

Hope Anthony

The God in the Car: A Novel



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CHAPTER I

AN INSOLENT MEMORY

"I'm so blind," said Miss Ferrars plaintively. "Where are my glasses?"

"What do you want to see?" asked Lord Semingham.

"The man in the corner, talking to Mr. Loring."

"Oh, you won't know him even with the glasses. He's the sort of man you must be introduced to three times before there's any chance of a permanent impression."

"You seem to recognise him."

"I know him in business. We are, or rather are going to be, fellow-directors of a company."

"Oh, then I shall see you in the dock together some day."

"What touching faith in the public prosecutor! Does nothing shake your optimism?"

"Perhaps your witticisms."

"Peace, peace!"

"Well, who is he?"

"He was once," observed Lord Semingham, as though stating

a curious fact, "in a Government. His name is Foster Belford, and he is still asked to the State Concerts."

"I knew I knew him! Why, Harry Dennison thinks great things of him!"

"It is possible."

"And he, not to be behindhand in politeness, thinks greater of Maggie Dennison."

"His task is the easier."

"And you and he are going to have the effrontery to ask shareholders to trust their money to you?"

"Oh, it isn't us; it's Ruston."

"Mr. Ruston? I've heard of him."

"You very rarely admit that about anybody."

"Moreover, I've met him."

"He's quite coming to the front, of late, I know."

"Is there any positive harm in being in the fashion? I like now and then to talk to the people one is obliged to talk about."

"Go on," said Lord Semingham, urbanely.

"But, my dear Lord Semingham –"

"Hush! Keep the truth from me, like a kind woman. Ah! here comes Tom Loring – How are you, Loring? Where's Dennison?"

"At the House. I ought to be there, too."

"Why, of course. The place of a private secretary is by the side of –"

"His chief's wife. We all know that," interposed Adela Ferrars.

"When you grow old, you'll be sorry for all the wicked things

you've said," observed Loring.

"Well, there'll be nothing else to do. Where are you going, Lord Semingham?"

"Home."

"Why?"

"Because I've done my duty. Oh, but here's Dennison, and I want a word with him."

Lord Semingham passed on, leaving the other two together.

"Has Harry Dennison been speaking to-day?" asked Miss Ferrars.

"Well, he had something prepared."

"He had something! You know you write them."

Mr. Loring frowned.

"Yes, and I know we aren't allowed to say so," pursued Adela.

"It's neither just nor kind to Dennison."

Miss Ferrars looked at him, her brows slightly raised.

"And you are both just and kind, really," he added.

"And you, Mr. Loring, are a wonderful man. You're not ashamed to be serious! Oh, yes, I've annoyed – you're quite right. I was – whatever I was – on the ninth of last March, and I think I'm too old to be lectured."

Tom Loring laughed, and, an instant later, Adela followed suit.

"I suppose it was horrid of me," she said. "Can't we turn it round and consider it as a compliment to you?"

Tom looked doubtful, but, before he could answer, Adela cried:

"Oh, here's Evan Haselden, and – yes – it's Mr. Ruston with him?"

As the two men entered, Mrs. Dennison rose from her chair. She was a tall woman; her years fell one or two short of thirty. She was not a beauty, but her broad brow and expressive features, joined to a certain subdued dignity of manner and much grace of movement, made her conspicuous among the women in her drawing-room. Young Evan Haselden seemed to appreciate her, for he bowed his glossy curly head, and shook hands in a way that almost turned the greeting into a differentially distant caress. Mrs. Dennison acknowledged his hinted homage with a bright smile, and turned to Ruston.

"At last!" she said, with another smile. "The first time after – how many years?"

"Eight, I believe," he answered.

"Oh, you're terribly definite. And what have you been doing with yourself?"

He shrugged his square shoulders, and she did not press her question, but let her eyes wander over him.

"Well?" he asked.

"Oh – improved. And I?"

Suddenly Ruston laughed.

"Last time we met," he said, "you swore you'd never speak to me again."

"I'd quite forgotten my fearful threat."

He looked straight in her face for a moment, as he asked —

"And the cause of it?"

Mrs. Dennison coloured.

"Yes, quite," she answered; and conscious that her words carried no conviction to him, she added hastily, "Go and speak to Harry. There he is."

Ruston obeyed her, and being left for a moment alone, she sat down on the chair placed ready near the door for her short intervals of rest. There was a slight pucker on her brow. The sight of Ruston and his question stirred in her thoughts, which were never long dormant, and which his coming woke into sudden activity. She had not anticipated that he would venture to recall to her that incident – at least, not at once – in the first instant of meeting, at such a time and such a place. But as he had, she found herself yielding to the reminiscence he induced. Forgotten the cause of her anger with him? For the first two or three years of her married life, she would have answered, "Yes, I have forgotten it." Then had come a period when now and again it recurred to her, not for his sake or its own, but as a summary of her stifled feeling; and during that period she had resolutely struggled not to remember it. Of late that struggle had ceased, and the thing lay a perpetual background to her thoughts: when there was nothing else to think about, when the stage of her mind was empty of moving figures, it snatched at the chance of prominence, and thus became a recurrent consciousness from which her interests and her occupations could not permanently rescue her. For example, here she was thinking of it in the very midst of her party. Yet

this persistence of memory seemed impertinent, unreasonable, almost insolent. For, as she told herself, finding it necessary to tell herself more and more often, her husband was still all that he had been when he had won her heart – good-looking, good-tempered, infinitely kind and devoted. When she married she had triumphed confidently in these qualities; and the unanimous cry of surprised congratulations at the match she was making had confirmed her own joy and exultation in it. It had been a great match; and yet, beyond all question, also a love match.

But now the chorus of wondering applause was forgotten, and there remained only the one voice which had been raised to break the harmony of approbation – a voice that nobody, herself least of all, had listened to then. How should it be listened to? It came from a nobody – a young man of no account, whose opinion none cared to ask; whose judgment, had it been worth anything in itself, lay under suspicion of being biassed by jealousy. Willie Ruston had never declared himself her suitor; yet (she clung hard to this) he would not have said what he did had not the chagrin of a defeated rival inspired him; and a defeated rival, as everybody knows, will say anything. Certainly she had been right not to listen, and was wrong to remember. To this she had often made up her mind, and to this she returned now as she sat watching her husband and Willie Ruston, forgetful of all the chattering crowd beside.

As to what it was she resolved not to remember, and did remember, it was just one sentence – his only comment on the

news of her engagement, his only hint of any opinion or feeling about it. It was short, sharp, decisive, and, as his judgments were, even in the days when he, alone of all the world, held them of any moment, absolutely confident; it was also, she had felt on hearing it, utterly untrue, unjust, and ungenerous. It had rung out like a pistol-shot, "Maggie, you're marrying a fool," and then a snap of tight-fitting lips, a glance of scornful eyes, and a quick, unhesitating stride away that hardly waited for a contemptuous smile at her angry cry, "I'll never speak to you again." She had been in a fury of wrath – she had a power of wrath – that a plain, awkward, penniless, and obscure youth – one whom she sometimes disliked for his arrogance, and sometimes derided for his self-confidence – should dare to say such a thing about her Harry, whom she was so proud to love, and so proud to have won. It was indeed an insolent memory that flung the thing again and again in her teeth.

The party began to melt away. The first good-bye roused Mrs. Dennison from her enveloping reverie. Lady Valentine, from whom it came, lingered for a gush of voluble confidences about the charm of the house, and the people, and the smart little band that played softly in an alcove, and what not; her daughter stood by, learning, it is to be hoped, how it is meet to behave in society, and scanning Evan Haselden's trim figure with wary, critical glances, alert to turn aside if he should glance her way. Mrs. Dennison returned the ball of civility, and, released by several more departures, joined Adela Ferrars. Adela stood

facing Haselden and Tom Loring, who were arm-in-arm. At the other end of the room Harry Dennison and Ruston were still in conversation.

"These *men*, Maggie," began Adela – and it seemed a mere caprice of pronunciation, that the word did not shape itself into "monkeys" – "are the absurdest creatures. They say I'm not fit to take part in politics! And why?"

Mrs. Dennison shook her head, and smiled.

"Because, if you please, I'm too emotional. Emotional, indeed! And I can't generalise! Oh, couldn't I generalise about men!"

"Women can never say 'No,'" observed Evan Haselden, not in the least as if he were repeating a commonplace.

"You'll find you're wrong when you grow up," retorted Adela.

"I doubt that," said Mrs. Dennison, with the kindest of smiles.

"Maggie, you spoil the boy. Isn't it enough that he should have gone straight from the fourth form – where, I suppose, he learnt to generalise – "

"At any rate, not to be emotional," murmured Loring.

"Into Parliament, without having his head turned by – "

"You'd better go, Evan," suggested Loring in a warning tone.

"I shall go too," announced Adela.

"I'm walking your way," said Evan, who seemed to bear no malice.

"How delightful!"

"You don't object?"

"Not the least. I'm driving."

"A mere schoolboy score!"

"How stupid of me! You haven't had time to forget them."

"Oh, take her away," said Mrs. Dennison, and they disappeared in a fire of retorts, happy, or happy enough for happy people, and probably Evan drove with the lady after all.

Mrs. Dennison walked towards where her husband and Ruston sat on a sofa in talk.

"What are you two conspiring about?" she asked.

"Ruston had something to say to me about business."

"What, already?"

"Oh, we've met in the city, Mrs. Dennison," explained Ruston, with a confidential nod to Harry.

"And that was the object of your appearance here to-day? I was flattering my party, it seems."

"No. I didn't expect to find your husband. I thought he would be at the House."

"Ah, Harry, how did the speech go?"

"Oh, really pretty well, I think," answered Harry Dennison, with a contented air. "I got nearly half through before we were counted out."

A very faint smile showed on his wife's face.

"So you were counted out?" she asked.

"Yes, or I shouldn't be here."

"You see, I am acquitted, Mrs. Dennison. Only an accident brought him here."

"An accident impossible to foresee," she acquiesced, with the slightest trace of bitterness – so slight that her husband did not notice it.

Ruston rose.

"Well, you'd better talk to Semingham about it," he remarked to Harry Dennison; "he's one of us, you know."

"Yes, I will. And I'll just get you that pamphlet of mine; you can put it in your pocket."

He ran out of the room to fetch what he promised. Mrs. Dennison, still faintly smiling, held out her hand to Ruston.

"It's been very pleasant to see you again," she said graciously. "I hope it won't be eight years before our next meeting."

"Oh, no; you see I'm floating now."

"Floating?" she repeated, with a smile of enquiry.

"Yes; on the surface. I've been in the depths till very lately, and there one meets no good society."

"Ah! You've had a struggle?"

"Yes," he answered, laughing; "you may call it a bit of a struggle."

She looked at him with grave curious eyes.

"And you are not married?" she asked abruptly.

"No, I'm glad to say."

"Why glad, Mr. Ruston? Some people like being married."

"Oh, I don't claim to be above it, Mrs. Dennison," he answered with a laugh, "but a wife would have been a great hindrance to me all these years."

There was a simple and *bona fide* air about his statement; it was not raillery; and Mrs. Dennison laughed in her turn.

"Oh, how like you!" she murmured.

Mr. Ruston, with a passing gleam of surprise at her merriment, bade her a very unemotional farewell, and left her. She sat down and waited idly for her husband's return. Presently he came in. He had caught Ruston in the hall, delivered his pamphlet, and was whistling cheerfully. He took a chair near his wife.

"Rum chap that!" he said. "But he's got a good deal of stuff in him;" and he resumed his lively tune.

The tune annoyed Mrs. Dennison. To suffer whistling without visible offence was one of her daily trials. Harry's emotions and reflections were prone to express themselves through that medium.

"I didn't do half-badly, to-day," said Harry, breaking off again. "Old Tom had got it all splendidly in shape for me – by Jove, I don't know what I should do without Tom – and I think I put it pretty well. But, of course, it's a subject that doesn't catch on with everybody."

It was the dullest subject in the world; it was also, in all likelihood, one of the most unimportant; and dull subjects are so seldom unimportant that the perversity of the combination moved Maggie Dennison to a wondering pity. She rose and came behind the chair where her husband sat. Leaning over the back, she rested her elbows on his shoulders, and lightly clasped her

hands round his neck. He stopped his whistle, which had grown soft and contented, laughed, and kissed one of the encircling hands, and she, bending lower, kissed him on the forehead as he turned his face up to look at her.

"You poor dear old thing!" she said with a smile and a sigh.

CHAPTER II

THE COINING OF A NICKNAME

When it was no later than the middle of June, Adela Ferrars, having her reputation to maintain, ventured to sum up the season. It was, she said, a Ruston-cum-Violetta season. Violetta's doings and unexampled triumphs have, perhaps luckily, no place here; her dancing was higher and her songs more surpassing in another dimension than those of any performer who had hitherto won the smiles of society; and young men who are getting on in life still talk about her. Ruston's fame was less widespread, but his appearance was an undeniable fact of the year. When a man, the first five years of whose adult life have been spent on a stool in a coal merchant's office, and the second five somewhere (an absolutely vague somewhere) in Southern or Central Africa, comes before the public, offering in one closed hand a new empire, or, to avoid all exaggeration, at least a province, asking with the other opened hand for three million pounds, the public is bound to afford him the tribute of some curiosity. When he enlists in his scheme men of eminence like Mr. Foster Belford, of rank like Lord Semingham, of great financial resources like Dennison Sons & Company, he becomes one whom it is expedient to bid to dinner and examine with scrutinising enquiry. He may have a bag of gold for you; or you may enjoy the pleasure

of exploding his *prestige*; at least, you are timely and up-to-date, and none can say that your house is a den of fogies, or yourself, in the language made to express these things (for how otherwise should they get themselves expressed?) on other than "the inner rail."

It chanced that Miss Ferrars arrived early at the Seminghams, and she talked with her host on the hearth-rug, while Lady Semingham was elaborately surveying her small but comely person in a mirror at the other end of the long room. Lord Semingham was rather short and rather stout; he hardly looked as if his ancestors had fought at Hastings – perhaps they had not, though the peerage said they had. He wore close-cut black whiskers, and the blue of his jowl witnessed a suppressed beard of great vitality. His single eye-glass reflected answering twinkles to Adela's *pince-nez*, and his mouth was puckered at the world's constant entertainment; men said that he found his wife alone a sufficient and inexhaustible amusement.

"The Heathers are coming," he said, "and Lady Val and Marjory, and young Haselden, and Ruston."

"*Toujours* Ruston," murmured Adela.

"And one or two more. What's wrong with Ruston? There is, my dear Adela, no attitude more offensive than that of indifference to what the common herd finds interesting."

"He's a fright," said Adela. "You'd spike yourself on that bristly beard of his."

"If you happened to be near enough, you mean? – a danger

my sex and our national habits render remote. Bessie!"

Lady Semingham came towards them, with one last craning look at her own back as she turned. She always left the neighbourhood of a mirror with regret.

"Well?" she asked with a patient little sigh.

"Adela is abusing your friend Ruston."

"He's not my friend, Alfred. What's the matter, Adela?"

"I don't think I like him. He's hard."

"He's got a demon, you see," said Semingham. "For that matter we all have, but his is a whopper."

"Oh, what's my demon?" cried Adela. Is not oneself always the most interesting subject?

"Yours? Cleverness; He goads you into saying things one can't see the meaning of."

"Thanks! And yours?"

"Grinning – so I grin at your things, though I don't understand 'em."

"And Bessie's?"

"Oh, forgive me. Leave us a quiet home."

"And now, Mr. Ruston's?"

"His is – "

But the door opened, and the guests, all arriving in a heap, just twenty minutes late, flooded the room and drowned the topic. Another five minutes passed, and people had begun furtively to count heads and wonder whom they were waiting for, when Evan Haselden was announced. Hot on his heels came Ruston, and the

party was completed.

Mr. Otto Heather took Adela Ferrars in to dinner. Her heart sank as he offered his arm. She had been heard to call him the silliest man in Europe; on the other hand, his wife, and some half-dozen people besides, thought him the cleverest in London.

"That man," he said, swallowing his soup and nodding his head towards Ruston, "personifies all the hideous tendencies of the age – its brutality, its commercialism, its selfishness, its – "

Miss Ferrars looked across the table. Ruston was seated at Lady Semingham's left hand, and she was prattling to him in her sweet indistinct little voice. Nothing in his appearance warranted Heather's outburst, unless it were a sort of alert and almost defiant readiness, smacking of a challenge to catch him napping.

"I'm not a mediævalist myself," she observed, and prepared to endure the penalty of an *exposé* of Heather's theories. During its progress, she peered – for her near sight was no affectation – now and again at the occasion of her sufferings. She had heard a good deal about him – something from her host, something from Harry Dennison, more from the paragraphists who had scented their prey, and gathered from the four quarters of heaven (or wherever they dwelt) upon him. She knew about the coal merchant's office, the impatient flight from it, and the rush over the seas; there were stories of real naked want, where a bed and shelter bounded for the moment all a life's aspirations. She summed him up as a buccaneer modernised; and one does not expect buccaneers to be amiable, while culture in them would be an incongruity. It was,

on the whole, not very surprising, she thought, that few people liked William Roger Ruston – nor that many believed in him.

"Don't you agree with me?" asked Heather.

"Not in the least," said Adela at random.

The odds that he had been saying something foolish were very large.

"I thought you were such friends!" exclaimed Heather in surprise.

"Well, to confess, I was thinking of something else. Who do you mean?"

"Why, Mrs. Dennison. I was saying that her calm queenly manner – "

"Good gracious, Mr. Heather, don't call women 'queenly.' You're like – what is it? – a 'dime novel.'"

If this comparison were meant to relieve her from the genius' conversation for the rest of dinner, it was admirably conceived. He turned his shoulder on her in undisguised dudgeon.

"And how's the great scheme?" asked somebody of Ruston.

"We hope to get the money," he said, turning for a moment from his hostess. "And if we do that, we're all right."

"Everything's going on very well," called Semingham from the foot of the table. "They've killed a missionary."

"How dreadful!" lisped his wife.

"Regrettable in itself, but the first step towards empire," explained Semingham with a smile.

"It's to stop things of that kind that we are going there,"

Mr. Belford pronounced; the speech was evidently meant to be repeated, and to rank as authoritative.

"Of course," chuckled Semingham.

If he had been a shopman, he could not have resisted showing his customers how the adulteration was done.

In spite of herself – for she strongly objected to being one of an admiring crowd, and liked a personal *cachet* on her emotions – Adela felt pleasure when, after dinner, Ruston came straight to her and, displacing Evan Haselden, sat down by her side. He assumed the position with a business-like air, as though he meant to stay. She often, indeed habitually, had two or three men round her, but to-night none contested Ruston's exclusive possession; she fancied that the business-like air had something to do with it. She had been taken possession of, she said to herself, with a little impatience and yet a little pleasure also.

"You know everybody here, I suppose?" he asked. His tone cast a doubt on the value of the knowledge.

"It's my tenth season," said Adela, with a laugh. "I stopped counting them once, but there comes a time when one has to begin again."

He looked at her – critically, she thought – as he said,

"The ravages of time no longer to be ignored?"

"Well, the exaggerations of friends to be checked. Yes, I suppose I know most of – "

She paused for a word.

"The gang," he suggested, leaning back and crossing his legs.

"Yes, we are a gang, and all on one chain. You're a recent captive, though."

"Yes," he assented, "it's pretty new to me. A year ago I hadn't a dress coat."

"The gods are giving you a second youth then."

"Well, I take it. I don't know that I have much to thank the gods for."

"They've been mostly against you, haven't they? However, what does that matter, if you beat them?"

He did not disdain her compliment, but neither did he accept it. He ignored it, and Adela, who paid very few compliments, was amused and vexed.

"Perhaps," she added, "you think your victory still incomplete?"

This gained no better attention. Mr. Ruston seemed to be following his own thoughts.

"It must be a curious thing," he remarked, "to be born to a place like Semingham's."

"And to use it – or not to use it – like Lord Semingham?"

"Yes, I was thinking of that," he admitted.

"To be eminent requires some self-deception, doesn't it? Without that, it would seem too absurd. I think Lord Semingham is overweighted with humour." She paused and then – to show that she was not in awe of him – she added, – "Now, I should say, you have very little."

"Very little, indeed, I should think," he agreed composedly.

"You're the only man I ever heard admit that of himself; we all say it of one another."

"I know what I have and haven't got pretty well."

Adela was beginning to be more sure that she disliked him, but the topic had its interest for her and she went on,

"Now I like to think I've got everything."

To her annoyance, the topic seemed to lose interest for him, just in proportion as it gained interest for her. In fact, Mr. Ruston did not apparently care to talk about what she liked or didn't like.

"Who's that pretty girl over there," he asked, "talking to young Haselden?"

"Marjory Valentine," said Adela curtly.

"Oh! I think I should like to talk to her."

"Pray, don't let me prevent you," said Adela in very distant tones.

The man seemed to have no manners.

Mr. Ruston said nothing, but gave a short laugh. Adela was not accustomed to be laughed at openly. Yet she felt defenceless; this pachydermatous animal would be impervious to the pricks of her rapier.

"You're amused?" she asked sharply.

"Why were you in such a hurry to take offence? I didn't say I wanted to go and talk to her now."

"It sounded like it."

"Oh, well, I'm very sorry," he conceded, still smiling, and obviously thinking her very absurd.

She rose from her seat.

"Please do, though. She'll be going soon, and you mayn't get another chance."

"Well, I will then," he answered simply, accompanying the remark with a nod of approval for her sensible reminder. And he went at once.

She saw him touch Haselden on the shoulder, and make the young man present him to Marjory. Ruston sat down and Haselden drifted, aimless and forlorn, on a solitary passage along the length of the room.

Adela joined Lady Semingham.

"That's a dreadful man, Bessie," she said; "he's a regular Juggernaut."

She disturbed Lady Semingham in a moment of happiness; everybody had been provided with conversation, and the hostess could sit in peaceful silence, looking, and knowing that she looked, very dainty and pretty; she liked that much better than talking.

"Who's what, dear?" she murmured.

"That man – Mr. Ruston. I say he's a Juggernaut. If you're in the way, he just walks over you – and sometimes when you're not: for fun, I suppose."

"Alfred says he's very clever," observed Lady Semingham, in a tone that evaded any personal responsibility for the truth of the statement.

"Well, I dislike him very much," declared Adela.

"We won't have him again when you're coming, dear," promised her friend soothingly.

Adela looked at her, hesitated, opened her fan, shut it again, and smiled.

"Oh, I didn't mean that, Bessie," she said with half a laugh. "Do, please."

"But if you dislike him – "

"Why, my dear, doesn't one hate half the men one likes meeting – and all the women!"

Lady Semingham smiled amiably. She did not care to think out what that meant; it was Adela's way, just as it was her husband's way to laugh at many things that seemed to her to afford no opening for mirth. But Adela was not to escape. Semingham himself appeared suddenly at her elbow, and observed,

"That's either nonsense or a truism, you know."

"Neither," said Adela with spirit; but her defence was interrupted by Evan Haselden.

"I'm going," said he, and he looked out of temper. "I've got another place to go to. And anyhow – "

"Well?"

"I'd like to be somewhere where that chap Ruston isn't for a little while."

Adela glanced across. Ruston was still talking to Marjory Valentine.

"What can he find to say to her?" thought Adela.

"What the deuce she finds to talk about to that fellow, I can't think," pursued Evan, and he flung off to bid Lady Semingham good-night.

Adela caught her host's eye and laughed. Lord Semingham's eyes twinkled.

"It's a big province," he observed, "so there may be room for him – out there."

"I," said Adela, with an air of affected modesty, "have ventured, subject to your criticism, to dub him Juggernaut."

"H'm," said Semingham, "it's a little obvious, but not so bad for you."

CHAPTER III

MRS. DENNISON'S ORDERS

Next door to Mrs. Dennison's large house in Curzon Street there lived, in a small house, a friend of hers, a certain Mrs. Cormack. She was a Frenchwoman, who had been married to an Englishman, and was now his most resigned widow. She did not pretend to herself, or to anybody else, that Mr. Cormack's death had been a pure misfortune, and by virtue of her past trials – perhaps, also, of her nationality – she was keenly awake to the seamy side of matrimony. She would rhapsodise on the joys of an ideal marriage, with a skilful hint of its rarity, and condemn transgressors with a charitable reservation for insupportable miseries. She was, she said, very romantic. Tom Loring, however (whose evidence was tainted by an intense dislike of her), declared that *affaires du cœur* interested her only when one at least of the parties was lawfully bound to a third person; when both were thus trammelled, the situation was ideal. But the loves of those who were in a position to marry one another, and had no particular reason for not following that legitimate path to happiness, seemed to her (still according to Tom) dull, uninspiring – all, in fact, that there was possible of English and stupid. She hardly (Tom would go on, warming to his subject) believed in them at all, and she was in the habit of

regarding wedlock merely as a condition precedent to its own violent dissolution. Whether this unhappy mode of looking at the matter were due to her own peculiarities, or to those of the late Mr. Cormack, or to those of her nation, Tom did not pretend to say; he confined himself to denouncing it freely, and to telling Mrs. Dennison that her next-door neighbour was in all respects a most undesirable acquaintance; at which outbursts Mrs. Dennison would smile.

Mrs. Dennison, coming out on to the balcony to see if her carriage were in sight down the street, found her friend close to her elbow. Their balconies adjoined, and friendship had led to a little gate being substituted for the usual dwarf-wall of division. Tom Loring erected the gate into an allegory of direful portent. Mrs. Cormack passed through it, and laid an affectionate grasp on Maggie Dennison's arm.

"You're starting early," she remarked.

"I'm going a long way – right up to Hampstead. I've promised Harry to call on some people there."

"Ah! Who?"

"Their name's Carlin. He knows Mr. Carlin in business. Mr. Carlin's a friend of Mr. Ruston's."

"Oh, of Ruston's? I like that Ruston. He is interesting – inspiring."

"Is he?" said Mrs. Dennison, buttoning her glove. "You'd better marry him, Berthe."

"Marry him? No, indeed. I think he would beat one."

"Is that being inspiring? I'm glad Harry's not inspiring."

"Oh, you know what I mean. He's a man who – "

Mrs. Cormack threw up her arms as though praying for the inspired word. Mrs. Dennison did not wait for it.

"There's the carriage. Good-bye, dear," she said.

Mrs. Dennison started with a smile on her face. Berthe was so funny; she was like a page out of a French novel. She loved anything not quite respectable, and peopled the world with heroes of loose morals and overpowering wills. She adored a dominating mind and lived in the discovery of affinities. What nonsense it all was – so very remote from the satisfactory humdrum of real life. One kept house, and gave dinners, and made the children happy, and was fond of one's husband, and life passed most – Here Mrs. Dennison suddenly yawned, and fell to hoping that the Carlins would not be oppressively dull. She had been bored all day long; the children had been fretful, and poor Harry was hurt and in low spirits because of a cruel caricature in a comic paper, and Tom Loring had scolded her for laughing at the caricature (it hit Harry off so exactly), and nobody had come to see her, except a wretch who had once been her kitchenmaid, and had come to terrible grief, and wanted to be taken back, and of course couldn't be, and had to be sent away in tears with a sovereign, and the tears were no use and the sovereign not much.

The Carlins fortunately proved tolerably interesting in their own way. Carlin was about fifty-five – an acute man of business, it seemed, and possessed by an unwavering confidence in the

abilities of Willie Ruston. Mrs. Carlin was ten or fifteen years younger than her husband – a homely little woman, with a swarm of children. Mrs. Dennison wondered how they all fitted into the small house, but was told that it was larger by two good rooms than their old dwelling in the country town, whence Willie had summoned them to take a hand in his schemes. Willie had not insisted on the coal business being altogether abandoned – as Mrs. Carlin said, with a touch of timidity, it was well to have something to fall back upon – but he required most of Carlin's time now, and the added work made residence in London a necessity. In spite of Mr. Carlin's air of hard-headedness, and his wife's prudent recognition of the business aspect of life, they neither of them seemed to have a will of their own. Willie – as they both called him – was the Providence, and the mixture of reverence and familiarity presented her old acquaintance in a new light to Maggie Dennison. Even the children prattled about "Willie," and their mother's rebukes made "Mr. Ruston" no more than a strange and transitory effort. Mrs. Dennison wondered what there was in the man – consulting her own recollections of him in hope of enlightenment.

"He takes such broad views," said Carlin, and seemed to find this characteristic the sufficient justification for his faith.

"I used to know him very well, you know," remarked Mrs. Dennison, anxious to reach a more friendly footing, and realising that to connect herself with Ruston offered the best chance of it. "I daresay he's spoken of me – of Maggie Sherwood?"

They thought not, though Willie had been in Carlin's employ at the time when he and Mrs. Dennison parted. She was even able, by comparison of dates, to identify the holiday in which that scene had occurred and that sentence been spoken; but he had never mentioned her name. She very much doubted whether he had even thought of her. The fool and the fool's wife had both been dismissed from his mind. She frowned impatiently. Why should it be anything to her if they had?

There was a commotion among the children, starting from one who was perched on the window-sill. Ruston himself was walking up to the door, dressed in a light suit and a straw hat. After the greetings, while all were busy getting him tea, he turned to Mrs. Dennison.

"This is very kind of you," he said in an undertone.

"My husband wished me to come," she replied.

He seemed in good spirits. He laughed, as he answered,

"Well, I didn't suppose you came to please me."

"You spoke as if you did," said she, still trying to resent his tone, which she thought a better guide to the truth than his easy disclaimer.

"Why, you never did anything to please me!"

"Did you ever ask me?" she retorted.

He glanced at her for a moment, as he began to answer,

"Well, now, I don't believe I ever did; but I –"

Mrs. Carlin interposed with a proffered cup of tea, and he broke off.

"Thanks, Mrs. Carlin. I say, Carlin, it's going first-rate. Your husband's help's simply invaluable, Mrs. Dennison."

"Harry?" she said, in a tone that she regretted a moment later, for there was a passing gleam in Ruston's eye before he answered gravely,

"His firm carries great weight. Well, we're all in it here, sink or swim; aren't we, Carlin?"

Carlin nodded emphatically, and his wife gave an anxious little sigh.

"And what's to be the end of it?" asked Mrs. Dennison.

"Ten per cent," said Carlin, with conviction. He could not have spoken with more utter satisfaction of the millennium.

"The end?" echoed Ruston. "Oh, I don't know."

"At least he won't say," said Carlin admiringly.

Mrs. Dennison rose to go, engaging the Carlins to dine with her – an invitation accepted with some nervousness, until the extension of it to Ruston gave them a wing to come under. Ruston, with that directness of his that shamed mere dexterity and superseded tact, bade Carlin stay where he was, and himself escorted the visitor to her carriage. Half-way down the garden walk she looked up at him and remarked,

"I expect you're the end."

His eyes had been wandering, but they came back sharply to hers.

"Then don't tell anybody," said he lightly.

She did not know whether what he said amounted to a

confession or were merely a jest. The next moment he was off at a tangent.

"I like your friend Miss Ferrars. She says a lot of sharp things, and now and then something sensible."

"Now and then! Poor Adela!"

"Well, she doesn't often try. Besides, she's handsome."

"Oh, you've found time to notice that?"

"I notice that first," said Mr. Ruston.

They were at the carriage-door.

"I'm not dressed properly, so I mustn't drive with you," he said.

"Supposing that was the only reason," she replied, smiling, "would it stop you?"

"Certainly."

"Why?"

"Because of other fools."

"I'll take you as far as Regent's Park. The other fools are on the other side of that."

"I'll chance so far," and, waving his hand vaguely towards the house, he got in. It did not seem to occur to him that there was any want of ceremony in his farewell to the Carlins.

"I suppose," she said, "you think most of us fools?"

"I've been learning to think it less and to show it less still."

"You're not much changed, though."

"I've had some of my corners chipped off by collision with other hard substances."

"Thank you for that 'other'!" cried Mrs. Dennison, with a little laugh. "They must have been very hard ones."

"I didn't say that they weren't a little bit injured too."

"Poor things! I should think so."

"I have my human side."

"Generally the other side, isn't it?" she asked with a merry glance. The talk had suddenly become very pleasant. He laughed, and stopped the carriage. A sigh escaped from Mrs. Dennison.

"Next time," he said, "we'll talk about you, or Miss Ferrars, or that little Miss Marjory Valentine, not about me. Good-bye," and he was gone before she could say a word to him.

But it was natural that she should think a little about him. She had not, she said to herself with a weary smile, too many interesting things to think about, and she began to find him decidedly interesting; in which fact again she found a certain strangeness and some material for reflection, because she recollected very well that as a girl she had not found him very attractive. Perhaps she demanded then more colouring of romance than he had infused into their intercourse; she had indeed suspected him of suppressed romance, but the suppression had been very thorough, betraying itself only doubtfully here and there, as in his judgment of her accepted suitor. Moreover, let his feelings then have been what they might, he was not, she felt sure, the man to cherish a fruitless love for eight or nine years, or to suffer any resurrection of expired emotions on a renewed encounter with an old flame. He buried

his dead too deep for that; if they were in the way, she could fancy him sometimes shovelling the earth over them and stamping it down without looking too curiously whether life were actually extinct or only flickering towards its extinction; if it were not quite gone at the beginning of the gravedigger's work, it would be at the end, and the result was the same. Nor did she suppose that ghosts gibbered or clanked in the orderly trim mansions of his brain. In fact, she was to him a more or less pleasant acquaintance, sandwiched in his mind between Adela Ferrars and Marjory Valentine – with something attractive about her, though she might lack the sparkle of the one and had been robbed of the other's youthful freshness. This was the conclusion which she called upon herself to draw as she drove back from Hampstead – the plain and sensible conclusion. Yet, as she reached Curzon Street, there was a smile on her face; and the conclusion was hardly such as to make her smile – unless indeed she had added to it the reflection that it is ill judging of things till they are finished. Her acquaintance with Willie Ruston was not ended yet.

"Maggie, Maggie!" cried her husband through the open door of his study as she passed up-stairs. "Great news! We're to go ahead. We settled it at the meeting this morning."

Harry Dennison was in exuberant spirits. The great company was on the verge of actual existence. From the chrysalis of its syndicate stage it was to issue a bright butterfly.

"And Ruston was most complimentary to our house. He said he could never have carried it through without us. He's in high

feather."

Mrs. Dennison listened to more details, thinking, as her husband talked, that Ruston's cheerful mood was fully explained, but wondering that he had not himself thought it worth while to explain to her the cause of it a little more fully. With that achievement fresh in his hand, he had been content to hold his peace. Did he think her not worth telling?

With a cloud on her brow and her smile eclipsed, she passed on to the drawing-room. The window was open and she saw Tom Loring's back in the balcony. Then she heard her friend Mrs. Cormack's rather shrill voice.

"Not say such things?" the voice cried, and Mrs. Dennison could picture the whirl of expostulatory hands that accompanied the question. "But why not?"

Tom's voice answered in the careful tones of a man who is trying not to lose his temper, or, anyhow, to conceal the loss.

"Well, apart from anything else, suppose Dennison heard you? It wouldn't be over-pleasant for him."

Mrs. Dennison stood still, slowly peeling off her gloves.

"Oh, the poor man! I would not like to hurt him. I will be silent. Oh, he does his very best! But you can't help it."

Mrs. Dennison stepped a yard nearer the window.

"Help what?" asked Tom in the deepest exasperation, no longer to be hidden.

"Why, what must happen? It must be that the true man –"

A smile flickered over Maggie Dennison's face. How like

Berthe! But whence came this topic?

"Nonsense, I tell you!" cried Tom with a stamp of his foot.

And at the sound Mrs. Dennison smiled again, and drew yet nearer to the window.

"Oh, it's always nonsense what I say! Well, we shall see, Mr. Loring," and Mrs. Cormack tripped in through her window, and wrote in her diary – she kept a diary full of reflections – that Englishmen were all stupid. She had written that before, but the deep truth bore repetition.

Tom went in too, and found himself face to face with Mrs. Dennison. Bright spots of colour glowed on her cheeks; had she answered the question of the origin of the topic? Tom blushed and looked furtively at her.

"So the great scheme is launched," she remarked, "and Mr. Ruston triumphs!"

Tom's manner betrayed intense relief, but he was still perturbed.

"We're having a precious lot of Ruston," he observed, leaning against the mantelpiece and putting his hands in his pockets.

"I like him," said Maggie Dennison.

"Those are the orders, are they?" asked Tom with a rather wry smile.

"Yes," she answered, smiling at Tom's smile. It amused her when he put her manner into words.

"Then we all like him," said Tom, and, feeling quite secure now, he added, "Mrs. Cormack said we should, which is rather

against him."

"Oh, Berthe's a silly woman. Never mind her. Harry likes him too."

"Lucky for Ruston he does. Your husband's a useful friend. I fancy most of Ruston's friends are of the useful variety."

"And why shouldn't we be useful to him?"

"On the contrary, it seems our destiny," grumbled Tom, whose destiny appeared not to please him.

CHAPTER IV

TWO YOUNG GENTLEMEN

Lady Valentine was the widow of a baronet of good family and respectable means; the one was to be continued and the other absorbed by her son, young Sir Walter, now an Oxford undergraduate and just turned twenty-one years of age. Lady Valentine had a jointure, and Marjory a pretty face. The remaining family assets were a country-house of moderate dimensions in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead, and a small flat in Cromwell Road. Lady Valentine deplored the rise of the plutocracy, and had sometimes secretly hoped that a plutocrat would marry her daughter. In other respects she was an honest and unaffected woman.

Young Sir Walter, however, had his own views for his sister, and young Sir Walter, when he surveyed the position which the laws and customs of the realm gave him, was naturally led to suppose that his opinion had some importance. He was hardly responsible for the error, and very probably Mr. Ruston would have been better advised had his bearing towards the young man not indicated so very plainly that the error was an error. But in the course of the visits to Cromwell Road, which Ruston found time to pay in the intervals of floating the Omofaga Company – and he was a man who found time for many things – this impression of

his made itself tolerably evident, and, consequently, Sir Walter entertained grave doubts whether Ruston were a gentleman. And, if a fellow is not a gentleman, what, he asked, do brains and all the rest of it go for? Moreover, how did the chap live? To which queries Marjory answered that "Oxford boys" were very silly – a remark which embittered, without in the least elucidating, the question.

Almost everybody has one disciple who looks up to him as master and mentor, and, ill as he was suited to such a post, Evan Haselden filled it for Walter Valentine. Evan had been in his fourth year when Walter was a freshman, and the reverence engendered in those days had been intensified when Evan had become, first, secretary to a minister and then, as he showed diligence and aptitude, a member of Parliament. Evan was a strong Tory, but payment of members had an unholy attraction for him; this indication of his circumstances may suffice. Men thought him a promising youth, women called him a nice boy, and young Sir Walter held him for a statesman and a man of the world.

Seeing that what Sir Walter wanted was an unfavourable opinion of Ruston, he could not have done better than consult his respected friend. Juggernaut – Adela Ferrars was pleased with the nickname, and it began to be repeated – had been crushing Evan in one or two little ways lately, and he did it with an unconsciousness that increased the brutality. Besides displacing him from the position he wished to occupy at more than one

social gathering, Ruston, being in the Lobby of the House one day (perhaps on Omofaga business), had likened the pretty (it was his epithet) young member, as he sped with a glass of water to his party leader, to Ganymede in a frock coat – a description, Evan felt, injurious to a serious politician.

"A gentleman?" he said, in reply to young Sir Walter's inquiry. "Well, everybody's a gentleman now, so I suppose Ruston is."

"I call him an unmannerly brute," observed Walter, "and I can't think why mother and Marjory are so civil to him."

Evan shook his head mournfully.

"You meet the fellow everywhere," he sighed.

"Such an ugly mug as he's got too," pursued young Sir Walter. "But Marjory says it's full of character."

"Character! I should think so. Enough to hang him on sight," said Evan bitterly.

"He's been a lot to our place. Marjory seems to like him. I say, Haselden, do you remember what you spoke of after dinner at the Savoy the other day?"

Evan nodded, looking rather embarrassed; indeed he blushed, and little as he liked doing that, it became him very well.

"Did you mean it? Because, you know, I should like it awfully."

"Thanks, Val, old man. Oh, rather, I meant it."

Young Sir Walter lowered his voice and looked cautiously round – they were in the club smoking-room.

"Because I thought, you know, that you were rather – you

know – Adela Ferrars?"

"Nothing in that, only *pour passer le temps*," Evan assured him with that superb man-of-the-worldliness.

It was a pity that Adela could not hear him. But there was more to follow.

"The truth is," resumed Evan – "and, of course, I rely on your discretion, Val – I thought there might be a – an obstacle."

Young Sir Walter looked knowing.

"When you were good enough to suggest what you did – about your sister – I doubted for a moment how such a thing would be received by – well, at a certain house."

"Oh!"

"I shouldn't wonder if you could guess."

"N – no, I don't think so."

"Well, it doesn't matter where."

"Oh, but I say, you might as well tell me. Hang it, I've learnt to hold my tongue."

"You hadn't noticed it? That's all right. I'm glad to hear it," said Evan, whose satisfaction was not conspicuous in his tone.

"I'm so little in town, you see," said Walter tactfully.

"Well – for heaven's sake, don't let it go any farther – Curzon Street."

"What! Of course! Mrs. – "

"All right, yes. But I've made up my mind. I shall drop all that. Best, isn't it?"

Walter nodded a sagacious assent.

"There was never anything in it, really," said Evan, and he was not displeased with his friend's incredulous expression. It is a great luxury to speak the truth and yet not be believed.

"Now, what you propose," continued Evan, "is most – but, I say, Val, what does she think?"

"She likes you – and you'll have all my influence," said the Head of the Family in a tone of importance.

"But how do you know she likes me?" insisted Evan, whose off-hand air gave place to a manner betraying some trepidation.

"I don't know for certain, of course. And, I say, Haselden, I believe mother's got an idea in her head about that fellow Ruston."

"The devil! That brute! Oh, hang it, Val, she can't – your sister, I mean – I tell you what, I shan't play the fool any longer."

Sir Walter cordially approved of increased activity, and the two young gentlemen, having settled one lady's future and disposed of the claims of two others to their complete satisfaction, betook themselves to recreation.

Evan was not, however, of opinion that anything in the conversation above recorded, imposed upon him the obligation of avoiding entirely Mrs. Dennison's society. On the contrary, he took an early opportunity of going to see her. His attitude towards her was one of considerably greater deference than Sir Walter understood it to be, and he had a high idea of the value of her assistance. And he did not propose to deny himself such savour of sentiment as the lady would allow; and she generally

allowed a little. He intended to say nothing about Ruston, but as it happened that Mrs. Dennison's wishes set in an opposing direction, he had not been long in the drawing room at Curzon Street before he found himself again with the name of his enemy on his lips. He spoke with refreshing frankness and an engaging confidence in his hostess' sympathy. Mrs. Dennison had no difficulty in seeing that he had a special reason for his bitterness.

"Is it only because he called you Ganymede? And it's a very good name for you, Mr. Haselden."

To be compared to Ganymede in private by a lady and in public by a scoffer, are things very different. Evan smiled complacently.

"There's more than that, isn't there?" asked Mrs. Dennison.

Evan admitted that there was more, and, in obedience to some skilful guidance, he revealed what there was more – what beyond mere offended dignity – between himself and Mr. Ruston. He had to complain of no lack of interest on the part of his listener. Mrs. Dennison questioned him closely as to his grounds for anticipating Ruston's rivalry. The idea was evidently quite new to her; and Evan was glad to detect her reluctance to accept it – she must think as he did about Willie Ruston. The tangible evidence appeared on examination reassuringly small, and Evan, by a strange conversion, found himself driven to defend his apprehensions by insisting on just that power of attraction in his foe which he had begun by denying altogether. But that, Mrs. Dennison objected, only showed, even if it existed, that Marjory

might like Ruston, not that Ruston would return her liking. On the whole Mrs. Dennison comforted him, and, dismissing Ruston from the discussion, said with a smile,

"So you're thinking of settling down already, are you?"

"I say, Mrs. Dennison, you've always been awfully good to me, I wonder if you'd help me in this?"

"How could I help you?"

"Oh, lots of ways. Well, for instance, old Lady Valentine doesn't ask me there often. You see, I haven't got any money."

"Poor boy! Of course you haven't. Nice young men never have any money."

"So I don't get many chances of seeing her."

"And I might arrange meetings for you? That's how I could help? Now, why should I help?"

Evan was encouraged by this last question, put in his friend's doubtfully-serious doubtfully-playful manner.

"It needn't," he said, in a tone rather more timid than young Sir Walter would have expected, "make any difference to our friendship, need it? If it meant that –"

The sentence was left in expressive incompleteness.

Mrs. Dennison wanted to laugh; but why should she hurt his feelings? He was a pleasant boy, and, in spite of his vanity, really a clever one. He had been a little spoilt; that was all. She turned her laugh in another direction.

"Berthe Cormack would tell you that it would be sure to intensify it," she said. "Seriously, I shan't hate you for marrying,

and I don't suppose Marjory will hate me."

"Then" (Mrs. Dennison had to smile at that little word), "you'll help me?"

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Dennison, allowing her smile to become manifest.

"You won't be against me?"

"Perhaps not."

"Good-bye," said Evan, pressing her hand.

He had enjoyed himself very much, and Mrs. Dennison was glad that she had been good-natured, and had not laughed.

"Good-bye, and I hope you'll be very happy, if you succeed. And – Evan – don't kill Mr. Ruston!"

The laugh came at last, but he was out of the door in time, and Mrs. Dennison had no leisure to enjoy it fully, for, the moment her visitor was gone, Mr. Belford and Lord Semingham were announced. They came together, seeking Harry Dennison. There was a "little hitch" of some sort in the affairs of the Omofaga Company – nothing of consequence, said Mr. Belford reassuringly. Mrs. Dennison explained that Harry Dennison had gone off to call on Mr. Ruston.

"Oh, then he knows by now," said Semingham in a tone of relief.

"And it'll be all right," added Belford contentedly.

"Mr. Belford," said Mrs. Dennison, "I'm living in an atmosphere of Omofaga. I eat it, and drink it, and wear it, and breathe it. And, what in the end, is it?"

"Ask Ruston," interposed Semingham.

"I did; but I don't think he told me."

"But surely, my dear Mrs. Dennison, your husband takes you into his confidence?" suggested Mr. Belford.

Mrs. Dennison smiled, as she replied,

"Oh, yes, I know what you're doing. But I want to know why you're doing it. I don't believe you'll ever get anything out of it, you know."

"Oh, directors always get something," protested Semingham. "Penal servitude sometimes, but always something."

"I've never had such implicit faith in any undertaking in my life," asserted Mr. Belford. "And I know that your husband shares my views. It's bound to be the greatest success of the day. Ah, here's Dennison!"

Harry came in wiping his brow. Belford rushed to him, and drew him to the window, button-holing him with decision. Lord Semingham smiled lazily and pulled his whisker.

"Don't you want to hear the news?" Mrs. Dennison asked.

"No! He's been to Ruston."

Mrs. Dennison looked at him for an instant with something rather like scorn in her eye. Lord Semingham laughed.

"I'm not quite as bad as that, really," he said.

"And the others?" she asked, leaning forward and taking care that her voice did not reach the other pair.

"He turns Belford round his fingers."

"And Mr. Carlin?"

"In his pocket."

Mrs. Dennison cast a glance towards the window.

"Don't go on," implored Semingham, half-seriously.

"And my husband?" she asked in a still lower voice.

Lord Semingham protested with a gesture against such cross-examination.

"Surely it's a good thing for me to know?" she said.

"Well – a great influence."

"Thank you."

There was a pause for an instant. Then she rose with a laugh and rang the bell for tea.

"I hope he won't ruin us all," she said.

"I've got Bessie's settlement," observed Lord Semingham; and he added after a moment's pause, "What's the matter? I thought you were a thoroughgoing believer."

"I'm a woman," she answered. "If I were a man – "

"You'd be the prophet, not the disciple, eh?"

She looked at him, and then across to the couple by the window.

"To do Belford justice," remarked Semingham, reading her glance, "he never admits that he isn't a great man – though surely he must know it."

"Is it better to know it, or not to know it?" she asked, restlessly fingering the teapot and cups which had been placed before her. "I sometimes think that if you resolutely refuse to know it, you can alter it."

Belford's name had been the only name mentioned in the conversation; yet Semingham knew that she was not thinking of Belford nor of him.

"I knew it about myself very soon," he said. "It makes a man better to know it, Mrs. Dennison."

"Oh, yes – better," she answered impatiently.

The two men came and joined them. Belford accepted a cup of tea, and, as he took it, he said to Harry, continuing their conversation,

"Of course, I know his value; but, after all, we must judge for ourselves."

"Of course," acquiesced Harry, handing him bread-and-butter.

"We are the masters," pursued Belford.

Mrs. Dennison glanced at him, and a smile so full of meaning – of meaning which it was as well Mr. Belford should not see – appeared on her face, that Lord Semingham deftly interposed his person between them, and said, with apparent seriousness,

"Oh, he mustn't think he can do just what he likes with us."

"I am entirely of your opinion," said Belford, with a weighty nod.

After tea, Lord Semingham walked slowly back to his own house. He had a trick of stopping still, when he fell into thought, and he was motionless on the pavement of Piccadilly more than once on his way home. The last time he paused for nearly three minutes, till an acquaintance, passing by, clapped him on the

back, and inquired what occupied his mind.

"I was thinking," said Semingham, laying his forefinger on his friend's arm, "that if you take what a clever man really is, and add to it what a clever woman who is interested in him thinks he is, you get a most astonishing person."

The friend stared. The speculation seemed hardly pressing enough to excuse a man for blocking the pavement of Piccadilly.

"If, on the other hand," pursued Semingham, "you take what an ordinary man isn't, and add all that a clever woman thinks he isn't, you get – "

"Hadn't we better go on, old fellow?" asked the friend.

"No, I think we'd better not," said Semingham, starting to walk again.

CHAPTER V

A TELEGRAM TO FRANKFORT

The success of Lady Valentine's Saturday to Monday party at Maidenhead was spoilt by the unscrupulous, or (if the charitable view be possible) the muddle-headed conduct of certain eminent African chiefs – so small is the world, so strong the chain of gold (or shares) that binds it together. The party was marred by Willie Ruston's absence; and he was away because he had to go to Frankfort, and he had to go to Frankfort because of that little hitch in the affairs of the Omofaga. The hitch was, in truth, a somewhat grave one, and it occurred, most annoyingly, immediately after a gathering, marked by uncommon enthusiasm and composed of highly influential persons, had set the impress of approval on the scheme. On the following morning, it was asserted that the said African chiefs, from whom Ruston and his friends derived their title to Omofaga, had acted in a manner that belied the character for honesty and simplicity in commercial matters (existing side by side with intense savagery and cruelty in social and political life) that Mr. Foster Belford had attributed to them at the great meeting. They had, it was said, sold Omofaga several times over in small parcels, and twice, at least, *en bloc*— once to the Syndicate (from whom the Company was acquiring it) and once to an association of German capitalists.

The writer of the article, who said that he knew the chiefs well, went so far as to maintain that any person provided with a few guns and a dozen or so bottles of ardent spirits could return from Omofaga with a portmanteau full of treaties, and this facility in obtaining the article could not, in accordance with the law of supply and demand, do other than gravely affect the value of it. Willie Ruston was inclined to make light of this disclosure; indeed, he attributed it to a desire – natural but unprincipled – on the part of certain persons to obtain Omofaga shares at less than their high intrinsic value; he called it a "bear dodge" and sundry other opprobrious names, and snapped his fingers at all possible treaties in the world except his own. Once let him set his foot in Omofaga, and short would be the shrift of rival claims, supposing them to exist at all! But the great house of Dennison, Sons & Company, could not go on in this happy-go-lucky fashion – so the senior partner emphatically told Harry Dennison – they were already, in his opinion, deep enough in this affair; if they were to go any deeper, this matter of the association of German capitalists must be inquired into. The house had not only its money, but its credit and reputation to look after; it could not touch any doubtful business, nor could it be left with a block of Omofagas on its hands. In effect they were trusting too much to this Mr. Ruston, for he, and he alone, was their security in the matter. Not another step would the house move till the German capitalists were dissolved into thin air. So Willie Ruston packed his portmanteau – likely enough the very one that had carried

the treaties away from Omofaga – and went to Frankfort to track the German capitalists to their lair. Meanwhile, the issue of the Omofaga was postponed, and Mr. Carlin was set a-telegraphing to Africa.

Thus it also happened that, contrary to her fixed intention, Lady Valentine was left with a bedroom to spare, and with no just or producible reason whatever for refusing her son's request that Evan Haselden might occupy it. This, perhaps, should, in the view of all true lovers, be regarded as an item on the credit side of the African chiefs' account, though in the hostess' eyes it aggravated their offence. Adela Ferrars, Mr. Foster Belford and Tom Loring, who positively blessed the African chiefs, were the remaining guests.

All parties cannot be successful, and, if truth be told, this of Lady Valentine's was no conspicuous triumph. Belford and Loring quarrelled about Omofaga, for Loring feared (he used that word) that there might be a good deal in the German treaties, and Belford was loud-mouthed in declaring there could be nothing. Marjory and her brother had a "row" because Marjory, on the Saturday afternoon, would not go out in the Canadian canoe with Evan, but insisted on taking a walk with Mr. Belford and hearing all about Omofaga. Finally, Adela and Tom Loring had a rather serious dissension because – well, just because Tom was so intolerably stupid and narrow-minded and rude. That was Adela's own account of it, given in her own words, which seems pretty good authority.

The unfortunate discussion began with an expression of opinion from Tom. They were lounging very comfortably downstream in a broad-bottomed boat. It was a fine still evening and a lovely sunset. It was then most wanton of Tom – even although he couched his remark in a speciously general form – to say,

"I wonder at fellows who spend their life worming money out of other people for wild-cat schemes instead of taking to some honest trade."

There was a pause. Then Adela fitted her glasses on her nose, and observed, with a careful imitation of Tom's forms of expression,

"I wonder at fellows who drift through life in subordinate positions without the – the *spunk*– to try and do anything for themselves."

"Women have no idea of honesty."

"Men are such jealous creatures."

"I'm not jealous of him," Tom blurted out.

"Of who?" asked Adela.

She was keeping the cooler of the pair.

"Confound those beastly flies," said Tom, peevishly. There was a fly or two about, but Adela smiled in a superior way. "I suppose I've some right to express an opinion," continued Tom. "You know what I feel about the Dennisons, and – well, it's not only the Dennisons."

"Oh! the Valentines?"

"Blow the Valentines!" said Tom, very ungratefully, inasmuch

as he sat in their boat and had eaten their bread.

He bent over his sculls, and Adela looked at him with a doubtful little smile. She thought Tom Loring, on the whole, the best man she knew, the truest and loyalest; but, these qualities are not everything, and it seemed as if he meant to be secretary to Harry Dennison all his life. Of course he had no money, there was that excuse; but to some men want of money is a reason, not for doing nothing, but for attempting everything; it had struck Willie Ruston in that light. Therefore she was at times angry with Tom – and all the more angry the more she admired him.

"You do me the honour to be anxious on my account?" she asked very stiffly.

"He asked me how much money you had the other day."

"Oh, you're insufferable; you really are. Do you always tell women that men care only for their money?"

"It's not a bad thing to tell them when it's true."

"I call this the very vulgarest dispute I was ever entrapped into."

"It's not my fault. It's – Hullo!"

His attention was arrested by Lady Valentine's footman, who stood on the bank, calling "Mr. Loring, sir," and holding up a telegram.

"Thank goodness, we're interrupted," said Adela. "Row ashore, Mr. Loring."

Loring obeyed, and took his despatch. It was from Harry Dennison, and he read it aloud.

"Can you come up? News from Frankfort."

"I must go," said Tom.

"Oh, yes. If you're not there, Mr. Ruston will do something dreadful, won't he? I should like to come too. News from Frankfort would be more interesting than views from Mr. Belford."

They parted without any approach towards a reconciliation. Tom was hopelessly sulky, Adela persistently flippant. The shadow of Omofaga lay heavy on Lady Valentine's party, and still shrouded Tom Loring on his way to town.

The important despatch from Frankfort had come in cipher, and when Tom arrived in Curzon Street, he found Mr. Carlin, who had been sent for to read it, just leaving the house. The men nodded to one another, and Carlin hastily exclaimed,

"You must reassure Dennison! You can do it!" and leapt into a hansom.

Tom smiled. If the progress of Omofaga depended on encouragement from him, Omofaga would remain in primitive barbarism, though missionaries fell thick as the leaves in autumn.

Harry Dennison was walking up and down the library; his hair was roughened and his appearance indicative of much unrest; his wife sat in an armchair, looking at him and listening to Lord Semingham, who, poising a cigarette between his fingers, was putting, or trying to put, a meaning to Ruston's message.

"Position critical. Must act at once. Will you give me a

free hand? If not, wire how far I may go."

That was how it ran when faithfully interpreted by Mr. Carlin.

"You see," observed Lord Semingham, "it's clearly a matter of money."

Tom nodded.

"Of course it is," said he; "it's not likely to be a question of anything else."

"Therefore the Germans have something worth paying for," continued Semingham.

"Well," amended Tom, "something Ruston thinks it worth his while to pay for, anyhow."

"That is to say they have treaties touching, or purporting to touch, Omofaga."

"And," added Harry Dennison, who did not lack a certain business shrewdness, "probably their Government behind them to some extent."

Tom flung himself into a chair.

"The thing's monstrous," he pronounced. "Semingham and you, Dennison, are, besides himself – and he's got nothing – the only people responsible up to now. And he asks you to give him an unlimited credit without giving you a word of information! It's the coolest thing I ever heard of in all my life."

"Of course he means the Company to pay in the end," Semingham reminded the hostile critic.

"Time enough to talk of the Company when we see it," retorted Tom, with an aggressive scepticism.

"Position critical! Hum. I suppose their treaties must be worth something," pursued Semingham. "Dennison, I can't be drained dry over this job."

Harry Dennison shook his head in a puzzled fashion.

"Carlin says it's all right," he remarked.

"Of course he does!" exclaimed Tom impatiently. "Two and two make five for him if Ruston says they do."

"Well, Tom, what's your advice?" asked Semingham.

"You must tell him to do nothing till he's seen you, or at least sent you full details of the position."

The two men nodded. Mrs. Dennison rose from her chair, walked to the window, and stood looking out.

"Loring just confirms what I thought," said Semingham.

"He says he must act at once," Harry reminded them; he was still wavering, and, as he spoke, he glanced uneasily at his wife; but there was nothing to show that she even heard the conversation.

"Oh, he hates referring to anybody," said Tom. "He's to have a free hand, and you're to pay the bill. That's his programme, and a very pretty one it is – for him."

Tom's *animus* was apparent, and Lord Semingham laughed gently.

"Still, you're right in substance," he conceded when the laugh was ended, and as he spoke he drew a sheet of notepaper towards him and took up a pen.

"We'd better settle just what to say," he observed. "Carlin will

be back in half an hour, and we promised to have it ready for him. What you suggest seems all right, Loring."

Tom nodded. Harry Dennison stood stock still for an instant and then said, with a sigh,

"I suppose so. He'll be furious – and I hope to God we shan't lose the whole thing."

Lord Semingham's pen-point was in actual touch with the paper before him, when Mrs. Dennison suddenly turned round and faced them. She rested one hand on the window-sash, and held the other up in a gesture which demanded attention.

"Are you really going to back out now?" she asked in a very quiet voice, but with an intonation of contempt that made all the three men raise their heads with the jerk of startled surprise. Lord Semingham checked the movement of his pen, and leant back in his chair, looking at her. Her face was a little flushed and she was breathing quickly.

"My dear," said Harry Dennison very apologetically, "do you think you quite understand – ?"

But Tom Loring's patience was exhausted. His interview with Adela left him little reserve of toleration; and the discovery of another and even worse case of Rustomania utterly overpowered his discretion.

"Mrs. Dennison," he said, "wants us to deliver ourselves, bound hand and foot, to this fellow."

"Well, and if I do?" she demanded, turning on him. "Can't you even follow, when you've found a man who can lead?"

And then, conscious perhaps of having been goaded to an excess of warmth by Tom's open scorn, she turned her face away.

"Lead, yes! Lead us to ruin!" exclaimed Tom.

"You won't be ruined, anyhow," she retorted quickly, facing round on him again, reckless in her anger how she might wound him.

"Tom's anxious for us, Maggie," her husband reminded her, and he laid his hand on Tom Loring's shoulder.

Tom's excitement was not to be soothed.

"Why are we all to be his instruments?" he demanded angrily.

"I should be proud to be," she said haughtily.

Her husband smiled in an uneasy effort after nonchalance, and Lord Semingham shot a quick glance at her out of his observant eyes.

"I should be proud of a friend like you if I were Ruston," he said gently, hoping to smooth matters a little.

Mrs. Dennison ignored his attempt.

"Can't you see?" she asked. "Can't you see that he's a man to — to do things? It's enough for us if we can help him."

She had forgotten her embarrassment; she spoke half in contempt, half in entreaty, wholly in an earnest urgency, that made her unconscious of any strangeness in her zeal. Harry looked uncomfortable. Semingham with a sigh blew a cloud of smoke from his cigarette.

Tom Loring sat silent. He stretched out his legs to their full length, rested the nape of his neck on the chair-back, and stared

up at the ceiling. His attitude eloquently and most rudely asserted folly – almost lunacy – in Mrs. Dennison. She noticed it and her eyes flashed, but she did not speak to him. She looked at Semingham and surprised an expression in his eyes that made her drop her own for an instant; she knew very well what he was thinking – what a man like him would think. But she recovered herself and met his glance boldly.

Harry Dennison sat down and slowly rubbed his brow with his handkerchief. Lord Semingham took up the pen and balanced it between his fingers. There was silence in the room for full three minutes. Then came a loud knock at the hall door.

"It's Carlin," said Harry Dennison.

No one else spoke, and for another moment there was silence. The steps of the butler and the visitor were already audible in the hall when Lord Semingham, with his own shrug and his own smile, as though nothing in the world were worth so much dispute or so much bitterness, said to Dennison,

"Hang it! Shall we chance it, Harry?"

Mrs. Dennison made one swift step forward towards him, her face all alight; but she stopped before she reached the table and turned to her husband. At the moment Carlin was announced. He entered with a rush of eagerness. Tom Loring did not move. Semingham wrote on his paper, —

"Use your discretion, but make every effort to keep down expenses. Wire progress."

"Will that do?" he asked, handing the paper to Harry

Dennison and leaning back with a smile on his face; and, though he handed the paper to Harry, he looked at Mrs. Dennison.

Mrs. Dennison was standing by her husband now, her arm through his. As he read she read also. Then she took the paper from his yielding hand and came and bent over the table, shoulder to shoulder with Lord Semingham. Taking the pen from his fingers, she dipped it in the ink, and with a firm dash she erased all save the first three words of the message. This done, she looked round into Semingham's face with a smile of triumph.

"Well, it'll be cheap to send, anyhow," said he.

He got up and motioned Carlin to take his place.

Mrs. Dennison walked back to the window, and he followed her there. They heard Carlin's cry of delight, and Harry Dennison beginning to make excuses and trying to find business reasons for what had been done. Suddenly Tom Loring leapt to his feet and strode swiftly out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Mrs. Dennison heard the sound with a smile of content. She seemed to have no misgivings and no regrets.

"Really," said Lord Semingham, sticking his eye-glass in his eye and regarding her closely, "you ought to be the Queen of Omofaga."

With her slim fingers she began to drum gently on the window-pane.

"I think there's a king already," she said, looking out into the street.

"Oh, yes, a king," he answered with a laugh.

Mrs. Dennison looked round. He did not stop laughing, and presently she laughed just a little herself.

"Oh, of course, it's always that in a woman, isn't it?" she asked sarcastically.

"Generally," he answered, unashamed.

She grew grave, and looked in his face almost – so it seemed to him – as though she sought there an answer to something that puzzled her. He gave her none. She sighed and drummed on the window again; then she turned to him with a sudden bright smile.

"I don't care; I'm glad I did it," she said defiantly.

CHAPTER VI

WHOSE SHALL IT BE?

Probably no one is always wrong; at any rate, Mr. Otto Heather was right now and then, and he had hit the mark when he accused Willie Ruston of "commercialism." But he went astray when he concluded, *per saltum*, that the object of his antipathy was a money-grubbing, profit-snatching, upper-hand-getting machine, and nothing else in the world. Probably, again, no one ever was. Ruston had not only feelings, but also what many people consider a later development – a conscience. And, whatever the springs on which his conscience moved, it acted as a restraint upon him. Both his feelings and his conscience would have told him that it would not do for him to delude his friends or the public with a scheme which was a fraud. He would have delivered this inner verdict in calm and temperate terms; it would have been accompanied by no disgust, no remorse, no revulsion at the idea having made its way into his mind; it was just that, on the whole, such a thing wouldn't do. The vagueness of the phrase faithfully embodied the spirit of the decision, for whether it wouldn't do, because it was in itself unseemly, or merely because, if found out, it would look unseemly, was precisely one of those curious points with which Mr. Ruston's practical intellect declined to trouble itself. If Omofaga had been a fraud, then Ruston would

have whistled it down the wind. But Omofaga was no fraud – in his hands at least no fraud. For, while he believed in Omofaga to a certain extent, Willie Ruston believed in himself to an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, extent. He thought Omofaga a fair security for anyone's money, but himself a superb one. Omofaga without him – or other people's Omofagas – might be a promising speculation; add him, and Omofaga became a certainty. It will be seen, then, that Mr. Heather's inspiration had soon failed – unless, that is, machines can see visions and dream dreams, and melt down hard facts in crucibles heated to seven times in the fires of imagination. But a man may do all this, and yet not be the passive victim of his dreams and imaginings. The old buccaneers – and Adela Ferrars had thought Ruston a buccaneer modernised – dreamt, but they sailed and fought too; and they sailed and fought and won because they dreamt. And if many of their dreams were tinted with the gleam of gold, they were none the less powerful and alluring for that.

Ruston had laid the whole position before Baron von Geltschmidt of Frankfort, with – as it seemed – the utmost candour. He and his friends were not deeply committed in the matter; there was, as yet, only a small syndicate; of course they had paid something for their rights, but, as the Baron knew (and Willie's tone emphasised the fact that he must know) the actual sums paid out of pocket in these cases were not of staggering magnitude; no company was formed yet; none would be, unless all went smoothly. If the Baron and his friends were sure of their

ground, and preferred to go on – why, he and his friends were not eager to commit themselves to a long and arduous contest. There must, he supposed, be a give-and-take between them.

"It looks," he said, "as far as I can judge, as if either we should have to buy you out, or you would have to buy us out."

"Perhaps," suggested the Baron, blinking lazily behind his gold spectacles, "we could get rid of you without buying you out."

"Oh, if you drove us to it, by refusing to treat, we should have a shot at that too, of course," laughed Willie Ruston, swallowing a glass of white wine. The Baron had asked him to discuss the matter over luncheon.

"It seems to me," observed the Baron, lighting a cigar, "that people are rather cold about speculations just now."

"I should think so; but this is not a speculation; it's a certainty."

"Why do you tell me that, when you want to get rid of me?"

"Because you won't believe it. Wasn't that Bismarck's way?"

"You are not Bismarck – and a certainty is what the public thinks one."

"Is that philosophy or finance?" asked Ruston, laughing again.

The Baron, who had in his day loved both the subjects referred to, drank a glass of wine and chuckled as he delivered himself of the following doctrine:

"What the public thinks a certainty, is a certainty for the public – that would be philosophy, eh?"

"I believe so. I never read much, and your extract doesn't raise my idea of its value."

"But what the public thinks a certainty, is a certainty – for the promoters – that is finance. You see the difference is simple."

"And the distinction luminous. This, Baron, seems to be the age of finance."

"Ah, well, there are still honest men," said the Baron, with the optimism of age.

"Yes, I'm one – and you're another."

"I'm much obliged. You've been in Omofaga?"

"Oh, yes. And you haven't, Baron."

"Friends of mine have."

"Yes. They came just after I left."

The Baron knew that this statement was true. As his study of Willie Ruston progressed, he became inclined to think that it might be important. Mere right (so far as such a thing could be given by prior treaties) was not of much moment; but right and Ruston together might be formidable. Now the Baron (and his friends were friends much in the way, *mutatis mutandis*, that Mr. Wagg and Mr. Wenham were friends of the Marquis of Steyne, and may therefore drop out of consideration) was old and rich, and, by consequence, at a great disadvantage with a man who was young and poor.

"I don't see the bearing of that," he observed, having paused for a moment to consider all its bearings.

"It means that you can't have Omofaga," said Willie Ruston. "You were too late, you see."

The Baron smoked and drank and laughed.

"You're a young fool, my boy – or something quite different," said he, laying a hand on his companion's arm. Then he asked suddenly, "What about Dennisons?"

"They're behind me if – "

"Well?"

"If you're not in front of me."

"But if I am, my son?" asked the Baron, almost caressingly.

"Then I leave for Omofaga by the next boat."

"Eh! And for what?"

"Never mind what. You'll find out when you come."

The Baron sighed and tugged his beard.

"You English!" said he. "Your Government won't help you."

"Damn my Government."

"You English!" said the Baron again, his tone struggling between admiration and a sort of oppression, while his face wore the look a man has who sees another push in front of him in a crowd, and wonders how the fellow works his way through.

There was a long pause. Ruston lit his pipe, and, crossing his arms on his breast, blinked at the sun; the Baron puffed away, shooting a glance now and then at his young friend, then he asked,

"Well, my boy, what do you offer?"

"Shares," answered Ruston composedly.

The Baron laughed. The impudence of the offer pleased him.

"Yes, shares, of course. And besides?"

Willie Ruston turned to him.

"I shan't haggle," he announced. "I'll make you one offer,

Baron, and it's an uncommon handsome offer for a trunk of waste paper."

"What's the offer?" asked the Baron, smiling with rich subdued mirth.

"Fifty thousand down, and the same in shares fully paid."

"Not enough, my son."

"All right," and Mr. Ruston rose. "Much obliged for your hospitality, Baron," he added, holding out his hand.

"Where are you going?" asked the Baron.

"Omofaga — *viâ* London."

The Baron caught him by the arm, and whispered in his ear,

"There's not so much in it, first and last."

"Oh, isn't there? Then why don't you take the offer?"

"Is it your money?"

"It's good money. Come, Baron, you've always liked the safe side," and Willie smiled down upon his host.

The Baron positively started. This young man stood over him and told him calmly, face-to-face, the secret of his life. It was true. How he had envied men of real nerve, of faith, of daring! But he had always liked the safe side. Hence he was very rich — and a rather weary old man.

Two days later, Willie Ruston took a cab from Lord Semingham's, and drove to Curzon Street. He arrived at twelve o'clock in the morning. Harry Dennison had gone to a Committee at the House. The butler had just told him so, when a voice cried from within,

"Is it you, Mr. Ruston?"

Mrs. Dennison was standing in the hall. He went in, and followed her into the library.

"Well?" she asked, standing by the table, and wasting no time in formal greetings.

"Oh, it's all right," said he.

"You got my telegram?"

"Your telegram, Mrs. Dennison?" said he with a smile.

"I mean – the telegram," she corrected herself, smiling in her turn.

"Oh, yes," said Ruston, and he took a step towards her. "I've seen Lord Semingham," he added.

"Yes? And these horrid Germans are out of the way?"

"Yes; and Semingham is letting his shooting this year."

She laughed, and glanced at him as she asked,

"Then it cost a great deal?"

"Fifty thousand!"

"Oh, then we can't take Lord Semingham's shooting, or anybody else's. Poor Harry!"

"He doesn't know yet?"

"Aren't you almost afraid to tell him, Mr. Ruston?"

"Aren't you, Mrs. Dennison?"

He smiled as he asked, and Mrs. Dennison lifted her eyes to his, and let them dwell there.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Will the money be lost?"

"Oh, I hope not; but money's always uncertain."

"The thing's not uncertain?"

"No; the thing's certain now."

She sat down with a sigh of satisfaction, and passed her hand over her broad brow.

"Why did you do it?" Ruston repeated; and she laughed nervously.

"I hate going back," she said, twisting her hands in her lap.

He had asked her the question which she had been asking herself without response.

He sat down opposite her, flinging his soft cloth hat – for he had not been home since his arrival in London – on the table.

"What a bad hat!" said Mrs. Dennison, touching it with the end of a forefinger.

"It's done a journey through Omofaga."

"Ah!" she laughed gently. "Dear old hat!"

"Thanks to you, it'll do another soon."

Mrs. Dennison sat up straight in her chair.

"You hope – ?" she began.

"To be on my way in six months," he answered in solid satisfaction.

"And for long?"

"It must take time."

"What must?"

"My work there."

She rose and walked to the window, as she had when she was

about to send the telegram. Now also she was breathing quickly, and the flush, once so rare on her cheeks, was there again.

"And we," she said in a low voice, looking out of the window, "shall just hear of you once a year?"

"We shall have regular mails in no time," said he. "Once a year, indeed! Once a month, Mrs. Dennison!"

With a curious laugh, she dashed the blind-tassel against the window. It was not for the sake of hearing of her that he wanted the mails. With a sudden impulse she crossed the room and stood opposite him.

"Do you care *that*," she asked, snapping her fingers, "for any soul alive? You're delighted to leave us all and go to Omofaga!"

Willie Ruston seemed not to hear; he was mentally organizing the mail service from Omofaga.

"I beg pardon?" he said, after a perceptible pause.

"Oh!" cried Maggie Dennison, and at last her tone caught his attention.

He looked up with a wrinkle of surprise on his brow.

"Why," said he, "I believe you're angry about something. You look just as you did on – on the memorable occasion."

"Uh, we aren't all Carlins!" she exclaimed, carried away by her feelings.

The least she had expected from him was grateful thanks; a homage tinged with admiration was, in truth, no more than her due; if she had been an ugly dull woman, yet she had done him a great service, and she was not an ugly dull woman. But then

neither was she Omofaga.

"If everybody was as good a fellow as old Carlin – " began Willie Ruston.

"If everybody was as useful and docile, you mean; as good a tool for you – "

At last it was too plain to be missed.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What are you pitching into me for, Mrs. Dennison?"

His words were ordinary enough, but at last he was looking at her, and the mails of Omofaga were for a moment forgotten.

"I wish I'd never made them send the wretched telegram," she flashed out passionately. "Much thanks I get!"

"You shall have a statue in the chief street of the chief town of – "

"How dare you! I'm not a girl to be chaffed."

The tears were standing in her eyes, as she threw herself back in a chair. Willie Ruston got up and stood by her.

"You'll be proud of that telegram some day," he said, rather as though he felt bound to pay her a compliment.

"Oh, you think that now?" she said, unconvinced of his sincerity.

"Yes. Though was it very difficult?" he asked with a sudden change of tone most depreciatory of her exploit.

She glanced at him and smiled joyfully. She liked the depreciation better than the compliment.

"Not a bit," she whispered, "for me."

He laughed slightly, and shut his lips close again. He began to understand Mrs. Dennison better.

"Still, though it was easy for you, it was precious valuable to me," he observed.

"And how you hate being obliged to me, don't you?"

He perceived that she understood him a little, but he smiled again as he asked,

"Oh, but what made you do it, you know?"

"You mean you did? Mr. Ruston, I should like to see you at work in Omofaga."

"Oh, a very humdrum business," said he, with a shrug.

"You'll have soldiers?"

"We shall call 'em police," he corrected, smiling.

"Yes; but they keep everybody down, and – and do as you order?"

"If not, I shall ask 'em why."

"And the natives?"

"Civilise 'em."

"You – you'll be governor?"

"Oh, dear, no. Local administrator."

She laughed in his face; and a grim smile from him seemed to justify her.

"I'm glad I sent the telegram," she half-whispered, lying back in the chair and looking up at him. "I shall have had something to do with all that, shan't I? Do you want any more money?"

"Look here," said Willie Ruston, "Omofaga's mine. I'll find

you another place, if you like, when I've put this job through."

A luxury of pleasure rippled through her laugh. She darted out her hand and caught his.

"No. I like Omofaga too!" she said, and as she said it, the door suddenly opened, and in walked Tom Loring – that is to say – in Tom Loring was about to walk; but when he saw what he did see, he stood still for a moment, and then, without a single word, either of greeting or apology, he turned his back, walked out again, and shut the door behind him. His entrance and exit were so quick and sudden, that Mrs. Dennison had hardly dropped Willie Ruston's hand before he was gone; she had certainly not dropped it before he came.

Willie Ruston sat down squarely in a chair. Mrs. Dennison's hot mood had been suddenly cooled. She would not ask him to go, but she glanced at the hat that had been through Omofaga. He detected her.

"I shall stay ten minutes," he observed.

She understood and nodded assent. Very little was said during the ten minutes. Mrs. Dennison seemed tired; her eyes dropped towards the ground, and she reclined in her chair. Ruston was frowning and thrumming at intervals on the table. But presently his brow cleared and he smiled. Mrs. Dennison saw him from under her drooping lids.

"Well?" she asked in a petulant tone.

"I believe you were going to fight me for Omofaga."

"I don't know what I was doing."

"Is that fellow a fool?"

"He's a much better man than you'll ever be, Mr. Ruston. Really you might go now."

"All right, I will. I'm going down to the city to see your husband and Carlin."

"I'm afraid I've wasted your time."

She spoke with a bitterness which seemed impossible to miss. But he appeared to miss it.

"Oh, not a bit, really," he assured her anxiously. "Good-bye," he added, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye. I've shaken hands once."

He waited a moment to see if she would speak again, but she said nothing. So he left her.

As he called a hansom, Mrs. Cormack was leaning over her balcony. She took a little jewelled watch out of her pocket and looked at it.

"An hour and a quarter!" she cried. "And I know the poor man isn't at home!"

CHAPTER VII

AN ATTEMPT TO STOP THE WHEELS

Miss Adela Ferrars lived in Queen's Gate, in company with her aunt, Mrs. Topham. Mrs. Topham's husband had been the younger son of a peer of ancient descent; and a practised observer might almost have detected the fact in her manner, for she took her station in this life as seriously as her position in the next, and, in virtue of it, assumed a responsibility for the morals of her inferiors which betrayed a considerable confidence in her own. But she was a good woman, and a widow of the pattern most opposite to that of Mrs. Cormack. She dwelt more truly in the grave of her husband than in Queen's Gate, and permitted herself no recreations except such as may privily creep into religious exercises and the ministrations of favourite clergymen; and it is pleasant to think that she was very happy. As may be supposed, however, Adela (who was a good woman in quite another way, and therefore less congenial with her aunt than any mere sinner could have been) and Mrs. Topham saw very little of one another, and would not have thought of living together unless each had been able to supply what the other wanted. Adela found money for the house, and Mrs. Topham lent the shelter of her name to her niece's unprotected condition. There were separate sitting-

rooms for the two ladies, and, if rumour were true (which, after all, it usually is not), a separate staircase for the clergy.

Adela was in her drawing-room one afternoon when Lord Semingham was announced. He appeared to be very warm, and he carried a bundle of papers in his hand. Among the papers there was one of those little smooth white volumes which epitomise so much of the joy and sorrow of this transitory life. He gave himself a shake, as he sat down, and held up the book.

"The car has begun to move," he observed.

"Juggernaut's?"

"Yes; and I have been to see my bankers. I take a trip to the seaside instead of a moor this year, and have let my own pheasant shooting."

He paused and added,

"Dennison has not taken my shooting. They go to the seaside too – with the children."

He paused again and concluded,

"The Omofaga prospectus will be out to-morrow."

Adela laughed.

"Bessie is really quite annoyed," remarked Lord Semingham. "I have seldom seen her so perturbed – but I've sent Ruston to talk to her."

"And why did you do it?" asked Adela.

"I should like to tell you a little history," said he.

And he told her how Mrs. Dennison had sent a telegram to Frankfort. This history was long, for Lord Semingham told it

dramatically, as though he enjoyed its quality. Yet Adela made no comment beyond asking,

"And wasn't she right?"

"Oh, for the Empire perhaps – for us, it means trips to the seaside."

He drew his chair a little nearer hers, and dropped his affectation of comic plaintiveness.

"A most disgusting thing has happened in Curzon Street," he said. "Have you heard?"

"No; I've seen nothing of Maggie lately. You've all been buried in Omofaga."

"Hush! No words of ill-omen, please! Well, it's annoyed me immensely I can't think what the foolish fellow means. Tom Loring's going."

"Tom – Loring – going?" she exclaimed with a punctuated pause between every word. "What in the world for?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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