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CHAPTER I., II., III., IV., V., VI., VII., VIII., IX., X., XI., XII.

THE OSBORNES

BY
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CHAPTER I

FOR the last five hours all the windows along the front of the newest and whitest and most pretentious and preposterous house in Park Lane had been blazing with lights, which were kindled while the last flames of the long July day had scarcely died down into the ash-coloured night, and were still shining when morning began to tinge the velvet gray of the sky with colour and extinguish the stars. The lights, however, in No. 92 seemed to be of more durable quality than the heavenly constellations and long after morning had come and the early traffic begun to boom on the roadway, they still burned with undiminished splendour. It was literally true, also, that all the windows in the long Gothic facade which seemed to have strayed from Nuremberg into the West End of London, had been ablaze; not only was the ground floor lit, and the first floor, where was the ballroom, out of which, all night, had floated endless webs of perpetual melody, but the bedrooms above, though sleep then would have been impossible, and, as a matter of fact, they were yet untenanted, had been equally luminous, while from behind the flamboyant balustrade the top of the house, smaller windows, which might be conjectured to belong to servants' rooms, had joined in the general illumination. This was strictly in accordance with Mrs. Osborne's orders, as given to that staid and remarkable person called by her (when she forgot) Willum and (when she remembered) Thoresby, and (also when she remembered) alluded to as "my major domo." "Willum" he had been in earlier and far less happy years, first as boot boy, then when the family blossomed into footmen, as third, second, and finally first of his order. Afterward came things more glorious yet and Thoresby was major domo. At the present time Mrs. Osborne had probably forgotten that there existed such officers as boot boys, and Willum probably had forgotten too. The rise of the family had been remarkably rapid, but he had kept pace with it, and to-night he felt, as did Mrs. Osborne, that the eminence attained by them all was of a very exalted order.

Mrs. Osborne had ordered that every window in the front of the house was to be lit, and this sumptuous edict not without purpose. She said it looked more joyful and what was a little electric light, and as the evening had been devoted to joy, it was right that the house should reflect this quality. For herself, she felt very joyful indeed; the last month or two had, it is true, been arduous, and in all London it is probable that there had been nobody, man or woman, more incessantly occupied. But had there been an eight hours bill introduced and passed, which should limit the hours of energy for hostesses, she would have scorned to take advantage of so pusillanimous a measure. Besides, the nature of her work necessitated continuous effort, for her work was to effect the siege and secure the capitulation of London. That, with her great natural shrewdness, she realized had to be done quickly, or it would never be done at all. London had, not to be starved, but to be stuffed into surrender. She had to feed it and dance it and ply it with concerts and plays and entertainments till its power of resistance was sapped. Long quiet sieges, conducted with regularity, however untiring, were, she knew well, perfectly incapable of accomplishing its fall. The enemy—at times, though she loved it so well, she almost considered London to be her enemy—must be given no quarter and no time to consider its plans. The assault had to be violent as well as untiring; the dear foe must be battered into submission. To “arrive” at all, you had to gallop. And she had galloped, with such success that on this night in July, or rather on this cool dewy morning in July, she felt that the capitulation was signed and handed her. But she felt no chill of reaction, as is so often the case even in the very moment of victory, when energies not only can be relaxed, but must be relaxed since there is nothing for them to brace themselves over any more. Her victory was of different sort: she knew quite well that she would have to go on being extremely energetic, else the capitulated garrison would by degrees rally again. But since the exercise of these energies was delightful to her, she was merely charmed that there would be a continual call for them.

There was no “casement jessamine” on the house, which could “stir to the dancers dancing in tune” but on the walls of the lowest story, growing apparently from large earthenware pots filled with mould, were enormous plants of tin ivy which swarmed up the walls of the

house. But it was too strongly and solidly made to stir even to the vibration produced by the earthquaking motor-buses which bounced down Park Lane, and thus the dancers dancing in tune had no effect whatever on it. This stalwart ivy was indeed a sort of symbol of the solidity of the fortunes of the house, for it was made at the manufactories from which her husband derived his really American wealth. They covered acres of ground at Sheffield, and from their doors vomited forth all sorts of metallic hardware of the most reliable quality. The imitation ivy, of course, was but a froth, a chance flotsam on the stream of hardware, and was due to the inventive genius of Mrs. Osborne's eldest son Percy, who had a great deal of taste. His was no abstruse taste, like an appreciation of caviare or Strauss, that required an educated—or, as others might say—a vitiated palate or a jaded ear, but it appealed strongly and almost overwhelmingly, to judge by the order book of the Art Department, to the eye of that general public which goes in for forms of decoration which are known as both chaste and "handsome," and are catholic enough to include mirrors framed in plush on which are painted bunches of flowers and bead curtains that hang over doors. With shrewd commercial instinct Percy never attempted to educate the taste of his customers into what they ought to want, but gave them in "handsome" catalogues lists of the things they did want, and of a quality that they would be sure to find satisfactory. Though this ivy, for instance, was from the excellence of its workmanship and the elaborate nature of its colouring rather expensive, it was practically indestructible till the melting point of the best tin was reached, and it resembled ivy so closely that you might perfectly well prick your fingers on it before you found out the art that so closely imitated nature. Indeed, before now some very pretty jesting had taken place in the windows of the house with regard to it, when Percy, who liked his joke (amid the scarcely suppressed merriment of the family), asked a stranger to pick a leaf of it and examine the beauties of nature as illustrated in the manner in which the stalk of the leaf was joined to the parent stem. Also it had no inconvenient habits of growing over places on which you did not wish it to trespass (if you wanted more, you ordered more), it harboured neither slugs nor any abominable insects and afforded no resting-place for birds, while it

could be washed free from London dust by the simple application of the hand-syringe.

The ivy has been insisted on at some little length because it was typical of the fortunes and family of its inventor. It was solid, indestructible and new, and in just the same way the Osbornes were very strong and well, held large quantities of gilt-edged stock, and had no family history whatever. In one point only were they unlike the ivy that clung to the limestone wall of the house in Park Lane, but that was an important one. The point of the ivy was to deceive—it was often successful in so doing—while the Osbornes never intended to deceive anybody. There was, with regard at any rate to Mrs. Osborne, her husband, and Percy, no possibility of being taken in. You could see at once what they were like; a glance would save you any subsequent disappointment or surprises. And no one, it may be added at once, ever pricked his fingers over them. They were as kind as they were new. But since many strains of blood have gone to the making of each member of the human race, one strain prospering and predominating in this specimen while in another, though of the same blood, it scarcely shows a trace of existence, the divergence of type even in one generation is often very marked indeed. Thus, though Mr. Osborne felt that he both understood and admired his eldest son, his admiration for the younger was agreeably tempered with mystification. “Old Claude’s a rum fellow,” he often said, and Mrs. Osborne agreed with him. But, as will be seen, there was still much in common between Claude and them.

The house, like the ivy, was also new and solid and in point of fact none of its inhabitants, again with the curious exception of Claude, were quite used to it yet. This they concealed as far as they were able, but the concealment really went little further than the fact that they did not openly allude to it. They all agreed that the house was very handsome, and Mr. Osborne had a secret gratification not unmingled with occasional thrills of misgiving as to whether he had wasted his money in the knowledge of the frightful costliness of it. Outside, as has been said, it was of Gothic design; but if a guest thought that he was to pass his evening or listen to music in a Gothic interior, he would have been rudely undeceived. It had been unkindly said that you went through a Gothic door to find Vandals within, and if Vandalism

includes the appropriation of beautiful things, the Vandalism exhibited here was very complete. But the destructive side of Vandalism had no counterpart; Mr. Osborne was very careful of his beautiful things and very proud of them. He admired them in proportion to their expensiveness, and having an excellent head for figures could remember how much all the more important pictures, articles of furniture, and tapestries had "stood him in." And he ran no risk of forgetting these items, for he kept them green in his memory by often speaking of them to his guests.

"Yes," he would say, "there's three thousand pounds worth of seating accommodation in this very drawing-room, and they tell me 'twas lucky to have got the suite at that figure. All Louis—Louis—Per, my boy, did they tell us it was Louis XV. or XVI.? Sixteenth, yes, Louis XVI. Divide it up and you'll find that it averages two hundred pounds a chair. Seems funny to sit on two hundred pounds, hey? Mrs. Osborne, she said a bright thing about that. 'Sit firm then,' she said and you'll keep it safe.' "

The furnishing and appointments of the house had in fact been entrusted to a notable firm, which though it had certainly charged Mr. Osborne a great deal of money for what it supplied, had given him very good for his cheque, and both he and his wife, after they had got over the unusual feeling of sitting on two hundred pounds, and if you chose putting your feet up on another two hundred, were quite content that both the furniture of this Louis XVI. room for instance and the cheque for it, should be what they called a "little stiff." It was the same in the Italian room that opened out of it, and matters were no better in the dining room, which was furnished with Chippendale. Here indeed a very dreadful accident had happened on the first evening that they had got into the house, now two months ago, for Mr. Osborne, alone with Percy his wife for that night, had drawn his chair up to the fire—the night being chilly—to drink his second and third glasses of port and had rested his feet on the pierced steel fender that guarded the hearth. This led to his tilting his Chippendale chair back on to its hind legs, which, designed to bear only half the weight of its occupant, had crashed into splinters and deposited Mr. Osborne on the floor and his second glass of port on his shirt front. But he had taken the incident with great good-humour.

“Live and learn,” he had said, “live and learn. Got to sit up and behave now, Maria. Per, my boy, don’t you finish all the port while your dad changes his shirt. Drink fair, for fair play’s a jewel, and fill your mother’s glass.”

Mr. Osborne would never have attained to the eminence he occupied as a manufacturer of hardware, had he not been a man of intelligence, and instead of upbraiding the furnishing firm for charging so high a price for a “four legs of carved dry rot” which a momentary irritation carefully kept to himself might have led him to do, drew the lesson that it was unwise to tilt chairs unless they were clearly tiltable. But this accident had caused him to insist on his own room, which he called his snuggery, being furnished as he chose and not as anybody else chose, and here he rejoiced in chairs of the pattern known as Chesterfield, a solid mahogany table, on which stood a telephone, and a broad firm mantel-shelf where he could put a box of cigars without fear of its overbalancing. On this point also, his wife had adopted a similar attitude and her own sitting room opening out of the white-furnished bedroom where she was afraid to touch anything for fear of “soiling” it, was thoroughly to her taste. As in her husband’s snuggery she had matters arranged for her own comfort and not for other people’s admiration. Percy had “done” the room for her, and sometimes when she came up here to look at her letters before going to bed, and drink the glass of hot water which was so excellent a digestive after the dinner that was still a little curious to her, she wondered whether Percy did not understand house furnishing better than the great French firm, the name of which she was always rather shy of pronouncing. She had asked him to choose all the furniture himself, remarking only that she was a little rheumatic, and found it difficult to get out of very low chairs. And he had succeeded to admiration, not only had he consulted her comfort, but he had divined and satisfied her taste. The paper of the walls was a pattern of ferns with iridescent lilies of the valley neatly disposed among them, so that it was almost a shame to hang pictures thereon; indeed it would have been quite a shame had not those pictures been so well selected. For Mrs. Osborne cared far more about the subject of a picture than the manner in which it was presented, and all the subjects were admirably chosen. There was a beautiful “view” of the church that Edward had

built at Sheffield, a print of the Duke of Wellington in a garter and of Queen Victoria in a bonnet and a couple of large oil-paintings, one of the Land's End and the other of Koynance Cove, both of which were intimately associated in her affectionate heart with her honeymoon. Edward and she had spent a month in Cornwall, staying at little inns and walking as much as possible to save expense, and though all that was thirty years ago, she never entered this room now without remembering how they had sat just on that very bluff above the emerald sea, and read the "Idylls of the King" together, and he had promised her, when they were rich enough, to give her an emerald necklace to remind her of the colour of the sea. It is true that those emeralds (which were remarkably fine) were not exactly of the tint that either nature had given to the sea, or the very vivid artist had reproduced in the painting that hung on the walls, but they still reminded both her and Edward of those enchanted weeks in Cornwall, and it was but seldom, when she wore her emeralds, that he did not say "Mrs. O. has got the Land's End emeralds on to-night."

Then, more often than not would follow the explanation of this cryptic remark, and the whispered information of how much the emeralds had cost. Mrs. Osborne, as a matter of fact, had overheard, again and again, what the figure was, but she was still officially ignorant of it, and generally closed the subject by saying, "Mr. Osborne won't never tell me what he paid for them. I believe he got them cheap, and that's why."

But she secretly rejoiced to know that this was not the reason. The reason was just the opposite; they had been so enormously expensive. That expense would not be unreasonable now, but at the time, for she had worn the Land's End necklace for twenty years, it had been preposterous. They had had no holiday one year in consequence, but had grilled in Sheffield throughout August and September. But during those months she had worn the emeralds every evening, and it had been a sort of renewal of the honeymoon. Though they had not been able to go away themselves, they had managed to send Percy and Claude to the seaside, and the two months in Sheffield, when every night she wore the emeralds which had been the cause of their remaining there, was still one of Mrs. Osborne's most delightful memories, as a sort of renewed honeymoon. Since then times had

considerably changed, and though to many the change from simplicity of life and not uncomfortable narrowness of means to the wider horizons which the rapid accumulation of an enormous fortune brings within the view, implies a loss of happiness rather than an extension of it, neither Edward nor she were of that Arcadian build. They both immensely enjoyed the wider horizon; the humble establishment with parlour maids had been all very well, but how much more enjoyable was the brownstone house on the outskirts of Sheffield with footmen and a carriage. For Mrs. Osborne did not find it in the least interfered with her happiness to have men to manage or "richer" things to eat. As a matter of fact she liked managing, and rejoiced in the building of a new wing to the brown stone house, in the acquisition of motor cars and in the drain on their time and resources by Edward being made Mayor of Sheffield. Neither of them ever thought that they had been happier when their means were more straitened and their establishment humbler. Both of them, in spite of an essential and innate simplicity of nature rejoiced in these establishments, and were always ready to enlarge and embellish and rejoice. They had always made the most of their current resources—though in a merely financial sense they had always saved—and it was as great a pleasure to Mrs. Osborne to see her table plentifully loaded with the most expensive food that money could provide, and press second helpings on her guests, as it had been to have a solid four courses at midday dinner on Sunday in Sheffield and tell her friends that Mr. Osborne liked nothing better than to have a good dinner on Sunday, and see a pleasant party to share it with him. She still inquired if she might not "tempt" her neighbours at table to have another quail, just as she had tried to persuade them to have a second cut of roast lamb, when in season, while from the other end of the table she would hear as a hospitable echo her husband's voice recommending Veuve Clicquot of 1884, just as in the old days he had recommended the sound whiskey which would hurt nobody, not if you drank it all afternoon.

The year of the mayoralty of Sheffield had been succeeded by seven years fatter than even Joseph had dreamed of. Edward was as sound in his business as he was in the whiskey he so hospitably pressed on his guests, and by dint of always supplying goods of the best possible workmanship and material at prices that gave him no more than a

respectable profit, the profits had annually increased till in the opinion of those who did not adopt so unspeculative a quality of goods, they had almost ceased to be respectable, and became colossal instead. Then, at the end of seven fat years, Edward had realized that he was sixty, though he neither looked nor felt more than an adolescent fifty, had turned the hardware business into a company, and as vendor had received ordinary shares to an extent that would insure him an income no less than that of the fat years. He had already put by a capital that produced some ten thousand pounds a year, and he was thus not disadvantageously situated. Percy, however, still held the Art Department in his own hands. The plant and profits of that had not been offered to the public, but had been presented to Percy by his father on the occasion of his marriage, an event now six years old. For the whole idea of ornamental tin ivy and the host of collateral ideas that emanated therefrom had been Percy's and it was now a joke between his father and him that Mrs. P. would soon have an emerald necklace that would take the shine out of the Land's End. "Land's End will be Mrs. P.'s beginning," said his father. "And the Sea is Britannia's realm," he added by a happy afterthought. "I'll call her Mrs. C. instead of Mrs. P. Hey, Per?"

Badinage had ensued. She was called Mrs. C. instantly and there were numerous conjectures as to who C. was. Mr. Osborne said that it was curious that C. was the first letter of Co-respondent; but that joke, though Edward was usually very successful in such facetiæ, was not very well received. The momentary Mrs. C. ate her grapes with a studied air, and Mrs. Osborne from the other end of the table—this was still in Sheffield—said, "You don't think, Eddie; you let your tongue run away with you."

On reflection Eddie agreed with her, and there was no more heard about Mrs. C. But he always thought that his badinage had been taken a little too seriously. "A joke's a joke," he said to himself as he shaved his chin next morning, leaving side-whiskers. "But if they don't like one joke, we'll try another. Lots of jokes still left."

So without sense of injury or of being misunderstood he tried plenty of others, which were as successful as humour should have any expectation of being. Humour comes from a well that is rarely found, but when found proves always to be inexhaustible. The numerical

value, therefore, of Edward's jokes had not been diminished and Percy inherited his father's sense of fun.

Still in Sheffield, Mr. Osborne had, after the formation of the company, seen an extraordinary increase in business, with the result that his income, already scarcely respectable, mounted and mounted. Years ago he had built a chapel of corrugated iron outside and pitch-pine inside in the middle of that district of the town which had become his and was enstreeted with the houses of his workmen, and now he turned the corrugated building into a reading room, as soon as ever the tall Gothic church with which he had superseded it was ready for use. A princess had come to the opening of it, and had declared the discarded church to be a reading room, and there was really nothing more to do in Sheffield, except to say that he did not wish to become a knight. Mr. Osborne had no opinion of knights: knighthood in his mind was the bottom shelf of a structure, where, if he took a place, it might easily become a permanent one. But he had no idea of accepting a bottom place on the shelves. With his natural shrewdness he said that he had done nothing to deserve it. But he winked in a manner that anticipated familiarity toward shelves that were higher. He had not done with the question of shelves yet, though he had nothing to say to the lowest one.

It must not be supposed that because he had retired from active connection with the hardware business, his mind slackened. The exact contrary was the case. There was no longer any need for him to exercise that shrewd member on hardware, and it only followed that the thought he had previously given to hardware was directed into other channels. He thought things over very carefully as was his habit, before taking any step, summed up his work in Sheffield, settled that a knighthood was not adequate to reward him for what he had already done, but concluded that he had nothing more to do in Sheffield, just for the moment. And having come to that conclusion he had a long talk with Mrs. O. in her boudoir, where she always went after breakfast to see cook and write her letters. But that morning cook waited downstairs in her clean apron long after Mrs. Osborne had gone to her boudoir, expecting every moment to hear her bell, and no bell sounded. For more weighty matters were being debated than the question of

dinner, and at first when Mr. Osborne broached the subject his wife felt struck of a heap.

"Well, Mrs. O., it's for you to settle," he said, "and if you're satisfied to remain in Sheffield, why in Sheffield we remain, old lady, and that's the last word you shall hear from me on the subject. But there's a deal to be considered and I'll just put the points before you again. There's yourself to lead off with. You like seeing your friends at dinner and giving them of the best and so do I. Well, for all I can learn there's a deal more of that going on in London where you can have your twenty people to dinner every night if you have a mind, and a hundred to dance to your fiddles afterward. And I'm much mistaken, should we agree to leave Sheffield and set up in town, if Mrs. O.'s parties don't make some handsome paragraphs in the *Morning Post* before long."

"Lor', to think of that," said Mrs. Osborne reflectively. She did not generally employ that interjection, which she thought rather common, and even now, though she was so absorbed, she corrected herself and said "There, to think of that."

"But mind you, my dear," continued Mr. Osborne, "if we go to town, and have a big house in the country, as per the scheme I've been putting before you, we don't do it to take our ease, and just sit in a barouche and drive round the Park to fill up the time to luncheon. I shall have my work to do, and it's you who must be helping me to get on, as you've always done, God bless you Maria, and fine and busy it will make you. There's a county council in London as well as in Sheffield, and there's a House of Parliament in London which there isn't here. No, my dear, if we go to London it won't be for a life of ease, for I expect work suits us both better, and there's plenty of work left in us both yet. Give us ten years more work, and then if you like we'll get into our Bath chairs, and comb out the fleece of the poodle, and think what a busy couple we are."

Mr. Osborne got up and shuffled to the window in his carpet slippers. They had been worked and presented to him by his wife on his last birthday and this had been a great surprise, as she had told him throughout that they were destined for Percy. At this moment they suggested something to him.

“Look at me already, my dear!” he said. “What should I have thought ten years ago if I had seen myself here in your boudoir at eleven of the morning in carpet slippers instead of being at work in my shirt sleeves this last three hours. ‘Eddie,’ I should have said to myself, ‘you’re getting a fat, lazy old man with years of work in you yet.’ And, by Gad, Mrs. O., I should have been right. Give me a good dinner, but let me get an appetite for it, though, thank God, my appetite’s good enough yet.’ But let me feel I earn it.”

Mrs. Osborne got up from her davenport and came and stood by her husband in the window. In front of her stretched the broad immaculate gravel walk bordered by a long riband bed of lobelias, calceolarias and geraniums. Beyond that was the weedless tennis lawn, with its brand new net, where one of the very numerous gardeners was even now marking out the court with the machine that Mr. Osborne had invented and patented the year before he retired from entire control of his business, and which sold in ever increasing quantities. Below, the ground fell rapidly away and not half a mile off the long straggling rows of workmen’s houses between which ran cobbled roads and frequent electric trams, stretched unbroken into the town. Of late years it had grown very rapidly in the direction of this brown stone house, and with its growth the fogs and smoky vapours had increased so that it was seldom, as on this morning, that they could see from the windows the tall and very solid tower of the Gothic church that had supplanted the one of corrugated iron. He looked out over this with his wife’s hand in his for a moment in silence.

“I don’t know how it is with you, my dear,” he said, “but every now and then a feeling comes over me which I can’t account for or resist. And the feeling that’s been coming over me this last month agone, is that me and Sheffield’s done all the work we’re going to do together. But there are plenty of days of work for us both yet, but not together. Look at that there quarter, my dear, right from where the New Lane houses begin to where’s the big chimney of the works behind the church. I made that, as well you know, and it’s paid me well to do it, and it’s paid Sheffield to have me to do it. Not an ounce of bad material, to my knowledge, has gone into the factory gates, and not an ounce of bad workmanship has come out of them. I’ve paid high for first-class materials, and I seen that I got them. I’ve turned out none

but honest goods what'll do the work I guarantee them for, and last you ten times as long as inferior stuff, as you and cook know, since there's not a pot or a pan in your kitchen, my dear, but what came from the shops. And I've made my fortune over it, and that's over, so I take it, and what's the sense of my sitting on top of a hill, just to look at my calceolarias and get an appetite for dinner by running about that court there? But if you've got a fancy for staying in Sheffield, as I say, this is the last word I speak on the subject."

Mrs. Osborne nodded at him and pressed his arm, as he poured out these gratifying recollections in his rather hoarse voice.

"There's more on your mind yet, Eddie, my dear," she said. "Do you think I've lived with you these years and seen you off your victuals by day and heard you tossing and turning in your bed at night without getting to know when you've told me all, or when you've got something further unbeknown to me yet? It's not me only you're thinking of."

Mr. Osborne beamed on his wife.

"Well, if you aren't right every time," he said. "You've guessed it all I reckon. Yes, it's Claude. I doubt whether I didn't make a mistake about Claude at the beginning, and whether we shouldn't have done better to put him into the business like Percy, and let Alfred leave him his money or not just as he liked. But there, if we made a mistake, it's our business to make the best we can of it now. But whenever I see the boy I think we did the right thing by him, and we've got to go on doing the right thing. And if a young fellow has been to Eton and Cambridge, and is going to be as rich a man and richer nor his father was, without having to do a stroke of work for it, I ask you, Mrs. O., what's he to do with himself in Sheffield? Of course, he could go to London and work at the law or go into the Army or adopt any other of the ways of wasting time and doing nothing, without having it cast up at you, but think of the chance he gets, if you and I settle in London and have a country house as well, so that he can ask his friends down for a bit of shooting or whatever's on, and bring them home to dine, and stop for his mother's dance or concert, or whatever you have named for such a day."

He paused a moment.

“He’ll be home for good now in a month’s time, and I should like to be able to say to him, ‘Claude, my boy, there’s no need for you to think how you’ll occupy yourself in Sheffield for your vacation, for we’ll soon be moving on. Mother and I’—that’s what I shall say—you understand—‘have come to an agreement, and there’ll be a house for you in Grosvenor Square, perhaps, or in Park Lane to bring your friends to, and a shooting box somewhere else, so that whether it’s Lord This or the Honourable That, you can bring them down and find a welcome, and a bird or two to shoot at, and the pick of the London girls for you to dance with.’ ”

“Eh, Edward, you talk as if the thing was done,” said his wife.

“Well, so it is, if you and I make up our minds to it. And you guessed right; it’s a particular feeling I’ve always had about Claude. Eton and Cambridge may have made a change in him, or it may be that he was something different all along. But to see him come into a room, into that smoking room for instance at the Club. Why, it’s as if the whole place belonged to him, it is, if only he cared to claim it. And the very waiters know the difference: and I warrant you there’s always an evening paper ready for him, whoever has to go without. But in London he’ll find friends, yes, and a girl to marry him, I wager you, whose folk came over with the Conqueror. Maria, I should like to speak of my son-in-law the Earl, or the Countess my boy’s mother-in-law. There’s a deal in a name if you can get hold of the right one.”

Mrs. Osborne gave a great sigh, and looked at her rings, and as she sighed the row of pearls that hung over her ample bosom rose and fell. There was a great deal in what Edward had said, and that which concerned Claude appealed to her most. She had felt it all again and again, and again and again she had wished, content though she was with the very comfortable circumstances of her life, that they had some other house in which to welcome him home for his vacation. She felt he was her own son at heart, but his manners were such! It was Claude all over to behave as if the whole room belonged to him, should he choose to claim it. She was devoted to Percy, but Percy, she well knew, felt as she did when he was going out to dinner, and thought about what he should say, and looked to see if his hair was tidy, and hoped he hadn’t left his handkerchief behind. But Claude seemed to know that everything was all right, with him, or if it wasn’t he didn’t care. Once

on a solemn occasion, when a Royal visitor was in Sheffield, the whole family had been bidden to lunch with the mayor, and Claude had discovered in the middle of lunch that he hadn't got a pocket-handkerchief, and the day was enough to make anybody persp——. And then in thought Mrs. Osborne checked again, and said to herself "action of the skin." But Claude, though hot, had been as cool as a cucumber. He just stopped a waiter who was going by and said, "Please send out to the nearest shop and get me a handkerchief." Mrs. Osborne would never have dared to do that, and if she had, she felt that the handkerchief wouldn't have come. But in five minutes Claude had his, "and never paid for it neither," thought Mr. Osborne to himself in a mixed outburst of pride and misgiving. Claude wanted a handkerchief and it came. He didn't bother about it.

But the whole suggestion of giving up Sheffield where she was so friendly and pleasant with so many local magnates and their wives, and launching into the dim unplumbed sea of London was bewildering though exciting. She had no doubts about Edward; wherever Edward was he would do his part; she was only doubtful about her own. And these doubts were not of durable quality, while the reflections about Claude were durable in texture. Once a friend of Claude's at Cambridge had come to stay at the brown stone house, and it had all been very awkward. He was an honourable, too, and his father was a lord, and though he was very quiet and polite, Mrs. Osborne had seen that something was wrong from the first. The most carefully planned dinners had been offered him, and Edward had brought out the Chateau Yquem, which was rarely touched, and this young man had eaten and drunk as if "it was nothing particular." Mrs. Osborne had tried to console herself with the thought that he didn't think much of his victuals, whatever they were, but it was not that he refused dishes. He just ate them all, and said no more about it. And he had been regaled with two dinner parties during the three days he was with them, to which all sorts of Aldermen and their wives and daughters had been bidden. She had not forgotten his rank either, for though there were two knights and their wives present at one of these dinners, and at the other two knights and a baronet, he had taken her in on both occasions. Nor was their conversation wholly satisfactory, for though Mrs. Osborne had the *Morning Post* brought up to her room with her

early tea, while the young man was there, in order that she might be up to date with the movements and doings of the nobility, she had extraordinarily bad luck, since the bankruptcy case that was going on was concerned with the affairs of his sister and her husband, and the memorial service at St. James's proved to be coincident with the obsequies of his great-uncle. Mrs. Osborne felt that these things would not happen when they were in the midst of everything in town.

So the momentous decision had been made and two strenuous years had followed, during which time Mr. Osborne had settled to adopt (as became a man of property in these Socialistic days) the Conservative cause in politics, and after one defeat to get himself returned for one of the divisions of Surrey. During that time, too, No. 92 Park Lane had been pulled down and by amalgamation with No. 93, been built up again in a style that enabled Mrs. O. to have her friends to dine, with a bit of a dance afterward or Caruso to sing, without it being necessary for late comers to huddle together on the stairs where they could not hear a note, or stand in the doorway of the ballroom without being able to get in, or to dance if they did. And though, as has been stated, the years had been strenuous and the struggle continuous, neither Mrs. Osborne nor her husband ever felt that it was a losing game that they were playing. Apart from this one defeat in the Conservative interest, and one dismal attempt at a dance in the house that they had taken before No. 92 was ready, to which eight men came (all told and counting Percy) they had swiftly and steadily mounted. For true to the principles on which her husband had amassed so large a fortune, all that Mrs. Osborne offered was of the very best, or at any rate of the sort which momentarily most attracted. The singer who was most in vogue sang at her concerts, or the heels that were most admired danced there, and beyond doubt the extreme pleasure that the excellent woman took in her own hospitality contributed largely to its success. She was no careworn anxious-eyed hostess, but bubbled with good-humour, was genuinely glad to see the world fill her rooms, and always welcomed the suggestion that any guest should bring a friend, whose name was instantly entered by her admirable secretary on her visiting list.

And thus she rose and prospered, till on the date at which this story opens, she had crowned the work of her season by giving this immense

fancy-dress ball, which, to give it its due, had whipped up again to full activity the rather moribund energies of the season. Somehow the idea had taken on at once; there had been no fancy-dress function of any importance that season, and by one of those whims that govern the flow and ebb of the social world, London had thrown itself with avidity into the notion. It was soon clear that everyone would be there, and everyone was, and at last in her own house Mrs. Osborne heard the strains of the National Anthem.

It had been of no particular period; the point was not to have a strict and classical function but any amount of jewels and fine dresses, and Queens of Sheba, Cleopatras and Marie Antoinettes joined hands in the quadrille with Napoleon, Piers Gaveston and Henry VIII. She herself had been an admirable Mistress Page, her husband a veritable merry knight. But of all the brilliant figures in that motley crowd there was none perhaps more admired than the slim dark Piers Gaveston. And that was Claude.

CHAPTER II.

DORA WEST was trimming her hat. It was a straw hat that had cost a shilling or two when it came into her deft hands, and the trimming would only prove to have cost a shilling or two when it became attached to the hat, and leaving the deft hands was put onto her extremely pretty head. But by that time the hat would certainly have become a very pretty hat. This she was explaining with great volubility to her friend.

"You are rich, darling May," she said, "and in consequence your attitude toward hats is a little opulent and vulgar. I can put the feathers and the flags and the birds' eggs in exactly the same place as Biondinetti, or whoever it is who sells you hats."

"No, not exactly," said Mary, with the quietness that real conviction brings. She was quite certain about that point, and so did not care to shout over it. It is only when people are not certain about what they say, that they drown their want of conviction in arguments. Conviction always swims.

Dora had several pins in her mouth, and so did not reply at once. In itself the pin-reason was excellent, and more excellent was the fact that she did not wish to reply, knowing the quiet truth of Mary's conviction, especially since she could not settle the exact angle at which a very large white feather should be put. It pierced the hat, once inward once outward, that was Biondinetti all over, but where in heaven's name ought it to start from? So she only made a little impatient noise with her lips, and even that was difficult, since there was a danger of causing a pin to be sucked into her mouth. But she made it successfully. She poised the feather a moment, focussing its appearance against the hat. The effect produced by the impatient noise was sufficient to ensure her against any immediate reply. Then suddenly the inspiration came, and with a pair of tiny scissors she cut a strand or two in the straw and stuck the quill feather through the holes.

"There," she said, "and you pay Biondinetti two guineas for doing that. I can't, and I wouldn't if I could. Austell wrote to me last week and said the swans were moulting, and I telegraphed—that cost sixpence and a little thought, instead of two guineas—to tell him to

send me big wing feathers. He's a dreadful ass; we all know that, but he had the sense to see I wanted feathers, and to catch a swan and pluck——"

"What a disgusting butcher," said May. "I don't mean butcher, I mean vivisectionist."

"And how do you think you get your feathers, darling?" asked Dora.

"I don't know; I never ask. The hat comes from the shop."

"Then don't ask now, because I will tell you. Your horrid shop has birds killed, and then plucks them. It does; you can't deny it. Whereas with me the swan was just moulting, and Austell assisted Nature, which we all do. He caught its head in a landing-net and it tried to peck, he says——"

Dora West stopped suddenly in the middle of these surprising remarks, and held out the hat at arm's length in order to observe the effect of the feather. She had one of those enchanting faces that are overwhelmingly pretty for no particular reason. You could, if you chose, argue her prettiness away, by maintaining with justification that no single feature on it had warrantable claims. They were all passable, it is true, but it was not clear how it came about that the sum of them was so delicious. Her eyes were gray, and had nothing striking to recommend them, her nose turned up at the tip far too markedly to be able to claim beauty, and the mouth was quite certainly too large. Yet even allowing for the charm of her extreme youth and the vigour and vividness of her vitality, there was no accounting for the supreme prettiness that was there. So the sensible thing was to stop arguing and look at it again, and more sensible yet, to say something that should make her laugh. For her laugh was the most enchanting thing of all; then every feature laughed, there was no telling where it began or where it ended. May before now had declared that from quite a distance off, when Dora's back was turned, she had in a ballroom seen she was amused because the back of her neck and her shoulders were laughing so much. "Oh, Nature wants a lot of assistance," she went on. "She is perfectly hopeless if you leave her to herself. Look at the flowers even, which are quite the nicest thing she does. Roses, for instance; all she could think of in the way of roses was the ordinary

wild dog rose. I don't say it is bad, but how paltry, if you have had simply millions of years to invent roses in. Then man comes along, who is the only really unnatural being, and in quite a few years invents all the heavenly roses which we see now. Of course Nature did it, in a sense, but she did it with his assistance."

"But why do you call man unnatural?" asked May.

"Why? Because he saw at once how stupid Nature was, and had to invent all the things that make life tolerable. He lit fires, and built houses, and made laws, and motor-cars, and shops, and—and boats and button hooks. Motor-cars, too; all that Nature could think of in the way of locomotion was horses."

The feathers were inserted in absolutely the right place, and Dora breathed a heavy sigh of satisfaction, laid the hat down on the end of the sofa, hovered over the tea table for a moment, and selected an enormous bun.

"And Nature gives us brains," she continued, with her mouth full, "and the moment we begin to use them, as I have been doing over that hat, which *is* Biondinetti, she decrees that we shall be so hungry that we have to stop and eat instead. The same with talking: she gives us a tongue to talk with and after quite a few minutes, talking makes us hungry too, and we have to use our tongue to help us to swallow. Did you know you swallowed with your tongue, darling? I never did till yesterday. I thought I swallowed with my throat, but apparently the tongue helps. That's why we can't talk with our mouths full as I am doing."

May Thurston looked at the hat on the end of the sofa for a while, and then transferred her gaze to her friend.

"I don't think I agree with you," she said. "At least I allow that many people don't know what being natural means, but I think all the nicest people are natural. You, for instance, and me and Mrs. Osborne last night at her dance. Never before have I seen a hostess really enjoying herself at her own ball. She stood at the top of the stairs and beamed, she danced and beamed——"

"And never before have you seen a person like Mrs. Osborne dance," remarked Dora.

“Well, not often. Anyhow, she enjoyed herself tremendously and was perfectly natural.”

Dora shook her head.

“It won’t do, darling,” she said. “I allow that Mrs. Osborne beamed all the time and enjoyed herself enormously. But why? Because everybody was there. Was she ever so much pleased at Sheffield, do you suppose, or wherever it was they came from? I am sure she was not. But last night she was pleased because every duchess and marchioness who counts at all was there, as well as heaps that don’t count at all. She’s a snob: probably the finest ever seen, and by what process of reasoning you arrive at the fact that a snob is natural is beyond me. I agree that heaps of nice people are snobs, but snobbishness is in itself the most artificial quality of an artificial age. Snobs are the crowning and passionate protest against Nature——”

“Oh well,” said May in deprecation of this rather lengthy harangue, “I didn’t mean to rouse you, Dora.”

“I daresay not, and in that case you have done so without meaning. But really, when you say that Mrs. Osborne is natural I am bound to protest. You might as well say that your mother is.”

“Oh no, I mightn’t,” said May quite calmly. “It would be simply silly to call mother natural. She only does things because they are ‘the thing.’ She spends her whole life in doing ‘the thing.’ And yet I don’t know—oh, Dora, what very odd people women are when they grow up! Shall you and I be as odd, do you think? I love mother, and so do you, and we both of us love yours, don’t we? but they are very, very odd people.”

Dora gave a little shriek of laughter.

“Oh don’t,” she said. “I want to talk about snobs a little more.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve often told me that mother was one,” remarked May.

“Yes, the darling; she is, isn’t she? She is the most delicious sort of snob. A month ago she wouldn’t know the Osbornes, and merely said, ‘I have no doubt they are very honest people,’ with her nose at the same angle toward earth as is the Matterhorn; while a week ago she was clamouring for an invitation to the dance last night. In the interval it had become ‘the thing’ to know the Osbornes. My mother saw it was

going to be ‘the thing’ to know them long ago, and called at Park Lane almost before they had washed the white blobs of paint off the windows, or hung up those shields of heraldic glass on the stairs——”

“Oh, no, is there heraldic glass on the stairs?” asked May, in a slightly awe-struck tone. “I never saw it.”

Dora, as her friend often declared, really did not always play fair. There had quite distinctly been the satirical note in her own allusion to the heraldic glass, but as soon as May reflected that in the appreciative reverence of her reply, Dora was down upon her at once.

“And why shouldn’t they have heraldic glass as much as your people or mine?” she asked smartly. “They’ve got exactly as many grandfathers and grandmothers as we have, and there’s not the slightest reason to doubt that Mrs. Osborne was a Miss Parkins, and Mr. Parkins’s heir, who, I expect, was far more respectable than my mother’s father, who drank himself to death, though mother always calls it cerebral hæmorrhage. Oh, May, we are all snobs, and I’m not sure the worst snobbishness of all isn’t shown by those who say they came over with William the Conqueror or were descended from Edward the Fourth. Probably the Osbornes didn’t come over with William the Conqueror but were here long before, only they don’t happen to know who they were.”

“I know, that is just it,” said May, calmly. “They don’t know who they were, and yet they put up their coats of arms.”

Dora looked at her friend in contempt.

“I suppose you think you have scored over that,” she said.

“Not in the least. I am only pointing out perfectly obvious things.”

“Then why do it?” said Dora. “What I am pointing out are not perfectly obvious things. At least they appear not to be to you. The whole affair is a game, stars and garters and ancestors, and coats of arms is all a game. Oh, I don’t say that it isn’t great fun. But it is absurd to take it seriously. What can it matter to you or me whether great-grandpapa was a peer or a bootblack? It only amuses us to think that he was a peer. And if it amuses Mrs. Osborne to think that Mr. Parkins had a coat of arms at all, why shouldn’t she put it up in the hall window? And since, as I said, she was the only child, of course she

quarters with the Osborne arms. It's one of the rules. I believe you are jealous of them, because they are richer than your horrid family."

Nothing ever roused May except a practical assault upon her personal comfort, and Dora seldom attempted to rouse her. It was invariably hopeless and the present attempt only added another to the list of her failures.

"I think that is partly true," said May. "I don't see why common people should have the best of everything. They only have to invent a button or a razor, and all that life offers is theirs. I think it's deplorable, but it doesn't make me angry any more than a wet day makes me angry, unless I am absolutely caught in the rain with a new hat. As to coats of arms and things, I think it is rather pleasant to know that one's grandfather was a gentleman."

Dora waved her arms wildly.

"But he probably wasn't!" she screamed. "Mine wasn't, he was the wicked one, you know, and did awful things. Much worse than Mrs. Osborne's probably ever dreamed of. Mrs. Osborne's great-grandfather would certainly have cut mine, if he had had the chance——"

"He wouldn't have had the chance," remarked May. "And also Mrs. Osborne herself would cut nobody, who would—would lend lustre to her house. Oh, Dora, let's stop. It isn't any good. You are a democrat, and a radical and a socialist, and really it doesn't matter. Besides I haven't seen you for—oh, well, nearly twenty-four hours. What has happened?"

Dora got up.

"I don't think I can stop," she said. "Because I want to know what you really think about certain things. Two heads are better than one, you know, even when mine is one of them. Oh, by the way, Austell has let Grote to the Osbornes. They have taken it for seven years from the end of July. It was mother's doing I think. I—oh, May, you may call me a radical and a socialist and anything else you choose, but I can't quite see Mrs. Osborne there. She'll fill it with plush. I know she will. After all, I expect mother is right. I suppose it is better to pay some of your debts, and have other people putting plush monkeys into your house than go on as Austell has been doing. I expect I should be just the same if he was my son instead of my brother. It doesn't seem to

matter much what one's brother does, as long as he doesn't wear his hair long, or cheat at cards. But I daresay it's different if he's your son."

Dora gave a great sigh, and was silent. In spite of that series of statements which had led May Thurston, quite reasonably, to call her a radical and a socialist, there was some feeling within her, rather more intimate, rather more herself, that made her dislike the idea of the Osbornes living in Grote, which had always been her home. The Austell finances, especially for the past two or three years, had been precarious, and though her mother had a jointure that would enable her and Dora to live quite comfortably in her house in Eaton Place, and at the little bungalow at Deal, it had been necessary before now to let the house in Eaton Place during the months of the season, and live at Deal, and to let the bungalow at Deal (it was of the more spacious sort) during August and September, and encamp, so to speak, in a corner of Grote. For Jim Austell, her brother, it could not be denied, was not a person who could possibly be described as dependable. His mother had made the most prolonged attempt to describe him as such, but without success, and she had at length seen the futility of clinging to Grote, a huge Jacobean mansion with an enormous park. In the latter, being of sandy soil, a public golf links had been started, which brought in £192 a year, while neighbouring farmers grazed their beasts on other portions. The total receipts, however, about paid for the flower beds and the trimming of the exquisite bank of rhododendrons that grew round the lake, and after a year or so of trial, the scheme had been pronounced financially unsound, and for the last six months the place had been in search of a tenant. Austell had hoped that his well-known skill at bridge and his knowledge of horses might save him from the extremity of letting it. In this he had been disappointed; they had but contributed to the speed at which it was necessary to do so.

All this, which was part of the habitual environment of Dora's mind, part of the data under which she lived, passed through it or was presented to it, like a familiar picture, in the space of the sigh that concluded her last speech. It was no longer any use thinking about these things; Grote had been let to the Osbornes, the bungalow at Deal had also been let for August, and till September she and her mother were going to "live in their boxes." After all, they had done that, as

everybody else had, often before, and for much longer periods than one month, but it was the first time that they had been compelled to live in their boxes with no house (except Eaton Place in August) to flee unto. And, at this moment the change struck Dora. For week after week before now, she had stayed with friends, knowing (though not thinking of it) that all the time there was home behind it all. True, now that Grote had been let, it would have been possible to live in the bungalow at Deal, but the latter had been let while the former was still uncertain, and Dora suddenly felt a sense of homelessness that was not quite comfortable. In two weeks from now they went to the Thurstons, then there were three more visits, then, no doubt, if they chose, many more visits, but there was nothing behind; there was no home. Meantime, the Osbornes grabbed homes wherever they chose, they built a palace in Park Lane, they took Grote from her own impecunious family, and as Mrs. Osborne had told her mother last night, Mr. O. had a fancy for a bit of stalking for self and friends in the autumn, and had taken a little box up in Sutherland. She, however, was going to settle down at Grote at the end of the season, and did not intend to go North. There had been badinage over this, it appeared, between her and Mr. O.; and he threatened her with an action for divorce on the grounds of desertion. And Dora felt much less socialistic and far more inclined to agree with May on the iniquity of common people having all they wanted simply because they invented a button. If only she could invent a button.

Dora, as has already been seen, was apt to be slightly discursive. She had one of those effervescent minds to which every topic as it comes on the board instantly suggests another, and in half a dozen sentences she was apt to speak of half a dozen totally different things, each in turn being swiftly abandoned for some fresh and more absorbing topic which each opened up. She had begun a moment before with telling May that she wanted her advice, and before that was asked or offered, before indeed, the subject on which it was desired was so much as mentioned, she had darted away afresh, poising, dragon-fly fashion, in the direction of Grote, and the letting of it to the Osbornes. The Osbornes indeed had been the connecting link, and now she went straight back *via* the Osbornes to the point from which she had started.

“Yes, I want your advice May,” she repeated, “or I think I do. It’s quite serious, at least it’s beginning to be quite serious, and there are so many dreadfully funny things connected with it. Yes, Mr. Osborne has asked leave to call upon mother this afternoon at six, and it’s half-past five now. Oh, dear, oh, dear! I suppose he found out in a book that that sort of thing was done a hundred years ago, and he wishes to be correct. The Osbornes are absolutely correct if you think of it. Every one went in to supper in the right order last night, which never happens at any other house I have ever been to, and where does he get those extraordinary good looks from? Oh, I don’t mean Mr. Osborne. How can you be so silly—but him. Yes, I’m telling it all very clearly, aren’t I, so I hope you understand. Perhaps Mrs. Osborne was a beauty once, you can’t tell.”

That May perfectly understood this extraordinary farrago of observations said less for her powers of perspicacity than might have been supposed, for Dora was not alluding to any new thing, but to a subject that had often before been mentioned between them. And Dora went on, still discursively but intelligibly.

“It’s coming to the crisis, you see,” she said. “Mr. Osborne’s call on mother is of a formal nature. He is going to ask permission for Claude to pay his addresses to me. He will use those very words, unless mother says ‘yes’ before he gets so far. And then I shall have to make up my mind. At least I’m not sure that I shall; I believe it’s made up already. And yet I can’t be sure. May, I feel just like a silly sentimental girl in an impossible *feuilleton*. He thrills me, isn’t it awful? But he does. Thrills! I don’t believe any boy was ever so good-looking. And then suddenly in the middle of my thrill, it all stops with a jerk, just because he says that somebody is a very ‘handsome lady.’ Why shouldn’t he say ‘handsome lady’? He said he thought mother was such a handsome lady, and I nearly groaned out loud. And then I looked at him again or something, and I didn’t care what he said. And he’s nice too. I know he’s nice, and he’s got excellent manners, and always gets up when a lady, handsome or not, comes into the room, instead of lounging in his chair as Austell does and all other young men nowadays except a few like Claude who aren’t exactly our sort. And he’s kind and he’s good. Am I in love with him? For heaven’s sake, tell me.”

Dora paused a moment and then took a cigarette from a box that stood on the mantelpiece, and lit it. She never smoked cigarettes; she only lit them, and the mere fact that she lit one was indicative of extreme absorption in something else.

"You're engaged, May," she said, "so you ought to know. Else what is the use of your being engaged. What do you feel when that angel Harry comes into the room?"

May could answer that quite easily.

"Oh, I feel as if it was me coming into the room," she said. "I feel as if I am not in the room, since you put it like that, unless he is."

The conversation had been flippant enough up till this moment, though, as a matter of fact, Dora, being inconsequential by nature, often gave the note of flippancy, when she was in earnest. Both of the girls, in any case, were quite serious now. And out of the depth of her twenty years' wisdom, May proceeded to draw a bucket full for Dora, who was only nineteen.

"Oh, I expect you are in love," she said. "At least I expect you are feeling as if you were. I understand perfectly about the thrill, though it sounds so dreadfully *Family Herald* when it is said. But one does thrill. I believe that thrill is a pretty good guide. I don't usually thrill, in fact I never had thrilled till I saw Harry. But I always thrill at him. I suppose all girls feel the same when they fall in love. I suppose people on bank holidays thrill when they change hats, or eat winkles. We are all common then. At least you may call it common if you choose. I don't see why you should. It's IT."

"You haven't told me about me," remarked Dora.

May Thurston shifted her position slightly. It was not done with any idea of manœuvre. She was the least dramatic of girls, and she only shifted because she felt a little uncomfortable. It was new to her also to take the lead. Dora usually strode ahead.

"I can't advise you about things of that sort," she said. "I'm old-fashioned, you see——"

"Oh, are you, darling?" murmured Dora. "Nobody would have guessed it."

“But I am over things like that, old-fashioned and romantic. I think love in a cottage would be quite ideal, not because a cottage is ideal—I would much sooner not live in one—but because love is. And, oh, Dora, I can just advise you not to marry him unless you are in love with him. I daresay heaps of girls make very nice sensible marriages, where there’s lots of money, and where they each like the other, but you do miss such a lot by not falling in love. You miss—you miss it all.”

Dora scrutinized her friend for a moment, her head a little on one side, with something of the manner of a bright-eyed thrush listening for the movement of the worm that it hopes to breakfast on.

“But there’s something in your mind, which you are not saying, May,” she remarked. “I can hear it rustling.”

“Yes. There are just two little things that make me wonder whether you are in love with him. The first is you said you were sure he was good! That is no reason at all. You don’t fall in love with a person because he’s good. You esteem and like him—or it’s possible to conceive doing so—because he’s good, but you don’t love him for that reason.”

Dora gave a little purr of laughter.

“Oh, May, you are heavenly,” she said. “But surely it’s an advantage if your *promesso* is good.”

“Oh, certainly, but nobody in love stops to think about that.”

“I see. Well, what is the second thing that makes you wonder?”

May looked at her with her large, serious blue eyes.

“What you said about being brought up with a jerk in the middle of your thrill, when he spoke of a handsome lady. As if it mattered! Yet somehow it does to you, or it would not bring you up with a jerk!”

“And you think it doesn’t matter?” asked Dora.

“Of course not if you love him, and if you don’t, in the name of all that is sensible, don’t marry him. That sort of marriage is called sensible, I know. It is really the wildest and most awful risk.”

Dora stared.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“Of course I know, simply because I’m in love with Harry. Fancy being tied to a man for life without that! Gracious, it’s nearly six, and he was to call for me at home at six.”

“Oh, you can keep him waiting ten minutes,” said Dora. “We’ve only just begun to talk about the great point.”

May shook her head.

“I could keep him waiting,” she said, “but I couldn’t keep myself. I must go. Darling, I long to hear more, only you see I can’t stop now. Come and see me to-morrow morning. I shall be in till lunch time.”

Dora shrugged her shoulders, not in the least naturally but of design.

“I think it’s a pity to fall in love then, if it makes one so selfish,” she remarked.

“No doubt you are right, darling. Good-bye,” said May.

It was, as May had said, close on six, and in anticipation of Mr. Osborne’s arrival, Dora removed herself from the little fore-and-aft drawing room which looked out in front through two windows on to Eaton Place, and at the back through one on to the little square yard behind the house, and went upstairs to her bedroom, taking the hat with one swan feather fixed in it and the other still unplaced, with her. But even the hat, though in this extraordinarily interesting condition with regard to its trimming, failed at the moment to make good any footing in her mind. It was not that hats were less interesting than before (especially to the maker and wearer) but that during this last month something else had grown infinitely more interesting than anything else had ever been; the standard of interest possible in this world which Dora found so full of enchanting things, had been immeasurably raised. Life hitherto had been brilliantly full of surface brightnesses, but it seemed to her now as if life, the sunlike spirit of life, which shone with so continuous a lustre on her, struck the surface of herself no longer, but penetrated down into depths that she had not yet dreamed of. There, in those depths, so it seemed to her, she sat now, while on the surface, so to speak, there floated all the pleasant and humorous and friendly things of life. The hat she held in her hand floated there, dogs swam about there and flowers sparkled, May

Thurston was there and friends innumerable. But as in the exquisite picture of the birth of Eve by Watts, a big photograph of which hung over her bed, it was as if all these were but a skin, a rind which even now was peeling off her, showing beneath the form and the wonder of the woman herself.

She sat in the window seat, and the hot air of the tired afternoon streamed slowly and gently in, just lifting and letting lie again the bright brown of her hair. Outside the hundred noises of the busy town mingled and melted together, and seemed to her to form, even as the blending of all colours forms the apparently colourless white, a general hush and absence of noise. Rousing herself for a moment, and consciously listening, she could detect and name the ingredients of it; there was the sharp clip of horses' hoofs, the whirr of motors, the chiding of swifts, the agitated chirp of sparrows over some doubtful treasure of the roadway, the tapping of heels on the hot pavement, the cool whisper of cleansing from a water cart, and the noise of news being cried round the corner. But all these were blended together and formed not confused noise but quietness, and from the quietness of her face, and the immobility of her hands which were usually so active, you might have guessed that she was tired or bored, and found this hour pass heavily. But a second glance would have erased so erroneous an impression: there was a smouldering brightness in her eye, and ever and again a little trembling at the corners of her mouth which might develop into a smile, or, equally easily almost, be the precursor of flooded eyes.

For the last month now she had had moods like this, when she dived down from the froth and effervescence of her surface mind and sat below in deep and remote waters. It was not that she had lost the power of living on the surface, for this afternoon with her friend she had been quite completely there, until toward the end of their talk she had felt that she was being beckoned down again and knew that when May left her she would sink into these depths that till lately she had not known existed. Yet the path that had led to them had been quite natural; all her life she had above all things loved beauty, whether of waves or birds or sunsets, or human beings. Thus it was without any sense of a strange or unusual thing happening to her that she had admired frankly and naturally the dark merry face of this young man.

He had taken her into dinner once or twice; he had danced with her a half dozen times. And then, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, he belonged to the surface of things no longer as far as she was concerned. Something smote at her heart, and the flowers and birds peeled away like rind as from Eve when she was born, and the woman shone within.

And indeed, there was little in all this to wonder at, for in spite of crabbed and cynical proverbs about beauty being only skin-deep, it remains and will remain to those who have eyes themselves, the wand of the enchanter. No doubt the enchantment can be made without the wand, but when eyes are keen, and blood is young, how vastly more easily is the enchantment effected with the aid of that weapon. And Claude to her thinking, before ever she even wondered if she was falling in love with him, was certainly not without the wand. He was dark, a potent colour to her who was so fair; hair nearly black grew low and crisp on the forehead, and eyebrows quite black met above his brown eyes. Then came the lean, smooth oval of his face, a mouth rather full-lipped, and a squarish chin. Often before he spoke, especially if he had, as not infrequently happened, some rather determined remark to make, he jerked his head a little back and put out his chin. It was a gesture of extraordinary decision, and "oh," said Dora to herself now, as she thought of it, "I do like a man to know his mind."

The same signs of knowing his mind were visible, too, in his movements. He never strayed about a room, or leaned against anything. If he purposed to stand up, up he stood; if he wished for support he sat down. But as far as Dora had seen, he seldom wished for support; those rather long slim limbs and boyish figure appeared remarkably capable of supporting themselves. He moved quickly and with a certain neatness that was attractive; once—these tiny details were important in making up her impression of him—she had seen him strike a match in a windy place to light his cigarette; one quick stroke had kindled it and his thin brown fingers made a cavern for it, in which it burned unwaveringly as in a room. And he could dance, really dance, not slide about in a crowded ballroom with an avoidance of collision which was really magical, and without—doubtless these things were all of the surface, but they caused the whole image to sink

down with her into those depths—without having to mop his face when they stopped, which in general was not before the music stopped.

Suddenly, from the combined quietness of the noises outside, a sound detached itself and made itself very clear to her ear. It was a motor just preparing to start somewhere close below her in the street, and Dora, feeling instinctively, somehow, that this was significant to her, got up and leaned out of the window. Her instinct was correct enough; a big, short, broad man with an extremely shiny top-hat was just stepping into the big Napier car that stood at her mother's door. Even as she looked out the chauffeur nipped into his place again, and in answer to the footman's inquiry she heard Mr. Osborne say " 'Ome" quite distinctly. Then he lifted his shiny hat and carefully wiped the top of his bald head. Upon which Dora had, no doubt in reaction from her really serious half hour of thought, a slight fit of the giggles.

But the giggles soon stopped; they were but of the nature of coming to the surface to breathe, and she was already beginning to sink back toward the depths again, when there came a tap at her door, and her mother entered.

Lady Austell was very tall, and one felt at once that there was not the slightest doubt that she was not a countess; it seemed somehow far too suitable a thing to have really occurred. But in the endless surprises of this world, in which everything unconjecturable happens, and everyone is what he should not be, the ideally fit thing had occurred, and a countess she was in spite of the obviousness of the fact that she must be. That she was dowager was no less easy a guess, for though eighteen years had elapsed since her husband's death, there was something about her dress, a little strip of crape insertion in the violet of her gown, it may be, or the absence of any jewels except an amethyst cross, or at other times a cap very Dutch and becoming with a ribbon of black in it that sat loosely on her abundant hair, that suggested, though it did not notify, widowhood. These insignia, it must be noted, she did not wear simultaneously, but there was never a day on which one at least of them, or others like them, was not present. No doubt also her manner gave confirmation to the impression conveyed by her dress, for it was one from which all exuberance had departed, though it suggested and reminded you (like a clear sunset) that a brilliant day had preceded it. Her voice also was rather faint and

regretful, the voice of a widow with an unsatisfactory son and an unmarried daughter. But those who knew her best had in their minds the very distinct knowledge that it was difficult if not impossible to silence that faint voice, or make it say anything different to what it had already said. Lady Austell, when her views were in conflict with those of others, never said very much, but she never changed her tune, nor indeed ceased faintly chanting it, until the opposition had been borne down by her quiet persistence. As for the regretfulness of which her gentle accents were full, it may have been composed of grief for the fact that others, not she, would eventually be obliged to yield.

It will be seen, therefore, that Theresa Austell was an instance the more of the undoubted fact that people as well as things are not what they seem. She seemed, until you knew her quite well, to live uncomplainingly but regretfully among the memories of dead and happier years, whereas, when your acquaintance with her ripened, you would find that she lived with remarkable keenness in the present, and kept a wide and unwavering eye on a live and happier future. She appeared to be soft, gentle and helpless; in reality she was remarkably capable of taking care of herself, and though like ivy she appeared to cling to others for support, her nature was in truth that of the famous ivy that grew on the new mansion in Park Lane; it could stand upright with perfect ease, and was of metallic hardness. Adversity—for she had not had a very happy life—instead of breaking her, had tempered her to an exceeding toughness; what had been at the most soft iron was now reliable steel.

She gave a faint wan smile at Dora as she entered.

“I thought you would be here, dear,” she said. “Your Aunt Adeline has telephoned to know if we want her motor. We can have it till dinner-time and it will then take us to her house. I knew you liked a drive, so I thanked her and said ‘yes.’ ”

This was merely another way of putting the fact that Lady Austell wanted a drive and also wanted to talk to Dora. But her method of putting it sounded better, and was very likely quite true. Dora did like a drive and since her mother knew it, that might possibly have been the reason why she accepted Aunt Adeline’s offer. But Lady Austell’s next reason (though she had already given reason sufficient) was not so

probable. “A drive will do you good, dear,” she said faintly. “You look a little fagged out and pale.”

Dora had learned not to dispute points with her mother. Though in general she was so full of discursive volubility, she was always rather silent with Lady Austell, of whom, in some way that she scarcely understood herself, she was considerably afraid. But that again was typical of the effect her mother produced on people; those who knew her but slightly thought she was the least formidable of women, but the better she was known the more she was feared. Often Dora argued to herself about the matter; she knew that she was not afraid of anything tangible her mother could do to her; she could not beat her or starve her, or ill-treat her, and it must have been her mother’s nature of which she was afraid. The feeling was analogous to a child’s fear of the dark; it fears not what it knows of, but the unknown possibilities that may lurk therein. It cannot say what they are; if it knew it would probably cease to fear them.

Dora got up at once.

“Yes, I should like a drive,” she said.

“Then put on your hat, dear.” And Lady Austell’s pale melancholy eyes fell on the half-trimmed straw.

“Another hat, Dora?” she asked. “I should have thought what you had would have lasted you till the end of the season!”

And at the words Dora’s pleasure in her new hat fell as dead as Sisera at Jael’s feet. Nobody could kill pleasure (though quite innocently) with so unerring an aim as Lady Austell.

“It didn’t cost twopence,” said Dora. “Jim sent me up the feathers from Grote.”

Lady Austell looked at the straw with an experienced eye.

“It is very cheap for less than twopence,” she remarked. “The only question is whether it was necessary. Then you will join me down below, dear? I have a note to write, and we may as well leave it instead of posting it.”

This was illustrative of the cause that had made Dora say that when women grew up they were very odd people. Lady Austell would unfalteringly drive through miles of odious roads to deliver a note

rather than post it, but would on the same day drive to Oxford Street (a two-shilling fare in a hansom) in order to purchase what she would have paid sixpence more for round the corner. She was the victim of the habit of petty economy, in pursuit of which passion—one of the most fatal—she would become a perfect spendthrift, casting florins and half crowns right and left in order to save pennies. She took great care of the pence and the half-crowns presumably took care of themselves, for at any rate she took no care of them. But when other people's expenditure was concerned, she took care of it all.

The note that had to be left (which concerned cessation of subscription from a library in Leicester Square) caused them to traverse the length of Piccadilly, and to retrace it, before they could leave the jostling traffic and turn into the Park, and it so happened that in this traverse of the streets, the month being mid-July, and the hour the late afternoon, Lady Austell had been almost incessantly occupied (though by her own word, she disliked all conventionality) in smiling sadly and regretfully as was her manner, at all the people she knew, and bowing (without a smile) to those who appeared to know her. Somehow, her smile, even when it was most gracious and welcoming, always suggested to the person on whom it was bestowed that something had gone wrong with his affairs, and Lady Austell knew and was most sympathetic, so that Mrs. Osborne (seated in a landau that bobbed prodigiously, owing to the extreme resilience of the springs that came from her husband's workshops) receiving one of these felt certain for a moment that Mr. O.'s mission that afternoon had not prospered until she remembered that she had seen Lady Austell smile like that before. Soon after, walking gaily eastward, came Austell, whom she had thought to be still in the country, and on whom she bestowed a glance of pained wonder, closely followed by Claude, looking in spite of the heat of the day extremely cool and comfortable in a straw-hatted suit. Dora did not see him; she was at the moment smiling violently at some one who did not see her. Then the motor checked for a moment at the gates of the Park, slid forward again into the less populous ways, and Lady Austell, abandoning the duties of recognition, did her duty by her daughter. As usual she began a little way off the point so that she could get well into her stride, so to speak, before you saw that she was going anywhere in particular. This was a

settled policy with her; it insured, in racing parlance, a flying start instead of a start from rest. During the drive down Piccadilly she had been arranging her thoughts with her usual precision; she knew not only what she was going to say, but how she was going to say it.

She gave a little sigh.

"What sermons there are not only in stones," she said, "but in streets. And, do you know, dear, when one drives down Piccadilly like that and sees all sorts and conditions of men and women jostling each other, what strikes me is not how different people are, but how alike they are. All the differences (she was getting into her stride now) which we think of as so great are really so infinitesimal. Real differences, the things that matter, do not lie on the surface at all. I think our tendency is to make far too much out of mere superficialities and to neglect or discount those traits and qualities which constitute the essential differences between one man and another. Don't you think so, dear?"

The ingenious Latin language has certain particles used in asking questions, one of which, the grammarian tells us, is used if a negative reply is expected, another if the reply is expected to be affirmative. Lady Austell, speaking in the less rich language of our day, could not make use of these, but there was something in her intonation quite as effective as "nonne." Dora, without question, found herself saying "yes."

"I am so glad you agree with me, dear," went on her mother, "and I am sure you will agree with me also in the fact that, this being so, we should try to judge people, or rather to appreciate them, by the true and inner standard, not by the more obvious but less essential characteristics that we see on the surface."

Lady Austell's voice sank a little.

"If one may say so without irreverence," she said, "how God must laugh at our divisions of classes. We must look like children arranging books by the colour of their covers instead of by their contents. We class all sorts of noble and ignoble people together and call them gentlemen, neglecting the only true classification altogether."

It was evident now to Dora that her mother had got an excellent start, and she could see what she had started for. There was no need for

reply, and Lady Austell having favoured a passing friend with a smile that was positively wintry in its sadness, proceeded.

"Such a good instance of what I am saying occurred to-day, dear," she said. "Mr. Osborne called on me at six, as I think I told you he was going to do, and for the first time perhaps I fully saw what true delicacy and feeling he has, and how immensely these outweigh any of those things which we hastily might call faults of manner or breeding. It is the same with her, kind excellent woman that she is. What a priceless thing to inherit all that kindness and sweetness of nature."

Lady Austell was flying along now; the race, so to speak, was clearly a sprint. Dora merely waited for her to breast the tape. She proceeded to do so.

"He came on a subject that very closely concerns you, dear," she said, "and like a true gentleman he asked my permission before allowing any step to be taken. Can you guess, dear?"

Dora, as has been said, stood considerably in awe of her mother, but occasionally a discourse of this kind, which she felt to be entirely insincere, roused in her an impulse of the liveliest impatience, which gave sharpness to her tongue.

"Oh, dear, yes," she said. "The truly delicate Mr. Osborne asked if Mr. Claude might pay his addresses to me. I expect he used just those words. I hope you allowed him to, mother."

Lady Austell's manner was always admirable. She appeared not to notice the sharpness of the speech at all. She laid her neatly gloved hand on Dora's.

"Ah, my dearest," she said.

She looked at her with her sad blue eyes, eyes that always looked tender and patient, even when she was disputing a fare with a cabman. "I am sure you will be very happy dear," she said after a pause. "He is the most excellent young man, everyone speaks well of him. And, my dear, how good-looking. A perfect—I forget the name."

Dora had a momentary tendency to giggle at the anticlimax of this. But she checked it, and again her impatience rose to the surface.

"Adonis?" she suggested. "But are not good looks one of those superficial things which we rate too high?"

Lady Austell smiled.

"Ah, you mischievous child," she said. "You make fun of all I say. I will send a note to Mr. Osborne to-night, for I told him I should have to speak to you first. You will make him very happy, Dora, and you will make somebody else happier. Shall we turn?"

CHAPTER III.

THE garden front of Grote faced southeast, and thus, though all day the broad paved walk in front of it had been grilled by the burning of the August sun, the shadow of the house itself had spread over it like an incoming tide of dark clear water before tea time, and at this moment three footmen were engaged in laying the table for that meal, while the fourth, as a matter of fact, was talking to the stillroom maid under pretence of "seeing to" the urn. They were all in the famous Osborne livery, which was rather gorgeous and of the waspish scheme of colour. There were, it may be remarked, only four of them, because Mr. Osborne was still in London, roughing it, so his wife was afraid, with a kitchen-maid for cook, and only two footmen besides his own man, for Parliamentary business had kept him there for a few days after Mrs. Osborne had left to get things in order at Grote. But he was expected down this afternoon for a couple of nights before he went North, and the six footmen would shine together like evening stars. "Company" also, though not in large numbers, were also arriving that evening, among whom were Lady Austell, her son, and Dora. The latter was now formally and publicly engaged to Claude.

The house was three-storied, built in the Jacobean style of brick and stone with small-paned windows, and the brick had mellowed to that russet red which is as indescribable as it is inimitable. A door opened from the long gallery inside, which was panelled and hung with portraits—inalienable, luckily, or Austell would have got rid of them long ago—onto this broad-paved walk that ran from end to end of the house. On the other side of it was the famous yew hedge with square doors cut in it, through which were seen glimpses of the flower garden and long riband bed below, and the top of this hedge grew the grotesque shapes of birds. A flight of stone steps led down into the formal flower garden below, which was bordered on the far side by the long riband bed. Below that again two big herbaceous borders stretched away toward the lake, on the far side of which there rose from the edge of the water the great rhododendron thickets. To right and left lay the park, full of noble timber, which climbed up to the top of the hill opposite. Across this ran the road from the station, which

skirted the lake on its eastern side, and passing by the flower garden came up to what Mrs. Osborne called “the carriage sweep” on the other side of the house, from which two wings projected, so that the carriage sweep was really the interior of a three-sided quadrangle.

The warning hoot of an approaching motor caused one of the footmen to disappear into the house with some alacrity, and a few minutes afterward Mr. Osborne emerged from the door into the gallery. He still wore London clothes, dark gray trousers and a black frock coat and waistcoat, for he had driven straight from the House of Commons to Victoria, but he had picked up a Panama hat in the hall, and had substituted it for his silk hat.

“And tell your missus I’ve come,” he observed to one of the wasps.

He sat down in a creaking basket-chair for a few moments, “to rest and cool,” as he expressed it to himself, and looked about him with extreme satisfaction. His big high-coloured face was capable of expressing an immense amount of contentment, and though from time to time he carried a large coloured handkerchief to his face, and mopped his streaming forehead with a whistled “Whew!” at the heat, so superficial a cause of discomfort could not disturb his intense satisfaction with life. Things had prospered amazingly with him and his: he was thoroughly contented with the doings of destiny.

He was still “resting and cooling” when Mrs. Osborne came bustling out of the house, also very hot, and kissed her husband loudly first on one cheek and then on the other.

“Well, and that’s right, my dear,” she said, “and it’s good to see you. But you are hot, Eddie, and is it wise for you to sit out o’ doors in the shadow without a wrap? You were always prone to take a chill.”

“I should be prone to take an apoplexy if I put anything else on, Mrs. O.,” remarked he. “But my! it’s a relief to get down into the country again. Not but what things haven’t gone very well this last week for me in the House. Commission on Housing of Employees! I had a good bit to tell them about that, and I warrant you they listened. Lor’, my dear, they like a plain man as’ll talk common sense to them, and tell ’em what he’s seen and what he knows, instead of argufying about procedure. I knew my figures, my dear, and my cubic feet per room, and my statistics about the health of my workmen and their

death-rate. I've been a common man, myself, my dear, and I told them so, and told them what things was when I was a lad."

Mrs. Osborne was slightly aghast.

"Oh! Eddie, I doubt that'll tell against you," she said.

"Not a bit of it, old lady. Everyone knew it to begin with, else I don't say I should have told them. And equally they know that they come and dance at No. 92 when Mrs. O. invites them. Glad they are to come, too, and my dinner table is good enough for anybody to put his legs under. But all that's over for the present, and I didn't come away for my holiday, which I've deserved, to talk more politics; I came away to enjoy myself, and have a breath of country air. Eh! it's a pretty little box this. I wish I could have bought it. I should have liked to leave a country seat for Per and Mrs. after you and me was dead and buried."

This turn in the conversation was not quite to Mrs. Osborne's taste.

"Don't talk so light about dying, Mr. Osborne," she said, "because you give me the creeps and the shivers for all it's so hot. There's a host of things too I want to talk to you about before the company comes, without thinking of buryings. There's the two pictures of you and me arrived, and it would be a good thing if you'd cast your eye over the walls, and see where you'd like them hung, and we'd get them up at once. They're a fine pair, they are, and the frames too, remarkably handsome."

"Well, you want a handsome frame for a handsome bit of painting," said her husband, "and finer works I've seldom seen. They was cheap at the price. Give me a cup of tea, Mrs. O., and we'll go and have a squint at 'em. What else, my dear?"

Mrs. Osborne poured him out a cup of tea as she knew he liked it, extremely strong. She put in the cream first and stirred it up before handing to him.

"Your brother Alfred came yesterday," she said, "and you must be careful how you behave to him Eddie. He's got a touch of the lumbago, and it makes him worried."

"Poor old Alf—cross as two sticks, I shouldn't wonder," said Mr. Osborne, sipping his tea loudly. "Never mind, there's Claude to look after him, and Claude manages him as never was. He's wrapped up in

that lad, Maria, my dear, and I'm sure I don't wonder. Where is the boy? And my lady Dora will be here this evening. Lord, Mrs. O., my tongue can't say 'Dora' yet: it keeps saying 'my lady.' I seem as if I can't get used to it. And what other of the lords and ladies have you got coming?"

"Well, there's Lady Austell and the Earl, and there's Lady Thurs—Lady May Thurston and Mr. Franklin, to whom she's engaged——"

"Why, we're a houseful of lovers," said Mr. Osborne, beaming delightedly.

"That we are. Then there's Alderman Price and lady, just run down from Sheffield, and Sir Thomas Ewart and lady——"

"Remind me to get out the '40 port," said Mr. Osborne. "Sir Thomas likes a glass of that."

"He likes a dozen glasses of that," remarked Mrs. Osborne, "but pray-a-don't sit for ever over your wine at table, Mr. O., for there's the—the—I never can remember the name of that quartette, but they're going to give us a bit of music after——"

"Lashing out, lashing out," said her husband, "you'll make a pauper of me yet, Mrs. O."

"Never you fear, but Dora loves music, and nothing would content Claude but that I must get the quartette down; and don't you look at the bill, Mr. O., because it's a scandal to pay that for a bit of music. And then there's Percy and Catherine, and your brother."

"Just a family party," said Osborne, "that's what I like. Family party and an old friend or two like Sir Thomas and lady. Times change, don't they, Mrs. O.? There was a time when you and me felt so flustered at being bid to dinner with Sir T. that we were all of a tremble. Not much trembling now, eh? Ah, Maria, for what we have received the Lord make us truly thankful!"

Mrs. Osborne did not at once follow this.

"And since when have you said your grace after your tea, Eddie?" she asked.

"Oh, it wasn't for my tea," said he, "I was just thinking of everything, teas and breakfasts and luncheons and dinners and work and play and enjoyment alike. I'm thankful, I am thankful for it all."

Then Mrs. Osborne understood and held out her plump hand with its large knuckles and immense jewelled rings to her husband.

"Eddie, my love," she said, "and Lor', here comes Alfred. Don't go kissing my hand before him. He'd think it so silly."

"Silly or not, Mrs. O., here goes," said her husband, and imprinted a resounding caress on it.

Round the corner of the house had come a queer wizened little figure. Alfred, for all the heat of the day, was dressed in black broadcloth, wore a species of buckled goloshes over his shoes and had a plaid rug over his shoulders. From above the garish colours of this rose a very small head, which would have been seen to be bald had not its owner worn over it a cap of Harris tweed, the peak of which almost came over his eye. Below that appeared a thin little aquiline nose, a mouth so tight and thin-lipped that it looked as if it was not meant to open, and cheeks so hollow that they looked as if they were being sucked in by voluntary contraction. His walk was peculiar as his dress: he moved one foot a little forward and then put the other level with it. The same process repeated led to an extraordinarily deliberate progression.

Alfred was Mr. Osborne's elder brother, older than him by some ten years. He had entered a broker's office as clerk at the age of fifteen, and in the intervening years had, by means of careful and studied speculation, amassed a fortune, that had made Mr. Osborne on a former occasion remark that Claude would be a richer man than his father without ever having done a stroke of work for it. For Alfred (unmarried as yet) had made Claude his heir, a benefaction in return for which he "took it out" of Claude's father and mother. By one of those strange fantasies of Nature which must supply her with so great a fund of amusement, he united to an unrivalled habit of being right with regard to the future movements of the stock market, an equally unrivalled eye for the merits of pictures, and had for years bought very cheaply such works as dealers and connoisseurs would run up and wrangle for at Christie's a few years later. Here the inimitable humour of the construction of his nature came in, for well as he loved a picture, he loved a financial transaction a little more dearly, and sometimes he had collected works of an artist of no particular merit, in the

consciousness that when dealers knew that he was buying them, they would begin to put the price up. Then he would gently unload, and leave them with unmarketable wares on their hands. He delighted in dealers, because they ministered to his recondite sense of fun; they did not delight in him, because they never knew whether he was collecting because he saw merit in an artist, or because his design was to make them think that such merit existed. One or two had tried to make friends with him, and asked him to dinner. He ate their dinners with a great appreciation, and scored off them worst of all. By some further strange freak of fancy, Nature had made it easy for him to acquire all that which his brother and sister-in-law could not acquire at all, for brother Alfred, in spite of his ridiculous clothes had the manner, the voice, and the ways of an eccentric and high-lineaged duke, cynical if you will, and of amazing ill-temper, a fancy which Mrs. Osborne delicately alluded to as being worried. He also gave the impression of infernal wickedness, a quality which he was quite lacking in, except as regards his ill-tempers. It was an undoubted fact that he invariably got the better of other competitors in speculating and picture dealing and such perfectly legitimate pursuits, which they might be inclined to attribute to diabolical alliances.

He crept toward the tea table, looked at his brother's hand, which was held out in salutation, as if it was an insect, rejected it, and sat down pulling his shawl more closely about his shoulders.

"Fresh from your triumphs in the House, my dear Edward!" he said. "You positively reek of prosperity. You seem to be hot."

"Well, I'm what I seem then," said Mr. Osborne with great good nature. He could not possibly be other than polite to brother Alfred, who was to make Claude his heir, even if he had been tempted to do so. As a matter of fact, he was not so tempted. "Rum old Alf" was his only comment on his brother, when he had been more than usually annoying.

"I gather that the aristocracy assembles before dinner," went on Alfred. "Maria, my dear, after giving me tea for forty years at frequent intervals, it is strange that you do not remember that I take milk and not cream. Another cup, please."

“Well, and how’s the lumbago, Alf?” asked his brother. “Plumbago I call it: weighs as heavy as lead round the loins. Not but what I’ve only once had a touch of it myself.”

“Very humorous indeed,” said Alfred. There was certainly no doubt that brother Alfred was a good deal worried, and Mr. Osborne made the mental note that his lumbago must be very bad indeed to make him like this. Acid he always was, but not always vitriolic. But luckily both Mr. Osborne and his wife were proof against either acid or vitriol. They only felt sorry that brother Alf was so worried.

“Well, well, take your mind off it, Alf,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of fair dames coming down to cheer you up. Lord, Maria, what a rip brother Alf was when he was a young one. Opera every night and bouquets to the ladies on the stage——”

“Libel,” remarked Alfred.

Libel it was, but Mr. Osborne had intended it for a pleasant sort of libel. As the libel and not the pleasantness struck Alfred, he abandoned the topic.

“Bought any pictures lately, Alf?” he said.

“No, but there are two I should like to have sold. You and Maria; never saw such daubs. What did you pay for them? Twenty-five pounds apiece?”

Mrs. Osborne laughed, quite good humouredly.

“Why, if he’s not trying to buy them cheap off us,” she said, “and sell them expensive. Twenty-five pounds apiece! as if you didn’t know that the frames came to more. You and your joking, Alfred! Take a cucumber sandwich, which I know you like, though how you digest such cold vegetables at tea passes me. Why, I am reminded of a cucumber sandwich for hours after.”

“Where are you going to hang them?” asked brother Alfred.

“And if we weren’t just going indoors when we’ve finished our tea to look!” said Mrs. Osborne cordially. “Do come with us, Alfred, and give your advice.”

“I should recommend the coal cellar,” said Alfred. “They want toning.”

“Why, and he’s at his joke again!” said Mrs. Osborne, with placid admiration.

There is probably nothing more aggravating to a man in a thoroughly bad temper than to fail in communicating one single atom of it to others, but to have your most galling attacks received with perfect good humour. Such was the case with poor Alfred now; he could no more expunge the satisfaction from Eddie’s streaming countenance, or strike the smile from his sister-in-law’s powdered face, than he could make a wax doll cease smiling, except by smashing its features altogether. He tried a few further shafts slightly more poisoned.

“It’s odd to me, Maria,” he said, “that you don’t see how Sabincourt, or whatever the dauber’s name is——”

“Yes, Mr. Sabincourt, quite correct,” said Mrs. Osborne.

“How he has simply been making caricatures of you and my poor brother, making you sit with your rings and bracelets and necklaces and tiaras, just to show them off. And you, too, Edward, there you sit at your table with a ledger and a cash box and a telephone, just for all the world as if you were saying, ‘This is what honest hardware has done for me!’ ”

Mrs. Osborne was slightly nettled by this attack on her husband, but still she did not show it.

“And I’m sure Mr. Sabincourt’s done the telephone beautiful,” she said. “Why, when I stand and look at the picture, I declare I think I hear the bell ringing. And as for my necklace and tiaras, Alf, my dear, why it was Eddie who bade me put them on. No, we’ve got no quarrel with Mr. Sabincourt, I do assure you.”

Alfred gave her one glance of concentrated malevolence, and gave it up. Whether he would have tried it again after a short period for reflection is uncertain, but at this moment Claude came out of the house. “Hullo, father!” he said. “I thought I heard the motors. But I was changing.”

“Glad to see you, my boy. Been having a ride?”

“Yes, on the new mare Uncle Alf gave me. She’s a ripper, Uncle Alf. I’m ever so much obliged to you. And how’s the lumbago?”

Alfred's face had changed altogether when Claude appeared, and for the look of peevish malignancy in his eyes there was substituted one of almost eager affection. And certainly, as Mr. Osborne had said, there was little wonder, for Claude's appearance might have sweetened the most misanthropic heart. He was dressed quite simply and suitably in white flannels and white lawn tennis shoes, and the contrast between him and his father in his thick, heavy London clothes was quite amazing. His brown clean-shaven face was still a little flushed by his ride, and his hair was even now just drying back into its crisp curls after his bath. He did not bother his mother to pour him out tea, and instead made a bowl of it for himself in an unused slop-basin, moving the tea things with his long-fingered brown hands with a quick deftness that was delightful to watch.

"Four lumps of sugar, Claude?" asked his father. "You'll be getting stout, my boy, and then what'll your young lady say to you?"

Alfred turned a glance of renewed malignancy on to his brother as Claude laughed.

"She'll say I'm taking after my father," he remarked.

Alfred gave a little thin squeak of amusement. He had entirely failed to annoy his brother, but he hoped that Claude would have better luck. But again he was doomed to disappointment; Mr. Osborne's watch chain only stirred and shook, as it did when he laughed internally.

Claude looked about for a teaspoon, took his mother's, and stirring his slop-basin of tea, which was half milk, had a long drink at it.

"Father, I thought I'd drive the Napier over to meet Lady Austell and Dora," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Why, there's the two landaus going, and the brougham, and the bus for the servants," said Mrs. Osborne. "What for do you want the car?"

Claude flushed a little.

"Oh, I only thought I should like to drive it," he said. "It's a smart turnout, too, and Dora likes motors."

Mr. Osborne's watch chain again responded to ventral agitations.

"Blest if he doesn't want to give his girl a drive in his dad's best car, to show off the car and his driving," he said with some jocosity, which

drew on him brother Alfred's malignancy again.

"It's a good thing you haven't got to do the driving, Edward," he observed. "Why shouldn't the boy have the car out? I'll pay for the petrol."

The suggestion conveyed here was not quite a random libel. Alfred, with his inconvenient habit of observation, had seen that the cost of petrol was a thing that worried his brother and promised to be a pet economy, like the habit of untying parcels to save string, or lighting as many cigarettes as possible at the same match, or the tendency shown by Lady Austell to traverse miles of dusty streets in order to leave a note instead of posting it. And Mr. Osborne got up a little more hastily than he would otherwise have done if this remark had not been made.

"Oh, take the car, take the car, Claude," he said. "Very glad you should, my boy. Now, Mrs. O., you and I will go in and see where we'll hang our likenesses."

Mr. Alfred waited till they had gone, and then drew his plaid a little closer round his shoulders with another squeak of laughter.

"I thought that would get the car for you, Claude," he said; "that vexed your father."

Claude finished his tea.

"I know it did, Uncle Alfred," he said. "Why did you say it?"

"Why, to get you the car. That's what I'm here for, to learn what you want and see you get it. There's some use in me yet, my lad. Usually I can't make your father annoyed with me, but I touched him up that time."

Claude could not help smiling at his uncle's intense satisfaction, as he sat there with shoulders hunched up, like a little malevolent ape, still grinning over the touch-up he had so dexterously delivered. He himself had got up after finishing his slop-basin of tea and was balanced on the arm of his chair, one slim leg crossed over the other, and his hands clasping his knees. His smile caused those great dark eyes nearly to close with the soft wrinkling up of the flesh at their outer corners, but closing them it opened his lips and showed the even white teeth between them. Then, with that gesture which was frequent with him, he tossed back his head and broke into a laugh.

“Well, it’s too bad of you,” he said, “but thanks for getting me the car. It’s a handsome bit of work; they told me at Napier’s there wasn’t such another on the road anywhere. And what if I do want to run Dora up in style? It’s natural, isn’t it?”

Somehow when Claude was with his father and mother he appeared to be a perfectly well-bred boy. But in spite of his extraordinary good looks and the perfect ease of his manner, the moment they had gone, and there was no standard of that kind to judge him by, he seemed different.

“It’ll be a pleasant change for her finding the house comfortable,” he went on, “with servants to answer the bells, and half a dozen bathrooms where there wasn’t one before, and no holes in the carpets to trip yourself over. The place was like an old dust heap when the lease was signed three weeks ago. But you may bet I made the furnishers and decorators put their best feet foremost, and I must say they’ve done it all in the best style. It’s a nice comfortable English house, that is what it is. Mother wanted to have no end of gilding and kickshaws. I put my foot on that and Per backed me up.”

Alfred shuffled to the house after Claude had gone, and made his way to the dining room, where he expected to find the portraits of his brother and sister-in-law in process of being placed. The gallery through which he had first to pass had been left more or less in the state the Osbornes had found it in, though it was with difficulty that Mrs. Osborne had been persuaded not to put down a carpet on the polished oak boards. But she had had her way with regard to a few Persian rugs which had been there, and which she pronounced not fit to be seen, and had got some nice thick pieces of the best Kidderminster instead. Otherwise the Jacobean oak of its chairs, tables and book-cases had been allowed to abide, nor had she interfered with the portraits of Wests that hung on its oak-panelled walls. But with the hall it was different; and she had made several striking changes here. There had not even been a hatrack in it, which did not matter much before, since the Wests had not entertained there for years, and you could put your hat down on one of the low oak chests. But Mrs. Osborne intended to entertain a great deal, and the first thing she did was to order two large mahogany hatstands with a sort of dock for umbrellas beneath, which she had placed one on each side of the door.

On the white plaster walls between the oak pillars that ran up to the roof she had put up a couple of dozen stags' heads (ordered from Roland Ward) and half a dozen foxes' masks, which gave the place a baronial and sporting air. The light from the two old bronze lamps similarly was quite insufficient, and she had put up four very solid yet elegant (such was their official description) electric standards, one in each corner of the hall, while over the central table she suspended another from the rafters above, slightly ecclesiastic in design, though indeed it might suggest an earthly coronet of overwhelming proportions as much as a heavenly crown. A few stuffed tarpons, killed by Per in Florida, carried on the sporting note, which was further borne out by a trophy of spears and battle axes and bead aprons which he had brought with him from the same tour. Finally, she had introduced an enormous early Victorian mahogany sideboard for laying a cloak or a coat on, and on this also stood a stuffed crocodile-lizard sitting up on its hind-legs, and carrying in its fore paws a tray for cards. This had been a birthday present to her from Mrs. Alderman Price, who was expected that evening, and even Percy, who had such taste, had said it was very quaint. So there it stood in the middle of the mahogany sideboard, carrying in its tray only the card of the clergyman of the parish. But Mrs. Osborne had no fear about callers; she was long past all that, and surveying the hall only this morning she had said to herself with great satisfaction, "I declare I shouldn't have known it, when I think what it was when I first see it."

Alfred stood and looked about him for a moment or two when he came into this very suitably furnished hall, and observed with some silent amusement that Roland Ward's label was still attached to one of the stag's heads. This he did not remove; indeed, with the end of his stick he poked it into a rather more prominent position. Then he passed on into the dining room.

The two portraits were already hung, for Mr. Osborne had seen at once where they should go, above the new mahogany sideboard which was like that in the hall, and was, in fact, as Mrs. Osborne said, "its fellow." The windows took up the long side opposite to them, and on the other two were some half dozen portraits, which Alfred had in vain tried to buy before now, but had found to his chagrin that they were inalienable. There was a Reynolds there, a Gainsborough, a couple of

Romneys, and all had about them that indefinable air of race and breeding which the old English masters, lucky perhaps in their sitters, or at any rate in their own quality of vision, render so superbly. Till this evening the third wall had been empty; now Mr. and Mrs. Osborne, she in all her jewels, he with the telephone and ledger, shone there.

Alfred glanced round the room, but his eye came back to these two portraits. Sabincourt, that superb modern artist, had done the sitters justice, justice so rough that it might be taken for revenge. Mrs. Osborne sat full face, her white hair gathered beneath the all-round tiara of diamonds that she felt to be so heavy. Close round her neck was the Land's End necklace, but a rope of pearls reached to her waist and was fastened there by an immense ruby. Her large pillowy arms were bare to the shoulder; in one hand she held the Perigaud fan, but it was so grasped that the rings on the hand that held it as well as the bracelets were in evidence. The other lay negligently, knuckles upwards, on the carved arms of her chair. Her face wore an expression of fatuous content, and it was extremely like her, cruelly like her. And Edward had fared as well (or as badly) at the eminent hands of the artist. A vulgar kindly face peered into his ledger, and as his wife said, you could almost hear the telephone bell ring.

Alfred seemed fascinated by the sight of the portraits, or rather by the sight of them in contrast with the others. He turned on the electric light which was attached to their frames, and drawing a chair from a table, sat down to observe them. Then he suddenly broke into a spasm of noiseless laughter, and slapped his thin thigh with his withered little hand.

After a while he rose.

"But I'll get Sabincourt to paint one of Claude," he said to himself, "and then ask any of these dealer-fools if it's a West or an Osborne, bless his handsome face."

Dinner that night was an extremely lengthy affair, but "informal-like, quite a family party," as Mrs. Osborne explained to several of her guests, as she informed them whom they were to take in or be taken in by. May Thurston was furnished with the most complete explanation.

“I thought we’d all be comfortable and not stuck up, Lady Th—— Lady May, now that we’ve left London behind us,” she said, “and though I’m well aware, my dear, that Sir Thomas ought to take you in, by reason of your rank, since Mr. O. takes in Lady Austell, and the Earl me, I thought you’d not be ill-pleased if I passed you off with your young man, same as I’ve treated Lady Dora in sending her in with Claude. And so all you young people will be together, and a merry time you’ll have, I’ll be bound. Ah, there is Sir Thomas; I must explain to him.”

Sir Thomas cared little for precedence, but much for his dinner and more for his wine. He was considered quite a courtier in manner at Sheffield, and bowed to Mrs. Osborne on the conclusion of her explanation.

“When Mr. Osborne has the ordering of the wines, and Mrs. Osborne the commanding of the victuals,” he said handsomely, “he would be a man what’s hard to please if he wasn’t very well content. And to take in Mrs. Percy is an opportunity, I may say, of studying refinement and culture that doesn’t often——” Here Mrs. Percy herself entered the room, close to where they were standing, and he broke off, conscious of some slight relief, for he was one of those people who can very easily get into a long sentence, but find it hard to rescue themselves from being strangled by it when once there. “But speak of an angel,” he added, “and there comes a fluttering of wings.”

Thereafter the “gathering of the clans,” as Mr. Osborne usually expressed the assembly of guests for dinner, came thick, but before they were gathered a deafening gong announced that dinner was gathered too. Austell, with his weak pale face, came last but one, and finally his mother made her slow and impressive entry. She looked like an elderly dethroned princess, come back after exile to the native country where she no longer ruled, and stretched out both hands to Mrs. Osborne, whom she had not seen since her arrival.

“Dear Mrs. Osborne,” she said. “How glad I am! Quite charming. A family party!”

“Clans all gathered now, Mrs. O.,” said her husband. “Let’s have a bit of dinner.”

The dinner was served throughout on silver; a grove of wine glasses stood at the right hand of each guest. In deference to Alfred's lumbago all windows were closed, and the atmosphere soon became very warm and comfortable indeed. An immense glass chandelier hanging above the table, and studded with electric lights, was the chief author of illumination, but clumps of other lights were on the walls, and each picture had its separate lamp. Sir Thomas's courtier-like speeches soon ceased, and he was content to eat and listen to the cultured conversation that flowed from Mrs. Per's lips, while his face gradually deepened in colour to a healthy crimson and his capacity for bowing must certainly have ceased also. He asked the butler, whom he called "waiter," which was the year of each particular vintage that was so lavishly pressed upon him, and occasionally, after sipping it, interrupted the welling of the cool springs of culture to look codfish-like up the table toward Mr. Osborne, and say, "Capital ninety-two, this." And then Mrs. Per would begin again. Her talk was like the flowing of a syphon; it stopped so long only as you put your finger on the end of it, but the finger removed, it continued, uninterrupted, pellucid, without haste or pause. She was the daughter of a most respectable solicitor in Sheffield, whose father and grandfather had been equally highly thought of, and Per openly acknowledged that some of the most chaste designs in the famous ornamental tinware were the fruits of her pencil. But with the modesty of true genius she seldom spoke of drawing, though she was so much wrapped up in art, but discussed its kindred manifestations, and in particular the drama.

She gave a sweet little laugh.

"Oh, Sir Thomas, you flatter me," she said in response to some gross and preposterous compliment about her age, while he was waiting for a second helping of broiled ham, to which Mrs. Osborne had successfully tempted him. "Indeed, you flatter me. I am quite old enough to remember Irving's 'Hamlet.' What an inspired performance! It made me quite ill, from nervous exhaustion, for a week. I had a silly little schoolgirl 'Hamlet' of my own—yes, I will allow I was at school, though nearly on the point of leaving, and I assure you Irving's 'Hamlet' killed it, annihilated it, made it—is it naughty of me?—made it stillborn. It was as if it had never lived. How noble looking he was!"

Sir Thomas raised his eyes towards Mrs. Osborne. “Best peach-fed ham I ever came across,” he said. “Wonderful man, wasn’t he, Mrs. Percy? Great artist, eh?”

Dora from opposite had heard the end of this.

“Claude, dear,” she said, “who is that nice fat man? I never saw anybody like his dinner so much. What an angel! It is funny to me, you know, coming back here and finding you of all people in that heavenly car, ready to drive me up from the station. We didn’t go quite the shortest way, did we? Last time I was here there was only our old pony-trap to take me and my luggage, so I had to walk. And do you know, Mrs. Osborne has put me in my own room.”

Claude turned towards her. In spite of the awful heat caused by the shut windows and the rich exhalation of roast meats, he was still perfectly cool.

“I did that pretty well then?” he said. “Do you remember my asking you about the house, and where your room was, and all that? So you never guessed why I asked? It was just that you might have your old room again. Such a business as there was with the mater. She said you ought to be on the first landing, where those big handsome rooms are. But I said ‘No.’ Give Dora the room on the second floor beyond the old school room, and you won’t hear any complaints.”

“Ah, that makes it even nicer to know that you did it,” said she.

The conversation round the table for the moment had risen to a roar. Mrs. Osborne was tempting Alderman Price to the sorbet he had refused; Mrs. Per had got on to “The Bells,” which she allowed (incorrectly) that she had not seen; Mr. Osborne was shouting the year of the liqueur brandy which went with the ice to Sir Thomas; and May and Mr. Franklin were wrangling at the tops of their voices over some question of whether a certain dance had been on Tuesday or Wednesday. Lady Austell only looked slightly aloof, and followed the direction of her son’s eyes which were fixed, as by enchantment, on the picture of his hostess. And the crowd and the noise seemed to make a silence and isolation for the two lovers.

“But it was a business getting my way,” he said. “I never should have but that I was always the mater’s favourite.”

Dora heard the words and something suddenly jarred. Somehow he should not have put it like that; he thought of himself, he took credit —— And then before this rather disconcerting little moment succeeded in disturbing her, she looked at him again. There was the cool strong face, the smouldering eyes, that upward tilt of the chin, each inimitable, each Claude and no other.

"Favourite?" she said. "Do you expect me to be surprised?"

Quails, out of season, but probably delicious, had come and gone, and with the iced fruit salad that followed port was handed round. And with that first glass of port Mr. Osborne rose to his feet.

"Now it's the first glass of good old port from Oporto, Sir Thomas," he said, "and I ask the company to drink a health, not of this happy couple nor of that, as we well might do, God bless you my dears, but to someone else. Toasts I know are in general given after the dinner is over, and I hope Mrs. O. has got a savoury for you yet, and a peach or two. But it's been my custom to propose a health with the first glass of port, such as I see now in my hand."

Sir Thomas gave a choked laugh.

"Wish all toasts were drunk in such a glass of port, Osborne," he said.

"Very kind, I'm sure, but silence for the chair, Sir Thomas. This is the first little dinner as we've had here, and may there be many to follow it, with all present as I see now. Ladies and gentlemen, who has had the privilege of entertaining you? Why Mrs. Osborne! Maria, my dear, your health and happiness, and no speech required. God bless you, Mrs. O."

It was a complete surprise to Mrs. Osborne, and for one moment she felt so shy and confused she hardly knew which way to look. Then she knew, and with her kind blue eyes brimming she smiled at her husband. Everyone drank something, Sir Thomas his complete glass with a hoarse murmur of "no heel-taps"; Mrs. Per a little sip of water (being a teetotaller) with her little finger in exclusive elevation; Lady Austell something at random out of the seven glasses at her right hand, which had all been filled at different periods of dinner without her observing. And Dora, radiant, turned to Claude.

“Old darlings,” she said enthusiastically, and resumed her conversation with Mr. Franklin on her right.

But Claude was not quite pleased with this heartfelt interjection. It was affectionate, loving even, but something more was due to the son of the house. The interjection ought to have been a little more formal and appreciative. It should have saluted the importance and opulence of his parents as well as their kindliness. After all, who had done the house up, and made it habitable?

And then instantaneously this criticism expunged itself from his mind. Dora always said the thing that was uppermost in her mind and “old darlings” was a very good thing to be uppermost.

Harry Franklin and Claude found themselves side by side when, not so very long afterward, the ladies left the room, and Mr. Osborne, glass in hand, went round the table and sat between Austell and Sir Thomas. The others, with the exception of Alfred, who did not stir, but continued sitting where he was at the end of the room far away from door and window, closed up also, and another decanter of the ’40 port was brought.

“And when you’ve given me news of that, Lord Austell and Sir Thomas,” said Mr. Osborne genially, “I warrant there’ll be another to come up from my cellar without leaving it empty neither.”

The prospect seemed to invigorate Sir Thomas, and he emptied and filled his glass. Austell meantime was taken to task by his host for not doing the same, but was courteously firm in his refusal, in spite of Mr. Osborne’s assurance that you could bring up a child on this port without its knowing the meaning of a headache. Harry Franklin and Claude also were not doing their duty, so Mr. Osborne reminded them, but the rest were sufficiently stalwart to satisfy him.

“And the Navron quartette are playing afterward, are they not?” asked Harry. “May told me so.”

Claude frowned slightly.

“Yes, but when they’ll be able to begin, I don’t know,” he said. “When the pater gets somebody to appreciate his port you can’t tell when anything else will begin except another bottle. What I want is a cigarette, and a talk to Dora.”

“I’ve got some,” said Harry innocently, producing his case, and taking one himself. He lit it.

“I say, you’d better wait,” Claude began, when the hoarse voice of Sir Thomas interrupted him. “It’s dishonour to the wine,” he said. “Mr. Osborne, sir, your wine is being dishonoured by that young gentleman opposite.”

Harry did not catch the meaning of this at once, and was “put at his ease again” by Mr. Osborne before he knew that he was not there already.

“You’re all right, Mr. Franklin,” said his host, “though in general we don’t smoke till the wine has finished going round. But if my guests mayn’t do what they like in my house, I’d sooner not have my friends round my table at all Drink your wine, Sir Thomas, and let those smoke who choose.”

The second bottle, which was not to leave Mr. Osborne’s cellar denuded, had appeared before this, and the indignant drinker cooled down over it. A faint little squeak of laughter was heard from Alfred, who had sent for his plaid again, and till now had sat perfectly silent, emptying and filling his glass as many times as possible. At this point he produced a large cigar and lit it himself.

“I disagree with Sir Thomas,” he said. “Good tobacco and good wine go very well together, very well indeed,” and he embarked on the nauseating combination. It was now half-past ten, and a message came in from the drawing-room as to whether the gentlemen would take their coffee in the dining room or have it with the music. This caused a break-up, the three young men, Austell, Claude, and Franklin going out, leaving the rest at the table.

“Those young fellows will please the ladies more than we old fogies would, hey, Sir Thomas?” said Mr. Osborne. “We’ll follow them by-and-by. It’s not every day that one meets one’s old friends, and has a glass of good wine together. Per, my boy, I hope you’re taking care of yourself.”

Per was doing this very adequately. He was a fat, white young man of nearly thirty, with an immensely high forehead from which the tide of hair had already receded far. He wore pince-nez and a large diamond ring, and looked rather older than he was and considerably

stouter than he should have been. “Thank you, yes, dad,” he said. “I’m going strong.”

This furnished Sir Thomas, whose indignation over the cigarette had not quite yet subsided, with a text.

“Yes, my boy,” he said, “and long will you, when you’re not afraid of your dinner and your glass of wine. Half the young fellows I see now drink barley water to their dinner, and some of them don’t eat hardly no meat, and that’s why we’re losing the trade of the world as well as all the boat races and what not. In my day we ate our beef and drank our wine, and so did our fathers before us, and I never heard that we lost many boat races then.”

Sir Thomas did not say whether he personally had ever won any, nor did Percy give testimony to the value of generous diet by the enumeration of any athletic feats of his own. A little shrill laugh again came from the other end of the table, but Sir Thomas did not hear it.

“Look at those three young fellows who went out—no offence to you, Mr. Osborne,” he continued. “Why, there wasn’t a spare ounce of flesh on any of their bones, and that means no stamina. They’d shut up like a pocket-knife if it came to a tussle, and I doubt if their bones are much more than grizzle with the messes they eat, and that not enough of them. No, give me a lad who eats his steak and drinks his bottle of wine, and I’ll tell you whom to back in business or across country.”

“Well, there’s sense in a steak to my thinking,” said Mr. Osborne, “and to be sure our fathers ate their beef and drank their beer or their port more free than the young fellows do now. But I’d be sorry to put my money against Claude if it came to a run or a cricket match. He’s a wiry young fellow, though he’s not such a hand at his dinner as is Percy.”

The cackle from the end of the table grew louder, but no voice followed. Alfred was one of those to whom his own sense of humour is sufficient in itself. Without a word he got up and shuffled, still wearing his overshoes, out of the door.

The quartette played in the long gallery and Claude, knowing that music to his family meant nothing except a tune which, as Mrs. Osborne said, you carry away with you, had steered a very happy

course, in the selection of it, so as to satisfy the impulses of filial piety and yet give pleasure to those who like Dora, and, it may be added, himself, did not want so much to carry tunes away, but to listen to music. Thus a selection from the "Mikado," admirably boiled down for strings, put everybody in a good humour, and Sir Thomas to sleep. Later on a similar selection from "Patience" made Mrs. Osborne again beat time with her fan without disturbing Sir Thomas, and for the rest the exquisite inevitable melodies of Bach and Scarlotti filled an hour's programme. And when it was over Claude turned to Dora, with whom he was sitting in a window seat, and his eyes glowed like hot coals.

"Let's come out," he said, "and stroll down to the lake. We can't stop indoors after that. Bach should always be played out of doors."

That was finely and justly felt; the next moment came a jar.

"They charged the mater a hundred and fifty guineas for coming down," he said, "but it's cheap, I shall tell her, for real good music. There's no price you can put upon a thing like that."

Again with Dora the check, the jar, lasted but an infinitesimal time, as she turned aside to pick up her fan which had dropped, and as she met his eye again she felt that divine discontent which so vastly transcended in her opinion all other happiness. And it appeared that he, too, was in tune with that.

"Come out, my darling," he said. "Let's get away from these people just for a bit, a five minutes. I don't want any more music, even though it was more Bach. And I don't want any supper, do you? They're going to have supper now."

Up went his head, with that little unconscious toss of the chin, and Dora half laughed to hear how at this moment he seemed to put Bach and supper on quite the same level, when there was the prospect of strolling with her outside. There was intense sweetness to her in that, and there was mastery also, which she loved. She felt that even if she had not cared for him, and even if she was particularly hungry, she would have to go with him. But as she rose she could not help commenting on this, wanting, woman-like, to hear the reply that her heart had already shouted to her.

"You speak as if Bach and supper were equally unimportant," she said.

“Of course. There’s not a pin to choose between them, if you’ll just come out with me.”

“And if I won’t?”

“But you will,” he said.

“Not even, ‘please’?”

He shook his head.

“Anything sooner than ‘please,’ ” he said. “Come or not just as you like.”

To Dora this was tremendously attractive: the absolute refusal to ask anything of her as a favour, even when he so intensely wanted it, was a revelation of the eternal masculine not opposed to but in accord with the eternal feminine. Nothing seemed to her more fantastic and sickly than the sort of devotion that begged for a flower, and sighed and pined under a woman’s unkindness or caprice. “Here is my heart,” he had in effect said to her, “take it or leave it, but if you take it give me yours.” Man gave, and was not woman to give too, in her own kind? She, too, longed to come out into the warm half-darkness of the stars with him, and why, in common fairness, should he be supposed to sue for a favour that which she longed to grant?

So out they went on to the dim-paved terrace walk. Above the sky was clear and the star-dust strewn thick over the floor of the heaven, and the fantastic shape of the birds on the yew hedge stood clear out against the luminous and velvet blue. A little draught of flower-scented air stole up through the square doorways in the hedge from the drowsy beds, that but dreamed of their daylight fragrance, and somewhere not far away in the park a night jar throbbed its bourdon note, making vibration rather than sound. Dora put her hand through his arm and laughed.

“I laugh for pure happiness,” she said, “and—and oh, Claude, it’s the real me who is with you now. Do you understand? I expect not, so I will explain. There are several me’s; you rather liked No. 1, which was the chattering and extremely amusing me; that was the one you saw first, and you did like her. Then—oh, well, the other me’s are all varieties of that, and right below them all is the real me. It doesn’t know sometimes whether it wants to laugh or cry or to talk or be silent; it only wants—— Oh, it’s like you with Bach and supper about

equal. Laughing and crying don't particularly matter if there is you, just as to you Bach and supper didn't matter if there was me. And there is. It's me, as the children say. And you and I make us. It comes in the grammars. I only wanted to tell you that. And now we'll instantly talk about something else."

Claude stopped, and against the faint luminance of the sky she saw his chin protrude itself.

"I don't see any reason for doing that," he said. "It's much the most interesting thing——"

"I know."

He drew her toward him.

"Well, you might give a fellow a kiss," he said.

CHAPTER IV.

THE morning delicacy to which Lady Austell was so subject was due to the fact that when staying in other people's houses she found she saw enough of her hosts and fellow-guests if she denied herself the pleasure of their company at breakfast. In all other respects, she was stronger than most horses, and could go through programmes which would have prostrated all but the most robust without any feeling of unpleasant fatigue, provided only that the programmes interested or amused her or in any way furthered her plans. But she really became tired the moment she was bored, and since sitting at breakfast with ten or twelve cheerful people, with the crude morning sunlight perhaps pouring in at a window directly opposite her, bored her very much, she chose the wiser plan of not joining in those public festivities. But with her excellent tact she knew that at a house like Mrs. Osborne's everybody was expected to come down, to be in admirable spirits and to eat a great deal of solid food, and so she explained to Mrs. Osborne that she never ate any breakfast. Hence it was that about half-past nine next morning her maid carried upstairs a tray groaning with coffee, hot milk, toast, just one poached egg, and a delicious plate of fruit. Mrs. Osborne had given her a very pleasant sitting room next her bedroom, furnished with Messrs. Linkwater's No. 1 white boudoir suite, for, like half the house, it had been practically unfurnished; and Austell who had ascertained those comfortable facts when he bade his mother good-night the evening before, caused this particular groaning tray to be brought here also and paddled in to join her in carpet slippers and a dressing gown.

"I call this a devilish comfortable house nowadays," he observed, "which is far more than could be said for it in our time. What a pity the Osbornes and we can't run it together. They would pay the bills, and we could give tone. I wish it was possible to be comfortable, though poor. But it isn't. Everything comfortable costs so much. Now, darling mother, let loose, and tell me what you think of it all. Really your—your absence of breakfast looks quite delicious. They have given me chops and beef and things. May I have a piece of your melon?"

Jim and his mother were rather fond of each other, but they seldom met without having a quarrel, for while both were agreed in the general plan of grabbing at whatever of this world's goods could be appropriated, each despised and, in private, exposed the methods of the other. He, so his mother was afraid, was one of the very few people who was not afraid of her, and she often wished he was. He had lit a cigarette after the bath, and was standing in front of the fireplace, on the thick, white sheepskin rug, smoking the end of it.

"Dear Jim," she said, "do you think you had better smoke in here? Mrs. Osborne may not like it."

"Oh, she will think it is you," said Jim calmly, "and so won't dare to say anything. She fears you: I can't think why. Now do tell me how it all strikes you. Can you bear it for three days? I can easily; I could bear it for months and years. It is so comfortable. Now what did you and Mrs. Osborne talk about at dinner? Mr. O. and I talked about the Royal Family. Sir Thomas seems a nice man, doesn't he?"

Lady Austell gave him a very generous share of her half melon; it looked rather like a bribe. She was going to indulge in what Jim called humbug, and hoped he would let it pass.

"I think, dear, as I said to Dora the other day," she remarked, "that we are far too apt to judge by the surface. We do not take enough account of the real and sterling virtues—honesty, kindness, hospitality —"

Austell cracked his egg.

"I did not take enough account of the effect of hospitality last night," he remarked, "because I ate too much supper, and felt uncommonly queer when I awoke this morning——"

"You always were rather greedy, my darling," said Lady Austell softly, scoring one.

"I know. I suppose I inherited it from my deli—I mean cerebral-hæmorrhage grandfather. But I don't drink."

This brought them about level. Jim proceeded with a smart and telling stroke.

"I refer my—my failures to my grandfather," he said, "so whatever you say about our hosts, dear mother, I shall consider that you are only

speaking of their previous generations. Their hospitality is unbounded, their kindness prodigious, but I asked you how long you could stand it? Or perhaps the—the polish, the culture, the breeding of our hosts really does seem to you beyond question. Did you see the stuffed crocodile-lizard in the hall? I will give you one for your birthday."

"I think you are odiously ungrateful, Jim," she said. "I have got them to take Grote for seven years at a really unheard-of price, and all I get in return is this."

Jim opened his pale weak eyes very wide.

"What have I done?" he said. "I have only agreed with you about their kindness, and asked your opinion about their breeding."

"You are sarcastic and backbiting," said his mother.

"Only as long as you talk such dreadful nonsense, darling mother," he said. "You don't indulge in rhapsodies about the honesty of your housemaid. Honesty in a housemaid is a far finer quality than in a millionaire, because millionaires are not tempted to be dishonest, whereas poor people like housemaids or you and me are. Really, I only wanted to have a pleasant little chat about the Osbornes, only you will make it serious, serious and insincere. Let's be natural. I'll begin."

He took one of his mother's crisp hot rolls, and buttered it heavily.

"I find Mr. and Mrs. O. quite delightful," he said, "and should have told you so long ago if you had only been frank. I do really. There isn't one particle of humbug about them, and they have the perfect ease and naturalness of good breeding."

Lady Austell tossed her head.

"That word again," she said. "You seem to judge everybody by the standard of a certain superficial veneer, which you call breeding."

"I know. One can't help it. I grant you that lots of well-bred people are rude and greedy, but there is a certain way of being rude and greedy which is all right. I'm greedy, so was the cerebral grandpapa, only he was a gentleman and so am I. I'm rude: I don't get up when you come into the room and open the door for you, and shut the window. Claude—brother Claude—does all these things, and yet he's a cad."

“I consider Claude a perfect gentleman,” said Lady Austell with finality.

“I know: that ‘perfect’ spoils it all,” said Jim meditatively. “Now Mr. Osborne is a frank cad—that’s how I put it—and Claude a subtle one. That’s why I can’t stand him.”

“I daresay you’ll do your best to live on him,” said Lady Austell.

“Certainly; though I shall probably succeed without doing my best. It will be quite easy I expect.”

“And do you think that is a gentlemanly thing to do?” asked his mother, “when behind his back you call him a subtle cad?”

“Oh, yes, quite; though no perfect gentleman would dream of doing it. I think Claude has masses of good points: he simply bristles with them, but he gives one such shocks. He goes on swimmingly for a time, and then suddenly says that somebody is ‘noble looking,’ or that the carpet is ‘tasteful’ or ‘superior.’ Now Mr. Osborne doesn’t give one shocks; you know what to expect, and you get it all the time.”

Lady Austell thought this over for a moment; though Austell was quite unsatisfactory in almost all ways of life, it was impossible to regard him as a fool, and he had the most amazing way of being right. Certainly this view of the frank cad and the subtle cad had an air of intense probability about it, but it was one of those things which his mother habitually chose to ignore and if necessary deny the existence of.

“I hope you will not say any of those ridiculous things to Dora,” she remarked.

“Ah; then it is just because they are not ridiculous that you wish me to leave them unsaid. If they were ridiculous you would not mind ____”

Jim waited a second to give his mother time to contradict this if she felt disposed. Apparently she did not, and he interrupted her consenting silence.

“I shall not say them to Dora, I promise you,” he said, “because, in case they had not occurred to her, she might see the truth of them, and it might put her off. That would damage my chances of living on him. It would be very foolish of me. Besides, I have no quarrel with Dora—

I like Dora. But my saying these things to her is superfluous, I am afraid. She sees them all perfectly, though to you they apparently seem ridiculous. Or am I wrong, mother, and do you only pretend to think them ridiculous?"

Lady Austell felt she could fight a little on this ground.

"They seem to me quite ridiculous in so far as they apply to Dora," she said. "She is deeply in love with him, dear child, and do you suppose that she stops to consider whether he says 'tasteful' or not?"

Jim smiled with faint malice.

"No, she does not stop to consider whether he says it or not," he replied, "because it is perfectly clear that he does. But when he does, she pauses. Not for long, but just for a second. She doesn't exactly wince, not a whole wince, at least, but just a little bit of one. You can't help it if you are not accustomed to it. If I was going to marry Mrs. Osborne, I should wince a little now and then. I don't in the least wonder that she's in love with him. I wish you would find me a girl, who would marry me, as handsome and rich as Claude. The only thing is——"

Jim finished breakfast, and was going slowly round the room looking at the furniture. He paused in front of a saddlebagged divan with his head on one side.

"The only thing is that though she may get accustomed to 'tasteful,' she may also get accustomed to his extraordinary good looks. Of course, then there's the money to fall back upon. I don't think I should ever get accustomed to so much. What is—is Uncle Alfred going to allow him on his marriage?"

"Fifteen thousand a year, I believe," said Lady Austell gently, as if mentioning some departed friend.

Jim gave a little sigh in the same style. He had a dreadfully inconvenient memory, and remembered that the original sum suggested was twelve thousand, which his mother had thought decent but not creditable. There was no doubt, so he framed the transaction to himself, that she had "screwed this up" to fifteen. So he sighed appreciatively, and his comment that followed was of the nature of a testimonial.

“When I marry I shall leave the question of settlements completely in your hands, if you will allow me,” he said. “I think you are too clever for anybody.”

It was not once or twice, but many times, that Lady Austell had told her son the complete truth in answer to some question of his, and when she had said “fifteen thousand, I believe,” it was only reasonable to expect that the answer would be satisfactory. But Jim always remembered something else, and his memory was terribly good. It was not that he considered twelve thousand a poor sum: he only recalled to his mother’s mind the fact that she had successfully suggested fifteen. And he had not openly stated the fact: he had merely requested her kindly aid with regard to his own marriage settlements, if there were ever to be any. That should have been to her a completely gratifying request; as it was, it left her with the sense of having been found out. The complete correctness of this impression was shown by Austell’s next words.

“I think you have been fearfully brilliant about it,” he said, “and I am sure you have made them all think that you considered fifteen thousand far too much. Do tell me: didn’t you say that you thought it was a great responsibility for so young a couple to be—to be stewards of so much wealth? Lord, how I wish somebody would make me a steward. Come in.”

Somebody had tapped at the door, and to tell the truth Lady Austell was not very sorry to have an interruption, for she had actually used the words that Jim had conjectured in a little talk with Mr. Osborne and his brother in which settlements were very genteelly and distantly alluded to. But there had been a distinct twinkle in Alfred’s eye at this point, and she did not want more cross-examinations. The interruption, therefore, was welcome.

Mrs. Osborne entered, looking hot and pleased. Jim at this moment was looking at a large engraving of Landseer’s “Monarch of the Glen” (part of the No. 1 white boudoir set) in an angle of the room parallel to the door, and she did not at once see him.

“Good morning, Lady Austell,” she said. “I thought I would just step up and see what you would fancy doing this beautiful day. There’s some of the party going to motor over to Pevensey——”

Mrs. Osborne caught sight of Jim, and gave a faint scream.

"And I'm sure if I don't beg your pardon, Lord Austell," she said with averted head, "for I never guessed you were here paying a morning visit to your mamma in your bath wrapper. But I thought somebody said 'Come in,' for I always tap at every door now, or clear my throat to give warning, with so many lovers about, bless them."

"Yes, I said 'Come in,' " said Austell. "Mayn't I come and talk to you and my mother? I thought my dressing—bath wrapper was rather smart."

It was rather, being of blue silk, new and unpaid for, and with Mrs. Osborne's permission he joined them. It had given her quite a turn for a moment to find that she had intruded on an earl in his dressing gown, but she rapidly recovered.

"Why, it's beautiful," she said, "and such a figure as Mr. O. is in his old green padded wrapper as hardly comes to his knees! It was the thought of that that gave me such a turn at finding a gentleman in his dressing gown. But I'm sure I needn't have minded. And what will you be thinking of doing, Lord Austell? It's Liberty Hall, as Mr. O. and I always tell our guests, and the more they say what they like to do, the better we're pleased."

Lady Austell had lit a cigarette just before Mrs. Osborne's entrance, and, still looking at her, with her usual bereaved, regretful smile, was making efforts to pass it to Jim behind the shelter of the table. He observed this, and with a stealthy movement took it from her, for though they exposed each other in private, they were firm allies in the presence of others.

"I've been having such a scolding from my mother," he said, "for smoking in here, but I told her you were far too good-natured to mind. Have I done very wrong?"

Mrs. Osborne beamed.

"And me just saying that the more our guests pleased themselves the better we were pleased!" she exclaimed. "Well, what is it to be, Lady Austell? A drive to Pevensey, with Sir Thomas and Mrs. Percy, and I'm sure there'll be no difficulty about getting another gentleman when it's known as you are going, or a stroll or what-not, and a bit of

lunch quietly at home, and maybe a drive afterward. Give it a name, Lady Austell, and it's settled."

Lady Austell turned one glance of gratitude at her son, and continued to smile at her hostess.

"You are too kind," she said, "but as I've just been telling Austell, what I should really like to do best would be to spend the morning quietly by myself, going over the dear old place again. And then may we see how the afternoon turns out?"

This pathetic mention of the "dear old place," though "dilapidated old barrack" would have been a far more accurate description of Grote as it was, made Mrs. Osborne feel quite apologetic. She spoke to her husband about it afterwards. "I assure you, my dear," she said, "to see her sitting there with that sad smile it was quite touching, as if it ought to have been she who asked me what I would fancy doing. Well, it's one up and another down in this world, and after all we've done something in taking the place off their hands, and putting a stick or two of furniture in it, and keeping the rain out. And the white boudoir suite, it looks beautiful; I hadn't seen it since they put it in."

"Well, I'm sure the oftener Lady A. favours us with her visits, the more we shall be pleased," said Mr. Osborne. "And we give them a rattling good rent for it, my dear, when all's said and done. Why, there's the motor coming round now, and the clock striking twelve already. Sir Thomas would like a glass of sherry, I'll be bound, before his long drive."

"And I must see cook," said Mrs. Osborne, "and half the morning gone already. Have you any fancy for dinner, to-night, my dear?"

Mr. Osborne thought for a moment.

"No, peace and plenty, my dear," he said, "such as we've always had, Maria. I shall be in for lunch, too. Thank God, old Claude doesn't want any music to-night. We was hurried away from table last night, and I think Sir Thomas felt he hadn't done justice to my port: '40, Maria, and needs a lot of justice. But to-night he shall have his skin full."

"Well, but Claude has said as how pleased Dora was with the music," said Mrs. Osborne, "and we're going to have a second go this evening. You can't deny them their music, Mr. O."

Mr. Osborne paused on his way to the door.

"Nor I don't want to," he said, "though myself, I hate that scratching sound. But last night, Mrs. O., I don't mind telling you, what with young—young Franklin lighting up before we'd got into the wine at all, and Claude and he leaving the room to join the ladies, and I'm sure I don't wonder, the dining room was a sort of Clapham Junction. And you telling me not to stop too long there and all. To-night give us time to sit and think, and if Claude wants his concert, God bless the boy, let him have it. But let it be made clear that those who want their wine and a talk, sit and have it, and don't feel they're expected. It's little I drink myself, as well you know, but there's Sir Thomas, who's a fish for his liquor, and little harm it seems to do him. I like my guests to have what they want, Maria, and there's no reason why some of us shouldn't stay quiet and pass the bottle, while others listen to them fiddles. That's the way we've got on, old lady, by giving everybody what they want, and of the best quality. Well, let's do so still. Those that care to leave the table this evening, let them leave, but don't let there be any pressure on such as like to remain. Lord, if there's Mrs. Per not coming out already with all her fallals on! I must go and get Sir Thomas his glass of sherry."

Mr. Osborne was in every way the most hospitable of men, and he would have felt it as a personal disgrace if (as never happened) any guest of his had not all the wine he wanted, even as he would have felt it a personal disgrace if any guest was not met at the station, or did not have sufficient breakfast. But wine to his mind was something of quite a different class to all other hospitalities, and was under his personal control, so that if Sir Thomas liked his drop of sherry in the middle of the morning, Mr. Osborne, if the sherry decanter, as proved to be the case this morning, was empty, had personally to go down to the cellar, followed by Thoresby with a taper, and fish out from the bin the bottle he wanted. Moreover, as the motoring party had finished breakfast nearly two hours ago, and would not get their lunch for nearly two hours after, Mrs. Osborne had ordered a tray of the more sustaining sorts of sandwiches, a cold ham, and a dish or two of fruit to be put ready in the dining-room to fortify them for their drive; for when they did have lunch it would only be a cold picnic kind of lunch which they carried with them in a huge wicker basket like a coffin, which two of

the resplendent footmen were even now staggering under, and bearing out to the motor. For the sake of good fellowship several of the party who were not going on this prodigious expedition joined the travellers in this collation, for, as Mr. Osborne said, with a large plate of ham in front of him, "It made a bit of a break in the morning to have a mouthful of sherry and a dry biscuit. Help yourself, Per, my boy, for you're the guard of this personally conducted tour, and you'll need a bite of something before you get your lunch."

Jim Austell meantime had gone back to his room, from which he ejected two flurried housemaids who were emptying things into each other, and dressed in a leisurely manner. He found a letter or two on his dressing table, and among them a note from Mr. Osborne's secretary containing an extremely satisfactory cheque for the first quarter's rent of Grote, and with great promptitude he despatched it to his bank. Then, coming downstairs and out on to the terrace, he found Claude rather impatiently waiting for the return of Dora, who had strayed off after breakfast with May Thurston, and challenged him to a game of croquet, in which the two were still engaged when the girls came back from their walk. They refused to join, and May went into the house while Dora drew a chair to the edge of the ground and watched. Jim, wallowing in the remembrance of his cheque, had proposed a sovereign on the game and Claude had accepted. The game, therefore, since money was concerned, was serious, but Dora, not knowing this, was not. She had a great deal to say.

"I think Englishmen are perfect butchers," she said. "The whole of the long glade is simply one mass of the most heavenly young pheasants, who ran to us in flocks to be fed. Then comes October, and when they run to be fed you shoot them in the eye."

"There you're wrong, Dora," said Jim, calmly taking aim, "you shoot at running rabbits, but not——"

"Oh well, you know what I mean, and you call it sport. There, that serves you right, Jim, now it's Claude's turn and he's got you. Oh, Claude, what a beautiful shot! Wasn't it lucky it hit the wire first? If it hadn't it would have missed blue altogether."

Claude did not reply: even though it was Dora who was talking, the fact that at the present moment he was playing a game overrode all

other considerations. He would have much preferred to stop playing the game, and talk to her instead, but since that was impossible he continued to be entirely absorbed in what he was doing. The balls (after the beautiful shot) were well placed for a break, but a little consideration was necessary. Then a somewhat lengthy and faultless exhibition followed. At the end he came and sat down on the grass by Dora.

"Not a bad break," he said, "I shall have a cigarette."

"What are we going to do after lunch?" asked she gently, as Jim walked off to the far end of the ground.

"Just exactly whatever you like so long as we do it by ourselves. I haven't seen you all morning."

"I know; it's been beastly," said she, "but May's a dear, you know, and she wanted to talk about Harry, and I rather wanted to talk about you, so we both talked together, and I can't remember a word she said."

Claude was lying face downward on the grass, nursing his match, and Dora was looking at the short hair on the back of his neck. Then quickly and suddenly she looked up.

"Oh, Jim, you cheated," she cried. "I saw you move that ball with your foot. What a brute he is! He always cheats at croquet, and is always found out. I don't cheat: I only lose my temper. Claude, dear, keep an eye on him. Or perhaps you cheat too, do you? Oh, what a heavenly day. Do let's go on the lake after you've finished your game. You shall row and steer, and I shall encourage you."

Dora passed over the fact of Jim's cheating as she passed over the other numerous topics of her conversation, things to be alluded to and left behind, and Claude, sitting up again when he had got a light, made no comment whatever to it. Jim continued to play calmly and correctly, and at the end of his break came toward them, leaving an unpromising position.

"You talk more rot in a short space of time than anyone I ever saw," he remarked. "What with shooting at running pheasants and saying I cheat, you make my head whirl."

"Oh, but you did, I saw you," said Dora calmly. "Why not grant it?"

She paused a moment as Claude aimed, and then continued:

"Oh, Claude, what bad luck! Or did it hit it? I almost thought I saw it tremble, and in a minute I shall be sure of it."

"I thought it hit," said Jim.

"No, I'm sure it didn't," said Claude. "Full inch between them."

The game was over in a couple of turns after this, but Dora, finding it hot on her grassy bank, had gone down to sit in the boat and wait for Claude. At the conclusion of the game he produced a sovereign and handed it to Jim.

"You gave me a good thrashing," he said, "couldn't get in but that once."

"Thanks. Yes, you had bad luck all through. I say.... You're satisfied that Dora was talking nonsense?"

"About what?"

"When she said I cheated. Of course I did nothing of the kind."

"Why, of course I'm satisfied if you tell me so," said Claude. "Are you coming down to the lake?"

"Not I. Dora would hurl me overboard."

Claude strolled away and Jim walked aimlessly about, taking shots across the lawn with various balls. He knew perfectly well that he had cheated, but it was the worst luck in the world that Dora had looked up that moment. There had been a ball quite close to his, but as far off as if it had been in a better world by reason of the fact that it was lying neatly and inaccessibly behind the stump. He had just moved it with his foot as he went by, without, so he told himself, more than half meaning to. That was quite characteristic of him; he but rarely fully meant that sort of thing; something external to himself seemed to suggest a paltry little manœuvre of this kind, and he yielded to it in an absent-minded sort of way, without any particular intention. Had the game, in fact, gone on without attention being called to it, he would probably have nearly forgotten about it by now.

But Claude's remark, though innocent and even cordial (considering what he himself privately knew), irritated him a good deal. He had said that of course he was satisfied since Jim had told him so. That looked as if he would not have been satisfied if he had not been told, an

utterly unjustifiable attitude, since he had never given Claude, so far as he knew, the very smallest grounds for supposing that he himself was capable of cheating at croquet or anything else. Perhaps in Sheffield it was the right thing to cheat, and at the end of the game everyone who had not cheated told his opponent so, who then kindly accepted his word. Claude would find, however, that among the sort of people he now moved, it wasn't correct to cheat; in fact, it was distinctly advisable not to. Indeed, in a very few minutes, Jim felt rather as if Claude had cheated, and he was himself kind but a little troubled about it.

Then—he felt almost ashamed of himself for dwelling so long on so small an incident—he looked at the matter afresh. He had cheated, and pocketed a sovereign probably in consequence. That was a very small sum of money to cheat for, but he distinctly wished that it had not occurred. And then he threw down again the mallet he had taken up.

"Fact is, I'm a rotten chap," he said to himself, and there was no dissentient voice in his brain.

Claude meantime had gone down to the lake after Dora. If he had been obliged to give his thoughts the definiteness of words, he would certainly have said that he thought the whole thing rather odd, but then, being of an extremely loyal, unsuspicious nature, he would have endorsed his remark to Jim, that his word was quite sufficient, and have turned his thoughts resolutely elsewhere. He did not want to think about such very nasty little things as cheating at croquet, whether there was a penny or a sovereign or nothing at all on the game, and he did not wish to examine a certain doubt that lurked in the bottom of his mind as to whether Dora had seen correctly or not. It was in the shade anyhow, and he let it lie there. But if anyone had told him (or Jim either) that the incident was a trifling and microscopic one, both would have been quite right to deny that. It was true that a game only and a sovereign were concerned, but the "directing" power no less important a personage than Honour. It really makes a great difference in the daily journey through life if that charioteer is at his post or not.

"Sorry for keeping you, darling," he said to Dora, "but we had to finish the game. It didn't take long, did it? I got my head knocked off."

Dora had already established herself, and he pushed out through the shallow water, where the weeds trailed whispering fingers against the bottom of the boat, to deeper water.

"How clever of you to screw it on again so quick," said she. "Yes, it's quite straight. Oh, Claude, I've been thinking such a lot since I left you. How funny it is how little tiny things, like Jim's cheating just now, suggest such a lot of other ones not at all tiny."

Claude gave a little short uncomfortable laugh.

"I say, darling, do you know," he said, "if I were you I shouldn't say that sort of thing even to me. He didn't cheat: he told me so. So you must have been mistaken, and it's an awful pity to let things like that ever be talked about. But let's go on to the big things which it (though it didn't happen) suggested."

Dora paid no attention whatever to these excellent moral reflections, but merely waited with her mouth open till he had finished in order to speak again.

"Oh, but he did, he did," she cried. "I saw him with both eyes. We never could play together because he always cheated and I always lost my temper. How funny of him not to confess."

Claude did not reply for the moment: it was all rather uncomfortable.

"Well, now for the big things," he said.

"Oh, bother the big things," said Dora. "I know you think I am wrong, and I'm not. I'm never wrong. I'm perfectly certain."

She stopped suddenly and leaned over the side of the boat, dabbling her hand in the water. She saw some unuttered trouble in Claude's face, and a rather dreadful conjecture occurred to her.

"Claude, you weren't playing for money, were you?" she asked in a low voice.

He made up his mind in a moment and acted with promptitude.

"Good gracious, no," he said. "What will you be suggesting next?"

But Dora was still grave.

"Oh, I am glad," she said, with relief. "And do let's talk about something else. I daresay I was quite wrong about Jim moving that ball. Oh, I know I wasn't," she cried. "It was only a game, you see, and

there was nothing on it, and oh, poor Jim, you see he always used to cheat. It was just the same at billiards; if the balls were touching he used to go on before he really looked to see if they were. And that leads on to the big things."

He had stopped rowing, and with the impetus which the boat had acquired in those vigorous strokes he made to get clear of the weeds, they were drifting toward the little island in the centre of the lake, where the swans made their nests. It was rimmed about with soft-branched willows that trailed yielding boughs toward the water, and the boat glided in under their drooping fingers, and ran on to a soft sandy promontory, where it beached its bows, while the enfolding willow gave shade.

"Yes, the big things," said Dora. "It's just this, darling. You've got heaps of attractions, but I'm not sure that one of your nicest things isn't that you are so safe. It is such fun being able to trust a person quite completely and entirely and know one was right in doing so. I don't believe you ever scheme or make plans. Mother does, and Jim does, and people get so keen on their plan that other things get rather out of focus. They go—oh, it's like hounds when they are really running well: they don't look at the scenery, you know. They put their dear noses down and follow, follow. And it's all because of money—no, not the hounds, don't be so foolish—but it is an advantage not to want to bother about money. I *do* like to know that I needn't bother any more at all, and that if I want to take a cab I can. Somebody—Pierre Loti, I think—said it must be exquisite to be poor. Well, it isn't. It's far more exquisite to be rich. Of course I had great fun about trimming a hat for twopence, and making it look as if it came from May's shop—Biondonetti, isn't it, but really I should much prefer to order hats direct. Wouldn't you?"

Claude happened to be hatless, but he passed his hand over his head instead, as if to recapture the sensation of ordering hats. "I suppose I order mine," he said. "I'm sure I never made one. I shouldn't know how to set about it."

"No, darling, you don't wear two feathers—and—nothing else. A hat of two feathers is fearfully smart."

“Are these the big things you proposed to talk about?” asked Claude.

“No, as if hats mattered. Oh, Claude, you’re moulting. A short black hair! And there’s another sticking out. May I pull?”

He bent his head a little down: she pulled, and he screamed. The hair remained where it was.

“And is that a big thing?” asked he again.

“No, donkey; darling donkey. You will interrupt so about hats. As if anybody cared where you got your hats, and you haven’t got one. How did you lead the conversation round to hats? Let’s see, it was Austell first, and then ... then, oh, yes, I said you were safe. And now I think I’ll go on. You may sit down here, if you like. There’s room for us both. Let’s be common, as May said about—about people like us, the other day. I would change hats with you, if you had one. As it is——”

Dora pulled the thick black curls.

“Oh, I wish you had a wig,” she said, “and nobody knew but me. I shouldn’t mind, and everybody would say what beautiful hair you had, and I should know it wasn’t real, and shouldn’t tell. It would be such fun. Then some day you would annoy me, and I should tell everybody it was only a wig. Claude, when I am old and wrinkly and quite, quite ugly, do you suppose you will care the least little bit any more for me? Oh, dear, I felt so extraordinarily gay all the morning, and now I’ve gone sad all in a minute! Oh, do comfort me! There is such a lot of gray-business in life, unless one dies quite young, which it would immensely annoy me to do. I wonder how we shall stand the gray-business, you and I, when we see each other getting older and more wrinkled and stiffer, stiffer not only in limb, and that is bad enough, but stiffer in mind, which is infinitely worse. No, don’t look at me like that, but sit up and be sensible. It has got to be faced.”

Unconsciously, or at the most half consciously, she was sounding him; she knew quite well that there were beautiful things to be said and said truly about what she had called the gray-business of life, and she wondered, longing that it might be so, whether there was within him that divine alchemy which could see how the gray could be changed into gold. Never had she felt his physical charm so potent as now, when he sat up obedient to her orders and leaned forward toward her,

with a look, a little puzzled, a little baffled in his eyes. Almost she was tempted to say to him, “Oh, it doesn’t matter, nothing matters beside this exquisite day and you, you, as I know you already,” but some very deep-lying vein of curiosity wholly feminine, and very largely loving, made her not interrupt her own question, but wait, with just a touch of anxiety, for his reply. She and Claude, she felt, would have some day to be far more intimately known by each other than they were now. Of him she knew little but his personal beauty, though she felt sure that, as she had said to May, he was good, and as she had said to him, that he was safe. And of her she guessed that he knew no more; that he loved her she had no doubt, but she felt that she had shown him as yet but little beyond that which all the world saw, her quick and eager attitude toward life, the iridescent moods of her effervescent nature. There was something that sat below these, her real self. She wanted Claude to know that, even as she wanted to know his real self.

This was all vague to her though real, instinctive rather than describable, and flashed but momentarily through her mind as she waited for his reply. But that reply came at once: Claude seemed to find no difficulty about the facing of the gray-business.

“There’s no cause to worry,” he said. “Just look at Dad and the mater! Isn’t he in love with her still? And I expect what you call the gray-business for a woman cannot begin while her husband loves her. I don’t suppose either of them ever gave a look, so to say, at anybody else. Think of the way he proposed her health last night! Not much gray-business about that! Why it was as if she was his best girl still, and that he’d just come a-courting her, instead of their having been married over thirty years. And she is his best girl still, just as you will ever be mine. And as for her, why he’s her man still. How’s that for the gray-business?”

Dora felt one dreadful moment’s inclination to laugh. She had asked for a sign that he could turn the gray into gold, and for reply she got the assurance that she might put her mind at rest with the thought of what Mr. and Mrs. Osborne were to each other! She knew that for that moment she only saw the ludicrous side of it, and that a very real and solid truth was firm below it, but somehow it was not what she wanted. She wanted ... she hardly knew what, but something of the spirit of romance that triumphantly refuses to acquiesce in the literal facts of

life, and see all things through the many-coloured blaze of its own light. She wanted the gray-business laughed at, she wanted the assurance that she could never grow old, given with a lover's superb conviction, to be received with the unquestioning credulity of a child. No doubt it ought to have been very comforting to think that the years would leave with them the very warm and comfortable affection which the father and mother had for each other, and she ought to be glad that Claude felt so sure of that. But, to her mind, there was about as much romance in it as in a suet pudding.

He saw the eagerness die from her face, and the shadow of her disappointment cross it.

"And what is it now, dear?" he asked.

Dora tossed her head back, a trick she had caught from him.

"It isn't anything now," she said, "it all concerns years that are centuries away. I think it was foolish of me to ask at all."

"I don't think it was in the least," said he. "You said it had to be faced, and I think I've given it a facer, at least the example of the governor and the mater has. Besides, there are other things that will colour up the gray-matter, children, we hope, sons going to school and daughters growing up."

Again Dora knew that he spoke with excellent sense, but again she felt that it was not sense she wanted, so much as lovers' nonsense, which is more essentially real than any sense. She wanted something airy, romantic, golden.... And then she looked at him again, and her wants faded from her. He brought her himself. She gave a little sigh and raised herself till her face was on a level with his.

"O Claude, I should be a donkey, if I was not content," she said.

"Lord, there'd be a pair of us then, if I wasn't," said he.

Sunday succeeded and breakfast in consequence was put an hour earlier so that any servant in the house could go to church. Mr. Osborne himself, though the day was already of scorching heat, came down in a black frock-coat suit of broadcloth, and his wife rustled in black satin. It was clearly expected that all their guests would go also,

for at half-past ten a stream of vehicles drove to the door past the window of the smoking-room.

"Got to start early," said he, "so that the men may put up the cattle and come too, but there's no call for you gentlemen to put out your cigars. The ladies won't mind a whiff of tobacco in the open air, Sir Thomas, and the church is but a step outside the Park gates, so that you can sit and finish there. There are the ladies assembling. Time to go: never keep the fair sex waiting, hey? or else the most indulgent of them will turn a cold shoulder."

The church, as Mr. Osborne had said, was but a stone's throw beyond the Park gates, and as they all arrived at twenty minutes to eleven there was time, before the groaning of the organ summoned them in, to have a turn under the trees and finish the cigars that had barely been begun.

It had been so taken for granted that everybody was coming to church that out of all the party there was only one absentee, namely, Austell, to whose room Mr. Osborne had sent with inquiries if he was ready, and the suggestion to send back the motor for him if he was not. But he certainly was not ready and the motor had not gone back for him, since he had said that he was not very well. Otherwise the whole of the party were there, and by degrees strayed into church. Mrs. Osborne had gone there at once from the carriage with Lady Austell, in order to escape from the heat, and they were already seated in the big square family pew which belonged to the house, when the others began to come in. Sir Thomas and Mr. Osborne were the last, because they had been discussing the recent rise in the price of tin up till the last moment. They entered, indeed, so shortly before the procession of four choir boys, two men and the vicar, that Mr. Osborne had barely time to sit down by his wife in the place she always kept for him next her in church, after standing up and putting his face in his hat, before he had to stand up again. Sir Thomas sat next Lady Austell. The two looked rather like a codfish in conjunction with a withered lily.

The pew was four-sided, the fourth side opening into the body of the church through the easternmost of the arches of the south aisle. In the centre of it was a very beautiful alabaster monument to the first earl and his wife, while the window was of exquisite early German

glass to the memory of the second. Elsewhere in numbers round the walls were other smaller tablets, some bearing medallions, others merely catalogues of the cardinal virtues with which the deceased were blessed, but the whole place was historical, established. And here this morning sat Mr. Osborne and his family and friends, among whom were Lady Austell and her daughter, who was going to join together the two families. She sat just opposite Claude, and of them all, he alone to the most observant eye was ambiguous. He might as well, so far as appearance went, have been of the Austells as of the Osbornes.

Dora, it was to be feared, was not very attentive, and her face wore that peculiarly rapt look, which, as May Thurston had once told her, was a certain indication that she was not thinking about what was going on. As far as the service of the church went that was true; she was completely occupied with the occupants of the pew. The sermon was in progress and her mother sat with eyes mournfully fixed on the Elizabethan monument in the centre, just as if the first earl had been her husband, while next her Sir Thomas had his eyes fixed on nothing at all, for they were tightly closed. His wife, next to him, and round the corner, made futile little attempts to rouse him to consciousness again, by pretending to put her parasol in a more convenient place, so that it should incidentally hit his foot. This, eventually, she succeeded in doing, and he opened one eye and rolled it drowsily and reproachfully at Lady Austell, as if she had interrupted some celestial reverie. Then he closed it again.

Claude, as Dora felt, had observed this, and was looking at her, so she passed over him, for fear of catching his eye, and went on to Uncle Alfred, who sat next him. He was closely wrapped up in a shawl that went over his shoulders, and a certain stealthy movement of his lower jaw caused her to suspect that he was eating some sort of lozenge. Then came Mrs. Osborne: Dora could hear her rather tight satin bodice creak to her breathing. She had the Bible in which she had verified the text open in her lap, and she was listening intently to the sermon, which was clearly to her mind, for her plump, pleasant face was smiling, and her eyes fixed on the preacher were a little dim: her smile was clearly one of those smiles of very simple happiness which are allied to tenderness and tears. And then Dora focussed her ear and heard what was being said:

“So this earthly love of ours,” said the preacher, “is of the same immortal quality. Years do not dim it; it seems but to grow stronger and brighter as the mere purely physical part of it——”

And then Dora’s eye was focussed again by a movement on the part of Mrs. Osborne, and her ear lost the rest of the sentence. Mrs. Osborne gave a great sigh and her dress a great creak, and simultaneously she took away the hand that was supporting the Bible in which she had verified the text, so that it slid off the short and steeply inclined plane between her body and her knee, and fell face downward on the floor. She did not heed this: she laid her hand, making kaleidoscopic colours in her rings as she moved it, on the hand of her husband, who sat next her.

He, too, had been following the sermon with evident pleasure, and it was hard to say to which of them the movement came first. For within the same fraction of a second his hand also let fall the silk hat which he had already gathered up in anticipation of the conclusion, and in the same instant of time it was seeking hers. His head turned also to her, as hers to him, and a whispered word passed between them. Then they smiled, each to the other, and the second whisper was audible right across the monument of Francis, first earl, to Dora, where she sat opposite to them.

“Maria, my dear,” whispered Mr. Osborne, “if that isn’t nice!”

Then Mrs. Osborne’s belated consciousness awoke; she withdrew her hand and picked up her Bible.

Mr. Osborne’s instinct in taking up his hat had been quite correct; the doxology followed, and a hymn was given out. He and his wife, so it was clear to Dora, had no consciousness except for each other and the hymn. She was the first to find it in her hymn-book, while he still fumbled with his glasses, and when they all stood up he shared the book with her and put down his own.

Then the organ indicated the first lines of the tune, and again the two smiled at each other, for it was a favourite, as it had been sung at the service for the dedication of the church in Sheffield. They both remembered that, but that did not wholly account for their pleasure: it had been a favourite long before.

Mrs. Osborne sang what is commonly called “second.” That is to say, she made sounds about a third below the air. Mr. Osborne sang bass: that is to say, he sang the air an octave or thereabouts below the treble. They both sang very loudly; so also did Percy, so also did Mrs. Per, who sang a real alto.

And then without reason Dora’s eyes grew suddenly dim. In the last verse Mrs. Osborne closed the large gilt-edged hymn-book with tunes, and looked at her husband. He moistened his lips as the last verse began, and coughed once. Then Mrs. Osborne’s rings again caught the light as she sought her husband’s hand. And she started *fortissimo*, a shade before anybody else:

“And so through all the length of days—”

Mr. Osborne did not sing: his fat fingers closed on his wife’s rings, and he listened to her. He would not have listened then to Melba. He would not have been so completely absorbed if the seraphim had sung to him.

And then finally Dora looked at Claude. She thought she understood a little more. But she only saw a little more.

CHAPTER V.

IT was about two of the afternoon in the last week of May, and this sudden heat wave which had spread southward over Europe had reached Venice, making it more than ever a place to dream and be still in and less than ever a place to see sights in. So at any rate thought its foreign visitors, for the Grand Canal even and the more populous of the waterways were empty of pleasure-seeking and church-inspecting traffic, and but little even of the mercantile or more necessary sort was on the move. Here and there a barge laden with coke and wood fuel was being punted heavily upstream, clinging as far as might be to the side of the canal, where it would feel less of the tide that was strongly setting seaward, or here another carrying the stacked-up furniture of some migratory household passed down midstream so as to get the full aid and current of the tide avoided by the other. But apart from such traffic and the passage of the gray half-empty steamers that churned and troubled the water at regular intervals, sending the wash of their slanting waves against the walls of the white palaces, and making the moored and untenanted gondolas slap the water with sudden hollow complaints, and grind their sides uneasily against the restraining *pali*, there was but little stir of movement or passage. No lounger hung about on the steps of the iron bridge, and the sellers of fruit, picture postcards, and tobacco had taken their wares into the narrow strip of shade to the north of the Accademia, and waited, unexpectant of business, till the cool of the later hours should bring the *forestieri* into the street again.

Even the native population shunned the glare of the sun, and preferred, if it was necessary to go from one place to another, to seek the deep shadows of the narrow footways rather than face the heat and glare of the canals, and the boatmen in charge of the public ferries had moored their craft in the shade if possible, or, with heads sheltered beneath their discarded coats, passed the long siesta-hour with but little fear of interruption or call on their services. The domes and towers of the town glittered jewel-like against the deep blue of the sky, and their outlines trembled in the quiver of the reverberating air. On the north side of the Grand Canal the southward-facing houses dozed behind

lattices closed to keep out the glare and the heat, and the air was still and noiseless but for the staccato chiding of the swallows which pursued their swift and curving ways with nothing of their speed abated. Over the horizon hung a purplish haze of heat, so that the edge of the sea melted indistinguishably into the sky, and Alps and Euganean hills alike were invisible.

Dora had lunched alone to-day, for Claude had gone to Milan to meet his father and mother, who were coming out for a fortnight and would arrive this evening; and at the present moment she was looking out from the window of her *sala* on to the lower stretch of the Grand Canal, which, as her intimacy with it deepened, seemed ever to grow more inexplicably beautiful. The flat which they occupied was on the south side of the canal, and though no doubt it would have left the room cooler to have closed all inlet of the baked air, she preferred to have the windows open, and lean out to command a larger view of the beloved waterway. Deep into her heart had the magic of the city of waters entered, a thing incomparable and incommunicable. She only knew that when she was away from Venice the thought of it caused her to draw long breaths, which hung fluttering in her throat; that when she was in it her eyes were never satisfied with gazing or herself with being soaked in it. She loved what was splendid in it, and what was sordid, what was small and what was great, its sunshine, its shadows, its moonlight, the pleasant Italian folk, and whether she sat in the jewelled gloom of St. Mark's or shot out with the call of her gondolier from some dark waterway into the blaze of ivory moonlight on the Grand Canal below the Rialto, or whether the odour of roasting coffee or the frying of fish came to her as she passed some little *caffe ristorante* in the maze of mean streets that lie off the Merceria, or whether she lay floating at ease in the warm sustaining water of the Lido, or watched in the church of St. Georgio the mystic wreaths of spirits and archangels assembled round the table of the Last Supper, peopling the beamed ceiling of the Upper Chamber and mingling mistlike in the smoke of the lamp with which it was lit—she knew that it was Venice, the fact of Venice, that lay like a gold thread through these magical hours, binding them together, a circle of perfect pearls.

Two threads indeed ran through them all: they were doubly strong, for it was in Venice last autumn that she and Claude had passed three

weeks of honeymoon and with the glory of the place was mingled the glory of her lover. It was that perhaps that gave to details and such sights and sounds as were not remarkable in themselves their ineffaceable character. It was because she and Claude had wandered, pleased to find themselves momentarily lost, in the high-eaved labyrinths of narrow streets, that the dingy little interiors, the *trattorias* with their smell of spilt wine, and their vine-leaf-stoppered bottles, their sharp savour of cooking and sawdust-sprinkled floors were things apart from anything that could be seen or perceived in any other town in the world. A spire of valerian sprouted from mouldering brickwork, the reflection of a marble lion's head on snow-white cornice quivered in the gray-green water below, little sideway-scuttling crabs bustled over the gray mud of the lagoons, bent on private and oblique errands of their own, seagulls hovered at the edge of the retiring water; gray-stemmed *pali* with black heads leaned together, marking the devious course of deep-dug channels; there came a cry of "*Stali*" and a gondola with high-arching neck (some beautiful black swan) shot out of a canal by the bridge where they lingered, and these sights and sounds, trivial in themselves, were stamped in her mind with the royal mint-mark that belonged to those weeks when she and Claude were in Venice after their marriage. Her emotion had streamed from her, soaking them with it: they were part of Venice, part of herself, and so wholly hers.

Some seal had been set on those things then that could never be melted out. It was Claude who had set it there, and he had so imprinted that seal upon Venice that to her now all that was Venice had the memory of her honeymoon upon it like a hallmark on silver. That time had been a score of divine days, luminous with the southern sun, warm with stillness or clement wind, and yet made vigorous with the youth and freshness of the immortal sea. And here, six months afterward, she had returned with Claude to spend a month of late May and early June before the weeks of London. In the autumn she had come home under the enchantment and by way of a neat Christmas present Mr. Osborne had prospectively given her the rent, the journey, the expenses of food and wine, the servants and their journeys and their wages of a month, "or call it five weeks, my dear, and you won't find me pulling you up short," he had said, "of that house on the Grand Canal that took your fancy, Palazzo —— but there, I've no head for foreign names. You

leave London, you do, with your maid and your cook, and your housemaid and what not, and don't forget Claude, hey? or he'll be quarrelling with you, and me taking his side too, though its only my fun. And you take a few English servants with you, as you can fall back upon, and you send me in a bill for all the tickets and the wages, and your living bills, and your gondolas, and that's my Christmas present to you. Don't you bother, but make yourself comfortable. You go as you please, as we used to say, for a month, or call it five weeks, and enjoy yourself, and let me know how much it's all stood you in. I shouldn't wonder if Mrs. O. and I didn't come and join you, oh, not to make you uncomfortable, no fear, but to take another piazza, ah, palazzo you call it, and have a look at the Italians, and see what's to be seen."

Dora had an excellent aural memory, and as she sat at her window to-day, watching the flickering reflection in the water of the sunstruck houses opposite, she could almost hear Mr. Osborne's voice saying these hospitable and free-handed things. But they did not get between her and her memory of the weeks in October. She was aware that during the last six months she had seen things differently to the way in which they were presented to her during those weeks, but it was not Venice that had altered. It was still Venice "as per last October," as her father-in-law might have said.

They had rowed out to Malamocco one day, and another they had gone to Torcello, the ancient mother of Venice, and she had found there a sort of tenderness for the earlier and now ruined and fevered town, just as—just as she found a tenderness for her husband's mother. Torcello was the beginning of the magic, from Torcello the creation of what she so loved had come. On another day they had taken dinner out on to the great lagoon, had tied up to a clump of hoary gray-headed *pali*, notching the *ferro* of their gondola into the disc of the setting sun. Then some tide had slowly swung them a little sideways, so that they still faced toward the brightness of the West, long after the sun had gone, and the glory of its departing had been infused into and flooded the heavens. A great cumulus cloud reared itself out of the western horizon, in tower and pinnacle of ineffable rose, with transparent aqueous blue dwelling in the folds of it and at the base of it lay the campaniles and roofs of Venice. And Claude had been beside her, he

whose beauty intoxicated her, so that she interpreted all he said or did through the medium of that. He had often yawned at things that engrossed her, he had often felt that long lingering before certain pictures was tedious, but his reason for it had ever been the same, and the reason was an intoxicating one. Then pictures and campaniles absorbed her, and in consequence he, so he complained, got the less of her. “Put me down in Clapham Junction,” he had said once, “and if I find you there I shan’t ask for Venice. Tintoret. Yes, No. 20 is by Tintoret. How did you guess? I see no label on the frame: they should have them all labelled. What a handsome frame!”

On another day, the only one on which the halcyon weather had played them a trick, they had gone out in the morning to Burano, rowing at full tide over the shadows and water of oily calm, with above them a sky that was turquoise, but for a few pale combed wisps of cloud. Northward it had been very clear, and the white range of snow mountains so sharp cut that it seemed that even on an autumn day they could row across and ascend those cliffs of white. Then—Claude had noticed it first—a great tattered edge of gray vapour streamed southward off the Alps, and spread with the swiftness of spilt water along the floor, in pool and promontory of vapour over the northern heavens. He and she had been talking Italian in ridiculous fashion to their head gondolier, and now Claude pointed dramatically northward and said, “Curioso cloudo.” On which all the gaiety and laziness of that child of the south vanished, and he and his *poppe* put the boat about and rowed top speed for Venice. They had come in expectation of fine weather, with no *felse*, but before they were halfway home a squall of prodigious wind and blinding rain struck them, and for an hour she and Claude nestled close beneath one mackintosh, hearing the squeal of the wind, the buffet of the rain, and by degrees the gradual rising of waves. They made a bolt for it across the last open water between San Michele and Venice, narrowly escaping being swamped.

Somehow to Dora now, that seemed the best of all the days. The gondola was three inches deep in savage spray-blown water. She knew there was danger of some sort abroad, when they had already started, and had gone too far in the maniac wind that descended on them to get back, but crouching beneath the one mackintosh with Claude, with the

rain streaming in from a hundred points, and with the danger of capsize imminent, she found a glory and triumph in the moment, which, indeed, was independent, or almost so, of Venice, and was pure Claude. He had lit a cigarette, after succeeding in striking a match with infinite trouble, saying, "Now for the last smoke this side the grave," and Dora found a sublimity of sangfroid in this remark. But at that time all he said or did was golden: he gilded all things for her.

In those days she was incapable of criticism with regard to anything that concerned him, for to her, lover of beauty as she was, his beauty, which now was a possession of hers, was a thing of dazzling and blinding quality. It blinded her still, but it must be supposed that the enthrallment of it was quite absolute no longer, since now, at any rate, she knew it was that which had taken the very command and control of herself out of her hands. She was in love with him, that was perfectly true, but it was with his beauty (an inextricable part of him) that she was in love. And now, to-day, as she leaned out of her window over the summer stillness, she found that she was beginning to be able to look undazzled at him, to see the qualities and nature of her husband as they were themselves, not as they had appeared to her in the early months of her marriage, when she could not see him at all except through the enchanted haze which surrounded him. Before she married him she had been able to do as she did to-day, to know that at times something (trivial it always was, as when he spoke of some woman as a "handsome lady") made her check suddenly. But when they were married, when he and his wonderful beauty were hers, and she was his, that power of criticism had altogether left her, and it was only with a sort of incredulous wonder that she could remember that she had ever been capable of it. To-day, now that he was absent, for she had not seen him for over twenty-four hours, she for the first time consciously registered the fact that the power of judgment and criticism as regards him had come back to her.

Dora drew herself in from her leaning out of the window, and settled herself in a chair. This discovery rather startled her. Insignificant as it might sound, if she had described it to May Franklin or some other friend, it seemed to herself to be indicative of some essential and radical change in her relation to her husband. And it concerned itself not with the present only and with the future, but

reached back into the past, so that a hundred little scenes and memories bore a different aspect to her now from that which they had hitherto borne. It had been enchanting to her, for instance, that he had said he would as soon be at Clapham Junction as at Venice, provided she was with him. At the time she had only thrilled with ecstatic wonder that she could be so much to him: now she made the comment that he did not really care for Venice. That was a pity; it was a defect in him, that he was indifferent to the exquisite beauties with which he was surrounded. She had not seen that before. It made him, so to speak, have no part in her Venice, which, strangely enough, he had created for her. It was as if a father disowned, did not recognize his own child.

Dora had no desire to pursue this train of thought, for there was something vaguely uncomfortable at the back of it at which she did not wish to look closer. So she mentally brushed it aside, and, a thing that was a daily if not an hourly habit of hers, took her mind back to the first days in which they had been together, and let it float her slowly down the enchanted weeks that had followed till it landed her at the present day again. Such retrospect had, indeed, passed out of the range of voluntary thought: it was like the pillow on which her mind, when at rest, instinctively reposed itself. After Venice they had wandered a week or two longer in North Italy, until toward the end of October a foretaste of winter caught them on the Italian lakes, and they had started for home, arriving there at the beginning of November. They had but passed through London, spending a couple of days at Claude's little flat in Mount Street, and had then gone down to Grote for the first big pheasant shoot of the year. She found both her mother and Austell there.

Dora was essentially appreciative of all the delightful things in life which can only be obtained by abundant money, and hitherto very few of these had been within her reach. True, she was sensible enough to enjoy pictures that were not hers, to look at beautiful things exposed for the public in museums and art collections; but she did not belong to that slightly unreal class of enthusiasts who say that as long as they are able to see fine pictures and fine statues they get from them all the pleasure which such things are capable of giving. Nor again was she deficient in her appreciation of comfort, and she knew that it was

infinitely nicer to telephone from the flat at Mount Street, as they had done on the two evenings they were there, and get a box at the theatre, than getting seats at the back of the dress circle, or, if times were exceptionally bad, having an egg with her tea and taking her humble place in the *queue* for the pit. She was humorist enough and of a sufficiently observant type to find entertainment of a kind while waiting in the *queue*, but it seemed to her insincere to say that you preferred going to a theatre in such mode. Similarly, though you had such a beautiful view and got so much air on the top of a motor bus that such a mode of progression along the London streets was quite enjoyable, it was really far more enjoyable to have your own motor, though your outlook was not from so elevated a perch and there was probably not quite so much air. And she was perfectly aware that she took the keenest pleasure in all the ease and comfort with which she had been surrounded since her engagement. Pierre Loti, as she had once quoted to May Franklin, had said that it was exquisite to be poor, but for herself she found it (having had long experience of poverty) much more exquisite to be rich. But there were things about that shooting week, in spite of her newly awakened love and her newly found opulence, which was in such resounding evidence there, which gave her bad moments: moments when she was between bitterness and laughter, nearer perhaps to laughter than the other, but to laughter in which bitterness would have found the reflection, at any rate, of itself.

A rather ponderous plan, evolved by the geniality and kindness of her father-in-law, underlay that week. He had been in London for the inside of one of the days that she and Claude had stopped in town after their return from Venice, *en route* for Grote, and had lunched with her. Claude had been out: Uncle Alf had sent for him—rather peremptorily, so it seemed to Dora—to come down to Richmond, and since Uncle Alf was purseholder for them both, and had intimated that he wished to see him on matters connected with the purse, the invitation had the authority of a command. Consequently she and Mr. Osborne lunched alone.

“And you look rarely, my dear,” her father-in-law had said, giving her a loud smacking kiss. “Claude seems to agree with you, bless his heart and yours, for there is nothing like being married, is there, when all’s said and done, provided you find him as your heart points out to

you? And you'll give old Dad a bit of lunch, and leave to smoke his cigar with you afterward, and tell him about Venice. My dear, I've looked forward to your return with that boy of mine, so as never was, and I'm blessed if I don't believe Mrs. O. wouldn't be jealous of you if it wasn't that you were his wife. But she thinks nought's too good for Claude, even if it's you. She says I run on about you like a clock that won't stop striking! and I dare say she's in the right of it."

It was not very easy to "tell" Mr. Osborne about Venice, because it was hard to think of any common ground on which he and Venice might conceivably meet and appreciate each other, but the description seemed to satisfy him, for it was largely "Claude and I." And what satisfied him even more was the evident happiness of the girl: she was in love with life, with love and with Claude and with beautiful things. Claude he had given her, beautiful things he could give her, and he asked if it was possible to pick up a Tintoret or two. Then came the plan, unfolded to her with almost boisterous enjoyment.

"Mrs. O. and I have put our heads together," he said, "and I'm her ambassador, accredited, don't they say? by her, and with authority to put propositions before you. Well, it's just this: when that dear boy and you come down to Grote to-morrow, we want you to be master and mistress of the house, and Mrs. O. and me and Per and all the rest of them to be your guests. It'll be for you to say what time we breakfast, and to see cook, and Claude will arrange the shoots, and give us a glass of wine after dinner if he thinks it won't hurt us, and it'll be found it won't, if he sticks to the cellar as I've laid down for myself and of which I'll give him the key. It'll give you a sort of lesson, like, my dear, as to how to make your guests comfortable, as I'll be bound you will."

It required no gifts of perception whatever to be able to appreciate the kindness and affection of that speech, and Dora did them full justice. At the same time she could not help being conscious of many little jerks. She remembered also the party there had been at Grote shortly after her engagement, wondered if the same sort of gathering would be assembling again, and tried to think of herself as hostess to Mrs. Price, Lady Ewart, and Mrs. Per. They were really very terrible people, and on this occasion of her home-coming with Claude it was beyond all question that the badinage would be of the most superlative

order. She remembered with fatal distinctness how her mother-in-law had alluded to Mrs. Per, before Dora met her, as very superior, and it seemed to her that no long and conscientious analysis of character could have arrived at a report so definitely and completely true as was the verdict conveyed by those two words. Yet she had married Claude, she loved Claude: to accept the burden of this honour was clearly one of the obligations entailed upon her, for it was Mr. Osborne's wish, his very kindly wish, backed and originated by his wife, and there was no shadow of excuse to shelter under for declining it. So her pause before replying was not greater than could be well filled by the smile with which she greeted the proposal.

"Ah, but how dear of you," she said cordially, "but we shall make all kinds of mistakes. Are you sure you and Mrs. Osborne are willing to risk our making a hash of your party? I shall probably forget most things, and Claude will complete it by forgetting the remainder."

Mr. Osborne laughed.

"My dear, you fill my plate with that hash, and I'll ask for more," he said. "I'll send up my plate twice for that hash, hey? That's capital, and it will give Mrs. O. a bit of a rest, for she's a little overdone. Indeed, I was thinking of putting off the party, but she wouldn't hear of it. And there's another thing, my dear. Couldn't you manage to call me 'Dad,' as the boys do? It isn't in nature that you should call Claude's father Mr. Osborne. I know it's a favour to ask, like, but you and me hit it off from the first, didn't we? You was the right wife for Claude, and no mistake."

That met with a far more spontaneous response from Dora. There was affection, kindness, as always, in what he said, but there was more than that now—namely, a pathos of a very touching kind, in his making a favour of so simple a request. Dora was ashamed of not having complied with it before it was asked.

"Why, of course," she said. "Dad, Dad, doesn't it come naturally? And if you talk such nonsense, Dad, about its being a favour, I shall—I shall call Claude Mr. Osborne Junior."

He patted her hand gently.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," he said. "Mrs. Per calls me Mr. Osborne, as you've often heard, and I don't know that with her

somehow that I want her to call me different. But I know with people like you, born in another rank of life, that's not the custom. You make pet names and what not, not that I ask that. But I should feel it as a favour, my dear, I should indeed, if you felt you could manage to say 'Dad' like the boys do."

Dora held up a reproachful forefinger.

"Now, I warn you, Dad," she said. "In one moment Claude shall be called what I said he should be."

"Then not a word more about it. Well, give my love to that rascal who's got so much more than he deserves, bless him, and we expect you both to-morrow. Gone to see Uncle Alf, has he? Poor old Alf: a mass of lumbago he was when I saw him two days ago. And acid? I should scarce have thought that anyone could have felt so unkind. And a beautiful day it was, too, with the sun shining, and all nature, as you may say, rejoicing—all but poor old Alf, God bless him. But Claude always does him more good than a quart of liniment, or embrocation either, though what he spends on doctors' stuff is beyond all telling."

Such was Mr. Osborne's plan, and, as has been said, the accomplishment of it gave Dora some rather bad moments. The party was terrifically ill-assorted: Lady Ewart, Mrs. Price, and one or two more like them and their husbands, being balanced against her mother and Austell, the Hungarian ambassador and his wife, and several others of that particular world in which both Mr. and Mrs. Osborne so much wished to be at home. Dora, in consequence, was positively tossed and gored by unremitting dilemma. She was obliged to make herself what she would have called both cheap and vulgar in order to convey at all to the Prices and Ewarts that particular pitch of cordiality to which they were accustomed. Alderman Price, for instance, habitually declined a second helping, not because he did not want (and intend) to have it, but because good manners made him say "No" the first time and "Yes" the second. As for asking for more, as Austell did, he would not have considered that any kind of behaviour. He was used to be pressed or "tempted," and Dora had to press and tempt him—a thing which, though she would have been delighted if he had eaten a whole haunch of venison, she found difficult to do naturally. You had to call the footman back (Mrs. Osborne did it quite easily), and get him

to put Mr. Price's plate aside, and wait till he had given the affair a second thought. Then he said, "Well, I don't know as if——" and the matter was brought to a triumphant conclusion. Yet it was not easy to manage if the procedure was new to you. Or, again, his wife particularly liked a glass of port after dinner, which after all was a completely innocent desire, but her gentility was such that she would never have thought of accepting it when it was casually offered her, but every night it had to be accepted in order to oblige Dora. Mrs. Osborne, before giving up the reins of government to her daughter-in-law, had imparted this diplomatic instruction, and Dora had been subsequently assured that her pressing and tempting was held to be the perfection of hospitality.

The flow of badinage, too, that went on incessantly from morning till night, and was almost exclusively matrimonial in character, was difficult to live up to, for whatever she or Claude did was construed by Mr. Osborne or Sir Thomas (with whom Dora, so she was assured by Lady Ewart, had become a favourite) into having some connubial bearing. If, as happened one day, Claude drove Mrs. Price home from the shooting, Lady Ewart, with an inflamed and delighted countenance, told Dora that she wouldn't wonder if they lost their way, and said the motor had broken down, to explain their coming in late. Or again Dora was pompously asked by Sir Thomas, on a morning of streaming wet, when no shooting was possible, to have a game of billiards, and accepting this proposal was expected to be immensely amused by the suggestion that Claude would be found hiding in the window seat, to hear what went on. The joke was all-embracing; if she spoke to Claude somebody wondered (audibly) what she was saying; if she spoke to anyone else, it was, again audibly, imagined that Claude was looking jealous. And if, for the moment, she did not speak to anybody, wonder was expressed as to what was on her mind.

All this was trivial enough in itself, and, as she well knew, oceans and continents of kindliness lay behind it. Her guests—this section of them at any rate—were pleased and well entertained as far as her part was concerned, and were charmed with her. But during all those seven stricken days—for the party was of the most hospitable order, and embraced a complete week—she had to nail a brave face, so to speak, over her own, and set her teeth inside the smiling mouth. The Prices

and the Ewarts had come here to enjoy themselves, and clearly they did. But there was a certain thick-skinned robustness which was necessary to anyone who had to enter into the spirit of their enjoyment. Had the party consisted entirely of Ewarts and Prices and "Pers," Dora would have found her own conduct an affair of infinitely less difficulty. As it was, her mother and Austell were there, and some six or seven more of her own world who looked on with faint smiles at such times as humour was particularly abundant, and, to do the barest justice to it, it must be said that it seemed unfailingly ubiquitous. One night Sir Thomas had taken Madame Kodjek, the wife of the Hungarian ambassador, into dinner, and in an unusual pause in the conversation Dora had heard her say in her faint silvery voice: "How very amusing, Sir Thomas. What fun you must have in Sheffield." Then she turned her back on him, put a barrier of a white elbow on the table between him and her, and talked to Dora herself, three places off, for the rest of dinner—a thing which, as Sir Thomas's indignant face silently testified, was conduct to which he was unaccustomed. Clearly such breach of ordinary manners was a thing unheard of in Sheffield. Dora, halfway between giggles and despair at the incident, had not, though longing to know, the heart to ask Mimi afterward what was the particular incident that made her conclude that life in Sheffield was so humorous an affair; but Sir Thomas had confided in his favourite that he thought the Baroness a very haughty lady and without any sense of what was due "to the gentleman who took you in to dinner."

It had been difficult, therefore, to steer a course, and, as in the case of those wandering channels in the lagoons, there were here no friendly groups of *pali* to guide her. She had to guess her way, turn her helm swiftly this way and that, to avoid running aground. Had she not been Dora Osborne she would, if she had found herself in a house party of this description, have had entrancing bedroom talks to Mimi and others about Sir Thomas and the Ewarts, and—the Osbornes. Such talks would not have been unkindly; she would have seen, even as she saw now, that all manner of excellent qualities underlay the irredeemable vulgarity, and, a thing more difficult in her present position, she would have seen the humorous side of affairs. But, as it was, she could not have any bedroom talks at all of this description. Indeed, Mimi and others pointedly avoided, as they were bound to do,

any mention of these other guests from the amiable desire not to say things that would embarrass her. Dora had married an Osborne, and by that act had joined another circle. True, she had not in the least left her own, but she had taken on, by necessity, the relations and friends of her husband. Indeed, looking at the transaction as a whole, there was not one of her friends who did not think she had done right, and few who did not a little envy her. There were some slight inconveniences in marrying into such a family, but they weighed very light indeed if balanced against the consequent advantages, and it was the business of her friends to minimize these disadvantages for her, pretend that Sir Thomas made no particular impression on them, and be deaf to Dora's insidiousness in getting Mrs. Price to have her glass of port. And the advantages were so great: she had gained superabundant wealth in exchange for crippling poverty, the Osbornes' house was now one to which everybody of any sense, and many of no sense, went, if they were so fortunate as to be asked, and, above all, she had married that charming and quiet Adonis of a husband, who looked anyhow leagues away from and above his effusive parents.

And Claude? During all this week Dora had been filled with an almost ecstatic admiration of him. He took the place corresponding to that which she herself so difficultly occupied, with perfect ease and success, and without apparent effort. To Mrs. Price's most outrageous sallies he found a reply that convulsed her with laughter, or made her, as the case might be, call him a "naughty man," and the thing seemed to be no trouble to him. And for the time, anyhow, such replies gave her no jerks, or, if they did, they were jerks of relief. "I shall warn Sir Thomas, Lady Ewart," he would say, "and you will find yourself watched," and without pause or hint of discomfiture continue a Bach conversation with Madame Kodjek.

Dora had set herself with a heartfelt enthusiasm to study and find out the secret of this wonderful performance, and she came to the conclusion that it was consummate tact grafted on to a nature as kindly as his father's or mother's that produced this perfect flower of behaviour. And the tact—a rare phenomenon rather, for tact implies the tactician, the pleasant schemer—was apparently unconscious. At least if it was conscious, it was Claude's delightful modesty that

disclaimed the knowledge of it. One evening she had a word with him about it.

"Darling, I don't know how you manage," she said, "and oh, Claude, I wish you would teach me. Everyone's delighted with you, and you do it all so easily. How can you flirt—yes, darling, flirt—with Mrs. Price one moment and without transition talk to Mimi on the other side?"

"Oh, the Price woman isn't so bad," said he. "She's a kind old soul really, and if you chaff her a bit she asks no more."

He had come in to see her before going down to the smoking room again, where the best cigars in England were, so to speak, on tap, and where Per and Sir Thomas, between the cigars, a little brandy and soda, and the recollections of their prowess among the pheasants during the day, always sat up late. In Mr. Osborne's house it was one of the rules of honour that the host should express a wish to sit up later than any of his guests, or wait at any rate till they all had yawned before proposing retirement, and Claude, after this cheerful remark about Mrs. Price, turned to leave the room again. Dora knew what was expected of him and suddenly rebelled.

"Surely you can leave them to drink and smoke and turn out the lights," she said. "Do stop and talk to me. I have sent Hendon away, and who is to brush my hair? Besides, I want to talk. I've got better right to talk to you than Sir Thomas has. Oh, Claude, teach me: you are yourself all the time, and yet you can say things to Mrs. Price, which, if it wasn't you——"

Dora broke off. He had unpinned the tiara, which was one of his father's many wedding gifts to her, and which she wore, knowing it was a ludicrous thing to do in the country, because it pleased him, and next moment her hair, unpinned also by a movement or two of his deft fingers, fell in cataracts round her face.

"I don't see the trouble," he said. "Lady Ewart isn't your sort, darling, but it's you who are so clever. It's you who manage so well, not me. Why, she said only to-day that she was quite jealous of you, for Sir Thomas thought such a lot of you, though of course that was only her chaff. And they say he'll be in the running for a peerage at the next birthday honours."

For the moment Dora was silent; simply she could not speak. She saw in the looking glass in front of her, looking over his shoulder, that face which to her was the most beautiful thing in the world, and simultaneously she heard what that beautiful mouth said. For that instant her mind was divided: it could not choose between beauty and the hopelessness of what was said. As if anybody cared who was made a peer, or as if a peerage conferred not only nobility but a single ounce of breeding! As if a problematic Lord Ewart could be for that reason even a shade more tolerable than a Sir Thomas of the same name! What could it matter, except to guards and railway porters who might count on a rather larger tip? And then the greater potency of her lover's face absorbed her, and she lifted up her hands and drew it down to her. "Ah, well, what does it all matter?" she said, "so long as there's you and me? But go down, dear, if you think you had better, and be sure to yawn a great deal, so that they won't sit up very late."

But after he had gone she wondered whether she guessed the reason why Claude made himself appropriate so easily to Lady Ewart and Mrs. Price. Was it simply because he found no difficulty in doing so? Was not his cleverness, his tact, shown rather in the fact that he could talk to Mimi appropriately? And it was at that moment, as she remembered now, that a certain trouble, vague and distant as yet, and couched in the innermost recesses and darkness of her mind, began to stir. She scarcely then knew what it was: she knew only that there was veiled trouble somewhere.

After this week of the shooting party, she and Claude had returned to town, still occupying the flat in Mount Street, where they remained till Christmas, with week-ends in the country. Most of these had been passed at the houses of Dora's friends, and it could not but please and gratify her to find how Claude was welcomed and liked, so that, if at Grote there had been trouble astir, it was still again. He did all the usual things better than the average: he shot well, he played golf excellently, he was a quiet and reliable partner at bridge, he talked pleasantly, always got up when a woman entered the room, and always opened the door for her to leave it. Such accomplishments did not, it is true, reach down very far below the surface, but a young man, if he happens to be quite exceptionally good-looking and has such things at his fingers' ends, will generally be a welcome guest. Dora had never

actually wanted comforting with regard to him, but it pleased her to see that he took his place easily and naturally. For the rest, he was busy enough, for in view of the next general election he was nursing a suburban constituency, which promised well. He spoke with fluency and good sense, he was making an excellent impression in public, and he earned a considerable personal popularity in the domestic circles of his voters. And in this connection Dora had another uncomfortable moment.

As was frankly admitted between them, she could help him a good deal here, and she often went down with him and made innumerable calls at West Brentworth on miles of detached and semi-detached villas. It was an advantage beyond doubt, in this sort of place, that Claude had married a girl of "title," and Lady Dora Osborne, or, as she was more generally addressed, Lady Osborne, charmed a large section of constituents not only because she was delightful, but because her brother was the Earl and her mother the Countess. There was no use in denying or failing to make the most of this adventitious advantage, and Dora made the most of it by being completely natural, and entering with zest into the questions of board-wages and the iniquities of tweenies. She could do that with knowledge and experience to back her, since such minutiæ had formed a very real part of her life up to the time of her marriage, and her mother was an adept in getting the most out of those who were so fortunate as to be the recipients of the somewhat exiguous wages. She could speak about beer money and the use of coals when the household was on board-wages with point and accuracy, and it charmed West Brentworth to find that Lady Osborne was not "too high" to take interest in such matters. At other houses, however, there reigned a more aristocratic tone: there would be a peerage and a copy of the *World* on the table, and a marked unconsciousness of the existence of anybody who was not a baronet. There the parties for Newmarket were discussed, and Mrs. Sandford, pouring out tea, and "tempting" Lady Osborne to a second cup, would say that the whole world seemed to have been in town lately, and was Lady Osborne dining at the Carlton two nights ago when so many distinguished people were there?

Upon which would ensue a very enlightened conversation. Mrs. Sandford knew quite well that the Earl of Wendover was Dora's first

cousin, and the Viscount Bramley her second cousin (for that came out of the peerage) and what a beautiful terrace there was at Bramley (for that came out of *Country Life*).

Then—and this was the uncomfortable moment—she and Claude got into their motor, having made the last call, and started for town. Claude said, "What a superior woman Mrs. Sandford seems to be."

All these things, and others of which these were typical, Dora thought over as she sat in the window of her *sala* looking over the Grand Canal on that baking afternoon in June when Claude had gone to Milan to meet his father and mother. They were all trivial enough, each at any rate was trivial; but to-day she wondered whether there was an addition sum to be done with regard to them. Each, if she took them singly, might be disregarded, just as half-pennies have no official status on cheques and are not treated seriously. But did they add up to something, to something that could not be disregarded?

She did not know, and, very wisely, forebore to conjecture. Besides, the gross heat of the day was subsiding, and a little breeze had begun to stir; below the window Giovanni had already finished the toilet of the gondola, and was putting in the tea basket, since she had said she would have tea out on the lagoon. Venice called to her, beckoned her away from thoughts where something sombre or agitating might lie concealed, into the sunlight and splendour of the day.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. AND MRS. OSBORNE, as has been mentioned, had no idea of planting themselves on Dora and her husband in their visit to Venice, and since the visit was to be thoroughly Bohemian in character, and they hoped and expected to rough it, it had seemed to them equally unsuitable to go to an hotel, where no doubt mediævalism would have been supplanted by modern conveniences. They both wanted, with that inexpressible elasticity and love of experience which was characteristic of them, to "behave native fashion and do like the Venetians," as Mrs. Osborne put it, and indeed the phrase pleased her husband no less than herself. So they had taken the Palazzo Dandoli for a fortnight, at a prodigious weekly rent, which included, however, the wages of the servants and the use of the gondolas. With a view to roughing it thoroughly, Mrs. Osborne had only brought her maid with her, and her husband was completely unattended. It was to be a jaunt, a wedding trip, a renewal of old times. Probably there would be little to eat and drink, and heaven only knew what kind of a bed to sleep in, while an Italian manservant would probably not know how to fold trousers. But all these possible inconveniences were part of behaving "native-fashion," and were not only to be expected but welcomed as being part of the genuine article.

The house stood on the eastern outskirts of Venice, with a garden facing San Michele and the lagoon, and here Dora strolled with her father-in-law on the morning after their arrival, waiting for the appearance of Mrs. Osborne, who, since they had arrived late the night before, was taking it easy, and was not expected down till lunch time at half-past twelve. Dora knew the owner of the place and had been there before, but never in these early days of summer, while yet the gardens were unscorched and the magic of spring had woven its ultimate spell. All the past was redolent in the walls of mellowed brick, the niches empty for the most part, save where a bust or two of stained Carrara marble still lingered, in the gray of the ivy-hung fountain, in the grilles of curving ironwork that gave view across the lagoon to the cypresses of San Michele, and, farther away, the dim tower of Torcello. Long alleys of cut and squared hornbeam, with hop-like flowers, led like

green church aisles down the garden, and spaces of grass between them were hedged in by more compact walls of yew and privet, with its pale spires of blossom faintly sweet. Round the fountain stood three serge-coated sentinels of cypress, encrusted over with their nut-like fruits, and, flame-like against their sombre foliage, were azaleas in bright green tubs, and the swooning whiteness of orange blossom. Elsewhere, the formality of the cut hornbeam alleys and clipped hedges gave place to a gayer and more sunny quarter, though even there Italy lingered in the pavement of red and white stone that led between the more English-looking flower beds. Peach trees, in foam of pink flower, and white waterfalls of spiræa were background here; in front of them stood rows of stiff fox-gloves and in front again a riot of phlox and columbine and snapdragon covered the beds to the edge of the path. To the left lay the rose garden, approached by a walk of tall Madonna lilies, already growing fat-budded, and prepared to receive the torch of flower-life from the roses, when their part in the race should be done, and homely pansies, with quaint, trustful faces, made a velvet-like diaper of deeper colour. Here, too, stood another fountain that from leaden pipe shed freshness on the basin below, where clumps of Japanese iris were already beginning to unfold their great butterfly flowers, imperial in purple or virginal in white, and over the green marble edge of it quick lizards flicked and vanished.

Dora had arrived at the palazzo while yet the morning was young and dewy, and, leaving word that she had come, passed through the white shady courtyard of the house and down the long alleys of the garden to look out on the lagoon from the far end of it. The tide was high and the cool water shimmered over the flats that an hour or two ago were still exposed and lay in expanse of glistening ooze, or green with fields of brilliant seaweeds. But the red-sailed fishing boats had to pass between the rows of *pali* that marked the channels, and a little company of them were even now going seaward. The wind blew gently from the north, tempering the heat, and to the north were visible the remote summits of snow-clad Alps. Just opposite were the orange walls and black cypresses of San Michele, but in the gaiety of the gay day even those associations were gladdened. It was good to be anything in Venice, even to be dead, and resting there in sound of the whispering lagoon.

Then came the interruption she had waited for: her name was jovially called, and down the pergola of vines which led to the grille, between the clumps of syringa and riot of rambler, came Mr. Osborne.

He had left England with the intention of roughing it and enjoying the experience, and was clad in the way that had seemed to him appropriate. He wore a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, below which his short fat calves looked like turned oak posts clad in thick worsted and set in strong brown boots. On his head he wore a felt hat with a puggaree attached to it, and round his shoulders was a strap that carried a large binocular glass. In a word, he appeared like a man deerstalking in the tropics. Like this he was equal to any foreigneering vicissitudes and provided against all accidents that might happen in a town where, instead of walking from one place to another, you went in a black sort of punt with a strange battleaxe at the prow.

"Well, dearie, and here we are," he said, "and pleased we are to be here, I do assure you. Passed a comfortable night, too, and so I warrant you has Mrs. O., for she was asleep still when I came downstairs. But, my dear, they've got but a paltry notion of furnishing these rooms. We had supper last night when we got in, in a great room as big as the hall at Grote, and nothing there but a table and a few chairs and some painted canvas on the walls, and on the floor a rug or two as you could scarcely get both feet upon. However, we were hungry, and the food was good enough. Macaroni they gave us, and a bit of veal and some cheese and strawberries. And this seems a pretty bit of garden, where Mrs. O. can sit and be cool if she finds the heat oppressive. And it's good to see you, my dear, and blooming you look."

He gave her a loud, kind kiss, and continued to pour forth his first impressions of Venice.

"Claude met us at Milan, as he'll have told you," he said, "and saw us safe here last night. It's strange, though, going to your house in a boat, and such a smell as there was at the last corner but one before we got here I never encountered. I should have had it looked into in no time if such a thing had occurred in the works at Sheffield. But it seems fine and open here, and I've no doubt we shall be well enough off. But to think of those old Doges with never a bathroom in their houses, nor hot water laid on nor nothing. But I enjoy that, my dear; I

want to see the old life as they had it, and look at their palaces, ah! and live in one, and see their pictures, and think what manner of folk they was, being born and getting married and dying and all, in the very rooms we now occupy."

Dora suddenly laughed.

"Oh, Dad," she said, "you are too heavenly. But why have you put on those thick clothes? It's going to be a roasting day. I am glad to see you. I'm sure you will find the house comfortable, and, oh! did you ever see such a morning? Look out there across the lagoon. It's Venice, you know, Venice!"

Mr. Osborne looked out through the iron grille.

"Well, I'm sure it's pretty enough," he said, "and talk of sea air, why the sea's all round you. We must have come a matter of a mile over the viaduct last night after we left the mainland. And sea air is what I want for mother; she wants a bit of setting up, and if she feels inclined to keep quiet and not look at the galleries and churches and sights every day, my dear, you'll know it's because she isn't quite up to the mark. Well, well; no, I'm not anxious about her, for she takes her food, and was as pleased to come out here, such as never was, but she's been a bit tired, and must take a rest."

"She's not ill?" asked Dora. "There's nothing wrong?"

"Not a bit of it. 'Tis true, I wanted her to see the doctor before she left home, but she wouldn't hear a word of it. Just to go to Venice, so she said, and see Claude and Dora, and not do much, that's the prescription for me, she said. And so here we are, my dear. Lunch at half-past twelve, too; how strange it seems! But after the breakfast they gave me, just a bit of toast and an egg, I don't doubt I shall be ready for it. But the coffee was prime, though it came up in an earthenware pot. I suppose it was that way the Doges took it. Lor', to think of it all! Wedding the sea, too, every year. I read it in the guidebook on the journey. A curious custom that was, heathenish, you may say. It takes one back, doesn't it?"

It was still an hour before lunch time, and at Dora's suggestion they went out for a turn in her gondola which was waiting, since Mrs. Osborne was not to be expected down till lunch time. Mr. Osborne, still feeling the insecurity of a foreign land, refused to change into

more suitable clothes, and, already perspiring profusely, embarked with a sense of being prepared for anything. As they got in Dora gave some short direction to her gondolier in Italian, and this roused his admiring curiosity.

"It's a strange thing too," he said, "that you say something of which I can't understand a syllable, and round the boat goes, as if you'd said, 'Right about turn.' Such a bother as we had with luggage and what not, before Claude met us. But Mrs. O. saw the hang of it, and kept saying, 'Venice, Palazzo Dandoli,' whenever one of them brigands looked in on us, and it seemed they wanted no more than that. Brigands they looked, my dear, though I dare say they were honest men in the employment of their company. And what's that now, that big telegraph-looking thing?"

He pointed at the huge disfiguring posts that brought the electric power into Venice.

"Oh, electric light, I think," said Dora. "Or perhaps it's telephone."

"My word, and I never expected to find either here," said Mr. Osborne. "Do you mean they have got the light and the 'phone? And why, if that's so, aren't they installed in the Dandoli?"

"Oh, Dad," she said, "where do you want to telephone to?"

"No, dearie, I don't want to telephone, but you'd have thought that in a place like that I've taken they'd surely have had the modern conveniences, if such were to be had. And where are we coming to now?"

Dora did not answer at once; this was one of the best places of all in that city of best places. There was a sharp turn from a narrow canal, overhung by tall red-stained walls, and they shot out into the Grand Canal just above the Rialto.

"Oh," she said, "look, look!"

The bow-shaped bridge lay to their left, as from the huddled houses they swept into the great waterway; a troubled reflection of palaces gleamed in the tide, the curve of the Grand Canal was flung outward and onward, reeling in the heat.

Just opposite was the fish market, newly rebuilt, with columns of ornamented iron work. Mr. Osborne pointed an admiring forefinger at

it.

"Well I never," he said, "to think to see the fellow of one of Per's designs in Venice. I shall have the laugh of Per over that, and tell him he copied them from some old courtyard of the Doges, or what not. Beautiful I call them. After all, they were wonderful old folk, weren't they, when we think that they put up there a design that might have been made in Sheffield to-day! I assure you, dearie, they are just like Per's drawings for No. 2 light arcade same as is in the showroom at the works."

Dora had not been attending very closely: those who love Venice are apt to be inattentive when some new magic comes into view, and to Dora the bow-arch of the bridge with the bow-arch of the canal below grew in wonder the oftener that she saw it.

"Arches?" she asked. "Arches like one of Per's designs? Oh, do show me."

"Why, that open place there," said Mr. Osborne, still immensely interested. "That arcade just opposite, with the ornamental arches in open work."

Dora could not help laughing.

"Oh, dear Dad," she said, "very likely they are Per's designs. That's the new fish market, just being rebuilt."

And then it struck her that her laugh might sound unkindly.

"It is quite possible they are Per's designs," she said. "Would it not be thrilling if they were? Giovanni"—again she spoke in Italian—"just land at the market and ask some of the workmen where the iron arches came from. I see one not yet put up, wrapped in straw. There is some label on it. See if it is from Osborne, Sheffield."

Giovanni floated the gondola to the side of the landing place with the flick of a quick-turned oar, and got out. In a moment he came back, having read the stamped label on the packing, and reported the gratifying news.

"Oh, it's too thrilling," cried Dora, "to think that they came from your works. Dad, you're a perfect wizard to see that, and guess it was Per's. You must write to him and tell him that his ironwork is going up

in Venice, and that you recognized it the first moment you—you saw the Grand Canal."

Mr. Osborne gave a little inward tremolo of laughter.

"Oh, I'm not so blind yet," he said, "and it's seldom you see work like Per's. There's something, as you may say, so individual about it. God bless the boy, how he'll like to hear that I spotted his design right across the Grand Canal. Eh, he might have been here, my dear, and studied the style of the architecture, when one sees how it fits in with the other monuments. I'll write to tell him that."

Mr. Osborne remembered that Dora had told him that Venice was the most beautiful place in the world, and the Grand Canal the most beautiful thing in Venice. And he made a concession that he did not really feel.

"Not but what he hadn't got a lot to compete against," he said. "That bridge now? That's a fine thing. And the curve of it looks built for strength. I warrant there's no iron girder made that would cause it to be safer. And the houses, beautiful, I'm sure! But I don't see any that I'd sooner take than the Palazzo Dandoli."

Suddenly Dora felt something dry up inside her. That, at any rate, was how she mentally phrased the sensation to herself. Her father-in-law was kind and wise and good; he was anxious to please, he was anxious to be pleased. But at the concession—for so she felt it to be—that Per had had a lot to compete with, when the excruciating iron arcade of the fish market was erected within stone-throw of the Rialto and within pea-shooting distance of the wondrous canal, she felt for the moment the impossibility of herself and Mr. Osborne being together at Venice. The situation was one that she had not faced without a tremor; now, for the moment, when it was actual and accomplished, it was inconceivable.

But this mercantile discovery had delighted Mr. Osborne; it had clearly raised his previous estimate of Venice. A town that could so aptly enshrine this design of Per's was a town that must receive the best attention. There was probably more in it than he had been at first disposed to imagine. He gave it his best attention.

A gray fussing steamboat going seaward on the tide and raising a huge wash of churned water, next engaged his admiration.

“Well, and if I didn’t think when we took so long to get to the Palazzo last night that the Italians would be wiser to build a big sea wall somewhere, and raise the level of the canal so as you could drive a horse and carriage down them!” he said. “But if you’ve got a ferry steamer that goes the pace of that—Lor’, my dear, how it makes us rock—I don’t see what there’s to complain of. And calling first on this side and then on that, same as they used to do on the Thames, what could you ask for more convenient?”

Again Dora had to enlist her sympathy on a foreign side.

“I know,” she said, “and they go right out to the Lido, where we’ll go and bathe this very afternoon, Dad. It will be awfully hot after lunch, so we’ll join the steamer at San Marco, and send the gondola out to meet us on the Lido, and take us back when it gets cooler. One gets roasted in a gondola on the lagoon when it’s as hot as this.”

Mr. Osborne was clearly a little troubled at this suggestion.

“Ah, no doubt there are sets of bathing machines,” he said at length. “A dip in the briny: very pleasant.”

Dora did not at once grasp the cause of his embarrassment.

“We’ll swim right out together,” she said. “You can swim for ever in this sea; it’s so buoyant. And then we sit on the sand and eat strawberries, while the sun dries us again.”

Then she saw that some portentous doubt on the question of propriety was in Mr. Osborne’s mind, guessed it, and hastened to remove the cause of it. “Or perhaps, coming straight out from England, you don’t want to bathe,” she said. “Besides, there’s the mater”—she had adopted this from Claude. “So we won’t bathe; we’ll take her out for a *giro*—a row—in the gondola and have tea out on the lagoon. Dad, you’ll love the lagoon, all gray and green. And the electric light poles cross it to the Lido.”

“Eh, that will be nice,” said Mr. Osborne quickly and appreciatively. “And here’s another bridge: why, beautiful, isn’t it? I think I like it better than that curved one. There seems more sense in it. You don’t have to mount so high.”

They had passed round the last corner of the canal, and in front of them lay the straight lower reach of it that passes into the great basin opposite St. Mark’s and the Doge’s palace. To right and left the stately

houses stood up from the water side, in glimmer of rose and blue and orange beneath the smiting glory of the noonday. Since yesterday the north wind, blowing lightly from the Alps, had banished the oppression of yesterday's heat and the glitter of the city had awoke again, pearly in the shadow and jewelled in the sun. And in the immediate foreground the only blot of disfigurement was the object of Mr. Osborne's admiration, the flat, execrable iron bridge opposite the Accademia. There it lay, convenient and hideous and impossible. And he liked it better than the curved one! It had more sense in it!

But there was no need for Dora to rack her brains to find some response which should steer a middle way between lack of cordiality to her father-in-law on the one hand and artistic perjury on the other. Between the fish market, the iron bridge, and the vile convenient speed of the steamboats Venice was going up in his estimation by leaps and bounds, and he was delighted to find he was almost able to endorse Dora's opinion on the town.

"Well, I call it all beautiful, my dear," he said, "and it's as I said to mother. 'Mother,' I said, 'if Dora says Venice is a nice place, you may be sure there is something in it, and we were right to come out and have a look at it ourselves.' But who'd have thought there was so much of modern convenience and comfort? And these gondolas too. I'm sure I'm as comfortable sitting here as in my own brougham and, except when the steamers go by, they glide as smooth as on an asphalt road. Pretty the water is too, though not clear. I should have thought that here in the south there'd have been more of blue in it. But I'm a bit surprised, my dear, that you with your eye for colour shouldn't have done up the gondola more brightly, had some blue curtains, maybe, or picked out that handsome carved work on the prow with a touch of red. There's a thought too much black about it for my taste. Seems to tell of a funeral, almost."

Dora could not argue about this: she could not give Mr. Osborne eyes which should see the value of the black blots of boats against the brightness of the sky mirrored in the canal. But it was easy to find praise in his speech to which she could respond, though the praise was expressed in a way that somehow set her teeth on edge.

"Oh, they are the most comfortable things in the world," she said, "and I even like the indignant slap they give when the wash of the steamer crosses them. Beautiful thing, with its arching neck like some great black swan! Ah, there's twelve striking. We shall just have time to look into our house and fetch Claude and then get back to the Dandoli for lunch. I hope they'll have put it in the garden. Oh, Dad, how this place has got into my heart! You never did such a nice thing as when you gave Claude and me a month here."

Mr. Osborne did not think much of Dora's water-entrance to the great gray palace of which she had the first floor, but the size of the huge *sala* (which she remembered to tell him was a hundred and ten feet long) was most satisfactory to him. But with its polished stone-plaster floor, and the Venetian emptiness of it, it seemed to him rather bare and comfortless.

"Well, I'm sure it's a handsome room enough in point of size," he said, "and in this hot weather it looks cool and restful. But it seems strange to have never a strip of carpet on the floor, and scarce a picture on the walls. Lord, my dear, don't it make your teeth chatter to think of coming down to this of a winter's morning, when even now it strikes so cool? But isn't there some Tintoret now, my dear, that you could fancy, or if not that, half a dozen big photographs of the canal and the bridge you liked so much to hang on the walls? And as for the floor, to be sure, it's a big job to cover it, but a proper carpet for that end of it where you've got your chairs and table, looking out over the canal, you shall have, if I have to telegraph to town for one, instead of those few rugs, or mats I should call them. Fancy advertising this as a house to be let furnished! I call it misrepresentation."

Dora took his arm.

"Oh, Dad, you are the kindest man that ever was," she said. "But indeed I want neither pictures nor a carpet, though it is darling of you to offer me them. I like it empty: it's the—the right style with these rooms. You found your dining room rather emptier than you liked, you know, but in a day or two you will get more than used to it, you will see how suitable it is. And I love this great empty room. Now we'll just go into the other rooms, and then we must get back for lunch. Claude seems to be out: I expect we shall find him at the Dandoli."

Lunch, as they found when they got back, had been laid, as Dora hoped, in the garden, in the centre of a gravelled space sheltered from the sun by the mellow brick wall and a clump of overarching delicate-fingered acacia trees, and made cool to the ear by the plash of the fountain into its marble basin. Down the sides and at the corners of this space were tubs of orange trees, and the heaviness of their drowsy fragrance mingling with the large dilution of this tide of warm sea-scented air was translated into something exquisitely light and vigorous. Claude had already arrived and was waiting with his mother for them, who was in excellent spirits.

"Why, dearest Dora," she said, "here we are, and ready I'm sure for lunch, to speak for myself, though it's not gone half-past twelve yet, and in England we shouldn't be sitting down for another hour. And Claude's been telling me that in England now it's not gone half-past eleven, and here we are wanting our lunch at such an hour as that. Eh, what's that? What did he say to me? 'Pronto,' it sounded like."

Guiseppe, the smiling Italian butler, had approached Mr. Osborne, and said exactly that.

"Yes, *pronto*," said Dora, "it means 'ready.' "

Mrs. Osborne beamed back at Guiseppe.

"And I'm *pronto*, too," she said. "Let's sit down."

"Mrs. O. will be having the whole Italian language by heart before the week's out," said her husband. "And such a morning as I've had with Dora, mother. Bridges and canals and steamers and churches. Ah, and you'd never guess, so I'll tell you without teasing you! They are rebuilding the fish market with arcades of iron pillars, very handsome, and who do you think supplies them? Osborne, Sheffield, and no other, my dear, and it's Per's No. 2, light arcade, same as is in the showroom, or I'm the more mistaken."

Mrs. Osborne was as delighted as her husband.

"I'll get a photograph of that this very afternoon," she said, "if there's such a thing as a photograph shop in Venice. Dora, my dear, have they a photograph shop in Venice, or hasn't that got here yet?"

Dora threw back her head, laughing.

“Oh, mother, how divine of you!” she said. “Considering I sent you literally hundreds of picture post cards when Claude and I were here in the autumn!”

“To be sure you did, my dear,” said Mrs. Osborne cordially. “And it had gone clean out of my poor head. So a photograph of the fish market I’ll send to Per this very afternoon, if I have to turn over all their scrapbooks for it. Mr. O., you’ll never manage macaroni that way. Wrap it round your fork, my dear, as you see Claude doing, and in it goes without any bother.”

“Well, mother, you’re not so much of a hand at it yourself,” observed Mr. Osborne in self-defence. “If I’m to take pattern by Claude, you take pattern by Dora. Now, I call that an excellent dish. You couldn’t have it better done, not in your own house. What does he say to me, Dora, my dear? *Banke*, is it?”

“*Bianco*,” said Dora, “white. Will you have white wine or red?”

“That’s another word for Mrs. O.,” said her husband. “I told you she’d get it all off by heart in no time. Yes, I’ll have a go at the bianco. One wants something light and cool on a morning like this, especially if the true time is only half-past eleven.”

“I declare it makes me feel quite greedy,” said Mrs. Osborne, “but such an appetite as I have to-day I haven’t had since the middle of April. And what else have you seen this morning, Mr. Osborne? Give an account of the sights, my dear, or I shall think you’ve had no eye except for Dora.”

They waited in the cool greenness of the garden till the heat of the day began to abate, and then went all together in one gondola, at Mrs. Osborne’s particular wish, to begin the sights of Venice. It was in vain that Dora suggested that everybody would be much more comfortable if they took two gondolas, and arranged their rendezvous, for Mrs. Osborne’s heart was set on a family party and she wasn’t sure that she would trust Mr. O. with Dora alone any more that day. So, as badinage loomed on the horizon, Dora hastily and completely withdrew her opposition, and they all four squeezed into one gondola.

The plan was to row out over the lagoon, and have tea at Santa Rosa. Tea made the centre of the afternoon, round which the rest appeared to be grouped in the minds of the Osbornes. Then they were

to return to Venice in time to look in at St. Mark's, and loiter in the piazza, where Mrs. Osborne, it was hoped, would find at one of the photograph shops the representation of the fish market on which she had set her heart. Accordingly the labouring gondoliers propelled the laden craft across to the little island, tied up to the bank, and procured strawberries from the fruit farm to add to their tea. Mrs. Osborne at first had a sort of vague prejudice against them, for abroad it was impossible to tell "who hadn't been touching them," and, it is to be feared, it was only because the rest of the party found them remarkably good that she joined them. But she was charmed with their picnic, and saw a great similarity between the little waterway of the island and the Regent's Park Canal.

They dined that evening at Dora's house—meals somehow had leaped into sudden importance and preponderance since the arrival of her father-in-law in Venice, though they had no more meals than usual—and Mrs. Osborne as well as her husband was voluble over all they had seen.

"Just to think that all the floor of St. Mark's is in marble!" said she. "Why, it seems almost a shame, doesn't it? I'm sure there's not a cathedral in England that's got such a grand floor, and St. Mark's, so you said—didn't you, Dora?—was only Roman Catholic?"

"Well, well, mother," said Mr. Osborne, "it's the Church of the country, you see, just as the English Church is ours. You'd think more of the Roman, if you'd been brought up to it. But I'm surprised at their letting the floor get into that state: it was all ups and downs, and I'm sure I scarcely knew where I should be setting my foot next. So dark it was, too, that one couldn't see as much as one would like. If I were them, I should send for some good English architect as knows when a building's safe, and when it isn't, and make him cut half a dozen sensible windows somewhere, or perhaps take down one of them domes, and put in a glass roof to it instead. Five domes there are, for I counted them, and that's beyond all reason."

Dora felt that this was too much for her: simply she could not think of any reply whatever. If somebody proposed putting a glass dome in St. Mark's, what answer was possible? But there was no need for one. Mrs. Osborne instantly joined in again.

“And never did I think to see such shops in Venice,” she said. “Why, there was electric fittings at one I passed, beautiful they were, with nymphs and such-like holding up the globes, the same as you might get in the most superior shops in town. And I need never have brought out stationery with me, for there was a stationer’s there as I could have bought the best cream-laid at. And not expensive either, if you recollect that a *lira* is but tenpence, though its strange to have your silver coins worth tenpence instead of a shilling. It wants a deal of thinking back into pounds and shillings.”

“They seem to have a notion of building, too,” said Mr. Osborne. “I’m sure that great square tower they were building was as solid a piece of work as you could find anywhere. And to think that the original had stood there five hundred years. How it takes you back!”

Claude nodded at Dora.

“What did I tell you?” he said. “Didn’t I say the mater and pater would like Venice near as much as you do?”

“Yes, dear, you were quite right,” said Dora, with a sort of despairing acquiescence in even this. “And what should you like to do to-morrow, Dad?” she asked.

“Eh, there’s more yet to see, is there?” he said. “And to think that I’ve been sight-seeing all day, and not finished even now! Who would have thought there was so much in such a small town? Well, my dear, I’m in your hands, and whatever you show me I’ll be bound I shall like it, if it comes up to the sample of Venice we’ve had to-day. And what says Mrs. O.?”

“Well, there’s all the pictures we haven’t seen yet,” said she. “Perhaps Dora would take us to see the pictures in the morning, but as for the afternoon I want nothing better than to have another look at St. Mark’s and do a bit more shopping, and perhaps have a bit of a row afterward, for I declare it’s a pity not to be out up till it’s time to dress.”

The next three or four days were, it must be confessed, a sort of nightmare to Dora, for she took Venice too seriously to see anything humorous in what she had to go through. She took them to the Accademia, and the Paul Veronese of the “Marriage of Cana” had an instant and amazing success owing to its size. Mr. Osborne doubted if

it would have got into the picture gallery at Grote at all, and Mrs. Osborne had no doubt whatever about it; she saw at a glance that it would not, "without you took its frame off." Other pictures pleased for other reasons: the "Procession of the Cross," because St. Mark's and the Campanile came into it; the Tintoret of the "Adoration of the Doges," because St. George was sitting by the Virgin, and he was an English saint. But before Titian's "Assumption of the Virgin" (a picture which, unfortunately, Dora detested) criticism with regard to its dimensions and even appreciation was mute, and its size and frame passed without remark. Mrs. Osborne's eyes filled with dear, heart-felt tears, and Mr. Osborne said, "Lor', Maria, it was worth coming to Venice for to see this alone, my dear. Well, now, they could paint in those days!" And immediately thereon, he bought an enormous copy of it, vilely executed, which an elderly English lady was just finishing with an uncertain strippling touch. She explained in quavering tones that she was obliged to charge very high for her copies because she spent weeks in study before she began to paint, in getting at the spirit of the original. And Mr. Osborne's alacrity in securing her work no doubt made her wish that she had charged higher yet for the spiritual tension required for its production.

On another day they went to San Rocco, for Mr. Osborne found to his amazement that it was impossible to see all the pictures in Venice in one "go," even if you spent the whole morning at it. This seemed strange, since you could see the whole of the Royal Academy in a less time. But the remedy was simple. Why not build a new picture gallery, hang all the pictures in Venice there, charge two *lire*, and have them all catalogued in one book? That was the kind of suggestion that cornered Dora: it seemed scarcely worth while to say that many were in the churches, and that it would be a pity to move them since they were painted for the places which they occupied. But, trying to be patient and kind, she did say so, and Mr. Osborne was fired with the brilliant thought of having copies made for the churches. Claude thought this an excellent idea. "The Gov.'s hit the nail on the head this time," he said, and was surprised when Dora, turning aside, said, "Oh, Claude!" to him. But apart from the pictures at San Rocco, which did not have a great success, the visit was memorable because Mrs. Osborne said "Bon giorno" to the custodian, just as if she did it every day of her life.

He understood perfectly, and made a suitable reply about the loveliness of the day. That was a little beyond Mrs. Osborne, so she said "Grazie," and her husband admiringly commented, "Lor', you speak it like a native! I told you the mother would have it by heart in no time," he said.

On this morning they had still an hour to spare before lunch, since the Tintorets were not interesting or beautiful, and they rowed across to the Giudecca to see a garden. The garden was fairly appreciated, though to Mrs. Osborne's mind the borders, where the southern June was rioting, were not quite so trim as she would have had them; but the great sugar factory was found to be most attractive, and Mr. Osborne was much surprised to find that Dora did not know whether it was possible to see over it or not. However, Claude made inquiries, and found it could be shown. He took his father there next day, and they were late for lunch. But Mrs. Osborne and Dora were late too: they had been ordering a very handsome gilt frame for the copy of "The Assumption," and the "pattern" on it wanted a lot of choosing.

Dora and Claude dined that night at the Dandoli, and Mr. Osborne announced that he and the mother had settled to stay on another week, for they were both thoroughly delighted with Venice.

"And its grateful to you, my dear, that we both are," said Mr. Osborne, "for telling us about it, and making us feel as how we should like to see it. There's fifty different things in Venice I should like to see a score of times, and if we're spared, my dear, we'll spend another month next year as per this sample."

Now Dora did her best when this little speech was made, but Sirocco had been blowing all day, and, as usual, it had made her feel rather jerky and irritable. Also, it must be remembered, Mr. Osborne, with the best and most appreciative intention in the world, had, as may be conjectured from the foregoing details of their days, succeeded in spoiling everything for her. Who could look at and enjoy a picture while he was wondering why Tintoret hadn't given St. John something more on, or feel the magic of the approach across the lagoon when Mrs. Osborne said that the gray shining mud-flats called to mind the Fal below Truro at low tide, and Mr. Osborne confirmed the accuracy of this impression? But Maria had such an eye for likenesses.

In consequence, Dora had a little failed in cordiality of tone on the receipt of the news, for by this plan they would leave Venice all together, and every day till their departure would be taken up with these nightmare excursions, for it was part of the plan that they should do everything together. Her words, whatever they were, had been expressive of delight at their remaining, but Claude, at any rate, had noticed the failure in tone, and on their way back after dinner he spoke about it in kindly fashion, but so, it seemed to Dora, with a matchless awkwardness.

"Sorry you're a bit off colour, dear," he said. "I know Sirocco always makes you feel like that."

Dora saw the obviously tactful intention; her conscience also a little accused her, and she knew quite well what he had in his mind and was probably going to say.

"Feel like what?" she said, though she knew this to be useless fencing.

"Oh, feel like what you felt when you said you were so glad the pater and mater were going to stop here. I don't say that they noticed, but I did. I expect I'm quicker than them at feeling what you feel. What you said was right enough; it was just the way you said it."

He leaned forward in his seat a little, looking her full in the face. And somehow the sight of him and the proximity failed for once to make themselves felt. His presence did not mitigate what he said, or stamp it with the old magic.

"I wish you would explain," she said.

"As if there was any need, darling," he said. "As if you don't understand as well as I do. You said you were delighted they were stopping, but only your voice said it. What's wrong? There's something up. And I thought we were having such jolly days together. Father and mother are enjoying it ever so much, and if they pretend they find it just a shade more delightful than they really do, why, it's just to please you, and make you feel it's a success that they do it. They settled to stop on, I believe, just for that."

This made matters no better. Dora felt she ought to be delighted they were doing so, and ought to be touched and pleased with the reason Claude had conjectured. But she was not: Venice, as a matter of

fact, or rather these days of Venice, were being spoiled for her. She would as soon, as Claude had once said to her, though with inverted meaning, have spent them at Clapham Junction if the Osbornes were to be with her. It was a great pity that they should stop on, if their motive in doing so was to gratify her. She hoped it was not that.

"Oh, I don't think that is it, Claude," she said. "Dad likes—likes the sun and the—oh, lots of things, Stucki's sugar factory for instance, and your mother likes the pigeons and the shops. But it isn't Venice they like."

"That's just what I say," said he, "they stop to make you think they do. They think the world of you, you know."

"Yes, the darlings," said Dora quickly. "That—that makes it so pathetic."

"Pathetic? You mean that you don't think so highly of them?"

Dora's heart suddenly sank. She had not meant that: she had meant only that it was a pity they stayed in Venice to please her, when in reality she was not enjoying their stay. She knew well that they were out of place in Venice ... it was hopeless to try to explain. But even if she had meant the other, it would have been a fatal error on Claude's part to put it into words. He called this kind of frankness "getting at the bottom of the thing." She felt he was certain to use that phrase now. He did so.

"Let's get at the bottom of it, dear," he said, "and as we always do, I shall speak my mind, just like you. Perhaps it will sound harsh to you: I'm sorry if it does."

He leaned back again, but without looking at him she could see that he tilted his head back, and put his chin a little out, the identical gesture which before she had found so attractive, so fascinating, even. She had told him so, too, a hundred times: had said she loved a man to know his mind, to be firm and decided, especially with those he loved best. No doubt he remembered that at this moment: perhaps even he was doing it consciously or at least half-consciously, so as to present what he had to say in the most attractive guise. But, suddenly and disconcertingly, she found the gesture scarcely less than odious.

"I think the pater's been awfully good to you, dear," he said. "He's done a lot for you, given you all sorts of things you had no reason to

expect. There's this month in Venice, to go no further than that. Well, it will stand him in a pot of money, and it's just because he doesn't grudge you one penny of it that I think you ought to feel rather more cordial to him about their stopping. I don't say that you behaved not cordially, because I think what you said was all right, and neither of them noticed that anything was awry, but you hadn't got the right feelings to back up your tongue. Wait a moment. I've not finished; there's something more yet, but I want to find words that won't hurt you, and yet will express what I mean."

There was something in this that roused a certain sense in Dora that she knew had been often present in her mind, but which she hoped would always remain dormant. But now it began to awake; his words, kind as they were, implied an impossible attitude. He was judging, so it seemed to her, making himself jury and judge all rolled into one, and it was understood that she, put in the dock before him, would make no defence. He knew that he was right—that was what it came to—and was going to tell her, as kindly as possible, what was right. And on the instant she found herself refusing to be judged and condemned by his standards. He did not know what Venice meant to her, or how essentially his father's attitude toward the things and the place that she loved jarred on her. And unfortunately the affair was typical of hundreds of other affairs. That Mr. Osborne had no artistic sense of any sort or kind did not matter, but what was beginning to matter was that Claude, who apparently could not see that the entire absence of it in a person with whom she was brought into day-long contact made something rather hard to bear, had put on his wig and was going to sum up on a matter about which he knew nothing. Her behaviour had never broken down; he had said that himself, and she believed it to be true; the matter was that he could not understand that she had to struggle against the disappointment of spoiled days, and was yet serenely confident that he had the complete data.

"Don't mind about hurting me," she said quickly. "I want you to say exactly what you feel."

They had arrived at the water-gate of their home, without her noticing it, and Giovanni was already standing, hat in hand, to give her the support of his arm on to the steps, which were slippery with the

receding tide. Claude was conscious of this first: he was quite conscious, also, of Dora's tone.

"Not before the servants," he said. "Get out, dear, and take Giovanni's arm. The steps are like ice!"

Again Dora was in revolt: it seemed to her that he was advising her against a thing he might have done himself, but which she could not have dreamed of. She had been absorbed in this—this dispute was it?—had not noticed. He had noticed, and warned her against an impossible thing.

Giovanni unlocked the door for them, received orders for the next day, and they went up the stairs together in silence. And as they went up all the womanhood in Dora—and there was much of it, and it was all sweet and good—rose, flooding for the time the bitter gray mud flats that had appeared. And at the top of the stairs she turned to him.

"Oh, Claude," she said, "we're not quarrelling, are we?"

"Takes two to make a quarrel," he said, "and I'm not one. But I want to say something yet, and I think you'd better hear it. I ask you to, in fact."

She unpinned her hat, and led the way to the end of the big *sala* that overlooked the canal. She sat down in her accustomed chair, flinging the window open, for the night was very hot.

"Say it then," she said.

Again Claude's head went back: he felt perfectly certain he was right.

"Well, it's just this. You've told me not to choose my words, so I won't bother to do so. You haven't felt right toward the pater and mater all this time here. When he wanted to go and see a factory, you wondered at him—and, yes, you despised him a bit for it. When he admired some picture you didn't think much of, you wondered again. Now, he never wondered at you. If you wanted to sit half an hour before some adoring Doge, he never wondered, any more than I wonder, for there are lots of people in the world, and they've got their different tastes and every right to them. But he only said to himself: 'Gosh, there's something there, and she's right, only I don't know what it is she's looking at.' He never thought you wanting in perception because you didn't admire the iron in the fish market. He only thought

to himself, ‘Let’s go and see something this afternoon that Dora does like.’ How often has he gone to the National Gallery in London? Never, you bet: he doesn’t know a picture from a statue. And how often has he gone to look at some mouldy old Titian here, because you thought it worth a look? Well, isn’t that anything? It’s no use you and me not saying things straight out, and so I say it straight out. He’s been boring himself fit to burst over your Botticellis, and been trying to admire them, saying this was the biggest picture he’d ever seen, and this was the smallest. And yet dear old Dad wasn’t boring himself, because he was with you, and trying to take an interest in what you showed him. Well then, I ask you!”

There, close in front of her, was the beautiful face, the beautiful mouth which she loved, saying things which, as far as they went, her essential nature entirely approved. But at the moment his beauty did not move her. And the account he had given was correct: she had been having on her nerves the fact that Mr. Osborne took more pleasure in the steamboats than in San Rocco, in the fish market than in the Frati. He might be right: she might be right, but in any case the attitudes were incompatible. And Claude at the moment clearly took up the attitude that was incompatible with hers. There was much more, too, he did not see: he did not see that indifference on Dora’s part did not destroy his father’s pleasure in the speed of the steamboats, whereas his artistic criticisms blackened her pictures for her.

And then, womanlike again, she knew only that Claude was her man, that he was beautiful, that he loved her....

“I dare say I am quite wrong,” she said. “I dare say you are quite right. Shall we leave it, then, darling? I will try—I will try to do better. I am sorry.”

“And there speaks my darling girl,” said Claude.

CHAPTER VII.

THE stay in Venice had naturally curtailed for Mrs. Osborne the weeks of her London season, but she had never intended to begin entertaining on the scale required by the prodigious success of the fancy-dress ball last year till after Whitsuntide. Before leaving town in May she had sent out all invitations for the larger functions (except those which her invited guests subsequently asked for on behalf of their friends, and which she always granted), and it was clear that the world in general was going to pass a good deal of its time at No. 92. Indeed, when she went through her engagement book on her return from Venice to Grote, hospitable though she was, and greatly enjoying the exercise of that admirable virtue, she was rather appalled at the magnitude of what she had undertaken. She was going to give three balls (real balls), three concerts, two big dinner parties every week, and a series of week-ends down at Grote, while on such other nights as she was not dining out herself there were a series of little parties. In addition Sheffield friends coming to stay with them for the insides of weeks to finish up with one of the Grote week-ends. These visits she looked forward to with peculiarly pleasant anticipations, for the dear soul could not but feel an intense and secret gratification at the thought of such local celebrities as Sir Thomas and the Prices seeing her and Mr. O. absolutely at the top of the tree, and entertaining princes and duchesses and what not just as they had entertained aldermen and manufacturers at Sheffield. Also there was a secret that Mr. Osborne had told her, which filled her with feelings that were almost too solemn to be glee. The secret was not to be talked about yet, but in private he no longer called her Mrs. O., but “my lady.” She hoped Sir Thomas would be with them when the honours were published, for secretly she still took her bearings, so to speak, by the stars as they appeared in Sheffield. There Sir Thomas Ewart, Bart., and Lady had been the very Pole-star to which quite important constellations reverently pointed. But now, as by some new and wonderful telescope, she saw herself and Mr. O. high above Sir Thomas. Why, even Per would be the Honourable Per, and Sir Thomas would have to say, “After you, Per, my boy.” She and Mr. O. had already had more than

one broken night in thinking of a title which he could submit for approval. Mrs. Osborne was all for something old and territorial.

"There's Hurstmonceaux, my dear," she said, "that ruined old castle which we drove over to see when you was down at Hastings with your attack of gout. I don't doubt you could buy it for a song, and there you'll be."

"And then next you'd be wanting me to do up the Castle and live in it," said he. "Besides, it's a regular stumper to say, and French at that. No, my dear, we must think of something more British than that; there's plenty of good names without crossing the Channel, so to speak, for something to call yourself by. But it's puzzling work, and new to me, to have to think of christening yourself afresh."

"Lor', Mr. Osborne, you don't mean to say that you've got to change your Christian name, too?"

"No, no, my dear. There's no Christian name to bother about; I don't deal any more in Christian names—not officially, anyhow."

He blew out the light.

"Good night, my dear," he said. "And God bless you."

It was all very well to say "Good night," but Mrs. Osborne could no more sleep than she could think of a name. After an interval she heard Mr. Osborne turn himself ponderously round in his bed, and knew that he was awake too.

"There's some things called 'Hundreds,' " she said. "I seem to remember that all England is cut up into Hundreds, which is a queer thing to think upon. It'll be worth while seeing in what Hundred the East End of Sheffield lies."

"There's something in that," said Mr. Osborne, "and it would bring the business into it. Lor', Mrs. Osborne, my lady, I'm glad I had nothing to say to a knighthood five years ago. I'd have been put on the shelf for good if I'd jumped at it. But not I! It's this parliamentary business coming on top of all I did at Sheffield that has given the extra turn. And I've been liberal, I'm sure, to the party. What was the name of the street now where I built the church in Sheffield? I declare it's gone out of my head. Thinking of new names drives the old ones out."

“Commercial Road, my dear,” said Mrs. Osborne, “for I thought of the name myself when you was building the street.”

“Then we ain’t no further on yet. Grote, too; that’s not to be thought of, as it’s Lord Austell’s second title.”

“After all, we only take the place on hire,” said Mrs. Osborne, “and it doesn’t bring the business in.”

“That’s what beats me,” said Mr. Osborne. “How to bring the business in! Lord Hardware, Tinware; that would be a thing to laugh at.”

The matter was still in debate on that morning when Mrs. Osborne went through her engagement book down at Grote and found so heavy a programme in front of her. And somehow to-day she did not feel markedly exhilarated by it. The journey back from Venice had tired her very much, and though she had felt sure that a good night’s rest coupled with a day or two of solid English food would set her up again, she still felt overdone and devitalized. She was disposed to attribute this in the main to the unnutritious character of Venetian diet, where, if you got a bit of veal for your dinner, that was as much butcher’s meat as you were likely to see; while, to make up, there would be nothing more than a slice of some unknown fish and the half of a chicken that was no bigger than a blackbird. As for a nice filet of beef or a choice leg of lamb, it was a thing unheard of. Yet she had not felt much inclined for the filet of beef when it was accessible again; it seemed to suit her as little as the rice and maccaroni had done. For the last week, too, she had had from time to time little attacks of internal pain. No doubt it was of no consequence, but it was a pain that she did not know and could not quite localize.

Once or twice she had thought of consulting a doctor, a thing that Mr. Osborne had urged on her before the Venetian visit, but some vague and curious fear prevented her—the fear of being told that something was seriously wrong, and that she would have to give up their London programme which she had planned so delightedly. That was a thing not to be contemplated; the London plans were, to her mind, part of the immutable order of things, and it was therefore essentially important that Mr. Osborne should not guess that she was

out of sorts, for she well knew, if he had so much as a guess of that, he would have carried her off, by force if necessary, and not let go of her till he had deposited her in some eminent consulting room, with specialists dangling at the end of the telephone. But she had never been lacking in spirit, and it would be a singular thing if she could not be genial and hearty to all the world for a few weeks more.

But what she doubted was her power of getting through the physical strain of it. She knew how tiring the standing about and the receiving was, and every day now she felt tired even before the fatigues of it had begun. If only she had a daughter, who could quite naturally take some of this off her hands, and let her sit down while the "company" were arriving. And then an idea struck her.

Dora and Claude were intending to occupy the flat in Mount Street till the end of the summer. After that they would come down to Grote, and soon, please God! the flat in Mount Street would be too small for them "and what would be theirs"—this elegant circumlocution was exactly the phrase that passed through Mrs. Osborne's mind—and when they returned to London again in the autumn, it would be to a house of their own in Green Street with place for a nursery. This, however, they were only going to take at Michaelmas; but Dora had written to her mother-in-law this very morning (and her innocent letter suggested possibilities to Mrs. Osborne), saying that Mount Street really seemed to be hotter than Venice, and dreadfully stuffy, which Venice was not. What if Dora and Claude would come and live with them in Park Lane till the end of July? She remembered how Dora had acted hostess down at Grote in the winter, and they might play the game again. But this time there would be a real object to be served by it; Dora would help her in the entertaining, which prospectively, as she planned it, had seemed so delightful, but now appeared so difficult. It was an excellent idea, if only she could compass it.

The large Indian gong had already boomed through the house, announcing that lunch was ready, and next moment Mr. Osborne came into her "boudoir," announcing that he was ready too. Venetian habit still lingered with him.

"Well, lunch is *pronto*, my lady," he said, "but you're busy yet, and still at the plan of campaign for the summer. But in your plan of

campaign don't forget the commissariat; and here's your lieutenant Marie come to tell you that my lady is served. Balls, concerts, dinners; dinners, balls, concerts; my lady is a regular Whiteley to the *élite*: she gives them all there's to be had. You'll be pauperizing the dukes and duchesses, my dear; they'll be thinking of nothing but the amusements you provide for them."

Mrs. Osborne was not without the rudiments of diplomacy, though, it may be remarked, nothing in the least advanced in that line was necessary with her husband. Still it was better that, if possible, he should suggest Dora and Claude coming to them than that she should. She laughed dutifully at Mr. O.'s joke about the dukes and duchesses, and proceeded.

"I had a note from Dora this morning," she said, as they sat down.

"Bless her heart," said Mr. Osborne parenthetically. "For what we are going to receive, my lady."

"Amen, my dear. There's some of that rice with bits of chicken in it as I got the recipe of from Pietro, and I could fancy a bit myself. Well, she wrote and said she was very well, and she'd seen—she'd been to call in Harley Street."

Mr. Osborne again interrupted.

"And was anything said about September?" he asked.

"There was some mention of September. And there was something else, too. Oh yes, she finds that pokey little flat in Mount Street hotter than Venice, she says."

"Well, then, why don't she and Claude take a cab round to No. 92, and let the luggage follow?" said Mr. Osborne rather hotly. "Claude's not got a grain of sense: he should have thought of it long ago, if Dora feels it stuffy and hot there, and suggested their installing themselves there, cool and comfortable. Bless the boy, all the same. But after I've had my lunch I'll get one end of the telephone and him the other, and see if you don't hear the front door slam and them drive away to Park Lane before I've lit my cigar. That'll suit you, my lady, will it? You'll like to have them dear children in the house, I know."

"Bless them, let them come," said Mrs. Osborne, "and the longer they stop the better I shall be pleased. Dora will be a help too: she will help me with the dinners and what not."

The two were alone on this their last day at Grote, but all six wasp-coloured footmen marshalled by Thoresby formed a sort of frieze round the table, occasionally changing a plate or handling a dish. Generous though he was with money, Mr. Osborne had very distinct notions about getting his money's worth when he had paid it, and since the house required six footmen he saw no reason why they should not all wait at table, even when only he and Mrs. O. were having their lunch. Nor was the number of dishes curtailed because they were alone; Mr. Osborne always ate of them all, and because there was "no company" that was no reason why he should go starved. It was not, therefore, for nearly an hour after the time they sat down that he went to the telephone—so accurately depicted by Sabincourt—and rang up Claude.

He joined Mrs. Osborne on the terrace a minute or two afterwards.

"Claude's willing enough, and thank you," he said, "but he says he must speak to Dora first. So you'd better telephone to 92, my lady, and tell them to make ready whatever rooms you think right. Give them a nice sitting-room, my dear, so that they can feel independent."

"Better hear from Dora first," said Mrs. Osborne.

"Just as you please; but when the girl says as the flat in Mount Street is hot and stuffy, and there's the coolest house in London waiting for her just round the corner, I don't see there's much call to wait. Well, my lady, I must be off. There's a committee been sitting in the Lords on the Bill about the Employers' Liability Act, and I must get all they've talked about at my fingers' ends. Who knows, but Mrs. O., but that I'll be able to tell them a thing or two in that chamber before the summer's out? It's a strange thing to me how clever men, such as have taken degrees and fellowships at Oxford, should have so little common sense on other matters. As if there wasn't a difference between one sort of risk and another, and they want to lump them all on to the employer. I doubt most of them Liberals are either Socialists or afraid of the Socialists. But there! the noble lords have had a committee and I must see what's been said and done."

"Just to think of it! And have you got any idea about your new name yet?"

“No, I daresay something will suggest itself. After all, I shall smell as sweet by any other name, hey?”

“Lor’, my dear,” said Mrs. Osborne with a slight accent of reproof; for Thoresby had come to see if there were any orders, and must have heard.

The question, however, about this move of Dora and Claude to Park Lane was not so foregone a conclusion as Mr. Osborne had anticipated. Claude had gone to the telephone when he was rung up, and came back beaming to tell Dora of this delightful offer.

“Dad and the mater invite us to go to Park Lane till the end of July,” he said. “I’m blowed if there are many fathers who would want a son and daughter-in-law in the house all the time. Of course I said that I must consult you first; that was only proper.”

“Oh, Claude,” said she, “of course it’s awfully kind. But, but do you think so?”

“But why not? It’s just like the governor to have guessed that we should feel stuffy and cramped in the flat during this hot weather.”

Dora remembered her letter.

“I’m afraid I may be responsible for that,” she said. “At least I wrote to your mother yesterday saying it was very hot and airless here. Oh dear, I hope she won’t think I hinted at this.”

“Not she. You don’t catch her imputing motives, specially when there weren’t any. She’s got more to think about than that. I say, Dora, are you sure you didn’t have that in your mind? Awfully sharp of you if you did.”

Dora resented this; indignant that he could have supposed her capable of it, and a little of this indignation coloured her words.

“I’m afraid that I can’t lay claim to sharpness,” she said, “because the fact is that if I had thought such an offer was possible, I should have said it was cool and airy here.”

Claude’s profile was outlined against the hot, hard blue of the sky outside, and Dora noticed how perfect it was. But she noticed it in some detached sort of way; it did not seem to concern her. At this he turned round, and came across the room to her.

“What’s the matter, dear?” he said. “Why is it you don’t want to go?”

“Oh, Claude, if you don’t see, you wouldn’t understand if I explained,” she said. “And I can’t quite explain, either.”

“Try,” he said.

“Well, I married you, do you see, and you are master of the house, and I’m mistress, and it isn’t quite the same thing if we go and live with other people. They are angelic, of course, to suggest it. But oh, I wish people wouldn’t be quite so kind—or, rather, that they would mix a little tact with their kindness. They’ve made it hard to refuse, telephoning like that. It’s—it’s like a word-of-mouth invitation for a month ahead. You’ve got to say ‘Yes.’ ”

Claude took up a rather listless hand of hers that lay on the arm of her chair.

“Ah, then I do understand,” he said, “and I love your reasons. I guessed it before you said it; you want to be alone with me. Well, it’s the same here. But I’ve no doubt they’ll give us a sitting room and all that.”

Though Dora had meant something very like that, it sounded rather dreadful to hear Claude say it, and say also that he had guessed. He oughtn’t to have guessed, although he assured her it was “the same here.” There was an unconscious complacency about his guessing that she did not like. But he went on without pause.

“As for its being tactless,” he said, “I think you’re rather hard on the governor. When a man’s as kind as he can be, and as devoted as he is to you, I don’t think you should say that.”

Claude stuck out his chin a little over this, and Dora, though she knew he was right from his point of view, knew that she had been right too. Kindness, even the most sincere, can easily be embarrassing: it needs refining, like sugar. But that was the sort of thing that Claude could not understand: the tact of good nature had been left out of him just as it had been left out of his father. So her reply was sincere.

“Yes, dear; it was a pity I said that,” she said.

But somehow the admission was bitter; the truth was that it was a pity to say it, because she ought to have been more careful in what she

said to him, not because the impulse that prompted her speech was a mistaken one. But all that was unconjectured by him.

“My darling,” he said, “you are so sweet with me. If I have to criticise anything you do, you never take it amiss. And now I’ll tell you another reason why I think we had better go, apart from the comfort and convenience of it. It is that I don’t think the mater is very strong, for all that she eats so heartily. She gets very easily tired, and she’s laid down a programme for the next six weeks which might well knock anybody out. Now it would be awfully good of you if you would help her with it.”

That appealed to Dora much more.

“Oh, then, let’s go, let’s go,” she said. “Telephone at once. No, I think I will. I think Dad would like me to.”

“You think of everything,” he said. “I hoped you would think of that. He’ll be so pleased at your telephoning. ‘8003 Lewes,’ you know.”

Claude had a meeting at Brentwood that afternoon and had to leave immediately, taking a cab to the station and the train from there, so that Dora might use the motor if she wished. He felt that this was a perfectly natural and ordinary thing to do, but at the same time he had to tell her he had done it.

“It takes but a very little longer,” he said in answer to her urging him to take the motor himself, “and a walk from the station at the other end will do me good. I wish I was going to prowl about with you all afternoon. But men must work, you know. Though when I come back I hope I shan’t find that you’ve been weeping. But you wouldn’t like your ‘Claudius Imperator’ to be a drone. Good-bye, my darling; I shall be back in time to dine and take you to the play.”

He lingered a moment still.

“If you haven’t got anything special to do, you might go down to Richmond and have tea with Uncle Alf,” he said. “He’d like it, and you haven’t seen him for some time.”

“Yes, I’ll go by all means,” she said.

“Thanks, dear. You see, after all, he gives us fifteen thou. a year.”

Dora ordered the motor, and set off on her drive to Richmond at once. The day was exceedingly hot, and the reverberation of the sun from the grilling pavements struck like a blow when she went out. A languid, airless wind raised stinging grit from the wood pavements, and the reek of the streets hung heavy in the air. She longed with an aching sense of physical want for the soft, dustless atmosphere of Venice, the cluck and ripple of its green waterways, and with no less an ache and thirst of the spirit for all that those things had once symbolized to her. Yet this last visit had not been the rapturous success of the one before. Venice was there unchanged, with the gold mist of romance that Claude had woven for her about it, but he, the magical weaver, or she, the woman for whom it had been woven, had altered somehow, and perhaps even in the enchanted city a certain vague but growing trouble that was in her mind would not be completely dissipated. In general outline she knew what it was, but hitherto she had not focussed her vision on it. But now she felt that it had better be examined, for it cried out to her from the darkness of her mind where she had been at pains to hide it. Perhaps on examination it might prove to be imagination only, to have no real existence except in her own mind. And the trouble was Claude.

It seemed to her ages ago, though in point of fact it was still scarcely twelve months, that she had told May Franklin that sometimes he said things that gave her a check. But it seemed almost longer ago, though it was only a few weeks, that she had sat alone one afternoon, when Claude was at Milan meeting his father and mother, and registered the fact that he again gave her checks. Between those two occasions lay romance, a golden dream, an experience which, common though it may be in this world of men and women, was none the less marvellous, miraculous. He, his love for her, and her love for him, had lifted life out of the levels on which it had hitherto moved, had made of it a winged and iridescent thing, which had soared many-coloured into sunlight and moonlight. And that marvel, the enchantment of it, had seemed to her then to be a thing indestructible and eternal. While she was she, and while Claude was Claude, it could never change, nor shed one feather from its rainbow wings. Often had she whispered to him, or he to her: “It will be like this for ever”; more often had the tense silence testified with greater authority than any voice, even his.

In those months whatever her senses perceived was glorified: she looked at the world through the radiance of love.

That conviction that their romance would last for ever was part of the divine madness of love: she saw that now clearly enough. She who had believed that they, and they alone, were different from all others, had not been truly sane when she believed it: she had been living in a world, real no doubt while it existed, yet not only capable of being extinguished but doomed to extinction. Once, before their marriage, she had talked to Claude about what she called "the gray-business" of life, and he, she remembered, had given the gray-business a "facer," to use his words, by pointing to the example of his father and mother. That had seemed to Dora, already ripening for romance, to fall very short of the reply she wanted. She had wanted lover's nonsense which would assure her that for them romance could never fade. But it had faded: it always faded. The question now was concerned with what was left. Did even the consolation of Claude's "facer" remain to her? Had she, to put her part of it baldly and brutally, got as great an admiration, respect, and affection for her husband as Mrs. Osborne had for hers? She knew she had not.

To-day she could look undazzled at the materials out of which her romance had been constructed and analyse them. It was made of her passion for beauty. She had fallen in love with his good looks. And she was getting used to them: she had got used to them. What else was there? What was left to learn, now she had that by heart?

There was a great deal left. So she told herself, but without emotion. There was his character left, which was sterling; his qualities, which were excellent; his kindness, his safeness, his—to go to purely material things—his wealth. And his vulgarity.

The word was coined: her thought for the first time definitely allowed it to pass into currency, and she had to reckon with it.

What a topsy-turvy affair it had been! How strikingly different a disposition from that which she had contemplated had come about! She had told herself that she must for ever be in love with that beautiful face, that slim, active body, those deft, decided movements; and she had told herself that his vulgarities were things of no moment, things to which she would swiftly get used. But events had been

evolved otherwise. She was used to his beauty; his vulgarities were cumulative in their effect on her; instead of getting used to them she was daily more irritated by them and—more ashamed of them. She had imagined even that it would be easy to cure them, to eradicate them. But it proved to be a task like that of emptying a spring with a teacup. She had thought that they lay, so to speak, like casual water on the surface of the ground, a mere puddle that the sun would swiftly drink up. It was not so; they sprang from his nature, and came welling up bubbling and plenteous and inexhaustible.

And there was something about them, so it seemed to her now, that tinged and made unpalatable all the good qualities in which he was so rich. You could draw a gallon of pure fresh kindness from that well-spring which was inexhaustible, but even before you had time to put your lips to it, and drink of it, some drop—quite a little drop—would trickle in from the source of his vulgarity and taint it all. It was even worse than that; there was a permanent leak from the one into the other, the kindness was tainted at the source.

Dora did not indulge in these reflections from any spirit of idle criticism or morbid dissection. She wanted to see how they stood, how bad things were, and what chance there was of their righting themselves. They were no longer mere surface vulgarities in him (or so she believed) that got on her nerves: she no longer particularly minded whether he said “handsome lady” or not; what she did mind was the impulse that prompted him, for instance, to suggest that she might go down and see Uncle Alf *because* he gave them “fifteen thou.” a year. She minded his saying he had guessed the reason why she did not want to establish herself in Park Lane; namely, because she wanted to be alone with him. She minded the suggestion that she had written to say the flat was stuffy, in order to be asked there. It was all common, common; he judged her by impossible standards, standards that were inconceivable. And yet all the time he was good, he was kind, he had all the qualities that should make her love him, make her devotion an imperishable thing. As it was, they had been married scarcely six months, and already she knew that at times he so got on to her nerves that she could have screamed. Already, as she began to look closely at these things, she felt she was glad they were going to Park Lane; she was glad that limitations were placed on her being alone with him.

It was a little cooler out of town, and Richmond Park was in the full luxuriance of its summer beauty. They had entered by the Roehampton Gate; she had still half an hour to spare before the time she had said she would be at Uncle Alfred's, and she directed her driver to turn up to the left, past the White Lodge, and go round by Robin Hood Gate and Kingston Gate. A delicious smell of greenness and coolness came from the noble groves of trees, beneath the clear shade of which, knee-deep in the varnished green of the young bracken, stood herds of fallow deer with twitching ears and switching tails, warding off the persistence of the flies. All the sweet forest sights and sounds were there: the air was full of the buzz of insects, and hidden birds called to each other from among the branches. Distantly on the right she could see gleams of water, where the Pen Ponds lay basking in the sunlight, and the flush of mauve and red from the great rhododendron thickets above them. All the triumph of summer time was there; all the joy of the ripeness and maturity of the year, of the kindled and immortal vitality of the world. But for herself, though every day brought nearer to her the miracle of motherhood, it seemed as if summer had stopped.

Once more she faced the situation as she conceived it to be. The time of romance, those months in the autumn were over: the red and gold of the autumn were withered from the trees. Brief had been their glory, which should have shed its light over many years yet; but, as far as she was concerned, what had made their flame was just the personal beauty of her husband. And out of them should already have sprung a deep and tender affection, the friendship which is not only the true and noble sequel of love, but is an integral part of love itself, perhaps even love's heart. But was it there? It seemed to her rather that something bitter had come out of it, something in which regret for the past was mingled with the gall of disillusionment. And even regret had but small part in it; those months of gold seemed already unreal to her: she felt that she was regretting a dream. It was the same in little things too, for the little things all took their colour from what had been to her then the one great reality. He had referred to himself, for instance, that very afternoon as "Claudius Imperator," and it was with a sense of unreality that she remembered the genesis of that very microscopic joke. She had bought a Roman coin in Venice with that inscription on it, and had given it to him, saying it was his label in case he was lost. To-day she

could not conceive doing such a thing: she could not recapture the state of mind in which she did it, the impulse even that made such a trifle conceivable. In any case, the thing was one that might be said once and then be forgotten. But Claude had the retentive Osborne sense of humour. With him it was "Once a joke, always a joke," and from time to time, as to-day, he brought out the "Claudius Imperator" again. The Osborne humour had a heavy tread—a slow, heavy, slouching rustic tread—and a guffaw of a laugh.

There is a Spectator within each of us who for ever watches our thoughts and words, and criticises them. It may be called conscience, or guidance, or the devil, as the case may be; for some folk are gifted with a Spectator that is their best self, others with a Spectator which is but a parody of themselves. Dora's Spectator was above the average; he was optimistic anyhow, and kindly, and at this point he came to her aid with, so to speak, several smart raps over her knuckles. Whatever was the truth of the whole matter—if, indeed, there is any absolute truth to be arrived at in the fluid and ever-varying adjustments of our relationships with others—only one attitude is compatible with self-respect; namely, to find out and hoard like grains of gold all that is fine and generous and lovable in others, and do our best to find something in ourselves worthy of being matched with it. Instead of this, so said Dora's Spectator to her now, she had, with acute and avid eye, been picking out all that in Claude seemed to her to be trivial or ludicrous or tiresome, and been finding in herself, to match it, intolerance and want of charity. There had been no difficulty, so said her Spectator, in laying hands on plenty of those.

She had but one word to say in self-defence, and the moment it was said she perceived that it amounted to self-accusation. She had fallen in love with his beauty: how could she not despond when she found that she was in love with it—like that—no longer? It had blinded her to all else: she had seen his vulgarities but dimly, if at all, even as she had seen his panoply of excellent qualities but dimly. Now she saw only the vulgarities, or at any rate she saw them right in the foreground, big and blinding; while behind, in the distance, so to speak, sat the rest of him. Was it not reasonable that her outlook, which must take its colour from the past, should be pessimistic? And then

even that piece of self-defence was turned into self-accusation. If that was the case, the fault had been hers from the beginning. But that was what she had done; she had separated him, the man, into packets: she had fallen in love with one packet, and now she was spreading in front of her another that only irritated and almost disgusted her. She had yet to learn the true and the wider outlook, to feel that fire of love that fuses all things together, and loves though it can tenderly laugh, and is gentle always, and rejoices in the weaknesses and imperfections and faults of the beloved, simply because they are his. For though there are many ways of love, the spirit that animates them all is just that; they are all swayed by one magical tune. But that Dora did not yet know, she had not heard a note of it, she did not even know the region of the soul where it made melody all day long. All that she had learned in the last few minutes was that she had with considerable acuteness been spying out causes for complaint, excuses for dissatisfaction. She could do a little better than that.

By this time she had arrived at Uncle Alf's and though the severe remarks of the Spectator had partially braced her again, after the rather sloppy abandonment of self-pity and dejection into which her introspection had brought her, it must be confessed that there was something about Uncle Alf, caustic and malicious though he was, that restored her more efficaciously. For out of all the weapons with which it is fair to fight the disappointments and despondencies that are incidental to human life, there is none sharper or more rapier-like in attack or defence than the sense of humour. And Uncle Alf was well equipped there: not even the picture dealer whom he habitually worsted would have denied that he had that. It was lambent and ill-natured; it twinkled and stung; but it had the enviable trick of perceiving what was ludicrous.

"And I hear poor old Eddie has been out with you and Claude in Venice, my dear," he said; "and I can't say which I'm the most sorry for—you, or him, or Claude, or Venice."

"Oh, why Claude?" asked she, for she had not thought of being sorry for Claude.

“Because you had taught him probably to admire Tintoret—or say he did—and Eddie would want him to admire the railway station. He would have to trim. A very funny party you must have been, my dear.”

Dora laughed; till this moment she had thought of them all as a rather tragic party, and the other aspect had not occurred to her.

“Do you know, I expect we were,” she said; “and all the time I took it seriously. I wonder if that was a mistake, Uncle Alf.”

“To be sure it was. There’s many things in this world that will depress you, and make you good for nothing, if you take them seriously, and that cheer you up if you don’t.”

That was not exactly wisdom out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, since Uncle Alf was a very old man, but it was a sort of elementary wisdom which a child might have hit on. And she felt that below the surface of this wizened, crabbed little old man there was something that was human. She had never suspected it before: in her shallowness she had been content to look upon him as a mask with a money-bag. To be sure, he was devoted to Claude: she had not even reckoned with what that implied, not given him credit for the power of feeling affection.

“I believe you are right,” she said.

“And when you’re as old as me, my dear, you will know it,” said he. “Lord, I’ve had a lot of amusement out of life—digging for it, you understand, not picking it up. Poor old Eddie amuses me more than I can say. Why, his hair is turning gray with success and pleasure.”

“Ah, not a word against him,” said Dora; “he’s the kindest Dad that ever lived.”

“I daresay; but there are things to laugh at in poor old Eddie, thank God. He and his Grote, and his Park Lane, and all! Did you ever see such a set-out, my dear? But Eddie in Venice must have been a shade finer yet. Tell me about it. He and Maria on the Grand Canal, and you and Claude; all in the same gondola, I’ll be bound, so as to make a family party. ‘This is the way we English go,’ good Lord. I wouldn’t have been your gondoliers on a hot day, not even for the entertainment of seeing you all like Noah’s Ark. Your gondoliers were thin men that evening, my dear, poor devils!”

Alfred had guessed the situation with the unerring eye of cynical malice, and his words brought the scene back to Dora with amazing accuracy. That day had depressed her at the time; she had never guessed how funny it was; and here she was laughing at it now, when it was a month old!

Alfred continued:

"Eddie among the pictures, too," he said. "A bull in a china shop would have been more suitably housed! Why, I nearly came out myself in order to see the fun. 'What a holy look there's about that, Maria,' he'd say; or, 'My, I don't believe it would go into the gallery at Grote unless you took the roof off.' And he wrote to me yesterday that he had bought a copy of that housemaid among the clouds by Titian—what a daub, my dear!—with a frame to match!"

It was too much for Uncle Alfred, and he gave a series of little squeaks on a very high note, shaking his head.

"Eddie's a silly man," he said; "a very silly man is poor old Eddie, and he gets sillier as he gets older. What does he want with his Assumption of the Virgin and his six powdered footmen? What good do they do him? As little as my liniment does me. Lord, my dear, he says something too in his letter that makes me think they're going to make a peer of him. He hints it: ah, I wish I'd kept the letter; but it made me feel sick, and I threw it away. But Eddie a peer, my dear. And I saw in a leader in the *Times* the other day that the Prime Minister hadn't got a sense of humour! I reckon they'll sack that leader writer if it's true that Eddie's going to have a peerage! Lord deliver us: Lord Saucepan: let's think of half a dozen names and send some picture post cards of Venice to Lord Saucepan, care of Mr. Osborne, Park Lane; Lord Lavatory, Lord Kitchen-sink. Fancy Per too, an honourable, and Mrs. Per. My dear, I hate that woman worse than poison. I should like to smack her face. She thinks she's a lady, and Maria thinks she's a lady. Why, Maria's more of a lady herself—and that's not saying much. To see Mrs. Per and you talking together about art or acting would make a cat laugh. I wonder at your marrying Claude when you thought of his relations."

Dora smiled at him.

“But that’s just what I didn’t do,” she said. “I only thought of Claude.”

“And well you might. My dear, I love that boy. He’s got into proper hands too: you can make a lot of him. Lord Toasting-fork, Lord Egg-whisk, Lord Frying-pan.”

Uncle Alfred could not get away from inventing titles for “poor old Eddie,” and he did it with a malicious relish that was rather instructive to Dora. It could not be called kind, but it hurt nobody; and his frank amusement at the idea of the peerage was certainly better than the heart-sinkings with which the prospect of the event had inspired Dora when she thought of the genial pomposity with which it would be received. Throughout she had been too heavy, too ponderous: she had pulled long faces instead of laughing, had seen the depressing side of expeditions like the family party in the gondola instead of its humorous aspect. That was a hint worth attending to. She had got a sense of humour, so she believed, yet somehow it had never occurred to her to look at those spoiled days of Venice in a humorous light.

Soon she rose to go.

“Uncle Alfred,” she said, “you’ve done me good, do you know? It is better to be amused than depressed, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my dear, and I hope you’ll laugh at me all the way back to town, me and my great-coat on a day like this, and my goloshes to keep the damp out, and a strip of flannel, I assure you, round the small of my back. Eh, I had the lumbago bad when first I saw you down at Grote, but the sight of those pictures of Sabincourt’s of Eddie and Maria did me more good than a pint of liniment. What a pair of guys! Lord and Lady Biscuit-tin.”

Dora laughed again.

“How horrid of you!” she said. “Well, I must go. Claude and I are going to the theatre to-night. And we are leaving the flat in Mount Street, Uncle Alf, and are to live in the house in Park Lane till the end of the season. Wasn’t it kind of Dad to suggest it?”

“Not a bit of it. You’ll help entertain Maria’s fine friends, half of whom she don’t know by sight. Not but what I envy you: Maria’s as good as a play down at Grote, and Maria in London must be enough to empty the music-halls. She does too, so they tell me. She asks

everybody in the ‘London Directory,’ and they all come. Good-bye, my dear; come down again some time and tell me all they do and say. Write it down every evening, else one’s liable to forget the plums.”

Dora had given orders that their personal luggage should be transferred from the flat to No. 92 during the afternoon, and on her return she drove straight to that house. Claude had already arrived, and was sitting in the big Italian drawing room. He had had a most successful meeting, and was in excellent spirits.

“This is a bit better than the flat,” he said. “I went in there just now, and it was like a furnace. But here you wouldn’t know it was a hot day. It’s a handsome apartment: the governor bought nothing but the best when he had it done. And how’s Uncle Alf?”

“Very well, I thought, and very amusing,” said she. “Oh, Claude, he had a great-coat on, and goloshes. He is too funny!”

Claude did not reply for a moment.

“Darling, I hate criticising you,” he said at length, “but I don’t think you ought to laugh at Uncle Alf, considering all he does for us.”

“But he recommended me to,” said she. “He said he hoped I should laugh at him all the way back to town. In fact we talked about laughing at people, and he said what a good plan it was.”

Claude paused again. He felt strongly about this subject.

“Did he laugh at the governor?” he asked.

“Well, yes, a little,” said Dora.

“I hope you stuck up for him. I’m sure you did.”

Dora gave a hopeless little sigh: she wondered if Uncle Alfred could have seen the humorous aspect of this; personally she could not.

“It was no question of sticking up for him,” she said. “It was all chaff, fun.”

Claude got up, with his chin a good deal protruded.

“Ah, fun is all very well in its right place,” he said, “and I’m sure no one likes a joke more than me. But there are certain things one should hold exempt from one’s fun——”

Dora tried the humorous plan recommended by Uncle Alfred.

“Darling, I hope you don’t consider yourself exempt,” she said. “I am laughing at you now. You are ridiculous, dear. You take things heavily, and I do too. We must try not to. So I hereby give you leave to laugh at mother and Austell as much as you like—and me.”

“Dora, I am serious,” he said.

“I know; that is just the trouble,” she said, still lightly.

Claude’s face darkened.

“Well, it’s a trouble you must learn to put up with,” he said rather sharply. “I daresay I’m old-fashioned: you may call me what you like. But I ask you to respect my father. I daresay he and the mater seem to you ridiculous at times. If they do, I ask you to keep your humorous observations to yourself. I hate speaking like this, but I am obliged to.”

Dora felt her hands grow suddenly cold and damp. She was not afraid of him exactly, but there was some physical shrinking from him that was rather like fear.

“I don’t see the obligation,” she said.

“Perhaps not. It is sufficient that I do. Now let’s have done. We spoke on the same subject, your attitude to my father, in Venice. Don’t let us speak of it again!”

“You say your say, and I am to make no reply. Is that it?” she asked.

“Yes; that is it. I know I am right. Come, Dora.” But the appeal had no effect, and for the moment she did not know how to apply Uncle Alf’s wise counsels.

“And if I know you are wrong?” she asked. “If I tell you that you don’t understand?”

“It will make no difference. Look here: the governor has done lots for you. You’ve never expressed a wish but what he hasn’t gratified.”

“Then ask him if he is satisfied with my attitude toward him,” said Dora. “See what he says. Tell him that Uncle Alfred has laughed at him, and I laughed too. Tell him all.”

“I wouldn’t hurt him like that,” said Claude.

Dora walked to the window and back again. She felt helpless in a situation she believed to be trivial. But she could not laugh it off: she could think of no light reply that would act as a dissolvent to it. And if she could find no light reply, only a serious answer or silence was

possible. She chose the latter. If more words were to be said, she wished that Claude should have the responsibility of them. Eventually he took it.

"And I'm sure we've all been good enough to your people," he said; "made them welcome at Grote for as long as they chose, and behaved friendly. And it was only ten minutes before you came in that I wrote to Jim, telling him he could live in the flat and welcome till the end of July. I don't see what I could do more."

The logical reply was on the tip of Dora's tongue—the reply "That did not cost you anything"—but she let it get no further. Only she rebelled against the thought that it was a kindness to do something that did not cost anything. He thought it was kind—and so in a way it was—to give Jim the flat rent free. He might perhaps have let it for fifty pounds. But he did not want fifty pounds. Yet he thought that it was kind: it seemed to him kind. It must be taken at that: it was no use arguing, going into the reasons for which it was no real kindness at all. And he had told her that now, she felt sure, to contrast his friendliness to her relations with her ridicule—so he would put it—of his. But he had done his best: she was bound to take it like that, not point out the cheapness of it.

"Claude, dear, that was nice of you," she said, searching for anything that should magnify his kindness. "And Jim will be an awful tenant. He will leave your books about and smoke your cigars. I hope you've locked them up."

"Not a thing," said he. "He just steps in. He'll find a sovereign on my dressing table, I believe, if he looks, and a box of cigars in a drawer of my writing table which he's welcome to. One doesn't bother about things like that."

That was the worst: the parade of generosity could not go further than saying that there was no parade at all. Dora could not reply any more to that: she could only repeat.

"It's awfully kind of you," she said again. "We must go and dress if we are to be in time for the first act."

CHAPTER VIII.

THOUGH it was true that Claude's kindness in lending Austell his flat did not cost him anything, it conferred a great convenience on his beneficiary, and Jim, who had been living at the Bath Club, had his luggage packed without pause, and wrote the letter of acceptance and thanks to Claude from the flat itself on Claude's writing paper. The letter was quite genuine and heart-felt, or at the least pocket-felt, for Jim had had some slight difference of opinion with his mother on the subject of being seen in a hansom with a young lady who in turn was sometimes seen on the stage, and Eaton Place, where he had meant to spend those weeks, was closed to him. But Claude's flat filled the bill exactly; it was far more comfortable than his mother's house, and there was nothing to pay for lodging, so that it was better than the club. His satisfaction was complete when he found that Claude had left his cook there, with no instructions whatever except to go on cooking, nor any orders to have catering bills sent to the tenant. So Jim made himself charming to the cook, gave her the sovereign which he had at once found on Claude's dressing table when he explored his bedroom, and said he would be at home for lunch. Plovers' eggs? Yes, by all means, and a quail, and a little *macédoine* of fruit. And by way of burying the hatchet with his mother, and incidentally making her green with envy (for it would have suited her very well if Claude had offered her the flat, since somebody wanted to take her house), he instantly telephoned asking her to lunch, and mentioned that he was in Mount Street till the end of July. The lunch she declined, and made no comment on the other, but Jim heard her sigh into the telephone. She could not hear him grin.

As had been mentioned before, Jim had no liking for Claude, and up till the present he had done little living upon him. But this loan of the flat—especially since there was free food going—was extremely opportune, for at the present moment Jim was particularly hard up, having been through a Derby week of the most catastrophic nature. He had done nothing rash, too, which made his misfortunes harder to bear; he had acted on no secret and mysterious tips from the stables, but had with the most plebeian respectability backed favourites only. But the

favourites had behaved in the most unaccountable manner, and their blighted careers had very nearly succeeded in completely blighting his. But he had raised money on the rent of Grote which would be paid him at the end of the month, and had paid up all his debts. That process, however, had made fearful inroads on his receipts for the next quarter, and strict economy being necessary, Claude's kindness had been most welcome. And as he ate his quail, Jim planned two or three pleasant little dinner parties. He would certainly ask Claude and Dora to one of them, or was that a rather ironical thing to do, since Claude would be paying for the food that they all ate? He would pay for the wine as well, it seemed, for a bottle of excellent Moselle had appeared, since he had expressed a preference that way, coming, he supposed, from Claude's cellar.

Jim looked round the room as he ate and drank, pleased to find himself in this unexpected little haven of rest, but feeling at the same time envious of and rather resentful towards its possessor. He quite sympathised with the doctrine of Socialism, and asked himself why it should be given to Claude to live perpetually in that diviner air where financial anxieties are unknown, where no bills need ever remain unpaid except because it was a nuisance to have to dip a pen in the ink and draw a cheque, whereas he himself was as perpetually in want of money. The particular reason why he was in this moment in want of it, namely because he had had a very bad week at Epsom, did not present itself to his mind, or, if it did, was dismissed as being an ephemeral detail. Perhaps in this one instance that was the reason why just now he was so absurdly hard up, but the general question was what occupied him. Claude was rich, he was poor; where was the justice of it? He liked prints, too, and why should Claude be able to cover his dining room walls with these delightful first impressions, while he could not? Indeed, he had no dining room at all in which he could hang prints even if he possessed them. His dining room was let to Mr. Osborne, who, it was said, was going to be made a peer, and on their walls hung the stupendous presentments of him and his wife. And Claude had married his sister: everything came to those who had cheque-books. Well, perhaps the Ascot week would make things pleasanter again; he had a book there which could hardly prove a

disappointment. If it did—but so untoward a possibility presented no features that were at all attractive to contemplate.

He finished his lunch and then made a more detailed tour of the flat. It was delightfully furnished (probably Uncle Alf was responsible for all this, since it was clearly out of the ken of any other Osborne), and everything breathed of that luxurious sort of simplicity which is so far beyond the reach of those who have to make sovereigns exercise their utmost power of purchase. By the way, he had taken a sovereign which was lying about on Claude's dressing-table and given it to the cook; he must remember to tell Claude that (for Claude might remember, if he did not), and pay him. Next that room was the bathroom, white-walled and white-tiled, with all manner of squirts and douches to refresh and cool. Then came a second bedroom, then the dining room in which he had just now so delicately fed, then the drawing room, out of which opened a smaller sitting room, clearly Claude's. There was a big writing table in it, with drawers on each side, and Jim amused himself by opening these, for they were all unlocked, and looking at their contents. Certainly Claude did things handsomely when he lent his flat, for in the first drawer that Jim opened was a box of cigarettes, and one of cigars. These latter smelt quite excellent, and Jim put back the cigarette he had taken from the other box and took a cigar instead. In another drawer were paper and envelopes stamped with a crest (no doubt the outcome of the ingenuity of the Herald's College), in another a pile of letters, some of which Jim recognized to be Dora's handwriting. This drawer he closed again at once: it was scarcely a temptation not to do so since he only cared quite vaguely to know what Dora found to say to her *promesso*. In another drawer were a few photographs, a few invitation cards, an engagement book, and a cheque-book. This latter was apparently an old one, for it was stiff and full toward the back with counterfoils, while the covers drooped together halfway down it.

Jim could not resist opening this, nor did he try to: he wanted to know (and there was no harm done if he did) what sort of sums Claude spent. But on opening it he saw that it was not quite empty of its cheques yet, the last but one in the book had not been torn out, but was blank, as was also the counterfoil. Then came the last counterfoil, on which was written the date, which was yesterday, and a scrawled

"Books, Dora," and an item of some £150. Then he turned over the earlier counterfoils: there was a big cheque to Daimler, no doubt for his car, another (scandalously large it seemed to Jim) to his tailor, more "Books," several entered simply as "Venice," and several on which there was nothing written at all. Apparently, in such instances, Claude had just drawn a cheque and not worried to fill in the counterfoil. That again was the sort of *insouciance* that Jim envied: it was only possible to very rich people or remarkably careless ones, whereas he was poor, but remarkably careful as to the payment of money. The blank cheque, forgotten apparently, for the cheque-book, tossed away with a heap of old invitation cards, looked as if it was thought to be finished with, was an instance the more of this enviable security about money matters. And Jim felt more Socialistic than ever.

He shut the drawer up, and examined the rest of the room, having lit the cigar which he had taken from the box and which he found to be as excellent to the palate as it was to the nostril. The room reeked of quiet opulence: there was a bookcase full of well-bound volumes, a pianola of the latest type, two or three more prints, the overflow from the dining room, and a couple of Empire arm-chairs, in which comfort and beauty were mated, and on the floor was an Aubusson carpet. And though feeling envious and Socialistic, Jim felt that it would be quite possible to be very comfortable here for the next six or seven weeks.

Like most people who have suffered all their lives from want of money, and have yet managed to live in a thoroughly extravagant manner, Jim had been so often under obligations to others that Heaven, suiting, we must suppose, the back to the burden, had made him by this time unconscious of such. He accepted such offers as this of the flat with a gay light-heartedness that was not without its charm, and made also the undoubted difficulty of conferring, no less than accepting, a favour gracefully, easy to the giver. But he did not like Claude, and had a sufficiently firm conviction that Claude did not like him, to take the edge off his enjoyment. Why Claude should not like him, he could not tell: he had always been more than pleasant to his brother-in-law, and when they met, they always, owing to a natural and easy knack of volubility which Jim possessed, got on quite nicely together.

This minute inspection of the flat had taken Jim some time, and when it was completed he strolled out to pay a call or two, see if there was any racing news of interest, and go round to the Osbornes to have a talk to Dora, whom he had not seen since she had returned from Venice, and in person express his gratitude for the timely gift of the flat. He found her in, but alone: Mr. and Mrs. Osborne were expected that afternoon.

"It was really extremely kind of Claude to think of it," he said, "and most opportune. I had the rottenest Epsom, and really was at my wits' end. You are probably beginning to forget what that means. Oh, by the way, I found a sovereign of Claude's on his dressing table and gave it to the cook in order to promote good feeling—or was it ten shillings?"

Dora laughed. This was characteristic of Jim, but she was used to it, and did not make sermon to him.

"I feel quite certain it was a sovereign, Jim," she said. "I will bet, if you like. We will ask the cook what you gave her."

"I daresay you are right. Ah, you expect Claude, though. I will give it him when he comes in. Have you seen mother? She and I are not on terms just now. But it does not matter, as I have Claude's flat."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing; she did it all. I hadn't the least wish to cut her. In fact, I wanted to stay in Eaton Place, until the flat came along, and when it did, I wished to give her a slice of my luck, and I asked her to lunch. She said 'No,' but sighed. The sigh was not about lunch but about the flat. She would have liked it. By Jove, Dora, you're nicely housed here. It's a neat little box, as Mr. O. would say."

Dora gave a short laugh, not very merry in tone.

"Ah, that's one of the things we mustn't say," she observed. "I've been catching it from Claude. He says he's respectful to my family, but I'm not respectful to his."

Jim paused with his cup in his hand.

"Been having a row?" he asked. "Make it up at once. Say you were wrong."

"But I wasn't," said she.

“That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you should let the purseholders have everything all their own way. Then everything slips along easily and comfortably.”

“Oh, money!” she said. “Who cares about the money?”

Jim opened his eyes very wide.

“I do very much,” he said, “and so did you up till a year ago. It is silly to say that money doesn’t matter just because you have a lot. It’s only the presence of a lot that enables you to say so.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she said, “and it adds to one’s pleasure. But it doesn’t add to one’s happiness, not one jot. I’m just as capable of being unhappy now as ever I was. Not that I am unhappy in the least.”

Jim nodded sympathetically.

“You look rather worried,” he said. “So you’ve been having a bit of a turn-up with Claude. That’s the worst of being married; if I have a shindy with anyone I walk away, and unless the other fellow follows, the shindy stops. But you can’t walk away from your husband.”

Dora was silent a moment, considering whether she should talk to her brother about these things which troubled her or not. She had tried to find a solution for them by herself, but had been unable, and she had a great opinion of his practical shrewdness. It was not likely that he would suggest anything fine or altruistic because he was not of that particular build, but he might be able to suggest something.

“Yes, we’ve been having a bit of a turn-up, as you call it,” she said. “That doesn’t matter so much; but what bothers me rather is our totally different way of looking at things. I’m awfully fond of Dad, I am really, but it would be childish if I pretended that I don’t see—well—humorous things about him. You see, one has either to be amused by such things—I only learned that yesterday from Uncle Alf—or else take them tragically. At Venice I took them tragically. I thought it dreadful that he liked to see the sugar factory better than anything else. And if it isn’t dreadful, it’s got to be funny: it’s either funny or vulgar. There’s nothing else for it to be. And then Claude—oh, dear! I told him he was at liberty to laugh at you and mother as much as he chose, but he didn’t appear to want to. I don’t think he’s got any sense of humour: there are heaps and heaps of ridiculous things about you both.”

“Good gracious! You never thought he had any sense of humour, did you?” asked Jim earnestly.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I thought about it at all. And that’s not the worst.”

Jim put his head on one side, and Dora’s estimate of his shrewdness was justified.

“Do you mean that you are beginning to mind about his being—er—not quite——?” he asked delicately.

Dora nodded.

“Yes, that’s it,” she said.

“What a pity! I hoped you wouldn’t mind. You appeared not to at first. One hoped you would get used to it before it got on your nerves. Can’t you put it away, wrap it up and put it away?”

“Do you suppose I keep it in front of me for fun?” she asked. “Oh, Jim, is it beastly of me to tell you? There’s really no one else to tell. I couldn’t tell mother because she’s—well, she’s not very helpful about that sort of thing, and talks about true nobility being the really important thing, that and truth and honour and kindness. That is such parrot-talk, you know; it is just repeating what we have all heard a million of times. No doubt it is true, but what if one can’t realize it? I used always to suppose Shakespeare was a great author, till I saw ‘Hamlet,’ which bored me. And I had to tell somebody. What am I to do?”

“Why, apply to Claude what you’ve been saying about Mr. Osborne,” said he. “There are things about him which are dreadful unless you tell yourself they are funny. Well, tell yourself they are funny. I hope they are. Won’t that help?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it might. But there are things that are funny at a little distance which cease to amuse when they come quite close. Uncle Alf made me think that the humorous solution would solve everything. But it doesn’t really; it only solves the things that don’t really matter.”

Dora dined quietly at home that night with Mr. and Mrs. Osborne and Claude, and after dinner had a talk to her mother-in-law while the

other two lingered in the dining room.

"Why, it was like seeing a fire through the window to welcome you when you got home of a cold evening," said Mrs. Osborne cordially, "to see your face at the head of the stairs, my dear. Mr. Osborne's been wondering all the way up whether you and Claude would be dining at home to-night. Bless you, if he's said it once he's said it fifty times."

"I love being wanted," said Dora quickly.

"Well, it's wanted that you are, by him and me and everyone else. And, my dear, I'm glad to think you'll be by my elbow at all my parties, to help me, and say who's who. And we lead off to-morrow with a big dinner. There's thirty to table and a reception after, just to let it be known as how the house is open again, and all and sundry will be welcome. Of course, you'll have your own engagements as well, my dear, and many of them, I'm sure, and no wonder, and there's nothing I wish less than to stand in the way of them, but whenever you've an evening to spare, you give a thought to me, and say to yourself, 'Well, if I'm wanted nowhere else, there's mother'll be looking out for me at the head of the stairs.' "

Dora laughed.

"I accept your invitations to all your balls, and all your concerts, and as many as possible of your dinners," she said. "You'll get sick of the sight of my face before the season is over."

"That I never shall, my dear," said Mrs. Osborne, "nor afterward, neither. And you'll come down to Grote, won't you, after July, and stay quiet there till the little blessed one comes, if you don't mind my alluding to it, my dear, as I'm going to be its grandmother, though it's a thing I never should do if there was anybody else but you and me present. Lord, and it seems only yesterday that I was expecting my own first-born, and Mr. O. in such a taking as you never see, and me so calm and all, just longing for my time to come, and thinking nothing at all of the pain, for such as there is don't count against seeing your baby. But you leave Claude to me, and I'll pull him through. Bless him, I warrant he'll need more cheering and comforting than you. And are you sure your rooms are comfortable here, dearie? I thought the suite at the back of the house would be more to your liking than the front, being quieter, for, to be sure, if you are so good as to come and

keep us old folks company, the least we can do is to see that you have things to your taste and don't get woke by those roaring motor-buses or the stream of vegetables for the market."

"But they are delightful," said Dora. "They've given me the dearest little sitting room with bedroom and bathroom all together."

Mrs. Osborne beamed contentedly. She had had a couple of days without any return of pain, and as she said, she had had a better relish for her dinner to-night than for many days.

"Well, then, let's hope we shall all be comfortable and happy," she said. "And I don't mind telling you now, my dear, that I've been out of sorts and not up to my victuals for a fortnight past, but to-day I feel hearty again, though I get tired easily still. But don't you breathe a word of that, promise me, to Mr. Osborne or Claude, for what with the honour as is going to be done to Mr. O. and the thought of his grandchild getting closer, and him back to work again, which, after all, suits him best, I wouldn't take the edge off his enjoyment if you were to ask me on your bended knees, which I should do, if he thought I was out of sorts. Lord, there he comes now, arm-in-arm with Claude. I declare he's like a boy again, with the thought of all as is coming."

The evening of the next day, accordingly, saw, with flare of light and blare of band, the beginning of the hospitalities of No. 92 Park Lane, the doors of which, so it appeared to Dora, were never afterward shut day or night, except during the week-ends when the doors of Grote flew open and the scene of hospitality changed to that of the country. Yet cordial though it all was, it was insensate hospitality—hospitality gone mad. Had some hotel announced that anyone of any consequence could dine there without charge, and ask friends to dine on the same easy terms, such an offer would have diverted the crowds of carriages from Park Lane, and sent them to the hotel instead. Full as her programme originally was, Mrs. Osborne could not resist the pleasure of added hospitalities, and little dances, got up in impromptu fashion with much telephoning and leaving of cards, were wedged in between the big ones, and became big themselves before the night arrived. Scores of guests, utterly unknown to their hosts, crowded the rooms, and for them all, known and unknown alike, Mrs. Osborne had the same genial and genuine cordiality of welcome. It was sufficient

for her that they had crossed her threshold and would drink Mr. O.'s champagne and eat her capons; she was glad to see them all. She had a shocking memory for faces, but that made no difference, since nothing could exceed the geniality of her greeting to those whom she had never set eyes on before. It was a good moment, too, when, not so long after the beginning of her hospitalities, her secretary, whose duty it was to enter the names of all callers in the immense volume dedicated to that purpose, reported that a second calling book was necessary, since the space allotted to the letters with which the majority of names began was full. She could not have imagined a year ago that this would ever happen, yet here at the beginning of her second season only, more space had to be found. And Dora's name for the second volume, "Supplement to the Court Guide," was most gratifying. Alf's allusion to the "London Directory," though equally true, would not have been so satisfactory.

But her brave and cheerful soul needed all its gallantry, for it was an incessant struggle with her to conceal the weariness and discomfort which were always with her, and which she was so afraid she would, in spite of herself, betray to others. There were days of pain, too, not as yet very severe, but of a sort that frightened her, and her appetite failed her. This she could conceal, without difficulty for the most part, since the times were few on which her husband was not sitting at some distance from her, with many guests intervening; but once or twice when they were alone she was afraid he would notice her abstention, and question her. Her high colour also began to fade from her cheeks and lips, and she made one daring but tremulous experiment with rouge and lip-salve to hide this. She sent her maid out of the room before the attempt, and then applied the pigments, but with disastrous results. "Lor, Mr. O. will think it's some woman of the music halls instead of his wife," she said to herself, and wiped off again the unusual brilliance.

But though sometimes her courage faltered, it never gave way. She had determined not to spoil these weeks for her husband. It was to be a blaze of triumph. Afterward she would go to the doctor and learn that she had been frightening herself to no purpose, or that there was something wrong.

And those endless hospitalities, this stream of people who passed in and out of the house, though they tired her they also served to divert her and take her mind off her discomforts and alarms. She had to be in her place, though Dora took much of the burden of it off her shoulders, to shake hands with streams of people and say—which was perfectly true—how pleased she was to see them. Friends from Sheffield, for she never in her life dropped an old acquaintance, came to stay, and the pleasurable anticipation she had had of letting them see "a bit of real London life" fell short of the reality. Best of all, Sir Thomas and Lady Ewart were in the house when the list of honours appeared in the paper.

It happened dramatically, and the drama of it was planned and contrived by Claude. He came down rather late to breakfast, having given orders that this morning no papers were to be put in their usual place in the dining room, and went straight up to his father.

"Good morning, my lord," he said.

"Hey, what?" said Mr. Osborne. "Poking your fun at me, are you?"

"There's something about you in the papers, my lord."

"Well, I never! Let's see," said Mr. Osborne.

He unfolded the paper Claude had brought him.

"My lady," he said across the table to his wife, "this'll interest you. List of honours. Peerages, Edward Osborne, Esquire, M. P."

It was a triumphant success. Sir Thomas actually thought that it was news to them both, and went so far as to lay down his knife and fork.

"Bless my soul!" he said. "Well, I'm sure there never was an honour more deservedly won, nor what will be more dignifiedly worn."

Mr. Osborne could not keep it up.

"Well, well," he said, "of course we've known all along; but Claude would have his joke and pretend it was news to us. Thank ye, Sir Thomas, I'm sure. Maria, my dear, I'm told your new coronet's come home. Pass it to my lady, Claude."

As if by a conjuring trick, he produced from under the table cloth an all-round tiara of immense diamonds, which had been previously balanced on his knees.

Mrs. Osborne had had no idea of this; that part of the ceremony had been kept from her.

"Put it on, Maria, my dear," he said, "and if there's a peeress in the land as better deserves her coronet than you, I should be proud to meet her. Let the Honourable Claude settle it comfortable for you, my dear. Claude, my boy, I'm jealous of you because you're an honourable, which is more than your poor old dad ever was."

The deft hands of the Honourable adjusted the tiara for her and she got up to salute the donor.

"If it isn't the measure of my head exactly!" she said. "Well, I never, and me not knowing a word about it!"

Meantime, as June drew to its close, in this whirl of engagements and socialities, the estrangement between Dora and Claude grew (though not more acute in itself) more of a habit, and the very passage of time, instead of softening it, rendered it harder to soften. Had they been alone in their flat, it is probable that some intolerable moment would have come, breaking down that which stood between them, or in any case compelling them to talk it out; or, a thing which would have been better than nothing, bringing this cold alienation up to the hot level of a quarrel, which could have been made up, and which when made up might have carried away with it much of the cause of this growing constraint. As it was, there was no quarrel, and thus there was nothing to make up. Claude, on his side, believed that his wife still rather resented certain remarks he had made to her at Venice and here on the subject of her attitude toward his father, contrasting it unfavourably with the appreciation and kindness which his family had shewn hers. In his rather hard, thoroughly well-meaning and perfectly just manner he examined and re-examined any cause of complaint which she could conceive herself to have on the subject, and entirely acquitted himself of blame. He did not see that he could have done differently: he had not been unkind, only firm, and his firmness was based upon his sense of right.

But in this examination he, of course, utterly failed to recognize the real ground of the estrangement, which was, as Dora knew, not any one particular speech or action of his, but rather the spirit and the nature which lay behind every speech, every action. This she was

incapable of telling him, and even if she had been able to do so, no good end would have been served by it. She had married him, not knowing him, or at the least blinded by superficialities, and now, getting below those, or getting used to them, she found that there were things to which she could not get used, but which, on the contrary, seemed to her to be getting every day more glaringly disagreeable to her. He, not knowing this, did his best to remove what he believed had been the cause of their estrangement by praise and commendation of what he called to himself her altered behaviour. For there was no doubt whatever that now, at any rate, Dora was behaving delightfully to his parents. She took much of the work of entertaining off Mrs. Osborne's hands; made but few engagements of her own, in order to be more actively useful in the house; and was in every sense the most loyal and dutiful of daughters-in-law. She also very gently and tactfully got leave to revise Mrs. Osborne's visiting list, and drew a somewhat ruthless lead pencil through a considerable number of the names. For in the early days to leave a card meant, as a matter of course, to be asked to the house. This luxuriant and exotic garden wanted a little weeding.

All this seemed to Claude to be the happy fruits of his criticism, and the consciousness of it in his mind did not improve the flavour of his speeches to Dora. They were but little alone, owing to the high pressure of their days; but one evening, about a fortnight after they had moved into Park Lane, he found her resting in her sitting room before dressing.

"There you are, dear," he said. "How right of you to rest a little. What have you been doing?"

"There were people to lunch," said she; "and then I drove down with Dad to the House. He was not there long, so I waited for him, and we had a turn in the Park. Then a whole host of people came to tea, and I—I multiplied myself."

"They are ever so pleased with you," said Claude, "and I'm sure I don't wonder. Ever since they came up you have simply devoted yourself to them."

In his mind was the thought, "Ever since I spoke to you about it." It was not verbally expressed, but the whole speech rang with it. Dora

tried for a moment, following Uncle Alf's plan, to find something humorous about it, failed dismally, and tried instead to disregard it.

"I'm glad," she said, "that one is of use."

Then she made a further effort.

"I think it was an excellent plan that we should come here," she added. "It suits us, doesn't it? and it suits them."

Claude smiled at her, leaning over the head of the sofa where she lay.

"I knew you would find it a success," he said. "I felt quite certain it would be."

Again Dora tried to shut her ears to the personal note—this ring of "How right I was!"

"It suits Jim, too," she said. "It really was kind of you to let him have the flat. May tells me she went to dine there last night. He had a bridge party."

Claude laughed.

"He's certainly making the most of it," he said; "just as I meant him to do. I think I'm like Dad in that. Do you remember how he treated us over the Venice house this year? Not a penny for us to pay. Jim's giving lots of little parties, I'm told, and Parker came round to me yesterday to ask if he should order some more wine, as Jim's nearly finished it. Also cigars and cigarettes. Of course I told him to order whatever was wanted. I hate doing things by halves. The household books will be something to smile at. But he's having a rare good time. It's not much entertaining he has been able to do all his life up till now."

Dora sat up.

"But Claude, do you mean he's drinking your wine and letting you pay for all the food?" she asked.

"Yes. It's my own fault. I ought to have locked up the cellar, and made it clear that he would pay for his own chickens. As a matter of fact, it never struck me that he wouldn't. But as that hasn't occurred to him, I can't remind him of it."

"But you must tell him he's got to pay for things," said Dora. "Why, he might as well order clothes and, just because he was in your flat,

expect you to pay for them!"

"Oh, I can't tell him," said Claude. "It would look as if I grudged him things. I don't a bit: I like people to have a good time at my expense. Poor devil! he had a rotten Derby week; no wonder he likes living on the cheap. And it must be beastly uncomfortable living on the cheap, if it's your own cheap, so to speak. I expect you and I would be just the same if we were poor."

But the idea was insupportable to Dora, and the more so because of the way in which Claude took it. Generous he was, no one could be more generous, but there was behind it all a sort of patronizing attitude. He gave cordially indeed, but with the cordiality was a selfconscious pleasure in his own open-handedness and a contempt scarcely veiled of what he gave. And the worst of all was that Jim should have taken advantage of this *insouciance* about money affairs that sprang from the fact that he had no need to worry about money. Claude did not like Jim, Dora felt certain of that, and this made it impossible that Jim should take advantage of his bounty. It was an indebtedness she could not tolerate in her brother.

"What's there to fuss about?" Claude went on. "If the whole thing runs into a hundred and fifty pounds, it won't hurt. And, after all, he's your brother, dear. I like being good to your kin."

Dora was not doing Claude an injustice when she told herself that his irreproachable conduct to her family was in his mind. It was there; he did not mean it to be in evidence, but insensibly and unintentionally it tinged his words. The whole thing was kind, kind, kind, but it was consciously kind. That made the whole difference.

"But it can't be," she said. "If you won't speak to Jim about it, I will. It is impossible that he should drink your wine and smoke your cigars and have dinner parties at your expense. I can't let him do that sort of thing, if I can possibly help it. I would much sooner pay myself than that you should pay for him."

"My dear, what a fuss about nothing!" said Claude. "It isn't as if it mattered to me whether I pay for his soup and cutlet——"

"No, that's just it," said Dora quickly. "That's why you mustn't. If it cost you something—— Oh, Claude, I don't think I can make you

understand," she said. "Anyhow, I shall tell Jim what I think; and if the poor wretch hasn't got any money, then I must pay."

"Oh, I don't suppose he's got any money," said Claude; "and as for your paying, my dear, what difference does that make? I give you your allowance—and I wish you'd say you wanted more, for Uncle Alf's always wondering whether you've got enough—and you want to pay me out of that. Well, it's only out of one pocket and into another. Don't fuss about it, dear. I wish I hadn't told you."

"But it isn't quite like that," said Dora. "I could deny myself something in order to pay, if Jim can't. I can tell them not to send me the dress——"

And then the hopelessness of it all struck her. She was in the same boat as her husband; she could not deny herself anything she wanted, because there was no need for self-denial. And without that she could not make atonement for Jim's behaviour. Nor could she say to herself that he had done it without thinking; Jim always thought when there was a question of money, for that he took seriously. It was only his own conduct, his own character, and other little trifles of that sort for which he had so light a touch, so easy a rein. He had been giving little dinners at his flat, instead of dining out, as he usually did. He would never have done that if he thought he was going to pay for the quails and the peaches. That he should do it was the thing that was irremediable—that, and the contemptuous kindness of Claude.

Claude saw there was some feeling in her mind of which he did not grasp the force. She wanted to pay herself, or to think she paid, for Jim's hospitalities. It did not make a pennyworth of difference. He would pay a cheque into her account, which would make her square again, and she would never notice it.

"Just as you like, dear," he said; "but you mustn't tell Jim you are doing it. He would think that I was reluctant to pay for his food and drinks; and I'm not. I can't stand being thought mean. There's no excuse for a fellow with plenty of shekels being mean."

"Oh, you are not that," said Dora quickly, her voice without volition following the train of thought in her mind.

"No, dear, I hope not," said he. "And, believe me, I haven't got two ill feelings to rub against each other with regard to Jim. It's only by

chance I knew. If there'd been another box of cigars in the flat, and a few more dozen champagne, Parker would never have come to me. As for the household books——why, dear, they'd have been sent up to you, and I bet you'd never have seen. No, it's just a chance as has put us in the knowledge of it all, and I for one should hate to take advantage of it. So cheer up, dear! Pay me, if it makes you feel easier; but don't say a word to Jim. I like doing a thing thoroughly, as I'm doing this."

He lingered a moment by the door.

"Perhaps that clears things up a bit, Dora," he said, with a touch of wistfulness in his voice.

And Dora tried, tried to think it did. She tried also to put all possible simplicity into her voice as she answered:

"But what is there to clear up, dear?" she asked.

"That's all right, then," said he, and left her. But once outside the door, he shook his head. Bottled simplicity, so to speak, is not the same as simplicity from the spring. He was quite shrewd enough to know the difference.

He was shrewd enough also to know that he did not quite understand what had gone wrong. Something certainly had, and after his compliments to her on the subject of the admirable way in which she was behaving to his parents he knew that it was no longer his strictures on that subject that made this barrier. True it was that during these past weeks neither of them had had much leisure or opportunity for intimate conversation; but there were glances, single words, silences even that had passed between them when they were in Venice first that had taken no time if measured by the scale of minutes or seconds, yet which had been enough to fill the whole day with inward sunshine. And he had not changed to her: that he knew quite well; it was not that he was less sensitive now, less receptive of signals of that kind. For his part, he gave them in plenty. Just now he had leaned over her, smiling, when she lay on her sofa, a thing that in early days would have been sufficient to make her glance at him, with perhaps a raised hand that just touched his face, with perhaps an "Oh, Claude!" below her breath. Honestly, as far as any man can be honest with himself, he was as hungry for that as ever; he made his private code just as before,

and no answer came. Something was out of tune: the vibrations, wireless, psychical, did not pass from her to him as they had done; and his own messages, so it seemed, throbbed themselves out, and found none to pick them up, but were lost in the unanswering air.

Claude was of a very simple and straightforward nature, but he felt none the less keenly because he was not capable of feeling in any subtle or complicated manner. Love had come into his life, and his part in that burned within him still, in no way less ardently. He believed that Dora had loved him also: believed it, that is to say, in a sacred sense: it had been a creed to him, just as his own love for her was a creed. With body and soul he loved her, not fantastically, but deeply, and as he left her this afternoon it seemed to him that his love was being poured into a vessel in which was bitterness. They had talked only about what to him was a trivial thing—namely, the completeness with which Jim had made himself at home in the flat; but in the earlier days it made no difference what they talked about: tenderness, love came through it all, like water through a quicksand, engulfing them. Their days had been passed in such a quicksand; they were always joyfully foundering in it. But now it was not so. Some bitter encrustation had come on it which bore their weight quite easily, and there was no risk of going through, nor any chance of it. Honestly, he did not believe that he was responsible for the formation of that crust. He had not changed; was not other than he had always been. Once for a moment his mind poised and hovered above the truth, and he half said to himself, “I wonder if she finds me common?” But he rejected that: it was the wildest freak of imagination. Besides, she had not found him common at first, and he had not grown commoner. On the contrary, she had taught him much—little things, no doubt, but many of them. He had noticed she was always polite to servants and shop people, and though a year ago his tendency had been to be rather short with them, as inferiors, he had instinctively followed her example. That was only one instance out of many. But, so the poor fellow told himself, they were all little things like that, which could make no real difference to anybody.

Yet he thought over this a little longer. He himself, for instance, had always known that his father and mother and Per were, so to speak, “common” beside him. That seemed perfectly natural, for he had been

sent to Eton and Oxford, and had picked up all sorts of things as to the way "gentlemen behaved," which they did not know. He would not press his guests to have more wine, as his father did, when they had refused, nor tempt them to a second helping, as his mother did. There were little tricks of language, too, infinitesimal affairs, but he, so he thought, had got into the way of it, whereas they had not. He, for instance, never said "Lor'," as his father constantly did, and his mother, if she "was not on the watch." But he said, "Good Lord," because fellows said that, and not the other. But what did that really matter? There was a certain boisterousness of manner also that characterized them, which he and Mrs. Per, for instance, who was certainly a perfect lady, did not practise. Often, half in jest, his father had said, "Old Claude's getting too much of a swell for me"; and though he deprecated such a conclusion, he understood what was meant, and knew that if half was jest, half was serious. But all this made it the more impossible that Dora should find him common. Eton and Oxford, he felt quite sure, had taken all the commonness out of him.

And how little it mattered! He saw a hundred things, day by day, in which, if he had been disposed to peer and dissect and magnify, he would have felt that there was a difference between his father and himself. But how measure so small a thing? But what did that matter? He saw the kindness, the honour, the truth of his parents, and he was as likely to cease respecting and caring for them because of that difference as he was likely to cease to love Dora because once he had found a gray hair in her golden head. Besides—and his mind came back to that—if she found him common now, she must always have found him common. But nothing was short of perfection in their early weeks in Venice.

Once, on his way downstairs to be ready to greet Per and his wife, who were expected that evening, he half turned on his foot, intending to go back to Dora and try to get to the bottom of it all. But he knew that he would find nothing to say, for there was nothing he could suggest in which he had fallen short. And even as he paused, wondering if it would be enough that he should go back and say, "Dora, what is it?" he heard the sound of the hall door opening. That was Per, no doubt; he must go down and welcome him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE question of the title had at length been settled: the simplest solution was felt to be the best; and Mrs. Osborne need not have felt so strange at the thought of changing her name, for she only changed the "Mrs." into "Lady." The eminently respectable name of Osborne, after all, was associated, as seen on the labels in the fish market at Venice, with the idea of hardware all the world over, a thing which Mr. Osborne had been anxious to "bring in," and, at the same time, it had a faintly territorial sound. Lady Osborne, however, was a little disappointed; she would so much have enjoyed the necessity of getting quantities of table linen with the new initial worked on it. As it was, it was only necessary to have a coronet placed above it. Indeed, within a week coronets blossomed everywhere, with the suddenness of the coming of spring in the South—on the silver, on the hot-water cans, on writing paper and envelopes, on the panels of carriages and cars, and an enormous one, cut solid in limestone (the delivery of which seriously impeded for a while the traffic in Park Lane), was hoisted into its appropriate niche above the front door of No. 92 by the aid of a gang of perspiring workmen and a small steam crane. It had been a smart morning's work, so said Lord Osborne, who looked out from the Gothic windows of his snuggery every now and then to see how it was getting on; and it became even smarter in the afternoon when gold-leaf had been thickly laid on it.

It was on the evening of that day that Lady Osborne had only a family party. She had planned that from the very beginning of the settlement of the summer campaign, had declined a very grand invitation indeed in order not to sacrifice it, and was going to send it to the *Morning Post* and other papers, just as if it had been a great party. Lady Austell was there and Jim, Dora and Claude, Uncle Alf, Per and Mrs. Per, and her husband and herself. That was absolutely all, and there was nobody of any description coming in afterward; nor was any form of entertainment, except such as they would indulge in among themselves, to be provided. The idea was simply to have a family gathering, and not heed anybody else, for just this one evening; to be homely and cosy and comfortable.

So there they all were, as Lady Osborne thought delightedly to herself, as she sat down with Jim on her right and Alfred on her left, just a family party, and yet they were all folk of title now except Alfred. It showed that money was not everything, for Alfred was the richest of them all, while the Austells, who were the "highest," were also the poorest. She had looked forward immensely to this evening, but not without trepidation, for if Alfred was "worried" he could spoil any party. Alfred, however, seemed to be in the most excellent humour, and when, as they sat down, she said to him, "Well, Alfred, it's your turn next to be made something," he had replied that he had just received a most pressing offer of a dukedom. And the witticism was much appreciated.

There was no keeping relations apart, of course, since they were all relations, and Claude was sitting next his father, with Mrs. Per between him and Jim, and it was his voice that his mother most listened for with the unconscious ear that hearkens for sounds that are most beloved. He was apologizing to his father for the mislaying of some key.

"I'm really awfully sorry," he said, "but I'm such a bad hand at keys. I never lock anything up myself. Everything's always open in the flat, isn't it, Dora? But I'm very sorry, Dad. It was careless."

"Ah, well, never mind," said his father. "And I'm not one as locks up overmuch either. Give me the key of my wine cellar and my cash box, and the drawer of your mother's letters to me when I was a-courting her, and the Tantalus, and the drawer where I keep my cheque-book and cash box, and I don't ask for more. I'm no jailer, thank Heaven! But don't you even have a key to your cellar, my boy?"

"Oh, I suppose there is one, and I suppose Parker has it," he said.

Jim, too, had caught some of this and turned to Lady Osborne.

"By Jove! that's so like Claude," he said.

Lady Osborne beamed delightedly upon him.

"Well, and it is," she said. "There never was a boy so free with his things. Lor'! he used to get into such hot water with his father when first he went to Oxford. There was no question, as you may guess, of his being kept short of money, but naturally his father wanted to hear where it went, and there's no denying he was a bit extravagant when

he first went up, as they say. But when Claude got his cheque-book, to look where and how it had all gone, why, there wasn't as much as a date or anything on one of the bits you leave in. I never can remember the name."

"Counterfoils?" suggested Jim.

"Yes, to be sure. And I'll be bound he doesn't enter half of them now. And his uncle here played him a trick the other day—didn't pay in his quarter's allowance, did you, Alf? And Claude never knew till he was told; just said he was hard up and didn't know why, bless him. Well, he being his father's son, it would be queer if he was tight-handed."

Jim laughed.

"I shall be down on Mr.—Lord Osborne like a knife," he said, "if he doesn't pay me his rent."

"I'll be bound you will, and quite right too, for money is money when all's said and done," said Lady Osborne cordially. "Well, I'm sure that sea trout is very good. I feel as I can take a mouthful more, Thoresby; and give Lord Austell some more. I'm sure I can tempt you, Lord Austell."

"Nothing easier," said Jim.

Uncle Alf came and sat next Dora in the drawing room when, after a rather prolonged discussion of the '40 port, the gentlemen joined the rest of the circle again.

"I came up here from Richmond, making no end of smart speeches in the carriage, my dear," he said, "in order to make Maria and Eddie jump, but I've not said one. She's a good old sort, is Maria, and she was enjoying herself so. My dear, what's that great big gold thing they've put up above the front door?"

"Oh! a coronet, I think," said Dora.

"I thought it was, but I couldn't be sure. Lord, what a set out! But those two are having such a good time. I hadn't the heart to make them sit up. And I daresay they've got a lot of men in the House of Lords not half so honest as Eddie."

"I should never have forgiven you, Uncle Alf," said she, "if you'd vexed them."

“Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t, then,” said he. “And what’s going to happen now? You don’t mean to say Mrs. Per’s going to sing?”

It appeared that this was the case. Naturally she required a certain amount of pressing, not because she had any intention of not singing but because a little diffidence, a little fear that she had been naughty, and hadn’t sung for weeks, was the correct thing.

Uncle Alfred heard this latter remark.

“She’s been practising every day. Per told us in the dining room,” he said. “Lord, if Sabincourt would paint her as she looks when she sings I’d give him his price for it. That woman will give me the indigestion if I let my mind dwell on her.”

Mrs. Per sang with a great deal of expression such simple songs as did not want much else. Indeed, her rendering of “Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be cle-he-ver,” was chiefly expression. There was a great deal of expression, too, in the concluding line, which she sang with her eyes on the ceiling and a rapt smile playing about her tight little mouth. “One lorng sweet sorng,” she sang on a quavering and throaty F: “One lorng sweet sorng.” And she touched the last chord with the soft pedal down and continued smiling for several seconds, with that “lost look,” as Per described it, “that Lizzie gets when she is singing.”

Her mother-in-law broke the silence.

“If that isn’t nice!” she said. “And I declare if I know whether I like the words or the music best. One seems to fit the other so. Lizzie, my dear, you’re going to give us another, won’t you now?”

Lizzie had every intention of doing so, but again a little pressing was necessary, and she finally promised to sing once more, just once, if Claude would “do” something afterward. So she ran her hands over the keys, and became light and frolicsome, and sang something about a shower and a maid and a little kissing, which was very pretty and winsome. After that she sang again and again.

Jim had seated himself opposite Dora, and in the middle of this their eyes met for a moment. A faint smile quivered on the corner of Jim’s mouth, but the moment after Mrs. Per came to the end of a song and he warmly complimented her. Eventually she left the piano and called upon Claude for the fulfilment of his promise.

Claude on occasion recited; he did so now. The piece he chose was a favourite of his father's, a little hackneyed, perhaps, for it was "The Sands of Dee," and Lord Osborne blew his nose when it was finished.

"Thank ye, my boy," he said. "You said that beautiful. Just to think of it, poor thing, her caught by the tide like that, and her hair getting into the salmon nets. I'm glad we didn't have that before dinner. I couldn't have eaten a morsel of that salmon."

"My dear, you're so fanciful," said his wife, "and it was sea trout. But Claude said it beautiful. I'm sure I've heard them at the music halls, often and often, not half so good as that, for all that they are professionals."

"So that if your uncle cuts you off with a shilling, Claude," said his father, "you can still make a home for Dora; hey, Dora?"

And then Per did several very remarkable conjuring tricks, which nobody could guess. You put a watch into a handkerchief and held it quite tight, and then there wasn't any, or else it was a rabbit, or something quite different. Again, whatever card you chose, and wherever you put it back into the pack, Per was on it in no time. Or you thought of something, and Per blindfold, with the help of Mrs. Per, told you what you had thought of. And the Zanzics were held not to be in it.

After the strain and bewilderment of these accomplishments it was almost a relief to sit down to a good round game, the basis of which was a pack of cards, some counters, a system of forfeits, and plenty of chaff.

And about twelve, after a little light supper, the party broke up, Alf driving down to Richmond, and Lady Austell, who had made up her little disagreement with Jim, dropping him at his rooms. It was but a step from Park Lane there, but they held a short and pointed conversation on their way.

"A delightful, charming evening," she said; "all so genuine and honest, with no forced gaiety or insincere welcome. How happy and content Dora ought to be."

"The question being whether she is," remarked Jim.

"My dear, have you noticed anything?" asked his mother rather quickly. "Certainly during that recitation she looked a little—a little

inscrutable. What a deplorable performance, was it not? And if that odious woman had sung any more I think I should have screamed. But Dora and Claude? Do you think the dear fellow is a little on her nerves?"

"Yes, I think the dear fellow is a little on her nerves," said Jim, with marked evenness of tone. "Can you not imagine the possibility of that? Consider."

It was very likely that Lady Austell considered. She did not, however, think good to inform Jim of the result of this consideration.

"And he?" she asked.

"I am not in his confidence," said Jim. "I am only in his flat. And here it is. Thanks so much, dear mother, for the lift. Won't you come in? No?"

"I must speak to Dora," said she, as the brougham stopped.

"I think that would be very unwise of you. She knows all you would say, about his honour, his kindness, and so on. But at the present moment I think she feels that all the cardinal virtues do not make up for—well, for things like that recitation."

Lady Austell thought over this for a moment as Jim got out.

"You are friends with Claude?" she asked. "Real friends, I mean?"

"No, I can't stand him, and I think he can't stand me."

Lady Austell could not resist giving her son a little dab.

"And yet you use his flat?" she said.

"Oh, yes, and drink his wine and smoke his cigars. You would rather have liked the flat, wouldn't you? Perhaps he'll lend it you another time. He likes doing kind things that don't incommode him. I think he likes feeling it doesn't matter to him, and I feel that the fact that we dislike each other gives a certain piquancy to them. Good night; I'm so glad you liked your party. It is refreshing after the glitter and hollowness of the world to get close to family affection again."

It seemed to her that a little flame of true bitterness, quite unlike his usually genial cynicism and *insouciance*, shone in these words.

"Good night, dear," she said very softly; "I hope nothing has disagreed with you."

Jim laughed a little to himself as he ascended the thickly carpeted stairs to the flat on the first floor, but the laugh was not of long duration or of very genuine quality. He felt at enmity with all the world in spite of the excellent dinner he had eaten. He felt that Dora was a fool to let little things like—well, like that recitation—come between her and the immense enjoyment that could be got out of life if only you had, as was the case with her, a limitless power of commanding its pleasures. And yet, if those pleasures were to be indissolubly wrapped up with an Osborne environment he felt he almost understood her absence of content. To put a case—if he was given the choice of going to Newmarket to-morrow with Lady Osborne in her two-thousand-pound seventy-horse-power Napier, or of travelling there third class at his own expense, what would he do? Certainly, if the choice was for one day only, he would go in the car, but if the choice concerned going there every day for the rest of his life, or hers, the question hardly needed an answer. The thing would become unbearable. And Dora had to go, not to Newmarket only, but everywhere, everywhere with Claude. And for himself, he would sooner have gone anywhere with Mrs. Osborne than with him.

It is more blessed to give than to receive; in many cases it is certainly easier to give with a good grace than to receive in the same spirit. And if the gift is made without sacrifice it is, unless the recipient is genuinely attached to the giver, most difficult to receive it charitably. It may be received with gratitude if it is much wanted, but the gratitude here is felt not toward the giver, but toward the gift. Toward the giver there is liable to spring up, especially if he is not liked before, a feeling compared with which mere dislike is mild. It was so with Jim now.

He squirted some whisky into a glass, put a lump of clinking ice into it, and added some Perrier water. All these things were Claude's, so was the chair in which he sat, so was the cigar, the end of which he had just bitten off. This latter operation he had not performed with his usual neatness; there was a piece of loose leaf detached, which might spoil the even smoking of it, and he threw it away and took another. They were all Claude's, and if his drinks and his cigars had been made of molten gold, Jim felt he would sit up till morning, even at the cost of personal inconvenience, in order to consume as much as possible of

them. The evening too, “the charming, pleasant party,” of which his mother had spoken so foolishly, had enraged him. There had been all there that money, the one thing in the world he desired so much, could possibly buy, and they had found nothing better to do than listen to ridiculous songs, hear an unspeakable recitation, and play an absurd round game. He hated them all, not only because they were rich, but because they were ill-bred and contented. Jovial happiness (the more to be resented because of its joviality), a happiness, he knew well, that was really independent of money, trickled and oozed from them like resin from a healthy fir tree; happiness was their sap, their life; they were sticky with it. And he was afraid he knew where that came from; it came not only from their good digestion, but from their kindness, their simplicity, their nice natures. But if he at this moment had the opportunity of changing his own nature with that of any of these Osbornes, to take their kindness, their joviality, their simple contentment with and pleasure in life, with all their wealth thrown in, he would have preferred himself with all his disabilities and poverty. There was something about them all, some inherent commonness, that he would not have made part of himself at any price. Only a day or two ago he had been telling Dora to put the purseholders in a good temper at whatever cost, not to mind about their being not quite—and now he saw her difficulty. It was not possible even to think of them in a humorous light; they were awful grotesques, nightmares, for all their happiness and wealth, if you were obliged to have much to do with them.

Jim finished his whisky and took more. Of all those tragic and irritating figures, the one who appeared to him most deplorable and exasperating was Claude, on whom he was living at this moment, and on whom he proposed to live till the end of the month. After that he would no doubt search out some means of living on him further. Rich people were the cows provided for the poorer. It was quite unnecessary, because you fattened on their milk, to like them. You liked their milk, not them. And it was this very thing, this fact of his own indebtedness to his brother-in-law, that made Claude the more insupportable. That Claude was kind and generous, that Dora had married him, aggravated his offence, and the unspeakable meanness of his own relationship to him, in being thus dependent on him,

aggravated it further. Yet his own meanness was part of Claude's offence; he would not have felt like this toward a gentleman. But Claude, as he had said long ago to his mother, was a subtle cad, the worst variety of that distressing species. So he lit another of his cigars.

The butt of the one he had just thrown away had fallen inside the brass fender, and the Persian rug in front of the fender had been pulled a little too far inward, so that its fringe projected inside. The smouldering end fell on to this fringe, and Jim watched it singe the edge of the rug without getting up to take it off, justifying himself the while. The interior of a fender was a proper receptacle for cigar ends, and if the edge of a rug happened to be there too it was not his fault. And the fact that he sat and watched it being singed was wholly and completely symptomatic of his state of mind. He liked seeing even an infinitesimal deterioration of Claude's property. What business had Claude with prints and Persian rugs and half-filled-in cheque-books? He was generous because the generosity cost him absolutely nothing.

Had Jim been able to hear the conversation that took place in the drawing-room of No. 92 after he and his mother had gone his evil humour would probably have been further accentuated. Lord Osborne started it.

"Well, give me a family party every night," he said, "and I ask for nothing more, my lady, though, to be sure, I like your grand parties second to none. Dora, my dear, that brother of yours is a sharp fellow. He beat us all at our round game. I hope he's comfortable in your flat, eh, Claude? You've left some cigars and such-like, I hope, so that he won't wish to turn out, saying there's more of comfort to be had at his club."

Claude reassured his father on this point, and Mrs. Per glided up to Dora. She usually glided.

"What a dear Lord Austell is, Dora," she said. "And so aristocratic looking. I wish I had a brother like that. Do you think that he liked my little songs? Per and I wondered if he would come down to Sheffield in the autumn. Per has some good shooting, I believe, though I can't bear the thought of it. Poor little birds! to be shot like that when they're so happy. I always stop my ears if they are shooting near the house."

“Lizzie, my dear, you’re too kind-hearted,” said Lady Osborne. “What would our dinners be like if it wasn’t for the shooting? Perpetual beef and mutton, nothing tasty.”

Mrs. Per wheeled around with a twist of her serpentine neck.

“Ah, but you can never have read that dear little story by Gautier—or is it Daudet?—about the quails,” she said. “I have never touched a quail since I read it. But Lord Austell, dear Dora. We were going to have a little party, very select, about the middle of September, and Per and I wondered if Lord Austell would come. There are the races, you know, for two days, and with two days’ shooting, and perhaps an expedition to Fountains, I think he might like it. He told me he was so interested in antiquities. And if you and Claude would come too——”

Mrs. Per broke off in some confusion. She had forgotten for the moment. And she drew Dora a little aside.

“Dear Dora,” she said, “I quite forgot. Quite, quite, quite! So stupid! But Claude, perhaps, if all is well? They are great friends, are they not? Claude told me that Lord Austell was keeping his flat warm for him. So kind and so nice of Claude to lend it, too, of course.”

Then Lord Osborne’s voice broke in again.

“Yes, the family party is the party to my mind,” he said. “No pomp; just a plain dinner, and a song, and a conjuring trick, and no fatigue for my lady, with standing up and saying ‘Glad to see you’ a thousand times—not but what she isn’t glad, as we all are to see our friends; but Lord, Mrs. O.—I beg your pardon, my lady—how nice to have a quiet evening such as to-night, with my Lady Austell and her son just dropping in neighbour-like, and no bother to anybody. Per, my boy, you’ve made a conquest of Lord Austell; he was wrapped up in your tricks, and each puzzled him more than the last. As he said to me, ‘You don’t know what to expect: it may be an egg, or a watch, or the ten of spades.’ ”

“Well, I expect it would take a professional to see through my tricks,” said Per; “and even then I’d warrant I’d puzzle him as often as not. There’s a lot of practice goes to each, and there’s many evenings, when Lizzie and I have been alone, when we’ve gone through them, and she pulled me up short if ever she saw, so I might say, the wink of

a shirt cuff. But they went off pretty well to-night, though I say that who shouldn't."

"And I'm sure I don't know what pleased me best to-night," said Lady Osborne, "whether it was the conjuring tricks, or Lizzie's singing, or the 'Sands of Dee,' or the round game. Bless me! and it's nearly one o'clock. It's time we were all in bed, for there's no rest for anybody to-morrow, I'm sure, not after the clock's gone ten in the morning till two the next morning and later."

Lord Osborne gave a gigantic yawn.

"I'm sure I apologize to the company for gaping," he said, "but it comes upon one sometimes without knowing. And what has my lady planned for to-morrow?"

"As if it was me as had planned it," said his wife, "when you would have half the Cabinet take their lunch with you, and a Mercy League of some kind in the ballroom in the afternoon! Three hundred teas ordered, and by your orders, Mr. O., which will but give you time to dress, if you're thinking to make a speech to them. But do be up to the time for dinner, for we sit down thirty at table at a quarter past eight, and out of the ballroom you must go, for if the servants clear it and air it for my dance by eleven o'clock, it's as much as you can expect of flesh and blood!"

"And she carries it all in her head," said her husband, "as if it was twice five's ten! Maria, my dear, you're right, and it's time to go to the land of Nod. Not that there'll be much nodding for me; I shall sleep without them sort of preliminaries."

"Well, and I'm sure you ought to after all the snoring exercise you went through last night," said Lady Osborne genially. "I couldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard it. There, there, my dear, it's only my joke. And they tell me it shows a healthy pair of lungs to make all that night music, as I may say. And, Dora, be sure as your brother knows he's welcome to dinner as well as the dance afterward, in case I didn't say it to him. I can always find an extra place at my table for them as are always welcome."

Lord Osborne got up.

"Not but what you didn't fair stick him over your conjuring tricks, Per," he said. "And did you cast your eye over the coronet I've had put

up above the front door? It's a fine bit of carving. Well, good night to all and sundry. Claude, my boy, you take good care of Per, and mind to put out the lights when you come to bed. One o'clock! I should never have guessed it was past twelve."

The Newmarket meeting began next day, and Jim was not put to the odious degradation of paying for his own ticket, as he motored down with a friend. No more delightful way of spending the morning could be desired than this swift progress through the summer air over these smooth roads; and that, with a confident belief in the soundness of his betting book and the anticipation of a pleasant and lucrative afternoon, entirely dissipated the evil humour of the evening before. After all, in this imperfect world, it was wiser to take the bad with the good, and if the manners and customs of the Osborne family got on his nerves, it must be put down to their credit, not to the aggravation of their offences, as he had been disposed to think last night, that they treated him in so open-handed a way. Certainly they would appear in a far more disagreeable light if they were close-handed with their money. It was, of course, a sin and an iniquity that other people should have money and not he; but since Providence (and that deplorable Derby week) had chosen to make this disposition of affairs, it was as well that certain mines of bullion should be accessible to him. And here already was the Heath, and the crowds, and the roar of the ring.

Like most gamblers, Jim, though practical enough in the ordinary affairs of life, had a vein of fantastic superstition about him, and it occurred to him after the first race, in which he had the good fortune to back the winner, that his luck had turned, and he cast about to think of the cause that had turned it. At once he hit on it: he had paid Claude back the sovereign which he had found on his dressing table and had given to the cook. That had been a happy inspiration of his: the action itself had been of the nature of casting bread on the waters, for Claude probably was unconscious of having left a sovereign there, and in any case would not ask for it; and here, not after many days, but the very next day, he had picked up fifty of them before lunch. Apparently some sort of broad-minded guardian angel looked after his bets and his morals, and, if he was good, turned the luck for him (for this broad-minded angel clearly did not object to a little horse racing) and enabled

him to back winners. And after this initial success Jim went back to his friend's motor and ate an extremely good lunch.

Whether the broad-minded angel looked back over Jim's past record and found something that he could not quite stand, Jim never reasoned out with any certainty; all that was certain was that after that first race the carefully made up, almost gilt-edged book went to pieces. Once in a sudden access of caution he hedged over a horse he had backed; that was the only winner he was concerned with for the rest of the day.

Jim returned to town that evening in a frame of mind that was not yet desperate, but sufficiently serious to make him uncomfortable. Outwardly, he took his losses admirably, was cheerfully cynical about them, and behaved in nowise other than he would have behaved if he had been winning all afternoon. He had promised to dine at the Savoy, but on arrival at the flat he found a telephone message written out which had come from Dora after his departure that morning, asking him to dine at No. 92. At that his mood of last evening flashed up again.

"I'll be damned if I ever set foot in that house again!" he said to himself. And regretted into the telephone.

There was a telegram for him as well. It was from a very well-informed quarter, giving him the tip to back Callisto, an outsider, for the big race to-morrow.

He crumpled it up impatiently; how many well-informed tips, he wondered, had he acted on, and what percentage of them had come off? Scarcely one in a hundred. No; backing outsiders was a good enough game if you were on your luck, and also happened to be solvent.

He did not go to Newmarket next day, but sat all afternoon in his club, making frequent journeys to the tape, that ticked out inexorably and without emotion things so momentous to him. It was a little out of order, and now and then, after the announcement "Newmarket," it would reel off a rapid gabble of meaningless letters like a voluble drunkard, or give some extraneous information about what was happening at Lord's. Then it pulled itself together again, and he saw that Callisto had won. Harry Franklin was looking over his shoulder as this information came out, and gave a cackle of laughter.

“Hurrah! fur coat for May and new gun for me,” he said.

“Lucky dog!” said Jim. “I thought you never betted.”

“Oh, once in a blue moon! Moon was blue yesterday. Somebody gave me this tip last night, and I had a shy.”

“I didn’t shy,” said Jim. “Rather a pity. Twenty-five to one, wasn’t it?”

“Yes; that fiver of mine will go a long way,” said Harry. “Come and dine to-night. Dora and Claude Osborne are coming.”

“Thanks awfully, but I’m engaged,” said Jim.

He went back to his flat when the last race was recorded to see just where he stood. He had nothing more on for the last day of the meeting, and thus his accounts were ready to be made up. A rather lengthy addition, with a very short subtraction of winnings, showed him just what he had lost. And he owed nearly five hundred pounds more than he could possibly pay. The exact sum was £476. It would have to be paid by Monday next.

It was true in a sense, that, as he told Harry Franklin, he was engaged that night, though the engagement was to himself only. It was necessary to sit and think. The money was necessary to him, and necessity is a lawless force. The money had to be obtained; so much might be taken for granted. It was no use considering what would happen if it was not obtained; therefore, all that might be dismissed, for it had to be obtained. That was the terminus from which he started.

He had telephoned from the club that he would be in for dinner, and would dine alone, and Claude’s admirable cook, it appeared, understood the science of providing single dinners as well as she understood more festive provisions. Dinner was light and short, and Parker, without prompting, gave him a half-bottle of Veuve Clicquot, iced to the right point and no further, and a glass of port that seemed to restore him to his normal level. What he had to face was no longer unfaceable; he felt he could go out and meet necessity.

Other possibilities detained him but little; it was no use applying to his mother for money, for he might as well apply to the workhouse; and he could not apply to the Osbornes. He tried to think of himself asking Claude to lend him this sum; he tried to picture himself going to

Lord Osborne with his story. But the picture was unpaintable: it had no possible existence.

And the other way—the way which already had taken form and feature in his mind—was not so difficult, far less impossible of contemplation, simply because his nature was not straight, and the moral difficulty of stealing appeared to him to be within his power to deal with. He had never been straight; but even now he made excuses for himself, said that it was a necessity that forced him into a path that was abhorrent to him. Perhaps he did dislike it a little; certainly he did not take it for amusement. Simply there was no other way open to him. There remained only to consider the chances of detection. They did not seem to him great. The cheque-book with which he would shortly be concerned had clearly been left in its drawer as finished with, for the last cheque was used, though not the one immediately preceding it. Claude, too, had almost bragged about his carelessness with regard to money, and the truth of his boast had been endorsed by his mother only two nights ago, when she told him how he had never noticed that his quarter's allowance had not been paid in. That was a matter of nearly four thousand pounds; this of hardly more than the same number of hundreds.

Besides, it if were detected, what would Claude do? Proceed against his wife's brother? He believed he need not waste time in considering such a possibility, for, to begin with, the possibility itself was so remote.

Then for a moment some little voice of honour made itself heard, and he had to argue it down. Not to pay such debts—debts of honour, as they were called—was among those very few things that a man must not do, and for which, if he does them, he gets no quarter from society in general. No doubt he could get his debts paid if he went to the Osbornes; but that he could not do. It was much harder for him than that which he proposed to do. So the little voice was silenced again, almost before it began to speak. But it was used to being taken lightly, to be not listened to.

He was not often at home in the evening, but when he was he usually sat in Claude's room, which, though small, was cooler than the southward-facing drawing room, and he took his cigar there now. A

tray of whisky and Perrier had already been placed there, but since he did not wish to be disturbed he rang the bell to tell Parker he wished to be called at eight next morning, and wanted nothing more that night. And then he took some writing paper from a drawer in the knee-hole table, and drew up his chair to it. He had found there also a carefully written out speech by Claude, designed for his constituents. He read a page or two, and found it dealt with local taxation. Large sums like "five million" were written in figures. Smaller sums, as in phrases "fivepence in the pound," were written out in full. This was convenient. There was also a frequent occurrence of "myself" in the speech. Part of that word concerned Jim. And Claude wrote with a stylograph: there were several of them in the pen tray. Jim had used them regularly since he came into the flat.

Dora was to call for him next morning at twelve, with the design of spending the afternoon at Lord's to see the cricket, and, arriving there a little before her appointed time, was told that he was out, but had left word that he would be back by twelve. Accordingly, since the heat was great in the street, she came up to the flat and waited for him there.

She felt rather fagged this morning, for the last week had been strenuous, while privately her emotional calendar had made many entries against the days. That estrangement from Claude, that alienation without a quarrel, and therefore the more difficult to terminate, had in some secret way got very much worse; his presence even had begun to irritate her; and he certainly saw that irritation (it did not require much perspicacity), and spared her as much as he could, never, if possible, being alone with her. Instead he threw himself into the hospitalities of the house; looked after Mrs. Per, taking her to picture-galleries and concerts, until Per had declared that he was getting to feel quite an Othello, and performed with zeal all the duties of a resident son of the house. And bitterly Dora saw how easy it was to him, how without any effort he caught the *rôle*. Like some mysterious stain, appearing again after years, the resemblance between him and his family daily manifested itself more clearly.

The sight of the flat caused these thoughts to inflict themselves very vividly on her mind, and, sitting here alone, waiting, it was almost

with shuddering that she expected Claude to enter. How often in these familiar surroundings she had sat just here, expecting and longing for him to come, to know that he and she would be alone together in their nest. And now the walls seemed to observe her with alien eyes, even as with alien eyes she looked at them. It was a blessing, anyhow, that they had gone to Park Lane: the dual solitude here would have been intolerable.

She had not got to wait long, for Jim's step soon sounded in the passage. She heard him whistling to himself as he went into his bedroom, and next moment he came in.

"I'm not late," he said, "so don't scold me. It's you who are early, which is the most outrageous form of unpunctuality. Well, Dora, how goes it?"

She got up and came across the room to him.

"It doesn't go very nicely," she said; "but you seem cheerful, which is to the good. Jim, it is so nice to see somebody cheerful without being jocose. We are all very jocose at Park Lane, and Claude flirts with Mrs. Per."

Dora gave a little laugh.

"I didn't mean to speak of it," she said, "and I won't again. Let's have a day off, and not regret or wonder or wish. What lots of times you and I have gone up to Lord's together, though we usually went by Underground. Now we go in a great, noble motor. Let's have fun for one day; I haven't had fun for ages."

Jim nodded at her.

"That just suits me," he said. "I want a day off, and we'll have it. Pretend you're about eighteen again and me twenty-one. After all, it's only putting the clock back a couple of years."

"And I feel a hundred," said Dora pathetically.

"Well, don't. I felt a hundred yesterday, and it was a mistake."

"Jim, I was so sorry about your bad luck at Newmarket. Somebody told me you had done nothing but lose. What an ass you are, dear! Why do you go on?"

Jim's face darkened but for a moment.

“It’s nothing the least serious,” he said. “I did have rather a bad time, but I’ve pulled through and have paid every penny. In fact, that is what kept me this morning. I hate to give away all those great, crisp, crackling notes! I hate it! And then on my way home I determined not to think about it any more, nor about anything unpleasant that had ever happened, and I get here to find you had come to the same excellent determination. Let’s have a truce for one day.”

“Amen!” said Dora.

It is astonishing what can be done by acting in pairs. Dora would have been perfectly incapable alone of watching cricket with attention, far less, as proved to be possible, with rapture; and it might also be open to reasonable doubt as to whether alone Jim could have found any occupation that would have deeply interested him. But together they gave the slip to their anxieties and preoccupations, and Jim did not even want to bet on the result of the match. All afternoon they sat there, and waited till at half-past six the stumps were drawn. Then Dora gave a great sigh.

“Oh dear! it’s over,” she said, “and I suppose we’ve got to begin again. What a nice day we’ve had. I—I quite forgot everything.”

Jim came home rather late that night, and found letters waiting for him in the little room where he had sat the night before. There was nothing of importance, and nothing that needed an answer, and in a few minutes he moved toward the door in order to go to bed. And then quite suddenly, with the pent-up rush of thought which all day he had dammed up in a corner of his brain, he realized what he had done, and his face went suddenly white, and strange noises buzzed in his ears, and his very soul was drowned in terror. But it was too late: his terror should have been imagined by him twenty-four hours ago. Now it was authentic; there was no imagination required, and he was alone with it.

CHAPTER X.

CLAUDE, as became the future candidate for the constituency of West Brentwood, was sedulous and regular in reading the House of Common debates, and two mornings later was sitting after breakfast with his *Times* in front of him, to which he devoted an attention less direct than was usual with him, for he expected every moment to be told that the visitor whom he was waiting for would be announced, and he could form no idea of what the visitor's business might be. Half an hour ago he had been summoned to the telephone and found that he was speaking to one of the partners in Grayson's bank, who asked if he could see him at once. No clue as to what so pressing a business might be was given him, and Mr. Humby, the partner who spoke to him, only said that he would start immediately. He had first telephoned, it appeared, to Claude's flat, and his servant had given him the address.

In itself there was little here that was tangibly disquieting, for Claude stood outside the region of money troubles, but other things combined to make him, usually so serene, rather nervous and apprehensive. For the last day or two he had been vaguely anxious about his mother, who appeared to him not to be well, though in answer to his question she confessed to nothing more than July fatigue, while his relations with Dora, or rather his want of them, continued to perplex or distress him. She was evenly polite to him, she went out with him when occasion demanded, but that some barrier had been built between them he could no longer doubt. He had not only his own feeling to go upon, for his mother had remarked it, and asked if there was any trouble. Lady Osborne was the least imaginative of women, he was afraid, and her question had so emphasized it to his mind that he had determined, should no amelioration take place, to put a direct question to Dora about it. He would gladly have avoided that, for his instinct told him that the trouble was of a sort that could scarcely be healed by mere investigation, but the present position was rapidly growing intolerable. All these things made it difficult for him to concentrate his attention on the fiscal question, and it was almost with

a sense of relief to him that the interruption he had been waiting for came.

He shook hands with Mr. Humby, who at once stated his business.

"I may be troubling you on a false alarm, Mr. Osborne," he said, "but both my partners and I thought that one of us had better see you at once in order to set our minds at rest."

"You have only just caught me," said Claude. "I am going into the country before lunch."

"Then I have saved myself a journey," said Mr. Humby gravely.

He produced an envelope and took a cheque out of it.

"The cheque came through to-day," he said; "it was cashed two days ago at Shepherd's Bank, quite regularly. But it is drawn by you to 'self' over a week ago. That was a little curious, since cheques drawn to self are usually cashed at once. Also, though that is no business of ours, it is a rather large sum, five hundred pounds, to take in cash. You have banked with us for some years, Mr. Osborne, and we find you have never drawn a large sum to yourself before. But the combination of these things seemed to warrant us in making sure the cheque was—ah, genuine. The handwriting appears to be yours."

Claude looked at the date.

"June 24," he said. "I did draw a large cheque about that time for a motor-car."

"That has been presented; it was drawn to Daimler's," said Mr. Humby.

Claude turned the cheque over: it was endorsed with his name, but search how he might he could not recollect anything about it. And slowly his inability to remember deepened into the belief that he had drawn no such cheque.

"If you would refer to your cheque-book," said Mr. Humby, "we could clear the matter up. I am sorry for giving you so much trouble."

"The question is, Where is my cheque-book?" said Claude. "I came over here a week ago, but before that I was at my flat. But I will look."

He went upstairs, into the sitting room, which was his and Dora's. She was sitting there now, writing notes, and looked up as he came in.

"Claude, can I speak to you for a minute?" she said.

“Yes, dear, but not this moment. I have to find my cheque-book. Where do you suppose it is? One must attend to business, you know.”

“Oh, quite so,” said she, and resumed her letter again.

Claude’s heart sank. Perhaps she wanted to speak to him about things that were of infinitely greater moment, and he had made a mess of it, repulsed her, by his foolish speech.

“Dora, what is it?” he asked. “Is it——”

She must have known what was in his mind, for she made an impatient gesture of dissent.

“No, if you can give me a minute later on, it will be all right,” she said.

His search was soon rewarded, but proved to be fruitless, for the cheque-book was a new one, and he had only used it for the first time three days ago. But perhaps she would remember something.

“Dora, did I give you a rather big cheque for household bills or anything, while we were in the flat?” he asked.

“Yes, I remember that you did,” she said. “And I remember endorsing it as you drew it to me. Why?”

“Only that there is a cheque that I appear to have drawn for five hundred pounds, just before I left the flat, and for some reason my bankers want to be sure that I did draw it.”

“You mean they think that it may be forged?”

“Yes.”

“But who can have got hold of your cheque-book?” asked Dora. “You have found it, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but this is no use. The cheque in question was drawn before I began this book. I suppose I left it at the flat.”

Dora had continued writing her note as she talked, for it was only a matter of a few formal phrases of regret, but at this moment, her hand suddenly played her false, and her pen sputtered on the paper. And though she did not know at that second why this happened, a moment afterward she knew.

Below his cheque-book in the drawer lay Claude’s passbook. It had been very recently made up, for his allowance from Uncle Alfred, paid

on June 28, appeared to his credit, and on the debit side a cheque to Dora of £150, cashed on the previous date. That, no doubt, was the cheque for "books" of which she had spoken.

She had gone on writing again, and Claude apparently had noticed nothing of that pen-splutter.

"Yes, here are cheques I have drawn up till the 29th," he said, "and none of £500. It looks rather queer. I'll be back again in five minutes. I must just see Mr. Humby, and tell him I can't trace it."

Claude went rather slowly downstairs again. The matter was verging on certainty. He had drawn a cheque for five hundred pounds, on June 24, and it had not been presented till two days ago. The cheque for the car was entered, and the cheque for books to Dora. He hated to think that Parker had forged his name, but if he had, good servant though he was, there was no clemency possible.

"May I look at the cheque again?" he asked.

He examined it more closely.

"I can find no trace of drawing any such cheque," he said, "and I believe it is a forgery. It is very like my handwriting, but I don't believe I wrote it."

"That is what we thought," said Mr. Humby.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked he.

"Find out who presented the cheque, and prosecute. I am very sorry: it is an unpleasant business, but the bank can take no other course."

He folded up the cheque again, put it in his pocket and left the room. But Claude did not at once go back to Dora. There had started unbidden into his mind the memory of a morning at Grote before they were married, of a game of croquet, of a sovereign. Next minute he too had left the room, and the minute after he was in the road, walking quickly to Mount Street. His old cheque-book no doubt was there, and he would be able to find it. And all the way there, he tried desperately to keep at bay a suspicion that threatened to grip him by the throat. And upstairs Dora waited for him: the same doubt threatened to strangle her.

Jim was out, but was expected back every moment, and Claude went into his small room, and began searching the drawers of his

writing table. There was a sheaf of letters from Dora in one, a copy of his speech on municipal taxation in another, and in the third a heap of old cards of invitation and the butt end of his cheque-book.

Sun blinds were down outside the windows, the room was nearly dark, and he carried this out into the large sitting room and sat down to examine it. There was a whole batch of cheques, most of which he could remember about, drawn on June 22. Then came a blank counterfoil and then the last counterfoil of the book, bearing a docket of identification as cheque to Dora for £150. That was drawn on the 27th.

He heard a step outside; the door opened and Jim entered. He was whistling as he came round the corner of the screen by the door. Then he saw Claude, his whistling ceased, and his face grew white. Once he tried to speak, but could not.

Claude saw that, the blank face, the whitened lips; it was as if Jim had been brought face to face with some deadly spectre, instead of the commonplace vision of his brother-in-law sitting in his own room, looking through the useless but surely innocuous trunk of an old cheque-book. And instantaneously, automatically, Claude's mind leaped to the conclusion which he had tried to keep away from it. But it could be kept away no longer: the inference closed upon him like the snap of a steel spring.

In the same instant there came upon him his own personal dislike of Jim, and his distrust of him. How deep that was he never knew till this moment. Then came the reflection that he was doing Jim a monstrous injustice in harbouring so horrible a suspicion, and that the best way of clearing his mind of it was to let the bank trace the cheque and prosecute. But he knew that it was his dislike of his brother-in-law that gave birth to this, not a sense of fairness. And on top of it all came the thought of Dora and his love for her, and mingled with that a certain pity that was its legitimate kinsman.

The pause, psychically so momentous, was but short in duration, and Claude jumped up. His mind was already quite decided: it seemed to have decided itself without conscious interference on his part.

"Good morning, Jim," he said. "I must apologize for making an invasion in your absence, but I had to refer back to an old cheque-

book."

Jim commanded his voice.

"Nothing wrong, I hope," he said.

Again Claude had to make a swift decision. He could tell Jim that a cheque of his had been forged, and that the matter was already in the hands of the bank: that probably would force a confession, if there was cause for one. But it would still be his dislike (though he might easily call it justice) that was the mover here. There was a wiser way than that, a way that, for all the surface falsehood of it, held a nobler truth within.

"No, nothing whatever is wrong," he said. "Excuse me: I must telephone to the bank, to say the cheque is all right. Ah, I'll telephone from here if you will allow me."

The telephone was just outside and Jim heard plainly all that passed. The number was rung up, and then Claude spoke.

"Yes, I'm Mr. Claude Osborne. I am speaking to Mr. Grayson, am I? It is the matter that Mr. Humby came to speak to me about this morning. Yes, yes: the cheque for £500. I find I have made a complete error. The cheque was drawn by me and is perfectly correct. Yes. It was very stupid of me. Please let Mr. Humby know as soon as he gets back. Yes. Thank you. Good morning."

Claude paused a moment with the receiver in his hand. Then he called to Jim.

"Can't stop a moment," he said. "I've the devil of a lot to do. Good-bye."

He walked back again at once to Park Lane, still thinking intently, still wondering if he could have done better in any way. Honest all through, he hated with a physical repulsion the thought of what he felt sure Jim had done, but oddly enough, instead of feeling a crescendo of dislike to Jim himself, he was conscious only of a puzzled sort of pity. By instinct he separated the deed from the doer, instead of bracketting them both in one clause of disgusted condemnation. And then he ceased to wonder at that: it seemed natural, after all.

He went straight up to Dora's room, and found her still at her table with letters round her. But when he entered she was not writing: she

was staring out of the window with a sort of terror on her face. Claude guessed what it was that perhaps had put it there, and what lurked behind that look of agonized appeal that she turned on him.

"I'm sorry for being so long, dear," he said, "but I've been making a fool of myself. That cheque I spoke to you about is quite all right. I found the counterfoil in my old book at the flat. I drew it right enough. Mr. Humby expects a fellow to carry in his head the memory of every half-crown he spends."

Dora gave one great sobbing sigh of relief, which she could not check.

"I'm glad," she said. "I hated to think that Parker perhaps had gone wrong. One—one hates suspicion, and its atmosphere."

Claude heard, could not help hearing the relief in the voice, could not help seeing that the smile she gave him struggled like mist-ridden sunlight to shine through his dispelled clouds of nameless apprehension. Nor could his secret mind avoid guessing what that apprehension was, for it was no stranger to him; he had been sharer in it till he had seen Jim, when it deepened into a certainty which was the opposite to that which at this moment brought such relief to his wife. The other certainty, his own, must of course be kept sealed and locked from her, and Claude hastened to convey it away from her presence, so to speak, by talking of something else, for fear that it might, in despite of him, betray some hint of its existence.

"But there was something you wanted to speak to me about," he said.

"Yes. It is about your mother. Do you think she is well?"

"No, I haven't thought so for the last three or four days," said he. "What have you noticed?"

"I went into her room just now," said Dora, "and she was sitting and doing nothing. And she was crying."

Claude paused in astonishment.

"Crying," he said. "The mater crying?"

"Yes. She clearly did not wish me to see it, and so I pretended not to. I had thought she wasn't well before now. We must do something, Claude; make her see a doctor."

“But why hasn’t she been to see a doctor all these days?” he asked. “The governor goes to a doctor if his nails want cutting.”

“I don’t know why she hasn’t been. There might be several reasons. But I thought I would speak to you first and then if you approved I would go to her and try to find out what is the matter.”

“I wish you would,” he said.

Dora got up, but her mind went back to that which she had been brooding over in his absence, that which frightened her.

“Did you see Jim?” she asked.

“Yes: he came in when I was there.”

“How was he?” she asked negligently.

“Oh, much as usual. I couldn’t stop because I wanted to get back to you. Will you come and tell me about the mater, after you have seen her?”

Dora went back to Lady Osborne’s room, and knocked before she entered. The apparition of her sitting and crying all alone had frightened her more than she had let Claude see, for as a rule her mother-in-law’s cheerfulness was of a quality that seemed to be proof against all the minor accidents of life, and Dora remembered how, one day in Italy, when they had missed a train at Padua, and had to wait three hours, Lady Osborne’s only comment had been, “Well, now, that will give us time to look about us.” She was afraid therefore that the cause of her tears was not trivial.

And now, when she went in again, receiving a rather indistinct answer to her knock, she found Lady Osborne hastily snatching up the day’s paper, so as to pretend to be occupied. But her face wore an expression extraordinarily contorted, as if her habitual geniality found it a hard task to struggle to the surface.

“And I’m sure the paper gets more and more interesting every day,” said she, “though it’s seldom I find time to have a glance at all the curious things that are going on in the world. What a dreadful place Morocco must be; I couldn’t sleep quiet in my bed if I was there! What is it, my dear?”

On her face and in her voice the trace of tears bravely suppressed still lingered, and a great wave of pity suddenly swept over Dora. Something was wrong, something which at present Lady Osborne was bearing in secret, for it was quite clear that her husband, whose cheerfulness at breakfast had bordered on the boisterous, knew nothing, nor did Claude know. Her mother-in-law, as Dora was well aware, was not a woman of complicated or subtle emotion, who could grieve over an imagined sorrow, or could admit to a personal relation with herself the woe of the world, for with more practical wisdom she gave subscriptions to those whose task it was to alleviate any particular branch of it. Her family, her hospitalities, her comfortable though busy life had been sufficient up till now to minister to her happiness, and if something disturbed that, Dora rightly thought that it must be something tangible and personal. So she went to the sofa, and sat down by her, and did not seek to be subtle.

"What is it?" she said. "Is there anything the matter?"

The simplicity was not calculated; it was perfectly natural, and had its effect. Lady Osborne held the paper in front of her a moment longer, but it was shaken with the trembling of her hands. Then she dropped it.

"My dear, I am a selfish old woman," she said, "but I can't bear it any longer. I've not been well this long time, but I've tried to tell myself it was my imagination, and not bother anybody. And I could have held on, my dear, a little longer, if you hadn't come to me like this. I warrant you, there would have been plenty of laughing and chaff at Grote this week-end, as always. But the pain this morning was so bad that I just thought I would have a bit of a cry all to myself."

"But why have you told nobody?" said Dora. "Not Claude, nor Dad nor me?"

Lady Osborne mopped her eyes.

"Bless your heart, haven't we all got things to bear, and best not to trouble others?" she said. "I know well enough how you'd all spend your time in looking after me, and having the doctor and what not, and I thought I could get through to the end of the season and then go and rest, and see what was the matter. And, my dearie, I'm a dreadful coward you know, and I couldn't abear the thought of being pulled

about by the doctor, and maybe worse than that. Anyhow, I've not given in at once. Some days my colour has been awful and no appetite, but I've kept my spirits up before you all. And I can't bear to think now that I must give in, and have to take doctor's stuff, and lie up, spoiling all your pleasure. But I don't think as I can go on much longer like this. Perhaps it's best that you know. Poor Eddie! Him and his jokes this morning at breakfast, chaffing me about Sir Thomas! Lor', my dear, what spirits he has! I declare he quite took my thoughts off. And about Claude and Lizzie too, as if Claude ever gave a thought to anyone but yourself."

Lady Osborne patted Dora's hand a moment in silence. She was not sure that Dora had "relished" her husband's fun at breakfast; now was the time to set it right.

"But then, Eddie knew that, else he'd never have made a joke of it," she said. "And you, my dearie, have been so sweet to me these weeks, not that you haven't been that always, as if you was my own daughter. Indeed, not that I complain of Lizzie, for I don't, often and often she's behaved high to Mr. O. and me, when you, who have excuse enough, have never done such a thing. Often I've said to him, 'It's as if Dora was an Osborne herself.' Thank you, my dearie, for that, and for all you've done and been. I daresay it's been difficult for you at times, but there! I daresay you think I've not noticed, but I have, my dear, and you've behaved beautiful always. I wanted just to say that, and you're behaving sweet and kind to me still."

Somehow, deep down, this cut Dora like a knife. There was a wounding pathos about it, that made those efforts she had put forth to behave decently, appear infinitely trivial, humiliatingly cheap. And the gentle patting on her hand continued.

"And now, dearie, I'm going to ask you to do another thing yet," said Lady Osborne, "and that is to take my place down at Grote this Sunday, and let me stay up here and see my doctor this afternoon. If you hadn't such quick and loving eyes, I should have gone through with it and held on, my dear, even if there was more mornings like this in store. But with you knowing, my dear, I'll not wait longer, and maybe make matters worse, though perhaps it's me as has been making a fuss about nothing, and a bottle of medicine will make me as

fit as a flea again, as Mr. O. used to say. Now we must put our heads together and contrive, so that he may think it's just a touch of the liver and nothing to be alarmed for, else he'll never go and leave me. He's gone off already to some committee, and the car is to call for him at twelve and drive him straight down, so that he'll find himself at Grote before he knows anything is wrong. And then, my dear, you must do your best to make him think it's nothing, as, please God, it isn't. What a trouble our insides are, though, to be sure, mine's given me little enough to complain of all these years. I've always eaten my dinner and got a good night's rest until this began."

They talked long, "contriving," as Lady Osborne had said, the sole point of the contrivance being that her husband should enjoy his day or two at Grote, and have everything to his liking, and not fret about her. Once and again and again once, Dora tried to lead the conversation back to Lady Osborne herself, to get from her some inkling of what her indisposition might be, what its symptoms were, with a view of encouraging her to face the doctor with equanimity, for this was clearly an ordeal she dreaded. And on Dora's third attempt she put an end to further questions.

"I think, dearie, we'll not talk about that," she said, "because, as I told you, I'm such a coward as never was, and the more I think about it, the more coward I shall be when I get to the doctor's door. It was just the same with me about my teeth before I lost them all: if one had to come out, I had such a shrinking from a bit of pain, that if I thought about it, I knew I shouldn't go to the dentist at all. So I used to busy myself with other things, and plan a treat, maybe, for the working folk, or an extra good dinner for Mr. O., or a surprise for Per or Claude; and it's a similar to that what I'll do now, if you don't mind. And I assure you I'm so bothered over the thought of you and Dad being at Grote without me that I've little desire to think about anything else. Thirty-five years it is last May, my dear, since we took each other for better or worse, and it's always been better, and not a night since then, I assure you, have we not slept under the same roof, and in the same room save when I had a cold and feared to give it him. And he's got to depend on me, Gold bless him, and knows that I shall see he has a biscuit or two on a plate by his bedside and a glass of milk, against he wakes the

night. Servants are never to be trusted, my dear, though I'm sure it's a shame to say it, when ours are so attentive. But he's got a new valet just of late, and if you could peep in at my lord's bedroom door when you went up to bed, and see as all was prepared, and that his slippers was put where he can see them in his dressing room, else he'll walk to bed in his bare feet and step on a pin or a tack someday, which I always dread for him. And if he comes in hot, as he's taken to do in this weather from his walk, just you behave as if you was me, and say to him, 'Mr. O., you go and change your vest and your socks, else I don't pour out your cup of tea,' and knowing as you'll do that will take a load off my mind, and I shall go to the doctor this afternoon, knowing as you are looking after him as if I was there, as comfortable as if I was going to have a cheque cashed for me. And, my dear, if you'd sit next him in church, and just nudge him if he attempts to follow the lesson without putting his glasses on. It's small print in his Bible, and never another one will he let me give him, just because it was that one he used to read out of to me when we were in Cornwall on our wedding trip, and sometimes no church within distance. But be sure he changes his underwear, my dear, when he comes in, for he catches cold easy, and his skin acts so well that it's as if he'd had a bath. And give him plenty of milk in his coffee at breakfast, not that he likes it, but he will have the coffee made so strong that it's enough to rasp the coats of the stomach, as they say, unless you drown it in milk. And you'll cheer him up, I know, my dear, if he gets anxious, and just say to him 'Stuff and nonsense, Dad, Mrs. O.'s had a bit of an upset, same as you have times without number, and she's always nervous about herself, and has gone to see the doctor, and as like as not will come down to-morrow afternoon with a couple of pills in her pocket, and ready to be laughed at to your heart's content.' That's what I want you to say, my dear, though you'll put it in your own words, and much better I'm sure. But to-day it's as if I feel I couldn't go and look after my friends, now that I know you'll take my place, for when there's a multitude in the house, sometimes the mistress can't get to bed till it maybe is one o'clock or worse, and I want a good long night. I shall try to see Sir Henry as soon as may be, and after that I don't doubt I shall just get to bed and sleep the clock round. I'm so tired, my dear, and there's something—— Well, I make no doubt that before many

hours are out, we shall all be laughing together over my silliness, and Mr. O. will be asking if I have taken enough phosphorus jelly, or what not. Lor', he'll never let me hear the last of it!"

That was a triumphant conclusion. The whole speech punctuated by silences, punctuated by a little dropping of tears and by a little laughter, was hardly less triumphant. Once, ages ago, so it seemed to Dora, Claude had held up his father and mother as examples of the ideal antidote against the gray-business of middle age, and it had failed to satisfy her then. She would have thought it comical, had not there been some very keen sense of disappointment about it, that a lover should speak to his beloved in such language. But now, with rekindled meaning, she remembered the incident and its setting. She had asked him for consolation with regard to the gray-business that awaited everybody, hoping to hear words of glowing romance, and had found it half comical, half tragic, that he refuted her doubts by the visible example of his father and mother. He had said that she "was his best girl still." But now Dora did not feel either the comedy or the tragedy of his reply; she felt only the truth of it. And she did not wonder that her mother-in-law was Dad's best girl still.

But for herself, though there was heartache in much that had been said, there was the beginning of understanding also, or, at any rate, the awakening of the sense that there was something to understand. Lady Osborne had called herself a coward, and reiterated that charge, with regard to seeing a doctor only. But love—a golden barrier of solid defence, no filagree work—had come between her and her fear; yet it was scarcely true to say that it had come there: it was always there. Once Dora had thought that, compared to romance, any relation that could exist between Claude's parents, must necessarily be of an ash-cold quality. But was it? She herself had known the romantic, but in comparison with all that she had been conscious of with regard to Claude for the last few weeks she could not call Lady Osborne ash-cold. In her there was some glow, some authentic fire that had never known quenching. It might have altered in superficials, for flames there might have been substituted the glowing heart of the fire. But it was the same fire. There had not been ashes at any time: the fire

always burned, unconsumed, with no waste of cinder; it was immortal, radium-like.

Then for the first time the beauty of it struck her. Before this moment she had seen something that appeared comical; then, with better vision, she had seen something that struck her as pathetic. Now with true vision she saw all she had missed before—Beauty. It was that she had worshipped all her life, thinking that she would always recognize and adore. But she had missed it altogether in that which was so constantly under her eyes. She had been too quick in seeing all that was obvious: wealth, indiscriminate hospitality, vulgarity (since she had chosen to call it so); but the big thing, that which was the essential, she had missed altogether. Once before, when Mr. and Mrs. Osborne shared a hymn-book in church, she had seen, and thought she understood. Now she was beginning to understand. She began to want to take other hearts into her own. The desire was there. The beauty she had at last seen attracted her, drew her to it. Strangely had it been unveiled, by tale of slippers and biscuits and underwear. She never had expected to find it in such garb. But Claude had known it was there; he had not been diverted by superficial things, but had seen always that "the mater was the governor's best girl still."

Dora left her mother-in-law that morning with a sense of humility, a sense also of disgust at herself for her own stupidity. All these months a thing as beautiful as this great love and tenderness had been in front of her eyes, and she had not troubled to look at it with enough attention to recognize that there was beauty there. But now the tears that dimmed her own eyes quickened her vision. At last she saw the picture in its true value, and it made her ashamed. Was she equally blind, too, with regard to Claude? Was there something in him, some great thing which mattered so much that all which for months had got on her nerves more and more every day was, if seen truly, as trivial as she now saw were those things that had blinded her in the case of Lady Osborne? It might be so; all she knew was that if it was there, she had not troubled to look for it. At first she had so loved his beauty that nothing else mattered; nor did it seem to her possible that love could ever be diminished or suffer eclipse. But that had happened, even before she had borne a child to him; and to take its place (and more

than take its place) there had sprung up no herbs of more fragrant beauty than the scarlet of that first flower. She had nothing in her garden for him but herbs of bitterness and resentment. That, at least, was all she knew of till now.

She paused a moment outside the door of the sitting room where she had left him, before entering, for she knew his devotion to his mother, and was sorry for him. And somehow she felt herself unable to believe that Lady Osborne's optimistic forecast would be justified; she did not think that in a few hours they would be all laughing over her imaginary ailment. And Claude must see that she was anxious; it would be better to confess to that, and prepare him for the possibility of there being something serious in store.

He looked up quickly as she came in, throwing away the cigarette he had only just begun.

"Well?" he said.

Dora heard the tremble and trouble in that one word, and she was sorry for him. That particular emotion she had never felt for him before; she had never seen him except compassed about with serene prosperity.

"Claude, I'm afraid she is ill," she said. "She feels it herself too. She has been in great pain."

"But how long has it been going on?" he asked. "Why hasn't she seen a doctor?"

"Because she didn't want to spoil things for us. She thought she could hold on. But she is going now, to-day."

"What does she think it is?" asked he.

"She wouldn't talk of it at all," said Dora. "I think she could hardly think of it, because she was thinking of Dad so much. She won't come down to Grote, you see, but stop up here, unless she is told it is nothing. And so we must do our best that he shan't be anxious or unhappy until we know whether there is real cause or not. She wants me particularly to go down there, or of course I would stop with her."

"The mater must feel pretty bad if she's not coming to Grote," said he.

“Yes, I am afraid she does. Oh, Claude, I am so sorry for her, and you all. Her bravery has made us all blind. I ought to have seen long ago. I reproach myself bitterly.”

“No, no, there’s no cause for that,” said he gently. “She’s taken us all in, and it’s just like her. Besides, who knows? it may be nothing in the least serious.”

“I know that,” said she, “and we won’t be anxious before we have cause. Go and see her, dear, before we start, and make very light of it; just say you are glad she is being sensible at last, in going to be put right. There is no cause for anxiety yet. I shall go round to Sir Henry’s and arrange an appointment for her this afternoon, if possible, and get him to write to us very fully this evening, so that we shall know to-morrow. And then, if we are to get down by lunch, it will be time for us to start. I ordered the motor for twelve.”

Lord Osborne was a good deal perturbed at the ne with which Dora met him at Grote, and it was an affair that demanded careful handling to induce him not to go back at once to town and see her.

“Bless me! Maria not well enough to come down, and you expect me to take my Sunday off, and eat my dinner as if my old lady was a-seated opposite me?” he asked. “Not I, my dear; Maria’s and my place is together, wherever that place may be.”

“But you can’t go against her wish, Dad,” said Dora. “And what’s to become of me if you do? I’ve been sent down on purpose to play at being her. You’ve got to have a glass of milk by your bed, and a couple of biscuits. Oh, I know all about it!”

“To think of your knowing that!” he said, rather struck by this detail.

“Yes, but only this morning did I know it,” said Dora. “I sat with her a long time, and all she could think about was that you should be comfortable down here.”

“Well, it goes against the grain not to be with her,” said he. “But, as you say, there’s no cause to be alarmed yet. And Sir Henry’s going to see her this afternoon?”

“Yes, and telegraph to me afterward. Dad, if you upset all our beautiful arrangements, neither she nor I will ever speak to you again. Oh! do be good.”

“But it won’t be like home not to have Lady O. here,” said he.

“She knows that; but Claude and I have to make as good an imitation as we can. And you’ll put me in a dreadful hole if you go back to town. She will say I have made no hand of looking after you at all. I shall be in disgrace, as well as you.”

“Well, God bless you, my dear!” said he, “and thank you for being so good to us. Here I’ll stop, if it’s the missus’s wish. No, I don’t fancy any pudding to-day, thank you.”

Dora laid down her spoon and fork.

“Dad, not one morsel do I eat unless you have some!” she said. “And I’m dreadfully hungry.”

Lord Osborne laughed within himself.

“Eh! you’ve got a managing wife, Claude,” he said. “She twists us all round her little finger.”

The expected telegram arrived in the course of the evening, and though it contained nothing definite, Lord Osborne was able to interpret it in the most optimistic manner.

“Well, Sir Henry tells you that Mrs. O.’s in no pain, and that he’s going to see her again to-morrow,” he said. “Why, I call that good news, and it relieves my mind, my dear. Bless her! she’ll get a good night’s rest, I hope now, and feel a different creature in the morning. There’s nothing else occurs to you, my dear? Surely he would have said if he had found anything really wrong?”

Dora read the telegram again.

“No; I think you are quite right to put that interpretation on it,” she said truthfully enough. “We’ll hope to get good news again to-morrow. I am glad she is out of pain.”

But secretly she feared something she did not say—namely, that there was something wrong, but that Sir Henry had not been able without further examination to say what it was. Yet, after all, that interpretation might be only imagination on her part. But there was

nothing in the telegram which appeared to her to be meant to allay the anxiety which he must know existed.

Dora went to bed that evening with a great many things to think about, which had to be faced, not shirked or put aside. The day, which by the measure of events had been almost without incident, seemed terribly full of meaning to her. Lady Osborne had seen a doctor; she had talked over domestic affairs with Dora ... that was not quite all: Claude had thought that a cheque had been forged, but found on examination that he had made a mistake. Set out like that, there seemed little here that could occupy her thoughts at all, still less that could keep away from her the sleep that in general was so punctual a visitor to her. But to-night it did not come near her, and she did not even try to woo its approach. She had no thought of sleep, though she was glad to have the darkness and the silence round her so that she might think without distraction. All these things, trivial as events, seemed to her to be significant, to hold possibilities, potentialities, altogether disproportionate to their face value. It might prove not to be so when she examined them; it might be that for some reason a kind of nightmare inflation was going on in her mind, so that, as in physical nightmare things swell to gigantic shape, in her imagination these simple little things were puffed to grotesque and terrifying magnitude. She had to think them over calmly and carefully; it might easily be that they would sink to normal size again.

She took first that affair of the cheque, which had turned out, apparently, to be no affair at all. Claude had made a mistake, so he had himself said, and the cheque which he and the bank had suspected was perfectly genuine. But Dora, between the time of his thinking there was something wrong and of his ascertaining that there was not, had passed a very terrible quarter of an hour—one that it made her feel sick to think of even now. There was no use in blinking it; she had feared that Jim had forged her husband’s cheque. She had hardly given a thought to what the consequences might be; what turned her white and cold was the thought that he had done it. Her pen had spluttered when the thought first occurred to her, but she believed Claude had not noticed that. But had he noticed the sob of relief in her voice when he told her that the cheque was all right? He was not slow to observe, his perceptions, especially where she was concerned, were remarkably

vivid, and it seemed to her that he must have noticed it. Yet he had said nothing.

Anyhow the cheque was correct, and she was left with the fact that it had seemed to her possible that Jim had been guilty of this gross meanness. And, just as if the thing had been true, she found herself trying to excuse him, saw herself pleading with Claude for him. Poor Jim was not ... was not quite like other people: he did not seem to know right from wrong. He had always cheated at games; she remembered telling Claude so one day down here at Grote, when he and Jim had been playing croquet and Jim had cheated. But they had not been playing for money. So Claude had told her. And he had told her the cheque was all right. That was all: there was nothing more to be thought of with regard to this.

Yet she still lingered on the threshold of the thought of it. Jim had got "cleaned out" (his own phrase) in the Derby week, had pledged the quarter's rent of Grote in advance to pay his Derby debts. And somebody had told her that Jim had lost heavily at Newmarket afterward, and he had told her that he had paid and was upright before the world in the matter of debts of honour.

She had passed the threshold of that thought and was inside again. Where had he got the money from? Well, anyhow, not by forgery. Claude had said that the mistake was his. But how odd that he should not have been able to recollect about a cheque for five hundred pounds, drawn only ten days before!

Dora still lingered in the precincts of that thought, though she beckoned, so to speak, another thought to distract her. What a wonderful thing, how triumphant and beautiful was the love of which she had seen a glimpse to-day! It was all the more wonderful because it seemed to be common, to be concerned with biscuits and coffee. A hundred times she had seen Lady Osborne wrapped up in such infinitesimal cares as these, and had thought only that her mind and her soul were altogether concerned with serving, that the provision for the comfortable house and the good dinner was aspiration sufficient for her spiritual capacity. Yet there had always been a little more than that: there had been the moment in church when the sermon was to her

taste, and the hymn a favourite, and she and her husband had tunelessly sung out of one book. That had touched Dora a little, but she had then dismissed it as a banal affair of goody-goody combined with a melodious tune, when she saw the great lunch that they both ate immediately afterward.

But now these details, these Martha-cares had taken a different value. This morning Lady Osborne had been in great pain, had broken down in her endeavour to carry on somehow, and was face to face with a medical interview which she dreaded. But still she could think with meticulous care of her husband's milk, of his slippers, of his tendency toward strong coffee. What if below the Martha was Mary, if it was Mary's love that made Martha so sedulous in serving?

All that she had overlooked, not caring to see below a surface which she said was commonplace and prosperous. The surface was transparent enough, too: it was not opaque. She could have seen down into the depths at any time if she had taken the trouble to look.

Before her marriage and for a few months after it, she had thought she knew what "depths" meant. She thought she knew what it was to be absorbed in another. Then had come her disillusionment. She had worshipped surface only: she knew no more of Claude than that. She had loved his beauty, she had got accustomed to it. She had at first disregarded what she had grown to call his vulgarity, and had not got accustomed to it. She had known he was honest and true and safe, but she had grown to take all that for granted. She had never studied him, looked for what was himself, she had had few glimpses of him, no more than she had had of his mother. But to-day she felt that with regard to her these glimpses were fused together: they made a view, a prospect of a very beautiful country. But as yet there had no fusing like that come with regard to her husband. Now that she "saw," even the country, the country of the gray-business was beautiful. And at present in her own warm country, her young country, beauty was lacking.

Perhaps—here the third subject came in—perhaps even in the trouble that she felt threatened them, there were elements that might be alchemized. She was willing, at least, to attempt to find gold, to transform what she had thought was common into the fine metal. Some alchemy of the sort had already taken place before her eyes; she

no longer thought common those little pathetic anxieties which she had heard this morning. For days and months the same anxieties, the same care had been manifest. There was no day, no hour in which Lady Osborne had not been concerned with the material comfort of those whom she loved. She was always wondering if her husband had got his lunch at the House, and what they gave him; whether the motor had got there in time, and if he remembered to put his coat on. Nor had her care embraced him alone. One day she had come up to Dora's sitting room and found that there was a draught round the door, and so had changed her seat. But next day there was a screen placed correctly. Or Claude had sneezed at dinner, and a mysterious phial had appeared on his dressing table with the legend that directed its administration. He had come in to Dora to ask if she had any explanation of the bottle. But she had none and they concluded Mrs. Osborne had put it there, fussily no doubt, for a sneeze was only a sneeze, but with what loving intent. She remembered everything of that sort. Per liked kidneys: his wife liked cocoa. It was all attended to. Martha was in evidence. But Mary was there.

Dora's thoughts had strayed again. She had meant to think about the trouble that she felt was threatening, and to see if by some alchemy it might be transformed into a healing of hurt. She did not believe that she was fanciful in expecting bad news: she wished to contemplate the effect of it, if it came. Supposing Lady Osborne was found to be suffering from something serious, how was she herself to behave? She had to make things easier for her father-in-law: she had to be of some use. That was not so difficult: a little affection meant so much to him. He glowed with pleasure when she was kind. But for Claude? That was more difficult. She had to be all to him. It was much harder there to meet the needs she ought to meet, and should instinctively meet without thought. Once, if she had said, "Oh, Claude," all would have been said because the simple words were a symbol. But now she could not say, "Oh, Claude" like that. She could be Martha, that was easy. But it was not Martha who was wanted.

The door from his dressing room opened, and he came in, shielding with his hand the light of his candle, so that it should not fall on her face. The outline of his fingers even to her half-shut eyes was drawn in luminous red, where the light shone through the flesh. He had often

come in like that, fearing to awaken her. Often she had been awake, as she was now.

To-night she feigned sleep. And she heard the soft breath that quenched the candle; she heard a whisper of voice close to her, words of one who thought that none heard.

“Good night, my darling,” he said.

CHAPTER XI.

JIM had been engaged to spend this week-end with a party, of which it is sufficient to say that though it would probably be amusing, it would not appear in the columns of the *Morning Post*. But on the Saturday afternoon he sent an excuse and remained in town instead. Much as he hated solitude, he had got something to do which made solitude a necessary evil. He had got to sit down and think, and continue thinking till he had made up his mind. He had to adopt a certain course of action, or by not acting at all commit himself to another course.

Claude had not come back into the room after sending that message by the telephone, and calling to him the farewell he had been unable to answer. A few seconds before only, when he himself had come into the room and found Claude examining the counterfoils of his cheque-book, he had thought that all was over, and had Claude said nothing to him, just looked at him, and pointed with a finger to the blank counterfoil close to the end of the book, Jim would have confessed. But Claude had spoken at once those incredible words, and the moment after had confirmed the reality of them by the message to his bank. The immensity of that relief had taken away Jim's power of speech; had he tried to use his voice he must have screamed. Then he heard the door of the flat shut, and the next moment he was rolling on the sofa, his face buried in its cushions, to stifle his hysterical laughter.

The incredible had happened; the impossible was now part of the sober history of the month. The bank had called in question the cheque; evidently Claude had come down here to see whether he had drawn a cheque of corresponding date, had found a blank counterfoil (not the first in the book), and had accepted that as evidence that the cheque was of his own drawing. The possibility of a forgery never apparently occurred to him. His vaunted carelessness about money matters was strikingly exemplified; he had not exaggerated it in the least. What a blessed decree of Providence that one's brother-in-law shall be so rich and such an idiot! Jim felt almost satisfied with the world.

But next moment with the same suddenness as this spasm of relief had come, it ceased. Swift and huge as the genie of some Arabian tale, a doubt arose. And before it fully developed itself, it was a doubt no longer, but a certainty. For one moment his relief had tricked him into believing that Claude thought the cheque to be of his own drawing; the next, Jim could no more delude himself with that. Rich as Claude was, fool as he was, it was not possible that he should believe himself to have drawn five hundred pounds in cash but a week ago, and to-day find no trace of it, nor any possible memory of how he had spent it. No, the cheque had been called in question; Claude therefore must know that forgery had been committed. That was certain.

But he had told his bankers that the cheque was genuine.

Jim got up from the sofa, put the cushion in its place, and smoothed it with mechanical precision. What did this mean? Did he guess by whom the forgery was committed? In a moment Jim felt injured and indignant at the idea of such a possibility crossing Claude's mind. He had never given him the shadow of ground for thinking that such a thing as forgery was possible to him. It was an insult of the grossest kind, if such a notion had ever presented itself to him. But Claude was of a suspicious nature; once before, Jim remembered, Dora had talked some nonsense about Jim's having cheated at croquet, and Claude had said that he was satisfied that this was not the case, when Jim told him it was not. He won a sovereign over that silly game of croquet.

But it was monstrous—if true—that Claude should suspect him of this. It was impossible for any self-respecting person, however unworthy of self-respect, to stop in his rooms, accept his hospitality, until he had made sure that such an idea had never crossed Claude's mind. His sense of injury bordered upon the virtuous. And then, with disconcerting rapidity, sense of injury and virtue all vanished. He could not keep it up. He saw through himself.

Once more his mind went back to the rapturous possibility that had caused him to bury his face in the sofacushion. Was there any chance of Claude's believing that the cheque was genuine? But already the question did not need an answer. That possibility was out of sight, below the horizon, and he was here alone, swimming, drowning.

That Claude knew forgery had been committed was certain then, and for some reason he shielded the forger. Either he suspected Jim (the sense of injury and virtue did not make themselves felt now), or he did not. If he did not, good. If he did, well, good also, since he shielded him.

Quick-witted and mentally nimble as he was, Jim took a little while to realize that situation. In the normal course of life he would necessarily meet Claude often, and he could not see himself doing so. He could not see how social intercourse was any more possible. Or would Claude avoid such intercourse, manage somehow that they should not meet? That might be managed for a time, but not permanently. Dora would ask him to dine, or Lady Osborne would ask him to stay, and either he or Claude would always have to frame excuses. Yet Claude's words of farewell to him had been quite normal and cordial. There was nothing there that anticipated unpleasantness or estrangement in the future. Perhaps Claude harboured no suspicion against him. Then whom did he shield? There was only one person, himself, who could have done this, whom there could be sufficient motive for shielding.

And then suddenly his own dislike of his brother-in-law flared up into hatred, the hatred of the injurer for the injured, which is one of the few things in this world that are pure black, and have no ray of reflection of anything good, however inverted and distorted, in them. And he was living in the rooms, eating the food, drinking the wine of the man whom he hated. That Claude had loaded him with benefits made, as once before, his offence the greater. And he was in Claude's power; at any moment, even if he did not suspect Jim now of having done this, he had but to send a further message to the bank, saying that their suspicion was correct, and he had not drawn the cheque, and he would suspect no further, for he would know.

The hot hours of the sunny afternoon went by, not slowly at all, but with unusual speed, though he passed them doing nothing, but occasionally walking up and down the room. He had told Parker when he sent his telegram of excuse about the river party that he would dine at home and alone, and it was a matter for surprise when he was told that dinner was ready. And after dinner he sat again in the room where this morning he had found Claude with his cheque-book, as far from

his decision as ever. But about one thing he had made up his mind; he believed Claude knew, or at any rate, suspected who had done this. There was no other explanation that could account at all reasonably for his shielding the culprit. It was no time to invent Utopian explanations (and even they would be elusive to the seeker); Jim wanted to see the things that were actually the case on this evening.

What was to be done? What was to be done? He could not tell Claude that his suspicions were grossly and gratuitously insulting, for Claude had expressed none; he had said there was nothing to suspect, no ground for suspicion. Nor did Jim see that it was possible to continue seeing Claude, feeling that he was in his hands, that at any moment he might disown the cheque, and let the bank pursue the usual course. Claude had been generous, quixotically generous that morning; but who knew whether that might not only be a momentary impulse, or even a move merely to gain time, to consider? It was a serious step to let one's wife's brother be prosecuted. But very likely he had only done it to stay immediate proceedings: very likely he wanted to talk it over with Dora first.... And at that thought the breaking point came. Through these solitary hours Jim had faced a good deal, and the fibres of endurance were weakened. And he could not face that. Anything was more tolerable than the picture of Dora being told.

Generous! That word had occurred in his thoughts, and it had been applied by him to Claude. It was no less than his due; he had always been generous. His generosity had not cost him much, had not entailed self-denial, but it had been there, it had been given. First in very little ways, as when he gave Jim free living at the flat; then in larger ways, when for the sake of Dora he imputed mere carelessness to himself instead of letting crime be brought home to another. The price of his generosity concerned nobody. And Jim was beaten. The worst of him surrendered to something a little better than the worst. The surrender was not nobly made; it was made from necessity, because every other course was a little more impossible than that. Claude had to be told. He knew that he was in Claude's hands already; the most he could do and the least was to seem to put himself there. And then suddenly he felt so tired that thought was no longer possible, and he fell asleep where he sat.

It was deep in the night when he woke, for the noise of traffic had almost sunk to silence, but from the dreamlessness of exhausted sleep he passed straight into full consciousness again, and took up the tragic train of thought where he had left it. He did not reconsider his decision —it was cut in steel—nor did he desire to, for to wish for the impossible requires the strong spring of hope, and of hope he had none. He was beaten; he resigned. And then on the outer darkness there shone a little ray. Claude, whom a few hours ago he had hated with the rancour of the injurer, had been generous, appallingly generous. Was there nothing he could do for Claude?

Yes; one thing, the hardest of all, the utmost. For weeks he knew things had not gone well with him and Dora. He got on her nerves, his vulgarities (as was most natural) irritated her, and she could no longer see in him anything but them. But there was more in Claude than that. She did not know it, but he might tell her. Perhaps if she knew, she would see, would understand.... Or had Claude already told her? That had seemed possible before, a thing easily pictured. But he did not think it likely now. It was not consistent with what Claude had already done. For it must have been for his wife's sake that he had acted thus.

A little while before it had seemed to Jim the worst possible thing, the one unbearable thing, that Dora should know. But looked at from this new standpoint it was different. If Claude told her, it was one thing; it was another if he did. If he did, if he could, it might help Dora to see that there was something in Claude beyond his commonness. And—Jim was a long time coming to it—it might in some degree atone, not in Claude's eyes, for he would not tell Claude what he meant to do, but in—in those eyes which look on all evil things and all good things, and see the difference between them.

There were a few arrangements to be made on Sunday, but he made them without flinching. Claude and Dora were at Grote, and a line to Claude there, asking to see him as soon as possible on Monday, and a line to Dora at Park Lane, saying that he wanted to see her alone in the afternoon, was all that was necessary. It was better to take those interviews in that order—he could not help being clever over it—for it was easier to face Dora, when able to tell her that he had already confessed to Claude. What he had to say would come with more force

thus. She would see that for the sake of helping Claude and her, he had done something that could not have been easy.

All that day down at Grote they waited for news from Sir Henry, but none came. Lord Osborne, always optimistic, saw the most hopeful significance in his silence.

"Depend upon it, my dear," he said to Dora as she went to bed that night, "depend upon it Sir Henry has seen my lady again, and has quite forgotten that we might be in some anxiety, because, as he knows now, forgetting he ain't told us, there's nought to be anxious about. That's like those busy men—Lord, my dear! fancy passing your life in other people's insides, so to speak—why it would make you forget your own name. But if there had been any cause for us to worry, depend upon it he'd have let us know. I bet I shall be making a joke of my lady's ailments before I'm twenty-four hours older. I'll be getting a few ready for her as I do my undressing to-night. And it's me as is cheering you up, my dear, this moment. You go to sleep quiet, or else I'll tell Mrs. O. that you've given me such an uncomfortable Sunday as I've not had since first we was married."

Then came Monday morning. Dora had her early post brought up to her bedroom, but since she had received Saturday posts forwarded from town yesterday, there was nothing sent on. In fact, there was only one letter for her directed to her here. And she opened it and read it.

Claude had already left by an early train when she got down. She did not expect this, since, as far as she knew, he had no engagements that morning and had intended not to leave till a later train, but he had gone. Lord Osborne and she were going to lunch in the country and drive back afterward, but after breakfast, when the last guests had gone, she went to him. He was in the room he called the "lib'ry" and was reading the *Morning Post*.

"See here, my dear," he said, "and think how we're all at the mercy of the press. There's my lady giving a little party this evening, and I'm blest if they don't know all about it already. Listen here: 'Lady Osborne has a small party to-night to meet——' "

“Ah, don’t,” said Dora, not meaning to speak, but knowing she had to.

Instantly the paper fell to the ground.

“What is it, my dear?” he said.

“I have heard from Sir Henry,” she said.

She gave him a moment for that; then she went on——

“Dad, dear,” she said, “there is trouble. He saw her again yesterday, and has written to me about it. There is something wrong. He does not know for certain what it is, but they will have to find out. Oh, it is no use my hinting at it. You’ve got to know.”

“Yes, my dear, yes,” said he.

“They have got to operate. It may be very bad indeed. They can’t tell yet. They don’t know till they see.”

Dora drew a long breath.

“It may be cancer,” she said, and by instinct she put her hand over her eyes, so that she should not see him.

“Mrs. O.?” he said very quietly.

Dora heard the buzzing of honey-questing bees in the flower-border outside the window, the clicking of a mowing machine on the lawn, and from close beside her the slow breathing of Lord Osborne. Without looking at him, she knew that he had pursed up his lips, almost as if whistling, a habit of his in perplexed moments. He had been smoking a cigar when she came in, and she heard him lay this down on a tray by his elbow. And then he spoke.

“Well, my dear,” he said, “we’ve all got to help her bear it, whatever it is.”

Dora found it impossible to speak for a moment. She could have given him sympathy had there been anything in his words that suggested it was wanted. She could have told him that they must hope for the best, that the worst was by no means certain yet; there were a hundred quite suitable things to say, if only he had appeared to need them in the least. But quite clearly, he did not; he did not happen to be thinking about himself at all or to want any consolation. And in face of this simplicity, she was dumb. It was perfect: there was nothing to be said except give the sign of assent.

“And, my dear, if you’ll order the motor round at once, I’ll put a few papers together, as I must take up with me, and then I think I’ll be off. And what’ll you do, my dear? Hadn’t you better stop as planned and have your morning in the country? Not but what I should dearly like to have you by my side.”

“Ah, Dad!” said she, and kissed him.

He smiled at her, holding her hand tight a moment.

“We’ve got to keep our pecker up, my dear,” he said, “so as to help her keep hers. She’ll be brave enough when she sees we’re brave, God bless her! And brave we are and will be, my dearie. We’d scorn to be cowards. And I’m glad we didn’t know this till this morning, for she’ll be pleased to hear as we had such a pleasant Sunday.”

“Yes, she could think of nothing else when she talked to me on Saturday,” said Dora.

What little more there was to be told she told him on their way up, but otherwise their drive was rather silent. Once or twice he leaned out of the window and spoke to the chauffeur.

“You can get along a bit quicker here,” he said. “There’s an empty road.”

Then he turned to Dora.

“If you don’t mind going a bit above the average, my dear?” he asked. “ ’Twould be a good thing, too, if we got home before Claude, and it’s but a slow train he’ll have caught.”

And once again as they crossed the great heathery upland of Ashdown Forest, redolent with gorse and basking in the sun: “Seems strange on a beautiful day like this!” he said. “But there! who knows but that we shan’t have some pleasant weather yet?”

Claude, meantime, getting Jim’s letter by the same post that had brought his news to Dora, had left by an earlier train, in order to see Jim as soon as possible. He had gone before Dora came down, and thus heard nothing of Sir Henry’s letter, and though he was anxious to know, as soon as he got to town, how his mother was, he determined to go to the flat on his way to Park Lane. That would not take long,

whatever it might be that Jim wished to tell him; a few minutes, he imagined, would suffice.

All the way up he pondered over it, but think as he might, he could find only one explanation of Jim's request, and that was that he was going to confess. That was the best thing that could happen, and as far as he could see it was the only thing. But the thought of his own part embarrassed him horribly: he had no liking for his brother-in-law, and guessed that on Jim's side there was a similar barrenness of affection. All this would make the interview difficult and painful: he could forgive him easily and willingly, but instinctively he felt how chilly a thing forgiveness is, if there is no warmth of feeling behind to vitalize it. But when first he suspected that Jim had done this, he felt sorry for him; if it turned out that he was going to confess, his pity was certainly not diminished.

On the threshold he paused: his repugnance for what lay before him was almost invincible, and all his pondering had led to nothing practical: he was still absolutely without idea as to what he should say himself. But the thing had to be done; waiting made it no easier, and he went in. He would have to trust to the promptings of the moment: all he was sure of was that he did not feel unkind, but only sorry. So—had he known it—he need not have been so very uncomfortable.

Jim was standing in the window, looking out on to the street. He turned as Claude came in, but said nothing. Something had to be done, and Claude spoke.

"You asked me to come and see you," he said. "So I came up as early as I could. Oh, good morning, Jim!"

He looked up, and saw that Jim did not speak because he could not. His face was horribly white, and his lips were twitching. And at the sight of him, helpless, and, whatever he had done, suffering horribly, a far greater warmth of pity came over Claude than he had felt hitherto. All his kindness was challenged. And the prompting of the moment was not a mistaken one.

"Oh, I say, old chap," he said, and stopped short.

For Jim broke. During all those two hideous days he had nerved himself up to encounter abuse, disgust, any form of righteous wrath

and contempt. He knew well that Claude had spared him not for his own sake, but for Dora's, and in this confession he was going to make, he was prepared to be treated as he deserved, though Claude had spared him public disgrace. But what he had not nerved himself up to encounter was kindness, such as that which rang in those few words. And once more, but now not with hysterical laughter, but with the weeping of exhaustion and shame and misery, he buried his head in that same sofa cushion.

Claude felt helpless, awkward, brutal. But it was no use doing anything yet: there was no reaching Jim till that violence had abated, and he sat there waiting, just crossing over once to the door, and bolting it for fear Parker should come in. And at length he laid his hand on Jim's shoulder.

"It's knocked you about awfully," he said. "I can see that, I'm awfully sorry. You must have had a hellish two days. You needn't tell me, you know."

Jim pulled himself together, and raised his head.

"That's just what I must do," he said. "I forged your cheque."

"Well, well," said Claude.

But Jim had got the thing said, and now he went on with suppressed and bitter vehemence.

"I've always been a swindler, I think," he said. "I'm rotten: that's what the matter with me. I've cheated all my life. I can't even play games without cheating. I cheated you at croquet once, and won a sovereign. Dora saw."

Again Claude's instinct, not his reason, prompted him and not amiss. It only told him he was sorry for Jim, and could a little reassure him over this.

"But she didn't know we were playing for money," said he quickly. "In fact, I told her we were not."

"So it's twice that you have spared me. Her, rather," said Jim.

Claude accepted the correction. It was an obvious one to him no less than to Jim.

"Yes: she'd have been awfully cut up if she had known," he said simply.

Jim got up.

“I wonder if you can believe I am sorry?” he said. “I am. My God, I’ve touched bottom now.”

“Why, yes, of course I believe it,” said Claude. “It’s broken you up, I can see that. Fellows don’t break unless they are sorry. But as for the thing itself, if you don’t mind my saying it, I think all cheating is touching bottom. It’s a rotten game. You know that now, though. And if you can believe me, I’m awfully sorry too. It’s a wretched thing to happen. But I’m so glad you told me: it makes an awful difference, that.”

Jim was silent a moment.

“I want to ask you something,” he said at length. “When did you first suspect me? Was it when I came in and found you here on Saturday?”

Claude bit his lip: he did not at all like answering this.

“No, before that,” he said. “At least I was afraid it was you as soon —as soon as I found I had left a cheque-book here. I’m sorry, but as you ask me, there it is.”

“From your previous knowledge of me?” asked Jim quietly.

“Well, yes, I suppose so, though you make me feel a brute. I say, I don’t think it’s any good going back on that, either for your sake or mine.”

“Yes it is: it hurts, that’s why it’s good.”

Claude shifted his place on the sofa a shade nearer Jim, and again laid his hand on his shoulder.

“Well, I think you’ve been hurt enough for the present,” he said. “I don’t like seeing it. You’ve had as much as you can stand just now.”

Jim shook his head.

“There’s another thing, too,” he said. “I’m absolutely cleaned out, and I can’t repay you till next quarter.”

Claude considered this. It was perfectly cheap and easy to say that he need not think of paying at all, but his judgment gave him something better to say than that.

“Well, we’ll wait till then,” he said. “I don’t want to be unreasonable.”

Again Jim’s lip quivered, and Claude seeing that rose to go.

“Well, I must get back,” he said. “I want to hear how the mater is. She hasn’t been well, and Sir Henry Franks saw her on Saturday, and again yesterday. Look round after lunch, will you? I don’t think Dora and the governor get back till then. And you’ll come on to the musical show this evening? There’ll be some good singing. Right, oh!”

But still Jim could not speak, and there was silence again. Then Claude spoke quickly, finally.

“Buck up, old chap,” he said, and went straight to the door without looking back.

He let himself out, and went for a turn up and down the street before going to Park Lane. He had been a good deal moved, for, kind-hearted to the core, it was dreadful to him to see, as he expressed it, “a fellow so awfully down in his luck.” And he was conscious of another thing that struck him as curious. He had liked Jim during those few minutes he had seen him to-day, a thing he had never done before, and he wished he could have made things easier for him, which again was a new sensation, for all that he had ever done for his brother-in-law he had done, frankly, for Dora’s sake. But he could not see how to make this easier: it was no use telling him that cheating was a thing of no importance; it was no use telling him he need not pay back what he owed. That was not the way to make the best of this very bad job. Of course, Jim must feel miserable; it would be a thing to sicken at if he did not. Luckily, however, there was no doubting the sincerity of his wretchedness. And yet the boyish sort of advice implied by the “buck up” was in place, too. But he felt vaguely that he could have done much better than he had done: in that, had he known it, he would have found that Jim disagreed with him.

He was told to his surprise, by the servant who let him in, that Dora and his father had arrived a few minutes ago, and that Dora wished to see him as soon as he came in. Accordingly he went straight to her room.

“Oh, Claude!” she said, “you have come. We didn’t know where you were. I had no idea you had left Grote till I came down to breakfast.”

There was trouble in her voice, and he noticed it, wondering if by any chance it had something to do with the trouble he had seen already that day. But clearly it could not.

“What is it?” he said quickly.

“Your mother,” she said, for it was no use attempting to break things. “Sir Henry saw her again yesterday. There has to be an operation. There is some growth. They can’t tell what it is for certain until they operate. Dad is going to see her now. They have settled it is best for him to tell her. Of course he won’t tell her what the fear is. Oh Claude! I am so sorry; it is so dreadful.”

“How does the governor take it?” asked Claude.

“Exactly as you would expect.”

“But it will be awful for him telling her,” said he. “I had much better. Per or I, anyhow. It’ll tear his heart out.”

“He won’t let you. When Sir Henry spoke of telling her, he said at once. ‘That’s for me to do.’ And then he went away to have a few minutes alone before going to her.”

A tap came at the door: Lord Osborne always tapped before he entered Dora’s room. It was her bit of a flat, he called it, and his tap was ringing the bell, and asking if she was in.

“Well, Claude, my lad,” he said, “Dora will have told you. We’ve all got to keep up a brave heart, for your mother’s sake.”

Claude kissed his father, and somehow that went to Dora’s heart. He had once said to her that kissing seemed “pretty meaningless” when she was not concerned.

“Yes, Dad,” said he. “That we will.”

“That’s right, my boy. And that blessed girl of yours has been so good to me, such as never was, and if she’ll give her Dad a kiss, too, why there we are, and thank you, my dear. Now I’m going to see mother and tell her, and I daresay she’ll like to see you both some time to-day, though if she doesn’t, why you’ll both understand, won’t you? They’ve fixed it for to-morrow, if she’s agreeable.”

“Dad, do let me do that for you?” said Claude. “It’s better for me to tell her.”

“No, my lad, that’s for your father and no other,” said he, “though it’s like you to suggest it, and thank you, my boy. I’ll come straight back to you, my dears, and tell you how all goes, and how she takes it, and pray try to quiet Mrs. Per. She’s carrying on so silly, wringing her hands and asking, ‘Is she better? Is she better?’ And telling me to bear up and all, as if I didn’t know that, small thanks to her! Per takes her back to Sheffield this afternoon, thank the Lord, and may I be pardoned for that speech, but it’s how I feel with her ridiculous ways.”

He went straight to his wife’s room, and was admitted by the nurse. Lady Osborne was in bed, of course, but smiled to him with neither more nor less than her usual cheerfulness.

“Well, and there’s my Eddie,” she said. “And I hope you’ve had a pleasant Sunday, my dear, as I’m sure you must have, with such pleasant company as came down to see you. I tell you I’m feeling a regular fraud this morning, for what with lying in bed and the medicine Sir Henry gave me, which took the pain away beautiful, I feel ever so much better. Now sit you down, Mr. O., and have a chat. Are you comfortable in that chair, my dear?”

“That I am, specially since I know you’re feeling easier and more like yourself, mother,” he said. “And before long, please God, we’ll have you looking after us all again.”

His wife was silent a moment. Then she spoke.

“Eddie, my dear,” she said, “Sir Henry said as how you would come and have a talk with me, for he’s told me nought himself, but just said, ‘You lie still and don’t worry, Mrs. Osborne,’ for he forgets as how you’ve been honoured. And I’ve guessed, my dear, that he means you’ve to tell me what’s the matter with me, and what they’re going to do to me. My dear, I’ll lie here a year, and take all the medicine they choose, if only——”

He moved his chair a little nearer the bed: the tears stood in his eyes, but his mouth was firm.

“I’ve come to tell you, my dear,” he said, “and we can’t always be choosers to have things the way we wish. We’ve got to submit to the will of God, and when them as are wise doctors, like Sir Henry, tells us

it's got to be this, or it's got to be that, it's His will, my dear, no less than the doctor's word. He's sent us a sight of joy and happiness and to-day, Maria, he's sending us a bit of trouble, for a change, I may say. But we'll take it thankful, old lady, same as we've taken all them beautiful years that we've had together. My dear, if I could get into bed there instead of you, and go through it for you! But that's not to be. I'll tell you as quick as I can, my dear, for there's no use in being silly and delaying, but——"

He blew his nose violently, then left his chair, and knelt down by the bed, taking her hand in his. And he kissed it.

"They don't quite know what's wrong with you, dearie," he said, "and they've got to see. You won't feel nothing; they'll give you a whiff of chloroform, and you'll go off as easy as getting to sleep of a night. And when you wake, they hope that there'll be good news for you, my dear, and that, as I say, you'll soon be about again, scolding and vexing us and making our lives a burden, as you've always done, God bless you. There, Maria, I can manage my joke still, and I'm mistaken if I don't see you smiling at me, same as ever."

She had smiled, but she grew grave again.

"I want to know it all, Eddie, my dear," she said. "There's nothing you can tell me as I shall fear more than what I guess. Do they think it's the cancer?"

"No, they don't say that," he said. "But they've got to see what it is. They're not going to think anything yet, until they see."

"Thank you, dearie, for telling me so gentle," she said. "I declare it's a relief to me to have it spoken. And when is it to be?"

"They said something about to-morrow. But that's as you please, Maria. But, my dear, there's no use in putting it off; better have done with it."

"No; I wish as it could have been to-day. But what a lot of trouble the inside is, as I said to Dora on Saturday. Eddie, my dear, I'm such a coward. You've all got to be brave for me; it's a lot of worry I'm giving. But it's not my fault as far as I know; I've lived clean and wholesome. It's a thing as is sent to one. Lor', my dear, you're crying. Now let's have no sadness in this house; it would be shame on us if we couldn't take our bit of trouble like men and women, instead of like a

pig as squeals before you touch it. But what an upset! There's you, my dear, wishing it was you, and there's me, being so glad it's not you. We shan't agree about that, Mr. O. And now, my dear, if you'll say a bit of a prayer, same as we've always said together every morning, you and I, before going down to our breakfast, and then let's have Dora and Claude in, and have a bit of a chat. 'Our Father,' my dear. We don't want more than that; it's what we've always said together of a morning, and it hasn't taken us far wrong yet."

There was silence a little after that was said, and then Lord Osborne got up.

"And if I haven't forgot to kiss you 'Good morning,' my dear," he said. "Well, that's that. And shall I fetch Dora and Claude? And what about Mrs. Per? Per's out, I know. He left early this morning from Grote and had business in the City, which he said would keep him to lunch. Maria, my dear, my vote's against Mrs. Per."

"Wouldn't she feel left out?" asked his wife.

"Well, she'd feel no more than is the case," said he. "Give me Mrs. Per, my dear, when there's Shakespeare or Chopin ahead, but not now. Such grimaces as she's been making in the Italian room! You'd have thought her face was a bit of string, and she trying to tie knots in it! No, Mrs. O.; I'll fetch Dora and Claude, and that's all you get me to do. You may ring the bell for Mrs. Per, but not me."

"Well, perhaps it would be more comfortable," said she, "without Lizzie, if you're sure as she won't feel she should have been sent for. I don't feel to want any antics to-day."

He stood by the bed a moment before going.

"I've never loved you like to-day," he said.

"Well, that's good hearing," she said; "but you repeat yourself, Eddie. I've heard you say that before, my dear."

"And it was always true," said he.

The moment he had left the room she called to the nurse.

"Now make me tidy, nurse," she said, "and if you'd smooth the bedclothes, and a pillow more, my dear, would make me look a little more brisk-like and fit for company. There's Lady Dora coming, so

pretty and so sweet to me, and my son Claude, her husband. My hair's all anyhow, so if you'd just put a brush to it, and there's a couple of rings on the dressing table, which I'll put on; handsome, aren't they, diamonds and rubies. Thank you, nurse, and we're only just in time. Come in, my dears; come in and welcome.

"Such a way to receive you," she said. "But there, why apologize, for if I didn't always say my bedroom was the pleasantest room in the house. Dora, my dearie, you've taken good care of Mr. O., and thank you, and he's so pleased with you that I'm on the way to be jealous. You wait till I'm about again, and see if I don't cut you out. Mr. O., do you hear that? Dora's got no chance against me, when I'm not a guy like this, lying in my bed. And you sit there, Dora, and Claude by you, as should be, and Mr. O. on the other side. There's a nice comfortable party, what I like."

"What's this talk of a guy?" said Claude. "You look famous, mother."

"Well, then, my looks don't belie me. Who shouldn't look famous with her friends and family coming to see her like this? Dora, my dear, you've got to take my place to-day, if you'd be so kind, for there's the concert this evening, and I won't have it put off. Lor', I shall be here, as comfortable as ever I was, with my door open, and listening, and feel that I was with you all, wearing my new tiara and shaking hands. No, my dear, there's no sense in putting it off. Such nonsense! I've asked our friends to come and see us this evening, and them as feel inclined shall come, if my word is anything. But we'll be a woman short at dinner, thanks to my silliness. I wonder if Lady Austell would be able to come, for there's the savoury of prawns as she took twice of last time she dined with us. I bid her to the party, I know, but not to dinner, I think. Claude, do you go and telephone to her now for me, and you, Mr. O., go down and help him; and I'll chat to Dora the while."

There was no mistaking the intention of this diplomacy, and the two men left the room. Then Lady Osborne turned to Dora.

"My dear," she said, "you'll have heard all there is to know. And I just want to tell you that I'm facing it O. K., as Claude says. There'll be nothing on my part to make anybody else shake and tremble. But

you'll have an eye to your dad, dear. He feels it more than me, though God knows, I'm coward enough really. It's got to be, and though I hate the thought of the knife—well, my dear, those as are born into the world and have the pleasure of it have to take the troubles as well as the joys. And if they find the worst, I'm prepared for that, as long as I know you'll stick to Mr. O., and help him. And there's Claude, too. Sometimes I've thought you've not been so happy together as I could have wished. I don't know what is wrong, but I've thought sometimes as all isn't quite right. I wanted to say just that to you; that was why I sent them down together, so crafty. But he loves you, my dear, and you can't do more than love. And you're going to bear him a child, please God. My dear, that's the best thing God ever thought of, if I may say so, for us women. I've had two, bless them, and I should have liked to have had a hundred. I'd have borne each one with thanksgiving."

She was silent a moment.

"Claude's a kind lad," she said. "He takes after father. And he loves you, too. I'm not presuming, I hope, my dear. That's all that's been on my mind, and I wanted to get it said. You'll forgive an old woman as is your boy's mother. Thank you, my dear, for giving me that kiss. I'll treasure that. I'll think of that when they send me off to sleep to-morrow."

The others came back at this moment with the news that Lady Austell would come to dinner.

"Now that's nice for your brother," said Lady Osborne. "He'll like to find his mamma here."

Dora had telephoned to Jim to say she would come and see him after lunch. Since receiving his note that morning, she had given but little thought to what he might have to say to her, for these other events banished all else from her mind. In spite of that which lay before them all, she could hardly feel sad, she could hardly feel anxious, for the noble simplicity and serenity of the other three infected her, to the exclusion of all else, with its own peace. She had not got to comfort anybody, to make any effort herself; she was lifted off her feet and borne along in these beautiful shining waters of courage and quietness. Indeed, it seemed to her that no one was making any effort at all; she

did not find her father-in-law sitting with his head in his hands, and rousing himself, when she came in, to a semblance of cheerfulness; she did not see Claude trying to suppress signs of emotion. They all behaved quite naturally. At first it amazed her, for she knew, at any rate, that there was no lack of love and tenderness in either of them; it seemed that they must be exerting some stupendous control over themselves. Then she saw, slowly but surely, how wide of the mark such an explanation was. They were exerting no control at all, they behaved like that because they felt like that, because their attitude toward life and death and love was serene and large and quiet. All these months it had been there for her to see, but, inexplicably blind as she now felt she had been, she had needed this demonstration of it before she began, even faintly, to understand.

It was no wonder, then, that Jim's affairs had been obliterated from her mind, but now as she entered that flat, she wondered what he wanted that should make him wish to see her in this appointed way. For a moment, with a sickening qualm, she went back to that quarter of an hour's suspense on Saturday morning, when she had allowed herself to fear that he was connected in some hideous fashion with the cheque Claude could not recollect about. That had haunted her afterward, too, when she lay long awake at Grote on Saturday night; but Claude had said so emphatically that the cheque was all right, that she felt her fear to be fanciful. Meantime Jim did not yet know about Lady Osborne, and as soon as she entered she told him.

"Oh, Jim!" she said, "we are in trouble. Lady Osborne has got to have an operation. There is something wrong, and they want to see what it is. There is a growth of some sort. And, oh, I have been so blind, so blind! They are all behaving so splendidly, and yet behaviour is the wrong word; they behave splendidly just because they are splendid. I never guessed they were like that. I'll tell you all about it. But first, what did you want to see me about? You don't look well, dear. What is it?"

"I'm all right," said he.

"But what is it?" asked Dora again, vaguely frightened.

Jim leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees, propping his head on his hands. This was worse than the telling of Claude had been, but

it had to be done. He had promised some humble, sorry little denizen within him that he would do it.

"Did Claude speak to you about a cheque," he asked, "which he could not remember drawing?"

"Yes, and then afterward he said it was all right," said she.

"Then I've got to tell you," he said.

Then her fear seized her again in full force.

"Don't, Jim," she cried, "don't tell me there's anything wrong."

"It's no use beating about," he said. "I forged that cheque and cashed it. Claude knows; I told him."

Dora sat still a moment. Then she put her hands up to her head.

"Open the window," she said, "I am stifling."

He got up and threw open the window away from the street. Then he walked over to the chimney piece and leaned his elbows on it, with his back to her.

At first Dora felt nothing but hard anger and indignation, and she knew that if she spoke at all it would be to say something which could do no good, and perhaps only make a breach between them that could never be healed.

And it was long that she waited, it was long before any spark of pity for him was lit. Then she spoke.

"Oh, Jim, what a miserable business!" she said. "But why did you tell me? Couldn't you have spared me knowing? Or perhaps you were afraid Claude would tell me."

"No; I don't tell you for that reason," he said. "After I saw Claude this morning, I knew he would never tell you."

"Why, then?"

"Because I want to tell you about Claude. It may do some good. Well, Claude's treated me in a way that's beyond my understanding. He is beyond your understanding, too, at present, and that's why I am telling you. I wish you could have been here when I told him. He was only sorry for me. If he was God, he couldn't have been more merciful. And it wasn't put on. He felt it; and I wanted, for once, to see if I couldn't be of some use."

He turned round and faced her.

“I want you to know what sort of a fellow Claude really is,” he said. “I know you don’t get on well, and that’s because you don’t know him. You judged him first by his face—that, and perhaps a little bit by his wealth. And then you judged him by what you and I call vulgarity and want of breeding. That’s not Claude either. Claude’s the fellow who treated a swindler and a forger in the way I’ve told you. He’s got a soul that’s more beautiful than his face, you know, and he’s the handsomest fellow I ever saw. I wanted you to get a glimpse of it. It might help things. That’s all I’ve got to say. I’m sorry for giving you the pain of knowing what I’ve done, but I thought it might do good. He’s just broken me up with his goodness. That’s Claude.”

The anger was quite gone now, and it was a tremulous hand that Dora laid on his shoulder.

“Oh, Jim,” she said, “thank you! I am so sorry for you, you know, and I’m grateful. I shall go back and tell Claude I know, and—and thank him, and be sorry.”

“Yes, that is the best thing you can do,” said Jim.

Claude was alone in their sitting room when she got back, and, as he always did, he rose from his chair as she entered. For a moment she stood looking at him, mute, beseeching. Then she came to him.

“Thank you about Jim, dear,” she said. “He has just told me about it, to make me—make me see what you were. Oh, Claude, I didn’t know.”

And then the tears came. But his arm was around her, and her head lay on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XII.

UNCLE ALF was seated with Dora on the terrace at Grote one afternoon late in August. Dora herself was hatless and cloakless, for it was a day of windless and summer heat, but Uncle Alf had an overcoat on, and a very shabby old gray shawl in addition cast about his shoulders. His face wore an expression of ludicrous malevolence.

"And I had to come out here, my dear, and take refuge with you," he said, "for Maria will drive me off my head with talk of that tumour of hers. Why, she speaks as if nobody had ever had a tumour before. I said to her, 'Maria, if it had been cancer now, and you'd got over as you have, it might have been something to make a tale of.' But tumour, God bless me! and benignant, so Sir Henry said, at that."

Dora gave a little shriek of laughter.

"Uncle Alf, sometimes I think you're the unkindest man in the whole world," she said, "and even when you're most unkind I can't help laughing. I wonder if you are unkind really. I don't expect so."

Uncle Alf took no notice of this, and went on with his grievances.

"As for Eddie, I'm sure I don't know what to make of him," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if he's going soft-headed, for he was always threatened that way, to my thinking. He can talk of nothing but the brave and beautiful Maria. Lord! my dear, it's a wonder to me that you can stand it. Doesn't it get on your nerves? Doesn't it make you feel sick and ill to hear how they go on?"

Dora laughed again.

"No, Uncle Alf, it doesn't, do you know? You see I was with them through all those dreadful days in the summer after the operation, when they still didn't know what it was for certain, and had to make an examination, and it made a tremendous impression on me. I always used to think that they all, including Claude, were very ordinary people. Well, they're not. They were very wonderful. They were cheerful, even when they were waiting for a verdict that might have been so terrible."

"Bah!" said Uncle Alf.

“Yes, if you wish. They used to get on my nerves, that is quite true, and you gave me a hint about it once which was very useful. You told me to see the humorous side of Dad and Mother.”

“Lord, it’s Dad and Mother, is it?” said Alf, in a tone of acid disgust.

“Yes, Dad and Mother. Just as you are Uncle Alf, but I’ll call you Mr. Osborne if you prefer. Very well, then, I took that hint, and sometimes now I laugh at them, which I never did before. I often laugh at them now, and let them see me laughing, and Dad says to Mother, ‘There’s Dora at her jokes again. What have you said?’ They know how I love them. Dear, don’t make such awful faces. They were so splendid, you know.”

“And Claude?” asked his uncle, after a pause.

“I didn’t do justice, or anything like it, to Claude till then,” she said. “He used to get on my nerves, too, very badly indeed. I don’t mind telling you, since I’ve told him, and we’ve laughed over that. But all that time in July, combined with something very fine that I found out he had done, made me see that what got on my nerves did not matter in the least. What mattered was Claude himself, whom I didn’t know before.”

“I love that boy,” said Uncle Alf, with unusual tenderness, “and I’m glad you do, my dear, because he deserves all the love you can give him. But I am glad you laugh at him, too. There’s no sense in not seeing the ridiculous side of people.”

“Oh yes, I laugh at him often,” said Dora. “I think he likes it. You see, he’s so dreadfully fond of me that he likes all I do.”

Uncle Alf gave a contemptuous sniff.

“Yes, he’s off his head about you,” he said. “I thought he had more sense. But there’s very little sense in anybody when you come to know them.”

“I know: it’s foolish of him,” said Dora. “I tell him so. But then I’m foolish about him. I expect if two people are foolish about each other, they can stand a lot of the other’s folly, though I expect it isn’t grammar. It is rather nice to be foolish about a man, if he happens to be your husband.”

“It seems to me you married him first, and fell in love with him afterward,” said Uncle Alf.

“That’s exactly what I did do,” said Dora softly.

“And what’s this fine thing Claude did?” asked the other. “Gave a cabman a sovereign, I suppose, and told him to keep the change. Much he’d miss it. And you thought that was devilish noble. Eh?”

“I can’t tell you what it was,” said she. “Nobody must know that.”

Uncle Alf was silent a minute: he wanted to say something ill-tempered but could not think of anything.

“Well, I’m glad the boy’s done something to deserve you, my dear,” he said, “though that sounds as if I was getting soft-headed, too, and perhaps I am, joining like this in this chorus of praise, this—this domestic symphony. But I can stand you and Claude: what I can’t stand is Eddie and Maria. Lord! if they aren’t coming out here, when I thought I had escaped. She in her bath chair, and he pushing it. A man of his age, and as stout as that. He’ll be bursting himself one of these days, and then we shall have Maria making us all sick with telling us how beautifully he bore it, and nobody behaved so bravely over a burst as her Eddie.”

Dora giggled hopelessly.

“Oh! you are such a darling,” she said. “I don’t mind what you say.”

The bath chair had approached, and Lady Osborne put down her sunshade as they came into the strip of shadow where Dora and Uncle Alf sat. He edged away from her as far as the angle of the house and the flower beds would permit.

“Well, and if this isn’t pleasant,” she said. “Eddie, my dear, we’ll stop here a bit and have a rest, if we’re not interrupting, and indeed it’s near teatime, and I want my tea badly to-day, I do. But my appetite’s been so good since my operation——”

Alf broke in.

“Maria, if I hear any more about you and your operation, I leave the house,” he said.

“Well, and I’m sure that’s the last thing I want you to do,” said Lady Osborne genially, “for I’m enjoying this little family party such as never was. Why, all the time I was getting better in London I was

looking forward to it, and dreamed about it too. There now, Alf, don't be so tetchy, stopping your ears in that manner, as if you had the neuralgia and was sitting in a draught. I was only going to say I'd been looking forward to a week or two of quiet down here with you all, and pleased I was to know that you would join us, instead of setting on Richmond Hill with the motors and all buzzing round you and raising clouds of dust with germs uncountable. Mr. O., my dear, you're all of a perspiration with pushing me, and thank you. Won't you be wise to put a wrap on, same as your brother does, when he sits out of doors, especially with you in that heat?"

"No, my dear, I'm comfortable enough. I was only wondering whether Dora was wise to sit here in that thin dress. It'll strike chill before sunset."

Dora again burst out laughing.

"Dad, we shall drive Uncle Alf off his head if we all think so much about each other," she said. "He's been making a formal complaint to me about it. He finds us all very trying!"

"And where's Claude and Jim?" asked Alf. "I hope they're taking great care of each other. Claude cut his finger this morning, and he bore it wonderfully. Never a cry nor a sob. But I wonder at you, Maria, letting them ride horses all about the country, without a doctor or a pair of surgeons to follow them in case of accidents. They might fall off and be hurt. A savage and dangerous beast is a horse, and more especially a mare, such as Claude was riding."

Lady Osborne entirely refused to notice the sarcastic intent of this.

"Well, to be sure, we've all got to take our risks," she said. "There'd be no sense in passing your life wrapped up in cotton-wool, and waiting for the doctor!"

"Why, and you used to ride too, when you was a lad, Alf," said her husband. "You're making Dora laugh at you. And I don't wonder: I could laugh myself!"

Alf got up from his chair.

"I think you'd both be the better for an operation, you and Maria," he said. "I should have a bit of humour put in, instead of a bit of tumour taken out. Not but what it's a far more serious affair. I doubt if either of you would get over it."

“Well, and it’s you who talked about my tumour this time,” said Lady Osborne triumphantly.

This was too much for Alf: he walked shufflingly back to the house, leaving his sister-in-law in possession of the field. But she used her victory nobly, with pity for the conquered.

Lady Osborne looked round in a discreet and penetrating manner after he had gone and was out of hearing.

“Dora, my dear, you mustn’t mind what Alf says,” she remarked with much acuteness. “He gets a bit sour now and then, and I’m sure I don’t wonder, with his lumbago, and no one to look after him. If only he had found a nice girl to look after him when he was young! Poor old Alf! But you can take it from me as knows him, he doesn’t really mean all he says. It’s his joke, and I’m not one to quarrel with a joke, and bless him, why shouldn’t he joke in his own way just as the rest of us do? And if sometimes he seems a bit ill-humoured over his joke—well, you let him get his bit of ill-humour off his mind, and he’ll be all the better for it. I never take no notice and it don’t hurt me. ‘Alf and his joke,’ I say over to myself, and no harm done.”

“Rum old cove is Alf,” said her husband; “he seems sometimes to want to quarrel with us all. But it takes two to make a quarrel, and he’ll have hard work to find the second in this house, if I know who lives in it. And he was just as anxious as he could be, Maria, when you was at your worst in the summer, telephoning five and six times in the day, till I said down the tube, ‘Maria’s love, and she’s asleep till morning.’ And what it’ll be when Dora here——”

“Mr. O., you go too far,” said his wife in a shrill aside. “But as you were saying about Alf, if there’s crust outside there’s crumb within. It’s a soft heart like your own, Mr. O., though he don’t know it.”

“Dad, when last were you angry with anybody?” asked Dora. “Can you remember?”

Lord Osborne considered this: it was a question that required research.

“Well, my dear, if you leave out things like my being angry with the Mother for giving us all such a fright last July—there’s one for you, Maria—I couldn’t rightly say. I had a dishonest foreman I remember at the works whom I had to dismiss, summary, too, one Monday

morning, but I think I was more sorry for his wife and children than I was angry with him. Nine children there was, and another expected, poor lamb! and stillborn when it came, for I inquired."

Dora saw Lady Osborne shoot out a furtive finger at him, and he understood.

"Then I was angry with Claude one day," he continued, "when he was a little lad. I think the devil must have been in the boy, for what must he do but rake out the fire from his mother's drawing room grate, and dump it all on the hearthrug. And yet I could scarce help laughing even when I gave him his spanking. What was in the boy's head that he should think of a trick like that? Perhaps it was his joke, too, something that looks mischievous at first, like old Alf's jokes. I'll take another cup of tea, Mother, for here's Claude coming with Jim, and such a tea-pot drainer as Claude I never saw."

"Yes, I doubt he'll injure his stomach," said Lady Osborne, "for I'm told that tea tans the coats of it like so much leather. Sir Henry told me so when we were having a chat one morning, after he'd dressed the place for me."

"Well, the less we know about our insides the better, to my way of thinking," said her husband, "until there's some call to see what's going on. Eat your dinner and drink your wine and get your sleep of nights, and you've done what you can to keep it contented."

"And I'm sure none's got a better right to tell us how to keep well than you, my dear," said Lady Osborne appreciatively, "for bar a bit of gout now and then, as it isn't reasonable you should be spared, there's not an hour's anxiety your health's given me since first we met, Mr. O., and here's the boys ready for their tea, I'll be bound. Old Alf, and his saying that he wondered at me allowing them to go horseback!"

All this, these quiet ordinary domestic conversations, as well as things of far greater import, had entirely changed in character for Dora. But it was for her only that they had changed; in themselves they were exactly as they had been before there came those days which, so she put it to herself, had opened her eyes and given sight to them. For she had labelled them trivial or tiresome, according as her own mood had varied, and though discussion on subjects of high artistic or spiritual

import was not rare but unknown among the Osbornes, she had now the sense to see that the kindly utterances of simple people possibly illustrated though they did not allude to qualities that were not at all trivial. For she saw now the personalities that lay behind these details of their life, the hearts out of which the mouths spoke. It was that which gave its tone to what had become music: and if Lord Osborne lingered in his cellar to find a bottle of wine that Sir Thomas appreciated, it was no longer Sir Thomas's undoubted greediness that concerned her, but his host's desire that his guest should enjoy himself. And she knew now that the spirit which did not think it trivial to see that the dinner was good, or that the wine was plentiful, was perfectly capable of rising to higher levels than these. When there was a call for courage, courage of a very wonderful sort had answered; when endurance was needed, endurance was there; when charity, as in the case of Jim, the charity that met the difficult and disgraceful situation was complete, and had all the fineness and delicacy which only perfect simplicity can give. How Claude had done it she did not know; there seemed no question of finesse or of diplomatic behaviour. He had merely behaved without difficulty, like Claude, and but a few weeks afterward there was Jim, sensitive and highly strung as he always was, staying with them all, not like a guest, but as one of the family, as Lady Osborne loved to think. And it was not that he was lacking in the sense of shame that made his friendship with Claude possible: it was that he, like Dora, had had his eyes opened. A heart as kind as Claude's counted for something after all: they both, it must be supposed, had taken it for granted until it was shown them. But the sight of it, the practical knowledge of it, worked the miracle, worked it easily, as if there was no miracle about it.

Dora had gone to her room shortly after tea to rest, on the diplomatic prompting of her mother-in-law. With so many gentlemen present, Lady Osborne would never have said, "Dora, the doctor told you to rest for a couple of hours before dinner," but she had reminded her that she had several letters to write for the post. And Dora, secretly and kindly smiling, had remembered at once, though (like the almug trees) there were no such letters. And with her to her room she took up the parcel of thought that has been indicated, for she wanted to examine its contents a little more closely before Claude came up, as he

always did, to read to her for a while before she dressed. Right at the bottom of the packet, she knew, there lay something very precious. She would look at that by and by, with him perhaps.

But in spite of the preponderance that qualities of the heart had now gained in her mind compared to what must be called qualities of the surface, to which belonged such things as beauty and breeding, she found that the latter had not at all lost their value. But she saw such things differently. They had assumed, so it seemed to her, not a truer value, but the true value. She loved Claude's beauty more than even in those enchanted days of honeymoon in Venice, not only now because it was beauty, but because it was Claude's, while such superficial failings as were undoubtedly his she laughed at still, but now without bitterness or irritation. They were funny: to say a "handsome lady" was still ludicrous, but now, since it was Claude who said it, it could not help being lovable. Indeed she and Jim had invented what they called "The Claude Catechism," which began, "Are you a handsome lady? No, but I am a perfect gentleman." And then Claude would throw whatever was handiest at Jim's head.

And how, like Pharaoh, had she at one time hardened her heart, refusing to give admittance, so it seemed to her now, to that sunshine of beautiful qualities that was always ready to stream in upon her. He had never failed her, he had always been patient, waiting for the door to open, for the closed windows to be unbarred. True, in the early days he thought they had been unbarred, that he had full admittance, but in the weeks that followed, when it was clear to him that ingress was given him no longer, he had waited, waited without bitter thought of her. She had made him, after their reconciliation, try to explain what he had felt to her, and he had done it, unwillingly, but not failing to answer her questions.

"You see it was like this, darling," he had said. "I saw something was wrong, and I tried to find out if I had done anything, or how I could set things right. But it didn't seem to me that I had altered at all —at least I knew I hadn't—toward you, from the time that you said you loved me, and so the best thing I could do was just to keep on at that. I thought of all sorts of things, tried to wonder at your reasons for not being pleased with me. But that was no use: I'd always been myself to you, and—and I thought you might care for me again later

on. Of course—I suppose it was in a selfish way—I was glad when poor old Jim made such a mistake, because that gave me an opportunity, you see, to—well, treat him decently. Not that I ever thought it would get to your ears. However, it did: Jim was a trump over that, going and telling you. I didn't mean him to, but when it happened like that, I couldn't help being pleased. You had been a bit hard on me, you know: thank God you were, for it makes it better now that you are not. Lord, what a jaw!"

This was the outcome of her talk with him, but the "jaw" was punctuated by questions of hers. It was another Claude catechism. But this one was not funny, nor had Jim any part in it.

Yes: she had separated this man who loved her into packets: there was her mistake. First she had loved his beauty, and then had taken that for granted. Next she had felt growingly irritated with all in him that did not correspond to the particular little tricks of conversation and life in which she had been brought up. Then she had got accustomed to those sterling qualities which she had taken for granted from the first. And then had come "the little more," and how much it was. He had but shown, in practical demonstration, that he was kind and brave and reliable, all that she had thought she had given him credit for at first. But the effect was immense: she fell in love, at first real sight, with his qualities.

That fused the whole: at last she was in love with the man, not with his face, not with his character taken by itself, but with him as a whole. That splendid body was his, his too were the greater splendours of character, and if his also were the things dealt with in the public Claude catechism, they were no longer rejected, they were no longer even accepted, they were welcomed and hugged. The reason for this was plain: it was Claude who said and did all that which was symbolized under the title of "handsome lady," and since it was Claude, it was a thing to be kissed, though laughter came too. He was no longer packets: they were fused into one dear whole, the thought of which and the presence of which made her heart ache with tenderness.

And now, thinking of these things, she had a thirsty eye for the opening of the door, a thirsty ear for the sound of his foot in the passage outside. But she knew he would not come quite yet, for at tea

some silly discussion had arisen between him and Jim as to whether it was possible to get (with a run) from the bottom of the terrace to the lake in twelve strides. Jim had been vehement on the impossibility of it, and though Claude cordially agreed that it was a feat of which Jim was pathetically incapable, he backed himself to do it for the sum of one shilling. Even now she could hear him running along the terrace below the window, and Jim's voice counting the strides.

Dora got up and strolled on to her balcony. The last attempt had apparently been unsuccessful, for Claude was starting again, and next moment with great strides his long legs were taking him across the grass that sloped down to the lake. This time it looked as if he would easily succeed, for the sixth leap had taken him well beyond the half-distance. The eleventh took him within a couple of yards of the edge, and next moment Dora joined in the shout of laughter that came from Jim. For it had not apparently occurred to Claude what happened next, if you leap at top speed to the margin of a lake. But he knew now, as he vanished in a fountain of spray. It was the deep end of the lake too.

Jim had collapsed altogether on the ground by the time Claude swam to shore, and Dora was equally helpless on the balcony, but by the time the involuntary bather had wrung his clothes out, Jim had recovered sufficiently to find the shilling he had lost to him.

"Oh! it was cheap at the price," he said. "I wish it had been a florin."

Claude walked up the terrace to the house, leaving a trail of water on the paving stones, and in a moment his dressing room door opened with a crack, and a head and naked shoulder came round the corner.

"Darling! I've been making a fool of myself," he said "I must change first, and then shall I come in to read to you?"

"Yes, do," she said, still laughing. "I saw it. I thought I should have a fit. Can't you do it again before you change? It was too heavenly."

"Yes, if you wish," said he. "But I shall have to put on my wet clothes again."

She laughed again.

"No, there would be no 'first fine careless rapture' the second time," she said.

“What’s that?” asked Claude.

“Nothing. Browning. Change, and then come and read to me.”

It was not long before he joined her, and seated himself on the floor by the side of the sofa where she lay, with his back against it. The book he was reading was “Esmond,” and that evening they came to the chapter in which Harry comes home, on December 29th, and goes to the service in Winchester Cathedral. And Claude read:

“ ‘She gave him her hand, her little fair hand: there was only her marriage ring on it. The quarrel was all over. The year of grief and estrangement had passed. They had never been separated.’ ”

Dora’s hand lay on her husband’s arm, and he felt a soft pressure of her fingers.

“Oh, Claude,” she said, “how nice! He was so faithful and patient, and it all came right.”

He let the book fall to the ground. As soon as she spoke he ceased to think of Esmond, and though Dora’s words referred to him, she was not thinking of him either.

“ ‘They had never been separated,’ ” she went on, still quoting, but still not thinking of the book. “They hadn’t really been separated, because their love was present all the time, but she had let it get covered up with irritation and impatience. Was it like that it happened?”

“I can’t remember,” he said, “indeed I cannot. Everything seems unreal that isn’t perfect.”

“And there is something more coming,” she said, “coming soon, perhaps in a few days now. So to-night, dear, let us talk a little instead of reading even that beautiful chapter. I am glad we got to it to-day. I like stopping just at those very words, and I want you to tell me just once, what really I know so well, that you feel as if we had never been separated, that you forgive all my stupidity and shallowness. I want to let it all pass from my mind for ever: to know that I needn’t ever reproach myself any more. I think I have learned my lesson: I do indeed. Just tell me, if you can, that you think I have!”

He had turned himself about as she spoke, and now instead of sitting he knelt by her side, she leaning on her elbow toward him. In

the humility of the simple words, there was something exquisite to him, they flooded his heart with a tender protectiveness.

“Oh, my darling, you say that to me! Indeed, indeed, I never reproached you.”

Dora was still grave.

“I know that,” she said, “but I reproached myself. How could I help it? But, Claude, the sting has gone out of my self-reproach. I can’t help it: it has. You have to tell me, if you truly can, that I needn’t barb it again.”

He saw she wanted the direct answer.

“You need not,” he said. “And I think you cannot. You can’t make an old bruise ache again when it is well.”

“Then it has gone,” she said. “Pull me up, dear, with those strong hands.”

He raised her to her feet, and she clung to him a moment.

“Oh, Claude! it is getting near the best time of all,” she said. “Your mother once told me that to bear a child was the best thing God ever thought of for women. Oh dear! and she was so funny at tea. Dad said something about a foreman he had discharged with nine children and another coming, and she pulled him up. How beautifully laughter and the biggest things in the world go together. They don’t interfere with one another in the least.”

“Lord! and to think that once I used to believe you weren’t respectful enough to Dad and her,” said he.

“And you were quite right. I can laugh at them now I love them. It’s that which makes the difference.”

She strolled to the window.

“Let’s come out on the balcony for a little,” she said. “What an evening!”

The sun had set, but not long, and in the west a flash of molten red lay along the horizon. That melted into orange, which again faded into pale green. Higher up the sky was of velvet blue, and little wisps of feathery cloud flushed with rose colour were flecked over it. The stars were already lit, and some noble planet near to its setting flamed jewel-like in that green strip of sky. Already the colours were half

withdrawn from the garden beds, but a hint of the flower presences came to them in the little fragrant breeze that fluttered moth-like in the stillness. Beyond lay the lake, screened from the glory of sunset by the tall clumps of rhododendrons on its far side, and in the shadow the water was dark and steel-like in tone. Birds still chuckled in the bushes, and from far away came the pulse of some hurrying train. And in the hush and quiet of the hour they spoke together of the dear event that was coming and would not be long delayed.

"So I wanted," she said at last, "to clear everything off my mind which could make me look backward. I want nothing to exist for me except you and our love for each other. Even Dad and Mother must get a little dim. I can't explain."

"I think I understand very well," said he.

"And you won't be frightened for me, Claude?" she asked. "Yet I needn't ask you. I saw what you were when mother was ill."

He did not answer.

"What then, dear?" asked Dora.

"Well, it's you, you see, now," he said. "I can't help it. But I'll do my best."

A week more passed quietly enough. Lady Austell arrived, and that somehow was the last straw for Uncle Alf, for she was so extraordinarily appropriate, and he persuaded Jim to come back to Richmond with him. Lady Austell had very thoughtfully let the house at Deal most advantageously for the whole month of September, and intended to have a nice long stay at Grote. Really it was quite too wonderful that Dora's baby should be born at Grote. It was a clear case of special Providence.

Then came a day when the house was very still, and the hot hours passed with leaden foot. To Claude it seemed that the morning would never pass to noon, and when noon was over each hour the more seemed an eternity twice told. But just before sunset there was heard the cry of a child.

Later, he was allowed to see Dora for a moment, and in a cot by her bed, tiny and red and crumpled, lay that which had come into the world.

"Oh Claude!" she said softly, as he came up to her bed, "all three of us—you and your son and I."

THE END

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[The end of The Osbornes by Benson, E. F. (Edward Frederic)]