

Benson Edward Frederic

Mammon and Co.



Edward Benson
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BOOK I

CHAPTER I THE CITY DINNER

"Egotism is certainly the first," said Lady Conybeare with admirable firmness; "and your inclination towards your neighbour is the second."

Now, this was the sort of thing which Alice Haslemere liked; and she stopped abruptly in the middle of her rather languishing conversation with nobody in particular to ask for explanations. It sounded promising.

"The first what, and the second what, Kit?" she inquired.

"The first and the second lessons," said Lady Conybeare promptly. "The first and the second social virtues, if you are particular. I am going to set up a school for the propagation of social virtues, where I shall teach the upper classes to be charming. There shall be a special class for royalty."

Lady Haslemere was not generally known as being particularly

particular, but she took her stand on Kit's conditional, and defended it.

"There is nothing like particularity – nothing," she said earnestly, with a sort of missionary zeal to disagree with somebody; "though some people try to get on without it."

Being a great friend of Kit's, she knew that it was sufficient for her to state a generality of any kind to get it contradicted. She was not wrong in this instance. Kit sighed with the air of a woman who meant to do her unpleasant duty like a sister and a Christian.

"Dear Alice," she said, "there is nothing so thoroughly irritating as particularity. I am not sure what you mean by it, but I suppose you allude either to people who are prudes or to people who are always letting fly precise information at one. They always want it back too. Don't you know how the people who insist on telling one the exact time are just those who ask one for the exact time. I never know the exact time, and I never want to be told it. And I hate a prudish woman," she concluded with emphasis, "as much as I abhor a well-informed man."

"Put it the other way round," said Lady Haslemere, "and I agree with you. I loathe a prudish man, and I detest a well-informed woman."

"There aren't any of either," said Lady Conybeare.

She sat up very straight in her chair as she made this surprising assertion, and arranged the lace round her throat. Her attitude gave one the impression somehow of a rakish frigate clearing for

action, and on the moment came the first shot.

"I am a prude," said a low, bass voice at her elbow.

Kit scarcely glanced round.

"I know you are," she said, replying with a heavy broadside; "but then you are not a man."

"That depends on what you mean by a man," said the voice again.

The speaker was so hidden by the arms of the low chair in which he sat, that a knee, shin and foot, in a horizontal line on the invisible support of another knee, was all that could be seen of him.

"I mean a human being who likes killing things," said Kit without hesitation.

"I killed a wasp yesterday," said the voice; "at least, I think it died afterwards. Certainly I disabled it. Oh, I am sure I killed it."

"Yes, and you remembered it to-day," said Lady Conybeare briskly. "You did not really kill it; it lives in your memory, and – and poisons your life. In time it will kill you. Do you suppose Jack remembers the grouse he killed yesterday?"

"Oh, but Jack is like the oldest inhabitant," said Lady Haslemere. "He never remembers anything, just as the oldest inhabitant never remembers a flood or a thunderstorm or a famine at all like the one in question. That means they don't remember anything at all, for one famine is just like another; so are thunderstorms."

Kit paused a moment, with her head on one side, regarding

the speaker.

"No; forgetfulness is not characteristic of Jack," she said, "any more than memory is. He remembers what he wants to remember, and forgets what he wants to forget. Now, it's just the opposite with me. I forget what I want to remember – horrid stories about my friends, for instance – and I remember the sort of thing I want to forget – like – like Sunday morning. Isn't it so, Jack?"

A slightly amused laugh came from a man seated in the window, who was no other than the Jack in question, and, incidentally, Kit's husband.

"It is true I make a point of forgetting unpleasant things," he said; "that is the only real use of having a memory decently under control. I forget Kit's milliner's bills – "

"So do I, darling," said Kit with sudden affection.

"No, you don't; you only remind me to forget them. I forget the names and faces of uninteresting people. I forget – no, I don't forget that – "

"What don't you forget, Jack?" demanded Kit with some sharpness. "I don't believe it."

"I don't forget that we've got to dine in the City at half-past seven. Why ever there was such an hour as half-past seven to put into a Christian clock I can't conjecture," he said in a tone of regretful wonder.

"Well, if you forget unpleasant things, and you don't forget that, perhaps it will be pleasant."

"I am quite certain it will be infernal," said Jack. "Go and dress, Kit."

Lady Conybeare frowned impatiently.

"Oh, Jack! when will you learn that I cannot do what you ask if you talk to me in that way?" she cried. "I was just going to dress. Now I can't, and we shall both be late, which will be very tiresome. You will curse and swear at me like St. Peter for keeping you waiting. How stupid you are, and how little you know me!"

Lord Conybeare looked at his watch.

"It is exactly three minutes to six," he said. "You needn't go for half an hour yet. There is loads of time – loads!"

Kit got up at once.

"That's a dear boy," she said. "Gracious! it's past the half-hour! I must fly! Good-bye, Alice; Conybeare and I will look in on you after our dinner. I think you said you were going to have a nice round game with counters. Good-bye, Tom, and learn not to be a prude."

"I'm sure you would teach me, if anybody could," said Tom rather viciously.

Kit adjusted the lace round her throat again.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said; "but prudes are born, not made. You don't shoot, you don't hunt, you remember every wasp you have possibly killed. Oh, Tom, I am afraid you are hopeless. Don't laugh. I mean what I say; at least, I think I mean the greater part of it."

"I reserve the less, then," said Tom. "I must go too. So Alice and Haslemere and I will see you to-night?"

"Yes; we'll escape as soon as we can from the dinner. Mind you take some money with you, Jack, for the round game. I must fly," she said again, and took her graceful presence very slowly out of the room.

There was a short silence, broken by Lord Conybeare.

"It is odd how you can tell a man by the hour at which he dines," he said. "Seven is an impossible hour, and the people who dine at seven are as impossible as the hour. People who dine at half-past are those who are trying to dine at eight and cannot manage it. They are also trying not to be impossible, and cannot."

Lady Haslemere got up.

"I once knew a man who dined at ten minutes to eight," she said, "which struck me as extremely curious. He was an archdeacon. I believe all archdeacons dine at ten minutes to eight. And they call it a quarter to, which is even odder."

"I don't know any archdeacons," said Tom, with a touch of wistfulness in his voice. "Introduce me to one to-night, Alice."

"Archdeacons don't come to Berkeley Street," said she.

"Why not? How exclusive! Do they expect Berkeley Street to come to them?"

"Probably. They are trained to believe nothing which is not incredible. It is exactly that which makes them impossible."

"Extremes meet," said Lord Conybeare. "The sceptic forces himself to believe everything that is perfectly credible. And he

succeeds so well. Sceptics believe that they once ate nuts – we've all eaten nuts once – and are descended from apes. And how obvious is their genealogy from their faces! If I was going to be anything, it should not be a sceptic."

Lady Haslemere wandered once round the room, condemning the china silently.

"I must positively go," she said.

"Do, Alice!" said Jack; "because I want to dress. But you are rather like Kit. When she says she must fly, it means she has little intention of walking, just yet."

Lady Haslemere laughed.

"Come, Tom," she said. "We are not wanted. How deeply pathetic that is! They will want us some day, as the hangman said. Well, Jack, we shall see you later. I *am* going."

Lord Conybeare went upstairs to his dressing-room, revolving with some intentness the affair of this City dinner. The taking off his coat led him to wind up his watch, and he was so lost in thought that for a moment he looked surprisedly at his dress-clothes, which were laid out for him, as if pyjamas would have been a more likely find. But his linked and studded shirt was an irresistible reminder that it was dinner-time, not bedtime, and he proceeded to dress with a certain neat haste that was clearly characteristic of him. In stature he was somewhat below the average size, both in height and breadth; but one felt that an auctioneer of men might most truthfully have said, when he came to him at a sale: "Here is a rather smaller specimen, gentlemen,

but much more highly finished, and very strong!"

The quick deftness of even unimportant movements certainly gave the impression of great driving power; everything he did was done unerringly; he had no fumblings with his studs, and his tie seemed to fashion a faultless, careless bow under a mere suggestion from his thin, taper-nailed fingers. He looked extremely well bred, and a certain Mephistophelian sharpness about his face, though it might have warned those whom Kit would have called prudes – for this was rather a sweeping word with her – that he might not be desirable as a friend, would certainly have warned the prudent that he would assuredly be much more undesirable as an enemy. On the whole, a prudent prude would have tried to keep on good terms with him. He appeared, in fact, even on so hasty and informal a glance as that which we are giving him as he arranges his tie, to be one of those lucky people to whom it is well to be pleasant, for it was difficult to imagine that he was afraid of anything or cared for anybody. Certain happily-constituted folk have never had any doubt about the purpose of the world, so clearly was it designed to feed and amuse them. Lord Conybeare was one of these; and in justice to the world we must say that it performed its altruistic part very decently indeed.

Jack Conybeare was still on the sunny side of thirty-five. He and Kit had been married some seven years, and had no children, a privation for which they were touchingly thankful. They had, both of them, quite sufficient responsibilities, or, to

speaking more precisely, liabilities; and to be in any way responsible for any liabilities beyond their own would have seemed to them a vicarious burden of the most intolerable sort. Their own, it is only fair to add, sat but lightly on them; Kit, in particular, wore hers most gracefully, like a becoming mantle. Chronic conditions, for the most part, tend to cease being acutely felt, and both she and Jack would far sooner have had a couple of thousand pounds in hand, and fifty thousand pounds in debt, than not to have owed or owned a penny. Kit had once even thought of advertising in the morning papers that a marchioness of pleasing disposition was willing to do anything in the world for a thousand pounds, and Jack had agreed that there was something in the idea, though the flaw in it was cheapness: you should not give yourself away. He himself had mortgaged every possible acre of his property, and sold all that was available to sell, and the close of every day exhibited to a wondering world how it was possible to live in the very height of fashion and luxury without any means of living at all. Had he and Kit sat down for a moment by the side of a road, or loitered in Park Lane, they would probably have been haled, by the fatherly care of English law, to the nearest magistrate, for that they had no apparent means of sustenance. Luckily they never thought of doing anything of the kind, finding it both safer and pleasanter to entertain princes and give the best balls in London.

A want of money is an amiable failing, common to the saint and the sinner alike, and does not stand in the way of the *accusé* acquiring great popularity. Jack, it is true, had no friends, for the

very simple reason that he did not in the least want them; Kit, on the other hand, had enough for two.

Her rules of life were very uncomplicated, and they daily became more so. "You can't be too charming," was the chief of them. She took infinite pains to make herself almost universally agreeable, and was amply repaid, for she was almost universally considered to be so. This embracing desire had its drawbacks, but Kit's remedies for them quite met the case. For instance, when any woman whom she did not happen to remember by sight greeted her, as often happened, effusively at some evening party, Kit always kissed her with a corresponding effusion; if a man in the same circumstances did the same, she always said reproachfully, "You *never* come to see us now." In this way her total ignorance of who they were became a trivial thing; both were charmed, and when people are charmed, their names become of notable insignificance.

The finest inventions of all are the simplest, and the simplicity of Jack's *modus vivendi* rivalled its own subtlety and the subtlety of Kit's. He loudly professed staunch Conservative principles, always voted with the Bishops in the House of Lords on any question, and had made a special study of guano and Church ritual. A method exposed always sounds a little crude, but the crudity often belongs not to the method but to its exposure. Certainly Jack's method answered, and no method can do more. The mammon of unrighteousness, not being deceived, but not being shocked at such duplicity, thought him very clever, and the

unmammom of righteousness, being deceived, was not shocked at other things which were occasionally in the air about him. With perfect justice they labelled the world scandal-loving and uncharitable when they were told these other things, and asked Jack to dinner, to show that they did not believe them. A further proof of his wisdom may be seen in the fact that he accepted such invitations, and if he and Kit left early, it was not because they were going on elsewhere to play round games, but because the laying of foundation-stones and the opening of bazaars had been so fatiguing.

But though both he and Kit were fond of appearing other than they were to sets other than their own, they were on the whole singularly unsecretive to each other. In the first place, they both knew that the other was reasonably sharp, and while each respected the other for this sharpness, they realized that any attempt to deceive would probably be detected. In the second place, a far better reason, even on the lowest grounds, on which they took it, they knew that mutual lying is a rotten basis for married life. Each allowed the other a wide latitude, and in consequence they were excellent friends, and always lent each other a helping hand if there was any scheme of mutual aggrandizement to be put through. There were just a few questions that Kit never put to Jack, nor he to her; each had a cupboard, a very little one, to which there was only one key, and they were wise enough never to ask each other for it. Such, hitherto, had been their married life – a great deal of frankness

and confidence, and an absolute respect for the privacy of the other's innermost sanctum.

To-night there was a beautiful scheme in the egg ready to be hatched, or neither of them would have dreamed of dining in the City at half-past seven. Attention was just beginning to be directed to West Australian gold-mining, and the public had awoke to the fact that there were large fortunes to be made, or lost, in that direction. Thus Jack, having no fortune to lose, went into it with a light heart; he was clearly marked out as one of those who were destined to win. In pursuance of the laudable idea of avoiding a really serious financial crisis, they were dining at the Drapers' Company, where they would meet a Mr. Frank Alington, who had a whole fleet of little paper companies, it was understood, ready to be floated. Jack had met him once, and had taken this opportunity of meeting him again, hoping to find bread upon the waters. It was to be Kit's business to make herself inimitably agreeable, ask him to Park Lane, and leave the rest to Jack. She, of course, would have a finger in the profits.

Kit was delighted to take the part assigned to her. Jack had looked into her bedroom as she was dressing, and through the half-open door had said, "Very gorgeous, please, Kit," and she had understood that this was a really important operation, and that a dazzling wife was part of the apparatus necessary. She had not meant to dress very particularly; plush and cairngorms, she had once said to Jack, was the sort of thing the City really appreciated, but she was always ready, within reason, to do as

Jack wished, and she told her maid to get out a dress that had arrived from Paris only that morning. But Jack's remark to her as she was dressing was the sort of hint that Kit always took. It cost so little to be pleasant in these ways, and how wise it was to obey one's husband in such matters! She had intended to keep this dress for a royal dinner a week hence, but she put it on without a murmur, and, indeed, her wifely devotion had its immediate reward.

For the dress! That surpassing man Jean Worth had said once, not to herself, but to some other customer, and no friend of hers, that it was a real pleasure to dress Lady Conybeare; and Lady Conybeare, on her side, kindly considered it a real pleasure to be dressed by Worth. Thus the gratification was mutual, and it must have been a consolation to the dressmaker, if he had to whistle long and loud for his cheque, to have his artistic pleasure to fall back on. Now Kit – a rare accomplishment – could stand orange, and to stand orange means to be admirably suited to orange. She loved it herself, Jean genuinely agreed with her, and in this dress four tints of orange chiffon, *Dantè*, *faisan doré*, *Vésuve*, and *pomme d'or*, blazed together. Even Worth, the greatly daring, had inwardly felt a qualm of audacity, but how admirably, when Kit was inside the gown, had his audacity succeeded! "*Réussi!*" he would have sighed had he seen it. Over all was a fine net of pale mandarin yellow, to which was tacked a cusped acanthus pattern of sequins; and Kit, looking at herself long and critically in her wardrobe glass, said "Lor'!" Her glorious red-gold hair,

full of dusky flames, of a tint after which Nature blindly gropes where Paris leads the way, was the point to which Worth had worked, and his success was beyond all approval or praise.

Next came the question of jewels, and Hortense, her maid, with the artist's eye, thought that pearls and pearls only, *pas un diamant*, would be consummately chic. Kit saw what she meant, and from an artistic point of view devoutly agreed, but she turned up her nose at the suggestion. "We don't want to be chic, my good woman," she said. "We want to hit 'em in the eye. The rubies, Hortense!"

Now, the rubies were really fine, glorious molten lakes of colour, almost barbarically splendid, and being entailed, they had been forced to remain in the Conybeare coffers. But if ever a woman and her dress were designed and built for rubies, Kit and this creation were. Hortense, moved beyond her wont, ejaculated "*Mon Dieu!*" as the gorgeous baubles were clasped on Kit's dazzling neck; and her mistress, being as candid with herself as she was with her husband, smiled serenely at her own reflection.

"A touch of rouge," she said to Hortense, and when that was unerringly applied, "There," she murmured, "that will double up the City. And Jack," she added to herself, "will then proceed to pick its pockets."

She rustled across the floor, and tapped at the door of her husband's dressing-room.

"Are you ready, Jack?" she asked.

"Yes, just. Come in, Kit."

Kit took from her table the orange-red fan which Worth had sent with the dress, threw the door open and held her head very high.

"The gold-miner's wife," she remarked.

Her husband looked at her a moment in blank admiration. Seven years' husband as he was, Kit still occasionally "knocked him over" as he expressed it, and she knocked him over now. Then he laughed outright.

"That ought to fetch 'em," he said frankly.

"So I think," said Kit; "but really, Jack, it was a sacrifice putting this on. Remember that, please. I was keeping it for the royalties next week, but you said 'very gorgeous,' and I obeyed."

"Oh, blow the royalties!" said Jack. "Dress in tartan plaid for them, or a kilt even. Besides, it is bad form for a hostess to be better dressed than her guests. That dress wouldn't do at all, Kit, in your own house. They would think you were an advanced Radical."

The India-rubber-tired brougham, with its little electric lamp in the roof (Kit's only real extravagance for more than ten days, as she triumphantly told Jack) was ready when they got downstairs, and they rolled off into the gaslit roar of the streets. This way and that flashed the gleaming lights of hansoms and carriages; it was like passing through an August shower of shooting-stars. Long queues of waiting folk stretched like snakes from the pit-doors of theatres; newsboys roared their "'orrible and revoltin'" details;

jewellers' shops with windows a blaze of gems signalled and winked across the streets; feathered women peacocked along, making eyes at the passers; loungers lounged; busy little men with black bags made scurrying bee-lines across the crowded roadway; buses, a plaster of advertisements, swung nodding on their way; and bicycles glided by them so spare and silent that they might have been incorporeal things. High up on house-roofs glowed the changing colours of prima-donna soaps, putting to shame the lesser lights of heaven; now an invisible gigantic penman would write *Kodak* with large flowing hand in red ink, then, dissatisfied, delete it, and try it again in yellow. Here the crystal signs of music-halls flashed diamonds, or the open door of a restaurant cast a brilliant square of light on to the street. Then for a moment a strident, diabolically-precise scale from a street-organ would overscore all other noises; but the hoofs and wheels which bore the hungry world to the houses of its friends to be fed reasserted itself with a crash and trample like some Valkürrie-ritt; the whole town was abroad, and humming like a swarming beehive.

Kit was never tired of the spectacle of life, provided it was gay, and varied, and full. The incessant movement, the infinite separate businesses, which went to make up the great major chord of London streets, the admirable pace at which the world moved, the marvel of its contrasts, the gas, the glitter, the sordidness and the splendour rubbing shoulders, all appealed to her tremendous *joie de vivre*, the best and the most unvarying

factor in her very living character. She had once expressed a wish to be buried, like a suicide at cross-roads, in the very centre of Piccadilly Circus. "No country churchyards or knells of parting day for me, thank you," she had said.

All down Piccadilly she was silent, looking devouringly from the window of the brougham at the kaleidoscope outside, but when they turned out of Trafalgar Square down Northumberland Avenue, to avoid the Strand, which at that hour spouts and bubbles with traffic like a weir in spring, she turned to her husband with a sigh of regret at leaving the fuller streets.

"The outline of the plot, Jack?" she said.

"Don't know it myself yet," said Jack. "But the *vieux premier* is Alington – a heavy, solemn man, like a butler, rather tiresome, I'm afraid. Very likely you will sit next him; he is a guest of the Drapers' like ourselves. If not, get hold of him somehow. He might dine to-morrow."

"But we give a dance to-morrow," said Kit, "and we feed only the very brightest and best."

"All the more reason for Alington coming, perhaps," said Jack. "I have heard it said that there are still a few people who care for a duke as such. It sounds odd, but let us hope he is one."

"Yes, those people are so easy to deal with," said Kit thoughtfully. "But it will upset the table, Jack."

"Of course, if you put your table as more important than possible thousands," said Jack.

"It is really a big thing then?" asked Kit.

"It is possibly a very big thing. I know no more than you yet. It may even run to a Saturday till Monday or more."

"Very good. I'll upset the whole apple-cart for it, as Mr. Rhodes says. Here we are. Let's get away early, Jack. I said we'd go to Berkeley Street afterwards."

"We'll go as early as we can," he replied. "But you mustn't risk not landing your fish because you don't play him long enough."

"Oh, Jack, I am not a fool," she said. "Order the carriage for ten. I'd undertake in this gown to land the whole house of laymen by ten without a gaff. Dear Jean Worth! What a lot of money I owe him, and what a lot of pleasure he gives me! I should be puzzled to say which was the greater."

CHAPTER II

SUNDAY MORNING

Mr. Frank Alington turned out to be a star of greater magnitude, in fact a Saturday till Monday star, almost a comet. Lord Conybeare found that the whirl and bustle of London did not allow of his seeing enough of him, so he phrased it, and thus it happened that, some ten days after the dinner at the Drapers' Company (Kit's playing and landing of the fish having been masterly, for she had him dead-beat long before ten), Mr. Alington arrived on a Saturday afternoon in June at what Kit called their "cottage" in Buckinghamshire.

Strictly speaking – though she did not often speak strictly – it was not a cottage at all; and it was certainly not in Buckinghamshire, but in Berkshire. But there was a rustic, almost Bohemian, sound to Kit's mind in Buckinghamshire, whereas Berkshire only reminded one of bacon, and a few miles either way made a very little difference. "And if I choose to call Berkshire the Malay Archipelago," said Kit, "who is to stop me?"

However, to adopt Kit's nomenclature, the cottage in question was a large red-brick Elizabethan house on the banks of the Thames, with a few acres of conservatories, and a charming flower-garden, leading down by green degrees and cut yew hedges to the river. But the cottage idea was not wholly absent, for they always dined in the room which had once certainly been

the kitchen. The range had been removed, leaving an immense open fireplace, where it was sacrilege to burn anything but logs, and the most charming dark oak dressers, bearing under the new *régime* quantities of old blue Nankin ware, ran round the walls. Following the same idea, they always sat in the big hall which opened straight on to the front-door, instead of in the drawing-room. "Quite like hobnailed day-labourers," said Kit.

The analogy is obvious, and Kit's admirable taste had made the likeness almost glaring. There was a grandfather's clock there, a couple of large oak settles on each side of the fireplace, which had bronze dogs for the fire-irons, and homely Chippendale and basket chairs. A few Persian rugs, it is true, which it would have tasked a connoisseur to price, happened to be lying on the floor, but otherwise it was quite uncarpeted, and you trod on real naked wooden boards of polished oak. In all the windows but one there were tiny diamond panes of old wavy glass, which made the features of the landscape outside go up and down like a switchback as you walked across the room; and in the other window, which gave light to the serving-up-room (a highly inconvenient arrangement, in which Kit, in the *rôle* of labourer, delighted), were real bottom-of-glasses panes, which looked charming. The roof was gabled and not even whitewashed (being also of oak), and altogether an unexacting labourer might have spent very fairly comfortable evenings in this simple room.

The cottage idea was carried out in the garden also. The beds were all of old-fashioned flowers, hollyhocks, London-

pride, poppies, wallflowers, dahlias, mignonette, quite rustic and herbaceous, with no pincushion Italian beds, which Kit said were very expensive and out of keeping with the prevalent simplicity. They also reminded her of badly-mixed salads. Stern frugality further showed itself in the clothing of the red-brick walls which bounded the garden. Here were no flaunting, flaming creepers, bright and profitless, but homely pear-trees and apricots, which bore quite excellent fruit. A common wooden punt lay moored at the end of the garden, useful and homely, fit for the carrying of the produce of the labourer's garden to market. A pile of embroidered cushions happened at that moment to be lying in it, and Kit had also left her jewelled Russian cigarette-case there, but that was all. Even the cigarette-case was made of simple plaited straw, and the monogram and coronet set in very blue turquoises at one corner seemed to have got there by accident, as if they had been chips which had fallen out of the sky, and might be shortly expected to float back there again.

It was Sunday morning, obviously Sunday morning, and Nature was proceeding as usual on her simple but pleasant way. A brilliant sun, a gentle wind, the smooth, unruffled river, all testified to the tenderness and benignity of the powers of the air. Spring, the watery, impetuous spring of the North, had now a month ago definitely given place to summer, leaving another year in which poets, with their extraordinary want of correct observation, might forget what it had really been like, and rhyme it a hundred undeserved and unfounded courtesies. But summer

had come in earnest in the latter days of May, with a marked desire to make itself pleasant, and give to the sturdy British yeoman, who had till then complained (with statistics of rainfall) of the wetness of the spring, another excellent opportunity of vilifying the dryness of the summer. Over such Providence watches with a special care, and, knowing that the one thing worse than having a grievance is to have none, gives them a kindly interchange of wet springs, dry summers, wet summers, dry springs, secure of never pleasing anybody.

A soft blue haze of heat and moisture hung over the river and the low-lying water-meadows on the far side, but as the hills beyond climbed upwards from the valley, they rose into an atmosphere extraordinarily clear. Though the day was hot, there was a precision of outline about the woods that cut the sky almost suggestive of a frosty morning, and even here below the heat was of a brisk quality. Everything was steeped in Sunday content, and from the gray church-tower standing guardian among the huddled hamlet-roofs came the melodious jangle of bells ringing for the eleven o'clock service. The labourers' garden was in full luxuriance of midsummer flower (for a bright and cheerful garden should be within reach of the humblest), and a rainbow of colour bounded the close-shaven lawn. Nothing, as is right, was ever done on this lawn, mossy to the foot, restful to the eye; no whitewash lines cut it up into horrible squares and oblongs, no frenzied tennis-balls ever did decapitation among the flower-beds that framed it, and you could wander about it at

dusk immune from anxiety as to whether your next step would be tripped in a croquet-hoop or entangled in the snares of a drooped tennis-net. During the weeks of spring it had been a star-sown space of crocuses, like the meadow in Fra Angelico's Annunciation, but these were over, and it had again become a green, living velvet.

Kit had developed that morning at breakfast a strange unreasoning desire to go to church, and until Jack saw her eat he was almost afraid she was going to be ill. To church accordingly she had gone, dragging with her Alice Haslemere, who was staying with them. They had been put across the river in the punt, Kit armed with a huge Church service, and it was evident, so thought Conybeare as he strolled down to the water's edge after the return of the punt, that Kit had smoked a cigarette as she went across. This, by the standard of perfection, he considered a mistake. If you are going to do a thing at all, do it thoroughly, he argued to himself, and that a woman should smoke just before going to church was a lapse from the proper level. But he took the cigarette-case with its turquoise monogram from where it lay on the cushion, and put it into his pocket. As like as not Kit would step on it when she got into the punt again.

Jack had enjoyed a long conversation with Mr. Alington after dinner the evening before, and he was now strolling about the garden expecting him to come out and continue it. Alington was, as he had told Kit, a heavy-looking man, but conversationally he had not found him in the least heavy. He had the air of a

solid, intelligent Englishman, whose mind had been considerably widened by extensive travel abroad, and took a large unisular view of things. Had he been disposed to apply for a situation as a butler, no householder could have reasonably hoped to find a more trustworthy or respectable-looking man. Sobriety shone from his large mild eye, and the lines of his firm, somewhat full-lipped, mouth expressed steadiness in every curve. If as a butler he had been told that the whole of the Royal Family were coming to high tea in ten minutes, you would have felt yourself safe to bet that the intelligence would not flurry him, and that a sufficient high tea would somehow immediately appear. For so ample and well-furnished a man he had a curiously small voice, rather suggesting that it came from a distance, and he spoke his sentences in a precise manner, never correcting a word, as if he had thought them out before he opened his mouth. Colour was given to this supposition by the fact that he always paused a moment before speaking. Such a habit of speech, when worn by the majority, would predispose towards heaviness; but the result when it arrived was not, in the case of Mr. Alington, heavy. On the contrary, it was weighty – a far different thing. In the interval of reminding one of an admirable butler he irresistibly suggested a member of a Conservative Cabinet, safe of a peerage. It was only when considered as a floater of gold mines that his appearance was against him, and even then it was against him only on the score of probability, for it was impossible that even an imaginative public could invent a man in whom more *primâ-*

facie confidence should be reposed as a trustee of the moneys of widows and fatherless.

Jack strolled in the garden for nearly half an hour before he appeared, chucking pebbles into the Thames and cigarette-ends into the flower-beds. At breakfast Mr. Alington had been dressed in a black frock-coat, but now when he made his unhurried exit from the low drawing-room French window he wore a straw hat and a suit of decorous tweed, the result, no doubt, of his observation that no one else wore Sunday clothes. He carried a malacca cane in one hand; in the other a large tune hymn-book with edges red in one light, gold in another.

"Lady Conybeare has started?" he inquired of Jack.

"Yes; she has gone to church. She went nearly half an hour ago."

Mr. Alington paused a moment.

"I had meant to go with her," he said. "I had no idea it was so late."

"There is the punt here," said Jack. "You can go now if you like. I had no idea you meant to."

"I thought everyone went to church on Sunday morning in England when they were in the country," he said. "But I would sooner not go at all than arrive in the middle of the prayer of St. Chrysostom."

"And I would sooner arrive in the middle of the prayer of St. Chrysostom than at the beginning of it," remarked Jack.

A slight look of pain crossed Mr. Alington's face, as if he

had a twinge of neuralgia; but he made no further comment on Jack's levity. He leaned his tune hymn-book carefully against the bottom of his basket-chair, after feeling that the lawn was dry, and lit a cigarette.

"An exquisite morning," he said, after a moment's reflection. "The hills look as if they had been painted with cream for a medium, an effect so rare out of England."

Lord Conybeare did not reply immediately, for he had not waited all this time in the garden for Alington to hear him talk about cream. Then he went straight to the point:

"All you said last night interested me very much," he began, "and your kind offer to invest some money for me in your new group of mines – "

Mr. Alington held up a large white, deprecating hand. On the little finger was a plain gold signet-ring, bearing the motto, *Fortiter fideliter feliciter*.

"It is nothing," he replied; "pray don't mention it. Indeed, Lord Conybeare, if I may say so, I only made that offer as a sort of feeler. Your reply to me then, your further reference to the subject now, show me that you are kind enough to be interested in my new undertakings."

"Profoundly," said Lord Conybeare; then, with disarming frankness: "Money is the most interesting thing in the world and the most desirable. I often wish," he added, "that I saw more of it."

Alington flicked a morsel of ash off the end of his cigarette.

"That confirms me in what I was thinking of saying to you," he replied. "Now will you allow me to speak with your own frankness? Ah, observe that beautiful line traced by that skein of starlings!"

Jack looked up.

"Lovely!" he said. "Pray speak."

"It is this then. My honest belief is that there are immense fortunes to be made in West Australian mining. I believe also, again with absolute honesty, that these claims which I own are – some of them, at least, extremely rich. Now, I wish very much that I was wealthy enough to work them by myself. I regret to say that I am not. I must therefore form a company. To form a company I must have directors."

"Surely your name – " began Conybeare politely, but with only the faintest conjecture of what might be coming.

"My name, as you so kindly suggest, will no doubt be a little assistance," said Alington, "for I am not wholly unknown in such matters. But it is not enough. This Company must be English; it must be formed here; the shareholders should be largely English. Why? For a variety of reasons. In the first place, you can raise ten thousand pounds here more easily than you can raise one thousand in Australia. Again, the British public is getting ready to go mad about West Australian mining, while in Australia they regard Australian mining without, well, without any premonitory symptoms of insanity. Perhaps they underrate its future; I think they do. Perhaps the British public overrates it; that also is

possible. But I bring my wares to the best market. Now I ask you, Lord Conybeare, will you be on my board? Will you be my chairman?"

He turned briskly round with the first quick movement that Conybeare had yet seen him make.

"I," he asked, "on a board of mining directors? I know about mines exactly what you told me, last night – that is to say, unless I have forgotten some of it."

The ghost of a smile flickered across Mr. Alington's broad face, and he laid his large white hand on Jack's knee. The latter seemed to regard it just as he might have regarded a harmless moth that had settled there. The poor thing did not hurt.

"You saw that I smiled," he said. "I saw that you saw it. I smiled because you spoke so far from the point. That is frank enough, is it not, to show you that I am telling you the truth. There are further proofs also."

Both in his action with his hand and in his speech the plebeian showed plain, but Jack did not resent it. He had not asked Alington down to the cottage to enjoy his refined conversation and his well-bred presence, but to talk business. That he was doing. Jack was quite pleased with him.

"I do not follow you," he said.

Mr. Alington lit another cigarette from the stump of his old one before replying, and rose to deposit the other out of sight in a garden-bed.

"Cigarette-ends are so terribly dissonant with this charming

garden," he said. "Now, I am speaking to you from a purely business point of view. I supposed – it was natural, was it not? – that you were so kind as to ask me to your delightful house in order to discuss these mines. You see how frank I am."

Conybeare let his eye travel slowly down a reach of the Thames.

"Yes, that was the reason why I asked you," he said.

"And I came for exactly the same reason. The pleasure of visiting you at your 'cottage,' as Lady Conybeare so playfully calls it, is great – very great; but plain business-men like me have little time for such pleasures. Frankly, then, I should not have come unless I guessed your reason. I, too, wished to talk about these mines, Lord Conybeare, and I ask you again to be a director on my board."

He took off his straw hat – for they were sitting in the shade – and propped it carefully up against his chair by the side of the large tune hymn-book. Its removal showed a high white forehead and a circular baldness in the centre of flossy, light-brown hair, like a tonsure.

"I am a plain business man," he went on, "and when I am engaged in business I do not offer an advantageous thing to others unless I get an advantage myself; for to introduce sentiment into business is to make a pleasure of it and a failure. You must remember, my dear Lord Conybeare, that England is essentially aristocratic in her ideas. At least, so far as your nobility is Conservative, she is aristocratic. Think if Lord Salisbury joined

a board how the public would clamour for allotments! Dear me, yes, the master of Hatfield might be a very rich man – a very rich man indeed."

Jack Conybeare was completely himself; he was not dazzled or unduly delighted at the offer. He merely wished to know what he got by it, taking for granted, and justly, that the man was sincere.

"Marquises still count, then," he said. "I give you my word I had no idea of it. I am glad I am a marquis. But what," he added, "do I get by it?"

"A salary," said Mr. Alington, and his usual pause gave the remark considerable weight. "But we will pass over that," he went on. "Directors, however, have the privilege of taking a great many shares before the concern is made public. In fact, in order to qualify for being a director, you must hold a considerable number."

"I am very poor," said Jack.

"That, fortunately, can be remedied," said Mr. Alington.

Jack was immensely practical, and very quick, and it was obvious at once that this was capable of two interpretations. He took the right one.

"You mean it is a certainty for me?" he said.

Again Mr. Alington let a perceptible pause intervene before he answered.

"I mean this," he said, "if you want plain speaking, and I think you do; it also suits me better. You shall be allotted a certain

number of shares, say ten thousand, in my new group of mines. You will probably only have to pay the first call. You will be a director of these mines – and, by the way, there is another name I have in my mind, the owner of which I should also like to have on my board. I had the pleasure of seeing him at your house in London. Very well, I issue my prospectus, and my name, as you so kindly observed, counts for something. I, of course, as vendor, shall join the board after allotment. Yours and another I hope will be there too. Now, I feel certain in my own mind that such a board (with certain other names, which shall be my affair) will be advantageous to me. It will pay. I am certain also – I say this soberly – that between my prospectus and my board the shares will at once go up, so that if you choose you can sell out before the second call. Thus you will not be without your advantage also. We do no favour to each other; we enter into partnership each for his own advantage."

"And my duties?" asked Jack.

"Attendance, regular attendance at the meetings of the company. On those occasions I shall want you to take the chair, read the report of the manager, if there is one to hand, make the statement of the affairs of the company, and congratulate the shareholders."

"Or condole?" asked Jack.

"I hope not. I should also ask you to immediately approach Lord Abbotsworthy, and ask him to be on the board. His is the other name I mentioned."

"Whatever do you want Tom Abbotsworthy for?" asked Conybeare surprisedly.

"For much the same reason as I want you. He is already an earl – he will be a duke. Dear me, if I was not a man of business I should choose to be a duke."

Jack pondered a moment.

"It is your own concern," he said. "I will ask him with pleasure, and I think very probably he will consent. Oddly enough, he and I were talking about this sudden interest in West Australia only yesterday morning."

"I think that many other people will be talking of it before long," said Alington.

"I consent," said Jack.

Mr. Alington showed neither elation, relief, nor surprise. But he paused.

"I think you will find it worth your while," he said. "And now, Lord Conybeare, there is another point. In the working of a big scheme like this – for, I assure you, this is no cottage-garden affair – there is, as you may imagine, an enormous deal of business. Somebody has to be responsible for, or, at any rate, to sanction, all that is done. Whether we put up fresh stamps, or whether we decide to use the cyanide process for tailings, or sink a deep level, or abandon a vein, or use the sulphide reduction, to take only a few obvious instances, somebody has to be able to answer all questions, difficult ones sometimes, possibly even awkward ones. Now, are you willing to go into all this, or not?"

If you wish to have a voice in such matters you must go into it. On that I insist. I hear you are a first-rate authority on chemical manures – a most absorbing subject, I am sure. Are you willing to learn as much about mines? On the other hand, it is open to you and Lord Abbotsworthy to leave the whole working of such affairs to me and certain business men whom I may appoint. But, having left it, you leave it altogether. You will have no right of being consulted at all about technical points unless you will make them your study. If you decide to leave these things to those whose life has been passed in them, good. You put implicit confidence in them, and if required, you will say so, honestly, at the meetings. If, on the other hand, you wish to have a voice in technical affairs, your voice must be justified. You must make mines, technically, your study. You must go out and see mines. You must acquire, not a superficial, but a thorough knowledge of them. You must be able to form some estimate of what relation one ounce of gold to the ton bears to the cost of working, and the capital on which such a yield will pay. Now which? Choose!"

And Mr. Alington faced round squarely, a little exhausted on so hot a morning by a volubility which was rare with him, and looked Jack in the face.

"Which do you advise?" asked the other.

"I cannot undertake to advise you. I have merely given you the data of your choice, and I can do no more."

"Then spare me details," said Jack.

Mr. Alington nodded his head gravely.

"I think you are wise," he said, "though I could not take the responsibility of influencing your own opinion. I pay you for your name. Your name, to tell you the truth, is what I want. You delegate business to business men. I hope you will put the matter in the same light to Lord Abbotsworthy. With regard to your salary as chairman, I cannot make you a precise offer yet; tentatively, I should suggest five thousand a year."

Lord Conybeare had to perfection that very useful point of good breeding, namely, the ability to preserve a perfectly wooden face when hearing the most surprising news. Mr. Alington, for all the effect this information apparently had on it, might have been speaking to the leg of a table.

"That seems to me very handsome," he replied negligently.

"It seems to me about fair," said Mr. Alington.

Lord Conybeare was puzzled, and he wondered whether Kit would understand it all. How his name on a "front page," as Mr. Alington called it, with attendance at a few meetings, at which he would read a report, could be worth five thousand a year, he did not see, though he felt quite certain that Mr. Alington thought it was. Whether it would turn out to be so or not, he hardly cared at all; clearly that matter did not concern him. If anyone was willing to pay five thousand a year for his name they were perfectly welcome to have it; indeed, he would have taken a much smaller figure. He had no idea that marquises were at such a premium. His distinguished ancestry had suddenly become an industrial company, paying heavily. "The new Esau," he thought

to himself, "and a great improvement on the old. I only lend my birthright, and the pottage I receive is really considerable."

Some time before they had reached this point in their conversation the punt had been taken across the river again to fetch Kit and Alice Haslemere back from church, and as Mr. Alington said his last words it had returned again with the jaded church-goers. He put on his straw hat, picked up the big tune hymn-book, and with Conybeare strolled down to the bottom of the lawn to meet them.

"Devotion is so very fatiguing," said Kit, in a harassed voice, as she stepped on to the grass. "Alice and I feel as if we had been having the influenza – don't we, dear? And I've lost my cigarette-case. It is too tiresome, because I meant to pawn it. I am sure I left it in the punt."

Jack took it out of his pocket and returned it to her.

"Thank your dear husband you didn't step on it," he remarked. Kit took it petulantly, and lit a cigarette.

"Oh, Jack, I wish you wouldn't be so thoughtful," she said. "Thoughtful people are such a nuisance. They always remind one of what one is doing one's best to forget, and put one's cherished things in safe places. Oh, I'm so glad I'm not a clergyman. I should have to go to church again this evening. What's that book, Mr. Alington? Oh, I see. Have you and Jack been singing hymns on the lawn? How dear of you! I didn't know you thought of going to church, or I would have waited for you. I understood you were going to talk business with Jack. There is business in

the air. Just a trifle stuffy."

Mr. Alington paused.

"We have been having a long and interesting talk," he replied. "One can say more on Sunday morning than in the whole of the rest of the week put together."

"Yes, that's so true," said Kit, walking on ahead with him, and smoking violently. "The man who preached knew it too. It was like a night journey, I slept so badly. And was your talk satisfactory?"

"To me, very," said Mr. Alington. "I am convinced it will also prove satisfactory to Lord Conybeare. He has kindly consented to become my chairman and a director of my new group of mines, the Carmel mines, as they will be called."

"What a nice name!" said Kit. "And shall we all make our fortunes?"

Mr. Alington nodded his massive head.

"I shall be very much surprised if we do not get a modest competence out of the Carmel mines," said he.

CHAPTER III

AFTER THE GEE-GEE PARTY

Lady Haslemere was entertaining what she called the "Gee-gees" or "Great Grundys" one night at her house in Berkeley Street. The "Gee-gee" party was an idea borrowed from Jack, and all who were weightiest in society came to it, a large number of them to dine, and the rest to the evening party. Just now her brother, Tom Abbotsworthy, was living with them, for his own house was being done up, and Alice had easily persuaded him to stay with them, instead of living with the Duke. Indeed to live with the Duke was nearly an impossibility; three women already had attempted to support the burden of being his Duchess, but they had all collapsed before long, leaving him in each case eminently consolable. He could hurry a person into the grave, so it was said, sooner than any man or woman in the kingdom. The last time Tom had seen him was about a week ago, at dinner somewhere, and the whole of his conversation had been to say loudly to him across the dinner-table at intervals of about two minutes, "Why don't you marry?"

Tom's presence in the house was a great boon during the season; he relieved his brother-in-law of his duties as host in an easy, unostentatious manner, thereby earning his heartfelt gratitude, and discharging these duties, instead of leaving them undischarged. Lord Haslemere himself had a habit of being

unreckoned with. He was an adept at doing wire puzzles, and played a remarkably good game at billiards, but otherwise there was nothing of him. He wore whiskers, spent the greater part of his day at the club, and was known as Whisky-and-Soda, not because he had intemperate leanings in that direction, but because there was really nothing else to call him. When his wife entertained, he shrank into what there was of himself, and the majority of his guests at an evening party did not generally know him by sight. His face was one stamped with the quality of obliviality; to see him once was to insure forgetting him at least twice. But at the "Gee-gee" parties he was made tidy, which he usually was not, and put in prominent places. He had been very prominent this evening, and correspondingly unhappy. He had taken a parrot-hued Duchess into dinner, and spilt a glass of wine over her new dress, and as her Grace's temper was as high as the bridge of her nose, the evening had been unusually bitter.

The "Grundy" dinner-party was succeeded by a vast "Grundy" At Home, to which flocked all the solid people in London, including those who "bridle" when a very smart set is mentioned, and flock thirstily to their houses, like camels to a desert well, whenever they are asked. It was the usual thing. There had been a little first-rate music – during which everyone talked their loudest – and a great many pink and china-blue hydrangeas on the stairs, a positive coruscation of stars and orders and garters – for two royal princes had been included among the "Gee-gees" – and about midnight Lady Haslemere was yawning dismally

behind her fan, and wondering when people would begin to go away. In the intervals of her yawns, which she concealed most admirably, she spoke excellent and vivacious French to the Hungarian Ambassador, an old bald-headed little man, who only wanted a stick to make him into a monkey on one, and laughed riotously at his stuffy little monkey-house jokes, all of which she had frequently heard before. In consequence, he considered her an extremely agreeable woman, as indeed she was.

Kit and her husband were not at the dinner, both having refused point-blank to go, on the ground that they had done their duty to "Grundy" already; but they turned up, having dined quietly at home, at about half-past eleven, with Mr. Alington in tow. He was not known to many people present, but Lady Haslemere instantly left her Ambassador, having received instructions from Kit, and led him about like a dancing bear. She introduced him to royalty, which asked him graciously whether he enjoyed England, or preferred Australia, and other questions of a highly original and penetrating kind; she presented him to stars and orders and garters, and to all the finest "Gee-gees" present, as if he had been the guest of the evening. Kit's eye was on her all the time, though she was talking to two thousand people, and saw that she did her duty.

The rooms were as pretty as decorated boxes can be, and hotter than one would have thought any boxes could possibly get. People stood packed together like sardines in a tin, cheek to jowl, and appeared to enjoy it. Anæmic men dropped inaudible

questions to robust females, and ethereal-looking *débutantes* screamed replies to elderly Conservatives. Nobody sat down – indeed, there was not room to sit down – and the happiest of all the crowd, excepting those who had dined there, were the enviable mortals who had come on from one house, and were able to announce that they were going on to another. Three small drawing-rooms opened out the one from the other, and the doorways were inflamed and congested. Whoever took up most room seemed to stand there, and whoever took up most room seemed to be dressed in red. Altogether, one could not imagine a more successful evening. Politicians considered it a political party, those who were not quite so smart as Lady Haslemere's set considered it the smartest party of the year, and everybody who was nobody considered that everybody was there, and looked forward to buying the next issue of *Smart Society*, in order to see what "Belle" or "Amy" thought of it all.

The noise of two or three hundred people all talking at once in small rooms causes a roar extraordinarily strident, and, as in the case of rooms full of tobacco-smoke, intolerable unless one contributes to it oneself. Mr. Alington had to raise his small, precise voice till it sounded as if he was intoning, and the effort was considerable. This particular way of passing a pleasant evening in the heat of the summer was hitherto unknown to him, and he looked about him in mild wonder. He felt himself reminded of those crates of ducks and fowls which are to be seen on the decks of ocean-going steamers, the occupants of which

are so cruelly overcrowded, and of whom the most fortunate only can thrust their beaks through the wicker of their prison-house, and quack desolately to the breeze of the sea. Lady Haslemere's rooms seemed to him to resemble these bird-crates, the only difference being that people sought this suffocating imprisonment of their own free will, because they liked it, the birds because the passengers had to be fed. One or two very tall men had their heads free, a few others stood by windows, and could breathe; but the majority could neither breathe nor hear, nor see further than their immediate neighbours. They could only quack. And they quacked.

By degrees the party thinned; an unwilling lane was cut through the crowd for the exit of the princes, and the great full-blown flowers in the hedges, so to speak, bobbed down in turn as they passed, like a field of poppies blown on by a passing wind. After them those lucky folk who were going on to another house, where they would stand shoulder to shoulder again with a slightly different crowd, and express extreme wonder that their neighbours had not been at Lady Haslemere's ("I thought everyone was there!"), made haste to follow. Outside all down the street from Berkeley Square at one end to Piccadilly at the other stretched the lines of carriage-lamps, looking like some gigantic double necklace. The congestion in the drawing-room developed into a really alarming inflammation in the cloak-room and the hall, and everyone wanted her carriage and was waiting for it, except the one unfortunate lady whose carriage stopped the

whole of the way, as a stentorian policeman studiously informed her, but who could only find attached to her ticket a small opera hat instead of the cloak which should have covered her. People trod on each other's toes and heels, and entangled themselves in other folks' jewels and lace. Rain had begun to fall heavily, the red carpet from the door to the curbstone was moist and muddy, contemptuous footmen escorted elderly ladies under carriage umbrellas to their broughams, and large drops of rain fell chill on the elderly ladies' backs. Loungers of the streets criticised the outgoers with point and cockney laughter, but still the well-dressed crowd jostled and quacked and talked, and said how remarkably pleasant it had been, and how doubly delightful it was to have come here from somewhere else, and to go on somewhere else from here.

Half an hour after the departure of the princes, Lady Haslemere, who was fast ceasing to yawn, manœuvred the two or three dozen people who still could not manage to tear themselves away, into the outermost of the three drawing-rooms, and nodded to a footman who lingered in the doorway, and had obvious orders to catch her eye. Upon this he and another impassive giant glided into the innermost room, and took two green-baize-covered tables from where they had been folded against the wall, setting them in the middle of the room, and placed a dozen chairs round them; then, making use of a back staircase, so that they should not be seen by the remaining "Grundys," they brought up and laid out a cold supper, consisting

chiefly of jelly and frills and froth and glass and bottles and quails and cigarettes, put cards, counters, and candles on the green-baize tables, and withdrew. Ten minutes later the last of the "Grundys" withdrew also, and the rest, some dozen people who had stood about in attitudes of the deepest dejection for the last half-hour, while a Bishop played the man of the world to Kit, heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief, and brightened up considerably. Automatically, or as if by the action of a current of air or a tide, they drifted into the inner room, and chalk lines were neatly drawn on the green-baize cloth.

Baccarat is a game admirably suited to people who have had a long day, and is believed to be a specific antidote to the gloom induced by huge "Grundy" parties. It is an effort and a strain on the mind to talk to very solid people who are interested in great questions and delight in discussion; but at baccarat the mind, so to speak, lights a cigarette, throws itself into an armchair, and puts on its slippers. Baccarat requires no judgment, no calculation, no previous knowledge of anything, and though it is full of pleasing excitement, it makes no demands whatever on the strongest or feeblest intellect. The players have only to put themselves blindly, as ladies dressing for dinner surrender themselves to a skilful maid, into the hands of Luck, and the austere elemental forces which manage the winds and waves, and decree in what order nines and other cards are dealt from packs, do the rest. You buy your counters, and when they are all gone you buy some more. If, on the other hand, they behave as counters should, and increase

and multiply like rabbits, you have the pleasure of presenting them to your host at the end of the evening or the beginning of the morning, as the case may be, and he very kindly gives you shining sterling gold and rich crackling bank-notes in exchange.

Tom Abbotsworthy, since he had been staying with his sister, always took the place of host when this soothing game was being played at Berkeley Street; for Lord Haslemere, if he were not in bed, was by this time busily practising nursery cannons on the billiard-table. Occasionally he looked in, with his fidgety manner, and trifled with the froth and frills, and if there was anyone present whose greatness demanded his attendance, he took a hesitating hand. But to-night he was spared; there was only a small, intimate party, who would have found him a bore. He was slow at cards, displayed an inordinate greed for his stake, and had been known at baccarat to consider whether he should have another. This, as already stated, is unnecessary. With certain numbers you must; with all the others you must not, and consideration delays the game.

The hours passed much more pleasantly and briskly than during the period of the "Grundy" party. It was a warm, still night, the windows were flung wide, and the candles burned unwaveringly. Round the table were a dozen eager, attentive faces. Luck, like some Pied Piper, was fluting to the nobility and gentry, and the nobility and gentry followed her like the children of Hamelin. Now and then one of them would rise and consult the side-table to the diminishment of frills and froth, or the crisp-

smelling smoke of a cigarette would hold the room for a few minutes. Most of those present had been idle all day, now they were employed and serious. Outside the rain had ceased, and for a couple of hours the never-ending symphony of wheels sank to a pianissimo. Occasionally, with a sharp-cut noise of hoofs and the jingle of a bell, a hansom would trot briskly past, and at intervals an iron-shod van made thunder in the street. But the siesta of noise was short, for time to the most is precious; barely had the world got home from its parties of the night, when those whose business it is to rise when their masters are going to bed, in order that the breakfast-table may not lack its flowers and fruits, began to get to the morning's work, and the loaded, fragrant vans went eastward. The candles had once burned down, and had been replaced by one of the impassive giants, when the hint of dawn, the same dawn that in the country illuminated with tremulous light the dewy hollows of untrodden ways, was whispered in the world. Here it but changed the blank, dark faces of the houses opposite into a more visible gray; it sucked the fire from the candles, was strangely unbecoming to Lady Haslemere, who was calculated for artificial light, and out of the darkness was born day.

There was no longer any need for the carriage-lamps to be lit when Kit and her husband got into their brougham. A very pale-blue sky, smokeless and clear, was over the city, and the breath of the morning was deliciously chill. Kit, whether from superior art or mere nature, did not look in the least out of keeping with

the morning. She was a little flushed, but her flush was that of a child just awakened from a long night's rest more than that of a woman of twenty-five, excited by baccarat and sufficient – in no degree more than sufficient – champagne. Her constant harmony with her surroundings was her most extraordinary characteristic, it seemed to be an instinct, acting automatically, just as the chameleon takes its colour from its surroundings. Set her in a well-dressed mob of the world, she was the best dressed and most worldly woman there; among rosy-faced children she would look at the most a pupil teacher. Just now in Lady Haslemere's drawing-room you would have called her gambler to her fingertips; but as she stood for a moment on the pavement outside waiting for her carriage-door to be opened, she was a child of morning.

She drew her cloak, lined with the plucked breast feathers that grow on the mother only in breeding-time, more closely about her, and drew the window half up.

"You were in luck as well as I, were you not, Jack?" she said. "I suppose I am mercenary, but I must confess I like winning other people's money. I feel as if I was earning something."

"Yes, we were both on the win to-night," said Jack.

Then he stopped, but as if he had something more to say, and to Kit as well as to him the silence was awkward.

"You noticed something?" she asked.

"Yes; Alington."

"So did I. So did Alice, I think. What a bore it is! What is

to be done?"

Jack fidgeted on his seat, lit a cigarette, took two whiffs at it, and threw it away.

"Perhaps we are wrong," he said. "Perhaps he didn't cheat."

Kit did not find it worth while to reply to so half-hearted a suggestion.

"It's damned awkward," he continued, abandoning this himself. "I don't know what to do. You see, Kit, what an awful position I am in. In any case, do let us have no scandal; that sort of thing has been tried once, and I don't know that it did any good to anybody."

"Of course we will have no scandal," said Kit quickly. "If there was a scandal, you would have to break with him, and pop go the gold mines as far as we are concerned."

Jack started. His thoughts had been so absolutely identical with what his wife said, that it was as if he had heard a sudden echo. And though the thoughts had been his own, and Kit had merely stated them, yet when she did so, so unreasonable is man, he felt inclined to repudiate what she said. The thing sounded crude when put like that. Kit saw him start, divined the cause with intuitive accuracy, and felt a sudden impatient anger at him. She hated hypocritical cowardice of this kind, for, having plenty of immoral courage herself, she had no sympathy with those who were defective in it. Jack, she knew very well, had no intention of breaking with Alington, because the latter had cheated at baccarat. Then, in Heaven's name, even if you are too squeamish

to be frank yourself, try to make an effort not to wince when somebody else is.

"That is what a man calls his honour," she thought to herself with amused annoyance. "It is unlike Jack, though."

Meantime her quick brain was spinning threads like a spider.

"Look here, Jack," she said in a moment. "Leave the thing entirely to me. It was stupid of me to mention it. You saw nothing: I saw nothing. You know nothing about it. There was no baccarat, no cheating, no nothing. Come."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack doubtfully.

He had great confidence in Kit, but this matter required consideration.

"Oh, Jack, I am not a fool," said Kit. "I only want you, officially, so to speak, to know nothing about this, just in case of accidents; but there will be no accidents if you let me manage it. If you want to know what I shall do, it is this: I shall go to Alice to-morrow – to-day, rather – and tell her what I saw. I am sure she saw it herself, or I should say nothing to her. I shall also add how lucky it was that only she and I noticed it. Then the whole thing shall be hushed up, though I dare say we shall watch Alington play once more to be certain about it, and if we see him cheat again, make him promise to play no more. Trust us for not letting it come out. I am in your galley about the mines, you see."

"She is to understand that I saw nothing?" asked Jack.

"Of course, of course," said Kit. "That is the whole point of it. What is your scruple? I am really unable to understand. I know

it is not nice to deal with a person who cheats at cards. You have always to be on the watch. You'll have to keep your eyes open in this business of the mines, but that is your own affair. Clearly it is much better that Alice should imagine you know nothing about the cheating. She might think you ought to break with the man, people are so queer and unexpected."

"What about Tom?" asked he.

They had arrived at Park Lane, and Kit stepped out.

"Jack, will you or will you not leave the whole matter in my hands – the whole matter, you understand – without interference?"

He paused for a moment, still irresolute.

"Yes," he said at last; "but be careful."

Kit hardly heard this injunction; as soon as he had said "Yes" she turned quickly from him, and went into the house.

It was already after four, and the tops of the trees in the Park had caught the first level rays of the eastern sun. The splendid, sordid town still lay asleep, and the road was glistening from the rain which had fallen earlier in the night, and empty of passengers. But the birds, those fit companions of the dawn, were awake, and the twittered morning hymn of sparrows pricked the air. Kit went straight to her bedroom, where the rose-coloured blinds, drawn down over the wide-open windows, filled the room with soft, subdued light, and rang the bell which communicated with her maid's room. When she was likely to be out very late she always let her maid go to bed, and rang for her when she

was wanted. Often she even made an effort to get to bed without her help, but this morning she was preoccupied, and rang before she could determine whether she needed her. Kit herself was one of those happily-constituted people who can do with very little sleep, though they can manage a great deal, and in these London months four or five hours during the night and a possible half-hour before dinner was sufficient to make her not only just awake, but excessively so at other times. In the country, it is true, she made up for unnatural hours by really bucolic behaviour. She took vigorous exercise every day in any weather, ate largely of wholesome things, hardly drank any wine, and slept her eight hours like a child. In this she was wiser than the majority of her world, who, in order to correct their errors in London, spend a month of digestive retirement at Carlsbad.

"Live wholesomely six months of the year," said Kit once, "and you will repair your damages. Why should I listen to German bands and drink salt water?"

Instead, she fished all August and September, cut down her cigarettes, and lived, as she said, like a milkmaid. It would have been rather a queer sort of milkmaid, but people knew what she meant.

Before her maid came (Kit's arrangement that she might go to bed was partly the result of kindness, partly of her disinclination to be waited on by a very sleepy attendant) she had taken off her jewels, and put them into her safe. There also she placed the very considerable sum of money which she had just won at baccarat,

to join the rainy-day fund. Jack did not know about the rainy-day fund – it was of Kit's very private possessions; but it is only fair to her to say that if he had been in a financial *impasse* it would have been at his disposal. No number of outstanding bills, however, constituted an *impasse* till you were absolutely sued for debt; the simplest way of discharging them, a way naturally popular, was to continue ordering things at the same shops.

Kit and her husband did not meet at breakfast, but took that plebeian meal in their own rooms. And she, having told Hortense to open the windows still wider, and bring her breakfast at half-past ten, put the key of her jewel-safe under her pillow, and lay down to sleep for five hours. She would want her victoria at twelve, and she scribbled a note to Lady Haslemere saying that she would be with her at a quarter past.

Outside the day grew ever brighter, and rivulets of traffic began to flow down Park Lane. The hour of the starting of the omnibuses brought a great accession of sound, but Kit fell asleep as soon as she got into bed, and, the sleep of the just and the healthy being sound, she heard them not. She dreamed in a vague way that she had won a million pounds, but that as she was winning the last of them, which would mean eternal happiness, she cheated some undefined shadow of a penny, which, in the misty, unexplained fashion of dreams, took away the whole of her winnings. Then the smell of tea and bacon and a sudden influx of light scattered these vain and inauspicious imaginings, and she woke to another day of her worthless, selfish, aimless

life.

CHAPTER IV

KIT'S LITTLE PLAN

To many people the events of the day before, and the anticipations of the day to come, give with the most pedantic exactness an automatic colour to the waking moments. The first pulse of conscious consciousness, without apparent cause, is happy, unhappy, or indifferent. Then comes a backward train of thought, the brain gropes for the reason of its pleasure or chagrin, something has happened, something is going to happen, and the instinct of the first moment is justified. The thing lay in the brain; it gave the colour of itself to the moment when reasoned thought was yet dormant.

Bacon and tea were the first savours of an outer world to Kit when she awoke, for she had slept soundly, but simultaneously, and not referring to these excellent things, her brain said to her, "Not nice!" Now, this was odd: she shared with her husband his opinion of the paramount importance of money, and the night before she had locked up in her safe enough to pay for six gowns at least, and a year's dentist bills, for her teeth were very good. Indeed, it was generally supposed that they were false, and though Kit always laughed with an open mouth, she had been more than once asked who her dentist was. Herein she showed less than her ordinary wisdom when she replied that she had not got one, for the malignity of the world, how incomparable she should have

known, felt itself justified.

Yet in spite of that delightful round sum in her jewel-safe, the smell of bacon woke her to no sense of bliss beyond bacon. For a moment she challenged her instinct, and told herself that she was going to have tea with the Carburys, and that Coquelin was coming; that she was dining with the Arbuthnots, where they were going to play a little French farce so screaming and curious that the Censor would certainly have had a fit if he had known that such a piece had been performed within the bounds of his paternal care. All this was as it should be, yet as the river of thought began to flow more fully, she was even less pleased with the colour of the day. Something unpleasant had happened; something unpleasant was still in the air – ah! that was it, and she sat up in bed and wondered exactly how she should put it to Lady Haslemere. Anyhow she had *carte blanche* from Jack, and if between half-past ten and a quarter past twelve she could not think of something simple and sufficient, she was a fool, and that she knew she certainly was not.

With her breakfast came the post. There were half a dozen cards of invitation to concerts and dinners and garden-parties; an autograph note from a very great personage about her guests at the banquet next week; a number of bills making a surprising but uninteresting total; another note, which she read with interest twice, and then tore into very small pieces; and a few lines from Jack, scribbled on a half-sheet of paper.

"Do the best you can, Kit," he said; "I am off to the City to

see A. I shall behave as if I knew nothing."

Kit tore up this also, but not into small pieces, with a little sigh of relief. "Sense cometh in the morning," she said to herself, and ate her breakfast with a very good appetite.

Whatever she had been doing, however unwisely she had supped, Kit always "wanted" her breakfast, and as she took it the affair of the night before seemed to her to assume a somewhat different complexion. In her heart of hearts she began to be not very sorry for the lapse in social morality of which Mr. Alington had been guilty on the previous night. It seemed to her on post-prandial consideration that it might not be altogether a bad thing that she should have some little check upon him. It might even be called a blessing, with hardly any disguise at all, and she put the position to herself thus. When you went careering about in unexplored goldfields with the owner, a comparative stranger, harnessed to your cart, it was just as well to have some sort of a break ready to your hand. Very likely it would be unnecessary to use it; indeed, she did not want to have to use it at all, but it was certainly preferable to know that it was there, and that if the comparative stranger took it into his head to bolt, he would find it suddenly clapped on. The only drawback was that Alice knew about it too; at least, Kit was morally certain that she had noticed Mr. Alington's surreptitious pushing forward of his stake after the declaration of his card, which was very clumsily done, and she would have preferred, had it been possible, that only Jack and she should have known, for a secret has only one value, and

the more it is shared the less valuable does each share become, on the simple arithmetical postulate that if you divide a unit into pieces, each piece is less than the original unit.

Indeed, the more she thought of it, the more convenient did it appear that Mr. Alington should have made this little mistake, and that she should have noticed it. And, after all, perhaps it would save trouble that Alice should have noticed it too, for in all probability it would be necessary to make Alington play again and watch him. For this she must have some accomplice, and as Jack was not to come into the affair at all, there really was no better accomplice to have than Alice. To lay this trap for the bland financier did not seem to Kit to be in any way a discreditable proceeding. She put it to herself that, if a man cheated, he ought not to be allowed to play cards and win his friends' money, and that it was in justice to him that it was necessary to verify the suspicion. But that it was a low and loathsome thing to ask a man as a friend to play cards in order to see whether he cheated or not did not present itself to her. Her mind – after all, it is a question of taste – was not constructed in such a way as to be able to understand this point of view, and she was not hide-bound or pedantic in her idea of the obligation entailed by hospitality. To cheat at cards was an impossible habit, it would not do in the least; for a rich man to cheat at cards was inexplicable. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that Kit was really shocked at the latter.

In the course of an hour came an answer from Lady

Haslemere. She was unavoidably out till two, but if Kit would come to lunch then she would be at home. Haslemere and Tom were both out, and they could be alone.

Kit always found Alice Haslemere excellent company, and during lunch they blackened the reputations of their more intimate friends with all the mastery of custom, and a firm though gentle touch. Like some deductive detective of unreadable fiction, Kit could most plausibly argue guilt from cigarette ashes, muddy boots, cups of tea – anything, in fact, wholly innocent in itself. But luckier than he, she had not got to wrest verdicts from reluctant juries, but only to convince Lady Haslemere, which was a far lighter task, as she could without the slightest effort believe anything bad of anybody. Kit, moreover, was a perfect genius at innuendo; it was one of the greatest charms of her conversation.

After lunch they sat in the card-room and smoked gold-tipped, opium-tainted cigarettes, and when the servants had brought coffee and left them, Kit went straight to the point, and asked Alice whether she had seen anything irregular as they played baccarat the night before.

Lady Haslemere took a sip of coffee and lit another cigarette; she intended to enjoy herself very much.

"You mean the Australian," she said. "Well, I had suspicions; that is to say, last night I felt certain. It is so easy to feel certain about that sort of thing when one is losing."

Kit laughed a sympathetic laugh.

"It *is* a bore, losing," she said. "If there is one thing I dislike

more than winning other people's money, it is losing my own. And the certainty of last night is still a suspicion to-day?"

"Ye-es. But you know a man may mean to stake, and yet not put the counters quite clear of that dear little chalk line. I am sure, in any case, that Tom saw nothing, because I threw a hint at him this morning, which he would have understood if he had seen anything."

"Oh, Tom never sees anything," said Kit; "he is like Jack."

Lady Haslemere's natural conclusion was that Jack had not seen anything either, and for the moment Kit was saved from a more direct misstatement. Not that she had any prudish horror of misstatements, but it was idle to make one unless it was necessary; it is silly to earn a reputation for habitual prevarication. Lies are like drugs or stimulants, the more frequent use you make of them, the less effect they have, both on yourself and on other people.

"Well, then, Kit," continued Lady Haslemere, "we have not yet got much to go on. You, Tom, Jack, and I are the only four people who could really have seen: Jack and I because we were sitting directly opposite Mr. Alington, you and Tom because you were sitting one on each side of him. And of us four, you alone really think that this – this unfortunate moral collapse, I think you called it, happened. And Jack is so sharp. I don't at all agree that he never sees anything; there is nothing, rather, that he does not see. I attach as much weight to his seeing nothing as to anybody else seeing anything. You and I see things very quick, you know,

dear," she added with unusual candour.

"Perhaps Jack was lighting a cigarette or something," said Kit. "Indeed, now I come to think of it, I believe he was."

"Jack can see through cigarette smoke as well as most people," remarked Alice. "But on the whole I agree with you, Kit; we cannot leave it as it is. I believe the recognised thing to do is to get him to play again and watch him."

"I believe so," said Kit, with studied unconcern.

Here she made a mistake; the unconcern was a little overdone, and it caused Lady Haslemere to look up quickly. At that moment it occurred to her for the first time that Kit was not being quite ingenuous.

"But I don't like doing that sort of thing," she went on, throwing out a feeler.

"But what else are we to do?" asked Kit, who since breakfast had evolved from her inner consciousness several admirable platitudes. "It is really not fair to Alington himself to leave it like this; to have lurking in one's mind – one can't help it – a suspicion against the man which may be quite erroneous. On the other hand, supposing it is not erroneous, supposing he did cheat, it is not fair on other people that he should be allowed to go on playing. He either did cheat or else he did not."

There was no gainsaying the common-sense of this, and Lady Haslemere was silent a moment.

"Tell Jack," she suggested at length, after racking her brains for something rather awkward to say.

As a rule she and Kit were excellent friends, and treated each other with immense frankness; but Lady Haslemere this morning had a very distinct impression that Kit was keeping something back, which annoyed her. Doubtless it was something quite trivial and unimportant, but she herself did not relish being kept in the dark about anything by anybody. But Kit replied immediately.

"I don't see why we should tell anybody, Alice," she said; "and poor dear Jack would pull his moustache off in his perplexity, if he were to know," she added, with a fine touch of local colour. "In any case, the last thing we want is a scandal, for it never looks well to see in the papers that the 'Marchioness of Conybeare, while entertaining a large baccarat party last night, detected one of her guests cheating. Her ladyship now lies in a precarious state.' You know the sort of thing. Then follow the names of the guests. I hate the public press!" she observed with dignity.

"Yes; it is like X rays," observed Lady Haslemere; "and enables the curious public to see one's bones. And however charming one may be, one's bones are not fit for public inspection. Also the papers would put the name of one of the guests with dashes for vowels, and the excited reader would draw his conclusions. Really, the upper class is terribly ill-used. It is the whipping-boy of the nation. Supposing Smith and Jones had a baccarat-party, and Smith cheated, no one would care, not even Robinson."

Kit laughed.

"That is just why I don't want to tell anybody," she said. "If

three people are in a secret, the chances of it getting out are enormously greater than if only two are. Not that anyone tells it exactly; but the atmosphere gets impregnated with it. You know what happened before. One has to keep the windows open, so to speak, and let in plenty of fresh air, politics, and so on. Other people breathe the secret."

"We can't tackle the man alone," said Alice.

"Why not? A man always hates a scene, because a man is never any good at a scene; and, personally, I rather like them. I am at my best in a scene, dear; I really am ripping."

Again Lady Haslemere had a quite distinct sensation that Kit was keeping something back. She seemed to wish to prove her case against Alington, yet she did not want anybody else to know. It was puzzling why she desired a private handle against the man. Perhaps – Lady Haslemere thought she had an inkling of the truth, and decided to take a shot at it.

"Of course it would be awkward for Jack," she observed negligently, "to be connected in business with this man, if it became known that he knew that Alington had cheated at baccarat."

Kit was off her guard.

"That is just what he feels – what I feel," she said.

She made this barefaced correction with the most silken coolness; she neither hurried nor hesitated, but Lady Haslemere burst out laughing.

"My dear Kit!" she said.

Kit sat silent a moment, and then perfectly naturally she laughed too.

"Oh, Alice," she said, "how sharp you are! Really, dear, if I had been a man and had married you, we should have been King and Queen of England before you could say 'knife.' Indeed, it was very quick of you, because I didn't correct myself at all badly. I was thinking I had carried my point, and so I got careless. Now I'll apologize, dear, and I promise never to try to take you in again, partly because it's no use, and partly because you owe me one. Jack does know, and he, at my request, left me to deal with it as if he didn't. It would be very awkward for him if he knew, so to speak, officially. At present, you see, he has only his suspicions. He could not be certain any more than you or I. As you so sensibly said, dear, we have only suspicions. But now, Alice, let us leave Jack out of it. Don't let him know that you know that he knows. Dear me, how complicated! You see, he would have to break with Alington if he knew."

Lady Haslemere laughed.

"I suppose middle-class people would think us wicked?" she observed.

"Probably; and it would be so middle-class of them," said Kit. "That is the convenient thing about the middle class; they are never anything else. Now, there is no counting on the upper and lower class; at one time we both belong to the criminal class, at another we are both honest labourers. But the middle class preserves a perpetual monopoly of being shocked and thinking

us wicked. And then it puts us in pillories and throws dirt. Such fun it must be, too, because it thinks we mind. So don't let us have a scandal."

Lady Haslemere pursed her pretty mouth up, and blew an excellent smoke-ring. She was a good-humoured woman, and her detection of Kit took the sting out of the other's attempted deception. She was quite pleased with herself.

"Very well, I won't tell him," she said.

"That's a dear!" said Kit cordially; "and you must see that it would do no good to tell anybody else. Jack would have to break with him if it got about, and when a reduced marquis is really wanting to earn his livelihood it is cruel to discourage him. So let's get Alington to play again, and watch him, you and I, like two cats. Then if we see him cheat again, we'll ask him to lunch and tell him so, and make him sign a paper, and stamp it and seal it and swear it, to say he'll never play again, amen."

Lady Haslemere rose.

"The two conspirators swear silence, then," she said. "But how awkward it will be, Kit, if anyone else notices it on this second occasion!"

"Bluff it out!" said Kit. "You and I will deny seeing anything at all, and say the thing is absurd. Then we'll tell this Alington that we know all about it, but that unless he misbehaves or plays again the incident will be clo-o-o-sed!"

"I should be sorry to trust my money to that man," said Alice.

"Oh, there you make a mistake," said Kit. "You are cautious

in the wrong place, and I shouldn't wonder if you joined us Carmelites before long. For some reason he thinks that Conybeare's name is worth having on his 'front page,' as he calls it, and I am convinced he will give him his money's worth. He may even give him more, especially as Jack hasn't got any. He thinks Jack is very sharp, and he is quite right. You are very sharp, too, Alice, and so am I. How pleasant for us all, and how right we are to be friends! Dear me! if you, Jack, and I were enemies, we should soon make London too hot to hold any of us. As it is, the temperature is perfectly charming."

"And is this bounder going to make you and Jack very rich?" asked Lady Haslemere.

"The bounder is going to do his best," laughed Kit; "at least, Jack thinks so. But it would need a very persevering sort of bounder to make us rich for long together. Money is so restless; it is always flying about, and it so seldom flies in my direction."

"It has caught the habit from the world, perhaps," said Alice.

"I dare say. Certainly we are always flying about, and it is so tiresome having to pay ready money at booking-offices. Jack quite forgot the other day when we were going to Sandown, and he told the booking-office man to put it down to him, which he barbarously refused to do."

"How unreasonable, dear!"

"Wasn't it? I'd give a lot to be able to run up a bill with railway companies. Dear me, it's after three! I must fly. There's a bazaar for the prevention of something or the propagation of something

at Knightsbridge, and I am going to support Princess Frederick, who is going to open it, and eat a large tea. How they eat, those people! We are always propagating or preventing, and one can't cancel them against each other, because one wants to propagate exactly those things one wants not to prevent."

"What are you going to propagate to-day?"

"I forget. I believe it is the anti-propagation of prevention in general. Do you go to the Hungarian ball to-night? Yes? We shall meet then. *Au revoir!*"

"You are so full of good works, Kit," said Lady Haslemere, with no touch of regret in her tone.

Kit laughed loudly.

"Yes, isn't it sweet of me?" she said. "Really, bazaars are an excellent policy, as good as honesty. And they tell so much more. If you have been to a bazaar it is put in the papers, whereas they don't put it in the papers if you have been honest. I often have. Bazaars are soon over, too, and you feel afterwards as if you'd earned your ball, just as you feel you've earned your dinner after bicycling."

Kit rustled pleasantly downstairs, leaving Alice in the card-room where they had talked. That lady had as keen a scent for money as Kit herself, and evidently if Kit denied herself the pleasure of causing a scandal over this cheating at baccarat (a piquant subject), she must have a strong reason for doing so. She wanted, so Lady Haslemere reasoned, to have Alington under her very private thumb, not, so she concluded, to get anything

definite out of him, for blackmail was not in Kit's line, but as a precautionary measure. She followed her train of thought with admirable lucidity, and came to the very sensible conclusion that the interest that the Conybeares had in Alington was large. Indeed, taking into consideration the utter want of cash in the Conybeare establishment, it must be immense; for neither of them would have considered anything less than a fair settled income or a very large sum of money worth trying for. This being the case, she wished to have a hand in it, too.

Tom, she knew, had been approached by Mr. Alington and Jack on the subject of his becoming a director, and she determined to persuade him to do so. At present he had not decided. Anyhow, to win money out of mines was fully as respectable as to lose it at cards, and much more profitable. Besides, the daily papers might become interesting if it was a personal matter whether Bonanzas were up or Rands down. Tom had a large interest as it was in Robinsons – whatever they were, and they sounded vulgar but rich – and she had occasionally read the reports of the money market from his financial paper, as an idle person may spell out words in some unknown language. The "ursine operators," "bulls," "flatness," "tightness," "realizations" – how interesting all these terms would become if they applied to one's own money! She had often noticed that the political outlook affected the money market, and during the Fashoda time Tom had been like a bear with a sore head. To know something about politics, to have, as she had, a Conservative leader ready

to whisper to her things that were not officially supposed to be whispered, would evidently be an advantage if you had an interest in prices. And the demon of speculation made his introductory bow to her.

It is difficult for those who dwell on the level lands of sanity to understand the peaks and valleys of mania. To fully estimate the intolerable depression which ensues on the conviction that you have a glass leg, or the secret majesty which accompanies the belief that one is Charles I., is impossible to anyone who does not know the heights and depths to which such creeds conduct the holder. But the mania for speculation – as surely a madness as either of these – is easier of comprehension. Only common-sense of the crudest kind is required; if it is supposed that your country is on the verge of war, and you happen to know for certain that reassuring events will be made public to-morrow, it is a corollary to invest all you can lay hands on in the sunken consols in the certainty of a rise to-morrow. This is as simple as A B C, and your gains are only limited by the amount that you can invest. A step further and you have before you the enchanting plan of not paying for what you buy at all. Buy merely. Consols (of this you must be sure) will rise before next settling-day, and before next settling-day sell. And thus the secret of not taking up shares is yours.

But consols are a slow gamble. They may conceivably rise two points in a day. Instead of your hundred pounds you will have a hundred and two (minus brokerage), an inglorious spoil

for so many shining sovereigns to lead home. But for the sake of those who desire to experience this fascinating form of excitement in less staid a manner there are other means supplied, and the chiefest and choicest is mines. A single mining share which, judiciously bought, cost a sterling sovereign may under advantageous circumstances be worth three or four in a week or two. How much more stirring an adventure! When we estimate this in hundreds and thousands, the prospect will be found to dazzle comparatively sober eyes.

Now, of the people concerned at present in this story, no less than five, as Kit drove to her bazaar, were pondering these simple things. Alington was always pondering them and acting on them; Jack had been pondering them for a full week, Kit for the same period, and Tom Abbotsworthy was on the point of consenting to become a director. And Lady Haslemere, thinking over her interview with Kit, said to herself, with her admirable common-sense, that if there was a cake going, she might as well have a slice. She had immense confidence in the power of both Kit and Jack to take care of themselves, and knew well that neither would have stirred a finger for Mr. Alington, if they had not quite clearly considered it to be worth their while. And Kit was stirring all her fingers; she was taking Alington about as constantly as she took her pocket-handkerchief; she took him not merely to big parties and large Grundy dinners, but to the intimate gatherings of the brightest and best. For she was a good wife to Jack, and she at any rate believed that there was a cake going.

CHAPTER V

TOBY

Lord Evelyn Ronald Anstruther D'Eyncourt Massingbird was not usually known as all or any of this, but as Toby. It would have been a difficult matter, requiring a faith of the most preposterous sort, to have stood in front of him and seriously said, "I believe you to be Lord Evelyn Ronald Anstruther D'Eyncourt Massingbird," and the results of so doing might have been quite disconcerting. But having been told he was Toby, it would have been impossible to forget or to doubt it. The most vivid imagination could not conceive a more obvious Toby; the identity might almost have been guessed by a total stranger or an intelligent foreigner. He was about twenty-four years old (the usual age of Tobys), and he had a pleasantly ugly face, with a snub nose, slightly freckled. Blue eyes, in no way beautiful, but very white as to the white and blue as to the blue, looked honestly out from under a typically unintellectual forehead, above which was a shock head of sandy hair, which stood up like a terrier's coat or a doormat, and on which no brush yet invented had been known to exert a flattening tendency. He was about five foot ten in height, and broad for that. His hat had a tendency to tilt towards the back of his head, and he had big, firm hands, callous on their insides with the constant use of weapons made for the violent propulsion of balls. He always looked comfortable in his

clothes, and whether he was adorning the streets of London, immaculately dressed and hot and large, or trudging through heather in homespun, he was never anything but Toby.

A further incredible fact about him, in addition to his impossible baptismal name, was that he was Jack Conybeare's younger brother, and Kit's brother-in-law. Nature, that exquisite humorist who turns so many dissimilar little figures out of the same moulds, had never shown herself a more imaginative artist than when she ordained that Jack and Toby should have the same father and mother. The more you considered their relationship, the stranger that relationship appeared. Jack, slim, aquiline, dark, with his fine, taper-fingered hands and the unmistakable marks of breeding in face and form, was sufficiently remote to all appearance from Toby – fair, snub-nosed, squat, with his big gloves and his big boots, and his chair-filling build; but in character they were, considered as brothers, perfectly irreconcilable. The elder had what we may call a spider-mind. It wove a thread invisible almost to the eye, but strong enough to bear the weight of what it was meant to bear. Obvious issues, the natural consequences of things, Jack passed by in the manner of an express rushing through a wayside station, and before Toby, to continue the metaphor, had drawn up, flushed and panting, at the platform, and read the name on the station board, Jack would be a gray streamer of smoke on the horizon. But Toby's grasp of the obvious was as sure as Jack's keen appreciation of subtleties, and though he made no dragon-fly dartings through the air, nor

vanished unaware on horizon points, he went very steadily along, right in the middle of the road, and was never in any danger of falling into obvious ditches, or colliding with anyone who did not unquestionably get in his way, or where he might be expected to go.

Toby was a person who got continually slapped on the back – a lovable habit, but one which no amount of diplomacy or thread-spinning will produce. To slap Jack on the back, for instance, must always, from his earliest years, have been an impossibility. This was lucky, for he would have resented it. That nobody ever quarrelled with either of them appears at first sight a point in common; in reality it illustrates their dissimilarity. It was dangerous to quarrel with Jack; it was blankly impossible to quarrel with Toby. You dare not try it with the one; it was useless to try it with the other.

At the present moment his sister-in-law was trying her utmost to do so, and failing pitifully. Kit was not accustomed to fail or to be pitiable, and it irritated her.

"You have no sense, Toby," she was saying. "You cannot see, or you will not, where your interest lies – yes, and your duty, too."

Now, when Kit talked about duty Toby always smiled. When he smiled his eyes wrinkled up till they closed, and he showed a row of strong, clean, useful teeth. Strength, cleanliness, and utility, in fact, were his most salient features.

Kit leaned back in her chair, waiting for his answer, for Toby got confused unless you gave him time. They were sitting in the

tented balcony of the Hungarian Embassy, and from within came the rhythm of dance music and a delicious murmur of voices. It was the evening of the day of the bazaar, and Kit felt that she had earned her ball. The night was hot, and as she attempted the hopeless task of quarrelling with Toby she fanned herself, partly, no doubt, for the sake of the current of air, but to a psychologist, judging by her face, not without the intention of fanning the embers of her wrath. She had sat out this dance with him on purpose, and she was beginning to think that she was wasting her time.

Toby's smile broadened.

"When did you last do your duty, Kit?" he asked.

"My duty?" said Kit sharply. "We are talking about yours."

"And my duty is – "

"Not to go to that vulgar, stupid music-hall to-morrow night with that loutish friend of yours from Oxford, but to dine with us, and meet Miss Murchison. You seem to forget that Jack is your elder brother."

"My duty towards Jack – " began Toby irreverently.

"Don't be profane. You are Jack's only brother, and I tell you plainly that it is no fun being Lord Conybeare unless you have something to be Lord Conybeare with. Putting money into the estate," said Kit rather unwisely, "is like throwing it down a well."

Toby became thoughtful, and his eyes opened again. His mind worked slowly, but it soon occurred to him that he had never heard that his brother was famed for putting money into the

estate.

"And taking money out of the estate is like taking it out of a well," he remarked at length, with an air of a person who is sure of his facts, but does not mean to draw inferences of any kind whatever.

Kit stared at him a moment. It had happened once or twice before that she had suspected Toby of dark sayings, and this sounded remarkably like another of them. He was so sensible that sometimes he was not at all stupid. She made a mental note of how admirable a thing is a perfectly impenetrable manner if you wish to make an innuendo; there was nothing so telling.

"Well?" she said at length.

Toby's face expressed nothing whatever. He took off a large eight and lit a cigarette.

"That's all," he said – "nothing more."

Kit decided to pass on.

"It's all very well for you now," she said, "for you have six or seven hundred a year, and you happen to like nothing so much as hitting round balls with pieces of wood and iron. It is an inexpensive taste, and you are lucky to find it amusing. In your position at present you have no calls upon you and no barrack of a house to keep up. But when you are Lord Conybeare you will find how different it is. Besides, you must marry some time, and when you marry you must marry money. Old bachelors are more absurd, if possible, than old spinsters. And goodness knows how ridiculous they are!"

"My sister-in-law is a mercenary woman," remarked Toby. "And aren't we getting on rather quick?"

"Quick!" screamed Kit. "I am painfully trying to drag you a few steps forward, and you say we are getting on quick! Now, Toby, you are twenty-five – "

"Four," said Toby.

"Oh, Toby, you are enough to madden Job! What difference does that make? I choose that you should be twenty-five! All your people marry early; they always did; and it is a most proper thing for a young man to do. Really, young men are getting quite impossible. They won't dance – you aren't dancing; they won't marry – you aren't married; they spend all their lazy, selfish lives in amusing themselves and – and ruining other people."

"It's better to amuse yourself than not to amuse yourself," said Toby. This, as he knew, was a safe draw. If Kit was at home, out she came.

"That is your view. Thank goodness there are other views," said Kit, with extraordinary energy. "Why, for instance, do you suppose that I went down to the wilds of Kensington and opened a bazaar, as I did this afternoon?"

"I can't think," said Toby. "Wasn't it awfully slow?"

He began to grin again.

"Slow? Yes, of course it was slow; but it is one's duty not to mind what is slow," continued Kit rapidly, pumping up moral sentiments with surprising fluency. "Why do you suppose Jack goes to the House whenever there is a Church Bill on? Why do

"I come and argue with you and quarrel with you like this?"

Toby opened his blue eyes as wide as Kit's bazaar.

"Are you quarrelling with me?" he asked. "I didn't know. Try not, Kit."

Kit laughed.

"Dear Toby, don't be so odious and tiresome," she said. "Do be nice. You can behave so nicely if you like, and the Princess was saying at the bazaar this afternoon what a dear boy you were."

"So the bazaar wasn't so slow," thought Toby, who knew that Kit had a decided weakness, quite unaccountable, for Princesses. But he was wise enough to say nothing.

"And I've taken all the trouble to ask Miss Murchison to dinner just because of you," continued Kit quickly, seeing her partner out of the corner of her eye careering wildly about in search of her. "She's perfectly charming, Toby, and very pretty, and you always like talking to pretty girls, and quite right, too; and the millions – oh, the millions! You have no one to look after you but Jack and me, and Jack is a City man now; and what will happen to the Conybeares if you don't marry money I don't know. You want money; she wants a Marquis. There it is!"

"Did you ask her?" said Toby parenthetically.

"No, darling, I did not," said Kit, with pardonable asperity. "I left that to you."

Toby sighed.

"You go so quick, Kit," he said. "You marry me to a person

I've never yet seen."

Kit drew on her gloves; the partner was imminent.

"Come and see her, Toby – come and see her. That is all I ask. Oh, here you are, Ted; I've been waiting for you for ages. I thought you had thrown me over. Good-bye, Toby; to-morrow at half-past eight, and I'll promise to order iced asparagus, which I know you like."

The two went off, leaving Toby alone. Conversation of this kind with Kit always reduced him to a state of breathless mental collapse. She caught him up, so to speak, and whirled him along through endless seas of prospective alliances, to drop him at the end, a mere lifeless lump, in unknown localities, with the prospect of iced asparagus as a restorative. This question of his marriage was not a new one between them. Many times before Kit had snatched him up like this, and plumped him down in front of some extraordinarily eligible maiden. But either he or the extraordinarily eligible maiden, or both, had walked away as soon as Kit's eye was turned, and made themselves disconcerting to her schemes. But to-night Kit had shown an unusual vigour and directness. Selfish and unscrupulous as she was, she had, like everybody else, a soft spot for Toby, and she could honestly think of nothing more conducive to his highest advantage than to procure him a wealthy wife. Wealth was the *sine quâ non* – no other need apply; but in Miss Murchison she thought she had found very much more. The girl was a beauty – a real beauty; and though she was not of the type that appealed personally to Kit,

she might easily appeal immensely to Toby. She had only come out that season, and Kit had met her but once or twice before; but a very much duller eye than Kit's could have seen that in all probability she would not be on view in the eligible department very long. She was American by origin, but had been brought up entirely in England; and her countrymen observed with pain, and the men of her adopted country with that patronizing approval over which our Continental neighbours find it so hard to keep calm, that no one would have guessed her nationality. Of her father little was known, but that little was good, for he was understood to be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, having made a colossal pile in some porky or oily manner, and to have had the good taste not to beget any other children. She and her mother had been at the bazaar that afternoon, where they had run across the pervasive Kit, who suddenly saw in her impulsive way that here at last was the very girl for Toby, wondered at her blindness in not seeing it before, and engaged them to dine next evening.

Now, Mrs. Murchison had long sighed and pined for an invitation from Kit, whom she considered to be the topmost flower of the smartest plant in the pleasant garden of society. At last her wish was fulfilled. Princes had drunk her champagne, and danced or sat out to her fiddles, and made themselves agreeable under her palms; but a small and particular set in society in which Kit most intimately moved had hitherto had nothing to say to her, and she accepted the invitation with

effusion, though it meant an excuse or a subterfuge to a Countess. But Mrs. Murchison had picked up the line of London life with astonishing swiftness and great perspicuity. Her object was to get herself and her daughter, not into the cleverest or the most amusing, or, as she styled it, the "ducalest set," in London, but into what she and others, for want of a better name, called "the smart set," and she had observed, at first with surprise and pain, but unerringly, that rank counted for nothing there. She could not have told you, nor perhaps could they, what did count there, but she knew very well it was not rank.

"Why, we might play kiss-in-the-ring with the Queen and Royal Family," she had observed once to her daughter, "but we should be no nearer for that."

A year ago she would have hoarded a Countess as being a step in the ladder she proposed to get to the top of, but now she knew that no Countess, *quâ* Countess, mattered a straw in the attainment of the goal for which she aimed; and this particular one, whom she had already thrown over for Kit, might as well have been a milkmaid in Connecticut for all the assistance she could give her in her quest. The smart set was the smart set, here was her creed; Americans had got there before, and Americans, she fully determined, should get there again. What she expected to find there she did not know; whether it would be at all worth the pains she did not care, and she would not be at all disappointed if it was exactly like everything else, or perhaps duller. It would be sufficient for her to be there.

In many ways Mrs. Murchison was a remarkable woman, and she had a kind and excellent heart. She had been the very pretty daughter of a man who had made a fair fortune in commerce, and had let his children grow up and get educated as God pleased; but from very early years this daughter of his had made up her mind that she was not going to revolve for the remainder of her life in commercial circles, and she had divided her money fairly evenly between adornments for the body and improvements for the mind. Thus she had acquired a great fluency in French, and an accent as remarkable as it was incorrect. In the same way she had read a great deal of history, and the classical literature of both English tongues; and though she seldom managed to get her names quite right, both she and those who heard her were easily able to guess to whom she referred. Thus, when she alluded to Richard Dent de Lion, though the name sounded like a yellow flower with a milky stem, there could be no reasonable doubt that she was speaking of the Crusader; or when she told you that her husband was as rich as Crœsum, those who had ever heard of Crœsus could not fail to see that they were hearing of him now. She was fond of allusions, and her conversation was as full of plums as a cake; but as she held the sensible and irrefutable view that conversation is but a means of making oneself understood, she was quite satisfied to do so.

Mrs. Murchison was now a big handsome woman of about forty, fresh, of high colour, and beautifully dressed. In spite of her manifest absurdities and the surprising nature of her

conversation, she was eminently likeable, and to her friends lovable. There was no mistaking the honesty and kindness of her nature; she was a good woman, and in ways a wise one. Lily, her daughter, who found herself on the verge of hysterics twenty times a day at her inimitable remarks, had the intensest affection for her mother, blindly reciprocated; and the daughter, to whom the wild chase after the smart set seemed perfectly incomprehensible, was willing that all the world should think her heart was in it sooner than that her mother should suspect it was not. Mrs. Murchison herself had begun to forget her French and history a little, for she was a mere slave to this new accomplishment, social success, and found it demanded all her time and attention. She worked at it from morning till night, and from night to morning she dreamed about it. Only the night before she had thought with extraordinary vividness in her sleep that her maid had come to her bedside with a note containing a royal command to sing duets with the Queen quite quietly at 11.30 that morning, and she had awoke with a pang of rapturous anxiety to find the vision unsubstantial, and that she need not get up to practise her scales. She made no secret of her ambitions, but rather paraded them, and told her dream to the Princess Frederick at the bazaar with huge *naïveté*. And to see Lily married into the smart set would have caused her to say her *Nunc Dimittis* with a sober and grateful heart.

But the smart set was a terribly baffling Will-o'-the-Wisp kind of affair, or so it had hitherto been to her. A married daughter,

an unmarried daughter even, so she observed, might be steeped in the smart set, while the mother was, figuratively speaking, in Bloomsbury. You might robe yourself from head to foot in Balas rubies, you might be a double Duchess, you might dance a cancan down Piccadilly, you might be the most amiable of God's creatures, the wittiest, the most corrupt, or the most correct of the daughters of Eve, and yet never get near it; but here was Mrs. Lancelot Gordon, who never did anything, was not even an Honourable, dressed rather worse than Mrs. Murchison's own maid, and yet was a pivot and centre of that charmed circle. Mrs. Murchison racked her brain over the problem, and came to the conclusion that no accomplishment could get you into it, no vice or virtue keep you out. That was a comfort, for she had no vices. But to-day Kit had asked her to dinner; the mystic doors perhaps were beginning to turn on their hinges, and her discarded Countess might continue to revolve on her unilluminated orbit in decent and dull obscurity with her belted Earl.

CHAPTER VI

TOBY'S PARTNER

Toby finished his cigarette when Kit left him, and threw the end over the balcony into the street. It went flirting through the air like a small firework, and he saw it pitch on the shoulder of an immense policeman below, who looked angrily round. And so it was that the discreet Toby withdrew softly into the ballroom.

It was only a little after one, and the dancing was at its height. Everyone who intended to come had done so, and no one yet had thought of going away. From the band in the gallery came the enchanting lilt of the dance music, with its graceful stress and abatement, making it impossible not to dance. The light-hearted intoxication of rhythmic movement entering into the souls of many women whom one would naturally have supposed to have left their dancing days behind them, for reasons over which they had no control, had produced the same sort of effect in them as a warm November day does in the bluebottles who have outlived the summer, and they were deluding themselves into thinking that "June was not over, though past her full." The ballroom was ideally occupied; it was peopled enough, but not overcrowded, and like a whisper underneath the shouting band you could hear the sibilant rustle of skirts, and the "sip-sip" of shoes over the well-polished floor.

Kit and her partner were as well matched and graceful a pair

as could be found in London – too well matched, the world said; but the world is never happy unless it is saying something of the sort, and the wiser there, among whom even her bitterest friends put Kit, are accustomed to discount all that is said. To repeat fresh gossip without actually believing or disbelieving it, and to hear it in the same light-hearted spirit makes the world as fresh as a daily paper to someone just arrived from long sea, and Kit's interest in what was said about her was of the most breezily superficial sort. She never intended that it should be ever so distantly possible that she should compromise herself, for she recognised with humble thankfulness how hard she was to compromise. She had done many risky things in her life, and there was safety in their very numbers. People would only say that her conduct with So-and-so had been much riskier, and yet it had come to nothing. Probably, then, this intimacy with Lord Comber was equally innocent. Other people had merely looked over hedges and been accused of stealing horses, while Kit, so to speak, had been found before now with the stolen halter in her hand; and yet her excellent grace in giving it up at the proper moment to the proper owner had got her out of what might have been a scrape to a less accomplished adventurer.

And to-night nobody talked more disagreeably than they had talked scores of times before. Up to a certain point repetition is the soul of wit; at least, the point of a joke grows by dwelling on it, but the repetition in excess is wearisome, and to-night people scarcely said more than what a beautiful couple they were.

About this there could scarcely be two opinions. Kit was very tall and slenderly made, and there was a boyish spring and grace about her dancing which gave a peculiar spontaneousness to this pretty performance. Ted Comber, a fresh-faced, handsome youth, had no extra weight on his hands; the two moved with an exquisite unanimity of motion. Amiable indiscretions and a course of life not indicated in the educational curriculum had led the authorities both at Eton and Christ Church to make their parting with him take place sooner than he had himself intended, but, as Kit said in her best manner, "He was only a boy then." He was in years not much more than a boy now; in appearance, especially by artificial light, he was a boy still, and the two numbered scarcely more than fifty years between them.

But balls are not given in order to furnish a hunting-ground for the novelist and reformer, and to-night there were few such present. Indeed, anyone must have had a soul of putty not to have laid criticism aside; not to have forgotten all that had been said before, and all that might be said afterwards, in the enchanting moment. This dance had been on the board some ten minutes when Toby entered; people with winds and what is known, by an elegant periphrasis, as a superfluity of adipose tissue had paused; and for a few minutes there were not more than half a dozen couples on the floor. Kit, secure in the knowledge that no one present except herself and Jack had been to that City dinner a fortnight before, had put on again the same orange chiffon creation as she had worn that night, and she blazed out against the

man's dark clothes; she was a flame in his encircling arm. The room was nearly square, and they danced not in straight lines up, across and down, but in one big circle, coming close to the walls only at four points in the middle of the sides of the room; like some beautiful twin star they moved round a centre, revolving also on a private axis of their own. Indeed, the sight of them whirling fast and smoothly in perfect time to the delicious rhythm was so pretty that no one thought of alluding to their private axis at all. Even the Hungarian Ambassador, as sprightly a young man of eighty or thereabouts as you could wish to see, and still accustomed to lead the cotillion, recognised the superiority of the performance. "Decidedly all the rest of us cut a poor figure when those two are dancing," he said with unwonted modesty to Lady Haslemere.

But in a few minutes the room grew crowded again. Recovered couples sprang up like mushrooms on the floor, and the pace slowed. Lord Comber steered as no one else could steer, but checks infinitesimal but infinite could not but occur. It would have been good enough had it not just now been better.

"We'll wait a moment, Ted," said Kit; "perhaps at the end it will be emptier again."

She stopped opposite one of the doors.

"Shall we go on to the balcony?" he asked. "There will be no one there."

"Yes. Oh, there is Mrs. Murchison! Take me to her. I'll follow you in a moment."

Ted swore gently under his breath.

"Oh, leave the Cræsum alone," he said. "Do come now, Kit. This is my last dance with you this evening."

But Kit dropped his arm.

"Fetch Toby," she said under her voice to Lord Comber, "fetch, you understand, and at once. He is over there." Then, without a pause, "So we meet again," she said to Mrs. Murchison. "You were right and I was wrong, for I said, do you remember, that the one way not to meet a person was to go to the same dance. And did you get all those great purchases of yours home safely? You were quite too charitable! What will you do with a hundred and forty fire-screens? – or was it a hundred and forty-one? Miss Murchison, what magnificent pearls you have! They are too beautiful! Now, if I wore pearls like yours, people would say they were not real, and they would be perfectly right."

Miss Murchison was what Kit would have called at first sight an uncomfortable sort of a girl, very pretty, beautiful indeed, but uncomfortable. What she should have said to Kit's praise of her pearls Kit could not have told you, but having made yourself agreeable to anyone, it is that person's business to reply in the same strain. Else, what happens to social and festive meetings? But Miss Murchison looked neither gratified nor embarrassed. Either would have shown a proper spirit.

"They are good," she said shortly.

Kit kept a weather eye open for Toby. She could see him near, and yet far, for the room was full, being reluctantly "fetched"

by Lord Comber, who appeared to be expostulating with him. There were still some seconds to elapse before he could get to them, but Kit had determined to introduce him then and there to Miss Murchison. Perhaps her beauty would be more effective than her own arguments.

"It is only quite a little dinner to-morrow," she said to Mrs. Murchison, in order to fill up the time naturally. "You will have to take a sort of pot-luck with us. A kind of 'no fish-knife' dinner."

Better and better. This was a promising beginning to the intimacy Mrs. Murchison craved. It was nothing, she said to herself, to be asked to a big dinner; the pot-luck dinner was far more to her taste.

"Well, I think that's perfectly charming of you, Lady Conybeare," she said. "If there's one thing I am *folle* about, it's those quiet little dinners, and one gets so little of them. Be it ever so humble, there's nothing like dining quietly with your friends."

Kit's face dimpled with merriment.

"That's so sweet of you," she said. "Oh, here's Toby. Toby, let me introduce you to Mrs. Murchison. Oh, what's your name? – I always forget. It begins with Evelyn. Anyhow, he is Conybeare's brother, you know, Mrs. Murchison."

Mrs. Murchison did not know, but she was very happy to do so. Also the informality was charming. But her happiness had a momentary eclipse. She knew that a man was introduced to a woman, and not the other way about, but might not some other rule hold when the case was between a plain miss and the brother

of a Marquis? English precedence seemed to her a fearful and wonderful thing. But Kit relieved her of her difficulty.

"And Miss Murchison, Toby," she said. "Charmed to have seen you again. Till 8.30 to-morrow;" and she smiled and retreated with Ted.

Blushing honours were raining thick on the enchanted lady. "One thing leads to another," she said to herself, and here was the brother of Lord Conybeare endorsing the happy meeting of this afternoon.

Then aloud:

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance," she said, for the phrase was ineradicable. She had searched in vain for a cisatlantic equivalent, but could not get hold of one. Like the snake in spring, she had cast off the slough of many of her transatlanticisms, but "very pleased" was deeply engrained, and appeared involuntarily and inevitably.

But Toby's inflammable eye had caught the *filia pulchrior*.

"My sister-in-law tells me you are dining with her to-morrow," he said genially. "That is delightful."

He paused a moment, and racked his brain for another suitable remark; but, finding none, he turned abruptly to Miss Murchison.

"May I have the pleasure?" he asked. "We shall just have time for a turn before this is over."

"Of course you may, Lord Evelyn," said her mother precipitately.

Miss Murchison paused for a moment without replying, and

Toby, though naturally modest, told himself that her mother's ready acceptance for her justified the pause.

"Delighted," she said.

Toby might be described as a good, useful dancer, but no more. People who persist in describing one thing in terms suitable to another speak of the poetry and the melody of motion, and the dancing Toby had no more poetry or melody in his motion than a motor car or a street piano. The tide of couples, as inexplicable in its ebb and flow as deep sea-currents, had gone down again, and they had a fairly free floor. But before they had made the circuit of the room twice Kit and Lord Comber reappeared, and Kit heaved a thankful sister-in-law's sigh.

"Toby is dancing with the Murchison girl," she said; "and she hardly ever dances. Now – "

And they glided off on to the floor.

"A design of yours?" asked Ted.

"Yes, all my own. *Ego fecit*, as Mrs. Murchison says. She has millions. If Jack were dead and I was a man, I should try to marry her myself. Simply millions, Ted. Don't you wish you had?"

"Certainly; but I am very content dancing with you. I prefer it."

"That is silly," said Kit. "No sane man really prefers dancing with – with anyone, to having millions."

"Why try the cynical *rôle*? Do you really believe that, Kit?"

"Yes, and I hate compliments. Compliments should always be insincere, and I'm sure you mean what you say. If they are sincere

they are unnecessary. Oh, it's stopping. What a bore! Six bars more. Quicker – quicker!"

The coda gathered up the dreamy threads of the valse into a vivid ever-quickenning pattern of sound, and came to an end with a great blare. The industrious and heated Toby wiped his forehead.

"That was delicious," he said. "Won't you have an ice or something, Miss Murchison? I say, it is sw – stewing hot, isn't it?"

Lily took his arm.

"Yes, do give me an ice," she said. "Who is that dancing with Lady Conybeare?"

Toby looked round.

"I don't see them," he said. "But I expect it's Ted Comber. Kit usually dances with him. They are supposed to be the best dancers in London. Oh yes, I see them. It is Comber."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, in the sort of way one knows fifty thousand people. We always say 'Hulloa' to each other, and then we've finished, don't you know."

"You don't like him, apparently."

"I particularly dislike him," said Toby, in a voice that was cheerful and had the real ring of sincerity.

"Why?"

"Don't know. He doesn't do any of the things he ought. He doesn't shoot, or ride, or play games. He stays at country houses, you see, and sits with the women in the drawing-room, or walks

with them, and bicycles with them in the afternoon. Not my sort."

Lily glanced at his ugly, pleasant face.

"I quite agree with you," she said. "I hate men to sit on chairs and look beautiful. He was introduced to me just now, though I did not catch his name, and I felt he knew what my dress was made of, and how it was made, and what it cost."

"Oh, he knows all that sort of thing," said Toby. "You should hear him and Kit talking chiffon together. And you dislike that sort of inspection?"

"Intensely. But most women apparently don't."

"No: isn't it funny! So many women don't seem to know a man when they see him. Certainly Comber is very popular with them. But a man ought to be liked by men."

Miss Murchison smiled. Toby had got two ices and was sitting opposite her, devouring his in large mouthfuls, as if it had been porridge. She had been brought up in the country and the open air, among horses and dogs, and other nice wholesome things, and this mode of life in London, as she saw it, under her mother's marchings and manœuvres to storm the smart set, seemed to her at times to be little short of insane. If you were not putting on a dress, you were taking it off, and all this simply to sit on a chair in the Park, to say half a dozen words to half a dozen people, to lunch at one house, to dine at another, and dance at a third. All that was only incidental in life seemed to her to be turned into its business; everything was topsy-turvy. She understood well enough that if you lived in the midst of your best friends, it would

be delightful to see them there three times a day, in these pretty well-dressed settings, but to go to a house simply in order to have been there was inexplicable. Mrs. Murchison had given a ball only a few weeks before at her house in Grosvenor Square, about which even after the lapse of days people had scarcely ceased talking. Royalty had been there, and Mrs. Murchison, in the true republican spirit, had entertained them royally. Her cotillion presents had been really marvellous; there had been so many flowers that it was scarcely possible to breathe, and so many people that it was quite impossible to dance. But as success to Mrs. Murchison's and many other minds was measured by your crowd and your extravagance, she had been ecstatically satisfied, and had sent across to her husband several elegantly written accounts of the festivity clipped from society papers. The evening had been to her, as it were, a sort of signed certificate of her social standing. But to Lily the ball had been more nearly a nightmare than a certificate: neither she nor her mother knew by sight half the people who came, and certainly half the people who came did not know them by sight. The whole thing seemed to her vulgar, wickedly wasteful, and totally unenjoyable.

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