Mammon and Co.

E F Benson

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE CITY DINNER

"Egotism is certainly the first," said Lady Conybeare with admirable firmness; "and your inclination towards your neighbour is the second."

Now, this was the sort of thing which Alice Haslemere liked; and she stopped abruptly in the middle of her rather languishing conversation with nobody in particular to ask for explanations. It sounded promising.

"The first what, and the second what, Kit?" she inquired.

"The first and the second lessons," said Lady Conybeare promptly. "The first and the second social virtues, if you are particular. I am going to set up a school for the propagation of social virtues, where I shall teach the upper classes to be charming. There shall be a special class for royalty."

Lady Haslemere was not generally known as being particularly particular, but she took her stand on Kit's conditional, and defended it.

"There is nothing like particularity—nothing," she said earnestly, with a sort of missionary zeal to disagree with somebody; "though some people try to get on without it."

Being a great friend of Kit's, she knew that it was sufficient for her to state a generality of any kind to get it contradicted. She was not wrong in this instance. Kit sighed with the air of a woman who meant to do her unpleasant duty like a sister and a Christian.

"Dear Alice," she said, "there is nothing so thoroughly irritating as particularity. I am not sure what you mean by it, but I suppose you allude either to people who are prudes or to people who are always letting fly precise information at one. They always want it back too. Don't you know how the people who insist on telling one the exact time are just those who ask one for the exact time. I never know the exact time, and I never want to be told it. And I hate a prudish woman," she concluded with emphasis, "as much as I abhor a well-informed man."

"Put it the other way round," said Lady Haslemere, "and I agree with you. I loathe a prudish man, and I detest a well-informed woman."

"There aren't any of either," said Lady Conybeare.

She sat up very straight in her chair as she made this surprising assertion, and arranged the lace round her throat. Her attitude gave one the impression somehow of a rakish frigate clearing for action, and on the moment came the first shot.

"I am a prude," said a low, bass voice at her elbow.

Kit scarcely glanced round.

"I know you are," she said, replying with a heavy broadside; "but then you are not a man."

"That depends on what you mean by a man," said the voice again.

The speaker was so hidden by the arms of the low chair in which he sat, that a knee, shin and foot, in a horizontal line on the invisible support of another knee, was all that could be seen of him.

"I mean a human being who likes killing things," said Kit without hesitation.

"I killed a wasp yesterday," said the voice; "at least, I think it died afterwards. Certainly I disabled it. Oh, I am sure I killed it."

"Yes, and you remembered it to-day," said Lady Conybeare briskly. "You did not really kill it; it lives in your memory, and—and poisons your life. In time it will kill you. Do you suppose Jack remembers the grouse he killed yesterday?"

"Oh, but Jack is like the oldest inhabitant," said Lady Haslemere. "He never remembers anything, just as the oldest inhabitant never remembers a flood or a thunderstorm or a famine at all like the one in question. That means they don't remember anything at all, for one famine is just like another; so are thunderstorms."

Kit paused a moment, with her head on one side, regarding the speaker.

"No; forgetfulness is not characteristic of Jack," she said, "any more than memory is. He remembers what he wants to remember, and forgets what he wants to forget. Now, it's just the opposite with me. I forget what I want to remember—horrid stories about my friends, for instance—and I remember the sort of thing I want to forget—like—like Sunday morning. Isn't it so, Jack?"

A slightly amused laugh came from a man seated in the window, who was no other than the Jack in question, and, incidentally, Kit's husband.

"It is true I make a point of forgetting unpleasant things," he said; "that is the only real use of having a memory decently under control. I forget Kit's milliner's bills——"

"So do I, darling," said Kit with sudden affection.

"No, you don't; you only remind me to forget them. I forget the names and faces of uninteresting people. I forget—no, I don't forget that——"

"What don't you forget, Jack?" demanded Kit with some sharpness. "I don't believe it."

"I don't forget that we've got to dine in the City at half-past seven. Why ever there was such an hour as half-past seven to put into a Christian clock I can't conjecture," he said in a tone of regretful wonder.

"Well, if you forget unpleasant things, and you don't forget that, perhaps it will be pleasant."

"I am quite certain it will be infernal," said Jack. "Go and dress, Kit."

Lady Conybeare frowned impatiently.

"Oh, Jack! when will you learn that I cannot do what you ask if you talk to me in that way?" she cried. "I was just going to dress. Now I can't, and we shall both be late, which will be very tiresome. You will curse and swear at me like St. Peter for keeping you waiting. How stupid you are, and how little you know me!"

Lord Conybeare looked at his watch.

"It is exactly three minutes to six," he said. "You needn't go for half an hour yet. There is loads of time—loads!"

Kit got up at once.

"That's a dear boy," she said. "Gracious! it's past the half-hour! I must fly! Good-bye, Alice; Conybeare and I will look in on you after our dinner. I think you said you were going to have a nice round game with counters. Good-bye, Tom, and learn not to be a prude."

"I'm sure you would teach me, if anybody could," said Tom rather viciously.

Kit adjusted the lace round her throat again.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said; "but prudes are born, not made. You don't shoot, you don't hunt, you remember every wasp you have possibly killed. Oh, Tom, I am afraid you are hopeless. Don't laugh. I mean what I say; at least, I think I mean the greater part of it."

"I reserve the less, then," said Tom. "I must go too. So Alice and Haslemere and I will see you to-night?"

"Yes; we'll escape as soon as we can from the dinner. Mind you take some

money with you, Jack, for the round game. I must fly," she said again, and took her graceful presence very slowly out of the room.

There was a short silence, broken by Lord Conybeare.

"It is odd how you can tell a man by the hour at which he dines," he said. "Seven is an impossible hour, and the people who dine at seven are as impossible as the hour. People who dine at half-past are those who are trying to dine at eight and cannot manage it. They are also trying not to be impossible, and cannot."

Lady Haslemere got up.

"I once knew a man who dined at ten minutes to eight," she said, "which struck me as extremely curious. He was an archdeacon. I believe all archdeacons dine at ten minutes to eight. And they call it a quarter to, which is even odder."

"I don't know any archdeacons," said Tom, with a touch of wistfulness in his voice. "Introduce me to one to-night, Alice."

"Archdeacons don't come to Berkeley Street," said she.

"Why not? How exclusive! Do they expect Berkeley Street to come to them?"

"Probably. They are trained to believe nothing which is not incredible. It is exactly that which makes them impossible."

"Extremes meet," said Lord Conybeare. "The sceptic forces himself to believe everything that is perfectly credible. And he succeeds so well. Sceptics believe that they once ate nuts—we've all eaten nuts once—and are descended from apes. And how obvious is their genealogy from their faces! If I was going to be anything, it should not be a sceptic."

Lady Haslemere wandered once round the room, condemning the china silently.

"I must positively go," she said.

"Do, Alice!" said Jack; "because I want to dress. But you are rather like Kit. When she says she must fly, it means she has little intention of walking, just yet."

Lady Haslemere laughed.

"Come, Tom," she said. "We are not wanted. How deeply pathetic that is! They will want us some day, as the hangman said. Well, Jack, we shall see you later. I *am*going."

Lord Conybeare went upstairs to his dressing-room, revolving with some

intentness the affair of this City dinner. The taking off his coat led him to wind up his watch, and he was so lost in thought that for a moment he looked surprisedly at his dress-clothes, which were laid out for him, as if pyjamas would have been a more likely find. But his linked and studded shirt was an irresistible reminder that it was dinner-time, not bedtime, and he proceeded to dress with a certain neat haste that was clearly characteristic of him. In stature he was somewhat below the average size, both in height and breadth; but one felt that an auctioneer of men might most truthfully have said, when he came to him at a sale: "Here is a rather smaller specimen, gentlemen, but much more highly finished, and very strong!"

The quick deftness of even unimportant movements certainly gave the impression of great driving power; everything he did was done unerringly; he had no fumblings with his studs, and his tie seemed to fashion a faultless, careless bow under a mere suggestion from his thin, taper-nailed fingers. He looked extremely well bred, and a certain Mephistophelian sharpness about his face, though it might have warned those whom Kit would have called prudes —for this was rather a sweeping word with her—that he might not be desirable as a friend, would certainly have warned the prudent that he would assuredly be much more undesirable as an enemy. On the whole, a prudent prude would have tried to keep on good terms with him. He appeared, in fact, even on so hasty and informal a glance as that which we are giving him as he arranges his tie, to be one of those lucky people to whom it is well to be pleasant, for it was difficult to imagine that he was afraid of anything or cared for anybody. Certain happily-constituted folk have never had any doubt about the purpose of the world, so clearly was it designed to feed and amuse them. Lord Conybeare was one of these; and in justice to the world we must say that it performed its altruistic part very decently indeed.

Jack Conybeare was still on the sunny side of thirty-five. He and Kit had been married some seven years, and had no children, a privation for which they were touchingly thankful. They had, both of them, quite sufficient responsibilities, or, to speak more precisely, liabilities; and to be in any way responsible for any liabilities beyond their own would have seemed to them a vicarious burden of the most intolerable sort. Their own, it is only fair to add, sat but lightly on them; Kit, in particular, wore hers most gracefully, like a becoming mantle. Chronic conditions, for the most part, tend to cease being acutely felt, and both she and Jack would far sooner have had a couple of thousand pounds in hand, and fifty thousand pounds in debt, than not to have owed or owned a penny. Kit had once even thought of advertising in the morning papers that a marchioness of pleasing disposition was willing to do anything in the world for a thousand pounds, and Jack had agreed that there was something in the idea, though the flaw in it was cheapness: you should not

give yourself away. He himself had mortgaged every possible acre of his property, and sold all that was available to sell, and the close of every day exhibited to a wondering world how it was possible to live in the very height of fashion and luxury without any means of living at all. Had he and Kit sat down for a moment by the side of a road, or loitered in Park Lane, they would probably have been haled, by the fatherly care of English law, to the nearest magistrate, for that they had no apparent means of sustenance. Luckily they never thought of doing anything of the kind, finding it both safer and pleasanter to entertain princes and give the best balls in London.

A want of money is an amiable failing, common to the saint and the sinner alike, and does not stand in the way of the *accusé* acquiring great popularity. Jack, it is true, had no friends, for the very simple reason that he did not in the least want them; Kit, on the other hand, had enough for two.

Her rules of life were very uncomplicated, and they daily became more so. "You can't be too charming," was the chief of them. She took infinite pains to make herself almost universally agreeable, and was amply repaid, for she was almost universally considered to be so. This embracing desire had its drawbacks, but Kit's remedies for them quite met the case. For instance, when any woman whom she did not happen to remember by sight greeted her, as often happened, effusively at some evening party, Kit always kissed her with a corresponding effusion; if a man in the same circumstances did the same, she always said reproachfully, "You *never* come to see us now." In this way her total ignorance of who they were became a trivial thing; both were charmed, and when people are charmed, their names become of notable insignificance.

The finest inventions of all are the simplest, and the simplicity of Jack's *modus vivendi* rivalled its own subtlety and the subtlety of Kit's. He loudly professed staunch Conservative principles, always voted with the Bishops in the House of Lords on any question, and had made a special study of guano and Church ritual. A method exposed always sounds a little crude, but the crudity often belongs not to the method but to its exposure. Certainly Jack's method answered, and no method can do more. The mammon of unrighteousness, not being deceived, but not being shocked at such duplicity, thought him very clever, and the unmammon of righteousness, being deceived, was not shocked at other things which were occasionally in the air about him. With perfect justice they labelled the world scandal-loving and uncharitable when they were told these other things, and asked Jack to dinner, to show that they did not believe them. A further proof of his wisdom may be seen in the fact that he accepted such invitations, and if he and Kit left early, it was not because they were going on elsewhere to play round games, but because the laying of foundation-stones and the opening of bazaars had been so fatiguing.

But though both he and Kit were fond of appearing other than they were to sets other than their own, they were on the whole singularly unsecretive to each other. In the first place, they both knew that the other was reasonably sharp, and while each respected the other for this sharpness, they realized that any attempt to deceive would probably be detected. In the second place, a far better reason, even on the lowest grounds, on which they took it, they knew that mutual lying is a rotten basis for married life. Each allowed the other a wide latitude, and in consequence they were excellent friends, and always lent each other a helping hand if there was any scheme of mutual aggrandizement to be put through. There were just a few questions that Kit never put to Jack, nor he to her; each had a cupboard, a very little one, to which there was only one key, and they were wise enough never to ask each other for it. Such, hitherto, had been their married life—a great deal of frankness and confidence, and an absolute respect for the privacy of the other's innermost sanctum.

To-night there was a beautiful scheme in the egg ready to be hatched, or neither of them would have dreamed of dining in the City at half-past seven. Attention was just beginning to be directed to West Australian gold-mining, and the public had awoke to the fact that there were large fortunes to be made, or lost, in that direction. Thus Jack, having no fortune to lose, went into it with a light heart; he was clearly marked out as one of those who were destined to win. In pursuance of the laudable idea of avoiding a really serious financial crisis, they were dining at the Drapers' Company, where they would meet a Mr. Frank Alington, who had a whole fleet of little paper companies, it was understood, ready to be floated. Jack had met him once, and had taken this opportunity of meeting him again, hoping to find bread upon the waters. It was to be Kit's business to make herself inimitably agreeable, ask him to Park Lane, and leave the rest to Jack. She, of course, would have a finger in the profits.

Kit was delighted to take the part assigned to her. Jack had looked into her bedroom as she was dressing, and through the half-open door had said, "Very gorgeous, please, Kit," and she had understood that this was a really important operation, and that a dazzling wife was part of the apparatus necessary. She had not meant to dress very particularly; plush and cairngorms, she had once said to Jack, was the sort of thing the City really appreciated, but she was always ready, within reason, to do as Jack wished, and she told her maid to get out a dress that had arrived from Paris only that morning. But Jack's remark to her as she was dressing was the sort of hint that Kit always took. It cost so little to be pleasant in these ways, and how wise it was to obey one's husband in such matters! She had intended to keep this dress for a royal dinner a week hence, but she put it on without a murmur, and, indeed, her wifely devotion had its immediate reward.

For the dress! That surpassing man Jean Worth had said once, not to herself, but to some other customer, and no friend of hers, that it was a real pleasure to dress Lady Conybeare; and Lady Conybeare, on her side, kindly considered it a real pleasure to be dressed by Worth. Thus the gratification was mutual, and it must have been a consolation to the dressmaker, if he had to whistle long and loud for his cheque, to have his artistic pleasure to fall back on. Now Kit —a rare accomplishment—could stand orange, and to stand orange means to be admirably suited to orange. She loved it herself, Jean genuinely agreed with her, and in this dress four tints of orange chiffon, *Dantè*, *faisan doré*, *Vésuve*, and *pomme d'or*, blazed together. Even Worth, the greatly daring, had inwardly felt a qualm of audacity, but how admirably, when Kit was inside the gown, had his audacity succeeded! "*Réussi!*" he would have sighed had he seen it. Over all was a fine net of pale mandarin yellow, to which was tacked a cusped acanthus pattern of sequins; and Kit, looking at herself long and critically in her wardrobe glass, said "Lor'!" Her glorious red-gold hair, full of dusky flames, of a tint after which Nature blindly gropes where Paris leads the way, was the point to which Worth had worked, and his success was beyond all approval or praise.

Next came the question of jewels, and Hortense, her maid, with the artist's eye, thought that pearls and pearls only, *pas un diamant*, would be consummately chic. Kit saw what she meant, and from an artistic point of view devoutly agreed, but she turned up her nose at the suggestion. "We don't want to be chic, my good woman," she said. "We want to hit 'em in the eye. The rubies, Hortense!"

Now, the rubies were really fine, glorious molten lakes of colour, almost barbarically splendid, and being entailed, they had been forced to remain in the Conybeare coffers. But if ever a woman and her dress were designed and built for rubies, Kit and this creation were. Hortense, moved beyond her wont, ejaculated "*Mon Dieu!*" as the gorgeous baubles were clasped on Kit's dazzling neck; and her mistress, being as candid with herself as she was with her husband, smiled serenely at her own reflection.

"A touch of rouge," she said to Hortense, and when that was unerringly applied, "There," she murmured, "that will double up the City. And Jack," she added to herself, "will then proceed to pick its pockets."

She rustled across the floor, and tapped at the door of her husband's dressing-room.

"Are you ready, Jack?" she asked.

"Yes, just. Come in, Kit."

Kit took from her table the orange-red fan which Worth had sent with the

dress, threw the door open and held her head very high.

"The gold-miner's wife," she remarked.

Her husband looked at her a moment in blank admiration. Seven years' husband as he was, Kit still occasionally "knocked him over" as he expressed it, and she knocked him over now. Then he laughed outright.

"That ought to fetch 'em," he said frankly.

"So I think," said Kit; "but really, Jack, it was a sacrifice putting this on. Remember that, please. I was keeping it for the royalties next week, but you said 'very gorgeous,' and I obeyed."

"Oh, blow the royalties!" said Jack. "Dress in tartan plaid for them, or a kilt even. Besides, it is bad form for a hostess to be better dressed than her guests. That dress wouldn't do at all, Kit, in your own house. They would think you were an advanced Radical."

The India-rubber-tired brougham, with its little electric lamp in the roof (Kit's only real extravagance for more than ten days, as she triumphantly told Jack) was ready when they got downstairs, and they rolled off into the gaslit roar of the streets. This way and that flashed the gleaming lights of hansoms and carriages; it was like passing through an August shower of shooting-stars. Long queues of waiting folk stretched like snakes from the pit-doors of theatres; newsboys roared their "'orrible and revoltin'" details; jewellers' shops with windows a blaze of gems signalled and winked across the streets; feathered women peacocked along, making eyes at the passers; loungers lounged; busy little men with black bags made scurrying bee-lines across the crowded roadway; buses, a plaster of advertisements, swung nodding on their way; and bicycles glided by them so spare and silent that they might have been incorporeal things. High up on house-roofs glowed the changing colours of prima-donna soaps, putting to shame the lesser lights of heaven; now an invisible gigantic penman would write *Kodak* with large flowing hand in red ink, then, dissatisfied, delete it, and try it again in yellow. Here the crystal signs of music-halls flashed diamonds, or the open door of a restaurant cast a brilliant square of light on to the street. Then for a moment a strident, diabolically-precise scale from a street-organ would overscore all other noises; but the hoofs and wheels which bore the hungry world to the houses of its friends to be fed reasserted itself with a crash and trample like some Valkürie-ritt; the whole town was abroad, and humming like a swarming beehive.

Kit was never tired of the spectacle of life, provided it was gay, and varied, and full. The incessant movement, the infinite separate businesses, which went to make up the great major chord of London streets, the admirable pace at which the world moved, the marvel of its contrasts, the gas, the glitter, the

sordidness and the splendour rubbing shoulders, all appealed to her tremendous *joie de vivre*, the best and the most unvarying factor in her very living character. She had once expressed a wish to be buried, like a suicide at cross-roads, in the very centre of Piccadilly Circus. "No country churchyards or knells of parting day for me, thank you," she had said.

All down Piccadilly she was silent, looking devouringly from the window of the brougham at the kaleidoscope outside, but when they turned out of Trafalgar Square down Northumberland Avenue, to avoid the Strand, which at that hour spouts and bubbles with traffic like a weir in spring, she turned to her husband with a sigh of regret at leaving the fuller streets.

"The outline of the plot, Jack?" she said.

"Don't know it myself yet," said Jack. "But the *vieux premier* is Alington—a heavy, solemn man, like a butler, rather tiresome, I'm afraid. Very likely you will sit next him; he is a guest of the Drapers' like ourselves. If not, get hold of him somehow. He might dine to-morrow."

"But we give a dance to-morrow," said Kit, "and we feed only the very brightest and best."

"All the more reason for Alington coming, perhaps," said Jack. "I have heard it said that there are still a few people who care for a duke as such. It sounds odd, but let us hope he is one."

"Yes, those people are so easy to deal with," said Kit thoughtfully. "But it will upset the table, Jack."

"Of course, if you put your table as more important than possible thousands," said Jack.

"It is really a big thing then?" asked Kit.

"It is possibly a very big thing. I know no more than you yet. It may even run to a Saturday till Monday or more."

"Very good. I'll upset the whole apple-cart for it, as Mr. Rhodes says. Here we are. Let's get away early, Jack. I said we'd go to Berkeley Street afterwards."

"We'll go as early as we can," he replied. "But you mustn't risk not landing your fish because you don't play him long enough."

"Oh, Jack, I am not a fool," she said. "Order the carriage for ten. I'd undertake in this gown to land the whole house of laymen by ten without a gaff. Dear Jean Worth! What a lot of money I owe him, and what a lot of pleasure he gives me! I should be puzzled to say which was the greater."

CHAPTER II

SUNDAY MORNING

Mr. Frank Alington turned out to be a star of greater magnitude, in fact a Saturday till Monday star, almost a comet. Lord Conybeare found that the whirl and bustle of London did not allow of his seeing enough of him, so he phrased it, and thus it happened that, some ten days after the dinner at the Drapers' Company (Kit's playing and landing of the fish having been masterly, for she had him dead-beat long before ten), Mr. Alington arrived on a Saturday afternoon in June at what Kit called their "cottage" in Buckinghamshire.

Strictly speaking—though she did not often speak strictly—it was not a cottage at all; and it was certainly not in Buckinghamshire, but in Berkshire. But there was a rustic, almost Bohemian, sound to Kit's mind in Buckinghamshire, whereas Berkshire only reminded one of bacon, and a few miles either way made a very little difference. "And if I choose to call Berkshire the Malay Archipelago," said Kit, "who is to stop me?"

However, to adopt Kit's nomenclature, the cottage in question was a large red-brick Elizabethan house on the banks of the Thames, with a few acres of conservatories, and a charming flower-garden, leading down by green degrees and cut yew hedges to the river. But the cottage idea was not wholly absent, for they always dined in the room which had once certainly been the kitchen. The range had been removed, leaving an immense open fireplace, where it was sacrilege to burn anything but logs, and the most charming dark oak dressers, bearing under the new *régime* quantities of old blue Nankin ware, ran round the walls. Following the same idea, they always sat in the big hall which opened straight on to the front-door, instead of in the drawing-room. "Quite like hobnailed day-labourers," said Kit.

The analogy is obvious, and Kit's admirable taste had made the likeness almost glaring. There was a grandfather's clock there, a couple of large oak settles on each side of the fireplace, which had bronze dogs for the fire-irons, and homely Chippendale and basket chairs. A few Persian rugs, it is true, which it would have tasked a connoisseur to price, happened to be lying on the floor, but otherwise it was quite uncarpeted, and you trod on real naked wooden boards of polished oak. In all the windows but one there were tiny diamond panes of old wavy glass, which made the features of the landscape outside go up and down like a switchback as you walked across the room; and in the other window, which gave light to the serving-up-room (a highly inconvenient arrangement, in which Kit, in the *rôle* of labourer, delighted),

were real bottom-of-glasses panes, which looked charming. The roof was gabled and not even whitewashed (being also of oak), and altogether an unexacting labourer might have spent very fairly comfortable evenings in this simple room.

The cottage idea was carried out in the garden also. The beds were all of old-fashioned flowers, hollyhocks, London-pride, poppies, wallflowers, dahlias, mignonette, quite rustic and herbaceous, with no pincushion Italian beds, which Kit said were very expensive and out of keeping with the prevalent simplicity. They also reminded her of badly-mixed salads. Stern frugality further showed itself in the clothing of the red-brick walls which bounded the garden. Here were no flaunting, flaming creepers, bright and profitless, but homely pear-trees and apricots, which bore quite excellent fruit. A common wooden punt lay moored at the end of the garden, useful and homely, fit for the carrying of the produce of the labourer's garden to market. A pile of embroidered cushions happened at that moment to be lying in it, and Kit had also left her jewelled Russian cigarette-case there, but that was all. Even the cigarette-case was made of simple plaited straw, and the monogram and coronet set in very blue turquoises at one corner seemed to have got there by accident, as if they had been chips which had fallen out of the sky, and might be shortly expected to float back there again.

It was Sunday morning, obviously Sunday morning, and Nature was proceeding as usual on her simple but pleasant way. A brilliant sun, a gentle wind, the smooth, unruffled river, all testified to the tenderness and benignity of the powers of the air. Spring, the watery, impetuous spring of the North, had now a month ago definitely given place to summer, leaving another year in which poets, with their extraordinary want of correct observation, might forget what it had really been like, and rhyme it a hundred undeserved and unfounded courtesies. But summer had come in earnest in the latter days of May, with a marked desire to make itself pleasant, and give to the sturdy British yeoman, who had till then complained (with statistics of rainfall) of the wetness of the spring, another excellent opportunity of vilifying the dryness of the summer. Over such Providence watches with a special care, and, knowing that the one thing worse than having a grievance is to have none, gives them a kindly interchange of wet springs, dry summers, wet summers, dry springs, secure of never pleasing anybody.

A soft blue haze of heat and moisture hung over the river and the low-lying water-meadows on the far side, but as the hills beyond climbed upwards from the valley, they rose into an atmosphere extraordinarily clear. Though the day was hot, there was a precision of outline about the woods that cut the sky almost suggestive of a frosty morning, and even here below the heat was of a brisk quality. Everything was steeped in Sunday content, and from the gray

church-tower standing guardian among the huddled hamlet-roofs came the melodious jangle of bells ringing for the eleven o'clock service. The labourers' garden was in full luxuriance of midsummer flower (for a bright and cheerful garden should be within reach of the humblest), and a rainbow of colour bounded the close-shaven lawn. Nothing, as is right, was ever done on this lawn, mossy to the foot, restful to the eye; no whitewash lines cut it up into horrible squares and oblongs, no frenzied tennis-balls ever did decapitation among the flower-beds that framed it, and you could wander about it at dusk immune from anxiety as to whether your next step would be tripped in a croquet-hoop or entangled in the snares of a drooped tennis-net. During the weeks of spring it had been a star-sown space of crocuses, like the meadow in Fra Angelico's Annunciation, but these were over, and it had again become a green, living velvet.

Kit had developed that morning at breakfast a strange unreasoning desire to go to church, and until Jack saw her eat he was almost afraid she was going to be ill. To church accordingly she had gone, dragging with her Alice Haslemere, who was staying with them. They had been put across the river in the punt, Kit armed with a huge Church service, and it was evident, so thought Conybeare as he strolled down to the water's edge after the return of the punt, that Kit had smoked a cigarette as she went across. This, by the standard of perfection, he considered a mistake. If you are going to do a thing at all, do it thoroughly, he argued to himself, and that a woman should smoke just before going to church was a lapse from the proper level. But he took the cigarette-case with its turquoise monogram from where it lay on the cushion, and put it into his pocket. As like as not Kit would step on it when she got into the punt again.

Jack had enjoyed a long conversation with Mr. Alington after dinner the evening before, and he was now strolling about the garden expecting him to come out and continue it. Alington was, as he had told Kit, a heavy-looking man, but conversationally he had not found him in the least heavy. He had the air of a solid, intelligent Englishman, whose mind had been considerably widened by extensive travel abroad, and took a large uninsular view of things. Had he been disposed to apply for a situation as a butler, no householder could have reasonably hoped to find a more trustworthy or respectable-looking man. Sobriety shone from his large mild eye, and the lines of his firm, somewhat full-lipped, mouth expressed steadiness in every curve. If as a butler he had been told that the whole of the Royal Family were coming to high tea in ten minutes, you would have felt yourself safe to bet that the intelligence would not flurry him, and that a sufficient high tea would somehow immediately appear. For so ample and well-furnished a man he had a curiously small voice, rather suggesting that it came from a distance, and he spoke his sentences in a precise manner, never correcting a word, as if he had thought them out before

he opened his mouth. Colour was given to this supposition by the fact that he always paused a moment before speaking. Such a habit of speech, when worn by the majority, would predispose towards heaviness; but the result when it arrived was not, in the case of Mr. Alington, heavy. On the contrary, it was weighty—a far different thing. In the interval of reminding one of an admirable butler he irresistibly suggested a member of a Conservative Cabinet, safe of a peerage. It was only when considered as a floater of gold mines that his appearance was against him, and even then it was against him only on the score of probability, for it was impossible that even an imaginative public could invent a man in whom more *primâ-facie* confidence should be reposed as a trustee of the moneys of widows and fatherless.

Jack strolled in the garden for nearly half an hour before he appeared, chucking pebbles into the Thames and cigarette-ends into the flower-beds. At breakfast Mr. Alington had been dressed in a black frock-coat, but now when he made his unhurried exit from the low drawing-room French window he wore a straw hat and a suit of decorous tweed, the result, no doubt, of his observation that no one else wore Sunday clothes. He carried a malacca cane in one hand; in the other a large tune hymn-book with edges red in one light, gold in another.

"Lady Conybeare has started?" he inquired of Jack.

"Yes; she has gone to church. She went nearly half an hour ago."

Mr. Alington paused a moment.

"I had meant to go with her," he said. "I had no idea it was so late."

"There is the punt here," said Jack. "You can go now if you like. I had no idea you meant to."

"I thought everyone went to church on Sunday morning in England when they were in the country," he said. "But I would sooner not go at all than arrive in the middle of the prayer of St. Chrysostom."

"And I would sooner arrive in the middle of the prayer of St. Chrysostom than at the beginning of it," remarked Jack.

A slight look of pain crossed Mr. Alington's face, as if he had a twinge of neuralgia; but he made no further comment on Jack's levity. He leaned his tune hymn-book carefully against the bottom of his basket-chair, after feeling that the lawn was dry, and lit a cigarette.

"An exquisite morning," he said, after a moment's reflection. "The hills look as if they had been painted with cream for a medium, an effect so rare out of England."

Lord Conybeare did not reply immediately, for he had not waited all this time in the garden for Alington to hear him talk about cream. Then he went straight to the point:

"All you said last night interested me very much," he began, "and your kind offer to invest some money for me in your new group of mines——"

Mr. Alington held up a large white, deprecating hand. On the little finger was a plain gold signet-ring, bearing the motto, *Fortiter fideliter feliciter*.

"It is nothing," he replied; "pray don't mention it. Indeed, Lord Conybeare, if I may say so, I only made that offer as a sort of feeler. Your reply to me then, your further reference to the subject now, show me that you are kind enough to be interested in my new undertakings."

"Profoundly," said Lord Conybeare; then, with disarming frankness: "Money is the most interesting thing in the world and the most desirable. I often wish," he added, "that I saw more of it."

Alington flicked a morsel of ash off the end of his cigarette.

"That confirms me in what I was thinking of saying to you," he replied. "Now will you allow me to speak with your own frankness? Ah, observe that beautiful line traced by that skein of starlings!"

Jack looked up.

"Lovely!" he said. "Pray speak."

"It is this then. My honest belief is that there are immense fortunes to be made in West Australian mining. I believe also, again with absolute honesty, that these claims which I own are—some of them, at least, extremely rich. Now, I wish very much that I was wealthy enough to work them by myself. I regret to say that I am not. I must therefore form a company. To form a company I must have directors."

"Surely your name——" began Conybeare politely, but with only the faintest conjecture of what might be coming.

"My name, as you so kindly suggest, will no doubt be a little assistance," said Alington, "for I am not wholly unknown in such matters. But it is not enough. This Company must be English; it must be formed here; the shareholders should be largely English. Why? For a variety of reasons. In the first place, you can raise ten thousand pounds here more easily than you can raise one thousand in Australia. Again, the British public is getting ready to go mad about West Australian mining, while in Australia they regard Australian mining without, well, without any premonitory symptoms of insanity. Perhaps they underrate its future; I think they do. Perhaps the British public overrates

it; that also is possible. But I bring my wares to the best market. Now I ask you, Lord Conybeare, will you be on my board? Will you be my chairman?"

He turned briskly round with the first quick movement that Conybeare had yet seen him make.

"I," he asked, "on a board of mining directors? I know about mines exactly what you told me, last night—that is to say, unless I have forgotten some of it."

The ghost of a smile flickered across Mr. Alington's broad face, and he laid his large white hand on Jack's knee. The latter seemed to regard it just as he might have regarded a harmless moth that had settled there. The poor thing did not hurt.

"You saw that I smiled," he said. "I saw that you saw it. I smiled because you spoke so far from the point. That is frank enough, is it not, to show you that I am telling you the truth. There are further proofs also."

Both in his action with his hand and in his speech the plebeian showed plain, but Jack did not resent it. He had not asked Alington down to the cottage to enjoy his refined conversation and his well-bred presence, but to talk business. That he was doing. Jack was quite pleased with him.

"I do not follow you," he said.

Mr. Alington lit another cigarette from the stump of his old one before replying, and rose to deposit the other out of sight in a garden-bed.

"Cigarette-ends are so terribly dissonant with this charming garden," he said. "Now, I am speaking to you from a purely business point of view. I supposed —it was natural, was it not?—that you were so kind as to ask me to your delightful house in order to discuss these mines. You see how frank I am."

Conybeare let his eye travel slowly down a reach of the Thames.

"Yes, that was the reason why I asked you," he said.

"And I came for exactly the same reason. The pleasure of visiting you at your 'cottage,' as Lady Conybeare so playfully calls it, is great—very great; but plain business-men like me have little time for such pleasures. Frankly, then, I should not have come unless I guessed your reason. I, too, wished to talk about these mines, Lord Conybeare, and I ask you again to be a director on my board."

He took off his straw hat—for they were sitting in the shade—and propped it carefully up against his chair by the side of the large tune hymn-book. Its removal showed a high white forehead and a circular baldness in the centre of

flossy, light-brown hair, like a tonsure.

"I am a plain business man," he went on, "and when I am engaged in business I do not offer an advantageous thing to others unless I get an advantage myself; for to introduce sentiment into business is to make a pleasure of it and a failure. You must remember, my dear Lord Conybeare, that England is essentially aristocratic in her ideas. At least, so far as your nobility is Conservative, she is aristocratic. Think if Lord Salisbury joined a board how the public would clamour for allotments! Dear me, yes, the master of Hatfield might be a very rich man—a very rich man indeed."

Jack Conybeare was completely himself; he was not dazzled or unduly delighted at the offer. He merely wished to know what he got by it, taking for granted, and justly, that the man was sincere.

"Marquises still count, then," he said. "I give you my word I had no idea of it. I am glad I am a marquis. But what," he added, "do I get by it?"

"A salary," said Mr. Alington, and his usual pause gave the remark considerable weight. "But we will pass over that," he went on. "Directors, however, have the privilege of taking a great many shares before the concern is made public. In fact, in order to qualify for being a director, you must hold a considerable number."

"I am very poor," said Jack.

"That, fortunately, can be remedied," said Mr. Alington.

Jack was immensely practical, and very quick, and it was obvious at once that this was capable of two interpretations. He took the right one.

"You mean it is a certainty for me?" he said.

Again Mr. Alington let a perceptible pause intervene before he answered.

"I mean this," he said, "if you want plain speaking, and I think you do; it also suits me better. You shall be allotted a certain number of shares, say ten thousand, in my new group of mines. You will probably only have to pay the first call. You will be a director of these mines—and, by the way, there is another name I have in my mind, the owner of which I should also like to have on my board. I had the pleasure of seeing him at your house in London. Very well, I issue my prospectus, and my name, as you so kindly observed, counts for something. I, of course, as vendor, shall join the board after allotment. Yours and another I hope will be there too. Now, I feel certain in my own mind that such a board (with certain other names, which shall be my affair) will be advantageous to me. It will pay. I am certain also—I say this soberly—that between my prospectus and my board the shares will at once go up, so that if

you choose you can sell out before the second call. Thus you will not be without your advantage also. We do no favour to each other; we enter into partnership each for his own advantage."

"And my duties?" asked Jack.

"Attendance, regular attendance at the meetings of the company. On those occasions I shall want you to take the chair, read the report of the manager, if there is one to hand, make the statement of the affairs of the company, and congratulate the shareholders."

"Or condole?" asked Jack.

"I hope not. I should also ask you to immediately approach Lord Abbotsworthy, and ask him to be on the board. His is the other name I mentioned."

"Whatever do you want Tom Abbotsworthy for?" asked Conybeare surprisedly.

"For much the same reason as I want you. He is already an earl—he will be a duke. Dear me, if I was not a man of business I should choose to be a duke."

Jack pondered a moment.

"It is your own concern," he said. "I will ask him with pleasure, and I think very probably he will consent. Oddly enough, he and I were talking about this sudden interest in West Australia only yesterday morning."

"I think that many other people will be talking of it before long," said Alington.

"I consent," said Jack.

Mr. Alington showed neither elation, relief, nor surprise. But he paused.

"I think you will find it worth your while," he said. "And now, Lord Conybeare, there is another point. In the working of a big scheme like this—for, I assure you, this is no cottage-garden affair—there is, as you may imagine, an enormous deal of business. Somebody has to be responsible for, or, at any rate, to sanction, all that is done. Whether we put up fresh stamps, or whether we decide to use the cyanide process for tailings, or sink a deep level, or abandon a vein, or use the sulphide reduction, to take only a few obvious instances, somebody has to be able to answer all questions, difficult ones sometimes, possibly even awkward ones. Now, are you willing to go into all this, or not? If you wish to have a voice in such matters you must go into it. On that I insist. I hear you are a first-rate authority on chemical manures—a most absorbing subject, I am sure. Are you willing to learn as much about

mines? On the other hand, it is open to you and Lord Abbotsworthy to leave the whole working of such affairs to me and certain business men whom I may appoint. But, having left it, you leave it altogether. You will have no right of being consulted at all about technical points unless you will make them your study. If you decide to leave these things to those whose life has been passed in them, good. You put implicit confidence in them, and if required, you will say so, honestly, at the meetings. If, on the other hand, you wish to have a voice in technical affairs, your voice must be justified. You must make mines, technically, your study. You must go out and see mines. You must acquire, not a superficial, but a thorough knowledge of them. You must be able to form some estimate of what relation one ounce of gold to the ton bears to the cost of working, and the capital on which such a yield will pay. Now which? Choose!"

And Mr. Alington faced round squarely, a little exhausted on so hot a morning by a volubility which was rare with him, and looked Jack in the face.

"Which do you advise?" asked the other.

"I cannot undertake to advise you. I have merely given you the data of your choice, and I can do no more."

"Then spare me details," said Jack.

Mr. Alington nodded his head gravely.

"I think you are wise," he said, "though I could not take the responsibility of influencing your own opinion. I pay you for your name. Your name, to tell you the truth, is what I want. You delegate business to business men. I hope you will put the matter in the same light to Lord Abbotsworthy. With regard to your salary as chairman, I cannot make you a precise offer yet; tentatively, I should suggest five thousand a year."

Lord Conybeare had to perfection that very useful point of good breeding, namely, the ability to preserve a perfectly wooden face when hearing the most surprising news. Mr. Alington, for all the effect this information apparently had on it, might have been speaking to the leg of a table.

"That seems to me very handsome," he replied negligently.

"It seems to me about fair," said Mr. Alington.

Lord Conybeare was puzzled, and he wondered whether Kit would understand it all. How his name on a "front page," as Mr. Alington called it, with attendance at a few meetings, at which he would read a report, could be worth five thousand a year, he did not see, though he felt quite certain that Mr. Alington thought it was. Whether it would turn out to be so or not, he hardly

cared at all; clearly that matter did not concern him. If anyone was willing to pay five thousand a year for his name they were perfectly welcome to have it; indeed, he would have taken a much smaller figure. He had no idea that marquises were at such a premium. His distinguished ancestry had suddenly become an industrial company, paying heavily. "The new Esau," he thought to himself, "and a great improvement on the old. I only lend my birthright, and the pottage I receive is really considerable."

Some time before they had reached this point in their conversation the punt had been taken across the river again to fetch Kit and Alice Haslemere back from church, and as Mr. Alington said his last words it had returned again with the jaded church-goers. He put on his straw hat, picked up the big tune hymn-book, and with Conybeare strolled down to the bottom of the lawn to meet them.

"Devotion is so very fatiguing," said Kit, in a harassed voice, as she stepped on to the grass. "Alice and I feel as if we had been having the influenza—don't we, dear? And I've lost my cigarette-case. It is too tiresome, because I meant to pawn it. I am sure I left it in the punt."

Jack took it out of his pocket and returned it to her.

"Thank your dear husband you didn't step on it," he remarked.

Kit took it petulantly, and lit a cigarette.

"Oh, Jack, I wish you wouldn't be so thoughtful," she said. "Thoughtful people are such a nuisance. They always remind one of what one is doing one's best to forget, and put one's cherished things in safe places. Oh, I'm so glad I'm not a clergyman. I should have to go to church again this evening. What's that book, Mr. Alington? Oh, I see. Have you and Jack been singing hymns on the lawn? How dear of you! I didn't know you thought of going to church, or I would have waited for you. I understood you were going to talk business with Jack. There is business in the air. Just a trifle stuffy."

Mr. Alington paused.

"We have been having a long and interesting talk," he replied. "One can say more on Sunday morning than in the whole of the rest of the week put together."

"Yes, that's so true," said Kit, walking on ahead with him, and smoking violently. "The man who preached knew it too. It was like a night journey, I slept so badly. And was your talk satisfactory?"

"To me, very," said Mr. Alington. "I am convinced it will also prove satisfactory to Lord Conybeare. He has kindly consented to become

my chairman and a director of my new group of mines, the Carmel mines, as they will be called."

"What a nice name!" said Kit. "And shall we all make our fortunes?"

Mr. Alington nodded his massive head.

"I shall be very much surprised if we do not get a modest competence out of the Carmel mines," said he.

CHAPTER III

AFTER THE GEE-GEE PARTY

Lady Haslemere was entertaining what she called the "Gee-gees" or "Great Grundys" one night at her house in Berkeley Street. The "Gee-gee" party was an idea borrowed from Jack, and all who were weightiest in society came to it, a large number of them to dine, and the rest to the evening party. Just now her brother, Tom Abbotsworthy, was living with them, for his own house was being done up, and Alice had easily persuaded him to stay with them, instead of living with the Duke. Indeed to live with the Duke was nearly an impossibility; three women already had attempted to support the burden of being his Duchess, but they had all collapsed before long, leaving him in each case eminently consolable. He could hurry a person into the grave, so it was said, sooner than any man or woman in the kingdom. The last time Tom had seen him was about a week ago, at dinner somewhere, and the whole of his conversation had been to say loudly to him across the dinner-table at intervals of about two minutes, "Why don't you marry?"

Tom's presence in the house was a great boon during the season; he relieved his brother-in-law of his duties as host in an easy, unostentatious manner, thereby earning his heartfelt gratitude, and discharging these duties, instead of leaving them undischarged. Lord Haslemere himself had a habit of being unreckoned with. He was an adept at doing wire puzzles, and played a remarkably good game at billiards, but otherwise there was nothing of him. He wore whiskers, spent the greater part of his day at the club, and was known as Whisky-and-Soda, not because he had intemperate leanings in that direction, but because there was really nothing else to call him. When his wife entertained, he shrank into what there was of himself, and the majority of his guests at an evening party did not generally know him by sight. His face was one stamped with the quality of obliviality; to see him once was to insure forgetting him at least twice. But at the "Gee-gee" parties he was made tidy,

which he usually was not, and put in prominent places. He had been very prominent this evening, and correspondingly unhappy. He had taken a parrot-hued Duchess into dinner, and spilt a glass of wine over her new dress, and as her Grace's temper was as high as the bridge of her nose, the evening had been unusually bitter.

The "Grundy" dinner-party was succeeded by a vast "Grundy" At Home, to which flocked all the solid people in London, including those who "bridle" when a very smart set is mentioned, and flock thirstily to their houses, like camels to a desert well, whenever they are asked. It was the usual thing. There had been a little first-rate music—during which everyone talked their loudest—and a great many pink and china-blue hydrangeas on the stairs, a positive coruscation of stars and orders and garters—for two royal princes had been included among the "Gee-gees"—and about midnight Lady Haslemere was yawning dismally behind her fan, and wondering when people would begin to go away. In the intervals of her yawns, which she concealed most admirably, she spoke excellent and vivacious French to the Hungarian Ambassador, an old bald-headed little man, who only wanted a stick to make him into a monkey on one, and laughed riotously at his stuffy little monkey-house jokes, all of which she had frequently heard before. In consequence, he considered her an extremely agreeable woman, as indeed she was.

Kit and her husband were not at the dinner, both having refused point-blank to go, on the ground that they had done their duty to "Grundy" already; but they turned up, having dined quietly at home, at about half-past eleven, with Mr. Alington in tow. He was not known to many people present, but Lady Haslemere instantly left her Ambassador, having received instructions from Kit, and led him about like a dancing bear. She introduced him to royalty, which asked him graciously whether he enjoyed England, or preferred Australia, and other questions of a highly original and penetrating kind; she presented him to stars and orders and garters, and to all the finest "Gee-gees" present, as if he had been the guest of the evening. Kit's eye was on her all the time, though she was talking to two thousand people, and saw that she did her duty.

The rooms were as pretty as decorated boxes can be, and hotter than one would have thought any boxes could possibly get. People stood packed together like sardines in a tin, cheek to jowl, and appeared to enjoy it. Anæmic men dropped inaudible questions to robust females, and ethereal-looking *débutantes* screamed replies to elderly Conservatives. Nobody sat down—indeed, there was not room to sit down—and the happiest of all the crowd, excepting those who had dined there, were the enviable mortals who had come on from one house, and were able to announce that they were going on to another. Three small drawing-rooms opened out the one from the other,

and the doorways were inflamed and congested. Whoever took up most room seemed to stand there, and whoever took up most room seemed to be dressed in red. Altogether, one could not imagine a more successful evening. Politicians considered it a political party, those who were not quite so smart as Lady Haslemere's set considered it the smartest party of the year, and everybody who was nobody considered that everybody was there, and looked forward to buying the next issue of Smart Society, in order to see what "Belle" or "Amy" thought of it all.

The noise of two or three hundred people all talking at once in small rooms causes a roar extraordinarily strident, and, as in the case of rooms full of tobacco-smoke, intolerable unless one contributes to it oneself. Mr. Alington had to raise his small, precise voice till it sounded as if he was intoning, and the effort was considerable. This particular way of passing a pleasant evening in the heat of the summer was hitherto unknown to him, and he looked about him in mild wonder. He felt himself reminded of those crates of ducks and fowls which are to be seen on the decks of ocean-going steamers, the occupants of which are so cruelly overcrowded, and of whom the most fortunate only can thrust their beaks through the wicker of their prison-house, and quack desolately to the breeze of the sea. Lady Haslemere's rooms seemed to him to resemble these bird-crates, the only difference being that people sought this suffocating imprisonment of their own free will, because they liked it, the birds because the passengers had to be fed. One or two very tall men had their heads free, a few others stood by windows, and could breathe; but the majority could neither breathe nor hear, nor see further than their immediate neighbours. They could only quack. And they quacked.

By degrees the party thinned; an unwilling lane was cut through the crowd for the exit of the princes, and the great full-blown flowers in the hedges, so to speak, bobbed down in turn as they passed, like a field of poppies blown on by a passing wind. After them those lucky folk who were going on to another house, where they would stand shoulder to shoulder again with a slightly different crowd, and express extreme wonder that their neighbours had not been at Lady Haslemere's ("I thought everyone was there!"), made haste to follow. Outside all down the street from Berkeley Square at one end to Piccadilly at the other stretched the lines of carriage-lamps, looking like some gigantic double necklace. The congestion in the drawing-room developed into a really alarming inflammation in the cloak-room and the hall, and everyone wanted her carriage and was waiting for it, except the one unfortunate lady whose carriage stopped the whole of the way, as a stentorian policeman studiously informed her, but who could only find attached to her ticket a small opera hat instead of the cloak which should have covered her. People trod on each other's toes and heels, and entangled themselves in other folks' jewels and

lace. Rain had begun to fall heavily, the red carpet from the door to the curbstone was moist and muddy, contemptuous footmen escorted elderly ladies under carriage umbrellas to their broughams, and large drops of rain fell chill on the elderly ladies' backs. Loungers of the streets criticised the outgoers with point and cockney laughter, but still the well-dressed crowd jostled and quacked and talked, and said how remarkably pleasant it had been, and how doubly delightful it was to have come here from somewhere else, and to go on somewhere else from here.

Half an hour after the departure of the princes, Lady Haslemere, who was fast ceasing to yawn, manœuvred the two or three dozen people who still could not manage to tear themselves away, into the outermost of the three drawing-rooms, and nodded to a footman who lingered in the doorway, and had obvious orders to catch her eye. Upon this he and another impassive giant glided into the innermost room, and took two green-baize-covered tables from where they had been folded against the wall, setting them in the middle of the room, and placed a dozen chairs round them; then, making use of a back staircase, so that they should not be seen by the remaining "Grundys," they brought up and laid out a cold supper, consisting chiefly of jelly and frills and froth and glass and bottles and quails and cigarettes, put cards, counters, and candles on the green-baize tables, and withdrew. Ten minutes later the last of the "Grundys" withdrew also, and the rest, some dozen people who had stood about in attitudes of the deepest dejection for the last half-hour, while a Bishop played the man of the world to Kit, heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief, and brightened up considerably. Automatically, or as if by the action of a current of air or a tide, they drifted into the inner room, and chalk lines were neatly drawn on the green-baize cloth.

Baccarat is a game admirably suited to people who have had a long day, and is believed to be a specific antidote to the gloom induced by huge "Grundy" parties. It is an effort and a strain on the mind to talk to very solid people who are interested in great questions and delight in discussion; but at baccarat the mind, so to speak, lights a cigarette, throws itself into an armchair, and puts on its slippers. Baccarat requires no judgment, no calculation, no previous knowledge of anything, and though it is full of pleasing excitement, it makes no demands whatever on the strongest or feeblest intellect. The players have only to put themselves blindly, as ladies dressing for dinner surrender themselves to a skilful maid, into the hands of Luck, and the austere elemental forces which manage the winds and waves, and decree in what order nines and other cards are dealt from packs, do the rest. You buy your counters, and when they are all gone you buy some more. If, on the other hand, they behave as counters should, and increase and multiply like rabbits, you have the pleasure of presenting them to your host at the end of the evening or the beginning of

the morning, as the case may be, and he very kindly gives you shining sterling gold and rich crackling bank-notes in exchange.

Tom Abbotsworthy, since he had been staying with his sister, always took the place of host when this soothing game was being played at Berkeley Street; for Lord Haslemere, if he were not in bed, was by this time busily practising nursery cannons on the billiard-table. Occasionally he looked in, with his fidgety manner, and trifled with the froth and frills, and if there was anyone present whose greatness demanded his attendance, he took a hesitating hand. But to-night he was spared; there was only a small, intimate party, who would have found him a bore. He was slow at cards, displayed an inordinate greed for his stake, and had been known at baccarat to consider whether he should have another. This, as already stated, is unnecessary. With certain numbers you must; with all the others you must not, and consideration delays the game.

The hours passed much more pleasantly and briskly than during the period of the "Grundy" party. It was a warm, still night, the windows were flung wide, and the candles burned unwaveringly. Round the table were a dozen eager, attentive faces. Luck, like some Pied Piper, was fluting to the nobility and gentry, and the nobility and gentry followed her like the children of Hamelin. Now and then one of them would rise and consult the side-table to the diminishment of frills and froth, or the crisp-smelling smoke of a cigarette would hold the room for a few minutes. Most of those present had been idle all day, now they were employed and serious. Outside the rain had ceased, and for a couple of hours the never-ending symphony of wheels sank to a pianissimo. Occasionally, with a sharp-cut noise of hoofs and the jingle of a bell, a hansom would trot briskly past, and at intervals an iron-shod van made thunder in the street. But the siesta of noise was short, for time to the most is precious; barely had the world got home from its parties of the night, when those whose business it is to rise when their masters are going to bed, in order that the breakfast-table may not lack its flowers and fruits, began to get to the morning's work, and the loaded, fragrant vans went eastward. The candles had once burned down, and had been replaced by one of the impassive giants, when the hint of dawn, the same dawn that in the country illuminated with tremulous light the dewy hollows of untrodden ways, was whispered in the world. Here it but changed the blank, dark faces of the houses opposite into a more visible gray; it sucked the fire from the candles, was strangely unbecoming to Lady Haslemere, who was calculated for artificial light, and out of the darkness was born day.

There was no longer any need for the carriage-lamps to be lit when Kit and her husband got into their brougham. A very pale-blue sky, smokeless and clear, was over the city, and the breath of the morning was deliciously chill. Kit, whether from superior art or mere nature, did not look in the least out of

keeping with the morning. She was a little flushed, but her flush was that of a child just awakened from a long night's rest more than that of a woman of twenty-five, excited by baccarat and sufficient—in no degree more than sufficient—champagne. Her constant harmony with her surroundings was her most extraordinary characteristic; it seemed to be an instinct, acting automatically, just as the chameleon takes its colour from its surroundings. Set her in a well-dressed mob of the world, she was the best dressed and most worldly woman there; among rosy-faced children she would look at the most a pupil teacher. Just now in Lady Haslemere's drawing-room you would have called her gambler to her finger-tips; but as she stood for a moment on the pavement outside waiting for her carriage-door to be opened, she was a child of morning.

She drew her cloak, lined with the plucked breast feathers that grow on the mother only in breeding-time, more closely about her, and drew the window half up.

"You were in luck as well as I, were you not, Jack?" she said. "I suppose I am mercenary, but I must confess I like winning other people's money. I feel as if I was earning something."

"Yes, we were both on the win to-night," said Jack.

Then he stopped, but as if he had something more to say, and to Kit as well as to him the silence was awkward.

"You noticed something?" she asked.

"Yes; Alington."

"So did I. So did Alice, I think. What a bore it is! What is to be done?"

Jack fidgeted on his seat, lit a cigarette, took two whiffs at it, and threw it away.

"Perhaps we are wrong," he said. "Perhaps he didn't cheat."

Kit did not find it worth while to reply to so half-hearted a suggestion.

"It's damned awkward," he continued, abandoning this himself. "I don't know what to do. You see, Kit, what an awful position I am in. In any case, do let us have no scandal; that sort of thing has been tried once, and I don't know that it did any good to anybody."

"Of course we will have no scandal," said Kit quickly. "If there was a scandal, you would have to break with him, and pop go the gold mines as far as we are concerned."

Jack started. His thoughts had been so absolutely identical with what his wife

said, that it was as if he had heard a sudden echo. And though the thoughts had been his own, and Kit had merely stated them, yet when she did so, so unreasonable is man, he felt inclined to repudiate what she said. The thing sounded crude when put like that. Kit saw him start, divined the cause with intuitive accuracy, and felt a sudden impatient anger at him. She hated hypocritical cowardice of this kind, for, having plenty of immoral courage herself, she had no sympathy with those who were defective in it. Jack, she knew very well, had no intention of breaking with Alington, because the latter had cheated at baccarat. Then, in Heaven's name, even if you are too squeamish to be frank yourself, try to make an effort not to wince when somebody else is.

"That is what a man calls his honour," she thought to herself with amused annoyance. "It is unlike Jack, though."

Meantime her quick brain was spinning threads like a spider.

"Look here, Jack," she said in a moment. "Leave the thing entirely to me. It was stupid of me to mention it. You saw nothing: I saw nothing. You know nothing about it. There was no baccarat, no cheating, no nothing. Come."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack doubtfully.

He had great confidence in Kit, but this matter required consideration.

"Oh, Jack, I am not a fool," said Kit. "I only want you, officially, so to speak, to know nothing about this, just in case of accidents; but there will be no accidents if you let me manage it. If you want to know what I shall do, it is this: I shall go to Alice to-morrow—to-day, rather—and tell her what I saw. I am sure she saw it herself, or I should say nothing to her. I shall also add how lucky it was that only she and I noticed it. Then the whole thing shall be hushed up, though I dare say we shall watch Alington play once more to be certain about it, and if we see him cheat again, make him promise to play no more. Trust us for not letting it come out. I am in your galley about the mines, you see."

"She is to understand that I saw nothing?" asked Jack.

"Of course, of course," said Kit. "That is the whole point of it. What is your scruple? I am really unable to understand. I know it is not nice to deal with a person who cheats at cards. You have always to be on the watch. You'll have to keep your eyes open in this business of the mines, but that is your own affair. Clearly it is much better that Alice should imagine you know nothing about the cheating. She might think you ought to break with the man; people are so queer and unexpected."

"What about Tom?" asked he.

They had arrived at Park Lane, and Kit stepped out.

"Jack, will you or will you not leave the whole matter in my hands—the whole matter, you understand—without interference?"

He paused for a moment, still irresolute.

"Yes," he said at last; "but be careful."

Kit hardly heard this injunction; as soon as he had said "Yes" she turned quickly from him, and went into the house.

It was already after four, and the tops of the trees in the Park had caught the first level rays of the eastern sun. The splendid, sordid town still lay asleep, and the road was glistening from the rain which had fallen earlier in the night, and empty of passengers. But the birds, those fit companions of the dawn, were awake, and the twittered morning hymn of sparrows pricked the air. Kit went straight to her bedroom, where the rose-coloured blinds, drawn down over the wide-open windows, filled the room with soft, subdued light, and rang the bell which communicated with her maid's room. When she was likely to be out very late she always let her maid go to bed, and rang for her when she was wanted. Often she even made an effort to get to bed without her help, but this morning she was preoccupied, and rang before she could determine whether she needed her. Kit herself was one of those happily-constituted people who can do with very little sleep, though they can manage a great deal, and in these London months four or five hours during the night and a possible half-hour before dinner was sufficient to make her not only just awake, but excessively so at other times. In the country, it is true, she made up for unnatural hours by really bucolic behaviour. She took vigorous exercise every day in any weather, ate largely of wholesome things, hardly drank any wine, and slept her eight hours like a child. In this she was wiser than the majority of her world, who, in order to correct their errors in London, spend a month of digestive retirement at Carlsbad.

"Live wholesomely six months of the year," said Kit once, "and you will repair your damages. Why should I listen to German bands and drink salt water?"

Instead, she fished all August and September, cut down her cigarettes, and lived, as she said, like a milkmaid. It would have been rather a queer sort of milkmaid, but people knew what she meant.

Before her maid came (Kit's arrangement that she might go to bed was partly the result of kindness, partly of her disinclination to be waited on by a very sleepy attendant) she had taken off her jewels, and put them into her safe. There also she placed the very considerable sum of money which she had just won at baccarat, to join the rainy-day fund. Jack did not know about the rainy-

day fund—it was of Kit's very private possessions; but it is only fair to her to say that if he had been in a financial *impasse* it would have been at his disposal. No number of outstanding bills, however, constituted an *impasse* till you were absolutely sued for debt; the simplest way of discharging them, a way naturally popular, was to continue ordering things at the same shops.

Kit and her husband did not meet at breakfast, but took that plebeian meal in their own rooms. And she, having told Hortense to open the windows still wider, and bring her breakfast at half-past ten, put the key of her jewel-safe under her pillow, and lay down to sleep for five hours. She would want her victoria at twelve, and she scribbled a note to Lady Haslemere saying that she would be with her at a quarter past.

Outside the day grew ever brighter, and rivulets of traffic began to flow down Park Lane. The hour of the starting of the omnibuses brought a great accession of sound, but Kit fell asleep as soon as she got into bed, and, the sleep of the just and the healthy being sound, she heard them not. She dreamed in a vague way that she had won a million pounds, but that as she was winning the last of them, which would mean eternal happiness, she cheated some undefined shadow of a penny, which, in the misty, unexplained fashion of dreams, took away the whole of her winnings. Then the smell of tea and bacon and a sudden influx of light scattered these vain and inauspicious imaginings, and she woke to another day of her worthless, selfish, aimless life.

CHAPTER IV

KIT'S LITTLE PLAN

To many people the events of the day before, and the anticipations of the day to come, give with the most pedantic exactness an automatic colour to the waking moments. The first pulse of conscious consciousness, without apparent cause, is happy, unhappy, or indifferent. Then comes a backward train of thought, the brain gropes for the reason of its pleasure or chagrin, something has happened, something is going to happen, and the instinct of the first moment is justified. The thing lay in the brain; it gave the colour of itself to the moment when reasoned thought was yet dormant.

Bacon and tea were the first savours of an outer world to Kit when she awoke, for she had slept soundly, but simultaneously, and not referring to these excellent things, her brain said to her, "Not nice!" Now, this was odd: she shared with her husband his opinion of the paramount importance of money, and the night before she had locked up in her safe enough to pay for six gowns

at least, and a year's dentist bills, for her teeth were very good. Indeed, it was generally supposed that they were false, and though Kit always laughed with an open mouth, she had been more than once asked who her dentist was. Herein she showed less than her ordinary wisdom when she replied that she had not got one, for the malignity of the world, how incomparable she should have known, felt itself justified.

Yet in spite of that delightful round sum in her jewel-safe, the smell of bacon woke her to no sense of bliss beyond bacon. For a moment she challenged her instinct, and told herself that she was going to have tea with the Carburys, and that Coquelin was coming; that she was dining with the Arbuthnots, where they were going to play a little French farce so screaming and curious that the Censor would certainly have had a fit if he had known that such a piece had been performed within the bounds of his paternal care. All this was as it should be, yet as the river of thought began to flow more fully, she was even less pleased with the colour of the day. Something unpleasant had happened; something unpleasant was still in the air—ah! that was it, and she sat up in bed and wondered exactly how she should put it to Lady Haslemere. Anyhow she had *carte blanche* from Jack, and if between half-past ten and a quarter past twelve she could not think of something simple and sufficient, she was a fool, and that she knew she certainly was not.

With her breakfast came the post. There were half a dozen cards of invitation to concerts and dinners and garden-parties; an autograph note from a very great personage about her guests at the banquet next week; a number of bills making a surprising but uninteresting total; another note, which she read with interest twice, and then tore into very small pieces; and a few lines from Jack, scribbled on a half-sheet of paper.

"Do the best you can, Kit," he said; "I am off to the City to see A. I shall behave as if I knew nothing."

Kit tore up this also, but not into small pieces, with a little sigh of relief. "Sense cometh in the morning," she said to herself, and ate her breakfast with a very good appetite.

Whatever she had been doing, however unwisely she had supped, Kit always "wanted" her breakfast, and as she took it the affair of the night before seemed to her to assume a somewhat different complexion. In her heart of hearts she began to be not very sorry for the lapse in social morality of which Mr. Alington had been guilty on the previous night. It seemed to her on post-prandial consideration that it might not be altogether a bad thing that she should have some little check upon him. It might even be called a blessing, with hardly any disguise at all, and she put the position to herself thus. When you went careering about in unexplored goldfields with the owner, a

comparative stranger, harnessed to your cart, it was just as well to have some sort of a break ready to your hand. Very likely it would be unnecessary to use it; indeed, she did not want to have to use it at all, but it was certainly preferable to know that it was there, and that if the comparative stranger took it into his head to bolt, he would find it suddenly clapped on. The only drawback was that Alice knew about it too; at least, Kit was morally certain that she had noticed Mr. Alington's surreptitious pushing forward of his stake after the declaration of his card, which was very clumsily done, and she would have preferred, had it been possible, that only Jack and she should have known, for a secret has only one value, and the more it is shared the less valuable does each share become, on the simple arithmetical postulate that if you divide a unit into pieces, each piece is less than the original unit.

Indeed, the more she thought of it, the more convenient did it appear that Mr. Alington should have made this little mistake, and that she should have noticed it. And, after all, perhaps it would save trouble that Alice should have noticed it too, for in all probability it would be necessary to make Alington play again and watch him. For this she must have some accomplice, and as Jack was not to come into the affair at all, there really was no better accomplice to have than Alice. To lay this trap for the bland financier did not seem to Kit to be in any way a discreditable proceeding. She put it to herself that, if a man cheated, he ought not to be allowed to play cards and win his friends' money, and that it was in justice to him that it was necessary to verify the suspicion. But that it was a low and loathsome thing to ask a man as a friend to play cards in order to see whether he cheated or not did not present itself to her. Her mind—after all, it is a question of taste—was not constructed in such a way as to be able to understand this point of view, and she was not hide-bound or pedantic in her idea of the obligation entailed by hospitality. To cheat at cards was an impossible habit, it would not do in the least; for a rich man to cheat at cards was inexplicable. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that Kit was really shocked at the latter.

In the course of an hour came an answer from Lady Haslemere. She was unavoidably out till two, but if Kit would come to lunch then she would be at home. Haslemere and Tom were both out, and they could be alone.

Kit always found Alice Haslemere excellent company, and during lunch they blackened the reputations of their more intimate friends with all the mastery of custom, and a firm though gentle touch. Like some deductive detective of unreadable fiction, Kit could most plausibly argue guilt from cigarette ashes, muddy boots, cups of tea—anything, in fact, wholly innocent in itself. But luckier than he, she had not got to wrest verdicts from reluctant juries, but only to convince Lady Haslemere, which was a far lighter task, as she could without the slightest effort believe anything bad of anybody. Kit, moreover,

was a perfect genius at innuendo; it was one of the greatest charms of her conversation.

After lunch they sat in the card-room and smoked gold-tipped, opium-tainted cigarettes, and when the servants had brought coffee and left them, Kit went straight to the point, and asked Alice whether she had seen anything irregular as they played baccarat the night before.

Lady Haslemere took a sip of coffee and lit another cigarette; she intended to enjoy herself very much.

"You mean the Australian," she said. "Well, I had suspicions; that is to say, last night I felt certain. It is so easy to feel certain about that sort of thing when one is losing."

Kit laughed a sympathetic laugh.

"It *is* a bore, losing," she said. "If there is one thing I dislike more than winning other people's money, it is losing my own. And the certainty of last night is still a suspicion to-day?"

"Ye-es. But you know a man may mean to stake, and yet not put the counters quite clear of that dear little chalk line. I am sure, in any case, that Tom saw nothing, because I threw a hint at him this morning, which he would have understood if he had seen anything."

"Oh, Tom never sees anything," said Kit; "he is like Jack."

Lady Haslemere's natural conclusion was that Jack had not seen anything either, and for the moment Kit was saved from a more direct misstatement. Not that she had any prudish horror of misstatements, but it was idle to make one unless it was necessary; it is silly to earn a reputation for habitual prevarication. Lies are like drugs or stimulants, the more frequent use you make of them, the less effect they have, both on yourself and on other people.

"Well, then, Kit," continued Lady Haslemere, "we have not yet got much to go on. You, Tom, Jack, and I are the only four people who could really have seen: Jack and I because we were sitting directly opposite Mr. Alington, you and Tom because you were sitting one on each side of him. And of us four, you alone really think that this—this unfortunate moral collapse, I think you called it, happened. And Jack is so sharp. I don't at all agree that he never sees anything; there is nothing, rather, that he does not see. I attach as much weight to his seeing nothing as to anybody else seeing anything. You and I see things very quick, you know, dear," she added with unusual candour.

"Perhaps Jack was lighting a cigarette or something," said Kit. "Indeed, now I come to think of it, I believe he was."

"Jack can see through cigarette smoke as well as most people," remarked Alice. "But on the whole I agree with you, Kit; we cannot leave it as it is. I believe the recognised thing to do is to get him to play again and watch him."

"I believe so," said Kit, with studied unconcern.

Here she made a mistake; the unconcern was a little overdone, and it caused Lady Haslemere to look up quickly. At that moment it occurred to her for the first time that Kit was not being quite ingenuous.

"But I don't like doing that sort of thing," she went on, throwing out a feeler.

"But what else are we to do?" asked Kit, who since breakfast had evolved from her inner consciousness several admirable platitudes. "It is really not fair to Alington himself to leave it like this; to have lurking in one's mind—one can't help it—a suspicion against the man which may be quite erroneous. On the other hand, supposing it is not erroneous, supposing he did cheat, it is not fair on other people that he should be allowed to go on playing. He either did cheat or else he did not."

There was no gainsaying the common-sense of this, and Lady Haslemere was silent a moment.

"Tell Jack," she suggested at length, after racking her brains for something rather awkward to say.

As a rule she and Kit were excellent friends, and treated each other with immense frankness; but Lady Haslemere this morning had a very distinct impression that Kit was keeping something back, which annoyed her. Doubtless it was something quite trivial and unimportant, but she herself did not relish being kept in the dark about anything by anybody. But Kit replied immediately.

"I don't see why we should tell anybody, Alice," she said; "and poor dear Jack would pull his moustache off in his perplexity, if he were to know," she added, with a fine touch of local colour. "In any case, the last thing we want is a scandal, for it never looks well to see in the papers that the 'Marchioness of Conybeare, while entertaining a large baccarat party last night, detected one of her guests cheating. Her ladyship now lies in a precarious state.' You know the sort of thing. Then follow the names of the guests. I hate the public press!" she observed with dignity.

"Yes; it is like X rays," observed Lady Haslemere; "and enables the curious public to see one's bones. And however charming one may be, one's bones are not fit for public inspection. Also the papers would put the name of one of the guests with dashes for vowels, and the excited reader would draw his conclusions. Really, the upper class is terribly ill-used. It is the whipping-boy

of the nation. Supposing Smith and Jones had a baccarat-party, and Smith cheated, no one would care, not even Robinson."

Kit laughed.

"That is just why I don't want to tell anybody," she said. "If three people are in a secret, the chances of it getting out are enormously greater than if only two are. Not that anyone tells it exactly; but the atmosphere gets impregnated with it. You know what happened before. One has to keep the windows open, so to speak, and let in plenty of fresh air, politics, and so on. Other people breathe the secret."

"We can't tackle the man alone," said Alice.

"Why not? A man always hates a scene, because a man is never any good at a scene; and, personally, I rather like them. I am at my best in a scene, dear; I really am ripping."

Again Lady Haslemere had a quite distinct sensation that Kit was keeping something back. She seemed to wish to prove her case against Alington, yet she did not want anybody else to know. It was puzzling why she desired a private handle against the man. Perhaps—Lady Haslemere thought she had an inkling of the truth, and decided to take a shot at it.

"Of course it would be awkward for Jack," she observed negligently, "to be connected in business with this man, if it became known that he knew that Alington had cheated at baccarat."

Kit was off her guard.

"That is just what he feels—what I feel," she said.

She made this barefaced correction with the most silken coolness; she neither hurried nor hesitated, but Lady Haslemere burst out laughing.

"My dear Kit!" she said.

Kit sat silent a moment, and then perfectly naturally she laughed too.

"Oh, Alice," she said, "how sharp you are! Really, dear, if I had been a man and had married you, we should have been King and Queen of England before you could say 'knife.' Indeed, it was very quick of you, because I didn't correct myself at all badly. I was thinking I had carried my point, and so I got careless. Now I'll apologize, dear, and I promise never to try to take you in again, partly because it's no use, and partly because you owe me one. Jack does know, and he, at my request, left me to deal with it as if he didn't. It would be very awkward for him if he knew, so to speak, officially. At present, you see, he has only his suspicions. He could not be certain any more than you or I. As you so

sensibly said, dear, we have only suspicions. But now, Alice, let us leave Jack out of it. Don't let him know that you know that he knows. Dear me, how complicated! You see, he would have to break with Alington if he knew."

Lady Haslemere laughed.

"I suppose middle-class people would think us wicked?" she observed.

"Probably; and it would be so middle-class of them," said Kit. "That is the convenient thing about the middle class; they are never anything else. Now, there is no counting on the upper and lower class; at one time we both belong to the criminal class, at another we are both honest labourers. But the middle class preserves a perpetual monopoly of being shocked and thinking us wicked. And then it puts us in pillories and throws dirt. Such fun it must be, too, because it thinks we mind. So don't let us have a scandal."

Lady Haslemere pursed her pretty mouth up, and blew an excellent smoke-ring. She was a good-humoured woman, and her detection of Kit took the sting out of the other's attempted deception. She was quite pleased with herself.

"Very well, I won't tell him," she said.

"That's a dear!" said Kit cordially; "and you must see that it would do no good to tell anybody else. Jack would have to break with him if it got about, and when a reduced marquis is really wanting to earn his livelihood it is cruel to discourage him. So let's get Alington to play again, and watch him, you and I, like two cats. Then if we see him cheat again, we'll ask him to lunch and tell him so, and make him sign a paper, and stamp it and seal it and swear it, to say he'll never play again, amen."

Lady Haslemere rose.

"The two conspirators swear silence, then," she said. "But how awkward it will be, Kit, if anyone else notices it on this second occasion!"

"Bluff it out!" said Kit. "You and I will deny seeing anything at all, and say the thing is absurd. Then we'll tell this Alington that we know all about it, but that unless he misbehaves or plays again the incident will be clo-o-o-sed!"

"I should be sorry to trust my money to that man," said Alice.

"Oh, there you make a mistake," said Kit. "You are cautious in the wrong place, and I shouldn't wonder if you joined us Carmelites before long. For some reason he thinks that Conybeare's name is worth having on his 'front page,' as he calls it, and I am convinced he will give him his money's worth. He may even give him more, especially as Jack hasn't got any. He thinks Jack is very sharp, and he is quite right. You are very sharp, too, Alice, and so am I.

How pleasant for us all, and how right we are to be friends! Dear me! if you, Jack, and I were enemies, we should soon make London too hot to hold any of us. As it is, the temperature is perfectly charming."

"And is this bounder going to make you and Jack very rich?" asked Lady Haslemere.

"The bounder is going to do his best," laughed Kit; "at least, Jack thinks so. But it would need a very persevering sort of bounder to make us rich for long together. Money is so restless; it is always flying about, and it so seldom flies in my direction."

"It has caught the habit from the world, perhaps," said Alice.

"I dare say. Certainly we are always flying about, and it is so tiresome having to pay ready money at booking-offices. Jack quite forgot the other day when we were going to Sandown, and he told the booking-office man to put it down to him, which he barbarously refused to do."

"How unreasonable, dear!"

"Wasn't it? I'd give a lot to be able to run up a bill with railway companies. Dear me, it's after three! I must fly. There's a bazaar for the prevention of something or the propagation of something at Knightsbridge, and I am going to support Princess Frederick, who is going to open it, and eat a large tea. How they eat, those people! We are always propagating or preventing, and one can't cancel them against each other, because one wants to propagate exactly those things one wants not to prevent."

"What are you going to propagate to-day?"

"I forget. I believe it is the anti-propagation of prevention in general. Do you go to the Hungarian ball to-night? Yes? We shall meet then. *Au revoir!*"

"You are so full of good works, Kit," said Lady Haslemere, with no touch of regret in her tone.

Kit laughed loudly.

"Yes, isn't it sweet of me?" she said. "Really, bazaars are an excellent policy, as good as honesty. And they tell so much more. If you have been to a bazaar it is put in the papers, whereas they don't put it in the papers if you have been honest. I often have. Bazaars are soon over, too, and you feel afterwards as if you'd earned your ball, just as you feel you've earned your dinner after bicycling."

Kit rustled pleasantly downstairs, leaving Alice in the card-room where they had talked. That lady had as keen a scent for money as Kit herself, and

evidently if Kit denied herself the pleasure of causing a scandal over this cheating at baccarat (a piquant subject), she must have a strong reason for doing so. She wanted, so Lady Haslemere reasoned, to have Alington under her very private thumb, not, so she concluded, to get anything definite out of him, for blackmail was not in Kit's line, but as a precautionary measure. She followed her train of thought with admirable lucidity, and came to the very sensible conclusion that the interest that the Conybeares had in Alington was large. Indeed, taking into consideration the utter want of cash in the Conybeare establishment, it must be immense; for neither of them would have considered anything less than a fair settled income or a very large sum of money worth trying for. This being the case, she wished to have a hand in it, too.

Tom, she knew, had been approached by Mr. Alington and Jack on the subject of his becoming a director, and she determined to persuade him to do so. At present he had not decided. Anyhow, to win money out of mines was fully as respectable as to lose it at cards, and much more profitable. Besides, the daily papers might become interesting if it was a personal matter whether Bonanzas were up or Rands down. Tom had a large interest as it was in Robinsons—whatever they were, and they sounded vulgar but rich—and she had occasionally read the reports of the money market from his financial paper, as an idle person may spell out words in some unknown language. The "ursine operators," "bulls," "flatness," "tightness," "realizations"—how interesting all these terms would become if they applied to one's own money! She had often noticed that the political outlook affected the money market, and during the Fashoda time Tom had been like a bear with a sore head. To knowsomething about politics, to have, as she had, a Conservative leader ready to whisper to her things that were not officially supposed to be whispered, would evidently be an advantage if you had an interest in prices. And the demon of speculation made his introductory bow to her.

It is difficult for those who dwell on the level lands of sanity to understand the peaks and valleys of mania. To fully estimate the intolerable depression which ensues on the conviction that you have a glass leg, or the secret majesty which accompanies the belief that one is Charles I., is impossible to anyone who does not know the heights and depths to which such creeds conduct the holder. But the mania for speculation—as surely a madness as either of these—is easier of comprehension. Only common-sense of the crudest kind is required; if it is supposed that your country is on the verge of war, and you happen to know for certain that reassuring events will be made public to-morrow, it is a corollary to invest all you can lay hands on in the sunken consols in the certainty of a rise to-morrow. This is as simple as A B C, and your gains are only limited by the amount that you can invest. A step further and you have before you the enchanting plan of not paying for what you buy at all. Buy

merely. Consols (of this you must be sure) will rise before next settling-day, and before next settling-day sell. And thus the secret of not taking up shares is yours.

But consols are a slow gamble. They may conceivably rise two points in a day. Instead of your hundred pounds you will have a hundred and two (minus brokerage), an inglorious spoil for so many shining sovereigns to lead home. But for the sake of those who desire to experience this fascinating form of excitement in less staid a manner there are other means supplied, and the chiefest and choicest is mines. A single mining share which, judiciously bought, cost a sterling sovereign may under advantageous circumstances be worth three or four in a week or two. How much more stirring an adventure! When we estimate this in hundreds and thousands, the prospect will be found to dazzle comparatively sober eyes.

Now, of the people concerned at present in this story, no less than five, as Kit drove to her bazaar, were pondering these simple things. Alington was always pondering them and acting on them; Jack had been pondering them for a full week, Kit for the same period, and Tom Abbotsworthy was on the point of consenting to become a director. And Lady Haslemere, thinking over her interview with Kit, said to herself, with her admirable common-sense, that if there was a cake going, she might as well have a slice. She had immense confidence in the power of both Kit and Jack to take care of themselves, and knew well that neither would have stirred a finger for Mr. Alington, if they had not quite clearly considered it to be worth their while. And Kit was stirring all her fingers; she was taking Alington about as constantly as she took her pocket-handkerchief; she took him not merely to big parties and large Grundy dinners, but to the intimate gatherings of the brightest and best. For she was a good wife to Jack, and she at any rate believed that there was a cake going.

CHAPTER V

TOBY

Lord Evelyn Ronald Anstruther D'Eyncourt Massingbird was not usually known as all or any of this, but as Toby. It would have been a difficult matter, requiring a faith of the most preposterous sort, to have stood in front of him and seriously said, "I believe you to be Lord Evelyn Ronald Anstruther D'Eyncourt Massingbird," and the results of so doing might have been quite disconcerting. But having been told he was Toby, it would have been impossible to forget or to doubt it. The most vivid imagination could not

conceive a more obvious Toby; the identity might almost have been guessed by a total stranger or an intelligent foreigner. He was about twenty-four years old (the usual age of Tobys), and he had a pleasantly ugly face, with a snub nose, slightly freckled. Blue eyes, in no way beautiful, but very white as to the white and blue as to the blue, looked honestly out from under a typically unintellectual forehead, above which was a shock head of sandy hair, which stood up like a terrier's coat or a doormat, and on which no brush yet invented had been known to exert a flattening tendency. He was about five foot ten in height, and broad for that. His hat had a tendency to tilt towards the back of his head, and he had big, firm hands, callous on their insides with the constant use of weapons made for the violent propulsion of balls. He always looked comfortable in his clothes, and whether he was adorning the streets of London, immaculately dressed and hot and large, or trudging through heather in homespun, he was never anything but Toby.

A further incredible fact about him, in addition to his impossible baptismal name, was that he was Jack Conybeare's younger brother, and Kit's brother-in-law. Nature, that exquisite humorist who turns so many dissimilar little figures out of the same moulds, had never shown herself a more imaginative artist than when she ordained that Jack and Toby should have the same father and mother. The more you considered their relationship, the stranger that relationship appeared. Jack, slim, aquiline, dark, with his fine, taper-fingered hands and the unmistakable marks of breeding in face and form, was sufficiently remote to all appearance from Toby—fair, snub-nosed, squat, with his big gloves and his big boots, and his chair-filling build; but in character they were, considered as brothers, perfectly irreconcilable. The elder had what we may call a spider-mind. It wove a thread invisible almost to the eye, but strong enough to bear the weight of what it was meant to bear. Obvious issues, the natural consequences of things, Jack passed by in the manner of an express rushing through a wayside station, and before Toby, to continue the metaphor, had drawn up, flushed and panting, at the platform, and read the name on the station board, Jack would be a gray streamer of smoke on the horizon. But Toby's grasp of the obvious was as sure as Jack's keen appreciation of subtleties, and though he made no dragon-fly dartings through the air, nor vanished unaware on horizon points, he went very steadily along, right in the middle of the road, and was never in any danger of falling into obvious ditches, or colliding with anyone who did not unquestionably get in his way, or where he might be expected to go.

Toby was a person who got continually slapped on the back—a lovable habit, but one which no amount of diplomacy or thread-spinning will produce. To slap Jack on the back, for instance, must always, from his earliest years, have been an impossibility. This was lucky, for he would have resented it. That

nobody ever quarrelled with either of them appears at first sight a point in common; in reality it illustrates their dissimilarity. It was dangerous to quarrel with Jack; it was blankly impossible to quarrel with Toby. You dare not try it with the one; it was useless to try it with the other.

At the present moment his sister-in-law was trying her utmost to do so, and failing pitiably. Kit was not accustomed to fail or to be pitiable, and it irritated her.

"You have no sense, Toby," she was saying. "You cannot see, or you will not, where your interest lies—yes, and your duty, too."

Now, when Kit talked about duty Toby always smiled. When he smiled his eyes wrinkled up till they closed, and he showed a row of strong, clean, useful teeth. Strength, cleanliness, and utility, in fact, were his most salient features.

Kit leaned back in her chair, waiting for his answer, for Toby got confused unless you gave him time. They were sitting in the tented balcony of the Hungarian Embassy, and from within came the rhythm of dance music and a delicious murmur of voices. It was the evening of the day of the bazaar, and Kit felt that she had earned her ball. The night was hot, and as she attempted the hopeless task of quarrelling with Toby she fanned herself, partly, no doubt, for the sake of the current of air, but to a psychologist, judging by her face, not without the intention of fanning the embers of her wrath. She had sat out this dance with him on purpose, and she was beginning to think that she was wasting her time.

Toby's smile broadened.

"When did you last do your duty, Kit?" he asked.

"My duty?" said Kit sharply. "We are talking about yours."

"And my duty is——"

"Not to go to that vulgar, stupid music-hall to-morrow night with that loutish friend of yours from Oxford, but to dine with us, and meet Miss Murchison. You seem to forget that Jack is your elder brother."

"My duty towards Jack——" began Toby irreverently.

"Don't be profane. You are Jack's only brother, and I tell you plainly that it is no fun being Lord Conybeare unless you have something to be Lord Conybeare with. Putting money into the estate," said Kit rather unwisely, "is like throwing it down a well."

Toby became thoughtful, and his eyes opened again. His mind worked slowly, but it soon occurred to him that he had never heard that his brother was famed

for putting money into the estate.

"And taking money out of the estate is like taking it out of a well," he remarked at length, with an air of a person who is sure of his facts, but does not mean to draw inferences of any kind whatever.

Kit stared at him a moment. It had happened once or twice before that she had suspected Toby of dark sayings, and this sounded remarkably like another of them. He was so sensible that sometimes he was not at all stupid. She made a mental note of how admirable a thing is a perfectly impenetrable manner if you wish to make an innuendo; there was nothing so telling.

"Well?" she said at length.

Toby's face expressed nothing whatever. He took off a large eight and lit a cigarette.

"That's all," he said—"nothing more."

Kit decided to pass on.

"It's all very well for you now," she said, "for you have six or seven hundred a year, and you happen to like nothing so much as hitting round balls with pieces of wood and iron. It is an inexpensive taste, and you are lucky to find it amusing. In your position at present you have no calls upon you and no barrack of a house to keep up. But when you are Lord Conybeare you will find how different it is. Besides, you must marry some time, and when you marry you must marry money. Old bachelors are more absurd, if possible, than old spinsters. And goodness knows how ridiculous they are!"

"My sister-in-law is a mercenary woman," remarked Toby. "And aren't we getting on rather quick?"

"Quick!" screamed Kit. "I am painfully trying to drag you a few steps forward, and you say we are getting on quick! Now, Toby, you are twenty-five——"

"Four," said Toby.

"Oh, Toby, you are enough to madden Job! What difference does that make? I choose that you should be twenty-five! All your people marry early; they always did; and it is a most proper thing for a young man to do. Really, young men are getting quite impossible. They won't dance—you aren't dancing; they won't marry—you aren't married; they spend all their lazy, selfish lives in amusing themselves and—and ruining other people."

"It's better to amuse yourself than not to amuse yourself," said Toby. This, as he knew, was a safe draw. If Kit was at home, out she came.

"That is your view. Thank goodness there are other views," said Kit, with

extraordinary energy. "Why, for instance, do you suppose that I went down to the wilds of Kensington and opened a bazaar, as I did this afternoon?"

"I can't think," said Toby. "Wasn't it awfully slow?"

He began to grin again.

"Slow? Yes, of course it was slow; but it is one's duty not to mind what is slow," continued Kit rapidly, pumping up moral sentiments with surprising fluency. "Why do you suppose Jack goes to the House whenever there is a Church Bill on? Why do I come and argue with you and quarrel with you like this?"

Toby opened his blue eyes as wide as Kit's bazaar.

"Are you quarrelling with me?" he asked. "I didn't know. Try not, Kit."

Kit laughed.

"Dear Toby, don't be so odious and tiresome," she said. "Do be nice. You can behave so nicely if you like, and the Princess was saying at the bazaar this afternoon what a dear boy you were."

"So the bazaar wasn't so slow," thought Toby, who knew that Kit had a decided weakness, quite unaccountable, for Princesses. But he was wise enough to say nothing.

"And I've taken all the trouble to ask Miss Murchison to dinner just because of you," continued Kit quickly, seeing her partner out of the corner of her eye careering wildly about in search of her. "She's perfectly charming, Toby, and very pretty, and you always like talking to pretty girls, and quite right, too; and the millions—oh, the millions! You have no one to look after you but Jack and me, and Jack is a City man now; and what will happen to the Conybeares if you don't marry money I don't know. You want money; she wants a Marquis. There it is!"

"Did you ask her?" said Toby parenthetically.

"No, darling, I did not," said Kit, with pardonable asperity. "I left that to you."

Toby sighed.

"You go so quick, Kit," he said. "You marry me to a person I've never yet seen."

Kit drew on her gloves; the partner was imminent.

"Come and see her, Toby—come and see her. That is all I ask. Oh, here you are, Ted; I've been waiting for you for ages. I thought you had thrown me over. Good-bye, Toby; to-morrow at half-past eight, and I'll promise to order iced

asparagus, which I know you like."

The two went off, leaving Toby alone. Conversation of this kind with Kit always reduced him to a state of breathless mental collapse. She caught him up, so to speak, and whirled him along through endless seas of prospective alliances, to drop him at the end, a mere lifeless lump, in unknown localities, with the prospect of iced asparagus as a restorative. This question of his marriage was not a new one between them. Many times before Kit had snatched him up like this, and plumped him down in front of some extraordinarily eligible maiden. But either he or the extraordinarily eligible maiden, or both, had walked away as soon as Kit's eye was turned, and made themselves disconcerting to her schemes. But to-night Kit had shown an unusual vigour and directness. Selfish and unscrupulous as she was, she had, like everybody else, a soft spot for Toby, and she could honestly think of nothing more conducive to his highest advantage than to procure him a wealthy wife. Wealth was the *sine quâ non*—no other need apply; but in Miss Murchison she thought she had found very much more. The girl was a beauty—a real beauty; and though she was not of the type that appealed personally to Kit, she might easily appeal immensely to Toby. She had only come out that season, and Kit had met her but once or twice before; but a very much duller eye than Kit's could have seen that in all probability she would not be on view in the eligible department very long. She was American by origin, but had been brought up entirely in England; and her countrymen observed with pain, and the men of her adopted country with that patronizing approval over which our Continental neighbours find it so hard to keep calm, that no one would have guessed her nationality. Of her father little was known, but that little was good, for he was understood to be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, having made a colossal pile in some porky or oily manner, and to have had the good taste not to beget any other children. She and her mother had been at the bazaar that afternoon, where they had run across the pervasive Kit, who suddenly saw in her impulsive way that here at last was the very girl for Toby, wondered at her blindness in not seeing it before, and engaged them to dine next evening.

Now, Mrs. Murchison had long sighed and pined for an invitation from Kit, whom she considered to be the topmost flower of the smartest plant in the pleasant garden of society. At last her wish was fulfilled. Princes had drunk her champagne, and danced or sat out to her fiddles, and made themselves agreeable under her palms; but a small and particular set in society in which Kit most intimately moved had hitherto had nothing to say to her, and she accepted the invitation with effusion, though it meant an excuse or a subterfuge to a Countess. But Mrs. Murchison had picked up the line of London life with astonishing swiftness and great perspicuity. Her object was to

get herself and her daughter, not into the cleverest or the most amusing, or, as she styled it, the "ducalest set," in London, but into what she and others, for want of a better name, called "the smart set," and she had observed, at first with surprise and pain, but unerringly, that rank counted for nothing there. She could not have told you, nor perhaps could they, what did count there, but she knew very well it was not rank.

"Why, we might play kiss-in-the-ring with the Queen and Royal Family," she had observed once to her daughter, "but we should be no nearer for that."

A year ago she would have hoarded a Countess as being a step in the ladder she proposed to get to the top of, but now she knew that no Countess, *quâ* Countess, mattered a straw in the attainment of the goal for which she aimed; and this particular one, whom she had already thrown over for Kit, might as well have been a milkmaid in Connecticut for all the assistance she could give her in her quest. The smart set was the smart set, here was her creed; Americans had got there before, and Americans, she fully determined, should get there again. What she expected to find there she did not know; whether it would be at all worth the pains she did not care, and she would not be at all disappointed if it was exactly like everything else, or perhaps duller. It would be sufficient for her to be there.

In many ways Mrs. Murchison was a remarkable woman, and she had a kind and excellent heart. She had been the very pretty daughter of a man who had made a fair fortune in commerce, and had let his children grow up and get educated as God pleased; but from very early years this daughter of his had made up her mind that she was not going to revolve for the remainder of her life in commercial circles, and she had divided her money fairly evenly between adornments for the body and improvements for the mind. Thus she had acquired a great fluency in French, and an accent as remarkable as it was incorrect. In the same way she had read a great deal of history, and the classical literature of both English tongues; and though she seldom managed to get her names quite right, both she and those who heard her were easily able to guess to whom she referred. Thus, when she alluded to Richard Dent de Lion, though the name sounded like a yellow flower with a milky stem, there could be no reasonable doubt that she was speaking of the Crusader; or when she told you that her husband was as rich as Crœsum, those who had ever heard of Crœsus could not fail to see that they were hearing of him now. She was fond of allusions, and her conversation was as full of plums as a cake; but as she held the sensible and irrefutable view that conversation is but a means of making oneself understood, she was quite satisfied to do so.

Mrs. Murchison was now a big handsome woman of about forty, fresh, of high colour, and beautifully dressed. In spite of her manifest absurdities and the

surprising nature of her conversation, she was eminently likeable, and to her friends lovable. There was no mistaking the honesty and kindliness of her nature; she was a good woman, and in ways a wise one. Lily, her daughter, who found herself on the verge of hysterics twenty times a day at her inimitable remarks, had the intensest affection for her mother, blindly reciprocated; and the daughter, to whom the wild chase after the smart set seemed perfectly incomprehensible, was willing that all the world should think her heart was in it sooner than that her mother should suspect it was not. Mrs. Murchison herself had begun to forget her French and history a little, for she was a mere slave to this new accomplishment, social success, and found it demanded all her time and attention. She worked at it from morning till night, and from night to morning she dreamed about it. Only the night before she had thought with extraordinary vividness in her sleep that her maid had come to her bedside with a note containing a royal command to sing duets with the Queen quite quietly at 11.30 that morning, and she had awoke with a pang of rapturous anxiety to find the vision unsubstantial, and that she need not get up to practise her scales. She made no secret of her ambitions, but rather paraded them, and told her dream to the Princess Frederick at the bazaar with huge *naïveté*. And to see Lily married into the smart set would have caused her to say her Nunc Dimittis with a sober and grateful heart.

But the smart set was a terribly baffling Will-o'-the-Wisp kind of affair, or so it had hitherto been to her. A married daughter, an unmarried daughter even, so she observed, might be steeped in the smart set, while the mother was, figuratively speaking, in Bloomsbury. You might robe yourself from head to foot in Balas rubies, you might be a double Duchess, you might dance a cancan down Piccadilly, you might be the most amiable of God's creatures, the wittiest, the most corrupt, or the most correct of the daughters of Eve, and yet never get near it; but here was Mrs. Lancelot Gordon, who never did anything, was not even an Honourable, dressed rather worse than Mrs. Murchison's own maid, and yet was a pivot and centre of that charmed circle. Mrs. Murchison racked her brain over the problem, and came to the conclusion that no accomplishment could get you into it, no vice or virtue keep you out. That was a comfort, for she had no vices. But to-day Kit had asked her to dinner; the mystic doors perhaps were beginning to turn on their hinges, and her discarded Countess might continue to revolve on her unillumined orbit in decent and dull obscurity with her belted Earl.

CHAPTER VI

TOBY'S PARTNER

Toby finished his cigarette when Kit left him, and threw the end over the balcony into the street. It went flirting through the air like a small firework, and he saw it pitch on the shoulder of an immense policeman below, who looked angrily round. And so it was that the discreet Toby withdrew softly into the ballroom.

It was only a little after one, and the dancing was at its height. Everyone who intended to come had done so, and no one yet had thought of going away. From the band in the gallery came the enchanting lilt of the dance music, with its graceful stress and abatement, making it impossible not to dance. The light-hearted intoxication of rhythmic movement entering into the souls of many women whom one would naturally have supposed to have left their dancing days behind them, for reasons over which they had no control, had produced the same sort of effect in them as a warm November day does in the bluebottles who have outlived the summer, and they were deluding themselves into thinking that "June was not over, though past her full." The ballroom was ideally occupied; it was peopled enough, but not overcrowded, and like a whisper underneath the shouting band you could hear the sibilant rustle of skirts, and the "sip-sip" of shoes over the well-polished floor.

Kit and her partner were as well matched and graceful a pair as could be found in London—too well matched, the world said; but the world is never happy unless it is saying something of the sort, and the wiser there, among whom even her bitterest friends put Kit, are accustomed to discount all that is said. To repeat fresh gossip without actually believing or disbelieving it, and to hear it in the same light-hearted spirit makes the world as fresh as a daily paper to someone just arrived from long sea, and Kit's interest in what was said about her was of the most breezily superficial sort. She never intended that it should be ever so distantly possible that she should compromise herself, for she recognised with humble thankfulness how hard she was to compromise. She had done many risky things in her life, and there was safety in their very numbers. People would only say that her conduct with So-and-so had been much riskier, and yet it had come to nothing. Probably, then, this intimacy with Lord Comber was equally innocent. Other people had merely looked over hedges and been accused of stealing horses, while Kit, so to speak, had been found before now with the stolen halter in her hand; and yet her excellent grace in giving it up at the proper moment to the proper owner had got her out of what might have been a scrape to a less accomplished adventurer.

And to-night nobody talked more disagreeably than they had talked scores of times before. Up to a certain point repetition is the soul of wit; at least, the point of a joke grows by dwelling on it, but the repetition in excess is wearisome, and to-night people scarcely said more than what a beautiful

couple they were.

About this there could scarcely be two opinions. Kit was very tall and slenderly made, and there was a boyish spring and grace about her dancing which gave a peculiar spontaneousness to this pretty performance. Ted Comber, a fresh-faced, handsome youth, had no extra weight on his hands; the two moved with an exquisite unanimity of motion. Amiable indiscretions and a course of life not indicated in the educational curriculum had led the authorities both at Eton and Christ Church to make their parting with him take place sooner than he had himself intended, but, as Kit said in her best manner, "He was only a boy then." He was in years not much more than a boy now; in appearance, especially by artificial light, he was a boy still, and the two numbered scarcely more than fifty years between them.

But balls are not given in order to furnish a hunting-ground for the novelist and reformer, and to-night there were few such present. Indeed, anyone must have had a soul of putty not to have laid criticism aside; not to have forgotten all that had been said before, and all that might be said afterwards, in the enchanting moment. This dance had been on the board some ten minutes when Toby entered; people with winds and what is known, by an elegant periphrasis, as a superfluity of adipose tissue had paused; and for a few minutes there were not more than half a dozen couples on the floor. Kit, secure in the knowledge that no one present except herself and Jack had been to that City dinner a fortnight before, had put on again the same orange chiffon creation as she had worn that night, and she blazed out against the man's dark clothes; she was a flame in his encircling arm. The room was nearly square, and they danced not in straight lines up, across and down, but in one big circle, coming close to the walls only at four points in the middle of the sides of the room; like some beautiful twin star they moved round a centre, revolving also on a private axis of their own. Indeed, the sight of them whirling fast and smoothly in perfect time to the delicious rhythm was so pretty that no one thought of alluding to their private axis at all. Even the Hungarian Ambassador, as sprightly a young man of eighty or thereabouts as you could wish to see, and still accustomed to lead the cotillion, recognised the superiority of the performance. "Decidedly all the rest of us cut a poor figure when those two are dancing," he said with unwonted modesty to Lady Haslemere.

But in a few minutes the room grew crowded again. Recovered couples sprang up like mushrooms on the floor, and the pace slowed. Lord Comber steered as no one else could steer, but checks infinitesimal but infinite could not but occur. It would have been good enough had it not just now been better.

"We'll wait a moment, Ted," said Kit; "perhaps at the end it will be emptier again."

She stopped opposite one of the doors.

"Shall we go on to the balcony?" he asked. "There will be no one there."

"Yes. Oh, there is Mrs. Murchison! Take me to her. I'll follow you in a moment."

Ted swore gently under his breath.

"Oh, leave the Crœsum alone," he said. "Do come now, Kit. This is my last dance with you this evening."

But Kit dropped his arm.

"Fetch Toby," she said under her voice to Lord Comber; "fetch, you understand, and at once. He is over there." Then, without a pause, "So we meet again," she said to Mrs. Murchison. "You were right and I was wrong, for I said, do you remember, that the one way not to meet a person was to go to the same dance. And did you get all those great purchases of yours home safely? You were quite too charitable! What will you do with a hundred and forty fire-screens?—or was it a hundred and forty-one? Miss Murchison, what magnificent pearls you have! They are too beautiful! Now, if I wore pearls like yours, people would say they were not real, and they would be perfectly right."

Miss Murchison was what Kit would have called at first sight an uncomfortable sort of a girl, very pretty, beautiful indeed, but uncomfortable. What she should have said to Kit's praise of her pearls Kit could not have told you, but having made yourself agreeable to anyone, it is that person's business to reply in the same strain. Else, what happens to social and festive meetings? But Miss Murchison looked neither gratified nor embarrassed. Either would have shown a proper spirit.

"They are good," she said shortly.

Kit kept a weather eye open for Toby. She could see him near, and yet far, for the room was full, being reluctantly "fetched" by Lord Comber, who appeared to be expostulating with him. There were still some seconds to elapse before he could get to them, but Kit had determined to introduce him then and there to Miss Murchison. Perhaps her beauty would be more effective than her own arguments.

"It is only quite a little dinner to-morrow," she said to Mrs. Murchison, in order to fill up the time naturally. "You will have to take a sort of pot-luck with us. A kind of 'no fish-knife' dinner."

Better and better. This was a promising beginning to the intimacy Mrs. Murchison craved. It was nothing, she said to herself, to be asked to a big

dinner; the pot-luck dinner was far more to her taste.

"Well, I think that's perfectly charming of you, Lady Conybeare," she said. "If there's one thing I am *folle* about, it's those quiet little dinners, and one gets so little of them. Be it ever so humble, there's nothing like dining quietly with your friends."

Kit's face dimpled with merriment.

"That's so sweet of you," she said. "Oh, here's Toby. Toby, let me introduce you to Mrs. Murchison. Oh, what's your name?—I always forget. It begins with Evelyn. Anyhow, he is Conybeare's brother, you know, Mrs. Murchison."

Mrs. Murchison did not know, but she was very happy to do so. Also the informality was charming. But her happiness had a momentary eclipse. She knew that a man was introduced to a woman, and not the other way about, but might not some other rule hold when the case was between a plain miss and the brother of a Marquis? English precedence seemed to her a fearful and wonderful thing. But Kit relieved her of her difficulty.

"And Miss Murchison, Toby," she said. "Charmed to have seen you again. Till 8.30 to-morrow;" and she smiled and retreated with Ted.

Blushing honours were raining thick on the enchanted lady. "One thing leads to another," she said to herself, and here was the brother of Lord Conybeare endorsing the happy meeting of this afternoon.

Then aloud:

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance," she said, for the phrase was ineradicable. She had searched in vain for a cisatlantic equivalent, but could not get hold of one. Like the snake in spring, she had cast off the slough of many of her transatlanticisms, but "very pleased" was deeply engrained, and appeared involuntarily and inevitably.

But Toby's inflammable eye had caught the *filia pulchrior*.

"My sister-in-law tells me you are dining with her to-morrow," he said genially. "That is delightful."

He paused a moment, and racked his brain for another suitable remark; but, finding none, he turned abruptly to Miss Murchison.

"May I have the pleasure?" he asked. "We shall just have time for a turn before this is over."

"Of course you may, Lord Evelyn," said her mother precipitately.

Miss Murchison paused for a moment without replying, and Toby, though

naturally modest, told himself that her mother's ready acceptance for her justified the pause.

"Delighted," she said.

Toby might be described as a good, useful dancer, but no more. People who persist in describing one thing in terms suitable to another speak of the poetry and the melody of motion, and the dancing Toby had no more poetry or melody in his motion than a motor car or a street piano. The tide of couples, as inexplicable in its ebb and flow as deep sea-currents, had gone down again, and they had a fairly free floor. But before they had made the circuit of the room twice Kit and Lord Comber reappeared, and Kit heaved a thankful sister-in-law's sigh.

"Toby is dancing with the Murchison girl," she said; "and she hardly ever dances. Now——"

And they glided off on to the floor.

"A design of yours?" asked Ted.

"Yes, all my own. *Ego fecit*, as Mrs. Murchison says. She has millions. If Jack were dead and I was a man, I should try to marry her myself. Simply millions, Ted. Don't you wish you had?"

"Certainly; but I am very content dancing with you. I prefer it."

"That is silly," said Kit. "No sane man really prefers dancing with—with anyone, to having millions."

"Why try the cynical *rôle*? Do you really believe that, Kit?"

"Yes, and I hate compliments. Compliments should always be insincere, and I'm sure you mean what you say. If they are sincere they are unnecessary. Oh, it's stopping. What a bore! Six bars more. Quicker—quicker!"

The coda gathered up the dreamy threads of the valse into a vivid ever-quickening pattern of sound, and came to an end with a great blare. The industrious and heated Toby wiped his forehead.

"That was delicious," he said. "Won't you have an ice or something, Miss Murchison? I say, it is sw—stewing hot, isn't it?"

Lily took his arm.

"Yes, do give me an ice," she said. "Who is that dancing with Lady Conybeare?"

Toby looked round.

"I don't see them," he said. "But I expect it's Ted Comber. Kit usually dances with him. They are supposed to be the best dancers in London. Oh yes, I see them. It is Comber."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, in the sort of way one knows fifty thousand people. We always say 'Hulloa' to each other, and then we've finished, don't you know."

"You don't like him, apparently."

"I particularly dislike him," said Toby, in a voice that was cheerful and had the real ring of sincerity.

"Why?"

"Don't know. He doesn't do any of the things he ought. He doesn't shoot, or ride, or play games. He stays at country houses, you see, and sits with the women in the drawing-room, or walks with them, and bicycles with them in the afternoon. Not my sort."

Lily glanced at his ugly, pleasant face.

"I quite agree with you," she said. "I hate men to sit on chairs and look beautiful. He was introduced to me just now, though I did not catch his name, and I felt he knew what my dress was made of, and how it was made, and what it cost."

"Oh, he knows all that sort of thing," said Toby. "You should hear him and Kit talking chiffon together. And you dislike that sort of inspection?"

"Intensely. But most women apparently don't."

"No: isn't it funny! So many women don't seem to know a man when they see him. Certainly Comber is very popular with them. But a man ought to be liked by men."

Miss Murchison smiled. Toby had got two ices and was sitting opposite her, devouring his in large mouthfuls, as if it had been porridge. She had been brought up in the country and the open air, among horses and dogs, and other nice wholesome things, and this mode of life in London, as she saw it, under her mother's marchings and manœuvres to storm the smart set, seemed to her at times to be little short of insane. If you were not putting on a dress, you were taking it off, and all this simply to sit on a chair in the Park, to say half a dozen words to half a dozen people, to lunch at one house, to dine at another, and dance at a third. All that was only incidental in life seemed to her to be turned into its business; everything was topsy-turvy. She understood well enough that if you lived in the midst of your best friends, it would be

delightful to see them there three times a day, in these pretty well-dressed settings, but to go to a house simply in order to have been there was inexplicable. Mrs. Murchison had given a ball only a few weeks before at her house in Grosvenor Square, about which even after the lapse of days people had scarcely ceased talking. Royalty had been there, and Mrs. Murchison, in the true republican spirit, had entertained them royally. Her cotillion presents had been really marvellous; there had been so many flowers that it was scarcely possible to breathe, and so many people that it was quite impossible to dance. But as success to Mrs. Murchison's and many other minds was measured by your crowd and your extravagance, she had been ecstatically satisfied, and had sent across to her husband several elegantly written accounts of the festivity clipped from society papers. The evening had been to her, as it were, a sort of signed certificate of her social standing. But to Lily the ball had been more nearly a nightmare than a certificate: neither she nor her mother knew by sight half the people who came, and certainly half the people who came did not know them by sight. The whole thing seemed to her vulgar, wickedly wasteful, and totally unenjoyable.

There are those, and her mother was one, who would cheerfully be asphyxiated in a sufficiently exalted crowd. To be found dead among a heap of Duchesses would be to her what to a soldier is death in the forefront of the battle. A mob of fashionable people had eaten and drunk at her expense, listened to her band and marvelled at her orchids. She had also to a high degree that excellent though slightly barbarous virtue which is called hospitality. She liked to feed people. But the human soul, as poets are unanimous in telling us, is ever aspiring upwards, and this point reached, Mrs. Murchison, as has been already stated, desired more. Her tastes became childlike again; she yearned for simple little dinners with the mystic few, those dinners which never even appeared in the papers, and were followed by no ball, perhaps not even by a "few people." Cold roast beef or bits of common bacon on skewers are sometimes served in the middle of banquets. Mrs. Murchison longed for her bits of bacon in suitable company. It was very nice to have the Prince asking after your dachshund's cough, but she had got past that.

These things passed vaguely through Miss Murchison's mind, as she and Toby ate their ices. He was like a whiff of fresh air, she thought, to one who had been breathing a close and vitiated atmosphere. He did not ask her where she had been last night, and where she had dined to-day, and who was in the Park in the morning. He seemed to be as little of the world which danced and capered in the next room, chattering volubly about itself, as she was herself. On that point she would like information.

"Do you like London?" she asked, at length, and then thought herself inane for

saying that. It sounded like one of the *banalités* she found so desperately stupid.

But Toby understood. He had just finished his ice, and with his spoon he made a comprehensive circle in the air. "This sort of thing, do you mean?" he asked. "All these fine people?"

"Yes, just that. All these fine people."

"It seems to me perfectly idiotic," he replied.

"Then why do you come?"

"Why? Oh, because there are a lot of people I really do like—real friends of mine, you understand, whom I see in this way. And they come for the same reason, I suppose."

Lily looked at him a moment out of her big dark eyes, and then nodded gravely.

"Yes, that makes all the difference," she said. "If you have a lot of friends here, there is a reason for coming. But——" and she stopped loyally.

Toby guessed what was on the end of her tongue, and with a certain instinct of delicacy changed the subject, or rather led it away from what he imagined was in her mind.

"I know what you mean," he said, "and everyone finds it a bore at times. One goes to a party hoping to see a particular person, and the particular person is not there. Really, I often wish I was never in London at all. But, you see, I am private secretary to my cousin Pangbourne, and while they are in office and the House is sitting I have to be in town. What would happen to the British Constitution if I wasn't, I don't dare to think."

Miss Murchison laughed.

"That must be interesting, though," she said. "I should love to be in the middle of the wheels. I notice in England that a sudden hush always comes over a room whenever a politician enters. Somebody describes the English as a race of shopkeepers. It is a very bad definition; they are much more a race of politicians. The shopkeepers come from America."

Toby shook his head.

"I wish I could notice a hush whenever I came into a room," he said. "I should feel as if I was making a mark. But I don't."

"But it is interesting, is it not?" asked Miss Murchison—"being secretary to a Minister, I mean."

Toby considered.

"Last week," he said, "I looked over the bills for the flowers in Hyde Park. They were immense, so I hope you approve of the flowers. I also checked the food of the ducks in St. James's Park, so I hope you do not think they are looking thin. Those ducks are the bane of my existence. Since then I have done nothing. My cousin comes into the secretaries' room every morning to see that we are working. He invariably finds us playing cricket with the fire-shovel. I am usually in."

"That also is interesting," said Miss Murchison. "I love games. Oh, there's my mother! I think she is looking for me."

"But I may have this dance?" asked Toby.

"I am sure she would allow me," said the girl; and as they both thought of her mother's feverish acceptance for her of the last, their eyes met.

"Let us go," said Toby gravely; and he gave her his arm back into the ballroom.

Miss Murchison, when she left half an hour later with her mother, was conscious of having enjoyed herself much more than she usually did at such parties. For the most part they seemed to her sad and strange forms of amusement. She danced with a certain number of young men, who admired her pearls or her profile. It is true that both were admirable, especially her profile. But to talk to them was like talking to order through a telephone; it seemed impossible to get beyond the *banalités* of the day. She was labelled, as she knew, as the heiress of the year; and it was as difficult to forget that as to forget that other people remembered it. No doubt when she got to know people more intimately it would be different; but these first weeks of débutancy could not, she thought, be considered amusing.

But Toby had been a most delightful change. Here was an ordinary human young man, who did not seem to be merely a weary automaton for going from one party to another. He was fairly stupid—an unutterable relief; for if there was one mode of conversation she detested, it was cheap epigram; and he was quite sensible and natural, a relief more unutterable.

Her mother drove home with her in a state of elation. The mystic innermost shrine was going to be unlocked at last.

"Lady Conybeare said that simply no one was coming to-morrow night," she said. "We shall be six or eight only. Lord Comber, I think, is coming, and Lord Evelyn. It will be quite an arcanum. She said she would wear only a tea-gown —I should say a tea-gown only. So *chic*. We will have a little tea-gown party before the end of the season, dear. You and Lord Evelyn quite hobnailed

together. Did you enjoy yourself, Lily?"

"Yes, very much."

"So glad, darling. I saw no pearls so good as yours. Wear them to-morrow, dear. Lady Conybeare said she adored pearls. 'Ah, Margerita!'" And Mrs. Murchison hummed a bar or two of Siebel's song in a variety of keys. "And the evening after we go to see 'Tristram and Isolde,'" she continued. "It is a gala night, and Jean de Risky plays Tristram. How lucky we were to get the box next the royal box! I hope it won't be very hot, for I hear that everybody stops to the end in 'Tristram.' There is a Leitmotif—or is it Liebstod?—at the end, which is quite marvellous, I am told. However, we can go late. I hope it will be in Italian. Italian is the only language for singing. I remember when I was a girl I used to sing 'La donna è nobile.' I forget who wrote it; those Italian names are so alike. And what did you talk to Lord Evelyn about, dear? Was he amusing? We might ask him to our box on Thursday to see 'Tristram.'"

"I don't think he cares about Wagner," said Lily; "indeed, he told me so."

"How very unfashionable! We all like Wagner now. Personally I think it is quite enchanting; but it always sends me fast asleep, though I enjoy it very much until. But there is a great sameness in the operas; they are like those novels I used to read by Mrs. Austen—'Sense and Sensibleness,' and all the rest of them about Bath and other watering-places. I thought them very tedious; but I was told one must read them. Or was it Sir George Eliot who wrote them? Dear me, how stupid of me! Sir George was there to-night, and I never once thought of telling him how much I enjoyed his charming novels!"

"George Eliot was a woman," remarked Lily, leaning back in her corner, tremulous with heroically-repressed amusement.

"You may be right, dear; but it isn't a common name for a woman. Of course, there's George Sand. But if you are right, how lucky I did not speak about his novels to Sir George! He would not have liked being mistaken for someone else. Some of those literary men are so sensitive."

"But, you see, he did not write any of those novels," said Lily, with a sudden little spasm of laughter.

"No, dear, that is just what I was saying. How you catch one up! My dearest, I am so glad you enjoyed yourself this evening. Sometimes I have thought you looked a little bored and tired. Really, London is charming! So much *jeu d'esprit* about it, is there not? And to-morrow we dine at Lady Conybeare's! How pleasant, and what a wonderful dress she had on this evening! She made me feel quite a dodo—I should say a dowdy."

Lily broke into a sudden peal of laughter, and her mother beamed good-

humouredly.

"Laughing again at your poor mother," she said, patting her hand. "You are always laughing, Lily; you are a perfect *fille de joie*. Dear me! I'm always saying the wrong word. Here we are, darling. Get out very carefully, because my dress is all over."

Lily stepped out into a perfect mob of powdered footmen who lined the steps of the Murchison mansion. Mrs. Murchison, when she took her house, gave what she called *bête noire* to a celebrated firm of London decorators (meaning, it is to be supposed, *carte blanche*) to make it as elegant and refined as money could. The result was an impression of extraordinary opulence; and the eminent firm of decorators, wise in their generation, had pleased Mrs. Murchison very well. Not the smallest part of her gratification was the immense sum she had to pay them. Money meant almost nothing to her, but it meant a good deal to other people; and to be able to say truthfully that one ceiling had cost a couple of thousand pounds was a solid cause of self-congratulation. Indeed, the contemplation of the cheque she had drawn pleased her nearly as much as what the cheque had accomplished.

She paused a moment in the hall, while one footman took off her cloak and handed it to another, and looked contentedly round on the stamped leather and the old oak, the Louis XIV. chairs, the Nankin ware, and the Persian rugs; and her mind went back for a second to the days of pitch-pine and horsehair, and in her excellent heart there rose a sudden thrill of thankfulness. Lily was already on the stairs, and her mother's eye followed her, and rested there so long that the third footman had closed the door, and stood to attention, waiting for her to move. And one hair of Lily's head was dearer to her than all the old oak and the opulence and the powdered footmen. She gave a heavy sigh, all mother.

"Put the lights out, William," she said, "or is it Thomas?"

CHAPTER VII

THE SOLITARY FINANCIER

Mr. Alington had not been present at the ball at the Hungarian Embassy, although Kit had taken the trouble to get him an invitation. By the evening mail had come a long report from his Australian manager, and as the report required considerable digestion, he, as always, put business before pleasure, especially since he did not dance, and devoted the evening to digesting it. It

was all a report should be, concise, clear, and full, and since he had hitherto known very little, technically speaking, about his new venture, it demanded long and solitary consideration. There was a very careful map sent with it, drawn to scale, with the reef where found marked in red, where conjectured in yellow.

West Australian mining at this time was but in its infancy. A few reports only had reached England about unexplored goldfields of extraordinary richness, and, as is incident to first reports, they had gained but slender credence. But Mr. Alington had only just come back from Queensland; he had seen gold-bearing quartz, he had made a few tentative experiments to prove the richness of the ore, and had subsequently bought a very large number of claims at a comparatively low cost. Some of these he fully expected would turn out to be worthless, or scarcely worth the working; others he soberly believed would be found to be very rich. And when he opened his manager's report on the night of the Hungarian ball, he had no more certain information about them.

The manager advised, consonantly with Alington's own desire, that a group of five mines should be started, which together embraced all his claims. In number one (see map) there was, as Alington would recollect, a very rich vein of gold, which had now been traced in bore-holes through numbers four and five. Numbers two and three were outliers from the direct line of this vein, but in both a good deal of outcrop gold might be profitably worked. All, so said the manager, were, as far as could be at present seen, well worth working, for the two on which the deeper vein did not lie had gold in smaller veins close to the surface, which could be got at with comparatively little cost. It was not yet known whether there was any deeper vein in them.

Then followed a good deal of technical advice. The main difficulty, as Mr. Alington would remember, was water, and they must be prepared for heavy expenses in this item. But otherwise the property could not be better. Of the specimens sent at random for examination, those from numbers one, four, and five were very rich, and the yield appeared to be not less than five ounces to the ton. This was very high, but such were the results. The reef from which they were taken was five feet thick. Then followed some discussion as to processes; there was certainly much to be said for cyanide, but he would not recommend corrosion. It was tediously long, and there was some talk of prohibiting women from being employed in it. Certainly the white lead produced by it would bring it under the head of dangerous trades. In numbers two and three the ore was very refractory, and it was curious to find a vein so difficult in the matter of gold extraction close by the vein of one, four, and five. Hitherto, in spite of repeated experiments, they had only been able to recover 20 per cent. of the gold it contained. But a new process was being tried in certain mines in the Rand—the Bülow, was it not?—perhaps Mr.

Alington would go into it and cable results. The worst of these chemical processes was that they were so expensive.

Mr. Alington looked more than ever like a butler of superior benevolence, as he sat at his table by a green-shaded reading-lamp, and made himself master of this excellent report. As he read, he inscribed from time to time neat little notes in pencil on the margin of the page, and from time to time jotted down some figures on his blotting-pad. His rooms, above a gunmaker's in St. James's Street—a temporary premise only—were admirably furnished for the wants of a business man of refined tastes and simple desires. A large revolving bookcase full of works of reference stood at his elbow, and a telephone was on the table before him. He was something of a connoisseur in pictures, and in his house on the Sussex Downs, to which he was extensively adding, he had a really fine collection of English masters. But the London fogs and corrosive smoke spelled death to pigments, and here in his modest quarters in London he had only prints. But these were truly admirable. Reynolds' Lady Crosby undulated over the fireplace; Lady Hamilton smiled irresistibly on him from under her crown of vine leaves if he looked at the opposite wall; by her sat Marie Antoinette in an old-gold frame of French work, and Mrs. Siddons was a first state with the coveted blotted edge.

But to-night Mr. Alington had no eye for these enchanting ladies; he sat long and studiously with the report in front of him, his broad, intelligent face alert with his work. From time to time he reached out a firm, plump hand to take a cigarette from a silver box which stood by his telephone, but often he sat with it unlit for ten minutes or so, absorbed in the page; or, again, he would put it down still only half smoked, as he made one of his little calculations, forget about it, and reach his hand out absently for another. In this way before midnight there were some half-dozen in his ash-tray scarcely touched. A spirit-case and a siphon stood on a tray to his right, and an hour before he had mixed himself a mild whisky-and-soda, which he had not yet tasted.

The silver bell of his Sèvres clock had already struck one when he took up the report, folded it carefully, and put it back in its registered envelope. The map, however, he spread out on the table in front of him, and continued to study it very attentively for ten minutes more. That, too, he then put in the envelope, and, leaning back in his chair, lit a cigarette in earnest and smoked it through. He was a little short-sighted, and for reading, particularly at night, he wore gold-rimmed spectacles, which gave him a scholastic, almost a theologian aspect. But these had long ago been pushed up on his forehead; the theologian had evidently some great matter in debate.

At length he rose, still slowly, and stood for a moment in profound thought. Then, with a sudden briskness, as of a man who had made up his mind, he

took the envelope, and, putting it into a drawer in his knee-hole table, turned the key upon it.

"It will be one of the very biggest deals," he remarked to himself.

A grand piano by Bechstein stood at the other side of the room, and Bach's St. Matthew Passion Music was open upon it. Mr. Alington took it up and turned over the pages with a loving reverence. He paused a moment, and hummed in his beautiful tenor voice the recitative of "And Peter went out," and then, lighting the candles, played a few crescendo chords, and plunged into the intricacies of the great double chorus of the lightnings and thunders. The sonorous and terrible fugue grew and grew under his deft hands, rising from crescendo to crescendo with its maddened, tumultuous ground-bass. A pause of a bar, and with a great burst he attacked the second part. He sang the air of "the bottomless pit" with full voice, while his hands quivered mistily in the frenzied chromatic accompaniment. The appalling terrors of the music possessed him; he seemed like a man demented. In the last six bars he doubled the bass as if written for pedals, and with the tierce de Picardy finished in a crashing chord.

Mr. Alington pushed his rather scanty hair back from his forehead and gave a great sigh full of reverential awe, the sigh of a religious artist. He was a true musician, and his own admirable performance of the wonderful text moved him; it smelled of the flames. Then after a moment he turned to the last chorus, the most perfect piece of pathos ever translated into sound, and played it through with all the reticence and sobriety of his utmost art. The wailing cadences, the simple phrases, touched him profoundly. Unlike Mrs. Murchison, he did not consider himself bound to worship Wagner, although the operas did not sound to him the least alike. He would have told you that he thought him artistically immoral, that he violated the canons of music, as binding, so he considered, on musicians as is the moral code on a civilized society. "A brilliant savage," he said once of that master; "but I know I am unfashionable."

He sat for a long minute perfectly still when he had finished the chorus, as absorbed in the thought of it as he had been in the mines half an hour before. Unaffected moisture stood in the man's eye; his face was that of a stout and rapturous saint in a stained-glass window contemplating some beatific vision. He was alone, and perfectly honest with himself. At length he shut the piano very softly, as if afraid of disturbing the exquisite sweetness and melancholy beauty of the music by any other sound, and, candle in hand, went to his bedroom. An admirable reproduction of Holman Hunt's "Lux Mundi" hung over his fireplace; the "Triumph of the Innocents" was directly above his anchorite-looking bed. They were favourite pictures of his, not only for their

subject, but for the genuineness of their feeling. They seemed to him to have grasped something of the simplicity of the real pre-Raphaelite school—something of its soberness, its constant love of form, its childlike straightforwardness. There was an old oak *prie-dieu* by his bedside, with several well-thumbed books of devotion on it, and he knelt there a full ten minutes before he got into bed. He was thankful for many things—his health, his wealth, his perseverance, his brains, his power of appreciating beautiful things; and he prayed for their long continuance and well-being fervently.

Mr. Alington was a sound sleeper and an early riser, and neither his new and dizzy schemes nor the pathos of the Passion Music kept him awake. He had various appointments in the City on the following morning, and was going to lunch with Lord Conybeare at White's. Jack was not there when he arrived, and he had to solace his waiting moments with the inspection of the room set aside for the reception of strangers. It was furnished with a table, on which stood an empty inkstand and a carafe of stale-looking water, two horsehair chairs, a weighing-machine, and a row of hat pegs hung up inside a shelfless bookcase. He hoped, however, that he would not in the future have to confine himself to the stranger's room when he made an appointment there, since Jack had put him up for the membership of the club, got Tom Abbotsworthy to second him, and had induced a large number of members to append their noble names to his candidature.

Jack came in before long, looking as he always looked, even in the most broiling weather—perfectly cool, unharassed, and ill to quarrel with. He never seemed to get either hot or dirty, even in the underground; smuts passed him by, and settled on the noses of his less fortunate neighbours.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "Let us have lunch at once. You have not been here long, I hope."

"Only a few moments," said Alington; "and I fancy I was here before my time."

"A fine habit," murmured Jack. "How punctual we should be between us!"

They entered the dining-room, which was rather empty, and took their seat at a small table a little removed from other lunchers.

"I did not see you last night at the Embassy," said Jack. "I thought you were sure to be there. Kit told me she had an invitation sent you, and busy men like you always seem to have time for everything."

"One has all the time there is," said Alington; "and I meant to go. But the mail brought me news—important news from Australia."

"Indeed? Good news, I hope."

"Excellent news. We shall very soon require your services."

"Ah! What will you drink?"

"Thanks, I never touch wine at lunch. A little water, please. I am a bit of an ascetic in certain ways. Yes, the news was excellent. I shall get out a prospectus at once, and float the companies. Out of the five mines, the same reef, a very rich one, runs through three. The other two are outliers from this reef, but there appears to be a good deal of surface gold. They ought to begin paying at once almost. I propose making two groups out of these five mines—one comprising the outliers, the other three the main reef. Or we might amalgamate them later. I strongly recommend your purchasing these outliers in large quantities. That, at least, is what I intend to do myself."

Jack laughed.

"It is easy to recommend my making large purchases," he said; "and I wonder if I could run up a bill for them. But circumstances over which I have long ceased to have any control——"

Mr. Alington held up his large white hand.

"You will not need to cover," he said. "Pay the first call, or, at most, the first two calls. I assure you that that will be all that is necessary. Unless I am much more mistaken than I have ever been in my life, the price will rise very soon and very considerably. You must remember that you draw a salary as a director. If you wish, I will advance that for this year."

"That would be very convenient," observed Jack with truth and candour.

"The first call will be half a crown," continued Alington. "A thousand pounds will thus enable you to command eight thousand shares."

"It is a long time since I have had eight thousand anythings," remarked Jack; "Of course, I don't count debts. I never count debts. But what will happen to me if the shares do not go up?"

"The shares will go up," said Alington dryly. "I should advise you to put yourself entirely in my hands about this. I simply cannot be wrong. As a director, you are bound to hold shares. I recommend you to put the greater part of them into these two outlying mines."

"I ask nothing better than to be guided by you," said Jack. "Many thanks for the hint."

Mr. Alington waved the thanks away, as if they were disproportionately large to the favour bestowed.

"And I should like to have a meeting of the directors on Tuesday," he said, "if

that will suit you and Lord Abbotsworthy. I am going to see him this afternoon. I propose to employ my own brokers, men whom I have dealt with for years."

By degrees the room filled up, and, as the tables near them had begun to be occupied, they dismissed for the present the subject of the mines. Jack was more than content to leave his own financial venture in Alington's hands, for he felt convinced that he was playing fair with him. Habitually somewhat cynical, he would have thought twice about going bail for his most intimate acquaintance; but he believed that Alington, as he himself candidly said, was acting for his own interests in making it worth a Marquis's while to join the board. About Alington's ability he had found no two opinions; extensive inquiries showed him that on all hands he was considered the shrewdest of the shrewd. The market had already got hints about the new issue, and was waiting with some impatience for the publication of its prospectus. And the interest extended far beyond the professional operators; the British public, as Alington had said, were nearly ripe to go mad on the subject of Australian gold, and he had chosen his moment well.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SIMPLY NOBODY

The "quiet dinner, simply nobody," to which Kit had invited the gratified Mrs. Murchison and her daughter the night before had grown like a rolling snowball during the hours of the Hungarian ball. If you are having a quiet dinner, one more does not make any difference or change the character of the entertainment, and there had been many such. Among others, Kit had met Alice Haslemere in the Park next morning, and the latter had made an appeal *ad misericordiam* to her.

"I am bidden to meet a Serene Transparency or a Transparent Serenity of some sort to-night," she had said. "Who? Oh, some second-class little royalty made in Germany, and I don't intend to go, and have said so. I gave an excuse, Kit; I gave you as my excuse, because you are a sort of privileged person, and even royalty lets you do as you choose. How do you manage it, dear? I wish you would tell me. Anyhow, I said that you asked me to dine to-night six weeks ago. You see, I owe you one over that disingenuous way you treated me about Jack and the baccarat. So you did ask me, didn't you?"

Kit slowed down; she was riding a white bicycle picked out with crimson.

"Seven weeks ago, Alice," she said; "and if you had forgotten I should never have forgiven you. Quite quietly, you know; and so we are quits. Lady Conybeare's dinner," she said with some ceremony, "will be served as usual at eight-thirty."

They were both riding the wrong side of the road, and Lady Haslemere cast an offended look at her father's coachman, who did not recognise her, and made way for the carriage.

"I knew it was an old, old engagement," she said, with feeling. "And who is coming? I forget; it is so long since you told me."

"Murchison *mère et fille*," said Kit; "and the *fille* is going to marry Toby. You just see. Also Ted and Toby and the baccarat man. Jack is very thick with him just now, and my ladyship smells money. Oh, Alice, we might play baccarat again to-night; I was thinking that it would be rather tiresome having to play gooseberry to Toby all the evening, but a hand at cards would help to pass the time, would it not? Let's see, baccarat is the game where you have to try and get nine, isn't it? How pleasant! There are some other people coming, too, and there will probably be more before evening. I notice that when there are dinners for Transparencies people ask me to ask them. I am a sort of refuge from royalty."

"Yes, and how transparent!" remarked Lady Haslemere.

"Isn't it? and what a bad joke! But wear a tea-gown, Alice, because I told Mrs. M. to do so. Yes, we'll play detectives on the Alington this evening. I hope he'll cheat again. It must be so amusing to be a real detective. I think I shall become one if all else fails. And most things have failed."

"To see if shopping takes so long, and whether the club accounts for late hours," quoted Lady Haslemere, with a touch of regret. "But, Kit, what a blessing it is that one does not feel bound to watch one's husband! Haslemere is so safe, you know; one might as well watch St. Paul's Cathedral to see if it flirted with St. Mary Magdalene's. It would bore me to death watching him. Only once have I seen him at all excited."

"Who was the happy lady?" asked Kit, with interest.

"It wasn't a lady at all—not even me. It was a wire puzzle, and he said it was mathematically impossible, and woke me up about three in the morning to tell me so. He was really quite feverish about it. But in demonstrating to me how impossible it was he accidentally did it, upon which he became perfectly normal, and we lived happily ever afterwards."

They turned into the road north of the Serpentine by the Achilles statue, and quickened their pace.

"One always does live happily ever afterwards," said Kit thoughtfully. "Truth is quite as strange as fiction. There's the old Duchess—what a cat! And just look at her wig all sideways! But I am also thankful that one's husband is not a detective. Jack would make such a bad one. I should be ashamed of him."

"I suppose he would. He is clever," said Alice, "and criminals are so short-sighted. They make the obvious mistakes. But Jack would make a ripping criminal."

"That is just it. As a detective Jack would overlook the obvious things because they are so obvious. Consequently, he would never find out anything, because criminals always make stupid mistakes, not clever ones. Jack never found out that the mine man cheated at baccarat, for instance. Oh, I forgot, you guessed that. Look, there's Ted. How badly he rides!"

"And he never finds out about Ted," remarked Lady Haslemere, with extreme dryness.

"Never. You see, there's nothing to find out. I always tell him what a darling Ted is, and so he never thinks he is a darling. I'm very fond of Ted, but—but —— After all, frankness pays better than anything else, especially when you have nothing to conceal."

Lady Haslemere considered the proposition for a moment, but found nothing to say about it.

"How is the mine man?" she asked abruptly.

"Green bay-trees. So he must be wicked. A few nights ago, when he dined with us, I asked him to sing after dinner, and he sang a sort of evening hymn in four sharps. Don't you know the kind? He has a really beautiful voice, and it nearly made me cry, I felt so regretful for something I had forgotten. Now, that shows he must be wicked. Good people only make me yawn, because they try and adapt themselves to me and talk about worldly things. And it is only wicked people who sing hymns with real feeling, who make me want to cry. Luckily, they are rare."

"And the mines?" asked Alice.

"Well, Jack is excited about the mines, like Haslemere with the wire puzzle, and when Jack is excited it means a good deal. He told me that if things went decently we should be solvent again—it sounds like a chemical—in fact, the mines are playing up. For to make Jack and me solvent, Alice, means a lot."

They had reached the Serpentine, and Kit dismounted and rested by the rails. It was a typically fine June day. The sky was cloudless, the trees were comparatively green, large wood-pigeons wandered fatly about, and childlike

old gentlemen were sailing miniature yachts across the water.

"What a pity one is not a person of simple pleasures!" remarked Lady Haslemere. "There is an old gentleman there who takes more delight in his silly little boat than you do in the prospect of solvency, or Haslemere even in a new wire puzzle. How happy he must be and how dull! I think dulness is really synonymous with happiness. Think of cows! You never found an absorbing cow, nor an unhappy one. The old gentleman has eaten a good breakfast; he will eat a good lunch. And he has probably got a balance at his bank."

"It's all stomach," said Kit regretfully—"all except the balance, I mean."

"Yes, that's what it comes to. So we shall play detectives to-night, Kit."

Kit started; she was absorbed in the toy yacht.

"Detectives? Oh, certainly," she replied. "But I almost wish we were wrong about the whole concern."

"The mine man cheated," said Alice, with decision. "I was thinking of asking Tom whether he saw."

"Oh, don't do that," said Kit. "We don't want a scandal. Look!"

A squall shattered the reflections in the calm water, and the old gentleman's toy yacht bowed to it and skimmed off like a swallow.

"Oh, how nice!" cried Kit, who was rapidly taking the colour of her surroundings. "Alice, shall we save up our money and buy a little toy yacht? Think how happy we should be!"

"If you are going to play the milkmaid, Kit," said Alice severely, "I shall go home. I won't play milkmaid for anybody. Playing gooseberry to Toby is nothing to it."

Kit sighed.

"Dear old gentleman!" she said. "Alice, I would give anything to be an old gentleman with white whiskers and a silly little yacht. Yes, I know, it is an impossible dream. About the baccarat, what were you saying?"

"I have things to say, if you will be so kind as to attend. Try to forget about your white whiskers, Kit."

"Yes, I will. There were no such white whiskers."

"Last night," said Lady Haslemere, "I lost two hundred and forty pounds and sixpence."

"How sixpence? What small stakes you must have been playing! Was it the game where you try to get nine?"

"Yes," said Alice, "and I lost the sixpence because I dropped it on the floor. I don't know how I got it, and I don't know what happened to it."

"Like Melchisedech," put in Kit.

"Exactly. Anyhow, I dropped it, and it just shows what extraordinary people people are. We all took candles and grovelled on the ground looking for that sixpence. Losing it annoyed me more than I can say. I didn't care so much about the rest."

"I should have cared much more," said Kit very fervently. "But you are quite right. And it explains to a certain extent how a very rich man like Mr. Alington can cheat over a few shillings."

"I dreamed about the sixpence too," said Alice. "I thought my salvation depended on it."

Kit did not reply at once.

"That seems inexpensive," she said at length. "I would go as far as that. Look at the yacht—oh, I forgot, I mustn't look at the yacht. Alice, I believe these mines are a big affair. Jack got up this morning at nine in order to be in the City by half-past eight, and it takes a lot to make him as punctual as that. Are you going to take a hand in them?"

"I want to, but Tom says no. He says he has more opportunity of judging, or something tedious, and will make enough for us both. He is willing to invest for me, but that is no fun."

"That is so like Jack," said Kit. "He wants me to have nothing to do with the mines. He expects to make enough for two, which is absurd, considering that nobody can possibly make enough for one. But I shall call myself Miss de Rougemont, spinster, care of the Daily Chronicle, or something, and so invest."

"Have you got a little nest-egg, dear?" asked Alice sympathetically. "How nice! I always have, but the stupid cards ate a big piece of the yolk last night."

"I know; they do. But, on the other hand, they fill it up again. I expect most women have nest-eggs of some sort. It may be money, or virtue, or vice, or secrets. Well, I'm going to drop mine slap into the Australian goldfields."

"I intend to be cautious," said Lady Haslemere. "But just to spite Tom I shall risk something. Tom was most tiresome and interfering. He says women know nothing about business. A lot he knows himself! If I had to pick out one man

eminently unfitted to be director of anything, it would be Tom."

"I can't have Jack left out in the cold like that," said Kit.

"They are a pretty pair. Tom's honest; that is all that can be said for him."

Kit screamed with laughter.

"I bet you that Jack is as honest as Tom," she said. "But that is just the way with your family, dear. They all think that they have a monopoly of the cardinal virtues, just as Mr. Leiter thought he could have a corner in corn. But, seriously, I do hope and trust that Alington's mines are sound. Think how the Radical papers would shout if something—well, if something untoward happened. Salaries, you know! Supposing the British public dropped a lot of money and there was an inquiry? Personally, I think Jack is rash to be chairman. He is paid for his name—he knows that perfectly well; but directors are supposed to be dimly responsible. And his boss cheats at baccarat! Also I think he shouldn't have a salary as director; that doesn't look well."

"That will surely be periphrased in the accounts, won't it?" asked Alice.

"I hope so; periphrasis covers a multitude of cheques."

They had got round to Hyde Park Corner again, and rode slowly through the gate into the roaring street. Kit's eye brightened at the sight of life; she forgot about her dream of white whiskers.

"I think gold-mines are an excellent form of gambling," remarked Alice. "You can play directly after breakfast. Now, one can't play cards directly after breakfast. I tried the other day, but it was a hopeless failure. Even naturals looked horrid by daylight."

"Gold-mines are a tonic," said Kit "You take them after breakfast like Easton's syrup, and they pick you up wonderfully. You should see how brisk Jack is getting in the morning."

"Well, *au revoir*, dear. Half-past eight, isn't it? May Tom come too?"

"Oh yes, and Haslemere if you like," said Kit, turning up Park Lane.

"I don't like," called out Alice shrilly, going straight on.

Kit giggled at intervals all the way home.

Mrs. Murchison's cup of happiness was very full that evening. Though the quiet little dinner had grown about eighteen, yet everyone was of Kit's own particular set, and it was what Kit called a "Christian dinner"—that is to say, everyone called each other by their Christian names. "So much nicer than a heathen dinner," she said to Mrs. Murchison. "You may meet cannibals there."

Mrs. Murchison herself was taken in by Tom Abbotsworthy, and it is doubtful which of them enjoyed their conversation most. She was enchanted to find herself with him, and her own remarks were really memorable.

"I just adore English society," she said over the first mouthfuls of soup. "Our brightest talkers in America cannot be compared with the ordinary clubmen in London. And the dinners, how charming!"

"You find people amusing?" asked Tom.

"Yes, and the substantiality of it. Not only the viands and the drinks, but the really improving conversation—the—the *tout à fait*."

Tom had the greatest of all social gifts—gravity.

"You think people have less *tout à fait* in America?" he asked.

"There's none of it; and now I come to think of it, I mean *tout ensemble*. How quick of you to see what I meant! But that's just it. My heart—and I told Mr. Murchison so the first time I saw him—is English. My head may be American, but my heart is English. Those were my words, *ipse dixit*."

"Very remarkable," said Tom.

"The air of dignity," continued Mrs. Murchison (soup always thawed her), "and the simile of tastes which I find in England! The wealth without ostensity—I should say ostentiousness! The solid comfort and no gimcrackiness!"

"I am afraid you will find plenty of gimcrackiness if you go to the suburbs," said Tom.

"I haven't yet projected any trips to the suburbs," said Mrs. Murchison with some dignity.

"Of course not. The proper definition of suburbs is the place to which one does not go. They are merely a negative geographical expression."

"Well, I'm an Anglophobe," said Mrs. Murchison with conviction; "and I believe nothing against England, not even its suburbs. But what would you say, Lord Abbotsworthy, was the main tendency of the upper classes in England?"

Tom was slightly puzzled.

"Tendency in what line?" he asked.

"By tendency I mean the direction in which they are advancing?"

"We are advancing towards America," he replied, after a moment's thought. "That is where our fiction goes, and that is whence our inventions come."

Mrs. Murchison dropped a large truffle off her fork, and remained a moment with it poised.

"I guess that's deep," she said. "I shall cable that to Mr. Murchison."

Tom wondered silently whether Mr. Murchison would be as much puzzled by it as he was himself; but his wife proceeded to elucidate.

"The fictions are the inventions, you mean," she said. "The one goes to where the other comes from. The oneness of the two countries, in fact. The brightest thing I've heard this summer," she observed.

Tom was lost in contemplation at the thought of the deep gloom in which all else that Mrs. Murchison had heard this summer must be involved, and he was grateful when that lady, after a reflective pause on his dazzling remark, changed the subject.

"What a lovely man Lord Evelyn is!" she said.

"Lord Evelyn? Oh, Toby! Yes, he's an excellent fellow."

"By lovely, I do not refer to his personal appearance," said Mrs. Murchison, "for that is homely. But by lovely I refer to his happy and amiable disposition."

"You have hit him off completely," said Tom. "Happy and amiable is just what Toby is."

Mrs. Murchison's mind went off for a moment on a maternal excursion at the sight of Lily and Toby, who were talking eagerly together, but came quickly back again.

"And the vivacity at present depicted in his face is considerable," went on Mrs. Murchison in a burst of analytic intuition. "I just adore vivacity. Vivacity without screaming, Lord Abbotsworthy, is what I just adore. Mr. Murchison is very vivacious; but to hear him when he is being vivacious, why,—you'd think he had the chicken-pox—I should say whooping-cough."

"That must be very alarming until you are used to it," said Tom.

"It is that. And the choking fit which sometimes ensues on his hilarity—why, I have seen times and again his life hung by a hair, like the sword of Demosthenes at Belshazzar's feast."

Mrs. Murchison delivered herself of this surprising allusion with the most touching confidence. She liked a well-turned sentence, and repeated it softly to herself.

"Such anxieties are inseparable from the union of the married life," said Tom

in a voice that trembled slightly.

Kit from the other side of the table had just burst out into a loud meaningless laugh, and he suspected that she had overheard.

"That's what I say," answered Mrs. Murchison; "and that's what the Prayer-Book says. The joys and the sorrows; the opportunities and the importunities."

This was slightly cryptic, but it was probable that importunity was to be taken as the opposite of opportunity. Tom chanced it, though he did not seem to remember anything in the Prayer-book which suggested the widest parallel to Mrs. Murchison's quotation. She went ahead in such a surprising manner in conversation that it was really difficult to keep up. She positively scoured the plains of thought.

"You find the opportunities, I am sure, much more numerous than the importunities," he said, faint, yet pursuing. "Yes, champagne."

"And that's just beautifully put, Lord Abbotsworthy," said Mrs. Murchison.

The tide of conversation changed, and set to opposite sides. Toby and Lily alone refused to obey the action of the tide, as if they were a rebel moon, which demanded a system of its own, refusing allegiance elsewhere, and continued to talk, regardless of the isolated unit they left on each side of them. Mrs. Murchison, who liked the agreeable hovering of the mind over first one subject and then another, which reminded her, she said, of the way in which the puma birds in the Southern States sucked honey from various flowers without alighting, was instantly involved in a sort of double-barrelled conversation with Lord Comber about the check system of baggage, and the relative position of women in England and the United States of America.

As dinner went on conversation became louder and more desultory. No one listened particularly to what anyone else was saying; the tendency for everyone to talk at once (this may have been the tendency of the upper classes which Mrs. Murchison had inquired about) became more marked, and the inimitable atmosphere of laughter was abroad. At Kit's house everyone always left the dining-room together as soon as cigarettes were handed round, for her excellent social sense told her that when people were getting on well (and at her house they always did), it was absurd for a party to go through the refrigerating process of isolation of the sexes, and waste time in thawing again. Besides, she considered it obsolete for men to sit over wine; nobody ever drank now, it was only in England that so absurd a form was kept up.

Some of the party were going on to a vague elsewhere, and Mrs. Murchison's eye caught Lily's soon after ten. She was most anxious on this first occasion not to outstay her welcome.

"It's been just too charming, Lady Conybeare," she said; "but Lily and I must go. We've got to go here and there, on and on till morning."

Kit rose. Her plan was prospering, for Lily and Toby were still talking together, and she felt particularly pleased with herself and everybody else.

"Too unkind of you to go," she said; "and if you don't come to see us again very soon, now that you know the way, I shan't forgive you. Send me a line any day and come to lunch. I am almost always in for lunch. And has Toby been making himself pleasant, Miss Murchison? He can when he likes. I saw him shaking with laughter at something you were telling him at dinner, and I longed to shout across the table and ask what it was. Good-night! Too tiresome that you have to go! Conybeare and I are going to be very domestic this evening, and not set one foot out, but sit and play cat's-cradle together when the others have gone. Mind, I only let you go under the distinct understanding that you will come back very soon, unless we've bored you both beyond forgiveness."

Jack went down with them to the front-door, and Kit as far as the head of the stairs, where she kissed her hand and looked regretfully after them, with her head a little on one side. As she expected, Mrs. Murchison gave one backward glance as she went out, and Kit kissed her hand again, smiling. Then, as soon as the front-door closed, she hurried back in a brisk business-like manner to join the others.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLOT MISCARRIES

Some ten or twelve people only remained in the drawing-room when Kit returned, for several had taken their departure before the Murchisons, and Toby seemed to be a target at which was being fired some straight, hard chaff. As usual, he was looking serene and pleasant, but it seemed to Kit that his smile at this moment was more the result of habit than of any entertainment that the chaff afforded him.

"Toby has made an impression," explained Alice, "and he's too modest to acknowledge it."

"Dear Toby, you made an excellent impression," said Kit, taking his arm, as he stood rather hot and stiff under the chandelier. "I'm very much pleased with you, and I'll remember you in my will."

"If he'll promise to remember you in his!" said Jack, who had returned from speeding the parting guest. "That should be worth something."

"Answer them back, Toby," said Kit. "Hit out."

"A lovely man," said Tom, "but homely. A happy and amiable disposition."

"More than can be said for you, old chap," remarked Toby. "Tom, how gray you are getting!"

"Yes, I've no chance. But you are in luck, Toby. The girl is charming, and her mother is unique."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about," said Toby, amid loud laughter and a shrill cat-call from Alice. "Well, I'm going, Kit. Good-night; and try to teach Tom manners."

And Toby, still smiling genially, went towards the door. But Kit retained his arm.

"Don't go, Toby," she said. "Stop and play a bit. You like baccarat. And don't mind what Tom says. You're a credit to the family."

"Toby will bring the family more credit," said Tom, in a low, audible voice to his sister.

"Tom, be quiet," said Alice. "When you try to chaff people, it is like an elephant dancing on eggshell china."

"Toby, Alice is calling you eggshell china. Lovely but homely."

"Awfully sorry, Kit," said Toby, "but I must go. I promised to go on to the Keynes'."

Now, it was to the Keynes' that the Murchisons had gone, and Kit knew it. She saw also that Toby had had enough of the subject, and, without any more efforts to detain him, especially since he was rather tiresome at baccarat, and always won. "Well, if you must go, you must," she said. "Let's see you again soon, old boy."

Toby smiled and nodded and left the room.

"Dear Toby!" said Kit, "it was hard luck on him. How could you say such things, Tom? It's serious. The poor boy is head over ears."

"There is a phenomenon in hypnotism called suggestion, Kit," he said, as she took a seat beside him. "If a thing is suggested to the subject, the suggestion is followed. Did you suggest it?"

"Oh, in a sort of way. But Toby isn't hypnotized; he's fascinated. I am

delighted he takes it seriously. She is a sweet girl, and I would sooner have Toby for my husband than anyone. I shall get him to marry me when Jack dies, like the woman in the parable. Oh, they have just put out a little green table. How queer of them! And cards! Well, I suppose, as it is there—— You play baccarat, I think, Mr. Alington?"

Mr. Alington paused, as usual, before replying, and looked benevolently at Kit and Lady Haslemere in turn.

"I shall be delighted to play," he said. "I find it very soothing after a tiring day; one does not have to think at all. I used to play a good deal in Australia, and, dear me, yes! I had the pleasure of playing the other night at your house, Lady Haslemere. Odd games we used to have in Australia. One had to keep both eyes open to see that nobody cheated. Indeed, that was not very soothing work. I have seen five nines on the table before now, which really is an excessive number. Embarrassing almost."

He had the manner of taking everybody into his confidence, and as the others were standing together as he spoke, and he a few steps from them, he had an easy opportunity to look several people in the face. Kit and Alice again received a special share of his kind and intelligent glance, and, as he finished speaking, he laughed in his pleasant voice, as if with considerable inward amusement. So, when they sat down at the card-table, out of the dozen of them there were at least two disconcerted people present, for it was not certain whether Jack had heard.

"I think he scored," said Alice, in a low voice to Kit; and Kit looked impatient, and thought so too.

When they had all taken their seats, Alington was found, as Kit and Alice had wished (and he also, if they had known it), to be opposite them. There were a few moments' delay, as the table was lined, and, playing idly with the counters he had purchased, he looked up at them.

"It is so simple to cheat at baccarat, without the clumsy device of five nines," he said. "One need only lay one's stake just on the white line, neither over it nor behind it. Then, if you win, the slightest touch and the counters will go over, and it appears that you have staked; if not, you leave them as they are. A touch of the cards will do it. So!"

He put a couple of cards face upwards on the table, as if showing his hand, and as he did it, drew his stake over the line so gently and imperceptibly that it was impossible to see that the counters moved. Kit laughed, not very pleasantly. Her laughter sounded a trifle cracked.

"Take care, all of you!" she cried. "There is a brilliant sharper present. Mr.

Alington, how stupid of you to tell us! You might have won all our money without any of us being the wiser."

Alington laughed, and Alice told Kit in a low voice not to lose her temper. Alington's laugh was a great contrast to Kit's, pleasant and amused.

"I make the company a present of the only safe way to cheat at baccarat," he said. "The bank? Ah, I see Lord Conybeare takes the bank."

Death and baccarat are great levellers, and Kit in her more sententious moments used to call the latter an escape from the trammels of civilization, and a return to the natural savage instincts. Certainly nothing can be simpler; the cave-men, provided they could count as far as nine, might have played at it. And, indeed, unalloyed gambling is not a bad second, considered as a leveller, to death itself. Rich men win, poor men lose; the Countess rubs shoulders (it is not meant that she did at Kit's house) with the cocotte; Jew spoils Jew, and Gentile Gentile. The simple turn of the cards is an affair as haphazard as life. If anyone, it must be the devil who knows where and when the nines will come up, and he is incorruptible on this point. The brute loses; the honest man wins; the honest man is made a pauper; the brute a millionaire. There is certainly something fascinating about what we call Luck. No virtue or vice invented by the asceticism or perverted corruptness of man has yet made a bait that she will take. Mathematicians tell us that she is purely mathematical; yet how emphatic a denial she gives to this shallow description of her if one tries to woo her on a system! One might as well make love on the prescriptions of the "Complete Letter-writer."

On this particular night she showed herself the opposite of all the epithets with which her unintelligent worshippers have plastered her. She is called fickle—she was a pattern of devotion; she is called changeable—she exhibited an immutable face. Wherever Alington sat, whether to the right or to the left of the dealer, or whether he took the bank himself, she favoured him with a fixed, unalterable smile, a smile nailed to her features, as if her photograph was being taken. Like the two-faced Jannet, as Mrs. Murchison had once called that heathen deity, she kept the benignant aspect for him.

Now, it is one of the rules without exception in this world, that nobody likes losing at cards. People have been heard to say that they do not like winning. This statement is certainly incorrect. It is possible to play an interesting set at tennis, an enjoyable round of golf, an entrancing football match, a really memorable game of chess, and lose, but it is not humanly possible to enjoy losing at baccarat. The object of the game is to win the money of your friends in an exciting and diverting manner, but the diversion tends to become something worse than tedium if they consistently win yours. Excuses and justifications may be found for most unprofitable pursuits, and perhaps the

only thing to be said in favour of gambling is that there is no nonsense about it, and, as a rule, no nonsense about those who indulge in it. No one as yet has said that it improves the breed of cards, or that he has the prosperity of the card-makers at heart. The card-table is still a place where hypocrites do not win credence from anybody.

The great goddess Luck ignored Lady Haslemere that night (for she is no respecter of persons, and cuts people whenever she chooses), merely letting her lose a few inglorious sovereigns, and devoted her attention to Alington and Kit. The latter she visited with every mark of her peculiar disfavour, and the nest-egg in her jewel-case upstairs had to be heavily unyoked. Kit seldom enjoyed herself less than she did this evening; as a rule, she had distinctly good luck at cards, and it was little short of maddening to sit there hour after hour, just to watch her stake being firmly and regularly taken away. Like most people who are generally lucky at cards, she was considered admirably good form at play; but when she was losing in this unexampled manner, she found it difficult to remain cordial, and more than once she had to force herself with an effort to remember that a hostess had duties. Alington's mild, intelligent face opposite her roused in her a kind of frenzy, and his unassumed quietness and utter absence of any signs of satisfaction at his huge winnings seemed to her in the worst taste. Both she and Lady Haslemere had seen how completely their scheme of watching him to see whether he cheated had miscarried; indeed, from the moment when he gave his little exhibition of the ease with which it was possible to defraud the table, they had realized that they might play the detective till their eyes dropped out of their heads from weariness without catching him. Lady Haslemere had given it up at once, concluding that Kit and she must have been mistaken before; Kit continued to watch him furtively and angrily, but the little detective game was not nearly so amusing as she had anticipated.

Meantime, as her stakes vanished and revanished, Kit found herself thinking absently of what Alington had shown them. It was so simple, and she almost wished that she was one of the people who cheated at cards. But she was not. Then occurred an incident.

Alington was taking the bank. Nearly opposite him, and belonging to the party on the dealer's right, was Kit. She had just been upstairs to get all that remained of her nest-egg, and in front of her lay several small counters, two of fifty pounds, and two of a hundred. She had just lost once, and counting up what remained to her, she put all her counters in a heap near the line. Again she staked fifty pounds, and on receiving her cards took them up and looked at them. She was rather excited; her hand trembled a little, and the lower edge of her cards twitched forward. Then she laid them on the table.

"Natural," she said, and as she said it, she saw that she had flicked one of her hundred-pound counters over the line, and it was staked. Almost simultaneously she caught Alington's eye; almost simultaneously Tom's voice said:

"One fifty. Well done, Kit! You've had the worst of luck all the evening."

"A fine, bold stroke," said Alington in his precise tones, still looking at her. "Luck must turn, Lady Conybeare."

For one moment Kit paused, and in that pause she was lost. Alington counted out her stake, pushed it over to her, and rose.

"A thrilling end to my bank," he said. "The first big stake this evening. Thank you, Lady Conybeare, for introducing big stakes. The game was getting a little slow."

And he went to the side-table for a cigarette.

Kit had cheated, and she knew it, and she suspected Alington knew it. She had neither meant, intended, contemplated, nor conceived possible such a thing, yet the thing was done. In point of fact, she had done it quite unwittingly. She had never intended to push her counters over the line with the edge of her cards. But then had followed—and she knew this, too—an appreciable moment in which she perceived what had happened before Tom's voice broke in. But she had not been able to say *at once*, "I have made a mistake; I only staked fifty." After that each possible division of a single second made speech infinitely more impossible. To hesitate then was to be lost. Thirty seconds later her stake was paid, and to say then what had happened was not only impossible, but inconceivable. Besides, she thought to herself with a sudden relief, it was wholly unnecessary. She would tell Alington about it quite candidly, and return the money. But it was a poor ending to the evening on which she and Alice were going to watch him to see if he cheated.

That moment when she did not speak was psychologically more important than Kit knew. She had lived in the world some five-and-twenty years, and for five-and-twenty years her instincts had been forming. But during those years she had not formed an instinct of absolute, unwavering, instantaneous honesty. Before now she had been in positions where there was a choice between the perfectly upright course and the course ever so slightly crooked, and had she known the history of her soul, she would have been aware that when she had stuck to the absolutely upright line she had done so after reflection. Then came this moment when there was no time for reflection, and the habit of looking at her decisions as ever so faintly debatable had asserted itself. She had paused to consider what she should do. That, in such circumstances, was quite sufficient.

That she was ashamed was natural; that she was angry was to her more natural still. She felt that the thing had been forced on her, and so in a manner, if we take into consideration all the instincts which were undoubtedly hers at that moment, it was; how far she was to be held responsible for those instincts is a question for psychologists and those who have got to the bottom of the problem of original sin, but not for story-tellers.

She had a great command over herself, and she gathered up her stakes with a laugh. There had been no perceptible pause of any kind.

"I was just going to order the carriage to take me to the workhouse," she said, "but I can still afford to breakfast without the assistance of the poor laws. Must you go, Mr. Alington? Half-past two; is it really? I had no idea. Good-night. I hope Jack is behaving himself on your board. Mind you keep him in order; it is more than I can do."

She looked Mr. Alington full in the face as she spoke, trying, but failing, to detect the least shadow of a change in his impassive and middle-class features. But when he looked benevolently at her through his spectacles and bowed with his accustomed awkwardness, she felt a sudden lightness of heart at the thought that he had not seen. She did not examine too closely into what this lightness of heart exactly implied.

The others soon followed Mr. Alington's example, and took themselves off. Jack had walked to the front-door with Lady Haslemere, and Kit waited a moment in the drawing-room, after sending Lord Comber, who lingered, away, for him to come up again. Whether she intended to tell him what had happened she scarcely knew; that must depend. But he did not return, and before long servants entered to put out the lights. They would have withdrawn when they saw her, but she got up.

"Yes, put the lights out," she said. "Has his lordship gone out?"

"No, my lady; his lordship went upstairs to his room ten minutes ago."

Kit abandoned the idea of telling him that night. If she went to his room, it would imply that she had something to say, and she did not wish to commit herself yet. So she went to her own room, and rang for her maid.

The hair and unlacing processes seemed interminable this evening, and were intolerable even to the accompaniment of an excellent Russian cigarette. She had been given on her birthday, only a few weeks before, by Lord Comber, a wonderful silver-framed antique mirror, with the old Venetian motto on it, "Sono felice, te videndo," and it had made dressing and undressing a positive pleasure. Jack also had made himself amusing about it; he had come into her room the day after it arrived, and, seeing the motto on it, said, laughing:

"God has given you a good conceit of yourself, Kit. Where did you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it," she replied, never having intended to make a mystery about it. "Ted gave it me."

"Ted Comber? What damned impertinence!"

Kit burst out laughing.

"Jack, you are inimitable as the jealous husband," she had said. "It is a new *rôle*. Poor Ted! it must have cost a pot of money."

And Jack had permitted himself to leave the room, banging the door behind him.

Ted and she had laughed over the episode together.

"So like a man to ask absurd questions, and then be angry because he is told the truth," Kit had said. "It would have been quite as easy for me to lie."

But to-night not even the mirror, with its amusing associations, nor the reflection of herself, nor the Russian cigarette, could beguile the tedium of the toilet. The comb caught in her hair; her maid's hands were cold, she was clumsy; the evening post was stupid; it was late; Kit was sleepy and discontented. In fact, she was in an abominable temper.

At last it was over, and her maid left her. She got up from the chair in front of her glass, where she had been sitting in her wonderful lace dressing-gown, and took a turn up and down the room. She felt like a fractious child, out of sorts, out of gear, out of temper. Then quite suddenly she stopped, threw herself face downwards on the bed, and began to cry from sheer rebellion and impatience of this stupid world.

CHAPTER X

MRS. MURCHISON'S DIPLOMACY

Mrs. Murchison was sitting on a pile of cushions beneath her crimson parasol. The cushions were in a punt, and the punt was on the Thames, and it was Sunday afternoon, and she and her daughter were spending a Saturday till Monday, the last of the season, with the Conybeares. Toby, in flannels, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows, was resting from his labours with the punt pole, and sitting opposite this lady. It was a blazing hot day, but, in spite of the glare of the water, cooler, so Mrs. Murchison has asserted, on the river than elsewhere. In point of fact, she felt positively frizzled with the heat; but

she had weaned Toby from his basket-chair under a tree on the lawn to have a private talk with him, ascertain how the land lay, and generally encourage him. This desire to speak to him privately took its birth from two words she had had with Kit the evening before. These two words, again, were the result of a conversation which Toby had had with Kit in the train coming down, and thus the fact that Toby was doomed to punt and swelter under a broiling sun instead of sitting coolly in the shade was indirectly his fault for having said what he had said to Kit.

For the last fortnight Kit had been in a state of chronic exasperation with her tiresome brother-in-law. Toby was gauging his own gait, and Kit's efforts to make him march in time with her had brought no results. He was always to be found at the houses to which Lily went, and at those houses he was always talking to her. But Kit could not bring him to the point. Elsewhere his demeanour was absent and slightly idiotic; he appeared to have something on his mind, and dressed with unusual care. Thus, as they travelled down from London on the Saturday, Kit felt herself called upon to try to put the finishing touch to the work she flattered herself she had begun so well. She had not yet told him that the Murchisons were coming. She had, in fact, only asked them the evening before.

"Who is to be there?" asked Toby, as they left Paddington.

"Oh, the usual lot: Ted and the rest, and—oh yes, Mrs. Murchison and her daughter."

Toby looked fixedly out of the window with the idiotic expression on his face, and the dawnings of a very creditable blush. There was silence a moment, and Kit watched him from behind her paper. Toby turned and caught her eye.

"Oh bother you, Kit!" he exclaimed.

Kit laid down the paper and began to laugh.

"And don't laugh," said Toby rudely; "it's all your fault."

"I should say it was Lily Murchison's," remarked Kit.

"Kit, will you be serious a minute?" said he. "I want to say things; I can't say them, you know, but you are clever—you will understand."

Kit laid her hand on his arm with a sympathetic pressure of her fingers.

"Dear Toby," she said, "I understand perfectly, and I am delighted—delighted! It is charming."

Toby looked very serious.

"Kit, I wish you had never told me to fall in love with her," he said; "it has

spoilt it all. Of course, it is not in consequence of what you said that I have, but I wish you hadn't suggested it that evening at the Hungarian dance. That she is rich, and that the world knows it, stands in front of me. It is a vile world; it will say I fell in love with her only because of that. Oh, damn!"

Kit was divided between amusement and impatience.

"It has been reserved for you, Toby, to discover that riches are a bar to matrimony," she observed; "the reverse is usually believed to be the case."

Toby shook his head. Kit appeared to him quite as tiresome as he to her.

"You don't understand," he said.

Kit had a brilliant idea. She saw that Toby wanted to talk about it, so she determined not to talk, but to leave in him a little barbed shaft that might do useful work.

"We'll not talk about it, Toby," she said; "I can see you don't want to. Probably you are not in love at all, just a bit attracted. Get over it as quick as you can, there's a good boy; it makes you unsocial and *distrait*. Besides, how often has she seen you? With all your excellent qualities, dear Toby, you are not exactly —well, anything more than quite a poor, pleasant, plain young man. So drop the whole thing; you will neither break your heart nor hers. I have made too much of it, no doubt. I was wrong, I feel sure I was wrong, and I beg your pardon. Oh, there has been a hurricane in Florida! How too terrible!" And she buried herself again behind her paper.

Toby gave a short preoccupied grunt, and subsided into his corner, frowning angrily at the innocent features of the landscape. With all his native modesty and candour, he was not quite of Kit's way of thinking. The lover's devotion, which quite honestly swears that he is not fit to be the doormat to the beloved's boots, sees all the time that there is another possibility, and even in the ecstasy of humiliation aspires to worthier offices. Even while he swears himself a doormat, yet with a magnificent inconsistence he lifts his eyes higher than her boots. Though Toby was all that those tame reptilia, who think that every woman they meet is in love with them, are not, yet he did not at all accept Kit's suggestion that Lily could not conceivably have anything to say to him. With perfect sincerity he would say he was not worthy, but he was not at all content to have it said for him. Even more absurd was her suggestion that he was not in love himself. *Distrait!* he should just think he was. And he glared savagely at the outside page of Kit's Pall Mall.

Just about as they went screaming and swaying through Slough, Kit laid her paper down and yawned elaborately. Through her half-closed eyes she saw Toby glowering darkly at her from the seat opposite, and waited with amused

satisfaction the working of her darts.

"Nothing in the paper," she said.

"I thought there was a famine in Florida," he observed dryly.

Kit regarded him for a moment in irritating silence.

"Florida is a long way off," she said at length. "Probably it is only a geographical expression. There are many places and people, Toby, much nearer than Florida."

The second link in the chain of circumstances which led to Toby's going punting in the heat was shorter. It occurred that same evening after dinner. Kit was sitting with Mrs. Murchison in the window of the hall, while the others were out on the lawn, when Lily entered, followed by Toby.

"I'm going to bed, mother," she said. "Good-night, Lady Conybeare; good-night, Lord Evelyn."

"Let me give you a candle," said Toby; and they left the room.

Then said Kit very softly, as if to herself: "Poor Toby! poor dear Toby."

Mrs. Murchison heard (she was meant to hear). Hence, on the following afternoon she wished for a private conversation with Toby, and at this moment they were in the punt together. Mrs. Murchison was, considered as a conversationalist, a little liable to be discursive, and heat and a heavy lunch combined to emphasize this tendency; they melted her brains, and a perfect stream of information concerning all parts of the globe came rioting out. Besides this natural bent, she considered it best to approach the subject, on which she particularly wanted to talk to Toby, by imperceptible degrees, not run at him with it as if she was a charging Dervish fighting for Allah. This accounts for her saying that the Thames reminded her so much of the Nile.

Now, Toby, like many others, snatched a fearful joy from Mrs. Murchison's conversation. He saw that the flood-gates were opening, and, with a sigh of delighted anticipation, he said that he supposed it was very like indeed.

"Quite remarkably like, quite," said Mrs. Murchison, "and the closer you look, the more the simile grows upon you. Dear me, how I enjoyed that winter we spent in Egypt! How often I thought over the psalm, 'When Israel came out of Egypt'! We spent a fortnight in Cairo first, and what between the dances and the bazaars and the tombs of the Marmadukes, and the excursions, we had plenty to do. I remember so well one ride to the Pyramids of Sahara, where we met a very famous archeologist whose name I forget, but he had red whiskers and a very nervous manner, and showed us over them."

"That must have been very pleasant," said Toby.

"Most delicious. Then another day we went to see the tree under which the Virgin Mary sat when *she* went to Egypt, which was really a remarkable coincidence, because my name is Mary, too, and the guide gave us a leaf from it as a Memento Mary. Ah, dear me, how charming and quaint it all was! Then we went up the river in our own private diabetes and stuck on a sandbank for weeks."

Toby's breath caught in his throat for a moment, but he stiffened his risible muscle like a man.

"Didn't you find that rather tedious?" he asked.

"No, not at all; I was quite sorry when we got off, because the air was so fresh, like champagne, and the sunsets so beautiful, and every evening great flocks of ibexes and pelicans used to fly down to the river to drink. But now I come to think of it, we weren't there for weeks, but only for an hour or two, and very tiresome it was, as we wanted to get on, and Mr. Murchison's language—— Then at Luxor such sights, the great Colossus of Mammon, and the temples and the hotel gardens. And while we were there some professor or another—not the one with the red whiskers, you must understand—discovered a cylinder covered with cruciform writing, but it seemed to me quite common. And the donkey-boys were so amusing; we used to throw them piazzas, and see them scramble for them."

"Threw them what?" asked Toby politely.

"Piazzas and half-piazzas. The small silver coin of the country."

"Oh yes. You must have travelled a good deal."

"Indeed we have: Mr. Murchison was so devoted to it; I used to call him the Wandering Jew. Then from Egypt we went on to the Holy Land, *La Sainte Terre*, you know the French call it—so poetical. And we saw Tyre and Sodom and all those places, and where Cicero was killed at the brook Jabbok, and where Elijah went up to heaven, and Damascus—quite lovely!—and the temples of Baalzac—or was it the temple of Baal?"

"Did you go with one of Cook's tours?"

"Indeed we did not; it would have spoiled all the poetry and romance to me if we had done that. No, Mr. Murchison took his yacht, so we could go where we pleased and when we pleased and how we pleased. Then from there we went to Athens, and on through the Straits of Messina, and saw that volcano—Hecla, is it not?—and got to Rome for Easter."

"Rome is delightful, is it not?" said Toby, still playing the part of Greek-play

chorus. "I have hardly travelled at all."

"Most interesting; I quite longed to be one of those poky little professors who spend all their lives hunting for grafficos in the Christian catafalques. I assure you we had quite a Childe Harold-al-Raschid pilgrimage, what with Egypt and all, quite like the Arabian Knight. It was wonderful. Travelling is so opening to the mind; I am sure I never really understood what 'from Dan even to Beersheba,' meant until I went and did it too."

"Did you go to Naples?" asked Toby, who still wanted more.

"Indeed we did, and saw Vesuvio in an eruction. Vesuvius you call it, but, somehow, when one has been to Italy, the Italian *point-de-vue* seems to strike one more. Dear me, yes! Vesuvio, Napoli—all those names are so much more life-like than Leghorn and Florence. And those queer little dirty picturesque streets in Napoli, where the Gomorrah live! I have often given myself up as murdered."

A spasm of inward laughter shook Toby like an aspen leaf as this incomparable lady gave him this wonderful example of the widening effects of foreign travel. But it passed in a moment.

"So like the Nile—so like the Nile," she murmured, as they slewed slowly through beds of water-lilies. "If you can imagine most of the trees taken away, Lord Evelyn, and the remainder changed into palms, and sand instead of meadows, you literally have the Nile. Indeed, the only other difference would be that the water of the Nile is quite thick and muddy, not clear like this, and, of course, the sky is much bluer. Dear Lily, how she enjoyed it!"

"Was Miss Murchison with you?" asked Toby.

Her mother settled herself comfortably in her cushions. This was more like business, and she congratulated herself on the diplomacy she had shown in leading the conversation round so naturally, via Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Italy, to this point.

"Yes, indeed she was; I never stir anywhere without my sweet Lily. Lily of the valley, I call her sometimes. My precious child! You see, Lord Evelyn, she was brought up in England, and for years I never saw her once. And I shall so soon have to part with her again!"

Toby, who had been leaning over the side of the punt, dabbling his blunt fingers in the cool water, sat up suddenly.

"How is that?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord Evelyn, you nearly upset the boat! These punts are so insecure! Only a plank between us and death. You see, I can't expect her to live with me

always. She will marry. Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and the same applies to a woman. I would not have her remain single all her life in order to be near me," said Mrs. Murchison, with a deep altruistic sigh.

Toby gave a little laugh of relief.

"Oh, I see. For the moment I thought you meant that—that something was already settled."

"No," said Mrs. Murchison; "the dear child is not so easy to please. Half London has been at her feet. But dear Lily has nothing to say to them. She sends them empty away, like the *Magnificat*."

Mrs. Murchison sighed.

"You are not a mother, Lord Evelyn," she went on, "and you cannot know all that is in a mother's heart, though I am sure you are delightfully sympathetic and understanding. I tell you I hardly sleep a wink at night for dreaming of Lily's future. I want her to marry some Englishman, of course. Some nice pleasant man out of the titled classes. She was born to be titled. I often shut my eyes when I look at her, and say to myself, 'Some day my darling will go into dinner before her own mother.'She has had the opportunity many times, and I have wondered lately whether my dearest has not someone in her eye—I should say her heart."

"I wonder," said Toby, with marked indifference.

"So like the Nile," said Mrs. Murchison diplomatically, giving it to be understood that the conversation was still quite general. "But the mysteries of a maiden's heart, Lord Evelyn!" she sighed. "Lily takes after me; as a child, I was so mysterious that nobody thought I should live."

"Miss Murchison is not delicate?" asked Toby.

"Dear me, no! most indelicate. Her health never gave me a moment's anxiety since she left her cradle. But she is very reticent about some things, and very thoughtful. When I was a child I used to fall in love a hundred times a day; it may have been Vanderbilt or a postman, and I used to put down their initials in a little green morocco pocket-book; but I never used to tell anyone about it, just like Lily. But you can see by her forehead how thoughtful she is, like Marie Antoinette. Doesn't Tennyson speak of the 'bar of Marie Antoinette'? She has it most marked above the eyes."

Toby's ignorance of "In Memoriam" was even less profound than Mrs. Murchison's knowledge of it, and he only murmured that he seemed to remember it, which was not true.

"Thoughtful and pensive," said Mrs. Murchison. "Dear child! how she looked

forward to coming down here! And so gay at times. And never, Lord Evelyn," said Mrs. Muchison very earnestly, "has she said an unkind word to me."

By this time Toby had already turned the punt round, and was propelling it deftly back towards the lawn.

"Yes, if I could see her nicely married to some such man," said Mrs. Murchison, growing bolder. "I should be content to lie like some glorious Milton in a country churchyard. Dear me, how lovely the river is, and so like the Nile! Well, I suppose we must be going back; it should be near tea-time. I have so enjoyed my little excursion with you, Lord Toby—I beg your pardon, Lord Evelyn; and what a pleasant chat we have had, to be sure!"

And the good, kind, excellent, worldly woman beamed at Toby's brown face.

Toby never wasted time in making resolutions. Instead, he went and did the thing; and now he walked cheerfully up to the group on the lawn with his coat on his arm, and inquired if anyone had seen Miss Murchison.

"Because perhaps she would like to go for a bit in the punt," he explained.

She was not there; vague people had seen her vaguely, "some time ago"; and the advent of tea made him wait, not because he wanted tea, but because his chance of finding her was better at a well-defined centre.

The rest of the party was spending Sunday afternoon in various orthodox manners: Lord Comber was abstaining from a pile of yellow French novels he had brought out, Kit was sleeping peacefully with her mouth open in a long deck-chair, Jack was throwing sticks into the water for the spaniels, and Lady Haslemere was in her bedroom (a recognised Sunday resort, like a public garden). But tea brought everyone flocking together, like eagles to a carcass, and among them came Lily.

Toby had not seen her come out through the drawing-room window; her step on the velvet of the grass was noiseless, and it was not till she was close to the table that he looked up. Then their eyes met, black eyes and blue; and so chance a meeting, a thing which had happened a dozen times before in the course of a meal, seemed strangely to disconcert each. The most simple of all changes had come over Toby; Mrs. Murchison's words had fired his inflammable material—it was all ablaze. And that beacon must have shone from his honest open eyes, for Lily saw the change that none other saw, the private signal flying for her; and when, soon afterwards, he lounged up to her, and asked her if she would care to go out in the punt, as it was cooler now, she knew, so she thought afterwards, what was coming.

She assented, and the two went down over the close-shaven lawn to where it was moored.

CHAPTER XI

MR. ALINGTON OPENS CHECK

Kit, like most people who possess that master-key to immense enjoyment of life, namely, a ravenous, insatiable appetite for pleasure, had always a vital instinct to put off as long as possible anything which was unpleasant. She usually found plenty of delightful things to do every day of her life; indeed, with her tremendous *joie de vivre*, almost everything she did was delightful, and if there was something not delightful to be done, as a rule she did not do it. In this complicated hurly-burly of life, it is a great thing to be able to simplify, as in the tutor-ridden days one used to simplify the huge vulgar fractions which covered the page, and turned out in the end to be equivalent to zero. Kit's methods of simplification were really notable; she cut out everything which looked as if it would give trouble, and did not care in the slightest degree about the result. And if you do not care about the result, life, like vulgar fractions and the wicked, ceases from troubling.

But occasionally, so cruelly conducted is this world, she was driven to take odiously disagreeable steps, for fear of the speedy and inevitable disaster which would attend their omission. There were also certain prophylactic measures she used habitually to take, just as one goes to the dentist to avoid possible toothache in the future. Under the latter head came such small affairs as bazaar-openings and tedious "Grundy" dinners; also the yearly visit to Jack's uncle, who was a Bishop—a grim ordeal, but efficacious. They gave one a firmer stand, so to speak. It would have argued a shocking lack of worldly wisdom to neglect such simple little things, and whatever Kit lacked, she had an admirable amount of that. But the avoidance of unpleasantness in the greed for the pleasures of the moment led her constantly to put off distasteful things, in the same way in which one puts off the writing of letters, blindly hoping that if they are left unanswered long enough they will, in a manner of speaking, answer themselves. This charming result is often attained, but sometimes it is not, whereby the children of Eve are disconcerted.

The tiresome baccarat incident had now been unanswered rather more than a fortnight, during which interval Kit had not seen Mr. Alington. She told Jack that the mine-man was rather too much for her. Besides, she had introduced him to a hundred houses; if he could not swim for himself now, he never would. But when on the morning following this Sunday, as Kit, figuratively speaking, looked over her old letters to see what had to be done in the last week in London, she came upon the baccarat letter, and read it through again,

hoping that she would feel that it had by now answered itself, for she had given it time. But though she was sedulous in taking a favourable view of this and all other matters concerning herself, she came to the disheartening conclusion that it had not. There was clearly only one of two things to be done —either give it more time and another chance to answer itself unaided, or answer it herself at once. And, as a wise and perhaps a good wife should, she determined to consult her husband about it, wishing that she had done so before.

The confidence between the two was, in a certain well-defined area, of an intimate kind. There were, no doubt, certain things which Kit did not tell Jack, and she on her side felt that there might be developments in the Alington scheme, for instance, into which she would not be permitted to enter. She did not resent this; everyone may have his own private sitting-room, where, if one knocks, one may be refused admittance. It was wiser then not to knock, and certainly there were things in hers which it was not her intention to show Jack. But apart from these few exceptions, Kit always told Jack everything, especially if she was in difficulties.

"It produces such peace of mind," she had said once to Alice, "to know that no one can tell your husband worse things than he already knows about you. How some women can go on letting their husbands remain in ignorance about their bills and other indiscretions, I can't conceive. Why, I should have to ask Jack every evening what he had learned about me during the day. And that sort of revelations come much better from oneself. It wears," said Kit thoughtfully, "the guise of candour, and also possibly of regret."

The two women practised great freedom of speech with each other, and Alice replied frankly:

"Sometimes I think you are a clever woman, Kit; at other times I feel sure I am wrong, and that you are the most abject of fools."

"I suppose you mean that I seem to you an abject fool now," said Kit. "Why, please?"

"Because you tell Jack only the things that don't really matter. The things which if he heard from elsewhere would really make a row, you don't tell him."

"Ah, but those are the things which nobody can tell him," said Kit, with her customary quickness, and more than her usual penetration.

This conversation occurred to her mind to-day, when she determined to ask his advice about the baccarat. The only question was whether it, too, came under the head of what nobody else could tell him. If it had been someone of her

own set who had seen, or whom she suspected to have seen, the little *faux pas* of the hundred-pound counter, it would no doubt have come under the head of the things incommunicable. To Tom, Toby, Jack, Lord Comber, it would have been impossible to repeat such a thing. But one could not guess what ideas of honour a wild West Australian miner might have. To repeat such a thing about a woman was contrary to the code in use among her associates, and a good thing, too, thought Kit, strictly confining the question to the particular instance, and not confounding issues by a consideration of honour in general.

Even after the lapse of a fortnight the thought of that evening was a smart and a mortification. Jack was going to entrust the ship of his fortunes to the wild man who sang hymns, and played a harmonium, for aught she knew, and her really laudable desire to have some hold, some handle over him, had ended in this *débâcle*. It was not certain, indeed, that he had seen, but Kit could not but admit that it was highly probable. After all, honesty was the best policy, and she determined to tell Jack.

He had gone up to town by an early train, and Kit, who disliked getting up early almost as much as she disliked going to bed early, followed him later. He was out when she reached Park Lane, and it was close on lunch-time when she heard a cab drive up. Next moment the butler had announced Mr. Alington. The two looked just like brothers.

"Good-morning, Lady Conybeare," he said very smoothly. "Your husband asked me to lunch here, as we have some business to talk over. I was to give you a message, if he was not yet in, asking you not to wait lunch for him. He might"—Mr. Alington appeared to ponder deeply for a moment—"he might be detained."

This meeting was intensely annoying to Kit. She had told Jack that she had had enough of the mine-man, and it was very tiresome to have this *tête-à-tête*, and quite particularly disagreeable after their last meeting to see him alone. However, she put on the best face she could to the matter, and spoke with familiar geniality.

"Oh, Jack is always late," she said. "But why he should think it necessary to ask me not to wait for him is more than I can say. I suppose you have been imbuing him with business habits. Jack a business man! You have no idea how droll that seems to his wife, Mr. Alington. Let us lunch at once; I am so hungry. Kindly ring that bell just behind you, please."

Mr. Alington sat still a moment, and then rose with deliberation, but did not ring.

"I am lucky to find you alone, Lady Conybeare," he said, "for the truth is,

there was a little matter I wanted to talk over with you."

Kit rose swiftly from her seat before he had finished his sentence, and rang the bell herself. It was answered immediately, and as the man came into the room, "Indeed; and what is that?" she said. "Is lunch ready, Poole? Let us go in, Mr. Alington. I am always so hungry in London and elsewhere."

Kit could scarcely help smiling as she spoke. She had no intention whatever of talking any little matter over with Mr. Alington, especially if it was the one she had in her mind; and she could not help feeling amused by the simplicity of the means by which she had put the stopper on the possibility of a private talk. She wished to hold no private communications with the man. She had done her part in launching him, for the convenience of Jack; she had given him to understand, or rather given other people to understand, that he was an *ami de la maison*, and she washed her hands of him. He was very kindly going to make Jack's fortune in return for benefits received, but he had distinctly said that the arrangement was one of mutual advantage. It was give and take; he was on the same level as your grocer or bootmaker, except that those tradesmen gave in the hopes of eventually taking, while Mr. Alington took as he went along. At the best he was a sort of cash-down shop, and Kit did not habitually deal with such. She did not consider him dangerous, and she was so well pleased with her own adroitness that she very unwisely determined to drive her advantage home.

So, as he followed her through the folding-doors into the dining-room, "What is the little matter you referred to?" she asked again, feeling perfectly secure in the presence of servants in the room.

Mr. Alington closed his eyes for a moment before he took his seat, and murmured a brief grace to himself. He opened them a moment afterwards with a short sigh, and Kit's *riposte* to his thrust did not seem to have ruffled or disconcerted him in the least.

His broad butler-like face was as serene as ever.

"It was a matter which I thought you might have preferred to discuss alone," he said; "but as you seem to wish it, I will tell you here. The other night when I had the pleasure of playing baccarat with you, you won on a natural——"

A flush of anger rose to Kit's face. The man was intolerable, insolent, before the servants, too; but as he spoke she felt a sudden fear of him. He looked her full in the face with mild firmness, breaking his toast with one hand, while with the other he manipulated his macaroni on the end of his fork.

"Stop!" said Kit, quick as the curl of a whiplash.

But Mr. Alington did not wince.

"You will be so kind, then, as to give me the opportunity of speaking to you privately about it," he said. "I am quite of your way of thinking. It is far better discussed so. I quite see."

Kit felt herself trembling. She was not accustomed to such bland brutality at the hands of anyone. She would have been scarcely more surprised if her stationer or butcher had suddenly appeared in the room, and urged the propriety of a private talk. Alington, it is true, had been to her house, had a right to consider himself a guest; but that made it even more intolerable. Apparently he had no idea of the distinction between guests and guests, and it would be a shocking thing if this were overlooked. Meantime he went on eating macaroni with a superb mastery over that elusive provender, in silence, since Kit did not reply.

The dining-room was one of the most charming rooms in London, rather dark, as dining-rooms should be, the walls of a sober, self-tint green, and bare but for some half-dozen small pictures of the Barbizon school, which, if alienable, would long ago have been alienated to supply the chronic scarcity of money in the Conybeare establishment. They were wonderful examples, but Kit hated them, since they could not be sold. "They make me feel like a man on a desert island with millions of gold sovereigns and no food," she had said once. The chairs were all armed, and upholstered in green brocade, and the thick Ispahan carpet made noiseless the feet of those "who stand and wait." Partly this, partly the distraction of her thoughts, brought it about that red mullets were at Kit's elbow a full ten seconds unperceived. She could not make up her mind what to do. She bitterly repented having said "Stop!" just now to Alington, for the vehemence of her interjection gave herself away. She had practically admitted that something had occurred on the night they played baccarat which she earnestly desired not to have discussed in public. A fool could have seen that, and with all her distaste for the man she did not put this label to him. And with odiously familiar deference he had agreed with her; he had assumed the right of discussing things with her in private.

Again, she could not quarrel with him. Conybeare's application to business, his early visits to the City, his frequent conferences with Alington, his unexampled preoccupation, all showed for certain that there were great issues at stake, for he would not give himself such trouble for a few five-pound notes. All this passed through her mind very rapidly, and at the end of ten seconds she leaned back in her chair, saw the red mullets, and took two of them.

"Yes, you are quite right," she said; "we will talk of it afterwards. Ah, here is Jack! Morning, Jack!"

Jack nodded to her and Alington, and took his seat.

"You have heard the news, Kit?" he asked.

"Lots; but which?"

"Toby is engaged to Miss Murchison. The Crœsum told me in the train this morning. She is coming to see you this afternoon."

Kit for the moment forgot her other worries.

"Oh, how delightful!" she cried. "Dear Toby! And Lily is most charming, and so pretty! Do you know her, Mr. Alington?"

"I have met her at your house, I think. And an heiress, is she not?"

"I believe she has a little money," said Kit. "One has heard people say so. But mere gossip, perhaps."

Jack laughed low and noiselessly.

"That will be so pleasant for Toby," he observed, "if it is true."

Kit sighed.

"What a pity that it is not the custom for a bride to settle money on her husband's brother, Jack!" she said.

"Yes, or give it in order to escape death duties. What opportunities for unusual kindness some people have!"

"Well, it is charming, anyhow," said Kit. "I noticed they went for a stroll in the punt yesterday afternoon, which I thought promising. A punt is so often a matrimonial agency. You aren't afraid of tipping it up like an ordinary boat. You proposed to me in a racing pair, or something skittish—do you remember, Jack?—and I said I'd do anything in the world if you would only row straight to shore. And you kept me to it. Hardly fair, was it, Mr. Alington?"

Mr. Alington smiled like an elderly clergyman at a school feast, and his smile was suggestive of his liking to see young people happy.

"I wonder the Matrimonial News doesn't keep a few punts for the use of clients," went on Kit, in nervous anxiety to get lunch over as quickly as possible. She had made up her mind about Alington in the last half-minute or so, and was desirous of getting a word with him, her intention being to deny his charge point-blank, and in turn accuse him. "Punts and evening hymns do wonders with people who can't quite make up their minds to propose."

Mr. Alington looked mildly interested at this surprising information, and he appeared to be weighing it carefully as he ate his quail before giving it his support.

"They might keep a small choir and a harmonium as well," went on Kit. "I believe all the respectable middle-class go to evening church on Sunday and sing hymns very loud out of one book, and propose to each other afterwards. Dear Toby, how happy he will be! How nice—how exceedingly nice!" she murmured sympathetically.

Alington and Kit had by this time finished lunch, and she rose.

"I can't stop and see you eat, Jack," she said. "Come, Mr. Alington; we will go and have coffee, and Jack will join us."

On these hot July days Kit often sat in the inner hall, which was cooler than the drawing-room. It was a charming place of palms and parquetry, with furniture at angles, and a general atmosphere of coolness and sequestered corners. Coffee came immediately with cigarettes, and Kit took one. Mr. Alington, however, explained that except on Sundays he did not allow himself to smoke till after dinner.

"I find a little abstinence very helpful," he gave as his modest excuse.

The servants withdrew, and Kit began playing with her subject.

"I am afraid you thought me very abrupt at lunch," she said, "but I have a great objection to discussing matters, which it is conceivable might be better kept private, before servants, and when you mentioned baccarat I thought it better to stop you, even at the risk of seeming very brusque. You will hardly believe it, Mr. Alington"—here her voice sank to a low confidential murmur—"you will hardly believe it, but only a few weeks ago I saw a man cheat at baccarat at a friend's house. Very distressing, was it not? I talked it over with a friend, and we found it most difficult to decide what to do. That sort of thing might so easily get about; it is so dangerous to speak before servants."

"I think you talked it over with Lady Haslemere?" remarked Mr. Alington.

Kit was stirring her coffee and smiling sweetly. She was getting on beautifully. But at these words and their peculiarly calm delivery her hand stopped stirring, and her smile faded.

"I think also you agreed to ask the suspect to play again, in order to watch him," went on the impassive butler. "Was it not so, Lady Conybeare? And I think the suspect was none other than myself."

Kit put down her coffee-cup and leaned back in her chair. The thing had gone wrong; she had meant to have got first innings on the subject of baccarat cheating, and she was rather afraid she was clean bowled. Quick as she was, she could not see her answer. Mr. Alington did not, however, look at her, nor did he pause longer than was necessary to sip his coffee.

"Your tactics were a little open, a little obvious, Lady Conybeare, if you will allow me to say so," he went on. "Delicious coffee! You exchanged so many glances with Lady Haslemere, and then looked up at me, that I could not fail to see you were watching for something. No man, I expect, likes to be suspected of so very paltry a crime as cheating at baccarat—a crime so hopelessly void of any grandeur—and no man, I am sure, likes a trap being laid for him by those whom he is entitled to consider his friends. And before I go on to the point I have in my mind I should like to say a word about this."

He cleared his throat and sipped his coffee again.

"What you and Lady Haslemere saw," he went on—"did your husband suspect me too? It does not matter—what you saw was this: I had declared a natural, and you saw me, as you thought, push a fifty-pound counter over the line. Was that not so?"

"There is no question of 'thought,'" said Kit, whom a sense of danger made the more incautious; "we saw you do it."

"Quite true. If you had observed a little more closely, you would have seen something else. Now, I ask you, the few times we have played baccarat together, did you ever see me fail to stake?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Quite so. If you had looked at the table a moment before, you would have seen I had nothing staked. What happened was this: I had staked four ten-pound counters and two fives; then, seeing that I had no more smaller ones, I withdrew them to substitute one fifty for them. At that moment I received my cards, and, taking them up I forgot for the moment to substitute my fifty. I looked at the cards, declared the natural, and you saw me push forward the fifty-pound counter quite openly, and, so you thought, clumsily. It never occurred to me for a moment there was any need of an explanation."

Kit's anger and alarm was growing on her.

"Very clumsily," she said; "we all saw it."

"It was stupid of me, no doubt, not to have explained at the time," he said, "but really I had no idea the company was so suspicious."

He paused for a moment, and his mild temper was roused at the thought of Kit's behaviour.

"But perhaps people are right to be suspicious," he added, with a raised intonation.

The shot went home, and Kit's face grew a shade paler. But she could not

conceivably show that she knew what he meant, for that would be to accuse herself. Instead, she put all the insolence her voice would hold into her reply.

"And what proof have I of the truth of what you say?" she asked, fighting desperately on this battle-ground of her adversary's choosing.

"The fact that I say it," said Mr. Alington. "Also, there is corroborative evidence if I choose to adduce it. I showed you the other night, meaning merely to give you a hint, that, had I wanted, I could have cheated very neatly. Is it credible, then, even supposing that I am one of those people who cheat, that I should have done it so clumsily?"

Kit in her heart believed the man, but her superficial woman's cunning refused to give up the hold she still hoped she might have over him, her only answer to the hold she was afraid he had over her.

"We all make blunders at times," she said, in her most fiendish manner. "Unfortunately, I don't believe what you say."

Mr. Alington sipped his coffee again. His momentary irritation had quite died down; you could not have found a kinder Christian in all England.

"Fortunately, however, that matters very little," he replied.

"It does not make a man popular among us," observed Kit, "if he is known to cheat at baccarat. I understood you the other night to say that sort of thing was common in Australia. I should advise you to remember that we think differently here."

Kit had lost her temper completely, and did not stop to weigh her words. Worse than that, she lost her head, and lashed out insults with foolish defiance.

Mr. Alington crossed one leg over the other, his mouth grew a shade more compressed and precise, and his large pale eyes turned suddenly unluminous and stale like a snake's. Kit grew frightened again, and when a woman is frightened as well as angry she is not likely to score off a perfectly cool man. There was a moment's pause.

"Lady Conybeare," said he at length, "you have chosen to treat me as a knave and as a fool. And I dislike very much being treated as a knave or a fool by you. You accuse me of cheating: that I have reason to believe does not seem to you very shocking."

"May I ask why?" interrupted Kit.

Mr. Alington held up his hand, as if to deprecate any reply just now.

"And you accuse me of cheating clumsily, foolishly," he continued. "But can you really think I should be so tragic an ass as to come to you with my mere

assertion that I did not cheat? I have given you your chance to believe me of your own free will; you have, I regret to say, refused it. I will now force you to believe me—force you," he repeated thoughtfully. "I have a witness, a person then present, who saw me withdraw those smaller counters and replace the larger."

Kit laughed, but uneasily.

"How very convenient!" she said. "What is his name?"

"Lord Abbotsworthy," remarked Alington. "I even took the precaution of calling his attention to what I had done. It was lucky I did. Ask Lord Abbotsworthy."

"One of your directors," said Kit, almost beside herself with anger, and rising from her chair.

"One of my directors, as you say," he replied, "and your friend. I need hardly remind you that your husband is another of my directors."

On the moment Jack came out of the dining-room. He cast one glance at Kit's face, took a cigarette, and strolled discreetly upstairs. When his wife was on the war-path and had not asked his alliance he did not give it.

"I shall be upstairs when you and my wife have finished your talk," he said over his shoulder to Alington. "Come and see me before you go."

The pause sobered Kit.

"Yes," continued Alington, "he had a moment before asked me to change him some money for small counters, and that left me with only a few small ones. Luckily, he will remember seeing me withdraw and substitute my stake. You and Lady Haslemere would have been wise to consult him before taking this somewhat questionable step of watching me. A fault of judgment—a mere fault of judgment."

Kit, figuratively speaking, threw up her hand. The desperate hope that Alington was lying was no longer tenable.

"And I await your apology," he added.

There was a long silence. Kit was not accustomed to apologize to anybody for anything. Her indifference to this man, except in so far as he could financially serve them, had undergone a startling transformation in the last hour. Indifference had given place first to anger at his insolence, then to fear. His placid, serene face had become to her an image of some infernal Juggernaut, whose car rolled on over bodies of men, yet whose eyelash never quivered. Pride battled with fear in her mind, fury with prudence. And Juggernaut

(butler no longer), contrary to his ascetic habit, lit a cigarette.

"Well?" he said, when he judged that the pause was sufficiently prolonged.

Kit had sat down again in her chair, and was conscious only of two things—this inward struggle, and an absorbing hatred of the man seated opposite her.

"Supposing I refuse to apologize?" she asked at length.

"I shall regret it very much," he said; "you probably will regret it more. Come, Lady Conybeare, by what right do you make an enemy of me?"

Again there was silence. Kit knew very well how everyone would talk if this detestable business became public, which she understood to be the threat contained in Alington's words, and knew also that a rupture between Jack and him, which must inevitably follow, would not be likely to lead to their financial success in this business of the mines.

"I shall require you also to tell Lady Haslemere and your husband, if he also has at any time suspected me, into what a deplorable error you have fallen," continued Alington, dropping out his words as you drop some strong drug into a graduated glass, careful to give neither too much nor too little.

Suddenly Kit made up her mind, and having done that, she determined to act with the best possible grace.

"I apologize, Mr. Alington," she said; "I apologize sincerely. I wronged you abominably. I will do in all points as you suggest."

Mr. Alington did not move a muscle.

"I accept your apology," he said. "And please do me the favour not to treat me like a fool again, for I am far from being a fool."

This speech was not easy swallowing for Kit, but she had to take what he threw her. Alington got up.

"I have to go upstairs to see your husband," he said, "because we have a good deal of business—the shares of the new group will be on the market in a few days."

He paused a moment.

"Do not give another thought to the matter, Lady Conybeare," he said. "It is much better we should be friends. Ah, by the way, regarding that matter on which I meant to speak to you, that unfortunate affair of the hundred-pound counter—you know what I mean. Do not give another thought to that, either. I assure you that it will not be through me that it goes further. I fully believe you never meant it. Only you did not correct your mistake instantaneously, and so

correction became impossible. Was it not so?"

His broad face brightened and beamed, like the face of a father speaking lovingly and consolingly to a son about some petty fault, and he held out his hand to her.

Kit wavered. She would have given anything in the world to say, "What affair of the hundred-pound counter? I don't know what you mean." But she could not. She was physically, perhaps morally, incapable of giving the words utterance. Alington had made her afraid; she was beaten, cowed. And the accuracy of his intuition astounded her. Then she gave him her hand; she had no word for him on this subject.

"Good-bye," she said—"*au revoir*, rather. You will be in and out a good deal, I suppose, while we are in London. There is always lunch at two. My husband is in his room upstairs. You know the way, I think."

Many people have their own pet plan of sending themselves to sleep, such as counting imaginary sheep going through a visionary hedge, or marking out a lawn-tennis court, lifting the machine as seldom as possible. Kit's method, though she usually fell asleep immediately, was to enumerate her dislikes. This was a long and remarkably varied list, beginning "Marie Corelli, parsnips," and she seldom got to the end of it. To-night she admitted Mr. Alington into the charming catalogue, and getting to his name, she did not continue the list, nor did she immediately go to sleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA

Toby was sitting on the edge of an old weather-beaten breakwater, now running out lop-sidedly and burying its nose in the sand, some three miles north of Stanborough-on-Sea, making an exceedingly public toilet after his swim.

His mother, old Lady Conybeare, had a charming house down here, which had, so to speak, risen from the ranks; in other words, it had originally been two cottages, and was now a sort of rustic palace. Her husband had been a man of extraordinary good taste, and both his idea and execution of this transformation was on the high-water mark of felicity. Brick with rough-cast was the delectable manner of it, and the old cottage chambers had been run one into another like the amalgamation of separate drops of quicksilver, to produce irregular-shaped rooms with fireplaces in odd corners. He had built

out a wing on one side, a block on another, a dining-room on a third; the front-door was reached through a cloister open to the sea, and supported on brick pillars; and big green Spanish oil-jars and Venetian well-tops lined the terraced walk. Opposite the front-door, on the other side of the carriage sweep, was a monastic-looking, three-sided courtyard, bounded by low-arched cloisters, and an Italian tower, square and tapering towards the top, bisected the middle side. Close abutting on this was a charming huddled group of red roofs, with beaten ironwork in the windows, suggestive of the refectory of this seaside monastery. In reality it comprised a laundry, a bakehouse, and the dynamos which supplied the electric light. For there was in reality nothing unpleasantly monastic about the place; the cloisters were admirable shelters from sun or wind, and were heavily cushioned; the bell in the tower rang folk not to prime, but to dinner; and the peas were not put in visitors' boots, but boiled and put in dishes. The house, in fact, was as habitable as it was picturesque, a high degree of merit; it was no penance at all to stay there; the electric light seemed to brighten automatically as dusk fell, even as the moon and stars begin to shine without visible lamplighter in the high-roofed hall of heaven; and there were about as many bathrooms, with hot and cold water, as there were bedrooms.

Toby was putting on his socks very leisurely; he had been down for a dip in the sea before lunch, and having lit the post-ablutive cigarette, sweetest of all that burn, he threw his towel round his neck, took his coat on his arm, and walked slowly up the steep sandy pathway to the top of the fifty-foot cliff on which the house and garden stood. Several old fishermen were standing about at the top in nautical attitudes, hitching their trousers, folding their arms, and scanning the horizon like the chorus in light opera. One had a lately-taken haul, and Toby inspected his wares with much interest. There were lobsters in blue mail—angry and irritable, which glanced sideways at one like vicious horses looking for a good opening to kick—feebly-flapping soles, anæmic whiting, a few rainbow mackerel, and, oh, heavens! crabs.

Now, temptation and crab were the two things in the world which Toby found it idle to attempt to resist, and he ordered that the biggest and best should be sent instantly up to the house. Perhaps it would be safer if he took it himself, for the mere possibility of its miscarrying was not to be borne, and grasping it gingerly by the fourth leg, he carried it, not without nervousness, wide angry pincers all agape, up across the lawn.

He went through the cloister and in at the door leading to the servants' parts, where he met a stern, stark butler.

"Oh, Lowndes," he said, "for lunch, if possible. By the hind-leg. For the cook, with my compliments, and dressed."

The transference was effected, much to Toby's relief, and he put down his towel and on his coat. There was still half an hour to wait for lunch, but that cloud had now its proverbial silver lining. Half an hour seemed an impossible time, but the silver lining was the possibility of the crab being ready by then. How long a crab took dressing Toby did not know, but if it took no longer than he did himself—and there was more of him to dress—half an hour should be sufficient for two.

Lily, who, like himself, held firmly the wholesome creed that it is impious to stop indoors while it is possible to be out, was sure to be in the garden somewhere, and Toby walked out again in his white, sea-stained tennis-shoes to find her.

The cottage had risen from the ranks, but not less remarkable had been the promotion of the garden. What a few years ago had been an unprofitable acreage of wind-swept corn, and more suggestive, by reason of its fine poppy-bearing qualities, of an opium rather than a wheat-field, was become a flowery wilderness of delight. Buckthorn, gray and green like the olives of the South, and bearing berries as if of a jaundiced holly, had been planted in shrubberies in the centre of garden-beds as screens from the wind, robbing the sea-gales of their bitter saltness before they passed over the flowers, and letting the bracing quality alone reach the plants. Mixed with the buckthorn were the yellow flames of the golden elder, noblest of the English shrubs, and rows of aspen all a-quiver with nervous feminine energy. Thus sheltered, there ran on each side of a broad space of grass away from the house an avenue of herbaceous border. Hollyhocks and sunflowers stood up behind, like tall men looking over the heads of an average crowd; shoulder-high to them were single dahlias and scarlet salvias; below them again a row of Shirley poppies, delicate in tint and texture as Liberty fabrics, and in a happy plebeian crowd at the edge mignonette, love-lies-a-bleeding, London-pride, and double daisies.

Toby sauntered silent-footed over the velvet carpet of grass up to the summer-house, faced with split planks of pollarded elm, which stood at the end, but drew an unavailing cover. Thence crossing the broad gravel walk, he tried the tennis-court, and went down the steps past flowering fuchsia-trees, where two great bronze storks of Japanese work turned a world-weary eye skywards, and explored the rose-garden. This lay in a natural dip of the land, studiously sheltered, and the wirework pergola which ran through it was on these August days one foam of pink sherbet petals. On either side were rockeries covered with creeping stonecrops, mountain-heaths, and Alpine gentians, those remote sentinels of the vegetable world. And strange to their blue eyes, accustomed to see morning break on paths untrodden of man and fields of flashing snow, must have been the soft hint of dawn in this land of tended green. But Toby saw them not, for there in a nook at the end, below an ivy-trained limb of tree,

sat the queen of the rosebud garden.

Lily was not reading, in spite of the seeming evidence of an open book on her lap, for the breeze turned its leaves backwards and forwards like some student distractedly hunting up a reference. For a moment the page would lie open and unturned; then a scud of flying leaves would end in a long pause at p. 423; then one leaf would be turned very slowly, as if the unseen reader was perusing the last words very carefully, while his fingers pushed the page over to be ready for the next. Then with a bustle and scurry he would hurry on and study the advertisements at the end, and as like as not go suddenly back to the title-page.

Lily had been thinking pleasantly and idly about Toby, and the many charming things in this delightful world, when he appeared. She welcomed him with a smile in those adorable dark eyes.

"Had a nice dip?" she asked, as he sat down by her. "Oh, Toby, when we are married I shall devote my whole life to getting your hair tidy for once. Then I shall turn my face to the wall and softly expire."

"If that's your object you'll be aiming at the impossible," remarked Toby, "like that silly school-master you read me about in Browning who aimed at a million."

"Grammarian," corrected Lily, "and I'll read you no more Browning."

"Well, it does seem to be a bit above my head," said Toby, without regret. "And I bought a crab on my way up, and, oh, I love you!"

Lily laughed.

"I thought you were going to say, 'Oh, I love crab!'" she said.

"And that would be true, too," said Toby. "What a lot of true things there are, if one only looks for them!" he observed.

"That's what the Christian scientists say," remarked Lily. "They say there is no such thing as lies or evil or pain."

"Who are the Christian scientists?" asked Toby. "And what do they make of toothache?"

Lily meditated a moment.

"The Christian scientists are unsuccessful female practitioners," she observed at length. "And there isn't any toothache; it's only you who think so."

"Seems to me it's much the same thing," said Toby. "And how about lies? Supposing I said I didn't love you?"

"Or crab?"

"Or crab, even. Would that be true, therefore?"

Lily leaned forward, and put down Toby's tie, which was rising above his collar.

"Well, I think we've disposed of them," she said. "Oh dear, I wish I was a man!"

"I don't," said Toby.

"Why not? Oh, I see. Thanks. But I should like to be able to bathe from a breakwater, and buy crabs from fishermen, and have very short, untidy straight-up hair, and a profession, Toby."

"Yes," said Toby, wincing, for he knew or suspected what was coming.

"Don't say 'yes' like that. Say it as if you meant it."

Toby took a long breath, and shut his eyes.

"Yes, so help me God!" he said, very loud.

"That's better. Well, Toby, I want you—I really want you—to have a real profession. What is the use of your being secretary to your cousin? I don't believe you could say the names of the men in the Cabinet, and, as you once told me yourself, all you ever do there is to play stump-cricket in the secretary's room."

"You should have warned me that whatever I said would be used against me," said the injured Toby. "But I saw after the flowers in Hyde Park last year."

"The work of a life-time," said Lily. "I wonder they don't offer you a peerage."

"You see, I'm not a brewer," said Toby.

"Beer, beerage—a very poor joke, Toby."

"Very poor, and who made it? Besides, I think you are being sarcastic about the flowers in Hyde Park. If there's one thing I hate," said Toby violently, "it is cheap sarcasm."

"Who wouldn't be sarcastic when a great tousle-headed, able-bodied, freckle-faced scion of the aristocracy tells one that he is employed—employed, mark you—in looking after the flowers in Hyde Park?" asked Lily, with some warmth. "Why, you didn't even water them!"

"I did the organization, the head work of the thing," said Toby. "That's the rub."

"Bosh!"

"Lily, you are really very vulgar and common in your language sometimes," said Toby. "I have often meant to speak to you about it; it makes me very unhappy."

"Indeed! Try and cheer up. But really, Toby, and quite seriously, I wish you would settle to do something; I don't care what. Go into the Foreign Office."

"Languages," said Toby; "I don't know any."

"Or some other office, or buy a farm, and work it properly, and try to make it pay. Give your mind seriously to something. I hate a loafer. Besides, a profession seems to me the greatest luxury in the world."

"Plain folk like me don't care for luxuries," said Toby. "I'm not like Kit. Kit is perfectly happy without the necessaries of life, provided she has the luxuries."

This diversion was more successful. Lily was silent a moment.

"Toby, I'm afraid I don't like your sister-in-law," she said at length.

Toby plunged with fervour into the new topic.

"Oh, there you make a great mistake," he said. "I allow Kit is not exactly a copy-book-virtue person, but—well, she's clever and amusing, and she is never a bore."

"I don't trust her."

"There, again, you make a mistake. I don't say that everybody should trust her, but I am sure she would never do a shabby thing to you or me, or——"

"Or?" said Lily, with the straightforwardness which Kit labelled "uncomfortable."

"Or anybody she really liked," said Toby. "Besides, Lily, I owe her something; she brought us together. As I have told you, she simply insisted on introducing me, though I didn't want to be introduced at all."

Lily made the sound which is usually written "pshaw!"

"As if we shouldn't have met!" she said. "Toby, our meeting was in better hands than hers."

"Well, she hurried the better hands up," said Toby, "and I am grateful for that. If it had not been for her, we should not have been introduced at that dance at the Hungarians, and I shouldn't probably have dined at Park Lane the night after; I should have gone to the Palace instead, so there would have been one, perhaps two, evenings wasted."

"Well, I'll make an effort to like her more," said Lily.

"Oh, but that's no manner of use," said Toby. "You may hold your breath, and shut your eyes, and try with both hands, and never get a yard nearer liking anybody for all your trying. And it's the same with disliking."

"Do you dislike anyone, Toby?" asked Lily, with a touch of wistfulness, for Toby's habit of universal friendliness always seemed to her extremely enviable.

Toby considered a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"Who is that?"

"Ted Comber," said Toby.

Lily drew her brows together. Toby's promptness in singling out this one person seemed hard to reconcile with his wide forbearance.

"Now why?" she asked. "Tell me exactly why."

"He ain't a man," said Toby gruffly. "Surely, Lily, we can talk about something pleasanter."

"Yes, I'm sure we can," she replied fervently. "I quite share your view. Oh, Toby, promise me something!"

"All right," said Toby, taken off his guard.

"Hurrah! that you will instantly get a profession of some sort. Dear Toby, how nice of you! There's the gong, and I'm simply ravenous."

Toby got up rather stiffly.

"If you consider that fair," he remarked, "I wonder at you. At least, I don't wonder, for it's extraordinary how little sense of honour women have."

"I know. Isn't it terrible?" said Lily. "Toby, it was nice of you to order that crab. I adore crab. Oh, there's mamma! I suppose she must have crossed last night. I didn't expect her till this evening."

Mrs. Murchison had been to the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth, and was very communicative and astounding about it. She began by saying how delicious it had been at Beyrout, and Lily, whose real and tender affection for her mother did not blunt her sense of humour, began to giggle helplessly.

"Bayreuth, I should say," continued Mrs. Murchison without a pause. "Lily dearest, if you laugh like that you'll get a piece of crab in your windgall. Well, as I was saying, Lady Conybeare, it was all just too beautiful. You may be sure

I studied the music a good deal before each opera; it is impossible to grasp it otherwise—the life-motive and all that. Siegfried Wagner conducted; they gave him quite an ovarium. But some people go just in order to say they have been, without thinking about the music. Garibaldi to the general, I call it."

Lady Conybeare, a fresh-faced, dark-eyed woman of not more than fifty, healthy as a sea-wind, and in her wholesome way as tyrannical, cast an appealing look at Toby. Toby was one of the few people who did not in the least fear her, and she was proportionately grateful. She had tried to spoil him as a child, and now depended on him. He had warned her what calls would be made on her gravity during Mrs. Murchison's visit, and she had promised to do her best.

"So few people appreciate Garibaldi," she said with emphatic sympathy.

"Yes it is so," said Mrs. Murchison, flying off at a tangent. "When I was a girl I used to adore him, and wore a photograph of him in a locket. But that is all gone out; it went out with plain living and high thinking;" and she helped herself for the second time to Toby's crab and drank a little excellent Moselle.

"But Bayreuth was very fatiguing," she went on; "or is it Beyrout? Until one has heard the operas once, it is a terrible effort of attention. *C'est le premier fois qui coûte.*Really, I felt quite exhausted at the end of the circle, and I was so glad to get back to dear, delightful, foggy old London again, where one never has to attend to anything. And it looked so beautiful this morning as I drove down the Embankment. I see they have put up a new statue at the corner of Westminster Bridge—Queen Casabianca, or some such person."

Toby choked suddenly and violently.

"I've said something wrong, I expect," remarked Mrs. Murchison genially. "Tell me what it is, Lord Evelyn, or I should say Lord Toby."

"Toby, please."

"Well, Toby—— Dear me! how funny it sounds, considering I only saw you first in June! Ah, dear me, since first I saw your face, what a lot has happened! But if it's not Casabianca, who is it?"

"Boadicea, I think," said Toby.

"Dear me! so it is. How stupid of me! She comes in the Anglo-Saxon history, does she not? and she used to bleed beneath the Roman rods in the blue poetry book—or was it pink? I never can remember. But how it all comes back to one! Caractacus, too, and Alfred and the cakes, and the seven hills."

Mrs. Murchison beamed with happiness. She knew very well the difference between being a unit among a large house-party, and staying as an only guest,

and this cottage by the sea seemed to her to be the very incarnation of the taste and culture of breeding. She knew also that several rich and aspiring acquaintances of hers were spending a week at Stanborough, and she proposed after lunch to stroll along the beach towards there, and perhaps call at the hotel on the links. Her friends were sure to ask where she was staying, and it would be charming to say:

"Oh, down at the cottage with Lady Conybeare. So delicious and rustic; there is no one there except Lily and dear Toby. Of course we are very happy about it. And don't you find a hotel quite intolerable?"

In the pause that followed Mrs. Murchison ran over her plans.

"What a charming place this is," she went on; "and how delightful to be near Stanborough! Lord Comber is there; he told me he was going on there from Beyrout. At the Links Hotel, I think he said."

Toby looked up.

"Is Comber there?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

His cheerful face had clouded, and his tone was peremptory.

"Of course I am sure," said Mrs. Murchison. "Dear me, how annoyed you look, Lord—I mean Toby. And I thought he was such a friend of your sister-in-law's and all. What is the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," he said quickly.

But he looked at his mother and caught her eye.

"What a very odd place for Lord Comber to come to!" said Lily, who had grasped "watering-place" with greater distinctness than Mrs. Murchison.

"I am sure I don't see why," said she. "Stanborough is extremely bracing and fashionable. I saw they had quite a list of fashionable arrivals there in the World yesterday. Isn't it so, Toby?"

"Perhaps he has come to play golf," said Toby in a tone of resolute credulity.

"Golf?" asked Mrs. Murchison vaguely. "Oh, that's the game, isn't it, where you dig a sandpit, and then hit the ball into it and swear? So somebody told me. It sounds quite easy."

Toby laughed.

"A very accurate description," he said. "I'm going to play this afternoon. Hear me swear!"

Lady Conybeare rose, as they had finished lunch.

"Come and see me before you go out, Toby," she said.

Lily looked from one to the other, and saw the desire of a private word between them.

"Oh, mother, let me take you to the rose-garden!" she said. "Shall we have coffee there as usual, Lady Conybeare?"

"Yes, dear. Take your mother out."

The two left the room, and Lady Conybeare turned to Toby.

"Well, Toby," she said.

"I don't wish to be either indiscreet or absurd, mother," he answered.

"Nor I," said she. "Kit told me she was coming to Stanborough for a week, and I asked her, of course, to stay here. She said she had made arrangements to stay at the Links Hotel. Jack is not coming."

Toby made two bread pellets, and flicked them out of the window with extraordinary accuracy of aim.

"Damn Kit!" he said. "She comes to-morrow, and that beast, I suppose, came a day or two ago. I saw somebody in the distance the day before yesterday who reminded me of him, but I didn't give another thought to it. No doubt it was he."

There was a pause.

"But Jack——" said Lady Conybeare, and it cost her something to say it.

"Oh, Jack's a fool!" said Toby quickly. "You know that as well as I do, mother. Of course, he's awfully clever, and all that; but I'll be blowed if my wife ever stops at a seaside hotel with a Comber-man."

Lady Conybeare stretched out her hand.

"Thank God, I have you, Toby!" she said.

"What a fool Kit is!" said Toby thoughtfully. "There are hundreds of people there, as Mrs. Murchison says. Telegraph for Jack, mother," he said suddenly.

Lady Conybeare shook her head.

"We have no right, no reason to do that," she said. "Toby, take the thing in hand. Do your best."

Toby looked out of the window and hit an imaginary opponent with his closed fist.

"Perhaps we could manage something," he said. "Don't say a word to Lily,

mother, or to Mrs. Murchison."

Lady Conybeare smiled rather bitterly.

"Nor wash my dirty linen in public," she said. "Is that my habit, dear?"

Toby got up and kissed his mother lightly on the forehead.

"I'll do my best," he said.

"I know you will."

And they went out to coffee in the rose-garden.

CHAPTER XIII

TOBY TO THE RESCUE

Half an hour later Toby was on his way to Stanborough, where he was to meet a friend at the club-house, and play a round of golf with him. As soon as that was over, he proposed to make a call at the Links Hotel and demand an interview with Ted Comber. Lily, in this as in all else above the common level of womankind, made no suggestion that she should come round with them. In fact, she voluntarily repudiated such a possibility.

"No proper man wants a girl hanging about when he is playing a game," she had said. "So if you ask me to come with you—if, in fact, you don't forbid me to—you'll be no proper man. Now, shall I come with you? I want to, awfully."

"Yes—I mean, no," said Toby, wavering, but deciding right.

Toby was playing with a friend after his own heart, who had just left Oxford, more to the regret of undergraduates than of tutors, and so presumably his departure was really regrettable. He was a hater of cities and five-o'clock teas, capable of riding whatever on this unruly earth had been foaled, but perfectly incapable of what he called "simpering and finesse," meaning thereby the pretty little social gifts. Furthermore, he was possessed of so much common-sense that at times he might have been unjustly suspected of being clever. Him, as they played, Toby determined to consult under secrecy as to what must be done with the ineffable Comber, and "If Buck and I," thought he, "aren't a match for that scented man, I'll brush my teeth with my niblick. Lord, what a lark!"

Toby, it must be confessed, rather enjoyed the mission with which his mother had entrusted him. He was not naturally of a punitive or revengeful

disposition, and, indeed, Lord Comber, had never done anything to him, except exist, which called for vengeance. But the thought of his discomfiture was sweet in his mouth, and, though he had not yet formed the vaguest idea as to how it was to be accomplished, he felt a serene confidence that he and Buck would be able to hatch something immensely unpleasant between them.

Here was no case, he thought gleefully to himself, that called for tact or diplomacy, or any lady-like little weapons, which Comber probably possessed. Brutal means must be used, and he should use them. He regretted intensely that both he and Comber were past the age when their difference could be settled with the straightforward simplicity which says, "Will you go of your own accord, or do you prefer to be kicked?" Dearly would he have liked that, for, indeed, his fists itched after the man.

Anyhow, the cause was good. Comber was to be sat upon, and Kit saved from making an egregious fool of herself. Married women of her age and appearance, reasoned Toby, do not stay alone with people like Comber at watering-places like Stanborough, and Kit's brother-in-law did not intend that she should do risky things of this description if he could prevent it. Toby's laudable determination on this point was not due, it must be confessed, to moral scruples. He did not know, and he did not care to know, whether Kit's flirtation with this man was serious or not. But people, he was aware, talked about them, and certainly, if she and he stayed in a Stanborough hotel for a week in August together, people would have an excellent reason for talking. Still less had he any fancy, supposing the worst came to the worst, for seeing, as his mother said, Conybeare linen, marked very plain, in the public wash-tub.

Also he hated Comber with all the fine intensity with which a healthy, normal young man hates, and is right to hate, those smiling, wobbly, curled and scented of his sex, who powder themselves and take pills, and read ladies' papers, and are at their best (or worst) in a boudoir—lap-dogs of London. Some women, and perhaps their Creator knows why, appeared, so Toby thought, to like them. Kit liked Comber—here was an instance of it that thrust sore at him. Now, Jack was no saint (here again Toby was not judging on moral grounds), but he was a man. He would shoot straight or ride straight all day, and in the evening he would make himself, it might be, quite scandalously agreeable to other people's wives. It was not right, and Toby did not defend him, but, anyhow, he behaved like a male. That was where the difference lay.

He remembered how they had all howled at Kit when one evening she had announced that she was going to Stanborough for a week in August to get braced. No, she was not going to take any of her friends with her, and very likely she would not even take a maid. She proposed to live in some stark

hotel swept by all the winds that blow, in a bedroom with only a small square of carpet, one damp sandy towel, and windows looking due north, and kept always wide open. She intended to bathe daily before breakfast in the cold, salt, terrible German Ocean, to sit and walk on the sands all day, and go to bed directly after an eggy high tea, about seven. She would have eggs with her tea, and eggs with her breakfast, and cold roast beef for lunch, and possibly beer. She would not go to stay with Jack's mother, which was the obvious thing to do, because the house was so comfortable, and she knew she would only sit indoors, and get up late and go to bed late if she did. She wanted to be cold and uncomfortable and early-birdish, and come back braced with a bronzed complexion like a sailor, and blowzy hair. It would be immensely healthy and exceedingly unpleasant.

Toby recollected these amazing plans of Kit's very precisely. Ted Comber, he also remembered, had been there when she had enunciated them, and when he asked if he might come too, had received an unqualified negative. Thus, whether Kit had or had not made this subsequent arrangement with him mattered not at all. If she had, the Perseus-Toby was coming hot-foot over the downs to deliver her from her self-forged fetters; and if Comber had come without being asked, still more peremptory should be his dismissal. What was to be done was clear to demonstration; how it must be done was a matter for council.

Toby found several friends at the club-house—it was of common occurrence that he found friends in casual and unlikely places—and got generally chaffed and slapped and offered various mixed and stimulating drinks warranted to improve his putting and shut the jaws of the bunkers. But in the course of time they got clear, and drove up the steep hill leading to the first hole. Once started, Toby gave the outlines of the problem to Buck, who was highly and justifiably indignant with him.

"It's a shabby trick, Toby," he said, "to bring me up on to this fine turf under the pretence of playing golf, if you want to talk morals. Good God! fancy talking moral problems on a golf links! If this was a lawn-tennis court, and you were a parson, I could understand it."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Buck!" said Toby; "the whole thing is stated—I have told you all—in ten words, and you needn't allude to it again till we get in. Then you shall say what you advise me to do. But it must be settled to-day; my sister-in-law comes to-morrow. Just let it simmer."

Buck grunted, waggled, frowned heavily at his ball, and laid the iron shot dead.

"There, it's all rot saying that to think of something puts you off," said Toby.

"Blast it all!" and his scudding half-topped ball ran very swiftly into the bunker.

"Of course, talking is one worse," said Buck, a little soothed.

Fifty yards separated the first green from the second tee, and Toby recapitulated the salient points of the problem. The man of few words answered nothing, and immediately afterwards drove a screamer.

These great sea-blown downs, over which the wind scours as shrill and salt as in a ship's rigging, are admirably predisposing towards lucidity of thought. The northern airs cleanse and vivify the brain; they set the blood trotting equably through the arteries, they tone down overstrung nerves, and raise the slack to the harmonious mean, and in a naturally sane mind lodged in an extremely sane body they produce extraordinarily well-balanced results. And golf above all human pursuits gives full play to what is known as the subliminal self, a fine phrase, denoting that occult and ruling factor in man's brain—unconscious thought. The body is fully and harmoniously occupied; so, too, the conscious mind. The eye measures a distance; the hand and muscles take its order, and direct the swinging of the club. Meantime that mysterious twin of entity, the inner brain, goes scenting along its private trails, without let or hindrance from the occupied conscious self. Each goes his own way, on roads, maybe, as diverse as those of Jekyll and Hyde, unharassed by the other. Once only in the round did Buck laugh in a loud and appreciative manner for no clear cause. His inner brain had caught a hare, and sent the message to the golfer.

It was still only a little after five when they returned to the club-house, and Toby ordered tea in a sequestered corner.

"Of course you'll go and call on this worm now," remarked Buck.

"Yes, that is what I meant to do. Got anything for me to say?"

"Toby, can you lie?"

"Like the devil, in a good cause."

"Well, tell the Comber man that you are coming to stay at the Links Hotel with your sister-in-law by her invitation. Do the thing properly, and be prodigal of details. It's a pity you have such a despicable imagination. Say that she wrote to you in despair because she would be bored to death with no one there to speak to, but that Conybeare insisted on her going. Nasty for the worm that? Eh?"

Toby pondered a moment.

"That's not up to much, Buck," he said. "It wouldn't drive the man away unless

he went simply from pique. And supposing he tells me Kit didn't write to me? Perhaps he has had a letter from her saying what fun they'll have."

"Oh, of course, if he says you lie," said Buck suggestively.

"Do you know the man?" asked Toby with rapture. "He is quite beautiful, with curly hair, rings, and scent, and I expect, if we knew all, stays."

Buck, it is idle to blink the fact, spat on the ground.

"Yes, I know him," he said. "Hell is full of such. By the way, I haven't seen you since you were engaged to be married. What an idiotic thing to do!"

"That happens to be your opinion, does it?" asked Toby mildly.

"Yes. I'm delighted, really. Congratulations. But the plan doesn't seem to suit you."

"No; it's rotten," said Toby. "I want something certain. This easily might not come off."

"He's a real worm, is he?" asked Buck. "I only know him by sight."

"Genuine, hall-marked," said Toby.

"Well, then give him a chance. Oh, not a chance of getting off. I mean, give him a chance of lying to you. Tell him as news that Lady Conybeare is coming here to-morrow, and perhaps he may appear surprised to hear it. That will give you an opportunity. You can say things to him then."

"Yes, there's more sense in that," said Toby. "Oh! come and dine to-night."

"All right. Is the She there?"

"Yes; you'll like her."

Buck looked at him enviously.

"What infernal good luck you have, Toby!" he said.

"Oh, I know I have," said Toby. "Lily——"

"Don't know her yet. But about the worm. Probably there will be a row. You've got to frighten him away, remember that. Worms are always nervous."

"There'll be a row afterwards with Kit, I'm afraid," said Toby.

"Oh, certainly. But it's all for her good. Introduce me when she comes, and I'll say I have been her guardian angel."

Toby looked at Buck's strong brown face for a moment in silence.

"You'd look nice with wings and a night-shirt," he remarked. "Pity Raphael or

one of those Johnnies isn't alive."

"If by Johnnies you refer to the Italian school of painters," said Buck, "it isn't worth while saying so."

"I know; that's why I didn't say so. Good-bye; I'm off to the Links Hotel. Dinner at eight."

Lord Comber was in, and would Toby come up to his sitting-room? He met him at the top of the stairs, like a perfect hostess, and took him down the broad passage, stopping once opposite a big glass to smooth his carefully-crimped hair. Then he took Toby's arm, and Toby bristled, for he did not thrust his hand inside the curve of his elbow and let it lie there, but inserted it very daintily and gently, as if he was threading a needle, with a slight pressure of his long fingers.

"It's quite too delightful to see you, Toby," he said; "and how splendid you are looking! I wish I could get as brown as that. You must let me do a sketch of you. Yes, I'm here all alone, and I've been terribly bored. I wonder if your mother would allow me to come and see her. Is Miss Murchison there, too?"

"Yes; she came a couple of days ago."

"How nice! I do want to see more of her. Everyone is frightfully jealous of you. And I hear your mother's house is quite beautiful. Round to the right."

Ted Comber firmly held the creed that if you flatter people and make yourself pleasant you can do anything with them. There is quite an astonishing amount of truth in it, but, like many other creeds, it does not contain the whole truth. It does not allow for the possible instance of two personalities being so antagonistic that every effort, even to be pleasant, on the part of the one merely renders it more obnoxious to the other. This is a very disconcerting sort of exception, and the fact that it may prove the rule is a very slight compensation, practically considered.

"You have some wonderful Burne-Jones drawings, someone told me," went on Ted, innocently driving the exception up to the hilt, so to speak, in his own blood. "Your father must have had such taste! It is so clever of people to see twenty years before what is going to be valuable. I wish I had known him. Here's my den."

Toby looked round the den in scarcely veiled horror. Daniel's den with all its lions, he thought, would be preferable to this. There was a French writing-table, and on it signed photographs of two or three women in silver frames, an empty inkstand, a gold-topped scent-bottle (not empty), and a small daintily-bound volume of French verse. Against the wall stood a sofa, smothered in cushions, and on it a mandolin with a blue ribbon. A very big low armchair

stood near the sofa, on the arm of which was cast a piece of silk embroidery, the needle still sticking in it, a damning proof of the worker thereof. There was a large looking-glass over the fireplace, and on the chimney-piece stood two or three Saxe figures. A copy of the Gentlewoman and the Queen lay on the floor.

"I can't get on without a few of my own things about me," said Lord Comber, fussing gently about the room. "I always take some of my things with me if I am going to stay in a hotel. This place is quite nice; they are very civil, and the cooking isn't bad. But it makes such a difference to have some of one's things about; it makes your rooms so much more homey."

And he drew the curtain a shade more over the window to keep the sun out.

"How long are you going to stop here?" asked Toby.

"Oh, another week, I expect," said Comber, removing the embroidery, and indicating the armchair to Toby. "Of course, it is rather lonely, and I don't know a soul here; but I'm out a good deal on these delicious sands, and another week alone will be quite bearable."

"I wonder you didn't arrange to come with somebody," said Toby quietly.

Lord Comber took up the gold-topped scent-bottle and refreshed his forehead. This was a little awkward, but Kit had told him to tell none of the cottage-party that she would be there. He remembered vaguely that Kit had, one evening in July, announced her intention of coming to Stanborough, but he could not recollect whether Toby was there, and, besides, at the time she had not really meant to do anything of the kind. It was only afterwards that they had made their definite arrangements. The worst of it was, that there was a letter from Kit lying on the table, and Toby might or might not have seen it.

"Everyone is engaged now," he said. "It is hopeless trying to get people in August. Oh, I heard from Kit this morning," he added, by rather an ingenious afterthought. "She asked me to come down to Goring in September."

"Was that all she said?" asked Toby.

"Oh, you know what Kit's letters are like," said he. "A delicious sort of hash of all that has happened to everybody."

Toby paused a moment. God was good.

"She didn't happen to say by what train she was going to arrive to-morrow?" he asked.

Lord Comber made a little impatient gesture, admirably spontaneous. He had often used it before.

"Oh, how angry Kit will be!" he said. "She told me particularly not to tell

anybody. How did you know, Toby?"

"She wrote to my mother some days ago declining her invitation to come to the cottage," he said. "Also the thing was discussed at length in my presence. There was no question of concealment. I remember you asked if you might come too, and she said no."

Lord Comber laughed, quite as if he was not annoyed.

"Yes, I remember," he said. "What fun Kit was that night! It was at the Haslemeres', wasn't it? I never saw her in such form."

Toby sat as stiff as a poker in the armchair.

"I can't quite reconcile your statement that you were going to be all alone with the fact that you knew Kit was coming to-morrow," he said. "Not off-hand, at least."

Ted Comber began to be aware that the position was a sultry one. Kit had distinctly told him not to tell any of the people at the cottage that she was coming, and he had said that this was the wrong sort of precaution to take. They would be sure to know, and a failure in secrecy is a ghastly failure, and so difficult to explain afterwards, for people always think that if you keep a thing secret there is something to be kept secret. No doubt she had come round to his way of thinking, and had told them herself, forgetting the prohibition she had laid on him. Altogether it was an annoying business. However, this scene with the barbarous brother-in-law had to be gone through with at once. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Kit told me not to mention it," he said. "We were going to have a rustic little time in all our worst clothes and no maid. That is all."

"You have lied to me—that is all," said Toby, with incredible rudeness.

"That is not the way for one man to speak to another, Toby," said Lord Comber, feeling suddenly cold and damp. "I followed Kit's directions."

"Of course, it is the fashion to say that it is the woman's fault," observed Toby fiendishly.

Lord Comber was quite at a loss how to deal with such outrageous behaviour. People did not do such things.

"Did you come here in order to quarrel with me?" he asked.

"No, I don't want to quarrel," said Toby, "but I intend that you shall go away."

"That is so thoughtful of you," said Comber.

He was getting a little agitated, and had recourse to the scent-bottle again. He

did not like fencing with the buttons off.

Toby did not answer at once; he was thinking of the suggestion he had made to his mother. He determined to use it as a threat, at any rate.

"Look here," he said; "Kit may choose her own friends as much as she pleases, but she cannot go staying alone with you at a place like this. Either you go or I telegraph to Jack."

Lord Comber laughed.

"Do you really suppose Jack would really mind?" he said.

"And do you know that you are speaking of my brother?" asked Toby.

"I'm sure that is not Jack's fault," remarked Comber.

"No. Then, as you say, if Jack won't mind, I'll telegraph to him at once. Have you a form here? Oh, it doesn't matter; I can get one in the office."

"The fact that you telegraph to Jack implies that there is something to telegraph about," said Comber. "There is nothing."

Toby did not choose to acknowledge that there could be any truth in this.

"I don't care a damn," he observed. "Either you go or I telegraph. Take your time, but please settle as soon as you can. I don't want to make things unpleasant, and if you say that your only aunt is very ill, and that you have been sent for, I won't contradict it—in fact, I'll bear you out if Kit makes a fuss."

"That is extraordinarily kind of you," said Lord Comber. "And since when have you become your sister-in-law's keeper in this astounding manner?"

Toby got quickly out of his chair, and stood very stiff and hot and uncompromising.

"Now, look here," he said: "my name is Massingbird, and so is Jack's, and I don't wish that it should be in everybody's mouth in connection with yours. People will talk; you know it as well as I do, and there is going to be no Comber-Conybeare scandal, thank you very much."

"You seem to be doing your level best to make one," said Lord Comber.

"Oh, I don't mind a Ted-Toby scandal," said Toby serenely. "I can take care of myself."

"And of Kit, it seems."

"And of Kit—at least, it seems so, as you say."

There was a long silence, and Toby drew a vile briar pipe out of his pocket. He noticed that Lord Comber, even in his growing agitation, cast an agonized glance towards it, and, putting it back in his pocket, he lit a cigarette.

"You don't like pipes, I think?" he said. "I forgot for the moment."

Toby sat down again in the big chair and smoked placidly. He intended to get an answer, and if it was unsatisfactory (if the worm turned and refused to go), he would have to consider whether he should or should not telegraph to Jack. He felt that this would be an extreme step, and hoped he should not have to take it.

Lord Comber's reflections were not enviable. To begin with, Toby had a most uncomfortable, angular mind and an attitude towards life which will not consent to be fitted into round holes nor adapt itself to nice easy compromises and tactful smoothings over of difficult places. He was all elbows, mentally considered—elbows and unbending joints. If he intended to carry his point, he would not meet one half-way; he held horrible threats over one's head, which, if defied, he might easily carry out. His own argument he considered excellent. To telegraph to Jack implied that there was something to telegraph about, but this square, freckled brute could not or would not see it. It really was too exasperating. He himself conducted his own life so largely by the employment of tact, finesse, diplomacy (Toby would have called these lies), that it was most disconcerting to find himself in conflict with someone who not only did not employ them, but refused to recognise them as legitimate weapons. Indeed, he was in a dilemma. It was impossible to contemplate a telegram being sent to Jack: it was equally impossible to contemplate what would happen if Kit came and found him gone. And the annoyance of going, of missing this week with her, was immense. It gave him a sort of *cachet* to be seen staying with Kit alone at a watering-place. She was more indisputably than ever on a sort of pinnacle in his world this year, and everyone would think it so very daring. That was the sort of fame he really coveted—to be in the world's eye doing rather risky things with an extremely smart woman.

Moreover, in his selfish, superficial way, he was very fond of her. She was always amusing, and always ready to be amused; they laughed and chattered continually when they were alone, and a week with her was sure to be an excessively entertaining week. She had proposed that they should do this herself, and written a charming note, which he kept. "We shall be quite alone, and we won't speak to a soul," she had said. And that from Kit, who, as a rule, demanded a hundred thousand people around and about, was an immense compliment.

But because all his thoughts as he debated these things, while Toby sat smoking, were quite contemptible, the struggle was no less difficult. A

despicable man in a dilemma, though the motives and considerations which compose that dilemma are tawdry and ignoble, does not suffer less than a fine spirit, but, if anything, more, for he has no sustaining sense of duty to guide and reward him. Ted Comber's happiness and pleasure in life, of which he had a great deal, was chiefly composed of trivial and unedifying ingredients, and to be intimate, not only privately, but also publicly, with Kit was one of them. And her unutterable brother-in-law sat smoking in his best armchair, after presenting his ultimatum. If a word from him would have sent Toby to Siberia, he would have gone. It would be a good deed to rid society of such an outrage.

Again, yielding with a bad grace had its disadvantages, for though he had no personal liking for Toby, a great many people, with whom he desired to be on the best of terms, had. There were certain houses to which he liked to go where Toby was eminently at home, and though he had enemies in plenty, and thought little about them, Toby would be a most undesirable addition to them. He was perfectly capable of turning his back on one, assigning reasons, and of behaving with a brusqueness which ought, so Lord Comber thought, to be sufficient to ensure anybody's being turned neck and crop out of those well-cushioned society chariots in which he lounged. But he knew very well, and cursed the unfairness of fate, that Toby's social position was far firmer than his own, while, whereas he cared very much for it, Toby did not care at all. Ted made himself welcome because he took great pains to be pleasant and to amuse people, and had always a quantity of naughty little stories, which had to be whispered very quietly, and then laughed over very loud, but the whole affair was an effort, though its reward was worthy. Men, he knew, for the most part disliked him, and men are so terribly unreasonable. Once last year only, his name had been cut out of a house-party by his hostess's absurd husband, and it was not well to multiply occasions for such untoward possibilities.

He took up his gold-topped scent-bottle for the third time, and by an effort almost heroic, though there was so little heroic in its cause, resumed a frank and unresentful manner.

"I disagree with you utterly, Toby," he said, "but I will do as you suggest. You don't mind my speaking straight out what I think? No? Well, you seem to me to have interfered in a most unwarrantable manner; but as you have done so, I dare say, from excellent motives, though I don't care a straw about your motives, I must make the best of it. I will go to-morrow morning, and I will telegraph now to Kit, to say I can't stop here. Now, you said you didn't wish to quarrel with me. That I hold you to. Let us remain friends, Toby, for if anyone has a grievance it is I. What I shall say to Kit, God knows; she will be furious, and if the thing comes out I shall tell her the whole truth, and lay the whole blame on you."

Toby rose.

"That is only fair," he said. "Good-bye."

Lord Comber smoothed his hair before the glass, when suddenly an idea struck him, so brilliant and so simple that he could hardly help smiling. He opened the door.

"I shall just walk with you to the top of the stairs," he said, again taking Toby's arm. "Really I am quite sorry to leave; I have got quite attached to my dear little room, and don't you think it's rather pretty? So sorry I shan't be able to come and see your mother at the cottage, and it's all your fault. Good-bye, Toby."

Toby went downstairs, and Lord Comber hurried back to his room. He had no longer the smallest resentment against Toby, and a smile of amused satisfaction testified to his changed sentiments. He rang for his man, and sat down to write a telegram. It was addressed to Kit, and ran as follows:

"Impossible to remain here. Excellent reasons. Do come to Aldeburgh instead. I arrive there to-morrow afternoon, and go to hotel."

He read it over.

"Poor Toby," he thought to himself. "What a lesson not to interfere!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHAIRMAN AND THE DIRECTOR

During this beautiful August weather Mr. Alington was very busily employed in London. At no time was he a notable lover of the country, taking it in homœopathic doses only, and enjoying a copy of Nature by Turner far more than the original thing. He was, indeed, somewhat disposed to Dr. Johnson's characteristic and superficial heresy that one green field is like another green field, and though he took no walks for pleasure down Fleet Street, he took many hansoms to his brokers for business. For the financial scheme which had darted like a meteor across his augur's brain on the night on which he received his manager's report had, meteor-like, left a shining and golden furrow. The shining furrow, indeed, had grown ever more brilliant and golden; it illumined the whole of his speculative heaven. And by the end of the month the reading of the augur was ready to be practically fulfilled.

Now, the Stock Exchange is, justly or unjustly, supposed to be a place where

sharp and shady deeds are done, but Mr. Alington, already a prince in the financial world, did not much fear bears or bulls or raids or rigging, and the market had a firm belief in his soundness.

His board consisted of Jack Conybeare, Tom Abbotsworthy, his Australian manager, Mr. Linkwood, a man as hard-headed as teak, and himself. At that time a board constituted on such lines was a new thing, and when the prospectus was sent out there were many business men who rather raised their eyebrows at it. But the effect, on the whole, was precisely what Mr. Alington had desired, and, indeed, anticipated. Surely the names of a couple of noblemen, one of whom was a prominent supporter of the Bishops in the House of Lords, and whose wife was really synonymous with the word bazaar-opener, the other a prospective Duke, were a guarantee of the good faith of the proceeding. The British public might not be aware that Lord Conybeare knew much about mines, but that department was well looked after by Mr. Alington and his manager, as shrewd a pair as could be found between the poles. Certainly, innovation as it was, this sort of board, so reasoned its inventor, looked well.

The British public followed these prognostications of Alington with touching fidelity, though they did not give Jack credit for ignorance about mining. Such an authority on guano must certainly be a well-informed man, and if those of the aristocracy who were in indigent circumstances were sensible enough to set themselves to make a little money, who would quarrel with them? Three acres and a gold-mine was just about what Jack was worth. Again the enemies of unearned increment were delighted. Here was a fine example, a horny-handed Marquis. A third section of the public, so small, however, as not to really have a voice at all, and who consisted chiefly of Conybeare's acquaintances, sounded a discordant note. "God help the shareholders," said they.

The prospectus gave a glowing but perfectly honest account of the property called the Carmel group, for no one knew better than Alington how excellent a policy honesty is, in moderation, and in the right place. Mount Carmel lay in the centre, on one diagonal Carmel North and South, on the other Carmel East and West. A very rich vein of ore ran through Carmel North, Mount Carmel and Carmel South, extending on the evidence of bore-holes the whole length of the three. Carmel East and West were both outliers from this main reef, but in both there was a good deal of surface gold, very easy to get at, and they should soon become dividend-payers. The ore in these two, however, was much more refractory than in the main reef, and in two or three experiments which had been made it had been found possible to extract only 20 per cent. of it. In the other three the ore was very different in quality, and very rich. Experiments had yielded five ounces to the ton, but these mines could not

become dividend-payers in the immediate future, as a good deal of developing work must necessarily be put through first. At one point, by a curious fault in strata, the reef came to the surface, and it was from here the specimens had been taken. There was now no difficulty about water, for a very satisfactory arrangement had been come to with a neighbouring property. A mill of a hundred stamps, which would soon be increased, if the mine developed as well as the directors had every reason to believe it would, was now in course of erection on Carmel East. Finally, they wished to draw special attention to the remarkable yield of five ounces to the ton from the vein running through Carmel North and the other two. Such a result spoke for itself.

The directors proposed to put this property on the market in the following manner: Two companies were offered for subscription, the one owning Carmel East and West, the other the North, South, and central mines. The two groups would respectively be called Carmel East and West, and Carmel. The vendor, Mr. Alington, received fifty thousand pounds down, and fifty thousand pounds' worth of shares, and the rest of the shares, after certain allotments made to the directors, were thrown open to public subscriptions, and the capital to be subscribed for was three hundred thousand pounds in Carmel East and West, five hundred thousand pounds in Carmel. Half a crown was to be paid on application, half a crown on allotment, and the remaining fifteen shillings for special settlement at not less time than two months. Cheques to be paid into the Carmel Company, Limited, at their account with Lloyd's.

This prospectus was quietly but favourably received; the public, as Mr. Alington had seen, were nearly ready to go mad about West Australian gold, but he was not ill-pleased that the madness did not rise to raving-point at once. His new group he fully believed was a genuine paying concern; that is to say, supposing he had floated one company embracing all the mines, and that company was judiciously and honestly managed, the shareholders would be sure of large dividends for a considerable number of years. But the scheme he had formed did not have as its end and object large dividends for a considerable number of years, though it did not object to them as such, and this quiet, favourable reception of the prospectus pleased him greatly. He very much valued the reputation of a steady, shrewd man, and it would not have suited his plans nearly so well if one or other group had gone booming up immediately.

The whole of the capital was very soon subscribed, and a large purchase or two had been made from Australia. This looked well for the company; it showed that on the spot the Carmel groups were well thought of. A friend of Mr. Alington's, whom he often spoke of as one of the acutest men he knew, a Mr. Richard Chavasse, was one of these large holders, and this gave him a great deal of satisfaction, so he told Jack. He himself was down at Kit's

cottage in Buckinghamshire on the first Sunday in September, alone with Lord Conybeare, and they had a good talk over the prospects of the mines, and collateral subjects. He and Jack got on excellently alone, and were already in the "my dear Conybeare and Alington" stage.

"I could not be better pleased with the reception the market has given to the Carmel group," said Alington. "I see you have followed my advice, my dear Conybeare, and invested largely in the East and West Company."

Jack was lounging in a long chair in the smoking-room. The morning was hopelessly wet, and violent scudding rain beat tattooes on the windows, and scourged its glory from the garden.

"Yes, I have paid ten thousand half-crowns twice," he said. "Even half-crowns mount up, and I used to think nothing of them. I have followed your advice to the letter, and I can no more pay the special settlement than I can fly."

"You were quite right," said Alington. "I assure you there will not be the slightest need for that. By the way, the Stock Exchange have given us the special settlement at the mid-October account. Dear me! what an opportunity poor Lord Abbotsworthy has missed! He would not take my advice. Even now the shares are at a slight premium. You have invested, in fact, the larger half of your first year's salary."

"Exactly. By the way, I don't want my salary to be printed very large in the balance-sheet. Put it in a sequestered corner and periphrase it, will you? People won't like it, you know, and the whole concern will be discredited; they are so prejudiced."

"That also need not trouble you," said Alington. "In fact, I have paid your salary myself. It does not appear at all in the balance-sheet."

Lord Conybeare frowned.

"Do you mean you pay me five thousand pounds a year out of your own purse?"

"Certainly. Your services to me are worth that, and I pay it most willingly, which the shareholders undoubtedly would not do. Indeed, my dear Conybeare, the benefit that your name and Lord Abbotsworthy's—yours particularly—have done me is immense. The British public is so aristocratic at heart and at purse; and unless I am some day bankrupt, which I assure you is not in the least likely, no one will ever know about your—your remuneration."

"I don't know that I altogether like that," said Jack in what Kit called his "scruple voice," which always irritated her exceedingly.

"A child," she said once, "could give points to Jack in dissimulation."

To Alington also the scruple voice did not seem a thing to be taken very seriously.

"I really do not see that that need concern you," he said, after his usual pause. "In fact, I thought we had settled to dismiss such matters for me to manage as I choose. You consented to be on my board. As a business matter, I am quite willing to give you this sum in return for your services. Now, the shareholders would not, I think, rate you at that figure. Shareholders know nothing about business; I do."

Jack laughed.

"How unappreciated I have been all these years!" he said. "I think I shall put an advertisement in the Times: 'A blameless Marquis is willing to be a director of anything for a suitable remuneration.'"

Mr. Alington held up his hand, a gesture frequent with him.

"Ah! that I should object to very strongly," he said. "Consider your remuneration a retaining fee, if you like, but we must keep our directors exclusive. I cannot have you joining any threepenny concern that may be going about, or, indeed, any concern at all. Carmel—you belong to Carmel," he said thoughtfully.

Jack took a copy of the Mining Weekly from the table.

"Have you seen this?" he asked. "There is a column about the Carmel mines, all most favourable, and written, I should say, by someone who knows."

Mr. Alington did not appear particularly interested.

"I am glad they have put it in this week," he said. "They promised to make an effort."

"You have seen it? Don't you think it is good?"

"I wrote it—practically, at least, I wrote it. The City editor, at any rate, was kind enough to write it under my suggestions—I might say under my dictation."

"One can't have too many friends," observed Conybeare.

"Well, I can hardly call him a friend. I never set eyes on him till two days ago, and then he was more an enemy. He called and tried to blackmail me."

"My dear Alington, what have you been doing?" asked Jack.

Mr. Alington paused and laughed gently.

"He tried to blackmail me not because I had been doing anything, but because

I had not done something—because I had not offered him shares, in fact; but I squared that very easily."

"You paid him?" asked Jack.

"Of course. He was comparatively cheap, and he became like Balaam. He came to curse, and he went away blessing me and the mine, and Australia and you, with a small cheque in his pocket and copious notes for this article to which you have been referring."

"Do you mean to say that you are liable to be called on by any City editor, and made to give him money not to crab the mine?" asked Jack incredulously.

"Well, not by any City editor," said Mr. Alington, "though I wish I was, but certainly by a fair percentage. It is a most convenient custom. When one is doing things, as I am, on a fairly large scale, it matters to me very little whether I pay the Mining Weekly a hundred pounds or so. That article is worth far more to me than that, just as you, my dear Conybeare, are worth far more to me than the paltry sum I give you as my director and chairman."

Mr. Alington spoke with silken blandness, yet with an under-current of proprietorship, as if he was a pupil-teacher delivering an address to school children, and was telling them beautiful little stories with morals.

"I see you are surprised," he went on. "But really there is nothing surprising about it. A paper gives an opinion; what matter whose—mine or the editor's? The editor probably knows nothing about it, so it is mine. And if a small cheque change hands over the opinion, that is the concern of me and my balance. It is worth my while to pay it, and it appears to be worth the editor's while to accept it. I only wish the custom went further—that one could go direct to the Times, say, and ask what is their price for a column. Sometimes one can do that—I don't mean with the Times—but it is always a little risky. I was very anxious, for instance, last week to get a good notice of this prospectus of ours in the City Journal, and I did what was perhaps rather rash, though it turned out excellently. Mr. Metcalfe, their second editor, is slightly known to me, and I know him to be poor and blessed with a large family. Poor men so often are. He has a son whom he wants to send to Oxford."

Mr. Alington paused again, with a look on his face like that which the embodied spirit of Charity Organization may be supposed to wear when it hears of a really deserving case. Jack listened quite attentively, though long speeches were apt to bore him. He felt as if he was learning his business.

"The lad is a charming young fellow," went on Charity Organization; "clever too, and likely to get an exhibition or scholarship. Well, I asked his father to call on me, and offered him two hundred pounds for such an article as appears

in the Mining Weekly which you have in your hand. He was indignant, most indignant, and wondered how I had the face to make such an offer. He said he would not do what I had suggested for twice the money. I took that, rightly, to mean that he would, and I gave it him. Four hundred pounds will help very considerably, as I pointed out to him, in his son's expenses at Oxford. And he went away, after a little further conversation, with tears of gratitude in his eyes—tears of gratitude, my dear Conybeare. Two days afterwards there appeared in the City Journal a very nice article, if I may say so, considering I wrote the greater part of it myself—really a very nice article about Carmel. And I was glad to help the young fellow, to give him a chance—very glad. I told his father so, putting it in exactly that way."

Mr. Alington sighed gently and modestly at this reminiscence, like a retiring man humbly thankful for the opportunity of aiding in a good work, and Jack for a moment was puzzled. Then, remembering he was dealing with a man of business, he laughed. The thing was excellently recited with praiseworthy gravity.

"The stage has lost an actor," he observed, "even if the world has gained a director. Admirable, my dear Alington. But why, why keep it up with me? I assure you I am not shocked."

Mr. Alington looked up in surprise.

"An actor? Not shocked? Keep it up?" he queried. "I do not understand."

"You are inimitable," said Jack.

Mr. Alington got up.

"You don't understand me," he said with a certain warmth, "and you wrong me. I gather from your words that you have doubts of my sincerity. By what right, if you please?"

Jack was grave in an instant.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I see that I was in the wrong."

The heat died out of Mr. Alington's face; there was no reproach in his mild, benignant eye. A kind, Christian gentleman looked gently at Jack.

"It is granted willingly," he said. "But please, my dear Conybeare, do not make such mistakes in the future. Let me ask you to assume that I am sincere till you have the vaguest cause for supposing I am not. The English law assumes a man's innocence till he is proved guilty. That is all I ask. Treat me as you would treat a suspect. But when you have such cause, please come to me and state it. Much harm can be done by nursing a suspicion, by not trying to clear it up. Harm, you will remember, was nearly done to me in that way before.

Luckily, I had an opportunity of explaining her error to Lady Conybeare."

Jack had an uncomfortable sense that this man, for all the blandness of his respectability, could show claws. He suspected that claws had been shown quite unmistakably to Kit on the occasion to which Mr. Alington so delicately alluded, for she had come upstairs, after her talk with him in the hall, with the distinct appearance of having been severely scratched. But Mr. Alington only paused long enough to let the bare justice of his demand sink in.

"Let me explain," he went on. "You have suspected me of insincerity, and, luckily, you have stated your suspicion with great frankness, beyond the reach of mistake. This is my case: I wanted very much an article by Metcalfe in the City Journal, and when he called that morning, I was prepared to pay as much as two hundred pounds for it, but not more. Eventually I paid him four hundred pounds, twice that sum, partly, no doubt, because it was necessary that he should not be able to say that I had attempted to bribe him; but I must demand that you believe that the fact of my thereby giving the young fellow a good chance made me pay that sum willingly. I did not haggle over it, though I am perfectly certain I could have got what I wanted for less. You believe this?"

Jack found himself saying that he believed this, and Mr. Alington grew even more silken and seraphic.

"I was delighted to do it," he said, "and in my private accounts I have entered two hundred and fifty pounds as a cheque to Metcalfe senior for business purposes, one hundred and fifty pounds as charity. It was charity. I entered it as such."

"Certainly you must have made a friend of Metcalfe senior, and junior if he only knew," said Jack.

"Yes, I am delighted to have done so. I have also incidentally made Metcalfe senior a—a confederate. From a business point of view that also pleases me. How marvellously all things work together for good! It comes in the morning lesson to-day."

Jack felt it difficult to know what decorum demanded of him. Bribing and the morning lesson in one breath were a little hard to reconcile. But if you have assumed and stated that you believe a man to be an actor, and if he assures you he is not, and you beg his pardon, it must be understood that you accept his *bonâ fides*. At any rate, you have to appear to do so, and Jack, who did not consider himself more than an amateur, found the task difficult, under the eye of one who was capable of such astonishing histrionic feats, who could act so containedly before no scenery and a sceptical audience. That unctuous voice quoting the lesson for the day was a miracle, and the miracle, like that of the barren fig-tree, seemed so unnecessary. However, everyone has an inalienable

right to pose, and it is the point of good manners to assume that nobody exercises it.

Mr. Alington rose with a sort of soft alacrity, and walked across to the window. Sheets of rain were still flung against the streaming panes, and the glory of the garden was battered and beaten. A thick vapour, half steam, half mist, rose from the water of the river, warmed by its summer travel, but his careful eye detected a break on the horizon.

"We shall have a fine afternoon," he said to Jack. "With your leave, therefore, I will get the prospectus, for I shall be glad to run over a few points with you."

Jack looked out over the drenched landscape.

"I bet you a sovereign it does not clear," he said.

Mr. Alington took a little green morocco note-book from his pocket.

"Done, my dear fellow," he said. "I will just record it. You will certainly lose. I would have given you two to one, if you had asked it."

He left the room, and in a few minutes returned with a sheaf of papers.

"Now, if you will give me your attention for half an hour or so," he said, "I will tell you all that you, as a director, need know."

"And as a shareholder?" asked Jack.

Mr. Alington rattled his gold pencil-case between his teeth. He felt disposed to trust his chairman a good long way, and, ignoring the scruple-voice, "Yes, I will tell you that also," he said. "But keep the two well apart, my dear Conybeare."

CHAPTER XV

THE WEEK BY THE SEA

Toby thought it wise to call at the Links Hotel on the morning following his interview with Lord Comber, to make sure of the result of his interference, while Buck waited and grinned in the garden. They both of them wanted to bet that the worm had kept his word and gone, and both were willing to lay odds on it, and thus no wager was possible. Toby's face was agape with smiles when he came back, and they both laughed for a full minute behind a laurel-bush.

This was satisfactory, everybody was pleased, and it was not the least unlikely that Lord Comber himself at that moment was laughing too. He had heard

from Kit the same evening in reply to his telegram that she would start for Aldeburgh (not Stanborough) next morning. All his neat and nasty little embroideries and Dresden china, his violet powder, scent-bottles, manicure brushes, and little vellum-bound indecencies of French verse, had been packed the same evening by his man, and he left Stanborough and the bowing proprietor of the Links Hotel in excellent spirits, with a new number of the Queen. Kit (she really was so clever about those things) had appeared in a gown exactly like one that was to-day given as a novelty in the paper a full three months before, and remarkably well she had looked in it. It was of pale lilac satin—Ted always knew how dresses were made—trimmed with point-lace, and straps of narrow black velvet. The bottom of the skirt was outlined with a scroll-patterned lace insertion, and cut into scallops to fit the lace. There was a mantle which went with it—perhaps the Queen would get hold of that in another month or two—which had suited Kit admirably: whatever Kit wore suited her. He felt quite proud to know a woman who antedated novelties in this way. Art as reflected in the fashion papers may be long; art on the same authority was always late if you took your time from Kit.

Packing and travelling by slow cross-country trains was naturally a nuisance, but, after all, how right Toby had been, thought Ted, though for wrong reasons. Stanborough was too full, and full of the wrong sort of people, those, in fact, who fill their suburban minds with the movements of the aristocracy, and he did not care at all that he should be renowned in suburban circles for doing risky things with smart women. Yes, how right Toby had been, and how marvellously had his scheme miscarried. Really, that sort of interference ought to be punishable; it was a brutal moral assault, and people ought to be taken up for such things, just as if they had kicked their wives. It was a crime with violence, and the cat, he believed, had been used with success on ruffians no more dastardly. Toby fully deserved the cat, and Lord Comber would have laughed to see him get it. Yet there was a distinctly amusing side to the affair, and it was really not possible to be angry for long with such feeble and futile attempts to interfere with his liberty and Kit's. That red-headed, freckle-faced brother-in-law, with his large hands and idiotic smile, would be violently hitting little golf-balls over the down this morning, thinking to himself how exceedingly clever he had been, and what a fine manly fellow he was. Lord Comber hated fine manly fellows, and they returned the compliment. It would be very amusing to tell Kit all about it. How she would scream! Perhaps they might arrange some delicate and devilish revenge together on Toby, something really nasty which would rankle. And the most amusing thing was that Kit and he had gained their point, namely, a week at the seaside together, seeming all the time to have yielded. He had avoided quarrelling with Toby, and had left him, victorious himself, to think that all the honours of the field were his.

In his pretty drawing-room way Toby Comber was very artistic, and where many people would see only a flat green field or a level landscape, he caught a delicious glimpse of a picture of the Dutch school. He looked out from his railway carriage window on placid cows standing knee-deep in pasture, or chewing a lazy cud beneath the narrow noon-day shade of drowsy elms, with a good deal of appreciation. He cared little either for cows or elms, except in so far as they reminded him of pictures which he admired, and which he knew to be valuable, and in the beauty of a landscape he looked mainly for an illustration of a picture. Like a large number of the more artistic of his world, he had a genuine respect for any work of art that was valuable, especially if it was more valuable than it would naturally appear to someone who did not know. He had a real reverence for rare first editions, even though he cared not two straws for what the book was about, and though all subsequent editions were better printed, and mezzotints which he would not have given two thoughts to a few years ago had become admirable in his eyes simply because people had begun to collect them and to pay high prices for them.

Hurry, so prominent and distressing a factor in our modern world, so subversive of true progress, is still unknown to cross-country lines, and they remain invincibly leisurely. By the map he had not many miles to go, but before his journey was half over he had enjoyed the sweets of his triumph over Toby and the quiet wayside pictures to the full, and his thoughts returned to their accustomed abiding-place, himself. He was a great admirer of personal beauty both in men and women; good looks always attracted him, and he was a devout admirer of his own. He was, so he considered, exceedingly nicely and suitably dressed for a hot August day. He wore a flannel suit of a yellowish-brown tinge, which matched divinely with the rich chestnut of his boots and the darker chestnut of his hair, and his tie was bandana, the prevailing tone of which was deep russet. He had been a little hurried over dressing this morning, and had not really had time to put a pin in it; but now there was ample leisure, and, opening his dressing-bag, he took out a looking-glass, which he propped on the seat opposite, and a little leather box in which he kept his pins and studs. He took off his straw hat and smoothed his hair once or twice with his hand, but, being still dissatisfied, got out a silver-handled brush, and drew it several times upwards across his front-hair, emphasizing that upward sweep in it which he admired so much. If he had had the choosing of his hair, he would not have given orders for a different shade, and for this reason he did not dye it, though people wronged him. Even natural advantages, if too marked, like Kit's teeth, have their drawbacks. His eyebrows were much darker, almost black, and his brown eyes were really fine, large, and liquid. He wore no moustache, though till lately he had not done so; but young men of the age which he desired himself to be had ceased wearing them, and now a moustache meant you were born in the sixties.

Then he smiled at himself, not because he was amused, but for professional reasons, noting two things, the first (with great satisfaction) being the whiteness and regularity of his teeth, the second (with misgiving) the regions round the eye. By daylight it was impossible not to notice that the outer corners were marked—disfigured almost—by two lines, hideously styled crow's-feet, and there were certainly other lines below the eye. However, Kit had told him that massage had been tried with success for that, and he intended to see about it when he got back to town.

After another lingering look, he put the glass down and unlocked his leather jewel-case. In it were pins of all kinds, made with screw heads, so that they could serve indiscriminately as studs, and he turned them over. There was a beautiful ruby set in tiny brilliants, which he saw at once was the proper colour for the tone of his dress. He had worn it as a solitaire the evening before, and he unscrewed it, and replaced the back of the stud with a pin. But then he stopped. Not long ago Kit had given him a charming turquoise of the *vieille roche*, a piece of noon-day sky, and incapable of turning green. It would be suitable to wear that when he met her, but unfortunately it did not go at all well with his clothes. However, sentimental considerations prevailed, and he put the ruby back, pinned the turquoise into his tie, and looked at himself again.

"It is rather an experiment," he said half aloud.

He had telegraphed to the Aldeburgh Arms for three rooms, two bedrooms and a sitting room, and, arriving there, he found they had been given him *en suite*, the sitting-room in the middle. He felt bound to ask whether these were the only rooms to be had, and finding there were no others, he was powerless to alter the arrangement.

Kit would not arrive for two hours yet, and he set his valet to work at once to make the sitting-room habitable. The Saxe figures he took out himself, and gave a hand to the draping of embroideries; but the man had a great deal of taste, and he left him before long to his own ideas. After giving orders that masses of flowers should be sent up, and some plants for the fireplace, he went out to stroll by the beach till Kit's train arrived. There was a fresh breeze off the sea, and he put a light dust-cloak over his arm, in case he should feel chilly.

Kit's train arrived punctually, and she in the highest spirits. She laughed till she cried over the immaculate Toby turned missionary, and it was with difficulty that Ted persuaded her not to write him a line.

"Think of his face," she cried, "if I just send a note!—'Dear Toby: How does Stanborough suit you and your *fiancée*? I meant to come there, as you know,

but only yesterday evening I decided to come to Aldeburgh instead. Oddly enough, Ted Comber arrived here to-day. It was so pleasant (and quite unexpected) meeting him, and we shall have the greatest fun. He has been at Stanborough, he tells me, and had a long talk with you only yesterday. He is so fond of you.'—Oh, Ted, think of his face!"

There was very little that was genuine about Ted except his teeth and the colour of his hair, but his voice had the true ring of sincerity when he thought of Toby's face.

"Oh, that would spoil it all!" he cried. "Toby must never know—at least, not for a long time. He would certainly come here, too. How tiresome that would be! And I should quite lose my temper with him."

Kit laughed.

"I know; that is just it," she said. "It would be so amusing. I love seeing scenes, and I should like to see you really angry, Ted. What do you do?"

"Well, you will soon know, if you write to Toby," he said. "Kit, you simply mustn't. No, I won't say that, or else you will. But please don't."

Kit laughed again.

"Well, I won't to-night, at any rate," she said. "But I shall keep it as a hold over you, so you must behave nicely. Oh, Ted, how pretty you have made your room! And tea is ready; I am so hungry. Really, it is quite too funny about Toby."

She sat down and poured out tea; then, looking up as she handed him his cup, saw he was looking at her.

"Well?" she asked.

"When did I not behave nicely to you?" he said.

"Oh, a thousand times—yesterday, to-day, now, even," she said, "in expecting me to be sentimental. How can a woman who is just dying for her tea be sentimental?"

She looked at him a moment with her head on one side.

"Yes, you look quite nice to-day," she said, "and, really, I am awfully pleased to be with you. But what evil genius prompted you to put a turquoise in a russet tie?"

Ted threw up his hands in half-mock despair.

"I knew it was wrong," he said. "But don't you see?"

Kit looked at it a moment.

"I remember now—I gave it you," she said. "Really, I think that is the greatest compliment you ever paid me, spoiling your scheme of dress. Sugar? Yes, you take two lumps, I know."

Ted laughed.

"It was an experiment, I felt," he said. "But I did right."

Kit was silent a moment, for she had just taken a large bite out of new-made bun.

"*I* think it will be the greatest fun down here," she said. "Poor dear Toby could not have played into our hands more beautifully. The poor child was quite right, and most thoughtful. Stanborough is certainly too much *du monde*—of the wrong sort, that is to say—in August. He drove us to Aldeburgh. It is on his head. And he actually threatened to telegraph to Jack. I wonder if he would have carried it out. Personally, I don't think he would; but, anyhow, it is all for the best. He couldn't have suited us better. Dear boy, how nice to have such a careful little brother-in-law!"

"He threatened me," said Ted plaintively, "in a loud, angry voice, with 'My name is Massingbird,' and all the rest of it. I told him that to telegraph meant there was a reason for telegraphing, and he had none. Besides, we did not want Jack. He was not part of the plan."

"Jack's nose has grown since he became a financier," remarked Kit. "That is the worst of becoming anything. If you become a pianist, your hair grows. If you become a philanthropist, your front-teeth grow. I never intend to become anything, not even a good woman," she said with emphasis.

"I hope not," remarked Ted.

"Oh, how I hate people who are in earnest about things!" said Kit in a sort of frenzy. "I mean I hate people being in earnest about the things they ought to be in earnest about. One should only take seriously things like one's hair and games and dress. For sheer social hopelessness give me a politician or a divine. Ted, promise me you will never become a divine."

"Not to-day, at any rate," said Ted; "but I shall keep it as a hold over you."

Kit laughed uproariously, and got up.

"I've finished for what I have received," she said, "and so we'll go out. Have you got a spade for me to dig in the sand with as I wade? Oh, there's the bezique-box. I think we'll play bezique instead. Is there a *café* or anything of the sort, where there will be a band. Bezique goes so well to a Strauss valse."

"There is a draper's shop and a church," said Ted. "That is all."

But after a couple of games the splendour of the evening weaned them from their cards. It had been a very hot day, but not long before sunset a cool wind was borne out of the sea, and they strolled out. Sunset was imminent in the west, and the land enmeshed in a web of gold. High in the zenith floated a few flushed feathers of cloud, and the sea was level and waveless—a polished surface of reflected brightness. The tide was on the ebb, and the smooth sand, wet from its retreat, was a mirror of the sky, a strip framed in the sea, and the high-water mark. Southward the land trended away in headland behind folded headland to an infinite distance of hazy and conjectured distances. The unbreathed air, a traveller over a hundred horizons of sea, was cool and tonic, and the whisper of the ripples crisp within the ear. And Kit with her childlike impressionableness, which was at once her danger and her charm, caught surely at the spirit of the free large spaces. She had taken off her hat, and walked firm and lithe along the shining ripple-fringed beaches, each footstep crushing for a moment the moisture out of the sand in a circle round her tread, and breathing deep, with open mouth, of the vivifying air. Like a chameleon she took instinctively the colour of her surroundings, and just now she was steeped in open air, freedom, and the great plains of sea and sky. She always gulped things down, camels and needles alike, thirsty of full sensations.

"Really, one's whole life is a series of mistakes, Ted," she said, "except in a few short moments like these. Why do we go to that rabbit-warren of a London, and live in little smoky boxes, when there is an empty sea-beach, and a great sea-wind within a few hours of us? Oh! I wish I was a fisherman, or a day labourer, or a gallon of sea-water, to stop in the open always."

Ted laughed.

"And if to-morrow is wet or cold, you will say, 'Why did we come to this God-forsaken German Ocean, when we could have stopped in our nice comfortable houses?'"

"I know I shall; and the worst of me is that I shall feel just as keenly as I feel this now. Jack called me a parasite once; he said I always found food in whatever I happened to be on. I dare say he is right. Oh, look at that bit of red seaweed on the sand! It looks as if it had been set, as one used to set butterflies; every little fibre is spread out separately. But if I pick it up, it will be just a stringy pulp. There are a great many morals to be drawn from that, and one is, 'Don't meddle.'"

"What a lesson for Tobys!" laughed Ted.

The sun set, and with the fading of the light they turned. Moment by moment the colours paled, and the evening iridescences turned gray and cold. Kit put

on her hat; there was a chill in the air, and they walked faster. By the time they reached the hotel it was nearly dark, and the shining window-squares looked inviting and comfortable, and Kit mentally revoked her desire to be a gallon of sea-water. It was already time to dress for dinner, and they went up to the sitting-room together. Their bedrooms were on opposite sides of it, both communicating with it and with the passage outside, and as they dressed they talked loudly and cheerfully to each other through doors ajar, their conversation being punctuated by sounds of the sponge. Ted was ready first, but a few moments afterwards Kit came out of her room, and went downstairs with him, still in a fever of high spirits, but with all the cool sanity of the great expanses driven out of her worthless little soul, and dressed in red.

They had a table to themselves in a corner of the plushy dining-room, where they could talk unheard and observe unobserved. Lord Comber, who always took the precaution of carrying wine with him when he was at hotels, had some excellent champagne, of which Kit drank her share, and their talk rose in crescendo with more frequent bursts of laughter as dinner went on. Toby again demanded their amused comments.

"Oh, if he could see us thus!" said Kit; and the idea was immensely entertaining, viewed in the light of dinner and wine.

Then followed a *résumé* of all the things which had not happened since the two had met, and which, even if they had, should never have been repeated. The world in which they lived is not noted for charitable impulses or moments of compassion, and that which should have called out pity, or if not pity, at least, have been accorded silence, was the occasion of great laughter. Kit, among her many gifts, was an excellent mimic; and Jack's shrug of the shoulders, when she really had her boxes packed to go to Aldeburgh vice Stanborough, was inimitable. But, as she said, she was no longer married to a man, but a company. Jack was no longer Jack, but a mixture of Alington, deep levels, and cyanide process. Then Mrs. Murchison came under review, and Kit improvised a really first-rate soliloquy.

But eventually the hush that comes with ice overtook them, and it was to break an appreciable silence that Ted spoke.

"How they stare at one!" he said. "Haven't the people who stay at this hotel ever seen people before? You would think we were woaded early Britons. Really, it is much better than Stanborough; there were all sorts of people there one knew. I am glad we came—and you, Kit?"

He looked up, and caught her eye for a moment.

"I also," she said. "But, Ted, I very nearly did not come. I could not conceive what your telegram meant; but I trusted you, you see; I assumed that your

excellent reasons were excellent. And when I knew what they were, I was justified, and you too. They were more than excellent; they were funny."

Ted laughed.

"They really were," he said. "But I don't know what I should have done if I had found a telegram here from you saying you were not coming."

"Did you think I should throw you over?" she asked.

He paused before replying, and looked up at the long table where the most of the people in the hotel were sitting.

"There is a man with a face like what you see in a spoon sitting there," he said. "No, I did not."

Kit followed his glance.

"Yes, I see him," she said, "and his mouth opens sideways. But how modest of you! What reason had you to think that?"

Ted felt his heart thump with a sudden riotous movement. He took up his glass to finish his champagne, and noticed that his hand shook a little. He drank the wine at a gulp.

"Because I think you like me a little, Kit," he replied.

He had never spoken to her quite like that before, though, for that matter, he might have used the identical words to her a score of times; never before had she given him exactly that sort of opportunity. But the presence of so many people close at hand of so utterly different a society to theirs that they might have been Red Indians, gave both him and her a strangely isolated feeling, as if they had been alone on a desert island. Both knew also that he by proposing, she by acceding to this visit to Aldeburgh, had taken another step in intimacy towards each other.

But without a pause Kit replied; and in spite of her reply, so far from disavowing it, she felt a sudden inward leap of exultation, and he, in spite of the lightness of her reply, was confirmed.

"Oh, Ted, don't be serious!" she said. "It is such bad manners. Think of Toby; think of the man with the spoon-face."

Ted lifted his brown eyes to hers, but she sat with eyes downcast, playing with her dessert-knife.

"Are you never serious?" he asked.

"Not at dinner. A serious voice carries so. It is audible as far as a Bishop's hat, if you see what I mean. Have you finished? Shall we go?"

And she lifted her long, fringed eyelashes a moment, and returned his look.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

KIT'S MEDITATIONS

Kit was sitting in her own room in the Buckinghamshire cottage one day late in the following December, staring intently into the fire. The fire, it is true, was worth looking at, for it was made of that adorable combination, cedar-logs and peat, and it had attained to that fine flower of existence—a fragrant, molten core of heat, edged by little lilac-coloured bouquets of flame, smokeless and glowing, the very apotheosis of a fire. Outside, the world was shrouded and made dizzy in a trouble of eddying snow, and as the great sonorous blasts trumpeted and lulled again, the reds of the fire would brighten and fade in a sort of mysterious sympathy with the bugling riot overhead. But that Kit should be doing nothing but looking at the fire was an unusual thing; it was odd that she should be alone, even odder that, if alone, she should not be occupied. The toes of her bronze-coloured shoes rested on the fender, and she leaned forward in the low armchair in which she sat, stretching out her hands towards the heat, and the fire shining through the flesh of her fingers made them look as if they were lighted from within—things red and luminous in themselves. It was already growing dusk, but she had enough light to think by, and quite enough things to think about.

The room was furnished with great simplicity, but the educated eye could see how extremely expensive such simplicity must have been. There was a rug or two on the floor, a few tables and chairs of the Empire on the rugs, and a few pictures on the crimson satin walls. Kit herself perhaps was the most expensive thing present, for she wore her pearls, and they glowed like mist-smoored moons in the fire-light. But she did not look as happy as the possessor of her pearls or her excellent digestion ought to look. There was something of the hard, tired look of suffering, mental and physical, about her face, and though she was alone, she made, now and then, nervous, apprehensive little movements.

Everything was going wrong, from money upwards, or downwards; for at the present moment Kit hardly knew how to arrange the precedence of her various embarrassments. The financial ones were at any rate the most tangible, though

perhaps the least feared, and for the fiftieth time that afternoon she ran over them.

In the beginning it had been altogether Jack's fault, but Kit was past finding either consolation or added annoyance in that. She had great faith in Alington's power of making their fortune, though personally he was detestable to her, for various excellent reasons, and she had wanted to invest the famous nest-egg, which from one cause and another had grown to upwards of three thousand pounds, in these mines under Alington's advice. After their last private interview she did not like to go to him straight, and so asked Jack to tell her in what mines to place a little money she had saved. The word "saved," when used by Kit, always made Jack smile.

But he was absurd, and strongly opposed to her risking her "savings" at all. He had told her to make herself quite happy; if she would leave things to him, and go on "saving" quietly, there would be enough for both of them, a statement in itself repugnant and almost blasphemous to Kit, who firmly held the doctrine that there never can be enough money for one, still less for two.

"You don't know what it all means, Kit," he had said, "and for that matter I don't either. One day perhaps your shares will go down, and you will sell out in a panic and lose a lot, or you will not sell out and you will lose more. It is impossible for me always to be instructing you; I have not got the data myself. I leave it all to Alington. Besides, I didn't know you had any money to invest."

"That is my affair," said Kit; "I have been lucky lately."

"Then put it into consols, and don't gamble any more," said Jack, with the fine inconsistence of the gambling fever on him, "or come and talk about it some other time; I've got twenty hundred things to do now."

Then in a flare of pride and temper, Kit had determined to manage for herself, and had put a couple of thousand pounds into Carmel East. This was in November, at a time when, for some reason, known perhaps to Alington, but certainly to no one else in the market, Carmel was behaving in a peculiarly mercurial manner. A week after she had made her investment the pound shares, which were standing at a little above par, had declined rapidly to fourteen shillings. It might only be a bear raid, but she was too proud to ask Jack for advice again, and remembering his ill-omened remark about not selling and so losing more, she telegraphed to her broker to sell out at once. This done, the shares began to rise again, and in less than a fortnight's time, owing to telegrams and reports from the mine, they stood at nearly two pounds. She reckoned up, almost with tears, what she had lost, which, added to what she might have gained, formed a maddening total. Her eighteen hundred shares, if she had only held on, would have been worth close on three

thousand six hundred pounds; instead, she had sold them when they stood at fourteen shillings for thirteen hundred pounds. And when Jack, a few mornings later, came into her room with a cheque for five hundred pounds, which he gave her, she felt that this only accentuated the bitterness of it.

"A little present, Kit," he said, "just for you to play about with. What a good thing you were wise, and did not concern yourself with things you did not understand! Oh, I bless the day when we went down to the City dinner and met Alington. You wore an orange dress, I remember: it would be rather graceful if you paid for it now."

"How much have you made, Jack?" she asked.

"Eight thousand, and I wish it was eighty. But that is the result of having no capital. I'm going to pay some bills—perhaps; but it is all very wearing."

Kit was not accustomed to cry over spilt milk, and Jack's present made up the greater part of what she had actually lost, though it was only a small proportion of what she might have gained. One learns by experience, she thought; for experience is a synonym for one's mistakes, and she had been a consummate fool to be frightened. The mine was still quite young, and if within a few months the shares were worth double their original value, it was likely to be a good investment even at the present price, and again she invested two thousand pounds in it. Since then the price had steadily gone down, and the shares were quoted a week ago at nineteen shillings. But this time, though it taxed her admirable nerve, she was not going to be frightened, and with the object of averaging she had spent the remaining spoonfuls of her nest-egg in buying more, thus reducing the whole price to thirty-two shillings per share. Thus, when they again went up, as she still believed they would do, she would sell as soon as they touched two pounds, as Jack had sold, and clear, though not so much as he had done, still, something worth having. But the averaging had been singularly unsuccessful, and this morning the abominable things had stood again at fourteen shillings.

This had been too much for Kit's nerves, and she went to Jack with the whole story. He had simply shrugged his shoulders; he was odiously unsympathetic. The "I told you so" rejoinder is always irritating, and the irritation it produces varies directly according to the amount of damage involved. Kit's irritation, it follows, was considerable.

"Oh, Jack, what is the use of saying that?" she had cried angrily. "I come to be helped, not to be moralized to. I ask you now as a favour to telegraph to Mr. Alington. You say you know nothing about these things, although you are a director. Well, perhaps he does. And I want some money."

It was not wise, and Kit knew it even as she spoke, to take a fretful,

discourteous tone. It had long been a maxim with her that courtesy was a duty, the greatest perhaps, which one owned to those with whom one was intimate, and that it was most foolish to let familiarity breed brusqueness. Besides, it never paid, except with tradesmen and others, to put your nose in the air, and, as a rule, she was not guilty of this breach of prudence. But to-day she was horribly worried, and anxious about many things, and that Jack should say "I told you so" seemed unbearable.

He did not reply immediately, and then, taking a cigarette from a table near him, "You usually do want some money," he remarked.

Kit made a great effort, and recovered her temper and her self-control.

"Dear Jack," she said, "I have been rude, and I apologize. But I very seldom am rude; do me the justice to admit that. Also I have been stupid and foolish. I am in an awful hole. Do telegraph to Alington, like a good boy, and ask him what I am to do. And I should really be very glad of a little money if you can spare it."

Jack looked at her curiously. It was utterly unlike Kit to behave like this. Her debts hitherto had sat lightly on her; she had often said that nothing was so nice as having money, and nothing so easy as to get along without it. Again, Kit's nest-egg of three thousand pounds seemed to him a surprising sum. She had not, as far as he knew, played much in the summer, and all the autumn, except for a fortnight she spent at Aldeburgh, they had been together, and her winnings certainly could not have been a fifth of that. He could not conceive how she had got it.

"Look here, Kit," he said, "you shall have some money if you must, though just now I want literally every penny I can lay hands on for this mine affair. I am playing for big stakes. If the thing comes off as I expect—and, what is much more satisfactory, as Alington expects—we shall be rich, and when I say rich it means a lot. But I think we had better have a talk. Oh, I will telegraph to Alington about your affair at once."

Kit felt wretchedly nervous and upset that morning, and while Jack wrote the telegram, she threw herself into a chair that stood before the fire and lit a cigarette, hoping to soothe her jangled nerves. Snow had already begun to fall, the air was biting; she shivered. But after a few whiffs she threw the cigarette away. It tasted evilly in her mouth, and she felt an undefined dread of what was coming, and not in the least inclined for a talk. Luckily, Jack was going up to town in half an hour; the talk could not last long.

He waited till the servant had taken the telegram, and then came and stood in front of the fire.

"How did you get that three thousand pounds?" he asked abruptly.

"I won it. I have told you so," said Kit.

"Where? When? It is a large sum. You know, Kit, I don't often pry into your affairs. Don't be angry with me."

"My dear Jack, I don't keep a book with the names and addresses of all the people from whom I have won sixpence. Neither of us, if it comes to that, is famed for well-kept account-books. Where? At a hundred places. When? This last summer and autumn," and her voice died a little on the words.

Jack turned and flicked the ash off his cigarette. He knew that Kit could not have won that amount, and he hated to think that she was lying to him. True, he was asking the sort of question they did not ask each other, but he could not help it—the air was ominous. She must have borrowed it or been given it, and such a suspicion cut him to the quick, for though he, like her, did not give two thoughts to running up huge bills at tradesmen's risk, yet it was quite a different thing to borrow from one's own class (for he knew rightly that Kit would never be so foolish as to go to a money-lender), or to be given money by one's friends. And her manner was so strange. He could not avoid the thought that there was something behind.

"Did Alice Haslemere lend you some?" he asked suddenly.

Kit, taken off her guard, saw a gleam of hope.

"Yes," she said quickly, not meaning to lie. Then, remembering she had told him that she had won it, "No," she added in the same breath.

Jack made a quick step back to the table at which he had been writing.

"There is no manner of use in talking if you can't tell me the truth," he said. "How much money do you want, Kit?"

Kit tried to answer him, but could not. She was only conscious of a great desolating helplessness, and slowly the sobs gathered in her throat. Jack, waiting for her answer, heard a quick-taken breath, and in a moment he was by her, the best of him ready to help, if possible, forgetting everything except that Kit was in trouble.

"My poor old girl!" he said. "What is the matter? Is there something wrong, Kit? Won't you tell me? Indeed I am your friend. Don't cry so. Never mind; tell me some other time if you like. There, shall I leave you? Will you be better alone?"

Kit nodded her head, and he touched her lightly and kindly on the shoulder, and turned to go. But before he had got to the door she spoke.

"No, it is nothing, Jack," she said, controlling her voice with an effort. "I am out of sorts, I think. Never mind about the money. I can push along."

She got up from her chair and went towards the door.

"Don't worry, Jack," she said.

She went to her own room, where she knew that no one would disturb her, and shut herself in. Jack would be away all day, and till evening she would be alone. A few people were coming down with him then from town, among them Toby and his wife, Ted Comber, and several others of their set. On the whole, she was glad they were coming; it was better to be distracted than to brood over things which no brooding will mend. Above all, she wanted an interval in which Jack and she would not be alone. Perhaps after a few days he might forget or remember only vaguely the affair of this morning.

She had lunched alone in her sitting-room off a tray, for it was warmer there than in the dining-room, and had tried a dozen ways of making the hours pass. It was impossible to go out; the snow, which had begun before Jack had left, was getting momently thicker and falling in giddy, frenzied wreaths. The air was bitterly cold, and she could see but dimly through the whirling atmosphere the lines of shrubs in the garden, standing with thick white mantles on. A couple of puffy-feathered sparrows crouched on her window-sill, and Kit in the bitterness of her heart hated them, and, going to the window, frightened them away. They dropped stiffly down on the lawn below, and half walked, half fluttered, to the shelter of a bush near. Then a sudden compunction came over her, and, throwing open the window, she flung out the crumbs from her lunch-tray, but the sudden movement only scared them off altogether. She stood long at the window, looking out on to the blinding desolation, and then by a violent effort detached herself for the moment from all the things that troubled her. They would all have to be taken and dealt with, but she could do nothing alone. Jack had to be told something —Jack and another.

The electric light was out of order, and about a quarter past three of that howling winter's afternoon she left her place by the fire and her unread book and rang for lamps. Then there were orders also to be sent to the stables, and she detained the man a minute to give them, knowing that when he had gone she would be alone again. The omnibus and the brougham must both meet the train, and the horses must be roughed, and was there any telegram for his lordship. One had come, and, guessing it was from Alington, she opened it.

"Bad slump in Carmel East," she read. "Cannot advise."

Kit crumpled the telegram up, and threw it impatiently into the grate. Here was another thing to be banished from her mind; truly this was a somewhat

extensive exile. She determined not to sell; unless something happened to send the prices up, it would be a mere reminder of her losses to rescue so small a salvage from the wreck. She did not want a little money, she wanted a great deal, and she would just as soon have none as a little. So, having determined to dismiss the whole subject, she thought of nothing else for the next half-hour.

Outside the evening grew darker and wilder, and the windows on the north-east of her room, the quarter from which the wind blew, were already half blinded by the snow, and every now and then a furious, unseen hand would rattle their casements as if demanding instant admittance. The wind, which had been rising and falling and rising again all day in fitful gusts, now blew with an astonishing and ever increasing vehemence. The line would be deep in snow, perhaps almost impassable; in any case the train which should bring Jack and the rest must be late. Kit felt that the elements, the snow and the storm, were malignant beings fighting against her; the solitude of the next few hours became unbearable, and who knew how many hours she might still be alone? Quick to catch at relief, it seemed to her that to have people about, to have the ordinary innumerable duties of a hostess to perform, would be the solution of her troubles, and the omnibus full of folk who had already left London were so many anchors to her. She would have to talk, laugh, entertain people, be her normal self, and hours and days would pass without giving her time or opportunity for thought or regret. She tried to tell herself that her present difficulties, like the unanswered letters, would manage and answer themselves. The nights she did not fear: hitherto she hardly knew what it was to be awake, and even if one did, there were those convenient things like morphia which one could always take.

Tea-time came; her room had grown intolerable to her, and she went to the hall, where they always had tea if there were people with them, waiting for the snow-muffled sounds of the carriage-wheels. The train was due half an hour before, and they might be here any moment if it had been punctual. Punctual she knew it could not be against this hurly-burly; but still, every minute that passed now was a minute in which they might have reached the station, less hopeless than those she had passed since lunch. The tea-things were brought in, and she ate a piece of bread-and-butter, thinking she would not make tea till they came, but the minutes went on pushing at the hands of the clock, and at last she made enough for herself, and drank a cup. But it seemed neither to warm nor invigorate her; the taste of the cream made her feel sick, and pouring the half of it away, she left the table, and came to sit nearer the fire, book in hand.

Outside the storm went on like some senseless lunatic symphony. Now the long steady note of a horn would blow weirdly in the chimney, and a choir of shrieking gusts like the violins would break in upon it, rising and rising higher

and higher as if leading to some stupendous climax. But no climax came; they would die down again with nothing gained, and the slow sobbing of 'cellos would answer them. Then for a moment there was hail mixed with the snow, and the sudden tattoo of the kettle-drums upon the window would seem to announce something, but nothing came except a long chromatic passage from the strings, leading nowhere, portending nothing. Then the horn in the chimney would have a bar or two, repeating its *motif*, as if to emphasize it, and strings and horns came in simultaneously in crazy music. Then for a moment there would be a dead, tense pause; the conductor seemed to stand with raised baton collecting the orchestra for the *finale*, but, instead of some immense riot of sound, only a flute would wail a broken note, and the whole movement begin again.

The noise maddened Kit; it seemed to her that her own thoughts were being made audible. Like the blind, senseless blasts, she would take up one meaningless strand of her life and try to weave it into some sort of pattern. But before she could hit on any idea, she would drop it again, and her mind would fly off now to that evening when she had cheated Alington at baccarat, now to the week at Aldeburgh, now to the affairs of Carmel East, and again, and yet again, to the week at Aldeburgh. It was all in fragments, loud, jangling, terrifying, with hysterical bursts of false feeling.

Then, for the first time in her life, the horror of the days that were gone, the horror of the moment, the horror of the future, seized Kit in their threefold grip, and shook her. She looked back on the years in which, day after day, she had clutched greedily, ravenously, at the pleasure of the moment; with both hands she had torn the blossoms off life, making herself great nosegays like a child in a hayfield, and now when she looked at them there was not a flower that was not withered and wilted. Through the past she had arrived at this awful present. She looked forward; the future was a blank, save for one red spot of horror in it, which would come closer and closer every day till it was on her. There was no escape for her.

Just then there was a lull in the mad symphony outside, and in the stillness she heard the soft thud of snow-clogged wheels pass by the windows. With a sense of relief, almost painful in its intensity, she ran to the door and flung it open, letting in a great buffet of snow-stifled wind that extinguished the lamps, and left only the misshapen shadows from the fire leaping monstrously on the walls. But instead of the omnibus she had expected, there was only a postman's cart, from which the man had already descended, blanketed in snow, with a telegram in his hand. He had just rung the bell.

Kit ran with it to the fire, and read it by the blaze. It was from Conybeare, sent off from two stations up the line.

"Blocked by snow," it said. "Line will not be clear till to-morrow morning."

A footman had come in answer to the bell. He found the door wide open, the snow blowing dizzily in, and on the hearthrug Kit, in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST DEAL

Mr. Alington was an early riser, and it was barely half-past eight when he finished his plain but excellent breakfast the morning after he had received Jack's telegram about Kit's venture in Carmel East. A certain instinct of perfection was characteristic of him; all his habits of living were of a finished character. He lived plainly, and he would sooner have his simple eggs and bacon off fine china, with alternate mouthfuls of admirably crisp toast and the freshest butter, than have rioted in the feasts of Caligula with a napkin ever so slightly stained. The same snowfall which had blocked the line between Tilehurst and Goring had not spared London, and the streets on this Sunday morning were dumb and heavy with snow. Gangs of men were out at work clearing it away, and streaks and squares of brown, muddy pavement and roadway of contrasted sordidness were being disclosed in the solid whiteness of the street. Mr. Alington, looking from his window, was afraid that these efforts were likely to prove but lost labour, for the sky was still thick and overlaid with that soft, greasy look which portends more snow, and in spite of the hour, it was but an apology for twilight on to which he looked out. This thought was an appreciable pang to him. The street was empty but for the street-clearers, and had attained that degree of discomfort only realized in London after a snowfall. The gaunt, gray-faced houses opposite showed lights twinkling in their windows, and the yellow, unluminous atmosphere was like a jaundiced dream. The palace clock at the bottom of the street was still lit within, but it was no more than a blurred moon through the clogged air.

But Mr. Alington, after his first comprehensive glance, gave but little attention to these atrocities of climate. His reading-lamp shone cheerily on his desk, and on the very satisfactory papers lying there, and Carmel basked in a temperate sunshine. For up till now the ways of the new group had entirely fulfilled his expectations, which from the beginning had been sanguine, and the best, so he hoped, was yet to be. The scheme which he had formed in the summer, and which he had talked over with Jack in September, had been simple, ingenious, and on the safe side of excessive sharpness. The dear, delightful public, as he had foreseen, was quite willing to fall in with his scheme, and had seconded

his plans for general enrichment—particularly his own—with openhanded patronage. The scheme in brief was as follows, had the public only known:

It will be remembered that he had formed two companies, Carmel, and Carmel East and West, with capitals respectively of three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand pounds. Carmel East and West had exhibited remarkable fluctuations, as Kit knew to her loss, Alington, and Jack following his advice, to their gain, and the way in which this had been worked was simplicity itself. The shares had been issued at par, and had risen almost immediately to twenty-five shillings. This Alington was disposed to put down partly to his own reputation and as the result of reports from the mine, but chiefly—for he was modest even when alone—to the effect of his noble body of directors. He as vendor had fifty thousand shares fully paid, and at this point he sold out, unloading very carefully under several names, and taking a very decent little profit for a man of simple tastes and butler-like appearance. The natural effect of this extensive sale was to cause the shares to drop, and the downward tendency was accelerated by unpromising news from the mine, which followed immediately on his sale. The ore, as stated in the prospectus, was refractory, and extracting it was both costly and yielded a very small percentage of gold. Mr. Alington, whom several large holders and substantial City men consulted about this time, was not sanguine. The results were bad, there was no denying it. Three weeks of a dropping market brought the shares to the condition they were in on that day of November on which Kit sold out for the first time, and they closed at thirteen and ninepence sellers, fourteen and threepence buyers. This seemed to Alington to be low enough for his second step, as he did not want the market to lose confidence altogether. He sent a telegram out to his manager in Australia, Mr. Linkwood, laconic, but to that intelligent fellow perfectly comprehensible:

"New process.—Alington," it ran.

He also sent one to Mr. Richard Chavasse:

"Invest."

The next morning he received from Mr. Linkwood the following reply:

"Carmel East. Ninety per cent. of gold extracted by Bülow process. Strong support by Australian markets.—Linkwood."

Now, the evening before certain large purchases in Carmel East had been made in England, not by the names under which Mr. Alington had previously unloaded, for the weakness of such a course was obvious, and he followed them up the next morning by a very large purchase in his own name, and by the publication of his telegram from Mr. Linkwood. He also saw several business men, to whom he gave a full explanation. He had telegraphed, he said

with absolute truth, to his manager to try the Bülow process, and, as they saw, it had yielded admirable results. Instead of twenty, they got ninety per cent. of the gold out. Concerning the strong support of the Australian markets, they would no doubt receive further news by cable. He had no information later than that telegram which he had published.

The effect of this on a market already predisposed to go a-booming after Westralians was natural and inevitable. The shares went up nearly a half during the day, and next morning when a further private cable, instantly made public, recorded that that shrewdest of financiers, Mr. Richard Chavasse, had bought to the extent of forty thousand pounds, they ran past thirty shillings.

A week later they stood at two pounds, owing to steady support from private investors. There was a spurious report that a dividend might be expected, so extraordinary successful had the month's crushing proved to be, and this was the unfortunate moment selected by Kit to make her second purchase. Simultaneously Alington, who for a week past had been very carefully unloading, telegraphed to Jack to do the same, and sold out largely under his own name. A week passed, and the shares moved slowly back, depressed by these large sales, though there was still a considerable demand for them in England. Then came another telegram from Australia, saying the mine looked much less hopeful. The vein which they had been working so successfully for the past two or three months came suddenly to an end, owing to a dip in the strata, and if struck again, it could probably be struck only at a much deeper level. This would entail considerable development. Following on this came large sales in Australia, Mr. Richard Chavasse (in consequence of a wire from England) being among them, and the shares went down to nineteen shillings. Then the possibility of a war between England and France depressed them still further, and they subsided quietly to fourteen shillings, where, for all that Mr. Alington at present cared, they were at liberty to remain. Thus closed the first act of the great deal, leaving a suspicious market.

Such was the position on this Sunday morning with regard to Carmel East and West when Mr. Alington looked out on the snow-muffled street. He had been to a concert the afternoon before, where they had performed Palestrina's Mass in B flat and fragments of those sweet, austere melodies still haunted his head. Like many men who have a great aptitude for figures, he had a marvellous musical memory, and sitting down at his piano, he recalled gently several of the airs. That was the music which really appealed to him, pure, simple melody of a sacred kind. No one regretted more than he the utter decadence of English music, its fall from its natural genius, which came to perfection, so he considered, under the divine Purcell. It had become *déclassé*, in the most awful sense of that awful word. An exotic German growth had spread like some parasitic plant over it; the native taste was still there, and every now and

then Parry, or some of his immediate school, would give one an air which was worthy of the English best, but otherwise everyone seemed emulous of indefinitely multiplying the most chaotic of Wagner, or the music of those people whose names ended in "owski." Then, and still from memory, by an act of unconscious cerebration, he played the last chorus out of "Blest Pair of Syrens," and, closing the piano, got up and went to his desk with tear-dimmed eyes, in harmony with himself.

He had anticipated events with the precision of a great general. The market had rushed, like starving folk when a granary is opened, at Carmel East and West, and after they had reached their highest point, and the big sales began, there had followed something like a panic. West Australian mines were still new to the public, and the greater financiers viewed them with suspicion. This sudden scare over Carmel East and West suited Mr. Alington exactly, for it would be sure to bring down the price of the second Carmel group—namely, the North, South, and Central mines. He had seen this six months ago, and had worked for this very end. At present he had no holdings in Mount Carmel, except those shares which he held to qualify as a director, and he had delayed any purchase in them till the panic created by the mercurial behaviour of the sister group should have brought down the price. The lower it went, the better would he be pleased, for he intended to make a coup over this compared to which what he had pocketed over Carmel East and West should be a mere bagatelle. But for Carmel he required no adventitious aid from marquises, and consequently the sudden resignation of Tom Abbotsworthy from his board, which event had taken place the day before, did not trouble him at all, nor did he care to know what cause "his regret to find that press of work prevented him" covered. The mine he knew was a magnificent property, quite able to stand on its own feet, and in the prospectus he had purposely understated its probable value. In doing so, he was altogether free from possible censure; the mine had seemed to him promising, and he had said so, and when the shares were suitably low he intended to buy all he could lay hands on. Purposely, also, he had undercapitalized it; eventually he meant to issue fresh shares. The five hundred thousand pounds already subscribed was not more than sufficient to work Carmel North, and both Mount Carmel and Carmel South of the same group he believed to be as remunerative as the others. The panic over Carmel East and West had already affected the other group, and yesterday evening the one-pound shares, after a week's decline, stood at fifteen shillings. He proposed to let them go down, if they kindly would, till they had sunk to ten shillings or thereabouts, then buy for all he was worth, and send a telegram to Mr. Richard Chavasse to do the same. And at the thought of Mr. Richard Chavasse he put his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, leaned back in his chair, and laughed aloud with a great mellowness of sound.

In certain respects Mr. Alington, for all his staid conversation and butler-like appearance, was a true humorist; in this instance, at any rate, that he alone should appreciate his own joke was sufficient for him, and he required no sympathizer. Indeed, it would have spoiled it all if other people had been able to appreciate it. Though a modest man, he considered the Chavasse joke very entertaining, and the Chavasse joke was all his own, and the point of it as follows:

Some years ago, out in Australia, he had a Swiss valet, a clever, neat-handed rogue in his way, who one night was sufficiently ill-advised to open the house to burglars. But the alarm was given. Mr. Alington, with a revolver and pyjamas, came mildly but firmly downstairs, and though the burglars escaped, he held his valet in the hollow of his hand. The man stood detected, and, hoping to make the best of his miscarried job, confessed his complicity to his master. Mr. Alington made him give his confession in writing, and sent it to his bank for safe keeping, but for the time took no further steps.

But not long before the formation of this new company, four or five months only before his own departure for England, he parted company with his servant, who left Melbourne at once. Three months afterwards a gentleman with a fine moustache and a short beard appeared—a personal friend, it would seem, of Mr. Alington's, and a man of wealth, interested in Australian mines. A few weeks only after his arrival Mr. Alington left for England. Mr. Richard Chavasse, however, remained, cultivated and linguistic, and lived in Alington's house at, it was supposed, a suitable rent. Altogether he may be best described as a creation.

Here, again, as in so many of the dealings of Providence with man, Mr. Alington often marvelled to see the working of all things together towards good. In the first instance there had not been wanting to his forbearance to give Mr. Richard Chavasse over to the police a vague feeling of compassion at the thought of those deft, shirt-studding hands given over bleeding to oakum-picking and the sewing of mail-bags; and how amply was that sweet pity rewarded! A man bound to him by fear was a far safer repository for the large sums of money, amounting sometimes to forty or fifty thousand pounds, over which Mr. Chavasse had control, than someone over whom he held no such check. Should Mr. Chavasse attempt to get off with the money, or even—so stringent were Alington's regulations for the strict and sober conduct of his life—leave the colony, a wired word from him to the bank would place the ex-valet's confession of complicity in the burglary in the hands of the police. Alington, in fact, had speculated largely in Chavasses, and he had the wit to see from the beginning that the more comfortable position he gave him, the more man of wealth and mark he made him, the securer he himself would be. A beggar with power of attorney may easily decamp with

the spoils, and possibly baffle pursuit, but for the solid man interested in mines, though slightly recluse and exclusive, it is hardly possible to evade capture. Besides, who in their senses would not prefer to live delicately than to dodge detectives? Certainly Mr. Chavasse was completely in his senses, and did not attempt escape. What Alington meant to do with him after the grand coup in Carmels he had not yet certainly determined.

In the interval Mr. Chavasse, ex-valet, lived in his house in Melbourne rent-free, and cost Mr. Alington perhaps eighty pounds a month. But how admirable an investment was that; and how small a percentage of his coinings for his master did that eighty pounds a month represent! Already it had often happened, as in the case of Carmel East, that Alington in England wanted to run up the price of some mine, and strong support in Australia was exactly what was needed to give a hesitating market confidence. Thus he exercised a dual control: here in England, no doubt, many investors followed his lead, for he was known to be an extremely shrewd man, with the instinct bred of knowledge equalled by none, and invariably his purchases seemed to herald a general advance. For as surely as Mr. Alington bought in London, so surely did a cable go out to Mr. Chavasse, "Invest balance," or "Invest half balance," and in due course came the answer, not necessarily to Alington—indeed, seldom to him—"Strong support in Australia." The plan was simple—all practical plans are: the valet had his choice between two courses of life—the one to live extremely comfortably in Alington's delightful house in Melbourne, passing pleasant, independent days, and occasionally, as the telegram came from England, making large purchases for this mine or that, or selling still in obedience; the other, to leave his comfortable house, and start off in an attempt to outrun the detectives: for as surely as he tried to escape, so surely would his confession lying at the bank pass into the hands of the police. Once a month, indeed, he had to send to England the statement of his accounts, and now and then he had been told that his cigar-bill was too large, or that whisky-and-soda for lunch would be a pleasant change from an expensive Moselle. On leaving Australia, Mr. Alington had transferred to him absolutely certain shares, certificates and balance at the Melbourne bank in payment, it was supposed, of some large purchase; and not infrequently he could, if he chose, draw a cheque for as much as fifty thousand pounds to self. Thus, for a few weeks, perhaps, he would be able to career over the world; but from that moment he would be Mr. Richard Chavasse no longer, that solid, linguistic gentleman, but the man Chavasse, earnestly wanted by the police for burglary.

There was risk on both sides. Alington knew that to convict the man, if he was so insane as to try to escape, meant exposure of his own side of the bargain and good-bye to the dual control. In his heart of hearts, indeed, he had hardly

determined what to do should Chavasse make so deplorable a blunder. No doubt he could be caught, no doubt his identity could be proved, and he could be landed in the place of tread-mills and oakum-picking, but there would be other revelations as well, not all touching Chavasse. However, he never seriously contemplated such possibilities, for he did not believe that the man would ever try to escape. He was comfortable where he was, and comfortable people will think twice before they risk a prosecution for burglary. Alington was far too acute to think of frightening him or keeping him continually cowering; exasperation might drive him to this undesirable ruin. Instead, he gave him a very fair allowance, and complaints as to the length of his cigar-bill were few. Indeed, he had gauged the immediate intentions of his ex-valet very correctly. Mr. Richard Chavasse had no present thoughts of attempting to liberate himself from his extremely tolerable servitude, and probably get in exchange something far less soft, while that confession of his lay at the bank. He had the dislike of risks common to men who have been detected once. If, however, he could by any plan, not yet formulated, manage to remove those risks, his conscience, he felt, would not tell him that he was bound in gratitude to Mr. Alington never to do anything for himself.

This morning, as Alington sat working in his well-lighted room, or looked out with kind and absent gaze into the snowy, sordid street, or laughed with pleasure at the thought of Mr. Richard Chavasse, he felt extremely secure, and humbly thankful to the Providence which had so guided his feet into the ways of respectability and wealth. Without being a miser in the ordinary usage of the word, he had that inordinate passion (in his case for money) which marks the monomaniac. Yet he remained extremely sane; his willingness to provide himself not only with the necessaries but also the luxuries which money will buy, remained, in spite of his passion for it, unimpaired. He was not extravagant, for extravagance, like other excess, was foreign to his mild and well-regulated nature, and had not been induced by the possession of wealth, but a scarce print he seldom left unpurchased. He gave, moreover, largely to charitable institutions, and the giving of money to deserving objects was a genuine pleasure to him, quite apart from the satisfaction he undoubtedly felt at seeing his name head a subscription list. In addition to his own great passion also, he had a thousand tastes and interests, a gift that even genius itself often lacks, and it may have been these on the one hand pulling against the lust for money on the other that kept him so well-balanced, just as the telegraph post is kept straight by the strain on both sides. As well as the one great thing, the world held for him hundreds of desirable objects, and the hours in which he was not devoted to his business were not, as they are to so many, a blank and a pause. He closed his ledger and opened the passion music; he shut his piano and untied his portfolio of prints, and his sleek, respectable face would glow with inward delight at each. A certain kindliness of disposition, which was part

of his nature, it must be confessed, he kept apart when he was engaged in business. This lived in an attic and never descended the stairs if he was at his desk. To give an instance, he had not the slightest impulse to help Kit in her difficulty, though a word from him would have shown her how in the next few months to make good her losses. She had chosen to mix herself up in business, and he became a business man from head to heels. It even gave him a little pleasure to see her flounder in so stranded a fashion, for he had not effaced, and did not mean to efface, from his mind the very shabby thing she had chosen to do to him on the night of the baccarat affair. Being very wealthy, it did not really matter to him whether she cheated him of a hundred pounds or a threepenny-bit, but he quite distinctly objected to being cheated of either. Had the last trump summoned him on the moment to the open judgment-books, he might have sworn truthfully enough that he had forgiven her, for he did not ever intend to make her suffer for it, even if he had the opportunity of doing so. Certainly he forgave her; he would not ever attempt to revenge himself on her, and he had not told a soul about it.

But her difficulties aroused no compassion in him, nor would they have done so even if she had never cheated him at baccarat. Business is business, and a statue of sentiment has no niche hewn in the mining market. One can do one's kindnesses afterwards, he said to himself, and, to do him justice, he often did.

For the present there was a lull in the Carmel transaction, and after a very short spell at the ledgers Mr. Alington closed them with a sigh. There were several receipts lying on his table, and he took them up, read each, and docketed it. One was for a considerable sum of money paid to a political agency. He hesitated a moment before putting the docket on it, and finally wrote on the top left-hand corner:

"Baronetcy."

CHAPTER III

LILY DRAWS A CHEQUE

Toby was sitting after breakfast in the dining-room of his house in town reading the Times. It had been settled for him by Lily before their marriage that he was to have some sort of a profession, and, the choice being left to him, he had chosen politics. He was proposing to stand for a perfectly safe borough in about a month's time, and though hitherto he had known nothing whatever about the public management of his country's affairs, since he was going to take a hand in them himself, he now set himself, or had set for him,

day by day to read the papers. He had just got through the political leaders in the Times with infinite labour, and had turned with a sigh of relief for a short interval to the far more human police reports, when Lily came in with a note in her hand.

"Good boy," she said approvingly, and Toby rustled quickly back to the leaders again.

"A most important speech by the Screamer," he announced, honouring by this name a prominent member of the Cabinet. "He seems to suggest an Anglo-Russo-Germanic-French-Italian-American alliance, and says with some justice that it ought to be a very fairly powerful combination. It is directed, as far as I can make out, against Mr. and Mrs. Kruger."

Lily looked over his shoulder for a moment, and saw the justice of the *résumé*.

"Yes, read it all very carefully, very carefully indeed, Toby," she said. "But just attend to me a moment first; I shan't keep you."

Toby put down the paper with alacrity. The Sportsman tumbled out from underneath it, but he concealed this with the dexterity bred of practice.

"What is it?" he asked, vexed at the interruption, you would have said, but patient of it.

"Toby, speaking purely in the abstract, what do you do if a man wants to borrow money from you?" she asked.

"In the abstract I am delighted to lend it to him," he said. "In the concrete I tell him I haven't got a penny, as a rule."

"I see," said Lily; "but if you had, you would lend it him?"

"Yes; for, supposing that it is the right sort of person who asks you for money, it is rather a compliment. It must be a difficult thing to do, and it implies a sort of intimacy."

"And if it is the wrong sort of person?" asked Lily.

"The wrong sort of person has usually just that shred of self-respect that prevents him asking you."

Lily sighed, and pulled his hair gently, rather struck by his penetration, but not wishing to acknowledge it.

"Door-mats—door-mats!" she observed.

"All right; but why be personal? Who wants to borrow money from you, Lily?"

"I didn't say anyone did," she replied, throwing the note of her envelope into the grate. "Don't be inquisitive. I shall ask abstract questions if I like, and when I like, and how I like. Read the Screamer's speech with great care, and be ready by twelve. You are going to take me to the Old Masters."

She went out of the room, leaving Toby to his politics. But he did not at once pick up the paper again, but looked abstractedly into the fire. He did not at all like the thought that someone was borrowing money from his wife, for his brain involuntarily suggested to him the name of a possible borrower. Lily had held a note in her hand, he remembered, when she came into the room, and it was the envelope of it, no doubt, which she had thrown into the grate. For one moment he had a temptation to pick it up and see whether the handwriting confirmed his suspicions, the next he blushed hotly at the thought, and, picking up the crumpled fragment from the grate with the tongs, thrust it into the hottest core of the fire.

But the interruption had effectually destroyed his power of interesting himself in this world-wide combination against Mr. and Mrs. Kruger. There was trouble in the air; what trouble he did not know, but he had been conscious of it ever since he had gone down one day late in last December to stay with Kit and Jack at Goring, and they had been blocked by the snow a couple of stations up the line. He had noticed then, and ever since, that there was something wrong between Kit and his brother. Kit had been unwell when they were there: she had hardly appeared at all during those few days, except in the evenings. Then, it is true, she had usually eaten and drank freely, screamed with laughter, and played baccarat till the small hours grew sensibly larger. But underneath it all lay an obvious sense of effort and the thundery, oppressive feeling of trouble—something impossible to define, but impossible not to perceive. In a way, supposing it was Kit who wanted to borrow money from his wife, it would have been a relief to Toby; he would have been glad to know that cash alone was at the bottom of it all. He feared—he hardly knew what he feared—but something worse than a want of money.

He sat looking at the fire for a few minutes longer, and then, getting up, went to his wife's room. She was seated at the table, writing a note, and Toby noticed that her cheque-book was lying by her hand. He abstained carefully from looking even in the direction of the note she was writing, and stood by the window with his broad back to the room.

"Lily," he said, "will you not tell me who it is who wants to borrow money from you? For I think I know."

Lily put down her pen.

"Toby, you are simply odious," she said. "It is not fair of you to say that."

Toby turned round quickly.

"I am not a bit odious," he said. "If I had wanted not to play fair, I could have looked at the envelope you left in the dining-room grate. Of course, I burnt it without looking at it. But I thought of looking at it. I didn't; that is all."

Lily received this in silence. For all his freckles, she admired Toby too much to tell him so. And this simple act, necessitated by the crudest code of honour, impressed her.

"That is true," she said. "All the same, I don't think it is quite fair of you to ask me who it was."

Toby came across the room, and sat down by the fire. The suspicion had become a certainty.

"Lily, if it is the person I mean," he said, "it will be a positive relief to me to know it. Why, I can't tell you. I haven't spoken to you before about the whole thing; but since we went down to Goring on that snowy day I have had a horrible feeling that something is wrong. Don't ask me what: I don't know—I honestly don't know. But if it is only money I shall be glad."

Lily directed an envelope and closed it.

"Yes, it is Kit," she said at length.

"Ah, what have you done?"

"I have done what she asked."

"How much?" The moment after he was ashamed of the question; it was immaterial.

"That is my own affair, Toby," she said.

Toby poked the fire aimlessly, and a dismal, impotent anger against Kit burned in his heart.

"Borrowing! Kit borrowing!" he said at length.

"Of course, I haven't let her borrow," said Lily quietly, sealing the note.

"You have made her a present of it?"

"Oh, Toby, how you dot your i's this morning!" she said. "Shall I unseal what I have written, and put a postscript saying you wish it to be understood that so much interest is charged on a loan? No, I am talking nonsense. Come, it is time to go out. Kit is coming to see me this afternoon, soon after lunch, so we must be back before two."

"Kit coming to see you? What for?"

"She asked me if I would be in at three. I know no more. Oh, my good child, why look like a boiled owl?"

The boiled owl got up.

"It is a disgrace," he said; "I've a good mind to tell Jack."

"If you do," remarked Lily, "I shall get a divorce—that's all!"

"I'm not certain about the law in England," said Toby, with emphasis, "but I don't believe for a moment that they'd give it you for such a reason. But make the attempt. Try—do try."

"Certainly I should," said she. "But, seriously, Toby, you mustn't think of telling Jack. He and Kit have had a row, so I believe, and she doesn't like to ask him for money. I come next: I do really, because you haven't got any. Besides, you said it was rather a compliment being asked; I agree with you. But to tell Jack—preposterous!"

She stood in front of him, drawing on her long gloves, her eyes fixed on her hands. Then she looked up.

"Preposterous!" she said again.

Toby took one of the gloved hands in his.

"I love and honour you," he said simply.

"Thank you, Toby. And how dear it is to me to hear you say that, you know. So you'll be good, and let me manage my own affairs my own way?"

"For this time. Never again."

"As often as I wish, dear. Oh, am I a fool? You seem to think so."

"It's not that—oh, it's not that," said Toby. "Money—who cares? I don't care a damn—sorry—what you do with it. It doesn't interest me. But that Kit should ask you for money—oh, it beats me!"

"I think you are hard on her, Toby."

"You don't understand Kit," he said. "She is as thoughtless as a child in many things—I know that—but being thoughtless is not the same as being upscrupulous. And about money she is unscrupulous. Pray God it is only——" and he paused, "well, it is time for us to go out, if we want to see the Old Masters. Personally I don't; but you are a wilful woman. And I haven't even thanked you."

"I should advise you not," remarked Lily.

"Why? What would you do?" said the practical Toby.

"I should call you Evelyn for a month."

Toby was sent to a political meeting directly after lunch, and Lily was alone when Kit arrived. Fresh-faced as a child, and dressed with an exquisite simplicity, she rustled across the room, just as she rustled at church, and in her eye there was a certain soft pathos that was a marvel of art. A mournful smile held her mouth, and, giving a long sigh, she kissed Lily and sat down close beside her, retaining her hand. It is far more difficult to be a graceful recipient than a graceful donor in affairs of hard cash, and it must be acknowledged that Kit exhibited mastery in the precarious feat. With admirable grasp of the dramatic rights of the situation, for a long moment she said nothing, and only looked at Lily, and even the doubting Apostle might have gone bail that her feelings choked utterance. That she was very grateful for what Lily had done is true, if gratitude can be felt without generosity; but it was not her feelings that choked her utterance, so much as her desire to behave really beautifully, and express her feelings with the utmost possible charm. At last she spoke.

"What can I say to you?" she said. "Oh, Lily, if you only knew! What can you have thought of me? But you must believe I loathe myself for asking. And you —and you——"

Real moisture stood in Kit's eyes ready to fall. Lily was much moved and rather embarrassed. Passionate relief was in Kit's voice, beautifully modulated.

"Please say nothing more," she said. "It gave me real pleasure—I am speaking quite seriously—to do what I did. So all is said."

Kit had dropped her eyes as Lily spoke, but here she raised them again, and the genuineness of the eyes that met hers brought her more nearly to a sense of personal shame than anything had done for years; for even the most undulating *poseur* feels the force of genuineness when really brought into contact with it, for his own weapons crumple up before it like the paper lances and helmets with which children play. Kit's life, her words, her works, were and had always been hollow. But Lily's sincerity was dominant, compelling, and Kit's careful calculated manner, a subject of so great preoccupation but two seconds ago, slipped suddenly from her.

"Let me speak," she said. "I want to speak. You cannot guess in what perplexities I am. In a hundred thousand ways I have been a wicked little fool; and, oh, how dearly one pays for folly in this world!—more dearly than for anything else, I think. I have been through hell—through hell, I tell you!"

At last there was truth in Kit's voice, a genuineness beyond question. Her carefully studied speech and silences were swept away, as if by a wet sponge from a slate, and her soul spoke. A sudden unexpected, but imperative, need to speak to someone was upon her, to someone who was good, and these past

weeks of silence were an intolerable weight. Goodness, as a rule, was synonymous in Kit's mind with dulness, but just now it had something infinitely restful and inviting about it. Her life withJack had grown day by day more impossible; he, too, so Kit thought, knew that there was always with them some veiled Other Thing about which each was silent. Whether he knew what it was she did not even try to guess; but the small things of life, the eating and the drinking, the talk on indifferent subjects when the two were alone, became a ghastly proceeding in the invariable presence of the Other Thing. To Lily also that presence was instantly manifest, the trouble about which Toby had spoken that morning. It was there unmistakably, and she braced herself to hear Kit give bodily form to it, for she knew that was coming.

Kit dropped her eyes and went on hurriedly.

"I am in unutterable distress and perplexity," she said; "and I dread—oh, I dread what lies before me! For days and nights, ever since that snow-storm down at Goring, I have thought only of what I have to go through—what is within a few months inevitable. I have tried to conceal it from Jack. But you guess, Lily. You know, I even went to a doctor to ask if anything could be done——"

Lily looked up with a glance of astonished horror.

"Stop, stop," she said; "you are saying horrible things!"

"Yes, I am saying horrible things," went on Kit, with a strange calmness in her voice; "but I am telling you the truth, and the truth is horrible. The truth about a wicked person like me cannot be nice. You interrupted me. I went, as I told you, but when I got there I drove away again. I was not so wicked as I thought I was."

Lily gave a great sigh of relief. But she had not seen the Other Thing yet.

"Oh, my poor Kit," she said; "I am so sorry for you; but—but you see the same thing lies before me. But fear it? I thank God for it every moment of my life. Cannot you forget pain, risk, danger of death, even in that? Nothing in this world seems to me to matter when perhaps soon one will be a mother. A mother—oh, Kit! I would not change places with anyone in earth or heaven."

Kit did not look up.

"It is different for you," she said.

"Different? How different?" she asked; but a sudden misgiving shook her voice. Outlines of the Other Thing were discernible.

A sudden spasm of impatience seized Kit.

"Ah, you are stupid!" she cried. "You good people are always stupid."

There was a long silence, and during that silence Lily knew Kit's secret, and as with everyone the world of trivial things swarmed into her mind. She heard the ticking of the clock, the low boom of life outside, the rustle of Kit's dress as she moved slightly. Something perfectly direct had to be said by the one or the other; anything else would be as out of place as a remark on the weather to a dying man.

"What am I to do?" asked Kit at length simply.

And the answer was as simple:

"Tell your husband."

"I think Jack would kill me if I told him," said Kit.

"I am very sure he would not. Besides, what does that matter? Oh, what does that matter?"

Kit looked up at her in silence, but after a moment Lily went on.

"Don't you see what I mean?" she said. "There are some situations in life, Kit, and this is one, where no side-issue, like being killed, comes in. There is, as God is above us, absolutely only one thing to be done, though there are a hundred arguments against it. What is the use of telling him? you might ask. Use? Of course there is no use. Why tell the disgrace? why make him miserable? why make him hate you, perhaps? Simply because you must—you must! Oh, my poor, poor Kit, I am so glad you told me! It must be something to tell anyone, even a feeble little fool like me. How could you have borne it alone? Oh, Kit, Kit!"

Again there was silence. Lily sat leaning forward in her chair, bending towards the other, with all the pure sweet womanliness of her nature yearning in her eyes. Perhaps she should have been shocked. She was not, for pity swallowed up the very ground on which censure should have stood. The two women, as asunder as the poles, were for the moment brought close by the Divine identical experience of their sex; yet what was to be to one the flower of her life and the crown of her womanhood, was to the other a bitterness ineffaceable, a shuddering agony.

"Oh, it is difficult, it is difficult!" went on Lily; "but when was anything worth doing easy? Does not all in you that you know to be best point one way? You cannot imagine going on living with Jack, day by day, week by week, without telling him. And when it comes——"

Lily broke off suddenly. Here was no question of words. What could argument do in a case that admitted of none? There was one thing—one thing only—to

be done; all else was impossible. If Kit did not feel that in her very blood and bones, no words could conceivably make her. She had been sitting quite still and silent, apathetic apparently, during Lily's speech. After her outbreak at the beginning, such entire composure was unnatural. The two might have been talking of Danish politics for all the interest Kit seemed to take in the subject. Inwardly storm and tempest raged; old voices, memories, all that was innocent, called to her; the gales of her soul bugled and shook the foundations of her building, but as yet the moment had not come. Then suddenly the slightest tremor seemed to shake her, and Lily saw that she was beginning to feel, and that some fibre long dormant or numb was still vital.

"All I say to you seems nothing more than platitude, perhaps?" she went on; "but platitudes are worth consideration when one touches the great things of life—when interest, tact, inclination, cleverness, are all sunk, and we are left with the real things, the big things—goodness, wickedness, what is right, what is wrong."

Her tone had a pleading wistfulness in it, her eyes were soft with tenderness, and the simple, homely words had the force of their simplicity. Kit was drawing on her gloves very slowly, still not looking up.

"Tell me two things more," she said, with a tremor in her voice. "Do you shrink from me? And the wrong I have done to—to your unborn child, what of that?"

Lily rose and kissed her on the forehead.

"I have answered you," she said.

Kit got up, hands trembling and with twitching mouth.

"Let me go," she said. "Let me go at once. Come if I send for you."

She hurried from the room without further good-bye, and Lily was too wise to try to detain her. Her carriage was still waiting, and she stepped quickly into it.

"Home," she said.

Outside the air was brisk with spring, the streets clean and dry, and populous with alert faces. Shop-windows winked and sparkled in the lemon-coloured sunshine; at a corner was a barrow full of primroses from the country, and the news of the day lay on the cobbles of the crossing, with stones to keep it from flying, in scarlet advertisement. A shouting wind swept down Piccadilly, hats flapped and struggled, errand-boys whistled and chaffed, buses towered and nodded, hansoms jingled and passed, but for once Kit was blind to this splendid spectacle of life. Her own brougham moved noiselessly and swiftly on its India-rubber tires, and she knew only, and that with a blank heaviness of

spirit, that each beat of the horses' hoofs brought her a pace nearer to her home, to her husband—a step closer to what she was going to do.

She got out at her own door, and, to her question whether her husband was in, was told that he was up in his room. He had ordered the carriage, however, which brought her back, to wait, as he was going out.

Kit went quickly up the staircase and along the parquetted floor of the passage, not loitering for fear she should not go at all. Jack was standing in front of his fireplace, an opened letter in his hand. As she came in he looked up.

Kit had advanced a few steps into the room, but stopped there, looking at him with eyes of mute entreaty. She had not stopped to think over what she should say, and though her lips moved she could not speak.

"What is it?" he said.

Kit did not reply, but her eyes dropped before his.

"What is the matter?" he asked again. "Are you ill, Kit?"

Then the inward storm broke. She half ran across the room and flung her arms round his neck.

"I wish I were dead!" she cried. "Jack, Jack—oh, Jack!"

CHAPTER IV

THE DARKENED HOUSE

Toby was just turning into the Bachelors' Club next morning after another terrible wrestle with the Screamer, when he ran into Ted Comber. They had met a dozen times since their interview in the Links Hotel at Stanborough last August; indeed, they were both of the snowed-up party which went to the cottage in Buckinghamshire in the winter. Toby, still in ignorance that his interference had only changed the scene of the week by the seaside, bore him no ill-will at all; in fact, having been extremely rude and dictatorial to him, he felt very much more kindly disposed to him afterwards, and, as usual, on meeting him to-day, he said "Hulloa!" in a genial and meaningless manner as they passed.

But this morning there was something comparatively dishevelled about Ted; the knotting of his tie was the work of a mere amateur, and he had no button-hole. As soon as he saw Toby he stopped dead.

"How is she?" he asked.

Toby stared.

"How is who?"

"Kit. Haven't you heard?"

Toby shook his head.

"I called there this morning," he said, "for Kit and I were going to an exhibition, and they told me she was ill in bed. And Jack would not see me."

"No, have heard nothing," said Toby. "Kit called on my wife yesterday, but I did not see her. Lily did not say anything about her being ill."

Lord Comber looked much relieved.

"I suppose it is nothing, then," he said; "I do hope so. It would be terrible for Kit to be ill, just when the season is beginning."

Toby stood for a moment thinking.

"Did you say Jack refused to see you?" he asked.

"Yes; I dare say he was very busy. No one sets eyes on him now that he has become a gold-miner. I am told he lives in the City, and plays dominoes in his leisure hours with stockbrokers. Probably he was only busy."

Toby bit his glove.

"Why else should he refuse to see you?" he asked.

"I can't think, because I'm really devoted to Jack. Well, good-bye, Toby. I'm so glad to have seen you. If there was anything serious, I'm sure they would have told you. Isn't the morning too heavenly?"

Lord Comber waved his hand delicately, and turned briskly into Piccadilly. He had really had rather a bad moment before he met Toby, and it was a great relief that that red-headed barbarian knew nothing of Kit's illness. It could scarcely be anything serious. One way and another he had seen almost nothing of her since he was down at the cottage in December, for he himself had been out of England, and in the country, until this week, whereas the Conybeares had been almost entirely in London.

It was a delicious spring morning, and his spirits rose quickly as he went eastwards. He was proposing to do a little shopping in Bond Street, since Kit could not come to the exhibition, and visit his hairdresser and his tailor. A play had just come out at the Haymarket, in which the men wore very smart coats with a great deal of thick braid about them, and he intended to order a coat

with thick braid at once. He remembered having seen in an old fashion-book of 1850 pictures of men with heavily braided coats, and had often thought how smart they looked. But they belonged to the crinoline age, and till now he had never seriously thought of getting one made. But this new play had quite convinced him; though they were the fashion when crinolines were in, they were not of the same ephemeral stamp as their feminine counterparts, and the late nineties should see them again.

Just at the corner of Half-Moon Street was a flower-seller, with bunches and button-holes of spring flowers. The girl who sold them was pretty, and he looked at her a moment deftly twisting the wire round the stalks, wondering where the lower orders got their good looks from. There were yellow jonquils, breathing a heavy incense; creamy narcissi with flaming orange-coloured centres; exquisite single daffodils, most classic of all flowers, pure and girlish-looking; double daffodils, which reminded him of the same girls grown older and rather stout, overdressed, with fringes; and small fragrant bunches of violets. For violets, except in so far as they were of a lovely colour, he did not care; they were as formless as cotton-wool when put together for a button-hole (the object of flowers), and the scent of them was so precisely like essence of violets as to be *banale*. But as he was dressed in dark blue serge, with a violet satin tie and a sapphire pin, he bought a bunch, and put it in his button-hole, completing his scheme of colour. He gave the girl a shilling, and when she would have offered him a heavy copper change, told her to keep it, and walked on with a little warm charitable feeling, unencumbered by the dead weight of so many pennies.

After his tailor's, a visit to Perrin's was necessary. He had a very particular hairdresser there, whom he must really take into serious consultation about certain gray hairs. There were at least a dozen of them above each of his ears, and they had appeared there during the last two or three months. All his family went gray early, and it was as well to face it. It was no use getting hair dyes, which might either ruin one's hair or be the wrong colour; it was only wise to consult the very best authorities, and if hair dye was necessary, let it be put on, at any rate directed, by a professional hand.

These were gloomy reflections; the shadow of age was beginning to peer over his shoulder, and he did not like it at all. He was as yet only thirty, but already ten years of being a young man, the only thing in the world worth being, were gone from him. Five years ago, men of forty, young for their age, were objects of amusing horror to him; their whole life, so he thought, must be one effort to retain the semblance of youth, and their antics were grotesque to the *vraie jeunesse*. But now both the amusement and the horror were gone; it would soon be worth while trying to learn a wrinkle or two from them. At twenty-five forty had seemed beyond the gray horizons; at thirty it had come so near

that already, and without glasses (which he did not need yet), one could see the details of that flat, uninteresting land. What he would do with himself when he was forty he could not imagine. Marry very likely.

But forty was still ten years off, thousands of days, and this morning was a jewel of spring, and he was so happy to think that probably Kit had nothing much amiss. Really, he had had some bad minutes, but Toby must have known if there had been anything wrong. So his spirits rebounded, and he resumed his reflections on age with a strong disposition towards cheerfulness as regards the outlook. When he looked over his contemporaries in his own mind, he candidly found himself younger than they. There was Tom Abbotsworthy, for instance, whose forehead was already nearly one with the top of his head, separated only by the most scrannel isthmus of hair, and corrugated with wrinkles on its lower parts, smooth and shining above. There was Jack Conybeare, with a visible tinge of gray in his hair, and lines about his eyes which were plain even by candlelight. Ted congratulated himself, when he thought of Jack, on his having so promptly gone to the face *masseur* on his return from Aldeburgh in September. It had meant a week of tedious mornings, and an uncomfortable sort of mask at night over the upper part of the face two or three times a week ever since, but the treatment had been quite successful. "Not only," as the somewhat sententious professor of massage had said to him, "had the growth and spread of the lines been arrested, but some had actually been obliterated." He congratulated Ted on his elastic skin. Again, his teeth were good, and really the only reconnoitring-parties of age at present in sight were this matter of gray hairs and a tendency to corpulency. For the former he was going to take prompt steps this morning, and he had already begun a course of gritty biscuits, most nutritious, but entirely without starch, which promised success in point of the latter.

But while he was making his butterfly way down Piccadilly, occasionally sipping at a jeweller's, or hovering lightly over a print-shop, Toby, after a long meditation on the top step of the club, during which time the hall-porter had held the door open for him, turned away instead of going in, and went up Park Lane to his brother's house. Kit's bedroom was directly over the front-door, and, looking up, he saw that the blinds were still down. Jack was coming into the hall from his room when Toby entered, and, seeing him, stopped.

"I was just coming to see you, Toby," he said. "I am glad you have come."

Jack's face looked curiously aged and drawn, as if he had spent a week of sleepless nights, and Toby followed him in silence, with a heart sunk suddenly into his boots. There was deadly presage in the air. Jack preceded him into the smoking-room, and threw himself down in a chair.

"Oh, Jack, what is it?" asked Toby.

The two remained together for nearly an hour, and at the end of that time came out together again. Toby took his hat and gloves from the hall-table, and was putting on his coat, when the other spoke.

"Won't you go and see her?" he asked, and his voice was a little trembling.

"I think I can't," said Toby.

"Why not?"

Toby had thrust one hand through the arm of his coat, and with it dangling remained a moment thinking.

"For two reasons: she is your wife—yours," he said, "and I am your brother; also you were a brute, Jack."

"For both reasons see her," he said; and his voice was sorry and ashamed.

"And it will do no good," said Toby, still irresolute.

"But it will be a pleasure to Kit," said Jack. "Don't, for God's sake, be always thinking about doing good, Toby! Oh, it maddens me!"

Toby disengaged the coated arm, and leaned against the hall-table.

"I shouldn't know what to say," he replied.

"You needn't know; just go and see her." Jack spoke with some earnestness. "Go and see her," he went on. "I can't, and I must know how she is. Toby, I believe you are sorry for both of us. Well, if that is so, I am sure Kit would like to see you, and certainly I want you to go. She was asking for you, her maid told me, an hour ago."

"I'm a damned awkward sort of fellow," said Toby. "Suppose she begins to talk, God knows what I shall say."

"She won't; I know her better than you."

Toby put his hat down, and drew off a glove.

"Very well," he said. "Send for her maid."

Jack laid his hand on Toby's arm.

"You're a good fellow, Toby," he said, "and may God preserve you from the fate of your brother!"

Jack rang the bell, and sent for Kit's maid. The two brothers remained together in the hall without speaking till she came down again.

"Her ladyship will see Lord Evelyn now," she said.

Toby went up the staircase behind the woman. They came to Kit's door, and having tapped and been answered, he entered.

The blinds, as he had seen from the street, were down, and the room in low half-light. The dressing-table was close in front of the window, and in the dim rose light that filtered through the red stuff, he could at first see nothing but a faint sparkle of silver-backed brushes and bottles. Then to the right of the window the bed became outlined to his more accustomed gaze, and from it came Kit's voice, rather gentler and lower-pitched than its wont.

"Toby, it is dear of you to come to see me," she said. "But isn't it stupid of me? Directly after seeing Lily yesterday I came back here, and tripped on those steps leading from Jack's room. I came an awful bang. I must have been stunned, for I remember nothing till I found myself lying on the sofa here. Oh dear, I've got such a headache!"

Toby found himself suddenly encouraged. Of all moral qualities, he was disposed to put loyalty the first, and certainly Kit was being magnificently loyal. Her voice was perfectly her own; she did not say that she had stumbled over something of Jack's, still less that he, as Toby knew, had knocked her down. He drew a chair up to the bedside.

"It is bad luck, Kit," he said; "and really I am awfully sorry for you. Is your head very bad?"

"Oh, it aches!" said Kit; "but it was all my own fault. Now, if anyone else had been to blame for it, I should have been furious, and that would have made it ache worse." She laughed rather feebly. "So one is saved something," she went on, "and even with this head I am duly grateful. It is a day wasted, which is always a bore, but otherwise——"

And she stopped abruptly, for the glibness of her loyalty was suddenly cut short by a pang of pain almost intolerable, which pierced her like a sword. She bit the bedclothes in her determination not to cry aloud, and a twenty seconds' anguish left her weak and trembling.

"I wanted to see you, Toby," she said. "Just to tell you how, how——" And she paused a moment thinking that her insistence on the fact that her accident was no one's fault but her own, might seem suspicious—"how glad I was to see Lily yesterday!" she went on. "I wonder if she would come to see me; ask her. But you must go now; I can't talk. Just ring the bell as you go out. I want my maid."

She stretched a hand from under the bedclothes to him, and he took it with a sudden fright, feeling its cold feebleness.

"Good-bye, Kit," he said. "Get better soon."

She could not reply, for another sword of pain pierced her, and he went quickly out, ringing the bell as he passed the mantelpiece.

Jack was still in the hall when he came downstairs again, and he looked up in surprise at the speed of Toby's return.

"She fell down, she told me," he said. "You were quite right, Jack—not a word."

Jack had not time to reply when Kit's maid hurried downstairs into the hall.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"Her ladyship is in great pain, my lord," she said. "She told me to send for the doctor at once."

Jack rang the bell and looked up at Toby blankly, appealingly.

"Go into your room, Jack," he said. "I'll send for the doctor, and do all that."

A footman was sent off at once for Kit's doctor, and Toby sat down at a writing-table in the hall and scribbled a note to his wife, to be taken by a messenger at once to his house. If Lily was not at home, he was to find out where she had gone and follow her. The note only contained a few words:

"My Dearest: Kit is in trouble—worse than I can tell you. Come at once to her. She wants you.

"Toby."

When he had written and sent this, he went back to Jack. The latter was sitting at his table, his face in his hands, doing nothing. Toby went up to him.

"Come, Jack," he said, speaking as if with authority, "make an effort and pull yourself together. Get to your work, or try to. There is a pile of letters there you haven't looked at. Read them. Some may want answers. If so, answer them. I have sent for Kit's doctor, and for Lily."

Jack looked up.

"It isn't fit that Lily should come here," he said.

Toby thought of Kit's visit the afternoon before, and Lily's refusal to him to say anything of what it had been about. That it had been private was all she would tell him, and not about money. And as they were sitting alone in the evening he thought he saw her crying once.

"I think it is very possible she knows," he said. "Kit had a private talk with her yesterday. Wait till she comes."

Jack rose from his seat.

"Oh, Toby, if you had only telegraphed for me from Stanborough, instead of packing him off!"

"I wish to God I had!" said Toby drearily.

Jack took up his letters, as Toby had told him, and began opening them. There was one from Mr. Alington enclosing a cheque. He barely looked at it. Money, his heart's desire, had been given him, and the leanness of it had entered into his soul. But seeing the sense of Toby's advice to do something, he answered some of these letters, mechanically and correctly.

Before long Lily was announced, and Toby rose quickly, and went out into the hall to meet her.

"Ah, Toby," she said, "you did quite right to send for me. They just caught me before I went out. You needn't tell me anything. Kit told me all."

Toby nodded.

"Will you see Jack?" he asked.

"Yes, if he would care to see me. Ask him whether he will or not."

But Jack had followed Toby, and before he could answer had come out of his room.

"It is awfully good of you to come, Lily!" he said. "But go away again. It is not fit you should be here."

"If Kit wants me, I shall see her," she said. "Please let her know that I am here, Jack."

"It isn't fit," said Jack again.

"I think differently," said Lily gently. "Please tell her at once, Jack."

Jack looked at her a moment in silence, biting his lip nervously.

"Ah God!" he cried, suddenly stung by some helpless remorse and regret, and without more words he went upstairs to see whether Kit would see her. He could not bring himself to go into the room, but asked through the maid. Soon he appeared again at the head of the stairs, beckoning to Lily, who was waiting in the hall below, and she went up. He held the door of Kit's bedroom open for her, and she went in.

The room was very dark, and, like Toby, it took her a few seconds before she could distinguish objects. From the corner to the right of the rose-square of the window came a faint moaning. Lily walked across to the bedside.

"Kit," she said, "my poor Kit! I have come."

There was silence, and the moaning ceased. Then came Kit's voice in a whisper:

"Lily," she said, "I told him. I told him all. Then—then—I somehow fell down those stairs leading from his room, and hurt myself awfully. My fault entirely.... I was not looking where I was going. Oh, I have felt so terribly ill since this morning, and it is only morning still, isn't it? Have they sent for the doctor?"

"Yes, they expect him immediately. Oh, Kit, are you not glad you told him? It was the only way. Now you have done all you can. It would be worse to bear if you had not told him. Oh, I wish—I wish I could take the pain instead of you! Hold my hand. Grip it with all your force; it will make the pain seem easier. And oh, Kit, pray to God without ceasing."

"I can't—I can't," moaned Kit; "I never pray. I have not prayed for years."

"Pray now, then. If you have turned your back on Him, He has never turned His back on you. The Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, born of a woman! Only be willing to let Him help you—that is sufficient. Think of the graciousness of that! And this is the very week of His Passion."

"I can't pray," moaned Kit again; "but pray for me."

The grip of Kit's hand tightened in Lily's, and she could feel the stones in her rings biting into her flesh. Yet she hardly felt it; she was only aware of it. And her whole soul went up in supplication.

"O most pitiful, have pity," she said. "Help Kit in the hour of her need; deliver her body from pain and death, and her soul, above all, from sin. Give her amendment of life, and time to amend, and the will to amend. Make her sorry. Oh, Almighty One, stand near one of Thy children in her pain and need. Help her—help her!"

The door of the room opened quietly, and Dr. Ferguson entered. He held in his hand a little bag. He went to the window and drew up the blinds, letting in a splash of primrose-coloured sunshine; then shook hands with Lily, who rose at his entrance, in silence.

"You had better leave us, Lady Evelyn," he said. "Please send the nurse up as soon as she comes."

Lily turned to the bedside once more before leaving the room, and Kit smiled in answer to her. Her face was terribly drawn and white, and the dew of pain stood on her forehead. Lily bent and kissed her, and left the room.

She rejoined Toby and Jack in the smoking-room. Jack got up when she entered with eyes of questioning.

"The doctor is with her," said Lily. "He will be sure to tell us as soon as he can."

"Do you think she is very bad?"

"I don't know. She is in dreadful pain. How on earth did she manage to fall so badly down these steps?"

"Did she tell you that?"

"Yes; she said it was entirely her own fault."

Jack turned away a moment.

"I knocked her down," he said at length.

Lily's eye flashed, but grew soft again.

"Don't let her know that you have told me," she said. "Oh, poor Jack!"

Jack turned to her again quickly.

"Lily, do you think she will die?" he asked. "And will it be that which killed her?"

"Don't say such things, Jack," said Lily firmly. "You have no right to say or think them yet. We must hope for the best. Dr. Ferguson will certainly tell us as soon as he knows."

For another half-hour they sat there, the most part in silence. Lily took up a book, but did not read it; Jack sat at a table beginning letter after letter, and tearing them up again, and all waited in the grip of sickening, quaking suspense for the doctor's report. Footsteps, which at such times fall with a muffled sound, moved about the house, and occasionally the ceiling jarred with the reverberation of a step in Kit's room, which was overhead. Lunch was announced, but still none of them moved. At last a heavy footstep came downstairs, the door of the smoking-room opened, and Dr. Ferguson entered.

"It is a very grave case," he said quietly. "I should like another opinion, Lord Conybeare."

Jack had faced round in his chair, and sat for a moment in silence, biting the end of his pen. His hands were perfectly steady, but one of his eyebrows kept twitching, and the colour was struck from his face.

"Please telegraph, or send a carriage to whomever you wish for," he said.

"A hansom will be quickest," said Dr. Ferguson, "unless you have horses already in. Excuse me, I will write a note."

Toby got up.

"I'll take it, Jack," he said. "Lily's carriage is still waiting."

"Thank you, Lord Evelyn," said the doctor. "Sir John Fox will certainly see you if you send your card in. He will be at home now. In fact I need not write. Bring him back with you, please."

Toby left the room, and Dr. Ferguson got up.

"She is very ill?" said Jack.

"Yes, the condition may become critical in an hour or two. I shall then"—and he looked at Jack—"I shall then have to try to save Lady Conybeare at whatever cost."

Jack gave a sudden short crack of laughter, but recovered himself.

"Meanwhile, Lord Conybeare," continued the doctor, "you are to consider yourself a patient too. I insist on your having lunch."

"I can't eat," said Jack.

"Excuse me, but you have got to. And you too, Lady Evelyn. By the way, Lady Conybeare tells me she had a fall. That, of course, caused this premature event. When did it happen?"

For a moment Jack swayed where he stood, and sat down again heavily. He seemed about to speak; but Lily interrupted him quickly:

"Yesterday afternoon, about four o'clock. Lady Conybeare told me about it. Please come in to lunch, Dr. Ferguson, unless you are going upstairs again at once, in which case I will send you some up. Come, Jack."

Toby returned before long, bringing Sir John with him. The two doctors had a short consultation together, and then went upstairs again.

Outside the muffled house the spring day ran its course of exquisite hours. The trees in the Park opposite were already covered with little green buds, not yet turned black by the soot of the city, and the flower-beds were bright and heavily fragrant with big, succulent hyacinths. Up and down Park Lane surged the busy traffic; now a jingling hansom would cut in front of a tall, nodding bus, now a dray would slowly cross the Park gate, damming up for a moment the two tides of carriages passing in and out. The great bourdon hum of London droned like some overladen bee, still intent on gathering more riches, and the yearly renewal of the lease of life granted every springtime made gay the tenants of this goodly heritage of earth. Inside the house Jack and Lily sat alone, for she had sent Toby away for an hour or two to get some air. They hardly spoke to each other; each listened intently for a foot on the stairs.

About four o'clock, just as the sun, still high, was beginning to cut the rim of

the taller trees in the Park, Dr. Ferguson entered. He beckoned to Jack, who left the room. Outside in the hall he stopped.

"You must decide," he said. "We cannot possibly save the mother and the child."

"Save the mother!" cried Jack. "Oh, save her!"

His voice was suddenly raised almost to a shriek, and through the closed door, Lily, hearing it, started up. In another moment he came back into the room, trembling frightfully, with a wild, scared look.

"Jack! Jack!" she said. "My poor fellow! be brave. What is it?"

"They have to try to save one," said Jack. "Oh, Lily!" And with a sudden upheaval of his nature, and an uprising of all that was tender and remorseful, long overlaid by his selfish, unscrupulous life, he gave way utterly and abandonedly. "Oh, Kit! Kit!" he moaned. "If she dies it will be my doing. I shall have murdered her. And we have been married six years! She was not twenty when we married—a child almost. And what have I done for her? Have I ever made this wicked, difficult business of life any easier for her? I, too, have been false and faithless, and when poor, brave Kit came to tell me—what she told me—I did that which may have killed her. She has to bear it all, and I, brute, bully and coward, go scot-free. She fell like a log, and I was not sorry, only frightened. And she told you, she told Toby, she told the doctor, that she had fallen herself. Poor, loyal Kit! And I am a fine fellow to be loyal to! O God! God! God!"

He writhed on the sofa, where he had flung himself in dumb, twisted agony. The pains of hell, a soul knowingly lost, were his. All the love he had once borne to Kit, all the years of their excellent comradeship together, rose and filled the cup of unutterable remorse.

Lily, woman to her heart's core, was one throb of pity for them both, and could scarce find words.

"Oh, Jack!" she said; "there is hope. It is not hopeless. They did not say that. It is awful; but be strong. We have to wait."

He did not answer her, but lay like a man dead, his face hidden in the elbow of his arm. Lily saw it was no use attempting to reach him by any words. For the time he lay outside the range of human sympathy, inaccessible. The outer darkness of remorse and regret was round him, not to be illuminated, but unpierceable and of necessity so. He was not a good man, but an utterly bad one would not have so suffered.

So they sat silent, and the sun sank lower behind the trees, till at length a few

rays through the yet thinly clad branches came in level at the window. Suddenly Jack sat up.

"I hear a step," he said, and next moment Lily perceived it, too.

"Go into the hall to them, Jack," she said, thinking that he would rather face the inevitable moment of news alone.

"I can't," said he.

The step came down the stairs, across the flagged hall, and Dr. Ferguson entered.

"She will pull through," he said. "Unless anything quite unforeseen happens, Lady Conybeare will do well."

CHAPTER V

TOBY ACTS WITHOUT SPEAKING

Ted Comber had passed an arduous but most satisfactory morning. His own particular hairdresser had been kind, sympathetic and consoling. Gray hairs were there, and it was no use denying it; but there was a wonderful new preparation, not really a hair-dye, but a natural product, which, like everything else connected with the hair, cost ten and sixpence the bottle, and was to be confidently recommended. He would send it round to South Audley Street. A little to be applied with a brush every day to the parts affected, and the smell was not unpleasant.

From there he had gone to his tailor's, and had a long talk to Mr. Barrett, who fully appreciated the solemnity of the braid idea, and said it might be an epoch. Down the edge of the coat—exactly so—and the waistcoat in the same manner, very broad. And what did his lordship think about the treatment of the trouser? Braid on the outside of the leg, or not? And his lordship thought braid. The suit could be ready by Saturday evening, and so Ted could wear it for the first time on Easter Sunday, said kind Mr. Barrett.

He came out of the shop humming a tune, very much pleased with himself and braid and Mr. Barrett. Mr. Barrett always consulted him as if his advice was worth having, with a bent back. To be a sort of *arbiter elegantiarum* in town was one of Ted's nasty little ideals, and he contrasted himself with a friend of his who was being measured as he came out, who, making some suggestion, not to Mr. Barrett, but only to an assistant, received the curt reply, "Not worn like that now, sir." How different would be the reception of any suggestion of

his! Mr. Barrett would look respectfully thoughtful for a moment or two, and then say, "Very becoming, very becoming indeed." As likely as not he would recommend the same innovation to the next customer, endorsing it with, "Lord Comber has just ordered a coat of that cut, sir."

It was already after one when he left Bond Street, and he turned briskly homewards. The morning was so lovely that he determined to walk, and he reached home just before lunch. The inimitable preparation had already arrived from Perrin's, and he went up to his bedroom to try its properties. It was dark chestnut in colour, with a curious pungent smell about it, and he applied it carefully, as directed, to the affected regions. The affected regions smarted a little at the application, but the pain could not be called really serious.

Though Ted had passed such assiduous hours since breakfast, the afternoon was so pleasant that he determined to have another stroll before tea. He had seen no one he knew that day except Toby, and he yearned for a little light conversation. So, after changing his blue suit for a more rigorous costume, soon after four he was on his airy way to the Bachelors' Club. Tea and toast always tasted so good at the Bachelors' Club, and he liked to think he was a Bachelor. It was pleasant also, as he walked up the steps, to contrast the sunny content of his five o'clock mood with his moment of real anxiousness this morning.

The reading-room was nearly empty, and he sank peacefully into his favourite chair by the window, and took up the Pall Mall. He abstained from the leading article, and from "Silk and Stuff," or something of the kind, at the bottom of the first page, cast a vague eye over "The Wares of Autolycus," without any definite idea as to what they might be, and turned to the small paragraphs to which he bore a closer affinity. Royal Highnesses were doing various tedious things, race-meetings among them; the German Emperor had written a hymn, or climbed a tree, or ridden a locomotive; and about half-way down the page he saw the following:

"The Marchioness of Conybeare is lying in a very critical condition at her residence in Park Lane."

Ted read it through once, hardly grasping it, and once more, thinking he must be the victim of some gigantic practical joke. The next moment he got hastily up from his chair, and at the door ran into an apologetic waiter, who was bringing his delicious tea and toast. But he did not pause for that, and going out into the street hailed a hansom, directing the man to drive him to Toby's house. They would be sure to know there, and, for private reasons of his own, he did not wish after his repulse of this morning to make a target of himself again at Park Lane.

Now, barely half a minute before his hansom drew up there, Toby, who had been sent out by his wife to get air, had come in. He was intending to see whether there were any letters for either of them, and then walk back to Park Lane. His straightforward, wholesome soul was full to brimming, and the ingredients of that cup were sympathy for Jack, anxiety for Kit, and blind anger and hatred for Ted. He was not a canting analyst, and could not have said which ingredient usurped proportion, nor did he cultivate mixed emotions, and the three existed quite separately and individually, making him as wretched as his nature permitted him to be. Between them all he felt pulled in pieces; any conclusion to either would make the other two more bearable.

He found a couple of letters lying on the hall-table for his wife, and putting them in his pocket to take back to her, he was just turning to leave the house again, when the front-door bell rang. The man who had let him in was still there, and Toby, half-way between unreasonable hope and sickening apprehension, thinking that it might be some news from Park Lane, advanced also towards the door, so that when it was opened he was close to it. Outside, on the topmost of the four steps that led up from the pavement, in the most well-cut of raiment, the glossiest of patent-leather shoes, and the most faultless of hats, stood Ted Comber.

Toby gave one short gasp, licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, took one step towards him, and knocked him backwards down the four steps. A cry of passionate dismay escaped the falling body; the faultless hat rolled under the hansom, the gold-crutched stick flew in a wide parabola into the area, and Toby, smiling for the first time since that morning, and not caring to improve or spoil the situation with words, walked away. The only regret that lingered in his mind was that there had not been a fuller gathering to observe the scene; however, the cabman and his own footman had an uninterrupted view of what had taken place.

So Toby's footsteps went briskly away along the wet pavement—there had been a cool spring shower some half-hour ago—and the footman at the front-door and the cabman on his exalted perch were left staring. The horse had shied and swerved at this considerable commotion on the pavement, and before the driver could stop it had taken a couple of prancing steps forward, bringing the off wheel with devilish precision over Ted's hat, crushing it lengthways. Its unenviable proprietor lay fallen across the pavement, his chestnut curls within a few inches of the curb, for the moment stunned. Returning consciousness reminded him of a severe pain on the side of his head, a really acute anguish in his right elbow, another hardly less distressing in his shoulder, and two more in his leg. Then he picked himself up, and a being more sunk beneath the zones of pity, take him body and mind together, could scarcely have been found in all big London. His frock coat was a

fricassée of dirt, his face was vanished in a splash of mud, the elbow of his right sleeve, whence came one of the most excruciating pains, was torn through shirt, and as he got up he could feel the grating of his broken watch-glass. A footman, discreetly but undisguisedly grinning, watched him from the door of Toby's house, a cabman from his perch. Dignity is scarcely compatible with dirt, and Ted knew it. He picked up his hat, which looked as if a drunken man had been trying to fold an opera hat the wrong way, and the battered remnants of what so lately had been so fine climbed into the hansom again, and requested to be driven home. It had not been a very successful visit.

His reflections were not the most enviable. That act of Toby's, for which he was now but a sorry parcel of aches, meant the worst. And at that thought all that was passably decent in the man came to the surface. There was not enough to cover a large surface, but there was a little. He pushed open the trap at the top of the hansom and changed his destination to Park Lane. Aching and bleeding as he was, he would not wait, wait, wait for tardy news. Nor was his anxiety wholly selfish; he had—God knows what proportion this bore to the whole—a fear based on affection. Then, having given the order, he devoted himself to patching up a very sorry object.

His face was bleeding under the right eye, and his cheek was scratched and raw; it seemed as if all the stray small objects in a London street had been inlaid into it in layers by an unpractised hand. His elbow was cut, his knee was cut, and both ached like toothache. But he mopped and brushed and dabbed till the balance of dirt was on his handkerchief, and when that was clear, realizing that to touch the breaches any more meant the transference of the dirt back again, he leaned idly against the cushions of the cab, in a state of mind compounded of anxiety and unutterable depression. Little had he supposed that the mirrors in the corners, often by him so satisfiedly and light-heartedly used, would ever have reflected so battered a self.

There was a carriage at the door when he drove up, but it gave him access, and after ringing the bell he huddled back into his cab again. Even now, when, to do him justice, he was a prey to the most poignant emotions that had ever touched his putty soul, the instinct of regard for his own appearance, the desire to shield the shattering it had undergone, asserted itself. He leaned forward in the hansom when the front-door was opened, showing to the footman only his undamaged left.

"How is Lady Conybeare?" he asked.

"A great improvement, my lord," said the man.

"Thanks. Please tell the coachman to drive to 12, South Audley Street."

Kit was alive—better. His spirits, elastic as his complimented skin, instantly

began to recover themselves, and his thoughts straying out of selfishness, absorbed for an hour in another, turned homewards again like sheep to their fold. He had been afraid that he had dropped that nice box of toys, the world, and that they would have been broken. But it seemed that it was not so. He had dropped them, it is true, and some of them, himself particularly, were rather scratched and muddy, but they were not broken. He could play with them a long time yet.

Instinctively again he turned to the slip of looking-glass in the corner of his hansom. His scratched face had stopped bleeding, and it did not look so bad as he had feared. His hat, it is true, was a sorry sight, but it is easy to get new hats, and the thought that Toby's barbarous revenge had mainly spent itself on a Lincoln and Bennett was even a little amusing. Much more important was the patch of whitening hair above his ear, and he turned his face sideways to examine it. Even that one application of the dark fluid he had made just before lunch had already changed it; the white hairs seemed to have been blotted with colour. How delightful!

He paid the cabman, let himself into the house, and went with a slight limp up to his bedroom, where he rang for his valet. He had had a fall, he explained, and must change his clothes and have a bath. Also, he would dine by himself at home, and a telegram must go at once to the Haslemeres to say that he had hurt himself and could not come. On the whole, he was not sorry to absent himself. Lady Haslemere had really become rather tiresome lately. She was always talking about bulls and bears, and Ted did not care in the least for the menagerie of the City. His warm bath with pine in it was soon ready, and he went to repair the damages of the day.

As he dressed he reviewed the agitations of the hour that had passed. An undignified part had been thrust on him by Toby, for the most complacent cannot flatter themselves that they show a brave figure when they are forcibly laid on pavements. But it was in the very nature of the case that the reason of the blow prevented the story going abroad. It was impossible that Toby should cause it to be known that he had knocked him down, for people would ask why. Secrecy, at any rate, was desired on both sides. As far, then, as that most unpleasant moment was to be regarded, he had only to apply vaseline to his cuts, order some new clothes, and live the occurrence down; not publicly—that would have been trying—but privately. He had only to get over it himself. Anyhow, Toby knew by this time how completely his bumble-bee diplomacy at Stanborough had miscarried, and at that thought the smarting of his own wounds grew appreciably less. Decidedly it had not been a pleasant moment when he flew backwards on to the pavement, but it was over. He smarted far more under the effect of the insult than under the insult itself. It was very like Toby, he thought, to deal with him in that manner. Anyhow, there was a smart

in Toby's soul which no vaseline could reach.

Against the violence that had been done him he could set the news of Kit's ameliorated condition. He told himself with sublime *naïveté* that it was worth while being knocked down to learn that. His anxiety had been terrible, really terrible, and he could not but balance that weight removed against other unpleasantnesses. Things were not so bad as they might have been. But it had been terrible, and he easily persuaded himself that he was suffering horribly. What had happened he did not yet exactly know; in any case it was horrible, and it would be wise not to dwell on it. He would know to-morrow, and as he brushed his hair he saw again with satisfaction the working of his pungent fluid.

He felt battered and tired, and, putting on a floss-silk dressing-gown, lay down on the sofa in his bedroom, and rang the bell for tea. Really, he had been through a life-time of suffering since he rang the bell for tea an hour before at the Bachelors' Club, and he desired that restorative agent most acutely. Most of all—and this was highly characteristic—he desired to dismiss the experiences of the day from his mind. It had all been extremely unpleasant, and there was a good deal that was unpleasant still hanging about, like the sultriness of a thundery day, low and imminent. But at the moment he could do nothing: no step that he could take would make matters better, no effort of will would disperse the thunder-clouds, and it was idle to brood over things, and mar one's natural cheerfulness with morose and gloomy reflections. His bright, shallow personality reflected like a wayside puddle whatever was immediately above it, and held no darkling shadows or remote lights of its own, and he was rightly very careful of the buoyancy of his spirits, since that was the best of him, and undeniably of the greatest use.

There was a small table by his hand, with the gold-topped scent-bottle, the evening paper, and a few yellow-covered French books on it. He sprinkled his forehead with the scent, threw the evening paper away, for there was a little paragraph in it which he wanted to forget, and took up Gautier's "Mademoiselle de la Maupin," and opened it at random. He read a page or two, and became interested, absorbed. The magic of words, a spell more potent than any wizard's incantation, took hold of him, and the indoor hot-house atmosphere of infinitesimal intrigue was most congenial. The low roar of London traffic outside grew dumb, the agitations of harsh experience grew remoter, the events of the day became to him as the remembrance of some book he had read, and the book he was reading grew flushed with the realities of life.

Toby in the meantime, after his short and decisive interview without words on the doorstep, had walked back to Park Lane, and got there not very many

minutes after his interviewer had made his call. He went straight into Jack's room, and found Lily there alone. Question and answer were alike needless; her face answered what he had not audibly asked.

"She will get through," she said. "They think she will certainly get through."

Toby threw his hat on to the sofa.

"Thank God! oh, thank God!" he cried. "Where is Jack?"

"Upstairs. They let him see her for a moment. He will be down again immediately. But they could not save both Kit and the child, Toby."

Toby sat down by his wife.

"Oh, Lily, what a difference five hours can make!" he observed with that grasp of the obvious which distinguished him. "By the way, I met someone when I was out."

"Whom?"

"Him. I went home to see if there were any letters for either of us—oh, there were two for you; catch hold—and as I came out I found him on the doorstep."

"What had he come for?"

"I didn't ask him. But I know what he went for. Spread-eagle on the pavement. All in his beautiful clothes. And the hansom went over his hat; damned neat it was. Oh, Lily, that made me feel better, and I felt, too, it was a good omen. I wish you had been there. You would have roared."

"Toby, you are a barbarian! What good does that do?" she said with severity.

"What that sort of a man wants is pain," remarked Toby.

"Was he much hurt?" asked Lily with extreme composure.

"I don't know. I hope so. I hope he was very much hurt."

"Do you mean you left him lying there?"

"Yes. He may be there now."

Lily's severity broke down.

"Then please have him taken away before I get back," she said. "Ah, here's Jack!"

Jack could not speak, nor was there need, but he shook hands, first with Lily, then with his brother, and nodded to them. Then suddenly his mouth grew tremulous, and he sat down quickly by the table, and covered his face with his hands.

Lily looked at Toby, and in answer to her look he went out of the room. As she passed Jack, following her husband, she laid her hand for one moment on his bowed shoulder, and went out also, closing the door behind her softly.

CHAPTER VI

LILY'S DESIRE

Toby and his wife left London the day before Easter to spend a fortnight at the cottage in Buckinghamshire, which Jack had lent them. Kit was going on as well as possible, but she could not yet be moved; they hoped, however, that both of them would come down to Goring before the others left. Mrs. Murchison was also spending Easter there, before she went back to America, where she purposed at present to be with her husband for a fortnight at least.

She had arrived just before tea, the others having come down in the morning, and was a torrent of amazing conversation.

"And then on Tuesday," she was saying, "I dined with dear Ethel Tarling at the Criterion. We had a beautiful dinner, and most amusing; and all during dinner some glee-club sang in the gallery those delicious English what-do-you-call-thems, only I don't mean meringues."

"Madrigals?" suggested Lily, in the wild hope it might be so.

"Madrigals, yes! They sang madrigals in the gallery—'Celia's Arbour' and 'Glorious Apollyon from on high beheld us.'"

Lily gave a little spurt of uncontrollable laughter.

"Always making fun of your poor old mother, you naughty child!" said Mrs. Murchison, with great good-humour. "Toby, you should teach her better. And then afterwards we went to the Palace Theatre to see the Biography. Most interesting it was, and the one from the front of a train made me feel quite sick and giddy—most pleasant. Oh! and I remember that it was that evening we heard about poor Lady Conybeare. How sad! I called there this morning, and they said she was much better, which is something."

"Yes, we hope that Jack and Kit will both come down here in ten days or so," said Toby.

"And Lord Comber, too," went on Mrs. Murchison guilelessly. "It was that same day he had a fall, and bruised himself very badly. Misfortunes never come singly. Did you not hear? He fell on his head, and I should think it was

lucky he did not get percussion of the brain."

Toby did not glance at his wife.

"Very lucky," he said.

"Was it not? Then I spent Wednesday at Oxford, which I was determined to see before I left England. Most beautiful and interesting it is. I lunched with the Master of Magdalen College, whom I met in London several times, and saw the statue they put up on the place where Shelley died."

"I thought he was drowned," said Lily.

"Very likely, dear," said Mrs. Murchison; "and now I come to think of it, the place is near the river, so I expect they put it up as near as they could. You couldn't wish to see them put a recumbent statue, a very recumbent statue indeed, so it is, in ten feet of water, dear," she observed, with great justice.

Mrs. Murchison sipped her tea in a very ecstasy of content. It was barely a year since she had first seen Toby, and marked him down as the ideal husband for Lily; and there they were all three of them, drinking tea, as she said to herself, in the stately homes of England, how beautiful they stand! Her siege of London had been rapid and brilliantly successful. The fortifications had fallen sudden and flat, like the walls of Jericho; and she made no more of dining at the Criterion with that marvellous Lady Tarling than of washing her hands or going to America.

"Yes, the Master of Magdalen College was most kind," continued Mrs. Murchison, "and said he remembered Toby well. Dear me, what a lot I shall have to tell your father, Lily! And after lunch—really, a most excellent lunch, I assure you, with quails in asps—we went down to the Ibis."

"To the where?" asked Lily.

"To the river," said Mrs. Murchison, suspecting a difficulty, "and saw where the college boats rowed their races—torpedoes, I think the Master called them, and I remember wondering why. His own torpedo won the last races."

Here Toby choked violently over his tea, and left the room with a rapid uneven step.

"Perhaps it's not torpedoes, then," went on his mother-in-law, supposing that he would have corrected her if he had been able to speak; "but it's something very like. Dear me, what a terrible noise poor Toby makes! Had we better go and pat him on the back? Then yesterday I went to the 'Messiah' at the Albert Hall, which made me cry."

Mrs. Murchison looked welcomingly at Toby, who here reappeared again,

rather red and feeble.

"Dear Toby," she said, "it's just lovely to think of you and Lily so settled and titled and happy; and when I'm on the ocean, I shall often go to my state-room, and count the days till I come back. I must be in America at least a fortnight, if not ten days; and I shall try and persuade Mr. Murchison to come across with me when I return. I'm very lucky about ships: I go out in the Lucania, and come back in the Campagna. And is there anyone else coming down here before I go on Wednesday, or shall we have a nice little no-place-like-home all by ourselves?"

"Oh, we are going to be simply domestic," said Lily, rising, "and we shan't have a soul beside ourselves. You know both Toby and I are naturally most domestic animals. We neither of us have any passion for the world. We like being out of doors, and playing the fool, and having high-tea—don't we, Toby?"

"I have no passion for high-tea," remarked Toby.

"Oh yes, you have. Don't be stupid! I don't mean literal high-tea, but figurative high-tea."

"The less literalness there is about high-tea, the better I like it," said Toby.

Lily passed behind his chair and pulled his wiry hair gently.

"Lord Evelyn Ronald Anstruther D'Eyncourt Massingbird, M.P., is not such a fool as a person might suppose," she remarked. "At times he shows glimmerings of sense. His love for figurative high-teas as opposed to figurative high-dinners is an instance. Don't blush, Toby. You've little else to be proud of."

"I've got you to be proud of," remarked Toby, bending back his head to look at her.

Mrs. Murchison rustled appreciatively. That was the sort of thing which English people could say naturally without gush or affectation. A Frenchman would have bowed, put his heels together, and kissed his wife's hand. An Italian would have struck the region of his heart. An American would have expressed it in four-syllable periphrasis. But Toby did none of these things. He said it quite simply, lit a cigarette, and growled:

"Leggo my hair, Lily!"

Lily "leggoed" his hair.

"He is trying to blow rings," she explained, "but he can only blow ribands and streamers. Also, he looks like an owl when he tries. Rings on his fingers and

bells on his toes," she added with immense thoughtfulness. "Toby, I'll buy you a peal of bells if you will promise to wear them on your toes."

Toby got up from his chair.

"If anyone has anything else of a peculiarly personal nature to say about me, now is their time," he remarked; "otherwise, we'll go out. Dear me! the last time I was here we got snowed up at Pangbourne, and slept in the Elephant Inn, and I remember I dreamed about boiled rabbit. I seldom dream, but I remember it when I do."

Lily sighed.

"Yes, and poor Kit was waiting for us all here. She was quite alone, mother, and had an awful *crise des nerves* over it."

"I should have thought she was the last person in the world to be nervous," said Mrs. Murchison.

"Oh, *crise des nerves* is not nervousness," said Lily; "it is being strung up, and run down, and excited."

"My mother," remarked Mrs. Murchison, "was of a very nervous temperament. I have seen her on the coldest days suddenly empty a carafe of water over the fire, for fear of the house catching. And evenings she would sometimes blow out the candle for the same reason."

Toby giggled explosively.

"And the cruel part was," continued Mrs. Murchison, "that throughout life she was afraid of the dark, in which the blowing out of the candles naturally left her. So, between her dread of a conflagration and her terror of the dark, it was out of the fireplace into the fire."

"Frying-pan, mother," said Lily.

"Maybe, dear; I thought it was fireplace. But it's six of one and half a dozen of another. Poor Mommer! she had a very nervous and excitable temperament, with sudden bursts of anger. At such times she would take out her false teeth —she suffered from early decay—and dash them to the ground, though it meant slops till they got repaired. Most excitable she was."

"Very trying," said Toby rather tremulously.

"No, we didn't find her trying, Toby," said this excellent lady. "We were very fond of her. Poor dear Mommer!"

She sighed heavily, with memory-dim eyes, and Toby's laughter died in his mouth. Mrs. Murchison got up.

"Well, I shall put on my hat," she said, "and come out with you both. I brought an evening paper down with me, but there is nothing in it, except that there has been a terrible tomato in the West Indies, destroying five villages—tornado, I should say—and great loss of life."

She went out of the room to fetch her hat, and Lily and Toby were left alone. Toby looked furtively up, wondering what he should meet in Lily's eye. Her face, like his, was struggling for gravity, and both shook with hardly-suppressed laughter. Neither could speak, and they turned feebly away from each other, Toby leaning with trembling shoulder on the mantelpiece, and Lily biting her lip as she looked helplessly out over lawn and river. Now and then there would come from one or other a sobbing breath, and neither dared look round. Once Lily half turned towards her husband, to find him half turned towards her with a crimson strangling face, and both looked hastily away again. The plight was desperate, and after a moment Lily said, in a choking, baritone voice:

"Toby, stop laughing."

There was no answer, and she gave him another moment for recuperation. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him wiping away the moisture of laughter. Then with a violent effort he subdued the muscles round his mouth.

"She's an old darling," he said; "but, Lily, I shouldn't have liked your grandmother."

Lily heaved a long sigh, herself again.

"Toby, you behaved very well," she said, "and mother is an old darling. Come, we'll go out."

Mrs. Murchison took her cheerful presence away after three days, as she was sailing to America almost immediately, and the two were alone for the next week. Spring had definitely come, and day after golden day ran its course. Life, eternally renewed with the year, had burst from its winter chrysalis, and stood poised a moment with quivering, expanding wings before launching itself into the half-circle of summer months. Everywhere, on field and tree, the effervescence of green and growing things foamed like some exquisite froth. One morning they would rise to see that the green buds on the limes had split, shedding their red sheaths; on another, the elms were in sudden tiny leaf; on another, the mesh of new foliage round the willows of the water's edge would make a delighted wonder for them. The meadows were scarce starred with pink-edged daisies when the buttercups sowed a sunshine on the fields, and in cool, damp places yellow-eyed forget-me-nots reflected the pale blue they gazed at so steadfastly. Toby and his wife would spend long, lazy mornings in the punt or drive about the deep-banked, primrosed lanes—he all tenderness

and solicitude for her, she happier than she had known it was given to mankind to be. They talked but little; to both it seemed that their joy lay beyond the region of words.

On the evening of one such day they were strolling about the garden as dusk fell. Birds called in the thickets and shrubs, now and then a rising fish broke the mirror of the river, and each moment the smell of the earth, as the dew fell, grew more fragrant.

"I wish we were going to stay here a long time," said Lily, her arm in his; "but we must go up to London when Parliament meets after the Easter holidays. The M.P.! Good gracious, Toby, to think that the welfare of your country depends upon a handful of people of whom you are one!"

"Parliament may go hang," said Toby, "and Jack will be delighted to let us stay here just as long as you like."

"I am sure of it, but I don't like. What do you suppose I wanted you to get into Parliament for, if you were not going near the House?"

"Never could guess," said Toby. "It's much more important that you should stop here if you want to."

"Don't be foolish—but, oh, Toby, when my time comes let me come down here again. It was here we were engaged; let it be here you take your first-born in your arms. I do want that."

She turned to him with the light of certain motherhood in her eyes, a thing so wonderful that the souls of all men are incomplete until they have seen it, and her beauty and her love for him made him bow his head in awe. His wholesome humble soul was lost in an amazement of love and worship.

"It shall be so, Toby?" she asked, with a woman's delight in learning how unnecessary that question was. "Will my lord grant the request of his handmaiden?"

"Ah, don't," he said suddenly. "Don't say that, even in jest."

"Then will you, Toby?" she asked.

"If my queen wills it," said he.

"Nor must you say that, even in jest," she said.

"I don't; I say it in earnest—in deadly earnest. It is the truest thing in the world."

"In the world? Oh, Toby, a big place! Then that is settled."

She took his arm again, and they strolled slowly over the short velvet of the

grass.

"Toby, there is another thing I want," she said after a moment.

"It is yours—you know that."

"I'm glad of it, then, because I don't think you will like it. It is this: I want you to see Lord Comber, and just shake hands with him."

Toby stopped.

"I can't," he said—"I simply can't."

"Think over it. You see, Toby, it is like this: you are part of me, and before this wonderful thing that is coming comes, I want to be 'all square' with everybody in the world. That's one of your silly golf expressions, so you'll understand it. And I can't be while you are not. Don't misunderstand me; it isn't that I don't feel as you do about him, and if I had been you and knocked him down as you did, I think I should have kicked him as he lay on the pavement. But now it is over."

"Lily, you don't know what you ask," said Toby. "If I had any reason to believe the man was sorry, that he had even any idea what a vile worm he is, it would be different. No doubt he had a bad time that day, for, as I told you, his tie was no better tied than mine; but having a bad time is not the same as being sorry, is it?"

"No," said Lily thoughtfully; "but whether he's sorry or not is not our concern; it doesn't affect what we ought to feel. He was vile; if he had not been, there would be nothing to forgive. Besides, you knocked him down. People ought to shake hands after they have fought; and I want you to."

"That is the best argument you have given me yet," said Toby.

"I don't want it to be an argument at all; I don't want my wish to be any reason at all why you should do it. You must do it because you agree with me."

"But I don't," said Toby.

"Well, tell me when you would shake hands with him," she said. "Would you this day fifty years?"

"No," said Toby.

"Would you if he was dying, or if you were?"

"I think I should; yes, I should."

"Oh, but, Toby, it is far more important to live in charity with people than to die in charity with them! Oh, indeed—indeed it is!" She stopped, and turned

round, facing him, and all her soul shone in her eyes. "Indeed it is, Toby!" she said again.

Toby looked at her for a long moment, then drew her nearer him.

"Oh, my love!" he said, "what have I done to deserve any part of you? It is as you wish; how can you doubt it? How can I do otherwise?"

She smiled at him.

"But why do you do as I wish, Toby?" she asked. "It must not be because I want you to."

Toby was much moved; never before had the wonder and splendour of love so held him.

"Oh, my beloved," he said, "it is because God has ordained that all you wish is right; I can give you no other reason."

Dusk began to fall layer on layer over the sky. In the west the sunken sun still illuminated a fleece of crimson cloud that hovered above it, and round them the gray, long English twilight grew more solemn and intense. The outlines of shadows melted and faded into the neutral tint of night, and from the house behind, and from the cottages that clustered together across the river, lights began to twinkle, and the wheeling points of remotest heaven were lit overhead. The crimson in the west died into the velvet blue of the sky, and in the east the horizon was dove-coloured with the imminent moon-rise. And as the two walked they spoke together, as they had not spoken before, of the dear event which June should bring.

To Lily, the happiness which, please God, should be hers lay in depths too abysmal for thought to plumb; and Toby for the first time fully understood how compassion, and no other feeling, had whole possession of her soul, when she had been with Kit and Jack all that terrible day, hardly more than a week ago. For that which had been to Kit a thing to dread was to the other the crown of her life, and that the experience to herself so blessed could be anything different to another woman called for pure pity. And other feelings—amazement, horror, shame—were trivial and superficial compared to that; it swept them utterly out of possibility of existence. The woman, the mother, had been between them a bond insoluble.

And Kit, so Toby thought, had felt something of this. For the five days that had followed, he himself had seen almost nothing of his wife; she had been all day at the house in Park Lane, and had twice slept there. Kit in the weakness and exhaustion of those days had held on, as if to a rock, to the sweet strength and womanliness of the other; that was the force that pulled her back to life.

That evening when they went in, Lily found waiting for her a letter from Jack, saying that the doctor had sanctioned Kit's being moved in a week's time, provided she went on as well as she was doing, and that they proposed to come down to Goring. One condition, however, Jack made himself, that Lily should telegraph quite candidly (he trusted her for this) whether she and Toby would rather they did not come. She laughed as she read the note, and sent her answer without even consulting Toby.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECOND DEAL

It was some eight weeks after Easter that Mr. Alington decided to make the next move in the game of Carmel, a move which should be decisive and momentous. He would have preferred for certain reasons to put it off a little while yet, for he had much on his hands, but the balance on the whole inclined to immediate action. During the last four or five months he had done a considerable deal of business as a company-promoter, and at the present moment had some half-million of pounds engaged in other affairs than mines. Motor-cars in particular had much occupied him, and he was the happy possessor of many patents for noiseless tires, automatic brakes, simpler steering-apparatus, and what not. He was a man of really large ideas where money was concerned, and a perfect godsend to patentees, for his policy was to buy up any invention concerning motors which possessed even the most modest merit, in the hopes that, say, in two years' time every motor-car that was built must probably carry one or more of the patents owned by him. He had, indeed, at the present moment in England not more than twenty thousand pounds which he could conveniently devote to the booming of Carmel, but there was lodged with Mr. Richard Chavasse in Melbourne a sum of not less than fifty thousand pounds, with which it was his purpose to supply the "strong support in Australia," to the end that Carmel should rise rainbow-hued above the ruck of all other mines. Altogether his position was a good one, for the last six weeks had brought him from his manager the most excellent private accounts of the mine, which for the most part he had saved up till the booming began. Mr. Linkwood also advised very strongly a fresh issue of shares. They had at present, for instance, only an eighty-stamp mill, whereas at the rate at which they were now getting gold out there was easily work for a mill of a hundred and fifty or two hundred stamps.

It was on this "strong support in Australia" by the convenient Mr. Chavasse that Mr. Alington chiefly relied; that at any rate should be the final touch. He

intended first of all to make a large purchase of his own in England, ten thousand shares at least, and immediately publish encouraging news from the mine. This he would preface, as he had so often done before, by a wire to Mr. Richard Chavasse, which in a few hours would bring forth the accustomed reply, "Strong support in Australia."

But though he would have preferred having a somewhat larger sum at his own disposal for the grand *coup*, he had reason for wishing to start the boom at once. Speculators had recovered from the scare of Carmel East and West, and already, before he had himself moved in the matter, the quotation for Carmel had risen from its lowest price of ten to eleven shillings up to sixteen. This was sufficient in his opinion to show that the public was already nibbling, for professional operators, he knew, were not entering this market, and this was the correct moment to give the fresh impetus. There had been a nineteen days' account just before Easter, which had made the market dull, but since then it had begun to show more vitality.

Other reasons also were his. He was beginning, for instance, to be a little nervous about the immediate success of his dealings in the motor trade. His patents were floated into companies, but in few instances only had the shares been well supported, and in more than one he had incurred a loss—recoverable no doubt in time—which even to a man of his means was serious. Worse than that, if this ill-success continued, it would not be the best thing for his name, and he was most anxious to get Carmel really a-booming while his prestige was still high. Again, many fresh mines had been started in Western Australia since the original flotation of the Carmel group, and his financial sense led him to distrust the greater part of them. Several had been grossly mismanaged from the first, some grossly misrepresented. Others he suspected did not exist at all, and he wished to hit the psychological moment when speculators were ready, as the improvement in Carmel shares had shown, to invest, and before they had seen too much of West Australian mines to make them shy. That moment he considered had come.

Accordingly he instructed his broker to make his own large purchase. This was ten days before settling day, and he hoped to sell out again before those ten days were passed. He had at first intended to purchase only ten thousand shares, but going over his scheme step by step, and being unable to see how it was possible, with this combination of satisfactory news from the mine, his own purchase, and Mr. Chavasse's strong support in Australia, that the shares could fail to rise, he decided to purchase five thousand shares more than he could pay for. It was humanly impossible that the shares should not rise. Consequently on Thursday he telegraphed out to his manager to send a long cablegram embodying all the private news he had himself been receiving for two months back, to his broker, made his own purchase on Friday morning,

and the same afternoon sent a cipher telegram to Mr. Chavasse, telling him to invest the whole of his capital then lying at Melbourne Bank in Carmel, and another in cipher to the manager, bidding him wire "Strong support in Australia." Thus in twenty-four hours his *coup* was made, and he went back to his Passion Music and his prints, to wait quietly for the news of the strong support in Australia. Already in a few hours after his own purchase, backed up as it was with the first of the favourable reports from the mine, the shares had risen three-eighths; the effect on the market, therefore, of the Australian support, he considered, level-headed man of business as he was, to be inevitable.

He was dining out that evening with Lord Haslemere, and was disposed in anticipation to enjoy himself. Lady Haslemere, it is true, was apt to be tedious when she talked about her own transactions in the City, and asked him whether the rise in some mine of which nobody had even heard was likely to continue, and was it not clever of her to have bought the shares at one and a half, for within a week they had risen to two and a sixteenth. She got the tip out of Truth. Mr. Alington, however, had all the indifference of the professional in money matters to the scrannel operations of the amateur, and when in answer to a question of his it appeared that Lady Haslemere had only twenty shares in this marvellous mine, and had worked herself up into a perfect fever of indecision as to whether they should take her certain eleven pounds profit, or be very brave and fly at fourteen, he felt himself really powerless to understand her agitations.

This evening directly after dinner she collared and cornered him, and finance was in her eye.

"I want to have a serious financial talk with you," she said, "so we'll go into the other drawing-room, where we shall be alone. Come, Mr. Alington."

Good manners insisted on obedience, but it was an ill-content financier who followed her. For Lady Devereux, who played Bach quite divinely, was among Lady Haslemere's guests, and even as he left the room to talk over his hostess's microscopic operations on the Stock Exchange, he saw her go across to the piano. It is true that he preferred a very large round sum of money of his own to half an hour of fugues and preludes, but he infinitely preferred half an hour of fugues and preludes to about seven and sixpence of Lady Haslemere's.

She lit a cigarette with a tremulous hand.

"I want to ask your advice very seriously," she said. "I put three hundred pounds into Carmel a week ago, and since then the shares have gone up a half. Now, what do you advise me to do, Mr. Alington? Shall I sell out, or not? I don't want to make such a mess as poor dear Kit did. She really

was *too* stupid! She took no one's advice, and lost most frightfully. Poor thing! she has no head. All her little nest-egg, she told me. But I mean to put myself completely into your hands. Do you expect Carmel will go higher?"

Mr. Alington stroked the back of his head, and tried hard to look genial yet serious. But it was difficult. Lady Haslemere had closed the door between them and the next room, and he could hear faintly and regretfully those divine melodies on the Steinway grand. And here was this esteemed lady, who was quite as rich as anyone need be—certainly so rich as to be normally unconscious of the presence or absence of a fifty-pound note—consulting him gravely (she had let her cigarette go out in her anxiety) about these infinitesimal affairs. If she had had a fortune at stake, he would willingly have given her his very best attention, regretting only that Lady Devereux had chosen this moment for playing Bach; but to be shut off from that exquisite treat for a small sum affecting a woman who was not affected by small sums was trying.

"I can't undertake to advise you, Lady Haslemere," he said; "but I can tell you what I have done myself: I have bought twenty-five thousand shares in Carmel to-day, and have not the faintest intention of selling out to-morrow."

Lady Haslemere clasped her hands. This was a flash of lightning against her night-light.

"Good gracious! aren't you nervous?" she cried. "I shouldn't be able to eat or sleep. Twenty-five thousand—and they've gone up three-eighths to-day. Why, you've scored over nine thousand pounds since this morning!"

"About that—if I sold, that is to say, which I don't mean to do."

"And so you are going to chance the mine going still higher?"

"Certainly. I believe in it. I also believe the price will rise very considerably yet."

Lady Haslemere bit her lip; she was clearly summoning up all her powers of resolution, and Mr. Alington for the moment felt interested. He was, as he might have told you, a bit of an observer. Whether or no Lady Haslemere won eleven pounds or fourteen he did not care at all, but that she should care so much was instructive. Then she struck her knee lightly with her fan.

"I shall not touch my three hundred," she said, and she turned on Mr. Alington a face portentous with purpose.

Mr. Alington sat equally grave for a moment, but the corners of his mouth lost their sedateness, and at last they both broke out laughing.

"Oh, I know how ridiculous it must seem to you," said Lady Haslemere; "but

if you have never earned a penny all your life, you have no idea how extraordinarily interesting it is to do so. You may think that it can't matter to me whether I gain ten pounds or lose twenty. But to gain it oneself—oh, that is the thing!"

Mr. Alington smiled with peculiar indulgence. "Well, frankly, it is inexplicable to me," he said. "Now, if you were playing for a large stake I could understand it, though I seldom get excited myself. Well, that is what I am going to do; I am going to play for a very big stake indeed, and I confidently expect to turn up a natural. Have you anything more to ask me?—for if not, and you will allow me, I shall go and listen to Lady Devereux. I have been so much looking forward to hearing her play again."

Lady Haslemere rose. She had wanted to have a general financial talk as well about Chaffers and Brownhills and Modder B, but the oracle had spoken about her grand*coup*, which was the main point.

"Yes, she plays divinely, does she not?" she said. "I knew Lady Devereux would be a magnet to draw you here. How busy you must have been lately, Mr. Alington! One has not seen you anywhere."

"Very busy indeed. But I intend to take a holiday after the Carmel deal is over."

"A deal? Do you call it a deal?" she asked. "I always thought a deal meant something rather questionable?"

Mr. Alington paused quite as long as usual before replying.

"Oh no; one uses 'deal' as quite a general term for an operation," he said.

They went back into the other drawing-room, and Mr. Alington, with an elaborate softness, drew a chair up near the piano. Lady Devereux played with exquisite delicacy and sobriety, in the true spirit in which to interpret that sweet, formal music. She did not thunder and thump, she did not cover swift, catchy runs with the loud pedal, but let each note fill its own minute, inevitable place. She did not extemporize a *rallentando* where passages were difficult, and make up for this by hurrying over minims, or give you a general idea of a bar. She played the music exactly as it was written with extreme simplicity. There were some twenty people in the room, some whispering together (for Lady Devereux played so well that nobody talked very loud when she was at the piano), some smoking, some playing cards, some passing under their breath the most screaming scandals; and the music was like a breath of fresh air let into a stuffy room. And by the piano, with his sleek face reposeful, beatific, and wearing an expression of sensual piety about it, sat the only listener—a man whose soul was steeped in money, whose God was

Mammon, who could roll on like some Juggernaut-car over the bodies of those he had ruined without one thought of pity or remorse. Yet the melody enchained him; while it lasted he was a child—a child, it is true, with respectable gray whiskers and an expansive baldness on the head, but happy, heedless of anything else in the world except the one exquisite tune, the one delicious moment.

Before long a baccarat table was made up, but he did not move from his place by the piano. Lady Devereux, a pretty, good-natured woman, who got on capitally with everybody except her husband, who, in turn, got on admirably with or without her, was delighted to go on playing to him, for she saw how real and how cultivated his enjoyment of her music was, and though she lost charmingly at baccarat, she really preferred playing even to one appreciative listener. She had an excellent memory, her taste was his, and the two wandered long in the enchanted land of early melody.

At last she rose, and with her Mr. Alington.

"I need not even thank you," he said; "for you know, I believe, what it has been to me. You are going to play? Baccarat for Bach! Dear lady, how shocking! I think I shall go home. I do not want to disturb the exquisite memories. I shall remember this evening."

He stood for a moment with her hand in his. His face looked like the representation of some realistic saint in bad stained glass.

"Good-night," he said. "And I, too, go and daub myself in actualities. But at soul I am no realist."

It was a fine summer evening, fresh and caressing to the diner-out, and he walked back from Berkeley Street slowly, with the musician ascendant over the financier.

Of late he had been very much absorbed in business, and had heard hardly any music, and thus this evening had been really an immense treat. After all, there was nothing so essentially delightful to the bones and blood of the man as this: he was still conscious that the passion for money-making which was his, was, as he expressed it, with more fervour than it was his wont to throw into his daily conversation, a daubing in actualities; and to-night it was with a sense of distaste, rising almost to repugnance, that he contemplated an hour at his desk. The work, he knew, would bring its own consolations and rewards, but as he started back he wished neither to be consoled nor rewarded. Of late, also, his delight in the polished artifices of money-making had been on the wane; for months now he had entertained, even in his hours of triumphant finance, the idea of retiring altogether from business when once he had brought to its inevitable climax this affair of the Carmel mines.

To-night this desire to concern himself no more in the jostle of the Tokenhouse land was more than usually potent, taking almost the form of resolve. Had an angel or devil, it mattered not which, offered him success such as he anticipated in these mines upon the signing of a bond that he would mine and motor no more, he would have signed. What allurements had that peaceful picture! He would sell out (so he figured to himself) his interest in all other businesses, invest his whole fortune in something safe and reliable, perhaps even consols; he would drop the Financial Times and take in the Musical Observer, and lead the life that in sober earnest he at the moment utterly believed himself to prefer. He had long been building a charming and palatially-simple house in Sussex, where in his declining years he proposed to spend the greater part of his time. There, with his prints, his music, and his gardening, he would pass slow, charming, uneventful days. The "long dark autumn evenings" would wean him from his garden-beds to his priceless portfolios, the turning year entice him to his garden-beds again. He would watch the jostle and the race for money with fatherly, Lucretian unconcern. He was tired, he felt sure he was tired, of the eternal struggle for what he held in sufficiency. How gross a parody of existence was the present for a man of truly artistic tastes and sensibilities! In ten days, if things went even passably well, he would have made enough to enable him to gratify these tastes to the full, and, soberly, he wanted no more than that. His beautiful home would be habitable within the year. He would have enough to marry on, for he fully intended to marry, since matrimony was a distinct factor in the social world, and he could say, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years." He was not given to excess of eating, drinking, or merriment—all that was foreign to him—but he would certainly have a string quartette belonging to his very complete establishment.

Mr. Alington had all the coolness in action which ensures success in most human pursuits, from the art of war to the art of making money, and the absence of which postulates a corresponding inefficiency in all practical undertakings. He never lost his head, nor got either frightened or *exalté* when he was at his work; but the intervals, after he had committed himself to some course of action, and before that action had produced its fruits, were sometimes tense periods to him. He went, no doubt, at forced draught when the great *coups* were being made, and after he had taken his headlong excursions Nature demanded a readjustment, and his fibres were relaxed. These periods of relaxation he usually tided over by the indulgence of his artistic tastes, which he used as a man of less fine sensibilities might use morphia or alcohol. But to-night the fugues and preludes so deftly exhibited by Lady Devereux seemed only temporarily efficacious. For a while they moved him, but he had not been home an hour when the effect wore off and left him, financially speaking, staring wide-awake.

Again and again he reviewed the natural effect of what he had done, the normal behaviour of the market towards the events which should be developed next day. Already the prices of Carmel were rising; to-morrow would come the announcement of strong support from Australia, and later in the day the more specific news that Mr. Richard Chavasse—that hard-headed operator—had bought to the extent of fifty thousand pounds. Logically, for the money-market is as subject to logical conclusions as any set of syllogisms, its prices must leap. News of the most satisfactory description would continue to arrive from the mine; in a day or two, in a week at the outside, the shares should stand at not less than four to five—no feverish price, but well warranted, so thought Mr. Alington, by its inherent excellence. There was no doubt there would be some slight fall owing to realizations, but that, so he imagined, would be only a temporary reaction. By settling-day, ten days from now, his twenty-five thousand shares bought in England should be worth more than four times their present value; his fifty thousand pounds invested by Mr. Richard Chavasse something over two hundred thousand. After that a firm good-bye to clamorous gold-getting.

He strolled backwards and forwards in his room, now stopping to look for a moment at one of his beloved prints, now lighting a cigarette or sipping a little mild whisky-and-soda. How admirably, he reflected, had his Carmel group hitherto turned out! How alluring had been his board of directors, how convincing to the public mind of the security of a scheme to which hereditary legislators lent their honoured names! Already more than one new board had copied his example, but it had been a great thing to be first in the field; the novelty of the idea was half its success.

But now his noble colleagues might go hang, for all he cared; they had served their turn and been his bell-wethers to the public. Jack Conybeare, he knew, had followed him in this last Carmel speculation, investing largely; he was a shrewd fellow, so thought Alington, and would have made a good business man had not the onus of hereditary obligations borne him elsewhere; and if he himself had been intending to start new companies, he would not have been sorry to have him again on his board—no mere name this time, but a man likely to be of practical use.

Yes; indeed he had struck a vein! Though he believed that ninety per cent. of success is due to effort and wisdom, he had got, like most speculators, a secret faith in that "tide in the affairs of men." It was impossible not to believe in strokes of luck; if things showed a general tendency to prosper, it was well to put many things in hand at once. The stars or some occult influence happened to be favourable just then; in the remote, conjectured heavens there was a conjunction of planets of notable benignity to you; it was your chance; the line was clear; hurry, hurry, while it lasted! In the same way one had at other times

to work with sobbing steps through a mire of ill-luck. Perversity for the moment characterized the universe; inanimate objects were malign; sheathed, hooded presences waited to clutch you. Nothing went right; the images of the gods were set awry; ominous mutterings were heard (not fancied) from the shrine. Then was the time to venture little, not to ride unmanageable horses, not to use new silk umbrellas, to go gently, neither praising nor complaining, for fear of further provoking the blind forces that strike; above all, not to think to repair ill-luck by wild strokes. In the nature of this world things would come round; a calm, dewy dawn would break on the low-roofed night. Wait!

For a year his good luck had held. People whom he wished to know had been glad to know him; he was already much at home in London. Carmel East and West had behaved with filial piety to their founder, and the greater Carmel seemed likely to turn out a son as dutiful, but more magnificent. His name would almost certainly be included in the list of Birthday honours, for he had made himself most useful to the Conservative party, and was contesting an impossible seat, for which it had been really difficult to find a candidate, and he had given in a princely manner to the party's funds. Recognition, he had reason to believe, was almost certain, and he would be delighted to be a baronet.

Again that discreet rogue Mr. Richard Chavasse had played his part admirably in the pleasant *rôle* allotted to him. Like a person of sense, he had accepted the soft inevitable, and had preferred to live very comfortably at Melbourne rather than attempt to get away with the large balance which stood to his name. He had not probably realized that it would have been almost impossible for Mr. Alington to bring him to justice, for the exposure of the "strong support in Australia" would have been inevitable. Or perhaps some feeling of gratitude to his benefactor had touched the accomplice of thieves; the criminal class had been diminished by one—a pleasant thought. The arrangement, however, had been a scheme of mutual advantage, and the man, at any rate, had been sensible enough to see that. It would almost immediately be necessary to think what must be done with that great operator, for to-morrow's purchase would be his last. Mr. Alington, in a gentle glow of charity, was determined to act most kindly to him; his confession should be destroyed, and perhaps he should have a couple of hundred pounds as well, and certainly some pious exhortations. Indeed, the only eclipse of the lucky star had been the motor business. There were ugly losses in his ledger over that—uglier than he had quite realized; but Carmel should gently heal the sore places with a golden lotion.

Next morning came a very favourable report from the mine, and about mid-day the news of the strong support in Australia. The price had been opened at a little over thirty shillings, the mine was eagerly inquired for, and for a couple of hours it rose steadily, and as it rose seemed to get more and more in

demand. Then one of those strange periodical madnesses which sometimes affect that shrewd body the Stock Exchange took possession. Everything else was neglected; it seemed that the whole world contained only one thing worth buying, and that shares in Carmel. Men bought and sold, and bought and sold again; now for half an hour would come a run of realizations, and the price would sink like a back-drawing wave in a swiftly advancing tide; but in another hour that was forgotten; the tide had risen again, covering the lost ground, and those who had realized were cursing their premature prudence, and bought again. Steady-going, unemotional operators lost their heads and joined in the wild skying of Carmel without a shred of justification, only hoping that they would find everyone else a shade madder than they, and that they would clear out on the top. Men sold at three and a half, bought again at four, sold at four and a half, and were not yet content. Nobody quite knew what was happening, except that they feverishly desired shares in Carmel, and that those shares were getting every moment more expensive. Bears who had sold ten minutes before came tumbling over each other to secure their shares before they had gone up out of sight, and having got them, as likely as not turned bulls and bought again, on the chance of Carmel going higher, though half an hour ago they had sold in the hope of its going lower. All day this went on, and about an hour before the closing of the market Alington, reading the tape record at his club, saw that the shares stood at five and a half—higher than he had ever hoped they would go in a week.

For a moment he hesitated. If he chose, there was now within his grasp all that he had been playing for. A hansom to the City; two careful words to his broker, for the unloading must be done very swiftly; then to his music and his baronetcy. In an hour the market would close till Monday, for Saturday was a holiday; but before Monday, on the other hand, would come fresh news from the mine. He debated with himself intently for a moment, and as he waited the tape ticked under his hand.

"Carmel," it spelled out, "five and five-eighths, five and three-quarters."

That was enough. For to-day nothing could stop the rise. There would be time to sell on Monday morning.

He called for a hansom; he was going to spend from Friday till Monday in the country, and not having more than enough time to catch the train, drove straight to Waterloo, where his valet would meet him with his luggage.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. ALINGTON LEAVES LONDON

Mr. Alington had never felt more at peace with himself, or in more complete harmony with his environment (a crucial test of happiness), than when he drove off to Waterloo from the doors of the Beaconsfield Club, of which he had lately become a member, after reading the last quotation of Carmel. All his life he had been working towards the consummation which was now practically his. His desire was satisfied, he had enough. A few forms only still remained to be put through, and he would be finally quit of all markets. On Monday morning his broker would sell for him every share he held in Carmel. On Monday morning, too, would that shrewd operator, Mr. Richard Chavasse, follow, as if by telepathic sympathy, the workings of Mr. Alington's mind, arriving at the same just conclusions, and a close with the offer made him by the Varalet Company in Paris for all the patents he owned in the motor business *en bloc*—at a considerable sacrifice, it is true—completed his financial career. Keen, active, and full of the most flattering triumphs as had been his progress towards this acme of his fortunes, yet he had never thought of it as anything but a progress, a road leading to a goal. Never had he let the edge of his artistic sensibilities get blunt or rusty from want of use, and he found, now that his more material work was over, that he himself, the vital and essential man, who dwelt in the financier, looked forward, like an eager youth on the threshold of manhood, to the real and full life which he was about to enter.

Humble thankfulness and grateful contentment with the dealings of Providence with him was his also. He had fifty years behind him; pleasant years and wholesome with hard work, during which he had used to great advantage many excellent gifts. The business of his life hitherto had been to make money; in that he had shown himself to be on the large scale. But more essential to him throughout all these years had been his growing artistic perceptions, his increasing love of beauty; that he felt to be the reason and the spring of his happiness. In this regard he had ever cultivated, with the assiduous patience born of love, his natural taste. That keen appreciation of Palestrina and the early melodists was no original birthright of his; it was a cultivated pleasure; a pleasure, no doubt, of which the germ was inborn, but cultivated to a high degree and with effort, because, simply, he believed it to be his duty to make the most of a gift.

In this matter of duty he had often suffered much wrong. The charitable impulse which had led him, one day in the spring, to draw so large a cheque to Mr. Metcalfe, had been an unjust derision in Jack's mouth. Alington really believed (and the most transcendent honesty cannot get below a genuine belief) that part of that notable cheque should be entered as a business transaction, part on the page devoted to charity. He may have deceived

himself, but he was not aware of it; he acted, as far as he knew, with the most judicial fairness in the partition of its entry.

But now for weeks past he had looked forward to the day when he should pass out of the money-making world to a fairer and more melodious one. He had no insane ambition to make inordinate wealth, nor to add a million to his million; his wealth he had steadily regarded as a means to an end, that end being the power to gratify his artistic tastes to the full. He did not forget to pray at his *prie-dieu* morning and evening, nor had he forgotten it on the most feverish days of finance, and he was at peace, imperfectly, no doubt, but, as far as his capabilities went, perfectly, with regard to death and what lay beyond. Meantime this life held for him much that was beautiful, much that was wonderful. He desired to realize its wonder and beauty as completely as possible. All his life he had been a getter of money, or so the world held him. But now no more. On Monday morning all his connection with the market would be severed, the real man should lead his real life.

These thoughts passed through his brain in a gentle glow of intimate pleasure, as his hansom went briskly towards Waterloo. He was going to spend this Friday till Monday with Mrs. Murchison, in her charming house on the Winchester downs, where the invigorating unused air would make more temperate this really tropical weather. A terrific heat-wave, from a positively scalding sea, had drowned London these last few days; the city had been a burning fiery furnace, and the consolation of being cast there, of having got there unwillingly, was denied him, for the flames had been of his own self-seeking. He might, indeed, as soon as he had made the *grand coup*, three days ago, have left London, and waited for the inevitable result in cool retirement, but this retreat from the scene of action had been morally impossible to him. Never before, as far as he remembered, had an operation so taken hold of him; never before had the tickings of the tape, or the call-whistle of his telephone, been of so breathless an urgency. Exciting as had often been the satisfaction with which he had watched the climbing of a quotation from twos into threes, or threes into fours, he could not recollect a restlessness so feverish as that with which he had watched the rise of Carmel. For this had been the *comble* of all: the rise of the price meant to him a perfect freedom from all future rises. To see Carmel quoted above five had been equivalent to his emancipation from all that should hereafter touch the nerves. Yet here was one weak spot. He had seen the quotation of over five and a half ticked out by the tape, yet he had not instantly sold. The old Adam in his case, as in so many others, had inconveniently and inconsistently survived. He had not been able to resist the temptation of wanting to be richer than he truly wanted to be. But in order to cut himself off from any such weakness in the future, he immediately pushed open the trap-door, and told his driver to stop at the

nearest telegraph office, and ten minutes after he had taken his final step, wiring both to his broker in London, and in cipher to Mr. Chavasse, at Melbourne, to sell out on Monday morning.

But this weakness was but inconsiderable. He had attained success all down the line; the only wavering had been between completeness and more than completeness. Here, as was natural, the instinct of years stepped in. The habit of making ten pounds in complete safety was more potent than the certainty of making nine. His own large purchase had heralded the rise, the good news from the mine had shouted an endorsement, the "strong support in Australia," the news of which had reached the market with the infallible result so long foreseen by him, had put the seal on certainty. The deal was beyond doubt.

At last and at last! This crippling of his life was over; he was free from the necessity of money-making, free also, thank God! from the desire. He no longer wanted more than he certainly had. How much can be said of how few!

His inward happiness seemed reflected in all sorts of small external ways. His horse was fast, his driver nimble at picking an unsuspected way, and the porters at Waterloo, miraculously recovered from the paralysis of the brain induced by Ascot week, not only were in accord as to the platform from which his train would start, but, a thing far more rare and precious, were one and all perfectly correct in their information.

To Mr. Alington, though his nature was far removed from the cynical, this seemed almost too good to be true, till, in his benignant strolls up and down the line of carriages, he met his hostess, Mrs. Murchison. She was feeling the heat acutely, but was inclined to be talkative.

"So you've come by the early train," she said. "Well, I call that just friendly, and it's the early bird that catches the train, Mr. Alington, and here we are. But the heat is such that if I was wicked and died this moment, I fancy I should send for a thicker mantle, and that's a chestnut. Lady Haslemere comes down by the four something, which slips a carriage at Winchester—or is it five?—which I think perilous. They cast you adrift, the Lord knows where, for I inquired about it, without engine, and if you haven't got an engine, where are you? A straw hat—that's just what we are going to be; a straw-hat party like Lady Conybeare and the tea-gowns, and dinner in the garden."

"That will be delicious," said Mr. Alington after his usual pause. "Dinner out of door is the only possible way of feeding without the impression of being fed. I always——"

"Well, that's just beautifully put," interrupted Mrs. Murchison. "You get so much all-fresco out of doors. And that's what I missed so much in my last visit to America, where I stopped a fortnight nearly. The set-banquet, with all the

ceremonial of the Barmecides, like what Mr. Murchison rejoices in, and the colour he turns over his dinner, seems to me an utter nihilism of the flow of soul. Why, there's Lady Haslemere! So she's caught the early bird too."

Lady Haslemere, according to her invariable habit, only arrived at the station one minute before the starting of the train, in a great condition of fuss, but she pressed Mr. Alington's hand warmly.

"You were quite right," she said: "I didn't sell out two days ago, and, oh! the difference to me. I have just this moment sold at five and three-quarters. Only think!"

"I congratulate you heartily," said Mr. Alington, with a smile of kind indulgence; "I too am going to sell on Monday morning."

A shade of vexation crossed Lady Haslemere's face.

"Do you think it will go higher again?" she asked.

"A shade, very likely. But possibly it may react a little. I was in two minds myself as to whether I should sell to-day."

Lady Haslemere's brow cleared.

"Oh, well, one can't always sell out at the very top," she said; "but it will be annoying to me if it goes to six. Two hundred and forty times five shillings. Ye-s."

"I think you have done very well," said Mr. Alington, with just a shade of reproof in his voice.

The financier travelled in a smoking compartment, the two ladies in a carriage to themselves, and as the train slid out towards Vauxhall high among the house-roofs, Mr. Alington felt that in more than this literal sense he was leaving London, that busy brain of the world, behind and below him. And though his parting glances were certainly not regretful, they were very kindly. He had been well treated by this inn at which he had passed so many years, laboriously building his house and the fortunes of his house. That was done; he needed hired chambers no longer. The newsboys, who at this very station had looked on him as a regular purchaser of the more financial of the evening papers, found him to-day quite indifferent to their wares, and even the placard "Extraordinary Scenes on the Stock Exchange" met an uninterested eye. One boy, indeed, had been so accustomed to give him the Evening Standard that, seeing his large profile against the carriage window before the train started, had without request handed him in the paper. But Mr. Alington pushed it gently aside.

"Not to-day, my lad—not to-day," he had said; "but here's your penny for

you."

The carriage was empty and, as London fell back behind the train, Mr. Alington's spirits, usually so equable and so seldom falling below the temperate figures of content, or rising into feverish altitudes, became strangely light and buoyant. He had often wondered in anticipation how this moment—the moment of casting off from him the chains of fortune-building—would affect him. Exciting and exhilarating hours had often been his; numerous had been the triumphs which his clear-sighted scrutiny of the financial heavens had brought him. He had felt a real passion for his pursuit; but the joy of the pursuit had never blinded him to the fact that it was an object he was pursuing. He wanted a certain amount of money, and he had now got it, and already the joy of having attained had swallowed up the lesser joy of attaining. He had often asked himself whether the habit and the desire of obtaining were not becoming too integral a part of him; whether, when his purpose was achieved, he would not feel suddenly let down—put out of employment. If that should prove to be so, he felt that his life would largely be a failure: he would have elevated the means into the end.

But the moment had come; it was his now, and he knew within himself that he had kept clear of so deplorable an error. He felt like a boy leaving school after a successful term, having won, and having deserved to win, some arduously-reached distinction. The thought gave gaiety to his glance: his eye sparkled unwontedly, he had a mind to dance. But the mood deepened; the surface gaiety became transformed into a thankfulness of a far more vital kind, and as the train devoured the miles between Clapham Junction and Waterloo, he knelt down on the dusty carpet of his carriage, and, with bared head and closed eyes, he thanked God for having given him the brain and the will to succeed, and, during that pursuit of the transient stuff, for not having let his heart be hardened at the daily touch of gold. Money-making, in the moment of this success, he still saw to be not an end in itself. The danger of that insidious delusion he had escaped. And before he rose he registered a vow to use the fortune of which he had thus been made steward temperately and wisely.

A large party was going to gather at Mrs. Murchison's next day, but till then there would only be the three who had come down by this train, and four or five more who had proposed to embark on the danger of the slip-carriage train, which would, if it ever came to port, land them in Winchester in time for dinner.

Mr. Alington had eagerly accepted the earlier invitation, in order that he might spend the Saturday in examining the monuments and antiquities of the old town. He had brought with him a compendious green guide to the city, and having mastered its principal contents in the train, he was able to point out to

the ladies the buildings of interest which they passed in their drive out. The college, above all, attracted his benevolent gaze, and his pale-blue eyes grew dim as they rolled by those lines of gray wall, the dimpling river which crossed beneath the road, the mellow brick of the Warden's house, and the delicate grace of the chapel tower, which dominated and blessed the whole.

"A priceless heritage! A priceless heritage!" he murmured. "Nothing can make up to me for not having been to one of the great public schools. The boys seem careless enough, heedless enough, God bless them!" he said, as a laughing mob of them streamed out of the college gate; "but the gracious influences are entering and working in them every day, every hour, forming an unsuspected foundation for the after-years. The peace and the coolness of this sweet corner of the world is becoming a part of them. All that I have missed—all that I have missed!"

He sighed softly, while Lady Haslemere yawned elaborately behind her hand. But the elaborate yawn ended in a perfectly natural laugh.

"Dear Mr. Alington," she said, "you are quite deliciously unexpected and appropriate. For you to be discontented with your lot is a splendid absurdity. I would have lived in a suburb all my life if to-day I could have sold your number of Carmel shares at the price I got."

Mr. Alington looked at her a moment, pained but forbearing.

"So would I," he said. Then, leading the talk away from anything so intimate to him, "Ah, that delicious stretch of water-meadow!" he said. "There is no green so vivid and delicate as that of English fields. And hark to the cool thunder of the weir."

A far-away rapture illumined his stout face, and Mrs. Murchison, who had made a speciality of Nature, struck in:

"There is a solidarity about English landscape which I do not find in our country," she said. "Like Mr. Alington, I could listen to that weir till I became an octogeranium. 'Peace with plenty,' as Lord Beaconsfield used to say. I was down at Goring yesterday with dear Lily, and we sat on the lawn till midnight, or it might have been later, and I had a long discussion with Jack Conybeare about the duties of the London County Council. Most rural and refreshing it was! Ah, dear me!"

Mrs. Murchison sighed, not because she was sad, but because her feelings outstripped her power of expression.

"So green and beautiful!" she murmured, as a sort of summary.

Lady Haslemere put up her parasol, extinguishing the view for miles round.

"Mr. Alington, do give me a hint as to what to go for next week. Will there be a rise in South Africans, do you think?"

The rapture died from Mr. Alington's face, but it gave place to a purely benignant expression. He shook his head gently.

"I cannot say," he answered. "I have followed nothing during these last weeks except the fortunes of Carmel. But any broker will advise you, Lady Haslemere."

Mrs. Murchison's house stood high on the broad-backed down, to the south of the town, and up at this height there was a wonderful freshness in the air, and the heat was without the oppressiveness of London. A vast stretch of rolling country spread out on every side, and line upon line of hills followed each other like great waves into the big distance. Though the drought had been so severe, the reservoirs of the sub-lying chalk had kept the short, flower-starred grass still green, and the long-continued heat had not filched from it its exquisite and restful colour.

Alington took off his hat and let the wind lift his rather scanty hair. It was an extreme pleasure to him to get out from the overheated stagnation of London streets into this unvitiated air, and he wondered at the keenness of his enjoyment. He had never been a great lover of the country, but it seemed to him to-day as if a heavy accumulation of years had been lifted off him, disclosing capacities for enjoyment which none, himself perhaps least of all, had suspected could be his. He gently censured himself in this regard. He had made a mistake in thus stifling and shutting up so pure and proper a source of pleasure. He would certainly take himself to task for this, and put himself under the tuition of country sights and sounds.

They had tea under the twinkling shade of a pine copse at the end of the lawn, and presently after Mr. Alington again took his straw hat, with the design of a stroll in the fresh cool of the approaching evening. The other two ladies preferred to enjoy it in inaction, waiting for the arrival of the adventurous slip-carriage guests, about whose fate Mrs. Murchison reiterated her anxiety.

So Mr. Alington, secretly not ill-pleased, started alone. He was about half-way down the drive, when he met a telegraph-boy going towards the house, and, in his expansive, kindly manner, detained him a moment with a few simple questions as to his name and age. Finally, just as he turned to walk on, he asked him for whom he was delivering a telegram, and the boy, drawing it out of his pouch, showed him the address.

Mr. Alington opened it slowly, wondering, as he had often wondered before, why the envelope was orange and the paper pink. It was from his brokers, and very short; but he looked for some considerable time at the eight words it

contained:

"Terrible panic in Carmels. Shares unnegotiable.
Wire instructions."

At first he read it quite blankly; it seemed to him that the words, though they were simple and plain enough, conveyed nothing to his mind. Then suddenly a huge intense light, hot and dazzling beyond description, appeared to have been uncovered somewhere in his brain, and the words burned and blinded him. He let the pink paper fall, bowing and sidling on the gravel of the drive, then stooped down with a curious groping manner and picked it up again. He put it neatly back inside the envelope, and asked the boy for a form, on which he scribbled a few words.

"Do nothing," he wrote. "I will come up immediately."

He gave the boy a shilling, waving away the change, and then, going to the grassy bank that bounded the drive, he sat down. Except for that moment, when his brain, no doubt instantaneously stunned, refused to tell him the meaning of the words, it had been absolutely composed and alert. The telegram gave no hint as to the cause of this panic, but without casting about for other possibilities, he put it down at once to his one weak point, Mr. Chavasse. That determined, he gave it no further thought, but wondered idly and without much interest what he felt. But this was beyond him. He had no idea what he felt, except that he was conscious of a slight qualm of sickness, so slight and so purely physical, to all seeming, that he would naturally have put it down, had it not appeared simultaneously with this news, to some small error of diet. Otherwise his brain, though perfectly clear and capable of receiving accurate impressions, was blank. There was a whisper of fir-trees round him, and little points of sunlight flickered on the yellow gravel of the drive as the branches stirred in the wind. Lady Haslemere's voice sounded thin and high from the lawn near—he had always remarked the unpleasant shrillness of her tones—and his straw hat had fallen off. He was conscious of no dismay, no agony of regret that he had not sold out two hours ago, no sense of disaster.

He sat there five minutes at the outside, and then went back to the lawn. The ladies looked up in surprise at the quickness of his return, but neither marked any change in his sleek features nor uncertainty in his step. His voice, too, when he spoke, was neither hurried, unsteady, nor differently modulated.

"Mrs. Murchison," he said, "I have just received the worst news about—about a venture of mine, which is of some importance. In fact, there has been, I fear, a great panic on the Stock Exchange over Carmel. May I be driven back to the station at once? It is necessary I should return to London. It is a great regret to

me to miss my visit. Lady Haslemere, I congratulate you on your promptitude in selling."

He stood there bland and respectable for a moment, while Mrs. Murchison murmured incoherent sympathy, surprised at the extraordinary ease with which polite commonplace rose to his lips. The courteous necessary words seemed to speak themselves, without any direction from him. The blow that had fallen upon him must, he thought, have descended internally, for his surface behaviour seemed as equable as ever. He was conscious only of the continuance of the qualm of sickness, and of a little uncertainty in movement and action.

He had intended, for instance, as far as he intended anything, to go away as soon as he had said good-bye, and wait for the carriage alone. But he found himself lingering; his feet did not take him away, and he wondered why. His straw hat was in his hand, and he fanned himself with it, though he did not feel hot. Perceiving this, yet still holding it, he stopped fanning, and bit the rim gently; then, aware that he was doing that, he put it on again.

"So good-bye," he said for the second time. "Ah, Lady Haslemere, you asked me for a tip. Well, if this panic is really serious—and I have no doubt it is—buy Carmels at the lower price, for all you are worth, if you have the nerve. I assure you that you cannot find a better investment. Good-bye, good-bye again. Perhaps—oh no, it doesn't signify. May I order the carriage, then, Mrs. Murchison? Thank you so much!" He lifted his hat, turned, and went to the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE SLUMP

The London evening papers that day were full of the extraordinary scenes that had taken place on the Stock Exchange. Before the opening of the market that morning Carmel had been eagerly inquired for, owing to the activity produced by the very extensive purchases on the day before, and an hour before mid-day news had been cabled from Australia that there was very strong support in the market there for the same, Mr. Richard Chavasse alone having purchased fifty thousand pounds' worth of the shares. Closely following on this came news from the mine itself: the last crushing had yielded five ounces to the ton, and a new, unsuspected reef had been struck. The combination of these causes led to one of the most remarkable rises in price ever known. The market (so said one correspondent) completely lost its head, and practically no business was done

except by the mining brokers. The shares that day had started a little above thirty shillings, and by four o'clock they had reached the astounding figure of £5 12s. 6d. A well-known broker who had been interviewed on the subject said that never in the course of a long experience had he known anything like it. Sober, steady dealers, in his own words, went screaming, raving mad. A boom in Westralian gold, it is true, had long been expected, but nothing could account for this extraordinary demand. No doubt the fact that Mr. Alington had purchased largely the day before had prepared the way for it, for he was considered among mining operators the one certain man to follow.

But the sequel to this unparalleled rise was even more remarkable. Buying, as had been stated, was much stimulated by the news of strong support in Australia (indeed, it was this that had been the signal for the rush); but about four o'clock, when the shares were at their highest, and some considerable realizations were being made, though the buying still went on, a sudden uneasiness was manifested. This was due to the fact that the telegram announcing the strong support in Australia was contradicted by another and later one, saying that the market in Carmel was absolutely inactive. Upon this, first a general distrust of the telegrams from the mine itself was manifested, and then literally in a few minutes a panic set in, as unaccountable as the previous rise; business came to a standstill, for in half an hour everyone was wanting to sell Carmel, and buyers could not be found. A few of the heaviest plungers cleared out, with thousands to their credit, but the majority of holders were caught. The shares became simply unnegotiable. The market closed on a scene of the wildest confusion, and when the Exchange was shut the street became impassable. To a late hour a mob of excited jobbers continued trying to sell, and just before going to press came a report that Mr. Alington, who had left town that day, but suddenly returned, was picking up all the shares he could lay hands on at a purely nominal figure. Settling-day, it would be remembered, occurred next week. A committee of the Stock Exchange was going to investigate the matter of the false telegram.

Kit and Jack had come down to Goring that day to join Toby and his wife there. Kit was steadily gaining strength, but this evening, being a little tired, she had gone to bed before dinner, and now, dinner being just over, Lily had left the others to see how she was. Neither Jack nor Toby was given to sitting over wine, and as soon as Lily went upstairs, they removed into the hall to smoke. The evening paper had just come in, and Jack took it up with some eagerness, for his stake in Carmel was a large one. He read through the account of what had taken place quite quietly, and leaned back in his chair thinking. Unlike Lady Haslemere, a few nights ago, he did not let his cigarette go out. At length he spoke.

"I expect I have gone smash, Toby," he said. He threw him over the paper.

"Read the account of what happened to-day on the Stock Exchange," he added.

Toby did not reply, but took the paper.

"The only thing to be thankful for is that I didn't sell out just before the panic," remarked Jack.

Toby read on in silence till he had finished it.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it would look as if I had known that the first telegram was false. What extraordinary nerve Alington must have! Do you see that he has been buying every share he can lay hands on?"

"I don't understand about the first telegram," said Toby.

"Nor do I, thank God!"

"Supposing it is a real smash, will you have lost much, Jack?"

"Eight thousand pounds—more than that, indeed, unless the price goes up again before settling-day, for I've only paid for about half my shares."

Toby was silent a moment, wondering how Jack had ever had eight thousand pounds to invest of late years. The latter understood the silence, and acknowledged the justice of his difficulty.

"I made three thousand over Carmel East and West," he explained. "That with my year's salary as director, makes eight. I invested it all, and bought more."

Toby looked up.

"Did that fellow give you five thousand a year as director?" he asked.

"That fellow did."

Toby whistled.

"A committee of the Stock Exchange is going to investigate the whole affair, it appears," he said. "Won't that be rather unpleasant if they get into salaries?"

"Exceedingly. Mind you don't let Kit know, Toby, until one has more certain news."

He took a turn up and down the room in silence.

"Extremely annoying," he said, with laudable moderation; "and I can't imagine what has happened, or who is responsible for the first telegram. Alington cannot have caused it to be sent merely to make the market active, for it was certain to be contradicted."

A man came into the room with a telegram on a salver, and handed it to Jack.

"Reply paid, my lord," he said.

Jack turned it over in his hand without opening it, unable to make the effort. Then he suddenly tore it open, and unfolded the thin pink sheet. It was from Alington.

"Can you meet me to-morrow morning at my rooms, St. James's Street?" it ran.

He scribbled an affirmative, and gave it back to the man.

"I shall have to go up to-morrow," he said to Toby; "Alington wants me to meet him in London; I shall go, of course. What a blessing one is a gentleman, and doesn't scream and sweat! Now, not a word to anyone; it may not be as bad as it looks."

Jack started off early next morning, and drove straight to Alington's rooms. Sounds of piano-playing came from upstairs, and this somehow gave him a sense of relief. "People *in extremis* do not play pianos," he said to himself, as he mounted the stairs. Alington got up as soon as he came in.

"I am glad you were able to come," he said; "it was expedient—necessary almost—that I should see you."

"What has happened?" asked Jack.

Mr. Alington took a telegram from his pocket, and handed it to him.

"The unexpected—it always does: this, in fact."

Jack took it and read:

"Chavasse left for England by P. and O. yesterday."

"You don't understand, my dear Conybeare, do you?" he said. "It is a very short story, and quite a little romance in its way."

And, in a few words, he told Jack the story of the burglary, Chavasse's confession, and his idea of using him as an independent operator in Australia.

"I make no doubt what has occurred," he said. "The man has drawn out the somewhat considerable balance I left at Melbourne for him to invest when ordered, and has taken it off with him. He has also, I expect, got hold of his own confession—a clever rogue."

"But the telegram?" asked Jack. "Who sent the telegram about the strong support in Australia?"

Mr. Alington opened his mild eyes to their widest.

"I, my dear fellow!" he said; "at least, of course I caused it to be sent. As usual, two days ago, I despatched one cipher telegram to this valet of mine, telling him to invest, and another to my manager telling him to wire, 'Strong support in Australia.' He did as I told him; Chavasse did not. That is all."

Jack was silent a moment, but it did not take him long to grasp the whole situation, for it was very simple.

"And what next?" he said.

Alington shrugged his shoulders.

"Unless the shares go up again before next settling-day, I shall almost certainly be bankrupt," he said.

"Then why, if the papers were correctly informed, did you go on buying last night?"

"Because I could get Carmel dirt cheap," he said. "If they go up, I am so much the richer; if they do not, I am done in any case. This unfortunate *contretemps* about my foolish valet does not affect the value of the mine. The gold is there just the same."

"But nobody will believe that," put in Jack.

"For the present, as you say—for the immediate present—they will not realize it. They will think themselves lucky to part with their shares enormously below their value. My fortune depends on how soon they realize it."

"There will be an inquiry into the matter?"

"Undoubtedly. Bogus telegrams are not officially recognised by the Stock Exchange."

Alington was certainly at his best, so thought Jack, when things happened. His sleek, unhurried respectability, a little trying and conventional at ordinary times, though unaltered in itself, became admirable, a rare manifestation of self-control. No flurried quickening marked his precise, unhurried sentences; they remained just as leisurely as ever. As in the days when Carmel East and West was behaving in so mercurial a manner, though so consonantly with his wishes, so now, when the greater*coup* had struck so back-handedly against himself, he did not cease to be imperturbably calm and lucid. Though without breeding in the ordinary sense of the word, he had to a notable extent that most characteristic mark of breeding, utter absence of exaltation in unexpected prosperity and complete composure in disaster. There was nothing affected about him; he was, as always, unimpulsive master of himself, and this, which in the social mill seemed a lack of animation, in the mill of adversity became a thing to respect.

"You take it very quietly," said Jack.

"It is mere habit," said Alington. "By the way, I hope, my dear fellow, that your wife is better?"

"Much better, thanks. We went to Goring yesterday."

"So I saw in the papers. How much had you in Carmel?"

"Eight thousand pounds cash. And half of my shares I have bought only, not paid for."

"Ah! will that be a difficulty?"

"More like an impossibility, unless they go up before settling-day."

"I am sorry for that," said Alington, "for I should have recommended your buying even more. I am going to bluff the thing out. I am going to buy and buy. Chavasse may go hang. I shall make no attempt to get him or his—my—fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand!" exclaimed Jack involuntarily.

"Fifty thousand! Indeed, I could not before the ship touches at the Cape. But if I buy, and am known to be buying, it is still conceivable that confidence may be restored, that the damage done by that absurd, unreasonable panic yesterday may be repaired. I don't say that the rush for shares was not insane, but the panic was not less so. And now, my dear fellow, I congratulate you on the way you have taken it. You would make a financier. *Æquam memento rebus in arduis!* How Horace has the trick of stating simple things inspiritingly! A divine gift."

"But what do you suppose they will find out at the inquiry?" asked Jack.

"Ah, you need not fear the inquiry in the least. That will not touch your salary as director, which is the sort of thing which I see you have on your mind. No. What would perhaps be serious for you is, if I became bankrupt. Then, it is true, my private accounts where your salary figures would be made public. The surest means of avoiding that is that shares should go up again before settling-day. It is with this view I am buying now; with this view I should recommend you to desperate measures! Desperate? Oh, certainly! But I must remind you that the case is fairly so. I see it is lunch time. You will lunch here, of course?"

Kit had not yet risen when Jack went up to London that morning, and she found Lily alone in the garden when she came down. Her illness had left her very weak and frail, and though she was getting on rapidly, she felt very different from the Kit who, a few weeks ago, would dress twenty times a day

for twenty engagements, and sit up half the night with baccarat. Physically and mentally, she had been much jarred by a very sudden and startling pull-up. All her life she had been content to go drifting giddily along, asking only of the moment that it should amuse her; and in those days when she lay in the darkened room it seemed as if somebody, not herself, had asked her some serious and frightening questions. At any rate, she had a scare, if no worse, and she felt disposed to go cautiously. Out of she knew not where had leaped the forces that strike, that pay the wages of all action, of sin, of virtue, of justice and injustice, and to her had wages been given. She had heard of such things before; cant phrases of childhood reminded her that one reaped as one had sown, that causes lead to effects, but until now she had not any more certain news of them. But during those three days of semi-consciousness, in which she had clung instinctively to Lily, it was as if some piece of herself, dormant and overlaid for the most part by the entertainment of ordinary every-day living, had, in the disablement of that, reasserted itself, and now that she was winning her way back to normal conditions this new consciousness had not been stilled again.

Lily, whom she had hitherto regarded as enviably rich, rather proper and *guindée*, had touched some chord in her which did not cease to vibrate. Of all people in the world, Kit would, *à priori*, have considered her the one who would naturally have shunned her. Hitherto she had regarded her, viewed by any intimate standard, with all the complete indifference with which people who do not consider themselves good look upon those whom they regard as being so, and the sinner is always sublimely incurious of the attitudes and actions of the saint. But Lily had come to her in her need; *guindée* as she might be, she had yet been a comfort and an encouragement to her in the hopelessness of her desolation, just as if she was not, as Kit supposed she must be, shocked at her. Afterwards, during her convalescence, for days a secret fear had beset Kit that the moment would come when Lily would talk to her seriously, "jaw her," as she put it to herself—very sweetly and gently, no doubt, but still "jaw" her. That would spoil it all. But day had added itself to day, and the "jaw" was still unspoken. Lily was only more patient with her than anyone, and more comfortable. She was not amusing, but Kit for once did not want to be amused. Her presence was pleasant; it was what Kit wanted, and this gave her food for thought.

More than once, again, during those darkened days Kit had broken down, cried herself nearly hysterical, and it was Lily who had soothed her back from the borders of insanity. She had not asked after the state of Kit's soul, or urged repentance on her; she had not been improving, or told her that pain was sent her for a good reason. Once, indeed, as we have seen, she had prayed with her, and Kit, who would naturally have screamed at such an idea, or told all her

friends what liberties a quite nice sister-in-law sometimes took, did neither. She found—it may have been imagination—that it did her good. All these things she had revolved secretly, but often, while they were staying at Goring, and they seemed to her significant. Her mind, indeed, used them as its ordinary provender, going to graze on them habitually.

Lily and Toby were off next day, and when Kit came down on the Sunday morning following Jack's departure to London, she had determined to talk to Lily. It struck her as odd that three weeks ago she should have been so nervous that Lily was going to talk to her, whereas now she herself was about to give her an intentional opportunity of doing so. Also to-morrow she would be left alone with Jack, who would return then, and sooner or later she and he would have to talk. Hitherto both of them had avoided the one subject which filled their minds: while in London it was an ever-present dread to each that some day this must come, each continually apprehensive that the other would begin, yet half longing to get it over. Both knew that the thing had to be talked out, there was no getting over that; nor was it any use waiting till the narcotic accumulation of time should dim the memories of that scene when Kit had told him all, and been answered by a blow. There are certain things which no lapse of time will ever cover: this was one. Words had to pass between them, and what those words should be neither could guess. Here was another reason why Kit wanted to be talked to by Lily.

They walked up and down the lawn for a few minutes, speaking of indifferent things, and Lily made some reference to her leaving on the next day.

"And I shall be alone with Jack," said Kit simply, but with purpose.

"Yes," said the other. Then, after a pause: "You must have things to say to each other, Kit. Jack told Toby yesterday he had hardly had a word with you since you were ill."

Kit stopped.

"I dread it," she said, "and I know it must come. But, Lily, what is to be said on either side? what can be said?"

"Ah, it's no use thinking over what you are going to say," said Lily. "You will say what you must, what you feel."

"I don't know what I feel," said Kit. "Let us sit down; it is warm. And I want to talk to you."

They sat down on a garden-seat, shaded by the fan-branched cedar and looking out over the haze of summer sunshine and the slow, strong river.

"I don't know what I feel," said Kit again.

"Try to tell me as best you can," said Lily quietly.

"Well, I won't be dishonest with myself, I am sure of that," said Kit. "Just now I have a horror of what—of what is past. But how can I know from what it springs? It may be only because the terrible consequences are still vivid to me. I have been wicked all my life—it is no use pretending otherwise. I have never tried to do good or to be good. Well, I get paid out for a bad thing I have done. Is it not most probable that I have a horror of it only because the punishment is very fresh to me?"

"That is something," said Lily. "If punishment makes you detest what you did, it is doing its work."

"Ah, but the burglar who is caught doesn't detest burglary, really. He may not commit it again, but that is a very different matter. You beat a dog for chasing a cat; when it sees a cat next time, it probably will put its tail down, but you have not eradicated its tendencies, or changed its nature."

Kit paused. She was groping about helplessly in her dim-lit soul.

"You are a good woman, Lily," she said. "You don't and you can't understand a person like me. Oh, my dear, I should never have got through it but for you! I want to be good—before God, I believe I want to be good, but I don't know what it means. I can only say that I will not do certain things again. But how feeble is that! I want to see Ted again—oh, how I want to!—but I believe that I want not to. Is that any good? I want to love Jack again. I did once, indeed I did, and I want him to love me. That is hopeless: he never will."

Lily was puzzled. Kit's difficulties seemed, somehow, so elementary that explanation was impossible. But she knew that it was only through the acknowledgment and the facing of them that her salvation lay. Kit was a child in matters of morals, and perfectly undeveloped; but, luckily, plain simplicity is the one means by which to approach children. Tact, finesse, all the qualities which Kit had and she had not were unneeded here.

"Kit, dear, it doesn't matter, so to speak, whether Jack loves you or not," she said. "Anyhow, it doesn't concern what you must do. Oh, you will not find things easy, and I never heard that one was intended to. You will find a thousand things you want to do, and must not, a thousand things you must do which are hard—harder than the old bazaar-opening, Kit. I am assuming, of course, that, on the whole, you want to be good. There is the great thing, broadly stated."

Kit nodded her head.

"I don't know. I suppose I do," she said.

"Well, there is no master key to it," said Lily. "Separately and simply you have to take each thing, and do it or avoid it. You will need endless patience. I don't want to preach to you, and I don't know how; but you have asked me to help you. Your life has been passed in a certain way: you have told me certain things about it. On the whole, you wish the future to be different. Forget the past, then—try to forget it. Do not dwell on it: it is a bad companion. It will only paralyze you, and you need all your power for what lies in front of you."

"Do you mean I must renounce the world, and all that?" asked Kit.

"No, nor go into a nunnery. You have a duty towards Jack. Do it; above all, keep on doing it, every day and always. Consider whether there are not many things, harmless in themselves, which lead to things not harmless. Avoid them."

"Don't flirt, you mean?" said Kit quite sincerely.

Lily paused a moment. There was a certain coarse simplicity about Kit which was at once embarrassing and helpful. Never were appearances more misleading; for Kit, with her pallor and exquisite face, looked the very image of a refined woman of the world, one who lived aloof from the grossness of life, yet of fine and complicated fibre. Instead, as far as present purposes were concerned, she was as ignorant as a child, but without innocence. She had lost the latter without remedying the former.

"Certainly don't flirt," she said; "but don't do a great deal more than that. Remember that you are a certain power in the world—many people take their tone from such as you—and let that power be on the right side. One knows dimly enough what goodness is, but one knows it sufficiently. I don't want you to be a raving reformer: that is not in your line. Set your face steadily against a great many things which are commonly done by the people among whom you move."

"The things I have done all my life," said Kit.

"Yes, the things you have done all your life."

Kit sat silent, and the gentleness of her face to this straight speech was touching. At last she looked up.

"And will you help me?" she asked. "Oh, Lily! I have been down into hell. And I didn't believe in it till I went there. But so it is—an outer darkness."

She said it quite simply and earnestly, without bitterness, or the egotism which want of reticence so often carries with it. Round them early summer was bright with a thousand blossoms and melodies; the mellow jangle of church bells was in the air; the time of the singing-bird had come.

"But I can't feel—I am numb. I don't know where to go, or where I am going," she went on, her voice rising. "I only know that I don't want to go back to the life I have hitherto led; but there is nothing else. The great truths—God, religion, goodness—which mean so much, so everything to you, are nothing to me. I feel no real desire to be good, and yet I want to be not wicked. One suffers for being wicked. I can get no higher than that."

"Stick to that, dear Kit," said Lily. "I can tell you no more. Only I know—I know that, if one goes on doing the thing one believes to be best, even quite blindly, the time comes that one's eyes are slowly opened. Out of the darkness comes day. One sees from where one has come. Then one look, and on again."

"But for ever, till the end of one's life?" asked Kit.

"Till the end of one's life. And the effort to behave decently has a great reward, which is decent behaviour."

"And Jack—what am I to say to Jack?"

"All you feel."

"Jack will think it so queer," said Kit.

"You did not see Jack when you were at your worst that afternoon. Oh, Kit! it is an awful thing to see the helpless anguish of a man. He will not have forgotten that."

"Jack in anguish?" asked Kit.

"Yes; just remember that it was so. Here's Toby. I thought he was at church. What a heathen my husband is!"

Toby strolled up, with his pipe in his mouth.

"I meant to go to church," he said; "but eventually I decided to take—to take my spiritual consolation at home."

"I, too, Toby," said Kit.

CHAPTER X

TOBY DRAWS THE MORAL

Toby was sitting in the smoking-room of the Bachelors' Club some weeks later on a hot evening in July. The window was open, and the hum of London came booming in soft and large. It was nearly midnight, and the tide of carriages had

set westward from the theatres, and was flowing fast. The pavements were full, the roadway was roaring, the season was gathered up for its final effort. Now and then the door opened, and a man in evening dress would lounge in, ring for a whisky-and-soda, and turn listlessly over the leaves of an evening paper, or exchange a few remarks with a friend. As often as the door opened Toby looked up, as if expecting someone.

It had already struck midnight half an hour ago when Jack entered. He looked worried and tired, and by the light of a match for his cigarette, which he lit as he crossed the room to where Toby was sitting, the lines round his eyes, noticed and kindly commiserated a few months before by Ted Comber, seemed deeper and more harshly cut. He threw himself into a chair by Toby.

"Drink?" asked the other.

"No, thanks."

Toby was silent a moment.

"I'm devilish sorry for you, Jack," he said at length. "But I see by the paper that it is all over."

"Yes; they finished with me this afternoon. Alington will have another week of it. Jove! Toby, for all his sleekness and hymn-singing, he is an iron fellow! He's got some fresh scheme on hand, and he's going about it with all his old quiet energy, and asked me to join him; but I told him I'd had enough of directorships. But there's a strong man for you! He is knocked flat, he picks himself up and goes straight on."

He picked up the paper, and turned to the money-market.

"And here's the cruel part of it all," he said, "for both of us: Carmel is up to four pounds again. If they had only given him another month, he would have been as rich as ever, instead of having to declare bankruptcy; and I—well, I should have had a pound or two more. Lord! on what small things life depends!"

Toby was silent.

"About the Park Lane house," he said, after a pause. "I talked it over with Lily, and if you'll let us have it at that price, we shall be delighted to take it. We only have our present house on a yearly lease, which expires in July."

"You're a good fellow, Toby."

"Oh, that's all rot!" said Toby. "Lily and I both want your house. It isn't as if we were doing you a kindness—it isn't really, Jack. But it's such rough luck on you having to turn out. Of course, you and Kit will always come there

whenever you like."

Jack lit another cigarette, flicking the end of the old one out of the window.

"I think I will have a drink, Toby," he said; "my throat is as dry as dust answering so many pertinent and impertinent questions, as to what I received as director, and what I made over Carmel East and West. They let me off nothing, and the Radical papers will be beautiful for the next week or two. They'll be enough to make one turn Radical."

"Poor old Jack! Whisky? Whisky-and-soda, waiter—two. Well, it's all over."

"Ted Comber was in court to-day," continued Jack, "all curled, and dyed, and brushed, and manicured. He watched me all the time, Toby. Upon my word, I think that was the worst part of the whole show."

Toby showed his teeth for a moment.

"I've made it up with him, I'm sorry to say," he remarked. "Lily insisted on it. We shook hands, and I was afraid he was going to kiss me."

"By the way, how is Lily?"

"Happy as a queen when I left her this morning, and the boy, oh! Jack, a beauty. He was shouting fit to knock the house down: you could have heard him in Goring. I left early, but Kit got up and breakfasted with me. Knowing how she hates getting up early, I put that down at its proper value. But she didn't attend to me much: she has no thoughts except for Lily and the boy."

"Kit has behaved like a real trump all through this," said Jack. "Never a word or a look of reproach to me. She's just been cheery, and simple, and splendid. You know, Toby, she is utterly changed since—since that time before Easter. We had a long talk the day after you and Lily left us there two months ago. I was never so surprised in my life."

"At what?"

"At what she said, and at what I said—perhaps most of what I said. She told me she was going to try not to be such a brute. And, upon my soul, I thought it was an excellent plan. I said I would try too."

Toby laughed.

"There's your whisky," he said. "Hang it all! I haven't got any money. You'll have to pay for it yourself, Jack—and mine, too. So you and Kit made a bargain?"

Jack glanced round the room, which had emptied of all its well-dressed, weary occupants. He and Toby were alone.

"Yes, we made a bargain. The worst of it was that neither of us know how to try, so we consulted Lily. Did it ever occur to you, Toby, that you have married the nicest girl that ever breathed?"

"I *had* an idea of it. It was Kit's doing, too. Funny, that."

"Well, Lily told us. She said some damned clever things. She said that turning over a new leaf meant not even looking back once to the old one. You know, Toby, that's devilish good. I thought she'd tell us to think what brutes we had been, and repent. Not a bit of it. We've just got to go straight on. Don't grin; I'm perfectly serious."

"I'm sure you are. I was only grinning at the notion of Lily telling you to repent. You know, if there are two things that girl is not, Jack, they are a preacher and a prig."

"You're quite right, and I always thought that to be good you had to be either one or the other, and probably both. She tells me it is not necessarily so, and so Kit and I are going to set to work. We are not going to run up any more huge bills which we can't pay; we are not going to invent or to listen to scandalous stories about other people; and we are going to flirt. We suggested that, and Lily thought it would do to begin upon. Also I was to tell the truth about Alington's bankruptcy. I did that. Really, Toby, it's very easy to tell the truth: it requires no effort of the imagination. But the truth is a brute when it comes out."

Toby looked up smiling, but Jack was perfectly grave and serious.

"Yes, you may think I don't mean it," he said, "but I do. We mean to reform, in fact; God knows it is high time. Kit and I have lived in what I suppose you would call rather a careless manner all these years, and we have come to an almighty, all-round smash. We had a very serious talk—we had never talked seriously before, as far as I can remember—and we are going to try to do better."

Jack got up and went to the window, and leaned out for a moment into the warm summer night. Then he turned into the room again.

"We are indeed," he said. "Good-night, Toby;" and he walked off.

Ted Comber had been to the opera that night, and was going on to a dance. They had been doing the "Meistersingers," and it was consequently after twelve when he got out. The dance was in Park Lane, and he turned into the Bachelors' Club to freshen himself before going on. He had spent a really delightful day; for he had lunched with amusing people, had sat an hour listening to Jack Conybeare's examination in the Alington bankruptcy case, and had had the opportunity of telling a very exalted personage about it

afterwards, making him laugh for ten minutes, and Ted, who had a fine loyal regard for exalted personages—some people called him a snob—was proportionately gratified. Of course it was too terrible for poor Jack, but it was absurd not to see the light side of it when properly considered.

"I was really so sorry for him I didn't know what to do," he had said to Lady Coniston at dinner. "Isn't it too terrible?" and they had both burst into shrieks of laughter, and discussed the question from every point and wondered how dear Kit took it.

The freshening up in the lavatory of the Bachelors' Club meant some little time and delicacy of touch. He had to be careful how he washed his face, for he had taken pains with it. Certainly the effect was admirable; for the least touch of rouge on the cheek-bone, and positively only the shadow of an antimony pencil below his eyes had given his face the freshness of a boy's. He looked at himself quite candidly in the glass, and said, "Not a day more than twenty-five." For he was no friend of false modesty, and any modesty he might have assumed about himself would have been undeniably false.

All this care for one's appearance, it is true, made a terrible hole in one's time; but if it lengthened one's youth, it was an excellent investment of hours. There was nothing that could weigh against that paramount consideration. He dried his hands, still looking at himself, and put on his rings. A touch of the hairbrush was necessary, and for his hands the file of the nail-scissors. Then he put on his coat again and went into the hall. Jack Conybeare was in the act of coming out of the smoking-room.

Ted had only a short moment for reflection, and almost without a pause he went on, meeting Jack.

"Good-evening, Jack," he said; "are you coming to the Tauntons'? Kit is in the country still, is she not?"

Jack had stopped on seeing him, and looked him over slowly from head to heel; then he walked by him without speaking, and went out.

Ted was only a little amused, and more than a little annoyed. Just now it did not matter much what Jack did, but, being wise in his generation, he did not care about being cut by anybody. The Conybeares would probably pick up again in a year or two, and to be cut by the master of quite one of the nicest houses in London was a bore. Besides, he was in an acme of good-fellowship after his amusing day.

He went on into the smoking-room to look round before proceeding to his dance. Toby was still sitting in the window where Jack had left him. Since their reconciliation a day or two before, Ted had felt most friendly towards

him, and he went delicately across the room to him, looking charming.

"I just met Jack in the hall," he said; "he looks terribly tired and old."

Toby bristled like a large collie dog.

"Naturally," he said.

"In fact, he was rather short with me," said Ted plaintively.

This was too much. Toby got up.

"Naturally," he said again.

The poor little butterfly felt quite bruised. Really, the Conybeares had not any manners. It serves so little purpose to be rude to anyone, and it was so easy and repaying to be pleasant. He knew this well, for the whole of his nasty little life was spent in reaping the fruits of being constantly pleasant to people. They asked you to dinner, they asked you to stay at their country houses, and having asked you once they asked you again, because you took the trouble to talk and amuse people. What more can a butterfly want than a sunny garden with flowers always open? Such a simple need! so easy to satisfy!

Well, there was a delicious flower open in Park Lane, and he went on to his dance. He must really give up the Conybeares, he thought; they were becoming too prickly. He had written twice to Kit, and had received no answer. Jack had given him a dead cut; Toby was a bear. And he sighed gently, thinking how stupid it was of the flowers to shut themselves up.

As soon as he had gone, Toby resumed his seat by the window. During the last few months he had touched life in a way he had never done before. To him this business of living had hitherto been a cheery, comfortable affair; the question of taking it seriously, even of taking it at all, had never formally presented itself to him. Then quite suddenly, as it were, as he paddled pleasantly along, he had got out of his depth. The great irresistible forces of life had swept him away, the swift current of love had borne him far out into the great ocean of human experience. Then, still encircled by that, he had seen storm-clouds gather, grim tempests had burst in hail and howling wind, the sea had grown black and foam-flecked. He had seen the tragedy of his brother's home—sin and its wages ruthlessly paid. There were such things as realities. And after that what? Into what new forms would the wreckage be fashioned, these riven planks of a pleasure-boat? But underneath the lightness of Jack's words to-nightthere had lain, Toby felt, a seriousness which was new. And the change in Kit was more marked still.

Outside, the world rolled on its way, and each unit in the crowd moved to his appointed goal, some of set purpose, others unconscious of it, but none the less

on an inevitable way. In the brains of men stirred the thoughts which, for good or ill, should be the heritage of the next generation, part of their instinctive equipment. The vast design was being worked out, unerringly, unceasingly, unhurried and undelayed, through the sin of one, the virtue of another. To fall itself and to fail was but a step towards the ultimate perfection; behind all worked the Master-hand. By strange pathways and chance meetings, by the death of the scarcely born and the innocent, by the unscathed life and health of the guiltiest, by love and beautiful things and terrible things, had all reached the spot where they stood to-day. Devious might be the paths they should hereafter follow, but He who had led them thus far knew.

And as Toby thought on these things, moved beyond his wont, he looked out, and saw with a strange quickening of the blood that in the east already there were signs that out of night was shortly to be born another day.

THE END