Bryce Charles

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	15
CHAPTER III	22
CHAPTER IV	32
CHAPTER V	42
CHAPTER VI	52
CHAPTER VII	60
CHAPTER VIII	77
CHAPTER IX	87
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	101

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CHAPTER I

The room looked very cool in the afternoon light. A few bowls of white roses that were arranged about it seemed to lend it an aspect of more than usual specklessness.

To Madame Querterot, a person of no taste, who made no pretension of being fastidious, and who had, moreover, little sympathy with a passion for cleanliness when this was carried to exaggeration, the airy lightness of the place suggested the convent school of her youthful days; and, bringing again before her the figure of a stern sister superior who had been accustomed in those vanished times to deal out severe penalties to the youthful but constantly erring Justine, caused her invariably to enter Mrs. Vanderstein's bedroom after a quick intake of the breath on the threshold, as if she were about to plunge into an icy bath.

Mrs. Vanderstein, ever the essence of punctuality, was ready for her on this particular evening, as she always was.

Wrapped in some diaphanous white garment, which she would perhaps have called a dressing-gown, she lay on a silk covered sofa and lazily watched Madame Querterot unpacking the little

bag in which she carried the accessories of her profession, that of a hairdresser and beauty specialist.

"You must make me very beautiful to-night, Madame Justine," she said, with a smile. "We are going to hear *La Bohème*, and the Queen will be there. My box is nearly opposite the Royal box, and in case Her Majesty's eyes fall in my direction I wish to look my best."

"All eyes will not fail to be directed to your side of the theatre, madame," replied Madame Querterot, taking out her collection of pomade pots, powder boxes and washes, and arranging them in a semicircle upon a Louis XVI table. "Royalties know the use of opera glasses as well as any citizen. As for making you beautiful, the good God has occupied Himself with that! I can only preserve what I find. I can make your beauty endure, madame. More than that one must not ask of me. I am not the good God, me!" and Madame Querterot's plump shoulders shook with easy merriment.

Mrs. Vanderstein, too, smiled. She did not suffer from any affectation of modesty as far as her obvious good looks were concerned. But she was obliged to own regretfully – though only to herself – that she was no longer as young as she had been; and the masseuse's assurances that her youthful appearance could be indefinitely preserved fell on her ears as melodiously as if they were indeed a prelude to the magic strains that would presently rise to charm her through the envied, if stuffy atmosphere of Covent Garden.

"You are a flatterer, Madame Justine," she murmured. Then, before she laid her head back against the cushions and gave herself up to Madame Querterot's ministrations, she called to a figure that was seated in the window, half hidden among the muslin curtains that fluttered before it: "Barbara, be sure and tell me if you see anything interesting."

Barbara Turner answered without looking round:

"Nothing has come yet, but I am keeping a good look-out."

Mrs. Vanderstein closed her eyes, and Madame Querterot, after turning up her sleeves and arraying herself in an apron, began to pass her short fingers over the placid features and smooth skin of the lady's face. For a time nothing else stirred in the big room.

A ray of sunlight passed very slowly across a portion of the grey panelled walls, and coming to a gilded mirror climbed cautiously over the carved frame, only to be caught and held a while on the flashing surface of the looking-glass.

On every side the subdued gold of ancient frames, surrounding priceless pictures that had been acquired by the help of the excellent judgment and long purse of the late Mr. Vanderstein, shone softly and pleasantly.

The furniture, of the best period of the reign of Louis XVI – as was the case all over the house – had been collected by the same unerring connoisseur, and each piece would have been welcomed with tears of joy by many an eager director of museums.

The thick carpet that covered the floor exactly matched the

pale grey tone of the walls and upholstery, and the extreme lightness of these imparted that air of great luxury which the lavish use of fragile colours, in a town as dirty as London, does more to convey than any more ostentatious sign of extravagance.

Through the open casements many noises rose from the street, for the bedroom was at the front of the house, which stood in a street in Mayfair immediately opposite to a great hotel where the overflow of foreign Royalty is frequently sheltered at times of Court festivals, when the hospitable walls of the Palace are filled to bursting point.

The coming and going of these distinguished guests was always a source of the most unquenchable interest to Mrs. Vanderstein, to whom every trivial action, if it were performed by any sort of a Highness, was brimming with thrilling suggestion.

At the period of which I speak, London was astir with preparations for a great function, and representatives of the Courts of Europe were arriving by every train from the Continent.

Mrs. Vanderstein could hear the sounds of a constant stream of carriages and motors stopping or starting below her window, and knew that it was not to her door that they crowded, but across the road under the magnificent stucco portico of Fianti's Hotel.

"Barbara, has no one interesting appeared?" she called again after a few minutes.

"Not yet," was the reply. "There's a victoria driving along the street now, though, which looks something like a Royal turnout.

Rather a nice looking pair in it."

"Is it a pair of foreign looking gentlemen?" asked Mrs. Vanderstein excitedly.

"No, a pair of Cleveland bays. I hate them as a rule, but from here they don't look bad. All back, though, of course."

"My dear girl, do tell me about the people. I don't want to hear about your horrid horses. I believe all sorts of celebrities go in and out of Fianti's while I am lying here, and you never even notice them."

"Yes, yes, I do," said Barbara. "I will call you directly any one passes who looks as if he might be accustomed to wield the sceptre, or who is wearing a crown over his top hat."

Mrs. Vanderstein made a little impatient movement. It annoyed her that her companion did not take her duties more seriously – did not, in fact, seem to understand how much more important was this task of keeping a good look-out in the wide bow of the window than any of the others that she was apt to approach in a quite admirable spirit of thoroughness. Why, wondered Mrs. Vanderstein, could the girl not do as she was asked in this matter, without making those attempts to be facetious which appeared so ill-advised, and which fell so extremely flat, as a moment's observation would have made apparent to her? She did not make jokes about the flowers while she arranged them, nor about Mrs. Vanderstein's correspondence, to which it was her business to attend. She was able to answer the telephone or order the carriage without

indulging in unseemly giggles. Why then, in heaven's name, couldn't she take up her post of observation at the window without finding in it an excuse for pleasantries as dull as they were pointless?

Mrs. Vanderstein sighed deeply and wriggled her head deeper in the cushions.

Madame Querterot saw the cloud and guessed very easily what had caused it: she had often noticed similar disturbances of her customer's otherwise easy-going temper. Knowing with remarkable accuracy on which side of her bread the butter was applied, she at once set herself to calm the troubled waters.

"You did not see me to-day, madame," she began, "but me, I have already seen you. I passed in Piccadilly where your auto was stopped in a block before the Ritz."

"Yes, we were kept there quite a long time, but I did not see you, Madame Justine," said Mrs. Vanderstein indifferently.

"How should you have seen me? I was in a bus. It's not there that you would look for your acquaintances. That understands itself! But I was not the only one to see you, and what I heard said of you then will make you smile. I said to myself at the moment, 'It is quite natural, Justine, but it will make her laugh all the same.'"

"What was it? Who can have said anything of me in an omnibus?"

"Ah, madame! Even in buses people do not cease to talk. One hears things to make one twist with laughter! But one hears the

truth too, sometimes, and this young man, even if he made a mistake, one cannot surprise oneself at that!"

"But you do not tell me what you heard," cried Mrs. Vanderstein.

"It was this young man of whom I speak to you. He was a nice smart looking young gentleman, and he had with him a lady, well dressed and very chic. What they did in that *galère* I know not, but as we passed the Ritz he touched his companion on the arm and pointed out of the window. 'Look, Alice,' said he, 'you see the dark lady in that motor? It is the Russian Princess they talk so much about, Princess Sonia. Is she not handsome? She was pointed out to me last night at the Foreign Office reception.' The lady he called Alice looked where he pointed and every one in the bus looked also. I, too, turned round and followed the eyes of the others. And who did I see, madame? Can you not guess? It was at you they looked, as you sat there in your beautiful car with Mademoiselle Turner beside you. You, with your flowers and your pretty hat with the long white feather, and your wonderful pearls. And your face, madame! But I must not permit myself to speak of that!"

"You talk great nonsense, and I do not believe a word you say," said Mrs. Vanderstein gaily, her good-humour more than restored. "No one could mistake me for a moment for the beautiful Princess Sonia."

"Nevertheless, madame, it happened as I say. And I see nothing strange about it. It was a very natural mistake, as anyone

who has seen both you and the Princess will readily agree."

Madame Querterot had not seen the Princess herself, but she had studied her photograph in the illustrated papers and devoutly hoped that Mrs. Vanderstein had not herself met the lady at closer quarters.

"The poor young man was not near enough to observe my wrinkles and my double chin, Madame Justine!"

"Bah! You will have forgotten the word wrinkle, which is not *d'ailleurs* a pretty one, by the time I have finished giving you my course of treatment. And as for a double chin, look at me, madame! I assure you that, in my time, I have developed no less than five double chins. And I have rubbed them all away. Do you suppose, then, that I shall allow you to have one?"

Mrs. Vanderstein looked as she was bidden. Indeed she lost no opportunity of studying the countenance of the little Frenchwoman, who, on her own admission, was at least ten years older than herself, but whose face was as smooth and unlined as that of a girl, though there was an indefinable something in the expression, an experienced glimmer, perhaps, in the eyes, that prevented her appearance from being entirely youthful.

Still, she might very well have been taken for Mrs. Vanderstein's junior, even for her younger sister, possibly, if she had been as well dressed, for there was a certain resemblance between the two women. Both were short and plump, both had long oval faces and brown eyes set rather near together beneath arched, well-marked eyebrows, and, though Madame Querterot

had not a drop of Jewish blood in her veins and her nose did not assume the Hebraic droop that in Mrs. Vanderstein betrayed her race, yet it was distinctly of the hooked variety and gave her a family likeness to the children of Israel, on which fact her relations and friends had frequently considered it entertaining to dwell. Her hair, however, was golden and fluffy, curling about her head with a juvenile abandon; while Mrs. Vanderstein's dark, straight locks were simply and severely dressed at the back, and concealed on her forehead by a large, flat curled fringe in the manner affected by the English Royal ladies.

Mrs. Vanderstein at all events was sincere in her admirations.

"If you can make me look as young as you do," she said now, "I ask nothing better. But indeed London in this hot weather is very wearing, and I see myself grow older every morning. To-day it was oppressive to drive even in an open motor."

To drive? Ah! Madame Querterot was not imaginative, but a vision of the crowded bus in which she went about her business floated before her, side by side with one of a rushing motor car; and she paused in her work for a minute and looked around her.

An electric fan revolved tirelessly above the window, and on a table at the foot of the bed was placed a large block of ice, half hidden in flowers and ferns. She raised herself, inhaling the cool air in long, deep breaths.

"It has been hot, very hot, these last days," she admitted. "It reminds me of our beautiful Paris, and of much in my young days that I would be content to forget," she added, with a laugh. "Ah,

the room in that city, in which as a girl I used to work; the little dark room where I learnt my trade! It was hot in that room in the summer. But, madame, I could not tell you how hot it was. I remember one of the girls who used to pray quite seriously to die, because, she explained to us, wherever she went in another world it could not fail to be more cool. It was over a baker's kitchen and had no window except one which gave on to a sort of shaft that ran up the middle of the house, so that we had the gas always burning. Oh, la, la!"

"How dreadful!" murmured Mrs. Vanderstein comfortably. "I wonder it was allowed."

"Allowed? Ah, madame, there are plenty of worse workrooms than that in Paris. I wonder what you would say if you could see your dresses made! We liked it very well in the winter, for there were no stairs, and it was agreeable then to shut the window and profit by the warmth from the kitchen. That was all long ago, before I married that poor Eugène and came to live in London. They were, all the same, not so bad, those days. Ah, la jeunesse, la belle jeunesse, which one does not know how to enjoy when one has it."

Madame Querterot crossed over to the table and laid her hands on the block of ice, casting a glance over her shoulder to the window where Barbara sat at her sentry post. The motionless, silent figure annoyed Madame Querterot. To be conscious that all her chatter was overheard by that quiet listener got on her nerves and sometimes made her, as she said, feel as if her own

words would suffocate her. There was so much she could have said to Mrs. Vanderstein from time to time if they had been alone – much that she instinctively felt would have been very acceptable to that lady – but in the presence of Miss Turner, even though nothing of her were visible except the back of her head, there were, it appeared, lengths of flattery to which Madame Querterot found herself incapable of proceeding. Thus did a feeling of awkwardness, some sense of restraint, cast a certain gloom over hours that should have been the brightest in the day.

"These roses, madame, how fine they are," she murmured, bending towards a bowl that stood on the table, and unconsciously her voice took on a note of defiance as she faced the window. "They are as beautiful as if they were artificial. One would say they were made of silk!"

Mrs. Vanderstein laughed tolerantly, but Barbara, her face turned to the street, made a naughty face.

Madame Querterot, with hands ice cool, went back to her massage, and for a little while again no one spoke.

Suddenly Barbara turned.

"Here comes a Royal carriage," she said. "I think it is Prince Felipe of Targona and his mother."

"Oh I must see them," cried Mrs. Vanderstein, jumping up, and brushing Madame Querterot unceremoniously aside. "Where are they?" She ran to the window.

The masseuse followed more slowly, and three heads were thrust out over the street.

CHAPTER II

A carriage was driving up to the steps of Fianti's.

To allow it to approach, a waiting motor was obliged to move away, and in the short interval that elapsed while this was being wound up and started off the carriage paused almost immediately opposite the window of Mrs. Vanderstein's bedroom; she had thus a better view of its occupants than it had ever previously been her fortune to obtain.

On the right of the barouche sat an elderly lady, with grey hair piled high under a very small black hat. She sat very upright and stiff, giving a little nervous start when the horses moved forward impatiently and were drawn up with a jerk by the coachman.

"That is the Princess," said Barbara, whose head was touching Mrs. Vanderstein's.

Prince Felipe sat beside his mother, a middle-aged young man of forty with a black upturned moustache and an eyeglass. He had a cigarette in his hand and, as they looked, he turned round and gazed after a smartly dressed woman who was driving by.

On the back seat of the carriage sat two other men – gentlemen in waiting, no doubt.

Mrs. Vanderstein's eyes were, however, fully occupied with the Princess and her son.

"Isn't he handsome?" she whispered to Barbara, as if there were a danger of being overheard above the rattle and din of the

busy roadway.

But it almost seemed as if the words reached the ears of the man she was watching, for, the motor in the portico having at last got under way and left the road clear for Their Highnesses, the Prince threw back his head as the carriage moved on, and looking up met Mrs. Vanderstein's eyes fixed admiringly on him.

She drew back her head in some confusion, but the Prince was still looking up when the barouche disappeared in the shade of the portico.

"Madame! Son Altesse vous a reconnue!" cried Madame Querterot, her face wreathed in smiles.

"He never saw me before," replied Mrs. Vanderstein, retreating into the room. "How odd that he should have looked up just then! What a charming face he has." And she subsided once more on the sofa, her own face aglow with excitement and pleasure.

"Don't move from the window, Barbara, whatever you do," she said. "Just think if we had missed them!"

As Madame Querterot resumed her rubbing, a knock came at the door, and Mrs. Vanderstein's maid entered bearing the jewels her mistress intended wearing that night at the opera. As she set the cases down on the dressing-table and busied herself in laying out the various garments of her mistress' evening toilet, she cast from time to time disapproving glances in the direction of Madame Querterot, whom, although a compatriot, she disliked very heartily, considering that in the privacy of Mrs.

Vanderstein's chamber any ministrations besides her own were unnecessary, and having altogether a strong tendency to look upon her countrywoman as an interloper, who had possibly an eye to a share in various perquisites for which Amélie preferred to see no other candidate in the field.

She took an elaborate gown from the wardrobe and spread it out upon the bed together with divers other articles of attire. She placed a jug of hot water in the basin and a jar of aromatic salts beside it.

She straightened several objects on the dressing-table, which had no need of being made straight; tilted the looking-glass forward and tilted it back again; lifted up a chair and set it down with a thud; and finally, despairing of ever witnessing the departure of her dreaded rival, was about to leave the room when her mistress' voice called her back.

"Amélie," she said, "just show me what necklace you have brought up for me to-night. Is it the one with the flower pendants or the stone drops?"

Amélie carried all the cases over to the sofa; and Madame Querterot left off rubbing while Mrs. Vanderstein sat up and opened them one by one.

In the largest a magnificent diamond necklace, imitating a garland of wild roses and their leaves, glistened against its blue velvet background. The other cases, when opened, displayed bracelets and a diamond tiara, as well as rings and a pair of ear-rings formed of immense single stones.

Mrs. Vanderstein shut them all up again and handed them back to Amélie.

"Take them down again to Blake," she said, "and tell him I have changed my mind and will wear the emeralds instead. They go better with that dress."

"Ah, madame," sighed Madame Querterot, as Amélie departed with the jewels, "what marvellous diamonds! Wherever one goes one hears the jewels of Mrs. Vanderstein spoken of."

"It is true," said Mrs. Vanderstein, "that my jewels are very good. My dear husband had a passion for them and collected stones as another man collects bric-à-brac. He never made a mistake, they say, and my ornaments are rather out of the way in consequence. For myself I feel it an extravagance to lock up such a vast amount of capital in mere gewgaws."

"My poor Eugène," said Madame Querterot, "had also this same enthusiasm for precious stones. He loved so to adorn his wife with diamonds, that dear soul! But with him it was, alas, more than an extravagance. It was our ruin; for he was not a connoisseur, like monsieur votre mari, and when the crisis came and we would have turned my jewellery back into money, behold, we were told that we had been cheated in our purchases, and that, for the most part, the stones were without value. Ah, the sad day! As you know, madame, bankruptcy followed, and we had to give up our beautiful *établissement* in Bond Street. It broke the heart of that poor Eugène. He never recovered from the blow and soon left me, I trust for a happier world, by way, it goes without

saying, of purgatory," added the masseuse, crossing herself like a good Catholic. "Since that day I have faced the troubles of this life alone, without friendship, without sympathy."

Here her emotion overcame Madame Querterot, and she turned away for a moment with a display of her handkerchief. She had omitted from her affecting narrative the fact that "that poor Eugène" had perished by his own hand, on discovering the state of his affairs; and she slightly trifled with the truth when she asserted that it was his unfortunate craze for covering his wife with jewels which had brought about such a disastrous state of things. It was Madame Querterot's own passion for the adornment of her person that had resulted in the dissipation of Eugène's savings, and brought him, at the last, to see with despair the total disappearance of the business, which she had neglected and ruined.

Mrs. Vanderstein's kind heart was touched.

She had heard vaguely the reason of the Querterots' removal from their gorgeous Bond Street rooms after the death of Eugène, the incomparable hairdresser, and it was from a creditable desire not to desert the unfortunate that she continued to employ the little Frenchwoman since the day of the catastrophe. But no details of the affair had reached her, and she now heard for the first time, and not without being sincerely moved, the sad story of a man who, having spent his all in lavishing tokens of affection on his wife, had in the end reduced her to a state of poverty bordering on want, and even left her to confront this terror in

solitude, as a result of his misdirected tenderness.

Considerably affected, she tried to speak words of comfort to the poor woman.

"It is dreadfully sad," she murmured. "Poor Madame Justine, how sorry I am. Your poor husband, I see well how he must have adored you and that what he did was all for the best. But you are not absolutely alone in the world, are you? Have you not a daughter?"

"Yes, it is true, madame, that I have a daughter," replied Madame Querterot, wiping her eyes and resuming her work.

"And she is no doubt a great comfort to you?"

"Children, madame, are at once a joy and a trouble," returned the masseuse evasively.

"I hope your daughter has not caused you much trouble."

"She has given me nothing but worry since the day she was born. Her childhood, her education, her illnesses! Measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps, scarlet fever; she has had them all one after the other."

"But not while you have been coming to see me!" cried Mrs. Vanderstein, alarmed.

"Ah no, madame, all that is long finished," replied Madame Querterot, "but since then I have been obliged to provide for her education, and every year she has become more expensive. Now she is eighteen, and you would imagine her anxious to repay some of the expense and *ennuis* she has caused me during all these years."

"Yes, no doubt," agreed Mrs. Vanderstein, "she will be a great help to you now."

"So one would think. But figure to yourself, madame, what this young girl proposes to me to do with her life. She desires to enter a convent and to spend her days in good works rather than be of assistance to her mother!" and Madame Querterot laughed bitterly.

"I think she ought not to take such a decisive step at present," said Mrs. Vanderstein; "at the age of eighteen she can hardly know if a religious life is really her vocation."

"She is obstinate like a donkey, madame. Just think of it, a young girl, healthy, not ugly; already she has had offers of marriage. There is a young man, very *bien*, very *comme il faut*, who demands her hand and who thinks of nothing but her. But will she take him? No. Not at all. We prefer to be a religious; and *voilà*!"

Madame Querterot, having finished her massaging, was repacking the brown bag in which she had brought her apparatus.

"I hope that you will amuse yourself at the opera, madame," she went on, folding her apron and laying it on top of the other things in the bag, the lock of which clicked as she shut it down with an impatient snap.

"A demain, mesdames," she concluded, taking up the bag by the handle and giving it a shake as if she only wished she could so shake her unsatisfactory child. "A cette heure-ci, n'est-ce pas?"

And with that she bowed herself from the room.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Vanderstein and Barbara hurried over their dinner and were early in their places in Covent Garden. Mrs. Vanderstein always arrived before the orchestra had tuned up. She had, like many of her race, a great appreciation of music and did not like to miss a bar of the overture, even though she had already heard the opera that was being given so often that she knew it by heart.

She felt very much in a mood to enjoy herself that evening, and till the first act was over leant back in her chair with half-closed eyes, hardly moving at all, and absolutely absorbed in listening to the wonderful singers who were that night interpreting Puccini's melodious work. Even the Royal box opposite barely distracted her attention for more than a few moments.

Barbara Turner was not musical, but she, too, was always pleased to go to the opera. She liked the sensation of luxury, which enveloped her there even more than elsewhere; she liked the feeling that the entertainment offered them was costing a huge amount of money, and therefore could only be witnessed by a privileged few. Although she laughed at Mrs. Vanderstein's passion for Royalty, she shared her simple satisfaction in the knowledge that the box in which they were now sitting was sandwiched between that occupied by the Duke of Mellinborough on their left, and the one tenanted by Sir Ian Fyves, the sporting Scotch millionaire.

Barbara rejoiced in the exclusiveness obtainable by the rich, therein differing from some other people who depreciate the advantages of wealth on the grounds that the largest fortunes may be made and handled by the most vulgar, and that banking accounts are not in these days the exclusive property of the refined, or even of the intellectual.

Mrs. Vanderstein made no secret of the benefit to her health derived from hours spent in the closest proximity to the aristocracy, the air inhaled by a duchess being separated from that which filled her own lungs merely by the thinnest of partitions. She invariably occupied the chair on the left-hand side of the box, so that the space between her and her unseen neighbours might be thought of in terms of inches; and it cannot be denied that Barbara herself relished the thought of the company of the great who surrounded her, heedless though they might be of the pleasure they were providing. It was not really to be expected, besides, that the nearness of Sir Ian Fyves, whose horse had already so easily won the Derby the year before, and who was again the lucky owner of the favourite for the coming contest, should leave unmoved the daughter of Bill Turner, the trainer.

All Barbara's childhood had been passed at Newmarket, and the talk of the racing men with whom her father associated had been the first to fall on her infantile ears. The horses in his charge had grown to be her chief interest in life, as they were that of every one she was brought in contact with; and at the age of ten

she knew as much about them – their points, prowess, value, and chances – as any stable boy on the place. On a small but truculent pony she followed her father and his friends to the heath in the early mornings and watched the morning gallops with a critical eye; with the same edifying companions she pottered about the stableyard during most of the rest of the day, and only when bed-time came – and it came at eight o'clock, for on that one point her father was firm – was she reluctantly torn away.

All Mr. Vanderstein's horses were trained by her father, and many a time the childish eyes followed them to victory.

In earlier days, before Barbara had made her bow upon the scene, Turner had been associated in various affairs of business with Mr. Vanderstein, then plain Mr. Moses Stein, familiarly known to his intimates of those days by the endearing nickname of Nosey Stein; sometimes in moments of rare affection, when some particularly brilliant *coup* had just been brought off, he was alluded to as Nosey Posey.

Mrs. Vanderstein, then Miss Ruth Hengersohn, had changed all this. The name of Stein was repugnant to her, though it seems a good enough sort of appellation in its way; Nosey or Nosey Posey she could only think of with a shudder; while the idea of being herself known as Mrs. Nosey filled her with a burning determination, which, as it cooled, hardened to the inflexible consistency of chilled steel.

Before their marriage took place, Mr. Stein, who always admiringly recognised, when he met it, a will more adamant

than his own, had at great trouble, inconvenience, and expense changed his name for that of Vanderstein, by which he was afterwards known.

The enterprises, chiefly connected with the promotion of companies, in which this gentleman had, in his early, forgotten – and best forgotten – youth, the assistance and co-operation of Mr. William Turner, were in their nature precarious and not a source, unfortunately, of the profit foreseen by those who set out upon them.

At the conclusion of one of them, indeed, things took on a very unexpected complexion, assuming in the twinkling of an eye so disagreeable a hue, that the directors of the company, whose management was suddenly the centre of attraction and which was in danger of receiving a most unwelcome, if flattering, attention from the public prosecutor, thought it best to disappear with a rapidity and unobtrusiveness highly creditable to a modest desire for self-effacement at a moment when free advertisement was within the grasp of each of them.

Luckily for Mr. Stein, his name did not appear among those who sat on the board of this particular company and he was able to pursue his way in a retiring and profitable manner; but it was otherwise with his less fortunate friend, Bill Turner.

It was to the search for this worthy though too incautious person that the efforts of the authorities were principally directed; and it was only by returning once more, under an assumed name, to the racing circles which he had during a

short interval forsaken for the city, and still further owing to the absence of the chief witness for the prosecution, whose whereabouts could not for a long time be ascertained, that Turner was able to escape the fate which ought assuredly to have been his.

He settled finally at Newmarket, and married the daughter of a neighbouring squire, who never spoke again to a child who could so far forget her father's position and ignore his commands as to unite herself to the more than questionable William.

The poor lady, however, took her revenge on her relations, and her leave of a world in which she had found time to suffer some disillusions, on the day that saw Barbara ushered into the light; so that the little girl was left to grow up entirely in that odour of the stables which her father preferred, in his heart, to any more delicate perfume.

It was not until she was ten years old that Turner began to suffer from the attentions of blackmailers, but these, having once discovered him, saw in him a mine of gold which they fondly expected to prove inexhaustible. Such, however, was not the case. After a year's persecution the wretched man found himself penniless, and on the advice of Vanderstein, the only one of his old pals who did not ignore him in his trouble, he left the country with precipitation and secrecy.

So little was his intention suspected that he eluded all further detection and bolted successfully to South America, where he remained untraced by undesirable acquaintances and finally

drank himself to death after several years of the most gratifying obscurity.

Turner's only regret at leaving England was that he could not take with him his little girl; but hampered by the company of a child escape would have been impossible, and he sorrowfully yielded to the representations of Vanderstein on that point.

The Jew promised to take charge of Barbara in the future, and assured Turner with every mark of solemnity that as long as he or his wife lived the girl should not lack a home. Turner, who knew that Vanderstein never ceased to chafe under a sense of obligations incurred in the early days of their struggles, placed every confidence in the words, and had no doubt that his friend would live up to his promises.

And Vanderstein did not fail to do so.

Barbara, whose grief at parting from her father was intense and pathetic, was comforted as best might be and sent to school at the select academy of the Misses Yorke Brown at Brighton. Here she received the best of educations in the company of about thirty other young ladies, the daughters of well-to-do middle class people. In their society she obtained a nodding acquaintance with algebra, history, science, and literature; with them she attended dancing classes, learnt a little French and German, and disported herself on the tennis court and hockey field. She roller-skated and played golf, became proficient in the art of swimming, and with a chosen and fortunate few rode daily on the downs.

At the end of six or seven years she had grown into a self-

possessed, capable young woman, a little old for her years perhaps, as was obvious to those who knew her well, but to outward appearance still a mere child, easily amused at trifles, and with a rare capacity for enjoying life, which made her a delightful companion.

Her face had an innocent and helpless expression at variance with her real nature, which was eminently self-reliant and independent. She would never forgive her mother's relations who had despised her father, and at any mention of them her large blue eyes would always flash resentfully.

Her relatives for their part made no effort to seek her out and were quite content to leave her to the Vandersteins' tender mercies.

Before Barbara left school Mr. Vanderstein died, leaving in his will a provision to the effect that his widow was to continue the care of his friend's daughter, either making her an annual allowance of £500 a year or taking her to live with her as friend and companion. There was a further bequest of £30,000 to Barbara, which was to become hers on Mrs. Vanderstein's death.

This was not the only thing in the will which filled Mrs. Vanderstein with indignation.

She found to her disgust that half the fortune, which she had formed the habit of considering hers, was left to young Joe Sidney, the son of her husband's sister. This lady had committed the horrid offence of marrying a Christian, and to her, during her lifetime, the orthodox and scandalised Moses never alluded.

Her death occurred a year or two before his own, and after it Mr. Vanderstein had displayed a certain interest in his nephew, but not enough to prepare his wife for his preposterous action in regard to the division of his money. Indeed, he expressed in the will his wish that after her death it should all go to Joe, though he left the final decision on this point to her judgment.

Old Vanderstein had amassed considerably over half a million sterling during the latter and most prosperous portion of his career, so that his widow was not altogether the pauper she was fond of declaring herself; but in the first shock of seeing her income divide itself by two she decided to save the £500 provided for Barbara and to submit instead to the infliction of her presence.

She had never seen the girl, who had, indeed, been a subject of disagreement between her husband and herself, but she was so easy-going and good-natured at heart that a very short period of Barbara's society had sufficed to change her prejudices and distrust into a warm affection, and she soon looked on her as she might have done on a younger sister.

There were occasions certainly when, if anything annoyed her, she would not refrain from pointing out to Barbara how much had been done for her and how exaggerated had been Mr. Vanderstein's views in this direction.

"My dear husband," she would exclaim, "would have ruined himself, if he had lived longer, by his own unbounded philanthropy. He was constitutionally unable to say 'no' to

anyone, and goodness knows in what difficulties he would have landed himself if time had only been afforded him. How often he would admit to me that certain people had tried to borrow from him and that he had let them have what they wanted. In vain I begged him to be more firm. He would make me promises, but I would soon discover that he had been doing the same thing again. 'My dear,' he would reply to my reproaches, 'I have really not the heart to refuse to help these poor young men.'"

Mr. Vanderstein did not bother his wife with details of his private affairs, holding that women have no concern with business; and he decidedly never thought it necessary to mention that he used a certain discretion in his benevolence, steeling himself against more supplications than she suspected.

It was true, however, that he never refused to lend money to such poor young men as were heirs to entailed estates or could offer other satisfactory security for the repayment of his kindness, and it was by these unobtrusive charities that his fortune was collected.

Mrs. Vanderstein's prejudices against Joe Sidney had also decreased very rapidly when she became acquainted with that young man, as she did shortly after his mother's death, and by the time this story begins – that is to say, three years after she herself had been left a widow – he had become a great favourite of hers, although there were still moments when she thought a little bitterly of the large sums he had deprived her of by the fact of his existence. However, she liked him well enough to let him

know that it was her intention to comply with Mr. Vanderstein's wishes in regard to the ultimate disposal of his fortune, and that her will constituted Sidney her sole legatee.

As she was only a few years older than himself and of a robust health, there was every likelihood that this provision would not affect his fortunes for many years to come, or even that she might survive him.

CHAPTER IV

When that night, during the interval between the first and second acts of the opera, the door of the box opened and Sidney made his appearance, Mrs. Vanderstein greeted him with a beaming smile and the most sincere pleasure.

"How nice to see you, dear Joe," she said. "I didn't know you were in London."

"I only came up from York last night," said her nephew, "or I should have been to see you before. The Garringdons asked me to their box, which is more or less under this, so I couldn't see if you were here, but I thought you would be."

He sat down and began to talk about his doings and to ask questions about theirs, Mrs. Vanderstein looking at him meanwhile with a feeling of gratification at the decorative effect on her box of this good looking youth. She hoped the audience, or at least some members of it, had noticed his entrance, and she thought to herself that even inconvenient nephews had their uses.

Joe Sidney was twenty-five years of age and his father's son. The late Mr. Sidney had been a very tall, fair individual, and Joe resembled him, showing the merest trace of the Jew in the droop of his nose, which, however, was not very marked. His eyes too, perhaps – but why pick to pieces a young man who really was, taken altogether, a very fine specimen of his kind? Though he had not, or scarcely had, inherited the appearance

of his mother's race, he showed much of its sympathy with art and music; and his intelligence was equalled by his prepossessing manner, which had made him a favourite since his boyhood with nearly all with whom he came in contact, and, combined with his wealth, rendered him extremely popular in the cavalry regiment in which he was a subaltern. He knew a great many smart people whose acquaintance Mrs. Vanderstein would have given her ears to make, and from time to time he invited her to meet one or two of them at a restaurant dinner or theatre, quite unconscious of the pleasure he was giving; for the very intensity of her longing made Mrs. Vanderstein shy of letting this superior young relative guess at it, and Barbara had never hinted to him at the weakness of his uncle's widow.

Poor Mrs. Vanderstein! One pities her when one reflects that if the good Moses had survived a few years, till the advent of a Radical government which was extremely short of sympathisers in the Upper House, she might have lived to hear him called "My Lord," and have answered with beating heart to the delicious salutation of "My Lady."

She seized the opportunity afforded by Sidney's presence now to gather information about the occupants of the boxes facing them. Did Joe see anyone he knew? Of course she knew by sight every one in the Royal box, except that man behind the Queen. Who was that? Sidney thought it was the Italian ambassador. What a distinguished looking man! And in the next box? Sidney didn't know. And the one beyond that? He didn't know either.

Mrs. Vanderstein was disappointed in him. Well, who did he know? Couldn't he tell her anyone?

"Really," said Sidney, "I don't see many, but there are one or two. That woman with the red face and the purple dress is Lady Generflex, and the man two boxes off hers on the right is Sir William Delaplage. Then that girl in pink who has just taken up her opera glasses is Lady Vivienne Shaw, and the man in the same box is Tom Cartwright, who was at Eton with me. Down in the stalls there are one or two men I know, and I think that's all. Of course there's old Fyves, next door. You know him, don't you?"

Mrs. Vanderstein gazed with intent interest at the people he pointed out; and then let her attention wander back to the Royal box while Sidney talked to Barbara.

"Have you been racing?" she asked him soon.

"Off and on. I went to see my horse, Benfar, run the other day. He came in easily last."

"I don't think that man can ride him well. He's a good horse. I saw him as a two-year-old."

"There's something wrong somewhere, that's certain. If I don't have better luck this year than I had last I shall give up keeping race-horses," said Sidney with decision.

"Oh, you mustn't do that," cried Barbara in a tone of so much distress that Sidney laughed.

"Why do you care?" he asked.

"I care a lot. I never see anything of racing people nowadays,

or meet anyone except you who knows a horse from a centipede. If you give up racing I shall feel that my last link of connection with the turf is severed."

"Why don't you get my aunt to bring you down to Epsom to-morrow?"

"Oh, she wouldn't like it a bit," said Barbara regretfully.

"I daresay she'd enjoy it enormously. Aunt Ruth, why don't you come racing with me sometimes? Miss Turner and I will show you the ropes and you'll probably be plunging wildly by this time next week."

"I hate spending a hot day walking from the stand to the paddock and back again," said Mrs. Vanderstein. "I hate horses and I hate seeing their heels waving round my head on every side, which seemed to me to be the case the only time I went to a race meeting. Nasty vicious animals. The way they are led about among the crowd by people who can't control them is most dangerous, I consider."

"I expect you saw one let off a kick or two out of sheer lightness of heart," said Barbara. "Horses are darlings, really; I wish you knew them as well as I do."

Mrs. Vanderstein not only disliked horses herself, but she strongly disapproved of Barbara's fondness for them. The career of the late Mr. Turner had been unedifying to such a point that even Mr. Vanderstein had been unable to disguise entirely from his wife some of its more notorious features, and Mrs. Vanderstein would have been better pleased if she could have

persuaded herself that the girl had forgotten all about the days of her companionship with so undesirable a father.

She had, moreover, no sympathy for speculation in any form, and especially mistrusted that which took the shape of gambling on the turf. Her greatest friend had married a man who had entirely ruined himself by the practice of backing losers; and the sight of the misery and privation that had, in this manner, been brought on a woman for whom she felt a sincere affection left on Mrs. Vanderstein one of those deep impressions that determine many of our strongest opinions and prejudices throughout life. To Mrs. Vanderstein betting was one of the most unpardonable sins. It was true that Mr. Vanderstein had kept a racing-stable and she had never really forgiven him for not giving it up at her request. But he had always assured her that he never betted.

She turned away without answering, and Barbara's conscience – for she knew how much her friend disliked the subject of the turf – made her think she detected an impatient expression in the back of the white shoulders and told her it would be better to change the conversation. The temptation was too strong, however, and she continued, dropping her voice to a murmur:

"You are going to Epsom to-morrow yourself?"

"Yes," said Sidney, wondering why she leant so confidentially towards him.

"Well, I wonder if you would be very kind and put a little money on a horse for me. Would it be too much trouble?"

"Not a bit. What horse is it?"

"It's a tip Ned Foster sent me. He was one of my father's grooms, you know, and I hear of him sometimes. He used to be very good to me when I was a child. I had a letter from him to-day begging me to back Averstone. He says he's absolutely certain to romp in on Wednesday."

"How much do you want me to put on him?" asked Sidney.

"I haven't got much, I'm afraid," said Barbara ruefully, "but I've saved a little out of the pocket money your aunt gives me. It's only £20. I wish it was more."

"Are you going to risk your entire fortune?" said Sidney. "You're a pretty rash young lady, aren't you?"

"Oh, I must have a flutter. Besides, it's a dead certainty. I'd put a thousand on if I had it."

"What a fearful gambler! When you've lost as much as I have you'll go a bit slower."

"Have you lost much?" asked Barbara sympathetically. "I'm so sorry. Just lately?"

"Well, yes, since you ask me I don't mind telling you that I have had some rather nasty blows during the last few months. That brute, Benfar, has a lot to answer for, my word!"

"He'll turn out a winner yet," said Barbara hopefully.

"He might come in first if all the other starters tumbled down," said Sidney, with an effort to treat the subject lightly, "but I'm afraid before that happens I shall have to shut up shop. Things can't go on like this. I lost £10,000 over the Lincolnshire meeting, and that's only a drop in the ocean. But I don't know why I'm

bothering you with my troubles," he concluded, pulling himself up abruptly.

"I am glad you tell me," she replied simply. "I am so very sorry that you have had such rotten luck. You'd better change it by backing my tip. Ned Foster would never have advised me to put my all on Averstone unless he knew it was a sure thing. He really has a regard for me, I believe, and he often used to say that the day would come when he'd make my fortune and his own. He doesn't approve of betting as a general thing. He's a most steady, cautious kind of individual."

"I wonder," said Sidney. "I think perhaps I'll have a last fling. What are the odds?"

"They're long. Averstone's not supposed to have a ghost of a chance. I think it's about 40 to 1 against him."

"My word, just think if one had a few thousands on him and it came off!" said Sidney. "The bookies would all die on the spot."

"It would be rather annoying for some one," laughed Barbara. "I hope it will come off."

"I'm afraid it would be too good to be true," said Sidney gloomily, "but it would certainly save the situation if it did. If I lost a very little more I'd have to leave the army."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Barbara, for the first time realising the graveness of the position for Sidney. "How dreadful. I *am* sorry!"

The young man laughed awkwardly.

"It's awfully good of you," he said. "I've been a perfect ass, of

course. If I could win back half what I've lost, I swear I'd never back a horse again!"

"I expect your luck will turn," repeated Barbara hopefully. She had all a gambler's instinct of optimism.

But Sidney only laughed again rather recklessly as he got up to go. The interval was over and the people were hurrying back to their seats.

"As the orchestra seems to be going to make another effort," he said, "I must get back to the Garringdons' box. Good night, Miss Turner; good night, Aunt Ruth; I'll come and look you up in a day or two, if I get over to-morrow without being obliged to put a sudden end to my career."

"What did Joe mean by his last remark?" Mrs. Vanderstein asked as the door shut behind the young man's vanishing form. "I don't understand what he meant about putting an end to his career."

"He was telling me he has lost a lot of money lately, racing," Barbara murmured rather reluctantly, for she was not sure if Sidney would like her to repeat what he had said. Still, she thought, it was surely absurd for her to imagine that he would confide in her anything he would hesitate to tell a relation. "I suppose he was trying to joke about that."

"It's nothing to joke about," said Mrs. Vanderstein severely. "Not that I saw anything like a joke. I think it's disgraceful, and I shall alter my opinion of him very seriously if he really has been betting. But hush, the music is going to begin."

And she was soon entirely engrossed in listening to it.

But Barbara, to whose ear any but the most elementary tunes presented nothing but a confused medley of noises, wriggled rather impatiently on her chair from time to time, as she waited for the act to come to an end. Recollections that had lain dormant for a long time, put away on some high shelf of the wardrobe of memory, had been awakened again by her conversation with Sidney and the letter she had that day received from the old stableman. How happy her childhood seemed when viewed now through the flattering medium of the intervening years, which obscured all that had been disagreeable, and magnified the delights of her unrestrained wanderings and of the free and easy company of her father and her father's delightfully jocular friends.

How they used to laugh at each other's witty remarks, and how she, too, had laughed, joining in the mirth without understanding in the least what aroused it but with enjoyment none the less complete on that account. With closed eyes she leant back against the wall of the box, her lips curved in a smile and her head a little to one side in an attitude of listening. But it was not the voices of the singers she heard. Instead, the thud, thud of galloping hoofs sounded in her ears, coming nearer and nearer, and, mixed with the creaking of leather, the excited snorts of her pony and the jingling of bits. She seemed to see around her the bare, open spaces of the heath and the figures of the watchers, among them herself, crouching low in the saddle with her back to the bitter

east winds that sweep across the bleak Newmarket country in the spring. Splendid bracing air, her father used to say, and for her part she had never given a thought to the weather. Happy, happy times! Oh, that they could return. Why could not Mrs. Vanderstein give her that £500 a year, thought Barbara, and let her take a cottage, however tiny, within reach of a race-course and within hail of a training stable? If only she had a little money of her own. Money was everything, after all. It meant liberty. If Averstone won his race it would be something to the good.

Mrs. Vanderstein, turning to catch her eye at a point in the music which, even more than the rest, gave her a pleasure that asked to be shared, saw only the closed lids and the smiling lips, and with a sensation of gratified surprise said to herself that Barbara was at last developing an appreciation of music.

CHAPTER V

When Madame Querterot left the cool, airy house, which reminded her so unpleasantly of one which was associated principally in her inmost consciousness with the sensation of corporal punishment applied in no niggardly spirit, she turned her steps towards her own home, which was situated in the remotest part of Pimlico.

By the time she got off her bus and set out on foot into the dreary labyrinth of dingy streets, in one of which she lived, the shadows were lengthening fast and the pavement was losing some of the blistering heat accumulated during the day. Madame Querterot climbed rather wearily the flight of steps before her door. When she entered the little shop where Julie sat sewing behind the counter, she passed through it without a word to her daughter, and going into the tiny room, which served as a sitting-room, threw herself into the one arm-chair with something like a groan.

Julie, whose smile of welcome had faded on her lips when she saw the expression on her mother's face, bent again over her work, and for a little while all was still in the tiny, two-storied house.

There was not room for many customers in the shop. Julie often wondered what she would do if more than two came in at the same time, but such an embarrassing contingency had not so

far occurred. Quite half the space was taken up by the counter, on which stood a tray containing hair-pins and hair-nets. In one corner a space was curtained off for such clients as should wish to have their hair dressed or washed. No one had as yet requested this last service. In the window Madame Querterot displayed a few superior articles which had survived the wreck of the Bond Street establishment.

There was a waxen lady, with fair hair wonderfully curled and twisted, who obscured the light a good deal as she stood with her shoulders disdainfully turned to the interior of the room and her snow white nose close against the plate glass, which separated her from the street. Plainly she felt it a come-down to look out on to this gloomy Pimlico roadway. Around her were strewn combs and brushes, bottles of brillantine and china pots containing creams for the complexion, curls and tails of false hair – in some cases attached to gruesome scalps of pink wax – and half a dozen elaborately carved tortoise-shell combs, which the luckless Eugène had invested in in a fit of mistaken enthusiasm shortly after his arrival in England, but which had never received so much as a comment or an inquiry as to price from any of those who had since looked on them.

They had remained, however, a source of pride to Madame Querterot, who would often remark to Julie what an air they bestowed.

Presently, after a glance at the clock, Julie put down her work and came to the door between the two rooms.

"You are back, mother," she said, looking at her gravely.

"So it appears," snapped her mother without raising her eyes.

"I am afraid you must be tired," went on Julie calmly. "The day has been so hot. Will you not take a glass of lemonade before supper?"

"Have you got a lemon?" asked Madame Querterot somewhat less crossly.

"Yes," said Julie.

She opened the cupboard and taking out a lemon, a tumbler, and a lemon squeezer, went about the business of preparing a cool drink for her heated parent.

"Has anyone bought anything to-day?" Madame Querterot asked when after a few minutes the beverage was handed to her. "Put a little more sugar in the glass."

"A boy came in for a bottle of hair-oil," replied Julie, "and a few women have bought hair-pins and hair-curlers. It has been a dull day."

"We shall soon be in the street at this rate," said Madame Querterot despairingly. "One cannot live on a few packets of hair-pins and a bottle of hair-oil. No. If only we could move to a fashionable locality. Here no one ever comes and we have but to die of hunger."

"We haven't been here very long. We may do better presently. It is the customers whom you massage that keep us from starvation." Julie propped open the door into the shop and taking up her work sat down by the table in the parlour.

"Bah! Who knows how long they will continue? They have the skin of crocodiles, all of them. What can I do with it? Nothing. And in time they will find that out, and I shall be put to the door. What will happen then? You, I suppose, think you will be safe in your religious house. And your poor mother, you will be able to mock yourself of her then, *hein*!"

"Mother, you know I shall not leave you while you want me. I have not spoken of becoming a nun since father died, have I?"

"Your father!" exclaimed Madame Querterot with emotion. "Your father was a poltroon. No sooner did I need his assistance than he deserted me!"

"Mother!" cried Julie, and there was that in her tone which made Madame Querterot's lamentations die away into inaudible mumblings.

The girl did not say any more, but went on quietly with her sewing, till after a while her mother rose to go upstairs.

At the door she paused.

"Bert is coming to supper," she said over her shoulder. "You have not forgotten that it is to-night we go with him to the theatre? He will be here soon, I should think," and she went on up the narrow stairs without waiting for an answer.

Half an hour later, when they sat down to a cold meal, which Julie had carefully prepared – for Madame Querterot was particularly fond of eating and had seen that her daughter early acquired the principles of good cookery – they had been joined by the guest to whom she had alluded.

This was a young man of anæmic aspect, with fair hair that lay rather untidily across a high, narrow forehead. His face, which was pale and thin, was not at first sight particularly prepossessing. The contour of it was unusually pointed, though the chin receded so much that it could hardly be said to exhibit a point. The mouth was weak and large and always half open, so that the teeth, stained brown by the smoking of continuous cigarettes, were not completely hidden when he talked under the straggling little moustache, the end of which he had an unpleasant habit of chewing. The nose was prominent and looked too large for the rest of his face, the eyes, dark and deep-set, seemed to flash with unsuspected fires when talk turned on a subject that interested him. It was they that redeemed the whole man from total insignificance. They were the eyes of an enthusiast, almost of a fanatic. He did not talk much, but seemed content to devour the food set before him and to gaze untiringly at Julie who sat opposite him at the small square table.

Julie was a very good-looking girl in her way, which was not at all an English way, although the English language came more naturally to her lips than her mother tongue. To tell the truth, she was not very proficient in that, her mother and father having both found it easier, after she began to go to school, to talk to her in broken English. Indeed, after twenty years or so of residence in London that language became as natural to them as their own tongue, and Madame Querterot's French had by now grown quite as anglicised as that of many linguists in her adopted country.

She found, however, that many of her customers preferred her to talk in broken English; they liked to feel that here was some one come straight from the gay city to do their pleasure.

Her daughter inherited her mother's oval face and arched eyebrows, but there the likeness ceased. Julie was tall while Madame Querterot was short; she was dark, while her mother was fair, and of a fairness that owed nothing to art. Julie had a straight, short nose and a little rosebud of a mouth, her skin was dark but glowing with health, and the brown eyes, set far apart under the low brow, had a wide-open look of sorrowful surprise as if she found herself in a world that failed continually to come up to her expectations. Bert, it was plain to see, found all this very much to his liking, and was so taken up with the contemplation of it that a great deal of Madame Querterot's conversation fell unheeded on his ears, and his answers, when he made any, were for the most part quite irrelevant.

Madame Querterot had by this time completely recovered her good temper, or at all events displayed the amiability habitual to her in intercourse with strangers. She prattled away about the weather, the letter she had that day received from her relations in Paris, asked about Bert's work, and showed, and possibly felt, great interest in his meagre replies. Presently she began to talk about the occupation of her own day.

"There is an old lady whom I visit for the massage," she said, "who would make you laugh to see. She is ugly, she is fat, she has the complexion of a turkey! Yet there is no one so anxious

as she to become young again. Was she ever beautiful? I do not know; but it is certain that she will not be so again. Every day I find her with a mirror in her hand and every day as I leave her she takes it up again to see if there is any improvement. For all I know she sits like that, gazing at her unsympathetic reflection till the next day when I come once more."

Madame Querterot paused and took a draught of her lemonade.

"A little more sugar, Julie, my cherished, and it would be better still," she said. "In this country sugar is less dear and you are unnecessarily careful of it. If we were in France I would not say so; there, there are *impôts*. But this, one must admit it, is the cheapest place one can live in. That is why one finds here so many Jews. Bah! the Jews! Why does one suffer them? In England as in France one sees nothing else; but even more in England since l'affaire Dreyfus. There is one lady to whom I go daily who would gladly live in France, I think, if it had not become less disagreeable for her race here since that business. But perhaps it is not only on that account that she stays here, now that I reflect. She is not one of those who amuse themselves well in a republic."

"How is that, mother?" asked Julie without much interest, while their guest, for his part, merely grunted indifferently.

"She is more than a Royalist," said Madame Querterot; "she loves to see a head which knows how it feels to wear a crown. She goes every day to watch the Queen drive through the park. Mon Dieu! I think she lives only for that. To-day a Prince passed

below her window, and as chance had it he looked up at her as he went. She was mad with joy; one would have said it was the happiest hour of her existence. She said nothing, but I have my eyes! And it is a woman who has everything to make her enjoy life. She is not bad-looking, not at all bad-looking; for a Jewess, even handsome; she is still young, and rich. Oh, but rich!"

Madame Querterot put down her knife and fork and raised both hands in the air to convey the extent of the wealth enjoyed by the lucky Jewess.

For the first time Bert displayed some interest in the conversation, or monologue, as one might more properly call it.

"It's disgraceful," he said, "it ought to be put a stop to. These people! They suck the blood of the poor!"

"The Jews, yes; it is their *métier*," agreed Madame Querterot.

"I don't refer to the Jew especially. What I'm alluding to at the present moment is all these useless rich folk. The drones of the hive, as you may say. These bloated capitalists who occupy the land that ought by rights to jolly well belong to the people. They'd better look out for themselves, I can tell them. There's a day coming when society won't stand it any longer. In other words, we're going to drive them out. Tax them out of their very existence. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Bert glared triumphantly round as he brought his hand down on the table with a conclusive emphasis which made the glasses on the table jump nervously.

"This Mrs. Vanderstein of whom I speak," resumed Madame

Querterot composedly, "has no land so far as I know. She has only a house in London. But she is rich all the same. One sees it at each step. In the house, what luxury! Such pictures! such furniture! such flowers! And automobiles, and boxes at the opera! Such dresses! And above all, such jewels! Oh, she is very rich, that one."

"It's all the same," declared Bert, "whether she spends her money on land, or on clothes, or what not. The point I want to impress on you is that she does spend it, and that while she's living on the fat of the land the rest of us may starve!"

He helped himself as he spoke to another plateful of *œufs à la neige*.

Julie watched him, the shadow of a smile playing about her mouth.

"Have you seen this lady's jewels, mother?" she asked. "I adore precious stones."

"I have seen some of them," said her mother. "To-night her maid brought to her a necklace and bracelets of diamonds, besides a coiffure and rings of great beauty, no doubt without price. But she sent them away again, saying that she would wear others. Those I did not see, but it is certain that she has many, and all wonderful. Every day she wears different ones and, constantly, a string of enormous pearls. Without those last I have never seen her. They are as large as marbles and, to tell the truth, not much more pretty, for my taste. When I tell you that she employs a night watchman, whose sole duty is to patrol the house every night, you

will understand that the value of what it contains must be large."

"That's just what these capitalists do," cried Bert excitedly. "They lock away thousands of pounds like that when the money ought to be out in the world paying just and equal wages. I should like to see it made a criminal offence to wear jewellery."

"But what would happen to the people who make it?" asked Julie. "They would all lose their means of earning a livelihood, is it not so? What would the pearl fisher do, or those who dig precious stones out of the earth? And the polishers and setters? Every industry has a host depending on it for a demand for its labour."

"There would be less need for labour," said Bert more gently, as was always the case when he spoke to her, "if the money was taken from the capitalists and divided among the people."

"Still – " objected Julie again.

Madame Querterot, however, did not propose to listen to an argument on the benefits to be expected from Socialism; she had frequently heard all that Bert had to say on the subject, and it had bored her very considerably. She pushed back her chair and stood up.

"It is half-past seven," she said, "we must put on our hats for the theatre. It begins at nine, but we shall take twenty minutes getting there, and I want to have good places. Come and get ready, Julie."

CHAPTER VI

The two women went upstairs; Bert lit a cigarette, and retired to smoke in the tiny yard behind the house. Soon he heard footsteps descending, and hastily throwing away his cigarette he entered the little room again just as Julie came into it. She had been quicker than her mother.

Bert did not waste time in preambles. He knew he only had a few minutes at the best.

"Joolie," he began hurriedly, "why do you never let me see you alone? Will you never be any nicer to me?"

"Aren't I nice to you, Bertie? I don't mean not to be."

"You know quite well what I mean. I want you to like me better. Oh, Joolie, you haven't a notion how fond I am of you. It seemed to come over me all of a sudden that day we walked in the Park, when your mother for once didn't come with us. And since then I haven't had a moment's peace. Not a single solitary moment. Wherever I look, whether it's going to the office, or at my work, or after it's done, I seem to see nothing but you, Joolie, and I don't want to see anything else either."

He moved closer to her and she retreated instinctively.

"Don't be afraid! I won't touch you," he said with a certain bitterness. "I know you can't bear the sight of me, but I'd give my life to make you happy."

"Oh, Bert," she said, and her tone was full of contrition. "It

isn't true that I can't bear the sight of you. I like you very much, I do indeed. We are such old friends. And it is so nice of you to like me so much, but why can't we go on just being friends?"

"Joolie, Joolie," cried the young man. "You don't understand. I love you, Joolie. I love you so much, dear! Don't you think you could marry me some day? There, I didn't mean to ask you now," he went on quickly, seeing the look on the girl's face, "don't answer me now. I know what you're going to say and I can't bear to hear it. Wait a while and perhaps I shall be able to get you to care for me in time."

Before she could reply Madame Querterot's foot was on the stair, and in another moment she came in smiling and arrayed in her best.

They set out without further delay and proceeded by a succession of buses to the Strand. Descending there, they made their way into one of the neighbouring streets and took their places in a queue of people who were already waiting for the doors of the theatre to open.

Though not by any means the first to enter, they secured good places in the pit and settled down in them to await the beginning of the performance, each of them, in his or her different way, prepared to enjoy the evening to the utmost.

When at length the curtain rose they followed the fortunes of the characters with a breathless intensity of interest, and the play itself formed the subject of a heated discussion afterwards, which lasted all the way home, Julie maintaining that an honest

course was always desirable whatever excuses might be adduced for other conduct.

Bert and Madame Querterot held, it appeared, more elastic opinions, Bert declaring that there were people it was a sin to leave in possession of their ill-gotten gains, and Madame Querterot inclining to the view that if anyone was so stupid as not to be able to keep what they had, small blame need attach to those who were clever enough to take it from them.

She upheld this contention by pointing out that no one did blame the gentleman burglar who formed the central figure of the play; the heroine herself, who was assuredly in a high degree the pattern of all the virtues, had easily forgiven his little lapses, slips which had been made entirely for her sake.

"For my part," she asserted, "I admire a man of that sort. Not that it is common to find one like him. Most men have too high a regard for the safety of their own skins. But one must admit that the young girl, for whom this brave man took all those risks, was of no ordinary beauty. It is possible that if there were more like her there would also be more lovers, young and ardent, ready to chance prison and the gallows to win the wealth that should make her theirs. Ah, there is no chivalry nowadays," and Madame Querterot heaved a heavy sigh. Possibly she was thinking of the base way in which Eugène had deserted her in the hour of need.

"Wealth is not always enough," said Bert disconsolately, "and, anyhow, wealth is an abomination and a snare. In the ideal socialistic state there won't be any such thing. All riches will be

equally divided and every one will have enough to live on, but no more. Anyone who wants luxuries will just have to work for them."

"You look too far ahead, my young friend," returned Madame Querterot philosophically. They were walking up the dark streets that led to her house, Bert having insisted on seeing them home in spite of protests as to the lateness of the hour and the necessity for his getting up early next morning.

"You have brains," she continued, "and you use them, which is not too general. But in this world it is a mistake to show that one is clever. The stupid only dislike one for differing from them in a way that they cannot understand, and clever people actually hate others who dare in this manner to resemble them. If you wish to be loved it is best to appear foolish. No one desires a lover too intelligent to care for their opinions. If you wish to obtain respect do not show yourself unusually brilliant. You will only be thought eccentric or even mad. And finally if you want to make money never allow anyone to suspect that you are not perfectly an idiot. People will be on their guard if they think they have to do with a clever man, but if they think you a fool precautions will seem unnecessary and it will be very easy for you to deal with them to your own advantage."

Bert listened to these remarks with more attention than he usually displayed.

"Do you really think a man has more chance with a girl if he is foolish and rich?" he asked in a low tone. They were walking

behind Julie, the pavement having narrowed so as to make it impossible to continue three abreast.

Madame Querterot slackened her pace and fell back a little.

"Run on, Julie, my angel," she called out, "and prepare me a cup of coffee. I feel a kind of faintness and will walk more slowly if Bertie will give me his arm."

Bert made a gesture of annoyance, and would have left her in pursuit of Julie, who hurried on as she was told, but Madame Querterot clutched at his arm and held him back.

"Stay with me, I wish to speak to you," she said, clinging so tightly to him that without roughness he could not have shaken her off.

"What is it? I want to speak to Joolie," he said crossly.

"You can speak to her any time; listen to me now. You asked me a minute ago if I thought one had more chance with a girl if one was rich."

"Yes." He spoke with returning interest. "You do think so, I suppose?"

"Bert, let me speak. I must tell you that for some time I have seen clearly that you have a tenderness for my daughter. You wish to marry her, is it not so?"

"It is the only wish of my life."

"It is easy to see. You show it in each word, in your whole manner towards her. But let me tell you, my friend, that in my country it is not only the consent of a young girl that is sought by a would-be husband. It would have been more *convenable* if you

had approached me, her mother, in this matter."

"Madame Querterot, will you help me? Joolie doesn't seem to care about me. Is there any other man?"

"There is no other man. Julie has an absurd idea of entering into a religious house, but she is a dutiful daughter and will not go against my wishes in that or any other matter. As regards this question of marriage she will, I am convinced, be guided by me. Ah, how she loves me, that child! There is nothing she would not do to please me. I say to you that Julie is not a girl. She is an angel!"

"I know that," grunted Bert; "if you'll help me with her, Madame Querterot, and there's ever anything I can do to show my gratitude, why, you can take it that I'll do it, that's all."

"Ah, Bert, now is the time to prove that. Words, words, words! But if it came to the point what would you do, not to show gratitude, but to win the hand of Julie? That is what I ask myself."

"I'd do anything. By Jove, I believe there's nothing I would stick at."

"Very well. Now, with me as your friend and ally I think you might make certain that my daughter will consent to the marriage. But I, Bert, will never agree to her marrying a poor man. I have other ideas for her, I assure you."

"You know I am poor," said Bert. "I despise riches, but for Joolie I wouldn't raise an objection to them if they were in my reach. But you know very well I shall always be poor as long as this beastly capitalist government has its own way. Some day

perhaps things will change."

"Bert," said Madame Querterot, dropping her voice, "it is yourself who have suggested to me a way by which one might become rich. Supposing I were to tell you that I had a plan; that I knew a way by which in a flash you might gain both riches and Julie, and at the same time show your faith in the truth of your own gospel? What then, Bert? Have you a little courage, my boy? Girls do not understand your modern ideas, that every one should be of an equal poverty; they like to have money, they like what money can give them. Did you not hear Julie say this evening that she adored jewels?"

They had reached the door of the shop and Bert turned towards it without answering. But Madame Querterot made as if to continue their walk, and after a moment's hesitation he turned and paced beside her.

"I would give her all the diamonds in the world," he said, "if she wanted them and I could get them for her. What do you suppose I care for my ideas, as you call them? Nothing! Oh, nothing matters beside Joolie! Still, I'm hanged," said Bert, "if I can see what you're driving at."

"I see a way," replied his companion, "of doing a little good business. For it I need the assistance that a young man like yourself can give. Some one with courage, with determination, and who will not be discouraged by a few apparent difficulties. But to succeed the affair must be kept secret. It is indeed of the most private character. Before I say more, swear to me by your

love for Julie that you will die before you repeat a word of what I am going to tell you."

"I swear it," said Bert solemnly.

Madame Querterot gave one more quick, penetrating glance at his pale face and, apparently reassured by the light that burned in the dark eyes, began to talk again in low, persuasive tones as they paced up and down before the little house.

Julie came to the door and cried to them that the coffee was ready; then despairing of an answer she retired to her bedroom, where a light burned for a little while; presently it was extinguished, and Julie in a few minutes was peacefully asleep.

But still her mother and her lover walked and turned on the pavement beneath her window.

CHAPTER VII

The next day, Mrs. Vanderstein, busy with a watering-can among the pots of roses that during the season adorned her balcony, and keeping a sharp look-out on the entrance to Fianti's opposite, was disappointed not to catch another glimpse of Prince Felipe of Targona whom she thought every minute to see issue from beneath the portico.

"What can keep him indoors on so fine a day?" she asked herself repeatedly, for again the sun smote down on the city out of a cloudless azure.

Having spent the hour immediately after luncheon in this vain expectancy, at the imminent risk of both sunstroke and indigestion, she began to despair of her hopes ever being fulfilled, and went back into the drawing-room, where she threw herself dejectedly into a chair.

"If this weather goes on," she said to Barbara, "we might run over to Dieppe for a few days."

Mrs. Vanderstein was very much in the habit of making sudden excursions to the other side of the Channel; whenever she was bored at home she would dash off at a moment's notice to Dieppe or Ostend.

Barbara enjoyed these trips, but sometimes wished Mrs. Vanderstein would not make up her mind to depart quite at the last minute, as she nearly always did. It was awkward occasionally

to have only half an hour given one in which to pack.

"Will you go to-day?" she asked, with a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Vanderstein answered wearily. "I daresay I may."

Barbara walked over to the open window.

"There's Madame Justine coming out of Fianti's," she remarked presently.

"Really?" said Mrs. Vanderstein, getting up and going to Barbara's side. "I wonder what she can have been doing there?"

Madame Querterot was hurrying along the pavement, bag in hand. She looked up at the balcony and made a little smiling bow in response to Mrs. Vanderstein's friendly nod. Then she rounded a corner and was out of sight.

"What a good kind face she has," Mrs. Vanderstein said as she turned back into the house. "It would cheer up anyone, that delightful smile. It always does me good to see Madame Justine."

"I can't think why you like her so much," said Barbara, as she also came back into the room. "I don't think she looks particularly nice."

"Ah, Barbara," said Mrs. Vanderstein, "at your age you are no judge of character. Now I know a good woman when I see one, and I do admire that one. Look at the way she works day and night to support her idle, ungrateful daughter."

"I don't suppose she's so ungrateful as her mother makes out," said Barbara. She seemed determined to see no good in poor

Madame Querterot.

In the cool of the afternoon the two ladies drove in the Park and visited one or two of the houses of their friends. It was past six when they returned home, and for once the masseuse was waiting for them. She came forward as Mrs. Vanderstein entered, and her manner showed some excitement. In the background hovered Amélie, who would have died sooner than allow Madame Querterot to remain alone in her mistress' room, hinting darkly, if vaguely, to the other servants that mysterious and terrible results would have to be expected if such a liberty were accidentally permitted.

"Oh, madame," cried Madame Querterot, "I have such amusing news. At all events I hope that you will laugh and not be offended if I repeat it to you."

"What is it, Madame Justine?"

"Figure to yourself, madame, that this morning I received a summons – but, madame," said Madame Querterot, checking herself on a sudden and casting a look of scarcely veiled malice towards the other occupants of the bedroom, "what I have to tell you is of a nature somewhat private. Is it possible that you permit that I speak with you alone?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Vanderstein; "why not, if you wish. Amélie, I will ring when I want you, please. Barbara, do you mind going away till I call you? Thanks so much. I must hear this amusing story of Madame Justine's."

Barbara and the maid lost no time in obeying, and left the

room; but while the one did so with alacrity, her pride preventing her from showing any curiosity, even for a moment, as to what Madame Querterot might have to relate, Amélie was at no pains to conceal the dislike, almost amounting to hatred, which shone in her eyes as she fixed them in an angry stare on her compatriot before she slowly moved towards the door. Some day she hoped to be revenged on this woman, this odious, talkative bourgeoise, for the way in which she had wormed herself, if not into her mistress' confidence, at all events into such familiar impertinent terms with her; when, if Mrs. Vanderstein could but be brought to feel about her, in her bones, as Amélie felt, she would recognise her for a person to whom an honest woman, let alone a lady at all *comme il faut*, would scorn to address herself.

Her rage and indignation continued to augment as the minutes passed and no bell summoned her back to her duties. Though no fonder of work than her fellows, Amélie's whole soul rose in revolt against the idea that she could be dispensed with. And when at last, after an hour's waiting, both she and Miss Turner were recalled to the bedroom, one of them at least re-entered it with murderous feelings in her heart, which she vented by making faces at the masseuse behind the ladies' backs and vowing to herself that the day of vengeance could not be much longer delayed.

As for Barbara, she was struck immediately she returned to her friend by a suppressed excitement, a restlessness of manner, which seemed to betray that there had been something of

personal interest in Madame Querterot's confidences. She did not like, however, to ask what the Frenchwoman had had to tell in private, and as Mrs. Vanderstein did not volunteer any information, but was very silent all the evening, fully occupied apparently with her own thoughts, Barbara was not sorry when bedtime came.

"Do you still think of running over to Dieppe?" she asked, as she said good night.

"To Dieppe!" cried her friend, "good gracious, no! I have all kinds of engagements, and you have forgotten that my box is taken for the gala performance of the opera on Monday. I shall certainly stay in London for the present!"

Clearly Mrs. Vanderstein had forgotten the half-formed intention of the afternoon.

Well, that would not prevent her changing her mind again, thought Barbara, and they might be off across the Channel in a day or two in spite of to-night's decision.

But days elapsed and no more was said on the subject. Every evening saw Madame Querterot arrive as usual; but now there was always a private interview between her and Mrs. Vanderstein, which left that lady flushed and smiling.

Barbara could not imagine what was happening to cause all these changes. She disliked Madame Querterot and vaguely resented the secret that she felt was being kept from her. Why should Mrs. Vanderstein have secrets with this horrid little Frenchwoman and leave her out in the cold? How could she allow

the woman's familiarity? Barbara was both piqued and disgusted at the whole trend of the matter.

On Sunday they walked in the Park with a certain Mrs. Britterwerth, a friend of Mrs. Vanderstein.

After a day or two of clouds and rain, during which people shivered and said it was like winter, the weather had cleared again to the radiant brightness which distinguished that summer from those preceding and following it. The Park was gay with light dresses and brilliant coloured parasols. The flowers, too, were at their best – the rain had come at the right moment for them and the beds were a vision of beauty – but they received scanty attention, as usual, people flocking to the other side of the road, where, to tell the truth, it was very pleasant on the green lawns beneath the trees.

The three ladies strolled up and down in the shade. Mrs. Vanderstein called it taking exercise, and did it once a week for the sake of her figure. Mrs. Britterwerth was really stout and would gladly have sat down after a turn or two, but was not allowed to by her more energetic friend.

"Consider, my dear, what a lot of good it does us," said Mrs. Vanderstein.

Here, presently, they were joined by Joseph Sidney, and soon Barbara found herself walking on ahead with him, while the two others followed them at a little distance.

She had not seen him since the night at Covent Garden, and she noticed with concern that he looked worn and worried.

"I saw that Averstone did no good," she said, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"No," said Sidney shortly.

"Did you back him?" she asked, and knew the answer before he spoke.

"Oh yes," he said, "I backed him all right. He'd have won, I daresay, if I hadn't spoilt his chance with my rotten luck."

Barbara walked on in silence for a minute.

"I'm sorry," she said at length. "It was my fault. I gave you the tip."

"Nonsense," he answered almost roughly. "Your money's gone too."

"Did you lose much last week?" she asked abruptly.

"So much," he replied, "that it's no good trying to hide it from you. It's bound to come out in a few days. The truth is that I've lost every penny my uncle left me and every sixpence I had before. Worse than that! I've lost money I can't pay, and I shall not only have to leave the regiment, but – " he broke off bitterly and slashed with his stick at the grass. "Well, you know what it means," he finished lamely.

"Oh, it can't be as bad as that!" cried Barbara. "Tell Mrs. Vanderstein. She will help you. How I wish I had some money!"

"Do you think she would help me?" asked Sidney. "She would let me blow my brains out first. You don't realise, perhaps, what a violent prejudice she has against betting. Look at this letter. I got it the day after I saw you at the opera." He pulled from his

pocket a large sheet of blue writing paper on which Barbara at once recognised Mrs. Vanderstein's unmistakable handwriting.

"My dear Joseph," it ran,

"I hope there is no truth in what I hear about your betting on race-horses. It is a practice I deplore with all my heart and I should be very sorry to see you descend to such unprincipled depths. Without entering upon a long dissertation, I must tell you that, unless you henceforward sever all connection with bookmakers and their kind, I shall think it my duty to depart from your uncle's wishes and leave my money away from you altogether. It pains me to write like this and I trust it is unnecessary, but it is best to have things understood.

"Your affectionate aunt,
"Ruth Vanderstein."

Barbara read the letter in horror-struck silence.

"That's the sort of help I should get from her," said Sidney, as she gave it back to him.

"Something must be done," she repeated dully; "can't you borrow from some one?"

"I've been losing steadily for three years," replied the young man, "and I had to go to the money-lenders long ago. I can't get another penny from them. It's rather funny if you think of how my uncle made his money, isn't it? But perhaps you don't know," he went on hastily, seeing the blank look on Barbara's face. "So that's how it is," he started afresh. "It's all up with me, you see. I'm absolutely done for unless I can get £10,000 by next week.

I'm pretty desperate, I can tell you. There's nothing I wouldn't do to get the money."

He spoke in emphatic tones, and several of the passing crowd turned their heads to see who it was who so loudly published the unfortunate state of his financial affairs. Sidney was quick to realise the attention he was attracting, and lowered his voice to a more confidential pitch. Neither he nor his companion specially remarked one among those who glanced up at them on hearing the outspoken words, a small spare man with a clean-shaven face and brown hair fading to a premature greyness. Nor if they had done so would either of them have recognised in this correctly dressed, spick and span Londoner, whose well-fitting morning coat and patent leather boots so exactly resembled those worn by Sidney himself and nearly every smart young man to be met with in the Park that day, the well-known private detective, Mr. Gimblet, the man most dreaded by the criminal class of the entire kingdom.

Walking at a more rapid pace than they, he was in the act of overtaking the couple as they strolled along, when something in Sidney's voice, a note of despairing recklessness more than the words themselves that he uttered, aroused his interest and wakened his ever ready curiosity. He continued to walk on without slackening his speed, and did not look back until he had advanced some fifty yards. Then he hesitated, loitered a moment, and finally sat down on one of the green chairs, which stood conveniently unoccupied, just before Sidney and Barbara strolled

unconcernedly by.

Before they had passed, Gimblet had made a quick survey of the young man's face, on which signs of worry and anxiety were very plainly to be noted.

"I wonder who it is," he thought; and continued, when they had gone on, to gaze meditatively after the young people.

In his turn he failed to observe two ladies who came up in the opposite direction to that in which his head was turned. Mrs. Vanderstein observed his intent expression as she approached, and following the direction of his eyes murmured to her friend:

"Do you see that man staring at Barbara? He looks quite moonstruck. She attracts a great deal of attention. Such a dear girl, I don't know what I should do without her."

"You are so good to her," murmured her companion. "The question is rather, what would she do without you? But she is certainly an attractive young person, especially to men. I wonder that you are not afraid to let that delightful nephew of yours see so much of her."

To Barbara, walking mechanically by Sidney's side, it seemed suddenly as if some strange darkness hung over the face of nature. The lightness of heart with which she had gone forth out of the house, the high spirits natural to her that constituted the only legacy of any value which she had inherited from her father, deserted her now to make place for distress on the young man's account. Nor was it only at the thought of the trouble that had fallen on him that she recoiled horror-struck and that the

sunlight took on a quality of gloom, which made the present hour such a dismal one and those of the future to appear encircled in a dusk that deepened, as it receded, till it merged into that utter obscurity over whose boundaries Joe seemed already to be slipping and vanishing. It was the effect of his disaster on her own life that chiefly terrified and shocked her. What would she do without the only man friend of anything like her own age whom she knew in London and whose tastes so much resembled her own? She would hear no more sporting gossip, be cut off from her one remaining link with the racing world. What would she do without him if he disappeared as he threatened? What would she do without the only person in the world she cared to see? The only person in the world she cared for… The knowledge came to her suddenly like a revelation and she stumbled for a moment in her walk as she realised with a flash of self-comprehension the full meaning of her dread.

In that instant she saw and realised that to lose Joe Sidney would be, for her, to lose all.

He, occupied in a recital of his troubles, noticed nothing beyond his own almost unconscious relief in speaking at length of the worries he had for so long kept to himself. It was a comfort to have so sympathetic a listener.

Still, not much comfort could be extracted even from that, with the crisis in his life so real and so near at hand, and he was soon repeating his earlier assertions that it was no use talking, and that there was no hope for him of anything but absolute ruin.

"Your aunt. She must, oh, she must help you!" Barbara heard herself saying again.

Again Sidney shook his head.

"You don't understand her. She will act in accordance with her ideas. We Jews – "

"You are not a Jew!" Her voice was indignant.

"My mother was a Jewess. You don't suppose I am ashamed of it? We Jews have stronger convictions – opinions – principles – call them what you like – than Christians are in the habit of hampering themselves with. We are more apt, I should say, to live up to our theories. My aunt looks on gambling as the most deadly of sins. Where you or I perceive a green track and a few bookies, she sees, I do believe, a personage with horns and a tail, brandishing a pitchfork. I'm not at all sure she isn't right. I am at least quite sure that if I could get out of this mess I'd never go near a race-course or have so much as a look at the odds again as long as I lived. It's not much use saying that now, is it? But believe me, help from Aunt Ruth is out of the question. You may scratch it. This is the end of all for me. I shall just have to go. Drop out, as many better men have had to do before me."

"Oh don't talk like that," cried Barbara. She had pulled herself together, and was thinking clearly and rapidly. "Listen to me. If you can't go to Mrs. Vanderstein with the truth, can't you go to her with" – she hesitated – "something else?"

"A lie," said Joe bluntly. "I don't wonder you think I'd not be above a lie if it could save me. But can you suggest one with

which I could go to her and ask for £10,000? If you can, let's hear it, for goodness' sake. But of course you can't. She's not an absolute fool!" He laughed again, a short, hard laugh.

"You don't know Mrs. Vanderstein as well as I do, though you are a relation," said Barbara. "She has weak points, you know. At least she has one weakness. I wonder if you know what it is?"

They had come to the Corner and paused by the rails. Instinctively Barbara turned about, looking to see if Mrs. Vanderstein were within earshot.

"Why, look at her now," she cried.

Sidney, too, turned, and followed the direction of her gaze.

His aunt and her friend had reached a point some fifty yards behind them. Mrs. Vanderstein's face was radiant. A rosy colour dyed her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled, when for a moment she lifted them and glanced in the direction of the roadway. But for the most part they seemed to be modestly cast down and Mrs. Vanderstein appeared interested solely in the toes of her shoes; these, though of the most pleasing aspect, did not entirely justify the delight the lady seemed to feel in them. She may, perhaps, have been wondering whether or no they touched the ground, for so lightly did she tread that a mere spectator might have felt very grave doubts on the subject. She looked, indeed, to be walking upon air. Even Sidney, unobservant as he commonly was of the expressions of people to whom he was not at the moment talking, could not help noticing her unusual demeanour. Indeed she looked the incarnation of happiness.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked, turning again to the girl beside him.

For answer she made a movement of her hand towards the road.

"Do you see that?" she inquired.

There was very little traffic in the Park on that Sunday evening. A motor or two rolled through, but they were few and far between. Joe saw nothing remarkable or that could, to his thinking, in any way account for his aunt's strange looks. One carriage only was driving by, a barouche occupied by an elderly lady and three foreign-looking men. There was nothing about them to attract attention.

"What in the world is there to see?" he said, in bewilderment.

"In that carriage are Prince Felipe of Targona and his mother," said Barbara, "and Mrs. Vanderstein gets as excited as that whenever she sees any kind of a Royal personage. I don't think," she added truthfully, "that I ever saw her show it quite so plainly, but you can see the effect they have on her. Royalty is what really interests her most in life. You wouldn't believe how much she is thrilled by it. It is an infatuation, almost a craze."

"I had no notion she was like that," said Joe, with an air of some disgust. "I should never have thought she was such a frightful snob."

"I don't think it is snobbishness with Mrs. Vanderstein," said Barbara. "It's more a sort of romanticness. But I don't suppose you understand. The point is that there's nothing she wouldn't

do to meet any kind of a little princeling. And if she once met him, there's nothing he could ask she wouldn't give. After all," she went on in an argumentative tone, "she ought not to let you be ruined. I am sure Mr. Vanderstein never would have. And £10,000 is really so little to her. Why, her pearls alone are worth far more. What does a sum like that matter? It's only four or five hundred a year. She wouldn't miss it a bit."

"I daresay," said Sidney, "but I don't see what good that does me."

"Have you got a friend you can trust who would stretch a point to help you?"

"Not a decimal point as far as cash is concerned. In other ways, I daresay I have got one or two. They'd help me all right, poor chaps, if they'd got any money themselves."

"It's not money. I mean some one who would take a little trouble."

"Oh yes, I think I can raise one of that sort. For that matter," said Sidney, "if you don't mind my calling you a friend, I think no one could want a better one. It's no end good of you to be so sympathetic and let me bore you with my rotten affairs."

The girl turned away her face.

"Of course I am a friend," she said, "but you will want a man, if my idea is any good. Now listen, I have got a plan."

Barbara hesitated. She was very conscious that the idea which had come to her was not one which would commend itself to Joe. A few hours before she would have scornfully rejected the

suggestion that she herself could ever be brought to tolerate such an expedient, but now everything was changed and all her convictions of right and wrong were shaken and tottering, if not entirely swept aside by the fear of the imminent danger to the man she loved. Her one feeling now was that at any cost the peril must be averted, and the question of the moment was how to represent her design in such terms as would prevail on him to see in it a path that a man might conceivably follow and yet retain some remnant of self-esteem.

Very carefully, choosing her words with deliberation, she disclosed to Sidney the plan that to her seemed to offer the only chance of setting his affairs in order. As she expected, he refused at first to entertain the idea at all; undismayed, she returned to the attack and persisted, with Jesuitical reasonings and syllogisms, in showing him that in the method she proposed lay his only hope of obtaining the necessary money. Very slowly and reluctantly he allowed himself to be persuaded. No one could have listened for half an hour to Barbara's cajolements without giving way.

At the first sign of his weakening she redoubled her efforts, and as she talked, refusing to allow herself to be discouraged by Joe's objections and the difficulties he pointed out, he gradually succumbed to her wheedling, and once he had thrust his scruples into the background became nearly as enthusiastic as she was herself.

Before they parted the plan was worked out in every point. It remained but to take the faithful necessary friend of Joe's into

their confidence. This, Joe told her, had better be a subaltern in his regiment, by name Baines, luckily in London at the present moment.

"As long," he said with a return to former doubts, "as old Baines is equal to the job. There's not much he'd stick at, though."

"Yes," said Barbara, and was silent a minute during which the difficulties of carrying out her plan successfully seemed to swarm around her with quite a new vigour. "If anything should turn up," she faltered, "to make this idea impossible, you will try telling Mrs. Vanderstein the truth, won't you? It is a chance, after all."

"Well, it can't make things worse, I suppose," he agreed. "I hope it won't come to that. I don't think it will now; but if it does, I promise, if it pleases you, that I will make a clean breast of it to her."

"Thank you," she murmured; and then as they turned, "there she is now, making signs that we should go back."

CHAPTER VIII

When they had driven away Sidney wandered off beyond the outskirts of the crowd to a lonely spot among the trees, where he walked up and down, whistling softly to himself and pausing from time to time to aim a blow at the head of an unoffending daisy with his stick.

"What an ass I am," he exclaimed presently in heartfelt tones, but a listener who had fancied he was alluding to his foolish gambling on the turf would have been mistaken. His thoughts were engaged on quite a different and much pleasanter subject.

How lovely she had looked! How sorry she had seemed! What sympathy had shone in her eyes as she listened to his discreditable troubles. How determined she had been to find a way out; surely she could not show such interest in the concerns of all her acquaintances.

The way out, by the by, now that he thought of it dispassionately, was hardly, perhaps, quite one that a man could take after all and keep the little self-respect left to him; but it was overwhelmingly sweet that she should have lost sight so completely of all considerations except the one of retrieving his fortunes.

He had always liked and admired her, of course, but never till to-day had he realised what a loyal, brave spirit dwelt behind those sea-blue, childish eyes. There was no girl in the world like

her, and was it unduly conceited of him to think she must like him a little to show such agitation at the tale of his misfortunes? And here he frowned and pulled himself up short. What business had he, a ruined gambler, a man whose career was, to all intents and purposes, at an end, to think twice about any girl, much less to feel so absurdly happy? He determined heroically to banish Barbara from his thoughts, and in pursuance of that excellent resolution walked off across the Park at such a tearing speed that little boys whom he passed asked derisively where the other competitors in the race had got to.

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It was on the following morning that Mrs. Vanderstein made certain confidences to Barbara, thereby dashing to earth the high hopes she had built of rescuing Sidney from the ruinous meshes in which he had entangled himself.

To that which Mrs. Vanderstein told her the girl listened at first with incredulity, but a scoffing comment was received with such extreme disfavour that she dared not venture another; and finally, as she heard more and fuller accounts and Mrs. Vanderstein, chafing under a sense of her friend's disbelief, went so far as to produce written evidence of the truth of the story, Barbara was no longer able to deny to herself that the astounding tale was undoubtedly not the joke she had taken it for, but represented the plain facts of the case.

With increasing dismay she heard all that Mrs. Vanderstein had to tell her, seeing her hopes for Joe vanish more completely at each new piece of information; and when at the end of the tale her friend reproached her for her lack of sympathy she had much ado to prevent herself from bursting into unavailing tears.

She was able, however, to summon enough self-control to find some words of affection, which seemed to fill the requirements of the situation; at all events they seemed to satisfy Mrs. Vanderstein. The girl only made one stipulation, and on this point remained obstinate till the elder lady, failing to shake her determination, was at last obliged to yield a reluctant consent.

As soon as she could escape, Barbara, making the first excuse that occurred to her, ran to her room, where she pinned on a hat without so much as waiting to glance in the looking-glass. Then, snatching up a latch key, she let herself out of the hall door and hurried to the nearest post office.

Several telegraph forms were filled in, only to be torn up and discarded before she worded the message to her satisfaction; and even when she handed it in under the barrier – which protects young ladies of the post office from too close contact with a public who might, were it not for these precautions, be exasperated into showing signs of violence – she was still regarding it doubtfully, and her fingers lingered on the paper as if reluctant to let it go.

It was addressed to Joseph Sidney, and covered more than one form.

"Plan completely spoilt will explain meanwhile try telling your aunt the truth as you promised she will be in at teatime and it will be best to get it over one way or another."

Would he come? she asked herself, as she went back to the house; and all the afternoon the same question echoed in her mind. Would he come? And, if he came and did not succeed in enlisting Mrs. Vanderstein's sympathies, what then?

There seemed no other possible course. In vain, as she sat beside her friend in the motor, she racked her brains to imagine some way in which Joe could still raise the money if this attempt failed. But she had his assurance that he had already exhausted all practicable means.

Mrs. Vanderstein wished to visit a shop in the Strand, and their way to it led them past the theatre that Madame Querterot had visited a week before, in the company of her daughter and her daughter's suitor.

Large placards ornamented the front of the house, depicting some of the more thrilling episodes of the play. These were varied by photographs of the young actor who played the principal rôle. He was portrayed in immaculate evening dress and in the act of opening the safe; another picture showed him snapping his fingers at the officers of the law; and yet a third displayed him as he took – in the fourth act – the heroine to his arms.

Mrs. Vanderstein and Barbara had seen the play, which was making a roaring success, on more than one occasion. Mrs.

Vanderstein smiled as she observed the posters.

"That is a good play," she said to her companion. "I can hardly help screaming when he escapes by the window as the police burst into the room. It is almost too exciting. And he, the gentleman burglar, you know, is so good-looking. One can't help being on his side, can one? And of course one is intended to be. All the honest people are so terribly dull. Besides, of course, he was a count and quite charming really. I don't wonder the heroine forgave him." She put down her parasol, as they turned into a shady street. "Do you know, Barbara," she went on, "I think that sort of play might do a lot of harm. It can't be right to make dishonesty appear so attractive."

Barbara made no reply, and Mrs. Vanderstein, glancing at her in surprise, was still more astonished at the strange look in the girl's eyes.

"What do you think about it?" she asked again.

"It depends on what you call harm," Barbara answered slowly, and as they pulled up at their destination the conversation came to an end.

They went home early and had barely finished tea when Sidney was announced. He looked rather pale and shook hands with Barbara without speaking as she made a hasty excuse and left the room. Going into another sitting-room, she waited in an agony of suspense till the drawing-room door should open and the interview be over for good or ill.

She had not long to wait.

Five minutes had scarcely passed before she heard the sound of hurried footsteps descending the stairs, and a moment later the front door banged behind Sidney's retreating figure. At the same time a bell pealed violently and, before it could be answered, Barbara caught the sound of the swish of silken skirts and the light tread of Mrs. Vanderstein's feet as she ran down a few steps and called over the banisters to the butler.

"Blake," she called, as that portly person emerged from the door leading to the basement. "Is that you, Blake?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Blake, I am not at home in future to Mr. Joseph Sidney. You are never to let him come into this house again. Do you understand?"

"Very good, ma'am." Blake's tones were as imperturbed as if he were receiving an order to post a letter.

"And tell the footmen. I will not see him again on any account whatever. Let it be clearly understood. And, Blake, please telephone at once to Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones and say, if it is convenient to him, I should like to see him immediately. Ask him to come at once; or to come to dinner; or to the opera. No," she corrected herself, "not to the opera to-night. But ask him to come and see me before I start if he possibly can. It is most important."

"Yes, ma'am." Blake showed no surprise: in moments of distress his mistress always telephoned to Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones.

Mrs. Vanderstein, still in a state of great agitation, retreated to write a letter before dressing for the opera, a matter that demanded, to-night of all nights, both time and undistracted attention.

When she descended to the dining-room all traces of the disturbance caused by Sidney's visit had vanished from her face; and her expression was again one of joyful expectation, as it had been throughout the day. After writing a hurried note, she had entirely dismissed all memory of her husband's nephew.

It was natural that, in the contest with other interests so enthralling as those which that evening filled the mind of his uncle's widow, Sidney should cease to occupy a place in Mrs. Vanderstein's thoughts; should become, as he would have expressed it, an "also ran." What was more remarkable was the fact that Barbara's countenance, when she took her place at the early dinner, wore a look of pleasant anticipation almost equalling that of her friend, very different from the signs of anxiety and distress that had been visible upon it during the earlier part of the day. Mrs. Vanderstein had seen nothing of the weeping figure which, after Joe's dismissal, lay with its face buried in the pillows on Barbara's bed trying to stifle the great sobs that shook it in spite of every effort, or even she, preoccupied as she was, would have felt astonished at so complete a recovery of spirits.

The change, indeed, had been instantaneous and coincided with the moment, when, in the midst of her grief, a sudden idea

had flashed into Barbara's mind, an inspiration, it seemed, that immediately smoothed away all trouble and made plain the way by which Sidney's difficulties should be removed. How was it possible that she had not thought of it before? The knowledge that Joe would never agree to the means she proposed to take, that the persuasions and sophistries of yesterday would be of no use here, that it would be impossible even to broach the subject to him, she swept from her impetuously. There was no need that he should ever suspect her hand in the matter. Care must be taken; she must act with prudence and caution, and all would be well. One thought only held her mind to the exclusion of all else, the wish to protect and save this boy whom she loved from the consequences of his own folly. Nothing was worth considering except this. No fear of the possible effect on her own life shook her resolution, for what, she thought, is life or for that matter death, if it does not imply the prolongation on the one hand, or, on the other, the cutting short of the ties of affection.

She remembered the reckless air with which Joe had said that this business would be the end of all for him, and with a shudder she told herself that the words could only have one meaning. If by sacrificing her life his could be saved, she would not hesitate to give it. Here plain to her eye was the opportunity to serve him, and whatever the result might be to herself she did not shrink from it. As she dressed for the evening, Barbara smiled gladly to herself and sang softly a little song. One thought disturbed her. Sidney was unaware that his salvation was so near. She could not

bear to think of him now, worried and despairing. Yet how could she reassure him without betraying herself and the great idea? With a little frown Barbara mused over this question, as she stuck a paste comb that Mrs. Vanderstein had given her into the masses of her thick fair hair. Presently she scrawled a few words upon a sheet of paper, and hastily folding it into an envelope tucked it into the front of her dress; then, fearing she was late, she ran down the stairs.

"Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones is out of town, ma'am," Blake was saying as she entered the room.

"Oh well, never mind now," said Mrs. Vanderstein.

Dinner that evening was a silent meal. Mrs. Vanderstein, gloriously arrayed, sat smiling abstractedly at nothing from one end of the small table. So preoccupied was she that she forgot to eat, and Blake was obliged to ask her repeatedly whether she would partake of a dish before she could be brought to notice that it was being handed to her. Once, as, recalled suddenly to the present, she brought her thoughts back with a start from their wanderings and turned with some trivial remark towards Barbara, she noticed with a faint feeling of amusement that the girl was as much engrossed in her own imaginings as she was herself, and was sitting absently pulling a flower to pieces, her great eyes fixed vacantly on the shining pearls that swung suspended from the neck of her friend.

They started in good time, Barbara begging to be allowed to stop for one minute at a post office on the way.

She had, she said, forgotten to reply to an invitation, and thought that now it was so late she had better send an answer by wire. She gave the message, which was already written out and in a sealed envelope, to the footman, together with some money, and told him to hand it in as it was, and not to waste time in waiting to see it accepted.

The man was back in a minute, and they drove on, to take their places a few minutes later in the long string of motors and carriages which was slowly advancing to the doors of the Covent Garden opera house.

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Gimblet lived in a flat in the neighbourhood of Whitehall. It was a fad of his to be more comfortably housed than most solitary men. The situation was conveniently near to Scotland Yard, where officials were much in the habit of requiring to see him at odd moments. The view from the windows, overlooking the river, was delightful to one of cultivated and artistic propensities, and the rooms, large and well-proportioned, were capable of displaying to advantage the old and valuable pictures and furniture with which it was the detective's delight to surround himself.

Much of his time was spent in curiosity shops, and he was among the first to discover that former happy hunting ground of the bargain seeker – the Caledonian market. Many an impatient member of the Force, sent round from the "Yard" to ask Mr. Gimblet's assistance in some obscure case, had, after kicking his heels for an hour or two in the hall, left the flat in desperation, only to meet the detective coming up the stairs with a dusky, dust-covered picture in his hand, or hugging to his breast a piece of ancient china.

The younger son of a Midland family, which had moderately enriched itself in the course of the preceding century by commercial transactions in which a certain labour-saving machine for the weaving industries had played a large part,

Mr. Gimblet had received the usual public school education, and had spent two or three subsequent years at Oxford. His artistic propensities had always been strongly marked, but his family showing much opposition to his becoming an artist, and he himself having a modest idea of his own genius and doubting his ability to make his way very high up the ladder of success by the aid of talent which he knew to be somewhat limited, he had ended by going into an architect's office, where he had worked with interest and enjoyment for several more years. It was by accident that he discovered his capacity for tracking the most wary of criminals to his hiding place and for discovering the authors of mysterious and deeply plotted crimes. It happened that a workman employed in the building of a house for which Gimblet had provided the design was found murdered in circumstances as peculiar as they were sinister. There appeared to be no clue to the author of the deed, and after a week or two the official investigators had confessed among themselves that they were completely at a loss.

To Gimblet, visiting the scene of the crime in his capacity of architect – but not without an unwonted and hitherto unknown quickening of the pulse – a piece of board nailed upright where it should have been horizontal had proved immediately suggestive; and its removal had brought to light certain hastily concealed objects, which with one or two previously unnoticed trifles had resulted in the capture and ultimate hanging of the murderer.

This success had led the young man to feel an interest in

other mysterious affairs of the same nature; and it was not long before he found the task of assisting the police in such researches so much more profitable and engrossing than his work as an architect, that he gradually came to give more and more of his leisure to the attempt to discover secrets and to solve problems which at first sight seemed to offer no solution. By the time he was thirty there was scarcely a crime of any importance that he was not called upon to assist in bringing home to its perpetrator; and he had entirely abandoned the pursuit of architectural learning for that of criminal mankind.

He refused an invitation to become attached to the official staff, although this was conveyed in terms that were in the highest degree flattering, preferring to be at liberty to decide for himself whether or no he should take up a case. It was the sensational and odd that attracted him; and he found that quite enough of this came his way to make his occupation an extremely profitable one.

Early on Tuesday afternoon Gimblet sat in his dining-room, contemplating with some satisfaction a large dish of strawberries and a pot of cream sent him by a Devonshire friend. He was finishing a luncheon which he considered well earned, as that morning he had discovered in a narrow back street in Lambeth, and purchased for a mere song, a little picture black with age and dirt, in which his hopeful eye discerned a crowd of small but masterfully painted figures footing it to the strains of a fiddle upon the grass under a spreading tree. Gimblet told himself that

it was in all probability from the brush of Teniers, and he had propped it on the dining-room mantelpiece so that in the intervals of eating he could refresh his eyes as well as his body. Beside him lay the day's paper which he had hardly had time to read before going out that morning. He heaped cream upon his strawberries, sprinkled them with sugar, and took, in succession, a spoonful of the mixture, a look at his picture, and a glance at the paper. With a contented sigh he repeated the process.

At the moment he had no work in hand, and no one more thoroughly enjoyed an occasional loaf.

It was good, he felt, to have nothing to do for once; to have time to idle; to eat greedily delicious food; to spend as many hours as he chose in the dusty recesses of second-hand shops; to do a little painting sometimes; even to be able to arrange beforehand to play a game of golf. Gimblet had an excellent eye, and had been rather good at games in early days. He seldom had time now and, if he did go down to a golf ground occasionally in the afternoons, had to resign himself to play with anyone he could find, as he never knew till the last minute whether he would be able to get away.

He thought of going this afternoon, and looked at his watch. There would be a train from Waterloo in half an hour. Just time to finish his strawberries and catch it. That picture would look well when he had cleaned it. He took up the paper again. It must have been a fine sight last night at Covent Garden. And what a list of singers. Gimblet, who loved music, wished he had been there.

"The Verterexes might have asked me to their box," he said to himself. "Life is full of ingratitude. After all I did for them."

And then it struck him that he had not done much for the Verterexes after all, beyond nearly arresting Mr. Verterex by mistake for a murder he had not committed.

Gimblet laughed.

Then his thoughts reverted lazily to the pleasures of loafing.

"I think I shall give up work," he said to himself. "Why not? I have enough money put by to keep me, with economy, in moderate comfort. Not quite so many strawberries perhaps," he added regretfully, taking another mouthful, "but what I want is leisure. Yes. I am decided I will do no more work. Let the police catch its own burglars!"

He spoke aloud, and defiantly, addressing himself to the picture.

At that moment his servant came into the room.

"A gentleman very anxious to see you, sir," he said. "I have shown him into the library."

"Ask him to come in here if he's in a hurry," said Gimblet. "I haven't finished lunch."

A minute later the man opened the door again, announcing:

"Major Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones."

Major Sir Gregory Aberhyn Jones was a little man with a pink complexion and a small brown moustache. He was short and rather plumper than he could wish, but carried himself very uprightly and with a great sense of his own importance, glaring

at those who might be so obtuse as not immediately to recognise it with such concentrated disapproval that it was usual for the offenders to realise their mistake in the quickest possible time. Behind a fussy, self-satisfied exterior he hid a fund of kindness and good nature seldom to be met with. Sir Gregory prided himself on his youthful appearance, was, in his turn, a source of some pride to one of the best tailors in London, took remarkable interest in his ties and boots, trained his remaining hair in the way it should go, and, though he was sixty-five, flattered himself that he looked not a day over fifty-nine.

"I am in luck to find you, Mr. Gimblet," he said, advancing with outstretched hand as Gimblet rose to receive him. "But this is a sad occasion, a very sad occasion, I fear."

"Dear me," said Gimblet, "I'm sorry to hear that. But won't you sit down? I thought as my man said you were in a hurry you would rather come in here than wait for me. May I offer you some strawberries? No? I'm sorry I can't give you any wine, but I'm a teetotaller, you know. Don't have any in the house. Afraid you'll think me faddy. And now that the servant has gone, may I ask what is the sad event which has given me the pleasure of seeing you?"

"Bad habit, drinking water," commented Sir Gregory, seating himself in an arm-chair by the fire-place. "But nowadays young men have no heads. They can't stand it, that's what it is. Show them three or four glasses of port and they say it gives them a headache. Absurd, sir! The country is rotten through and

through. The men can't eat, they can't drink, they can't even dance! They stroll about a ball-room now in a way that would make you sick. In my days we used to valse properly. But they don't dance the *deux-temps* any more, I'm told. They say it makes them giddy! Giddy! Rotten constitutions, that's what we suffer from nowadays. It's the same with all this talk of reforming the army. Compulsory service indeed," the major snorted. "What should we want compulsory service for? In my day one Englishman was as good as twenty Germans or any kind of foreigner. At least he would have been if we'd had a European war, which as it happened was not the case while I was in the Service. But now there are actually people who think that if it comes to a fight it would be an advantage for us to have as many men as the enemy. They ought to be ashamed of themselves, if there's any truth in it. No, no, the army doesn't need reforming, take my word for it. There are a few alterations which I could suggest in the uniforms which would make all the difference in the world, but except for that, what I say is, let sleeping dogs lie."

Having delivered himself of these remarks, Sir Gregory felt in his pocket, drew forth a cigar case, selected a cigar and asked for a match.

"Did you come to persuade me to your views on compulsory service?" asked Gimblet pleasantly as he continued to devour his strawberries, which were now nearly all gone. "Because I'm afraid it's no good. You can't possibly convince me that its adoption is not a vital necessity to the nation."

"I'm sorry to hear you think that," said the other, "for I have the highest opinion of your intellect. Believe me, when you discovered the frauds that were being perpetrated at the Great Continental Bank last year, I marked you down, Mr. Gimblet, as the man I should consult in case of need. And it is to consult you that I am here. I said it was a sad occasion. Well, it is sad for me, but I am not yet, as a matter of fact, quite sure whether or no it is desperately so. What has happened, in a word, is this. A lady to whom I am deeply attached has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" said Gimblet, pushing back his chair. He had eaten the last of the strawberries. "May I ask who the lady is – a relation of yours?"

"Not exactly. She is a Mrs. Vanderstein, for whom, as I have just said, I have a great regard, I may say an affection. In fact," said Sir Gregory, leaning forward and speaking in confidential tones, "I don't mind telling you that she is the lady I have chosen to be the future Lady Aberhyn Jones."

"Indeed. You are engaged to marry her?"

"Not precisely engaged," admitted Sir Gregory, with a slightly troubled look.

As a matter of strict accuracy, he had proposed to Mrs. Vanderstein about three times a year ever since the death of her husband; but Mrs. Vanderstein, although tempted by his title, had already been the wife of one man twice her age and did not intend to repeat the experiment. Still, his friendship was dear to her; he was the only baronet of her acquaintance and she liked to

have him about the house. He had been a director on the board of one of her husband's companies, and, when introduced by him, her pretty face and amiable disposition had quite captured Sir Gregory's heart, so that he had cultivated Mr. Vanderstein's society to such good purpose as to become a constant habitué of the house in Grosvenor Street.

After Mr. Vanderstein's death he lost no more time than decency demanded in proposing to his widow; and, though she refused to marry him, and refused over and over again, yet she did it in so sympathetic a manner and was so kind in spite of her obstinacy that Sir Gregory believed her absence of alacrity in accepting his hand to be prompted by anything rather than a lack of affection. She treated him as her best friend and consulted him on every question of business, to the wise conduct of which her own shrewdness was a far better guide, and had imperceptibly fallen into the habit of never making a decision of any importance without first threshing out the pros and cons in conversation with him. Nothing so strengthened her faith in the soundness of her own judgment as his disapproval of any course she intended to adopt.

"For some reason," Sir Gregory continued after a pause, "Mrs. Vanderstein has never consented to an actual engagement. It is that which makes me so uneasy now. Can it be – Mr. Gimblet, I give you my word I feel ashamed of mentioning such a suspicion even to you – but can it be that she has fled with another?"

He uttered the last words in such a tragic tone that Gimblet,

though he felt inclined to smile, restrained the impulse, and, summoning up all the sympathy at his command, inquired again:

"Will you not explain the circumstances to me a little more fully? When did the lady vanish? Have you any reason to think she did not go alone? Was there some kind of understanding between you, and what did it amount to?"

"I will be perfectly frank with you," said Sir Gregory, "much the best thing in these cases is to be absolutely candid. You agree with me there? I thought you would. At the same time where a lady is concerned – you follow me? One must avoid anything that looks like giving her away. But in this case there is really no reason why I should conceal anything from you. Mrs. Vanderstein has never accepted my proposals. On the contrary she has refused to marry me on each of the occasions when I have suggested it to her. You ask me why? My dear sir, I cannot reply to that question. Who can account for a woman's whims? Not I, sir, not I. Nor you either; if you will allow me to say so." Sir Gregory's hands and eyes were uplifted in bewilderment as he considered the inexplicable behaviour of woman in general and of Mrs. Vanderstein in particular. "But I have no doubt that in time she would have reconsidered her decision," he went on puffing at his cigar, "that is to say I *had* no doubt until this morning."

"And what happened then?" asked the detective.

"I came up from Surrey, where I had been paying a week-end visit," pursued his visitor, "arriving at my rooms at midday.

My servant at once informed me that Mrs. Vanderstein had sent a telephone message yesterday evening, begging me to go immediately to see her and adding that it was most important. I only waited to change into London clothes, Mr. Gimblet, before I hurried to her house in Grosvenor Street. And when I got there, what did I hear? 'Pon my soul," exclaimed Sir Gregory, taking his cigar out of his mouth, "you might have knocked me down with a feather!"

"You heard that the lady had disappeared?"

"Exactly. Not been seen or heard of since last night. Drove away from her own door, they tell me, in her own motor car; and has never come back from that hour to this."

"Did she leave no word as to where she was going?"

"None whatever. She dined early, of course, on account of the opera."

"The opera! In that case what makes you think she didn't go there?"

"Of course she went. Didn't I say so? She drove off to Covent Garden and that's the last that's been heard of her."

"You interest me," said Gimblet. "Was she not seen to leave the opera house?"

"I don't know about that," said Sir Gregory. "I found the servants very much disturbed; and very glad they were, I may say, to see me."

"She has probably met with some accident and has been taken to a hospital," suggested Gimblet. "Have any inquiries been

made?"

"I rather think they have been telephoning to the hospitals, but I told them not to communicate with the police till I had seen you. Wouldn't do, you know. She would dislike it extremely, especially if it turns out as I fear and she has gone off with some other man."

"I can't see why she should have done that," said Gimblet. "She was her own mistress, I suppose, and had no need to conceal her movements. Depend on it," he went on, for the anxiety on Sir Gregory's face moved him to pity, "she will be found at one of the hospitals; and I advise you to make inquiries at them. A woman, alone as she was, would be carried to one of them if she were taken ill or met with a slight accident that prevented her for the moment from giving her address."

"But she was not alone," urged Sir Gregory. "Miss Turner, her companion, was with her, of course."

"Indeed," said Gimblet, "you said nothing of there being anyone with her. And what has Miss Turner to say on the subject?"

"She's not there. She's vanished too."

"Really," said the detective. "This is getting interesting. That two ladies should set out for Covent Garden opera house on a gala night and never return from it, is, to say the least, slightly unconventional. Now, before we go any further," he went on quickly, "what do you wish me to do in the matter?"

"I want you to find Mrs. Vanderstein, naturally," returned

Sir Gregory, staring at him in astonishment; "I feel the greatest anxiety on her account, the more so since you consider her likely to have met with an accident."

"But if, as you seem to suspect, the lady has gone off deliberately, will she not be annoyed at our seeking her out? Will she not be angry with you for trying to discover her movements if she wishes them unknown?"

"I daresay she'd think it dashed impertinent. But I can't help that. She may be in need of me; in fact," cried Sir Gregory with sudden recollection, "I know she is! Don't I tell you she telephoned for me last night? A most urgent message. That proves she wishes for my help in some matter of importance to her, and how can I assist her without knowing where she is?"

"As you say," said Gimblet, "it does look as if she did not wish to leave you unacquainted with her whereabouts. Well, I have nothing to do just now and if you wish me to make inquiries I will do so with pleasure, though I do not think it will prove to be an affair altogether in my line."

"Thank 'ee. Thank 'ee," mumbled the old soldier with his cigar between his teeth. "That's what I want. Now, how are you going to set about it?"

"I am going to ask you a few questions first. You have not yet furnished me with that comprehensive clear account in which the trivial details which look so unimportant and may yet be of such moment are never omitted: the lucid narrative so dear to the detective's heart. I do not think, if you will pardon my saying so,

that I am likely to get it from you, Sir Gregory."

Sir Gregory glared, but said nothing; and Gimblet continued, with a smile:

"To begin with, who is Mrs. Vanderstein?"

"The widow of a Jewish money-lender." Sir Gregory spoke somewhat shortly. He considered Gimblet's remarks disrespectful.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.