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THE SILVER
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The Silver Fox

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CHAPTER I

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LADY SUSAN had never been so hungry in her life. So, for the sixth time, she declared between loud and unbridled yawns. She worked her chair across the parquet towards the fire-place, dragging the hearthrug into folds in her progress, and put her large and well-shod feet on the fender.

“What a beast of a fire! When you’ve quite done with it, Bunny, I shouldn’t mind seeing it just the same. You are a selfish thing!”

In obedience to this rebuke Major Bunbury moved an inch or two to one side.

“I’m not as selfish as you are,” he said, with agreeable simplicity. “Miss Morris can’t see anything but your boots.”

“Oh, she likes seeing boots,” replied Lady Susan, establishing one on the hob. “They don’t have ’em in Ireland, do they, Slaney!”

It was obviously the moment for Miss Morris to say something brilliant, but she let the opportunity slip. Perhaps she was hampered by the consciousness that her boots had been made in an Irish country town. She got red. She did not know that it was becoming to her to get red. Finding no more appropriate retort, she laughed, and pushing back her chair, walked over to the window. What she looked out on was the lawn at Hurlingham, covered smoothly and desolately with snow; a line of huddled, white hummocks of ice, moving very slowly across the middle distance, represented the River Thames; down to the right, five or six skaters glided on the black and serpentine curves of a little

lake—they looked like marionettes sliding along a wire. Even at that distance they seemed to Slaney over-dressed and artificial. No doubt they were screaming inanities to each other, as were these other English idiots in the room behind her. How ineffably stupid they were, and how shy and provincial they made her feel! How could Hugh have married into such a pack?

One of the double doors at the end of the room opened, and a small, dark man appeared.

“Awfully sorry to have kept you all waiting,” he said abjectly. “I’m afraid it’s a bad business; they say that there’s nothing to be had here on Sundays at this time of year, unless it’s ordered beforehand.”

“Oh Lord!” ejaculated Lady Susan, bringing her foot and the shovel down with a crash. “Do you mean to say there’s nothing to eat?”

“It’s not quite as bad as that, but precious nearly,” he replied, looking at her so deplorably that Slaney felt inclined to laugh. “We’re going to have some of the waiter’s dinner. It’s a leg of mutton, and he says he don’t think it’s quite boiled yet, but I said we wouldn’t wait.”

Lady Susan seized Major Bunbury’s hand, and pulled herself out of her chair. She was stalwart and tall, and her dress fitted beautifully. With a whisk and rustle of silk petticoats she was across the room and caught Miss Morris by the arm.

“Worry, worry, worry! Sess, sess, sess!” she said, with a sufficiently fortunate imitation of her father’s kennel huntsman. “Come on and eat raw leg of mutton! I *hope* the waiter likes onion sauce!”

In the dining-room a genial fire was blazing; a soft and rich-coloured carpet glowed on the floor; the atmosphere was of old-fashioned comfort; there was a desirable smell of fried potatoes. The party sank into their places at an oval table, and to each was administered a plateful of pink mutton that grew rosier at every slice. Captain Hugh French, late of the ——th Hussars, looked round upon his guests, and felt that champagne was the only reparation in his power.

“I feel it’s all my fault bringing you people down here to starve. You’ll have to take it out in drink,” he said helplessly.

The words were addressed to the company, but his brown eyes, that were like the eyes of a good small dog, addressed themselves to those of his wife. Slaney, following them, wondered whether he could help seeing the black line frankly drawn along the edge of Lady Susan’s lower eyelids. The white glare from the snow showed it unsparingly, as she looked at her husband over the rim of the champagne glass from which she was drinking.

“Yes, darling, you’re a silly little thing,” she said blandly; “I always said that spill had given you softening of the brain.”

“What spill?” asked Slaney. It was almost the first time she had spoken. She had sat, inwardly scornful and outwardly shy, in the midst of conversation whose knack she could not catch, and whose purport she thought either babyish or vulgar. There must be an English and an Irish form of humour, so at least it seemed to Slaney, as she listened with the intolerance of the clever provincial to Lady Susan’s loud and ready laugh. Hugh, at all events, was not,

she thanked Heaven, humorous in either manner. She found herself less of a fool when she was talking to Hugh.

“I’m afraid you don’t take much interest in your cousin’s misfortunes, Slaney,” he said. “Didn’t you know that I was smashed up at Bungalore last spring, playing polo? I was trying to ‘ride off’ this great brute,” indicating Major Bunbury, “and I got the worst of it. I was in hospital for a month, and grew a thundering big black beard. Couldn’t shave for six weeks.”

“Don’t make me sick,” said Lady Susan, beginning heartily on biscuits and cheese. “If I’d known that in time I wouldn’t have married you. A little man with a beard’s like a cob with a long tail. Couldn’t do with you if you’d a long tail, Hughie.”

“I’m goin’ to grow another when we get down to French’s Court,” retorted Hughie. “I shan’t have anything else to do there. What on earth do you do with yourself at Letter Kyle, Slaney?”

“Do you grow a beard, Slaney?” shouted Lady Susan, with her mouth full of biscuit. “If *I’m* bored over there I shall just dye my hair again. How do you like it now, Bunny? I got it done in Paris on our way through. I think it might be a bit redder.”

“Why, it’s as red as a fox now,” said Major Bunbury, regarding it critically.

“Talking of foxes,” put in Slaney, endeavouring to be genial, “they all expect Hugh to start the hounds again when he comes over. That will give you something to do, Hugh.”

“Tally ho!” uttered Major Bunbury, with a subdued whoop. “That’s a rippin’ good notion. I’ll come over and whip for you, Hughie.”

“No, you won’t!” cried Lady Susan. “I’ll whip for him myself; but I don’t believe he knows anything about it—does he, Bunny?”

“Oh dear, no!” replied Major Bunbury, with elephantine sarcasm; “he’s a perfect owl. Can’t think why we made him carry the horn till he left the regiment—and the funny thing was that he seemed quite up to the job.”

Captain French took no notice of the compliment.

“I can’t imagine who the people are who want me to get up a pack there,” he said, without much enthusiasm; “last time I was over there seemed to be no one in the place but the parson and the two old Miss Macarthys. They’d make a pretty sort of a hunt.”

“Oh, there are a lot of farmers,” replied Slaney, “and there’s the police officer, and there’s Mr. Glasgow, the contractor of the new railway.” To her own surprise and annoyance she blushed as she spoke, and Major Bunbury, glancing incidentally at her, thought her almost handsome.

“Glasgow,” repeated Hugh; “there was a chap called Glasgow at Eton with me. What sort of age is this man?”

“Oh, he’s young—at least, not very young—I mean he’s not exactly old; but he’s older than you are, Hugh,” replied Slaney, with incoherence probably due to the blush; “his name is Wilfrid,” she added. “I think he did say something about having been at school with you.”

“That’s the man. Clever sort of chap; fancies himself a bit. I remember one of my pals was a fag of his, and said he

was awfully particular about his toast. He wants hounds, does he? Why don't he get them up for himself?"

"He's too busy; besides, he said you were the man to do it, Hugh. He said he had always heard you were a great rider, and knew all about your having won the Gold Cup at Punchestown." She was conscious of pleasure in the expounding of Mr. Glasgow.

Lady Susan, on the contrary, began to find it a bore.

"Oh, look here, you people," she broke in, "we can't sit here all day to listen to Hughie being made more conceited than he is. Come out and skate."

She snatched Major Bunbury's plate from before him, and put it down in front of an expectant cat, flung a dinner napkin over her husband's head, and fell to arranging her fringe and veil at a looking-glass with minute care and entire disregard of the company.

As Miss Morris walked after her cousin's wife down the snowy path to the lake, she framed with a confident touch the description that she would give of her to Mr. Glasgow. Scarcely less confidently, and with a comfortable sense of fore-knowledge of his ideas and point of view, she formulated the phrase in which he would give his opinion of Lady Susan. It was satisfactory to reflect that, though she was a failure in Lady Susan's set, she found no difficulty in talking to intellectual people like Mr. Wilfred Glasgow.

A light and stinging wind blew along the ice, powdering the surface with infinitely delicate particles of snow. The graceful lawns and slopes of Hurlingham stared in blank whiteness, the evergreens stood out unnaturally dark and trim in the colourless monotony; beyond the scrape and hiss

of the skates the silence was extraordinary. Slaney did not enjoy herself. The south-west of Ireland is not the climate in which to learn skating; she toiled up against the wind with aching ankles, she drifted back in front of it, and finally, in bitter resentment of her ungainly helplessness, achieved the haven of a chair. Lady Susan swung and circled, and knew that her colour was rising in a manner more becoming than the best rouge that money could buy; Major Bunbury swung assiduously after her. Hugh was cutting intricate figures far away. Slaney began thinking of the gaunt afternoon service in progress at that moment in the church of Letter Kyle. There would be no music because she was not there to play the harmonium; Uncle Charles would be longer and louder than ever over the responses to the Psalms now that her reproving eye was off him; Mr. Glasgow——no, she felt tolerably sure that the Sundays of her absence would not be the ones selected by Mr. Glasgow for walking over to afternoon service at Letter Kyle.

“Come along, Slaney,” said Captain French, sailing down upon her with his hands extended, “I know it’s poor fun for you, but you must keep at it.”

They moved off together, and Slaney felt, as she often did, a glow of appreciation of Hugh’s desire to make things pleasant for others. She did not notice character very much, except at the moments when it was in contact with herself. Between the manifestations of her cousin’s amiability towards her she habitually thought of him as merely unintellectual. At this stage of Slaney’s history intellectual people were to her as irrevocably severed from the others as were the sheep from the goats.

“Tell me more about this idea of the hounds,” said Hugh, dodging behind the island to avoid the raking sweep of Lady Susan’s advance. “What am I to hunt? Hares or foxes or a red herring?”

“Foxes, of course,” replied Slaney; “there are any amount of them. Uncle Charles shot two in our wood this autumn.”

“Good Lord!” ejaculated Hugh; “where does he expect to go when he dies?”

“Where do you think?” answered Slaney, with an effort to be suitably flippant; “if there’s anything in the world that Uncle Charles is more convinced of than another it is that he always has moved in the highest circles, and that he always will.”

Hugh laughed in his kindly, indiscriminating way.

“By the way,” went on Slaney, following up a connection of ideas, “there’s a curious story in the country now about a fox. Mr. Glasgow wanted gravel for the new railway, and bought a bit of a hillside from old Danny Quin at Cahirdreen. There was a big patch of furze there, and the men said that when the first blast went off a grey fox ran out of it and away into the hills; a sort of fox that no one had ever seen before. They say that there is an old prophecy about the bad luck that is to come when that hill is thrown into Tully Lake, and that is just what is to be done where the line crosses a corner of the lake. They believe that the fox is a witch or a fairy, and that it will bring the bad luck.”

“By Jove! that’s rather interesting,” said Hugh, steering Slaney into a chair and subsiding into another beside her; “we’ll have to kill that grey fox.”