

Hope Anthony

Beaumaroy Home from the Wars



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CHAPTER I

DOCTOR MARY'S PAYING GUEST

"Just in time, wasn't it?" asked Mary Arkroyd.

"Two days before the – the ceremony! Mercifully it had all been kept very quiet, because it was only three months since poor Gilly was killed. I forget whether you ever met Gilly? My half-brother, you know?"

"Only once – in Collingham Gardens. He had an *exeat*, and dashed in one Saturday morning when we were just finishing our work. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I think I do. But since my engagement I'd gone into colours – oh, of course, I've gone back into mourning now! – and everything was ready – settlements and so on, you know. And rooms taken at Bournemouth. And then it all came out!"

"How?"

"Well, Eustace – Captain Cranster, I mean – Oh, I think he really must have had shell-shock, as he said, even though the doctor seemed to doubt it! He gave the Colonel as a reference in some shop, and – and the bank wouldn't pay the cheque. Other cheques turned up too; and in the end the police went through his papers, and found letters from – well, from her, you know. From Bogota. South America, isn't it? He'd lived there ten years, you know, growing something – beans, or coffee, or coffee-beans, or something – I don't know what. He tried to say the marriage wasn't binding, but the Colonel – wasn't it providential that the Colonel was home on leave? Mamma could never have grappled with it! The Colonel was sure it was, and so were the lawyers."

"What happened then?"

"The great thing was to keep it quiet. Now wasn't it? And there was the shell-shock – or so Eustace – Captain Cranster, I mean – said, anyhow. So, on the Colonel's advice, Mamma squared the cheque business and – and they gave him twenty-four hours to clear out. Papa – I call the Colonel papa, you know, though he's really my stepfather – used a little influence, I think. Anyhow it was managed. I never saw him again, Mary."

"Poor dear! Was it very bad?"

"Yes! But – suppose we had been married! Mary, where should I have been?"

Mary Arkroyd left that problem alone. "Were you very fond of him?" she asked.

"Awfully!" Cynthia turned up to her friend pretty blue eyes suffused in tears. "It was the end of the world to me. That there could be such men! I went to bed. Mamma could do nothing with me. Oh, well, she wrote to you about all that."

"She told me you were in a pretty bad way."

"I was just desperate! Then one day – in bed – the thought of you came. It seemed an absolute inspiration. I remembered the card you sent on my last birthday – you've never forgotten my birthdays, though it's years since we met – with your new address here – and your 'Doctor,' and all the letters after your name! I thought it rather funny." A faint smile, the first since Miss Walford's arrival at Inkston, probably the first since Captain Eustace Cranster's shell-shock had wrought catastrophe – appeared on her lips. "How I waited for your answer! You don't mind having me, do you, dear? Mamma insisted on suggesting the P.G. arrangement. I was afraid you'd shy at it."

"Not a bit! I should have liked to have you anyhow, but I can make you much more comfortable with the P.G. money. And your maid too – she looks as if she was accustomed to the best! By the way, need she be quite so tearful? She's more tearful than you are yourself."

"Jeanne's very, very fond of me," Cynthia murmured reproachfully.

"Oh, we'll get her out of that," said Mary briskly. "The tears, I mean, not the fondness. I'm very fond of you myself. Six years ago you were a charming kitten, and I used to enjoy being your 'visiting governess' – to say nothing of finding the guineas very handy while I was waiting to qualify. You're rather like a kitten still, one of those blue-eyed ones – Siamese, aren't they? – with close fur and a wondering look. But you mustn't mew down here, and you must have lots of milk and cream. Even if rations go on, I can certify all the extras for you. That's the good of being a doctor!" She laughed cheerfully as she took a cigarette from the mantelpiece and lit it.

Cynthia, on the other hand, began to sob, prettily and not in a noisy fashion, yet evidently heading towards a bout of grief. Moreover, no sooner had the first sound of lamentation escaped from her lips, than the door was opened smartly and a buxom girl, in lady's-maid uniform, rushed in, darted across the room, and knelt by Cynthia, sobbing also and exclaiming, "Oh, my poor Mees Cynthia!"

Mary smiled in a humorous contempt. "Stop this!" she commanded rather brusquely. "You've not been deceived too, have you, Jeanne?"

"Me, madame? No. But my poor Mees – "

"Leave your poor Mees to me." She took a paper bag from the mantelpiece. "Go and eat chocolates."

Fixed with a firm and decidedly professional glance, Jeanne stopped sobbing and rose slowly to her feet.

"Don't listen outside the door. You must have been listening. Wait till you're rung for. Miss Cynthia will be all right with me. We're going for a walk. Take her upstairs and put on her hat for her, and a thick coat; it's cold and going to rain, I think."

"A walk, Mary?" Cynthia's sobs stopped to make way for this protest. The description of the weather did not sound attractive.

"Yes, yes. Now off with both of you! Here, take the chocolates, Jeanne, and try to remember that it might have been worse."

Jeanne's brown eyes were eloquent of reproach.

"Captain Cranster might have been found out too late – after the wedding," Mary explained with a smile. "Try to look at it like that. Five minutes to get ready, Cynthia!" She was ready for the weather herself, in the stout coat and skirt and weather-proof hat in which she had driven the two-seater on her round that morning.

The disconsolate pair drifted ruefully from the room, though Jeanne did recollect to take the chocolates. Doctor Mary stood looking down at the fire, her lips still shaped in that firm, wise, and philosophical smile with which doctors and nurses – and indeed, sometimes, anybody who happens to be feeling pretty well himself – console or exasperate suffering humanity. "A very good thing the poor silly child did come to me!" That was the form her thoughts took. For although Dr. Mary Arkroyd was, and knew herself to be, no dazzling genius at her profession – in moments of candour she would speak of having "scraped through" her qualifying examinations – she had a high opinion of her own common sense and her power of guiding weaker mortals.

For all that Jeanne's cheek bulged with a chocolate, there was open resentment on her full pouting lips, and a hint of the same feeling in Cynthia's still liquid eyes, when mistress and maid came downstairs again. Without heeding these signs, Mary drew on her gauntlets, took her walking-stick, and flung the hall door open. A rush of cold wind filled the little hall. Jeanne shivered ostentatiously; Cynthia sighed and muffled herself deeper in her fur collar. "A good walking day!" said Mary decisively.

Up to now, Inkston had not impressed Cynthia Walford very favourably. It was indeed a mixed kind of a place. Like many villages which lie near to London and have been made, by modern developments, more accessible than once they were, it showed chronological strata in its buildings. Down by the station all was new, red, suburban. Mounting the tarred road, the wayfarer bore slightly to the right along the original village street; bating the aggressive "fronts" of one or two commercial innovators, this was old, calm, serene, grey in tone and restful, ornamented by three or four good-class Georgian houses, one quite fine, with well-wrought iron gates (this was Dr. Irechester's); turning to the right again, but more sharply, the wayfarer found himself once more in villadom, but a villadom more ornate, more costly, with gardens to be measured in acres – or nearly. This was Hinton Avenue (Hinton because it was the builder's wife's maiden name, Avenue because avenue is genteel). Here Mary dwelt, but by good luck her predecessor, Dr. Christian Evans, had seized upon a surviving old cottage at the end of the avenue, and, indeed, of Inkston village itself. Beyond it stretched meadows, while the road, turning again, ran across an open heath, and pursued its way to Sprotsfield, four miles distant, a place of greater size where all amenities could be found.

It was along this road that the friends now walked, Mary setting a brisk pace. "When once you've turned your back on the Avenue, it's heaps better," she said. "Might be real country, looking this way, mightn't it? Except the Naylor's place – oh, and Tower Cottage – there are no houses between this and Sprotsfield."

The wind blew shrewdly, with an occasional spatter of rain; the withered bracken lay like a vast carpet of dull copper colour under the cloudy sky; scattered fir trees made fantastic shapes in the early gloom of a December day. A sombre scene, yet wanting only sunshine to make it flash in a richness of colour; even to-day its quiet and spaciousness, its melancholy and monotony, seemed to bid a sympathetic and soothing welcome to aching and fretted hearts.

"It really is rather nice out here," Cynthia admitted.

"I come almost every afternoon. Oh, I've plenty of time! My round in the morning generally sees me through – except for emergencies – births and deaths, and so on. You see, my predecessor, poor Christian Evans, never had more than the leavings, and that's all I've got. I believe the real doctor – the old-established one – Dr. Irechester, was angry at first with Dr. Evans for coming; he didn't want a rival. But Christian was such a meek, mild, simple little Welshman, not the least pushing or ambitious; and very soon Dr. Irechester, who's quite well off, was glad to leave him the dirty work – I mean," she explained, smiling, "the cottages and the panel work – National Insurance, you know – and so on. Well, as you know, I came down as *locum* for Christian – he was a fellow-student of mine – and when the dear little man was killed in France, Dr. Irechester himself suggested that I should stay on. He was rather nice. He said, 'We all started to laugh at you, at first, but we don't laugh now – anyhow, only my wife does! So, if you stay on, I don't doubt we shall work very well together, my dear colleague.' Wasn't that rather nice of him, Cynthia?"

"Yes, dear," said Cynthia, in a voice that sounded a good many miles away.

Mary laughed. "I'm bound to be interested in you, but I suppose you're not bound to be interested in me," she observed resignedly. "All the same, I made a sensation at Inkston just at first. And they were even more astonished when it turned out that I could dance and play lawn tennis."

"That's a funny little place," said Cynthia, pointing to the left side of the road.

"Tower Cottage, that's called."

"But what a funny place!" Cynthia insisted. "A round tower, like a Martello tower, only smaller, of course; and what looks just like an ordinary cottage – or small farmhouse – joined on to it. What could the tower have been for?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Origin lost in the mists of antiquity! An old gentleman named Saffron lives there now."

"A patient of yours, Mary?"

"Oh no! He's well off – rich, I believe. So he belongs to Dr. Irechester. But I often meet him along the road. Lately there's always been a younger man with him – a companion, or secretary, or something of that sort, I hear he is."

"There are two men coming along the road now."

"Yes, that's them – the old man and his friend. He's rather striking to look at."

"Which of them?"

"The old man, of course. I haven't looked at the secretary. Cynthia, I believe you're beginning to feel a little better!"

"Oh no, I'm not! I'm afraid I'm not, really!" But there had been a cheerfully roguish little smile on her face. It vanished very promptly when observed.

The two men approached them, on their way, no doubt, to Tower Cottage. The old man was not above middle height, indeed scarcely reached it; but he made the most of his inches, carrying himself very upright, with an air of high dignity. Close-cut white hair showed under an old-fashioned peaked cap; he wore a plaid shawl swathed round him, his left arm being enveloped in its folds; his right rested in the arm of his companion, who was taller than he, lean and loose-built, clad in an almost white (and very unseasonable-looking) suit of some homespun material. He wore no covering on his head, a thick crop of curly hair (of a colour indistinguishable in the dim light) presumably affording such protection as he needed. His face was turned down towards the old man, who was looking up at him and apparently talking to him, though in so low a tone that no sound reached Mary and Cynthia as they passed by. Neither man gave any sign of noticing their presence.

"Mr. Saffron, you said? Rather a queer name, but he looks a nice old man; patriarchal, you know. What's the name of the other one?"

"I did hear; somebody mentioned him at the Naylor's – somebody who had heard something about him in France. What was the name? It was something queer too, I think."

"They've got queer names and they live in a queer house!" Cynthia actually gave a little laugh. "But are you going to walk all night, Mary dear?"

"Oh, poor thing! I forgot you! You're tired? We'll turn back."

They retraced their steps, again passing Tower Cottage, into which its occupants must have gone, for they were no longer to be seen.

"That name's on the tip of my tongue," said Mary in amused vexation. "I shall get it in a moment!"

Cynthia had relapsed into gloom. "It doesn't matter in the least," she murmured.

"It's Beaumaroy!" said Mary in triumph.

"I don't wonder you couldn't remember that!"

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL REMEMBERS

Amongst many various, and no doubt useful, functions, Miss Delia Wall performed that of gossip and newsagent-general to the village of Inkston. A hard-featured, swarthy spinster of forty, with a roving, inquisitive, yet not unkindly eye, she perambulated – or rather percyceled – the district, taking stock of every incident. Not a cat could kitten or a dog have the mange without her privity; critics of her mental activity went near to insinuating connivance. Naturally, therefore, she was well acquainted with the new development at Tower Cottage, although the isolated position of that dwelling made thorough observation piquantly difficult. She laid her information before an attentive, if not very respectful, audience gathered round the tea-table at Old Place, the Naylor's handsome house on the outskirts of Sprotsfield and on the far side of the heath from Inkston. She was enjoying herself, although she was, as usual, a trifle distrustful of the quality of Mr. Naylor's smile; it smacked of the satiric. "He looks at you as if you were a specimen," she had once been heard to complain; and, when she said "specimen," it was obviously beetles that she had in mind.

"Everybody knows old Mr. Saffron – by sight, I mean – and the woman who does for him," she said. "There's never been anything remarkable about *them*. He took his walk as regular as clock-work every afternoon, and she bought just the same things every week; her books must have tallied almost to a penny every month, Mrs. Naylor! I know it! And it was a very rare thing indeed for Mr. Saffron to go to London, though I have known him to be away once or twice; but very, very rarely!" She paused and added dramatically, "Until the armistice!"

"Full of ramifications, that event, Miss Wall. It affects even my business." Mr. Naylor, though now withdrawn from an active share in its conduct, was still interested in the large shipping firm from which he had drawn his comfortable fortune.

She looked at him suspiciously, as he put the ends of the slender white fingers of his two hands together, and leant forward to listen – with that smile of his and eyes faintly twinkling. But the problem was seething in her brain; she had to go on.

"A week after the armistice Mr. Saffron went to London by the 9.50. He travelled first, Anna."

"Did he, dear?" Mrs. Naylor, a stout and placid dame, was not yet stirred to excitement.

"He came down by the 4.11, and those two men with him. And they've been there ever since!"

"Two men, Delia! I've only seen one."

"Oh yes, there's another! Sergeant Hooper they call him; a short thickset man with a black moustache. He buys two bottles of rum every week at the 'Green Man.' And – one minute, please, Mr. Naylor – "

"I was only going to say that it looks to me as if this man Hooper were, or had been, a soldier. What do you think?"

"Never mind papa! Go on, Miss Wall. *I'm* interested." This encouragement came from Gertie Naylor, a pretty girl of seventeen who was consuming much tea, bread, and honey.

"And since then the old gentleman and this Mr. Beaumaroy go to town regularly every week on Wednesdays! Now who are they, how did Mr. Saffron get hold of them, and what are they doing here? I'm at a loss, Anna."

Apparently an *impasse*! And Mr. Naylor did not seem to assist matters by asking whether Miss Wall had kept a constant eye on the Agony Column. Mrs. Naylor took up her knitting and switched off to another topic.

"Dr. Arkroyd's friend, Delia dear! What a charming girl she looks!"

"Friend, Anna? I didn't know that! A patient, I understand, anyhow. She's taking Valentine's beef juice. Of course they *do* give that in drink cases, but I should be sorry to think – "

"Drugs, more likely," Mr. Naylor suavely interposed. Then he rose from his chair and began to pace slowly up and down the long room, looking at his beautiful pictures, his beautiful china, his beautiful chairs, all the beautiful things that were his. His family took no notice of this roving up and down; it was a habit, and was tacitly accepted as meaning that he had – for the moment – had enough of the company, and even of his own sallies at its expense.

"I've asked Dr. Arkroyd to bring her over – Miss Walford, I mean – the first day it's fine enough for tennis," Mrs. Naylor pursued. There was a hard court at Old Place, so that winter did not stop the game entirely.

"What a name, too!"

"Walford? It's quite a good name, Delia."

"No, no, Anna! Beaumaroy, of course." Miss Wall was back at the larger problem.

"There's Alec's voice – he and the General are back from their golf. Ring for another teapot, Gertie dear."

The door opened; not Alec but the General came in, and closed the door carefully behind him; it was obviously an act of precaution and not merely a normal exercise of good manners. Then he walked up to his hostess and said, "It's not my fault, Anna. Alec would do it, though I shook my head at him, behind the fellow's back."

"What do you mean, General?" cried the hostess. Mr. Naylor, for his part, stopped roving.

The door again! "Come in, Mr. Beaumaroy – here's tea."

Mr. Beaumaroy obediently entered, in the wake of Captain Alec Naylor, who duly presented him to Mrs. Naylor, adding that Beaumaroy had been kind enough to make the fourth in a game with the General, the Rector of Sprotsfield, and himself. "And he and the parson were too tough a nut for us, weren't they, sir?" he added to the General.

Besides being an excellent officer and a capital fellow, Alec Naylor was also reputed to be one of the handsomest men in the Service; six feet three, very straight, very fair, with features as regular as any romantic hero of them all, and eyes as blue. The honourable limp that at present marked his movements would, it was hoped, pass away. Even his own family were often surprised into a new admiration of his physical perfections, remarking, one to the other, how Alec took the shine out of every other man in the room.

There was no shine – no external obvious shine – to take out of Mr. Beaumaroy – Miss Wall's puzzling, unaccounted-for Mr. Beaumaroy. The light showed him now more clearly than when Mary Arkroyd met him on the heath road, but perhaps thereby did him no service. His features, though irregular, were not ugly or insignificant, but he wore a rather battered aspect; there were deep lines running from the corners of his mouth, and crowsfeet had started under the grey eyes which, in their turn, looked more sceptical than ardent, rather mocking than eager. Yet when he smiled, his face became not merely pleasant, but confidentially pleasant; he seemed to smile especially to and for the person to whom he was talking; and his voice was notably agreeable, soft and clear – the voice of a high-bred man, but not exactly of a high-bred Englishman. There was no accent definite enough to be called foreign, certainly not to be assigned to any particular race; but there was an exotic touch about his manner of speech suggesting that, even if not that of a foreigner, it was shaped and coloured by the inflexions of foreign tongues. The hue of his plentiful and curly hair, indistinguishable to Mary and Cynthia, now stood revealed as neither black, nor red, nor auburn, nor brown, nor golden, but just – and rather surprisingly – a plain yellow, the colour of a cowslip or thereabouts. Altogether rather a rum-looking fellow! This had been Alec Naylor's first remark when the Rector of Sprotsfield pointed him out, as a possible fourth, at the golf club, and the rough justice of the description could not be denied. He, like Alec, bore his scars; the little finger of his right hand was amputated down to the knuckle.

Yet, after all this description – in particularity, if not otherwise, worthy of a classic novelist – the thing still remains that most struck observers. Mr. Hector Beaumaroy had an adorable candour of

manner. He answered questions with innocent readiness and pellucid sincerity. It would be impossible to think him guilty of a lie; ungenerous to suspect so much as a suppression of the truth. Even Mr. Naylor, hardened by five-and-thirty years' experience of what sailors will blandly swear to in collision cases, was struck with the open candour of his bearing.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, Miss Wall, that's right, we go to town every Wednesday. No particular reason why it should be Wednesday, but old gentlemen somehow do better – don't you think so? – with method and regular habits."

"I'm sure you know what's best for Mr. Saffron," said Delia. "You've known him a long time, haven't you?"

Mr. Naylor drew a little nearer and listened. The General had put himself into the corner – a remote corner of the room – and sat there with an uneasy and rather glowering aspect.

"Oh, no, no!" answered Beaumaroy. "A matter of weeks only. But the dear old fellow seemed to take to me – a friend put us in touch originally. I seem to be able to do just what he wants."

"I hope your friend is not really ill – not seriously?" This time the question was Mrs. Naylor's, not Miss Delia's.

"His health is really not so bad, but" – he gave a glance round the company, as though inviting their understanding – "he insists that he's not the man he was."

"Absurd!" smiled Naylor. "Not much older than I am, is he?"

"Only just turned seventy, I believe. But the idea's very persistent."

"Hypochondria!" snapped Miss Delia.

"Not altogether. I'm afraid there is a little real heart trouble. Dr. Irechester –"

"Oh, with Dr. Irechester, dear Mr. Beaumaroy, you're all right!"

Again Beaumaroy's glance – that glance of innocent appeal – ranged over the company (except the General, out of its reach). He seemed troubled and embarrassed.

"A most accomplished man, evidently, and a friend of yours, of course. But – well, there it is – a mere fancy, of course, but unhappily my old friend doesn't take to him. He – he thinks that he's rather inquisitorial. A doctor's duty, I suppose –"

"Irechester's a sound man, a very sound man," said Mr. Naylor. "And, after all, one can ask almost any question if one does it tactfully – can't one, Miss Wall?"

"As a matter of fact, he's only seen Mr. Saffron twice – he had a little chill. But his manner, unfortunately, rather – er – alarmed –"

Gertie Naylor, with the directness of youth, propounded a solution of the difficulty. "If you don't like Dr. Irechester –"

"Oh, it's not I who –"

"Why not have Mary?" Gertie made her suggestion eagerly. She was very fond of Mary, who, from the height of age, wisdom, and professional dignity, had stooped to offer her an equal friendship.

"She means Dr. Mary Arkroyd," Mrs. Naylor explained.

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Naylor – I know about Dr. Arkroyd. In fact, I know her by sight. But –"

"Perhaps you don't believe in women doctors?" Alec suggested.

"It's not that. I've no prejudices. But the responsibility is on me, and I know very little of her; and – well, to change one's doctor – it's rather invidious –"

"Oh, as to that, Irechester's a sensible man; he's got as much work as he wants, and as much money too. He won't resent an old man's fancy."

"Well, I'd never thought of a change, but if you all suggest it –" Somehow it did seem as if they all – and not merely youthful Gertie – had suggested it. "But I should rather like to know Dr. Arkroyd first."

"Come and meet her here; that's very simple. She often comes to tennis and tea. We'll let you know the first time she's coming."

Beaumaroy most cordially accepted the idea – and the invitation. "Any afternoon I shall be delighted – except Wednesdays. Wednesdays are sacred – aren't they, Miss Wall? London on Wednesdays for Mr. Saffron and me – and the old brown bag!" He laughed in a quiet merriment. "That old bag's been in a lot of places with me and has carried some queer cargoes. Now it just goes to and fro, between here and town, with Mudie books. Must have books, living so much alone as we do!" He had risen as he spoke, and approached Mrs. Naylor to take leave.

She gave him her hand very cordially. "I don't suppose Mr. Saffron cares to meet people; but any spare time you have, Mr. Beaumaroy, we shall be delighted to see you."

Beaumaroy bowed as he thanked her, adding, "And I'm promised a chance of meeting Dr. Arkroyd before long?"

The promise was renewed, and the visitor took his leave, declining Alec's offer to "run him home" in the car. "The car might startle my old friend," he pleaded. Alec saw him off, and returned to find the General, who had contrived to avoid more than a distant bow of farewell to Beaumaroy, standing on the hearthrug, apparently in a state of some agitation.

The envious years had refused to Major-General Punnit, C.B. – he was a distant cousin of Mrs. Naylor's – the privilege of serving his country in the Great War. His career had lain mainly in India and was mostly behind him even at the date of the South African War, in which, however, he had done valuable work in one of the supply services. He was short, stout, honest, brave, shrewd, obstinate, and as full of prejudices, religious, political, and personal, as an egg is of meat. And all this time he had been slowly and painfully recalling what his young friend Colonel Merman (the Colonel was young only relatively to the General) had told him about Hector Beaumaroy. The name had struck on his memory the moment the Rector pronounced it, but it had taken him a long while to "place it" accurately. However, now he had it pat; the conversation in the club came back. He retailed it now to the company at Old Place.

A pleasant fellow, Beaumaroy, socially a very agreeable fellow. And as for courage, as brave as you like. Indeed he might have had letters after his name save for the fact that he – the Colonel – would never recommend a man unless his discipline was as good as his leading, and his conduct at the base as praiseworthy as at the front. (Alec Naylor nodded his handsome head in grave approval; his father looked a little discontented, as though he were swallowing unpalatable, though wholesome, food.) His whole idea – Beaumaroy's, that is – was to shield offenders, to prevent the punishment fitting the crime, even to console and countenance the wrongdoer. No sense of discipline, no moral sense – the Colonel had gone as far as that. Impossible to promote or to recommend for reward – almost impossible to keep. Of course, if he had been caught young and put through the mill, it might have been different – "it *might*" – the Colonel heavily underlined the possibility – but he came from Heaven knew where, after a life spent Heaven knew how. "And he seemed to know it himself," the Colonel had said, thoughtfully rolling his port round in the glass. "Whenever I wigged him, he offered to go – said he'd chuck his commission and enlist – said he'd be happier in the ranks. But I was weak, I couldn't bear to do it." After thus quoting his friend, the General added: "He was weak – damned weak – and I told him so."

"Of course he ought to have got rid of him," said Alec. "Still, sir, there's nothing – er – disgraceful."

"It seems hardly to have come to that," the General admitted reluctantly.

"It all rather makes me like him," Gertie affirmed courageously.

"I think that, on the whole, we may venture to know him in times of peace," Mr. Naylor summed up.

"That's your look out," remarked the General. "I've warned you. You can do as you like."

Delia Wall had sat silent through the story. Now she spoke up and got back to the real point:

"There's nothing in all that to show how he comes to be at Mr. Saffron's."

The General shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, Saffron be hanged! He's not the British Army," he said.

CHAPTER III

MR. SAFFRON AT HOME

To put it plainly, Sergeant Hooper – he had been a sergeant for a brief and precarious three weeks, but he used the title in civil life whenever he safely could – and he could at Inkston – Sergeant Hooper was a villainous-looking dog. Beaumaroy, fresh from the comely presences of Old Place, unconscious of how the General had ripped up his character and record, pleasantly nursing a little project concerning Dr. Mary Arkroyd, had never been more forcibly struck with his protégé's ill-favouredness than when he arrived home on this same evening, and the Sergeant met him at the door.

"By Gad, Sergeant," he observed pleasantly, "I don't think anybody could be such a rascal as you look. It's that faith that carries me through."

The Sergeant helped him off with his coat. "It's some people's stock-in-trade," he remarked, "not to look a rascal like they really are, sir." The "sir" stuck – out of pure habit; it carried no real implication of respect.

"Meaning me!" laughed Beaumaroy. "How is the old man to-night?"

"Quiet enough. He's in the Tower there – been there an hour or more."

The cottage door opened on to a narrow passage, with a staircase on one side, and on the other a door leading to a small square parlour, cheerfully if cheaply furnished, and well lit by an oil lamp. A fire blazed on the hearth, and Beaumaroy sank into a "saddle-bag" arm-chair beside it, with a sigh of comfort. The Sergeant had jerked his head towards another door, on the right of the fireplace; it led to the Tower. Beaumaroy's eyes settled on it.

"An hour or more, has he? Have you heard anything?"

"He was making a speech a little while back, that's all."

"No more complaints of palpitations, or anything of that sort?"

"Not as I've heard. But he never says much to me. Mrs. Wiles gets the benefit of his symptoms mostly."

"You're not sympathetic, perhaps."

During the talk Hooper had been to a cupboard and mixed a glass of whisky and soda. He brought it to Beaumaroy and put it on a small table by him. Beaumaroy regarded his squat paunchy figure, red face, small eyes (a squint in one of them), and bulbous nose with a patient and benign toleration.

"Since you can't expect, Sergeant, to prepossess the Judge and Jury in your favour, the instant you make your appearance in the box – "

"Here, what are you on to, sir?"

"It's the more important for you to have it clearly in your mind that we are labouring in the cause of humanity, freedom, and justice. Exactly like the Allies in the late war, you know, Sergeant. Keep that in your mind – clinch it! He hasn't wanted you to do anything particular to-night – or asked for me?"

"No, sir. He's happy with – with what you call his playthings."

"What are they but playthings?" asked Beaumaroy, tilting his glass to his lips with a smile perhaps a little wry.

"Only I wish as you wouldn't talk about judges and juries," the Sergeant complained.

"I really don't know whether it's a civil or a criminal matter, or both, or neither," Beaumaroy admitted candidly. "But what we do know, Sergeant, is that it provides us with excellent billets and rations. Moreover – a thing that you certainly will not appreciate – it gratifies my taste for the mysterious."

"I hope there's a bit more coming from it than that," said the Sergeant. "That is, if we stick together faithful, sir."

"Oh, we shall! One thing puzzles me about you, Sergeant. I don't think I've mentioned it before. Sometimes you speak almost like an educated man; at others your speech is – well, illiterate."

"Well, sir, it's a sort of mixture of my mother – she was class – the blighter who come after my father, and the board school – "

"Of course! What they call the educational ladder! That explains it. By the way, I'm thinking of changing our doctor."

"Good job too. I 'ate that Irechester. Stares at you, that chap does."

"Does he stare at your eyes?" asked Beaumaroy thoughtfully.

"I don't know that he does at *my* eyes particularly. Nothing wrong with 'em, is there?" The Sergeant sounded rather truculent.

"Never mind that; but I fancied he stared at Mr. Saffron's. And I've read somewhere, in some book or other, that doctors can tell, or guess, by the eyes – Well, that's only an idea. How does a lady doctor appeal to you, Sergeant?"

"I should be shy," said the Sergeant, grinning.

"Vulgar! Vulgar!" Beaumaroy murmured.

"That Dr. Mary Arkroyd?"

"I had thought of her."

"She ought to be fair easy to kid. You 'ave notions sometimes, sir."

Beaumaroy stretched out his legs – debonnair, well-rounded legs – to the seducing blaze of oak logs.

"I haven't really a care in the world," he said.

The Sergeant's reply – or comment – had a disconcerting ring. "And you're sure of 'eaven? That's what the bloke always says to the 'angman."

"I've no intention of being a murderer, Sergeant." Beaumaroy's eyebrows were raised in gentle protest.

"Once you're in with a job, you never know," his retainer observed darkly.

Beaumaroy laughed. "Oh, go to the devil! – and mix me another whisky." Yet a vague uneasiness showed itself on his face; he looked across the room at the evil-shaped man handling the bottles in the cupboard. He made one queer restless movement of his arms – as though to free himself. Then, in a moment, he sprang from his chair, a glad kindly smile illuminating his face; he bowed in a very courtly fashion, exclaiming, "Ah, here you are, sir? And all well, I hope?"

Mr. Saffron had entered from the door leading to the Tower, carefully closing it after him. Hooper's hand went up to his forehead in the ghost of a military salute, but a sneering smile persisted on his lips. The only notice Mr. Saffron took of him was a jerk of the head towards the passage, an abrupt and ungracious dismissal, which, however, the Sergeant silently accepted and stumped out. The greeting reserved for Beaumaroy was vastly different. Beaumaroy's own cordiality was more than reciprocated. It seemed impossible to doubt that a genuine affection existed between the elder and the younger man, though the latter had not thought fit to mention the fact to Sergeant Hooper.

"A tiring day, my dear Hector, very tiring. I've transacted a lot of business. But never mind that, it will keep. What of your doings?"

Having sat the old man in the big chair by the fire, Beaumaroy sauntered across to the door of the Tower, locked it, and put the key in his pocket. Then he returned to the fire, and, standing in front of it, gave a lively and detailed account of his visit to Old Place.

"They appear to be pleasant people, very pleasant. I should like to know them, if it was not desirable for me to live an entirely secluded life." Mr. Saffron's speech was very distinct and clean-cut, rather rapid, high in tone, but not disagreeable. "You make pure fun of this Miss Wall, as you do

of so many things, Hector, but – " he smiled up at Beaumaroy – "inquisitiveness is not our favourite sin just now!"

"She's so indiscriminately inquisitive that it's a thousand to one against her really finding out anything of importance, sir." Beaumaroy sometimes addressed his employer as "Mr. Saffron," but much more commonly he used the respectful "sir." "I think I'm equal to putting Miss Delia Wall off."

"Still she noticed our weekly journeys!"

"Half Inkston goes to town every day, sir – and the rest three times, twice, or once a week. I called her particular attention to the bag, and told her it was for books from Mudie's!"

"Positive statements like that are a mistake." Mr. Saffron spoke with a sudden sharpness, in pointed rebuke. "If I form a right idea of that woman, she's quite capable of going to Mudie's to ask about us."

"By Jove, you're right, sir, and I was wrong. We'd better go and take out a subscription to-morrow; she'll hardly go so far as to ask the date we started it."

"Yes, let that be done. And – remember – no unnecessary talk." His tone grew milder, as though he were mollified by Beaumaroy's ready submission to his reproof. "We have some places to call at to-morrow, have we?"

"They said they'd have some useful addresses ready for us, sir. I'm afraid, though, that we're exhausting the most obvious sources."

"Still, I hope for a few more good consignments. I suppose you remain confident that the Sergeant has no suspicions as regards that particular aspect of the matter?"

"I'm sure of it – up to the present. Of course there might be an accident, but with him and Mrs. Wiles both off the premises at night, it's hardly likely; and I never let the bag out of my sight while it's in the room with them – hardly out of my hand."

"I should like to trust him, but it's hardly fair to put such a strain on his loyalty."

"Much safer not, sir, as long as we're not driven to it. After all, though I believe the fellow is out to redeem his character, his isn't an unblemished record."

"But the work – the physical labour – entailed on you, Hector!"

"Make yourself easy about that, sir. I'm as strong as a horse. The work's good for me. Remember I've had four years' service."

Mr. Saffron smiled pensively. "It would have been funny if we'd met – over there, you and I!"

"It would, sir," laughed Beaumaroy. "But that could hardly have happened without some very curious accident."

The old man harked back. "Yes, a few more good consignments, and we can think in earnest of your start." He was warming his hands – thin yellowish hands – at the fire now, and his gaze was directed into it. Looking down on him, Beaumaroy allowed a smile to appear on his lips – a queer smile, which seemed to be compounded of affection, pity, and amusement.

"The difficulties there remain considerable for the present," he remarked.

"They must be overcome." Once again the old man's voice became sharp and even dictatorial.

"They shall be, sir – depend on it." Beaumaroy's air was suddenly confident, almost braggart. Mr. Saffron nodded approvingly. "But, anyhow, I can't very well start till favourable news comes from –"

"Hush!" There was a knock on the door.

"Mrs. Wiles – to lay the table, I suppose."

"Yes! Come in!" He added hastily to Beaumaroy, in an undertone, "Yes, we must wait for that."

Mrs. Wiles entered as he spoke. She was a colourless, negative kind of a woman, fair, fat, flabby, and forty or thereabouts. She had been the ill-used slave of a local carpenter, now deceased by reason of over-drinking; her nature was to be the slave of the nearest male creature, not from affection (her affections were anæmic), but rather, as it seemed, from an instinctive desire to shuffle off from herself any responsibility. But at all events she was entirely free from Miss Delia Wall's proclivity.

Mr. Saffron rose. "I'll go and wash my hands. We'll dine just as we are, Hector." Beaumaroy opened the door for him; he acknowledged the attention with a little nod, and passed out to the staircase in the narrow passage. Beaumaroy appeared to consider himself absolved from any preparations, for he returned to the big chair and, sinking into it, lit another cigarette. Meanwhile Mrs. Wiles laid the table, and presently Sergeant Hooper appeared with a bottle of golden-tinted wine.

"That, at least, is the real stuff," thought Beaumaroy, as he eyed it in pleasurable anticipation. "Where the dear old man got it, I don't know; but in itself it's almost worth all the racket."

And really, in its present stages, so far as its present developments went, the "racket" pleased him. It amused his active brain, besides (as he had said to Mr. Saffron) exercising his active body, though certainly in a rather grotesque and bizarre fashion. The attraction of it went deeper than that. It appealed to some of those tendencies and impulses of his character which had earned such heavy censure from Major-General Punnit and had produced so grave an expression on Captain Alec's handsome face – without, however, being, even in that officer's exacting judgment, disgraceful. And, finally, there was the lure of unexplored possibilities – not only material and external, but psychological; not only touching what others might do or what might happen to them, but raising also speculation as to what he might do, or what might happen to him at his own hands; for example, how far he would flout authority, defy the usual, and deny the accepted. The love of rebellion, of making foolish the wisdom of the wise, of hampering the orderly and inexorable treatment of people just as, according to the best modern lights, they ought to be treated – this lawless love was strong in Beaumaroy. Not as a principle; it was the stronger for being an instinct, a wayward instinct that might carry him – he scarce knew where.

Mr. Saffron came back, greeted again by Beaumaroy's courtly bow and Hooper's vaguely reminiscent but slovenly military salute. The pair sat down to a homely beefsteak; but the golden-tinted wine gurgled into their glasses. But, before they fell to, there was a little incident. A sudden, but fierce, anger seized old Mr. Saffron. In his harshest tones he rapped out at the Sergeant, "My knife! You careless scoundrel, you haven't given me my knife!"

Beaumaroy sprang to his feet with a muttered exclamation: "It's all my fault, sir. I forgot to give it to Hooper. I always lock it up when I go out." He went to a little oak sideboard and unlocked a drawer, then came back to Mr. Saffron's side. "Here it is, and I humbly apologize."

"Very good! Very good!" said the old man testily, as he took the implement.

"Ain't anybody going to apologize to me?" asked Hooper, scowling.

"Oh, get out, Sergeant!" said Beaumaroy good-naturedly. "We can't bother about your finer feelings." He glanced anxiously at Mr. Saffron. "All right now, aren't you, sir?" he inquired.

Mr. Saffron drank his glass of wine. "I am perhaps too sensitive to any kind of inattention; but it's not wholly unnatural in my position, Hector."

"We both desire to be attentive and respectful, sir. Don't we, Hooper?"

"Oh my, yes!" grinned the Sergeant, showing his very ugly teeth. "It's only owing that we 'aven't quite been brought up in royal pallises."

CHAPTER IV

PROFESSIONAL ETIQUETTE

Dr. Irechester was a man of considerable attainments and an active, though not very persevering, intellect. He was widely read both in professional and general literature, but had shrunk from the arduous path of specialism. And he shrank even more from the drudgery of his calling. He had private means, inherited in middle life; his wife had a respectable portion; there was, then, nothing in his circumstances to thwart his tastes and tendencies. He had soon come to see in the late Dr. Evans a means of relief rather than a threat of rivalry; even more easily he slipped into the same way of regarding Mary Arkroyd, helped thereto by a lingering feeling that, after all and in spite of all, when it came to really serious cases, a woman could not, at best, play more than second fiddle. So, as has been seen, he patronized and encouraged Mary; he told himself that, when she had thoroughly proved her capacity – within the limits which he ascribed to it – to take her into partnership would not be a bad arrangement. True, he could pretty well choose his patients now; but as senior partner he would be able to do it completely. It was wellnigh inconceivable that, for example, the Naylor – great friends – should ever leave him; but he would like to be quite secure of the pick of new patients, some of whom might, through ignorance or whim, call in Mary. There was old Saffron, for instance. He was, in Irechester's private opinion – or, perhaps it should be said, in his private suspicions – an interesting case; yet, just for that reason, unreliable, and evidently ready to take offence. It was because of cases of that kind that he contemplated offering partnership to Mary; he would both be sure of keeping them and able to devote himself to them.

But his wife laughed at Mary – or at that development of the feminist movement which had produced her and so many other more startling phenomena. The doctor was fond of his wife – a sprightly, would-be fashionable, still very pretty woman. But her laughter, and the opinion it represented, were to him the merest crackling of thorns under a pot.

The fine afternoon had come – a few days before Christmas – and he sat, side by side with Mr. Naylor, both warmly wrapped in coats and rugs, watching the lawn tennis at Old Place. Doctor Mary and Beaumaroy were playing together, the latter accustoming himself to a finger short in gripping his racquet, against Cynthia and Captain Alec. The Captain could not cover the court yet in his old fashion, but his height and reach made him formidable at the net, and Cynthia was very active. Ten days of Inkston air had made a vast difference to Cynthia. And something else was helping. It required no common loyalty to lost causes and ruined ideals – it is surely not harsh to indicate Captain Cranster by these terms? – to resist Alec Naylor. In fact he had almost taken Cynthia's breath away at their first meeting; she thought that she had never seen anything quite so magnificent, or all round and from all points of view – so romantic; his stature, handsomeness, limp, renown. Who can be surprised at it? Moreover, he was modest and simple, and no fool within the bounds of his experience.

"She seems a nice little girl, that, and uncommonly pretty," Naylor remarked.

"Yes, but he's a queer fish, I fancy," the Doctor answered, also rather absently. Their minds were not running on parallel lines.

"My boy a queer fish?" Naylor expostulated humorously.

Irechester smiled; his lips shut close and tight, his smile was quick but narrow. "You're match-making. I was diagnosing," he said.

Naylor apologized. "I've a desperate instinct to fit all these young fellows up with mates as soon as possible. Isn't it only fair?"

"And also extremely expedient. But it's the sort of thing you can leave to them, can't you?"

"As to Beaumaroy – I suppose you meant him, not Alec – I think you must have been talking to old Tom Punnit – or, rather, hearing him talk."

"Punnet's general view is sound enough, I think, as to the man's characteristics; but he doesn't appreciate his cunning."

"Cunning?" Naylor was openly astonished. "He doesn't strike me as a cunning man, not in the least."

"Possibly – possibly, I say – not in his ends, but in his means and expedients. That's my view. I just put it on record, Naylor. I never like talking too much about my cases."

"Beaumaroy's not your patient, is he?"

"His employer – I suppose he's his employer – Saffron is. Well, I thought it advisable to see Saffron alone. I tried to. Saffron was reluctant, this man here openly against it. Next time I shall insist. Because I think – mind you, at present I no more than think – that there's more in Saffron's case than meets the eye."

Naylor glanced at him, smiling. "You fellows are always starting hares," he said.

"Game and set!" cried Captain Alec, and – to his partner – "Thank you very much for carrying a cripple."

But Irechester's attention remained fixed on Beaumaroy – and consequently on Doctor Mary; for the partners did not separate at the end of their game, but, after putting on their coats, began to walk up and down together on the other side of the court, in animated conversation, though Beaumaroy did most of the talking, Mary listening in her usual grave and composed manner. Now and then a word or two reached Irechester's ears – old Naylor seemed to have fallen into a reverie over his cigar – and it must be confessed that he took no pains not to overhear. Once at least he plainly heard "Saffron" from Beaumaroy; he thought that the same lips spoke his own name, and he was sure that Doctor Mary's did. Beaumaroy was speaking rather urgently, and making gestures with his hands; it seemed as though he were appealing to his companion in some difficulty or perplexity. Irechester's mouth was severely compressed and his glance suspicious as he watched.

The scene was ended by Gertie Naylor calling these laggards in to tea, to which meal the rest of the company had already betaken itself.

At the tea-table they found General Punnet discoursing on war, and giving "idealists" what idealists usually get. The General believed in war; he pressed the biological argument, did not flinch when Mr. Naylor dubbed him the "British Bernhardt," and invoked the support of "these medical gentlemen" (this with a smile at Doctor Mary's expense) for his point of view. War tested, proved, braced, hardened; it was nature's crucible; it was the antidote to softness and sentimentality; it was the vindication of the strong, the elimination of the weak.

"I suppose there's a lot in all that, sir," said Alec Naylor, "but I don't think the effect on one's character is always what you say. I think I've come out of this awful business a good deal softer than I went in." He laughed in an apologetic way. "More – more sentimental, if you like – with more feeling, don't you know, for human life, and suffering, and so on. I've seen a great many men killed, but the sight hasn't made me any more ready to kill men. In fact, quite the reverse." He smiled again. "Really sometimes, for a row of pins, I'd have turned conscientious objector."

Mrs. Naylor looked apprehensively at the General: would he explode? No, he took it quite quietly. "You're a man who can afford to say it, Alec," he remarked, with a nod that was almost approving.

Naylor looked affectionately at his son and turned to Beaumaroy. "And what's the war done to you?" he asked. And this question did draw from the General, if not an explosion, at least a rather contemptuous smile: Beaumaroy had earned no right to express opinions!

But express one he did, and with his habitual air of candour. "I believe it's destroyed every scruple I ever had!"

"Mr. Beaumaroy!" exclaimed his hostess, scandalized; while the two girls, Cynthia and Gertie, laughed.

"I mean it. Can you see human life treated as dirt – absolutely as cheap as dirt – for three years, and come out thinking it worth anything? Can you fight for your own hand, right or wrong? Oh, yes, right or wrong, in the end, and it's no good blinking it. Can you do that for three years in war, and then hesitate to fight for your own hand, right or wrong, in peace? Who really cares for right or wrong, anyhow?"

A pause ensued – rather an uncomfortable pause. There was a raw sincerity in Beaumaroy's utterance that made it a challenge.

"I honestly think we did care about the rights and wrongs – we in England," said Naylor.

"That was certainly so at the beginning," Irechester agreed.

Beaumaroy took him up smartly. "Aye, at the beginning. But what about when our blood got up? What then? Would we, in our hearts, rather have been right and got a licking, or wrong and given one?"

"A searching question!" mused old Naylor. "What say you, Tom Punnit?"

"It never occurred to me to put the question," the General answered brusquely.

"May I ask why not, sir?" said Beaumaroy respectfully.

"Because I believed in God. I knew that we were right, and I knew that we should win."

"Are we in theology now, or still in biology?" asked Irechester, rather acidly.

"You're getting out of my depth anyhow," smiled Mrs. Naylor. "And I'm sure the girls must be bewildered."

"Mamma, I've done biology!"

"And many people think they've done theology!" chuckled Naylor. "Done it completely!"

"I've raised a pretty argument!" said Beaumaroy, smiling. "I'm sorry! I only meant to answer your question about the effect the whole thing has had on myself."

"Even your answer to that was pretty startling, Mr. Beaumaroy," said Doctor Mary, smiling too. "You gave us to understand that it had obliterated for you all distinctions of right and wrong, didn't you?"

"Did I go as far as that?" he laughed. "Then I'm open to the remark that they can't have been very strong at first."

"Now don't destroy the general interest of your thesis," Naylor implored. "It's quite likely that yours is a case as common as Alec's, or even commoner. 'A brutal and licentious soldiery' – isn't that a classic phrase in our histories? All the same, I fancy Mr. Beaumaroy does himself less than justice." He laughed. "We shall be able to judge of that when we know him better."

"At all events, Miss Gertie, look out that I don't fake the score at tennis!" said Beaumaroy.

"A man might be capable of murder, but not capable of that," said Alec.

"A truly British sentiment!" cried his father. "Tom, we have got back to the national ideals."

The discussion ended in laughter, and the talk turned to lighter matters, but, as Mary Arkroyd drove Cynthia home across the heath, her thoughts returned to it. The two men – the two soldiers – seemed to have given an authentic account of what their experience had done to them. Both, as she saw the case, had been moved to pity, horror, and indignation that such things should be done, or should have to be done, in the world. After that point came the divergence. The higher nature had been raised, the lower debased; Alec Naylor's sympathies had been sharpened and sensitized; Beaumaroy's blunted. Where the one had found ideals and incentives, the other found despair – a despair that issued in excuses and denied high standards. And the finer mind belonged to the finer soldier; that she knew, for Gertie had told her General Punnit's story, and, however much she might discount it as the tale of an elderly martinet, yet it stood for something – for something that could never be attributed to Alec Naylor.

And yet – for her mind travelled back to her earlier talk by the tennis-court – Beaumaroy had a conscience, had feelings. He was fond of old Mr. Saffron; he felt a responsibility for him – felt it, indeed, keenly. Or was he, under all that seeming openness, a consummate hypocrite? Did he value

Mr. Saffron only as a milch cow – the doting giver of a large salary? Was his only desire to humour him, keep him in good health and temper, and use him to his own profit? A puzzling man – but, at all events, cutting a poor figure beside Alec Naylor, about whom there could circle no clouds of doubt. Doctor Mary's learning and gravity did not prevent her from drawing a very heroic and rather romantic figure of Captain Alec – notwithstanding the fact that she sometimes found him rather hard to talk to.

She felt Cynthia's arm steal round her waist, and Cynthia said softly, "I did enjoy my afternoon. Can we go again soon, Mary?"

Mary glanced round at her. Cynthia laughed and blushed. "Isn't he splendid?" Cynthia murmured. "But I don't like Mr. Beaumaroy at all, do you?"

"I say yes to the first question, but I'm not quite ready to answer the second," said Mary with a laugh.

Three days later, on Christmas Eve, one whom Jeanne, who caught sight of him in the hall, described as being all there was possible of ugliness, delivered (with a request for an immediate answer) the following note for Mary Arkroyd:

"Dear Dr. Arkroyd,

Mr. Saffron is unwell, and I have insisted with him that he must see a doctor.

So much he has yielded – after a fight! But nothing will induce him to see Dr. Irechester again. On this point I tried to reason with him, but in vain. He is obstinate and resolved. I am afraid that I am putting you in a difficult and disagreeable position, but it seems to me that I have no alternative but to ask you to call on him professionally. I hope that Dr. Irechester will not be hurt by a whim which is, no doubt, itself merely a symptom of disordered nerves, for Dr. Irechester has been most attentive, and very successful hitherto in dealing with the dear old gentleman. But my first duty is to Mr. Saffron. If it will ease matters at all, pray hold yourself at liberty to show this note to Dr. Irechester. May I beg you to be kind enough to call at your earliest convenience, though it is, alas, a rough evening to ask you to come out?

Yours very faithfully,

Hector Beaumaroy"

"How very awkward!" exclaimed Mary. She had prided herself on a rigorous abstention from "poaching"; she fancied that men were very ready to accuse women of not "playing the game" and had been resolved to give no colour to such an accusation. "Mr. Saffron has sent for me – professionally. He's ill, it seems," she said to Cynthia.

"Why shouldn't he?"

"He's a patient of Dr. Irechester's."

"But people often change their doctors, don't they? He thinks you're cleverer, I suppose, and I expect you are, really."

There was no use in expounding professional etiquette to Cynthia. Mary had to decide the point for herself – and quickly; the old man might be seriously ill. Beaumaroy had said, at the Naylor's, that his attacks were sometimes alarming.

Suddenly she recollected that he had also seemed to hint that they were more alarming than Irechester appeared to appreciate; she had not taken much notice of that hint at the time, but now it recurred to her very distinctly. There was no suggestion of the sort in Beaumaroy's letter. Beaumaroy had written a letter that could be shown to Irechester! Was that dishonesty, or only a pardonable diplomacy?

"I suppose I must go – and explain to Dr. Irechester afterwards." She rang the bell to recall the maid, and gave her answer. "Say I will be round as soon as possible. Is the messenger walking?"

"He's got a bicycle, Miss."

"All right. I shall be there almost as soon as he is."

She seemed to have no alternative, just as Beaumaroy had none. Yet while she put on her mackintosh – it was very wet and misty – got out her car, and lit her lamps, her face was still fretful and her mind disturbed. For now – as she looked back on it – Beaumaroy's conversation with her at Old Place seemed just a prelude to this summons, and meant to prepare her for it. Perhaps that too was pardonable diplomacy, and no reference to it could be expected in a letter which she was at liberty to show to Dr. Irechester. She wondered, uncomfortably, how Irechester would take it.

CHAPTER V

A FAMILIAR IMPLEMENT

As Mary brought her car to a stand at the gate of the little front garden of Tower Cottage, she saw, through the mist, Beaumaroy's corrugated face; he was standing in the doorway, and the light in the passage revealed it. It seemed to her to wear a triumphant impish look, but this vanished as he advanced to meet her, relieved her of the neat black handbag which she always carried with her on her visits, and suggested gravely that she should at once go upstairs and see her patient.

"He's quieter now," he said. "The mere news that you were coming had a soothing effect. Let me show you the way." He led her upstairs and into a small room on the first floor, nakedly furnished with necessities, but with a cheery fire blazing in the grate.

Old Mr. Saffron lay in bed, propped up by pillows. His silver hair strayed from under a nightcap; he wore a light blue bedroom jacket; its colour matched that of his restless eyes; his arms were under the clothes from the elbows down. He was rather flushed, but did not look seriously ill, and greeted Doctor Mary with dignified composure.

"I'll see Dr. Arkroyd alone, Hector." Beaumaroy gave the slightest little jerk of his head, and the old man added quickly, "I am sure of myself, quite sure."

The phrase sounded rather an odd one to Mary, but Beaumaroy accepted the assurance with a nod. "All right, I'll wait downstairs, sir. I hope you'll bring me a good account of him, Doctor." So he left Mary to make her examination; going downstairs, he shook his head once, pursed up his lips, and then smiled doubtfully, as a man may do when he has made up his mind to take a chance.

When Mary rejoined him, she asked for pen and paper, wrote a prescription, and requested that Beaumaroy's man should take it to the chemist's. He went out to give it to the Sergeant, and, when he came back, found her seated in the big chair by the fire.

"The present little attack is nothing, Mr. Beaumaroy," she said. "Stomachic – with a little fever; if he takes what I've prescribed, he ought to be all right in the morning. But I suppose you know that there is valvular disease – quite definite? Didn't Dr. Irechester tell you?"

"Yes; but he said there was no particular – no immediate danger."

"If he's kept quiet and free from worry. Didn't he advise that?"

"Yes," Beaumaroy admitted, "he did. That's the only thing you find wrong with him, Doctor?"

Beaumaroy was standing on the far side of the table, his finger-tips resting lightly on it. He looked across at Mary with eyes candidly inquiring.

"I've found nothing else so far. I suppose he's got nothing to worry him?"

"Not really, I think. He fusses a bit about his affairs." He smiled. "We go to London every week to fuss about his affairs; he's always changing his investments, taking his money out of one thing and putting it in another, you know. Old people get like that sometimes, don't they? I'm a novice at that kind of thing, never having had any money to play with; but I'm bound to say that he seems to know very well what he's about."

"Do you know anything of his history or his people? Has he any relations?"

"I know very little. I don't think he has any – any real relations, so to speak. There are, I believe, some cousins, distant cousins, whom he hates. In fact, a lonely old bachelor, Dr. Arkroyd."

Mary gave a little laugh and became less professional. "He's rather an old dear! He uses funny stately phrases. He said I might speak quite openly to you, as you were closely attached to his person!"

"Sounds rather like a newspaper, doesn't it? He does talk like that sometimes." Beaumaroy moved round the table, came close to the fire, and stood there, smiling down at Mary.

"He's very fond of you, I think," she went on.

"He reposes entire confidence in me," said Beaumaroy, with a touch of assumed pompousness.

"Those were his very words!" cried Mary, laughing again. "And he said it just in that way! How clever of you to guess!"

"Not so very. He says it to me six times a week."

Mary had risen, about to take her leave, but to her surprise Beaumaroy went on quickly, with one of his confidential smiles, "And now I'm going to show you that I have the utmost confidence in you. Please sit down again, Dr. Arkroyd. The matter concerns your patient just as much as myself, or I wouldn't trouble you with it – at any rate, I shouldn't venture to, so early in our acquaintance. I want you to consider yourself as Mr. Saffron's medical adviser, and – also – to try to imagine yourself my friend."

"I've every inclination to be your friend, but I hardly know you, Mr. Beaumaroy."

"And feel a few doubts about me? From what you've heard from myself – and perhaps from others?"

The wind swished outside; save for that, the little room seemed very still. The professional character of the interview did not save it, for Mary Arkroyd, from a sudden and rather unwelcome sense of intimacy – of an intimacy thrust upon her, though not so much by her companion as by circumstances. She answered rather stiffly, "Perhaps I have some doubts."

"You detect – very acutely – that I have a great influence over Mr. Saffron. You ask – very properly – whether he has relations. I think you threw out a feeler about his money affairs – whether he had anything to worry about was your phrase, wasn't it? Am I misinterpreting what was in your mind?"

As he spoke, he offered her a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece. She took one and lit it at the top of the lamp-chimney; then she sat down again in the big chair; she had not accepted his earlier invitation to resume her seat.

"It was proper for me to put those questions, Mr. Beaumaroy. Mr. Saffron is not a sound man, and he's old. In normal conditions his relations should at least be warned of the position."

"Exactly," Beaumaroy assented, with an appearance of eagerness. "But he hates them. Any suggestion that they have any sort of claim on him raises strong resentment in him. I've known old men – old monied men – like that before, and no doubt you have. Well now, you'll begin to see the difficulty of my position. I'll put the case to you quite bluntly. Suppose Mr. Saffron, having this liking for me, this confidence in me, living here with me alone – except for servants; being, as one might say, exposed to my influence; suppose he took it into his head to make a will in my favour, to leave me all his money. It's quite a considerable sum, so far as our Wednesday doings enable me to judge. Suppose that happened, how should I stand in your opinion, Dr. Arkroyd? But wait a moment still. Suppose that my career has not been very – well, resplendent; that my army record is only so-so; that I've devoted myself to him with remarkable assiduity, as in fact I have; that I might be called, quite plausibly, an adventurer. Well, propounding that will, how should I stand before the world and, if necessary" (he shrugged his shoulders), "the Court?"

Mary sat silent for a moment or two. Beaumaroy knelt down by the fire, rearranged the logs of wood which were smouldering there, and put on a couple more. From that position, looking into the grate, he added, "And the change of doctors? It was he, of course, who insisted on it, but I can see a clever lawyer using that against me too. Can't you, Dr. Arkroyd?"

"I'm sure I wish you hadn't had to make the change!" exclaimed Mary.

"So do I; though, mind you, I'm not pretending that Irechester is a favourite of mine, any more than he is of my old friend's. Still – there it is. I've no right, perhaps, to press my question, but your opinion would be of real value to me."

"I see no reason to think that he's not quite competent to make a will," said Doctor Mary. "And no real reason why he shouldn't prefer you to distant relations whom he dislikes."

"Ah, no real reason; that's what you say! You mean that people would impute – ?"

Mary Arkroyd had her limitations – of experience, of knowledge, of intuition. But she did not lack courage.

"I have given you my professional opinion. It is that, so far as I see, Mr. Saffron is of perfectly sound understanding, and capable of making a valid will. You did me the honour – "

"No, no!" he interrupted in a low but rather strangely vehement protest. "I begged the favour – "

"As you like! The favour, then, of my opinion as your friend, as well as my view as Mr. Saffron's doctor."

Beaumaroy did not rise from his knees, but turned his face towards her; the logs had blazed up, and his eyes looked curiously bright in the glare – themselves, as it were, afire.

"In my opinion a man of sensitive honour would prefer that that will should not be made, Mr. Beaumaroy," said Mary steadily.

Beaumaroy appeared to consider. "I'm a bit posed by that point of view, Dr. Arkroyd," he said at last. "Either the old man's sane —*compos mentis*, don't you call it? – or he isn't. If he is – "

"I know. But I feel that way about it."

"You'd have to give evidence for me!" He raised his brows and smiled at her.

"There can be undue influence without actual want of mental competence, I think."

"I don't know whether my influence is undue. I believe I'm the only creature alive who cares twopence for the poor old gentleman."

"I know! I know! Mr. Beaumaroy, your position is very difficult. I see that. It really is. But – would you take the money for yourself? Aren't you – well, rather in the position of a trustee?"

"Who for? The hated cousins? What's the reason in that?"

"They may be very good people really. Old men take fancies, as you said yourself. And they may have built on – "

"Stepping into a dead man's shoes? I dare say. Why mayn't I build on it too? Why not my hand against the other fellow's?"

"That's what you learnt from the war! You said so – at Old Place. Captain Naylor said something different."

"Suppose Alec Naylor and I – a hero and a damaged article – " he smiled at Mary, and she smiled back with a sudden enjoyment of the humorous yet bitter tang in his voice – "loved the same woman – and I had a chance of her. Am I to give it up?"

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