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Содержание

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Chapter One.
Auntie and her Darling

"Don't eat too much marmalade, Sydney dear. It may make you bilious."

"Oh, no, auntie dear, I'll be careful."

"You have a great deal of butter on your bread, dear?"

"Yes, auntie; that's the beauty of it Miller says – "

"Who is Miller, Syd dear?"

"Our chemistry chap at Loamborough. He shows us how when you mix acids and alkalis together they form new combinations which go off in gas."

"Indeed, dear! Your studies must be very interesting."

"Oh, they are, auntie – awfly. That's how it is with the marmalade and the fresh butter – this is real fresh butter, isn't it?"

"Of course, dear. Whatever did you think it was?"

"Dab, aunt dear. Margarine. That wouldn't do, of course; but the marmalade's nearly all sugar – that's carbon – and the butters all carbon, too; and then there's a lot of acid in the oranges, and it all combines, and one kills the other and does you good. It never

hurts me. Shall I give you some game pie, auntie?"

"Thank you, no, my dear, but you may pass me the dry toast. Thanks. Pass your cup, my child."

Sydney Smithers, who, to use his own term, had been "going in" deeply for the marmalade, went backwards in his arrangement of the breakfast comestibles, and helped himself liberally to the game pie, especially the gelatinous portion, glancing once at the pale, handsome, sedate-looking lady presiding at the head of the table ready to meet his eyes and bestow a smile upon the dear child, her nephew, who made the Denes his home, when he was not at Loamborough spending his last terms before commencing a college career.

"Such a dear, sweet boy," Lady Lisle often said to herself, as she beamed upon him blandly with thirty-five-year-old eyes, and idolised him, as she had no children of her own, and he was her own special training.

"At it again," said the boy to himself, as he glanced at the lady furtively; "more letters. Lady doctors, lady barristers. Blest if I don't think she means to go in for a lady parson! More meetings to go to, auntie dear?" he said aloud.

"Yes, my darling," replied the lady, with a sigh and another affectionate beam upon the plump-looking darling intent upon the game pie. "The calls made upon my time are rather heavy. By and by, when you have grown up, I hope you will be able to help me."

"Why, of course I will, auntie. Didn't I want to write that

answer for you yesterday?"

"Um – er – yes, my dear; but we must wait a little first. Your writing is not quite what I should like to see."

"No, auntie; it is a bit shaky yet. We don't go in for writing much at Loamborough; we leave that to the Board School cads."

"And I should like you to be a little more careful over your spelling."

"Oh, Mullins, M.A., says that'll all come right, auntie, when we've quite done with our classics."

"I hope so, my darling, and then you shall be my private secretary. I did hope at one time that I should win over your uncle to a love for my pursuits. But alas!"

"Don't seem in uncle's way much, auntie, but he means right, uncle does. You wait till he's in the House – he'll make some of 'em sit up."

"I hope not, my dear child. I rather trust to his brother members leading him into a better way."

"Ah, I don't think you ought to expect that, auntie," said the "dear boy," using his serviette to remove the high-water mark of coffee from an incipient moustache. "They go in for all-night sittings, you know."

"Yes, my dear, but only on emergencies, and for their country's good."

"Walker!" said the "dear boy," softly.

"I used to think at one time that I should be able to wean him from his bad habit of lying in bed so late. If he would only follow

your example of getting up early enough for a long walk or ride before breakfast!"

"Nicest part of the day, auntie."

"Yes, my dear."

Lady Lisle sighed, and went on eating crumblets of dry toast and sipping her tea, as she opened and examined a pile of letters, many of which had a very charitable-institution-like look about them; and Sydney Smithers, her nephew, toiled pleasantly on at taking in stores, till his aunt sighed, glanced at the door, then at the clock, and then at her nephew.

"Have you finished, Syd, my dear?"

"Yes, auntie, quite."

"Ha!" sighed the lady, gathering up her letters, the boy springing up to assist her in carrying them to the side-table in the embayed window of the handsome room. "You will, I know, take advantage of your being with us, my dear, to avoid those of your poor dear uncle's habits which your own good sense will teach you are not right."

"Oh, of course, auntie dear."

"And to follow those which are estimable."

"To be sure, auntie dear."

"For your uncle is at heart a noble and generous gentleman."

"Regular brick in some things, auntie," said the "dear boy," and Lady Lisle winced.

"Try not to make use of more of those scholastic words, Syd dear, than you can help."

"All right, auntie, I won't; but brick is right enough. Mullins, M.A., says it's so suggestive of solidity and square firmness."

"Yes, my dear, of course, and I wish you to be firm; but, above all, be a gentleman, and – er – careful in your selection of your friends."

"Oh, yes, auntie; I am."

"You see, my dear, it is our misfortune that the Denes is situated here."

"But, auntie, it's a jolly place."

"Yes, my dear; but it was quite a wreck from neglect till your uncle married me, and he – er – we restored the place – his ancestral home – to what it is."

"You did it up beautifully, auntie."

"Well, I hope I did, my dear child, but I have often regretted the money that was spent over a place situated as it is."

"Situated, auntie? Why, it's lovely."

"Lovely by nature, my dear, but tainted and made ugly by the surroundings of the society which affects the district."

"Is it, auntie?"

"Yes, my dear. I never could understand why it should be selected by those dreadful people for their sports and pastimes."

"You mean the racing, auntie?"

"Yes, my dear" – with a shudder. "Tilborough has become a den of infamy – a place which attracts, so many times a year, all the ruffiandom of London, to leave its trail behind. The late Lord Tilborough used to encourage it with his stablings and

horses, and – yes, it's a great pity: the sweet innocency of the neighbourhood is destroyed."

"Yes, auntie."

"Of course, Lady Tilborough calls occasionally, and I am compelled to be civil to her; but I wish you to avoid all communication with her and her friends as much as possible."

"Oh, I never see her, auntie, except when she's driving. I've met her sometimes when I've been out with uncle."

Lady Lisle winced. "Not lately, Sydney dear?" she said after a pause.

"Not very lately, auntie. Last time it was when Dr Granton – "

"That person who comes and stays at Tilborough?"

"Yes, auntie; uncle's old friend."

Lady Lisle winced again.

"He's an awfully jolly chap. You like him, auntie?"

"No, my child, I do not. Your uncle's old friends of his bachelor days belong to quite a different world from mine."

"But he's a clever doctor, auntie. Done uncle no end of good. Proper sort of chap to know."

"How can you judge as to that, my dear?" said the lady, sternly.

"Well, you see, auntie, one does get a bit queer sometimes. I had such a headache the other day when he called to see uncle, and he laughed at me, and took me over to the hotel and gave me a dose of stuff that cured it in half an hour."

"Sydney, my dear, I beg that you will never go to that hotel

again. Avoid Tilborough as much as you would any other evil place. The next time you have a headache either go and see Dr Linnett or come to me, and I will give you something out of the medicine-chest. Dr Granton cannot be an experienced practitioner."

"Why, they say, auntie, he's wonderfully clever over accidents in the hunting field."

"Yes, in the hunting field," said the lady, sarcastically; "but a medical man's practice should be at home, and in his own neighbourhood. A man who attends grooms at racing stables is to my mind more of what is, I believe, called a veter – "

"That's right, auntie – a vet."

"Than a family practitioner," continued the lady, sternly; "and it is a source of great trouble to me that your uncle does not give up his society. I desire that you avoid him."

"All right, auntie; I will."

"Always bear in mind, my dear, that it is easier to make acquaintances than to end them."

"Yes, auntie; I found that out in Loamborough. Some of the fellows will stick to you."

"Say adhere, my child."

"Yes, auntie."

"Always bear in mind what a great future you have before you. Some day – I sincerely hope that day is far distant – your dear grandfather must pass away, and then think of your future and the position you must hold. A title and a princely income."

"Oh, yes; I often think of it all, auntie. I say, though, I wish the chaps wouldn't be quite so fond of chaffing a fellow about the old guv'nor buying his title."

"He did not buy it, Sydney, my dear," said Lady Lisle, with a faint colour coming into her cheeks.

"Didn't he, auntie? They say so."

"The truth of the matter is, my dear, that the party – "

"Good old party!" said the "dear boy" to himself.

"The party was pressed for money to carry on the Parliamentary warfare, and, with your dear grandpapa's noble generosity, he placed his purse at the party's disposal."

"Keeps it pretty close when I want a few dibs," said the "dear boy" to himself.

"And the baronetcy was the very least return that the retiring Prime Minister could make him."

"Oh, that's it, is it, auntie?"

"Yes, my dear," said the lady, laying down one of her secretarial appeals she had that morning received from the enterprising dun of the Society for the Propagation of Moral Maxims. "Yes," she said, with some show of animation, "the title was honourably earned and bestowed, and some day, Syd, my dear boy, you will be very proud of it. New? Yes, of course it is new."

"And it'll grow old, won't it, auntie?"

"Of course, my dear. And the Lisles, your dear uncle's people, need not be so proud of their old family title. The Lisle, your

uncle's ancestor, was only a wealthy country gentleman, who bought his baronetcy of King James the First."

"For a thousand quid, auntie?"

"A thousand *pounds*, my dear," said the lady, looking at him wonderingly.

"Yes, auntie; but he was a gentleman."

"And so is your grandfather, Sydney, my child," said the lady, rather austerely.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said the "dear boy," rather sulkily. "The fellows at Loamborough are always chucking the 'Devil' in my face."

"Syd!"

"They do, auntie – it's the machine that tears up the old shreds at the mills – and saying grandpa ought to have been made Baron Shoddy."

"My dear Syd!"

"And do you know what they call me?"

"No, no; and I don't want to know, sir."

"Young Devil's Dust," snarled the boy.

"Indeed!" said the lady, indignantly. "Loamborough was selected for your education because the pupils were supposed to be young gentlemen – aristocrats."

"So they are," grumbled the boy, "and that's the worst of them. Stink with pride."

"From envious poverty, Sydney, my child."

"Oh, yes, they're poor enough, some of 'em, and glad enough

to borrow my tin."

"Of course," said the lady, bitterly. "The Lisles, too, have shown me a good deal of haughtiness, but they were not too proud to see the representative of their family form an alliance with the Smitherses."

"When uncle had been sold up two or three times."

"Don't allude to such matters, Sydney, my child," said the lady, sternly.

"Can't help it," grumbled the boy, sourly, as if his breakfast had not agreed with him, consequent upon his making improper combinations of carbon, acid, and alkali – "it stings a bit. The fellows say uncle wouldn't have married you if it hadn't been for the dibs."

"Sydney, my dear boy, you can afford to look down with contempt upon such evil, envious remarks. Your dear uncle fell deeply in Jove with me, and I with him, and we are extremely happy. The only trouble I have is to combat – er – er – certain little weaknesses of his, and yearnings for the – er – er – the – "

"Turf, auntie. Yes, I know."

"The racing and the gambling into which he had been led by dissolute companions. But enough of this, my dear. I find I am being unconsciously led into details of a very unsavoury nature. Your uncle is now completely weaned from his old pursuits, and happy as a model country gentleman."

The "dear boy" winked solemnly at the bronze bust of a great Parliamentary leader on the chimney-piece, and the lady

continued —

"In a few days he will address his constituents at the head of the poll as member for Deeploamshire."

"What price Watcombe?" said the "dear boy," sharply.

"I do not understand your metaphor, Sydney, my child," said the lady, coldly.

"I mean, suppose Watcombe romps in at the race."

"Race! Oh, my dear boy, pray do not use that word. If you mean suppose his adversary should be at the head, pray dismiss the thought. Your dear uncle must win and take his seat in the House. Some day I shall see his nephew, my dear child, following his example – the second baronet of our family. Think of this, Sydney, and learn to feel proud of descending from one of the manufacturing commercial princes of the Midlands, whose clever ingenuity resulted in the invention of a complicated instrument – "

"Improved devil," said the "dear boy" to himself.

"For tearing up old and waste woollen fragments into fibre and dust."

"Devils dust," said Sydney, silently.

"The former being worked up again into cloth – "

"Shoddy," muttered Sydney.

"And the latter utilised for fertilising the earth and making it return a hundredfold."

"Gammon," said Syd.

"The whole resulting in a colossal fortune."

"Which the old hunks sticks to like wax," said Syd to himself.

"And of which you ought to be very proud, my dear."

"Oh, I am, auntie. But I say, how was it pa and ma went off to Australia?"

"Pray do not revive old troubles, my dear. My brother never agreed with your grandfather. I grieve to say he was very wild, and given to horse-racing. Then he grievously offended your grandfather in the marriage he made clandestinely. Let it rest, my dear boy. Papa behaved very handsomely to John, and gave him ample funds to start a fresh career at the Antipodes, leaving you to my care – to be my own darling boy – to make you a true English gentleman; and I feel that I have done my duty by you."

"Oh, auntie, you are good," said the "dear boy." "I'm sure I try to do what you wish."

"Always, my darling, with a few exceptions. I have found out that."

"What, auntie?" said the "dear boy," changing colour.

"That my darling is a leetle disposed to be vulgar sometimes."

"Ha!" sighed the lad, with a look of relief.

"But he is going to be as good as gold, and grow into a noble gentleman, of whom his country will be proud. There, now we understand each other. Mr Trimmer is late this morning."

"Scissors! How she made me squirm!" muttered the boy, who had risen and walked to the window as if to hide his emotion with the scented white handkerchief he drew from his pocket. "He isn't late, auntie – just his usual time."

"Dear, dear, and your uncle not yet down!"

"Shall I go and rout him out, auntie?"

"No, my dear," said the lady, sternly, "I will speak to him when he comes down."

"Do, auntie. Tell him he loses all the fresh morning air," said the boy, demurely, feeling in the breast-pocket of his jacket the while, and causing a faint crackling sound as of writing-paper, while he noted that the lady was resuming her perusal of the morning's letters.

Just then the breakfast-room door opened and a pretty little dark-eyed parlourmaid entered the room.

"Mr Trimmer is in the libery, my lady."

"Show him in here, Jane," said Lady Lisle, without raising her eyes, "and tell Mark to have the pony-carriage round in half an hour."

"Yes, my lady."

The girl turned to go, her eyes meeting those of the "dear boy," who favoured her with a meaning wink, receiving by way of reply a telegraphic wrinkling up of the skin about a saucy little retroussé nose.

"Little minx," said the "dear boy" to himself.

"Young impudence," said the girl, and she closed the door, to return in a few minutes to show in Mr Trimmer, her ladyship's confidential bailiff and steward of the estate.

Chapter Two.
A Most Trustworthy Person

"Ah, good-morning, Mr Trimmer," said Lady Lisle. "Don't go, Sydney, my dear. It is as well that you should be present. You cannot do better than begin to learn the duties of a person of position – the connection between the owner of property and his, or her, dependants."

"All right, auntie," said Syd, returning, with a quick nod and a keen look, the obsequious bow of the gaunt-looking man in white cravat and pepper-and-salt garb.

"Sit down, Mr Trimmer."

"Thank you, my lady."

The steward drew a chair to the table, and placed a particularly neat bag before him, which he proceeded to open, and brought out a packet of papers neatly docketed and tied up with green silk ferret in quite legal fashion.

"What are those, Mr Trimmer?" said the lady, assuming a gold-framed pince-nez.

"The reports upon the Parliamentary canvass, my lady. Ditto those in connection with the village charities and your donations in town. If your ladyship will glance over them I think you will find them perfectly correct."

"Of course, Mr Trimmer. I will read the latter over at my

leisure."

At that moment the merry notes of a well-blown post-horn were heard, and Lady Lisle started, while Syd ran to the window.

"What is that?"

"I fancy it comes from a coach, my lady, passing the lodge gates."

"Yes, auntie. Drag going over to Tilborough," cried the boy, screwing his head on one side so as to follow the handsome four-in-hand with its well-driven team.

"Tut – tut!" ejaculated Lady Lisle. "These degrading meetings! Come away, Sydney, my dear."

"Yes, auntie," said the boy; and as he was not observed he leant forward, pressed one hand over the other as if taking a shorter hold of double reins, gave his right hand a twist to unwind an imaginary whiplash, followed by a wave something like the throwing of a fly with a rod, and then smiled to himself as he tickled up an imaginary off-leader, ending by holding himself up rigidly.

"That's the way to tool 'em along," he said to himself.

"Is there any fresh news in the village, Mr Trimmer?"

"No, my lady, nothing particular, except – er – a little report about Daniel Smart's daughter."

"Maria, Mr Trimmer. She has not returned?"

"No, my lady."

"Surely she has settled down in her new place?"

The steward coughed, a little hesitating cough.

"Nothing – "

Lady Lisle stopped and glanced at Sydney, who turned away and became very much interested in one of the pictures, but with his ears twitching the while.

"Oh, no, my lady," said the steward, quickly; "only I fear that your ladyship has been imposed upon?"

Syd moved to the mantelpiece and began to examine the mechanism of a magnificent skeleton clock.

"Imposed upon? But the girl has gone to the situation in town?"

"Ahem! No, my lady; the report I hear is that she has gone to fulfil an engagement with some dramatic agent who trains young people for – "

"The theatre?"

"No, my lady, for the music-halls."

"Oh!" ejaculated Lady Lisle. "Dreadful – dreadful!"

Syd's face was a study in the mirror behind the clock, as he placed one foot on the polished kerb and screwed up his mouth, listening with all his might.

"Yes, my lady, it is very sad. But I'm afraid that several of the better-looking girls in the neighbourhood have had their heads turned by the great success which has attended a Miss Mary Ann Simpkins in London."

Crash!

"Good gracious me!" cried Lady Lisle, starting up at the noise.

"It's nothing, auntie," cried Syd, excitedly. "Foot slipped on

the fender – nothing broken."

The boy turned, with his face flushed, and his voice sounded husky.

"But that vase you knocked over, my dear?"

"It was trying to save myself, auntie. It isn't even cracked."

"But you've hurt yourself, my child?"

"Oh, no, auntie, not a bit," said the boy, with a forced laugh.

"Pray be careful, my dear."

"All right, auntie," said the boy, and he stooped down to begin rearranging the poker and shovel, which he had kicked off the fire-dog to clatter on the encaustic tiles.

"Pray go on, Mr Trimmer. How grievous that such a scandal should befall our peaceful village. A Miss – er – Miss – "

"Mary Ann Simpkins, my lady."

"Simpkins, Simpkins? Surely I know the name?"

"Yes, my lady, and I daresay you've seen her at Tilborough. Very pretty girl – daughter of Sam Simpkins."

"What, at the hotel?"

"Yes, my lady," said the agent, with sad deference. "He is the trainer and keeper of racing stables – Tilborough Arms."

"Yes, yes, I know. Ah! what a home for the poor girl! No wonder. But you said something about turning the girls' heads."

"Yes, my lady. She went into training in town."

"Ran away from home, of course?"

"Oh, no, my lady. Simpkins had her educated in London for that sort of thing – singing and dancing."

"Shocking! Shocking!"

"Yes, my lady. Her father has shares in one of the great music-halls, the Orphoean. I am told that she is quite the rage. You see, some of the young people here knew her at school. Such things quite spoil them for service."

"And all originating in this dreadful racing, Mr Trimmer. If it had not been for this, Mr Simpkins – "

"Exactly, my lady; but I beg your pardon for introducing so unpleasant a subject."

"Do not apologise, Mr Trimmer; it was quite right. I must see the parents of any of the girls who have tendencies in that direction, and Daniel Smart's daughter must certainly be brought back."

"Yes, my lady," said the agent. "Now let us change the subject. How is Sir Hilton's canvass progressing?"

"Admirably, my lady. You see, we have all the influence upon our side; but I think it is about time now for Sir Hilton to show a little – just a little – more interest in the matter."

"Of course, Mr Trimmer; he shall."

"He need not do much, my lady, beyond a little visiting amongst the voters, and, say, addressing three or four meetings. Our Parliamentary agent has prepared the heads of a very telling speech for him, a summary of which, my lady, you will find in that packet marked 'b' and endorsed 'Address.'"

"Certainly! Will go into the matter with Sir Hilton. His election will follow in due course."

"Yes, my lady – it is a certainty. Lord Beltower has withdrawn."

"Very wise of him."

"There is that Mr Watcombe, the big brewer, still in the field, and he has some influence, especially at Tilborough amongst the racing people; but, of course, he has not a chance."

"A brewer? Faugh!"

"Yes, my lady; the man's pretensions are absurd. Will you go through the estate accounts this morning?"

"Impossible now, Mr Trimmer; the news you have given me is too disturbing, and besides, Sir Hilton will be down here to breakfast. That will do now."

"Thank you, my lady – er – er – "

"Yes, Mr Trimmer?" said the lady, looking up inquiringly.

"I am very sorry to make a request, my lady, at such a time, especially as there is a good deal requires looking over at the farm just now; but I should be greatly obliged if your ladyship could spare me for the rest of the day."

"Oh, certainly, Mr Trimmer," said Lady Lisle, looking at her sedate steward so wonderingly that he felt it necessary to make some explanation.

"I regret to say that I have had a telegram from London, my lady – an aged relative – very ill, and expressing a desire to see me."

"Hullo!" said Sydney to himself; "the old humbug smells a legacy."

"Pray go at once, Mr Trimmer."

"Oh, thank you, my lady. You always are so sympathetic in a case of trouble."

"I hope so, Mr Trimmer. Can I do anything for her, or for you?"

"Oh, no, my lady. Your permission is all I want. I am in hopes that my presence will be of some benefit to her. I am her favourite nephew."

"Then pray go at once. You will return to-night, of course?"

"Oh, yes, my lady; but I fear that I shall have to make it the last train."

"Of course. Give Sir Hilton's man orders to meet you with the dogcart at the station. I would say stop as long as is necessary with the poor old invalid were it not that I wish you to be on the spot to watch over the progress of Sir Hilton's Parliamentary affairs. Just now they are vital."

"Exactly, my lady. Good-morning, my lady, and thank you for your kindness."

Lady Lisle smiled and bowed, raising her hand in a queenly way, as if to hold it out for her retainer to kiss, but contenting herself by giving it a slight wave towards the door.

"Good-morning, Mr Sydney. A delicious morning, sir; a nice breeze."

"Oh, was it?" said the boy, rather surlily.

"Yes, sir; the trout were rising freely as I passed over the bridge in the lower meadows."

"Humph!"

"I thought I would mention it, sir. I fancy the May-fly are up."

Sydney nodded, and the steward reached the door, but returned, taking out his pocket-book, after placing the black bag upon a chair.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon, but I omitted to show your ladyship a paragraph I cut out of this morning's county paper."

Lady Lisle took the scrap handed to her respectfully. "Thank you, Mr Trimmer. Oh! Yes. Listen, Sydney, my dear. Listen. This will interest you. Electioneering!" and she read aloud —

"'We understand that Mr Watcombe, the well-known London brewer – '" Her ladyship stopped and frowned.

"Yes, auntie; I hear," cried the boy – "brewer – ?"

"'Is making strenuous efforts to gain the seat for the Tilborough division of the county. He is now in Paris, but upon his return he will commence his campaign by delivering a series of addresses to the voters. The first, we understand, will be given at the Tilborough Arms Hotel.'"

"Pah!" ejaculated Lady Lisle, making as if to throw down the fragment of paper.

"Pray read on, my lady." Her ladyship rearranged her pince-nez and continued, beginning in a contemptuous tone of voice, which changed as she went on —

"'But the gallant brewer, whose beer finds but little favour in this district, will learn that he has an extremely dangerous rival in our popular resident squire of the Denes – Sir Hilton Lisle, of

sporting fame, who, to deal in vaticinations, we consider will be the right man in the right place.'"

"He-ah, he-ah!" cried Sydney. "So he will."

"Yes, my dear," said his aunt, smiling at the boy's enthusiasm; "the editor means well, but it is very vulgarly written, 'of sporting fame.' Bah!"

"But that's right, auntie. Uncle used to be very famous. Wasn't he Master of the Hounds six years ago?"

"Yes, my dear, to his sorrow," said Lady Lisle, reprovingly.

The steward shook his head, and looked up as he passed out, with studied deliberation, as if to let the lady see how marked was the resemblance between his action and that of the steward in Hogarth's picture "Marriage à la Mode," while the lady portion of his audience moved towards the other door.

"Going out, auntie?"

"Yes, my dear, for a short drive down the village. The pony-carriage will be round in a few minutes. I was going to the vicarage, but my first call will be at the Smarts'. I should like you to go with me."

"Go with you, auntie?" said the boy, in a hesitating voice.

"Yes, my dear. Do you not wish to go?"

"I did, auntie, but after what Mr Trimmer said about the trout rising, and the May-fly – you see, they only come once a year."

"Oh, very well, my darling; I suppose I must not object to your liking to fish. Isaac Walton was quite a poet."

"Regular, auntie; and the Prince says fishing begets a love of

Nature."

"Who does, my dear?"

"The Prince – the Principal, auntie. He's a regular dab at throwing a fly."

Lady Lisle winced again but screwed up a smile, and made no allusion to the *dab*, which seemed to strike her in the face like a cold frog – tree frog – and made her wince. "You will be back to lunch, my dear?"

"Well, no, auntie. You see, the May-fly only rise once a year, and I thought I'd make a long day of it."

"Then tell Jane to cut you some sandwiches, and pray be careful not to fall in. You will bring us a dish of trout for dinner?"

"Oh, yes, of course, auntie, if they rise."

"Oh, Hilton, how late you are!" sighed the lady, and her stiff dress rustled over the carpet as she moved forward in a stately way, frowning, and then smiling with satisfaction, for her nephew darted to the door to throw it open, catching directly at the soft white hand extended to him and kissing it. Then, closing the door, he indulged in a frantic kind of dance, expressive of the most extreme delight, one, however, which came to a sudden end, the boy stopping short in a most absurd position as if suddenly turned to stone, for the door was quickly opened and a head was thrust into the room.

Chapter Three.
Four People's Skeletons

"Hi! You, Jane, what are you always listening at the door for?"

"So as to be ready to see you coming your games," said the maid, laughing, "Ha, ha, ha! He thought it was his aunt, ketching him on the hop!"

"That I didn't, old saucy one."

"Yes, you did, and I've a good mind to tell her what a beauty you are – there!"

"Do; and I'll tell her what I saw in the shrubbery last week. Mark my words; see if I don't I will; mark my words."

"You tell if you dare!" cried the maid, with flaming face.

"Oh, I dare."

"But you won't. You wouldn't be such a coward. I say, going out?"

"Yes, I want some sandwiches – a good lot. And, look here, get uncle's flask and half fill it with milk, and then fill it up with sherry."

"What for? What are you going to do?"

"The May-fly's up."

"Up where?"

"Get out! Over the river. I'm going fishing."

"Don't believe you. You're going to the races."

"Sh!" the boy hissed, and looked sharply round.

"There, I knew it!" cried the girl. "I'll tell her ladyship, and stop that."

"Just you do. I'm going whipping the stream."

"Don't believe it. But she'll be whipping you for a naughty boy."

"Shrubbery and old Mark," said the boy, thoughtfully, as if speaking to himself. "Wonder what sort of a pair the new parlourmaid and groom and valet would be?"

"Oh, you!" cried the girl, with scarlet face and flashing eyes, in which the tears began to rise, making her dart out of the room so that they should not be seen.

"Checkmate, Miss Dustpan!" said Sydney, with a chuckle. "What a sharp one she is, though. My word! I never liked old Trim before. He's off on some game of his own. Artful old beast! He isn't such a saint as he pretends. Can't be going to the races, can he? No, not he; not in his line. Spree in London's more in his way. A beast, though, to talk like that. Knows too much about such matters. I wish I could find out something, and get him under my thumb, as I have saucy Jenny. How the beggar made me jump!"

He glanced round at the vase he had nearly broken, then at the door, and directly after at the window, to which he ran and looked out, for there was the grating sound of wheels on the drive, but growing fainter and fainter.

"My word! Isn't the old girl quick at putting on her hat and

scarf! She's safe for the day. Bravo, old Trimmer! Just when I was done up for an idea to slope off. Fish rising? Yes, I'll rise 'em. Cookie'll have hard work to fry all the trout I catch to-day. Phew! There goes another brake. Blow up, you beauty! Why, auntie would have just met them tittuping along. They must have scared the ponies into fits. She can't half hold them."

He turned from the window, listening the while, though, to the rattle of wheels and the trotting of horses down the road, and after a glance at the door, through which the little maid had passed, he drew a note from his pocket and began to spell it over in a low voice.

"'My dear darling Syd' – why, this is three days old. I didn't notice it before – 'Here's nearly a week and you haven't been to see me. Do come. I want to say something so particular. If you don't come before, of course you'll be at the races. I've got a new frock' – frock without a k – 'new frock for the occasion' – Ha, ha! What a rum little gipsy she is! Put the *k* she dropped in frock into occasion – 'I say, do tell your aunt and uncle all the truth' – Likely! – 'and then I can tell dear dad' – Jigger dear dad! – 'I feel so wicked. He must know soon.' – What did she put two thick lines under that for? – 'That's all now, because the dressmaker' – with only one s – 'has come to try on my frock. I say, do tell your dear aunt. She'll be awfully cross at first, but when she knows all – that's all, dear. – Your affeckshunt for ever and ever, Lar Sylphide' – Lar la – Yar! Yar! Tell auntie – phew! Talk about all the fat in the fire, and me with it. Uncle's parlous state won't be

nothing to mine. Ugh!"

The boy jumped as if he had received a blow, and turned towards the window. For the door was opened suddenly and Jane reappeared.

"Not gone then, Impidence?"

"No, I'm not gone yet, Saucebox. Why don't you tell my aunt?"

"Never you mind. What was that you were scuffling into your jacket pocket? Worms for fishing?"

"Of course."

"Was it? I know better. I heered the paper crackle; it's another letter for her."

"What!" cried the boy, changing colour. "What her?"

"Her as you write to. I saw you scribbling, and watched you sneak off down to the village to post it."

"You're a wicked fibster, Jenny."

"Oh, no, I'm not. What did you give the postman five shillings for?"

"I didn't," said the boy, flaring up.

"Yes, you did, and it was to bring letters for you on the sly, I shall write and inform the post-office people."

"Yes, you do, and I'll half kill you, and poison old Mark."

"There! I knew it. Who is she?"

"You be off."

"No, nor I shan't be off neither. I believe it's Dan Smart's girl, who's gone to London. Oh, my! what a wicked one you are, Master Syd, for such a boy. Your sangwidges is ready. Shall I

bring 'em here?"

"Did you get the flask?"

"Yes."

"And filled it with milk and sherry?"

"Yes, but you don't deserve it, for threatening to get poor Mark the sack."

"Then you shouldn't threaten to tell tales."

"I won't, Master Syd, if you won't."

"All right, then, it's a truce. Here, I must be off."

"What, without your sangwidges and flask?"

"No; to get my fishing-rod."

"Then you won't tell?"

"Tell? No. Here, give us a kiss, Jenny."

"Shan't. They're all for Mark."

"Must," cried the boy, seizing her round the waist.

"Pst! Someone coming."

Syd dashed out of the window, and the girl began to move some of the breakfast things, but was interrupted by the entrance of a sharp-looking young groom with very closely-cut hair, and trousers so tight in the leg that the wonder was how he put them on and pulled them off.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mark?" said the girl, tartly.

"Me it is, Jenny. Think it was the boss?"

"Maybe. Here's a pretty time of the morning to have breakfast things about."

"Pretty time? Of course, it's a pretty time. Eat when you're

hungry. When the guv'nor wants his corn he'll come down to the sally-manger as they call it."

"But look at the time!"

"Oh, hang the time! A man ain't a locomotive, made to live up to a time-table. I believe her ladyship has a time for everything, down to sneezing and cleaning her teeth. It's orful, that it is."

"Ah! you're a pretty pair."

"We was in the old days, Jenny," said the young man, with a smirk, "before we began to go off and look seedy, him with being married to her ladyship, and me pulled down, fretting about you."

"Get along with your nonsense! I know. You were a pair of regular rackety rakes, and her ladyship has done wonders for Sir Hilton."

"Well, ain't you done wonders and improved me, dear? You know I ain't like the same chap."

"Oh, I don't know. I sometimes feel I'm very stupid to think about you. You're always talking about your old ramping, scamping days."

"But there wasn't any harm in 'em, Jenny. Only a bit of sport – a race here, a steeplechase there, and a turn at hunting in the winter. Ah! they was times, Jenny, my gal Reglar old English gentleman sort of life. Go to bed when you liked; get up when you liked. Breakfast in bed or out of it. None of your tea-and-toasting, but a hock and seltzer for a start; nice little devilled something after, and there you were, fit as a fiddle. None of your time-table life, like it is here."

"Yes, you were a nice pair."

"We were, Jenny, and we're not to be sneezed at now; but you're a bit hard on us, Jenny, both of you."

"I'm too soft on you, Mark, and you know it."

"Well – say sometimes, my dear; but you know you are orful nubbly now and then, and you say things to me that buzz in my ears like bluebottles in a stable window. I don't grumble, but I'm sorry for the guv'nor, that I am."

"Ah! he has a deal to grumble at. Wasted as good as three fortunes."

"Woho, my lass! Steady there! Not wasted. Spent 'em like a noble English baronet, and he always had his money's worth. Yes, we did."

"We indeed! Wasted everything, he did, on the Turf, and then was sold up disgraceful. Just like a pore man might be."

"Gently, my lass, gently!" cried Mark. "Sold up, and disgraceful? Nothing of the kind. The luck was again' us, and we can't quite meet our engagements; so we lets the things come to the hammer. Old Tat knocks 'em down to the highest bidder at High Park Corner, and we pays like gentlemen as far as the money goes. What more would you have till the luck turns and we pay up again?"

"Ah! you're a nice pair. It was time you were both off the Turf. Neither of you ever cared."

"Don't say that, my lass. I cared a deal, and when I see my satin-skinned beauties knocked down – "

"Your what?"

"'Osses, my gal, 'osses – the tears quite come in my eyes."

"I dessay," said Jenny, tartly. "I believe you think much more of a horse than you ever did about me."

"Nay, you don't, Jenny. You know better. Man's love for a hoss ain't the same as what he feels for his sweetheart. You know that. But a chap of the right sort as understands 'osses can't help loving the beautiful pets. I don't mind yer laughing at me. I quite cried when our La Sylphide was knocked down and I had to say good-bye to her. I don't know what I should ha' done if I hadn't known she was going into good quarters with someone who'd love her. All right! It's gallus weak, I suppose, but I did, and you may laugh."

"I wasn't laughing, Mark," said the girl, holding out her hand. "I was only smiling at you. I like it. Shows your 'art's in the right place."

"Jenny!" And "business," as theatrical people say.

"Now, don't, Mark. That'll do. Suppose Sir Hilton was to come?"

"Let him," said the groom, sharply. "I ain't ashamed of loving the dearest, sweetest little lass in the country, though she has got a sharp tongue that goes through me sometimes like a knife."

"All the better for you, Master Mark. You want talking-to, for you've been a deal too wild."

"Nay, nay, nay, Jenny; 'ossy, but never wild."

"Let's see," said Jane, going on giving touches to the breakfast-

table. “But stop a minute. What do you want here? Her ladyship wouldn’t like it if she caught you.”

“Ain’t she gone out?”

“Oh, yes, I forgot. Well, Sir Hilton’ll be down directly, and he’ll ask you why you’ve come.”

“No, he won’t. I shall have first word.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ask him if he wouldn’t like the ’orse put in the dogcart to run over to Tilborough.”

“What for?”

“To see the race, my gal.”

“What!”

“Our old mare La Sylphide’s going to run.”

“Our old mare indeed! Go to the race! Why, there’d be a regular eruption.”

“So there would; but I do wish the guv’nor would risk it this once.”

“He’d better! So that was the reason you come here, was it?”

“Well, partly, Jenny. You see, I thought I might get a minute with you alone.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Jane, frowning, but with eyes looking very bright. “You pretend and pretend, and yet all the time you’re sneaking off every chance you get over to Oakland.”

“Well, I do, my lass; I own to that.”

“There,” cried the girl, “and yet you have the impidence to talk to me.”

"Of course, you know why I go."

"Yes; to see that showy lady's maid that comes over to our church sometimes."

"Tchah! I go over to the stables to have a look at La Sylphide. Oh, Jenny, she is a picture now."

"Look here, Mark; 'pon your word, now, is that the truth?"

"Why, you dear, jealous, little darling, you know it is. Look here, Jenny; she runs to-day for the cup, and, with Josh Rowle up, it's a certainty."

"I know better than that, Mark. There's no certainty in horse-racing."

"Oh, yes, there is, if you've got the right mare and the man up who understands her, as Josh does, when he isn't on the drink. The guv'nor and Josh Rowle are the only two men who can ride La Sylphide, and I tell you it's a certainty. I've put the pot on this time."

"What for?"

"Because I want it to boil."

"What, to make a what-you-may-call-it – a mash for La Sylphide?"

"Na-a-a-y!" cried Mark. "What a dear, innocent, little darling you are, Jenny! We call it putting the pot on when we lay every dollar we can scrape together, and more too, on a horse winning."

"And that's what you've done?" said Jenny, quietly.

"That's right, little one; every mag."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mark."

"What!" cried the young man in dismay.

"Didn't you promise me that if I'd keep comp'ny with you, you'd give up all your old tricks you learnt with Master – Sir Hilton – and be steady?"

"And so I have been. Saved every penny, and thought of nothing but getting on for you."

"Yes, it looks like it," said the girl, sarcastically.

"Well, so it do. This is only a bit of a flutter."

"Flutter, indeed!"

"And what's it for?"

"To make a fool of yourself again, like your master."

"Oh, is it?" said the young fellow, sturdily. "You know well enough that if I saved all my wages I couldn't save enough to take a pub in twenty years. If La Sylphide passes the post first to-day she'll land me enough to take a nice little roadside hotel, something like Sam Simpkins, the trainer at Tilborough, only not so big, of course; nice little place, where I can plant my wife behind the bar, and do a nice trade with visitors, somewhere down in the country where there's waterfalls and mountains and lakes."

"And that is why you've begun betting again, Mark?" said the girl, a little more softly.

"Yes, that's what I meant, my gal, for I didn't think you'd take it like that. Our mare – I mean Lady Tilborough's – La Sylphide being a certainty. But if she loses, I shan't go and marry some rich woman for the sake of her money."

There was silence for a few moments, Mark turning a little away to take a pink out of his buttonhole and begin nibbling the stalk, and Jenny turning in the other direction so that her lover should not see a little sign of weakness in her eyes, which she strove hard to master, and so well that in a short time, when she spoke again, her voice sounded sharp and without a tremor.

"A pretty game, I'm sure, sir. Races indeed, and betting too! Sir Hilton had better take your precious dogcart and go La Sylphiding. You mark my words, if he does her ladyship will be sure to find it out, and then if she suspects you had anything to do with it you'll get the sack."

"Well, I don't know as it matters much," said the groom, drearily. "You don't seem to understand a fellow, and it's all wrong here, and it's miserable to see the poor guv'nor so down in the mouth."

"Down in the mouth indeed, after missus's father found the money to pay all his debts, and four thousand pounds for him to go into Parliament as an M.P."

"Tchah! Such nonsense! Our Sir Hilton ain't going to give up the Turf and chuck hisself away like that."

"Chuck hisself away?"

"Yes. Turn Jawkins. Him going to turn himself into a talking windmill, a-waving his arms about? Not he. But how come you to hear that?"

"Mr Trimmer told me."

"Mr Trimmer! How come he to tell you?" said the young man,

with his face growing dark.

"Oh, Mr Trimmer is very pleasant and friendly to me sometimes."

"Oh, is he? Then he ain't going to be, and so I tell him. A long, lanky, white-chokered imitation Methody parson, that's what he is! What right has he got to be civil to you, I should like to know?"

"Well, I'm sure, sir," cried the girl, whose eyes were sparkling with delight to see how her lover was moved, "I don't know what her ladyship's bailiff and agent and steward and confidential man would say – him, a real gentleman – if he heard what poor Sir Hilton's groom and valet said."

"Gentleman – confidential man! Why, he ain't half a man, and he ain't the good sanctified chap he pretends to be, and I'd tell him so to his face. Look here, Jenny; he may be her ladyship's, but he ain't going to be your confidential man. But there, I ain't no right to say nothing, I suppose, and this about finishes it. Ladyship or no ladyship, whether the guv'nor comes or whether he don't, I'm going over to Tilborough racecourse 'safternoon, and if La Sylphide don't pull it off for me I shall make a hole in the water and leave it to cover me up."

"Mark!" said Jenny, softly, with her eyes half closed. "Well?"

"I can't help Mr Trimmer speaking civil to me when he comes to see her ladyship about the accounts."

"Oh, no, of course not," said the young man, sarcastically.

"I can't really, Mark – dear. He always seems to me like one of those nasty evats that come down in the stone passage in damp

weather, and just as they do when they've rubbed a little of the whitewash on to their throats."

"Jenny!"

"Yes, Mark dear. I do hope La Sylphide will win."

"Oh!"

"Ahem!"

Smart-looking, well-built, dapper little Sir Hilton Lisle, looking the beau-ideal of a horse-loving country gentleman, entered the breakfast-room.

Chapter Four.
The Tempter's Call

Mark and Jane started apart, looking extremely guilty – of a loving kiss – but quite ready to make the best of things, the latter darting to the table to rearrange the position of a couple of forks, and Sir Hilton's body-servant holding out a hand, palm upwards.

"Do look sharp, Jane," he said, "and hurry up that hot coffee and the kidneys. I knew Sir Hilton would be down directly."

"Mark!" said the baronet, sharply.

"Yes, Sir Hilton."

"You know I don't like humbug, eh?"

"Yes, Sir Hilton?"

"Jane, my girl, do you want to lose your place?"

"No, Sir Hilton. I'm very sorry, Sir Hilton – I – "

"Let him kiss you?"

"Oh, Sir Hilton!"

"Don't deny it! Saw more. You gave him one. Now, look here, both of you. You, Jane, are a very nice, respectable girl, and I like you. Mark, here, is a very good fellow, and if some time you two think of getting married, I don't say I will not give you both a hundred pounds to start life with – "

"Oh, Sir Hilton!"

"If I've got it. But no more of this. It looks bad, and is not

respectful to your employers. You both know, I suppose, that if her ladyship saw half what I noted just now you would be dismissed, Jane, and I'm afraid, Mark, I should have to part with you."

"I beg – "

"That will do – not another word. Breakfast, Jane – quick, please."

"Yes, Sir Hilton!" and Jane drew a breath full of relief, as she hurried through the door.

"Heigh – ho – ha – hum!" yawned the baronet, placing his hands in his pockets and looking down in a dreamy way at the breakfast-table. Then he took out and opened his hunting watch, and closed it with a snap.

"E-lev-en o'clock," he said. "Her ladyship send for you, Mark?"

"Yes, Sir Hilton. Brought round the pony-carriage."

"Oh! Gone out?"

"Yes, Sir Hilton."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Morning's paper, Sir Hilton," said the man, obsequiously, as he drew a sporting-print from his pocket and held it out meaningly turned down at a particular spot.

"What's that?" said the baronet, glancing at one line, and then, turning angrily, "Take it away!" he cried.

"Beg pardon, Sir Hilton. Tilborough first Summer Meeting."

"Take it away!"

"Yes, sir; but La Sylphide."

"Look here, Mark, my lad, no more of this. I know, of course, but take it away. Do you want to drive me mad?"

"Beg pardon, Sir Hilton. Then you won't drive over in the dogcart?"

"What?"

"Just to see her pull it off, Sir Hilton."

"Confound it, man! Hold your tongue! Be off!"

At that moment there were steps on the gravel, and directly after a peal arose from the door-bell.

"Go and see who that is, sir, and never mention anything connected with the Turf again. It's dead to me, and I'm dead to it," he muttered, as the man left the room, giving place to Jane, who hurried in with covered dishes upon a tray.

"Did you see who that was, Jane?"

"No, Sir Hilton. Some gentleman on horseback. His horse is hooked on one side of the gate."

"Who the deuce can it be?"

"Dr Granton, sir," said the groom, coming to the door.

"Oh! Where is he?"

"Study, sir."

"Bring him in here."

Sir Hilton looked quite transformed. There was a bright, alert look in his erstwhile dull eyes, and he seemed to pull himself together as he started actively from his chair, and made as if to hurry after his groom.

But he was too late, for the door reopened, and Mark showed in a handsome, dark, military-looking man of about five-and-thirty, who marched in, hunting-crop in hand, spurs jingling faintly at his heels, and dressed in faultless taste as a horseman.

"My dear old Jack!"

"Hilt, old boy!"

"This is a surprise. Here, Jane, another cover; the doctor will breakfast with me."

"My dear fellow, I breakfasted at eight."

"Never mind; have an eleven's. Mouthful of corn then never hurt anyone. A chair here, Mark. That will do, my man."

Mark backed out, with the half-grin, which had sprung up on seeing his master's animation, dying out, and shaking his head, while the visitor turned the chair placed for him back to the table and bestrode it as if it were a horse.

"Whatever brings you down into this dismal region?"

"Dismal, eh?" said the visitor, glancing round, and then out of the window. "Races."

"Humph!" ejaculated the baronet. "Yes; I heard they were to-day."

"You heard? Aren't you coming?"

"No, no. I've dropped all that sort of thing now."

"Oh, yes, I forgot; and my manners, too. How is her ladyship?"

"Oh, well – very well, Jack," said Sir Hilton, in a mournful way.

"That's right, old chap. Well, trot her out."

Sir Hilton frowned.

"I beg your pardon, old man. Presuming on old brotherly acquaintance. I shall be glad to see her, though."

"Of course, my dear boy; but the fact is, she is out."

"She is? Hang it all, then, I've come at the right time. Have a day off with me at Tilborough, and we'll dine afterwards at the hotel. We can get a snack of something."

"No, no; you misunderstand me. My wife is only having a morning drive in the pony chaise. A little business in the village."

"Oh, I see; Lady Bountiful – district visiting – buying curtsies of the old women, and that sort of thing."

"Yes – er – exactly."

"Ah! I've heard that Lady Lisle does a deal in that way. Takes the chair at charity meetings, eh? Primrose Dame, too?"

"Who told you that?"

"Told me? Let's see. Oh, it was Lady Tilborough."

The conversation ceased for a minute or two while Jane entered with a tray, busied herself, and then departed, leaving the visitor quite ready to show that his eight o'clock breakfast was a thing of the past.

"I say, though," he exclaimed, with his mouth half full, "I didn't mean this. I've left my horse hitched on to the gate."

Sir Hilton rose, stepped to the window, and returned.

"Not there. Mark would see to it, of course, and give it a feed in the stables."

"That's all right, then. Yes, Lady Tilborough was talking about

you the other day."

"Was she? What did she say?"

"Oh, not much. Only that it was a pity you had given up hunting and the Turf."

The baronet sighed – almost groaned. "Anything else?"

"Well – er – no-o-o-o. Oh, yes; a little bit of badinage."

"Eh? What about? Nothing spiteful? No, she wouldn't. She's a dear good creature, bless her!"

"Good boy! So she is – bless her!"

"Ah! I once thought when the old man died, that – "

"Oh, did you? Well, you didn't, and you've married well enough to satisfy any man."

Sir Hilton sighed, and his visitor looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Come, old man, you don't seem to care for your corn. You didn't have a wet night?"

"Hot coppers this morning? My dear boy, no! Why, I lead as quiet a life as a curate now."

"All the better for you."

Sir Hilton sighed again.

"Then it's true?" said the visitor, smiling.

"What's true? What have you been hearing? Did Lady Tilborough say – "

"Oh, nothing; only a bit of chaff about you."

"Tell me what the widow said."

"Oh, it was all good humouredly – a bit of her fun. You know

what she is – wouldn't hurt the feelings of a fly."

"Yes, yes, I know; but she has been laughing at me. She has – "

"Nonsense – nonsense! Don't make your coat rough, old man. She only said it was a pity."

"What was a pity?"

"That dear old Hilt should be ridden with his curb chain so tight – by George! I didn't know how hungry I was."

"Yes," said Sir Hilton, sadly; "the curb is a bit too tight sometimes, Jack; but someone means well, and she has a right to be a bit firm. I always was a fool over money matters."

"Nonsense, old fellow! You were a prince, only you were unlucky, and were obliged to make a clear up; but you're all right again now."

"Yes," said the baronet, "I'm all right again now." But his voice sounded very doleful.

"It was thirty thou' a-year, wasn't it – I mean, isn't it?"

Sir Hilton nodded.

"She got the title and you got the tin. Quid pro quo!"

Sir Hilton nodded again, and then made a desperate effort to turn the conversation back upon his friend.

"Lady Lisle has always taken an interest in parish matters and the poor, and it pleases her. She would not, of course, like me to take an interest now in racing affairs."

"Of course not – of course not, my dear boy," said the visitor, helping himself to the marmalade left by Sydney.

"But what about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm doing capitally," was the reply, rather thickly uttered.

"Nonsense! I mean that affair. How do matters go with the widow?"

"Hah!" sighed the visitor, laying down his knife.

"Hallo! Not off, is it, old chap?"

"No, not off, Hilt, but I'm just where I was. Like the farmer over the claret, I don't seem to get no furder."

"Well, you must be a duffer, Jack."

"I suppose I am, old man. Pluck enough in some things, but I'm afraid of her."

"But haven't you spoken?"

"No; I daren't, for fear she should laugh at me, and the whole affair be quite off."

"I say, Jack, you're dead hit."

"I am, old man – dead. Bless her! She's an angel! But I'm afraid, after her experience with that old ruffian Tilborough, she has made up her mind never to run in double harness again."

"Nonsense! Pluck up, old fellow; a woman likes a man to be manly, and if she accepted you – "

"Ah, *if* Hilt, *if*."

"She would, or I don't know her. I should like to see it come off, for there wouldn't be a better matched pair in England. Go in and win."

"Well, hang me if I don't! I've been playing a shilly-shally waiting game, and now I'll come to the point. But I say, what's

this about you in the papers – election news?"

"Oh, it's the wife's wish. She won't rest till I have 'M.P.' at the end of my name."

"Good thing too. You're getting mossy here. Go into Parliament, and it will soon be rubbed off. The poor dear lady is spoiling you. Too much apron-string. She's stopped your racing and hunting, but you must do something. Go in and win your seat."

"I don't care much about it."

"More fool you! Think of the chances it will give you of a little life. The House – there you are; an excuse for everything not quite in running order with the ideas of such a lady as madam. Club? Best in London. Late hours? Sitting till two, three, four, or milk-time."

"Yes; I never gave that a thought."

"An excuse for everything, dear boy, and your wife proud of you. Oh, I should enter for those stakes, certainly. It will cost you something, though."

"I suppose so; but, between ourselves, Lady Lisle has placed four thou' to my account for election expenses."

"Brave little woman! The widow's all wrong."

"How! Why? What do you mean?"

"She said her ladyship kept the chequebook, and saw to the estate herself, only allowing you a little pocket-money when you were a good boy."

"Tell Lady Tilborough to mind her own business, Jack," said

the baronet, tartly.

"My dear Hilt, I'd share my last fiver with you, or I'd back any of your paper with pleasure; but I'll be hanged if I'll do that I say, though, come on to the race to-day."

Sir Hilton shook his head.

"Nonsense! Think of it. Your old filly, La Sylphide, first favourite. I saw her a week ago. Lovely! Lady Tilborough told me she wouldn't take four times as much for her as she gave at your sale."

"The beautiful gazelle-eyed creature!" sighed Sir Hilton.

"That she is."

"Who is up?" said Sir Hilton.

"Josh Rowle, your old jock, of course. The widow told me that she wouldn't – I mean the mare – let anyone else go near her."

"Just like her, Jack. She had a temper, but she was like a kitten with me. Came ambling up the paddock when I whistled, and she'd rub her head against me for all the world like a cat, and fetch bits of carrot out of my pocket, or whinny for sugar. Ah! those were dear old days. Yes, she'll pull it off for certain."

"Come and see her run."

"I couldn't, old man. I couldn't bear it. No, I'm entered for the House of Commons. Lady Lisle says I'm to be a – a Minister some day."

"Bravo! Be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and keep the purse. But I say, do come. You must be hungry for a race after fasting so long."

"I am, Jack, I am."

"Come, then."

"No; don't ask me," said the baronet; "my racing days are over."

"And you've burnt your jockey cap and silk, the scarlet and blue stripe of the finest gentleman-rider of his day?"

"By Jove! no. I keep them, leathers, boots, whip, and all, in a locked-up drawer. My man, Mark, takes them out to set them up and worship sometimes."

"Then you really won't come?"

"No, Jack, I can't. It would break my wife's heart if I did, and she really is very fond of me."

"Very well; I won't press you, old man. But, I say, you think La Sylphide will win?"

"It's a dead cert. Have you anything on?"

"All I'm worth, dear boy. Have you?"

"I? Nonsense! I haven't made a bet these two years."

"Then now's your time."

"No, no: I've done with that sort of thing."

"But, personally, you are not flush of money, are you?"

"I? Never was so short in my life."

The doctor laughed. "Seize the chance, then, to make a thou' or two."

"Impossible."

"Nonsense! You say yourself the mare's sure to win."

"Bar accidents, she must."

"Then make your game."

"No; I have no money."

"Why, you said just now that her ladyship had placed four thou' to your credit in her bank."

"For my electioneering exes."

"Bosh! To use. Put on the pot and make it boil. Why, man, you could clear enough on the strength of that coin lying idle to set you up for a couple of years."

"Ye-e-es," said Sir Hilton, who began biting at his nails. "Might, mightn't I?"

"Of course. Why, you would be mad to miss the chance."

"It does sound tempting."

"Tempting? Of course. It isn't as if there was any gambling in it."

"Exactly. There would be no gambling in it?"

"Of course not. If it were some horse whose character you did not know, it would be different. But here you are – your own mare, whom you know down to the ground. Your own jockey, too. Look here, dear boy, La Sylphide can't help winning. You'd be mad to miss this chance. I should say, go and see the run, but I give way to your scruples there; but when I see you chucking away a pile of money I begin to kick."

Sir Hilton rose and walked up and down the room, as his old friend and companion continued talking, and ended by coming back to the table and bringing down his fist with a bang.

"Yes," he cried, "it would be madness to miss the chance. By

Jove! I'll do it."

"Bravo, old man!"

"I'll put it in your hands, Jack. Get on for me all you can."

"Up to what?"

"All I've got in the bank. Four thou'."

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course."

"Well done, old chap. That's Hilt up to the hilt, like in the old times."

"Pst! Someone coming," said the baronet, dropping into a chair. "We didn't hear the chaise. It's my wife."

Chapter Five.
A Lamentable Case

Lady Lisle swept into the room, fresh from the pony-carriage, looking rather stern and haughty, her brows knitting at the sight of the breakfast things, and then rising a little as she saw the gallant-looking gentleman who rose and advanced to meet her.

"Dr Granton!"

"At your service, Lady Lisle. I was in the neighbourhood, and rode over to see my dear old friend, but I am just off. I congratulate you. How well he looks!"

"I am glad you think so. But – you have only just come. Will you not stay? My husband must have a good deal to say to you."

"We could talk for hours, my dear madam, but I must be going on."

"You will stay to lunch?"

"Impossible. Most important business in the neighbourhood. Hilton has been most hospitable and refreshed me, and I really must be off – eh, Hilt?"

"Certainly."

"The fact is, Lady Lisle, it is a question of money matters. Business connection with a bank."

Lady Lisle bowed, and looked relieved.

"If you must go, then, Dr Granton – "

"I really must, my dear madam. No, no, Hilton, dear boy, don't ring for the horse; I'll go round by the stables and pick up my hack. Don't you come. Good-morning, Lady Lisle. I hope you will let me call if I am again this way?"

"Certainly, Dr Granton. I am always happy to extend the hospitality of the Denes to my husband's friends."

"Thank you; of course. Once more, good-morning. Morning, Hilton, dear boy. Au revoir!"

He passed out, and the frown on Lady Lisle's brow deepened. "I'm afraid, Hilton," she said, "that Dr Granton's business may have something to do with the races."

"Eh? Indeed! Well, now you say so, I suppose it is possible."

"You have not allowed him to tempt you into going, Hilton?"

"No, my dear," said the baronet; "certainly not."

He spoke out quickly and firmly, the glow of the virtuous who had resisted temptation warming his breast.

"Thank you, dear," she said, laying her hand almost caressingly upon her lord's shoulder. "It could only have meant gambling, risking money to win that of others. Hilton, my love, it is so vile and despicable."

"Think so, Laura?" he said, with the cold chill of his wife's words completely extinguishing the virtuous glow.

"Think so? Oh, yes, Hilton. You cannot imagine how happy you make me by the way you are casting behind you your old weaknesses, and are devoting yourself to Parliamentary study."

"For which I fear I am very unfit," said Sir Hilton; and he

turned cold directly after at a horrible thought which seemed to stun him.

Suppose she should say, "Well, give it up," and want to withdraw that balance at the bank! "What an idiot I was to say that!" he thought. But relief – partial relief – came the next minute.

"That is your modesty, my dear," said Lady Lisle. "I flatter myself that I know your capabilities better than you know them yourself. Hilton, I shall devote myself to the task of being your Parliamentary secretary, and I mean that you shall shine."

"Thank you, my dear," said the unhappy man, sadly, as he thought of the daring venture he had set in commission, and began to repent as he walked to the window and looked out.

"I ought not to have risked that money, though. Suppose the mare lost," he mused. "Bah! I know her too well. There isn't a horse can touch her in the straight, and it will regularly set me up. I shan't have to go begging for a cheque, and then have 'What for, darling?' ringing in my ears. Hang it all! It makes a man feel so small. Why, the very servants pity me – I know they do. And as for that old scoundrel Trimmer – oh, if I could only give him something, even if it were only a wife to keep him short!"

"Suppose – " he thought again, and could get no farther than that one word, which, like the nucleus of a comet, sent out behind or before it a tail of enormous proportions – a sort of gaseous mist of horrible probabilities concerning that four thousand pounds.

"If I could get a message to him and stop it all," he muttered,

as he watched Jane rapidly clear the table of the tardy breakfast things.

"Yes, my love, Parliament must be the goal of your ambition," said Lady Lisle, with her eyes brightening, as soon as they were alone. "If I had been a man how I should have gloried in addressing the House!"

"Ah! there's a deal of talk goes on there, my dear," replied Sir Hilton.

"And what talk, Hilton! What a study! The proper study of mankind is man. How much better than devoting all your attention to dogs and horses!"

"'How noble a beast is the horse,' dear, it said in my first reading-book."

"Absurd, my love. Pray don't think of horses any more."

Sir Hilton winced, and then watched his lady as she moved in a dignified way to the fireplace to rearrange her headgear.

"Going out again, my dear?" said Sir Hilton, for want of something better to say.

"Yes, love. I have ordered the carriage round, to drive over to Hanby."

"To Hanby, dear?"

"Yes. Mr Browse drove by while I was at the vicarage," said the lady, in a tone of disgust. "That man is in arrear with his rent for the farm. The vicar said he supposed the man was going to the races, and I am going over to see his wife."

"For goodness' sake, don't go and interfere, my dear," cried Sir

Hilton, anxiously. “It would get talked about so at the Tilborough Market, and spread in all directions.”

“It would not matter, that I see,” said her ladyship, haughtily. “But I was not going to interfere. I might, perhaps, say a word or two of condolence to poor Mrs Browse, and point out how much happier she would be if her husband followed the example of mine.”

“But, hang it all, Laura, he can’t try to enter into Parliament!”

“No, my love, but he could give up horse-racing.”

“Surely you are not going over there – to drive all those miles – to say that?”

“No, my love, only to help carry on your election contest, and be in time. Mr Browse is in my – our debt, according to Mr Trimmer’s figures, for a whole year’s rental of the farm.”

“But you mustn’t go and dun people.”

“Dun, Hilton?”

“Well, collect rents. Leave that to Trimmer.”

“Of course I shall, my dear,” said her ladyship, with a condescending smile. “I am going over to name that circumstance of their indebtedness to me – us, and to tell her that I shall expect Mr Browse to vote for you. She will compel her husband to do so, and that will ensure one vote.”

“The grey mare’s the better horse,” said Sir Hilton to himself, and he was thinking of the train of circumstances in connection with the race, and planning to rush off and try to forestall the doctor’s risking money, as he sat back in his chair, when, slowly

slouching along after passing through the swing gate, one of the regular hangers-on of a race-meeting approached the house. His aspect was battered, and the pink hunting-coat – one which had seen very much better days – was rubbed to whiteness here and greased to blackness there. It was frayed and patched, and wore the general aspect of having been used as a sleeping garment on occasion, being decorated with scraps of hay, prickly seed vessels, and the like, in addition to the chalky dust of the road, a good deal of which powdered the round-topped, peaked hunting cap, once of black velvet, now all fibre, with scarcely a trace of nap.

The coat was closely buttoned up to the throat, and a pair of much-worn cord trousers completed the man's costume, all but his boots, which were ornamented with slashings, for the benefit, probably, of bunions, for if intended for effect, after the fashion of an old stuffed doublet, the effort was a mistake.

But there was no mistake about the man's profession. He was hall-marked "tramp" by his blear eyes and horribly reddened, bulbous nose, and racing-tout by the packet of race-cards peering out of his breast-pocket. But evidently he was a man of much invention, inasmuch as from a desire to do a little trading on his way from racecourse to racecourse, or for an excuse to find his way to houses where he might pick up unconsidered trifles, cadging, filching, and the like, he carried in one hand a fat, white mongrel puppy, with a bit of blue ribbon tied about its neck. As a dog, it was about as bad a specimen as could be met with in

a day's march; but it had one advantage over its owner – it was scrupulously clean.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.