence, which has ennobled and glorified everything.

Looking at Olive Castlemaine's photograph, you would have said, "That is a fine, striking-looking girl." If you met her and talked with her, you would not use those words. Perhaps you would not try to describe her at all. You would be impressed by a sense of nobility, of spirituality, and you would be surprised if you heard of her doing anything mean and small. Indeed you would not believe it. Perhaps that was why strangers generally asked questions about her. For beauty which suggests truth, loveliness of mind, purity of soul, is of the rarest kind. And yet this beauty is possible to all.

"I say, Olive."

"Yes, father."

"Nearly finished?"

"Oh, please forgive me. I ought to be ashamed of myself, but it is an interesting letter."

"Who is it from?"

"From Bridget Osborne. We were together in Germany, you know."

"Bridget Osborne? Where does she live?"

"In Devonshire – Taviton Grange. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yes," said John Castlemaine with a smile. Then he added, "What a coincidence!"

"What is a coincidence?"

"Oh, my letter is from a man in Taviton."

"What letter?"

"The letter which led me to tell you that two men are coming here to dinner to-night."

"Oh, I had almost forgotten. Yes, I must tell Mrs. Bray. Half-past seven, I suppose."

"Yes; by the way, what makes your letter so interesting?"

"Well, Bridget's letters are always interesting. As you know, she writes well, and she has quite a gift in summing up people. You remember her letter about that French Count?"

"Very well. Yes, yes, it was very clever. Has some one else of note been staying at the Grange?"

"In a way, yes. At least she thinks he will be of note. Indeed she describes a very striking man."

"Who is he?"

"He is the candidate which her father has persuaded to fight Sir Charles Trefry at the next election."

John Castlemaine opened his eyes rather widely for a moment, then a rather amused look came upon his face.

"Tell me what she thinks about him," he said quietly.

Olive Castlemaine took up the letter she had placed on the table and began to search for the part which gave the description to which she had referred.

"There's a lot about the girls we met in Germany," went on Olive; "you'll not be interested in them. Oh, here it is. Listen: 'A very interesting guest has just left us. I am not sure whether I like him or no. Sometimes I think I do, and at others I am just as sure that I don't. He is the candidate who has been elected to fight Sir Charles Trefry, and father feels sure that he's bound to win. He came here to dinner last night, after which he addressed a meeting at the Taviton Public Hall, and then came back here again for the night. Of course father knows him very well, but, as I have always been away when he has been here before, this is the first time I have seen him. He arrived about six in the evening, and, owing to the meeting, we had to have an early dinner. The thing which was most remarkable about him before the meeting was his silence. He scarcely spoke a word. And yet I am sure that nothing escaped him. He has large grey eyes, which have a strange look in them. His face is very pale, and he looks all the more striking because he is cleanly shaven. As I said, he was very silent, and yet I felt interested in him. He impressed me

as one of those strong, masterful men who compel people to do things against their wills. Of course father asked two or three people of local importance to meet him, and the quiet way in which he snubbed them without being rude – ay, and without their feeling that they were snubbed – amused me. I rarely go to these political meetings, but I was so interested that I wanted to hear him, and I went. Of course there was a great crowd, but I took very little notice of it; I was too intent upon studying Mr. Radford Leicester's face. I have heard him spoken of as a keen politician, but I never saw a man look so utterly bored. Especially was this so at the beginning of the meeting; a little later a smile of amused contempt came upon his face as he listened to eulogiums on "our historic party." When he got up to speak, he looked disgusted at the way the people cheered, and although the former part of his speech was clever, there was nothing striking about it. He did not seem to think the audience worth an effort. Presently, however, one of the cleverest men in the town – he belonged to the other side – got up and heckled him. Then the fun began. He seemed to realise that he was on his mettle, and the way he pulverised our "local clever man" will be the talk of the town for a week of Sundays. Never before did I realise the influence of a strong, clever man. He simply played with the audience and swayed the people at will.

"'When we got home after the meeting he was again very silent for some time; then the vicar of our parish called, and again the fun commenced. This time politics were mingled with religion,

and although such discussions are generally very dull, I would not have missed it for anything. To see the Rev. William Dunstable writhe and wriggle and try to explain and qualify was simply splendid. I think I see his method. Mr. Dunstable would make one of his very orthodox assertions, with which Mr. Leicester would seem to agree. After this he would lead the vicar on by a series of the most innocent questions, but which presently led him to an awful pit from which he could not get out. What Mr. Leicester believes himself I have no idea, although I am told he has very queer opinions; but that he gave Mr. Dunstable a very bad time there can be no question. Indeed, he is one of the cleverest men I ever met.

"'And yet I don't think I like him. He doesn't seem sincere, and you always have the feeling that he's mocking you. Besides, he seems to have no faith in anything. He coolly pours scorn upon our most cherished traditions, and yet you can't fasten upon a single saying which commits him. In a sense, he's a sort of modern Byron, and yet you can never associate him with Byron's vices.

"'I am afraid you will be awfully bored at this long description of a man you have perhaps never seen nor heard of, but he's the talk of the town just now, and really he's a most fascinating man. If ever you have the chance to meet him, be sure and embrace it. You'll want to disagree with everything he says, but you'll find him interesting.'"

"Is that all?"

"Yes, all about him."

"He must be a smart fellow, I should think. Should you not like to meet him?"

"I'm not sure. Of course, you know that Bridget is rather given to enthuse. Still, a clever person is always interesting."

"Because," said Mr. Castlemaine slowly, "it is rather a strange coincidence."

"What is?"

"Why, this same Mr. Radford Leicester is one of the two men who are coming to dine here to-night."

"It'll be interesting to compare notes with Bridget," said Olive, after a moment's hesitation. "But why is he coming here?"

"Oh, a Mr. Lowry, a sort of local magnate in the neighbourhood of Taviton, wishes to see me on a matter of some importance, and he has asked this Mr. Leicester to be his spokesman. I did not wish to be in town to-night, so I asked him to come here to dinner."

"And to spend the night?"

"No. They will return to town. There is a train about twelve."

But for her friend's letter Olive Castlemaine would have paid no attention to the fact that two men were coming to dine, but remembering what she had just read she felt rather desirous of seeing Mr. Radford Leicester. Perhaps that was why she told her maid to take special care in selecting a dress that night, and why, just after seven o'clock, Olive made her way to the drawing-room with more than usual interest.

She heard steps and voices in the hall just before the dinner-hour, and a few minutes later the two visitors were announced.

John Castlemaine introduced them to his daughter, and then watched her face with an amused smile. Perhaps he wondered if her opinion tallied with that of the letter she had received that very day. Mr. Lowry caused no interest. He was simply a commonplace man who had succeeded in becoming rich. Olive had seen such by the dozen, and valued them at their true worth. But few of them were interesting. As a rule, they looked at everything through the medium of money. To them passing events were of interest because of the effect they might have upon the financial market. And even here their outlook was narrow and superficial. It was evident, however, that Radford Leicester did interest her. He was a perfect contrast to the commonplace, corpulent man of business. Mr. Lowry seemed rather awed by coming into the home of one who stood so high in the commercial world. He was impressed by the quiet dignity of the great house. The old-fashioned, costly furniture, the sombre richness of everything, gave a feeling of repose to which his own house was a stranger. He wondered why it was so. He had given instructions to the manager of one of the largest furnishing establishments in Tottenham Court Road to spare no expense either in decorating or furnishing the mansion he had built, and although they had obeyed him he knew that it was different from this. As a consequence he felt ill at ease, and he stammered when Olive spoke to him. But Radford Leicester was different.

He was perfectly at ease in the great drawing-room, and placed himself in the right relationship towards every one immediately. And yet a careful observer could see that he was more than usually interested. His large eyes flashed when he saw Olive Castlemaine. He had seen her only once before, and then had not been introduced to her. If he had given her a thought, it was only to regard her as the daughter of a very rich City man, and that she was said to be very religious. Now, however, all was different. While under the influence of whisky he had made a wager that he would win this woman's consent to be his wife, and now that they met face to face he had strange feelings. The first was a feeling of shame. He would not have admitted it even to himself, but he knew the feeling was in his heart. For another thing, he doubted himself. Before a word was spoken he knew that this woman was no shallow creature to be carried away by high-sounding phrases. Neither would she mistake cynical opinion, cleverly expressed, for truth. He almost felt afraid of the large brown eyes which were lifted so fearlessly to his.

When he had entered the house he, like Mr. Lowry, had felt the quiet dignity and the atmosphere of cultured refinement which prevailed.

"Who has created this," he asked himself, "the father or the daughter?"

"It is not the father," he concluded before John Castlemaine had spoken a dozen words. It was true that John Castlemaine bore an untarnished reputation for honour and uprightness, but

he was not a cultured man; he would never give the house its tone. There were a hundred things which suggested the artist's feeling, the scholar's taste. When he saw Olive Castlemaine, he had no further doubt.

And he felt ashamed. Not that his opinions about women in general were altered. His experiences had been too bitter. He simply felt that his conversation in the club in London a week or so before was, to say the least of it, in bad taste. He did not mean to go back upon his words; that was not his habit. Besides, the difficulties which presented themselves made him more determined to carry his plans into effect.

As for Olive, she felt that her friend had estimated this man rightly – at least in part. He was a striking-looking man; he was a clever man. The florid merchant by his side looked mean and common compared with him. The quiet masterfulness of Leicester impressed her. He suggested a reserve of strength and knowledge which she had never before felt when brought into contact with other political aspirants. She knew the general type of Parliamentary candidates. Some had made money and wanted to have the honour associated with the British House of Legislature; others, again, were brought up with the idea of adopting the political life as a career. Neither in the one case nor the other were they men of note; they would be simply voting machines, even if they entered the House of Commons – just dull, uninteresting men, who had never grasped the principles which govern a nation's life.

But this man was different. The strong chin, the well-shaped head, the large grey eyes, could only mean a man of more than ordinary note.

They sat near each other at dinner, and all the time Radford Leicester was seeking to weigh Olive Castlemaine in the balance of his own opinions.

"I hope none of those fellows will let the wager leak out," he said to himself. "The girl makes me angry. What business has a rich City man's daughter – a religious woman and a Nonconformist – to look with searching eyes like that? I must be careful."

"You are an admirer of Tolstoi, Miss Castlemaine," he said, glancing towards a picture on the wall.

"You say that because of his picture," she replied. "An artist friend of ours knows the family. He paid a visit to Tolstoi's home, and the Count consented to sit for his picture. I believe it is very good."

"But you admire him?"

"Why do you think so?"

"Because you allow his picture to hang on your wall."

"You forget that my father would naturally govern such matters."

"I should not imagine that your father would elect to give honour to a man of Tolstoi's views."

"My father greatly admires the artist's work."

"But not this one. You are quite right, Mr. Leicester," said Mr.

Castlemaine, who had overheard their conversation. "I am not an admirer of this Russian's revolutionary ideas. My daughter and I had quite an argument about this picture."

"And Miss Castlemaine had the best of it."

"What man was ever equal to a woman in argument?" said Mr. Castlemaine good-humouredly. "Yes, what were you saying, Mr. Lowry?"

"Why do you admire him?" asked Radford Leicester, turning to Olive.

"A woman always admires strength, courage, honesty," replied Olive.

"And which most?"

"Honesty."

"That is interesting. Might one ask why?"

"Because the other two do not exist without it."

Radford Leicester did not repress the answer that rose to his lips. He could not be altogether a hypocrite, even to carry out his plans.

"That is a very respectable tradition," he said.

"You do not believe it?"

"I would not try to destroy it for worlds," he said. "I can feel the whole constitution rattling about my ears at the very thought of its destruction."

"But you do not believe it?"

"What would you say if I told you I did not?"

"I should say that Tolstoi's life would prove you in the wrong."

"Have you ever considered what a complex thing humanity is, Miss Castlemaine? I have known honest men – that is, as honest men go – as timid as rabbits, and I have known scoundrels who have been as brave as lions. Is not human nature constantly laughing at us?"

"That is because our judgments are so shallow. We do not look beneath the surface."

"Yes, doubtless you are right. But my main objection to the so-called honest man is that he is so frightfully dull."

"To say the least of him, Tolstoi is not dull."

"Therefore he is not honest."

"Surely a sweeping conclusion from a very uncertain premiss."

"No, not uncertain."

"No? May I ask how you can prove it true?"

"By constantly meeting with men – and women."

"You mean that all the honest people you have met with are dull?"

"Pardon me, I am not sure I have ever met with an honest man. But I have met with those who are called honest, and – "

The girl looked at him steadily. She was not sure whether he was in earnest. It is true his face was perfectly serious, and yet she thought she detected a mocking tone in his voice.

"Children, for example," she said. "The most interesting children are those who are least self-conscious. The moment they become self-conscious and begin to act a part they cease to be attractive."

"Then you think that all but children are dull?"

"Why do you say so?"

"Because all grown-up people are acting a part."

"Again, are we not still on the surface?"

"No, we are down very deep. We are considering life. Life is simply acting a part. Why we act the parts we do is difficult to tell. Only I have noticed this: in life, as on the stage, those who elect to act the part of the good honest person are invariably dull. It is your villain who interests, and your villain who does the daring things – except in melodrama," he added quickly.

"What an unfortunate man you must be, Mr. Leicester," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you have been so unfortunate in the society you have frequented."

"Oh no, I have been singularly fortunate."

"Yes?"

"Yes, on the whole, I have found people wonderfully interesting."

What did he mean by talking in this fashion? Olive Castlemaine tried to answer the question, but was baffled. She was sure he was not such a little man as to pride himself upon breaking away from recognised rules of life simply for the sake of appearing odd. She was about to lead the conversation into another direction when a servant came bearing a card.

"Mr. Purvis," said John Castlemaine. "I wonder if he has had

his dinner."

Olive Castlemaine and Radford Leicester looked at each other, they hardly knew why, and each thought that the other looked uncomfortable.

CHAPTER IV
A DOUBLE PERSONALITY

A few minutes later Purvis sat at the dinner-table. It appeared that he wished to see Mr. Castlemaine, and not knowing he would be engaged, had taken the liberty of calling. He seemed surprised at seeing Leicester there, but naturally said nothing. As for Leicester, his interest in the gathering seemed to evaporate at Purvis's entrance. He suddenly became rather moody, and when he spoke, addressed his remarks to Mr. Castlemaine rather than to his daughter. This evidently pleased Purvis, who became quite cheerful at Leicester's gloomy demeanour.

Presently dinner came to an end, when Olive went away into the drawing-room, while the men adjourned to the library. Mr. Lowry seemed rather annoyed at Purvis's presence, but made the best of the situation by talking to Mr. Castlemaine in low tones.

"You are abstemious to-night, Leicester," said Purvis.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, after all, you are not willing for her to know all the truth."

Leicester did not reply.

"Surely you are not going on with this business?"

"Else why am I here?"

"But you are to let her know your character in full."

"No man's character is known in full."

"But – but – "

"Look here, Purvis, I shall play the game. See that you do," and he gave the young man a glance which made him slightly uncomfortable.

"Of course – of course," he said nervously. "I don't like it. Still, there's no danger – that is, there will not be when she knows everything."

"Which you will see to."

"I shall tell her nothing of our conversation; as for the rest – well, there will be no need for me to tell her that."

Leicester gave the other a look which was almost angry.

"No," he said, "I daresay you are right. A man's so-called vices soon become public property. Of course," he went on, "you will talk with her about me."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, you will. You will let her know all the world says, and a little more."

"I say, Leicester."

"Oh, don't grow indignant, my dear fellow. I know the worth of your indignation; besides, I only wanted to tell you that you are quite at liberty to say what you like."

"You mean that?"

"Oh, certainly. Of course the wager is a secret. As for the rest, I authorise you to give your imagination full scope. I say, Purvis, I imagine Mr. Castlemaine and Mr. Lowry wish to talk with me

about a private matter. I'm sure you don't mind, do you? and Miss Castlemaine will be lonely. I'm not in the least jealous, my dear fellow."

Mr. Castlemaine was much impressed with the way Leicester stated the affair which Mr. Lowry wished to bring before him. Everything was so carefully thought out, and so clearly expressed, that the man who was accustomed to deal with vast business enterprises was simply delighted. As he declared afterwards, it was quite an intellectual treat to talk with such a man. Besides, he made the conversation so interesting by introducing matters which appealed to John Castlemaine's tastes, that he felt like insisting on him staying the night. As a rule, whenever he talked of business matters in his own house, which was very seldom, he got through it as quickly as possible. But to-night all was different. When the business conversation came to an end, he still continued to talk.

"By the way," he remarked when Leicester had said something which more than ordinarily amused him, "my daughter ought to hear that, and we might as well go into the drawing-room. You've finished your cigar, haven't you?"

Leicester threw his cigar-end into the grate, and having finished his whisky, he followed his host.

They found Purvis eagerly talking with Miss Castlemaine, and Leicester knew the moment he entered that he had been the subject of their conversation. She gave him a quick, searching glance, as if she could scarcely believe what Purvis had been

telling her. The look made him angry. He had told Purvis that he was at liberty to make known his character, and yet he keenly resented his communication. There had been times when he had taken pleasure in his peculiar reputation; but to-day everything seemed different. Still Leicester was not a man who shrunk from a difficult situation; indeed, he presently found himself possessed with a sort of savage joy, as he found himself uttering sentiments which had become commonplaces to men of his way of thinking. Moreover, he seemed desirous of showing Purvis that he did not desire to hide from Miss Castlemaine the kind of man he really was.

"I hear you are making great progress in your constituency down in Devonshire, Leicester," said Purvis.

"Oh yes, we are enjoying ourselves hugely down there," was the reply.

"For my own part, I do not find it fun to nurse a constituency," said Purvis.

"That's because you do not look on the humorous side of the question," replied Leicester. "When one regards the whole business in the same light as that in which a boy plays a game of marbles, it is great fun."

"I cannot think of the Government of my country in that light," said Purvis loftily.

"No," said Leicester quietly; "well, tastes differ. Politics are just what you make them, comedy or serious drama. And I prefer comedy."

"Thus it too often becomes a fiasco. A man becomes a member of Parliament for the good of his country. He sacrifices his time and money for the welfare of his fellow-creatures. At least he should. I know of no higher calling than to be a legislator in one's own land. It is not fun, it is duty."

"The greatest comedy I know of," said Leicester, "is the pretence to be serious. I never laugh so immoderately as I do at so-called serious drama. One can so easily see the make-up of the whole business. The passion, the pathos, the high moral sentiment, the remorse, it is all got up for the occasion – and it is great fun."

"But politics are different from the drama."

"Are they? I have never had much to do with the dramatic world, but I am told that managers run theatres to make money for themselves by amusing the spectators. When comedy fails, they try tragedy. Politics are pretty much the same. Politicians put pieces on the stage to amuse the spectators, and there-by benefit themselves. When they fail to obtain the support of the audience – well, they are kicked off the stage and another set of actors put on."

"Only in politics the actors don't make money."

"No," said Leicester quietly, "they don't, at least not many. But they are inspired by the same motive as the actor is."

"And that?"

"Self, my dear fellow, self. The *bonâ fide* actor is generally poor, and he seeks money and popularity. The politician does not

always want money, but he wants fame. He wants to lift his head above the crowd, he wants to be mentioned in the newspapers, he wants to be singled out as he passes along the stage of life. Does the actor care a fig about the welfare of the spectators? All he wants is their money and their applause. Does the politician care a fig about the welfare of the voter? Still, it's great fun."

"Come, come, Mr. Leicester," said Mr. Lowry, "it wouldn't do for the people down at Taviton to hear you say such things."

"Exactly," said Leicester; "the people like to be fooled. Therefore the best thing is to fool them. Besides, is it not all a part of one great show? We are puppets on the stage of life, and we have to play our part. And each plays it with his eye on the audience."

"Personally," said Purvis, "I should not spend time and money for such a purpose. I know it may sound like boasting; but I would give up politics to-morrow but for the good of my country."

"Some time ago," said Leicester mockingly, "I was invited to speak at a political meeting, to assist the candidature of a young politician, who is supposed to be filled with very noble sentiments. I went and listened to this young politician. During his speech a man interrupted. The speaker tried to answer him, and failed. The man continued his interruption. At last some one shouted, 'Don't trouble about him, he hasn't got a vote.' Immediately this young, high-souled politician said, 'I came to speak to electors, not to men who have no vote, and therefore no stake in the country.' Exactly. But think a moment. Who was this

interrupter? He was a man with a life to live. He had his burdens to bear and his battles to fight. But he was not a voter, he could not help to send him to Parliament, therefore – " and Leicester shrugged his shoulders.

During this speech Purvis looked more and more angry. The blood mounted to his face and he shifted in his seat. Moreover, he saw that the eyes of the others were upon him, which did not add to his comfort.

"Yes, it's great fun," went on Leicester, "this acting on the great stage of life while the audience cheers or groans, as the case may be. But as to motives – well, let them pass."

"But, Mr. Leicester," said Olive, who had keenly enjoyed the conversation, partly because she was not sure whether Leicester was serious or only joking, "are you not forgetting that there are conscientious artists? Are there not artists who live for their art and care nothing about praise or blame?"

"Is not that another form of selfishness?" remarked Leicester.

"But surely, Leicester," said Purvis, "you do not mean that you confess to these sordid motives; – that you regard politics as only a game to play, in order to win applause? Do you mean to say that you are no better than the crowd you describe?"

"My dear fellow, I am a great deal better, for the simple truth that I am honest. I don't profess to having these high sentiments which some boast of."

"The last time I heard you speak," said Purvis, "you spoke in no measured terms of the present Government. You declared it

to be the bounden duty of the country to thrust it from power. Why did you say this if one party is as good as another, and all men uniformly selfish?"

"Because they do not play the game well," replied Leicester quietly; "because they make false moves, and because it grates upon one's artistic feelings to see a thing done badly. I would for the same reason hoot an orchestra off a platform for making discords. To begin with, the present Government have a very poor piece, and, secondly, they play it very badly. Miss Castlemaine," he added, turning to Olive, "please forgive us for talking in this way; but you see we are all alike. All men talk shop, just the same as women do."

"The part you are acting now is very interesting to me," said Olive, with a laugh.

"And to me also," said Leicester, looking at Purvis. "Indeed, when one comes to think of it, all parts played seriously, especially when a great deal depends on the way one plays them, are tremendously interesting."

"Then you admit you are acting a part?"

"Are we not all acting a part?" replied Leicester.

"And for the amusement of the audience?"

"And for selfish purposes? Else why do we act?"

The girl looked at him steadily, as if trying to read his thoughts. That she was interested in him she had to admit, not so much because of what he said, as because of his strong personality. She could not help feeling that he was the

dominating influence in the room. She did not believe in the opinions to which he had given expression, neither did she believe that he believed in them; nevertheless he uttered them with such an air of conviction that he impressed her in spite of herself.

"My reading of life is utterly different from yours," she said presently. "Did Charles Lamb act a part when he sacrificed the woman he loved and the life he hoped to live in order to give his life to protect his poor mad sister?"

"Charles Lamb has never ceased to be praised since he did it," remarked Leicester.

"But he never thought of the praise at the time," said Olive.

"No, I will admit that you've brought a strong exception which proves the rule," said Leicester, "and yet poor Lamb was a drunkard."

He looked at Purvis as he spoke, as if to remind him that he was playing his part fairly.

"Of course that was a terrible weakness of Lamb's," said Olive, "and yet one cannot help feeling kindly towards him. He was so penitent, so contrite; besides, he has gladdened the world by his bright, cheery outlook on life. Even from your standpoint, the man who looks for the evil in life plays his part badly. It is he who looks for the good and the beautiful that really helps the spectators."

"I think otherwise," remarked Leicester. "The doctor who exposes a disease, and fights it, is he who is the greatest benefactor."

"To expose a disease without fighting it, on the other hand, is of but little use," said Olive; "besides, it seems to me that the greatest physician is he who teaches us to live such healthy lives that the diseases find in us nothing to live on. The best remedy against the encroachment of disease is strong, vigorous health."

"But how to obtain that strong, vigorous health, Miss Castlemaine, is not that the great question?"

"By breathing pure air. By partaking of pure food, mental and moral, as well as physical," she replied. "The conversation so far has made me feel quite morbid."

John Castlemaine and Mr. Lowry laughed heartily, while Purvis heaved a sigh of relief. He had wondered how this conversation affected Olive, and he rejoiced that it had not pleased her. As for Leicester, he gave her a quick glance of admiration. He was glad that Winfield had mentioned her. Here at least was a woman better worth winning than any he had ever seen. Again he felt ashamed of the conversation that had taken place at the club, even while he was more than ever determined to prove to Purvis and Sprague that he was right in his contention.

"At any rate, Purvis cannot accuse me of hiding my opinions," he said to himself, and then he turned the course of the conversation.

During the rest of the evening Leicester seemed to forget his sad, hopeless opinions, and he completely restored the good opinion which John Castlemaine had formed concerning him at first, and which he had well-nigh lost during the time when

Leicester was giving expression to his cynical views. And this was no wonder, for even Purvis himself was well-nigh carried away by his cleverness. He spoke well concerning current books and current events. He compared notes with Olive concerning places both had visited and books which both had read. He exerted himself to be agreeable, and he succeeded vastly. Perhaps the atmosphere of the house helped him, perhaps he found in Olive one who helped to restore his good opinion of womanhood; perhaps he realised his determination to win his wager and obtain the promise of Olive Castlemaine to be his wife. Be that as it may, the Radford Leicester of the early part of the evening was not the Radford Leicester of the latter.

Olive felt this. He reminded her of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. His dual personality became somewhat of a problem. Which was the real man? Both were interesting – almost fascinating. He was clever when the pessimistic mood was upon him; he was far more clever when he became the student and the scholar, talking brilliantly of books, of architecture, of art, and of the struggling, troubled life of humanity.

Concerning religion he said nothing. Once or twice, when Olive introduced the subject into their conversation, he avoided it. Perhaps he shrank from expressing his lack of faith in those truths by which, to Olive, all the opinions of men must be tested; but of other things he spoke freely and well. Moreover, the girl helped him. Her straightforwardness, her freedom from petty meannesses, and her wide, intelligent outlook on life made

him for the moment forget his oft-expressed opinion of women. Besides, he had his part to play, and he played it.

Presently a servant came saying that Mr. Lowry's motor-car was at the door.

"You are not going up to town by train?" said Mr. Castlemaine.

"No, I had the car in London, and I thought I might as well use it," replied Mr. Lowry; "besides, I can get back quicker in the car."

"Yes," replied Mr. Castlemaine, "I suppose so; but, personally, I would rather be behind a pair of good horses. I am really sorry you have to go so soon," he said, turning to Leicester. "I am very glad to have met you. I hope we shall see more of each other."

Purvis looked angrily at Leicester as he heard John Castlemaine say this, but he said nothing; he was a little afraid.

"Are you going back to London, Purvis?" asked Leicester. "If you are, I'm sure Mr. Lowry will be glad to give you a lift."

"Thank you," said Purvis; then, as an afterthought, he added, "I should like a word with Mr. Castlemaine before I go. We have all been so interested in Mr. Leicester's opinions that I had almost forgotten the errand on which I came."

For a minute Leicester was alone with Olive.

"I have to thank you for a pleasant evening, Miss Castlemaine," he said, "one of the few pleasant evenings of my life."

She looked up at him inquiringly.

"I mean what I say," he said. "While we were at dinner I told you that I had found life very interesting. I told you a lie. Why I told it I don't know. It slipped from my tongue before I realised what I was saying. I have not found life interesting, I have found it anything but that – anything. But this evening has been an oasis in the desert, and I thank you."

"I am glad you have had a pleasant evening," said Olive quietly; nevertheless she wondered how much truth there was in his words.

"You do not believe me," he said, "but what I say is perfectly true. I do not find the stage of life very interesting to act on."

"Then it is best not to act," said Olive.

"That is not a matter of choice."

"I think it is. One can choose to play a part, or he can choose to live a life."

"The same thing," he replied.

"Pardon me, I do not think so."

"All the same, I thank you for a pleasant evening. When one has very few of them, it is a great deal to be thankful for."

There was something in the tones of his voice that convinced her that he meant what he said. She reflected that his face was sad, and that there was no joy in his eyes.

"Forgive me, a stranger, asking a question," he went on. "Do you find life happy?"

"Exceedingly."

"That is interesting. I wish I knew your secret."

"By ceasing to play a part."

She had not meant to say this; but the words escaped her before she realised them.

"How can one do that?"

"By seeking to serve the spectators, instead of pleasing them."

He laughed almost bitterly.

"If the spectators were only worth it," he said. He held out his hand. "Good-night, Miss Castlemaine," he said; "thank you again very much."

He walked into the hall, where Mr. Lowry stood awaiting him.

"Is Purvis ready?"

"He is talking with Mr. Castlemaine."

Instinctively Leicester felt that he was the subject of the conversation, and Leicester was right.

Purvis had explained his visit to Mr. Castlemaine in a very few words, then he said, "A funny fellow – Leicester, isn't he?"

"He is no ordinary man," said Mr. Castlemaine. "He should have a great career."

Purvis shook his head.

"You do not think so?"

"I do not deny his cleverness," said Purvis. "That is generally recognised; but – but – "

"Oh, I take but little notice of his joking," said John Castlemaine, "for he was joking."

"No, he was not joking."

"You mean that – "

"He believes in nothing – neither in God nor man. He does not believe in the commonplaces of Christian morality. He makes a boast of his atheism."

Mr. Castlemaine looked serious.

"That is a great pity for the poor fellow," he said.

"But that's not the worst," said Purvis.

"No?"

"No; it's an awful pity, but he's a hard drinker."

"Ah, I'm very sorry, for he struck me as a man with great possibilities."

Mr. Castlemaine did not seem to enjoy Purvis's conversation, and he moved into the hall, to bid his guests good-night.

During the ride to London Leicester was very silent. The car swept swiftly along the now almost empty roads, and presently stood outside the club where we first met the man whose story I am trying to tell.

Directly they entered the smoking-room, Leicester ordered a large whisky, which he drank quickly. It seemed as though his abstinence at Mr. Castlemaine's had caused cravings which he was eager to appease.

"Well," said Purvis presently, "you've taken the first step."

"Yes, I've taken the first step."

"I say, Leicester, give it up – it's not right."

Leicester shrugged his shoulders.

"Even if you succeeded it would be – "

"You mean that I am not worthy of her?"

"You know that yourself."

Leicester laughed.

"You see you rush to whisky the moment you get back."

"Well, she knows all about it."

"How?"

"You told her – and you told her father too."

Purvis's eyes dropped.

"Oh, don't be downcast, my dear fellow," said Leicester mockingly. "I gave you liberty to tell them, and you took advantage of my permission. And you told her all the rest, too. Oh, I know you well enough for that, and on the whole I'm glad. But mind," and he rose to his feet like a man in anger, "if you let on about the rest – "

"You mean the wager?"

"Call it what you like – if you or Sprague let on about that, then, to quote your Bible, it were better that a millstone were hanged about your neck, and you were cast into the depths of the sea."

Purvis shrank before the savage gleam of the man's eye.

"You – you surely don't mean that – that you are going on with – with this business?"

"Yes, I am," replied Leicester. His voice was quiet, but he spoke like a man in anger. "I am going on, and – and – if you do not play the game – well, you know me, Purvis."

"Of course a promise is a promise," said Purvis; "all the same – "

"Go to bed, my son," said Leicester mockingly. "I think you'll be all right now."

If Purvis had remained he would have been almost frightened at the look which came into Leicester's eyes.

CHAPTER V
THE STRENGTHENING OF THE CHAIN

For the next few days following the night of the dinner at John Castlemaine's house, a change seemed to have come over Radford Leicester. He became less hopeless, and he did not drink so freely. It might seem as though an evening spent in the society of a good woman had a beneficial effect upon him. He did not take any further steps to carry out his avowed intention, but when he spoke of women it was with less bitterness.

Both Sprague and Purvis noticed this, and both wondered what it portended. Could it be that Leicester meant to reform, or did it mean that he was simply playing a part, in order to win the woman he had boasted he could win?

Nevertheless he was moody, and seemed unhappy. He met these men sometimes at the club, but spoke little. Moreover, in public he was very abstemious, so much so that even the waiter noticed it.

"Is he turning over a new leaf?" asked Purvis of Sprague.

"If he is, he is not playing the game," replied the other.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it was understood that he should win her on the understanding that he was an atheist and a drunkard."

"But surely you don't object to his reforming?"

"No, of course I should be only too glad if he did, only in that case all the point of our discussion would be gone."

They were, during this conversation, sitting in the club where we first met them, and just as Purvis was about to reply to the other Leicester entered the room. He looked even paler than usual, and the dark rings around his eyes suggested pain either physical or mental. No sooner did he see them than he walked towards them, as if glad of an opportunity of companionship.

"How are you, Leicester?"

"I have a beastly headache," he replied.

Sprague and Purvis looked at each other significantly, a look which Leicester noticed.

"No," he said, "don't draw your conclusions. I have not been drinking. It's that confounded constituency."

"Why, anything happened there?"

"No – nothing of importance. It's only the old game. This man has to be written to, and the other man has to have a certain statement explained. I'd give up the whole thing for twopence."

"Where would your career be then, Leicester?"

"Hang the career," he said moodily.

"It's all very well to say that, old man, but a great deal depends on it."

"What?"

"Well, your future – your future in Parliament, and your future matrimonial arrangements."

He gave the two men an angry look.

"Surely that's my affair," he said.

"Sorry to contradict you, old man; but it is our affair too. That hundred pounds, you know."

Leicester gave expression to a sentiment which was more forcible than elegant.

Sprague looked at him eagerly. Ever since the night when we first met these men, he had cherished anger in his heart towards Leicester. He felt that this man despised him, and he was glad of the opportunity of giving him one, as he termed it, "on his own account."

"Our gallant warrior is afraid to fight," he said with a sneer.

Leicester started as though he were stung. The look on Sprague's face maddened him. For Leicester was in a nervous condition that night. His abstention from spirits was telling on him terribly. Every fibre of his being was crying out for whisky, and every nerve seemed on edge.

"What do you mean, Sprague?" he demanded.

"I mean that our gallant warrior is pulling down his flag," said Sprague. "He has found out that the citadel cannot be easily taken, and he's ready to give up without striking a blow."

Leicester looked on the ground moodily. In his heart of hearts he was ashamed of the whole business, but he felt he would rather do anything than confess it before these fellows.

"I hear he's turned teetotaller, too," went on Sprague, who seemed anxious to pay off old scores. "Who knows? we may see

Leicester posing as a temperance advocate yet."

Leicester rose to his feet as if unable to contain himself. To be sneered at by a man like Sprague was too much. He seemed about to give vent to an insulting remark, then as if thinking better of it checked himself. He rung a bell which stood on the table.

A waiter came in answer to his summons.

"Whisky," he said.

"A large or a small one, sir?"

"Bring – bring a bottle," he said savagely.

"I say, Leicester, don't do that!" said Purvis.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't start drinking again."

Again Leicester was almost overwhelmed with anger. How dare these fellows seek to interfere with him!

"May I ask my dear Moody and Sankey when the control of my actions came within your province?" he said, with a strong effort at self-control.

"Don't take it in that way, old man. I'm sure you are ashamed of the other business, and – "

"What business?"

"You know what business. You can't go on with it. You would never have thought of it if you hadn't been drinking too much; and really, I was awfully glad when I saw that you were giving it up."

Leicester did not reply, but instead looked eagerly towards the waiter, who was coming towards him.

He poured out a large portion of whisky into a glass, and then, having added a small quantity of soda-water, he took a long draught.

"There," he said, when he set down the glass empty, "that for your pious platitudes, my friends."

The action seemed to restore something of his equanimity, and it also brought back the old bravado which had characterised him.

"The brave warrior appears to require Dutch courage," remarked Sprague, who seemed bent on arousing all that was evil in him.

"Better that than none at all," remarked Leicester quietly. "And let me tell you this, my friend, you can tell your mother that I shall not assist you in your drawing-room meetings. By the way, what line are you on now? Is it Hottentot children, anti-smoking, or the conversion of the Jews?"

The colour had risen to his cheeks, the old light had come back to his eyes.

"As if I cared for your Dorcas meeting standards of morality," he went on. "What, you thought the poor sinner was repenting, eh? And you had all your texts, and your rag-tags of advice to pour into my willing ears. Tell me, Sprague, have you selected one of your women speakers to speak a word in season? You know how partial I am to public women."

"You tried to give up the drink for a whole week for one," retorted Sprague angrily.

"Did I, now? Well, then, I'll make up for my past misdeeds. I repent of my backsliding, my dear pastor, and I return to my spiritual comforter."

He poured out more whisky, still with a steady hand, and looked at them with a mocking smile.

"Have faith, Sprague," he said; "have faith, as your favourite women speakers say so eloquently at those dear drawing-room meetings which you love so much, 'there's nothing done without faith.'"

Purvis, who was the better fellow of the two, looked really distressed. He was ashamed of what had taken place, and had sincerely hoped that Leicester had given up the wild scheme upon which they had embarked.

"I am sorry for all this, Leicester," he said, "and I confess frankly I hoped – "

"That I had been brought to the stool of repentance, that I was ashamed of my misdeeds, and that I was going to give up the game. No, my friends, I stand by what I said, and what is more, I am going to carry it through. I am not converted to your professed belief in the nobility of women, and as for being ashamed – tah, as though I cared for your copybook morality!"

Neither of the men spoke in reply. They were almost afraid of the man. He spoke quietly, and yet the strange light in his eyes showed how much moved he was.

"And what is more, dear Moody and Sankey," he went on, "I'll play the game honestly. I'll hide none of my sentiments. I'll

win this woman under no false colours. Why should I? There is no need. What did I say? Let women have their selfish ambition gratified, and nothing else matters."

"Come now, Leicester, you know it is not so. I should think your visit to Mr. Castlemaine's would at least have caused you to drop that rubbish."

He had by this time finished his second glass of whisky, and while as on the former occasion it showed no effects on his perfect articulation, and while he spoke very quietly, it doubtless made him say and do what without its influence he would never think of doing.

"I say, Purvis," he said, lying back comfortably in his chair, and lighting a cigar, "did I hide my sentiments at Mr. Castlemaine's? Did I pose as a moral reformer? And what is more, did you spare me? Did you not, with great and loyal friendship, give both Mr. and Miss Castlemaine your views concerning me? Did you not tell Miss Castlemaine of my reputation at Oxford, and of my terrible opinions? Did you not tell Mr. Castlemaine that I was an atheist, that I had laughed at Christian morality, and that I was a hard drinker? Come now, deny it if you can."

"You know what you said to me," said Purvis, looking on the floor like a man ashamed.

"Of course I did, my dear fellow. Don't look so miserable about it. Well, I did my worst, and you did your worst. Now look at that!"

He threw a letter to Purvis as he spoke.

"Am I to read it?"

"Else why did I give it you?"

Purvis opened the letter and read it. It was an invitation to Mr. Castlemaine's to dinner.

"Are you going?" asked Purvis.

"Of course I am. Do you think I am going to let such an opportunity slip? Oh, you need not be afraid to show it to Sprague. It is not an invitation to a drawing-room meeting, it is only to a dinner."

"Well, that means nothing," said Sprague.

"No? I think it proves my statements to the hilt. That invitation would not have come from John Castlemaine without his daughter's consent – perhaps it was at her instigation. And yet she knows that I am – well – all you've described me to be. I am an atheist, I've thrown copybook morals overboard, I am a hard drinker. But what then? I conform to the conventions; no man has ever seen me drunk; but more than all that, I am mentioned as one who is going to have a brilliant career. Hence the invitation."

"An invitation to dinner means nothing," urged Sprague.

"Hence the invitation, and hence the future justification of my statements," he persisted. "Good-night, my friends, I am sorry I cannot stay longer."

He walked out of the room quite gaily. A casual passer-by, if he had met him, would at that moment have thought of him as a happy man.

And yet, although Sprague and Purvis did not know it, Leicester had entered the smoking-room of the club that night with a strong inclination to refuse the invitation to John Castlemaine's house. He *had* been ashamed of making a woman the subject of a wager, and more, he had for several days been fighting against the craving for alcohol. He realised more than any man the mastery which it had gained over him, and he knew that unless he conquered the habit, he would soon be a slave to it, body and soul. An evening spent in the society of a good woman, moreover, had aroused his latent manhood, and he felt that he could not degrade himself by standing by the challenge he had made. He knew as well as they that it was made under the influence of whisky, and that no man of honour should stand by it.

During the days he had been fighting his craving for drink, the thought of what he had done became more and more repugnant, and when he entered the room where Sprague and Purvis were, he intended telling them that nothing more must be said about it.

It seemed, however, that the fates were against him. He was in a nervous, irritable mood, caused by his abstention from the poison which had become almost a necessity to him, and the significant glances of the two men maddened him. Had they met him in the right spirit, it is possible that the affair, which did not reflect credit upon any of them, might have been dismissed as an idle joke. As we have seen, however, they had taunted him, they had aroused him to anger; these men whom he regarded as his

inferiors had assumed an air of superiority, and this in the present state of his nerves was more than he could bear. He had ordered whisky, and after that his good resolutions went by the board. Radford Leicester would have died rather than have confessed himself beaten. Thus do great issues often rest upon unimportant events.

After he had gone a silence fell between the two young men for some time.

"I wish we hadn't been such fools, Sprague," said Purvis presently.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are as bad as he is, perhaps worse. We at least were sober."

"Yes, I know; but who would have thought that he would stand by his guns?"

"We know what he is. I believe if we had been wise to-night he might have been led to give it up. But now nothing will move him."

"Well, it may teach Miss Castlemaine a lesson," said Sprague, whose pride had not yet recovered from the wound which her refusal had made; "but there – it's all right. It'll never come to anything. For that matter, if anything serious came of it, I would tell her the whole history of the joke."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because you dare not. Because she would despise us all to our

last day, because she would never speak to us again. You know the kind of girl she is."

Sprague was silent.

"Is it a dinner-party which Mr. Castlemaine is giving, or is Leicester invited in a friendly way, I wonder?" he said presently.

"Evidently a friendly invitation, seeing Mr. Castlemaine has written the letter with his own hand."

"Was it true that you told Mr. Castlemaine the truth about him?"

Purvis looked uncomfortable.

"Evidently he did not believe it," he replied, after hesitating a few seconds. "You know Leicester's way. When you look into those wonderful eyes of his you cannot tell whether he's joking or whether he's in earnest. Besides, he's such a handsome, fascinating chap, and I saw that Mr. Castlemaine took to him. Then, although it is perfectly true that he talked in his usual mocking way during a part of the evening, he altered his tone before he left. Evidently he found Miss Castlemaine to be a congenial companion, for he grew quite earnest in his conversation, and you know that when he is earnest, he is nothing short of brilliant. In fact, he showed us two Radford Leicesters that night: we had Leicester the cynic, but we had also Leicester the scholar, the brilliant conversationalist, the man who has read everything worth reading, and seen everything worth the seeing. No one could help noticing how Miss Castlemaine admired him."

"And you believe he'll carry this thing through now?"

"I'm sure he'll propose to her. Didn't you see his eyes? And you know what a fellow he is. When once he sets his mind upon a thing he'll go straight on. Ordinary considerations do not daunt him. Refusals will only make him more determined. Besides, you wounded his pride to-night, and – well, I wish we had not been such fools. For my own part, I am ashamed of the whole business."

"I tell you we need not fear. We know what Miss Castlemaine is. She is not the kind of woman to be carried away by a handsome presence and clever speeches. It isn't as though this would be her first offer."

"No, but she admires strength. Do you know her favourite characters in history?"

"No."

"Well, just think. The men she admires most are Luther, Richelieu, Cromwell, and Napoleon."

"A curious combination."

"Yes, but each one of them had the same characteristics. All of them were strong men, men who dared great things, played for great stakes."

"Well, Leicester has not dared great things."

"But he's capable of great things. Why, you know as well as I, that when he's in a room, every one else is put in the shade, that is if he cares to exert himself. I tell you Leicester could be a great man, if he only had the motive power."

"But we need have no fear. When did you say he was invited

to Mr. Castlemaine's?"

"Next Thursday week."

"I wish we were invited too," said Sprague.

"Who knows? – perhaps we may be."

As a matter of fact they were, and when the night of the dinner came round they both found themselves sitting not only in close proximity to Leicester, but also to Miss Olive Castlemaine. For this was one of those rare occasions when John Castlemaine gave a dinner-party.

Radford Leicester sat beside Olive Castlemaine, and all admitted that they were the most striking-looking couple in the room. Had they met in some brilliant society throng, they would have been just as noteworthy. Moreover, this was one of those nights when Radford Leicester found himself in a mood to exert himself, while Olive Castlemaine, as hostess, naturally desired to be agreeable.

For the first part of the dinner but little of note was said. The conversation passed from one topic to another. Motor-cars, a continental exhibition, the latest new novel of note, and the political situation were each discussed in their turn. Society scandal was not indulged in, and the sayings and doings of actresses and music-hall singers were not to be mentioned. Thus, when one comes to think about it, the conversation was of a considerably higher standard than that often indulged in at society functions. But then it must be remembered that John Castlemaine was a middle-class man, who professed the

Christian religion, and the atmosphere of his house was not favourable to "smart" talk.

Indeed, if the truth must be told, Radford Leicester grew rather restive under it. He noticed, too, that both Sprague and Purvis were watching him closely, and listening to all he had to say. He instinctively knew of what they were thinking, and more, he felt certain that if his host and hostess were aware of the circumstances which led to his being their guest that night, a servant would have shown him to the door. Moreover, although he was not afraid of the outward effect of taking much wine at dinner, he was obliged to be abstemious. Olive Castlemaine had heard of his weakness, and would doubtless take note of the number of times the waiter filled his glass.

Presently, when discussing politics, someone remarked on the amount of self-sacrifice which had been practised by Members of Parliament, especially by those who held a prominent position in the country.

"Mr. Leicester does not believe in that," remarked Purvis. "He is of opinion that it is all great fun."

At this all eyes were turned towards Leicester.

"You are mistaken," he replied, "I believe the self-sacrifice of these men is very great."

"Mr. Leicester has surely altered his opinion of late," remarked Sprague. "Behold, a Saul among the prophets!"

"Not in the slightest, I assure you," replied Leicester. "I believe that hosts of these men sacrifice themselves a great deal. If

you ask me who they sacrifice themselves for, I should say – themselves."

"Then the candidate for Taviton sacrifices his leisure for – "

"The candidate for Taviton, exactly. My dear Sprague, you have hit off the situation with your usual felicity."

"I don't think Mr. Leicester is fair to himself," remarked Olive Castlemaine, looking questioningly into Leicester's face.

"I assure you I am," replied Leicester. "Indeed, I am inclined to think that the people who are called self-sacrificing are very undesirable people to associate with."

"Come, come now, Leicester, you don't believe that," said Purvis.

"I assure you I do most sincerely," replied Leicester quietly. "The other day I was at a house where there were six people present, and they were waiting to play some game where only four could take part. Well, four of them were self-sacrificing people, and wanted to give way to the others. Two were selfish, and desired to engage in the game. Well, neither of these four would give way in their unselfishness – with the result that the game was never played at all. The evening was spoiled by unselfish people."

He looked so serious as he spoke that Olive Castlemaine laughed outright.

"Many an evening which might have been pleasant," went on Leicester, "has been spoiled for me by these unselfish people making themselves and everybody else uncomfortable, under the

pretence that they were trying to make us comfortable. Of this I am sure, if people were really and truly honest, and were openly selfish, then each man would seek his own enjoyment and find it."

"And be miserable when he had found it," remarked Olive quietly.

"I assure you that is a fallacy," said Leicester, "else why is it that the so-called moral and unselfish people are the most disagreeable to deal with? This I can say truly, the most morose and unhappy people I have ever met are these moral reformers."

"Then what would you suggest?"

"A good healthy paganism. I know this is an awful heresy, but can any reasonable man say that the English, with all their religious institutions, are as happy as the old Greeks were?"

"We can't accuse Leicester of hiding his light under a bushel," said Sprague to Purvis, after dinner, during which Leicester continued to talk in the same strain.

"No, but I have yet to see that Miss Castlemaine is repelled by him."

"That's because she believes he is playing a part."

"You believe that she thinks he's been joking?"

"Exactly."

But they were wrong. Olive Castlemaine believed that there was an undertone of sincerity in all Leicester said, and she was sorry for him. During the evening she saw a great deal of him, and although she did not feel quite comfortable in his presence, his

personality fascinated her. Indeed, he became quite an enigma to her. Sometimes, when the cynical side of his nature was uppermost, she felt almost sorry that he had been invited to the house, but when he changed and spoke earnestly on matters which interested her, she forgot her feelings of aversion.

Indeed, when all the guests had left the house that night, Olive Castlemaine reflected what a fine man Radford Leicester would be if the sad, hopeless spirit were cast out of him, and he could be inspired by high and noble motives.

"I wonder what would do it?" she asked herself again and again.

CHAPTER VI
LEICESTER'S WOOING

During the next few weeks Radford Leicester and Olive Castlemaine met more than once. By what seemed a strange coincidence Leicester received invitations to houses where Olive Castlemaine had promised to go. They spoke but little on these occasions, nevertheless it was evident that each found the other very interesting. It was noticed, moreover, that Leicester was less cynical and hopeless when in her presence. His eyes shone with a new light, and his voice was resonant with eagerness. She seemed to act upon him as a kind of mental and spiritual tonic. The old bored air passed away when she appeared, and while he seemed to be little interested in the society of others, there could be no doubt that Olive Castlemaine aroused him to earnestness.

When he was with men, he was cold and cynical as ever, neither did he seem to be fighting the habit which had gained such mastery over him. Sprague and Purvis often talked about him, but they had no idea of what he intended to do. True to their promise, they said nothing about the compact which they had made, and while some of Leicester's friends thought he would be a suitor for Miss Castlemaine's hand, others were just as certain that he was "not a marrying man." But no one seemed certain. Leicester was not a man who gave his confidence freely, and of

late he seemed less sociable to his acquaintances than ever. As for friends, he did not possess any.

More than once Purvis and Sprague sought to make him divulge his intentions, but when they asked him questions he looked at them in a way that, to say the least, did not encourage them. When he happened to meet Olive Castlemaine, he was interested, eager, and sometimes almost excited; with others he was moody, taciturn, and evidently far from happy.

At last one day the light of resolution came into his eyes. He lunched at his club, and then, having dressed with great care, he made his way to Olive Castlemaine's home. He had received no invitation, neither did he know whether he would find her in the house. Nevertheless he went. During his journey there, he seemed in deep thought. At the railway station he bought a paper, but he never looked at it. Sometimes he looked out of the window, but evidently he saw nothing. He was as unconscious of his surroundings as a sleep-walker.

Presently he drew near the station which he knew to be the nearest to The Beeches, and then he rose in the carriage and walked between the seats, as though he were considering some course of action.

"Shall I tell her the truth, the whole truth?" he said presently. "Shall I relate to her the miserable – ? No, no – not that!" He set his teeth firmly together as he spoke. "No, no – not that!" he repeated, and again he looked out of the carriage window with the same stony stare.

"If she refuses me – " he said presently. "But no, I'll not be refused. If she says no a hundred times, I'll ask her again. I won't, no I *can't* be refused. It would be – "

The man's body grew rigid as he spoke. Evidently Radford Leicester was in a stern mood, and bent upon a mission which affected him deeply.

The train stopped, and the porters shouted the name of the station. He stepped on to the platform and looked around him. Only a very few people had come by the train; the time was yet too early for the City men. Outside the station he engaged a hansom, and told the man to drive him to The Beeches.

"I wonder if she's at home," he said to himself, "and if she is, I wonder if she'll see me?"

There could be no doubt that Radford Leicester was untrue to the creed which he had so often professed. "Nothing is worth while," he had answered many times, when he was asked why he did not take life seriously. But he was serious now. His eyes shone with the light of expectancy and of determination. He did not notice the country through which the cab was passing. He did not realise that, instead of busy streets and tall buildings, there were lanes and quiet meadows. He did not notice that the speculating builder had not been allowed to ruin a pleasant neighbourhood, and that although he was not many miles distant from the heart of London, the district was suggestive of a country village. Yet so it was. John Castlemaine owned all the land around, and he had kept the speculating builder at bay. It is true he had built many

workmen's cottages – cottages which reflected credit alike upon his heart and upon his artistic tastes, but long rows of jerry-built ugliness were nowhere visible, and the countryside retained the sweet rusticity of a purely rural district.

The Beeches was a fine old mansion standing far back in its own grounds, and surrounded by a number of large old trees, which gave the house its name. Once inside the lodge gates, it was difficult to believe that London, with its surging life, lay in the near distance. An atmosphere of restfulness and repose reigned, only disturbed by the passing of the trains, which ran a little more than a mile away from John Castlemaine's house.

While Radford Leicester was passing along the quiet road he took no notice of his surroundings, but once inside the lodge gates he seemed to realise where he was. He had been to the house twice before, but he had not noticed the grounds. Indeed, he had had no opportunity. Night had fallen before he came, and as he had left at midnight, it was impossible to see anything. Now, however, all was different. It was true the time was late autumn, and many of the trees were denuded of leaves; but the sun shone brilliantly, and the autumn flowers gleamed in the sunlight. He noticed, too, the air of stately repose which characterised the house; he was impressed by the extensive lawns, and the gnarled old trees which dotted the park. Here was no tawdry, ornamented dwelling of the *nouveau riche*; it was the solid, substantial dwelling of a City merchant of the old school. Even the servants had an air of proprietorship. They were not of the

"month on trial" order. Evidently they had served the family for many years, and had become accustomed to their surroundings.

Leicester had noticed, when he told the cabman to drive to The Beeches, that the man had treated him with marked respect. Visitors of John Castlemaine were not to be regarded lightly.

"Will you wait a minute," said Leicester to the cabman, as he drew up at the door. He was not sure whether the one he had come to see might be disposed to see him. He rang the bell, realising that his heart was beating faster than was its wont.

"Is Mr. Castlemaine at home?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Perhaps Miss Castlemaine is in?"

"Yes, sir."

The servant recognised him again, and took his card in to Olive with a smile.

"Will you walk in, sir?" he said presently, and then Leicester, having dismissed the cabman, entered the house for the third time.

Everything was strangely quiet. The house might have been in the heart of the country. To the young man it felt almost like a temple, so different was it from the gaily decorated club where he spent so much of his time. When the servant left him, and he looked around the room into which he had been shown, he felt like a man in a dream. It seemed to him as though he had entered a new world. The air of refinement and culture which he had realised when he first entered this room seemed more than

ever present. Then a great pain shot through his heart. Why was he there? What had led to his being there?

He heard a rustle of garments outside, and Olive Castlemaine entered. He felt as though this was the first time he had seen her at home. Evidently she had expected no visitors, and she was dressed for no function. He noticed that she looked younger now than when he had seen her on other occasions, more girlish, more than ever a child of nature. He preferred to see her in this way. It had always seemed to him that women appeared at their worst in the attire which society demands for evening functions. It gave the impression of artificiality, of being dressed for "show." But now all was different. She stood before him in a simple, closely fitting dress, which perfectly harmonised with her glossy dark brown hair and perfect complexion, and also revealed to advantage her finely moulded form.

"I make no apology for taking a great liberty, Miss Castlemaine," he said. "I have called this afternoon on the chance of seeing you, because I could do no other."

She gave him a quick glance; but quick as it was, it revealed the fact that Leicester's mocking, cynical manner was gone. The flash of his eyes, the stern, set features showed that he was deadly in earnest.

"You frighten me," she said, with a laugh. "I hope you have brought me no bad news."

"I have not the slightest idea how you will regard it," he said, "but I have come to ask you a favour."

"What is it?" she said, still smiling. "Is it to give a subscription to some charity which you have been in the habit of condemning?"

"No," he replied, "I have come to ask you to listen to me patiently for a few minutes."

She froze somewhat at this. Perhaps the look in his eyes made her feel somewhat uncomfortable. She realised that it was somewhat unusual for a comparative stranger to come in such a way.

"I am afraid I am a poor listener," she said, "and, what is more, I am at a loss to conceive how I can advantage you by doing so."

"Still, you will hear me out, won't you?"

"I have no choice, have I?" she said, almost nervously.

"I want to be frankly egotistic," he said. "I want to speak about a worthless subject – myself."

She felt her heart fluttering; but she spoke composedly.

"Then I think we had better sit down," she said.

She suited the action to the word, but Leicester continued standing. He laid his hat and gloves on a chair, but stood before her, his body almost rigid.

"I have seldom been earnest during the last few years," he said, "but when I have been, I have always wanted to stand up. I am in earnest now."

Olive Castlemaine did not reply, but she sat watching him. There was no longer a tone of mockery in his voice, and his pale face and earnest eyes gave no suggestion of the cynical

faithlessness which characterised him at their first meeting. She felt as though she would like to refuse to listen to him, but his presence forbade her. He was strong and masterful, even in his appeal.

"Miss Castlemaine," he said, "I imagine that you have heard but little that is good of me. You have been told that I am an atheist, a man without faith in man, or in God, and what you have heard is in the main true. Not altogether, but in the main. I am not what is called a good man, indeed I cannot claim to have been even an admirer of goodness. Certainly I have believed in very little of it."

Olive interrupted him. "As a strong Protestant, Mr. Leicester," she said, "I am not a believer in confessions, and I am sure I am not fitted to be your confidante."

"You promised to listen to me, Miss Castlemaine," he said, "and I claim the fulfilment of the promise. Believe me, I did not come here lightly, neither am I speaking meaningless words. This afternoon will be a crisis in my life, and if there is a God, He knows that I am as sincere as a man can be."

Again she was silenced. The strength of the man's personality was, although she did not know it, bending her will to his. On the other hand, she was exercising no power of resistance, and she was interested to know what he would say.

"I do not know that I am an atheist," he said. "Indeed, I have sometimes a feeling at the back of my mind that there must be a God, and that this life is only a fragment of life as a whole; but

that is not often. That is no wonder. I was brought up to believe that there was no God. I was trained to distrust every one, and to look for evil motives in every life. I believe my father meant to be kind in doing this for me; anyhow, I am a result, at least in part, of his training. I never knew a mother's care.

"Please do not misunderstand me; I am not growing maudlin nor sentimental; I am simply stating facts. I went to Oxford, and while there, my father's training was confirmed, accentuated. I suppose I had abilities, and was informed when I took my degree that my career there was – well, more than creditable. I did the usual thing when I was three or four and twenty. I fell in love."

"Really, Mr. Leicester," said Olive, "there can be no – "

"It was the fancy of a boy," went on Radford, as if he had not heard her, "and it did not last long. She jilted me in a very ordinary fashion, and my heart-wounds were not deep. All it did, I think, was to confirm my early impressions about woman's love. Since that time I have avoided women. Yes, I speak quite sincerely, I have avoided them. Despising them, I neglected seeking the society of women altogether. I have lived mainly at my club, so that I might not be brought into contact with them. You will naturally ask, if you are interested in me at all, what I have lived for, I quite realise that every man must have some motive power in life, some driving-force, and I have had mine. It is very poor, very mean in your eyes, no doubt; but I will tell the truth. My driving-power has been ambition. Rightly or wrongly, many who know me believe I have gifts above the ordinary; they

have told me that if I will, I can have a notable parliamentary career. Possibly they are right – I do not know. But I realise, even in spite of my creed, that the motive is insufficient. Besides, I cannot help laughing at the whole political world. The great bulk of our political magnates have no sense of humour, but they are irresistibly funny nevertheless. I can see that they are only pawns in the game, although they think they are of great importance, and then – "

He stopped, and took two or three steps towards the window; then he returned and, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, went on speaking.

"I have been wondering during the last few weeks whether I have not been blind to a very real world," he said. "This I know: I have been simply longing to believe in things the existence of which I have denied. I have wanted to believe in a final Will, a final Beneficence; I have wanted to believe that we are not the playthings of a blind chance, and that what we call disorder and discord are but the preludes to a divine Harmony. With that longing has come another and this is a selfish longing. It is to play something like a worthy part on the stage of life. Sometimes this longing scarcely exists; sometimes it grows strong and clamorous. There are times when I believe that I, even I, can live a life that is really worth the living. This belief is only a new-born child. It is sickly, and lacks vitality, but it exists.

"No, no, bear with me a few minutes longer. I know I have

chosen a poor subject to talk about, but then I confess myself to be an egotist. I, like every other man, regard myself as the only person worth talking about; so please forgive me. But do not mistake me. I do not pose as a good man, or a worthy man. I still doubt whether such exists; but there are times when I have strange longings, and these longings sometimes, though rarely, become a kind of belief that I, worthless, faithless as I am, can live a life which is worth the living."

He was silent a few seconds, and seemed at a loss how to proceed, while Olive Castlemaine sat, scarcely realising the true condition of affairs, at the same time feeling the masterfulness of the man who spoke to her.

"Perhaps you are hardly interested to know the reason for this," he went on, "nevertheless I must tell you. You are the reason."

Olive glanced up like one startled.

"I, Mr. Leicester?"

"You. I have not learnt to believe in goodness generally, but I believe in your goodness. I have not learnt to believe in women, but I believe in a woman. I believe in you. And I believe in you because I love you."

He spoke quietly, and there was no tremor in his voice, but his face was, if possible, paler than usual. That he was deadly in earnest no one could doubt.

"I make no pretences," he went on. "I do not say, nay, I do not think that I shall ever become a pattern man. Even now I have

no strong faith, even if I have any, in either God or man; but I love you!"

He seemed to be carried away by his own confession. Almost rudely he turned his back on her and walked to the window and looked out over the stretch of lawn and park-land. But he did not remain there. When he came back again Olive glanced at him almost fearfully, and for a moment was well-nigh repelled by the fierce look in his eyes.

"I love you," he went on, still quietly; but his voice had changed. There was an intensity in its tones which she had never heard before. "I love you so, that – that with you by my side, I feel I could conquer anything, accomplish anything – anything! Look at me, yes, like that. Now then, do you love me?"

Almost mechanically she shook her head. She did not know why she did this, only it seemed as if some unseen monitor compelled her.

Radford Leicester took a step towards her.

"You must," he said, in the same low tone, but still almost fiercely, "you must, you must! You must not withhold it. Good God! you do not know what this hour means to me. My life, my future, my faith, my all is in your hands."

Still she remained silent. Her face had become pale, and although the look in her eyes was not of fear, it showed no confidence.

"Speak to me," he went on. "I am not a boy longing for a new toy. I am a hardened man, a hardened sinner, if you like. I make

no boasts, no professions, but I love you, love you! and you must love me, you must."

For a moment the girl resented his air of masterfulness. She was not of the weak and pliable kind of women that could be carried away by wild assault. She looked up at him steadily now, and Leicester saw by the expression in her eyes that he had touched a wrong chord.

"Forgive me my rudeness," he said, before she had a chance to speak, "but I think a man in earnest is sure to be rude; he must be. Do not think, moreover, that I do not realise the value of what I am asking for. I do. I know that you have been sought after on all hands. I know that you are said to be rich, and that you can choose where you will. Oh, yes; I have thought of all that, and I have realised my madness in coming to you; but I am a desperate man. No, no, do not think I have been simply attracted by a beautiful face. I have been seeing beautiful faces any time these last ten years; it's not that. It's you, you. I love you, I tell you, and if you cannot love me I shall go into a blacker hell than I have yet known, and I shall go there with eagerness, and eagerness born of despair. But with your love I can do anything. Oh, I am not boasting, and I am not speaking before looking down to the very depths, but with your love I can live a life worth the living; I can make a position worth the making. Tell me, Olive Castlemaine, tell me that you can give a thought, a kind thought, a loving thought to me."

In spite of herself she was moved. Olive Castlemaine admired

strong, masterful men. She could forgive rudeness where there was sincerity and strength, and certainly she had never been wooed in this way before. She could not help comparing Leicester with men like Purvis and Sprague. They were weak and effeminate beside him. His very cynicism, his faithlessness seemed to her but as an expression of a strong nature, which was dissatisfied with conventions and a weak assent to commonly accepted beliefs. It is true she had seen his weakness, she had heard him express the purposelessness of his life; but she had also seen in him another Radford Leicester which was great and strong. And yet he had not won her. Something, she knew not what, told her to refuse. An indefinable fear, perhaps owing to her Puritan training and her healthy upbringing, kept her from uttering the words he longed to hear.

Still Radford Leicester had caused her heart to beat as it had never beaten before; never had she been drawn by such an admiration, an admiration akin to affection, as she was drawn now. He was a strong man, and she instinctively felt that in him were the possibilities of greatness and of goodness. She believed, too, that she could be the means of translating those possibilities into actual life; but she did not give him a ray of hope. A few minutes before, she felt like speaking. Now the desire had gone. She had nothing to say, she knew not why.

"You are thinking of what you have heard about me," he said, "are you not?"

"Perhaps."

He was silent for a moment. Perhaps it was because he thought of the night which led to this meeting, and as a consequence felt ashamed. Once, on his way thither, he had thought of telling her the whole story, but now he would rather have suffered death than that she should know. Even then he determined that if either of the men who were parties to the shameful compact, should divulge the secret he would make their lives a hell. For Radford Leicester was not making love to gain a wager. A passion to which he had hitherto been a stranger had gripped him body and soul. At that moment Olive Castlemaine was everything to him. He would have bartered his immortal soul to gain her love. The cold, cynical crust of the man's nature had been broken, and the hot lava which had been lying beneath now burst forth.

"And you care for that," he said.

"Yes, I care for that."

"And if I had been what you call a good man, what then?"

"I do not know."

"But it would influence you?"

"It would influence me greatly."

"You believe in all you have heard?"

"You have denied nothing – and no, Mr. Leicester, even if I loved a bad man, I would crush that love – that is, as you have been speaking of it."

He called to mind what he had said to Sprague and Purvis on the night the compact was made, and while there was a feeling of joy in his heart at her words, the memory of that night pierced

him like a poisoned arrow. This woman had disproved his creed by a single sentence. For he knew that she meant it. There was no weak, faltering hesitancy in her words. The flash of her eyes, the tone of her voice, told him that she had uttered no idle threat. Here was a nature as strong as his own, a nature which loved goodness as much as he had pretended to despise it.

He felt that the ground was slipping under his feet, but he retained his calm.

"Wait a moment," he said, "there is something else I want to say to you."

CHAPTER VII
A WOMAN'S HEART

If a few months before any one had told Radford Leicester that in order to gain a woman's good opinion he would excuse his own mode of life, he would have either grown angry or laughed that man to scorn. Yet he contemplated doing it at that moment. Perhaps if Sprague or Purvis had been in the room at that moment, they would not have been sure whether he were in earnest, or whether he were playing a part in order to win his wager. For they believed him to be capable of anything. But Leicester was not playing a part. He felt that nothing was too much, that no sacrifice was too great to win the woman who stood before him. And yet in his sacrifice he would not appear to humble himself, for he was a proud man.

"In the past I have not taken the trouble to contradict idle gossip," he said. "I did not think it worth while. Besides, I did not mind what people believed about me. But I have the right to tell you the truth."

"Really, Mr. Leicester, there is no need, and I do not wish to hear confessions."

"But I have the right."

"What right?"

"The right of a man whose future is in your hands, the right

of a man whom you can send to heaven or to hell," he replied. "Oh, I am not speaking idle words. Forgive me if I seem to boast. I am no dandy who has made love a dozen times, and to whom a refusal means nothing but what a bottle of wine or a trip to the Continent can atone for. Whether your answer is yes or no, means everything to me. For you must become my wife, I tell you you *must*!"

The girl's eyes flashed refusal, even while they did not lack in admiration. No woman respects a man the less because he will not contemplate refusal.

"Listen, then," he went on. "You have heard all sorts of things about me. I am an atheist, I am a drunkard, I am a cynic, and I laugh at the standards of Mrs. Grundy. Yes, you have heard all that."

"And I have no right to interfere with your mode of life," she said, "only, Mr. Leicester – "

"Wait a moment before you say what is on your lips," he interrupted. "In this case it is for me to speak, and you can do no other than listen."

"Why?" she asked, almost angrily.

"Your sense of what is fair and honourable forbids you," he said. "Yes, I may be what is commonly reported, but there is another side even to that. Let me tell you, then, that I, who never professed to believe in what is called truth and honour, never willingly deceived any man, either by word or by deed. Yes, let me do myself justice. I, who have laughed at Mrs. Grundy and

all her ways, never broke a promise made. And more, no man can accuse me of sullying either the honour of man or woman. I may be all that is said of me, but I am not that kind of man."

Something, not only in his words, but in his manner, appealed to her. In spite of herself, she gave him a quick, searching glance. There was something noble in his face, there was a healthy anger in his words. Whatever his creed might be, he was not a bad man.

"I had the right to tell you so much," he went on; "that at least was my privilege, and now, having told you, I must tell you something else. You may refuse me once, you may refuse me twice; but in the end you will have to accept me."

Again there was a gleam of anger in her eyes, and he saw the look of scorn which rested on her face.

"I will tell you why. You cannot run the risk of sending a man to hell. With you as my wife I can do anything. Oh yes, I know my words seem like the words of a mountebank, but even my worst enemies have never accused me of being a boaster, and I repeat it; no guardian angel which your story-books tell about could do for a man what you could do for me. I could work, I could think, I could even become great and good. But without you – even the thought of it is like looking into hell."

"And I," said Olive, "could have but little faith in a man who dared not stand alone. If a man's future, his character, his career, are dependent on a woman, then he rests upon a weak reed. A man to be strong must rest on God."

"That may be your theory; if it is, I know that human nature is

always laughing at you. If God is, He's giving you the opportunity of making a man of me."

"I would try and help you," said Olive, "but what you ask is my love, and love cannot be given for the asking. It can only be given as it comes. In such a matter we are not free agents."

"And could you not love me? Answer me honestly, could you not love me?"

This was the first sign of Leicester's advantage. Her eyes dropped, and the colour came to her cheeks.

Leicester's heart beat aloud for joy; he could not repress a cry of exultation.

But Olive Castlemaine mastered herself by a strong effort of will.

"You ask me to speak to you honestly," she said. "Well, I will. I could never love a man – that is as you would be loved – if I did not respect him and I could not respect a man who was the slave to an evil habit."

"You mean – " he hesitated, and looked on the floor.

"Yes, I mean that."

"Look here," he said eagerly, "promise that you will be my wife, and I will never taste a drop of alcohol of any sort again. I give you my word for that. Neither wine, nor whisky, nor spirits of any sort shall ever again pass my lips."

Again she looked at him eagerly, and he thought he saw her eyes soften.

"I mean it," he went on. "What I want is motive power; given

that, I can conquer anything. Well, I will do this; say yes, and from this time forward I will never touch it again – never, never!"

"If a thing is an evil, if it is a wrong," she said, "a man should fight it because it is wrong. If a habit has mastered you, you should fight it, and conquer it – because of your respect of – your own manhood."

"You ask too much," he said. "No man can do and be without a sufficient motive. Take you out of my life, and what motive have I?"

"The belief in your own manhood."

"Why should I believe in that? If you refuse me, what have I to live for? Yes, I fight for a position which at heart I despise. I become a member of the British Parliament; many who have not the brains of a rabbit, nor the ideals of a low tavern-keeper, occupy that position. Faith in God and man! I can only think of them through you."

She felt the unworthiness of his position. She knew that her ideal man must always be strong and brave, whatever the circumstances of his life might be, and, so far, Leicester had disappointed her. Nevertheless, there was in his words a subtle flattery which appeals to every woman. She was, humanly speaking, the saving power of his life. The destiny of this strong man was in her hands. What might he not do and be if he were inspired by great hopes and lofty ambitions? His name could be a household word in the land. Millions of struggling, starving people would have cause to bless his name. And she, she could

be the means used by God whereby all that was best and noblest in this man could be realised. For she, like all who knew him, felt the wondrous possibilities of his life. It might seem like boasting when he said that with her by his side he could do anything, but she felt sure it was true.

Besides, Leicester appealed to her woman's pride. Every woman longs for strength, masterfulness in the man she loves; she would rather be mastered by a strong man, than be master of a weak man. At that moment she forgot Leicester's cynicism, his professed scorn for all she held most dear; she thought of him as the man he could be.

Behind all that was unworthy, the real man lay strong and brave. He might become a Cabinet Minister, Prime Minister! He had power which could fit him even for this. The sphere of such a man's influence was simply boundless. He could uplift the whole tone of the nation. And then, more than all, he loved her! This was not the sneering, unbelieving man who first came to her father's house a few weeks before, who took a pleasure in laughing at all that was best and truest. No one could accuse him of lack of earnestness to-day. He had almost frightened her by the intensity of his appeal, the passion of his words. And did she love him? If perfect love casteth out fear, she did not love him. Nevertheless, no man had ever appealed to her like this man. Others had asked her for her love, and she had refused them without hesitation; but Leicester was different. If she refused him, it would be after many questions, it would be with an aching

heart.

And yet she was afraid. She wanted to think, she wanted to examine her own heart in loneliness and in silence. Yes, and she wanted to speak to her father. Was this a sign that she did not really love him? It was difficult to say. Leicester had been spoken of in her hearing as one who sneered at all things which to her were sacred, and it was out of harmony with her whole life-thought to link her life with such a man. But there was another side of the question. He loved her, and the thought of his love made her heart beat quickly, and filled her with a strange joy.

These thoughts passed through her mind in a flash. Nay, perhaps she did not think them at all. They became a kind of consciousness to her, a series of impressions which possessed her being without mental activity on her own part. Moreover, Leicester, by a kind of intuition, divined what was in her mind. For these two natures were closely akin, although their training, outlook, and conceptions of life were entirely different. If he were a keen-brained, strong, masterful man, she was in her degree his equal. She loved strength even as he rejoiced in it. Although in many respects presenting a strong contrast, Mother Nature had cast them in a similar mould.

Meanwhile, Leicester was watching her closely. He tried to read her face as he would read an open book, with what eagerness we need scarcely say. What had begun in grim and almost repelling jest had resulted in terrible earnestness. This man loved with all the strength of his nature.

"I want your answer," he said at length. "And I must only have one answer. Oh, forgive me if I seem rude, but I cannot help it. I know that I have not spoken as I ought: that is because I have spoken as I was compelled. I know how unworthy I am – yes, I am in deadly earnest. I know I am not worthy to brush your boots; but I love you with all the strength of my life. Tell me, Olive Castlemaine, that I may hope."

"No," she said quietly, "I cannot tell you that – that is – yet."

She knew she yielded the whole position in that qualification, although she would not have admitted it – so strange a thing is a woman's heart. Leicester felt sure of it too, and, unbeliever as he was, he could have said "Thank God."

"I must have time to think," she went on. "I must speak to my father."

He took a step forward as if to grasp her hand, but she drew back.

"No," she said. "I did not expect – that – you would come to me in this way, and – it is not a decision which can be made lightly."

"No, great God, no," said Leicester. His voice was hoarse, and almost trembling. He never could have believed that he could have been so much moved. "It is everything to me – everything."

In his heart of hearts he believed that she would accept him, and yet the fear that she should not became a ghastly nightmare.

"Excuse me," she went on, "but I think I would like to be alone now. I want – "

"Yes," interrupted Leicester, taking his hat and gloves. "I understand. Good-afternoon."

She felt almost disappointed. Was he going away like this? Did he take it for granted that she would write him her decision? But she said nothing. A servant came in answer to her ring, and Leicester walked into the hall. To the servant his manners seemed that of a visitor who had been coldly received.

"Shall I call a carriage, sir?"

"No, I shall walk to the station."

The man opened the door, and he left the house without another word. He walked to the station almost like a man in a dream; he could hardly realise that what had taken place was an actual fact. He had proposed to Olive Castlemaine, and he had not been refused. He found he had twenty minutes to wait for a train back to London, but that did not trouble him. Nothing mattered now. A new element had come into his life; everything had changed. He was no longer a ship upon life's sea, he was a man who loved, and was loved. True, Olive had not said so much as this, but he had read enough of her character to know that had there not been strong hope for him, she would have refused him there and then.

He walked up and down the platform without seeing or hearing anything. One thought filled his mind, one hope filled his heart. Presently, when his train arrived, he had a vague idea that he was on the way to the City.

An hour later he arrived at his club. By this time the spell

which the interview with Olive had cast over him had lost some of its power. Doubts began to arise, fears came into his heart. He was no longer sure of himself or of her. As the excitement passed away, the old longing for whisky came back to him. He was on the point of ordering it when he remembered what he had said to Olive.

"She has not yet promised you," said temptation. "Indulge freely while you may. You will be breaking no promise." He stretched out his hand to ring a bell, but as quickly withdrew it.

"No," he said, "I should be ashamed to meet her again if I did. I'll not be such a weak thing as that."

He scarcely slept that night. Hope and fear, joy and despair alternately possessed him, and in his darker hours the craving for drink dogged him. Once he went so far as to take a bottle of whisky from a cupboard, but when he realised what he was doing he opened the window and poured the contents into the street. Never in his whole life had a night seemed so long. Again and again did he switch on the electric light and try to read, only to throw one book after another from him in anger and weariness. When morning at length came, it brought no comfort. What had given him hope and joy the day before only filled his mind with doubt now. Besides, every fibre of his drink-sodden nature cried out for satisfaction. Life became almost unbearable.

"It's this uncertainty," he said. "If she had said yes, I could drive the craving from me as such an accursed thing should be driven, but while I am in doubt I seem like a feather in the wind."

As the thought passed through his mind, the humour of the situation possessed him. He laughed at himself. He, Radford Leicester, who for years had despised women, was now admitting that his whole future depended on the single word of one of the despised sex. What would his acquaintances say? This reminded him of Purvis and Sprague, and of the compact they had made, and then he felt like laughing no more. What if they should ever divulge what had taken place between them!

He seized a telegraph form, and wrote quickly: "*Expect me to-night at six. Leicester.*" This dispatch he addressed to Olive Castlemaine, and after that he became more calm. It seemed to form another link between him and the woman he loved. He spent the morning in answering letters which had come from his constituency, and then, after lunch, he went to a livery stable and hired a horse. When he returned he hardly knew where he had been, but the owner of the horse knew he had been ridden hard, so hard that he resolved to make certain stipulations before trusting him again with such a valuable animal.

A few minutes before six Radford Leicester was again at The Beeches.

"Mr. Castlemaine is expecting you, sir," said the servant, as he took his hat and coat; "he will be down in a few minutes. Will you step this way, sir?"

It was the same room. He noted the chair where Olive had sat the day before, he remembered the quiet ticking clock on the mantelpiece, the fire-irons that were placed on the hearth. He

recalled the words of the servant, "Mr. Castlemaine is expecting you, sir." Did that mean that Olive had deputed her father to speak for her? If so, it meant refusal. His heart grew cold at the thought. The door opened and Olive entered. Eagerly he looked at her, feverishly he tried to read her answer in her eyes.

She came up close to him, and then stood still. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Olive?" he said. Everything he meant seemed to be in her name as he uttered it. It was a question, it was an expression of his love, of his heart's longings.

"Yes," she replied.

He lifted her hand reverently to his lips and kissed it. He longed to take her in his arms, and to tell her of his heart's joy; he longed to kiss her lips, and tell her that he would give his whole life to make himself worthy of her trust. But something sealed his lips. What was it?

Is there, humanly speaking, a diviner power on earth than the love of a pure, womanly woman? Is there anything that can make a bad man ashamed of his badness, or lead a purposeless man to devote his life to some great and worthy cause, so really and truly as the love of a woman whom he knows to be worthy of the name of woman? If there is, I do not know of it. If the old, old story that sin came upon the race by a woman is true, it is more true that good women are God's greatest means of purifying the world of its sin. Radford Leicester had not been a good man. If he had not fallen as low as some, it was because of innate

pride, and because his nature abhorred some of the grosser and coarser forms of sin. He had not been filled with high purposes, he had lived wholly for self; but as he kissed Olive's hand, such a contrition, such a shame as he had never known before, came into his heart. Proud man as he was, he found himself saying what he would have laughed to scorn a few months before.

"Thank you, Olive," he said, still holding her hand, "you have given me a new life to live." He hesitated a moment, and then went on speaking again. "I want to tell you this," he said. "Although I am unworthy of you, I will try and make myself worthy. That promise I made yesterday I will keep. Yes, I will keep it. And – and if there is a God, I will find Him."

He spoke the words reverently. There was not a touch of the cynic in his voice; it was even as he felt. God had used this woman to lead him the first step towards his salvation.

"You have no doubt, no fear, Olive?" he said.

"No," she said quietly, "not one. I believe you, I trust you implicitly."

"And you love me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Really and truly. You know what I mean?" He spoke quietly and slowly, but his voice trembled.

"How could I say what I have said – else?" There was a sob in her voice as she spoke, and yet the sob sounded like a laugh.

"Thank God!"

He did not believe, this man, that God existed, and yet it was

the only way that he could express the great joy of his heart. Never, until then, had he known what happiness meant. The old, hopeless, purposeless past was forgotten; that night his history began anew.

After dinner that night, John Castlemaine and Radford Leicester talked long and earnestly. It was no light matter to the father to promise his child in marriage; moreover, although he admired Leicester, and while he believed that a great career was possible to him, he did not feel quite happy. For John Castlemaine belonged to the old school of thought, and he had no sympathy with the modern looseness of ideas. He came of a stock who for more than a hundred years had fought the battle of religious liberty, and who had been ready to sacrifice their goods, even their lives, for principle. He was a Puritan of the best order. He retained all their old strong characteristics, he stood for their noblest ideals, without adhering to much that was sunless and repugnant. He was a happy, genial man, kind almost to indulgence as far as his daughter went, but he was strong in his hatred of the so-called morals of that class to which Leicester was supposed to belong. Moreover, Olive was his only child. Upon her he had poured the wealth of his affection, and thus the thought of giving her to a man was no light matter. Could he then give her to Leicester? It was a hard struggle; but in the end Leicester won. He spoke to John Castlemaine freely and frankly, and he spoke with such fervour, such strength of purpose, that in spite of all he had heard, John Castlemaine was convinced of

the other's worthiness.

"But not yet, not yet," said the older man. "I cannot bear to lose her yet."

"But why need we wait?" asked Leicester. "We are neither of us children, and I need her, Mr. Castlemaine. She is all the world to me."

"I say 'not yet,' because without her I shall be alone. Fancy me living in this great house without Olive. It will become like a vault, an empty vault, and I do not know how I can bear it."

"I am free to live where you like," said the young man. "I will build a house close by here if it is your will, or I will buy one. I saw one for sale on my way here."

"Then why not live here?" asked John Castlemaine. The thought of having his son-in-law always near him was pleasant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.