

E. F. BENSON



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Chapter I

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The big pink and white dining-room at the Carlton was full to suffocation of people, mixed odours of dinner, the blare of the band just outside, and a babel of voices. In the hall theatre-goers were having their coffee and cigarettes after dinner, while others were still waiting, their patience fortified by bitters, for their parties to assemble. The day had been very hot, and, as is the manner of days in London when June is coming to an end, the hours for most people here assembled had been pretty fully occupied, but with a courage worthy of the cause they seemed to behave as if nothing of a fatiguing nature had occurred since breakfast. The band played loud because it would otherwise have been inaudible above the din of conversation, and people talked loud because otherwise nobody could have heard what anybody else said. To-night everybody had a good deal to say, for a case of the kind that always attracts a good deal of attention had just been given that lengthy and head-lined publicity which is always considered in England to be inseparable from the true and indifferent administration of justice, and the vultures of London life found the banquet extremely to their taste. So they ate their dinner with a sense of special gaiety, pecked ravenously at the aforesaid affair, and all talked loudly together. But nobody talked so loud as Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer.

It was said of her, indeed, that, staying for a week-end not long ago with some friend in the country, rain had been expected because one day after lunch a peacock was heard screaming so loud, but investigation showed that it was only Mrs. Palmer, at a considerable distance away on the terrace, laughing. Like the peacock, it is true, she had been making *la pluie et le beau temps* in London this year, so the mistake

was accountable. At present, she was entertaining two young men at an ante-opera dinner. A casual observer might have had the impression that she was clothed lightly but exclusively in diamonds. She talked, not fast, but without pause. She was in fact what may be called a long-distance talker: in an hour she would get through much more than most people.

'Yes, London is just too lovely,' she was saying; 'and how I shall tear myself away on Monday is more than I can imagine. I shall cry my eyes out all the way to Liverpool. Mr. Brancepeth, you naughty man, you were thinking to yourself that you would pick them up and carry them home with you to remind you of me. I should advise you not to say so, or I shall get Lord Keynes to call you out. I always tell everyone that he takes as much care of me as if he were my father. Yes, Lord Keynes, you are what I call faithful. I say to everyone, Lord Keynes is *the* most faithful friend I ever had. Don't you think you are faithful, now? Well, as I was saying when Mr. Brancepeth interrupted me with his wicked inquiries, I shall cry my eyes out. Indeed, if it wasn't that Lord Keynes had faithfully promised to come over in the fall, I think I should get a divorce from Lewis S. and remain here right along.'

'On what grounds?' asked Bertie Keynes.

'Why, on the grounds of his incompatibility of residence. Just now I feel as if the sight of Fifth Avenue would make me feel so homesick for London that I guess I should rupture something. When I am homesick I feel just like that, and Lewis S. he notices it at once, and sends to Tiffany's for the most expensive diamond they've got. That helps some, because a new diamond is one of the solemnest things I know. It just sits there and winks at me, and I just sit there and wink at it. We know a thing or two, a big diamond and I. But I conjecture it will have to be a big one to make me feel better this time, for just now London seems to me the only compatible residence. I guess I'll make Lewis buy it.'

Mrs. Palmer's tact had been one of the standing dishes of the season, and it appeared that there was plenty of it still in stock. It was distributed by her with strict impartiality to anyone present, and had a firm flavour.

Bertie Keynes laughed, and drew from his pocket a small printed card.

'I don't know if you have seen this,' he said. "'Admit bearer to see the world. Signed, Lewis S. Palmer.'" And he handed it to her.

Mrs. Palmer opened her mouth very wide, and screamed so loud that for a radius of three tables round all conversation ceased for a moment. The scream began on about the note selected by express trains when they dash at full speed through a station, rose an octave or two with an upward swoop like a steam siren, came slowly down in a chromatic scale, broken off for a moment as she made a hissing intake of her breath, and repeated itself. This year it had been one of the recognised cries of London.'

'Why, if that isn't the cutest thing in the world,' she screamed. 'I never saw anything so cunning. Why, I never! Admit bearer to see the world! How can I get one for Lewis? It would just tickle him to death.'

'Pray take this,' said Bertie. 'I brought it on purpose for you.'

'Well, if that isn't too nice of you! I shall just hand that to Lewis without a word the moment I set eyes on him. I guess that'll make him want to buy the world in earnest. Why, he'll go crazy about buying it now that it has been suggested. Well, I'm sure, Lord Keynes, it's just too nice of you to give me that. I shall laugh myself sick over it. I always tell everyone that you are the kindest man I ever saw. Gracious, it's half after nine! We must go at once. I'll be down with you in a moment, but I must give this to my maid to be packed in my jewel-case.'

Mrs. Palmer looked at it again as she rose, gave another shrill scream, and vanished, leaving her two guests alone.

Charlie Brancepeth moved his chair a little sideways to the table as he sat down again, crossed his legs, and took a cigarette from his case.

'If you had asked her a hundred pounds for it, she would have given it you, Bertie,' he remarked.

Bertie Keynes raised his eyebrows a shade.

'A hundred pounds is always welcome, Charlie,' he said, without a shadow or hint of comment in his voice. In fact, the neutrality of his tone was too marked to be in the least degree natural.

Charlie did not reply for a moment, but blew thoughtfully on the lighted end of his cigarette.

'Why this sudden—this sudden suppression of the mercantile spirit?' he asked.

Bertie laughed.

'Don't trouble to be more offensive than is necessary to your reasonable comfort,' he remarked with some finish.

'I am not; I should have been in considerable pain if I hadn't said that. But why this suppression?'

Bertie delayed answering long enough to upset the salt with his elbow, and look reproachfully at the waiter for having done so.

'There isn't any suppression,' he said at length. 'The mercantile spirit is going strong. Stronger than ever. Damn!'

'Is it the salt you asked a blessing on?' said Charlie.

'No; the non-suppression.'

'Then you really are going to America in the autumn?' asked he. 'I beg its pardon, the fall.'

'Yes. Fall is just as good a word as autumn, by the way.'

'Oh, quite. Over there they think it better, and they have quite as good a right to judge as we. If they called it the pump-handle it wouldn't make any difference.'

'Not the slightest. Yes, I am going.'

Charlie smiled.

'Oh, I suddenly understand about the mercantile spirit,' he said. 'It was stupid of me not to have guessed at once.'

'It was rather. Charlie, I should like to talk to you about it. The governor has been making some uncommonly sensible remarks to me on the subject.'

'He would. Your father has an immense quantity of dry common-sense. Yes, come round after the opera, and we'll talk it out lengthways. Here's Mrs. Palmer. I hope Pagani will sing extremely loud to-night, otherwise we shan't hear a note.'

Two electric broughams were waiting at the Pall Mall entrance as Mrs. Palmer rustled out between rows of liveried men, whose sole office appeared to be to look reverential as she passed, as if to have just seen her was the Mecca of their aspirations. Then, after a momentary hesitation between the two young men, Bertie followed her dazzling opera-cloak into the first brougham, and, amid loud and voluble regrets on her part that there was not room for three, and the exaction of a solemn promise that Charlie would not quarrel with his friend for having monopolized her, they started. Charlie gave a little sigh, whether of disappointment or not is debatable, and followed them alone in the second brougham.

The motor went swiftly and noiselessly up Haymarket, and into the roaring whirlpool of the Circus. It was a fine warm evening, and over pavement and roadway the season of the streets, which lasts not for a few months only, after the manner of the enfeebled upper class, but all the year round, was in full swing. Hansom cabs, newsboys shouting the latest details of all the dirty linen which had been washed that week, omnibuses nodding ten feet high above the road, and life-guardsmen nodding six, women plain and coloured, men in dress-clothes hurrying late to the theatres, shabby skulkers in shadow, obscure persons of prey, glittering glass signs about the music-halls, flower-sellers round the fountain, swinging-doors of restaurants swallowing in and vomiting out all sorts and conditions of men, winking sky—signs, policemen controlling the traffic—

all contributed their essential but infinitesimal quota to the huge hodge-podge of life, bent as the great majority of life always is on the seizure of the present vivid moment, the only thing which is certainly existent. For the past is already to everyone but of the texture of a dream; the future is a dream also, but lying in impenetrable shadow. But the moment is real.

To Charlie it appeared to-night that the festival of the pavements was certainly gayer than the festival of the Carlton. His own world schemed more, it might be, and substituted innuendo for a bolder and more direct manner of talk, but it really had less capacity for enjoyment. Ten weeks of London broke its wind somewhat, and it retired into the country to graze, to digest, to recoup. But here on the pavements a lustier spirit reigned, the spirit of the people, pressing upwards and upwards like buried bulbs striving towards the light through the good, moist earth, whereas, to continue the metaphor that was in his mind, the folk among whom he moved, whose doings he continually observed with an absorbed but kindly cynicism, were like plants tended in a greenhouse, and potted out when the weather became assured.

And what if the whole of England was becoming every year more like a tended greenhouse plant, compared to the blind thrust of forces from the earth in other countries? For all the old landmarks, as the great wheel of human life whirled down the road of the centuries, seemed to be passing out of sight; the world was racing westwards, where America sat high on the seas, grown like some portentous mushroom in a single night. There, at the present moment, the inexorable, relentless logic of nature was working out its everlasting proposition that the one force in the material world was wealth. England had had her turn, even as Rome had had her turn, and even as the hordes of barbarians had swept over the countries that had been hers till they reached and took the capital itself, even so—well, had he

not himself dined with Mrs. Palmer that evening? It was not in his nature to hate anything, so it cannot be said that he hated her screaming, her insensate conversation, her lack of all that is summed up in the words breeding and culture, but he saw these loud defects, and knew of their existence. On the other hand, he saw and knew also of her intense good-nature, her true kindness of heart, and believed in the integrity of her life; so, if it was fair to consider her presence in London typically as of the nature of a barbarian invasion, it must be confessed that England had fallen into the hands of very kindly foes. They did not even actively resent culture, they were simply not aware of it, and cut it when they met. In any case they were irresistible, for the power that moved them was wealth more gigantic than any which heretofore had furthered the arts of war and peace, and that wealth was grasped by men who only yesterday had toiled with their hands in factories and workshops. Like stars reeling upwards from below the horizon, they swarmed into the sky, and looked down, not cruelly, but merely calmly, into the world which they owned.

Of such was Mrs. Palmer's husband; he had been a railway porter, now he was railways and steamships and anything else of which he chose to say 'This is mine.' Occasionally men like these watered the English greenhouse plants, and an heiress propped up the unstable fortunes of some five-hundred-years-old English name. But such gift of refreshment was but a spoonful out of the great wells; also, in a manner of speaking, having thus watered the plants, they picked them.

His motor got caught in a block at the entrance to Leicester Square, and he arrived at the Opera House some few minutes after the others had got there. A commanding white label with Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer's name printed on it was on the door of the omnibus box on the grand tier, and he found her, with her resplendent back firmly turned towards the stage, discoursing in shrill whispers to Bertie

Keynes, and sighing more than audibly for the end of the act. It was the last representation for the year of 'Tristan und Isolde,' and the house was crowded. Royalty was there: a galaxy of tiaras sparkled in the boxes, and a galaxy of stars sang together on the stage. For London had suddenly conceived the almost incredible delusion that it was musical, and flocked to the opera with all the fervour of a newly-born passion. It was not, it never had been, and it never would be musical, but this particular form of the game 'Let's pretend' was in fashion, and the syndicate rejoiced. Soon London would get tired of the game, and the syndicate would be sad again.

But the longest act comes to an end at last, and even as the curtain fell, Mrs. Palmer began screaming again. She screamed when she was amused because she was amused, and she screamed when she was bored in order that it might appear that she was not. Just now she was amusing herself very tolerably, for as soon as the lights were up, the world in general flocked into her box, supplementing the very desirable company already assembled there.

'Why, of course I am coming back next year,' she was explaining. 'And if Lewis doesn't come with me, and take Seaton House for me, so as to be able to have more than one person to dinner at a time, I guess I'll have a word or two to say to him which he won't forget; and if you, Mrs. Massington, don't come over to us in the fall with Lord Keynes, I shall cry my eyes out; and if that monster, Mr. Brancepeth, is as impudent again as he was at dinner, saying that he would pick them up and take them home to remind him of me, I'll ask him to leave my box, and call him back the moment afterwards, because I can't help forgiving him.'

There was a laugh at this brilliant effort of imagination, and Mrs. Massington leaned back in her chair towards Charlie, while Mrs. Palmer continued her voluble remarks.

'You are getting quite polished, Charlie,' she said. 'I should not have suspected you of so much gallantry.'

'I hope you never suspect me of anything,' he said.

'Oh, I do—of lots of things. Chiefly of a disapproving attitude. You are always disapproving. Now, you probably disapprove of my going to America.'

'You have not gone yet,' he said.

'No, but I shall. Mrs. Palmer has asked me to stay with them, and I am going. And Bertie is really going too.'

'So he told me to-night.'

'Who suggested it? His father?'

'Yes. As usual, he has shown his immensely good sense.'

Mrs. Massington laughed.

'You are extremely old-fashioned,' she said. 'I wonder at your dining with Mrs. Palmer at all, and coming to her box.'

'I often wonder at it myself,' said he. 'Never mind that. I haven't seen you for an age. What have you been doing with yourself?'

'I haven't been doing anything with myself. It is other people who have been doing all sorts of things with me. I have been taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged—literally dragged—from place to place. All this week there's been the Serington case, you see. I was in the court for three mornings, getting up at unheard-of hours to be there. Really it was very amusing. Topsy in the witness-box was the funniest thing you can possibly imagine. He jumped every time anybody asked him a question. They seem to have had the most extraordinary manage, and the servants appear to have spent their entire time in looking through keyholes. I wonder how the house-work got done at all. Charlie, you don't appear in the least amused.'

He looked at her a moment gravely.

'Am I really so awfully old-fashioned?' he asked.

'Yes, you old darling, I think you are. Are you shocked at my calling you an old darling? It's quite true, you know.'

'Delighted to hear it. But am I old-fashioned, then?'

'Certainly. Antique, out of date, obsolete. Of course, that sort of thing, all the Serington affair, is extremely shocking, and they are done for, quite done for; nobody will ever speak to them again—at least, except abroad. But because it is shocking, I don't see why I should pretend not to be amused at the really ridiculous figure Topsy cut in the witness-box. It would argue a very imperfect sense of humour if I was not amused, and great hypocrisy if I pretended not to be. I was amused, I roared; I was afraid they would turn me out.'

He laughed.

'Somehow, whatever you do, I can't disapprove,' he said; 'though the notion of all Topsy's friends sitting there and looking at him, and talking it over afterwards, makes me feel ill. But you——'

'Dear Charlie, it is too nice of you. But break those rose-coloured spectacles through which you so kindly observe me. It is no use. I have told you before it was no use, and I don't like telling you again.'

'Why?' he asked.

'Oh, that is so like a man, and especially an Englishman. You know why. Because it hurts you.'

'You dislike hurting me? That is something,' said he.

'But that is all,' she said.

The orchestra had taken their places, and a silence began to spread over the theatre as the lights were lowered. Then suddenly he leaned towards her so that he could smell the faint, warm fragrance of her presence.

'You mean that?' he asked.

She nodded her head in reply, and the curtain rose.

Chapter II

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Mrs. Palmer, when the opera was over, had many voluble good-byes to say to her friends, for she was leaving London next day, and sailing for her native shores in the middle of the week. Consequently, it was some time before the two young men could get off from Covent Garden, but eventually they strolled away together to pick up a hansom rather than wait for one. Charlie Brancepeth's rooms were in Half Moon Street, and it was thus nearer one than twelve when they got home. He threw himself into a long easy-chair with an air of fatigue, while the other strolled about somewhat aimlessly and nervously, smoking a cigarette, sipping whisky-and-soda, with the indolent carriage of a man who is at home with himself and his surroundings. In person he was of the fair, blue-eyed type of his family, small-featured, and thin, and looking taller, in consequence, than he really was. His eyebrows, darker than his hair, had the line of determination and self-reliance; but one felt somehow that his appearance had less to do with the essential man beneath than with the ancestors from whom he had inherited it. But his aimless, undetermined strolling one felt was more truly his own.

At last he went to the window and threw it open, letting in the great *bourdon* hum of London, coming somewhat muffled through the heavy air. Only the gentlest draught drew into the room from outside, barely stirring the flowers in the window-boxes, but spreading slowly over the room the warm, drowsy scent of them. Then, taking himself by the shoulders, as it were, he sat down.

'Charlie, I am going to America,' he said, 'in order, if possible, to find an extremely wealthy girl who is willing to marry me.'

'So I understood when you said the mercantile spirit was not suppressed. Well, you are frank, anyhow. Will you tell her that? Will you ask how much she expects to have as a dowry?'

'No, it will be unnecessary to tell her anything; she will know. You don't suppose the Americans really think that lots of us go there to find wives because we prefer them to English girls? They know the true state of the case perfectly well. They only don't choose to recognise it, just as one doesn't choose to recognise a man one doesn't want to meet. They look it in the face, and cut it—cut it dead.'

'I dare say you are perfectly right,' said Charlie with marked neutrality.

'I suppose you disapprove; you have a habit of disapproving, as I heard Sybil Massington say to you to-night. By the way, she is going to America, too, she told me.'

Charlie's face remained perfectly expressionless.

'Yes,' he said slowly. 'You might arrange to travel together. Never mind that now, though. You told me your father had some very sensible things to say about mercenary marriages. Do tell me what they were; he is always worth listening to.'

Bertie Keynes hailed this with obvious relief. It was easier to him to put up his father's ideas for his friend, if he chose, to box with, than receive the attack on his own person. He did not care in the least how much Charlie attacked his father's opinions on matrimony; nor, on the other hand, would the Marquis of Bolton care either, because the fact of his never caring for anything was so widely known as to have been abbreviated like a sort of hall-mark into his nickname of Gallio.

'Yes, the governor talked to me about it yesterday,' he said to the other. 'He was very convincing, I thought. He put it like this: It is impossible for royalty to marry commoners; therefore, when royalty goes a-wooing, it goes a-wooing in

its own class. It is equally impossible for me to marry a poor woman, because I can't afford it. Everything is mortgaged up to the hilt, as you probably know, and, indeed, if I don't marry a rich woman, we go smash. Therefore, I must go a-wooing, like royalty, among the class into which alone it is possible for me to marry. I see the force of that reasoning, so I am going to America. See?'

'Gallio might have gone on to say that it appeared that the English aristocracy is the only possible class for extremely rich American girls to marry into,' remarked Charlie.

'Yes, I'll tell him that,' said the other; 'he would be pleased with that. Then he went on to say that every country necessarily sends abroad for barter or exchange what it doesn't want or has too great a supply of. America has more money than it knows what to do with, so it is willing to let some of it come here, while we have just found out that titles are no longer of the slightest value to us. Nobody cares about them now, so we send them for distribution abroad too.'

'Labelled,' said Charlie. 'Ducal coronet so much, countess's coronet much cheaper, baroness's coronet for an annuity merely. You will be a marquis, won't you? Marquises come rather high. Brush up the coronet, Bertie, and put a fancy price on it.'

Charlie rose with some impatience as he spoke, and squirted some soda-water into a glass.

'Doesn't the governor's view seem to you very sensible?' asked the other.

'Yes, very sensible; that is why I find it so damnable. Sense is overrunning us like some horrid weed. Nobody thinks of anything except what will pay. That is what sense means. A sensible, well-balanced view—a sensible, bank-balanced view! That is what it comes to.'

Bertie Keynes whistled gently to himself a minute.

'I don't think I'll tell Gallio that,' he said; 'I don't think he would like that so much.'

Charlie laughed.

'Oh yes, he would; but you needn't tell him, since he knows it already. Well, in soda-water, I drink success to your wooing. Don't make yourself cheap.'

Bertie lit another cigarette from the stump of the one he had been smoking previously.

'If anybody else had said that, I should have been rather annoyed,' he remarked.

'You are annoyed as it is; at least, I meant you to be. It's no use arguing about it, because we really differ, and you cannot argue unless you fundamentally agree, which we do not. I'm in the minority, I know; almost everybody agrees with you. But I am old-fashioned; I have been told so this evening.'

'By——'

'Yes, by Sybil Massington. She, too, agrees with you.'

There was silence for a minute or two.

'It's two years since her husband died, is it not?' asked Bertie.

'Yes, two years and one month. I know what you are thinking about. I asked her—at least, she saw what I meant—again this evening, but I have asked her for the last time. I suppose it is that—my feeling for her—that to-night makes me think what a horrible cold-blooded proceeding you are going to embark on. I can't help it; I do feel like that. So there's an end of it.'

Bertie did not reply, and a clock on the chimney-piece chimed two.

'There's one more thing,' he said at length. 'You advised me to brush up the coronet. Did you mean anything?'

Charlie took out his watch, and began winding it up. Mechanically, Bertie took his coat on his arm.

'Yes, I meant exactly what you think I meant.'

'It's rather awkward,' said Bertie. 'She's going out to America in the autumn to act. I am certain to meet her in New York; at any rate, she is certain to know I am there.'

'Will that really be awkward?' asked Charlie. 'Is she—is she?'

'I haven't seen her for nearly two years,' said the other.

'I don't know whether she hates me or the other thing. In either case, I am rather afraid.'

Mrs. Massington also had spent the hour after she had got home in midnight conference. Since her husband's death, two years ago, she had lived with an unmarried sister of her own, a woman some ten years older than herself, yet still on the intelligent side of forty, and if she herself had rightly earned the title of the prettiest widow in London, to Judy, even more unquestionably, belonged the reputation of the wisest spinster in the same village. She was charmingly ugly, and relished the great distinction that real ugliness, as opposed to plainness, confers on its possessor. She was, moreover, far too wise ever to care about saying clever things, and thus there were numbers of people who could never imagine why she was so widely considered a gifted woman. To Sybil Massington she was a sort of reference in all questions that troubled her—a referee always to be listened to with respect, generally to be agreed with, but in all cases to be treated with entire frankness, for the very simple reason that Judy invariably found you out, if you concealed any part of the truth, or had been in any degree, when consulting her, what Mrs. Massington preferred to call diplomatic.

Sybil Massington herself, though now a two-years-old widow, with weeds which, as we have seen, others considered quite outworn, was still barely twenty-five. She was one of those fortunate beings who invariably through life see more smiles than frowns, more laughter than tears, for the two excellent reasons that she was always, even

when herself tired or bored past the general freezing-point of politeness, alert to amuse and to be interested in other people; the second because she studiously avoided all people and places where frowns and tears were likely to be of the party. K She deliberately took the view that life is a very charming 'business at the best, but full in its very woof—inseparably from existence—of many sombre-tinted threads. It was therefore futile to darken the web of existence by serious or solemn thoughts on the sadness of life and the responsibilities which she did not really think were binding on her. She preferred dancing in the sun to reading tracts in the shade; she wished primarily to be happy herself, and, in a scarcely secondary degree, she wished all her friends to be happy too. In this way her essential selfishness yet had the great merit of giving much pleasure as it went on its pleasant course; and though she had not, to state the fact quite baldly, the slightest desire that anybody should be good, it gave her the greatest pleasure to see that they were happy, and she really spent an enormous amount of trouble and force in advancing this object. Such a nature, whatever may be its final reward or punishment, certainly reaps a rich harvest here; for strenuous and continued efforts to be agreeable, especially when made by a young and pretty woman, yield their sixtyfold and a hundredfold in immediate returns.

It must be confessed that she had immense natural advantages for the rôle she so studiously played. She was rather above the ordinary height of women, and had that smooth, lithe gracefulness which one associates with boyhood rather than womanhood. Her head, small for her height, was set on to her neck with that exquisite pose one sees in the Greek *figurines* from Tanagra; and her face, with its long, almond-shaped eyes, straight features, and small mouth, expressed admirably the Pagan attitude towards life that was hers. It was a face to be loved for its fresh dewy loveliness, a face as of a spring morning, to be enjoyed with

a sense of unreasoning delight that such beauty exists. It gave the beholder the same quality of pleasure that is given by the sight of some young animal, simply because it is so graceful, so vital, so made for and capable of enjoyment. And behind her beauty lay a brain of the same order, subtle because she was a woman, but in other respects even as her face, a minister and pastor of the religion of innocent mirth and pleasure. In pursuance of this creed, however, she was capable of subtle and intricate thought, and just now, in her talk with her sister, it was getting abundant exercise.

'Ah, that is no use, dear Judy,' she was saying. 'I do not say to you, "Make me different, then tell me what to do," but "Take me as I am, and tell me what to do."' Judy's shrewd face broadened into a smile, and a pleasant soul looked out of her intelligent eyes—eyes that were bright and quick like a bird's.

'I don't in the least want to make you different,' she said, 'because I think you are a unique survival.'

Sybil's eyes expressed surprise.

'Survival!' she said.

'Yes, dear; you came straight out of Pagan mythology; you were a nymph in the woods by the Ilyssus, and Apollo saw you and ran after you.'

'Did he catch me?' asked Sybil, with an air of dewy innocence.

'Don't be risky; it doesn't suit you. Really, Sybil, considering what—what great natural advantages you have, you should study yourself more closely. Just as a fault of manner committed by a woman who wears a beautiful dress is worse than a fault of manner committed by a char-woman, so you, with your appearance, should be doubly careful not to say anything out of character.'

'Dear Judy, you are charming, but do keep to the point.'

'I thought you were the point; I am sure I have talked about nothing else.'

'I know: it is charming of you; and you have yawned so frightfully doing it that it is cruel to bring you back to it. But I really want your advice now at once.'

Judy poured out some hot water from a blanketed jug, and sipped it. Having an admirable digestion, she was determined to keep it. 'Take care of your health, if it is good,' was a maxim of hers. 'If it is inferior, try to think about something better.'

'State your case, then, in a very few words,' she said, looking at the clock.

'It is fast,' said Sybil, laughing, 'though not so fast as I should wish. Well, it is this: I am twenty-five years old, and I don't believe I have the faculty of what is known as falling in love. It always seems to me I haven't time, to begin with. I was married, as you know, at eighteen, but I can't imagine I was ever in love with John. Otherwise that horror couldn't have happened.'

Judy looked up, forgetting the time and the hot water.

'What horror?' she asked.

The light died out of Sybil's face; she looked like a troubled child.

'I have never told anyone,' she said, 'because I was ashamed, but I will tell you to make you understand me. He was ill, as you know, for months before he died; every day I used to grow sick at the thought of having to sit by him, to talk to him. He got more and more emaciated and awful to look at. One night I did not kiss him as usual. He asked me to, and I refused; I could not—simply I could not. I loathed the thought of the days that were coming; I longed for the end, and when the end came I was glad. I tried to persuade myself that I was glad his sufferings were over. It was not so; I was glad that mine were over. So I think I never loved him, though I liked him very much. Then he got ill and awful, and I was very sorry for him. But that was all. Ah——'

She got up, and walked up and down the room once or twice, as if to waken herself from the clutch of some horrid

dream. Then she stopped behind Judy's chair, and leaned over her sister, stroking her hair.

'Yes, that was the horror, Judy,' she said; 'and I am that horror. Now, to-night again Charlie would have asked me to marry him, if I had not; "smiling put the question by." I like him very much; I think I should like to have him always in the house. I like everything about him.'

'Don't marry him,' said Judy quickly.

'Judy, when you speak like that, you are saying to yourself, "If only she was different." Well, I am not; I am as I am. I couldn't make my eyes blue by wanting, or make myself an inch taller. Well, it must surely be far more difficult to change one's nature in so radical a way.'

'I think you did not run very fast when Apollo began Judy.'

'That does not suit you, either, dear,' remarked Sybil. 'Well, then, I am not to marry Charlie. Am I to marry anybody? That is the point. Or am I to consider that marriage is not for me?'

'How can I tell you, Sybil?' asked Judy, rather perplexed. 'I dare say there are men who regard marriage like you. You can calmly contemplate marrying a man whom you just like. I don't see why, if you can find a man like you, you shouldn't be far happier together than you would be single. I don't see what law, human or Divine, prevents your marrying. You promise to love, honour, and obey—well, fifty people mean exactly fifty different things by love. Because A doesn't attach the same meaning to it as B, B has no right to say that A doesn't love. And perhaps your "liking very much" will do. But don't marry a man who loves you very much. John did.'

'Yes, John did,' said Sybil, and paused a moment. 'Then I think I shall go to America,' she said.

'America?' said Judy.

'Yes; Mrs. Palmer has asked me to go, and I think I shall accept.'

'Do you mean the steam-siren?' asked Judy.

'Yes, the steam-siren. You see, I like steam, go, energy, so much that I don't really mind about the siren.'

'She has the manners,' said Judy, 'of a barmaid, and the mind of a—a barmaid.'

'I know. But I don't mind. In fact—don't howl—I like her; she is extremely good-natured.'

Judy yawned.

'Dear Sybil, she is extremely rich.'

'Certainly. If she lived in a back fourth-floor flat in New York, I shouldn't go to stay with her. You see, I like rich people; I like the quality of riches just as you like the quality of generosity. By the way, you must be rather rich to be generous to any extent, so the two are really synonymous; I'm glad I thought of that. Anyhow, I am going to stay with her.'

Judy got up.

'You are going to stay with her in order to meet other people who are rich,' she said.

'Why not?' asked Sybil. 'Other things being equal, I should prefer to marry a rich man than a poor one. Or shall I cultivate acquaintances in Seven Dials?'

Judy laughed.

'I think they would appreciate you in Seven Dials,' said she, 'and I am sure they will in America. You can make yourself very pleasant, Sybil.'

'Yes, dear, and you can make yourself most unpleasant, and I adore you for it. Judy dear, it's after two. How you keep one up talking!'

Chapter III

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Mrs. Massington was lying on an extremely comfortable and elaborately padded wicker couch under a conveniently shady tree. The time was after lunch, the day an excessively hot Sunday in July, and the place the lawn of Lord Bolton's present residence on the hills above Winchester. His big country place at Molesworth was let, and had been for some years, since he could not afford to live in it; but in the interval he made himself fairly at home in the houses of other people in equally impecunious circumstances. As he truly said, one must live somewhere, and he very much preferred not to live at Molesworth. The plan partook of the nature of that of those ingenious islanders who lived entirely by taking in each other's washing, but, though theoretically unsound, it seemed to succeed well enough in practice.

For himself he really preferred Haworth, the place he had taken for the last four years; for Molesworth was unmanageably immense, remote from London, and really lonely, except when there was a regiment of guests in the house. Haworth, on the other hand, was small, exquisite in its way, and within an hour or so of London.

From the lawn the ground sloped sharply down to the water-meadows of the Itchen, where in the driest summer the grass was green, and streams of a translucent excellence wove their ropes of living crystal from bank to bank of their courses. A few admirable trees grew on the lawn, and all down the south front of the Tudor house a deep riband of flower-bed, all colour, gleamed and glowed in the summer sun. Sweet-peas were there in huge fragrant groups, stately hollyhocks, with flowers looking as if they had been cut out of thin paper by a master hand, played chaperon from the back; carnations were in a swoon of

languid fragrance, love-lies-bleeding drooped its velvety spires, and a border of pansies wagged their silly faces as the wind passed over them. Behind, round the windows of the lower story, great clusters of clematis, like large purple sponges, blossomed, miraculously fed through their thin, dry stalks. At some distance off, in Winmester probably, which pricked the blue haze of heat with dim spires, a church bell came muffled and languid, and at the sound Mrs. Massington smiled.

'That is what I like,' she said. 'I like hearing a railway-whistle when I am not going in the train; I like hearing a church bell when I am not going to church; I like seeing somebody looking very hot when I am quite cool; I like hearing somebody sneeze when I haven't got a cold; I like—oh, I like almost everything,' she concluded broadly.

'I wonder if you, I, we shall like America,' said a voice, which apparently came from two shins and a knee in a basket-chair.

'America?' said Sybil. 'Of course you, I, we will. It is absurd to go there unless one means to like it, and it is simply weak not to like it, if one means to. Bertie, sit up!'

'I don't see why,' said Bertie.

'Because I want to talk to you, and I can't talk to a tennis-shoe.'

The tennis-shoe descended, and the chair creaked.

'Well,' said he.

'You and I are going on business,' she said. 'That makes one feel so like a commercial traveller. The worst of it is neither you nor I have got any wares to offer except ourselves. Dear me! I'm glad Judy can't hear me. Oh, there's Ginger! Ginger, come here!'

Ginger came (probably because he had red hair). He wore a Panama hat, and looked tired. He might have been eighteen or thirty, and was twenty-four, and Bertie's younger brother, his less-used name being Lord Henry

Scarton. He sat down suddenly on the grass, took off the Panama hat, and prepared himself to be agreeable.

'There is a Sabbath peace about,' said he; 'that always makes me feel energetic. The feeling of energy passes completely away on Monday morning, and it and I are strangers till the ensuing Sunday. Then we meet. But now it is here, I think I shall go to church. There is a church, isn't there? Come to church, Bertie.'

'No,' said Bertie.

'That is always the way,' remarked Ginger; 'and it is the same with me. I never want to do what anybody else proposes; so don't propose to me, Sybil.'

'Ginger, why don't you do something?' asked Sybil.

'I will go to church,' said Ginger.

'No, you won't. I want you to tell Bertie and me about America. You haven't been there, have you?'

'No. The capital is New York,' said Ginger; 'and you are sick before you get there. When you get there, you are sick again. Then you come back. That is why I haven't been. Next question, please.'

'Why is Bertie going, then?' she asked.

'Because—because he is Bertie instead of me.'

'And why am I going, then?'

'Because you are not Judy. And you are both going there because you are both progressive English people.'

Ginger got up, and stood in front of them.

'All people who on earth do dwell,' said he, 'go to America if they want to dwell—really dwell—on earth. If you want to have all material things at your command, you will, if you are going to get them at all, get them quicker there than anywhere else. But if you attain your ambition, you will come back like cast iron. Everything that was a pleasure to you will be a business; you will play bridge with a cast-iron face, and ask for your winnings; you will study the nature of your soil before you plant a daisy in it; you will always get your money's worth out of everybody. You will be cast iron.'