Benson Edward Frederic

Scarlet and Hyssop: A Novel

Edward Benson

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

It has been ordained by the wisdom of Nature that the same fact shall strike the majority of her foolish children almost simultaneously. This phenomenon can hardly have escaped the most casual observer; the majority of swallows, for instance, in any given area will agree, practically in the same week, that our English autumn is no longer tolerable, and with consenting twitterings set their heads southwards; or in the spring, again, one may observe that in any given field daisies and buttercups will determine, only to be nipped by unpunctual frosts, that it is now time to come out, while even man, that most vacillating and least uniform of all created things, has a certain sympathy in his sensations; the sap stirs with moderately equal effervescence in the most dissimilar units; and without further preamble, to take the case in point, London settles without consultation, but with considerable unanimity, when spring may be considered to have stopped and summer to have begun. It is hardly necessary to state that London is, if not always, at any rate very frequently, completely deceived – like the buttercups and daisies – about a point so apparently palpable as even this, and a few biting frosts about mid-May usually send it back to its furs again; but the fact remains that on or about the same day the streets suddenly wear a completely different garb. On all sides the chrysalises burst, and butterflies gay or sober, according to their temperaments, hover and try their wings over a ground strewn, so to speak, with the brown husks of the "winter weeds outworn." Nor is this bursting of the chrysalis confined to externals: the time has come; the tides of vitality turn and flow through the town, and the reopened houses, newly decked window-boxes, and the flush of colour in the streets, are but symptomatic of the inward conviction of their inhabitants that a fresh season for doing a quantity of things they should not do, and as great an opportunity for leaving undone many things that they should do, has been turned up by the spade of Time, that irresponsible farmer of years.

Though not usually given to prosing, Lady Alston had been making remarks somewhat to this effect as she sat with Mrs. Brereton after lunch in a balconied window of her drawing-room in Park Lane looking over the haze and warmth of the Park. Being for the moment, at any rate, in a pessimistic mood, she accounted for it by a belittling explanation.

"We are so obvious; that is why we all do things simultaneously," she said; "and a thing that everybody does is not in itself worth doing at all. I don't suppose there ever was a race so utterly deficient in originality."

The sun was not very hot, and Mrs. Brereton put down her parasol, and pointed dramatically with it down Park Lane.

"What do you call that?" she asked. "Did you ever see anything so wildly and colossally original? You have travelled, dear Marie, and have seen Aztecs and wigwams and the gorgeous East in fee, whatever that may mean. But have you ever seen anything to approach Park Lane?"

Lady Alston laughed.

"I don't call nightmares original," she said.

"I'm sure I don't know why not. I see nothing in the nature of a nightmare which is incompatible with originality. Just look: there we have a Gothic façade, followed by a very plain English erection which reminds me of beef and beer and Sunday. A little further down you will observe a kind of kiosk, and after that the front of the Erechtheum and something from the slums of Nürnberg. If one could look round the corner, we would see a rustic cottage, a bit of Versailles, a slice of Buckingham Palace as *pièce de resistance*, and some Pompeian frescoes by way of a savoury. There's richness for you."

"Scraps only, scraps from other places. It always reminds me of a dog's dinner," said Lady Alston; "and all of us who live here are like scraps for a dog's dinner, too. Bits of things, remnants, a jumble sale, with everything priced above its proper value."

Mildred Brereton leaned back in her chair, so that the sun did not catch her hair. The particular Titian shade she affected was so difficult to please in a strong light, and she felt sure that at this moment there was a sort of metallic iridescence on it. She would have to go to the hair-dresser's again to-day.

"Dear Marie, what possesses you this lovely morning?" she asked. "Why is the world so stupid?"

"Probably only because I had a very short night. I am quite aware that when one is dissatisfied with things in general, it means that one's *vie interieure*, shall we say? is dissatisfied with something particular."

"And what form does the dissatisfaction take?"

Lady Alston threw her hands wide with an admirably graceful gesture.

"I despair of the human race of the day," she said, "but I have enough grace to include myself. Do you suppose there ever was such a stupid class of people – especially we, Mildred, the women! We have all, literally all, we should want to make ourselves happy in an animal way – good health, sufficient money, and a deep abiding selfishness. But we can't amuse ourselves; we are not happy; we are like dogs out for a walk, we must continually have sticks thrown for us. We can none of us invent anything ourselves. We can none of us stand solitude, which is in itself a complete confession of our stupidity, our parasitic nature. We go and hear people sing and act, and make music; and go and see horses race; we play cards for hours because we have not got the wit to talk – they say Bridge killed conversation. What nonsense! there was none to kill. Our whole brains, such as they are, are occupied in devising things to do to make the time pass. And we devise very badly: we are always glad when each thing is over. We go to a concert. How long! We live three months in London. How nice it will be to get down to the country again! We play Bridge. Will the rubber never end? We spend the autumn in the country. Will November never be over? On the top of that we do all in our power to make it appear that time has not passed with us. We dye our hair and paint our faces, in order to appear young, but the moment we open our mouths it is obvious we are tired, withered old women! There!"

Mrs. Brereton moved a little into the shadow.

"Don't mind me, dear," she said, "I am going to have it done again this afternoon; it won't do at all."

Lady Alston laughed; she had noticed the iridescence.

"Now you, Mildred," she said, "you are an excellent case in point. Tell me why you find it worth while to do that. What object is served by your spending hours at your hair-dresser's? Can you find nothing better to do?"

"You don't know my hair-dresser. He is a small Frenchman with a lack-lustre eye, who sighs over the wickedness of the world. I sigh too; and we find sympathy in each other's eyes. Some day I shall ask him to dinner, and that will be disappointing. Besides, my hair is beginning to be neatly picked out with gray, and when your hair is gray it looks as if you were no longer young. Nor am I. I am thirty-six. But I have still a greedy appetite for pleasure, which is the only real test of youth. Therefore I cut my coat, or rather dye my hair, according to my essential age, and pay no attention to the utterly misleading measure of years."

"But what is the use of being young if it is only to be young?" asked Lady Alston.

"That is a question which you will not ask when you are thirty-six. Most delightful things are of no use whatever, and useful things are seldom delightful. Go on about the want of originality in the world."

"There is really nothing to say about it. It is there, a colossal fact. Nobody is serious – seriousness is considered the greatest of social crimes – and we drift along like thistle-down. We are vicious; we

are idle. No one has any dignity or any manners, and there is no object under the sun, except perhaps the avoidance of physical pain, for which we would sacrifice our breakfast or dinner."

"There is no one under the sun," said Mildred, "for whom many of us would not sacrifice our reputations."

"But not our dinner. Oh, I know I am only really speaking of – well, of people you and I know best, among whom we choose to pass our time. There again you see our utter want of originality. We are bound hand and foot by conventions of our own making. Supposing I happened to go into the country for a fortnight, instead of grilling here in London, every one would say it was quite unheard of. And I have not got sufficient originality to go, although I do think that it is simply silly and absurd to live in a town in the summer."

"Every one would say a great deal more than that," remarked Mrs. Brereton.

"I know they would. They would wonder whom I had gone with, and they would speedily invent several people. I beg the pardon of the people among whom we live. They have one passion, and it is scandal; the more ill-natured the better."

"No; ill-nature has nothing to do with it," said Mrs. Brereton. "They have a passion for scandal, it is true. What else is there to talk about? I share it; in fact, I have a particularly large helping, but it is the subject-matter of scandal which really interests people. I don't see why you shouldn't call it the study of human nature. It is if you come to think of it."

Lady Alston shook her head.

"No, the study of the worst side of it," she said. "So far, what you say is true. All that most men think about is women, and all that women think about is men. That is the coarse, raw truth of the thing; that is the real indictment. Oh, it is inexplicable to me! All that we want in this world is at our command – at any rate all the beautiful and interesting things in existence can be read or heard or seen by us. But we don't waste two thoughts on them all. We sit in corners and giggle like barmaids with our young men. And, as long as there is no public scandal, no scandal of the wrong sort – you know what I mean – the more people that see us, the better we like it. We put our noses in the air when we see a Harry and a Harriet with their arms round each other's necks, having changed hats, and say, 'How those people *can*!' But we can! And we do!"

Mrs. Brereton shrieked with laughter.

"Oh, Marie, you are too heavenly!" she said. "And you certainly have a right to say those things, because nobody ever accused you of changing hats with anybody. You don't draw them in, you know, dear. They call you 'Snowflake' and all sorts of things, I am told. And such lots of people offer you their hats. Yet you never take one."

Lady Alston shifted her position slightly, as if something had suddenly made her uncomfortable.

"It is no use talking about wickedness nowadays," she said, "because people simply stare, as if they did not know what you meant. But I made Blanche stare in a different kind of manner the other day, when I asked her if she really had no idea how vulgar she was."

"Surely she did not mind being called vulgar?"

"She did when I explained carefully what I meant by vulgarity. Of course a certain sort of vulgarity is *chic* now. It is very vulgar not to be vulgar, not to talk at the top of one's voice, and eat too much, and laugh very loud at things which ought not to be said; but when I told her what sort of a picture she makes when she sits simpering and ogling Dick all across the room, and, so to speak, spreading herself on the floor for him to walk over, she did not think I was so pleasant. But that's exactly what she does."

Mrs. Brereton drew on her gloves.

"There is something very successful in your attitude, Marie," she said. "You go about hurling home-truths at people; you hold up looking-glasses to them, and make them see themselves; you point out what brutes they are, and scold them for it; but they never bear you any ill-will, and always want to see you. You really must not go into the country: we cannot get on without you!"

"Ah, if I only was conceited enough to think that, I should go!"

"That is truly amiable. But what I mean is this: you have got somehow the quality of centrality; our parties – I'm sure I don't know why – are brilliant if you are there, and sensibly flatter if you are not. I suppose it is because people are always talking about you, and it is so nice in one's own house to be able to point to the original. At the same time, I always feel about you as if you were the volcano on which we were all dancing."

"I shan't explode: I am the least likely person in the world to explode," said Marie.

"Ah, you never can tell about volcanoes. That is the joy of them. I snatch a fearful joy from you, dear. I wish I was a volcano. How do you manage it? Do you get very angry inside, and determine not to say anything till the pressure is irresistible? By the way, Jim Spencer has just come back. You know him, I suppose? Anyhow, you will meet him at dinner this evening."

Marie looked up with a sudden vivacity.

"Jim Spencer? Why, of course I do. We were brought up together almost. Then – well, then I married, and I lost sight of him somehow."

"One does," observed Mrs. Brereton. "Marriage often produces a sort of moral cataract."

"Don't be foolish, Mildred. There is nothing cheaper or easier or falser than that sort of innuendo. Besides, he went abroad; he has been away two years, I should think."

"They do go abroad," said Mrs. Brereton.

"Oh, if you want to know, there is no earthly reason why I should not tell you. He proposed to me. But I always liked him very much."

"I always said so," remarked Mrs. Brereton.

"Then you had no business to. Dear Jim! I shall be delighted to see him again. He is one of the few really reasonable people I know. He has got some sort of plan of his own; he has always known what he meant to do, though he has not always done it. For instance, he wanted impossible things; he had no money and I had none, so he proposed that we should marry and support ourselves by his writings. He has appeared before now in Christmas numbers."

"Then, perhaps you acted wisely. But he rolls in wealth now. A South African millionaire, without anything South African about him: no local colour, in fact. He is also remarkably handsome. Wealth, manners, good looks! A fairy-prince combination."

Lady Alston laughed.

"Dear me! I shall like to see Jim with society at his feet," she said.

"You make certain it will go there?"

Lady Alston raised her eyebrows.

"My dear, how can you ask? He is rich – that is sufficient alone."

"He must not kick us, then. It is to be understood he gives us halfpence, golden halfpence. And it is very interesting – that story about him and you, I mean."

Lady Alston did not at once reply.

"You give one a bad taste in the mouth sometimes, Mildred," she said at length.

"Very possibly. And you always tell one that one has done so."

"I know. That is why we are friends."

Mrs. Brereton looked doubtful.

"In spite of it, I should say."

"No, because of it. Ah! here is Jack."

Jack Alston was one of those people whom it was quite unnecessary to point out, because he was distinctly visible not only to the outward, but also to the inward eye. He was so large, that is to say, that you could not fail to notice that he had come into a room, and at the same time, he had about him the quality of making himself felt in some subtle and silent manner. As a rule he spoke but little; but his silence, as Mildred Brereton once remarked with more than her usual insight, took up all the time. It could not be described as a rich silence, for it was essentially dry, but somehow it compelled

attention. Probably, if he had been short and squat, it would have passed unnoticed, but coming as it did from him, it was charged with a certain force, partaking of his own quality. Also it was doubly unnecessary for his wife to call attention to his entrance, for on no one did it produce such an effect as on her. Thus, on this occasion, having remarked on it, she said no more.

Jack lounged slowly into the balcony, shook hands with Mrs. Brereton, and sat down on a basket chair sideways to his wife, so that he looked straight at her profile.

"Decent afternoon for once, Mildred," he said. "Summer at last. You look summery, too."

"What there is left of me," said she. "Marie has been taking the hide off us all – skinning us."

Jack considered this a moment.

"Well, you look all right skinned," he said at length. "Bad habit of Marie's, though. What has she been skinning you about?"

"She's been telling me we are all wicked and stupid, and vicious and vulgar."

"That's a hobby of hers. One must have a hobby. Going out this afternoon, Marie?"

Mildred took the hint instantly.

"I must be off," she said. "Really, Jack, you have the most brutal manner. You send me to the right-about with the least possible ceremony. So I wish to tell you I was going in any case. I've a hundred things to do."

Jack rose.

"When have you not? I'll see you down. Wait a minute, Marie, if you're not in a hurry; I want to have a word with you."

"Oh, don't trouble," said Mildred. "I can find my way."

Jack said nothing, but merely followed her into the house, and when they had passed the drawing-room, "Has she been cutting up rough about anything in particular?" he asked.

"Oh, no; merely the rigid attitude, fire-works, thunder-storms, what you will."

"I'm rather tired of them. For several reasons she had better stop. I believe most idiots find it amusing."

Mildred took a parasol out of the stand, with the air of a purchaser selecting the one that most struck her fancy. As a matter of fact, it happened to be her own.

"I should take care if I were you," she said in a low voice. "A man like you cannot form the least idea of what a woman like Marie really is. Is my carriage here? Just see, please."

She stood on the bottom step of the stairs, putting on her rather thick and masculine driving-gloves, while Jack crossed the hall and rang the bell. Then he came back to the bottom of the stairs again.

"Do you mean that she suspects anything?" he asked.

"No, of course not. What I do mean is that she is beginning to see what we all are like. You and I, when we see that, are delighted. It is a nice big playground. But it does not strike Marie as a playground. Also you must remember that she is the – how shall I say it! – the sensation, the latest, the fashion. You've got to be careful. She is capable of exploding some day, and if she did it would be noticeable. It will hardly be worth while picking up the fragments of you and me that remain, Jack, if she does. Because if she does, it will be since something has touched her personally."

"Well?"

"You are extraordinarily slow. Of course the person who is most likely to touch her personally is you."

"I've got to mind my p's and q's, in fact. That's not the way to manage her."

Mrs. Brereton's face clouded a little as she walked across the hall to the door which was being held open for her.

"Well, *au revoir*," she said. "I shall have more to say to you to-night. You dine with us, you know."

Jack Alston did not appear to be in any particular hurry to go upstairs again after Mrs. Brereton had gone. He waited on the door-step to see her get in, a groom who barely reached up to the horses' heads holding them while she took up the reins, then running stiffly to scramble in behind, as she went off down Park Lane in the most approved fashion, elbows square, a whip nearly perpendicular, and her horses stepping as if there were a succession of hurdles to negotiate, each to be taken in the stride. Her remarks about the importance of taking care had annoyed Jack a little, and still more his own annoyance at being annoyed. He had his own ideas about the management of his affairs, among which, about halfway down, came his wife, and the hint that she might, even conceivably, make matters unpleasant for him was the same sort of indignity as a suggestion that he could not quite manage his own dogs or horses. But after a minute he turned.

"For what time is her ladyship's carriage ordered?" he asked of the footman.

"Half-past three, my lord."

"Tell them to come round at a quarter to four instead," he said, and went slowly upstairs again.

He found his wife on the balcony where he had left her, with her maid beside her with two hats in her hand.

"Yes, that one will do," she said, "and send the other back. No, I will take it myself this afternoon. It is all wrong. Put it in a box and leave it in the hall. I am going out immediately."

The maid retired with the condemned hat, and while Marie pinned the other on, she turned to her husband.

"You wanted to speak to me?" she said, not lifting her eyes.

Jack looked at her in silence a moment, and lit another cigar.

"Finish pinning on your hat first," he said.

Marie found herself obeying him, with a sense of wanting, just in order to see what happened, not to do as he told her. However, she pinned her hat on.

"Well?" she said again.

"Jim Spencer has come back," he said.

"I knew that. Mildred told me just now."

"I wanted to say a few words to you about him. I find people have not forgotten that he was very much attached to you once."

She looked up at him with eyes of indifferent wonder, as if he had asked her some inane unanswerable sort of riddle.

"People are quite at liberty to remember or forget what they like, as far as I am concerned," she said. "Is that all you have to say to me? If so, I will go out, I think. The carriage ought to be round."

"Not yet. I told them not to come round till a quarter to four. And I have more to say."

"Please consult me another time," she said, "before you take it upon yourself to alter my arrangements."

Jack did not reply at once. Then in a voice expressive neither of compunction nor annoyance, "It is no use making a fuss," he said. "I wish merely to warn you that people have not forgotten. I wish also to ask you to behave reasonably. People, very likely, will connect your names again: you know what they are."

She rose flushing.

"So you wanted a quiet quarter of an hour in which to insult me," she said.

He pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Marie," he said.

"Supposing I choose not to?"

"We will not suppose anything so absurd. There! Why not have done it at once? As I was saying, this will inevitably happen, and so I should advise you to accept it. That will entail certain alterations in your – your general style. I have often heard you criticising rather mercilessly the world you live in; Mildred tells me you were doing so this afternoon. I don't mind your doing that: you have a racy

sort of way of talking, and no doubt all your criticisms are perfectly true. But with the return of Jim Spencer, I should advise you either to drop that sort of thing, or else not see very much of him."

He paused, and flicked the end of his cigar-ash over the balcony.

"Not that I mind your doing either the one or the other in themselves," he continued, "but to do both will show a want of wisdom."

"Ah, you don't mind what I do, but only what people say!"

"Exactly. You have quite grasped my meaning."

Again she rose from the chair in which she had sat at his bidding.

"That is all, then, I imagine," she said. "Five minutes was enough."

"Yes, for what I had to say. I thought you might like to talk over it."

"I have not the least desire to."

Jack reached out his hand for an early edition of the evening paper, and unfolded it.

"Perhaps you would tell me what you mean to do."

"I have no intention of doing anything. Certainly I have no intention of discussing the question with you."

Jack did not show the slightest impatience.

"There's no use in being so nettled about it," he observed. "If a woman behaves in a certain way, she gets talked about. That is all. I have indicated to you that if you do certain things you will get talked about; I do not want that."

"From your point of view, I wonder why. Mildred is talked about, so I am told; but I never knew that you considered that a reason for not seeing her a good deal."

For one moment he looked quickly up, then turned back a fluttering leaf of his paper.

"Quite true. And if you were anybody else's wife, I should not mind how much you were talked about. But you are mine – it happens you are mine."

Marie did not reply.

"Somehow the matter has grown to larger dimensions than I had intended," he added. "I only meant to give you quite a friendly and, in a way, insignificant word of warning. But somehow you have put it all into capital letters. There, go out for your drive. Really, Marie, I had not the slightest conception you would make such an affair of it."

"You think I have been unreasonable."

"I do."

She made a great effort with herself.

"Very well, I will forget all about it. You see, we rub each other up the wrong way, Jack. It is a great pity."

"Yes. But it's not worth bothering about."

The paper appeared to have nothing much in it, and it was only a few moments after his wife had left him that Jack put it down, and finished his cigar without other employment than his own thoughts. This short scene with Marie had disturbed him in the same way as a fall in the barometer may disturb a picnic-giver: it may come to nothing, but there is a hint of the fair weather breaking. At the same time, he was perfectly well accustomed to be utterly at variance with her, and never contemplated any divergence of opinion between them which could result in his having to give way. It is only selfish people who cannot believe that they are selfish, and Jack never passed moral judgments on himself or anybody else. To be critical of any behaviour that did not annoy him personally he held to be an absurd attitude to adopt; it was only behaviour that might prove inconvenient to one's self that could reasonably be criticised, or, rather, not so much criticised as corrected. He knew quite well that the small but well-dressed fragment of the world that at all concerned him, was perfectly aware that his marriage with Marie had not been a romantic success, though personally he considered it quite up to the average. To a nature like his, unbroken constancy and devotion to one's wife is not only an achievement never aimed at, but an achievement not even contemplated. He had married, as

many men do, simply because many men do marry, and an heir is certainly the natural complement to estates and a title. But no heir had been born, and, in a manner of speaking, Marie had made his estates and title appear ridiculous and lopsided; she had not fulfilled her part of the bargain.

It is not meant to be understood that he stated these things to himself with the foregoing baldness, but none the less, if he had analyzed the springs of action that determined the course of the life he led, he would have admitted that they represented its ground-motives with sufficient accuracy. But Jack was not in the habit of analyzing anything: inquiry into the reasons for conduct seemed to him a profitless pursuit, since – again to put the matter baldly – he did not care at all whether a person acted wickedly or not. In fact, as his wife had said, there were many people who simply stared if you talked of wickedness. Her husband was among them, but he did not even stare.

It is commonly said that modern life is too full and too complex, but this generalization requires limiting. Certainly to a man, or in particular a woman, not belonging to "the world," a sudden plunge into that frothy mill-race would be complex to the verge of distraction. But there are many ways of simplifying this complexity, and one of the most convenient and efficient is to strike out, without further consideration, all moral obligations, positive and negative. When once one no longer thinks it necessary to reflect whether one ought or ought not to do or to avoid a thing, the saving of time and tissue is quite enormous. For it is not so much doing things as thinking about them which consumes the minutes and the nerves, and once having made an unalterable rule to do a thing if it is pleasant, and refrain from it if it is not, one can get into a single day a number of delightful experiences which would appear to those who do not know the recipe quite incredible. Again, as among wild beasts, so in the world, the weak go to the wall. There is no place for them, and no use for them. Every one has to look out for himself, and fight for his own possessions and those of other people. Not to recognise this spells failure. Such, at any rate, was Lord Alston's experience, and he was generally understood to have had a good deal of it.

But as he sat now with the stale paper on his knees he had a vague sense of being balked. He knew his own section of the world fairly well, and having broken his rose-coloured spectacles a long time ago, and not having desired to get new ones, he realized that people certainly remembered Jim Spencer's attachment to his wife, and that piecing together with their habitual amiability, their opinion of the ill-success of his own marriage with her, her frankly low opinion of the world, and the possibility of the renewed intimacy of his wife and this man, they would say things which would annoy him personally. He had hoped that Marie would see this, or if not that, at any rate learn it by heart, so to speak, from a few well-chosen remarks of his. But she had done neither the one nor the other; she had taken the well-chosen remarks, so he considered, remarkably ill, and the only *amende* had been to say that she would forget all about it. To Jack's mind this was but poor wifely conduct.

CHAPTER II

Andrew Brereton, Mildred's husband, was a man about whom little was known and hardly more conjectured, since he was most emphatically of that type of man who arouses in none the remotest feeling of curiosity. There seemed to be no doubt that he was of humble origin, but his origin, whether humble or haughty, he had completely built over with the tall edifice of his subsequent achievements, which had resulted in the amassing of a fortune large enough to satisfy the requirements even of his wife. It is generally supposed that brains of some kind are necessary in order to make a very large quantity of money, and these must be postulated for him; but having made a fortune, brains – or so a study of this particular millionaire would lead one to suppose – thenceforth become a superfluity. Certainly it appeared that Mr. Brereton, on his retirement from business, either locked his up, or, perhaps, as a concluding bargain, disposed of them, no doubt at a suitable valuation, to his house, which dealt largely and wisely in sound mining concerns in South Africa. Physically he was thin and meagre in build, and habitually wore a harassed and troubled look, especially in his own house, where he sat at the head of the table, and, for all the attention that was usually paid him, might as well have been sitting on the area-steps. But inasmuch as he really had an immense fortune, and his wife had the spending of it, the privilege of being present when she entertained her friends in his house was accorded him without question, and the further advantage of his sitting on the area-steps instead of at his table was never seriously weighed by any one.

To-night there was only a very small party, all the members of which, with the exception of Jim Spencer, had probably met five or six times a week since they came up to London, and during the winter had been together more often than not in each other's houses. There was, therefore, no sorting and resorting of groups required; conversation could either be general, or in a single moment split up like broken quicksilver and roll away into appropriate corners. For the moment it was general, or rather everybody was listening to Arthur Naseby, a stout young man, fresh-faced, but prematurely bald, who, standing on the hearth-rug, harangued the room in a loud and strident barytone.

"*The* most awful party I ever was at," he was saying. "Mrs. Boneman was there, the wife of our eminent artist, wearing a sort of bird's-nest on her head with three Union Jacks and some Easter eggs stuck into it. She was dressed in a sort of Brussels carpet trimmed with what looked like horsehair. I'm sure it was not horsehair really, but probably some rare and precious material, but it looked like it; and she wore what I understood to be the famous Yeere diamonds. They were about as large as pen-wipers, and were plastered round her neck and pinned on to the shoulders; others were scattered about her back. I imagine she stood in the middle of the room, and her maid threw them at her, and they stuck in the horsehair."

Mrs. Brereton shrieked with laughter.

"You are too heavenly!" she cried. "Go on, Arthur. Who else was there?"

"All the people whom one always sees coming out of the door of the Cecil at Brighton, and all those who ask one to supper at the Carlton, in order to inquire apparently who is sitting at the other tables. It is a sort of passion with a certain kind of person to know who is supping at the other tables at the Carlton, and his, or usually her, limitation that he never does. It appears to them of far greater importance than who is supping at their own. Well, they were all there, Princess Demirep, and the Linoleums and Lincrustas. Hosts of them! I assume it was most brilliant."

"Whom did you go with?" asked Lady Davies, who always wore an air of intent study when Arthur Naseby was talking, because she was trying to remember all he said in order to repeat it as original.

"I went with Blanche Devereux. I was dining with her, and she insisted on my coming. We are both going again on the 16th."

"So am I. Dear Blanche! what did she make of it all?"

"She said she had never felt so humbled in her life. You see, this was a particular party of *intimes*; the 16th is an omnibus. The brilliance of the gathering overwhelmed her, just as it did me. We really knew nobody there, and sat in a corner alone in London, till Mrs. Maxwell herself left her commanding situation at the head of the stairs where she received her guests and came and talked to us. I know she thought she was being kind. So she was, but not in the way she meant."

"She is too wonderful," said Mildred, "Was she dressed in red satin?"

"I should have said bound, not dressed. Very tightly and neatly bound with silk-markers and gilt edges. She thanked Blanche for coming, and just stopped herself saying she felt much honoured; also she had hoped to see her husband as well. Now, I have heard many tactful things in my life, but I think never anything quite so tactful as that. A strange fatality pursues poor Mrs. Maxwell; she says unerringly and loudly the only thing which it is absolutely impossible to say. Blanche is not a prude, I think we are all agreed, and therefore not easily shocked. Poor Mrs. Maxwell might have said almost anything, however improper, without offending her. Again, Blanche is a woman of the world; she can usually make some sort of reply to the most awful put-your-foot-in-it. But she was completely outclassed by that one simple sentence. Mrs. Maxwell was first, and nobody else anywhere."

Lady Davies was so far carried away by this brilliance as to laugh, and thus completely forgot all she had learned by heart from Arthur's previous conversation.

"Then poor Mrs. Maxwell turned to me," he went on, "and remarked that I looked far from well. When any one says that to me, I am always ill for the next three days; in fact, I hardly thought I could get here to-night. Of course, that spoiled the rest of my pleasure, and I hardly knew what happened, except that Dick turned up later in the evening, and – and pursued his impetuous path. I fancy that poor Mrs. Maxwell imagined that he was Blanche's husband. But I don't wonder at that."

Marie's nerves were a little on edge to-night, and both what Mr. Naseby said and the roaring volubility with which he said it jarred on them. At this particular moment certainly she was possessed with a longing of an almost passionate kind to cover him up like a canary with a piece of green baize. But, as there was no baize to hand, she got up from where she was sitting in the canary's immediate vicinity, and sought a safe distance in the window-seat. Jim Spencer, who had been sitting at the other side of the room, got up also, and, crossing the hearth-rug where Mr. Naseby stood, followed her into her retreat. The latter, seeing a secession from his audience, cast one pained and pitying glance at them, and then covered their retreat by the continuation of his monologue.

"So you, like me, find it a little trying, Jim," said Marie, when they were seated together; "but you will have to get used to it."

"Is there much of that sort of man?" asked Jim. "I don't remember anything quite like it when I was in London last."

"No, he is a recent invention. He invented himself, in fact. Mildred thinks she invented him, but she only detected him. The truth is, I think, that on the whole people have grown rather stupider in the last year or two, or perhaps it is only lazier, and Arthur Naseby saves them the trouble of having to talk themselves. In fact, he makes it impossible."

"Is he always like that?"

"As far as I know, always."

"How odd that he doesn't find it fatiguing! Or perhaps it is even odder that other people don't find it fatiguing. Tell me something about him."

"I know nothing whatever about him more than what you can see and hear," said Marie. "Indeed, I don't believe there is any more. He is very rich, and declines to marry."

"Then the man is a husk, a husk with a tongue," said Jim.

"Probably about that; at least, I never heard that any one had reason to believe there was anything more than the husk. Jim, I wonder how many of us have real people inside. I expect there are lots of husks and nothing more."

"Do you think so? I rather believe that most of us have got something real, though perhaps nothing very wholesome or very pleasant. That being so, one tries to conceal it, though sometimes it pops out like a lizard from a crevice. I think I would give anything to get inside anybody else, just for a minute, to see what he was really like."

"You would be rash to do it. It is quite certain that if you could get inside anybody, as you say, you would never speak to him again. Good gracious! could you imagine writing down all that had been in your mind during a normal half-hour?"

"It depends who was to read it."

"You mean you would let a friend read it?"

Jim laughed.

"Well, if I am as bad as you think, it would clearly be a dangerously stupid thing to show it to an enemy."

"Ah! you would sooner lose a friend than give a handle to an enemy," said Marie. "I entirely disagree with that. I would choose to make or keep one friend, even at the risk of arming a whole regiment of enemies against myself. Enemies matter so little."

"Certainly friends matter more," said Jim, "and perhaps acquaintances less than either. The worst of having been away from London so long is that one finds so many of the latter and so few of either of the others!"

"What are your general impressions at present?" asked Marie.

The stream of talk from Mr. Naseby was apparently beginning to run dry; the pressure was diminishing, and Jim spoke lower.

"I hardly know what to think at present," he said. "London seems to me to have changed extraordinarily during the last few years. As far as I can make out, it does not matter now how dull and stupid a man is, how vulgar or vicious a woman is, as long as he or she is rich enough."

Marie raised her eyebrows.

"Why, of course," she said calmly. "What else did you imagine?"

"That is not all. Apparently, also, you can go to a man's house or a woman's house, eat her food and drink her wines. Then you hurry on to the next and tell them that it was *the* most awful party you ever were at. But still, apparently, you can go there again on the 16th."

Mildred Brereton had joined them, and lit a cigarette from a fire-breathing Japanese dragon. She blew out a great cloud of laughter and smoke together, with her mouth very wide.

"Dear Jim, you are too delicious!" she shrieked. "Really, I shall get you to come and talk to me instead of Mr. Naseby, for you amuse me much more. Arthur, you are dropped; Jim is funnier. Of course we are all going on the 16th, because Pagani and Guardina are both going to sing, and they sing too divinely for words. Also, considering what we all know about them, and considering that they know we all know it, it is exceedingly amusing to see them look at each other with frigid politeness. Why, only the other day Mrs. Maxwell introduced them to each other, saying she must make two great artists acquainted. Too screaming! But you are too delightful and old-fashioned. Your idea about the obligations entailed by hospitality is a savage notion, dear Jim, like cannibalism, and vanishes before the march of civilization. I believe there is an excessively native tribe in Java or Japan, or somewhere, which still practises it. If you eat their salt, they stick to you through thick and thin."

Arthur Naseby had joined them.

"How too dreadful!" he exclaimed. "Fancy having a lot of assorted savages, thick and thin, sticking to one! It sounds as if one was a kind of superior fly-paper."

"Arthur, you mustn't begin talking again, or we shall never get any Bridge," said Mrs. Brereton. "Won't you play, Marie?"

"No, I really haven't got time," she said. "I told you I have to go on at half-past ten. Please what time is it, Jim?"

"Close on eleven."

"Then I must really be moving, Mildred. But Jack will play; he isn't coming on with me."

"Where are you going, Lady Alston?" asked Arthur.

"To see Blanche Devereux."

Arthur Naseby's face fell.

"I never knew she was giving a party," he said.

Marie laughed, rising.

"She isn't; don't be frightened; it is still possible that she has not dropped you, like Mildred. I'm only going to see her about the soldiers' bazaar. In fact, it is because she isn't giving a party that I am going."

Jim Spencer got up too.

"Will you give me a lift?" he asked. "I am going to Eaton Place also."

"Certainly. Good-night, Mildred. Yes, I know my carriage is here. They told me half an hour ago. Jack is stopping to play, I suppose. Please tell him I have taken the carriage."

The two went out, and Mrs. Brereton and Naseby stood still looking at them. When they had disappeared they looked at each other.

"Dear Marie!" said that lady effusively, "how delighted she evidently is to see Jim Spencer again! Oh, dear, yes, they were very great friends in the old days, very great friends indeed. Come, Arthur, they are waiting for us."

"You always have such delightful people at your house," said Arthur, "and you always have something interesting to say about them. And that stiff young man is very rich, is he not?"

"Beyond the dreams," said Mrs. Brereton. "I wonder whom he will find to make his money fly for him?"

"One can never tell. He looks to me as if he might spend it on Corots or charity or something of that imperishable kind. Doesn't it strike you as odd that whereas the perishable nature of money is always dinned into one, yet one can apparently purchase imperishable treasure by being charitable with it? No, I can't imagine any one making his money fly. Some one might make it march away, very solemnly and in good order, but not fly. He is a little stiff, is he not?"

"Perhaps a little reserved. But when reserve breaks down, it is so *very* unreserved. I like seeing a reserved person having a real holiday."

"How many days would you say it was to the holidays?" asked Arthur, in a low voice, as they reached the card-table where Jack and another were waiting.

"I can't tell. I shouldn't wonder – no, I can't tell."

Marie and Jim Spencer meantime were driving down from Grosvenor Square towards the Park. The night was warm, and hosts of stars burned very large and luminous in a sky that was beyond the usual London measure of clearness. After the heat of the rooms, in particular after a certain feverishness of atmosphere, not physical so much as moral, a sense of extreme hurry and pressure, the night air and the cool steadiness of the stars were refreshing, not only physically but morally. Perhaps from their years of early companionship and intimacy, perhaps from a certain more deeply seated sympathy of mind, each was very conscious of the thoughts of the other, and the swift silent motion through the glare of the streets seemed to isolate them from the world. It was with something of this in her mind that Lady Alston spoke to the other.

"Yes, put down my window, Jim," she said, "and your own, too, if you are not afraid of catching cold. We are both outdoor people, I think."

"We used to be," said he.

"Do you mean you have changed? Or do you find I have?"

"I find you have. But I am quite willing to believe that it may be some change in myself that makes me think so."

Marie unwound the light shawl which she had thrown over her head, and undid the fastening of her gold-thread cloak, so as to let the air play on her uncovered neck. In another woman, he felt,

this might have indicated some suspicion of coquetry, but he did her the justice to feel that no such imputation was possible.

"No, if you feel that you are probably right," she said, "for you do not seem to me to have changed at all. We both agree, in fact, about you. There remains then me. How have I changed?"

He looked at her in the dusk of the carriage for a moment without replying.

"You seemed so much in harmony with those people," he said. "I felt that you felt yourself to be one of them. But I, obviously, I am afraid, felt that I was not. That is how I think you have changed; in the old days you would have appeared to yourself as alien to them as I do."

She gave him one glance.

"Ah, the old days!" she said with some impatience. "It is absurd and ridiculous to want to remain as one was. Indeed, not to change shows that one has a nature incapable of development. It implies a sort of moral torpor, an atrophy of one's nature not to get older as one gets older. And one of the biggest, and perhaps best effects of age is to give one tolerance, to make one realize that it takes all sorts to make a world."

He laughed.

"Why this sudden vehemence?" he asked.

"Oh, for a variety of reasons! One is because you judge me correctly, another because you judge me incorrectly. You are perfectly right to say that I have changed, but perfectly wrong to imply, even tacitly, that one is the worse for changing. And you do me the grossest injustice when you suppose that I am in harmony with those people. I am not any more than I ever was. But it is absurd to coil one's self up like a hedgehog, and run your spines into everything you come across. As a matter of fact I often do, but it is a mistake."

They drove on some way in silence. At last she spoke again.

"Many of the people with whom I appear to you to be in harmony I consider wicked," she said; "and many of them, I am sure, are vulgar in the largest sense of that wonderful term. England is a plutocracy, let me tell you, Jim. It worships wealth. It will certainly worship you. How will you like it? It will really be very interesting to see how you behave. It is an awful position for you: if you refuse to smile on your worshippers, they will write you down a miser; if you do smile on them, you will make yourself as vulgar as they."

He laughed.

"You frighten me," he said. "Is there no place in London for a quiet millionaire?"

She leaned forward with a sudden eagerness.

"Ah, Jim, make one, make one!" she said. "That is the root of the matter. Try if you can spend your money without encouraging either vice or vulgarity. It is worth an effort."

She leaned back again, laughing lightly, and drew her cloak round her again.

"Dear me, I have been vehement," she said; "but don't be afraid; I will treat you to no more outbursts. Only this afternoon my husband told me how absurd they were."

"Well, reserve them for me," he said; "I rather like them. You are an inspiring person, Marie. You know I always found you inspiring."

"Many thanks. But no inspiration will make any one do anything. One's motive has to come from within, not without, if it is worth anything."

"I am not so sure of that."

They stopped at Lady Devereux's house in Eaton Place, and until the bell was answered sat silent. Then, as the footman opened the carriage-door, "I am delighted you have come back, Jim," she said – "I really am delighted. Come and see me often. Come to lunch to-morrow, for instance. Yes! That is right. Thirty-one, you know, and lunch at one-thirty."

CHAPTER III

Jim Spencer woke next morning with that thrill of quickened anticipation which serves to remind us even before full consciousness has returned, that something new and exciting has come into our lives. He needed but little thought to remember what it was, and as he lay watching with idle but wide-awake eyes his man putting his clothes out, he told over and over again in his mind, like the beads of a rosary, the events of the evening before, always finishing with the pendant, so to speak, the fact that in a few hours he was going to see her again. Frankly and honestly he reminded himself that all romance was over: to begin with, and also to end with, she was another man's wife, and that was sufficient for him, as no doubt it was sufficient for her. Three years ago he had left England because he desired in every fibre of his being to marry her, and since that was impossible, because he entirely refused to waste his life in purposeless dangling after what he could not get. And in this spirit, which is more instinct with manliness than any sacrifice of years and youth to the mere watching of the unattainable shadow on the blind, he had gone out to the Transvaal, farmed there with the same fervour as that which he had thrown into his love-making, and subsequently, by the discovery of the reef on his land, had become, if not one of the richest men who had found colossal fortunes as sheep-farmers, at any rate one of the second rank-millionaire, if not multi-millionaire. But at that point a certain sobriety of nature had reasserted itself; he had not mistaken that full meal of gold for the *hors d'œuvre*, nor sought to duplicate it and reduplicate it. He had not lost sight of the fact that he had enough, but recognising it with all the thankfulness that plenitude gives, and not with the false appetite of the habitual glutton, he had, so to speak, said grace and retired from the dinner-table.

So now, at the age of thirty, he was temporarily, at any rate, without employment, even as he had been, temporarily also, without employment when Marie decided to marry, not him, but Jack Alston. True, he had plenty of artistic tastes; in music and pictures he could easily have passed the remainder of his life, however long, just as, without ever being bored, he could have shot all the autumn, hunted all the winter, and dozed and dined all the spring and summer, according to the traditional method of the English gentleman, whose obituary notice eventually teems with encomium on his useful and simple life, which means that he has been a J. P. But to pass one's life merely in hearing music and looking at or buying pictures seemed to him as unworthy of a person who called himself a man, as did the recognised round of shooting and hunting appear to him unworthy of a rational being at all. But as to what this temporary abandonment of employment should terminate in, he, as he lay in bed this morning, had no present idea. Anyhow, he was to see Marie again, and he deliberately quenched further reflection.

The morning had not been foresworn, but fulfilled with liberal generosity the promise of the last few days, and when Mildred Brereton reached the Row on a black mare, which had been behaving itself as might a crab on hot plates, and would have tried any but the most masterly seat and hands, the broad brown expanse of the Ladies' Mile was plentifully dotted with riders. The little green seats, too, by the side were in high request, and she walked, or rather danced, very slowly up for a hundred yards or so, before letting her chafing mount have a canter, noting with her quick eye a hundred things and people which would have escaped one less trained and less naturally gifted to observe combinations of interest. Jack Alston had joined her, and she kept up a running comment.

"There's Pagani with that absurd Italian woman," she said. "Why must a man of that kind do that when Guardina is sure to be here? There, I told you so! what a row there will be! She has the temper of a fiend, like me. Jack, if you ever flirt with another woman on the sly, and I see you, there'll be the deuce to pay. Come and tell me frankly if you are going to do that sort of thing. Dear Madame Guardina, how are you? Do walk a little way with us. No, there's not a soul here this morning, is there? I've seen no one, not even the most constant habitués like Pagani. And you sang Lucia last

night, I hear, too divinely, and I had some stupid people to dinner and couldn't come. Yes, Lord Alston was one of them; he was the cleverest there. Judge of the rest!"

The prima donna, a good-natured soul, who had the most perfect vocal chords in the world, absolutely no artistic sense, a passion for Pagani, and an adoration for the particular set to which Mrs. Brereton belonged, was delighted to be seen talking to her, and, turning back, walked along the rails in the opposite direction to that in which Pagani sat.

"Well, I must say you missed something," she said with engaging frankness, "for I never was in better voice. And on Saturday I sing La Tosca. With the open mouth, too, as I've no other engagement for a fortnight."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go to my house on the river and throw sticks for my dogs. You've never been there yet, Mrs. Brereton. Do come down sometimes. I shall drive there on Saturday night after the opera."

Mrs. Brereton made a short calculation.

"I will; I should love to," she said. "I hear it is charming."

"A dozen basket chairs and two dozen dogs," said Madame Guardina.

"I adore dogs. Are you off? Good-bye. About the middle of next week?"

"Any day."

Mildred gave her a charming smile and turned to Jack.

"That's one good-natured thing this morning already," she said, "and it's barely ten yet. Pagani was just moving when I saw Guardina; he'll be gone before she gets to him."

"I wish you were half as good-natured to me," remarked Jack.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"Tell me how to behave to a hopelessly unreasonable woman, who is one's wife!"

Mildred puckered her lips as if to whistle.

"Explain in five minutes," she said. "I can't really hold this untamed savage any longer. Come on, Jack; we'll canter – shall we call it? up to the end."

Whether Mildred called it a canter or not, it is not doubtful what other people would have called it. But even the heart of the restraining policeman must have been touched by the splendid vision that flew by him, Mildred sitting her horse as no other woman could, sitting a horse also that few could have sat at all, and treating its agitated toe-steps with less concern than a man in an arm-chair gives to a persistent fly on a summer afternoon. The consciousness that hundreds of people were looking at her added, if anything, to her unconcern; certainly also the fact that many who saw her saw also, and remarked, that Jack was with her gave an additional zest to her enjoyment. For her creed was that secrecy in this world was impossible, and the only way to prevent people talking in the way that mattered and was annoying was to do things quite openly. It mattered not in the least if people said, "Oh, we have always known that!" or if they always took it for granted; what did matter was if they said, "We have lately thought there must be something of the kind!" Trespassers can be prosecuted; length of possession constitutes a title.

They drew up at the top of the mile, and Mildred adjusted her hat.

"There," she said, "the cobwebs have been dispersed for the day. Now we'll go on talking. Explain, Jack. Why do you want treatment for Marie?"

Jack lit a cigarette.

"She makes scenes," he said, "and they bore me. She made one last night."

"What about?"

"I don't know that it's worth repeating, really," he said.

"Probably not, but you are going to tell me."

He looked at her a moment with his thin eyebrows drawn together in a frown, hit his horse rather savagely for an imaginary stumble, and reined it in again more sharply than was necessary.

"I don't the least like being dictated to, Mildred," he said. "Nobody adopts that tone with me – with any success, that is to say."

She laughed.

"Oh, my excellent friend," she said, "you really speak as if I was afraid of you. For goodness' sake, don't put on schoolmaster airs. You know perfectly well that doesn't go down. Don't hit your horse now; you are behaving like a sulky child that whips its doll. What was the scene about?"

"Did you see the infernal manner in which she walked off with Jim Spencer last night, driving him home in her brougham and saying she was going to Blanche Devereux'? That was her way of getting quits with me."

"Quits with you? What for?"

"For a conversation I had with her after lunch yesterday. I told her that if she was seen about with Jim Spencer people would talk, and if they talked it was absurd for her to keep up the sort of attitude she maintains towards society in general, saying that we are both fools and knaves."

Mildred made a gesture of despair.

"The stupidity of men really exceeds all bounds," she said. "I beg your pardon, that is by the way. You were saying that she walked off with Jim last night. I suppose you commented on that too, did you?"

He flushed angrily.

"If she imagines she is going to make a fool of me before all the world, the sooner she learns her mistake the better," said he.

"You said that to her?" asked Mildred in a tone in which "even despair was mild."

"Of course I did, or rather, I asked her whether she really went to see Blanche. She saw what I meant all right."

"You seem to imagine she is as great a fool as you," remarked Mildred.

He turned half round on his horse.

"I don't stand such language from any one," said he.

"Oh, for God's sake don't be absurd! You stand exactly what language I choose to use to you. Is it really possible, Jack, that you don't see what a dangerous and foolish game you are playing? *Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* you are married to that pearl of a woman, and you think you can treat her like that. You aren't fit to tie her boot-laces, and – "

"I have no intention of trying."

"Don't be funny. I was saying you weren't fit to tie her boot-laces, but I can't expect you to see that. And you have practically told her you suspect her of an intrigue with Jim Spencer. Now, if she was the sort of woman you seem to think she is, that would be the very way to drive her into it. Personally, I wish she was, but she isn't, and we must make the best of it. But what you have done is to show her, if further demonstration were necessary, your own utter depravity. Of the sickening folly of that, I needn't speak. Go on: what did she say then?"

"She said she didn't care in the slightest degree whether I believed she went to Lady Devereux's or not. She also said that Jim was coming to lunch. So of course I shall go home to lunch."

Mildred laughed outright.

"You have the most wonderful power of choosing the only impossible thing to do or say," she remarked. "That is the one thing out of the question. The impeccable attitude of guardian angel, my dear Jack, is the one attitude that cannot be made to pose well. Nor have you the figure for it."

They rode on a little while in silence.

"Have your own way, then," he said at length.

"Of course I shall. Poor old Jack, how you do manage to put your foot in it! And I have to pull you out so often. Aren't you grateful to me?"

"Not particularly this moment."

"Well, you will be soon. You needn't tell me when you are. A good action is its own reward, and I am bursting with an approving conscience this morning. I've helped Guardina and Pagani, I've helped you."

"Yourself perhaps?"

"That also is my reward. I didn't think of myself – at least, not much."

She looked at him with a gay and kindled eye; the exercise had brought the blood into her face, and it was impossible to credit her with the six-and-thirty years which she had assured Marie were hers. And looking at her, his smarting ill-humour evaporated.

"How is it one never gets tired of you?" he said.

She laughed.

"Because I do not let you get accustomed to me," she answered.

Certainly if Jack Alston had, as was generally supposed, the gift of getting his way with other people, Mrs. Brereton had the gift of getting her way with him. This, she knew well, but was far too wise to say, was the true secret of his absolute dependence on her, for there is nothing that a masterful and brutal mind really enjoys so much as finding some one stronger than itself. At times she was inwardly afraid that she would some day get the worst of it, but knowing that in managing men, as in managing horses, the real secret of their mutiny is not so much fear on their driver's part, as the knowledge of that fear in the driver, she was always, as in this particular instance, more than usually brutal, and was accustomed to make him, so to speak, more resonant under her hand, when she was not quite certain in the depths of her own mind that she was going to win. Then, when the stress was over, she gave him his own head again, with such completeness as to convey to him the impression that he had always been free: there was no reminder, not the faintest strain on the curb to show him that the curb was still there. She used it, in fact, rarely, but in earnest, and never fell into the habit, so common in women of her stamp who are otherwise clever, of nagging, or making a point of getting her way over any matter on which she did not really desire it.

Nor was her genuine attachment to him less capable of comprehension than his to her. In addition to the immense charm of his extraordinary good looks and his devotion to her, there was added that sense, so dear to an ambitious woman, that she was controlling a figure that bade fair to be one of the most prominent of the day, and could make it dance to her wire-pulling like a marionette on its string. Though Jack was not yet forty, he already held a minor post in the Government, and when the elections came on in the summer or autumn, it was expected in many quarters that he would be made Chief Secretary at the War Office. For the nation had of late begun to wonder whether that serene and unbiased attitude which is the natural outcome of complete ignorance on the affairs of the Department is really the ideal equipment for a statesman. A little knowledge, it has long been agreed, is a dangerous thing, but the nation, in view of recent events, had distinctly formed the suspicion that no knowledge at all was almost as hazardous. Indeed, it was supposed that this idea had gently begun to communicate itself to the Government itself. Anyhow, it was rumoured that more than a mere reshuffling of the old cards would take place, and Jack Alston's name was freely mentioned as a probable occupant of the office in Pall Mall. Until his succession to the title on his father's death six years ago, he had been a soldier of the practical, hard-working order, not content with figures and much polo, but busy with ideas on boots and rifles, and the knowledge he had thus acquired he had since used on more than one occasion with telling effect on discussions in the Upper House about military matters, and the cold, aloof attitude with which anything so out of taste as criticism founded on knowledge, or the discussion of practical questions in a practical manner, is usually treated in that august assembly had not produced the slightest effect on him. He asked awkward questions, and pointed out the absurdity of the answers or the silence they received with such imperturbable pertinacity that it was beginning to be felt that there really might be something in this novel idea of letting a man who knew a good deal about a subject be employed in that capacity. At any rate, he could not then continue to criticise the Department in question if he controlled it. Builders and Government

contractors Jack appeared to consider not as masters of the Government, but as their servants, and where a firm vowed that a particular programme could not be completed under six years, he would have no hesitation in demanding to know how they had managed to take foreign orders in the interval. These things shook the immemorial calm of Pall Mall, and produced the sort of gentle perturbation which might be caused by the introduction of a risky topic at a tea-party of elderly maiden ladies. But Jack Alston was without tact in these matters, and continued to be horribly risky.

So he who should perhaps control so huge an affair as the army, and she who controlled him, rode back towards Hyde Park Corner, a striking-looking pair, at which many gazed. Their friendship was now of several years' standing, and people had begun to find that there was nothing new to say about so well-established a fact. There had never been any scandal, and London is a wonderfully tolerant town. It is, in fact, almost incapable of being shocked except by that which is printed in the daily papers. This constitutes the real power of the press. As long as definite publicity in black type on white or pink paper is not given, a fact, however well known, remains private; it is only truly shocking when the compositor has set it up; then takes place a great and essential change. And this morning half the world looked at them, and remarked on the beauty of their horses and the fine horsemanship of their riders, and shrugged their shoulders now and then, and smiled and talked about something else.

"So you had better lunch with me, Jack," said Mrs. Brereton, going back to her subject. "You have a Committee at three, I know."

"And what must I say to Marie?" asked he.

"Say? Say you lunched with me. It has also the minor advantage of being perfectly true. Oh, so few people see the extraordinary advantage to be gained by telling the truth. It is so easy, too: you can tell the truth by a mere effort of memory, whereas any – any diplomatic evasion calls the imaginative faculty into play."

"I don't think I've got the imaginative faculty," said Jack.

"No, you haven't much. That is why, when you evade, you are always so unconvincing. Rich ornamental detail is necessary to the simplest untruth, whereas if you are telling the truth the cruder you are the better. Your very crudity, Jack, is the making of you as a politician."

"I know what I want politically, anyhow," he said. "I want proper rifles and the knowledge among the men as to the right direction in which to fire them off."

"Oh, don't make speeches. That is exactly your oratorical style – in other words, no style at all. The British public likes that. It says there is no nonsense about you. How odd it is that politically you should be a man of such astounding simplicity, and socially – well, a person who savours of duplicity!"

"I'm straightforward enough," said he.

"Oh – oh! Never mind that. But the British public is odder still. It insists – at least, it wishes to believe – that its public men should be people of blameless private life. Now, what can that matter? But I don't think it has any doubt about you, Jack. It believes you to be a model of domesticity. Also by my advice, you see, you breed pigs and shorthorns. There is something magical about pigs and shorthorns. The public consider them a sort of testimonial to a man's character; I suppose it is the touch of Nature, or the touch of the farmyard."

"Making the whole world kind!"

"Chestnuts, surely. Well, *au revoir*; go home and dress, and try not to look glum, and tell Marie you are lunching with me. Good-bye, I must hurry: I have some things to do before lunch."

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Maxwell was a voluminous woman of gorgeous exterior, who would have been pained to hear herself alluded to as a woman instead of a lady. There was, as she had more than once acutely remarked, a breeding that is altogether independent either of beauty or wit, and Cleopatra herself might have been utterly without it.

"And that," said Mrs. Maxwell, "is what makes the difference between a lady and not a lady."

The inference which she herself drew and meant to be drawn is too obvious to need pointing out, especially when we remember that she certainly had neither beauty nor wit, except in so far as it may be held a proof of ability to have married a money-lender of Jewish extraction and enormous wealth. But Mrs. Maxwell had ambition, and an amazing industry. Years ago when she married her Henry she had made up her mind that, if there was any power whatever in the fact of millions, she would procure whatever was to be procured with them, and in especial she had set her heart on bringing not to her feet, but to her table and her ballroom, all that was noblest and highest in the land. The task had been far less arduous than she had anticipated, and she felt on this night of the 16th of May that the prize had been publicly presented to her. Every one who was any one was going to cross her threshold that night; a favoured three or four dozen were going to dine there first, and the rest would come in afterwards. Earls and Countesses were among them. There was not room for all such nowadays at Mrs. Maxwell's table.

The form that the entertainment was going to take was a concert, for, as Mrs. Maxwell said, you can dance anywhere for the cost of your shoe-leather and a couple of trumpets; but it meant a prettier penny than most people can find in their purse to hear Pagani and Guardina sitting in a comfortable chair instead of that dreadful draughty opera-house, and having to go to that cold, creepy "foyure" to get a glass of lemonade. There was no nonsense or affectation, it will be remarked, about Mrs. Maxwell's French, which she used ruthlessly in her conversation, and all her epithets ran in well-matched pairs, like her horses.

The Maxwells' house stood in Piccadilly overlooking the Green Park, and it had been purchased as it stood, glass, plate, china, and books complete, from its owner, who was in straitened circumstances. There were not many books in the bargain, but among them, luckily enough, was the callers' book of the late owner, and for the sake of continuity and general interest Mrs. Maxwell's visitors went on writing their names there without a break, since the book at the time of their taking possession was only about half full. It was curious to observe how at first there was a sort of slump in distinguished names, which now had completely rallied and developed into a boom; in fact, on the last few pages half the names were the same as those on the earlier part of the book.

Among the many other desirable objects in the house were the pictures. These included several very fine Italian pictures by great masters, "Raffle," as Mrs. Maxwell rather familiarly called that eminent artist, being notably represented. They had occasioned a somewhat violent difference between their present master and mistress, Mrs. Maxwell maintaining that it was impossible to feel easy and comfortable beneath such serious-like pictures, Transfigurations and what not, and observing with some heat that you couldn't sit quiet in your chair with St. Stephen stoned and bleeding immediately above your head. Eventually a compromise had been arrived at, and they had been removed from the drawing-room into the corridor. But even more pointed had been the discrepancies arising from the small but exquisite half-dozen of Dutch pictures that had hung in the dining-room. Mr. Maxwell, again, had been disposed to leave everything exactly as they had found it, arguing that a family who had lived in the house for a couple of hundred years knew more about what was suitable to the house than they. This had inflamed his wife.

"It's a matter of taste, Maxwell," she said; "and I've got as much right to my own taste as any Duke in the kingdom. And I maintain that while you're eating your dinner there's no pleasure in

looking at a row of pots and pans hung on the wall, as if to remind you of where your food has been, and cheeses and what not. And as for that picture of old Dutchmen eating I don't know what horror, and smoking their pipes the while, why, it's enough to turn the good wholesome food in your stomach. And that's my opinion, whether you like it or not."

Mr. Maxwell, who was a just man except in matters of money-lending, realized that he did not feel as keenly as this.

"But if you take them away, my dear, what will you put in their place!"

"Why, the portraits of you and me and Anthony: you and me on each side of the fireplace, and Anthony in the middle."

This suggestion was a happy one, and had been put into effect. The portraits in question were admirable examples of a very eminent painter of the day, and Henry as large as life, with the unmistakable features of his race, sat smoking his cigar, so natural, on one side of the Italian fireplace, while on the other hung Mrs. Maxwell in her crimson gown with all her diamonds on. Both pictures were diabolically clever, and much more like the sitters than the sitters (happily for them) had any idea: for where Mrs. Maxwell saw only the impressionist blurs of coloured light which indicated her priceless stones, the painter had finely observed and faithfully represented an intolerably ostentatious opulence; where Mr. Maxwell saw only that he was, as usual, smoking a cigar, the painter had seen the man who liked to be painted as doing so. Besides, the glowing end of it, smouldering beneath its white ash, was marvellously indicated, and Mr. Maxwell often declared he could almost catch a whiff of it. Between them hung Anthony, a young man of about twenty-three. He was undoubtedly the son of each of his parents. And the two parents were turned fondly, as in life, towards the hope of the house, and the hope of this house, beautifully dressed, also as in life, stared somewhat vacuously in front of him.

It was, in fact, on Anthony, quite as much as on the mounting of the ladder of social distinction, that his mother's ambitions centred, and Anthony, it must be allowed, was largely that which his mother would have him be; but on the great question of the potency of wealth, its being able to get for you, if you spend it properly, anything you wish, from a wife or an ancestor to a pair of shoes, she did not feel certain of his soundness. There were other things, too, about Anthony which puzzled his mother: he was accustomed to read poetry, and appeared to enjoy Wagner, a curious crookedness, so she thought, in one otherwise honest. But both mother and son were agreed that, wherever he got his shoes, he could not do better than get his wife from Andrew Brereton's house, the prospective bride being Maud Brereton, a young goddess of about eighteen years and six feet of wholesome growth, whom her mother invariably alluded to as "my little girl."

To-night it certainly seemed that the new patron saint of England, St. Sovereign, received definite canonization. Royalty, stars and garters, wit, talent, beauty, and birth, all came and bowed the knee. Even a stray copy of the menu at dinner was picked up by an enterprising reporter for publication next day in the paper he represented, so that Mr. Maxwell's inimitable *chef* would have the opportunity of living his triumph o'er again. Dinner was not till half-past eight, and a feast that costs five pounds a head necessarily takes time to negotiate, especially since Mr. Maxwell always ate largely and slowly of every dish that was put before him, so that before the gentlemen left the dining-room the less favoured guests had already begun to arrive. Among these was Guardina, who with great good sense had declined her dinner invitation for the very excellent reason that if she dined there she would eat too much, and if she ate too much she would not be able to sing. "And I am here to sing," she added, being without illusions.

Among the diners there had been Mrs. Brereton and Lady Alston, and the former, following her invariable practice of always paying court to Jack's wife, linked her arm in Marie's as they were going upstairs, to the momentary consternation of Mrs. Maxwell, who clearly saw from her place at the end of the procession of ascending ladies that there were several women of higher rank behind her.

"Dear Marie, I haven't seen you for a whole two days," she said. "Where have you hidden yourself? And I never expected to see you here."

"Why not? Surely the dinner was excellent, and is not Guardina to sing?"

"Yes, of course. Oh, I see, you are laughing at me. Don't be cross, Marie."

"I'm not cross, only frank."

"Oh, but frankness is such a bore, except when you use it as a weapon of concealment. In fact, I was talking to Jack about that very point two days ago. As a means of convincing people that you are not telling the truth, there is nothing so certain as to tell it."

This Bismarckian but imaginative *résumé* of the conversation in the Park came out quite glibly, and Marie laughed.

"Really, Mildred, you have a way with you," she said. "Jack went out yesterday morning in a vile temper, and came back after riding with you like a drifting angel, all sweetness and smiles. What had you done to him?"

"I forget what we talked about – probably about him, for that always puts a man in a good temper quicker than anything else. I'm so glad it was successful."

Marie sat down on a gilt Louis XV chair upholstered in Genoese velvet.

"I shall send him to you whenever he is in a bad temper, I think," she went on, "with a ticket pinned on to him, 'Please return in good condition.'"

Mildred laughed.

"Dearly as I like Jack," she said, "I am not sure that my affection would quite go to those lengths. Because Jack in an odious temper is like – well, like Jack in an odious temper. I know nothing, indeed, to compare to him."

"Well, I wish you would tell me your secret."

"My dear, there is none. Besides, another woman can so often put a man in a good temper, when his wife could not possibly."

"That doesn't say much for matrimony."

Mildred looked up a moment, and then fell to fingering her fan again.

"Oh, matrimony is such an excellent institution that a few little disadvantages of that sort really don't weigh. But certainly what I say is true. And you know it is just the same with us. Jack can put me in a good temper when my dear Andrew would assuredly fare pretty badly if he tried."

"I never quite knew why you married him."

"Oh, for a variety of reasons. He was very rich, I liked him, he wanted to marry me. And we have been very happy. One can't look for perfection in one's husband any more than in one's own servants or one's horses. The point is that they should not have any vices, and on the whole suit you."

"Is that the modern theory?" asked Marie.

"No, I don't know that it is exclusively modern. But what's the matter, Marie? What was Jack in a bad temper about?"

Marie frowned.

"Jack was coarse. I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. Do you remember my going home with Jim two nights ago from your house, when I was going to see Blanche about the bazaar? Well, he hinted that I had not been to see her at all. Now, what are you to do when your husband behaves like that?"

Mildred laughed.

"Dear me! is that all? Men are coarse folk, you will not recognise that, and when they are in a bad temper they say all sorts of things they don't mean. Now, I can tell you how I should deal with that. I should simply have laughed in his face, laughed with a wide mouth. But as for letting it disturb my peace of mind – You, too, of all people, who simply are the most enviable woman in London."

"So you tell me," said Marie; "but I don't quite know why."

"Oh, my dear, if it was not you I should think you were fishing for compliments – Why? Because you have the brains to be sometimes amused and sometimes bored at what absorbs all of us; because you are young; because somehow or other you are *the* person; because you make any woman standing near you look dowdy and coarse – "

Marie laughed.

"I am stifled in my own perfections," she said. "Let me get a breath of air."

"Guardina is just going to oblige us with one," said Mildred. "She really is like the girl in the fairy stories out of whose mouth drop diamonds and pearls. I suppose she is paid at least a sovereign a note. How pleasant that must be! Look, there is poor Nellie Leighton standing close to her, as if she hoped to be able to pick some of them up. What a wonderful woman! Not a penny of any sort to bless herself with, an insatiable appetite for pleasure, and the most light-hearted and appreciative woman I know. She sees us; she is coming over here."

Mrs. Leighton, in fact, opened her mouth sideways towards one ear, which was her way of smiling, and rustled elaborately across the room. She laid an affectionate hand on Marie's arm, and looked as if she had something very important to say.

"She is going to sing the 'Zitanella,'" she whispered as the accompanist played a brilliant chromatic passage to compel silence. "Quite too divine for words. And I have bought a new house. Rustic."

But at the moment a sound as faint and far-away as the ring of a musical glass pierced the air. Guardina's lips were hardly parted, but that spear of sound thrilled through the room. Certainly, if she was paid a sovereign a note, that first note of the "Zitanella" was good measure. Then it broke like quicksilver into a thousand perfectly round and shining globules of sound, collected itself again, poised, quavered, trilled, thrilled, perched as it were like a bird on the topmost twig of sound, and vanished like a conjurer's handkerchief into air. Mrs. Leighton again extended her mouth over her right cheek.

"Too delicious!" she said. "And how we are to pay for it all – the house I mean – I haven't got the remotest idea. It is so comfortable having no money at all: you not only don't, but you can't pay for anything, and it's no use thinking about it. Marie, you must come down and see it. There are two spare bedrooms all white and chintz. When I am there I always dream of milk and butter and litters of pigs. Yes, isn't Guardina marvellous? I wish she would lend me her vocal cords for a week. I would willingly lend her anything I have for a fortnight."

The end of Guardina's song was marked by a sort of general post, and Marie was snapped up by Mr. Maxwell, if such a phrase can properly be used of so deliberate a process. His interpretation of the art of conversation chiefly consisted in opening his mouth as if he was going to speak, and then shutting it again, like a fish in an aquarium. The person with whom he was conversing he stood over in an encompassing manner, with an air of proprietorship. Elsewhere Anthony had cornered Mildred Brereton's little girl, who evidently wanted to go away, but was checked by her mother's eye, which from time to time pinned her like a fluttering butterfly to the spot. She herself was taken possession of by Mrs. Maxwell, who, unlike her husband, was as voluminous in speech as she was in person. Arthur Naseby, close beside them, was half listening to his hostess's conversation, while he was discussing a quantity of subjects entirely unfit for discussion with Mrs. Leighton.

"Yes, I'm sure she sings beautiful," said Mrs. Maxwell, "and so true. She seems to hit the note every time. What a thing to have a gift like that! and I'm sure she makes the most of it. Why, I remember her first coming out, and she went away in a hanson-cab from the opera. But she can go handsomer than cabs now!"

Mrs. Brereton again pinned the unfortunate Maud to her seat.

"And what a brilliant party you have got together, Mrs. Maxwell!" she said. "Positively, there is every one here one has ever heard of, and absolutely nobody that one hasn't heard of. That is so

clever of you! It is easy enough to get people, but the difficulty is to not have the wrong ones. I'm sure you must find it so."

Mrs. Maxwell sighed.

"It's as much as Anthony and me can do in a week's work to go through the calling-book," she said. "Talk of weeding, you never saw such a deal of it as we have to do. People seem to think they can all come for the calling. But one must be careful, and I try never to ask any one whom a single one of my guests would be sorry to have in their own houses."

Mrs. Brereton smiled a congratulatory smile.

"We should most of us be very glad to see them in ours," she said.

Mrs. Maxwell's mood grew more sublime.

"And the pushing and the shoving that some people do to get asked to other people's houses," she said, "why, it fair passes belief. Now, Maxwell has no spirit. 'Let 'em all come,' he says, like that horrid vulgar song; but I said, 'No, Maxwell – if they all come, half of them will keep away, and them's the very half you want, and where shall we be then?' There's Guardina going to sing again, with Pagani this time. She's got to sing two solos and two duos. How wonderfully their voices suit! you would say they was made for each other. Excuse me, there's the Duchess of Perth just come, and I must say a word to her."

Arthur Naseby sank into the unoccupied seat.

"Anything more divine I never wish to hear," he said in a shrill whisper. "And the diamonds have caught an added lustre for their brilliant surroundings. To-night Mrs. Maxwell is one coruscation, with a collation to follow."

"How true, too, what she said about Pagani and Guardina," murmured Mrs. Brereton. "It takes that sort of person to say that sort of thing. I am not nervous personally, but" – and her eye caught sight of Maud and Anthony again – "but she is an excellent good kind woman," she added with a very distinct change of tone.

"And what of the new man, Jim Spencer?" asked Naseby. "Are there developments? I always look on you as a sort of barometer. You can tell what is going to happen before it does happen."

Mildred looked round.

"A little cloud like a man's hand," she said.

"Rising out of South Africa. You mean his head will follow?"

"Hush! That's the worst of having these great people to sing. One cannot talk."

"So unsociable," said Arthur Naseby.

The room where they sat was the ballroom, with six windows overlooking Piccadilly. It would have held certainly a hundred couples on the floor, and, crowded as it was now, it must have contained twice the number. All the world, as Mrs. Brereton had said, was there, and if it was true that, as Mrs. Maxwell hoped, every one present would have been glad to see any of the guests at their houses, the world, it must be confessed, was of very catholic if not apostolic tendencies. It would be, in fact, impossible to imagine a more heterogeneous gathering: here a peer of European reputation, whose very name was considered by the country at large to be synonymous with solid respectability, was being talked to by a woman who in other circles, and in widely different ways, was also of European reputation, and who seemed capable of quite making him forget for the moment, at any rate, the happy colonies which were intrusted to his wise and well-judged care; here a traveller recently returned from regions which were supposed to be impenetrable on account of the cannibal habits of their denizens was relating to two overdressed dowagers the internal horrors which ensued on drinking the only water which could be found in these abandoned spots; here a terrible man with curiously arched eyebrows and carmine-coloured cheeks, who looked like a decadent wax-work, was retailing to a brilliant *débutante*, in discreet whispers, things that made her white shoulders shake with laughter, till she was whisked away by an indignant mother. Princes of royal blood mingled with the crowd, which bobbed as they approached, and straightened itself again to make itself amusing, and all talked and

giggled and gabbled together with the utmost freedom and impartiality. But the predominant feature of the entertainment which brought all its heterogeneous components into one harmonious whole was Wealth: Wealth burst from the throat of the singers, Wealth gleamed from the gilded chairs and Genoese upholstering, Wealth beamed from the ropes of pearls and diamonds which encircled lean necks and plump necks, old necks and young necks, and sat enthroned on black and gray and white and brown, and particularly on golden, hair. There were no doubt many people there who were not rich, but the wives of such were pretty, or had some *cachet* other than mere good breeding about them; but it is certain that there was no one in London who was very rich who had not at any rate been asked for that night, and but few who had not come. This probably was what Mrs. Maxwell meant when she said there was no one there whom any of her guests would not have liked to have at their own houses, and, with exceptions so few as to be negligible, she was perfectly right. All the plutocracy, in fact, were there, English, American, German, Greek, and Jew, with all the mixtures of religion, race and language which wealth, with its wonderful amalgamating power, can bring together. It was, in fact, a typical English party, for there was there all that money could buy and all those whom the power of money could bring. That is why it was so very full. People of birth and breeding were there, who screamed with unkindly laughter at Mrs. Maxwell and her bevy of quite impossible millionaires, yet they drank her champagne and danced to her fiddles with the greatest goodwill in the world, and had Mrs. Maxwell a hundred sons, each of whom would be as rich as Anthony, they would have hurled two hundred daughters at their heads; and had she a hundred daughters, it is perfectly certain that at least two hundred coronets, prospective or immediate, some with strawberry leaves, some with pearls, some possibly, even with fleur-de-lis, would have been laid at their feet. There were, of course, many people who still were not seen in Mrs. Maxwell's drawing-rooms, and who persisted in looking over her head when they met her elsewhere, but she in her turn called them "stuck-up," so the honours were pretty evenly divided. The world in general, moreover, distinctly agreed with Mrs. Maxwell, and said how absurd it was to give yourself airs.

Mrs. Maxwell by this time was getting to know the ropes sufficiently well to refrain from telling people how honoured she felt by seeing them at her house; she also was sufficiently well acquainted with the minute appetite the English have for music and the great appetite that our healthy nation has for food. Consequently the concert, at which every item was admirable and performed by first-rate artists, was short, and the supper, also in the hands of first-rate artists, elaborate. Her other preparations also were on the most complete scale, and Bridge-tables were ready in one room, all sorts of nicotine and spirits in another, and in the garden behind, brilliantly illuminated as to its paths and decently obscure as to its seats, there were plenty of opportunities to enjoy the coolness of the night air, which many people seemed to find refreshing and invigorating. In the supper-room, finally, there was a huge sort of bar for the rank and file, and a quantity of small tables for the very elect. "In fact," as Mildred Brereton said to Jack as they strolled about the garden after a violent tussle to get food, owing to the invincible determination of every one to eat without delay, "it is as good as the best restaurant, and there is no bill afterwards."

Jack laughed.

"You mistake the character of the entertainment," he said. "It is a *salon*; I heard Mrs. Maxwell say so, and not a restaurant. Also, the bill is your presence here."

"I expect many people would like to know another restaurant conducted on the same principle," said Mildred; "but for you to say that sort of thing is absurd, Jack. I believe Marie is making you as old-fashioned as herself."

Jack swore gently.

"Has she been old-fashioned to-night?" he asked.

"Immensely. She told me about her row with you."

"How like a woman! They have to unburden to their friends about everything. What's the good of unburdening?"

"Jack, you are such a pig – so am I; that is why we are friends. But, anyhow, I can see what a pearl she is. Sometimes I've half a mind to finish with the whole affair. Marie makes – "

He turned on her fiercely.

"You don't dare," he said.

"My good man, it is no use storming. You get your way in the world, I allow, for somehow or other most people are afraid of you. But if you think I am, you are stupendously mistaken. To resume – half a mind, I said. When I have the whole mind you shall be instantly told. I am scrupulously fair in such matters, and I recognise the justice of your knowing first."

She got up as she spoke.

"I shall now go home," she said.

He laid his hand on her arm.

"No, don't go yet, Mildred," he said. "And I wish to Heaven you would not say such horrible things. But never mind that: you don't mean it. Sit down again."

She laughed.

"I mean every word," she said, "also that I must go. Come; Andrew is sure to be playing Bridge. You can just drive me home. I will leave the carriage for him."

Jack rose also.

"Won't he look for you?" he asked.

"Not for long, and then he will play some more Bridge."

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Brereton, among her many other moral hallucinations, was in the constant habit of remembering that she was an excellent mother, and that, next to her own affairs, it was highly probable that among all others she took most thought for those of her daughter. Consequently, on the afternoon following the Maxwell entertainment she determined to devote herself to Maud and her prospects, and with that end in view drove down with her in a space-annihilating motor-car to their house just above Windsor, in order both to talk with her by the way, and when arrived there see that things were in order for the week-end party that they were giving on Saturday. The summer weather which had begun with such splendour a week ago had by an unparalleled effort kept itself up, and seven days of sunshine had brought out a wealth of fresh green leaf on the trees, in London still varnished and undimmed by dust, and in the country of an exquisite verdure. Overhead the sun was set in a sky of divine purity, and the swift motion through the air she felt to be quite as exhilarating to the senses as would have been the afternoon party to which, had not duty called, she would otherwise have gone. She had never wished to have a daughter, and the abandonment of this party reminded her how often she was sacrificing herself to Maud. Indeed, she seemed to herself a most excellent mother.

But, notwithstanding that she was generally and justly supposed to be able to spar with the most robust emergencies, Mrs. Brereton did not particularly fancy the task she had set herself, or that, strictly speaking, had been set her; in fact, early this morning there had arrived for her a note from her hostess of last night, saying what sort of communication her dear Anthony had made her before he went to his bed. Under these circumstances it was only right that Maud's mother should be asked whether she sanctioned the step he proposed to take in presenting himself as a suitor for her daughter's hand. The phrasing of the note, as might be expected from so successful a lady as Mrs. Maxwell, was as unimpeachable as its contents, and both filled Mrs. Brereton with joy, for the two odious sons of her husband by his first marriage would inherit the bulk of her husband's fortune, and Maud would have almost nothing. Now, Mrs. Brereton had no desire whatever to see her an impecunious peeress, or, indeed, an impecunious anything, and she had come to the very wise conclusion that money certainly is money, and that where a chance of marrying a huge fortune was presented, it would be distinctly a failure of maternal duty not to put its advantages very distinctly and decidedly before her daughter. But she was never very much at ease with Maud, whom, if she had been another woman's child, she would have described as an uncomfortable kind of girl. But being her own, she spoke of her always as very original and with great opinions of her own. She did not particularly like girls, any more than she liked young men or new wines: they all needed maturing before they were fit for the palate. But she was just, and gave full allowance to the necessity for being young before you can become mellow, though she wished that Maud would be quick about it. Really, when a girl is nearly nineteen, nearly six feet high, with a superb figure, and a face at which men undisguisedly stare, and with reason, it is time for the possessor of such advantages to begin thinking about making her nest. Here was one ready, excellently well-feathered. She only hoped, strongly but somehow remotely, that Maud might see it in that light. But she considered her daughter to combine symptoms of hopeless simplicity with those of the most world-weary cynicism. It was impossible that both could be genuine, but it puzzled her mother to say which was.

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