# RHODA BROUGHTON

# DOCTOR CUPID: A NOVEL

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**Broughton R.**

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# Содержание

# Rhoda Broughton
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## DOCTOR CUPID

Ich komme, Ich weiss nicht woher;
Ich gehe, Ich weiss nicht wohin;
Ich bin, Ich weiss nicht was;
Mich wundert dass Ich so fröhlich bin

***'Oh, Doctor Cupid, thou for me reply'***
***Sir Philip Sidney***

# CHAPTER I

| What the Big House Owes to us. | | What we Owe to the Big House. | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | As much of our company as it likes to command. | 1. | Heartburnings from envy. |
| 2. | As much dance music as it can get out of our fingers. | 2. | Headaches from dissipation. |
| 3. | The complete transfer of all the bores among its guests from its shoulders to ours. | 3. | The chronic discontent of our three maids. |
| 4. | The entire management of its Workhouse teas. | 4. | The utter demoralisation of our boot-boy. |
| 5. | The wear and tear of mind of all its Christmas-trees and bran-pies. | 5. | The acquaintance of several damaged fine ladies. |
| 6. | The physicking of its sick dogs. | 6. | A roll of red flannel from the last wedding. |
| 7. | The setting its canaries' broken legs. | 7. | The occasional use of a garden-hose. |
| 8. | The general cheerful and grateful charing for it. | | |

'There! I do not think that the joys and sorrows of living in a little house under the shadow of a big one were ever more lucidly set forth,' says an elder sister, holding up the slate on which she has just been totting up this ingenious debit and credit account to a pink junior, kneeling, head on hand, beside her; a junior who, not so long ago, did sums on that very slate, and the straggle of briony round whose sailor-hat tells that she has only just left the sunburnt harvest-fields and the overgrown August hedgerows behind her.

'We have had a good deal of fun out of it too,' says she, rather remorsefully. 'Do you remember' – with a sigh of recollected enjoyment – 'the day that we all blackened our faces with soot, and could not get the soot off again afterwards?'

To what but a mind of seventeen could such a reminiscence have appeared in the light of a departed joy?

'I have left out an item, I see,' says Margaret, running her eye once again over her work; 'an unlimited quantity of the society of Freddy Ducane, when nothing better turns up for him! Under which head, profit or loss' – glancing with a not more than semi-amused smile at her sister – 'am I to enter it, eh, Prue?'

'Loss, loss!' replies Prue, with a suspiciously rosy precipitation. 'No question about it; no one makes us lose so much time as he! Loss, loss!'

Margaret's eyes rest for an instant on her sister's face, and then return not quite comfortably to the slate, upon which she painstakingly inscribes the final entry, 'An unlimited quantity of Freddy Ducane's society, when nothing better turns up for him!'

'"The acquaintance of several damaged fine ladies!"' reads Prue over her sister's shoulder. 'I suppose that means Lady Betty?'

'I name no names,' replies Margaret gravely. 'I keep to a discreet generality —

> '"If it do her right,
> Then she hath wrong'd herself; if she be free,
> Why, then, my taxing like a wild-goose flies,
> Unclaimed of any man."'

'Dear me!' repeats Prue, under her breath, in a rather awed voice; 'I wonder what it feels like to be damaged!'

'You had better ask her,' drily.

'I suppose she says dreadful things,' continues the young girl, still with that same awed curiosity. 'I heard Mrs. Evans telling you that she "stuck at nothing." I wonder how she does it.'

'You had better ask her,' more drily.

'Damaged or not damaged,' cries Prue, springing up from her knees and beginning to caper about the room, and sing to her own capering, 'we shall meet her to-night —

'"For I'm to be married to-day, to-day,
For I'm to be married to-day."

Or if I am not to be married, I am to go to my first dinner-party, which is a step in the right direction. Do you remember your first dinner-party, Peggy? How did you feel? How did you look?'

'I looked very plain, I believe,' replies Peggy sedately. 'At least, I was told so afterwards. I remember that I felt very swollen. I had a cold, and was shy, and I think both combined to make me feel swelled.'

'It is a pity that shyness has not the same effect upon me,' says Prue, stretching out a long girlish arm, whose thinness is apparent even through its chintz muslin covering. 'The one thing that would really improve my appearance' – stopping before the only looking-glass that the little room boasts, and putting her finger and thumb in the hollows of cheeks scarcely rounded enough to match the rest of the pansy-textured child face – 'the one thing that would really improve my appearance would be to have the mumps.'

Peggy laughs.

'*Unberufen!* I should catch them, and you cannot say that they would improve me.'

'Never mind!' cries Prue, turning away with a joyous whirl from the mirror. 'I shall do very well. There are people who admire bones! I shall pass in a crowd.

'"For I'm to be married to-day, to-day,
For I'm to be married to-day."'

Her dance and her song have carried her out into the garden – the small but now opulent garden; and, partly to look at her, partly to pasture her eyes upon a yet more admired object, Peggy has followed her as far as to the French window, and now stands leaning one handsome shoulder against the door-post, and looking out upon her kingdom of flowers.

'We owe the Big House one good thing, at all events,' she says, a smile of satisfaction stealing into her comely eyes. 'I never knew what peace of mind was until I had a garden-hose.'

At this moment, in the hands of Jacob the gardener, it is playing comfortably on the faces of the tea-roses, and a luxurious drip and patter testify to their appreciation.

Prue has come back panting, and sunk out of breath on the window-sill. The briony garland has fallen from her hat, and a little hairy dog is now galloping about the lawn boastfully with it, his head held very high. Something in his attitude gets on the nerves of the other animals; for the parrot, brought out to sun himself upon the sward, raps out his mysterious marine oath, which he generally keeps for a crisis; and the white cat forgets herself so far as to deal him a swingeing box on the ear as he passes her.

'I met the brougham from the Big House as I came up the lane,' says Prue, trying to cool herself with the inadequate fan of a small pocket-handkerchief; 'it was on its way back from the station. How tired those poor horses must be of the road to the station! It had three people inside it – Lady Betty, Mr. Harborough, and some third person.'

'Her maid, probably.'

Prue shakes her head.

'No; the maid followed in a fly with the nurses and children. Dear me, Peggy, what a number of servants they take about with them – maid, one; valet, two; footman, three; two nurses, five!'

'Nurses, five!' repeats Margaret inattentively, not thinking of what she is saying, and with her eyes still riveted on the hose; 'surely that is a very unusual number, isn't it?'

'I could not see the third person distinctly,' continues Prue narratively; 'but I think it was the man whom Lady Betty brought with her last year. She seems always to bring him with her.'

'More shame for her!' replies Peggy severely.

'Mr. Harborough was very fond of him, too,' says Prue reflectively. 'He called him "John."'

'More fool he!' still severelier; then, with a sudden and happy change of key, 'That is right, Jacob. Give it a good souse; it is covered with fly.'

'Do not you wonder what we shall do to-night?' cries Prue, her mind galloping gaily away from the blackness of Lady Betty's deeds to the splendid whiteness of her own immediate prospect. 'Charades? dancing? I prophesy dancing.'

'"For Willy will dance with Jane,"'

bursting out into song again —

'"And Betty has got her John."'

She breaks off, laughing. Margaret laughs too.

'Betty may have got her John, but I am sure I do not know who Peggy and Prue will have, unless Freddy can split himself up into several young gentlemen at once. He can do most things' – with a touch of bitterness – 'possibly he can do that too.'

'Or perhaps we shall go out star-gazing in the walled garden,' interrupts Prue, hurriedly and redly shying away from the name thus introduced. 'I always think that the stars look bigger from the walled garden than anywhere else in the world.'

'Was it there that you and Freddy went to look for Cassiopeia's Chair?' inquires Peggy drily; 'and were more than an hour and a half before you could find her?'

'It is so odd that I had never noticed her before,' cries Prue hastily. 'She is such a queer shape, more like a long straggling W than a chair.'

'And, after all,' continues Margaret slowly, with an uneasy smile, and not paying any heed to her sister's interpolation, 'she turned out to be in the kiosk.'

Prue is silent. The little hairy dog has brought her ruined garland back to her feet; and, holding it between his fore-paws, is painstakingly biting off each leaf and tendril, and strewing them over the close-shaven sward. The parrot is going to sleep, standing on one leg, and making a clacking noise with his beak; not a posture that one would have thought *à priori* conducive to slumber.

'It was not a place in which one would have expected to find a large constellation, was it?' asks Peggy, still with that same rather rueful smile, and stroking her sister's childish head as she speaks – 'the darkest corner of a kiosk.'

But at that Prue leaps to her feet; and having, in the twinkling of an eye, twitched the hose out of Jacob's hand, she points it at her sister.

'Mention the word kiosk once more,' cries she desperately, and winking away a couple of tears, 'and you will not have a dry stitch upon you.'

# CHAPTER II

'Ave Maria! 'Tis the hour of prayer!
Ave Maria! 'Tis the hour of love!'

Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of dinner, too; and towards that dinner, about to be spread at the Big House, the inmates of the little one are hastening on foot through the park. Brougham have they none; goloshes and a lanthorn their only substitute. The apricot sunset and the harvest moon will be their two lanthorns to-night; but upon the goloshes Peggy has, in the case of her sister, sternly insisted. Hastening through the park – alternately hastening, that is to say – and loitering, as Prue's fear of being too late, and Peggy's better-grounded apprehension of being too early, get the upper hand.

'How calm you are!' cries the young girl feverishly, as Margaret stops for a moment to

'Suck the liquid air'

of the ripe harvest evening, and admire the velvet-coated stags springing through the bracken. 'How *can* you be so calm? Were you calm at your first dinner-party?'

'I cannot recollect,' replies Peggy, honestly trying to recall the now five-years-old dead banquet referred to. 'I can only remember that I felt swelled.'

'Do not you think that we might go on now?' asks Prue, anxiously kicking one golosh against the other. 'We cannot be much too soon; our clocks are always slow. It would be awkward, would not it, if we sailed in last of all?'

Though inwardly convinced that there is very little fear of this catastrophe, Peggy good-humouredly complies; and still more good-humouredly refrains from any 'told-you-so' observation upon their finding themselves sole occupants of the flamboyant Louis Quatorze chairs and Gobelin sofas in the large drawing-room, where the housemaids have evidently only just ceased patting cushions and replacing chair-backs.

'Never mind!' says Prue joyfully; 'we shall have all the more of it, and we shall see everybody come in. I shall love to see everybody come in. Who will be first? Guess! Not Lady Betty! she will be last. I remember your saying last year that she was always late, and that she never apologised.'

'That was very ill bred of her,' replies Margaret austerely.

'And that one night Mr. Harborough scolded her, and you saw her making a face at him behind his back. Oh! how I wish' – breaking out into delighted laughter – 'that she would make a face at him to-night, and that he could catch her doing it!'

Her laughter is checked by the thrilling sound of the folding-doors being rolled back to admit some new arrivals. It is nobody very exciting, however; only Mr. Evans, the clergyman of the parish, whom they see every day, and that household angel of his, upon whose testimony lies the weight of Lady Betty Harborough's conversational laxities.

A stranger would be thunderstruck to hear that Mrs. Evans is in her wedding-dress, as the sable rook is less black from head to heel than she; but to those who know and love her, it is *le secret de Polichinelle* that her gown – through having since taken an insignificant trip or two to the dye-pot, and been eked out with a selection of funeral scarves and hat-bands – is verily and indeed the one in which she stood in virgin modesty beside Mr. Evans at the altar, fifteen rolling years ago. During a transition stage of red, it has visited the Infirmary Ball for five years; it had an unpopular interval of snuffy-brown, during which it did nothing remarkable; and in its present inky phase it has mourned for several dead Evanses, and for every crowned head in Europe.

'I am so glad we are not last,' says Mrs. Evans, relaxing her entrance smile, and sinking into an easy conversational manner, as she sees that she has only her two young parishioners to accost; 'not that there is ever much fear of that in this house, but Mr. Evans could not get the horse along. Have you any idea' – looking curiously round – 'whom we are to meet? Lady Roupell's note merely said, "Dear Mrs. Evans," or "My dear Mrs. Evans" – I forget which – "will you and Mr. Evans come and help us to eat a haunch of venison?" She knows that Mr. Evans would go any distance for a haunch of venison.'

To this somewhat extravagant statement of his appreciation of the pleasures of the table the pastor is heard to make a captious demurrer; but his wife goes on without heeding him.

'Of course that gave one no clue. I think people ought to give one some clue that one may know what to put on. However, I thought I could not go far wrong in black; never too smart, and always smart enough, you know.'

Peggy assents, and, as she does so, a trivial unbelieving wonder crosses her mind as to what the alternative 'toilette,' which Mrs. Evans implies, but upon which the eye of man has never looked, may be.

'And you are no wiser than we?' pursues the vicar's wife interrogatively. 'I wonder at that, living so near as you do. Have not you heard of anybody at all?' with a rather discouraged intonation.

'I am not sure – I think – the Harboroughs – '

'The Harboroughs?' cries the other eagerly. 'Mr. and Lady Betty? Her father died last winter; he was the second duke; succeeded by his eldest son, her brother. The Harboroughs! – and Mr. Talbot, of course?' with a knowing look.

'I do not know,' replies Margaret cautiously; 'perhaps.'

'I am afraid it is more than perhaps,' rejoins Mrs. Evans significantly. 'I am afraid it is – '

But her sentence dies unfinished, killed by the frou-frou of silk that announces the approach of a smart woman, and of the white-waistcoated gentleman who has bought the privilege of paying for the silk. Then follows an unencumbered man, whose speech bewrayeth him to be a diplomate, and who has a great deal to say to the smart woman.

After five minutes more frou-frou is audible, heralding the approach of a second smart woman – Lady Betty herself this time – with her lawful Harborough stepping somewhat insignificantly behind her.

Lady Betty is so exceedingly glad to see the two girls that Peggy asks herself whether her memory has played her false as to the amount of intimacy that existed between them last year. She has not overheard the aside that passed between her ladyship and her husband as she sailed up the long room:

'Who are they? Have we ever met them here before? Are they all one lot?'

Nor, indeed, would it ever have entered into the guileless Peggy's mind as possible that a woman who took her by both hands, and smiled into both eyes, could have clean forgotten, not only her name, but her very existence.

Once more the folding-doors roll wide, to admit this time, at last, the hostess, Lady Roupell, and her nephew, Freddy Ducane, who – both chronically late for everything – arrive simultaneously; the one still fastening his sleeve-link, and the other hastily clasping her bracelets.

'I beg you all a thousand pardons, good people,' cries the old lady, going round and dealing out hearty handshakes to her injured guests. 'I am sure you must all have been blessing me; but if you had seen me five minutes ago, you would wonder that I am here now – ha! ha! Well, at all events we are all assembled at last, are not we? No! Surely we are short of somebody; who is it? John Talbot, of course! Where is John Talbot?' looking round, first at the general company, who are quite unable to answer her; and turning, secondly, as if involuntarily, towards Lady Betty. 'Where is John Talbot?'

But at this instant, in time to save Lady Betty's blushes, which indeed are in no great hurry to show themselves, John Talbot appears to answer for himself – John Talbot, the third occupant of the brougham, the 'man whom Lady Betty always takes about with her.'

His entry is not quite what is expected, as he enters by no means alone. Clasped in his embrace, with her fat arms fastened round his neck, and her face buried – a good deal to its detriment – in his collar, is a young person in her nightgown; while running by his side is a little barefoot gentleman, with a long dressing-gown trailing behind him.

'We hope that you will forgive us,' says the young man, advancing towards his hostess; 'but we have come to say good-night. I suggested that our costume was not quite what is usual, but I was overruled.'

As he speaks his fair burden makes it clear by a wriggling movement that she wishes to be set down; and, being obliged in this particular, instantly makes for her mother, and, climbing up into Lady Betty's splendid lap, begins to whisper in her ear. The boy stands shamefaced, clutching his protector's hand, and evidently painfully conscious that no other gentleman but himself in the room is in a dressing-gown.

'Do you know what she is asking me?' cries Lady Betty, bursting into a fit of laughter. 'Freddy, I must congratulate you upon a new bonne fortune. She is asking whether she may kiss Freddy Ducane! There, be off with you! Since' – with a look of casual careless coquetry at Talbot – 'you have introduced my family, perhaps you will be good enough to remove them.'

Mr. Talbot complies; and, having recaptured Miss Harborough – a feat of some difficulty, as, unlike her brother, she enjoys her *déshabillé*, and announces a loud intention of kissing everybody – departs in the same order in which he arrived, and the pretty little couple are seen no more.

# CHAPTER III

It is obvious that, whatever else he may be, John Talbot is, with the exception of Mr. Evans, the man of smallest rank in the room, since to him is assigned the honour of leading Peggy into the dining-room. She had not at all anticipated it; but had somehow expected fully to see him, in defiance of precedence, bearing off his Betty. Nor is she by any means more pleased at, than prepared for, the provision made for her entertainment. John Talbot, the man whose name she has never heard except in connection with that of another man's wife! John Talbot, 'the man whom Lady Betty always takes about with her!' In Heaven's name, why does not she take him about with her now, and not devolve the onus of his entertainment upon other innocent and unwilling persons?

With thoughts such as these, that augur but ill for the amusingness of his dinner, running through her mind, Margaret lays her hand as lightly as it is possible to do, without absolutely not touching it, upon the coat-sleeve presented to her, and marches silently by its side into the dining-room, inwardly resolving to be as laconic, as forbidding, and as unlike Lady Betty to its owner as politeness towards her hostess will allow, and to devote as nearly as possible the whole of her conversation to her neighbour on the other side. Nor does her resolution flinch, even when that other neighbour reveals himself as Mr. Evans. It is certain that no duty compels her to take the initiative. Until John Talbot begins, she may preserve that silence which she would like to maintain intact, until she rises from the feast to which she has but just sat down. Doubtlessly he is of the same mind as she; and, maddened by separation from his idol, irritated against her, who, for even an hour, has taken that idol's place, he will ask nothing better than to sit mute in resentful pining for her, from whom Lady Roupell has so inhumanly parted him. As to his intentions to be mute, she is soon undeceived; for she has not yet finished unbuttoning her gloves when she finds herself addressed by him.

'I think I had the pleasure of meeting you here last year?'

Nothing can be more banal than the observation; more serenely civil, less maddened than the tone in which it is conveyed. He is not going to leave her in peace then? She is so surprised and annoyed at this discovery that for a moment she forgets to answer him. It is not until reminded of her omission by an expectant look on his face that she recollects to drop a curt 'Yes.'

'I came' – thinking from her manner that the incident has escaped her memory, and that he will recall it by becoming more circumstantial – 'I came with the Harboroughs.'

Another 'Yes,' still more curt and bald than the last. H'm! not flattering for him, certainly; but she has obviously not yet overtaken the reminiscence.

'It was about this time of year.'

'Yes.'

What is the matter with the girl? there is certainly something very odd about her. He has noticed her but cursorily so far, but now gives her an attentively examining look. She appears to be perfectly sane, and not in the least shy. Is that handsome mouth, fresh and well cut, absolutely incapable of framing any syllable but 'Yes'? He gives himself some little trouble so to compose his next question that the answer, 'Yes,' to it shall be impossible.

'Do you happen to recollect whether it was this month or September? Lady Betty Harborough and I had an argument about it as we came up from the station.'

*Lady Betty Harborough!* With what a brazen front he himself has introduced her! She, Peggy, would as soon have thought of flying in the air as of mentioning that name which he has just so matter-of-factly pronounced.

'I am afraid that I do not remember,' she answers frostily.

He looks at her again, in growing wonder. What *does* ail her? Is it, after all, a mysterious form of shyness? He knows under how many odd disguises that strange malady of civilisation hides itself. Despite his thirty-two years, is not he shy himself sometimes? Poor girl, he can feel for her!

'Not only did we meet here,' pursues he, with a pleasant friendly smile, 'but Lady Roupell was good enough to take me down to call upon you at your own house.'

'Yes?'

Well, it is uphill work! If he has to labour at the oar like this from now until dessert, there will not be much left of him at the end. Well, never mind! it is all in the day's work; only he will ask Lady Roupell quietly not to inflict this impossible dummy upon him again.

'We came down upon you in great force, I remember – it was on a Sunday – Lady Roupell, Freddy, the Bentincks, the Harboroughs.'

He pauses, discouraged, despite himself. She has been leisurely sipping her soup, and now lays down her spoon, looking straight before her. He heaves a loud sigh, but not even that induces her to look round at him.

'Lady Roupell often brings people down on Sunday afternoons,' she says, in an indifferent voice, which implies that it is a quite impossible feat for her memory to separate the one insignificant Sunday to which he alludes from all or any others. In point of fact, she remembers it perfectly, and the recollection of it adds a double chill to her tone.

On that very Sunday afternoon did not this man and his Lady Betty flagrantly lose themselves for an hour in an orchard six yards square? Did not Lady Betty, without leave asked or given, eat all the mulberries that were ripe on Peggy's one tree? Did not she, in rude horse-play pelting a foolish guardsman with green apples, break a bell-glass that sheltered the picotee cuttings cherished of Jacob's and of Peggy's souls?

Ignorant of the offensive reminiscences he has stirred up, Mr. Talbot blunders on:

'I remember you had a tame – '

He stops. He cannot for the life of him recollect what the tame animal was that he was taken to see. He can only recall that it was some beast not usually kept as a pet, and that it lived in a house in the stable-yard. Of course if he pauses she will supply the word, and his lapse of memory need never be perceived.

But he has reckoned without his host. She has indeed turned her face a little towards him, and says 'Yes?' expectantly.

It is clear that she has not the least intention of helping him; and is it, or is it not, his fancy that there is a slight ill-natured tremor about that corner of her mouth which is nearest him?

'A tame – badger,' suggests he desperately.

But the moment that he has uttered the word he knows that it was not a badger.

'A tame badger!' repeats she slowly, and again gazing straight before her; 'yes, what a nice pet!'

She is not shy at all, nor even stupid. She is only rude and malevolent. But he will not give her the satisfaction of letting her see that he perceives it.

'Perhaps Lady Roupell will have your permission to bring us down to see you next Sunday, when I may have an opportunity of stroking my old friend the badger's' (he smiles, as if he had known all along that it was not a badger) 'head once again.'

'I do not know what Lady Roupell's plans for next Sunday are,' replies she snubbingly; and so turns, with a decided movement of head and shoulder, towards her other neighbour, Mr. Evans, who, however, is not nearly so grateful for her attentions as he should be.

Mr. Evans has the poor and Peggy Lambton always with him, but he has not a haunch of fat buck-venison more than three times a year. In everyday life he is more than willing to give his share of the Vicarage dinner to such among the sick and afflicted of his flock as can be consoled and supported by underdone shoulders of mutton and batter-puddings; but on the rare occasions when the opportunity offers of having his palate titillated by the delicate cates of the higher civilisation, he had very much rather be left in peace to enjoy them. He has no fault to find in this respect with Prue Lambton, to whom, as having taken her in to dinner, he might be supposed to have some conversational obligations.

Why, then, cannot Peggy, to whom he owes nothing, be equally considerate? Perhaps Peggy's heart speaks for him. At all events, after one or two vain shots at the harvest-home and the Workhouse tea, she desists from the futile effort to lead him into chat; but subtly remains sitting half turned towards him, as if talking to him, so as to baffle any further ventures – if, indeed, he have the spirit to make such – on the part of her other neighbour. Her tongue being idle, she allows her eyes to travel. It is true that the thick forest of oats and poppies which waves over the board renders the sight of the table's other side about as difficult as that of the coast of France; but at least she can see her fat hostess at the head of the table, and her slim host at the foot. Freddy Ducane is in his glory – something fair and female on either hand. On his right Lady Betty, who, being a duke's daughter, takes precedence of the other smart woman, who was only a miss before she blossomed into a viscountess; on his left, to ensure himself against the least risk of having any dull or vacuous moments during his dinner, he has arranged Prue Lambton – 'his little friend Prue.' Beyond the mere fact of proximity – in itself, of course, a splendid boon – she does not, so far, seem to be much the gainer by her position.

However, he snatches a moment every now and then to explain to her – Peggy knows it as well as if she heard his words – how entirely a matter of irksome duty and hospitality are his whispers to Lady Betty, his tender comments upon her clothes, and long bunglings with the clasp of her pearls. And, judging by her red-stained cheeks, her empty plate (which of us in his day has not been too superbly happy to eat?), and the trembling smiles that rush out to meet his lame explanations, Prue believes him. Poor little Prue!

Margaret sighs sadly and impatiently, and looks away – looks away to find John Talbot's eyes fastened upon her with an expression of such innocent and genuine curiosity that she asks involuntarily:

'Why do you look at me?'

'I beg your pardon a thousand times!' he answers apologetically. 'I was only wondering, to be quite sincere – by the bye, do you like people to be quite sincere?'

'That depends,' replies Peggy cautiously.

'Well, then, I must risk it. I was wondering why on earth you had thought it worth your while to snub me in the way you have been doing.'

She does not answer, but again looks straight before her.

How very offensive in a woman to look straight before her! She ought to be quite certain of the perfection of her profile before she presents it so persistently to you.

Shall he tell her so? That would make her look round pretty quickly.

'I was trying to see whether I could not regard it in the light of a compliment,' continues he audaciously.

'That would not be easy,' replies she drily.

'It was something that you should have thought me worth wasting your powder and shot upon,' he answers.

Certainly her profile is anything but perfect; her chin projects too much. In her old age, if she had a hook nose (which she has not), she would be a mere nut-cracker.

Shall he tell her that? How many disagreeable things he might tell her! It puts him into quite a good humour with her to think of them.

'Now, about that badger, for instance,' says he.

But at that, against her will, she laughs outright.

'Dear little beast!' she cries maliciously; 'so playful and affectionate! such a pet!'

She has laughed. That is something gained, at all events. It is not a nice friendly laugh. On the contrary, it is a very rude, ill-natured one: she is obviously a rude, ill-natured girl; but it is a laugh.

'You can see for yourself,' pursues he, holding out one of the *menus* for her inspection, 'that we are only at the first *entrée*; we shall have to sit beside each other for a good hour more. Lady Roupell does not want to talk to me; and your neighbour – I do not know who he is, and I will not ask you,

because I know you would not answer me civilly – but whoever he is, he will not talk to you. I saw you try to make him, and he would not; he snubbed you. I was avenged! I was very glad!'

Peggy would much rather not have laughed; but there is something that seems to her so ludicrous in the fact of her abortive advances to Mr. Evans having been overheard and triumphed at, that she cannot help yielding to a brief and stifled mirth at her own expense. And, after all, what he says is sense. He is a very bad man, and she dislikes him extremely; but to let him observe to her that the news from Afghanistan seems warlike; or to remark in return that she has never seen the root-crops look better, need not in the least detract from the thoroughness of her ill opinion of him, and may make the ensuing hour a shade less tedious to herself than would entire silence. So she turns her candid eyes, severely, serenely blue, for the first time, full upon him, and says:

'I think you are right; I think we had better talk.'

But of course, at that sudden permission to talk, every possible topic of conversation flies out of his head. And yet as she remains, with her two blue eyes sternly fixed upon him, awaiting the question or questions that she has given him permission to put, he must say something; so he asks stupidly:

'Who is your neighbour?'

'Our vicar.'

'What is his name?' (How infinitely little he cares what the vicar's name is; but it gives him time.)

'E V A N S,' replies she, spelling very distinctly and slowly, afraid that she may be overheard if she pronounce the whole name.

'Oh, thanks; and the lady opposite in mourning is Mrs. E V A N S?' (spelling too).

'She is Mrs. Evans; but she is not in mourning; she is in her wedding-gown!' replies Peggy, breaking into a smile.

She never can help smiling at the thought of Mrs. Evans's wedding-dress, any more than Charles Lamb's Cheshire cats can help laughing when they think of Cheshire being a County Palatine. She is smiling broadly now. Well, if her smile come seldom, there is no doubt that it is a very agreeable one when it does come. What sort of thing could he say that would be likely to bring it back?

'I did not know that people were ever married in black.'

She shakes her head oracularly.

'No more they are!'

She is smiling still. (What a delightful wide mouth! and what *dents de jeune chien*!)

'It is made out of an old Geneva gown of his?' suggests Talbot wildly.

Again she shakes her nut-brown head.

'Wrong.'

'I have it!' he cries eagerly. 'I know more about the subject than you think; it has been dyed.'

The mirth has retired from her mouth, and now lurks in the tail of her bright eye.

'You did not find that out for yourself,' she says distrustfully; 'some one told you.'

'Upon my honour, it is my own unassisted discovery,' replies he solemnly, and then they both laugh.

Finding herself betrayed into such a harmony of light-hearted merriment with him, Margaret pulls herself up. After all, she must not forget that there is a medium between the stiff politeness she had planned and this hail-fellow-well-met-ness into which she finds herself somehow sliding. Nor does his next sentence, though innocently enough meant, at all conduce to make her again relax her austerity.

'I should not allow my wife to dye her wedding-gown black.'

His wife! How dare he allude to such a person? He, with his illegal Betty ogling and double-entendre-ing and posturing opposite! How dare he allude to marriage at all? He to whom that sacred tie is a derision! She has frozen up again.

Without having the faintest suspicion of the cause, he is wonderingly aware of the result. Is it possible that she can object to his introducing his hypothetical wife into the consideration? She is more than welcome to retort upon him with her supposititious husband. He will give her the chance.

'Would you?'

'Would I what?'

'Dye your wedding-gown black?'

She knows that she would not. She knows that she would lay it up in lavender, and tenderly show the yellowed skirt and outlandish sleeves to her grandchildren forty years hence. But in the pleasure of contradicting him, truth is worsted.

'Yes.'

'You would?' in a tone of surprise.

She must repeat her fib.

'Yes.'

'Well, I should not have thought it.'

He would like her to ask him why he would not have thought it; but she does not oblige him.

'I think it would show a want of sentiment,' pursues he perseveringly.

'Yes?'

Good heavens! If she has not got back again to her monosyllable!

'Do not you?'

'No.'

'I should think it would bring ill-luck, should not you?'

'No.'

'Should not you, really?'

'I do not think that it is worth arguing about,' replies Peggy, roused and wearied. 'I may dye mine, and you need not dye yours, and we shall neither of us be any the worse.'

'And yet – ' he begins; but she interrupts him.

'After all,' she says, turning once more upon him those two dreadfully direct blue eyes – 'after all, I am not at all sure that it is not a good emblem of marriage – the white gown that goes through muddy waters, and comes out black on the other side.'

There is such a weight of meaning and emphasis in her words that he is silent, and wishes that she had kept to her monosyllables.

# CHAPTER IV

'Yon meaner beauties of the night,
That poorly satisfy our eyes,
More by your number than your light;
You common people of the skies,
What are you when the moon shall rise?'

'Oh, Peggy! I have had such a dinner!' cries Prue, in an ecstatic voice, drawing her sister away into a window as soon as the ladies have reached the drawing-room.

'Have you indeed?' replies Margaret distrustfully, and wilfully misunderstanding. 'Had you two helps of venison, like Mr. Evans?'

'Oh! I am not talking of the food!' rejoins the other impatiently. 'I do not know whether or not I ate anything; I do not think I did. But they were so amusing, I did not want to talk. He saw that I did not want to talk, so he let me sit and listen.'

'That was very considerate of him.'

'She was so amusing; she told us such funny stories about Mr. Harborough – no harm, you know, but rather making game of him. I do not know what Mrs. Evans meant by saying that she stuck at nothing. She said one or two things that I did not quite understand; but I am sure there was no harm in them.'

'Perhaps not.'

'And she was so kind to me,' pursues Prue, with enthusiasm; 'trying to draw me into the conversation, asking how long I had been out.'

But here the sisters' *tête-à-tête* is broken in upon by the high-pitched voice of the subject of their conversation.

'Who would like to come and see my children in bed? Do not all speak at once. H'm! nobody? This is hardly gratifying to a mother's feelings. Miss Lambton, I am sure you will come; you look as if you were fond of children. And you, Miss Prue, I shall insist upon your coming, whether you like it or not!'

So saying she puts her hand familiarly through the delighted little girl's arm, and walks off with her, Peggy following grudgingly. She has not the slightest desire to see the young Harboroughs, asleep or wake; though she has already had to defend her heart against an inclination to grow warm towards them, upon their rosy nightgowned entry before dinner. She has to defend it still more strongly, when, the nursery being reached, she sees them lying in the all-gentleness of perfect slumber in their cribs. Even that not innumerous class who dislike the waking child, the self-assertive, interrogative, climbing, bawling, smashing, waking child, grow soft-hearted at the sight of the little sleeping angel. Is this really Lady Betty bending over the little bed? recovering the outflung chubby arm from fear of cold, straightening the coverlets, and laying a light hand on the cool forehead? Peggy ought to be pleased by such a sign of grace; but when we have formed a conception of a person we are seldom quite pleased by the discovery of a fact that declines to square with that conception.

'You are very fond of them?' she says in a whisper, that, without her intending it, is interrogative; and through which pierces perhaps a tone of more surprise than she is herself aware of.

Lady Betty stares.

'Fond of them! Why, I am a perfect fool about them; at least I am about him! I do not care so much about her; she is a thorough Harborough! Did you ever see such a likeness as hers to her father? He' (with a regretful motion of the head toward the boy's bed) 'is a little like him too; but

he has a strong look of me. When his eyes are open he is the image of me. I have a good mind to wake him to show you.'

'Oh, do not!' cries Margaret eagerly; 'it would be a sin!'

But the caution is needless. The mother had no real thought of breaking in upon that lovely slumber.

'Did you ever see such a duck?' says she rapturously, stooping over him; 'and his hand!' – taking the little plump fist softly into her own palm – 'look at his hand! Will not he be a fine strong man? He can pummel his nurse already, cannot he, Harris? And not a day's illness in all his little life, bless him!'

Her eyes are almost moist as she speaks. The colour would no doubt come and go in her cheeks, only that unfortunately it has contracted the habit of never going, unless washed off by eau-de-Cologne. Against her will, Peggy feels her ill opinion melting away like mist; but happily, on her return to the drawing-room, she is able to restore it in its entirety. For no sooner have the men appeared than Lady Betty disappears. The exact moment of her flight and its companion Peggy has been unable to verify; as, at the moment when it must have taken place, she was buttonholed by Mrs. Evans on the subject of rose-rash, an unhandsome little disorder at present rioting among the Evans's ranks; and for which Peggy is supposed to have a specific. But though she did not actually see the person who shared Lady Betty's evasion, she is as sure as to who it was as if her very bodily eyes had looked upon him, – John Talbot, of course. With John Talbot she is now dishonestly philandering under the honest harvest-moon; to John Talbot she is now talking criminal nonsense, with those very lips that five minutes ago were laid upon the sacred velvet cheeks of her little children. With a curling lip Margaret looks round the room.

Why, Prue is missing too, and Freddy! Prue, the prone to quinsy, to throats, to delicacy of all kinds, straying over the deep-dewed grass without cloak or goloshes! For it would be expecting something more than human of her to suppose that when invited out by her admirer to hear all that the poets have said of Orion and Arcturus and the sister Pleiads, she should stop him in the full flow of his inspiration to inquire after what the Americans prettily call her 'gums.' If she will only have the sense to keep to the gravel paths! The elder sister has walked to the window, and now stands straining her eyes down the long alley to see if she can catch any glimpse of the little figure that, since its wailing infancy seventeen years ago, has caused her so many anxious hours. Shall she take upon herself the invidious office of spy, and follow her? or trust to the child's common sense, and to the possibility of her occasionally dropping her eyes from the enormous moon, now queening it in a great field of radiance above her head, to her own thin-shod feet? She is still hesitating when a voice, coming from behind her, makes her start.

'What a night!'

She turns to find that the utterer of this original ejaculation is none other than John Talbot. Is it possible that they have already returned from their lovers' ramble? But no! there is no sign of Lady Betty. It is clear that *he* could not have been the companion of her stroll. For the second time this evening Margaret has found herself in error.

'*You?*' she says, in a tone of rather vexed surprise.

'Why not?'

'I thought that you were out.'

'*I!* no!'

A moment's silence. Whom then could she have lured into her toils? Freddy? But Freddy must be with Prue. Mr. Evans? the diplomate? There is not much choice.

Her speculations are again broken in upon by the voice:

'Will not you take a turn?'

'I think not; that is to say' – correcting herself – 'I shall only go a few steps, just to find my sister.'

'May I help you to find her?'

'I do not know why I should give you that trouble.'

A moment's silence, spent by both in reflections. This is the outcome of his.

'I do not think that I have done anything fresh.'

'Anything fresh?'

'Not since we parted; nothing to earn me a new set of snubs.'

She smiles a little. 'You have not had much time.'

'And I will not do anything fresh.' Then aside, 'I am blessed if I know what I did.'

'That is rather a rash engagement,' smiling again.

It is fortunate that her teeth are so good, for she shows a great many of them.

'But if I keep it I may come?' pertinaciously.

'I suppose so;' and out they step together.

It cannot be helped, but it is a little perverse of fate that, after all, it should be she who, in appearance at least, is the one to philander in the moonlight with this despiser of the marriage law. And whether or no it is his presence that brings her ill-luck, it is some time before she succeeds in the object of her search. The grounds are rather large, with meandering walks and great clumps of shrubs that hide them from one another.

Each of Prue's favourite resorts has been visited, but without result. The walled garden, hushed and sleeping; the trellised wall, where ancient brick has disappeared beneath the thronged faces, diversely dazzling, of the brown, orange, tawny and sulphur nasturtiums; the retired seat beneath the tulip-tree. All, all are empty. Nothing remains but the kiosk, and Peggy feels sure that Prue is not in the kiosk.

Thither, however, they bend their steps; but before they reach it a turn of the walk reveals to them two seated figures. One is certainly the Prue whom they seek; Prue sitting upon an uncomfortable garden bench, on which nobody ever sits – on which she herself has never sat before. But is it conceivable that, since dinner, Freddy can have doubled in size, can have lost all the hair off the top of his head, and have exchanged his cambric shirt-front and his diamond and turquoise studs for a double-breasted waistcoat buttoned to the chin?

With a feeling akin to stupefaction Peggy realises that it is Mr. Evans, and not Freddy, who is Prue's companion. As they approach he rises reluctantly. He had much rather that they had not come. Prue never wants to talk to him. She lets him sit and silently ruminate and dream beside her; a cigarette between his lips, and a blessed oblivion of dissenters, boys' schooling, girls' ugly faces, rickety baby, Christmas bills, invading his lulled brain. Prue neither rises nor changes her position. Her arms lie listlessly on her lap, and she is staring up at Cassiopeia, the one constellation for ever exalted above its fellows by having had Freddy Ducane for its exhibitor.

'Do you think you are quite wise to sit out here, with nothing over your shoulders?' asks Margaret, stooping over her sister, and speaking in a tone of such exceeding gentleness as positively to astound Talbot, who had not calculated upon the existence of such tones in a voice which has conscientiously employed only its harsher keys for his benefit.

'I am not cold,' replies Prue dully.

'How long have you been here? Long?'

'I do not know.'

'We were too comfortable to take note of time, were not we, Miss Prue?' says Mr. Evans, with a sigh for his lost peace. 'A southern moon, is not it?' to Talbot.

'Quite long enough, I am sure,' rejoined Peggy, putting her hand persuasively on her sister's shoulder. 'Come with us! come!'

Talbot cannot help hearing that 'Come!' even while exchanging original remarks upon the stars of the southern hemisphere with the vicar; nor can he further help speculating as to whether, if that 'Come!' were addressed to himself, and were inviting him to follow it to Lapland, to Hong Kong, or to some yet hotter place, he should have the force of mind to decline. But at all events Prue has.

'I had rather stay here,' replies she, *sotto voce*, with an accent of miserable irritation. 'Why should I come? Nobody wants me; nobody misses me! Please leave me alone.'

There is nothing for it but to comply. With a heavier heart than that with which she reached it, Margaret leaves the bench and its ill-sorted occupants. She takes little heed as to the direction of her steps until she finds herself and her companion approaching the kiosk, whence is plainly audible the sound of voices, which, as they advance nearer to it, grows hushed. It is too dark to see into the interior, as above the little gimcrack temple, memorial of the bad taste of fifty years ago, rises a brotherhood of tall, spruce firs that project their shade over and before it.

Just in front of it Talbot stops her to point out to her a shooting-star that is darting its trail of glory through the immensities of space. Has he not heard those voices – he must have been deaf if he did not – nor observed that marked succeeding silence? He shows no sign of uneasiness or curiosity. His eye is resting apparently, with a calmer enjoyment than she can bring to it, on the gold mist rolling its gauzy-billows in the hollows of the park.

It is only to those who come to her with a tranquil and disengaged mind that the great mother gives the real key of her treasure-houses; and Peggy's mind to-night is too ruffled to give her any claim to the great endowment.

They are standing silently side by side, when a noise, proceeding from the inside of the kiosk, makes itself audible – a noise apparently intended to counterfeit the mewing of a cat, followed by the crowing of a most improbable cock.

Talbot does not even turn his head.

'We are not at all frightened, and not much amused,' he says, in a clear matter-of-fact voice.

'You had not an idea that we were here, had you?' cries Lady Betty, springing out of the temple, followed by Freddy Ducane. 'Did not I mew well? and did not Freddy crow badly? Freddy, you have no more idea of crowing than a carp.'

'I can do better than that,' replies Freddy, in self-defence. 'I am not in voice to-night.'

'But you had not a notion that we were here, had you?' repeats Lady Betty pertinaciously.

'As we had heard you talking at the top of your voices for half a mile before we came up to you, we had some slight inkling of it.'

Peggy wonders whether the cold dryness of his tone is as patent to the person to whom it is addressed as it is to herself. She supposes that it is, since she instantly takes possession of him; and, under the pretext of showing him a plant which can scarcely be distinguishable from its neighbours under the colourless moonlight, walks him off into a dusky alley.

Margaret remains alone with Freddy.

'"Why so dull and mute, young sinner?
Prithee, why so mute?"'

says he familiarly, approaching her.

She looks him fully and gravely in the face. Most people find it difficult to look at Freddy Ducane without smiling. Peggy feels no such inclination. Between her and this image of youth and sunshine there rises another image – a poor little image, to whom this gay weather-cock gives its weather – a little image that expands or shrinks as this all-kissing zephyr blows warm or cold upon it.

'Because I have nothing to say, I suppose,' replies she shortly.

'Come with me to the walled garden' – in a wheedling voice – 'and show me the stars.'

'Thank you, I can see them quite well here.'

'"My pretty Peg, my pretty Peg,
Ah, never look so shy!"'

cries he, breaking into a laugh, which she does not echo.

'I am not your pretty Peg; and I have told you several times that I will not be called "Peg."'

'*Peggy*, then. Personally, I prefer *Peg*; but it is a matter of opinion. Peggy, are you aware that you have been poaching?'

'I do not know what you mean.' But she does.

'Her ladyship did not much like it, I can tell you,' continues he delightedly. 'She manifested distinct signs of uneasiness. I could not keep her quiet, though I went through all my little tricks for her. She *would* make those ridiculous noises; and she whipped him off pretty quickly, did not she? Ah, Peggy' – tenderly – 'you would have done better to have kept to me! *I* would not have left you in the lurch.'

To this she deigns no answer.

'Where is Prue?' asks he, a moment later, with an easy change of topic. 'What have you done with Prue?'

'I have done nothing with her,' rather sadly.

'You have sent her home with her nurse to bed, I suppose?' suggests he reproachfully. 'I sometimes think that you are a little hard upon Prue.'

*Hard upon Prue!* She, whose one thought, waking and sleeping, is how best to put her strong arm round that fragile body and weakling soul, so as to shield them from the knocks of this rough world! This, too, from him, who has introduced the one element of suffering it has ever known into Prue's little life.

'Am I?' she answers quietly; but her cheek burns.

'There is no one that suits me so well as Prue,' says the young man sentimentally, looking up to the sky.

> '"She's like the keystone of an arch,
> That doth consummate beauty;
> She's like the music of a march,
> That maketh joy of duty!"'

Peggy's eye relents. He may mean it – may be speaking truth – it is not likely, as he seldom does so; but after all, the greatest liars must, during their lives, speak more truth than lies. One is prone to believe what one wishes, and he *may* mean it.

'There is no one that I am so fond of as I am of Prue,' pursues he, with a quiver in his voice.

'You have an odd way of showing it sometimes,' says she, in a softened tone.

'Are you alluding to *that*?' asks he, glancing carelessly over his shoulder at the kiosk. 'Pooh! I hated it. I shall get milady to pull it down some day. I was so glad when you and Talbot came up: it was so dark, and I felt the earwigs dropping on my head.'

'Then why did you go there?' inquires she.

He bursts into a laugh, from which sentiment and quiver are miles away.

'The woman tempted me; at least' (seeing his companion's mouth taking a contemptuous upward curve at this mode of expression) – 'at least, she seemed to expect it. I always like to do what people seem to expect.'

And Margaret's heart sinks.

# CHAPTER V

'To one that has been long in city pent,
'Tis very sweet to gaze upon the fair
And open face of heaven – to breathe a prayer
Full in the smile of the blue firmament.'

It is the next day. John Talbot has spent a very happy morning. He is a countryman at heart. Fate has put him into the Foreign Office, and made him a great man's secretary, and tied him by the leg to London for ten months out of the twelve; but the country, whose buttercups brightened his childhood, keeps his heart – the country, with its little larks upsoaring from its brown furrows; with its green and its russet gowns; with its good, sweet, innocent noises, and its heavenly smells. He has been lying on the flat of his back on the sward, with his hands under his head, staring in luxurious idleness up at the sky, and listening to the robin's song – in August scarcely anybody but the redbreast sings – and to the pleasant swish of the wind among the lime-tops. Lying there alone on the flat of his back – that is to say, at first. Afterwards he has plenty of company. Not, indeed, that either his host or his fellow-guests trouble him much. From the lair he has chosen he has a view of his lady's window. It is true that he looks but seldom towards it, nor do its carefully closed casements and drawn curtains hold out much hope of a descent of the sleeping goddess within. Lady Roupell lets it be understood that she does not wish to be seen or spoken to till luncheon; and the rest are dispersed, he neither knows nor cares whither. And yet he has companions. They are in the act of being escorted out to walk by their nurses when they catch sight of him. In an instant they bear down upon him as fast as their fat legs will carry them.

'Just think!' cries Lily, beginning to shout at the top of her voice long before she reaches him – 'just think what Franky has been doing! Is not he a naughty boy? He took the water-can and emptied it over Nanny's skirt! She says she will ask mammy to whip him!'

'Which mammy will most certainly decline to do,' says Talbot *sotto voce* to himself.

He has raised himself on his elbow, the more safely to receive their onslaught. He is aware of an idiosyncrasy of Miss Harborough's – that of narrating hideous crimes as having been committed by her little brother, which have in reality been executed by herself.

'If it was Franky who upset the water-can, how is it that it is your frock which is wet?' asks he judicially.

She does not answer, beyond putting her head affectedly on one side, and rubbing her shoulder against her ear.

'Are you sure that it was not you, and not Franky?'

Instantly, with the greatest ease and affability, she acknowledges that it was she; and the nurses at that moment coming up, she is about to be walked off for chastisement, when weakly interceded for by Talbot, who has the further lunacy to request that both children may be left in his charge. After that he has a very eventful morning. He is in turn a pony, a giraffe, a hyæna, a flamingo (unhappily for him the little Harboroughs have lately visited the Zoological Gardens), a rabbit (about the natural history and domestic life of which animal he hears some very startling facts), and the captain of a robber band. Finally, he has to take part in a terrible game – the one most dreaded by their family of all in the little Harborough repertoire – Ingestre Hall destroyed by fire, done with bricks. And the odd thing is that he likes it – likes it better than Downing Street and the great statesman.

When the luncheon gong sounds he can hardly realise that it is two o'clock. He is so much dishevelled by his transmigrations – which, indeed, have been as numerous as Buddha's – that, after having repaired the injuries to his toilette, he finds that everybody is already in the dining-room –

finds the inevitable chair left vacant for him beside Lady Betty. He has sat by Lady Betty through so many luncheons and dinners that it has lost the gloss of novelty, and they speak to each other scarcely more than a husband and wife would do. It is her voice that he hears prevailing over those of the rest of the company as he enters the room, for she has not Cordelia's gift.

'Lambton? Are they any relation to Lord Durham?'

'I do not think so,' replies the hostess carelessly. 'Their father was a small squire in these parts, who over-farmed himself, and died very much out at elbows. And their mother – well, their mother was nothing but a very poor creature' (with a shrug), 'who was always fancying herself ill, and whom nobody believed until she proved it by dying! Ha! ha! Poor soul! I do not think that anybody cried much, except Peggy; she cried her eyes out.'

'Not quite out,' thinks Talbot, remembering the severe blue darts that shot at him over-night; and to his own soul, at this testimony to her tender-heartedness, he says, 'Nice Peggy!'

'Which was Peggy?' asks Mr. Harborough, looking up from his cutlet; 'the big one? Yes? I like Peggy. I do not know when I have seen such a good-looking girl.'

His wife bursts into a laugh.

'I knew that Ralph would admire her. Did not I tell you so?' turning to Talbot. 'She is just his style; they cannot be too big for Ralph; he admires by avoirdupois weight.'

'As to that, my dear,' retorts Mr. Harborough tranquilly, 'we all know that you are not much in the habit of commending your own sex; but I think you will find that I am not alone in my opinion.'

There is a moment's silence. Men are cowardly things. Not one of them is found to take up the cudgels for poor Margaret.

'She would be good-looking perhaps if she were bled,' pursues Lady Betty; 'she looks so aggressively healthy!'

'You cannot make the same complaint of poor Prue, at any rate,' says Lady Roupell, in a voice that betrays some slight signs of dissatisfaction with her guest's observations, for she likes her Lambtons.

'No; she is a high-coloured little skeleton!' rejoins Betty, looking with pensive ill-nature at her plate. 'What a pity that they cannot strike a balance! The one is as much too small as the other is too big; they are like a shilling and sixpence!'

And having thus peaceably demolished the sisters, whom nobody defends, she passes smilingly to another subject.

After luncheon Talbot is lounging before the hall door, with a cigarette, thinking, with a sort of subdued disgust (engendered, perhaps, by the fragment of conversation but now related) of himself, his surroundings, and his life in general, when he is joined by his hostess, dressed for walking – as villainously dressed as only a female millionnaire dares be: a frieze jacket like a man's, a billycock hat set on the top of her cap, and a stout stick in her hand. She tells him that she is going down to the farm to see how the stacks are getting on, and he strolls along aimlessly beside her. He knows that he ought not – he knows that his unwritten laws bind him for all the afternoon to the side of the hammock where Lady Betty is swinging; and yet he goes on strolling along by the side of an old woman to whom no laws, either God's straight or man's crooked ones, bind him, simply opening his nostrils to the pungent perfume of the hot bracken, and his eyes to the sight of the gentle doves watching him from under Queen Elizabeth's oak.

Arrived at the farm, he is slowly making up his mind to return to his duty, when his companion addresses him:

'Will you go a message for me?'

'With all the pleasure in life,' replies he, a slight misgiving crossing his mind as to how he will be received on his return after so prolonged a truancy.

'It is only just to run over to the Lambtons'.'

'The Lambtons'?'

'Yes – Peggy and Prue.'

'Of course, of course; but – but how am I to find them?'

'I thought you knew the way; I took you there last year. You cannot miss it; a hundred yards down the road' – (pointing) – 'just outside the park; a little old red house. You cannot miss it.'

She is turning away back to her ricks and her reapers when he recalls her.

'But what am I to say when I get there?'

'Pooh?' she says, laughing; 'what a head I have! I forgot the message. Tell Peggy we are all coming down to-morrow afternoon, Sunday, as usual; and bid her have plenty of muffins for us.'

As he walks along the road he ponders with himself whether, if Margaret looks at him with the unaccountable austerity of last night, he shall ever be able to give her that insolent order for unlimited muffins.

Lady Roupell was right. There is no missing the way. He almost wishes that there was. He has rung the bell – how much too loudly! It seems as if it would never stop clanging. And yet the odd thing is that he has produced no result by his violence; nor does the stout Annian door show any signs of rolling back on its hinges. He stares up at the face of the house; every window wide open, and above each a little century-and-a-half-old decoration of Cupids and cornucopias, and apples and grapes; a broken arch over the relentless door, and on either hand of it a great bush of traveller's joy, with its pretty welcoming name; and a Virginia creeper, in its dazzling decay, showing the stained and faded red brick what red can be. Is that one of the windows of the drawing-room on the right-hand side – that window into which he has so much difficulty in hindering himself from looking – with the green earthenware cruches and the odd-shaped majolica pot crammed with corn marigolds on the window-ledge? It is certainly very strange. He rings again, more mildly, but still very distinctly, without any further result than before. A third time; the same silence. A ridiculous idea crosses his mind that perhaps Margaret has seen from an upper window who her visitor is, and has forbidden any of her household to admit him; and, though he dismisses it as incredible, he is so disheartened by it, and by his thrice-repeated failures to attract attention, that he is turning away towards the entrance-gate, when, at last, something happens. A figure appears, flying round the corner of the house; a figure so out of breath, so dishevelled, so incoherent, that it is some seconds before he recognises in it the younger Miss Lambton – the 'high-coloured little skeleton,' as his gentle lady had sweetly baptized her. High-coloured she is now with a vengeance!

'Oh! it is you, is it?' she cries pantingly. He has never been presented to her, nor have they ever exchanged a sentence; but, in great crises like the present, the social code goes to the wall. 'Oh, I wonder could you help us? we are in such trouble!' Her tone is so *navré* that his heart stands still. Peggy is dead, of course. 'The fox has got out!' pursues she, sobbing; 'got out of his house, and we do not know what has become of him!'

'*The fox!*' repeats he, relieved of his apprehensions, and with a flash of self-reproach – 'of course it was a *fox*! of course it was not a *badger*!'

Surprise at this observation checks Prue's tears.

'No!' says she; 'who ever thought it was?'

And at that moment another tumultuous figure appears round the corner of the house. This time it is Margaret; Margaret nearly as breathless, as scarlet, as tearful as Prue. On catching sight of Talbot she pulls herself into a walk, and with a laudable, instantaneous struggle to look cold and neat and repellent, she holds out her hand.

'I hope you have not been waiting long,' she says formally. (The little unconquerable pants between each word betray her.) 'Did you ring often? I am afraid that there was nobody in the house; we were all, servants and all, about the fields and garden. Oh!' (nature and sorrow growing too strong for her) 'have you heard of our misfortune?'

'That I have,' replies Talbot, throwing as much sympathetic affection as that organ is capable of into his voice; 'and I am so sorry!'

'He has never been out except upon a chain in all his life, poor little fellow!' says Peggy, sinking dejectedly upon a large old-fashioned round stone ball, one of which ornaments each side of the door. 'He will know no more than a baby how to take care of himself!'

'Have you searched everywhere?'

'Everywhere.'

'The hen-house?'

'Yes.'

'Stables?'

'Yes.'

'Coach-house?'

'Yes.'

'Hayloft?'

'Yes.'

'Boot-hole?'

'Yes.'

'Cellar?' growing wild in his suggestions. 'Once I knew a hard-pressed fox run right into a cellar.'

'Even there.'

Talbot is at the end of his ingenuity. But at least there is one thing gained – she has spoken to him as to a fellow-sufferer.

This is no great advance perhaps, since were a new Deluge to cover the earth, which of us would not cling round the neck of a parricide if he were on a higher ledge of rock than we?

'If he is once away in the open,' says Margaret desperately, 'he is sure to get into a trap or be worried by a dog; he has no experience of life. Oh, poor little man!'

Her eyes brim up, and her voice breaks.

Prue has fallen, limp and whimpering, upon the other stone ball. Talbot stands between the mourners.

'Come,' says he stoutly, 'let us be doing something. Let us rout out every possible hole and corner once again; and if he does not turn up, I will go and tell the game-keepers and the farm-labourers to be on the look-out for him.'

Something in the manly energy of his tone puts new life into the dispirited girls, and the search recommences.

The procession is swelled by the three maids, with their aprons over their heads; by the stable-boy, and by Jacob with a pitchfork. It is led by Talbot, whose zeal sometimes degenerates into ostentation, as when he insists on exploring chinks into which the leanest lizard could not squeeze itself, and on running his stick through little heaps of mown grass where not a field-mouse could lie perdue.

The party has gradually dispersed in different directions, and Talbot finds himself alone in the tool-house, which has been already twice explored. In one corner stands a pile of pots of all sizes, reaching almost to the roof, and with its monotony enlivened by a miscellaneous stock of rakes, pea-sticks, and scythes leaning against it. The whole erection looks too solid to admit of its being a hiding-place for anything, but it is possible that there may be a hollow behind it.

After prying about for a few moments on his knees, he finds indeed an aperture, which has been hidden by a pendent bit of bass-matting – an aperture large enough to admit the passage of a small animal. To this aperture he applies his eye. What does he see? Two things like green lamps glaring at him from the darkness. Aha! he is here!

# CHAPTER VI

Talbot looks round apprehensively. Heaven send that no one, neither meddlesome Jacob, nor gaping boy, nor screaming maids, nor – worst of all – Peggy herself, may come up till he has got at his prey, may come up to rob him of the glory of safe recovery and restoration. In his haste he incautiously thrusts in his arm, feels something warm and woolly, but feels too, at the same instant, a smart stinging sensation as of little teeth fastening on his finger. He draws his hand away quickly, and shakes it, for the pain is acute.

'You are there, my young friend, that is very clear.'

But he cannot be stopped by such a trifle! He hastily binds up his wound with his pocket-handkerchief, and begins quickly to enlarge the opening. As it grows, he has to fill it with his body, to obviate the danger of the fox making a dash past him. In the course of his labours, several little pots fall about his ears; a dislodged spade-handle gives him a brisk blow on the shoulder; old cobwebs get into his mouth. But he is rewarded at last. Through the breach he has made daylight pours in, and shows him a little red form crouched up against the wall, and showing all its dazzling white teeth in a frenzy of fear. Poor little beast! Probably some indistinct memory of the cruel hounds that tore its mother limb from limb is giving its intensity of terror to that grin. But if he is suffering from fear, he is also perhaps at present a little calculated to inspire it. It just crosses Talbot's mind how exceedingly unpleasant it will be, if, in these very close quarters, the companion of his *tête-à-tête* makes for his nose. There is nothing for it but to take the initiative. It occurs to him that he may have a pair of dog-skin gloves in his pocket; and this on examination, proving to be the case, he puts them on. The right-hand glove will of course not go over the handkerchief that binds his finger. It – the handkerchief – has therefore to be removed, and the blood spurts out afresh. What matter? Thus protected, without further delay he makes a bold grab, past that grinning, gleaming row of fangs, at the scruff of the fox's neck, and having got a good grip of it, proceeds to back out of the hole, dragging his booty after him; the booty snapping, and holding on to the ground with all his four pads in agonised protestation.

To back out of a hole, with all the blood in your body running to your head, smothered in cobwebs, with dusty knees and barked knuckles – this is hardly the way in which a man would wish to present himself to a woman with whom he is anxious to stand well. And yet it is under these conditions that Peggy, at whose feet he finds himself on having completed his retrograde movement, first sees anything in him to admire.

'So you have found him?' cries she, dropping on her knees, and turning a radiant face towards the procession on all-fours which has now quite emerged into the daylight; 'behind the pots? and we thought that we had searched everywhere so carefully. How clever of you! – but' (her tone changing) 'you have hurt him!' her glance falling on a few drops of Talbot's blood which, stealing from under the glove, have dropped on the fox's fur.

'I do not think so,' replies the young man drily; but he does not more directly claim his own property, nor protest against the – as it happens – rather ingenious injustice of this accusation.

'Then he has hurt you!' says she, drawing this obvious inference; and her blue eye darts like lightning at his hand. 'He has bitten you! oh, how shocking of him! Not badly?'

'He mistook me for a hound, I suppose,' replies John, smiling.

'He was determined that you should not forget a second time that he was a fox,' says she, breaking into a charming mischievous laugh, lapsing, however, at once again into grave solicitude; 'but it is not a bad bite, is it? Let me look! Here, Prue! take this little villain home, and shut him up, and let us hear no more about him!'

Prue complies, and the two young people remain in the tool-house alone.

'Let me look,' says she, beginning very delicately to pull off the glove, so as not to hurt him. 'How did he manage to get at you through this thick glove?'

'I did not put it on till afterwards,' replies Talbot. 'Of whom does that trait remind you? If it is Simple Simon, do not mind saying so!'

They both laugh.

'But it is a dreadful bite!' says she, holding the wounded finger with two or three of her slight yet strong ones – fingers a little embrowned by much practical gardening, and down which he now feels little shivers of compunction and concern running. 'Almost to the bone! oh, poor finger! I feel so guilty. Come with me into the house, and let me tie it up for you.'

He is in no great hurry to have it tied up. He likes the dusty tool-house, and is not at all alarmed at the sight of his own gore; but, consoling himself with the reflection that Prue will probably pass some time in weeping over and fondling their amiable pet, and that he has a good chance of, at all events, some further *tête-à-tête* over the rag and oil-silk, he follows her docilely, and presently finds himself inside the little room into which he had had so much ado to hinder himself from peering during his long kicking his heels at the hall door.

It proves to be not a drawing-room after all – to have more of the character and informality of a little sitting-hall; a room where dogs may jump on the chairs with as valid a right as Christians; a room with an oak settle by the chimney-corner, and a great cage full of twittering finches in a sunny window, and into which half the flowers of the field seem to have walked, and colonised its homely vases; a room with nothing worth twopence-halfpenny in it, and that yet is sweet and lovable.

He has not many minutes in which to make his explorations, for she is promptly back with her appliances, and silently binding round his finger her bit of linen that smells of lavender.

As she stoops over his hand he can look down on the top of her head, and admire her parting – a thing which not many ladies possess nowadays. Hers is as straight as a die; and on each side of that narrow white road rises the thick fine hair, bright and elastic.

It is many years since Betty has owned a parting. On the other hand, she has two very nice toupets – a morning and an evening one. Talbot has once or twice seen one of these toupets off duty, and has regretted his knowledge that it came off and on. Well, there is nothing about Peggy that comes off and on.

How quickly and daintily she has dressed his wound, and – oh! if here is not Prue already back again!

'Have you shut him safely in?' looking up from her nearly finished task.

'Yes.'

'And given him his dinner?'

'Yes; but he will not eat it. I think he is seriously vexed; he tried to bite me, too!'

Talbot laughs.

'What could have made you choose such a pet?'

'We did not exactly choose him,' replies Margaret gravely; 'he was sent to us; all the rest of the litter were killed. He was the only one the huntsman could save. He brought him to show us. He was a mere ball of fluff then. One could not turn away a poor little orphan ball of fluff from one's door, could one?'

'He was a very tiresome orphan then, as he always has been since,' says Prue drily. 'No one but Peggy would have been bothered with him; he was far more trouble than a baby. She had him,' – turning towards Talbot – 'to sleep in her room for a whole fortnight, and got up every two hours all through the night to feed him.'

Margaret reddens.

'He would have died else!'

'But no other person on earth would have had the patience, would they?' cries Prue, warming with her theme.

'Prue!' says Peggy severely, 'is my trumpeter dead, and are you applying for the situation?'

At this moment the door opens, and one of the three neat maids whom John has already seen careering about the pleasure-grounds in pursuit of the fox, enters with a tea-tray.

The sight of a covered dish of hot cakes recalls to Talbot the original object of his visit.

'Oh, by the bye, I was forgetting! I have a message for you from Lady Roupell.'

'Have you?'

She is standing, straight and lithe as a young poplar, by the tea-table, brandishing a brown teapot in her hand.

'Yes. She bid me tell you that they are all coming down to see you to-morrow afternoon.'

Is it his imagination that a sudden slight stiffening comes over her as he speaks – a stiffening that seems to extend even to the friendly teapot?

'And also,' continues he, not much liking his errand, and hastening to get it over, 'she desired me to say that, as she is particularly fond of muffins, and as yours are an exceptionally good – '

'Are you sure that she said all that?' interrupts Prue, with a sceptical gaiety. 'She is not generally so polite. She generally says only, "Girls, I'm coming; have lots of muffins!"'

Talbot laughs, convicted.

'Perhaps that was nearer the mark.'

'I am so glad that they are all coming,' pursues Prue, with excitement. 'Will Lady Betty come? Oh, I hope so! How beautiful she is! What eyes! What a colour!'

Talbot looks sheepish. The alarmingly increased volume and splendour of his Betty's carnations of late have been the cause of several sharp altercations between him and her. And yet he cannot doubt that the child says it in all good faith. It is not at the corners of *her* mouth that that tiny malicious smile is lurking. To him how much pleasanter a topic was the fox! He relishes the change in the conversation so little that he scalds his throat in his haste to drink his tea and be gone.

As he walks home across the park he entertains himself with the reflection how he shall account to Betty for his finger.

# CHAPTER VII

Next day is as the pretty old song obliquely puts it. Such of the parish as are not Dissenters, drunkards, or the mothers of young babies (it does not leave a very large margin), have been to morning church. The Vicarage, the Manor, and the Red House have all been represented. The Vicarage sits immediately below the pulpit, so that the preacher's eloquence may soar on stronger pinions, upborne by the sight of the nine ugly faces to whom he has given the light of day. The Manor, with its maids, footmen, and stables, spreads half over the aisle; and in one of its pews the Red House, pewless itself, is allowed to take its two seats.

'The day that comes between
A Saturday and Monday,'

On this particular morning Peggy's devotions are a good deal distempered by the fact of her having Miss Harborough for a neighbour – Miss Harborough without her nurse; Miss Harborough wriggling a good deal, bringing out of her pocket things new and old; and finally (the devil having entered into her), when the hymn begins, striking up in rivalry, 'Over the Garden Wall.' As, however, no one perceives this piece of iniquity except Peggy, who feigns not to hear it, she desists, and adopts instead the less reprehensible but still somewhat embarrassing course of closely copying Peggy's every smallest gesture – unbuttoning her glove, turning a page of her prayer-book, whipping out her pocket-handkerchief at the very same instant as her unwitting model. It is even a relief when this flattering if servile imitation gives way to loud stage-whispers, such as, 'Franky has got his book upside down;' 'Don't you wish you were as tall as John Talbot?' 'Evans is all in white;' 'Did you hear me say the Lord's Prayer?' etc. etc.

It is afternoon now. You need not be either a Dissenter, a drunkard, or a mother, not to go to church in the afternoon. Nobody goes – nobody, that is, except Mr. Evans and the children whom he catechises, asking them questions which they never answer, and which he would be very much embarrassed if they did. Luncheon is over.

'Let us give them all the slip,' says Lady Betty. 'I know what milady's Sunday walks are – she does not spare one a turnip or a pigsty; and as to going to tea with the Lambtons, I say, like the man in the Bible, "I prithee have me excused."'

Talbot, to whom this is addressed, follows her in silence, to where, beneath a great lime-tree only just out of flower, hangs the hammock, spread the wolf-skins, stand the wicker-chairs and tables, the iced drinks, and the Sunday papers.

'Now we'll be happy!' says Betty, sitting down sideways on the hammock, and adroitly whisking her legs in after her. 'As soon as milady's back is turned I will have a cigarette, and you shall talk me to sleep. By the bye,' with a slight tinge of umbrage in her tone, 'your conversation of late has rather tended to produce that effect.'

'And what better effect could it produce?' asks John ironically. 'I sometimes wish that I could get some one to talk me to sleep for good and all!'

'How tiresome!' cries his fair one, not paying much heed to this lugubrious aspiration, and feeling in her pocket. 'I have left my cigarette-case in the house; go, like a good fellow, and get it for me. Ask Julie for it.'

He goes with the full docility of a pack-horse or a performing poodle, and on his way indoors meets his young host, sent by his aunt in search of the truants, and to whom he imparts Betty's change of plans.

'So you are not coming!' says Freddy, in a broken-hearted voice, throwing himself into a chair. In his soul he is rather glad.

'So I'm not coming!' repeats she, mimicking his tone.

'May not I stay too?' travelling over the sward in his chair nearer the hammock, and lightly touching the pendent white hand.

'What! and leave your little anatomical specimen lamenting?' cries she ill-naturedly.

He winces.

'I do not know to whom you are alluding. But may not I stay?' with a slight tremble in his voice.

'Of course you may,' replies she cheerfully. 'Who hinders you? – stay by all means!'

He looks confused. He has not the slightest wish to stay. He has only followed his habitual impulse to say what he imagines to be the agreeable thing – an impulse that has already led him into many quagmires, and will lead him into many more.

'I would not be so selfish,' he says with a charming smile of abnegation; 'I know my place better,' with an expressive glance at the back of the disappearing John. And, suiting the action to the word, he disappears too; when she screams after him:

'Give my love to the sack of potatoes and the skeleton!'

By the time that Talbot returns with the cigarette-case the coast is quite clear, and Betty is at liberty to light her cigarette as soon as she pleases; a liberty of which she immediately avails herself.

There is a prospect before them of an unbroken *tête-à-tête* until eight o'clock. With how deep a joy and elation ought this reflection to fill him! A year ago it would have done so. To-day with how leaden a foot does the stable clock pace from quarter to quarter. And yet there is no lack of talk. He himself, indeed, does not contribute much; but Betty is in a fine flow. She favours him – not for the first time by many – with several unamiable traits in Mr. Harborough's character, with the dreadful things her dearest friend said of her last week – faithfully reported to her by her second dearest – together with various shady particulars in the personal history of both friends. She gives him the latest details of an internecine broil between two ladies, both candidates for the favour of a great personage. She makes some good jokes upon the death of a relation, and the approaching collapse of an intimate acquaintance's reputation; and, in short, dots her *i*'s and crosses her *t*'s, and calls a spade a spade, and enjoys herself famously. And *he*? He listens in a sort of wonder.

This, then, is what he has for five years sacrificed his career to. This, then – to be alone with this – he has manœuvred for invitations, planned risky rendezvous, abandoned the hope of home's sanctities. A heavy leaden sickness seems to steal over him. He is recalled to the present by a tone of very decided indignation in his lady's voice – his lady, who, by an easy transition, has slipped from scandal to the hardly dearer or less dear subject of clothes.

'Shepherd is a beast! Just fancy! he sent me out deer-stalking in a silk skirt! Why, you are not listening to a word I say!'

It is in vain for him to protest. On cross-examination he shows so culpable an ignorance as to who Shepherd is – though heaven knows that in his day he has heard enough of the great woman's tailor – that her ladyship's anger is heightened instead of appeased.

'You certainly are not amusing to-day,' cries she, flouncing out of the hammock.

'I never was much of a Jack Pudding,' replies he wearily. 'Was I ever amusing? I do not recollect it. I think that I left that to you.'

His tone is so dry that she reddens even under her rouge.

'Perhaps it is your finger that pains you too much,' says she, looking round her armoury for a weapon of offence, and rather cleverly hitting upon this one. 'We have never got to the bottom of that mysterious wound yet. I believe it is somehow connected with your Blowsabella. Perhaps you became too attentive, and she had to set her dog or her cat upon you in self-defence.'

There is such a horrible caricature of the truth in this supposition, and her tone is so insulting, that he turns pale, and it is a moment or two before he can speak; then:

'Do not you think it would be a good thing if you gave up this sort of joke?' he asks, with a rather dangerous quietness. 'They are not very ladylike. Had you not better leave them to Julie?'

He has no sooner finished these sentences than Betty bursts into tears. She had imagined that she was amusing him as much as herself; and, indeed, he has often before laughed heartily at things not less ill-natured or more harmless; now the disgust and *ennui* of his tone are a disagreeable revelation to her. And besides, as I have before observed, her paint is of that quality that she may confidently afford herself a few tears. But even if it were not to be done with safety she must give way to them now, anger and mortification forcing them from her eyes.

Now if there is one thing that a waning lover dreads more than a quarrel, it is the reconciliation that follows it. So, by the time that Betty has sobbed, and wished herself and him dead, and announced her intention of telling Mr. Harborough, and going away to-morrow and taking Freddy Ducane with her, and been apologised to and comforted, her admirer is reduced to such a pitch of flat lassitude of mind that there is no bidding of hers which he would not tamely execute. He therefore acquiesces dumbly when, her smiles being at length restored, she proposes that they shall go to tea with the Lambtons after all. They can easily overtake the others, and perhaps it will be more amusing than sitting here quarrelling – 'though there is a certain charm in quarrelling too!' she adds sentimentally.

As he cannot echo this, he pretends not to hear it. His mind is occupied by the doubt, which he is unable to resolve, whether her proposal is dictated by a generous desire to make an *amende*, or by further malice. She is perfectly capable of either. They have not a very pleasant walk. Betty's preposterous heels turn under her at every three steps; and though she always says that she is very fond of the country, she generally forgets to look at it, while John loves it too heartily and deeply dear to say anything about it to such ears.

As they near the Red House his heart sinks lower and lower. He has never had the moral courage to confess his yesterday's visit, and the episode that marked it. There are ninety-nine chances to one against his escaping without some inquiry after his finger, some mention of the fox, some chance allusion which will betray him. And then? what then? Why, another quarrel, another reconciliation. Pah! No; sooner than face that he will be telegraphed for back to Downing Street.

They are not kept waiting at the door at all to-day, but are at once ushered through the house into the garden, where they are told that they will find Miss Lambton.

As she hears their footsteps she looks up, and sees them approaching – Betty stepping smartly ahead, and Talbot following sheepishly behind. He is conscious of there being a sort of false air of man and wife about them – a happy couple spending their Sunday afternoon in parading their domestic bliss before their friends. By an intuition that he would far rather have been without, he sees the same idea passing through Margaret's mind, and reflected in a sudden cloud, and as sudden honest redness on her face. Certainly any stranger coming in upon the scene would be more likely to credit him with the honour of being Lady Betty's owner than he would the insignificant figure kneeling and mysteriously bending over something on the top of the stone steps that lead down a gentle bank from the gravel walk to the sward and the vivid August borders – a figure whose manœuvres are interestedly watched by the rest of the company, and which does not take the trouble to turn its head an inch at the sound of its wife's voice.

'We have been quarrelling,' cries Betty, with a sprightly candour which grates horribly upon Talbot, 'and we have come to you to help us to keep the peace. Oh!' – making a face – 'so Ralph is showing you some of his tricks. I would not look at them if I were you. He will never leave you any peace if you encourage him! The whole of the first year of our married life he spent in teaching me to tie knots in my pocket-handkerchief and swallow spoons; and I have never found that I have been much the better for either.'

Not a shadow of a smile shows itself upon Margaret's face, but Prue has smiles enough for the two.

'He is showing us how to mesmerise a hen!' cries she delightedly. 'Oh! it is *so* clever! I cannot think how he does it!'

In effect, upon closer examination, Mr. Harborough is seen to be grappling with a large barn-door fowl, which is squawking a good deal, and resisting his efforts to hold her nose down upon the stone step; while Freddy, with a piece of chalk, draws a straight line from her beak to the end of the step.

'You must none of you speak!' says Mr. Harborough, with authority. 'If you talk, you will prevent her going off into the mesmeric sleep.'

Dead silence. The protesting squalls have ceased. After a few moments the hands that hold her are lightly removed. She lies quite still.

'There!' says the operator, in a tone of subdued triumph; 'she will not awake until the chalk line is rubbed out. Curious, is not it?'

But even as he speaks Dame Partlet, to give him the lie, has struggled to her legs, and lustily screeching, makes off with her longest stride and fluttered wings. Instantly the whole company gives chase. John Talbot, Mr. Harborough, Freddy Ducane, Margaret, Prue, even Chinese-footed Betty, two collies, and a terrier, who have been standing officiously round, all off in full cry at once. Across the garden-beds; through Jacob's best potatoes; over the sunk fence into the open park, helter-skelter they go – John leading, closely followed by Freddy and Mr. Harborough, while the three women tear madly behind.

John has got her! Not at all! She has slipped between his fingers, and he has measured his length on the grass! Then it is Freddy's turn, but she runs between his legs, and down goes he too. Certainly she is a gallant hen! John is up again, and now both he and Peggy make an unsuccessful lunge at her as she passes; and if it had not been for Mink, who adroitly pinned her by the wing – a feat for which he was afterwards much blamed, though they profited by his discourtesy – they would probably still have been tumbling over each other in pursuit of that speckled hen.

At the moment when Peggy and John had made their joint and futile grab at the object of their chase, her hand had come with some violence into contact with his wounded one. Instantly she is off her guard, and down from her stilts.

'Did I hurt your finger?' very anxiously.

'Not in the least, thanks.'

'Are you quite sure?'

'Quite.'

'But I am afraid that I must have done.'

'I assure you no! How is the fox?'

He adds the last words with a hasty attempt to keep the conversation to the one topic over which alone they seem fated to be friendly.

'He is very well! better' – with a slight smile – 'than he deserves.'

'I should like to see him, to tell him that I bear no malice.'

She looks irresolute for a moment; then, 'Would you? Come this way!'

Before they have made three steps Betty is after them.

'Where are you two making off to in such a hurry?'

'We are going to see the fox,' replies Peggy coldly.

'The fox? What fox?'

'Why, my tame fox,' rejoins Peggy, with a little air of surprise; 'the one that bit Mr. Talbot when he was here yesterday.'

The murder is out.

'H'm!' says Betty, in a very dry voice; 'so the mystery is solved!'

'What mystery?' asks the other, in a tone of ever colder and growing astonishment. 'There is no mystery; it is only that my fox escaped from his house yesterday, and Mr. Talbot was good enough to catch him again for me; and in so doing was unfortunately bitten. What mystery is there in that?'

Her displeased blue eyes turn in inquiry from one to the other, but neither has any answer ready for her. Nor does she again repeat her question; but Talbot, stealing one guilty look at her, sees that she has comprehended that he has been afraid to own his visit to her, and that she despises him heartily for it.

# CHAPTER VIII

John Talbot spends a wretched night. He does not owe this to the fact of Betty's infantine gambols, her ogles and cats'-cradles with Freddy Ducane through the previous evening; nor yet to any physical ill. It is one ray of honest contempt from a country-bred girl's heaven-blue eye that kills his rest. It seems to shine in upon his whole life, as a beam of clear morning sunshine shines in upon some ugly over-night revel, bringing out into all their unlovely prominence the wine-stains, and the guttered candles, and the faded flowers. A desire, whose futility he recognises, but which is none the less real for the impossibility of its ever being gratified, to set himself right with this thrice-seen stranger, takes possession of him; a desire to tell her his story – to lay before her the reasons why she should be lenient with him. Would she think them very cogent? His memory, made acuter by the darkness, journeys back over the past five years, weighing, sifting, recalling – back to the beginning, that August when his chief's affairs kept him in London after everybody else had left; when, sick at heart from a recent grief, he had fallen sick in body too; and when Betty, also detained in London by some accident – Betty, whom he had hitherto met only as one meets in the world, hearing of his sad plight, had come out of pure kind-heartedness – yes, he is quite sure that at first it was only out of pure kind-heartedness – to sit beside his sofa; Betty, laden with sweet flowers; Betty, with compassionate eyes and a womanly smile; Betty, with less paint and a lower voice; with more clothes and fewer after-dinner stories; and last, fatalest of all, with that likeness, fancied or real, to the sister he had just lost. He remembers the day on which he first told her of that resemblance. In the dark night he recalls again many another little landmark in that first period of his passion, and grows half tender again as their dead faces rise before him. But what did that first idyllic stage lead to? To nothing, indeed, as criminal as the world, as Margaret probably gives them credit for, but to those unhandsome shifts and expedients which have made of his life since one long shuffle and evasion. The kotowing to people he disliked and despised for invitations to meet her; the risky rendezvous; the mad jealousies; the half-heartedness in his work; the entire disintegration of all his plans, liable to be upset at a moment's notice, in order to dovetail in with her convenience; the irrepressible senseless friendliness, which he dare not refuse, on the part of the stupid worthy Harborough; the genuine fondness of that Harborough's little children – he looks back upon them all with nausea. No! there is nothing to be said for him! She would say that there was nothing to be said for him! He has slidden down a precipice, it is true, whose first slope was easy and gentle; but there were many bushes at which he might have caught in his downward passage to save himself if he had wished; and he caught at none. And now he is at the bottom! The very passion which gave some slight tinge of a bastard nobility to his ignoble life is dead – dead as the roses that flushed its dawn, and he must still be tied to its lifeless body as fast as – nay, faster than – he was to its living charms. This is his conclusion; and it is one not much calculated to lull him into slumber.

To prove the difference between a bad conscience and a good one, Margaret sleeps calmly; but she wakes in the morning with the sense of something faintly disagreeable having happened. She shakes it off as she goes about her garden and her chicken-pens, the more easily as Prue is in bounding spirits, which is to be accounted for by the fact of Freddy having invited her to go out riding with him in the afternoon, and promised to mount her upon one of his own horses – a privilege often before accorded to her, but which never fails to lift her into Elysium. She is too excited to settle to anything more solid than jumping over the garden-beds and the tennis-net, to and fro with Mink. If you are in paradise, why trouble yourself with earth's sordid tasks? But Margaret, not being in paradise, is meditatively grubbing on hands and knees in the rather overgrown border, when a ring at the door-bell brings her somewhat quickly to her feet. A sudden thought sends the indignant blood to her cheek. Is it possible that it can be Talbot? After yesterday, is it conceivable that he can have the presumption again to force himself upon her? She moves hastily towards the house to forbid his

admission, if it be he. But she is too late. The visitor has been already let in; and proves to be one to whom her door is never shut – only Freddy Ducane.

'Have you come to fix the time for your ride?' asks she cordially, beaming upon him. He, at least, has wrenched himself out of Circe's sty. 'Do you want Prue? She is in the garden.'

The young man looks a shade embarrassed.

'Yes,' he says; 'I do. No; I do not – at least, I have something to say to her, but I think' – insinuatingly – 'that I had rather say it to you. You know, Peggy, how fond I am of saying things to you! There is no one to whom I can say things as comfortably as I can to you.'

At this preface her heart sinks a little.

'What is it?' she asks curtly.

'Oh, only my luck!' throwing himself into a chair. 'By Jove' – looking round the room – 'how cool you feel! and how good you smell!'

'I do not suppose that you came here to say that,' rejoins she, still standing over him in expectant anxiety.

His answer is to try and get possession of her hand.

'Peggy,' he says plaintively, 'that is not a nice way to speak to me; that is not the way I like to be spoken to. The reason why I came here – it is very inhospitable of you to insist upon my giving a reason – was to say' – sighing profoundly – 'that I fear dear little Prue and I shall have to give up our ride this afternoon.'

Her foreboding was a true one then!

'Why?'

'Oh, because – because – just my luck!'

'I understand,' replies she caustically. 'You are in the case of the man who telegraphed to the house where he did not wish to stay, "So sorry. Cannot come. *No lie ready.*"'

Freddy colours.

'Peggy, if I were not so really fond of you,' he says, in an injured voice, 'I should not allow you to speak to me like that. There are days when you rasp one like a file. Prue never rasps one.'

'Is that the reason why you think yourself justified in always letting her go to the wall?' asks Margaret, with a bitterness that seems out of proportion to the occasion; but in her mind's eye she sees the poor little figure that has been frolicking among the geraniums with dog and cat – sees, too, the metamorphosis that will be worked in it.

Freddy rolls his curly head uneasily to and fro on the chair-back.

'You talk as if I were not quite as disappointed as she,' he says, in a lamentable tone. 'But what is one to do? When one has guests, one must entertain them. Somebody must entertain *her*.'

'Must entertain whom?'

'Oh, you know as well as I do! You are only asking out of ill-nature. Betty, of course!'

'Betty, of course!' repeats she after him, with an indefinable accent.

'Well, Peggy, I appeal to you. What could I do, when she asked me point-blank? You know that I never can refuse to do anything that anybody asks me point-blank.'

'Then suppose that *I* ask you point-blank to throw *her* over?' suggests Margaret, looking full at him with her straightforward blue eyes.

'But you would not,' returns he hastily. 'You dear thing, it would not be the least like you; and it would only make her hate Prue for life. Ah, you do not know Betty!'

'And, meanwhile, where is her *âme damnée*, pray?' asks Margaret with a curling nose.

'"Where is John Talbot? Where is valiant John?"'

Freddy shrugs his shoulders.

'Valiant John is a little slack of late; he wants poking up a bit. But' – with a coaxing change of tone – 'it will be just the same to Prue to go another day, will not it? and you will tell her, will not you? I – I really am in a great hurry this morning; and I – I – think I had rather *you* told her.'

'I will do nothing of the kind,' replies Peggy severely. 'You may do your own errands.'

Nor do any of his blandishments, any of his numerous assertions of the reverential attachment he has always felt for herself, any of his asseverations of the agonising grief it causes him to give the slightest pain to Prue, avail to make her budge one inch from her original resolution. She watches him as, with a somewhat hang-dog air, he walks across the grass-plot to meet her sister, who comes treading on air to meet him. And then Margaret looks away. She cannot bear to witness the extinction of that poor short radiance. She does not again meet young Ducane; nor does Prue reappear until luncheon-time, when she comes down from her bedroom with red eyes, but an air of determined cheerfulness.

'It would have been much too hot for riding to-day,' she says, fanning herself; 'unbearable, indeed! We are going a far longer ride in a day or two. He says he does not think that they will stay long. He was so bitterly disappointed. I do not think that I ever saw any one so disappointed – did you?' casting a wistful glance at her elder.

'He *said* he was,' replies Peggy sadly.

The incident has made her own heart heavy; and it is with an unelastic step that she sets off in the afternoon to the Manor, summoned thither by one of Lady Roupell's almost daily cocked-hat notes, to hold sweet converse upon the arrangements of an imminent village concert. A casual sentence to the effect that everybody but the old lady herself will be out has decided Margaret to obey the summons, which, did it expose her to a meeting with Lady Betty and John Talbot, she would have certainly disregarded.

Prue accompanies her to their gate, still with that strained look of factitious content on her childish face; and, as she parts from her sister, whispers feverishly:

'Find out how soon they are going!'

Dispirited as she was on leaving her own home, Miss Lambton's cheerfulness undergoes still further diminution before she reaches her goal; as, in passing through the park, has not she, in a retired and bosky dell, caught a glimpse of a white gown, and of a supine male figure, with a curly head and a poetry book, stretched beside it? She starts at the sight.

Freddy had certainly implied that he was going out riding with Lady Betty. On searching her memory, she found that he had not actually said so; but he had knowingly conveyed that idea to her mind. It is not the first time by many that Freddy Ducane has succeeded in conveying impressions that do not absolutely tally with the fact; but each fresh discovery of his disingenuousness gives her a new shock. Lady Roupell's boudoir is upstairs; and, following her usual custom, Margaret repairs thither unannounced. In doing so she passes the day nursery's open door; and, through it, sees Miss Harborough sitting on the floor, buttoning her boots. Peggy stops a moment to throw the child a greeting; but is instantly checked by the nurse.

'Oh, please, ma'am, do not speak to her! I am sure that she does not deserve it! she has been a real naughty girl!'

On inquiry, it appears that the enemy of man having again entered into Miss Lily, she has cut the string of her necklace, strewed the beads all over the floor, and then told a barefaced lie, and entirely denied it.

During this recital of her iniquities she continues her buttoning quite calmly; and merely says, with a dispassionate tone of indifference and acquiescence:

'Yes, I am bad.'

It is two hours later – so long does the discussion over the penny reading last – before Margaret again passes the nursery door. The interval has been filled by a discussion as to which of the local talent must be invited to contribute, and which may be, without giving too much offence, left out;

but the larger part has been spent in a confederate consultation as to how best to prevent Mrs. Evans from singing 'Love, the Pilgrim.'

The matter is arranged at last; and Peggy puts on her hat and gloves again to depart. As she repasses the nursery door she finds that an entire change of decoration has taken place. Instead of the young cynic defiantly buttoning her boots in the teeth of the law, she sees a little pious figure in a white nightgown, kneeling by its nurse's side. The instant, however, that the saintly little form catches sight of her it is up on its bare legs, and rushing towards her.

'Oh, Miss Lambton, do let me say my prayers to you! it would be so pleasant! – No, Franky,' with a disposition to hustle her little brother, who is putting in a like claim; 'you are too little; you can say yours to Nanny!'

As she speaks she pulls Peggy by the gown into the room; and, placing her in a chair, kneels down at once – so that there may be no chance of her escaping – beside her, with hands devoutly folded, but a somewhat roving eye.

'Which shall I say?' asks she, with a wriggle of the back and an air of indifference: '"Our Father" or "Gentle Jesus"?'

'Say whichever you please,' replies Margaret gently; 'only attend and make up your mind which.'

'Oh, then,' with another wriggle, 'I will say "Gentle Jesus."'

After a pause:

'Do you think that there would be any harm in my praying for John Talbot?'

Margaret gives a little jump. It is, then, an hereditary passion! But she answers drily:

'Not the least.'

Another pause. The wriggling has ceased.

'Only,' pursues Peggy, quite determined not to supply the form of petition for Talbot's welfare, 'only you must say it out of your own head. I am not going to tell you what to say.'

'Oh, then,' with an air of resolution, 'I had better say, "God bless John Talbot; and I am glad he is here."'

She has pronounced this last somewhat eccentrically-worded supplication rather loud, and at the end of it her wandering eye takes in an object which makes her spring from her knees as hastily as she had done before.

'Oh! there is John Talbot!' cries she, tearing out barefoot into the passage, and flinging herself into his arms.

'I have been praying for you!' cries she, hugging him. 'Miss Lambton said that I might.'

At this unexpected colouring given to her reluctant permission Peggy reddens.

'I said that there was no harm in it,' explains Peggy hurriedly; 'there is no *harm* in praying for any one.'

'And the more they need it the greater charity it is,' replies he, looking at her with so sad and deprecating a humility that her anger against him melts.

# CHAPTER IX

> 'God Almighty first planted a Garden. And indeed it is the Purest of Humane pleasures. It is the Greatest Refreshment to the Spirit of Man; Without which Buildings and Pallaces are but Grosse Handy-works: And man shall ever see that when Ages grow to Civility and Elegancie they come to Build Stately, sooner than to Garden Finely: as if Gardening were the Greater Perfection.'

I do not know whether Peggy had ever read Bacon, but she certainly endorsed his opinion.

'The garden is the only really satisfactory thing,' she says to herself, three days after that on which she had conducted Miss Harborough's devotions, as she stands beside her carnation-bed, and notes how many fat buds have, during the night, broken into pale sulphur and striped and blood-red flowers.

To few of us, I think, has not at one time or other of our lives the doubt presented itself, whether the people we love are not a source of more pain than pleasure to us, what with their misfortunes, their ill-doings, and their deaths. But despite frost, and snail, and fly, and drought, and flood, the joy in a garden must always enormously exceed the pain. The frost may shrivel the young leaves, but the first sun-kiss brings out green successors; the drought may make the tender herbs bow and droop, but at the next warm rain-patter they look up again. The frost that nips our human hearts often no after-sunbeam can uncongeal; and the rain falls too late to revive the flower that the world's cruel drought has killed.

'Did you find out how soon they are going?' asks Prue breathlessly, running down the road to meet her sister on her return from the Manor, in her eagerness to get her tidings.

It has been the one thought that has filled her mind during the three hours of Margaret's absence. Peggy shakes her head despondently.

'Milady did not know.'

'I suppose that they had gone out riding before you got there.'

This is not a question, so Margaret thinks herself exempted from the necessity of answering it.

'Had they gone out riding before you got there?' repeats Prue, with feverish pertinacity.

It *is* a question now, so she must make some reply. She only shakes her head.

'Then you saw them set off?' – very eagerly. 'How did she look? beautiful, I am sure!'

'I did not see them.'

It is a moment before the younger girl takes in what the last sentence implies; then she says in a changed low key:

'You mean to say that they did not go out riding at all?'

'No,' replies Peggy, softly putting her arm round her sister's shoulders, as if she would ward off the imminent trouble from her by that kind and tender gesture; 'they did not go out riding at all; they sat in the park together instead.'

There is a short silence.

'Then he threw me over for nothing?' says Prue, in a choked whisper.

'Yes,' in a whisper too.

Prue has snatched herself out of Peggy's arms, and drawn up her small willowy figure.

'He shall not have the chance of playing fast and loose with me again in a hurry,' she says, her poor face burning.

Alas! he would have the chance next day, if he chose to take it; but he does not even take the trouble to do that. Two whole days pass, and nothing is either seen or heard of him. And through these two long days Prue, with flagging appetite and fled sleep, rejecting occupation, starting at the sound of the door-bell, watches for him; and Peggy watches too, and starts, and is miserable for company.

During those weary two days Prue's mood changes a hundred times, varying from pitiful attempts at a dignified renunciation of him, always ending in a deluge of tears, to agonised efforts at finding excuses for his neglect, and irritation at her sister for not being able to say that she thinks them sufficing ones.

'He is so hospitable,' she says wistfully, as the sun sets upon the second empty day; 'he has almost exaggerated ideas of what he owes to his guests. And after all, there is no one else to entertain them. Milady does not trouble her head about them; he has such good manners; he is so courteous! Come now, prejudiced as you always are against him, you yourself have often said, "How courteous he is!"' Then, as Peggy makes but a faint and dubious sign of acquiescence, she adds irritably: 'Whether you own it or not, you have said so repeatedly; but there is no use in talking to a person who blows hot and cold, says one thing to-day and another to-morrow.'

The third morning has come. In the garden, dew-crisped and odorous, but whose spicy clove-carnation breath brings no solace to her careless nostril, Prue sits bent and listless, her fragile prettiness dimmed, and the nosegay of her choicest flowers – usually most grudgingly plucked – extravagantly gathered by Margaret five minutes ago, in the hope that their morning beauty may tempt her sick chick to a smile, lying disregarded on the grass beside her, and sniffed at by Mink, who makes a face of unaffected disgust at the mignonette.

'He has never in his life been so long without coming to see us when he was at home,' says Prue dejectedly; 'once he was thirty-six hours, but that was accounted for afterwards by his having had one of his neuralgic headaches. Do you think' – with a little access of life and animation – 'that he can be ill?'

'It is possible, of course,' replies Margaret gravely; 'but I do not think it is probable.'

'If I could only *know*,' says the other wearily; 'if I could be *sure*; it would be something to be *sure* of anything! I am so tired of wondering!'

'I might go up to the Big House to find out for you,' suggests Peggy, magnanimously swallowing down her own acute distaste to this proposition, and speaking with a cheerful relish, as if she liked it. 'I could easily make an excuse to go up to the Big House; shall I go?'

The capricious poppy colour has sprung back into Prue's thin cheek.

'Oh, if you would!'

'Of course I will,' replies Margaret gaily; 'it will be a nice walk for me; the garden makes me so lazy about walking. What time shall I go? morning or afternoon?'

'Oh, if you did not mind, morning is the soonest.'

The words are scarcely out of her mouth before ting, tang! sharply sounds the hall-door bell. It is a bell that is hardly ever pulled in a forenoon, save by one person – a person who does not confine himself to the canonical hours of calling.

In a moment there is a light in Prue's dimmed eyes, and Margaret's great blue ones beam for company.

'I think that I need not go up to the Big House, after all,' she says, with soft gladness.

'Shall I go away,' asks Prue, in a trembling whisper, 'and not come back for ten minutes or so? Perhaps he would think better of me if I did not seem so eager to meet him. Shall I?'

'I think I would not,' answers Peggy gently; 'I would sit quietly here, just as if nothing had happened. I think it would be more dignified.'

They wait in silence. What a long time Sarah is in putting on a clean apron and turning down her sleeves! But he is admitted at last, has passed through the house, and is stepping across the turf towards them.

*He!* But what he? Alas for Prue! there are more he's than one in the world – more he's that call at uncanonical hours!

'Oh, Peggy!' she says, with almost a sob, 'it is only John Talbot! It is not he after all.'

Peggy does not answer. Her feelings, though nearly as poignant as her sister's, are a good deal more complex. An indignation for which she can perfectly account, and an agitation for which she can give herself no reason at all, make her disappointment, though not far from being as bitter, less simple than Prue's.

She advances to meet her visitor with an air that would make a more impudent heart than his sink. Over her face is written, though the words do not actually pass her lips, that least reassuring of salutations, 'To what are we indebted for the honour of this visit?'

A woman's anger is seldom wholly reasonable, and on this occasion Margaret's indignation against Talbot is called forth not only by his being himself, but by his not being Freddy Ducane, which is certainly more his misfortune than his fault. After all, he is, for a villain, not possessed of very much effrontery, since the austerity of so young an eye strikes him dumb.

The only person who shows him any civility is Mink, who, being of a rather superficial character, is glad of any addition to his social circle, and does not inquire too nicely into its quality.

It is probable that Talbot, being a man of the world, would have recovered the use of his tongue in time; but as he is rather slow about it, Margaret takes the initiative.

'Is it something about the village concert?' she asks.

He looks puzzled.

'The village concert! I am afraid that I have not heard anything about the village concert.'

'Oh!' returns she, coldly surprised. 'I thought that probably Lady Roupell had asked you to leave a message with me about it. It is not that, then?'

She continues to look expectantly at him. Since it is not that, it must be on some other errand he has come. She clearly thinks it an impossible impertinence on his part to have called on her at eleven o'clock in the morning without an excuse.

And yet such is the case. He has come because he has come; he has no better reason to give, either to her or to himself. A wild idea of trumping up the expected message, and another of feigning that he has come to inquire after the fox, cross his mind; but he dismisses both: the first because he knows he should be found out, and the second because Miss Lambton might take it as a fresh demand upon her pity for the wound got in her service.

'I am afraid I have no message,' he says boldly. 'I was passing your door, and I – I – rang. By the bye' (smiling nervously as the utter inadequacy of his explanation falls upon his ears), 'what a loud bell yours is! I was so frightened at the noise I made that I was half inclined to run away when I had rung it.'

She does not say that she is glad he did not; she does not say anything civil. She only asks him to sit down, which, when he has shaken hands with Prue, and wondered inwardly what she can have been doing to make herself look so odd, he does.

Again silence, and again it is broken by Margaret. After all, she cannot be conspicuously rude even to him in her own house. It is, indeed, one of the problems of life, 'When is it permissible to insult one's neighbour?' Not in one's own house; not in his. There is, then, only the open street left.

For the sake of saying something, and also because she knows that she is giving voice to her sister's unspoken wish, Peggy inquires civilly whether they are all well at the Manor.

'Yes, I think so,' replies Talbot slowly. 'I have not heard any of them complain of any disease beyond the long disease of life.'

His tone is so little what one would expect from the happy lover of a fashionable beauty, that Margaret, with that charity that thinketh no evil, to which we are all so prone, instantly sets it down to affectation.

'That is a disease that I daresay does not hinder you all from amusing yourselves,' returns she sarcastically.

'Amusing ourselves? Oh yes, very well. I do not complain.'

There is such an obviously true ring about the depression with which this announcement of his contentment with his lot is uttered, that even she can no longer doubt of its reality. So he is not happy with his Betty after all! And a very good thing, too! Serve him right! But perhaps the discovery tends to mollify a little the tone of her next observation.

'Are you thinking how badly we want mowing?' she asks, her eyes following the direction of his, which are absently bent upon the sward, to-day not shorn to quite its usual pitch of velvet nicety. 'So we do, indeed. But Jacob has unluckily fallen ill, just as milady lent me the machine, and there it and the pony stand idle, and we' – regretfully eyeing her domain – 'are, as you see, like a hay-meadow.'

Talbot does not speak for a moment. A great idea is labouring its way to birth in his mind – an idea that may give him a better foothold here than any casually escaped fox or precarious porterage of messages can ever do.

'Why should not I mow?' asks he at last.

'*You?*'

'Yes, I; and you lead the pony.'

She looks at him, half inclined to be angry.

'Is that a joke?'

'A joke – no! Will you tell me where the pony is? May I harness it?'

Again she looks at him, waveringly this time, and thence to her turf. It is already an inch and a half too long; by to-morrow morning it will be three inches, an offence to her neat eye; and when Jacob falls ill he is apt to take his time about it. She yields to temptation.

'I will call the boy.'

But the boy is out —*marbleing*, vagranting after his kind about the near village, no doubt.

They have to harness the pony themselves; and by the time that they have put the bridle over her head, inserted her feet into her mowing shoes, and led her out of her dark stall into the sunny day, John has almost recovered the ground he had lost since that fortunate hour when, with three drops of his blood, he had bought a square inch of oil-silk and a heavenly smile.

They set off. Loudly whirs the machine. Up flies the grass in a little green cloud, which the sun instantly turns into deliciously scented new-mown hay; sedately steps the pony; gravely paces Margaret beside her; honourably John stoops to his toil behind. It is not a pursuit that lends itself much to conversation; but at least he has continuously before his eyes her flat back, her noble shoulders, the milky nape of her neck; and can conjecture as to the length of her unbound hair by counting the number of times that the brown plait winds round the back of her broad head. Every now and then they pause to empty out the grass, and each time a few words pass between them.

'Is Jacob very ill?'

'I am afraid that he suffers a good deal.'

'Is he likely to die?'

'Heaven forbid!'

'Because if he is, I wish you would think of me.'

He is half afraid when he has said this; it verges, perhaps, too nearly upon familiarity.

But she is not offended. Her eye, flattered by her shaven lawn, cannot rest very severely upon him who has shaven it for her. Her spirits have risen; exhilarated by the wholesome exercise, by the sunshine, by who knows what. Only when her look falls now and again upon Prue, still flung listlessly on the garden-seat, with her nosegay – not more flagging than she – withering on the ground beside her, does a cloud come over it.

'Should I get a good character from your last place?' returns she playfully.

'From the Foreign Office?'

'Was it the Foreign Office?' with a momentary impulse of curiosity for which she instantly pulls herself up. 'You know one always expects to get a character from the last place.'

'I do not know whether it is a good one. It is a nine-years' one.'

Then they set off again. Next time it is about Prue.

'I hope she is not ill?' his eyes following Margaret's to the little forlorn figure under the Judas-tree.

'No-o.'

'Nor unhappy?'

'We all have our Black Mondays' – evasively – 'only some of us have Black Tuesdays and Black Wednesdays as well – ah!'

What has happened to her? Her gloomy sentence has ended in a suppressed cry of joy, and her cheeks have changed from pink to damask. He turns to seek the cause of this metamorphosis.

'Why, there is Ducane!'

In an instant his eyes have pounced back upon her face. It is settling again into its pretty normal colours, but the joy is still there.

'Yes, there is Freddy!' she acquiesces softly.

A sharp needle of jealousy pricks his heart. This, then, is why she received him so frigidly. She was expecting the other.

'We stop now, I suppose?' he says abruptly.

'What! tired already, Jacob's would-be successor?' asks she rallyingly.

'Hardly. But I supposed that you would wish to stop.'

'On account of Freddy?' – with a little shrug. 'Pooh! he is a fly on the wall; and besides, he – he is not coming this way.'

It is true. Straight as a die young Ducane is making for the Judas-tree; and from under that Judas-tree a little figure, galvanised back into youth and bloom, rises, walking on air to meet him.

The eyes of John and Margaret meet, and he understands. As he goes home he feels that he has made a real step in advance this time. He shares a secret with her. He knows about Prue!

# CHAPTER X

'Our Master hath a garden which fair flowers adorn,
There will I go and gather, both at eve and morn:
Nought's heard therein but Angel Hymns with harp and lute,
Loud trumpets and bright clarions, and the gentle, soothing flute.

'The lily white that bloometh there is Purity,
The fragrant violet is surnamed Humility:
Nought's heard therein but Angel Hymns with harp and lute,
Loud trumpets and bright clarions, and the gentle, soothing flute.'

'Well,' cries Peggy anxiously, as, the young men having taken leave, she sees her sister come running and jumping, and humming an air, to meet her, 'is it all right?'

'Of course it is all right,' replies Prue, vaulting over the tennis-net to let off a little of her steam. 'If it had not been for your long face, I should never have doubted it.'

'Yes?'

'It was just as I expected; he was too polite to leave them. He says he never in his life remembers spending two such tedious days; but he is so unselfish. He says himself that he knows he is full of faults, but that he cannot understand any one being selfish, even from the point of view of their own pleasure. He said it so simply.'

'H'm!'

'I was so sorry for you, Peggy – saddled with that tiresome John Talbot all morning. Of course I ought to have helped you; but you know I had not a word to throw to a dog. It was very provoking of him, wasting all your morning for you.'

'My morning was not wasted,' rejoins Margaret calmly. 'He may be a very bad man, but he mows well.'

'He might as well have finished it while he was about it,' says Prue, captiously eyeing the lawn. 'It looks almost worse than it did before, half mown and half unmown.'

For an instant Margaret hesitates; then, with a slight though perceptible effort over herself, she says:

'I suppose he thought so; for he has offered to come again to-morrow to finish it. He said one could not leave it half-shaven, like a poodle.'

She looks at her sister a little doubtfully as she speaks – as one not quite sure of the soundness of the comparison, and that would be glad to have it confirmed by another judgment. But Prue's wings have already carried her up again into her empyrean.

'We are to ride quite late this afternoon. He wants me to see the reapers reaping by moonlight as we come home. He says he always associates me with moonlight. I am to ride the bay. He says he quite looks upon her as mine – that it gives him a sort of turn to see any one else on her;' and so on, and so on.

Margaret smiles rather sadly; but as it is no use going to meet trouble half-way, she allows herself to be carried away by Prue's infectious spirits, on however rickety a foundation those spirits may be built. In her heart she is scarcely more pleased with her own conduct than with her sister's.

'One cannot touch pitch without being defiled,' she says to herself severely.

She says it several times – is, indeed in the act of saying it next morning, when, on the stroke of eleven, punctual to his minute, the poor pitch reappears. She sets him at once to his mowing, and allows him very short intervals for rest and conversation. Since he has come to work, let him work.

No doubt as soon as he discovers that it is honest labour and not play that is expected of him he will trouble her with no more of his assiduities. And yet, as he bids her good-bye, leaving behind him a smooth sweep of short velvet for her to remember him by, he seems to linger.

'How is Jacob?' he asks.

'No better.'

'The garden looks a little straggly,' suggests he insidiously, knowing her weak side. 'A great many things want tying up. The beds need edging, and the carnations ought to be layered.'

'You are very learned,' says she, smiling. 'Does the F.O. teach you gardening?'

'Well, no; that is not included in the curriculum. That is an extra.'

'Who did teach you, then?' asks she, with an inquisitiveness which, as soon as the words are out of her mouth, shocks and surprises herself.

Can it be Betty? A Betty that loves her children and digs in her garden! If it is so, Peggy will have to reconstruct her altogether.

'My sister.'

His sister! What a relief! It would have been so humiliating to have had her strongest taste degraded by a community with painted, posturing Betty.

'You have a sister?'

'*Had.* There is a good deal of difference.'

And with that he leaves her abruptly. But he returns next day at the same hour; and, as there has blown a boisterous wind in the night, which has prostrated top-heavy plants, torn off leaves, and scattered flower-petals, she has not the heart to refuse his aid in a general tidying and sweeping up. Next day he clips the edges of the borders very nicely with a pair of shears; and the next day they gather lavender off the same bush. Gathering lavender, particularly off the same bush, is a good deal more productive of talk than mowing; nor is it possible to her to keep her new servant within the bounds of a silence to which she had never attempted to confine her old one.

But, indeed, by the time that they have come to the lavender day the wish for his silence has ceased. On the second – the general sweeping day – he had told her about his sister – had told her in short dry sentences how he had lost her; and she had cried out of sympathy for him who did not cry, and had said to herself, 'What if it had been my Prue?' On the third day, though assuredly no word or hint of Betty had passed his lips, somehow, by woman's instinct, sharpened by observation, she has sprung to a conclusion, not very erroneous, as to his garish mock-happiness and his shattered life. On the fourth day she asks herself why he never comes except in the forenoon; and herself answers the question, that it is because lazy Betty lies late, and until one o'clock has no knowledge of his comings or goings. On the fifth day she resolves that he shall come in the afternoon. She will be visited openly or not at all. So when, giving his bundle of lavender into her hands, he says with a valedictory formula, 'The same hour to-morrow?' she answers quietly:

'I am afraid not; I have an engagement with Mrs. Evans for to-morrow morning; we must give up the garden to-morrow, unless' – as if with an afterthought – 'unless you could come later – some time in the afternoon?'

His countenance falls. What property has he in his own afternoons? His weary afternoons of hammock and scandal and cigarettes?

'I am afraid – ' he begins; but at once he sees her face hardening. She knows. She understands. Cost what it may, he will not see again in her mouth and eyes that contempt whose dawning he had once before detected, to the embittering of his rest. He will not leave her with those tight lips and that stern brow. Pay for it as he may, he will do her bidding.

'At what hour, then?' he asks readily. 'Four? five? it is all one to me.'

She hesitates a moment. She has laid a trap for him, and he has not fallen into it.

'Shall we say five?'

He sees the surprise in her look, and is rewarded by it. But as he walks home he ponders. How is he to break to Betty the act of insubordination of which he has pledged himself to be guilty? For the last week he has been leading a double life; dissembling his happy mornings from the monopoliser of his weary afternoons. A sense of shame and revolt comes over him. He will dissemble no longer. Know as he may that from the tyranny whose yoke he himself fastened about his neck – from the chain which he himself has encouraged to eat into his life, only death or Betty's manumission can – according to honour's distorted code – free him; yet there is no reason why he should deny himself the solace of such a friendship as a good woman who divines his miserable story will accord him: a woman who lies under no delusion as to his being a free agent; in whose clear eyes – their innocence not being a stupid ignorance – he has read her acquaintance with his history; and whose strong heart can run no danger from the company of one whom she despises. Nor as the time draws near, though the natural man's aversion from vexing anything weaker than itself, coupled with his knowledge of his lady's unusual tear-and-invective power, may make him wince at the thought of the coming contest, does his resolution at all flag as to asserting and sticking to his last remnant of liberty. He might, as it happens, have cut the knot by flight, Betty having given him the occasion by forsaking him for a game of billiards with Freddy; but he is determined to fight the battle out on the open field. She has rejoined him now, and the weather being fresher than it was, and Betty the chilliest of mortals, they are walking briskly up and down the terrace, she wrapped in a 'fluther' of lace and feathers, and with her children frisking round her, a good and happy young matron. She is very happy just now, dear Betty. She has beaten Freddy at billiards, and made him break tryst with Prue. She is going to make him break another to-morrow. Is it any wonder that she looks bright and sweet? Little Franky has hold of her hand; and Lily is backing along the gravel walk before her. Betty laughs.

'Can you imagine what can be the pleasure of walking backwards with your tongue out?' asks she of Talbot. 'Franky darling, you are pulling my hand off; would not you like to run away and play with Lily?'

But the little spoilt fellow only clutches her fingers the tighter.

'No, no; I like to stay with you, mammy!'

'And so you shall,' cries she, hugging him; 'you shall always do whatever you like. But Lily' – in a colder key – 'you may run away; we do not want you. What are you staring at me so for, child?'

Lily puts her head on one side, and hoisting up her shoulder to meet her cheek, rubs them gently together, with her favourite gesture.

'I was only thinking, mammy,' replies she pensively, 'what much smaller ears than yours Miss Lambton has. Do you think that she will grow deaf sooner than other people because her ears are so small?'

'Nonsense!' rejoins the mother sharply; 'do not get into the habit of asking stupid questions. Run away!'

'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings,' etc. The way has been paved for Talbot in a way that he could not have expected. Miss Harborough walks away slowly, dragging her legs, and with a very deep reluctance. She scents an interesting conversation in the air.

'It is odd that Lily should have mentioned Miss Lambton,' says Talbot, taking the plunge; 'for I was just going to mention her myself.'

'It is what you do not often do,' replies Betty drily; '"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," cannot be said of you.'

'Her gardener is ill,' continues Talbot, leaving unnoticed this little fling, and speaking in as matter-of-fact a tone as he can assume; 'and I promised to help her to water her garden. By the bye' – with an unnecessary glance at the stable clock – 'if you could spare me for half an hour – I said I would be there by five – I ought to be off.'

There is an ominous silence. Then:

'How do you know that her gardener is ill? Did she think it necessary to write and communicate that interesting fact to you?'

'No.'

'She has not been here since Monday?'

'I believe not.'

'Then you have been there?'

'Yes.'

'What day?'

He hesitates. Shall he make a clean breast of it? Yes; 'in for a penny, in for a pound.'

'I have been there five days,' replies he slowly, and looking down.

Another pause. He keeps his eyes resolutely averted from her face, but he hears an angry catch in her breath.

'In the morning, I suppose, before I was up?'

'Yes.'

She breaks into a rather shrill laugh.

'What an incentive to early rising! The early Blowsabel picks the worm.'

Her tone is so inexpressibly insulting that he has to bite his lips hard to keep in the furious retort that rises to them; but he masters himself. Of what use to bandy words with an angry woman? And, after all, from her point of view she has some cause of complaint. Franky has altered his mind, and trotted off after his senior, for whose tree-climbing, cat-teasing, general mischief-doing powers he entertains a respect tempered with fear. They are alone.

Betty is walking along with her nose in the air, a smile of satisfied ire at the happiness of her last shaft giving a malicious upward curve to her pretty mouth.

'How I should have laughed,' says she presently, 'if any fortune-teller had told me that it would be my fate to be supplanted by a sa – '

'You are going to say "a sack of potatoes,"' says he, interrupting her. 'Do not. If you must call names, invent a new one!'

'Why give myself that trouble,' asks she insolently, 'when the old one fits so admirably? *Supplanted by a sack!*' (dwelling with prolonged relish on the obnoxious noun). 'What a good title for a novel! Ah! Freddy, my child!' catching sight of the young fellow, who is just stepping out of the window of the drawing-room. 'I was afraid you had gone to dry your skeleton's eyes. Come and dry mine instead: I assure you they need it much more.'

As she speaks she goes hurriedly to meet Ducane, and disappears with him round a corner of the house.

Talbot is free to pursue his scheme with what heart he may. The last ten minutes' conversation has taken all the bloom off his project. That the whole pleasure to himself has been eliminated from it is, however, no reason why he should break his word to Peggy, and, if he wishes to obey her with the punctuality that he has always hitherto shown, he must set off at once. He begins to walk towards a turn-stile that leads into the park!

# CHAPTER XI

'Her cheeks so rare a white was on,
No daisy makes comparison
(Who sees them is undone);
For streaks of red were mingled there,
Such as are on a Catherine pear,
The side that's next the sun.'

He has not gone above a hundred yards when he hears a small thunder of feet behind him, and turning, finds Miss Harborough flying at the top of her speed to overtake him.

'Mammy said I might go with you,' cries she breathlessly.

He stops and hesitates. Is it possible that she has sent this innocent child to be an unconscious spy upon him?

'Mammy said I might go with you,' repeats Lily, seeing his hesitation, and beginning to drop her long lashes, and rub her cheek with her shoulder, according to her most approved methods of fascination.

'But I did not say so,' returns he gravely.

'Oh, but you will,' cries she, flinging herself boisterously into his arms; 'and I – I'll help you over the stiles.'

Who could resist such a bribe as this? Certainly not Talbot. They walk off amicably hand-in-hand. After all, he ought to be thankful for anything that distracts him from his own thoughts, which are certainly neither pleasant nor profitable enough to be worth thinking. To-day he is sad, not only on his own account, but on Margaret's. Short as has been the time of his acquaintance with her, he has got into a habit, which seems long, of being sorry with her sorrows. He knows that to-day will be a black day for Prue, and that Peggy will be darkened in company. Is it not better then, seeing that he cannot stir a finger to lift the weight from the three hearts he would fain lighten, that he should have his eight-year-old companion's chatter to be distracted by, that he should be initiated into the hierarchy of her affections, and learn the order and degree in which her relations and friends are dear to her? He is surprised and flattered at the extremely high place assigned to himself immediately after father, and some way above mammy; but is less exhilarated on finding out that he shares it with the odd-man, who has made and presented a whistle to her.

'And Franky? where does Franky come?' asks John, really quite interested in the subject.

'My dear little brother!' exclaims Lily, with an extravagant affection of sisterly tenderness. 'I am *so* fond of him! Poor little brother! he has *no* toys!'

John smiles rather grimly. He knows that Miss Lily squabbles frightfully with her little brother in real life; and how entirely mendacious is her statement as to his destitution of playthings.

'I have given him most of mine,' pursues Lily, casting one eye subtly up to watch the effect of her words, 'but he has broken them nearly all, and now we neither of us have any!'

John receives this broad hint in a silence which Miss Lily feels to be sceptical; but as her attention is at the same moment diverted by the sight of Miss Lambton's Red House, and of Mink's face looking through the bars of the gate, on the anxious watch for passing market-carts to insult, she does not pursue the subject.

Mink takes them for a market-cart at first, and insults them; but afterwards apologises, and shows them the way to the garden, jumping up at Lily's nose, with an affectation of far greater pleasure than he can really feel.

They find his mistress standing alone in the middle of her domain, a great gutta-percha snake lying on the ground behind her, and the hose directed at a thirsty verbena-bed.

As they come up with her, the chiming church clock, having finished its preliminary stave of 'Home, Sweet Home,' strikes five. Whether the chimes or her own thoughts have deafened her, she does not hear their approach.

'Is not that punctuality?' asks Talbot, drawing near. 'Which is better, to have only one very small virtue, and to have it in absolute perfection, or to have a smattering of several large ones?'

At his voice she starts, and turns, her eye falling upon him, and also, of course, upon the child. The latter instantly flings herself into her arms.

'Mammy and John Talbot said I might come!' cries she effusively.

'You did not give John Talbot much choice in the matter,' returns he drily.

'But mammy told me to come,' urges Lily in eager self-defence; 'she told me to run fast that I might be sure to overtake you!'

John feels a dull red rising to his brow; but he will not let his eyes sink: they meet Peggy's full and straight. She shall see that this time, at all events, he has been neither ashamed nor afraid to proclaim his visit to her.

Peggy has gently unclasped the child's arms from about her neck.

'What a dear little doggy!' cries Lily, chattering on, and deceived by Mink's manner, as all strangers are, into the belief that he has conceived a peculiar fancy for her. 'What is his name?'

'Mink.'

'And what kind of dog is he?'

'That is what no one – not even himself – has ever been able to make out,' returns Margaret, with a smile. 'Sometimes he thinks that he is a Yorkshire terrier, and sometimes he does not. I bought him at the Dogs' Home, because he was the most miserable little dog there, and because I was quite certain that if I did not, nobody else would. He has grown so uppish now that sometimes I have to remind him of his origin – have not I, Minky?'

'Mammy had a Yorkshire terrier once,' says Miss Harborough thoughtfully – 'John Talbot gave it her – but he died. She had him stuffed: he looks horrid now!'

Talbot writhes. It seems to him as if he had never before tasted the full degradation of his position. He makes a clumsy plunge at changing the conversation by inquiring after Prue.

'She is lying down,' replies Peggy, while he sees a furrow come upon her white forehead. 'The heat tries her; at least' – her eye meeting his with a sort of appeal – 'she is very easily tired; and she has been waiting all afternoon with her habit on. She was engaged to go out riding at three, and now it is five; people ought not to make engagements if they are not prepared to keep them!'

'I am afraid he had forgotten all about it,' answers Talbot sadly.

Margaret's only answer is a dispirited shrug; and Lily having by this time scampered off to visit the fox; if possible, with safety, pull his brush; eat anything that is eatable in the kitchen-garden; and make friendly advances to the stable-boy – Miss Lambton again takes up the hose.

'This,' says she, looking at it affectionately, 'is the one solid good I have ever got from the Big House!'

He does not answer. Though he certainly does not class himself under the head of a solid good, her words give him a vague chill.

'It sounds ungrateful,' pursues Peggy; 'but I often wish we could move this acre of ground, with everything that is on it, fifty miles farther away.'

'Do you?'

'Of course,' pursues she gravely, 'we get a great deal more society here than we should anywhere else; but I often think that that is a doubtful good. We grow to know people whose acquaintance we should be far better without.'

He winces. Does he himself come under this category? But she means no offence.

'You can have no notion how our lives are cut up,' she continues. 'We live in a whirl of tiny excitements, that would not be excitements to anybody but us. We never can settle to any serious occupation; the moment we take up a book there is a note: "Prue, come out riding;" "Peggy, come and look over the accounts of the Boot and Shoe Club;" "Peggy and Prue, come and dine to meet the – the – "'

Harboroughs is the name which rises to her lips, and which she suppresses out of politeness to him.

He knows, too, that the plural pronoun which she has employed throughout has been used only as a veil for Prue's weakness; that the picture she has drawn has no likeness to her own steady soul.

'I sometimes think seriously of moving,' she says presently. 'It would be a wrench' – looking round wistfully. 'The only two big things that ever happened to me have happened here: Prue was born here, and mother died here. Yes, it would be a wrench.'

He listens to her in a respectful silence. It would be impertinent in him to express overt sympathy in her trouble, the trouble she has never put into words.

'Sometimes I think that we should do better in London,' she goes on, looking at him almost as if appealing to him for counsel; 'there would be more to interest and distract us in London.'

'What, and leave the garden?' says he, lifting his eyebrows.

'She does not care really about the garden,' answers Margaret, forgetting herself, and using the singular pronoun which she might have employed all along. 'And as for me' – with a little laugh – 'I would grow mignonette in a box; and buy a load of hay, as I heard of one country-sick lady doing, and make myself a haycock in the back-yard.'

'I cannot fancy you in a town,' says he, almost under his breath.

It is true. It is impossible to him to picture her except with a background of waving trees, a floor of blossoming flowers, a spicy wind to toss her hair, and finches to sing to her. His imagination is not strong enough to transplant her to the narrow bounds of a little South Kensington home, lost in the grimy monotony of ten thousand others.

'It is very difficult to know what to decide,' she says, almost plaintively, 'and I have no one to advise me. Though I am not very young – twenty-two – I have very little experience of life. There must be a best; but it is hard to find. Do you never feel it so?'

Her large pure eyes are upon him, asking him, as well as her mouth does, for an answer to this unanswerable question. For a moment he hesitates, then:

'Do not you know that there are some people who have arranged their lives so ingeniously that for them there is no best; that the only choice left them lies between bad and worse?'

'I do not believe it,' answers she solemnly. 'God gives us all a best, if we will only look for it; and' (in a lighter key) 'never fear but I shall find mine before I have done!'

After that they finish their watering almost in silence. When he bids her good-bye, having recaptured his Miss Harborough, who is restored to him a good deal smirched by a delirious half-hour in the hayloft with a litter of kittens, Margaret thanks him simply, yet very heartily, for his services to her.

'Why are you so grateful to-day particularly?' asks he, alarmed. 'You make me feel as if the band were playing "God Save the Queen," and everything was at an end.'

'Jacob comes back to his work to-morrow,' answers she, 'and you know,' with a smile, 'I cannot afford to keep two gardeners.'

'He must be very weak still.'

'Do not be afraid,' laughing again; 'I will not overwork him.'

'Then I am to consider myself dismissed?'

'With thanks – yes.'

'Out of work? Turned into the street?'

'Yes.'

'And without a character?'

'I daresay you will not miss it,' replies she, a little cynically. 'Many people do without one.'

He winces. She is not half so nice when she is cynical.

'Come along, Lily,' he says, in a vexed voice; 'we are not wanted here any longer. We are old shoes, sucked lemons, last year's almanacs. Let us go.'

'My child!' cries Margaret, her eye falling for the first time on a gigantic rift in the front of Miss Harborough's frock, 'what have you done to yourself? What will Nanny say to you?'

'I do not care what she says!' replies Lily swaggeringly. 'She is an old beast! Oh, Miss Lambton,' with a sudden change of key, 'may not I come again to-morrow? Alfred wants me to come again to-morrow.' (Alfred is the stable-boy.) 'May not I come with John Talbot again to-morrow?'

'You see that we are both of one mind,' says John, with a melancholy whine, walking off with his young lady.

# CHAPTER XII

The Harboroughs' and Talbot's invitation to the Manor had been for a fortnight. Of that fortnight fully a week has already elapsed. To the house which comes next in the Harboroughs' autumn programme John Talbot has, by some strange oversight, not been asked. For this reason – to mark her indignation at so flagrant a departure from the code of civilised manners – Betty shows every symptom of an intention to throw up her engagement.

But for once Mr. Harborough's love of sport exceeds his pliability. From a house which possesses some of the best grousing on the Yorkshire moors, not even the fact that his wife's admirer is not bidden to share it can keep him; and what is more, as it is an old-fashioned house which expects to see husband and wife together, he will make Betty go too.

Talbot's engagements are more elastic. By an easy readjustment of them he might spare another seven days to his present quarters. It is true that Lady Roupell has not as yet definitely asked him to prolong his visit, but he knows that she is hardly aware whether he goes or stays; and as to Freddy, he is always brimming over with an easy hospitality which costs him nothing, and makes every one say what a good fellow he is.

A whole week of absolute freedom, afternoons as well as mornings; a whole week during which he need not pretend to be jealous – pretend to be fond – pretend to be everything that he once was, and is not, and never will be again! It is possible, too, that Jacob may have a relapse. In that case, a whole week of mowing, of clipping edges, of picking lavender, and gathering groundsel for the cage-birds! He knows that there must always be eleven bits gathered, because there are eleven birds, and she cannot bear one to be without. He smiles softly at this tender-hearted puerility of hers.

And meanwhile, since she has made it clear to him that she does not desire any more of his immediate company, he keeps himself away for two whole days. What business has he, who can never claim any rights over her, to expose her, by his assiduities, to the coarse gossip of a gaping village?

But though his eye is not enriched by her, her presence and her words are with him night and day. One of her sentences rings for ever in his ears – 'God gives us all a best, if we will only look for it.' Look for it as he may, how can he find his best? and finding, how dare he take hold of and make it his? His best! The best for him – does not it apparently stare him in the face?

To shake off this chain that was once of flowers, and is now of cold eating iron, and to walk the world a free man, free for honest work and honest love. Ay, but to the riveting of that chain there went an oath, from which the mere fact of his having grown tired of wearing its fetters does not, in his opinion, release him. He is bound by an engagement the more perversely sacred, because none can hold him to it.

Only by her with whom it was made can he be emancipated from it; and for that emancipation how can he ask her? How can he go to her and say, 'I have grown tired of you; I have grown fond of another woman. Let me go!'

It is only as a free gift from her hand that he can accept his dismissal; and, of the improbability of her ever making him that gift, his sinking spirit assures him. It is not only vanity and habit that tie her to him. Deep in his heart he knows that, cold wife, partial mother, bad friend as she is, to him she has been, and is, a fond and faithful lover; that, if he were but to hold up his finger, she would toss to the winds position, diamonds, toilettes, admirers, everything that for her life holds of valuable, to face opprobrium and poverty by his side. He knows that he and Franky are the two things in the world she really loves, and for whom her foolish heart beats as truly under its worldly 'fluther' of lace and satin as did ever Cornelia's for her Gracchi, or Lucretia's for her lord.

It is absolutely impossible that he can cut her adrift. Bitterly unsatisfactory, wrong, senseless, and now oppressive as is the connection that binds him to her, he must hope for none other, none better, none dearer, as long as her and his lives last.

Such being the case, is not it the height of unwisdom to himself, perhaps of injustice to that other woman, that he should seek her company with the consciousness of a heart he dare not give, and a hand he dare not offer?

This is the question that dings perpetually in his ears, as he lies down and as he rises up, as he walks moody and alone in the park, as he answers Lily's startling questions, and evades her broad hints; or listens to Betty's anathemas of her man-milliner, or her petulant lamentations over the expected loss of his society during the ensuing week.

He has not yet answered it on the third day after his last visit to the little Red House, when he meets Peggy in the lane, staggering under a philanthropic load of framed lithographs, which he helps her to carry to the workhouse, and to hang up on the walls, whose dreary monotony of whitewash they agreeably and gaudily vary. He has not yet answered it the next day, when he carries a message to her from Lady Roupell, a message which must be preposterously long, since it takes two hours and a half to deliver; he has not yet answered it on the day after, nor on the day after that again, which is the last of the Harboroughs' visit.

On the afternoon of that day some business has brought Peggy reluctantly up to the Manor, where she had not appeared for above a week. John and Lily, as is but civil, escort her home again! It is true that Miss Harborough has had a near shave, at the moment of setting off, of being recaptured by her nurse – a danger from which she has been rescued only by her own presence of mind, a presence of mind made all the acuter by her excessive desire to flirt with John, and to overhear what – unintended for Lilyan ears – he has to say to his companion.

'Oh, Miss Lambton!' cries she, pulling down Peggy's face in order to whisper importantly into her ear; 'do not you think I had better come with you? There are the stiles! I do not see,' with an affectation of excessive delicacy, 'how you are to get over the stiles with only John Talbot!'

Her plea is admitted as sound.

They all three spend a long dawdling afternoon at the Little House. They take the fox out for a run in the field on his chain; and in his joy he gallops round and round, tying all their legs together, even throwing Miss Harborough down – an accident which fills her with delight. He offers to play with Mink, who growls, and receives his advances with such hauteur that he has to be reminded of the humility of his own beginnings, and of the Dogs' Home. The snubbed fox throws himself on the sward and pants, swishing his brush from side to side like a cross cat. Then they restore him to his prison, at which he opens his red mouth wide, making little angry wild noises.

After they have done with the fox, they have still the garden to water; the kittens in the hayloft – to which they ascend, on the joint invitation of Alfred and Lily – to see; peas to throw to the pretty prosy pigeons, long-windedly courting in fans and pouts, and prism-coloured throats on the dove-cot roof. And when at length her guests take their tardy leave, Peggy is insensibly lured, step by step, into accompanying them more than half-way home.

Into what could not such an evening lure one? Through a barley-field first; all the pale spears slanting westward in the level sun; then a field of old pasture, knapweeds purpling, little hawkweed clocks telling the time in fairyland, loitering buttercups. Then a hedgerow with woody nightshade and long blue vetch; then the green night of a little wood. Though the sun is nearing his declension, the delicious smell that all day long he has compelled the grass and the flowers to bring him, in odorous tribute, still tarries, making the air rich —*âcre*, as the French say; a word for which there is no precise English equivalent. On the farther side of the tiny forest they part; if so short a severance can indeed be called to part. Are not they to meet again in an hour or so, at that dinner-party at the Manor, to which both Peggy and Prue are bidden? and even if it were not so, have not they to-morrow, and again to-morrow, and yet to-morrow again, to look forward to? This being so, why is it that such a curious last-time feeling clings to Talbot as he crosses the park with his little chattering comrade, making him turn his head again and again in futile seeking towards the sylvan gate whence his tall and white-gowned friend has already disappeared?

On entering the house, and going through an upper passage to his room, he is accosted by Betty's maid, who tells him that her ladyship's headache is better; that she is on the sofa in Lady Roupell's boudoir, and that she has expressed a wish to see him as soon as he comes in. He follows with a guilty conscience and a sinking heart. Has he for one moment of his long blissful afternoon remembered the headache, to which alone he owed his freedom; the headache genuine enough – though it took its birth from mortification and spleen – to keep her stretched in pain and solitary darkness the livelong day? She is in semi-darkness still, her windows closed (a headache always makes her chilly); not a glint of apricot cloud or suave blue sky-field reaching her. A sense of pity, largely touched with remorse, comes over him, as he takes her hand, and says softly:

'You are better at last? Come, that is well!'

She leaves her hand, languid and rather feverish, lying in his.

'It is time that I should be better!' she says, with an impatient sigh. 'What a day I have had! – our last day!' There is such genuine grief and regret in the accent with which she pronounces the three final words that his remorse deepens; but that increase of self-reproach does not make it the least more possible to him to echo her lamentation. 'I asked Julie how often you had been to inquire after me,' continues she, turning her eyes, innocent to-day of their usual black smouches, interrogatively upon him; 'she said she could not remember.'

Talbot blesses the wisely ambiguous maid; and, to hide his confusion, stoops his head over the hand, which he still – since it is evidently expected of him – holds.

'I wish my inquiries could have made you better,' says he, taking – and feeling with shame that he is taking – a leaf out of Julie's book. 'I am afraid that you will not be able to come down to dinner.'

'Oh, but I shall!' returns she sharply. 'Why do you think I shall not? Is the wish father to the thought?'

He laughs constrainedly, taking refuge in what is often the best disguise, truth.

'Yes, that is it!'

'Milady would never forgive me,' pursues she, rolling her head restlessly about upon the cushions, 'if I left her to struggle with the natives alone; I am sure I have not the heart to struggle with any one! Oh, how miserable I am! John!' – laying her other hand on his, and clasping it between both hers – 'how *am* I to get through the next fortnight?'

Talbot wonders whether the burning blush that he feels searing him all through his body shows in his face, whether he looks the double-faced cur that he feels. Probably he does not, or else the faint light helps him; for she goes on unsuspiciously:

'You have never told me where you have decided to go to-morrow – to the Mackintoshes or the Delaneys? If you ask my advice,' with a rather showery smile, 'I should say the Delaneys; for you will be less well amused there, and have more time to think of me! Remember that you have not given me your address; give it me now, lest you should forget it!'

The tug of war has come. He would rather have put it off until her headache was gone – until he could meet her upon more equal terms. What chance has a man against a woman lying on a sofa with her eyes full of tears, and a handkerchief wetted with eau-de-Cologne tied round her aching brows? None. His hesitation is so obvious that she cannot but notice it.

'Well,' she says, with some sharpness, 'why do not you answer me? Where is the difficulty?'

He laughs artificially.

'The difficulty,' he says, trying to speak carelessly – 'the difficulty is that there is no difficulty. You have my address already. I am going to stay here!'

He has deposited his box of dynamite: he has now only to wait for the explosion. But for twenty or thirty heart-beats she remains entirely silent, and, at the end of that time, only repeats his own words:

'To – stay – here!'

'Yes.'

Another silence. He begins to wish that the explosion would come. It would at least be better than this. She has sat up on her sofa, and pushed back the wet bandage from her damp and straightened hair. She has neither belladonna nor rouge. He has always strongly deprecated and even reviled the use of either; and yet he cannot help thinking, though he hates himself for so thinking, that she looks old and haggard without them.

'And this,' says she at last, speaking between her teeth in a low voice, 'is your delicate way of intimating to me that I am superseded!'

He has risen to his feet. They stand staring each at each in the twilight room, the one not whiter than the other. How much worse it is than he had feared! Close outside the window a robin is piping blithely. A stupid wonder flashes across his mind as to whether he is one of those for whom Peggy scatters crumbs on her window-sill.

'I think that that is a question not worth answering,' he replies, trying to speak calmly.

'But all the same it must be answered,' rejoins she, with symptoms of rising excitement. 'You shall not leave the room until it is answered.'

'Will you please to repeat it then in a more intelligible form?' asks he, with a forced composure.

For a moment she glares at him with dead-white face and shining eyes; then, rising from her sofa, flings herself into his arms.

'How can you expect me to say such words twice?' cries she, bursting into a tempest of tears; 'but if it is so, tell me the truth. You have always blamed me for not speaking truth; learn your own lesson: tell me the truth. Is it all over – all at an end?'

She has withdrawn herself again from him, and now stands holding him at arm's length, a hand upon each shoulder, her dimmed eyes fixed upon his face, searching for the least sign of faltering or evasion upon it. But she finds none.

'You know,' he answers, in a low quiet voice, whose gentleness is the cover for a bottomless depression, 'that there will never be an end to it until you make one.'

Something in his tone dries her tears.

'Then why do you want to stay here?' asks she, her voice still shaking from her late gust of passion.

He is silent. Her words find an echo in his own heart. Why indeed? Seen in the hell-light of his renewed bondage, his plan for that one little halcyon week ahead seems to him to have been a monstrosity of folly and unreason. How could he, for even a moment, have entertained it?

Betty has sat down again upon the sofa; and wiping rather viciously the eyes in which an ireful light is flashing, she says softly, as if she were saying something rather pleasant:

'I am sure you would not wish to hurt *her*, or blight *her* young affections; and yet it seems to me that you are on the high-road to do both.'

He writhes, but he could not speak, if flaying alive were to be the penalty of his dumbness.

'I do not think' – still in that silky key – 'that you have any right to turn the poor thing's head with attentions such as she has probably never received before.'

At that he laughs out loud, and insultingly:

'Turn her head! Ha! ha!'

'It is very amusing, no doubt,' rejoins Betty, her false suavity giving way to a most real fury, breast heaving, and colour rising, 'and such hilarity becomes you extremely; but, as she has probably never seen any one more attractive than the village apothecary, it would be no great excess of coxcombry on your part to suppose that you might be his successful rival.'

But this taunt fails to extract any reply. Exasperated by her insuccess in driving him into angry speech, she goes on:

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.