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THE  
MARQUIS  
OF  
PUTNEY  
BY  
RICHARD  
MARSH



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**THE MARQUIS OF PUTNEY**

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

**THE BEETLE: A MYSTERY**

**A DUEL**

**GARNERED**

**A METAMORPHOSIS**

**THE TWICKENHAM PEERAGE**

**A SPOILER OF MEN**

**BOTH SIDES OF THE VEIL**

**THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN**

**MARVELS AND MYSTERIES**

**THE GODDESS: A DEMON**

**THE JOSS: A REVERSION**

**CONFESSIONS OF A YOUNG LADY**

THE  
MARQUIS OF PUTNEY

BY  
RICHARD MARSH

METHUEN & CO.  
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.  
LONDON

1905

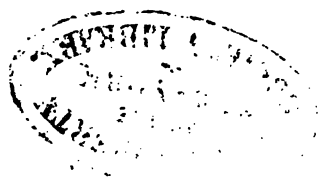
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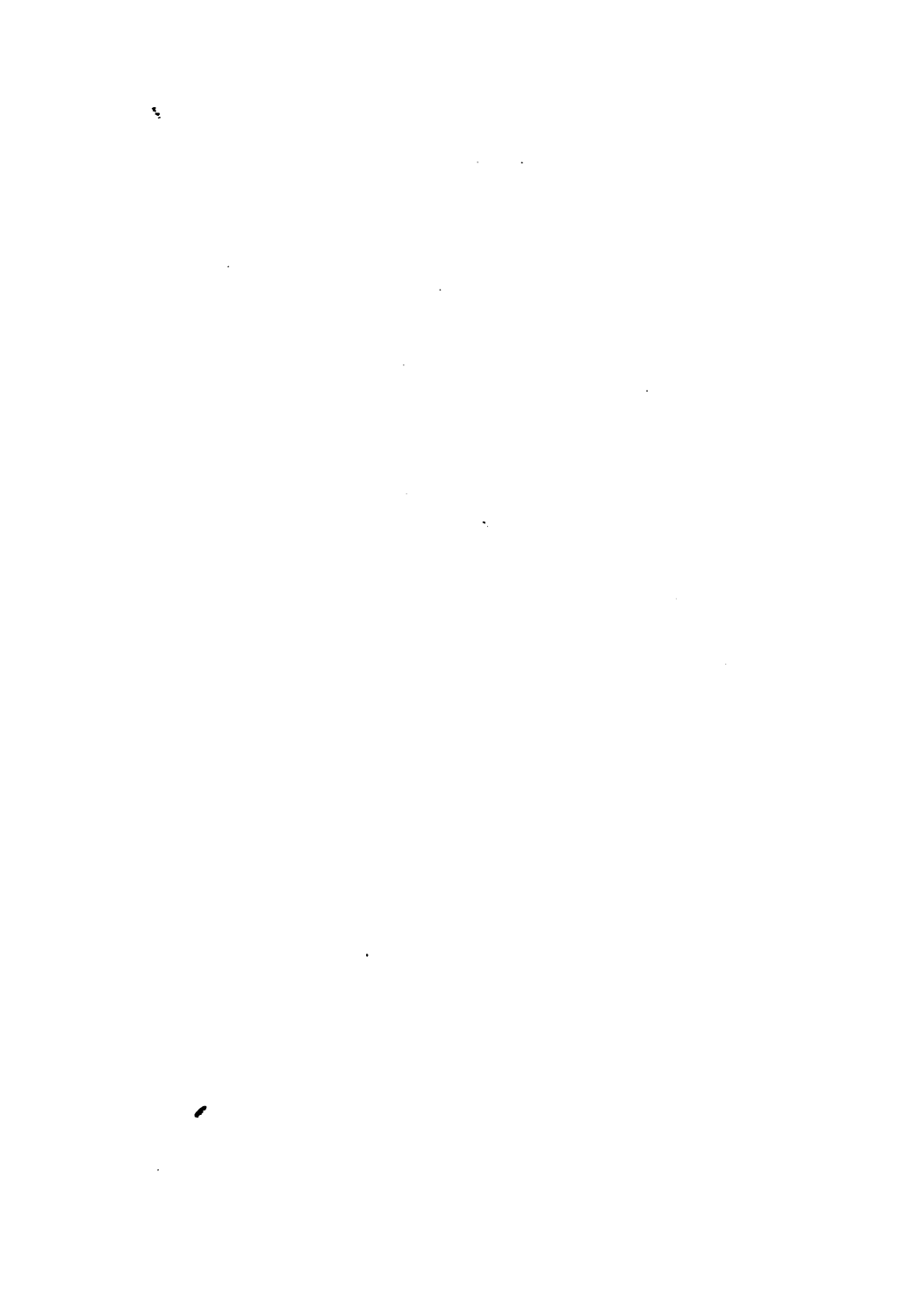
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# THE MARQUIS OF PUTNEY

## CHAPTER I

### THE STORY OF THE TWO WOMEN

THE duke was incredulous. He stared at the in-offensive Joynson as if he suspected him of an attempt to make him the victim of some disreputable practical joke. He demanded—

“What infernal nonsense are you talking?”

As he replied, Joynson’s tone and manner suggested the concentrated essence of humility.

“I am afraid it is not nonsense, your grace. I fear you will find that it is only too true.”

“Kidnapped!—in broad daylight!—in the middle of Hyde Park!—my son!—and heir!—the Marquis of Putney! Joynson, you’re a fool!”

Apparently Joynson was willing to admit the soft impeachment—to admit anything, indeed, except the one thing the duke desired. He stuck to his tale.

“I fear, your grace, it is only too true,” he persisted in repeating.

His grace waxed warm. So far he had not taken the man’s statement seriously. He had exhibited no symptoms of concern. His attitude was expressive of a half angry, half amazed conviction that, for no reason at all so far as he knew, Joynson was talking nonsense. Now he began to stride about the room as if with growing irritation.

"I have to leave for the House immediately ; I have a speech to make on this confounded crofter question,—as you are very well aware. In any case, I can only spare five minutes. If you wish me to believe what you have said, where are those two women ? They may have humbugged you ;—they won't find it so easy with me."

"Mrs. Olive and Sarah Barnes are both outside."

"Then bring them in."

Joynson brought them in. Mrs. Olive, the head nurse, was a woman of about forty ; brown-haired, pleasant-faced, softly spoken. Her usual comfortable self-possession had given place to a discomposure which was almost tragic. As the duke eyed her, she trembled.

"Where's my son ?"

The inquiry, which was by no means gently uttered, seemed to frighten her into speechlessness. She fingered the folds of her dress ; her lips moved, but no words came from them. He repeated his inquiry, with variations, louder than before.

"Do you hear me ? Where's the Marquis of Putney ?"

Then she answered, with tremulous tones, "Your—your grace, I—I don't know."

It was an answer which was hardly calculated to appease him.

"What the devil dō you mean by 'you don't know' ? Aren't you responsible for him ? Aren't you his nurse ? Where is he ?"

"He's—he's gone."

"Gone ! Woman, you'd better be careful ! Where can a child, not yet ten months old, have gone—without the knowledge of his nurse ? Answer me,—where's my son ?"

Mrs. Olive tried to answer, and failed ; instead, she put her hands up to her face and burst into a flood of hysterical tears. The duke stared at her with an expression of countenance which hinted at anything but sympathy.



"You're a nice sort of person, upon my word ! To think that my child should have been entrusted to the care of a woman like you !" He turned to Sarah Barnes. "Perhaps you have more sense than she has ; you can hardly have less. Will you be so good as to inform me where my son is ?"

Sarah Barnes was a squarely built, stolid-faced young woman, country bred, with about her still something of the atmosphere of the fields. Possibly because she was conscious that her actual responsibility was less, she proved to be more at her ease than her senior. Her answers to the questions which were showered on her, if brief, were to the point, and came readily enough ; though the tale she had to tell was as unsatisfactory as it very well could be—strange, also, to the verge of the incredible.

"His lordship, your grace, was taken out of his perambulator."

The duke was to be excused if he indulged in what seemed a vain repetition of the girl's words.

"Taken out of his perambulator ? Of course he was taken out of his perambulator. Isn't he in the habit of being taken out of his perambulator ? Do you imagine that I suppose he takes himself out of his perambulator ? The point of interest, to me, is—who took him ?"

"I don't know, your grace."

"Where was he taken ?"

"In the park, up by the Serpentine."

"And where were you—and Mrs. Olive ?"

"I was with my aunt."

"And where was your aunt ?"

For the first time the girl showed signs of hesitation. "She—she was talking to her husband."

"Talking to her husband ! I thought she hadn't one ;—I thought she was a widow : it was on that understanding she was engaged."



The girl looked furtively at her still sobbing aunt ; apparently her desire was, while telling the truth, to do the other as little harm as she possibly could.

"If you please, your grace, her husband hasn't treated her very well ; I think that's why she doesn't wish any one to know she has one. We came upon him unexpected. He would speak to her. She thought if I was there he'd behave himself. So I went with her."

"And left my child without a custodian ?"

"We left his lordship asleep in his perambulator under a tree."

"How long did you leave him ?"

"I don't quite know, your grace ;—only a few minutes."

"What does that mean ?—half an hour ?"

"I couldn't quite say ; but I shouldn't think it was so long as that. Then I said to aunt, 'Hadn't I better go back and see if his lordship's awake ?' So we all three of us went back. And when we got back the perambulator was empty."

"How far away from his perambulator had you been—you, and your precious aunt, and her delectable husband ?"

"I couldn't quite say, your grace. Not very far. Just a little way under the trees."

"What do you call a little way ?—a hundred yards ?"

"About that."

"Two hundred yards ?"

"I couldn't exactly say, but I shouldn't think we went as far as that."

"You could point out the exact point to which you went, and the exact spot on which you left the perambulator ?"

"Oh yes, your grace."

"During your absence did neither of you keep, say, one eye on it ?—did neither of you observe what was taking place ?"

Sarah glanced at her aunt, with an air of increased confusion.

"Part of the time we did ; but part of the time it wasn't in sight."

"Indeed !—and that's what you call going a little way ! On my word, you deserve a whipping ! So, when you did come back to it, the perambulator was empty ?"

"Yes, your grace."

"My son had disappeared ?"

"Yes, your grace."

The first affirmative was uttered meekly ; the second was meeker still. Evidently Sarah was becoming more and more depressed by a consciousness of her delinquency.

"Then, when you found that my son had vanished, what did you do ?"

"If you please, your grace, at first we were so surprised and frightened that we didn't know what to do. We thought some one had been playing us a trick ; perhaps some other nurse."

"Who attends to her duties better than you do. Well ?"

"We turned the bassinet inside out, thinking he might have been hidden under the cushions. Then we searched the grass, and behind trees ; then we asked every one we saw if they had seen any one carrying a baby ; then—then we came home."

"It did not occur to you to ask the husband of your widowed aunt what finger he had had in the matter ?"

Mrs. Olive's tears grew more pronounced ; the girl only replied after an interval of silence.

"No, your grace."

"Though I perceive that you both suspect him ?"

In the midst of her sobs Mrs. Olive broke into audible speech.

"He's not a good man, your grace, but I don't think he's so bad as that. Besides, why should he do it?"

"It doesn't occur to you that the infant son and heir of the Duke of Datchet might be an article worth stealing? Being the kind of character you suggest, it might, however, occur to him. He might reason that I should be willing to give, say, a five-pound note for the return of my only child. Didn't you put any question to him on the subject at all?"

"When we returned to the bassinet, and found it empty, he had already gone."

"Had he? Then it's possible that, being a man of resource, he reached the bassinet first, and emptied it."

"It's not possible. He went in the opposite direction; we watched him go."

"But it is possible that, close at hand, he had a friend, unknown to you, who watched over the bassinet while you were absent?"

"Your grace, I can't think it. Cruelly though he's treated me, and bad though he's been, I cannot believe that he would be so wicked as that."

"You mean that you would rather not believe it. Since it is plain that, with the best will in the world, you cannot succeed in persuading yourself, it's hardly likely that you will succeed in persuading me. Is your husband's name Olive?"

The woman's glance fell; her voice was scarcely audible.

"No, your grace."

"I see;—it's like that. What is his name?"

"He married me as James Sully; but—I'm not sure that was his real name. I've never known what his real name was."

"He being a man of so many aliases? To think that the wife of such a man should have been introduced into

my family as the custodian of my son and heir!—the irony of it! What is your husband's trade and profession?"

"He calls himself a plumber."

"But in reality——?"

"He's a very bad man."

"Professional criminal, perhaps?"

If anything, the woman was weeping more profusely, if more quietly, than before.

"I—I'm afraid he is something of the kind."

"Good God! and my child was at the mercy of this man's wife! Been in prison?"

"He's only just come out."

"For what was he sentenced?"

"Burglary."

"Nice man! Where is he living now?"

"I don't know."

"You are sure you don't know?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Your grace, I will be frank with you."

"It might be as well; and surely it is almost time."

"I am myself an honest woman; I always have been honest; I come from decent folk: of this I can give you all the proof you can possibly require. When I was in a situation I met this man; I believed what he said. It was only after I had become his wife that I discovered what kind of person he really was. When he was sent to prison I gave up using the name under which he had married me, and tried to start afresh. I have succeeded very well, until to-day. For more than five years I have seen and heard nothing of him. When he came up to me in the park I was so startled and upset that I lost my head. I tried to shake him off; but he wouldn't go. He said that he had something to say to me, and insisted on saying it then and there. I didn't want to have a scene, and, knowing what he was like, I thought it would be better for me to listen.

But, as I was afraid of what he might say or do, I took Sarah with me as a sort of protection ; thinking that the fact of her presence would induce him to keep his language and his conduct within bounds. I see now how wrong I was."

"It was bad enough to desert my child yourself ; it was almost worse to constrain this young woman to desert him also, and so leave him wholly without protection."

"I see that now ; I didn't then. I was in such a state. Besides, I never thought that any harm would come of it."

"That, quite possibly, was what you were meant to see. Pray what pleasant confidence did your husband repose in you ?"

"He wanted money, as I expected. When I told him I wouldn't give him any—and, indeed, I'd none with me to give,—he was very angry."

"Didn't he give you an address to which you were to send him money ?"

The answer came with marked hesitation. "No—o. But he said if I didn't bring him at least ten pounds to-night he'd send her grace a letter which would result in my being discharged from my situation."

"Where are you to take it ?"

"In the park at half-past nine."

"Whereabouts ?"

"Between Albert Gate and the Serpentine Bridge."

"A convenient rendezvous. Did you say you would be there ?"

"I said I wouldn't ; but—I don't know."

"I know you will be there : with some one else quite close at hand." He turned to the man, who had remained quietly by : "Joynson, telephone to them at Scotland Yard to send me at once some one who's not altogether an idiot. And telephone to Lord Carrick in the House, to let him know that circumstances over which I have no control will

prevent my speaking.—Tell them at Scotland Yard that I must have their best man here inside fifteen minutes.”

Joynson left the room. The duke stood by the window, looking out into the courtyard. The two women continued motionless: the girl white-cheeked, with tightly closed lips, anxious eyes; her aunt cried unceasingly, as it were, under her breath. Her emotion was making a piteous sight of her. Presently the duke faced round to them, wholly oblivious of their distress.

“God knows what mischief you women have done to-day. If it is as bad as it seems, you need expect no mercy from me; no punishment can be too great for your deserts. It comes, too, at a most inopportune moment. Not only am I so pressed by many matters that I have hardly a moment which I can legitimately call my own, but, as you are well aware, there is the ball to-night, to which the prince is coming. What am I to do,—if my son is lost? Am I to receive my future sovereign, as if nothing had happened; or, at the eleventh hour, am I to shut my doors against my future king, and against my friends,—because of your misconduct? There is also my wife. You know how delicate is the state of her health. When to-night’s ball is over she leaves London for the country, to remain there for an indefinite period; and, as you are again aware, my son goes with her. I shall be afraid to tell her the tale which you have told me. She is lunching out, but, so soon as she comes back, she will have to be told. I am not sure that I ought not to tell her at once, across the telephone, though Heaven only knows what the result will be. If it could be kept from her it should be—the doctor has warned me that any sudden strain might have the most serious consequences,—but how can it? The moment she returns she will ask for her boy; when he is not forthcoming, what am I to tell her?” His voice was charged with passion. “If any harm comes to her because of you I shall feel like taking the law into my

own hands, and treating you—both of you!—as cruelly as you have treated me.”

The man, Joynson, returned to the room. “Your grace, I have explained to Lord Carrick that you will probably be prevented from attending in your place in the House; and somebody is already on his way from Scotland Yard.”

The duke drew him aside into the window, where he put to him a question.

“What do you think of that woman’s story?”

Joynson seemed to be debating within himself. “Your grace wishes me to be quite candid?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then your grace places me in an invidious position. Because, while I distrust the woman, and still more her so-called husband, I doubt if either of them has had anything to do with his lordship’s disappearance.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

Again Joynson paused, as if for self-communion. “Your grace will laugh at me.”

“If I do, what then? It will not be for the first time. Out with it, man: I have often found you to be not so great a fool as you seemed.”

“I have been warned of his lordship’s disappearance, three times, in a dream.”

“A dream! Come, Joynson, that’s too much,—even for you. Do you expect me to take stock of dreams? What was your dream?”

“Three times I dreamt; but the first warning came to me when I was wide awake.”

“What are you talking about? You were ever a man of mystery; don’t torment me at such a moment.”

“On the day after his lordship was born, I received an envelope in which was a sheet of paper on which these words were typewritten: ‘Don’t imagine that the Marquis

of Putney will be left either to your master or to you.'"

"Are you joking?"

"I have both the envelope and its contents in my pocket. Here they are."

The duke scanned attentively what the other handed to him. For some seconds he was silent.

"Why did you not tell me of this before?"

"What good would have been gained?"

"I might have been on my guard."

"I know your grace better than that. You would only have laughed, torn it up, thrown it into the fire, and cared nothing."

"That is true enough." The duke rustled the envelope between his finger and thumb. "Have you any idea from whom this came?"

"I have no more idea than your grace has."

For a moment the two men's eyes met. Then both looked hurriedly away, as if each was desirous of not seeing what was on the other's face.



## CHAPTER II

### THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE DRAMA

THE name of the person who came from Scotland Yard was Wainford, Inspector Thomas Wainford. He was big and bulky ; over six feet high, and broad in proportion ; with a heavy black moustache and a brusque manner. Towards the duke he was sufficiently deferential —though occasionally, even with him, he was more than a trifle curt ; with the two nurses he was abrupt and harsh, almost to the point of brutality. So soon as he was in possession of the outlines of their story, he demanded, and obtained, a minute description of the missing child, together with a full and particular inventory of everything he had on. When he had it all written down, he observed—

“His lordship, your grace, would have been worth stealing for the sake of the clothes he was wearing ; he must have had lace on him to the value of more than a hundred pounds. That sort of thing can be easily turned into money. We’ll see if we can trace it as a clue. I should like to have a photograph of him in that robe : it might be useful.”

“My wife has several photographs of him ; quite possibly she has one in that robe. I will inquire, if you like.”

“I should be very much obliged to your grace if you would. In the mean time, I’ll send the description over the

## THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE DRAMA 13

telephone. In a few minutes every policeman in London will be on the lookout with his eyes wide open.—You two women had better wait here till I come back ; I've a good deal more to say to you."

On his return he subjected them to a severe cross-examination ; with Mrs. Olive especially he was unsparing.

"You say this man married you as James Sully : under what name was he convicted ?"

"Benjamin Cooper."

"Cooper ? That was for the St. John's Wood burglaries ; I had the case. That's the man we know as the Prowler—as big a blackguard as there is in town. And you must be the woman we were looking for, who passed as his wife, and was supposed to have got off with the spoil."

"I was his wife ; at least, I was married to him in church. I don't believe you have been looking for me ; and if by ' spoil ' you mean the proceeds of his dishonesty, I have had nothing to do with it. I never touched a penny of his money ; he always lived on mine."

"That's your story ; we'll look into it a little later on. So he's out again, is he ? And you had a rendezvous with him this morning in Hyde Park ?"

"I had nothing of the kind. I would go to the other end of England to avoid seeing him. My constant prayer is that I may never see him again."

"Just so. Then you had no idea he would be there ?"

"I had not. I would have taken care to keep away if I had known."

"And he had no expectation of seeing you ?"

"That I cannot say."

"He said something which showed that he did expect to see you ?" She hesitated. He urged her. "Come, out with it ! You'll only make matters worse for yourself by trying to screen him."

"I'm not trying to screen him. And as for making matters worse for myself, if his lordship, of whom I was as fond as if he were my own child, has really been stolen, I don't care what happens to me."

"No doubt. Remarks of that sort are not invited. What did he say which showed that he expected to see you this morning in Hyde Park?"

"He's found out where I was in service; and it seems that some one told him that most fine mornings I was in the park."

"Who gave him that information?"

"I can't say. It was no friend of mine."

"How can you say that, if you don't know? No doubt it was a matter of common notoriety that generally in fine weather the Marquis of Putney was taken for an airing in Hyde Park by his two nurses. He had only to become aware of the fact that you were his head nurse, and the thing became quite simple. A word or two to another lady friend—a hint to her to keep herself handy while he engaged your attention,—and the thing was done. The only difficulty in his way you yourself removed when you persuaded this young woman to keep you company; that was a stroke of luck on which he could hardly have counted. Indeed, so curious a stroke of luck was it for him that it makes me wonder if, by any possibility, you were standing in with him."

Mrs. Olive flamed up. "How dare you say such a thing? It's a lie!—and you know it's a lie!"

"I am only pointing out what construction certain persons might put upon your action; and not without reason. You yourself must perceive how, unwittingly or not, you assisted your husband in carrying out his little arrangements."

"You're taking it for granted that he's guilty. I don't believe it;—I don't believe he's had anything to do with

his lordship's disappearance. I can't think that he's so bad as that."

"You didn't think that he was so bad as he was afterwards proved to be : you're possibly the sort of woman who never believes anything till it hits them in the face, and then it knocks them down. You can take it from me—if you don't know it already—that the man to whom you are married is capable of any iniquity he can lay his hand to. What's his address ?"

"I tell you again, I haven't a notion."

"But he'll be in Hyde Park to-night to receive from you that ten pounds ?"

"He said he would be."

"He said he would be ; but he probably won't. I understand. At any rate, we'll be there to see." The inspector, crossing to the duke, drew him aside. "I fancy there's little doubt about it. That fellow has had a hand of some sort in the disappearance of your son : whether the woman is in with him I don't know. I must look up her record. Nor do I know whether the object is robbery or blackmail. That remains to be seen."

"You arrive at rapid conclusions."

"Given what has happened, and such a man as the Prowler close at hand, at what other conclusion can one arrive ? What I propose to do now is to go with these two women to the park, and learn from them exactly how the land was lying. We shall then be able to understand better how the whole affair was managed."

Five persons went to Hyde Park : the duke, Joynson, the inspector, and the two women. Then took place what is called in France a "reconstitution of the drama." The five passed up the Row till they reached the precise point at which Mrs. Olive first became conscious of the presence of the man with many aliases. She described how she had seen him leaning against the railings ; and how, hoping she

was still unobserved, in sudden alarm she had instructed her niece to turn the perambulator round, and beat a hurried retreat. Sarah interposed a remark to the effect that she could not think what her aunt meant by her unexpected action, as they had previously arranged to go to the end of the park, right up to the railings of Kensington Gardens, and back. Mrs. Olive's hopes were vain. Her manœuvre was noted. Before the perambulator had been turned right round her husband was upon her.

The woman's plight was pitiful. Sully made it instantly clear that, until he had had his say, escape was out of the question. It was not surprising that his wife lost her head and became bewildered. Conscious that the ducal baby-carriage was familiar to many of those around—that curious eyes were noticing her association with the not particularly prepossessing looking scamp,—fearful of what, at any moment, he might say or do,—anxious, before all else, to avoid a scene, a scandal,—it seemed to her, in her confusion and distress, that the only thing she could do was to grant him the interview which he demanded. Hurrying along, they came to where the path branches off from the main road between two lines of trees towards the police-station—a neighbourhood which one would have thought that James Sully, alias Benjamin Cooper, alias the Prowler, would have shunned. It is possible, however, that all parties were oblivious of the nature of the building which stood among the trees. Anyhow, at this point, Sully had insisted on his wife giving him an opportunity to unburden his marital mind ; declining, at the same time, to be bothered any more by the close company of the ducal bassinet. The wife had remonstrated ; but he so raised his tones, and used such language, that the frightened woman thought it better to comply.

“ If you don't do as I tell you, and let me have a chance of talking to you without having that —— perambulator

## THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE DRAMA 17

hanging about my heels, you'll be sorry. Besides, what's the harm? It doesn't take two to look after a kid and a pram. This young lady can look after it as well as you, and perhaps better."

Both women were firm in asserting that his proposal was that Sarah Barnes should remain in charge of the Marquis of Putney. The suggestion to the contrary came from Mrs. Olive: she admitted it.

"I was afraid of him," she declared. "I wouldn't have gone alone with him up that path for all the gold of the Indies."

"That you were," corroborated Sarah. "I never saw you in such a state. You were trembling so that every moment I thought you were going to faint."

"So I said," continued Mrs. Olive, "'Sarah, if I go with him you must come too, because go with him alone I won't.' 'That's all right,' he said; 'a fine girl like that I don't object to, but I won't have the kid,—that's how he spoke of his lordship. 'Don't you think,' I said, 'that I'm going out of sight of this bassinet, or that I'm going to leave it for more than two minutes, either.' 'Don't you worry about the bassinet,' said Sarah; 'that'll be all right, aunt.' Didn't you say that, Sarah?'"

The girl admitted that she did. "So I stood the bassinet under this tree, in the shade, right out of the glare of the sun."

"You're sure that this is the tree?" interpolated the inspector.

"Quite; I'm not likely to forget. There was scarcely any one about."

"You looked to see?"

"I did."

"Who was about?"

"An elderly lady and gentleman were walking away from us along the path there; there was a nurse with a

child in a mail-cart down by the water ; some people were looking over the bridge,—I saw them move off as I stood watching : but quite close to us there was no one at all."

"Were you suspicious that you observed so carefully?"

"I was conscious that I was doing what I ought not to do, in leaving the bassinet under the tree, so I looked to see if any suspicious characters were in sight. If there had been I wouldn't have left it ; nothing would have induced me."

"But you did leave it,—both of you."

"We did ; we went up this path with Jim,—that's what I used to call the man I married. I'll show you how far we went."

The five of them proceeded up the path which wound among the trees.

"The moment we started he began to ask for money. When I told him I hadn't any with me, his language was frightful. I clung to Sarah as tight as I could, feeling sure that it was only her being there that kept him from striking me. This is about as far as we went."

"You can't see the tree under which you say you left the bassinet from here."

"I know that, now ; I didn't then. I was in such a state of mind that all I could think of was what he was going to say and do next."

"How long did you remain here?"

"I couldn't say."

"Half an hour?"

"I shouldn't think it was as much ; but it might have been. I wanted to get away again and again, but he wouldn't let me."

The duke interposed. "You two women deserve penal servitude ; it'll be no fault of mine if you don't get it. That you should have left my child, for whose safety you

were responsible—for half an hour—or anything approaching it!—alone and unprotected in a public place, while you allowed that scoundrel to rant and bully,—I never heard of anything so monstrous. Even granting that your own statements are literally true, no words can express the contempt I feel for you. You are despicable creatures.”

The inspector followed, rousing Mrs. Olive out of the dismal silence into which the duke had cast her.

“Afterwards—when the man you called your husband did let you go—what did you do then?”

“We went back to the bassinet.”

“Yes; and then?”

“I was afraid that his lordship might have woke up, and be crying; but—all was still.”

“Did you see any one about as you returned?”

“Not a soul. But I was too anxious to get back to notice, I was all of a flutter. When I reached the bassinet it was empty.”

“Empty?”

“Empty. His lordship had gone, and everything else had gone. His bottle; his pacifier; his coral; the lamb which her grace gave him yesterday; the lace cover which I had placed over the bassinet to keep the flies from troubling his sleep; his rug; even the cushions on which he had been lying. Nothing was left except the frame of the bassinet.”



## CHAPTER III

### THE DUCHESS

THE Duchess of Datchet was lunching with Lady Mary Murray,—her husband's sister. The fact was that Datchet House being in the hands of an eminent firm of decorators, who were transforming it into a fairy palace for that night only, it was desirable that the duchess should lunch out. Sir Frank Murray, Lady Mary's husband, being otherwise engaged, the women were *tête-à-tête*. The topics of conversation were four; the ball which was to take place that night at Datchet House; the clothes which were to be worn there; the duchess's health; and the Marquis of Putney. The duchess was old-fashioned; inasmuch as her husband and her child were to her quite objects of importance. She was of opinion that, taking him all in all, she had the finest thing in husbands that a woman was ever plagued with; she was quite sure she had the sweetest child. The Marquis of Putney was her especial cult. No middle-class mother could have made a greater fuss about her baby. She adored him for a variety of reasons; some of them she kept to herself. Lady Mary made fun of her.

"Wait till number two comes along; Putney's nose will be put out of joint."

"Never. Mary, how can you say such things? I trust that I shall always love my children, however many God may give me; and I should like the next to be a girl.

But Putney will always be Putney ; nothing ever can alter that. I realize—if you don't—that, next to the Royal children, Putney is the most important baby in England. Sometimes, when I am undressing him—I undress him whenever I can—I find the consciousness of his importance a little overwhelming. It really is a very serious matter to undress the heir of Datchet.”

Lady Mary laughed, glancing at the speaker out of the corners of her eyes. Socially, and indeed financially, the duchess had been nothing and no one—the third daughter of a Sussex squire. Her personal beauty, grace, and charm had been, practically, her only assets. Tales were told of there having been something between her and Ivor Dacre ;—the duke's cousin, and, at that time, his heir. It was certainly he who introduced her to the duke ; whom she saw and conquered. Scandal had it that she threw over the heir to the dukedom to marry the actual holder. Certainly, of late, relations between the cousins had not been so intimate as they used to be ; but had the duke married any one else that would have probably resulted ;—a wife does make a difference to a man in the matter of his friendships. Society was entertained by the spectacle of Mr. Dacre's bearing towards his new cousin ; and of hers towards him. It was whispered that he had sworn to be revenged on her ; but even the most credulous treated that as absurd. One incident gave colour to the hints of the gossips ; but that might have been an accident. The day after the Marquis of Putney was born Ivor Dacre went abroad—unexpectedly. Scandalmongers said to avoid acting as godfather ; but, as the other godfather was the prince, that seemed ridiculous. It is true that he did remain away till after the christening, and that no one seemed to know his address ; but, as has been said, that might have been an accident.

It was stated that the duchess resented his absence very

bitterly. But while that might have been the merest rumour it is an undoubted fact that when Mr. Dacre was present she seemed to take a malicious pleasure in rubbing in the fact that her baby was heir to the Datchet glories. This was the more singular, since, as a rule, she was one of those rare women who seem incapable of saying or doing an unkind thing. The exception became so marked that Lady Mary, half in earnest, half in joke, ventured on remonstrance.

"Do you know, Mabel, that I think you're inclined to be a little rough on Ivor ; and it's so queer, because you're the very soul of sweetness. If you don't look out he'll be minus that affection which he ought to have for his cousin."

"He's minus it now. He hates him."

"Mabel ! What nonsense ! Ivor never hated any one in his life."

"All the same he hates Putney ; I have the best of reasons for knowing it. That is entirely between ourselves ; and I know I can trust you ; but I have."

Lady Mary looked at her as if asking herself if she could be in earnest. A few days afterwards she remarked to Mr. Dacre—

"Ivor, what have you said or done to Mabel that she should have come to regard you as a surviving example of the wild ogre ?"

He contemplated her with his dark-blue eyes in silence, as if he were endeavouring to perceive, from the expression of her countenance, what was the meaning which was behind her words. He returned her question for question.

"Does she regard me as an ogre ?"

"Very nearly, I'm afraid. She says that you hate Putney ; she seems to believe it too."

All he said was, "Well ?"

"It's not well ; it's very far from well. Can't you

perceive what mischief may come from her being allowed to continue in such a belief unchecked? What misunderstandings may arise?"

"What do you wish me to say or do?"

"I wish you to show her, by word and deed, that she's altogether wrong."

"I'm not so sure that she is wrong."

"Ivor!"

"That, from your point of view, constitutes a difficulty."

"Don't be absurd."

"I don't go so far as to say that I hate his lordship."

"I should think not."

"But, at the same time, under the circumstances, you would hardly expect me to clothe myself in sackcloth and ashes if the Marquis of Putney were to die—in infancy."

At that moment, so luck would have it, her Grace of Datchet came into the room. Dacre had not been speaking in a whisper. It was instantly plain, from the lady's bearing, that his speech had been overheard; indeed, she made prompt proclamation of the fact.

"I heard what you said, Mr. Dacre. I am not surprised. It is just the sort of thing I expected you would say. But I warn you that I shall not forget."

Before either of the others could reply she had left the room again. Lady Mary was for going after her; Mr. Dacre held her by the arm.

"Let her go. You will do no good by talking to her. Even if you succeed in patching up a peace it will only be make-believe; neither of us is likely to forgive the other. There is more between us than you suppose."

Lady Mary acquiesced, unwillingly; she saw something on the man's face which startled her. Thenceforward, when the ladies were together, Mr. Dacre's name was never mentioned.

When, that afternoon, the duchess left Lady Mary after

lunch, on her return to Datchet House, before removing her hat or her gloves, she ran straight upstairs to the nursery. She was full of a desire to snatch her baby up in her arms, and kiss him ; to bear him away to her own room ; to have him all to herself. Her mood was all tenderness, pride, love. She would have liked to fondle both her husband and her child ; because, that warm July afternoon, she loved them both, and was so proud of them ; she would have liked them to have fondled her. As regards her husband, she knew that this was an impossibility, being aware that political duties called him to the House. Then there were a dozen other calls upon his time, which would leave him without a moment for her. But with her baby it was different. She could have him all to herself, and he could have her.

It was, therefore, with a little shock of disappointment that she found the nursery was empty. She rang the bell. Instead of the maid, whose duty it was to attend to the requirements of the nursery, the butler, Twyford, appeared at the door. The duchess stared at him.

"Where is Clifford ? I rang for Clifford."

If she had been on the alert, she would have perceived that there was something unusual in the butler's bearing.

"Is there anything I can do for your grace ?"

"You ? What have you to do with the nursery ? Send Clifford here." Then, as if with a sudden change of purpose, she asked, "Is his lordship out ?" The moment she had spoken her keen maternal instinct caused her to note the singularity of the man's manner ; to realize that it was strange that he, of all people, should have answered her ring. "What has happened ? Why do you look at me like that ? Why are you here ?"

The change in her demeanour caused him to falter. "I am afraid, your grace, that something has occurred which is in the nature of an incident."

Twyford's fashions of speech, his perverted phrases, his congenital incapacity to give a simple answer to a simple question—these things were a standing joke. He was an excellent servant, and not the less excellent because he was unconsciously so amusing ; the duke and she had often laughed at him when his back was turned. It was not the amusing side of him which appealed to her then ; she resented his sesquipedalian utterance.

"Speak plainly, can't you ? What has happened ?"

Twyford made a visible effort to do as he was told. "I have been given to understand that his lordship has unfortunately disappeared."

"His lordship—disappeared ? What do you mean ?"

"From what I can gather, it would appear that his lordship has been removed from his bassinet."

"Removed from his bassinet ?" The duchess glanced about the room, as if in search of the bassinet in question. She moved—imperiously—towards the perturbed butler. "Will you tell me what you mean ? Twyford, if you don't speak plainly I shall feel disposed to shake you."

She looked as if she could do it. She was tall and straight ; physically, as fine a type of a young woman as one could wish to see. Twyford was big, but he was also portly ; not so young as he had been five and forty years ago. One felt that one had only to take him by the shoulders, and move him briskly to and fro, to shake the breath right out of him. Whether his dignity would ever recover from such a shock was another question. He had arrived at that time of life, and at that style of figure, when his dignity was his most cherished possession ; without it he would be bereft indeed. And the duchess was actually—almost!—threatening to shake him. His first feeling was one of thankfulness that none of the other servants were close enough to hear. Although he was not aware of the fact, nothing was easier than to shatter

what he flattered himself was the natural majesty of his demeanour ; he was at once reduced to stammering.

"I—I can only assure your grace that I am in possession of no particulars."

"No particulars of what ? Speak up !—and talk sense, if you can ! What do you mean by saying that his lordship has disappeared—that he has been removed from his bassinet ? What has happened to my boy ?"

"Your grace, I can only repeat that I am credibly informed that his lordship has—has gone."

"Gone ? Gone where ? Where can a baby of ten months go ? How can a child of that age go anywhere, by himself ? What do you mean ? What are you trying to conceal ? Can't you tell me the truth ? Is he hurt ? Is he ill ? Has he had an accident ? What has happened to him ? Do you hear ? Tell me ! tell me ! Where is he ? Where is Mrs. Olive ? Where is Barnes ? Send Clifford to me ! You are no use ! Don't you see how you are torturing me ? Why can't you tell me what I want to know ? Oh where is there some one with some sense ? If you are not careful you will make me ill, and then what will the duke say ?"

A reflection of the kind was occurring to Twyford. He had imagined that self-possession and the duchess were inseparable associates. This feverish woman was a revelation. He was becoming alarmed ; beginning to wish that he had allowed Clifford to answer the bell. It had been a mistake of his to regard it as appertaining to the dignity of his office to be a breaker of bad news. He had cast himself for a *rôle* which it was extremely uncomfortable to sustain. Yet if he did not sustain it properly her grace might become unduly agitated ;—even hysterical. Then what would happen to him ? Would she ever forgive him for driving her into hysterics ? Pulling himself together with an effort, he blundered into a statement of the truth.

"I am afraid, your grace, that, from what I have been told, his lordship has been kidnapped in Hyde Park."

The effect upon the lady was unexpected. "Kidnapped? In Hyde Park?" She drew herself up and looked at him, as if he were a curiosity. All at once she was calm again. Then she laughed,—quite naturally. "Twyford, what a silly thing you are. You always were an unconscious humorist. What foolish tales have they been telling you?"

Twyford was hurt. That she should laugh at him; when, with an effort, he had brought himself to the sticking-point, and spoken plainly!

"I can only assure your grace that that is what I have gathered. It is true that no authoritative statement has been made; but that is what is generally understood in the house, that his lordship has been kidnapped in Hyde Park."

She regarded him with curious eyes, and laughed again;—this time a little weakly, as if she were not quite sure of her ground.

"It sounds very funny, and quite incredible, like one of the silly stories. How could the Marquis of Putney be kidnapped—as you call it; the word in itself sounds ridiculous!—in Hyde Park, in broad daylight, when he was being watched over by a couple of nurses—guaranteed good characters—and all the police of London?"

"That I cannot inform your grace. I am in possession of no particulars. I can only repeat what I have gathered."

"Gathered? From whom?"

Twyford fidgeted. "It is certainly a fact that Mrs. Olive and Barnes returned without his lordship, and that the bassinet was empty."

"Empty! Twyford! Be careful! Did you yourself see that it was empty?"



"I cannot say that, your grace; but I am credibly informed that it was empty. The two women were in a state of extreme excitement; indeed, I am advised that Mrs. Olive was in a condition bordering on hysteria. They both rushed off to Mr. Joynson and the duke; and shortly afterwards an individual who was understood to be of the nature of a detective arrived in the house. He gave his name as Inspector Wainford, of Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard? A detective? Twyford, are you really in earnest? If you have been made the victim of some cock-and-bull story, and are passing it on to me, I will never forgive you—never!"

Fortunately for Twyford, the tension was removed by the entrance of the duke; to whom the lady ran with complete disregard of the butler's presence.

"Hereward! thank God you've come! What does this stupid person mean with his detectives and his kidnapped in Hyde Park? He has been talking the greatest nonsense; is he mad?"

The duke looked at Twyford, not too genially; that functionary tried to look as if he were not uncomfortable, and failed.

"Mabel, come into my room; I wish to speak to you."

"Speak to me here! at once! Where is Putney? Tell me what it all means?"

"If you will come to my room I will tell you all there is to tell. I prefer to speak to you there."

The duchess, who knew her man, understood, despite her agitation, that time would be gained by doing as he wished. So, without remonstrance, she obeyed. The duke and the duchess passed together, arm-in-arm, to his grace's own room, on the first floor. There they found Joynson, who, at a glance from his master, immediately vanished. The duchess, still gloved and hatted, confronted her lord with that in her mien which, to his thinking, added

to her beauty ; and he had always esteemed her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Now, Hereward, tell me—in one word!—where is my son?"

The "one word" was not forthcoming.

"My dear Mabel, there is no cause for you to be distressed."

"Isn't there? I shall be able to judge for myself upon that matter when you have told me what it is which you hold to be no cause. Hereward, you know I am not very well, and how essential it is that I should do my best to keep myself sound and fit for to-night. You have no idea to what tortures Twyford has been subjecting me; don't you continue them, or—I may break down. If there is any bad news, tell me—the worst; better that than this circumlocution. I perceive that something has happened to Putney; please tell me—at once—what it is."

"That is just the point. I can hardly be said to know myself; but I can give you my honest assurance that I believe that, in a very short time, you will have him safe and sound again in your arms."

"In the mean time, what has happened? You must know what has happened to my baby?"

"I feel convinced that nothing has happened, that nothing can have happened. His description has been circulated all over the town; every policeman in London is on the look-out for him; he may be restored to you at any moment; indeed I expected to find him awaiting my return."

"Then—he is lost?"

"For the moment, yes; I am afraid that is so. But, I repeat, there is no necessity why you should distress yourself; children are lost every day in London; it is a commonplace occurrence; you may confidently anticipate his being found in a very short time."

"Where is Mrs. Olive?"

"I don't think any good can result from your interviewing her just now. The woman has behaved very badly, and is conscious that she has behaved badly; in consequence she is very much distressed. I give you my word that everything has been done—and is being done—that can be done. Before you see that wretched woman you had better give her an opportunity of recovering her senses; as it is, she is nearly out of them."

"Where is Mrs. Olive?"

"My dear! I presume that she is in her room; but don't you hear what I say? I beg that you will be guided by me."

"Hereward, I trusted my child to Mrs. Olive. I want to hear from her exactly what has happened; and I will hear."

He made a little gesture with his hands. "If you insist!—but I tell you nothing can be gained; I can give you all the information you can possibly require."

"I do insist. I want to hear her speak with her own lips. She is a woman; I shall understand her better than you. Send for her this instant; don't you see what I am suffering? that it is as much as I can bear?"

The duke rang a handbell; Joynson appeared.

"Request Mrs. Olive to come here at once; and see that she comes."

There ensued an interval of waiting, during which her grace's outward calmness was in conspicuous contrast to her husband's obvious uneasiness. Yet even a superficial observer would have understood that the woman's feelings were deeper than the man's; that it needed but a touch to lay bare her inward agony. The duke, realizing this, talked glibly on, endeavouring by a flood of truisms to bring her back into the region of the commonplace. But for all the effect his glibness had on her he might as well have held

his peace ; she never spoke. Until at last she asked a question.

“Why doesn't Mrs. Olive come ?”

As if by way of a reply to her inquiry, the door was flung wide open, with a violence and an abruptness to which the lady and the gentleman were unaccustomed. The girl Barnes came rushing in.

“Oh, your grace !” she cried. “My aunt is dead ! She has killed herself ! She has committed suicide.”

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DUCHESS ACCUSES

JUDGING from her appearance, Sarah Barnes was hardly in her right mind. She seemed possessed by some variety of St. Vitus' dance. The muscles of her face were continually twitching, as if involuntarily. She held out her hands on either side of her ; her fingers opened and shut. Her whole body seemed to be in a state of muscular excitation. She did not present an agreeable spectacle. She seemed to be trembling on the border of an epileptic fit.

The duke and the duchess were so taken aback that, on the instant, they did not realize what it was that she meant. They stared at her as if they had no notion of what it was she said ; the duchess gazed at her as a child might have done, open-eyed, wondering. Then, a gleam of comprehension coming to the duke, he crossed quickly towards her, speaking angrily.

"What nonsense are you talking ? Are you an utter idiot ? How dare you rush into my room as if you were insane ?"

The girl mechanically repeated her own words. "Oh, your grace ! My aunt is dead ! She has committed suicide !"

Joynson came past her, through the open door. The duke turned to him—still angry.

"Is the girl stark mad ? What rubbish is she talking ?"

Joynson's face seemed a shade graver than usual ; his tone was almost bitter.

"Unfortunately, what she says is true. Mrs. Olive is dead."

"My son !" cried the duchess. "What has she done to my son ?"

Presently the great house was all in confusion. Every one was in a state of agitation. The servants, crowding out of their offices, were much in evidence. Their superiors, as excited as themselves, did little or nothing to keep them in check. Joynson went up with the duke to Mrs. Olive's room ; and the duchess went with them. In spite of her husband's entreaties she would go ; she would not stay behind. She reiterated her determination to learn what that woman had done to her son ; as if anything could be learnt from the dead. Fearful of what might result from too insistent opposition, the duke yielded. He felt convinced that she was hovering about the regions of hysteria ; in her then state, Heaven only knew what the result might be. Mrs. Olive was a sufficiently gruesome object to look upon. She lay, fully dressed, all twisted up, across a couch, as if death had come upon her with sudden agony. On her face there was a look of curious rigidity, as if some dreadful fear had overtaken her at the very last. It would have been difficult for a stranger to have recognized in her the pleasant-faced woman of but a few hours ago. One could not but suspect that, though she had chosen to die, she had regretted her choice almost as soon as it was made. But the vehicle she had preferred moved so rapidly that she had had no time to change her mind ; while she repented, it whisked her through the portals which close for ever on those who have passed, so that repentance had but added to her agony. The twisted fingers of her right hand gripped a little blue bottle, so tightly that force would have been needed to take it from her.

"Better touch nothing," said Mr. Joynson, "till the doctor comes, and the police. We can do no good ; she is quite dead. Better let them see her exactly as we found her."

The duchess's attitude was singular. She stood staring down at the dead woman with an impassivity which was scarcely human ; regarding her as if she had been some lay figure. The tragedy of her sordid ending seemed not to touch her at all.

"She was a wicked woman. She killed herself to escape the consequences of what she did to my son."

The duke was shocked. He remonstrated with her in a half whisper.

"Mabel, you must not say that."

"I shall say it ; I do say it. What did she do to my son ?"

Some one entered who proved to be a doctor. It appeared that the alert Joynson had sent for one the moment the discovery had been made ; he had come hastening from round the corner. The room was promptly cleared. The duchess was sent downstairs in charge of the duke ; whereupon the deferred explanation took place between them.

He found her attitude a little trying. She listened almost without interruption, but with something in her manner which both puzzled and irritated him. Her outward bearing was as placid as if she were reconciling herself to an irrevocable decree of fate. He would much rather she had stormed and wept, instead of sitting so straight and still. To his thinking, a touch of hysterics would have been better than that. When he had finished, he did his best to comfort her, making out that the matter was of less importance than he feared that it might prove to be. Even while he was speaking, he was conscious that his efforts were vain ; for all the heed she paid to them, his words might have remained unuttered.

"As I have told you before, I don't think there is any cause for concern; that is, for undue concern. There ought to be no reasonable doubt that within a very short time our boy will be restored to us."

The lady had been sitting perfectly still, leaning a little back; her gloved hands lying over each other in her lap; her eyes fixed on the carpet just in front of her shoes; her whole bearing expressive of a mood which to him was both new and painful.

When he reiterated what, after all, was but an empty assurance of his belief that things were not so bad as they seemed, she did show signs of life. Rising from her chair, she said, in a tone of voice which suggested almost fatalistic resignation—

"You are quite wrong. Our son will never be restored to us, never."

He stared at her in amazement. "Mabel! What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"I mean what I say, and I say what I mean. Our son will never be restored to us—if Mr. Dacre can help it."

While she spoke the door had opened. Turning to see who had entered, the duke perceived that the new-comer was Mr. Dacre himself. Apparently his wife's words had been addressed to him.

Ivor Dacre's good looks were proverbial. At that period he was not quite so young as he had been; but, in putting his boyhood behind him, if anything his beauty—it was nothing less—had mellowed, so that at thirty-three he was really better worth looking at than he had been when he was ten years younger. At least the women said so, and on such matters they are supposed to be judges. He was tall and slender, with that slenderness which denotes endurance and agility. He was grace itself; his every attitude, his every movement, was a delight to the eye. When he danced even the men liked to watch him; many



a ball had become a glorious memory to a woman, because his name had figured once upon her programme. Those with whom he danced twice or thrice, long afterwards pleasant thrills came to them when they recalled those moments of rapture. He was smooth-cheeked as a girl, but his face was a man's. There was a glint of laughter about his lips; an eloquence in his violet eyes which was unintentional; no man could have meant the things he—unconsciously—looked at every woman. His hair was a dark shade of chestnut, curling all over his head in little clusters of curls which were his despair; however close he kept it cut, the curls in embryo were always there. Not the least of his charms was his total absence of self-consciousness; never a less conceited man than Ivor Dacre. And he had such a pleasant humour, such a ready sympathy.

Now he came quickly into the room, surprise and concern written large all over him.

"Hereward! What is this I hear? That Putney has been kidnapped? It can't be true!"

The duke made a little movement with his body. "Unfortunately, I fear it is only too true; at least I know of no explanation which can adequately account for his disappearance."

"But it's inconceivable! incredible! The thing can't be!"

The duchess interposed. "However, no one knows better than you do that the thing not only can be, but that it is."

Ivor regarded her as if puzzled. "No one knows better than I do? But I assure you that I know nothing at all about it. I was passing, and Twyford came out and told me. It was the first intimation I had had; or, of course, I should have been here before."

"Twyford came out and told you? Did he indeed?"

How extremely kind of him! And so unnecessary, wasn't it?"

"Unnecessary? I don't understand. Oughtn't he to have told me? Wasn't I meant to know?" He glanced from the wife to the husband. "Hereward, are you—are you trying to keep it a secret?"

It was the duchess who replied. "Oh dear no. On the contrary, we propose to publish it from the housetops, if it should become necessary. But before we reach that stage, while we three are together alone—we three who are the only persons in the world to whom this little baby's—shall we call it disappearance?—it is of the least real importance; while to us it is of capital importance—the most important thing in the world. To me, because this is my child; to my husband, because this is his heir; to you, because his coming meant the loss of so much on which—shall we say possibly?—you had already counted. Let us understand each other before misunderstanding becomes too hideously dangerous. You and I understand each other very well already; it is my husband who understands nothing. This is a moment when it becomes necessary that he should be made to understand—for my sake. Therefore let me beg you voluntarily to lay aside the hypocrisy which clothes you as with a garment, else I shall have to tear it off—which would involve a loss of dignity both to you and to me; and be as frank, in my husband's presence, as you would be were we alone, say, in the woods at home, where you and I learnt to know each other so well."

While she was speaking, both men observed her with what seemed to be a complete lack of comprehension; judging from appearances, which of the pair was the more perplexed it would have been difficult to say.

The Duchess of Datchet had been the loveliest bride of her year. Since she had been a wife, scarcely more than

two happy years, it was hardly likely that her loveliness had dimmed; it emphatically had not. In years the merest girl—she had been married when she had just turned eighteen, and was not yet twenty-one—in some respects she was already an accomplished woman of the world. A taste—or even a capacity—for melodrama was almost the last thing one would have suspected her of. Rather one would have written her down as among those who, smiling on the rack, would have murmured polite nothings to the chief torturer. All that the duke understood was that, without a moment's warning, she had sloughed the skin of the penny plain and donned the lurid hues of the twopence coloured. In his astonishment he supposed that she had lost her wits; failing to realize that, after all, when one is not twenty-one, there are times when the girl will out, even though she is a duchess, and acts the part as if to the manner born.

What Ivor Dacre understood he alone could tell; he looked as if he understood nothing at all—a fact on which she candidly commented.

“Don't try to look as if you are a dullard. Whatever else you are, you are not that; you cannot even pretend to be successfully. And you can pretend most things.”

Ivor seemed to stammer. “My dear Mabel——”

She cut him short. “There was a time when I permitted—possibly even encouraged—you to call me your dear Mabel. That time has gone for ever. Now, and henceforward, I am to you, merely—the Duchess of Datchet.”

The duke eyed her with a tendency to be opened-mouthed.

“Mabel, what are you talking about? This worry has been too much for you. Hadn't you better go and lie down?”

In all cases of feminine trouble the duke's universal

panacea was "lying down." The lady slightly inclined her dainty head.

"I thank your grace ; not yet. There are one or two remarks I have to make to Mr. Dacre, and I intend to make them. Mr. Dacre, if my son is restored to me by six o'clock this afternoon no inquiries will be made. That is one remark I have to make. You follow me ?"

"I do not, except—if you will pardon my saying so—to the extent of sharing Hereward's feeling that you had better lie down."

She flushed, and held herself—if the thing were possible—a little straighter.

"You are insolent ! Thank you. That removes the last shadow of a shade of compunction I may have felt. Hereward, our son has been kidnapped by Mr. Dacre."

She said it quietly, yet with a slight, almost childish, touch of braggadocio, as if she defied contradiction. It was, perhaps, the monstrous nature of the charge which held both men dumb ; at least, for some seconds neither of them spoke. Then the duke said, with an air which suggested that he was chiding some froward girl—

"You are talking very foolishly, Mabel. I quite grant that there is much to be said in your excuse ; still, I would ask you to remember that there are things which are not to be excused, under any circumstances whatever."

"Do I not know it ? Mr. Dacre has been guilty of one of them. Have you ever had cause to suspect me of being untruthful ? I say again, our son has been kidnapped by your cousin, Mr. Ivor Dacre. If, for the first time since I have been honoured by your acquaintance, you doubt me, ask him. I do not think that, in my presence, he will deny it."

"I shall do nothing so absurd. Mabel, I am ashamed of you."

"I shall begin to be ashamed of you if, now that I have

removed the handkerchief which blindfolded you, you persist in keeping your eyes shut. I am not so foolish as to mean that Mr. Dacre stole our boy with his own two hands, or that he was anywhere in the neighbourhood when he was being stolen. To suggest that were indeed to be absurd. He is far too prudent a diplomatist. But I do say that it is he who has supplied the motive power ; that it is he who has put the machinery in motion. It is by his instructions that our son has been kidnapped. That is to state the position more exactly ; and I will put it that way if you like it better. I presume you credit your wife with honour. I give you my word of honour that that is true, and that I have good reason for knowing it to be true."

"Mabel, I can only hope that you don't realize the meaning of your own words. To speak of nothing else, you make Ivor out to be a raving lunatic. Ivor, don't stand there motionless. Tell this foolish girl she's dreaming."

"Do you believe the charge which the Duchess of Datchet has just made against me ?"

"Do I believe it ! What a question to ask !"

"If you do not believe it, I trust I may say nothing which may imply contradiction of a lady, especially of one who is so much my social superior."

"Ivor ! Mabel ! What is the matter between you ? I thought you were the best of friends."

The lady spoke. "We may touch upon that point later. Meanwhile let us keep to the point. I have heard women accused of being illogical ; I trust you will not become in that respect like unto a woman. In the sight of God our son is more mine than yours, since it was by my agony that he was born of me. If you are against him, to cover your kinsman, then he has none left but me ; I'll not flinch from fighting for him, not having the fear of your kinsman in my eyes. I say, for the third time, that Mr. Dacre has kidnapped our son. If, though he does

not condescend to go through the farce of a denial, you take it for granted that I am lying, I am prepared to give you the reasons on which my charge is based in his presence—if he cares to hear them.”

Ivor turned to the duke. “If it is any satisfaction to the duchess, Hereward, let me give you my assurance that she is labouring under an entire misapprehension ; and that I have not only had no sort of finger in the kidnapping of the Marquis of Putney, if he has been kidnapped, but that I had no notion that anything untoward had happened to him, until I was informed by your own servant outside your own door. I trust that her grace will accept this assurance in the spirit in which it is made, and that she will not touch upon matters with which this issue is not concerned.”

## CHAPTER V

### COUSINS

THE duke listened to his cousin's words with a countenance which, if it was not exactly beaming, was probably intended to be expressive of much goodwill. He turned to the duchess with what was meant to be an affectionate gesture.

"You hear, Mabel!—and are now quite satisfied! My dear, I understand your trouble perhaps better than you suppose; but please remember that it is also mine. I cannot tell you too often that I am convinced that this is but a passing cloud, that at any moment the sun may shine through; so don't let worry get the better of our common sense because it's a dark one while it lasts."

There was a pause before the lady answered, during which she observed her husband with an odd little smile, as if her feeling towards him was one of infinite pity.

"I heard you speaking the other day of some one who was living in a fool's paradise. How queer it is that, often, we can see others so much plainer than we can see ourselves;—surely no one was ever in quite such a fool's paradise as you are at the present moment. You have grown up in a sort of cult of Mr. Dacre—the sort of admiration which comes of ignorance, because I doubt if you have ever known him intimately. Now, I have; very intimately indeed—ask him. I place not the slightest reliance on the statement he has just now made, and that for the very simple reason that about two years ago he told

me, with the utmost distinctness, that if we ever did have a child he'd have it kidnapped."

"I deny it."

"Then what, precisely, was your threat? Possibly, now and then, your memory plays you tricks. This happens to be a point on which mine is perfectly clear. I'm prepared to go into the witness-box and swear that you told me, in so many words, that if Hereward and I ever had a man child you'd cause it to be kidnapped."

"I may have talked wild nonsense in a moment of temper; you know perfectly well that nothing I may have said of the kind was ever seriously meant."

"So far as I am able to judge, you were in no worse temper then than you are now. You have always struck me as being a person who had his temper very much under control."

"Then I have been able to conceal from you my sensations better than I imagined."

"I think not. On the contrary, I fancy I have understood you better than you suspected. Under a careless front you hide a will of steel. You stick at nothing to carry out your aims. Having once sworn to be revenged, neither time nor changing circumstance will ever turn you from your purpose."

"I trust—and believe—that your diagnosis of my character is incorrect."

"I know better; and so do you. By the way, before we go any farther, are you aware that your tool, Mrs. Olive, is dead?"

"Dead!—Mrs. Olive!—It can't be! I saw her in the park only an hour or two ago."

"Oh, you did see her in the park? Indeed! Was that before the kidnapping? or afterwards? or about the time that it was taking place? In any case, now she's dead; she has committed suicide."



"Committed suicide! Impossible!"

"But not inconvenient—for you! Extraordinary how fortune sometimes assists us to cover up that which we most ardently desire to keep concealed."

"Your insinuations become more and more monstrous."

"Insinuations? They are intended to be plain statements."

"You are more unfair than even I thought you could be."

"Do you deny that it was through your machinations that Mrs. Olive was introduced into my house, as the custodian of my child? Before you answer, let me inform you that she told me that it was so with her own lips. I ought to have known then that her presence threatened danger. I did suspect it; but, to be frank, I underrated your capacity for crime."

The duke asked a question. "Is it a fact, Ivor, that this woman was introduced into my house by you?"

"It is. I have known her for years; though she had made a most unfortunate marriage, she was a woman in whom I had entire confidence."

"No doubt." This was the duchess; he went on as if unheeding.

"I had reason to be aware that she was just the person you required; I thought I should be doing you both a good turn by putting her into the way of becoming nurse to your baby."

"You might have advised us of our indebtedness to you."

"Why should I? Hereward, be reasonable. There were circumstances in her life which she wished to keep quiet; I might have had to talk of them. Wishing to avoid the risk of doing that I said nothing, being satisfied with the knowledge that you couldn't have had a better person."

"With such a husband?"

"The husband was a drawback. But as, at that time, he was in prison, and bade fair to stay there, all that was necessary was to keep him in ignorance of her whereabouts, and he was as good as non-existent."

"Your reasoning, Ivor, was imperfect. It is owing to this woman's criminal negligence that Putney has been stolen; while it is more than possible that her husband is immediately responsible for his disappearance."

"The scoundrel! If he is!"

"He is not." This was the duchess. "Don't try to head us off on that bad scent, Mr. Dacre. It is of course possible that Mr. and Mrs. Olive were doing your bidding; but that they were carrying out your instructions, if, between them, they stole Putney, that the responsibility is immediately yours, I have no more doubt than you have. I won't detain you much longer, Hereward, or Mr. Dacre; I—I have other things to think of. So I will endeavour to crowd into one sentence some of the reasons why I know that it is Mr. Dacre who has stolen our child. To begin at the beginning. He was very disappointed when you married. He thought you were the sort of man who would never marry; he told me so himself. He took it for granted that he would be the next Duke of Datchet——"

The duke interrupted her, almost sternly. "Mabel, I beg you will not say such things; I forbid it."

She turned her face a little to look at him, still with the same old smile.

"Indeed? Of course if you forbid, I obey—within limits. I will not say such things to you, if you forbid it; but I will, and shall, say them to my lawyer, and to the police. If there is justice, I will compel Mr. Dacre to return to me the child he has stolen."

She moved towards the door; the duke interposed himself.

"Mabel, I implore you——"

She stood, confronting him. There was that on her face which silenced him ; his sentence remained unfinished.

"Be so good as to let me pass ; be advised, lest you place too great a strain on my obedience."

She spoke almost in a whisper ; but he did as she requested, holding the door wide open as she passed, very straight, head in the air. He continued to hold it open for a moment or two after she had gone, his countenance changing as he did so, till it seemed drawn with anguish. The expression was still there when he returned across the room, so transforming him that his cousin noted it with a certain curious surprise.

There was an interval of silence, during which Ivor Dacre remained erect, watching his cousin, brushing the crown of his silk hat lightly with the fingers of his right hand. There was that in his attitude which suggested that he was on his guard, prepared for attack, for anything ; resolved that the first blow should come from the other. Nothing, on the other hand, in the duke's bearing hinted at a bellicose purpose. Indeed, as Dacre continued to observe him he gradually became conscious of a sense of being puzzled. Usually the most self-possessed of men, the duke's uneasiness was so obvious, and so peculiar, that Ivor began to wonder if, by any chance, he could be physically unwell. He stood, his back to Ivor, with bowed head, leaning with one hand upon a writing-table, as if he needed its support to help him to stand. Then, with tremulous steps, very different from his characteristic stride, passing to the fireplace, still with his back to Ivor, he clung—it amounted to clinging—to the mantelpiece with both his hands ; continuing there so long that Dacre was inclined to ask himself if he had forgotten he was present. When he did turn there was a drawn look upon his face which positively startled Ivor ; it made him look so

unnaturally old. He spoke with a wan and crooked smile.

"Well, Ivor, she takes it badly."

Dacre was so amazed by the appearance he presented that, for the moment, he was at a loss as to his meaning.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say that Mabel takes it badly; the loss of her child."

In his turn Dacre smiled; a very different smile to that which distorted the other's visage.

"Is that surprising? You could hardly expect her not to be affected; you don't look as if you were unconcerned."

There was something in the other's tone which seemed to act on the duke like a cold douche. He perceptibly shuddered, drew himself up, looked at Ivor as if he had been suddenly roused out of sleep.

"I? Of course I am not unconcerned; that would be to ask too much. But I trust that I don't take it so seriously as Mabel seems disposed to do."

"You must pardon my bluntness, Hereward; but, from the look of you, I should have thought that you took it worse. You look positively ill."

"Ill? Nonsense! I am no more ill than you are; and I don't suppose I look it; it is your imagination."

He glanced about him, from side to side, as if searching for something which he expected to see, and was surprised to find was missing; a small piece of by-play which had on Mr. Dacre a somewhat disconcerting effect—it was so unlike his cousin. Suddenly the duke threw his head a little back, as if he was listening.

"Isn't that a child's voice?" he asked.

The other echoed his words. "A child's voice?"

"Yes; isn't— isn't it a baby crying?"

Mr. Dacre's amazement seemed to grow. "I hear nothing. Even if a baby was crying you would hardly

hear it, in a room of this size, with the door closed. Datchet House is too well built."

As if persuaded by his cousin's words, the duke ceased to listen.

"I suppose so ; it is my imagination which is this time at fault. But I certainly thought it was curiously like a child's cry. Strange how easily one can delude one's self into the half belief that one hears what one desires to hear. The fact is, I am so confident that the whole affair is but an incident, that the child will be restored to us in a very short time, that, unconsciously, I suppose, my nerves are in a state of tension. To change the subject, I had no idea that Mabel and you were on the terms you seem to be."

"So far as I am concerned, the duchess and I are on the best of terms."

"She hardly seems to be upon the best of terms with you."

"That is my misfortune."

The duke eyed his cousin with some appearance of returning to his wonted self. His tone became a trifle dry.

"I need not, I presume, tell you that I am aware that there was something between Mabel and you before she did me the honour to promise to be my wife. What, exactly, there was I do not know, and I do not desire to know ; but I regret to find that it has left in Mabel's mind so unpleasant an impression of your character."

"I repeat that that, again, is my misfortune. I assure you that the fact is quite the other way with me. No one could have a higher opinion of the duchess's character than I have."

"I presume you make an exception in my favour?"

"I am not sure that I do. I am inclined to reiterate that no one could have a higher opinion of the duchess than I have ; not even her husband."

"It becomes, therefore, the more unfortunate that she should have got this unfortunate idea into her head that you can have had anything to do with the disappearance of our boy."

"If, as you so confidently anticipate, Putney is presently returned to you, that idea will vanish."

"If he is not, what then?"

"Is the thing supposable?"

"Let us suppose it. If she persists in her idea the position will become one of extreme delicacy. She is not a woman who is always easy to influence."

"That I can believe."

"Speaking for myself, I do not quite understand the part you played in introducing to the house that woman Olive."

"Yet nothing could be simpler."

"What was the nature of the interest you had in her?"

"I merely wished to do her a good turn."

"And us a bad one?"

"Not at all. You could not have found a better nurse had you searched England, or a better woman."

"With such a husband?"

"The husband was a drawback. But when she told me of the precautions she was taking to prevent his finding out her whereabouts I confess that I thought them adequate."

"Yet he found her."

"Apparently—the blackguard!"

"It is not at all unlikely that we owe what has happened to him; I fear, in the light of her subsequent self-destruction, that I am disposed to suspect her of being his accomplice. I think a jury will suspect her also."

"I am sure she was nothing of the kind."

"How can you be sure? What other motive could she

have, except a guilty conscience, and the desire to avoid discovery?"

"Why do people commit suicide? It is not necessarily a sign of guilt. I can fancy her saying to herself, 'Rather than live with him again, rather than admit, in the face of the whole world, that such a villain is my husband, I will kill myself;' and she did."

"And in so doing rendered him an excellent service, in removing from his path—presuming her to have been innocent—the one witness from whom he had most to fear."

"At such moments people are not logicians, especially women. When they take the arbitrament of life or death into their own hands they do not stay to think. Personally I am convinced that she was innocent—blameless."

"Not blameless; she had no right to leave the child unguarded."

"You must remember that I am ignorant of all the details. If she was guilty of an error of judgment that was all she did. The scoundrel she believed she married——"

"Believed? Didn't she marry him?"

"It is extremely likely that he was a bigamist, to say the least. In his cheerful moments he used to entertain her by declaring that he had several other wives still living; and it is possible that, for once in a way, he was telling the truth. He's quite a pleasant character. There is no doubt that he's a blackguard of the finest water. If he has got hold of Putney, I know enough of him and of his haunts to be pretty sure that, with the aid of the police and, perhaps, a little money, the boy will be restored to you, sound and well."

"You think it is a case of blackmail?"

"I think nothing, because I know nothing. But, if that gentleman has got him, I should say it certainly is. The point is, has he?"

"Why do you doubt it? All the evidence goes to show that, in some degree or other, he is the criminal."

"I neither doubt nor believe. The impression made upon my mind is that you doubt it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is true. Are you prepared to assure me that you believe that man has kidnapped your child—or his wife?"

"I should be a very foolish person if I were. I draw my deductions from the facts which are before me. Everything at present is the merest surmise. All we know is that the child is lost."

"Precisely. That is all we know."

"Children are constantly being lost; and, almost invariably, are very quickly found again. I echo my own words when I say that I am convinced that the whole affair is but an incident, and that presently the boy will, in the ordinary course of events in such cases, be restored to his parents."

"We will hope so."

The two men looked at each other.

When Mr. Dacre had gone, Joynson entered the room, in answer to the ducal ring. At the moment of his entry the duke seemed to be so absorbed in his own meditations that, after a decent interval, the man thought it desirable to call attention to his presence.

"Your grace rang?"

The duke glanced up with a start. "Oh yes—yes. Joynson, you will see that announcements are sent out that the ball is postponed; Mr. Gregory has the list. The exact facts must be stated to the Prince; but with the others let there be a little vagueness. Even if, as is probable, his lordship is found within the next two or three hours the duchess will hardly be in a condition to receive her guests. And then, in any case, there is the



unfortunate business of that wretched woman's suicide. See that every one is told not to come."

"Your grace's instructions shall be carried out."

"And, Joynson." The duke hesitated ; then suddenly asked a question, in quite a different tone of voice, and with quite a different air, "Have you any idea where she is?"

Joynson hesitated in his turn, but apparently it was not because he had any doubt as to whom the personal pronoun referred to. Presently he said, very curtly—

"She is dead!"

The duke half rose from his seat. "Dead? Joynson, you don't mean it?"

"She died the week that you were married."

"You knew it? And you never told me?"

"If your grace will reflect, why should I tell you? I was aware that it was a connection which you wished to forget. You have never referred to it until this hour."

"That is true. But—is it possible?—what an extraordinary thing! Then—then there is nothing to fear."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PROWLER'S HOMING

A VERY curious thing happened to Mr. Benjamin Cooper ; there was nothing to show absolutely that that was his name ; and, as a matter of fact, although it was the style and title by which he had last been known to the police, he was now prepared to take his Bible oath that his name was something altogether different. This thing which happened to him was one of those things which turn out to be double-edged ; at first sight it seemed to be a stroke of luck, in its way, almost a brilliant stroke of luck ; later, it assumed quite another guise.

As he was going away from that momentous interview in Hyde Park with the unhappy woman to whom he had united himself in the bonds of holy matrimony, he struck off in the direction of the Marble Arch. On his way he saw—not on the path along which he was walking, but on one which branched off to the left—something lying on the ground, something white. His first impression was that it was a pocket-handkerchief. It not being his habit to leave any loose property lying about which he could possibly appropriate, he made a strategic movement in the direction of the distant object. When he reached it he saw that his first impression had been an erroneous one ; it was not a pocket-handkerchief. As he picked it up he glanced around to see who was in sight. In the more or less near distance there were several people ; in his immediate neighbourhood

there was no one ; particularly was there no one on the path on which he stood. It was within a hundred and fifty yards of where he had quitted his wife, and led in the direction of the public roadway. As his fingers closed about the article, and his greedy eyes fell on it, he was at a loss to make out what it was. It seemed to be a strip of lace ; possibly, he decided, some sort of fichu, or whatever the women called it, and some careless female had allowed it to slip unnoticed from her shoulders. Whatever it was it certainly was nothing masculine, and therefore not the sort of thing of which a man of his appearance would be likely to be the owner. With instinctive quickness, crushing it into a small compass between his fingers, he thrust it inside his jacket, and returned to pursue his original direction.

His temporary residence—all his residences were temporary—was in the purlieu of Lisson Grove. On his way home he had an adventure ; indeed, he had more than one ; or, as he might have phrased it, he did one or two bits of business. The first was in connection with a gold cigarette-case ; at least, he hoped it was gold. There are so many imitations of that sort of thing about nowadays ; they entail such disappointments to men of his profession. A couple of elegant youths were in front of him. One of them took out what looked like a gold cigarette-case. Having helped himself and handed it to his companion, he returned it to the bottom left-hand pocket of his jacket ;—his companion being on the right, and his jacket unbuttoned. Brushing past them along the narrow path, slipping his nimble fingers into the pocket, he withdrew the case. It was a pretty impudent thing to do, since there was no one near to act as cover ; and the owner had only to put his hand into his pocket to learn his loss, when a very delicate situation would arise for Mr. Cooper. But the Prowler—to give him the name by which he was generally known to his natural foes—prided himself upon the fashion in which he could—

and did—do that kind of thing. He held that if your skill was sufficient, the more impudence—which he called nerve—you had the better. Certainly on that occasion he was justified, for he walked away with the cigarette-case in his pocket without meeting with the slightest interference.

As he neared the Arch he saw—again in front of him—a lady; middle-aged, stout, over-dressed. He was a man of critical tastes; as he observed her he said to himself—

“That old girl’s got it all on, and a bit more. She wouldn’t look any the worse if some of it came off.”

Among other adornments she wore that absurdity affected by women who are vulgar and silly, which they call a “chatelaine.” Attached to her waistbelt was a hook, from which was suspended divers chains, to which was fastened the most ridiculous collection of rubbish—a pencil, a penknife, a note-book, a match-box, a mirror, a puff-box, smelling salts, sweet-box, and, to crown all, a large chain purse; the whole collection, hook, chains, and all, being made of what looked like solid gold.

“If that’s real,” commented to himself the judicious Mr. Cooper, “and by the look of it I should say it was, the old dear’s offering to the first *bona-fide* bidder a goodly number of quids, even if it’s only fourteen carat; and a solid lump like her ought to wear nothing under eighteen carat, if only that she might show the hall-mark to her friends, and crush ’em.”

Mr. Cooper paid her the most flattering attention, from a respectful distance. The wide open space about the Marble Arch renders it easy for a person to keep another person in sight, without attracting the attention of the person shadowed, or of anybody else. One can dawdle and loiter, look this way and that, gravitate first in one direction then another, without seeming to be anything unusual. When the woman with the chatelaine passed out

of the park Mr. Cooper was within six feet of her, and she still had not the faintest suspicion of his existence.

Once outside the park she did what—having some acquaintance with her species—he thought it probable she would do ; she crossed over to the corner of the Edgware Road and waited for a 'bus. Why women bedecked in such fashion should, for the sake of saving a cab fare, ride in an omnibus, it is difficult for the merely masculine mind to understand. One would suppose that the spirit of economy would have moved them before they reached that point. One would also have thought that they might have realized that it is unsafe to make a display of gewgaws of that description in a public conveyance. But, as Mr. Cooper was aware, women of that type never seem to realize anything clearly ; probably most omnibuses and tramcars contain at least one example of the species.

As it is not unusual, several persons were waiting at the corner of Edgware Road for the 'bus they wanted ; and, among them, as chance would have it, was not only the woman with the chatelaine, but, also, Mr. Benjamin Cooper. At the last moment, however, it seemed that Mr. Cooper, changing his mind, decided to choose some other form of conveyance ; because, just as the omnibus started with the lady, he turned right round, and went off—rapidly—in quite a different direction.

When the omnibus had gone two or three hundred yards the lady woke to the position with a sudden exclamation.

“ Good gracious !—I've lost my chatelaine ! ”

The other passengers stared ; the conductor looked in at the door. The lady, in a state of the extremest agitation, was floundering about in an attempt to preserve her balance in the shaky vehicle, as, rising from her seat, she was endeavouring to look round herself, and behind herself, and over herself, and under herself, all at the same time.

"Conductor!" she cried. "Stop the omnibus!—I've lost my gold chatelaine!"

"What have you lost?" placidly inquired the conductor, who was used to lady passengers.

"My gold chatelaine! Stop the 'bus at once! I must get down!"

"You never had no chatelaine on when you got in," he remarked, as he rang the bell; adding, as she descended, "Seems to me that people who can afford to wear gold chatelaines out in the street didn't ought to ride in omnibuses."

"Don't be impertinent," she snapped, "or I shall report you."

Then she had quite a thrilling time, with unsympathetic policemen and equally unsympathetic passers-by, receiving cordial assurances from all sides that she would never see or hear anything again of the chatelaine which she had lost. And she never did.

But Mr. Cooper returned to his humble home with a contented mind; his morning stroll had been productive of the most satisfactory results—for him.

At that period of his life he was a lonely bachelor, occupying a single top-floor room. Having secured himself against interruption by turning the key, he proceeded to subject his spoils to a more intimate examination than circumstances had hitherto permitted—beginning with the chatelaine, and starting by looking for the hall-mark on that. Luck was on his side.

"Eighteen carat!" he told himself with glee. "That's a bit of all right! I thought she looked it." The fact was ostentatiously announced on every article; apparently on each of the links on all the chains. Even the purse was eighteen carat; and, in a different sense, the contents were eighteen carat too, consisting of a five-pound Bank of England note, eight pounds in gold, fourteen shillings in

silver, and—actually!—another little eighteen-carat gold case, containing hairpins.

“That’s a jewel of a woman,” chuckled Mr. Cooper, jingling the sovereigns between his palms. “I wonder if she was eighteen carat all over. She would have been worth taking if she was; she’d have made a fine lot of stuff for the melting-pot.”

The cigarette-case proved disappointing. It was gold, of a kind—of the nine-carat kind; when you come to turn a nine-carat gold cigarette-case into sovereigns, the number you receive in exchange is hardly even plural. Mr. Cooper sampled the contents with the relish of a connoisseur.

“They are Turkish, and decent Turkish; I will say that for him. If they’d been American, hang me if it wouldn’t have been too much.”

There remained the article he had found in the park. Of that he could make neither head nor tail. It was a piece of lace, about four feet long and twenty inches wide.

“That’s no fichu, or whatever they call ’em. No woman—not even our dotty dear of the chatelaine—would wear a thing like that. It looks to me more like a window curtain of some sort; one of those small ones you fasten across the middle. And yet I don’t know. What’s a window curtain of any sort doing right out in the middle of the park, all on its lonesome. It might be a veil, of sorts; only it’s not likely, that shape, and with edges like that. I do believe it’s a curtain of some kind; though I’m blowed if I know what kind. Anyhow, although I don’t pretend to be a judge of this kind of thing, it does look to me as if it were a handsome piece of stuff; out of the way handsome. What’s this in the centre? And in the corners?” He took it to the window, so as to be able to examine it to better advantage. “Is it a coat of arms, or a crest, or what is it? There’s a swagger look about it, as if it belonged to some one who’d taken a fancy to himself.

And what's this in the corners ? 'P—P—P—P'—in each of the four. Now, what's that stand for ?—the name of the party who lost it ? Is it his monogram ? 'P'—all over the place. Crests and coats of arms aren't much in my line ; but I wonder who the deuce 'P' is !—I dare say that little bit of stuff's worth money."

In daring to say that, he was not daring to say too much. He was holding in his hands a piece of lace which had a history ; an heirloom of one of England's greatest families, worth the gold chatelaine, and the contents of the purse, many times over.

He arrived at a decision. "I know what I'll do. It's no good giving in a thing like this at any of the usual cribs ; they're sure to do me. If it's worth anything there'll be more offered for its recovery than what they'll give me ; and there was nothing crooked about the way it came to me. I'll take it with me to-night when I go to have that little chat with my old girl ; and I'll show it her. She knows all about these sort of things ; she'll soon give me some idea of what it's worth ; and perhaps she'll be able to give me a hint as to where it came from."

He took it with him that night ; and that was the cause of the trouble.



## CHAPTER VII

### SLIGHTLY INFORMAL

WHEN Mr. Cooper strolled across the park that night, to keep his appointment with his wife, it was with a mind at ease. He had no idea of what awaited him, so blind are the sharpest-sighted mortals. He had fed well; he had drunk well. There was money in his pockets; at home there was that which promised to produce a great deal more. The night was fine; out there in the park it was delicious. The band was still playing; he paid a penny for a chair and sat and listened. Quite a nice girl was on the chair next his, disposed to be friendly. Something in the lady's-maid line, from what he could gather. He had a natural fondness for female servants of the superior class; he had had relations with several of them, which had turned out very well—for him. Very well they got on together, and remarkably fast, advancing more towards intimacy in a very few minutes than some people would have done in many weeks. But then Mr. Cooper was a skilled practitioner in matters of the kind, and, where a feminine fool of a certain sort was concerned, moved more rapidly than she—until afterwards—had any notion of. He would have liked to have stopped, and played the game to a finish, right there and then; only he was conscious that time was passing, and that it might not be wise to strain too much the patience of the lady with whom his appointment was already overdue. So, with his new acquaintance he made

an appointment for her next night out, which he was destined not to keep, and, pleading pressing business, continued his stroll towards the rendezvous he had made in the morning.

The spot he had named was not far from the bandstand, on the path which branched off from the road through the trees—the same spot, indeed, on which there had been the meeting of the morning. Directly he quitted the roadway he found himself in comparative darkness; the lamps had gone, the branches meeting overhead obscured the sky. It was difficult, especially at first, to make out his surroundings; to see who was about. As he progressed, his eyes becoming more accustomed to the gloom, he was able to distinguish objects better. So far as he could make out he was the only person on the path. It dawned on him more and more clearly that there were chairs under some of the trees, and that some of them were occupied—by couples; but on the path itself there appeared to be no one.

“Perhaps, because I happen to be a trifle late, she’s put on frills, and taken herself off. She ought to know me better than that; I’ll teach her something if she has. If she’s not there——” The threat remained in embryo. All at once some one came out from under the trees on to the path a little way in front of him. “Hallo!—there she is! I’ve been doing her an injustice; probably some rude fellow has been trying to introduce himself; so she’s been keeping under cover until I came.” The figure on the path was that of a female, who moved leisurely forward. Quickening his steps, he caught her up, addressing her from behind as he did so. “Well, my dear; little late, aren’t I? Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

When he spoke she turned; and as she turned he perceived that he had made a mistake—that the woman was not his wife. There was that about her demeanour which

he did not understand. She stood, in perfect silence, regarding him, through the gloom, with an insistent scrutiny. A little taken by surprise, he was about to take off his hat and apologize for the error he had made, when he heard the sound of persons moving behind him among the trees on his right, and before he could move or speak, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice said—

“I want you.”

His instinct was to twist himself loose ; or, if that failed, then to turn upon his captor and assail him with that injurious violence for which he had more than once been famed. Conscious, however, that several persons were about him, he realized that to struggle would be vain and might be dangerous. With perfect *sang froid* he looked round at the man who still held him by the shoulder.

“And pray who may you be ?”

“I’m Inspector Wainford, of Scotland Yard ; and you’re Benjamin Cooper, alias James Sully, alias the Prowler ; so now we’ve introduced ourselves to each other perhaps you’ll hold out your hands for the darbies. It’s a clean cop, my lad.”

Recognizing that the inspector spoke the truth, he did as he was bid with an admirable docility which suggested the well-trained thief. In his voice, as he put a question, there was more than a touch of irony.

“Would it be troubling you too much, inspector, to tell me what you’ve copped me for, as I’m a perfectly innocent man”

“You’ll be told that soon enough. Meanwhile here’s a gentleman who would like to speak to you.”

The inspector withdrew ; apparently behind a tree. The Prowler became aware that two other men were standing in front of him, one of whom said, in a voice which was unmistakably a gentleman’s—

"You know me, Sully."

The man addressed stared, conscious of a sense of growing bewilderment. There was something about these proceedings which was beyond his comprehension, considerable though his experience had been.

"I'll be damned if I do."

"Don't lie to me, James Sully; you know me perfectly well."

A light burst in upon the other's brain. "By God, it's Mr. Dacre. And what might you want with me? What's the meaning of this little game? Interfering again between husband and wife—is that it?"

"You'll understand what I want with you, Sully, when I tell you—if you were not aware of the fact before—that I'm the cousin of the Duke of Datchet."

"The cousin of——"

"This is the Duke of Datchet."

Mr. Dacre motioned to the man at his side. More and more puzzled, Sully glanced from one to the other.

"Well?—and if he is the Duke of Datchet, what then? I'm the Duke of Windsor, that's who I am—and what's the odds if I'm not? I've done nothing to any duke, that I'm aware of, that he should want to make himself nasty to me."

"Oh yes, you have. Don't try that line; it won't do."

If there had only been light enough it would have been seen that the man's stare grew more pronounced.

"I don't know what you're driving at, Mr. Dacre; straight, I don't."

"Do you mean that?"

"Certainly I mean it. Perhaps if you was to tell me what you're driving at, perhaps then I might understand. I want to treat you squarely."

"You'll find it worth your while to do so; well worth your while."

The speaker's tone was pregnant with a significance which the other vainly tried to fathom. Mr. Dacre went on.

"Without any beating about the bush, you'll tell us plainly, and at once, what you know about the Marquis of Putney."

"The Marquis of Putney? What lark is it you're trying to have with me, Mr. Dacre? Who's the Marquis of Putney? I really am not used to being in such high company."

It was the man standing by Mr. Dacre's side who spoke next.

"The Marquis of Putney is my infant son, as I believe you are aware."

"So help me——" began Mr. Sully; but the other cut him short, with a cold severity which, to Mr. Sully, seemed uncalled for.

"Don't trouble yourself to commit perjury; at least, till you are aware what the position actually is. I repeat that the Marquis of Putney is my infant son, as you are aware; the woman who called herself your wife, and who was known to me as Mrs. Olive, was my son's nurse, as you are also aware; this girl, standing here, is her niece, Sarah Barnes—as she is acquainted with many of the facts of the case I advise you to take care what statements you may make. This morning, while you engaged your wife, and this girl, in conversation, my son, the Marquis of Putney, was taken out of his perambulator, and—to be brief—kidnapped. Your wife has since committed suicide."

"My wife has committed suicide!—my wife!"

"Therefore, whether or not she was your accomplice probably you alone can tell. However, circumstances have arisen which render it practically certain that you were associated with the disappearance of my child. I say nothing of the degree of your guilt; that is for you to

make plain. Your part may have been a minor one ; you may even have been the tool of others. What I ask from you is frankness ; if you tell me the truth you shall have no cause to regret it."

"Excuse me, but are you the Duke of Datchet ?"

"I am."

"Then all I can say is, your grace, that, although I supposed you had a child, since my wife was nurse in your house, I didn't know it was a son ; I never heard of the Marquis of Putney ; and as for kidnapping—if there has been any kidnapping—I know no more about it than a babe unborn. And if that's not the truth may I never speak again."

Mr. Cooper made a mistake common with men of his class ; he protested too much. To the thinking of both his hearers his words had about them the ring of insincerity. When he spoke again the duke's tone was cold—measured.

"Is that the position you have finally decided to take up ?"

Again Mr. Cooper was a trifle too emphatic. "I can't tell you anything if I don't know anything—how can I ? Ask yourself the question."

"Then, in that case, you leave me no option. I shall have to make a formal charge against you, and leave you to the law."

"If you make charges against me from now to never it won't make any difference ; you'll be doing yourself no good ; you'll only be locking up an innocent man."

Mr. Dacre interposed. "Unfortunately, Sully, I have the best of reasons for knowing that you're an irredeemable scoundrel and a thorough-paced liar, and that not the slightest reliance is to be placed on anything you say."

The gentleman referred to became pathetic. "That's what comes of getting a bad character. Guilty or not

guilty, everything's put down to you. It's hard ; bitter hard."

Mr. Dacre showed no sign of being touched. "Officer," he observed, "take your prisoner."

The prisoner was taken, and conveyed to Vine Street police station, where he was formally charged with being concerned in the kidnapping of the Marquis of Putney. His pockets were turned out there and then. One of the first things discovered was the strip of lace he had picked up in the park. At sight of it Sarah Barnes, who had accompanied the party to the station, exclaimed—

"Why, there's his lace coverlet ! It was over him when we left him asleep in his pram."

The inspector addressed the duke. "Your grace recognizes the article ?"

The duke was regarding it with mingled feelings. "I do ; I know it well. It is of great value, and has been in the family for generations ; indeed, it is an heirloom, and is only used for the head of the house.—May I " he hesitated—"may I say a few words to this man in private ?"

The request might not have been granted in every case, but it was granted in this ; the prisoner being taken to a cell, and the duke shut in with him. During the brief interview which followed the gaol-bird carried off the palm for self-possession—the peer being so affected by his emotions as to be almost inarticulate.

"Do you still persist in your denial after the evidence of your guilt which has just been found upon you ?"

"Evidence ! Blow me if calling that evidence isn't good !—Why, I don't know any more about it than what I've heard you say. I picked it up in the middle of Hyde Park, same as you might have done a pocket-handkerchief."

"Man, it's useless your piling lie upon lie. I will not give you an opportunity to commit further perjuries, but I

will make you a proposition. Tell me where my son is, or set me on the way of finding him for myself, and not only will I make no charge against you, but I will give you One Hundred Guineas."

"How many more times am I to tell you that I can't do it?"

"Is it that the amount I offer is too small? Name your own sum."

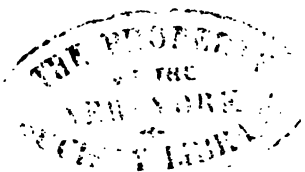
"If you were to offer me the contents of the Mint it would make no difference. What's the use of talking?"

"We shall find him; don't imagine that your silence will prevent our doing that. It may cause delay, but it will do no more—it will not even serve to screen your accomplices."

"Accomplices!" interjected the prisoner. "Oh, Lord!"

"For yourself, the consequences will be most serious. You have already a record of crime; when this most heinous offence is added to the others I do not think I exaggerate in anticipating for you a sentence of penal servitude for life. Your present attitude makes the matter worse. For the last time I ask you, on what terms will you enable me to restore an innocent babe to his heart-broken mother?"

The prisoner threw up his arms with a groan. "And all this comes of picking up a bit of lace in the middle of Hyde Park!"





## CHAPTER VIII

### “AND WOULD NOT BE COMFORTED.”

THAT night, at Datchet House, the lights were to have shone on “fair women and brave men;”—not improbably the hostess would have been the fairest woman there. For weeks the preparations for that ball had occupied her thoughts; everything that money and taste could do had been done to do honour to her Royal guests. Girl-like she had dreamed of the success which she herself would make. She would be the admired of all admirers; a vision of loveliness whom royalty itself would be delighted to honour; an enchantress whose sway for the night would be unchallenged. That ball would be historical, if only because she, the hostess of all London, was at the zenith of her still girlish beauty. Everything went to show it. The dress she had had made was a triumph of the dressmaker’s art; she fell in love with herself as she moved among the mirrors when she tried it on. She was to wear the Datchet diamonds—those glorious lumps of light which would gleam in her hair, against her smooth white skin, with fairy radiance. Beyond the slightest doubt, that night she would be a creature of infinite charm, and all the world would willingly admit it, while the music, and the laughter, and happy voices, filled the air, and the men and the women danced.

That was the picture as she had painted it; an attempt at prophecy which the Fates had laughed to scorn.

For that night the house, which was to have been thronged by all who in London were worth knowing, was like a house of the dead. The rooms which were to have been a blaze of lights were all in darkness ; there was not so much as a glimmer of light in any one of all those grand reception-rooms. Where the people were to have thronged was utter solitude ; where the music was to have crashed and swelled was silence ; where the dancers were to have made night gay was desolation. A blight seemed to have fallen on the place. Servants spoke in whispers, moving softly, with anxious feet. Every now and then people came to the door to make inquiries, which were invariably answered with mournful words, in tones of grief. Worse still, as the night grew later, guests arrived, ignorant of the fact that the festivities had been postponed ; on such an occasion it is impossible to make sure that announcements, sent out on such short notice, reach every one who is expected. These unfortunate people, on arriving, looked, one and all, bewildered ; wondering why the street was so quiet, the house in darkness. To each had to be repeated the same dreary explanation : one which, for the most part, they seemed to find it difficult to understand. As each, in turn, retired, it was generally with the same puzzled air, as if he, or she, had been baulked of an expected pleasure for some reason which was not clearly apprehended.

Meanwhile, up in her own room, wrestling with her own imaginings, was the Duchess of Datchet. Her mood had given, and still was giving, much anxiety to those who were most concerned for her. She had had no dinner ; nothing had passed her lips since she had returned from Lady Mary's lunch, she angrily refusing all suggestions that she should either eat or drink. There had been an unpleasant scene between her and the duke, when he had come up to urge her to be reasonable. For the first time since they had known each other bitter words had been spoken ; the

mental strain which she was undergoing seemed temporarily to have unhinged her reason. When he tried to comfort her she accused him of being cold and callous; indifferent to what had happened to their son; when he offered her tenderness, she spurned him from her, crying that if he had any feeling for her of that kind, he would go out into the streets, and search every room in every house in London, till he had found her boy. Indeed, she bade him not to let her see his face again, unless he was bearing in his arms her son. When, disturbed by her vehemence, the duke departed, she rang the bell, and summoned Twyford, and actually bade him muster all the servants, male and female, and send them out into the streets of London, to search and search, until the boy was found.

The decorous Twyford, startled out of his wits, afraid to refuse to carry out her orders, still more frightened of obedience, was, with his humming and hahing, producing in her a state of excitement which threatened to become hysterics, when, much to his relief, Lady Mary Murray, coming bustling into the room, requested him to retire.

Lady Mary was the duke's elder sister; not only the wife of a diplomatist, but a diplomatist herself. It was understood that in a difficult place no one's touch was more efficacious than hers; that she had a great gift for making the rough ways smooth. For the rôle of general pacifier she had one capital qualification; she herself believed that it was one which she was eminently adapted to fill. In probably the majority of instances her faith was justified; but, in dealing with her Grace of Datchet in her present mood, she was encountering a factor of an altogether novel kind. She struck a wrong note at the beginning.

"My dearest Mabel," she exclaimed, "what have you been doing to make yourself look such a guy?"

Her notion was that if she could only bring the duchess to think of her own personal appearance she would lessen

the strain in other directions ; just then she would have much preferred to talk about chiffons instead of missing heirs, she having been informed downstairs that the one thing needful was to keep the duchess from worrying. Unfortunately, however, her grace took what was a really innocent remark in quite a wrong spirit.

"Don't be impertinent, Mary ; even if you have come from him."

There was such an unusual intonation in the duchess's voice that her visitor regarded her with a slight sensation of discomfiture.

"I was not aware that I was impertinent ; I certainly did not mean to be. And pray from whom do you think I have come ?"

The duchess's rejoinder seemed to take it for granted that the other's question answered itself.

"Then, if you have not come from him, might I ask you to leave me. I prefer to be alone."

Lady Mary, who had been requested, over the telephone, to keep the duchess company for an indefinite period, in order to divert her thoughts, ignored the lady's request. Sitting down she proceeded to divest herself of the wrap which she had thrown over her dinner dress.

"How warm it is ! In the brougham I was nearly stifled ; I wished I'd taken something which would open properly ; on a night like this a brougham's a hearse."

In her turn the duchess ignored Lady Mary's remarks. "If you won't go, then I suppose I must, since I intend to be alone."

Lady Mary tried the effect of what she intended to be a little judicious scolding.

"Mabel ! How can you be so utterly ridiculous ! I see you haven't even changed your frock ; and I thought you one of the most sensible persons of my acquaintance."

The effect was not at all what the speaker wished. The

duchess eyed her for a moment or two, as if she was something novel and curious, and not altogether nice. Then she moved towards the door.

"I will leave you in possession of my room, Lady Mary."

The other started up. "Mabel! What do you mean?"

"Since, as I have told you, I intend to be alone, if you won't leave me I must leave you."

And she did. Before the other could stop her, she was gone. Lady Mary was left alone to make the best of a rather awkward situation. She did not take the matter quite so good-naturedly as she might have done. Gathering her wrap about her, she, too, went out of the room, descending the stairs to her brougham, which was waiting at the door. She said to herself, as she took her seat in it—

"The little savage! Even a bereaved mother ought not to quite forget her manners. There are things which I won't stand even from Hereward's wife."

The duchess passed from Lady Mary Murray to the day nursery. There she found Clifford, the maid, whose special charge the room was, arranging a particularly fine collection of toys—considering that their owner was a ten-months'-old baby—in what she called order. The duchess stopped her.

"I don't think you need trouble to do that, Clifford. They will never be wanted again. At least, by my boy."

The girl, who had known the duchess all her life, being the daughter of one of her father's tenants, looked at the speaker with eyes which were wet with tears.

"You mustn't say that, Miss Mabel—I beg your pardon; I mean, your grace."

"You needn't beg my pardon; and you may say 'Miss Mabel.' If I had married in the rank in which I was, as I ought to have done, and become plain Mrs., instead

of the Duchess of Datchet, I should never have lost my boy."

"You mustn't say that either," cried the girl. "Because it isn't so. Leastways—you mind my sister, Rose?"

"Of course; do you think I so soon forget? She married Joe Varley, the keeper; old Sam's son."

"That's so. They've got a baby; at least, now he's getting on for four."

"Do you think I don't remember? You must think I'm very silly. Didn't I go and see him the day after he was born? and didn't I make him a cap?"

"I'd clean forgotten, your grace, but to be sure you did. But it seems so long ago, and things all seem so different."

"They not only seem, they are different."

"That they are, your grace. Well, I was going to tell your grace about that boy of Rose's—what happened to him a while ago. You mind the lane that runs outside their cottage, Friar's Lane, some call it."

"As if I didn't know every inch of it."

"It's about a month ago, or maybe six weeks, young Joe was playing all alone by his little self in the lane, just outside the gate. Rose, she went to fetch him in to dinner, and though she looked everywhere she could think of, there was not a sight of him to be seen; only there was his little cloth cap lying on the ground. A nice state she was in; Joe was out—she didn't rightly know where; as you know, the nearest cottage is a good mile, and scarcely anybody ever passes down the lane. For three whole days they heard nothing of the child; they'd given him up for dead, or lost for ever; they thought that he was drowned, and all sorts of things. And then, on the fourth day, if he didn't turn up, without so much as a scratch upon him."

"Where had the young gentleman been?"

"The afternoon of the day he was lost he was found

just outside Patcham, nearly twenty miles from their place. He was crying in the high road. The woman who found him, she took him home with her ; and it wasn't till the fourth day that it was found out who he was, or anything at all about him."

"How did a child of that age get to Patcham?"

"That's the mystery. It's believed that a higgler, named Bunce, with whom Joe had had a few words, came along the lane with his cart and saw the boy all by his little self. Whether he'd had a drop or two to drink, or whether he meant to play a trick off on Joe, isn't known ; but it's believed that he took him up in his cart, and drove right off with him, and then left him in the road outside Patcham."

"The wretch ! I hope he was properly punished."

"Well, in a manner of speaking, your grace, though nothing has been proved against him. When Joe taxed him with it he denied it ; but Joe, he picked a quarrel with him, and by the time he'd done, Bunce, he took to his bed for the best part of a week. I'm just telling you this, your grace, because it shows that though a child may be missing for so much as three whole days, it doesn't need to follow that there's anything wrong with him, after all."

"I don't think the cases are quite the same, are they ? Unfortunately my boy is the Marquis of Putney."

"I don't see that there's anything unfortunate about that, begging your grace's pardon. It'll make it all the more sure that he'll be found, and that no one won't dare to do any harm to him."

Her grace's features were twisted into what was possibly meant for a smile.

"I wish that I could be of your opinion, Clifford."

The girl was dismissed, the duchess being in no mood for even homely sympathy, and apparently determined

to despair. She passed into the night-nursery ; now untenanted. His lordship's bassinet—a royal gift—suspended by silver rods to a silver frame, glorious with lace and ribbons, was empty. His mother stood beside it.

“I wonder,” she asked herself, “where he sleeps to-night?” The fashion of her face was changed as her eyes passed to the bed on which the late head nurse had been wont to slumber. “And where she sleeps? his tool.” Her young face seemed to grow older as she put to herself a third interrogatory. “Will he sleep at all? Does conscience keep men wakeful; such men as he? Not likely. It is just those men who have dreamless nights. But my little baby; God send him sleep wherever he may be!” Turning, she looked about the room with fevered glances. “If I only knew where he was! If I could only guess where he has hidden him! If I could only do something to find out! Instead of having nothing to do but wait. Is it strange that I keep thinking that I hear him calling? And I believe I do; I believe that he keeps calling to me all the time. I feel sure that that's his voice, only—it seems to come from such a long way off; it frightens me. If I tried to follow it I shouldn't know which way to go: and yet—he may be nearer than I think. Sometimes he sounds—he sounds quite near. Oh, if I could only find out!” She seemed to arrive at a sudden resolution. “I'll go and ask him. Perhaps—perhaps if we're alone together—as we used to be—he won't refuse to tell me; for the sake——” Her sentence remained unfinished. Putting her hands up to her face a shiver seemed to go all over her. “Was I wicked, or just a fool?—I was only a girl, and he was a grown man. Perhaps, if we are alone together, he might tell me. He might be revenged—some other way. I'll change my dress, and I'll try. I can't stay here, just waiting.”



## CHAPTER IX

### SWEETHEARTS ONCE

**W**HEN Ivor Dacre returned to his rooms in Clarges Street, having left Mr. Benjamin Cooper in Vine Street police station, he was greeted in the hall by his man Peters, in whose very air of discretion there was something which he instinctively resented.

"The Duchess of Datchet is here, sir."

Mr. Dacre did his best not to appear surprised : though his self-repression was as obvious as Peters' air of discretion.

"Has she been waiting long ?"

"Only a few minutes ; not five. She gave instructions that the brougham was to return for her in twenty minutes."

Nodding lightly, Mr. Dacre passed into his bedroom. So soon as he was covered by the door his manner changed completely. So far from showing any symptoms of being flattered by the compliment which, to some men's thinking, such a call would have implied, he seemed disturbed to an almost unreasonable degree.

"Now I'm in for a bad half-hour. I might have guessed she'd do it ; it's exactly the sort of thing she would do ; but what does she suppose she'll gain by coming to me like this ? Does she imagine that I'm like a glove, which, at her pleasure, she can turn inside out. It was her turn once ; why shouldn't it be mine now ? It's going to be, let her say or do exactly what she pleases."

His countenance was black enough, as he indulged in self-communion ; yet it was with a sunny smile that he entered to the lady in the adjacent room.

There was between these two that somewhat singular thing, perfect physical sympathy. Whatever their mood, so soon as they were together both recognized that each had that which the other desired ; a state of affairs which had resulted in some odd situations. One came about then. While his foot was on the threshold Ivor Dacre had firmly resolved that, at its warmest, a frigid courtesy should mark his bearing towards the lady : although, as a rule, having once resolved, he was sufficiently unbending, on that occasion no sooner was he in the room itself than he felt his resolution melting ; whether he would or would not, the lady appealed to him so strenuously, for so many reasons, in so many ways. He could not look at her as he looked at other women. When she spoke, or moved, her voice and motions had for him the strangest, subtlest charm. He had been content to sit and watch for the new point of view which each little gesture suggested ; the play of the sunshine on her hair ; and so soon as he saw her then, standing, so straight and so disdainful, beside his own particular armchair, he knew quite well that if she would only sit in it, and let him look at her, she would entertain him in the fashion in which his soul delighted.

And as he was affected, so was she. She had meant to be cruel to him as the grave ; hard as the callous flint. As she heard him coming her intention had grown stronger ; yet, when he came, it was a pleasure to her to feel that his eyes were on her. He had proposed to greet her with a superficial smile, and that ancient formula, "This is an unexpected pleasure." She had determined not to greet him at all, but to treat him with a scorn which should cut him like a whip of scorpions. But, when they saw each other, though neither spoke, their glances met in a silence

which was eloquent—a silence which was curiously persistent, and which, at last the lady broke.

“Ivor!” she said.

“Mabel!” he rejoined. Then added, with sudden recollection, “I beg your pardon; ‘your grace’ I should have said.”

“You—you may call me ‘Mabel.’”

He looked at her with burning eyes; and nothing could have been less like the words he meant to say than those he actually uttered; to which there ensued a conversation which was grotesquely different from anything they had either of them intended.

“You were the loveliest girl I ever saw, even as a child; but since you have been a woman you have grown still more beautiful.”

“Do you really think that I am beautiful?”

He closed his eyes, as St. Antony might have done in his desire to shut out too dangerous a vision.

“Whenever I look at you I see all those things which in a woman are most to be desired. It is very odd. I can understand how it was that I felt it once; but that I should feel it still, that’s the marvel.”

“Haven’t you forgiven me?”

“Have you forgiven yourself?”

“I’ve been happy.”

“I haven’t; there’s the difference. Sometimes I’ve doubted if you were.”

“I have been.”

“After a fashion; not as I’d have made you happy.”

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. “I’m the Duchess of Datchet.”

“There’s the rub; that you should have sold yourself for a mess of pottage; or, rather, that you should have sold me, and, in selling me, should have robbed me of my pottage, for it was my pottage. I was the heir. You’d

have been the Duchess of Datchet if you'd married me. I'm convinced that Datchet would have married no one if he hadn't married you."

"He did marry me."

"Or you married him—which was it?"

She smiled, maliciously. "What does it matter?"

"As you say, what does it? I suppose all good women are like you; one fears to think what the bad ones are like."

"That's one point of view; there's another one. Why should women be different from men?"

"Or even girls."

"Or even girls? Why should a girl be necessarily an idiot?"

"Why shouldn't she be a rogue instead?"

"For a girl to be ambitious is, according to the standard which you use for women, but not for men, to be a rogue. As things are there is only one way by which a girl can attain to the goal of her ambition: and that is by the gate of marriage. If I had married you I might have been physically happy, but I should always have been regretting that I wasn't the Duchess of Datchet."

"You would have been—in God's good time."

"When? After how many years?"

"You are not yet twenty-one; you could afford to wait."

"And Hereward is not yet fifty. He will live another thirty years, and more—at least, I hope so."

"Do you?"

"I do. If I had been your wife you'd have dreamed murder; every time you looked at him, every time you thought of him, you'd have hoped that he'd be quick and die. It isn't as though I didn't love him. I did. I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't loved him. I married him for love."

"That's not true, and you know I know it. You loved me with a strength of love of which, as a child, you were afraid; and you still love me with a love of which you're still afraid; while I love you with a love which will only die as my manhood dies. It is only a point of honour which keeps us at arm's length. I dare not come too near to you, and you dare not come too near to me, lest we enter that land of delights where honour is not."

She turned away. When she spoke again her voice was tremulous.

"Ivor, give me back my boy."

"Why should I?"

"Because—you love me."

"And you love me; yet what have you done for love of me?"

"I'll do anything, if you'll give me back my boy."

"What will you do?"

"Whatever you want."

There was a pause, during which she stood with her back to him, while he devoured her with looks of longing. Presently he gave himself a shake, as if he were shaking off a devil which perched upon his shoulder, and whispered in his ear. Again he closed his eyes, as if again to shut the vision out. And he twisted himself round, and picked up a book which was lying on a table.

"Mabel, have you always thought I was that kind of man?"

"What kind of man?"

"Have you always thought I was a blackguard?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh yes, you do."

"I don't. I never thought you were a blackguard."

Then she added, as if by way of an afterthought, and one could fancy she was smiling—

"It depends on what you call a blackguard."

"I see. I suppose it does depend. Let me give you my positive assurance, at this somewhat late hour of the day, that I'm not that kind."

"Not what kind?"

Again, although one could not see her face, one suspected a smile.

"I am not at all the sort of person you appear to imagine I am."

A further pause. Then she turned, so that now he had his back to her.

"Does that mean that you won't give me back my boy?"

"It does."

"You—you coward!"

"Why am I a coward?"

"Because you have done in the darkness what you dare not do in the light. Had you come and taken my boy out of my arms, that would have been an act which required some courage. You have preferred to act like a contemptible cur. You are right; I did not imagine you were that sort of person."

"I see. This is rather droll." Then he turned so that they were face to face. "Do you seriously wish me to believe that you think that I have kidnapped your boy, or that I know who has?"

"I will give you question for question. Is it to be war between us? Do you wish me to tell our story to the lawyers, and to the police; and so provide some excellent entertainment to the public?"

"I give you my word of honour that I know no more what has happened to the Marquis of Putney than you do; and that I have had no more hand in his disappearance."

"Your word of honour! You gave me your word of honour once before, and something stronger than your word of honour. When I told you that I was going to

marry Hereward you said that you would make it the endeavour of your life to give me cause to regret it ; and you swore that if I bore him a son he should never live to be the Duke of Datchet."

"When a man is treated by a girl as I was treated by you, in the first flush of his resentment he says anything. It all came as such a surprise—such a shock. I trusted you so implicitly ; had such faith in your truth. You, who had been my promised wife for months, came and told me that you were going to marry the man whose heir I was, because I was his heir, and he had great possessions. It would not have been strange if I had taken you by the throat and strangled you. In any other country than this I should have made him answer for his conduct with his life."

"He knew nothing of what was between us."

"No. That I believed ; and so I spared him."

"And swore to be revenged on me—and you have been revenged. I own I deserved to be punished. And yet, miserable wretch that I am, I have come to appeal to you for mercy, because my punishment is more than I can bear. Ivor, have mercy ! I have used you badly ; I deserve all that you choose to do to me ; use me as you will. I have come here, of my own accord, so that you can use me as you will ! Only—give me back my boy ; give me back my boy !"

The duchess, suddenly possessed by a storm of emotion, dropped on to her knees, all tears. Dacre stared at her, bewildered ; then tried to assuage her grief.

"Mabel, you mustn't cry ! I do entreat you to believe——"

She renewed her petition, without suffering him to finish.

"Oh, Ivor, give me back my child ! give me back my child !"

While she still was wailing, her husband came into the room, with the most matter-of-fact air in the world. To judge from his demeanour, nothing in the situation struck him as being in the least unusual. He nodded to his cousin.

"Oh, Ivor, your man told me that Mabel was here." He crossed to his wife, as if it were the merest commonplace to find her crying on her knees in some one else's rooms.

"Mabel, I've good news for you. I believe that we're on the track of that boy of ours."

She looked up, with tear-dimmed eyes ; her breath coming in little gasps.

"On his track ? What do you mean ?"

"I believe we've caught the rascal who was at least partly concerned in his disappearance ; and that, when he's been brought to see the matter in its proper light, we shall soon have our darling restored to us."

The duchess availed herself of the hand which her husband extended to enable her to rise to her feet.

"Who is this man ?" she asked.

"What his real name is I don't know ; he's the supposititious husband of the wretched woman we knew as Olive. He was in possession of Putney's lace coverlet ; so that there is no doubt that he knows something, if he can be induced to speak ; probably the reflections born of a night's confinement will be inducement enough. But, come ; your brougham is at the door ; we'll relieve Ivor of your presence. I'll tell you all there is to tell as we are driving home."



## CHAPTER X

### THE BOX

THE duke fulfilled his promise, telling her all that there was to tell as the carriage bore them through the lamp-lit streets. For the most part she listened in silence ; that is, if she was listening—which, occasionally, he doubted. She sat in the corner, as far away from him as she could get. When he put out his hand to touch her, as if desirous of extending to her that affectionate sympathy which is born by the touch of a loving hand, she repelled him, drawing herself closer into her corner. He showed no sign of resenting her apparent disinclination for his too near neighbourhood. His attitude towards her was a blend of humility and gentleness ; during the last few hours his bearing seemed to have undergone a curious change. Ordinarily, he moved and spoke—even where trifles were concerned—as one who had authority ; a man could hardly live for fifty years within the shadow of the Datchet purple without showing some consciousness of a sense of his own importance ; and, consciously or not, more than ever of late that sense had become written large on him. Physically a big man, it had made him seem even bigger than he was. His deportment towards the world in general had become almost too dignified for ordinary life ; in the family circle, when he unbent, he was suave rather than simple. He had no intimates ; he was not a man of friendships ; but by those who saw most of him it had been said that his marriage had made of him a man, and paternity a duke.

Now, on a sudden, this ducal side of him seemed—at least, temporarily—to have vanished. He had become, not only human, but very human; almost unnaturally meek and mild. He bore himself towards the duchess as one who, having done her an injury, was conscious of his guilt, and who, therefore, since he had merited her displeasure, was incapable of resenting her strange whims. The point of the jest being that she herself was in such an unreasonable mood that she was oblivious, apparently, of there being anything strange about him; the result being that, for some more or less unknown reason, each seemed to be afraid of the other.

She sat in her corner and sulked—for that was what her bearing amounted to—while, with laboured timidity, he expounded his views on the subject of Mr. Benjamin Cooper, and the lace coverlet which had been found upon him. When he had finished both were still—until they were nearing Datchet House, when he said—

“I trust, Mabel, that, after what I have been telling you, you will accept my assurances that the boy will shortly be restored to us, and that, therefore, you will not allow yourself to worry. You know how essential it is that you should not worry.”

As he spoke she was looking through the opposite window.

“Whether I worry or do not worry, I presume it will make no difference to the issue. I know that my son will never be restored to me—never!”

He moved in his seat with a start. “Mabel! how can you permit yourself to say such monstrous things!”

“Whether the thing is monstrous or not, it’s true; and I believe you know it’s true. I’m sure that Mr. Dacre does.”

In the half light he stared at her with a very odd expression on his face, as the carriage rolled into the courtyard

in front of Datchet House. The duke asked Twyford, who met them in the hall—

“Any news?”

For once the butler was monosyllabic. “None, your grace.”

The duchess was smiling as they crossed the hall; and as they ascended the stairs. On the landing she paused.

“I will wish you good night; I shall not see you again.”

“You are going to bed? That’s right. A good night’s rest will do you good.”

“I did not say I was going to bed. I said I should not see you again. Good night.”

Turning, she moved off in the direction of her own apartments. He looked after her, anxiously; doubtfully; as if, if he had dared, he would have followed. He had not been wont to part from her in such a manner, at night. She, the merriest, lightest-hearted, most debonaire of wives, had always had for him a sunny smile, or something sweeter. This serious person, with her dark sayings, her air of kismet, above all, with her aloofness, was a revelation, and one which troubled him in a manner, in a degree, he would have found it hard to explain. He had never thought that the girl he had married—that deliciously fair and fresh young country maiden!—could, on a sudden, have become like this; that, all at once, an impenetrable wall should have sprung up between them, to sunder them,—as if they never had been joined. That a woman should mourn for her babe, than that nothing could be more natural. But, in the hour of her mourning, might she not be expected to turn to the husband whom she loved for comfort?—to seek for consolation in his arms, while she wept against his breast? Especially would one have anticipated such behaviour from one who, though both wife and mother, was but a child.

With what seemed weary footsteps the duke moved to his own sitting-room. As he entered Joynson appeared through an opposite door. This man and the duke were of about the same age. Joynson was the son of a long line of Datchet retainers. For nearly a hundred and fifty years there had been one of his name attached as personal attendant to the head of the house. When the present duke, as Marquis of Putney, obtained, as was the family custom, his commission in the Guards, the present Joynson was entered on the strength of the same regiment as a private. During the whole of his military service he acted as his lordship's orderly ; when, in due course, the Marquis handed in his papers, the man went with him, and had stayed with him ever since. Neither could have been better suited than in his relation with the other. No doubt the man knew more about the master than the master knew about the man, since there was more to know ; but the master knew enough about the man to understand him better than he had ever understood anybody else—or ever would.

In person, Joynson was tall, and slight, and looked a little older than the duke, though there was not six months between them ; but that was principally because his dark hair was getting grizzled, while the duke's brown locks were still untouched by time. While his bearing was soldierly, it was easy, though respectful and reserved. It was the latter quality which struck those most who knew him least. They said that Mr. Joynson was a deep one ; that he always knew a great deal more about everything than he let you think. The duke, who knew him best, was aware that he had a gift of silence which was almost superhuman ; and since he himself was—especially when occasion required—by way of being a silent man, that suited him exceedingly well. He had the best of reasons for knowing that he could trust his man-servant with what

was dearer to him than his life ; and, since circumstances, more than once, had forced him to trust some one, that was lucky.

Without speaking a word, moving to an armchair, the duke extended his feet ; Joynson proceeded to remove his boots. When the process was nearly completed the duke said—

“Nothing transpired?”

“Nothing, your grace. There are some letters.”

“From whom?”

“There is a package marked private. The rest are of no importance.”

“A package?”

“A package, your grace.”

When Joynson had withdrawn, the duke remained for some minutes in his armchair, still with his legs extended. He seemed tired, listless, worn, as if many things were against him ; not at all like a man who has everything the world has to offer at his finger-ends. When he rose it was with a sigh. He went and stood before a portrait which occupied the whole of the wall above his mantel ; the portrait of a girl—of the girl he had married. Her face, indeed, was the prevailing feature of the room ; it was everywhere ; in photographs, miniatures, pastels ; on tables, bookcases, shelves. But this portrait was the work of the painter who, beyond all others, was the vogue, and who deserved to be the vogue ; since, as a painter of portraits, he was very near to the greatest of the great—when his subject moved him. It had been begun—and finished—within three months of her marriage, and had been the Academy portrait of last year. The duke had never been quite sure if he liked it. The likeness was wonderful ; the face seemed to speak to him out of the canvas, and laugh. Yet the artist had seen something on the girl's face which the duke assured himself was certainly not there.

What, precisely, it was, he had never been able to define ; he only knew that this was not the face of his wife as he would have had it painted. The artist was a person who, when he had once condescended to execute a commission—he had the whole English-speaking world knocking at his door—would endure no cavilling ; what he had done he had done, and there was an end. So when the duke ventured mildly to insinuate that, while he admitted its artistic excellence, there was something about the expression of the countenance which he did not altogether like, the painter, with a laugh, turned to the lady, who joined him in laughing at the duke, protesting that, for her part, it was exactly as she would like to be, and hoped she was.

It dawned upon his grace, as, that night, he looked up at the pictured features, that the painter's had been the prophetic vision ; he had himself seen, for the first time that day, the something on his wife's face which the painter had seen—last year. As he recognized the fact his weariness, for some reason, seemed to increase. Turning from the lovely face, he sat down to examine the letters which awaited him upon a table.

As Joynson had said, they were unimportant. Unless otherwise instructed, Joynson opened all the letters which were addressed to the duke ; and, having sorted them, left for his inspection only those which were of personal interest. One communication remained unopened—the one which Joynson had alluded to, marked "Private." The duke drew it towards him. It was an oblong packet, perhaps a foot long, and six inches broad, done up in brown paper, secured by what seemed to be an unnecessary quantity of string. It had been registered ; on the string and on the paper were great dabs of sealing-wax—many more than were required by the post-office regulations. The duke glanced at the thing with languid amusement.

"What rubbish does this contain ? and to what foolish

person am I indebted for its despatch ? It is light enough ; perhaps the contents are valuable, out of all proportion to their weight. How many seals are there ?" Counting them, he found that there were twelve ; he smiled still more. "This comes from some one who has both time and wax to spare. What's the device upon the seal ?"

With careless curiosity he looked to see ; holding the packet well under the electric lamp which stood at his elbow, to enable him to see it to better advantage. As he looked something on his face was altered. First, the smile grew less, then faded altogether, while the careless curiosity gave place to puzzled interest.

"That's odd ! I seem to have seen that seal before. There's nothing unusual about it and yet, it's very odd." Something seemed to strike him as being odd. Lowering the packet he stared at the lamp as if he were searching in it for some lost memory ; then, as if he failed to find what he sought he resumed his examination of the device upon the seal. "A hand—a right hand—feminine—holding a signet, palm downwards. Nothing could be more commonplace ; it's not a crest, it's the sort of trumpery which can be bought at any shop ; why should it seem to try back to some forgotten chord of memory ? I'm fanciful, that's all."

He studied the address. "To the Duke of Datchet, K.G., Datchet House, W." It had been typed on an ordinary gummed label and then affixed to the wrapper. Taking up a penknife, he proceeded to cut the string ; of which there was such a quantity that the process was quite an operation ; pausing each time he came to the device upon the seal, as if he were still endeavouring to connect it with some bygone association. When, at last, all the string was cut he removed the wrapper, disclosing an ordinary card-board box, such as is used nowadays to enclose a thousand and one commercial products, from boots to bonbons. It proved to be full, for the most part,

of cotton wool. In the heart of this was something wrapped in thin white tissue-paper. He thrust in his fingers to take this out, and, withdrew them hurriedly. So hurriedly, indeed, that the action was almost grotesque ; like that of the person who inadvertently touches something which is hotter than he supposed. What was the cause of his haste there was nothing to show. It was not that what was within was hot ; nor that it was alive ; nor sharp-edged ; nor prickly ; there were none of the ordinary reasons which induce a man to withdraw his fingers from contact with an object in a hurry. The cause of his action was so obscure that he himself was in doubt as to what had prompted it. He only knew that something had—the word startled hardly described it ; that something had sent a thrill right up his arm, until it reached his heart ; and that his heart had all at once turned cold. It was too absurd, but, he sat there shivering, motionless, hardly breathing, like a man whose nervous system had suddenly collapsed. For fully a minute he sat perfectly quiescent. Then his glance fell on the hand-bell which he used to summon Joynson ; for some moments it seemed as if he were about to ring it ; then he changed his mind.

“No. I won’t ring. I won’t ring. I can—I can get it myself.”

What it was that he could get for himself was presently made plain by the fact of his rising from his chair and going to a sideboard which stood in a corner. He opened a cupboard in which there were glasses and decanters. He looked at these as if he were in doubt which he would have ; then, selecting one, poured out some of the contents into a tumbler, and sipped, and sipped.

“The strain has been too much for me,” he told himself, between the sips. “I’ve been overdoing it ; I want a rest. I’ll go down to Mallow as soon—as soon as I can.” He drew



himself up straighter, as if the liquor was strengthening his backbone. "It's absurd that I should be so easily upset, without—without any cause—any cause whatever. I haven't been taken like this since I was married." Although he had finished the contents he seemed unwilling to relinquish his hold on the tumbler. "I mustn't take any more. It'll do me no good. Besides, what—what am I taking it for? It's most ridiculous—positively laughable."

His bearing hardly suggested the laughable side of the situation to which his words pointed. When he did put down the tumbler he walked across the room away from instead of towards, the table on which the packet lay. He glanced at his watch.

"I think I'll go to bed. A good night's sleep will do me good, if—if I can sleep. As for the box, Joynson can attend to that. Joynson? why Joynson? He'll draw quite erroneous conclusions, if I don't take care. It's all the merest nonsense. I'm allowing my imagination to run away with me. The box contains nothing of the least importance. There's no reason whatever why I shouldn't turn it out upon the table, and when I see what it does contain I shan't dare to tell Joynson what a fool I've been. So now to put my rubbishing fancies to the test."

With an air of decision he moved towards the table, on which the package was reposing, with rapid steps, which grew less rapid, and less decided, as he advanced, until, when he was within two feet of the table, he paused abruptly.

"I'll ring for Joynson; I'll not touch the thing. What does it matter what it contains? Why should I touch it if I'd rather not? And I'd much rather not. I'll ring."

When he perceived that the hand-bell stood on the table beside the package, again hesitation overcame him; it seemed as if his reluctance to approach the table was

greater than he had supposed. And then what, under the circumstances, was a really strange thing happened. The communicating door was opened, and Joynson, coming through, stood in silence, as if expecting to receive his master's orders. The duke, on his part, stared at him as if he were some strange being, which Joynson perceiving, said—

“Your grace rang?”

“Rang! No, I didn't ring.”

“I beg your grace's pardon; I thought I heard the bell.”

“Bell? What bell?”

“Your grace's bell.”

“My bell? You couldn't have heard my bell; I never rang.”

Joynson bowed; then, as if struck by something unusual in the duke's manner, inquired—

“Is there anything that I can do for your grace, now that I am here?”

The duke appeared to be in doubt; then, swinging round upon his heels, said, almost harshly—

“No, nothing—nothing whatever. When I do want you, I will ring in such a manner that there will be no mistake about your hearing it, I'll take care of that. But, until I do ring, be so good as to understand that I don't wish to be disturbed.”

Joynson withdrew with something in his impassivity which, so soon as his back was turned, moved his master to self-reproach. He made as if to recall him; then checked himself.

“He couldn't have heard me ring—he couldn't. Yet I meant to ring; I wonder what he heard. It must have been simply his fancy, which is perhaps more active than usual, like mine. The probability is that he dropped asleep, and then, suddenly waking, in a conscience-stricken moment, thought he heard my bell.”

He moved, as if by accident, towards the sideboard on which stood the decanter and the empty glass.

"We're a little off our mental balance, both Joynson and I."

He poured something out into the tumbler, and had already raised it more than halfway to his lips when, apparently, for the first time, he realized what it was that he was doing. His manner changed, his form stiffened, his face grew sterner.

"Drinking to steady my nerves? Am I reduced to that? Are they in such a state that I must resort to neat brandy as a pick-me-up? I think not." He replaced the tumbler, with its contents untouched, upon the sideboard. "I and myself must have had a serious misunderstanding if, all at once, I am becoming frightened by shadows." Turning, he glanced towards the table, and he smiled; perhaps a little wanly, but still he smiled. "And all about a box!" Even as he spoke, his right hand strayed, as if without his knowledge, towards the abandoned tumbler; which, when he perceived its purpose, caused him to so flush with indignation, that on the moment he banished hesitation, and strode angrily to where the package was upon the table. He took the box, and turned it upside down.

Such a heap of cotton wool stood on the table that one wondered how it had ever been crammed into the box. The contents proper—or improper—still were unrevealed. There returned to him a touch of hesitation; when it passed he took the wool in both his hands, dividing it in the centre, and there, in the very heart of it, reposed something wrapped in a sheet of tissue-paper. At sight of it all the duke's strange qualms came back again. He glared, rather than stared, at it; as before, he began shivering as with cold. Apparently obsessed by some sudden paroxysm, snatching up the hand-bell, he began to

ring it vigorously ; and, as if not content with the noise it made, commenced calling, almost at the top of his voice—

“Joynson! Joynson! Joynson!”

When, on the instant, the man came into the room, he found himself confronted by his master, who, as if unconsciously, continued to agitate the bell, while he gazed at him with eyes which seemed to wonder what it was he looked upon.

“Your grace! What is wrong?”

Recalled to himself, the duke pointed the bell towards the table.

“Joynson, what’s in that paper?”

The man approached the table, to see what paper was referred to. When he saw, some slight change took place on his well-trained visage.

“It appears to be——”

“I didn’t ask you what it appeared to be, I asked you what it was. Open it and see. Do you hear what I tell you? Open it and see.”

The duke’s agitation was as unusual as was the servant’s tardy obedience, which almost amounted—if it did not quite—to unwillingness to carry out orders. He glanced up at his master with that on his face which suggested an unspoken appeal, on which the duke flamed out.—

“Do you hear what I say? Will you, or will you not, do as I tell you, and see what is in that paper?”

Then the man obeyed, with something cold and self-contained in his bearing which was in striking contrast to his master’s strange excitement. He picked up the sheet of tissue-paper gingerly, as if it were something which he would have preferred to handle with a pair of tongs ; yet resolutely as if, since needs must, it was a matter about which he was disposed to make no bones, and with delicate, but unfaltering fingers, unfolded it, until what it contained was disclosed ; whereupon, he deposited the contents, still

lying on the tissue-paper, but now uncovered, on the table. And he stared, and his master stared ; and both of them were still.

On the table lay a hand, a human hand ; at least unless appearances singularly belied it, it was a human hand. A woman's hand, not over small, yet shapely, with long, slender fingers, which tapered to a point. It was in a state of perfect preservation, so perfect that it conveyed an uncanny suggestion of actual life. One felt as if one was being the victim of a trick ; and that the woman who owned it must herself be there, although she, and the arm to which it was attached, were both invisible.

The hand lay palm downwards, gripping something with the partially extended fingers. On the middle finger were three rings ; it was at them the duke was staring, as if he stared at a ghost. Laced between the third finger and the fourth, and the first finger and the thumb, so that it was drawn right across the hand at the base of the fingers, was a piece of paper on which there were typewritten words.

How long the master and the man continued silent probably neither of them ever knew. Both seemed to grow older as they gazed, with eyes which never left it, at the hand upon the table. It was the duke who broke the silence, in a voice which he would not have recognized as his own.

"It is her hand ; she has my rings upon her finger!" Joynson did not speak. "What's—what's on the paper?"

The man bent down, and read aloud, "The Dead Hand!"

The words were echoed by his master. "The dead hand! her hand!" After a pause he asked, "What—what is it, she's holding?"

Very deliberately Joynson turned the hand right over. In the arched palm was crushed a piece of material.

Joynson opened it out—so far as the gripping fingers would permit—to see what it was. The man seemed at a loss, the master recognized it on the instant.

“It’s a piece of one of Putney’s robes, probably the one he wore this morning. There’s the crest, and the monogram—‘P.’”

## CHAPTER XI

### LORD CECIL'S PROPOSAL

**T**HERE is, after its fashion, probably no finer hall in any of England's ancestral homes than the inner hall at Mallow ; nor any nobler double staircase than that which rises from it. The sun, that fine September afternoon, streaming through the stained-glass windows, lit the somewhat sombre interior with glorious radiance ; in particular it shone on a girl in a riding-habit, who came running down the stairs, as if she was well worth shining on. And she was. When she was halfway down, as if surprised, she stopped, crying to some one in the hall below.

"So you've returned !"

"Yes," rejoined a voice, which had a flavour of acidity ;  
"I have returned."

The girl came down a few more steps, then stopped again. She put her hands—with her riding-whip in one and her gloves in another—behind her back, and her head a little upon one side.

"And pray what's the matter with you now ?"

Although the reply was but a single word the acidity was more pronounced than before.

"Nothing."

"Then what's the matter with you, anyhow ? Cecil, you're a trial."

"So other people seem to think."

There was something in the tone in which the words were spoken which seemed to move the girl to thought. The air of levity grew less. She came down the remaining stairs with sedater steps, and went and stood on one side of the large open fireplace, in which a fire was blazing—in the hall at Mallow, at the first approach of autumn, on the finest day a fire was welcome, if only for the sake of its friendly glow. Where she was, the dancing flames gleamed on her, as she switched her skirt with the toy she called a whip.

"Old boy, what's wrong?"

The person she addressed leaned back in the armchair, in whose capacious recesses he seemed lost, and pressed together the tips of his unnaturally slender fingers.

"Now that you're there there's nothing wrong; but when you're absent, why—there's everything."

"I'm afraid you're rather silly."

"I'm afraid I am; indeed, I'm sure I'm worse than that."

He was still, while she observed him. It was odd how, apparently with the completest unconcern, they observed each other.

Presently he said, "I've been to Lady Mary's, as you know."

"How is she?"

"She's all right; that is, she's about as right as she generally is—to me. I've always the feeling strong upon me that I'm not a nephew whom she regards with pride, or affection either."

"You're not over fond of her."

"I'm not. But then, of whom am I over fond, except you? And, considering what your sentiments are towards me, you're a standing example of what a mistake it is for me to be over fond of any one."

"Cecil, why are you such a silly?"



"I don't know. Why am I anything? if I am anything. There's a crowd at the Mount; the sort of crowd there always is when there is a crowd—an injudicious mixture of the very old and the very young. Just as a move was being made for lunch, a child—a small imp of a girl—came running into the room, blundering upon my toes. When she had almost knocked me down, she looked up at me—she hadn't very far to look—and cried, I presume by way of an apology, 'Why, you're crooked!' Pretty way of introducing herself, in a room full of people, wasn't it?"

The girl by the fireplace was silent for a moment. Then she said, still eyeing him intently—

"So that's it, is it? I thought there was something."

"Yes, there's generally something; though, really, that is nothing. The thing's one of those truths which are being so constantly proclaimed that I ought to have grown indurated years ago. But I haven't. I never hear a person say it to my face, or—what is more common—suspect them of whispering it behind my back, but that, if I had more courage, I should feel like murder, or, if I'd less, like suicide. As it is, being betwixt and between, I just indulge in a general curse, and I turn sour within."

"I wish, with all my heart and soul, that I was what you call crooked instead of you!"

"Oh no, you don't. You may think you do; but if your wish were granted, even for a moment, you'd cry aloud to God Almighty to let you off. It isn't only that I'm personally what I call crooked, but that everything is crooked. I'm the only child of my father, and yet I've an elder brother somewhere in the world, whose shadow is always over me. It's because his shadow has been always over me that I am what I am."

He shuffled out of the great armchair, and one could see what he was: not exactly a hunchback, but thin, undersized, ill-shaped, his body seeming twisted from his thighs

upward. As is not unusual in such cases, his head was not only larger than the average, but out of all reason big in proportion to his body, giving him the appearance of being top-heavy. To add to his misfortunes, he was club-footed; the left leg being shorter than the right, and the foot not fully developed. While he had remained in the chair these deficiencies had not been so noticeable, for his features were by no means bad, and there was a haunting beauty in his large black eyes which was pathetic. They seemed saturated with unshed tears. But when he began to hobble about with the aid of a stick, there was a crab-like clumsiness about his manner of progression which was almost painfully grotesque. As he moved he proclaimed his grievances in a voice which, always sufficiently shrill, as his excitement grew, became an ear-trying falsetto.

"His shadow was on me before I was born. I suppose it was because my mother used to dream of him of nights, bad dreams, that she brought me, prematurely, into the world, a thing to laugh at. Why they didn't destroy such a thing as I must have been at birth, I can't conceive. My mother's told me that it cost thousands of pounds to keep me alive. Was ever such monstrous folly—such waste of money? I've told her, again and again, that she'd better have let me die. I think she's come to believe it now. I'll soon be twenty; so that for nearly twenty years, although I've been the only child, I've had a brother somewhere in the world—and he's the heir. The Marquis of Putney is his style and title, and on the twenty-sixth of next October will be his coming of age—he'll be twenty-one. All the members of the family have their eyes fixed on that date as if it was a sort of Anno Domini. If he's fulfilled the promise of his infancy he must be a perfect Admirable Crichton of a man. It's the oddest thing in the world to have a phantom brother. He's with me all the time. I've pictured him a million times—what he looks

like ; how he walks ; how he talks ; the things he can do, and the things he can't ; the eyes with which he looks out on to the world ; the look with which he'll greet me ; ye gods and little fishes ! how proud of his brother he will be ! He haunts my father day and night, sleeping and waking, although the good old gentleman would rather you'd not guess it. I know ! I know ! I've observed him, and enjoyed the tragi-comedy. He watches for his footsteps all the time ; listens for his voice. In every stranger he thinks that he may see his son, and searches him with his poor old eyes, to make quite sure. Every letter-bag may contain the epistle which tells of his return. To this hour he sighs each time he discovers that it is still delayed. By all accounts, what men well-to-do would consider a fortune has been spent in endeavours to discover his lordship's whereabouts, and spent in vain. Nothing to show for all those golden sovereigns but lies, false scents, make-believes, enough tales of swindler's wiles to pack a library. It seems that his lordship rode out in his perambulator one July morning in Hyde Park ; Heaven knows where he's been to since, and only Heaven. Sometimes I ask myself if the whole story of his ever having been is not a myth. There's nothing but tradition to support it. It's certain that—after a fashion of her own—my mother regards him as but a mere tradition. She does not share my father's faith in his return. Quite the other way. While she declines to commit herself to any statement as to whether he's alive or dead, she's perfectly convinced that he is dead to us. What's more, she always has been. Her statement to me to that effect was one of her earliest utterances I can remember. What ground she has to go upon she alone can tell. She seems to be the only person who clearly understands, and I doubt if her understanding's very clear. At any rate, it's cryptic. It's something to do with Cousin Ivor, but I never could make out just what,

though I've diligently inquired of all the principals concerned. It's with some quaint intention of spiting him that, lately, she's persisted in desiring that I should be proclaimed the heir—I, the crooked one!—and swears that if Putney is not to hand by the time I'm twenty-one, I shall be. Conceive me as heritor to the dukedom of Datchet, with all the dignities and vast possessions which appertain to it. Wouldn't that be irony in the highest? Dolly, can you picture me as the Duke of Datchet?"

All the time he had been speaking the girl had stood looking down into the fire; now, looking round to him, she gave her head a little upward jerk; as if she were jerking off a burden.

"Cecil, I can't think why you talk like this. You do it on an average about once a week. It does you no good; it does me none: and you must excuse my saying that it's not in the best of taste."

"Is there anything about me which is in the best of taste? If so I'll be obliged if you'll tell me precisely what it is. I'd like to know. I hope, Dolly, that you're not forgetting that I'm your husband that is to be; and that therefore it is much to be desired that you should not set yourself up as being in any way my superior; even in matters of taste."

"I wish you wouldn't say such things!"

"Why not? Are we children, that we should refuse to look facts in the face? Aren't you to be my wife?"

"Cecil!"

"To exclaim 'Cecil' is no answer. Let us be practical. My mother promised your mother that you should marry her only remaining son, meaning me; it being her belief that I'm all in the son line that remains to her. When your mother died, she promised you that you should be my wife. You know she did."

"How many times have I told you that I didn't understand?"

"No; but you've understood since; over and over again—you've had opportunities enough. You've been brought up in the bosom of the family on the distinct understanding, repeated, on an average, more than once a week, that one day, you and I are to be married. Can you deny it?"

"I neither deny nor admit."

"You're a feminine casuist of unripened years. Are you fourteen, Dolly?"

"You know very well that I'm eighteen next Christmas."

"Maturity approaches. You don't look it."

"Don't be so absurd. Constance Grainger told me only the other day that I looked twenty-one."

"And I suppose you told her that she looked twenty-two. It's only when the weather's breezy that you tell each other the candid truth. Together you look about thirty—two sweet fifteens."

"I feel—ancient."

"Do you? Then what do you imagine I feel? By the way, you've never told me how old you think I look."

"Can't you ever get away from the personal equation?"

"What's that? That's rather a good sentence. I don't believe you know what it means; but you might let us have it again."

"Perhaps you're not aware that I promised to ride over to Constance about some important business, and that my horse is waiting at the door."

"What's the business?"

"It has nothing to do with you?"

"Civil. Will you give her a message?"

"That depends on what the message is. Not if it's any rubbish."

"It is not rubbish. I wish you to give my kind regards to Constance, and to tell her that our wedding-day—yours and mine—is nearly fixed ; and that I trust that she, and her family, are taking into earnest consideration the subject of the presents."

"Cecil, I really wish you wouldn't talk like that ! I don't believe you'd do it if you understood how seriously I dislike it."

"That's a pity ; because facts are facts. And my mother's been giving me what, I fancy, she calls hints, but what struck me as being more like orders, that, under what she styles the circumstances, I ought to be married as soon as I'm twenty-one ; and I fancy she's been giving you similar hints. Hasn't she ?"

"We'll talk about it when you are twenty-one."

"Is that what you said to her ?"

"Has she commissioned you to speak to me upon the subject ?"

"Well—in a way—she has ; or, of course, I shouldn't venture. She's desperately anxious that the matter should be on a definite basis. She knows—in a general way—that we're going to be married ; but she'd like to know in a particular way. You see, she's brought you up to be my wife ; and now she kind of feels that it's about time a public announcement was made. I fancy that's about the size of it. I'm sure she'd like us to arrive at a clear and final understanding, you and I ; because, after all, we're two of the principals. So—Dolly, will you be my wife ?"

"I'm going ! If I don't start at once it'll be dark before I'm back again."

"Think it over as you go. You'll do me the justice to admit that I never have put the question before ; and that therefore I do deserve some sort of an answer—for my own sake, as well as my mother's. The disadvantages are so obvious that I needn't allude to them ; but I do beg

you'll keep at least one eye on the advantages. I'm aware that I'm a person no woman would care to live with."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Aren't you? That's nice of you—even to say it. I dare say I might be bearable as a brother."

"I meant as a brother."

"You see the suggestion isn't—exactly—a brother."

"Cecil, I really must be going."

"I'm not detaining you. I shouldn't think of doing so with such a mere triviality as an offer of marriage—with me. I'm only asking you, as you go, to keep at least part of an eye on the advantages. To begin at the very beginning—if you'll only authorize me to advise her that you've formally answered yes, I fancy you'd find that she'd behave handsomely—to you."

"She always does do that."

"I fancy, on that occasion, her behaviour would be especially handsome—I only, what she calls, hint at it. Then, of course, there is something in being Lady Cecil Dacre."

"I cannot wait another second—I'm off!"

"One moment more! While you're riding, remember that, should my phantom brother prove to be a phantom, there's always the eventual possibility of your becoming the Duchess of Datchet; and on the desirability of being that I needn't——"

But the girl had gone.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE CUTTING

**E**VEN a plain woman, if she can ride, looks well on horseback. Miss Barber was very far from being plain, while her seat and hands, where a horse was concerned, were a byword. She had been put on a horse so soon as she was "shortened"; by the time she could walk she could ride; and she had been a well-known figure in the hunting-field long before she was in her teens. Not only could she ride anything, she could ride it anywhere: with a daring that was only equalled by her skill. It was her laughing boast that no horse came down when she was up; and never tired. Now, though she was five feet ten in her stockings, and scaled close upon ten stone in her riding kit, it certainly was a fact that a horse went farther, and better, under her than under women—as well as men—who had nothing like her ounces.

She was riding a bay mare, who had been a birthday present from the duchess: nearly all the things she had worth having were by way of being presents from the duchess; not impossibly that fact was in her mind as she rode. The mare was a beauty, and, as is sometimes the case with horses, she seemed to be conscious of the fact that, as regards good looks, she and her rider made a pair. They made a perfect picture as the mare cantered over the grass bordering the road which wound its way through the



home farm. Presently Miss Barber reduced the pace to a walk, stroking her steed's neck as she did so.

"Steady, Lady, steady! You'll make me excited if you move like that. In a few minutes you shall go as fast as you please; but, to begin with, I must do some thinking—I really must."

The Lady tossed her head and whinnied; as if, while desiring to explain that she quite understood, she did venture to express a hope, in a friendly spirit, that the thinking would not last too long—it was such a day for a gallop, and the going so delightful. The girl, laughing, whispered in The Lady's ear that she would get her thinking over and done with as soon as she possibly could, since she sincerely shared the hope that it would not take her long.

Yet it occupied her longer than she had meant it should. So much was hanging in the balance. Cecil Dacre had given her such food for thought. Things were so tangled. She did so want to please every one: especially the duchess. No one could have done more for her than the duchess; she owed her everything. And yet she was no kin of hers; her mother was merely the dear friend of her childhood, that was all. Mrs. Barber had married a soldier, who had been killed in India; when, soon after his death, she followed him, her only child, Dorothy, then a small girl, would have been left friendless and almost penniless if it had not been for the amazing goodness of the duchess, on whom she really had no claim whatever. No fairy godmother could have treated her better. She not only took her to her beautiful home—or, rather, homes,—but she gave her all that her girlish heart could possibly desire. And now, in return, she not exactly asked, it would be more correct to say that she took it for granted, that she would marry her son.

Cecil had his points. Since the girl and the boy had

grown up together—the girl with her governesses, the boy with his tutors—no one was in a position to know him better than she did ; and she knew he had his points. No one could be gentler, pleasanter, more amusing, when he chose. And, where she was concerned, he was the very soul of generosity. If he could have had his way he would have shared everything he had ever had with her ; in fact, no one could have made a greater fuss of her, in every possible way. And, of course, she was very fond of him. But, whether fortunately or not she could not say, it was a fact that she was fond—passionately fond—of every sort of athletic pursuit : in that respect she was a modern of moderns. She was, essentially, an out-of-doors girl ; while he was, emphatically, an indoors young man. Read, write, dream, that was his idea of life ; while hers—if she was conscious of it or not—was constant physical exercise. She was always wanting to be up and doing ; inaction to her meant misery : while he was perfectly content to remain quite still. Therefore, since they had no tastes in common, in the real sense of the word, they were never likely to be companions.

She was aware that there were sufficient reasons why he should desire physical quiescence : since, occasionally, even slight exertion made him ill ; while, at his best, a gentle stroll was sufficient exercise. As a rule, he had fair health, so long as he kept his temper, was not worried, and took things easy. Not the least trying thing about him was that, often, it was positive pain to him to see others doing what he could not do : bringing keenly home to him his own condition, it filled him with a frenzy of envy. For instance, he never showed himself at a dance ; and, if he could have had his way, would have inhabited a country where there was no dancing. He would not, willingly, look on at a game of tennis, or cricket. In his presence it was desirable not to talk about hunting or shooting ; lest,

without any apparent provocation, he should suddenly say something which would make things unpleasant for everybody there.

Since Miss Barber loved all sports and pastimes, it was rather trying, when he was about, to have to keep off all her favourite topics of conversation ; as for practising them, if he saw her play so much as a game of tennis he would be disagreeable to her for the rest of the day. She was sorry for him. The knowledge that she was, did not make him any better ; but, at the same time, it was a little uncomfortable to be brought so constantly into contact with a person with whom one had so little in common. As for marrying him——!

To begin with, Miss Barber did not want to marry. She had a sort of dim suspicion that marriage was not all that some people supposed it was ; she was almost convinced that, at any rate, matrimony was not suited to her ; at least, just yet. Say, in five or six years' time, when she was growing elderly, and tired of life, she might bring herself to face the prospect with something approaching to equanimity ; but, in the meantime, the association of the idea of marriage with her was really too absurd.

The trouble was that the absurdity of the thing did not strike other persons—and, among them, the duchess—so forcibly as it did her. It was true that the duchess had told her, over and over again, that she hoped before long to have her, not only as a make-believe, but as a real daughter ; but though she had known what she had meant, her meaning had never been brought really home to her till lately. Twice, within the last fortnight, she had told her clearly, in so many words, that she hoped, Cecil and she would be married as soon as possible after he was twenty-one, and had rather more than hinted that it was time that matters were placed on a definite footing, settlements arranged, and even the trousseau thought of. And now here was

Cecil—acting, as he admitted, on his mother's suggestion—making her a formal offer of marriage: at least, she supposed it was meant to be formal offer; it was so difficult, sometimes, to tell if he was in earnest.

If he was serious, she would have to give him an answer; and pretty soon. She knew him well enough to be aware that he would worry her until she did. Circumstanced as she was, it was impossible to avoid him. If he chose, he could worry some sort of an answer from her in four and twenty hours; or make her life a burden. Then, behind him, was the duchess. Even supposing she was able to arrange an armistice with him—the thing was possible—she would still have to tackle his mother. The girl was conscious that, with her, no subterfuges would prevail; that, in her hands, she would be helpless.

No; an answer, of some sort, she would have to give, and quickly. It was only honest, besides, that she should answer. What should she say? If she said "Yes"—she shuddered at the notion of saying "Yes," and urged The Lady to move a little faster. On the other hand, if she said "No"—she was afraid to think of what the result would be if she said "No." Cecil might be managed. At the back of her head she had a kind of doubt whether he was very anxious either one way or the other. On the subject of his mother she had no doubt at all. Where the lady was concerned she had always been conscious of the iron hand under the silken glove. Quite why she wanted her to marry Cecil she did not know, though she had suspicions which were not altogether flattering to herself. That she had set her heart upon the marriage she did know, and Dolly was haunted by a dreadful fear that, if she threw any obstacles in the way, the lady would not hesitate to sever the connection which existed between them as if it had never been, and cast her with taunts and reproaches out into the world. That the duchess was fond of her the girl

had cause to believe ; but that her fondness for her was as nothing compared to the affection she had for her son she was equally sure. That she would resent, to the utmost of her capacity—which was great—what she would regard, in the first place, as a slight upon her boy, and, in the second, as crass ingratitude towards herself, Dolly felt convinced. And it was so nice to be the duchess's daughter ; it was, from all points of view, such an enviable position. And the girl was woman enough to appreciate the fact that it was something to be Lady Cecil Dacre ; especially as with the position went the possibility of becoming Duchess of Datchet.

What a bother the whole thing was ! Why could not one continue to be just a girl, and just eighteen ?

All at once, without the slightest notice, the mare gave a sideways jump, which, had not Dolly been an expert rider, would have jerked her out of the saddle.

"Lady !" she exclaimed. "What is the matter ?"

Then stopped short, because she perceived that a man was standing between her and the hedge, who had sprung she hardly knew from where. The hasty glance with which she favoured him did not cause her to be prepossessed by his appearance, though he was not ill-looking ; but there was a penetrating twinkle in his bold, black eyes which annoyed her. He was middle-aged—possibly somewhere in the forties—slight, and fairly tall. He was dressed in a dark grey lounge suit, with a grey bowler hat to match, and he carried a leather bag. Somehow Dolly was not sure that he was a gentleman ; directly he spoke she was sure that he was not. On such points there is nothing to equal the rapidity with which excessive youth arrives at its decisions.

"You did that uncommonly well. You looked as if you were glued there."

"I beg your pardon ?"

He addressed her as easily as if he had known her for

years, and, though her manner was frigidity itself, he showed no sign of being chilled.

"I was alluding to the way in which you stuck to your saddle. Ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have been out of it, and some of them good riders."

"You frightened my mare."

"I beg her pardon, and yours. She's a beauty. May I make her acquaintance? I generally find that good horses are as fond of me as I am of them."

He moved a little closer. Instructed by Dolly, The Lady moved away. With an almost imperceptible movement of her head the girl prepared to continue her ride, when the stranger checked her.

"One moment; we appear to misunderstand each other. My excuse for startling your mare is that I'm a stranger hereabouts, and wanted to ask if this is the road to Mallow?"

"This is the private road to the house."

"It's the private road to the house I want, since it's a private visit I'm going to pay. Is the duke in?"

"I believe he was just now."

"You've come from Mallow?"

"I have."

"Then you're Miss Barber?"

Dolly was conscious that he was eyeing her with a keen scrutiny which did not please her.

"That is my name."

She did not condescend to ask him what his name was, although she wondered. As if he read her thoughts, he volunteered the information.

"My name is Harvey Willis. Although it's one with which the duke is intimately acquainted, it's not one which you are likely to have heard pronounced at Mallow, though probably it will be better known there soon. Good afternoon, Miss Barber. A pleasant ride, and may no one else

give your mare the jumps. We shall probably meet on your return—at Mallow."

Lifting his hat, he moved off at a pace which suggested an excellent pedestrian, whilst The Lady went off at a gallop in the opposite direction. Dolly could not have said why, but the brief interview had left on her a distinctly disagreeable impression. Who Mr. Harvey Willis was, or what his business might be at Mallow, she had no notion; more, she preferred to have no notion. He was a kind of person whom—instinctively, rather than judiciously—she associated with unpleasant things. He had on her the effect which some people seem to have on cats: he made her feel disposed, without apparent reason, to scratch. Bending forward, she whispered in her horse's ear—

"Now, Lady, for a burst! Let's get away from him as far, and as fast, as we can! Did he dare to say that I could ride, and that you were a beauty? As if we didn't know both those things without being told them by impertinent strangers!"

Miss Barber was destined to have another adventure before she reached her journey's end, and this time when she was already nearly there. Avoiding the roads, she went across country, taking, as far as it was possible, a bee-line towards the goal at which she was aiming. This involved her traversing some very rough country, and it was while she was passing over some of the very roughest parts that the second adventure occurred.

She had reached a point at which she was undecided. Choosing one of the recognized paths involved a journey of probably a couple of miles; while, if she cut through the wood by a way she knew, it would mean not more than a quarter of the distance. Of course, there were reasons why she should not go through the wood, or there would have been no necessity for her hesitation. First of all, there were the birds. Colonel Grainger's pheasants were not

creatures to be lightly disturbed. But then, need she disturb them? She knew the wood almost as well as the keepers, and was persuaded that the way she proposed to go there were no birds. It was true that, if she met a keeper, he might be of a different opinion; while, if she encountered Colonel Grainger, he might possibly say something rude. She was inclined to think, however, that the chances of seeing any one were so remote as to be scarcely worth considering. She had the best of reasons for knowing that, at that time of day, that part of the wood was—practically always—deserted. A much more solid reason why she should keep out of the wood was that, in places, the going was really very bad. The path she desired to follow—which was not a path—degenerated, at one part, into a narrow passage between an expanse of bracken on one side, and a lofty bank upon the other. Riding through the bracken was out of the question. Not only did it rise to seven or eight feet, but the stems were so stout that forcing a way through would occasion The Lady something beyond inconvenience; she might be cut to ribbons. The only thing was to hug the bank, and to give the bracken as wide a berth as possible. Even then, not only was the ground itself loose and friable, but the bank was practically one continuous rabbit warren. Here and there the burrows extended under the level. Experience had taught her that it was by no means difficult for The Lady to thrust her feet right into them.

Ordinary people would have decided that this was a case of the shortest way there being the longest way round, and would have unhesitatingly preferred the two miles to the half one. In such matters Miss Barber was a rule unto herself; and it pleased her to think that she and The Lady were one. The truth is that she had originally been shown the way that she ought not to go, by Colonel Grainger's own dearest daughter, her most particular



friend. Constance Grainger it was who had first initiated her in the mysteries of what she called "the cutting."

"Of course," she frankly admitted, "if the pater knew I rode this way he'd have a fit ; but it's such a saving that when I am alone I nearly always do."

It is to be feared that, on her frequent visits to the Abbey, Miss Barber nearly always did so too.

Entrance to the wood was gained by a jump over what, in summer, was a dry ditch, with a low bank beyond—which was in itself an act of trespass. Whenever they reached the well-known spot The Lady would prick up her ears, and glance inquiringly at her mistress. It is not impossible that, while she realized the impropriety of negotiating that jump, she was yet perfectly willing to take it, as her mistress put it, "like a bird." Indeed, Miss Barber assured herself that The Lady loved the cutting ; and even went so far as to give a sop to her conscience by pretending that she went that way, as much to please The Lady as herself. It certainly was the fact that the mare generally showed signs of the liveliest interest when it was decided to try the cutting ; and—so Dolly declared—delighted in exhibiting the dainty skill with which, hemmed in on either hand, she could pass over the heads of those treacherous bunnies.

They were at a point where the poor apology for a path was at its very worst when, something happened which all but brought the mare and her rider to lamentable grief. The bracken was at its highest, and so was the bank ; between the two there was a space not more than three feet wide. They could hear the rabbits scurrying through the undergrowth, and, now and then, could see them ; but The Lady was used to rabbits, they went unheeded even when they ran between her legs. What was worse than rabbits, they heard the birds : to do her justice, Miss Barber heard them with a sense of guilt ; a

feeling which, it seemed, was shared by her steed. Each time a bird got up, with the whir-r-ring sound with which a startled pheasant sometimes will rise, The Lady gave a sort of shiver, as if she knew she was in part responsible for proceedings which were distinctly improper. That afternoon Miss Barber's prognostications that there would be no birds in that part of the wood were falsified. For once in a way an undesirable number seemed to have foregathered where she least wished them to be. At one point more than a dozen had risen together, with a whirl and tumult which made her seriously consider whether it would be better to go forward or back; apparently, from the pricking of her ears, The Lady shared her rider's doubts. This sort of thing was more than she quite liked; the whole air seemed to be alive with whirling wings. It was only after momentary hesitation that Dolly, having decided that, since they had come more than halfway, the best thing to do was to advance, proceeded to press The Lady forward. The mare quickened her pace, as if, following Dolly's reasoning, she recognized that the best thing to be done was to get out of an awkward situation as fast as she possibly could; when, without the slightest warning, or notice of any kind, something happened which tried The Lady's nervous system—already sufficiently strained—more than it had been tried for many a day, so that she not only forgot her manners, but almost lost her head, out of sheer fright.

The birds were raising a hullabaloo; the ground afforded but uncertain footing; the bracken soared on the left: Dolly was wishing, heartily, that, for once, she had preferred the longer road, when some one, or something, scrambled on to the lofty bank on the right, and sprang down in front of them within a dozen feet of The Lady's nose. The thing was so unexpected that it was not strange that The Lady, in sheer alarm, leapt almost her own height

from the ground ; jerking Miss Barber from her saddle in a style which only something like a miracle prevented from being an ugly fall. Once back again on solid ground both the mare and her rider stared to see who—or what—had been the occasion of such a nerve-shocking experience. Miss Barber anticipated that, at the least, it would prove to be a keeper ; or, what would be a much more serious apparition, Colonel Grainger himself. She was perfectly well aware that, in creating such a disturbance among the pheasants, with the shooting season already close at hand, she had been guilty of a cardinal offence. A keeper would be justified in addressing to her some very outspoken remarks on the subject of “his” birds ; to which she was prepared to listen with a bearing of the utmost meekness : while the irate owner—who, where his game was concerned, was no respecter of persons, either male or female—in his righteous wrath might be expected to talk to her in a manner which would make her tingle, if he did not inform her, in uncomfortably plain language, that she was trespassing where she was, and send her back, with orders to approach his premises by the proper roads. That would have been humiliation indeed.

Her relief, therefore, was as great as her surprise when she perceived that the individual who had been the cause of so much agitation, both to her and to The Lady, was neither the colonel nor a keeper, but a strange young man,—what was more, an apparently inoffensive and decidedly good-looking young man. He stood, cap in hand, all contrition for the untoward results of his unlooked-for entry on the scene.

“I beg your pardon, but—I had really no idea that it was anybody riding.”

Miss Barber, conscious of her bad behaviour, relieved to escape well-merited punishment, in the sudden revulsion of

her feelings, was, of course, disposed to be as merciless as circumstances permitted.

"If my horse had not behaved wonderfully well you might have been the cause of a serious accident ; my mare is trembling even now."

She might have added that she herself was just a little tremulous ; but not for worlds would she have allowed this intrusive person to guess the state to which well-founded fears had brought her.

"I saw how excellently your horse behaved." She noticed that he said nothing about her own behaviour, in the saddle, as the other man had done. "But I assure you that, until I was in the very act of leaping down, I never, for a moment, guessed that it could be any one on horseback. Indeed, even now I don't understand how it is that you can have got here, with all this bracken about, and not a vestige of a path."

"Possibly I know the wood better than you do."

"That's true enough. It's because I don't know it at all that I gave you such a start. The fact is, I'm going to Colonel Grainger's. Have you heard of a Colonel Grainger, hereabouts ?"

"Oh yes, I've heard of him."

"He lives at a place called the Abbey. Do you know where that is ?"

"Very well."

Although this young man suddenly became almost confidential, Miss Barber evinced no such signs of resentment as she had done in the case of Mr. Harvey Willis. She sat quite still ; while The Lady smoothed her ruffled plumes.

"It's like this. It seems that I got out at the wrong station. The station for the Abbey is——"

"Densham."

"Yes, Densham. I found that out when it was too

late. I've some muddled idea in my head that their station was Wargate."

"That's our station."

"Your station?"

"The one we use."

"Is that so? You see, The Abbey, Wargate, is the Grainger's postal address, and I suppose that's how the muddle arose. Anyhow, I got out there."

"Why, it's miles away."

"So I discovered, after the train had gone. But the weather was so fine, and the country seemed so beautiful——"

"The country is lovely."

"Isn't it? People talk about the Continent, such places as the Schwarz-Wald, when they have such woodland scenery as this at home. Some of the country I have come through couldn't be beaten anywhere. Still, it's a pretty long way. I suppose I've been a good ten miles."

"Quite; probably more. It depends upon the way you've come."

"You may be sure I've come the longest; I always do make a mess of things like that. I was beginning to fear that the people at the Abbey would be wondering what had become of me. So I asked a man I met on the road if there wasn't a short cut to the house. He sent me into the forest—I've been in the forest ever since. I believe that in the forest I should have stayed if it hadn't been for you. It's a regular maze; I haven't the slightest notion whereabouts I am. I'm hoping you'll give me some very clear and easy directions, which will enable me to find the house."

"I'm going there."

"Are you? That's splendid! Then perhaps you won't mind my following at your horse's tail?"

"Not a bit. I shan't even mind your walking in front

of her nose. There's not room here for you to walk alongside, but there will be presently."

When the procession started, he remarked, "I suppose you know Jack Grainger?"

"I do."

Mr. Jack Grainger, who was a feather-headed young gentleman, had asked her to be his wife only a week ago, but that was by the way.

"He's at New—New College, Oxford, you know."

"I do know. I have other acquaintances who are also there."

"Have you? I'm there. Perhaps you know my name? My name's Sheldon, Lawrence Sheldon."

"Jack has spoken to me of you. He told me you were coming."

"Did he? That was awfully good of him. I'm his tutor, you know. I'm supposed to be coaching him for all sorts of things. I've come over to see if we can't get in a little reading before term begins."

"I shouldn't think that Jack Grainger was very fond of reading."

"Oh, well, he's not; not over and above fond. Still, I hope that we shall do something."

The young lady had been observing him more attentively than he perhaps suspected. Presently she delivered herself of the fruit of her observation.

"Do you know, Mr. Sheldon, that you're uncommonly like—as far as appearance goes—some one I know extremely well. Indeed, the resemblance is so marked that I've been wondering if you can be a relation of his."

"Indeed? I hope so. What's his name?"

"Dacre."

"Dacre? Dacre? No relation of mine. Indeed, I don't remember ever to have heard the name, except, of

course, in connection with the Datchet crowd. Isn't that the Duke of Datchet's family name?"

"It is. This Mr. Dacre is the duke's cousin, the Hon. Ivor Dacre."

"I'm fearfully flattered, but I'm afraid I can't claim the connection. I'm nothing and nobody."

"In a house I know there hangs a portrait, which might be yours."

"Is that so? Are you in earnest?"

"Of course I'm in earnest."

"But—how very odd!"

"The oddest part of it is that there are other portraits in this house, and you might—almost—have sat for more than one of them. Indeed, if I were to take you to it, and you looked about you, I feel convinced that you'd have an odd sort of feeling that you'd wandered, unawares, among your family portraits."

"And, pray, what is the name of this mysterious house?"

"Mallow."

"Mallow? Isn't that one of the seats of the Duke of Datchet?"

"That's just the point. It's the headquarters of the Dacres, and yours is the Dacre face. I'm afraid you'll think it rather rude of me to be so outspoken on so very personal a subject, but I happen to live at Mallow, and am intimately acquainted with every picture which hangs upon its walls; though that's rather a rash boast, for they are many, so perhaps I'd better say, almost every one. But I do assure you, when I saw you first of all, standing, with your cap in your hand, as if you had fallen, I couldn't think from where, I wondered if, by any possible chance, you could have been precipitated—I believe that's the proper word—out of one of the frames at Mallow."

## CHAPTER XIII

### MR. HARVEY WILLIS GAINS ACCESS TO THE DUKE

WHEN Mr. Harvey Willis inquired, on his arrival at Mallow, for the duke, he was asked for his name.

"Never mind my name. You tell him that it's some one who particularly wishes to see him, and whom he'll be very glad to see."

"His grace does not see strangers, unless they give their names."

"I'm no stranger. He'll see me. He'll be the sorriest man if he doesn't. You give him my message. It'll be a sufficient passport to his presence."

Lord Cecil, sauntering out of the great hall to see who had arrived, heard the speaker's words.

"This man is quite right. The duke does not see anonymous strangers. It's a necessary rule."

Mr. Willis looked him up and down, completely at his ease.

"You're Lord Cecil Dacre?"

"I am."

"I thought so, though you're singularly unlike your brother."

"My brother?"

"I said your brother."

A trifle startled, Cecil eyed him as if he was endeavouring



to find out what manner of man he was. Then he returned into the great hall.

"Come inside," he said. The other followed him. "I don't know what you meant by your reference to my brother ; if you meant anything. I haven't one."

"Haven't you?—no brother ? is that so ? Well, my information is different. But you'll excuse me, I haven't come to see you, in the first place ; I've come to see your father. Be so good as to let him know that there's somebody who particularly wishes to see him—some one for whom he's been looking for twenty years ; and that he'll be a very sorry old gentleman if he doesn't give me a hearty welcome. Never mind my name : he'll know my name when he sees me ; he'll see it painted on my face. You let him have my message, and a chance to digest it, while I'm warming myself before that comfortable-looking fire. It strikes colder in here than it does outside."

Mr. Willis, moving to the fireplace, placed himself so that, from where Cecil stood, the flames played upon his profile. This was a type of person with whom his lordship was unfamiliar. Scarcely—surely—a gentleman ; and yet there was about him an air of self-possession which suggested that, at any rate, he was a man who knew his world, and was assured of his own right to a place in it. For a few brief moments a wild thought crossed Cecil's mind, but, when he perceived that the stranger was certainly forty he dismissed it, though with a fluttering of the heart which surprised himself. He summoned a footman.

"Let the duke know that a gentleman wishes to see him on business of importance, and tell him I sent you."

When the servant had gone, Lord Cecil, depositing himself in one of the huge armchairs, in which he appeared to so much greater advantage than on his feet, regarded the stranger for some seconds in quizzical silence ; which he broke by saying—

"I presume, from the hint you dropped just now—I take it was intended for a hint—that you're the bearer of still another cock-and-bull story; we have had so many."

The stranger, settling himself on the stuffed seat which ran all round the fireplace as a sort of guard, eyed the other in his turn.

"You do presume, Lord Cecil; and, I'm afraid, you mean to be rude. Never be rude, unless you are quite certain you have cause; and be civil even then. It's so much more effective. This advice is offered to you in the friendliest spirit." The speaker glanced around. "A fine place you have here; one can understand how it is that a man should desire to be its possessor. For me, personally, a huge house offers no attractions; but—other men, other tastes. And if one must have miles of passages, and acres of floor space, one would like them to be contained within such walls as these. This is my first visit to Mallow."

"Is it, indeed? I am glad—speaking for the family—that it meets with your approval; even though that approval's qualified."

"It's very good of the family to be glad—through their mouthpiece. Are you a humorist, Lord Cecil—or thereabouts?"

Before Cecil could reply to this somewhat ambiguous question, the footman, returning, conveyed to him in an undertone a message of which, presently, he gave an audible rendition.

"The duke is not feeling very well this afternoon, and he is much occupied. He wishes to know what is the nature of the business on which you wish to see him; and, especially, if you cannot regard me as his substitute. He would prefer that you should do so. Any communication you might make to me would be as if it were made to him."

"Does that mean that the duke declines to see me?"

"That is not what I understand. He merely expresses a wish that you should treat me as his deputy, for reasons which I have mentioned."

"I regret that I am unable to comply with his wish." The stranger addressed himself to the footman: "Did you give the duke my message?"

"I delivered his lordship's message, in accordance with his lordship's instructions."

"Then, this time, give him my message; so far as you are able, word for word as I give it you. Now pay attention. Tell the duke that I am the person for whom he has been looking for twenty years; and that he will be sorry if I say what I have to say to any one but himself, in private. You have that clearly?"

The man glanced at Cecil; who observed, curtly enough—

"Give the duke this gentleman's message." When the man had vanished again, his lordship remarked to the stranger: "You must understand, sir, that my father is not only an old man, but that, lately, he has been ailing. I'm not sure that I ought to subject him to the risk of an interview which, from your tone, threatens to be of an unpleasant nature."

The other smiled—a smile which, for some cause, made Cecil tingle from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet.

"Let me reassure your lordship. Although I have not seen the duke for more than twenty years, he has been under my constant observation; there is nothing you can tell me about him which I do not know already, perhaps better than you. Indeed, I think I use no figure of speech when I say that, compared to my knowledge of the Duke of Datchet, yours is the merest ignorance."

There was that in the speaker's tone which moved the

lad to exclaim, with sudden heat, yet not without some boyish dignity—

"I trust, sir, that you recollect that you are speaking of my father, to his son."

"To one of his sons ; oh dear yes, I'm not likely to forget it."

Cecil began to scramble out of the chair ; it was a process which, with him, always took some time.

"That's the second hint you've dropped of the same kind. Do you mean——"

The stranger held up his hand ; the footman was seen approaching.

"Hush ! The messenger returns. Well, what says the duke this time ?"

"His grace is willing to see you."

The stranger nodded to Cecil as he rose to his feet. "You perceive ? It is as I told you. We will continue, you and I, to chop phrases together later on. I fancy we shall have opportunities."

He followed the footman with a smile for which the lad could have hit him. Cecil, moving to the fire, occupying almost the identical place which the other had just now quitted, indulged himself with cheerless meditations.

"He's some bounder ; it's written large all over him. What an idiot I was to send his message, and so give him a chance of bothering the pater. Of course, what he hints at is simply putrid nonsense. Yet, what a difference it would make, to me, if it wasn't ! And what would Dolly say ? I wonder."

CHAPTER XIV  
THE DEAD HAND

SINCE we met him last, the Duke of Datchet had aged. He was by way of being an old man, even in this age of old men who are still accounted young. He was within sight of his seventieth birthday. And in some respects he was almost older than his years. Nowadays some men of three score and ten are comparatively juvenile; there was little of the juvenile about him. Not that he was decrepit; or that he had lost the use either of his limbs or his faculties. Though he could no longer walk any great distance, nor sustain any excessive or prolonged exertion, still, in that respect, he was not far from a match for his weakling son. Age had pressed him hardest on another point—his nerves had gone. To what extent he only knew, and Joynson. It was not exactly that his courage, in the ordinary sense of the word, had grown less; or that he was not prepared to meet, with equanimity, most of the ills of life which the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune might direct against him. It was in a particular direction only that his nervous system had been shaken to its foundations—on the side, it would seem, of his imagination. He had strange imaginings. Sometimes Joynson would be summoned to him in the middle of the night, to find him trembling and crying like a child; sometimes he would find him in the same condition in the middle of the day. Fond, as a rule, of solitude—almost, his

medical men hinted, injuriously fond—at these times the one thing he could not endure was being left alone.

Some curious scenes were enacted on those occasions. Joynson would come into the room to find his master in a condition of what looked very like hysterics. Apparently paying no heed to him, the man would set about some ordinary task in an ordinary way; presently, perhaps, addressing some relevant remark to him in ordinary tones. His master's proceedings he utterly ignored. Sometimes, for instance, the duke would solemnly assure him, in agonizing tones, that his eldest son's blood was on his hands; he would repeat this, in different words, over and over again. Joynson might incidentally remark that he had dropped a spark on the pair of trousers he had been wearing, and it had burnt a hole; or that a book, about which he had been making inquiries, had got itself mislaid. Never, if he could help it, would he enter into conversation with his master about the things which haunted him. Presently the mental stress and strain would grow less; and the duke, with or without cause, would begin to reproach his servant. Then Joynson knew that the actual need for his services was beginning to cease. So long as his master's mind could be diverted from the one absorbing topic—absorbing to the point of mental and physical danger—all might be well.

Mr. Harvey Willis was shown into what was known as the Duke's Room; which, at Mallow, was an apartment of magnificent proportions. The footman withdrew, and he found himself alone with a white-haired man, who was seated at a table, writing. For some seconds his presence seemed to go unheeded; then the writer, ceasing to write, turning in his chair, glanced round in his direction.

"Well, sir? To what do I owe this pleasure? My servant brought me a somewhat singular, and wholly incomprehensible message; what is it you wish to say to

me ? I must ask you to be brief, as, this afternoon, I am much engaged ; there are several letters which I must finish for the post."

Mr. Willis had remained planted within a few feet of the door, hat in one hand, bag in the other, looking about him with an air of curious amusement ; as the other spoke his amusement seemed to increase.

"I must be brief, must I ? That is unfortunate ; for, I fear, if I am as brief as is possible, I shall still be long."

As if struck by the peculiar quality of his tone, as well as by the singularity of his words, the duke turned farther round, so that he could get a better look at him.

"I find your language somewhat strange, sir. Who are you ? What is your name ?"

"Isn't it written on my face ?"

"If you will come a little closer, perhaps I shall be able to see."

"Your sight is not so good as it was ?"

"No, sir, it is not. At my age it seldom is."

"I suppose that is so. In your case it was not good even when you were younger."

"You are mistaken if you imagine that I ever was short-sighted."

"Is that so ? It is curious how a man can delude himself about such a thing as that. If you hadn't been the most short-sighted man I ever knew you wouldn't be sitting there now, and I shouldn't be standing here ; we shouldn't be about to have the little talk we're going to have."

"Who are you ? What do you mean ? Didn't you hear me tell you to come a little closer ?"

"I heard you. And I noticed that you spoke as one who is used to command ; there was an I-take-it-for-granted-that-he'll-do-as-I-tell-him air about you which did you credit. The trouble is that I'm not used to obey—especially the Duke of Datchet. He may be a big man

in some folks' eyes ; he's a small one in mine ;—about the very smallest man I know. But perhaps you'll say that this is a case of youth and age. I admit that, in all senses, you're a much older man than I am ; and so—I'll humour the sere and yellow."

Still holding his hat and bag, the speaker strode jauntily across the room. As he approached, the duke stood up ; impelled, apparently, by the desire to get, from a perpendicular position, a better view of him :—even going to the extent of putting on his glasses to assist his vision ; a process which the other seemed to enjoy. When the inspection had continued in silence for a perceptible period, the stranger asked—

" Well, do you see my name upon my face ? "

As he replied, the duke's tone was emphatic. " No, sir, I do not."

" Look again ; make quite sure : don't confess that age has got hold of you to that degree."

" I have looked as long as I desire." As a matter of fact, the duke was removing his glasses. " It is possible that, as you affirm, I have seen you before ; if so, the meeting does not linger in my memory : it may have made more impression on you than it did on me. Therefore I must again request you to be so good as to enlighten my ignorance."

The other's smile became more pronounced ; indeed, his enjoyment of the situation appeared to be growing greater and greater.

" This is droll,—really droll. So you think that our last meeting made a greater impression on me than it did on you. That, if correct, does strike me as by way of being a psychological curiosity ; yet you seem to be in earnest. I should have known you anywhere ; I should have recognized your little mannerisms, the tones of your voice : yet surely you have altered more than I have done—



I'll swear you have. The years can't have marked me as they have marked you—I'll swear they haven't. There is in your face a look of age which has nothing to do with the mere tale of your years. I once knew a man who, afterwards, long afterwards, was hung. Years and years before that came, I could see, in his eyes, that it was coming;—as if he were standing in the shadow of the gallows and was aware of it, even though a little dimly. On your face there is what I saw on his—a consciousness, more or less vague, that the shadow of the gallows is all about you, that you can't step out of it, into the clear, unshadowed sunshine. I am certain that nothing has occurred which has produced such a change in me as that has done in you. Has your faculty of memory forsaken you altogether? Do you remember nothing?"

"I believe that my memory is about as good as ever it was."

"That, also, is written on your face. You only live in the past."

"You seem to see a great deal more on my face than I do on yours, or wish to. I am not accustomed to have such remarks addressed to me by strangers, or, indeed, by any one. The people with whom I come into contact are generally sane. If you propose to continue your conversation upon such lines, I am afraid I must ring the bell, and ask my servant to show you to the door."

"Ring, by all means; I shall be glad to see Joynson again."

For the first time the duke showed signs of being interested. He had seemed dull and languid, as if ill-health, or fatigue, rendered him impervious to the other's somewhat melodramatic methods. Now he glanced quickly round; his eyes seemed to open wider.

"Joynson? What do you know of Joynson?"

"This much. That I'm willing to have a little bet that Joynson remembers me."

"Why should he? What have you had to do with him, or he with you?"

"Nothing, except as your servant. He illustrates a theory which I have always held, that the relation of master and servant is a dangerous one. Had Joynson served you less faithfully he would have served you better: he might have made you understand what manner of man you have been, and still are, and so have saved you from the painful operation I have presently to perform—that of letting in light upon your darkness."

The duke sank back upon his chair with an air of weariness. He all at once became a querulous old man.

"You talk! talk! talk! What is it you're talking about? Is there meaning in anything you say? If so, let's have it! Or are you what you sound, some impudent mountebank, that thinks he can play the fool with me? If so, don't think you can insult me with impunity, my man. I'll have you thrown down the steps!"

"I don't fancy you'll have me thrown down the steps."

"Then tell me what's your business, and who you are, and be quick about it!"

"I'll tell you what my business is, and who I am, after my own fashion. And, first, as to who I am. You say you don't see my name written on my face?"

The duke struck the table impatiently with his open palm.

"No, I don't! I don't! I tell you again, I don't! How do you suppose I'm going to carry in my mind the faces of the hordes of people I am always meeting? I forget them the moment their backs are turned, and it's lucky for me I can. I don't want to have my memory burdened with a lot of useless lumber."

"Is that so? Well, I'm going to show you a face on which I believe you will see the name, written clearly."

The speaker drew a chair close to the table in front of which the duke was sitting, and sat on it. He placed his grey bowler hat on the floor, and the leather bag, which he had never relinquished, on his knee. Unlocking the bag, he took out of it a large envelope, and out of the envelope a panel photograph. This he handed to the duke.

"I think you'll see the name on that."

The duke showed no eagerness to take what was offered. "What's that? What have you got there? I don't want to waste my time looking at all sorts of rubbish."

"You won't waste your time looking at this. Look, and see."

The duke took the proffered photograph with a hand which seemed sufficiently unwilling. He laid it on the blotting pad in front of him, arranged his glasses on his nose, fussily, till they were exactly to his liking, then picked it up for purposes of examination. It was the portrait of a woman, young and beautiful. He eyed it, at first, with ostentatious indifference, but when he began to grasp what he was looking at, all show of indifference vanished. His look became a concentrated, continuous stare.

It was curious how his grace's manner had suddenly changed. There ensued a striking little scene. For probably three or four minutes, neither man either moved or spoke. Mr. Willis sat, leaning a little forward over his still open bag, watching the duke very much as a cat might watch a mouse, observing the other's features with a keen eagerness which suggested some predatory animal. The duke, on his side, seemed unconscious that he was being watched, so engrossed was he in contemplating the woman's photograph. The contemplation had, or seemed to have, on him a really singular effect—that of rejuvenescence. As he gazed he seemed to be growing younger. He certainly

sat up straight ; held his head more erect ; when he spoke it was in more virile tones. His language showed a tendency to be almost too virile. Beyond doubt he had become more of a man.

"It's very like her! very like her! By God, it's her living image!" He turned to Willis. "I'll—I'll buy it of you."

"It's not for sale."

"Not for sale? I tell you I'll buy it of you ; and if I say I'll buy it of you, I will. I'll give you anything you like to ask."

"What I should ask, if I asked anything—which I don't—would be beyond even your capacity."

"What do you mean? Who are you? Where did you get it from?"

"You see the name written on her face? You know who it is?"

"Of course I do."

"Her name was Margaret Willis."

"I probably know that better than you do."

"I think not. Now don't you see the name written on my face?"

"What are you driving at? What is the name I'm supposed to see?"

"Don't you see the likeness?"

"The likeness—to whom?"

"And I used to be so like her! I must have changed much more than I supposed, or even you would see it. This is really droll. One day I shall have to tell this story against myself. I'm her brother. I'm Harvey Willis."

"Her brother? I remember she had a brother. I did meet him. But—is that why you expected me to recognize you on the spot? Why, man, so far as I'm aware, I only saw you once, and that's more than twenty years ago."

"I only saw you once. I recognized you."

The duke laughed — an uncomplimentary laugh. "Possibly. More men know the Duke of Datchet than the Duke of Datchet knows; and some of them, I've found, have uncommonly good memories. Let me think. Some of it begins to come back to me. Why, damn it, man, if my memory serves me right, I was given to understand that you were an infernal scamp!"

"Then, in that case, we made a pair: we were two infernal scamps. But, in my case, I'm something more than a scamp." He stretched out his arm, so that his hand rested in front of the duke, upon the table. "I'm the dead hand."

## CHAPTER XV

### BREAD UPON THE WATERS

IT seemed, from the duke's manner, that the words conveyed to him no meaning: he said as much.

"The dead hand? Your style of conversation seems to me to be founded on my recollections of the transpontine stage. Pray, what do you wish me to apprehend, when you say that you're the dead hand?"

"You have forgotten—the dead hand? That, too?"

His grace, as he eyed the other fixedly, seemed to be considering; then he slightly altered his position on his chair, and glanced down.

"Mr. Willis, you seem desirous to divert my thoughts into channels which could hardly have a creditable issue—for you."

"Creditable? Who are you, that you talk of creditable,—you, her murderer?"

Mr. Willis pointed to the portrait which the duke still held. For some seconds the duke was still continuing to regard the woman's face; then he said, curtly—

"I'll not have you say that!"

"Why not—when your conscience has been saying it to you, over and over again, through all these years? You have not been able to silence that."

"You use the language of gross exaggeration."

"I speak the plain truth, baldly. It's because it is the plain truth that—I'm the dead hand."

"Again that phrase. Is it merely a phrase, or does it signify something which redounds to your discredit?"

"By way of prologue to my answer I'll show you another photograph on which I think you'll also see that the name is written plainly." From his bag Mr. Willis took a second envelope, and, from it, another portrait. "You see the name inscribed upon that countenance?"

The duke examined the second photograph. It was that of a young man, still apparently in his teens. If the duke observed it with interest he did not reveal the fact as he had done in the case of the woman's likeness. His tone was dry.

"Who's this?"

"Your son."

"Her son?"

"I said, your son."

"Precisely, that is what I mean. I will say our son, if you prefer it."

"Her son died when she did; she died in giving him birth."

There was a pause; when the duke spoke again his voice was harsher.

"Have you proof of that?"

"I have; haven't you?"

"If I had I shouldn't require it of you."

"Joynson has proof; at least, he had it. He was in the house when she died. He saw her after she was dead, with her dead babe beside her."

There was a longer pause than before. Then the duke shut his eyes, behind his glasses.

"Was he? Damn him!"

"It was you who, in that house, was damned, for ever. When she knew that she was only to be your light-o'-love, and your cast off light-o'-love at that—that, in spite of all your vows and protestations, your lovers' perjuries, she was

never to be your wife, she swore that she would never live to bring your bastard into the world ; so, as soon as, in her agony, she had been delivered of him, she died : you had killed her—both the mother and the child.”

A still longer pause that time, and, all the while, the duke kept his eyes shut fast. When he spoke again it was slowly, as if he were measuring each word before he used it.

“You appear, still, to be unable to understand that a man, situated as I was then, was not his own master.”

“He was master of his own passions.”

“No, no ; not even that.”

“Is that the rule that you lay down for others ? The man who robs a bank ; do you excuse him because he is not master of his passion for other men’s gold ? ”

“I am not excusing myself, even to you. I loved this woman ; fashioned as I was, I could not help but love her : yet, placed as I was, I could not make of her my wife.”

“Then, if you’d been a white man, instead of the black thing you were, you’d not have dishonoured her with what you call your love.”

“She did not hold herself dishonoured, then ; nor did I mean that she should be.”

“When you talk like that, my fingers tingle to strike you, as they tingled, all those years ago, to kill you : and, do you know, the same itch has been in them ever since.”

“You never understood. It was easy, in your position, to judge ; had you been in mine, you would have found, as I found, that I was helpless.”

“A man like you—yes : but don’t write me down as if I were a man like you ; I’m not. A woman is to me a woman ; and I’ll not leave one worse than I found her. You only thought of yourself, and not of her.”

“You are mistaken.”

“I am not mistaken : she lies in her grave, to prove it ;



while you still lie out of it. The mischief is, with a man in your position, that he never gets to know himself ; unless he's stronger than the average, which you are not. He's so surrounded with the artificial that he mistakes it for reality ; unless, again, he's unusually clear-sighted, which you are not. He thinks, because he knows who his great-grandfather was, and is the possessor of what that more or less blackguard old person held to be his, that, in some fashion, which he doesn't pretend to describe, even to himself, he's set apart from other men, and is not as they are. My lord duke, that attitude is merely a relic of mediæval stupidity. England is one of the few places in which it is still to be found ; and there, nowadays, it's only to be found among the blackguards of your sort. There are clean dukes, just as there are clean chimney-sweepers. Your point seems to be that you were born unclean. Now that I hear you spouting the same old rotten lies that I heard you spouting years ago, I begin to think that you must have been ; only—don't set it down to the discredit of your family. Blackguards are born even to butchers ; they're not the exclusive perquisites of peers."

"When you have finished, sir."

"When I have finished, yes ; what then ?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. I admitted, years ago, my fault ; and I offered to atone for it."

"What did you offer ?"

"All that was in my power."

"Liar ! liar ! liar ! I called you that more than twenty years ago. I should have thought you would have remembered me, just because of it ; but—your memory is peculiar. That I should be calling it you again after all that water has gone over the mill, isn't it odd ?"

"Have you come here to do so—for that only ?"

"Not such a fool ! To call such a man as you a liar, why, it's paying you a compliment."

"I'm an old man, sir."

"You were not an old man then ; yet I don't remember that you showed any symptoms of the sort of resentment at which you hint. I take it that you had some hot blood in your veins then, if you haven't now. But your memory seems to be such a curious chaos, that I'll do something to give it shape and form. If I recall certain other words I used it may be that you'll recall them too ; at least, I'll try. At the time we speak of, I not only called you liar, several times ; I said something which was much more to the purpose, for I was ever a practical man. I warned you that if you killed my sister I'd kill you : not quickly, nor violently, nor as you killed her ; but in such a way that you'd never even guess that you, and all that you esteemed, were dying, worse than a merely physical death, until it suited me to advise you of the fact ; and then—you'd learn it. You thought, probably, in your aristocratic light-heartedness—though you never struck me, I must admit, as light-hearted, even when you played the lover ; and, though you were a duke, what my sister saw in you I never understood—that I was using, what you would have called, the language of melodrama, of gross exaggeration ; you being one of those sort of persons who—unconsciously—suppose all other men to be their own equivalents. But I'm not your sort of man at all, at all ! And, through the years, I've been doing what I said I would : I've been killing you—you, and all your breed. The catastrophe which you slew my sister to avert is upon you—because you slew her. It's a case of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth ; or, as the scriptures have it in another place, the bread you cast upon the waters has returned to you, after many days. That's all !"

"Oh, that's all, is it ? Well, Mr. Willis, you interest me, after an unintentional fashion. I remember now that, on the one occasion of our previous meeting, you did use

what, you rightly suppose, I held to be the language of melodrama. If it had been less lurid I might have given it more serious attention. For good or ill, I fancy I am constitutionally incapable of paying much heed to men who use big words when small ones would serve them equally well. If, therefore, you are about to prove to me that fustian seeds have borne solid fruits, some of my most cherished theories will have to be reconsidered. Pray consider me to be all attention."

"That's the way you look at it?"

"That is."

"You sneer at me?"

"Not at all. I merely wait."

"Very well; then don't you ask for mercy later on."

"I promise you I won't. I have never asked for mercy from man or woman, and I never will. You misapprehend my character. I believe that I am not one who is likely, under any circumstances, to flinch from the consequences of my own actions, whatever those consequences may be."

"You believe that?"

"I do."

"Then I fancy you'll find that your belief is built upon the sand. But we shall see."

"We shall. Really, Mr. Willis, you whet my curiosity. Don't let me hurry you, but, at your leisure, perhaps, you'll explain. And might I ask you, since you've so piqued my appetite for marvels, to make your explanation as clear as possible; and, remembering my constitutional dulness, to avoid as many decorative words as you conveniently can."

"I promise you that, at any rate, my explanation shall be clear. You hold it in your hand."

## CHAPTER XVI

### A YOUNG MAN'S GUARDIAN

THE duke was still holding in his hand the photograph of a young man ; at which, when the other spoke, he glanced.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"And yet it's simple—that's the likeness of your son."

"Of my—son ?"

"Of your son—and heir—the Marquis of Putney."

The duke showed no sign of being moved. He examined the photograph with an air which was impersonal rather than critical.

"I hear what you say, Mr. Willis."

"But you don't believe me ?"

"I don't go as far as that. As you may imagine, I have seen other portraits of my son, in which he is not at all like this. I have, also, on two or three occasions, seen my son himself. Once he had red hair, and once he had no hair at all. He struck me, that time, as being rather odd-looking."

"You don't recognize your son in that portrait ?"

"Is it likely ? Last time I saw my son he was a baby ten months old. I don't remember what he looked like then ; fathers seldom do have a very clear impression of what their infant sons really do look like ; what he may have become I have not the faintest notion."

"Then I have here a pictorial record which I think you

may find interesting ; it will give you a vivid impression of what your son looked like at various stages of his existence." Mr. Willis took out of his bag a good-sized volume which he laid in front of the duke. "Let us begin at the beginning. We have here a photograph of the Marquis of Putney on the day on which he was stolen."

"He was stolen ?"

"Oh yes, I stole him."

"You—stole him ?"

"I did."

"You make that assertion, Mr. Willis, clearly understanding the consequences which such a confession entails ?"

"We'll come to that sort of thing later : I give you my word that we shall come to a close understanding upon that point ; in the meanwhile let's get on. Within an hour of his coming into my possession I had him photographed ; that's the photograph at which you're looking. You'll observe that he's wearing the clothes he had on at the time I stole him. On the next two pages you will find photographs, not only of each article of clothing he was wearing, but also of certain other articles which I conveyed when I took him. They are still in my possession. Some, or all of them, will undoubtedly be recognized by you ; by Joynson ; by the duchess ; by the woman who then was Sarah Barnes, and who is still in your service ; as well as by certain other persons whom I need not now particularize. Here are two portraits of him, taken at the same time, with his clothes off : here is a front view, and this is a back view. Rather curious those. I have had them enlarged to more than life scale. They show certain marks of which, probably, his mother, or some one, has kept a record : you will see them recurring in the photographs which follow ; some of them have faded or vanished, others he has not sloughed until the present day. Here you have him,

clothed, a year afterwards—you will observe that each photograph is dated—and here, on the same day, naked, again back and front: you will see that the marks recur. Thenceforward, there is at least one photograph taken every year, clothed and unclothed, until the series culminates in the one I gave you, which is his most recent likeness. To you, his father, that should be a volume replete with interest, since it gives you, with the most intimate details, your son's pictorial history from his infancy to the present day; though it will probably interest his mother more than you, since women are fonder of photographs than men—especially photographs of their own children."

The duke methodically turned page after page, seeming to find something of interest on each.

"Whatever else it is, this volume of yours is at least a curiosity. By whom were those photographs taken?"

"By me."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"Then you are the only witness as to their genuineness?"

"On that point no evidence is required."

"You rely on their being able to speak for themselves?"

"I rely upon nothing. I merely state the facts."

"Has this young gentleman been a member of your household all this time?"

"He has."

"Subsisting on your bounty?"

"That's so."

"Enjoying good health?"

"Excellent; he's never had a day's illness."

"That's good. Then his constitution's sound?"

"Magnificent. Never known a finer."

"Has he received some sort of education?"

"No young man living has received a finer—of its kind."

"Of its kind. I note the reservation. Does that mean within the limits of your resources?"

"Exactly; within the limits of my resources."

"I trust they have been ample."

"They've been sufficient—with management."

"I fear that he has been somewhat of a tax on them."

"Not at all; not a bit. He's been a source, to me, of perpetual interest and amusement."

"Amusement. Indeed. And your object has been—blackmail?"

"No; you stole my sister, I stole your son; that's all."

"With the idea of inflicting on me that long agony which is born of doubt, ignorance, suspense?"

"Well,—not exactly that."

"Then, Mr. Willis, what was it,—exactly? Do you propose to keep him from me still longer—for a further indefinite period?"

"Emphatically no; that's what's brought me here. He's nearly of age; on the twenty-sixth of next month he'll be twenty-one. I thought it about time that he should enter into the possession of those rights and privileges which are appurtenances of his position; is that the proper phrase? In other words, that he should return to the home of his fathers."

"Is he acquainted with the facts?"

"What facts?"

"Of his position; does he know who he is?"

"Not he; I've been able to do one or two things with him, but if ever an even dim glimmer of who he is had entered his head I don't think that even I should have been able to keep him from returning, on the instant, to the home of his fathers."

"Then who does he believe that he is?"

"An orphan."

"The son of what father?"

"The son of an old friend of mine—a dear old friend, a very remarkable old friend."

"Mr. Willis, there is, about your words and manner, even to my dull old ears, a sinister ring; as if there was another meaning behind everything you said. You undertook to make yourself quite clear. Don't you think that the time has come for you to do so? Where is this young man at the present moment?"

"In jail."

"Where?"

"In jail."

"In jail? What do you mean?"

"I mean that, at the present moment, the Marquis of Putney is serving a term of imprisonment in one of His Majesty's jails."

The duke eyed the speaker for a moment; then glanced about him around the room as if looking for some one who, he thought, might possibly be there. Taking off his glasses, he began to tap with the rims against the still open book of photographs.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Willis?"

"I am."

"Do you wish me to understand that this young man is—eh—actually in prison?"

"He is; whether you understand it or not."

"Which prison?"

"That's my secret."

"For what offence?"

"That, again, is my secret."

"And I am asked to believe that this young man who, it is asserted, is at the present moment in an anonymous prison, is my son, and heir, the Marquis of Putney?"

"I ask you nothing; don't let there be any misunder-



standing on that point—it would be a pity. So far as I am concerned, your attitude, whether of doubt or faith, matters nothing. I state the facts, accurately ; whether you accept, or reject, them is your affair, not mine.”

“Your attitude is one of malicious neutrality ?”

“If you like to put it so.”

“Let me understand you on one point, Mr. Willis. You have stood towards this young man in a parental relation ?”

“To the best of my ability.”

“You are responsible for his training. What sort of training can you have given him if, at the age of twenty, he is an inmate of a jail ?”

“Excellent—of its kind.”

“Of its kind ? You have used that phrase before. What kind of training have you given him ?”

“I have trained him to be a thief.”

“A thief ?”

“A thief. You made my sister a prostitute ; I have made your son a thief. That’s why I took him ; because I proposed to make of him a thief. I’m the dead hand.”

“Are you using the language of sobriety, Mr. Willis ? Am I to understand that you mean exactly what you say ?”

“Let me give you that clear exposition of the matter which I promised you. You’re one kind of a scamp : the kind who lies to a woman ; takes advantage of her innocence ; robs her of all she has ; and then, having shovelled her into her grave, walks on. To my mind that’s the worst sort of scamp there is. If justice were justice your bones would have been bleached long ago, and your name would stink. But justice isn’t justice ; and—that’s where the human element comes in. Now I’m a scamp of another kind ; I live—and always have lived—by what are euphoniously called my wits. You know what that means.

Since I have been your son's guardian, I have done my best to instil my principles into him—as a parent always does do. I have taught him, morning, noon, and night, that when a man has no property of his own it's his business to get hold of the property of others—somehow. And I've given him some capital object-lessons in how to do it. And I do assure you that a more delightful pupil a man couldn't wish to have. For quickness of perception there never was his superior. And he's not superficial—never has been; the way he gets at the root of a matter by intuitive processes of his own is amazing, simply amazing. Within a couple of years of his being in knickerbockers he earned his own keep—I give you my word of honour. He was such a pretty boy, strange ladies liked to take him on their laps to kiss him; when he came away he left with the best things they had about them in his little pockets. And if they found him out it was only a childish prank; you couldn't be hard upon a child. When he got to trousers we brought off some wonderful coups together—wonderful! He was a game kid, if ever there was one, yours was: a regular chip of the old block. When he was in his first Etons I've known him walk out of a West End shop with five hundred pounds' worth of things about him: he's done that, mind you, both at home and abroad; because we've travelled a bit, he and I have. You know what an Eton suit is—there's nothing of it. You wouldn't think that a little lad, in his first one, could carry five hundred pounds' worth of stuff about with him, without anybody being a ha'porth the wiser. But he did, many a time; he was a marvel, that lad of yours."

Mr. Willis sat back in his chair, and smiled, genially. The duke sat and watched him with a sort of fascination with which certain creatures are supposed to regard a snake, —speechless, motionless.

"Don't think that his education was neglected; it

wasn't—that wouldn't have suited my book at all. It's true that he's never been to a public school, or any school ; but then you know what sort of education they deal out at schools. Your son's been educated in the school of the world. We've never wanted for money, either of us ; we've lived like fighting-cocks,—often at the rate of more than five thousand a year : he'll tell you all about it when you see him ; I tell you, he's had a high old time. There's hardly a corner of the earth—worth knowing—he doesn't know. He'd teach your Foreign Office folks a thing or two : at the interpreter game he'd beat them hollow. There isn't a young man of your acquaintance who, as a linguist, is within a thousand miles of him ; he's got the gift—I've got it myself, so I know what I'm talking about. There's not a tongue worth talking—east or west—that he's not good at ; and, mind you, almost supernaturally good. I can't repeat it too often,—he's a marvel, your son is, just a marvel."

Again Mr. Willis paused to smile ; while still the duke sat grimly silent.

"We've been Frenchmen, Germans, Dutch, all sorts, and the aboriginals have never found us out. As a French vicomte and his motherless son, he and I worked a Russian princess—who was as good as French herself—to the tune of over thirteen thousand pounds, and to this hour she believes that we both of us were born and bred in fair Touraine. I tell you this, so as to let you know that he has been used to high society ; it won't be his first introduction to it when he enters his father's halls, not by any manner of means. He's moved in the company of princes, as well as plebeians, since the day I put him into knickers. I have always made it a rule to take him where there was money to be made. He's got a list of titled acquaintance as long as you have, and they all love him, he's and she's ; he's a very nice lad, that boy of yours. In all the

little details which go to make a gentleman he's a don. Take games—bridge, for instance, of which you're all just now very fond; he can play bridge, that boy of yours, my word! And he's so young, that's the charm of it; he takes the whole lot in, every time. Why, not long ago, at Newport—the American village, you know—we taught them a thing or two at bridge: well, I'd be ashamed to say how much we took away—you'd think we were hard upon our hosts; and they never spotted us, not once; they never even smelt us. They'd be glad to see us again if we went back to-morrow, and have another game. As far as character goes we have kept our end up more than you might think; but then, the boy's a marvel!"

This time Mr. Willis laughed outright, as if the jest were really too good for a mere grin; but the duke never moved.

"You'll smile,"—any one who looked less like smiling than the duke did just then one could hardly conceive; but perhaps Mr. Willis was only using a figure of speech—"when I tell you that my twenty years' guardianship of your son has done more to inoculate me with what I'll call the aristocratic virus than I should have thought was possible. It has taught me to believe that there may be something after all in blood; that the cant phrase, 'Breeding will tell,' may not be all cant. If that boy of yours wasn't the hope of a great family, the offspring of a hundred sires, the heir to a great inheritance, I doubt if he would have turned out to be the marvel he has done—I seriously doubt it. It has compelled me to believe that blood will tell. And that makes it so unfortunate that there should be such an uncomfortable climax to this biographical sketch of mine. It can't sound pretty to a father's ears, when he first has news of his long-lost son, to be told that he's in jail; and there's the trouble. But really he brought it on himself—I will say that; and he'll be the first to admit it

if you ask him. He would try something I warned him not to try, taking a quite unnecessary risk, and—the result was he was pinched in the act. Most unfortunate, most unfortunate! But then, men in his profession, and mine, will have misfortunes; it's the chance of the game! though, considering all things, we've both of us had wonderfully few—wonderfully few. And there's this to be said, his time's nearly up; he'll soon be on his own again, and then you'll find he won't be a penny the worse for his little accident. He'll come back to me, have a hearty welcome, find plenty of pieces—I'm well off for a man in my walk of life; much better off than some imagine—he'll soon forget compulsory attendance at morning chapel. It's remarkable how soon you do forget—remarkable."

## CHAPTER XVII

### MR. WILLIS EXPLAINS HIS INTENTIONS

MR. WILLIS, tilting his chair back on its hind legs, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets, surveyed the duke with an air of benevolence, as if he was modestly conscious that his deserts were great. The duke said nothing. He looked at Mr. Willis with something in his glance the meaning of which it was not easy to determine. Then he picked up the photograph of the young man, and looked at that ; still in his glance that same odd quality. From the one photograph he returned to the book of photographs, examining those at the end, and comparing them one with the other. Then, leaning back in his chair, he transferred his attention to Mr. Willis.

"You will observe, sir, that I have not asked for mercy—yet."

"As you say, not yet."

"I hope you will not be shocked when I tell you that I found your story rather amusing."

"Not at all—glad to have amused you."

"It has had what possibly you may consider rather an unexpected result: it has filled me with feelings of devout thankfulness that, all these years ago, I managed to get the better of my natural inclinations, and did not make this young lady my wife,"—he held up the photograph of the girl—"fond though I was of her."

"Has it, indeed?"

"Think of what my position would have been if, for more than twenty years, I had had you for a brother-in-law. Angels and ministers of grace defend me! I should have needed all the assistance they could render."

"You think so?"

"I do. Long ere this my grey hairs would have gone down in sorrow, and shame, to the grave, if I had been related, though only by marriage, to such a man as you."

"We appear to have a high opinion of each other. I know you to be a seducer of women, a cad, a hypocrite, a traitor, and a liar; and you think me——"

"I should be sorry to trouble you with my opinion, Mr. Willis."

"Rather than have me as a brother-in-law you prefer me in the *role* of your son's guardian."

"We now approach that question. Have you ever heard of the process of pulling a man's leg?"

"I've played the game."

"And are once more taking a hand in it?—You place me in a delicate position. I've no doubt that part, probably the larger part, of what you've been telling me is false; the difficulty is to say which part, if any, is true. However, if you place me in possession of the necessary details—you have so far only favoured me with vague generalities—I will have inquiries made, and, in due course, you shall be advised of the result."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. I shall give you no more details than I have done already."

"Then what do you propose to do? What is the purport of your visit here? You don't suppose that, on such a matter, I'm going to accept your *ipse dixit*—your bare assertion?"

"I don't care what you accept. I've stated the facts; that's all I'm going to do."

"Your knowledge of the facts may satisfy you—I also have to be satisfied."

"That you never will be ; not by me—if only for the reason, that the more you do know of the facts the more dissatisfied they'll make you. Now I'll tell you how the position appears to me. I take it that, in the ordinary course of things, you're not very far from the grave. The one thing you want to do, before you get there, is to find your son. Isn't that so ?"

"Well ?"

"Either he's dead or living. So long as you even suspect he's living, but don't know where he is, you're hung up—the family coach is stuck fast. Suppose you die without knowing, where will that crooked son of yours be—not to speak of his mother ?"

"You may take it that these points have occurred to me on previous occasions—all that you can say on them you may consider as admitted."

"Very well, then—I've kept your boy dark for twenty years ; if I like I can keep him for another twenty, or ever—you'll never lay your finger on him unless I guide it. There's another point, which perhaps you haven't considered—suppose he marries ? He nearly did it once—a fly girl, only she was a bit too fly ; she'd seen too much trouble, of all sorts—though she was as fine a girl as ever you saw—and clever ! It was her cleverness did for her ; he found out, in time, that she might prove to be a bit too clever, even for him. But suppose I was to get him married—I might easily do it ; he's quite a lady's man—to a young lady who was both a prostitute and a thief—many a time ; many a time ! And she was to present him with a large family, ready made and otherwise—how would that stock do to gamble in for a Duke of Datchet ?"

"Mr. Willis, these inquiries of yours hardly demand an answer, although you appear to look for one."



The duke rose from his chair, wearily. The other checked him.

"Don't get up."

"Thank you ; I'm a little tired of sitting."

"I tell you, don't get up ; sit down. We're very comfortable where we are, and I can talk to you as I please. If you start fidgeting about this great room I shall have to shout at you ; so, until you do sit down, I'm dumb."

Mr. Willis took a cigar-case from his pocket ; and, from it, a cigar which he proceeded to light. His grace regarded him with an air partly of surprise, partly of amusement, and, also, partly of something else.

"I am not aware that you have much more to say which I care to listen to ; but, if you prefer that I should listen sitting I am at your service."

He resumed his seat. Mr. Willis, puffing at his cigar, smiled pleasantly at him.

"You asked me what is the purport of my visit here, what I propose to do ; by way of concluding my few remarks I'll tell you. I, of course, hold myself at liberty to change my mind, and to do anything else I please ; but, as at present advised, my intention is to tell your son—so soon as he comes out of jail—that he's the Marquis of Putney ; and, from my knowledge of the young gentleman, I should say that within the shortest possible space of time after the receipt of that information he'll be knocking at your front door ; and that if he can't get in that way he'll get in at one of the windows—at which method of entering a family mansion he's one of the greatest experts living."

"And am I to receive him on the terms that no inquiries are to be made ?"

"That's as you choose ; please yourself and you please me. Take him to your bosom, or take him by the scruff of his neck, and throw him down the steps, as you hinted

at throwing me, you'll please me either way. While if you catch him getting through the window, and have him pinched, that'll amuse me more than I can tell you. I can fancy how the papers will have it on the placards, 'The Marquis of Putney charged by his father the Duke of Datchet with burglary.' Oh, that'll be great! But it appears to me that you're looking at this in rather a lop-sided sort of way, as if you were the only person on in this scene; and, you know, you're not. This boy has not only got a father, of a sort, he has also got a mother, of another sort."

"Don't introduce that lady's name, sir!"

"Not introduce that lady's name? But I shall; I shall introduce any name I choose, and you'll sit tight and listen. You know almost as well as I do that the Duchess of Datchet would welcome the restitution of her long-lost son for so many reasons that I haven't time to touch upon them all; and that I've only got to show her the pictures which are in that book and she'll need to have no inquiries made—she'll strain that lad to her aching breast; if I'll let her, she'll go with me to him, without waiting for him to come to her."

"I give you my personal assurance that all you have said shall have my most careful attention; and, in the mean time, I must beg you to have no communication with the duchess except with my express permission."

"Goodness sakes alive!—the dear old man! I've never asked permission yet for anything I ever did; and I should as soon think of asking your permission as you would of asking mine. I assure you it's my intention to have a short interview with the Duchess of Datchet before I leave these premises; that is, unless you take me by the neck and throw me down the steps, an operation for which I've been waiting all this time."

"I beg you, Mr. Willis——"

"Now, duke, don't forget—there's to be no mercy asked."

"Mercy! Do you imagine I was going to ask for mercy? You use very strong language about the grievance you profess to have against me; I was merely going to remind you that you don't even pretend to have a grievance against the duchess, who is an unfortunate lady."

"As for her being an unfortunate lady, I've known many of them; the market's overdone with 'em. As for not having a grievance against her, I'm not so sure. She occupies my sister's place; and perhaps that's one of the things I might be going to tell her."

"You dare!"

"Dare! Don't talk about what I dare do or you may have more music than I intended. If I were to tell her, what would be the harm? You've done each other. She occupies my sister's place, while you're where she meant that Mr. Ivor Dacre should be; and I'm more than inclined to suspect that she's been sorry ever since that she didn't carry out her original intention."

The duke again started up. "You go too far, sir!"

"Sit down, or you'll go too far."

"You are under a misapprehension if you imagine that I will sit still to listen to such remarks."

"Very well, then; ring the bell and let the duchess know that I'm here; I fancy she's expecting me."

"Expecting you?"

"I just let her have a line advising her that she might possibly receive news of her long-lost son during the course of to-day; I didn't want it to come upon her with too much of a shock."

"You—you!"

"Don't finish; you might be sorry; at your age."

"Mr. Willis, without imputing motives, if you will give me your undertaking to have no communication with the

duchess until this matter has been duly sifted I will make it well worth your while to carry that undertaking out."

"You couldn't."

"I couldn't what?"

"Make it worth my while."

"Unless your demands are too outrageous."

"What I should demand would be this: that you should raise my sister up out of the grave into which you bundled her, and install her here at Mallow as the Duchess of Datchet. That is the only thing which would make it worth my while."

"You are absurd!"

"It struck me that in thinking you could make it worth my while, to keep off the duchess—if I might use such a figure of speech—you were absurd."

"Since you adopt that tone, sir, I have to inform you that steps will be taken which will effectually prevent you from causing annoyance to the Duchess of Datchet."

"Oh, I shouldn't annoy her, not at all; I might annoy you, but I shouldn't annoy her. At the same time, don't let me keep you from taking steps. You talked about throwing me down some a while ago; is that the sort of steps you mean? Once more, might I ask you to ring the bell and let the duchess be informed that I am at her service."

"Dismiss that idea from your mind, Mr. Willis; you will not see the Duchess of Datchet."

"It appears that there you really are mistaken; because here she is."

While the duke was still in the act of announcing that, under no circumstances, would his visitor be allowed to see her grace, the door opened, and, before the duke could move, or say a word to keep her out, the duchess entered, with—of all people in the world—Mr. Ivor Dacre at her heels.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A MOTHER'S INSTINCT

THE Duchess of Datchet was, at forty-one, in the opinion of many persons who believed themselves—not without reason—to be well qualified to judge, even more lovely than she had been at twenty-one ; and then she was a reigning beauty. Hers was that type of beauty which, if circumstances are only kindly, becomes mellowed by the efflux of time ; she would still be lovely at seventy. And, though she would probably have been most unwilling to admit it, fortune had meted out to her just that treatment which was suited to the preservation, and even the enhancement of her charms. For the last twenty years she had, so far as it was possible for a woman in her position, lived out of the social tumult the clear, sweet, simple life of a great country lady. She had become religious ; the feeling having grown upon her, although she might not have uttered it even to herself, that, since it seemed that there was only God to whom she could look for help, it became her to cause continually to arise a mother's prayers, and the incense of her good deeds. A religious life means, at any rate, an orderly life ; and, for a woman, an orderly life is, not infrequently, a royal road to health. She had grown to be known as one of the most religious women in England ; a friend of all good causes ; a shining example for the rest of the peerage ; and that was much better than a reputation for, say, playing

bridge seven nights a week until three in the morning—or its social equivalent!—if she desired, as all properly constituted women do desire, to keep her looks. Only women themselves know how late hours do try them.

And then another preservative she had stumbled on by chance; and that was a sentimental attachment. She had owned—to herself—rather late in the day, that in throwing over Ivor Dacre, to marry his cousin, she had behaved—not altogether as she might have done. And so, since she had been false to him, she decided to be true; she would be true to him—as true that is, as the conditions permitted—and yet not false to her husband; the result being that for many years she had, practically, been either a widow or a spinster, whichever way you choose to take it. And that, since giving Cecil to the world had nearly killed her, had probably also been good for her health. Her way of treating the position was droll. She kept Ivor in one shrine, the door of which she occasionally opened; and her husband in another, whose door she, also, occasionally opened: the dual habit ended in giving her the air of a contemplative saint; people said that there was something about her ethereal beauty which reminded them of the Madonna. Not the least odd part of it was that she still professed to believe that Ivor had kidnapped her boy; and at rare intervals, she favoured him with interviews in which, while she acknowledged her guilt, and that she merited punishment, she implored him, with exquisite, and always graceful, pathos, not to make her punishment unending—which interviews, while they seemed to do her good, were hard on Ivor. He was still a bachelor; which was probably one reason why she opened the door of his shrine rather oftener than that of the other.

This was the lady who had entered the duke's room just as his grace had refused to allow Mr. Willis to have an opportunity of seeing her; Mr. Dacre, still a very

handsome man, closing the door behind her, and following in her train. As she advanced, Mr. Willis bowed. It was to be noted that so soon as she appeared his demeanour changed ; nothing could have been more courteous, or in better taste, than the language he used, and the manner in which he addressed her.

"Mr. Dacre informs me that my son, Lord Cecil, told him that you profess to be the bearer of some news of"—her lip was a little tremulous—"of the Marquis of Putney. Are you the person from whom I received a note ? Are you Mr. Harvey Willis ?"

"I am that most unworthy person."

Before she could speak again Ivor Dacre interposed. "Excuse me ; haven't you and I met before, sir ?"

"We have ; on more than one occasion."

"Among other occasions at Nice, at the Princess Antoniadis's ?"

"I remember you very well, Mr. Dacre ; I am hardly likely to forget."

"Nor am I ; though, at that time, you were not known to me as Mr. Harvey Willis. I understood that you were a Frenchman, and that your name was the Vicomte de St. Symphorien ; you had a young Frenchman with you whom you called your son."

"Precisely ! Only that young Frenchman was as English as I am. Your grace, Mr. Dacre has an excellent memory ; I always found it so. It is most fortunate that he should be here at the present moment. I make you my acknowledgments, Mr. Dacre. The young man to whom he refers was—nay, is—the Marquis of Putney."

The duchess looked from one to the other. "I—I don't understand——"

"And yet, when you have received an explanation, you will find that nothing is more simple. For particulars as to how I became associated with the marquis at a very

early period of his career, I refer you to the duke. No story could be more romantic ; you will learn everything from your husband. Let me show you what I know you will agree with me in thinking is an extremely interesting series of photographs."

The duke laid his hand on the book of photographs just as Mr. Willis was about to pick it up.

"You shall do nothing of the kind, sir."

Mr. Willis appeared to be surprised. "I beg your pardon? Will you be so good as to remove your hand? I want my book ; my book."

Either the emphasis which he laid upon the personal pronoun or something which he saw in his eyes, induced the duke to withdraw his hand. He turned to the duchess, a little feebly.

"Mabel, I must ask you to suspend your judgment till I have had a little private conversation with you. Eh—Mr. Willis is not to be taken altogether seriously."

Mr. Willis assumed an air of injured virtue ; and did it fairly well.

"Duke, how can you say that? Duchess, I leave you to pronounce or to suspend judgment exactly as you please. Do you know who that is?"

He held out to her the book open at the first page, on which was the portrait of a baby. She glanced at it casually, as if doubtful of his meaning. Then, snatching it from him, she stared at it with an eagerness which seemed momentarily to increase. Then, fervently, she exclaimed—

"It's my boy!—my baby! Hereward, it's—it's Putney!" She turned to Mr. Willis ; her eagerness making her stammer. "How—how did you get it?"

"You recognize the likeness?"

"Recognize it? Why, it's perfect!—it's my boy himself! Hereward, isn't it—isn't it wonderful?"



The lady's sudden excitement seemed to have a disturbing influence upon her husband.

"Mabel, I must beg you to consider what you say. How can you be sure that you recognize, in—in a photographic representation, a ten-months'-old baby, whom you have not seen for more than twenty years?"

"Because I'm his mother, I suppose that's why. And you talk about not having seen him for twenty years!—why, I've never lost sight of him—never!—he has been continually before me! I've seen him every hour of every day and night! I know him as well as if I'd had him in my arms ten minutes ago! I'd pick him out among ten million—just as though a mother can forget her baby!—a father, perhaps; but a mother, never! never! Besides, haven't I his photographs? Aren't they with me wherever I go? I've one life-size of him; we'll compare this with that; and then you'll see if I am wrong. And then there are his clothes, they come out splendidly."

"If your grace will turn the page you will find that there is a separate photograph of each."

Her grace did turn the page, and burst into a string of half-tearful, half-laughing exclamations.

"Why, so there is! how good they are! all the things that he was wearing! here's the little cap I made for him! and—actually!—the lamb I'd given him that morning! and the coral father gave him! and there—there he's naked! My little naked baby! Hereward! Hereward! don't you know your son without his clothes on? Why, I've something here." Laying down the book, she began fumbling with her bodice, taking from it a locket attached to a fine gold chain. "There is his likeness, in my locket; now, you compare this with that and see if they are not the same."

"If your grace will turn the other pages you will find that the book contains a complete pictorial record of that

young gentleman from his infancy to the present day, each photograph being dated."

She did as he suggested, each page yielding her fresh delights. It was pretty, as well as pathetic, to watch the ecstasy with which she devoured—with her eyes—each photograph in turn.

"I could spend days looking at these ; and—and I will ! Oh, sir, how can I ever thank you ? It's really like a miracle. For twenty years I've lost him ; but here—here he is in every one of them ; so that—so that I'll be able to know him after all. It's—it's God's hand has done it. He moves in a mysterious way—it's—it's very wonderful." The tears were steaming down her cheeks ; her voice was broken by her sobs. "Hereward, do you—do you mean to tell me that you—you doubt that this—this is our boy ?"

She was resting her fingers on the book of photographs. The duke was also moved, but in a different fashion ; he seemed desirous of keeping his glance averted from her face.

"I am free to admit that there may be—eh—points of resemblance ; but, at the same time, Mabel, I must ask you to accept my assurance that there are reasons which render it advisable that, at any rate, for the present, we should avoid anything in the shape of a final decision. Nor, of course, under any conditions, could a book of photographs be accepted as sufficient evidence of identity. In a matter of this sort we must not allow—eh—we must not allow our impulses to rule us."

"That is what you say ; then this is what I say. As you are aware, I have had innumerable photographs submitted to me, which claimed to be likenesses of my boy ; and, on several occasions, I have seen the originals. But never once have I doubted ; never once have I seen cause to hesitate ; even for a moment. They were pretenders ;

impostors, one and all ; both the photographs and the originals. Nor in the case of these photographs do I hesitate ; they carry conviction to my mind, and to my heart, as clearly, as instantly, as they did. Just as certainly as those were not portraits of my son, these are. God, in Whose presence we are standing, has, in His infinite wisdom, made a mother's instinct infallible on such a matter. I know nothing of how they were procured ; but I do know that it is my son who looks at me out of them. And, knowing that, all that I desire farther is to meet him, and to—to hear his voice. Sir, when can I see my boy ? ”

Mr. Willis, stroking his chin, seemed to be reflecting ; his reply might have been described as diplomatic.

“Owing to a combination of circumstances, for details of which I refer you to your husband, at the moment I cannot be said to be—eh—exactly in touch with him ; and there is another point ; at present he does not know his own position, who he is.”

“He does not know—he does not know he has a mother ? ”

“Indeed no ; were he in possession of that knowledge he would come rushing to you on the wings of the wind.”

“Then—then how soon can you let him know where—where is he ? ”

The latter part of the question went unanswered.

“I cannot venture to say with absolute certainty ; and I would not buoy you up with an expectation which may not be fulfilled ; but I think that you may expect to hear from him, personally, in about a week.”

“Sir, place yourself in communication with him as soon as you possibly can ; and—and request him not to keep me waiting longer than he can help. One—one grows impatient—after twenty years.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DUKE, THE DUCHESS, AND IVOR DACRE

MR. WILLIS did not remain at Mallow, although the duchess pressed him to stay at least the night. Possibly he noticed that her invitation was not seconded by the duke with any undue show of warmth. Possibly, also, he was aware that there was that in the attitude of Mr. Ivor Dacre which was hardly suggestive of the friendliest feelings. Being a sensitive person, these considerations might have induced him to decline, gracefully, regretfully, to avail himself of the duchess's proffered hospitality. His attitude towards Mr. Dacre, at parting, was delicately civil.

"It gives me sincere pleasure, Mr. Dacre, to have encountered you again; especially as I find myself in a position which enables me to render a service to your family."

Mr. Dacre's bearing was neither delicate nor civil. He bestowed on Mr. Willis the curtest of nods, and let him go without a word.

When the duchess was left alone with the two men, her demeanour towards them was scarcely redolent of the essential sweetness of the Christian spirit. Her tone at the very beginning was one of acerbity.

"You neither of you seem disposed to rejoice with me because my son that was lost is found. As for you, Mr. Dacre, I am not surprised. I will not, now, inquire what part you have taken in the concealment of my son

during all these years. I will merely remark that your manner, when Mr. Willis was speaking to you, suggests one of two things—a guilty knowledge, or a mind which is ill at ease. Later, I promise you, that all necessary inquiries shall be made. But, in any case, I can hardly expect you to be radiant with satisfaction when confronted by even the possibility of the return of my son, the Marquis of Putney. So you I excuse.”

Mr. Dacre bowed. He could not trust himself to speak, though he was used to similar gibes from the same quarter; the strange fact of it being that, though this woman still continued to mete out to him injurious usage, he still continued to love her. Men do not necessarily love best the women who treat them best.

Having made herself disagreeable to Ivor, the lady addressed herself to her husband.

“Hereward, you are a mystery to me; but that, of course, you always have been. Still, one would have imagined that you might have shown some vestige of personal satisfaction at the discovery of your son and heir. And, also, that you might have shown some sort of civility to the man who had brought you news of him. Although he may not be a person of whom you altogether approve, gratitude might have prompted you to do so much. Well,” she persisted, when the duke remained silent, “is that all you have to say to me?”

His grace was fidgeting, as, nowadays, he generally was when he lacked words which would enable him to give adequate expression to his feelings.

“I—I regret that you—you should misjudge me; but, at the risk of appearing unsympathetic, I must request you to allow me an opportunity for private reflection before—eh—entering into the matter at any length. The position is by no means so simple as you seem to suppose.”

“Not to you, perhaps. But, to me, it is simplicity

itself." Judging from the expression of his countenance, the duke mentally writhed. "I am concerned with one issue, and with one issue only. Is this, or is this not, my son?" She held out the book of photographs, with which Mr. Willis had presented her; to her a priceless gift for which, so great was her emotion, she had only been able to render him the baldest thanks. "Hereward, do you, or do you not believe, that this child, this lad, who is portrayed here, is my son—and yours? Answer me plainly, if you please."

"Mabel, I—I——"

"Don't try to frame an empty form of words. I'll have a plain answer."

"I think it—it is possible he may be."

"You admit so much. I should have thought that even a possibility of our son being restored to us would have filled you with pleasurable emotion. It makes me so—so glad that I'm afraid to think of it lest—lest I should behave foolishly. I—I want to be alone, that I may pour out my heart in thankfulness to God."

"I quite share your feelings there. I think that a little quiet reflection might do both of us much good."

"But you—you, my husband—you, the father of my son—I ought to know you, what you mean by this or that way of expressing yourself; but, if I do know you, then I should say that your dominant feeling is one of annoyance. Hereward, why should you be annoyed by the prospect of our son's being restored to us?"

"Mabel, you misjudge me utterly—wholly. You have there a book of portraits; but that is all you have. They may, or may not be, portraits of our son——"

"They are!"

"Well, if you will have it so, they are. I have already told you that I think it's possible; but until you hear from the boy himself, until you have met him face to face, a nd

have learnt his story from his own lips, let me entreat you not to build what may prove, after all, to be but a castle in Spain. I repeat that what I ask you to do is to suspend judgment."

"But why—why? I know that this is my son! I know it!"

"At most you know that you have there his portrait, and that is all you know."

"But you know more. Mr. Willis explicitly referred me to you for particulars, having, I presume, placed you in possession of them. Had you endorsed my invitation to him to become our guest, I should have learned them from him. Having, for reasons of your own, withheld your endorsement, I must learn them from you. Tell me first, please, how he came to be associated with our boy."

"Mabel, on two points I am not able to give you information. The first is, what reliance is to be placed upon his statements. The second is, how he himself wished me to regard them—whether as serious utterances or as mere impertinences."

"Tell me what he told you. I will draw my own conclusions. What is his explanation of how he first became associated with our boy?"

"He says he stole him."

"Stole him! Then"—she turned to Mr. Dacre—"is that the meaning of your rudeness to him? Was he your accomplice, your tool? And have you now fallen out with him, or he with you?"

The duke looked amazed; his cousin only smiled. "Duchess, you have imputed to me so many monstrous things that one more or less makes little difference. I was not this man's accomplice, nor was he my tool. I saw him for the first time in my life only a short time ago, and then I had not the faintest notion that he had ever had anything to do with the Marquis of Putney."

The lady returned to her husband. "Then is his object, after all, blackmail?"

"He says no."

"Then what can have been his motive?"

"He says"—the duke plainly hesitated—"mind you, I say he says that, in what he did, he was actuated by a personal grudge he had against me."

The lady started. "A personal grudge against you! What—what grudge can he have had against you?"

In his answer the duke trifled with truth in a fashion which was hardly ducal.

"That's the question. From what I was able to gather from his somewhat mixed metaphors, he wishes it to be believed that he has been the victim of a singular hallucination."

The lady read into her husband's words a meaning of her own.

"I suppose that I am to understand, from that, that this man was associated with incidents in your career which were not altogether to your credit?"

"My dear," rejoined her husband, with ominous placidity, "in your life, as well as in mine, there have, no doubt, been incidents which you have regretted; else you were more, or less, than human."

The lady flushed, Ivor moved a little farther off; whether it was fair or unfair, the thrust had evidently gone home. The lady's tone was dignity itself.

"I have not the slightest desire, Hereward, to inquire too closely into your history, though I begin to understand how it is that your feelings at the prospective restoration of our son may be flavoured with acidity. May I ask if there is any part of Mr. Willis's story with which you think it advisable to acquaint me—now?"

"Mabel, you persist in misunderstanding me."

"Is not the fault yours?—since, having dismissed Mr.



Willis, on a subject of which I am entitled to know at least as much as you, you maintain such an attitude of reserve."

"I will tell you this much, that man told me such an amazing story that I hold myself justified, and, indeed, bound, to make, at any rate, certain elementary inquiries into its truth, before I even hint at its nature."

"Very well, now I understand—possibly much more than you imagine. So I need not trouble you with my presence any longer; you two men will be able to discuss my son better in his mother's absence."

When the lady had gone—with the precious book of photographs pressed to her breast with both her hands—the duke raised his hands with a gesture which was eloquent.

"Now I've offended her! She believes I'm a heartless wretch! A nice position that man has placed me in!"

"You don't appear to be particularly comfortable." As he said this Ivor was eyeing his cousin closely; when he spoke again he turned aside, ostensibly to light a cigarette which he took out of a box which was on a shelf behind. "Hereward, do you really think that this young fellow's Putney?"

"How am I to know what to think? The whole thing has come upon me like a bombshell. You know that I can't go at my fences blindfold; I must look at 'em!—if a woman doesn't."

"Exactly. Still I perceive that you think that the thing is possible."

"If the story that scoundrel tells is true, it's certain the youngster's Putney."

"He is a scoundrel?"

"On his own confession."

"Hereward, I think I ought to tell you something."

"What's coming now?"

"I'm afraid it isn't pleasant."

"It won't be the only unpleasant thing I've heard this afternoon. Let's have it."

"You heard him say that the youngster I saw him with at Nice was Putney?" The duke nodded. "I took him for a Frenchman."

"The fellow says the boy speaks all sorts of languages as if he was to the manner born; indeed he claims to be able to do the same thing himself."

"He's right enough there, at any rate, so far as French is concerned. They passed themselves off as a French father and his son; as you're aware, I know something of France and the French, but they certainly took me in. Between them they fleeced a foolish woman of some quite surprising sums, and, I'm afraid, that the chief actor in the swindle was—the young man. Indeed, I was forced to the conclusion that he was the most thorough-paced young scoundrel I ever had encountered. I could tell you some curious tales about him. But then, you see, I took him for a Frenchman, as well as his father."

"You are sure this Willis is the man?"

"Absolutely. You heard him admit it. The fellow must be an amazing actor. I had no idea that he even knew a word of English; he denied that he did—he took me in all round. Looking back I am inclined to think that, in their way, they must have been a pair of geniuses. In view of this story of his about Putney, I think it is only right that I should let you know."

"Thank you, Ivor. You have done me a service."

Leaning back in his chair the duke looked up into the vacant air with a smile which was hardly suggestive of gaiety of heart.

## CHAPTER XX

### FOR FUN

LIFE at Mallow was transformed. Had the duke had his way he would have held his peace ; he would have said nothing about the new candidate for the Marquisate. But the duchess was of another mind. So soon as Miss Barber had returned from her visit to Constance Grainger she told her. She gave instructions that the young lady was to be sent up to her directly she entered the house. When Dolly, clad still in her habit, entered the duchess's room she found her grace kneeling on the prie-dieu in front of the tiny altar which she had erected against the western wall. Seeing how she was engaged, the girl drew back.

"I hope I have not interrupted you."

The duchess instantly rose. "No ; I am glad you have come, I was waiting for you. I was thanking God, and praying also. Dolly, a miracle has happened since I saw you—I have found my son." Miss Barber eyed the great lady shrewdly ; being conscious that now and then she was visited by curious moods, she wondered if one of them was on her now. Apparently the duchess perceived the interrogation which was on the girl's face ; she repeated her statement in another form. "Dolly, I have found Putney."

Dolly's eyes opened very wide. "You have found—the Marquis of Putney ?"

"I have. I was thanking God for His infinite mercy, and—and praying that He may make my son a blessing to

his mother, who has been praying for him all these years ; there is something within which tells me that my prayers will be answered. Oh, Dolly, I have been like a child for silliness, I have been crying nearly all the time ; you cannot think how I long to see him, and—and to kiss him, Dolly—to kiss my boy. See here !” The duchess led her to a book of photographs which was lying on a table, drawing her attention to the portrait of a baby. “Isn’t that like him ? Isn’t that his very image ?”

“How can I tell ? You know I never saw him.”

“But there he is—you’ve seen that hundreds of times.” The duchess pointed to a life-size photograph of an infant which was hung against the wall. “And here he is again ; and here, and here ; these are my own photographs ; you have seen him often. Compare these with that ; isn’t it his very image ?”

“It’s very like him ?”

“Isn’t it?—exactly ! And, see, here’s at least one portrait of him for every year of his life—isn’t it wonderful ?”

“But—I don’t understand—where did you get these from ?”

“Mr. Willis brought them with him.”

“Mr.—who ?”

“Mr. Willis ; it is he who brought us the good news. Dolly, he knows my boy quite well ; and—and soon Putney’ll be coming home—perhaps in a week. Think of it, Dolly—think of it !”

The girl was thinking of the man who had startled her on the road through the farm, who had told her that his name was Harvey Willis, and to whom she had taken an instant dislike. She was thinking, also, of that other man, that younger man, who had also startled her, who had told her that his name was Lawrence Sheldon, and by whose striking resemblance to certain of the Mallow portraits she

had been so particularly struck. Could it be possible that he——?

"I wonder," she began, then stopped.

"You wonder what?" asked the duchess, who was still feasting her eyes on the portraits in the book.

The girl hesitated; it was certainly almost inconceivable that it could be. And yet—the Marquis of Putney had been found; the one thing was hardly stranger than the other.

"I wonder if—this afternoon—I can have seen him?"

"Seen him? Seen whom?"

"Seen your son—the Marquis of Putney."

"Dolly!—what do you mean? Where have you seen my boy?"

"I'm not sure it was he; he said his name was Sheldon."

"Sheldon? That can't be Putney! Where was he?"

"At—at the Abbey; he's Jack Grainger's tutor."

"Jack Grainger's tutor? What nonsense are you talking? My son is abroad; at least, I gather that he is abroad. Mr. Willis gave me to understand that it would take some little time to communicate with him; and that, therefore, it will be perhaps—perhaps a week before I can see him."

"It was the likeness which made me wonder; it's quite uncanny. Do you know that Mr. Sheldon is the living image of Mr. Ivor Dacre;—and I dare say he's like what the duke was when the duke was younger; but he really is just like Mr. Dacre."

Her grace smiled indulgently.

"I don't fancy that my son resembles either his father, or Mr. Dacre; it's just possible—don't you think it is?—that he may resemble his mother; though I must confess that, in his later portraits, I don't see much likeness to me. If he's like his portraits he's extremely handsome, that's

plain. But, in about a week, we shall be able to determine all these nice points for ourselves. My dear, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes? What is it?"

The girl glanced at the lady inquiringly; for the tone of her voice had changed.

"I want you to break the news to Cecil." The girl was still. Presently the duchess added, while she continued her examination of the portraits, "Of course I will tell him all about it afterwards; but, in the first place, I should like the news to come from you. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit. I don't suppose it matters who tells him. He will have to know."

"Of course he will have to know. And"—there was a perceptible pause—"I want you to promise that it will make no difference."

"How can I help its making a difference? It must make a difference to him if the Marquis of Putney does come home."

"Of course, that I understand. But I don't think he'll mind; I know he won't; his joy at his brother's return will blot out all other feelings." The girl's lip slightly curled; she was beginning to wonder. "But that is not what I want. I want you to promise that it shall make no difference between you two."

"Why should it? The Marquis of Putney is not my brother."

"Dolly, you must promise me that you will be Cecil's wife."

It was a second or two before the girl spoke again.

"The point is, does Cecil want me?"

"He does; I know he does."

"Can't you let us settle it between us? If he really wants me he'll tell me so. But surely you must understand

that I should really and truly like to know, quite clearly, from his own lips, if he does want me."

"Dolly, you're not behaving quite fairly. When I made my home yours I made it quite clear to you that I intended that you should be Cecil's wife ; it was only with that intention that I brought you home."

"That—that's not quite a nice way of putting it, for me."

"It's the truth ; with which you have been acquainted from the first. As you know, Cecil is, in some respects, not altogether as some young men are. It is, on that account, my duty to provide him with a wife ;—a suitable wife. I know him. Where he is himself concerned he is morbidly sensitive ; he depreciates himself. He will never ask a girl to be his wife ; not as other men do. He will always be afraid—though they mayn't show it—that they are making fun of him ; that, at the best, they are marrying him for anything but himself. He loves you ; and you know it ;—do you not know it ?"

"I believe he likes me."

"Likes you ! Pray don't imagine that I am unaware that you are a very clever girl—as well as a very dear girl ; I love you, Dolly—and don't know when a young man loves you, and when he merely likes you. Cecil loves you, and you know it. What is more, you know that he loves you so much that at a word or a sign from you, he'll pretend he doesn't. If he suspects that you're not very fond of him, or that you're in two minds about it, he'll not worry you with offers of his affection :—he'd rather die a bachelor, for your sweet sake. Don't you know as well as I do that Cecil is that kind of boy ?"

"I think he may be."

"While there was a possibility of his being the prospective Duke of Datchet he could not but be conscious that he was a good match even for the dearest girl in the world

—and that you are the dearest girl in the world I freely own."

"You ought not to say such things."

"Why not?—when I think them?—when I so often make it the subject of my prayers that God will give you me to be my daughter? But now—now that Putney is coming home, Cecil will feel—well, you know what Cecil will feel. I entreat you to make him feel that Putney's home-coming will make no difference to you; in short, I want you to make love to him if he's afraid of making love to you—so now you understand."

"It's rather an awkward thing for a girl to have to do, isn't it?"

"That, I take it, depends on how it's done. It's for my sake you will do it—for my sake, Dolly!—as well as Cecil's. Promise, here and now, that you'll be his wife, whatever happens."

"If he wants me I—I will."

"No, that won't do. You know he wants you; you must let him know that you want him. You're perfectly aware that you can be his wife if you choose. I want you to promise that you will choose.—Now, Dolly."

"I'll put it this way; if he shows an inclination to choose me, I'll—choose him; but I'm not going to do all the wooing."

"No. I don't ask you to do all of it; do part. If you give him a lead he'll not be slow to follow."

They looked into each other's eyes; and then the duchess kissed her.

Presently Dolly went in search of Cecil, to break the news. She found him in what he called his "den," reading a novel. Her greeting was of the unceremonious kind; she knew with whom she had to deal;—indeed, as his mother had more than hinted, she knew him better than he knew himself.



"Hallo, Cecil; heard the news?"

He lowered his book and looked at her. She was still in her habit, and had her skirt in one hand and her whip in the other; he could hardly have had a prettier picture to look at.

"Goose turned out to be a swan?"

"Putney's been found."

He closed the book, leaving his finger in to mark the place.

"No? Has he? At last? Truly and really?"

"Truly and really."

"Mr. Harvey Willis his discoverer?"

"It seems so."

"I saw it in his eye, not to mention that he hit out at me with it on his tongue. The mother know?"

"Rather. I've just come from her. She's in raptures."

"She would be; especially as she had always announced that he never would be found. I suppose now she'll give us all to understand that she knew it from the first, and very nearly said so. How does the duke seem to take it, and Mr. Ivor Dacre?"

"Is Mr. Dacre here?"

"Rather. He turned up as the tale was being told. I tipped him the wink which Mr. Willis had previously tipped me."

"I haven't seen him or the duke. I've only seen the duchess. Do you know, when she told me that Putney had been found, I wondered if I'd seen him."

"How's that? Are there many of him about?"

She told him the story of her encounter with Mr. Lawrence Sheldon, at somewhat greater length than she had told his mother. Apparently it had made a considerable impression on her mind. Cecil's comment was characteristic.

"And in spite of his carrying about with him the more

distinguished portions of the Dacre physiognomy, he isn't Putney? I must see this Mr. Sheldon and congratulate him. He'll never know the hardships which attend the lot of a Duke of Datchet. And whereabouts may the actual Putney be?"

"Your mother says that he's abroad. She seems to think that he may appear upon the scene in about a week."

"May he? Mallow will feel honoured. We must get our best clothes out, and darn them. It's to be hoped that he's been living a respectable life. These long-lost heirs are apt to be such curiosities; at least, so I've learnt from my fictional studies. I say, wouldn't it be a shock to them if he turned out to be like me?"

"They'll be in luck if he turns out to be half as nice. Cecil, I've been thinking about what you said to me this afternoon."

"To which of my words of wisdom do you especially refer?"

"Didn't you say something—about asking me to be your wife?"

"I said 'Will you marry me?' and then you went away; which was just the kind of answer I expected."

"Well, would you like me to—to——"

"Not too many 'to's.' To what?"

"Don't be silly! You know—what you said."

"Dolly, did you say that you'd just come from my mother?" She nodded. "Then that's it. She's been putting you up to this."

"Cecil, what do you mean?"

"She's been saying, 'That poor, dear Cecil was in a bad enough way before; he's in a much worse way now that Putney's coming home. Do marry him and see if you can't make things up for him a little, Dolly dear.' Now, hasn't she?"

"Cecil, will you pay attention to me?"

"I've been paying attention to you for ever such a time—urged by my mother."

"Is that the only reason? Thank you."

"Dolly, I would like to marry you. I really would."

"Would you? Then you shall."

"Shall I? It takes two to make a marriage. You wait a bit. Would the idea of marrying me ever have entered your head if my mother hadn't put it there? Now, tell me honestly."

"You know, Cecil, that sometimes people don't know how fond they are of people until other people point it out to them."

"That is rather neatly put, though it might have been more elegantly expressed. I understand. You'd never have known how fond you were of me if my mother hadn't told you—which only shows what a thing it is to have a mother."

"I don't mean anything of the kind; you know I don't. I don't need any one to tell me that I'm fond of you. You know I'm fond of you. I like you better than any one in the world, except——"

She hesitated, and stopped.

"Yes! except?"

"I was going to say except Constance Grainger; but I do like you better than her."

"Thank you. I also like you better than any one else in the world, and I always shall; and that's the difference between you and me."

"You have no right to say such things."

"What's the matter with that particular thing? If my mother hadn't brought you up to the profession of marrying me, you'd never have chosen it of your own accord. I know it, if you don't. You like me. Of course I know you like me—I should be an ass if I didn't. I know you regard me as your dearest chum, with the possible exception

of Constance Grainger. But, you see, I love you, and there again's the difference. Perhaps that's what makes me see the position more clearly than you do, or than the mother does."

"Cecil!"

"You see, also, that the mother, who is a wise mother, as mothers always are, has taken care—although you may not have noticed it; that's her artfulness—that you should know as few young male things as possible. Indeed, I believe I'm the only eligible of the kind with whom you are on anything like terms."

"There's Jack Grainger."

"That child!"

"He's as old as you are. Last week he asked me to marry him."

"The imp! And did you thank him?"

"I told him that I was going to marry you."

"No? Dolly!"

"Of course I didn't know at that time that you didn't want to marry me."

"One thing being plain that, at any rate, you didn't want to marry him."

"I certainly didn't! The idea! Why, he's absolutely no good at anything—absolutely no good. He'd just been my partner in a four-handed set at tennis, and had let me down most frightfully. He seemed to think that asking me to be his wife made up for it."

"Did he? The impertinence of the wretch! You know, Dolly, that no one in this world is a greater incompetent than I am, at anything and everything."

"It's different with you."

"Exactly; that's just it. There's no excuse for Jack. If he liked he could do things. There's every excuse for me. No matter how I liked I never could."

"Cecil, I do wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"I must, Dolly, I must—if for this occasion only. On the eve of this great change in the family fortunes, since, henceforward, we are destined to take two very back seats in the Datchet household, let us arrive at a perfect understanding, if the thing is possible. Dolly, let it be this way. I'm conscious of your consciousness that the mother mightn't behave quite prettily if things didn't turn out exactly as she wished, so—we'll let her think they're going to. It will do the poor dear no harm."

"Cecil!"

"Dolly! Therefore, you'll be engaged, shall I say *pour rire*?—for fun?"

"You'd better not."

"Then I won't. We'll be engaged most seriously; and I'll tell her so. She'll bestow on us her blessing. And should she be disposed to bestow on us anything else worth having, I'm sure I'm willing. Only it's understood between us that should either of us discover, later, that a mistake's been made——"

"You're pretty sure to make that discovery."

"I think I probably am; quite probably. It's by no means an ascertained fact that you're all you set yourself up to be."

"Cecil!"

"You pretend to be a vixen; but it's quite possible that you're the sweetest, and meekest, and softest of her sex."

"How dare you say such things!"

"On the other hand the discovery might be yours; it might dawn on you that you'd prefer Jack Grainger."

"I certainly never should discover that."

"You never know—you never know."

"As it happens, in this case I do know."

"Do you? Then that's something. However, by whichever party the discovery of the mistake was made, the other party would take it as a matter of course—and be

thankful—and the engagement would melt as the mists away. Well, on those terms are we to be engaged ? ”

“ If you call that being engaged.”

“ What do you regard as completing an engagement—a ring ? ”

He took from his waistcoat pocket a little leather case ; and from the case a hoop of gold, which was alive with brilliants.

“ Oh, Cecil, you haven’t—you haven’t got a ring ! ”

“ I have ; I’m sorry to have to contradict you at this early stage of our engagement, but I have. What’s more, I’ve been carrying it about some days.”

“ Cecil, how—how could you ? ”

“ That’s it—how could I ? It’s pretty decent—for a ring.”

“ It’s a beauty.”

“ I wonder—do you think it fits ? ”

“ How can I tell ? ”

“ Of course, you couldn’t—unless you tried it on.”

“ Cecil ! ”

“ Which is the finger on which it’s supposed to go ? ”

“ That’s—that’s the engagement finger.”

“ Is it ? You seem to know.”

“ Cecil ! ”

“ It goes over the top quite easily—doesn’t it ? Is it supposed to go farther on ? ”

“ It’s supposed to go right down to the bottom ; you know it is.”

“ Is it ? And it does go right down to the bottom : actually !—and fits ! Really, Dolly, your finger, with that ring upon it, looks uncommonly well. We must show it to the mother.”

## CHAPTER XXI

### A MESSAGE FROM THE MARQUIS

FIVE days afterwards there came a telegram for the duchess. It had only been discovered after Mr. Willis had gone that he had left no address behind ; actually nothing which would enable any one to trace his whereabouts. This somewhat surprising fact was the occasion of some friction. The duke rather more than hinted that he was just about to ask the man for his address when interrupted by the duchess ; and had it not been for her grace's emotional excesses that he would have asked for it while she was there. The duchess suggested that, as he was presumed to be a man of affairs, it was his business to see that everything was in due form and proper order ; and that the idea of suffering the man to depart without leaving his address was truly monstrous. As this was admitted by all parties it benefited no one ; the only point at issue being, Who was to blame ? During four whole days there was something like chaos at Mallow. Urged by the anxious lady, and also, in a less degree, by his own sense of what was fitting, the duke telegraphed here, there, and everywhere, in search of information which he altogether failed to obtain ; sent for his solicitors, and other persons ; begged her grace not to put advertisements in the agony columns, but try to keep calm ; so that there began to be a feeling in the air that, unless something happened soon, the duchess—and, quite possibly, also the duke—would

become seriously ill. Her grace refused to come down to meals, or to have them in her own apartment ; declined to see the doctor, who ought always to be a refuge for ladies in distress ; though she saw the rector of the parish, who, after the interview, came down the staircase looking surprised ; altogether matters were becoming really serious when, on the fifth day, there came that telegram.

It happened that that morning the duke had gone to town. Although the duchess had practically driven him there, by announcing that if he did not go and do something she would, it is possible that he was content to get away, for a period, from the atmosphere of Mallow. The morning was far advanced, but nothing had been seen of the duchess, who, it was understood, was keeping her bed ; and Dolly was contemplating taking Cecil for a spin in one of the motors—since there was no one else to take, when—it came.

Dolly and Cecil were in the hall. It was not very nice weather, and Cecil was not in the best of tempers ; nor for that matter, was the lady either. As she put it to him, in her elegant English—

“You know how I hate being stuck in the house, especially when it is so frightfully dull, and there isn’t a soul to speak to ; because I might as well try to carry on a conversation with one of those suits of armour as with you. I’ve been talking for I don’t know how long, and you haven’t paid the slightest attention.”

Cecil, not over fond of the open air at the best of times, positively objected to it when the elements were unpropitious ; and, just then, there was a drizzling rain and a coolish breeze—the notion of motoring through that sort of thing did not appeal to him at all.

“I thought you said that the mother might probably want you, and that you’d stay in on the off-chance.”

“She evidently doesn’t want me ; but I suppose that



makes no difference. I'll stay in ; since it's plain that you don't want to go out. Thank goodness, here is some one ; though it's only a telegraph boy." She was standing at the door which divided the outer hall from the inner. Seeing, through the window, the boy hand an envelope to the man in waiting, she made inquiries. "Who's it for ?"

"For the duchess."

"Then let it be sent up to her at once. Let's hope that something's going to happen at last ; though I don't suppose for a moment that anything is."

In the latter part of the observation, Miss Barber was wrong ; something was going to happen. The telegram ascended.

When it reached her room the duchess was sitting up in bed reading a volume of sermons ; it was her habit to resort to a volume of sermons when—so it would seem—she desired to inform Providence that she was in the deepest depths of the dumps ; her remaining in bed was another sign of the dumps—there was nothing whatever the matter with her health. She looked very pretty as she reclined against the pillows ; and the garment she wore over her *robe de nuit* was most becoming.

When her maid came to her bedside with the yellow envelope upon a salver, she picked it up with an air of languor which seemed to say that nothing in this world interested her—or ever could interest her again. But when she had opened it, and had read the contents, the volume of sermons went in one direction, and the bed-clothes in another, and there she was, kneeling on the mattress, all excitement and flurry.

"Holden ! Holden ! He's coming !—he's coming !"

Holden, the maid, who had not the least idea who was coming, behaved as if she knew quite well.

"Indeed, your grace ; when ?" she asked.

"When? To-morrow! Holden! Holden! listen to this!" The duchess, still kneeling on that mattress, and looking prettier even than before, read the telegram aloud. "'To the Duchess of Datchet, Mallow. The Marquis of Putney, who has only just learnt that he is the Marquis of Putney, trusts to arrive at Mallow to-morrow, Wednesday, by the train due at two-thirty.'" She lowered the telegram, looked up at the ceiling, possibly with an eye to the heavens beyond, and drew a long, long breath. "So, after all, my prayers have been heard—he's coming!"

The whole performance was uncommonly attractive. So was all that followed. No more bed for her, and no more sermons; she was out of one, and rid of the other, in a twinkling. She bathed, and was dressed by Holden—all radiant with tears and laughter; those tears which are born of the happiest laughter. She sent for Dolly, who found her trembling with ecstatic agitation.

"Dolly! he's coming!"

Miss Barber had not Holden's diplomacy; she stared to see how the lady was transformed.

"Coming? Who is coming?"

There was reproach in her grace's beautiful eyes. "Who? Whose coming can be of the slightest interest to me except my boy's?—Dolly, he is coming!"

She thrust the pink slip of paper into the girl's hand. Dolly read what was on it with eyes which were more critical than the elder woman's.

"What—what a very curious telegram!"

"Curious? How is it curious? What strange things you say! Don't you see that he has only just learnt that he is the Marquis of Putney—that he has a mother? What must he be thinking?—and feeling? If he's feeling anything like I am I don't know whether I envy him or whether I don't—my boy! Where's Cecil? I told them to send him to me; oh, Cecil, there you are." His lordship

came stumping into the room, looking a trifle sour ; as she went fluttering towards him, in her almost youthful grace and beauty, the contrast between the mother and child was striking. "Oh, Cecil, my darling son, your brother's coming!"

He glanced at the telegram she gave him. "It's very good of him to let you have a wire to say so ; very good."

"Oh, Cecil, is that all you have to say?"

"What else is there to say, except that I hope he'll have a pleasant journey."

She laughed, a trifle oddly. Indeed there was that about her which neither the boy nor the girl had seen before, she was overflowing with such an exuberant vitality that she seemed incapable of remaining for a moment still ; though generally repose was one of her strongest points, sometimes to an exasperating degree.

"You naughty boy! But I know you mean more than that ; of course you do! But, Cecil, Cecil, you must help me in making all the preparations."

"What preparations are there to be made? Do the beds want airing?"

"Cecil, you are not to talk like that. We must have one arch at the gate ; and—and I think we ought to manage a second ; I must set them all moving, and you must help me. We won't go to the station to meet him ; no, we won't ; I—I should probably make a goose of myself if we did ; but we'll send a carriage, and the tenants shall be lined up on either side of the drive, and—and we'll receive him on the steps."

"Don't you think you'd better communicate the contents of this telegram to the duke, and give him a hint of what it is that you're proposing?"

"Certainly ; you can do that. Frankly, I think it's just as well your father did go to town ; because I tell you quite candidly—just as candidly as I should have told him

—that, in this matter, I intend to do exactly as I please. It's my holy day ; I mean to do what I can to keep it holy. I feel in an especial sense that it is my son who is coming home."

"I see. I hope you won't find me in the way."

"Cecil ! how can you speak to me like that ? As if it would make any difference in my love for you ! If I thought that you thought it would, I—I should never be happy again."

"My dear mother, do let me preserve the family from that catastrophe. But, seriously, don't you think that if you were to take matters a little more coolly than you seem disposed to take them it would do no harm ; let this first home-coming be a strictly domestic event. Putney will be coming of age very soon, and then you might have the cocoanut shies and the swings ; but, to begin with, let him just come home. I expect you'll find he'll like it better."

"No," she said, "I'll have at least one arch." And she had.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE DUKE AND THE YOUNG PRETENDER

THE weather was not altogether what it might have been ; the arch had to be erected under unfortunate climatic conditions ; nothing had been heard of the duke, from what Cecil could learn, he and Joynson had not alighted at Park Lane, but had deposited themselves nobody seemed to know where. As a matter of fact Cecil's telegrams only reached his grace on the Wednesday morning ; when, dawdling over a late breakfast, he was expecting Mr. Charter, his own particular solicitor, and the man of business in whom he reposed most confidence, Joynson came in with a small pile of telegrams on a waiter.

"These have been sent on from Datchet House ; it appears that they have been looking for us all over London."

His grace opened the first one. It was from Cecil ; containing the telegram which had reached his mother, together with some voluminous, and outspoken, additions of his own. The duke read it and re-read it with feelings of which amazement was apparently not the least conspicuous.

"Joynson, here—here's a pretty kettle of fish ! What—what on earth is to be done ?"

He snatched up the other envelopes ; they contained more or less emphatic variations of Cecil's desire to know why he had received no answer. The duke, staring at

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Joynson, who had studied each telegram when his master had done with it, repeated his previous inquiry—

“What—what on earth is to be done?”

“It seems that the marquis is to travel by the train which reaches Wargrave Station at two-thirty, and leaves London at twelve-five ; I think your grace ought to travel by it also.”

“Twelve-five ! but it's after half-past eleven now ; and I'm not dressed ; and Charter's coming !”

“If Mr. Charter comes before we leave he might go with us.”

“That's true.”

“If he doesn't we might leave word for him to follow ; his presence may be required.”

“That's true again.”

“Your grace can finish dressing in five minutes ; a good horse ought to get us to the station in time.”

A good horse did, but only just in time. Master and man—Mr. Charter had not arrived ; word had been left for him to follow—were bundled into the same compartment, which would have been all right if they had it to themselves ; but they hadn't. A young man and woman were at the other end ; and it rapidly dawned on the duke and Joynson that, from their point of view, they were matter in the wrong place. Whether the young man had paid the guard to treat that compartment as reserved did not transpire ; but from the way he glared it was plain that resentment was smouldering in his breast.

“When is our first stoppage ?” inquired the young woman, in a manner which was marked.

The young man explained in a fashion of his own. “Not till we get to Wargrave, and then only by signal. Wargrave, in a sort of way, is the Duke of Datchet's private station ; I believe Mallow is the only place within miles of it ; so, as there isn't likely to be any of the

Mallow people on board, we probably shan't stop even then."

The young woman laughed ; the duke and Joynson looked at each other in silence—they did not even smile.

None the less the train did stop at Wargrave, and Joynson and the duke descended. Moreover, the fact that several other people were on the platform seemed to suggest that the neighbourhood was not so sparsely populated as the young man supposed. Besides the master and his man the only other passenger who alighted was a young gentleman who got out of a carriage at the other end of the train. Joynson descended first ; as the duke followed he remarked—

"Mr. Robbins is here."

Mr. Robbins was the Mallow steward, who had been deputed by the duchess to meet the heir. Seeing the duke come out of one end of the train, and an individual, who was probably the marquis, come out of the other end, he was for a moment rather at a loss ; then, hat in hand, he approached the duke.

"I was not aware that your grace was expected."

"I wasn't—who is ?"

"Your grace has not heard ? The Marquis of Putney is expected ; her grace has instructed me to meet him. I fancy that must be he."

Mr. Robbins looked towards the individual who was standing on the platform, with a gladstone bag at his feet ; the duke followed the steward's gaze.

"Joynson, go and inquire."

Joynson traversed the length of the platform, and raised his hat.

"May I ask your name ?"

"My name ?" The stranger, who had stood and watched him coming, regarded him with a smile which was a little impertinent. "What's yours ?"

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"My name is Joynson ; I'm the Duke of Datchet's own man. That is his grace, standing there."

"Are you ? I'm the Marquis of Putney. If that's the duke you'd better take me to him ; or I can take myself. How about my luggage ? I've only got this bag."

"That will be attended to."

Joynson led the way, the young man followed. When he reached the old man who stood awaiting him, he bowed.

"The Duke of Datchet ?" The old man nodded ; whatever may have been his feelings his face was an expressionless mask. "I'm the Marquis of Putney ; at least, so I have been told."

"If you're the Marquis of Putney, I'm your father."

Neither offered to shake hands ; each kept his hands in his overcoat pockets. Without another word the duke led the way to a carriage. Both got in. As a footman was with the coachman on the box, Joynson was left to follow in a second carriage. The pair drove off, the duke drawing back in his corner, the better to observe the young man at his side, who, he was conscious, was a young man who was very much at his ease. He was looking about him with an air of amusement, and was the first to speak.

"This is very odd."

"How odd ?"

"That I should be driving with you, and that you should be the Duke of Datchet."

"There's nothing odd about my being the Duke of Datchet."

"No ; but there's something odd about my being the Marquis of Putney. When I got up yesterday morning I was not even aware that there was supposed to be such a person."

"You learned the facts from Mr. Harvey Willis ?"

"What he calls the facts."

"You don't place much reliance on his word ?"



The young man glanced quickly round ; then away again.

" Oh yes, but I do."

" You are aware that I have only his word, of whose value I know nothing ; and that beyond that I have no proof whatever that you are the Marquis of Putney ? "

Again the young man glanced round.

" But I am."

This time he kept his eyes fixed steadily on the duke, who had an opportunity of realizing what sort of eyes they were. There was something in them which made the old man conscious of a curious sensation ; something with which he was familiar, which moved him in a fashion he would have found it difficult to explain. He was silent ; possibly he was endeavouring to decide what it was in them which was familiar. This was a handsome lad, already every inch a man ; tall, well-built, head well set upon his shoulders, wide-browed, square-jawed ; a son who, so far as looks went, would disgrace no father. The duke mentally compared him with Cecil ; it seemed hard to believe that those two could be the sons of the same father, and the same mother—they were so utterly unlike.

While the older man observed the younger, the youth returned him glance for glance, with an unwavering fixity of gaze which the duke found a trifle disconcerting. There was also an assurance, almost a touch of patronage, about his manner, for which the other was unprepared ; this young man was both frank and critical.

" You are rather older than I expected."

" I am nearly seventy ; do I look older than that ? "

" I mean—to be my father."

" It is by no means certain that I am your father."

" You are."

" How do you know ? "

" For one thing we are so like each other ; you have my

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eyes, and nose, and mouth, and chin ; and there are other points of resemblance. As I was coming down in the train I was wondering if, after all, you were ; but, now that I have seen you, I have no doubt whatever."

"Either you have very keen perceptions, or you arrive very rapidly at conclusions."

"Don't you care for me to have keen perceptions ? Isn't it a family trait ?"

"I am not sure."

"I perceive that you are also not sure if you will like to have me as a son."

"I am not."

The lad laughed. "And I'm not sure that I shall like to have you as a father. It's odd. I suppose there are fathers and sons who are not in sympathy."

"I believe you have had experience ; haven't you come across such instances ?"

"Oh yes, many ; that's true. But, in my case, I have always said that if I had had a father, I should have got on with him ; so, if we don't get on, it will seem odd, to me. Of course you understand that if you feel you'd rather be without me, you can."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I mean, practically, this is the first time we have ever met ; if you would like it should be the last I don't mind a bit."

"I fancy you don't appreciate the situation."

"I think I do. I am your son and heir ; you are the Duke of Datchet and I am the Marquis of Putney ; I inherit the family title and estates, automatically, at your decease. I understand, also, that I at once enter into possession of certain properties which are the appanage of the marquise. Isn't that the situation ?"

"You appear to have assimilated certain facts—you had them from Mr. Willis ?"

"In part."

"Let me explain to you what the position is. I have come down by this train, at some personal inconvenience, because, learning that you were travelling by it, I wished to have some conversation with you before you reached my house. As you are aware, you are not here at my invitation; you appear to have invited yourself. You would have received no invitation from me until I had been satisfied on two points; one, that you are the Marquis of Putney; two, that you are the sort of person I should wish my son to be. So far I have been satisfied on neither point; I may add that your behaviour in coming, uninvited, to my house, does not tend to the furtherance of my satisfaction. That, exactly, at the present moment, is the position."

"You don't believe that I'm your son?"

"Your perceptions are evidently sufficiently keen to enable you to gather that, at the moment, that is not the point."

"I fear that you over-estimate what you call my perceptions; it seems to me that it is the point. If I am your son I am not only entitled, it is my duty, to invite myself to Mallow."

"How do you make that out?"

"You, as my father, for what you suppose to be sufficient reasons of your own, may be disposed to disown me; or, at least, to keep me at arm's length. Mr. Willis warned me that such might be the case; but—I also have a mother."

"Let me warn you that I do not allow you to take advantage of the Duchess of Datchet's simplicity; it is for that special purpose that I am here."

"Indeed? I am afraid that now I don't follow."

"I do not intend to allow you to introduce yourself to the duchess as her acknowledged son—and mine."

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"How do you propose to prevent my doing so?"

"You are going to give me your assurance that you won't."

"And if I decline?"

"Then you won't go to Mallow."

"But I'm going to Mallow now."

"You will not go to Mallow till you have given me the assurance I require."

The lad looked at the duke ; then he put his head out of the carriage window and looked about him, exclaiming—

"Stop, please!"

The carriage stopped ; he turned the handle.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to get out to ask a question." Descending, he said to the coachman, "Where are you driving me?"

The carriage door was snatched out of his hand. The duke put his head out of the window, commanding—

"Drive on!"

The carriage drove on, leaving the young gentleman standing in the middle of the road.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE DUCHESS PERSUADES THE DUKE

THE excitement which reigned at Mallow—of a kind ! Such of the tenants as were obtainable were displayed on either side of the drive long before the marquis could by any possibility arrive ; with them were the work-people on the estate, and their women-folks and children, and all the while it rained and blew. Cecil expressed himself forcibly to Dolly.

“It’s a howling shame to keep those poor beggars waiting out there in weather like this ; if I were they I should cut and run.”

Miss Barber looked nervously round.

“Cecil, I wish you’d be careful what you say ; you know there’ll only be more unpleasantness. Let your mother do what she pleases, and say nothing.”

“My dear Dolly, I was saying nothing to any one of the slightest consequence ; I was only speaking to you ; and as you happen to be nothing and no one, I don’t mind mentioning, strictly between ourselves, that it’s my belief that my mother’s gone temporarily insane.”

Certainly the duchess was in a singular mood ; some itch was in her blood which prevented her from keeping still—or from allowing any one else to keep still either. Usually the least worrying of women, now she was *Worry* with a capital letter. The domestic department was in a turmoil ; from the scullery-maids and pages to the majestic heads of the servants’ hall. She had them all marshalled

to receive his lordship, when, at the most, the train could have only just reached Wargrave Station ; and made things unpleasant for all concerned because one or two of the underlings happened to be a few moments behind the others. Then ensued a bad half-hour ; a long one it was. There was no sign of any arrival. She would allow no one to leave the hall, declining to leave herself, snubbing Cecil severely when he suggested she should lie down till, at any rate, the carriage should enter the grounds ; indeed, Cecil found himself in an atmosphere which was charged with qualities of which he had had no previous experience. About ten minutes to three the duchess—who kept fluttering from the fireplace to the door, and from the door to the fireplace—asked him—

“ If the train was punctual isn’t it time that he was here ? What is the earliest time he could get here ? ”

“ I should say that depended, in a measure, upon whether the horses dropped down dead ; and also, upon whether the bottom dropped out of the carriage.”

She looked at him with something on her face, and in her eyes, which was altogether new to him ; for one dreadful moment Dolly, who was sitting at a little distance, feared that she would snatch him up out of the big chair in which he was sheltered, and shake him—she might easily have done it. When she spoke there was a coldness in her voice which was in uncomfortable contrast to the fire in her eyes.

“ Cecil, I warn you that I am not in a mood to be laughed at ; especially by you.” She moved again to the door ; whence, after an interval, she returned. “ It’s past three o’clock ; he ought to be here. Something may have happened. If anything has happened to keep him from me much longer, I—I’m afraid that it will be more than I shall be able to bear. I feel as if something in my head was going to burst.”

She put her hands up to her brows. Cecil, silent, stared up at her with a look upon his face which it was perhaps as well she did not notice.

"If—if he doesn't come soon I'll have a carriage round, and I'll go and meet him; I'll find out what has happened. I'd walk if it wasn't raining. I wish I'd gone to the station to meet the train; I should have known. Oh, Cecil, if he shouldn't come!"

A footman announced, "Your grace, the carriage is coming down the drive."

She ran to the door. "Cecil, quick! quick! Dolly, quick!"

Dolly went after her. Cecil, raising himself slowly from his chair, winking at Miss Barber, murmured—

"Oh, Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, what it is to have a brother!"

The duchess had gone right out of the hall, on to the steps, in the rain; the carriage to which the footman had alluded came bowling towards the house.

"Why don't they cheer?" she asked, alluding to the quiescence of the tenants and the rest of the retainers. "Why don't they cheer?"

The reason was made plain when the vehicle drew up at the foot of the steps, she hurrying down to meet it, oblivious of the rain. Joynson got out, followed by Mr. Robbins. She stared at them—past them, into the empty carriage, wholly at a loss.

"Where—where is my son? Where is the Marquis of Putney?"

Joynson removed his hat. "Has his grace not arrived?"

"His grace?—the duke? I—I didn't know he was expected. Mr. Robbins, where is the Marquis of Putney, whom you went to meet? Did he—has he not come?"

Possibly it was the little break which came in her voice

which made the steward nervous—something did. He stammered as he answered, as if her agitation was contagious.

"Certainly, your grace ; his—his lordship arrived by the train you mentioned."

She drew a long breath, as if something in her throat was choking her.

"Then, where is he?"

The steward glanced round, as if he himself was slightly puzzled.

"Has his lordship not come?"

"Of course he has not come ; if he had do you suppose I should ask you where he was? You went to meet him. Why is this man in the carriage with you instead of my son?"

"His grace met his lordship ; they drove off together. They started before we did. I do not understand why it is they have not arrived."

The lady looked Mr. Robbins very straight in the face. "The duke met the marquis and drove off with him?"

"And drove off with him."

She turned to Joynson. "Where has your master gone?"

"I expected to find him here."

Her eyes passed from one man to the other ; as if searching for a meaning on their faces which was not expressed by their words. She looked as if she could say a great deal—for some moments they thought she was going to say it ; then, apparently, she changed her mind.

"Stand there, one on either side of the steps, and wait until the duke arrives, with his lordship."

She could not have issued an order to them with more scathing brevity had they been a pair of scullions who had misbehaved themselves. She herself retired into the house, leaving them to await, with the rest of the underlings, his



lordship's arrival, in the rain. A footman came down to her holding open a large umbrella, under whose shelter she re-entered the hall. Dolly came to her, anxiously.

"Aren't you very wet?"

The duchess brushed her aside. "What does it matter?" She spoke to Cecil. "If your father is playing me some trick, he will be sorry."

"My dear mother, why should you suppose that my father is playing you a trick?"

Possibly she realized that the expression on his countenance was not so sympathetic as it might have been; her manner suggested that she had towards him almost a feeling of personal resentment.

"We shall see. I trust, for your own sake, if it is a trick that he is playing, that you have no part in it."

The crooked figure was drawn as straight as it could be drawn.

"Mother, do you not forget?"

"On the contrary, for the first time since you have known me, you will find that I remember. It is possible that you may shortly have to choose between your father and me."

A more injudicious speech she could hardly have made, in tones which were audible to the entire household, or one more unlike her. Cecil eyed her as if she were some strange creature; Dolly drew herself a little away from him as if she were afraid of being associated with something he might say or do. The duchess stood in front of the fire, as if to dry. There was a prolonged and awkward silence.

Then a man came in from the outer hall, announcing, "Your grace, another carriage is coming down the drive. Mr. Joynson says that this is the one the duke is in."

Again she moved to the door, down the steps, into the rain. They saw how pale she was, and how she trembled.

The carriage drew up ; the duke descending. Perceiving that he was alone—

“Hereward,” she asked, “where is my son?”

She looked at him, and he at her. If she was white he was stern ; in his tone, look, manner, there was an unusual harshness.

“In one moment I will give you all the information in my power.” He turned to Mr. Robbins. “What are all these people doing here? What is the meaning of all this nonsense? Send these people away at once. And have that rubbish taken down at the gate—immediately. And understand, Mr. Robbins, that, on a future occasion, you are not to allow rubbish of that kind to be erected unless you receive personal instructions from me.”

His wife’s voice repeated, “Hereward, where is my son?”

He took off his hat. “If your grace will permit me to offer you my arm.”

She drew herself away. “Answer me, where is my son? Why is he not in the carriage which I sent to meet him, not you? He came ; where is he?”

“If your grace will permit me to conduct you to my room I shall have pleasure in placing myself at your service.”

“Won’t you tell me here? You had better ; I shan’t leave this spot until you have told me ; nor shall you go either. Tell me, what have you done with him? Where is he?”

The duke glanced round. From the look on his face one wondered if he was considering the advisability of instructing his retainers to bear the lady bodily from the spot which she had proclaimed her determination not to quit ; if such was the case the conclusion at which he arrived was in the negative. Nothing could have been more courteous than his bearing.

“Will your grace permit me to observe, first, that I am

not fond of standing in the rain, at my age ; and, second, that I am averse to a public discussion of matters which concern ourselves alone—if you reflect I think you will recognize that you are also. If, however, you will favour me with your presence in my own apartment, I shall have pleasure in placing at your disposal all the information you can possibly require. May I not offer your grace my arm ? ”

“ If you’ll go first I’ll follow you ; but I’ll not have your arm.”

The duke bowed, and—thus requested—preceded the lady up the steps. In the hall the household servants still stood, waiting to be dismissed. The duke glared round at them.

“ Here, too ! What are all these people doing here ? Take them away—the lot of them ! ”

Without waiting to see his instructions carried out the duke strode through the throng ; and her grace strode after him. When they were alone together he turned on her, in anger—it was noticeable that there was a quality in his anger which gave to his age an appearance of decrepitude.

“ Have I to thank you for these—these ridiculous proceedings ? Why have you taken advantage of my absence to make of me, and of my house, a laughing-stock ? ”

She also was angry ; but in her wrath there was a tonic something which seemed to tend to the increase of her natural force and strength. All her gentleness seemed to have become swallowed up by an overmastering ferocity, sprung from some hidden depths of her being. Had not his own passion blinded him, he would have perceived that, from some occult cause, this was a woman transformed, and been warned in time. She replied to his question with a repetition of the one to which she had received no answer.

“ Where is my son ? ”

He glanced at her; then, as if dimly realizing that there was something strange about her bearing, glanced quickly away.

"How am I to know? Dead twenty years ago, for all that I can tell you! Fortunately I returned when I did; you would have made of me a target for the public laughter!"

"Hereward, take my advice, pay attention to me, and answer my question—before I make you."

Startled, he looked at her. "Before you—what?"

"Before I make you. For twenty years I've been robbed of my child because of you—don't deny it!—you told me yourself that that man stole my boy because of you. What have your sins to do with me, that my child, and I, should be punished because of your offences? For more than twenty years I've been your whipping-boy; I'll be that no longer. Why you fear this man Willis, what hold he has on you, I don't know, nor do I want to know—I am no prier into your secrets; but, for no private reasons of your own, whatever they may be, shall you rob me any longer of my boy. So, once more, before I make you, where is he?"

"You talk of your son, as if, in that conjunction, you were the person of most importance—the essential thing is that he should be shown to be my son."

"Hereward—again—where is he?"

"I don't know."

"You met him at the station—you drove away with him—what have you done with him that he was not in the carriage with you?"

"You allude to that young vagabond?—that—Mabel, what are you doing? Are you mad?"

She had taken him by his shoulders with both her hands, and held him tight; so tight that, though he struggled, he could not break loose.

"I am going to make you tell me where my son is!"

She shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, showing such strength of grip that the old man was helpless as a child. When she had shaken him enough she threw him from her, so that he dropped into an armchair in a crumpled, gasping heap. As she did so a voice exclaimed—

"Your grace!"

Looking round she saw that Joynson had entered the room, and had evidently been a spectator of at least part of the scene. Snatching up her husband's malacca cane she moved towards him—the cane in her hand.

"Leave this room, before I lay your master's cane across your back! When I am here, how dare you come into this room without orders!"

There came two words from the crumpled figure in the armchair.

"Joynson, go!"

Joynson went. The lady returned to her husband, still holding his cane—throughout the scene she preserved a singular sort of calmness.

"Well, Hereward, am I to use further means of persuasion before you will tell me where my son is?"

The duke answered, between his gasps.

"He got out—of the carriage—on the Densham road—and there—I left him."

"You left him on the Densham road? Why did he get out of the carriage—there?"

"Because—I gave him to understand—that he had not come to Mallow—at my invitation."

"You gave him—my son, and yours, when seeing him for the first time after twenty years—to understand that he had not come home at your invitation—so, being unwilling to be the uninvited guest, he descended from the carriage—which I, his mother, had sent to meet him!—so that you drove home alone, and left him standing in the road. You

mirror for fathers ! you model for husbands ! you prince of fine gentlemen ! Hereward, I am going to send every man, woman, and child, in the house and on the estate, out into the country, to search for my boy, with instructions—when found—to bring him home, in triumph. If, within the hour, he is not found, I'll set the telegraph in motion ; and every newspaper in England shall contain an appeal from me to him. And, when he does come home, if you don't treat him with that courtesy—I'll say nothing of affection, for that's a word whose meaning you've never known—which a father owes to his firstborn son, who has given him no cause of offence—for he can have given you none—I'll shame you with a shame which shall bring you on to your knees in the dust, before him, and before me."

Without another word she left the room—discovering, just as she was going, that she still retained the malacca cane, she let it drop from her hand on to the floor.

In the duke's room all was silent. His grace remained in the armchair, in the crumpled position in which his wife had left him, still seeming to experience some difficulty in breathing. During a space of perhaps five minutes he continued motionless, undisturbed. Then some one rapped at the door which was at the other end of the room. As the duke paid no heed, the rapping was presently repeated ; as it still went unheeded the door was opened about a couple of inches, and Joynson's voice inquired from without—

"Is your grace alone ?"

The duke vouchsafing no reply, the door was opened wider, and Joynson entered. He stood for a moment, glancing round ; the duke was crumpled up so low down in the chair that from where the servant stood nothing could be seen of him. It was only when Joynson advanced farther into the room that he perceived his master, and the singularity of his attitude.

"Your grace is ill ?"

The duke, with a perceptible effort, placed himself in a more dignified position, then sat staring into vacancy—grimly. Some moments elapsed before he replied to the man's question.

"Yes, Joynson, I am ill. I'm suffering from that worst of illnesses, old age. I've reached that period in life's tragi-comedy when a man ceases to be a man ; and becomes, instead, but sapless bones. The strange part is that I was not aware of it—till now."

Joynson, having crossed the room to pick up the malacca cane, returned to his master.

"Will your grace take off your overcoat?"

"My overcoat? I've got it on, have I? I didn't notice it." He stood up; Joynson assisted him to remove the garment, he needed the assistance. "Joynson, do you remember the regimental sports, when I threw Sergeant Baines, and broke his collar-bone?"

"Very well, your grace."

"He was two stone heavier than I was."

"He was, your grace."

"Wasn't it the same year I picked up the policeman in Piccadilly, and threw him halfway across the street?"

"It was in May you cross-buttocked Sergeant Baines; the policeman was the July following."

"Was it? He was a heavy man. It cost me a lot of money to keep that still."

"So I've understood, your grace."

"All that seems a long time ago, doesn't it?"

"It's nearly fifty years, your grace."

"Fifty years? Good God! Fifty years! Wasn't that about the time of—what was her name?—the red-haired girl?"

"Miss St. Clair, your grace."

"Ah yes, St. Clair. She was an uncommonly fine girl; yet I don't think she could have shaken the breath out of my body, do you?"

"I do not, your grace."

"No, I don't think she could."

The duke sat staring at his hands, which he held up in front of him, as if he was realizing, for the first time, what wizened hands they were.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### HER GRACE BEGS PARDON

THE duchess, proceeding from the duke's room, passed into the hall, prepared to summon the household, and scatter it over the countryside, in search of the missing marquis. As she entered the hall a footman opened the door of the outer hall to admit a young man, who held his cap in his hand. At sight of him she stopped and stared, as if wonderstruck; then went hurrying towards him, with agitated, anxious movements, which unflatteringly recalled those of a fluttering hen.

"Surely you—you are my son? You are—you are Putney?"

As the young man came in, Dolly—who, with Cecil, was the only other occupant of the hall, also advanced to meet him. As the duchess spoke she paused, seeming startled.

"Then—then you are the Marquis of Putney, after all?"

The young gentleman glanced from one to the other, seeming puzzled. He addressed the duchess.

"I'm afraid there's some mistake. I am Lawrence Sheldon, and I come from the Abbey. Miss Grainger asked me, if I found myself in the neighbourhood of Mallow, to give a message to Miss Barber."

Dolly introduced him, informally. "This is the Mr. Sheldon by whose likeness to the Dacre family I told you I was so much struck. Mr. Sheldon, this is the Duchess of Datchet."

Mr. Sheldon bowed. Her grace kept her eyes upon his face, with, in them, a curious expression, as if she was looking at some one in a dream ; and she smiled, oddly.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Sheldon ; I mistook you for my son, the Marquis of Putney."

The instant she ceased speaking a voice said, "Excuse me, I'm the Marquis of Putney."

They all turned round. There, in the doorway, stood another young man, holding a bowler hat in his hand, looking wet and muddy. The duchess stared at him in his turn, as if these various happenings were getting beyond her comprehension. The young man, on his part, advanced towards her with an air of smiling self-possession which did him credit.

"So, if you are the Duchess of Datchet, I'm afraid it is I who am your son ; and, I hope, it is you who are my mother."

She still stood silent ; as if, in that first moment, she found it occupation enough to look at him. Then, with a little gasp, she asked—

"Are you—are you—really, Putney ?"

"I am."

It was an example of life's little ironies that now, when the moment of meeting had actually come, she should find herself, almost absurdly, at a loss. She had meant it all to have been so different. During the last four and twenty hours she had rehearsed, mentally, over and over again, what she intended should be the fashion of the meeting. The carriage should come dashing down the drive, between rows of cheering tenants ; she would meet it at the foot of the steps ; the marquis would spring out, she would fold him in her arms, and all the world should cry, Amen.

But, in spite of those rehearsals, things had not been at all like that. There had been untoward incidents, of an extremely disconcerting kind ; then she had taken a perfect

stranger to be her son, and, if his manner had not been positively stand-offish, would have taken him to her breast ; before she had recovered from her very amazing error, the veritable Putney had arrived, in a manner which was not at all suggestive of a triumphal progress, and, to her own utter bewilderment, she felt herself to be positively afraid of him. Not only had things been altogether different, he was also different. He seemed so much older than she had expected ; so much bigger, in every sense of the word ; so much more important, so much more at his ease, so much more of a man. The idea of taking him in her arms, and crying over him. With a gasp she realized that to do that would be—to speak of nothing else—to approach perilously close in the ridiculous. Her amazement was almost grotesque when he turned her programme upside down, and, instead of her taking him in her arms, he took her in his arms, pressing her to his overcoat, oblivious of the fact that it was wet, and, kissing her, not once, or twice, but half a dozen times, observing incidentally—

“Mother, I am glad that I have found you.”

The remark as a remark—was banal, yet the way in which he uttered it gave it what seemed to her to be a flavour of actual impropriety. When he released her she was trembling so that she could scarcely stand ; the blood had rushed into her face and dyed it crimson. To look at her one would have thought that she had been the victim of an outrage. Without a word she turned right round, and made as if about to leave the hall. When she had reached the foot of the staircase the young man cried after her—

“Mother !”

When she heard him she stopped, as if the sound of the word had woke in her a consciousness of the strangeness of her behaviour. For a moment she stood motionless, as if she struggled for power to enable her to conceal her own

emotions. Then, facing round, she returned towards the young man, the colour coming and going in her cheeks, her eyes shining, her limbs still tremulous, her voice shaky.

"I am very silly ; but, the truth is, I am not very well, and, this morning, I have had much to try me. So you are Putney ?"

She seemed to find it difficult to meet the young man's eyes, glancing away as soon as she caught them as if there was something in them which disturbed her. She turned towards Mr. Sheldon.

"It was ridiculous of me to make such a mistake ; but—the fact is, Putney, you don't look a bit like what I expected you would do."

"I hope I don't look very much worse ?"

"No—o, I don't know that it's that ; but—somehow—you're so different. But I'm forgetting. Putney, this is your brother ; this is Cecil."

Cecil came stumping forward ; a look on his face the meaning of which it was not easy to define.

"But—are you Putney ? In this first scene of what looks like a comedy of errors one wonders if there are other scenes to follow."

"Oh yes, I'm Putney."

"Then, if you are Putney, I'm your brother ; though I don't look much like you."

"No, you don't."

There was something about the manner in which these three words were uttered which had an unpleasant effect on those who heard them ; almost as if he had flicked them across the face with a pocket-handkerchief. There was a touch of savagery in Cecil's retort.

"I don't know that I want to look like you, either."

"Don't you ? That's queer."

Though the words were spoken with a laugh, they stung. Cecil spoke to Mr. Sheldon.

"Upon my word, I believe that Dolly's right, and that I'm more like you than like him; I hope that you don't mind."

Mr. Sheldon laughed; in his laughter there was a quality which the other's lacked.

"Since I've been here it's been discovered that I resemble all sorts of delightful people; I wish the likeness wasn't only superficial."

The duchess said—it was odd how she kept her eyes upon his face, as if on it she found nothing to disturb her—

"So you've brought Dolly a message from Constance Grainger? By the way, Putney, let me introduce you to Miss Barber." The two young people bowed. "How is Constance? How did you come?"

"Oh, I walked."

"Walked from the Abbey!—in this weather?"

"I don't mind the weather; and I love walking."

"But it's been raining hard. That reminds me; I am afraid, Putney, that you must be a little damp. Have you any luggage?"

"One bag; they told me at the door that that had been sent upstairs some time ago; a Mr. Joynson brought it."

"Joynson; oh yes. Are you—dampish?"

"I am—a little."

"Would you like to change?"

"I should, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" She rang a bell; to the servant who appeared, "Show the Marquis of Putney to his room."

Soon after the young man had been conducted up the staircase the duchess ascended also. When she reached her room, locking the door, going to the prie-dieu which stood before the altar against the wall, she sank on to her knees, and, covering her face with her hands, presently began to cry as if her heart was breaking. She would

have found it difficult to give a clear definition of what it was that troubled her, but she had not cried like that for years. After a while, the violence of her grief abating, uncovering her face, crossing her hands upon her breast, she looked up at the crucifix which stood upon the altar, and she prayed, the tears still rolling down her cheeks. Then, rising, she sponged her face, doing her best to remove from it all traces of her weeping. And she went downstairs to the duke's room. She knocked at the door and entered. The duke was sitting at his table, writing. Without looking round, he asked—

“Who's there?”

“It is I, Hereward.”

When he heard her voice he turned, with a start, and rose from his chair.

“You! I beg your pardon; I had no idea. I thought it was one of the servants.”

“Hereward, I have come to beg your pardon for my ill-temper; for my bad behaviour; and for having been rude to you.”

He stared for a moment, as if at a loss to understand the situation; then he smiled, a little whimsically.

“You did shake me, didn't you?”

“I'm afraid I did; I know I did. I'm—sorry.”

“You couldn't have done it fifty years ago.”

“No; fifty years ago I wasn't born.”

He seemed to be pondering the point, as if struck by it.

“I suppose not, when you come to think of it. So the moral's this: that when a man of fifty marries a girl in her teens, the probability is that, later on, there'll arrive at least one moment when he'll learn that they belong to different ages. That was my moment, when you deposited me in that armchair.”

“Hereward, I beg your pardon.”

"My dear Mabel, from my heart I forgive you ; I forgave you while you were doing it, although—it struck me as a little droll. It is very good of you to beg my pardon ; I fancy I ought also to beg yours—you must have found me most provoking. Only—the next time—please remember that old bones soon get sore, and keep sore so long."

"Hereward !"

He went to her, and put his arm about her, and kissed her ; and she kissed him, and rested her head upon his shoulder, and cried a little. She was still crying when, by her request, he opened the door and let her go.

When he was again alone, he remained standing close to the door which she had just passed through, stroking his chin with the rim of his glasses ; endeavouring to solve, from imperfect premises, the puzzle of her coming and her going.

"I wonder what has happened now ?—These dear women !"

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE FATHER AND HIS SON

DINNER at Mallow that night was rather a curious meal. There were present the duke and duchess, Miss Barber, Lord Cecil Dacre, and the young gentleman who had become known in the house as the Marquis of Putney. Of these five persons the last was the only one who seemed quite at his ease—which was rather odd, since he was the cause of the general uneasiness ; though exactly for what reason it would have perhaps been difficult to say. He was undeniably handsome, so far as appearance went he would have done credit to any table ; his bearing and manners were as good as they very well could have been of their kind. Perhaps his faults—from their point of view—lay rather in the other direction ; if he had not been quite so good-looking, if his bearing had not been so assured, his manners less redolent of the article called polish, it is possible that, though he might have impressed them less, they would have liked him more.

Of course his position was not an easy one ; and, probably, with the best will in the world, the duchess made it harder for him than she need have done. She, whose self-possession was a byword, was in a state of the most painful nervousness, than which there are few things more infectious. She did not seem to know whether to talk or to be still ; each time she spoke it was with an effort, and when she was still they had a feeling that tears were



trembling near her eyes. She appeared to desire to be as friendly towards the stranger as a mother ought to be, while, at the same time, regarding him with alarm which was not at all maternal ; the result of which mixture of feelings was that one minute she was chattering volubly about things which were not worth chattering about, while the next she was preserving a silence which was not only stony, but snubbish also.

They sat at an oblong table. The duchess was at one end ; on her right was the newly found marquis, on her left was Cecil. It certainly was a fact that Cecil's treatment of his brother was not all it might have been. He ignored him when he could ; when he could not, neither his words nor his tone were just what one brother should use to another, especially when they were meeting for the first time in their lives. Next to Cecil sat Dolly ; she was evidently doing her utmost to behave quite nicely, but unfortunately, those of them who knew her best were aware that this nice behaviour of hers was not spontaneous. At the other end sat the duke ; his demeanour was a study. Nothing could have been more courteous, nothing could have been more chilling, and—now and then—nothing could have been more disagreeable. The effect produced by his deportment was heightened by the fact that at all points he met his match in the Marquis of Putney.

The joke, for the lookers-on, and the tragedy, for the players, lay in that one fact, that, while this young man ought to have been crushed and unhappy, he was quite evidently enjoying himself to a degree which verged on the insolent. He so plainly found them all amusing—even his mother. She had a dreadful suspicion that he regarded her as a delightful woman to look at, but rather a fool ; and one felt that if she had not been his mother he would have made love to her in a manner she might have found it a trifle difficult to resist ; and one had a notion that she

felt that way herself: hence the alarm with which she quite obviously regarded him. Cecil he treated as a curiosity. Ill-tempered as curiosities are apt to be, he bore himself towards him with a laughing condescension which was galling. Of Dolly he took but little notice; there was nothing in his bearing towards her to which she could take exception.

He reserved his force for the duke. Though neither said to the other a discourteous thing, one was conscious that between these two there was battle. As the meal progressed one realized that it was a battle in which age would almost certainly be worsted. There was a calm assurance about the younger man, born of strength, vigour, vitality, against which one felt that the old man might struggle in vain. As he sat a little bent in his chair one felt that he was very old—as if he had aged during the last few hours. It was an unpromising preface to the relations which should exist between a father and his first-born son. Their meeting in the drawing-room before dinner was an oddity. The young man was talking to the duchess when his father entered. They bowed to each other, but the old man was ominously still. Presently the young man said to him, as easily as if there had been no sort of unpleasantness between them, and as if there were nothing singular in his father's manner—

“I should imagine that from where I left you on the road it's rather a pleasant walk to the house, in fine weather.”

The duke's reply was hardly genial. “We flatter ourselves that the country about here is pleasant.”

Just then dinner was announced; and the duke took in the duchess.

Throughout the meal the young man persisted in his refusal to notice anything singular in the old man's manner, and to wholly ignore his efforts to snub him—from which

attitude he evidently derived more entertainment than the others did. When the meal was ended, and the ladies gone, the duke said to Cecil—

“I have a few words which I wish to say in private, do you mind allowing me to say them?”

Without hesitation Cecil went stumping out of the room; the young man and the old one were left alone together. The young man, lighting a cigar which he had taken from a box in front of him, said to the duke at the other end of the table—

“It’s just as well that you sent him away, as I happen also to have a few words which I wish to say to you.”

“Have you? I think, however, that I’ll say my say first.”

The young man, having lit his cigar, stood up and moved his chair to within a couple of feet of where the duke’s was. Leaning forward on the table he regarded him with a keen attention which possibly the old man found—at such close quarters—slightly disconcerting; though if he did he allowed no sign to escape him.

“Well, sir, I’m waiting.”

The duke suffered him to wait for a moment or two, while he eyed the wineglass whose stem he was fingering.

“You have possibly found my attitude a little unexpected?”

“I have, considering that we have met to-day, as father and son, practically for the first time in our lives,”

The duke’s lips wrinkled. “We’ll leave the ‘father and son’ part out of it; the question of your sonship is a matter rather for the lawyers than for you and me—a point which, apparently, you only imperfectly appreciate.” The young man was silent, keeping his eyes, with the same fixed stare, on the old man’s face. “The point on which I wish to speak to you, and which accounts for my attitude, will exist even if you are shown to be my son. I am possibly doing you

an injustice. I hope I am. If I am you will find me very willing to ask your forgiveness. I am not fond of apologies ; but nothing will give me more sincere pleasure than to find that it is my duty to apologize to you. If I am doing you an injustice the fault is in your friend Mr. Willis, from whom I have received all the information concerning you that I have received. I shall reach the point to which I am coming perhaps quickest by asking you a question, point-blank. Is it true that you have recently been in jail ? ”

The young man's gaze did not falter, although the duke suddenly looked at him as if he would read his soul ; nor did the fashion of his countenance change.

“ Why do you put to me such a question ? ”

“ That is a retort which you are quite entitled to make. My answer is that when Mr. Willis was here last week he told me that you were—at that time—in jail. ”

“ He told you that—Willis ? ”

“ He did. ”

“ But—why ? What was his motive ? ”

“ The question of motive is not one with which we are immediately concerned. The point is—did he lie ? Were you at that time, in jail ? ”

“ I was. ”

Still the fashion of the young man's countenance did not change ; nor were his eyes averted.

“ You were ? ”

“ I was ; I was released yesterday morning. ”

“ Yesterday morning ? And how long afterwards did you despatch a telegram to the Duchess of Datchet ? ”

“ Within a few hours. Willis met me shortly afterwards and told me who I was ; so I wired to the duchess. ”

“ To all intents and purposes, you came straight from a prison here ? ”

“ Exactly. ”

"You are frank. Mr. Willis hinted that that was not the first time you had been inside a jail."

"It wasn't."

"It wasn't? Indeed. Mr. Willis also informed me that, young though you are, you have long been an accomplished thief, swindler, cheat, and blackguard; in all respects an unfit associate for honest men and women."

"He told you that also?"

"He did."

"I wonder what his motive can have been."

"The point is—is what he said true?"

"It is; I am all the things he said I am."

"You admit it?"

"Since he gave you the information, and can, if he likes, furnish you with proofs, what have I to gain from a denial?"

"You strike me as being an amazing person. At least you will perceive that, whether you are or are not shown to be my son, my attitude towards you must always be peculiar."

"I don't see why."

"Don't you? Do you imagine that if the Marquis of Putney is a person of your character I must admit him to Mallow, and all that it implies, merely because he is the Marquis of Putney?"

"I don't see how you can help it. Pardon me if I seem to interrupt you; but I have listened to you, now you listen to me."

"I don't know that I choose to listen to you."

"You'll have to listen if you choose to or if you don't. It's no use your looking about for a bell. If you make any serious attempt to ring a bell, or to leave your seat, or to summon aid, till I have said what I have to say, I'll wring your neck. If you look into my eyes, and consider the information you have received from

Willis, you will perceive, if you are a perceptive person, that I am using no empty threat ; I will wring your neck. If I am to hang—as I sometimes fancy—I may as well hang for you ; though I grant that it is unusual for an acquaintance between father and son to commence by the son killing his father.” The young man, leaning back in his seat, blew the smoke of his cigar into the air ; the old man sat still, watching—as if he did see something in the young man’s eyes which kept him still. “ You’ve retailed the information which you received from Willis about me ; now I’ll tell you what he told me about you, and, when I’ve finished, you’ll understand how it is that I don’t recognize your right to assume an attitude towards me which—as you put it—is peculiar. Willis tells me that you seduced his sister under a promise of marriage ; is that true ? ”

“ It is false.”

“ Didn’t you seduce her ? ”

“ I decline to answer.”

“ I see ; you admit the seduction, but deny the promise of marriage ; is that it ? ”

“ I repeat that I decline to answer. You are trenching on matters which are absolutely no concern of yours.”

“ Pardon me, but I am going to bring home to your apparently dull perception that they are very much my concern. He holds letters of yours to her which contained expressions which she interpreted as equivalent to a promise of marriage, and which you meant that she should so interpret. When, finding herself with child by you, she learned that you had been practising on her simplicity, the discovery killed her. Since, if it had not been for you, she would have lived, and continued happy in the position of life in which God had placed her, Willis, not unnaturally, regarded—and still regards—you as her murderer. Since it was useless to look unto the law for redress, he became

a law unto himself. He stole me to punish you. You know what manner of man he is ; he has fashioned me in his own image. I am what I am—having never had a chance of being anything else—because of what you did, and were, and are. The responsibility is wholly yours. I am the fruit of the seed you sowed. Now you perceive why I decline to admit your right—merely because you occupy the seat which will presently be mine—to assume what you call a peculiar attitude towards me ; I being the natural son of such a father.”

“There is nothing to show you are my son.”

“You said that, if it is shown that I am your son, it will make no difference to your attitude.”

“It won’t. I’ll not have a person of your sort at Mallow.”

“Why not—when there is a person of your sort there already?”

“I’ve nothing to add to what I’ve said ; even though you wring my neck.”

“But I’ve a bargain to propose. As you observed, the question of whether I am or am not your son is one largely for the lawyers. I undertake, on my part, if it is shown that I am not your son, to take myself away from Mallow, and to trouble you no more ; if you, on your part, undertake to accord me that treatment, in all respects, which is proper to your son and heir, if it is shown that I am your son, or until it is shown that I am not.”

“In other words, if you are proved to be an impostor, you condescend to promise that you’ll submit to be treated as one?”

“The point of course being that I’m not an impostor. I know that you’re my father, just as you know that I’m your son.”

“I don’t.”

“I regret, my dear father, that I am forced to the

unpleasant conclusion that you're a liar ; you do know it. The fact is that if I were proved by all the courts in England to be your son, you'd not willingly admit it ; you've taken such a prejudice against me."

"I'll never admit that a convicted thief's my son."

"Exactly ; there you are ! My dear father——"

"Don't call me that !"

The old man gripped the wineglass as if he would hurl it at the other's face ; a gesture on which the young man commented.

"I shouldn't throw it, if I were you. My dear father——"

The old man, leaning forward, struck the young man with the wineglass on the cheek, shivering it to splinters. The instant the glass touched his skin the young man caught the other by the throat, with one hand, and held him by the throat for perhaps thirty seconds. When he released him the duke dropped back into his chair in a much worse condition than when, in the afternoon, the duchess had finished shaking him ; indeed, his appearance was so unpleasant, that one wondered how close he had come to being choked to death. His head hung forward on his breast, his mouth was open, his tongue protruded, his eyes were shut, there was a perceptible interval before he showed any sign of life. Then a shiver went all over him ; he seemed attacked by some sort of convulsion, as he fought for breath. When consciousness did return he seemed such a feeble old man. And all the while the youth sat, enjoying his cigar, observing him without any show of either interest or emotion.

"My dear father," he continued—the old man glanced up, but, just then, he was incapable of giving further proofs of his resentment—"if you decline to give the undertaking I have asked, I shall go to the duchess, and tell her what I've just told you, showing how, because you were a liar and a blackguard, I, a helpless and unoffending lad,



have been trained to be a thief. Her view of the position may be different to yours. Now, which is it to be? Your undertaking, or my tale?"

"You'll—probably—kill her—if you do—tell her."

The words were gasped rather than spoken. "You'll kill her, not I—since nothing can be farther from my wish than to tell my mother what will redound so little to your credit, and to mine. My desire is to keep our knowledge of each other's characters locked in our own breasts. I shall not tell her unless you compel me."

"Have you—any objection—to my having—a glass of wine?"

"None whatever; let me give you one."

"No—you don't. I'll—help myself."

"If you prefer it; I only thought you seemed a trifle shaky."

As the duke leaned forward it was all that he could do to draw the decanter towards him; but he glanced at the other's face with what perhaps was meant for a grin.

"I've cut your face."

"It's nothing; the merest scratch. I nearly wrung your neck. What a delightful talk we're having. Well, which is it to be? Your undertaking, or my tale?"

"I'll tell you in the morning."

"Oh no, you don't! I've seen enough of your methods to be aware that you'll have had me pitched into the moat before the morning; if there's such a thing about the premises."

"I wish there were."

"Just so; I don't doubt it; which is why I prefer to have your undertaking to-night."

"I'll tell you in the morning."

"Then I shall have to tell the duchess to-night. I must look after my own salvation."

"What is it you want?"

"Nothing which is in the least injurious to your dignity. I don't ask you to take me to your heart, or anything of that kind, as some fathers would."

"Thank you."

"I do not ask you for your love, as some sons would, though you have mine. I merely ask you to accord to me the same treatment you would accord to any other guest beneath your roof."

"For how long?"

"I suppose the lawyers will take some time."

"Before it's established, to my satisfaction, that you're my son—years."

"I see. You mean to fight me?"

The old man said nothing. Lifting his glass with a shaky hand, he sipped its contents with a grin, which was a little ghastly. The significance of his silence was not lost upon the other, although his manner remained unruffled—it was a peculiarity of this young man, that nothing seemed to ruffle him. Carefully extinguishing what remained of his cigar, he laid the stump in an ash-tray.

"As it's really time that we joined the ladies, it's just as well that we're approaching an agreement, as I believe we are; because at least we've arrived at a common understanding. If years will be required to prove to you that I'm your son, it would of course be absurd to expect you to receive me as your guest for an indefinite period. As, however, certain formal steps will have to be taken by your lawyers, as well as mine, I am advised that—for my own interests—it would be desirable that I should remain at Mallow till they are finished. They ought not to occupy more than two or three days—four at the outside. I will put it this way, then; I will undertake to leave Mallow within, say, four days, if you will promise, during those four days, to treat me as you would any other guest."

"My man, Charter, is coming down to-morrow. I don't know what the lawyers who are acting on your behalf may propose to do. Charter will have something to say to you, but he'll probably have done with you in a couple of days. Give me your word that you'll leave Mallow when Charter's finished with you, and I'll undertake to treat you, while you're here, as civilly as I can."

The young man stood up. "Very well—that's agreed—bravo! I'm to stay at Mallow for a couple of days; and, during that time, you're to treat me civilly."

"As civilly as I can."

"Precisely; I do not ask from you impossibilities. As civilly as you can. Now, shall we join the ladies? Shall I assist you to get out of your chair?"

The old man glared up at him; he said nothing—there was more eloquence in his look than could have been conveyed by any spoken negative.

## CHAPTER XXVI .

### IN THE SMALL DRAWING-ROOM

IN the drawing-room—at Mallow, the drawing-rooms being many, the one in which they sat was known as the small one—most of the talking which was done was done by the ladies. Cecil read, and listened, and now and then put in a word—mostly when he could not help it. It was rather an odd fact that the Marquis of Putney was never once mentioned—even by his mother. It was almost odder that the principal theme should have been Mr. Sheldon. The duchess seemed to be able to talk of nothing and no one else. She flooded Dolly with a rain of questions, of which he was always the subject. Some young women might not have cared to be questioned, and cross-questioned, about a strange young man; but Dolly did not seem to mind. It was surprising what a deal she appeared to know of him. She had met him on several occasions since that first meeting in the wood, considering how short a time ago that was, and how distant was the Abbey; on some of those occasions under circumstances which seemed to be a trifle obscure. Evidently Jack Grainger did not occupy very much of Mr. Sheldon's time, apparently, also, Mr. Sheldon was fond of walking considerable distances; from what could be gathered from Miss Barber's remarks she had encountered him—by the strangest accident—at least twice in the Mallow grounds. Some persons would have thought it curious. Of those

persons the duchess was quite capable of being one ; but, just then, so insatiable was her desire for information, that she seemed to see nothing strange in the fact that this young lady was in possession of such a fund of it.

Mr. Sheldon was an orphan. Was Dolly sure ? Quite ; he himself had told her so.

" He has never known either his father or his mother ; doesn't that seem queer ? "

" Very," agreed the duchess. " Did he say that he had never seen either of them ?—not either ? "

Oh yes, he had said that ; what was more it seemed that he knew nothing whatever about them, absolutely nothing ; wasn't that remarkable ? It appeared that he had been brought up by a person who was no relation of his at all—at least she said that she was no relation ; though that was a statement which he had found so difficult of credence that more than once he had told her that he believed she was a relative of his. And each time he had told her so she cried ; wasn't that queer ? What kind of person was she ? If Mr. Sheldon was to be believed, she was all that was most perfect in a woman—a sort of feminine angel without wings. No doubt he exaggerated ? Dolly was not so sure ; she was disinclined to think that it was his habit to exaggerate. She had certainly done a great deal for him—devoted her whole life to him, in fact. Mr. Sheldon could not speak of her too highly. Very far from rich, she had denied herself for his sake ; she had sent him to first-rate schools, and, afterwards, to the university, where he now was. He was quite sure that she had spent much more on him than on herself. Now that he had reached man's estate this troubled him ; he had great difficulty in preventing her continuing to expend what was practically her all on him ; because he had refused to permit it, they had almost quarrelled. Perhaps, suggested the duchess, it was his own money she had been spending.

No ; he had asked her. She had admitted it was not. But—an admission of that kind—what did it amount to ? To everything, according to Mr. Sheldon. He declared that she was a woman who was incapable of an untruth ; he believed that she would have liked to say that the money was his, but—she could not lie. There was a smile about the duchess's lips which hinted at incredulity ; but she only observed that it was very mysterious why a woman should insist on spending her little all on a young man who was related to her by no ties of kindred. Yes, agreed Miss Barber, it was ; and that was why Mr. Sheldon had so often asked himself if it could be possible that she was not related to him. She was unmarried ; she was still quite young, not yet thirty-seven.

“Not yet how much ?” cried her grace.

Not yet thirty-seven, and—Mr. Sheldon said—one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Until very recently he had thought her the most beautiful woman ; but it seemed that quite lately he had encountered some one else who, apparently, he was inclined to think was even more beautiful.

“But,” demanded the duchess, “how old is he ?”

“He's nearly twenty-one.”

“And she's not more than thirty-six—only fifteen years older than he is, if that. And, you say, good-looking, and not married ; and he's lived alone with her all his life, and she no relation ? It doesn't seem—well, it does seem most mysterious.”

Miss Barber said nothing ; she was very busily engaged just then, with a tie which she was knitting. Presently her grace remarked—

“I should like to see this Mr. Sheldon, and have a talk to him.”

“You can quite easily do that. He may be coming over to-morrow, with an answer to the message I sent to Constance.”

Quite unexpectedly Cecil joined the conversation, without putting down the book which he was reading.

"Isn't Constance Grainger cognizant of the fact that there's such a thing as a postman, that she should employ this most remarkable person to carry, what she calls her messages, gratuitously, in all weathers, across all those miles of country?"

Neither of the ladies replied. For some moments they both of them were still. Then the Marquis of Putney entered—which perhaps prevented their giving Cecil the information he required.

Directly the marquis appeared the duchess rose.

"I would not go to bed until you came, although I'm feeling very tired. This has been a very trying time for me. I have not felt like myself at all. You must not judge me by what you have seen of me to-day; in the morning I shall be quite a different person. Yet I could not go without bidding you good night."

As he bowed over his mother's extended hand Dolly thought how handsome he was; how much older he seemed than Cecil; how different, how much more a man of the world.

"My father has had so much to say to me that I fear that the time has slipped away without our noticing; but I do trust that to-morrow you'll feel rested. I have so many things I wish to say to you."

"And I. Do you think there are not many things I wish to say to you? To-morrow I'll say them all."

When he raised her hand, and, bending, touched it with his lips, she blushed; one wondered if she had expected something else, and been afraid of it. When he had held the door open for her to pass through, he came back to Dolly and Cecil, and laughed.

"I wonder if you two guess how queer all this seems, to me?"

"I suppose it does seem queer," said Dolly.

"Yesterday I hadn't a relation in the world, and now I've not only a father and a mother, but also a brother, and Heaven knows how many uncles, aunts, and cousins. By the way, are you a relative of mine?"

Dolly shook her head.

"No, I'm not; not even a little bit of one."

"Don't count me as a brother." This was Cecil.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the sort of brother that doesn't count. Anyhow, I'm only a fraction, not a whole."

Without answering, the marquis, crossing to the piano, began to play.

"How beautifully you play," commented Dolly, when he stopped.

"That's Chopin; what he calls a nocturne; he must have had some very curious nights, that fellow. When one's in a mood in which one feels as if one were suspended between heaven and hell, with glimpses into both places, it's then that one plays Chopin; that's the mood he understood quite well. Do you mind my singing?"

Without waiting for an answer he sang something in German, singing as well as he played; he not only had a good voice, he used it in a way which was almost startlingly effective. Though his listeners' knowledge of German was rudimentary, both the boy and the girl were more moved by what he sang than they would have cared to admit. When he had finished he swung round on the music-stool.

"That's the story of my life."

"Is it?" Dolly spoke. "I'm afraid I don't understand German so well as I ought to do; but—it's a very beautiful song."

"It's the story of a man who is alone in the world, with nothing and no one to care for, or to care for him; and he



dreams—as those sort of chaps will dream. He dreams that he's no longer alone ; that he has troops of relations and friends ; heaps of money ; all the things he has never had, but always desired. The dream is so real, it makes him so happy, that the very intensity of his happiness wakes him up, and—he finds that it's nothing but a dream. So the last state of that man is worse than the first."

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE DUKE DREAMS

THAT night the Duke of Datchet had a dream ; his was an even stranger dream than that of which his newly-found son had been singing, with much charm and skill. He had been taciturn while Joynson had been assisting him to make his final preparations for retiring to rest. Sometimes, when undressing, he would be garrulous ; master and man would discuss together the incidents of the day ; but that night he scarcely spoke a word, till he was between the sheets, and his attendant was about to retire. He raised his head from his pillow and asked—

“Joynson, how do you sleep at night ?”

As if taken by surprise the man considered for a moment before he answered.

“It varies, your grace. Sometimes I sleep the whole night through ; sometimes I lie awake till it’s almost time for getting up.”

“Thinking ?”

“Yes, your grace, thinking—mostly.”

“It’s a nuisance— isn’t it ?—that kind of wakefulness ; yet, often, I don’t know which is worse, to lie awake and think, or to go to sleep and dream. I fancy that these restless nights are an attribute of old age ; it’s a malady to which we’re both becoming victims.”

“I realize that I am not becoming younger. I don’t know—I don’t know that I regret it.”

"Don't you, Joynson ; don't you ?"

"We have grown old together, your grace, and—I don't think that either of us has much cause for regret."

"I suppose not, Joynson ; I suppose not. You always were an optimist."

"Yes, I've always been an optimist ; ever since I knew the meaning of the word."

"Ready for either event—heaven or hell."

"I don't think it matters much."

"Nor do I, Joynson, which it is. We've both of us been gentlemen. I should like you to know, Joynson, that for many years I've realized, quite clearly, that, in all essentials, you're every bit as fine a gentleman as I am."

"I am obliged to your grace for saying so."

"It's a bald expression of a simple truth. Good night, Joynson."

"Good night, your grace."

The man went ; and, almost as soon as the door was closed, the master fell asleep. And then came the dream—a dream which was even more real than that of which the young man had been singing.

Suddenly—how long after he had fallen asleep he never knew—it seemed to him that he was wide awake. For some moments he could not understand what had woke him. Then, by degrees, he became conscious that a light was in his room ; it was a peculiarity of his that he never had been able to sleep with a light in his room. In a state of pleasant ease he lay and wondered how it could have got there, and whence it came. Then he heard a sound, as of the rustling of papers ; it came again, and again. He raised his head from his pillow, and he saw—in his dream.

One of the electric lights was switched on. The door of the great safe in the corner—a safe which was so large as to be, to all intents and purposes, a strong room—was open ; in front of it stood the Marquis of Putney, with

some papers in his hands. The old man's sight was too weak to enable him to see, from that distance, just what papers they were ; evidently they contained matter which the young man found of extreme interest, since he regarded them with close attention. The duke watched, silent ; the marquis, apparently unconscious that he was being watched, continued to study the papers he was holding. It seemed to the duke to be the strangest dream he had ever had, and one of which he could not get rid. Presently he asked, and the sound of his own voice startled him—

“What are you doing there ?”

The young man looked round, with the most casual air, quite at his ease, and looked at the duke, as if not in the least surprised, and smiled.

“So—you’ve woke up ? I thought you were sleeping very soundly.”

This did seem to the duke to be the strangest dream as he repeated his own inquiry—

“What are you doing there ?”

“Looking through the family papers, and other things ; isn’t it plain ?”

“How—how did you get that door open ?”

“My dear father!—with your keys.”

“So—so you’re playing the thief—at Mallow.”

“You’re uncivil, and inexact. Since it was obvious that you would not allow me to have access to the family papers, if you could help it, I had to make my own opportunity ; in other words, to protect myself against my own father. I find here many interesting things—things which I ought to know, with whose existence I ought to be acquainted. Had you been a natural parent you would have volunteered to bring them to my notice—to make me cognizant of their contents. There are also, I admit, certain documents which I could hardly expect you to publish, even to your son ; but if I have come upon them,

unawares, the fault again is yours. Had you behaved properly I should not have been compelled to resort to a mode of procedure which has an appearance of irregularity, and your secrets would have remained inviolate. Now, here—here, for instance, are what strike me as being some very interesting photographs.”

He picked up a small portfolio which rested on a chair. At sight of it the duke exclaimed in his dream—

“Put it down!”

“Ah!—you recognize it? Then you know how interesting I must have found its contents. It contains, as you are aware, a number of charming portraits of a charming girl—all of the same girl—and all charming, though, perhaps, a little old-fashioned; it is odd how quickly portraits, and especially photographs, do get old-fashioned. Now, who is the lady? I’ve been asking myself that question while you slept. There is something about her which I have seen before—somewhere; she reminds me of some one, something—for the moment, I can’t just lay my finger on the spot. It certainly isn’t my mother, the duchess; no one could be less like her than this charming girl. Father, who is she?”

“Put those things down; return them to their proper places; shut the door of that safe, give me my keys, and go.”

“My dear father, I haven’t seen half the things I want to see, and mean to see. How unreasonable you will persist in being. As for these pretty pictures, of this pretty girl, I mean to take them with me. I note that they are accompanied by what seem to be letters—quite a number, and other articles; what looks like hair—of a very pretty shade—and ribbons, and all sorts of curious things. It’s possible that, when I’ve had time to read them, the letters, and the portraits, and the other things, may be brought to bear upon you in such a manner that you may be induced to take a more correct view of a father’s duty towards his

son. Take my advice, and don't look for a bell. You won't be allowed to ring it ; you'll find it pleasanter not to try."

But the duke was not to be persuaded. Sitting up, he stretched out his arm towards an ivory push-piece which was at the side of his bed. Before he could reach it the young man had him by the throat, it was remarkable with what swiftness he moved ; the scene in the dining-room was re-enacted. The strong young hand held the old throat tight for a quite perceptible period. Then, relaxing its hold, let the head and body which were joined by the throat drop back upon the bed, to come back to life if they could. And the marquis stood looking down at the duke, addressing him with the unemotional air of business-like attention which seemed to be his most singular characteristic.

"That's part of one of the exercises of what they call over here the Japanese art of self-defence ; the art consisting in knowing exactly when to stop. If you go on too long the subject's dead. If you stop too soon he'll probably perform the trick on you ; there is an answer to it, if you have a chance of getting it in, and, perhaps, one day, I'll show you what it is. I've had so much practice at it, one way or another, that I generally manage to hit the happy medium ; so that the answer would avail you nothing, even if you knew it. Isn't it effective ? Now lie still, and, when you do get back your breath, keep on lying still ; do ! Because, you know, in the case of an old man like you, even the most skilful practitioner might perform the trick once too often ; and then, of course, we should both of us be sorry."

The duke did lie still, except for the convulsive twitchings of his body, as he fought for his breath ; it was pleasant neither to see nor to hear him. And the marquis continued his investigations into the contents of the safe—very thorough they were !—while the old man dreamed.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### ASLEEP

IT was Joynson's custom, if his master had not summoned him before—which he often did—to take a cup of coffee into his bedroom at eight o'clock. That morning, the duke having given no sign of wakefulness, the man, at the usual hour, took in his coffee. He knocked at the door and, receiving no answer, entered. It was a common occurrence for him to receive no answer ; sometimes, when he went in, the duke declined to notice him ; in which case, unless he had received special instructions over-night, he would leave the coffee on a little table, and retire again. This had happened rather frequently of late ; the man concluded that his master was acquiring a habit of lying long awake, and then falling asleep as the morning approached.

That morning the duke allowed his entry to go unnoticed. Joynson drew the small table close to the bed ; placed on it the coffee, and, before retiring, glanced at his sleeping master. It was plain that he was asleep, and the servant had been so noiseless that no movement of his was likely to have roused him. He lay so that his face was turned the other way ; one hand was outside the bed-clothes, and Joynson saw that there was something in his hand. This struck the man as being rather odd ; especially when he perceived that the something was apparently a photograph. It was held so that the face was uppermost ;

Joynson, leaning over, perceived that it was the face of a woman ; and, when he saw that, it would be incorrect to say that he changed countenance, because that was a thing he never did ; his countenance had long ago become a mask which, apparently, could not change. But, when he saw the face which was on the photograph, something happened to his countenance ; but whether it was to his eyes, or to his mouth, or to what part of it, it was difficult to say. His glance, passing from the photograph, perceived that his master's other hand was stretched above him, on the pillow, and that there was something in that. The fingers were clenched upon the object, so that only a part of it was visible ; and that part was suggestive of a tress of hair.

Launched on the path of observation, all at once Joynson was struck by his master's stillness ; he lay so very still, even for one who was sleeping soundly. The man moved quickly and quietly round the bed, so that he could see the sleeper's face. When he saw it he stared at it for the space of perhaps half a dozen seconds, fixedly ; then he dropped on his knees beside the bed, and hid his own face in the bed-clothes. There he stayed so long, and so motionless, that one wondered if he could have been stricken by a stroke of paralysis. But that such was not the case he showed, when, after an interval of certainly several minutes, he raised his head, and again regarded the sleeper's face. Then he did some strange things. Stooping forward he kissed the duke upon the mouth ; and stroked his hair, softly, as the mother strokes the hair of the child she loves ; and the backs of his withered hands. He even lifted first one, and then the other, to his lips, as if they were hands from which he had received much kindness.

And the duke showed no sign of resenting the liberties his servant took with him, for he was dead.

When Joynson rose to his feet he looked about him,



shrewdly. Then he made the circuit of the room, slowly ; passing from object to object, and observing each in turn, closely, as if in search of something. He took a bunch of keys, which lay upon a dressing-table ; with one of them he unlocked the flap of a bureau, which, as it fell back, disclosed within a nest of drawers. Putting his hand into an aperture, he pressed a spring ; one of the drawers leapt open. Out of it he took a leather case, which was locked. Having re-fastened the bureau, he slipped this case, with the bunch of keys, into his jacket pocket. Returning to the bed, he took the photograph from one hand, and the tress of hair—it proved to be a tress of hair—from the other ; and then he did the oddest thing of all, he kissed them both, closing his eyes as he did so as if he prayed. On the floor was an envelope ; the inference being that it had contained the portrait, and the tress of hair ; replacing them in it, he put the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket. Then, having given another quick glance about the room, as if to make sure that everything was in order, he pressed his finger against the push-piece of the bell three times, in rapid succession. Almost immediately there came a rap at the door.

“Come in !”

There entered his understrapper—the man whose duty it was to perform for the duke those offices which his grace, or Joynson, required of him. The superior looked the inferior servant straight in the face.

“Atkins, the duke is dead !”

There was no doubt that the underling retained the power to change the fashion of his countenance ; its expression became a vivid note of exclamation.

“Dead !—good Lord ! Mr. Joynson, you don't mean it !”

“Of course I mean it. You ass ! Do you suppose I should say a thing like that if I didn't mean it ? I thought

he was asleep ; but I've just discovered he is dead. Look for yourself, and see."

The man came forward, and saw. "He—he does look as if he was dead, doesn't he?"

"Look! He is dead. He has been dead for hours; his hands are cold."

There was a break in the speaker's voice which the other did not notice.

"But he was all right last night; how ever can it have happened?"

"That's what we have to learn. Pay attention to what I'm saying. Go, at once, to Mr. Lanning, and tell him from me that he's to take you in his fastest car to Dr. Kirby. Bring Kirby back with you. If he isn't in, bring his assistant; only mind you bring some one. And tell Lanning to give the car its head. The duke mustn't be touched or moved till the doctor's seen him, so just you be as quick as ever you can. And—listen to this!—don't you say a word to any one—except to Mr. Lanning and the doctor—about the duke's being dead. You understand?"

Atkins, protesting that he understood quite well, departed.

It chanced that as he was leaving the ante-room, which led to the duke's bedroom, and which his grace had occasionally used as a sitting-room, he encountered the Marquis of Putney, who was strolling along with his hands in his pockets, humming a tune.

At sight of Atkins the young gentleman stopped short.

"Aren't you," he asked, "one of my father's body servants?"

"Yes, my lord. My name is Atkins; I'm under Mr. Joynson."

"I thought so. How is my father this morning?"

It instantly occurred to Mr. Atkins that this young

man was, at that moment, the Duke of Datchet ; the reflection so startled him that he became confused.

"I'm sorry to say, my lord—I beg your grace's pardon—I mean——" He stammered, stopped, and then went on. "I'm sorry to say that his grace is dead."

It never struck him that Mr. Joynson's instructions to acquaint no one with that fact could have included the person whom—so it appeared to him—it principally concerned.

"Dead!" The young man started back. "Dead! My father dead!"

Then it did strike Mr. Atkins that he might have construed his instructions in a manner which might not commend itself to Mr. Joynson ; and that caused him to stammer again.

"I—I'm afraid he is, my lord—I mean—that is——"

The young man did not wait for him to finish ; he darted through the door, across the ante-room, into the ducal bedchamber. He saw the duke's man busied with something at the dressing-table.

"Joynson," he exclaimed, "what's this I'm told ? That my father's"—glancing round he saw the figure lying between the bed-clothes—"dead ! Father ! He—he doesn't answer. How can it have happened ? He looks as if he had died in his sleep." A thought seemed suddenly to strike him ; he drew himself up straighter. "Then—then I'm the Duke of Datchet ! Great Cæsar ! What a turn of fortune's wheel !" There was a brief interval of silence, during which he looked at Joynson and Joynson looked at him. "A doctor must be sent for, at once."

"One has been sent for."

"Does my mother know ?"

"No one knows. I have only just discovered that the duke is dead."

"Why did you not send instantly to inform me what had happened?"

"Why should I?"

"Why should you? Your tone, and your manner, Joynson, hardly suggest that you appreciate the situation. I am ruler here, and master, no matter who has been. I feign no sorrow for an old gentleman who—although he was my father—I only met for the first time yesterday, and who was not particularly civil to me then; the king is dead, long live the king. You will find me willing to be considerate to old servants, as long as old servants do not presume, as, I have been informed, they are sometimes disposed to do. Let everything remain exactly as it is; let nothing be touched."

"I am capable of doing all that is required."

"Are you? Your notion of what is required may differ from mine. Where are my father's keys?" He began pulling out drawer after drawer in the dressing-table as if in search of them. Out of one of the drawers he took several small keys which were strung on a slender steel chain. "Hallo! what's this? They look as if they were the keys of a safe, probably that safe over there. An ivory tablet's attached to one of them, on which there's something written. What is it? 'fermer'—that looks as if it was the key-word of a letter-lock. Do you know if these are the keys of my father's safe—that one in the corner?"

Joynson was staring at the keys which the young man was holding, as if bewildered.

"How did those keys get there?"

"My good man, how am I to know? One might presume that my father placed them there."

Joynson's fingers, in his coat-pocket, were closed about the leather case which he had taken from the bureau. Taking it out of his pocket he unlocked it, with one of the keys which he had found on the dressing-table.

"It's empty ; this is the box in which those keys are always kept ; it contains a separate place for each of them. Who took them out ?"

"What keys are those which you have there ?"

"They belong to the duchess."

The young man moved swiftly—as he seemed to have a knack of doing—towards Joynson ; almost before the man knew what had happened he had twisted the bunch of keys from between his fingers.

"If they belong to the duchess, I will give them to her. But I rather suspect that they belong to the duke ; and—I'm the duke. What are you looking at ?"

Joynson was eyeing the hand which he had raised to caress his dawning moustache with singular intentness.

"I'm looking at your hand."

"My hand ?" The young man looked at it himself. "What's the matter with it ? Is there anything extraordinary about my hand ?"

"There is something about your hand which is—extraordinary."

The young man was turning it over and over. "What do you mean ? What nonsense are you talking ?"

Joynson moved away, in silence. Still the young man was regarding his hand.

"Have you any pretensions to palmistry ? Is that what it is ?"

"No ; I know nothing about palmistry, nor about hands either."

"Then what do you mean by saying that there is something extraordinary about mine ?"

"Possibly, before long, you may learn."

"It strikes me, Mr. Joynson, that you're rather an impertinent person. Don't imagine that because my father allowed you to take liberties with him that I will permit you to be impertinent to me. I am going to tell my

mother that the late duke is dead." He emphasized the adjective—pausing at the door to give a parting shot. "Understand that nothing is to be moved or touched. However it may have been with my father, you will find it extremely inadvisable to attempt to play tricks with me ; so, for your own sake, be warned in time."

When he had quitted the ante-room he took the bunch of keys which he had snatched from Joynton in one hand, and the keys which he had taken from the dressing-table drawer in the other, and he laughed, as if there was something about them which tickled him. So soon as he had gone, Joynton, returning to the bed, and kneeling by it, for the second time, again hid his face in the bed-clothes by the sleeper's side.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A BEARER OF TIDINGS

THE young man, knocking at the duchess's door, was informed by her maid that the lady was still in bed.

"I am sorry, but I must see her at once—it is of the utmost importance, or I would not disturb her."

Scarcely had the lady realized who was there, and her maid had time to slip her arms into one of those wonderful garments in the shape of jackets which women sometimes wear when it pleases them to sit up in bed, when the young man's voice was heard without, speaking through the open door.

"Mother, can I come in? I must!"

"One moment!" she cried.

Then he entered—she receiving him all smiles, blushes, and perturbation. None of which things, apparently, he noticed. Calm, and serious—though one suspected him, somehow, of a quizzical inclination to smile—without the least preamble, or even an exchange of morning greetings, he came straight to the point.

"Mother, my father is dead!"

Smiles and blushes vanished; the lady looked up at him with startled eyes.

"Dead! Putney, what—what do you mean?"

"It seems, mother, that he died in his sleep."

"Putney!"

That was all she said; but on her face, and in her eyes,

was eloquence. The young man went on—and still one felt that behind his quiet, even tones there was something very like a smile.

"It is probable that he knew no pain ; but that he passed away in profound and dreamless slumber. Everything has been done that can be done ; there is nothing you can do. I must try, mother, to take his place—to be to you something of what he was."

"You !—take his place !—you !" She shuddered. "Where is Joynson ?"

"He is in my father's room. A doctor has been sent for ; and Joynson agrees with me in thinking that you had better not go to the duke till the doctor has seen him first. You know, mother, that I am the Duke of Datchet now. You must help me to try and bear my burden. I shall want your help—so badly."

"You !—the Duke of Datchet !—you !" She shuddered again. "Will you please go ? I must get up."

He went—but, before going, he kissed her on the brow, stooping so suddenly that his lips had touched her forehead before she perceived his intention, or, judging from her manner, it was possible she might have resisted. She turned and looked after him, as he was leaving the room, with something on her face which was very strange ; and, when he had gone, she covered her face with her hands, and shuddered again.

In the hall he found Dolly and Cecil, with whom he adopted the same method of going straight to the point.

"I think, Miss Barber, that my mother may be wanting you. Cecil, our father is dead."

The same word came from the lips of both the girl and boy, as if it were an echo.

"Dead !"

"Yes, dead. Joynson found him dead in his bed ; it seems that he died in his sleep. I have just come from



my mother, Miss Barber, and I fancy she may be wanting you, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" she cried, and went running up the staircase. Cecil stumped after her as fast as he could stump, without a word. The young man, left alone, held out his hands to the blaze of the fire. There had been a touch of frost in the night; the autumn air was still keen. A footman came to attend to the fire. The young man addressed him.

"Where does one breakfast?—and when?"

"The family breakfast in the oak room—there is no particular time—breakfast is waiting to be served now, my lord."

"And where is the oak room?"

"I will show your lordship."

"One moment. What's your name?"

"Martin, my lord."

"Martin, my father, the duke, is dead. His man, Joynson, found him dead in his bed—he died in his sleep. Which means that I am now the Duke of Datchet—you understand? Let the household be informed. When I ring it will be for some one to show me to the oak room."

The footman departed to inform the household.

Again alone, the young man turned, and looked about him. Realizing, perhaps more clearly than he had done before, that the hall at Mallow was a really fine example of what a hall might be, he stretched out his arms, as if he would take to his breast all that what he saw represented, and hold it tight; and to himself he said—

"It's mine; all this is mine. How very, very curious! And, also, how very, very delightful! To think that all those things which the soul of a man can desire should have tumbled into my hands all at once! What a time I'll have! What a time!"

A door swung open. Some one came from the outer hall into the inner one. A voice exclaimed—

"Hallo! You're the very person I want to see."

The young man, roused from his reverie, perceived that the new-comer was Mr. Harvey Willis. He looked at him for a moment, in silence, rather oddly.

"Now I come to think of it, you also are just the person I want to see, which is by way of being a coincidence."

Mr. Willis was glancing round. "This is a bit too public here; isn't there some place where I can talk to you, where we can be quite private, at once?"

"I agree with you that it's too public here. There is somewhere where we can be quite private, and where you can talk to me at once. Follow me."

Mr. Harvey Willis followed the young man.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE IMPENDING SWORD

"THIS," explained the young man, as he admitted Mr. Willis into a room of comfortable proportions, "is my own private apartment. We do things well at Mallow; there is space to burn. This is my sitting-room; on the other side of that door is my bedroom; beyond is my bathroom. These, therefore, are, for the moment, my own particular quarters, in which we shall be quite private, and for which I won't apologize; though, between ourselves, I shall be in very different quarters shortly."

"That, I think, is extremely possible."

There was a dryness about the speaker's tone which the other did not seem to notice. It was the young man who continued—

"Before you favour me, there are one or two remarks with which I should like to favour you. And, in the first place, let me present you with a piece of information. I'm the Duke of Datchet, Willis."

Mr. Willis started, and stared. "What!"

"The late duke, my respected, and venerable father, died in the night; peace to his ashes! I occupy the position he has just vacated."

Mr. Willis stared still harder. "You don't say!"

"I do say. At this moment he lies in his bed, dead. It is unfortunate that Providence did not spare him longer

to enjoy his son's society. So, I repeat, I am now the Duke of Datchet ; and will you be so good, Willis, as to address me as 'your grace.' "

"It looks as if that feminine jade, Fortune, were doing her best to act up to her reputation."

"How do you mean ? Showering her favours where and when least expected ?"

"Exactly ; you've hit it."

Again there was that odd dryness in the speaker's tone. "I notice that you don't congratulate me."

"Oh, I'll congratulate you. Give me a moment or two to get my bearings ; then I'll give you all the congratulations you can possibly desire."

"Thank you very much." The young man was regarding his companion with something very curious in his eyes. "Willis, you've always played me fair."

"It's very good of you to say so."

"Therefore I'm at a loss to understand why you should have played me such a very dirty trick, in giving me away to my late respected father."

"Explain yourself, your grace."

"No explanation is required. You understand quite well ; you've got the gift of understanding."

"Still, I should like you to explain just what you mean by 'giving you away.' "

"Why was it necessary to place the late duke in possession of my record ?"

"Oh, I see ; that's it, is it ? I thought I explained that it wasn't only your game I was playing."

"That I understand without an explanation."

"Still, you've got to bear it well in mind ; because it was part of my game to let the old gentleman know just what kind of son I'd got for him. I knew it would please him to learn that you were that kind of son ; and my chief desire was to give him pleasure."

"Willis, if my father had continued to live, you wouldn't."

"No? How's that?"

"Because I should have killed you."

"You're a silly young fool, your grace!"

"No doubt. We're all fools; but why, in this especial instance?"

"You talk about being the Duke of Datchet as if you'd only got to talk and be. You'll find that a few trifles in the way of proof will be wanted; where are you going to get them, if not through me?"

"I shall get them through you."

"Shall you? Before you've killed me?—or after?"

"I don't fancy that the accident of your being alive or dead would make much difference."

"You simple-minded youth! I do like to hear you talking."

"You've said that on previous occasions."

"If you'd listened to me you wouldn't be in the damned fine hole you now are."

"I rather like the hole I'm in, thank you."

"Do you? You wait! Suppose you were able to establish yourself as Duke of Datchet beyond possibility of cavil, I should still hold you between my finger and thumb. I've only got to publish your record, especially one or two parts of it which you and me know only—then where'd you be?"

"Where I was, and am; to me the question seems rather, where would you be, by the time I'd finished. Do you seriously think that I'm afraid of you? or care one snap of the fingers for anything you can do or say?"

"I think you've sense enough to know that, duke or no duke, I can work you very serious mischief."

"Since the early moments of my life you've worked me all the mischief you could work me; you did me more

when you gave me away to my father ; you're doing me still more by coming here."

"When you talk like that I feel like going straight off, and leaving you to face the music."

"Which way would you like to go? Through the window? Because I feel like despatching you that way ; especially as the drop's considerable."

"You pretty boy! You damned silly young fool! Your grace the Duke of Datchet doesn't happen to be aware that the police are on your track?"

"Are they?"

"They are—very much they are ; and if your grace doesn't look uncommon lively they'll have their hands upon your grace's shoulders, and the darbies round your grace's wrists."

"Is that so?"

"Do you suppose I've come here at this time of the morning to talk pretty?—or to talk anyhow? I've been travelling all night. I've had to go all round England to get here ; they stuck to me so tight that I couldn't shake them off. I'm not dead sure I've done it now ; but I made up my mind I'd give you the office, and this is all the thanks I get for it."

"What do they want with me?"

"The bottom seems to have dropped out of pretty nearly everything ; hanged if I know what it is they don't want. But there's one particular thing I happen to know they do want, and that's the chap who——"

Mr. Willis glanced round, leaned forward, whispered something in the other's ear, as if he feared listeners even in the empty room. The young man looked at him with curious intentness ; his lips were drawn tighter together.

"Are you sure?"

"Look at that."

Mr. Willis took a paper out of his pocket, unfolded

it, held it out in front of the other, for whom one glance was apparently sufficient. He seemed to prefer to keep his eyes fixed on the other's face.

"When did you get that?"

"Yesterday."

"How did they find out?"

"I've made no inquiries; I didn't think it was worth my while to wait for that. If you like to wait, you'll learn. It was enough for me to know that the warrant was out."

"For whom?"

"Both of us."

The young man drew his lips in, as if to moisten them. "Won't—my being the Duke of Datchet make a difference?"

"How?"

— "Can't it be arranged? There's bushels of money, and plenty of influence."

"Good God, man, you don't think that sort of thing can be squared?—whether you're duke or costermonger! Not in England! The only difference it'll make will be to the papers—they'll star your case; lord! if you only do give 'em the chance, how they'll star it! But as for you—if it's brought against you—you'll quite possibly go for life. Don't you delude yourself into thinking that in this country you can get round a little job like that; you've seen enough of the game to know better."

"It's—it's pretty tough."

"I suppose it's no use reminding you that you did this, not only on your own, but against my very strong advice, and that I only went in it to cover you; and yet, if they do get us, they'll make it almost as warm for me as they will for you. Don't you call that pretty tough?"

"But you're not the Duke of Datchet—of an hour's standing."

"And you're not the Duke of Datchet—yet. If the family doesn't want you, it may be years before you are the Duke of Datchet—at the best ; a man can't become a duke by merely jumping over a garden gate, as you seem to think. And if your friends the police once get the bracelets on you, you'll never be the Duke of Datchet—never ! never ! never !"

"You're a cheerful sort of person !"

"I'm anything you like to call me. The question is, are you going to take advantage of the chance I've put myself out of the way to give you, or are you going to play at being the Duke of Datchet until the traps come ?"

"Are you sure they know where I am ?"

"If they did know they'd probably have had you before this ; there's a telegraph office even at Mallow ; but I'm betting that they will know inside twelve hours."

"I'm disposed to chance it."

"Good ; then chance it. I'll leave you chancing it."

"Where are you going ?"

"That's my business."

"When are you going ?"

"I don't mind telling you when I'm going. You say that's your bedroom. Well, I'm going in there to have a wash and brush up. I've got a stale, up-all-night sort of feeling, which an operation of that sort may benefit. When I've had that wash and brush up I'm coming back here to see if you've finally made up your mind to chance it ; and—then I'm going."

"Very well ; that'll give me possibly ten minutes in which to make a decision ; and perhaps in that time I shall have made it."

Mr. Harvey Willis passed into the bedroom ; the young man remained alone—to go through the process of making up his mind. He continued to stand where the other had left him, with his back to the fire, his hands in his jacket



pockets ; and he kept his eyes fixed upon the door through which Willis had vanished, as if he desired to penetrate its panels, and see what was taking place beyond. And he said to himself—

“Suppose this is a put-up thing of his?—suppose!—where should I be then? If I let him bluff me out of Mallow—just now ; how pleased I should be when I found out that I’d been bluffed ! On the other hand, if my friends in blue really are on the look-out, then some one must have given away the game ; and the point is, who? If I thought—what a holy show I’d make of him.”

Some one rapped at the door which led into the passage ; he looked round, as if considering the quality of the rapping.

“Who’s that? That’s not one of the servants. Rap again.”

He waited, in silence, till the tapping was repeated ; then he said, after another moment’s consideration—

“Come in !”

The door opened, to admit Joynson, who, having entered, shut it behind him. He had a parcel in his hand. The young man looked at him with that singular intentness with which it seemed to be his habit to look at everything ; as if he always wished to see what was behind the face at which he was looking. Joynson bore his scrutiny with characteristic imperturbability ; looking back at him with expressionless eyes which made it difficult to say if he saw everything or nothing. Since he seemed disposed to keep silent till spoken to the young man spoke.

“So it’s you, is it? Any fresh news? What do you want with me?”

“I wish to speak to you.”

“What about? If it’s nothing very important I must ask you to postpone your speaking till a more convenient season ; at present I’m engaged.”

"It is of the first importance."

"To me?—or to you?"

"To you."

"Then, in that case, speak on ; only make it as short as you can."

## CHAPTER XXXI

### HIS MOTHER'S HAND

IT was impossible to say that Joynson's manner did not become a person in his position ; it was equally impossible to say that it was deferential ; about it there was a subtle flavour which suggested something which was not exactly either contempt or pity, but which was akin to both.

"You came into the duke's bedroom last night."

Although there was nothing tangible to show it, one felt that this was not the kind of remark which the young man had expected. It was a second or two before he answered ; always with his eyes upon the other's.

"Well ?"

"You opened his bureau ; you took out the keys of his safe ; you opened his safe."

Again a pause before the young man spoke. "Joynson, I'm afraid you permit yourself to address me in a strain which I shall be reluctantly compelled to notice."

"You took certain property of the duke's out of his safe which I would advise you, for your own sake, to hand to me at once."

"You're a nice man, Joynson, upon my honour !"

"The duke awoke and discovered you in the act of robbing his safe."

"Go on, pray."

"You know why—and how—he died. If you will be

advised you will give me what you took out of his safe, and leave Mallow at once."

"And if I will not be advised? Would you advise me to drop you out of that window?"

"Not till you have heard me to an end—for your own sake."

"Then—for my sake—end."

"I told you that there was something extraordinary about your hand. I have come to tell you what it is. Your hand proves that you never were the Marquis of Putney, and that, therefore, you are not the Duke of Datchet."

"What may you happen to mean, Mr. Joynton, if I may treat you as if you were sane?"

"You have your mother's hand."

"Is there any harm in that?"

"None; only your mother was not the Duchess of Datchet."

"Mr. Joynton!"

"She was a much-wronged woman; but she never was the Duke of Datchet's wife, although you are his son."

"Mr. Joynton, I am asking myself if I shall actually be constrained to thrash—with my own hands—my father's valet."

"Your mother's name was Margaret Willis; you stole her portraits, and her letters, out of your father's safe last night. They were his most priceless treasures. Although he never made her his wife he never ceased to love her—until you killed him. Maybe he loves her still—on the other side of the grave. He was that kind of man."

For the first time the young man seemed to be startled into silence. Joynton added—

"Your mother was the sister of the Harvey Willis with whom you are acquainted."

Then the young man spoke. "You damned liar!"

The valet remained undisturbed. "When I was a

young man I also loved your mother ; and I hoped to make her my wife. But she preferred my master. So that her memory is the only possession I have. As that is a possession I prize, I think even more now than then, for her sake I would render you such service as I can. Therefore, I beg you to be advised by me. Give me what you took from your father's safe ; for his sake, for your mother's sake, for your own sake, leave Mallow at once, and I will undertake—I have authority for what I say—that provision shall be made for you. But if you will not act on my advice I fear that you will be placed in a position which you will find both ignominious and painful."

"You are very good, Mr. Joynton. But will you be so good as to explain what you mean by saying that I have my mother's hand ?"

"I recognized it the moment you raised it to stroke your moustache ; I know it so well, although I have not seen it for many years. The Willis and my people were neighbours ; and in our part of the world it was so conspicuous a characteristic that it was known as the Willis hand. Every member of the Willis family had it, male and female, so far as I know, without exception. Certainly your mother had it in a very marked degree. I used to tease her about it when she was a small girl, all those years ago."

"Your remarks are interesting, Joynton ; but I still have to learn what you mean by the Willis hand."

"The peculiarity only extends to the right hand ; haven't you yourself ever noticed anything peculiar about your right hand ? You have never seen any other like it ; except Harvey Willis's. He has your hand."

"Confound Harvey Willis ! What do you mean by saying he's got my hand ? Come to the point, Mr. Joynton."

"Notice the shape of your right hand, when you take

it out of your pocket. The first finger is the longest ; the other fingers slope down at regular distances to the little finger, which is abnormally short ; I have never seen a right hand, except a Willis hand, on which the first finger was the longest. On the first joint of the first finger, just below the nail, there is a lump, which might be a piece of flesh, or an enlarged bone ; which lump recurs in a much more marked degree, in the same place, on the little finger, on which the nail, also, is almost as small as a baby's. Not only have all the Willis right hands these prominent characteristics, they have a family likeness to each other which is unmistakable. But I can illustrate my meaning better by showing you your mother's right hand ; with which you will be able to compare your own, and you will then see what I mean."

Joynson, placing on a table the brown-paper parcel which he had brought into the room, began to divest it of its brown-paper covering. The young man observed him with an air of being distinctly puzzled.

"You are going to show me what?"

"Your mother's right hand."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"If you will come here, you will see." Joynson had disclosed an oblong box made of mother-of-pearl. Taking off the lid, he motioned to its contents. "There is your mother's hand."

The young man maintained his position in front of the fireplace, wearing an air of resentment, as if he suspected Joynson of an intention to make him the victim of a practical joke. The valet continued as imperturbable as ever.

"Shall I bring it to you—or won't you come to it?"

The young man, striding towards the table, stared at what was in the box. Reposing on a bed of light-blue satin was a woman's hand. It lay palm downwards ; on

the third finger were three handsome rings. Although not small, it was a shapely hand, with long, slender, tapering fingers ; and if Joynson's words had not called attention to the matter, one would not have noticed the unusual fact that the first finger was longer than the others, and that there was a peculiar formation on the first and little fingers just below the nail.

"What is it ?" inquired the young man.

"It is your mother's hand ; or, rather, it is the model of her hand ; though, when I first saw it, I thought it was her hand itself ; but that is a trick of colouring. Does it not look like life ?"

"I could have sworn it was alive."

"The deception is aided by the rings upon the finger ; they are the very rings your father gave her. If you will place your right hand beside it you will understand what I meant by saying that you have the Willis hand ; and how it was that I recognized it on the instant."

The young man hesitated ; then took his right hand out of his jacket pocket, and stretched it beside the one which was lying in the box.

"You see ? Like hers, your first finger is the longest of the four ; and on the first finger, as well as on the little one you have the same characteristic peculiarity. Can you doubt that this is your mother's hand ?"

The young man was silent ; impressed, forcibly, by the resemblance which, now that the two hands were side by side, was unmistakable. It was accentuated by the fact that, although the youth's hand was obviously that of a strong man, it not only had about it an indefinable feminine quality, but, for a person of his inches, it was unusually small ; so that, as the hand in the box was large for a woman, the pair might almost have belonged to the same person.

The young man compared them long and carefully,

something on his face becoming grimmer and grimmer as the similarity was brought more and more home to him. When he spoke there was a dryness in his tone which seemed to escape the other's notice.

"They certainly are alike."

"Are they not? If your mother were alive she would have been pleased to see it."

"Would she? I wonder! And so this lady was the sister of Mr. Harvey Willis?"

"There's the hand of Mr. Harvey Willis in proof of it." A third hand was stretched out beside the other two. It was that of the gentleman in question, who, unobserved, had come into the room. "It's a freak of what they call heredity. There's something in the Willis blood which reproduces it every time a child is born of Willis stock. It's a problem in anthropology."

The young man glanced up. "Then my mother was your sister?"

"She was. We've all three of us the Willis hand to show it; which, I fancy, would in itself be almost evidence enough to satisfy a judge and jury."

"She was old Datchet's light-o'-love."

"Steady, my lad; she was your mother. And, although she was your mother, as good, as sweet, as pure a woman as God ever suffered to come into this man-cursed world; and so Tom Joynson here will tell you."

"What do I care about what you call her purity if she was this man's mistress?"

"You pretty boy!"

"You lied to me when you told me that I was the Marquis of Putney?"

"What's a lie—to you?"

"And you lied to him?"

"He, also, was a liar."



"But you did lie—to both of us? Let's have it clear, now; you did lie?"

"Certainly; why not? Gently—keep clear! You will have it, will you. Then you shall! Once before you nearly cooked my goose for me; but I'm hanged if you shall again!"

The young man had made one of his rapid movements in the direction of Mr. Willis. But as the table was between them, and the other, by means of a strategic retreat, did his best to keep it there, he was not easy to reach. When the young man whirled the table aside, to get within grips of Mr. Willis, that gentleman, realizing his intentions, drew back a step or two, and, taking something from his jacket pocket, as his would-be assailant advanced, flung it in his face. There was a sound as of something breaking—the sort of sound which an egg makes as it falls upon the floor. The young man fumbled with outstretched arms, as if smitten with sudden blindness. Blundering forward, he went crashing to the ground, and lay, where he had fallen, still.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES

MR. WILLIS and Joynson remained silent, looking down at the young man as he lay in an uncomfortable heap upon the carpet. The moment hostilities had threatened, Joynson, snatching up the mother-of-peal box, had retreated with it to what he possibly judged to be a safe distance.

"What have you done to him?" he asked, in the even tones which, somehow, never seemed to be monotonous, although they never varied.

"Stopped him."

"Have you hurt him?"

"Not I. I merely wanted to stop his hurting me, that's all."

"What is it that smells so strongly?"

"It's what stopped him, the stuff you smell. It isn't pretty stuff for any one to smell. Better open the window, to let the smell out; or else come into the other room."

Joynson threw the window open; the fresh air of the morning, coming through it, made the atmosphere within more breathable, as Mr. Willis admitted.

"That's better; no man can inhale much of that perfume and keep his senses. I could tell you some tales about it which might amuse you. It's a little secret which I got from Singapore—that place of little secrets. Very handy I've found it, I assure you. See here!" He took a narrow case from his jacket pocket, four or five inches long, and

perhaps an inch wide ; and showed that it contained some small, white balls, very like the balls which were used for ping-pong, that game which came and went, only smaller. " There's something for you to play with. Each of those is filled with—the secret. They want careful handling ; they smash quicker than eggs. You only have to plant one on the face of your best friend ; and if it hits him somewhere about the right spot, he'll go down like that pretty boy went down. It's like a god out of a machine. There'll be no real harm done. He'll only just lie still, as good as gold, for anything up to half an hour ; you can bring him round pretty well as soon as you like if you're taking the odds against his being troublesome. He may have a touch of headache ; but, with anything like a constitution, he'll soon be smiling—that is, if he has an eye for a joke. You know, Tom—— What's the matter with you ? ”

“ It's the first time any one has called me by that name for twenty years.”

“ Is it ? You must excuse me, but it seemed to come easiest. I was going to say that our young friend is a holy terror. If I hadn't stopped him he'd have stopped me—for ever. When he feels like it, he'd think no more of killing Tom, Dick, or Harry, than he would of killing a chicken. I've had one experience ; since when I've not been looking for another. He's the only person I ever knew who's absolutely no respect for human life.”

“ I believe he is responsible for the death of the duke, his father.”

Mr. Willis looked round. “ No ? Not so loud, man ! You don't say ? ”

“ I don't mean that he actually murdered him ; but I know that he was in the duke's bedroom last night, and that, if the duke wasn't dead when he left it, he died a few minutes afterwards.”

"I see ; you mean it was that way. You know, Tom, when a person wakes up at an undesirable moment, accidents will happen ; especially if it's a person who's advanced in years."

"Two things are strange to me ; that you should be Margaret's brother, and that he should be her son."

"How strange ? Why strange ?"

"Since she was a saint."

"My dear Tom, how little of the world you seem to know, in spite of all the chances you have had, with your dear master. In nearly every saintly family there's a sinner ; it's Nature's idea of humour. Given me, isn't that enough to account for him ? If she'd lived he might have grown up to be a paragon of all the domestic virtues ; but—with me for trainer ?"

"If you had loved her, it might have been your salvation, and his."

"But—that's the joke !—I did love her ; she was the only creature I ever did love."

"But not as I loved her."

"Hardly—since she was my sister. In that sense I've never loved any woman, thank the Lord !"

"I wonder who has been the happier—you, who have never loved any woman, or I, who have loved only one ?"

"I don't see where your happiness comes in, considering that you got nothing out of the one woman you did love, except dust and ashes."

"You're mistaken ; I got the only thing I ever had worth having—the memory of my love. It has sweetened all my life."

"You're a queer chap ; but, then, you always were. It's always been a mystery to me why you didn't stick a knife into that master of yours when you found out how he'd tricked you."

"How did he trick me ?"

"Didn't he rob you of your girl?"

"She never was that—never. I never told her that I loved her. And when he loved her, what more natural than that she should love him? Would you have had me stand in her way?"

"You call that standing in her way!"

"Harvey, there was a time when she thought, and I thought, that she would become his wife."

"Then why didn't she? It wasn't through any fault of hers."

"No, it wasn't through any fault of hers."

"It was his fault, wasn't it?"

"No; nor was it his fault."

"Then—man alive!—whose fault was it?"

"He was the Duke of Datchet; and it couldn't be. You mayn't understand; but I did, and do. Yet, if he had known, because he didn't make her his wife, she would die, he would have married her, though I doubt if the marriage would have been a happy one. I see now what I did not see then. But life is such a composite thing that I have long since given up attempting to resolve it into its component parts. Why did you try to foist her son off on him as the Marquis of Putney? It would have been better for you, and for him, and for the lad, if you had told the plain truth."

"You think so? It's a question of the point of view. We're of a different kidney, you and me. My love for her made me hate him; so I cast about to see how I could hit him hardest. It struck me that if I made of that boy of his a devil incarnate, and then one day introduced him to his father, he wouldn't like that. So I tried my hand at the boy, and succeeded. Then, all at once, a chance offered of planting him on his wicked parent as the long-lost marquis—which would be hitting him a much nastier one than I'd ever hoped to hit him; so you bet I snatched

at it. And if the old gentleman had only lived, and if the young gentleman hadn't been such a holy terror, I'd have led him such a dance to his grave that I'd have been more than even with him by the time he got there."

Joynson had been regarding Mr. Willis while he had been speaking, as if, in his gravely impersonal way, he found him an interesting study.

"Into what different moulds men are run. You seem to flatter yourself upon your capacity to take hatred to your bosom, and let it feed upon your vitals, till it makes of you a monster. I esteem myself happy to have never hated any one."

"You're not a man, a real, live, flesh and blood man ; you're only a husk ; and, though you mayn't think it, you've always been only a husk."

"Perhaps ; who knows ? Am I to take it that you practised this deception upon the duke because you knew nothing of the Marquis of Putney's whereabouts ?"

Mr. Willis stared at the speaker, in silence ; then he laughed ; and he winked his eye.

"What ho ! you ancient fox ! haven't we an innocent way of asking a man a leading question ?—springing it at him out of the empty air ! Look here, Tom, I'll be straight with you, with whoever I've been crooked—and his name's legion. We're in a bit of a mess, this pretty boy and me. It's like this, the tecs are after us—which is English-as-she's-spoke for the police ; you won't ask why, because you wouldn't like the answer—it's nasty ! nasty ! If he'd been the Duke of Datchet a hundred times over they'd have gripped him if he'd stopped at Mallow ; and, though he's only in the first dawn of his young manhood, the rest of his life would have been pretty nearly all jug. You know what 'jug' is, in the classical sense ? It's short for jail, Tom. We're leaving Mallow as soon as he recovers his senses, which, you'll observe, he's doing now ; yours truly

and the-duke-for-a-quarter-of-an-hour ; and, if we've a bit of luck, we'll leave those tecs lamenting. We're going far, far away ; to where the East's a-calling, Tom ; to where extradition warrants don't run ; and where, if they did, they wouldn't find us ; at the vanishing trick there never was our equal. You should see me in my favourite *role*, Tom, of a priest at a nice bluggy temple I know at Benares."

Suddenly Mr. Willis, bending himself double, assumed an attitude of curious prostration. From his hidden face there came a voice which was not his, in a whining torrent of what seemed to Joynson to be gibberish. Just as suddenly Mr. Willis returned to his former upright posture ; and he grinned.

"That's a prayer to Buddha, Tom, which, as one of his priests, I've prayed—ah, thousands of times, and found it answered quite as satisfactorily as any other prayer I've prayed. But we're not returning to Benares ; that grew a trifle warm, and—those people have such memories. Unlike you, they can hate, Tom. We're going to a spot where we shall find it even hotter than Benares, though in a different sense ; and when we've established ourselves as respectable citizens—if you only knew what respectable citizens are like out there ! it's a paradise for paragons !—by then I shall have had time to consider the question you've just now put to me, and it's possible I may be able to oblige you with some sort of an answer."

"Does that mean that you wish me to believe that you do know something about the whereabouts of the Marquis of Putney ?"

"It means—my dear Tom, what does it mean ? It means that we are fleeing for our lives, and that I know nothing about anything until our lives are saved."

"And if I say that you shall not leave Mallow—neither you nor the lad—until you have given me what I consider to be a satisfactory answer to my question ?"

"My dear Tom, you won't say it."

"Why won't I?"

"Because, and because ; two excellent reasons. I'm her brother, he's her son—two most excellent reasons. I'll not descend to the vulgarity of hinting that you couldn't keep us at Mallow if you were to try, since you will not try."

Joynson, silent, observed Mr. Willis. Then, going to where the young man still lay upon the floor, stooping over him, he laid his hand upon his shoulder, and said—

"He's coming back."

On the instant, as if the words had been some potent charm, the young man sat up laughing, as at some excellent joke, exclaiming—

"I say, Willis, if he tries to stop us, shall we stop him?"

It was Joynson who answered, "No ; you'll have no need to stop me, because I'll not try to stop you. For your mother's sake I'll help you on your way."

The young man rose to his feet, and laughed again. There was about him no appearance of discomfiture—even when he confronted Mr. Willis he wore what seemed to be an invariable air of unruffled ease.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE TELEGRAM

**I**VOR DACRE alighted at the fine flight of stone steps which led up to the entrance hall at Mallow, from the country fly which had brought him over from the station. He glanced up at the glass-panelled door, expecting to see one of the accustomed footmen come down the steps to meet him. No one appeared. When he entered there was no one to hold back the swing doors; the outer hall was empty, the inner hall as well. He glanced about him with a feeling of strangeness. Through all the years he had known Mallow there had always been footmen standing in the outer hall, to greet the coming guests. He missed them, as if their absence denoted that there was something wrong—certainly it pointed to an irregularity. Why were they not there? What could have become of them? Had there been some change made in the domestic arrangements, which had remained unaltered, he believed, for generations? And, if so, why? What was it?

He hesitated, at a loss what to do. With no one there it seemed to him there was a subtle difference in the air of the house—almost as if he had entered, unawares, the deserted fairy palace of the fairy tales. How still it was; there was not a sound. Was it in reality deserted? The blazing fire was a splash of colour. The hall, except when the lamps were lighted, was always a little in shadow; then it seemed to him to be unusually dark. Possibly it

was only his imagination—and he had just come out of the open air—but it did him good to see the fire. It spoke of life.

He stood some distance from it, looking at it, wondering, half whimsically, what it was that he had better do ; and—there was the duchess coming down the stairway. It is possible that, in turning, he also disturbed the silence, because, until then, the duchess had been unconscious that any one was in the hall ; but, when he turned, she saw him. And each of them was still, and looked at the other.

Never had Ivor seen her but the sight had made his pulses quicken. Never for an instant, for him, had there been any woman but her. He laughed at himself, often, for his folly ; heaped on her, in his mind, the unflattering epithets which, he protested, she deserved ; swore that never had man been treated worse than she had treated him ; and she was so silly ; by all of which things, it seemed, his love was fanned. For the more the days went by, the more his longing for her grew ; though he never breathed a hint of it to her, nor, indeed, to any. Yet, who can doubt she knew ?

And she ? She, who had played the traitress, and for that sort of substance which, in the fret of life, becomes more unsubstantial than a dream, sold, while still a child, her womanhood. After her fashion she had borne herself, on the cross to which she had nailed herself, almost as well as he had done ; though for more than twenty years it had been raised on Calvary. Duchess of Datchet she had been, queen of wealth, and rank, and beauty, with all the things she could desire within reach of her finger-tips—save one. Fashioned as she was, that was the one thing worth having ; compared to it all the other things were as nothing, since it was the man she loved—who, she knew, loved her.

She had read in a book that love was vulgar, bourgeois,

middle-class, proper for housemaids, perhaps; but that men and women of birth and breeding, wealth, intellect, affairs, either erased it from their dictionaries, or interpreted it after a fashion of their own; and that so amused her that she kept the book among her most precious possessions, and, when her heart was hungriest, would take it and read that particular passage again and again, hoping that its sheer absurdity would serve her as an anodyne. She found that easier than wrestling on her knees before the altar which she had erected in her bedroom. For though she owned her sin, and strove to cast it down before His cross, as she had been taught to do, it was such a part and parcel of her nature that she could not cast it out—and she knew she never could, strive how she might.

And now the old man lay sleeping with his fathers, who had been her husband in nothing but name for more than twenty years. And she was full of trouble, more than ever full of trouble, though sorrow had long been her bed-mate. And she was fleeing, she knew not where nor to whom, for comfort, help, advice, for she knew that never had she been in greater need of one who was wiser than she. And, behold! even as she fled, there was Ivor, in the hall. As women, the best and the worst of them, are apt to be, she was superstitious; the discovery of Ivor, just at that moment, seemed to her to be a sign from heaven, or from hell. She was afraid. Her mind was in a tumult, swayed this way and that by wavering emotions. When she saw him she realized that, though she had not consciously been thinking of him, he had been at the back of her thoughts all the while; it seemed so pleasant and so right that he should be there. And there came over her a great longing. She leaned over the baluster and looked at him, and her fear was gone; she went fluttering down the stairs, and ran to him.

“Thank God, Ivor, you have come; Hereward is dead!”

She held out both her hands to him, and he took them into his ; it was the first time for more than twenty years that those hands had touched. Though they were constantly encountering each other, she would never let him touch her hand ; it was one phase of her madness, her intimates declared. Then that phase of her madness was forgotten, both by her and by him ; it is odd how in the stress of a great emotion, though it may be born of folly, one can forget even the happenings of twenty years. He held her hands perhaps tighter than he thought, or than she knew, the one thing prominent to his mind was the fact that she had called him Ivor.

"Dead ! Mabel !"

"He died in the night, they say in his sleep."

He was still, and she was still ; during that silence they understood each other, after twenty years. He proffered none of the sugarplums of consolation, possibly because, on a sudden, his thoughts flew off at a tangent.

"Then, does that young man succeed ?"

That his thoughts were hers, her tone, her face, her manner, betrayed ; though she uttered but a single word—

"Ivor !"

He did not notice that a second time she had called him by his Christian name ; something else was hammering at his brain.

"Is he here ?"

"He came—yesterday."

It seemed to her that it was much longer than that since he had come.

"Where is he ? I must speak to him at once ; it's for that I'm here."

"What is it you wish to say to him ?" She drew closer ; her voice sank to a whisper. "Ivor, I—I'm afraid of him."

"Afraid of him ?"

"I—I don't—I can't—think that he's my son."

"But I thought you were convinced?"

"I'm not convinced—I'm not. My conviction is that he's not my son."

"I'm aware that there's little in the shape of legal evidence; but I thought that you were satisfied with the evidence of the photographs. Isn't he like them?"

"Ivor, a trick's been played; I'm sure some trick's been played."

"How do you mean—some trick?"

"When he came yesterday I was afraid of him—afraid for my life. No mother would feel like that towards her son."

"Not though she last saw him when he was a baby, and only meets him again when he has become a man?"

"Not as I felt towards him; it's against nature. I could not bear to be in the same room with him—in the same house; I felt towards him as if he were a thing of horror. And, Ivor, when I went to my room last night, trembling all over with fear of him, you can't—you can't think what a state I was in. When I had said good night, I was afraid he would want to kiss me; but, thank God, he didn't. Could a mother feel like that towards her son? I ran from where he was as if he were Satan, and feared that he might follow at my heels. When I got to my room, after—after I'd washed my hand where his lips had touched it, I looked at the book of photographs for hours and hours; and—Ivor, I'm sure that a trick's been played."

"Explain exactly what you mean."

"It's so difficult—so difficult—it's been so cleverly done; but I'll try. The first eleven years all the photographs are photographs of my boy."

"Of that you still are sure?"

"Of that I still am sure; quite sure. I'll tell you why, some day, but—not now, for fear he comes."

She glanced about her, as if the fear of his coming was a very present terror. He held her hands yet closer in his, as if to pass courage from his veins to hers—an intention which she recognized with something in her eyes which moved him almost more than he could bear.

"Go on," he whispered. His voice failed him, so that he could but whisper.

She went on. "After the first eleven years the next photograph—that for the twelfth year—is not—quite his."

"What do you mean by 'it's not quite his'?"

"Ivor, have you—do you know what is meant by a composite photograph?"

He smiled. "Rather. When I was a victim of the camera craze I used to take composites myself—often."

"The photograph in that book which is supposed to represent my boy when he was twelve years old is a composite photograph."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely. A composite photograph is obtained by recording more than one exposure on a single plate; you know that."

"Of course. I don't know that your definition is technically accurate, but it will pass."

"It's a combination, on a single plate, of the portraits of more than one person."

"Precisely."

"The result being that some of the characteristics of each subject are shown. That's the case with that photograph; it shows some of the characteristics of my boy, and some of another boy. It's an ingenious blend."

"You're sure it's a blend?"

"I made sure before I went to bed; and when I show you those photographs, and so am able to illustrate my meaning, you'll be sure. In that photograph there's more

of my boy than of the other, so that the transition may not be too startling; but in the next that other boy comes more to the front. Oh, they're the work of a craftsman! In the next three photographs he comes more and more to the front; till, in the one for the seventeenth year, there's nothing left of my boy. It's all that man upstairs—and he's not my son. He's older than my son; I don't know how much, but he is older; and he doesn't resemble Putney in the least."

"I can only say, Mabel, that I hope you're right."

"I am. But why should you so especially hope it? Ivor, have you any reasons of your own?"

"I'm afraid—I didn't mean to tell you, but after what you've said I think I'd better."

"You had better. Henceforward, Ivor, we must tell each other everything."

"That's a compact. Mabel, I'm afraid that that young man, who you say is upstairs, is an indifferent character."

"I'm sure of it. It's written on his face, in his eyes, his voice, all over him."

"A very indifferent character; in fact, an all-round bad lot. That's the special reason why I hope he isn't Putney."

"You need not fear. He isn't."

"And—if he's Duke of Datchet——"

"That he'll never be. No changeling shall be Duke of Datchet in my time; it's my son's inheritance. But, Ivor, how come you to know that that man upstairs is—what he is?"

"Mabel, it's a long story; but I do know. And last night I learnt, by the merest accident, that there's a warrant out for his arrest."

"Is he that kind of thing?"

"I'm afraid so."

As she stood before him she began to grow redder and

redder, till she was all red. He did not ask her why, although he wondered. He went on with his story.

"I knew he'd come down here—they told me in Park Lane. When I heard about the warrant, it was too late to communicate with him last night; so I came down by the first train this morning—to warn him."

"Are the—police—likely to come down here?"

"From what I heard I fear they are; and—it's possible—by the next train."

"Ivor, they mustn't arrest him—at Mallow."

"No. That's what I feel; and—they shan't. The question is—— Who's that?"

While he had been speaking the door had swung open, some one had entered the hall. It was a young man, who held his cap in his hand. The duchess, taking her hands away from Mr. Dacre, who had held them all this time, took two or three steps towards the new-comer.

"This—this," she began, then stopped; her voice seemed to fail her.

"Mabel, if this—if this is the young man whom you supposed to be upstairs, I fear it's a true bill; I'm afraid it's Putney."

The lady recovered her voice, on the instant. "But this isn't, as you put it, the young man whom I supposed to be upstairs." She went closer to the new-comer. "This is Mr. Lawrence Sheldon. Mr. Sheldon, this is Mr. Ivor Dacre, whom we all think that you so much resemble."

The young man had been staring at Ivor with an intentness which was almost an impertinence.

"I was wondering who it was; we are rather alike, aren't we?"

"You are more than rather alike, Mr. Sheldon. Now that you are together I can see that you are like each other almost to the point of the incredible."



"And who," exclaimed Ivor—and he seemed bewildered—"if I may ask the question, is Mr. Sheldon?"

"Mr. Sheldon is, I understand, an undergraduate of New College, Oxford; but, beyond that, so far as Mallow is concerned, I'm afraid he's a stranger."

"A stranger? You'll think my manners are to seek, Mr. Sheldon; but, for a stranger—to Mallow—you're the most wonderful stranger I ever saw; the place is peopled with your ghosts. I could have sworn you were a Dacre."

The young man laughed. "I wish I were." He turned to the duchess. "You'll think it's awfully rude of me to intrude myself at this unseemly hour; but—has she come?"

The duchess smiled at him as if she did not think that he was rude.

"Has who come?"

"Has Miss Willis come?"

"Miss Willis? And who's Miss Willis?"

"Miss Willis?" He repeated the name as if he were puzzled. "She's—she's my guardian; at least, I don't know what else to call her. I hope that I haven't muddled things, and that no one's been having a joke with me; but I received this telegram last night, and, though I couldn't understand it, I thought I'd better come round this morning to see if I could find out what it meant."

He handed the duchess a telegram which he took from his pocket. It was addressed to Lawrence Sheldon, and ran—

"Meet me at Mallow the first thing to-morrow morning. It is the last wish I shall express to you. For your sake, and for mine, I hope you will observe it.—DINAH WILLIS."

The duchess read, and re-read the telegram with evident astonishment.

"This," she observed, "is a very mysterious telegram to be sent to you. Why should Miss Willis ask you to meet her—of all places in the world—at Mallow?"

"That," he answered, "is more than I can tell you ; but—here she is !"

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### DINAH

THEY turned, and saw that a woman had entered the hall; a tall, graceful, and even beautiful woman, in the prime of life, and, probably, like the duchess, in the prime of her beauty. She was well, but quietly dressed, with almost quakerish neatness; as if her chief desire was to be unostentatious. There was a quakerish flavour about her bearing—the product, perhaps, of self-repression; for one had only to glance at her with even cursory observation to perceive that, probably, here was a woman who practised self-repression as her rule of life.

When the young man saw her he went eagerly towards her, and, though she did not offer him her hand, he took it, and held it in his.

“Dinah!” he said.

One felt that his intention was to kiss her; and that he would have kissed her, had she not drawn a little back, and so made him conscious that there were others there. He regarded her with puzzled eyes, as if there were something in her attitude which troubled him—her silence, perhaps, or the fashion in which she kept his eagerness at bay. He led her by the hand a little forward.

“Dinah, this is the Duchess of Datchet. This is Miss Willis, from whom I had the telegram.”

The duchess seemed disposed to be friendly. “I was hearing about you, Miss Willis, only last night, and just

now Mr. Sheldon was reading a telegram from you in which you asked him to meet you this morning at Mallow, and, as there were no signs of you, he was wondering if it was a joke."

The duchess held out her hand; which the other ignored, almost as if she were afraid to touch it. She looked about her with, in her eyes, a hunted look. As one watched her one was struck by the girlish purity of her face, by its almost sublime simplicity, while one realized that she seemed to be standing under the shadow of some overmastering dread. She essayed to speak, but it was with difficulty the words would come.

"I—I am Dinah Willis."

The duchess, seeing her distress, endeavoured to relieve it; the woman was trembling so that she could hardly stand.

"Let me offer you a chair, Miss Willis; you must sit down, you're tired."

"No, I—I'm not tired; only—only there is something I must say to you, and then I'll go."

"But you can tell me what you have to say sitting down, can't you?"

"No, I—I can't sit down, not here."

She half started back, as if her instinct bade her to flee from that place of dread. The duchess smiled—a little wanly; but it was a smile.

"Then what mysterious something have you to say to me, which prevents your sitting down?"

When she essayed to answer, speech failed her altogether; she stood, for some moments, with palsied lips, her gaze upon the duchess's face. Then words began to come, jerkily.

"Don't—don't—you know—who this is?"

The reference was to Mr. Sheldon, who stood anxiously by, troubled for her.

"He tells me he is Lawrence Sheldon."

The duchess would have continued, had not Miss Willis interrupted her, with painful eagerness, reiterating her inquiry.

"Don't—don't—you know him?"

"I thought, yesterday, for some moments, he was my son."

Again the duchess would have continued, but again the other interrupted, this time with an eagerness which was hysterical.

"He is your son!"

The words seemed to have been forced from her by a species of convulsion, the tears streamed down her cheeks, as if her utterance had freed them. The duchess shrunk back, as if the other had struck her a blow. The colour went out of her cheeks; the tears came into her eyes; her lips seemed palsied. Mr. Dacre, perceiving the plight which both the women were in, advanced towards the stranger. One could not but suspect that even his calmness was disturbed; one even wondered if there was not a tremor in his voice.

"You say your name is Willis; are you any relation to Mr. Harvey Willis?"

"I am his sister."

"Then, in that case, you are probably aware that he has already introduced one Marquis of Putney to Mallow."

"That is why I—I have come."

"I am afraid I don't see the exact sequitur."

"He—he is practising a deception."

"And you're not? Codlin's the man, not Short? It's under your thimble that the pea is hidden; is that it?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir; but this—this is the Marquis of Putney. I—I stole him."

"You stole him? I don't wish to say anything which can hurt your feelings, but—this becomes a trifle

complicated. I thought your brother laid claim to that distinguished honour?"

"My brother had nothing to do with it. He did not know anything about it till long afterwards. It was I who took him out of his perambulator, and I—I took him home."

"But why?" cried the duchess, in whose eyes the tears were still standing, and who still was trembling. "Why did you do such a wicked thing?"

The stranger began to show some signs of self-possession, her voice and manner grew more assured.

"Do you not know who I am?"

"I hear that you are Miss Willis, that Mr. Harvey Willis is your brother, but that explains nothing to me. You are still young; twenty years ago you must have been scarcely more than a child. Why were you guilty of such an act of monstrous wickedness? I had done you no injury."

"You had done me no injury; but"—in the woman's bearing, as she repeated, with a slight difference, her former question, there was an ominous significance—"do you not know?"

"Know? Know what? What is there to know? Ivor, do you know what she means?"

"I know precisely what she means, your grace, and, with your very kind permission, I will tell you." The voice came from behind them. On the lowest step of the staircase was Mr. Harvey Willis, a step or two higher was the young man whom he had asserted was the Marquis of Putney, higher still was Joynson, with the mother-of-pearl box in his hand. With an air of the most complete assurance Mr. Willis came towards them across the hall. It was he who had spoken, it was he who continued to speak. "I've just about ten minutes in which to catch a train; a train, your grace, which will convey me and our young

friend here to a station on a line you've never heard of, which is in such a very curious part of the world that it's probable that you'll never hear of it, or us, again. And, before I start, since I see dear Dinah here—how are you, Dinah? I thought it possible that you might find your way to Mallow." He nodded to Miss Willis, with the most brotherly smile. But she ignored his presence utterly, a fact on which he proceeded to comment. "Ah, sister, sister, still stiff in the back? Won't you even nod to me? It may be the last chance you'll ever have; you'll be sorry when you think of your brother—your only brother, Dinah—far, far away across the sea."

"Or else in jail."

Her tone was uncomfortably grim; it only made him laugh.

"As you say, Dinah, or else in jail. And if you only knew how close to jail I'm standing at this moment, you'd understand the hurry I am in to catch that train. So, in the space of about ten minutes, may it please your grace, I'll compress as much useful information as I possibly can; and, as things have turned out, it's information which you really ought to have. To put it briefly, then, your son and heir, the Marquis of Putney was kidnapped in Hyde Park because your husband, the Duke of Datchet, killed my sister, Margaret Willis; it was done on the principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, in the good sound Biblical spirit with which you are, of course, familiar."

The duchess looked at him with white face, and startled eyes, as if she did not understand; which, indeed, she did not do, as she showed by the question which she addressed to Mr. Dacre.

"Ivor, what does he mean—by saying—that Hereward—killed his sister?"

It was Mr. Willis who replied, before Mr. Dacre had a chance to speak.

"That's what I'm going to explain—what I mean. You know, your grace, there are many ways of killing, especially of killing a woman, particularly if you catch her young. Your late husband, the late duke, chose the old, old-fashioned way, which is still efficient now and then. By dint of sundry lies he induced my sister—who was as pure a woman as you are—to become his mistress; then he arranged matters so that, at the mathematical moment, she should die. That was his way of killing a woman."

"It's not true!"

"Pardon me, your grace, it is true, as the most superficial inquiries, if made in the proper quarters, will assure you."

Ivor Dacre made a movement as if he designed to prevent Mr. Willis from saying anything further; then, appearing to change his mind, he suffered him to continue, which Mr. Willis did do in his own way.

"The Willises, your grace, are—or rather, perhaps, I should say were—a highly respectable family, until your husband appeared upon the scene, as Joynson here will testify; though, socially, they may be hardly up to the Duke of Datchet's level. My mother kept the Bull's Head Inn at Hawthenden, at that time a hostelry well known to hunting gentlemen, in the Quorn country; but probably your grace knows Hawthenden? You may even know the Bull's Head Inn. It would have been better for all of us if the Duke of Datchet had never seen it. One day, as they have it in the stories, 'tis more than twenty years ago, his Grace of Datchet went a-hunting in the Quorn country, and being wet, and cold, and tired, and hungry, dropped in at the Bull's Head Inn for something to eat and to drink. It pleased Satan that my sister Margaret should wait on him; I don't know how that was, for there were plenty of hired attendants at the Bull's Head Inn, but I fancy the intention was to do him honour. And so my



sister did him honour—too much honour. His grace must have been in a susceptible mood—though, mind you, she was a lovely, and a charming girl, though she was an inn-keeper's daughter—here's one who's not so much unlike her." He pointed to Dinah, who stood silently by. "Anyhow, from what I've seen and been able to understand, he fell in love with her at sight. And, what was stranger, to my thinking, very much stranger, she seems to have fallen in love with him. To my thinking there was nothing in the man—saving your grace's presence. He wasn't handsome, he wasn't lively, he wasn't even young. I imagine she was beguiled by her own simplicity ; it's as certain as that the sky's above us that she loved him. He took rooms at the Bull's Head Inn, and fell to courting, to my mother's distress and sore alarm. She feared ! she feared ! And when he wasn't there, he was writing to her from somewhere else—such letters ! They're still in existence. Dinah has them all ; some of them written at Mallow. I believe it was his letters which really won her ; he'd a knack of writing letters which would cheat a girl, full of the most convincing perjuries. One day she discovered that she was going to have a baby. For her it was the awaking out of dream ; she was half beside herself with fright. In all essentials she was the merest child. She slipped out of the Bull's Head Inn, and came to Mallow."

"To Mallow ?"

"Yes, to Mallow ; this fine and beautiful Mallow. When she saw how fine and beautiful it was, that frightened her still more ; she realized what a difference there was between it and the Bull's Head Inn. She daren't come into the house. Half out of her wits, she wandered aimlessly about the grounds. There Joynton found her."

"By the lake."

The interpolation came from Joynton, who was standing in the background, holding the mother-of-pearl box.

"Yes, by the lake. It's a pity she didn't put herself into the lake, it would have flavoured the water. Joynson brought her to the house by the back way, and always by the backway, to the duke. They must have had an affecting interview, those two; which of them was the more astonished by the time it was finished, I've often wondered. She had come to ask him to enter with her into the holy bonds of matrimony as quickly as they could be entered—within four and twenty hours, if the thing was feasible, so as to be well in time. It had never suggested itself to her philosophy, even in the agony of her fear, that she wasn't going to give birth to the Marquis of Putney. I should like to have seen his face when he had assimilated her proposition. Joynson says that he thought of saying yes; and, as he ought to know, I say nothing. That night she slept at Mallow."

"In the blue room." This was Joynson.

"In the blue room?" echoed the duchess. "That's my room."

"It seems, your grace, that it was my sister's room for that night only; probably since you've been at Mallow you've been sleeping in her bed. The duke had done all the thinking he thought the situation demanded by the morning; so, the next day, having explained to her that dukes—perjured or unperjured—do not marry innkeepers' daughters, he sent her back to the Bull's Head Inn, with his kind regards—under sentence of death. If he had dosed her with all the poisons in the British pharmacopœia he couldn't have rendered the result more certain. She never rallied; she never really recovered her senses. When she gave a child to the world—the Duke of Datchet's child—she left it. If I'd had my way I'd have cut it on her tombstone with my own hands, 'Killed by the Duke of Datchet.'"

"When—when was all this?"

The duchess asked the question as if she were afraid of being heard.

"Just before he married you. I take it that he went straight from here to ask you to be his wife, having the feeling strong upon him that he'd better get some presentable person to be the Duchess of Datchet while he'd the chance."

"Ivor, did you know this?"

"I never heard a word of it until now. To me it is all strange."

She looked at him with ashen cheeks, as if she were reminding herself that it was for such a man she herself had committed perjury—so that they had been a pair of perjurers. Mr. Willis went on, his words stinging her, whether or not he meant it, as if they had been the lashes of a whip.

"I take it that he was asking you to be his wife while she lay dying. Her death, and the shame of it, killed my mother. It broke her heart; she never could look the world in the face again. About the time that you were becoming the Duchess of Datchet, and the sods were growing green on Margaret's grave, we put my mother's coffin on top of hers. The Bull's Head Inn was sold. The Willis became disreputable, and have remained disreputable ever since. And I took the baby."

"You took the baby!"

"There were reasons, on which I need not just now enter. Time's pressing; I have to catch that train. My amusing little story promises to be bigger than I thought, so I'll simply say that I took the baby. The days passed on; you had a baby. The first baby came into the world on a bed of shame; yours—issue of the same father—on a bed of glory. Number one was born without a name; number two, although the younger, with a beauty; he was the Marquis of Putney."

Dinah thrust herself into her brother's story with an impetuosity, a fluency, a passion, which transformed her, and carried them away. One could not doubt that her words, commonplace enough in themselves, even after all the years, burst from a heart which was still a flaming furnace. It was not that she was eloquent, or that her phrases were well chosen; it was merely that she saw what had happened twenty years before as clearly as if it had happened yesterday—saw it with the same mood upon her, and that she spoke straight on.

"And one day I was in Hyde Park, and I saw a perambulator come along with two nurses. And I heard one lady say to another, 'Those are the Duke of Datchet's nurses; that's the Marquis of Putney in the perambulator.' And I followed the two nurses and the perambulator. And a man spoke to the nurses, and walked with them. And they left the perambulator under a tree, and went off with the man. And I went to the perambulator, and looked in, and there was the baby. I thought—I thought I'd kill him; I thought I'd take him out of the perambulator and kill him, and throw him on the grass. I tried hard to kill him; but I couldn't do it then, he was so fast asleep. I took him out of the perambulator and emptied it, and took him home with all his things; and he felt so strange in my arms. I thought I'd kill him when I got him home; but when he awoke he smiled at me, and held out his little arms, and I couldn't—I couldn't! I had meant to hate him—oh, how I had meant to hate him! But I hadn't had him an hour before I began to love him—oh, how I began to love him! I didn't know what to do. I daren't take him back, and I wouldn't, I wouldn't! Now that I'd got him, I meant to keep him; I didn't care! I didn't care! I bought a cottage in the country, and I took him with me there, and there he's been with me ever since. I nursed him, and tended him, and did for him all that a mother

could, and I spent all my money on him, so that he might miss as little as need be ; and I tried to bring him up to be good, and true, and brave, and honest ; and he's all of them, and more—I know ! I know ! And though he stands there, and sees me for what I am—and—and he's always thought me a good woman until now—God knows that I've done him no harm ! ”

She had her fists clenched at her sides, and her head erect ; and though the blinding tears were in her eyes, they flamed as if, in the presence of the God to whom she appealed, she dared any to accuse her.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### MR. HARVEY WILLIS EXPLAINS

HER brother, taking advantage of her silence, resumed the rôle of narrator—in his own way.

“I knew nothing of all this—bless you!—not a word. My ignorance was seraphic. Could I imagine her to be capable of such an act—the timid, the law-respecting, the devout Dinah! What’s more, I hadn’t the dimmest notion where the dear girl was. She kept herself hidden from her only brother for more than twenty years.”

The look with which she favoured him was pregnant with significance.

“I wish I could have continued hidden.”

“You hear! Isn’t it incredible?—with such a brother! By the merest chance I stumbled on her whereabouts; and then, what was I told? That there was a young man at Dinah’s house. Picture my sensations! When I called—my welcome was inconceivably frigid! I asked her to explain. She hummed and hahed; she wasn’t frank—oh no!—not as she has just now been? Her words were wrapped in mystery; her manner was enigmatical. But I’m a person who is accustomed to put two and two together; I’d a sort of feeling that I was getting on the trail—when the young man passed the window of the room in which we were—and it flashed on me. You’ll observe that the young gentleman has an individuality of his own; he’s the kind of person who—having once

seen—is not likely to be easily forgotten. Now I never had seen that young gentleman before, but, not very long ago, I had seen some one so like him, so amazingly, so incredibly like him, that—to adapt an odd little phrase which you sometimes hear in France—the likeness ‘jumped to the eyes.’ It so happened—queer how things do happen!—that my acquaintance with the person to whom I allude had been of such a nature that it was quite impossible that his face could be forgotten. Certain incidents had ensured its being stamped on my memory for ever—and, I should say, longer. The person to whom I am alluding is Mr. Ivor Dacre—you have him here. I believe, Mr. Dacre, that I’m right in saying that you were as little likely to forget me as I was to forget you.”

“I certainly was not likely to forget you.”

“I exchange with you the compliment. When I saw that young man passing the window, I said to myself, ‘My God! there’s that damned Dacre grown young!’ Just for the instant I thought there were visions about. It did seem beyond credence that Dinah could have a duplicate of the Honorable Ivor Dacre about her premises. Then I resumed my occupation of putting two and two together; and by degrees I got them joined. I recalled the kidnapping of the Marquis of Putney; that mysterious, audacious, and still undiscovered crime—how the world had been full of it—how it was notorious that his whereabouts remained unknown—how, in consequence, that famous family hung, as regards the future, between heaven and hell—between Scylla and Charybdis. It occurred to me that it was about that time that Dinah had disappeared; vanished into space. I remembered that the tragedy of Margaret had moved her even more than me—how implacable she’d been. In particular I remembered a horrid oath I’d heard her swear that, by hook or by crook, if she ever had a ghost of a chance, in

her small way she'd make the Duke of Datchet pay the piper for his tune. I looked at her; and—I knew she'd kept that oath. It was written on her face. She has an eloquent face, has Dinah; especially when she would rather that she hadn't. 'As I'm alive,' I cried, 'it was you who stole that kid!' 'Harvey!' she said; just 'Harvey!'—but the way she said it was enough for me. I went back at her. 'It was you who kidnapped the Marquis of Putney and—he's just passed the window.' She looked at me—just looked. She said nothing; but in trying to say something she went down in a heap on the floor.

"Oh dear! oh dear! I had a time!

"It's always been a rule of mine, when a woman faints, to let her. She faints because she wants to; it does her good. Sometimes a woman faints; and sometimes a woman cries, so that you wonder how she does it. Either way it's a safety-valve; let it blow. If you want to ease the boiler—don't you interfere.

"So I let Dinah faint it out. And I'll say this for her—that she took her time. While she was taking it, I looked round—with that natural interest which a brother feels in a sister from whom he has long been parted. And I soon saw enough to make it clear that my sister—in whom I trusted—had been guilty of a crime which had shocked humanity. We'll draw a veil over the picture which would show you how that discovery shocked me. Among other fatal evidence which I came across was a book of photographs."

"You broke open my safe to get at it."

"I'd just time to do it—just time. That safe, Dinah, belongs to an extinct pattern in which it is extremely unsafe to repose your confidence. I had only had one peep inside that book of photographs when I saw that Dinah—poor dear!—was coming to; but that one peep



was enough to demonstrate to me its capital importance. With presence of mind which did me the greatest credit, when I perceived that the swoon was about swooned out, I opened the window, and I threw that book of photographs as far as I could, into a clump of bushes. It was not an easy thing to throw, so I take pride in saying that I used such skill that it landed on a spot where it wouldn't be easy to see it if you didn't know that it was there. I closed the window, and I turned to Dinah, just in time to welcome her back to life, and the happiness of her brother's presence; and to receive her—I am now using the language of the wildest metaphor—in her brother's arms. I regret to have to add that I did not leave Dinah's little home on those terms on which one desires to leave one's only sister's little home."

"Had I known what I only discovered afterwards, how you had robbed and plundered me, you would have gone in charge of the police!"

"There now!—there! Is it credible that this can be an only sister, speaking to an only brother? That book of photographs, which I returned, when the shade of night had fallen, to retrieve from underneath those bushes—in the afternoon Dinah watched me off the premises in a manner which made it impossible to even glance in its direction."

"Had I only known!"

"Had she only known! It inspired me—that book of photographs—with a grand idea. When I looked at the pretty pictures of a pretty boy which Dinah had arranged in such pretty order, I thought of a young gentleman with whom I was acquainted. I had some of his photographs. With the aid of a little ingenuity—and a camera—out of his photographs, and that pretty boy's photographs, I produced a combination which was intended to fool a duke, and even deceived a duchess."

The duchess interposed. "Pardon me, I was not deceived. When I examined them—with care—I saw exactly what you had done—when the cheat began; to what it was intended to lead up. Did I not tell you that after the eleventh year they began to be composite photographs?"

The question was addressed to Ivor Dacre; but it was Mr. Harvey Willis who replied.

"Ah!—your grace detected it?—then the game would have become difficult if Dinah had not appeared upon the scene, with her pretty boy—and if certain other—trifling—interventions had not occurred." This with a glance towards Joynson. "I congratulate your grace upon your grace's acumen; which merely demonstrates the truth of a suggestion which your grace was pleased to make upon a previous occasion—that the maternal instinct is infallible. It is evident that, at least so far as your grace is concerned, you cannot deceive a mother—that is a lesson which I have acquired for use at some future period. It is, therefore, with feelings of the profoundest gratitude that I bid your grace adieu—since it now becomes absolutely necessary that I should catch that train. Dinah, may the saints watch over you! Mr. Dacre, to our next merry meeting!" He turned to the young man. "Are you ready? The time has now arrived when we must tear ourselves from Mallow."

The young man moved towards the duchess. "I am the Duke of Datchet's first-born son; and, though you have usurped my mother's bed, it was she whom he loved—to the end. I have the proofs here." He pressed his finger-tips against his jacket pocket. "He died with my mother's portrait clasped tight in his right hand; in his left a lock of her hair; if there was any hope in his heart it was the hope of meeting her." He said to the young man whom we have known as Lawrence Sheldon,

"Your grace of Datchet, I am your elder brother. Go up to our father—you will find him lying on his bed—and thank him for giving you my place. Now, Willis, I'm ready to catch that train."

The duchess stopped him, with halting words. "Can—can nothing be done for you?—Ivor, can nothing be done?"

The young man returned to her again. "Nothing can be done. I take from whom I can; but I will not take from you. Though I am a thief, and steal all my life, and live to a ripe old age, I cannot rob the world of half what, by its arbitrary conventions, it has helped you to rob my mother, and me."

With that he went out of the hall. And Mr. Harvey Willis went with him, and Joynson, and Ivor Dacre. And the duchess, and Dinah Willis, and he whom we have known as Lawrence Sheldon, were left alone together.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE SHADOW

THE duchess is still a widow. It is notorious that the terms on which she stands towards Ivor Dacre are of a curious kind ; but that they always have been. They are lovers, as of yore ; but only in a Platonic sense. Whether Plato will ever give way to Hymen it is not easy to predict ; and the years are going by. Between them are three shadows—the shadows of her own perjury ; of her husband's perjury ; of the son of the woman who lies in her grave. Of her own act, by her own sin, to serve, what seems to her now to have been her tawdry ambition, she associated herself with a tragedy whose consequences, she is only too conscious, are likely to be far reaching.

She lives at some distance from Mallow, in what is by no means a large house, in a southern county. Her companion is Dorothy Barber. From that fact has arisen another complication in her already sufficiently complicated existence. The present Duke of Datchet is in love with Dorothy, and makes no secret of his love ; and Dorothy loves him. Which slight accident has not only been to the duchess an occasion of considerable distress, it has placed her in a quandary. It is not so singular as those persons who are not acquainted with the whole circumstances may suppose ; but of her two sons her favourite is Lord Cecil Dacre. And it was not only always her intention that Dorothy should marry Cecil, but she has reason to believe

that Cecil regards her as the apple of his eye. A union between them would have pleased her well. Yet that is a consummation which is never likely to come about. And the duchess is comforted by the knowledge that it is difficult to apportion the blame. Dorothy's attitude is docility itself. While she admits that she loves the duke, she expresses her willingness to marry Cecil—to please the duchess; or to please Cecil; or, apparently, to please any one. She, indeed, avows a disposition to meet anybody's views on that point, but her own, which exasperates the duchess more than she cares to admit. Cecil vehemently protests that nothing would induce him to marry Dorothy; though his mother knows very well that he would give his right hand for a chance of making her his loving wife. He lives a lonely life in a shooting-box in Scotland, from which his mother has the greatest difficulty in inducing him to emerge.

It is possible that his conduct in this matter may be the immediate cause of Miss Barber's shortly becoming the Duchess of Datchet. In reply to his mother's reiterated reproofs for neglecting her, he recently dropped a hint that it was out of the question, under existing circumstances, that he should be a frequent visitor to her house while Dorothy continues to live, move, and have her being under the same roof which shelters her. Although the duchess suspects her son of jesuitical insidiousness, in consequence of that hint it is not improbable that Miss Barber may find herself even hustled into a marriage toward which her grace has not shown herself hitherto inclined.

Her conduct in this direction may be also prompted by another motive—her own experience. There is no doubt that Dolly does love the duke—she sorrowfully admits it. While the duchess regards the sorrow as hypocritical, and is quite sharp about it to Dolly, she is perfectly aware that the love is real. And, remembering how she and her

husband were both traitors to love, and all that came of it, she is loath to stand again in true love's way.

Then, also, the duke's attitude is so perfectly correct ; and that again exasperates the duchess. Indeed, if the present duke has a fault, it is that his attitude always is correct. He is not in any sense a prig, or Dolly would not love him ; he has no pretension to superior virtue, or to superior anything. But he happens to be sweet-natured, and sweet-tempered, and always wishful to do what is right—with a keen discrimination of what is right. He says that he fell in love with Dolly without being aware that Cecil had any prior claim ; but, now that he does know, he is ready to withdraw in Cecil's favour, and also to do his utmost to make amends for any unintentional wrong he may have done him. The duchess acknowledges that neither he nor Dolly could behave better, human nature being what it is ; yet it is not at all unlikely that, in her heart, she suspects them of being associated together in a conspiracy, the ultimate result of which will be that Cecil will be left lamenting.

Her grace's feelings towards the present duke, taking them altogether, are of a somewhat nondescript and indefinite kind. After mourning for him so long one might have thought that she would have welcomed his restoration with more warmth than it seems she has done. Possibly the separation was too prolonged ; her son, when she did meet him, proved to be a stranger. That he was her son was shown beyond a shadow of doubt, to the complete satisfaction of all the parties most concerned. He has shown toward her every conceivable courtesy and consideration, of which she, on her side, has shown herself to be sufficiently sensible. Yet one is inclined to guess that, somehow, she does not regard him as if he were her son—in the sense in which Cecil is her son. And the reason, perhaps, is pretty obvious, since she trained Cecil in the

way in which she thought he should go, and—the duke was trained by Dinah. There's the rub—Dinah.

If Dinah Willis had never been on the face of the earth her grace would, at this moment, be a happier woman. She stands between her son and her in so many ways. First, as a reminder. Dinah stands to her as a symbol. She never thinks of her without thinking of all that she represents—of her sister, whose dead hand still seems to be stretched out of her grave ; of her brother ; of her own husband ; and of that other across the seas. Then, though the child was hers, it was Dinah who had the joy of nursing him ; who won his love as if she were his mother—an affection which he preserves unto this hour. He has persistently refused—even at her own entreaty—to regard her as in any way culpable. He is believed to have expressed to her his conviction that in what she did she was justified. He has proclaimed abroad that no man could have had a better mother ; that she did for him all that a mother could have done. Looking back from his ripe manhood he still maintains it. No doubt the rumour of this has reached the duchess ; and, constituted as she is, has not tended to sweeten her thoughts of Dinah. He has established her in a pleasant house on one of his estates, where he is her constant visitor. The duchess once said to Dorothy that he regarded her as his mother by courtesy, and Dinah Willis as his mother in fact ; though she only spoke in jest it is probable that some such feeling is actually at the back of her mind.

It may seem strange that the young man across the seas should be one of the chief bonds of union between them ; but it is so. Hardly was he away from Mallow when he police were there ; but, hot-foot though they were, the fugitives eluded them. The officers of the law soon made his record plain. Though hardly out of his teens he was known to have been guilty of nearly every

offence in the calendar ; it seemed incredible that one so young could have been so incredible a scoundrel. Under ordinary circumstances the chief desire of every one connected with Mallow would have been to erase him even from the tablets of their memory. But the circumstances were extraordinary. It was true that he was this kind of person, that he had done these things ; but—who was to blame ? The duchess had to ask herself if it was not her husband, the duke—if it was not his father. It was very clear to the present duke's mind that this was his brother ; that, if it were not for what some think is the pleasant irony of the law, he would have been Duke of Datchet ; then, where would he himself have been ? Surely it was the late duke's duty, from any and every point of view, to have concerned himself more with his child than it seems he did. However it may have been with the mother, to her son he never seems to have given even a single thought ; or he would not have been content with a mere report of his death, even though it came to him by way of Joynson, if it was unsupported by legal testimony. Certainly the child ought never to have been suffered to fall into the hands of Mr. Harvey Willis ; which was almost equivalent to falling into hell. How could the suckling babe be held responsible for the training he received from the very hour of his birth ? If there is a recording angel, who strikes a balance, will not the major part of the responsibility be held to be the duke's ? And, if his, then—though in a diminished degree—his wife's, and his son's.

It is impossible that the young man should ever return to England—openly ; the law would grip him if he did. Still, if it could be ascertained in what part of the world he is hidden, assistance might be rendered him, which might prevent him from pursuing a career of crime—if, that is, he could be prevailed upon to accept



assistance ; which Joynson declares that he more than doubts.

"He'll hang," observed that ancient servitor to both the duke and the duchess ; "and he probably will hang—before he will accept so much as a penny piece from either of you."

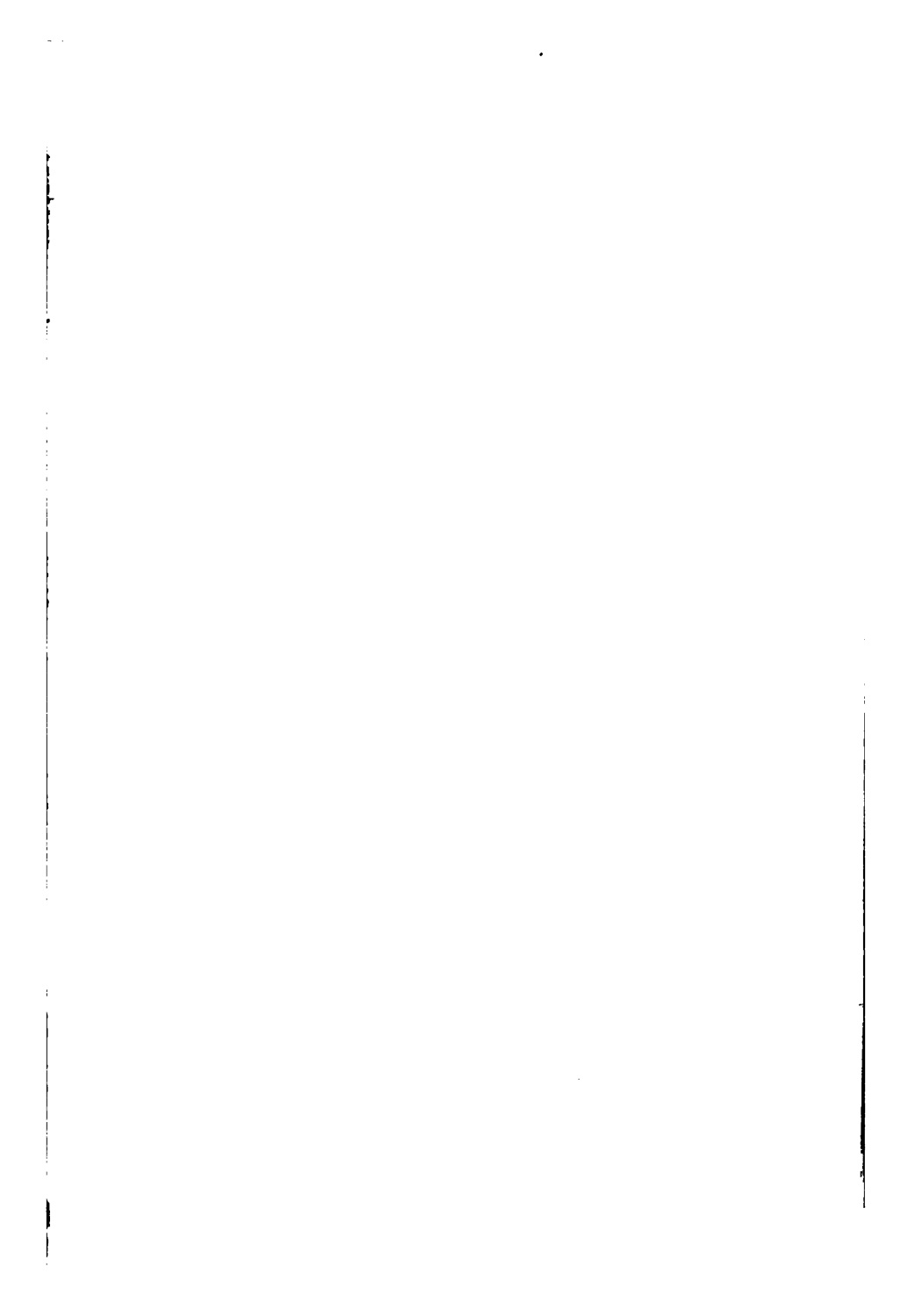
Joynson's attitude then, and since, has caused the duchess to regard him with serious misgivings. She believes that he knows more about the young man's whereabouts than he chooses to own. She says that she had never liked the man, and that he never liked her—which may possibly be. She told her son, the present duke, that she did not trust him ; after what had occurred she never would ; what a double life his active connivance had enabled the late duke to live, to the very end. She doubted if any but a small part of the story was told yet. Mark her words !—Joynson had enough shameful secrets locked in his breast to shame them all ; and one day they might know it. She had no confidence in him whatever.

But the duke, who—young though he is—takes the man's view, although he did not say so, was, and is, of a different opinion. He has every confidence in Joynson. He believes in his integrity as in his own. He has obtained an insight into the working of the man's mind which does him credit. He knows that he has one canon of conduct, and apparently one only ; and that that may be summed up in the one word, duty—as he sees it. Duty, as he sees it, means obedience to his master, alive or dead. Their association in life was so intimate that it has not been sundered by the grave. He still hears his master's voice ; and continues to do what he believes to be his bidding ; and will continue to do so until he himself is gathered to his fathers.

Thus it seems to the present duke, as well as to the duchess, that across Mallow, and all that it represents, a

shadow falls, cast by that young man who is somewhere beyond the sea. The duke thinks that it is at least possible that, one day, it may resolve itself into the man himself; when he will be confronted by problems which he may not find easy of solution. In that hour he confidently expects to receive from Joynson, if he has not yet joined his master, very material assistance. There are, though perhaps he may not admit it even to himself—probably only three persons in whom he has complete reliance; one is Dinah—another is Joynson—and the third is Dolly; but possibly his is only a very young man's point of view.

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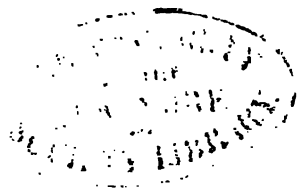
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