

Boothby Guy

The Mystery of the Clasped Hands: A Novel



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CHAPTER I

"I never knew such a fellow as you are for ferreting out these low, foreign eating-houses," said Godfrey Henderson to his friend, Victor Fensden, as they turned from Oxford Street into one of the narrow thoroughfares in the neighbourhood of Soho. "Why you should take such trouble, and at the same time do your digestion such irreparable injury, I can not imagine. There are any number of places where you can get a chop or steak, free of garlic, in a decent quarter of the Town, to say nothing of being waited upon by a man who *does* look as if he had been brave enough to face the dangers of washing once or twice within five years."

His companion only laughed.

"Go on, my friend, go on," he said, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke. "You pretend to be a cosmopolitan of cosmopolitans, but you will remain insular to the day of your death. To you, a man who does not happen to be an Englishman must of necessity be dirty, and be possessed of a willingness to sever your jugular within the first few minutes of your acquaintance. With regard to the accusation you bring against me, I am willing to declare, in self-defence, that I like burrowing about among the small restaurants in this quarter, for the simple reason that I meet men who are useful to me in my work, besides affording me food for reflection."

The taller man grunted scornfully.

"Conspirators to a man," he answered. "Nihilists, Anarchists, members of the Mafia, the Camorristi, and the Carbonari. Some day you will enter into an argument with one of them and a knife thrust between your ribs will be the result."

"It may be so," returned Victor Fensden, with a shrug of his narrow shoulders. "Better that, however, than a life of stolid British priggishness. How you manage to paint as you do when you have so little of the romantic in your temperament, is a thing I can not for the life of me understand. That a man who rows, plays football and cricket, and who will walk ten miles to see a wrestling match or a prize fight, should be gifted with such a sense of colour and touch, is as great a mystery to me as the habits of the ichthyosaurus."

And indeed, what Fensden said was certainly true. Godfrey Henderson, one of the most promising of our younger painters, was as unlike the popular notion of an artist as could well be found. He had rowed stroke in his 'Varsity boat, had won for himself a fair amount of fame as a good all-round athlete, and at the same time had painted at least three of the most beautiful pictures – pictures with a subtle touch of poetry in them – that the public had seen for many years. His height was fully six feet one and a half, his shoulders were broad and muscular; he boasted a pleasant and open countenance, such a one in fact as makes one feel instinctively that its owner is to be trusted. Taken altogether, a casual observer would have declared him to be a young country Squire, and few would have guessed that the greater portion of his life was spent standing before an easel, palette and brush in hand.

Victor Fensden, his companion, was of an altogether different stamp. He was at least three inches shorter, was slimly built, and at first glance would appear to possess a highly nervous and delicate constitution. In his dress he also differed from his friend. His taste betrayed a partiality for velvet coats; his ties were usually startling, so far as colour went; he wore his hair longer than is customary, and further adorned his face with a neat little Vandyke beard and mustache. Like Henderson he was also a votary of the brush. His pictures, however, were of the impressionist order – pretty enough in their way, but lacking in form, and a trifle vague as to colouring. On occasions he

wrote poetry. There were some who said he was not sincere, that his pictures were milk-and-water affairs, suggestive of the works of greater men, and only intended to advertise himself. If that were so, the success they achieved was comparative. Sad to relate, there were people in London who had not heard the name of Victor Fensden; while the walls of the Academy, which he affected so much to despise, had not so far been honoured by his patronage. "The whole thing," he would say, adopting the language of our American cousins, "is controlled by a Business Ring; the Hanging Committee and the dealers stand in with each other. If you prefer to do bad work deliberately, or at any rate are content to be commonplace, then you're safe for admission. But if you prefer to do something which may, or may not, please the multitude, but which will last longer than Burlington House, or the National Gallery itself, then you must be content to remain outside." After this tirade, regardless of the implied sneer at his work, Godfrey would laugh and turn the matter off by proposing dinner, luncheon, or some other distraction. He knew the value of his own work, and was content to estimate it accordingly.

Having reached the end of the street down which they had been walking, when the conversation already described occurred, they found themselves before the entrance to a small eating-house. One glance was sufficient to show that it was of the foreign order, so derided by Henderson a few moments ago before. They entered and looked about them. The room was long and narrow, and contained some ten or a dozen small tables, three or four of which were already occupied. Pictures of the German school, apparently painted by the yard, and interspersed with gaudy portraits of King Humbert with his mustache, Victor Emmanuel with his wealth of orders, the latter cheek by jowl with Mr. Garibaldi in his felt hat, decorated the walls. The proprietor, a small, tubby individual, with the blackest of black hair and eyes, and an olive skin that glistened like the marble tops of the tables, came forward to welcome them. At his request they seated themselves and gave their orders.

"What enjoyment you can find in this sort of thing I can not imagine," repeated Henderson, almost irritably, as he looked about him. "If you take a pleasure in macaroni and tomato, and find poetry in garlic and *sauer-kraut*, the divine instinct must be even more highly developed in you than your warmest admirers believe. We might have gone to the club and have had a decent meal there."

"And have had to listen to a lot of supercilious young idiots chattering about what they are pleased to call 'their work,'" the other replied. "No, no, we are better off here. Set your imagination to work, my dear fellow, and try to believe yourself in Florence, with the moonlight streaming down on the Ponte Vecchio; or in Naples, and that you can hear the waves breaking up on the rock under the Castello del Ovo. You might even be listening to *Funiculi-Finicula* for the first time."

"Confound you! I never know whether you are serious or not," replied Godfrey. "Is it a joke you're bringing me here to-night, or have you some definite object in view?"

He looked across the table at his companion as if he were anxious to assure himself upon this point before he said anything further.

"What if I *had* an object?" the other answered. "What if I wanted to do you a good turn, and by asking you to come here to-night were able to help you in your work?"

"In that case," Henderson replied, "I should say that it was very kind of you, but that you have chosen a curious way of showing it. How a low Italian restaurant in Soho can help me in the work I have on hand I can not for the life of me understand. Is it possible for you to be more explicit?"

"If the critics are to be believed you ask too much of me," Fensden returned, with one of his quiet laughs. "Are they not always declaring that my principal fault lies in my being too vague? Seriously, however, I will confess that I had an object in bringing you here. Have I not heard you grumbling morning, noon, and night, that the model for your new picture is about as difficult to find as, well, shall we say, an honest dealer? Now, I believe that the humble mouse was once able to assist the lion – forgive the implied compliment – in other words, I think I have achieved the impossible. It will take too long to tell you how I managed it, but the fact remains that I have discovered the girl you want, and what is more, she will be here to-night. If, when you have seen her, you come to

the conclusion that she will not answer your purpose, then I shall be quite willing to confess that my knowledge of a beautiful woman is only equal to your appreciation of an Italian dinner in a cheap Soho restaurant. I have spoken!"

"And so you have really brought me here to eat this villainous concoction," Henderson answered, contemptuously regarding the mess before him, "in order to show me a face that you think may be useful to me in my work? My dear fellow, you know as well as I do that we think differently upon such matters. What you have repeatedly declared to be the loveliest face you have ever seen, I would not sketch upon a canvas; while another, that haunts me by day and night, does not raise a shadow of enthusiasm in you. I am afraid you have had your trouble in vain. But what abominable stuff this is to be sure! Order some wine, for pity's sake."

A flask of chianti was brought them, and later some goat's milk cheese. Upon the latter, bad as it was, Henderson elected to dine. He had barely finished what was placed before him when an exclamation from his companion caused him to turn his head in the direction of the door. Two women were entering the restaurant at the moment, and were approaching the table at which the young men sat. The elder was a stout and matronly party, dark of eye, swarthy of skin, and gorgeous in her colouring, so much so, indeed, that not the slightest doubt could have existed as to her nationality. She was a daughter of Italy from the top of her head to the soles of her ample feet. Her companion, however, was modelled on altogether different lines. She was tall, graceful, and so beautiful, in a statuesque way, that Henderson felt his heart thrill with pleasure at the sight of her. Here was the very woman he had been so anxious to discover. If he had hunted the Continent of Europe through, he could not have found any one better suited to the requirements of the work he had in hand. Since it was plain that it was she for whom Fensden was waiting, it looked as if their tastes, for once, were likely to be the same.

"What a perfect face!" exclaimed Godfrey, more to himself than to his companion. "At any hazard, I must induce her to sit to me."

Fensden looked at his friend's face, made a note of the admiration he saw there, and smiled to himself.

"What did I tell you?" he inquired with a note of triumph in his voice. "You pooh-poohed the notion that I should ever be able to find you a model. What do you say now?"

"She is perfect," Henderson replied. "Just look at the eyes, the beautiful contour of the face, the shapely neck and the hands! Great Scott! what is a woman of her class doing with such hands? Where did you meet her?"

"In another of my contemptible restaurants," Fensden answered. "Directly I saw her, I said to myself: 'This is the model for Godfrey!' I made inquiries about her, and, finding that she was willing to sit, made an appointment to meet her here this evening."

By this time Godfrey's antagonism had entirely left him. His only desire now was to secure this woman, and, with her assistance, to complete his masterpiece. As soon as the doors of Burlington House were thrown open, that face should look down upon the picture-lovers of England, or he'd never touch a brush again.

The two women, by this time, had seated themselves at another table; and it was almost with a sense of disappointment that Godfrey observed his ideal commence her meal. To watch her filling her pretty mouth to overflowing with steaming macaroni was not a pleasing sight. It was too human and too suggestive of a healthy appetite to harmonize with the poetic framework in which his imagination had already placed her.

When the ladies had finished their meal, the two young men left their own table and crossed the room to that at which they were seated. Fensden said something in Italian, which elicited a beaming smile from the elder lady, and a gesture of approval from her companion. It was not the first time in his life that Godfrey Henderson had had occasion to wish he had taken advantage of the opportunities he had had of acquiring a knowledge of that melodious language.

"The signora declares that there is no occasion for us to speak Italian, since she is an accomplished English scholar," said Fensden, with a sarcastic touch that was not lost upon Henderson.

"The signorina also speaks our villainous tongue as well as if she had been born and bred within the sound of Bow Bells."

At this supposed compliment, the elder lady smiled effusively, while her daughter looked gravely from one man to the other as if she were not quite sure of the value to be placed upon what Fensden had said. Having received permission, the two men seated themselves at the table, and Henderson ordered another flask of wine. Under its influence their acquaintance ripened rapidly. It was not, however, until they had been talking some little time, that the all-important subject was broached.

"And it is Teresina's portrait that your friend would paint, signor?" said the elder lady, turning to Fensden. "And why not? 'Tis a beautiful face, though I, her mother, say it. If the signor will make the – what you call it – 'rangements, it shall be as he wishes."

Less than a minute was sufficient to place the matter on a satisfactory basis, and it was thereupon settled that the Signorina Cardi should attend at the studio at a certain hour every week-day until the picture was finished. Matters having been arranged in this eminently friendly fashion, the meeting broke up, and with many bows and compliments on Fensden's and the signora's parts, they bade each other adieu. A few minutes later, the two young men found themselves once more in the street.

"My dear fellow, I don't know how to thank you," said Henderson. "I've been worrying myself more than I can say at not being able to find the face I wanted. I owe you ten thousand apologies."

But Fensden would not hear of such a thing as an apology. His only desire was that the picture should be successful, he said.

"I had no idea that he was so fond of me," Henderson remarked to himself that night when he was alone in his bedroom. "Fancy his hunting through London for a model for me. He is the last man I should have thought would have taken the trouble."

Next morning Teresina entered upon her duties, and Godfrey set to work with more than his usual enthusiasm. The picture was to be his *magnum opus*, the greatest effort he had yet given to the world. The beautiful Italian proved to be a good sitter, and her delight as the picture grew upon the canvas was not to be concealed. Meanwhile Fensden smoked innumerable cigarettes, composed *fin-de-siècle* poems in her honour, and made a number of impressionist studies of her head that his friends declared would eventually astonish artistic London. At last the picture was finished and sent in. Then followed that interval of anxious waiting, so well known to those who have striven for such honours as the Academy has to bestow. When it was announced that it had passed the first and second rejections great was the rejoicing in the studio.

"It is your face that has done it, Teresina," cried Godfrey. "I knew they wouldn't be able to resist that."

"Nay, nay," said the signora, who was present, "such compliments will turn the child's head. Her face would not be there but for the signor's cleverness. Well do I remember that when Luigi Maffoni painted the portrait of Monsignore – "

No one heeded her, so she continued the narrative in an undertone to the cat on her lap. The day, however, was not destined to end as happily as it had begun. That evening, when they were alone together in the studio, Fensden took Godfrey to task.

"Dear boy," he said, as he helped himself to a cigarette from a box on the table beside him, "I have come to the conclusion that you must go warily. There are rocks ahead, and, from what I see, you are running straight for them."

"What on earth is the matter now?" Godfrey asked, stretching himself out in an easy chair as he spoke. "I know the poise of that head is not quite what it might be, but haven't I promised you that I'll alter it to-morrow? Teresina is the very best model in the world, and as patient as she's beautiful."

"That's exactly what I am complaining of," Victor answered, quietly. "If she were not, I should not bother my head about her. I feel, in a measure, responsible, don't you see? If it hadn't been for me, she would not be here."

The happiness vanished from Godfrey's face as a breath first blurs and then leaves the surface of a razor.

"I am afraid I don't quite grasp the situation," he said. "You surely don't suppose that I am falling in love with Teresina – with my model?"

"I am quite aware that you're not," the other answered. "There is my trouble. If you *were* in love with her, there might be some hope for her. But as it is there is none."

Henderson stared at him in complete surprise.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked.

"No one was ever saner," Fensden replied. "Look here, Godfrey, can't you see the position for yourself? Here is this beautiful Italian girl, whom you engaged through my agency. You take her from beggary, and put her in a position of comparative luxury. She has sat to you day after day, smiled at your compliments, and – well, to put it bluntly, has had every opportunity and encouragement given her to fall head over ears in love with you. Is it quite fair, do you think, to let it go on?"

Godfrey was completely taken aback.

"Great Scott! You don't mean to say you think I'm such a beast as to encourage her?" he cried. "You know as well as I do that I have behaved toward her only as I have done to all the other models before her. Surely you would wish me to be civil to the girl, and try to make her work as pleasant as possible for her? If you think I've been a blackguard, say so outright!"

"My dear Godfrey, nothing could be further from my thoughts," answered Fensden in his usual quiet voice, that one of his friends once compared to the purring of a cat. "I should be a poor friend, however, if I were to allow you to go on as you are going without an expostulation. Can not you look at it in the same light as I do? Are you so blind that you can not see that this girl is falling every day more deeply in love with you? The love-light gleams in her eyes whenever she looks at you; she sees an implied caress even in the gentle pats you give her drapery, when you arrange it on the stage there; a tender solicitude for her welfare when you tell her to hurry home before it rains. What is the end of it all to be? I suppose you do not intend making her your wife?"

"My wife?" said Godfrey, blankly, as if the idea were too preposterous to have ever occurred to him. "Surely you must be jesting to talk like this?"

"I am not jesting with you, if you are not jesting with her," the other replied. "You must see for yourself that the girl worships the very ground you walk upon. However, there is still time for matters to be put right. She has so far only looked at the affair from her own standpoint; what is more, I do not want her to lose her employment with you, since it means so much to her. What I do want is, that you should take hold of yourself in time and prevent her from being made unhappy while you have the opportunity."

"You may be quite sure that I will do so," Henderson replied, more stiffly than he had yet spoken. "I am more sorry than I can say that this should have occurred. Teresina is a good girl, and I would no more think of causing her pain than I would of striking my own sister. And now I'm off to bed. Good-night."

True to his promise, his behaviour next day, so far as Teresina was concerned, was so different that she regarded him with surprise, quite unable to understand the reason of the change. She thought she must have offended him in some way, and endeavoured by all the means in her power to win herself back into his good graces. But the more she tried to conciliate him, the further he withdrew into his shell. Victor Fensden, smoking his inevitable cigarette, waited to see what the result would be. There was a certain amount of pathos in the situation, and a close observer might have noticed that the strain was telling upon both of the actors in it, the girl in particular. For the next fortnight or so, the moral temperature of the studio was not as equable as of old. Godfrey, who was of too

honest a nature to make a good conspirator, chafed at the part he was being called upon to play, while Teresina, who only knew that she loved, and that her love was not returned, was divided between her affections for the man and a feeling of wounded dignity for herself.

"I wish to goodness I could raise sufficient money to get out of London for six months," said Godfrey, one evening, as they sat together in the studio. "I'd be off like a shot."

Fensden knew why he said this.

"I am sorry I can't help you," he replied. "I am about as badly off as yourself. But surely the great picture sold well?"

"Very well; for me, that is to say," Godfrey replied. "But I had to part with most of it next day."

He did not add that he had sent most of it to his widowed sister, who was very badly off and wanted help to send her boy to college.

A short silence followed; then Fensden said: "If you had money what would you do?"

"Go abroad," said Godfrey quickly. "The strain of this business is more than I can stand. If I had a few hundreds to spare we'd go together and not come back for six months. By that time everything would have settled down to its old normal condition."

How little did he guess that the very thing that seemed so impossible was destined to come to pass!

CHAPTER II

One morning a week or so after the conversation described at the end of the previous chapter, Godfrey Henderson found lying on the table in the studio a long, blue envelope, the writing upon which was of a neat and legal character. He did not own a halfpenny in the world, so what this could mean he was not able to imagine. Animated by a feeling of curiosity he opened the envelope and withdrew the contents. He read the letter through the first time without altogether realizing its meaning; then, with a vague feeling of surprise, he read it again. He had just finished his second perusal of it when Fensden entered the room. He glanced at Godfrey's face, and said, as if in inquiry:

"Anything the matter? You look scared!"

"A most extraordinary thing," returned Godfrey. "You have heard me talk of old Henderson of Detwich?"

"Your father's brother? The old chap who sends you a brace of grouse every season, and asks when you are going to give up being a starving painter and turn your attention to business? What of him?"

"He is dead and buried," answered Godfrey. "This letter is from his lawyer to say that I am his heir, in other words that Detwich passes to me, with fifteen thousand a year on which to keep it up, and that they are awaiting my instructions."

There was a pause which lasted for upward of a quarter of a minute. Then Fensden held out his hand.

"My dear fellow, I am sure I congratulate you most heartily," he said. "I wish you luck with all my heart. The struggling days are over now. For the future you will be able to follow your art as you please. You will also be able to patronize those who are not quite so fortunate. Fifteen thousand a year and a big country place! Whatever will you do with yourself?"

"That is for the Future to decide," Godfrey replied.

That afternoon he paid a visit to the office of the firm of solicitors who had written to him. They corroborated the news contained in their letter, and were both assiduous in their attentions and sincere in their desire to serve him.

Four days later it was arranged that Godfrey and Fensden should start for the Continent. Before doing so, however, the former purchased a neat little gold watch and chain which he presented to Teresina, accompanied by a cheque equivalent to six months' salary, calculated at the rate she had been receiving.

"Don't forget me, Teresina," he said, as he looked round the now dismantled studio. "Let me know how you get on, and remember if ever you want a friend I shall be only too glad to serve you."

At that moment Fensden hailed him from the cab outside, bidding him hurry, or he feared they would miss their train. Godfrey accordingly held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said, and though he would have given worlds to have prevented it, a lump rose in his throat as he said it, and his voice was so shaky that he felt sure she must notice it.

Then, bidding her give the key to the landlord when she left the studio, he went out into the street, and jumped into a cab, which next moment started off for the station. How was he to know that Teresina was lying in a dead faint upon the studio floor?

When they left England for the Continent Godfrey had only the vaguest notion of what they were going to do after they left Paris. Having spent a fortnight in the French capital they journeyed on to Switzerland, put in a month at Lucerne, three weeks in Rome, and found themselves, in the middle of November, at Luxor, looking upon the rolling waters of the Nile. Their sketch books were surfeited with impressions, and they themselves were filled with a great content. They had both visited the Continent on numerous occasions before, but this was the first time that they had made

the acquaintance of the "Land of the Pharaohs." Godfrey was delighted with everything he saw, and already he had the ideas for a dozen new pictures in his head.

"I had no notion that any sunset could be so gorgeous," he said one day, when they sat together watching the ball of fire descend to his rest on the western horizon of the desert. "The colours have not yet been discovered that could possibly do it justice. For the future I shall come out here every year."

"Don't be too sure, my friend," said Fensden. "There was a time when such a thing might have been possible, but circumstances have changed with you. You are no longer the erratic Bohemian artist, remember, but a man with a stake in the country, and a county magnate."

"But what has the county magnate to do with the question at issue?" Godfrey inquired.

"Everything in the world," retorted his companion. "In virtue of your new position you will have to marry. The future Mrs. Henderson, in all probability, will also have a stake in the country. She will have great ideas, moreover, connected with what she will term the improvement of the land, and, beyond a trip to the Italian lakes at long intervals, will not permit you to leave the country of her forefathers."

"What a strange fellow you are, to be sure!" replied Godfrey. "To hear you talk one would think that the possession of money – and, by Jove, it's a very decent thing to have when you come to consider it – must necessarily relegate a man to the region of the commonplace. Why shouldn't I marry a girl who is fond of travelling?"

"Because, as a rule, Fate ordains otherwise," Fensden replied. "I think I can describe the sort of girl you will marry."

"Then do so, by all means," said Godfrey, "I'll smoke another cigar while you are arranging it."

"In the first place she will be tall. Your idea of the ludicrous would not let you marry a small woman. She will have large hands and feet, and the latter will be heavily shod. That is how in London I always pick out the girls who live in the country. She will be handsome rather than pretty, for the reason that your taste lies in that direction. She will not flirt, because she will be in love with you. She will be an admirable housewife of the solid order, and while I should be prepared to trust to her judgment in the matter of dogs and horses, roots, crops, and the dairy farm, finer susceptibilities she will have none. Do you like the picture?"

"Scarcely," said Henderson; "and yet, when all is said and done a man might do worse."

There was a pause, during which each man knew what the other was thinking about. Godfrey was recalling Teresina's beautiful face, and Fensden knew that he was doing so.

"By the way," said Fensden, very quietly, "I noticed this morning that you received a letter bearing an Italian post-mark. Would it be indiscreet if I inquired your correspondent's name?"

"I don't see why there should be any mystery about it," Henderson replied. "It was from Teresina."

"From Teresina?" said the other, with a look of surprise.

"Yes, from Teresina," his friend answered. "I made her promise before we left home that should she leave England she would let me have her address, and, if she were in need of anything, she would communicate with me. You can see the letter if you like. Here it is."

He took the letter in question from his pocket and handed it to his companion. It consisted of only a few lines and gave the writer's address with the hope that the time might soon come when she would again be allowed to sit to "her kind patron."

Victor, having perused it, handed it back to Godfrey, who replaced it in his pocket without a word.

Two days later they returned by steamer to Cairo, where they took up their abode at the Mena House Hotel. Godfrey preferred it, because it was some distance from the dust of the city, and Fensden because he averred that the sneer on the face of the Sphinx soothed him more than all the luxuries of Cairo. As it was, he sat in the veranda of the hotel and made impressionist sketches of dragomen, camels, and the backsheesh-begging Bedouins of the Pyramids. Godfrey found it impossible to work.

"I am absorbing ideas," he said. "The work will come later on."

In the meantime he played polo in the Ghezireh, shot jackals in the desert, flirted with the charming tourists in the verandas of the hotel, and enjoyed himself immensely in his own fashion. Then one day he received a telegram from England announcing the fact that his mother was seriously ill, and asking him to return without delay.

"I am sincerely sorry," said Fensden, politely. Then he added, regretfully: "I suppose our tour must now, like all good things, come to an end. When do you leave?"

"By to-morrow morning's train," he answered. "I shall pick up the mail boat at Ismailia and travel in her to Naples. If all goes well I shall be in England to-morrow week. But look here, Victor, when you come to think of it there's not the least necessity for you to come, too. It would be no end of a shame to rob you of your holiday. Why should you not go on and finish the tour by yourself? Why not come with me as far as Port Said, and catch the steamer for Jaffa there?"

"It's very good of you, my dear Godfrey," said Fensden, "but – "

"Let there be no 'buts,'" the other returned. "It's all arranged. When you come home you shall describe your adventures to me."

Needless to say, in the end Fensden agreed to the proposal, and next day they accordingly bade each other good-bye on the promenade deck of the mail steamer that was to take Henderson as far as Naples. Fensden was beginning to realize that it was by no means unpleasant to have a rich and generous friend. Poverty was doubtless romantic and artistic, but a well-filled pocket-book meant good hotels and the best of wines and living.

While the boat ploughed her way across the Mediterranean, an idea occurred to Godfrey, and he resolved to act upon it. It was neither more nor less than to utilize what little time was given him in Naples in seeking out Teresina and assuring himself of her comfort in her old home. He had quite convinced himself by this time that any affection he might once have felt for her was now dead and buried. For this reason he saw no possible danger in paying her a visit. "Victor made more of it," he argued, "than the circumstances had really warranted. Had he not said anything about it, there would have been no trouble, and in that case Teresina would still be in London, and sitting to me."

As soon as the vessel was in harbour, he collected his luggage and made his way ashore. A cab conveyed him to an hotel he had patronized before; and when he was safely installed there, and realized that he could not proceed on his journey until the next morning, he resolved to set out in search of Teresina. Producing her letter from his pocket-book he made a note of the address, and then started upon his errand, to discover that the signorina Cardi's home took some little finding. At last, however, he succeeded, only to be informed by an intelligent neighbour that the signora was not at home, while the signorina had gone out some fifteen minutes before. Considerably disappointed, he turned to descend the steps to find himself face to face with Teresina herself as he stepped into the street. She uttered a little exclamation of astonishment and delight at seeing him.

"How is it that you are here, signor?" she inquired, when they had greeted each other. "I did not know that you were in Naples."

"I only arrived this afternoon," he answered. "I am on my way to England."

"To England?" she said, and then uttered a little sigh as if the very name of that country conjured up sad memories. "It is cold and wet in England now; and do you remember how the studio chimney smoked?"

This apparently irrelevant remark caused them both to laugh, but their mirth had not altogether a happy sound.

"I am going to give up the studio," he answered. "I expect that for the future I shall do my work in the country. But you are not looking well, Teresina!"

"I am quite well," she answered, hurriedly. How was he to know that for many weeks past she had been eating her heart out for love of him? If the whole world seemed dark to her now it was because he, her sun, no longer shone upon her.

"And your mother, the signora, how wrong of me not to have inquired after her. I trust she is well?"

"Quite well, signor," she replied. "She often talks of you. She is at Sorrento to-day, but she may be back at any minute. She would have liked to have seen you, signor, to have thanked you for your great goodness to us."

"Nonsense," said Henderson, hurriedly. "It is the other way round. My thanks are due to you. Had it not been for your face, Teresina, my picture would never have been such a success. Do you know that several ladies, great ladies in England, said that they would give anything to be so beautiful? I don't think I shall ever do a better piece of work than that."

He had just said this when he noticed that a young man, tall, slim, and very dark, had approached them unperceived, and was now glaring angrily at him. Teresina had also become aware of his presence, and was visibly affected by it. Whereas only a moment before she had been all sunshine and delight at seeing Henderson once more, now she was quite the reverse.

"Is this man a friend of yours?" Godfrey asked, in English. "He seems to be put out about something."

"It is only Tomasso Dardini," she answered, as if the explanation were sufficient. "He is quick-tempered, but he means no harm."

"Then I wish to goodness he'd go away; he glares as if he would like to eat me. If I may hazard a guess, Teresina, I should say that he is in love with you."

"He is very foolish," she answered, and a flush spread over her face. "Some day, if he is not very careful, he will get into trouble."

"I should not be at all surprised to hear it," Godfrey replied.

Then, turning to the man in question, he signed to him to be off about his business. For a moment the youth seemed inclined to refuse, but presently he thought better of it, and marched off down the street, looking back now and again as if to see whether the Englishman and the girl were still conversing together.

"And now, Teresina, I have a little plan to propose to you," said Godfrey, when the other had turned the corner. "As I told you just now, I am on my way to England, and therefore, shall only be able to spend to-night in Naples. From the announcements I see they are playing 'Faust' at the Opera-House. Why should not you and your mother dine with me, and go there afterward? It would be a pleasant way of spending the evening, and we could talk of old days."

Teresina clapped her hands with delight. In her love of the Opera she was a genuine Neapolitan.

"It would be lovely," she cried. "My mother will come, I feel sure. It is kind of you, signor."

It was thereupon arranged that they should meet at a certain place, dine, and then go on to the Opera together. Having settled this, Henderson returned to his hotel, whiled away the time as best he could, and when the hour arrived, set off to the rendezvous.

Punctual to the moment he put in an appearance at the place. It was a restaurant not unlike that in which he had first met Teresina and her mother. He could not help recalling that memorable evening as he waited on the pavement outside, and his one wish was that Fensden could have been there to have shared the entertainment with him. When the signora and her daughter arrived, it was plain that they regarded the occasion an important one. They were both attired in their best, and, so far as colour went, the signora herself was not unlike a bird of Paradise. Teresina was more soberly clad, but Henderson noticed that a necklace with which he had once presented her, as a memento of a certain piece of extra work she had done for him, encircled her slender throat. As he looked at it, he thought of the day on which he had given it to her, and as the remembrance occurred to him, he wondered whether it was wise on his part to play with fire for a second time. The signora greeted him with southern volubility, and, as soon as he could get in a word, Henderson suggested that they should enter the restaurant. Having done so, they seated themselves at one of the small tables, and

he gave his orders. It was a banquet that was destined to be remembered with pleasure by two of the party, and also by a third, for another and less romantic reason.

"And so you are returning to England, signor?" said the signora, when the first pangs of her hunger had been assuaged. Then, remembering the circumstances connected with the latter portion of their stay in London, she added, pathetically: "I think if it were possible, I should not be sorry to return – even though the winter is so cold and it rains so often."

"If you feel as if you would like to return, why do you not do so?" asked Godfrey, with a quickness that caused Teresina to look up at him in surprise, and then to look down again with equal celerity. "I am sure Teresina could get plenty of employment. I would do all I could to help her. For my own part, I never could understand why you left so quickly."

If he had reflected for a moment, he would probably have been able to arrive at an understanding of the reason that had prompted her departure. He was too modest a man, however, to think of such a thing. Nevertheless, he changed the conversation by making inquiries as to their present life in Naples, and then went on to talk of Fensden, who at that moment, could they have seen him, was fast asleep in a railway carriage, on his way from Jaffa to Jerusalem. The signora had never been partial to the impressionist artist and poet, and she had a vague idea that it was to that gentleman's agency that they owed the flight of the owner, and the consequent cessation of Teresina's employment at the studio. She was too prudent, however, to say anything on that score to Godfrey. She knew the friendship that existed between the two men; and she was also aware that her daughter, who was the possessor of a quick temper, and a tongue that she could use when she liked, would brook no disparagement of either Mr. Henderson or his friend.

"As to returning to England, we must think it over," she said, complacently, when Godfrey had filled her glass with champagne for the fourth or fifth time. "It would make another great change in our affairs, but Teresina is young, and there is nothing for us to do in Naples. I could wish that she should marry, signor, but she will not hear of it. I tell her the time may come when it will be too late. But girls do not listen to their elders nowadays."

Godfrey glanced at Teresina's face to find that it had suddenly become very pale. He hastened to render her assistance without delay by twitting her mother as to the number of sweethearts she herself had had, much to that lady's delight. This crisis having been smoothed over, he paid the bill and they left the restaurant.

Darkness had fallen by this time, a fact which may have accounted for the young man's uncertainty as to whether he did or did not recognise the figure of a man who was watching the doorway from the other side of the street. It certainly looked as if it belonged to Tomasso Dardini; but he said nothing on this point to either of his guests. He would be leaving Naples in the morning, he argued, and no necessity existed for making a fuss about it. If the silly young man were jealous, the morrow would remove the cause; and after that it would not matter very much whether he were aware of their visit to the Opera or not. With Teresina beside him and the signora on the other side, they entered the theatre and took their seats. The house was crowded, and the Opera itself was received with that critical appreciation so characteristic of the Neapolitan theatre-goer. Whether Godfrey enjoyed it as much as his neighbours is a question that admits of some doubt. He certainly found pleasure in studying the expressions that flitted across Teresina's face as she watched what went on upon the stage; but I scarcely think it went further. When it was over, he escorted them back to their dwelling, and bade them good-bye upon the threshold.

"Good-bye, Teresina," he said. "It may not be very long before we meet in London. Do you remember the little place where I first saw you? I think, when I get back, I must dine there once more, if only for old association's sake."

"Good-bye, signor," she said, giving him her hand after the English fashion. "It was kind of you to think of us, and to give us such pleasure as you have done to-night."

"I have enjoyed it," he replied, and then, bidding her return soon to London, he left her, and made his way down the narrow, evil-smelling street toward the quarter in which his hotel was situated. He was still fifty yards from the corner when a figure emerged from a doorway and hurried quickly after him, keeping on the dark side of the street. Leaving the thoroughfare in which Teresina's house was located, he employed a short cut with which he had become acquainted that afternoon. He had scarcely entered this, however, before he became aware of a light footstep behind him. Turning quickly, he found a man, whom he immediately recognised, within a few feet of him. Muttering something in Italian, he raised his arm, and Godfrey saw that he held a poniard in his hand. With the quickness of a practised athlete, he seized the uplifted wrist with his left hand, while with his right he delivered a blow that took the would-be assassin beneath the chin and sent him sprawling upon his back in the road. Picking up the dagger that the other had let fall, he placed it in his pocket, saying, as he did so: "I will keep this, my friend, as a memento." Then, having made sure that the other had no intention of following him, he continued his walk, little dreaming how strangely that incident was to affect his future life.

CHAPTER III

If I were given my choice of all the charming residences in the county of Midlandshire, I fancy I should decide in favour of Detwiche Hall. To my thinking it is, in every respect, an ideal residence. While sufficiently old to have a history (one of the Charleses spent some days in hiding there), it has proved itself capable of being adapted to modern ideas of comfort. The main portion was built, I believe, toward the close of the reign of the Virgin Queen; a wing was added by the owner who occupied it in the time of the early Georges; while the father of the man who had bequeathed the property to Godfrey, was responsible for the stables, and a somewhat obscure wing on the southern front. It was admirably situated in the centre of a park of some three hundred acres, and was approached by a picturesque drive, about half a mile long, which ran for some distance along the banks of an ornamental lake. On this lake, by the way, some of the finest duck shooting in the county is to be obtained. In his boyhood Godfrey had spent many happy days there, little dreaming that some day it would become his own property. Indeed, it is quite certain it would not have done so had his cousin Wilfred not been killed in India in the performance of a piece of desperate heroism that will be remembered as long as a certain native regiment exists. As for Godfrey, the old man had always liked the boy, but had been bitterly disappointed when he had resolved to embark upon an artistic career instead of playing the part of a country gentleman, as so many of his ancestors had done before him. To have proved himself a capable Master of Hounds would have been in the old bachelor's eyes a greater distinction than to have painted the finest picture that ever graced the walls of Burlington House. Yet in his heart he knew the power of the young man, and honoured him for the dogged persistence with which he had fought the uphill fight of a painter's life.

"Well, well, I suppose he'll come out of it all right in the end," he was wont to say to himself when he thought of the matter. "He'll be none the worse for having known a little poverty. I like the boy and he likes me, and, please God, he'll do his best by the dear old place when he comes into it. I should like to see him in it."

This, unfortunately, he was not able to do; but could he have heard the universal expression of approbation so lavishly bestowed upon the young master of Detwiche when he had been six months in possession he would have felt that his generosity had been rewarded. Indeed, there could be no sort of doubt as to Godfrey's popularity. He was received by the county with open arms, and by his tenantry with a quiet appreciation that showed they knew how to value the blood that ran in his veins without making a fuss about it. Owing to the short time that had elapsed since his uncle's death it was necessarily impossible for him to see very much society, but those who partook of his hospitality returned home not only delighted with their host, but also with the quality of their entertainment.

"An acquisition, a decided acquisition," said old Sir Vivian Devereux, the magnate of the district. "His idea of game preservation is excellent, and he is prepared to support the hunt with the utmost liberality. All he wants to make him perfect is a wife."

On hearing this Lady Devereux looked at her lord and her lord looked at her. Between them they had a very shrewd idea that they knew where to look for the future mistress of Detwiche Hall. Mistress Margaret, their daughter, called by her friends Molly, who had that season made her bow before her Majesty, said nothing, but maybe that was because she did not think there was anything to be said. She had her own ideas on the subject. She had seen the young squire of Detwiche, though he had not been aware of the fact, and, being an unaffected, straightforward English girl, without prudery or conceit of any sort, had come to the conclusion that she liked the look of him. Eligible young men were scarce in the neighbourhood, and if she dreamt dreams of her own who shall blame her? Not I, for one.

Three months had passed since Godfrey had escorted Teresina and her mother to the Opera. The summons which had brought him home so hurriedly had, fortunately, proved to be a false alarm.

Though his mother had been seriously ill, there had not been so much danger as they had led him to suppose. A month at Torquay had completely restored her to health, and now she was back at Detwisch once more, as hale and hearty an old lady as any to be found in the kingdom. Assisted by her youngest daughter, Kitty, she welcomed the wanderer home with every sign of delight.

Godfrey, unlike so many other people, had the good fortune to be as popular in his own family circle as he was out of it, and he and his youngest sister had been on the best of terms from the days when they had gone bird's-nesting together, until the time when she had assisted him in packing his first picture for the Academy. Since then, however, she had not seen so much of him.

"Kit's no end of a brick," he had been heard to say, "and the fellow who marries her may consider himself lucky."

It was scarcely to be wondered at, therefore, if Miss Devereux and Kitty, living as they did within two miles of each other, should soon have become intimate. They were in the habit of seeing each other several times a week, a fact which Godfrey, from a distance, had felt somewhat inclined to resent.

"When I get home I shall find this girl continually in the house," he said to himself; and when he *did* arrive and the many charming qualities of her friend had been explained to him he did not feel any the more disposed to be cordial.

"I can see what it will be," he said to his sister, "I shall not catch a glimpse of you now."

"Perhaps you won't want to when you meet Molly," was the arch rejoinder. "You have no idea what a pretty girl she is. They say she created a tremendous sensation when she was presented this year. Folks raved about her."

"The bigger duffers they," was the uncompromising reply. "You have one fault, my dear girl. Ever since I have known you your swans have invariably turned out to be geese. I fancy I can realize what Miss Devereux will be like."

"In that case pray describe her," was the saucy rejoinder, and Miss Kitty made a very pretty losing hazard (they were playing billiards at the time), after which she failed to score and chalked her cue.

Now it seems scarcely fair to say so, but Godfrey, being taken at a disadvantage, fell back on what can be only considered by all honest people a mean device. In describing Miss Devereux he used the almost identical terms used by Fensden when he had attempted to draw a picture of his friend's future wife.

"You are quite at sea," said Miss Kitty, patting her dainty shoe with the end of her cue as she spoke. "Some day, if you are not very careful, I will tell Miss Devereux what you have said about her. She would never forgive you the large feet and thick boots."

"As you are strong be merciful," said Godfrey, potting the red into the right-hand pocket and going into the left himself. "I don't mind admitting without prejudice that I am getting anxious to see this paragon. When do you think she will next honour you with her society?"

"On Friday," Kitty replied. "We have taken up wood-carving together, and she is coming to see some patterns I bought in town last week."

"In that case we will defer consideration of her merits and demerits – for I suppose she has some – until then," Godfrey replied, and then once more going into the pocket off the red he announced the game as standing at one hundred to ninety-five.

On the following afternoon he had occasion to drive to the market town. It was a bright, clear day, with a promise of frost in the air, and as his dog-cart rolled along the high road, drawn by a tandem team he had purchased the previous week, he felt as well satisfied with himself and his position in the world as it was possible for a young man to be. His business transacted in the town he turned his horses' heads homeward once more. The handsome animals, knowing that they were on their way to their stables, stepped out bravely, and many an approving glance was thrown at the good-looking young squire of Detwisch by folk upon the road. He had completed upward of half his

journey when he became aware that a young lady, who had appeared from a by-road, was making her way in the same direction as himself.

"Whoever she is she certainly sits her horse well," he said to himself, as he watched her swinging along at a slow canter on the soft side of the road. "I wonder who she can be?"

As soon as the turf gave place to hard metal she pulled her hack up and proceeded at a walk. This very soon brought Godfrey alongside, and as he passed he managed to steal a glance at a very pretty face and as neat a figure as he ever remembered to have seen.

"I wonder who she can be?" he repeated. And as he continued his drive he meditated on the subject.

On the Friday following he was unexpectedly called to town. His solicitors desired an interview with him respecting the purchase of a farm, and he had no option but to comply with their request. As luck would have it, however, he was able to return by a somewhat earlier train than he expected, and was just in time to hear from his butler that afternoon tea had been carried into the drawing-room.

"Are there any visitors?" he inquired.

"Miss Devereux, sir," said the man; "she came to lunch."

"I had forgotten that she was to be here to-day," he said to himself as he crossed the hall in the direction of the drawing-room. "I wonder what she will be like?"

As every one who has visited Detwich is aware, the drawing-room is an exceedingly handsome room. It is long and lofty, if possible a little *too* long for cosiness. This fault, if fault it be, is amply atoned for, however, by a capitally constructed ingle-nook, in which it was the custom for the ladies to take afternoon tea. Godfrey strolled across the floor to this charming contrivance, little guessing what was in store for him. A lady was sitting with her back to him holding a cup of tea in her hand.

"I don't think you have met Miss Devereux, Godfrey," said his sister.

"I have not yet had that pleasure," he replied. Then to himself he added: "Good gracious! It's the fair equestrienne." Then aloud: "I've heard a good deal of you from Kitty, Miss Devereux."

"And I of you," she answered. "You seem to have been everywhere, and to have seen everything. Doubtless you find this part of the world very dull."

"Not at all," he answered. "I am extremely fond of the country, and particularly of that about here."

If the truth were told I fancy he had never thought much about it until that moment. For the future, however, under a certain magic influence, he was to view it with very different eyes.

"In spite of what some people say," he continued, "I consider English country scenery charming."

"And yet it must be very beautiful abroad. Kitty read me one or two of your letters, and from the description you gave of the various places you had visited, I gathered that you thought nothing could be so beautiful on earth."

"No doubt they are very beautiful," he answered. "But for my part give me the old-world peace of England. There is certainly nothing like that to be found elsewhere. I would rather stand on the hill yonder and look down the valley in summer-time, than gaze upon the Rhine at Heidelberg, or Naples harbour at daybreak, or visit ancient Philæ by moonlight."

What further heresies this young man would have pledged himself to in his enthusiasm I can not say. Fortunately for him, however, the vicar and his wife were announced at that moment, and a distraction was thus caused. Until that moment Miss Kitty had been regarding him with steadfast eyes. Clever beyond all other men, as she considered her brother, she had never seen him come out of his shell like this before. Hitherto he had been rather given to pooh-poohing the country, and had once been known even to assert that "London and Paris were the only two places in which it was possible for a civilized man to live." What was the reason of this sudden change?

The vicar was a tall man with a pompous air, who looked forward some day to being a bishop, and had already assumed the appearance and manners of one. His wife, on the other hand, was small,

and of a somewhat peevish disposition. It was currently reported that the husband and wife spent the greater portion of their time in squabbling, while it was certain that they contradicted each other in public with an openness and frequency that at times was apt to be a little embarrassing.

"Possibly I may have been wrong," said the vicar, when he had seated himself and had taken a cup of tea from his hostess's hands, "but did I not hear you extolling the beauties of a country life as I entered the room, Mr. Henderson?"

He put the question as if it were one of world-wide importance, which, answered carelessly, might involve great international complications. Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued: "For my part, while admitting that a country life is possessed of many charms, with which the Metropolis can not compare, I must go on to say that there is a breadth, if I may so express it, in London life that is quite lacking outside."

His wife saw her opportunity, and, as was her habit, was quick to take advantage of it.

"You have never had any experience of London life, William, so how can you possibly tell?" she said, sharply.

"My dear, I venture to say that it is a generally admitted fact," her husband replied.

"Generally admitted facts are as often as not rubbish," retorted the lady with some asperity. "What I say is, let a man do his duty wherever he is, and make the best of what he's got, without grumbling."

There was an unmistakable innuendo in this speech, and for a moment an awkward silence ensued.

"I hear you have built a new conservatory, Mr. Henderson?" said Miss Devereux, as if to change the subject.

"It is just completed," said Godfrey. "Would you care to see it?"

A general desire to inspect this new wonder having been expressed, Godfrey led the way from the room, contriving, when all had passed out, to take up his position beside their youngest visitor.

"Will you take pity upon a stranger in the land?" he said, "and give me some information?"

"What can I tell you?" she asked.

He glanced at the vicar and his wife, who were some little distance in front.

"Do they always squabble like this?" he inquired.

"Yes, invariably," she replied. "We are used to it, but strangers are apt to find it embarrassing. I really believe the habit of squabbling has grown upon them until they have become so accustomed to it that they do not notice it. By the way, Mr. Henderson, there is one question of vital importance I must decide with you. Are you going to hunt?"

As a matter of fact Godfrey had made up his mind to do so occasionally, but now, remembering that Miss Devereux possessed the reputation of a second Diana, he spoke as if it were the hunting that had mainly induced him to live in Midlandshire. He registered a vow that he would purchase a stud immediately, and that he would look upon missing a run as a sin that could only be expurgated by religiously attending the next.

By this time they had reached the new conservatory, which adjoined the studio Godfrey had built for himself. It was a handsome building, and gave a distinction to that side of the house which it certainly had lacked before.

"Admirable, admirable," said the vicar, complacently. "It reminds me of the palm-house at Kew."

"It is twenty years since you were at Kew, William; how can you possibly remember what the palm-house is like?" retorted his wife.

"My dear, I have always been noted for the excellence of my memory," the vicar replied. "I assure you I have the most vivid recollection of the house in question."

"You mislaid your spectacles this morning, and if I hadn't seen you put them in your pocket you would never have thought of looking for them there," said his wife, to whom this fact appeared to be relative to the matter at issue.

From the conservatory to the studio was a natural transition, and the latest work upon the easel was duly inspected and admired.

"I remember your picture in the Academy last year, Mr. Henderson," said Miss Devereux. "I can assure you that it brought the tears into my eyes."

"It is very kind of you to say so," he said, feeling that no compliment that had ever been paid him was so much worth having.

Then a luminous idea occurred to him.

"I wonder if, some day, you would let me paint you a little picture?" he asked, almost timidly.

"I really could not think of such a thing," his companion replied. "Your time is too valuable to be wasted in that way."

"I shall paint one, nevertheless," he replied. "In return, perhaps, you will instruct me in the ways of the Midlandshire hunt?"

"I shall be delighted," she answered. "You must make Kitty come too."

Godfrey promised to do so, but for once in his life he was ungallant enough to think that he could dispense with his sister's society. Presently Miss Devereux's cart was announced and Kitty and Godfrey accompanied her to the front door. She kissed Kitty and then held out her hand to Godfrey.

"Good-bye, Mr. Henderson," she said. "Remember that the hounds meet at Spinkley Grove on Thursday, at eleven o'clock, when you will be permitted an opportunity of making the acquaintance of the Master and the Hunt."

"I shall be there without fail," he answered, as he helped her into the cart and arranged her rug for her. She thereupon nodded to the groom, who left the ponies' heads and jumped on to the step behind as the cart passed him, with an adroitness that was the outcome of long practice. A moment later the vehicle had turned the corner of the drive and was lost to view.

"Well?" said Kitty as they turned to go in.

"Well," Godfrey replied.

"You like her?"

"Very much indeed," he answered, and as they passed down the hall together he made an important decision to himself. "Provided she will have me," he said, "I think I have found my wife."

CHAPTER IV

More than a month had elapsed since Godfrey had made his début as a recognised member of the Midlandshire Hunt. It is also necessary to state that during that period he had seen a good deal of pretty Miss Molly Devereux, who, faithful to the promise she had given him, had shown him a large amount of the country, with the fences, hedges, and ditches thereof. She was also the person who was mainly responsible for the large sum of money he had spent on horseflesh during that time. As a matter of fact, this impressionable young man was head over ears in love, and to prove it, he neglected his work, imperilled his neck, and, as his mother remarked, ran an almost daily risk of coming to an early grave through waiting about on the outskirts of damp coverts, to say nothing of the long, wet rides home on wintry evenings.

"I can not understand why you do it," said the old lady, who, by the way, was not nearly so obtuse as she pretended to be. "When you first came home from abroad, you declared that the hunting would never possess sufficient attraction to take you out on a damp day. Now you are never happy unless you are in the saddle."

"It's a good healthy exercise, mother," said Kitty, with the suspicion of a twinkle in her eyes. "Besides, Godfrey has taken such a liking to Sir George Penistone, the Master, that he is never happy when he is parted from him."

Now if there was one person in the country for whom Godfrey entertained a profound distaste, it was for the gentleman in question. Sir George was known to have been desperately in love with Miss Devereux ever since he had left the 'Varsity; but, while he was plucky enough in the saddle, and would ride his horse at anything that an animal could be expected to jump, and at a good many that it could not, he had never been able to screw up his courage sufficiently to broach the subject to her. Finding that he had a rival in the field, however, had given him a fillip, and, in consequence, relations between the two young men were as strained as it was possible for them to be, and yet to allow them to remain on speaking terms. Whether the young lady herself was aware of this is more than I can say; if she were she gave no sign of it, but treated them both with the same impartiality. Certain other ladies of the hunt vowed that she was a heartless flirt, and that she was playing one man off against the other. Such uncharitable sentiments, however, could only be expected from people who would have acted in the same fashion had they been placed in a similar position.

It has been said by a well-known writer, who, for all we know to the contrary, was a crusty old bachelor, and therefore well qualified to speak upon the matter, "that the very uncertainty of love is one of its greatest charms." I fancy that Godfrey Henderson, at that particular time, would not have agreed with the sage in question. The uncertainty of knowing whether he was loved or not, was making a different man of him. In days that seemed as far removed from the present as if a gulf of centuries lay between, he had been a happy-go-lucky, easy-going fellow, taking the world as he found it, and never allowing himself to be much troubled by anything. Now, however, he had grown preternaturally solemn, was much given to silent communings with himself, and only brightened up when he was in the presence of the person who was the object of his adoration. Naturally this could not continue for long.

"I'll speak to her the very first opportunity I get," he said to himself; "and if she won't have me, I'll cut the whole show and go abroad. I could pick up Fensden in Dresden, and we'll go off to Japan together."

But when he was given a favourable opportunity of speaking, he found he was unable to bring his courage to the sticking-point, and for the next day or two he called himself by a variety of names that, had they been addressed to him by any one else, he would have considered most objectionable. Regarded dispassionately, in the silent watches of the night, it seemed a small thing to do. He had only to get her alone, to take her hand, if he could manage to obtain possession of it, and then to

make his passion known, and ask her to be his wife. Any one could do that, and he had the best of reasons, when he looked round the circle of his married acquaintances, for knowing that it had been carried out successfully on numerous occasions before. Yet when it became necessary to put it into practice he discovered that it demanded a heroism to which the charge of the Light Brigade and the storming of the Redan were as nothing.

"I see that the hounds meet at Churley cross roads on Monday," said his sister, one morning at breakfast. "Molly wants me to go, but I fear it will be impossible. I suppose it is not necessary to ask if you will be there?"

"I suppose I shall," Godfrey replied, as if he had not thought very much about the matter.

In his heart, however, he knew that it would require an extraordinary force to keep him away. On Friday he did not go, for the reason that he had incidentally learned that a certain lady would be in town at her dressmaker's. The same day he discovered that his old friend and schoolfellow, James Bradford, to wit, had returned from America, en route to the Continent, and the inference was that if they did not lunch together, they would be scarcely likely to meet again for some considerable time. What, therefore, was more fitting than that he should catch the 10.18 train at Detwiche, and set off for the Metropolis? His mother and sister said nothing, except to wish him a pleasant journey. When they were alone together afterward, however, Mrs. Henderson turned to her daughter.

"Poor boy," she said, "I never thought he would take it as seriously as he is doing. I have never seen a harder case."

To which her daughter replied somewhat enigmatically:

"I wish I knew what she intends doing."

Despite the eagerness Godfrey had shown to renew his acquaintance with his friend, Mr. James Bradford, he did not appear to derive such a vast amount of satisfaction from their meeting as the trouble he had taken to bring it about would have implied.

"I never saw such a change in a man in my life," said Mr. James Bradford afterward, when Godfrey had left the club. "He fidgeted about all the time we were at lunch, and examined his watch at least twice in every five minutes. Coming into money doesn't appear to agree with him. It's a pity, for he used to be such a good chap."

On leaving Pall Mall Godfrey took a cab to Bond Street, and for upward of an hour paced religiously up and down that fashionable thoroughfare. Then, taking another cab, he drove to Euston, where he spent at least three-quarters of an hour inspecting the various trains that passed in and out of the station, pottering about the bookstalls, and glaring at the travellers who approached him. As every one is aware who lives in the neighbourhood, there is only one good train in the afternoon that stops at Detwiche, hence his reason for going to the station at that hour. As the time approached for that train to leave, he grew more and more nervous, and when the train itself at length backed into the station to take up its passengers, his anxiety became almost pitiable to watch. Placing himself near the bookstall, he scrutinized every passenger who approached him. At last he became aware of two figures, who were making their way leisurely along the platform in search of an empty carriage. One was Lady Devereux, tall, gray-haired, and eminently dignified; her companion there is no need to describe. It struck Godfrey, as he watched her, that never in his life had he seen so pretty a face or figure. Nerving himself to carry out the operation he had in mind, he strolled down the platform, then turning, walked back along the train, glancing into the various carriages as he passed, until he reached that in which the two ladies were seated. Then, as if he were more than surprised at seeing them, he lifted his hat.

"How do you do, Lady Devereux?" he said. "This is an altogether unexpected meeting!" Then, having saluted the younger lady, he inquired whether they would permit him to travel down with them.

"Do so, by all means," Lady Devereux replied. "Molly and I have been obliged to put up with each other's company since the early morning. But how is it that you are not hunting to-day, Mr. Henderson?"

"An old friend has just returned from America," Godfrey remarked, "and he invited me to lunch with him. Otherwise I should have been out, of course."

Whether Miss Molly believed this statement or not I can not say, but I do not think it probable. One thing was plain; on this particular occasion she had made up her mind not to be gracious to the poor young man, and when he endeavoured to draw her into conversation, she answered him shortly, and then retired into the seclusion of her newspaper.

Why she should have treated him so it is impossible to say, but there could be no sort of doubt that she was offended at something. In consequence the poor fellow was about as miserable a specimen of the human race as could have been found in England that day. When Detwich was reached, he saw the two ladies to their carriage, and bade them good-bye. Then, mounting to the box of his own dog-cart, he sent the horse flying down the street at a pace that, had he not been well known, would in all probability have secured him an interview with a magistrate.

"And what sort of journey did you have?" inquired his mother, as she gave him a cup of tea on his arrival at the house.

"Very pleasant," he answered, though his looks belied his assertion.

"And would you care, as you said the other day, to go back to live in London?" asked mischievous Miss Kitty.

"I think London is one of the most detestable places on earth," he replied, stirring his tea as though he were sweeping the Metropolis into the sea.

"And did you see any one you knew while you were in town?" inquired his mother.

"A lot of people I don't care a scrap about," he answered.

Feeling that he was not in a fit humour for society, he took himself off to his studio, where he threw himself into an easy chair, and lit the largest pipe in his possession. This he smoked as savagely as if it were responsible for his troubles. By the time the dressing-bell rang, he was more than ever determined to set off for Japan. So strong, however, was the chain which bound him, that, on second thoughts, he came to the conclusion that he would postpone his departure until after the meet at the Churley cross roads on the following Monday. In consequence he spent a miserable Saturday, and it was not until he came out of church on Sunday morning that he was anything like his old self. All through the service he had been paying a greater amount of attention to a neat little toque, and the back of a very shapely head, a few seats in front of him, than was altogether proper in a place of worship. According to custom, the two families united in the porch.

"Good-morning, Mr. Henderson," said Molly, as they shook hands, and then, after they had passed outside and the usual commonplaces had been exchanged, she continued: "What do you think of the state of the weather?"

There was more in her speech than met the eye. What she really meant was: "Do you think we shall be able to hunt to-morrow? If so, I am prepared to be kind to you once more."

Godfrey replied that there had been signs of frost early in the morning, but he rejoiced to see that they were going off.

"We shall see you to-morrow, I suppose?" she said, as they passed through the lych-gate out into the high road.

"Of course," he answered. "Provided old Benbow doesn't break his neck in the meantime, I shall be there."

"I am so glad," she answered, and then, as though she felt that she had said too much, she devoted her conversation during the rest of the walk to Kitty, leaving Godfrey to discuss parish affairs with her father.

She had said enough, however, in that short time to transport Godfrey into the seventh heaven of delight; and I venture to think that if any one had been foolish enough to suggest a trip to Japan to him at that moment, it would have been at the peril of his or her life.

I must leave you to imagine with what attention he studied the appearance of the sky during the next eighteen hours. The barometer in the hall was tapped with a regularity that was sufficient to disorganize its internal economy forever and a day. Before he retired to rest, he took careful stock of the heavens, and was relieved to find that there was no sign of frost in the air. Next morning he was up betimes, took his tub with the air of a man from whom great things are expected, and made a heartier breakfast than he had done for some weeks past. He looked a handsome figure in pink as his mother was careful to inform him.

The distance to Churley cross roads from the Hall is little more than a mile, so that the half-hour he had allowed himself to get there, enabled him to jog along without hurrying his horse. It was what might be described as a perfect hunting morning. A slight mist hung in places upon the fields; it was, however, being quickly dispersed by the sunshine. A pleasant breeze was driving the clouds across the sky, throwing delightful shadows upon the meadows, and crisping the surface of the river as he passed over the old stone bridge. When he reached the cross roads he had still some ten minutes in hand; but as there were several others as early as himself, this fact did not weigh heavily upon his mind. Meanwhile he kept a sharp eye on the road down which he had come, and when he espied the stout figure of the old baronet on his famous hunter, with his daughter beside him, mounted on a somewhat vicious-looking chestnut, he rode forward to receive them.

"A capital day," said the old gentleman, when they had exchanged the usual salutations. "We could scarcely have a better. Strangely enough, as I was saying to Molly just now, in fifty years I've never known a wet Churley Cross Meet."

"What do you think of my new horse, Mr. Henderson?" inquired his daughter, when the latter had remarked upon the strangeness of the coincidence. "Papa bought him for me on Saturday."

"He must be very nearly thoroughbred," Godfrey replied, not caring to add that he did not altogether like the look of the animal in question. There was a nasty flicker in the horse's eyes, of which, to Godfrey's thinking, he showed a great deal too much white. There could be no denying his make and shape, however. "You'll be showing us a clean pair of heels to-day."

"I'll be bound she will," said the old baronet, upon whom the horse had evidently made a favourable impression. "They tell me he won a decent steeplechase last season; and Seth Warton, of whom I got him, says he is the best he has had in his stable for many a long day. That says something."

"I sincerely hope he may prove to be all you could wish," said Godfrey; and at that moment the Master came forward to bid them good-morning.

"I think we'll try the Spinney first, Sir Vivian," he said. "I hear good reports in that direction. A new horse, Miss Devereux, and I should say a fast one. Have pity on us all!"

As if to prove that his manners were not so good as his looks, the animal in question made as if he would rear, and for a moment Godfrey's heart seemed to stand still.

"I don't like the look of him," he said to himself. "Heaven send he does her no mischief."

But he was not permitted much time to think of such a thing, for the Master had given the signal, and already a general move was being made in the direction of the Spinney. Godfrey settled himself down by Miss Devereux's side, leaving the old gentleman free to discuss the prospects of the day with the local doctor, a sportsman of some celebrity in the neighbourhood.

"Miss Devereux," said Godfrey, as they approached the wood, "at the risk of offending you, I must say that I don't altogether care about the look of that horse. I should say, from his appearance, handsome as it is, that he possesses more than a touch of temper. I do hope you will be careful what you do with him to-day."

"You needn't be afraid," she answered, as she flashed a sharp glance at him. "I think we understand each other perfectly. He hasn't been with hounds for some time, and he's naturally a little excited. It will wear off, however, before the day is done."

"I sincerely hope it may," Godfrey continued. "In the meantime I can not help wishing that we could exchange mounts."

"You think that you could manage him better than I?" she said. "If that is a challenge we will see. Now, let us watch what goes on, for I want to be well away."

At that moment three blasts of the horn were heard from the right, and, before Godfrey could have counted twenty, the hounds were out of cover and streaming away in the direction of the village – only to change their course after the first quarter of a mile.

"It looks as if we were in for a fast thing," said Miss Devereux; and the words had scarcely left her lips when the chestnut gave a violent plunge in the air and was off at a racing pace.

"If he goes on like that, the brute will pull her arms out, if he doesn't do anything worse," Godfrey muttered to himself.

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