

Benson Edward Frederic

Dodo Wonders–



Edward Benson

Dodo Wonders—

«Public Domain»

Benson E.

Dodo Wonders– / E. Benson — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Benson E. F. Edward Frederic Dodo Wonders—

CHAPTER I DODO DE SENECTUTE

Dodo was so much interested in what she had herself been saying, that having just lit one cigarette, she lit another at it, and now contemplated the two with a dazed expression. She was talking to Edith Arbuthnot, who had just returned from a musical tour in Germany, where she had conducted a dozen concerts consisting entirely of her own music with flaring success. She had been urged by her agent to give half a dozen more, the glory of which, he guaranteed, would completely eclipse that of the first series, but instead she had come back to England. She did not quite know why she had done so: her husband Bertie had sent the most cordial message to say that he and their daughter Madge were getting on quite excellently without her – indeed that seemed rather unduly stressed – but ... here she was. The statement of this, to be enlarged on no doubt later, had violently switched the talk on to a discussion on free will.

Edith, it may be remarked, had arrived at her house in town only to find that her husband and daughter had already gone away for Whitsuntide, and being unable to support the idea of a Sunday alone in London, had sent off a telegram to Dodo, whom she knew to be at Winston, announcing her advent, and had arrived before it. On the other hand, her luggage had not arrived at all, and for the present she was dressed in a tea-gown of Dodo's, and a pair of Lord Chesterford's tennis-shoes which fitted her perfectly.

"I wonder," said Dodo. "We talk glibly about free will and we haven't the slightest conception what we really mean by it. Look at these two cigarettes! I am going to throw one away in a moment, and smoke the other, but there is no earthly reason why I should throw this away rather than that, or that than this: they are both precisely alike. I think I can do as I choose, but I can't. Whatever I shall do, has been written in the Book of Fate; something comes in – I don't know what it is – which will direct my choice. I say to myself, 'I choose to smoke cigarette A and throw away cigarette B,' but all the time it has been already determined. So in order to score off the Book of Fate, I say that I will do precisely the opposite, and do it. Upon which Fate points with its horny finger to its dreadful book, and there it has all been written down since the beginning of the world if not before. Don't let us talk about free will any more, for it makes one's brain turn round like a Dancing Dervish, but continue to nurse our illusion on the subject. You could have stayed in Germany, but you chose not to. There!"

Edith had not nearly finished telling Dodo about these concerts, in fact, she had barely begun, when the uncomfortable doctrine of free will usurped Dodo's attention and wonder.

"The first concert, as I think I told you, was at Leipsic," she said. "It was really colossal. You don't know what an artistic triumph means to an artist."

"No, dear; tell me," said Dodo, still looking at her cigarettes.

"Then you must allow me to speak. It was crammed, of course, and the air was thick with jealousy and hostility. They hated me and my music, and everything about me, because I was English. Only, they couldn't keep away. They had to come in order to hate me keenly at close quarters. I'm beginning to think that is rather characteristic of the Germans; they are far the most intense nation there is. First I played – "

"I thought you conducted," said Dodo.

"Yes; we call that playing. That is the usual term. First I played the 'Dodo' symphony. I composed one movement of it here, I remember – the scherzo. Well, at the end of the first movement,

about three people clapped their hands once, and there was dead silence again. At the end of the second there was a roar. They couldn't help it. Then they recollected themselves again, having forgotten for a moment how much they hated me, and the roar stopped like turning a tap off. You could have heard a pin drop."

"Did it?" asked Dodo.

"No: I dropped my baton, which sounded like a clap of thunder. Then came the scherzo, and from that moment they were Balaams. They had come to curse and they were obliged to bless. What happened to their free will then?"

"Yes, I know about Balaam," said Dodo, "he comes in the Bible. Darling, how delicious for you. I see quite well what you mean by an artistic triumph: it's to make people delight in you in spite of themselves. I've often done it."

Dodo had resolved the other problem of free will that concerned the cigarettes by smoking them alternately. It seemed very unlikely that Fate had thought of that. They were both finished now, and she got up to pour out tea.

"If I could envy anybody," she said, "which I am absolutely incapable of doing, I should envy you, Edith. You have always gone on doing all your life precisely what you meant to do. You've got a strong character, as strong as this tea, which has been standing. But all my remarkable feats have been those which I didn't mean to do. They just came along and got done. I always meant to marry Jack, but I didn't do it until I had married two other people first. Sugar? That's how I go on, you know, doing things on the spur of the moment, and trusting that they will come right afterwards, because I haven't really meant them at all. And yet, 'orrible to relate, by degrees, by degrees as the years go on, we paint the pictures of ourselves which are the only authentic ones, since we have painted every bit of them ourselves. Everything I do adds another touch to mine, and at the end I shall get glanders or cancer or thrush, and just the moment before I die I shall take the brush for the last time and paint on it 'Dodo fecit.' Oh, my dear, what will the angels think of it, and what will our aspirations and our aims and our struggles think of it? We've gone on aspiring and perspiring and admiring and conspiring, and then it's all over. Strawberries! They're the first I've seen this year; let us eat them up before Jack comes. Sometimes I wish I was a canary or any other silly thing that doesn't think and try and fail. All the same, I shouldn't really like to be a bird. Imagine having black eyes like buttons, and a horny mouth with no teeth, and scaly legs. Groundsel, too! I would sooner be a cannibal than eat groundsel. And I couldn't possibly live in a cage; nor could I endure anybody throwing a piece of green baize over me when he thought I had talked enough. Fancy, if you could ring the bell now this moment, and say to the footman, 'Bring me her ladyship's baize!' It would take away all spontaneousness from my conversation. I should be afraid of saying anything for fear of being baized, and every one would think I was getting old and anæmic. I won't be a canary after all!"

Edith shouted with laughter.

"A mind like yours is such a relief after living with orderly German minds for a month," she said. "You always were a holiday. But why these morbid imaginings!"

"I'm sure I don't know. I think it's the effect of seeing you again after a long interval, and hearing you mention the time when you composed that scherzo. It's so long ago, and we were so young, and so exactly like what we are now. Does it ever strike you that we are growing up? Slowly, but surely, darling, we are growing up. I'm fifty-five: at least, I'm really only fifty-four, but I add one year to my age instead of taking off two, like most people, so that when the next birthday comes, I'm already used to being it, if you follow me, and so there's no shock."

"Shock? I adore getting older," said Edith. "It will be glorious being eighty. I wish I hadn't got to wait so long. Every year adds to one's perceptions and one's wisdom."

Dodo considered this.

"Yes, I daresay it is so up to a point," she said, "though I seem to have seen women of eighty whose relations tell me that darling granny has preserved all her faculties, and is particularly bright

this morning. Then the door opens and in comes darling granny in her bath-chair, with her head shaking a little with palsy, and what I should call deaf and blind and crippled. My name is shouted at her, and she grins and picks at her shawl. Oh, my dear! But I daresay she is quite happy, which is what matters most, and it isn't that which I'm afraid of in getting old!"

"But you're not afraid of dying?" asked Edith incredulously.

"Good gracious, no. I'm never afraid of certainties; I'm only afraid of contingencies like missing a train. What I am afraid of in getting old is continuing to feel hopelessly young. I look in vain for signs that I realise I'm fifty-five. I tell myself I'm fifty-five – "

"Four," said Edith; "I'm six."

"And that I was young last century and not this century," continued Dodo without pause. "We're both Victorians, Edith, and all sorts of people have reigned since then. But I don't feel Victorian. I like the fox-trot, and going in an aeroplane, and modern pictures which look equally delicious upside down, and modern poetry which doesn't scan or rhyme or mean anything, and sitting up all night. And yet all the time I'm a grandmother, and even that doesn't make any impression on me. Nadine's got three children, you know, and look at Nadine herself. She's thirty, the darling, and she's stately – the person who sees everybody in the Park walking briskly and looking lovely, always says that Nadine is stately. I read his remarks in the paper for that reason, and cut that piece out and sent to Nadine. But am I a proper mother for a stately daughter? That dreadful thought occurs to Nadine sometimes, I am sure. Would you guess I had a stately daughter?"

It certainly would have seemed a very wild conjecture. Dodo had preserved up to the eminently respectable age of which she felt so unworthy, the aspect as well as the inward vitality of youth, and thus never did she appear to be attempting to be young, when she clearly was not. She was still slender and brisk in movement, her black hair was quite untouched with grey, the fine oval of her face was still firm and unwrinkled, and her eyes, still dancing with the fire that might have been expected only to smoulder nowadays, were perfectly capable of fulfilling their purposes unaided. She had made an attempt a few years ago to wear large tortoise-shell spectacles, and that dismal failure occurred to her now.

"I have tried to meet old age halfway," she said, "but old age won't come and meet me! I can't really see the old hag on the road even yet. Do you remember my spectacles? That was a serious expedition in search of middle-age, but it did no good. I always forgot where they were, and sat down on them with faint fatal crunches. Then Jack didn't like them; he said he would never have married me if he had known I was going to get old so soon, and he always hid them when he found them lying about, and he gave me an ear-trumpet for a birthday present. David used to like them; that was the only purpose they served. He used to squeal with delight if he got hold of them, and run away and come back dressed up like Mummie."

"I am lost without spectacles," said Edith.

"But I'm not; it was my spectacles that were always lost. And then I like rainbows and conjuring-tricks and putting pennies on the line for the train to go over, and bare feet and chocolates. I do like them; there's no use in pretending that I don't. Besides, David would find me out in no time. It would be a poor pretence not to be excited when we have put our pennies on the line, and hear the Great Northern Express whistle as it passes through Winston on the way to our pennies. That's why it rushes all the way from London to Edinburgh, to go over our pennies. And we've got a new plan: you would never guess. We gum the pennies on the line and so they can't jump off, but all the wheels go over them, and they get hot and flat like pancakes. I like it! I like it!" cried Dodo.

Edith had finished tea, and was waiting, rather severely, for a pause.

"But that's not all of you, Dodo," she said; "there is a piece of you that's not a child. I want to talk to that."

Dodo nodded at her.

"Yes, I know it's there," she said, "and we shall come to it in time. Of course, if I only thought about pennies on the line and conjuring tricks I should be in my second childhood, and well on the way to preserving all my faculties like the poor things in the bath-chairs. You see, David is mixed up so tremendously in these games: I don't suppose I should go down to the line five minutes before the six o'clock express passed through and put pennies there if it wasn't for him. I was forty-five when he was born, so you must make allowances for me. You don't know what that means any more than I know what artistic triumphs mean. Oh, I forgot: I did know that. David's away, did I tell you? He went away to-day to pay a round of visits with his nurse. He is going to visit the dentist first and then the bootmaker, and then he's 'going on' to stay with Nadine for the night. That's the round, and he comes back to-morrow, thank God. Where were we when you got severe? Oh, I know. You said there was a piece of me which wasn't entirely absurd, and you wanted to talk to that. But it's ever so difficult to disentangle one piece of you from all the rest."

"Drawers!" said Edith relentlessly. "You must have drawers in your mind with handles and locks. You can unlock one, if you want what's inside it, and pull it out by its handle. When you've finished, push it back and lock it again. That certainly is one of the things we ought to have learned by this time. I have, but I don't think you have. All your drawers are open simultaneously, Dodo. That's a great mistake, for you go dabbling about in them all, instead of being occupied with one. You don't concentrate!"

She suddenly relented.

"Oh, Dodo, go on!" she said. "I'm having a delicious holiday. You always appear to talk utter nonsense, but it suits me so admirably. I often think your activity is a fearful waste of energy, like a fall in a salmon-river which might have been making electricity instead of running away. And then quite suddenly there appears a large fat salmon leaping in the middle of it all, all shiny and fresh from the sea. Don't let us concentrate: let's have all the drawers open and turn out everything on to the floor. I don't grow old any more than you do inside, in spite of my raddled, kippered face, and bones sticking out like hat-pegs. I am just as keen as ever, and just as confident that I'm going to make Bach and Brahms and Beethoven turn in their graves. I hear there was a slight subsidence the other day over the grave of one of them: it was probably my last concert in Berlin that was the real cause of it. But I've kept young because all my life I have pursued one thing with grim persistence, and always known I was going to catch it. I haven't had time to grow old, let alone growing middle-aged, which is so much more tragic!"

"Oh, middle-age is rapidly growing extinct," said Dodo, "and we needn't be afraid of catching it nowadays. When we were young, people of our age were middle-aged. They wouldn't drain life to the dregs and then chuck the goblet away and be old. They kept a little wine in it still and sipped it on special occasions. They lay down after lunch and took dinner-pills to preserve their fading energies. Now, we don't do that; as long as we have an ounce of energy left we use it, as long as there is a drop of wine left we drink it. The moment I cease to be drunk with any spoonfuls of youth that remain to me," said she with great emphasis, "I shall be a total abstainer. As long as the sun is up it shall be day, but as soon as it sets it shall be night. There shall be no long-drawn sunsets and disgusting after-glows with me. When I've finished I shall go 'pop,' and get into my bath-chair till I'm wheeled away into the family-vault. And all the time at the back of my atrophied brain will be the knowledge of what a lovely time I have had. That's my plan, anyhow."

Dodo had got quite serious and absently dipped the last two or three strawberries into her tea-cup, imagining apparently that it contained cream.

"You're different," she said; "you can achieve definite projections of yourself in music; you can still create, and as long as anybody creates she is not old. Stretching out: that's what youth means. I daresay you will write some new tunes and go to play them in Heligoland in the autumn. That's your anchor to youth, your power of creation. I've got no anchor of that kind; I've only got some fish-hooks, so to speak, consisting of my sympathy with what is young, and my love of what is new. But

when you blame me for having all my drawers open, there I disagree. It is having all my drawers open that stands between me and the bath-chair. But, my dear, what pitfalls there are for us to avoid, if we are to steer clear of being terrible, grizzly kittens."

"Such as?" asked Edith.

"The most obvious is one so many sprightly old things like us fall into, namely, that of attaching some young man to their hoary old selves. There's nothing that makes a woman look so old as to drag about some doped boy, and there's nothing that actually ages her so quickly. I never fell into that mistake, and I'm not going to begin now. It is so easy to make a boy think you are marvellous: it's such a cheap success, like spending the season at some second-rate watering-place. No more flirting for us, darling! Of course every girl should be a flirt: it is her business to attract as many young men as possible, and then she chooses one and goes for him for all she's worth. That is Nature's way: look at the queen-bee."

"Where?" said Edith, not quite following.

"Anywhere," continued Dodo, not troubling to explain. "And then again every right-minded boy is in love with several girls at once, and he chooses one and the rest either go into a decline or marry somebody else, usually the latter. But then contrast that nice, clean way of doing things with the mature, greasy barmaids of our age, smirking over the counter at the boys, and, as I said, doping them. What hags! How easy to be a hag! I adore boys, but I won't be a hag."

Dodo broke off suddenly from these remarkable reflections, and adjusted her hat before the looking-glass.

"They are older than the rocks they sit among, as Mr. Pater said," she remarked. "Let us go out, as Jack doesn't seem to be coming. His tennis-shoes fit you beautifully and so does my tea-gown. Do you know, it happens to be ten minutes to six, so that if we walk down across the fields, on to the railway-cutting, we shall get there in time for the express. One may as well go there as anywhere else. Besides, David put the gum-bottle and our pennies inside the piano, and thought it would be lovely if I gummed them down to-night, as if he was here. That's really unselfish: if I was away and David here, I should like him not to put any pennies down till I came home. But David takes after Jack. Come on!"

The roses round the house were in full glory of June, but the hay-fields down which they skirted their way were more to Dodo's mind. She had two selves, so Jack told her, the town-self which delighted in crowds and theatres and dances and sniffed the reek of fresh asphalt and hot pavement with relish, and the country self which preferred the wild-rose in the hedge and the ox-eyed daisies and buttercups that climbed upwards through the growing grasses to the smooth lawn and the garden-bed. She carried David's gum-bottle and the pennies, already razor-edged from having been flattened out under train-wheels, and ecstatically gummed them to the rails.

"And now we sit and wait as close as we dare," she said. "Waiting, really is the best part. I don't think you agree. I think you like achievement better than expectation."

"Every artist does," said Edith. "I hated going to Germany, not because I thought there was any chance of my not scoring a howling success, but because I had to wait to get there. When I want a thing I want it now, so as to get on to the next thing."

"That's greedy," remarked Dodo.

"Not nearly so greedy as teasing yourself with expectation. The glory of going on! as St. Paul said."

"And the satisfaction of standing still. I said that."

"But great people don't stand still, nor do great nations," said Edith. "Look at Germany! How I adore the German spirit in spite of their hatred of us. That great, relentless, magnificent machine, that never stops and is never careless. I can't think why I was so glad to get away. I had a feeling that there was something brewing there. There was a sort of tense calm, as before a thunderstorm –"

The train swept round the corner and passed them with a roar and rattle, towering high above them, a glory of efficiency, stirring and bewildering. But for once Dodo paid no attention to it.

"Darling, there has been a lull before the storm ever since I can remember," she said, "but the storm never breaks. I wonder if the millennium has really come years ago, and we haven't noticed it. How dreadful for the millennium to be a complete fiasco! Oh, there's Jack going down to the river with his fishing-rod. Whistle on your fingers and catch his attention. I want to show him your tennis-shoes. Now, the fisherman is the real instance of the type that lives on expectation. Jack goes and fishes for hours at a time in a state of rapt bliss, because he thinks he is just going to catch something. He hasn't heard: I suppose he thought it was only the express."

"I want to fish too," said Edith. "I adore fishing because I do catch something, and then I go on and catch something else. Besides nobody ever fished in a tea-gown before."

"Very well. We'll go back and get another rod for you. Gracious me! I've forgotten the pennies and the gum-bottle. David would never forgive me, however hard he tried. Go on about Germany."

"But you don't believe what I say," said Edith. "Something is going to happen, and I hate the idea. You see, Germany has always been my mother: the whole joy of my life, which is music, comes from her, but this time she suddenly seemed like some dreadful old step-mother instead. I suppose that was why I came back. I wasn't comfortable there. I have always felt utterly at home there before, but this time I didn't. Shall I go back and give some more concerts after all?"

"Yes, darling, do: just as you are. I'll send your luggage back after you. Personally I rather like the German type of man. When I talk to one I feel as if I was talking to a large alligator, bald and horny, which puts on a great, long smile and watches you with its wicked little eyes. It would eat you up if it could get at you, and it smiles in order to encourage you to jump over the railings and go and pat it. Jack had a German agent here, you know, a quite terribly efficient alligator who never forgot anything. He always went to church and sang in the choir. He left quite suddenly the other day."

"Why?" asked Edith.

"I don't know; he went back to Germany."

Edith came back from her fishing a little after dinner-time rosy with triumph and the heat of the evening, and with her arms covered with midge-bites. Dodo had dressed already, and thought she had never seen quite so amazing a spectacle as Edith presented as she came up the terrace, with a soaked and ruined tea-gown trailing behind her, and Jack's tennis-shoes making large wet marks on the paving-stones.

"Six beauties," she said, displaying her laden landing-net, "and I missed another which must have been a three-pounder. Oh, and your tea-gown! I pinned it up round my knees with the greatest care, but it came undone, and, well – there it is. But I hear my luggage has come, and do let us have some of these trout for dinner. I have enjoyed myself so immensely. Don't wait for me: I must have a bath!"

Jack who had come in a quarter of an hour before, and had not yet seen Edith, came out of the drawing-room window at this moment. He sat down on the step, and went off into helpless laughter...

Edith appeared at dinner simultaneously with the broiled trout. She had a garish order pinned rather crookedly on to her dress.

"Darling, what's that swank?" asked Dodo instantly.

"Bavarian Order of Music and Chivalry," she said. "The King gave it me at Munich. It has never been given to a woman before. There's a troubadour one side, and Richard Wagner on the other."

"I don't believe he would have been so chivalrous if he had seen you as Jack did just before dinner. Jack, would your chivalry have triumphed? Your tennis-shoes, my tea-gown, and Edith in the middle."

"What! My tennis-shoes?" asked Jack.

"Dodo, you should have broken it to him," said Edith with deep reproach.

"I didn't dare to. It might have made him stop laughing, and suppressed laughter is as dangerous as suppressed measles when you get on in life. There's another thing about your Germans. I thought of it while I was dressing. They only laugh at German jokes."

"There is one in *Faust*," said Jack with an air of scrupulous fairness. "At least there is believed to be: commentators differ. But when *Faust* is given in Germany, the whole theatre rocks with laughter at the proper point."

Edith rose to this with the eagerness of the trout she had caught.

"The humour of a nation doesn't depend on the number of jokes in its sublimest tragedy," she said. "Let us judge English humour by the funny things in *Hamlet*."

Dodo gave a commiserating sigh.

"That wasn't a very good choice," she said. "There are the grave-diggers, and there's Polonius all over the place. The most serious people see humour in Polonius. Why didn't you say Milton? Now it's too late."

Jack suddenly laughed.

"I beg your pardon," said he; "I wasn't thinking about Milton at all, but a vision of Dodo's tea-gown appeared to me, as I last saw it. Yes. Take Milton, Edith. Dodo can't give you a joke out of Milton because she has never read him. Don't interrupt, Dodo. Or take Dante. Ask me for a joke in Dante, and you win all down the line. Take Julius Cæsar: take any great creature you like. What you really want to point out is that great authors are seldom humorous. I agree: one up to you. Take a trout – I didn't catch any."

Edith did precisely as she was told.

"I hate arguing," she said. "Dodo insisted on arguing about middle-age all the afternoon. In the intervals she talked about putting pennies on the line. She said it was enormous fun, but she forgot all about them when she had put them there."

"Don't tell David, Jack," said Dodo, aside. "All right. Dodo's got middle-age on her mind. She bought some spectacles once."

"My dear, we've had all that," said Dodo. "What we really want to know is how you are to get gracefully old, while you continue to feel young. We're wanting not to be middle-aged in the interval. There is no use in cutting off pleasures, while they please you, because that makes you not old but sour, and who wants to be sour? What a poor ambition! It really is rather an interesting question for us three, who are between fifty-four and sixty, and who don't feel like it. Jack, you're really the oldest of us, and more really you're the youngest."

"I doubt that," said Edith loudly.

"This is German scepticism then. Jack is much more like a boy than you are like a girl."

"I never was like a girl," said Edith. "Ask Bertie, ask anybody. I was always mature and feverish. Dodo was always calculating, and her calculations were interrupted by impulse. Jack was always the devout lover. The troubadour on my medal is extremely like him."

Jack passed his hand over his forehead.

"What are we talking about?" he said.

"Getting old, darling," said Dodo.

"So we are. But the fact is, you know, that we're getting old all the time, but we don't notice it till some shock comes. That crystallises things. What is fluid in you takes shape."

Dodo got up.

"So we've got to wait for a shock," she said. "Is that all you can suggest? Anyhow, I shall hold your hand if a shock comes. What sort of a shock would be good for me, do you think? I know what would be good for Edith, and that would be that she suddenly found that she couldn't help writing music that was practically indistinguishable from the *Messiah*."

"And that," said Edith, "is blasphemy."

Jack caught on.

"Hush, Dodo," he said, "an inspired, a sacred work to all true musicians."

Edith glanced wildly round.

"I shall go mad," she said, "if there is any more of this delicious English humour. Handel! Me and Handel! How dare you? Brutes!"

CHAPTER II

HIGHNESS

Unlike most women Dodo much preferred to breakfast downstairs in a large dining-room, facing the window, rather than mumble a private tray in bed. Jack, in consequence, was allowed to be as grumpy as he pleased at this meal, for Dodo's sense of fairness told her that if she was so unfeminine as to feel cheerful and sociable at half-past nine in the morning, she must not expect her husband to be so unmasculine as to resemble her.

"Crumbs get into my bed," she had said to Edith the evening before, when, the morning venue was debated, "and my egg tastes of blankets. And I hate bed when I wake: I feel bright and brisk and fresh, which is very trying for other people. Jack breakfasts downstairs, too, though if you asked him to breakfast in your bedroom, I daresay he would come."

"I hate seeing anybody till eleven," said Edith, "and many people then."

"Very well, Jack, as usual, will be cross to me, which is an excellent plan, because I don't mind, and he works off his morning temper. Don't come down to protect me: it's quite unnecessary."

This was really equivalent to an invitation to be absent, and as it coincided with Edith's inclination, the hour of half-past nine found Dodo reading her letters, and Jack, fortified against intrusive sociability by a copy of the *Times* propped against the tea-kettle.

The room faced south, and the sun from the window struck sideways across Dodo's face, as she exhibited a pleasant appetite for correspondence and solid food, while Jack sat morose in the shadow of the *Times*. This oblique light made the black ink in which Dodo's correspondents had written to her appear to be a rich crimson. She had already remarked on this interesting fact, with an allusion to the spectacles which had been finally lost three years ago, and as a test question to see how Jack was feeling, she asked him if he had seen them. As he made no answer whatever, she concluded that he was still feeling half-past ninish.

Then she got really interested in a letter from Miss Grantham, an old friend who had somehow slipped out of her orbit. Miss Grantham was expected here this afternoon, but apparently had time to write a long letter, though she could have said it all a few hours later.

"Grantie is getting poorer and poorer," she said. "A third aunt has died lately, and so Grantie had to pay three thousand pounds. I had no idea funerals were so expensive. Isn't it miserable for her?"

She turned over the page.

"Oh! There are compensations," she said, "for the third aunt left her twenty-five thousand pounds, so she's up on balance. Three from twenty-five... Not funerals: duties. But she sold a picture by Franz Hals to make sure. How like Grantie: she would run no risks! She never did; she always remained single and lived in the country away from influenza and baccarat. Oh, Jack, the Franz Hals fetched eight thousand pounds, so her poverty is bearable. Wasn't that lovely?"

"Lovely!" said Jack.

Dodo looked up from Grantie's letter, and ran her eyes round the walls.

"But those two pictures there are by Franz Hals," she said. "Do let us sell one, and then we shall have eight thousand pounds. You shall have the eight, darling, because the picture is yours, and I shall have the thousands because I thought of it."

Jack gave a short grunt as he turned over his paper. He had not quite got over the attack of the morning microbe, to which males are chiefly subject.

"All right," he said. "And what shall we buy with the eight thousand pounds? Some more boots or bacon?"

Dodo considered this oracular utterance.

"That's a wonderfully sensible question," she said. "I don't really know what we should buy with it. I suppose we shouldn't buy anything, and the picture would be gone. I would certainly rather have it than nothing! What a mine of wisdom you are! I suppose it was my mercantile blood that made me think of selling a picture. Blood's thicker than paint... It always shows through."

A fatal brown spot had appeared in the middle of Jack's paper just opposite the spirit-lamp of the tea-kettle against which it leaned. As he was considering this odd phenomenon, it spread and burst into flame.

"Fire!" cried Dodo, "Edith will be burned in her bed. Put – put a rug round it! Lie down on it, Jack! Turn the hot water on to it! Put some sand on it! Why aren't we at the seaside?"

Jack did none of these brilliant manoeuvres. In an extraordinarily prosaic manner he took the paper up, dropped it into the grate and stamped on it. But the need for prompt action had started his drowsy mechanisms.

"Well, it's morning," he said as he returned to the table, "so let us begin. No: I think we won't sell a Franz Hals, Dodo. And then came Grantie and her auntie, and then you with your mercantile blood. Which shall we take first?"

"Oh, blood, I think," said Dodo, "because there's a letter from Daddy. He would like to come down this afternoon for the Sunday, and will I telephone? He put a postal order for three-and-sixpence in his letter, to pay for a trunk-call: isn't that rather sweet of him? Daddy is rich, but honest. Epigram. Put up a thumb, darling, to show you recognise it. Jack, shall I say that Daddy may come, and we should love it? I like people of eighty to want things. And really if we can give pleasure to a person of eighty hadn't we better? Eighty minus fifty-four: that leaves twenty-six. It would be pathetic if in twenty-six years from now you no longer cared about giving me pleasures. What has happened to the postal order for three-and-six? He did enclose it, I saw it. I believe you've burned it with the *Times*, Jack. Can we claim from the fire-insurance?"

Jack formed a mental picture of old Mr. Vane, contemplated it and dismissed it.

"Of course he shall come if you want him to," he said. "Send him my love."

"That's dear of you. I do want him to come because he wants to, which after all is a very good reason. Otherwise I think – I think I should have liked him to come perhaps another day, when there weren't twenty-five million other people. On the other hand Daddy will like that: he's getting tremendously smart, and 'goes on' to parties after dinner. My dear, do you think he will bring another large supply of his patent shoe-horns with him this time? I think we must examine his luggage, like a customhouse."

This was an allusion to a genteel piece of advertising which Mr. Vane had indulged in last time he stayed with them. On that occasion Dodo had met him at the door, and without any misgivings at all had seen taken down from the motor an oblong wooden box about which he was anxious, and which, so he mysteriously informed her, contained "presents." This she naturally interpreted to mean something nice for her. It subsequently appeared, however, that the presents were presents for everybody in the house, for Mr. Vane had instructed his valet to connive with the housemaids and arrange that on the dressing-table of every guest in the house there should be placed one of Vane's patent shoe-horns with a small paper of instructions. This slip explained how conveniently these shoe-horns fitted the shape of the human heel, and entailed no stamping of the human foot nor straining of leather...

"That's what I mean by blood coming out," continued Dodo, "when I want to sell a Franz Hals. I think I must be rather like Daddy over that. He doesn't want any more money, any more than I do, but he cannot resist the opportunity of doing a little business. After all why not? A shoe-horn doesn't hurt anybody."

"It does: it hurt me!" said Jack. "It bruised my heel."

"Did it? Who would have thought Daddy was such a serpent? I didn't use mine: my maid threw it into the fire the moment she saw it. She observed, with a sniff, that she wouldn't have any of those

nasty cheap things. I remonstrated: I told her it was a present from Daddy, and she said she thought he would have given me something handsomer than that."

"They weren't very handsome," remarked Jack. "Nothing out of the way, I mean. Not raging beauties."

"Daddy went on to Harrogate afterwards," said Dodo. "He flooded the hotel with them. He used to sit in the velvet place which they call a lounge, and make himself agreeable to strangers, and lead the conversation round to the fact that he was my father. Then as soon as they were getting on nicely, he produced a shoe-horn. Bertie Arbuthnot told me about it: Daddy worked the shoe-horn stunt on him."

"Priceless!" said Jack grinning. "Go on."

"Quite priceless: he gave them away free, gratis. Well, Daddy came in one day when Bertie was sitting in the lounge, and asked him if he knew me. So they got talking. And then Daddy looked fixedly at the heel of Bertie's shoe which was rather shabby, as heels usually are, and out came the shoe-horn. 'Take one of these, young man,' said he, 'and then you'll make no more complaints about the bills for the cobbling of the heels of your shoes. Vane's patent, you mark, and it's that very Vane who's addressing you!'"

Dodo burst out laughing.

"I adore seeing you and Daddy together," she said. "You find him so dreadfully trying, and I'm sure I don't wonder, and you bear it with the fortitude of an early Christian martyr. What was the poem he made about the shoe-horn which was printed at the top of the instructions?"

Jack promptly quoted it:

"As I want to spare you pains
Take the shoe-horn that is Vane's."

"Yes, that's it," said Dodo. "And what a gem! He told me he lay awake three nights making it up, like Flaubert squirming about on the floor and tearing his hair in the struggle to get the right word."

Dodo got up, looked for the *Times*, and remembered that it was burned.

"That's a relief anyhow," she said. "I think it's worth the destruction of the three-and-six-penny postal order. If it hadn't been burned I should have to read it to see what is going on."

"There's nothing."

"But one reads it all the same. If there's nothing in the large type, I read the paper across from column to column, and acquire snippets of information which get jumbled up together and sap the intellect. People with great minds like Edith never look at the paper at all. That's why she argues so well: she never knows anything about the subject, and so can give full play to her imagination."

Dodo threw up the window.

"Oh, Jack, it is silly to go to London in June," she said. "And yet it doesn't do to stay much in the country, unless you have a lot of people about who make you forget you are in the country at all."

"Who is coming to-day?" asked he.

"Well, I thought originally that we would have the sort of party we had twenty-five years ago, and see how we've all stood them; and so you and I and Edith and Grantie and Tommy Ledgers represent the old red sandstone. Then Nadine and Hughie and young Tommy Ledgers and two or three of their friends crept in, and then there are Prince and Princess Albert Allenstein. They didn't creep in: they shoved in."

"My dear, what a menagerie," said Jack.

"I know: the animals kept on coming in one by one and two by two, and we shall be about twenty-five altogether. Princess Albert is opening a bazaar or a bank or a barracks at Nottingham on Tuesday, that's why she is coming!"

"Then why have you asked her to come to-day?"

"I didn't: she thought it would be nice to come on Saturday instead of Monday, and wrote to tell me so – remind me to give Daddy the autograph: he has begun collecting autographs – However, he will look after her: he loves Princesses of any age or shape. As for Albert he shall have trays of food brought him at short and regular intervals, so he'll bother nobody. But best of all, beloved David is coming back to-day. He and his round of visits! I think I'll send a paragraph to the *Morning Post* to say that Lord Harchester has returned to the family seat after a round of visits. I won't say it was the dentist and the bootmaker."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't teach David to be a snob!" said Jack.

"Darling, you're a little heavy this morning," said Dodo. "That was a joke."

"Not entirely," said Jack.

Dodo capitulated without the slightest attempt at defence.

"Quite right!" she said. "But you must remember that I was born, so to speak, in a frying-pan in Glasgow, enamelled by the Vane process, or at least that was my cradle, and if you asked me to swear on my bended knees that I wasn't a snob at all, I should instantly get up and change the subject. I do still think it's rather fun being what I have become, and having Royal Families staying with me – "

"And saying it's rather a bore," put in Jack.

"Of course. I like being bored that way, if you insist on it. I haven't ever quite got over my rise in life. Very nearly, but not quite."

"You really speak as if you thought it mattered," said Jack.

"I know it doesn't really. It's a game, a rather good one. Kind hearts are more than coronets, but I rather like having both. Most people are snobs, Jack, though they won't say so. It's distinctly snobbish of me to put my parties in the paper, and after all you read it in the morning, which is just as bad. The Court Circular too! Why should it be announced to all the world that they went to the private chapel on Sunday morning and who preached? It has to be written and printed and corrected. That wouldn't be done unless a quantity of people wanted to read it. I wonder if it's read up in heaven, and if the angels say to each other how pleasant it all is."

Dodo bubbled with laughter.

"Oh, my dear, how funny we all are," she said. "Just think of our pomposity, we little funny things kicking about together in the dust! We all rather like having titles and orders; otherwise the whole thing would have stopped long ago. Here's Edith: so it must be eleven."

Edith had taken to smoking a pipe lately, because her doctor said it was less injurious than cigarettes, and she wanted to hurt herself as little as possible. She found it difficult to keep it alight, and half-away across the room she struck a match on the sole of her shoe, and applied it to the bowl, from which a croaking noise issued.

"Dodo, is it true that the Allensteins are coming to stay here to-day?" she asked. "I saw it in the *Daily Mail*."

Jack opened his mouth to speak, but Dodo clapped her hands in his face.

"Now, Jack, I didn't put it there," she said, "so don't make false accusations. Of course they did it themselves, because you and I – particularly I – are what people call smart, and the Allensteins aren't. That proves the point I was just going to make: in fact, that's the best definition of snob. Snobs want to show other people how nicely they are getting on."

Edith sat down in the window seat between Dodo and Jack, who shied away from the reek of her pipe, which an impartial breeze, coming in at the window, wafted this way and that.

"But who's a-deniging of it, Saireh Gamp?" she asked. "The snob's main object is not actually having the King or the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury to dinner; what he cares about is that other people should know that he has done so. Snobbishness isn't running after the great ones of the earth, but letting the little ones know you have caught the great ones."

"You hopeless women!" said Jack.

Dodo shook her head.

"He can't understand," she said, "for with all his virtues Jack isn't a snob at all, and he misses a great deal of pleasure. We all want to associate with our superiors in any line. It is more fun having notable people about than nonentities. When it comes to friends it is a different thing, and I would throw over the whole Almanack of Grotha for the sake of a friend – "

Jack turned his eyes heavenwards.

"What an angel!" he said. "Was ever such nobility and unworldliness embodied in a human form? What have I done to deserve – "

Dodo interrupted.

"And we like other people to know it," she said. "Poor Jack is a *lusus naturæ*; he is swamped by the normal. You must yield, darling."

Jack made an awful face as the smoke from Edith's pipe blew across him, and got up.

"I yield to those deathly fumes," he said.

Dodo's guests arrived spasmodically during the afternoon. A couple of motors went backwards and forwards between the station and the house, meeting all probable trains, sometimes returning with one occupant, sometimes with three or four, for nobody had happened to say what time he was arriving. About five an aeroplane alighted in the park, bearing Hugh Graves as pilot, and his wife Nadine as passenger, and while Dodo, taking her daughter's place, succeeded in getting Hugh to take her up for a short flight, Prince and Princess Albert arrived in a cab with Nadine's maid, having somehow managed to miss the motor. Jack was out fishing at the time, and Prince Albert expressed over and over again his surprise at the informality of their reception. He was a slow, stout, stupid man of sixty, and in ten years' time would no doubt be slower, stouter, stupider and seventy. He had a miraculous digestion, a huge appetite for sleep, and a moderate acquaintance with the English language. They spent four months of the year in England in order to get away from their terrible little Court at Allenstein, and with a view to economy, passed most of those months in sponging on well-to-do acquaintances.

"Also this is very strange," he said slowly. "Where is Lady Chesterford? Where is Lord Chesterford? Where are our hosts? Where is tea?"

Princess Albert, brisk and buxom and pleasant and pleased, waddled through the house into the garden, where she met Nadine, leaving her husband to follow still wondering at the strangeness of it all. She talked voluble, effective English in a guttural manner.

"So screaming!" she said. "Nobody here, neither dearest Dodo nor her husband to receive us, so when they come we will receive them. Where is she?"

Nadine pointed to an aeroplane that was flying low over the house.

"She's there just now," she said.

"Flying? Albert, Dodo is flying. Is that not courageous of her?"

"But Lady Chesterford should have been here to receive us," said he. "It is very strange, but we will have tea. And where is my evening paper? I shall have left it in the cab, and it must be fetched. You there: I wish my evening paper."

The person he had thus addressed, who resembled an aged but extremely respectable butler, took off his hat, and Princess Albert instantly recognised him.

"But it is dear Mr. Vane," she said. "How pleasant! Is it not amusing that we should arrive when Dodo is flying and Lord Chesterford is fishing? So awkward for them, poor things, when they find we are here."

Prince Albert looked at him with some mistrust, which gradually cleared.

"I remember you!" he said. "You are Lady Chesterford's father. Let us have tea and my evening paper."

Once at the tea-table there was no more anxiety about Prince Albert.

"There are sandwiches," he said. "There is toast. There is jam. Also these are caviare and these are bacon. And there is iced coffee. I will stay here. But it is very strange that Lady Chesterford is not here. Eat those sandwiches, Sophy. And there are cakes. Why is not Lady Chesterford – "

"She is flying, dearest," said she. "Dodo cannot give us tea while she is flying. Ah, and here is dearest Edith and Lord Ledgers."

The news of the august arrivals had spread through the house, and such guests as were in it came out on to the terrace. Dodo's father took up an advantageous position between the Prince and the Princess, and was with difficulty persuaded to put on his hat again. He spoke with a slight Scotch accent that formed a pleasant contrast to the German inflection.

"My daughter will be much distressed, your Highness," he said, "that she has not been here to have the honour to receive you. And so, your Highness, the privilege falls on me, and honoured I am – "

"So kind of you, Mr. Vane," said that genial woman. "And your children, Nadine? They are well. And, dearest Edith, you have been in Berlin, I hear. How was my cousin Willie?"

Mr. Vane gave a little gasp; he prevented himself with difficulty from taking off his hat again.

"The Emperor came to my concert there, ma'am," said Edith.

"He would be sure to. He is so musical: such an artist. His hymn of Aegir. You have heard his hymn? What do you think about it?"

Edith's honesty about music was quite incorruptible.

"I don't think anything at all about it," she said. "There's nothing to think about."

Princess Albert choked with laughter.

"I shall tell Willie what you say," she said. "So good for him. Albert dearest, Mrs. Arbuthnot says that Willie's Aegir is nothing at all. Remind me to tell Willie that, when I write."

"Also, I will not any such thing remind you," said her husband. "It is not good to anger Willie. Also it is not good to speak like that of the Emperor. When all is said and done he is the Cherman Emperor. My estate, my money, my land, they are all in Chermany. No! I will have no more iced coffee. I will have iced champagne at dinner."

Mr. Vane already had his hand on the jug.

"Not just a wee thimbleful, sir?" he asked.

"And what is a thimbleful? I do not know a thimbleful. But I will have none. I will have iced champagne at dinner, and I will have port. I will have brandy with my coffee, but that will not be iced coffee: it shall be hot coffee. And I will remind you, Sophy, not to tell the Emperor what that lady said of his music. Instead I will remind you to say that she was gratified and flattified – is it not? – that he was so *leutselig* as to hear her music. Also I hear a flying-machine, so perhaps now we shall learn why Lady Chesterford was not here – "

"Dearest, you have said that ten times," said his wife, "and there is no good to repeat. There! The machine is coming down. We will go and meet dearest Dodo."

The Prince considered this proposition on its merits.

"No: I will sit," he said. "I will eat a cake. And I will see what is a thimbleful. Show me a thimbleful. A pretty young lady could put that in her thimble, and I will put it now in my thimble inside me."

Fresh hedonistic plans outlined themselves.

"And when I have sat, I will have my dinner," he said. "And then I will play Bridge, and then I will go to bed, and then I will snore!"

Dodo had frankly confessed that she was a snob; otherwise her native honesty might have necessitated that confession when she found herself playing Bridge in partnership with Nadine against her princely guests. She knew well that she would never have consented to let the Prince stay with her, if he had not been what he was, nor would she have spent a couple of hours at the card-table when there were so many friends about. But she consoled herself with desultory conversation and

when dummy with taking a turn or two in the next room where there was intermittent dancing going on. Just now, the Prince was dealing with extreme deliberation, and talking quite as deliberately.

"Also that was a very clever thing you said, Lady Chesterford, when you came in from your flying," he said. "I shall tell the Princess Sophy, Lady Chesterford said to me what was very amusing. 'I flew to meet you,' she said, and that is very clever. She had been flying, and also to fly to meet someone means to go in a hurry. It was a pon."

"Yes, dearest, get on with your dealing. You have told me twice already."

"And now I tell you three times, and so you will remember. Always, when I play Bridge, Lady Dodo, I play with the Princess for my partner, for if I play against her, what she wins I lose and also what I win she loses, and so it is nothing at all. Ach! I have turned up a card unto myself, and it is an ace, and I will keep it. I will not deal again when it is so nearly done."

"But you must deal again," cried his partner. "It is the rule, Albert, you must keep the rule."

He laid down the few cards that remained to be dealt, and opened his hands over the table, so that she could not gather up those already distributed.

"But I shall not deal again," he said, "the deal is so near complete. And there is no rule, and my cigar is finished."

Dodo gave a little suppressed squeal of laughter.

"No, go on, sir," she said. "We don't mind."

He raised his hands.

"So there you are, Sophy!" he said. "You were wrong, and there is no rule. Do not touch the cards, while I get my fresh cigar. They are very good: I will take one to bed."

He slowly got up.

"But finish your deal first," she said. "You keep us all waiting."

He slowly sat down.

"Ladies must have their own way," he said. "But men also, and now I shall have to get up once more for my cigar."

"Daddy, fetch the Prince a cigar," said Dodo.

He looked at her, considering this.

"But, no; I will choose my own," he said. "I will smell each, and I will take the smelliest."

During this hand an unfortunate incident occurred. The Princess, seeing an ace on the table, thought it came from an opponent, and trumped it.

"But what are you about?" he asked. "Also it was mine ace."

She gathered up the trick.

"My fault, dearest," she said. "Quite my fault. Now what shall I do?"

He laid down his hand.

"But you have played a trump when I had played the ace," he said.

"Dearest, I have said it was a mistake," said she.

"But it is to take five shillings from my pocket, that you should trump my ace. It is ridiculous that you should do that. If you do that, you shew you cannot play cards at all. It was my ace."

The rubber came to an end over this hand, and Dodo swiftly added up the score.

"Put it down, Nadine," she said. "We shall play to-morrow. We each of us owe eighty-two shillings."

The Prince adopted the more cumbrous system of adding up on his fingers, half-aloud, in German, but he agreed with the total.

"But I will be paid to-night," he said. "When I lose, I pay, when I am losed I am paid. And it should have been more. The Princess trumped my ace."

The entrance of a tray of refreshments luckily distracted his mind from this tragedy, and he rose.

"So I will eat," he said, "and then I will be paid eighty-two marks. I should be rich if every evening I won eighty-two marks. I should give the Princess more pin-money. But I will fly to eat, Lady Chesterford. That was your joke: that I shall tell Willie, but not about his music."

Dodo took the Princess up to her room, followed by her maid who carried a tray with some cold soup and strawberries on it.

"Such a pleasant evening, dear," she said. "Ah, there is some cold soup: so good, so nourishing. This year I think we shall stop in England till the review at Kiel, when we go with Willie. So glorious! The Cherman fleet so glorious, and the English fleet so glorious. What do you say, Marie? A little box? How did the little box come here? What does it say? Vane's patent soap-box."

Dodo looked at the little box.

"Oh, that's my father," she said. "Really, ma'am, I'm ashamed of him. His manufacture, you know. I expect he has put one in each of our rooms."

"But how kind! A present for me! Soap! So convenient. So screaming! I must thank him in the morning."

Then came a tap from the Prince's room next door, and he entered.

"Also, I have found a little box," he said. "Why is there a little iron box? I do not want a little iron box."

"Dearest, a present from Mr. Vane," said his wife. "So kind! So convenient for your soap."

"Ach! So! Then I will take my soap also away inside the box. I will have eighty-two marks and my soap in a box. That is good for one evening. Also, I wish it was a gold box."

Dodo went downstairs again, and found her father in a sort of stupor of satisfaction.

"A marvellous brain," he said. "I consider that the Prince has a marvellous brain. Such tenacity! Such firmness of grasp! Eh, when he gets hold of an idea, he isn't one of your fly-aways that let it go again. He nabs it."

His emotion gained on him, and he dropped into a broader pronunciation.

"And the Princess!" he said. "She speaking of Wullie, just like that. 'Wullie,' as I might say 'Dodo.' Now that gives a man to think. Wullie! And him his Majesty the Emperor!"

Dodo kissed him.

"Daddy, dear," she said, "I am glad you've had a nice evening. But you put us all out of the running, you know. Oh, and those soap-boxes, you wicked old man! But they're delighted with them. She is going to thank you to-morrow."

"God! An' there's condescension!" said he reverently.

CHAPTER III

CROSS-CURRENTS

Dodo had been obliged to go to church on Sunday morning by way of being in attendance on Princess Albert. She did not in the least mind going to church, in fact she habitually did so, and sang loudly in the choir, but she did not like going otherwise than of her own free-will, for she said that compulsion made a necessity of virtue. Church and a stroll round the hot-houses, where the Prince ate four peaches, accounted for most of the morning, but after lunch, when he retired to his room like a flushed boa-constrictor, and Jack had taken the Princess off in a motor to see the place where something happened either to Isaac Walton or Isaac Newton, Dodo felt she could begin to devote herself to some of the old friends, who had originally formed the nucleus of her party. For this purpose she pounced on the first one she came across, who happened to be Miss Grantham, and took her off to the shady and sequestered end of the terrace. Up to the present moment she had only been able to tell Grantie that she was changed; now she proceeded to enlarge on that accusation. Grantie had accepted (you might almost say she had courted) middle-age in a very decorous and becoming manner: her hair, fine as floss silk had gone perfectly white, thus softening her rather hard, handsome horse-like face, and she wore plain expensive clothes of sober colours with pearls and lace and dignity.

"You've changed, Grantie," said Dodo, "because you've gone on doing the same sort of thing for so long. Nothing has happened to you."

"Then I ought to have remained the same," said Grantie with composure. She put up a parasol as she spoke, as if in anticipation of some sort of out-pouring.

"That's your mistake, darling," said Dodo. "If you go on doing the same thing, and being the same person, you always deteriorate. I read in the paper the other day about a man whose skin became covered with a sort of moss, till he looked like a neglected tombstone. And going on in a groove has the same effect on the mind: if you don't keep stirring it up and giving it shocks at what you do, it vegetates. Look at that moss between the paving-stones! That's there because the gardeners haven't poked them and brushed them. The terrace has changed because it hasn't been sufficiently trodden on and kicked and scrubbed. It has been let alone. Do you see? Nothing has happened to you."

Miss Grantham certainly preserved the detached calm which had always distinguished her.

"No, it's true that I haven't been kicked and scrubbed," she said. "But all my relations have died. That's happened to me."

"No; that happened to them," said Dodo. "You want routing out. Why do you live in the country, for instance? I often think that doctors are so misunderstanding. If you feel unwell and consult a doctor, he usually tells you to leave London at once, and not spend another night there. But for most ailments it would be far more useful if he told you to leave the country at once. It's far more dangerous to get mossy than to get over-done. You can but break down if you get over-done, but if you get mossy you break up."

Dodo had a mistaken notion that she was putting Grantie on her defence. It amused Grantie to keep up that delusion for the present.

"I like a life of dignity and leisure," she said, "though no doubt there is a great deal in what you say. I like reading and thinking, I like going to bed at eleven and looking at my pigs. I like quiet and tranquillity –"

"But that's so deplorable," said Dodo.

"I suppose it is what you call being mossy. But I prefer it. I choose to have leisure. I choose to go to bed early and do nothing particular when I get up."

Dodo pointed an accusing finger at her.

"I've got it," she said. "You are like the poet who said that the world was left to darkness and to him. He liked bossing it in the darkness, and so do you. You train the village choir, Grantie, and it's no use denying it. You preside at mother's meetings, and you are local president of the Primrose League. You have a flower-show in what they call your grounds, just as if you were coffee, on August bank-holiday, and a school-feast. You have a Christmas-tree for the children, and send masses of holly to decorate the church. At Easter, arum lilies."

Miss Grantham began to show that she was not an abject criminal on her defence.

"And those are all very excellent things to do," she said. "I do not see that they are less useful than playing bridge all night, or standing quacking on a stair-case in a tiara, and calling it an evening party."

"Yes, we do quack," conceded Dodo.

"Or spending five hundred pounds on a ball – "

"My dear, that wouldn't do much in the way of a ball," began Dodo.

"Well, a thousand pounds then, if you wish to argue about irrelevancies. All the Christmas-trees and Easter decorations and school-feasts don't cost that – "

"Grantie dear, how marvellously cheap," said Dodo enthusiastically. "What a good manager you must be, and it all becomes more appalling every minute. You know that you don't boss it in the darkness because of the good you do, and the pleasure you give, but because it gives you the impression of being busy, and makes so little trouble and expense. Now if you ran races, things in sacks, at the school-feasts yourself, and pricked your own delicious fingers with the holly for the Christmas decorations, and watered your flowers yourself for the flower-show, there might be something in it. But you don't do anything of that kind: you only give away very cheap prizes at the school-feast, and make your gardeners cut the holly, and take the prizes yourself at the flower-show. You like bossing it, darling: that's what's the matter, and it's that which has changed you. You don't compete, except at the flower-show, and then it's your gardeners who compete for you. You ought to run races at the school-feast, if you want to be considered a serious person."

"I couldn't run," said Miss Grantham. "If I ran, I should die. That would make a tragic chord at the school-feast, instead of a cheerful note."

"It would do nothing of the sort," said Dodo. "The school-children would remember the particular school-feast when you died with wonderful excitement and pleasure. It would be stored for ever in their grateful memories. 'That was the year,' they would say, 'when Miss Grantham fell dead in the sack-race, and such a lovely funeral.' They wouldn't think it the least tragic, bless them."

To Miss Grantham's detached and philosophic mind this conclusion, when she reflected on it, seemed extremely sound. She decided to pursue that track no further, for it appeared to lead nowhere, and proceeded violently upwards in a sort of moral lift.

"And then I happen to like culture and knowledge," she said. "I just happen to, in the same way as you like princes. I know you won't agree about the possible advantage of educating yourself. Last night at dinner I heard you say that you had probably forgotten how to read, as you hadn't read anything for so long. That made me shudder. You seem to think that, because I live in the country, I vegetate. You call me mossy, and I am nothing of the kind. I read for three hours a day, wet or fine. I do wood-carving, I play the piano."

Dodo gave a long sigh.

"I know; it sounds lovely," she said. "So does suicide when you have to get up early in the morning. Sometimes Jack and I think we should like to live in a cottage by a river with a bee-hive and a general servant, and nine rows of beans like Mr. Yeats, and lead the simple life. But moral scruples preserve us from it, just as they preserve one from suicide. When I feel that I want to live in the country, I know it is time to take a tonic or go to Ascot. I don't believe for a moment that I was meant to be a 'primrose by the river's brim.' If you go in for being a primrose by the river's brim,

you so soon become 'nothing more to him' or to anybody else. If Nature had intended me to be a vegetable, she would have made me more like a cabbage than I am."

Miss Grantham was hardly ever roused by personal criticism, partly because she hardly ever was submitted to it, and partly because it seemed to her to matter so singularly little what anyone else thought of her. But when Dodo began again, "You're a delicious cow," she interrupted firmly and decisively, dropped any semblance of defence and attacked.

"And now it's my turn," she said, "and don't interrupt me, Dodo, by any smart repartees, because they don't impress me in the least. I may be a cabbage – though as a matter of fact, I am not – but I would far sooner be a cabbage than a flea."

"A flea?" asked the bewildered Dodo.

"Yes, dear, I said 'flea.' All the people who live the sort of life which you have deliberately adopted as your own, are precisely like fleas. You hop about with dreadful springs, and take little bites of other people, and call that life. If you hear of some marvellous new invention, you ask the inventor to lunch and suck a little of his blood. Then at dinner you are told that everybody is talking about some new book, so you buy a copy next morning, cut the first fifty pages, leave it about in a prominent place, and ask the author to tea. Meanwhile you forget all about the inventor. Then a new portrait-painter appears, or a new conjuror at the music-halls or a new dancer, and off you hop again and have another bite. For some obscure reason you think that that is life, whereas it is only being a flea. I don't in the least mind your being a flea, you may be precisely what you choose. But what I do object to is your daring to disapprove of my way of life, about which you know nothing whatever. You called me narrow – "

"Never!" said Dodo.

"In effect, you called me narrow. Didn't you?" asked Gratie calmly.

"Yes."

"Very well then. When you talk about narrowness, you seem unaware that there is no greater narrowness possible than to adopt that cocksure attitude. You think you are competent to judge modes of living about which you are quite ignorant. What do you know about me?"

Dodo surged out of her chair.

"Gratie dear, we don't understand each other one bit," she said, kissing her. "How sad it all is!"

Gratie remained unmoved and calm.

"I understand you perfectly," she said. "Though I am quite aware you don't understand me."

Dodo suddenly ceased to attend, and held up a silencing finger.

"Listen!" she said.

From the open window of a bedroom just above their seat came a sound sonorous and rhythmical. Dodo had not meant to have the war carried into her own country, and she was rather glad of an interruption.

"Albert!" she said rapturously. "Albert snoring."

Any text would have done for Gratie's sermon that moment.

"Yes, I hear," she said. "We can all snore, but that particular snoring amuses you, in some odd way, because he's a prince. I don't love you any the less because you are a snob and a flea."

Dodo burst into a peal of laughter.

"Gratie, you're perfect!" she said. "Oh, how little did I think when I began calling you a vegetable, quite conversationally, that you would turn round and hustle me like this. And the worst of it is that you are right. You see, you arrange your ideas, you think what you mean to say, and then say it, whereas I say anything that comes into my head, and try to attach some idea to it afterwards if it's challenged. Usually it isn't, and we talk about something else, and everyone thinks 'What clever conversation!' But really you wrong me: I am something more than a snobbish flea."

"Yes; you're a parody," said Miss Grantham thoughtfully. "That is the deplorable thing about you. You have always made a farce out of your good qualities, and a tragedy out of your bad ones."

What a waste! You need never have been either a farce or a tragedy, but just a decent, simple, commonplace woman like me."

Dodo knew perfectly well what Grantie meant by this considered indictment. It needed but the space of an astonished gasp, as this cold hose was sluiced on her, to understand it entirely, and recognise the basic truth of it. She knew to what Grantie alluded as her good points, namely her energy, her quickness, her vivacity, her kindliness. Of these, so said Grantie, she made a farce, used them to cause laughter, to rouse admiration, to make a rocket of herself. And there was no more difficulty in identifying the bad points, out of which tragedies had come. They were just the defects of her qualities, and could easily be grouped together under the general head of egotism.

Quite suddenly, then, there came a deepening in the import of the conversation which had begun so superficially. At first Dodo had used the lightness of touch, in discussing Grantie's mode of life, which, to her mind, befitted such subjects. But now she found herself gripped; something had caught her from below. For some reason – perhaps from having lived so long in the country – Grantie took matters like tastes and conduct and character quite seriously. Dodo did not mind that in the least; it was still she who was being talked about, and thus her egotism was fed. Even if it was being fed with 'thorns and briars of the wilderness,' it was still being attended to.

"Go on," she said. "Explain."

"It's hardly worth while," said Grantie, "because you know it already. But just think of your telling me with disapproval that I have changed! So much the better for me, though you think it is a matter for regret."

"Darling, I never said you weren't quite delightful as you are," said Dodo.

"I wasn't aware that there was any such complimentary *nuance* in your criticisms," said Grantie. "Anyhow there is none in mine. I find that you have not changed in the least: you are in essentials precisely the same as you always were, and I could weep over you. I talked to Edith last night, when you were taking off the Princess's shoes or something, and she quite agreed with me. She said that you were amazing in the way that you had retained your youth. But she thought that was lovely, and there I disagreed. I find it tragic. It's an awful thing, Dodo, to be youthful at your age, which is the same as mine. If you were worth anything, if you had ever got out of yourself, your life would have changed you. You say that there is a man covered with moss: well, there is a tortoise covered with its bony shell. You remain the same marvellous egotist that you were when you dazzled us all thirty years ago, and it is just because I have changed that I see through you now. You have thought about yourself for fifty-four long years. Aren't you tired of the subject yet?"

Dodo felt a keen sense of injustice in this.

"But you don't understand me," she said. "After all, I don't know how you could. You haven't got a husband and a son for whom you would do anything. Oh, and a daughter," she added hastily.

"How you enjoyed saying that!" observed Miss Grantham.

Dodo paid no attention to this very just remark, and went on as if nothing had been said.

"Dear Grantie, you only understand things on your own plane. You don't know what marriage and children mean. But I do; I've been married over and over again. Because you pat other people's children on the head, and give tea and shawls to their parents, you think you know something about devotion."

Miss Grantham looked at her watch.

"If Jack or you had to die in a quarter of an hour's time, that is to say at five minutes to four in horrible agony, which would you choose?" she asked.

"But that's impossible," said Dodo in some agitation. "You are putting ridiculous cases."

"They are ridiculous cases, because you know what your choice would be, and don't want to confess it," said Grantie. "I don't press for an answer, but it was your own fault that I asked the question since you talked nonsense about devotion which I can't understand. I merely inquired into its nature. That's all; it is finished."

"Grantie, I hate you," said Dodo. "Why don't you make the best of other people, as I always do?"

"Simply because they insist on making the worst of themselves, and it would be rude to disagree with them," said Grantie.

"You are a sour old maid," said Dodo with some heat.

Miss Grantham spoke to the terrace generally in a detached manner.

"Why don't you make the best of people as I always do?" she quoted.

Dodo laughed.

"Oh yes, you scored," she said. "But to be serious a moment instead of pea-shooting each other. I allow you have hit me on the nose several times with devilish accuracy and hard, wet peas. What fun it used to be – "

"To be serious a moment – " said Grantie.

"That's another pea; don't do it. To be serious, as I said before, do you really suppose that you can alter your character? It always seems to me the one unchangeable thing. A thoroughly selfish woman can make herself behave unselfishly, just as a greedy person can starve himself, but they remain just as selfish and greedy as before. Oh, Grantie, I've got a dreadful nature, and the only thing to be done is to blow soap-bubbles all over it, so that it appears to be iridescent."

"You don't really believe that about yourself," said Grantie.

Dodo groaned.

"I know I don't," she said. "I know nothing about myself. When David thinks I am adorable, I quite agree with him, and when you tell me that I am a worm, I look wildly round for the thrush that is going to eat me. There's one on the lawn now; it may be that one. Shoo! you nasty bird!" she cried.

The thrush scudded off into the bushes at the sound of Dodo's shrill voice and clapped hands.

"So it isn't that one. What a relief!" said Dodo. "But what's to be done?"

"Knit!" said Miss Grantham firmly. "Sew! Get out of yourself! Play the piano!"

"But I should only think how beautifully I was playing it," said Dodo. "All you say is true, Grantie; that's the beastly thing about you, but it's all no use. Listen at that fortunate Cherman snoring! He isn't thinking about himself; he's not thinking about anything at all. I wish I was eighty. It's better to be in a bath-chair than in a cage. We are all in cages, at least I am, and you are a raven in a cage. You croak, and you peck me if I come near you. Iron bars do make a cage, whatever Lovelace thought about it, if the iron bars are your own temperament. I can't get out, and isn't it awful?"

Dodo gave a great sigh, and lit a cigarette.

"I shall forget all about it in two minutes," she said, "and that's the really hopeless thing about me. I feel deeply for a few seconds, and then I feel equally deeply about something perfectly different. Just now I long for something to happen which will break the bars or open my cage. And yet it is such a comfortable one. That's the matter with all of us, me with my egotism, and you with your school-feasts. We're all far too cosy and prosperous. 'See saw, Margery Daw!' We're all swinging in an apple-tree. The rope has got to break, and we must all go bump, if we hope for salvation. It must be something big, something dreadful. If Jack lost all his property, and went utterly bankrupt, that wouldn't help me. I should get an old wheezy barrel-organ and parade the streets and squares in London, singing in a cracked voice, and have a lovely time. Or I should get a situation at a tea-shop, or I should chaperon climbers, and it would all amuse me, and I shouldn't change one atom. Really I don't think anything would do me any good except the Day of Judgment... Thank God, here's Hughie; I am getting rather insane. Hughie, what have you been doing, and if so, are you happy, and if so, how dare you be happy? Why are you happy?"

Hughie considered these questions, and ticked the answers off on his fingers.

"I've been doing nothing," he said, "and I dare to be happy. I don't know why. But again, why shouldn't I be?"

"But why should you? What have you done to deserve it? Catechise him, Grantie, because it's Sunday afternoon, and make him confess that he's got a horrid nature, and ought to be miserable."

"Go ahead," said Hugh. "But it's no use trying to make me confess that I've got a horrid nature. I haven't. I've got rather a nice one."

"Then you are wrapped up in self-esteem," said Dodo, "and I'm better than you."

Hugh, seated on the terrace, looked up at Dodo with the mild, quiet surprise that he exhibited when his aeroplane engine miss-fired.

"Of course you are," he said. "So why not play croquet? Then I shall be better than you."

"But I want to know what makes you happy. Grantie's been stirring me up, and making me feel muddy. I've been telling her all the good reasons why I lead the life that suits me – "

Grantie gave a loud croak of dissent, like the raven to which Dodo had compared her.

"That bears not the most distant relation to truth," she said. "What you have been doing is to give all sorts of bad reasons why I shouldn't lead the life that suits me."

Dodo paid no attention to this.

"And she's been making me say that the Day of Judgment is the only thing that will do me any good. She has been ferreting me out, like a rabbit, and making me confused. It isn't the real me that she has bolted. When you ferret rabbits, you get rabbits that are fussed and frightened and in a hurry; they aren't normal rabbits. Grantie, you are a mixture between a raven and a ferret and a gadfly – a marvellous hybrid, as yet unknown to books on natural history. You have pink eyes, and a horny beak and a sting. I want Jack. Where is Jack? Oh, he's still out with that dear old Cherman governess. And listen – oh, it has stopped!"

Dodo looked up at the window from which the noises of repose had come, and at the moment a large suffused face looked down.

"Also, your garden-party awoke me," said its injured owner. "I was dreaming a pleasant dream, and then in my dream there came noise. I was in the restaurant at the Ritz, and it was dinner, and then people at the next table began talking and laughing, and I could no more attend to my dinner, and then I awoke, and it was all true except the Ritz and the dinner, for there were people talking and laughing, and so I awoke. And so it was a dream, and yet it was not a dream. Where is the Princess? She is not home yet? I will play croquet, and I will win and I will have my tea."

"Yes, do come down, sir," said Dodo. "It was me talking."

"Also, in English you should say 'I' not 'me,'" said this profound scholar.

"No, sir, you shouldn't," said Dodo. "You say 'I' when you're learning English, because that is correct, and when you've learned it you say 'me.'"

"So! Then me will come and play croquet. Ha! You see I have learned English so quickly. First will me put on my white pantaloons, and then I will play croquet. Auf wiedersehen."

Dodo looked across at Grantie.

"You shall play with him," she said in an encouraging whisper. "Devotion to others, darling! Duty! Change! Expansion of soul and development of character! All that we've been talking about which I haven't got."

Dodo strolled away with her son-in-law when she had seen Grantie firmly embarked on a game with the Prince, who played with even more deliberation than his opponents found so wearing when he played bridge, and with a thoroughly East Prussian thoroughness. He very soon made up his mind that he was a player of more resource than Grantie, and so arranged to have a stake of five marks on the game. This made it a peculiarly serious business, and one that entailed a great deal of stooping down behind the ball he was playing with, and accurately aligning his mallet in the direction of the object. Having done this he got up with creaks from his stiff white pantaloons, and clinging to the handle of his mallet, as to a life-buoy, while keeping it unmoved, bent down again to pick up his spectacles which had always fallen off. He answered, in fact, perfectly to Edith's definition of the German spirit as the unhurrying and relentless entity which spared no trouble in securing a certain advance towards its appointed end. As exemplified by Prince Albert the efficiency of this industrious labour had to be supplemented by a ruthless system of cheating. The moment he thought that Miss Grantham's eye

was occupied in other directions, he rolled his ball by a stealthy movement of his foot into a more advantageous position for his next stroke, and made any little surreptitious adjustment that might tend to confound his adversary. Unfortunately it was a very short time before Miss Grantham awoke to these manœuvres, and proceeded to take counter-offensive measures of a more than neutralising character. For instance, the moment he had aligned his mallet, and bent down for the second time to pick up his spectacles, she shifted the position of the ball at which he had taken his aim, and if possible, put the wire of a hoop between him and it, or if that was not feasible, merely kicked it a foot or two away, for she had observed that on rising again for the second time he paid no more attention to where the object ball was but devoted his mind to hitting in the direction in which he had laid his mallet. He hit his own ball extremely true. Grantie, so far from having any compunction about this, felt that she was merely doing her proper part; if these were the German rules, it was incumbent on her to observe them... At other times, if she hoped to make a hoop herself, she merely trundled her ball into an easier position.

Slowly and calmly, like the light of morning, the fact of these manœuvres made to match his own dawned on him, and he unblushingly proposed an abandonment of these tactics.

"Also, as it is," he said, "first I cheat, and then you cheat. I do not gain if we do so, so where is the use? Always there is a wire when I hit at your ball, and then I go bump, and I do not gain. So no longer will I move my ball, and no longer shall you. Shall that be a bargain, an agreement? There is no gain if we both do so. I did not know that in England you played so."

Dodo had returned by this time, with David holding on to her hand, and heard the ratification of this infamous bargain.

"Oh, Grantie, how I despise you," she said, "and how comfortable that makes me feel. You have lowered yourself, darling; you have come down from your pedestal."

The game had got to an exciting stage, and a loud hoarse voice interrupted.

"Also my ball skipped," cried the Prince. "It ran and rolled and then it did skip over the other ball. It is no game on such a carpet. It is madness to have marks on the game when my ball skips like that. It ran and it rolled and then it skipped. I play for nothing if my ball skips. If again my ball skips, I will pay no marks."

Edith had joined Dodo on the edge of the lawn.

"That's Berlin all over," she observed.

David lifted up a shrill treble.

"Mummie, I don't understand this game," he said very distinctly. "May I cheat when I play croquet? First he cheated and then she cheated: I watched them from the nursery. And what are marks?"

Dodo devoted her entire attention to David.

"They are slipper-marks," she said brilliantly. "You shall get them if ever I catch you cheating at croquet."

"But has he got – " began David.

"Quantities! Shut up, darling!"

This international event was protracted till dressing-time was imminent, and during the last half-hour of it the Prince was the prey of the most atrocious anxieties. If the game was abandoned, no decision would be reached, and he would not get his five marks, of which he, in the present state of affairs, felt that he was morally possessed. On the other hand, if they fought it out to the bitter stump, dinner must either be put off, which in itself made a tragedy of this pleasant day, or he would be late for dinner, which was almost as terrible. By way of saving time he debated these contingencies very slowly to his wife.

"If I stop I do not win," he said, "and if I do not stop, I may yet be beaten, and also it will be after dinner-time. I am puzzled. I do not know what I shall do. I do not win if I stop – "

"Dearest, you must stop talking," said she briskly, "and go to hit your ball. Dodo will put off dinner till half-past eight, but we cannot all starve because of your five marks."

"But it is not five marks alone," said he. "It is also glory. Ha! I have thought, and I will tell you what I shall do. I shall play till half-past eight and then if it is not finished, I will come to dinner in my white pantaloons, and I will not clean myself. So!"

"But you cannot dine in your white pantaloons," said she. "It would be too screaming!"

"But I will dine in my white pantaloons, whether they scream, or whether they do not scream. Often have I at Allenstein dined in my white pantaloons, and if I do not clean myself, I am still clean. So do not talk any more, Sophy, for I shall do as I please, and I shall please to dine in my white pantaloons if the game is not over. See! I strike! Ach! I did not stoop. I did not look. But I will not be hurried... But look, I have hit another ball. That is good! My ball did not skip that time, and I will have five marks. Now you shall see what I do!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.