

PAUL'S PARAGON

W. E. NORRIS



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PAUL'S PARAGON

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PAUL'S PARAGON

BY
William Edward
W. E. NORRIS

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PAUL'S PARAGON

CHAPTER I

THE DISTURBED RECLUSE

“WELL, Mr. Lequesne,” said the rosy-faced, thick-set little parson, as he got up and knocked out the ashes from his pipe with an air of finality, “I dare say you have the best of the argument. You are a very clever, well-read man, and no doubt you are more skilled in dialectics than I can pretend to be. For all that, it doesn't follow that you are right or that I am wrong. You may yet live to see for yourself the results of banishing religious teaching from our schools.”

“But, my dear Mr. Hale,” mildly protested the tall, gaunt man whom he addressed, “I am dead against secular education. I quite recognise that religion—any religion—is an immense support to morality, though I am unable to agree with you in thinking that there can be no morality without religion.”

“There never *has* been any,” the other boldly affirmed.

“I should have thought that cases might be cited; but we won't argue the point. Indeed, I didn't know

that we had been arguing. I only ventured to state some of my personal views because you demanded them."

The Rector of the parish gave a dissatisfied grunt. Prompted by sympathy, compassion and a sense of duty, he had resolved to speak a few pastoral words to this queer parishioner of his, who, while contributing liberally to local charities, never came to church, and the occasion of having been invited to lunch at Stone Hall for the first time in two years had seemed to be one which ought not to be neglected; yet during a colloquy which had lasted more than an hour he had not contrived to discharge what he conceived to be his real mission. Now, at the last moment, he made an effort to do so—clumsily enough.

"Surely, Mr. Lequesne," said he, "you must feel that even if we could dispense with the dogmas of Christianity, we could not make ourselves independent of its vast consolations. Surely you, if anybody, must sometimes long for the certainty that this earthly life is not all, and that when it is over, we shall be reunited to those whom we have loved here!"

It was with a suggestion of polite chilliness in his voice that Paul Lequesne replied: "Quite so; and if the wish to believe in a thing implied the power to believe in it, that would be very nice indeed. With some people, I suppose, it does. One congratulates and envies them. Are we in for another spell of bad weather, do you think?"

Mr. Hale accepted the invited rebuff and took himself off. Presently Paul Lequesne, standing in the

embrasure of the window which commanded a prospect of rugged coast-line, of grey-green seas sweeping into a wide bay and of bare inland country, dim with trailing mists, saw his visitor's black figure plodding down the hill towards the village and sighed while he smiled. He was afraid he had been rather rude, and he was sorry; but it had been essential to snuff out the kindly-meaning cleric before he perpetrated further indiscretions.

Not that good Mr. Hale signified. For two years now Paul Lequesne had lived and thought—had tried to live and think—as though for him nothing would ever signify again. But that is really an impossible attitude for a man of little over thirty and in perfect bodily health to maintain. He knew it was impossible. What he less and less liked to contemplate, yet was more and more driven by sheer stress of necessity to contemplate, was the question of alternatives. On this bleak afternoon of late spring they obtruded themselves with special insistence, those unwelcome alternatives, because, as sometimes happened, his brain refused the literary labour which was his first and chief standby, while the wild-fowl shooting which was his second had come to an end. In plain words (though he did not employ them mentally), he was bored.

For the first thirty years of his life Paul Lequesne had been amongst the fortunate few who are never bored. He had always had plenty to do and had always been able to do the very things that pleased him most. Comfortably off, something of a sportsman, a good deal of a student and a scholar, he had

found ample work in writing essays, historical studies and occasional verses, without needing to trouble about whether these brought him adequate pecuniary reward or not, while games, mountain-climbing, fishing and shooting had afforded him relaxation to his heart's content. At the age of twenty-six he had made the happiest of marriages, and if the fact that it had proved childless ought to be accounted as some set-off to its otherwise perfect felicity, neither he nor his charming and accomplished wife had taken that view. They had been so mutually devoted, they had so entirely sufficed one another, that the advent of squalling babies might well have seemed to them a doubtful boon. Neither too rich nor too poor, they had led exactly the life that they would have chosen to lead and had enjoyed every day of it. Paul's increasing celebrity as a writer had brought him numberless friends and acquaintances, whom he had delighted to entertain in Chester Square, where he dwelt; Mrs. Lequesne had earned well-merited reputation as a hostess; they had visited much in country houses, had travelled abroad when they felt inclined to travel, and had achieved, in short, the social ideal of being at once in the heart of things, yet quite independent. No two people in the world could have been more contented with their lot than they. Then, as by some swift shock of earthquake or lightning-stroke out of a clear sky, the entire fabric of Paul Lequesne's existence had been shattered. A neglected chill, an access of fever, double pneumonia and death—the whole tragedy was but an affair of days. Scarcely had the unhappy man been made to understand that

his wife was dangerously ill before she was gone. She was gone, and with her went—literally everything!

Such, at all events, was his impression of the ruin that had come upon him. He obeyed the wounded animal's instinct to crawl away and hide himself. The one thing that he could by no means endure, the one thing that had still power to give him additional pain, was condolence. And, as it chanced, a sanctuary lay ready to his hand. Stone Hall, grey and grim upon a jutting foreland of the Northumbrian coast, had recently and unexpectedly passed into his possession by inheritance. He had not dreamt of inhabiting the place, nor had he succeeded in discovering a tenant for it; so in his misery its total seclusion seemed to beckon to him. Thither, accordingly, he betook himself to face, all alone, the future which must needs be faced, and his friends, of course, said it was the very worst thing he could do. However, they did not say so to him, because they were not given the opportunity, and it may be that they were mistaken. On the other hand, it is certain that he was mistaken if he imagined that the remainder of his days could be spent in unbroken solitude. Like many other persons of a reserved habit, he was more dependent upon human companionship than he was aware of being. By nature affectionate and unselfish, neither study nor sport was likely to meet his permanent needs. Moreover, he was denied that species of solace so glibly offered by Mr. Hale and so eagerly accepted by thousands of mourners.

“Even if these pious folks knew what they persuade themselves that they know,” he mused, “I

shouldn't want to share their convictions. Immortality at the expense of identity is only another name for extinction, and, shuffle and wriggle as they will, they are forced to admit that identity—what one calls one's self—must cease when the breath goes out of one's body. Something in us may survive death; but I can't find in me the slightest desire to be something or somebody else through all eternity. It's the past that I cry for and can never have again, it isn't a glorified future."

The tall, lean, muscular man, who had contracted a slight habitual stoop, and who looked rather more than his age, looked also as if he might be destined to live for a great many years yet. He had a well-shaped head and a long, narrow face, ending in a pointed chin, the outline of which was concealed by a short beard. This and his close-cut hair were of a light, indeterminate brown colour. His grey eyes, very clear and keen, were sunk beneath somewhat overhanging brows; his lower lip protruded a little; distinct lines ran from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth. His general aspect gave an impression of sternness and melancholy, though there were rare moments when a smile transfigured his whole countenance. He was perfectly sound, he was in hard condition, and he came of a long-lived stock. These things had to be taken into account, and he took them into account. He told himself, as he had often told himself before, that what had happened was not only Maud's death but his own. He might not want to be somebody else, but already and inevitably he was somebody else, and his life must by hook or

by crook be made to adjust itself to the existing conditions.

Thus far he had scarcely essayed such adjustment. His one, partially successful, aim had been to tire himself out in mind and body, and so get through the days without counting them. Obligatory visits to London on matters of business had caused periodical, always exquisitely painful, interruptions in this self-imposed sentence of hard labour; for, with a sort of perverse determination to drain the cup of bitterness to its dregs, he chose to retain the Chester Square house, which, by his orders, remained precisely as he had left it on the morrow of his wife's funeral. When in London, he saw none of his old friends, with the single exception of Mrs. Baldwin, and perhaps he would not have seen her if she had not made such a point of it. He liked Lilian Baldwin pretty well, though it is improbable that he would have become intimate with her, had she not been intimate with Maud in former days and had she not claimed sympathy on the ground of a bereavement similar to and almost simultaneous with his own. A kindly, cheerful woman, who had entirely recovered from the loss of the late learned Professor Baldwin (her senior by more than a score of years), and who would fain have persuaded Paul to bow, as she had bowed, to the decree of Heaven. Somehow, he did not mind her talking to him about Maud—did not even very much mind her broad hints that he would do well to seek a substitute for poor, dear Maud, until it dawned upon him all of a sudden that she herself might not be unwilling to be so selected. That, to be sure, gave

him a fine fright and sent him back to Northumberland like an arrow from a bow. However, he did not break off all relations with the too friendly widow. She was now in Italy, whence she wrote him long letters, to which he sometimes replied. It was at this moment in his mind to scribble a few lines to her. She was a woman of the world, and a sensible one, as women go, he thought: possibly she might be able to suggest something. For something, clearly, would have to be done ere long; some fresh departure would have to be undertaken, however shrinkingly and reluctantly. To dwell at Stone Hall, seeing nobody and repelling the advances of the few neighbours, had been a practicable line of conduct for a couple of years; permanently practicable he perceived that it could not be.

Paul, thus constrained to part with the irretrievable past, thus unhappily debarred from contemplating futurity with the assured, fervent gaze of his Cilician namesake, stood at the window and absently surveyed material objects. Beneath him the great curve of the bay, blurred by drifting fog, swept away towards Dunridge—little, invisible Dunridge, deserted at this season of the year, but frequented during the summer months by sparse visitors, some of whom would occasionally pick their way across the sands to the somewhat inaccessible promontory on which Stone Hall was planted. Anybody who happened to be in a hurry to reach Stone Hall from Dunridge might avoid a circuit of several miles by driving over the sands at low water and fording the stream below the house; but this was so unusual an occurrence that Paul

started in surprise when he descried a gig apparently making for the only destination to which any vehicle, coming from that direction, could be bound. He soon brought a pair of field-glasses to bear upon it and discovered that it was being driven by a black-bearded man, unknown to him, at whose side a small boy was seated.

“What the deuce can the fellow want here!” he muttered, with the annoyance of a recluse under menace of intrusion. “Well, he won’t get here, whoever he may be; I can tell him that much! The ford would be barely manageable today even by a native who knew how to take it, and he looks like a stranger.”

No doubt it was because he was a stranger that the wayfarer drove steadily on. Paul, watching him as he drew nearer, saw him point to the stream with his whip, say something to the boy and make straight for the crossing-place whence it became a duty, in common humanity, to warn him off. For the brook, swollen by recent rains, was a good deal more dangerous than it might appear to the uninitiated. There was a possibility, if a doubtful one, of traversing it in safety by wheeling sharply to the right immediately after leaving the track which led to its brink; but this was just what an uninitiated person was pretty sure not to do, and in the middle was a hole ten or twelve feet deep. Paul, running down the hill, was joined by his groom, who had seen from the stable-yard what was not unlikely to occur, and who said:

“Dunridge Arms gig, sir. One o’ them silly trippers who thought it was a nice afternoon for a drive

by the sea, I s'pose. Hebblethwaite didn't ought to allow such folks to go out by theirselves. Serve him right if he was to lose his horse and trap ! ”

“ Oh, he won't do that,” answered Paul ; “ the horse won't face it. You may as well give the man a shout though, Perkins.”

Perkins shouted, and so did Paul. Also, as had been anticipated, the shaggy cob stopped short at the water's edge and flung up his head. But the stranger, misinterpreting, as it seemed, the cries and signals addressed to him, stood up and lashed the wiser animal, who responded by throwing himself into his collar and breasting the flood. Then, with a dramatic abruptness which would have been ludicrous if it had not been a life and death matter, came the foreseen catastrophe. For a moment the cart and its occupants were completely submerged ; but presently the struggling horse and his driver reappeared upon the surface, and Perkins darted off down stream to intercept them at a point where the bank made an elbow, against which, with luck, the current might carry them. Paul waited for the boy, who was swimming like a fish, and who, as he scrambled ashore, disregarded alike proffered assistance and praises of his pluck.

“ I'm all right,” he gasped, “ but the horse—look at him !—he'll be drowned ! ”

Paul looked, whipped a knife out of his pocket and jumped into the water. Perkins had already hauled the man out ; but the horse, entangled by harness and broken shafts, was undoubtedly in imminent danger of perishing. To cut him loose, seize him by the

bridle and rescue him was not the easiest job in the world, nor would it have been accomplished by anybody but a powerful man, armed with a knife which was fortunately sharp. Accomplished, however, it was, under the approving eye of the juvenile spectator, who clapped his hands and called out :

“ Well done, sir ! ”

“ Same to you,” answered Paul gravely, “ Now, my little man, be off up to the house as fast as you can lay legs, ring the bell and ask for Mrs. Williams, the housekeeper. She’ll have you in blankets before you know where you are. I’ll see to your father.”

The boy shook himself like a dog and laughed.

“ Bless you, that isn’t father ! ” said he. “ Father’s dead. That’s Mr. Eastwood. I told him it was too deep—you can always see when the water’s dark and smooth like that in the middle—but he wouldn’t listen. Now he’ll get one of his bad colds for certain. Are you Mr. Lequesne ? We were coming to see you.”

“ Yes, I am Mr. Lequesne,” Paul replied ; “ but do as I tell you or there will be two colds, instead of one.”

The boy, a sturdy, bright-eyed little fellow, who might be eight or nine years of age, laughed again, glanced at the speaker, seemed to recognise in him a person who had better be obeyed, and trotted away up the hill without another word.

The black-bearded man, whom Paul now approached, looked scarcely in a condition to follow suit. Supported by Perkins, he had staggered to his feet ; but he was shivering violently and his teeth chattered while he jerked out incoherent apologies.

“ Mr. Lequesne—I am so sorry and so ashamed ! I was about to call at your house, for reasons which I will explain presently. . . . They told me at Dunridge that it was quite safe to take the short cut across the sands. . . . I had no idea—no intention . . . ”

“ I am sure you hadn't, ” interrupted Paul, smiling. “ Please don't distress yourself. Come along, if you can walk, and let us get you into a warm bed. ”

The contrite stranger protested feebly; but of course he could not refuse the hospitality of which he stood in such obvious need; and thus it came to pass that, half an hour later, Perkins had to ride off in quest of the doctor.

CHAPTER II

DISMISSED LIONS

IF one of the dripping strangers had to own himself fit for nothing but bed and medical treatment, the other was in no such forlorn case. When, after despatching Perkins for the doctor and changing his own drenched garments, the invaded hermit entered the library which was the one sitting-room of which he made use, he found his arm-chair tenanted by a small, ruddy-faced person who was enveloped in what appeared to be one of the housekeeper's flannel dressing-gowns, and who was casting affectionate glances at the prepared tea-table.

“Hullo!” said Paul.

“Hullo!” returned the youngster, with a gurgling, infectious sort of laugh. “How's Mr. Eastwood?”

“Not very well, I am afraid. Let me cut you some cake. You, at any rate, are none the worse for your ducking, I am glad to see.”

“Oh, I'm as right as rain, thanks. The water was jolly cold, though, wasn't it?”

“Yes, I found it so. By the way, could you tell me who Mr. Eastwood is?”

The boy swallowed a mouthful of cake and looked reflective. “Oh, well—I don't know that he's anything except Mr. Eastwood.” Then, as if recognising

that this might fall short of giving full satisfaction to legitimate curiosity, he proceeded: "I live with him and Mrs. Eastwood. My name's Guy Hilliar, and I think I'm a sort of cousin of yours. That's why we came down here from London to see you."

Vague memories of a distant relative who had married a man called Hilliar recurred to Paul's mind, together with an impression that the man called Hilliar had not turned out very satisfactorily. Doubtless this child was an orphan, on whose behalf some appeal was in contemplation. Well, if that was all! . . . Appeals, more or less warranted, reached Paul by almost every post, and as his very inexpensive tastes left him always with a considerable balance at his bankers', he seldom turned a deaf ear to them. Meanwhile, he refrained from putting further questions, and it may have been a result of this delicacy on his part that the boy, who evidently was not afflicted with shyness, grew disjointedly communicative. From his *obiter dicta* it could be gathered that he had been born and bred abroad, that his mother, like his father, was dead, and that the Eastwood family resided at Arcachon.

"That's where you learnt to swim, I suppose," Paul suggested.

The boy nodded, but presently corrected himself. "No, I don't think so; I can't remember. I believe I've always known how to swim. I can ride too," he added, with a pleased grin. "Not well, you know, because I haven't been properly taught; but I can stick on all right. That's because I'm not in a

funk, like Tom and Nellie and the others. I haven't ever been in a funk—yet.”

He made this announcement in no boastful tone, but rather as one who mentions a personal and possibly interesting peculiarity. It had and has, at all events, the merit of veracity; for to this day Guy Hilliar remains one of those rare and enviable mortals who are unacquainted with the sensation of physical fear. To the rest of us such persons are almost always attractive, and from the first Paul Lequesne felt strongly drawn towards his juvenile kinsman. The latter had already shown himself a plucky and merry little chap; in the sequel he was to prove that he possessed other claims upon the affection which, to be sure, has ever been ungrudgingly accorded to him by friends and companions of both sexes. But for the moment his equipment of courage and high spirits was enough, and in the course of half an hour he had achieved more than anybody else had done for two years, in that he had made Paul laugh repeatedly.

The entrance of the local practitioner, who had been upstairs and who wished to make his report, put an end to an amusing conversation, and what the doctor had to say in an undertone was not altogether amusing.

“I'm afraid your friend must stay where he is for a few days to come, Mr. Lequesne. I hope he may shake off the effects of the severe shock and chill that he has had; but a man in his condition! . . . You know, I daresay, that his lungs are anything but sound. You didn't know? Well, so it is, and the

disease is evidently of long standing. I have given directions to Mrs. Williams and I'll look in again tomorrow morning; for the present there's very little to be done beyond keeping him quiet and warm. Oh, yes, go up and see him by all means; he seems very anxious to see you. Don't let him talk too much, that's all, and the sooner he can get off to sleep the better."

It is, to say the least of it, rather inconsiderate behaviour on the part of a total stranger, whose business with you might apparently have been transacted just as well by letter as in person, to plunge into an ice-cold stream at your door and get himself laid up under your roof with threatened congestion of the lungs; but Paul Lequesne was a patient man. His patience was tried; for Mr. Eastwood, sitting up in bed, was so verbosely penitent that it took a long time to bring him to the point. The point (put much more succinctly than he put it) was that he wanted Mr. Lequesne's kind advice as to what was to be done with Guy Hilliar, and the reason why he stood in sore need of advice with regard to that momentous question was that the boy was upon his hands without visible means of subsistence. The circumstances which had led to a situation so necessarily embarrassing to a poor man with a family amounted, when condensed and stripped of irrelevancies, to something like this:

Three or four years back an acquaintance, quickly developing into intimacy, had sprung up at Arcachon between the Eastwoods and the Hilliards—or rather between the former and amiable, invalided Mrs.

Hilliar; for Mr. Hilliar's absences, on unspecified affairs, from the villa which his wife's delicate health compelled him to rent for her in a mild climate had been frequent and prolonged. About eighteen months ago poor Mrs. Hilliar's malady had taken a sudden turn for the worse and, before her roving husband could be communicated with, she had expired, commending her child, almost with her last breath, to friends whom she described as the only ones she had in the world. How could they repudiate the charge thus pathetically thrust upon them? They had been very fond of Mrs. Hilliar, they were very fond of the little fellow himself, and Mr. Hilliar, when he appeared upon the scene, had been, to do him justice, handsome in his proposals. It was, he had explained, well-nigh impossible for him, who was obliged to be constantly on the move, to carry his small son about the world with him; but he would gladly and gratefully pay for the boy's maintenance until such time as it should be in his power to make more definite arrangements. So Guy had become a temporary member of the Eastwood household, and payments had been made by his father, at first every month, afterwards with less regularity, finally—that was to say for six consecutive months—not at all. It is not pleasant to dun an absent friend, whose letters, though couched in the kindest and most appreciative terms, have ceased to contain any allusion to the sordid subject of ways and means; yet the exigencies of a restricted income are insistent, and Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood had just made up their minds to give Mr. Hilliar's memory a gentle jog when

information reached them from Malaga that he had fallen a victim to fever in that place. And the worst of it was that he had left literally not a penny more than had been required to pay his doctor's bill and his funeral expenses. His friend Mr. Vigors, who had been with him at the last, had written that, to his certain knowledge, poor Hilliar had been "stone broke," and subsequent inquiry had confirmed the truth of that melancholy assertion. Consequently, the only step to be taken was to ascertain whether the orphan had any relations able and disposed to come to his aid. Of Hilliar relations none were discoverable; and indeed Mrs. Hilliar had mentioned that she could name no surviving member of her husband's family. She had, however, spoken of a first cousin of her own, the Rev. John Clements, a Shropshire clergyman, and once or twice also of her kinsman, the distinguished author, Mr. Lequesne. Now, the Reverend John, on being apprised of the case, had answered politely, but quite decisively, that he could recognise no demand upon him in connection with it as valid. He was not at all well off; his first duty was to his wife and children; if his unfortunate cousin Rosamund had seen fit to marry a man of dubious character, and if the child of her imprudent marriage had been left destitute, he was extremely sorry, but it was scarcely his affair. In brief, should the worst come to the worst, he would try to squeeze out twenty pounds a year; but more than that he could not do. And he would very much rather not do that. There remained the distinguished author; and it had seemed permissible to profit by one of

those infrequent visits to England which precarious health and limited means allowed to lay the facts before him.

Such was Mr. Eastwood's narrative; respecting which Paul, who had listened attentively and without interrupting the speaker, had one or two observations to make. Had the boy's father died intestate? Had it been ascertained that he had possessed no means whatsoever at the time of his death? Was it, for the matter of that, quite certain that he was not still alive? Unscrupulous persons have been known to feign death in order to free themselves of irksome responsibilities, parental and other. Was Mr. Vigors a man whose statements could be relied upon?

Mr. Eastwood replied that he had anticipated the above queries. No will had been found. The late Mr. Hilliar's bankers had testified that not a shilling remained to the credit of his account, which indeed he had attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to overdraw. As to the fact of his demise, it was beyond question.

“About Mr. Vigors I hardly know what to say. I only saw him once, when he passed through Arcachon with his friend Hilliar on their way south. We were told that he was well connected; but, on the other hand, there were rumours of his being a gambler and out-at-elbows—rather shady and disreputable, in short. The truth is that one couldn't feel exactly prepossessed in favour of any friend of poor Hilliar's, who was himself shady, I am afraid, though the pleasantest, cheeriest fellow! However, Mr. Vigors must be acquitted of aiding and abetting in any such

deception as you suggest. I don't at all wonder at your suggesting it; the same idea, I confess, crossed my own mind. But I have papers which are quite conclusive upon the point, and I brought them with me to show you. They are lying on the hearthrug, where your housekeeper, at my request, kindly spread them out to dry."

The documents, issued and attested by Spanish local authorities, had not suffered much from their immersion, nor could it be doubted that they were genuine. A copy of a death-certificate, signed by two doctors, and a certificate of burial were supplemented by a letter of condolence from the English chaplain at Malaga, who had conducted the funeral of the deceased, and who much regretted to say that previous ministrations on his part had been declined. "Although," he added, in a fine spirit of hopefulness, "we are entitled to believe that a different decision would have been taken, but for the prostration consequent upon three days of high fever. Mr. Vigors, of whose devotion to his friend and efficiency under trying circumstances I cannot speak too highly, encourages that belief."

It seemed to be clearly established, then, that Guy Hilliar was an orphan. What was not in the least clear was Guy Hilliar's future; though what the evidently kind-hearted, anxious and perplexed Mr. Eastwood hoped it might be could be conjectured without any great difficulty. He and his wife would have consulted together, would have been at the pains to institute inquiries, and might well have scented in

the person of a lonely, childless, well-to-do widower a possible saviour of the situation. Hence, doubtless, Mr. Eastwood's journey from London to Northumberland, with the ingratiating, superfluous waif in tow. Small blame to the poor man! Ingratiating though Guy might be (and the boy's remarkable gifts and charms had been alluded to with wistful, incidental emphasis), his superfluosity was indisputable, and if it was rather too much to expect of his own distant kith and kin that they should assume possession of him, it would be still less reasonable to throw such an obligation upon a benevolent outsider. Now the notion that Providence or Fate had responded after this fashion to a mute cry of his did for a moment seem to smile at Paul Lequesne; but it was manifestly too complex, too subversive, too fraught with all manner of drawbacks to be entertained then and there. How the dickens was he to deal with an unfledged mortal who, for at least a year or two yet, would demand some sort of feminine supervision? Measles, mumps, religious training, first aid in the educational process—what lone man is sufficient for these things? A far simpler and wiser plan would be to subsidise the probably not unwilling Eastwoods. So, after a space of silence, he could find no more to say to the flushed, expectant man who, propped up by pillows, gazed interrogatively at him than:

“ Well, Mr. Eastwood, we must think things over, and I daresay we shall be able to hit upon some solution. Our young friend downstairs seems to me to be about the most unattached human being I ever

heard of in my life; but if anybody is bound to annex him, it must be Mr. Clements and I; it certainly can't be you. And I don't think I'll trouble Mr. Clements for his annual twenty pound dole."

"My dear sir," exclaimed his gratified and relieved hearer, "you remove an immense load from my mind! I came here, I assure you, with the utmost reluctance and diffidence; in fact, if my wife hadn't urged the step upon me so strongly, I don't know that I should have had the courage to take it at all. But, as she very truly said, it was our duty to leave no stone unturned. Just consider our position! With four children and the scantiest of incomes, we should scarcely have been justified in adopting Guy; yet . . ."

"Ah, but please consider mine," broke in Paul, who feared that Mr. Eastwood was going too fast. "It so happens, fortunately, that I can quite well afford to pay for a young kinsman's keep and education, and I believe that is what I ought to do. Anyhow, I'll do it. But I am not prepared to say that I can offer him a home. Owing to circumstances into which I need not enter, I myself may at any moment shut up this house and become virtually homeless. My plans are without shape, and are as likely as not to remain so for an indefinite length of time. So, you see, it would be nothing short of lunacy on my part to saddle myself today with somebody else's offspring."

Mr. Eastwood hastened to concur. If a home was—as it plainly was—the first and most pressing

requisite, the Arcachon villa where he and his wife dwelt, year in and year out, was available. "We ask for nothing better than to keep the boy with us as long as—well, as long as it may be thought desirable for us to keep him. The pecuniary difficulty has been the only lion in our path. That particular lion," added Mr. Eastwood, with a rather rueful smile, "prowls round about us pretty regularly; but if in this instance he can be driven off . . ."

"Oh, he shall be driven off," Paul promised; "set your mind at ease so far as the pecuniary lion is concerned. For the rest, as I said before, we must take a little time to consider matters. Meanwhile, I am sure the doctor would tell me that I have been making you talk a great deal more than you ought."

He descended the staircase with a very distinct sense of having acquired something. Possibly, should the Fates prove propitious, it might in the long run turn out that he had acquired something of inestimable value.

To remove a lion from poor Mr. Eastwood's path had been ridiculously easy: what if, in so doing, he should have scared away that far more formidable, dimly perceived lion of a second marriage from his own?

"One must—anyhow, *I* must—have a dependent fellow-creature of some description in the world," he reflected. "That brat's back isn't very broad yet, but it will grow broader every day, and I shouldn't wonder if it were to end by furnishing a defenceless

man with all the shelter he will need against the fiery darts of widows and spinsters."

Such speculations were, of course, altogether premature; yet they served to dispel fears and forebodings which had been real enough, despite their haziness, some hours before.

CHAPTER III

GUY GETS INTO THE SADDLE

“ON the mend, I believe, though he isn’t going to leave his bed yet awhile,” was the doctor’s pronouncement the next morning. “The truth is that it doesn’t take much to kill people in his condition. I suppose you couldn’t send for his wife, could you? He doesn’t wish her to be frightened; but it would be as well, if possible, that he should have somebody about him who is accustomed to nursing, and I gather from what he says that he is accustomed to being nursed.”

Mrs. Eastwood’s presence was to be desired on more grounds than one, and Paul, having obtained her London address, composed a telegram which would not, he hoped, unduly alarm the lady. Her husband, she was informed, had caught cold and was not fit for immediate travel. It would be a kindness to Mr. Lequesne if she would allow him to receive her as his guest for a few days. Stepping across to the stable-yard with this summons, which would have to be conveyed to Dunridge by hand, he descried Guy Hilliar engaged in earnest conversation with Perkins, and wished him good morning.

“I was wondering what had become of you,” he said. “Why didn’t you turn up at breakfast?”

“Good morning, sir,” answered the boy. “Oh, I

had breakfast with Mrs. Williams ever so long ago. I say, were you thinking of sending to Dunridge for our things ? ”

“ Well, I must send Perkins to Dunridge with a telegram,” Paul replied. “ Yes, of course, now that you mention it, he had better bring your luggage back.”

“ Because,” pursued the boy breathlessly, “ I should like awfully to go with him, if you don't mind. He says I could ride the horse that brought us over.”

Paul pursed up his lips and shook his head. “ We have only men's saddles here,” he objected. “ I'm afraid you would hardly be able to sit in one of them even if Perkins were to go on horseback ; but, as he has to return with your traps, he must do the trip on wheels.”

“ Beg pardon, sir,” interposed Perkins, with a grin, “ but the young gentleman seems to be wonderful keen about riding, and Hebblethwaite's cob is that quiet you might lay his head up agin' a steam-engine and he wouldn't do nothing. You see, sir, the cob has *got* to be took back home anyhow, and Hebblethwaite can send a light cart with the luggage. If you was to be so kind as to let the young gentleman come along o' me, sir, I'll undertake he don't break no bones.”

Guy kept silence, but looked expectant and confident. He had, as Paul was to discover later, a way of looking like that. He had also a way of concluding swift alliances with all and sundry ; witness the visible conquest of Perkins, who passed for a somewhat gruff and unapproachable person. There are

two good methods of encountering opposition in this world. The first is to fight it; only then you must take your chance of being worsted. The second and the surer is to treat it as non-existent; only in order to employ that you must be blessed with certain innate gifts. It was doubtless because he was thus blessed that Guy Hilliar found himself, without much more ado, perched precariously upon the broad back of Mr. Hebblethwaite's shaggy cob. To the indignity of a leading-rein he did, indeed, submit; but from the deprecating side-glance which he cast upon it Paul rightly surmised that this was meant to be a merely temporary concession.

"Well, what is it now?" Paul asked, as Perkins, preparatory to mounting, approached him with the air of one who has a confidential request or suggestion to make.

"I was on'y wondering, sir," answered the man, "whether you'd care to hire one o' Hebblethwaite's ponies for a bit. Mrs. Williams she tells me the young gentleman 'll be here another week for sure, and I could teach him a deal in that time. Not to mention keeping him out of mischief and saving you bother, sir. That's how I look at it."

"Thank you, Perkins," answered his master gravely; "it is very kind and thoughtful of you to look at it from that point of view. Oh, yes; secure the pony if you can get one and if the boy still fancies horse exercise after the shake-up that he is going to have. But I rather expect to see him return in the cart with the luggage."

He would have had no such expectation if he had

been better acquainted with Guy Hilliar, in whom tenacity of purpose was happily mated with abnormal physical toughness. He walked out of the stable-yard after the departing couple and watched them while they slowly descended the hill. They did not keep to the road, but, turning sharply to the right, made for the stream, which had, to be sure, diminished somewhat in volume since the previous afternoon, but which was still quite capable of administering a cold bath to the unwary. They splashed across the ford, however, without hesitation or difficulty; the boy, looking back, waved his hand, and away cantered Perkins over the sands, the led cob lumbering after him like a dinghy in the wake of a yacht.

“Well,” muttered Paul, half amused, half angry, “that’s one way of teaching people to ride. It wouldn’t be mine. Confound that ass Perkins! Ten to one he gives the young beggar a toss and ruins his nerve!”

But perhaps Perkins, who had begun life as an apprentice in a training stable, understood what he was about and was aware that the quality of nerve which is liable to be shaken by one fall in soft sand is hardly worth nursing. Be that as it may, the boy was not unseated, even when the canter developed into a hand-gallop. That he was not could only have been due to skill or instinct in the matter of maintaining balance; for of course it was out of the question for his short legs to get any grip of the saddle, and indeed recurrent flashes of daylight between them and it were visible to the already distant spectator. After a few furlongs Perkins pulled up, the leading-

rein was discarded, and then Paul saw the pair jog along, side by side, in the sunshine, perceptibly contented with themselves and one another.

The day was sunny and windy and rather cold, as the days of May are apt to be in that region. Thin clouds coursed across a pale blue sky; a glittering fringe of surf defined the great semicircle of the bay; battalions of sea-birds, wheeling and calling, poised themselves above the breakers; far off a patch of grey smoke marked the spot where Dunridge lay hidden amongst sandhills and low cliffs. Paul turned away, with a sigh, and made for the house. He was thinking that it is good to be young and a pity that one never knows—can't know—when one is well off. One knows when one is badly off, though, and can appreciate at its full worth any mitigation of one's distress. As Paul sat down at his writing-table and prepared to grapple with an essay upon the philosophers and metaphysicians of the seventeenth century, it came to him more and more forcibly that he would be a fool to let the indicated and offered amendment in his own lot slip through his fingers. Would it, after all, he wondered, be such a wild enterprise to assume immediate possession of the orphan?

Paul's theory upon the subject of dogs was that unless you have them from puppyhood you will never make them really your own dogs at all, and the essential point for him was to have something of his very own.

“ Besides, hang it all! I know I'm going to be fond of the young rascal. I'm positively fond of him as it is, though I know no more about him than he

does about me. Anyhow, I don't want him to dislike me, and who doesn't dislike an absent, benevolent patron ? ”

Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza and the rest of them were treated that day in a spirit of veiled and respectful sarcasm which slightly surprised the essayist himself. Paul's pen was ever at the mercy of his mood, and his mood just then was not one of reverence for philosophic theses and precepts. All those ponderous tomes, all that prodigious cry, and in the end so very small a handful of wool ! The learned seeker after truth, shorn, as he is bound to be, by learned scribes of a later age, makes but a sorry show when they have done with him, and weary students may well exclaim, with old Montaigne, *Que sçais-je ?* or with Faust, *Da steh' ich nun, ich armer Thor ! Und bin so klug als wie zuvor.* If (by cogitation or otherwise) we are persuaded of the fact that we exist, not much more can be taken as proved in regard to an existence about which assertions so numerous, so confident and so contradictory are put forward. During its brief span things, good and evil, happen to us—some through our own volition, others unquestionably in independence or defiance of it. They have to be accepted. Even our mode of dealing with them has to be accepted, since the claim of free will, so flattering to our self-love, will not stand scrutiny, and we remain under the sway of our respective temperaments, which we did not create and cannot alter. Paul, who perhaps knew himself about as well as any of us can pretend to know ourselves, was always on his guard against a natural tendency to quick decisions. But

what was the result? Why, in nine cases out of ten that, after full deliberation, he acted just as he would have done if he had obeyed his first impulse. Still, deliberation and delay, though they may do little good, can do no harm; so when the radiant Guy returned towards evening, he was not at once asked how he would like to exchange Arcachon for Northumberland as an established place of residence.

Only towards evening did the boy reappear; for Perkins had been instructed to wait at Dunridge for a reply to Paul's telegram. This he had done, and in the compass of twenty well-selected words Mrs. Eastwood contrived to notify that she was distressed, ashamed, grateful, that she would not cause additional inconvenience by taking the night express, but that she hoped to arrive about five o'clock on the morrow. Guy did not seem to be very much interested in her advent or in the condition of Mr. Eastwood, who was reported to be neither better nor worse. He had tidings of greater personal moment to impart.

"I say," he began, as soon as he was given a chance, "we've got the pony all right, and I rode him back. He's a ripper! Perkins believes he can jump; but he wouldn't let me try him at a little stone wall. Do you think we might have some hurdles put up in a field tomorrow?"

Well, the hurdles and the pony had to wait, and so had Master Guy. He was, as Perkins appreciatively remarked, "an uncommon hard little customer"; but he had had no recent experience of the saddle, and, as a consequence, abrasions had been sustained of which he became acutely conscious the next morning.

He was fain to take Mrs. Williams into his confidence, ruefully and reluctantly fain to agree with her that a day of remedies and comparative inaction must be his portion. The loan of a light fishing-rod partially consoled him, and although he did not succeed in getting a rise (the state of the turbid stream not being such as to encourage anglers), he delighted Paul by the rapidity with which he learnt how to throw a fly.

Very likely he would have delighted anybody, for he was as quick, intelligent and observant as he was cheerful, and his flow of conversation never flagged; but to a man fatigued almost to breaking-down point by long communion with his own sad soul he was as the dew of heaven to parched ground. In the afternoon they had a ramble together along the seashore, and before they reached home, to find Mrs. Eastwood already awaiting them, they had arrived at a mutual understanding which was destined to endure.

Mrs. Eastwood, a plump matron whose brown hair was streaked with grey, and whose pleasant, homely features showed traces of a struggle with the asperities of small-income life, seemed to take in the situation at a glance. She could not fairly be accused of having created the situation, since it was not to be supposed that her husband had half drowned himself at her bidding; but it would have been only human on her part to hope for it, or for something like it. Indeed, she made frank avowal of such hopes a few hours later, when she and Paul had dined together and Guy had been sent to bed.

“Of course,” said she, “neither John nor I could

have ventured to propose your adopting Guy; yet one did feel that if you were to see him, there might be just a chance of your taking a fancy to him. Because he *is* a dear boy, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is a nice boy," answered Paul; "but, as I pointed out to your husband, I am rather unfavourably handicapped for ventures of that sort. If I were an old lady, for instance, the thing would be as simple as engaging a governess and having a school-room prepared. Placed as I am, governesses look somewhat impossible."

Mrs. Eastwood quite saw that; but she also saw plainly enough what her host's wishes were, and she signified her sympathy with them. Upon the worst view of it, his position could offer no greater embarrassments than that of a widower with an only son of tender years, and Guy, after all, was not of such very tender years. School loomed upon the near horizon; preparation for school under male tuition ought not to be unattainable; in short, given the will, a way might surely be discovered. At the same time, if Mr. Lequesne thought the plan of which he had spoken to her husband a more promising one, she would gladly take the boy back to France and do her best for him until she should be replaced by an English schoolmaster.

But after the first evening that project was tacitly abandoned, and further discussions between Paul and the Eastwoods assumed a more practical shape. The invalid, whose recovery was retarded by no complications, was of his wife's mind as to the mistake of making two bites at a cherry. Assuming that Guy's

eventual home was to be with Mr. Lequesne, the sooner existing ties were snapped the better. "If I might presume to advise, I should say, let him have some memories of childhood connected with you before school changes and hardens him. That will give you a hold over him which nothing else ever can and for which you may both be thankful in after life."

This sounded like wise counsel : added to which, it was in entire consonance with Paul's personal ideas and inclinations. By the time that Mr. Hale had been approached and had been found willing to lay the foundations of a classical and religious education ; by the time that Mrs. Williams, who had successfully brought up three children of her own, had proclaimed her readiness to discharge quasi-maternal functions, and by the time that Mr. Eastwood was pronounced fit to face a railway journey, it only remained to convey to the person chiefly concerned an intimation which was received by him with outspoken enthusiasm. It would have been pretty of him, perhaps, to evince some regret at the prospect of severance from people who had been so good to him ; but then again it might have been insincere, and insincerity at the age of nine is an alarming symptom.

"What I particularly like about the boy," Paul wrote, at the end of an unusually long explanatory epistle to his friend Mrs. Baldwin, "is his cheery independence. As far as one can forecast the future, he will need to be independent ; for he seems to be totally bereft of kindred and, although there is nothing the matter with my health, accidents may happen to

anybody. That is one reason why I want to bespeak your kindly interest for him. Of course you won't applaud this leap in the dark of mine, and I daresay you will think that I might have consulted you and other friends before committing myself to it. Well, yes. But, you see, the truth is that consulting you wouldn't have made any difference. I should only have had the air of ungraciously scouting your admonitions, and in one way at least I score by announcing the event after its accomplishment. For in the good time coming, when this innocent child has developed into a handsome young man (he is going to be a very handsome young man, I think) and has run into debt and married a chorus girl and threatened his benefactor's life and all the rest of it, you won't be able to round upon me with 'Didn't I tell you so!''

CHAPTER IV

MRS. BALDWIN AND MR. VIGORS

WHEN the erudite Professor Baldwin expired after a short illness, of what the doctors called "heart failure" (to which cause, indeed, together with cessation of breath, everybody's demise may be correctly assigned), his widow wept like Niobe; for he had been quite a nice old man in his way and she had been quite fond of him—in hers. Since, however, the Professor had been very nearly double her age, since she was pretty, well-to-do and of a cheerful, gregarious nature, a day came when she had to pocket her handkerchief. It came, in truth, rather sooner than she cared to admit to a fellow-mourner so tragically unlike her as Paul Lequesne; yet she did not shrink from the friendly duty of reminding him that if fidelity is a fine attribute, courage is another, and that life is not given to us to be spent in vain repining. One immediate effect of these exhortations has been alluded to: possibly, if Mrs. Baldwin had not been in the main a good-natured woman, she would have resented the rebuff and dropped the startled recusant. But she did not wish to drop a friend to whom she was sincerely attached, so when Paul took to his heels she only shrugged her shoulders. Sooner or later he must needs recognise

what all the world is bound to recognise, and then, no doubt, he would revert to a social scheme which had of yore made him the pleasantest of hosts and companions. Meanwhile, she remained in touch with him through the medium of the post. Lengthy and chatty accounts of a winter sojourn in Rome had reached the hermit of Stone Hall; now at a season which both in Italy and in Northumberland goes by the name of spring, but which has no common feature save that name, she had flitted to Florence, where she was spending a few weeks very agreeably in a *Bello Sguardo* villa, placed at her disposal by an absent acquaintance.

Mrs. Baldwin was one of those extremely fair women whose clear and flawless skins are the envy of the rest of their sex. She had a neat figure, china-blue eyes and rippling flaxen hair; her curved lips almost always wore a smile. The half mourning which was the symbol of her no longer recent widowhood suited her, and the French-grey costume which she was wearing, as she sat in her carriage near the rails at a race-meeting in the Cascine was the work of a skilled artist. Beside her sat her little four-year-old daughter Audrey, while from the opposite seat the black eyes and olive complexion of a picturesquely attired Italian nurse served (doubtless undesignedly, but not the less effectually) to throw her blonde charms into relief. The little daughter and the nurse served, in any case, to give countenance to a lady who might have hesitated to appear on a race-course all by herself. Mrs. Baldwin, though neither shy nor prudish, was a strict upholder of the proprieties, and over-precaution is a

fault on the right side when one is conscious of being a good deal admired and is likewise anxious to enlarge one's visiting-list.

The well-dressed, well set-up man who presently drew near and raised his hat was precisely one of those persons who might or might not form desirable additions to a London visiting-list. Mrs. Baldwin liked him; he seemed to be well-bred and to have a large circle of friends, British and foreign; but she had not thus far come across anybody who had known Mr. Vigors in England; so the rather marked attentions which he had been pleased to pay her of late had met with no more than a guarded encouragement.

"Been here long?" he asked, in a tone of easy familiarity which somehow was not disrespectful. "I was afraid you had changed your mind about coming, and indeed I can't say that there's much in the way of racing to deserve your patronage. The whole *mise en scène* is charming, though, isn't it?—the sunshine and the greenness and the pretty frocks and all."

His eyes rested approvingly upon Mrs. Baldwin's pretty frock; his shapely hand bestowed a light pat upon the head of the child, who looked up at him and laughed; he had even a quick glance for the handsome nurse which was probably not thrown away. Mr. Vigors's age might have been anything between thirty and forty. He had a short, straight nose and a square jaw; his greyish eyes and rather wide mouth exhibited a hint of latent humour which was prepossessing enough. He wore his dark hair cut very close to his head, as was the custom at that time, and

he anticipated a fashion which had not yet become general by shaving the whole of his face. Miss Shakerley said he looked like a cross between an actor and a convict; but that was not at all true. He looked at least as much like a Master of Hounds or a smart variety of barrister, and no impartial critic would have denied him the voice and bearing of a gentleman. If Miss Shakerley chose to proclaim her belief that he was an adventurer and a blackleg, that was in all probability because he had not troubled himself to propitiate her, and because she was a sour, jealous, stuck-up old maid who thought she could patronise everybody upon the strength of being the sister of an Irish viscount.

Such, at all events, was Mrs. Baldwin's estimate of a lady with whom she had had sundry slight passages of arms, and whom she now saw approaching at the striding, masculine pace affected by some sports-women. Miss Shakerley, gaunt, hook-nosed and weatherbeaten, wore a short tweed skirt, thick boots and a covert-coat. She had the effect of aggressively intimating to the assembled Italian ladies, who were arrayed like the lilies of the field, and of whose amazed scrutiny she could not but be aware, that what was good enough for a country race-meeting in England was good enough for their poor little show.

“Rotten sport,” she remarked, as she offered Mrs. Baldwin a large hand, clad in buckskin, “but it makes a change from picture-galleries and churches. Are you going to Princess Monterone's ball tonight? Oh, no, you don't know her, do you? I should think that unfortunate child must be rather bored, squatting

in a carriage, instead of running about and stretching her arms and legs. What sort of a peasant is the nurse meant to duty for? I never saw anything like her out of a doll-shop."

Mrs. Baldwin blandly ignored these invitations to the fray, while Mr. Vigors, whose folded arms rested upon the hood of the carriage, brought a reflective gaze to bear upon the speaker. He may have been thinking that he had never seen anything at all like her, in a doll-shop or elsewhere, and she may have divined what his faintly amused smile implied; but although she had a shot in her locker for him (and had indeed borne down upon Mrs. Baldwin's equipage with the express intention of firing it), she preferred to go on talking as if he did not exist. Only after she had witnessed the result of a race through her binoculars and had delivered some trenchant criticisms upon the winner's style of finishing did she abruptly unmask her batteries with—

"By the way, Mr. Vigors, you were telling us the other day that the Duke of Branksome is a relation of yours. Well, he arrived here last night, and there he is—the old gentleman in the grey coat—so that will be nice for you."

The effect of this announcement upon Mr. Vigors was a little disappointing; for he showed no sign of confusion, but only said:

"Oh, Branksome, yes; we're connected, hardly what you could call related. In fact, I haven't set eyes upon him since I was a boy. However, I dare-say he won't repudiate me if I look him up."

"His eyes seem to be set upon you now," observed

Miss Shakerley maliciously. "You might take this opportunity to renew the intercourse of boyhood."

Mr. Vigors took it without more ado. Probably the Duke of Branksome, who was ever quick to descry and admire a pretty woman, had been looking at Mrs. Baldwin, not at him; but his reception, which the two ladies watched from afar, had all the appearance of being a cordial one. They saw Mr. Vigors shaken by the hand; presently they saw him patted on the shoulder; then the Duke and he strolled off together in the direction of the paddock, consulting, as they walked, a race-card which Vigors was tapping with his pencil.

"That man's impudence would carry him through anything!" exclaimed the vexed Miss Shakerley. "I wouldn't mind laying ten to one that he is no more connected with the Duke than he is with the Pope; only I expect he has had the wit to name the winner of the next race."

"I am glad," said Mrs. Baldwin, who was beginning to lose patience, "that I haven't such a suspicious mind as yours. I know nothing about Mr. Vigors, except that he has been kind and polite, but I did see from the first that he was a gentleman."

"And I saw from the first that he was an arrant bounder," returned the other contemptuously. "He has managed to dazzle and humbug you all by spending money freely and bragging about his intimacy with people high up in the world; but he has never taken *me* in for a moment. One recognises that type of *chevalier d'industrie* at a glance when one has knocked about as much as I have."

Not until some hours later did rejoinders of a telling and crushing order suggest themselves to Mrs. Baldwin. All she did at the time was to contemplate the horizon and wish that Miss Shakerley would go away. But before very long she was heartily glad that that disagreeable woman had seen fit to remain stationary; for just as she was upon the point of remarking that she must take Audrey home before sunset, who should reappear but Mr. Vigors, accompanied by an elderly gentleman of amiable aspect, and welcome as flowers in May was the voice of Mr. Vigors when he said :

“ Mrs. Baldwin, I want to introduce my cousin, the Duke of Branksome.”

The spruce, smiling Duke wanted to be introduced. He was kind enough to say so, and he might have added that he always wanted to be introduced to ladies who looked attractive. Apparently he had expressed no eagerness to be presented to Miss Shakerley. It may be said at once that he was not Mr. Vigors's cousin, although he did not mind being thus designated. He had dimly remembered, on being put in mind of the circumstance, that there were collateral Vigorses; he was not reminded, and had perhaps never been aware, that the career of one of them had reflected little lustre upon the clan. He himself was good-natured, easy-going, predisposed in favour of any man who had some knowledge of horseflesh; moreover, when the Duchess was not with him, he felt at liberty in the matter of casual acquaintanceships. His ready acceptance of Mr. Vigors, therefore, did not mean quite as much as it was taken to mean by divers interested spectators; but it certainly did

mean a signal victory for that gentleman and a sharp defeat for the crestfallen Miss Shakerley, who quitted the field in disorder.

Mrs. Baldwin also had a joyous sense of victory. Nobody could pretend that she had vouched for Mr. Vigors or that she had been imprudently intimate with him; still Miss Shakerley (and, for all she knew, others as well) had chosen to represent her as his dupe; so that his vindication was in some sort her own. To say that, apart from the above consideration, she was made happy by ducal civilities is to bring no very uncharitable charge against her, and this particular duke was so friendly and pleasant that she must have taken to him if he had been the least distinguished of commoners. For some little time he remained chatting with her; he asked leave to call, regretted very much that she was not going to Princess Monterone's dance, and even hinted that, if she cared about an invitation, he might procure one for her. Mrs. Baldwin's self-respect would not allow her to notice that tentative suggestion; but of course she said that she would be charmed to see the Duke at tea any afternoon, and so took her departure in placid triumph.

It is perhaps necessary to be a duke in order to realise to the full what immense facilities for promoting the happiness of humbler mortals inhere in the mere possession of that dignity. There is, to be sure, by way of counterpoise the responsibility attaching to a right use of such facilities; but, as the Duke of Branksome had always taken life lightly and gaily, it may be hoped that he was able, during the

ensuing fortnight, to enjoy without misgiving the spectacle of the benefits bestowed by his countenance upon Mrs. Baldwin and Mr. Vigors. The latter, already liked for his frank, engaging manner, his lavish hospitality and his alacrity in organising entertainments of all kinds, found himself immediately the most popular man in Florence. As for the former, not only was she made the recipient of flattering advances on the part of ladies who had hitherto taken little notice of her, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that she was secretly envied the assiduous homage paid to her by one whose detractors had fallen silent. Very sweet to Mrs. Baldwin's palate were these experiences, and not unwelcome was the homage alluded to, although she did not mean to let it go too far. She was by no means devoid of shrewdness, she knew the value of independence, and she knew various other things into the bargain—amongst them that Mr. Vigors was addicted to high play. That was his affair; she had no intention of making it hers. Gamblers may be charming as friends or admirers; but women who wish for peace and security do not marry them. If Mrs. Baldwin had been minded to marry a second time, her choice assuredly would not have fallen upon Mr. Vigors. Nor, perhaps, would it have fallen upon Paul Lequesne, strong as was her affection for that friend of many years' standing, and piqued though she had been by his maladroit intimation that he was not a candidate for the late Professor's shoes. She would not have accepted Mr. Vigors and might not have accepted Paul, if either of them had asked her; but she had no

sort of objection to being asked. On the contrary, as regarded one of them, she almost felt that she ought to have been asked. She quite felt that it was her right to be consulted by him before he took any important step or decision.

Thus it happened that Mr. Vigors, presenting himself at the Bello Sguardo villa one fine morning, found his fair friend seated under a tent-umbrella in the garden with a puckered brow and an open letter on her knees.

“No bad news, I hope?” said he interrogatively, pointing to the sheet.

“Yes, horrid!” was Mrs. Baldwin’s vexed reply. “One of my oldest friends writes to tell me that he has done a perfectly idiotic thing. I don’t know whether you ever heard of him—Paul Lequesne, the author.”

Oh, yes, Mr. Vigors had heard of him; had even read some of his books. “With difficulty, I must confess, but with a great deal of ignorant appreciation. I shouldn’t have supposed him to be an idiot. What has he been doing?”

“Adopting a nine-year-old waif; it’s too ridiculous! I used to be very fond of his wife, and since her death, two years ago, I have been almost the only person to whom he has spoken or written. I do think he might have given me a chance of dissuading him from such a gratuitous piece of folly as this!”

Mr. Vigors listened to further details with a sympathetic interest which was perceptibly augmented by the mention of the adopted orphan’s name.

“Hilliar?” he repeated. “Not poor Jack Hilliar’s boy, by any chance?”

“ I'm sure I don't know whether the father's name was Jack or not,” answered Mrs. Baldwin. “ He seems to have been a species of vagabond and to have left his son to the charity of some people called Eastwood. Did you ever come across him ? ”

“ I knew him well ; I was with him when he died at Malaga. In fact, it devolved upon me to do what could be done for him during his short illness and to communicate with the Eastwoods as soon as all was over. I couldn't communicate with his people, for he had never mentioned them to me. Mr. Lequesne must be one of them, I presume. Well, perhaps I ought to be sorry for your friend, but I can't help being glad for Jack Hilliar's sake. I know he was troubled about his boy, and well he might be, for he died practically penniless, poor fellow ! ”

“ It sounds rather discreditable,” murmured Mrs. Baldwin, naïvely giving expression to the almost universal sentiment respecting the destitute. “ What kind of person was this Mr. Hilliar ? ”

Mr. Vigors smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “ Oh, well, *de mortuis*, you know. . . . I don't say that he would ever have been likely to set a bright example to his son ; but there were good points about him. And he had bad luck. The very worst of luck, certainly, at San Sebastian and other places where we played baccarat on that last trip of his. What would have become of him if he hadn't died I can't think ! ”

“ Ah, that's what gambling leads to ! ” observed Mrs. Baldwin, improving the occasion.

Her neighbour accepted the reproof with disarming meekness. “ Oh, if you mean that I'm a confirmed

gamester and that I ought to be ashamed of myself, I plead guilty," he returned. "Just now I feel more than usually ashamed, because for the last two or three nights I've done nothing but lose. At such times one clearly sees the error of one's ways. Yet—one is bound to go on until the luck turns."

"Yes; and when it does turn, you feel bound to go on until it deserts you again."

Mr. Vigors nodded and smiled. "My dear Mrs. Baldwin, you compress the whole vicious circle into a nutshell. I've nothing at all to say for myself. That is, unless my being a lone bachelor may count as some excuse. Perhaps, if I were a married man, or if I had a young son dependent upon me, I should abjure cards; but then again perhaps I shouldn't. It's best not to boast. The truth is that I love all games of chance."

Mrs. Baldwin read him a little homily. She said she was not straitlaced; she saw no reason why people should not amuse themselves with games of chance or skill, provided they did not stake more than they could afford to lose. Surely it was possible to get the requisite degree of excitement out of the gain or loss of comparatively small sums.

"Possible," Mr. Vigors agreed, "but not altogether easy. You see, one plays where play is to be had; which means, generally speaking, at clubs. And in foreign clubs the recognised stakes are apt to be high. Then why frequent them? you'll ask. Well, as I said before, what is a lone bachelor to do with his evenings?"

In the verbal contest provoked by this question,

and rendered lively by the thrust and parry of disputants who were not too much in earnest, the late Jack Hilliar and Paul Lequesne dropped out of sight. Mr. Vigors contrived to insinuate that he was capable of becoming earnest at any moment, but that he was chivalrously disinclined to cause embarrassment to a hospitable lady who had every right to give him his cue. That was an attitude which Mrs. Baldwin could appreciate, and which, indeed, suited her well enough. Demure flirtation is a harmless form of amusement and it was not likely to inflict any serious wound upon the heart of her visitor, whom she liked better and better the more she saw of him. A gambler he might be, and perhaps he was not exempt from other failings; but at least he was a gentleman—frank, simple and unaffected. He looked you straight in the face while he talked, and his clear, healthy eyes, which were rather peculiar—being of a pale grey hue, with faint greenish rays in the iris—gave the lie to such malignant surmises as Miss Shakerley and others had thought proper to disseminate.

After he had gone, Mrs. Baldwin, reverting to the consideration of a less agreeable subject, made reply to Paul Lequesne at some length. She mentioned that she had met Mr. Vigors, who unfortunately had no good report to give of the late Hilliar; she dwelt upon the risk of inherited tendencies and the infatuation of courting disappointment and disillusion. She also said that of course it was no business of hers to interfere, and that, since she had been told in so many words how little her opinion was desired or valued, there might be impertinence in offering it. At the

same time, she could not help thinking that, as one who had at any rate tried to be of use, she was entitled just to point out—&c., &c.

Having thus let off steam, she read over what she had written, laughed a little and tore the sheet to pieces. This was highly characteristic of her; for, as has been said, she was in the main a kind-hearted woman and she was essentially a prudent one. Therefore, notwithstanding a pardonable wish to administer to her correspondent the rating that he deserved, she recognised that it would not be in the least worthwhile to quarrel with him. After all, severe silence would be at once more dignified and more effective.

CHAPTER V

INNOCENT FELLOW-SUFFERERS

JUST when Italy is beginning to be really Italy, and a divine climate has finally shaken off those accesses of bitter cold which render it, while they last, no bad imitation of a diabolical one, the invading armies from the north turn their backs upon her and leave her to herself. It is (from the invaders' point of view) a great pity; but, since nobody can be in two places at one and the same time, it cannot be helped, and the claims of London must needs be acknowledged both by the fashionable and by those who lack courage to own that they are not so.

“ I suppose,” said Mr. Vigors, who had been having tea in Mrs. Baldwin's garden one afternoon with a number of other guests, and who, as had become his habit, had lingered behind the last of them, “ you are making ready for flight, like the rest of the world. Branksome tells me he's off on Monday, and I hear of so many impending departures that my little fare-well entertainment will evidently have to be given this week if it is to be given at all.”

“ What entertainment ? ” Mrs. Baldwin asked.

“ Oh, only a small impromptu dance that I had in mind. People have been very nice to me here, and

I should like to make some sort of return. I may count upon you to help me with it, I hope ? ”

Mrs. Baldwin replied that she would be charmed to do what she could. During her married life she had given up dancing, but of late she had once or twice allowed herself to be persuaded (generally by Mr. Vigors) to resume a recreation of which she had been fond and for which she could not yet be accounted too old. She jibbed indeed at the further suggestion that she should act as hostess—obviously it would not do for her to accept that part—but she was very willing to inspect the list of the invited and to supply the practical hints for which she was asked. Only she had to enter a protest against the splendour and extravagance of Mr. Vigors’s ideas. A good band of course, and stacks of flowers, if he insisted upon having them, and a supper, if he insisted upon that; but to make the cotillon (upon which he likewise insisted) a pretext for offering gifts of jewellery ! Mrs. Baldwin had heard that such prodigality was not without precedent, but she had always fancied that the people who practised it were rather

“Vulgar and ostentatious ? ” put in her companion, with a goodhumoured laugh. “Well, say I’m both; it doesn’t matter if I am. Anyhow, when I give my friends a treat, I like to do them well. And I can assure you that the ladies won’t a bit mind taking my trinkets. It isn’t as if I proposed to shower diamonds upon them; all I want is that they should carry away some trifling memento of the good time that we have had these last weeks.”

“ Well, it's very kind of you,” said Mrs. Baldwin, almost won over—for in truth she had come to regard Mr. Vigors as in some sense belonging to her, and she rather liked the notion of his finishing up thus resplendently with a blaze of fireworks, as it were—“ very kind and generous; but I can't think it necessary.”

“ Oh, if it were necessary, it couldn't be called kind or generous, could it? Not that it's either; it's nothing but an acknowledgment, which I shall enjoy making, of other people's kindness and generosity. The only bother is”

He stopped short, pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb and had a little laugh to himself, as at some comic, but vexatious difficulty, the nature of which he refused to specify when requested to do so. Naturally, he was begged and commanded to specify it. At length, with another laugh and a shrug of his shoulders, he obeyed orders.

It was too absurd; but the fact was that he found himself for the moment without ready money to pay jewellers, florists and others who might not be disposed to grant credit to a stranger. He had meant the dance to take place in the course of the ensuing week, by which time remittances would have reached him from England; but now there was this unavoidable hurry, and he hardly knew what to do about it. “ Branksome would oblige me with a loan, no doubt, only I don't much like applying to him just as he is on the eve of starting for home. I shouldn't be able to repay him by Monday, you see.”

If Mrs. Baldwin took this for a broad hint, she was

scarcely to be blamed; but she blamed herself a good deal when her response—made after just one moment of hesitation—gave visible offence. The genial Mr. Vigors, it seemed, could look extremely angry and rather formidable when provoked, and he evidently deemed that great provocation had been offered to him. Far from returning thanks, he frowned and said coldly that he was very sorry to have laid himself open to so extraordinary a proposal. It was not pleasant to be under pecuniary obligations to anybody; but to accept, and to seem to have invited, such assistance from a lady! . . . Well, it would be a lesson to him to be more cautious in the future, that was all.

He made as though he would have taken his leave in deep dudgeon; but of course this could not be permitted. Mrs. Baldwin was all the more apologetic because she was afraid he must have noticed the brief demur which had preceded her unfortunate overture, and it was not until he, in his turn, had apologised for having nearly lost his temper that she plucked up courage to renew it. Why should it be considered insulting to offer a trifling service to a friend when one could do so without the slightest personal inconvenience? As it happened, she had changed a batch of circular notes that very day and had plenty of money in the house. She was not going away on the following Monday, like the Duke of Branksome, and surely it was paying her rather a poor compliment to spurn what she herself would not have thought twice about taking, had their respective positions been reversed!

Mr. Vigors, however, remained obdurate. He im-

plored her to say no more about it. He did not want to make mountains out of molehills, but there were certain universally recognised rules which must be regarded as inviolable. No; he could not admit that there was anything absurd or unreasonable in making a fetish of general rules. Perhaps he was entitled to say that he knew a little more of the world than Mrs. Baldwin did, and she might take his word for it that to surrender fetishes of that description is to put yourself, so to speak, out of the game.

Yet he left Mrs. Baldwin's villa, a quarter of an hour later, with bank-notes to the value of 2,500 *lire* in his pocket. That was doubtless because he did not leave at once, instead of requesting the lady to drop the subject. Such requests, as he ought to have been aware, are never complied with, and he should also have been aware that it is wiser, as well as easier, to run away from a resolute lady than to argue with her. Mrs. Baldwin showed herself resolute to the point of threatening that if she were thwarted in this matter, she would have nothing more to do with Mr. Vigors's dance: all that can be claimed for her vanquished opponent is that when he withdrew, she had the sense that it was upon her, not by any means upon him, that a favour had been conferred.

A hundred pounds might possibly suffice to defray the cost of cotillon trinkets; but Mr. Vigors's guests, assembled in the transformed *salle-à-manger* of his hotel on the night of what it pleased him to describe as "a quite informal little hop," agreed that a bill very largely in excess of that sum must await him at the hands of his landlord. They found themselves

in a ball-room exquisitely adorned with banks and festoons of roses; some of them had had glimpses or had heard reports of the supper which was to be served at midnight; everybody was saying that if the host was not a millionaire, his conduct was worthy of one. All Florence, native and foreign, was at a function which was destined to become memorable, and which was a success from the moment of its inception. The only discordant note that reached Mrs. Baldwin's ears, gratified by a chorus of compliments which seemed to be addressed almost as much to her as to Mr. Vigors, came from the Duke of Branksome, who remarked confidentially that in his opinion this was rather overdoing things.

"All very fine; but how the deuce can the man afford it, you know? I can only say that if I were to go in for such a display as this on my travels, I should hear of it from the Duchess!"

"But Mr. Vigors is a bachelor," Mrs. Baldwin pleaded, a little distressed by this expression of disapproval from an exalted quarter.

The Duke glanced at her keenly for a moment. "H'm!—yes," he assented. "And I think, if I were a marriageable lady, I should be inclined to let him remain one."

The advice was not needed; but the fact of its being tendered by so courteous a person as the Duke of Branksome was both significant and disagreeable. Mrs. Baldwin was not averse to being congratulated (for anybody was welcome to know that Mr. Vigors had had the benefit of her assistance and taste); but she did not wish to be made too conspicuous and

certainly she did not wish to be compromised. She said to herself that she would not dance and that she would leave rather early.

As a matter of fact, she had to dance two or three times, and of course she could not refuse her host as a partner. What she did quite decisively refuse to do was to lead the way with him into the supper-room. There were ladies of high rank present whose right of priority was beyond dispute, and Mr. Vigors was compelled to relinquish an inadmissible intention, though he did so with great unwillingness. Eventually he gave his arm to Princess Monterone, who declares to the present day that she never sat down to a better supper in her life and never had a more charming neighbour. She now remembers, although the circumstance made little impression upon her at the time, that while she was being conducted across the hall between a double line of curious, uninvited spectators, a man started forward, as if to accost her entertainer, but either thought better of his intention or was pushed aside. "And a very good thing that he was!" says she, with one of her shrill laughs. The Princess, indeed, being of a merry and humorous disposition, cherishes the entire episode of Mr. Vigors's ball as a diverting one. For the Duke of Branksome and Mrs. Baldwin, on the other hand, it must always have lugubrious associations, admirably though they played their respective parts in saving it from abrupt collapse.

For while preparations for the cotillon were being made, and while Mrs. Baldwin was wondering what had become of Mr. Vigors, whom she had not seen for

the last quarter of an hour, a note, inscribed "Private and Immediate," was handed to her, and the distressing purport of it was as follows :

"Dear Lady—I have this moment received the sad news that my poor brother is dangerously ill in Rome, and that if I do not hasten to him, I may not see him alive. I must leave by the 2 a.m. train, which I have just time to catch; but I would not for the world break up the party, and, as I have made arrangements with Count Vignatelli, who has kindly promised to lead the cotillon, I am in hopes that my absence will not be noticed at first. Later, no doubt, it will, and then I am sure you will be good enough to explain and apologise on my behalf. I am telling nobody, except you and Branksome. I shall indeed be grateful to you both if you will consent to act as my representatives under these unhappy conditions. I trust that I may be able to return to Florence within a few days, and I am

Ever yours,

G. VIGORS."

The Duke, who presently joined Mrs. Baldwin, opined that they had no choice but to comply with their departed host's request. "Oh, yes," he added, in answer to certain vexed observations, "I understand your feeling; it's very much my own. One doesn't exactly want to take charge like this and advertise oneself as belonging to the man; still, when all's said, we can't help it any more than he could. And I agree that his guests may as well have their fun to the finish."

They had it, and enjoyed it so thoroughly that, as Mr. Vigors had foreseen, they only discovered at the finish that there was no host for them to thank. Then of course there was regretful sympathy; though this found somewhat less fervent utterance than appreciation of benefits received. Thus Mrs. Baldwin, like the moon after sundown, held pride of place in a fair sky, and if prominence which she had decided to forgo was thrust upon her, she had the consolation of being associated therein with a full-blown duke and an unqualified success.

All successes, as students of history are aware, must await, and are for the most part diminished by, the qualifications of results. This one, viewed in the distant perspective to which it now belongs, must be pronounced tolerably complete, so far as Mr. Vigors was concerned: as for poor Mrs. Baldwin, she was to learn only too soon how very far it was from being anything of that kind in her own case. Late on the following afternoon she was resting luxuriously and unsuspectingly in her darkened *salon* when in marched the Duke of Branksome, with calamity writ large upon a long face. He said:

“My dear Mrs. Baldwin, I am sorry to tell you that I bring most unpleasant news. No use trying to break these things gently—the long and the short of it is that you and I have been fooled by an uncommonly clever and impudent swindler.”

Mrs. Baldwin flung up her hands to her temples in consternation. “Oh!” she ejaculated; “you can’t mean——!”

“That,” answered the Duke, sitting down and

laughing dejectedly, "is just what I do mean, and I'm afraid there's no room for doubt about it. Our friend Vigors has decamped. We have telegraphed to the Grand Hotel at Rome, which was the address he left, and the reply is that nothing is known there of him or of his dying brother. The police have been informed, and inquiries have been made at the railway station, from which it appears that he, or somebody like him, booked for Naples last night. Not that it matters much what has become of him."

"But why," gasped Mrs. Baldwin—"why?"

"Why have these proceedings been taken? Well, it seems that an Englishman who arrived yesterday—a Captain Parker, quite a decent, intelligent sort of person—caught sight of Vigors while we were all trooping across the hall into the supper-room last night. You may remember that there was a little crowd of people staying in the hotel who stood and stared at us. Parker had only a passing glimpse of him, but is certain that he recognised him as a man, calling himself Hamilton, who played the same game at Malta a year ago that he has been playing here. Cut a great dash, borrowed money right and left, and then vanished, without saying goodbye. Parker ought to have denounced him there and then, you'll say. He admits that he ought; but he shrank from making a scene, and he thought an interview with the manager of the hotel this morning would answer all necessary purposes. He reckoned without our friend's sharp eyes and sharp wits. Depend upon it, Vigors saw him, realised that there was nothing for it

but to bolt and acted with the promptitude that we know of. A cool-headed, resourceful scamp!—one must allow him to be that. By Parker's account, he has been amusing himself in this style all over Europe for years past. It turned out, after his Maltese campaign, that the so-called Hamilton was wanted by the London police on several charges of false pretences and one of a forged cheque. Not quite the brightest people in the world, the London police; though perhaps it hardly becomes us to jeer at them."

"I can't believe it!" moaned the dismayed Mrs. Baldwin, shiveringly conscious that she could and did.

"I wish," observed the Duke, with a wry smile, "we hadn't both of us been so ready to believe what we might so well have doubted. However, the milk is spilt. The milk, in my case, means a couple of hundred which that smooth-tongued ruffian got out of me to pay a gaming debt. Not to mention the cost of his preposterous dance, which I foresee that I shall have to defray. I did, unfortunately, allow myself to be more or less identified with that festivity. I'm not going to pay the jewellers, who have been up at the hotel, dancing about and tearing their hair. If they choose to take an unknown foreigner at his word, that's their look-out."

Mrs. Baldwin's heart fluttered down into her shoes. The unpaid jewellers, the defrauded Duke—what need was there of further witness? Whatever else Mr. Vigors might have done or left undone, it was proved that he had lied to her. She could only murmur bitterly, "Oh, what a goose I have been!"

“ Well, we’re in the same boat, as far as that goes,” remarked the goodhumoured Duke.

He did not take the affair quite so tragically as Mrs. Baldwin did. Perhaps the loss of the money, though he might not like it, was no very serious matter to him; perhaps he was philosophical enough to reflect that honest folks are always liable to be imposed upon, though he might not like that either. What really seemed to strike him most forcibly was the joke of the whole thing. So simple, so easy!—needing nothing for its triumphant accomplishment save impudence and audacity. He owned that he was not particularly eager for the arrest of the fugitive, who doubtless deserved penal servitude, but who had none the less deservedly won in repeated contests of wits against the world.

Very different and not nearly so sporting were Mrs. Baldwin’s sentiments. She did not consider herself vindictive, and might possibly have found it in her heart to let a mere thief escape scot-free; but never could she forgive a man who had made her a public laughing-stock, nor, for the matter of that, was she likely to forgive one who must have indulged in many a private laugh at her expense. If it had rested with her to have Mr. Vigors flogged at the cart-tail through the streets of Florence, flogged he would have been, and even then she would not have held his offence to be adequately purged. Immediate vengeance, however, was not to be hers. After some days—days which she spent in strict seclusion, admitting no visitors, except the Duke of Branksome, and reducing the exultant and persistent Miss Shakerley

to condolences scribbled upon a card—it became manifest that the vanishing of Vigors had been as deftly executed as the rest of that gentleman's nefarious *tours de force*. The police authorities, who had failed to get wind of him, thought it more than probable that he had embarked at Naples on one of the vessels which daily leave that port; the Duke, convinced that there was nothing more to be done, announced that he was about to depart for England and strongly recommended Mrs. Baldwin to do likewise.

“Better get out of this,” he frankly said. “Of course we weren't the fellow's accomplices; still we had, unluckily, the appearance of being his friends, and indeed I went so far as to let him give out that he was a relation or connection of mine. Which, to be sure, may have been true.”

“You think he really was Mr. Vigors, then?” asked Mrs. Baldwin, oddly soothed by that admitted possibility.

The Duke shrugged his shoulders. “God knows! Oh, yes, I shouldn't be surprised; but I'll have investigations made when I reach home. I daresay I have heaps of shady belongings; most people have. At all events, we mustn't expect much pity, you and I, except what we can spare for one another as fellow-sufferers and fellow-innocents.”

Unwittingly he had hit upon the only phrase capable of applying a touch of balm to Mrs. Baldwin's sore soul. Since suffer she must, it was something to suffer hand in hand with a duke, something to have established a bond of union with his Grace which

might lead to future relations of a gratifying order. She was not very fond of throwing away money, and the thought of her gratuitously wasted hundred pounds festered in her memory; yet she was for sharing the cost of the defaulter's dance, and only allowed that intention to be overruled when it was pointed out to her that such action would be liable to grave misrepresentation, should it be divulged in the course of ultimate criminal proceedings. The Duke could not take her money; but he took her hand, pressed it paternally, hoped that they might meet in London, and so bowed himself out, leaving a most agreeable impression behind him.

Yes; when gains were balanced against losses, Mrs. Baldwin found herself, so to speak, a duke to the good. *Per contra* she was a chattering, malevolent Miss Shakerley—and Heaven only knew how many more chatterers, malevolent or compassionate—to the bad. No wonder she registered a vow that Florence should see her face again no more. Nor indeed was it very wonderful that she conceived an added prejudice against Paul Lequesne's *protégé*—so rashly selected from a disreputable gang of which Mr. Vigors and the late Mr. Hilliar must be taken as samples!

CHAPTER VI

A VISIT OF INTRODUCTION

No remonstrance, rebuke or criticism can ever be quite so snubbing as abstention from the same, and Paul Lequesne certainly did feel a little disappointed when a communication which must at least be acknowledged to have dealt with matters of considerable moment to him remained unanswered. However, he was not as disconsolate as Mrs. Baldwin may have hoped to make him. For one thing, he had not expected his friend to be pleased, and, for another, he was sure that she would be, so soon as the privilege of making Guy Hilliar's acquaintance should be hers. In the small circle of those about him pleasure was general and genuine; for it had been no less clear to Paul's dependents than to himself that a change of some description was indicated, and they gladly welcomed an interloper whose advent seemed to promise fixity of tenure for them. That they also liked the boy for his own sake was a matter of course: from infancy up to his present stage of maturity Guy Hilliar has always been liked, and sometimes loved, for his own sake. Since he hit it off with everybody, it was not strange that he should win the heart of a man literally starving for lack of human affinities;

still it did so happen that he was endowed with qualities which made a special appeal in that quarter. His pluck, his quick comprehension, his unfailing high spirits and the originality of his comments upon what was novel to him—all these combined to charm one who had himself tasted the joy of life, and who very well knew that he could never taste it, unless vicariously, again. Even a boy like other small boys would have been an immense boon to Paul : the gods in plenitude of generosity had granted him something altogether out of the common, and he was proportionately grateful. Perhaps it was over-sanguine of him to count upon Mrs. Baldwin as certain to participate in his enthusiasm ; but he was not very well versed in the peculiarities of women, never having been really intimate with more than one.

In the last days of May his correspondent deigned at length to let him hear that she was upon the point of leaving Florence ; but her letter, which gave the scantiest report of her own doings, contained no reference to his. She was not feeling particularly well, she said, and thought of going to Switzerland for a few weeks to recuperate in preparation for the fuss and fatigue of London. She mentioned no Swiss address ; so he was fain to await further tidings, which reached him, towards mid-June, from Cromwell Road, where Mrs. Baldwin lived. This time she wrote in friendlier strain—

“ Do come and see me soon, and tell me all about your eccentric—I am afraid I *must* call it rather hasty and eccentric—adoption of a nobody’s child. I, too, have things to tell you—which must account

for my long silence. I simply hadn't the courage to embark upon a pen-and-ink record of it all. Oh, no; please don't jump to conclusions; I am not going to be married again or anything of that sort. Only I have had a perfectly sickening experience! Well, I am beginning to get over it now, and you shall hear the whole story as soon as it may please you to appoint a day, on which I will, as usual, give orders that no other callers are to be admitted. I know you generally pay a furtive visit to London about this time of year."

He generally did; and Mrs. Baldwin's missive decided him to accelerate what had hitherto always meant for him the envisagement of a painful ordeal. Painful it was bound to be; nevertheless, the presence of the eager, observant Guy so changed the whole aspect of things that the Chester Square house, terribly unchanged though it was, had almost the effect of having put on a new face for him. In the familiar rooms, already faded and ineffably forlorn, the conviction came to Paul that if Maud could see him with this improbable *pis-aller* of his, she would be relieved and approving. She could no more see him than he could see her; she had ceased to be; never again could their eyes meet or their voices greet one another. If he was certain of anything, he was certain of that. Yet in some sense—even in a very real one—she would continue to exist so long as he drew breath and retained his faculties. Therefore he thanked God (for he had faith in a God, if scarcely in the anthropomorphic Deity of the Hebrews or the Christians,) that there had been found for him a way

of reconciliation with life which involved no shadow of infidelity to her beloved memory.

Now it was quite natural that a man situated as he was should be anxious to enlist for Guy the good will of his only woman friend, and it was just like him—though perhaps it would not have been like anybody else—to take the boy round to Cromwell Road on the occasion of a visit which obviously demanded privacy. Mrs. Baldwin's hurried greeting, followed immediately by a dismayed whisper of "Good gracious! you've brought it with you, then!" only moved him to mild surprise.

"Why, of course!" was his rejoinder.

Then he beckoned to Guy, who, from a few paces in the rear, was taking rapid stock of Mrs. Baldwin's artistic drawingroom, and said: "Come along and be introduced to my best friend. She is going to be one of your best friends also, I hope."

Mrs. Baldwin's expression of countenance hardly seemed to warrant the anticipation. Murmuring "How do you do?" she extended a small, white hand, which the boy grasped in his strong, brown one.

"All right, thanks," he responded pleasantly. "You *have* got a jolly lot of roses here! Do you grow 'em yourself or buy 'em in the market?"

A half-involuntary smile hovered for a moment about the lips of a lady who liked the prettiness of her environment to be appreciated, yet who had no notion of being rushed into intimacies. She replied that she had a little garden of her own in the country, but that she was afraid she could not pretend to be

wholly independent of the florist. She then moved quickly towards one of the windows, asked Paul's help in opening it and took occasion to say, under her breath :

"It's too tiresome of you ! How can we possibly talk now ? The young gentleman's dignity would be affronted if one suggested his having tea in the nursery, I suppose ?"

"I forgot about our wanting to have a talk," Paul not very tactfully confessed. "Oh, no ; I don't think he'd mind."

He did not mind in the least. His wit was quite equal to the conjecture that he might be temporarily *de trop*, and of tact he had an innate supply which had been denied to his patron. "Yes, rather !" was his prompt response to Paul's hesitating inquiry of whether he wouldn't like to go upstairs and make acquaintance with a very small girl.

"I can always get on with kiddies," he added reassuringly for the benefit of his hostess.

With whom could he not get on ? Even the semi-hostile Mrs. Baldwin had to own, after the bell had been rung and he had been conducted out of the room, that there was something rather engaging in the ease and simplicity of his address. However, she made haste to qualify that admission by adding :

"Oddly advanced for his years, though. Considering his parentage and all, that would make me a little uneasy if I were in your place. But I'm afraid it's too late to wave red flags at you."

"Much too late," Paul assented. "I'm fully committed to him, and I'm not a bit uneasy. In reality

he isn't what you call 'advanced'; he is only that rarest and most delightful phenomenon, an absolutely natural human being. I don't quite know what you mean about his parentage."

Mrs. Baldwin was divided between eagerness to explain what she meant and reluctance to avow that her information was derived from a somewhat tainted source. She said :

"Well, you yourself wrote that his father didn't seem to have been a very estimable sort of person, and what I have heard since makes me strongly suspect that he was downright dishonest."

The associate and probable confederate of Mr. Vigors could hardly have been anything else; but Mrs. Baldwin gradually forgot him while denouncing the man who had so grievously sinned against her. Although, during the progress of her graphic narrative, Paul was more than once shaken by a spasm of internal laughter, he kept his countenance duly grave and sympathising until she wound up with—

"And the disgusting part of it is that there seems to be no prospect of this wretched impostor's being arrested."

At this it seemed permissible to smile. "Is his arrest so desirable?" Paul inquired. "I should have thought that the less publicity given to his feats the better you would be pleased."

"Ah, that's what the Duke says. Certainly I shouldn't like to have to give evidence at the Old Bailey, or wherever it is; but I don't suppose I should be called. He would be tried for one of his previous offences—forgery, I believe, amongst others. By

the way, the Duke, who was here a few days ago, has had inquiries made of different members of the Vigors family, and they are dreadfully ashamed and distressed, as well they may be! They didn't know about the forgery or about his having swindled people in Malta; but they don't deny that he is capable of anything. He appears to have been their black sheep. They had to drop him years ago, and they rather hoped he might be dead. Perhaps you'll think me ridiculous, but the fact that he is a gentleman by birth does give me just a scrap of comfort. And the Duke, you see, was as completely taken in as I was."

Paul, who was acquainted with his friend's little weaknesses, could well believe that these two circumstances were of a nature to appease her. He observed that the delinquent was pretty sure to be laid by the heels sooner or later.

"He'll tempt the Fates once too often, as such people always do, and then you'll get your revenge, since you're so keen upon it. My personal feeling is that if he and Hilliar were tarred with the same brush, which seems very likely, I am better off than the Vigors family, inasmuch as *my* black sheep has the merit of being as dead as mutton."

"But he wasn't yours at all! Nothing in the world compelled you to make a pet of a black lamb."

"Nothing compelled me; everything induced me. Don't you understand—but I needn't put the question, for I'm sure you do—that what I have done is going to be my salvation?"

Mrs. Baldwin shook her head and made a dubious grimace. The salvation of the heavy-hearted may be achieved by less hazardous devices. Moreover, she must not be expected to bestow her blessing upon a venture as to the wisdom or folly of which her opinion had not been so much as asked.

“One can only hope for the best,” said she, “but, look at it how you will, it’s a leap in the dark. And I’m by no means sure that I like that precocity which evidently fascinates you.”

“You will like it,” Paul returned, “as soon as you realise that it means nothing more nor less than an unusually perfect condition of mental and bodily health. Hale, who has taken his education in hand, says he’ll be fit for school in no time.”

“Well, I’m glad, at any rate, that you are sending him to school and letting a clergyman prepare him,” said Mrs. Baldwin, who was herself orthodox, even to the extent of observing Saints’ days when she remembered them.

“Did you think I should preach agnosticism to him?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know why you shouldn’t preach what you profess to believe.”

“Agnosticism isn’t a profession of belief.”

“That’s so absurd! As if anybody could get on without a creed of some sort! Not that yours would satisfy anybody but yourself. And why did you drag the boy up to London with you, instead of leaving him to pursue his studies with your good Mr. Hale?”

“A little because he wants clothes, but much more

because I want you to take to him and be good to him. Come, Lilian, you will be good to him and me, won't you ? ”

Every now and then Paul addressed Mrs. Baldwin by her Christian name, and this always conciliated her. For the rest, she was not very hard to conciliate, belonging, as she did, to that preponderant class of mortals who habitually and sensibly acquiesce in what cannot be helped. It was plain that, for good or for ill, this boy was to be an established factor in the development of Paul Lequesne's unfolding future ; so that, whether one liked or disliked him, one must reckon with him. To like him was to take the line of least resistance, and Mrs. Baldwin smiled graciously enough as she answered :

“ My dear Paul, I hope you know that all I wish is to be allowed to give you any small help I can. If you rather took my breath away at first, you can hardly wonder, can you ? It's a serious matter, you see, to announce all of a sudden that you have provided yourself with a son and heir. Because I suppose that's what you mean him to be.”

“ Well, no,” replied Paul, after a moment of silence, “ I am not quite prepared to make such an announcement at this early stage. I don't see why I should, and there are manifest reasons why I shouldn't. Still, between ourselves, that looks like the probable outcome.”

Mrs. Baldwin had a nimble imagination. It now took a bold step into futurity and caused her to say : “ Then I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll marry him to Audrey one of these days. That is if he behaves

himself and turns out the paragon that I know you expect him to be. For the present I should think he has had about as much of the bride-elect's company as he can do with, poor little wretch! So I'll ring and give orders for his release."

CHAPTER VII

THE ADULTS

ON a fine afternoon of early summer, some fifteen years after the occurrence of the episodes narrated in the foregoing chapters, two young men and a girl were seated on the closely mown turf of a lawn which sloped gently down towards the glittering Thames. They had just stepped out of the punt which lay moored to the landing-steps hard by, and they supplied (or, at any rate, two of them did) a highly decorative foreground to what, despite steam-launches and disfiguring trippers, still remains one of the most charming landscapes in England. For the hanging woods beyond the river were in the full glory of their June foliage, and immediately behind the little group were borders gay with roses and irises and herbaceous plants, behind which again the middle distance was filled after a fashion pleasant enough to the eye by a long, rambling building, the white walls of which were more than half masked in creepers. But the three persons thus attractively framed were not for the moment appreciative of scenery, their attention being otherwise engaged. Each of them was gravely perusing the acting edition of a play, and the knitted brows and slightly dilated nostrils of one of them

seemed to imply that the study afforded her small satisfaction.

“ I don't want to be disagreeable,” she remarked, “ but I must say that this strikes me as a perfectly rotten piece ! ”

“ I respectfully beg to associate myself with that expression of opinion,” observed the young man who lay prone at her feet, a pipe in his mouth and his chin supported by his left hand. “ Not that it matters.”

“ It may not matter to *you*,” the girl rejoined, with some warmth. “ Perhaps you don't mind all this nauseous hugging and kissing.”

“ At duty's call, I'm prepared to go through with it.”

“ Well, I'm not. So if I'm to act at all, Mr. Cleland, you'll have to cut out at least three quarters of the love scenes, please.”

The third member of the party, who was squatting upon his crossed heels, like a Turk, chuckled. He was broad-shouldered, but of diminutive stature, and had a quaintly humorous face which must be called ugly, in default of a more fitting adjective, though it could never have been described as repellent. His nose turned up absurdly, his wide mouth approached the lobes of his jutting ears, he had small, twinkling eyes and his straight, dust-coloured hair persisted in falling over his forehead, notwithstanding daily efforts at bringing it into conformity with the prevailing fashion of a greasy, brushed-back sheaf. He said remonstratingly :

“ My dear Miss Baldwin, there's nothing in reason that I wouldn't do to oblige you; but you and Guy

are cast for the lovers, don't you see, and some realistic touches are indispensable. I feel for you both; I do indeed! I can imagine how you'll hate it. Still you must be brave. Consider the audience."

"Bother the audience!" said Miss Baldwin.

"That's just what you'll do, unless you throw yourself into your part. They won't be able to make head or tail of the play, poor things! And it isn't half a bad play really. You can't judge of any play by reading it; you won't be in a position to judge even when you're acting in it as splendidly as I know you will. It's the people on the other side of the footlights who will do the judging, and you may depend upon it that they'll simply revel in the scenes you want to omit."

"I doubt it," returned the young lady; "I doubt very much whether they will be given the chance of revelling by me."

"Oh, you couldn't have the heart to desert us! As I tell you, you and Guy have all my sympathy, but . . ."

"Don't worry about me," interjected the other young man; "I'm beginning to think that I shall rather enjoy it."

"Ah, that's your politeness. I was going to say that I quite understand a natural mutual repugnance; but you can get rid of all that by bearing in mind that you're purely fictitious. Take example by me. What I'm called upon to do is to play the fool—a part, as you know, utterly foreign to my nature. But do I kick? Do I lay back my ears and threaten to cut the whole concern? Nothing of the sort! I remember

that my sole business is to make things go as well as I can, and if anybody takes me for a genuine fool, I shall accept that as a tribute to the excellence of my acting."

"Nobody," said Miss Baldwin, "is likely to mistake Guy and me for genuine lovers, and we shouldn't care if anybody did. It isn't the stage embraces that I object to, it's the mawkish imbecility of the whole thing."

An uninformed bystander might have wondered why the speaker and the youth who lay at her feet were not lovers; for if appearances are anything to go by, they should have found it no hard matter to be that. With the fair hair and exquisite complexion which she had inherited from her mother and with the violet eyes which were all her own, Audrey Baldwin at the age of nineteen was fit to pass a very high standard of feminine beauty. Her broad forehead, her straight little nose, her white teeth and her neat figure were so many admirable accessories. The sum total of her, in fact, came almost as near perfection as young Cleland, for one, was ready to pronounce it. As for Guy Hilliar, the acknowledged perfection of him at all points and in all capacities was only preserved from exasperating a generation of imperfect contemporaries by the indescribable ease and grace with which he carried so heavy a handicap. Neither at Eton nor at Oxford had he made for himself a single enemy; which was remarkable, considering that at both those seats of learning and sport he had accomplished without effort everything to which he had seen fit to turn his ever roving attention. He had

not, it was true, touched absolute high-water mark in any particular branch—had not been Captain of the Boats or the Eleven at Eton and had been content to dispense with first-class honours at the University. Notoriously, however, this was not because he could not have been or done anything that had pleased him, but merely by reason of a disinclination on his part to specialise. He liked to make sure that he could do this or that (invariably discovering that he could); after which others were welcome to stick to the job and bear away the prize. Naturally, such an attitude was not without attractiveness for the others: one readily admits a man to be one's superior when he refrains from proving himself so. Moreover, Guy was free from vanity, and if inevitably self-confident, was never self-assertive. Physically, the sturdy little boy who had taken Paul Lequesne's fancy fifteen years back had ripened into something much finer than could have been anticipated at that early stage in his development. The white boating flannels and sweater in which he was now clad were not very well adapted to display the singularly symmetrical lines of his slim body and limbs, though these could be divined; but they gave value to the poise of his lean head upon a bare, muscular neck. His hair and eyes were dark and his features refined, their expression varying from moment to moment, as is often the way with people of alert intelligence. Altogether a young man of such conquering aspect and attributes that the strictly sisterly affection professed for him by his neighbour was scarcely to be accounted for, unless by the fact that they had grown up together in rela-

tions not unlike those of brother and sister. Audrey's strong and frequently proclaimed detestation of sentimentality in any shape or form may have been a secondary cause, although Walter Cleland, a keen-eyed observer, had no great belief in that.

"You can't," he objected, answering her last remark, "have a novel or a play without any love-making, and in a play it's bound to be rather raw, or it won't carry conviction. You wouldn't call this one mawkish if you were looking on at it."

"I'll look on then," said the young lady decisively.

But it was at once pointed out to her by both her companions that this would be a peculiarly base and shabby form of treachery. Time was short, there had been considerable difficulty in obtaining promises of co-operation, and the worst possible effect would be produced upon an already refractory band of amateur histrions if it had to be announced that Miss Baldwin had thrown up the leading part in disgust.

"Oh, very well," she sighed resignedly at length; "if I must, I must! Of course I'll do my best to please, though I shan't be much pleased with anybody who thinks me pleasing in such a character. All we can hope for is that Mr. Cleland, as the funny man, will draw off attention from our drivellings."

"He will," said Guy. "Heaven be praised, he'll completely and mercifully eclipse the lot of us! That's what he's for. In point of fact, that's what your good mother is giving the show for."

"Is it?" asked Audrey. "I thought it was because nobody else would attempt to get up private theatricals in London at this time of year, and because

it's so original to do things that other people aren't doing."

"She may be under that impression, but the true truth is that she has been hypnotically suggestionised by that little fiend Wattie, who doesn't care how much suffering he inflicts upon others so long as he can secure one more low-comedy triumph for himself."

Walter Cleland turned up the whites of his eyes and groaned. "Here's gratitude!" he ejaculated; "here's recognition of self-sacrifice! You needn't believe me unless you like, Miss Baldwin, but I owe it to myself to tell you that I'm only here now—neglecting my business and displeasing my old governor, who quite rightly thinks I ought to be on a high stool in the Liverpool office—by Guy's express request."

"I believe you," said the girl.

"Thanks; I expected no less of your discrimination. For reasons of his own, into which I needn't enter, he made a great point of my being in London for a few weeks just now, and as I really didn't see how that was to be contrived without some sort of a plausible excuse, he trotted out the idea of theatricals and rehearsals. He did indeed! Let him deny it if he dares!"

Guy did not deny it. He laughed and returned, "Well, I didn't choose the play, anyhow, and I didn't persuade Mrs. Baldwin that she wanted to produce it upon her Cromwell Road stage either. Don't depreciate yourself, Wattie; you've done it all very cleverly, and Mrs. Baldwin has a high opinion of you, and so have I. As for your rotten piece, it's

a rotten piece, as aforesaid; but—likewise as aforesaid—that doesn't matter. You'll bring down the house, as you always do, while Audrey and I are blushing unseen beneath our grease and paint."

At Oxford young Cleland had achieved fame as a comic actor and private popularity by his gift of mimicry and other diverting qualities. His friendship with Guy Hilliar, which dated from old Eton days, was an affair of enthusiastic hero-worship on the one side and amused liking on the other. Such as it was, it had stood the test of time and, as one result of it, Walter had long ago been made acquainted with Mrs. Baldwin and her daughter. The son of a prosperous Liverpool shipowner, he had been taken into his father's business on the termination of his University career; so that he did not seem likely to be as often seen as of yore in South Kensington or at Weir Cottage, which was the name of Mrs. Baldwin's riverside dwelling between Maidenhead and Marlow. He was, however, in no danger of being dropped by that lady, who not only recognised his social value but was accustomed to make free use of him as a species of unpaid secretary or aide-de-camp. Presently her high, clear voice was heard calling out to him from the verandah—

"Mr. Cleland! Are you there? I want you to come and help me with my invitation-cards."

He scrambled to his feet and trotted off obediently. His unfailing readiness to fetch and carry for Mrs. Baldwin was accepted by her as a matter of course and one of which the causes required no investigation. She had not guessed—but would have been neither

astonished nor alarmed if she had—that it was due to an absolutely hopeless adoration of her daughter. Whatever matrimonial alliance Audrey might end by making, (and Audrey was vexatiously reticent or indifferent upon that subject,) she certainly would not espouse poor little Walter Cleland.

At six-and-forty Mrs. Baldwin differed as little from her former self as the passage of fifteen summers and winters would permit. She had grown stoutish, the colour had faded out of her hair and the outline of her chin had assumed an added curve; but her face was scarcely lined, there having been so few events to furrow it since that unfortunate and well-nigh forgotten Florentine episode which had marred the early days of her independence. Her independence was one of several possessions which she had wisely retained; another being her friendship with Paul Lequesne. If she also still retained some sense of latent grievance against that unassailable celibate, it was partially merged in a more recent one against Guy Hilliar, who had falsified anticipation by declining to lose his heart to Audrey. The new grievance was precisely on all fours with the old, inasmuch as Audrey could, of course, make a far better match. There was no reason for her marrying young Hilliar; only it was a sort of slight upon her and a display of bad manners in him that she had not been asked to do so.

“I’ve had my work cut out to save your play from foundering,” Walter Cleland remarked, as he climbed the flight of steps which gave access to the verandah. “Miss Baldwin wanted to chuck it because she couldn’t stand the love scenes.”

“ I call that such a silly kind of modern affectation ! ” cried Mrs. Baldwin impatiently. “ Nowadays girls don’t put it on the ground of shyness or modesty, like their grandmothers, who may have been just as affected in a more human fashion ; they want people to believe that they despise what no woman has ever despised since the world began or ever will.”

“ Only nobody does believe it,” the young man observed.

“ That’s what I say ; that’s the silliness of the pose. I hope you figuratively boxed Audrey’s ears.”

“ I can’t see myself doing that, even figuratively. No ; I condoled with her and Guy ; I told them I could quite imagine how unpleasant it would be for them both. But I appealed to their public spirit.”

“ Really,” said Mrs. Baldwin, with a little toss of her head, “ I can’t see why it should be so unpleasant.”

“ Between ourselves,” returned Walter Cleland, with much gravity, “ nor can I. Still one has to allow for other people’s ways of looking at things. And it’s all the more easy when, as you say, they are only make-believe ways, which don’t make one believe.”

Mrs. Baldwin was aware that this jocular youth was almost always laughing at somebody, and occasionally—at the wrong moment, as a rule—she half suspected him of the audacity of laughing at her. She now threw him a sharp glance, was reassured by the solemnity of his countenance, and said :

“ Well, come and address envelopes for me. We shall only just save the post.”

Audrey was never asked to address envelopes or

remember where people lived or revise her mother's list. For such purposes she was useless, her tastes from childhood having taken a different turn.

"What a bore it is to be grown-up!" she was saying at that moment to Guy Hilliar. "We used to have much better fun than we shall ever have again, don't you think so?"

"In some ways," he assented. "Oh, yes, we haven't had a bad time, and I shouldn't mind repeating the dose. One has to keep moving, though. One wants to have a shot at new experiences, even if they aren't going to be an improvement upon the old ones."

"I don't. But then there are so few novelties—practically only one—that women are allowed to aim at. It's a different story, of course, for men, who can choose any career they like for themselves. Which reminds me to ask whether you are any nearer a choice than you were."

"Much nearer. In fact, I've made it, subject to my old man's consent. I'm going to join the firm of Cleland and Son."

The girl stared at him in amazed incredulity. "A firm of Liverpool shipowners!—*you!*"

"Why not? It will be tremendously interesting as soon as one gets the hang of the thing, which I shall do in less than a year. I was staying in Liverpool last week with Wattie's people, as you know, and I very soon saw all the possibilities of their business. It ought to be capable of immense expansion."

"But what if it is? What if you immensely expand it and make a fortune? I should have

thought money-grubbing was the last thing you would care to go in for."

The young fellow laughed. Four-and-twenty though he was, his laughter had not yet lost its boyish ring. "I'm not keen about money," he answered, "and I have no wish to grub. I can't tell you exactly why this notion seemed to draw me, except that it promises quicker results than the professions. The army, the bar, diplomacy—one knows what they may lead to, with patience and perseverance and luck. But all so deadly slow! What's the use of being a Field-Marshal or a Lord Chancellor or an Ambassador when you're old and worn out? What's the use of getting to the top of the tree if you're only ready to drop off it, like an over-ripe apple, and be swept away?"

"You might enjoy yourself on the way up; I can't picture you enjoying yourself in a fusty counting-house. Did old Mr. Cleland suggest taking you into his business?"

"Not he! He threw cold water upon me, and so did Wattie. But I talked them over."

"You would! And will Mr. Lequesne be talked over, do you suppose?"

"Oh, yes, dear old chap! He won't fancy the idea at first—perhaps not at last either—but he won't be obstinate about it. He never is."

"Never with you," the girl agreed meditatively. "It's a wonder he hasn't spoilt you altogether."

"Thanks awfully for the admission that he hasn't. But I really believe indulgence is the best kind of treatment for me. You might give it a trial some-

times, as an alternative to the usual snubbing system."

"Kindly mention a single instance of my having snubbed you."

"I'll kindly mention a dozen if you like. You started that bad habit no less than five years ago, when I took great trouble to split a sixpence and when you instantly chucked the half which you were meant to cherish for ever into the river."

"I forgot about the split sixpence," said Audrey, laughing. "Yes, I suppose you did feel a little bit snubbed at the time; but that sort of rubbish had to be nipped in the bud."

"So you were pleased to decree."

"Oh, you were pleased too. You didn't really want to begin 'keeping company,' in accordance with servants'-hall traditions; you only tried it on because it had dawned upon you that you were a young man and that I was almost a young woman. As I said just now, being grown-up is an unmitigated bore. The next thing will be that you'll be marrying somebody, and the chances are that I shall hate her."

"Much more likely that you'll marry somebody whom I shall be sure to hate."

"No; you were never known to hate anybody. At the bottom of your heart you don't think anybody quite worth hating. Now, isn't that true?"

"I don't know; but I know it's one more snub. Why are you in such a critical humour this evening?"

"You can't expect me to be in a flattering humour. I don't like your throwing yourself away upon a commercial career; I think you're making a great

mistake. Not that you will be moved an inch by what I think.”

“ Well, you haven’t had time to think a great deal about it yet, have you ? ”

“ I shouldn’t change my opinion if I were to think about it from now till Christmas.”

“ All right ! Tell me to give the thing up, and it shall be given up like a shot. You have only to speak the word.”

Disdaining response to so extravagant an assertion, Audrey rose and shook out her skirt. “ I’m going to dress for dinner,” she announced laconically.

CHAPTER VIII

' IN LOCO PARENTIS '

PAUL LEQUESNE sat at his writing-table in Chester Square with a blank folio sheet of paper before him and an idle pen between his fingers. He had, as he always had, an apportioned daily task of literary work to get through, but was taking, as he sometimes took, the liberty to neglect it. Blessed liberty which belongs to the race of scribes alone amongst professional toilers, and which, let us hope, makes up to them for the precarious, ill-paid nature of their calling ! This one, at all events, had not to concern himself much with questions of remuneration or publication, being pecuniarily independent, as well as celebrated enough to be sure of his limited audience. The fifteen years which had turned his hair and beard grey had firmly established his reputation as a philosophical essayist, a polished, if infrequent versifier, and an accomplished critic. He was known by name to all the world, read by a small section of it and respectfully entreated by a far larger one. A success, in fine, as successes go, and by no means dissatisfied with a life which had given him his full share of good things. He had not asked of it what it could not give, had never quite shaken off the settled melancholy bequeathed to him by a dead past ; yet, now that he

was deep in middle age, he remained strong and active, and if he had no vestige of personal ambition left, he had plenty of it for the young man who was coming home presently.

A most undeniable, unqualified success, that young man, whether you took him broadly on his merits or in a more restricted sense as having fulfilled the mission assigned to him by Providence and a lone benefactor. Looking back, Paul could truly and proudly affirm that from first to last the boy had given him no single hour of anxiety, save of that pleasurable kind which had preceded the news of some fresh victory, scholastic or athletic. And what was even better was that there had been no slackening of the bonds which united two mortals so unusually devoid of other domestic ties. None, that is, in their mutual affection and only as much in their close intimacy as one of them deemed inevitable. Paul Lequesne, scarcely a man of the world in the common acceptation of that term, but sensible and acquainted with the various, unvarying attributes of adult human nature, had recognised that a time must come when the boy would cease to tell him everything and had determined that, when it came, he on his side would cease to ask questions. Perhaps this was wise of him, and it was certainly self-denying (for he liked it even less than the average father likes it); yet he pushed a salutary rule to somewhat greater lengths than he need have done, and the result was a sense of restraint, not to mention an occasional twinge of pain, which he might just as well have spared himself. For Guy, free to come and go as he pleased, free to make his own plans

and choose his own future, was not at all prone to secretiveness. Sometimes he forgot to mention what he had been about; sometimes a disappointing telegram would come from him at the last moment to announce, without explanation, that he could not turn up for an arranged shoot or a day's fishing; but he never thought of taking a step of any consequence without consulting Paul, nor had he ever made any concealment of the very few and venial scrapes in which Oxford had involved him. During this month of June he had been staying with sundry friends, ending up with a short visit to the Baldwins at Weir Cottage; now he proposed to devote several weeks to London and—incidentally—to the definite, oft postponed selection of an avocation.

Paul's grave face lightened up all over when a hansom stopped at the front door, which his study window commanded, and a minute later he was shaking hands with the subject of a whole empty afternoon's meditations. All he said was "Well, Guy?" and the other only responded with "Well, old man?" But the English tongue, as employed by two Englishmen who are in affinity is beautifully comprehensive and comprehensible.

The new-comer rang the bell, ordered tea, flung himself sideways into an easy-chair, with his legs dangling over one of the arms, and (being bound by no self-denying ordinance in that respect) began to ask questions. Quite intelligent, well-informed questions, relating to recent learned controversies; for he was a rapid, omnivorous reader and had, amongst his other gifts, a sound literary instinct. He said:

“ I simply roared over that article of yours on Nietzsche. The only thing I was afraid of was that they mightn’t see you were laughing at them all the time.”

“ But I wasn’t,” Paul protested.

“ Oh, come ! Tell that to somebody else. But you were jolly polite and deferential, as you always are, and I daresay they took some of your compliments literally. I say, you’ve been sitting indoors and stooping over your blotting-book too much; you want me to drag you out into the fresh air. Let’s have a day up the river, shall we ? Wattie Cleland and I have been putting in a couple of nights at Weir Cottage, and we should have had a first-rate time if it hadn’t been for some infernal theatricals which Mrs. Baldwin is getting up and in which we’re all booked to make fools of ourselves.”

He went on chattering discursively, as was his wont in the society of a hearer who was always content to listen to him. It was not until he had finished his tea and lighted a pipe that he announced :

“ Well, now I’ve got some news for you, and you aren’t going to like it, though I hope you aren’t going to mind it very acutely either, after the first shock. I’ve hit upon my calling. Clerk in the firm of Cleland and Son, with the virtual promise of being speedily taken into partnership. Say ‘ Damn ! ’ if you want to.”

Paul did not avail himself of the accorded permission. He said nothing at all, but looked as surprised and dismayed as he felt.

“ Oh, yes, I know ! ” Guy resumed, answering unuttered comments. “ At that rate, what becomes of

public life and distinction and office and so forth? Well, they aren't excluded, supposing they're what one ought to want and aim at—which, after all, isn't mathematically demonstrated. The House of Commons is just as likely to open its doors to a prominent shipowner as to a successful barrister, and if Cleland and Son aren't prominent in a few years' time it won't be the junior partner's fault. I had no idea until I was in Liverpool last week what chances lie waiting for an enterprising firm to collar them. Dear old Cleland has spent an active and blameless life with his eyes serenely closed."

"I daresay you opened them for him," Paul remarked.

"Rather! He's wide awake now and as keen as a man who has begun to think about retiring has it in him to be. Oh, I don't say that he doesn't shake his head; you couldn't expect him to do anything else just at first. But he does see that his business is open to development, and he sees that what it chiefly wants is fresh blood."

"Fresh capital too, I presume."

"Naturally that will be needed, and I don't suppose an empty-handed partner would quite meet his views. But those are matters of detail which you can talk over with him. He's coming up to London on purpose to see you."

This might have struck some people as a pretty cool way of taking things for granted; but Paul, who was accustomed to Guy's wide purview and magnificent disregard of preliminaries, had a different aspect of the case in mind. He said:

“ It’s an experiment like another, and all experiments are interesting. The trouble is that we are debarred by the brevity of life from making more than one, or possibly two, of this particular kind. Just now, but only just now, you can choose between a number of professions and trades. It’s rather important that you shouldn’t choose the wrong one.”

“ Beastly important—and a shot at a venture, whatever one’s choice may be. There you are! How is a man to tell whether he’ll like or dislike a thing that he hasn’t tried? All I know is that I dislike slow progress, and the professions are very, very slow. Commerce isn’t. It leaps and bounds gaily when you give it the spur at the psychological moment.”

“ I daresay it does; only that doesn’t cover the whole ground. You may go ahead with relative speed and yet have to give your best years to unremitting office work. How about the minor pleasures of life, which I think you appreciate as much as anybody? Isn’t there some danger of your missing them? ”

“ Ah, that’s Audrey’s way of looking at it.”

“ Audrey has sensible ways of looking at things. You have spoken to her, then? ”

The young man nodded. “ I always do, you know. I told her I’d chuck the whole concern if she liked. Which put her back up, though it was perfectly true.”

What Guy’s sentiments were respecting Audrey Paul had never been able to determine with certainty. He knew, because he could not help knowing, that

Audrey had only a friendly affection for Guy, and this was a matter of regret to him, since it meant the non-fulfilment of a project which Lilian Baldwin and he had often pleased themselves by discussing in days gone by. He himself was much attached to the girl, and, considering how many young women there are to whom it would be rather difficult to become attached, it seemed a sad pity to lose her. Lost, however, in that sense she manifestly was, and, this being so, some comfort was to be derived from Guy's equally manifest tepidity. It would not, perhaps, have taken a great deal to make the young man fall seriously in love with her. As it was, he had been, and still remained, a little in love with her—not seriously so. Paul, faithful to the rule which he had laid down for himself and also, in his shy way, disposed to shrink from alluding to such subjects, had not been interrogative; but Guy, who was not in the least shy, had volunteered confidences on several occasions. “I believe it's more that I'm awfully fond of her,” he had said once, seeming to examine his own mental condition with a species of amused curiosity. He did not, for the rest, appear to be of an amorous temperament, and if he was not averse to ephemeral flirtations, he never, so far as Paul knew, allowed them to interfere with pursuits or amusements which made more appeal to him. For all his charm and amiability, there was a touch of hardness in his composition against which Paul (himself tender and sensitive below the surface) had once or twice barked metaphorical shins. He now went on to mention casually that he was going to the theatre that evening with the

Baldwins and Wattie Cleland, and that he proposed to bring the whole party—“There may be a couple of other fellows, but I’m not sure”—back to supper in Chester Square.

“I like your cool cheek!” exclaimed the master of the house. “How am I to provide food for six or seven people at such short notice, do you suppose?”

But the truth was that he did like it. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to be treated with a lack of ceremony which afforded him the sensation of being the young fellow’s intimate and equal. It is a subtle form of flattery more acceptable to the elderly than the young are generally aware.

Guy was clever enough to be aware of it; clever enough, likewise, to know that there is a time to speak and a time to keep silence. Naturally his old man, who had received something of a jar, would want to think things over before saying any more about them. After he should have had his dinner and smoked a couple of cigars in solitude he would arrive at the desired and predestined conclusion all right. In the meantime literature, the coming University cricket match, the prospects of autumn shooting at Stone Hall and so forth would provide all that was needed to keep conversation alive.

La parole est aux jeunes. Every wise man who has passed the meridian of life recognises that, and knows that if the inexperienced are not unlikely to make mistakes, the experienced are almost certain to make one by thwarting them. This may be a pity; but there is no help for it, and really the next best thing to ruling people by the exercise of an enlightened and

benevolent despotism is to let them rule themselves. Half measures lead to nothing but barren disputes and the stirring up of bad blood between the disputants. Something of this sort was, as Guy had foreseen that it would be, the outcome of Paul's solitary ruminations. No doubt the lad would obey a positive order, and obey it without sulking; he had never in his life been either disobedient or sulky. Nor had he ever been very amenable to argument or persuasion. Mutinous he was not; only he was constitutionally impatient of control, just as he was impatient of delay, and it was in all probability for that reason that he had selected an avocation scarcely worthy of the talents which he would bring to it. Well, disillusion might be in store for him; he might find the head of a steady-going mercantile firm more authoritative, less disposed towards new and adventurous departures than he anticipated. If so, that would do him no harm. On the other hand, a good deal of harm might be done by forcing him against his will along a track which he was not minded to tread. Coercion, in short, must not be employed, and nothing less than coercion was worth attempting.

So when the theatre-goers arrived about midnight, and when Audrey took immediate occasion to whisper to her host "You've caved in! I can see it by your face!" his smiling reply was "That's my strength of mind, not my weakness."

"After a fashion, perhaps," the girl conceded; "but you think too much about him and not enough about yourself. Why should he always have his own way?"

“ Something in his elemental construction, I imagine.”

“ Sure it isn’t something in yours ? ”

“ Now you’re accusing me of weakness, after all, when I thought it was so intelligent of you to grasp the point. Well, I confess that this scheme of Guy’s doesn’t enchant me; but, as I’m not prepared to knock it on the head, the chances are that it will materialise, unless Mr. Cleland suggests unreasonable terms.”

“ I’ll tell Mr. Cleland’s son to see that they are made prohibitive,” Audrey declared. “ If you don’t mind Guy’s being wasted, I do.”

It will be perceived from the above short colloquy that the terms upon which the speakers stood with regard to one another were intimate and confidential. A good deal more guarded in his utterances was Paul wont to be with Audrey’s mother, who evidently had not been informed of what Guy was meditating, since she made no reference to it.

Mrs. Baldwin, brocaded and jewelled, was in high good humour. She had brought with her a glossy lordling whose name Paul did not catch, but who was visibly smitten with Audrey and complacently exhibited in the character of one more captive. As a matter of fact, Audrey’s captives were not very numerous, for she had short ways with the susceptible; but her mother liked to represent that they were, and could never quite forgive Guy Hilliar for not caring whether they were or not.

“ Only came into his estates the other day, after a long minority,” Paul was told; “ which means that

there's any amount of money. And such a nice, unassuming boy! Oh, not amazingly clever; but it isn't required of everybody to be that. One paragon is enough, perhaps, in a party of half a dozen."

The supper party, anyhow, was sufficiently enlivened by Guy, who not only knew how to talk but how to make other people talk. Or rather he had the knack of doing so without perceptible effort, which was one amongst many reasons for his being liked far and wide.

"I saw Audrey urging you to put the extinguisher on me," he remarked, laughing, when Paul and he were alone. "You can, you know. I make you the same offer that I made to her. Tell me to give the thing up and it shall be given up."

"What did she say to that?" Paul inquired.

"She didn't say anything at all."

"Ah! Then I think, if you'll allow me, I'll provisionally imitate her."

CHAPTER IX

COMEDY ON AND OFF THE STAGE

ANY private instructions that Audrey may have conveyed to Walter Cleland must have been either disregarded or ineffectual; for Mr. Cleland senior proved so amenable and moderate that negotiations were reduced to a mere matter of form. He called in Chester Square by appointment one day—stout, white-whiskered, rosy and genial—to make frank acknowledgment of his readiness, not to say anxiety, for a concluded bargain.

“The fact of the matter is, Mr. Lequesne, that I want that young man of yours—want him rather badly. I’m sixty-five years of age, I’m sorry to tell you, and I’ve had the misfortune to lose my eldest son, and whether Walter will be fit to step into my place when the time comes is just what I don’t know. I believe he has some business capacity; but he hasn’t Hilliar’s brains and doesn’t pretend he has. Brains are required, with competition getting keener every day, and there’s no use in blinking the fact that at sixty-five a man’s brains, like his limbs, are the worse for wear. I see the full force of what Hilliar says. Chances for us in more directions than one; only we must look alive if we don’t want to be crowded out. Why don’t I look alive, then? Well, sir, I’m

a sexagenarian, that's all. Understand me; I'm not suggesting partnership tomorrow or next day. The lad will have to start at the foot of the ladder, as my own boy is doing; but I expect to see him running up it quicker than most."

What Mr. Cleland apparently did suggest was an abbreviated period of apprenticeship, and the sum which he thought he would be entitled to demand at a later date, should all go well, as the price of Guy Hilliar's admission into his firm did not sound excessive. Rather flattering, this avowed eagerness on the part of a shrewd, elderly man of business to annex a force as yet purely conjectural. Paul could not help feeling flattered, though he also felt bound to observe :

"It has to be remembered that if Guy sticks to his present purpose, he will be going in for something that he has never touched or thought about before. He may be totally unsuited for it."

But Mr. Cleland's gesture of dissent was emphatic. "No, sir; he can't be that, and I'll tell you why he can't. He is suited for anything in this world that he may choose to turn his hand to. Once in a while—once in a generation, shall we say?—a youngster of his sort crops up. I know them when I see them, and so do you, I make no doubt. I rather discouraged him at first, as he may have told you. Not because I didn't want him, but because both my boy Walter and I thought you wouldn't consider the prospect good enough for him. Mind you, I don't say it is. Very likely, if I were his father or his guardian, I should wish him to fly at higher game. However,

that's for you to decide. I'm not here to oppose his inclinations and my own interests."

Opposition to Guy's inclinations could scarcely come from one who had no interests apart from his to serve, nor any personal wishes of an obstinate kind. Two or three days sufficed to dispose of certain preliminaries, insisted upon by Mr. Cleland—a clear statement of the firm's financial position, a consultation with Mr. Lequesne's lawyers, the exchange of a few formal letters, and so forth—after which it only remained for the destined rejuvenator of a venerable house to proceed to Liverpool at his earliest convenience. The young man needed no spur. He was impatient to get to work, and would have taken his departure forthwith, had he not been pledged to Mrs. Baldwin's dramatic entertainment.

"Nobody's fault but my own," he philosophically remarked. "Mrs. Baldwin would never have thought of theatricals if she hadn't been put up to it by Wattie, and Wattie was instigated by me. You see, my first idea was that I might be the better of a little backing and that Wattie would help me with you; so I offered him the chance of capering about behind the footlights, which was much the same thing as offering a carrot to a donkey. Now it turns out that I was the donkey. It's ripping of you to yield without a murmur, and I'm no end grateful; but I didn't foresee that everything was going to be made so smooth for me."

He saw and foresaw as much as quick wits and intuitive sympathy of a certain order enabled him to do. He may be pardoned (in view of his youth) for

not seeing how this little speech of his risked hurting the feelings of a sensitive hearer. But if Paul was ultra-sensitive, he was also very sensible; so his only rejoinder was :

“ You can make up for lost time later. Meanwhile, your loss is my gain.”

The best days of Paul's life were those during which he had his boy with him. He looked forward to them for weeks and mused upon them with a contented, retrospective smile long after they had dropped back into the past. But the boy's point of view was, and of course could not but be, different. It was quite natural that he should be in a hurry to be off, quite in accordance with nature that he should have forgotten sundry projects for joint recreation which the curtailment of his holiday was likely to defeat. Between the old and the young intimate friendship is only possible upon the condition that the old shall never be exacting. To be exacting is to be a bore, and when once you have become a bore all is over! It has already been mentioned that Paul's tendency was to magnify the wisdom and expediency of self-effacement. He was not really in any danger of being a bore, and he might easily have seen more of Guy than he did during the ensuing fortnight if he had not waited for suggestions which never came, because he was supposed to be busy and disinclined for them. It was taken for granted that he would be disinclined to attend the Cromwell Road theatricals; but he was exhorted to “ buck up and face the music.”

“ Audrey says she hopes to goodness you won't,” Guy told him; “ she pretends that you'll lose all

respect for her if you see her posturing as a lovelorn, lackadaisical, mid-Victorian damsel. The truth is, though, that she acts jolly well, and you're as mid-Victorian as you can be yourself. Aren't you now? Besides, Wattie will make you laugh."

In any case, Mrs. Baldwin would not have condoned Paul's absence. She was rather proud of her long-standing friendship with a distinguished man of letters and liked to parade him at parties which had another species of distinction for their chief end and aim. On this occasion she had been fortunate in getting together a large number of titled guests (always to her the symbol of social triumph); so when Paul reached the top of the staircase where she was standing, he was received with smiles indicative of a high barometer.

"At last!" she exclaimed, while she held his hand. "I haven't seen you for ages. Not since that evening when you gave us such a good supper and carefully didn't tell me about this fantastic move of Guy's, which must have been worrying you to death. I'm so sorry!—it seems such a come-down for him, doesn't it? But we can't talk now. You'll find a seat reserved for you, with your card pinned to it. The third row, I think."

Paul made his way into a darkened auditorium which was already crowded and soon became inconveniently so. Mrs. Baldwin had asked more people than the room would hold, and apparently there were no defaulters; but that she doubtless regarded as a success in itself. As for the play, it was not a great work of art, nor could the performers be

said to rise above the ordinary amateur level, with the one notable exception of Walter Cleland, whose impersonation of a bewildered, irascible busybody fairly took the audience by storm. Thanks to his talent, as well as to the infinite pains that he had taken in coaching his collaborators, the three acts passed off briskly, accompanied and encouraged by constant laughter and applause. When all was over, he was called before the curtain and loudly cheered; after which a similar compliment was paid to Guy and Audrey. "Because they're so beautiful," Paul's neighbour said.

It was a sufficient reason, and one which might not, perhaps, be deemed objectionable by most young ladies; but Miss Baldwin, whose quick ears had more than once caught the inevitable comment that she and young Hilliar made a charming couple, bowed her acknowledgments with a little frown of impatience which did not fail to tickle her companion.

"Oh, yes," said he, as soon as he had led her off the stage, "that's what their arch mother-wit suggests, and scowling at them was a very good way to convince them that they're right. What shall I do? Would you like me to step before the curtain again and say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, to prevent misconception, let me tell you that there's nothing between me and Miss Baldwin. Absolutely nothing, I give you my word?'"

"Yes, please," answered Audrey. "And you might mention at the same time that I'm sorry I shall not be able to show any more this evening, as I'm going to take a Turkish bath."

“ I’ll mention it. So then we don’t wind up with a dance, after all ? ”

“ The rest of you do. I’m not equal to dancing after what I have been made to go through.”

Guy sat down on the floor and buried his face in his hands. “ You cut me to the quick ! ” he murmured. “ Knowing that I was personally repugnant to you, I did try my very best to combine an approximately plausible rendering of my part with a physical aloofness for which I hoped you would be grateful. I said to myself, ‘ I must be looking supremely absurd ; everybody must see that my chaste salutes are being bestowed upon the desert air ; but no matter ! I’m doing the right thing, I’m riding to orders, and I shall be rewarded later.’ Now my reward is—this ! ”

“ Don’t be imbecile,” said Audrey.

“ I shall go on being imbecile as long as you go on being cross. Where’s your sense of justice ? I didn’t write the play, I didn’t give it, I didn’t invite you to act in it, I didn’t invite myself to act in it. Yet I am to bear the whole burden of other people’s sins ! And just as we are upon the point of being parted for Heaven knows how long too ! ”

“ Do you mean that you are leaving for Liverpool tomorrow ? ” Audrey asked in a slightly altered voice

“ Well, not just literally tomorrow, but . . . ”

“ Then get up out of the dust. Since you aren’t going into exile yet, what is there to cry about ? ”

“ What is there to have a Turkish bath about ? ”

“ Oh, I need a thorough scrubbing ; but of course I can’t disappear. I must change my clothes, though, and I don’t mean to hurry.”

A large proportion of Mrs. Baldwin's guests went away, as they were expected to do, soon after the play was over, and when Guy Hilliar—who also had to wash his face and get into evening attire—returned to the long, rapidly cleared room, he found it tenanted for the most part by young people. A tall, striking-looking woman whom he had noticed in the front row of seats during the performance, and who was now standing near the doorway, manifestly requested Mrs. Baldwin to introduce him to her. This was Lady Freda Barran, a daughter of the Duke of Branksome and a lady whose notorious escapades had penetrated to circles far removed from those in which she habitually disported herself. It was not everybody who cared to know Lady Freda; still, as she had contrived to keep out of the Divorce Court and had apparently arrived at some sort of a *modus vivendi* with her husband, she continued—her ducal parentage doubtless aiding—to be very generally received, and Mrs. Baldwin, for one, affected to believe that she was less black than she was painted.

For the young man who was now presented to her she had no black looks, but on the contrary, a smile of that peculiar kind which she reserved for attractive young men and which seldom failed to attract them. She was on a large scale and extremely handsome—a sort of blonde Juno, with a superb figure, red lips, and sleepy eyes of a brownish tint which suggested smouldering fires. Presently Guy found himself dancing with her, found that she danced better than anybody he had ever come across before in his life, found, furthermore, that she knew how to insinuate

agreeably flattering things after a lazy, casual fashion. He had two dances in succession with her and began to be interested in her while they were sitting out a third; for she took that opportunity to be candidly confidential with him respecting herself. It passes for a commonplace that women who hanker after masculine appreciation always talk about their interlocutors, never about themselves; but although this may be a sound enough working principle, it was little regarded by Lady Freda, who was immune from principles of any description and who loved to expatiate upon the one theme which was to her of prime importance. She had been much more sinned against than sinning, it appeared. An unsympathetic husband, a few venial imprudences on her part, censorious tongues, the calumnies of envious hypocrites—and so on and so forth. The fable has been narrated times out of mind; yet it remains, and will ever remain, effective with the young and generous. If Lady Freda wished to gain a champion that evening, (but perhaps that was not exactly what she wished,) it served her purpose.

“At her old games!” muttered an elderly spectator who had reason to know, if anybody had, what her games were. “Ought to be ashamed of herself, making an ass of a boy like that!”

The Duke of Branksome, now a widower well stricken in years, was scarcely upon speaking terms with his daughter. Nobody could accuse him of Puritanical rigidity; but, when all's said, there are limits, and Lady Freda had transgressed them. Moreover, she had been terribly expensive. Again

and again he had paid her heavy debts; again and again he had put up with her cynical effrontery, shrinking from the scandal of an open rupture; but of late he had held little verbal communication with one who only sought him out when she wanted money, and if by chance he found himself in the same room with her, he generally made haste to quit it. Had he known that she was to be present that evening, he would probably have excused himself; though he had a liking for his hostess and a suspicion that it pleased her to supply his name to representatives of the press as having appeared at her parties. But since he was there, and since he saw what was patent, he thought a word of warning to Paul Lequesne, with whom he was acquainted, would not be out of place.

“Don't let that good-looking young fellow of yours have anything to do with my daughter, or she'll gobble him up, body and bones. Her appetite for good-looking young fellows is insatiable.”

“He has a head on his shoulders,” answered Paul; “I think he can take care of himself.”

“Don't you believe it, my dear Lequesne! Some rules have no exceptions. Unless you want a dog to be caught in a trap, you don't trust to his taking care of himself over trapped ground, and Freda is a deadly man-trap. Neither more nor less than that, I'm sorry to say.”

She was, at any rate, almost as tenacious. Either because Guy Hilliar had taken her fancy or because there was nobody else in the room who seemed worth while, she maintained a firm grip of him, and when at

length he contrived to slip away, in order to beg Audrey for a dance, his request came too late.

“Sorry,” said the girl, “but I’ve nothing left. Don’t try to look broken-hearted; you aren’t a good actor, you know. Even Mr. Cleland admits that you aren’t that.”

Wattie Cleland, who was her partner at the time, would certainly never have admitted that Guy was not superlatively good in no matter what capacity; but he did sometimes wonder at his hero’s taste, or want of taste. He inquired of Audrey who the big, supercilious lady with the powdered nose was, and was quite astonished to hear that she was a famous beauty. He was in nowise astonished, however, to learn that she was “not very nice.”

“Oh, that’s printed all over her in large type,” he observed. “I hate women of her sort!”

“Most men,” said Audrey, “do the other thing, I’m afraid. Poor Guy! Well, I don’t feel quite as sorry as I did that he is going to be buried alive in Liverpool, nor quite as furious with you for burying him.”

“It hasn’t been my fault,” Wattie eagerly declared; “it hasn’t indeed! I tried my level best to choke him off. Don’t I always try to do everything that you ask me to do?”

“I hadn’t noticed it. I thought I had asked you to let me off acting tonight. But that’s over and done with, thank goodness! Now I want to go on dancing, please.”

As Paul walked homewards with Guy in the pale light of dawn, he ventured to repeat something of

what the Duke of Branksome had said, and was heartily laughed at for his pains.

“ Did you sit up all night for the sake of administering that drop of wholesome poison to me, old man ? I believe you did, Heaven forgive you ! Make your mind easy ; all is peace ! She asked me to go and see her, but I shan't go ; there won't be time. All the same, it's rather rough on her to be robbed of her character by her own father.”

“ I fancy that, as far as character goes, she can sing in the presence of any robber,” said Paul.

“ Ah, well ! you don't know much about her, do you, old man ? Not as much as I do, though I've only known her a few hours. The truth, as far as I can make out, is that she's a little bit unhappy and more than a little bit maligned ; but really I don't care a penny, one way or the other. Hang all women ! No ; I won't even make an exception in favour of Audrey, who has been trampling upon me and refusing to dance with me. Give me a fill of tobacco and let's talk about more satisfying things.”

CHAPTER X

THE DUNRIDGE LINKS

IT was not until the late autumn that Guy saw his way to take a holiday. He might have had one in August for the asking; but in his letters from Liverpool he spoke of himself always as undergoing a tedious process of training which would only be protracted by interruptions, and he preferred to get done with it once for all in half the usual time by working double tides. Consequently there was no partridge shooting for him in September, and two-thirds of October had slipped out of the life of the waning year before Paul was apprised by telegram of his impending advent.

“Quite right that he should take his business in earnest,” remarked Mr. Hale, who had tramped up to Stone Hall to join in welcoming the quondam pupil of whom he was not a little proud; “one wouldn’t wish him to be a loafer. At the same time, it isn’t as if he had to toil for his daily bread. I’m for moderation in all things myself.”

“You and I, my dear Hale, are moderate men,” answered Paul. “That accounts for our having got on together so happily all these years and for one of us enjoying the regard and esteem of the neighbourhood. I daresay it also accounts for your not being Arch-

bishop of Canterbury and for my remaining an obscure essayist. You mustn't expect soaring sky-rockets like Guy to be moderate."

"Well, Archbishops are, at all events," said Mr. Hale; "it's their one indispensable qualification."

Mr. Hale, grizzled, weatherbeaten and past middle age, was not now likely to be promoted to any higher post than that with which he was, upon the whole, pretty well contented. He still deplored his friend's agnosticism and sometimes combated it; but he had a comforting, unformulated theory respecting strayed sheep which allowed of their ultimate inclusion in the fold by methods beyond the range of the official shepherd's crook. Furthermore, he opined and proclaimed that if charity and unselfishness be sure outward signs of an inward Christianity, there must be something inaccurate about Paul Lequesne's label.

"I apologise to you and the Archbishops," said the latter; "I expressed myself badly. I believe what I really meant was that you and I haven't Guy's all-conquering animal spirits."

"We haven't his all-conquering brains, I know," returned Mr. Hale, with a goodhumoured laugh. (He never read Paul's writings and was under the honest impression that they scarcely deserved to be read.) "It's amazing, the way that fellow grips and masters a subject! He has the whole art and science of shipowning, whatever that may be worth, at his fingers' ends by this time, I'll be bound. But do you fancy such a career for him?"

"I don't find myself enthusiastic about it," Paul confessed; "still, if he is satisfied, so am I."

Mr. Hale shook his head. "Lucky for you that Guy is what he is! Your system would be the ruin of most young men."

"How do you know that I should apply it to any other young man? Guy being, as you say, what he is, I can afford to let him do what he likes. I have no fear of his ever doing anything that I shall be entitled to dislike."

The subject of this unlimited confidence walked in while he was still under discussion. He looked a little pale and tired, Paul thought, but said he was perfectly well, though short of fresh air.

"I've been holding my nose relentlessly to the grindstone for more than three months," he added, "and it's sharp enough now to rip up a rhinoceros."

"You have encountered some pachyderms already, I daresay," remarked Paul.

"Oh, yes, and there are others to be tackled; but most of them have dropped charging at me, I'm glad to say. Cleland and Son will begin to forge ahead soon, you'll see. Meanwhile, I've earned the right to stretch my legs. Now, Mr. Hale, do you want to run a quarter of a mile against me, with a hundred yards' start?"

"I do not," answered Mr. Hale decisively; "but I'll tell you what I'll do with you. I'll play you for half-a-crown over the Dunridge links, and you shall give me a third. I allow myself two days of golf a week, and tomorrow happens to be one of them."

"Right you are! But what about my old man?"

"Your old man," said Paul, who did not play golf and who had had hopes of a day's rough shooting,

“ will be delighted to walk round with you and act as referee in case of disputes. A visit to Dunridge will have all the charm of novelty for me; I haven't been near the place since it smartened itself up into a popular seaside resort.”

If he was unable to feel any great interest in the eighteen-hole course whereby Dunridge had supplemented a somewhat meagre allowance of natural seductions, it was none the less true that he was delighted to do anything in Guy's society, and he thoroughly enjoyed driving across the sands in a dogcart on the following morning, his companion taking the reins as a matter of course, while Perkins, the young gentleman's early instructor and profoundly appreciative admirer, sat behind, with folded arms and pricked-up ears. What Perkins heard was scarcely of a nature to appeal to him, for no more than his master or Mr. Hale could he conceive of Guy in a counting-house as the right man in the right place; but he gathered that, as usual, victories were in sight and laurels waiting to be plucked. It appeared that, although Mr. Cleland was liable to fits of obstruction and reaction, a forward policy was to be adopted. The substitution of at least two fast liners, to begin with, for the leisurely tramps which had hitherto waddled out to South America, making no bid for passenger traffic; the opening up of additional and regular communications with the Far East, for which there was still ample room—upon these and other projects Guy held forth with a zest which showed, at all events, that his heart was in his job

“ We’re going to start a branch office in London, and I rather expect to be put in charge of it,” he mentioned parenthetically.

So this was good hearing for one who had been wondering upon what possible pretext an occasional stay of some days in Liverpool could be contrived. A pleasant drive through the crisp air, between the silvery grey dunes and the green sea, with the gulls circling overhead and the fresh young voice sustaining its monologue. The best moments of life come and go like that, not specially noticeable while they last, yet ineffaceable and raised to their true value when one looks back upon them and thinks with a sense of satisfaction not wholly retrospective, “ Yes, that was a good day ! ”

Mr. Hale, who had bicycled over to Dunridge by the circuitous high road, was waiting for his opponent outside the little club-house and was swinging a driver with the easy accuracy attainable by most golfers when there is no ball in the way to cramp their muscles. As he was a twelve-handicap man, he ought to have been able to give a pretty good account of himself, at the odds, against a player who had never reached, nor tried to reach, high proficiency. Nevertheless, he lost his half-crown at the sixteenth hole, after a match in which it may have been true, as he alleged, that Guy had all the luck.

“ Who but you,” he complained, “ would have laid himself dead with a cleek shot out of the worst bunker on the course ! You take the wrong club, use it in the wrong way and then look as if you had expected nothing

else than the miraculous result. That kind of thing isn't golf, it's a mixture of ignorance and effrontery!"

"What you would have called golf," observed Guy, "would have been to play back with a niblick and make sure of losing the hole in orthodox style. But cheer up; you shall have your revenge in the afternoon. I'm never much use after lunch."

He was to be of no use at all to Mr. Hale, as it turned out. Hardly had the trio disposed of such frugal fare as the club could furnish during the off season when a smart motor dashed up, from which descended two men and a lady who flung the door open, marched in, called aloud for caddies, stared interrogatively at the strangers and looked a good deal as if the whole place belonged to them. It did, in fact, belong to one of them, a swarthy, undersized man, with a clipped black moustache. This was young Lord Dunridge, the chief landed proprietor in a district upon which he did not very often shed the light of his presence. After a moment he remembered the parson, whom he had been scrutinising, and said "How are you, Hale?" with a sidelong jerk of the head; to which greeting the other made somewhat cold and formal response. But there was nothing cold or formal in the lady's recognition of Guy Hilliar. Removing the white gauze veil in which her head was enveloped, she displayed the features of Lady Freda Barran and gave utterance to a pleased surprise which was evidently sincere.

"You!—of all people to come across in this wilderness! What luck! I meant to have a round

with Lord Dunridge, for want of something better to do, but I shan't now. Jimmy, you and Dun will have to play together; I'm going to take a lesson from Mr. Hilliar." She added a brief, casual introduction. "My husband, Captain Barran."

Captain Barran, late of the 22nd Hussars, was known in sporting circles as a fine horseman and a constant winner of cross-country events. He was not much known elsewhere, nor in truth was there much else to know about him. He had a square, clean-shaven face, dull, greyish eyes, and a thin-lipped mouth, which he seldom opened. Having opened it now to reply "Right!" and having favoured Guy with a bow which was scarcely more than a nod, he seemed to think that nothing further in the way of general amenity was required of him. Ill-used and unconsidered though Lady Freda had represented herself to be, it was clear that she knew how to get her own way on occasion. She obtained it on this occasion, notwithstanding Lord Dunridge's sullen scowl, Guy's murmured excuses and Mr. Hale's outspoken assertion of a prior claim. After all, what pressure can be brought to bear upon a lady who frankly avows that she doesn't care two straws whether other people are pleased or not?

Her nominal victim was not, perhaps, so very ill pleased. He could play golf with Mr. Hale any day, and Lady Freda excited his curiosity, if she stirred no other emotion in him. Other emotions, however, were at her beck and call; for although she was not in the least clever, she had large experience of a certain

order and was herself emotional—within limits. That she intended to make a conquest of this handsome youth and enjoyed the process of so doing were as much matters of course as it was that she would partially succeed. Complete success was not obtainable at a rush, since she had to deal with one who did not lose either his head or his heart easily, and whose imagination chanced just then to be engaged and fired by unromantic commercial visions; but no doubt she accomplished enough to satisfy her. Wandering amongst the wind-swept sandhills and over spaces of turf upon which she inflicted an occasional wound for form's sake, (she declined to count her strokes and played her opponent's ball when it seemed to lie nicely,) she employed the art which conceals art to such purpose that Guy very soon thought he understood her. He could quite understand that ill-natured, superficial people might eye her askance, as she complained that many did. She owned that she had not always been circumspect; it was not in her nature to be circumspect; and besides—

“Anything that helps one to forget for a few hours! I lead a dog's life really, though I'm supposed to be having lots of fun. Shooting parties, race meetings and that eternal bridge, which reduces me to the verge of ruin twice or three times a year—if you only knew how sick I am of the whole monotonous round! But I'm like a squirrel in a cage; the more I struggle to escape the more I stick where I am. I don't want to talk about myself, though; I'm not worth talking about.”

It was with great difficulty that she could manage to discuss anybody or anything else for long; yet her knowledge of the average man forbade her to harp for ever upon that one string, and the lively interest which she affected in her companion's present and future did not go wholly without reward. You may be self-reliant enough to adhere to your own purpose, good-humouredly dispensing with the approval of your friends; still intelligent sympathy can never be unwelcome, and Lady Freda had nothing but admiration to express for a young man who declined to be led by the nose along well-trodden tracks.

“So original of you to strike out a line for yourself!” said she. “And you'll be in London in the winter, you think? Well, that's something to look forward to. Come and see me in Green Street. Come as soon as possible, and come often. Do you know you're the only *human* being in my entire acquaintance. Such an acquaintance, and such beings as it's composed of!”

Guy was sorry for her. She intimated that she had never been given half a chance, and that sounded like the truth. It also seemed to be flatteringly true (for the matter of that, it was) that she longed for closer acquaintanceship with him and his humanity. Captain Barran, visible at intervals in the offing, was presumably human, but certainly did not look humane, while Lord Dunridge, playing golf like a cricketer, and an infuriated cricketer to boot, had the effect of being a brutal, bad-mannered person.

“Dun?” said Lady Freda indifferently, in reply

to an incidental question respecting the latter. "Oh, I don't know; he's more Jimmy's friend than mine. Bore me to tears; but that's not his fault, poor fellow! Bless you for delivering me from him this time, anyhow!"

It was almost a pity that Mr. Hale could not hear her; for a speech so impudently mendacious would have gone far towards justifying the hard things that he was even then saying about a lady who had defrauded him of his game and left him with nothing to do but to tell Paul what she was. Mr. Hale knew what she was: everybody knew.

"I should have thought you must have heard current reports, Lequesne, living more than half the year in London, as you do."

"Nothing specific that I can call to mind," answered Paul, whose relations with the gay world were slight. "One has a vague impression of her not being exactly the sort of woman whose price is said to be far above rubies."

"There's something more than a vague impression in these parts, I can tell you! It's well known that old Lady Dunridge ceased to live with her son last year rather than receive her, and if you speak of price!—well, if all tales are true . . ."

"Perhaps they aren't. At any rate, she has her husband with her."

"That's just it. I hope I am not given to forming uncharitable judgments, but I am bound to conclude that Captain Barran is either a knave or a fool, and he doesn't pass for a fool, I believe. It is altogether

a disgraceful scandal, which is setting the worst possible example to the neighbourhood."

"Is it your theory," inquired Paul, smiling, "that such moral irregularities are contagious? I only ask for the sake of information and because I can't myself see why they should be."

"A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," returned Mr. Hale dogmatically; "you know that as well as I do. There's no end to the mischief that a man in Lord Dunridge's position can work by his personal misconduct. I'm not sure that I oughtn't to cut him. I'm quite sure you ought to tell Guy that he must see no more of the woman."

"On the ground that she is naughty? That might be a reason if he were a curate; but you see, my dear Hale, the ordinary young layman can't be kept from coming into contact with naughtiness. And this particular sinner is the less formidable as, according to you, she isn't unattached."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself that that's any safeguard! These depraved women are like the daughters of the horse-leech!"

It flashed across Paul's memory that the daughter of the Duke of Branksome had been described by her father as possessed of an insatiable appetite in certain directions; but he only smiled and observed:

"How well informed you seem to be with regard to them! Nevertheless, I venture to think that I shall do more wisely to let Guy form his own opinion of the lady."

It would not, in any case, be wise to encourage the

visibly threatened intervention of good Mr. Hale, who presently departed on his bicycle, remarking that since he had been done out of his afternoon round, he might as well attend to some parish work; but Paul was a little more disquieted than he cared to show. In principle, young men had better be left to acquire knowledge of this bad world for themselves; in practice, one can't—if they happen to be one's own young men—refrain from trying to put them on their guard. So Paul, when his young man reappeared all alone—Lady Freda having joined her husband and Lord Dunridge at the far end of the links, whither the motor had been sent to pick them up—displayed himself in the unwonted character of a retailer of gossip.

“Oh, that's what they say of her, is it?” asked Guy, with a disdainful laugh. “I rather wish somebody, not a parson or a woman, would say it to me.”

“I didn't know I was either,” Paul remarked.

“Dear old man,” returned Guy, patting him on the back, “of course I don't mind *your* saying anything to me. To begin with, I'm sure you wouldn't really believe such lies upon the strength of mere report, and then I perfectly see what you're driving at. Be comforted; I shall not elope with Lady Freda Barran.”

“I don't think you will. But, for once in a way, I'll take all risks and confess that I hope you aren't going to play golf with her again tomorrow.”

“I couldn't if I would, because she is leaving tomorrow, and I wouldn't if I could, because you

and I are going to shoot. Look here, old man, as soon as ever I fall in love with anybody, possible or impossible, you'll hear of it fast enough. I wish you would try not to be set against Lady Freda, though, for I've an idea that she'll become a rather particular friend of mine."

CHAPTER XI

THE SELF-INVITED GUEST

THE Duke of Branksome, who had had ample opportunity of judging, may have been correct in calling his daughter no better than a man-trap; but those illegal engines were only, in the era of their employment, a terror to trespassers, and no man can trespass upon land which is beyond his reach. Consequently, Guy's anticipation that her ladyship was destined to become a particular friend of his received no prompt fulfilment. After six happy weeks at Stone Hall, during which she was neither mentioned nor often remembered by him, he returned to hard labour, Liverpool holding him fast, save for a short Christmas holiday, until the following February, when Messrs. Cleland and Son's London office was at length opened and he was sent up to assume control of it. He was at that time very busy, very well contented with himself, his avocation, his maturing schemes, and very highly esteemed by old Mr. Cleland, who, being in London for a day or two, called in Chester Square to deliver a panegyric upon him.

“Marvellous business capacity, my dear sir, simply marvellous! Seems as if he couldn't make a mistake! He won't convert me into a millionaire, because there

isn't going to be time, but he'll die a millionaire himself, unless I'm much mistaken."

Paul, whose opinion was that exceptional ability may be turned to many ends more satisfying than the accumulation of wealth, rejoiced nevertheless in the young fellow's achievements and rejoiced more especially in his regained companionship. Not that Chester Square saw much of Guy between the hours of breakfast and dinner or that it was by any means an everyday event for him to dine at home. He had so many sides, so many interests, so large and heterogeneous an acquaintance that he was in constant request, and, as he scarcely knew what it was to be tired in mind or body, life in London suited him well enough. Like Paul, he loved country life, country sports, fresh air, the sense of space and freedom; but, unlike Paul, he did not pine for these things when they were not to be had.

"*Entbehren sollst du—sollst entbehren!*" he quoted, one evening, shaking an admonitory forefinger at the latter, who had permitted himself to speak regretfully of wild-fowl with nobody to shoot them.

Paul laughed shortly and sighed long. "To whom do you say it!" he ejaculated; though indeed the young philosopher was not very likely to guess how apposite was his apostrophe.

When one's time is fully engaged and all one's immediate wants are met, it is no very hard matter to forgo superfluous luxuries. Guy's omission to call in Green Street, however, was not the outcome of self-denial but of sheer, discreditable oblivion.

"I'm sorry," he ingenuously told Lady Freda on

that March afternoon when he was so fortunate as to find her at home and alone, "but the fact is that I clean forgot until today about your kindly telling me I might look you up. I've had such heaps of things to do this last month."

There was no hint of mortification in Lady Freda's twinkling, half-closed eyes nor any ring of displeasure in her laugh. She seemed to be genuinely diverted, and so, no doubt, she was; for if it was a novel experience to her to hear that she had dropped out of memory, she had absolute confidence in her power to prevent the recurrence of such a lapse.

"You're a nice boy!" she remarked. "What do 'heaps of things' mean? Heaps of appointments with chorus girls, I suppose."

Guy shook his head. "My appointments are mostly in the City, with shipping agents and emigration agents and people of that sort. It's only once in a blue moon that I manage to get away from them as early as this."

"Come later next time, then. We agreed that you were to come often, didn't we?"

She pushed him into a low chair, giving him tea and waiting upon him with a half-jocular, half-affectionate solicitude which he could not find disagreeable. Her diminutive dwelling was not very well furnished and would have revealed itself at a glance to feminine eyes as that of a woman who either did not take the trouble to look after her servants or did not care to have pretty surroundings. The flowers looked as if they had not been changed for several days, nor the lace curtains for several weeks; there

was an untidy litter of newspapers and invitation-cards on the only table. But Guy was not critical of such details; he was not even critical of this undeniably handsome, engagingly familiar lady, into whose conversation some rather queer phrases and sentiments found their way every now and then. Had she not already told him that her life was spent in a deplorable *milieu*? He was told it all again, and was moved to compassion, as before, and how could he do otherwise than like one who made no secret of her liking for him? Probably (for she was an indolent, stupid sort of woman, who saw little difference between one man and another, save that some were good-looking, while others were not) it was without diplomatic design that she began to ask questions relating to her visitor's business pursuits. She had never before met anybody who was really keen about commerce, viewed as a sport or amusement; so the phenomenon struck her as rather funny and interesting. Thus she incidentally strengthened a hold which she would have acquired in any event, and when Guy rose to take his leave he willingly promised to return on the next day but one.

Lady Freda Barran had the name of advertising her flirtations. It was one amongst many habitual exhibitions of bad taste with which she was reproached, and it had done her more harm than all her alleged delinquencies. Whether she enjoyed the triumph of proclaiming a fresh conquest or whether she simply did not care what people said about her, so long as she was amusing herself, may be doubtful; but either way admirers and intimates of hers had

to expect that notoriety would be thrust upon them. Some of them objected to this; most fatuously welcomed it; only a few, like Guy Hilliar, accepted it as adventitious and unimportant. His wide acquaintance had points of contact with her narrower one; meetings were easily arranged, and if tongues soon began to wag, how was he to help that? He might think her fancy for dining at a restaurant with him and going on to a play a trifle indiscreet; but he could scarcely tell her so. It was her nature to be indiscreet, and she had (by her own account) so few pleasures, and, after all, there was no harm in it.

But when, in the not unnatural sequence of events, he found himself assuring Mrs. Baldwin that there was no harm in it, that annoyed lady retorted that the guilt or innocence of such proceedings as his was not the question. What mattered, and what she was afraid might matter rather seriously to him if he did not take care, was breaking the rules. Social restrictions, Heaven knew, were far from rigorous; but certain things were forbidden by common consent, and nice people fought shy of those who did them.

“Of course, if you don't mind making yourself conspicuous and ridiculous by sitting in that woman's pocket at the few private entertainments to which she is still asked, it may be your affair; but I hear that you make a positive practice of dining with her—or rather giving her dinner, for I'm sure she doesn't pay!—in public places where you are certain to be recognised. I do feel that I ought to say something to you about it, even at the risk of being told to mind my own business.”

Guy made no such discourteous rejoinder; though perhaps he gave almost equivalent offence by merely smiling and venturing to hope that poor Lady Freda's name was not to be removed from the Cromwell Road visiting-list. The struggles of his monitress to reconcile an ingrained love of strict propriety with a strong disinclination to flout the peerage had often amused him.

"I've struck her off already," was Mrs. Baldwin's unexpected answer. "Don't force me to treat you in the same way, that's all!"

Audrey laughed when this alarming threat was reported to her. "Poor mother! No; I don't think there's much fear of her forbidding you the house, whatever happens. It's true, all the same, that you're rather exasperating. I myself sometimes feel powerfully tempted to box your ears."

"Box them," said Guy, bending his shapely head forward. "Although I don't deserve it, I shall quite like it."

"Oh, I'm not going to do anything that you would like. Not that you *would* like it, for I should take care to give you such a smack as you would remember for many a long day. Well, I suppose this is a phase through which most men of your age have to pass; but it makes them insufferable while it lasts. If only I could get you to see your Lady Freda with my eyes!"

"Why not try to see her with mine? She isn't half a bad fellow really."

"I'm sure she isn't," answered Audrey drily; "I'm sure there are no half measures about her. Tem-

porary measures, perhaps. You, for example, are a temporary measure, and if Lord Dunridge hadn't broken his leg on the last day of the steeplechasing season . . ."

"Ah, exactly, Lord Dunridge! There's an instance of the rot people talk. She has told me all about Lord Dunridge."

"And I daresay she will tell Lord Dunridge all about you; only she isn't very likely to tell either of you all about herself. Now, if it's the same thing to you, we'll talk cricket and forget the lady."

All his life long Guy had done what had seemed good in his own eyes, defeating opposition or ignoring it, as the case might be; yet there were two persons whose sway over him he was ever ready to acknowledge. One of them, as has been seen, rather contemptuously declined to exercise it in the present crisis; the other remained obstinately silent. Paul of course knew—for that matter, Mrs. Baldwin deemed it her duty to let him know—what was going on; but an almost morbid dread of preaching and a conviction of the futility of saying more than he had already said closed his lips. He hoped that perhaps the young man would speak, and it was scarcely surprising that he hoped in vain. So Guy and Lady Freda continued to do no harm in a style which might have failed to convince a British jury of its harmlessness.

Captain Barran, who had been absent at Newmarket and elsewhere, turned up in London for the Derby week and appeared to view his wife's latest hanger-on with a sort of impatient disdain. He was not very civil; but he was so seldom at home and so frugal of

speech when there that it was difficult either to discover what his sentiments were or to arrive at any impartial estimate of him. Impartial Guy could not be, since he believed what he had been told; but if he had been left to judge for himself, he might very likely have set Captain Barran down as a henpecked husband.

“ Oh, do go away somewhere, Jimmy; you’re getting on my nerves ! ” Lady Freda would exclaim; and Jimmy would go without a word. On his way out he generally cast a glance at Guy which seemed to say rather distinctly, “ You young ass ! ”—but he exhibited no jealousy nor any reluctance to make himself scarce.

Was there cause or excuse for jealousy on Captain Barran’s part ? Absolutely none, Guy would have affirmed during the early days of his intimacy with Lady Freda; but, as time went on, the proverbial fate of those who play with fire overtook him. Some scorching of the fingers was, indeed, inevitable, seeing that he was made of flesh and blood and that he had to do with a woman who understood men generically, if she understood very little else. Yet she was maladroit enough. As soon as she felt sure of him, she began to make demands upon his allegiance which might well have cost her the loss of it. Recklessness up to a given point he thought rather good fun; but there were places to which he did not like escorting her and houses to which he did not care about being unceremoniously introduced by her. The more he demurred, however, the more she insisted: it was as if she took a perverse pleasure in proving to him,

against his will, how fictitious was the original portrait of herself which she had drawn for his beguilement. The climax was reached when she heard that he was going to a garden-party at Weir Cottage and stated her intention of accompanying him thither, although she had not been asked.

“ Oh, you *couldn't* do that ! ” he remonstrated, in dismay.

“ Why not ? Because your fat friend forgot to send me a card ? ”

“ But—perhaps it wasn't that she forgot,” the young man hesitatingly suggested.

“ Perhaps it wasn't,” assented Lady Freda, with much composure. “ Perhaps you know it wasn't ? Ah, then, that quite decides me. I wasn't sure that I cared about her silly old function, but I'm sure I shall enjoy giving her a lesson in manners. We'll motor down together and you shall see me administer it.”

Here was a pleasant prospect ! Guy desisted from expostulation because he had discovered by this time that to thwart Lady Freda was merely to whet her appetite. His one hope was that she might forget a date of which he was careful not to remind her. He himself was in no danger of forgetting it ; for Walter Cleland, who had lately been sent to act as his coadjutor in the London office, was full of the open-air *tableaux vivants* which were to be the chief feature of Mrs. Baldwin's riverside levy. Young Cleland—“ always so clever and useful,” said Mrs. Baldwin, in whose favour he now stood high—was organising these, and had received special instructions to do so without including Guy.

“It’s her loss and ours, not yours,” Wattie apologetically remarked; “of course you aren’t eager to pose as a type of masculine beauty. All the same, I don’t know why she should say that she doesn’t wish people to think you an intimate friend of the house just at present.”

Guy knew, and groaned in spirit. Unless, by the mercy of Heaven, Lady Freda should change her mind, or the rain should descend in torrents, or the motor break down between London and Maidenhead, he must put the extinguisher upon intimate friendship by providing Mrs. Baldwin with an impromptu *tableau* which was likely to eclipse anything devised by the innocent Wattie.

None of the above saving contingencies occurred, and it was late on a perfectly lovely afternoon that he was whirled up to the door of Weir Cottage with a companion whose serenity he envied rather than admired. Lady Freda was in the best of tempers. For one thing, she was looking extraordinarily well in a pale blue costume and a huge hat, slightly in advance of the then prevailing fashion; for another, she delighted in manifestations of audacity; finally, the unconcealed misery of her fellow-sinner gave the measure of his subservience.

“Buck up!” was her admonition to him, as she stepped out of the car, flung off her dust-cloak and prepared to walk across the lawn; “the old lady won’t kill and eat us.”

The pair could not have timed their arrival more neatly from the point of view of one of them or more disastrously from that of the other. The *tableaux*

had just come to an end; the spectators, grouped round a charming grassy amphitheatre, had risen from their seats, but had not dispersed; so Lady Freda Barran and Mr. Hilliar, announced in stentorian accents, advanced under the concentrated gaze of some three hundred pairs of eyes. It was perhaps the first time in his life that Guy had felt thoroughly shy. The three hundred, it was true, would not know, unless they were told, that Lady Freda was an unbidden guest; but he had little hope of their being allowed to remain long in ignorance. He did not dare to look at Mrs. Baldwin, of whose proximity he was only made aware when he heard Lady Freda drawl out :

“How do you do? We were told you had some sort of a show on—Punch and Judy, is it?—so we thought we'd look in upon you.”

The impudence and the significance of the “we” were not lost upon him—nor upon an outraged hostess either, it might be conjectured—but he could only hold his breath, waiting in cold apprehension for what was to follow. Nothing followed. In another moment he was moving on, speaking to various people who accosted him, grateful for the unexpected forbearance of his hostess, whose hand he had a confused impression of having taken. The truth was that Mrs. Baldwin had been too staggered to display overt resentment and, by receiving Lady Freda in absolute silence, had done what was no doubt the most dignified thing to do. None the less, but rather the more, was she furious with both of the transgressors, and if for a moment she had seemed to condone their offence, that was not because she had any notion of permitting

it to go unpunished. After a time Guy espied her talking rapidly and vehemently to Paul, upon whose grave countenance vexation was writ large. Of course the old man was vexed ! He had every right to be, and so had Mrs. Baldwin. The whole situation was odious ; but unhappily there seemed to be no immediate prospect of escape from it. Lady Freda, who had come across some acquaintances, had advanced to the front with them ; the entire assemblage were resuming their seats ; apparently some further spectacle was about to be provided for them.

“ Oh, it’s Wattie and his monkey tricks,” muttered Guy, as he sank down upon the grass in the background, glad to take cover behind a human screen.

Walter Cleland possessed the gift of mimicry in a degree which might have been worth thousands to him at the music-halls, had he not possessed other means of growing rich. He was now giving a series of impersonations of well-known public characters—statesmen, actors and so forth—in which he was aided neither by voice nor costume, yet which met with instant and delighted recognition. It was very clever and very funny ; but it made no appeal to one dejected member of the audience, who had never felt less inclined to laugh. What he had an almost irresistible inclination to do was to take to his heels, and he was actually wondering whether such a craven course was altogether out of the question when somebody touched him lightly on the shoulder. As soon as he saw who it was, he jumped up and hastened to forestall rebuke by an abject admission of guilt.

“ Oh, there’s no name for it !—I quite agree ! You

do well to be angry, and I acknowledge the justice of every word that you haven't said. Only, if you'll believe me, I'm most awfully sorry ! ”

But Audrey, strange to say, did not seem to be angry. “ You needn't tell me that,” she answered, laughing a little ; “ your face speaks out loud for you. Of course you couldn't have wished to inflict a deliberate affront upon mother.”

“ No ; but of course she will think I did.”

“ That's just it, and that's why you must get Lady Freda to go away without taking leave. Can you manage that ? ”

“ I'll try.”

“ You really must. Otherwise things will be said which can only be washed out in blood. I'll undertake to make your peace with mother somehow or other before you see her again ; but if you go near her now, I answer for nothing ! ”

Audrey slipped away without waiting to be thanked, and not long afterwards he was enabled, by good luck, to give effect to her advice. Perhaps Lady Freda, who had been much amused by Walter Cleland's performance, did not think that anything else of an amusing nature was likely to occur ; perhaps she was really surprised on being told how late it was. As for the ceremony of saying goodbye, she omitted that more often than she observed it, wherever she might be, and she allowed herself to be hurried off without protest.

“ Not half bad,” was her indulgent verdict upon the afternoon's entertainment. “ Quite glad we came.”

“ You can’t,” Guy was goaded into retorting, “ be anything like as glad as I am that we’ve gone ! ”

Audrey and Walter Cleland watched the departing motor. The former heaved a sigh of relief, while the latter, whose round face expressed awe and consternation, exclaimed : “ What *could* have made him do such a thing ! Mrs. Baldwin will never forgive him, will she ? ”

“ Oh, I expect that will be all right,” answered Audrey cheerfully ; “ she can’t very well help forgiving him, you see. But—I don’t think he’ll ever forgive Lady Freda.”

CHAPTER XII

VAIN VOYAGES

AUDREY knew Guy Hilliar very well, and certainly she made no mistake in assuming that Lady Freda had disgusted him. As for his never forgiving the culprit, that was another affair; though he might perhaps have been disposed to break with her, had he not, most unfortunately, been told that he could do no less. And it was particularly unfortunate that Paul, as a rule so measured in his language and so chary of issuing anything that could sound like an order, should have thought it right on this occasion to speak peremptorily.

“I quite understand,” said he, “that the whole thing was the infernal woman’s doing. It would be absurd to pretend that you were not to blame for acting like her accomplice; still I suppose you should be allowed to plead ‘first fault.’ Don’t let anything of the sort happen again, though. She has done enough to justify you in dropping her, and drop her you must, unless you wish to be dragged down permanently to her level.”

This, it must be confessed, was no judicious way of admonishing a self-confident and high-spirited youth. Guy, as in honour bound, began at once to take Lady

Freda's part, and in endeavouring to persuade his hearer he easily persuaded himself that she was excusable. Of course she had behaved foolishly; there was no denying that she often did behave foolishly. On the other hand, she had great and constant provocation. Why should people always insist upon believing the worst? If she had the air of defying public opinion, it was because public opinion was so stupid and uncharitable that she could hardly help defying it.

“I didn't want her to thrust herself upon Mrs. Baldwin without an invitation; I wish she hadn't. I'll even say, if you like, that I wish I had refused to go with her. But since I did go, I can scarcely make that a reason for turning my back upon her, can I? Don't ask me to be a sneak, old man; because that's just a little more than I can stomach, even to oblige you.”

The argument was only saved from developing into a quarrel by the extreme dread that each man had of estranging the other. Neither of them quite credited the other with harbouring that dread, though both were personally and acutely conscious of it, and the inevitable result was that estrangement ensued. The elder forbade nothing; he merely stated his views with emphasis and became coldly reserved; the younger conceded nothing, but replied goodhumouredly, while allowing it to be seen that he was neither convinced nor impressed.

Mrs. Baldwin, dexterously handled by Audrey, accepted the subsequent apology which was her due, but was not over and above gracious.

“I went and saw the Duke,” she announced. (“How you must have enjoyed that!” Guy thought.) “I felt that he ought to hear of his daughter’s extraordinary conduct, and I will tell you exactly what he said. He said, ‘My dear lady, I have ceased to wonder at anything that Freda does. I can only advise you to cut her, and if the young man has any sense he will do the same. The fact is that decent people won’t know Freda now.’ Those were his very words. I don’t doubt that you’re sorry, and I ask for nothing better than to forget such a very unpleasant episode; but you must see yourself that you can’t very well continue to be that woman’s friend and ours.”

Guy suppressed a smile—suppressed it rather too visibly—and observed that it took some courage, no doubt, to reject ducal advice. He was afraid, though, that he could not throw over his friends at anybody’s bidding. Was he to understand that this would mean his being thrown over by the oldest and most valued of them?

Mrs. Baldwin made an impatient gesture. “Oh, if it comes to that, no. For Paul Lequesne’s sake—and, in spite of everything, I must say for your own—I shall never actually throw you over. But I tell you plainly that it will be impossible for us to see much of you while this infatuation of yours lasts.”

The young man could only bow to the above decree and go his way. Mrs. Baldwin and Paul were in the right; but so, after a fashion, was he. They had put it out of the question for him to do what he might perchance have done of his own accord if they had

been less insistent. He foresaw troubles and perils of divers kinds, but did not at all foresee how they were to be avoided. In this strait a suggestion from old Mr. Cleland that he should proceed shortly to Australia, in order to conduct some important negotiations on behalf of the firm, was a veritable godsend to him. He jumped at the proposal, declared himself ready to start at even shorter notice than was required of him and booked his passage without more ado. It scarcely needs to be added that both Chester Square and Cromwell Road signified glad approval. That Guy should be willing to absent himself for a period of at least four months might surely be taken as tantamount to an assertion of liberty on his part; so something in the nature of a general reconciliation sweetened the hurry and bustle of last days.

What Green Street would think and say remained to be ascertained. Not without a sense of relief did Guy find that his announcement would have to be made in the presence of Lord Dunridge, whom he encountered in Lady Freda's drawingroom and who turned an interrogative, hostile stare upon him. But Lady Freda received the news with an unconcern which, if it was not genuine, was admirably counterfeited.

“Australia?—how beastly for you! The voyage out takes an eternity, doesn't it? And nothing particular to do when you get there, I should think. Oh, business, yes; I forgot you were a man of business. By the way, aren't there gold mines in Australia? Find out about them on the spot and buy me some shares in one that has a rise in it, won't

you ? Heaven knows I could do with a whole gold mine to myself ! ”

Lord Dunridge let out an abrupt laugh and remarked, “ I believe you ! ”

“ Sneers at the poor and needy,” said her ladyship, “ come with a bad grace from people like you, Dun, who are wallowing in unearned increments. I only wish you knew what it is to have a dressmaker demanding payment of a four figure bill ! ”

“ I know all right,” was Lord Dunridge’s, perhaps unexpected, reply.

Did Lady Freda look disconcerted for an instant ? If so, it was but for an instant, and she did not change the subject. Bankruptcy, she averred, stared her in the face. “ All your fault too, Dun, for putting me on to wrong ones ever since the flat-racing season began. I don’t believe you know anything about horses really, except how to ride them.”

She addressed nearly the whole of her conversation to the somewhat sullen and taciturn personage whom she had once described as more her husband’s friend than hers ; she took little further notice of Guy, who soon rose. He was, to tell the truth, a trifle chagrined and rather more than a trifle surprised. No doubt, if he had been better versed in women’s ways, he would have guessed that he was intended to be both : as it was, he laughed at himself, without much mirth, while descending the stairs, and wondered whether somebody else was not already laughing at him. On a sudden somebody else removed that uncomfortable apprehension from his mind.

“ Mr. Hilliar ! ” called out Lady Freda’s voice from

the landing. "Come back, please; I forgot to give you a message for Mr. Lequesne."

But it was no message for anybody save himself that she had to impart when he obeyed her summons.

"Let me have your address," she whispered hurriedly, "and write to me. Write by every mail! It's all I shall have to look forward to in the bad time coming."

He went away a little elated, after all. Not being quite a fool, he could not miss the significance of that hasty and agitated leave-taking; yet there was no need to draw the ugliest conclusions from her evident fear of giving umbrage to her other visitor. Very likely the man admired her; very likely her husband owed him money and she simply could not afford to offend him. Not a very dignified position to occupy; but one which had probably been forced upon her and which merited pity rather than scorn. Pity, indeed, had from the first been Guy's dominant sentiment with regard to Lady Freda, and we all know to what that sentiment is proverbially akin. Upon the whole, he was glad that she wanted to hear from him, glad that she had not meant to snub him, not very sorry that he was bound for the antipodes.

That antipodean reconnaissance of his proved fruitful in successes, new lights, prospects of profitable enterprise for the firm of Cleland and Son, in which he was really more absorbed than in anything or anybody else. At Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane his youth, his quick intelligence and his goodhumoured determination to get his own way not only won him many friends but enabled him to brush aside all obstacles. Windy

New Zealand, whither he proceeded in the spring of the inverted year, detained him for some additional weeks, and, as he eventually decided to return to England by long sea, in order that he might visit Rio, with which port the Cleland steamers were in intermittent communication, it was not until December that London saw him once more. During his absence letters had reached him as frequently and regularly as his movements by land and sea would allow—long and affectionate letters from Paul, who was wont to be less reserved with his pen than with his tongue; occasional short ones from Audrey; voluminous scripts, dealing in about equal measure with business matters and theatricals, from Wattie. As for Lady Freda, she shone in the character of a correspondent after a fashion which might have astonished those who only knew that she was indolent, unimaginary and not over well educated. Precisely in virtue of the above attributes she produced careless, badly spelt, natural compositions which had all the effect of speech and which hit their mark as unerringly as if she had had wit enough to take deliberate aim. They were alive, those effusions of hers, and they kept, for their recipient, life in the emotions which her bodily presence inspired. Of course she was frankly egotistical; it would never have entered into her head to be anything else. She did not ask, and doubtless did not care to know, what her distant friend was about; but she did want to tell him that she had had luck, or the reverse, at bridge, that Jimmy was too close-fisted for words, that she was staying in a house where the women were banded together to entreat

her despitefully, and so forth. Always and in particular that she was bored—hideously bored! Such interjected phrases as “I miss you *awfully!*” or “I want you every day!” or “*How* I wish you were here!” seemed to come from her heart. Possibly they did.

The wanderer, who had only named an approximate date for his return home, gave Paul a pleasant surprise by walking into the Chester Square study, unannounced, one afternoon. Bronzed by southern suns and salt breezes, he looked the very picture of health, as he stood, smoking a pipe, with his back to the fire, and all he had to say went towards showing that his mental condition was not less sound than his physical. Naturally, he had a great deal to say. He discoursed long and cheerfully to a pleased listener, and, since he claimed to have learnt no end of things, it seemed reasonable to hope that he might have forgotten some.

Paul expressed that hope, the next evening, to Mrs. Baldwin, who had amiably consented to dine with her old friend at the shortest notice and add her welcome to his.

“At Guy’s age,” he remarked, answering a direct query from her, “six months in changed and changing scenes should amply suffice for purposes of obliteration. Perhaps, if the truth were known, there wasn’t so very much to obliterate. He hasn’t mentioned her name yet.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t do that,” Mrs. Baldwin observed.

“Well, then, he hasn’t been to see her either. I can account for every minute of his time today. Her

ladyship, I suspect, is an extinct volcano, if she ever was an active one—which I am inclined to doubt.”

“Women of her variety,” said Mrs. Baldwin, “are in chronic eruption, like Stromboli. That, so far as it goes, may lessen their destructiveness, perhaps. I mean, she may be in pursuit of some fresh prey by this time; let us hope she is.”

Guy did not so much as know whether Lady Freda was in London or not. He proposed to find out soon; but such leisure time as he had during his first few days was willingly given to Audrey and Wattie Cleland, with whom it was delightful to be once more upon the old footing of familiarity. The latter, it struck him, was upon a somewhat more familiar footing in Cromwell Road than of yore and was somewhat more avowedly Audrey's bondsman. Poor Wattie! Well, every man, this young philosopher supposed, must needs pay tribute to the other sex in some shape or form, and a palpably hopeless attachment has the double advantage of being proof against disappointment and providing an outlet for natural instincts. He was not very far from regarding Lady Freda as his own safety-valve: probably he was the very first person to associate her with the idea of safety.

Of course Guy was alive to certain dangers and dilemmas which might arise out of resumed relations with a lady who rather relished than dreaded such things; these, however, he hoped, with a little luck and dexterity, to evade. If he had not been conspicuously dexterous in the past, he had at least been taught what to evade for the future, while his luck, in that connection, had hitherto been so bad that it

might fairly be expected to turn. Unfortunately, as every gambler knows, luck, good or bad, is much more likely to run in series than to alternate. Considering that the metropolis has some thirty or forty theatres and between four and five millions of inhabitants, Guy might justifiably have assumed (if he had thought about the matter at all) that in going to a play with the Baldwins and Wattie Cleland he took but an infinitesimal risk of encountering Captain and Lady Freda Barran. Nevertheless, there they were, seated in the next row of stalls behind him, and waved salutations necessarily followed mutual recognition. None were vouchsafed by Mrs. Baldwin, who, after glancing over her shoulder, developed a severe rigidity of spine. As for Guy, he said to himself that this was rather a nuisance, but that, after all, it might have been worse. For one thing, Lady Freda was attended by her husband, which was unwontedly conventional of her, and, for another, she was beyond speaking distance. The only question was whether he could possibly help approaching her and shaking hands after the first act. He was spared the responsibility of decision by Captain Barran, who pushed his way up immediately after the curtain had dropped and said, with his customary economy of words :

“ How are you ? My wife wants you to talk to her. I'm going to have a smoke.”

Even Mrs. Baldwin must have seen that such an invitation could not be declined, whatever she may have thought of the taste exhibited in despatching it. It was Audrey who, without turning her head, murmured under her breath, “ Don't ! ”

The young man understood. An opportunity had been given him of doing now what Audrey doubtless hoped and expected that he would end by doing. But the difficulty was that he did not intend to fulfil Audrey's anticipations in that respect; so he whispered hurriedly, "Must, I'm afraid! I'll be back in half a minute."

Well, it was really very pleasant to see Lady Freda again. Pleasant, too, to find her so unmistakably glad to see him, as well as generously willing to condone a remissness for which he could do no less than crave pardon.

"I saw in the papers that your steamer had arrived," she said; "so I was beginning to wonder a little why you didn't ring the door-bell. But never mind! The great thing is that you're back. Now when are we to meet? Because this can't be called a meeting, can it?"

It certainly could not be made into a private and confidential one, nor was it of long duration; for before the *entr'acte* was at an end Captain Barran returned and Guy was fain to rise.

"Jimmy," said Lady Freda, "you don't want to see the end of this piece, do you?"

"No," answered her nominal lord and master concisely.

"Then be off to your club, or whatever it is that you're pining for."

Captain Barran looked doubtful. "Better see you home first, hadn't I?" he suggested.

"I'm not going home; I'm going to finish the evening with bridge at Mrs. Beaumont's. I'm sure Mr.

Hilliar won't mind putting me into a cab when the thing is over."

"Right!" responded Captain Barran, and so departed, without further waste of God's great gift of speech.

It was a slightly dismayed man who prepared to drop into his vacated stall; but Lady Freda was, for once, reasonable and considerate.

"Oh, you be off too!" said she, laughing; "I mustn't get you into trouble with your Baldwins a second time. You might come back after the next act, though, if they'll let you."

He did that without asking for permission. Perhaps Audrey may have been aware that Captain Barran had quitted the theatre, but Mrs. Baldwin, more resolute than Lot's wife in the repression of feminine curiosity, had not looked round, did not mean to look round, and consequently could not tell whether or not Guy, when he stepped past her, was bent upon the legitimate solace of a cigarette.

It appeared that he would have time for one, since Lady Freda, the moment that he drew near, announced her own retirement. "I've had enough of this; I'm going home. Take me out and call a taxi for me, will you?"

"You have changed your mind about joining the bridge party, then?" said Guy.

"No, I haven't changed it; I never had the slightest intention of playing bridge tonight. I want my own fireside. Don't you want to come and share it with me?"

That was the very last thing that he wanted to

do; yet two or three minutes later he was being whirled towards Green Street in her company. Most of us, in the course of our lives, have been guilty of a few extraordinarily foolish actions, and have afterwards wondered what on earth made us commit them. Guy was often to wonder how he had been induced to yield to a request which ought not to have been put forward and compliance with which was only too sure to lead to distressing results. Lady Freda could have enlightened him if she had chosen. A pleading look, the light touch of her gloved fingers on his wrist, the hint of a sneer at his timidity . . . commonplace, threadbare tricks enough; yet so invariably effective and effectual! Thus Hercules submits to wind wool for Omphale, and Samson has his hair cut, and innumerable object lessons are furnished to a race which persistently declines to take warning by them.

CHAPTER XIII

CAPTAIN BARRAN FINDS HIS TONGUE

GUY HILLIAR had never been addicted to introspection and self-analysis; had indeed never had much spare time to devote to a study which certain philosophers have pronounced all-important, and which a great many people who are not philosophical pursue without conspicuous profit to themselves or anybody else. Intimate acquaintance with his own character and temperament, therefore, neither perplexed nor arrested him on his way through the world. Life, as he saw it, was an active, vivid affair, compact of the most diverse interests and demanding, if the best was to be got out of it, an alert mind, as well as a sound, hard body. Possibly it was because he possessed both qualifications that he was disposed, consciously or unconsciously, to regard women as occupying a subordinate position in the cosmic scheme. He liked them, he was not incapable of loving them; only he could not imagine them playing a controlling part in the evolution of his career. His theory respecting them—so far as he had any formulated theory—was that they were in essence incidental. Nevertheless, he had several times been impelled to the question of whether he was at all in love with Lady Freda

Barran, and had always answered, with a smile, that he supposed he was—a little. This did not strike him as a dangerous condition of things. With the pathetic, unwitting arrogance of youth, he believed that he was master of himself and that nobody—certainly no woman—would ever be able to lead or drive him against his will. Consequently, he sat silent in his corner of the taxicab; for it was entirely against his will that he was being driven to Green Street, and realisation of that fact gave him something to think about.

Lady Freda also remained silent throughout the brief transit. But when she had reached home, had opened the door with a latchkey and had conducted her companion into the familiar, oddly forlorn-looking drawingroom which contained so little that was feminine, except herself, she threw off her long ermine-lined cloak and, with it, her reticence.

“So much for old Mother Baldwin!” she cried, laughing aloud.

The young man frowned. “Oh, that’s it, is it?” said he rather curtly.

“Well, I owed her one. Ah, if only one could pay off all one’s debts so easily!”

“You didn’t find it very difficult, I must admit,” observed Guy, with a grim face.

“What will they do to you? Forbid you the privilege of their acquaintance for ever?”

“Yes, most likely. I shall have no right to complain if they do, and—they happen to be the last people in the world with whom I should have wished to quarrel.”

Lady Freda glanced at him quickly from beneath her drooped eyelids.

“ You would rather quarrel with me, then ? Why don't you ? You would be all in the fashion. You want to marry the girl, I suppose.”

“ It's fortunate for me that I don't, as she has never had any use for me, except in the capacity of a chum, and will have no use for me in that capacity henceforth. Is it quite worth while, do you think, to set people who are fond of each other by the ears for the sake of such a tuppenny triumph as this ? ”

“ Between ourselves,” answered Lady Freda, sinking down into a low chair, “ I often doubt whether anything is worth while. Well, I seem to have upset your little temper, anyhow.”

“ So that was your second object,” remarked Guy, who was decidedly upset and wished her to know it. “ You give yourself an amiable sort of character.”

Abruptly, and as if to offer herself to him under an aspect possibly more pleasing, she changed her whole tone. “ Don't be cross with me,” she pleaded in a lowered voice, “ because I can't bear it ! Haven't I had enough to try me ? I did behave well at the theatre ; nobody could have behaved better until—until I saw you and that girl laying your heads together, and then the Devil entered into me. I oughtn't to have whisked you off ; it wasn't a nice thing to do ; but—I wasn't feeling very nice. How would you feel, I wonder, if somebody whom you had been longing and longing for months to see came back from the other side of the world and never even gave himself the trouble to come near you ? ”

She held up her hand to check him, as he opened his lips. "Oh, please don't say you forgot! You have said that to me once, and one doesn't care about a repetition of such compliments."

"I didn't forget," Guy began; "but——"

"Very well; you didn't forget. Never mind the excuses; I'll forgive. I can't *not* forgive; I'm too desperately all alone! Now, if I say I'm sorry, will you forgive me?"

He did not believe that she was sorry; but he saw, or thought he saw, that she was hurt, and it was true that she had been rather cavalierly treated. His wrath began to evaporate.

"It's a pity," he remarked, with a short, vexed laugh, "that you behaved what you call well at the theatre. If you had hauled me over the coals then——"

"As if I could," she interrupted, "when we were squeezed up into a flock of strangers, like sheep in a pen! But don't I tell you that I'm not going to haul you over the coals at all? I'm not going to say another word about it. Only sit down and stop scowling!"

She half rose, stretched out her bare, white arms and, laying her hands upon his shoulders, gently forced him to seat himself on a footstool beside her chair. Then she gave him a long look and a long smile.

Well, she was a beautiful woman. She might also be a totally unprincipled one; but that was not his reading of her. He only thought her singularly imprudent, and under certain conditions imprudence

is not so very difficult to pardon. Moreover, that plea of her loneliness never failed to move him. He knew well enough that she had no friends; he thought the world at large was cruelly hard upon her; he did not doubt that she was afflicted with an impossible husband.

Presently she began to give instances of Captain Barran's increased impossibility. Of late, it seemed, he had taken it into his head to become jealous. "Jimmy jealous, if you please!—after all this time, and after the obstinately blind eye that I've turned to his own little ways of amusing himself! The other day he made quite a scene about Lord Dunridge—poor Dun, of all people! Dun isn't to come to the house any more. He will be putting you on the proscribed list next."

"I hope not," said Guy.

"Don't let him!" she exclaimed eagerly; "for the love of Heaven, don't let him! If it came to that, there would be nothing left for me but cyanide of potassium!"

However, she did not sustain the tragic note. After all, she may have reflected, this moment of joyful reunion was more appropriate for the soothing and cajoling of her hearer than for alarming him. She therefore demanded a detailed account of his travels, and while he talked—he was soon talking rapidly and graphically—she extended her toes to the fire and, half closing her eyes, slowly fanned herself.

The rhythmic swaying of the fan stirred his hair, wafting to him the faint odour of Parma violets which he associated with her; gradually the last

traces of his annoyance were dispelled and he surrendered himself to the charm of a situation which could not but appeal to any man's senses. Guy, it may be owned, liked to hear himself talk; he had a great deal to say and said it well; it was evident that Lady Freda liked listening to him. The best part of an hour slipped imperceptibly away. He was merely expatiating upon matters which interested him; he was not making love to the listening lady. Yet that was what he had every appearance of doing; so it was to be regretted that Captain Barran should fling the door open and march into the room before a change of attitude could be effected.

Captain Barran, whom three strides brought to the hearthrug, looked distinctly formidable. He had, of course, as good reason to look so as Guy, scrambling hastily to his feet, had for looking uncommonly foolish. But all he said, after he had glared at his wife in silence for a minute, was :

“Thought you told me you were going to Mrs. Beaumont's.”

“I changed my mind,” drawled Lady Freda, who, for her part, did not appear to be in the smallest degree disconcerted. Then she asked, through a yawn, “What brings you home so early?”

“Since you want to know,” answered her husband, “I wasn't quite sure that you were speaking the truth about Mrs. Beaumont and her bridge party. Seems you weren't.”

“Jimmy,” said Lady Freda, continuing to swing her fan languidly, “your manners are deplorable. I object to being addressed in that tone of voice.”

“Then don’t bring men here at midnight,” returned Captain Barran. “I won’t have it. It isn’t decent.”

This, at any rate, was plain language—so plain that it could hardly be allowed to pass unnoticed by the intruder. Yet Guy, generally quick of wit and speech in moments of emergency, found himself at a loss. *Qui s’excuse s’accuse*, he thought: besides, there was really no excuse to be made. The man was evidently very angry; his face was white, his brows were drawn together, his lower jaw jutted out combatively. Nevertheless, he had himself well in hand, and Guy could not help thinking that he cut, upon the whole, a better figure than his wife, who got up with much deliberation and said:

“I’m awfully sorry to have let you in for this sort of thing, Mr. Hilliar. Very likely he’ll be sorry too when he’s sober,” she added, jerking her fan disdainfully towards her husband.

“I’m sober,” said Captain Barran shortly; “I don’t drink, as you know. I think you might as well go to bed now.”

Was Lady Freda at all frightened? Perhaps she was wondering whether her visitor was, for she contemplated him curiously for an instant before moving towards the door, which her husband was holding open.

“Goodnight, Mr. Hilliar,” said she. “Mind you come and see me again soon.”

She swept out, leaving the two men together. She must have perceived that a breach of the peace was imminent; but whether she recognised that as unavoidable or whether—as seems more likely—she

had certain primordial feminine instincts with regard to male affrays, she made no attempt, verbal or other, to avert it.

As Captain Barran still held the door open, Guy could only assume that he was meant to walk out, and this he accordingly did. Upon the landing, however, he stood still and broke silence at last. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you have something to say to me."

The other nodded. "Yes, there's something. It won't take long. Just step into my den, will you? First door on the left at the bottom of the stairs."

Captain Barran's den merited its designation. It was a small, comfortless room, with very little in it, except a shabby armchair, a writing-table, a pile of gun-cases and another pile of japanned tin boxes. Over the mantelpiece were crossed foils and a rack of riding-whips; a few coloured prints, illustrative of fox-hunting and steeplechasing adventures, hung on the walls. The owner of this not very attractive retreat had the air of breathing more freely as soon as he had gained it. Without any prefatory remarks, he took off his coat and said :

"Now, young fellow, I'm going to give you a good, sound thrashing."

That caused Guy also to breathe more freely. It simplified things and enabled him to reply :

"Thrashing me, or trying to thrash me, will be a longish job, and it will be bound to kick up a devil of a shindy. Do you want everybody in the house to know what we are about?"

“ I said,” repeated Captain Barran doggedly, “ that I was going to give you a thrashing.”

“ Yes, I know; but you didn't say why. Understand, please, that I'm not a bit afraid of you. You're heavier than I am, but you're a good many years older, and I'm as active as a cat, besides being fairly good with my fists. I'll venture to promise that you don't touch me once in a quarter of an hour. So I needn't hesitate to tell you that you're exciting yourself about nothing.”

“ I don't know what you call nothing,” returned the other. “ I find you here in the middle of the night, sprawling at my wife's feet. That's enough for me.”

“ As you please; but you had better wait half a minute. Say, if you like, that it was foolish of Lady Freda to ask me to go home with her and foolish of me to come. But that's all there is to be said about it. I give you my word of honour that she isn't what you are foolish enough to take her for.”

Captain Barran's inexpressive countenance displayed an unusually rapid series of emotions, the final and predominant one of which was perhaps disappointment. It would have relieved him more than anything else in the world that he could think of to thrash somebody, (as a substitute for somebody else who could not be thrashed,) and it looked as though he would have to refuse himself his sole available solace. For this young donkey was obviously speaking the truth, so far as it was known to him. Nothing for it, apparently, but to resume the discarded coat and remark, with a sigh :

“ Well, I suppose the fact is that you meant no

particular harm and haven't done any. I accept your word of honour for that much. I wouldn't be in such a hurry to pledge it for other people, though, if I were you. My wife isn't what I'm foolish enough to take her for, eh? I wonder what you take her for yourself, since you're so wise!"

Guy was not averse to supplying the desired information. He really believed that he could diagnose Lady Freda with some accuracy, and, although he might well have borne a grudge against her for her inconsiderate conduct that evening, he had the magnanimity to depict her in flattering colours. Also he did not see why he should spare the stupid and selfish husband who was in fact to blame for all her follies and vagaries. He therefore delivered an honest and plain-spoken, if inevitably ludicrous, harangue, to which Captain Barran, leaning against the mantelpiece, with his back to the fire, listened in phlegmatic silence.

"Ah," observed the latter, when the orator had concluded; "so that's your way of looking at things, is it? Now perhaps you might care to hear mine."

"Oh, I daresay there's your side of the case," Guy generously conceded.

"There's my side, right enough. Mind you, I don't set up to be a model of domestic virtue; I expect I'm pretty much the same as other men whose wives don't make them too welcome at home. But I'll say this for myself, that I've been jolly indulgent. I never grudged Freda money as long as there was any, and I wasn't badly off when I married her. I haven't said much either about her pretty well

ruining me by her extravagance, and I haven't said much about her telling me lies when I've asked her what she owed—though that's a thing I don't like. Times and again I've been to my old father-in-law to get him to pay up, because I couldn't pay myself—and that's another thing I haven't liked. Now he says he'll be hanged if he'll pay up any more, and I'm sure I don't blame him. Well, I've stood being fleeced and humbugged and treated like a dog. No use in having rows. She went her way and I went mine; that was about the size of it. Only I always believed until a short time ago that she was straight. Straight about other men, I mean. You may have heard a different story."

"Oh, there are always sure to be ill-natured rumours about pretty women," said Guy, as Captain Barran paused in what was, for him, an almost unprecedentedly long speech. "I certainly did hear some gossip connected with Lord Dunridge."

"So did everybody else, it seems; a woman's husband is always the last to hear. Well, I've had a row with Dunridge."

"Yes; Lady Freda told me that you had. She couldn't understand your being jealous of him."

"I expect she could. Anyhow, I had a row with him, and I don't intend any other fellow to take his place. Upon my word, I don't know why I'm saying all this to you, unless it's because you strike me as such a decent, honourable sort of—of a damned fool, if you'll excuse my calling you so."

"I'm sure you mean to be complimentary," said Guy, smiling.

“ Really it’s what you are, you know, and if I tell you not to show your face here again, you ought to be much obliged to me.”

There was so little doubt about this that the young man himself was half tempted to acquiesce. Having heard the other side of the case, (and suspecting that he had not heard the whole of it either,) he could not help modifying his opinion of Lady Freda’s husband—even in some degree his opinion of Lady Freda. He still thought, however, that she was misunderstood, and he called to mind a rather piteous entreaty of hers.

“ Look here,” said he; “ of course you’re at liberty to forbid me your house; but I hope you won’t. Whether I’m a damned fool or not, you’re good enough to call me decent and honourable—which is more than some other fellow might be. And don’t you see that there’s bound to be some other fellow ? ”

Captain Barran appeared to be trying to think. Perhaps that was always a somewhat laborious operation with him. “ I don’t know much about you,” he remarked, after a long pause. “ Are you a rich man ? ”

“ Oh, Lord, no ! ”

“ So much the better for you ! Well, I don’t warn you off. Or rather, I do warn you; but if you won’t be warned, that’s your affair. You seem to me to offer yourself as a sort of lightning-conductor. Is that it ? ”

“ That’s near enough,” answered Guy, laughing.

“ Right ! I don’t quite see where the fun comes in

for you ; but I've no quarrel with lightning-conductors myself. Have a drink before you go ? ”

The two men shook hands at parting. It is always desirable to avoid scandal, and in so small a house scandal must needs have been the outcome of fist-cuffs ; yet the interests of one of them might have been better served by strife than by peace.

CHAPTER XIV

REVELATIONS

SOME years ago Londoners addicted to the healthy habit of riding in Hyde Park before breakfast were accustomed to meet a big grey horse, bestridden by a long-legged man of preoccupied and rather melancholy mien. Those who were acquainted with the solitary equestrian by name as well as by sight sometimes informed those who were not that he was Paul Lequesne, "the literary chap, you know," and not unfrequently added that he looked as if he continued to give his attention to literature even when he was in the saddle. However, he did not always look like that, nor was he always alone; for Miss Baldwin, to whom he had taken the liberty to present a hack, and who had been a crony of his from her childhood, enjoyed nothing more than being called for by him at an early hour when the weather was fine. There was not much to be said for the weather on a certain misty morning which saw these two cantering along Rotten Row together, except that it was not actually wet; but then if you want to have ocular proof of the sun's existence, you must not inhabit London in December.

"Any news from Liverpool?" the girl inquired, as they drew rein.

“ Oh, yes; news of a sort. The sort of news that I get from him nowadays. A great deal about the shipping industry and its engrossing interest.”

“ We had better thank our stars that it supplies engrossing interest, hadn't we ? ” suggested Audrey.

“ I suppose so. Perhaps he himself thanks his stars; but he tells me nothing. I don't know whether it was wisdom or chance or a genuine business claim that took him off to Liverpool in such a hurry.”

“ A little of all three, I daresay. Anyhow, it's a mercy that he went.”

“ I suppose so,” answered Paul again.

Of what had taken place at the theatre he only knew as much as Audrey and Mrs. Baldwin had told him. The former had not revealed, while the latter had not realised, quite everything. Mrs. Baldwin, owing to her determination not to bestow a second glance upon Lady Freda, had been left under the impression that Guy had gone away with her and Captain Barran, and the husband's supposed participation in an act of studied rudeness had appeared to her to be relatively extenuating. The studied rudeness, to be sure, was bad enough; so it was really fortunate that Guy should have departed for Liverpool, in obedience to a summons from old Mr. Cleland, before she had an opportunity of saying to him what she had said with much emphasis to Paul.

“ Long may he stay there ! ” Audrey resumed. “ It's rather hard on you, but it's the only remedy for him.”

“ Australia doesn't seem to have been a remedy,” observed Paul dejectedly.

“ No, it doesn't,” the girl had to admit; “ Australia has been rather disappointing. It ought to have cured him, for when he started on his travels, he wasn't. . . . At least, I don't think he was; but the truth is that I don't understand Guy as well as I did when he was a nice, athletic, hard-hearted boy. I don't understand the attraction of Lady Freda either; I shouldn't have thought her the least dangerous—to him. Unless it's dangerous to be merely handsome in a superb, unrefined way.”

“ I'm afraid it is,” sighed Paul.

“ Well, then, let us be grateful to the shipping industry. The things that one is reduced to being grateful for! Some day—as soon as it's safe—I'll pay Master Guy out for giving you all this worry. Meanwhile, don't worry too much, and don't take it into your head that he has changed to you, because that hasn't happened and never will. You see, this isn't the kind of thing that he *could* very well talk to you about, is it? ”

If Audrey did not understand Guy, she had no difficulty in understanding a person of more reserved character, and if she sometimes caused that very sensitive person to wince, she had her reasons. It was a great deal better for him, she thought, to be made aware that his secret soreness was perceptible to one sympathiser than to bottle it up and brood over it all alone.

“ Oh, he has changed,” said Paul; “ you yourself admit that he isn't what he was. It's true that he couldn't be. Time, unfortunately, effects transformations in everybody.”

“ Except in you and me. Now do you think we might have a mild gallop ? ”

A very brief space of time, when aided by circumstances, may produce the most salutary transformations, and Guy, safely out of the way at Liverpool, recognised that his sentiments with regard to a lady who had as nearly as possible got him into a horrid mess had become qualified. That her husband's account of her had been in the main true he could not doubt, and although he might still pity her and still believe that she had been in some respects misjudged, he was not much disposed to be the victim of further caprices. It was, in short, a great stroke of luck that the head of the firm should have desired to confer with him at a critical juncture, and, being where he was, his inclination was to remain there. As it happened, he was not really required at the London office, the management of which was safe in Walter's hands, while Liverpool afforded a more suitable field for the promotion of enterprises upon which he was bent. Of course he had to send Lady Freda a few explanatory lines, the reply to which he awaited with some trepidation; but at the end of a week she merely wrote to say that things might have fallen out worse, inasmuch as she was just starting for Monte Carlo and probably would not be back before the spring. To their last interrupted interview she made no allusion, nor did she mention her husband, beyond adding in a postscript that he was to escort her to the South. “ Troublesome!—but I suppose there will be pigeon-shooting for him while he stays, which isn't likely to be long.”

The coast being thus clear, Guy was able to spend Christmas in Chester Square, and that short holiday, at all events, was marred by no untoward incident. Short, however, it had to be.

"Can't help it," he said to Audrey, who remonstrated less on her own account than on Paul's. "I'm in the very thick of negotiations which are bound to stick fast or slide back the moment that I remove my shoulder from the wheel. Dear old Cleland knows in his heart that I'm right; only he is a trifle too advanced in life to have the courage of my opinions; so I must be upon the spot to keep shoving him along. By about the middle of next year, I expect, everything will be in working order and I shall have a chance to pause and mop my heated brow."

"And then?"

"Ah, I wonder! Having put that job through, one may want to go in for something else, I daresay."

"You always do and always will. Is there anything in the world, Guy, that you care about for its own sake?"

"Yes, my dear Audrey, your approval. And want is likely to be my master there up to the finish."

"You shall have it as soon as ever you deserve it."

"Yes, I can see the symbol of it from here!—a wreath tenderly laid upon my coffin. Only when you have lost me for ever will you appreciate me at my true worth."

He had somehow failed to appreciate her at hers. Vaguely conscious of this from time to time, he was accustomed to tell himself that all was for the best, considering how the least hint of even semi-jocular

sentiment exasperated her. But indeed nobody could have been much more impervious to the assaults of sentiment than he himself was at this period, and letters from the Riviera which showed an increasingly sentimental tendency left him securely cold. He had a feeling for Lady Freda—a very safe, harmless, well-controlled sort of feeling, to which perchance some indulgence might be accorded when he should have a little more time; but he was quite certain that he was not going to make a fool of himself about her.

It is a pity to be quite certain in any case to which there are two parties, one of whom is a woman. What was really certain was that a tacit challenge to Lady Freda Barran would be taken up, and Guy's replies to her letters, together with his obstinate refusal to quit the scene of his activities, did in effect constitute such a challenge. Many months, however, were still to elapse before the calling into requisition of weapons only available at close quarters could ensue. Summer was at its height when the definite amalgamation of several important shipping firms with that of Cleland and Son set the triumphant Guy free to return to London, and as a matter of course—or, at any rate, a matter of courtesy—he was in Green Street within twenty-four hours of his arrival.

It was a wan, listless and faintly smiling lady who held out her hand to him and thus threw him off his mental balance at the start. He had often seen Lady Freda look tired, discontented or cross, but never before had she presented herself to him under any other aspect than one of perfect physical health; so

he was as much shocked and distressed as he made haste to announce. But she assured him that she was not ill.

“ I'm all right. At least I shall be now that you have come at last. I've been a little bit—lonely sometimes, you know.”

She was not a good actress; her pathos was as unconvincing as powder and rouge. Yet bad actresses are applauded to the echo every night, and pinchbeck oratory spurs the emotions of multitudes, and if painted faces did not, somehow or other, achieve the aim of their disfigurement, they would not, it must be assumed, exhibit themselves in such profusion. Just because his perceptions were keen Guy was impressionable; also his instincts were generous, and he could not bear to think that any woman, not to mention a beautiful one, should have fretted over fancied neglect on his part. Thus he found himself saying things which might very well have been left unsaid; thereby evoking perilous rejoinders. There is no need to follow the successive steps of the ensuing duologue up to that step too far which was its predestined consummation. It is so easy—given favouring conditions—to exclaim “ I love you ! ”—so easy even to be momentarily sincere in the assertion. These stupid things are of daily occurrence and scarcely require explaining. Lady Freda's conclusion, however, may be worthy of record as a somewhat notable departure from use and wont in such amorous conjunctures.

“ This,” she remarked composedly, “ clears the air. Now that we have told one another all there is

to tell, we can go on being friends without any harassing *arrière pensée*."

The young man, who had been pacing to and fro, with a wrinkled forehead, stood still and stared at her. "But—how can we?" he ejaculated.

"Why shouldn't we? I'm content. I knew I cared for you; but you didn't seem as if you cared very much for me. Oh, a little, perhaps—not as I wanted you to care. So that was rather miserable. But I don't doubt any longer; you have given me your word . . ."

"Ah, yes, my word!" he broke in, already conscious of having given it in too great haste. "But, you see—well, the fact is I can't come here again without breaking my word. That night last winter I pledged my word of honour to Barran . . ."

Lady Freda interrupted in her turn by laughing, as at some highly diverting reminiscence. "So he told me. Poor Jimmy!—and poor you! It must have been awfully awkward for you both, but awfully comic. He was going to pound you to a jelly, wasn't he? And then it turned out that you were as innocent and transparent as the purest calves'-foot jelly, without any pounding. Don't look so savage. He said you were perfectly willing to fight, and he wasn't at all sure that you couldn't have knocked him out of time either. But he was sure you were innocent. So you are, you know."

Perhaps that is not the precise form of eulogy generally coveted by the young, and Guy's brow remained clouded. "Do you think so—still?" he asked.

She laid the tips of her fingers on his shoulders and kissed him lightly. "Silly boy, of course I do!" she answered; "and I love you all the better for it. I tell you I'm content; I ask for nothing more than to be loved a little in return. That's why we're going to be good—and happy."

Guy had grave doubts as to whether he was going to be happy and some as to whether Lady Freda was going to be good. For his own part, he could readily enough have accepted a Platonic attachment, if that were what she wanted; only he hardly saw how anything so lukewarm was reconcilable with their mutual avowals. Moreover, he did not at all relish the notion of playing Captain Barran false—for even a Platonic attachment would imply a breach of faith. He left the house presently with a humbled conscience and a hangdog mien. Doubtless, if he had been in love with Lady Freda, the casuistry employed by all illicit lovers would have come to his aid; but in love with her he was not, albeit forced in sheer self-defence to assure that humbled conscience of his that he was. Her physical charms, it was true, had power to stir his blood; her love for him (which must surely be real, or why should she have troubled her head about him?) flattered his vanity; her isolation (which was unquestionably a reality) moved him to sympathy and compassion; but her hold over him was no stronger than these things rendered it. Small wonder was it, therefore, that Paul Lequesne had an unusually taciturn and pre-occupied companion that evening.

It is a matter of universal experience that, however

bad things may have looked overnight, they look ten times worse in the morning; so the fact that Guy was able to whistle cheerfully while dressing, the next day, speaks volumes for the indomitable vitality which was his birthright. He had had no defeats in his life; only a few checks and reverses which it had been a pleasure to overcome. He was so accustomed to regard himself as ever victorious that even a dilemma from which no honourable or agreeable bolt-hole was at present to be discerned could not quench his optimism. He put it provisionally away from him when he set off for the City to impart divers interesting and important items of intelligence to the expectant Walter.

During business hours Walter Cleland was, generally speaking, a quiet, serious, heedful person. It was, therefore, both surprising and annoying to notice that his attention wandered whilst projects of a vital and far-reaching order were being lucidly explained to him and that every few minutes his features were contorted by an ill-suppressed, wholly inappropriate smile.

“What the deuce is the matter with you?” Guy exclaimed impatiently at last. “If you’re seeing yourself in some new comic part, might I suggest a postponement of the mental rehearsal?”

Wattie apologised. “Very sorry, old chap. I was really listening to every word you said; only I expect I had better make my confession to you before we settle down to talk shop. As a matter of fact, I *am* coming out in a new part, and I shouldn’t wonder if you were to call it a comic one. Anyhow, it’s

astonishing almost to the point of being incredible. To put it shortly, I'm going to be married."

"Never!" ejaculated Guy.

The other nodded. "I'm telling you the sober truth. I'm an engaged man; though I still have to keep on pinching my leg, so as to make sure that I'm myself. You haven't been round to Cromwell Road yet, I suppose?"

"Not yet. Have they heard about it there?"

"Heard about it yesterday afternoon," answered Wattie, with an outburst of ecstatic laughter, "and they were the very first to receive the news too. Come, Guy, you know well enough that there's only one girl whom I should ever dream of marrying. Of course you thought that she would never dream of marrying me, and so did I; but—well, what's the use of trying to account for miracles? I give you my word I had no more intention of proposing to her yesterday than I had of hugging Mrs. Baldwin; though I did both those things before I left the house. Why I can't tell you, except that they are just off to Switzerland for the rest of the summer and that I was rather down in the mouth at the thought of not seeing her again for such a long time. In one way or another it all came out—and I've been standing on my head, so to speak, ever since."

Guy's sensations were of a kindred, if less pleasurable, nature. He could not in the least understand, and could only with difficulty believe in, Audrey's choice. Certainly Wattie Cleland was a first-rate little fellow in his way and might even, from a worldly point of view, be accounted eligible; but . . . The

“ buts ” were so numerous and so prohibitory that they would hardly bear thinking of at a moment when one’s immediate, imperative duty was to say something friendly. The friendly speech found more or less adequate utterance, getting itself accomplished after a fashion, as necessary things always do. Probably it rang with as much sincerity as was required, since Wattie was encouraged to embark upon a prolix narration of events and incidents tending to throw light upon an otherwise incomprehensible climax. Audrey and he, it appeared, had been a great deal together while other people had been wandering round the world; they had found that they thought and felt alike about most things; they had, in a word, become fast friends. “ I don’t mean that I had the faintest hope of anything beyond friendship; you know how she bars love-making——” and so on and so forth.

Guy listened patiently, interjecting an occasional sympathetic murmur when that seemed to be expected of him. He was thinking, “ Perhaps it’s all right; I suppose it’s all right. I suppose she’s really as prosaic as she insists upon making herself out. But why, in the name of common sense, should this conclusive evidence of her being what she is open my eyes for the first time to the sickening truth that I have loved her myself all along ! ”

CHAPTER XV

MR. HILLIAR OF BUENOS AYRES

WHEN Guy returned from the City to Chester Square, he found a post-card, addressed to him, on the hall-table, and, after glancing at it, made a displeased grimace.

“ I shall be at home and alone at five o'clock tomorrow. Be a dear and come. F.”

He did not like the wording of the summons, and very much less did he like its being despatched on a post-card for servants to grin at. Was it out of carelessness or perversity that Lady Freda did these things? Either way, he was minded to disappoint her, and he would have paid her back forthwith by adopting a similar means of intimating that he was sorry he couldn't manage to call, if he had not remembered just in time that his response might fall into the hands of Captain Barran, who would, of course, be quite entitled to peruse it. Anybody is at liberty to read a post-card, and what if Paul, for instance, should have happened to read Lady Freda's? That was a rather disagreeable possibility.

However, Paul, who was not in the least more likely to look at a communication addressed to somebody else because it bore a half-penny stamp instead of a penny one, knew nothing about the matter.

What, as presently appeared, he did already know was the strange and unwelcome piece of news which Guy had to impart to him. Not that he admitted it to be unwelcome. He was brief and dry upon the subject, merely remarking that it was the natural result of two young people having been thrown together, he supposed.

“Well, but, hang it!—Wattie Cleland!” Guy protested. “And if it comes to throwing people together, how about Audrey and me? We’ve been a good deal thrown together, first and last.”

“Ah, you were so resolutely opposed to natural results!”

“One of us was, you mean! Yes, she was pretty resolute and explicit in my case, I must confess. There wasn’t any occasion to be so in Wattie’s, I should have thought. What does Mrs. Baldwin say to this?”

“I gather that she isn’t overjoyed; but I haven’t seen her. Audrey came here this afternoon to claim my felicitations.”

“Which you refused, I hope.”

“Why should you hope that I was so bad-mannered? Did you refuse good wishes to your friend?”

“That’s altogether different. For one thing, he’s deeply and honestly in love.”

“I have no reason to doubt that she is in the same enviable predicament. She told me she was perfectly happy, and she certainly looked so.”

“Oh, well!” answered Guy, with a touch of impatience, “if everybody is satisfied, there’s no more to be said.”

He had hoped that Paul would say a little more. He himself would have been ready, on slight encouragement, to say a great deal more. He was humbled, penitent, sick at heart, anxious for sympathy from a quarter whence he might well expect it to be forthcoming. Paul, on his side, desired nothing more earnestly than to be confided in; only he would not solicit confidences. In his heart he deplored Audrey's engagement; in his heart he had always cherished a lingering suspicion that she was fonder of Guy than she chose to acknowledge, while he knew that Guy was, in a manner, very fond of her. But then there had been this stupid entanglement with Lady Freda Barran, and now, so far as he could judge, the girl had really bestowed her affections upon a young man who loved her and was worthy of affection. It would be rather late in the day to offer advice respecting Audrey, even if he were asked for it; though advice respecting another person was to be had for the asking. The two men sat silent for a space, each waiting for the other to make a first move, and waiting, as was but natural, in vain.

"When do you think of going north?" Guy inquired at length.

"Oh, any day. I should have flitted before now if it hadn't been for the prospect of seeing you here. Is there much to detain you in London?"

"I don't think so," answered Guy, after a momentary hesitation. "One or two matters, perhaps, which may need looking into. *You* shan't be detained at any rate. I know you're sighing and dying to be off, and, between ourselves, so am I. You won't

have been at home long before I'm after you. I've earned a good solid holiday and I think we'll spend it together, just you and I, shall we?"

Paul's grave face was transfigured by one of his rare smiles. "Thank you," he replied simply.

"Hang women!" Guy burst out on a sudden.

"One can't do that to them, even when they deserve it. Sometimes it is possible to commute the sentence to banishment."

"H'm!—sometimes perhaps. At all events, I'm not sorry that the Baldwins are going to banish themselves for a bit. Do you know when they start for Switzerland?"

"Yes; the day after tomorrow."

"So soon? Then I must make time to go round there tomorrow and offer my most insincere congratulations."

It crossed his mind that here at least was an excellent excuse for neglecting one member of the sex upon which he had passed so sweeping a judgment; but indeed he was more in the mood to require excuses from Lady Freda than to offer her any. Meanwhile it was not impracticable to forget her. Interviews with sundry City magnates engaged his attention during the whole of the following morning, and in the afternoon he willingly took over correspondence which Wattie Cleland, who was eager to get away early (one could guess why) left him to tackle. He took it over willingly because he himself felt no great eagerness to pay an obligatory visit of congratulation, and as it kept him employed up to rather a late hour, he finally decided to postpone the discharge

of that duty until after dinner. It was no unusual thing for him to present himself in Cromwell Road during the evening.

He was just about to quit the office when one of the clerks came in to announce that a gentleman wished to see him, handing him at the same time a card upon which he was a little surprised to read the name of "Mr. Hilliar." He had always been given to understand that he was the sole survivor of his family; so this namesake of his, whatever might be his errand, could scarcely have called to claim consanguinity. But the elderly, neatly dressed man who presently entered was really a relative, it appeared, albeit a distant one.

"How distant I should be puzzled to tell you," said he. "I have lived nearly the whole of my life in South America, and should have lost touch with my people even if they hadn't all been dead and gone long ago. Still I do recollect your father, Jack Hilliar—wasn't his name Jack?—who died somewhere in Spain, I believe, in the year 1891 or thereabouts. So you are poor Jack Hilliar's boy! Yes, I can see that you have a look of him. A distinct likeness; though you have improved upon the original, if I may take the liberty of saying so."

There was something prepossessing about this stranger, who had the voice of a gentleman and whose clear blue eyes and healthy red-brown face, framed in a trim white beard, seemed to indicate a past given up to out-door sports rather than to the industrial activities by means of which he went on to state that his fortune—"such as it is"—had been made. It

was, in fact, upon matters connected with industry and commerce that he had wished to see Messrs. Cleland and Son's London representative.

“Your firm, I believe, is enlarging its operations, and I want you to be more interested than you have hitherto been in Buenos Ayres and Bahia Blanca.”

“I'm afraid there isn't much of an opening for us at either of those ports,” said Guy.

“Oh, pardon me; there's still an opening for a go-ahead steamship company, such as yours, notwithstanding the competition. But it isn't only as regards shipping that I should like to make Argentina—and perhaps you also—go ahead. I daresay you don't need to be told that Argentina is pretty prosperous, but I am sure you don't know—because very few people besides myself do—what immense possibilities of wealth are still waiting for development in that wonderful country.”

He enlarged upon the topic, talking very well, in a quiet, fluent way, and pointing out that facility and rapidity of transport were essential factors in schemes which he hoped to see operative before he died. “It's true that I'm no chicken; but I believe I have some years of work left in me yet, and at any rate I can't bring myself to sit still, twirling my thumbs, while life and health last. The joy of life is to keep moving and keep other people and things moving, don't you think so?”

It was to a kindred spirit that he appealed. Guy, stimulated, as always, by a suggestion of new ventures, took note of what he had been told, promised to write to his chief and hoped for further meetings

with his genial kinsman. Would not the latter call in Chester Square and be introduced to Mr. Lequesne, who would certainly be glad to make his acquaintance.

“Lequesne?” repeated Mr. Hilliar, pricking up his ears. “You don’t mean the great Lequesne, do you?”

“I suppose I do,” answered Guy, laughing. “I mean Paul Lequesne, the critic and essayist. He has been a father to me ever since I was a small orphan of nine, and I think him great. I don’t know whether the world at large does.”

“The world at large seldom does honour to men who are great in his particular line until after their death. Still, he has admirers already, even amongst the ignorant, and, as I am one of them, I should consider it a privilege to be presented to him. He lives in London, of course?”

“Well, reluctantly, for a part of the year. He has a house in Northumberland which he and I always call home, and, by the way, he is going there almost at once. If you want to make sure of seeing him, why not come and dine quietly with us tonight?”

Mr. Hilliar demurred. “It’s very kind of you,” he answered, with a smile, “and I should be delighted to accept Mr. Lequesne’s hospitality; but I think I must wait until he offers it.”

Guy, however, declared that there was no need to stand upon ceremony. “It’s an understood thing that I may ask any friends I please to dine, and if the cook sometimes objects to my bringing home half a dozen without notice, the master of the house never does. Indeed, it’s just what he likes.”

This was true enough; and Paul, when warned later that a guest was expected who was both a distant relative and a diligent student of his works, only expressed some natural curiosity as to the man's identity.

"I've no doubt he'll tell you what the exact relationship is if you ask him," said Guy. "I forget whether he told me or not; we were discussing Argentina most of the time. But you'll like him. He's brimful of ideas—information too, I suspect. He suited himself to me and talked business; but I shouldn't wonder if he was capable of talking literature or metaphysics with you. The impression one gets of him is that he wouldn't be out of his element in any company."

Such, in effect, was the impression produced upon his host by the spruce stranger who was announced at eight o'clock and who introduced himself, with an engaging blend of ease and deference, as "if not an old acquaintance, a very old and appreciative disciple." He was evidently taken with Guy, to whom Paul fancied that he displayed at moments traces of a family likeness. Certainly the two men seemed to resemble one another in character. Something buoyant, adventurous, goodhumouredly combative which distinguished them both made a bond of union between them and commended the elder to a third person who was very differently constituted.

If similar dispositions are drawn together like magnet and needle, there is also a powerful attraction in contrast; so that those whose shoulders have been bowed by a sedentary life must needs own the

fascination that belongs to brisk, vigorous, flat-backed coevals.

During the early part of dinner Paul remained, as was habitual with him, silently observant; but before the stage of dessert was reached he had been drawn into a conversation from which Guy gradually retired. An incidental, though possibly not undesigned, allusion of Mr. Hilliar's to Schopenhauer brought about this change of parts. Mr. Hilliar, it seemed, had studied the writings of Schopenhauer, as well as those of Kant, Spinoza, Descartes and other philosophers. Somewhat superficially, he confessed; still he had got at the gist of their respective theories and did not mind stating in colloquial language what he thought of them, even to a scholar and an expert. Paul, weary of learned treatises and the solemn ambiguity of skilled commentators, found this amusing and refreshing. He listened, laughed, consented to expound a little, admitted the validity of certain common-sense criticisms.

"Oh, everybody must be allowed a postulate to start with," he acknowledged. "Euclid himself can't get to work without postulates."

"Just so," returned the other, "and at that rate revealed religion, for instance, stands upon all fours with science and philosophy. Postulate for postulate, the one best fitted to meet human requirements might as well be granted."

"It makes rather more exacting demands than the others," Paul observed.

"Doesn't that depend upon how you look at it? Nothing can be absolutely proved; it's only by an

illusion or an assumption that we arrive at what we call proof. Christianity may be an illusion and Evolution is an assumption. The one is at least attractive, picturesque and decisive, whereas the other, besides being abominably depressing and ugly, leaves the general mystery as dark as ever, after all. I'm a Catholic myself," Mr. Hilliar rather unexpectedly added.

Paul lifted his eyebrows. "I shouldn't have gathered that from what you have been saying," he remarked.

"Well, in the absence of priests one permits oneself some liberty of speech. It was a priest in Rosario who made a willing convert of me some years ago. He wasn't as exacting as you might suppose, nor was I. Of course I had to swallow the Tridentine Creed; but I may have swallowed some tougher morsels than that in my day. You see, Mr. Lequesne, it had to be that or Atheism, and of the two alternatives I preferred Pope Pius the Fourth. To be, as I believe you are, a calm, reasonable, moral Agnostic one must be a genuine *esprit fort*. I respectfully admire your attitude; only I can't quite rise to it."

Paul was not at all fond of defining his personal attitude with regard to theology, philosophy or ethics. What he had to say upon the point he said (and that mostly by inference) in print. If on this occasion he departed from custom, it was more because Mr. Hilliar excited his interest and curiosity than because he felt called upon to explain why he himself could do no otherwise than hold judgment

in abeyance. The two had begun to smoke and were deep in debate when Guy, slipping quietly out of the room, shaped a course for Cromwell Road.

He found the household in that state of hurry and flurry which no woman, be she never so well provided with servants, seems able to avoid on the eve of a journey, and although he was made verbally welcome, he perceived at once that the omission of his visit would have been neither noticed nor resented. Mrs. Baldwin, who was busily writing letters, returned to her occupation the moment after she had shaken hands with him, while Audrey cut short gracefully worded felicitations with—

“Thanks very much indeed; but I haven't time to talk. Really and truly I haven't! Wattie is in the dining-room, helping me to put away china that we don't want smashed, and unless I help him to help me, he'll deliver the charwoman from evil by smashing most of it himself. Sit down and entertain mother for a little quarter of an hour.”

Mrs. Baldwin's back appeared to symbolise disinclination for entertainment. The intermittent remarks which she flung over it proclaimed, further, that she was in no genial mood.

“You needn't trouble to say things that you can't possibly mean. Of course I'm as much disgusted as you are—or ought to be. . . . She might have married anybody! And then to take this funny little nobody, whom one had never thought of, except as a sort of good-natured, grown-up errand boy! . . . Fond of him? Oh, don't ask me; I can't pretend to understand Audrey. She says she

is ; but really, with his utter insignificance and his middle-class connections and his turned-up nose and all ! . . . Yes, I know he's well off ; I only wish he wasn't ! Then one might have some excuse for forbidding the banns. Not that there would be much use in my forbidding anything. Parents are helpless nowadays. Happen what may, one has to grin and bear it."

Parents and others must needs bear with a young lady whose mind is made up. Perhaps it is not imperative to grin ; and indeed when the betrothed pair entered, after the completion of their labours, Wattie seemed capable of undertaking all the grinning that the case might demand. Audrey, too, was unmistakably, if incomprehensibly, radiant. It was difficult to talk to her, difficult to throw a discreet veil over regrets which were all the more poignant because her manner showed that she had no faintest suspicion of their existence. Guy, who got up as soon as he could, was not pressed to linger.

"We shall be back by the beginning of October," were Audrey's parting words. "Look us up if you are in London then ; but I rather hope you won't be. I hope you're going to give the whole autumn to Stone Hall and Mr. Lequesne."

Guy hoped so too. He hoped, at any rate, that it would be practicable for him to show London a clean pair of heels. It is bad to become enamoured of a married woman, worse to avow your love, worse still to find that you have avowed it without being in love at all. But what is enough to make the average man despair is the discovery that he has done

this while his whole heart has been given to another person who would not have thanked him for the gift even if he had been free to offer and she free to accept it. Guy differed from the average man in so far as that he was resolute against allowing any woman or women to reduce him to despair. Nevertheless, it was with a bent head and a bitter taste in his mouth that he strode eastwards, wondering, as he walked, whether he might not hit upon some pretext for leaving England and remaining absent a long time. Buenos Ayres, perhaps, in furtherance of schemes sketched out by Mr. Hilliar ?

CHAPTER XVI

THE AMIABLE MARPLOT

IF the Church of Rome, to which Mr. Hilliar had proclaimed himself obedient, refuses the right of private judgment in matters of faith, she allows it with regard to the affairs of this world, and scarcely had Guy left Paul and his guest to continue their conversation when the latter, abruptly discarding theology and philosophy, proceeded to make known in what manner he had exercised that privilege.

“It has been a great pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lequesne,” said he, “but the present moment seems a good one for me to tell you that this is not our first meeting. I almost think I should have recognised you, though I see you don’t remember me.”

Paul, after a long look at the other, shook his head. “I have no recollection of your face,” he confessed.

“Oh, you wouldn’t be likely to have any. It was too long ago, and I daresay you didn’t notice me particularly on the occasion. But can you carry your memory as far back as the summer of 1882, when you were staying with some friends in Kent and when you went over to Folkestone for a day to see some cousins of yours, Clements by name?”

“Perfectly well. I have often thought of that day since, because that was the first and only time

that I set eyes on Guy's mother, Rosamond Clements. A pretty, delicate-looking girl who had just engaged herself, rather against her people's wish, to the man whom I believe she soon afterwards married. Her *fiancé* had gone over to Paris upon I forget what errand, and I remember that we all walked down to the harbour to meet him when the steamer came in."

Mr. Hilliar nodded. "That's right. I wonder whether you remember that he brought Miss Rosamond a big box of bonbons, which she made a point of distributing to you all, as you walked up the hill."

"I believe I do—dimly."

"The bombardment of Alexandria was over; Tel-el-Kebir was coming. The French, beginning to realise what a mistake they had made, were furious with us. Jack Hilliar, who had a number of French acquaintances, reported that they would hardly speak to him. There was a good deal of talk amongst you about the situation."

"Yes—yes; it comes back to me," said Paul, with a sigh.

It came back to him suddenly and vividly, that hot summer afternoon of more than a quarter of a century ago; the hazy blue sky, the glare of the white cliffs, the cheerful chatter of voices long silenced, the young fellow, fresh from Oxford and full of the joy of life, who had borne his name. How many times we die before we draw our last breath!

"Well," Mr. Hilliar resumed, "these are trifles; I only mention them partly to put you in the atmosphere, as it were, partly because they have some independent value. There's another little incident

which you may recall. The craze for tattooing, which afterwards became so fashionable, had been started by a Japanese professor of the art in Paris, and Jack Hilliar had been persuaded to have his arm adorned with an Oriental device into which his sweetheart's initials were introduced. He exhibited it to her while you were having tea at the Clements's lodgings."

"He did. I remember his saying that she wouldn't be able to disown him now that he bore her brand. But how do you know all this? I don't see you as one of the party."

"I was there, all the same," returned Mr. Hilliar, laughing.

He unfastened his sleeve-link and displayed a muscular forearm, on the inner side of which, stretching from wrist to elbow, was a representation in divers colours of a dragon. Conspicuous in one of the loops formed by the monster's spiral tail stood out the letters R.C.

To say that Paul experienced a painful shock is to give a very inadequate description of his sensations. On the instant he perceived all that this astounding revelation meant for him, and it was as if his little world had been brought crashing down about his ears. Almost simultaneously, however, the conviction that the man must be an impostor came home to him.

"But—it's impossible!" he exclaimed.

"You may well think so," assented the other, smiling. "For all that, it's a cold fact that I am Jack Hilliar—at your service. And when I say at

your service, Mr. Lequesne, let me make haste to add that I mean what I say. I haven't breathed a word to the boy, and I won't do so without permission from you. I fully acknowledge that you have acquired rights and that I have forfeited mine."

The generosity of the admission was scarcely noticed by Paul, whose momentary dismay had been succeeded by an incredulity for which there was ample and solid ground. He said :

"John Hilliar died at Malaga in 1891. In the next room I have documentary and official proofs of his death. Excuse me one minute."

He stalked out and presently returned, carrying a small sheaf of papers which he handed to the pretender, who continued to smile while examining them, but who owned that they did, upon the face of them, appear tolerably conclusive.

"Of course these are forgeries; still I'm bound to say that they're uncommonly clever ones. How on earth did Vigors, who, I presume, supplied them, get hold of those stamped certificates, I wonder! And the letter from the parson, too, with that allusion to 'Mr. Vigors's devotion to his friend and efficiency under trying circumstances'—what a characteristic touch! Well, there's no denying that he was a devilish clever fellow, if one couldn't call him an estimable one. By the way, what has become of Vigors? But I suppose you don't know."

"As far as I am aware," answered Paul, "nobody does. Probably he is dead. He turned out to be a swindler, and I believe he would have been arrested by the police if he had set foot in this country again.

But that did not seem to be any reason for questioning the authenticity of documents which were attested by the Spanish authorities, and in the presence of them I must still remain of opinion . . .”

“That Jack Hilliar is defunct? Then, my dear sir, what do you make of me, pray? I don't lay special stress upon that marked arm of mine, which may strike you, I daresay, as reminiscent of old-fashioned dramas; but haven't I put you in mind of things which only you and I could know? No doubt, if I had wanted to personate a dead man, I might have had my arm tattooed in imitation of his; but it would be rather difficult to conjecture my motive. Because I am sorry to say—and, for that matter, you may be aware—that my past was hardly one which a respectable, elderly man would be eager to appropriate. What is more to the point, and what you will naturally wish to have cleared up, is Vigors's motive for representing that I had died and been buried at Malaga. Well, I can explain that. The fact is that Vigors believed he had killed me. You would like particulars, no doubt?”

“If you please,” said Paul.

“I'll be as concise as I can. You seem to have been informed that Vigors was a bad lot, and, not to mince matters, I'll say frankly that there wasn't a great deal to choose between him and me. I'm not here to make excuses for myself; of course there can't be much excuse for a married man who gambles away the whole of his small patrimony and is reduced to supporting a sick wife and a child by his wits. The necessity of supporting them by hook or by crook

doesn't whitewash shady transactions, and some of my transactions were shady enough. Also they took me into shady company. Vigors and I were birds of a feather—birds of prey who hunted together, despoiling geese and pigeons of their plumage. Sometimes, after the manner of predatory creatures, we used to fall out over the booty, and we fell out pretty seriously one day at San Sebastian, where he had taken the bank at baccarat and showed an unsportsmanlike inclination to hang on to his winnings. It was an understood thing that we should go shares on such occasions; so you may imagine how disgusted I was with him for trying to make out that there had been no agreement that time. We walked along the cliffs together, arguing the point, and whether we ended by actually coming to blows or not I can't tell you. Nor can I say for certain that he meant to push me over the edge into the sea. Perhaps he didn't; let us give him the benefit of the doubt. But I presume he didn't allow himself the benefit of any doubt as to the result; for he was off without troubling to make any investigations. That was just like Vigors. A quick-witted fellow, but always prone to act on impulse. His obvious course was to run back, announce that I had met with a fatal accident and organise a search party: instead of adopting it, he bolted. When I crawled into San Sebastian late that night, I was told that he had been obliged to start for Madrid, that he had left a message for me to that effect, and that he had appeared to be very much vexed by my absence, for which he had professed to be unable to account. No wonder he took

it for granted that I had been killed! I most undoubtedly ought to have been, and to this day I have no notion why I wasn't. Something must have broken my fall, and I suppose that, by good luck, the tide was on the ebb. All I remember is coming to myself on a patch of sand after sunset, drenched to the skin and rather badly bruised, but with all my bones intact. You may ask why I didn't give chase. Well, for one reason, I couldn't. I had been a good deal knocked about, and it was a case of bed for several days. Then again I didn't know what had become of Vigers and wasn't over and above anxious to renew our partnership. Finally, it occurred to me, while I was lying in bed and thinking things over, that I might do worse than take this opportunity of disappearing. Heartless and unprincipled? No, not so very. I was almost at the end of my resources, my poor wife was dead, and the boy was under the care of those worthy Eastwoods, who couldn't let him starve. Vigers was bound to account for me in one way or another, and I guessed that he would trump up some such yarn as he actually did. Looking back now, I really think that I acted wisely and considerately. Ten days later I was at sea, on my way to Buenos Ayres. A casual meeting in a billiard-room with a man who had just come from those parts, and who painted the country in glowing colours, decided me to give Argentina a trial."

"And you have been there ever since?" asked Paul, as the narrator paused.

"Not quite ever since. After I had been there a couple of years and had scraped together a little

money, I took a trip across to Bordeaux and Arcachon, meaning to look up Eastwood and perhaps take the boy off his hands. But poor Eastwood was dead, and the family had left. A former servant of theirs, who didn't know who I was, was very communicative and gave me all the information she had, telling me, amongst other things, that Guy had been adopted by you. Can you wonder that I didn't care to disturb an arrangement so infinitely more advantageous for him than any that I could have substituted for it? I said to myself, 'Jack, my friend, back you go to Buenos Ayres until you have made your fortune and can hold up your head again.' And back I went."

"There is one thing in Mr. Vigors's alleged conduct which strikes me as unaccountable," observed Paul meditatively. "You say he was under the impression that he had killed you. But then he must have seen the probability of your body being found and his fabricated story exposed."

"One would think so; but, as I said before, Vigors was a man of impulse. He may have hoped that tides and currents and fishes would be his salvation; though it's more likely that his one idea was to get away as fast as express trains could take him. I don't pretend to explain Vigors; I'm only telling you as much as I know of the truth."

It all sounded extremely like the truth. It was, in any case, palpably, painfully true that the man was Guy's father; which was the one and only thing that signified. His fortune was presumably made, his shapely grey head was up, his right to disturb an

arrangement grounded upon his supposed demise was incontestable. He himself, however, repeated that he considered that right a forfeited one.

“Please don’t look so distressed, Mr. Lequesne. I quite understand how you feel. You are fond of the lad; you would hate to be deprived of him; you think he belongs to you a great deal more than he does to me—and so, in common reason and justice, he does. Let me say once more that I am at your orders. Tell me to hold my tongue and mum shall be the word. You won’t, I am sure, ask me to drop his acquaintance. There is such a thing as natural affection, though I haven’t displayed any during all these years. But, apart from that, I must own that he fairly delights me. I was certain that he would when I heard of him out in South America and gathered what his aptitudes were. In fact, it was much more an irresistible craving to talk with him than a wish to get into business relations with Clelands and other firms that brought me to England, and he more than fulfils my hopes. However, if I may be allowed to see a little of him in my present character of a distant relative, I shall be satisfied.”

“I am obliged to you for the suggestion,” answered Paul a trifle drily, “but I should not wish to deceive Guy upon this or any other subject; nor do I see how it could be practicable to deceive him for long. What occurs to me is that, at his age, he can no longer be said to be dependent upon me.”

“He is dependent upon you for an income, I presume,” observed Mr. Hilliar, laughing.

“No; I believe he is earning quite enough to keep

him. I do make him an allowance, of course; but, for anything I know, the changed circumstances may make him wish that to be discontinued."

If Mr. Hilliar looked taken aback for one instant, the emotion was so slight and so transient that Paul, who was watching him like a cat, could not have sworn to it.

"I hope," was his prompt rejoinder, "you don't suspect me of mercenary motives. Naturally, I should be sorry if my son's prospects were to be injured by my reappearance, and the more so because I myself have done nothing at all for him; but when I offered to maintain my incognito, I was thinking more of you than of him."

"Maintaining your incognito is out of the question," said Paul. "What the consequences of dismissing it are to be Guy, I think, will have to decide. Mercenary considerations are most unlikely to weigh with him. But, for the rest, although he is a full-grown man, who can make a home for himself when and where he likes, there remains a species of authority and responsibility, based upon sentiment, which must be either yours or mine. In short, a man can't have two fathers."

"So that he will have to choose between us, you mean?"

"Bluntly put, it comes to that. Many people might consider that he has no choice, seeing that you are really his father, whereas I have only stood *in loco parentis*; still the case is an abnormal one, and I think there is perhaps something in what you say about your having forfeited your rights."

“There is so much in it, my dear sir, that I am prepared to make formal renouncement of them. But why, if I may ask, must you needs place both me and the boy in such a painful predicament? Can't I be accepted simply as a returned prodigal father, who claims nothing and asks nothing, unless it be a small share of the affection which he hasn't earned? Remember old Louis XVIII—‘*Rien n'est changé, il n'y a qu'un Français de plus.*'”

“He didn't mean what he said, and if he had, he would have been talking flat nonsense. Facts are not affected, one way or the other, by a phrase.”

Mr. Hilliar smiled and made a deprecating gesture. “Well, what would you have me do? I can't help my existence being a fact, can I? It's true that I needn't have divulged it to you, and I begin to be almost sorry that I did; but I beg to say once more that, as far as I am concerned, you are at liberty to keep it to yourself for ever.”

The reiteration of this absurd permission drew no acknowledgment from Paul, who only remarked:

“I shall not bring any sort of pressure to bear upon Guy, and of course I shall not repeat everything that you have told me about your past life. I shall lay the bare facts before him and leave him free to shape his future as he may think best.”

“Then,” answered Mr. Hilliar, laughing good-humouredly, “I believe I can guess what his choice will be, and I assure you I shall not grumble at it. Now I had better take myself off, so that you and he may have the field clear. I am staying at the

Carlton Hotel, where a note or a message will find me when I am wanted."

After he had gone, Paul experienced some twinges of compunction. He certainly had not been over cordial to a man whom, in spite of everything, he could not help rather liking, nor, perhaps, was it quite fair to assume that Mr. Hilliar's self-abnegation implied a lively sense of possible benefits to come. On the other hand, who could be expected to speak smooth things to so unforeseen and so disastrously inopportune a marplot ?

CHAPTER XVII

A LOOPHOLE

“It’s queer to find that one has an authentic father,” remarked Guy musingly; “but really it isn’t at all unpleasant. I’m sorry he should have thought that I might wish to disown him, poor old chap! On the contrary, I don’t know that I have ever taken a greater liking to anybody in such a short space of time.”

There is always, of course, some difficulty in foretelling how people will receive revolutionary tidings; but Paul had hardly been prepared for so calm and—to his sense—so inept a comment as this upon the long story which he had striven to narrate with strict accuracy and impartiality.

“The question of your wishing to disown your father didn’t arise,” he said; “Mr. Hilliar’s suggestion was that you should be kept in ignorance of the fact that he is your father. It was well meant, no doubt, and though it couldn’t possibly be entertained, I don’t, under all circumstances, so very much wonder that he should have made it.”

“Because of his having deserted me in my childhood? Yes; but I can’t, after all, be said to have suffered, and one sees his idea. I rather admire him

for preferring to remain dead until he could feel that he might creditably come to life again."

Paul, unable to rise to the level of admiring Mr. Hillair, made no rejoinder, and presently Guy resumed:

"There's no reason why everybody shouldn't be told, I suppose?"

"None at all. Indeed, it's unavoidable that the truth should be told. The point is—how will your future be affected by this?"

"Oh, not in any disagreeable way, I hope. He and I are interested in much the same sort of things. He'll wish me to stick to my trade, I expect."

"Perhaps. Only he may wish, naturally enough, to have you near him. And, from what he said, I gathered that he means to return to Argentina."

To Paul's anxious eyes the smile with which Guy greeted this feeler looked cruelly significant. The boy had always been like that—always attracted and stimulated by fresh departures, always ready to accept change, never reluctant to break with a played-out past. He had not seemed to mind leaving either Eton or Oxford, though he had had so many friends and such happy days in both places. Possibly it was essential to his vitality and efficiency that he should be a little hard of heart.

The appreciation was scarcely fair. Paul did not know what good cause the young man had for longing to be out of England; much less did he suspect that his own unnecessarily hard and dry recital had quenched confidential inclinations. Guy, thoroughly out of conceit with himself, had come home in a frame of mind to welcome sympathy and counsel.

For a very little he would have told his old man all about his newly discovered love for Audrey, all about his foolish affair with Lady Freda. But his tentative preamble had been checked by a statement so delivered as to make him doubt whether he had not lost something of his old man's affection. He had fancied of late—not altogether without reason—that Paul had changed to him, and the intimation that the future was at his own disposal had neither escaped him nor failed to cause him a pang which he would not for the world have betrayed. Just because he was fonder of Paul than of any other human being (with the possible exception of Audrey Baldwin) he could not let himself assume an injured air, and that was partly why he replied, in a tone of cheerful acquiescence :

“ Well, Argentina would do me all right. As it happens, I might easily go out there in the interests of the firm.”

“ Yes ? ” said Paul interrogatively. And then : “ But you won't be starting tomorrow or next day, I presume.”

“ Goodness, no ! Am I not to have my summer and autumn holiday at Stone Hall ? ”

“ I hope you are. I shall be off there myself tomorrow, I think, and perhaps you will join me when you can.”

After all, he could not bring himself to say what he had made up his mind to say. Granted that the choice between him and Mr. Hilliar would have to be taken, it did not follow that Guy ought to be confronted there and then with alternatives and

required to leap before he had had time to look. Besides, Guy understood. The trivial circumstance that he had spoken of "Stone Hall," instead of "home" was evidence enough to Paul's acute sensibility of his having understood. As for himself, he was probably best out of the way. Giving frank utterance to this impression, he was not contradicted; nor was he invited—as surely he might have been!—to give some sort of lead to one whose decision could not be but still unformed.

He was not invited to give a lead because Guy knew very well that he would refuse to do any such thing. That may have been a sufficient reason for abstention; but there was no obvious reason for seeking counsel in a far less trustworthy quarter—unless indeed that method of eliminating other themes of conversation in the same quarter might be accounted as such. It was on the next afternoon that Lady Freda Barran—a little cross at first, owing to her ignored summons, but easily placated, as usual—was informed of what had befallen her young friend, and her advice, if somewhat cynical, was much to the point.

"Let them fight over you, like Solomon's two ladies over the baby. They'll end by compromising, as the others didn't; you'll be painlessly chopped in half, and you'll score both ways. What sort of a person is he, this long-lost parent of yours?"

"Oh, he's splendid! I've been spending the whole day with him, and if we had spent the last twenty years together we couldn't have got on better. We really did spend fractions of the first

nine years of my life together. I recognised him perfectly as soon as he began to remind me of those old days and of his having taught me to swim and a heap of other things. If he hadn't grown a beard and if his hair hadn't turned white, he would look just the same now as he did then."

"Rich?"

"I don't know; but I fancy he must be fairly well off."

"And not exacting, you say?"

"Anything but! It isn't he who wants to put me in a fix. In fact, he doesn't see why there should be one."

"Oh, well, then, that simplifies matters. You have only to say that common decency and gratitude and all that forbid you to throw over Mr. Lequesne."

"So my father thinks; but I'm not sure that I want what you and he think I ought to want. Or rather, I'm quite sure I don't. That 'scoring both ways,' as you put it, is just what I don't fancy."

"You're a dear," said Lady Freda, "but you're an awful donkey. What is this fidgety old Lequesne driving at, anyhow?"

"I wish I knew! Sometimes I wonder whether he hasn't had about enough of me. When one comes to think of it, I must have been a good deal of a disappointment to him."

"Rubbish! You couldn't disappoint anybody if you tried."

"I'm afraid I've managed it in his case. He was tremendously proud of me and my small triumphs when I was a boy; most likely he expected them to

be followed by successes in literature or politics. Commerce says nothing to him. If he were to speak his whole mind, he would have to own that he looks upon trade as a calling for the vulgar."

Lady Freda yawned. Other people's affairs seldom held her attention for long, nor did it seem to her to matter in the least what Mr. Lequesne's tastes might be, provided he made the right kind of will—which thing he could in all probability be relied upon to do. She shifted the talk to a subject which never bored her, though it was beginning, unfortunately, to bore her hearer. Casually it came out that she would soon be turning her back upon London. Goodwood and Cowes claimed her; after which there would be Scotland, she supposed.

"It's disgusting to think of what an age it may be before we meet again! Still one never knows; opportunities may crop up, and I daresay I could get you some shooting invitations later. Promise to accept them if I do!"

He gave provisional pledges with alacrity. At the back of his mind he knew that he was not going to be tempted to Scotland by any bait, whether sporting or amatory, but it seemed allowable to say that he would respond to signals unless unavoidably hindered. Hindrances would not be far to seek.

How glad he was to emerge from the siren's dwelling into the fresh air! How strange it seemed to him that he should ever have pictured Lady Freda as a siren at all! Nevertheless, he was aware that release could only be temporary, that he was committed for good, if not for positive ill, that he was

bound in honour, or dishonour, by his own words. Possibly that was a rather exaggerated view to take; possibly he would not have taken it if he had been a little older and a little more conversant with the ways of the world. But, being young, chivalrous and in some directions credulous, he saw himself caught in a net from which there was no escape, save the imperfect one of not thinking about it.

That sedative he was enabled to employ for all it was worth, and no doubt it was worth a good deal to him. He was given plenty to think about during the weeks that followed—weeks given up in a great measure to the furtherance of an undertaking which his energetic father had crossed the Atlantic to push. The Chaco Development Company already existed, though scarcely as yet in more than embryonic shape, owing to the apathy with which its proposed operations were regarded in Buenos Ayres. The vast forests of Northern Argentina, so rich in valuable timber, so difficult of access, remained unexploited and almost unexplored, Mr. Hilliar said, by a community amply engaged in the facile accumulation of pastoral wealth. British enterprise and British capital were needed; only they must be forthcoming without too long delay, lest the Germans or the Americans should step in and a magnificent opening be for ever closed. With his prospectuses, his maps, his statistics, his personal knowledge of the district in question, he was persuasive and convincing. It was not Guy alone who found him so, nor was his reception, either in business or in social circles, a cold one. That a man's father should drop abruptly

from the clouds, after having been reputed dead and buried for a matter of seventeen years, might seem upon the face of it to be an incident demanding some explanation; but in truth Guy's friends demanded remarkably little. It was, after all, his affair, not theirs, and since he was apparently pleased, they had no reason to be otherwise. With frank, genial Mr. Hilliar they could hardly help being pleased. At the same time, solid, stolid capitalists could not be expected to take him on trust merely because he had nice manners and because his son was a youngster of proved ability. He himself was conscious of this.

"I must meet your senior partner," he said. "For one thing his support will be of great use to us, and, for another, I confess I should like to see Cleland and Son getting the lion's share of the huge profits which we shall be making in a year or two."

So there was a visit to Liverpool and there were several long colloquies with Mr. Cleland which moved that ordinarily cautious old gentleman to something bordering upon enthusiasm. Strange to say, it was Guy who on this occasion deprecated precipitancy and pointed out that it would not do for the firm, as such, to finance a company unconnected with shipping. Prone to enthusiasm himself, he recognised that his father was equally so, and just because his own uniform success thus far in what had looked like bold ventures had won him the well-nigh blind confidence of the senior partner he dreaded to take undue advantage thereof. It might be, probably it was, true that those remote forests contained any amount

of *quebracho* timber which was worth any amount of money; but whether the difficulty and expense of bringing it to market might not prove prohibitory remained to be seen. His two elders were disposed to smile at him. One of them had worked out a rough estimate of the cost of constructing a light railway; the other, while agreeing that the firm must not—for the present, at any rate—“take a hand,” went so far as to estimate that, upon the receipt of fuller information, he and others might raise the bulk of the requisite capital amongst them. That was all that Mr. Hilliar wanted. Finally, it was decided that a competent person (the competent person was easily named) should be sent out to survey and report upon the district—which was all that Guy wanted.

“We’ll make the trip together,” his father said to him afterwards. “That is, I’ll go a part of the way with you; for I’m afraid my days of camping out and roughing it are over. Well, now that you have got leave of absence from your firm, the next thing will be to get leave from Mr. Lequesne.”

He made it a point that that permission should be requested. He said he felt uncomfortably guilty as it was, and he would never forgive himself if an estrangement for which there was no real justification were to come about through any action of his. “It isn’t my fault that I happen to be your father; but it’s altogether my fault that he has thought of you and treated you as a son. So we must impress it upon him that you and he stand precisely where you did.”

“But do we?” Guy objected. “Isn’t it rather

for him than for me to say whether we do or not ? ”

Mr. Hilliar laughed. “ Why, of course it is. Hence the need for smoothing down ruffled feathers. You're proud, you're independent, you would like to take up the position of saying that you ask no favours. All very fine, but please to consider poor me. Don't you understand that I can't let you quarrel with Mr. Lequesne and your bread and butter ? No, not even amicably.”

Father and son were made welcome at Stone Hall in September, and certainly it did not seem as if their host had the least desire to be quarrelsome. That he was not quite himself Guy very soon detected ; but his other guest, being less familiar with him, saw only in his marked friendliness a sensible and kindly acceptance of the situation. There was no trouble about the proposed journey. Paul evaded the question of his approval being needed, remarked that it ought to be an interesting excursion and diverged to the subject of sport in the interior of Argentina, as to which Mr. Hilliar was qualified to give full information. Information concerning Mr. Hilliar's past came out incidentally then and on other occasions. It appeared to have been a chequered, perhaps not at all times a strictly reputable one. He had the air of concealing nothing, yet he did not reveal much. Paul, watching the man, studying him, trying to place him, could arrive at no more positive result than a deepening impression that he was somehow unsafe. Well, he was pretty certain to be, or have been, that. What else he was, in addition to being

a good man on a horse, a very fair shot and an agreeable, well-read companion, remained dubious.

He was, at any rate, sharp enough to guess that Paul wanted to know. Walking back from shooting, one day, when Guy had marched on ahead and was out of earshot, he said all of a sudden :

“ Confess now, Mr. Lequesne : you set me down as an adventurer, don't you ? ”

“ By your own account, you have led an adventurous life,” answered Paul, a little taken aback.

“ And always shall, I expect, in spite of my grey hair. You're quite right ; I can't resist adventure ; *c'est plus fort que moi*. Something in the blood, I suppose. Look at that boy of mine !—isn't he just the same ? The same, with a difference which I needn't specify, because you're so fully alive to it. Say that he's adventurous and that I'm an adventurer. As for this El Chaco Company, I honestly believe that there are millions in it ; still, like everything else of the sort, it's a bit of a gamble. Come what may, I don't want Guy to be a loser by it.”

“ I presume he needn't be a shareholder,” said Paul.

“ No ; but there are other aspects of the case. You told me in London that he would have to choose between us. I hope and think that you have changed your mind about that ; yet I should like to be assured that his having chosen in some sort to throw in his lot with mine won't mar his prospects with you. See how frank I am ! ”

He brought a pair of laughing blue eyes to bear upon his neighbour. Really not bad sort of eyes—

clear, bold and bright. Nevertheless, Paul, while he returned their gaze, repeated inwardly, "Unsafe! —unsafe!"

Aloud he said :

"You suggest a rather one-sided bargain, Mr. Hilliar."

"Amend it, then. Keep the boy; he's yours more than mine; I've acknowledged that all along. Let the bargain be that he shall stay in England, instead of going out to Argentina with me, and that you shall make no alteration in what you had intended doing for him before I rose so disturbingly from the dead."

Was he sincere? He had all the appearance of being so; yet he must have known that such an offer could not be accepted. Perhaps he wanted, as Lady Freda would have said, to "score both ways," which is more than any man ought to want.

"I am afraid," answered Paul, smiling, "that I am scarcely in a position to conclude bargains. Guy, who is a free agent, has decided to go to Argentina. I raise no objection, nor, to return frankness for frankness, do I feel called upon to bind myself by any promise. We must allow the future to develop as it may. For the present, we are all friends, and nobody, I think, is aggrieved. At all events, I don't consider that I have any grievance."

He did not consider that he had any grievance of a nature to be imparted to or understood by Mr. Hilliar. That Guy's confidence and communicativeness should have become things of the past was, after all, only one of those little tragedies which are part and parcel of the normal course of human life.

Fathers, mothers, guardians must recognise, if they be endued with common sense, that a time comes for the putting away of childish things. However, a consoling surprise was in store for the philosopher.

“Old man,” said Guy, one evening when they were by themselves for a few minutes, “I want to tell you something. You’re not to think that I don’t mind leaving you and leaving England. I do mind; only—I should mind staying here ever so much more. To put things shortly, I couldn’t face Audrey’s wedding day. It isn’t catastrophic; I shall get over it right enough in time. Only I thought I should like you to know.”

Paul’s hand was on his shoulder in a moment, and Paul’s voice—the old voice which had not been heard for such a long time—was saying, “My dear boy!—is it so bad as that?”

“It’s rather bad,” Guy owned. “Sometimes it hurts like the very devil. It can’t be helped, though, and there’s no use crying about it. I wanted you to know, that was all.”

Paul was both glad and sorry. He was also surprised; for he had sometimes doubted whether it was in Guy’s nature to care deeply for anybody.

“Oh, you stupid fellow!” he exclaimed; “why do you make these discoveries when it is too late? But perhaps—who knows?—perhaps it isn’t too late. I suppose I oughtn’t to suggest such a thing as her playing young Cleland false; yet if she has made a mistake—which doesn’t seem impossible—might there not still be some hope?”

“Oh, not an earthly!” broke in Guy, laughing.

“What she sees in Wattie I can't imagine; but I'm as sure of her loving him as I am that she wouldn't have got beyond liking me if he had never been born. No; exile is the only physic for my complaint. Besides, there are other reasons.”

“Other reasons for your leaving the country?”

“Yes; but I'd rather not put a name to them, if you'll let me off, old man. I daresay you can guess what they are, and if you can't, never mind! Least said soonest mended. I had to tell you about Audrey, because—well, you know why. But now that you hold the key, you'll be merciful and leave the door shut, won't you? We can find some better fun for our last days together than opening cupboards and examining skeletons.”

To such an appeal Paul was the last man in the world to turn a deaf ear. He nodded, smiled and said none of the things that he was longing to say. Curt and partial though Guy's confession had been, its spontaneity rejoiced his heart and likewise softened it a little towards Mr. Hilliar, who, he felt tolerably sure, did not know as much as he did.

CHAPTER XVIII

IMAGINATION AND ENERGY

WE say that the world is small, just as human beings in all ages have been wont to assert tritely that life is short; but the truth of the latter statement, though so patent, is seldom realised by the young, while that of the former has only been brought home to us in quite recent times. The world today is almost inconveniently small; yet even now upon the surface of the broad ocean, with England a thousand miles astern, some illusory sense of rupture, remoteness and freedom is not attainable by imaginative voyagers. Guy Hilliar, extended upon a deck-chair and arrayed in the white flannels appropriate to the temperature and latitude, was so much under the impression of having definitely slipped his moorings that he could afford to indulge in a sigh or two. Not, of course, that he regretted what he had done. That it had been the best possible thing to do was proved by an indignant and reproachful missive from Lady Freda, which had reached him on the eve of embarkation, if by nothing else. Only Lady Freda did not know, nor did Paul Lequesne, nor did anybody, save Guy himself, how definite this departure of his was likely to be. He had thought it all out and had made up his mind that England

should not see him again for some years to come, if he could help it. Ostensibly he had been despatched by his firm upon an informal mission which would probably be discharged before the end of the year; secretly he had resolved to sever connection with his firm, offer his services to the Chaco Development Company and start life afresh in the Southern Hemisphere. Perhaps this might be rather hard upon Paul, perhaps not; he was uncertain. Upon that point he had intermittent qualms and misgivings, but upon no other. Lady Freda—well, Lady Freda would miss him a little, or persuade herself that she did. As for Audrey, who might be good enough to miss him more than a little, such light affliction must have been hers in any case, since it would have been altogether too heavy a tax upon his fortitude to maintain intimate relations with Mrs. Walter Cleland. So if he sighed while he reclined thus, watching the white wake of the ship upon the indigo of a slowly heaving sea, it was only because one does not bid farewell to the past without a touch of sadness.

Presently his father, who had just finished a game of deck quoits, strolled up and dropped into a chair beside him. Mr. Hilliar, clad in spotless white duck, looked as smart, alert and cheery as he always did.

“Find this board-ship life rather tedious?” he asked.

“Not particularly,” answered Guy; “it’s a reposeful sort of interlude.”

“Ah, you’re young enough to bear with interludes! Personally, I’m not bored, because I never allow

myself to be that; but I do resent having to kill time. It's no fair duel, considering that time is bound to retort by killing us—and some of us pretty soon too! Once at Buenos Ayres, though, we'll get to work, and I believe we're fairly quick workers, you and I. The thing will be to draw up your report and despatch it with as little delay as possible."

He made no secret of his impatience to be done with preliminaries which he deemed superfluous. As a concession to Mr. Cleland, he had agreed that Guy should inspect the Company's property; but what practical result would such a cursory inspection have, beyond establishing the fact that the Company owned so many square miles of virgin forest? However, as he remarked, with shrugged shoulders, one must make concessions if one wants to receive them. He would willingly have made concessions to Paul; he was insistent that Guy should neglect none.

"Be sure you write to Mr. Lequesne from Madeira," said he. "Let him have no excuse for fancying that it's out of sight out of mind with you. You think me a mercenary old beggar, I know, but it's my clear and sheer duty to be mercenary in this instance. I didn't seek you out in order to deprive you of your inheritance."

His disinterested (it could not but be disinterested) eagerness to safeguard his son's future was rather touching, however little Guy might be in sympathy with it. That he would be found in sympathy with his son's private intentions was evidently not to be expected; so he was kept in ignorance

of them. For the rest, there was sympathy enough and to spare between two men who had numerous points of resemblance. They had become attached to one another, they had quickly understood one another—the younger perhaps perceiving, or beginning to guess, better than the elder where they were sooner or later bound to part company. Casual remarks, allusions, reminiscences exhibited Mr. Hilliar as being what he had so candidly confessed to Paul that he was. Adventurers are often engaging, lovable mortals; the misfortune is that their standard of honourable conduct is apt to be elastic, while neither they nor their statements can be implicitly depended upon. Germs of doubt which had found their way into Guy's mind respecting the Chaco Company and other matters were stimulated to active growth at Madeira, where a relay of passengers for South America came on board. Shortly after the voyage had been resumed, two of these—young Anglo-Argentine men of business, it seemed—entered the smoking-room, where Guy was reading a newspaper, and one of them said, with a laugh :

“ Whom do you think I stumbled upon just now ? Old Hilliar, if you please, in his best form. Very full of himself and some wild-cat scheme that he has been over to England to float.”

“ Always thought he couldn't show his face in England,” remarked the other.

“ Oh, I don't know about that ; one needn't believe all one hears. I like the old chap myself ; though I wouldn't trust him with a dollar of my money, mind you. He isn't to be trusted with a dollar of his

own, when he has one. Light come, light go! I've seen him rich and I've seen him stone broke, and upon my word, I believe he'd as soon be the one as the other."

"Well, he's stone broke now, isn't he?"

"He doesn't look like it. Going to make things hum somewhere in the backwoods, so he says, and he tells me he's taking his son out with him to start the show."

"His son? I didn't know he had one."

"Nor I; but old Hilliar is a man of surprises. It's a wise son who knows his own father, and I should think there might be some little surprise in store for this one, unless——"

Here Guy, who had already cleared his voice once or twice without avail, lowered his paper and fixed a steady gaze upon the speaker, whose cheeks were gradually suffused with a rich crimson flush. After that, the only thing to be done, in common humanity, was to get up and walk out, leaving the unhappy man to meditate at his leisure upon the idiocy of making such observations in public places.

Yet it may well be that if Mr. Hilliar himself had overheard what had been said about him, he would not have been greatly disconcerted; for he was neither thin-skinned nor conscious of guile in his recent dealings. He had never told his son that he was a wealthy man: as a matter of fact, he was seldom acquainted with the state of his resources, save when—as had sometimes occurred—he found himself without resources at all. He had made and lost moderate fortunes again and again; his

credit at Buenos Ayres did not stand high in any sense; but through good report and evil report he had kept hosts of friends, and this young man—Jackson by name—was one of them. Poor Jackson, on being formally introduced to Guy at a later hour, was with difficulty restrained from apologising there and then—did, indeed, subsequently apologise, much to his hearer's amusement.

“ I can't tell you how sorry I am ! I ought to be kicked ; I've been kicking myself, figuratively speaking, ever since. I do hope you won't think any more about what I said. Of course in a young country like Argentina everybody has to be more or less of a speculator, and your father hasn't always been as lucky in his ventures as some of us, that's all. I've no doubt this new company of his—I forget what he called it—is perfectly sound.”

The insincerity of the assertion and the sincerity of the penitence expressed were so self-evident that Guy could not help laughing. He soon grew friendly with Mr. Jackson and his congeners, of whom there were several on board ; he was not offended by strictures which had not been meant for his ears and which, indeed, could not properly be called offensive. Many a substantial and preposterous undertaking has been pronounced a wild-cat scheme in its inception. Nevertheless, it stood out plainly that optimistic asseverations would require verifying.

Mr. Hilliar's good faith, happily, did not need that. He blew the trumpet of the Chaco Development Company with no uncertain sound ; he discoursed to all and sundry upon the dazzling future,

the boundless capabilities of the region which he extolled; nobody, listening to him, could doubt that he believed every word of what he professed to believe, and he was such a pleasant, picturesque talker that he never lacked listeners. Jackson and the other Buenos Ayres merchants knew singularly little about the extensive forest lands of Northern Argentina. They did, however, know that there was money in *quebracho* timber, the demand for which was ever on the increase. The trouble, they told Guy, was that the logs had to be conveyed for long distances over a difficult, swampy country, that the climate was said to be very unfavourable to bullocks, and that fodder was scarce. Such obstacles might, no doubt, be surmounted, but they had hitherto been found deterrent by those who desired quick returns. Anyhow, there was nothing like making inquiries and investigations on the spot. Guy was strongly advised to do so, and gathered that these good fellows wished to dissuade him from taking any irrevocable action before doing so. They were very good fellows, addicted to sport, cricketers, polo-players, readily drawn towards one whose tastes corresponded to their own. Guy might have amused himself extremely well at Buenos Ayres, if he had been free to accept the hospitality which was pressed upon him; but Mr. Hilliar laid great stress upon the value of time, and for his own part, he was impatient to get to grips with facts. That he had thus far been nourished with large doses of fiction was more and more apparent to him.

The handsome, bustling, essentially modern capital

of Argentina is not less lamentably devoid of distinction than other modern cities. Driving through its crowded streets with his son, after the completion of the voyage, Mr. Hilliar made the excuses for it which we all feel constrained to make for our respective places of residence when these do not chance to be rendered impressive to a stranger by nature or art.

“*Ville quelconque*, as Pierre Loti might say. Yes; but what else could it be, under the conditions? Make due allowance for the conditions and you'll have to admit that the civic authorities deserve some praise. The public buildings and the public gardens are well enough. As for private houses, I hope to introduce you into some that wouldn't disgrace London or Paris. I disposed of my own shanty before I sailed for Europe; that's why we're going to put up at the Grand Hotel. But they won't do us badly there, you'll find.”

This airy, casual intimation that he had no home was of a piece with Mr. Hilliar's curiously happy-go-lucky attitude respecting all matters of business. It did not take Guy many days to discover that if his father was gifted with imagination, energy and zeal, such humble trivialities as sums in arithmetic were beyond or beneath him. Now, for the successful conduct of a commercial enterprise imagination and energy are qualities by no means to be despised; they stand for the poetry of the thing and may even constitute its vital principle. Only the indispensable supplement of prose must be contributed by somebody, and Guy—himself no great lover of prosaic

details—recognised that this would have to be his job. There was no one else to assume it. Certainly not the sallow, languid, cigarette-smoking youth who appeared to represent the entire executive staff of the Chaco Development Company, and who occupied a dingy little office in a back street; certainly not the Directors, with whom he dined by turns, and who, one and all, evinced a polite disinclination to answer direct queries. Civil-spoken, well-to-do persons, interested in their own affairs, not much interested, Guy suspected, in an undertaking which had the support of their names, whatever that might be worth.

“They’ll be glad enough to pick up our shares by-and-by,” Mr. Hilliar predicted; “for the time being, they hold a qualifying number and no more. That’s the worst of these people. Until they’re sure that Europe is going to take a hand they won’t move. Then they come tumbling over one another to pay ten times the price they need have paid. Well, the moral is that the sooner Europe gets your report the better.”

He seemed to take it for granted that the report would be favourable; he hinted that a very rapid and superficial survey of the Company’s territory would suffice; he did not disguise his anxiety to obtain capital. “Without capital, you see, we’re at a standstill,” said he, in his ingenuous way.

The first part of Guy’s journey towards the Chaco region was accomplished in comfort, not to say luxury, for the Argentine railways have no need to fear comparison with any in the world; but his

father, who bore him company as far as Santa Fé, gave him warning that he had no pleasure trip in prospect. The summer season having set in, the weather was already hot; but in the northern swamps and forests for which the traveller was bound it was going to be very much hotter. Also on the road thither there would be mosquitos, scanty food, rough accommodation, sometimes no accommodation, and at the end of all a property still wholly undeveloped.

“Of course, however, that is just our point. We shouldn't have got the land for a song if it hadn't been undeveloped, and the point of your report, as soon as you have satisfied yourself that the timber is there all right, should be the comparative ease with which it may be developed. Sure and quick access to the Paraná river; that's what we want, and that's what a little judicious expenditure will give us. But you'll see for yourself. Don't be discouraged at finding the country a wilderness. Naturally it must be a wilderness until it is opened up.”

It was to a somewhat absent-minded hearer that Mr. Hilliar held forth while the train rumbled across vast plains, where interminable pastures, varied by crops of maize and alfafa, stretched themselves out to meet the sky-line. Discouraged Guy was not, and did not mean to be; but he was a little distrustful, a little doubtful whether it would be in his power to draw up the report demanded of him. Suppose he should be compelled to pronounce the Chaco Company too speculative to be touched? Nothing for it, in such a case, but to return to England with

dropped ears and tail. Return to England being, in any case, an essential part of his father's programme, his own private programme could not for the present be so much as hinted at, and this also helped to render him pensive.

“Get there as quickly as you can, and get back as quickly as you can,” was the parting injunction addressed to him. “I'll book our passages the moment I hear from you that you're on the way down.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE DARK HORIZON

THE faculty of believing what we wish to believe is so common, so well-nigh universal, that few of us indeed can pride ourselves upon being in a position to deride it. It is a faculty which, under the designation of simple faith, takes rank as a high virtue, and which, on any estimate, must surely be accounted beneficent, seeing what happiness and consolation it has brought to millions of mortals. As a set-off, to be sure, that same faculty has been known to lead occasional luckless persons straight to Portland breakwater or to the stern, wind-swept heights of chilly Princetown—so liable to abuse and corruption are all human endowments! It may be that Mr. Hilliar was a potential saint gone wrong; it is unfortunately certain that he was addicted to assertions as positive as they were inaccurate; yet it remains open to the charitable to assume that he must have been his own dupe to the extent of fancying that the Chaco Development Company held profitable assets. Else, why should he have sent forth his son to obtain ocular proof that it held next to none?

Guy, it is true, arrived at an adverse conclusion rather more speedily than he might have done, had he not been predisposed towards it by a tedious

journey in sweltering tropical heat and by depressing items of information gleaned on the way; yet the unquestionable facts which confronted him at his destination sufficed to warrant him in saying to himself, as he did, that he was engaged on a fool's errand. Timber there was in abundance, and the Company's property was a fairly extensive one, although a considerable portion of it seemed to be of little value; but other companies, in full working order, were established round about, and before so much as beginning to compete with them a very heavy outlay must clearly be envisaged. They had constructed light railways, those other companies; they had erected buildings for extracting on the spot the tannin which constitutes the chief value of the *quebracho* tree; in short, they held the field, and, from all that Guy could gather, they had by no means struck an El Dorado. They were doing, so he was told by local agents and managers who were friendly enough, as well as they had any right to expect, having regard to their remoteness from markets; but they did not think that very large profits were going to be derived from the industry. Candidly interrogated as to the prospects of the Chaco Development Company, they laughed and shook their heads. It was on the cards, one of them opined, that somebody might realise a fortune by that enterprise; but not the shareholders. Oh, dear, no! not the shareholders. Everything tended to confirm that forecast. Guy, needless to say, made careful examination and judged for himself; but only one judgment was possible. The thing was not, perhaps, a downright fraud—he

hoped and thought that it was not—but to represent it as likely within any reasonable period to become a paying concern would be almost equivalent to fraud.

So that had to be the gist of the communication which he despatched in due course to his father. He added that he proposed to follow closely upon its heels, since there was nothing more for him to do where he was, nor anything further to be ascertained. A slight attack of fever, contracted amongst the marshes which formed no small part of the Company's domain, delayed, but did not seriously inconvenience, him. He had provided himself with a stock of quinine, and Nature had provided him with a constitution proof against all ordinary ailments. Mental disturbance was less easily cured—could not, in fact, be cured at all, and had to be endured with such fortitude as a man who hated nothing so much as owning himself beaten could muster. Beaten, however, he was. He had, as Cleland and Son knew well, an unerring *flair* in such matters, and he was convinced that the Chaco Development Company would never be any good. This in itself was mortifying enough; but far worse was the necessary relinquishment of his design, the necessary reversion to England, home and duty. For duty—or, at any rate, obligations which might be included under that head—would not begin and end with office work in London or Liverpool.

“Serves me right for trying to run away!” he ruefully reflected. “One should never run away; one should always face things. Even when one can't tell just what one may have to face.”

The first thing that he had to face when he reached Buenos Ayres on a sultry November afternoon was the announcement that his father had sailed for New York more than a week ago. A long explanatory letter accounted for this change of plan by reasons, more or less plausible, foremost amongst which was the desirability of conferring with a certain financier in the United States who had shown some disposition to co-operate.

“As soon as I have finished with him,” Mr. Hilliar wrote, “I shall make straight for London, where you had better join me. I am truly sorry that you should take so gloomy a view of our outlook, though I can’t say that I am altogether surprised; for of course one’s spirits are apt to flag in a tropical desert. Of course, too, the other men did their level best to put you off. It wasn’t exactly their business to encourage rivals, was it? Personally, I don’t find my faith in the least shaken; but we will talk it all over when we meet. Meanwhile, pray write a little more optimistically to Mr. Cleland than you did to me. Or, if that goes against the grain with you, don’t write at all. I can’t impress upon you too strongly . . .”
&c., &c.

What he impressed upon his correspondent with great strength and at great length was the criminal folly of cutting your own throat. Possibly he did not realise—he certainly did not appear to do so, for his sophistry was equalled only by his ingenuousness—the full significance of his exhortation; but what it amounted to, in effect, was that, for the sake of obtaining indispensable support, there must be some

suppressions of truth and suggestions of falsehood. Failing these, let there at least be silence !

It was out of the question to oblige him; yet it seemed shabby and treacherous to put the extinguisher upon him without more ado. Finally Guy decided to report in guarded terms to Mr. Cleland that he could not, as at present advised, recommend the financing of a company which had not yet found its feet. No step should be taken before his arrival in England, when the whole subject might be discussed. That, he knew, would suffice for the temporary protection of a shrewd and cautious old gentleman whom he was in duty bound to protect.

But, as the outward mail would not leave for several days, there was no hurry about putting pen to paper, and before doing so he turned to the formidable heap of letters which had accumulated during his absence. He had already glanced at the envelopes, and had not felt his anxiety to open them stimulated by the sight of Lady Freda Barran's handwriting on no less than four. According to her ladyship a precedence the reverse of complimentary, he perused, with a sinking heart, effusions which did not err on the side of reticence. Through what access of baleful insanity had he imagined himself in love with this woman? Mentally casting back, he did not believe that he had imagined anything of the kind. He had never been prone to falling in love, had never but once been really in love in the whole course of his life—and then he had failed to recognise the circumstance! Being made of flesh and blood, he had of course been physically attracted from time to

time by various women, of whom Lady Freda had been one; but never had the heart and soul of him been concerned in such fugitive emotions. He had accepted them much as one accepts a cold in the head or any other experience incidental to one's humanity; he had not suffered them to interfere for a moment with the ordering of his life, present or future. Almost he was sorry that he should be like that, almost he wished that he could feel a passion which he would perforce have to feign. For he was going back to Lady Freda—nothing for it, as matters stood, but to go back!—and if she had ever desired a Platonic friendship with him, she had evidently jettisoned that rather absurd fantasy, and, since he must needs play Captain Barran false, it seemed a pity that there should be no sort of makeweight for so ignoble a compulsion.

An affectionate and jocular epistle from Wattie Cleland did not detain its recipient long. Of course poor Wattie was innocent of any intention to set his friend's teeth on edge; but the circumstances rendered him so inevitably grotesque, incongruous, insupportable, that the only thing to be done with him was to toss him aside and try to forget him.

Now it was Audrey's turn to claim a hearing. Audrey had written from the shores of the Lake of Geneva, where she and her mother were still lingering, although Paris and extensive purchases of clothing loomed in the near future. "Mother gets a melancholy consolation out of the prospect of spending hours and hours upon the selection of my *trousseau*. She needs all the consolation she can get, poor dear;

for, much as she likes Wattie, she is still oppressed by a sense of his unworthiness. 'Admirable as far as conduct goes, I grant you; high-principled and domesticated and all that. But when one *looks* at him, and when one thinks of the matches that you might so easily have made!'—Can't you hear her, even from as far off as South America? She doesn't understand, though perhaps you do, what Wattie's supreme merit is. Anyhow, he just exactly suits me, and what more can anybody ask for in a husband?"

Nothing, Guy supposed. At the same time, he felt that his perspicacity was unduly flattered; for he really could not conjecture what Wattie Cleland's supreme merit might be. Apparently it was not beyond Audrey to form a conjecture upon the subject of his own special demerits. Without saying in so many words that she had guessed the reason of his flight to the Western Hemisphere and had further guessed his intention of remaining there, she allowed it to be inferred that these were no secrets to her. Also she intimated that her sympathies were much more with Paul Lequesne than with him or with Mr. Hilliar.

"Fathers who can cheerfully dispense with their sons for the best part of a lifetime don't seem to me to deserve a great deal of consideration. Not as much, at any rate, as those who have undertaken all their duties and haven't insisted upon their privileges. If you throw over Mr. Lequesne—but surely you can't!—don't expect me to forgive you, whether he does or not. Throw over anybody else you like—some people may be dropped without the interposition of

the Atlantic Ocean—only do remember that he has nobody but you and that the more he wants a thing the less likely he is to ask for it. That's his way. But you know him just as well as I do, and ought to know him much better than I do; so why should I preach?"

Two long letters from Paul were pathetic in their careful abstention from anything that could be construed into a demand. He did not even say, as he might pardonably have said, that he was lonely, sad and out of sorts. Nor did he trespass upon forbidden ground. His sole allusion to Audrey (and this was probably meant as a considerate warning) was a casual mention that the wedding, he understood, would not take place until after Christmas. Oh, yes; Guy knew him, and was neither ungrateful nor unappreciative. There was no need to remind Guy of what he owed to his old man, even though some process of throwing over or being thrown over should prove to be unavoidable. As for putting in an appearance at Audrey's wedding, why not? It would be considerably easier to go through that ordeal than to adopt her sage counsel with regard to a certain desertion. Alfred de Musset declared that whenever he had loved a woman he had informed her of the fact and that whenever he had ceased to do so he had used the same sincerity, believing that in affairs of the heart "*il n'y a de crime qu'au mensonge.*" The simplicity of the tenet is not without charm; though it ought perhaps to be regarded as a prerogative of the Latin races. It could scarcely commend itself to a young man so essentially British as Guy Hilliar,

who was, moreover, very inexperienced and did not know that such ruptures as Audrey hinted at occur every day—a bad quarter of an hour being the sole cost of them. No; he did not see how he was to break with a woman who had avowed her love for him and whom he had professed to love. He must accept the consequences of his actions, be they what they might.

A hand was laid upon his shoulder while he sat forlornly musing. It was Mr. Jackson, who accosted him with the cordiality engendered by compulsory sojourn in a city whence all acquaintances who could make their escape had been driven away by the hot season.

“So here you are back again!” said the friendly Jackson. “Had a good time in El Chaco? Oh, well, of course you didn’t go there for fun. Yes, it isn’t exactly an earthly paradise, by all accounts, and one’s ardour gets a bit damped when one comes face to face with the infernal inaccessibility of these places. Not but what I daresay there’s something in the timber notion—or will be, with time and patience. Mr. Hilliar is off to hustle the New Yorkers, as I suppose you know. And you’re off to Europe, no doubt. Lucky beggar! I wish I was; but it’ll be a jolly long time before I get another holiday, as far as I can see.”

Probably Mr. Jackson could form a shrewd surmise as to the position of affairs; but he was discreet and generous enough to repress any curiosity that he may have felt. Soon Guy was taken to dine at the Strangers’ Club, where his host was joined by several

friends and where an excellent dinner, together with much talk of racing and polo, served as correctives to dejection. Our young man had recovered a little of the sanguine habit of mind which was his birthright by the time that he returned to his hotel and, picking up an English newspaper a month old, found, as one usually does after having been deprived of news for a long period, that nothing particular of public interest had happened during his absence. Something of no small private and personal interest to him had happened, though, as he discovered when, in the act of laying down the sheet, his eye fell upon the following paragraph, headed, *Fatal Accident in the Hunting Field*:

“Universal regret will be felt in sporting circles at the death of Captain ‘Jimmy’ Barran, who succumbed yesterday to injuries sustained while cub-hunting in Leicestershire a few days ago, when the young horse that he was schooling fell heavily at a fence and rolled over him. Captain Barran, who was very well known as a gentleman rider, was married to a daughter of the Duke of Branksome. Lady Freda Barran was in Scotland at the time of the accident, and, although telegraphed for as soon as her husband’s condition was pronounced to be hopeless, did not, unfortunately, arrive until he had breathed his last.”

For several minutes Guy stared at those few lines of cold print and never moved a muscle. Not that he was dazed; for his mind always worked rapidly, and what had taken place was only too perceptible to him in all its bearings. Poor Barran was dead,

and—Barran's widow was free. That meant the end of somebody else's freedom. He no more doubted that it would now be incumbent upon him to marry Lady Freda than he doubted that she would wish and expect him to marry her. Readers well versed in the ways of this wicked world will perhaps have the magnanimity to abstain from laughing at him. It was, indeed, entirely to his credit that he should assume as a matter of course what ought, according to every received moral code, to be so assumed, and that the lady's release should appear to him finally exclusive of his own. The misfortune was that this sudden simplification of a hard case was far less tolerable than its intricacies had been. From those intricacies he might sooner or later, in this way or in that, have emerged; but the bonds of matrimony can be loosed only by death or divorce, neither of which alternatives smiled at him. So there was at least one person outside sporting circles who deplored the hapless Captain Barran's demise with his whole heart.

CHAPTER XX

MR. HILLIAR IN HIS ELEMENT

NOT a few men in Buenos Ayres and elsewhere were wont to affirm that old Jack Hilliar would rob a church. But that was only a way of speaking. They laughed while they shook their heads and kept a soft place in their hearts for a miscreant who had always contrived to retain his neighbour's affections, even when he was losing their money and his own. Perhaps he was not really a miscreant; perhaps he would not have gone so far as to rob a church; although it is extremely likely that he would have misappropriated any church funds committed to his charge, and would have done it in so open, amiable and gentlemanlike a way that nobody would have held him guilty, save in a technical sense. Technically, he had more than once brought himself within reach of the law's arm; he had exhausted the credit and credulity of Argentina; it was currently reported (and, for that matter, it was true) that in earlier life he had made his native land too hot to hold him. Yet the general opinion about him was that, although he might be devoid of scruple in relation to money matters, he had counterbalancing good qualities in such full measure as to account for and justify his great popularity. General opinions are seldom at

fault. Jack Hilliar had plenty of good qualities, and it is much to be regretted that mere commonplace honesty could not be included in the list of them. He was, as he had truly told Paul Lequesne, an adventurer; the dominant note of his character was a sporting delight in adventures, sound or unsound, and if, after he had embarked upon one of them, honesty chanced to stand in the way, honesty had to go to the wall. So when his son's letter from El Chaco reached him, he was not long in deciding what his own course of action ought to be. Clearly he must return to England in advance of a witness whose evidence threatened to ruin everything. Clearly, too, he must be careful to avoid arousing suspicions which might find expression in a cabled message to old Mr. Cleland. He therefore wrote soothingly to Guy, as aforesaid, and invented the North American financier. The loss of time involved in taking passage to New York and thence to Liverpool would not be serious; he calculated upon a lead of at least three weeks, and he hoped that he might be able to greet Guy's disembarkation with the announcement of an accomplished fact. After that, the young man might be uneasy or sceptical, but there would be nothing left for him to do but to hold his peace.

Thus it came to pass that Mr. Cleland, driving down to his Liverpool place of business one morning, had the agreeable surprise of being accosted by a caller whom he had not expected to see again so soon, and who at once proclaimed himself the herald of glad tidings.

“I didn’t wait for my son to return from his journey of discovery,” Mr. Hilliar said. “He will be following me in a week or two most likely; but the news I had from him was so very encouraging, and time is of such paramount consequence, that I thought I had better slip over here without any unnecessary delay.”

He proceeded to give his talent for romance a free rein. The Chaco forests were a gold mine, nothing less than that; the troublesome question of transport was as good as solved; approach to the Paraná river was not going to be the hard matter that had been anticipated, and a monopoly secured to the cargo steamers of the Cleland line would, it might be predicted, prove a highly lucrative one. All this sounded colourable enough; only the extreme urgency of the affair was not quite apparent to an elderly, deliberate man of business.

“But I understand that your Company actually owns the property,” Mr. Cleland observed.

“That is so,” the other assented; “but we don’t own the entire district. I wish we did! There are already rivals in the field, my son tells me, and it’s of the last importance for us to forestall competition. My one fear is that, even now, we may turn out to have been too dilatory, owing to lack of funds. I don’t mean that I have any doubt as to our ultimately acquiring all the land we need; still you know what competition is. Our object should be to get these people to sell their holdings to us at a reasonable price.”

His object, in brief, was to get an issue of capital

on the part of the Chaco Development Company influentially underwritten, and he seemed to be in a fair way towards attaining it. Without definitely committing himself, Mr. Cleland spoke reassuringly and suggested the visit to London which would have been made in any case.

“ You had better go and look up my boy Walter, who has a sound head on his shoulders, though some folks take him for a buffoon. Well, I don't know why a business man shouldn't amuse himself out of business hours by comic acting, if he has a turn that way. Enlarges the circle of his acquaintance and so forth. In fact, I rather think it was through private theatricals that Walter first came to know his future wife. Miss Baldwin—you'll have heard about her and her mother from your son, no doubt. A charming girl, and Mrs. Baldwin is a very agreeable woman.”

“ Oh, yes,” answered Mr. Hilliar, with a retrospective smile, “ I heard of Mrs. and Miss Baldwin from Guy, and from Mr. Lequesne too. I believe Mrs. Baldwin was one of the people to whom poor Vigors gave a circumstantial account of my death years ago.”

Mr. Cleland looked momentarily embarrassed; for he remembered on a sudden his son's having told him how Mrs. Baldwin had written about Vigors as a rascally swindler, and had added that she would not be at all surprised if Guy's newly found father were to turn out another. This caused him to remark, with apparent irrelevance :

“ Ah, well ! ladies are apt to be prejudiced. And

then, you see, Mrs. Baldwin is one of Mr. Lequesne's oldest and most intimate friends."

"So that, for his sake, she naturally wishes I had had the good taste to stay dead?" suggested Mr. Hilliar, still smiling.

He could generally guess what was passing through the minds of his interlocutors, and it was seldom indeed that he allowed such clairvoyance to perturb him. "But really," he went on, "Mrs. Baldwin needn't be sorry for anybody's sake. I am—as of course I ought to be—the least authoritative of fathers, and I have never wished or meant that my gain of a son should be Mr. Lequesne's loss."

In all truth and sincerity, he had never meant that it should be Guy's loss. If there was one thing for which he was more anxious than for the salvation of the menaced Chaco Company, it was the maintenance of his son's connection with Paul. He had half a mind to take Stone Hall on a circuitous route to London, in order to deliver affectionate messages with which he had not been charged, but decided, upon consideration, against a possibly unwelcome display of officiousness.

If he had made his way to Stone Hall, he would have been confronted by shuttered windows and barred doors. It had long been Paul's habit to spend the greater part of the winter in Northumberland, for he rather enjoyed the rigour of the climate and wild-fowl shooting was still the form of sport which pleased him most; but this year for the first time he had found the loneliness of his abode oppressive. It had somehow struck him as desperately symbolic

of the lonely future that he must expect; so all of a sudden he had betaken himself to Chester Square—less because it was Chester Square than because it was not Stone Hall. By way of ostensible reasons for the move, he had work on hand (blessedly urgent work demanded by an editor in a hurry) which could be more easily prosecuted within reach of the British Museum; also the Baldwins were due home from Paris, and he wanted to see Audrey.

Audrey wanted to see him. She was troubled in her mind about her old friend, and a rapid scrutiny of his appearance, when she descended upon him immediately after her arrival in London, did not tend to reassure her.

“You’ve been moping and grouching,” said she accusingly.

“I have,” Paul admitted. “Why not?”

“Because it can’t be allowed. Besides, you may have been doing it without any cause, or for the wrong cause. I suppose you know that Guy is coming home?”

Paul started. “No; there wasn’t a hint of that in his last letter, which came some weeks ago. Have you heard from him?”

“Not from him; but I have heard from Mr. Cleland—or at least Wattie has—that Mr. Hilliar landed at Liverpool the other day and that Guy is to follow soon. It appears that they got through their business in Argentina in a shorter time than they expected.”

“And satisfactorily?”

“More than satisfactorily, according to Mr. Hilliar;

but Wattie seems to think Mr. Hilliar's account may require confirming."

"I am disposed to agree with Wattie. At any rate, I don't see why, if the Company is prospering, Guy should be in haste to return to this country."

"That's just it. Of course one is glad, in a way, that he is coming; but—it has the effect of being rather sudden, hasn't it? Especially as we know that there were some good reasons for his *not* returning to this country in haste."

Paul looked quickly at her, saw that she did not mean what he had fancied for a moment that she might mean, and laughed. "Oh, I don't think those reasons matter much," said he; for indeed he did not think that they were now likely to matter at all.

But Audrey was insistent and explicit. "I've a horrid fear that orders may have been issued to him. You know, he's capable of marrying her."

"Of marrying the widowed Lady Freda Barran?" asked Paul, raising his eyebrows. "I take leave to doubt it."

"That's so exasperating of you! You mean that he isn't such a fool? But indeed he is! In some ways Guy is just about the most foolish fool I know. Promise me that you won't let him do this crazy thing!"

"Well, you see, my dear Audrey, he isn't under my control."

"Take up that line and we're lost! You've been taking up that line—don't say you haven't, because I know you have and I knew you would—and look at the results! You fret yourself to fiddlestrings,

Guy's feelings are hurt, and Lady Freda rules the situation. Or else perhaps Mr. Hilliar does."

"Mr. Hilliar has natural rights."

"He seems to have hesitated a long time before he asserted them. And I have a rather strong suspicion that when he did, it was only because he thought they might be made to pay. Meanwhile, what about your rights?"

"Really I haven't any. In fairness to Mr. Hilliar, I ought to say that he offered to surrender Guy to me unconditionally—or almost unconditionally. But of course I couldn't agree to that. It was for Guy to choose between us."

"How you would make me hate you if I didn't adore you! Guy is foolish and tiresome enough, but you beat him out of sight. As if one chucked all that made one's life worth having for the sake of a little rubbishy, misplaced pride!"

"Do you think I have been scolded enough now?" asked Paul meekly.

"Nothing like enough; but I leave it to your own conscience to deal with you. Anyhow, rights or no rights, you can't allow him to marry that woman!"

"I don't believe he wants to marry her, and I should think it improbable that she wants to marry him. Still, I will go so far as to say that such a marriage will not take place without a most vigorous protest from me. Any further instructions?"

"Not today. Perhaps, after I have had a good look at Mr. Hilliar . . ."

"Are you going to have a look at him?"

Audrey nodded. "He is to call at Wattie's office

tomorrow morning, and I've arranged that he is to be brought to lunch with mother and me afterwards. He *may* be all right; only I have my doubts. I shall soon see what sort of a person he is, though, and then we'll talk him over, you and I, and decide what is to be done about him."

One might look long and often at Mr. Hilliar before deciding what ought to be done about him, and even then it might not prove quite the easiest thing in the world to act upon one's decision. Less because he was convincing than because he was so light-hearted, so sanguine, such a good fellow, had many a hard-headed man of business been talked over by him; so that if he had made a virtual conquest of old Mr. Cleland, there did not seem to be much likelihood of his encountering serious resistance on the part of Mr. Cleland's son. Indeed, he did not anticipate any. He called by appointment at that young gentleman's City office, said what he had to say cheerfully and concisely, was listened to with deferential attention and was promised such facilities for an early conference with fiscal potentates as Cleland and Son were in a position to guarantee.

"Of course, Mr. Hilliar," the young man added, "my father will have explained that that is all we, as a firm, can do for you. Later on, when your scheme has materialised and the question of freight arises, we may transact business together, and I hope we shall; but our own capital, naturally, must not be diverted . . ."

"From your own business," interrupted Mr. Hilliar, with a goodhumoured laugh. "My dear

fellow, that's self-evident. The point is that we're going, incidentally, to give your business such a hoist up that I think we may reasonably ask for your support."

He launched forth into particulars, waxing eloquent and descriptive, as his manner was, and enjoying his own picturesque diction, as he always did, while his auditor nodded at intervals, and put in a sagacious remark or two. Walter Cleland was in truth a practised student of humanity who knew as well as another how to classify and interpret types. Moreover, he had had his instructions from Audrey. After a time, he looked at his watch and said :

"Now, Mr. Hilliar, won't you come and be my guest at a West End restaurant? I'm afraid I must be off, because the girl I'm going to marry and her mother have promised to lunch with me; but I told them I should very likely be bringing you, and they'll be delighted to make your acquaintance. They're old friends of Guy's, as you know."

Mr. Hilliar had a moment of perceptible hesitation. Did he conjecture that his son's old friends were anxious to take stock of him and were not too favourably disposed towards him? However, his reluctance, if he felt any, was speedily overcome.

"Oh, well!" said he, with a sudden chuckle, as at some diverting thought which he did not express or explain.

Possibly he flattered himself—he had ample warrant for so doing—that ladies were even more susceptible than men to the fascination of his address, and that to disarm the not unnatural hostility of Mrs.

Baldwin and her daughter would be no hard affair. Be that as it may, he had nothing to complain of in the manner of his reception by them, though it did not take him many minutes to recognise that the younger lady would require more careful handling than the elder. That both were scrutinising him narrowly, after they had taken their places at the little flower-bedecked table, was manifest; only there was a difference between their respective attitudes and apparent aims which could be felt. Mrs. Baldwin's steady, intent gaze seemed to imply nothing more than curiosity; she was quite gracious, smiling and ready to be won over by the somewhat old-fashioned gallantries of her neighbour. Miss Audrey, on the other hand, had the unmistakable air of one who, while holding judgment in abeyance, distrusts soft speeches. Mr. Hilliar tried her at first with compliments which were thoroughly sincere, (for he thought her an extremely pretty and attractive young woman); then, finding himself on the wrong road, forsook it straightway in favour of a frank, paternal mien which served his turn far better. Evidently she was much interested in Guy, as to whose plans she asked quick, direct questions. When was he coming to England? Why was he coming? Did he mean to return to Argentina or not?

Mr. Hilliar laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid I can only keep on replying that I don't know," he declared. "I haven't heard from him since I left Buenos Ayres, and I shall not be told what his intentions are until we meet—if then."

“But I suppose you know what you wish him to do,” the girl persisted.

“Oh, yes; that’s easily stated. I wish him to please himself. Also I must confess that I wish him to please Mr. Lequesne, to whom he owes everything.”

Audrey made a slight approving gesture. “And it stands to reason,” she remarked, “that he can’t please Mr. Lequesne by going back to South America. Still . . .”

“Yes?” said Mr. Hilliar interrogatively.

But she did not conclude her sentence. At intervals she put further queries, which were met with straightforward answers. She gathered that Mr. Hilliar knew nothing about Lady Freda Barran; she likewise received the impression that he had no sinister or selfish designs. He assured her, indeed, in so many words of his necessarily detached standpoint with regard to Guy.

“You see, Miss Baldwin, the fact is that I am debarred by my own act from interfering with him or dictating to him in any way. I look upon him rather as a young friend than as my son; only perhaps, since he is my son, I am all the more shy of thrusting advice upon him. That’s as it should be, don’t you think so?”

Thus by degrees he made his way into her good graces. He took some trouble about it, for his quick wit had revealed to him that she was important. What was supremely important was to secure the friendly offices of Cleland and Son. These were—for the time being, at all events—palpably dependent upon the queer little cock-nosed fellow who was just

as palpably under the domination of Miss Baldwin. Why on earth she had fallen in love with the queer little cock-nosed fellow and had reserved a mere sisterly affection for handsome Guy was an amusing, but incidental, puzzle. It did not directly concern Mr. Hilliar, whose business was only to convince her that he was a kindly and harmless old gentleman. Upon the whole, he greatly enjoyed his luncheon, which partook of the nature of an adventure in more ways than one. He enjoyed all adventures—giving the preference, of course, to successful ones.

“I wonder,” said Mrs. Baldwin, as she prepared to rise, “whether Mr. Hilliar would care to motor down to Marlow with me and see my little riverside abode.”

Mrs. Baldwin, it need scarcely be said, had not been neglected while the affable guest had been conciliating her daughter, and she appeared to be in high good humour with him. It was not, she owned, the best time of the year for exhibiting the beauties of Weir Cottage; still the afternoon was fine, and she must absolutely betake herself thither in order to inspect certain alterations and additions to the house which were in progress.

“Walter and Audrey are going to look at a football match; so it would really be an act of charity on your part to come and keep me company.”

“My dear lady,” cried the charmed Mr. Hilliar, “you are too kind! I can’t imagine anything that I should like better.”

It would have been difficult to imagine any proposal that would have surprised the two young people more.

They exchanged glances and Audrey lifted her eyebrows, while Wattie's lips shaped themselves as if to emit a whistle; for never before in the memory of either of them had Mrs. Baldwin been known to show such emphatic favour to an untitled stranger. However, they assumed (and were not mistaken in assuming) that she had her reasons.

CHAPTER XXI

OLD SCORES

SEATED in Mrs. Baldwin's luxurious landaulette-motor and finishing the cigarette which he had been begged not to throw away, Mr. Hilliar might well feel that a successful day promised to terminate as agreeably for him as it had begun. His features expressed complacency and self-approval; sentiments which—owing to some cause not quite equally apparent—were reflected upon those of his companion. Stealing a side glance at her, he thought to himself that she looked uncommonly like a plump, sleek cat who has just caught a mouse. The fancy tickled him and increased his curiosity as to what her game might be. For of course she had a game; no more than Wattie and Audrey did he imagine that he had been invited to join in this rural expedition from motives of pure sociability. Divers tentative essays, however, elicited nothing illuminating in the way of response. She was not, as elderly ladies so often are, in quest of a lucrative investment; she did not seem to be, as her daughter had undoubtedly been, inquisitive and a trifle suspicious; she simply reclined in her corner, purring gently and holding her interlocutor, as it were, at arm's length.

“How nice of you to say so! Yes, although I am dear Audrey's mother, I must agree with you that Walter Cleland is a fortunate man. Guy? Oh, almost like a son of my own; he has been constantly with us ever since he was a little boy. Charmed to hear that you think so highly of his talents!”

It was with such colourless phrases that she made reply while the car was deftly steered through crowded streets in the failing light of the short winter afternoon. Her voice sounded amiable, but her attention was not engaged; more than once she omitted to return any answer at all. Only when the suburbs had been reached and speed had been increased did Mr. Hilliar, trying this subject and that, hit upon one which seemed to rouse her from her reverie.

“I can't help having a rather guilty feeling about Mr. Lequesne,” he was saying. “You, as his most intimate friend, probably know that he doesn't like me, though I happen to have a very sincere liking and admiration for him. Perhaps it would be rather strange if he did like me.”

“Really I think it would,” Mrs. Baldwin assented, and at last she spoke with a distinct change of intonation.

“Well—of course. And, as I say, I do feel guilty. All the same, I have honestly and earnestly tried to avoid giving him any cause for complaint, except by the fact of my existence.”

“There was the fact of your announcing that you existed,” Mrs. Baldwin observed.

“Ah, exactly! That was my unpardonable offence. I had excuses—or, at any rate, I thought I had—for

dying; but it was breaking all the rules to come to life again."

"Which rules?" Mrs. Baldwin inquired.

"The rules of the game of life, as he understands them. Mind you, I think he misunderstands them. I can't see why a player who has withdrawn from the game should be forbidden to look on at it and interest himself in it. I can't see why the man who has taken his place should jump up at once and say, 'Since you have chosen to return, I must hand over my cards to you.'"

"Was that what Paul Lequesne said to you?"

"Something tantamount to that, and really it distresses me. I'm human; I'm alone in the world; it's no great wonder, I suppose, that I have become attached to Guy and that I don't want to be parted from him. But I don't want, and I never did want, to part him from Mr. Lequesne."

"I am sure you can never have wanted to make such a very bad bargain," said Mrs. Baldwin, with a short laugh. "A bargain of another sort may have looked feasible and tempting; but poor, dear Paul is a difficult subject. What you call the rules of the game have always been so clear and simple to him! It would no more occur to him to offer a bribe than to accept one."

Mr. Hilliar received a disagreeable shock. Plain enough was it to him now that he had to deal with no friend in this placid, elderly lady, and if he had obeyed his natural fighting instincts, he would have invited her to unmask her batteries then and there. But for form's sake he made a mild, pained protest.

“ My dear Mrs. Baldwin, of what are you accusing me ? ”

She did not reply. The car was sweeping at full speed along level stretches of country road; the bare branches of the trees were black against a fiery sunset; Mrs. Baldwin, silent and motionless in her corner, remained obstinately deaf to queries and assurances from which her neighbour was at length fain to desist. She was biding her time, he presumed; doubtless she had something up her sleeve which would be produced presently; he was even beginning to guess what that something was likely to be. Therefore he was scarcely taken by surprise when—Slough having been left behind, after some temporary abatement of pace—she straightened herself up on a sudden and said :

“ You have been owing me a hundred pounds rather a long time, Mr. Vigors.”

“ So you did recognise me,” he coolly returned, “ notwithstanding my white beard and all. Well, well ! it was a risk of course, but I was bound to take it. Even if I had declined young Cleland’s invitation we must have met sooner or later, and I trusted to Time, who hasn’t been as merciful to me as he has to you. How many years is it ? Seventeen or eighteen, I suppose. I’m so sorry about the hundred pounds. To tell the truth, that kind loan of yours had entirely escaped my treacherous memory; but you shall have a cheque tomorrow. As a mere matter of curiosity, may I ask whether you knew me at once ? ”

“ I knew you the moment that I saw your eyes,” Mrs. Baldwin replied. “ You have rather odd eyes, with green streaks in them, and my memory happens

to be a good one. Unlike yours, which is not the only treacherous quality that distinguishes you, Mr. Vigors. We will say no more about the loan; I feel that I am fully repaid—or shall be soon. For although you seem inclined to put a bold face upon it, you must realise that you are in my power, and you may be sure that I shall do my duty.”

He was very sure that he was in a tight place, very sure that, by a cruel stroke of ill luck, the Chaco Development Company was destined to perish for lack of sustenance. Nevertheless, he did not take her whole meaning.

“You intend, I suppose,” said he, “to publish abroad what I can’t deny, that I was guilty of an act of imposture many years ago. If that is your notion of duty, so be it! Yet I hardly know who will benefit or who will thank you. Not my unfortunate and innocent son, for one.”

“I imagine that Guy Hilliar will be as thankful as he ought to be to hear that he is not your son.”

“But he is! I am really his father and my name is really Hilliar, though circumstances obliged me to adopt an *alias* when I first had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. If you will kindly listen to me for five minutes, I will tell you the whole truth.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vigors, but the truth is the last thing that I should expect to hear from you, and I haven’t left myself time for listening to more fables. You can relate them, if you think it worth while, to the police, who are well acquainted with your history, I believe. Don’t attempt to jump out of the car, unless you wish to commit suicide.”

"I have no intention of jumping out," Mr. Hilliar declared, "and I doubt whether the police would take me into custody upon the charge of an offence alleged to have been committed abroad so many years ago."

"There were offences committed in this country," returned Mrs. Baldwin grimly; "forgery being one of them. I daresay some of the people whom you swindled when you passed under the name of Hamilton are still alive and will be glad to have news of you. The only reason why I did not drive you to the nearest police-station was that I preferred to confront you with Paul Lequesne, who is waiting for me by appointment at my cottage. You are so clever and shifty that there's no knowing what you might not contrive to make him believe if you were not brought face to face with him in my presence. As it is, even you will have to own yourself checkmated. You ought to have sworn that you were not Vigors and had never been in Florence in your life. It's far from certain that you would have been identified by anybody but me."

Not altogether through regret at having neglected that palpable line of defence did Mr. Hilliar refrain from further parley with an implacable foe. That Mrs. Baldwin was cognizant of the fictitious Hamilton's exploits came as a most unwelcome revelation to him; for that ugly affair of the forged cheque was perhaps the only one amongst his numerous delinquencies of which he felt heartily ashamed. So strange and manifold are the methods and survivals of conscience. It had been a cheque for a trifling amount, written under pressure of urgent need for

cash; yet on that one occasion he had been a downright felon, and he had never been able to forget it. Other peccadilloes he had forgotten and forgiven himself as readily as we all forgive ourselves the follies of youth; but he did not in the least like it to be known that he had once imitated somebody else's signature. Therefore he hung his head and held his peace. For the rest, Mrs. Baldwin had calculated distance and speed with such accuracy that in another minute the car had been brought to a standstill at the door of Weir Cottage, near which a tall, stooping man, with a pipe in his mouth, was pacing to and fro.

"You are rather late," Paul Lequesne remarked, as he advanced to greet Mrs. Baldwin. Then, catching sight of her companion, he held out his hand and said: "I heard that you were in England, but I didn't know that I was to have the pleasure of meeting you as soon."

"Nor did I," returned the other imperturbably. "It is a little surprise which our kind friend here has thoughtfully arranged for us both."

"I have seen the architect," Paul began, as they entered the drawingroom, where a bright fire had been lighted and a tea-table made ready. "He is prepared to carry out your instructions; but he and I agree in thinking . . ."

"Oh, you think I'm mistaken, no doubt," broke in Mrs. Baldwin; "one of you has a way of thinking that I'm generally mistaken. Yet every now and then the stupidest people turn out to be right, and I must say for myself that I suspected all along you

were rather too ready to believe in this gentleman's being what he gave out that he was. Let me introduce him to you. He is not Mr. Hilliar at all; he is Mr. Vigors, *alias* Hamilton, *alias* several other persons, I believe; and if he has got any money out of you, I am afraid there is very little chance of your ever seeing it back."

It may be hoped that she enjoyed herself. Life of late had not shaped very enjoyably for her, and it was in her nature to hold somebody (though not always the right person) responsible for adverse episodes. Perhaps it was not, strictly speaking, either Paul Lequesne's or Guy Hilliar's fault that her daughter was about to make a tiresome, unsatisfactory marriage; yet she had something of a grievance against them both; they had both been disappointing, and in her heart she was more attached to them than to any other friends whom she possessed. To be enabled, therefore, to put them to confusion, to render them a genuine service and to requite that miscreant Vigors at one and the same time was a luxury such as Fate seldom awards to discernment and desert.

"Oh, by all means!" said she blandly, when the somewhat bewildered dialogue which ensued had culminated in a request on the part of the accused that he might be permitted to make an explanatory statement. "From the moment that Mr. Vigors admits the truth of *my* statement I have nothing against his making as many as he likes on his own account, true or untrue. Only, as I am pretty certain that he will not speak the truth, and as I really know

all that I care to know about him, I think I will go and have my interview with the architect while he talks."

"What unaccountable beings women are!" murmured Mr. Hilliar, smiling pensively, as she swept out of the room. "One would have expected her to be full of interest and curiosity; but there's never any telling how they will take things. I wonder whether her idea is to give me a chance of bolting. Not impossible; for although I daresay she would like very well to have me arrested, she would hate running the gauntlet of publicity and ridicule. Besides, she may feel that she and I are quits. She was always a good-natured sort of creature, if rather a goose."

Paul cut short these desultory reflections with some sternness. "Please come to the point," said he. "Of course you cannot be Vigors."

"Oh, of course not. Vigors died at Malaga in the spring of 1891. It was easy, and it happened to be particularly convenient, for me to establish a confusion of identity in an hotel where nobody knew which of us was which. Hence the official documents which you possess. There you have the whole story in brief. My encounter with Mrs. Baldwin in Italy was a mere freak of destiny. Rather an unfortunate one for me, as things have fallen out; but there seems to be a sort of rough justice in the sequence of human affairs, and if one only lives long enough, one ends by paying for one's fun. It was great fun at the time, I remember," Mr. Hilliar concluded, with a retrospective smile.

"I see nothing funny in robbery and imposture," remarked Paul curtly.

"You wouldn't. You're incapacitated by your mental and moral structure from entering into the diversions that belong to mine. The very last time that we had a talk together I told you I was an adventurer, as you may recollect. I can't put it more lucidly; but I should despair of ever getting you to understand what the term implies."

"It appears, at any rate," observed Paul, "to imply a faculty for boundless mendacity. What about that long, connected narrative of your having been pushed over a cliff near San Sebastian by your confederate?"

"Mendacious, my dear sir; purely mendacious from start to finish! Not without artistic merit, though, considering that I had to make it up almost as I went along. And it served."

"It has served to show me that I can't believe a single word you say. What proof is there, for instance, that this man Vigors is really dead?"

"He is quite dead. Those Spanish documents—which were the weak point in my case, by the way, only you didn't insist—prove beyond all possibility of doubt that an English traveller died at Malaga in April 1891. That person was not Jack Hilliar, who now stands before you and whom you have recognised. The trouble for Jack Hilliar is that it was he, not Vigors, who personated Hamilton and I can't tell you how many other fictitious sportsmen. What a game it was! How I kept it up year after year! Well, as I was saying, I'm accountable for Hamilton,

and it's more than probable that Mrs. Baldwin, reinforced by Scotland Yard, could send me to prison; for Hamilton, I am very sorry to have to confess to you, was once fool enough to sign a cheque with another man's name. There!—now you're *au fait!*”

“Upon my word,” exclaimed Paul, after a pause, “I think you had better take to your heels!”

“So do I. The pursuit, I imagine, won't be very hot. Even Mrs. Baldwin, when you have convinced her that I am the father of my son, will hardly wish to put me in the dock. Why should she?—why should any of you? I couldn't be more effectually or permanently swept out of your lives by a sentence of penal servitude, and you escape the reflected obloquy.”

A few steps took him to one of the French windows, which he opened.

“I'm going to walk to the station,” he announced—“the railway station, not the other one. Tell Mrs. Baldwin so, if you like; though I fancy she would rather picture me flying across country in abject terror. Goodbye, Mr. Lequesne; I don't ask you to forgive the vexation that I have caused you, because I haven't a doubt that you will. It's so easy to have mercy upon the fallen!”

But Paul quickly followed and intercepted him. “One moment, please! I did not mean you to take what I said so literally, and I am not quite clear that I ought to let you go.”

“Oh, if you think you ought to send for a policeman! . . .”

“ There will be no question of that. The question for me is how Guy would wish me to act. You are—well, you have been telling me what you are. Yet I can't forget what he will certainly remember, that you are his father.”

“ He won't remember that humiliating circumstance long.”

“ He will always remember it,” said Paul sadly and a little bitterly. “ You talk about our escaping reflected obloquy; but he can't escape it. He has accepted you, he has identified himself with you . . .”

“ Not to the extent of being dragged down by me. My poor Chaco Company, it's true, is done for—just as I was upon the verge of setting it firmly upon its legs too!—but you'll find when you see him that he himself was disposed to give it its death-blow. He didn't believe much in the Chaco Company.”

“ He believed in you, though.”

“ I'm not sure. If he believed—but I doubt whether he did—that I care a lot more for his welfare than I do for my own, he made no mistake. I have my little virtues, as well as my vices, Mr. Lequesne.”

“ Who hasn't? I am not passing judgment upon you; I am only wondering whether a decent man can repudiate his own father, vicious or virtuous.”

“ How does that point arise? I shan't, unless you force me, wait here to be repudiated. Obviously I have got to clear out of this country, and I take it that the best thing I can do for my son is never to be heard of again. I presume I may also take it that with my disappearance he will revert to his old position and his old prospects in relation to you?”

The last interrogative phrase jarred upon Paul, who, in spite of himself, had been softening towards a man devoid, indeed, of honesty and honour, yet not wholly devoid of saving graces. He had never contemplated disinheriting Guy; but he had not seen, and did not now see, why he should give pledges to Mr. Hilliar. So, instead of making a direct reply, he observed drily :

“ You don't seem to realise that you can't, with your light-hearted appearances and disappearances, obliterate the footprints that you leave. When you let Guy know that he had a father living you took an ineffaceable step.”

Mr. Hilliar flushed and for the first time displayed some signs of annoyance. “ Oh you philosophic moralists ! ” he exclaimed. “ You fancy yourselves liberal, and you're narrower by a long way than the Church which you like to call bigoted. The Church understands humanity; you have only a bemused familiarity with dialectics. The Church, which recognises the staring fact that all human beings are sinners, offers pardon and pity for sins; you can't, because your silly theories of logic won't allow you. So at the end of all you find yourselves in the same boat with the fanatical Hebrew lawgiver who proclaimed the Almighty as a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children. What a futile figure you cut ! ”

“ I only reminded you that effects follow causes,” said Paul, a little surprised by this outbreak. “ The Church of Rome doesn't dispute that, I believe.”

Mr. Hilliar sighed and laughed. “ Oh, well,” he

returned, " what's the good of my blustering ? I'm helpless, anyway ; I can but trust that your common sense may prove more than a match for your logic. Fortunately, the chances are that it will. Now I'm off. I shall be at the Carlton Hotel until tomorrow morning, in case you and Mrs. Baldwin should decide, after further deliberation, to lay hands upon me."

He stepped out into the garden, waved his hand with an indescribable blending of jauntiness, defiance and dejection, and so was gone, Paul making no further effort to detain him.

CHAPTER XXII

SAGACIOUS WATTIE

AUDREY BALDWIN was wont to declare that football—whether Rugby or Association, but preferably Rugby—affords the keenest enjoyment to spectators that is to be got out of looking on at any game. Vast multitudes appear to be of her opinion, and if there was one humble individual who did not share her enthusiasm to the full, he knew a great deal better than to say so. Walter Cleland knew several things in connection with his betrothed better than he liked them; but he was a sensible little fellow, who realised that if we insist upon having things as we should like in this complex world, we run no small risk of obtaining nothing at all. Between him and the girl who was soon to be his wife there existed an unformulated, yet clearly understood, compact in virtue of which they had become the best of friends. Any breach, or attempted breach, thereof might prove fatal to friendship, while it assuredly would not create love in the breast of a young woman who openly proclaimed her conviction that love was nauseous rubbish. Poor Wattie, well aware that tender passions are seldom evoked by such features as his, had to make the best of that; and he bravely did so,

telling himself in occasional moments of despondency how jolly thankful he ought to be that Audrey held views to which alone he was indebted for his amazing good fortune.

Therefore he sat contentedly by her side while she watched, with dilated eyes, the vicissitudes of a contest which she found in the highest degree exciting. He also managed to grow a little excited, and they conversed very much as a couple of schoolboys might have done, giving their entire attention to the game until it ended gloriously in a narrow victory for the side which they both favoured. Only when they were driving away together in a hansom, (Audrey preferred that doomed vehicle to its mechanical supplanter,) did Wattie's recent guest come up for deferred criticism.

"Quite nice," was Audrey's verdict; "much nicer than I expected. Straight, too, as far as one could judge."

"Yes," Wattie agreed, with just a tinge of dubiousness.

"Do you mean that he isn't straight?"

"Oh, I daresay he's all right; time will show. I wonder what your mother knows about him."

"She can't know anything about him."

"I expect she knows something. Either that or she wants to find out something. I had my eye on her at lunch, and I saw that, for all her affability, he wasn't making quite so much headway with her as he was with you."

Audrey gave him a friendly prod in the ribs with her elbow. "Nothing escapes those little squeezed-up

eyes of yours ! ” she cried. “ They’re always taking notes.”

“ It’s what they’re for,” said Wattie demurely. “ They’re useless for the sort of purpose to which old Hilliar puts his.”

He drew himself up, expanded his chest, directed a benevolently admiring gaze at his neighbour and said, in an exact reproduction of Mr. Hilliar’s voice, “ My dear young lady, pray believe that I am neither selfish nor ungrateful. I recognise as fully as you can what is due to Mr. Lequesne.”

Audrey laughed. “ Well, I believe he does,” she returned. “ I only hope Guy does ! ”

“ One hardly knows,” observed Wattie, resuming his ordinary demeanour, “ what to hope about Guy.”

“ One knows what to fear. But that mustn’t happen. You mustn’t allow it to happen ! ”

“ Good gracious ! do you see me giving orders to Guy ?—or him obeying them ? ”

“ Couldn’t your father order him back to Buenos Ayres ? In case of absolute necessity, I mean.”

“ The governor, like the rest of us, is Guy’s very humble servant nowadays. Besides, he wouldn’t see the necessity. A man who wants to marry a duke’s daughter isn’t generally supposed to be throwing himself away.”

“ He doesn’t want to marry her ; and if he did, it would be all the more necessary for somebody to grab him by the coat-tails. We can’t stand still, looking on, while he commits suicide.”

“ Perhaps,” suggested Wattie, “ the lady isn’t so bent upon his destruction as all that. I don’t know

much about her, but from what I have heard, I shouldn't say that she was exactly the sort of person to hanker after domesticity for its own sake. And although you and I may consider Guy a thousand times too good for her, I suppose she might look rather higher if she really thought of giving matrimony a second trial, mightn't she ? ”

“ Not she ! Her own people shy across the street when they see her ; she isn't as young as she was, and I fancy she must be rather hard up. Guy is well off and going to be better off. I'm afraid she has recalled him. ”

Wattie shrugged his shoulders. “ At that rate, he'll have to take his chance, won't he ? He certainly wouldn't listen for a moment to me, and I doubt whether he would listen to anybody else, unless it's Mr. Lequesne. ”

“ Just at present Mr. Lequesne is in the mood to submit to anything, except a snub. Really it looks as if I were the only person in the world to care what becomes of poor Guy ! ”

“ You care a good deal, don't you ? ”

“ You know I do ! ”

“ H'm !—lucky I'm not of a jealous disposition. ”

“ Wattie, ” said the girl, turning upon him in sudden displeasure, “ you are not to talk like that, please, even as a joke. ”

“ Did I mean it for a joke ? The worst of being a professional joker is that one's gravest utterances are apt to be met with derisive laughter . . . ”

“ I am not laughing, ” broke in Audrey.

“ Or misplaced indignation. As a matter of fact, I suspect you do care more for Guy than for me. ”

This had the odd effect of restoring Audrey's momentarily impaired good humour. "Let's break off the engagement, then," said she cheerfully. "That will leave me free to save Guy from the ogress by marrying him myself. I might, you know."

"I believe you," Wattie returned, with a rueful grimace.

"Then you *must* be a donkey! I suppose that if there is a living being whom nothing would ever persuade Guy Hilliar to marry, it's your future wife; and if there is a living being whom even her splendid altruism But we won't pursue this painful subject further. Now I want my tea."

Walter Cleland belonged to one of those modern clubs which admit ladies as visitors and which are chiefly utilised by their members for purposes of entertainment. It was a big, imposing place, much frequented towards the close of winter afternoons, and when our young couple entered the room in which tea was served they could not at first descry a single disengaged table. A waiter drew their attention to one from which a small, swart man and a tall, fair-haired lady, dressed in deep mourning, had just risen. Audrey did not know Lord Dunridge by sight; but she knew his companion, whose half-closed eyes lighting presently upon her, opened themselves by the fraction of an inch and whose smiling lips were parted to let forth an ejaculation of pleased surprise.

"Oh!—how do you do, Miss Baldwin? Such luck to have run up against you!"

Save that she was arrayed in unrelieved black,

(which happened to be extremely becoming to her,) Lady Freda Barran did not look much like the victim of a recent bereavement. Nor, of course, did she evince the faintest embarrassment at encountering the daughter of a lady who had found means of letting her know that their acquaintance was at an end. On the contrary, she repeated her cry of "Such luck!" and added, by way of explaining it, "I'm so anxious for news of Guy Hilliar!"

"I haven't heard from him for a long time," answered Audrey, who, though habitually truthful, thought evasion justifiable under the circumstances.

"Haven't you really? Nor have I, and I'm beginning to be quite jumpy about him. He can't have been gobbled up by a tiger, can he?"

"It doesn't seem likely in a country where there aren't any tigers," was Audrey's dry response.

"Well, but there are jaguars and snakes and things, aren't there? What can be the fun of rushing off to those outlandish tropical places!"

Wattie observed that Argentina enjoyed a temperate climate, and added sententiously that even England might sometimes be found too hot for comfort.

"Mr. Cleland, isn't it?" asked Lady Freda, who had not hitherto taken any notice of him. "How amusing you were that afternoon with your imitations! Oh, and, by the way, you're his partner; so you must know what he is about."

"Not very positively," Wattie replied; "but to the best of my belief he is at sea. His father tells me that he is on the way home."

“Come! that’s reassuring. What address would find him on arrival?”

“I couldn’t say; but probably the first thing he will do will be to look in at the office. Can I deliver any message to him for you?”

“I wish you would! My love, and what does he mean by leaving letters unanswered? Tell him to come to Green Street immediately and beg pardon.”

Lord Dunridge, who looked cross and impatient, here struck in, not over civilly, with, “I say, are you coming or not?”

“Half a second!” returned Lady Freda. “Good-bye, Miss Baldwin, and don’t forget to send me a card when you have another show on like that last one of yours. Never laughed more in my life! Thanks so much for your information, Mr. Cleland. Goodbye, both of you.”

As soon as she had disappeared, Audrey, seating herself at the tea-table, exclaimed:

“Women of that sort ought to be publicly ducked in the nearest horse-pond!”

“She wouldn’t mind that,” said Wattie; “she’d convert a humiliation into a triumph. Her hair grows on her head and her complexion doesn’t wash off. The sympathies of half the crowd and the homage of all the men would be hers at once.”

“She seems to have won yours already. What can there be that always attracts men in sheer, vulgar impudence!”

“She doesn’t attract me,” Wattie answered; “she rather repels me. All the same, she’s a handsome woman, and there’s something rather splendid in what

you call her impudence. The mere fact of her being here with Lord Dunridge—and without a hint of a widow's cap either! But perhaps the cart-wheel hat put that out of the question."

"Widows of a few months' standing don't wear hats," said Audrey.

"Not even merry ones? Probably she makes her hits by hats or in some kindred fashion. She does things that nobody else would dream of doing, and she does them just because she feels inclined, not for the sake of being stared at. Well, such as she is she's a force, and Guy will have to tackle her."

"Yes, thanks to you. Why must you needs tell her that he was coming to England?"

"Partly because she would have found out soon, whether I had told her or not, partly because I was curious to hear what she would say. You were under the impression that her speaking of Guy by his Christian name and sending him her love and all was meant for your benefit, weren't you?"

"Well—wasn't it?"

"I don't think so. I suspect it was meant for Lord Dunridge. Lord Dunridge, you see, is a very much bigger fish than Guy, and it's notorious that she has kept him from marrying up to now. Suppose her present object should be just the opposite?—and suppose he should be laying back his ears?"

"Bright, observant boy! So that was Lord Dunridge, was it? Go on."

"That's all. It's only a guess; but he has a dog-in-the-mangerish look about him. Perhaps the best way of getting him to insist upon having what

he could do very well without would be to make him think there was a chance of its being given to somebody else."

Audrey sipped her tea meditatively. "I should like to think that you were right," said she. "If you are, Guy is safe."

"Unless her first string snaps. And it may; for she gives me the idea of being rather heavy-handed. We're pretty powerless, whatever happens."

"I'm not going to admit that yet," Audrey rejoined in a determined tone of voice.

But whether she liked to admit it or not, the case was hardly one for effective intervention on the part of friends. A man who deems himself in honour bound to a course for which he has small relish will not be deterred by representations that he is not so bound, nor could Guy be told anything about Lady Freda that he did not already know or surmise. And Lord Dunridge, as a possible lightning-conductor, looked less to be depended upon the more he was considered. At one time and another Audrey had heard a good deal about that young nobleman (for what do not girls hear in these unfettered days?) and was aware of the standard of conduct that governs his like. He and his like would doubtless say that one does not marry Lady Freda Barrans if one can help it, and very often they contrive to help being involved in such obligations. Upon the whole, Audrey concluded that Lord Dunridge was as little likely to elbow Guy aside as Mr. Hilliar or Paul Lequesne were to hold him forcibly back.

Pondering thus by the fireside in Cromwell Road,

after Wattie had escorted her thither and had taken leave of her, she had one of those revolts against the dull invincibility of circumstance to which the young are periodically liable. It all seemed so stupid, so needless, so meaningless! Time goes ticking along and brings what it must bring; there is no putting the clock back, no doing away with results which spring from wholly incommensurate causes. What irony to pretend that we are the arbiters of our own fate! On a sudden it came to her that Guy, if he should marry Lady Freda, would not be behaving in such a much more improbable, incongruous, unforeseen way than she was in marrying Wattie Cleland. True, she was fond of Wattie and contented with her lot; only she recognised at the moment that she could not truly be said to have chosen him or it. We don't choose: things happen to us!

The door was thrown open, and in marched Mrs. Baldwin to proclaim, in a voice muffled by a thick gauze veil and a turned-up fur collar, what strange and exhilarating things had happened to her in the course of the past few hours.

"Congratulate me, Audrey! I've been getting a little of my own back—as you would say in your slangy way. Talk about Nemesis and poetic justice! Well, you were a very small child in the Florence days; so I daresay you don't remember that rascally Mr. Vigors and the trick that he played upon us all."

"I can just remember Mr. Vigors," answered Audrey, "and of course I have often heard you tell the story of his iniquities. What about him?"

"Only that he and your specious Mr. Hilliar are

identical. Actually identical; for Mr. Vigors was a myth, it seems—which is rather a pity for some reasons, though perhaps it may be as well for others. Imagine the audacity of the man in sitting down to a luncheon-table with me and flattering himself that I shouldn't know those green-streaked eyes of his again amongst ten thousand! Well, he is sorry now, no doubt, and I should think he must be sorry, too, that he selected me as the victim of one of his impostures in days gone by. If, on account of his being Guy's father, I have had to let him fly from justice, instead of sending him into the penal servitude which he so richly deserves, I have at least put an end and a finish to him and his present fraudulent schemes. I don't know when I have been so pleased!"

"Pleased that Guy's father turns out to be fraudulent!" exclaimed the bewildered and dismayed Audrey.

"My dear child, don't put words into my mouth that I haven't used. No; but I think I have some right to be pleased with myself for having exposed an impostor who might never have been detected but for me. Help me off with my coat, and I'll give you a full account of the whole business."

CHAPTER XXIII

AUDREY THROWS UP THE SPONGE

“So that disposes of Mr. Hilliar,” Mrs. Baldwin concluded her protracted tale by observing. “As I told Paul Lequesne, it’s rather like compounding a felony to let him go free; still, all things considered, perhaps we were justified. If he had really been Mr. Vigors, that would have been a different thing; but as there appears to be no doubt about his being Mr. Hilliar, we had to think of other people.”

“Naturally you had,” said Audrey, who had listened to her mother’s graphic narrative without interruption or comment. “It would have been impossible for you to send Guy’s father to gaol.”

“Oh, I don’t know about impossible,” Mrs. Baldwin returned; “it would have been disagreeable, of course, and I daresay nobody would have been much the better off. For my own part, I am quite satisfied with having prevented him from doing further mischief. I shall not breathe a word to anyone—not even to the Duke, though I almost feel that he ought to be told—and the whole affair will be buried in oblivion.”

“But can it?” Audrey asked. “Won’t some explanation have to be given to Mr. Cleland, for instance?”

Mrs. Baldwin jerked up her shoulders. "Mr. Cleland will hear that the man has decamped, I suppose, and will draw his own conclusions. We don't know what has become of him, so we can't say."

"Even so, Guy must suffer, I'm afraid. It will be taken for granted that his father has done something disgraceful."

"Then, my dear," retorted Mrs. Baldwin impatiently, "the truth will be taken for granted, that's all. I'm sorry for Guy; but really when people have such fathers! . . . You and Paul both talk as if Guy were the only person in the world worth considering. One doesn't expect thanks and doesn't get them; still, when one has discharged an imperative duty and has shown a good deal of generosity and kindly feeling into the bargain, it is a little hard to meet with nothing but black looks."

"I'm not looking black," Audrey declared; "I'm only looking blue. I don't know how Guy will take all this; I foresee complications."

Given a nature like Guy's and a situation such as that with which he would be confronted on his arrival, they were visible enough, those complications. They were, however, scarcely of a kind to impress themselves upon Mrs. Baldwin, who indeed could do nothing to minimise them. Audrey, therefore, said little more to her mother; but on the following day she hastened betimes to seek the comprehension and sympathy which she counted upon finding in Chester Square.

"There have been some rather startling developments since you were here last, haven't there?" Paul began, after she had been shown into his study.

"No need now for you to make a report to me upon Mr. Hilliar."

"And I had such a glowing one ready for you! I thought him a particularly nice old gentleman who seemed to enjoy life and wish everybody else to enjoy it."

"You needn't be ashamed of your diagnosis; that's the man, as I read him. Unluckily he has a kink somewhere in his moral equipment which baffles analysis and throws the whole machine out of gear. There was nothing to be said to him; there's scarcely anything to be said about him. I believe your mother and I took the only course open to us."

"Yes, if it had to be either flight or arrest; and mother says she couldn't have kept silence upon any other condition than his disappearance."

"In justice to her, I don't think she could. For the matter of that, I couldn't have kept silence myself; though I don't mean to say that it would have been my duty to enlighten the authorities."

"Oh, one knows whom you'll have to enlighten, worse luck!"

Paul sighed. "It will hit him hard, you think?"

"It must. I don't know whether he cared a great deal for his father; one hopes there wasn't time, and he hasn't, perhaps, what you could call a very affectionate nature"—

"Not very," Paul agreed.

"Still there's the humiliation and the loss of prestige. He'll feel that. You see, he has worked such wonders with this shipping business, and they have all been, after a fashion, on their knees to him and have thought

he couldn't make a mistake. Now he will have the air of being at least a dupe, even if he isn't suspected of being an accomplice. I shouldn't wonder if it were to lead to his retiring from the firm."

"Neither should I; but I doubt whether the shipping business would have interested him much longer in any event. He had done what there was to be done with it. What I personally dread—I may be quite mistaken, though—is his taking up the idea that he ought not to throw his father over. And Jack Hilliar is one of those men whom it's simply essential to throw over."

"Oh, I've thought of that too. But surely Mr. Hilliar will be undiscoverable!"

"It isn't easy to be undiscoverable nowadays, even if one tries to be, and there's no certainty that Mr. Hilliar will try very hard. England, to be sure, must remain forbidden ground for him; but I fancy he might be prevailed upon to accept a helping hand in some country with which we have no extradition treaty."

"I see. And as the one and only thing you care about is to keep Guy with you, you would die rather than dissuade him from following his father into banishment."

"That's your way of putting it," said Paul, with a smile. "I shall certainly do my best to dissuade him, but I shan't be able to speak quite as strongly as I might if I were altogether disinterested."

"Then I'll use the strong language," Audrey promised.

"Very well; only I don't think he'll listen. All

will depend upon the aspect under which things may present themselves to him. On the one hand, there's the appearance of retiring cravenly, which would go against the grain with him; on the other, there's filial duty, backed up just now, I imagine, by a firm conviction that he would be better anywhere than in this country."

"Ah, there I'm with him!—there's the trouble! We can't get away from the fact that this country is a horribly dangerous place for him to be in. Do you know, I met that woman yesterday afternoon. She was at Wattie's club, where we were having tea, and she had the face to ask for news of Guy—calling him 'Guy,' too, if you please! He was to be given her love as soon as he arrived and told to go and see her without loss of time."

"I daresay you won't deliver that message," Paul remarked.

"It was intrusted to Wattie. No; I don't suppose it will be delivered in those words; but he will be sure to walk into her web, and then goodness knows what words she won't employ! Couldn't he be prevented somehow from seeing her?"

"Not by me, I'm afraid," answered Paul; "but I can't say that she alarms me much. I happen to know that he hasn't the least desire to marry her."

"It isn't a question of what he desires; the question is whether she hasn't it in her power to make an appeal to him which he can't, or won't, resist. Wattie thinks she is setting her cap at Lord Dunridge, who was with her yesterday, and no doubt she might make the same sort of appeal to him; but the difference between

Lord Dunridge and Guy is—well, you know as well as I do what it is.”

Paul stroked his beard reflectively. Of course there are circumstances under which it is in a lady's power to formulate an irresistible claim; but he did not believe that such circumstances existed in the particular case, and at any rate he was not prepared to discuss them with Audrey. He said :

“ You don't make your behests very clear. I am to keep Guy in England if I can, and I am to prevent him from seeing Lady Freda Barran if I can. How can I do both?—or indeed either? Do you want me to drag him off by main force to Stone Hall and detain him in custody there until further orders? ”

“ Yes,” answered Audrey, with decision, “ that's just what I do want. Take him away; let him go out shooting with you and lead the sort of life that used to satisfy you both when you were wiser than either of you is now. Tell him you want him badly; he'll go with you if you say that. Why should you be too proud to ask one small favour when so much depends upon it? After all, you owe it to him to make some sacrifice, for it was a good deal your fault that he ever got into this mess. You could have stopped it easily enough.”

A sensible man does not allow himself to be provoked by the normal, ingenerate obliquity of feminine judgments, and Paul Lequesne had more sense, as well as more patience, than most men. Nevertheless, the injustice of such an attack, coming from such a quarter, was too much for him, and he made the somewhat imprudent rejoinder of—

"I could have done no such thing, easily or otherwise. But *you* could."

"I should like to know how!"

"Perhaps, in strictness, you couldn't. Perhaps—only you make me doubt it sometimes—it wasn't possible for you to care for him in the way that he cares for you, and perhaps nothing short of that would have availed."

"In the way that he cares for me!" echoed Audrey, drawing her brows together and looking thoroughly displeased. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. It's a betrayal of confidence, I suppose, but for some reasons it is as well that you should know the truth. At all events, you will realise now that if he thinks this country no place for him, it isn't because Lady Freda Barran is one of its inhabitants."

"All I realise is that you are under a most absurd delusion. At odd times—not very often, though, for I always hated that sort of thing—Guy used to amuse himself by pretending to make love to me; but he never was in earnest, and I wish he hadn't given you the idea that he was. I don't think it was very nice of him."

"He doesn't seem to have discovered that he was in earnest until he heard of your engagement," said Paul. "That is what often happens to women and every now and then to men. He said very little to me upon the subject—only a few words, by way of accounting for his wish to go to South America—but what he did say was sufficient."

“Sufficient for what? To make you believe that he was sincere?”

Paul nodded. “His sincerity was all the more unmistakable because he didn’t make a tragedy of it. He will recover in time; everybody recovers from everything in time. Only, as you remarked a while ago, he hasn’t a very affectionate nature; and for that very reason love won’t be the transient emotion with him that it is with nine people out of ten.”

“I could have sworn,” Audrey declared, in vexed accents, “that if he ever felt a touch of that transient emotion in his life, it wasn’t I who had made him acquainted with it.”

“I am sure that it wasn’t you who intended to do so, my dear. His misfortune isn’t your fault. You can understand, though, why I don’t regard Lady Freda as dangerous.”

“No; I don’t see that this makes her the least less dangerous. How tiresome it all is! I wonder whether you haven’t been letting your imagination run away with you just a little bit. What did Guy say?”

But when Paul began trying to render a faithful and conscientious report of the confession which he had received, she very unreasonably interrupted him with—

“Oh, never mind! I don’t care to hear. I rather wish you hadn’t told me at all. There wasn’t much use in telling me, now that I am going to marry somebody else.” She caught herself up quickly.

“Of course I don't mean that there could ever have been any use. Please don't think that!”

“I don't,” said Paul.

“You looked as if you thought so; I'm afraid you would like to think so. And nothing could be farther from the truth. The truth is that, fond as I am of Guy, I couldn't have married him; he isn't my idea of a husband—and Wattie is. Well, I'm sorry—very sorry indeed and very much surprised—but it can't be helped. He'll recover, as you say.”

She was manifestly annoyed; she was not, Paul thought, in the smallest degree touched, and he took himself to task, as soon as she had left him, for having yielded to the temptation of discharging an ill-advised and wholly ineffectual shot. If in the recesses of his mind there had lurked a suspicion or hope that Audrey, like Guy, might have been ignorant of the state of her own feelings, it was now quenched, once for all, and if he had been disposed throughout to think of poor Walter Cleland as a negligible factor, his callousness had met with merited requital.

Not altogether unaccustomed to be viewed in the above light, Wattie took no offence when he was requested, that afternoon, in a short note from his betrothed to omit the daily visit which he was in the habit of paying her after business hours.

“Mother and I,” Audrey informed him, “have just decided to go down to Marlow for a day or two. She wants to hustle the architect, and I rather feel that I don't, at the moment, want to be hustled by anybody; so we are taking leave of absence. By the early post tomorrow morning you will hear from

mother how right you were to be circumspect in your dealings with Mr. Hilliar. It's such a long yarn, and she enjoys telling it so much more than I should, that I won't anticipate her."

Circumspect in matters relating to business Wattie had always been, and since he was a physiognomist, as well as an unremitting observer, he had to some extent appraised Mr. Hilliar. The letter from Mrs. Baldwin which duly reached him the next morning did not, therefore, cause him any inordinate astonishment, although he at once perceived, as Audrey had done, that what had happened would be a heavy blow to Guy. Nothing could be done to soften it. Mr. Hilliar had fled like a defaulter, and announcement of that untoward circumstance must needs be made. It was enjoined upon Wattie by his correspondent, with an assumption of magnanimity at which he had a little laugh, that he was on no account to make additional revelations to anybody; but that prohibition obviously could not apply to the defaulter's son, whose return was thus menaced with even worse trials than that which two friends of his had apprehended for him. No wonder Audrey's first impulse had been to retire to Weir Cottage and pull herself together in solitude! It has just been said that Wattie was inured to cavalier treatment, and he had very truly said of himself that he was not of a jealous disposition. This, no doubt, was why he neither ventured to run down to Marlow uninvited nor wrote to express the sympathy that he felt. Like the wise, patient, longsuffering little man that he was, he waited, without breaking silence, for the summons

which did not reach him until four days later; but when, in obedience to it, he hastened to Cromwell Road, Audrey's pale, drawn and unsmiling face gave him a shock for which he had not been prepared.

"I say," he exclaimed involuntarily, "I didn't think it would hurt you so much as this."

"It doesn't," she answered, in a rather hard, dry voice. "Of course I'm concerned on Guy's account; but I haven't been thinking about him—not in that way, at least—all these days and nights; I've been thinking about you, Wattie."

"That's an unusual honour for me," remarked the young man. But his laugh was a forced one, for he knew on the instant what was coming.

"Yes, it is," Audrey assented; "much too unusual. If I had thought a little more about you and a little less about myself when you asked me to marry you, perhaps I shouldn't have been brought to this despicable pass. It's no excuse that I never pretended to be in love with you; you were willing to take me as I was, and I was willing to be taken. Now, at the last moment, I have got to say that I can't keep my word. It isn't—if you can understand—that I don't want to keep it or that I'm not ashamed of myself and disgusted with myself for breaking it; it's just that the thing has become impossible."

She looked him full in the face and set her lips tightly (he noticed that they quivered a little, nevertheless), as if bracing herself against protest or reproach; but he uttered neither. He only asked quite quietly:

"Any special reason for that?"

“Yes,” she replied, without flinching, “and as you have a right to hear the truth, I had better come out with it at once. I know now that I love somebody else, that’s all.”

He appreciated that mercifully uncompromising statement; for the harshness of her words was atoned for by her woebegone face, and he saw that she was giving herself as much pain as she was giving him.

“Well,” said he, omitting a superfluous question, “it’s a good thing that you found out in time. I can guess what opened your eyes. One never really knows how much one cares for people until, for some reason or other, one has to be awfully sorry for them, and this wretched business about his father . . .”

“It wasn’t only that,” Audrey interrupted; “it was something that Mr. Lequesne said. At first I didn’t see why it should make any difference; only after I had got home and began to think” . . . Her voice faltered for an instant; but she cleared it and resumed: “I felt I must have time; so I persuaded mother to come down to Marlow, and there I fought the thing out all by myself. Or rather, I didn’t fight; I threw up the sponge. One may marry without being in love; I am sure hundreds and thousands of women do and never regret it; but to marry one man when you love another—it seems to me almost wicked!”

“Quite wicked, I should call it. I suppose I mustn’t ask what it was that Mr. Lequesne said?”

“You may ask anything. He told me that Guy loved me.”

“Oh, come!—that’s better. I was afraid he might

have told you something very different. Guy is a queer chap in some ways, and it didn't occur to me—though I might have known if I hadn't been a bit off my head at the time. . . . It has been a misunderstanding all round. Happily, you and he won't misunderstand one another any more."

"But Wattie," exclaimed the girl, in unfeigned distress, "I can't bear you to take it like this! You must think me a perfect beast, and I do wish you would say so!"

"I would with pleasure if that was what I thought; but of course it isn't. You made a mistake for which there was every imaginable excuse, and now that you have discovered your mistake you have been absolutely straight and honest with me, as you always are. You couldn't do more, and lots of girls, I expect, would have contrived to do less."

Audrey shook her head despairingly. "If I could but think that you didn't very much mind! You oughtn't to mind, for you aren't losing anything worth having; but what's the use of saying that? It's wonderful and beautiful of you to behave so well; only—I can't help knowing that you did care for me."

"Why use the past tense? I've even the vanity to believe that you still care a little for me."

"Indeed I do, Wattie!" she cried, bursting into tears. "I care more for you, I think, than for anybody in the world, except—except the one. Yet at the eleventh hour I must jilt you and disappoint you and make you look ridiculous. All I can say is that I *must*!—there's nothing else to be done!"

It was then that Wattie Cleland showed how extraordinarily well he had it in him to behave.

“Look here, Audrey,” said he; “we’ve been jolly prosaic from the start, you and I, and we shall spoil the symmetry of the whole affair if we wind up with heroics and hysterics. I’ll admit that I’m a little disappointed; but don’t run away with the idea that I’m going to be inconsolable. As a matter of fact, I may tell you now that I’ve had my doubts of late as to whether this marriage business can be run successfully on prosaic lines, and, unless I’m much mistaken, so have you.”

“No; never until a few days ago!”

“Oh, you were beginning to doubt; you were growing more and more defiantly friendly. Now, I hope, you’ll be my best friend without any need for defiance. My notion is that Providence meant us to be friends, not husband and wife; so let’s be thankful that we have been saved from flying in the face of Providence. Don’t worry about me; I shall be all right.”

Did she believe him? At any rate, she could not quarrel with an attitude which excluded deprecation. She had played him false and he had accepted his dismissal with perfect good humour: what remained to be said? Only to bind him to secrecy respecting the cause of his dismissal; and this, as may be supposed, he readily promised to observe.

“Because,” Audrey explained, “there’s nothing to prove that Guy hasn’t changed. Mr. Lequesne said he would recover, and indeed he went out to

Argentina for the express purpose of recovering; so it may very well be that you will have an old maid for your best friend, after all."

"Oh, I don't anticipate such a lame conclusion as that," answered Wattie, laughing.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE IRONY OF COINCIDENCE

NOTHING was more glaringly apparent to Guy Hilliar than the path marked out for him by duty and honour—not even his extreme disinclination to tread it. He knew, indeed, that some men are lax in their notions of what they owe to women whom they have loved, or professed to love, and whom they love no longer; but such men, by his way of thinking, are simply cads, and he could no more take his cue from them than he could (for instance) advise or allow those who trusted him to invest money in a bogus company. However reprehensible it may be to make love to a married woman, it is infinitely worse to shrink from marrying her, should she, by ill luck, become a widow. At the same time, he did not consider the fulfilment of acknowledged obligations so urgent as to necessitate a voyage to England by the quickest and most direct route. Pending his arrival, Mr. Cleland would not, he knew, commit the firm to any rash enterprise, while Lady Freda, for all her disdain of conventional usages, could scarcely contract a fresh alliance before the grass was green upon her late husband's grave. Accordingly, he took passage in a twelve-knot Italian steamer which, touching at various ports, was only due to reach Genoa towards

the last days of the year; for he was not without hope of thus evading an obligation which did not rank as a duty. Audrey's wedding, according to Paul, was to be solemnised "after Christmas." That might perhaps mean immediately after Christmas, and the chance of turning up a few days too late to be present at the ceremony seemed worth taking.

Not, to be sure, that it really signified. He meant to renew as soon as possible that long-standing friendship and *camaraderie* with Audrey which she, for her part, would certainly wish to maintain; he did not mean to cherish a hopeless passion a day longer than could be helped. It is not over hopeless affairs that a man can make himself miserable; when hopes are dead, the only thing to be done with them is to bury them, just as the only thing to be done with an unalluring future is to clothe it with such measure of glamour as can be conjured up. Guy did not forget that there had been times when he had been very nearly, if not quite, in love with Lady Freda; he tried hard to believe that he was still fond of her; he was sure that she was fond of him, and he had always been of opinion that she was at heart a better woman than she cared to appear. Why should they not be happy enough together, as happiness goes?

During the long, leisurely transit across the Atlantic he strove—with no very brilliant success, it must be owned—to make the best of things after the above fashion, sustained, upon the whole, less by illusion than by that resolve not to accept defeat which had stood him in good stead from his childhood. He had need of all his courage and optimism, for the outlook

was sufficiently sombre. Upon one point, at any rate, illusion must be abandoned. That his father was what Mr. Jackson in an unguarded moment had pronounced him to be was only too evident, and what was to become of his father was a somewhat anxious question.

“For that matter,” Guy mused, “I wonder what is going to become of me! One doesn’t return from an adventure like this with one’s head quite as high as when one set out, and if the firm ceases to believe in me, they may not have much further use for me—nor I for them. Can’t afford to quarrel with my bread and butter, though; I must stick to it until I can find something else. Especially as I shall soon be married to a rather expensive wife!”

Reminiscences of Lady Freda’s extravagance and her insatiable appetite for money gave him a cold shudder. He saw her—could not help seeing her—making unabashed demands upon Paul, and he felt that, should her requests be granted, as they probably would be, his humiliation would be almost greater than he could bear. Weighed down by these two burdens, his genial, happy-go-lucky father and his spendthrift wife, he would have to prove himself a strong swimmer indeed to keep his head above water.

The monotony of an ocean voyage under steam and under modern conditions may be soothing to worn-out invalids, but has little charm for an active, restless young man who is provided with nothing pleasant to think about. Guy wearied of it long before Christmas Eve, when the cloud-capped rock of Gibraltar was sighted. It was with clouds, rain, a blustering

chill Levanter and grey, tumbling waves that the Mediterranean received him, the weather continuing stormy until the steamer dropped anchor, three days later, at Messina, where he made up his mind to disembark. It came into his head that a letter from home would help him to regulate his next movements and that if a certain celebration should be imminent, he might just as well know what to expect, or perhaps avoid. As soon, therefore, as he had been liberated from the exhaustive investigations of the Italian custom-house officers, he sent off a telegram in which Paul was begged to write to Naples. Another despatch to Wattie Cleland announced that he expected to reach England ere long, but named neither date nor provisional address. All things considered, he was not so very anxious to hear from Wattie.

It was now too late to carry out his original intention of pushing on to Palermo; so he made his way through the dusk of a wet and cheerless afternoon towards the Hotel Trinacria, whither he had given orders that his luggage should be conveyed. The day being Sunday and a *festa*, (though the conditions were suggestive of anything rather than festivity,) the shops had closed early and the streets were almost deserted. The few draggled and shivering pedestrians whom Guy met had the air of hurrying for shelter, and he strode forward to imitate them. An unmistakably English traveller, clad in a long, heavy coat, was chatting with the hall-porter as he entered the hotel.

“*Brutto tempo!*” Guy heard him say. Then

followed a laugh, the sound of which caused him to stare at the stranger, whose back was turned towards him. The latter, glancing round, started also; after which there were simultaneous ejaculations of "Hullo!" succeeded by a pause just long enough to make Guy aware that his father was not only surprised but a little perturbed by the sight of him. But with Mr. Hilliar perturbation was ever the most fugitive of emotions. He laughed again, clapped his son on the shoulder and cried gaily :

"*Les beaux esprits se rencontrent!* You come, I suppose, from the *Navigazione Generale* steamer which arrived today. If your having selected that line, of all others, and landing here, instead of going on to Genoa, isn't the result of telepathy, there's no such thing! Probably there is no such thing, and this is only a sample of the irony of coincidence. The more so as—now that I come to think of it—I shouldn't, at the time when you took your passage, have exerted telepathic force to draw you to Sicily."

"But what force," asked the bewildered Guy, "has brought you here?"

Mr. Hilliar depressed the corners of his mouth and jerked up his eyebrows. "Oh, *force majeure!* I'm leaving Europe by request. A vessel of the same line that restored you to this hemisphere takes me back to the other tomorrow. Strange that we should meet once more on the summit of the watershed, so to speak! I should like to call it Providential, only I don't really believe . . . Still, nobody knows how much or how little he believes, as Lequesne might say, and I've always had a lingering suspicion that

we're not free agents. Be that as it may, you're the last person I thought of encountering at Messina."

Guy could make nothing of these disjointed utterances, save that they plainly pointed to some sudden stroke of adverse fortune. "I don't know what you're talking about," said he apprehensively. "Has anything happened?"

"A most portentous thing," his father replied, taking him by the arm and leading him into the adjoining smoking-room, which was untenanted. "Sit down and have a drink. You won't? Well, my dear fellow, I won't keep you any longer in suspense. What has happened, to put it in a nutshell, is that the whole house of cards has come down with a run. Oh, not *your* house; you'll suffer no injury; rather the contrary, I fancy. I'm speaking of my own flimsy structure."

"The Chaco Development Company?"

"That amongst other cards; but only as an item in the general collapse. Nobody but myself to blame. At my age, and after all I've been through, I ought to know better than to take avoidable risks; but that's a lesson I shall never learn. Risks, after all, are the salt of life; one incurs them largely for their own sake. There's this to be said, that the risk of being brought face to face with Mrs. Baldwin sooner or later could hardly have been avoided. Still I needn't have accepted young Cleland's invitation to meet her at such very close quarters in a restaurant."

"Why shouldn't you have met Mrs. Baldwin?" Guy asked.

"Only because she spotted me like a shot. Women,

I take it, never forget or forgive a man who has once made them look foolish, and it might have struck me—though it didn't—that she would have a pretty vivid recollection of the agreeable Mr. Vigors who skipped from Florence some seventeen or eighteen years ago, after getting her to receive his guests at a ball for which he omitted to pay."

It was as if Guy had been stabbed, without warning or provocation, by some friendly hand. He looked, in questioning, half-incredulous protest, at his father, who met his gaze with a steady smile and a nod.

"Yes," Mr Hilliar tranquilly continued, "I was the Florentine Vigors of elusive memory. The real Vigors, I should mention, was lying six feet deep in the Malaga cemetery, and I'm sure he wouldn't have grudged me the use of his name, for he hadn't made it a highly honoured one. At that time I had many good reasons for wishing to pass as defunct; so I effected an exchange of nomenclature which harmed nobody—unless, indeed, you like to say that it has harmed you. But that I must take leave to doubt. What you would have developed into if I had survived my Spanish trip and returned to Arcachon to pick you up who can tell? It's certain that you wouldn't have been educated at Eton and Oxford. No, Guy, I don't ask your pardon for having died; it was in my resurrection that I showed some lack of good taste and good feeling, perhaps. *Mon Dieu! que voulez-vous?* I never could resist adventures, and it was an adventure, my swooping down upon you and the Clelands, with my Chaco Development Company and all. An adventure which was within an

ace of turning out a success too ! Or would you have insisted upon wrecking the Company, I wonder ? ”

“ I don't know,” Guy replied. “ I should have had to tell the truth, I suppose.”

His voice was rather hoarse ; his troubled, puzzled eyes still scrutinised that blandly composed father of his, who apparently set no store at all by the truth. “ You haven't told me yet what Mrs. Baldwin did or why you are here,” he observed presently.

“ She threatened to give information to the police, and I'm here because I'm a fugitive,” was Mr. Hilliar's smiling reply. “ From the moment that she recognised me there was nothing for it but flight. Whether I could be arrested or not in Brazil—I'm bound for Brazil, by the way—I don't know ; but no proceedings will be taken. All parties concerned are glad enough to have got rid of me for ever and a day. I make no exception of you.”

“ You haven't a right to include me—yet,” said Guy quickly. “ I don't feel as if I would allow this ; but I don't really understand. . . . I must hear more.”

“ The more you hear of my history, my dear boy, the less you'll like it. That's rather a reason for putting you in possession of details, though. I'm not sorry that we have met. In fact, I'm very glad ; for I wanted to see you once again, if only to free you from conventional compunctions. Lequesne said something about the possibility of your having compunctions—and precious nearly made me lose my temper, which was more than Mrs. Baldwin could achieve. I say, have you taken a private sitting-room here ? ”

“ No; but I’ll order one if you wish.”

“ Do, like a good fellow. We’ll dine together and have a bottle of champagne and as decent a meal as the hotel can produce. Then you shall be told everything that you can want to know, besides some things which it’s best that you should know ”

CHAPTER XXV

THE DILEMMA

It was in a spacious and lofty room, made cheerful by electric light and a crackling wood fire, that the father and son sat down to dinner. Mr. Hilliar had donned evening dress—a ceremony which Guy had neglected—and the handsome, distinguished-looking old gentleman commanded the evident respect and admiration of the waiters in attendance.

While they were hovering round he could not very well broach delicate subjects, for, although he addressed them in Italian, which he spoke fluently, it was quite probable that they had a smattering of English; but what he could do, and did very well indeed, was to chat about generalities with an ease and apparent unconcern the contagion of which gradually gained his less serene companion. Guy was made to recount his experiences in the Chaco country, which were listened to and commented upon with interest; something was also said about Liverpool and London, the peculiar misty charm of the English autumn, the delightful situation of Mrs. Baldwin's riverside dwelling. The champagne bottle passed to and fro until a second had to be ordered; the ceaseless patter of rain upon the window-panes gave an added sense of comfort and snugness

to the two diners which one of them visibly appreciated, while the other, a little off his balance, a little bewildered by the blithe unreality of the whole scene, began to ask himself whether things had, after all, come to so desperate a pass as he had been led to believe. When the waiters had finally withdrawn, Mr. Hilliar moved to the fire, deposited his coffee-cup on the mantelpiece, lighted a cigar and observed, without any change of voice or manner :

“ You were saying that you didn’t understand and that you wished to hear more. Something you must have heard, though, in the old days from the Eastwoods about your scapegrace of a father. At least, I presume so.”

Guy shook his head.

“ No ? Ah, well ! they were excellent, innocent sort of people, and I daresay they didn’t like to tell you that, as a husband and a father, I left a good deal to be desired. I was very seldom at home—always off on some mysterious business, as to the nature of which your poor mother made no inquiries. Didn’t dare, I suppose. But you’ll remember that I used to turn up from time to time with my pockets full.”

“ I remember,” said Guy, “ what fun it was for me when you did. I remember our bathing in the sea together and your giving me elementary instruction in boxing on the sands. We were great pals.”

Mr. Hilliar looked extraordinarily pleased. “ We were,” he answered, “ we were ”—and was silent for a moment, staring at the glowing logs

“That mysterious business of mine,” he resumed —“what do you suppose it was? Nothing more nor less than the plucking of pigeons. To be more specific, it was preying upon the best society in divers cities and watering-places under sundry disguises. It was winning money at cards sometimes, it was getting the merest acquaintances to lend me money when I lost, it was living on the fat of the land and taking the key of the fields as soon as the game began to show symptoms of exhaustion.” He threw up his hands and laughed aloud. “The pigeons that there are in the world, asking to be plucked! The childlike alacrity with which people, old and young, will lend themselves to the most barefaced impostures and swallow the most egregious inventions! I recollect an old General at Malta—highly connected, no fool, priding himself upon being a man of the world—who was prepared to swear that I was his second cousin, although Heaven only knows—I didn’t—whether he had any second cousins or not. He pressed a couple of hundred upon me and was almost affronted when I declined to take more than half. There were plenty like him; I don’t doubt that there are plenty today, and will be *in saecula saeculorum*. The Duke of Branksome in Florence, for instance. I happened to be aware that Vigors was distantly related to his family; so I marched up to him, introduced myself and was taken for granted there and then. That, as you may imagine, was quite sufficient for Mrs. Baldwin and others. With audacity and nerve, the ancient trick of personation can be played over and over again. I could

tell you of *tours de force* that would amaze you; but I should despair of ever conveying any idea to an honest fellow like you of what sport it all was."

"I was brought up with the idea that sport and swindling are opposites," Guy was constrained to say, though he felt something of a prig for saying it

"Just so. As one result of my swindling propensities, you were brought up in the most honourable sporting traditions. That's as it should be, and I'm not asking you to sympathise with those old escapades, of which, by the way, the Vigors *coup* was the last. I may boast that since then I've run fairly straight—straight in the commercial interpretation of the word. Yet what is commerce, what is statesmanship, what is diplomacy, what are the practices of law and war but an eternal struggle to worst somebody else? By fair means, you'll say. Well, not always; but anyhow they aren't Christian means, and the perpetual game of beggar-my-neighbour which constitutes life can't be brought into line with the acknowledged duty of loving your neighbour as yourself. Practical morality, in short, is a purely conventional affair. One man is rewarded with a peerage and a pension, while another, for doing what amounts to pretty much the same thing in a different field of activity, gets a term of hard labour. So here I stand at the end of all, the unabashed, uncomplaining outcast that you see me. I've done some queer things in my day; but"— He paused and broke into a short, gleeful laugh—"hang it! I did them uncommonly well."

It was hard to withhold from him a little of the sympathy which he disclaimed. He did not talk like a rascal, much less did he look like one. He must, of course, be accounted responsible for the eccentricities of his conscience; but must he be blamed or despised for having a conscience of that sort?

"Look here, father," said Guy, getting up and joining him by the fireside, "you aren't going to be cast out by me, at any rate, and I don't see why you should be cast out at all. These things happened a great many years ago; I don't believe Mrs. Baldwin can really want to do us all an unkind turn by raking them up. Even if she does, and if England is made impossible for you, you can't be allowed to vanish into space. I shall stand by you, happen what may."

"You'll do no such thing!" returned Mr. Hilliar. "I'm the most amiable man in the world, but, as I told you before dinner, I came very near losing my temper with Lequesne when he suggested that you might refuse to let me sink below the surface. Why, you young idiot, you're bound to let me sink! All you can do is to commit suicide by sinking with me, which would not only be useless but devilish ungrateful to the man who has been your real father all these years. You forget him."

"No," answered Guy, "I don't forget him; I shall never do that. But I'm not sure that he will still wish—after what has happened . . ."

"So you're afraid he may be ashamed of your father's son, eh? Now, I have a much greater

admiration for Lequesne's writings than I have for him as a man; in some respects he seems to me to be fantastic and opinionated—in short, rather an ass. But I have never thought so meanly of him as you seem inclined to do. No, my dear boy; take my word for it, he won't be ashamed of you, he'll be as proud of you as he has good reason to be. And he'll be only too glad and thankful to have you back on the old terms, which I disturbed, though I never meant to disturb them."

"Ah! that's what you take for the important point."

"It *is* the important point. Lequesne has always maintained that you would have to choose between us. Absurd enough at first, but as plain as a pike-staff now. All very fine for you to talk of standing by me, my dear Guy, but you simply can't; nor can Lequesne and Mrs. Baldwin grant me a bill of indemnity to please you. There's more against me than charges of false pretences; there's an unfortunate matter of a cheque which I signed with a name that wasn't my own." . . .

For the first time Mr. Hilliar had the grace to look a little out of countenance; but his aplomb only failed him for a moment, and he concluded briskly, "No choice for a detected forger but to drop out of sight and hearing; you'll admit that, perhaps."

It had to be admitted. Guy could find nothing to say, and his father went on:

"Don't distress yourself about me; I shan't starve. I've got a little money, and I have friends at Rio who will put me on to a job of some sort. I'm not as young

as I was, it's true, but I don't feel at all too old for a fresh start."

He was vigorous and sharp-witted enough to make one, no doubt, and this last avowal of his (so conclusive as to the question of rehabilitation !) simplified possibilities for him after an almost enviable fashion. Thinking of his own compromised outlook, Guy exclaimed half-involuntarily :

" I wish I could go with you and make a fresh start too ! "

" I wish you could, and I'm glad you can't," answered his father, smiling. " Sentiment, after what I've been telling you, might sound out of place, so I won't indulge in any ; but since we shall never meet again after this, I'll allow myself to tell you, as a sort of epilogue to the rest, that I shall think of you daily for the rest of my life and remember you always in my prayers. Oh, the circumstance that I say them isn't so quaint and incongruous as you think. We all commit sins—even the Holy Father himself, not to mention the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief of the Salvation Army and Paul Lequesne. Miserable sinners we are and shall continue to be while we draw breath ; so why should I be above or beneath asking for mercies that I don't deserve ? But I was saying that you have a disreputable father who couldn't care more for you if he were a model of virtue ; which is one reason for his not being more dejected. Because for you this explosion is nothing but a blessing. It hoists you out of turbid waters—waters which threatened to become turbid, anyhow—and deposits you upon the

safe dry land where you were before. You won't find it too dry; you'll carve out a career for yourself, I'm sure; you'll have a liberal paymaster at your back, and one of these days, I hope, you'll make a satisfactory marriage."

It would have been cruel to point out to him what he did not appear to realise, that he had rendered these agreeable prophecies somewhat difficult of fulfilment. Guy limited himself to remarking that upheavals do not, as a rule, tend to bring about restorations. Something—some half-conscious touch of fellow-feeling, perhaps, and impulse to repay confidence with confidence—prompted him to add:

"Whatever else I may do, I shall not make a satisfactory marriage. It's on the cards that I shall have to make an unsatisfactory one, though."

"The deuce it is!" ejaculated Mr. Hilliar, as much dismayed as the most upright and punctilious parent could have been. "Who is the woman? Not some confounded chorus girl, I hope?"

He learned with relief that the undesirable lady was of ducal birth; he was also glad to hear, in response to direct interrogations, how flimsy her claims were. Guy told him all about her and about Audrey also. Somehow it was easy to tell things to this elderly scapegrace which would have been less easily confessed, for instance, to Paul Lequesne, and perhaps Mr. Hilliar was in some ways a more capable adviser than Paul.

"Bless your life, boy, she hasn't the shadow of a case!" was his verdict. "A harmless little affair like that commits nobody to anything, and you may

depend upon it that you weren't her ladyship's only admirer either. I shouldn't give her another thought if I were in your place. And, if I were in your place, I shouldn't give up the girl I loved without a struggle, let me tell you. Cut out the ridiculous little man to whom she has engaged herself; he oughtn't to take such a great deal of beating. Go in and win while there's still time."

"As a matter of fact, there isn't time," answered Guy. "Not that I should try to cut out a friend of mine if there were, or that I should have the remotest chance of succeeding if I did."

"Ah, these chivalrous traditions, which say so little to the degenerate likes of me!"

"They don't come into play, as it happens. Audrey has the kind of sincere affection for me which can be guaranteed as absolutely non-inflammable. I only mentioned her and Lady Freda so that you might understand why I would rather be going to Brazil than to England."

He refrained from adducing other reasons for his deep reluctance to return home. The inevitable humiliation of that return; the patronising compassion of Mrs. Baldwin; the not improbable severance of his connection with the Clelands, which it would be incumbent upon him at least to propose; the impossibility (for as such he now regarded it) of reverting to old relations with Paul—was it likely that his father could be made to comprehend all these things, even supposing that they could be plainly and brutally set forth? He spoke despondently, instead, of what he still felt to be his obligations

towards Lady Freda. He could not at all agree that they were imaginary; he would unquestionably have to marry her if she should wish it, and his conviction was that she would wish it. There was, to be sure, the conceivable contingency, to which he did not allude, of unwillingness on her part to espouse a forger's son; but upon that he could pin little hope. Lady Freda had ever a superb disdain—it was about the only trace of aristocratic lineage discernible in her—for such social usages and prejudices as might stand between her and the gratification of a caprice.

But whilst he was talking, light broke in upon Mr. Hilliar, who was no novice at thought-reading and who did at last begin very well to comprehend the ordeal that awaited a proud and sensitive young man.

“How about staying abroad a little longer?” he suggested. “Why hurry home if you'd rather not? You aren't at anybody's beck and call.”

Guy made a gesture of negation. “No use shivering on the brink; one must either face things or bolt. All I mean is that I wish I could bolt. I should like to do what you're doing—just close the chapter finally and open a brand new one.”

“Come along, then,” said his father suddenly.

“You don't mean that!” faltered Guy, his breath taken away by this abrupt and unforeseen change of front.

“By Jove, I do, though!” Mr. Hilliar returned, eager and excited in a moment. “When all's said and done, why not? It isn't as if you were wanting

in brains or enterprise. You'll soon make your fortune over there; fortunes are waiting to be made in Brazil, I can tell you. Then in a year or two, if you care to go back to the old country, you'll be able to snap your fingers at Lequesne and the rest of them. I say nothing about myself; I've forfeited all title to consideration, I acknowledge. Still I should love to have you with me and I should glory in helping to make you independent."

He expatiated upon his theme, waxing dithyrambic, as his habit was when seized by some novel inspiration. Of his affection for his son and desire to do the best for him there is no need to doubt; he perceived that Lady Freda Barran might, however absurdly, be a real danger; he recognised the charm—the legitimate charm—of acquired independence; he was, moreover, without knowing it, inwardly jealous and distrustful of Paul Lequesne, whose refusal to be bound by any pledges he had not forgotten. But what moved him to enthusiasm more than anything else was, beyond question, his thirst for adventure, his innate, incorrigible levity

It was at an open door that he knocked; yet Guy, either in spite or in consequence of strong temptation, could not see his way to dispense with a flying visit to England as a preliminary to more definite flight.

"I don't think I can sail with you tomorrow," he said; "but I'll follow you to Rio by the first steamer. If I spend a couple of days in England, it's as much as I shall."

At this Mr. Hilliar's face fell. "Impossible, my dear fellow! Tell a woman that you propose to

desert her and she'll hang on to you with might and main, whether she loves or hates you. The one thing that you mustn't dream of doing is to see her ladyship."

"I'm not going to see her," Guy answered; "what would be the good? I wasn't thinking of her."

"Of Lequesne, then? And what good do you expect to do by seeing Lequesne? Naturally, he'll move heaven and earth to keep you when once he has got you—and he'll do it too! Why, it's of the essence of the whole scheme that nobody shall know what has become of you!"

"But you yourself exhorted me just now not to be ungrateful."

"Well, I don't deny that Lequesne will have the right to call you ungrateful; one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. He won't think you any the less so for hearing your intention from your own lips. Besides, if you let him know what your plan is, you give me away."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes, necessarily: otherwise you won't have a leg to stand upon. You're free, Guy; I've nothing to say against your going back to England. Perhaps you had better go, and perhaps you ought to go. Only don't delude yourself with such a preposterous idea as that it's open to you to take England on your way to Brazil."

The argument which followed was scarcely to be called an argument, seeing that the elder man had all the best of it and that the idea which he combated

was so obviously a preposterous one. Guy at length was fain to admit as much. His dilemma, stripped bare, stared him in the face, awaiting the decision which he still shrank from pronouncing. As between his father and Paul—since it had come to that extremity—he was, and had to be, for Paul; yet—was it quite certain that Paul wanted him? Could he find it in his heart to abandon this dishonoured, lovable, forlorn father of his, who no longer affected indifference to abandonment?

“I can't make up my mind!” he owned at last. “I'm sorry, but really I can't! Let me sleep upon it. It's too late to take my passage tonight, and by breakfast time tomorrow I shall know what I'm going to do.”

“So be it!” answered Mr. Hilliar cheerfully. “And bear this in mind, if it will help you at all: you'll please me best by pleasing yourself.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SOLUTION

To sleep upon a hard problem, and thus bring a refreshed brain to bear upon its complexities, is no bad plan, provided that sleep is obtainable; but the difficulty of those confronted with hard problems is apt to be the refusal of a tired brain to cease working, and Guy had never felt more hopelessly wide awake in his life than he did after he had been dismissed to the solitude of his vast, chilly bedroom. Solitude, to be sure, helped him a little, though his father's parting admonition gave him no help at all. Please himself!—that, in either event, he would certainly be unable to do. Well, then, setting himself aside, whose pleasure ought to make the scale drop? His father's, perhaps, since his father would really be pleased by the carrying out of this plan for their joint eclipse, while it was at least doubtful whether Paul desired the resumption of conditions which, for that matter, probably could not be resumed. But although Guy repeated this to himself with the persistency of incomplete conviction, he did not in his heart believe that Paul, of all people, would show him the cold shoulder because he was under a cloud. He knew his old man far too well to believe anything of that sort; he knew that Paul would

be deeply wounded—and with good reason—by an unexplained flight which would have all the appearance of having been prompted by sheer cowardice. It made him hot all over to recognise, as he was forced to do, that his flight, should it take place, would be at any rate partially due to that motive. Yet his father was right in pronouncing explanations out of the question. To proclaim one's intention of quitting the visible scene is like flourishing a pistol and announcing that one is about to commit suicide. Such threats are neither seriously made nor seriously taken. No; somebody must go to the wall; somebody must be scurvily treated. Lady Freda sank into comparative insignificance; it would not take Lady Freda long to forget that she had once had a fancy for a young fellow who, after making a brilliant start in the race of life, had abruptly bolted off the course. The protagonists in the struggle—silent, passive protagonists who left the issue to a distraught third person—were these two men: on the one side the generous benefactor, the staunch and intimate friend of so many years; on the other the amiable, unprincipled, frivolous father who had nothing to say for himself (and did not even say that) save that he was an old man, disgraced and alone. The plea gained rather than lost force by its palpable inadequacy. Just because he had every excuse for casting his father off Guy felt that it would be peculiarly base to do so. Thus the hapless young man turned and turned, getting no nearer to an exit from the labyrinth into which, through no fault of his own, he had been led.

He got into bed, blew out the candle and traversed the same oft-trodden ground over and over again, with the result that it did ultimately sink away from him, leaving him to the company of shadowy personages who conducted themselves after the most grotesque fashion—Mr. Hilliar, Mrs. Baldwin, Paul, Audrey and Lady Freda flitting, one after the other, through the forests of El Chaco and all calling aloud upon a strayed explorer who lay, powerless and speechless, hard by. In other words, Guy fell into a feverish sleep; although he was afterwards ready to affirm that he had not closed an eye all night. He remembered clearly enough, at all events, to have heard a clock in the neighbourhood strike five.

It was almost immediately after this that something occurred which he will assuredly never forget to the last day of his life. A horrible, universal uproar, distant at first, then swelling and approaching at terrific speed—suggestive on the instant of a hurricane. Instinctively he sprang up, felt for matches, struck a light—and was at once flung flat upon his face. Some gigantic force shook the building furiously to and fro, as a terrier shakes a rat; there was a thunder and crash of crumbling walls, a tinkle of shattered glass, shrill human cries; then, after a flash of vivid realisation, came darkness and oblivion. Such was all the account that Guy could give later of the great earthquake which he survived. He had no recollection of having fallen with the falling house or of having tried to escape; he could only suppose that he must have made such an attempt because, when he recovered his senses, he was clutching his

watch and a roll of Italian bank-notes in one hand.

Consciousness returned to him by slow degrees. He was in the dark; he thought he was rather badly hurt; his head was aching and swimming, his left arm numb, his legs pinned down by some heavy weight. . . . What had happened? Soon it came to him that he was in Messina, that the hotel had been destroyed by an earthquake and that he was lying buried beneath the ruins. He was also aware that he was parched with thirst, that his mouth was full of dust and that if he did not succeed in extricating himself ere long, he would be suffocated. He could raise the upper part of his body, he found—no doubt some vaulted masonry or arrested girder had protected him—but as soon as he essayed to free his legs an avalanche of dislodged *débris* warned him that every movement was fraught with danger. He lay still for a while, collecting his wits, and then it was that he felt the watch and the notes in his right hand. Then, too, he made the encouraging discovery that a chink of daylight had been opened up above him by the subsidence of wreckage which he had started. Not unattainable, that chink of daylight, if only he could manage to release his lower limbs! For this, however, he had to recognise that he had not strength enough. He could stir them a little, and he did not think that any of his bones were broken, unless his left arm was; but he was in a good deal of vague pain, blood was trickling down into his eyes, and he feared lest by fainting away he might lose what small chance he had of being rescued.

Of rescuers there was no indication. Absolute silence reigned, save that from time to time there was a dull concussion, caused possibly by the collapse of undermined edifices far away. Had everybody but himself been killed, then? In subsequently narrating his experiences, Guy declared that he would much rather die than again pass through the half-hour, or hour, or whatever the length of time may have been, that followed. Every interminable minute of it deepened his conviction that he was doomed to perish by inches, to perish of hunger and thirst, most likely, and to suffer torments before release came. It was like a hideous nightmare, and what added to the similitude was that when he attempted to raise his voice in a shout for help, only the feeblest cracked wail came forth. He repeated it, nevertheless, every now and again—more because it seemed to be forced from him than because he had any hope of its reaching human ears—and at last the inexpressibly welcome sound of human steps and voices fell upon his own. Nearer and nearer it came until the trampling ceased close above him and somebody said, in English:

“Right here ’twas—a child’s cry like. Stand by to heave these stones o’ one side and we’ll know more about it.”

“Hullo there!” gasped Guy; “get me out of this if you can!”

“Right oh, mate!” responded a cheerful voice; “we’ll have you out in five minutes.”

It took them much longer than that to disinter him; but he understood that they were obliged to work with great precaution, and their frequent

exhortations to patience were not needed. Picks and crowbars were plied, the space of light grew larger and larger, the workers themselves—seafaring men in their shirt-sleeves—became visible. One after another they stepped down into the cellar (for such it was) where the injured man lay, cleared the rubbish from his feet and legs and, passing their arms under him, lifted him up into a scene of desolation which at that first moment was as a garden of the gods in his sight.

The ribbon on one of the men's caps, which bore the inscription *S. S. Pelican*, caught his eye, and he learned, on inquiry, that it was the Cleland liner of that name, homeward bound from Bombay, which had reached the Straits just before the catastrophe; so a cheer was raised when he made himself known. Some of the craft in the harbour had been driven ashore, he was told, by the huge waves which had accompanied the upheaval; but the *Pelican* had suffered no damage, and her crew had hastened to succour survivors. He would be carried on board at once and every care would be taken of him. But to this he demurred.

“Never mind me,” said he; “I'm right enough. All I want is a drink of water, if you can get me one. Go on digging, like good fellows. My father was sleeping in a room near mine and he must be close by. I don't stir from this until I know whether he is dead or alive.”

The ship's officer who was in command of the party remonstrated. “You may be sure we shall do our best, sir; but you can't stop here in the cold, knocked

about as you are and with no clothes on you, so to speak. I've sent two men for a stretcher."

It was, Guy noticed, very cold. The air was darkened by a brooding cloud of dust, through which a chill drizzle was still falling, and the thin pyjamas that he wore were already wet through. However, he managed to stagger into a standing posture and, balancing himself unsteadily, repeated his injunctions.

"Dig away; don't waste time. You've something more useful to do than to carry a stretcher."

Quiet orders, proceeding from an Englishman of the traditionally ruling class, are almost always obeyed by his fellow-countrymen, and Guy, despite some further expostulations, had his way. The men wrapped their coats about him; one of them procured him some rain-water, which he swallowed at a gulp; then, sinking down upon a heap of stones, (for in truth he was too sick and dizzy to stand,) he watched their resumed operations. Corpse after corpse was extricated and borne away past him while he sat there in the murky atmosphere; every now and then the ship's officer, darting hither and thither, came to speak a word or two of encouragement or to press a few drops of brandy upon him. He witnessed some ghastly spectacles; but, what with exhaustion and nervous tension, he felt impervious to it all, conscious only of waiting for something that was coming and of the necessity of holding out that long. He was scarcely moved when at length the expected happened and he was assisted to walk to where, some yards away, the dead body of an elderly man with

a shattered skull had been deposited upon the ground.

"Yes, that is my father," he said, and stared with a sort of dull curiosity at the placid features which had escaped disfigurement.

"Death must have been instantaneous, sir," remarked the ship's officer.

"I suppose so," Guy assented. "You'll take care, of course, that he is given decent burial. He was a Roman Catholic; you'll have to let some priest know. I can't—can't see to things myself just now. My head's rather queer." . . .

Then he lurched suddenly forward, was caught as he fell, and obtained release for a season from all physical and mental afflictions.

In the old Eton and Oxford days Guy Hilliar's luck had been a byword, and indeed, upon a review of his whole career, it would seem that Fortune maintained a kindly care for him and a pretty constant bias in his favour. To get your arm broken and your crown cracked in an earthquake may not be strictly good luck; but to emerge from such a visitation alive and to be tended by friends who chance to be the only people on the spot with comforts and luxuries at command is, in a manner of speaking, to fall upon your feet. That in one other respect an appalling tragedy had served the young man no ill turn was a view of the case which, happily, did not obtrude itself upon him then or thereafter. For many consecutive hours, in fact, he remained incapable of anything in the nature of connected thought. Alternating between delirium and coma, he knew

little more than that he was extended in a roomy cabin, that there ice-bags on his aching head, that dark figures, stooping over him, were doing things to his arm which gave him considerable pain, and that liquid nourishment which he did not at all want was administered to him at frequent intervals. Throbings and heavings told him at length that the vessel was under way, and he began to put questions to somebody who was seated beside him—a burly, rosy man, recognisable under scrutiny as the ship's doctor.

“Can't allow talking yet,” was the reply that he received. “You lie quiet, sir, and don't worry; that's all *you've* got to do. You're aboard the steamship *Pelican*, and . . .”

“Oh, yes, I know,” interrupted Guy; “I remember all that. My father was killed. I wanted to give instructions about his funeral, and I believe I did. Have they been carried out?”

“Everything has been done that you could have done yourself, Mr. Hilliar,” answered the doctor evasively. “You're safe out of the worst shake-up I've ever seen or heard of, and for the present the less you think about it the better. Your business is to get well, and I'm glad to tell you that there's no reason why you shouldn't.”

“Where are you taking me?” Guy inquired, after a pause.

“Well, we hope to get you landed and made comfortable at Naples in the course of tomorrow. You won't be yourself again tomorrow, though—nor the next day, nor the next week. I've set a simple frac-

ture of the left arm for you; that's nothing. But you have had a nasty knock on the head, and you're suffering from nervous shock, as well as a good deal of fever. So you'll have to take care of yourself. Or rather, we shall have to see that you're taken care of at Naples. Now you know all about it, and I'm not going to let you speak another word."

A few hours later Guy awoke from sleep, somewhat refreshed, and found the grey-haired skipper contemplating him with a concerned face.

"Well, Captain Mason," said he, (for he knew this old servant of the Company, having made a voyage with him some eighteen months before,) "you didn't think our next meeting would be like this, did you?"

The other shook his head emphatically. "That I didn't! But it's a good job that we *have* met like this; for I doubt you wouldn't have lived twenty-four hours if you'd been left at Messina, without a roof to cover you or a doctor to attend to you, same as thousands of others."

"Thousands? Was the whole town wrecked, then?"

"My dear sir, it's wiped out! God only knows how many perished, and maybe those that were killed outright weren't the worst off."

He was more communicative than the doctor; he described some of the horrors that he had witnessed—the outbreak of fires amongst the ruins, the utter destitution of the half-naked survivors, exposed to bitter cold and an unceasing, pitiless rain, the impossibility of finding food for them, the lack of medical

aid. Some Russian and English men-of-war had landed relief parties who were doing their utmost; but to cope with a disaster of that magnitude they would have had to multiply themselves and their resources by ten. Guy listened, scarcely taking it all in, vaguely ashamed of the contrast between those wretched people's lot and his own.

"I say!" he exclaimed presently, "isn't this your cabin? It's awfully good of you!"

"Bless your soul!" returned the Captain, "I haven't any use for a cabin. Haven't had my clothes off since Sunday night, and this is Thursday. We're full up with fugitives—lying about the decks and all over the place, and barely half rations to give the poor devils! Best thing we could do for them was to take them off to Naples; else we should have stopped on at Messina and borne a hand a bit longer."

Captain Mason was now called away, and did not reappear during the remainder of the short passage. Both he and the doctor had their hands full, and the disembarking of a forlorn, somewhat unruly crowd, when Naples had been reached, kept them busy for several hours. Not until that operation had been completed was Guy removed, under the doctor's supervision, to an hotel where a room had been prepared for him, where a nurse was already in attendance, and where he was informed that news of his safe arrival had been telegraphed to England. He tried to express thanks, but could not manage to say much or to keep his mind from wandering after he had spoken a few sentences. His final impression before

relapsing into complete unconsciousness, was that, in spite of the rally which he had seemed to make, he was going to die.

“Worse before he’s better, I shouldn’t wonder,” he overheard the doctor say. “A constitution like his ought to pull him through, though.”

CHAPTER XXVII

WATTIE TAKES CHARGE

“WELL, all I have to say about it is that I give Audrey up,” concluded the flushed and annoyed Mrs. Baldwin, who had been saying a great deal more than that about it by the space of a quarter of an hour. “I don’t understand her, and I never did. You, I believe, are under the impression that you do; so perhaps you can give some explanation of this last extraordinary proceeding of hers.”

It might have lain within the compass of Paul’s ingenuity to hazard one; but whether, if he did so, it would prove as welcome to his friend as the news which she had called in Chester Square to impart had been to him seemed doubtful; so his answer was:

“I should be inclined to accept her own if I were you. She tells you that she has changed her mind, and it’s evident that she has.”

“But that explains nothing,” Mrs. Baldwin protested. “If there’s a girl in this world who knows her own mind it’s Audrey, and to tell me that she has changed it without any reason, after I had actually ordered the invitation cards for the wedding, is a little too absurd! Naturally, one’s first idea was that there must have been a quarrel; but not

a bit of it! Just as good friends as if they had never thought of being anything more, and as if they hadn't received van-loads of presents which will now have to be sent back!"

"The young man is resigned, then?"

"It seems so. Rather poor-spirited of him, I can't help thinking; but he isn't, you know . . ."

"I know, because you have so often told me, that he isn't the son-in-law whom you would have selected."

"That's another matter. I don't see why you and Audrey should remind me of that as if it deprived me of any right to complain. I didn't pretend to like the match; but I gave my consent, and everybody was told, and the *trousseau* was bought, and all. Now I am coolly informed that the engagement is at an end! It isn't only, nor principally, on my own account that I am so put out. You'll think me coarse and vulgar for saying so, I've no doubt, but it's true all the same, that girls who behave in such a way damage themselves and compromise their prospects."

As a general rule, they probably do; but the actual case, Paul hoped, was going to turn out an exception. Of course he could not dissociate Audrey's action from his recent talk with her, little though she had appeared to be moved by the revelation which he had so indiscreetly made. He blessed his indiscretion, he foresaw a sufficient set-off to the shock of Mr. Hilliar's ignominious egress and he inwardly rejoiced, saying to himself that it now only remained for Guy to turn up on Christmas Eve

and for the little drama to conclude with seasonable merriment.

But although he was duly bidden to dinner in Cromwell Road on Christmas Day, he could take with him no tidings of Guy's advent; nor indeed was he asked for any. Audrey, quite composed and at her ease, vouchsafed neither queries nor confidences, devoting herself cheerfully to the entertainment of a rather large assemblage of relatives and friends, amongst whom Paul was a little surprised to notice Walter Cleland.

"Isn't it almost indecent of them!" Mrs. Baldwin murmured in his ear. "I took it for granted that he wouldn't come; but Audrey said why shouldn't he, when he had been invited? I suppose he sees no reason why he shouldn't. One tries to keep abreast of the times; but the rate at which people are moving now rubs it into me that I was born in the middle of good Queen Victoria's reign. Would such a situation as this have been conceivable when you and I were young?"

Paul, who was of opinion that human nature remains today precisely what it was in the earliest times, could only conclude that Walter Cleland was not proud—an inference which the behaviour of that truly heroic young man during and after dinner tended to confirm. Wattie was the salvation of a gathering menaced at the outset with flatness. The Baldwin collaterals, it was easy to see, were mystified and inclined to assume an attitude of reserved censure; but he played tricks for them, sang songs to them, insisted successfully upon making them laugh, and

reaped, let us hope, the reward of Audrey's gratitude, which was doubtless more important to him than the appreciation of Paul Lequesne.

The latter left early, alleging with truth that he had a fit of the shivers and believed he was in for a bad cold. He was in, as it proved, for something more troublesome than that, and the doctor, whom he was constrained to summon on the following day, packed him off to bed at once, remarking that influenza, complicated with bronchial symptoms, is not a malady to be trifled with. Thus it was that when news of the Calabrian disaster reached England, one reader of the newspapers was in no case to feel for others' woes. Three days of influenza suffice for the quenching of all abstract interests and sympathies, and an added groan to those forced from him by his own aching limbs was as much as Paul could offer to remote sufferers. Guy's telegram, which was delivered the same morning, did not alarm him; for he failed to notice that it had been despatched from Messina and assumed that the voyager was already at or near Naples. The morrow brought fuller particulars, together with the report that there had been a few English victims; but only on the last day of the year, by which time Paul had managed to crawl as far as an armchair, did the following paragraph meet his startled eye :

“ It has now been ascertained that amongst the travellers staying at the Hotel Trinacria on the fatal night were two Englishmen, named Hilliar, father and son. The body of Mr. Hilliar the elder was found, a few hours after the catastrophe, by a search

party from the steamer *Pelican* and identified by his son, who had himself received serious injuries. By a singular coincidence, young Mr. Hilliar is connected with the well-known firm of Cleland and Son, owners of the *Pelican*, to which vessel he was conveyed as soon as possible. Great credit is due to the master and crew for their untiring exertions in the cause of humanity. The *Pelican*, laden with refugees, has now sailed for Naples."

About a quarter of an hour later Miss Baldwin, calling to make inquiries in Chester Square, was met by Mrs. Williams, the agitated housekeeper, who exclaimed—

"Oh, Miss Audrey, thank goodness you've come! Perhaps you can get him to listen to reason. You've heard about Mr. Guy, I suppose?"

"Yes, I have seen the papers," Audrey answered. "Is Mr. Lequesne in a great state of mind?"

"My dear, he's neither to hold nor to bind! Says he must start for Naples tonight—and him not fit to stagger across the room yet!"

"Well, he can't do that," Audrey observed.

"No, my dear, that he can't; but try it he will, without somebody stops him. I've spoken real sharply to him; but, bless you, he makes no more of *me!* . . . 'Serious injuries'!—well, as I told him, there's no dependence upon newspapers, and even if they *are* serious, we know what Mr. Guy is. Why, if that boy could be killed by getting himself knocked about, he'd have been dead a dozen times over long before now! Tough!—that never was no word for him!"

But in spite of these brave utterances, Mrs. Williams had to have recourse to her pocket-handkerchief. "I wish I could go to Naples myself," she confessed, "and that's the truth! May be I will later on; for I expect they don't know much about nursing in them outlandish places. What we've got to do now, though, Miss Audrey, is to make the best of a bad job. By hook or by crook, the master must be kept from rushing out into the cold air and catching his death."

It did not, under the circumstances, sound a very hard task; yet Audrey found it really more difficult than she had anticipated. Paul, like most men who have enjoyed good health all their lives, was accustomed to regard his body as an obedient servant, and was rendered both angry and incredulous by a display of mutiny in such a quarter. Having, moreover, taken it strongly into his head that Guy was dying, he was not to be deterred from going to him by representations that he himself would probably die of the mere attempt. Finally, therefore, it seemed best to let him give directions for packing and to stand aside while he stumbled down to his study in quest of money and a cheque-book. This method of treatment having resulted in the foreseen collapse, he was assisted upstairs again and was fain to own himself beaten.

"But we can't sit here with our hands before us," he plaintively urged. "Something must be done!"

"Something has been done," Audrey returned. "I've been trying to tell you, only you wouldn't

listen, that Walter has telegraphed to Naples to say that rooms will be wanted at an hotel and that a nurse will have to be engaged. Most likely Guy will have no money; so I suggested giving your name to the Consul, if necessary, and saying that you would be answerable for all expenses. Was that right?"

"You're admirable, and I'm ashamed of myself," said Paul contritely. "Set down my ridiculous behaviour to bewilderment and physical debility, please. The whole thing has such a fantastic, improbable sound! How came he to be with his father?—and what could have taken either of them to Messina?"

"Well, he must have been on his way home by the Italian steamer which was due to touch at Messina about the 27th. His father may have known that and gone to meet him, or they may have met by mere chance. At least, that's what Wattie thinks."

"Yes," assented Paul reflectively; "that would have been it. And now the unfortunate man is dead. A good thing too, one would say, if—oh well, since you and I are alone, I *will* say it! From the first it has been borne in upon me that Guy would stick to him, though there couldn't have been the slightest use in sticking to him. What tricks Fate plays us! If, after all, my poor boy is to follow him to the grave"

"Rubbish!" interrupted Audrey brusquely. "Guy isn't going to stick to him in such an exaggerated style as that. I daresay he isn't even much hurt and won't thank us for our officiousness when he

finds a nurse waiting to welcome him. I should never have ventured to bespeak the nurse, only I knew you would work yourself up into a panic and insist upon it."

Perhaps she had not all the confidence that she affected; but her unflinching common sense told her that the first thing to be done was to reassure Paul, and this by degrees she was enabled to accomplish. She remained in the house, though not in the sick-room, which she only visited at intervals, (having, it may be surmised, more reasons than one for forbidding the invalid to talk,) and in the course of the afternoon Walter Cleland arrived, bringing a telegram from the Company's agent at Naples which might fairly be pronounced satisfactory. Preparations had been made for Guy's reception, Captain Mason had reported that his life was not in danger, and the *Pelican* was due within eight or ten hours.

"Of course," Wattie added, "our people will take care that Guy has all he wants; but if there's any message that you would like me to telegraph, Mr. Lequesne, I'll send it off at once."

"You're very good and very helpful," answered Paul gratefully; for indeed he could not but recognise now that the young man was surprisingly both. "Will you just explain, then, that I am on the shelf, but that I shall start for Naples the moment I am allowed."

"I will if you wish it," said Wattie; "but do you think it would be quite wise to mention your illness? You know yourself how apt one is to fret and worry when one is feeling bad, and he has had some hard

knocks, apart from what he may have got in the earthquake, you see."

Paul acquiesced. He perceived, in fact, that he could not do better than acquiesce in all the suggestions of one who so evidently had his wits about him. If this particular suggestion turned out in the sequel to have been a rather unfortunate one, neither he nor anyone else could have divined that it would prove so.

"Wattie will see to that" became a constant formula upon Audrey's lips during the days that followed; and Wattie always did see, quietly and expeditiously, to the various commissions with which he was charged. It was through him that Paul, who, much to his own surprise and chagrin, found himself too feeble to put pen to paper, was placed in communication with the Naples doctor; it was to him that the doctor's replies were addressed, and it was he who exercised some discretion in making their import known. For in truth the first accounts from Naples were not as encouraging as they might have been, and it was admitted that the fever which had Guy in grip must run its course before he could be considered out of danger. Wattie and Audrey, who met in consultation daily, agreed as to suppressing what it could serve no good purpose to disclose. They agreed as to all matters; morning and evening they laid their heads together, apparently enjoying the process, while the sick man, as he made slow advancement towards convalescence, watched their intimate relations with increasing wonder and curiosity.

"You're the oddest pair, you two!" he felt

impelled to say bluntly to the young man at length. "One would think you had never . . ."

"Been engaged to be married?" asked Wattie, with a grin. "Well, that's just what we're trying to think, and I must say we're getting on quite nicely. I wouldn't swear that she hasn't almost forgotten it already."

"And you?"

"Ah, I've a retentive memory—always had. I remember as well as possible, for instance, that when Guy and I were boys, I hadn't a doubt about his having lost his heart to Audrey. Afterwards I began to think—and so did you, I expect—that he wasn't the sort of fellow to lose his heart to anybody."

Paul nodded. "Yes; but we were mistaken."

"Of course we were, and so it was that other mistakes were made. However, as I say, some of them are on the high road to being forgotten."

"I suppose," Paul resumed, after a moment of silence, "I ought not to ask why she threw you over."

"Frankly, Mr. Lequesne," answered the young man, laughing, "I don't think you ought to ask me. Ask her, if you choose; but I wouldn't, if I were you. She isn't exactly bound to tell you, is she? Question for question, though, there's one that I should rather like to put to you, and I don't see that you can object to it, because I needn't say that I know what is in your mind. Are you quite sure of Guy?"

"Yes," answered Paul, "I believe I may say that I am. At any rate, he was sure of himself before he went away. Audrey tried to frighten me about

Lady Freda Barran, but I daresay you will agree with me that that is an imaginary scare."

Wattie looked a little doubtful. "Well, one hopes so," he replied. "The common talk is that she is doing her level best to marry Lord Dunridge, who certainly ought to marry her; only his people are holding him back and he's inclined to jib—so I'm told. I expect she'll carry her point; still it's very possible that she may be keeping Guy up her sleeve as a second string. Not that it really matters, because you have only to say that you won't allow it."

"You give Guy credit for being so docile as that?"

"No; but I give the lady credit for knowing very well what she is about. Make it clear to her that if she marries Guy, she'll have a husband whose face and brains are his only fortune, and you'll have no further trouble with her."

"She shall have some intimation, if necessary," Paul promised.

"Very likely it won't be necessary. You'll soon be fit to start for Italy now, and a few words from you should make Guy proof against all the Lady Freda Barrans that ever were. At least, I hope so."

"He will be rather astonished to hear that you hope so," Paul could not help remarking.

"For a minute or two, perhaps, but much less astonished than he was to hear of my engagement. He'll be as willing and anxious to dismiss that absurd episode from memory, you'll see, as—other people."

CHAPTER XXVIII

KILL OR CURE

IT was on one of those warm and gloriously sunny mornings which winter bestows upon southern Europe with a more lavish hand than early spring that Paul Lequesne disembarked at Naples, after a calm passage from Marseilles in a big North German Lloyd boat. He had left London in a sudden access of irritability, engendered by convalescence and by the discovery that those about him had been keeping him in the dark as to Guy's condition. Not until danger was over had he been informed of how real the danger had been, and this necessary reticence he had rather unreasonably resented. Perhaps, too, he had begun to resent—or, at any rate, to be disquieted by—the lack of any message or letter addressed directly to him. He had, therefore, wrung an unwilling assent from his medical adviser and had set forth at a moment's notice to find out for himself how matters stood.

“*Oggi sta benissimo il signorino,*” was the gratifying reply of the Italian nurse who met him on his arrival at the high-perched hotel, and who went on chattering with a volubility which outstripped Paul's knowledge of her language. He gathered, however, that his heralding telegram had been re-

ceived, that he was expected and that he could at once see the patient, who was up and dressed. He was then conducted into the room where Guy—dressed indeed, but only “up” in the sense that he had been moved from his bed to a sofa—lay extended beside the open window. The first sight of him was rather a shock; for he was white and wasted, his head was still wrapped in bandages and his eyes looked unnaturally large.

“My poor boy,” Paul exclaimed, “what a time you must have had!”

“Baddish while it lasted,” Guy answered, smiling, “but I’m getting on hand over fist now, as the doctor and the nurse will tell you. It wasn’t so much the hammering I got as a return of fever. I was down with it out in Argentina, and I suppose I hadn’t really shaken it off. Awfully good of you to come all this way to see me!” He added, after a moment, “You heard about my poor father’s death?”

Paul signified assent. “Yes, just the bare fact. I know nothing of what took him to Messina or how it was that you and he were together.”

Guy’s explanation, though condensed, was free from any suppressions. He seemed anxious (as indeed it was neither unnatural nor blameworthy on his part to be) to make it clear that he was not ashamed of his father—or, at the least, that he accepted and associated himself with such shame as might attach to his father’s memory.

“I think, if he had lived, you wouldn’t have heard any more of me,” he confessed. “I had pretty well made up my mind to go off with him to Brazil and

leave you to wonder or guess what had become of me. It sounds beastly shabby, I know, but I had to cut myself off finally from you or from him. There was no middle course for me that I could see."

Paul winced a little, but replied: "I agree; there wasn't any room for compromise. And from one point of view you might have been right in deciding for your father."

"In spite of what he had done?"

"Or because of it. One is less entitled to forsake the fallen than the fortunate, perhaps. Of course, though, if you had consulted me, I should have done my utmost to prevent you from joining him."

"Yes, I know. Yet it would have been difficult for me—the son of an exposed forger and impostor—to take up life in England where I dropped it. Even now it won't be over and above easy."

"Good heavens! do you think Mrs. Baldwin or any of us will breathe a word about bygones? Not that you would be made to suffer if we did."

"Oh, one suffers in such cases; it's inevitable. Roughly just, too, I daresay. My father was what I've just called him, and everybody has a right to say that he brought disgrace upon himself and me. Only I can't, speaking personally, feel that he was a great criminal. I know he didn't take that view of himself. He broke rules, and when one breaks rules one must pay forfeit; but if it comes to moral guilt—well, is any man morally guilty who can't for the life of him see that he is?"

Not even to please Guy could Paul give adherence

to so casuistic a theory as that. He took refuge in generalities and in the admission that he, for his own part, had always liked a man whom no mortal was now called upon to judge. For this he was thanked; but Guy's tone, though pleasant enough, had a hint of constraint which reacted upon the older man and which was not diminished by his repeating his remark of—

“It's awfully good of you to have come out here.”

“I wish you wouldn't talk like that!” exclaimed Paul. “Don't you think it would have been awfully bad of me if I hadn't come? Don't you know that I should have come long before this if I hadn't been rather awfully bad in a physical sense?”

Guy turned his head and stared. “Have you been seedy?” he asked. “By Jove, yes! I see now that you have. What was it?”

“Nothing more tragic than a sharp attack of influenza; but, such as it was, it effectually laid me by the heels, worse luck!”

“I wish they had told me!” murmured Guy regretfully. “It never occurred to me that you could be ill. I'm sorry!”

“It was our fault that you were not told,” Paul said; “we were afraid—stupidly—of making you anxious. As if anything short of sheer incapacity to move would have kept me away from you! And, not knowing that I was incapacitated, you must have thought . . .”

“Oh, I thought there were heaps of things that might have detained you at home,” interrupted

Guy hurriedly. "Audrey's wedding, for one. Has that come off yet?"

"No," answered Paul, "it hasn't, and I am glad to tell you that it never will. Audrey has broken off her engagement."

The effect of this announcement was distinctly disappointing. Guy merely raised his eyebrows and remarked: "I'm not much surprised. Wattie is as good a little chap as ever stepped, but I couldn't believe that she quite knew what she was about when she promised to marry him. She'll know better next time, perhaps."

"I hope she will," returned Paul, laughing a little; "I think she will. Come, Guy, don't pretend that this isn't good news to you!"

But no responsive smile illumined Guy's pale face. "It doesn't particularly concern me," said he. "You remember what I told you before I went away; I shouldn't have had a look in, Wattie or no Wattie. If I'm glad that she has given up the idea of marrying him, it isn't because I dream of stepping into his shoes. Moreover—I had better tell you at once, though I'm afraid you won't like it—I am going to marry somebody else."

Paul attached no more importance to that proclaimed intention than he imagined it to deserve. "I certainly shouldn't like it if by 'somebody else' you mean Lady Freda Barran," he acknowledged; "but then I doubt whether you would like it either; so . . ."

"You needn't doubt that," interposed Guy. "I don't say that I am crazily in love with her; once is

enough for crazes. But I am fond of her, and she has been very good and kind to me."

"Has she really? In what way has she displayed her goodness and kindness, I wonder!"

"By coming straight out from England, travelling day and night, the moment that she heard what had happened to me. What would have happened to me, but for her, I don't know—most likely I should have gone under. The fact is that she found me in the most deplorable state of nervous breakdown and prostration that you can imagine. I knew instructions had been sent by you that I was to wait for nothing; what I didn't know was that you were ill, and it seemed to me that your remaining at home and not even telling them to give me a message . . ."

"I did tell them to give you messages!" Paul broke in.

"They weren't delivered, then. It seemed to me that that silence of yours spoke for itself. I had a horrible feeling of being despised and deserted. As far as I could see, she was the only one who cared enough for me to stick to me through thick and thin, and though I did you an injustice, old man, and I'm sorry for it, I still feel that nothing ought ever to make me turn my back upon her. And nothing ever will. I don't know whether you understand."

Only too well did the dismayed Paul understand that he had been outgeneralled. Whatever else might be doubtful—and in the last few minutes some things of which he had been certain seemed to have become so—it stood out as a plain fact that

Lady Freda could marry Guy if she wished. So completely was he at her mercy that discussion and deprecation would be mere waste of breath.

"Are you actually engaged to her?" was the only question that appeared to be worth asking.

"Not actually and formally," answered Guy, with a smile; "she isn't the sort of person to—to bother about formalities."

"She isn't indeed!"

"No; but it's implied; it's—indispensable, in short. Of course I don't expect you to be pleased. You think what most people think about her, and not without some reason, I admit. All the same, you'll change your opinion when you know her better."

Not deeming this probable, Paul made no reply. "She is still here, I suppose?" he asked presently.

"Oh, yes; she may come in at any moment."

She walked in at that very moment, a tall figure arrayed all in white, graceful, beautiful, (no disputing her grace and beauty, confound her!) and bearing a handful of fresh violets, which she thrust under Guy's nose.

"Aren't they delicious!" she cried. "I bought them for you in the market. Do you know, you're looking a lot better to-day. How do you do, Mr. Lequesne? Our poor earthquaked victim is well round the corner now, you see. I hope you haven't been talking too much, though, Guy."

She stooped over her charge, patting and arranging his pillows, while the nurse, who had followed her into the room, struck an attitude of admiring, lack-

adaisical ecstasy for which Paul would dearly have loved to wring her neck. Obviously Lady Freda had taken command; obviously she was recognised and sympathised with as the sick man's affianced bride; obviously she meant to carry through the part ascribed to her. "Not until she has fought and beaten me, though!" resolved the grim, silent antagonist whom she did not even deign to treat as a possible antagonist. She ignored him while she moved slowly about the room, examining medicine bottles and giving directions in Italian to the obsequious nurse; it was only when the shrill striking of a clock on the mantelpiece drew her attention to the hour that she appeared to recollect his presence.

"Have you had your *déjeuner* yet, Mr. Lequesne?" she asked pleasantly. "No? Then you had better come and have it with me. Guy generally takes a *siesta* at this time of day."

Shortly afterwards Paul was partaking of red mullet at a round table, gay with flowers, in Lady Freda's adjacent sitting-room and was replying in gruff monosyllables to the remarks which his gracious, if somewhat absent-minded, entertainer was pleased to address to him from time to time. Naturally, she was not embarrassed; nobody had ever seen Lady Freda embarrassed; yet even she might be feeling a trifle anxious or apprehensive, he hoped. But he had to possess his soul in patience until the attendants—smirking attendants who doubtless, like the nurse, saw in this fair English lady a ministering angel—were out of the room. Then, with great promptitude, he cleared decks for action.

“When something disagreeable has to be said,” he began, “the best plan is to say it in as few words as possible. After what I have seen and heard this morning, I may dispense with preliminaries and come straight to the point, which is simply that I object. Guy Hilliar, it is true, is not bound to consult me, and he has not consulted me; nevertheless it may count for something with you that I am absolutely and unalterably opposed to your ever becoming his wife.”

Lady Freda, with her elbow on the table and a white, shapely hand supporting her chin, gazed sleepily at this uncompromising foe and smiled.

“Yes?” said she. “Why?”

“Must I give my reasons in detail? I will, if you insist; but as I am sure you realise what they are, it should be sufficient to remind you that you have a past.”

The above blunt summing up of her disqualifications did not offend or disconcert Lady Freda, who rejoined: “I have been talked about, you mean. You are so little in the world that one would hardly have expected you to know that; but everybody seems to hear everything nowadays. Most of what they hear is quite untrue, of course; still I won't defend myself; it really isn't worth while. I grant you my past; you are welcome to make the most and the worst of it. Personally, I can't see what anybody's past signifies. I shouldn't care a pin if Guy had the stormiest past on record; I don't care a pin about his father's past, though I suppose your idea is that it ought to be visited upon him . . .”

“ I beg your pardon,” interjected Paul, “ I have never had any such idea.”

“ Well, he thinks you have. But I was going to say that the past is one thing and the present is quite another. Supposing at this present moment Guy loves me and I love him ? ”

“ Do you seriously ask me to believe that you love him ? ”

Lady Freda opened her blue eyes in unfeigned surprise and amusement. “ What a funny old man you are ! ” she exclaimed. “ Why in the world shouldn't I love him ? Because you suspect that he isn't the first person whom I have honoured in that way ? But surely you can't think that people only fall in love once in the course of their lives ! ”

“ I think,” answered Paul, “ there are people who never arrive at falling in love even once, and it would not surprise me if you were one of them. I suppose I must take it that you have a fancy or caprice for Guy which you would call being in love with him ; but I can state upon his own authority that he is not in love with you.”

“ Oh, can you ? When did he tell you that ? ”

“ He told me this morning.”

“ Really ? ” said Lady Freda, with superb composure.

But, noticing that a faint tinge of colour mounted into her cheeks, while her brows contracted ever so slightly, he pressed what he thought his advantage. “ Yes, and I believe I may add that he does love another person.”

It must be owned that Paul was not adroit. On the other hand, skilful strategy might not have availed him much with Lady Freda, who differed in some respects from the ordinary run of women.

"Oh, Miss Baldwin?" said she. "Yes; one guessed that you destined him for Miss Baldwin. But isn't she going to marry the little comic amateur?"

"No; the project has fallen through. I was glad to be able to give Guy that piece of news this morning."

"And did he say then that he loved her?"

"Not this morning," truth compelled Paul to acknowledge; "but he did say so a few months ago, before he went to South America."

"Ah, a few months ago! Things have happened since then."

"What has happened is that by establishing yourself here and taking him under your wing you have placed him in a rather compromising situation. I am sorry to have to speak so crudely; but perhaps you won't mind."

"Not in the least. As you say, we are a good deal compromised, he and I. Isn't that more or less of a reason for your accepting what can't be helped?"

"It remains to be seen what can be helped and what can't. Rest assured that if I can by any possibility prevent a marriage which would have no chance of turning out happily, I shall prevent it. And I think I can. I don't know what your income is . . ."

"I'm sure *I* don't!" interpolated Lady Freda languidly.

“But Guy, apart from what I allow him, has only what he may be earning. He is at liberty to marry; but I am also at liberty to refuse supplies while I live and to leave him nothing when I die.”

Lady Freda sipped her coffee and laughed. “Do you know, Mr. Lequesne,” said she, with much deliberation, “I don’t call that such a blood-curdling threat. There might be something in it if you were sincere; but of course you aren’t. Of course you would punish yourself quite as much as Guy if you were to make a pauper of him.”

Nothing, unfortunately, could be more obvious. The weak spot in Paul’s armament, offensive and defensive, was precisely that, should the worst come to the worst, he would not only act with gross injustice by casting off his adopted son but would deprive his own remaining years of all joy and all purpose. It looked as if her ladyship had him on the hip. Nevertheless, Guy had to be saved—and Audrey too! He felt very much as a surgeon may feel who in the midst of an operation finds himself compelled to make up his mind instantly whether he will take a big risk or not. A barely perceptible alteration that came over Lady Freda’s features during the few seconds while she was waiting for him to speak helped to give him courage. He divined that if she could but be made to believe him, she would draw back, and he saw that the only way of commanding belief would be to tell the truth. In other words, he must either discard menaces or proclaim in deadly earnest a determination which he might have cause

to rue to the end of his days. He decided as most surgeons in an analogous predicament would have done and chose the bolder course.

“I have no wish to punish anybody,” said he; “but you are very much mistaken if you fancy that I shall shrink from punishing myself. Whether I am right or wrong about it, Guy Hilliar will never marry you with my consent. And to show you that what I have said just now was said with sincerity, I solemnly swear that if he does marry you, I will neither give nor leave him another shilling.”

He felt himself turn white and his heart thumped against his ribs; for he realised intensely to what a calamitous fiasco he was exposed. He saw, however, that Lady Freda was impressed—convinced. That was something; but more than that she did not allow him to see. With perfect calmness and an indolently wondering air, she remarked:

“How you must hate me!”

“No,” he answered, almost enjoying the rare luxury, which had become a necessity, of stating facts in their inherent, unclothed veracity; “my feeling about you as a human being is one of absolute indifference. But I should hate more than anything else that I can conceive to see you married to Guy.”

“So it appears. Have you told him that he will be cut off without even the traditional shilling if he marries me?”

“Not yet; but I shall.”

“I suppose you will. Rather unwise of you, I

should say; but I have noticed that people who pass for being out-of-the-way wise are often quite curiously dense about things which every schoolgirl knows. After all, you have only to imagine yourself in his place. Would you stand being bullied?"

"I shall not attempt to bully him; I haven't attempted to bully you. I have only attempted to give you pause by pointing out the inevitable consequences of a certain action."

"Oh, I'm pausing," said Lady Freda, with a laugh; "it may interest you to hear that I've been pausing all the time. He hasn't, though, and it's as certain as you sit there that you can't make him. His future, in short, rests with me."

"Well, then?"

"Well, then, I'm in no hurry. As soon as I have decided you shall be told; but I wouldn't be over sanguine if I were you. Worse women than I—and, if that mattered, I'm not half such a bad woman as you are pleased to think—have chosen love and thought the world well lost. But you're too dry an old stick, saving your presence, to know what women are made of."

Lady Freda yawned, rose slowly and, after standing for a moment at the open window, which commanded a far-stretching panorama of sunlit coast and sea, added, "I'm going out for a walk now. *Au plaisir!*"

Paul withdrew, in painful doubt as to whether he had made the blunder of his life or not. He did, as it happened, know enough of women to be aware that nothing can ever be predicated with safety

respecting them; also he knew that if this particular woman had a distinctive quality, it was recklessness. He had, he felt tolerably sure, surprised her and caused her to recoil a few paces; it by no means followed that he had defeated her.

CHAPTER XXIX

PRISCA VENUS

LADY FREDA went to her bedroom, summoned her maid and hesitated for some minutes between two hats of vast dimensions, one of which was overshadowed by black ostrich feathers, while the other was chastely adorned with sprays of white lilac. Having finally decided in favour of floral decoration—

“Pinner,” she asked, “has Lord Dunridge called yet?”

“Not that I know of, my lady,” answered the maid. “I suppose, if his lordship comes and wants to see me, I’m to say the same as I did yesterday and the day before?—‘Not at home to anybody.’”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I shall be out all the afternoon. Was he very angry yesterday?”

Pinner, a demure, sharp-eyed little person, who was in all her mistress’s secrets (so far as Lady Freda could be said to have any), made a shocked gesture.

“Oh, my lady, *such* language! I was obliged to tell his lordship that I wasn’t accustomed to be spoken to like that.”

“So then he tipped you, no doubt,” observed Lady Freda, studying the back view of her costume in a long mirror, with the help of a hand-glass.

The maid simpered. “Really, my lady,” she went

on, "I don't hardly know what to do with his lordship, he's that violent. 'I'm not going to be turned away from this door again,' he says. 'All very fine her refusing to receive me, but she's jolly well *got* to receive me, and you can tell her so from me,' he says."

"Yes; you delivered that message last night, I remember," said Lady Freda. "Give me my gloves and the big white sunshade. It's just possible that I may not come in to dinner this evening. If I decide to dine out, somebody shall let you know."

"Very good, my lady. Any message for Mr. Hilliar?"

Lady Freda deliberated a moment. "My love," she answered, "and I won't tire him any more today, now that Mr. Lequesne is here to talk to him."

She swept down the staircase and crossed the entrance-hall, nodding right and left in acknowledgment of the obsequious salutations which greeted her passage. A legend obtained in the establishment to the effect that her ladyship was as wealthy as she was beautiful. Out of doors the sun was shining from a cloudless sky and the air was warm and still, as on an English summer day. Beyond and beneath a foreground of aloes, flowering shrubs and stone pines lay the white city of Naples, the wide sweep of the azure bay, Vesuvius, topped by a thin, hovering plume of smoke, violet Capri in the far distance. With very slow steps Lady Freda descended the eminence upon which the hotel was situated, her eyes, as usual, half closed and the flicker of a smile upon her lips. Scenery did not say much to her; but she was vaguely soothed

by the charming environment and fully aware that she herself was looking her best, a knowledge which to no member of her sex can ever be other than soothing.

She had not progressed far on her downward way when there hove in sight the figure of a shortish man, wearing a blue serge jacket, white trousers and a yachting cap. His eyes were bent upon the ground, his lower jaw was thrust forward and he was pounding up the hill with the gait of one who has a set purpose in mind. Lady Freda's smile, as she watched his approach, became a shade accentuated. It is highly probable that an on-looker, cognizant of her situation and of the interview which she had recently brought to a close, would have pronounced that smile of hers enigmatic; but in truth she was the least enigmatic of mortals, and if she was now looking faintly amused, when she might have been expected to look apprehensive or dubious, it was for the quite simple reason that faint amusement was what she felt, while apprehension and perplexity were emotions foreign to her nature. The advancing pedestrian was nearly abreast of her before he looked up, stopped dead and called out, with scant ceremony or civility, "Hullo!"

"Hullo!" returned her ladyship affably. "On your way to leave another card for me? Warm work, isn't it, walking the pace you do?"

"Look here, Freda," said Lord Dunridge roughly, "I've had enough of this nonsense. I didn't mean to leave a card for you; I meant seeing you, whether you liked it or not."

"Always delighted to see you when I can, Dun,"

was Lady Freda's calm rejoinder. "I couldn't have you admitted into the hotel, because you make such a noise when you're angry."

"Might have disturbed your dear patient, eh?" Lord Dunridge suggested, with a savage grin.

"That was it. But he is out of earshot now; so if you want to shout, shout away. I wish you wouldn't, though; it only makes me wonder why I have stood being shouted at by you so long."

Lord Dunridge did not shout; but he remarked that, if it came to that, he himself had stood a lot, first and last. Somewhere or other, however, the line had to be drawn, and he was disposed to draw it at her bolting off post-haste to Italy and constituting herself the care-taker of a man who was no relation of hers nor even what you could call an intimate friend. He thought that was just about the limit.

"Did you have the *Bernicia* fitted out and give chase at once?" Lady Freda inquired, with an air of languid curiosity.

"The *Bernicia* was waiting for me at Cannes, as you know well enough," returned Lord Dunridge sullenly. "I joined her there and came on here the day before yesterday. Now I want you to tell me what this means."

"You don't want much, do you? You think yourself entitled to an explanation of all my proceedings, perhaps?"

"Yes, Freda, that's just what I do think. Now, then!"

"Although you don't favour me with any explanation of your own. What was the meaning of this

proposed Mediterranean cruise of yours, I wonder? Or rather, I don't wonder, because of course I know. It was to be rather a long cruise, and it was to be the outward and visible sign that you were a free agent. Free, I mean, except for your not daring to disobey your mother's orders."

Lord Dunridge pushed his cap to the back of his head and rubbed his brow.

"It's easy to sneer," he grumbled. "Wait till you've had your people at you morning, noon and night, scolding, imploring, crying, going on about your duty to the family and God knows what else! And with a strongish case, which wasn't badly put, mind you."

"I might wait some time before my people gave themselves so much trouble," Lady Freda observed. "It's true that I haven't got a mother with the reputation of a saint and the temper of an old peahen. Tell me some of the compliments she paid me; I'm sure they must have been refined and forcible. Let's sit down, shall we?"

There was a bench, shaded by a wild olive tree, hard by. Lady Freda made for it, seated herself, patted it with her gloved hand, by way of invitation to her scowling companion, and resumed:

"You were saying that your dear mother put her strong case well."

"I said it was a strong case, and so it was," returned Lord Dunridge doggedly. "Seems to me that it's a bit stronger now; but that's what you've got to disprove, if you can."

"Oh, no, Dun," answered Lady Freda, with much

suavity, "I haven't 'got to' prove or disprove anything. Play the game, please. Either we are free, you and I, or we aren't. If you are at liberty to drop me gradually—which was what you meant to do, you know—my taking care of poor Guy Hilliar during his illness can't be any business of yours."

"Are you going to marry that fellow?"

"What if I am? He is a dear fellow and awfully handsome, besides being a thorough gentleman in all his feelings, which is more than can be said for some people."

Lord Dunridge sprang to his feet. "You're the most heartless woman I ever met or ever heard of!" he cried. "I don't believe it's in you to care a brass farthing for any human being but yourself. I like your talking about my dropping you, when you're ready to chuck me for the first good-looking boy that happens to come along! All right!—I'm well rid of you, and I should have been rid of you long before now if I hadn't allowed myself to be humbugged with my eyes open over and over again. But it's a damned shame, for all that!"

He stamped up and down, raving incoherently, vituperating and whimpering by turns—a pitiable and contemptible spectacle enough. But Lady Freda neither pitied nor despised him. She was habituated to his vapouring ways, which, if they sometimes bored her, never disgusted her. She was not, indeed, easily disgusted. She waited for the storm of words to exhaust itself, then tranquilly continued:

"Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. I can't have you dictating to me, but I make no claim

upon you. Go away, Gander Dun, and marry anybody you like."

Lord Dunridge caught her by the wrists and glared at her in mingled wrath and supplication. "You know there's only one woman on earth whom I shall ever marry!" he returned hoarsely. "You know I can't live without you! More fool I, of course!—let it go at that. Look here, Freda, I won't let my mother or Hilliar or anybody else come between you and me. Be my wife, and I'll swear you shall never repent of your bargain!"

It was a bold promise and a bold offer. Not until now had he been bold enough to formulate that offer, nor upon this first utterance of it was he to be met half-way. Lady Freda metaphorically rolled him over in the dust and trampled him underfoot before she would admit that he had not forfeited all title to be forgiven; but when he was very humble, very penitent, very abject, she shrugged her shoulders and yielded. *Quamquam sidere pulchrior Ille est, tu levior cortice et improbo Iracundior Hadriâ, Tecum vivere amem. . . .* Such, less classically worded, was the gist of her final avowal, which, it may be hoped, contained some germ of truth. It is probably true that Lord Dunridge had not been spurred to leaping point by means of a deliberately prepared stratagem; it is fairly certain that he would not have been received by her that afternoon had she not been brought up against a stone wall in the morning. But Lady Freda's was one of those perfectly simple natures which seldom fail to baffle the analyst.

It was agreed that the marriage should take place

in Rome as speedily and quietly as might be. A London wedding, with previous notice given and futile hostility provoked, was on every account to be deprecated. After a month or two Lord and Lady Dunridge would return to England, and there would be a general consensus of opinion that the proper thing had been done in the proper way. Not that Lady Freda had ever been, or ever would be, the slave of public opinion; only it was as well to avoid bother and fuss. She might have added that it was as well to cut the ground from beneath the feet of an incensed dowager. Upon the same principle of escaping needless bother she announced her intention of leaving for Rome that same evening.

“ I shan't show here any more. Forgot to tell you, by the way, that old Lequesne made his appearance this morning—as savage as you were just now and even more rude. I don't care to meet him again. You go up to the hotel—will you?—ask for Pinner and tell her to pack and meet me at the station at eight o'clock. You might pay my bill for me at the same time.”

“ I don't suppose I've got nearly enough money in my pocket,” Lord Dunridge objected.

“ Write them a cheque, then. You had better see about my railway-tickets, too, and say I shall want a *coupé* reserved in the express. Now I'll wander down to the yacht and wait till you come.”

Still serenely smiling, Lady Freda descended the winding road towards the town until the driver of a little open hack-carriage flourished his whip at her, was beckoned to draw up and received instructions

to take her to the harbour. There she hired a boat and was soon alongside of the *Bernicia*, a large steam-yacht in which she had made more than one cruise during the lifetime of Captain Barran, who, disliking the sea, had not accompanied her on those occasions. The bearded skipper advanced to the gangway, with his hand to his cap, and apologised for not having sent the motor-launch.

“ I didn’t know your ladyship was expected,” he said. “ His lordship’s orders were that he was to be met between four and five o’clock.”

“ Yes, I have just left his lordship; he has gone to do some commissions for me,” Lady Freda explained.

She chatted for a few minutes with the captain, who had the good manners of his class and who betrayed none of the curiosity which he must have felt. Then she betook herself to the main cabin, sat down and began to write rapidly. With scarcely a pause between the sentences, she dashed off a letter which should have been, but apparently was not, somewhat difficult to compose.

“ Dearest Guy,” she wrote, “ don’t think me a pig for clearing out of Naples without saying good-bye. You’ll pardon me, perhaps, when I confess that I simply couldn’t *bear* to bid you good-bye! You know, dear, I’m very, very fond of you, and I’m sure I always shall be; only, after the way in which your old Lequesne talked this morning, I began to see breakers ahead into which it would be a mistake for you and me to adventure ourselves. If there is a

perfectly fatal thing to do (I ought to know that, if anybody ought!) it's marrying upon a small, uncertain income. You wouldn't have liked it any more than I should, and the end would have been that we should both have got bored and cross, even if we hadn't vulgarly quarrelled. Mr. Lequesne will chuckle and think he has scared me off; but it isn't altogether that. I never promised to marry you, as you know, and perhaps Dunridge would say that I wasn't free to promise—which is more or less true. I may as well tell you at once that I am going to marry Dunridge, who is here in his yacht and a towering rage. I mean he *was* in a rage until I appeased him by striking my colours. The poor fellow has been devoted to me for ages, and though I don't pretend to adore him, I daresay we shall get on well enough. I think you are going to marry Miss Baldwin, who has thrown over the little comic man for the sake of your *beaux yeux*—so Mr. Lequesne gives me to understand. Of course she has been cracked about you all the time, and you will soon believe, if you don't believe it already, that your heart has been true to her from childhood's hour. Besides, you will have to obey orders. Rather an arbitrary person, that deputy father of yours. Means well, though, I should think. Tell him from me that I bear him no malice for his brutality (he really was too brutal for anything!) and that I rather admire his pluck. If I had cared to put him in a hole this morning, I could have done it with very great ease. Why didn't I, then? he may ask. Ah! . . .

“Well, dear Guy, I won't say any more. Forgive

me, but don't quite forget me. And, as it's for the last time, I'll sign myself

Your loving

FREDA."

While Lady Freda was reading over what she had written, something tickled her nose. She brushed it away, and it fell with a tap upon the paper.

"Oh, bother!" she muttered.

Not that she grudged the visible tribute of a tear to renounced dreams; only she felt that that tell-tale blot accorded ill with what had been intended to convey an impression of deliberate flippancy. For the rest, her missive did not, on reperusal, entirely satisfy her; but she could not take the trouble to begin all over again, nor indeed was there time to do so. It was, at all events, explicit—as explicit as it had any need to be—and it had the additional merit of being unanswerable. She did not wish for an answer. So she folded up the sheets, of which her large handwriting had filled nearly three, pushed them into an envelope, which she addressed, and went on deck once more.

"Jarvis," said she to the skipper, who drew near in response to her raised hand, "I want this note sent. Is there anybody who can take it for me?"

"Well, the cook will be going ashore in a few minutes, my lady," Jarvis answered. "I daresay he could deliver it, if it isn't too far off."

Lady Freda produced a ten-franc piece. "It won't be if he drives," she said. "Tell him to hire a shay. No particular hurry, only I should like the note to go now."

It had better go, she thought, before Lord Dunridge came on board. The great drawback to Dunridge was the facility with which his temper was upset, and she realised that, for the sake of her own peace and comfort, she would have to humour that temper of his more carefully in the future than she had done in the past. Other small drawbacks there were to balance against imposing revenues and a big social position; but one cannot expect to get everything.

“There’s this to be said,” Lady Freda mused, summing matters up, “that Dun will improve by keeping. The older he grows the less exacting he’ll be. Whereas my poor, dear Guy, with his strict notions and his pretty beliefs about women in general. . . . Well, if he’s lucky to be released from me, the luck isn’t all on his side, perhaps. And I do triumph; everybody will have to own that I triumph! There’s nothing to cry about.”

CHAPTER XXX

FULFILMENTS

IT is well to have acquired the philosophic habit of mind; but this, like every other mental condition, is very much at the mercy of the body wherein it dwells, and a philosopher with the aftermath of influenza in his system is no more exempt from nervous irritability than the average frail mortal. Paul, after his dismissal by Lady Freda, was not sorry to hear from the nurse that her patient had dropped asleep; for in his actual state of suspense he felt scarcely capable of facing Guy. He left the hotel and wandered about restlessly for an hour or two, growing increasingly pessimistic as the leaden-footed minutes ticked themselves away. No doubt his desperate bid for mastery had produced an effect; but how long was that effect likely to endure with so shallow and wanton a woman as Lady Freda Barran? Left to herself, and judging of others by herself, as most of us do, would she not speedily revert to her conviction that he had not really meant what he had said? Was it not only too possible that she would look upon "solemnly swearing" as nothing more than an emphatic method of making a statement? In any event, she was not bound to come to a decision at

once; she could, and doubtless would, keep the apprehensive enemy on tenterhooks for many days yet. And he had burnt his ships. He knew it, if she did not, and there fell upon him that sense of impotence which is perhaps the most miserable of all human experiences.

Well-nigh overwhelming, therefore, were the glad and astonishing tidings which were imparted to him on his return to the hotel. It was the nurse who, while he was dejectedly mounting the staircase, ran down to meet him and, with much volubility and gesticulation, made announcement of Lady Freda's exit. The woman was excited, distressed and indignant. She made no secret of her belief that he was answerable for this abrupt ejection of an angelic lady, and she wanted to know how he had found it in his heart to behave with such cruelty, not only to her, but to the poor, suffering *signorino*, who had not yet been informed of what had happened. She (the nurse) had not dared to tell him, nor would she now take the responsibility of inflicting upon him a blow which might easily bring about his death. Oh, these cold, hard English! To drive his beloved one away from him just as he was beginning to regain strength—what an infamy!

As soon as he could make himself heard, Paul entered mild disclaimers. He had no power to order off angelic and beloved ladies, he had received no hint of an intention on the part of this one to take wing, he had still some difficulty in believing that she had done so. However, he did not think that the *signorino* would die of it if she had, and perhaps there

had been some not unnatural misconstruction of the situation. Might he beg for particulars ?

The nurse, a little mollified, related as much as she had been able to gather from a maid whose knowledge of Italian was rudimentary. Without any doubt Lady Freda had departed. Orders had been given that her trunks were to be packed forthwith and that she was to be met at the station in time for the night express to Rome. Why she had walked out, as if for no other purpose than to take the air, and had then sent back the above startling instructions remained a mystery. The maid, it was true, had not appeared to be very much astonished; but—*che vuole?* The maid was an Englishwoman, dull, taciturn, stupefied by habitual over-eating—without an idea in her head, except to do what she was told !

Paul thought she sounded like a useful sort of servant and expressed a wish to speak to her. However, he got very little out of Miss Pinner when she suspended her packing operations for a minute and stepped into the corridor. She “really couldn’t say” whether or not Lady Freda had any special reason for leaving Naples; her ladyship’s plans were often changed at short notice. She had been told that her ladyship would be out the whole afternoon and might not return to dinner; that was all she knew. “Oh, and I was to say, with her ladyship’s love to Mr. Hilliar, that she wouldn’t disturb him again today, now that you are here, sir.”

Of Lord Dunridge the discreet Pinner made no mention. It may be conjectured that recent developments were neither obscure nor unwelcome to her,

and if she opined that her mistress had achieved a clever victory rather than suffered a reverse, she was not likely to be alone in taking that view. A fugitive twinkle in her eye when she spoke of transmitting her mistress's "love" to Mr. Hilliar did not escape Paul's notice; but he was in no mood to quarrel with impertinence or reticence, with anything or anybody.

A few minutes later he was in Guy's room and had blurted out the great news, happily confident that it would have no such tragic issue as had been apprehended. Dismay, indeed, was not amongst the emotions exhibited in swift succession upon the invalid's face.

"Good Lord! what *can* you have been saying to her!" was Guy's first articulate comment.

"You may well ask!" Paul exclaimed, heaving a prodigious sigh. "Whether I should have the courage, or the foolhardiness to risk such a throw a second time or not I'm sure I don't know; but I felt that it was neck or nothing, so I chanced it—and won. She didn't let me suspect that I had won, though, and I have been suffering tortures ever since. I know now what purgatory is—not to mention paradise!"

A queer vibration in Paul's voice, even more than the unwonted vehemence of the language that he employed, surprised and touched his hearer, who murmured compunctiously, "I didn't think you cared so—so much as all that! But you haven't told me what you said."

"Oh, the crudest, vulgarest thing! I swore that if you married her, you would never touch another shilling of my money while I lived or after I died.

The point, you understand, was that I should have been as good as my word and that she knew it. I couldn't have driven that thrust home unless I had been absolutely truthful and determined; so I leave you to imagine what my feelings were when all the answer I got was that she would think it over and make up her mind at her leisure."

Guy winced slightly. "But, my dear old man, I wasn't counting upon you to support me!"

"I am sure you weren't, and I shouldn't have used that argument with you. Not as an argument, at least; I might have had to announce it as a fact. But against her it looked like my only weapon—a sort of boomerang, which might have missed its mark and recoiled with pulverising force upon wretched me. Mercifully, it hasn't!"

"You think," said Guy, after a moment of pensive silence, "that she wouldn't face comparative indignance?"

"Well, that's implied, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. She may have felt that she ought not to spoil my prospects."

"A very proper and becoming sentiment too, if she were capable of it; but she isn't," returned Paul rather callously. "Still, as her train doesn't leave for some hours yet, you might send a note by her maid imploring her to return and share your bread and water. I have nothing to urge against safe tests and experiments."

"This is the sort of pride that comes of trying unsafe ones with impunity," remarked Guy, with a half-unwilling laugh. "No; you're quite right; she

wouldn't come back. Of course she wouldn't. She's not—well, there are various fine things that she's not. All the same, I should be an ungrateful brute to forget what she is and what she has done for me. I was in deep waters, you see; I fancied myself forsaken by everybody that I cared for in the world, except her. I don't want to be pathetic, but . . .”

“She has my heartfelt gratitude,” interrupted Paul hastily; for he was conscious of having been himself upon the verge of pathos or bathos; “I don't know that I have ever felt more grateful to any human being in my life. Unless indeed it be your very sagacious young friend Walter Cleland, who put me up to the best way of dealing with her. Upon my honour, when I think of what you and I owe to young Cleland I find myself utterly disconsolate! For there's no visible way of paying our debt.”

“Oh, one is much obliged to him, of course,” said Guy, who could hardly be expected to appreciate his friend's sagacity in the particular instance named; “but, as a matter of fact, there wasn't any need for him to fuss. Our agents here would have looked after me all right without telegraphic instructions. I'm at least as much indebted to Captain Mason of the *Pelican* as I am to Wattie.”

“We won't forget Captain Mason of the *Pelican*; means of discharging our obligations in that quarter may be hit upon, I daresay. But you will be uncommonly clever if you can suggest any means of rewarding a man who cheerfully submits to be jilted for your sake.”

“Glad to hear that he's cheerful and submissive;

but if he has been jilted, it certainly hasn't been for my sake. Please dismiss that notion from your mind, once for all. You'll allow, perhaps, that I know Audrey Baldwin a little better than you do."

Paul shook his head.

"Nevertheless, old man, I do know her better, and you may take my word for it that she'll always be delighted to do anything for me except the one thing that she can't do."

"*Qui vivra verra.* So long as you still want her to do that one thing, I'm content."

Guy made a grimace. "It's stupid, but it can't be helped. I shall go on wanting her to do that—I was nearly saying till the end of my days, but perhaps I had better say till she marries some other fellow. The funny thing is that I never really thought I should much mind her engaging herself to some other fellow until she went and did it. Absurd as that may sound, it's the truth."

"I can believe it," said Paul. "Also I can tell you that she would have minded most emphatically your engaging yourself to Lady Freda Barran."

"That's a totally different thing. If she had had a brother, she wouldn't have liked him to marry Lady Freda. Quite natural that she shouldn't; although it seems to me that you and she are a bit prejudiced."

It was at this apposite juncture that Lady Freda's note was delivered to Guy, who read it through slowly, raising his eyebrows once or twice, while his lips twitched themselves into a smile.

"Well, there she is for you!" he remarked, as he handed the sheets over to Paul. "Boldly depicted

by her own hand, with a fine economy of line. I don't call a woman who writes like that a bad sort of woman, you know."

Perhaps it was her candour that appealed to him, or the palpable genuineness (so far as it went) of an affection which she had decided to jettison, or possibly the mute eloquence of that smudge upon the last page. At any rate, he much preferred her ladyship's present epistolary style to the more impassioned one of the past. But Paul, reading a little between the lines, was less favourably impressed. It was very like a woman, he thought—though not like what he, for his part, would have called a good woman—to suggest that a match had been arranged for her correspondent to which he would have to accommodate himself, and her insinuation that she had not been actuated by wholly selfish motives in giving up the game struck him as more dexterous than honest.

"I am sorry she thought me brutal," said he; "I tried to be as polite as the case would allow."

"Oh, I expect you were pretty brutal," laughed Guy. "Never mind; she says she doesn't bear malice, and I am sure she doesn't. Admit that she is good-natured, if you can't concede her any other merit. Somehow, it's a tremendous relief to me that she's going to marry Dunridge."

"Poor devil!"

"No; not so long as he behaves himself and gives her all the money she asks for. What she says about getting bored and cross, as the result of being hard up, is true enough, so far as she is concerned; that was her real quarrel with Barran, I suspect, though she

may not have known it. But the fact is that I'm no judge of women, and I don't believe you're much of an expert in that line either, old man. We can rub along together very well without them, thank goodness ! ”

His spirits had revived; he began to chatter freely, as of yore; he seemed amply satisfied to have recovered the old familiar friendship which so many things had combined to thwart. In the long palaver which ensued Audrey was but little discussed. As to her reason for having discarded Wattie Cleland Guy remained obstinately incredulous, and Paul did not care to insist. After all, he himself could not affirm positively that he knew her reason, although he was comfortably convinced that he did. For the time being, it was enough, and more than enough, that a day which had begun with such menace of storm was ending in joy, safety and peace.

* * * * *

Some three weeks later Paul Lequesne and Mrs. Baldwin were sitting on a sun-warmed bench in the Boboli gardens. They had reached Florence that morning, she coming from the north, he from the south, and this meeting of theirs, the outcome of much correspondence, was only the pretext for bringing about another meeting which Paul had been eager to secure with as little delay as might be. Some delay had been unavoidable, since neither he nor Guy had been in a condition for travelling straight through to England; but such diplomacy as had been needed to persuade Mrs. Baldwin that her own health demanded a short visit to brighter climes had been

exercised (chiefly by the ever serviceable Wattie Cleland), and she was now, like her companion, awaiting in subdued excitement what she declined to treat as a foregone conclusion.

"I answer for nothing, mind!" said she. "Audrey must guess why she has been brought here, I suppose, but she is perfectly capable of making us all look supremely foolish."

"If she had meant to do that," observed Paul, smiling, "she wouldn't have let you bring her here, and she certainly wouldn't have let us slip out of the hotel, leaving her and Guy to follow at their convenience. I beg you to note that they haven't followed in any headlong haste. Getting on for two hours, I make it, since we saw them last."

"Ah, well!" said Mrs. Baldwin, heaving a contented sigh. And then—"Don't you think it's rather good of me to join forces with you like this and to overlook—all that I've overlooked? For you can't call it a great match, and you can't pretend that Guy has behaved particularly well."

"My dear old friend," answered Paul, "I think you are very good indeed; but if you expect me to say that I don't think any woman fortunate who gets Guy for her husband, I must disappoint you. Moreover, you know that this is what you and I have been wishing for ever since they were children."

"Yes," Mrs. Baldwin assented; "it will be satisfactory if it comes off—and in Florence, of all odd places! A sort of revenge for me upon that wretched man who got us all into such trouble here eighteen years ago."

“ He brought no trouble upon me,” Paul remarked. “ Quite the contrary. Suppose he hadn’t played those pranks ? Suppose he had done his duty, gone back to Arcachon and claimed his small boy ? I shudder when I think of what would never have happened if poor Jack Hilliar had been an ordinary, respectable citizen.”

“ And yet you don’t believe in Providence ! ”

Paul was avowing a modest reluctance to trace the finger of Providence in blessings conferred by such equivocal means when an old gentleman who was sauntering slowly by came to a pause, stood still, blinking, for a moment and then raised his white hat. It was the Duke of Branksome, bent, aged, shaky of gait and voice, but still chirpily debonnair. He was on his way from Rome, where he had been attending his daughter’s second nuptials, he said.

“ An old attachment. . . . I daresay you may have heard. Better, under all the circumstances, to get the ceremony over abroad in a quiet way. Pleased ? —oh, dear me, yes ! Only too glad to see her married to anybody who can afford to keep her ! ”

His Grace chuckled ; he was always wont to speak of his domestic affairs with much openness and simplicity. He reminded Mrs. Baldwin that he had first had the privilege of making her acquaintance in the Tuscan capital.

“ Seems only yesterday, and your appearance fosters the illusion, my dear lady,” he gallantly added. “ Remember our friend Vigors ? What a rascal, eh ? —what a clever rascal ! Hanged or shot long ago, I suppose.”

Presently the good-natured old fellow shuffled on, thinking to himself that the aspect of stout, grey-haired Mrs. Baldwin was a terrible shatterer of illusions and that pretty women ought never to grow old. After a time his dimmed, but appreciative gaze fell upon a woman who was not only pretty and young, but whose charming face was transfigured and irradiated after a fashion which one cause alone can evoke. The cause by her side had the air of being not less serenely blissful than she. Hand in hand, they stepped past the old Duke, who recognised the pair and chuckled benevolently once more, but did not accost them. They had not even seen him; perhaps they would not have seen anybody just then.

"It simply *had* to be," Audrey was saying. "We both did our idiotic best to prevent it from ever coming to pass, didn't we? But it has come to pass in spite of us, and if only I hadn't poor Wattie so horribly upon my conscience!" . . .

"He's a little bit upon mine," Guy owned. "All the same, I don't know that he's so much to be pitied as if . . ."

"As if he had married me? Thanks!"

"Well, you can't deny that it would have been a catastrophe of the first magnitude if he had. And even supposing one poor chap has to go to the wall we're pleasing at least two other people besides ourselves, remember."

Audrey broke out into a laugh. "Oh, let's be honest," she cried, "and confess that we're too outrageously happy to care if the whole human race had to go to the wall!"

So they passed on in the sunshine between the clipped cypresses and were lost to sight—destined, it may be hoped, to such enduring happiness as awaits some lucky members of the human race after the transient outrageous phase has gone the way of all phases.

THE END

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