

Wells David Dwight

Parlous Times: A Novel of Modern Diplomacy



David Wells

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of Modern Diplomacy**

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CHAPTER I

THE CONSPIRACY

"Forty thousand pounds is a pretty sum of money."

"Bribery is not a pretty word."

"No – there should be a better name for private transactions when the amount involved assumes proportions of such dignity." The speaker smiled and glanced covertly at his companion.

"Darcy is our man without doubt. Can you land him? He may hold out for the lion's share and then refuse on the ground of – honour."

"Darcy and honour! That is a far call."

"There is much unsuspected honesty going around."

"Perhaps – but not Darcy."

"But what if he refuse?"

"He cannot."

"Why not?"

"That's my secret. I force Darcy's hand for you, and in return I expect fair recognition."

"You have our promise, but it must be to-night. There is no time to lose. I'll go on to the house. Where will you see Darcy?"

"Leave that to me. Until morning —*adios*," and he vanished among the deep shadows and dark shrubbery.

The sun had sunk red and fiery below the edge of the waving mesa, and a full tropical moon shed its glory over the landscape, making dark and mysterious the waving fields of cane, which surrounded the whitewashed courts of the palatial hacienda. The building was brilliantly lighted within, and from it came such sounds of discordant merriment as could be produced only by a singularly inferior native orchestra. Through one of the long French windows which gave on to the veranda of the house, there stepped forth the figure of a man. He stood for a moment taking long breaths of the heavy miasmatic air, as if it were grateful and refreshing after the stifling atmosphere of the ballroom. Had he not worn the uniform of a British officer he would still have been unmistakably military in appearance, standing six feet or over, a fine specimen of an animal, and handsome to look upon. But it was a weak face for a soldier, in spite of its bronze and scars, a weakness which was accentuated by the traces of a recent illness. To judge from his pallor it had been severe. The man had a pair of shifty grey eyes, which never by any chance looked you straight in the face, and now expressed ill-concealed ennui and annoyance. Not the countenance of a joyful bridegroom certainly, and yet, he had but that moment left the side of his wife of a few hours, the most beautiful woman in that South American State, and the only child and sole heiress of its most famous planter, Señor De Costa.

Up to that day the progress of his suit and the many obstacles which might intervene to prevent its successful consummation, had given a certain zest to the game. Now that he had won, he was heartily sick and tired of the whole affair. Seizing a moment when his wife was dancing with one of her relations, he had stolen out on the broad veranda to be alone, and to pull himself together in order that he might play out the rest of what was, to him, a little comedy; and to the woman within – well, time would show. The soft moonlight tempted him. His place was in the ballroom, he knew, but he put one foot off the edge of the piazza, and as it pressed the soft grass under his feet, he fell a willing victim to the spell of the night, and strolled slowly off into the darkness.

His meditations were not, however, destined to remain uninterrupted. He had gone scarcely thirty yards when a lithe figure rose suddenly out of a clump of bushes, and touching him softly on the arm, whispered in perfect English, without the faintest touch of Spanish accent: —

"Hist, Señor Darcy. A word with you, and speak softly."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Colonel Darcy, instinctively feeling for his revolver, for in this remote and not over well-governed section, a night encounter did not always have a pleasant termination.

"I mean you no harm," said the stranger, "only good."

"Then why couldn't you come to the house and see me there?" demanded the officer brusquely.

"It was out of consideration for your Excellency," replied the stranger quietly. "I had the honour to serve under your Excellency some years ago, in England."

"Impossible!" said the Colonel. "You are Spanish, but —"

"Of Spanish parents, Señor, but English-born. I joined the regiment at Blankhampton. My room-mate was Sergeant Tom Mannis."

Darcy drew in his breath sharply.

"Your Excellency may remember he died of fever."

"I never saw or heard of your friend!"

"Though he was your Excellency's body-servant," suggested the stranger.

Darcy bit his moustache.

"When he died," continued the speaker, "he bequeathed certain papers to me, containing evidence of a ceremony performed over a certain officer of his regiment, then stationed in Ireland, in the month of August three years ago."

"Ah," said the Colonel, "I think I see the drift of your remarks, my friend. You wish to have a little chat with me, eh?"

The man nodded.

"It is a pleasant night," continued Darcy, "suppose we stroll a trifle farther from the house." He slipped his hand furtively behind him.

"With pleasure," acquiesced the other. "But," he added, as they took their first step forward, "the Señor will find only blank cartridges in his revolver. It is a matter that I attended to personally."

Darcy swore under his breath. Aloud he said, simply: —

"Say what you have to say, and be quick. I shall be missed from the ballroom."

The man nodded again, and plunged abruptly into his narration.

"There is an island at the mouth of the X – River, off the coast of this country, as you have probably heard. It contains large manufactories for the sale of a staple article, which we produce. Owing to an amiable arrangement between the heads of the firm in England and our Government, a monopoly of this article is secured to them, in return for which certain officials in this country receive thousands of pesetas a year. As your Excellency may remember, a treaty is pending between this country and Great Britain, looking to the secession of the island to the latter. If the treaty succeeds, the monopoly, owing to your accursed free-trade principles, will cease, and the island and its products be thrown open to competition."

"It has been suggested by certain patriotically disposed personages, with a desire for their country's good, that a prearranged disposition of forty thousand pounds in gold among a majority of the members of the Cabinet who are to pass upon the treaty some six months hence, might result in its rejection."

"Well," said Darcy, shortly, "what of that?"

"The only difficulty that remains, is the transportation of the bullion from England to our capital. Those interested in the matter have felt that if an Englishman of undoubted integrity," there was just a suspicion of sarcasm in the speaker's tones, "who is so highly connected in this country

that the usual customs formalities would be omitted on his re-entry, I say, if this Englishman could see his way to bringing over the gold, things might be satisfactorily arranged."

"A very interesting little plot," said the officer. "And what would the philanthropic Englishman receive for his services?"

"He would receive at the hands of the president of the company a packet of papers, formally the property of Sergeant Tom Mannis, of her Britannic Majesty's – th Fusiliers, lately deceased."

"And what would prevent the philanthropic but muscular Englishman from wringing the neck of the low-down sneak who has proposed this plan to him, and taking the papers out of his inside pocket?"

"Because, Excellency, they are now in the safe of the manufacturing company."

"And the president of that company?"

"Is a guest at your Excellency's wedding."

Darcy clenched his hands nervously. He was battling silently, skilfully, not to betray the dread which was unnerving him. The music floated out from the house – fitful and discordant.

"An Englishman," he said slowly, "never gives way to a threat, but of course, if he could be brought to see the purely philanthropic side of the argument, and receive – well, say, five per cent. of the bullion carried, for his travelling expenses, he might see his way to sacrifice his personal interests for the good of his adopted country."

"Good," said the stranger. "The president will meet you the day after to-morrow, at three o'clock in the afternoon, at the capital in the San Carlos Club."

"Very well," said Darcy. "Go. Someone's coming!"

The figure of the stranger faded into the darkness, and a moment later the soft footsteps of a woman approached.

"Ah, *mia carrissima*," he said, taking her in his arms. "You have missed me."

"Yes," she said, with a little sigh of satisfied relief, as she felt his strong embrace about her. "But why did you leave me? I do not understand."

"The air of the room oppressed me. I came out to breathe."

"I did not know," she said. "I was frightened." And as she raised her face to him, he saw that she had been crying.

She might well have commanded any man's attention. Tall and slight, lissome in every movement of her exquisitely shaped figure, barely thirty, and very fair withal. Even the tears which sparkled on her long lashes could not obscure the superb black eyes full of a passion which betrayed Castilian parentage as surely as did those finely-chiselled features, and that silky crown of hair which, unbound, must have descended to her feet. Half Spanish, half Greek, she was a woman to be looked upon and loved.

"But, Inez, surely you trusted me?" came the suave tones of expostulation from her husband.

"Trusted you, my knight? Have I not trusted you this day with my soul, with my whole life? You have been so near to death's door, and I have been so near to losing you, that I fear now, every moment you are out of my sight."

"Oh, I don't think there is any danger," he said, laughing. "I am strong enough now, though I daresay I should never have pulled through without such a plucky nurse."

"Ah, yes," she said. "I can shut my eyes and see you now, how frightfully ill and worn you were, when you came to my father's house that night, three months ago, invalided home from India."

"Yes," he said. "It was the greatest stroke of luck in my life that I should have lost my way and have been obliged to beg your hospitality for the night."

"And then the fever. The next morning you were delirious. For days you knew nothing, understood nothing, yet you talked, talked, always."

Colonel Darcy shifted uneasily.

"One generally does that," he said. "The raving of delirium."

"You said things that meant nothing usually. But one name you were always repeating, a strange English name of a woman."

"And it was?" he murmured, stroking her hair.

"Belle. La Belle, I think you meant. And the other name, I do not remember. It sounded harsh, and I did not like it."

He laughed nervously.

"There is nothing for you to be jealous about, *cara mia*," he said. "It was the name of a playmate of my childhood. I had not heard or thought of it for years. But that is the way in fever. The forgotten things, the things of no importance come uppermost in the mind."

"And then," she went on, "came that happy day when you knew us, and then you grew stronger and better, and I realised that you would be going away from us for ever."

"Did you think?" he asked softly, "that I could ever have forgotten my nurse?"

"I had been unhappy and very lonely. I feared to hope for joy again, till the day that you told me you loved me." And she hid her face on his shoulder to hide her blushes.

"Come," he said. "We must think of the present. I have a little surprise for you. I have been going over my affairs, and I do not think it will be necessary to take you away from home for so long a time as I had first thought. I hope that in six months we may be able to return."

"Oh!" she cried. "That is indeed good news! I dread your England. It is so far away, and so strange."

"I shall try to teach you to love it. But we must be returning to the house. Our guests will miss us."

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I meant to have told you. The president of some great manufacturing company has arrived to pay his respects, and is anxious to speak with you."

CHAPTER II

WANTED – A CHAPERON

Aloysius Stanley, Secretary of a South American Embassy, was not happy. Yet he was counted one of the most fortunate young men in London. Of good family, and large fortune, he had attained a social position, which not a few might envy. His rooms faced the park, he belonged to the swellest and most inane club in town, was *ex officio* a member of the Court, and knew at least two duchesses, not perhaps intimately, but well enough to speak to at a crush. He had been christened Aloysius, because his father owned a large plantation in a South American Republic – no, it was a Dictatorship then – and had named his son after the saint on whose day he had been born, out of consideration for the religious prejudices of the community.

His name, then, was Aloysius Stanley, and this was the reason his intimates called him "Jim." His other titles were "my dear colleague," when his brethren in the diplomatic corps wanted anything of him, and "Mr. Secretary" when his chief was wroth.

Having shown no special aptitude for growing sugar he had been early put into diplomacy, under the erroneous impression that it would keep him out of mischief.

He was, on the evening on which he is first introduced to us, standing in the immaculate glory of his dress suit, on the top step of the grand staircase of the Hyde Park Club.

His party, a very nice little party of six, had all arrived save one, and that one was his chaperon. The two young ladies, safe in harbour of the cloak-room, awaited her coming to flutter forth; the two gentlemen wandered aimlessly about the now nearly deserted reception-room, for dinner was served and most of the brilliant parties had already gone to their respective tables.

Surely she would come, he told himself; something unavoidable had detained her. Lady Rainsford was much too conscientious to leave an unfortunate young man in the lurch without sending at least a substitute – yet, with it all, there was the sickening suspicion that she might have met with a carriage accident in crowded Piccadilly; have received, as she was on the point of starting, the news of some near relative's death; some untoward accident or stroke of fate, which took no count of social obligations, and would leave him in this most awful predicament. Why had he departed from his invariable rule of asking two married ladies – what if it did cramp him in the number of his guests? Anything was better than this suspense! If fate was only kind to him this once, he vowed he would never, as long as he lived, tempt her again in this respect.

Hark – what was that! a hansom was driving at break-neck speed up to the ladies' entrance. Some other belated guest – Lady Rainsford had her own carriage – no, a man – and – Good Heavens! it, was her Ladyship's – butler. Something had happened. He needed no page to summon him – he rushed down, two stairs at a time.

"No, sir, no message," explained the flustered butler – "I come on my own responsibility – seeing as her Ladyship had fainted dead away as she was just a putting on her opera cloak – and knowing as she was coming to you, sir, as soon as the doctors had been sent for, I jumps into a cab and comes here to let you know as you couldn't expect her no-how – her not having revived when I left – and – Thank you, sir – " as Stanley, cutting short his volubility, pressed a half-sovereign into his hand, to pay him for his cab fare and his trouble – adding as he did so: —

"Pray request her Ladyship not to worry herself about me, I shall be able, doubtless, to make other arrangements – and – express my deep regrets at her indisposition." The man touched his hat and was gone, and the Secretary slowly reascended the stairs.

"Make other arrangements!" Ah, that was easier said than done. What would his guests say when he confessed to them his awkward dilemma? Lady Isabelle McLane would raise her eyebrows, call a cab, and go home, would infinitely prefer to do so than to remain under the present conditions.

But Belle? Without doubt Belle Fitzgerald would do the same – not because she wished to, but because Lady Isabelle did. And the two men – they would probably stay and chaff him about it the rest of the evening. Lieutenant Kingsland always chaffed everybody – he could stand that – but Kent-Lauriston's quiet, well-bred cynicism, would, he felt, under the circumstances, simply drive him mad.

Yet, they must be told. He must face the music, or find a chaperon, and how could he do the latter in a maze of people whom he did not know, and who were all engaged to their own dinner-parties? Outside the Club it was hopeless, for there was no time to send for any lady friend, even were such an one dressed and waiting to come at his behest. A telephone might have saved the situation, but London is above telephones; they are not sufficiently exclusive. No, he must meet his fate, and bear it like a man, and none of his guests would ever forget it or forgive him, or accept any of his invitations again.

Stanley ascended the stairs with the sensations of an early Christian martyr going to the arena – indeed, he felt that a brace of hungry lions would be a happy release from his present predicament. As he reached the top step, a conversation, carried on in the low but excited tones of a man and a woman, reached his ears, which caused him to pause, partly out of curiosity at what he heard, but more because the words carried, in their meaning, a ray of hope to his breast.

"I tell you, I will not dine with those men. It is an insult to have asked me to receive them, they are – ", but here the man, evidently her husband, interrupted earnestly in a low tone of voice, begging her to be silent, but she did not heed his request.

"I tell you," she continued, as he passed on to the dining-rooms, "I will go back alone. Ugh! how I despise you!" loathing and contempt stung in her words. "If only my father were here, he would never permit – " She turned suddenly, and crossed the hall to the staircase, coming face to face with the Secretary.

"What – Inez? You? I did not know you were in London. But of course – I might have known – Then that was Colonel Darcy? I have never had an opportunity to congratulate him or – to wish you every happiness," he added bitterly.

"Don't, Jim! Don't!" There was something suspiciously like a sob in her low voice. "That is a mockery I cannot stand – at least from you."

"I fail to understand how my wishes, good or otherwise, would mean anything to Madame Darcy."

"No – you do not understand. That is just it. Oh, Jim – it has all been a piteous, horrible mistake. They lied to me – and then you did not come back. They said you were – oh, can't you see?"

The Secretary looked at the beautiful face before him, now flushed and distressed. How well he knew every line of that exquisite profile and the hair parted low and drawn back lightly from the brow.

"Let me explain," he urged hotly.

Madame Darcy had recovered her self-possession and drew herself up with a gesture of proud dignity.

"No – " she answered gently. "This is neither the time nor place for explanations between us. Will you see me to my carriage – please?"

"Oh, don't go! I need you so. Please stay and help me out of a most embarrassing situation."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, you see it is a most awkward predicament. My chaperon has been taken suddenly ill at the last moment, and is unable to be present," he began, plunging boldly into his subject. "As I am entertaining two young ladies at dinner to-night, you will understand my unfortunate situation. Will you honour me by accepting the vacant place at the head of my table, as my chaperon?"

Madame Darcy said nothing for a moment, but looked intently at the Secretary.

"Who form your party, Mr. Stanley?" she asked presently.

"Do not call me Mr. Stanley, Inez."

"It is better – at least for the present."

"As you wish, Madame Darcy," he acquiesced stiffly.

"I cannot explain now – but believe me it is wiser. And your party consists of – ?"

"Lady Isabelle McLane, daughter of the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur, Miss Fitzgerald, a niece of Lord Axminster, Lieutenant Kingsland, of the Royal Navy, and Lionel Kent-Lauriston – well, everybody knows him."

She smiled.

"Yes," she said, "I have met him; he is most charming." In saying which she but voiced the generally accepted verdict of society.

Everyone knew Kent-Lauriston and everyone liked him. He was a type of the most delightful class of Englishman. With all his insular prejudices strong within him, and combining in his personality those rugged virtues for which the name of Britain is a synonym, he had in addition that rarest of talents, the quality of being all things to all men; for he was possessed of great tact and sympathy flavoured with a cheerful cynicism which hurt no one, and lent a piquancy to his conversation. It was said of him, were he put down in any English shire, he would not need to walk five miles to find a country house where he would be a welcome and an honoured guest.

"Then I may hope that you will do me this great kindness?" continued the Secretary.

"I accept with pleasure."

"And Colonel Darcy – " he began.

"My husband," she replied, not waiting for him to finish his sentence, "cannot possibly have any objection to my dining with my country's diplomatic representative. I will speak to him, however, and tell him when to order my carriage," and she passed into the next room. Though unperceived himself, the Secretary saw reflected in a great mirror the scene that followed; her proud reserve as she delivered her dictum to her husband, his gesture of impatient anger, and the look which attended it; and finally the contempt with which she turned her back on him and swept out of the room. A moment later she was by Stanley's side, saying: —

"Will you take me to your guests?"

As she entered the reception room on the Secretary's arm, he trembled with evident agitation. Her marvellous beauty, the wonderful charm of her voice and manner brought to mind only too vividly a realising sense of something he had once hoped for – of something which, of late, he had tried to forget. Yet he was about to give a dinner to a lady whose future relations with himself had been a subject of debate for some months, not only in his own mind, but in the minds of his friends.

Miss Fitzgerald was the guest of the evening, and, it must be allowed, was one of the most winsome, heart-wrecking, Irish girls that ever delighted the gaze of a youth. She was tall, fair, and almost too slim for perfection of form, though possessed of a lissomeness of body that more than compensated for this lack, and she had, in addition, the frankest pair of blue eyes, and the most gorgeous halo of golden hair, that could well be imagined.

She was possessed of a legendary family in Ireland, and numerous sets of relations, who, though not very closely connected, were much in evidence in the social world of London. She had, however, no settled abiding place, and no visible means of support. She was sparkling, light-hearted, and perfect dare-devil, and the town rang with the histories of her exploits. All the men were devoted to her, and as a result, she was cordially hated by all the dowagers, because she effectively spoiled the chances of dozens of other less vivacious but more eligible debutantes. The remainder of the guests were brought together rather by circumstance than by design. Kent-Lauriston had been especially invited, because the Secretary knew him to be greatly prejudiced against the fascinating Belle, with regard to any matrimonial intentions she might be fostering. Miss Fitzgerald herself had suggested the Lieutenant, and the Lieutenant had opportunely hinted that his distant connection Lady Isabelle did not know Miss Fitzgerald, and as they were all to meet in a country house in Sussex at the end of the week, perhaps it would be pleasanter to become acquainted beforehand.

At Madame Darcy's coming, such a feeling of relief was made manifest that her task would have been light, had not her charm of manner served to put all immediately at their ease. The ladies welcomed her warmly as a solution of an embarrassing situation, and with men she was always a favourite, so the little party lost no time in seeking their already belated dinner.

At first, indeed, there was a little constraint, owing to the fact that Lady Isabelle, a type of the frigid high-class British maiden, was disposed to assume an icy reserve towards Miss Fitzgerald, a young lady of whom she and her mother, a dragon among dowagers, thoroughly disapproved.

The conversation was desultory, as is mostly the case at dinners, and not till the champagne had been passed for the second time did it become general, then it turned upon racing.

"You were at Ascot, I suppose?" asked Miss Fitzgerald of Madame Darcy.

"Oh, yes," she replied, "They are very amusing – your English races."

She spoke with just the slightest shade of foreign intonation, which rendered her speech charming. "I was on half a coach with four horses."

"What became of the other half?" queried the Lieutenant.

"That is not what you call it – it is not a pull – ?" she ventured, a little shy at their evident amusement.

"Perhaps you mean a drag," suggested Stanley, coming to the rescue.

"Yes, that is it," she laughed, a bewitching little laugh, clear as a bell, adding, "I knew it was something it did not do."

"I always go in the Royal Enclosure," murmured Miss Fitzgerald languidly, turning her gaze on the Secretary, while she toyed with the course then before her. "It's beastly dull, but then one must do the correct thing."

It was a very simple game she was playing – quite pathetic in its simplicity – but dangerous in the presence of Lady Isabelle, in whose veins a little of the dragon blood certainly ran, as well as a great deal that was blue, and Miss Fitzgerald's assumption was a gage of battle not to be disregarded.

"Really. I gave up the Enclosure several years ago. It is getting so common nowadays," said her Ladyship, growing a degree more frigid while the Irish girl flushed.

"Perhaps Miss Fitzgerald enjoyed a run of luck to compensate her for the assemblage?" suggested Kent-Lauriston drily.

"No," responded that young lady. "I came a beastly cropper."

"That was too bad for you," he replied.

"Or somebody else," suggested the Lieutenant, and amidst a burst of laughter Miss Fitzgerald regained her good humour.

"Possibly our host had better luck," ventured Kent-Lauriston.

"Oh, His Diplomacy never bets," laughed Miss Fitzgerald. "He is much too busy hatching plots at the Legation."

"I protest!" cried that gentleman. "Don't you believe them, Madame Darcy. I'm entirely harmless."

"Yes?" she said. "I thought one must never believe a diplomat."

"Oh, at the present day, and in a country like England, our duties are very prosaic."

"Come now, confess," cried Miss Fitzgerald, laughing. "Haven't you some delightfully mysterious intrigue on hand, that you either spend your days in concealing from your brother diplomats, or are dying to find out, as the case may be?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he replied gravely, "but my duties and tastes are not in the least romantic."

"At least, not in the direction of diplomacy," murmured the Lieutenant, giving the waiter a directive glance towards his empty champagne glass.

"You have a beautiful country, Miss Fitzgerald," came the soft voice of Madame Darcy, who had heard the aside, and was sorry for the young girl at whom it was directed.

"Oh, Ireland, you mean. Yes, I love it."

"We are mostly Irish here," laughed Lieutenant Kingsland. "One of my ancestors carried a blackthorn, and Miss Belle Fitzgerald."

"Belle Fitzgerald!" she said, starting and looking keenly at the Irish girl, who turned towards her as her name was mentioned, "are you the Belle Fitzgerald who knows my husband, Colonel Darcy – so – well –"

"Your husband?" she said slowly, looking Madame Darcy straight in the face. "Your husband? No, I have never met *your* husband. I do not know him."

Lieutenant Kingsland, seeing the attention of the company diverted from his direction, half closed his eyes, and softly drew in his breath. Just then the orchestra made an *hejira* to the drawing-room, and the little party hastened to follow in its footsteps, in search of more music, liqueurs, coffee, cigarettes, and the most comfortable corner.

"My dear Jim," expostulated his guest of honour, half an hour later, "there is not a drop of green Chartreuse, and you know I never drink the yellow. Do be a good boy and run over to the dining-room, and persuade the steward to give us some."

As he rose and left them, obedient to the Irish girl's request, she leaned over to Kingsland, who was seated next her, and handing him a square envelope, said quietly, and in a low voice: —

"I want this given to Colonel Darcy before Stanley returns – his party is still in the dining-room. Don't let our crowd see you take it."

"Oh, I say," he expostulated, inspecting the missive which was blank and undirected, "it's a risky thing to do, especially in the face of the whopper you just told his wife about not knowing him."

"I had to, 'Dottie' – I had indeed – she's so jealous she would tear the eyes out of any woman who ventured to speak to him."

"I won't do anything for you if you call me 'Dottie.' You know I hate it."

"Well, Jack then – dear Jack – do it to please me and don't stand there talking, Stanley may return any minute."

"All right, I'll go."

"And don't flourish that envelope, it's most important and – it's too late."

"The Chartreuse is coming," broke in the Secretary. "I met the steward in the hall – a letter to be posted?" he continued, seeing the missive, which the Lieutenant held blankly in his hand. "Give it to me, and I'll attend to it."

A sharper man might have saved the situation, but sharpness was not one of Kingsland's attributes, and dazed by the sudden turn of affairs, he allowed Stanley to take the letter.

"Why, it's not addressed!" he exclaimed, examining the envelope which bore no mark save the initials A. R. in blue, on the flap. "Whom is it to go to?"

"I don't know," replied the Lieutenant, shamefacedly.

"Where did it come from?"

Kingsland looked about for help or an inspiration, and finding neither fell back on the same form of words, repeating, "I don't know."

Miss Fitzgerald had started up on the impulse of the moment, but sank back in her seat as the Secretary said, slipping the missive into the inside pocket of his dress-coat: —

"I am afraid I must constitute myself a dead-letter office, and hold this mysterious document till called for."

CHAPTER III

PARLOUS TIMES

"We are living in parlous times," said the Chief Confidential Clerk, of the Departmental Head of the South American Section of Her Majesty's Foreign Office.

Mr. Stanley, Secretary of South American Legation, bowed and said nothing. Inwardly, he wondered just what "parlous" meant, and made a mental note to look it up in a dictionary on the first opportunity that offered.

The Chief Confidential Clerk was the most genial of men, who always impressed one with the feeling that, diplomatic as he might be at all other times, this was the particular moment when he would relax his vigilance and unburden his official heart. As a result, those who came to unearth his secrets generally ended by telling him theirs.

In this instance neither of the speakers knew anything of the subject in hand, a treaty relating to the possession of a sand bar at the mouth of a certain South American river. A matter said to have had its rise in a fit of royal indigestion, in the sixteenth century. Somehow it had never been settled. Each new ministry, each new revolutionary government was "bound to see it through," and the treaty was constantly on the verge of being "brought to an amicable conclusion," just as it had been for nearly three hundred years.

The fate of nations had, in short, drifted on that sand-bar and stuck fast, at least the fate of one nation and the clemency of another.

The Chief Confidential Clerk was not conscious that he was really ignorant of the subject in hand – no true diplomat ever is – the young Secretary was painfully aware of his own unenlightenment.

"You are to understand," his Minister had said, "that you know nothing concerning the status of the Treaty."

"But, I do not know anything, Your Excellency," admitted the Secretary.

"So much the better," replied the Minister, "for then you cannot talk about it."

The result of this state of affairs was, that at the end of half an hour the Chief Confidential Clerk had discovered that the Secretary knew nothing, while the Secretary had discovered – nothing.

"We are living in parlous times," said the English official, "parlous times, Mr. Stanley."

Then his lunch arrived, and the interview closed in consequence.

"I wonder," said the Secretary, half to himself and half to the horse, as he trundled clubwards in a hansom, "I wonder if I could write out a report of that last remark; it might mean so much – or so little."

Stanley did not worry much over his failure to extract information at the Foreign Office, because he was much more worried over deciding whether he was really in love with Belle Fitzgerald.

That young lady had been the cause of much anxiety to all those friends who had his interests at heart, and from whom he had received advice and covert suggestions, all tending to uphold the joys of a bachelor existence as compared with the uncertainties of married life. They had spoken with no uncertain voice. It was he who had wavered, to-day, believing that she was the one woman on earth for him; to-morrow, sure that it was merely infatuation. Now his decision had been forced. He was invited to a house-party at her aunt's, Mrs. Roberts; Belle would be there, and if he accepted, he would, in all probability, never leave Roberts' Hall a free man.

Miss Fitzgerald and the Secretary had seen a great deal of each other during the season just drawing to a close. At first, as he assured himself and his friends, it was merely "hail, fellow, well met," but when he came to know the Irish girl better, their relations assumed a different significance, as he gradually realised the isolated position she occupied. Interest had changed to pity. He regretted that, for lack of guidance, she seemed to be her own worst enemy, and feared that her really sweet

nature might be hardened or embittered from contact with the world. He told himself he must decide at once whether he loved this wilful girl, and should ask her to give him the right to protect her from the world and from herself.

Yet Stanley was keenly sensitive of the rashness of the step he contemplated. The sweet bells of memory ring out whether land or sea separates us. In spite of much honest effort on his part, the picture of a beautiful face could not be banished from his mind. Now, just when he was convincing himself that he could put the past behind him, Inez crossed his path again.

He grew bitter at the thought. "She did not trust me. She never loved me or she could not have married that scoundrel, Darcy. It is all over now – and Belle needs a protector."

On the other hand, he realised how many reasons opposed such a course of action. His father, his colleagues, and society, demanded something better of him. That very social position which had put him in the way of meeting his innamorata required of him in return that he should not make a mesalliance, while sober common sense assured him with an irritating persistence that the world could not be persuaded to perceive that Miss Fitzgerald had any of the necessary qualifications for the position which he proposed to give her. But he was young and high-spirited, and these very limitations which society imposed, irritated him into a desire to do something rash. He was still, however, possessed of a substratum of worldly wisdom, and knowing that left to his own devices he would certainly go to Mrs. Roberts', regardless of what might follow, he resolved to give himself one more chance. If he could not guide himself, he might, in this crisis, be guided by the stronger will of another. He determined to ask advice of his friend Kent-Lauriston.

In a case of this sort, Lionel Kent-Lauriston was thoroughly in his element, having assisted at hundreds of the little comedies and tragedies of life, which do more to determine the future of men and women than any great crisis.

His creed may be summed up in the fact that he loved all things to be done "decently and in order." In a word he was a connoisseur of life, and the good things thereof. Unobtrusive, always harmonious, he knew everyone worth knowing, went everywhere worth going. Lucky the youth who had him for his guide, philosopher and friend. He could show him life's pleasantest paths.

Stanley was one of these favoured few. They had met soon after he came to England, and the younger man had conceived a genuine admiration for the older.

It seems hardly necessary to say, that Kent-Lauriston, though (or because) a bachelor, was an authority on matchmaking. He had reduced it to a fine art. His keen eye saw the subtle distinction between the vulgar buying and selling of a woman, with the consequent desecration of the marriage service, and the blind love, which, hot-headed, sacrifices all the considerations of wisdom to the passion of the hour.

"Never marry without love," he would say, "but learn to love wisely."

It was to this man that the Secretary determined to make confession. Kent-Lauriston, he was sure, did not approve of the match and would use his strongest arguments to dissuade him from it. Stanley knew this was the moral tonic he needed. He did not believe it would be successful, but he determined to give it a fair trial.

The Secretary reached his decision and his destination at one and the same moment, and feeling that his good resolutions would be the better sustained by a little nutriment, made his way to the luncheon table for which this particular club was justly famous; indeed, few people patronised it for anything else, situated as it was, almost within city limits, and boasting, as its main attraction, an excellent view of the most uninteresting portion of the Thames.

Happening to look in the smoking-room, on his way upstairs, Stanley caught sight of Lieutenant Kingsland.

"Hello!" he said. "You lunching here?"

"I don't know," returned the other, laughing uneasily. "I'm inclined to think not. Viscount Chilsworth asked me to meet him here to-day; but, as he's half an hour late already –"

"You think your luncheon is rather problematical?"

"I was just coming to that conclusion."

"Make it a certainty, then, and lunch with me."

"My dear fellow, you forget that I dined with you last night."

"What of that? When I first came to London, I was told that an English club was a place where one went to be alone – but I prefer company to custom."

"Yes – but there are limits to imposing on a friend's hospitality. While I'm about it, I might as well share your breakfast and bed."

"Not the latter, in any event, as long as I'm in small bachelor quarters."

The Lieutenant laughed.

"Well, then," he began, "if you'll forgive me –"

"There's one thing I won't forgive you," interrupted the Secretary, "and that is keeping me a moment longer from my lunch, for I'm ravenously hungry. I just want to send a telegram to Kent-Lauriston, asking him to meet me at the club this afternoon, and then I'll be with you."

Once they were settled at the table and the orders given, their conversation turned to general subjects.

"I suppose we'll all meet at the end of the week in Sussex," said the Lieutenant.

"Yes," replied Stanley, "at Mrs. Roberts'."

"Is it to be a large party?"

"I don't imagine so. Sort of house-warming. They've just inherited the estate. Belle Fitzgerald, you and I, and the Port Arthurs – I don't know who else."

"That reminds me," exclaimed Kingsland, "I must hurry through lunch. I promised the Marchioness I'd do a picture exhibition with her Ladyship at three, and it's nearly two, now."

"Under orders as usual, I see," said his host, and the Lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and looked sheepish. He was weak, impecunious, handsome and dashing, and rumour said just a bit wild, and, moreover, was known throughout the social world of London as the tame cat of the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur; a very distant relative of his, and as the especially privileged companion of her only daughter, Lady Isabelle McLane, on the tacit understanding that he would never so far forget himself as to aspire to that daughter's hand.

"I say," remarked that officer, who did not relish the turn which the conversation had taken, "tell me something about your country."

"Do you desire a complete geographical and political disquisition?" asked the Secretary, laughing.

"Hardly. What's it like?"

"The climate and Government of my country are both tropical."

"I suppose you mean intense, and subject to violent changes."

The Secretary looked out of the window at the most uninteresting view of the Thames, saying:

"I think we're going to have a thunderstorm."

"Am I to take that remark in a political sense?" inquired the Lieutenant.

"I don't believe I've told you," said his host abruptly, discontinuing an inopportune subject, "that I'm a South American only by force of circumstances. My parents were born in the States."

"My dear fellow," Kingsland hastened to assure him, "I never had the least intention of prying into your affairs, domestic or diplomatic. I was merely wondering if the country you represent brought forth any staple products, which would yield a profitable return to foreign investment?"

The Secretary mentioned one – which was said to be connected prominently with the treaty which was the subject of his recent visit to the Foreign Office – and so was naturally uppermost in his mind – "but," he added, "that staple is practically a monopoly, controlled by a firm of manufacturers, whose headquarters are in London, and, unless they fail, the outside public would have little chance in the same field."

"I suppose their failure is hardly likely."

"I'm not so sure of that – it all depends on a treaty now pending between your Government and mine. Frankly, if I had any money to invest, I would not expend it in that direction."

"Thank you. By the way, if your land doesn't produce good investments, it certainly brings forth beautiful women. What wonderful beauty that Madame Darcy has, who dined with us last night."

"Our fathers are old friends," replied Stanley.

"Ah, what a pity," said the Lieutenant.

"I don't understand."

"That she should not have married you, I mean, instead of that bounder Darcy. I have heard his name more than once in official circles, and there's precious little to be said in his favour. But his wife – ah, there's a woman any man might be proud to marry. Such beauty, such refinement, so much reserve. Rather a contrast to our fascinating Belle, eh?"

"I have the greatest respect for Miss Fitzgerald," said the Secretary stiffly.

"Yes, but not of the marriageable quality," said the Lieutenant, speaking *ex cathedra* as one who had also been in the fair Irish girl's train. "Oh no, my dear fellow, a woman of Madame Darcy's type is the woman for you. The Fitzgerald, believe me, would break a man's heart or his bank account, in no time."

"Look here," said Stanley shortly, "I don't like that sort of thing."

"Don't turn nasty, old chap," said Kingsland. "I'm only speaking for your good. I'd be the last man to run down a woman. I love the whole sex, and the little Fitzgerald is no end jolly, to play with, but to marry – ! By the way, have you heard of her latest exploit. The town's ringing with it. She –"

"Thanks, I'd rather not hear it," replied the Secretary, who just now was trying to forget some phases of her nature.

"By Jove!" broke in the Lieutenant – "speaking of angels – there she is now."

"What, down in this section of the city?"

"Yes, in a hansom cab."

"An angel in a hansom!" cried the Secretary, "that's certainly a combination worth seeing," and rising, he stepped to the window, followed by Kingsland. The two men were just in time to see the lady in question dash by along the Embankment, and to note that she was not alone. Indeed, even the fleeting glimpse which they caught of her companion was sufficiently startling to engrave his likeness indelibly on their minds.

He was an oldish man, of say sixty, clad in a nondescript grey suit of no distinguishable style or date, surmounted by a soft felt hat of the type which distinguished Americans are said to affect in London, while his high cheek bones and prominent nose might have given him credit for having Indian blood in his veins, had not his dead white skin belied the charge. He was possessed, moreover, of huge bushy brows, beneath which a ferret's keen eyes peeped out, and were never for an instant still.

"Gad!" exclaimed the Lieutenant, "this promises to be the strangest escapade of all."

"Who the devil is he?" demanded Stanley, facing around, with almost an accusing note in his voice.

The Lieutenant returned his glance squarely.

"Why, he's the man who gave her – I mean, who was talking to her last night at the Hyde Park Club."

"Last night? I don't remember seeing him."

"It was when you were waltzing up and down stairs in search of a chaperon."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied the Lieutenant brusquely, lighting a cigarette, and thrusting his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"But you must have some idea?"

"Never saw him before last night, I assure you. Must be off now, old chap. Late for my appointment already. Thanks awfully for the lunch. See you at Lady Rainsford's tea this afternoon? Yes. All right. Hansom!"

And he was gone.

CHAPTER IV

A LADY IN DISTRESS

After lunch the Secretary returned to the Legation and made out his report to his Minister, concerning the treaty. He had looked up the word "parlous" in the dictionary, and found that it meant, "whimsical, tricky," – a sinister interpretation he felt, when connected with anything diplomatic; moreover the Foreign Office was distressingly uninformed on the subject, another reason for suspicion. Yet, as far as he knew – only the mere formalities of settlement remained, the ratification by vote of his home Government – the exchange of protocols – and behold it was accomplished – much to the credit of his Minister and the satisfaction of all concerned. Doubtless the visit was nothing more than a bit of routine work, and his private affairs seeming for the time more important, he dismissed it from his mind as not worthy of serious consideration and compiled an elaborate report of three pages, not forgetting to mention the arrival of the Chief Clerk's lunch, as matter which might legitimately be used to fill up space. This done, he was about to leave the office in order to meet his appointment with Kent-Lauriston, when John, the genial functionary of the Legation, beamed upon him from the door, presenting him a visiting card, and informing him that a lady was waiting in the ante-room.

"An' she's that 'ansome, sir, it would do your eyes good to see 'er."

The Secretary answered somewhat testily that his eyes were in excellent condition as it was, and that the lady did not deserve to be seen at all for coming so much after office-hours, and delaying him just as he was about to keep an appointment – then his eyes happened to fall on the card and his tone changed at once.

"Madame Darcy!" he exclaimed. "Why, what can have brought her to see me! – John, show the lady in at once, and – say my time is quite at her service."

A glance at his fair chaperon of the night before, as she entered the room, told him that she was in great trouble, and he sprang forward to take both her hands in his, with a warmth of greeting which he would have found it hard to justify, except on an occasion of such evident sorrow.

"Inez – Madame Darcy," he said, leading her to his most comfortable arm-chair – "this is indeed a pleasure – but do not tell me that you are in distress."

"I am in very great trouble."

"Anything that I can do to serve you – I need hardly say," he murmured, and paused, fascinated by this picture of lovely grief.

"I was prompted to come to you," she replied, "by your kindness of last evening, for I knew you had seen and understood, and were still my friend, and also my national representative in a foreign land, to ask your aid for a poor country-woman who is in danger of being deprived of her freedom, if not of her reason."

"But surely you are not speaking of yourself!"

"Yes, of myself."

The young diplomat said nothing for a moment or two, he was arranging his ideas – adjusting them to this new and interesting phase of his experience with Madame Darcy.

As a Secretary of Legation is generally the father confessor of his compatriots – he had ceased to be surprised at anything. People may deceive their physician, their lawyer, or the partner of their joys and sorrows; but to their country's representative in a strange land they unburden their hearts.

"Tell me," he said finally, breaking the silence, "just what your trouble is."

"I need sympathy and help."

"The first you have already," he replied with a special reserve in his manner, for he felt somehow that it was hardly fair that she should bring herself to his notice again, when he had almost made

up his mind to marry a lady of whom all his friends disapproved. Indeed, in the last few minutes the force of Kingsland's remarks had made themselves felt very strongly, and he especially exerted himself to be brusque, feeling in an odd kind of way that he owed it to Miss Fitzgerald. So putting on his most official tone he added, "to help you, Madame Darcy, I must understand your case clearly."

"Don't call me by that name – give me my own – as you once did. My husband's a brute."

"Quite so, undoubtedly; but unfortunately that does not change your name."

"Would you mind shutting the door?" she replied somewhat irrelevantly. They were, as has been said, in the Secretary's private office, a dreary room, its furniture, three chairs, a desk and a bookcase full of forbidding legal volumes, its walls littered with maps, and its one window looking out on the unloveliness of a London business street.

As he returned to his seat, after executing her request, she began abruptly: —

"You're not a South American."

"No, my father was a Northerner, but, as you know, he owned large sugar plantations in your country, and if training and sympathy can make me a South American, I am one."

"You're a Protestant."

"Yes, so are you."

"It is my mother's faith, and though I was brought up in a convent at New Orleans, I've not forsaken it. I feel easier in speaking to you on that account."

"You may rest assured, my dear, that what you say to me will go no farther. 'Tis my business to keep secrets."

"Two years ago," she began abruptly, plunging into her story, "after our – after you left home, an Englishman, a soldier returning from the East incapacitated by a fever, and travelling for his health, craved a night's rest at my father's house. As you know, in a country like ours, where decent inns are few and far between, travellers are always welcome. It was the hot season, we pressed him to stay for a day or two, he accepted, and a return of the fever made him our guest for months. He needed constant nursing – I – I was the only white woman on the plantation."

"I see," said Stanley. "You nursed him, he recovered, was grateful, paid you homage."

"Remember I was brought up in a convent. I was so alone and so unhappy. He told me you had married. I believed him – trusted him."

"Quite so. His name was Darcy. He is a liar."

"He is – my husband."

"A gentleman – I suppose?"

"The world accords him that title," she replied coldly.

"I understand – He's a man of means?"

"He has nothing but his pay."

"And you – but that question is unnecessary. Señor De Costa's name and estates are well known – and you are his only child."

"Yes, you're right," she burst out. "It's my money, my cursed money! Why do men call it a blessing! Oh, if I could trust him, I'd give him every penny of it. But I cannot, it's the one hold I have on him, and because I will not beggar myself to supply means for his extravagances he dares –"

"Not personal violence, surely?"

"To put me away somewhere – in a retreat, he calls it. That means a madhouse."

"My dear Madame Darcy!"

"Call me Inez De Costa, I will *not* have that name of Darcy, I hate it."

"My dear Inez, then; your fears are groundless; they can't put sane people in madhouses any longer in England, except in cheap fiction – it's against the law."

"It's very easy for you to sit there and talk of law. You, who are protected by your office, but for me, for a poor woman whose liberty is threatened!"

"I assure you that you're in no such danger as you apprehend."

"But if I were put away, you would help me?"

"You shall suffer no injustice that we can prevent. You may return home and rest easy on that score."

"I shall never return to that man."

"Why not return to your father?"

"Would that I could!" she exclaimed, her eyes brimming with tears. "But how can I, with no money and no friends?"

"I thought you said – " began the Secretary, but his interruption was lost in the flow of her eloquence.

"I've not a penny. I can cash no cheque that's not made to his order, and to come to you I must degrade myself by borrowing a sovereign from my maid. I've travelled third-class!"

The Secretary smiled at the ante-climax, saying:

"Many people of large means travel third-class habitually."

"But not a De Costa," she broke in, and then continued her narration with renewed ardour.

"I've no roof to shelter me to-night. No where to go. No clothes except what I wear. No money but those few shillings; but I would rather starve and die in the streets than go back to him. I'm rich. I've powerful friends. You can't have the heart to turn away from me. Have you forgotten the old friendship? You must do something – something to save me – " and in the passion, of her southern nature she threw herself at his feet, and burst into an agony of tears.

Stanley assisted her to rise, got her a glass of water, and had cause, for the second time in that interview, to thank his stars that love had already shot another shaft, because if it were not for Belle, his official position, and the fact that the Señora had one husband already – well – it was a relief to be forced to tell her that legations were not charitable institutions, and that much as he might desire to aid her, neither he nor his colleagues could interfere in her private affairs.

"Then you refuse to assist me – you leave me to my fate!" she cried, starting up, a red flush of anger mantling her cheek.

"Not at all," he hastened to say. "On the contrary, I'm going to help you all I know how. I can't interfere myself, but I can refer you to a friend of mine, whom you can thoroughly trust, and who's in a position to aid you in the matter."

"And his name?"

"His name is Peter Sanks, the lawyer of the Legation, a gentleman, truly as well as technically. A countryman of yours who has practised both here and at home, and who always feels a keen interest in the affairs of his compatriots. He has chambers in the Middle Temple. I'll give you his address on my card."

"You're most kind – I'll throw myself without delay on the clemency of this Señor – "

"Sanks."

"*Madre de Dios!* What a name!"

"I dare say he was Don Pedro Sanchez at home, but that would hardly go here. I've written him a line on my visiting card, requesting him to do everything he can for you, and, of course, I need hardly say to you, as a friend, not as an official, that my time and service are entirely devoted to your interests. There is nothing that I possess which you may not command."

"And for me, you do this?" she asked, looking up wistfully in his face.

He took her two little hands in his, and bending over, kissed the tips of their fingers.

"I cannot express the gratitude," she began.

"Don't," he said, cutting short her profuse thanks. "It's nothing, I assure you. Here is my card to Sanks. Better go to him at once, or you may miss him. It's nearly three o'clock." And feeling that it was unsafe to trust himself longer in her presence, he touched the bell, saying to the confidential clerk who answered it: —

"The door, John."

A moment later she was gone, leaving only the subtle perfume of her presence in the room. Stanley threw himself moodily into the nearest chair. It was too bad that this bewitching woman should be married to a brute. It was too bad that he couldn't do more to help her, and it was – yes, it really was too bad, that she should have come again into his life just at the present moment. She was so exactly like what he had fancied the ideal woman he was to marry ought to be. But she wasn't a bit like Belle, and the reflection was decidedly disturbing. And now, he supposed, she would get a divorce, and – oh, pshaw! it wasn't his affair anyway, and he was late for his appointment with Kent-Lauriston.

He rang his office bell sharply, picking up his hat and gloves as he did so, and saying to the messenger who answered his summons: —

"Give this report to his Excellency, John, and let me have some visiting cards, will you – No, no, not any official ones. Some with my private address on."

"Very sorry Sir, but they're all out. I ordered some more day before yesterday, Sir. They should have come by now."

"Just my luck, why didn't you attend to them earlier?"

"Isn't there one on your desk, Sir. I'm sure I saw one lying there this morning."

"Why, yes, so there was." And he turned hastily back, only to exclaim after a moment's hopeless rummaging: —

"Confound it! I must have given it to Señora De Costa!"

CHAPTER V

A GENTLEMAN IN DISTRESS

Kent-Lauriston was prompt to his appointment, and it took but a few moments to establish the Secretary and himself in a private room with a plentiful supply of cigarettes, and two whiskeys and sodas.

Stanley was nervous and showed it. Kent-Lauriston adjusted his monocle, tugged at his long sandy moustache, and surveyed his companion from head to foot.

"Not feeling fit?" he queried. "Suffering from political ennui?"

"Oh, my health is all right, as far as that goes – "

"Yes, I see," this last remark meditatively. Then he added. "Some deuced little scrape?"

Stanley nodded.

"Woman?"

"It concerns a lady – perhaps two."

Kent-Lauriston frowned, and tugged his moustache a trifle harder, to imply that he now understood the affair to be of a more complex order, requiring the aid of skilful diplomacy, in place of the simple directness of five-pound notes.

"Want my advice, I suppose?"

"Yes," admitted Stanley, "and so I'd better make a clean breast of the matter."

"Decidedly."

"The fact is, I want to marry – or rather, don't want to marry – no, that's not it either – I want to marry the girl bad enough, but I think I'd better not. It would be what the world – what you might call, a foolish match."

"Deucedly hard hit, I suppose?"

"You see," continued the Secretary, ignoring his friend's question, "I know I oughtn't to marry her, but left to myself, I'd do it, and I need a jolly good rowing – only you mustn't be disrespectful to the lady – I – I couldn't stand that."

"I think I know her name."

"Miss Fitzgerald. You dined with her at the Hyde Park Club last evening."

"Daughter of old Fitzgerald of the – th Hussars – "

"I – I believe that was her father's regiment, but now she lives – "

"Lives!" interjected Kent-Lauriston. "No, she doesn't live – visits round with her relatives – old Irish ancestry – ruined castles and no rents – washy blue eyes and hair, at present, golden."

"She is one of the most beautiful Irish girls I've ever seen," cried Stanley. "In repose her face is spirituelle. She is a cousin of Lord Westmoorland."

"Fourteenth cousin – twice removed."

"I don't know her degree of relationship."

"I do."

"She's splendid vitality and courage," said the Secretary, desirous of turning the conversation, which threatened to drift into dangerous channels. "She's dashing, thoroughly dashing."

"Gad, I'm with you there! I've seldom seen a better horse-woman. I've watched her more than once in the hunting field put her gee at hedges and ditches that many a Master of Hounds would have fought shy of, – and clear 'em, too."

Stanley smiled, delighted to hear a word of commendation from a quarter where he least expected it, but Kent-Lauriston's next remark was less gratifying.

"Little rapid, isn't she? Trifle fond of fizz-water and cigarettes?"

"She's the spirits of youth," said the Secretary, a trifle coldly.

"Let me see," mused his adviser. "How about that Hunt Ball at Leamington?"

"I wasn't there, and I must ask you to remember that you're talking of a lady."

"Um, pity!" said his friend ambiguously, and added, "How far have you put your foot in it?"

"Well, I haven't asked her to marry me."

"Ah. Order me another whiskey and soda, please," and Kent-Lauriston sat puffing a cigarette, and tugging at his moustache till the beverage came. Then he drank it thoughtfully, not saying a word; a silence that was full of meaning to Stanley, who flushed and began to fidget uneasily about the room.

Having finished the last drop, and disposed of his cigarette, his adviser looked up and said shortly: —

"How did this begin?"

"I met her some months ago – but only got to know her intimately at the races."

"Derby?"

"No, Ascot."

"Royal Enclosure, of course."

"Royal Enclosure, of course. She was visiting her aunt."

"I know. That type of girl has dozens of aunts."

"Her uncle brought her down and introduced us. He left her a moment to go to the Paddock and never came back."

"Um, left you to do the honours."

"Exactly so, and I did them. Saw the crowd, saw the gees, had lunch – you know the programme."

"Only too well. Do any betting?"

"A little."

"Thought it was against your principles. You told me so once."

"I – I didn't bet – that is –"

"Oh, I see. She did."

"Rather – a good round sum."

"You knew the amount?"

"Well, the fact is – she'd given her uncle her pocket-book, and he got lost."

"Clever uncle; so you paid the reckoning."

"She said she knew the winning horse."

"We always do know the winners."

"This was an exception to prove the rule."

"So you put down – and she never paid up."

"Youth is forgetful, and of course – you can't dun a lady."

"No – you can't dun a *lady*!"

"Look here!" cried Stanley. "I won't stand that sort of thing!"

"Beg your pardon, I was thinking aloud, beastly bad habit, purely reminiscent, I assure you. Go on."

"Well, of course I saw something of her after that. Aunt invited me to call, also to dine."

"What about that trip down the Thames?"

"Why, I'd arranged my party for that before I met Belle – I mean Miss Fitzgerald."

"Oh, call her Belle, I know you do."

"And she happened to mention, quite accidentally, that one of her unaccomplished ideals was a trip down the Thames. I fear she's shockingly cramped for money you know, so as I happened to have a vacant place –"

"You naturally invited her – I wonder how she found out there was a vacant place," mused Kent-Lauriston.

"My dear fellow," reiterated Stanley. "I tell you she didn't even know I was getting it up. Of course if she had, she'd never have spoken of it. Miss Fitzgerald is far above touting for an invitation."

"Of course. Well you must have advanced considerably in your acquaintance during the trip. Had her quite to yourself, as it were, since I suppose she knew none of the party."

"Oh, but she did. She knew Lieutenant Kingsland."

"To be sure. He was the man who wagered her a dozen dozen pairs of gloves that she wouldn't swim her horse across the Serpentine in Hyde Park."

"And she won, by Jove! I can tell you she has pluck."

"And they were both arrested in consequence. I think the Lieutenant owed her some reparation, and I must say a trip down the Thames was most *à propos*."

"Look here, Kent-Lauriston, if you're insinuating that Kingsland put her up to –"

"Far from it, my boy, how could I insinuate anything so unlikely? Well, what other unattainable luxuries did you bestow?"

"Nothing more to speak of – why, yes. Do you know the poor little thing had never seen Irving, or been inside the Lyceum?"

"So you gave the 'poor little thing' a box party, and a champagne supper at the Savoy afterwards, I'll be bound, and yet surely it was at the Lyceum that –"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, I was becoming reminiscent once more; it's a bad habit. Let's have the rest of it."

"There isn't much more to tell. I've ridden with her sometimes in the Park. Given her a dinner at the Wellington, a few teas at the Hyde Park Club. I think that's all – flowers perhaps, nothing in the least compromising."

"Compromising! Why, it's enough to have married you to three English girls."

"She's Irish."

"I beg her pardon," and Kent-Lauriston bowed in mock humility.

"What do you think of my case, honestly?"

"Honestly, I think she means to have you, and if I was a betting man, I'd lay the odds on her chances of winning."

"Confound you!" broke in Stanley. "You've such a beastly way of taking the words out of a man's mouth and twisting them round to mean something else. Here I started in to tell you of my acquaintance with Miss Fitzgerald, and by the time I've finished you've made it appear as if her actions had been those of an adventuress, a keen, unprincipled, up-to-date Becky Sharp. Why, you've hardly left her a shred of character. I swear you wrong her, she's not what you've made me make her out, – not at all like that."

"What is she like then?"

"She is a poor girl without resources or near relations, thrown on the world in that most anomalous of positions, shabby gentility; who has to endure no end of petty insults; insults, covert, if not open, from men like you, who ought to know better. I tell you she's good and straight, straight as a die; brave, fearless, plucky – isn't the word for it. A little headstrong, perhaps, and careless of what the world may say, but whom has she had to teach her better? There's no harm in her though. Of that I'm sure. And underneath an exterior of what may seem flippancy, her heart rings true; but you're so prejudiced you'll never admit it."

"On the contrary," replied his friend, lighting another cigarette, "I'm perfectly willing to agree to nearly all that you have just said in her favour – all that is of vital importance, at least. I know something of this young lady's career, and I'm prepared to say I don't believe there is anything bad in her. She has to live by her wits, and they must be sharp in consequence; and having to carve out her own destiny instead of having a mother to do so for her, she has become self-reliant, and to some extent careless of the impression she makes, which has given her a reputation for indiscretion which she really does not deserve. She's certainly charming, and undeniably dashing, though whether it arises

from bravery or foolhardiness, I'm not prepared to say; but one thing I can state most emphatically – you're not the man to marry her."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because you're too good for her."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"No – matter of fact."

Stanley flushed angrily – but Kent-Lauriston continued:

"No need to fly into a passion; what I say is perfectly true. The only way for Belle Fitzgerald to marry, be happy, and develop the best that is in her, is to have a husband whose methods – forceful or otherwise – she can understand and appreciate. You are too good for her. Her struggle with life has been a hard one, she has seen the seamy side of human nature, and it has taught her to estimate all men at their worst. She'd consider your virtue, weakness. You could never take her to South America and the ancestral plantation; it would bore her to extinction. She'd require to live in London or keep open house in the country, and she'd gather about her the set she goes with now. Her companions, her manner of life, you think unworthy of her; already they grate on your finer sensibilities, blinded as you are; believe me, they'd grate much more when she bore your name. No, the only man who could marry her, be happy, make her happy, and keep his good name untarnished in the future, would be one who knows her world better than she does herself; who has a past that even she would shudder at; who has no ideals, no aspirations, just manly vigour and brute force; who could guide her with a hand of steel in a glove of velvet, and pull her up short at the danger line, because he knows what lies beyond, and she knows that he knows. She'd tire of you in six months; she would not dare to tire of the other man."

"I think you wrong her," said Stanley wearily. "Indeed, your own criticism of her might be applied to yourself. Your knowledge of the world has caused you unconsciously to misjudge a nature you cannot understand. Yet I know that my friends would all voice your sentiments – that they'd all be disappointed in the match."

"Exactly so – and they'd be in the right – excuse me for being blunt, but with your wealth and social position you would be simply throwing yourself away."

"I know all that – but – I'm so sorry for her."

"You could serve her better as her friend than as her husband. She must live your life or you must live hers – in either case, one of you would be unhappy."

"I half believe you're right. Confound it! I know you're right, and yet – how am I to get out of it with honour?"

"Don't have any false sentimentality about that, my boy. Believe me, she understands the situation much better than you do. So far you have been chums; if you stop there, she is too much a woman of the world to lay it up against you. You've given her much pleasure during the past season and she appreciates it; but she's quite enough of a philosopher to accept cheerfully the half-loaf."

"But I can't be just a friend."

"Not now, perhaps, but you can a few months later, when other things have supervened."

"If I see her again – it's all over."

"Don't see her then."

"That is just the point. She's going to stay with an aunt in Sussex."

"Another aunt?"

"Yes, Mrs. Roberts, and I am invited to go down to the house-party to-morrow, and have accepted, and shall come back engaged."

"Send your excuses, by all means, write to-day."

"Yes, I suppose it's for the best, but you know I hate to do it. Somehow I can't think all you imply of her."

"My dear boy," said Kent-Lauriston, "I may be doing the lady gross injustice and keeping you out of a very good thing, but even in that case you must not go to Sussex. For heaven's sake, man, take time to consider! It's too important a matter to be decided in a hurry. If she cares for you and is worthy of you, she'll give you every fair opportunity of asking her the fateful question and a reasonable amount of time to think it over. Take a fortnight for calm reflection; it's very little to allow for what may be a life's happiness or misery. Meanwhile try and keep your mind off it. Run over to Paris with me. If at the end of our trip you still feel the same towards her, I won't stand in your way, I promise you. Come, is that a fair offer?"

"Most kind," said Stanley, "and to show you my appreciation of all the trouble you've taken, I'll send my regrets to Mrs. Roberts by the first post."

"Good boy!" said his mentor, sententiously.

"I don't know about Paris, as to whether I can get leave, I mean."

"Nonsense, you have already arranged your leave for the house-party, I'll be bound. Dine with me here to-morrow night at eight, and we'll talk it over."

"Thanks, I will. I must be going now, I have to look in at a tea or two."

"Not to meet our charming enchantress?"

"No, no, trust me, I'll play fair," and he was gone.

Kent-Lauriston puffed meditatively at his cigarette, now that he was alone, and tugged hard at his moustache.

"The little Fitzgerald a pattern of all the virtues, eh?" he said, half to himself, and half to the departing Secretary, and added, under his breath:

"Gad! How she would rook him! Never been to the Lyceum or down the Thames! May she be forgiven!"

CHAPTER VI

AFTERNOON TEA

The Secretary had stated that he had several calls to make, but they resolved themselves into one, the fact being that the day was disagreeable and the prospect of riding vast distances in hansom cabs, interspersed with short intervals of tea, not alluring. He therefore decided to confine his attentions to one hostess, and selected his missing chaperon, Lady Rainsford, whose indisposition had come so near wrecking his little dinner. Her Ladyship had much to commend her. Her house was central and large, one knew one would meet friends there, and there were plenty of nooks and corners for tête-à-têtes, while, as her circle was most select, and she received frequently, there was a fair chance that her rooms would not be crowded.

Stanley found his hostess quite recovered, and standing by the side of a bright fire in a diminutive fireplace, for the rain had made the day a bit chilly.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary," she cried, as he entered. "I was beginning to think you'd not forgiven me for leaving you in the lurch last night."

"Don't speak of it, I beg," he said, hastening to deprecate her apologies. "I should have called to enquire the first thing this morning."

"You should most certainly, and I ought to tax you with base desertion," she went on.

"That would be impossible, but I'm a victim of stern necessity. Society demands all my spare time, and I'm forced, as one always is in London, to neglect my friends for my acquaintances."

"You deserve a thorough rating, and if it were not for my duties as hostess, I'd give it to you here and now."

"I claim the protection of your hearth," he rejoined, laughing.

"Oh! But it's such a tiny hearth," she remonstrated.

"And I," he added, "am such an insignificant personage."

"I won't have you run yourself down in that way. I believe you are a great social lion. Come, confess, how many teas have you been to in the last seven days?"

"Fifty-six."

"Good gracious! How do you men stand it, and having something to eat and a cup of tea at every place?"

"Shall I enlighten you as to the professional secrets of the habitual tea-goer? We don't."

"But surely you can't always refuse."

"I never refuse. I always accept the cup – and put it down somewhere."

"For another guest to knock over. You're a hardened reprobate, but this time you shall not escape. You know Miss Campbell, who is pouring tea for me this afternoon? No? Then I'll introduce you. Miss Campbell, this is Secretary Stanley, a member of the Diplomatic Corps, who has just confessed to me that he habitually eludes the trustful hostess and the proffered tea. You'll give him a cup and see that he drinks it before he leaves the room," and the vivacious little woman departed, leaving him no alternative but to accept his fate meekly.

"How do you like your tea?" inquired Miss Campbell, a young lady deft of hand, but with few ideas.

"Lemon and no sugar."

"How nasty! But then, I forgot you never really drink it, Lady Rainsford says. But this time –"

"This time," he replied, "I'm a lamb led to the slaughter."

Miss Campbell said, "Really?" Then there followed an awkward silence.

Looking around for some means of escape, he saw a face in the crowd, that caused him to start, so utterly unexpected and out of place did it seem, considering what he had heard that afternoon. It was the face of Colonel Darcy.

He did not think the man knew him, and for obvious reasons he did not care to be introduced; so he turned again to Miss Campbell, who, seeing no alternative, rose to the occasion and continued the conversation by remarking: —

"Is it true that you go to such an enormous number of teas? What do you find to talk about?"

"Oh, I don't find much. I talk about the same thing at every tea. If you meet other people it makes no difference."

"How clever of you!"

"On the contrary it's simply dulness, and because I'm lazy – I – " but he left his sentence unfinished, for Miss Campbell's attention was palpably wavering, and her glance spoke of approaching deliverance. He looked over his shoulder to see Darcy advancing with Lieutenant Kingsland.

The two officers had met in the crush a few minutes before, and the Colonel had lost no time in taking Kingsland to task for his stupidity of the past night.

"I'm no end sorry," the Lieutenant said, in very apologetic tones.

"That doesn't give me my letter," growled the Colonel.

"I know I'm an awful duffer," assented Kingsland, "but when he came up behind me and asked questions about it, I was so staggered I let him take it right out of my hands. It wasn't addressed, you know, and I naturally couldn't say who gave it to me."

"I should hope not indeed."

"Well, what shall I do – ask him for it?"

"No, no, leave it alone; you've blundered enough. You all meet at a country house to-morrow."

"Yes."

"Well, trust its recovery to her; she'll get it, if he has it with him. If he leaves it behind in London so much the easier for me."

"But I thought you were coming down – "

"You think a great deal too much, and your actions are – "

"Sh!" whispered the Lieutenant, laying his hand on Darcy's arm. "He's looking our way, he'll hear us."

Stanley had not caught a word of the previous conversation, but a whisper sometimes carries much farther than the ordinary tones of the voice, and he heard the caution and saw the gesture which accompanied it, very distinctly.

The Colonel and the Lieutenant were close upon him by this time, and Stanley, who had no wish to be recognised, began to move off, and disappeared in the crowd, determined to make the best of his way to the door. He was terribly bored.

He was not destined to escape quite so easily, however, for Lady Isabelle McLane sighted him in transit, and in a moment more had drawn him into a protecting corner with two seats, and settled down to a serious conversation.

"I hear you're going down to the Roberts'," she said; "I'm invited too."

"Then I'm all the more sorry that I'm not to be there," he replied.

"You surprise me; I supposed your acceptance was of some standing. I hope there's nothing wrong, that your chief hasn't forgotten his position, and turned fractious?"

"Oh, no, my chief behaves very well," Stanley hastened to assure her, "but the fact is – I, well, I don't find it convenient."

"Or, in other words, you've some reason for not wanting to go."

He assented, having learned by long and bitter experience, that when a woman makes up her mind to exert her faculties of instinct, it is easier by far to acquiesce at once in any conclusion to which she may have jumped, however erroneous.

"Will you be shocked if I say I'm glad of it?"

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders; he thought he knew what was coming.

"It certainly isn't complimentary to me," he replied; "but you've always exercised the prerogative of a friend to tell disagreeable truths."

"Now, that's very unkind, Mr. Stanley. I'm sure I only do it for your good."

"My dear Lady Isabelle, if you'll allow a man who is older than your charming self, and who has seen more of the world than I hope you'll ever do – "

"To tell a disagreeable truth?" she queried, filling out the sentence, as pique prompted her.

"To make a suggestion."

"It's the same thing. Go on."

"It's merely this. That you'll never achieve a great social success till you've realised that the well-being of your friends is your least important consideration."

"Dear me, Mr. Secretary, I had no idea you were so tender in regard to Miss Fitzgerald."

"Who said anything about Miss Fitzgerald?"

"I did. I don't suppose you knew she was to be at Roberts' Hall."

"Certainly I know it. That is the very reason why I'm not going."

"I'm unfeignedly rejoiced. I've watched your progress in London with much interest, and believe me, Miss Fitzgerald is a stumbling-block in your path."

"All my friends, all the people who have my good at heart," he replied a trifle testily, "seem to think it their duty to warn me against Miss Fitzgerald."

"I should hate to see you become entangled."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's not even the shadow of a chance of such an event coming to pass. Miss Fitzgerald and I are both philosophers in our way. We attend to the serious business of society when we are apart, and indulge in a little mild and harmless flirtation when we occasionally meet, quite understanding that it means nothing, and is merely a means of relaxation, to keep our hands in, as it were."

"You say that so glibly, that I'm sure you must have said it before. It's flippant, and, besides that, it's not strictly true."

"Really!"

"Oh, excuse me if I've said anything rude, but this is a very, very serious matter, according to my way of thinking! and I do wish you'd consent to be serious about it just for once, won't you, to please me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, and I'm amazingly honoured that you should have spent so much of your valuable time over my poor affairs."

"That isn't a promising beginning," she said reflectively, "for a man who has agreed to be serious; but really now, you must know that I'm distressed about you. Your attentions to this lady are the talk of London."

"I've told you," he replied, "that I've refused this invitation to the house-party. Isn't that a sufficient answer, and won't it set your mind at rest?"

"Ye-es. Would you object if I asked just one more question? If you think it horribly impertinent you're just to refuse to answer it."

"Ask away."

"Had you, before refusing, previously accepted this invitation of Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes," he replied, a trifle sheepishly.

"Thanks, so much," she said, "I quite understand now."

"Then may we talk on some more congenial subject?"

"No, you must take me back to Mamma."

"What, was I only taken aside to be lectured?"

"Oh, no," she hastened to assure him, naïvely – it was her first season – "but we have been chatting already fifteen minutes, and that's long enough."

"Oh, dear!" he said regretfully, "I thought I'd left Mrs. Grundy at the tea-table."

"You are so careless yourself that you forget that others have to be careful. Here comes Lieutenant Kingsland to my rescue. You would not believe it, Lieutenant," she continued, as that officer approached them, "this gentleman considers himself abused because I will not talk to him all the afternoon."

"I quite agree with him," said Kingsland, "not that I have ever had that felicity; it's one of my most cherished ambitions."

"You're as bad as he is; take me to Mamma, at once."

"I'll take you to have some tea. Won't that do as well?" and they moved away.

Ten minutes later the Secretary met the Dowager Marchioness of Port Arthur, who bore down on him at once.

"Mr. Stanley, have you seen my daughter?" she demanded. "I'm waiting to go home, and I can't find her anywhere."

"The last I saw of her she was with Lieutenant Kingsland."

"Oh, you *have* seen her this afternoon, then."

This last remark seemed tempered with a little disapproval.

"I had the pleasure of fifteen minutes' chat with her," continued the Secretary imperturbably. The Marchioness raised her eyebrows.

"At least she said it was fifteen minutes" – he hastened to explain – "it didn't seem as long to me; then Lieutenant Kingsland arrived."

"I knew his mother," she said, "he comes of one of the best families in the land."

Most young men would have been crushed by the evident implication, but Stanley rose buoyantly to the occasion.

"He proposed – " he began.

The Marchioness started.

"To get her a cup of tea," continued the Secretary, placidly finishing his sentence.

"You may escort me to the tea-table," she replied, frigidly, and added: "We leave town tomorrow."

"Yes, I know," said her companion, as they edged their way through the crowd. "I'm invited myself."

"I should think you would find it difficult to attend to the duties of your office, if you make a practice of accepting so many invitations."

"Oh, I haven't accepted," he returned cheerfully.

The Marchioness was manifestly relieved.

They had by this time reached the tea-table. Lady Isabelle was nowhere in sight.

"I do not see my daughter," said her mother severely. "You told me she was here."

"Pardon me, I told you that Lieutenant Kingsland offered to get her a cup of tea."

"Well."

"But they went in the opposite direction."

"I won't detain you any longer, Mr. Stanley." The Dowager's tone was frigid. "If my daughter is in Lieutenant Kingsland's charge, I feel quite safe about her. She could not be in better hands."

The Secretary bowed and went on his way rejoicing, and his way, in this instance, led him to his lodgings.

"I wonder why she is so down on me and so chummy with Kingsland," he thought. "If she'd seen him on my launch on the Thames, she might think twice before entrusting her daughter to his charge. Well, it's none of my business, any more than my affairs are the business of Lady Isabelle."

He was just a little annoyed at the persistency with which his friends joined in crying down a woman, who, whatever her faults might be, possessed infinite fascination, and was, he honestly believed, not half so bad as she was painted. He told himself that he must seek the first opportunity that circumstances gave him at Mrs. Roberts' house-party, to have a serious talk with Miss Fitzgerald and warn her, as gently as he could, of what was being said about her. Then he recollected with a start, that he had decided not to go, that he had promised to write a refusal and – no, that he had *not* written. He would do so at once. His latch-key was in his hand.

He opened the door. There was his valet, Randell, standing in the hall, but with a look on his face which caused Stanley to question him as to its meaning, before he did anything else.

"Puzzled? I am a bit puzzled. That's a fact, sir," Randell replied to his question. "And it's about that lady," indicating the Secretary's sitting-room with a jerk of his thumb.

"What lady?"

"Why, the lady as come here half an hour ago, with her luggage, and said she was going to stay."

"Randell, are you drunk or dreaming? I know of no lady," cried Stanley, amazed.

"Well, you can see for yourself, sir," replied the valet, throwing open the door.

The Secretary stepped in, and confronted – Madame Darcy.

CHAPTER VII

AN IRATE HUSBAND

"Madame Darcy!" he exclaimed, too astonished not to betray in some measure his emotions. Then following the direction of her eyes, and noting the interrogatory glance, which she threw at Randell, he signed to his valet to leave them together.

"To what have I the honour – " he began abruptly, his voice showing some trace of the irritation he was not quite able to suppress. Surely, he thought, Inez De Costa, large as the liberty of her youth might have been, must know that in England, worse still in London, a lady cannot visit a bachelor's apartments alone, without running great danger of having her actions misconstrued.

She, with true feminine intuition, was none the less keen to realise the awkwardness of the situation, and to suffer more acutely because of the inconvenience to which she was putting him.

"A thousand pardons for this unwarrantable intrusion," she interrupted, "on one who has already loaded me with favours. It is the result of a stupid – a deplorable blunder – for which I shall never forgive myself. But once it had been committed, it seemed better that I should stay and explain. What letter could ever have made suitable apology – have made clear beyond all doubt, as I must make it clear, that until I had passed your threshold I had no suspicion that these were your lodgings, and not the Legation."

Stanley bowed, he could not but believe her, every anguished glance of her eyes, every earnest tone of her impassioned voice, carried conviction. But how had this strange mischance come about.

"You've seen Sanks?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Ah, that is it," she exclaimed, thankful for the outlet he had suggested. "That good Señor Sanks, he was so kind, he said I had a case, and could be protected from – him. He has written a letter, I forget what he called it, some legal name, requiring my husband to surrender my goods, my money, and I have written him also to send them to your care at the Legation, as he told me. Then I drive here with what I have – I had nothing when I started, but he advanced me a sum," she flushed, "to buy what was needful till my trunks come. He advised me to stay at some private hotel, known only to you and to himself, till my husband has declared his attitude in the case. I make my purchases, I drive, as I suppose, to the Legation, my luggage is unloaded and carried in. I ask if Señor Stanley, if you are here, they say you will be shortly, I dismiss my cab, I enter, then I find it is not the Legation – it is your private apartments."

She paused, awaiting his sentence of displeasure – but his tone was rather that of thoughtful wonder.

"How could Sanks have made the mistake in my address? He knew, must have known, them, both."

"It was my fault, all mine," she broke in hastily. "It was undecided where I should have my things sent. I filled in the address myself, from your card."

"Ah, that's it," said Stanley, beginning to see light. "I remember now, I gave you my private card by mistake for my official one. You've nothing to distress yourself about, Inez, this is my blunder, and it is I who must beg your pardon."

"Ah, we will not beg each other's pardon then. It is a foolishness between friends," she returned, with just that little foreign touch which rendered her so irresistible.

"I quite agree with you," he replied heartily. "We've other and more important things to consider."

"But what to do?" she exclaimed.

"Well, you must take Sanks' advice, and go to some quiet, private Hotel, – say X – 's. I know them and will introduce you, send you over with Randell: it's better than going with you myself. You'll find it most comfortable."

She shivered and shrugged her shoulders.

"But of course," he hastened to add, "you'll stay and dine with me first."

"But Jim!" she said, rising.

"But why not?" he persisted. "It's a beastly night. You're here. It makes little difference whether you stay an hour or two, or the thirty minutes you have already remained. I'll send you over early in the evening."

"But the household – "

"They'd know in any event. The fact is the important thing to them, the details do not matter. Your staying here for dinner in a prosaic manner, as if there was no reason why you shouldn't, would do more to stop tongues from wagging, than your sudden disappearance after a mysterious visit. Believe me, I should not urge this if it were more or less than common sense."

"But your engagements?"

"I should have dined alone in any case."

She stood uncertain whether to go or to remain, one hand upon the table. Then she smiled at him, though there were tears in her eyes, saying; —

"I will stay – I will trust to your judgment. Whom have I to trust but you?"

"Good!" he cried, an air of quick decision taking possession of him, now her consent had been given; "my landlady will put a room at your disposal should you wish to remove the stains of travel before dinner. You'll find her kindly, if inexperienced. I'll go and explain the situation to her and to my valet." And he stepped towards the door.

"Explain?"

"Explain by all means, my dear. In this country it is the greatest of all mistakes to try to deceive your servants, especially where circumstances give the slightest scope for misconstruction."

"I thought servants were our worst scandal-mongers."

"True, they're only human. But put a well-trained servant on his honour by giving him your confidence, and he's far less likely to betray you, than if you try to blind him to an obvious truth."

She laughed, and he left her to arrange for his impromptu dinner.

When they sat down to table, half an hour later, she was more self-possessed than he had ever before seen her, and chatted away quite gaily on indifferent topics, each taking great care to avoid the one subject which neither could forget.

With the fruit and wine, the valet, who performed the double office of body servant and butler, left them to themselves, having first received careful directions from Stanley in regard to escorting madame to her hotel, half an hour hence.

Once they were alone the reserve, which the servant's presence had called into play, was no longer exerted, and she spoke freely of her own troubles.

"You've no idea," she said, "what a misery my winter in England has been. I shall never look back on it without feeling that this is the most cruel place on earth."

"You mustn't judge the whole country from your own unfortunate experience," the Secretary hastened to interpose. "I've never found more true culture and refinement than I've met with here."

"Ah," she replied, "but when the Englishman is a brute – ! Since I came to this country, I've never written a word to my father that has not been read and – approved!" There was a wealth of scorn in her tones. "Not a word of my sorrows, of the indignities, the insults he had heaped upon me. Any attempt to post a letter on my own account, or to send it by a servant, has resulted in failure, and in the ignominy of having it opened, and destroyed in my presence. My income lies there in the bank. His brother is the banker. I had the choice of drawing cheques to my husband's order, or not drawing them at all."

"Were you then deprived of money? Surely, to keep up outside appearances, and I judge your husband would have desired that, you must have had an allowance?"

"I had unlimited credit in the town," she replied. "I could buy what I pleased and charge it, but not a shilling did I have wherewith to pay. It was my maid, my good Marie, who, when he threatened me with detention, gave me her little all, her savings, and told me to run away – ah, that was bitter! But I knew she meant no disrespect – I accepted it – she shall be repaid a hundred-fold."

"I think you need have no fears of not being restored to all your rights and privileges," he said, "and then?"

"Then I will be free."

"You mean you will procure a separation?"

"A divorce."

"But surely your husband – "

"Oh, he has not even constancy to commend him; he does not even conceal his preferences. He is always receiving letters from some woman – some old friend, he tells me – calling him to London for an hour, or a day, as the case may be, and no matter what plans I may have made, he goes."

"You know her name?"

"She signs her Christian name only – no wonder – but I have her letters and I'll find her out."

"And when you've found her, what then? Will you plead with her?"

"I?" she cried. "I, a De Costa, degrade myself by pleading with a woman of that class!"

The Secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"I think every woman," he said, "has some good in her, low as she may be, some spark of longing for better things, some element of self-respect that never quite dies out."

"You're right," she admitted. "A man is by nature a brute. A woman, even at her worst, is not quite that. Some extra spark of divinity seems to have been given her in compensation for her weakness."

"I believe no woman is wholly bad," said the Secretary. "The worst women of history have, at some moments in their lives, been very near redemption."

"I believe that is so," she replied.

"I am very glad to hear you say that. If you can still find charity in your heart for your own sex, surely I may believe, even in the face of my friends' hostile criticism."

"And is there a woman, whom you – shall we say, 'respect' enough to believe in – no matter what is said of her?"

"There is," he replied.

"Then be sure she has some virtues worthy of that respect. I can picture," she went on, "the woman whom you should marry. You must be, to her, an ideal, and she must live her life in terms of you. Gentle and refined, and knowing more of your home than of the world."

The Secretary sighed.

"These are the women," he said, "that we dream of, not that we marry."

"There are many such in the world," she returned. "Is not the woman you are defending one of them?"

"No," he said, "not like that."

"Then she is not worthy of you, she will grate upon you. Does she ever do so?"

"I love her," he said simply.

"Then you will marry her. I'm so glad!" she returned, offering him her hand.

"I don't know. I don't think so," he replied. "I can't tell how I should act."

"Then you do not love her. Love is blind, it does not reason."

"I love her," he repeated, seeking to justify himself. "Certainly I love her, but one should, in this day and generation, love wisely."

"One should love," she replied, "and that is all, neither wisely nor unwisely – love has no limits. You do not love her – you must not marry her – you will be unhappy if you do. I believe she grates on you, you'll never find the good that is in her. That power has been given to some other man."

Stanley raised his hand in protestation, but at that moment, Randell appeared in the doorway, equipped to take Madame De Costa to her hotel, and their private conversation was at an end.

She made her adieux very prettily, not saying too much in the valet's presence, but enough to show how truly deep was her appreciation of the Secretary's kindness, and left him wishing, wondering. He found time before retiring to re-read all Belle's letters for the first time critically, and seriously caught himself wondering if one could really love a woman who wrote slang and whose spelling was not always above suspicion. Subsequently, he remembered, having dismissed Randell for the night, that he had never written that letter to Mrs. Roberts.

It was certainly an unfortunate oversight, but it was too late now; he would telegraph his regrets in the morning, and he fell asleep while making up his mind that he was very glad he had decided not to go.

He arose refreshed and altogether philosophic, relegated Madame De Costa to past diplomatic experiences, and in the light of that youthful folly which wears the guise of wisdom, told himself, as he walked across the Green Park to his office, that he was glad the incident was over. But nevertheless, while he thought of the fair Señora many times during the morning, the existence of Miss Fitzgerald, or of her aunt, never occurred to him till force of circumstances brought it to his mind.

Force of circumstances, in this instance, found actual embodiment in the person of Randell, who put in an appearance at the Legation about noon. The valet had never been there before in his life, and his appearance in Stanley's office was assurance in itself that something most unusual must have happened. The instant he set eyes on him, the Secretary was prepared for a fire or the death of a relative – at least.

"Well?" he said. "What is it?"

"A gentleman 'as called to see you, sir, at the house."

"You didn't come all the way down here to tell me that!" he exclaimed, immensely relieved.

"Yes, sir. You see, sir, it was some particular gentleman."

"Who?"

"Colonel Darcy, sir."

"Good Heavens!"

"And very excited, sir."

"Naturally; but how did he know that Madame De Costa – Mrs. Darcy, I mean. That is, why didn't he come to the Legation?"

"You see, sir, as he told me the story – " and Randell paused uneasily.

"Well, out with it, man: what did he tell you?"

"That the lady had written him – which he got this morning, that she had placed herself in your care, and all her belongings were to be sent to your address."

"What, my private address?"

"Yes, sir. Quite correct, sir. He showed it to me in her letter."

"It's all because I gave her my private card by mistake," and Mr. Stanley cursed a number of people and things under his breath.

"He asked plenty of questions, which I didn't answer, more than I was in duty bound. But when he learned as you was a bachelor, sir, and the lady had been at your rooms last evening, he was that upset – "

The Secretary tilted his office chair back on its hind legs and gave vent to a long, low, meditative whistle.

"I explained to him that there was nothing to be displeased about; but he wouldn't have none of it and said – "

"Yes, yes, what did he say?"

"He said a good many things, some of which I wouldn't repeat, sir, not being respectful; but he asked for your official address, which I wouldn't give him, and said as he'd call you out – and spoke of bringing suit – and called you – wel-I, most everything, sir."

"You need not particularise, Randell."

"No, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir. Except to my mind, he didn't seem really very much displeased over the matter."

Stanley grunted significantly. He thought he understood. Darcy could have wished for nothing better.

"I took the liberty, sir," continued the valet, serenely, "to bring your bag, ready packed, and your travelling rug and umbrella, thinking as you might be leaving town to-day, sir."

"Confound you, Randell, I believe you think me guilty after all."

"I thought as you were going to Mrs. Roberts' to-day, sir. You spoke of it to me a week ago, and had forgotten to give directions about your things, sir."

"Yes," said Stanley meditatively, and rang his bell. "John," he continued to the functionary who appeared, "did I send Mrs. Roberts of Roberts' Hall, Sussex, a telegram this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Well, please wire her at once that I'll arrive this afternoon. Leave in an hour. Is his Excellency disengaged?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, that will do," and as John departed he added to Randell: "You might go ahead and reserve a corner seat in a first-class carriage for me. Facing the engine. Liverpool Street – you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Where is Colonel Darcy?"

"Waiting at your rooms for an answer."

"Ah," said Stanley, "that gives me time to explain things to the Chief. If Colonel Darcy is there when you return after seeing me off, tell him I don't know anything about his wife, and if that isn't good enough he can call on his Excellency. Say I'm away in the country for an indefinite time."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't know where."

"Quite right, sir," and Randell departed for the station.

"Quite right!" groaned Stanley as he sought the Sanctum Sanctorum of the Legation. "I only wish it were!"

CHAPTER VIII

DIPLOMATIC INSTRUCTIONS

Mr. Stanley's Chief was a grey, weazened little man, who had achieved distinction in diplomacy and in his country's councils, largely on account of his infinite capacity for holding his tongue. As a result he let fall little and learned much. His reticence, however, was not the reserve of impotence, but the reserve of power.

On this occasion he was busy at his great desk, which occupied the centre of the room, and merely glancing up at his Secretary's entrance, he resumed the piece of work on which he was engaged. Ten minutes later he put down his pen and gave his waiting subordinate an encouraging smile. It was his official permission to speak.

"I regret to say that I have got into a little scrape, sir, concerning which will you give me leave to clear myself?"

"Leave of absence or my approval, Mr. Stanley?"

"Both, your Excellency."

The Minister leaned back in his chair, rested his elbows on the arms, and bringing the first fingers of each hand together, held them at the level of his face and gazed attentively at their point of contact. It was a favourite attitude which the Secretary understood, and he at once gave a concise account of all the circumstances concerning Madame Darcy.

The Minister heard him out in perfect silence, and after taking a moment or two to ponder over his words, remarked quietly:

"It's a small world, Mr. Stanley."

"You mean the fact that Señor De Costa and my father were friends before they quarrelled, and that his daughter – "

"No, I do not mean that."

The Secretary thought it better policy not to ask what he did mean, though he much wished to know; and silence again reigned.

Presently the Minister sat up to his desk and ran his hand through the mass of papers upon it; finally unearthing one in particular, which he submitted to a careful scrutiny.

"Your report of your visit to the Foreign Office yesterday," he said – "a very important communication, Mr. Stanley."

If his Chief had a disagreeable trait, and he was on the whole an exceedingly amiable man, it was an assumed seriousness of speech and demeanour, which he intended for sarcasm, and which invariably misled his victims to their ultimate discomfiture.

Stanley, who was aware of this trait and not very proud of the report in question, hastened to disclaim any inherent excellence it might be supposed to contain.

"There's nothing in it, your Excellency, except that remark about 'parlous times.'"

"Which was just the thing I was most anxious to hear. It proves that the Foreign Office regards the accomplishment of the treaty as by no means certain."

Stanley, with difficulty, checked an exclamation of surprise, but he had learned to respect his Chief's little fads, and succeeded.

The Minister cleared his throat, an indication that this was one of the rare occasions on which he was about to speak at length, and on which he desired absolute attention and immunity from comment – and proceeded:

"For three hundred years a treaty has been pending between Great Britain and our own country, concerning the possession of an island lying at the mouth of the river X – . At first Spanish distrust of

English aggression and, at a later period, the frequent changes of government to which our unfortunate country has been subjected, have prevented the successful termination of the negotiations.

"Matters have never been more favourable for its settlement than at the present time, and the immediate cession of the island to Great Britain, in return for a most satisfactory indemnity. For the last few weeks, however, we have noted an increasing opposition on the part of certain members of our own Ministry, to the acceptance of the English propositions, the cause of which has now been discovered. An influential manufacturing concern, officered and financed by certain unscrupulous persons in this country, owns large mills on the island in question, for the production of an article of which they would be assured a monopoly, did the territory still remain in our hands, but which would be open to competition did it come into the possession of Great Britain. The company, in order to obtain a continuance of the monopoly, have raised £40,000 for distribution among a majority of the committee, who are to pass upon the treaty, thus practically insuring the failure of the negotiations.

"While there is no reasonable doubt that this unfortunate state of affairs exists, we have not been able to obtain actual proofs of the same, and it is very necessary to do so, in order that the Executive should be able, when the treaty comes up for consideration, six weeks hence, to inform the intending offenders that their intrigue is known. It is not the intention of our government to create any scandal in this matter, it being quite sufficient to insure the passage of the treaty, that the Executive should hold proof of the Minister's guilt, and be in a position to back up the threat of exposure and punishment.

"Now it is known that the English agent intrusted with the financial part of this disgraceful scheme, the man who is to take the money to be used in bribery and corruption from this country to ours, is the worst type of an adventurer, a thorough-going scoundrel, and clever enough to make a fortune in some honest way. His name is Colonel Robert Darcy."

The Secretary so far forgot himself as to draw in his breath sharply, and his Chief looked at him with a disapproving frown, and then continued:

"This is why I said that the world was small when you told me of your connection with this man. For the past few weeks I have had him carefully watched, and I have learned that he is to go down to Sussex almost at once, to receive the money for this dishonourable purpose from one of the heads of the firm, a silent partner, whose identity we have not yet discovered. This money is to be paid in gold, and after receiving it, and his private instructions, Darcy will return at once to London and sail for the scene of his mission. I cannot watch his course in Sussex personally, and I do not think it wise to risk publicity by putting the affair in the hands of the police. Before you told me of your association with this man and his wife, I had some thoughts of giving you the conduct of this important and delicate matter, now – "

"Now!" burst out the Secretary, unable in his chagrin longer to contain himself, "I have by my stupid blundering rendered myself unfit for the place, and lost a splendid chance!"

The Minister was visibly annoyed.

"I was about to say, sir, when you interrupted me (a very bad habit of yours, Mr. Stanley), that you had unconsciously so perfectly adapted yourself to fill the position, that you have made it impossible for me to give it to anybody else."

Stanley gasped; he could not help it.

"A diplomat should never express anything," remarked his Chief severely, and continued his statement.

"The greatest triumph of art could never have placed you in the position you now occupy as a result of a fortuitous combination of events. You can go right to the ground where Darcy must operate, and any one of a dozen people can tell him that you have perfectly natural and innocent reasons for being there. Being only human and apparently very angry, he'll certainly seek you out, and you may depend on it that I'll see that he has definite information as to where you have gone and with whom you are staying. All you'll have to do is to associate yourself with him; he'll give you ample opportunity for doing so, and to keep your eyes open.

"I need hardly point out that, should you, during the next fortnight, be able to obtain in any way the required evidence, you would not only merit my approval but would put yourself in the sure way of promotion, and that for the best of all reasons, as one who has done a signal service to your country.

"Now, just a word of warning. Do not communicate with me unless it is absolutely necessary. Do not try to find out anything about Darcy; do not try to see him. Do not so much as breathe the treaty to anyone. Simply be yourself. He's bound to suspect you at first, and it will only be as time passes and he becomes convinced from your manner of life – that you are young, inexperienced and wholly unfit to be trusted with a diplomatic secret – that he'll put himself off his guard. Then will be your opportunity. Seize it if possible. That's all; now go. No thanks, please; I trust you will deserve mine when you return. I'll manage everything for you here, and the Legation pays your expenses – your leave is for an indefinite period."

Stanley bowed silently, his heart was too full to speak, and he turned to leave the room.

"Stop!" came his Chief's voice. "You ought to know that Darcy has a confederate. One of the two is a masterhand, probably the Colonel; but see if you can find out the other; I've not been able to do so."

Stanley started, a vivid remembrance flashing through his mind of Kingsland's significant caution to Darcy at the tea. "Sh'. He's looking our way! He'll hear us."

The Ambassador noticed the involuntary movement of his subordinate, and a grim smile played about his lips.

"Deportment, Mr. Secretary, deportment," he said. "A diplomat should always appear at his ease. So; that is better. You can go."

CHAPTER IX

A HOUSE-WARMING

Much has been written of the blessed state of them that go a house-partying in England, and certain it is that no pleasanter pastime has been devised by civilised man, and that in no other country in the world has it been brought to a like degree of perfection.

Two great canons govern these functions, which it would be exceedingly well did the hostesses of all lands "mark, learn and inwardly digest." The first is that all guests are on speaking terms of intimacy with each other from the time they arrive till they depart. My Lady may not know you next time you meet her in Bond Street, and the Countess perchance will have forgotten to put your name on her visiting list for the remainder of this or any other season, but during the blessed interval of your sojourn at that hospitable Hall in Berks, you knew them both, and they were very gracious and charming. The second rule is none the less framed for your comfort and convenience, and it reads: "Thou shalt be in all things thine own master."

Most admirable of rules. The amusements of the place, and most English country places are framed for some particular amusement, are put unreservedly at your disposal. Are you on the Thames? Boats and boatmen are at your beck and call. Are you North in the shooting season? A keeper waits your orders. Do you hunt? Grooms and horses are yours to command. But none of these things are you ever compelled to do. Should you fear the water, though you are on an island, no one will ever suggest to you the possibility of leaving it. While your ecclesiastical host, Bishop though he be, would never take it for granted that you were predisposed to week-day services and charity bazaars.

Mrs. Roberts was a perfect hostess, and there was no doubt that her house would shortly be a favourite on many lists.

I say, "would be," advisedly, for she had quite recently come into the possession of her own, which had been another's; a distant cousin, in short, the last of his branch of the family, who had the good sense to drink himself to death, shortly before the opening of this narrative, and leave his fine old Elizabethan manor house to his very charming relative, an action which did him no credit, because the estate was entailed, and he could not help it.

Roberts Hall had more than one attraction: indeed, it was blessed with an unusual number of delightful adjuncts for a country place, which does not pretend to be a demesne. For one thing, a number of miles intervened between the lodge gates and the Hall, and that, in England, is a great consideration. As long as one has plenty of land, the manner of one's habitation is of little account, while in America houses must be as large or larger than one can afford, and if when they are built they cover most of our land, we are none the worse off in our neighbour's estimation.

The estate, moreover, could boast of many fallow fields, and more than one avenue of fine old oaks, while it had a deer park of which many a larger place might have been proud. There was also a private chapel, for the use of the family and tenantry, boasting a great square family pew, fenced round on two sides with queer little leaden-paned windows, giving a view of the enclosure which contained the family monuments. It was farther enriched by a pretentious piece of carving in high relief, vigorously coloured, representing the resurrection, wherein generations of defunct Roberts were depicted popping up, with no clothes on, out of a pea-green field, much after the manner of the gopher of the prairie.

The gardens were extensive, including two artificial ponds, which for age and solidity might have been constructed from the beginning, tenanted by a number of swans, all very proud and controversial, and surrounded by an eight-foot hedge of holly which was a crimson glory in winter.

But if the place was fascinating without, it was still more so within. It had a long low entrance hall with a tessellated pavement, panelled to the ceiling with the blackest of oak, and boasting a rail screen of the same material dividing the apartment, which many a church might have envied. There was moreover a library filled with a priceless collection of old volumes, chiefly perused, for some fifty years past, by the rodents of the establishment.

Mrs. Roberts was in the great hall when Stanley arrived, and so received him in person. She was a most vivacious little woman, to whom a long sojourn on the Continent, coupled with a diplomatic marriage, had given the touch of cosmopolitanism, which was all that had been needed to make her perfect.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, though you are the last comer," she said cordially. "The Marchioness and Lady Isabelle, under the escort of Lieutenant Kingsland, reached here in time for lunch, and Miss Fitzgerald came a few hours later, while Mr. Riddle has just driven over."

"Mr. Riddle," asked the Secretary, "who is he?"

"Oh, Arthur Riddle, don't you know him? He is one of our county magnates and a near neighbour. I hope you'll all like each other, but you must realise that you have come to the veriest sort of pot-luck. I haven't begun to get settled yet, or know where anything is."

"You speak as if you were a visitor," he said, laughing.

"Indeed, I feel so. I'm constantly getting lost in this rambling old house, and having to be rescued by the butler."

"Have you really never been here before?"

"It's my first appearance. It was quite impossible to visit here during the lifetime of the late owner. Why, I don't even know the traditions of the place, and it positively teems with them. I shall organise you all into an exploring party, with free permission to rummage from garret to cellar."

"I suppose there's plenty to discover?"

"Discover! My dear Mr. Secretary, this place is fairly alive with ghosts, and sliding panels, and revolving pictures; and there's a great tiled, underground passage leading off from the kitchens into the country somewhere, which everyone is afraid to explore, and which the last incumbent had nailed up because it made him nervous."

"I hope you've reserved a nice cork-screwy staircase with a mouldering skeleton at the top, for my especial discovery and delectation."

"First come, first served," she replied; "but there's something in this very hall that's worthy of your mettle, the greatest prize puzzle a hostess ever possessed, only I shan't forgive you if you solve it, for it's one of the standard attractions of the house, and has amused guests innumerable."

"Trot it out forthwith. I'm all impatience."

"I shall do nothing of the kind unless you treat it with more respect. An oaken door, studded with silver nails, that has not condescended to open itself for at least two centuries, cannot be 'trotted out'!"

"I beg its humble pardon," said the Secretary, approaching the door and putting his shoulder against it. "It's as steady as a rock."

"Oh, yes. Nothing but dynamite or the proper combination could ever move it the fraction of an inch."

Stanley regarded it as it stood framed in its low Saxon portal, a magnificent piece of black oak, sprinkled from top to bottom with at least a hundred huge, silver-headed nails, driven in without any apparent design. Another peculiarity was that neither lock, hinges, nor keyhole were visible.

"Does it lead anywhere?" he asked, greatly interested.

"To an unexplored tower," she replied. "To which this appears to be the only entrance; at least it has no windows."

"How interesting. I wonder how they ever got it open."

"Tradition says that this is the original of our modern combination lock. No human strength can move it; but once exert the slightest pressure on the proper combination of those silver nails, five I believe, one for every digit, and the portal swings open of itself."

"And discloses, what?"

"Open it and see," she answered.

"Are you sure the house won't tumble down if I do, or that you'll never smile again – or that some unpleasant ancestral prognostication isn't only awaiting the opening of that door to fall due and take effect?"

"I can't insure you," she replied, "and I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense," and she shivered slightly.

"You surely don't believe, in the nineteenth century – " he began; but she interrupted him, saying almost petulantly:

"You'd grow to believe anything if you lived in a place like this. On the whole, I think you'd better leave the door alone," she added, as he began to finger the nails thoughtfully, "you're too clever, you might succeed."

"If I do," he assured her, "I'll promise to keep my discoveries to myself."

"You'd better confine your attentions to the library; it's much more worthy of your consideration," she replied, evidently wishing to change the subject.

"With pleasure," acquiesced Stanley, following her lead. "And what am I to discover there?"

"Nothing. Now I come to think of it, it's already pre-empted."

"Who are our literary lights?"

"Lady Isabelle McLane and Lieutenant Kingsland."

"I should never have suspected it of either of them," he replied, manifestly surprised, for Kingsland's literary tastes, as evidenced on the Thames, had not been of an elevated nature; and Lady Isabelle was too conventional and well-ordered a person to care to read much or widely.

"Nor should I," agreed his hostess; "but they remain glued to the bookcases, and to see them going into raptures over an undecipherable black letter volume, adorned with illustrations that no self-respecting householder would admit to his family circle, is, considering the young lady's antecedents at least, rather amusing. They've the room entirely to themselves."

"Oh!" said Stanley, and they both laughed.

"But the Marchioness is certain that it is literary enthusiasm," she assured him.

"My dear Mrs. Roberts," said the Secretary, "that is merely the wisdom of age." And they laughed again.

"And now," he added, "if you'll permit, I'll begin my tour of exploration, by finding where my belongings are bestowed."

As he spoke, a footman was at his side, and his hostess, nodding cheerfully to him, left him to his own devices.

Stanley's room was charming, and he was so busy examining its curiosities that the sound of the dressing-bell awoke him to the realities of the situation with a start of surprise that he could have unconsciously idled away so much time.

But then there was a fireplace, almost as large as a modern bedroom, ornamented with blue tiles of scriptural design, blatantly Dutch and orthodox; and the great logs resting on fire-dogs, that happened to be lions, which caused most of the guests to break the tenth commandment in thought, and neglect to break it in deed, only because they were unsuited both by weight and design for surreptitious packing in bags or boxes. Also there was the wall paper, rejoicing in squares of camels, and groves of palm trees, amidst which surroundings fully a hundred Solomons received a hundred blushing Queens of Sheba. Moreover, there was a huge four-poster into which you ascended by a flight of steps, and from the depths of whose feather-beds you were only rescued the following morning by the muscular exertions of your valet, which, as Kingsland aptly remarked at dinner, was

a tremendous cinch for the family ghosts, as they could haunt you all night long if they liked, without your ever being able to retaliate.

Altogether, it is doubtful if Stanley would ever have remembered to dress for dinner, had not his meditations been interrupted by a series of astonishing sounds in the hall, which seemed to betoken the movements of great weights with strenuous exertions. Just at that moment the valet entered with his freshly brushed dress clothes, and a question as to the cause of the disturbance elicited the fact that:

"They was Mr. Riddle's chests, sir," and though it wasn't his place to say it, "he's a mighty queer old gentleman, gives magic lantern shows and entertainments free for charity, sir."

"From his luggage, I should imagine he was supporting an opera troupe."

"They was labelled 'stereopticon,' sir, but they was that heavy – "

"Thanks," broke in the Secretary. "That's quite sufficient."

He never approved of encouraging gossip, and was not interested in the description of the benevolent county magnate – still less in the weight of his chests – yet he smiled quietly to himself as he dressed for dinner.

CHAPTER X

BEFORE DINNER

The Lieutenant and Miss Fitzgerald were in the billiard-room, and the former was putting in the half-hour which must elapse before dinner by teaching the latter the science of bank-shots.

"I say," queried her instructor, in one of the pauses of the game, "do you know that little diplomatic affair of yours has turned up again? I saw it driving in from the station, half an hour ago.

"Jimsy Stanley, I suppose you mean?"

"The same, – and look here, you won't turn crusty, if I ask you a point-blank question?"

"No, Dottie."

"Don't call me that, you know I hate it."

"Isn't it your naval sobriquet?"

"Never mind if it is."

"But I do mind, and I shall call you what I please, for it suits you perfectly. Well, then, Dottie, I don't mind your asking me anything, if it's for a purpose, and not for idle curiosity."

"Oh, it's for a purpose fast enough."

"Go ahead, then. I'll try and bank that ball into the side-pocket, while you are thinking it out."

"It doesn't need thinking out. It's just this: Do you mean business with Little Diplomacy?"

"What affair is that of yours?" she asked, pausing in the act of chalking her cue.

"None, thank goodness; but I'd like to do a pal a good turn, and so – "

"Well?"

"If you'll accept a bit of advice."

"Out with it."

"Don't lose any time, if you do mean business. He's being warned against you."

"Aren't you clever enough to know the result of that?"

"Yes, if the advice comes from a woman – but supposing it's from a man?"

"Who?"

"Kent-Lauriston."

Miss Fitzgerald so far forgot herself as to whistle.

"How do you know?"

"Gainsborough told me. He said he overheard an awful long confab between them at the St. James, two days ago, and Diplomacy said he'd write a letter to our hostess, sending his regrets."

"No such letter has been received."

"Probably he changed his mind, – but – "

"Then he'll make a clean breast of it to me, but I'm much obliged just the same, and I won't forget it."

"I'll see he owns up to it."

"You won't do anything of the sort, you'll bungle it, and there's an end of things."

"Have I generally bungled your affairs with Little Diplomacy?"

"No. You were a trump about that launch party. Now I mustn't keep you from her Ladyship – run along, and remember if I can be of any help – just call on me."

"You can be – and I want you to – "

She broke in with a merry laugh.

"I knew it."

"Why?"

"Because Lieutenant Kingsland doesn't generally put himself out to oblige his friends, unless he expects them to make return with interest."

The gentleman in question looked sheepish and shrugged his shoulders.

"Come now," she continued briskly. "Let me hear it, and don't go blundering about for an explanation; the facts are sufficient. I've been alone with you long enough. I don't wish to set myself up as a rival to Lady Isabelle."

"It's about her I want your help."

"Of course, I know that. Go on."

"You don't ask if I mean business."

"I don't need to. I know the amount in consols which she received from her grandmother."

"Don't be so damned mercenary!"

"Why not say a thing as well as mean it? Let's be honest for once in a way. Besides, you're not to swear at me, Lieutenant Kingsland – please remember I'm not married to you."

"No. By Gad! I wish you were."

"Oh, no, you don't. I haven't silver enough to cross the palm of my hand. But to come to business. Doesn't your affair progress swimmingly?"

"Why, it has so far – as long as the Dowager fancied there was danger from Little Diplomacy's quarter, I was used as a foil. Now that she learned about your claims she breathes again, and gives me the cold shoulder in consequence."

"I suppose you haven't been wasting your time?"

"Rather not."

"It's all right then?"

"Yes, I think so; but the old lady'll never allow it."

"Marry without consulting her."

"That's what I mean to do."

"Where?"

"Why, here. Haven't we got the parson and the church attached? What could be more convenient?"

"Nothing, if the Marchioness doesn't suspect?"

"But I'm afraid that she does."

"What – not that –"

"Only that my intentions are serious."

"Transfer them to me then – temporarily."

"Won't do. Devotion to Lady Isabelle is the tack. Why won't you lend me your little affair?"

"What, Jimsy?"

"Yes. I fancy the old lady has a mistaken idea that he's poverty-stricken. Of course, I know that can't be the case if you –"

"Do not finish that sentence, Lieutenant Kingsland; I'm quite willing to oblige you – by mentioning to the Dowager the amount of Mr. Stanley's income – if I know it."

"She'll accept your word for it, even if you don't, and once her attention is turned to him, I'll have a clear field."

"Is that the help you wanted?"

"No, I want you to square the parson."

"Oh, I see; that's a more difficult matter. When do you wish to command his services?"

"If I need 'em at all it'll be in about three days. To-day's Thursday – say Sunday."

"I'll do what I can."

"You're a brick. Oh, by the way, I spoke to Darcy about that letter you gave me at the Hyde Park Club."

"And he told you to keep a still tongue in your head and leave it to me."

"How did you know that?"

"It's good advice," she continued, ignoring his question, "and I'll give you some more. If I make any suggestion after dinner, advocate it warmly – put it through."

"You mean to get that letter to-night?"

"I must get it to-night."

"But suppose he's left it in London?"

"Then I must find it out this evening, and take steps to procure it there."

"You wouldn't have his rooms searched?"

"I must have that letter – that's all," she replied. "You don't know what it means to me?"

"I don't know anything about it. But why not ask him for it?"

"Tell him it was mine, and that I sent it to Darcy," she exclaimed, incredulously.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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