

Hope Anthony

Second String



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Chapter I HOME AGAIN

Jack Rock stood in his shop in High Street. He was not very often to be seen there nowadays; he bred and bought, but he no longer killed, and rarely sold, in person. These latter and lesser functions he left to his deputy, Simpson, for he had gradually developed a bye-trade which took up much of his time, and was no less profitable than his ostensible business. He bought horses, "made" them into hunters, and sold them again. He was a rare judge and a fine rider, and his heart was in this line of work.

However to-day he was in his shop because the Christmas beef was on show. Here were splendid carcasses decked with blue rosettes, red rosettes, or cards of "Honourable Mention;" poor bodies sadly unconscious (as one may suppose all bodies are) of their posthumous glories. Jack Rock, a spruce spare little man with a thin red face and a get-up of the most "horsy" order, stood before them, expatiating to Simpson on their beauties. Simpson, who was as fat as his master was thin, and even redder in the face, chimed in; they were for all the world like a couple of critics hymning the praise of poets who have paid the debt of nature, but are decorated with the insignia of fame. Verily Jack Rock's shop in the days before Christmas might well seem an Abbey or a Pantheon of beasts.

"Beef for me on Christmas Day," said Jack. "None of your turkeys or geese, or such-like truck. Beef!" He pointed to a blue-rosetted carcass. "Look at him; just look at him! I've known him since he was calved. Cuts up well, doesn't he? I'll have a joint off him for my own table, Simpson."

"You couldn't do better, sir," said Simpson, just touching, careful not to bruise, the object of eulogy with his professional knife. A train of thought started suddenly in his brain. "Them vegetarians, sir!" he exclaimed. Was it wonder, or contempt, or such sheer horror as the devotee has for atheism? Or the depths of the first and the depths of the second poured into the depths of the third to make immeasurable profundity?

A loud burst of laughter came from the door of the shop. Nothing startled Jack Rock. He possessed in perfection a certain cheerful seriousness which often marks the amateurs of the horse. These men are accustomed to take chances, to encounter the unforeseen, to endure disappointment, to withstand the temptations of high success. *Mens Aequa!* Life, though a pleasant thing, is not a laughing matter. So Jack turned slowly and gravely round to see whence the irreverent interruption proceeded. But when he saw the intruder his face lit up, and he darted across the shop with outstretched hand. Simpson followed, hastily rubbing his right hand on the under side of his blue apron.

"Welcome, my lad, welcome home!" cried Jack, as he greeted with a hard squeeze a young man who stood in the doorway. "First-rate you look too. He's filled out, eh, Simpson?" He tapped the young man's chest appreciatively, and surveyed his broad and massive shoulders with almost professional admiration. "Canada's agreed with you, Andy. Have you just got here?"

"No; I got here two hours ago. You were out, so I left my bag and went for a walk round the old place. It seems funny to be in Meriton again."

"Come into the office. We must drink your health. You too, Simpson. Come along."

He led the way to a back room, where, amid more severe furniture and appliances, there stood a cask of beer. From this he filled three pint mugs, and Andy Hayes' health and safe return were duly honoured. Andy winked his eye.

"Them teetotallers!" he ejaculated, with a very fair imitation of Simpson, who acknowledged the effort with an answering wink as he drained his mug and then left the other two to themselves.

"Yes, I've been poking about everywhere – first up to have a look at the old house. Not much changed there – well, except that everything's changed by the dear old governor's not being there any more."

"Ah, it was a black Christmas that year – four years ago now. First, the old gentleman; then poor Nancy, a month later. She caught the fever nursin' him; she would do it, and I couldn't stop her. Did you go to the churchyard, Andy?"

"Yes, I went there." After a moment's grave pause his face brightened again. "And I went to the old school. Nobody there – it's holidays, of course – but how everything came back to me! There was my old seat, between Chinks and the Bird – you know? Wat Money, I mean, and young Tom Dove."

"Oh, they're both in the place still. Tom Dove's helpin' his father at the Lion, and Wat Money's articled to old Mr. Foulkes the lawyer."

"I sat down at my old desk, and, by Jove, I absolutely seemed to hear the old governor talking – talking about the Pentathlon. You've heard him talk about the Pentathlon? He was awfully keen on the Pentathlon; wanted to have it at the sports. I believe he thought I should win it."

"I don't exactly remember what it was, but you'd have had a good go for it, Andy."

"Leaping, running, wrestling, throwing the discus, hurling the spear – I think that's right. He was talking about it the very last day I sat at that desk – eight years ago! Yes, it's eight years since I went out to the war, and nearly five since I went to Canada. And I've never been back! Well, except for not seeing him and Nancy again, I'm glad of it. I've done better out there. There wasn't any opening here. I wasn't clever, and if I had been, there was no money to send me to Oxford, though the governor was always dreaming of that."

"Naturally, seein' he was B.A. Oxon, and a gentleman himself," said Jack.

He spoke in a tone of awe and admiration. Andy looked at him with a smile. Among the townfolk of Meriton Andy's father had always been looked up to by reason of the letters after his name on the prospectus of the old grammar school, of which he had been for thirty years the hard-worked and very ill-paid headmaster. In Meriton eyes the letters carried an academical distinction great if obscure, a social distinction equally great and far more definite. They ranked Mr. Hayes with the gentry, and their existence had made his second marriage – with Jack Rock the butcher's sister – a *mésalliance* of a pronounced order. Jack himself was quite of this mind. He had always treated his brother-in-law with profound respect; even his great affection for his sister had never quite persuaded him that she had not been guilty of gross presumption in winning Mr. Hayes' heart. He could not, even as the second Mrs. Hayes' brother, forget the first – Andy's mother; for she, though the gentlest of women, had always called Jack "Butcher." True, that was in days before Jack had won his sporting celebrity and set up his private gig; but none the less it would have seemed impossible to conceive of a family alliance – even a posthumous one – with a lady whose recognition of him was so exclusively commercial.

"Well, I'm not a B.A. – Oxon. or otherwise," laughed Andy. "I don't know whether I'm a gentleman. If I am, so are you. Meriton Grammar School is responsible for us both. And if you're in trade, so am I. What's the difference between timber and meat?"

"I expect there's a difference between Meriton and Canada, though," Jack Rock opined shrewdly. "Are you goin' to stay at home, or goin' back?"

"I shall stay here if I can develop the thing enough to make it pay to have a man on this side. If not, pack up! But I shall be here for the next six months anyway, I expect."

"What's it worth to you?" asked Jack.

"Oh, nothing much just now. Two hundred a year guaranteed, and a commission – if it's earned. But it looks like improving. Only the orders must come in before the commission does! However it's not so bad; I'm lucky to have found a berth at all."

"Yes, lucky thing you got pals with that Canadian fellow down in South Africa."

"A real stroke of luck. It was a bit hard to make up my mind not to come home with the boys, but I'm sure I did the right thing. Only I'm sorry about the old governor and Nancy."

"The old gentleman himself told me he thought you'd done right."

"It was an opening; and it had to be taken or left, then and there. So here I am, and I'm going to start an office in London."

Jack Rock nodded thoughtfully; he seemed to be revolving something in his mind. Andy's eyes rested affectionately on him. The two had been great friends all through Andy's boyhood. Jack had been "Jack" to him long before he became a family connection, and "Jack" he had continued to be. As for the *mésalliance*— well, looking back, Andy could not with candour deny that it had been a surprise, perhaps even a shock. It had to some degree robbed him of the exceptional position he held in the grammar school, where, among the sons of tradesmen, he alone, or almost alone, enjoyed a vague yet real social prestige. The son shared the father's fall. The feeling of caste is very persistent, even though it may be shamed into silence by modern doctrines, or by an environment in which it is an alien plant. But he had got over his boyish feeling now, and was delighted to come back to Meriton as Jack Rock's visitor, and to stay with him at the comfortable little red-brick house adjoining the shop in High Street. In fact he flattered himself that his service in the ranks and his Canadian experiences had taken the last of "that sort of nonsense" out of him. It was, perhaps, a little too soon to pronounce so confident a judgment.

Andy was smitten with a sudden compunction. "Why, I've never asked after Harry Belfield!" he cried.

He was astonished at his own disloyalty. Harry Belfield had been the hero of his youth, his ideal, his touchstone of excellence in all things, the standard by which he humbly measured his own sore deficiencies, and contemptuously assessed the demerits of his schoolfellows. Of these Harry had not been one. No grammar school for him! He was the son of Mr. Belfield of Halton Park – Harrow and Oxford were the programme for him. The same favourable conditions gave him the opportunity – which, of course, he took – of excelling in all the accomplishments that Andy lacked and envied – riding, shooting, games of skill that cost money. The difference of position set a gulf between the two boys. Meetings had been rare events – to Andy always notable events, occasions of pleasure and of excitement, landmarks in memory. The acquaintance between the houses had been of the slightest. In Andy's earliest days Mr. and the first Mrs. Hayes had dined once a year with Mr. and Mrs. Belfield; they were not expected to return the hospitality. After Andy's mother died and Nancy came on the scene, the annual dinner had gone on, but it had become a men's dinner; and Mrs. Belfield, though she bowed in the street, had not called on the second Mrs. Hayes – Nancy Rock that had been. It was not to be expected. Yet Mr. Belfield had recognized an equal in Andy's father; he also, perhaps, yielded some homage to the B.A. Oxon. And Harry, though he undoubtedly drew a line between himself and Andy, drew another between Andy and Andy's schoolfellows, Chinks, the Bird, and the rest. He was rewarded – and to his worship-loving nature it was a reward – by an adoration due as much, perhaps, to the first line as to the second. The more definite a line, the more graciousness lies in stepping over it.

These boyish devotions are common, and commonly are short-lived. But Andy's habit of mind was stable and his affections tenacious. He still felt that a meeting with Harry Belfield would be an event.

"He's all right," Jack Rock answered, his tone hardly responding to Andy's eagerness. "He's a barrister now, you know; but I don't fancy he does much at it. Better at spendin' money than makin' it! If you want to see him, you can do it to-night."

"Can I? How?"

"There's talk of him bein' candidate for the Division next election, and he's goin' to speak at a meeting in the Town Hall to-night, him and a chap in Parliament."

"Good! Which side is he?"

"You've been a good while away to ask that!"

"I suppose I have. I say, Jack, let's go."

"You can go; I shan't," said Jack Rock. "You'll get back in time for supper – and need it too, I should say. I never listen to speeches except when they put me on a jury at assizes. Then I do like to hear a chap fight for his man. That's racin', that is; and I like specially, Andy, to see him bring it off when the odds are against him. But this politics – in my opinion, if you put their names in a hat and drew 'em blindfolded, you'd get just as good a Gover'nment as you do now, or just as bad."

"Oh, I'm not going for the politics. I'm going to hear Harry Belfield."

"The only question as particularly interests me," said Jack, with one of his occasional lapses into doubtful grammar, "is the matter of chilled meat. But which of 'em does anything for me there? One says 'Free Trade – let it all come!' The other says, 'No chilled meat, certainly not, unless it comes from British possessions' – which is where it does come from mostly. And it's ruin to the meat, Andy, in my opinion. I hate to see it. Not that I lose much by it, havin' a high-class connection. Would you like to have another look in the shop?"

"Suppose we say to-morrow morning?" laughed Andy.

Jack shook his head; he seemed disappointed at this lack of enthusiasm. "I've got some beauties this Christmas," he said. "All the same I shan't be lookin' at 'em much to-morrow mornin'! I've got a young horse, and I want just to show him what a foxhound's like. The meet's at Fyfold to-morrow, Andy. I wish I could mount you. I expect you ride fourteen, eh?"

"Hard on it, I fancy – and I'm a fool on a horse anyhow. But I shall go – on shanks' mare."

"Will you now? Well, if you're as good on your legs as you used to be, it's odds you'll see a bit of the run. I recollect you in the old days, Andy; you were hard to shake off unless the goin' was uncommon good. Knew the country, you did, and where the fox was likely to make for. And I don't think you'll get the scent too good for you to-morrow. Come along and have tea. Oh, but you're a late-dinner man, eh?"

"Dinner when, where, and how it comes! Tea sounds capital – with supper after my meeting. I say, Jack, it's good to see you again!"

"Wish you'd stay here, lad. I'm much alone these days – with the old gentleman gone, and poor Nancy gone!"

"Perhaps I shall. Anyhow I might stay here for the summer, and go up to town to the office."

"Aye, you might do that, anyhow." Again Jack Rock seemed meditative, as though he had an idea and were half-minded to disclose it. But he was a man of caution; he bided his time.

Andy – nobody had ever called him Andrew since the parson who christened him – seemed to himself to have got home again, very thoroughly home again. Montreal with its swelling hill, its mighty river, its winter snow, its Frenchness, its opposing self-defensive, therefore self-assertive, Britishness, was very remote. A talk with Jack Rock, a Conservative meeting with a squire in the chair (that was safely to be assumed), a meet of the hounds next morning – these and a tide of intimate personal memories stamped him as at home again. The long years in the little house at the extreme end of Highcroft – Highcroft led out of High Street, tending to the west, Fyfold way – in the old grammar school, in the peace of the sleepy town – had been a poignant memory in South Africa, a fading dream in the city by the great river. They sprang again into actuality. If he felt a certain contraction in his horizon he felt also a peace in his mind. Meriton might or might not admire "hustlers;" it did not hustle itself. It was a parasitic little town; it had no manufactures, no special industry. It lived on the country surrounding it – on the peasants, the farmers, the landowners. So it did not grow; neither did it die. It remained much as it had been for hundreds of years, save that it was seriously considering the introduction of electric light.

The meeting was rather of an impromptu order; Christmas holidays are generally held sacred from such functions. But Mr. Foot, M.P., a rising young member and a friend of Harry Belfield's,

happened to be staying at Halton Park for shooting. Why waste him? He liked to speak, and he spoke very well. The more Harry showed himself and got himself heard, the better. The young men would enjoy it. A real good dinner beforehand would send them down in rare spirits. A bit of supper, with a whisky-and-soda or two, and recollections of their own "scores," would end the evening pleasantly. Meriton would not be excited – it was not election time – but it would be amused, benevolent, and present in sufficiently large numbers to make the thing go with *éclat*.

There was, indeed, one topic which, from a platform at all events, one could describe as "burning." A Bill dealing with the sale of intoxicating liquor had, the session before, been introduced as the minimum a self-respecting nation could do, abused as the maximum fanatics could clamour for, carried through a second reading considerably amended, and squeezed out by other matters. It was to be re-introduced. The nation was recommended to consider the question in the interval. Now the nation, though professing its entire desire to be sober – it could not well do anything else – was not sure that it desired to be made sober, was not quite clear as to the precise point at which it could or could not be held to be sober, and felt that the argument that it would, by the gradual progress of general culture, become sober in the next generation or so – without feeling the change, so to say, and with no violent break in the habits of this generation (certainly everybody must wish the next generation to be sober) – that this argument, which men of indisputable wisdom adduced, had great attractions. Also the nation was much afraid of the teetotallers, especially of the subtle ones who said that true freedom lay in freedom from temptation. The nation thought that sort of freedom not much worth having, whether in the matter of drink or of any other pleasure. So there were materials for a lively and congenial discussion, and Mr. Foot, M.P., was already in the thick of it when Andy Hayes, rather late by reason of having been lured into the stables to see the hunters after tea, reached the Town Hall and sidled his way to a place against the wall in good view of the platform and of the front benches where the big-wigs sat. The Town Hall was quite two-thirds full – very good indeed for the Christmas season!

Andy Hayes was not much of a politician. Up to now he had been content with the politics of his *métier*, the politics of a man trying to build up a business. But it was impossible not to enjoy Mr. Foot. He riddled the enemy with epigram till he fell to the earth, then he jumped on to his prostrate form and chopped it to pieces with logic. He set his audience wondering – this always happens at political meetings, whichever party may be in power – by what odd freak of fate, by what inexplicable blunder, the twenty men chosen to rule the country should be not only the twenty most unprincipled but also the twenty stupidest in it. Mr. Foot demonstrated the indisputable truth of this strange fact so cogently before he had been on his legs twenty minutes that gradually Andy felt absolved from listening any longer to so plain a matter; his attention began to wander to the company. It was a well-to-do audience – there were not many poor in Meriton. A few old folk might have to go to "the house," but there were no distress or "unemployment" troubles. The tradesfolk, their families, and employees formed the bulk. They were presided over by Mr. Wellgood of Nutley, who might be considered to hold the place of second local magnate, after Mr. Belfield of Halton. He was a spare, strongly built man of two or three and forty; his hair was clipped very close to his head; he wore a bristly moustache just touched with gray, but it too was kept so short that the lines of his mouth, with its firm broad lips, were plain to see; his eyes were light-blue, hard, and wary; they seemed to keep a constant watch over the meeting, and once, when a scuffle arose among some children at the back of the hall, they gave out a fierce and formidable glance of rebuke. He had the reputation of being a strict master and a stern magistrate; but he was a good sportsman, and Jack Rock's nearest rival after the hounds.

Beside him, waiting his turn to speak and seeming rather nervous – he was not such an old hand at the game as Mr. Foot – sat Andy's hero, Harry Belfield. He was the pet of the town for his gay manner, good looks, and cheery accessibility to every man – and even more to every woman. His youthful record was eminently promising, his career the subject of high hopes to his family and his fellow-citizens. Tall and slight, wearing his clothes with an elegance free from affectation, he

suggested "class" and "blood" in every inch of him. He was rather pale, with thick, soft, dark hair; his blue eyes were vivacious and full of humour, his mouth a little small, but delicate and sensitive, the fingers of his hands long and tapering. "A thoroughbred" was the only possible verdict – evidently also a man full of sensibility, awake to the charms of life as well as to its labours; that was in keeping with all Andy's memories.

The moment he rose it was obvious with what favour he was regarded; the audience was predisposed towards all he said. He was not so epigrammatic nor so cruelly logical as Mr. Foot; he was easier, more colloquial, more confidential; he had some chaff for his hearers as well as denunciation for his enemies; his speech was seasoned now by a local allusion, now by a sporting simile. A veteran might have found its strongest point of promise in its power of adaptation to the listeners, its gift of creating sympathy between them and the speaker by the grace of a very attractive personality. It was a success, perhaps, more of charm than of strength; but it may be doubted whether in the end the one does not carry as far as the other.

On good terms as he was with them all, it soon became evident to so interested an onlooker as Andy Hayes that he was on specially good terms, or at any rate anxious to be, in one particular quarter. After he had made a point and was waiting for the applause to die down, not once but three or four times he smiled directly towards the front row, and towards that part of it where two young women sat side by side. They were among his most enthusiastic auditors, and Andy presently found himself, by a natural leaning towards any one who admired Harry Belfield, according to them a share of the attention which had hitherto been given exclusively to the hero himself.

The pair made a strong contrast. There was a difference of six or seven years only in their ages, but while the one seemed scarcely more than a child, it was hard to think of the other as even a girl – there was about her such an air of self-possession, of conscious strength, of a maturity of faculties. Even in applauding she seemed also to judge and assess. Her favour was discriminating; she let the more easy hits go by with a slight, rather tolerant smile, while her neighbour greeted them with outright merry laughter. She was not much beyond medium height, but of full build, laid on ample lines; her features were rather large, and her face wore, in repose, a thoughtful tranquillity. The other, small, frail, and delicate, with large eyes that seemed to wonder even as she laughed, would turn to her friend with each laugh and appear to ask her sympathy – or even her permission to be pleased.

Andy's scrutiny – somewhat prolonged since it yielded him all the above particulars – was ended by his becoming aware that he in his turn was the object of an attention not less thoroughgoing. Turning back to the platform, he found the chairman's hard and alert eyes fixed on him in a gaze that plainly asked who he was and why he was so much interested in the two girls. Andy blushed in confusion at being caught, but Mr. Wellgood made no haste to relieve him from his rebuking glance. He held him under it for full half a minute, turning away, indeed, only when Harry sat down among the cheers of the meeting. What business was it of Wellgood's if Andy did forget his manners and stare too hard at the girls? The next moment Andy laughed at himself for the question. In a sudden flash he remembered the younger girl. She was Wellgood's daughter Vivien. He recalled her now as a little child; he remembered the wondering eyes and the timidly mirthful curl of her lips. Was it really as long ago as that since he had been in Meriton? However childlike she might look, now she was grown-up!

His thoughts, which carried him through the few sentences with which the chairman dismissed the meeting, were scattered by the sudden grasp of Harry Belfield's hand. The moment he saw Andy he ran down from the platform to him. His greeting was all his worshipper could ask.

"Well now, I am glad to see you back!" he cried. "Oh, we all heard how well you'd done out at the front, and we thought it too bad of you not to come back and be lionized. But here you are at last, and it's all right. I must take Billy Foot home now – he's got to go to town at heaven knows what hour in the morning – but we must have a good jaw soon. Are you at the Lion?"

"No," said Andy, "I'm staying a day or two with Jack Rock."

"With Jack Rock?" Harry's voice sounded surprised. "Oh yes, of course, I remember! He's a capital chap, old Jack! But if you're going to stay – and I hope you are, old fellow – you'll want some sort of a place of your own, won't you? Well, good-night. I'll hunt you up some time in the next day or two, for certain. Did you like my speech?"

"Yes, and I expected you to make a good one."

"You shall hear me make better ones than that. Well, I really must – All right, Billy, I'm coming." With another clasp of the hand he rushed after Mr. Foot, who was undisguisedly in a hurry, shouting as he went, "Good-night, Wellgood! Good-night, Vivien! Good-night, Miss Vintry!"

Miss Vintry – that was the other girl, the one with Vivien Wellgood. Andy was glad to know her name and docket her by it in her place among the impressions of the evening.

So home to a splendid round of cold beef and another pint of that excellent beer at Jack Rock's. What days life sometimes gives – or used to!

Chapter II

A VERY LITTLE HUNTING

If more were needed to make a man feel at home – more than old Meriton itself, Jack Rock with his beef, and the clasp of Harry Belfield's hand – the meet of the hounds supplied it. There were hunts in other lands; Andy could not persuade himself that there were meets like this, so entirely English it seemed in the manner of it. Everybody was there, high and low, rich and poor, young and old. An incredible coincidence of unplausible accidents had caused an extraordinary number of people to have occasion to pass by Fyfold Green that morning at that hour, let alone all the folk who chanced to have a "morning off" and proposed to see some of the run, on horseback or on foot. The tradesmen's carts were there in a cluster, among them two of Jack Rock's: his boys knew that a blind eye would be turned to half an hour's lateness in the delivery of the customers' joints. For centre of the scene were the waving tails, the glossy impatient horses, the red coats, the Master himself, Lord Meriton, in his glory and, it may be added, in the peremptory mood which is traditionally associated with his office.

Andy Hayes moved about, meeting many old friends – more, indeed, than he recognized, till a reminiscence of old days established for them again a place in his memory. He saw Tom Dove – the Bird – mounted on a showy screw. Wat Money – Chinks – was one of those who "happened to be passing" on his way to a client's who lived in the opposite direction. He gave Andy a friendly greeting, and told him that if he thought of taking a house in Meriton, he should be careful about his lease: Foulkes, Foulkes, and Askew would look after it. Jack Rock was there, of course, keeping himself to himself, on the outskirts of the throng: the young horse was nervous. Harry Belfield, in perfect array, talked to Vivien Wellgood, her father on a raking hunter close beside them. A great swell of home-feeling assailed Andy; suddenly he had a passionate hope that the timber business would develop; he did not want to go back to Canada.

It was a good hunting morning, cloudy and cool, with the wind veering to the north-east and dropping as it veered. No frost yet, but the weather-wise predicted one before long. The scent should be good – a bit too good, Andy reflected, for riders on shanks' mare. Their turn is best served by a scent somewhat variable and elusive. A check here and there, a fresh cast, the hounds feeling for the scent – these things, added to a cunning use of short cuts and a knowledge of the country shared by the fox, aid them to keep on terms and see something of the run – just as they aid the heavy old gentlemen on big horses and the small boys on fat ponies to get their humble share of the sport.

But in truth Andy cared little so that he could run – run hard, fast, and long. His powerful body craved work, work, and work yet more abundantly. His way of indulging it was to call on it for all its energies; he exulted in feeling its brave response. Fatigue he never knew – at least not till he had changed and bathed; and then it was not real fatigue: it was no more than satiety. Now when they had found – and they had the luck to find directly – he revelled in the heavy going of a big ploughed field. He was at the game he loved.

Yes, but the pace was good – distinctly good. The spirit was willing, but human legs are but human, and only two in number. Craft was required. The fox ran straight now – but had he never a thought in his mind? The field streamed off to the right, lengthening out as it went. Andy bore to his left: he remembered Croxton's Dip. Did the fox? That was the question. If he did, the hunt would describe the two sides of a triangle, while Andy cut across the base.

He was out of sight of the field now, but he could hear the hounds giving tongue from time to time and the thud of the hoofs. The sounds grew nearer! A thrill of triumph ran through him; his old-time knowledge had not failed him. The fox had doubled back, making for Croxton's Dip. Over the edge of yonder hill it lay, half a mile off – a deep depression in the ground, covered with thick

undergrowth. In the hope of catching up, Andy Hayes felt that he could run all day and grudge the falling of an over-hasty night.

"Blown," indeed, but no more than a rest of a minute would put right, he reached the ledge whence the ground sloped down sharply to the Dip. He was in time to see the hunt race past him along the bottom – leaders, the ruck, stragglers. Jack Rock and Wellgood were with the Master in the van; he could not make out Harry Belfield; a forlorn figure looking like the Bird laboured far in the rear.

They swept into the Dip as Andy started to race down the slope. But to his chagrin they swept out of it again, straight up a long slope which rose on his left, the fox running game, a near kill promising, a fast point-to-point secured. The going was too good for shanks' mare to-day. Before he got to the bottom even the Bird had galloped by, walloping his showy screw.

To the left, then, and up that long slope! There was nothing else for it, if he were so much as to see the kill from afar. This was exercise, if you like! His heart throbbed like the engines of a great ship; the sweat broke out on him. Oh, it was fine! That slope must be won – then Heaven should send the issue!

Suddenly – even as he braced himself to face the long ascent, as the last sounds from the hunt died away over its summit – he saw a derelict, and, amazed, came to a full stop.

The girl was not on her pony; she was standing beside it. The pony appeared distressed, and the girl looked no whit more cheerful. With a pang to the very heart, Andy Hayes recognized a duty, and acknowledged it by a snatch at his cap.

"I beg your pardon; anything wrong?" he asked.

He had been interested in Vivien Wellgood the evening before, but he was much more than interested in the hunt. Still, she looked forlorn and desolate.

"Would you mind looking at my pony's right front leg?" she asked. "I think he's gone lame."

"I know nothing about horses, but he does seem to stand rather gingerly on his – er – right front leg. And he's certainly badly blown – worse than I am!"

"We shall never catch them, shall we? It's not the least use going on, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I know the country; if you'd let me pilot you –"

"Harry Belfield was going to pilot me, but – well, I told him not to wait for me, and he didn't. You were at the meeting last night, weren't you? You're Mr. Hayes, aren't you? What did you think of the speeches?"

"Really, you know, if we're to have a chance of seeing any more of the –" It was not the moment to discuss political speeches, however excellent.

"I don't want to see any more of it. I'll go home; I'll risk it."

"Risk what?" he asked. There seemed no risk in going home; and there was, by now, small profit in going on.

She did not answer his question. "I think hunting's the most wretched amusement I've ever tried!" she broke out. "The pony's lame – yes, he is; I've torn my habit" (she exhibited a sore rent); "I've scratched my face" (her finger indicated the wound); "and here I am! All I hope is that they won't catch that poor fox. How far do you think it is to Nutley?"

"Oh, about three miles, I should think. You could strike the road half a mile from here."

"I'm sure the pony's lame. I shall go back."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

During their talk her eyes had wavered between indignation and piteousness – the one at the so-called sport of hunting, the other for her own woes. At Andy's question a gleam of welcome flashed into them, followed in an instant by a curious sort of veiling of all expression. She made a pathetic little figure, with her habit sorely rent and a nasty red scratch across her forehead. The pony lame too – if he were lame! Andy hit on the idea that it was a question whether he were lame enough to swear by: that was what she was going to risk – in a case to be tried before some tribunal to which she was amenable.

"But don't you want to go on?" she asked. "You're enjoying it, aren't you?" The question carried no rebuke; it recognized as legitimate the widest differences of taste.

"I haven't the least chance of catching up with them. I may as well come back with you."

The curious expression – or rather eclipse of expression – was still in her eyes, a purely negative defensiveness that seemed as though it could spring only from an instinctive resolve to show nothing of her feelings. The eyes were a dark blue; but with Vivien's eyes colour never counted for much, nor their shape, nor what one would roughly call their beauty, were it more or less. Their meaning – that was what they set a man asking after.

"It really would be very kind of you," she said.

Andy mounted her on the suppositiously lame pony – her weight wouldn't hurt him much, anyhow – and they set out at a walk towards the highroad which led to Nutley and thence, half a mile farther on, to Meriton.

She was silent till they reached the road. Then she asked abruptly, "Are you ever afraid?"

"Well, you see," said Andy, with a laugh, "I never know whether I'm afraid or only excited – in fighting, I mean. Otherwise I don't fancy I'm either often."

"Well, you're big," she observed. "I'm afraid of pretty nearly everything – horses, dogs, motor-cars – and I'm passionately afraid of hunting."

"You're not big, you see," said Andy consolingly. Indeed her hand on the reins looked almost ridiculously small.

"I've got to learn not to be afraid of things. My father's teaching me. You know who I am, don't you?"

"Oh yes; why, I remember you years ago! Is that why you're out hunting?"

"Yes."

"And why you think that the pony – ?"

"Is lame enough to let me risk going home? Yes." There was a hint of defiance in her voice. "You must think what you like," she seemed to say.

Andy considered the matter in his impartial, solid, rather slowly moving mind. It was foolish to be frightened at such things; it must be wholesome to be taught not to be. Still, hunting wasn't exactly a moral duty, and the girl looked very fragile. He had not arrived at any final decision on the case – on the issue whether the girl were silly or the father cruel (the alternatives might not be true alternatives, not strictly exclusive of one another) – before she spoke again.

"And then I'm fastidious. Are you?"

"I hope not!" said Andy, with an amused chuckle. A great lump of a fellow like him fastidious!

"Father doesn't like that either, and I've got to get over it."

"How does it – er – take you?" Andy made bold to inquire.

"Oh, lots of ways. I hate dirt, and dust, and getting very hot, and going into butchers' shops, and –"

"Butchers' shops!" exclaimed Andy, rather hit on the raw. "You eat meat, don't you?"

"Things don't look half as dead when they're cooked. I couldn't touch a butcher!" Horror rang in her tones.

"Oh, but I say, Jack Rock's a butcher, and he's about the best fellow in Meriton. You know him?"

"I've seen him," she admitted reluctantly, the subject being evidently distasteful.

For the second time Andy Hayes was conscious of a duty: he must not be – or seem – ashamed of Jack Rock, just because this girl was fastidious.

"I'm related to him, you know. My stepmother was his sister. And I'm staying in his house."

She glanced at him, a slight flush rising to her cheeks; he saw that her lips trembled a little.

"It's no use trying to unsay things, is it?" she asked.

"Not a bit," laughed Andy. "Don't think I'm hurt; but I should be a low-down fellow if I didn't stand up for old Jack."

"I should rather like to have you to stand up for me sometimes," she said, and broke into a smile as she added, "You're so splendidly solid, you see, Mr. Hayes. Here we are at home – you may as well make a complete thing of it and see me as far as the stables."

"I'd like to come in – I'm not exactly a stranger here. I've often been a trespasser. Don't tell Mr. Wellgood unless you think he'll forgive me, but as a boy I used to come and bathe in the lake early in the morning – before anybody was up. I used to undress in the bushes and slip in for my swim pretty nearly every morning in the summer. It's fine bathing, but you want to be able to swim; there's a strong undercurrent, where the stream runs through. Are you fond of bathing?"

Andy was hardly surprised when she gave a little shudder. "No, I'm rather afraid of water." She added quickly, "Don't tell my father, or I expect I should have to try to learn to swim. He hasn't thought of that yet. No more has Isobel – Miss Vintry, my companion. You know? You saw her at the meeting. I have a companion now, instead of a governess. Isobel isn't afraid of anything, and she's here to teach me not to be."

"You don't mind my asking your father to let me come and swim, if I'm here in the summer?"

"I don't suppose I ought to mind that," she said doubtfully.

The house stood with its side turned to the drive by which they approached it from the Meriton road. Its long, low, irregular front – it was a jumble of styles and periods – faced the lake, a stone terrace running between the façade and the water; it was backed by a thick wood; across the lake the bushes grew close down to the water's edge. The drive too ran close by the water, deep water as Andy was well aware, and was fenced from it by a wooden paling, green from damp. The place had a certain picturesqueness, but a sadness too. Water and trees – trees and water – and between them the long squat house. To Andy it seemed to brood there like a toad. But his healthy mind reverted to the fact that for a strong swimmer the bathing was really splendid.

"Here comes Isobel! Now nothing about swimming, and say the pony's lame!"

The injunction recalled Andy from his meditations and also served to direct his attention to Miss Vintry, who stood, apparently waiting for them, at the end of the drive, with the house on her right and the stables on her left. She was dressed in a business-like country frock, rather noticeably short, and carried a stick with a spike at the end of it. She looked very efficient and also very handsome.

Vivien told her story: Andy, not claiming expert knowledge, yet stoutly maintained that the pony was – or anyhow had been – lame.

"He seems to be getting over it," said Miss Vintry, with a smile that was not malicious but was, perhaps, rather annoyingly amused. "I'm afraid your having had to turn back will vex your father, but I suppose there was no help for it, and I'm sure he'll be much obliged to –"

"Mr. Hayes." Vivien supplied the name, and Andy made his bow.

"Oh yes, I've heard Mr. Harry Belfield speak of you." Her tone was gracious, and she smiled at Andy good-humouredly. If she confirmed his impression of capability, and perhaps added a new one of masterfulness, there was at least nothing to hint that her power would not be well used or that her sway would be other than benevolent.

Vivien had dismounted, and a stable-boy was leading the pony away, after receiving instructions to submit the suspected off fore-leg to his chief's inspection. There seemed nothing to keep Andy, and he was about to take his leave when Miss Vintry called to the retreating stable-boy, "Oh, and let Curly out, will you? He hasn't had his run this afternoon."

Vivien turned her head towards the stables with a quick apprehensive jerk. A big black retriever, released in obedience to Isobel Vintry's order, ran out, bounding joyously. He leapt up at Isobel, pawing her and barking in an ecstasy of delight. In passing Andy, the stranger, he gave him another bark of greeting and a hasty pawing; then he clumsily gambolled on to where Vivien stood.

"He won't hurt you, Vivien. You know he won't hurt you, don't you?" The dog certainly seemed to warrant Isobel's assertion; he appeared a most good-natured animal, though his play was rough.

"Yes, I know he won't hurt me," said Vivien.

The dog leapt up at her, barking, frisking, pawing her, trying to reach her face to lick it. She made no effort to repel him; she had a little riding-whip in her hand, but she did not use it; her arms hung at her side; she was rather pale.

"There! It's not so terrible after all, is it?" asked Isobel. "Down, Curly, down! Come here!"

The dog obeyed her at her second bidding, and sat down at her feet. Andy was glad to see that the ordeal – for that was what it looked like – was over, and had been endured with tolerable fortitude; he had not enjoyed the scene. Somewhat to his surprise Vivien's lips curved in a smile.

"Somehow I wasn't nearly so frightened to-day," she said. Apparently the ordeal was a daily one – perhaps one of several daily ones, for she had already been out hunting. "I didn't run away as I did yesterday, when Harry Belfield was here."

"You are getting used to it," Isobel affirmed. "Mr. Wellgood's quite right. We shall have you as brave as a lion in a few months." Her tone was not unkind or hard, neither was it sympathetic. It was just extremely matter-of-fact. "It's all nerves," she added to Andy. "She overworked herself at school – she's very clever, aren't you, Vivien? – and now she's got to lead an open-air life. She must get used to things, mustn't she?"

Andy had a shamefaced feeling that the ordeals or lessons, if they were necessary at all, had better be conducted in privacy. That had not apparently occurred to Mr. Wellgood or to Isobel Vintry. Indeed that aspect of the case did not seem to trouble Vivien herself either; she showed no signs of shame; she was smiling still, looking rather puzzled.

"I wonder why I was so much less frightened." She turned her eyes suddenly to Andy. "I know. It was because you were there!"

"You ran away, in spite of Mr. Harry's being here yesterday," Isobel reminded her.

"Mr. Hayes is so splendidly big – so splendidly big and solid," said Vivien, thoughtfully regarding Andy's proportions. "When he's here, I don't think I shall be half so much afraid."

"Oh, then Mr. Wellgood must ask him to come again," laughed Isobel. "You see how useful you'll be, Mr. Hayes!"

"I shall be delighted to come again, anyhow, if I'm asked – whether I'm useful or not. And I think it was jolly plucky of you to stand still as you did, Miss Wellgood. If I were in a funk, I should cut and run for it, I know."

"I thought you'd been a soldier," said Isobel.

"Oh, well, it's different when there are a lot of you together. Besides – " He chuckled. "You're not going to get me to let on that I was in a funk then. Those are our secrets, Miss Vintry. Well now, I must go, unless – "

"No, there are no more tests of courage to-day, Mr. Hayes," laughed Isobel.

Vivien's eyes had relapsed into inexpressiveness; they told Andy nothing of her view of the trials, or of Miss Vintry, who had conducted the latest one; they told him no more of her view of himself as she gave him her hand in farewell. He left her still standing on the spot where she had endured Curly's violent though well-meant attentions – again rather a pathetic figure, in her torn habit, with the long red scratch (by-the-by Miss Vintry had made no inquiry about it – that was part of the system perhaps) on her forehead, and with the background, as it were, of ordeals, or tests, or whatever they were to be called. Andy wondered what they would try her with to-morrow, and found himself sorry that he would not be there – to help her with his bigness and solidity.

It was difficult to say that Mr. Wellgood's system was wrong. It was absurd for a grown girl – a girl living in the country – to be frightened at horses, dogs, and motor-cars, to be disgusted by dirt and dust, by getting very hot – and by butchers' shops. All these were things which she would have to meet on her way through the world, as the world is at present constituted. Still he was sorry for her; she

was so slight and frail. Andy would have liked to take on his broad shoulders all her worldly share of dogs and horses, of dust, of getting very hot (a thing he positively liked), and of butchers; these things would not have troubled him in the least; he would have borne them as easily as he could have carried Vivien herself in his arms. As he walked home he had a vision of her shuddering figure, with its pale face and reticent eyes, being led by Isobel Vintry's firm hand into Jack Rock's shop in High Street, and there being compelled to inspect, to touch, to smell, the blue-rosetted, red-rosetted, and honourably mentioned carcasses which adorned that Valhalla of beasts – nay, being forced, in spite of all horror, to touch Jack Rock the butcher himself! Isobel Vintry would, he thought, be capable of shutting her up alone with all those dead things, and with the man who, as she supposed, had butchered them.

"I should have to break in the door!" thought Andy, his vanity flattered by remembering that she had seen in him a stand-by, and a security which apparently even Harry Belfield had been unable to afford. True it was that in order to win the rather humble compliment of being held a protection against an absolutely harmless retriever dog he had lost his day's hunting. Andy's heart was lowly; he did not repine.

Chapter III

THE POTENT VOICE

After anxious consultation at Halton it had been decided that Harry Belfield was justified in adopting a political career and treating the profession of the Bar, to which he had been called, as nominal. The prospects of an opening – and an opening in his native Division – were rosy. His personal qualifications admitted of no dispute, his social standing was all that could be desired. The money was the only difficulty. Mr. Belfield's income, though still large, was not quite what it had been; he was barely rich enough to support his son in what is still, in spite of all that has been done in the cause of electoral purity, a costly career. However the old folk exercised economies, Harry promised them, and it was agreed that the thing could be managed. It was, perhaps, at the back of the father's mind that for a young man of his son's attractions there was one obvious way of increasing his income – quite obvious and quite proper for the future owner of Halton Park.

For the moment political affairs were fairly quiet – next year it would be different – and Harry, ostensibly engaged on a course of historical and sociological reading, spent his time pleasantly between Meriton and his rooms in Jermyn Street. He had access to much society of one kind and another, and was universally popular; his frank delight in pleasing people made him pleasant to them. With women especially he was a great favourite, not for his looks only, though they were a passport to open the door of any drawing-room, but more because they felt that he was a man who appreciated them, valued them, needed them, to whom they were a very big and precious part of life. He had not a shred of that indifference – that independence of them – which is the worst offence in women's eyes. Knowing that they counted for so much to him, it was as fair as it was natural that they should let him count for a good deal with them.

But even universal favourites have their particular ties. For the last few months Harry had been especially attached to Mrs. Freere, the wife of a member of Parliament of his own party who lived in Grosvenor Street. Mr. Freere was an exceedingly laborious person; he sat on more committees than any man in London, and had little leisure for the joys of home life. Mrs. Freere could take very good care of herself, and, all question of principles apart, had no idea of risking the position and the comforts she enjoyed. Subject to the limits thus clearly imposed on her, she had no objection at all to her friendship with Harry Belfield being as sentimental as Harry had been disposed to make it; indeed she had a taste for that kind of thing herself. Once or twice he had tried to overstep the limits, elastic as they were – he was impulsive, Mrs. Freere was handsome – but he had accepted her rebuke with frank penitence, and the friendship had been switched back on to its appointed lines without an accident. The situation was pleasant to her; she was convinced that it was good for Harry. Certainly he met at her house many people whom it was proper and useful for him to meet; and her partiality offered him every opportunity of making favourable impressions. If her conscience needed any other salve – it probably did not feel the need acutely – she could truthfully aver that she was in the constant habit of urging him to lose no time in looking out for a suitable wife.

"A wife is such a help to a man in the House," she would say. "She can keep half the bores away from him. I don't do it because Wilson positively loves bores – being bored gives him a sense of serving his country – but I could if he'd let me."

Harry had been accustomed to meet such prudent counsels with protests of a romantic order; but Mrs. Freere, a shrewd woman, had for some weeks past noticed that the protests were becoming rather less vehement, and decidedly more easy for her to control. When she repeated her advice one day, in the spring after Andy Hayes came back from Canada, Harry looked at her for a moment and said,

"Would you drop me altogether if I did, Lily?" He called her Lily when they were alone.

"I'm married; you haven't dropped me," said Mrs. Freere with a smile.

"Oh, that's different. I shouldn't marry a woman unless I was awfully in love with her."

"I don't think I ought to make that a reason for finally dropping you, because you'll probably be awfully in love with several. Put that difficulty – if it is one – out of your mind. We shall be friends."

"And you wouldn't mind? You – you wouldn't think it – ?" He wanted to ask her whether she would think it what, on previous occasions, he had said that he would think it.

Mrs. Freere laughed. "Oh, of course your wife would be rather a bore – just at first, anyhow. But, you know, I can even contemplate my life without you altogether, Harry." She was really fond of him, but she was not a woman given to illusions either about her friends or about herself.

Harry did not protest that he could not contemplate his life without Mrs. Freere, though he had protested that on more than one of those previous occasions. Mrs. Freere leant against the mantelpiece, smiling down at him in the armchair.

"Seen somebody?" she asked.

Harry blushed hotly. "You're an awfully good sort, Lily," he said.

She laughed a little, then sighed a little. Well, it had been very agreeable to have this handsome boy at her beck and call, gracefully adoring, flattering her vanity, amusing her leisure, giving her the luxury of reflecting that she was behaving well in the face of considerable temptation – she really felt entitled to plume herself on this exploit. But such things could not last – Mrs. Freere knew that. The balance was too delicate; a topple over on one side or the other was bound to come; she had always meant that the toppling over, when it came, should be on the safe side – on to the level ground, not over the precipice. A bump is a bump, there's no denying it, but it's better than a broken neck. Mrs. Freere took her bump smiling, though it certainly hurt a little.

"Is she very pretty?"

He jumped up from the armchair. He was highly serious about the matter, and that, perhaps, may be counted a grace in him.

"I suppose I shall do it – if I can. But I'm hanged if I can talk to you about it!"

"That's rather nice of you. Thank you, Harry."

He bowed his comely head, with its waving hair, over her hand and kissed it.

"Good-bye, Harry," she said.

He straightened himself and looked her in the face for an instant. He shrugged his shoulders; she understood and nodded. There was, in fact, no saying what one's emotions would be up to next – what would be the new commands of the Restless and Savage Master. Poor Harry! She knew his case. She herself had "taken him" from her dear friend Rosa Hinde.

He was gone. She stood still by the mantelpiece a moment longer, shrugged shoulders in her turn – really that Savage Master! – crossed the room to a looking-glass – not much wrong there happily – and turned on the opening of the door. Mr. Freere came in – between committees. He had just time for a cup of tea.

"Just time, Wilson?"

"I've a committee at five, my dear."

She rang the bell. "Talk of road-hogs! You're a committee-hog, you know."

He rubbed his bald head perplexedly. "They accumulate," he pleaded in a puzzled voice. "I'm sorry to leave you so much alone, my dear." He came up to her and kissed her. "I always want to be with you, Lily."

"I know," she said. She did know – and the knowledge was one of the odd things in life.

"Goodness, I forgot to telephone!" He hurried out of the room again.

"Serves me right, I suppose!" said Mrs. Freere; to which of recent incidents she referred must remain uncertain.

Mr. Freere came back for his hasty cup of tea.

The Park was gay in its spring bravery – a fine setting for the play of elegance and luxury which took place there on this as on every afternoon. Harry Belfield sought to occupy and to distract his mind by the spectacle, familiar though it was. He did not want to congratulate himself on the thing that had just happened, yet this was what he found himself doing if he allowed his thoughts to possess him. "That's over anyhow!" was the spontaneous utterance of his feelings. Yet he felt very mean. He did not see why, having done the right thing, he should feel so mean. It seemed somehow unfair – as though there were no pleasing conscience, whatever one did. Conscience might have retorted that in some situations there is no "right thing;" there is a bold but fatal thing, and there is a prudent but shabby thing; the right thing has vanished earlier in the proceedings. Still he had done the best thing open to him, and, reflecting on that, he began to pluck up his spirits. His sensuous nature turned to the pleasant side; his volatile emotions forsook the past for the future. As he walked along he began to hear more plainly and to listen with less self-reproach to the voice which had been calling him now for many days – ever since he had addressed that meeting in the Town Hall at Meriton. Meriton was calling him back with the voice of Vivien Wellgood, and with her eyes begging him to hearken. He had "seen somebody," in Mrs. Freere's sufficient phrase. Great and gay was London, full of lures and charms; many were they who were ready to pet, to spoil, and to idolize; many there were to play, to laugh, and to revel with. Potent must be the voice which could draw him from all this! Yet he was listening to it as he walked along. He was free to listen to it now – free since he had left Mrs. Freere's house in Grosvenor Street.

Suddenly he found himself face to face with Andy Hayes – not a man he expected to meet in Hyde Park at four o'clock in the afternoon. But Andy explained that he had "knocked off early at the shop" and come west, to have a last look at the idle end of the town – everybody there seemed idle, even if all were not.

"Because it's my last day in London. I'm going down to Meriton to-morrow for the summer. I've taken lodgings there – going to be an up-and-downer," Andy explained. "And I think I shall generally be able to get Friday to Monday down there."

To Meriton to-morrow! Harry suffered a sharp and totally unmistakable pang of envy.

"Upon my soul, I believe you're right!" he said. "I'm half sick of the racket of town. What's the good of it all? And one gets through the devil of a lot of money. And no time to do anything worth doing! I don't believe I've opened a book for a week."

"Well, why don't you come down too? It would be awfully jolly if you did."

"Oh, it's not altogether easy to chuck everything and everybody," Harry reminded his friend, who did not seem to have reflected what a gap would be caused by Mr. Harry Belfield's departure from the metropolis. "Still I shall think about it. I could get through a lot of work at home." The historical and sociological reading obligingly supplied an excellent motive for a flight from the too-engrossing gaieties of town. "And, of course, there's no harm in keeping an eye on the Division." The potent voice was gathering allies apace! Winning causes have that way. "I might do much worse," Harry concluded thoughtfully.

Andy was delighted. Harry's presence would make Meriton a different place to him. He too, for what he was worth (it is not possible to say that he was worth very much in this matter), became another ally of the potent voice, urging the joys of country life and declaring that Harry already looked "fagged out" by the arduous pleasures of London life.

"I shall think about it seriously," said Harry, knowing in himself that the voice had won. "Are you doing anything to-night? I happen for once to have an off evening."

"No; only I'd thought of dropping into the pit somewhere. I haven't seen 'Hamlet' at the – "

"Oh lord!" interrupted Harry. "Let's do something a bit more cheerful than that! Have you seen the girl at the Empire – the Nun? Not seen her? Oh, you must! We'll dine at the club and go; and I'll get her and another girl to come on to supper. I'll give you a little fling for your last night in town. Will you come?"

"Will I come? I should rather think I would!" cried Andy.

"All right; dinner at eight. We shall have lots of time – she doesn't come on till nearly ten. Meet me at the Artemis at eight. Till then, old chap!" Harry darted after a lady who had favoured him with a gracious bow as she passed by, a moment before.

Here was an evening-out for Andy Hayes, whose conscience had suggested "Hamlet" and whose finances had dictated the pit. He went home to his lodgings off Russell Square all smiles, and spent a laborious hour trying to get the creases out of his dress coat. "Well, I shall enjoy an evening like that just for once," he said out loud as he laboured.

"I've got her and another girl," Harry announced when Andy turned up at the Artemis. "The nuisance is that Billy Foot here insists on coming too, so we shall be a man over. I've told him I don't want him, but the fellow will come."

"I'm certainly coming," said the tall long-faced young man – for Billy Foot was still several years short of forty – to whom Andy had listened with such admiration at Meriton. In private life he was not oppressively epigrammatic or logical, and not at all ruthless; and everybody called him "Billy," which in itself did much to deprive him of his terrors.

The Artemis was a small and luxurious club in King Street. Why it was called the "Artemis" nobody knew. Billy Foot said that the name had been chosen just because nobody would know why it had been chosen – it was a bad thing, he maintained, to label a club. Harry, however, conjectured that the name indicated that the club was half-way between the Athenæum and the Turf – which you might take in the geographical sense or in any other you pleased.

Andy ate of several foods that he had never tasted before and drank better wine than he had ever drunk before. His physique and his steady brain made any moderate quantity of wine no more than water to him. Harry Belfield, on the contrary, responded felicitously to even his first glass of champagne; his eyes grew bright and his spirit gay. Any shadow cast over him by his interview with Mrs. Freere was not long in vanishing.

They enjoyed themselves so well that a cab had only just time to land them at their place of entertainment before the Nun, whose name was Miss Doris Flower, came on the stage. She was having a prodigious success because she did look like a nun and sang songs that a nun might really be supposed to sing – and these things, being quite different from what the public expected, delighted the public immensely. When Miss Flower, whose performance was of high artistic merit, sang about the baby which she might have had if she had not been a nun, and in the second song (she was on her death-bed in the second song, but this did not at all impair her vocal powers) about the angel whom she saw hovering over her bed, and the angel's likeness to her baby sister who had died in infancy, the public cried like a baby itself.

"Jolly good!" said Billy Foot, taking his cigar out of his mouth and wiping away a furtive tear. "But there, she is a ripper, bless her!" His tone was distinctly affectionate.

But supper was the great event to Andy: that was all new to him, and he took it in eagerly while they waited for the Nun and her friend. Such a din, such a chatter, such a lot of diamonds, such a lot of smoke – and the white walls, the gilding, the pink lampshades, the band ever and anon crashing into a new tune, and the people shouting to make themselves heard through it – Andy would have sat on happily watching, even though he had got no supper at all. Indeed he was no more hungry than most of the other people there. One does not go to supper there because one is hungry – that is a vulgar reason for eating.

However supper he had, sitting between Billy Foot and the Nun's friend, a young woman named Miss Dutton, who had a critical, or even sardonic, manner, but was extremely pretty. The Nun herself contrived to be rather like a nun even off the stage; she did not talk much herself, but listened with an innocent smile to the sallies of Billy Foot and Harry Belfield.

"Been to hear her?" Miss Dutton asked Andy.

Andy said that they had, and uttered words of admiration.

"Sort of thing they like, isn't it?" said Miss Dutton. "You can't put in too much rot for them."

"But she sings it so – " Andy began to plead.

"Yes, she can sing. It's a wonder she's succeeded. How sick one gets of this place!"

"Do you come often?"

"Every night – with her generally."

"I've never been here before in my life."

"Well, I hope you like the look of us!"

Harry Belfield looked towards him. "Don't mind what she says, Andy. We call her Sulky Sally – don't we, Sally? – But she looks so nice that we have to put up with her ways."

Miss Dutton smiled reluctantly, but evidently could not help smiling at Harry. "I know the value of your compliments," she remarked. "There are plenty of them going about the place to judge by!"

"Mercy, Sally, mercy! Don't show me up before my friends!"

Miss Dutton busied herself with her supper. The Nun ate little; most of the time she sat with her pretty hands clasped on the table in front of her. Suddenly she began to tell what proved to be a rather long story about a man named Tommy – everybody except Andy knew whom she meant. She told this story in a low, pleasant, but somewhat monotonous voice. In truth the Nun was a trifle prolix and prosy, but she also looked so nice that they were quite content to listen and to look. It appeared that Tommy had done what no man should do; he had made love to two girls at once. For a long time all went well; but one day Tommy, being away from the sources of supply of cash (as a rule he transacted all his business in notes), wrote two cheques – the Nun specified the amounts, one being considerably larger than the other – placed them in two envelopes, and proceeded to address them wrongly. Each lady got the other lady's cheque, and – "Well, they wanted to know about it," said the Nun, with a pensive smile. So, being acquaintances, they laid their heads together, and the next time Tommy (who had never discovered his mistake) asked lady number one to dinner, she asked lady number two, "and when Tommy arrived," said the Nun, "they told him he'd find it cheaper that way, because there'd only be one tip for the waiter!" The Nun, having reached her point, gave a curiously pretty little gurgle of laughter.

"Rather neat!" said Billy Foot. "And did they chuck him?"

"They'd agreed to, but Maud weakened on it. Nellie did."

"Poor old Tommy!" mused Harry Belfield.

It was not a story of surpassing merit whether it were regarded from the moral or from the artistic point of view; but the Nun had grown delighted with herself as she told it, and her delight made her look even more pretty. Andy could not keep his eyes off her; she perceived his honest admiration and smiled serenely at him across the table.

"I suppose it was Nellie who was to have the small cheque?" Billy Foot suggested.

"No; it was Maud."

"Then I drink to Maud as a true woman and a forgiving creature!"

Andy broke into a hearty enjoying laugh. Nothing had passed which would stand a critical examination in humour, much less in wit; but Andy was very happy. He had never had such a good time, never seen so many gay and pretty women, never been so in touch with the holiday side of life. The Nun delighted him; Miss Dutton was a pleasantly acid pickle to stimulate the palate for all this rich food. Billy Foot and Harry looked at him, looked at one another, and laughed.

"They're laughing at you," said Miss Dutton in her most sardonic tone.

"I don't mind. Of course they are! I'm such an outsider."

"Worth a dozen of either of them," she remarked, with a calmly impersonal air that reduced her compliment to a mere statement of fact.

"Oh, I heard!" cried Harry. "You don't think much of us, do you, Sally?"

"I come here every night," said Miss Dutton. "Consequently I know."

The pronouncement was so confident, so conclusive, that there was nothing to do but laugh at it. They all laughed. If you came there every night, "consequently" you would know many things!

"We must eat somewhere," observed the Nun with placid resignation.

"We must be as good as we can and hope for mercy," said Billy Foot.

"You'll need it," commented Miss Dutton.

"Let's hope the law of supply and demand will hold good!" laughed Harry.

"How awfully jolly all this is!" said Andy.

He had just time to observe Miss Dutton's witheringly patient smile before the lights went out. "Hullo!" cried Andy; and the rest laughed.

Up again the lights went, but the Nun rose from her chair.

"Had enough of it?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said the Nun with her simple, candid, yet almost scornful directness. "Oh, it's been all right. I like your friend, Harry – not Billy, of course – the new one, I mean."

When they had got their cloaks and coats and were waiting for the Nun's electric brougham, Harry made an announcement that filled Andy with joy and the rest of the company with amazement.

"This is good-bye for a bit, Doris," he said. "I'm off to the country the day after to-morrow."

"What have we done to you?" the Nun inquired with sedate anxiety.

"I've got to work, and I can't do it in London. I've got a career to look after."

The Nun gurgled again – for the second time only in the course of the evening. "Oh yes," she murmured with obvious scepticism. "Well, come and see me when you get back." She turned her eyes to Andy, and, to his great astonishment, asked, "Would you like to come too?"

Andy could hardly believe that he was himself, but he had no doubt about his answer. The Nun interested him very much, and was so very pretty. "I should like to awfully," he replied.

"Come alone – not with these men, or we shall only talk nonsense," said the Nun, as she got into her brougham. "Get in, Sally."

"Where's the hurry?" asked Miss Dutton, getting in nevertheless. The Nun slapped her arm smartly; the two girls burst into a giggle, and so went off.

"Where to now?" asked Harry.

Andy wondered what other place there was.

"Bed for me," said Billy Foot. "I've a consultation at half-past nine, and I haven't opened the papers yet."

"Bed is best," Harry agreed, though rather reluctantly. "Going to take a cab, Billy?"

"What else is there to take?"

"Thought you might be walking."

"Oh, walking be – !" He climbed into a hansom.

"I'll walk with you, Harry. I haven't had exercise enough."

Harry suggested that they should go home by the Embankment. When they had cut down a narrow street to it, he put his arm in Andy's and led him across the road. They leant on the parapet, looking at the river. The night was fine, but hazy and still – a typical London night.

"You've given me a splendid evening," said Andy. "And what a good sort those girls were!"

"Yes," said Harry, rather absently, "not a bad sort. Doris has got her head on her shoulders, and she's quite straight. Poor Sally's come one awful cropper. She won't come another; she's had more than enough of it. So one doesn't mind her being a bit snarly."

Poor Sally! Andy had had no idea of anything of the sort, but he had an instinct that people who come one cropper – and one only – feel that one badly.

"I'm feeling happy to-night, old fellow," said Harry suddenly. "You may not happen to know it, but I've gone it a bit for the last two or three years, made rather a fool of myself, and – well, one gets led on. Now I've made up my mind to chuck all that. Some of it's all right – at any rate it seems to happen; but I've had enough. I really do want to work at the politics, you know."

"It's all before you, if you do," said Andy in unquestioning loyalty.

"I'm going to work, and to pull up a bit all round, and – " Harry broke off, but a smile was on his lips. There on the bank of the Thames, fresh from his party in the gay restaurant, he heard the potent voice calling. It seemed to him that the voice was potent enough not only to loose him from Mrs. Freere, to lure him from London delights, to carry him down to Meriton and peaceful country life; but potent enough, too, to transform him, to make him other than he was, to change the nature that had till now been his very self. He appealed from passion to passion; from the soiled to the clean, from the turgid to the clear. A new desire of his eyes was to make a new thing of his life.

Chapter IV

SETTLED PROGRAMMES

Mark Wellgood of Nutley had a bugbear, an evil thing to which he gave the name of sentimentality. Wherever he saw it he hated it – and he saw it everywhere. No matter what was the sphere of life, there was the enemy ready to raise its head, and Mark Wellgood ready to hit that head. In business and in public affairs he warred against it unceasingly; in other people's religion – he had very little of his own – he was keen to denounce it; even from the most intimate family and personal relationships he had always been resolved to banish it, or, failing that, to suppress its manifestations. Himself a man of uncompromising temper and strong passions, he saw in this hated thing the root of all the vices with which he had least sympathy. It made people cowards who shrank from manfully taking their own parts; it made them hypocrites who would not face the facts of human nature and human society, but sought to cover up truths that they would have called "ugly" by specious names, by veils, screens, and fine paraphrases. It made men soft, women childish, and politicians flabby; it meant sheer ruin to a nation.

Sentimentality was, of course, at the bottom of what was the matter with his daughter, of those things of which, with the aid of Isobel Vintry's example, he hoped to cure her – her timidity and her fastidiousness. But it was at the bottom of much more serious things than these – since to make too much fuss about a girl's nonsensical fancies would be sentimental in himself. Notably it was at the bottom of all shades of opinion from Liberalism to Socialism, both included. Harry Belfield, lunching at Nutley a week or so after his return to Meriton, had the benefit of these views, with which, as a prospective Conservative candidate, he was confidently expected to sympathise.

"I've only one answer to make to a Socialist," said Wellgood. "I say to him, 'You can have my property when you're strong enough to take it. Until then, you can't.' Under democracy we count heads instead of breaking them. It's a bad system, but it's tolerable as long as the matter isn't worth fighting about. When you come to vital issues, it'll break down – it always has. We, the governing classes, shall keep our position and our property just as long as we're able and willing to defend them. If the Socialists mean business, they'd better stop talking and learn to shoot."

"That might be awkward for us," said Harry, with a smile at Vivien opposite.

"But if they think we're going to sit still and be voted out of everything, they're much mistaken. That's what I hope, at all events, though it needs a big effort not to despair of the country sometimes. People won't look at the facts of nature. All nature's a fight from beginning to end. All through, the strong hold down the weak; and the strong grow stronger by doing it – never mind whether they're men or beasts."

"There's a lot of truth in that; but I don't know that it would be very popular on a platform – even on one of ours!"

"You political fellows have to wrap it up, I suppose, but the cleverer heads among the working men know all about it – trust them! They're on the make themselves; they want to get where we are; gammoning the common run helps towards that. Oh, they're not sentimental! I do them the justice to believe that."

"But isn't there a terrible lot of misery, father?" asked Vivien.

"You can't cure misery by quackery, my dear," he answered concisely. "Half of it's their own fault, and for the rest – hasn't there always been? So long as some people are weaker than others, they'll fare worse. I don't see any particular attraction in the idea of making weaklings or cowards as comfortable as the strong and the brave." His glance at his daughter was stern. Vivien flushed a little; the particular ordeal of that morning, a cross-country ride with her father, had not been a brilliant success.

"To him that hath shall be given, eh?" Harry suggested.

"Matter of Scripture, Harry, and you can't get away from it!" said Wellgood with a laugh.

Psychology is not the strong point of a mind like Wellgood's. To study his fellow-creatures curiously seems to such a man rather unnecessary and rather twaddling work; in its own sphere it corresponds to the hated thing itself, to an over-scrupulous worrying about other people's feelings or even about your own. It had not occurred to Wellgood to study Harry Belfield. He liked him, as everybody did, and he had no idea how vastly Harry's temperament differed from his own. Harry had many material guarantees against folly – his birth, the property that was to be his, the career opening before him. If Wellgood saw any signs of what he condemned, he set them down to youth and took up the task of a mentor with alacrity. Moreover he was glad to have Harry coming to the house; matters were still at an early stage, but if there were a purpose in his coming, there was nothing to be said against the project. He would welcome an alliance with Halton, and it would be an alliance on even terms; for Vivien had some money of her own, apart from what he could leave her. Whether she would have Nutley or not – well, that was uncertain. Wellgood was only forty-three and young for his years; he might yet marry and have a son. A second marriage was more than an idea in his head; it was an intention fully formed. The woman he meant to ask to be his wife at the suitable moment lived in his house and sat at his table with him – his daughter's companion, Isobel Vintry.

Isobel had sat silent through Wellgood's talk, not keenly interested in the directly political aspect of it, but appreciating the view of human nature and of the way of the world which underlay it. She also was on the side of the efficient – of the people who knew what they wanted and at any rate made a good fight to get it. Yet while she listened to Wellgood, her eyes had often been on Harry; she too was beginning to ask why Harry came so much to Nutley; the obvious answer filled her with a vague stirring of discontent. An ambitious self-confident nature does not like to be "counted out," to be reckoned out of the running before the race is fairly begun. Why was the answer obvious? There was more than one marriageable young woman at Nutley. Her feeling of protest was still vague; but it was there, and when she looked at Harry's comely face, her eyes were thoughtful.

Though Wellgood had business after lunch, Harry stayed on awhile, sitting out on the terrace by the lake, for the day was warm and fine. The coming of spring had mitigated the grimness of Nutley; the water that had looked dreary and dismal in the winter now sparkled in the sun. Harry was excellently well content with himself and his position. He told the two girls that things were shaping very well. Old Sir George Millington had decided to retire. He was to be the candidate; he would start his campaign through the villages of the Division in the late summer, when harvest was over; he could hardly be beaten; and he was "working like a horse" at his subjects.

"The horse gets out of harness now and then!" said Isobel.

"You don't want him to kill himself with work, Isobel?" asked Vivien reproachfully.

"Visits to Nutley help the work; they inspire me," Harry declared, looking first at Vivien, then at Isobel. They were both, in their different ways, pleasant to look at. Their interest in him – in all he said and did, and in all he was going to do – was very pleasant also. "Oh yes, I'm working all right!" he laughed. "Really I have to, because of old Andy Hayes. He's getting quite keen on politics – reads all the evening after he gets back from town. Well, he's good enough to think I've read everything and know everything, and whenever we meet he pounds me with questions. I don't want Andy to catch me out, so I have to mug away."

"That's your friend, Vivien," said Isobel, with a smile and a nod.

"Yes, the solid man."

"Oh, I know that story. Andy told me himself. He thought you behaved like a brick."

"He did, anyhow. Why don't you bring him here, Harry?"

"He's in town all day; I'll try and get him here some Saturday."

"Does he still stay with the – with Mr. Rock?" asked Vivien.

"No; he's taken lodgings. He's very thick with old Jack still, though. Of course it wouldn't do to tell him so, but it's rather a bore that he should be connected with Jack in that way. It doesn't make my mother any keener to have him at Halton, and it's a little difficult for me to press it."

"It does make his position seem – just rather betwixt and between, doesn't it?" asked Isobel.

"If only it wasn't a butcher!" protested Vivien.

"O Vivien, the rules, the rules!" "Nothing against butchers," was one of the rules.

"I know, but I would so much rather it had been a draper, or a stationer, or something – something clean of that sort."

"I'm glad your father's not here. Be good, Vivien!"

"However it's not so bad if he doesn't stay there any more," Harry charitably concluded. "Just going in for a drink with old Jack – everybody does that; and after all he's no blood relation." He laughed. "Though I dare say that's exactly what you'd call him, Vivien."

Just as he made his little joke Vivien had risen. It was her time for "doing the flowers," one of the few congenial tasks allowed her. She smiled and blushed at Harry's hit at her, looking very charming. Harry indulged himself in a glance of bold admiration. It made her cheeks redder still as she turned away, Harry looking after her till she rounded the corner of the house. In answering the call of the voice he had found no disappointment. Closer and more intimate acquaintance revealed her as no less charming than she had promised to be. Harry was sure now of what he wanted, and remained quite sure of all the wonderful things that it was going to do for him and for his life.

Suddenly on the top of all this legitimate and proper feeling – to which not even Mark Wellgood himself could object, since it was straight in the way of nature – there came on Harry Belfield a sensation rare, yet not unknown, in his career – a career still so short, yet already so emotionally eventful.

Isobel Vintry was not looking at him – she was gazing over the lake – nor he at her; he was engaged in the process of lighting a cigarette. Yet he became intensely aware of her, not merely as one in his company, but as a being who influenced him, affected him, in some sense stretched out a hand to him. He gave a quick glance at her; she was motionless, her eyes still aloof from him. He stirred restlessly in his chair; the air seemed very close and heavy. He wanted to make some ordinary, some light remark; for the moment it did not come. A remembrance of the first time that Mrs. Freere and he had passed the bounds of ordinary friendship struck across his mind, unpleasantly, and surely without relevance! Isobel had said nothing, had done nothing, nor had he. Yet it was as though some mystic sign had passed from her to him – he could not tell whether from him to her also – a sign telling that, whatever circumstances might do, there was in essence a link between them, a reminder from her that she too was a woman, that she too had her power. He did not doubt that she was utterly unconscious, but neither did he believe that he was solely responsible, that he had merely imagined. There was an atmosphere suddenly formed – an atmosphere still and heavy as the afternoon air that brooded over the unruffled lake.

Harry had no desire to abide in it. His mind was made up; his heart was single. He picked up a stone which had been swept from somewhere on to the terrace and pitched it into the lake. A plop, and many ripples. The heavy stillness was broken.

Isobel turned to him with a start.

"I thought you were going to sleep, Miss Vintry. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I threw a stone into the water. I'm afraid you were finding me awfully dull!"

"You dull! You're a change from what sometimes does seem a little dull – life at Nutley. But perhaps you can't conceive life at Nutley being dull?" Her eyes mocked him with the hint that she had discovered his secret.

"Well, I think I should be rather hard to please if I found Nutley dull," he said gaily. "But if you do, why do you stay?"

"Perpetual amusement isn't in a companion's contract, Mr. Harry. Besides, I'm fond of Vivien. I should be sorry to leave her before the natural end of my stay comes."

"The natural end?"

"Oh, I think you understand that." She smiled with a good-humoured scorn at his homage to pretence.

"Well, of course, girls do marry. It's been known to happen," said Harry, neither "cornered" nor embarrassed. "But perhaps" – he glanced at her, wondering whether to risk a snub. His charm, his gift of gay impudence, had so often stood him in stead and won him a liberty that a heavy-handed man could not hope to be allowed; he was not much afraid – "Perhaps you'd be asked to stay on – in another capacity, Miss Vintry."

"It looks as if your thoughts were running on such things." She did not affect not to understand, but she was not easy to corner either.

"I'm afraid they always have been," Harry confessed, a confession without much trace of penitence.

"Mine don't often; and they're never supposed to – in my position."

"Oh, nonsense! Really that doesn't go down, Miss Vintry. Why, a girl like you, with such – "

"Don't attempt a catalogue, please, Mr. Harry."

"You're right, quite right. I'm conscious how limited my powers are."

Harry Belfield could no more help this sort of thing than a bird can help flying. In childhood he had probably lisped in compliments, as the poet in numbers. In itself it was harmless, even graceful, and quite devoid of serious meaning. Yet it was something new in his relations with Isobel Vintry; though it had arisen out of a desire to dispel that mysterious atmosphere, yet it was a sequel to it. Hitherto she had been Vivien's companion. In that brief session of theirs – alone together by the lake – she had assumed an independent existence for him, a vivid, distinctive, rather compelling one. The impressionable mind received a new impression, the plastic feelings suffered the moulding of a fresh hand. Harry, who was alert to watch himself and always knew when he was interested, was telling himself that she was such a notable foil to Vivien; that was why he was interested. Vivien was still the centre of gravity. The explanation vindicated his interest, preserved his loyalty, and left his resolve unshaken. These satisfactory effects were all on himself; the idea of effects on Isobel Vintry did not occur to him. He was not vain, he was hardly a conscious or intentional "lady-killer." He really suffered love affairs rather than sought them; he was driven into them by an overpowering instinct to prove his powers. He could not help "playing the game" – the rather hazardous game – to the full extent of his natural ability. That extent was very considerable.

He said good-bye to her, laughingly declaring that after all he would prepare a catalogue, and send it to her by post. Then he went into the house, to find Vivien and pay another farewell. Left alone, Isobel rose from her chair with an abrupt and impatient movement. She was a woman of feelings not only more mature but far stronger than Vivien's; she had ambitious yearnings which never crossed Vivien's simple soul. But she was stern with herself. Perhaps she had caught and unconsciously copied some of Wellgood's anti-sentimental attitude. She often told herself that the feelings were merely dangerous and the yearnings silly. Yet when others seemed tacitly to accept that view, made no account of her, and assumed to regard her place in life as settled, she glowed with a deep resentment against them, crying that she would make herself felt. To-day she knew that somehow, to some degree however small, she had made herself felt by Harry Belfield. The discovery could not be said to bring pleasure, but it brought triumph – triumph and an oppressive restlessness.

Wellgood strolled out of the house and joined her. "Where's Harry?" he asked.

"He went into the house to say good-bye to Vivien; or perhaps he's gone altogether by now."

Wellgood stood in thought, his hands in his pockets.

"He's a bit inclined to be soft, but I think we shall make a man of him. He's got a great chance, anyhow. Vivien seems to like him, doesn't she?"

"Oh, everybody must!" She smiled at him. "Are you thinking of match-making, like a good father?"

"She might do worse, and I'd like her to marry a man we know all about. The poor child hasn't backbone to stand up for herself if she happened on a rascal."

Isobel had a notion that Wellgood was over-confident if he assumed that he, or they, knew all about Harry Belfield. His parentage, his position, his prospects – yes. Did these exhaust the subject? But Wellgood's downright mind would have seen only "fancies" in such a suggestion.

"If that's the programme, I must begin to think of packing up my trunks," she said with a laugh.

He did not join in her laugh, but his stern lips relaxed into a smile. "Lots of time to think about that," he told her, his eyes seeming to make a careful inspection of her. "Nutley would hardly be itself without you, Isobel."

She showed no sign of embarrassment under his scrutiny; she stood handsome and apparently serene in her composure.

"Oh, poor Nutley would soon recover from the blow," she said. "But I shall be sorry to go. You've been very kind to me."

"You've done your work very well. People who work well are well treated at Nutley; people who work badly – "

"Aren't exactly petted? No, they're not, Mr. Wellgood, I know."

"You'd always do your work, whatever it might be, well, so you'd always be well treated."

"At any rate you'll give me a good character?" she asked mockingly.

"Oh, I'll see that you get a good place," he answered her in the same tone, but with a hint of serious meaning in his eyes.

His plan was quite definite, his confidence in the issue of it absolute. But "one thing at a time" was among his maxims. He would like to see Vivien's affair settled before his own was undertaken. His idea was that his declaration and acceptance should follow on his daughter's engagement.

Isobel was not afraid of Mark Wellgood, as his daughter was, and as so many women would have been. She had a self-confidence equal to his own; she added to it a subtlety which would secure her a larger share of independence than it would be politic to claim openly. She had not feared him as a master, and would not fear him as a husband. Moreover she understood him far better than he read her. Understanding gives power. And she liked him; there was much that was congenial to her in his mind and modes of thought. He was a man, a strong man. But the prospect at which his words hinted – she was not blind to their meaning, and for some time back had felt little doubt of his design – did not enrapture her. At first sight it seemed that it ought. She had no money, her family were poor, marriage was her only chance of independence. Nutley meant both a comfort and a status beyond her reasonable hopes. But it meant also an end to the ambitious dreams. It was finality. Just this life she led now for all her life – or at least all Wellgood's! He was engrossed in the occupations of a country gentleman of moderate means, in his estate work and his public work. He hardly ever went to London; he never travelled farther afield; he visited little even among his neighbours. Some of these habits a wife might modify; the essentials of the life she would hardly be able to change. Yet, if she got the chance, there was no question but that she ought to take it. Common sense told her that, just as it told Wellgood that it would be absurd to doubt of her acceptance.

Common sense might say what it liked. Her feelings were in revolt, and their insurrection gathered fresh strength to-day. It was not so much that Wellgood was nearly twenty years her senior. That counted, but not as heavily as perhaps might be expected, since his youthful vigour was still all his. It was the certainty with which his thoughts disposed of her, his assumption that his suit would be free from difficulty and from rivalry, his matter-of-course conclusion that Harry could come to Nutley only for Vivien's sake. If these things wounded her woman's pride, the softer side of her nature lamented the absence of romance, of the thrill of love, of being wooed and won in some poetic fashion, of everything – she found her thoughts insensibly taking this direction – that it would be for

Harry Belfield's chosen mistress to enjoy. Nobody – least of all the man who was content to take her to wife himself – seemed to think of her as a choice even possible to Harry. He was, of course, for Vivien. All the joys of love, all the life of pleasure, the participation in his career, the moving many-coloured existence to be led by his side – all these were for Vivien. Her heart cried out in protest at the injustice; she might not even have her chance! It would be counted treachery if she strove for it, if she sought to attract Harry or allowed herself to be attracted by him. She had to stand aside; she was to be otherwise disposed of, her assent to the arrangement being asked so confidently that it could hardly be said to be asked at all. Suppose she did not assent? Suppose she fought for herself, treachery or no treachery? Suppose she followed the way of her feelings, if so be that they led her towards Harry Belfield? Suppose she put forth what strength she had to upset Wellgood's plan, to fight for herself?

She played with these questions as she walked up and down the terrace by the lake. She declared to herself that she was only playing with them, but they would not leave her.

Certainly the questions found no warrant in Harry Belfield's present mood. He had made up his mind, his eager blood was running apace. That very evening, as his father and he sat alone together after dinner, in the long room graced by the two Vandykes which were the boast of Halton, he broached the matter in confidence. Mr. Belfield was a frail man of sixty. He had always been delicate in health, a sufferer from asthma and prone to chills; but he was no acknowledged invalid, and would not submit to the *rôle*. He did his share of county work; his judgment was highly esteemed, his sense of honour strict and scrupulous. He had a dryly humorous strain in him, which found food for amusement in his son's exuberant feelings and dashing impulses, without blinding him to their dangers.

"Well, it's not a great match, but it's quite satisfactory, Harry. You'll find no opposition here. I like her very much, and your mother does too, I know. But" – he smiled and lifted his brows – "it's a trifle sudden, isn't it?"

"Sudden?" cried Harry. "Why, I've known her all my life!"

"Yes, but you haven't been in love with her all your life. And, if report speaks true, you have been in love with some other women." Mr. Belfield was a man of the world; his tone was patient and not unduly severe as he referred to Harry's adventures of the heart, which had reached his ears from friends in London.

"Yes, I know," said Harry; "but those were only – well, passing sort of things, you know."

"And this isn't a passing sort of thing?"

"Not a bit of it; I'm dead sure of it. Well, a fellow can't tell another – not even his father – what he feels."

"No, no, don't try; keep all that for the lady. But if I were you I'd go a bit slow, and I wouldn't tell your mother yet. There's no particular hurry, is there?"

Harry laughed. "Well, I suppose that depends on how one feels. I happen to feel rather in a hurry."

"Go as slow as you can. Passing things pass: a wife's a more permanent affair. And undoing a mistake is neither a very easy nor a very savoury business."

"I'm absolutely sure. Still I'll try to wait and see if I can manage to get a little bit surer still, just to please you, pater."

"Thank you, old boy; I don't think you'll repent it. And, after all, it may be as well to give the lady time to get quite sure too – eh?" His eyes twinkled. He was fully aware that Harry would not think a great deal of time necessary for that. "Oh, by-the-bye," he went on, "I've a little bit of good news for you. I've interceded with your mother on Andy Hayes' behalf, and her heart is softened. She says she'll be very glad to see him here – "

"Hurrah! That's very good of the mater."

" – when we're alone, or have friends who we know won't object." He laughed a little, and Harry joined in the laugh. "A prudent woman's prudent provisosoes, Harry! I wish both you and I were as wise as your mother is."

"Dear old Andy – he's getting quite the fashion! I'm to take him to Nutley too."

"Excellent! Because it looks as if Nutley would be coming here to a certain extent in the immediate future, and he'll be able to come when Nutley does." He rose from his chair. "My throat's bothersome to-night; I'll leave you alone with your cigarette."

Harry smoked a cigarette that seemed to emit clouds of rosy smoke. All that lay in the past was forgotten; the future beckoned him to glittering joys.

"Marriage is his best chance, but even that's a considerable chance with Master Harry!" thought his father as he sat down to his book.

The one man who had serious fears – or at least doubts – about Harry Belfield's future was his own father.

"I probably shan't live to see the trouble, if any comes," he thought. "And if his mother does – she won't believe it's his fault."

Chapter V

BROADENING LIFE

"Five all, and deuce!" cried Wellgood, who had taken on himself the function of umpire. He turned to Isobel and Vivien, who sat by in wicker armchairs, watching the game. "I never thought it would be so close. Hayes has pulled up wonderfully!"

"I think Mr. Hayes'll win now," said Vivien.

An "exhibition single" was being played, by request, before the audience above indicated. Andy Hayes had protested that, though of course he would play if they wished, he could not give Harry a game – he had not played for more than a year. At first it looked as if he were right: Harry romped away with the first four games, so securely superior that he fired friendly chaff at Andy's futile rushes across the court in pursuit of a ball skilfully placed where he least expected it. But in the fifth game the rallies became very long; Andy was playing for safety – playing deadly safe. He did not try to kill; Harry did, but often committed suicide. The fifth, the sixth, the seventh game went to Andy. A flash of brilliancy gave Harry the eighth – five, three! The ninth was his service – he should have had it, and the set. Andy's returns were steady, low, all good length, possible to return, almost impossible to kill. But Harry tried to kill. Four, five. Andy served, and found a "spot" – at least Harry's malevolent glances at a particular piece of turf implied a theory that he had. Five all! And now "Deuce"!

"He's going to lick me, see if he isn't!" cried Harry Belfield, perfectly good-natured, but not hiding his opinion that such a result would be paradoxical.

Andy felt terribly ashamed of himself – he wanted to win so much. To play Harry Belfield on equal terms and beat him, just for once! This spirit of emulation was new to his soul; it seemed rather alarming when it threatened his old-time homage in all things to Harry. Where was ambition going to stop? None the less, eye and hand had no idea of not doing their best. A slashing return down the side line and a clever lob gave him the game – six, five!

Harry Belfield was the least bit vexed – amusedly vexed. He remembered Andy's clumsy elephantine sprawlings (no other word for them) about the court when in their boyhood he had first undertaken to teach him the game. Andy must have played a lot in Canada.

"Now I'll take three off you, Andy," he cried, and served a double fault. The "gallery" laughed. "Oh, damn it!" exclaimed Harry, indecorously loud, and served another. Andy could not help laughing – the first time he had ever laughed at Harry Belfield. Given a handicap of thirty, the game was, barring extraordinary accidents, his. So it proved. He won it at forty-fifteen, with a stroke that a child ought to have returned; Harry put it into the net.

"Lost your nerve, Harry?" said the umpire.

"The beggar's such a sticker!" grumbled Harry, laughing. "You think you've got him licked – and you haven't!"

"I'm glad Mr. Hayes won." This from Vivien.

"Not only defeated, but forsaken!" Harry cried. "Andy, I'll have your blood!"

Andy Hayes laughed joyously. This victory came as an unlooked-for adornment to a day already notable. A Saturday half-holiday, down from town in time to lunch at Nutley, tennis and tea, and the prospect (not free from piquant alarm) of dinner at Halton – this was a day for Andy Hayes! With an honest vanity – a vanity based on true affection – he thought how the account of it would tickle Jack Rock. His life seemed broadening out before him, and he would like to tell dear old Jack all about it. Playing lawn-tennis at Nutley, dining at Halton – here were things just as delightful, just as enlightening, as supping at the great restaurant in the company of the Nun and pretty sardonic Miss Dutton. He owed them all to Harry – he almost wished he had lost the set. At any rate he felt that he ought to wish it.

"It was an awful fluke!" he protested apologetically.

"You'd beat him three times out of five," Wellgood asserted in that confident tone of his.

Harry looked a little vexed. He bore an occasional defeat with admirable good-nature: to be judged consistently inferior was harder schooling to his temper. Triumphant in whatever the contest might be had grown into something of a custom with him. It brooked occasional breaches: abrogation was another matter. But "Oh no!" cried both the girls together.

Harry was on his feet again in a moment. Women's praise was always sweet to him, and not the less sweet for being open to a suspicion of partiality – which is, after all, a testimony to achievement in other fields.

Such a partiality accounted for the conviction of Harry's superiority in Vivien's case at least. She had grown up in the midst of the universal Meriton adoration of him as the most accomplished, the kindest, the merriest son of that soil, the child of promise, the present pride and the future glory of his native town. Any facts or reports not to the credit of the idol or reflecting on his divinity had not reached her cloistered ears. Wellgood, like Harry's own father, had heard some, but Wellgood held common-sense views even more fully than Mr. Belfield; facts were facts, and all men had to be young for a time. Now, if signs were to be trusted, if the idol's own words, eyes, and actions meant what she could not but deem they meant (or where stood the idol's honesty?), he proposed to ask her to share his throne; he, the adored, offered adoration – an adoration on a basis of reciprocity, be it understood. She did not grumble at that. To give was so easy, so inevitable; to receive – to be asked to accept – so wonderful. It could not enter her head or her heart to question the value of the gift or to doubt the whole-heartedness with which it was bestowed. It was to her so great a thing that she held it must be as great to Harry. Really at the present moment it was as great to Harry. His courtship of her seemed a very great thing, his absolute exclusive devotion a rare flower of romance.

But she had been glad to see Andy win. Oh yes, she was compassionate. She knew so well what it was not to do things as cleverly as other people, and how oppressive it felt to be always inferior. Besides Andy had a stock of gratitude to draw on; somehow he had, by his solidity, caused Curly to appear far less terrible. With a genuine gladness she saw him pluck one leaf from Harry's wreath. It must mean so much to Mr. Hayes; it mattered nothing to Harry. Nay, rather, it was an added chance for his graces of manner to shine forth.

They did shine forth. "Very good of you, ladies, but I think he holds me safe," said Harry.

"I shouldn't if you'd only play steady," Andy observed in his reflective way. "Taking chances – that's your fault, Harry."

"Taking chances – why, it's life!" cried Harry, any shadow of vexation utterly gone and leaving not the smallest memory.

"Well, ordinary people can't look at it like that," Andy said, with no touch of sarcasm, amply acknowledging that Harry and the ordinary were things remote from one another.

Was life taking chances? To one only of the party did that seem really true. Harry had said it, but he was not the one. He was possessed by a new triumphant certainty; Wellgood by the thought of a mastery he deemed already established, and waiting only for his word to be declared; Vivien by a dream that glowed and glittered, refusing too close a touch with earth; Andy by a stout conviction that he must not think about chances, but work away at his timber (he still called it lumber in his inner mind) and his books, pausing only to thank heaven for a wonderful Saturday holiday.

But life was taking chances! Supine in her chair, silent since her one exclamation in championship of Harry Belfield, Isobel Vintry echoed the cry. Life was taking chances? Yes, any life worth having perhaps was. But what if the chances did not come one's way? Who can take what fate never offers?

All the present party was to meet again at Halton in the evening. It seemed hardly a separation when Harry and Andy started off together towards Meriton, Harry, as usual, chattering briskly, Andy

listening, considering, absorbing. At a turn of the road they passed two old friends of his, Wat Money, the lawyer's clerk, and Tom Dove, the budding publican – "Chinks" and "The Bird" of days of yore.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harry! Hullo, Andy!" said Chinks and the Bird. When they were past, the Bird nudged Chinks with his elbow and winked his eye.

"Yes, he's getting no end of a swell, isn't he?" said Chinks. "Hand-and-glove with Harry Belfield!"

"I suppose you don't see much of those chaps now?" Harry was asking Andy at the same moment. There was just a shadow of admonition in the question.

"I'm afraid I don't. Well, we're all at work. And when I do get a day off – "

"You don't need to spend it at the Lion!" laughed Harry. "As good drink and better company in other places!"

There were certainly good things to drink and eat at Halton, and Andy could not be blamed if he found the company at least as well to his liking. He had not been there since he was quite a small boy – in the days before Nancy Rock migrated from the house next the butcher's shop in High Street to preside over his home – but he had never forgotten the handsome dining-room with its two Vandykes, nor the glass of sherry which Mr. Belfield had once given him there. Mrs. Belfield received him with graciousness, Mr. Belfield with cordiality. Of course he was the first to arrive, being very fearful of unpunctuality. Even Harry was not down yet. Not being able, for obvious reasons, to ask after her guest's relations – her invariable way, when it was possible, of opening a conversation – Mrs. Belfield expressed her pleasure at seeing him back in Meriton.

"My husband thinks you're such a good companion for Harry," she added, showing that her pleasure was genuine, even if somewhat interested.

"Yes, Hayes," said Mr. Belfield. "See all you can of him; we shall be grateful. He wants just what a steady-going sensible fellow, as everybody says you are, can give him – a bit of ballast, eh?"

"Everybody" had been, in fact, Jack Rock, but – again for obvious reasons – the authority was not cited by name.

"You may be sure I shall give him as much of my company as he'll take, sir," said Andy, infinitely pleased, enormously complimented.

Placidity was Mrs. Belfield's dominant note – a soothing placidity. She was rather short and rather plump – by no means an imposing figure; but this quality gave her a certain dignity, and even a certain power in her little world. People let her have her own way because she was so placidly sure that they would, and it seemed almost profane to disturb the placidity. Even her husband's humour was careful to stop short of that. Her physical movements were in harmony with her temper – leisurely, smooth, noiseless; her voice was gentle, low, and even. She seemed to Andy to fit in well with the life she lived and always had lived, to be a good expression or embodiment of its sheltered luxury and sequestered tranquillity. Storms and stress and struggles – these things had nothing to do with Mrs. Belfield, and really ought to have none; they would be quite out of keeping with her. She seemed to have a right to ask that things about her should go straight and go quietly. There was perhaps a flavour of selfishness about this disposition; certainly an inaccessibility to strong feeling. For instance, while placidly assuming Harry's success and Harry's career, she was not excited nor what would be called enthusiastic about them – not half so excited and enthusiastic as Andy Hayes.

The dinner in the fine old room, under the Vandykes, with Mrs. Belfield in her lavender silk and precious lace, the girls in their white frocks, the old silver, the wealth of flowers, seemed rather wonderful to Andy Hayes. His life in boyhood had been poor and meagre, in manhood hard and rough. Here was a side of existence he had not seen; as luxurious as the life of which he had caught a glimpse at the great restaurant, but far more serene, more dignified. His opening mind received another new impression and a rarely attractive one.

But the centre of the scene for him was Vivien Wellgood. From his first sight of her in the drawing-room he could not deny that. He had never seen her in the evening before, and it was in the

evening that her frail beauty showed forth. She was like a thing of gossamer that a touch would spoil. She was so white in her low-cut frock; all so white save for a little glow on the cheeks that excitement and pleasure brought, save for the brightness of her hair in the soft candle light, save for the dark blue eyes which seemed to keep watch and ward over her hidden thoughts. Yes, she was – why, she was good enough for Harry – good enough for Harry Belfield himself! And he, Andy, Harry's faithful follower and worshipper, would worship her too, if she would let him (Harry, he knew, would), if she would not be afraid of him, not dislike him or shrink from him. That was all he asked, having in his mind not only a bashful consciousness of his rude strength and massive frame – they seemed almost threatening beside her delicacy – but also a haunting recollection that she could not endure such a number of things, including butchers' shops.

No thought for himself, no thought of trying to rival Harry, so much as crossed his mind. If it had, it would have been banished as rank treachery; but it could not, for the simple reason that his attitude towards Harry made such an idea utterly foreign to his thoughts. He was not asking, as Isobel Vintry had asked that afternoon, why he might not have his chance. It was not the way of his nature to put forward claims for himself – and, above all, claims that conflicted with Harry's claims. The bare notion was to him impossible.

He sat by her, but for some time she gave herself wholly to listening to Harry, who had found, on getting home, a letter from Billy Foot, full of the latest political gossip from town. But presently, the conversation drifting into depths of politics where she could not follow, she turned to Andy and said, "I'm getting on much better with Curly. I pat him now!"

"That's right. It's only his fun."

"People's fun is sometimes the worst thing about them."

"Well now, that's true," Andy acknowledged, rather surprised to hear the remark from her.

"But I am getting on much better. And – well, rather better at riding." She smiled at him in confidence. "And nobody's said anything about swimming. Do you know, when I feel myself inclined to get frightened, I think about you!"

"Do you find it helps?" asked Andy, much amused and rather pleased.

"Yes, it's like thinking of a policeman in the middle of the night."

"I suppose I do look rather like a policeman," said Andy reflectively.

"Yes, you do! That's it, I think." The vague "it" seemed to signify the explanation of the confidence Andy inspired.

"And how about dust and dirt, and getting very hot?" he inquired.

"Isobel says I'm a bit better about courage, but not the least about fastidiousness."

"Fastidiousness suits some people, Miss Wellgood."

"It doesn't suit father, not in me," she murmured with a woeful smile.

"Doesn't thinking about me help you there? On the same principle it ought to."

"It doesn't," she murmured, with a trace of confusion, and suddenly her eyes went blank. Something was in her thoughts that she did not want Andy to see. Was it the butcher's shop? Andy's wits were not quick enough to ask the question; but he saw that her confidential mood had suffered a check.

Her confidence had been very pleasant, but there were other things to listen to at the table. Andy was heart-whole and intellectually voracious.

They, the rest of the company, had begun on politics – imperial politics – and had discussed them not without some friction. No Radical was present —*Procul, O procul este, profani!*— but Wellgood had the perversities of his anti-sentimental attitude. A Tory at home, why was he to be a democrat – or a Socialist – at the Antipodes? Competition and self-interest were the golden rule in England; was there to be another between England and her colonies? The tie of blood – one flag, one crown, one destiny – Wellgood suspected his bugbear in every one of these cries. Nothing for

nothing – and for sixpence no more than the coin was worth – with a preference for five penn'orth if you could get out of it at that! He stood steady on his firmly-rooted narrow foundation.

All of Harry was on fire against him. Was blood nothing – race, colour, memories, associations, the Flag, the Crown, and the Destiny? A destiny to rule, or at least to manage, the planet! Mother and Daughters – nothing in that?

Things were getting hot, and the ladies, who always like to look on at the men fighting, much interested. Mr. Belfield, himself no politician, rather a student of human nature and addicted to the Socratic attitude (so justly vexatious to practical men who have to do something, good, bad, or if not better, at least more plausible, than nothing) interposed a suggestion.

"Mother and daughters? Hasn't husband and wives become a more appropriate parallel?" He smiled across the table at his own wife. "No personal reference, my dear! But an attitude of independence, without any particular desire to pay the bills? Oh, I'm only asking questions!"

Andy was listening hard now. So was Vivien, for she saw Harry's eyes alight and his mouth eager to utter truths that should save the nation.

"If we could reach," said Harry, marvellously handsome, somewhat rhetorical for a small party, "if only we could once reach a true understanding between ourselves and the self-governing – "

"Oh, but that's going beyond my parallel, my dear boy," his father interrupted. "If marriage demanded mutual understanding, what man or woman could risk it with eyes open?"

"Doesn't it?" Isobel Vintry was the questioner.

"Heavens, no, my dear Miss Vintry! Something much less, something much less fundamentally impossible. A good temper and a bad memory, that's all!"

"Well done, pater!" cried Harry, readily switched off from his heated enthusiasm. "Which for the husband, which for the wife?"

"Both for both, Harry. Toleration to-day, and an unlimited power of oblivion to-morrow."

"What nonsense you're talking, dear," placidly smiled Mrs. Belfield.

"I'm exactly defining your own characteristics," he replied. "If you do that to a woman, she always says you're talking nonsense."

"An unlimited supply of the water of Lethe, pater? That does it?"

"That's about it, Harry. If you mix it with a little sound Scotch whisky before you go to bed – "

Andy burst into a good guffaw; the kindly mocking humour pleased him. Vivien was alert too; there was nothing to frighten, much to enjoy; the glow deepened on her cheeks.

But Wellgood was not content; he was baulked of his argument, of his fight.

"We've wandered from the point," he said dourly. ("As if wanderings were not the best things in the world!" thought more than one of the party, more or less explicitly.) "We give, they take." He was back to the United Kingdom and the Colonies.

"Could anything be more nicely exact to my parallel?" asked Belfield, socratically smiling. "Did you ever know a marriage where each partner didn't say, 'I give, you take'? Some add that they're content with the arrangement, others don't."

"Pater, you always mix up different things," Harry protested, laughing.

"I'm always trying to find out whether there are any different things, Harry." He smiled at his son. "Wives, that's what they are! And several of them! Harry, we're in for all the difficulties of polygamy! A preference to one – oh no, I'm not spelling it with a big P! But – well, the ladies ought to be able to help us here. Could you share a heart, Miss Vintry?"

Isobel's white was relieved with gold trimmings; she looked sumptuous. "I shouldn't like it," she answered.

"What has all this got to do with the practical problem?" Wellgood demanded. "Our trade with the Colonies is no more than thirty per cent – "

"I agree with you, Mr. Wellgood. The gentlemen had much better have kept to their politics," Mrs. Belfield interposed with suave placidity. "They understand them. When they begin to talk about women – "

"Need of Lethe – whisky and Lethe-water!" chuckled Harry. "In a large glass, eh, Andy?"

Wellgood turned suddenly on Andy. "You've lived in Canada. What do you say?"

Andy had been far too much occupied in listening. Besides, he was no politician. He thought deeply for a moment.

"A lot depends on whether you want to buy or to sell." He delivered himself of this truth quite solemnly.

"A very far-reaching observation," said Mr. Belfield. "Goes to the root of human traffic, and, quite possibly, to that of both the institutions which we have been discussing. I wonder whether either will be permanent!"

"Look here, pater, we're at dessert! Aren't you starting rather big subjects?"

"Your father likes to amuse himself with curious ideas," Mrs. Belfield remarked. "So did my father; he once asked me what I thought would happen if I didn't say my prayers. Men like to ask questions like that, but I never pay much attention to them. Shall we go into the drawing-room, Vivien? It may be warm enough for a turn in the garden, perhaps." She addressed the men. "Bring your cigars and try."

The men were left alone. "The garden would be jolly," said Harry.

Mr. Belfield coughed, and suddenly wheezed. "Intimations of mortality!" he said apologetically. "We've talked of a variety of subjects – to little purpose, I suppose. But it's entertaining to survey the field of humanity. Your views were briefly expressed, Hayes."

"Everybody else was talking such a lot, sir," said Andy.

Belfield's humorous laugh was entangled in a cough. "You'll never get that obstacle out of the way of your oratory," he managed to stutter out. "They always are! Talk rules the world – eh, Wellgood?" He was maliciously provocative.

"We wait till they've finished talking. Then we do what we want," said Wellgood. "Force rules in the end – the readiness to kill and be killed. That's the *ultima ratio*, the final argument."

"The women say that's out of date."

"The women!" exclaimed Wellgood contemptuously.

"They'll be in the garden," Harry opined. "Shall we move, pater?"

"We might as well," said Belfield. "Are you ready, Wellgood?"

Wellgood was ready – in spite of his contempt.

Chapter VI

THE WORLDS OF MERITON

The garden at Halton was a pleasant place on a fine evening, with a moon waxing, yet not obtrusively full, with billowing shrubberies, clear-cut walks, lawns spreading in a gentle drabness that would be bright green in to-morrow's sun – a place pleasant in its calm, its spaciousness and isolation. They all sat together in a ring for a while; smoke curled up; a servant brought glasses that clinked as they were set down with a cheery, yet not urgent, suggestion.

"I suppose you're right to go in for it," said Wellgood to Harry. "It's your obvious line." (He was referring to a public career.) "But, after all, it's casting pearls before swine."

"Swine!" The note of exclamation was large. "Our masters, Mr. Wellgood!"

"A decent allowance of bran, and a ring through their noses – that's the thing for them!"

"Has anybody got a copy – well, another copy of 'Coriolanus'?" Harry inquired in an affectation of eagerness.

"Casting pearls before swine is bad business, of course," said Belfield in his husky voice – he was really unwise to be out of doors at all; "but there are degrees of badness. If your pearls are indifferent as pearls, and your swine admirable as swine? And that's often the truth of it."

"My husband is sometimes perverse in his talk, my dear," said Mrs. Belfield, aside to Vivien, to whom she was being very kind. "You needn't notice what he says."

"He's rather amusing," Vivien ventured, not quite sure whether the adjective were respectful enough.

"Andy, pronounce!" cried Harry Belfield; for his friend sat in his usual meditative absorbing silence.

"If I had to, I'd like to say a word from the point of view of the – swine." Had the moon been stronger, he might have been seen to blush. "I don't want to be – oh, well, serious. That's rot, I know – after dinner. But – well, you're all in it – insiders – I'm an outsider. And I say that what the swine want is – pearls!"

"If we've got them?" The question, or insinuation, was Belfield's. He was looking at Andy with a real, if an only half-serious, interest.

"Swine are swine," remarked Wellgood. "They mustn't forget it. Neither must we."

"But pearls by no means always pearls?" Belfield suggested. "Though they may look the real thing if a pretty woman hangs them round her neck."

Their talk went only for an embellishment of their general state – so comfortable, so serene, so exceptionally fortunate. Were not they pearls? Andy had seen something of the swine, had perhaps even been one of them. A vague protest stirred in him; were they not too serene, too comfortable, too fortunate? Yet he loved it all; it was beautiful. How many uglies go to make one beautiful? It is a bit of social arithmetic. When you have got the result, the deduction may well seem difficult.

"It doesn't much matter whether they're real or not, if a really pretty woman hangs them round her neck," Harry laughed. "The neck carries the pearls!"

"But we'd all rather they were real," said Isobel Vintry suddenly, the first of the women to intervene. "Other women guess, you see."

"Does it hurt so much if they do?" Belfield asked.

"The only thing that really does hurt," Isobel assured him, smiling.

"Oh, my dear, how disproportionate!" sighed Mrs. Belfield.

"I'd never have anything false about me – pearls, or lace, or hair, or – or anything about me," exclaimed Vivien. "I should hate it!" Feeling carried her into sudden unexpected speech.

Very gradually, very tentatively, Andy was finding himself able to speak in this sort of company, to speak as an equal to equals, not socially only, but in an intellectual regard.

"Riches seem to me all wrong, but what they produce, leaving out the wasters, all right." He let it out, apprehensive of a censoring silence. Belfield relieved him in a minute.

"I'm with you. I always admire most the things to which I'm on principle opposed – a melancholy state of one's mental interior! Kings, lords, and bishops – crowns, coronets, and aprons – all very attractive and picturesque!"

"We all know that the governor's a crypto-Radical," said Harry.

"I thought Carlyle, among others, had taught that we were all Radicals when in our pyjamas – or less," said Belfield. "But that's not the point. The excellence of things that are wrong, the narrowness of the moral view!"

"My dear! Oh, well, my dear!" murmured Mrs. Belfield.

"I've got a touch of asthma – I must say what I like." Belfield humorously traded on his infirmity. "A dishonest fellow who won't pay his tradesmen, a flirtatious minx who will make mischief, a spoilt urchin who insists on doing what he shouldn't – all rather attractive, aren't they? If everybody behaved properly we should have no 'situations.' What would become of literature and the drama?"

"And if nobody had any spare cash, what would become of them, either?" asked Harry.

"Well, we could do with a good deal less of them. I'll go so far as to admit that," said Wellgood.

Belfield laughed. "Even from Wellgood we've extracted one plea for the redistribution of wealth. A dialectical triumph! Let's leave it at that."

Mrs. Belfield carried her husband off indoors; Wellgood went with them, challenging his host to a game of bezique; Harry invited Vivien to a stroll; Isobel Vintry and Andy were left together. She asked him a sudden question:

"Do you think Harry Belfield a selfish man?"

"Selfish! Harry? Heavens, no! He'd do anything for his friends."

"I don't mean quite in that way. I daresay he would – and, of course, he's too well-mannered to be selfish about trifles. But I suppose even to ask questions about him is treason to you?"

"Oh, well, a little bit," laughed Andy. "I'm an old follower, you see!"

"Yes, and he thinks it natural you should be," she suggested quickly.

"Well, if it is natural, why shouldn't he think so?"

"It seems natural to him that he should always come first, and – and have the pick of things."

"You mean he's spoilt? According to his father, that makes him more attractive."

"Yes, I'm not saying it doesn't do that. Only – do you never mind it? Never mind playing second fiddle?"

"Second fiddle seems rather a high position. I hardly reckon myself in the orchestra at all," he laughed. "You remember – I'm accustomed to following the hunt on foot."

"While Harry Belfield rides! Yes! Vivien rides too – and doesn't like it!"

She was bending forward in her chair, handsome, sumptuous in her white and gold (Wellgood had made her a present the quarter-day before), with her smile very bitter. The smile told that she spoke with a meaning more than literal. Andy surveyed, at his leisure, possible metaphorical bearings.

"Oh yes, I think I see," he announced, after an interval fully perceptible. "You mean she doesn't really appreciate her advantages? By riding you mean – ?"

"Oh, really, Mr. Hayes!" She broke into vexed amused laughter. "I mustn't try it any more with you," she declared.

"But I shall understand if you give me time to think it over," Andy protested. "Don't rush me, that's all, Miss Vintry."

"As if I could rush any one or anything!" she said, handsome still, now handsomely despairing.

To Andy she was a problem, needing time to think over; to Wellgood she was a postulate, assumed not proved, yet assumed to be proved; to Harry she was – save for that subtle momentary

feeling on the terrace by the lake – Vivien's companion. She wanted to be something other than any of these. Follow the hounds on foot? She would know what it was to ride! Know and not like – in Vivien's fashion? Andy, slowly digesting, saw her lips curve in that bitter smile again.

From a path near by, yet secluded behind a thick trim hedge of yew, there sounded a girl's nervous flutter of a laugh, a young man's exultant merriment. Harry and Vivien, not far away, seemed the space of a world apart – to Isobel; Andy was normally conscious that they were not more than twenty yards off, and almost within hearing if they spoke. But he had been getting at Isobel's meaning – slowly and surely.

"Being able to ride – having the opportunity – and not caring – that's pearls before – ?"

"I congratulate you, Mr. Hayes. I can imagine you making a very good speech – after the election is over!"

Andy laughed heartily, leaning back in his chair.

"That's jolly good, Miss Vintry!" he said.

"Ten minutes after the poll closed you'd begin to persuade the electors!" She spoke rather lower. "Ten minutes after a girl had taken another man, you'd – "

"Give me time! I've never thought about myself like that," cried Andy.

No more sounds from the path behind the yew hedge. She was impatient with Andy – would Harry never come back from that path?

He came back the next moment – he and Vivien. Vivien's face was a confession, Harry's air a self-congratulation.

"I hope you've been making yourself amusing, Andy?" asked Harry. His tone conveyed a touch of amusement at the idea of Andy being amusing.

"Miss Vintry's been pitching into me like anything," said Andy, smiling broadly. "She says I'm always a day after the fair. I'm going to think it over – and try to get a move on."

His good-nature, his simplicity, his serious intention to attempt self-improvement, tickled Harry intensely. Why, probably Isobel had wanted to flirt, and Andy had failed to play up to her! He burst into a laugh; Vivien's laugh followed as an applauding echo.

"A lecture, was it, Miss Vintry?" Harry asked in banter.

"I could give you one too," said Isobel, colouring a little.

"She gives me plenty!" Vivien remarked, with a solemnly comic shake of her head.

"It's my business in life," said Isobel.

Just for a second Harry looked at her; an impish smile was on his lips. Did she think that, was she honest about it? Or was she provocative? It crossed Harry's mind – past experiences facilitating the transit of the idea – that she might be saying to him, "Is that all a young woman of my looks is good for? To give lectures?"

"You shall give me one at the earliest opportunity, if you'll be so kind," he laughed, his eyes boldly conveying that he would enjoy the lesson. Vivien laughed again; it was great fun to see Harry chaffing Isobel! She liked Isobel, but was in awe of her. Had not Isobel all the difficult virtues which it was her own woeful task to learn? But Harry could chaff her – Harry could do anything.

"If I do, I'll teach you something you don't know, Mr. Harry," Isobel said, letting her eyes meet his with a boldness equal to his own. Again that subtle feeling touched him, as it had on the terrace by the lake.

"I'm ready to learn my lesson," he assured her, with a challenging gleam in his eye.

She nodded rather scornfully, but accepting his challenge. There was a last bit of by-play between their eyes.

"It's really time to go, if Mr. Wellgood has finished his game," said Isobel, rising.

The insinuation of the words, the by-play of the eyes, had passed over Vivien's head and outside the limits of Andy's perspicacity. To both of them the bandying of words was but chaff; by both the exchange of glances went unmarked. Well, the whole thing was no more than chaff to Harry himself;

such chaff as he was very good at, a practised hand – and not ignorant of why the chaff was pleasant. And Isobel? Oh yes, she knew! Harry was amused to find this knowledge in Vivien's companion – this provocation, this freemasonry of flirtation. Poor old Andy had, of course, seen none of it! Well, perhaps it needed a bit of experience – besides the temperament.

Indoors, farewell was soon said – hours ruled early at Meriton. Soon said, yet not without some significance in the saying. Mrs. Belfield was openly affectionate to Vivien, and Belfield paternal in a courtly way; Harry very devoted to the same young lady, yet with a challenging "aside" of his eyes for Isobel; Andy brimming over with a vain effort to express adequately but without gush his thanks for the evening. Belfield, being two pounds the better of Wellgood over their bezique, was in more than his usual good-temper – it was spiced with malice, for the defeat of Wellgood (a bad loser) counted for more than the forty shillings – and gave Andy his hand and a pat on the back.

"It's not often one has to tell a man not to undervalue himself," he remarked. "But I fancy I might say that to you. Well, I'm no prophet; but at any rate be sure you're always welcome at this house for your own sake, as well as for Harry's."

Getting into the carriage with Isobel and her father, Vivien felt like going back to school. But in all likelihood she would see Harry's eyes again to-morrow. She did not forget to give a kindly glance to solid Andy Hayes – not exciting, nor bewildering, nor inflaming (as another was!), but somehow comforting and reassuring to think of. She sat down on the narrow seat, fronting her father and Isobel. Yes – but school wouldn't last much longer! And after school? Ineffable heaven! Being with Harry, loving Harry, being loved by – ? That vaulting imagination seemed still almost – nay, it seemed quite – impossible. Yet if your own eyes assure you of things impossible – well, there's a good case for believing your eyes, and the belief is pleasant. Wellgood sore over his two pounds, Isobel dissatisfied with fate but challenging it, sat silent. The young girl's lips curved in sweet memories and triumphant anticipations. The best thing in the world – was it actually to be hers? Almost she knew it, though she would not own to the knowledge yet.

Happy was she in the handkerchief flung by her hero! Happy was Harry Belfield in the ready devotion, the innocent happy surrender, of one girl, and the vexed challenge of another whom he had – whom he had at least meant to ignore; he could never answer for it that he would quite ignore a woman who displayed such a challenge in the lists of sex. But there was a happier being still among those who left Halton that night. It was Andy Hayes, before whom life had opened so, who had enjoyed such a wonderful day-off, who had been told not to undervalue himself, had been reproached with being a day after the fair, had undergone (as it seemed) an initiation into a life of which he had hardly dreamt, yet of which he appeared, in that one summer's day, to have been accepted as a part.

Yes, Andy was on the whole the happiest – happier even than Harry, to whom content, triumph, and challenge were all too habitual; happier even than Vivien, who had still some schooling to endure, still some of love's finicking doubts, some of hope's artificially prudent incredulity, to overcome; beyond doubt happier than Wellgood, who had lost two pounds, or Isobel Vintry, who had challenged and had been told that her challenge should be taken up – some day! Mrs. Belfield was intent on sleeping well, as she always did; Mr. Belfield on not coughing too much – as he generally did. They were not competitors in happiness.

Andy walked home. Halton lay half a mile outside the town; his lodgings were at the far end of High Street. All through the long, broad, familiar street – in old days he had known who lived in well-nigh every house – his road lay. He walked home under the stars. The day had been wonderful; they who had figured in it peopled his brain – delicate dainty Vivien first; with her, brilliant Harry; that puzzling Miss Vintry; Mr. Belfield, who talked so whimsically and had told him not to undervalue himself; Wellgood, grim, hard, merciless, yet somehow with the stamp of a man about him; Mrs. Belfield serenely matching with her house, her Vandykes, her garden, and the situation to which it had pleased Heaven to call her. Soberly now – soberly now – had he ever expected to be a part of all this?

High Street lay dark and quiet. It was eleven o'clock. He passed the old grammar school with a thought of the dear old father – B.A. Oxon, which had something to do with his wonderful day. He passed the Lion, where "the Bird" officiated, and Mr. Foulkes' office, where "Chinks" aspired to become "gentleman, one etc" – so runs the formula that gives a solicitor his status. All dark! Now if by chance Jack Rock were up, and willing to listen to a little honest triumphing! It had been a day to talk about.

Yes, Jack was up; his parlour lights glowed cosily behind red blinds. Yet Andy was not to have a clear field for the recital of his adventures; it was no moment for an exhibition of his honest pride, based on an unimpaired humility. Jack Rock had a party. The table was furnished with beer, whisky, gin, tobacco, and clay pipes. Round it sat old friends – Chinks and the Bird; the Bird's father, Mr. Dove, landlord of the Lion; and Cox, the veterinary surgeon. After the labours of the week they were having a little "fling" on Saturday night – convivially, yet in all reasonable temperance. The elder men – Jack, Mr. Dove, and Cox – greeted Andy with intimate and affectionate cordiality; a certain constraint marked the manner of Chinks and the Bird – they could not forget the afternoon's encounter. His evening coat too, and his shirt-front! Everybody marked them; but they had a notion that he might have caught that habit in London.

Andy's welcome over, Mr. Dove of the Lion took up his tale at the point at which he had left it. Mr. Dove had not Jack Rock's education – he had never been at the grammar school but he was a shrewd sensible old fellow, who prided himself on the respectability of his "house" and felt his responsibilities as a publican without being too fond of the folk who were always dinning them into his ears.

"I says to the girl, 'We don't want no carryings-on at the Lion.' That's what I says, Jack. She says, 'That wasn't nothing, Mr. Dove – only a give and take o' nonsense. The bar between us too! W'ere's the 'arm?' 'I don't like it, Miss Miles,' I says, 'I don't like it, that's all.' 'Oh, very good, Mr. Dove! You're master 'ere, o' course; only, if you won't 'ave that, you won't keep up your takings, that's all!' That's the way she put it, Jack."

"Bit of truth in it, perhaps," Jack opined.

"There's a lot of truth in it," said the Bird solemnly. "Fellers like to show off before a good-looking girl – whether she's behind a bar or whether she ain't."

"If there never 'adn't been barmaids, I wouldn't be the one to begin it," said Mr. Dove. "I knows its difficulties. But there they are – all them nice girls bred to it! What are ye to do with 'em, Jack?"

"A drink doesn't taste any worse for being 'anded – handed – to you by a pretty girl," said Chinks with a knowing chuckle.

"Then you give 'er one – then you stand me one – then you 'ave another yourself – just to say 'Blow the expense!' Oh, the girl knew the way of it – I ain't saying she didn't!" Mr. Dove smoked fast, evidently puzzled in his mind. "And she's a good girl 'erself too, ain't she, Tom?"

Tom blushed – blushed very visibly. Miss Miles was not a subject of indifference to the Bird.

"She's very civil-spoken," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"That she is – and a fine figure of a girl too," added Jack Rock. "Know her, Andy?"

Well, no! Andy did not know her; he felt profoundly apologetic. Miss Miles was evidently a person whom one ought to know, if one would be in the world of Meriton. The world of Meriton? It came home to him that there was more than one.

Mr. Cox was a man who listened – in that respect rather like Andy himself; but, when he did speak, he was in the habit of giving a verdict, therein deviating from Andy's humble way.

"Barmaids oughtn't to a' come into existence," he said. "Being there, they're best left – under supervision." He nodded at old Dove, as though to say, "You won't get any further than that if you talk all night," and put his pipe back into his mouth.

"The doctor's right, I daresay," said old Dove in a tone of relief. It is always something of a comfort to be told that one's problems are insoluble; the obligation of trying to solve them is thereby removed.

Jack accepted this ending to the discussion.

"And what have you been doing with yourself, Andy?" he asked.

Andy found a curious difficulty in answering. Tea and tennis at Nutley, dinner at Halton – it seemed impossible to speak the words without self-consciousness. He felt that Chinks and the Bird had their eyes on him.

"Been at work all the week, Jack. Had a day-off to-day."

Luckily Jack fastened on the first part of his answer. He turned a keen glance on Andy. "Business doin' well?"

"Not particularly," Andy confessed. "It's a bit hard for a new-comer to establish a connection."

"You're right there, Andy," commented old Mr. Dove, serenely happy in the knowledge of an ancient and good connection attaching to the Lion.

"Oh, not particularly well?" Jack nodded with an air of what looked like satisfaction, though it would not be kind to Andy to be satisfied.

"Playing lawn-tennis at Nutley, weren't you?" asked Chinks suddenly.

All faces turned to Andy.

"Yes, I was, Chinks," he said.

"Half expected you to supper, Andy," said Jack Rock.

"Sorry, Jack. I would have come if I'd been free. But – "

"Well, where were you?"

There was no help for it.

"I was dining out, Jack."

Andy's tone became as airy as he could make it, as careless, as natural. His effort in this kind was not a great success.

"Harry Belfield asked me to Halton."

A short silence followed. They were good fellows, one and all of them; nobody had a jibe for him; the envy, if envy there were, was even as his own for Harry Belfield. Cox looked round and raised his glass.

"'Ere's to you, Andy! You went to the war, you went to foreign parts. If you've learned a bit and got on a bit, nobody in Meriton's goin' to grudge it you – least of all them as knew your good father, who was a gentleman if ever there was one – and I've known some of the best, consequent on my business layin' mainly with 'orses."

"Dined at Halton, did you?" Old Jack Rock beamed, then suddenly grew thoughtful.

"Well, of course, I've always known Harry Belfield, and – " He was apologizing.

"The old gentleman used to dine there – once a year reg'lar," Jack reminded him. "Quite right of 'em to keep it up with you." But still Jack looked thoughtful.

Eleven-thirty sounded from the squat tower of the long low church which presided over the west end – the Fyfold end – of High Street. Old Cox knocked out his pipe decisively. "Bedtime!" he pronounced.

Nobody contested the verdict. Only across Andy's mind flitted an outlandish memory that it was the hour at which one sat down to supper at the great restaurant – with Harry, the Nun, sardonic Miss Dutton, Billy Foot, and London at large – and at liberty.

"You stop a bit, my lad," said Jack with affection, also with a touch of old-time authority. "I've something to say to you, Andy."

Andy stayed willingly enough; he liked Jack, and he was loth to end that day.

Jack filled and pressed, lit, pressed, and lit again, a fresh clay pipe.

"You like all that sort of thing, Andy?" he asked. "Oh, you know what I mean – what you've been doin' to-day."

"Yes, I like it, Jack." Andy saw that his dear old friend – dear Nancy's brother – had something of moment on his mind.

"But it don't count in the end. It's not business, Andy." Jack's tone had become, suddenly and strangely, persuasive, reasonably persuasive – almost what one might call coaxing.

"I've never considered it in the light of business, Jack."

"Don't let it turn you from business, Andy. You said the timber was worth about two hundred a year to you?"

"About that; it'll be more – or less – before I'm six months older. It's sink or swim, you know."

"You've no call to sink," said Jack Rock with emphasis. "Your father's son ain't goin' to sink while Jack Rock can throw a lifebelt to him."

"I know, Jack. I'd ask you for half your last crust, and you'd soak it in milk for me as you used to – if you had to steal the milk! But – well, what's up?"

"I'm gettin' on in life, boy. I've enough to do with the horses. I do uncommon well with the horses. I've a mind to give myself to that. Not but what I like the meat. Still I've a mind to give myself to the horses. The meat's worth – Oh, I'll surprise you, Andy, and don't let it go outside o' this room – the meat's worth nigh on five hundred a year! Aye, nigh on that! The chilled meat don't touch me much, nor the London stores neither. Year in, year out, nigh on five hundred! Nancy loved you; the old gentleman never said a word as showed he knew a difference between me and him. Though he must have known it. I'm all alone, Andy. While I can I'll keep the horses – Lord, I love the horses! You drop your timber. Take over the meat, Andy. You're a learnin' chap; you'll soon pick it up from me and Simpson. Take over the meat, Andy. It's a safe five hundred a year!"

So he pleaded to have his great benefaction accepted. He had meant to give in a manner perhaps somewhat magnificent; what he gave was to him great. The news of tea and tennis at Nutley, of dinner at Halton, induced a new note. Proud still, yet he pleaded. It was a fine business – the meat! Nor chilled meat, nor stores mattered seriously; his connection was so high-class. Five hundred a year! It was luxury, position, importance; it was all these in Meriton. His eyes waited anxiously for Andy's answer.

Andy caught his hand across the table. "Dear old Jack, how splendid of you!"

"Well, lad?"

For the life of him Andy could say nothing more adequate, nothing less disappointing, less ungrateful, than "I'd like to think it over. And thanks, Jack!"

Chapter VII

ENTERING FOR THE RACE

Andy Hayes had never supposed that he would be the victim of a problem, or exposed to the necessity of a momentous choice. Life had hitherto been very simple to him – doing his work, taking his pay, spending the money frugally and to the best advantage, sparing a small percentage for the Savings Bank, and reconciling with this programme the keen enjoyment of such leisure hours as fell to his lot. A reasonable, wholesome, manageable scheme of life! Or, rather, not a scheme at all – Andy was no schemer. That was the way life came – the way an average man saw it and accepted it. From first to last he never lost the conception of himself as an average man, having his capabilities, yet strictly conditioned by the limits of the practicable; free in his soul, by no means perfectly free in his activities. Andy never thought in terms of "environment" or such big words, but he always had a strong sense of what a fellow like himself could expect; the two phrases may, perhaps, come to much the same thing.

In South Africa he had achieved his sergeant's stripes – not a commission, nor the Victoria Cross, nor anything brilliant. In Canada he had not become a millionaire, nor even a prosperous man or a dashing speculator; he had been thought a capable young fellow, who would, perhaps, be equal to developing the English side of the business. Andy might be justified in holding himself no fool: he had no ground for higher claims, no warrant for anything like ambition.

Thus unaccustomed to problems, he had expected to toss uneasily (he had read of many heroes who "tossed uneasily") on his bed all night through. Lawn-tennis and a good dinner saved him from that romantic but uncomfortable ordeal; he slept profoundly till eight-thirty. Just before he was called – probably between his landlady's knock and her remark that it was eight-fifteen (she was late herself) – he had a brief vivid dream of selling a very red joint of beef to a very pallid Vivien Wellgood – a fantastic freak of the imagination which could have nothing to do with the grave matter in hand.

Yet, on the top of this, as he lay abed awhile in the leisure of Sunday morning, with no train to catch, he remembered his father's B.A. Oxon; he recalled his mother's unvarying designation of old Jack as "the butcher;" he recollected Nancy's pride in marrying "out of her class" – it had been her own phrase, sometimes in boast, sometimes in apology. Though Nancy had a dowry of a hundred pounds a year – charged on the business, and now returned to Jack Rock since Nancy left no children – she never forgot that she had married out of her class. And into his father's? And into his own? "I'm a snob!" groaned Andy.

He grew a little drowsy again, and in his drowsiness again played tennis at Nutley, again dined at Halton, again saw Vivien in the butcher's shop, and again was told by Mr. Belfield not to undervalue himself. But is to take nigh on five hundred pounds a year to undervalue yourself – you who are making a precarious two? And where lies the difference between selling wood and selling meat – wood from Canada and meat in Meriton? Andy's broad conception of the world told him that there was none; his narrow observation of the same sphere convinced him that the difference was, in its practical bearings, considerable. Nay, confine yourself to meat alone: was there no difference between importing cargoes of that questionable "chilled" article and disposing of joints of unquestionable "home-bred" over the counter? All the argument was for the home-bred. But to sell the home-bred joints one wore a blue apron and carried a knife and a steel – or, at all events, smacked of doing these things; whereas the wholesale cargoes of "chilled" involved no such implements or associations. Once again, Canada was Canada, New Zealand New Zealand, Meriton Meriton. With these considerations mingled two pictures – dinner at Halton, and Jack Rock's convivial party.

"I'll get up," said Andy, too sore beset by his problem to lie abed any more.

Church! The bells rang almost as soon as Andy – he had dawdled and lounged over dressing and breakfast in Sunday's beneficent leisure – was equipped for the day. In Meriton everybody went to Church, except an insignificant, tolerated, almost derided minority who frequented a very small, very ugly Methodist chapel in a by-street – for towns like Meriton are among the best preserves of the Establishment. Andy always went to church on a Sunday morning, answering the roll-call, attending parade, accepting the fruits of his fathers' wisdom, as his custom was. "Church, and a slice of that cold beef, and then a jolly long walk!" he said to himself. He had a notion that this typical English Sunday – the relative value of whose constituents he did not, and we need not, exactly assess – might help him to settle his problem. The cold beef and the long walk made part of the day's character – the "Church" completed it. This was Andy's feeling; it is not, of course, put forward as what he ought to have felt.

So Andy went to church – in a cut-away coat and a tall hat, though it drizzled, and he would sooner have been in a felt hat, impervious to the rain. He sat just half-way down the nave, and it must be confessed that his attention wandered. He had such a very important thing to settle in this world; it would not go out of his mind, though he strove to address himself to the issues which the service suggested. He laboured under the disadvantage of not being conscious of flagrant iniquity, though he duly confessed himself a miserable offender. He looked round on the neighbours he knew so well; they were all confessing that they were miserable offenders. Andy believed it – it was in the book – but he considered most of them to be good and honest people, and he was almost glad to see that they did not look hopelessly distressed over their situation.

The First Lesson caught and chained his wandering attention. It was about David and Jonathan; it contained the beautiful lament of friend for friend, the dirge of a brotherly love. The Rector's voice was rather sing-song, but it would have needed a worse delivery to spoil the words: "How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places! I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished!" Thus ended the song, so rich in splendour, so charged with sorrow.

"Clinking!" was Andy's inward comment. Then in a flash came the thought, "Why, of course, I must ask Harry Belfield; he'll tell me what to do all right."

The reference of his problem to Harry ought to have disposed of it for good, and left Andy free to perform his devotions with a single mind. But it only set him wondering what Harry would decide, wondering hard and – there was no escaping from it – jealously. His service in the ranks, his residence in communities at least professedly democratic, had not made him a thorough democrat, it seemed. He might have acquired the side of democracy the easier of the two to acquire; he might be ready to call any man his equal, whatever his station or his work. He stumbled at the harder task of seeing himself, whatever his work or station, as any man's equal – at claiming or assuming, not at according, equality. And in Meriton! To claim or assume equality with any and every man in Meriton would, if he accepted Jack Rock's offer, be to court ridicule from equals and unequals all alike, and most of all from his admitted inferiors. Surely Harry would never send him to the butcher's shop? That would mean that Harry thought of him (for all his kindness) as of Chinks or of the Bird. Could he risk discovering that, after all, Harry – and Harry's friends – thought of him like that? A sore pang struck him. Had he been at Nutley – at Halton – only on sufferance? He had an idea that Harry would send him to the butcher's shop – would do the thing ever so kindly, ever so considerately, but all the same would do it. "Well, it's the safe thing, isn't it, old chap?" he fancied Harry saying; and then returning to his own high ambitions, and being thereafter very friendly – whenever he chanced to pass the shop. Andy never deceived himself as to the quality of Harry's friendship: it lay, at the most, in appreciative acceptance of unbounded affection. It was not like Jonathan's for David. Andy was content. And must not acceptance, after all, breed some return? For whatever return came he was grateful. In this sphere there was no room even for theories of equality, let alone for its practice.

For some little time back Andy had been surprised to observe a certain attribute of his own – that of pretty often turning out right. He accounted for it by saying that an average man, judging of average men and things, would fairly often be right – on an average; men would do what he expected, things would go as he expected – on an average. Such discernment as was implied in this Andy felt as no endowment, no clairvoyance; rather it was that his limitations qualified him to appreciate other people's. He would have liked to feel able to except Harry Belfield who should have no limitations – only he felt terribly sure of what Harry Belfield would say: Safety, and the shop!

By this time the church service was ended, the cold beef eaten, most of the long walk achieved. For while these things went straight on to an end, Andy's thoughts rolled round and round, like a squirrel in a cage.

"A man's only got one life," Andy was thinking to himself for the hundredth time as, having done his fifteen miles, he came opposite the entry to Nutley on his way home after his walk. What a lot of thoughts and memories there had been on that walk! Walking alone, a man is the victim – or the beneficiary – of any number of stray recollections, ideas, or fancies. He had even thought of – and smiled over – sardonic Miss Dutton's sardonic remark that he was worth ten of either Billy Foot or – Harry Belfield! Well, the poor girl had come one cropper; allowances must be made.

Cool, serene, with what might appear to the eyes of less happy people an almost insolently secure possession of fortune's favour, Harry Belfield stood at Nutley gate. Andy, hot and dusty, winced at being seen by him; Harry was so remote from any disarray. Andy's heart leapt at the sight of his friend – and seemed to stand still in the presence of his judge. Because the thing – the problem – must come out directly. There was no more possibility of shirking it.

Vivien was flitting – her touch of the ground seemed so light – down the drive, past the deep dark water, to join Harry for a stroll. His invitation to a stroll on that fine still Sunday afternoon had not been given without significance nor received without a thousand tremblings. So it would appear that it was Andy's ill-fortune to interrupt.

Harry was smoking. He took his cigar out of his mouth to greet Andy.

"Treadmill again, old boy? Getting the fat off?"

"You're the one man I wanted to see." Then Andy's face fell; it was an awful moment. "I want to ask your advice."

"Look sharp!" said Harry, smiling. "I've an appointment. She'll be here any minute."

"Jack Rock's offered to turn the shop over to me, as soon as I learn the business. I say, I – I suppose I ought to accept? He says it's worth hard on five hundred a year. I say, keep that dark; he told me not to tell anybody."

"Gad, is it?" said Harry, and whistled softly.

Vivien came in sight of him, and walked more slowly, dallying with anticipation.

"Splendid of him, isn't it? I say, I suppose I ought to – to think it over?" He had been doing nothing else for what seemed eternity.

Harry laughed – that merry irresponsible laugh of his. "Blue suits your complexion, Andy. It seems damned funny – but five hundred a year! Worth that, is it now, really? And he'd probably leave you anything else he has."

Silently-flitting Vivien was just behind Harry now. Andy saw her, Harry was unaware of her presence. She laid her finger on her lips, making a confidant of Andy, in her joy at a trick on her lover.

"Of course it – well, it sort of defines matters – ties you down, eh?" Harry's laugh broke out again. "Andy, old boy, you'll look infernally funny, pricing joints to old Dove or Miss Pink! Oh, I say, I don't think you can do it, Andy!"

"Don't you, Harry?" Andy's tone was eager, beseeching, full of hope.

"But I suppose you ought." Harry tried to be grave, and chuckled again. "You'd look it uncommon well, you know. You'd soon develop the figure. Old Jack never has – doesn't look as if his own steaks did him any good. But you – we'd send you to Smithfield in no time!"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Vivien suddenly.

"Oh, there you are at last! Why, the funniest thing! Old Andy here wants to be a butcher."

"I don't want – " Andy began.

"A butcher! What nonsense you do talk sometimes, Harry!" She stood by Harry's side, so happy in him, so friendly to Andy.

"Fact!" said Harry, and acquainted her with the situation.

Vivien blushed red. "I – I'm very sorry I said what – what I did to you. You remember?"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Andy.

"Of course I – I never knew – I never thought – Of course, somebody must – Oh, do forgive me, Mr. Hayes!"

Harry raised his brows in humorous astonishment. "All this is a secret to me."

"I – I told Mr. Hayes I didn't like – well – places where they sold meat – raw meat, Harry."

"What do you think really, Harry?" Andy asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Your choice, old man," he said. "You've looked at all sides of it, of course. It's getting latish, Vivien."

Andy would almost rather have had the verdict which he feared. "Your choice, old man" – and a shrug of the shoulders. Yet his loyalty intervened to tell him that Harry was right. It was his choice, and must be. He found Vivien's eyes on him – those distant, considering eyes.

"I suppose you couldn't give me an opinion, Miss Wellgood?" he asked, mustering a smile with some difficulty.

Vivien's lips drooped; her eyes grew rather sad and distinctly remote. She gave no judgment; she merely uttered a regret – a regret in which social and personal prejudice (it could not be acquitted of that) struggled with kindness for Andy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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