

Emma Orczy

The Heart of a Woman



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Orczy Emmuska

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CHAPTER I

WHICH TELLS OF A VERY

COMMONPLACE INCIDENT

No! No! she was not going to gush! – Not even though there was nothing in the room at this moment to stand up afterward before her as dumb witness to a moment's possible weakness. Less than nothing in fact: space might have spoken and recalled that moment.. infinite nothingness might at some future time have brought back the memory of it.. but these dumb, impassive objects!.. the fountain pen between her fingers! The dull, uninteresting hotel furniture covered in red velvet – an uninviting red that repelled dreaminess and peace! The ormolu clock which had ceased long ago to mark the passage of time, wearied – as it no doubt was, poor thing – by the monotonous burden of a bronze Psyche gazing on her shiny brown charms, in an utterly blank and unreflective bronze mirror, while obviously bemoaning the fracture of one of her smooth bronze thighs! Indeed Louisa might well have given way to that overmastering feeling of excitement before all these things. They would neither see nor hear. They would never deride, for they could never remember.

But a wood fire crackled on the small hearth.. and.. and those citron-coloured carnations were favourite flowers of his.. and his picture did stand on the top of that ugly little Louis Philippe bureau.. No! No! it would never do to gush, for these things would see.. and, though they might not remember, they would remind.

And Louisa counted herself one of the strong ones of this earth. Just think of her name. Have you ever known a Louisa who gushed? who called herself the happiest woman on earth? who thought of a man – just an ordinary man, mind you – as the best, the handsomest, the truest, the most perfect hero of romance that ever threw a radiance over the entire prosy world of the twentieth century?

Louisas, believe me, do no such things. The Mays and the Floras, the Lady Barbaras and Lady Edithas, look beatific and charming when, clasping their lily-white hands together and raising violet eyes to the patterned ceiling paper above them, they exclaim: "Oh, my hero and my king!"

But Louisas would only look ridiculous if they behaved like that.. Louisa Harris, too!.. Louisa, the eldest of three sisters, the daughter of a wealthy English gentleman with a fine estate in Kent, an assured position, no troubles, no cares, nothing in her life to make it sad, or sordid or interesting.. Louisa Harris and romance!.. Why, she was not even pretty. She had neither violet eyes nor hair of ruddy gold. The latter was brown and the former were gray... How could romance come in the way of gray eyes, and of a girl named Louisa?

Can you conceive, for instance, one of those adorable detrimentals of low degree and empty pocket who have a way of arousing love in the hearts of the beautiful daughters of irascible millionaires, can you conceive such an interesting personage, I say, falling in love with Louisa Harris?

I confess that I cannot. To begin with, dear, kind Squire Harris was not altogether a millionaire, and not at all irascible, and penniless owners of romantic personalities were not on his visiting list.

Therefore Louisa, living a prosy life of luxury, got up every morning, ate a copious breakfast, walked out with the dogs, hunted in the autumn, skated in the winter, did the London season, and played tennis in the summer, just as hundreds and hundreds of other well-born, well-bred English girls of average means, average positions, average education, hunt, dance, and play tennis throughout the length and breadth of this country.

There was no room for romance in such a life, no time for it... The life itself was so full already – so full of the humdrum of daily rounds, of common tasks, that the heart which beat with such ordinary regularity in the seemingly ordinary breast of a very ordinary girl did so all unconscious of the intense pathos which underlay this very ordinary existence.

Vaguely Louisa knew that somewhere, beyond even the land of dreams, there lay, all unknown, all mysterious, a glorious world of romance: a universe peopled by girlish imaginings, and the sensitive, creating thoughts of poets, by the galloping phantasies of super-excited brains, and the vague longings of ambitious souls: a universe wherein dwelt alike the memories of those who have loved and the hopes of those who suffer. But when she thought of it all, she did so as one who from the arid plain gazes on the cool streams and golden minarets which the fairy Fata Morgana conjures on the horizon far away. She looked on it as all unreal and altogether beyond her ken. She shut her eyes to the beautiful mirage, her heart against its childish yearnings.

Such things did not exist. They were not for her – Louisa Harris. The little kitchenmaid at the court who, on Sunday evenings, went off giggling, her chubby face glowing with pride and the result of recent ablutions, on the arm of Jim the third gardener, knew more about that world of romance than well-bred, well-born young ladies ever dreamed of in their commonplace philosophy.

And Louisa Harris had always shut down the book which spoke of such impossible things, and counted herself one of the strong ones of the earth.

Therefore now, with Luke's letter in her hand, in which he tells her in a very few words that he loves her beyond anything on earth, and that he only waits the day when he can call her his own, his very own dearly loved wife, why should Louisa – prosy, healthy-minded, healthy-bodied Louisa – suddenly imagine that the whole world is transfigured? – that the hotel room is a kind of ante-chamber to heaven? – that the red velvet, uncompromising chairs are clouds of a roseate hue and that the bronze Psyche with the broken thigh is the elusive fairy who, with Morgana-like wand, hath conjured up this mirage of glorious visions which mayhap would vanish again before long?

She went up to the window and rested her forehead against the cool pane. She might be ever so strong, she could not help her forehead feeling hot and her eyes being full of tears – tears that did not hurt as they fell.

Outside the weather was indeed prosy and commonplace. Rain was coming down in torrents and beating against the newspaper kiosk over the way, on the roofs of tramways and taxi-autos, making the electric light peep dimly through the veil of wet, drowning, by its incessant patter, to which the gusts of a November gale made fitful if loud accompaniment, the shouts of the *cochers* on their boxes, the rattle of wheels on the stone pavement, even at times the shrill whistle for cabs emanating from the porch of the brilliantly lighted Palace Hotel.

It was close on half-past six by the clock of the Gare du Nord opposite. The express from Ostend had just come in – very late of course, owing to the gale which had delayed the mail boat. Louisa, straining her eyes, watched the excited crowd pouring out of the station in the wake of porters and of piles of luggage, jabbering, shouting, and fussing like an army of irresponsible pigmies: men in blouses, and men in immaculate bowler hats, women wrapped in furs, clinging to gigantic headgear that threatened to leave the safe refuge of an elaborate coiffure or of well fixed gargantuan hatpins, midinettes in fashionable skirts and high-heeled shoes, country women in wool shawls that flapped round their bulky forms like the wings of an overfed bat, all hurrying and jostling one another in a mad endeavour to avoid the onrush of the innumerable taxi-autos which in uncountable numbers wound in and out of the slower moving traffic like the erratic thread of some living, tangled skein.

Just the every-day prosy life of a small but ambitious capital struggling in the midst of an almost overpowering sense of responsibility toward the whole of Europe in view of its recent great Colonial expansion.

Louisa gave an impatient sigh.

Even the strong ones of the earth get wearied of the daily round, the common task at times. She and aunt were due to dine at the British Embassy at eight o'clock; it was only half-past six now and obviously impossible to sit another two hours in this unresponsive hotel room in the company of red velvet chairs and the bronze Psyche.

Aunt, in conjunction with her maid Annette, was busy laying the foundations of an elaborate toilette. Louisa was free to do as she pleased. She got a serviceable ulster and a diminutive hat and sallied forth into the streets. She did not want to think or to dream, nor perhaps did she altogether wish to work off that unusual feeling of excitement which had so unaccountably transformed her ever since Luke's letter had come.

All she wanted was to be alone, and to come out of herself for awhile. She had been alone all the afternoon, save for that brief half hour when aunt discussed the obvious over a badly brewed cup of tea: it was not that kind of "alone-ness" which Louisa wanted now, but rather the solitude which a crowded street has above all the power to give.

There is a kind of sociability in any room, be it ever so uncompromising in the matter of discomfort, but a crowded street can be unutterably lonely, either cruelly so or kindly as the case may be.

To Louisa Harris, the commonplace society girl, accustomed to tea fights, to dances and to dinner parties, the loneliness of this crowded little city was eminently welcome. With her dark ulster closely buttoned to the throat, the small hat tied under her chin, with everything on her weather-proof and unfashionable, she attracted no notice from the passers-by.

Not one head was turned as, with a long breath of delight, she sallied forth from under the portico of the hotel out into the muddy, busy street; not one glance of curiosity or interest so freely bestowed in the streets of foreign capitals on a solitary female figure, if it be young and comely, followed this very ordinary-looking English miss.

To the crowd she was indifferent. These men and women hurrying along, pushing, jostling, and scurrying knew nothing of Luke, nor that she, Louisa Harris, was the happiest woman on earth.

She turned back toward the Boulevard, meaning to take a brisk walk all along the avenue of trees which makes a circuit round the inner part of the town and which ultimately would lead her back to the Gare du Nord and the Palace Hotel. It was a walk she had often done before: save for one or two busy corners on the way, it would be fairly solitary and peaceful.

Louisa stepped out with an honest British tread, hands buried in the pockets of her serviceable ulster, head bent against the sudden gusts of wind. She did not mind the darkness of the ill-lighted, wide boulevard, and had every intention of covering the two miles in a little more than half an hour.

How the time sped! It seemed as if she had only just left the hotel, and already surely not a quarter of a mile away she could see glimmering the lights of the Place Namur, the half-way point of her walk.

She was in the Boulevard Waterloo where private houses with closed porte-cochères add nothing to the municipal lighting of the thoroughfare.

Trams had been rushing past her in endless succession: but now there was a lull. Close by her a taxi-auto whizzed quickly past and came to a standstill some hundred yards away, near the pavement, and not far from an electric light standard.

Louisa, with vacant eyes attached on that cab, but with her mind fixed on a particular room in a particular house in Grosvenor Square where lived a man of the name of Luke de Mountford, continued her walk. Those same vacant eyes of hers presently saw the chauffeur of the taxi-auto get down from his box and open the door of the cab, and then her absent mind was suddenly brought back from Grosvenor Square, London, to the Boulevard Waterloo in Brussels, by a terrible cry of horror which had broken from that same chauffeur's lips. Instinctively Louisa hurried on, but, even as she did so, a small crowd which indeed seemed to have sprung from nowhere had already gathered round the vehicle.

Murmurs of "What is it? What is it?" mingled with smothered groans of terror, as curiosity caused one or two of the more bold to peer into the gloomy depths of the cab. Shrill calls brought a couple of *gardiens* to the spot. In a moment Louisa found herself a unit in an eager, anxious crowd, asking questions, conjecturing, wondering, horror-struck as soon as a plausible and graphic explanation came from those who were in the fore-front and were privileged to see.

"A man – murdered – "

"But how?"

"The chauffeur got down from his box.. and looked in.. ah, *mon Dieu!*"

"What did he see?"

"A man.. he is quite young.. only about twenty years of age."

"Stabbed through the neck – "

"Stabbed? – Bah?"

"Right through the neck I tell you.. just below the ear. I can see the wound, quite small as if done with a skewer."

"*Allons! Voyons! Voyons!*" came the gruff accents from the two portly *gardiens* who worked vigorously with elbows and even feet to keep the crowd somewhat at bay.

Louisa was on the fringe of the crowd. She could see nothing of course – she did not wish to see that which the chauffeur saw when first he opened the door of his cab – but she stood rooted to the spot, feeling that strange, unexplainable fascination which one always feels, when one of those great life dramas of which one reads so often and so indifferently happens to be enacted within the close range of one's own perception.

She gleaned a phrase here and there – saw the horror-stricken faces of those who had seen, the placid, bovine expression of the two *gardiens*, more inured to such sights and calmly taking notes by the light of the electric standard.

"But to think that I drove that rascally murderer in my cab, and put him down safe and sound not ten minutes ago!" came with the adjunct of a loud oath from the irate chauffeur.

"How did it all occur?"

The *gardiens* tried to stem the flow of the driver's eloquence; such details should first be given to the police. *Voyons!* But what were two fat *mouchards* against twenty stalwart idlers all determined to hear – and then there were the women – they were determined to know more.

Louisa bent her ear to listen. She was just outside the crowd – not a part of it – and there was no really morbid curiosity in her. It was only the call of the imagination which is irresistible on these occasions – the prosy, matter-of-fact, high-bred girl could not, just then, tear herself away from that cab and the tragedy which had been enacted therein, in the mysterious darkness whilst the unconscious driver sped along, ignorant of the gruesome burden which he was dragging to its destination.

"*Voilà!*" he was saying with many ejaculations and expletives, and a volley of excited gestures. "Outside the *Parc* near the theatre two bourgeois hailed me, and one of them told me to draw up at the top of the *Galerie St. Hubert*, which I did. The same one – the one who had told me where to go – got out, clapped the door to and spoke a few words to his friend who had remained inside."

"What did he say?"

"Oh! I couldn't hear and I didn't listen. But after that he told me to drive on to *Boulevard Waterloo No. 34* and here I am."

"You suspected nothing?"

"Nothing, how should I? Two bourgeois get into my cab; I see nothing; I hear nothing. One of them gets out and tells me to drive on farther. How should I think there's anything wrong?"

"What was the other man like? The one who spoke to you?"

"*Ma foi!* I don't know... It was raining so fast and pitch dark just outside the *Parc* lights – and he did seem to keep in the shadow – now I come to think of it – and his cap – he wore a cap – was

pulled well over his face – and the collar of his coat was up to his nose. It was raining so, I didn't really see him properly. I saw the other one better – the one who has been murdered."

But the rotund *gardiens* had had enough of this. Moreover, they would hear all about it at full length presently. As for the crowd – it had no business to know too much.

They hustled the excited driver back on to his box, and themselves got into the cab beside it – the dead man, stabbed in the neck from ear to ear – the wound quite small as if it had been done with a skewer.

The *gardiens* ordered the chauffeur to drive to the commissariat, and Louisa turned away with a slight shiver down her spine and her throat choked with the horror of what she had only guessed.

CHAPTER II

ONCE MORE THE OBVIOUS

You don't suppose for a moment, I hope, that a girl like Louisa would allow her mind to dwell on such horrors. Mysterious crimes in strange cities – and in London, too, for a matter of that – are, alas! of far too frequent occurrence to be quite as startling as they should be.

A day or two later, Louisa Harris and her aunt, Lady Ryder, crossed over to England. They had spent five weeks in Italy and one in Brussels, not with a view to dreaming over the beauties of the Italian Lakes, or over the art treasures collected in the museums of Brussels, but because Lady Ryder had had a bronchial catarrh which she could not shake off and so her doctor had ordered her a thorough change. Bellaggio was selected, and Louisa accompanied her. They stayed at the best hotels both in Bellaggio and in Brussels, where Lady Ryder had several friends whom she wished to visit before she went home.

Nothing whatever happened that should not have happened; everything was orderly and well managed; the courier and the maid saw to tickets and to luggage, to hotel rooms and sleeping compartments. It was obviously their mission in life to see that nothing untoward or unexpected happened, but only the obvious.

It was clearly not their fault that Miss Harris had seen a cab in which an unknown man happened to have been murdered.

Louisa, with a view to preventing her aunt from going to sleep after dinner and thereby spoiling her night's rest, had told her of the incident which she had witnessed in the Boulevard Waterloo, and Lady Ryder was genuinely shocked. She vaguely felt that her niece had done something unladylike and odd, which was so unlike Louisa.

The latter had amused herself by scanning a number of English papers in order to find out what was said in London about that strange crime, which she had almost witnessed – the man stabbed through the neck, from ear to ear, and the wound so small it might have been done with a skewer. But, with characteristic indifference, London paid but little heed to the mysterious dramas of a sister city. A brief account of the gruesome discovery – a figurative shrug of the shoulders as to the incompetence of the Belgian police, who held neither a clue to the perpetrator of the crime nor to the identity of the victim. Just a stranger – an idler. Brussels was full of strangers just now. His nationality? who knows? His individuality? there seemed no one to care. The police were active no doubt, but so far they had discovered nothing.

Two men, the murderer and the murdered, engulfed in that great whirlpool known as humanity, small units of no importance, since no one seemed to care. Interesting to the detective whose duty it was to track the crime to its perpetrator. Interesting to the reporter who could fill a column with accounts of depositions, of questionings, of examinations. Interesting to the after-dinner talker who could expatiate over the moral lessons to be drawn from the conception of such a crime.

But the murdered man goes to his grave unknown: and the murderer wanders Cain-like on the face of the earth – as mysterious, as unknown, as silent as his victim.

CHAPTER III

AND NOW ALMOST LIKE A DREAM

Everything went on just as convention – whose mouth-piece for the moment happened to be Lady Ryder – desired; just as Louisa surmised that everything would; the letters of congratulations; the stately visits from and to Lord Radclyffe, Luke's uncle; the magnificent diamond tiara from the latter; the rope of pearls from Luke; the silver salvers and inkstands and enamel parasol handles from everybody who was anybody in London society.

Louisa's portrait and that of Luke hastily and cheaply reproduced in the halfpenny dailies, so that she looked like a white negress with a cast in her eye, and he like the mutilated hero of *L'Homme Qui Rit*; the more elegant half-tone blocks in the sixpenny weeklies under the popular if somewhat hackneyed heading of "The Earl of Radclyffe's heir and his future bride, Miss Louisa Harris"; it was all there, just as it had been for hundreds of other girls and hundreds of other young men before Louisa had discovered that there was only one man in the whole wide world, and that, beyond the land of diamond tiaras and of society weddings, there was a fairy universe, immense and illimitable, whereon the sun of happiness never set and whither no one dared venture alone, only hand in hand with that other being, the future mate, the pupil and teacher of love, the only one that mattered.

And the wedding was to be in four weeks from this day. The invitations were not out yet, for Louisa, closely pressed by Luke, had only just made up her mind half an hour ago about the date. Strangely enough she had been in no hurry for the wedding day to come. Luke had been so anxious, so crestfallen when she put him off with vague promises, that she herself could not account for this strange reticence within her – so unworthy a level-headed, conventional woman of the world.

But the outer lobby of the fairy universe was surpassingly beautiful, and though the golden gates to the inner halls beyond were ajar and would yield to the slightest pressure of Louisa's slender fingers, yet she was glad to tarry awhile longer. Were they not hand in hand? What mattered waiting since eternity called beyond those golden gates?

This morning, however, convention – still voiced by Lady Ryder – was more vigorous than was consistent with outward peace. Louisa, worried by aunt, and with the memory of Luke's expression of misery and disappointment when last night she had again refused to fix the wedding day, chided herself for her silly fancies, and at eleven o'clock set out for a stroll in Battersea Park, her mind made up, her unwonted fit of sentimentality smothered by the louder voice of common-sense.

She and Luke always took their walks abroad in Battersea Park. In the morning hours they were free there from perpetual meetings with undesired company – all outside company being undesirable in the lobby of the fairy universe. Louisa had promised to meet Luke in the tropical garden at half-past eleven. She was always punctual, and he always before his time; she smart and businesslike in her neat, tailor-made gown and close hat which defied wind and rain, he always a little shamefaced when he took her neatly gloved hand in his, as most English young men are apt to be when sentiment for the first time happens to overmaster them.

To-day she saw him coming toward her just the same as on other days. He walked just as briskly and held himself as erect as he always did, but the moment that he was near enough for her to see his face she knew that there was something very wrong in the world and with him. Some one from the world of eternity beyond had seen fit to push the golden gates closer together, so that now they would not yield quite so easily to the soft pressure of a woman's hand.

"What is it, Luke?" she asked very quietly, as soon as her fingers rested safely between his.

"What is what?" he rejoined foolishly and speaking like a child, and with a forced, almost inane-looking, smile on his lips.

"What has happened?" she reiterated more impatiently.

"Nothing," he replied, "that need worry you, I think. Shall we sit down here? You won't catch cold?" and he indicated a seat well sheltered against the cold breeze and the impertinent gaze of the passers-by.

"I never catch cold," said Louisa, smiling in spite of herself at Luke's funny, awkward ways. "But we won't sit down. Let us stroll up and down, shall we? You can talk better then, and tell me all about it."

"There's not much to tell at present. And no occasion to worry."

"There's nothing that worries me so much as your shilly-shallying, Luke, or the thought that you are making futile endeavours to keep something from me," she retorted almost irritably this time, for, strangely enough, her nerves – she never knew before this that she had any – were slightly on the jar this morning.

"I don't want to shilly-shally, little girl," he replied gently, "nor to keep anything from you. There, will you put your hand on my arm? 'Arry and 'Arriet, eh? Well! never mind. There's no one to see."

He took her hand – that neatly gloved, small hand of hers – and put it under his arm. For one moment it seemed as if he would kiss that tiny and tantalizing place just below the thumb where the pink palm shows in the opening of the glove. Luke was not a demonstrative lover, he was shy and English and abrupt; but this morning – was it the breath of spring in the air, the scent of the Roman hyacinths in that bed over there, or merely the shadow of a tiny cloud on the uniform blue of his life's horizon that gave a certain rugged softness to his touch, as his hand lingered over that neat glove which nestled securely in among the folds of his coat sleeve?

"Now," she said simply.

"Have you," he asked with abrupt irrelevance, "read your paper all through this morning?"

"Not all through. Only the important headlines."

"And you saw nothing about a claim to a peerage?"

"Nothing."

"Well! that's all about it. A man has sprung up from nowhere in particular, who claims to be my uncle Arthur's son, and, therefore, heir presumptive to the title and all."

Luke heaved a deep sigh, as if with this brief if ungrammatical statement, his own heart had been unburdened of a tiresome load.

"Your uncle Arthur?" she repeated somewhat bewildered.

"Yes. You never knew him, did you?"

"No," she said, "I never knew him, though as a baby I must have seen him. I was only three, I think, when he died. But I never heard that he had been married. I am sure father never knew."

"Nor did I, nor did Uncle Rad, nor any of us. The whole thing is either a thunderbolt or.. an imposture."

"Tell me," she said, "a little more clearly, Luke dear, will you? I am feeling quite muddled." And now it was she who led the way to the isolated seat beneath that group of silver birch, whose baby leaves trembled beneath the rough kiss of the cool April breeze.

They sat down together and on the gravelled path in front of them a robin hopped half shyly, half impertinently, about and gazed with tiny, inquisitive eyes on the doings of these big folk. All around them the twitter of bird throats filled the air with its magic, its hymn to the reawakened earth, and drowned in this pleasing solitude the distant sounds of the busy city that seemed so far away from this secluded nook inhabited by birds and flowers, and by two dwellers in Fata Morgana's land.

"Tell me first," said Louisa, in her most prosy, most matter of fact tone of voice, "all that is known about your uncle Arthur."

"Well, up to now, I individually knew very little about him. He was the next eldest brother to Uncle Rad, and my father was the youngest of all. When Uncle Rad succeeded to the title, Arthur was heir-presumptive of course. But as you know he died – as was supposed unmarried – nineteen

years ago, and my poor dear father was killed in the hunting field the following year. I was a mere kid then and the others were babies – orphans the lot of us. My mother died when Edith was born. Uncle Rad was said to be a confirmed bachelor. He took us all to live with him and was father, mother, elder brother, elder sister to us all. Bless him!"

Luke paused abruptly, and Louisa too was silent. Only the song of a thrush soaring upward to the skies called for that blessing which neither of them at that moment could adequately evoke.

"Yes," said Louisa at last, "I knew all that."

Lord Radclyffe and his people were all of the same world as herself. She knew all about the present man's touching affection for the children of his youngest brother, but more especially for Luke on whom he bestowed an amount of love and tender care which would have shamed many a father by its unselfish intensity. That affection was a beautiful trait in an otherwise not very lovable character.

"I daresay," resumed Luke after a little while, "that I have been badly brought up. I mean in this way, that if – if the whole story is true – if Uncle Arthur did marry and did have a son, then I should have to go and shift for myself and for Jim and Frank and Edith. Of course Uncle Rad would do what he could for us, but I should no longer be his heir – and we couldn't go on living at Grosvenor Square and –"

"Aren't you rambling on a little too fast, dear?" said Louisa gently, whilst she beamed with an almost motherly smile – the smile that a woman wears when she means to pacify and to comfort – on the troubled face of the young man.

"Of course I am," he replied more calmly, "but I can't help it. For some days now I've had a sort of feeling that something was going to happen – that – well, that things weren't going to go right. And this morning when I got up, I made up my mind that I would tell you."

"When did you hear first, and from whom?"

"The first thing we heard was last autumn. There came a letter from abroad for Uncle Rad. It hadn't the private mark on it, so Mr. Warren opened it along with the rest of the correspondence. He showed it to me. The letter was signed Philip de Mountford, and began, 'My dear uncle.' I couldn't make head or tail of it; I thought it all twaddle. You've no idea what sort of letters Uncle Rad gets sometimes from every kind of lunatic or scoundrel you can think of, who wants to get something out of him. Well, this letter at first looked to me the same sort of thing. I had never heard of any one who had the right to say 'dear uncle' to Uncle Rad – but it had a lot in it about blood being thicker than water and all the rest of it, with a kind of request for justice and talk about the cruelty of Fate. The writer, however, asserted positively that he was the only legitimate son of Mr. Arthur de Mountford, who – this he professed to have only heard recently – was own brother to the earl of Radclyffe. The story which he went on to relate at full length was queer enough in all conscience. I remember every word of it, for it seemed to get right away into my brain, then and there, as if something was being hammered or screwed straight into one of the cells of my memory never really to come out again."

"And yet when – when we were first engaged," rejoined Louisa quietly, "you never told me anything about it."

"I'll tell you directly how that was. I remembered and then forgot – if you know what I mean – and now it has all come back. At the time I thought the letter of this man who called himself Philip de Mountford nothing but humbug. So did Mr. Warren, and yet he and I talked it over and discussed it between us for ever so long. It all sounded so strange. Uncle Arthur – so this man said who called himself Philip de Mountford – had married in Martinique a half-caste girl named Adeline Petit, who was this same Philip's mother. He declares that he has all the papers – marriage certificates or whatever they are called – to prove every word he says. He did not want to trouble his uncle much, only now that his mother was dead, he felt all alone in the world and longed for the companionship and affection of his own kith and kin. All he wanted he said, was friendship. Then he went on to say that of course he did not expect his lordship to take his word for all this, he only asked for an

opportunity to show his dear uncle all the papers and other proofs which he held that he was in real and sober truth the only legitimate son of Mr. Arthur de Mountford, own brother to his lordship."

"How old is this man – this Philip de Mountford – supposed to be?"

"Well, he said in that first letter that the marriage took place in the parish church of St. Pierre in Martinique on the 28th of August, 1881; that he himself was born the following year, and christened in the same church under the name of Philip Arthur, and registered as the son of Mr. Arthur Collingwood de Mountford of Ford's Mount in the county of Northampton, England, and of Adeline de Mountford, née Petit, his wife."

"Twenty-four years ago," said Louisa thoughtfully, "and he only claims kinship with Lord Radclyffe now?"

"That's just," rejoined Luke, "where the curious part of the story comes in. This Philip de Mountford – I don't know how else to call him – said in his first letter that his mother never knew that Mr. Arthur de Mountford was anything more than a private English gentleman travelling either for profit or pleasure, but in any case not possessed of either wealth or social position. Between you and me, dear, I suppose that this Adeline Petit was just a half-caste girl, without much knowledge of what goes on in the world, and why she should have married Uncle Arthur I can't think."

"If she did marry him, you mean."

"If she did marry him, as you say," said Luke with a singular want of conviction, which Louisa was not slow to remark.

"You think that this young man's story is true then?"

"I don't know what to think, and that's the truth."

"Tell me more," added Louisa simply.

"Well, this Philip's story goes on to say that his father – Uncle Arthur – apparently soon tired of his exotic wife, for it seems that two years after the marriage he left Martinique and never returned to it to the day of his death."

"Pardon," said Louisa in her prim little way, "my interrupting you: but have any of you – Lord Radclyffe I mean, or any of your friends – any recollection of your uncle Arthur living at Martinique for awhile? Two years seems a long time –"

"As a matter of fact, Uncle Arthur was a bit of a wastrel you know. He never would study for anything. He passed into the navy – very well, too, I believe – but he threw it all up almost as soon as he got his commission, and started roaming about the world. I do know for a fact that once his people had no news of him for about three or four years, and then he turned up one fine day as if he had only been absent for a week's shooting."

"When was that?"

"I can't tell you exactly. I was only a tiny kid at the time, not more than three years old I should say. Yes, I do remember, now I come to think of it, that Uncle Arthur was home the Christmas after my third birthday. I have a distinct recollection of my dad telling me that Uncle Arthur was one of my presents from Father Christmas, and of my thinking what a rotten present it was. Later on in the nursery all of us children were rather frightened of him, and we used to have great discussions as to where this uncle came from. The Christmas present theory was soon exploded, because of some difficulty about Uncle Arthur not having been actually found in a stocking, and his being too big anyway to be hidden in one, so we fell back on Jim's suggestion that he was the man in the moon come down for a holiday."

"You," she said, "had your third birthday in 1883."

"Yes."

"That was the year, then, that your uncle Arthur came home from his wanderings about the world, during which he had never given any news of himself or his doings to any member of his family."

"By Jove, Lou, what a splendid examining magistrate you'd make!" was Luke's unsophisticated comment on Louisa's last remark.

But she frowned a little at this show of levity, and continued quietly:

"And your uncle, according to this so-called Philip de Mountford, was married in 1881 in Martinique, his son was born in 1882, and he left Martinique in 1883 never to return."

"Hang it all, Lou!" exclaimed the young man almost roughly, "that is all surmise."

"I know it is, dear; I was only thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"That it all tallies so very exactly and that this – this Philip de Mountford seems in any case to know a great deal about your Uncle Arthur, and his movements in the past."

"There's no doubt of that; and –"

Luke paused a moment and a curious blush spread over his face. The Englishman's inborn dislike to talk of certain subjects to his women folk had got hold of him, and he did not know how to proceed.

As usual in such cases the woman – unmoved and businesslike – put an end to his access of shyness.

"The matter is – or may be – too serious, dear, for you to keep any of your thoughts back from me at this juncture."

"What I meant was," he said abruptly, "that this Philip might quite well be Uncle Arthur's son you know; but it doesn't follow that he has any right to call himself Philip de Mountford, or to think that he is Uncle Rad's presumptive heir."

"That will of course depend on his proofs – his papers and so on," she assented calmly. "Has any one seen them?"

"At the time – it was sometime last November – that he first wrote to Uncle Rad, he had all his papers by him. He wrote from St. Vincent; have I told you that?"

"No."

"Well, it was from St. Vincent that he wrote. He had left Martinique, I understand, in 1902, when St. Pierre, if you remember, was totally destroyed by volcanic eruption. It seems that when Uncle Arthur left the French colony for good, he lodged quite a comfortable sum in the local bank at St. Pierre in the name of Mrs. de Mountford. Of course he had no intention of ever going back there, and anyhow he never did, for he died about three years later. The lady went on living her own life quite happily. Apparently she did not hanker much after her faithless husband. I suppose that she never imagined for a moment that he meant to stick to her, and she certainly never bothered her head as to what his connections or friends over in England might be. Amongst her own kith and kin, the half-caste population of a French settlement, she was considered very well off, almost rich. After a very few years of grass-widowhood, she married again, without much scruple or compunction, which proves that she never thought that her English husband would come back to her. And then came the catastrophe."

"What catastrophe?"

"The destruction of St. Pierre. You remember the awful accounts of it. The whole town was destroyed. Every building in the place – the local bank, the church, the presbytery, the post-office – was burned to the ground; everything was devastated for miles around. And thousands perished, of course."

"I remember."

"Mrs. de Mountford and her son Philip were amongst the very few who escaped. Their cottage was burned to the ground, but she, with all a Frenchwoman's sense of respect for papers and marks of identification, fought her way back into the house, even when it was tottering above her head, in order to rescue those things which she valued more than her life, the proofs that she was a respectable married woman and that Philip was her lawfully begotten son. Her second husband – I think from

reading between the lines that he was a native or at best a half-caste – was one of the many who perished. But Mrs. de Mountford and Philip managed to reach the coast unhurt and to put out to sea in an open boat. They were picked up by a fishing smack from Marie Galante and landed there. It is a small island – French settlement, of course – off Guadeloupe. They had little or no money, and how they lived I don't know, but they stayed in Marie Galante for some time. Then the mother died, and Philip made his way somehow or other to Roseau in Dominica and thence to St. Vincent."

"When was that?"

"Last year I suppose."

"And," she said, meditating on all that she had heard, "it was in St. Vincent that he first realized who he was – or might be?"

"Well, in a British colony it was bound to happen. Whether somebody put him up to it out there, or whether he merely sucked the information in from nowhere in particular, I can't say: certain it is that he did soon discover that the name he bore was one of the best known in England, and that his father must, as a matter of fact, have been own brother to the earl of Radclyffe. So he wrote to Uncle Rad."

Louisa was silent. She was absorbed in thought and for the moment Luke had come to the end of what he had to say – or, rather, of what he meant to say just now. That there was more to come, Louisa well knew. Commonplace women have a way of intuitively getting at the bottom of the thoughts of people for whom they care. Louisa guessed that beneath Luke's levity and his school-boyish slang – which grew more apparent as the man drew to the end of his narrative – that beneath his outward flippancy there lay a deep substratum of puzzlement and anxiety.

The story as told by Luke sounded crude enough, almost melodramatic, right out of the commonplace range of Louisa's usual every-day life. Whilst she sat listening to this exotic tale of secret and incongruous marriage and of those earthquakes and volcanic eruptions which had seemed so remote when she had read about them nine years ago in the newspapers, she almost thought that she must be dreaming; that she would wake up presently in her bed at the Langham Hotel where she was staying with aunt, and that she would then dress and have her breakfast and go out to meet Luke, and tell him all about the idiotic dream she had had about an unknown heir to the Earldom of Radclyffe, who was a negro – or almost so – and was born in a country where there were volcanoes and earthquakes.

How far removed from her at this moment did aunt seem, and father, and the twins! Surely they could not be of the same world as this exotic pretender to Uncle Radclyffe's affection, and to Luke's hitherto undisputed rights. And as father and aunt and Mabel and Chris were very much alive and very real, then this so-called Philip de Mountford must be a creature of dreams.

"Or else an imposter."

She had said this aloud, thus breaking in on her own thoughts and his. A feeling of restlessness seized her now. She was cold, too, for the April breeze was biting and had searched out the back of her neck underneath the sable stole and caused her to shiver in the spring sunshine.

"Let us walk," she said, "a little – shall we?"

CHAPTER IV

NOTHING REALLY TANGIBLE

They walked up the gravelled walk under the chestnut trees, whereon the leaf buds, luscious looking, with their young green surface delicately tinged with pink, looked over ready to burst into fan-shaped fulness of glory. The well-kept paths, the orderly flower beds, and smoothly trimmed lawns looked all so simple, so obvious beside the strange problem which fate had propounded to these two young people walking up and down side by side – and with just a certain distance between them as if that problem was keeping them apart.

And that intangible reality stood between them, causing in Luke a vague sense of shamefacedness, as if he were guilty toward Louisa, and in her a feeling of irritation against the whole world around her, for having allowed this monstrous thing to happen – this vague shadow on life's pathway, on the life of the only man who mattered.

People passed them as they walked: the curious, the indifferent: men with bowler hats pulled over frowning brows, boys with caps carelessly thrust at the back of their heads, girls with numbed fingers thrust in worn gloves, tip-tilted noses blue with cold, thin, ill-fitting clothes scarce shielding attenuated shoulders against the keen spring blast.

Just the humdrum, every-day crowd of London: the fighters, the workers, toiling against heavy odds of feeble health, insufficient food, scanty clothing, the poor that no one bothers about, less interesting than the unemployed labourer, less picturesque, less noisy, they passed and had no time to heed the elegantly clad figure wrapped in costly furs, or the young man in perfectly tailored coat, who was even now preparing himself for a fight with destiny, beside which the daily struggle for halfpence would be but a mere skirmish.

Instinctively they knew – these two – the society girl and the easy-going wealthy man – that it was reality with which they would have to deal. That instinct comes with the breath of fate: a warning that her decrees are serious, not to be lightly set aside, but pondered over; that her materialized breath would not be a phantom or a thing to be derided.

Truth or imposture? Which?

Neither the man nor the girl knew as yet, but reality – whatever else it was.

They walked on for awhile in silence. Another instinct – the conventional one – had warned them that their stay in the park had been unduly prolonged: there were social duties to attend to, calls to make, luncheon with Lord Radclyffe at Grosvenor Square.

So they both by tacit consent turned their steps back toward the town.

A man passed them from behind, walking quicker than they did. As he passed, he looked at them both intently, as if desirous of arresting their attention. Of course he succeeded, for his look was almost compelling. Louisa was the first to turn toward him, then Luke did likewise: and the passer-by raised his hat respectfully with a slight inclination of head and shoulders that suggested foreign upbringing.

Once more convention stepped in and Luke mechanically returned the salute.

"Who was that?" asked Louisa, when the passer-by was out of ear shot.

"I don't know," replied Luke. "I thought it was some one you knew. He bowed to you."

"No," she said, "to you, I think. Funny you should not know him."

But silence once broken, constraint fled with it. She drew nearer to Luke and once more her hand sought his coat sleeve, with a light pressure quickly withdrawn.

"Now, Luke," she said, abruptly reverting to the subject, "how do you stand in all this?"

"I?"

"Yes. What does Lord Radclyffe say?"

"He laughs the whole thing to scorn, and declares that the man is an impudent liar."

"He saw," she asked, "the first letter? The one that came from St. Vincent?"

"Yes. Mr. Warren and I did not think we ought to keep it from him."

"Of course not," she assented. "Then he said that the letter was a tissue of lies?"

"From beginning to end."

"He refused," she insisted, "to believe in the marriage of your uncle Arthur out there in Martinique?"

"He didn't go into details. He just said that the whole letter was an impudent attempt at blackmail."

"And since then?"

"He has never spoken about it."

"Until to-day?" she asked.

"He hasn't spoken," he replied, insisting on the word, "even to-day. Two or three times I think letters came for him in the same handwriting. Mr. Warren did not open them, of course, and took them straight to Uncle Rad. They always bore foreign postmarks, some from one place, some from another; but Uncle Rad never referred to them after he had read them, nor did he instruct Mr. Warren to reply. Then the letters ceased, and I began to forget the whole business. I didn't tell you, because Uncle Rad told me not to talk about the whole thing. It was beneath contempt, he said, and he didn't want the tittle-tattle to get about."

"Then," she asked, "what happened?"

"A week ago a letter came with a London postmark on it. The address and letter were both type-written, and the latter covered four sheets of paper, and was signed Philip de Mountford. Bar the actual story of the marriage and all that, the letter was almost identical to the first one which came from St. Vincent. Mr. Warren had opened it, for it looked like a business one, and he waited for me in his office to ask my opinion about it. Of course we had to give it to Uncle Rad. It had all the old phrases in it about blood being thicker than water, and about longing for friendship and companionship, and all that. There was no hint of threats or demand for money or anything like that."

"Of course not," she said. "Whilst Lord Radclyffe is alive, the young man has no claim."

"Only," he rejoined, "that of kinship."

"Lord Radclyffe need not do anything for him."

Already there was a note of hostility in Louisa's even voice. The commonplace woman was donning armour against the man who talked of usurping the loved one's privileges.

"I wish," he insisted, "that I could have got the letter from Uncle Rad to show you. It was so simple and so sensible. All he asks is just to see Uncle Rad personally, to feel that he has kindred in the world. He knows, he says, that, beyond good-will, he has no claim now. As a matter of fact, he has something more substantial than that, for Uncle Arthur had a little personal property, about fifteen thousand pounds, which he left to us four children – Jim and Frank and Edie and me, and which I for one wouldn't touch if I knew for certain that this Philip was his son."

"But," she argued, "you say that the man does not speak of money."

She hated the talk about money: for she had all that contempt for it which women have who have never felt the want of it. It would have been so simple if the intruder had only wanted money. She would not have cared a little bit if Luke had none, or was not going to have any. It was his right which she would not hear of being questioned; his right in Lord Radclyffe's affections, in his household, and also his rights in the future when Lord Radclyffe would be gone.

"You are sure," she insisted, "that he does not want money?"

"I don't think," he replied, "that he does, just now. He seems to have a little; he must have had a little, since he came over from St. Vincent and is staying at a moderately good hotel in London. No. He wants to see Uncle Rad, because he thinks that, if Uncle Rad saw him, blood would cry out in response. It appears that now he has lodged all his papers of identification with a London lawyer – a

very good firm, mind you – and he wants Uncle Rad's solicitor to see all the papers and to examine them. That seems fair to me, doesn't it to you?"

"Very fair indeed," she mused.

"What I mean," he added with great conviction, "is that if those papers weren't all right, he wouldn't be so anxious for Uncle Rad's solicitors to have a look at them, would he?"

"No."

And after awhile she reiterated more emphatically.

"Certainly not."

"I must say," he concluded, "that the whole thing simply beats me."

"But what does Lord Radclyffe say now?"

"Nothing."

"How do you mean nothing?"

"Just what I say. He won't talk about the thing. He won't discuss it. He won't answer any question which I put to him. 'My dear boy, the man is a palpable, impudent impostor, a blackmailer' and that's all I can get out of him."

"He won't see the man?"

"Won't hear of it."

"And won't he let his solicitor – Mr. Dobson, isn't it? – meet the other lawyer?"

"He says he wouldn't dream of wasting old Dobson's time."

"Then what's going to happen?"

"I don't see," he said, "what is going to happen."

"Won't you have a talk about it all with Mr. Dobson, and see what he says?"

"I can't very well do that. Strictly speaking it's none of my business – as yet. I couldn't consult Uncle Rad's lawyers, without Uncle Rad's consent."

"Another one then."

He shrugged his shoulders, obviously undecided what to do. He had thought very little about himself or his future in all this: his thoughts had dwelt mostly on Lord Radclyffe – father, mother, brother, sister to them all. Bless him! And then he had thought of her. He looked round him with eyes that scarcely saw, for they really were turned inward to his own simple soul, and to his loving heart. Right up against that very simplicity of soul, a duty stood clear and uncompromising. A duty yet to be performed, the real aim and end of all that he had said so far. But he did not know how best to perform such a duty.

Simple souls – unlike the complex psychological phenomena of modern times – are apt to be selfless, to think more of the feelings of others, than of analyzing their own various sensations; and Luke knew that what he considered his duty would not be quite so obvious to Louisa, and that by fulfilling it he would give her pain.

CHAPTER V

JUST AN OBVIOUS DUTY

But it was she who gave him an opening.

"Luke," she said, "it's all very well, but the matter does concern you in a way; far more so, in fact, than it does Lord Radclyffe. Nothing can make any difference to Lord Radclyffe, but if what this young man asserts is all true, then it will make a world of difference to you."

"I know that. That's just the trouble."

"You were thinking of yourself?"

"No. I was thinking of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes," he said now very abruptly, quite roughly and crudely, not choosing his words lest they helped to betray what he felt, and all that he felt. "If what this man says is true, then I am a penniless nonentity whom you are not going to marry."

"You are talking nonsense, Luke, and you know it," was all she said. And she said it very quietly, very decisively. He was talking nonsense, of course, for, whatever happened or didn't happen, there was one thing in the world that was absolutely, undeniably impossible, and that was that she should not marry Luke.

Whilst she Louisa Harris, plain, uninteresting, commonplace Louisa Harris was of this world, her marriage with Luke must be. People, in this present day, matter-of-fact world, didn't have their hearts wrenched out of them; they were not made to suffer impossible and unendurable tortures; then why should she Louisa Harris, be threatened with such a cataclysm?

"I am not," he was saying rather tonelessly, "talking nonsense, Lou. I have thought all that over. It's over eight days since that letter came; eight times twenty-four hours since I seemed in a way to see all my future through a thick, black cloud, and I've had time to think. I saw you too, through that thick, black cloud – I saw you just as you are, exquisite, beautiful, like a jewel that should forever remain in a perfect setting. I –"

He broke off abruptly, and, mechanically, his hand went up to his forehead and eyes. Where was he? He gave a sudden, quaint laugh.

"What a drivelling fool you must think me, Lou."

She looked straight at him, pure of soul, simple of heart, with a passion of tenderness and self-abnegation as yet dormant beneath the outer crust of a conventional education and of commonplace surroundings, but with the passion there nevertheless. And it was expressed in the sudden, strange luminosity of her eyes – I would not have you think that they were tears – as they met and held his own.

They didn't say anything more just then. People of their type and class in England do not say much, you know, under such circumstances. They have been drilled not to: drilled and drilled from childhood upward, from the time when, after a fall and a cut lip or broken tooth, the tears have to be held back, lest the words "snivel" or "cry-baby" be mentioned. But quietude does not necessarily mean freedom from pain. A cut lip hurts worse when it is not wetted with tears.

It was only the shadow that was hovering over these two as yet: nothing really tangible. And the shadow was not between them. She would not let it come between them. If it covered him, it should wrap her too. The commonplace woman had no fear of its descent, only as far as it affected him.

"Nothing," she said after awhile, "could make a difference to our marriage, Luke. Except, of course, if you ceased to care."

"Or you, Lou," he suggested meekly.

"Do you think," she retorted, "that I should? Just because you had no money?"

"Not," he owned, "because of that. But I should be such a nonentity. I have no real profession, and there are the others. Jim in the Blues costs a fearful lot a year, and Frank in the diplomatic service must have his promised allowance. I have read for the bar, but beyond that what am I?"

"Your uncle's right hand," she retorted firmly, "his agent, his secretary, his factotum, all rolled into one. You manage his estates, his charities, his correspondence. You write his speeches and control his household. Lord Radclyffe – every one says it in London – would not be himself at all without Luke de Mountford behind him."

"That's not what I mean, Lou."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that – "

He paused a moment then added with seeming irrelevance:

"We all know that Uncle Rad is a curious kind of man. If this story turns out to be true, he would still say nothing, but he would fret and fret and worry himself into his grave."

"The story," she argued obstinately, "will not turn out to be true. It's not like you, Luke, to jump at conclusions, or to be afraid of a nightmare."

"I am not afraid," he rejoined simply. "But I must look at possibilities. Yes, dear," he continued more forcibly, "it is possible that this story is true. No good saying that it is impossible: improbable if you like, but not impossible. Look at it how you like, you must admit that it is not impossible. Uncle Arthur may have married in Martinique; he was out there in 1881; he may have had a son; his telling no one about his marriage is not to be wondered at; he was always reticent and queer about his own affairs. This Philip may possibly be Uncle Rad's sole and rightful heir, and I may possibly be a beggar."

She uttered an exclamation of incredulity. Luke, a beggar! Luke the one man in all the world, different from every other man! Luke ousted by that stranger upstart!

God hath too much sense of humour to allow so ridiculous a Fate to work her silly caprice.

"And," she said with scorn, "because of all these absurd possibilities you talk of breaking off your engagement to me. Do you care so little as all that, Luke?"

He did not reply, but continued to walk beside her, just a yard or so apart from her, turning his steps in the direction of the gates, toward the Albert Bridge, their nearest way home. She – meekly now, for already she was sorry – turned to look at him. Something in his attitude, the stoop of the shoulders, usually so square and erect, the hands curiously clasped behind his back, told her that her shaft – very thoughtlessly aimed – had struck even deeper than it should.

"I am so sorry, dear," she said gently.

His look forgave her, even before the words were fully out of her mouth, but with characteristic reticence, he made no reply to her taunt. Strangely enough she was satisfied that he should say nothing. The look, which did not reproach even whilst it tried to conceal the infinite depth of the wound so lightly dealt, had told her more than any words could do. Whatever Luke decided to do, it would be from a sense of moral obligation, that desire for doing the right thing – in the worldly sense of the term – which is inherent in Englishmen of a certain class. No sentiment save that of a conventional one of honour would be allowed to sway her destiny and his.

Conventionality – that same strained sense of honour and duty – decreed that under certain mundane circumstances a man and woman should not mate. Differences of ancestry, of parentage, of birth and of country, divergence of taste, of faith, of belief – all these matter not one jot. But let the man be beggared and the woman rich, and convention steps in and says, "It shall not be!"

These two bowed to that decree: unconventional, in so far that they both made the sacrifice out of the intense purity of their sentiment to one another. They made an absolutely worldly sacrifice for a wholly unworldly motive. Luke would as soon have thought of seeing Louisa in a badly fitting serge frock, and paying twopence for a two-mile ride in an omnibus, as he would expect to see a diamond tiara packed in a card-board box, it would be unfair on the jeweller who had made the tiara thus to

subject it to rough treatment; and it would be equally unfair on the Creator of Louisa to let her be buffeted about by the cruder atoms of this world.

Louisa only thought of Luke and that perhaps he would feel happier in his mind if she allowed him to make this temporary sacrifice.

There is such wonderful balm in self-imposed sacrifice.

"What," she asked simply, "do you want me to say, Luke?"

"Only that – that you won't give me up altogether unless – "

Here he checked himself abruptly. Was there ever an Englishman born who could talk sentiment at moments such as this? Luke was no exception to that rule. There was so much that he wanted to say to Louisa, and yet the very words literally choked him before he could contrive to utter them.

"Don't," she said quietly, "let us even refer to such things, Luke. I do not believe in this shadow, and I cannot even understand why you should worry about it. But whatever happens, I should never give you up. Never. We will put off fixing the day of our wedding; since we have made no announcement this won't matter at all: but I only agree to this because I think that it is what you would like. I fancy that it would ease your mind. As for breaking our engagement in the future – in case the worst happens – well it shall not be with my consent, Luke, unless you really cease to care."

They had reached the gate close to the bridge. Life pulsed all round them, the life of the big city, callous, noisy, and cruel. Omnibuses, cabs, heavy vans, rattled incessantly past them. People jostled one another, hurrying and scurrying, pigmies and ants adding their tiny load of work, of care, of sorrow to the titanic edifice of this living world.

Louisa's last words remained unanswered. Luke had, by his silence, said everything there was to say. They stood on the pavement for a moment, and Luke hailed a passing taxicab.

At the corner opposite, an omnibus pulled up on its way westward. A man stepped off the curb ready to enter it. Louisa caught his eye, and he raised his hat – the man who had passed them in the park just now.

CHAPTER VI

JUST A DISAGREEABLE OLD MAN

The luncheons at Grosvenor Square were always rather dull and formal, but Louisa did not mind that very much. She was used to dull and formal affairs: they were part and parcel of her daily life. London society is full of it. The dull and formal dominate; the others – vulgar if more lively – were not worth cultivating.

Then, she almost liked Lord Radclyffe, because he was so fond of Luke. And even then "almost" was a big word. No one – except Luke – could really like the old man. He was very bad tempered, very dictatorial, a perfect tyrant in his own household. His opinions no one dared contradict, no one cared to argue with him, and his advanced Tory views were so rabid that he almost made perverts from the cause, of all those whom he desired to convince.

And even these were few, for Lord Radclyffe had no friends and very few acquaintances. He had a strange and absolute dislike for his fellow men. He did not like seeing people, he hated to exchange greetings, to talk or to mingle with any crowd that was purely on pleasure bent. He went up to the House and made speeches – political, philanthropic, economic speeches – which Luke prepared for him, and which he spoke without enthusiasm or any desire to please. This he did, not because he liked it or took any interest in things political, philanthropic or economic, but only because he considered that a man in his position owed certain duties to the State – duties which it would be cowardly to shirk.

But he really cared nothing for the thoughts of others, for their opinions, their joys, or their sorrows. He had schooled himself not to care, to call philanthropy empty sentiment, politics senseless ambition, economics grasping avarice.

His was a life entirely wrapped up in itself. In youth he had been very shy: a shyness caused at first by a serious defect of speech which, though cured in later years, always left an unconquerable diffidence, an almost morbid fear of ridicule in its train.

Because of this, I think, he had never been a sportsman – or, rather, had never been an athlete, for he was splendid with a gun and the finest revolver shot in England, so I've been told, and an acknowledged master of fence, but with bat, ball, or racquet he was invariably clumsy.

He had always hated to be laughed at, and therefore had never gone through the rough mill of a tyro in athletics or in games. Arthur, one of his brothers, had been a blue at Oxford; the other one, James – you remember James de Mountford? was the celebrated cricketer; but he, the eldest, always seemed to remain outside that magic circle of sport, the great ring of many links which unites Englishmen one to another in a way that no other conformity of tastes, of breeding, or of religion can ever do.

Because of this diffidence too, no doubt, he had never married. I was told once by an intimate friend of his, that old Rad – as he was universally called – had never mustered up sufficient courage to propose to any woman. And as he saw one by one the coveted matrimonial prizes – the pretty girls whom at different times he had admired sufficiently to desire for wife – snapped up by more enterprising wooers, his dour moroseness grew into positive chronic ill-humour.

He liked no one and no one liked him: and during sixty years of life he had succeeded in eliminating from his entire being every feeling of sentiment save one. He had to all appearances an absolutely callous heart: he cared neither for dog nor horse – he ordered a splendid mare to be shot without the slightest compunction after she had carried him in the hunting field and in the park faithfully and beautifully for over eight years, just because she had shied at a motor-car and nearly thrown him. He was not cruel, you know, just callous in all respects save one: void of all sentiment – he called it sentimentality – save in his affection for Luke.

Luke had been – ever since he was a growing lad – the buffer in the establishment between the irascible master and the many subordinates. From Mr. Warren – the highly paid and greatly snubbed secretary – down to the maids below stairs, one and all brought troubles, complaints, worries to Mr. Luke. No one dared approach his lordship. A word out of season brought instant dismissal, and no one thought of leaving a place where, besides excellent wages, there was the pleasure of waiting on Mr. Luke. Never Mr. de Mountford, you notice, always Mr. Luke. He had grown up amongst the household; Winston, the old coachman, had taught him to ride; Mary, now housekeeper, then a nurse, had bathed him in a wash-hand basin when he was less than eighteen inches long.

Therefore the atmosphere of the gloomy old house pleased Louisa Harris. With the perfect and unconscious selfishness of a woman in love, she gauged everything in life just as it affected Luke. She even contrived to like Lord Radclyffe. He trod on every one of her moral and spiritual corns, it is true; he had that lofty contempt for the entire feminine sex which pertains to the Oriental, more than to the more civilized Western races; he combated her opinions, both religious and political, without any pretence at deference; he smoked very strong cigars in every room in the house, without the slightest regard for the feelings of his lady visitors; he did or left undone a great many other things which would tend to irritate and even to offend a woman accustomed to the conventional courtesies of daily social life; but when Luke entered a room, where, but a moment ago, Lord Radclyffe had been venting his chronic ill-humour on an offending or innocent subordinate, the old man's dour face would become transfigured, irradiated with a look of pride and of joy at sight of the man on whom he had lavished all the affection of which his strong nature was capable.

Luke could do no wrong. Luke was always right. He could argue with his lordship, contradict him, obtain anything he liked from him. Eternal contradictions of human nature: the childless man in perfect adoration before a brother's son; the callous, hard-hearted misanthrope soft as wax in the hands of one man.

CHAPTER VII

THE PART PLAYED BY A FIVE-POUND NOTE

And it was into this atmosphere of gloom and of purposeless misanthropy that Louisa Harris brought this morning the cheering sunshine of her own indomitable optimism.

She knew of course from the first that the subject which interested every one in the house more than any other subject could ever do was not to be mentioned in Lord Radclyffe's presence. But she was quite shrewd enough to see that dear old Luke – unsophisticated and none too acute an observer – had overestimated his uncle's indifference to the all-absorbing matter.

The old man's face – usually a mirror of contemptuous cynicism – looked, to the woman's keener insight, distinctly troubled, and his surly silence was even more profound than hitherto.

He hardly did more than bid Louisa a curt, "How de do?" when she entered, and then relapsed into moroseness wholly unbroken before luncheon was announced.

Jim – "in the Blues" – was there when she arrived, and Edie came in a few moments later, breathless and with hat awry and tawny hair flying in all directions, straight from a tussle with the dogs and the sharp wind in the park.

Evidently no secret had been made before these two of the strange events which had culminated this very morning in their brother's avowal to Louisa, and the postponement *sine die* of the wedding. But equally evidently these young creatures absorbed in their own life, their own pursuits and amusements, were not inclined to look on the matter seriously.

Their sky had been so absolutely cloudless throughout their lives that it was impossible for them at the moment to realize that the dark shadow on the distant horizon might possibly conceal thunder in its filmy bosom.

Edie – just over twenty years of age and already satiated with the excitement of three London seasons, her mind saturated with novel reading and on the lookout for some new sensations – was inclined to look on the affair as an exhilarating interlude between the Shrove Tuesday dance at Wessex House and the first Drawing-Room in May. Jim – "in the Blues" – very eligible as a possible husband for the daughters of ambitious mammas, a trifle spoiled, a little slow of wit, and not a little self-satisfied – dismissed the whole incident as "tommy-rot."

When Louisa first greeted them, Edie had whispered excitedly:

"Has he told you?"

And without waiting for a direct reply had continued, with unabated eagerness:

"Awful exciting, don't you think?"

But Jim with the elegant drawl peculiar to his kind had suppressed further confidences by an authoritative:

"Awful rot I call it, don't you? Luke is soft to worry about it."

Strangely enough, at luncheon it was Lord Radclyffe who brought up the subject matter. Edie with the tactlessness of youth had asked a point-blank question:

"Well," she said, "when is that wedding to be? and what are we bridesmaids going to wear? I warn you I won't have white – I hate a white wedding."

Then as no answer came she said impatiently:

"I wish you'd name the day, you two stupid. Awfully soft I call it hanging about like this."

Luke would have said something then, but Louisa interposed.

"It is all my fault, Edie," she said. "You know I want to take the twins out myself this season. I must give them a real good time before I marry."

"Bosh!" remarked Edith unceremoniously. "Mabel and Chris will have a far better time when you are married and can present them yourself. Tell them from me that its no fun being 'out' and

the longer they put it off the better they'll enjoy themselves later on. Besides, Colonel Harris will take them about."

"Father hates sitting up late – " hazarded Louisa, somewhat lamely.

"The truth of the matter is," here broke in Lord Radclyffe dryly, "that Luke had persuaded you to put off the wedding because of this d – d impostor who seems to have set you all off by the ears."

Edie laughed and said, "Bosh!" Jim growled and murmured, "Rot!"

Luke and Louisa were silent, the while Lord Radclyffe's closely-set, dark, piercing eyes, wandered from one young face to the other. Louisa, feeling uncomfortable beneath that none too amiable scrutiny, did not know what to say, but Luke quietly remarked after awhile:

"You're right, uncle. It is my doing, but Lou agrees with me, and we are going to wait until this cloud is properly cleared up."

If any one else had spoken so clearly and decisively in direct contradiction to the old man's obvious wishes in the matter, the result would have been an outburst of ill-humour and probably a volley of invectives, not unmixed with more forcible language. But since it was Luke who had spoken – and Luke could do no wrong – Lord Radclyffe responded quite gently:

"My dear boy," he said, and it was really touching to hear the hard voice soften and linger on the endearing words, "I have told you once and for all that the story of this so-called Philip de Mountford is a fabrication from beginning to end. There is absolutely no reason for you to fret one single instant because of the lies a blackmailer chooses to trump up. As for your putting off your wedding one single hour because of this folly, why, it is positive nonsense. I should have thought you had more common-sense – and Miss Harris, too, for a matter of that."

Luke was silent for a moment or two while Edie tossed her irresponsible young head with the gesture of an absolute "I told you so." Jim muttered something behind his heavy cavalry moustache. Louisa, with head bent and fingers somewhat restless and fidgety, waited to hear what Luke would say.

"If only," he said, "you would consent, Uncle Rad to let Mr. Dobson go through this man's papers."

"What were the good of wasting Mr. Dobson's time?" retorted Lord Radclyffe with surprising good humour. "I know that the man is an impostor. I don't think it," he reiterated emphatically, "I know it."

"How?"

Before the old man had time to reply, the butler – sober, solemn Parker – came in with a card on a salver, which he presented to his master. Lord Radclyffe took up the card and grunted as he glanced at it. He always grunted when he was threatened with visitors.

"Why," he said gruffly, and he threw the card back onto the salver, "haven't you told Mr. Warren?"

"Mr. Warren," said solemn Parker, "is out, my lord."

"Then ask Mr. Dobson to call another time."

"It's not Mr. Dobson hisself, my lord. But a young gentleman from his office."

"Then tell the young gentleman from the office that I haven't time to bother about him."

"Shall I see him, sir?" asked Luke, ready to go.

"Certainly not," retorted the irascible old man. "Stay where you are. You have got Miss Harris to entertain."

"The young gentleman," resumed Parker with respectful insistence, "said he wouldn't keep your lordship five minutes. He said he'd brought some papers for your lordship's signature."

"The Tower Farm lease, Uncle Rad," remarked Luke.

"I think, Mr. Luke," assented the butler, "that the young gentleman did mention the word lease."

"Why has that confounded Warren taken himself off just when I want him?" was Lord Radclyffe's gruff comment as he rose from the table.

"Let me go, sir," insisted Luke.

"No, hang it, boy, you can't sign my name – not yet anyway. I am not yet a helpless imbecile. Show the young man into the library, Parker. I can't think why Dobson is always in such a confounded hurry about leases – sending a fool of a clerk up at most inconvenient hours."

Still muttering half audibly, he walked to the library door, which Parker held open for him, and even this he did not do without surreptitiously taking hold of Luke's hand and giving it a friendly squeeze. For a moment it seemed as if Luke would follow him, despite contrary orders. He paused, undecided, standing in the middle of the room, Louisa's kind gray eyes following his slightest movement.

Jim stolidly pulled the cigar box toward him, and Edie, with chin resting in both hands, looked sulky and generally out of sorts.

Parker – silent and correct of mien – had closed the library door behind his master, and now with noiseless tread he crossed the dining-room and opened the other door – the one that gave on the hall. Louisa instinctively turned her eyes from Luke and saw – standing in the middle of the hall – a young man in jacket suit and overcoat, who had looked up, with palpitating eagerness expressed in his face, the moment he caught sight of Parker.

It was the same man who had lifted his hat to Luke and to herself in Battersea Park this very morning. Luke saw him too and apparently also recognized him.

"That's why he bowed to us, Luke – in the park – you remember?" she said as soon as the door had once more closed on Parker and the visitor.

"Funny that you didn't know him," she continued since Luke had made no comment.

"I didn't," he remarked curtly.

"Didn't what?"

"I did not and do not know this man."

"Not Mr. Dobson's clerk?"

Luke did not answer but went out into the hall. Parker was standing beside the library door which he had just closed, having introduced the visitor into his lordship's presence.

"Parker," said Luke abruptly, "what made you tell his lordship that that young gentleman came from Mr. Dobson?"

The question had come so suddenly that Parker – pompous, dignified Parker – was thrown off his balance, and the reply which took some time in coming, sounded unconvincing.

"The young gentleman," he said slowly, "told me, Mr. Luke, that he came from Mr. Dobson."

"No, Parker," asserted Luke unhesitatingly, "he did nothing of the sort. He wanted to see his lordship and got you to help him concoct some lie whereby he could get what he wanted."

A grayish hue spread over Parker's pink and flabby countenance.

"Lord help me, Mr. Luke," he murmured tonelessly, "how did you know?"

"I didn't," replied Luke curtly. "I guessed. Now I know."

"I didn't think I was doing no harm."

"No harm by introducing into his lordship's presence strangers who might be malefactors?"

Already Luke, at Parker's first admission, had gone quickly to the library door. Here he paused, with his hand on the latch, uncertain if he should enter. The house was an old one, well-built and stout; from within came the even sound of a voice speaking quite quietly, but no isolated word could be distinguished. Parker was floundering in a quagmire of confused explanations.

"Malefactor, Mr. Luke!" he argued, "that young man was no malefactor. He spoke ever so nicely. And he had plenty of money about him. I didn't see I was doing no harm. He wanted to see his lordship and asked me to help him to it – "

"And," queried Luke impatiently, "paid you to help him, eh?"

"I thought," replied the man loftily ignoring the suggestion, "that taking in one of Mr. Dobson's cards that was lying in the tray could do no harm. I thought it couldn't do no harm. The young gentleman said his lordship would be very grateful to me when he found out what I'd done."

"And how grateful was the young gentleman to you, Parker?"

"To the tune of a five-pound note, Mr. Luke."

"Then as you have plenty of money in hand, you can pack up your things and get out of this house before I've time to tell his lordship."

"Mr. Luke – "

"Don't argue. Do as I tell you."

"I must take my notice from his lordship," said Parker, vainly trying to recover his dignity.

"Very well. You can wait until his lordship has been told."

"Mr. Luke – "

"Best not wait to see his lordship, Parker. Take my word for it."

"Very well, Mr. Luke."

There was a tone of finality in Luke's voice which apparently Parker did not dare to combat. The man looked confused and troubled. What had seemed to him merely a venial sin – the taking of a bribe for a trivial service – now suddenly assumed giant proportions – a crime almost, punished by a stern dismissal from Mr. Luke.

He went without venturing on further protest, and Luke, left standing alone in the hall, once more put his hand on the knob of the library door. This time he tried to turn it. But the door had been locked from the inside.

CHAPTER VIII

AND THUS THE SHADOW DESCENDED

From within the hum of a man's voice – speaking low and insistent – still came softly through. Luke, with the prodigality of youth, would have given ten years of his life for the gift of second-sight, to know what went on between those four walls beyond the door where he himself stood expectant, undecided, and more than vaguely anxious.

"Luke!"

It was quite natural that Louisa should stand here beside him, having come to him softly, noiselessly, like the embodiment of moral strength, and a common-sense which was almost a virtue.

"Uncle Rad," he said quietly, "has locked himself in with this man."

"Who is it, Luke?"

"The man who calls himself Philip de Mountford."

"How do you know?"

"How does one," he retorted, "know such things?"

"And Parker let him in?"

"He gave Parker a five-pound note. Parker is only a grasping fool. He concocted the story of Mr. Dobson and the lease. He is always listening at key-holes, and he knows that Mr. Dobson often sends up a clerk with papers for Uncle Rad's signature. Those things are not very difficult to manage. If one man is determined, and the other corruptible, it's done sooner or later."

"Is Lord Radclyffe safe with that man, do you think?"

"God grant it," he replied fervently.

Jim and Edie made a noisy irruption into the hall, and Luke and Louisa talked ostentatiously of indifferent things – the weather, Lent, and the newest play, until the young people had gathered up coats and hats and banged the street door to behind them, taking their breeziness, their optimism, away with them out into the spring air, and leaving the shadows of the on-coming tragedy to foregather in every angle of the luxurious house in Grosvenor Square.

And there were Luke de Mountford and Louisa Harris left standing alone in the hall; just two very ordinary, very simple-souled young people, face to face for the first time in their uneventful lives with the dark problem of a grim "might be." A locked door between them and the decisions of Fate; a world of possibilities in the silence which now reigned beyond that closed door.

They were – remember – wholly unprepared for it, untrained for any such eventuality. Well-bred and well-brought up, yet were they totally uneducated in the great lessons of life. It was as if a man absolutely untutored in science were suddenly to be confronted with a mathematical problem, the solution or non-solution of which would mean life or death to him. The problem lay in the silence beyond the locked door – silence broken now and again by the persistently gentle hum of the man's voice – the stranger's – but never by a word from Lord Radclyffe.

"Uncle Rad," said Luke at last in deep puzzlement, "has never raised his voice once. I thought that there would be a row – that he would turn the man out of the house. Dear old chap! he hasn't much patience as a rule."

"What shall we do, Luke?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"You can't go on standing like that in the hall as if you were eavesdropping. The servants will be coming through presently."

"You are right, Lou," he said, "as usual. I'll go into the dining-room. I could hear there if anything suspicious was happening in the library."

"You are not afraid, Luke?"

"For Uncle Rad, you mean?"

"Of course."

"I hardly know whether I am or not. No," he added decisively after a moment's hesitation, "I am not afraid of violence – the fellow whom we saw in the park did not look that sort."

He led Louisa back into the dining-room, where a couple of footmen were clearing away the luncheon things. The melancholy Parker placed cigar box and matches on a side table and then retired – silent and with a wealth of reproach expressed in his round, beady eyes.

Soon Luke and Louisa were alone. He smoked and she sat in a deep arm-chair close to him saying nothing, for both knew what went on in the other's mind.

Close on an hour went by and then the tinkle of a distant bell broke the silence. Voices were heard somewhat louder of tone in the library, and Lord Radclyffe's sounded quite distinct and firm.

"I'll see you again to-morrow," he said, "at Mr. – Tell me the name and address again, please."

The door leading from library to hall was opened. A footman helped the stranger on with coat and hat. Then the street door banged to again, and once more the house lapsed into silence and gloom.

"I think I had better go now."

Louisa rose, and Luke said in matter-of-fact tones:

"I'll put you into a cab."

"No," she said, "I prefer to walk. I am going straight back to the Langham. Will you go to the Ducies' At Home to-night?"

"Yes," he said, "just to see you."

"You'll know more by then."

"I shall know all there is to know."

"Luke," she said, "you are not afraid?"

It was the second time she had put the question to him, but this time its purport was a very different one. He understood it nevertheless, for he replied simply:

"Only for you."

"Why for me?"

"Because, Lou, you are just all the world to me – and a man must feel a little afraid when he thinks he may lose the world."

"Not me, Luke," she said, "you would not lose me – whatever happened."

"Let me get you a cab."

He was English, you see, and could not manage to say anything just then. The floodgates of sentiment might burst asunder now with the slightest word uttered that was not strictly commonplace. Louisa understood, else she had not loved him as she did. It never occurred to her to think that he was indifferent. Nay more! his sudden transition from sentiment to the calling of a cab – from sentiment to the trivialities of life pleased her in its very essence of incongruity.

"I said I would walk," she reminded him, smiling.

Then she gave him her hand. It was still gloveless and he took it in his, turning the palm upward so that he might bury his lips in its delicately perfumed depths. His kiss almost scalded her flesh, his lips were burning hot. Passion held in check will consume with inward fire, whilst its expression often cools like the Nereid's embrace.

He went to the door with her and watched her slender, trim figure walking rapidly away until it disappeared round the corner of the Square.

When he turned back into the hall, he found himself face to face with Lord Radclyffe. Not Uncle Rad – but an altogether different man, an old man now with the cynical lines round the mouth accentuated and deepened into furrows, the eyes hollow and colourless, the shoulders bent as if under an unbearable load.

"Uncle Rad," said Luke speaking very gently, forcing his voice to betray nothing of anxiety or surprise, "can I do anything for you?"

But even at sight of his nephew, of the man who had hitherto always succeeded in dissipating by his very presence every cloud on the misanthrope's brow, even at sight of him Lord Radclyffe seemed to shrink within himself, his face became almost ashen in its pallor, and lines of cruel hardness quite disfigured his mouth.

"I want to be alone to-day," he said dryly. "Tell them to send me up some tea in the afternoon. I'll go to my room now – I shan't want any dinner."

"But, sir, won't you – ?"

"I want to be alone to-day," the old man reiterated tonelessly, "and to be left alone."

"Very well, sir."

Lord Radclyffe walked slowly toward the staircase. Luke – his heart torn with anxiety and sorrow – saw how heavy was the old man's step, how listless his movements. The younger man's instinct drew him instantly to the side of the elder. He placed an affectionate hand on his uncle's shoulder.

"Uncle Rad," he said appealingly, "can't I do anything for you?"

Lord Radclyffe turned and for a moment his eyes softened as they rested on the face he loved so well. His wrinkled hand sought the firm, young one which lingered on his shoulder. But he did not take it, only put it gently aside, then said quietly:

"No, my boy, there's nothing you can do, except to leave me alone."

Then he went up stairs and shut himself up in his own room, and Luke saw him no more that day.

CHAPTER IX

WHICH TELLS OF THE INEVITABLE RESULT

And now a month and more had gone by, and the whole aspect of the world and of life was changed for Luke. Not for Louisa, because she, woman-like, had her life in love and love alone. Love was unchanged, or if changed at all it was ennobled, revived, purified by the halo of sorrow and of abnegation which glorified it with its radiance.

For Luke the world had indeed changed. With the advent of Philip de Mountford that spring afternoon into the old house in Grosvenor Square, life for the other nephew – for Luke, once the dearly loved – became altogether different.

That one moment of softness, when Lord Radclyffe – a bent and broken old man – went from the library up the stairs to his own room, determined to be alone, and gently removed Luke's affectionate hand from his own bowed shoulders, that one moment of softness was the last that passed between uncle – almost father – and nephew. After that, coldness and cynicism; the same as the old man had meted out to every one around him – save Luke – for years past. Now there was no exception. Coldness and cynicism to all; and to the intruder, the new comer, to Philip de Mountford, an unvarying courtesy and constant deference that at times verged on impassive submission.

And the change, I must own, did not come gradually. Have I not said that only a month had gone by, and Arthur's son, from the land of volcanoes and earthquakes, had already conquered all that he had come to seek? He who had been labelled an impostor and a blackmailer took – after that one interview – his place in the old man's mind, if not in his heart. Heaven only knows – for no one else was present at that first interview – what arguments he held, what appeals he made. He came like a thief, bribing his way into his uncle's presence, and stayed like a dearly loved son, a master in the house.

And Luke was shut out once and for all from Lord Radclyffe's mind and heart. Can you conceive that such selfless affection as the older man bore to the younger can live for a quarter of a century and die in one hour? Yet so it seemed. Luke was shut out from that innermost recess in Uncle Rad's heart which he had occupied, undisputed, from childhood upward. Now he only took his place amongst the others; with Jim and Edie and Frank, children of the younger brother, of no consequence in the house of the reigning peer.

Luke with characteristic pride – characteristic indolence, mayhap, where his own interests were at stake – would not fight for his rightful position – his by right of ages, twenty years of affection, of fidelity, and comradeship.

The day following the first momentous interview, Lord Radclyffe spent in lawyers' company – Mr. Davies in Finsbury Court, then Mr. Dobson in Bedford Row. The latter argued and counselled. Though papers might be to all appearances correct and quite in order, there was no hurry to come to a decision. But Lord Radclyffe – with that same dictatorial obstinacy with which he had originally branded the claimant as an impostor and a blackmailer – now clung to his reversed opinion. Convinced – beyond doubt, apparently – that Philip de Mountford was his brother Arthur's son, he insisted on acknowledging him openly as his heir, and on showering on him all those luxuries and privileges which Luke had enjoyed for so many years.

Indignant and mentally sore, Jim and Edie protested with all the violence of youth, violence which proved as useless as it was ill-considered. Luke said nothing, for he foresaw that the end was inevitable. He set about making a home for his younger brothers and sister to be ready for them as soon as the cataclysm came, when Philip de Mountford, usurping every right, would turn his cousins out of the old home.

Frank, absent at Santiago – a young attaché out at his first post – had been told very little as yet. Luke had tried to break the news to him in a guarded letter, which received but the following brief and optimistic answer:

"Why, old man! what's the matter with you? worrying over such rubbish? Take my advice and go to Carlsbad. Your liver must be out of order."

But the catastrophe came, nevertheless; sooner even than was expected. Edie's language grew very unguarded in Philip's presence, and Jim – "in the Blues" – did not watch over his own manners when the new cousin was in the house.

One evening when Luke was absent – as was very often the case now – and the family gathering consisted of Lord Radclyffe – sullen and morose; Philip, pleasantly condescending; and Jim and Edie, snubbed and wrathful, a difference in political opinion between the young people set a spark to the smouldering ashes.

Philip – still pleasantly condescending – did not say much that evening, though he had been called a cad and an upstart, and told to go back to his nigger relations; but the next morning Jim and Edie received a curt admonition from Lord Radclyffe, during which they were told that if such a disgraceful exhibition of impertinence occurred again, they would have to go and pitch their tent elsewhere.

They brought their grievance to Luke; told him all that they had treasured up in their rebellious young hearts against the usurper, and much that they had hitherto kept from the elder brother, who already, God knows! had a sufficient load of disappointment to bear.

What could Luke do but promise that Jim and Edie should in future have a house of their own, wherein neither usurper nor upstarts would have access, and where they could nurse their wrath in peace and unsnubbed.

For the first time since many, many days Luke was alone with his uncle in the library. Philip was out, and Lord Radclyffe was taken unawares.

What Luke would never have dreamed of doing for himself he did for his brothers and sister; he made appeal to his uncle's sense of right, of justice, and of mercy.

"Uncle Rad," he said, "you have told us all so often that this should be a home for us all. It doesn't matter about me, but the others – Jim and Edie – they haven't offended you, have they?"

Lord Radclyffe was fretful and irritable. When Luke first came in, it had almost seemed as if he would order him to go. Such an old man he looked – sour and morose – his clothes hung more loosely than before on an obviously attenuated frame. He seemed careworn and worried, and Luke's heart, which could not tear itself away from the memories of past kindness, ached to see the change.

"Would you," he asked insistently, "would you rather we went away, Uncle Rad?"

The old man shifted about uneasily in his chair. He would not meet Luke's eyes any more than he would take his hand just now.

"Jim and Edie," he said curtly, "are very ill-mannered, and Philip feels –"

He passed his tongue over his lips which were parched and dry. A look – it was a mere flash – almost of appeal passed from his eyes to Luke.

"Then," said Luke simply, "it is this – this Philip whom Jim and Edie have offended? Not you, Uncle Rad?"

"Philip is your uncle Arthur's son," rejoined Lord Radclyffe, speaking like a fretful child in a thin voice that cracked now and again. "He will be the head of the family presently –"

"Not," interposed Luke earnestly, "before many years are past, I trust and pray for all our sakes, Uncle Rad –"

"The sooner," continued the old man, not heeding the interruption, "those young jackanapes learn to respect him, the better it will be for them."

"Jim and Edie have been a little spoiled by your kindness, sir. They are finding the lesson a little hard to learn. Perhaps they had better go and study elsewhere."

Lord Radclyffe made no reply. Silence was full of potent meaning; of submission to another's more dominant personality, of indifference to everything save to peace and quiet.

Suppressing a sigh of bitter disappointment, Luke rose to go.

"Then," he said, "the sooner I make all arrangements the better. There's only the agreement for the flat to sign and we can move in next week."

"Where's the flat?" queried the old man hesitatingly.

"In Exhibition Road, Kensington, close to the park. Edie loves the park, and it won't be far from barracks for Jim."

"But you've no furniture. How will you furnish a flat? Don't go yet," continued Lord Radclyffe seeing that Luke was preparing to take his leave. "Philip won't be here till tea time."

"I am afraid, sir, that I don't care to steal a few minutes of your company, just when Philip is absent. I would rather not see you at all than see you on sufferance."

"You are very obstinate and tiresome – and you make it so difficult for me. I want to hear about the furniture – and how you are going to manage."

"Lou is helping Edie to get what is wanted," replied Luke, smiling despite the heavy weight of disappointment in his heart. It was pitiable to see the old man's obvious feeling of relief in the absence of the man who was exercising such boundless influence over him.

"But have you money, Luke?" he asked.

"Not overmuch, sir, but enough."

"The fifteen thousand pounds your father left you?"

"Yes. And that's about all."

"And the fifteen thousand pounds from your uncle Arthur?"

"I don't know about that, sir. I think that should go back to Uncle Arthur's son."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" retorted Lord Radclyffe querulously. "I've talked to Dobson about that. Your uncle Arthur left that money to you – and not to his son. He had his own reasons for doing this. Dobson thinks so too."

"It is very kind of Mr. Dobson to trouble about my affairs but –"

"The money was left to you," persisted the old man, "and to Jim and Edie and Frank."

"They will do whatever they like with their share, but I could not touch a penny of Uncle Arthur's money."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know yet, uncle. I have only had a month in which to think of so much – and there was the new flat to see to."

Lord Radclyffe rose and shuffled toward Luke. He dropped his voice, lest the library walls had ears.

"I'll not forget you, Luke – presently – when I am gone – and that won't be long – I'll provide for you – my will –"

"Don't, Uncle Rad, for God's sake," and the cry was wrung from a heart overburdened with pity and with shame.

And without waiting to take more affectionate leave, Luke hurried from the room.

CHAPTER X

LIFE MUST GO ON JUST THE SAME

They met at dances and at musical At Homes, for the world wagged just as it had always done, and here – don't you think? – lies the tragedy of the commonplace. Luke and Louisa, with the whole aspect of life changed for them, with a problem to face of which hitherto they had no conception, and the solution of which meant a probing of soul and heart and mind – Luke and Louisa had to see the world pass them by the same as heretofore, with laughter and with tears, with the weariness of pleasure, and the burdens of disappointment.

The world stared at them – curious and almost interested – searching wounds that had only just begun to ache, since indifferent hands had dared to touch them. And convention said: "Thou shalt not seem to suffer; thou shalt pass by serene and unmoved; thou shalt dance and sing and parade in park or ball room; thou art my puppet and I have nought to do with thy soul."

So Luke and Louisa did as convention bade them, and people stared at them and asked them inane questions that were meant to be delicate, but were supremely tactless. People too wondered what they meant to do, when the engagement would be duly broken off, or what Colonel Harris's – Louisa's father – attitude would be in all this. Somehow after the first excitement consequent on Lord Radclyffe's open acknowledgment of the claimant things had tamed off somewhat; Luke de Mountford looked just the same as before, although awhile ago he had been heir to one of the finest peerages in England and now was a penniless son of a younger son. I don't know whether people thought that he ought to look entirely different now, or whether he should henceforth wear shabby dress clothes and gloves that betrayed the dry cleaner; certain it is that when Luke entered a reception room, a dozen lips were ready – had they dared or good-breeding allowed – to frame the question:

"Well, and what are you going to do now?"

Or,

"Do tell us how it feels to find one's self a beggar all of a sudden."

Enterprising hostesses made great attempts to gather all parties in their drawing rooms. With strategy worthy of a better cause they manœuvred to invite Philip de Mountford and Lord Radclyffe, and Luke and Louisa – all to the same dinner party – promising themselves and their other guests a subtle enjoyment at sight of these puppets dancing to rousing tunes, beside which the most moving problem play would seem but tame entertainment.

But Philip de Mountford – though as much sought after now as Luke had been in the past – declined to be made a show of for the delectation of bored society women; he declined all invitations on his own and Lord Radclyffe's behalf.

So people had to be content to watch Luke and Louisa.

They were together at the Ducies' At Home. There was a crush, a Hungarian band from Germany, a Russian singer from Bayswater, a great many diamonds, and incessant gossip.

"Luke de Mountford is here – and Miss Harris. Have you seen them?"

"Oh, yes! we met on the stairs, and had a long chat."

"How do they seem?"

"Oh! quite happy."

"They don't care."

"Do they mean to break off the engagement?"

"I have heard nothing. Have you?"

"Louisa Harris has a nice fortune of her own."

"And Lord Radclyffe will provide for Luke."

"I don't think so. He practically turned him out of the house, you know."

"Not really?"

"I know it for a positive fact. My sister has just got a new butler, who left Lord Radclyffe's service the very day Philip de Mountford first walked into the house."

"Old Parker, I remember him."

"He says Lord Radclyffe turned all the family out, bag and baggage. They were so insolent to Philip."

"Then it's quite true?"

"That this Philip is the late Arthur de Mountford's son?"

"Quite true, I believe. Lord Radclyffe openly acknowledges it. He is satisfied apparently."

"So are the lawyers, I understand."

"Oh! how do you do, Miss Harris? So glad to see you looking so well."

This, very pointedly, as Louisa, perfectly gowned, smiling serenely, ascended the broad staircase.

"I have not been ill, Lady Keogh."

"Oh, no! of course not. And how is Mr. de Mountford?"

"You can ask him yourself."

And Louisa passed on to make way for Luke. And the same remarks and the same question were repeated *ad infinitum*, until a popular waltz played by the Hungarian gentlemen from Germany drew the fashionable crowd round the musicians' platform.

Then Luke and Louisa contrived to make good their escape, and to reach the half-landing above the heads of numerous young couples that adorned the stairs. The hum of voices, the noise of shrill laughter, and swish of skirts and fans masked their own whisperings. The couples on the stairs were absorbed in their own little affairs; they were sitting out here so that they might pursue their own flirtations.

Luke and Louisa could talk undisturbed.

They spoke of the flat in Exhibition Road and of the furniture that Louisa had helped Edie to select.

"There are only a few odds and ends to get now," Louisa was saying, "coal scuttles and waste-paper baskets; that sort of thing. I hope you don't think that we have been extravagant. Edie, I am afraid, had rather luxurious notions –"

"Poor Edie!"

"Oh! I don't think she minds very much. Life at Grosvenor Square in the past month has not been over cheerful."

Then as Luke made no comment she continued in her own straightforward, matter-of-fact way – the commonplace woman facing the ordinary duties of life:

"Now that the flat is all in order, you can all move in whenever you like – and then, Luke, you must begin to think of yourself."

"Of you, Lou," he said simply.

"Oh! there's nothing," she said, "to think about me."

"There you are wrong, Lou, and you must not talk like that. Our engagement must be officially broken off. Colonel Harris has been too patient as it is."

"Father," she rejoined, "does not wish the engagement broken off."

"All these people," he said, nodding in the direction of the crowd below, "will expect some sort of announcement."

"Let them."

"Lou, you must take back your word."

"How does one take back one's word, Luke? Have you ever done it? I shouldn't know how to."

She looked at him straight, her eyes brilliant in the glare of the electric lamps, not a tear in them or in his, her face immovable, lest indifferent eyes happened to be turned up to where these two

interesting people sat. Only a quiver round the lips, a sign that passion palpitated deep down within her heart, below the Bond Street gown and the diamond collar, the soul within the puppet.

She held his glance, forcing him into mute acknowledgment that his philosophy, his worldliness, was only veneer, and that he had not really envisaged the hard possibility of actually losing her.

Oh, these men of this awful conventional world! How cruel they can be in that proud desire to do what is right! – what their code tells them is right! – no law of God or nature that! – only convention, the dictates of other men! Hard on themselves, selfless in abnegation, but not understanding that the dearest gift they can bestow on a woman is the right for her to efface herself, the right for her to be the giver of love, of consolation, of sacrifice.

Commonplace, plain, sensible Louisa understood everything that Luke felt; those great luminous eyes of hers, tearless yet brilliant, read every line on that face drilled into impassiveness.

No one else could have guessed the precise moment at which softness crept into the hard determination of jaw and lips; no ear but hers could ever have perceived the subtle change in the quivering breath, from hard obstinacy that drew the nostrils together, and set every line of the face, to that in-drawing of the heavy air around caused by passionate longing which hammered at the super-excited brain, and made the sinews crack in the mighty physical effort at self-repression.

But to all outward appearance perfect calm, correct demeanour, the attitude and tone of voice prescribed by the usages of this so-called society.

"Lou," he said, "it is not fair to tempt me. I should be a miserable cur if I held you to your word. I am a penniless beggar – a wastrel now, without a profession, without prospects, soon to be without friends."

He seemed to take pleasure in recalling his defects, and she let him ramble on; women who are neither psychological puzzles nor interesting personalities have a way of listening patiently whilst a tortured soul eases its burden by contemplating its own martyrdom.

"I am a penniless beggar," he reiterated. "I have no right to ask any woman to share my future dull and humdrum existence. A few thousands is all I have. I think that Edie will marry soon and then I can go abroad – I must go abroad – I must do something – "

"We'll do it together, Luke."

"I feel," he continued, rebellious now and wrathful, all the primary instincts alive in him of self-preservation and the desire to destroy an enemy, "I feel that if I stayed in England I should contrive to be even with that blackguard. His rights? By God! I would never question those. The moment I knew that he was Uncle Arthur's son I should have been ready to shake him by the hand, to respect him, to stand aside as was his due. But his attitude! – the influence he exercises over Uncle Rad! – his rancour against us all! Jim and Edie! what had they done to be all turned out of the house like a pack of poor relations – and poor Uncle Rad – "

He checked himself, for she had put a hand on his coat sleeve.

"Luke, it is no use," she said.

"You are right, Lou! and I am a miserable wretch. If you only knew how I hate that man – "

"Don't," she said, "let us think of him."

"How can I help it? He robs me of you."

"No," she rejoined, "not that."

Her hand still rested on his arm, and he took it between both his. The couples in front of them all down the length of stairs paid no heed to them, and through the hum of voices, from a distant room beyond, came softly wafted on the hot, still air the strains of the exquisite barcarolle from the "Contes d' Hoffmann."

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