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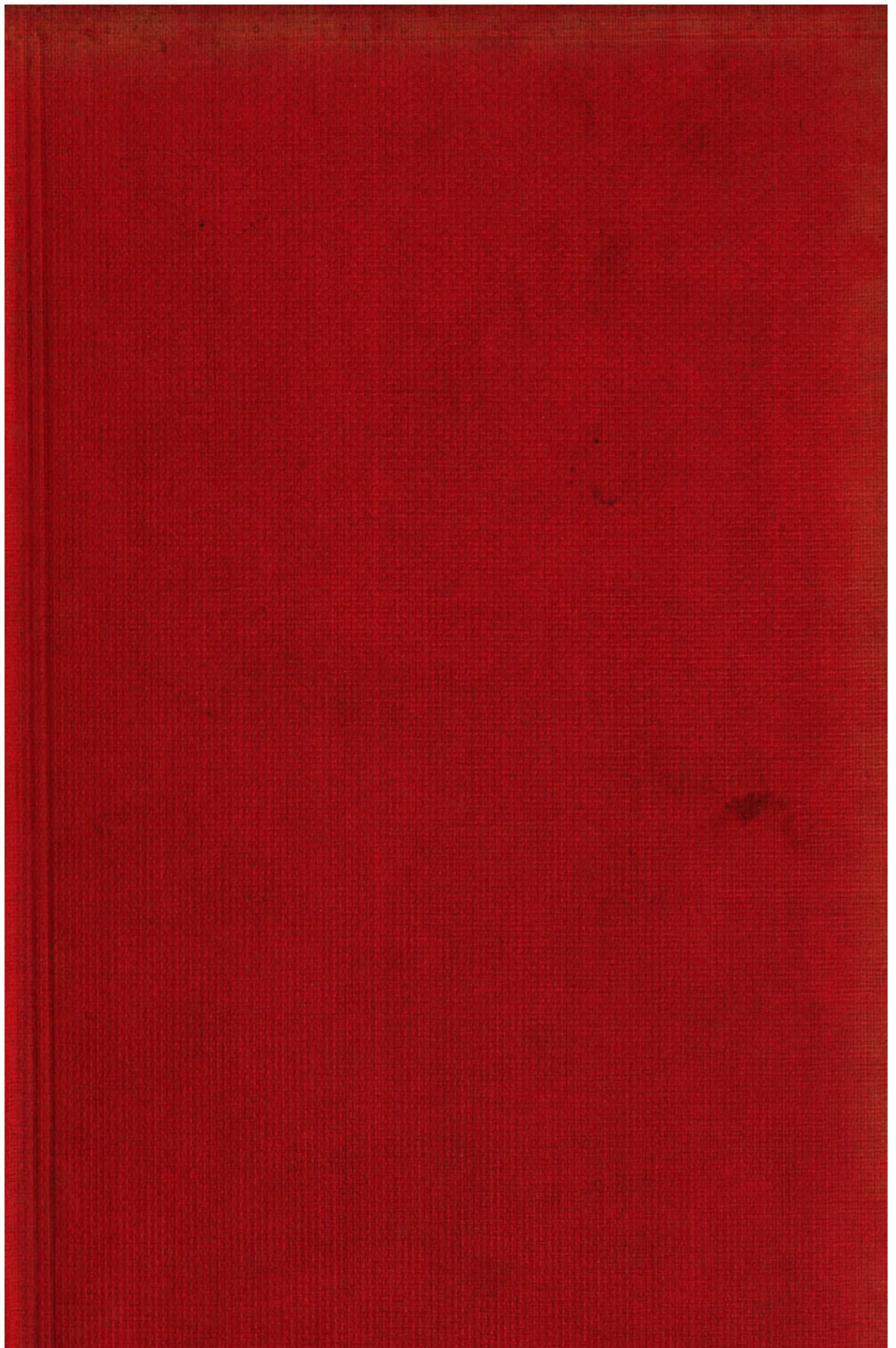
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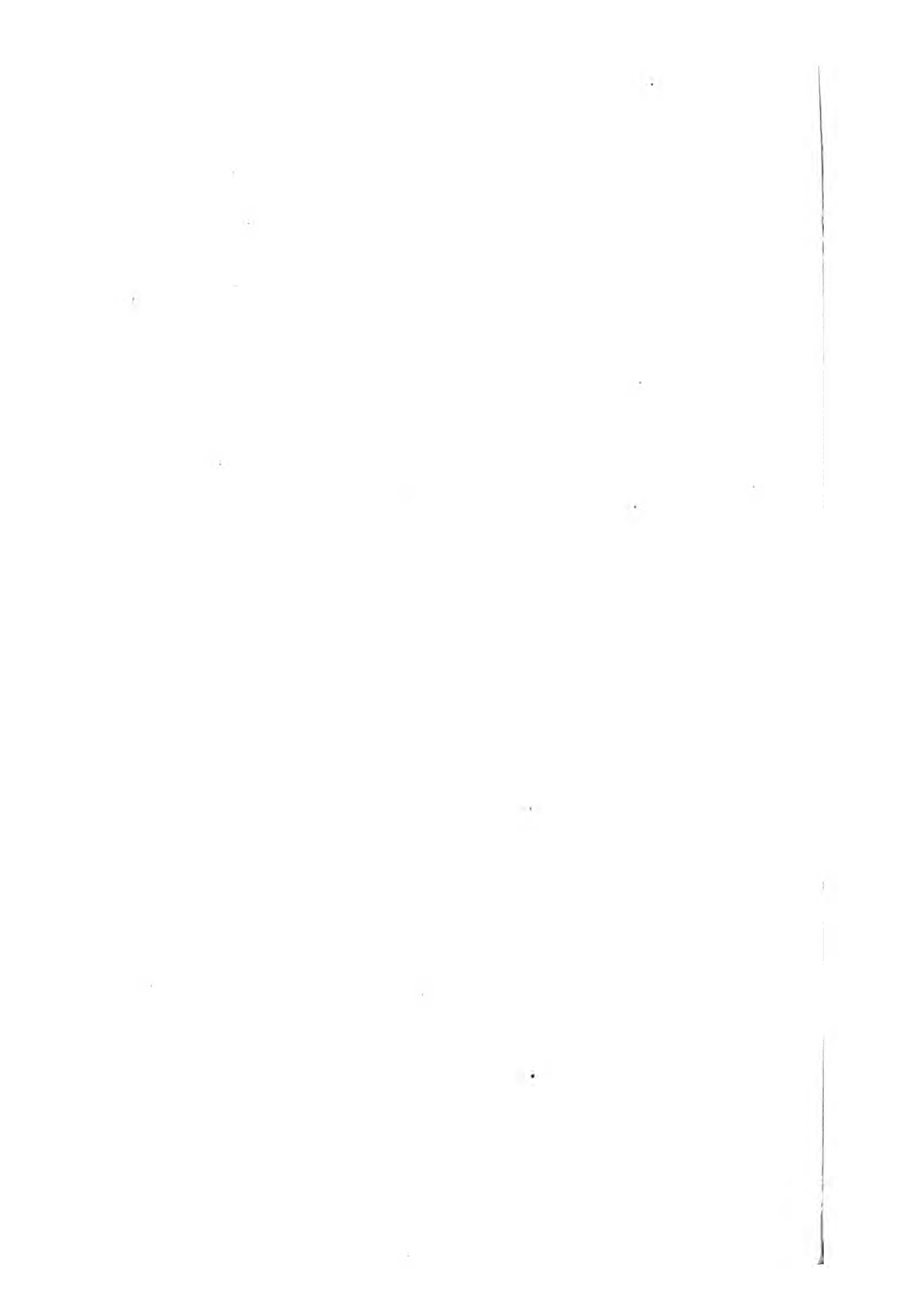


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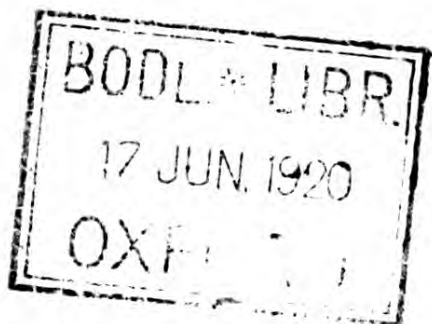
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Apron-Strings

By
Richard Marsh



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Readers are requested to note that all the characters in this story are purely fictitious, and the names are not intended to refer to any real person or persons.

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CHAPTER I

A NEW FROCK

"I DOUBT if it's so much fun being engaged as some people think."

Peggy was putting some finishing touches to the garment she was making. She paused to smooth what she had been just doing with the tip of her finger. As she did so she added with a contemplative air:

"A girl thinks it must be splendid fun to be engaged. There isn't much fun about it sometimes."

Ethel Osborn smiled. She eyed Peggy as if she were a curiosity.

"My dear Peggy, your girl who thinks it's splendid fun being engaged must be very young and very simple. If she isn't she knows it's rotten."

"I'm not sure that you've any right to say that; it certainly isn't rotten."

"What does your girl expect when she's engaged? She thinks she's going to have presents given her—anyhow, a ring. I believe there are girls—of a sort—who become engaged just for the sake of getting an engagement ring."

"Nonsense! Don't be so silly!"

"Just look at the fuss that's made about it. As soon as they're engaged they begin to worry about the ring. Every time they meet an acquaintance they're asked if they haven't got it yet. When they have got it it is handed round; everybody

admires it. If it has cost the man a packet they're happy; if it's something cheap they're not sure if they haven't made a mistake."

"Ethel, what rubbish are you talking? Are you suggesting that I only became engaged to Stanley because I wanted a ring?"

"Why did you say that being engaged isn't all fun? Have you found out that the stones in your ring are false?"

"How dare you hint at such a thing? I'm just worried about Stanley's prospects. I've been engaged to him just over a year. He doesn't like long engagements."

"And do you? Well, there's one thing to be said for a long engagement, it wards off the evil day of marriage."

"I suppose you think it's smart to talk like that. When we first became engaged Stanley thought we could be married in a month or two—he is so sanguine, or was then. He was quite certain that something or other of his would be produced and make his fortune. Nothing has been produced; nothing looks as if it were likely to be produced. Now he's in a state of the deepest hump; he actually talks about emigrating to Canada. Do you think it's fun being engaged to a man who talks like that?"

"Anyhow, your prospects have improved. You're getting six guineas a week now; before long you'll be getting sixteen; you're on the high road to become a star of musical comedy. I keep on announcing the fact in at least one paragraph a week."

"If I am, what's the good of that? Do you think Stanley would live on my earnings? When I become his wife my acting days will be done, I shall have made my last appearance on the boards for ever."

“ Oh, we know all about that! All nice young actresses leave the stage when they're married, and come back to it twelve months afterwards.”

“ You're the sort of person to cheer one up.”

“ My dear, they can't keep off it.”

“ You'll find I can keep off it. If I thought that I should have to go back to the stage after I was married, I'd never be married at all. I'm sure that married life doesn't go with the stage. I'm not fond of the theatre anyhow, I've seen too much of it. Dad and the mater both grew to hate it before they died. My mother always hoped that I should never be an actress. When I had to go through a stage door to earn a living for her—you know when she was paralysed she couldn't earn a farthing for herself—the idea that I had become an actress because of her, I am sure, hastened her end. I have been keeping myself now for more years than I care to count.”

“ One would think you were a centenarian.”

“ I was twenty-two on the twenty-eighth of last month, being April as ever was; that's how near I am to being a centenarian.” She held up the garment on which she was engaged. “ I believe this is going to be rather a nice frock, don't you know.”

“ It's going to be more than nice. If you have such an objection to the stage you might try your hand at dressmaking; just with the two words, 'Ailsa—Modes,' across the window of a shop in Bond Street I believe you would make your fortune.”

“ I am twenty-two ”—Miss Simpson continued her previous remarks without paying any heed to what Miss Osborn had said. “ I began to work when I was sixteen, so I've been at it nearly six years. In that time I have learnt just enough of the stage to be quite sure that I don't want to know

any more—It's so difficult to know how to arrange for the fastening up of a dress; I'm sure I don't know how I'm going to fasten this. Mind you, I'm not saying a word against the theatre, that would be both silly and ungrateful. It's been kind enough to me, and I don't know what I should have done without it; but it just happens that it doesn't appeal to me."

"I don't think that you have any right to complain. So far as I know you've never been out of a shop."

"I haven't, and I'm not complaining; only—I hope to have done with it when I become Mrs Stanley Brock. If I ever have to go back to it, as you so kindly suggest, it will be a pretty bad day for me. I really think I'd rather try dressmaking. How much do you think I ought to get for a frock like this?"

"How much has it cost you?"

"I was reckoning it up only yesterday—less than a guinea, all in."

"My hat! And I paid three guineas for the thing I've got on—at a sale, mind you—at a special price even for a sale. The saleswoman declared that I was getting it for less than cost price. Compared to that gown of yours this is nothing but a rag. And look at the work you've put into it."

"I have put a good deal of work—and it is well finished off."

Miss Simpson was holding up the garment in question to enable its good points to be displayed to the best advantage. Miss Osborn observed it critically.

"It's a dream, my dear, that's what that frock is—a dream. I know a woman whom it would exactly suit. I believe she'd give you a tenner for it down."

"Would she? I'd like to take her tenner, but the fact is I've got to wear the thing myself. I've nothing decent to wear. I'm going out with Stan next Sunday, and it does seem to cheer him up so to see me in a nice new frock. I don't believe as a rule he knows what it is that does cheer him up, but I'm sure it's the frock. Would you like to see if it suits me, and if it fits, and all that sort of thing? I don't expect that anyone will come in here. I can make a bolt if anyone does. I'll give you a private view if you like."

For reasons which are hidden from the average man the average woman likes to have a "private view" of her friend in her newest gown, especially in that rank of society to which Miss Simpson and Miss Osborn belonged. It was a completely successful function, that "trying on." Ethel Osborn was enthusiastic.

"My dear," she declared, "you will never make a great actress."

"That's dead sure." Miss Simpson was surveying herself in the toilet glass which had been brought in from the adjoining bedroom and placed upon the floor. "If only because I don't want to. I should think no one could be a great actress who didn't want to be."

"But you were born a great dressmaker. Let's get a little syndicate together. I believe in you to that extent that even I would contribute. It's my firm conviction that in a very short time you will have as large a business as you choose." The speaker was still engaged in a critical observation of the other. "Do you know I've made a discovery—with the aid of that frock. I've discovered that you're really pretty."

"It's the frock, my dear. Anyone can look pretty in a really pretty frock."

“ There must be something inside the frock, however pretty the frock may be. Peggy, you’re lovely.”

“ Stuff and nonsense! Ethel Osborn, what’s the matter with you this morning? You do keep talking such utter rubbish.”

“ Peggy Simpson, I wonder you haven’t married a duke before this.”

“ My dear, why should I? ”

“ The Frivolity girls have reputations for marrying dukes—why haven’t you, or at any rate someone with a tremendous lot of money? Why haven’t you been bombarded with love letters? ”

“ I’ve had my share.”

“ Peggy! ”

“ Any girl who acts at the Frivolity has to have her share. If she didn’t I believe she’d be reported to the management and get her notice. Of course I’m only rotting, but I’m quite sure that no girl has acted—if you can call it acting—for as much as a month without having had her little lot of what you call ‘ love letters.’ ”

“ Go on, my dear, I smell copy. ‘ Confessions of a coming star in Musical Comedy—Miss Ailsa Lawrence on her love letters.’ I know where they’d give me two guineas, and perhaps three, for that article as soon as written.”

“ You’d better not dare to put my name to it, or there’ll be trouble.”

“ That’s right, my dear, try to keep your best friend from earning her daily bread. I’ve heard a good deal about that sort of thing, but I’ve never encountered it in real life. Honestly, what sort of love letters do you have? ”

“ What sort do you expect? What kind of creature do you imagine it is who turns himself inside out to a girl he’s only seen on the stage and knows nothing about? Some of them are rather

pathetic. About three years ago a man kept writing to me nearly every other day. Really and truly, in a sort of a kind of a way, some of his letters went to my heart—they did. At last I agreed to meet him. We lunched together.”

“Lunched?”

“Yes, lunched—I said lunched. You needn’t turn up your nose at me.”

“I wasn’t; my nose won’t turn up.”

“And you needn’t smile.”

“My dear, I’ve got to smile, you’re so delicious.”

“He had told me in his letters that he was in the early thirties; he turned out to be thirty-six; very lean, very silent. For fifteen years he had lived practically alone in some out-of-the-way place in North-west Canada, just managing to keep body and soul together. Then one day he found gold upon his property—in a little hollow which in winter was nine or ten feet under water. He didn’t believe it at first; he thought he must be mistaken. First of all he found one small nugget, then another; then he took a piece of what I think he called quartz and broke it up with a hammer and found traces of gold in that. Then he took another piece of quartz and sent the whole lot off to some government office to be tested. When the report came back he was startled. My dear, he sold that piece of land for more than five hundred thousand pounds.”

“More copy! I see a five-pound note in this. What became of your friend? What was his name?”

“Never mind his name. According to him—and I quite believed what he said—he had never had any real acquaintance with any woman in his life. He had come back to England with his fortune, hoping to find a wife. He made me the queerest kind of offer. He offered, as coolly and

quietly as if it were a business proposition, to give me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds if I would consent to marry him."

"Was the man in earnest? If so, in the name of all that's wonderful, my dear child, why didn't you?"

"Between ourselves, Ethel, it's quite possible I might have done."

"You might have done? What do you mean? I asked, why didn't you?"

"He died. I was to have lunched with him—we had got into the habit of lunching together two or three times a week; he failed to keep his appointment. He had rooms in Cork Street. I had been there two or three times for tea. I felt sure he would have kept his appointment if it had not been for some very sufficient reason. I called to inquire if he wasn't well. The landlord opened the front door and told me he was dead. The landlord asked me in. He had died in his sleep during the night, the doctor said from some disease of the heart. It turned out that he had some distant relations, who, I understood, divided his money between them."

"Is that all?" Miss Simpson had paused.

"That is all, so far as I'm concerned. As I said, I might have married him had he lived—there was something about him which began to attract me. But he didn't give me time. He was dead within a month of my first making his acquaintance."

"Some girls would have married him in a great deal less than a month for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"I dare say; I didn't. Suppose he had died directly after I had married him—it would have been dreadful."

"That doesn't follow in the very least. Some girls' point of view in that case would have been

that they had got all that money for practically nothing.”

“My dear, I don’t care what some girls’ point of view would have been. Talking of love letters from unknown writers, there’s one there. You can look at it if you like; it might amuse you.”

Miss Simpson called her friend’s attention to an envelope which was on the table at which she was working. Miss Osborn picked it up. By now Miss Simpson had passed from her new gown back into her old one. The other made a comment on the envelope she had picked up, having observed the words which were embossed on the flap.

“Carlton Club. My word, that’s some address! Handwriting unformed and youthful—I should say a boy’s.”

“He says he’s twenty-one. So you think the frock will do as it is, without altering; any suggestions you make shall be acted on.”

“You cannot paint the lily—you cannot improve that gown; it’s just perfect as it is.” Miss Osborn had taken the letter out of the envelope. “What’s this? This is a proposal of marriage.”

“It seems to be.”

“Seems to be? There’s no seeming about it. This is a regular proposal of marriage made by someone who appears to be very much in earnest. What’s the gentleman’s name? Frank Picard. What have I heard just recently about someone named Picard? Oh, of course, I know. Peggy!” The speaker seemed to be a little excited. “If this is the Frank Picard I’m thinking of, you’ve got something here which is worth a good deal more than two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Who’s that? It’s someone at the door.”

“Come in!”

The door opened and a gentleman entered.

CHAPTER II

A DESPAIRING LOVER

THE gentleman who entered was Mr Stanley Brock. He was quite good-looking; good-looking, too, in a sense which suggested intellect; and, one might almost add, the cult which some suppose to have been lost for ever—Bohemian. Stanley Brock was an excellent example of your extremely clever, free-and-easy young gentleman, up-to-date. He was pretty tall and he was pretty broad; his hair was dark; his moustache minute; his nose aquiline; his chin square; his eyes grey; his mouth just a trifle long lipped. He wore a green soft felt hat on the back of his head, a good deal on one side. The colour of his waistcoat was light grey, with blue enamel buttons; being rather open at the top adequate space was given for the display of a blue necktie tied in a large, artistic bow.

Undoubtedly he was a most presentable looking person, if his taste in dress was a little lurid. Unfortunately he did not appear at that moment to the best advantage. This was a person whose attitude towards life should have been one of continual sunshine. Just then, from his point of view, the sky was overcast; the sun had hidden its countenance; for him the outlook was black and gloomy—so black, so gloomy, that as he came into the presence of those two ladies he even forgot his manners. Not only did he not take his hands out of his jacket pockets, he did not even remove his hat. Nor did he vouchsafe a word of greeting. With an air of extreme depression he sauntered towards what was no doubt a familiar armchair on the other side of the room.

The two girls observed him, Miss Simpson glancing up from her frock with an expression on her countenance which certainly did not suggest an enthusiastic greeting.

“ Good morning, Mr Stanley Brock. Where is your little black boy—have you lost him on the road? ” Her tone was not altogether cordial.

Mr Brock made no attempt to reply till he had settled himself at his ease in that armchair. If his manner was intended to suggest despair it was possibly a trifle overdone.

“ If the allusion is to my hat, it won't come off. I am bowed down under a weight of black care which obscures my good manners. Neale's a beast. Good morning, Miss Osborn.”

Miss Osborn, who had risen from her chair, was holding in her hand the envelope and its enclosure which she had taken from the table.

“ Good morning, Mr Brock. Peggy, if you don't mind, I should like to take this letter with me upstairs and look the matter up. Unless I'm very much mistaken I may be able to give you some useful information about the writer of this epistle, say in—do you think I might come back in half an hour? ”

“ In less, my dear. Mr Brock is too much bowed down under his load of care to mind your coming or going. Pray don't leave me at his mercy, in the absence of his good manners, a moment longer than you can help. It will be awful for me. Certainly being engaged isn't all fun.”

Smiling, the letter in her hand, Miss Osborn left the room. The moment she had gone Miss Simpson turned her attention to the gentleman on the armchair.

“ Mr Stanley Brock, take off your hat.” With a groan Mr Brock did as he was bid. “ Sit up, and say ' Good morning, Peggy.' ” The gentleman remonstrated.

“What’s the good of saying good morning when it’s not good morning? I tell you Neale’s a beast.”

“Does that mean that he’s returned the play?”

“Oh dear no! On the contrary, he’s accepted it.”

“Accepted it! Stan! Then what are you looking like that for?”

“He’s accepted it—even effusively.”

“Why are you so trying? If the man has accepted the play what more do you want? Has he offered you wretched terms?”

“Mr Neale is of opinion that my play would almost certainly capture the town. He sees a fortune in it for both of us—especially for him. All he suggests is that we should produce the play together.”

“What do you mean by that? I wish you would speak plainly.”

“I’m trying to. Give me time and I will speak quite as plainly as Mr Neale. Peggy, Neale’s a beast!”

“You’ve said so already, but you’ve said nothing to explain why he’s a beast. I suppose there is some reason.”

“Mr Neale is also a business man—and a generous soul. He feels that in a matter of this sort we ought to go shares—what he calls shares. If I will find half the expenses of production, or induce my friends to find it among them—friends! as if I had any friends with money!—then the play can go to rehearsal at once, and begin to capture the town as soon as ever I please.”

“What does he call half the cost of production?”

“Five hundred pounds—that’s his idea of half.”

“Five hundred pounds is a good deal of money.”

“It’s more than I have ever had in all my life, or am ever likely to have. So far as I’m concerned it’s a sum beyond the dreams of avarice—absolutely.”

Miss Simpson was staring at the garment on which she was still supposed to be engaged.

“Do you believe the play would be a success?”

“What a question to ask the man who wrote it! My dear Peggy, no one knows if a given play will or will not be successful. A theatre is a place of mystery; no one who is associated with it can be sure of anything. Perfect drivel, stuff with no pretence to anything good about it, may find the town in some queer mood and draw people of all sorts and conditions to packed houses until goodness alone knows when; a play which everyone concerned is perfectly convinced is just the sort of thing to please the theatrical public may fall as dead as a door nail and not even attract dead heads. So far as I’m concerned, I do believe in my play. I ought to—it’s cost me thought enough. If I had the cash I’d take a theatre myself and bring it out entirely on my own. I believe it would win for me both coin and reputation. Five hundred pounds! If I could I’d spend on it five thousand, in the conviction that it would quite possibly win for me forty thousand. But I haven’t got the money, and I’ve no more chance of getting it than of getting the moon. When I heard from Neale I gained a foot in height; when I heard his terms I lost a yard. That’s the truth. When I went to the theatre I felt like soaring to the skies; when I came away I felt like dying in a ditch—which will probably be the end of me.”

“Don’t be so silly! That sort of talk doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“I dare say not. But when you encounter nothing but disappointment, day after day, month

after month, all the stuffing gets knocked out of you. You're a rag."

"But surely you must know someone who has got five hundred pounds, someone who has enough faith to let you have it. It can't be difficult to get up a syndicate of five hundred pounds."

"Glad to hear you think so. I don't know where to turn to start it. I might get together fifty pounds at a push, but five hundred!—my dear Peggy, it's impossible."

"And your other play—I thought you expected to hear about that."

"I don't know about expected. Mr Levi Isaacs Faulkner—I believe his real name is Isaacs—told me that I should hear, and I know that I haven't—that's all. No one in his office seems to know anything about it. Possibly they've used the script for pipe-lights, or for some other useful purpose. I can get no news of it of any sort or kind. No, Peggy, I'm a beaten man. I'm going to chuck the game; you'd better chuck me."

"Thank you, I'd rather not. It so happens that I intend to be Mrs Stanley Brock."

"I'm going to emigrate; that, my dear, is what I'm going to do."

"Then I shall emigrate with you."

"That will be an extremely wise thing of you to do. We'll get some shack somewhere in the Canadian wilderness and there we'll live together as paupers until we die."

"We shall do nothing of the sort. Really, Stanley, you are too ridiculous! I don't believe five hundred pounds is so hard to find as you make out. What would you say if I were to find it myself?"

"You! May I ask, Miss Simpson, where you propose to find it?"

"At this moment I can't tell you. I haven't

thought about it. But I've a sort of feeling that if I do set to work to think I could find it for you. Oh, Stanley, if you only knew how I'd love to find it!"

"No doubt; a good many people would love to find it. But I didn't come here to bore you with my worries."

"Bore me? In the first place your worries are mine, and I'm just as anxious for you to make a big success as you can be yourself. Perhaps you don't realise that your success would be mine. The idea of boring me is really too ridiculous."

"It's very sweet of you, my dear, to talk like that. You surely are a most comforting soul to talk to. But, all the same, the fact remains that I did not come to talk rot about my plays, I just came to ask you to come and lunch with me."

"That doesn't sound as if you were stony."

"Who said anything about being stony? You're perfectly aware that I do earn occasional precarious shillings by getting stuff printed somewhere, and that occasionally I do get paid for it. It so happens that I've got enough to treat you to an eighteen-penny luncheon, and I've set my heart on a bottle of a certain Moselle. Say yes."

"I'll be delighted to lunch with you, if that's what you mean, and to share the Moselle. Stan, I've got a new frock—it's just finished—shall I wear it to lunch with you?"

She held up the garment for him to look at.

"If you wear a radiantly splendid gown like that—I suppose it's a gown? It looks to me as if it might be anything."

"What a foolish person the average young man can be—of course it's a gown. Are you asking me out to lunch to-day?"

"Of course I'm asking you out to lunch to-day." He glanced at his watch. "It's just after twelve.

I'll call for you at twenty minutes past one, lunch at half-past. What I was going to say was that if you look very lovely I shan't dare to offer you an eighteen-penny lunch, I shall have to make it at least half a crown."

"Would the extra shilling break you?"

"No; in fact I think I'd rather make it half a crown."

"Then I shall put the frock on—and you can make it half a crown. Stanley, don't look so overcast. Behave as if you were going to have a delightful lunch—with me, and my new frock. Stan, you'll love it."

"I shouldn't wonder. The mere prospect bucks me up." He rose from his chair. "Then till twenty minutes past one."

"I'll be ready." He made as if to move towards the door. "Stan, do you know you haven't kissed me once. You're not dreaming of going without giving me one."

"I'm afraid, you're dangerous. If I once begin to kiss you I shall never want to stop. You're an example of how appetite comes with eating."

"I'm not sure that that's a nice thing for you to say. Pray just what do you mean?"

"It's not easy to explain. I believe you know without my explaining. When I get close to you I want to get closer and closer; when I start to taste your lips I can't leave off. Upon my word, Peggy, I want to keep on kissing you until further notice. To ask me to kiss you is to lead me into temptation. If I once put my lips to yours I don't know when I may stop."

"Well"—the lady went a little closer to him and looked him straight in the face—"you might at any rate try—by beginning to kiss me once."

He on his side, moving closer towards her, acted on the lady's instructions.

CHAPTER III

WANTED—FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS

MISS OSBORN, having knocked discreetly at the door, being bidden to enter, came into the room to find Mr Brock just on the point of leaving, and Miss Simpson still engaged with some details of her frock. Mr Brock paused to address the lady before he went.

“Miss Osborn, I’m not sure that I oughtn’t to say good-bye. I’m not sure that I shan’t be tossing on the billows, in an emigrant ship—steerage—before this time next week.”

The lady seemed startled.

“Mr Brock! you’re not serious?”

It was Miss Simpson who replied:

“Of course he isn’t! I don’t know why he talks like that, but he will do it. He’s no more likely to emigrate than you are.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Miss Osborn, “some little time ago I was thinking of emigrating. I had an attack of the blues, work was preternaturally hard to get, England seemed to me to be played out, and I had half a mind to make a fresh start somewhere else.”

Mr Brock took advantage of the lady’s confession. Addressing Miss Simpson, he held both hands out in front of him.

“There you are! Miss Osborn’s case is my own. To me there is no doubt that England is played out. I’ve only got to make up my mind where to make a fresh start and a passage will be booked—steerage.”

“In the meanwhile,” observed Miss Simpson,

“perhaps you’ll be so good as to call for me punctually at twenty minutes past one—and take me out to lunch.”

“I will, to the moment. It may be the last time for years that I shall have the chance of giving you an English lunch.”

“It’s all very well for you to laugh at him,” remarked Miss Osborn when the gentleman had gone, “but he does seem to me to have a fit of the blues. Is there anything particularly wrong?”

Miss Simpson had sat down by the table, with the frock upon her knee. She herself seemed to be a little depressed. Her tone was not buoyant.

“Ethel, things aren’t rightly arranged. It is wrong that a man’s whole future should be spoilt by the want of such a sum as five hundred pounds.”

“It may be wrong, but it’s a very common case. That is a subject upon which I propose to write an article, some day. I’m convinced that there are hosts of people who, for the want of half that sum, are kept from making a good position for themselves. For what, in Mr Brock’s case, is that precise amount wanted?”

“Five hundred pounds as some contribution towards the cost of production will induce Mr Neale to bring out a play of Stanley’s which he is convinced will make his fortune. You may smile. I know lots of dramatists who have written worthless plays have been convinced that they will make their fortunes, but in Stanley’s case I believe he’s right. If I only knew where to lay my hands on five hundred pounds, the play should be produced at once, and then you’d see!”

“My dear, I’m quite sure you’re right. I believe in Mr Brock almost as much as you do.

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If you really and truly want five hundred pounds, I think I can put you in the way of getting it, in—well, in a very short time.”

Miss Simpson showed signs of animation.

“Ethel! do you mean it?” The speaker looked at her friend with doubtful eyes. “Of course you don’t mean it. You’re in want of five hundred pounds at least as much as I am; if you knew how to get it I’m very sure you would.”

“As a matter of fact I do want money, and I do know how to get it; at least I know how you might get it. I’m afraid I never should—at least, that way. We don’t all get the same chances, my dear.”

“Now what are you driving at? I know you’re only making fun of me—don’t imagine for a moment that I think you’re serious.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken; I am.” She held out a sheet of paper. “This is the letter which was on your table, the one signed Frank Picard. I’ve been looking up the writer. As I expected, he’s not plain Frank Picard, he’s Sir Frank Picard, and he happens to be one of the richest men in England, probably the richest unmarried man.”

“How do you know?”

“All the world knows. He was twenty-one last year. There were most tremendous doings at his place, Dunston Park; all the papers were full of them. He came into a clear two hundred thousand pounds a year, besides accumulations amounting to goodness knows how much. His father died twelve years ago; his mother has been sole guardian. In her hands practically the whole of the income has been put aside—invested in gilt-edged securities, until now the capital sum is simply enormous.”

“You may be correct. It may be right or it

may be wrong—but I don't see, whichever way it is, how it interests me."

"I should have thought it was the sort of information which would interest a young lady about a gentleman who has made her an offer of marriage."

"Ethel! Again I ask, what are you driving at? The man of whom you are speaking is an entire stranger to me; I never saw him in my life."

"He seems to have seen you. Here, at any rate, in black and white, as clearly expressed as it very well could be, is an offer of marriage which is as valid an offer as was ever made."

Miss Osborn was regarding the speaker with wide open eyes.

"Do you really think that I would regard that sort of stuff as if it were meant in earnest?"

Miss Osborn shrugged her shoulders.

"It's impossible to say how you may regard it. I only know that just now you were talking about how glad you would be to be able to lay your hands upon five hundred pounds."

"That was for Stanley Brock—I don't want it myself."

"I quite understood. What does it matter who it's for? I told you that I could put you in the way of getting it. I will—that's all."

"What rubbish are you talking? What crack-brained idea have you got in your head?"

"Sir Frank Picard has made you an offer of marriage."

"It wasn't meant seriously. You know perfectly well it wasn't."

"I know nothing of the kind. I tell you again that I never heard of one which struck me as being meant more seriously."

"Ethel, perhaps you'll be so good as to let me

have some idea of what it is you've got in your head. I tell you that that letter was not meant seriously. Are you suggesting that I should treat it as if it were? Can it have escaped your memory that I am engaged to one man already, or are you hinting that I should throw Stanley over?"

Miss Osborn was standing by the table. She was a tall, strongly built young woman, twenty-eight years old, with something in her manner and bearing which suggested that she might be a good ten years older. The comparison between herself and Miss Simpson was striking. There was something about the younger woman which suggested innocence, and ignorance which was almost child-like. Miss Osborn seemed to be a woman of the world, hard as nails, quick to see an advantage, keen to grasp it, the sort of person who would be chary to lose an opportunity of improving her position, no matter at whose expense. Smart in her appearance, if anything, too smart, cool, self-possessed, not bad looking, having gained an advantage it would not be easy to take it from her again.

She emphasised her words by gestures with the letter which she still continued to hold.

"Peggy, I'm not going to suggest anything outrageous. I'm merely going to ask you to show that you are possessed of at least a small amount of common sense. Please will you answer one or two questions?"

"It depends upon what they are. Look here, Ethel, I don't know that I ever meant you to see that letter."

"You told me to read it—or as good as told me."

"I dare say; but I never dreamt that you'd look at it in this sort of way. Just give me the letter—and get it out of your mind."

“Don't be silly—listen to what I have to say—just answer me one or two questions.”

“What are your questions?”

“Is this the first letter you've had from Sir Frank Picard?”

“No, of course it isn't—if you've read it you ought to be able to see that for yourself. I've had a lot of that sort of stuff lately. That's the fourth from Sir Frank Picard.”

“The fourth! Spread over what space of time?”

“During the last four days I've had one from him each day.”

“All like this?”

The girl smiled, as if the question amused her.

“Rather more so, if anything. My dear, you've no idea what rubbish some men will send through the post. According to his own story, Mr Picard—or Sir Frank Picard, or whatever he is—saw me for the first time in his life four nights ago, and had never heard of me till he saw me. The poor fellow must be of feeble intellect, because the sight of me seems to have turned his head.”

“Don't you think anything of the kind! I should say that Sir Frank Picard was a perfectly healthy, normal young man—or he wouldn't look at just such a girl as you. It's quite common for young men to fall in love at sight, only in most cases it's a story of hopeless affection. The writer of this letter must be very young as well as very rich. He considers himself in a position to choose a wife where he pleases. He chooses you—and why shouldn't he? He's as much in earnest as ever a young man was, and he's clearly accustomed, if he wants a thing, to have it. Accept his offer and he'll marry you at sight—or

as nearly at sight as can be managed. You try it, my dear, and see."

Miss Simpson appeared to be in a state of considerable agitation.

"My dear Ethel, you are absolutely dense! Are you really suggesting that I should throw Stan over for a perfect stranger?"

"Accept Sir Frank Picard to-day and he'll probably be willing to give you any amount, in reason, to be let off to-morrow. Then you can marry your Stan."

Miss Simpson, placing herself on a chair, stared at Miss Osborn as if she presented a very singular study. She asked her rather an odd question—especially under the circumstances.

"How long have I known you, Ethel?"

"My dear, you've known me long enough to be aware that I'd never offer you anything but sound advice. One, or two, or even three thousand pounds are a mere drop in the ocean to a man like this." Miss Osborn waved the letter. "He can afford to pay for his whistle."

"Ethel!—how horrid you are! Are you going to suggest that I'm what you call his 'whistle'?"

"A woman has as much right to be business-like as a man—this sort of thing should be a question of business to her. There are girls who would marry Sir Frank Picard at sight."

"Are there? And do you suppose I'm one? Am I to marry him merely because he's rich?"

"Certainly—he wants to marry you because you're pretty, so why shouldn't you marry him because he's rich? Two hundred thousand pounds a year, my dear, and accumulations, and Dunston Park—that's his place in the country—and a husband, a dear boy who has lost his head, as well as his heart, because of you—what more can you want? If you ask me to be candid, I've

no doubt that you'd be as happy—to put it mildly—as Lady Frank Picard as—well, as Mrs Stanley Brock.”

“ I don't ask you to be candid—I hate and detest that sort of candour. You're a perfect pig! I never suspected you of that sort of thing. Let me tell you that I'd sooner marry Stanley Brock without a shilling in his pocket than—well, than anyone else with millions.”

Again Miss Osborn shrugged her shoulders.

“ Very well, tastes differ. I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with yours. I only wish I had your chance, that's all. I suppose you couldn't induce this young gentleman to pass his offer on.”

“ If you'll let him know your views upon the subject perhaps he will be willing to oblige you.”

“ If I only thought so—my dear, I'd let him know my views upon the subject as fast as the resources of science would enable me. As, however, I doubt his willingness to oblige, perhaps you'll permit me to point out that, lacking the necessary shilling, Mr Brock seems rather more disposed to emigrate than marry.”

“ You've no right to talk like that! How dare you! ”

“ My dear, what have I said? You needn't flare out at me like that. You told me yourself that Mr Brock wanted money, and that you'd do anything to get him the money he requires. Here's a chance to show that you meant what you said—why won't you take it? You might at least do something for the man you profess to love.”

“ Ethel Osborn, I believe you're a perfect little fiend! Are you really hinting that because a rich man believes himself to be in love with me I should take advantage of his belief—and his wealth—to enable me to marry another? If that's the sort of

thing you have in your mind, I wonder you dare to stand there and look me in the face."

"You talk like the simple and soft-headed heroine of a penny novelette. I'm thinking of nothing of the kind—at least, not on the lines you suggest. All I propose, at the moment, is that you should gratify this enthusiastic young gentleman's request and accord him the pleasure of an interview. He tells you plainly—here are his words—that to meet you will be the happiest moment of his life. Clearly, then, it won't cost you much to make him happy. Why shouldn't you see him?"

"I'm not going to see him! I'm going to have nothing to do with him. I never have had anything to do with unknown people who leave letters for me at the stage door, and I'm not going to begin now."

"There was the Canadian gentleman who found the gold mine."

"He was an exception—the one exception. Besides, I wasn't engaged then. The idea, Ethel, of wanting me to play the traitor to the man I love, and who loves me——"

"Rubbish! I want you to help the man you love, that's all."

"You've nice ideas of helping! I'm more disappointed in you than I can say! To want to drag me into such a vulgar—what shall I say?—conspiracy! Ethel, I can't help calling it a conspiracy."

"Very well, call it what you please—only—there'll be no harm in doing that—give this young gentleman the interview he asks for."

"I won't! I won't see him, I won't have anything to do with him, I'll have nothing of any sort of kind to do with him! Give me that letter, and change the subject, if you please."

"And you really do intend to allow the man you

profess to love to go unsuccessful and disappointed to his grave—for all you care—rather than lift your little finger to help him? ”

“ Give me that letter, please. ”

“ I’ve heard about Mr Brock’s plays; I’ve been told they’re good; if you will allow them to be produced——”

“ I’ll allow them to be produced! ”

“ If you’ll allow them to be produced they will probably be a success—but if you won’t you won’t. Poor man! So near the realisation of his life’s dream, and yet so far! ”

“ I believe you have come into this room for the express purpose of driving me mad. Ethel, do stop being a perfect pig. Give me that letter—and stop it! ”

As Miss Simpson held out her hand for the document she asked for Miss Osborn’s tone and manner became suddenly wheedling.

“ Now, Peggy, no one can be a more perfect pet than you. I know you love Mr Brock—truly; I know you’re not quite heartless. See Sir Frank Picard. ”

“ Ethel, I won’t tell you, for fear of hurting your feelings—I suppose you have feelings—that your reasoning seems to me to be the most remarkable I’ve ever heard of. I will merely tell you, once more, and finally—if you know what finally means—that I won’t see your Sir Frank Picard. ”

The room door opened and a lady entered, without, apparently, having taken the trouble to announce her coming. It seemed that in entering she had heard Miss Simpson’s closing words.

“ What’s that about Sir Frank Picard? ” she inquired. “ I’ve just seen him. ”

CHAPTER IV

MISS STACEY GIVES AN ADDRESS

THE new-comer was a young lady of rather a familiar type—to those who have much to do with theatres. Her age, as is apt to be the case with young ladies, was uncertain; it might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five. If the presence of paint and powder on her face, kohl round her eyes, colouring on her lips, and dye on her hair had caused an observer to put her down at even more than the latter age, such a conclusion would possibly have been a wrong one; the truth being that Miss Florence Stacey had been connected with the footlights for so many years that it had become second nature to her to wear “make-up,” both in the theatre and out. She was tallish and she was stoutish. Her manner suggested the stage. Her voice was a little strident. She gave one the impression of wearing all the clothes she could get on at once. Hers was really a resplendent personality—only, unfortunately, there happened to be a good deal too much of it. She was the sort of young lady whose attractions might have been enhanced by a modest desire to keep herself as much as possible in the background. Experience, however, had convinced her that the best thing for her to do, off and on the stage, was to thrust herself as much as possible in the foreground, and always keep herself in the centre of the picture. However this policy might have answered on the boards, it was a mistake off them. Her inability to keep from thrusting herself into matters where her presence—and interference—

were decidedly not wanted was seriously against her.

As was quickly made plain, it was her fondness—to use a popular idiom—for thrusting her fingers into other people's pies which was responsible for her presence in that room. As has already been reported, she burst into the room—it was her habit to “burst” into any place she entered—with the question:

“What's that about Sir Frank Picard? I've just seen him.”

Without waiting for an answer, she continued in a breathless sort of way she had:

“How do, girls! Peggy Simpson, you ought to have a lift. Trapesing up four flights of stairs don't suit me; I'm getting a little short in the wind. Ethel Osborn, you've got a new hat on—at least, it's new to me. I don't know when I saw you last. Did you get it at a sale? Peggy, are you making another new frock? I rather like that colour, it would suit me. What do you think of this frock of mine? I got it from a friend who let me have it for half what she gave for it. It fits me like a glove. What do you think she let me have it for? You couldn't get it for ten guineas at a shop. Thirty shillings was every farthing I paid—and, mind you, it was a Paris model!”

Miss Stacey rattled on as if she were some piece of clockwork machinery which, being wound up, would not stop until it had run down. It was only when she came to an end of her disconnected string of sentences that she said something, apparently by accident, which was of interest to her hearers.

“By the way, I forgot to tell you—he's coming here.”

Miss Simpson looked at her as if she were a little startled.

"He's coming here? What do you mean? Who's coming here?"

"Didn't I explain? I quite meant to. Why, your Sir Frank Picard!"

There was no mistake about Miss Simpson being startled then.

"My Sir Frank Picard! Florence, what on earth do you mean?"

Miss Stacey apparently became aware that she had said something which was a little vague. In her turn she stared.

"Isn't he your Sir Frank Picard? He gave me to understand he was." She seemed to be making an effort at recollection. "He didn't say so right out, but I jumped to the conclusion, from what he said, that you were a friend of his."

"Jumped to the conclusion! Florence Stacey, you really are a perfect idiot! I never saw Sir Frank Picard in my life."

"Didn't you now! Think of me making a mistake like that! Well, you needn't be shirty about it—and please keep a civil tongue between your teeth—I've done no harm. He's a perfect picture to look at, and quite the gentleman. If you don't want to see him I'll see him myself and tell him so. I shouldn't wonder, if I were to drop him a hint, if he didn't give me a bit of lunch. I tell you what it is, I'm getting sick of paying for my own lunches. He'll find no frills on me!"

"Florence, will you try to make yourself plain. Do you really mean that Sir Frank Picard is coming here? How do you know?"

"Well, I don't know—not what you might exactly call know—but the fact is, I expected to find him here already. I called at the theatre to see if there was anything for me—there always does seem to be something for somebody else, but

never anything for me; I can't think why everyone at the theatre always seems to be getting something, and me not so much as a postcard. Will you believe me, that Milly Douglas, who is nothing but skin and bone and can't say boo to a goose, has had invitations to supper four times in the last fortnight, and from quite nice men, too—according to her, and it's quite a month since I had so much as a line—and then I only had a note which I don't believe was meant for me at all, because whoever wrote it wanted me to tell him if I was the Florence Stacey he had known eleven years before, and who had been in a shop down Brixton way. The idea of such a thing! I should have slapped his face if I could have got within reach of him—with his 'eleven years ago'!

Miss Simpson had seated herself with an air of resignation.

"When you've quite finished, will you please let me know what all this has got to do with anyone of the name of Picard."

"Of course it's got nothing to do with anyone of the name of Picard—who said it had? The fellow who sent that note to me signed himself Henry Watson. I remember it well."

Peggy turned to Miss Osborn with a little air of weariness.

"Would you mind trying to find out why she said what she did about Sir Frank Picard—or did I merely dream that she said it?"

Miss Osborn did as she was requested. She addressed Miss Stacey.

"Do you hear? Why did you say that Sir Frank Picard was coming here?"

"Because I understood him to say so. It was like this. I happened to call at the theatre to see if there was anything for me, as I said——"

"We know you have said that. What has Sir Frank Picard got to do with your going to the theatre?"

"Well, it was like this—if you'll let me get a word in edgeways I'll tell you! You keep on interrupting! There was nothing, as I told you. I went into the theatre to get something out of my locker, and when I came back old Jenkins wasn't in his office."

"Who's old Jenkins?"

"The stage door-keeper—silly! Everyone knows who old Jenkins is. As I said, old Jenkins wasn't in his office. As I was wondering where he was, someone came in from the street. When he saw me he took off his hat—so I couldn't help noticing how good looking he was—and he asked—quite the gentleman—'Excuse me, but are you engaged in this theatre?' 'I've been a member,' I told him, 'of the company at this theatre for just over three years.' He seemed quite pleased. 'How delightful!' he said. 'Do you know Miss Ailsa Lawrence?' 'I ought to,' I said, 'considering that she's a particular friend of mine.' 'I envy you,' he said—though what he meant I can't say. 'I'm Sir Frank Picard, of Dunston Park—here's my card.' He took a piece of paste-board out of a sort of pocket-book, and here it is." The speaker produced something from the hand-bag she was carrying and held it out at arm's length—apparently as evidence of *bona fides*. "Can you give me Miss Lawrence's address?" he went on, 'there's something I must say to her—if possible, at once. It's most important.' 'Does she happen to be a friend of yours?' I said. No one knows better than I do what kind of people hang about the stage door of a theatre. His answer, and his manner, and his appearance, combined, as it were, quite disarmed me. I'd have

told him anything—honestly I would. ‘I hope,’ he said, ‘that before long she’ll be the best friend I have in the world.’ He actually blushed—upon my word, he did—and that made him better looking still—and he spoke as if he meant what he said—and it might have been, even more. It’s many a long day since I saw a young fellow whose looks I’ve liked better than I did his. If you really haven’t seen him, I’ll tell you just what he looks like.”

“Quite so,” interposed Miss Osborn, as if she feared that they were in for a long description. “And you gave him Peggy’s address?”

“Miss Ailsa Lawrence’s address. There wasn’t a word said about Peggy from first to last. I don’t believe he even knows her name is Peggy. He wrote the address down—which I saw no harm in giving him, and I’m sure there was no harm done—on the back of another of his own cards, and he bowed again. ‘Thank you very much,’ he said, ‘for the very real service you have done me. I have not the pleasure of knowing your name——’ ‘My name,’ I told him, cutting in as it were, ‘is Florence Stacey—and if you like I’ll give you my address.’ I fancy he couldn’t have heard my words, because all he said was, ‘I hope before long, Miss Stacey, to show you how grateful I really am.’ And with that he went out into the street as if he couldn’t get out fast enough, and of course I took it for granted that he was rushing off here, considering the tearing hurry he was in. And that’s how it was that I expected to find him here when I came.”

“Possibly,” observed Miss Osborn, “as you put it, he was rushing off here—and possibly he’s rushing still.” Then to Peggy, “If he does come, what’s going to be done?”

“I certainly shan’t see him.”

"Don't be absurd, there's no reason why you should be rude to him."

"It's he who'll be rude, if he comes here uninvited. Anyhow, I tell you I will not see him, and I won't! He seems to have got my address from Florence by a sort of trick."

"Nonsense! There was no trick about it."

"There certainly wasn't," agreed Miss Stacey. "He asked me right out for it, as openly and plainly as could be. I saw no harm in giving it to him. What harm was there?"

"There was none whatever. You did perfectly right, Miss Stacey, in giving Sir Frank Picard Peggy's address. Miss Stacey herself says that this gentleman's manners were perfectly respectful and as good as they could be. It was a compliment he paid you. If you refuse to see him at all your behaviour will be about as bad as it could be."

"Won't see him? Why won't she see him? What is there wrong about Sir Frank Picard?"

"She won't see him for absolutely no reason at all—just because of some unreasonable whim. But I'm hoping that she will see him. Come, Peggy, you must see him. You might just as well not be rude to him."

"What does he want with her?"

"He wants to marry her. Whatever else that is, it's no crime."

"I should think not—and he a Sir! Why, if she were to marry him she would be Lady Picard."

"I'm not suggesting that she should actually marry him——"

"Aren't you? That's very good of you, I'm sure."

"But, Peggy, the man means well. He evidently does want to marry you. The least you can do is to refuse him to his face, not treat him as

if he were some penniless raggamuffin, who is insulting you by paying you the highest compliment a man can pay a woman. Just think what heaps of money he's got."

"Heaps of money? Has he got heaps of money?"

"He's probably got more than eighty thousand a year."

"Eighty——!" Miss Stacey was unable to continue her sentence from the very beginning. The magnitude of the sum named deprived her of the power of speech. When it came back she gasped, "Do you really mean to say that that young gentleman has eighty thousand pounds a year?"

"I do, at the very least—probably more."

Miss Stacey's attitude was one of boundless amazement.

"And do you mean to say she refuses to marry him?"

"You know perfectly well, Florence Stacey, that I'm engaged to be married already."

"What does that matter?"

"What does it matter?" It was apparently Peggy's turn to be amazed. "Are you mad?"

Miss Stacey's agitation as she repudiated the charge was obviously genuine.

"No, I'm not mad—and so I'd have you know. It's you who are mad! The one thing a girl wants in this world is money."

"It's like you to talk like that!"

"It's perfectly true. With money a girl is someone; without it she's no one. The more she's got the more she is. There's nothing a girl can't do—or can't be, for the matter of that—if she has money enough. I know about Mr Stanley Brock—I don't believe he has two pennies to rub together. I say he ought to be ashamed of himself

if he's going to stand in the way of your making a good match—a match like this."

"If you're going to talk in that disgusting way, Florence Stacey, I'll have to ask you to leave my room."

"It's not a question of marriage. You know perfectly well that I'm not suggesting that you should be the vulgar, mercenary creature Miss Stacey thinks you ought to be."

"Why is it vulgar to marry a man with eighty thousand pounds a year? I only wish I had the chance!"

"I'm only asking you," continued Miss Osborn, "to treat Sir Frank Picard with the civility which he's entitled to expect. If he comes just see him—for five minutes, that's all. But it doesn't look as if he were coming; he certainly doesn't seem to be rushing here in the manner Miss Stacey spoke of."

When she paused there came an exclamation from Miss Stacey.

"Listen! There's someone on the staircase! It's him—I bet you a penny it's him!"

Peggy caught up her new frock from the table.

"Then, Ethel, if it is, kindly convey my regrets to Sir Frank Picard—say anything you like; express my sense of the honour he would do me, and that sort of thing—but kindly make it perfectly plain that on no conditions whatever will I consent to make his acquaintance."

Miss Simpson was making off towards the bedroom, with her frock over her arm, when Miss Osborn caught her by the sleeve.

"Peggy, don't be an idiot! How do you know it is he? I shouldn't wonder if it were just Miss Stacey's vivid imagination. I don't hear anything at all."

Even as she was speaking there came a knocking at the outer door.

"What's that?" exclaimed Miss Stacey. "How about imagination now? I bet you a pound it's him."

A sudden dominating spirit seemed to seize Miss Osborn.

"Peggy, if that's Sir Frank Picard you're going to see him—you are! What's more, you're going to put on that new frock to see him in."

The girl seemed to make a feeble attempt at remonstrance.

"Ethel, don't talk like that! I don't want to see him!"

"And I tell you you shall see him! Miss Stacey, if that is Sir Frank Picard at the door, keep him engaged in conversation. Tell him that Miss Lawrence is engaged for a moment, but will see him directly. Now, Peggy, come and get into that frock."

Miss Simpson, overcome by the stronger personality of the elder girl, allowed herself to be led into the bedroom which adjoined, feebly remonstrating as she went. As she vanished from one room into the other the knocking at the outer door came again.

CHAPTER V

SIR FRANK PICARD

MISS STACEY, left alone, ignoring the repeated knocking at the outer door, considered the situation for a moment—in her own fashion. Going to a looking-glass which was over the mantel-piece, she “touched herself up,” producing from her handbag the various requisites for the performance. With a small stick of carmine she smeared her lips—not to the improvement of her appearance. With something in what looked like a thin piece of kid she heightened the colour on her cheeks, using a powder-puff to tone it down. With a pencil she drew thin but not faint lines round her eyes. With something which she took from a small flat phial she increased the glossiness of so much of her hair as was visible in front. Having done these things with practised fingers, very quickly, she surveyed the result with evident satisfaction—addressing her reflection in the mirror.

“Now, my dear, you ought to do. If Sir Frank Picard isn’t out to marry you, he ought to give you something—with a little management you ought to make a good thing out of it. Goodness knows it’s wanted, whatever it is.”

Someone knocked for the third time. This time she opened, addressing the visitor with an air of beautiful unconsciousness.

“Do you happen to have knocked before?” she asked.

“Twice,” he replied. “I was beginning to wonder if anyone was in.”

“The fact is, I was talking to Miss Lawrence and a friend of hers; this is, I suppose, how no one

came to notice. Pleased to see you. Sir Frank Picard, I believe? Miss Lawrence is engaged for the moment, but she's hurrying as fast as ever she can, and has asked me to entertain you. You're not the first gentleman I've entertained, not by a good many. Take a chair. You seem to have some parcels—to say nothing of flowers. Who are they for?"

"Miss Lawrence, if she will permit me to offer them."

"What—all of them? She is a lucky girl! You know there are other people who would like things as well as her. What's this?"

Miss Stacey was holding a large oblong parcel in one hand.

"They are chocolates. Of course I don't know if Miss Lawrence likes chocolates, but if she does I hope she'll be so good as to excuse me for venturing to offer her one or two."

"One or two! You call this one or two! I should say there were pounds and pounds! How many are there?"

"I think there are six pounds—of various sorts. I hope she won't mind."

"Six pounds—all for her? I think that's a trifle thick. She's always stuffing at chocolates. I saw a great box here only the other day when I came in. And, do you know, I haven't had so much as a quarter of a pound, since I don't know when. With a salary like mine I can't afford to buy them for myself. They're my passion—chocolates are. You wouldn't like to let me have them instead of her, just for once in a way? You would be doing a real kindness, upon my word you would!"

With a glance at his watch, the visitor managed to ignore what certainly was a sufficiently plain hint.

“Do you think Miss Lawrence will be long? Are you sure she knows that I’m here?”

“She’ll be here fast enough, don’t you make any mistake. What’s in this?”

Miss Stacey held up another parcel—the second largest.

“Those are gloves—I’ve always been told that ladies generally find gloves useful—just a few.”

“Just a few—that’s like your few chocolates! How many gloves are there in here?”

“I told the man to put in six dozen.”

“Six dozen pairs of gloves! Do you call those a few? Why, I never had half a dozen pairs at one time in all my life. What size are they?”

“Of course I had to guess at the size, but I had noticed that Miss Lawrence has small hands, so I told him six.”

“Now, that’s a pity. Six and a half is really my size, but I can squeeze into a six and a quarter. Do you think if I took them back to the shop they would change them?”

The visitor stared.

“I don’t quite follow. Isn’t six right for Miss Lawrence?”

“It isn’t her I’m thinking of—it’s me. Look here, Sir Frank Picard, it was I who gave you her address; you’d never have got it at all without me. You said you’d like to have a chance of showing how grateful you were—now you have got one, show it! Between ourselves, there’s hardly anything I wouldn’t do to be given a present of six dozen pairs of gloves all at one time. Couldn’t you let me have these?—you don’t know how difficult I find it to keep myself in gloves—then you could let Peggy—I beg pardon, I mean Miss Lawrence—have another lot later on.”

The visitor seemed, as was not unnatural, to be a little embarrassed. Miss Stacey had a way of

putting a request which made it a little difficult to say no. However, he seemed able to hold his own better than the lady had perhaps either hoped or expected.

"I'm afraid I can't let you have what is intended for Miss Lawrence, but I will certainly bear in mind what you say—thank you very much. Don't you think you'd better go and tell Miss Lawrence that I'm here?"

Miss Stacey's manner as she cut his sentence short was a trifle huffy.

"I tell you she knows that you're here all right, and she'll come when she's ready. Hurrying her won't make her any quicker. She's not the sort to hurry for anyone." She held up the last, and smallest package. "What's in here?"

The young gentleman seemed embarrassed, which, on the whole, was not to be wondered at. This was a lady, who, if allowed to have her own way of interfering in what was no affair of hers, was enough to embarrass anyone.

"That's—that's just a little present—for—for Miss Lawrence—if she will allow me to offer it."

"You won't have any trouble about that. She is the sort who would allow you to offer anything, she would. I asked you what was inside."

"Just—just a little trifle from—from—a jeweller's."

"A jeweller's?" Miss Stacey pricked up her ears. "Upon my word, you are going it! The first time of coming to see her, too! You can get all sorts of things from a jeweller's—what's in this? Ear-rings or something? If it is, it so happens that she doesn't wear ear-rings."

"It isn't ear-rings."

"Then what is it?"

"It's—it's a necklace."

"A necklace! What sort of a necklace?"

"It's—a little pearl necklace, that's all."

"That's all! That's your way of putting it, is it? Are they real pearls?"

"I hope so. They were sold to me as real pearls."

"How much did you pay for it?"

"That's a funny question! You can hardly expect me to answer it."

"Look here, Sir Frank Picard, it seems to me you're not acting on the square. You know, if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be here at all. You talk about showing your gratitude, and then you bring her three presents and not a single thing for me. I don't call that behaving very nicely! If you think it over, I think you'll see what I mean. I consider that, in the face of what you owe me, one of these things ought to be for me. I never have worn a real pearl necklace in all my life. These pearls I've got on aren't real, although you might think it. They may look as if they cost a thousand pounds—or even more—but they didn't. What I paid for them was eighteen shillings, but then I got them cheaper because one of them had a little crack, and another fell into a blob of ink. You can't see it, if you keep it turned the right side, but it's there all the same. And look at the size of them—larger than peas! But I always have dreamed, though this necklace of mine has been much admired, of having some real pearls. I do think that you might—and that, under the circumstances—you ought to let me have this. Now, be a good sort and say, 'Florence'—you can call me Florence, though our acquaintance has been so short—'it's yours.'"

Sir Frank Picard held his own with what, considering the lady's persistence, was distinctly courage.

"I'm very sorry indeed to seem disobliging, but

I'm afraid I don't see my way to give anyone else something meant for Miss Lawrence." He seemed to be seized by a sudden inspiration. "You might—you might have the flowers."

He had brought with him a great bunch of roses, cut when at their very best—a magnificent display of bloom. Miss Stacey eyed them with scathing scorn as if they were a wretched lot of weeds, beneath contempt.

"Roses? What's the good of roses to me? You can keep your roses!—you can give them to her if you like. What I want is the pearl necklace. I'll just open the parcel and see what it looks like."

"I'd much rather you didn't, if you don't mind."

"I shan't do any harm to it! What harm can I do?"

"I don't say that you can do any harm. Only—I'd rather it were first opened by the person for whom it is intended."

"Stuff and nonsense! I'll just peep inside and then I'll tie the parcel up again, so that she will never know that it has been opened."

The lady showed signs of putting her threat into execution. He remonstrated.

"Miss Stacey, please don't! Please give me my parcel."

"What parcel has she got of yours?" Miss Osborn, as he was putting his request, came out of the adjoining room. "You are Sir Frank Picard? What parcel has Miss Stacey got of yours?"

"Well—she's only jesting. It is a little parcel which I ventured to bring for Miss Lawrence."

Miss Osborn's tone was a trifle grim.

"I dare say Miss Stacey is rather fond of a little jest."

Miss Osborn moved to the table. "Is this it? Do you mind giving me that." She held out her

hand for what the other seemed indisposed to relinquish.

"It has nothing to do with you, anyhow," declared Miss Stacey.

"Is that the little parcel which Sir Frank Picard has brought for Ailsa? If that is the case, you must hand it over to me. I'll see that she gets it all right. And those other two parcels—are they for her? I'll take charge of them. Thank you very much. And those beautiful roses! Oh, what lovely roses! Are they also meant for Miss Lawrence, Sir Frank?"

"They are all meant for Miss Lawrence, if she'll forgive my bringing them. Will it be long before I shall be able to see her?"

Apparently Miss Osborn had relied upon getting her own way; in spite of Miss Stacey's evident disinclination to relinquish them, the three parcels had passed from her keeping. Miss Osborn had them all three under her arm, while she held out the roses, the better to admire them.

"Miss Lawrence will be here almost immediately. I ought to tell you, Sir Frank, that she's coming most unwillingly. She did not wish to see you."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Why should you be sorry? Would you wish, say, your sister—if you have a sister——"

"I haven't—I often wish I had. I am my mother's only child."

"If you had—would you like her to be eager to see a perfect stranger who had forced his way into her apartments?"

"I say! I hope I haven't gone as far as that! I asked Miss Stacey to give me Miss Lawrence's address——"

"What made you do that? Miss Stacey had certainly no right to give it to you."

"I don't see that." This was the lady. "No harm has been done. I suppose Sir Frank Picard is a gentleman."

Miss Osborn ignored Miss Stacey. She addressed the visitor.

"I believe that you have written to Miss Lawrence—you will admit, I think, that you had no right to do that. Miss Lawrence has paid no attention to your letters. You are surely able to understand what her silence meant."

"I hope that, if she will only see me, she will forgive me for having written without an introduction—I did not know anyone who could give me one."

"She has not forgiven you—as yet. You can hardly expect that she would. I have seen at least one of your letters—she showed it to me and asked my advice. I was rather struck by the letter, Sir Frank Picard. It seemed to me to have been written by someone who did not intend to be insolent."

The visitor's eager anxiety was obvious.

"I don't know what your name is——"

"My name is Osborn."

"I assure you, Miss Osborn, that nothing was farther from my mind than to be—to be anything like it. I had to write to her—I simply had to! If you could only understand how I felt you would know that I had to. If Miss Lawrence will only give me an opportunity of saying just a few words to her, I feel certain that I can soon make her understand."

"You are going to say a few words to her. At my suggestion, as one who believes in your sincerity, Sir Frank Picard, she will grant you a brief interview. But you must understand that Miss Lawrence is very sensitive, and that it is a difficult position you are placing her in. It is impossible

that you should see her alone. She proposes to hear what you have to say in our presence—in the presence, that is, of Miss Stacey and myself.” If the visitor felt a little chagrined at the prospect of having the interview in the presence of such witnesses, as some young gentlemen might very well have been, he allowed no sign to escape him. Miss Osborn, speaking in her most impassive tones, brought the point at which she was aiming very clearly to the front. “I had better tell you, Sir Frank Picard, that the first thing which Miss Lawrence will require on her arrival is proof of your sincerity.”

The gentleman's eyes opened a little wider.

“Proof of my sincerity? I'm afraid I don't quite understand.”

“The matter will be made perfectly clear presently. In the meantime, may I presume, before Miss Lawrence comes, that you are ready and willing to give any proof which may be required that when you wrote those letters—I might almost call them those remarkable letters—you were not trifling, but meant every word you said?”

“I still don't quite follow you, but I certainly wasn't what you call 'trifling.' I did mean every word I said.”

“Then if that really is the case I am very hopeful that you and Miss Lawrence will soon be able to come to a perfect understanding. Please may I ask you to be very careful to say nothing which may wound her, and always keep in mind that it is a very delicate position in which you have placed her, and that it is merely owing to my persuasion that she has consented to see you at all.” She dropped her voice. “Don't forget what I have said to you, Sir Frank. I believe this is she who is coming.”

CHAPTER VI

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

MISS AILSA LAWRENCE came into the room in her new frock—as it seemed, timidly, anxiously, in doubt as to the sort of reception she was about to receive and the kind of person she was to encounter. What Ethel Osborn had said of her was true—she was extremely sensitive. Six years' experience of the stage had not blunted her sensibility. His nervous disposition had been one of the primary causes of her father's death. He was a bundle of nerves; what other men would have won through killed him. Her mother had been a daughter of a dissenting schoolmaster, a Puritan in every fibre of his being. His daughter, paradoxical though it might seem, had, to a great extent, inherited his temperament. It is true that her mother being dead, the girl had found herself unhappy at home, and to escape unhappiness, had chosen to spend her life in a theatre rather than in a chapel. But at bottom the Puritan was there.

She had refused, at considerable sacrifice, to associate herself with any doubtful entertainment. More than once she had declined what might have been a remunerative engagement lest she might be required to play or do something of which she disapproved. Such a young woman—in these days when an actress, who is no one in particular, is more and more required to do unquestioningly what she is bid, and be thankful—was scarcely likely, unless possessed of gifts very much above the average, to win her way quickly to the front.

This woman's gifts were certainly not unusual.

She was a failure. That is, by very careful management, she just contrived to live. Economy was her strongest point. Seldom did she spend a penny more than was necessary to keep body and soul together. Fortunately, her husband did better than she did. Then he fell on evil times. Losing one engagement he found it difficult to get another. Fortune on the stage is a fickle jade. There was a run just then on plays in which there seemed to be no part for him. He worried and worried, and then died. There was a whisper, among those who knew him best, that morphine had had something to do with that. This doubt so affected his wife that within a fortnight of his death she herself was stricken by paralysis. She was never able to work again, although—so ironical is fate—offers poured in on her. Luckily, she had still a little money which she eked out in such a manner that she was able, for a considerable time, to keep herself and her daughter from the workhouse.

In her days of misfortune her inherited nature came strangely to the front. In a sense, she became almost like a religious maniac. She grew to look upon the theatre not only with aversion, but with terror. She prayed God morning and night that her child might never do what she had done and seek her living on the stage. And all the time, while she prayed, she knew that the hour was drawing closer and closer in which circumstances would be so up against her that the girl would have to follow in her footsteps.

Her fears were justified. They had been without a penny in the house for over a fortnight; all means to get money had been tried—in vain; there came an offer to give the girl a place in the chorus, which the sixteen-year-old child, realising that it seemed to be that or nothing, wanted to accept. The mother gave way; her daughter became a

chorus girl, entering a career in which she bade fair to have better success than her mother had done. For over a year she earned her parent's bread as well as her own—until the day came when it was only necessary to work for herself. The woman died praying God that her daughter's soul might still be saved from the burning.

A child who had had such experiences, and of such parents, would surely have been a "sport" had she been anything but sensitive. Luckily, she seemed to be made of a stronger stuff than either her father or mother had been. A strong vein of common sense was a prominent feature in her character. Her taste was good; she would have chosen to do certain things and to avoid others, had she been able, but she was quite conscious that, if she was to reach a position of independence, she would have to put aside her own tastes, when flaunting them in the face of others would have meant weakening her position.

One principle she had held fast. She would have nothing to do with men—strangers—who honoured her with their more or less casual attentions. She would not use them as a means of profit. As she had told Ethel Osborn, she had once broken away from her rule and almost become the wife of a perfect stranger, who had forced himself upon her notice by introducing himself.

Now, for the second time, inclination as well as principle had gone by the board, and, urged by the worldly minded Ethel, she was allowing herself to make the acquaintance of an uninvited correspondent, under circumstances which, to say the very least, were more than invidious.

Little wonder that, as she came out of her bedroom to meet the young gentleman about whose intentions and desires there seemed to be not the slightest possible shadow of doubt, the conscious-

ness that she was doing that which, according to her own standards, she ought not to have done, moved and troubled her to an extent which one would have thought scarcely possible in a girl who had been for more than six years in up-to-date musical comedy.

She blushed as she came into the room. Not that there was anything strange in that, because this girl retained what some call the "art of blushing" to a remarkable degree. But she not only blushed, she trembled—though of that she only might have been aware. She glanced affrightedly towards the expectant visitor, as if asking herself what manner of man he was. Had he been the kind of person he very easily might have been—she had had some vicarious experience of what sort of men they are who haunt stage doors—she would have turned on her heel and fled at once. But this young man, who eyed her as she appeared, was not at all the sort of person she had expected. He was so young a man, and so good to look at! A little to her surprise it was this fact which impressed her more than any other—the fact of his good looks. Not only were they beyond a doubt, they were of such an unusual quality. Good-looking men, old and young, she had seen possibly by hundreds; but never had she met one who was good-looking as this stranger was.

She knew him to be twenty-two; he stared at her with the eyes of a boy of twelve. Her keen gift for appreciating certain qualities in others told her, on the instant, with almost startling clearness, that these were the eyes of innocence.

Miss Simpson told herself a short while after entering the room that this young gentleman might have been a generation younger than herself, although their years might be the same; this

young man had not nibbled at, or even seen the fruit of the tree of knowledge. He was fairly tall and fairly broad, and held himself with the careless ease of the youth who has always had his own way. He was very good-looking, exceedingly well-dressed, and was, perhaps, under the impression that he bore himself as becomes a man of the world—and all the while he was so amazingly young.

Miss Osborn took it upon herself to perform the ceremony of introduction.

“Sir Frank Picard, this is Miss Ailsa Lawrence, to whom, I believe, you have written certain letters. Ailsa, this is Sir Frank Picard.”

The pair bowed to each other. The gentleman was obviously impressed by the lady's appearance—and indeed she looked charming, in the brand-new dress which became her so well, a faint flush on her cheeks, an expression in her eyes which was in part shyness and part something very like mischief.

“I—I—I cannot tell you,” stammered Sir Frank, “how very good I—I think it is of you to see me.”

“If that is the case, then you'll be able to prove it by your actions, Sir Frank.”

The speaker was Miss Osborn. The gentleman glanced at her with surprise, as if he did not know quite what to make of her air of prim prudence. Miss Osborn transferred her remarks to Peggy.

“I believe I am correct in saying that this gentleman has addressed to you certain communications which, under the circumstances, were most unbecoming.”

Peggy flushed—this time all over. Plainly she did not appreciate either Miss Osborn's tone or her words.

“I'm sure I didn't authorise you to say anything

at all like that. I dare say that this gentleman never meant any harm in writing as he did—but some young people are so very young.”

It was Sir Frank's turn to flush—as if he felt that to be charged with youth was to be charged with a crime.

“I'm of age, Miss Lawrence—past twenty-one.”

“Some people at twenty-one are really scarcely twelve: surely that is a very delightful state of things?”

“You speak as if I were a child, whereas I'm a man.”

“I suppose at twenty-one one is a man—legally.”

“I'm a man in every sense. I came into possession of my property about a year ago. I see after everything, and nothing is done without my orders. Everything is as entirely under my control as if my mother had never said a word.”

“Your mother is still living?” The question came from Miss Osborn.

The gentleman seemed startled, as if it amazed him to think that the fact of Lady Picard's existence should have been hidden from anyone.

“You don't mean to say you don't know that my mother is still alive? You couldn't have thought she was dead! Why, everyone knows my mother—she's one of the finest women in England!”

The genuineness of the young gentleman's surprise seemed to amuse his hearers. They glanced at each other. Possibly because he did not notice the glances which they exchanged, Sir Frank went gravely on.

“I am conscious what a great thing it is for a man to have such a mother as mine. Until lately the smallest things concerning me have been in her hands; she has made me what I am.” He said

this with a curious little air of pride which seemed to tickle his listeners still more. "She has taught me the management of a great estate—no man could have been more successful in looking after mine than she has been. If, at the present moment, I am the richest man in England—as I understand I am—I owe my position largely to her. I may tell you in private—ordinarily I should not say a word to you about such matters, but standing towards you in the relation I happen to do, it seems to me I am in honour bound to give you some rough idea of what my position really is."

As the girl looked at his eager face and listened to his earnest tones, something seemed to move her to a sense of what was very much like shame.

"I really do not see that you are in duty bound to tell me anything—I would much rather you did not."

The gentleman seemed to open his eyes wider, as if with surprise.

"I don't understand you in the least. Oughtn't a man——"

Miss Osborn interposed before he could bring his sentence to a conclusion.

"You are quite right, Sir Frank. I agree with everything you say. Miss Lawrence is a most unbusiness-like young lady; she has placed the matter entirely in my hands——"

"Ethel!" The exclamation was a remonstrance.

Miss Osborn endeavoured to hush the other up.

"You know perfectly well you did, or I shouldn't have interfered in the matter at all."

"I didn't ask you to interfere."

Miss Lawrence's tone suggested meekness. Miss Osborn went ruthlessly on.

"It's not fair of you to talk like that! Sir Frank, Miss Lawrence does not wish to detain you——"

"I certainly do not!" This time there was unmistakable decision in the lady's tones.

"Before your relations with her can go any farther, the position must be regularised."

"Ethel, whatever are you talking about? I don't in the least understand you." Miss Osborn had apparently pained her.

The gentleman took the matter into his own hands—anxiously, eagerly.

"Please to understand, Miss Osborn, that that is exactly what I've come to do. I don't want to have anything the least informal. Quite the contrary—I want to have everything put upon a proper footing."

"What you say does you credit, Sir Frank. What may we take your letters to mean?"

"Mean?" His eyes were again wide open. "Why, what I said, what I wrote in them."

"But you did not know Miss Lawrence when you wrote to her."

"I know I didn't—that was my bad luck. I wanted to know her more than anything else in the world."

"Your letters to her—although a complete stranger's—might have been construed as expressions of affection."

"That's what they were; that's what I meant them to be. I've been in love with her from the first moment I saw her on the stage. Don't tell me there's no such thing as love at first sight—I know better! And, if I may be permitted to say so—I know it sounds like cheek, but it isn't meant to be"—he dropped his tone, speaking with what might be described as shy eagerness—"the feeling which I felt for you before I made your

acquaintance has become much intensified now that I have."

"But, Sir Frank Picard——"

Miss Osborn cut the young lady short.

"Please to let me speak. Let me manage the preliminaries, and then you can come in afterwards. I hope, Sir Frank Picard, that you perfectly appreciate what it is you're saying. What is it precisely that you wish us to understand? Your letters contained a proposal of marriage—do you wish us to understand that you are repeating that proposal now?"

"Of course I do. What else do you think I've come for?" He seemed to be indignant. "Miss Lawrence, if you will only agree to be my wife——"

"Sir Frank Picard!"

Miss Osborn thrust herself forward. "Will you please address yourself, in the first place, to me. This matter must be done in the regular and proper form—before Miss Lawrence can agree to have anything to do with you of any kind whatever. Now, Sir Frank Picard, will you be so good as to pay very great attention to what I am going to say. Do you wish Miss Lawrence to become your wife?"

"I do, you know I do. Don't I keep saying that I do? Oh, Miss Lawrence——"

"Gently, Sir Frank. Again, would you be so good as to address yourself to me? Are you willing to give your written promise to that effect?"

The gentleman seemed slightly startled.

"What do you mean by my written promise?"

"Nothing can be clearer. When would you propose to marry her—if she agreed to have you?"

"At the very earliest possible moment—to-day if she would."

"To-day is absurd! Would you marry her in a fortnight?"

"I tell you that I'd only be too glad to have the chance of marrying her to-day and you ask if I'd marry her in a fortnight! Rather!"

"Then, Sir Frank, if you're serious, will you be so good as to sit down and write a letter on the lines which I will suggest?"

"I'll do anything you like. Tell me what it is you want me to write and I'll put down exactly what you wish." The gentleman moved to the table. "Tell me what it is you want and you shall have it. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to write it down exactly."

Miss Simpson attempted a mild remonstrance.

"Sir Frank Picard! I beg of you.—Ethel, please!"

An unexpected interruption came from the hitherto silent Miss Stacey.

"Ailsa, why on earth do you keep interrupting? Why don't you let Miss Osborn manage things? It seems to me that she's getting on first-rate, and the best thing you can do is to keep still and let her alone."

This plain speaking seemed to startle the young lady into at least momentary silence. Miss Stacey continued her remarks on lines of her own.

"Now, get on, you two—unless you want to mess about all day."

Miss Osborn, who was apparently as much surprised as Peggy, assumed what she no doubt intended to be an air of severe dignity.

"Now, Sir Frank Picard, if you'll be so very good." The gentleman was staring at Miss Stacey as if he could not make her out. Miss Stacey had a way of saying things which was her own. "Pray do not allow her to worry you."

Miss Stacey, in her turn, tried remonstrance.

“That’s right—she’ll snub me if she can! But let me tell you, Sir Frank Picard, that if it hadn’t been for me you would never have been here at all. And I will say this—I’m not one to be afraid of speaking my mind——”

“We’re quite sure you’re not,” observed Miss Osborn. “Sir Frank, would you mind sitting down—and writing?”

Sir Frank placed himself on a chair at a little table in a corner of the room, upon which the lady had arranged for him pens, ink and paper.

“Now, Miss Osborn, what am I to write?”

“You might write something like this.” The lady paused for a moment to consider, then said: “‘Dear Miss Lawrence’—you might begin with that—‘I can only tell you again what I have told you in my letters; there’s nothing in the world I want so much as to have you as my wife. If you will only agree to be my wife I promise that I will marry you within a fortnight of this date.’”

The gentleman, whose pen had been writing rapidly, paused to suggest an improvement.

“It’s all right as far as it goes, and of course it is all of it true, but why should I wait a fortnight? Why can’t I marry her to-day?”

“Marry me to-day?”

“Sir Frank Picard!”

“I say!”

The speakers were the three ladies in turn. The gentleman explained.

“A chap only told me the day before yesterday that you can go right off to a place called Doctors’ Commons, and pay twenty-five pounds, and you can have something they call a special licence. Then you can walk straight round to the nearest church and you can get married within five or ten minutes. Why shouldn’t we do that instead of waiting a fortnight? If you want a trousseau, or

that sort of thing, I can give you the name of a shop where my mother deals, and they'll let you have what you want in less than no time. And I've got a new motor-car—a brand-new motor-car—a top-hole one! We might stop at Dover, or somewhere, for the night, cross with the car tomorrow morning—I'll wire to them to send it along—and we might go for our honeymoon in my new motor-car. Wouldn't that be ripping? We might have no end of fun." He made a special appeal to Peggy, speaking with a boyish eagerness as from the bottom of his heart. "Say you'll do it and I'll go and get things ready."

Peggy shrank back as if afraid that his eagerness might have an effect upon her for which she was neither prepared nor desired. Her voice was a little shaky. She seemed to tremble.

"You are very kind, Sir Frank Picard, but I ought to tell you that so far as I'm concerned——"

Miss Osborn cut her brutally short, as if fearful of what she was going to say.

"I must say, Sir Frank, that I think you are mistaken in the situation. Would you go to a lady to whom you had an introduction—say, from your mother—and ask her, at the first time of meeting, to marry you at once? Wouldn't you feel that because of your mother's introduction you ought to treat her with a little more ceremony than that? Miss Lawrence feels that because you have introduced yourself you consider yourself at liberty to make any proposition to her you like, as if she were nothing and no one."

"Oh, I say!" The boy's discomfiture was obvious. "I'm awfully sorry if I've behaved badly, but I do think you are rather hard on me. You see it was you who suggested our marrying in a fortnight. Nothing could suit me better, only, if it comes to that, I really don't see how a

few days can make very much difference. I would love——”

“That will do, Sir Frank. Let me explain before you say anything further. A few days would make a good deal of difference. Miss Lawrence can have nothing whatever to do with you unless she can count upon receiving a warm reception from your family.”

“Why, Miss Osborn, if you mean my mother, Miss Lawrence may count upon the hottest of welcomes from her. And not for herself alone. My mother has dropped a good many hints about my marriage lately. Only the other day she told me that the sooner I took a wife and gave her a daughter the happier she would be. She added that the greatest boon she could wish for was to meet her son’s wife before she herself was very old. I tell you that when she hears that I have found a wife, and am going to marry her in a fortnight, she will simply jump with joy!”

“Suppose she met with disapproval from your mother?”

The young gentleman seemed to be a trifle startled. He drew himself up with a gesture which was full of significance.

“My mother’s tastes and mine have always been the same. Besides, I don’t mean to be disrespectful or unkind, but it would make no difference to me if she did. In this matter I will brook no opposition, and I know my mother too well to suppose that she would ever offer it.”

“But suppose that she did? One should be prepared for all eventualities. It is necessary, before Miss Lawrence comes to any further decision, that she should meet your mother.”

“Meet my mother? Of course she can meet my mother! I’ll telegraph to her to come to town at once.”

"It is very nice of you to propose to order your mother about, but I'm afraid that would not quite suit Miss Lawrence. She would rather go down to your home at Dunston Park and there be introduced to your mother as a probable daughter-in-law. Your mother's reception of the news will help her to arrive at some sort of decision."

"Will Miss Lawrence come down and see her to-morrow? My mother is having a sort of party in the afternoon, and that will enable me to introduce her to the whole county."

"What do you say, Ailsa, to Sir Frank's suggestion?"

"I don't know that there's anything to say. You seem to be taking the matter entirely out of my hands."

"Anyhow, will you go down to Dunston to-morrow?"

The gentleman pleaded with her on his own account.

"Please, Miss Lawrence, say that you will. If you only knew what it would mean to me!"

"Have you any particular engagement to-morrow?" This was Miss Osborn.

"I am not aware of any."

"Then, in that case, please, please, please come!"

The man, in his curious eagerness, was very like a boy. The girl looked at him with something in her glance which was very like compassion.

"If you will allow me to explain——"

Miss Osborn prevented her.

"You can do all the explaining you want some other time, when you and Sir Frank are together. In the meanwhile, let us settle the preliminaries. I think I may say on Miss Lawrence's behalf, Sir Frank, that you can positively count upon her coming to Dunston to-morrow. May I not say so, Ailsa?" She did not give that young lady

much time to answer, but went galloping on. "Have you finished writing what I suggested, Sir Frank?" She glanced at the sheet of paper on which he had scribbled. "This seems all right. All that it needs is your signature."

Reseating himself, the young gentleman attached his signature.

"Is there anything else you want?" he inquired.

"Nothing. This is just an informal little note to prevent any misunderstanding afterwards." She read the written words again, then glanced at him. "You perfectly understand what you have written?"

"You ask some queer questions, Miss Osborn. Of course I understand what I have written. I assure you I'm not at all dull—my mother always says that I'm quick-witted."

"I think your mother is very fortunate in having such a son."

"She thinks she is, but I myself sometimes wonder. I've seen such a lot of young men, and I've been surprised at the way they often turn out. I don't know if you think there's anything unusual about me—do you, Miss Lawrence, see anything unusual about me?"

The girl blushed vividly, apparently in her endeavour to assume an unexaggerated smile.

"I—I think there is something—just a little unusual."

"That's what my mother thinks. She thinks I'm something quite unique."

"I am really inclined to think you are—if you don't mind my saying so."

"Of course I don't mind! As if I minded anything you say! My mother would be flattered if she heard you say it. I have been to her, in a sense, a sort of experiment. You see the result; she is perfectly satisfied with it—I'm not so sure

that I am. Would it bore you very much if I told you all about it?"

Peggy thought of Stanley Brock and her engagement for lunch.

"Would it take you very long?"

"I would make it as short as I could. But—are you pressed for time? Won't you lunch with me?"

Miss Osborn came in with her usual ruthless interference.

"I'm afraid that is quite and altogether impossible, Sir Frank. But as, as I was just about to point out to you, your call has been prolonged beyond the usual limits, I think the time has come when we must really say good morning. I am sure that Miss Lawrence will be delighted to listen to anything you may have to say, at the greatest possible length, when she comes down to you to-morrow at Dunston."

The boy looked at the speaker with a whimsical smile wrinkling his lips and twinkling in his eyes.

"I think you're very hard, Miss Osborn. I don't know what sort of person you really think I am, but you haven't said one—well, one nice thing since I came. You won't let Miss Lawrence say a word for herself—I really don't believe she would say the things with which you credit her. I feel sure she has a better opinion of me than you appear to have, because she must know there isn't a single thing I wouldn't do for her—and I'm in a position to do a good many things——"

Miss Osborn interposed.

"I don't doubt it for one moment—you appear to be rather fond of singing your own praises."

"You aren't, are you? You appear to be under the impression that I'm some undesirable animal. No one has ever treated me as you are doing!"

"I beg to apologise if I have said anything I ought not to have said. Ailsa, you hear Sir Frank—are you in a position to lunch with him?"

"You know perfectly well I'm not! I'm much obliged to you for your kind invitation, but I'm already engaged, and I couldn't lunch with you anyhow, even if I weren't."

"You hear, Sir Frank Picard? Is Miss Lawrence candid enough? Do you prefer her frankness to mine?"

CHAPTER VII

THE TEMPTRESS

It was a somewhat crestfallen young gentleman who quitted Miss Simpson's room. In spite of the unmistakable touch of shyness which had marked his demeanour, he had entered with a suggestion of cock-sureness which did not mark his bearing as he departed.

"You will come to-morrow?" were almost his last words to Miss Lawrence.

Miss Osborn took the answer from the lady's lips.

"Miss Lawrence has said that she will come to Dunston Park to-morrow; what she says she will do she will do; you may count upon her keeping her word."

The boy regarded the lady almost as if he resented the readiness with which she took the management of affairs into her own hands.

"Thank you, Miss Osborn, but I had rather that the assurance had come from Miss Lawrence's own lips. Good-bye."

"Good-bye." The girl touched his hand with her own. She added, as if moved by a little cloud which she saw upon his face, "I will come to Dunston to-morrow—I promise."

The cloud lifted; he beamed at her.

"Thank you—that's the nicest thing you've said to me. The best train leaves Victoria at twelve-thirty; there's another at two. If you will let me know by which train you will come I'll send a car to meet you at the station."

"I'm afraid I can't promise to come by any particular train. I rather think that the one which leaves at two will be better than the other."

“ ‘You’ve burnt your boats,’ ” was Miss Osborn’s first observation when the gentleman had departed. “ Now you will have to go.”

The girl’s rejoinder was a trifle startling.

“ You’re a pig! I hate the sight of you! ”

Miss Osborn’s manner remained unruffled.

“ Pray why? ” she inquired.

“ For a dozen reasons; you know very well what they are! I never thought you would have behaved as you have done.”

“ And pray what is there in my behaviour to which you take objection? ”

“ Don’t be such a hypocrite! How dare you ask me such a question? Look at the false position you’ve got me into—you, and you only! ”

“ That’s right—if there is any blame try to put it on me. Here’s that young gentleman’s written promise of marriage; that ought to be worth a trifle.”

Miss Osborn held out the sheet of paper on which the boy had written. The girl regarded her askance, with what seemed to be passionate resentment.

“ Ethel! ”

“ Well?—Peggy. What’s the matter now? You’d better take it. It will be safer in your keeping than in mine.”

Instead of being eager to snatch what the other offered, the girl put her hands behind her back. Her attitude seemed to afford her friend amusement. Clearly she did not take her seriously.

“ Very well—as you choose. I’ll put the letter on your writing-table. You’ll be able to make any use of it you please.” She said, as she laid it down, “ He seems to be rather a nice boy—luckily.”

“ Luckily? Do you say ‘ luckily ’? Don’t you see that that makes it ever so much worse? ”

“ I’m afraid I don’t. How do you mean ? ”

“ If he were some wretched little bounder I shouldn’t so much mind behaving to him like a cat; I might feel that he deserved it. But he’s a gentleman; he takes it for granted that I’m a lady.”

“ He certainly is a gentleman—almost too much so. He’ll have some of his ideas knocked out of him before very long.”

“ Ethel, you’re positively heartless! Do you think I should be proud of myself for any share I may have in doing that ? ”

There came a characteristic interpolation from Miss Stacey.

“ He’s brought you these presents, and all these roses, Peggy. If that’s not like a perfect gentleman I don’t know what is.”

Miss Simpson stared. “ Presents? He never said a word about them.”

“ Seemed to me to be too shy. You were neither of you too encouraging, don’t you know! Anyhow, here they are. That’s chocolates—six pounds of them. And that’s gloves—six dozen pairs—mind you, six dozen pairs! And that—what do you think that is? That’s a pearl necklace—real pearls!—and you never said so much as thank you.”

“ He never gave them to me—I had no idea he had brought them; I shouldn’t have accepted them anyhow.”

The girl shrank back, as if fearful of coming into too close neighbourhood of the offerings which were never offered.

Miss Osborn took up a position which was, perhaps, a trifle unexpected.

“ You certainly could not have accepted them; I entirely agree with you there. They had better be sent back to him, or held over till you are in a

position to have an explanation. In the meantime, I might take them into my charge. Florence, I have something which I wish to say to Peggy in private—you might leave us alone. Hand me over those three parcels."

Apparently the demand did not commend itself to Miss Stacey.

"Why should I give them to you? You've no more right to them than I have. They have nothing to do with you."

"I don't for one moment suggest that they have. I'm simply going to hold them for Peggy until she makes up her mind what to do in the matter. Don't be silly! Hand them over! And please will you allow me to have a few words with Peggy in private?"

With an air of grievance, very reluctantly relinquishing the parcels in question, Miss Stacey took herself away, saying, as she went, as if to relieve her mind:

"Those who deserve shan't have; it seems to me that if anyone deserves something of course they get nothing. It's pretty clear, Peggy Simpson, that you're going to make a good thing out of that young chap, and it's all by your pretence of perfect innocence. And I'll bet a trifle that Miss Ethel Osborn gets her way. I tell you straight that if I don't get at least something for myself it won't be for want of trying. If it hadn't been for me he would never have come near the place. I don't want to be the only one left out in the cold after all I've done."

Miss Osborn turned to her friend, after the other had gone.

"She's a very nice young woman, Florence Stacey. In everything she does and says I should think it would be impossible for a human being to show less tact than she does."

"Do you know, Ethel, there's a good deal of truth in what she says."

"There may be—I said tact; there certainly is none of that. Talking about 'getting something for herself' and 'not going to be left out in the cold'—painfully vulgar young woman! But never mind Miss Stacey, we'll try to forget her. Peggy, let us speak candidly to each other, you and I. You know you've got the chance of your life."

"You called Florence vulgar just now. Are you going to try and copy her?"

"Don't be absurd! I trust I don't move on quite Miss Stacey's lines. Yours is the tide in the affairs of men—and women—which will never, never come again. For goodness sake do take it at the flood. Don't flatter yourself that you are doing something romantic when you are really showing yourself an ungrateful fool by refusing the gifts which the gods are offering. Do be sensible—marry him."

The girl seemed startled, as if the other had said something which it was not possible for her to have heard correctly.

"Marry him? What are you talking about?"

"There's no doubt that he's in love with you, over head and heels. There's nothing you can ask which he wouldn't give. Think what settlements he would make—possibly twenty thousand pounds a year! Think what it would mean—the wife of a great gentleman, who would ask nothing better than to be allowed to be your willing slave. I know all about Mr Brock. If the question were fairly put to him I believe he'd be the first to agree that you are foolish to throw away such a chance. Even if Mr Brock succeeds as a dramatist, what does that mean? You know what it means in worry, disappointed hopes—one success and a dozen failures, the major part of the profits of that success taken from you. You know, only too well,

what the life of a so-called successful dramatist is apt to be—a continual struggling for rewards which never come, and which exist, for the most part, only in the imaginations of people who know nothing about them. Marry Sir Frank Picard—think what that would mean—Peggy, I do beg of you. The mistress of everything a woman can desire, secure of your position, of your place in society; free from the perpetual anxiety of what next week may bring. And don't you make any mistake, my dear; you would make Frank Picard an excellent wife, and he would make you a good husband. Peggy, before you do anything rash, do think the matter over——”

“I won't think the matter over; I decline to have anything to do with it. How dare you hint such a thing! Ethel Osborn, I'm beginning to wish that I'd never seen nor heard of you—putting such thoughts into my head! tempting me to do such things! I shall be ashamed to look at my own face in the mirror.”

Miss Osborn made a little movement with her shoulders and sighed.

“Well, my dear, pray do not let me tempt you into doing anything which you would rather not. I only wanted to do you a good turn—that's all. You'll find Sir Frank's letter where I placed it. What it ought to be worth perhaps you know—it ought to be worth a great deal to you—more than the sum which Mr Brock stands in need of, and which you probably won't give him.”

“Ethel!” The utterance of the name was a passionate cry.

Again there came that curious movement of the other's shoulders.

“Very well, my dear, I won't say that to please yourself will be to please me—because I think it is quite possible that you won't please me; but at

any rate in the future you will have the pleasure of being able to look back and congratulate yourself on having thrown away a chance which only comes to one woman in ten million—that will be something, won't it, dear? I'll take these parcels till you've made up your mind what ought to be done with them. You promised to go down to Dunston Park to-morrow, so I suppose you'll go. And for goodness sake, child, don't come empty away. Think of poor Mr Brock if of nothing else. Good-bye, my love; I do hope that you will like Lady Picard."

Ethel Osborn quitted the room, leaving Miss Peggy Simpson a prey to varying emotions which she had not dreamed would ever trouble her. She stood staring for some seconds at the door through which the other had vanished; then she drew a long breath, clenched her fists, and observed in a perfectly audible tone of voice:

"That I should ever have let her persuade me to behave like a perfect pig!"

Having delivered herself of this somewhat curious observation, Miss Simpson seemed to be in doubt what to do with herself next. Then, as it seemed more by accident than design, she found herself by the writing-table on which reposed Sir Frank's epistle. Casually she picked it up, glanced at it, changed colour, the hand which held it fell to her side. Furtively she folded it, first into two and then into four. Glancing round the room as if, although knowing it to be empty, she was fearful of being observed, she slipped the folded sheet of paper into the bosom of her frock.

As she did so someone tapped at the door. Mr Stanley Brock came in.

CHAPTER VIII

“ THE LOIN OF LAMB ”

MR BROCK was jubilant. So far from wearing his hat, as he did on his first introduction, the second he was through the door he took it off and waved it in the air.

“ Luck! ” he exclaimed. “ Actually a stroke of luck—come my way! It’s unbelievable, but true. I met George Withers as I was going along the Strand—Withers runs *The Trumpet*, I know him pretty well; he stopped me. ‘ Brock,’ he said, ‘ you’re the very man I want to see. You know that story of yours you sent to me, I’m going to put it in our next number. It’s going to press in the morning. Do you want a proof, or can you trust me to see that it’s all right? I’ll give you a cheque for ten pounds in the morning.’ That settled it. ‘ Let me have the cheque,’ I told him, ‘ and I’ll trust you to do anything.’ Now I do call that a stroke of luck, because, do you know, Peggy, my girl, I was going to crack my last sovereign on our lunch.”

“ Stan! how foolish of you! In that case we’ll lunch at a tea-shop.”

“ Oh, no, we won’t—especially now, with the certainty of a tenner in the morning. If Withers says I shall have a cheque I shall. I can trust him as far as that, anyhow. It’s rather a good story he’s got. Do you remember my telling you about it? I called the thing, ‘ The Loin of Lamb.’ ”

“ I know you told me about a story which you thought was a good idea, but I don’t quite recollect what it was about. You know, Stan, you tell me about so many of your stories.”

“ That’s a fact—don’t rub it in!—I’ll tell you about it all over again. Just you listen—and this time try to recollect.”

Perching himself on the head of the couch he swung his feet in the air.

“ ‘ The Loin of Lamb ’—title—is a country inn. A girl on the stage—I call her Violet Esmond—she might be you!—is stuck on ‘ The Loin of Lamb.’ She fancies herself much more as the mistress of a flourishing country inn than in the chorus of any musical show there ever was. She has a sweetheart, Joe Henderson—he might be me!—who finds himself no nearer marriage than since they first became engaged, six years ago.”

“ Have they been engaged six years? She can’t be very young.”

“ She’d pass in a crowd—as you’ll hear. They are both of them quite conscious that they’re not so young as they were. Then there’s a chap who falls in love with Miss Esmond, having seen her from the front. She finds out all about him—his father made his money in margarine—and he wants to marry her—the son not the father. She is an artful baggage. As you know, my love, all girls are artful—but she’s a oner!”

“ Girls are certainly not more artful than men!”

“ My love, you should keep off ice which is not warranted to bear. But you listen, and then tell me if she wasn’t a oner. Two thousand pounds is wanted for ‘ The Loin of Lamb,’ which to Violet and Joe is a sum of which they have not even dreamed. She thinks of Margarine—we’ll call him Mr Margarine—and she concocts a nefarious plot. She gets from him a promise of marriage, and an invitation to call on his distinguished family in their sumptuous flat at Hyde Park Gate. Then what do you think she does? ”

"I'm sure I don't know, and I don't care either! I don't seem to fancy your Violet Esmond."

Possibly the unnecessary bitterness in her tone was the result of a feeling that there was an uncanny resemblance between herself and the lady. Mr Brock went gaily on.

"That artful young woman—to whom you very naturally don't feel drawn—actually sees her way to getting the price of 'The Loin of Lamb' out of that poor young Mr Margarine. Fancy taking advantage of a man's true love like that! Oh, she was an artful one! There is a grand reception on at Hyde Park Gate, to which she goes in fancy dress—the baggage! There was a kick-up at Covent Garden to which she went in something very spicy indeed. That sort of thing may be all right and proper at Covent Garden in the small hours of the morning, but at a slap-up fashionable function, in the middle of the afternoon, in a splendid flat at Hyde Park Gate—what ho! And it was what ho! She created a sensation when she showed herself among the crowd of visitors in that beautiful abode, and announced herself as the future Mrs Margarine. Now, wasn't that a thing to do!"

The speaker paused as if for a reply, but none came.

"Whatever are you looking at?" he inquired of the lady.

There was an expression on Miss Simpson's face which almost suggested that she might be looking at a ghost. Mr Brock had done something of which he had not dreamed—he had put an idea into the lady's head which, under certain circumstances, might prove to be the very one she wanted.

"My pet," continued Mr Brock, "what was the result of that artful young woman's conduct? She created such a scandal in that flat at Hyde Park

Gate, and she made such a show with young Margarine's promise of marriage, that the family bought her off—yes, the distinguished family, at the poor young man's own supplication, bought her off! And with part of the money which she had so wickedly extracted from them that artful young woman bought 'The Loin of Lamb.' Think of the awfulness of that young woman's conduct—yet what are the consequences? At the present moment 'The Loin of Lamb' is known to every motorist as the best hostelry outside London; one of the best-kept and most flourishing places of the kind. Its proprietors, Mr and Mrs Joseph Henderson, are making a fortune hand over fist. And the point of the joke is that Joe Henderson up to this moment does not know how he really came to occupy the pleasant position he now enjoys.”

CHAPTER IX

LADY PICARD

THERE are lovely houses in England; we all know of them; but it is doubtful if they owe as much of their charm to their architects as those gentlemen might think. Three things go to make a lovely house; often enough the man who planned it—the architect—has had little to do with it. The position; the way in which the house has been kept; its age—these are the three factors which go to make the beauty of an English home. Dunston Park is one of the loveliest houses in England; everyone who knows it agrees—as everyone agrees that architecturally it is all wrong—a collection of blunders. It has been erected at various periods, perhaps beginning its existence as an Elizabethan manor. Different periods have seen additions. In the days of their extreme youth they may have seemed monstrous—shuddering at each other in horrified amazement. The passage of the years, the position in which the building stands, the exquisite care which has been taken of the fabric—these things have toned and mellowed the collection of contradictions until to-day, coming on it for the first time from whatever point of view you like, it is apt to strike the beholder as the realised ideal of what a perfect home may be.

It contains many delightful apartments; one of the best of them being known as “the garden-room.” It has been described as “a beautiful old room in a beautiful old house”—a description which could not have been more apposite. The colour scheme is silver grey—almost white. The

walls are panelled with silver grey leather, on which, here and there, are flower studies, painted by artists who loved the models whose beauty they sought to keep alive for all time. It has deep embrasured windows. On one side double doors lead into the garden. A woman's room as we are introduced to it; the furniture and appointments light, delicate, dainty. On the glorious summer afternoon on which we make its acquaintance flowers are everywhere—on the tables, in the windows, hanging in the embrasures, hiding the floor.

The room, the flowers, the atmosphere of the apartment—these together formed a fitting framework for its solitary occupant. Lady Picard was alone—her chair covered with light blue satin. She was banked up by cushions. Somehow, she was a woman who suggested cushions wherever she might be. She travelled with her own cushions. Before she took her seat in a railway carriage her attentive maid unbuttoned a case which she had borne down the platform and produced two large cushions and one smaller one, which she arranged in the exact manner in which her ladyship liked to have them. Lady Picard was tall, she was stately; looking perhaps forty and being nearly fifty; obviously one of those persons whom the great cares of life touch with fingers which are not only tender, but actually beautifying. Superficially very gracious, very sweet, very careful not to wound—perhaps a little stupid. Some people, no doubt a little difficult, found her slightly irritating.

This lovely great lady had had a curious existence, in a sense of which she herself had not the dimmest notion—all her life she had been used to having her own way. By what some might have considered to be the special interposition of

Providence, nothing had occurred to rumple her serenity. Whether, if Providence had been responsible for this, Providence had not blundered, was a problem which events might presently determine. Used to having practically boundless funds at her disposal, living in a world which was wise enough to know on which side its bread was buttered, she had come to regard herself as the possessor of a strong character and an unfaltering will; the fact being that she had never encountered opposition; supposing herself to have reached a point at which she considered that no other ideals were possible. These things being so, it was not strange that she had come to regard everything as for the best in this best of all possible worlds—and she looked it.

She was engaged on "fancy-work" when we first make her acquaintance. It was a characteristic of hers that she always was employed on work which suited the occasion; work of some sort she always was busy with—or what she imagined to be work; such being a subject upon which some ladies have curious notions. Her "drawn-thread work," for instance, was famous. She would expend a great deal of time and trouble in making a "table-centre" of a piece of material which, when finished—according to some Philistine boors—was not one whit more attractive than when begun. Some folks were so venturesome as to call some of her fancy-work—even some of her greatest triumphs—sheer waste of time. But it is not on record that anyone ever ventured to say so to her ladyship's face. And so she continued to embroider fine linen handkerchiefs with designs which were hardly suited to the purposes for which a handkerchief is intended, strong in the conviction that, unlike some erring females, she never wasted time.

"I never sit with my hands in front of me," she would say. "I'm afraid that nowadays there's a great deal too much valuable time spent in reading fiction."

That latter sort of remark would generally be addressed to a girl who had taken up a novel with the apparent intention of reading it to the end—and that young girl would feel like throwing the novel at her ladyship's head.

"There is far too little plain sewing done nowadays," was another of the remarks with which it delighted her to instruct the world, and she would spend many worthless hours in pushing her needle in and out of a piece of flannel destined to become a hideous garment for the poor which could have been obtained at much less cost, both of labour and cash, if made by one of those sewing machines which she was sorry to see were popular with "all sections of society."

It so chanced that, at the moment we meet her, placing on a little table which stood by her side the gorgeously embroidered cushion-cover which was to form part of her contribution to an approaching bazaar, she rose to greet a lady who was standing in one of the entrances to the garden.

"My dear Sarah!" It was to be noticed what a soft, clear, musical voice she had, in itself so suggestive of the real great lady. "I was wondering why you had not come. I expected you an hour ago."

"Trifling misunderstanding with the car. Wanted to telephone you to send relief, but there was no telephone. People round here seem to be of your way of thinking—not in sympathy with modern improvements. So Delia and I drove nine miles in a carriage—they told me at the inn where I got it that it was a carriage, and they ought to know. Anything liquid in the house?"

The speaker placed herself in an armchair with the air of one who has a grievance. Lady Picard looked at her as if she were amazed.

"My dear Sarah! of course there is. I'm so sorry to hear——"

"Yes, of course you are, but you might have sent something to pick us up."

"How could I do that when I had no idea that you were in trouble?"

"Although there was no telephone, apparently for miles, there was a telegraph office, so I sent a wire."

"No telegram has reached me. How long ago did this unfortunate occurrence take place?"

"Judging by my feelings I should say about twelve hours ago."

"Twelve hours ago? Isn't that rather——"
A manservant appeared in the doorway which led to the house. He had a tray in his hand. Lady Picard addressed him. "Buldeel, has no telegram come for me?"

"One has just arrived, your ladyship." Buldeel proffered the tray he was holding.

Lady Picard took the envelope which was on it, reading the telegram which it contained with what one felt was a little surprise.

"Is there any answer, your ladyship?" inquired Buldeel.

Lady Picard looked at the new-comer as if she were at a loss.

"You see for yourself that the telegram has only just arrived, so I couldn't send. I am very sorry. No, Buldeel, there is no answer."

The visitor addressed the servant.

"Buldeel, be so good as to bring me, inside ten seconds, a liqueur glass of crême de menthe, the same of French vermouth, cracked ice, a bottle of lemonade, and a large tumbler; and remember that

I have been dragged for about twelve hours by a horse with no legs along a dusty road, in a carriage without cushions and without springs."

With a slight inclination of his head Bulteel vanished to fetch the lady what she wanted.

Lady Picard was looking at her visitor with a mixture of sympathy and wonder.

"I wonder where you got the carriage from, which was so uncomfortable as you describe."

"Don't ask; I wish the man no harm. I only hope that it will never be your ill-fortune to have to ride in it. As my driver has had to wire for a repairer I suppose the car is there for the night; when a car of mine does break down I generally find that it is there for the night. It's a new car, and cost twelve hundred, and I rather suspect that my excellent son Archibald celebrated its arrival by taking it out for what he terms a 'joy ride,' so it may have to go back to the manufacturer. Archie's 'joy rides' spell ruin for me. The last he went he got himself locked up. I expected—and I may say rather hoped—that they would keep him there for life."

"Sarah! you shouldn't speak of the dear boy—your own son—like that. It's only his natural high spirits."

The new-comer put up her lorgnette and surveyed the other as if she were some sort of curiosity; then she observed, with a sigh as if of resignation:

"Yes, it may be his natural high spirits. I know the natural high spirits of a dear boy like Archie. Have you those fluids which I asked Bulteel to bring on the premises, or must I perish from thirst?"

"I didn't quite understand what it was you asked for, but I have no doubt that they are somewhere about the place."

"Somewhere about the place? That sounds so comforting! My dear Margaret, you have no idea how to manage a house." The manservant appeared with a tray in his hand. She addressed him. "Here you are. I doubt, Bulteel, if you've not been a little more than ten seconds. Place the tray upon a table at my elbow. Do you know how a drink ought to be mixed?"

"I fancy I know what your Grace requires."

The stranger watched the proceedings with the greatest possible interest while Bulteel proved that he did know. Lady Picard apparently was in doubt whether to look on or to avert her glance. As the stranger raised her tumbler she asked a question.

"Won't you have one, Margaret? Bulteel has only brought one tumbler."

"I don't quite know what it is you are drinking, Sarah, but, as you know, I seldom drink between meals."

"It is something besides water, the Fates be thanked! Bulteel, your education has not been wholly neglected; this does you credit." The lady had taken a long and apparently satisfactory drink. With a deferential movement of his head the man withdrew. "I suppose, Margaret, you haven't got a cigarette?"

"I won't say that I'm afraid I haven't, because, as you are aware, I never smoke. I do not regard it as a nice habit for women."

"It's extraordinary how ignorance can so prevail. Such doctors as know something of medicine are agreed that it is the finest thing in the world for the highly strung women of to-day."

The speaker took a small gold case from her handbag; from it a cigarette which she placed between her lips and lighted with a match which came from the same receptacle. Leaning back

her head, she expelled the smoke through her nostrils.

“My dear Margaret, if you only knew what you lose!”

The other's lips were shut a little closely.

“I do not wish, Sarah, to force my opinions on you, but, as all the world is aware, we differ.”

“Oh, my dear, how thankful I ought to be!”

What the speaker quite meant was not clear. Lady Picard's lips were a little more firmly closed. She bent over the embroidered cushion-cover as if to keep herself from speaking. Presently she asked, as if the interval of silence had done her good:

“Where is darling Delia? I hope nothing has happened to her. I have been so looking forward to seeing her. I hope she's in the best of health.”

“Darling Delia always is in the best of health, it's a habit of hers. Nothing has happened to her, nothing ever does. At present she's with your tame rabbit.”

Lady Picard, startled, almost dropped her cushion-cover as she stared at the speaker.

“Sarah, you do say such extraordinary things! My tame rabbit? Who do you mean?”

“Isn't the creature's name Taylor? Yes, I remember. He's a soldier of sorts.”

Lady Picard, drawing herself up on her chair, spoke with an air of marked umbrage.

“General Sir George Taylor is, as you're perfectly aware, a soldier of the greatest distinction. He has fought for his country in various campaigns and been the recipient of nearly every dignity which can be bestowed on him. You know this as well as I do!”

“Yes, yes, yes, I know. Why don't you marry him?”

"Sarah, you go too far! How dare you ask me such a question?"

"Why shouldn't I? Is there anything against the man?"

"I sometimes think that it is your wish and your intention to be trying. You know that to me marriage is a sacred subject, not to be lightly spoken of by anyone; and that you should make a jest of such a thing to one in my position—oh, Sarah, how could you?"

"Goodness gracious, what's the matter with the woman? Aren't you marriageable?"

"No, Sarah, you know perfectly well I'm not."

The other sat up straighter, with an air of startled sympathy.

"I'd no idea that anything was wrong. What is it? Is it your health? My poor girl, why didn't you tell me about it before?"

Lady Picard seemed a little bewildered. "What is there to tell you?"

"Is there anything the matter with your health?"

"Of course there isn't. I've always lived temperately and regularly, and have never had a day's illness in my life. What have you got in your mind, Sarah?"

"Then what is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong."

"There must be something wrong. Has the man got a wife already?"

Lady Picard positively flushed; with her that sort of thing was still possible.

"Sarah, you really are almost as much as I can bear! How dare you suggest such a thing about General Taylor? What is the matter with you?"

"You said you weren't marriageable—why aren't you marriageable?—that's what I want

to know. You're talking of getting Frank married."

"I'm not only talking, I'm hoping he will marry. You know perfectly well the understanding there has always been between us."

"What are you going to do when he is married?"

"What am I going to do?" Her ladyship's confusion seemed to grow.

"You can't stop here."

Lady Picard's manner as she first eyed the speaker and then returned, as if doubtfully, to her cushion-cover, suggested that something had occurred to upset her mental equilibrium. Her tone was grave.

"Really, your outlook on the more serious aspects of life is so different from mine that I scarcely know what to say to you. You know I have never concealed that one of the dearest hopes of my heart is that my dear son Frank should be married to Delia. Believing, as I do, that for one in Frank's position an early marriage is most desirable, I am anxious there should be as little delay as possible, having due regard to what propriety and custom require of young persons in their position. Sir Frank Picard and Lady Delia Haydon cannot, of course, be joined together in holy matrimony at a few days' notice."

The visitor expelled a whiff of smoke through her nostrils. "Why not?"

Lady Picard smiled indulgently.

"One hardly knows how to regard some of your questions—as if you did not know! When persons in their position marry the county has certain expectations which it would be unkind and unwise, and even improper, to disappoint. I am a great stickler for precedent. When a Picard of Dunston Park marries it has always been an occasion for

general rejoicing; looked forward to with eager anticipation sometimes for months; looked back upon with tender memories for many years. To you, as I am aware, the old customs mean nothing; to me they mean a great deal. I know they mean much to Frank, and trust they mean something to dear Delia."

"I doubt it. Anyhow, that's not my point. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I shall, of course, reside at the Dower House, where, under such circumstances, the dowager Lady Picard always has resided."

"The Dower House is three miles from anywhere. Won't you be very lonely?"

"A woman often is lonely; I am prepared for that. I ask nothing more when I have once seen my dear son happy and settled in life."

"Stuff! You're always for the bad old times, the bad old customs, the bad old habits of thought. If you had happened to be a Hindu wife you would have insisted upon being burned on your husband's funeral pyre."

"Even if it were possible for me to conceive of myself as a Hindu wife, I trust I should have done nothing so contrary to the teaching of common sense and true religion."

"Practically you are practising the same thing. You are willing to be buried alive because your son gets himself a wife. You are not an old woman, as women go you are still young—why on earth don't you marry General Taylor? I happen to know that he'd be only too glad to marry you. He's not a pauper, and he's a man of distinction—you yourself admit it—what have you against him?"

The flush came back to her ladyship's cheeks. Like some shy girl she averted her eyes, keeping them bent over the cushion-cover on which she was

engaged. For some seconds she was silent. The visitor, amazed and amused, watched her with her lorgnette held up to her eyes. When she did speak it was in an undertone, a little shakily, as if confusion had affected her voice.

"I do not know why you should take such an interest in what I propose to do with the rest of my life. So far as I know you never have concerned yourself with my movements."

"That is because I make it a rule not to interfere with anybody's movements. But when you talk about my girl marrying your boy I look upon it as a special occasion. Many of the things you have said and done have struck me as eminently foolish——"

"I would rather not listen if you speak in that strain."

"When I hear of your proposing to crown an ill-spent life——"

"Sarah!" The exclamation somehow reminded one of the bleat of a frightened sheep.

"——by committing the greatest folly of all, I feel that, under the circumstances, I've got to speak. However, since it is perfectly clear that common sense—coming even from me—will not avail with you, I will allow you to continue to treat the unfortunate Taylor as no decent woman would—and beg you to consider the subject closed. Die an old maid if you like. A husband is a nuisance, but, personally, I have no taste for the state of single blessedness."

"When you talk of my dying an old maid I suppose you are forgetting that I had a husband, one who meant as much to me as I am sure I meant to him."

"Yes, but when one only has a husband about three years he scarcely counts. I don't call a three year marriage marriage at all. However, as

I said, we'll change the subject. There is something else which I wish to talk about, and which really brought me here alone. You have a way of taking things for granted which sometimes amuses me and—sometimes doesn't. You seem to pose as the person who makes the figures move."

"As is so often the case where you are concerned, I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Are you sure that your Frank proposes to marry my Delia?"

Her ladyship opened her eyes. "It has not occurred to me that anything else could be possible."

"Hasn't it? Then it has to me. What makes you take this particular thing so much for granted?"

"You do not know my boy; we understand each other perfectly."

"That's what I'm wondering—do you? Has Frank told you, in so many words, that he proposes to marry Delia?"

"Frank and I have not entered into minute details. My views on the sacredness of marriage being what they are you could hardly expect it. But in all essentials there is such perfect understanding between my son and me that you may take it that we are as much in sympathy on this subject as on all others."

"Great God in heaven!—was there ever such a woman! Has this remarkable son of yours only to guess at what is in your mind to be expected to obey your wishes? Is that not too much to expect of human nature?"

CHAPTER X

A CONTRAST IN MOTHERS

FOR some seconds Lady Picard's needle went in and out of her cushion-cover as if she were working for dear life. Then its movements became slower. With her face still bent over her work, she spoke in tones of curious solemnity—as if she announced an awful truth.

“Sarah, you also are a mother.”

The reply was not by any means so gravely uttered.

“I should think I was—five times over—four boys and one girl. When one has done that sort of thing, one hardly thinks that a woman who has only had a singleton has any right to be considered a mother at all. At any rate, she's only a beginner.”

“Experience teaches me that the woman who has only borne one child is apt to accept her maternal responsibilities much more seriously than one who has had several.”

“In a sense I agree with you. The woman who has only had one baby fancies herself sometimes much more important than the woman who has had a hatful—which is apt to be bad for the baby.”

“I have always regarded Frank as a special charge from heaven.”

“We all know that, my dear. He's been a kind of hobby.”

“I don't think the word is quite rightly chosen. I trust that Frank has been to me much more than what you call a 'hobby.' You must not laugh at me, but I have always felt that my child was a gift from God, from Whom he came spotless into

the world; and that it would be my duty as well as my pride and pleasure to keep him as unstained as he came to me. When he was dying I told his father that I intended to devote the whole of the remainder of my life to his son, and he approved."

"You're sure that he approved? He always seemed to me to be a level-headed man. If anyone knew anything about boys he did."

"You know that my dear husband was not so serious in all things as he might have been—even in the hour of his going."

"If only you had been a little less serious yourself, my dear."

"But his lightness was only superficial. With it he veiled the real man who was within. I have consulted the monitor and I am convinced that he approved of my resolve to devote my life to his son. On that resolve I have acted. I drew up a plan on which I hoped, with God's help, to work. I formed an ideal to which I trusted he might attain. I say it in all earnestness, but I believe he has attained it. I will not go so far as to say that my boy has never given me an instant's uneasiness, but I do declare that communion with him has been a constant joy, growing stronger as time showed what a beautiful and amenable spirit he had."

"I wouldn't give a row of pins for a boy who hadn't the devil in him somewhere—and who showed it at least once a day."

"You shock me! I know that man is born to sin as the sparks fly upward; I could not bear to think that the devil was in my boy."

"I'm sorry for Frank if he isn't."

Again the needle went in and out and the lady's lips were pressed closer together, until all at once they were wrinkled by their owner's effort to smile.

"We will not argue. I sometimes think that within we are nearer together than we would seem to be from without. I have no doubt that you wish your boys to do well as I wish mine. I do not believe that it can be otherwise, only you have your methods, and I have mine."

"I have no method. I feel pretty sure that if you try to bring up a boy in the way he should go, when he is old he will depart from it. I have always felt that it is better to leave him alone as much as possible; he can make himself as well as I can make him."

"I have trained Frank, so far as it is humanly possible, to be the kind of man I would like him to be, and I believe that by God's mercy success has crowned my efforts. You will perhaps smile again, but it is because of that belief that I am a happy woman. What can a mother ask more than the knowledge that under her guidance her boy has become the man she would desire him to be? He is not like other boys."

"He certainly is not!"

"He has never been to a school, either private or public."

"He would certainly have had something of the devil in him if he had."

"Nor to the university; his whole education has been conducted under my eyes—so he has been kept, as far as may be, from evil, and from the knowledge of evil. I would not lead my own son into temptation."

"Oughtn't he to have been to the 'Varsity? I thought all the Picards went to New."

"The names of several Picards have been on the books of New College, Oxford. Pressure was put upon me to let his be added to the rest. It was for me a subject for long and careful consideration."

"It is not a subject on which you were qualified

to judge; it is a pity he wasn't left with a proper guardian."

"Who should be a better guardian for a son than his mother? Who could make his interests so wholeheartedly her own? His whole future, the management of his estates—everything—was left unreservedly in my hands. I have tried to be faithful to my trust and I believe I have been. I believe that many young men fall away because they have been brought into contact with influences which warp their moral fibre. I have not encouraged the presence of any young man at Dunston who would be likely to say or do anything which could lead my son into a knowledge of evil until he had arrived at years at which he would be able to judge what a horror evil really is."

"You are a fool, my dear."

"I don't think, Sarah, it becomes you to use such language to me, especially in view of the fact that, at least in part, it is because of my care that he has become a man who will make, in all respects, a good husband for your child."

"Who is going to judge if he will make a good husband—you, I, or Delia? She may have her own ideas of what a good husband should be."

"Surely there can be only one standard for a good husband, Sarah."

"I'm against you there. Your good husband would be a nightmare to me. Why should he be inflicted on me?"

"What can you mean? You really do say the most astonishing things. I sometimes wonder if you know what you are saying."

"According to your showing Frank is a saint. I very much doubt if Delia wants that kind of man. Between ourselves, Delia is a little devil herself—up to any mischief going."

"Sarah!—how can you say such an awful thing

of your own daughter? What a light it throws upon her mother's training."

"Upon my word! Margaret, you really are a perfect idiot! I don't want to be rude, but you are! It's incredible that there should be people like you still at large—in what are supposed to be these days of rational education. I was a little devil myself, and always have been, thank goodness! I was a limb of Satan before I was in my teens. What I should have lost if I hadn't been! I was born in the purple and I married in the purple—if I hadn't been Sarah, Duchess of Ditchling, goodness knows who I should have been—but in England a duchess is always a duchess, no matter what she is. We have proper ideas upon such subjects. I tell you quite frankly that the last person in England I would choose as a husband for Delia is your son, if it weren't that he represents one of our greatest families, and is, and is likely to continue to be, one of the richest bachelors on the market. But why you want him to marry Delia, after what you have tried to make of him, is beyond me altogether. Tell me frankly why you're so set on his marrying the girl."

Lady Picard seemed to be more than a trifle confused, and bent closer over her cushion-cover.

"Sarah, you do say such astonishing things! What can be more natural than that I should wish my child to marry yours? You and I were girls together."

"Is that any reason why they should marry each other?"

"His father wished him to marry her."

"Did he? And he died when his son was three years old and Delia just shortened. He must have wished it while they were still in their cradles!"

“ He did. He told me more than once that he hoped that Frank would marry Delia Haydon—and marry her young. He said it in that half-laughing way he had, but he meant it all the same.”

“ Oh he did, did he? And why do you wish him to marry her? ”

Lady Picard looked up from her work and, for almost the first time, looked the other very straight in the face. One saw that she had fine eyes, and how difficult it was to make sure what the meaning was which they conveyed. An odd change had taken place in her tone.

“ Who else is there for him to marry? ”

“ Who else is there for him to marry? That's it, is it? Now we're getting there. You may appear to be a fool, but you're as wide awake as a woman need be. What do you mean by saying: Who else is there for him to marry? ”

“ Who is there? There may be things about you to which I object—there are many things; among them the use of words and phrases which would seem to me vulgar if heard in the servants' hall. I cannot close my eyes to the fact that in spite of these drawbacks there is no more desirable family in England from which I should like him to choose a wife. I like Delia—I like you—it is only out of some spirit of silly mischief that you say things which shock me. You are not the kind of woman you pretend to be. The Duke is, by common consent, one of the finest gentlemen in England. Part of your land joins ours, and it has always been understood that arrangements might be made by which it could be incorporated with ours.”

“ Incorporated is a good word. Now you're beginning to deal with facts, getting into an atmosphere in which I can breathe. Of course I

should like Delia to marry Frank; but as I should like her to marry someone in any case, I want to know just how matters stand. Does Frank agree?"

"I have always instilled in his mind that it is the duty of a man in his position to marry early, and that he could not find a more suitable wife in all respects than Delia. I have not said that in so many words, but he understands. He is ripe for marriage, and you will find that at a hint he will take Delia in his arms."

"There is no one else?"

"That I can assure you—he knows no one."

"Don't be so certain. Look at the trouble Ethel Staines has had with Putney. I suppose you know that some young woman who, with scarcely a rag of clothing on, is dancing in the halls, is likely to be the future Marchioness of Putney. Young men did not use to marry those sort of persons. They made other arrangements. It seems that the times have changed. It costs a fortune to keep them from the altar."

"You need have no fear of anything of the kind in Frank's case. He has never been to the theatre in his life, except with me to see some of Shakespeare's plays."

"You don't mean it! It sounds incredible. How about pantomimes?"

"Frank has never seen a pantomime. I've seen so much mischief done by women of that sort that I made up my mind, when Frank was quite a boy, that no stone should be left unturned to keep him from temptation. He has been kept, and will be. I've asked the county to the party I am having to-morrow in order that some more or less formal announcement may be made that a marriage is shortly to take place between the pair. Does Delia understand?"

“What Delia understands she alone knows. She has not been brought up on Frank’s lines. If she wants to marry Frank she will; if she doesn’t she won’t—nothing will make her. My impression is that she will.”

“Oh, Sarah, I do hope we’re not going to have any trouble with Delia. I can count absolutely on Frank, but you don’t know how provoking Delia can be!”

“Don’t I? A waggon-load of monkeys is nothing to her!”

“She loves to tease dear Frank, and he is so sensitive.”

“You mean he has such a good opinion of himself that the idea of anyone disagreeing with him would send him flying off, sulkily, like a dog, with his tail between his legs. I quite understand, and I have no fear on that score. You guarantee that he is free from entanglements—Delia will do the rest.”

“Frank knows no one I don’t; there’s not the slightest cause for fear.”

“If you’re sure of that, I think we may count upon all being well. I haven’t seen him—is he here?”

“He’s in town. I thought he would have returned before this, but he wired this morning to say he had been delayed—now I expect him almost immediately. He has some business to attend to; certain matters which it is desirable—although he does not know it—should have his attention before anything formal is done. When he does come I shall only give him a hint, you will give Delia a hint——”

“My dear, avoid too many hints. It is dangerous hinting to Delia.”

“At least I will give Frank a hint. Then we’ll leave the pair together”—her ladyship paused; for

the first time she smiled—"I think we may have an announcement to make to the county tomorrow."

The Duchess held up her hand. "Gently! Be careful!—there's Delia coming—with your tame rabbit."

"Sarah, I wish you would not use such language in connection with General Taylor!"

"I won't—if I can remember it. And don't you be too free with your hints to Delia."

CHAPTER XI

A MODERN DAUGHTER

LADY DELIA HAYDON was a young woman of to-day, almost a young woman of to-morrow—that was commonly felt. It was also universally admitted that there could hardly be a more delightful example of her type. She had a way of doing things which she ought not to have done—which everyone knew she ought not to have done—which made them somehow seem to be just the things worth doing. She lacked many of those things which all young women ought to keep in stock—respect, for instance, for her elders, especially for her parents. As she came through the doorway of the garden-room, with General Taylor just at her heels, she should have greeted her mother, the Duchess of Ditchling, old-fashioned folk would have said, with at least some little show of consciousness of the relations which existed between them; especially, as this was her first meeting with her hostess, ought she to have spoken to her with something of that lady-like grace and sweetness which, as she well knew, Lady Picard so liked to see in a young girl. She might at least have greeted her. What she did do was to march straight into the garden-room, to a big settee which stood in about the centre, climb on to the seat and plant herself on one of the ends. From that post of vantage she surveyed, with very bad manners, and an air of bewitching impertinence, the two elder ladies.

“Trotty!” was the first remark she made. “I wish you wouldn’t smoke those cigarettes! I’ve

told you about them before—they're poisonous. Now, if you would only try mine!"

Trotty—which was the nickname by which she addressed one who was not only her mother, but also one of England's greatest duchesses—put her cigarette between her lips, expelled a little cloud of smoke, and then remarked, with something in her manner which almost suggested discomfiture:

"I have already told you that I would rather not smoke your cigarettes; my knowledge of cigarettes is perhaps greater than yours, and I prefer my own. I have also asked you not to call me Trotty."

The young woman treated the latter request as if it had not been made.

"My dear Trotty!—and Trotty does suit you so well—doesn't it, General Taylor?"

The well-set-up, elderly gentleman to whom the question was addressed seemed to be slightly abashed. He glanced at her for a second, as if in doubt; then turned to her mother.

"How are you, Duchess? I was very sorry to hear from Lady Delia of the misfortune you had with your motor-car. I trust it has left you none the worse. I gather from what she says that it might have been very serious indeed."

The Duchess eyed the General through her lorgnette.

"It might have been, but it wasn't. Delia, don't you see Lady Picard?"

The young lady nodded to her hostess with genial affability.

"How do you do? How lovely your roses are! They beat ours all into splinters."

Lady Picard smiled—as if she found the girl amusing.

"Dunston has always been famous for its roses;

it's very good of you to like them. Good afternoon, Delia, I hope you're very well. When I was your age I always said good afternoon to the lady of the house."

If the words were intended to convey a criticism it was not one which seemed to produce much effect upon Lady Delia.

"My manners," she agreed, quite pleasantly, "are awful! That is Trotty's fault."

"Delia!" remonstrated her mother, as if irritated. "I won't have you address me like that!"

Balancing herself on her two hands, Lady Delia leaned right back on her perch on the couch, regarding her mother with the kindly contemplation with which a woman regards her child.

"What is the use of saying that you won't have it rain when it is going to rain? For years we have discussed the Trotty question—it is still Trotty, and Trotty it is going to be." The young lady glanced towards Lady Picard. "Where's the boy?"

"The boy? Do you mean Frank?"

"Is there another boy about the place? I didn't know it."

"My dear Delia," Lady Picard spoke solemnly, "if you take my very strong advice you won't let Frank hear you speak of him as a boy—he might not like it."

"Mightn't like it!" The young lady screwed her pretty mouth up until it was shaped like an O. "As if that mattered! It might do him good! As if a child like that counts!"

"Delia!" Lady Picard, looking up from her cushion-cover, still spoke gravely. "Frank is not a child, dismiss that idea from your mind. He has not only ceased to be a child, he has put away childish things; he is a man. He does not allow

himself to forget it, nor does he like others to forget it either."

The young woman, with an air of dainty impertinence, laughed at Lady Picard.

"Frank a man? That I doubt if he will ever be. I know him better than you do."

The elder lady looked at the younger with an air of startled surprise. Her eyes grew wider open.

"You know my son better than his own mother does! My dear Delia, what foolish things you allow yourself to say. In the case of any mother and any child how could that possibly be? But in the case of Frank and myself, when I have devoted twenty-two years to studying him, what can your knowledge of him be compared to mine?"

Lady Delia not only remained unabashed, she smiled with a little air of something very like condescension.

"You see him with the eyes of a mother, I don't; that's in my favour—enormously. Your mother's eyes distort your vision. You see him as you like him to be, as you think he is; I don't. There is nothing to distort my vision. I see straight, and just what there is. Besides, you belong to an older generation; young people understand each other better than their elders ever will. I tell you that I know Frank—he will never be a man. He might have been if he had been properly brought up, but it's too late—he never will now."

"Delia, you are the most trying creature that ever lived! Why are you so fond of saying just the one thing you're not wanted to say?"

This was the Duchess, who spoke with a sort of plaintive wail. Lady Picard checked her. She still seemed to be a little startled.

"Sarah, let Delia go on. I am seeing, for the

first time, a side of her which I did not know existed. Her theory that the older generation cannot understand the younger one took me by surprise. I am very curious to know what she means by speaking of Frank as if he had been badly brought up. Why do you say that he will never be a man?"

The Duchess made what perhaps were meant to be private signals to Delia, which were perhaps intended to induce her to hold her peace. If the girl saw them she ignored them utterly. She seemed to hesitate for some moments what reply to give to Lady Picard. Coming, seemingly, to a sudden decision, lowering herself from her position she descended to the floor. She held out her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

"What is the use, Lady Picard, of continuing a discussion which pleases no one? If I gain my point, or you yours, it will result in nothing. You understand one thing, I another, by a man. I know Frank to be weak——"

"Frank weak? My son Frank?"

"I know him to be at the mercy of every wind that blows; to be led this way or that by whoever takes the trouble to lead him. But what can be expected of anyone so ignorant as he is? Who does not know, unassisted, his own way across the road. He could be twisted round the finger of any girl who happened to be with him. He is incapable of saying no to anything she might ask him. So far as he is concerned, if she chooses to fool him to the top of his bent she can get from him any mortal thing she wants."

"Sarah, this is too much! Delia, how dare you say such things? You libel Frank, absolutely libel him! He's the soul of courage, honour, strength, and firmness of purpose. I, his mother, ought to know."

“Yes—but you don’t! Frank is a very good boy in his way, but it is not the way you think. In some respects he’s as weak as water, Frank is. The girl who becomes his wife will have all her work cut out to keep him from showing it half a dozen times a day. Most men are like putty in the hands of anything in petticoats—but Frank! Dear Lady Picard, it is so sweet of you to think so highly of your son. It must be so nice to be a mother—so long as her eyes remain unopened. Afterwards—well, that’s another thing and depends upon the mother. It is like a wife who has implicit faith in her husband and then discovers him in an intrigue with her own maid. The first time the dear simpleton is apt to take it badly—until experience has taught her that there’s always sure to be someone.”

Lady Picard turned to the Duchess with cheeks which were nearly scarlet.

“Sarah! amid what surroundings has your daughter lived? From where can she have got these horrible ideas?”

The Duchess lit a fresh cigarette with the tip of the last.

“Margaret, I told you what my dear daughter was like when she was bent on exasperation. I’ve never been able to stop her—perhaps you can.” Coming forward, Lady Delia put her arms about her mother’s neck, in spite of her parent’s remonstrance. “Delia, don’t do that!”

The young woman’s tone was soft and tender.

“Dear Trotty, how lovely you are! How thankful we ought to be to Providence for having given us our mothers! A mother always reminds me of a hen with ducklings. When they want to take to the water she does make such a fuss. Fancy a hen with eaglets! What must her feelings be like the first time they ascend towards the sun?”

General Taylor, wouldn't you like to be a mother?"

"I'm thankful," the military looking gentleman replied, with what he intended to be stiffness, "that I haven't a daughter."

"Oh no, you're not—you'd love to have a daughter; and you wouldn't make a bad father as fathers go. Why don't you marry?"

The young lady had a knack of speeding her arrows home. A soldier can cut a fine figure in many campaigns and yet be a shy man. The young lady's question seemed to put the General utterly to rout. He made a stammering attempt to find words with which to reply. Had not the Duchess come to his rescue he would possibly literally have turned tail and fled.

"Delia," her Grace remarked, "I believe I dropped my handkerchief." She spoke with an air of engaging candour. "Would you mind going and seeing if I did?"

The young lady looked at her mother as if she were in two minds, then she glanced round, and laughed.

"Here's Frank! Perhaps Frank will go. Frank, mother thinks that she may have dropped her handkerchief in the rose garden. As a matter of fact, it is in the bag which she has on her lap. But would you mind going to the rose garden and seeing if it's there?"



CHAPTER XII

A BOMBSHELL

SIR FRANK PICARD had entered unnoticed from the house—presenting as he stood in the doorway and glanced at the occupants of the garden-room a picture of fine young masculine humanity. Slightly flushed perhaps; even a little excited; still as pretty a young gentleman as one could wish to see. When Lady Delia Haydon turned and saw him he went quickly forward into the room. He exclaimed as he went:

“Hullo, people! Hullo, mother! Hullo, Duchess! Hullo, General! Hullo, Delia!”

Those who knew him well were conscious that under the show of perfect ease which his off-hand greeting was intended to suggest, there was something which was scarcely normal. Lady Delia looked at him out of the corners of her eyes—she had a trick of doing it which made her seem bewitching.

“Hullo, yourself!” she said—with something in the manner in which she almost whispered it which made him stand and stare at her. He spoke almost as if he were ashamed and was trying to excuse himself.

“I’m awfully sorry, but I’m feeling rather poor company.”

“How sad! and you are generally such excellent company, aren’t you?”

“I don’t feel like it just now, I can tell you. Hullo, mother!”

He crossed towards his mother’s chair; she laid her hand upon his arm.

"I thought you had not noticed me, my dear."

"Why do you say that? I spoke to you when I came in."

"Spoke to me? Yes, but you generally do more than that when we meet." Drawing his face down towards hers, she kissed him. "Why, my boy, you are positively a little feverish."

He drew his head back almost pettishly.

"I'm a little out of sorts, mother, and that's a fact. I've had a good deal to vex me."

She seemed concerned.

"My boy, what has happened? Is anything wrong?"

"It depends what you call wrong. I told Woodham before I left where the tea tent was to stand, and they're putting it up on the other side of the lawn. I asked him what he meant—he must have understood what I said—and he actually said that you had told him to pay no attention to my orders, but that the tent was to stand where he was placing it. Was Woodham telling the truth?"

Her ladyship looked at him as if a little startled.

"My dear boy, the tea tent has always stood in the same place whenever we've had a garden party. It positively seemed to me that something was wrong——"

The young gentleman cut her short.

"My dear mother, I have no doubt that you're perfectly right, but would you permit me to point out that, as a little change, I wish Woodham, or any other of the servants, to understand that when I give an order it has to be obeyed. I didn't like Woodham's manner at all. I made him undo all that he had done and set about doing what I told him. There can't be two captains aboard, can there, dear?"

Sir Frank Picard touched his mother lightly on the shoulder with what might have been meant to

be a gesture of endearment, but which looked very like condescension. As he moved away the expression on her ladyship's face pointed to something very much like tragedy. Her cheeks flushed, her lips opened a little widely, she breathed quickly; a stranger coming in just then might have been moved to fear that someone had struck her a blow. To be spoken to like that by her own son, in the presence of others—for the moment, to her, the world seemed almost to have turned upside down. The Duchess spoke to him as he moved to a seat.

"I suppose, Frank, you will be able to say to me—as you did to your mother—that you spoke to me as you came in."

Her daughter interposed. "So he did, mother; he said 'Hullo!'"

The Duchess did not seem satisfied. She continued her remarks.

"I hope, Delia, that Frank's manners are not quite so bad as yours. Is 'Hullo!' Frank, all that you have to say to me!"

Sir Frank had placed himself on a chair with both elbows resting on a small round table which he had dragged closer up.

"I'm afraid, Duchess, that for the moment I really think it is. You see I've got a headache; until I got rid of a couple of Seidlitz powders I couldn't see out of my eyes—thanks to your Archie."

"Why are you thankful to my Archie—for the headache or the Seidlitz powder?"

"A little of both. He asked me to dinner last night—a rattling good dinner he gave us—a top-hole feed. Mother, I made a note of one or two of the things he did give us—perhaps you'll be so good as to pass them on to the kitchen with my compliments. There never does seem to be anything worth eating at Dunston."

"Frank, what are you talking about? I am sure no one in the county keeps a better table than we do at Dunston."

"That's a question of opinion, isn't it, dear? And the wine—Duchess, I think you'll be able to judge what the champagne was like when I tell you that I put nearly a couple of bottles away to my own cheek."

Lady Picard, who was passing through a series of novel and unpleasant emotions, exclaimed in horrified amazement:

"My dear boy! You drank champagne?—you, a teetotaller?"

If his reply was to the point, it startled her ladyship.

"My dear mother, if I had been a teetotaller I shouldn't have drunk champagne, should I? Don't you think that stands to reason?"

"But, Frank, you have never tasted wine in your life!"

"That's the trouble. If I had I might have known when to stop, and I shouldn't have gone in for whisky afterwards, but stuck to brandy like the others. Archie told me this morning that when you have champagne for dinner you never ought to touch whisky; brandy's the only thing. Of course I had a liqueur or two—I don't know what the stuff was called—but it wasn't bad—only, as Archie says, it helped to 'sew me up.' What Archie doesn't know about drinks I don't think is worth knowing."

The Duchess surveyed the young gentleman through her lorgnette with an air of not unjustifiable indignation.

"That's a nice thing to say, Frank Picard! Do you know you're speaking to a mother of her son?"

"Sorry, but it is a fact. I had no idea that

Archie was so up in everything—but he is. Afterwards we had a little game.”

“A little game? What sort of a game?”

“Poker. Of course I didn’t know anything about poker. The mater never would let me so much as touch a card.”

“My dear boy, I’ve always told you——”

“Yes, my dear mother, I know. But Archie says he played poker when he was five.”

“Sarah, can it be possible that your son Archie played poker when he was five, or anything like that age?”

“I dare say, I shouldn’t wonder. Cards are always lying about our place, week-days and Sundays. Our house would seem strange without them.”

Lady Delia spoke. “You must understand, dear Lady Picard, that mother doesn’t mean any harm—but people have such different ideas. In our house we have no ideas at all—and never have had.”

Sir Frank went on. “But it’s hard on me. The result is that the first time I have a good dinner, and some decent wine, and a game of cards, they do me in to the extent of about two thousand pounds.”

“Frank, do you mean to say that unprincipled Archie robbed you of two thousand pounds—or anything like it?”

This was Lady Delia, whose tone and manner suggested that the possibilities of the thing amused her very much.

“My dear Delia, there was no robbery about it—nothing of the kind! I was simply out of the nursery, that’s all. When I told them I didn’t know anything about the game they didn’t want me to play. ‘If you do play,’ said Archie, ‘you’ll lose your money as sure as you’re alive. Poker is not a game for babes. We’ll cut you up between

us.' That put my back up. 'Look here, Archie,' I told him, 'if you played poker at five then I ought to play at twenty-two. I assure you I intend to play before I'm twenty-three—so perhaps you'll give me my first lesson now.' 'Then we'll play for love,' said one of the other chaps; 'I for one am not going to take money from a child.' 'That may be,' I answered, 'but I'm ready to play poker for whatever points you please. I expect to lose; but experience is worth paying for. I'm not an idiot; let's play a little to put me into the game, then perhaps you'll find I'm not such a fool as you suppose!' Well, we played a little; then we started—they all joined. I began by winning—at one time I had won sixteen hundred pounds."

"Not from Archie, I'm sure. He hasn't as much to lose."

As this remark came from that young man's mother she ought to have known.

"I won most of it from a chap they call 'the Bishop'—I don't know what his name was, but they call him 'the Bishop' because he's the Bishop of something's son."

"You appear to have been in lively company, young man." This was Lady Delia. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

"I was; I had an excellent time! I didn't care whether I won or lost, it was all very good fun." Getting up from his chair, the young gentleman put his hands into his trousers pockets and delivered himself of words of wisdom. "I don't know that poker is the sort of game I should care to play often. I should say it was rather monotonous—but for once in a way it is certainly amusing. I don't think I played so badly—Archie will tell you that—or they wouldn't have taken my money. I ran into a vein of bad luck towards the finish—couldn't get hold even of a pair of knaves—that's

all. Only this morning hadn't I a headache! I assure you the next time I join in a game of poker no one will need to teach me how to play, or warn me not to mix three or four stiff whiskies and sodas with liqueurs and nearly a couple of bottles of champagne. A pinch of experience—as you've often told me, my dear mother—is worth a pound of theory."

The countenances of the three ladies as they listened to the young gentleman's narrative were mirrors of conflicting emotions. It would possibly be no exaggeration to say that Lady Picard had more sensations crowded into those few minutes than in the whole of her preceding life. She looked like a stricken woman—as if what she heard was too awful for credence. Once or twice she seemed to make an effort to speak—especially was this the case when the young gentleman paused. She sat up in her chair, ignoring the fact that her cushion-cover had fallen to the floor; brushed her hand across her eyes, opened her lips—and said nothing. Glancing at her, as if perceiving her plight, the Duchess spoke instead—with an air of severity which somehow sat oddly on her. Obviously it was a little forced.

"Pray, Sir Frank Picard, do you consider the instruction you received worth the money it cost?"

Sir Frank smiled, as if he perceived the humour which was at the back of her sternness. Perching himself on the arm of his chair he surveyed his polished boots.

"That's just what I'm asking myself—queer, isn't it? Some men get their teaching spread over a term of years—Archie seems to have been learning all his life, I haven't. I got all my instruction crammed into—well, two or three hours. I fancy that Archie's education cost him a trifle—it seems

to have been so thorough that he couldn't have got it for nothing—it stands to reason.”

“ In one respect you are correct. Knowledge of a certain sort, as you put it, is not given away with a pound of tea. It has to be paid for—by someone. Archie's education was paid for by his father and mother—they're paying for it still.”

The young gentleman nodded as if to denote his entire comprehension.

“ There you are—you have to pay! Well, I paid—and I don't think I paid too much. With this stunning headache I don't feel that I can be sure of anything—but that's my impression. Delia, do you think I paid too much? ”

The young lady, back again on her seat at the head of the settee, seemed to be picking with her finger-tips at the pattern on her frock.

“ How am I to tell? You seem to me to be the sort of person who will keep on paying—for everything—always. That's all.”

“ I don't know that you're entitled to say that.”

“ Perhaps not; after all you're such a mere chit of a child that perhaps one isn't entitled to prophesy anything about your future—as yet. You're all future—I'm all past.”

“ No doubt.” This was her mother, who spoke with scorn. “ You always were all past. I've been blessed in my children! ”

Sir Frank glanced at the speaker with something quizzical in his eyes.

“ I dare say you are—without knowing it.”

“ It is certainly without knowing it.” The Duchess's tone was grim.

“ I fancy mother is not so sure that she is blessed in her child as she was before I went to town. A few days in London have changed me. It seems queer that I had never been away from home all

by myself before. You don't know—no woman can know—what a difference it makes to a chap when he's all alone in town. I've had some good times with the mater—haven't I, mother dear?—in London, and Paris, and all over the place—but that's different. I did exactly what she wanted. When she asked me what I wanted to do—I wanted what she wanted me to do—somehow I had to. But when you're on your own—it's different. Mother dear, you feel that I've been a very awful character, don't you? ”

Her ladyship seemed about to reply, but for some reason she refrained. The young man went on, as if his intention was to administer the comfort which he felt was needed.

“ Well, mother, I've not—honest! I'm a man, that's all; you want to keep me always a boy. As Archie says, it's no good for a mother to try to keep her son always in knickerbockers, because he will grow out of them. I've grown out of mine, and I'll keep on growing. I'm afraid you find it rather a shock. But, as Archie always says—he's a clever chap, is Archie, and knows no end of a lot—'It's nature, and sometimes nature is a little shocking.' But I have one piece of good news for you which will perhaps make up for some of the bad. You know, dear, you have always said you would like me to marry early. You know that only a week ago you said, 'Now that you have a home there is only one thing I ask, that your home should have a wife—please don't keep me waiting for her very long.' Mother, I won't. I won't keep you waiting at all.”

The young man's sudden change of subject and especially his appeal to herself seemed to startle the already bewildered woman.

“ Frank! ” she exclaimed, speaking in little more than a whisper.

"Yes, mother, I'm in earnest. I won't keep you waiting for my wife at all. Isn't that good news?"

"Good news! What does he mean? Delia, what does he mean? Why don't you tell me?" She glanced towards the girl, who had suddenly sat up on the head of her settee, as if she also were a little startled.

"Tell you?—what am I to tell you? There's nothing for me to tell you. Lady Picard, why do you speak like that?"

The Duchess spoke—sharply, as if she were all at once on the alert.

"Certainly Delia has nothing to tell you. My dear Margaret, why should she have? Perhaps Frank is only jesting."

"Indeed, Duchess, I'm doing nothing of the kind. The mater has always said that to her marriage is a serious thing—and I'm sure it is to me, especially my own marriage. Mother, you are funny! After all you've said don't you think it's good news to hear that I'm going to be married? I thought that it was the best news I could bring you. Dear, what's the matter? You don't seem to be a bit like your usual self. You don't think I'm such a very awful person, do you? I assure you, truly, that I'm not."

He had placed himself on a chair which he had drawn close to Lady Picard. Her ladyship made an effort to be, as he had put it, "herself" again.

"My dear boy, I'm sure that you're not. Every—everyone has occasional slips. A son brought up as you have been could not fall away from grace in a single night. What is it—what is it you were saying about marrying? I didn't—I didn't quite understand."

"Weren't you listening? I spoke very plainly. I was telling you that I have found what you

wanted me to find"—he dropped his voice, leaning closer to her—"a wife."

Her bewilderment seemed to increase.

"But—but I don't understand. What—what do you mean—by—you've found a wife?" In her voice there was almost a touch of fear—a something which seemed to rouse resentment in him.

"Aren't you glad? I tell you again, mother, I've found a wife. Isn't that good news? I've been telling myself all the way down from town how delighted you would be to hear it. You don't seem very pleased."

Her ladyship, as she shrank back as if to avoid her son's too near neighbourhood, certainly did not seem very glad. Rather, she seemed to be frightened. It was the Duchess who spoke—a little harshly.

"Pray, Frank, what wife have you found? Before your mother can tell you if she is glad or sorry she will have to know that. You cannot expect her to be enthusiastic about a stranger, of whom she may know nothing. What is the lady's name?—if you really are in earnest."

"I really am in earnest—why, Duchess, should you suppose that I'm not?" He got up from his chair as if he were a little angry. "The lady's name is Lawrence. I thought mother would be glad to hear that I was to be married. I didn't know that it would be necessary for me to enter into details."

"Really, Frank Picard, it would seem that you haven't even the small amount of sense I credited you with. You tell your mother that you've found a wife, and then you wonder at her wanting to know what you call 'details.' You say her name is Lawrence, but don't mention if she is Miss or Mrs. It does not occur to you that your mother may care to know if she happens to be a widow with two or three ready-made children."

"Miss Ailsa Lawrence is the lady I'm going to marry."

"Ailsa Lawrence? Who is Miss Ailsa Lawrence? What a name!" The Duchess turned to Lady Picard. "Do you know any Ailsa Lawrence?"

Frank Picard forestalled his mother's answer—if she had intended to make one. He spoke with what he might have meant to be dignity, but which looked like irritation.

"No, Duchess, my mother does not know any Ailsa Lawrence. In all probability she has never heard of her before, or of her family."

"Do you mean to say, Frank Picard, that you are going to thrust an absolute stranger on your mother, and make of her your wife. Would it be presumptuous if the oldest friend you have, who knew you when you were born, were to ask who Miss Ailsa Lawrence is?"

"I don't know if your happening to be an old friend entitles you to ask, but I don't mind giving you the information you require. I don't mind telling you that Miss Ailsa Lawrence happens to be an actress."

Had Sir Frank Picard desired to produce an effect upon his audience he could hardly have succeeded better.

"An actress! Frank Picard!" The Duchess turned to her ladyship, with something like fire in her eyes. "I thought you said he knew no actresses?—and now he's going to marry one."

"I don't know what's wrong, Duchess, about the profession of an actress that you should seem so shocked at the idea of my becoming associated with one, but let me tell you this—my mother is no more aware of my acquaintance with any member of the profession than you are."

CHAPTER XIII

LADY DELIA SPEAKS OUT

THE garden-room seemed suddenly to have become the centre of an electrical disturbance. Sir Frank Picard stood glaring at his audience as if he would have liked to quarrel with each of them in turn and all of them together. As the Duchess sat staring at him a little breathlessly, as if quite unprepared to meet his sudden onslaught, the young gentleman, finding himself unanswered, turned and stormed at his mother.

“ I find, mother, that the Duchess of Ditchling takes an interest in my affairs of a kind which is entirely unexpected. But you seem to take none at all. I expected at least some show of congratulations—doesn't a mother generally congratulate her son on his approaching marriage?—but you sit there as if you were dumb! What have I done to deserve such treatment? Mother, what does it mean? Will you speak to me, please! ”

Her ladyship seemed disposed to do nothing of the kind; indeed, to judge by her bearing and demeanour, she seemed to be bereft of speech. General Taylor, observing her condition, crossed towards where she was sitting. His manner was sufficiently stern; not at all suggestive of congratulations.

“ If you will take my advice, Frank Picard, you will not force your mother to speak when she would so obviously rather keep silent. You owe her an apology, sir. ”

“ I owe her an apology! What have I done for which I ought to apologise? Is it a sin to tell my own mother that I am going to be married? ”

“Have you no sense of filial feeling? Permit me, Lady Picard, to offer you my arm. A stroll in the garden will do you good.”

Without a word the lady, rising from her chair, accepted the General's proffered arm. Still in silence, arm in arm, the pair marched across the room, through the window, out into the garden. As if wholly taken aback the young gentleman eyed them in wordless amazement. When they had gone he turned to the Duchess.

“What on earth,” he demanded, “is the meaning of this? What does the General mean by speaking to me like that—in my own house? And has mother suddenly gone mad? Will someone please tell me what it means?”

“I will tell you one thing, my boy.” The Duchess, getting up out of her own chair, spoke with a candour which on occasion one may expect from a near relation. “If you were my lad—although you call yourself a man—I should be tempted to see whether a whipping would do you good.”

“Duchess!” He eyed the lady and gasped, seeming to be able to get no further than the single utterance. She went calmly on.

“Whether it's owing to natural deficiency I cannot say, but I never met anyone who seemed to be so absolutely devoid of the bare rudiments of common sense as you seem to be. You may call yourself a man, but you appear to be without the brains of a boy.”

Holding herself as bolt upright as her dumpy little figure permitted, the Duchess, in her turn, went sailing towards the window. When she reached it, pausing, she turned to address her daughter.

“Don't you think, Delia, you had better come

with me for a turn in the garden? You might find the air refreshing."

The young lady replied with the frankness which seemed to be a family trait.

"No, mother, I don't think I should, thank you very much. I don't want any refreshment—aerial or otherwise—and I don't want a stroll in the garden. I had as much of the garden as I wanted, for one afternoon, when you tacked me on to General Taylor. You go for a stroll in the garden. The heat is a little grilling, but if you like that sort of thing it may do you good."

Putting up her lorgnette to survey her daughter, her Grace delivered herself of a judicial criticism of her daughter's conduct.

"Delia Haydon, you are an impertinent minx. You will be so good as to understand that I wash my hands of you."

Quite what she meant by the latter mysterious threat was not clear. Had the Duchess of Ditchling heard Lady Delia Haydon's comment she would have felt that her words had not produced a satisfactory effect. The young lady spoke genially to Sir Frank Picard even as her mother was still passing into the garden.

"Dear Trotty is a very clever woman, but I sometimes think she's at her cleverest when she talks nonsense. You never know what she means."

"What I want to know is what it all means? Have these people, including your mother, all gone suddenly mad?"

"No, Frankie, they've not; they've merely made the mistake of treating you as if you were sane—and of course you know you're not."

"May I ask you, Delia, to be so good as to explain? What have I said—or done—which strikes you as insane?"

The girl, putting her head on one side, stared at the indignant youth as if he were a curiosity.

"Frankie, dear, will you ever grow up? Some children don't."

Sir Frank Picard shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands with a gesture which apparently suggested unutterable things.

"Of course if you're going to begin to talk like that I know what to expect—nothing but impudence."

"How dare you hint that I'm ever impudent! And, anyhow, how could anyone be impudent to a person of your sort?"

"Look here, Delia, you really have got some sense if you choose to show it—suppose you stop talking that sort of stuff and give a chap a helping hand."

"Who is the chap?" The girl observed the process of Sir Frank's seating himself in about the centre of the couch on one end of which she was perched with disapproving eyes. "I would rather you did not sit there if you don't mind."

"Why ever not? There's plenty of room. The thing's more than six feet long." The young gentleman, glancing towards the girl, observed her from a point of view which apparently had not occurred to him before. "I say, Delia, you do look ripping—really now."

"Frank Picard, will you please not use that sort of language when speaking of me. So you're going to be married?"

"I am—that's what I can't understand. The mater has always made a great point of my marrying young; only the other day she as good as said that all she asked of Providence was to see me with a wife; and now that I tell her I've got a wife—or as good as got a wife—instead of being nice about it, and that sort of thing, you saw how she

went on—and your mother joined her. What does it mean? It's an awful blow for me."

"It must be. I suppose you thought that any old thing would do as a wife from your mother's point of view."

"You oughtn't to talk like that—you really oughtn't! It isn't kind of you. And we have been such—such friends, haven't we?" The young gentleman screwed round on the couch and was looking at the girl with something quite odd in his eyes. "Really, Delia, something queer must have happened to you; I never knew you were so pretty. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"Not at all—why should I? You do say such nice things to a girl."

"But I really am in earnest. It may be the dress or something, but there's something about you this afternoon which I never saw before."

"It's so charming of you to make such a pleasant discovery, even if it is a little late in the day. Did you think I squinted?"

"Delia, what an idea! Of course I didn't. I can't explain—I'm not good at explanations—but there is something about you—your eyes, or your mouth, or—or——"

"Or something. Don't say you're not good at description—you do it so well. Did you say you were going to get married?"

"Never mind about that. I want you and I to understand each other."

"There's no fear about our not doing that. I understand you perfectly well. Did you say you were going to get married?"

"Of course I did—but we needn't talk about that just now."

"I thought perhaps you had forgotten. What

did you say the lady's name was? Excuse my asking—in case you don't remember."

"Am I likely to have forgotten the name of the girl who is going to be my wife? What funny things you do say! But just now what I want to say——"

"Ailsa Lawrence." Lady Delia, her pretty chin resting on the palms of her hands, sat staring intently into space. "What a lovely name! A little theatrical, perhaps, but I think you said that she was connected with the theatre."

"Of course she is. But let us leave that just for the moment; what I want to talk about is——"

"There's something so—alluring about an actress; so—so romantic. Don't you think there is?"

"She's the only actress I have ever known—so I don't see how you can expect me to speak of the others, as if I knew any more."

"Just so—quite true. I suppose she's very much in love with you. I can see you're madly in love with her."

"I don't know about madly. Of course I care for her."

"You do care for her? It is so sweet of you to do that! Is she so very, very beautiful?"

"That depends. I don't mean to say she's not good looking—she is. But at the same time——"

"At the same time—what? Please go on. You do seem to be so ecstatic about Miss Lawrence; it does one good to listen. Is she tall, or is she short? Now tell me all about her. I'd love you to."

"Well—when I come to think of it—and it's put that way—I'm not sure that there's much to tell. I'm not much of a hand at talking about girls; but I did think it would please the mater to hear that I had found a wife."

"And you found her to please the mater? What a good son you are."

"I'm not so sure that I did choose a wife just to please the mater; it would be rather a tall order. Do you know I have a sort of feeling that there's something queer about you, as well as about the mater and the rest; that you're pulling my leg, or making fun of me, or something. Delia, don't you want me to marry?"

"What a preposterous thing to say—as if I cared—if you married two wives a day. Really, Frank, you think yourself of more importance than you really are. Your mother may care who you marry—or who you don't—but no one else does—certainly I don't. Why should I?"

"I thought we were such friends."

"Are we? I didn't know it. I've always looked upon you as rather a silly boy."

"Delia, I hate to hear you talk like that. It doesn't seem to be like you a bit. You know we've been such friends."

"Anyhow, that's all over, if we have been."

"Why do you say that? What difference does it make?"

"You had better ask Miss Ailsa Lawrence what difference it makes."

"My friends will be my wife's."

"Oh! Will they? Suppose your wife says she would rather not—she mayn't like me."

"Why shouldn't she?"

"I mayn't like her. You can't force us to like each other whether we do or don't. There are lots of girls I don't like—lots and lots—and one of them may be your wife. We none of us may like her. Don't you think that is possible?"

"Then—then it will be all the worse for you if you don't. In my house everyone will have to like my wife."

“ Exactly, that’s quite a proper position to take up—from your point of view. But there is ours. Some men will marry any kind of girl—especially young men. Suppose, for instance, you had chosen to marry a chorus girl.”

“ Miss Lawrence is a chorus girl.”

The young gentleman said it with a show of pride which sat upon him a little awkwardly; he did not seem so much at his ease as he would have liked it to appear.

“ A chorus girl! Oh, Frank!” The girl’s amazement was perhaps a little overdone—but she did it very well. “ I thought you said she was an actress.”

“ She is an actress—in the chorus of the musical comedy, ‘ Captivating Clara ’ at the Frivolity Theatre.”

“ That horribly vulgar, rubbishing thing! It hasn’t a grain of sense in it!”

“ It’s a tremendous success—the theatre was packed each time I was there.”

“ I dare say—by an audience of boys like you, who had had two bottles of champagne before they went. Very well, Frank, I won’t be nasty—you poor boy! I dare say there are nice chorus girls. Evelyn Cathcart went into the chorus in some horrid theatre; when Sir Donald heard of it he wouldn’t have her in the house. Of course it would be awkward if we none of us could know your wife. Between ourselves, Frank, do you think she is that kind of person? ”

“ Upon my word! you’re a cheerful sort of creature! You call yourself my friend! Do you really suppose I should marry the kind of person you suggest? Delia, it’s too bad!”

“ What kind of person are you going to marry? I keep on trying to find out, but you won’t tell me. You know you’re just a silly boy. You

know lots of nice girls whom we all know—why couldn't you marry one of them instead of someone we none of us know? How long have you known Miss Ailsa Lawrence? Who is she? Who is her father—or her mother? What do you know about your future wife beyond the fact that you are going to marry her—or that you say you are?"

"Say I am? What do you mean by that? It's a rotten world! Upon my word, I've come to the conclusion that it's a rotten world!"

"Is it the world or the people in it? Really, Frank, I don't wish to be disagreeable, even to you—but you've behaved so badly to your mother, though she is very far from having deserved such conduct on your part. She has always had such faith in you!"

"Pray how have I behaved badly to my mother?—tell me that!"

"What is the good of my telling you if you don't know—if you really don't know? In that case I can only repeat—poor Frank!"

"The mater has always told me that she wanted me to marry early, that all she asked was to see me with a wife——"

"Oh, don't be so absurd! It's incredible that you should be so stupid as you want to make yourself out to be. The average boy of ten has more sense than you have—and you call yourself a man. A man! Should I wound your feelings if I asked whether you think 'man' is a synonym for 'idiot'?"

"Delia, I won't have you talk to me like that—I will not have it!"

"My unfortunate child, I don't want to talk to you at all—probably this is the last time I shall ever do so."

"What I have done or said to you that you

should treat me like this is beyond me altogether. What have I done? Now, out with it—what have I done?”

Lady Delia's manner was solemn—for her. She sat up stiffly on her perch, and with her hands on her knees looked down upon him sadly. He was bending about as if some itch in the blood prevented him from keeping still. Each word she spoke seemed to increase his restlessness.

“Frank, I wish never to forget that you are my host. As you say, we have been friends in the past——”

“Have been? Aren't we friends now?”

“How can I tell? In such matters the girl cannot always be the chooser. Suppose my mother objects to Miss Ailsa Lawrence. Most unfortunately, it so happens that chorus girls are among her pet aversions. Oh, Frank, why couldn't she have been anything else but a chorus girl. I think Trotty would sooner she had been in a tea-shop. Couldn't you pretend that she was in a tea-shop?”

“Why on earth should I?”

“Well, it's like this. Suppose mother were to take it into her head to pack up and leave the house—and take me with her. She's in mortal terror of even meeting a chorus girl, and she'd rather do anything than run any risk.”

“Oh, that's it, is it?” It was Sir Frank's turn to assume an air of would-be gravity which seemed to sit upon him oddly. “I had no idea that the Duchess of Ditchling had such strong opinions on a subject of which she cannot possibly know anything.”

“Oh, doesn't she? That's all you know about it. My mother could tell you stories about chorus girls——”

The young gentleman held up his hand with

what might have been meant to be an air of lordly dignity.

"If you please—stop; I would rather not hear about your mother's stories. You said just now that rather than run any risk the Duchess might prefer to pack up and leave my house. If that is so, as the master of the house, perhaps it is my duty to tell you that if the Duchess stops she will run a very considerable risk—what you call risk. The lady I hope shortly to make my wife is coming to her future home this afternoon."

"Frank! what do you mean?" The young gentleman looked at his watch.

"Miss Lawrence is possibly arriving at the station now. A car is there to meet her. She may be here at any moment."

"Are you serious?"

"That's not the first time you've asked that; it's not very flattering. Yes, Delia, I'm perfectly serious. Miss Lawrence is coming to be introduced to the home of which she will presently be mistress. Had my mother, or the Duchess, given me a chance I would have explained this while they were here. You can, if you like, explain it to them now—if you think it necessary. I need not tell you that it is my mother's duty to be the first to greet her future daughter-in-law. For some reason, which I do not pretend to understand, she has made this difficult, if not impossible—so I will take her place." He moved towards the door at the end of the room. "This is not going to be the sort of reception I had hoped my wife would have. I had hoped—I see now, foolishly—that she would have been greeted with open arms by you all. As things have turned out, all that is left to me is to ask that no one should treat her with the faintest show of rudeness—or I am afraid there will be trouble."

Standing, the young gentleman eyed the girl with a look of something which was very like defiance. He paused as if to give her an opportunity of speaking. When she was still he turned on his heel and quitted the room. One had a queer doubt as he went if his external air of severity was not a cover for boyish tears.

Lady Delia had descended from the head of the couch. She stood regarding the door through which the young gentleman had vanished. As she did so the look which was on her face passed gradually away; her expression changed. The stiffness seemed to go out of her. She reseated herself upon the couch, as if limply. The gaiety seemed to have gone from her countenance. She leaned to one side, put her arms on the head of the couch, and buried her face in her hands. One might have been excused for wondering if she were crying. She certainly presented a picture of trouble.

At the other end of the room there was a door which opened into a different part of the garden. While Lady Delia maintained her disconsolate position, the handle of this door was turned, as if furtively, and a stranger came in.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS LAWRENCE ARRIVES

THE stranger was a girl—the door was opened just wide enough to disclose that fact. Only her head and the upper part of her body came actually into the room—slowly and softly, as if her wish was to avoid attracting attention. She glanced about her as if to learn if the room was unoccupied. Apparently she arrived at the conclusion that it was, because, with the same odd carefulness, she introduced the rest of her body, and closed the door behind her.

The huge settee on which Lady Delia had placed herself stood at such an angle that from that door, until one came right into the room, anyone on it would not immediately be visible. Indeed, it was not for some seconds that either girl did become conscious of the other's presence.

The stranger, standing shyly inside the entrance, seemed gradually to become aware of a faint sound issuing from somewhere. By degrees her glance reached the settee. She became aware not only that someone was on it, but that it was from this someone that the faint sound was proceeding. Who was the cause of it was not clear; all she could see was a hat resting on one of the heads of the couch; under this hat it seemed that someone was quietly crying. The new-comer was startled. Who could it be who was under the hat, and whence these tears? She hesitated as to whether to beat a retreat, before anyone could accuse her of playing the part of eavesdropper. She took it for granted that no feminine person ever wishes to be discovered in the act of crying.

Presently the sound ceased. Could her entrance have been observed? Suddenly the hat on the couch was raised; the face of a girl looked from under the brim. The owner of the face had suddenly become conscious of the presence of the stranger. She seemed astonished, staring as if she found it difficult to believe the evidence of her tear-stained eyes—they were tear-stained, there could not be a doubt of that. Both girls remained motionless. Presently the girl on the couch stood up; her voice came like a challenge down the room.

“Who on earth are you?”

The stranger made no attempt to reply. Instead she evinced a disposition to turn and beat a hasty retreat—which did not seem to suit the girl on the couch.

“Stop! Where are you going? I want to speak to you.” Quitting the neighbourhood of the couch she moved down the room towards the stranger. When she reached a certain point she paused and stared, as if puzzled. “Haven’t you made a mistake? Haven’t you come to the wrong door? Don’t you want the servants’ entrance?”

The stranger replied, “I have not come to the wrong door, and I don’t want the servants’ entrance—why should I?” Suddenly something seemed to overwhelm the speaker with confusion. Her tone changed—even the fashion of her speech. She had spoken in the ordinary manner of a person of education; now she spoke like a street girl, making an awkward sort of curtsy as she did so.

“Beg pardon, miss, I’m sure, but you can take it from me that I ain’t made any mistake. I know nothing about this place, since I’ve never been here before. I don’t know what door I have got to, or what part of the house; but I don’t want no

servants' entrance—not much! You can take that from me—you really can.”

Again the awkward curtsy. Lady Delia stared as if puzzled. She came a little closer. “Why do you speak like that?”

The other seemed taken aback, as if the question startled her.

“Speak like what? I ain't said nothing, have I?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean. When I first spoke to you you answered my question like a Christian; now—now you're talking like nothing on earth!”

The other's confusion perceptibly increased.

“I'm sure, miss, I'm sorry. I don't mean no harm—I really don't!”

“Oh, you don't, don't you? Then what do you mean?”

“Don't mean nothing, miss. You can take it from me that I don't.”

“I won't take anything from you, thanks. You say you haven't come to the wrong door—but I don't see how you got to this one. What do you want? I suppose you do want something.”

“Oh yes, I do want something; I want a good deal.”

There was a perceptible something in the speaker's tone—it might almost have been a veiled threat—which struck Lady Delia's ears.

“Oh, you want a good deal. Who are you?”

“I'm the future Lady Picard, that's who I am—and now you've got it.”

Lady Delia eyed the speaker as if bewildered.

“You are the future Lady Picard!—you!—you! I don't believe it.”

The stranger broke in with sudden ferocity.

“Who asked you if you believed it? Who asked you? I am the future Lady Picard. Sir Frank

Picard's wife I'm going to be—straight! And you stand talking to me as though I was the sweepings off the road, asking questions about if I haven't come to the wrong door, and I don't know what. You've got a nerve. I'm going to be Lady Frank Picard, of Dunston Park, and if I can't come to what door I like in my own house—that's a pretty state of things, isn't it? Pray who may you be—standing there talking to me as if I was a worm."

"I'm Lady Delia Haydon, and I'm the daughter of the Duchess of Ditchling."

Obviously the new-comer was startled. She drew a little back.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, miss, but how was I to know who you were?"

"And do you mean to tell me that you're Miss Ailsa Lawrence?"

"I am—why shouldn't I be? I suppose you're not going to say that I'm not!"

"You are Miss Ailsa Lawrence!" Lady Delia's tone and manner seemed to affect the stranger unpleasantly. "Frank Picard is going to marry you?"

"And why shouldn't he? Tell me that—why shouldn't he?"

"I'm sure I don't know!" Lady Delia paused as if with hesitation. Suddenly she broke into what seemed to be a peal of irrepressible laughter. Dropping into a chair she continued to indulge in her mirth as if she were unable to stop.

The stranger looked as if she were uneasy, without understanding what it was which amused the other.

"What might you happen to be laughing at?" she asked, a little suddenly. "What is there funny about Sir Frank Picard's going to marry me?"

Lady Delia's reply took a singular form. Ceasing her mirth, apparently with an effort, her hands pressed to her sides as if her ribs were sore, she said, laughter still coming from her in little gasps:

"What's the game?"

The inquiry seemed to startle Miss Lawrence.

"Game?" she echoed. "What do you mean by—what's the game?"

"I believe you know perfectly well what I mean. I ask you quite civilly and nicely, what's the game? I'm sure there is one. I've known Frank Picard all his life; I understand him really better than I believe he does himself—he's not the wisest boy I ever met—but of one thing I'm quite sure—that he never asked you to be his wife as you are now." Miss Lawrence seemed to shrivel, as if the other's words had scorched her. "He's got excellent taste in girls' dress, whatever else he hasn't got. I'm perfectly certain that he never asked a girl got up as you are to be his wife—I doubt if he would even speak to her."

"I tell you if you doubt that Sir Frank Picard asked me to marry him——" Miss Lawrence looked about her with uneasy glances, seeming at a loss to find words with which to complete her sentence. The other went on.

"I don't doubt anything. I may be ill-mannered, but I'm not so rude as that. All I want to know is, what's the game? I've been looking at you. When you came through the door I had a feeling that I had seen someone like you before, and the more I look at you the more I am sure of it. I haven't quite got there yet, but I shall soon. Where have I seen that dress before, and that hat? Don't tell me that when Frank Picard asked you to be his wife you wore those things, because that I don't believe. No man ever proposed to a girl

dressed like you are—even 'Arry wouldn't do it! Sir Frank Picard's taste in such matters is, to put it mildly, finical. If a girl isn't dressed just so, in a hat to his taste and at the right angle, or if there's anything the least bit wrong with her, he wouldn't hesitate to tell her so. I tell you what it is, Miss Lawrence, he wouldn't be seen dead with anyone dressed as you are. And your accent; when you first came through that door your accent was perfectly all right. He wouldn't exchange two sentences with a girl who spoke as you've been speaking now. I know him, I tell you, so it's no use your playing it off on me. Now, tell me, what's the game?"

Miss Lawrence was disposed to be sullen.

"It ain't any business of yours, I tell you."

Lady Delia cut her short. "Don't talk like that. You can speak as well as I can—I dare say better; so please do."

"I don't know what right you have to ask me questions."

Miss Lawrence had reverted to her customary method of speech, though her manner was sulkier than one hoped it often was. Lady Delia clapped her hands—as if it were a game at which they were playing.

"There!—hurrah!—now you're talking more like yourself. This is going to be great fun, I can see. Now, don't be disagreeable—tell me what it means. Why did you come down here toggled up like that?"

Miss Lawrence broke into sudden heat.

"I'm an idiot, that's what I am! I'm a perfect idiot!"

"We lots of us are that! I shouldn't let a little thing like that worry you—not a little bit."

"I almost wish I'd never been born!"

"I shouldn't do that. It's the common lot—we

all of us have got to be born, so what is the use of making a fuss about what can't be helped."

"It's all very well for you. You say you're the daughter of a duchess."

"Don't lay that to my charge, I'm not to blame. What fault is it of mine? Now what's the matter with the girl? For goodness sake don't cry. It's such a waste of force."

There was no mistaking the purpose for which the lady had raised a gaudy handkerchief to her eyes—certain sounds proclaimed it. She was not too far gone in grief to be unable to retort.

"You were crying yourself when I came in."

The charge seemed to have found Lady Delia unprepared. She seemed to have no answer ready beyond a vain repetition of the other's words.

"I was crying when you came in? What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean what I say; you know you were crying. I couldn't make out what it was at first, then I saw your head on the end of the couch, and I heard you crying—you know I did!"

"I didn't know you did, or I should have been pretty disgusted. I wasn't boo-hooing anyhow."

"I wasn't boo-hooing either, only—only you're horrid!"

"I didn't mean to be horrid—if you'll only give me a chance I want to be friends. Frank has been telling me about his going to marry you."

"Then you knew all the time? that makes it worse."

"Makes what worse? I'm quite sure that you've not the least intention of marrying him."

"How do you know that?" Possibly the surprise she displayed was the most genuine exhibition Miss Lawrence had given yet.

"Would you have come down here like that if you did? People don't get dressed up like a figure

of fun by accident; they must have done it on purpose. You must have planned it all along. That's why I ask you to tell me what's the game."

Miss Lawrence had placed herself on a chair immediately facing Lady Delia, at whom she was staring with wide-open eyes which were like two notes of interrogation. She seemed to be divided in her mind.

"You'll laugh if I do tell you; you'll think I'm a fool."

"I'm pretty certain you're not a fool, any more than I am. And why shouldn't I laugh? Hasn't anyone laughed at you on the way here?"

Miss Lawrence seemed to show a slight inclination to be tickled, as if at certain recollections.

"Well, one or two persons did smile. I caught them at it. I wondered if it was at me. Do I look very funny?"

"Funny?—a turn out like that? Funny's not the word! Believe me, you look—astounding. Red leather shoes, scarlet stockings, green and yellow check skirt, which must have been made for someone else; it doesn't in the least fit you, sky blue silk blouse, pink tulle hat. I should say more than six feet round, with heaven knows how many big green feathers—and all the vulgarest, commonest and ugliest jewellery you could manage to get hold of—there's a costume for a country lane in the middle of the day—and that costume's yours. If you don't think that's enough to startle the natives and make them what you call 'smile'—you've queer ideas. What I admire is your courage. Where did you get it from?"

Miss Lawrence, who had been keenly watching the speaker, seemed to arrive at a sudden conclusion.

"Where did I get my courage from?" A twinkle

seemed to come into Miss Lawrence's eyes. "I'll tell you. You may think I'm a pig——"

"I don't think I shall do that, because I don't believe you are."

"I'm afraid I am, and you'll think I am. You're the daughter of a duchess, so you don't know what this world is like—to a girl like me. I'm engaged to be married——"

"I presume that you are—since you are the future Lady Picard."

"I don't mean that—I'm engaged to be married to a man I love—I don't care, I am!" The speaker had burst into sudden flame.

"Why shouldn't you be? I should be sorry for you if you were engaged to be married to a man you didn't love. I know what that means, and I—I never will be that—if I can help it."

Lady Delia's manner changed as she wound up her sentence.

Miss Lawrence thought she caught a note of pathos in the other's voice. Her own attitude seemed to change in response; she all at once became more human, less defiant. When she next spoke her voice faltered a little.

"I—I think I'll wait for him outside."

Suiting her action to her words she began to move off, but Lady Delia went after her quickly and laid her hand on her arm.

"You're going to stop here!"

"Who says I am?" The tone had become defiant again and tinged with Cockney.

"I say it—because I believe you and I are in the same boat."

Miss Lawrence opened her eyes very wide at this. For a moment she seemed incapable of replying. When she did, it was without the slightest trace of a Cockney accent.

"In the same boat—you and I?"

Lady Delia laughed suddenly, gleefully.

"There! that's your own voice again!" She all at once burst into the wildest imitation of Cockney. "Your Cockney comes off as mine goes on, and I lay yours comes off quicker than mine does. If I couldn't make a better 'Arriet than some—well, there!" Then with equal suddenness she relapsed into her natural tones again and held out her hand. "Shake!"

Obedying a natural impulse Miss Lawrence half held out her hand, then hastily withdrew it.

"I—I won't!"

"Do!"

Lady Delia was still holding out her hand with an engaging smile. Miss Lawrence still hesitated, speaking petulantly, like a child who knows that it is in the wrong.

"I will not. Why should I shake hands with you? You are my enemy."

She was trying to avoid Lady Delia's eyes, but they seemed to hold her in spite of herself. Suddenly the smile in them became reflected in her own, and with a little laugh Miss Lawrence took the hand that was still outstretched towards her.

CHAPTER XV

AN ALLIANCE

“Now,” said Lady Delia, “we can talk comfortably.” She drew Miss Lawrence down beside her on the settee. “What on earth made you say that I was your enemy?”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?”

Lady Delia laughed again.

“My dear child, how absurd you are!”

“It may seem absurd to you—but I mean it. I thought something of this kind would happen. I wish I had never come.”

Lady Delia patted her hand affectionately.

“I am very glad you came.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Miss Lawrence had a distinct air of being made fun of.

“Believe it or not, as you like—it’s true. If you’d been the sort of girl I thought you might be, I might have been sorry you came—but you’re not.”

Miss Lawrence considered this for a moment as though she found it rather involved. Then she spoke, a trifle petulantly again.

“How can you tell what sort of girl I am? Coming in this way—dressed like this—thrusting myself into a great house—the promised wife of a silly, gabbling boy.”

She paused for breath and Lady Delia laughed once more.

“It’s not a very polite description, but really it suits him to a ‘t.’ That’s just what he is. He doesn’t even know what it means to get married—hasn’t the very vaguest notion. But then, you see, he’s never grown up.”

Miss Lawrence was still pursuing the trend of her rather aggrieved thoughts.

“And yet all the same I’m the future Lady Picard, don’t you forget it. If I like, I can be mistress of all this, of his million in cash, and his hundred thousand pounds a year. That’s all as true as you sit there.”

Lady Delia answered soothingly.

“I know it’s true.”

But Miss Lawrence was not to be mollified for the moment. Her tone became, if anything, more petulant.

“Yet you pretend that you’re glad to see me! If you dared, you’d have me thrown out of the house.”

“I dare do a good many things.”

Miss Lawrence appeared to take alarm at this. She rose from the settee with a hasty movement.

“You daren’t do that!”

“I dare, but I don’t want to.” Lady Delia smiled. “Sit down, like a sensible girl, and let’s talk this over quietly.” She drew Miss Lawrence down on the settee beside her again. “Why, you’re likely to prove the best friend I ever had!”

This remark produced another silence. It seemed to require a good deal of digestion. When Miss Lawrence spoke again it was in a considerably less truculent tone.

“Am I? Pray, how’s that? Do you want me to marry him?”

Lady Delia appeared overcome with mirth again.

“Not exactly! And, what’s more, you don’t want to marry him!”

This shaft seemed to go home. Miss Lawrence winced perceptibly. But she made a brave show of resistance nevertheless.

“Don’t I? Not when I came down for that express purpose?”

Lady Delia did not look very impressed.

"Did you? I wonder!" She moved along the settee a little closer to Miss Lawrence. "Ailsa—do you mind my calling you Ailsa?"

"My name is not Ailsa!" Her voice was distinctly subdued.

"Not Ailsa?"

Miss Lawrence all at once broke out into a torrent of self-accusation.

"I'm a fraud all over. My name is Peggy Simpson. They call me Ailsa Lawrence at the theatre because Peggy Simpson is such a common name. I'm all pretence. I pretend that I'm the future Lady Picard, and I'm engaged to another man. That's why I agreed to be Sir Frank Picard's wife."

This irresistible flow of words culminated in a half-sob on Miss Lawrence's part, but moved Lady Delia to a burst of uncontrollable laughter. She laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks, and when she tried to speak, the words came out in intermittent gasps.

"That seems—to be—a pretty—funny reason!"

Miss Lawrence rose to her feet and looked down at her indignantly.

"It may seem funny to you, and you're welcome to your opinion. As for me—I'm going back to town. Give Sir Frank Picard my compliments and tell him that Miss Ailsa Lawrence regrets having allowed him to make her acquaintance and wishes to see no more of him—and to hear no more of him either."

Once again Miss Lawrence began to make off in the direction of the door, and once again Lady Delia followed her and stopped her.

"Please don't go!"

Miss Lawrence turned, half unwillingly as it seemed.

“ Why shouldn't I go? What possible reason can you have which should induce you to urge me to stay? ”

Lady Delia was quite serious now. She laid her hand almost caressingly on the other girl's arm.

“ If you really do wish to have no more to do with him, don't you see that you would defeat your own purpose by going? If I do give him your message—if I were so foolish—he would certainly be rude to me, and he'd rush after you by the next train—if he didn't charter a special. He'd think that I'd said, or done, something horrid to you; that I had driven you away. He must know that girls have lots of different ways of being horrid to one another. If you go back to town, as you talk of doing, nothing will induce him to believe that I'm not practising them on you. So please do stay, and finish the game you meant to play.”

All through this speech Lady Delia had been gently leading Miss Lawrence towards the settee again, and now they both sat down once more. Miss Lawrence was silent for several moments before she asked:

“ Do you know what I did come for? ”

Lady Delia smiled again.

“ No—frankly I don't. Tell me, what *did* you come for? I'm all over curiosity to know.”

Another moment or two passed before the answer came, in a low voice:

“ As I told you, I'm engaged—to a man who hasn't any money. I wanted to get him some money—so I came here.”

Lady Delia became grave again.

“ I don't quite understand, and yet I do—in a way. How much money do you want—for him? ”

“ Five hundred pounds.”

A smile stole back to Lady Delia's face.

“ Is that all—really? I'm a pauper, but I'll

give you five hundred pounds with pleasure. But you can't be going to marry on five hundred pounds?"

Miss Lawrence hastened to explain—a little incoherently.

"He's a dramatist, he writes plays; he'll have one brought out if he can put down five hundred pounds towards the cost of production, and our fortune will be made."

Lady Delia ignored the delightful optimism of the last sentence, which in other circumstances might have moved her to mirth. She was thinking hard.

"So you were driven to this by love for another man?"

"I don't know that I was driven. I don't want to pretend any more than I can help. He's tired of waiting and so am I—I saw there was a chance and I took it."

"But you only had to breathe a hint, and Frank would have given you five hundred pounds without the slightest hesitation."

"Do you think I could have taken it from him—as a gift?" This with a genuine show of indignation.

"Don't look so furious!" Lady Delia smiled engagingly. "What did you propose to do?"

"He wanted to marry me—he does want to marry me."

"Don't be too sure—with him yesterday is not always to-day."

Miss Lawrence flamed up.

"It had better be, where I'm concerned. Do you think I'll allow him to play fast and loose with me?"

Lady Delia gave vent to a whistle.

"I see—that's the idea!"

"Of course! Just because I'm togged out like

this and talk Hounsditch, do you imagine that I'm going to allow him to play fast and loose with his promises without compensating me for the injury he has done my feelings? "

Lady Delia didn't answer at once. She hardly knew what to make of this girl. In some ways she seemed so unsophisticated—a veritable child of nature, and yet the plan she had evolved was hardly in keeping with the character of one who was innocent of the world and all its ways. Then a possible explanation occurred to her.

"Was the idea your own?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't. It was a friend's."

Lady Delia beamed.

"I thought as much. And who was the friend—a man or a woman?"

"A woman—Ethel Osborn."

"Miss—or is it Mrs?—Osborn must be something of a genius."

"She is." Then with a sudden change of tone, "I don't know if you are speaking with contempt."

"On the contrary, I think Miss Osborn's is such an excellent idea that I do hope you'll carry it out to the end."

Miss Lawrence considered this for a moment. It appeared to puzzle her.

"Why? What advantage would it be to you?"

Lady Delia seemed to hesitate. When she spoke eventually it was half to herself as it were.

"If Frank Picard were to be taught a really good lesson, one which he would never forget, it would do him good." Then she added, almost below her breath, "And it would give me the whip hand over him for ever and a day."

Miss Lawrence looked at her curiously.

"Are you—are you in love with him?" she asked.

Lady Delia started.

"I'm not—he's in love with me," she answered.

"And yet he asked me to marry him!"

"Oh, that's a sign!" This was said with a little rippling laugh. "When Clara wants Jones to marry her she makes a dead set at Brown."

"But it doesn't always come off!"

"No," repeated Lady Delia, "it doesn't always come off. It wouldn't in this case if you had been the sort of girl you might have been."

"So you want me to teach him a lesson?"

"Yes, I do. Don't think me a brute, my dear. It's really for his good. He's impossible at present; it's not his fault, it's his perfectly absurd upbringing that is responsible. His mother has kept him in cotton-wool all his life, imagining she could continue to keep him there until she handed him over to some nice girl who would make him a good wife and persist in the cotton-wool process."

"That nice girl being you?"

"I never said so, though I believe the old lady has considered the possibility. Why she should fix on me, goodness only knows! I'm the last sort of woman to keep any man swathed in cotton-wool. But I'm fond of Frank; we've grown up together, and I feel I could make a man of him."

"In other words, you're in love with him!"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure." Lady Delia laughed again. "One thing I am certain of, and that is that he'll be safer in my hands than anyone else's because I understand him so well. If the wrong girl were to get hold of him now it might spell disaster."

"The wrong girl isn't going to get hold of him," returned Miss Lawrence gravely.

Lady Delia squeezed her arm affectionately.

"You're a dear! Why I have unburdened my heart to you like this I don't know, but I feel as

though I had known you for years. So you see, we're allies now, and you've got to help me. That's why I don't want you to go until you've had a little talk with Frank. When he sees you in this elegant apparel, and hears you talking like a little Cockney and making an exhibition of yourself in front of his friends, I'm afraid"—there was a little laugh here—"I'm afraid that he'll want to get out of his promise to marry you!"

"That's what I came for."

"I know—and that's why you're going to carry it out to the bitter end. There's only one danger."

"Danger?"

"That dress—that terrible dress. Directly you came in I thought I'd seen it before. I've been trying to think where I had; now I've got it. It was last year at the Frivolity; a dress like that lingers in one's memory. You were one of a chorus of girls who all wore dresses like that—at least I suppose you were one, I'm sure the dress was—and you sang a chorus in a song about donahs. I asked my brother what a donah was; he said it was a man's best girl. I've heard more than I want about donahs since. I vaguely recalled something about that dress directly I saw it. It was that which made me smell a rat. Fortunately Frank Picard only went to a theatre for the first time in his life the other night or he'd have smelt a rat too—he's quick enough at doing it. Couldn't you have worn something a little—a little less striking?"

"I had nothing to wear, and there was no time to make anything. I got this from the theatre."

Lady Delia laughed outright.

"So I supposed! There can't be another dress like that in the world—outside the theatre. Let's hope that no one will spot it."

"What does it matter if they do?" Miss

Lawrence looked puzzled. "Besides, they won't have a chance—I'm going."

She half rose in her seat, but Lady Delia pulled her down again.

"Oh no, you're not. You've got to stay and finish the game."

"How can I—when you know?"

"That makes no difference—he doesn't." Lady Delia suddenly clapped her hands together in joyful anticipation. "Oh, what a lark it will be! I only wish I had the chance—I'd love to have the chance. Ailsa, or Peggy, or whatever your name is, don't be so foolish as to ask for a paltry five hundred; ask for a hundred thousand pounds—he can spare it!"

Miss Lawrence looked startled, as she undoubtedly was.

"A hundred thousand pounds! Oh no, I couldn't! I couldn't ask for anything. I'm in a hateful position—I'm doing a hateful thing. I wish with all my heart and soul that I had never heard Sir Frank Picard's name, then I shouldn't have been tempted."

"Don't be a goose." Lady Delia put her arms round her with a conciliatory movement. "If I were in your position I should think it the most lovely idea to—to insinuate a hundred thousand pounds out of a man like Frank Picard for the benefit of the man I really loved. Talk of the adventures which come to the adventurous—that's the sort of adventure which would commend itself to me."

Miss Lawrence shook her head a trifle sadly.

"It's not at all the sort of thing I like. I don't care for what you call adventures. I like a quiet life; I hate upsetting things."

"You mean you like monotony, the trivial round, everlastingly over and over again? I do

not. I should have thought that an actress—who I've understood is always craving for excitement—would not have liked it either."

Once more Miss Lawrence shook her head. She spoke rather contemplatively.

"I get four pounds a week. It's true that I've been at the Frivolity for two years now, in regular work, but I may, any day, get a fortnight's notice—and then be twelve months trying to look for something else. I should like that four pounds a week to be monotonous anyhow! But that isn't what I meant. I don't like to do the sort of thing I'm doing, and I don't think that anyone would."

"I should." Lady Delia spoke emphatically.

"I tell you you wouldn't."

"And I tell you I would!"

Miss Lawrence drew herself up rather stiffly.

"It may not become a person in my position to contradict flatly the daughter of the Duchess of Ditchling——"

Lady Delia suddenly threw her arms around her.

"You absurd little thing to go putting on airs like that. Don't you understand—you're my ally, my pal, and you've got to help me. So just don't let us have any more nonsense."

Much to Miss Lawrence's amazement Lady Delia drew her towards her and kissed her affectionately. Someone coughed loudly in the background. The two girls sprang apart and turned round. The Duchess of Ditchling was standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER XVI

PLAYING THE GAME

THE Duchess was hot and the Duchess was in an ill-temper. The two with her were generally synonymous. Being hot made her cross, just as being cross made her hot, and so the thing went on in a vicious circle until the Duchess became hotter and hotter and at the same time more and more cross.

At the present moment she had, it must be admitted, ample excuse for both these conditions. She had been walking up and down outside in the sun trying to pacify Lady Picard, with the aid of General Taylor, whose efforts, she considered, had been both clumsy and unconvincing. Had the Duchess had Lady Picard to herself she felt certain she could very soon have brought her to a reasonable frame of mind, and have persuaded her to face calmly the extraordinary situation produced by the bombshell which Sir Frank had suddenly flung amongst them. But the blundering intervention of General Taylor had foiled all her plans, with the result that Lady Picard was being reduced to a state of mind that bordered upon hysteria, and rendered her incapable of either thought or reasoning. The Duchess had finally left them in despair.

There was another circumstance which was contributing to her general feeling of irritability. In spite of the way she had spoken to Lady Picard of Lady Delia, the Duchess was in reality very devoted to her daughter. With a mother's instinct she had divined Delia's attachment to Sir Frank,

and though she considered him, in the privacy of her own mind, a booby and a nincompoop, she did him the justice to put down his worst faults to the ridiculous manner in which he had been brought up. On the other hand, he was very well off, to say the least of it, and she felt convinced that if anyone could make a man of him Delia could. It was, therefore, with feelings of the deepest satisfaction that she had heard Lady Picard's oft-expressed desire that Frank and Delia should marry, though nothing would have induced her to betray those feelings to the outer world, least of all to Lady Picard herself. Thus it can easily be seen how those same feelings had been rudely outraged by Sir Frank's abrupt declaration that he had already found a wife.

Full of concern regarding her daughter, and the effect on her of the aforesaid declaration, she had returned to the house with the intention of finding Delia and having it thoroughly out with her. Judge of her amazement and consternation at discovering her in the act of embracing a creature who, at the first glance, appeared to have walked straight out of the slums of Whitechapel.

She came forward, as both girls rose from the settee, staring through her lorgnettes at the apparition before her.

"Delia! Who—who is this extraordinary person?"

Lady Delia stifled a laugh.

"It's all right, Trotty." Then in a hasty whisper to Miss Lawrence: "It's my mother—the Duchess. Don't be afraid—tip her the accent—remember, you're doing it for me!" She turned to the Duchess again. "Trotty, let me have the honour of introducing you to Miss Ailsa Lawrence—the future Lady Frank Picard." Then with a comical glance at Miss Lawrence she added:

“ Miss Lawrence, this is my mother—the Duchess of Ditchling.”

Miss Lawrence, entering into the spirit of the thing, made an exaggerated curtsy. The Duchess literally gasped for breath!

“ Good heavens! ”

The words seemed forced from her. She was evidently making a violent effort to control herself, so violent indeed that the lorgnettes snapped in her hand and fell in pieces to the floor.

“ Damn! ” said the Duchess loudly.

“ Oh, Trotty! ” Lady Delia’s voice was meant to be reproachful, but it was nearly choked with laughter. “ Miss Lawrence, please forgive my mother’s language; I know how unused you must be to anything of the kind.”

“ Delia! ” The Duchess’s tone was frosty. “ What is the meaning of this? Is it a joke, or—or a nightmare? ”

“ Don’t be silly, Trotty! ” Lady Delia was still struggling with her laughter. “ I’ve told you what it is. This is the young lady Frank is going to marry.”

“ This thing! ”

The mixture of amazement, contempt, horror, and incredulity expressed in those two words would be impossible to describe adequately.

“ Trotty, don’t be rude! Miss Lawrence, I must apologise for my mother’s bad manners.”

She winked at Miss Lawrence, who immediately took the cue. By now she had determined to play the game for all it was worth; her Cockney accent as she spoke became a terrible thing to hear.

“ Oh, don’t mention it, I’m sure.” She turned to the gaping Duchess. “ Pleased—pleased to meet your Grice—I suppose you are your Grice—I mean, I suppose that’s how I ought to speak to you.”

“Quite right, Miss Lawrence,” put in Lady Delia hastily, “everyone speaks to my mother as your Grice—I mean, your Grace—don’t they, Trotty dear?”

The Duchess paid no attention to her daughter. She was eyeing Miss Lawrence as a child might eye some weird and wonderful wild animal newly arrived at the Zoo.

“Are you a female nigger minstrel?”

“Trotty!”

The interpolation was Lady Delia’s. The Duchess went on calmly addressing Miss Lawrence.

“If you are not, why have you dressed yourself as if you were?”

Miss Lawrence seemed suddenly stung to action. She forgot that she was only playing a part—she became the part itself. The Cockney accent grew more pronounced than ever.

“What business is it of yours how I dresses myself, any more than it’s my business how you dresses yourself? I’m the future Lady Frank Picard, that’s who I am. Perhaps Sir Frank likes to marry a female nigger minstrel. And if he does, what then? I suppose you’re his guest. If his guests don’t know how to behave to their host’s future wife any better than you do, I’d as soon be a female nigger minstrel as the Duchess of Ditchling.”

Lady Delia couldn’t resist putting in her word. The expression on the Duchess’s face just then was the most delicious thing she could ever remember.

“That serves you right, Trotty! I’m very glad, Miss Lawrence, to hear you call my mother to order.”

“I hope I didn’t hurt her feelings,” went on Miss Lawrence, catching another wink from Lady Delia. “But then she didn’t ought to hurt

mine. When I am Lady Frank Picard I won't have her stopping in this house unless she does mind her p's and q's—she with her female nigger minstrels. So I'd have her to know."

"Hear, hear! I've heard a good deal about the bad manners of the aristocracy." Lady Delia was giving a very fair imitation of her mother. "As your daughter, Duchess, I do hope that it is not too late for you to learn a lesson—comparing your host's future wife to a female nigger minstrel!"

By this time the Duchess had collapsed somewhat feebly into a chair.

"Delia! What is the meaning of this tomfoolery?"

"Tomfoolery?"

"If you wish me to believe that Frank Picard ever asked a young woman, who could come down to his house in such clothes, and speak as this one does, to marry him——"

"Trotty!"

"Be so good as not to call me Trotty!" the Duchess snapped. Then she addressed herself to Miss Lawrence. "Young woman——" she began, but was interrupted by Lady Delia.

"Stop, mother, before you say something which you may ever after have cause to regret. Here are Lady Picard and General Taylor!" Then in a whisper, "Now's your time, Ailsa! Have a shot at them!"

This whispered admonition had not escaped the notice of the Duchess. She now came up and caught hold of Lady Delia by the arm.

"Delia, you're conspiring with this young woman. What mad freak are you up to?"

By this time Lady Picard and General Taylor had entered, the lady leaning on the General's arm. Lady Delia broke away from her mother's restraining grasp and went straight up to them.

" Oh, Lady Picard, I have such a delightful surprise for you! "

The old lady flushed a little. She had had one surprise, and she looked as though she rather dreaded the form which the second one might take. Her worst fears were shortly to be more than confirmed.

" A surprise, my dear? " she stammered.

" She's an imp of mischief, " put in the Duchess, referring to her daughter, but no one took any notice of her.

Lady Picard's eyes had suddenly become fixed on Miss Lawrence. They remained there as though fascinated. Meanwhile Lady Delia had gone on talking.

" Dear Lady Picard, you will be so glad to hear that Miss Ailsa Lawrence has arrived. "

" Miss—Ailsa—Lawrence! " The words came falteringly from Lady Picard's lips. Her gaze still remained immovably fixed on Miss Lawrence. Lady Delia took her arm and led her gently forward in that lady's direction, talking all the time.

" I understand that her marriage with Frank will take place in about a week. Allow me to present her to you. "

They had come very close to Miss Lawrence by this time. Lady Picard's eyes were still riveted on her. Miss Lawrence seemed to find something in their gaze that disconcerted her, for she moved back a pace or two.

" I don't want to know her! I won't know her! "

Lady Delia gave her a look. " Do—please! " she said in a whisper.

But Miss Lawrence had not completely recovered herself yet. She seemed confused, and her words came falteringly.

“ I—I’m not going to be played about with. I won’t have it.”

It was Lady Picard who, all unconsciously, gave Miss Lawrence back her self-possession.

“ Who is this young person? ” she asked in cold, stinging tones.

The contempt in the old lady’s voice gave all the impetus that was needed. Miss Lawrence pulled herself together, drew herself up, and launched forth in the vilest Cockney.

“ I’m Ailsa Lawrence, I am. Now you know who this young person is, and if you’re Lady Picard, you’re my future mother-in-law, so now you know who you are too.” She went up to Lady Picard and confronted her boldly. “ You don’t seem very gushing, considering what a near relation you’re going to be! ”

The old lady shrank back, dismay and horror alike depicted on her countenance.

“ Keep away from me! Don’t come near me! ”

Miss Lawrence pursued her unflinchingly.

“ Keep away from you? Upon my sivvy! Your son’s wife has got to keep away from you, has she? Even before she is his wife? I tell you this—I’m going to be mistress here. This house is going to be my house, and everyone in it has got to treat me according, whether she’s my mother-in-law or whether she isn’t. I was a female nigger minstrel a minute ago, I’m a young person now—I’ll learn you who I am. I’m to be my Lady Picard very soon—the new Lady Picard will learn the old Lady Picard what her place is. You take that straight from me. A young person, am I, and a female nigger minstrel? I won’t be called a female nigger minstrel for nothing—not much, I won’t. I’ll show you! You’ve brought it on yourselves, and you shall have it! ”

Before anyone could stop her, or even divine

what she was going to do, Miss Lawrence had picked up her preposterous skirt several inches and started to dance, singing in a little quavering voice as her steps kept time to the melody :

“ Meet me in the Park
As soon as it is dark,
We'll have a jolly lark,
Ho, ho, ho!

We'll have a reg'lar treat
I'll buy you things to eat,
And hire a penny seat,
Ho, ho, ho!”

The singing became a humming as the dance grew wilder and wilder. Lady Picard turned her head away with an expression of horrified amazement. General Taylor hastened to her side, averting his gaze from the wildly cavorting female figure in the middle of the room. The Duchess gave one look at Delia, as though to convey that she held her responsible, and then muttered something to herself, which sounded very like an expletive. In the midst of it all the door opened and Sir Frank Picard walked in.

CHAPTER XVII

DISILLUSION

SIR FRANK stood for a moment just inside the door, gazing in speechless amazement at the appalling apparition that was careering about the room. Not the slightest suspicion crossed his mind at first as to the identity of that apparition; his first thought was that the world, or rather that little corner of it which was represented by Dunston Park, had gone mad, or else that he himself was bereft of his senses. He looked round the room for some explanation. He saw his mother cowering in a corner in an attitude of shrinking horror, while General Taylor stood over her, obviously trying to administer consolation. He saw the Duchess standing like an image of outraged fury, still muttering to herself. Then he looked at Lady Delia. Was that a gleam of mocking laughter he saw in her eyes? It looked very like it. But before he had time to settle the question in his mind the dancing apparition had come up to him. It stopped dancing and stood still before him. Then a harsh, grating, Cockney voice broke in upon his senses.

“Why, it’s Frankie! My old Frankie boy! What ho! Frankie, how are you coming along? You’ve been hiding yourself, haven’t you?”

Sir Frank gazed at her uncomprehendingly. Still no vestige of the truth had penetrated to his consciousness, he only vaguely wondered who this terrible creature could be, never connecting her

for a moment with the beautiful Miss Ailsa Lawrence who had captivated his heart so suddenly and, as he had imagined, so completely. He stammered out a few incoherent words:

“ I—I don’t understand.”

His bewilderment was a comical sight, and Lady Delia had to turn aside hastily in order to stifle a guffaw. Miss Lawrence gave a glance in her direction, then turned to Sir Frank again.

“ You’re not going to pretend you don’t know me? Do you think it right and proper that your future wife should come to the station and no one be there to meet her? I had to come up in a grocer’s cart, or something of the sort, dressed up in my best clothes too. People took me for a show—took me for a show, they did! ”

Sir Frank continued to stare at her. A horrible fear was beginning to take hold of him, a fear that he knew this creature, that she was someone who had a right to speak to him as she was doing. But he battled against it, tried to fight it down. He refused to believe that such a thing could be; it was incredible, impossible! He made another stammering attempt at speech.

“ What—what does this mean? ”

Miss Lawrence seemed to tower above him in her offended dignity. Instinctively he appeared to shrink into himself, looking for the moment quite puny beside her. Her voice rose in a sort of crescendo indignation.

“ What does it mean? That’s what I want to know! If I’d let you have your way I’d have been your wife now, at this moment! And you’re looking at me as if you didn’t know who I was! ”

The fear in Sir Frank’s mind began to grow into a conviction. Something in the voice, hideous as it was, sounded familiar; the face too, in spite of the terrible hat that surmounted it—

surely he had seen that face before? Was it really the face of Ailsa Lawrence, the girl whose beauty he had fallen in love with at first sight when he saw her on the stage? If so, and he was almost incapable of doubting it now, she was the girl he had promised to make his wife, whom he had invited down to be introduced to his beautiful old mother and his beautiful old home—the mere thought of it now seemed sacrilege. But the conviction grew and grew; this was the girl undoubtedly, the same girl, but oh, how different. Was she different, or was it merely that the scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes? Sir Frank couldn't tell; he was incapable of thinking clearly just then. But the conviction remained, and he groaned inwardly, a groan of absolute despair. Meanwhile the mocking voice went on, tearing at his senses like a sharp-edged knife.

“ I suppose you'll be trying to pretend that I'm not Ailsa Lawrence, the girl you pestered with your silly love-letters, the girl you promised to marry—I've got your promise in writing here ”—she fingered the bosom of her dress—“ the girl you invited down here to meet your people! ” Suddenly she shook her fist in his face with a gesture of violent anger. “ You're a nice cup o' tea! ”

A little cry came from Lady Picard.

“ She's drunk! ”

An ominous silence fell for a moment. Then Miss Lawrence strode over towards Lady Picard like an avenging fury.

“ Drunk? What's that? My Lady Picard—what was that you said? ”

The old lady shrank back in her chair as though she believed the girl was going to strike her. General Taylor stepped in front of her with an air of protection.

“ Miss Lawrence—please! ”

Miss Lawrence glared at him.

“ All right, old stick-in-the-mud! I ain't going to use no personal violence, if that's what you're afraid of. You're a General, ain't you? Well, I've been a 'general' once myself, when I was in service.”

With a mocking laugh she turned away and walked up to Sir Frank again.

“ Still standing there like a stuck pig, eh? Ain't you got nothing to say to your future wife? ” She came closer, holding out her arms to him. “ Say a kind word to your little Ailsa, won't you? ”

All this time Sir Frank had remained rooted to the spot, as though incapable of speech or action. A thousand thoughts were racing through his mind, tumbling headlong one on top of another, leaving no clear impression as they went, but only increasing his general bewilderment. He felt absolutely helpless; there seemed to have been a sudden upheaval in his hitherto well-ordered life which had lifted him up sky-high and then let him fall with a sickening thud, leaving him stranded on a desert shore of total perplexity. He felt that he was all alone, marooned far away from every hope of comfort and sympathy, at the mercy of a horrible nightmare which every moment threatened to envelop him. Instinctively he looked towards Lady Delia, but her eyes were turned away from him—mercifully, perhaps, for there was no mistaking the laughter that was in them. Then he turned and saw the vision of the woman who was coming towards him with outstretched arms. Something seemed to snap in his brain. With an agonising cry, like that of a wounded animal, he flung round and bolted from the room.

For a moment Miss Lawrence seemed baffled. She stared after his retreating figure as though at

a loss what to do. Then with another cry, which seemed like an echo of his own, she rushed out after him.

The silence that fell on the garden-room when they had gone was akin to the ominous calm that precedes the coming of a tropical storm. It was broken by a little piteous moan from Lady Picard.

“What shall we do? What shall we do? Oh my son—my son!”

The General bent over her with whispered words of comfort. They were hard to find, for the situation was so extraordinary, so absolutely unparalleled in his long experience, that all ordinary expressions appeared irrelevant and meaningless.

It was from another direction that the storm broke. The Duchess had been holding herself in considerable restraint for a considerable time. The unwonted exertion of keeping silence was beginning to tell upon her. Her amazement at all these unwonted happenings had gradually culminated in a feeling of furious anger—anger at a mother who could bring up a son so foolishly and thus reap from her sowing so terrible a harvest, and anger at the insult she imagined had been heaped upon her daughter by having her passed by as the future Lady Frank Picard in favour of such an awful creature as had just left the room. Frankly, she was puzzled by Delia's attitude. The girl seemed to take the whole thing as a joke; the Duchess more than suspected that she and that unspeakable woman were in league together for some inscrutable reason. But she had no time to stop to think of that now. Anger was the emotion that was uppermost in her mind at the moment, and it was bound to find a vent; it found it, naturally enough, in Lady Picard.

“Now, Margaret, I hope you're satisfied,” she

began. Lady Picard shrank back in her chair once more, and General Taylor made another gesture of protection, but there was no stopping the Duchess just then. "Didn't I tell you that you were bound to reap the whirlwind some day after the ridiculous way in which you have brought up your boy? Did you expect to be able to keep him swathed in cotton-wool *all* his life?" She was unconsciously echoing Lady Delia's words to Miss Lawrence. "Did it never occur to you that the nice, soft, white cotton-wool was bound to become soiled in time, and all the more hopelessly soiled because it never ought to have been there at all. You stuck it in his ears, so that he shouldn't hear the wicked words of the men and women around him; you stuck it over his eyes so that he shouldn't see their wicked ways; gagged him with it so that he shouldn't learn to drink or swear. And what is the result? He tears out the cotton-wool and throws it from him, and then immediately goes the whole hog of idiocy, because of his absurd ignorance. Bah, Margaret! I've no patience with you!"

Lady Picard made a feeble protest.

"Dear Sarah—please!"

"Don't 'dear Sarah' me!" The Duchess was not to be stayed at this juncture. The words were bursting to come out, and out they meant to come. "Didn't I tell you that every boy ought to have a bit of the devil in him? But a good healthy devil, not an anæmic imp that has been molly-coddled to such an extent that the moment it is released it makes for the first heap of refuse it can find."

"Sarah—really—your words are most indelicate!"

"Indelicate! Rubbish! What's the use of thinking we can go on for ever handling life, and the plain facts of life, with kid gloves? If you had

allowed Frank to have been a little more indelicate he would have been a sane man to-day, instead of a hopeless, gibbering lunatic."

Lady Picard held up her hands as though to ward off a blow. But it was of no avail; the Duchess was wound up.

"If you had only let him have his head a bit he'd have sown his wild oats by now, normal, sensible wild oats such as any healthy-minded young man is entitled to sow if he doesn't want to grow up an insufferable nincompoop. He would have had an affair or two with women and have come out all the better for it, without having to reap such a crop as we have seen to-day—in that awful woman who has just left the room."

"Sarah—you forget your daughter is present!"

"I do not forget it. I am speaking as much on her behalf as my own. Thank God! I have brought her up sensibly to know life as it is, not as it is supposed to be in the recesses of a band box, lined with cotton-wool and tied up with apron-strings. As for Frank, I hope he'll have to marry the woman—it will serve him right. Perhaps she will be able to make a man of him, though heaven knows she will have her work cut out. And this is the ninny you dared to suggest should marry my daughter——"

"Mother—kindly leave my name out of the discussion."

The Duchess stopped in sheer amazement. She found herself confronted by Lady Delia, a very composed and determined Lady Delia, from whose face all traces of mocking laughter had fled.

"You have a perfect right to say what you like about Frank to Lady Picard, though it is a pity that some of your remarks should not have been a little more moderate and in better taste. But when you begin to couple his name with mine you

have me to consider, and I do not care for the subject to be continued."

The Duchess gasped. She was momentarily bereft of the powers of speech. Used as she was to a certain amount of defiance on Lady Delia's part—a defiance that she welcomed as evidence of her sensible upbringing—the fact that she should "go back on her like this," as she put it in her own mind, on this particular subject astonished her. While she was still casting about for a suitable reply Lady Picard rose and spoke in a low voice to General Taylor.

"General—will you be so kind as to see me to my room?"

The General offered her his arm with a gallant air, and the two began to move off together. As they passed the still silent Duchess Lady Picard spoke again.

"Sarah, I am sure you did not mean all you said. I am glad to think that your daughter has clearer notions of what is decent and becoming than you have. Perhaps there is something to be said for the way you have brought her up after all."

With this Parthian shot she left the room, hanging somewhat heavily upon the General's arm. The Duchess let her go without a word. But as the door closed she turned angrily to her daughter.

"Now, Delia, will you kindly explain——"

To her astonishment Lady Delia suddenly sank on to the settee and burst into peal upon peal of uncontrollable laughter. The Duchess stood regarding her for a moment with an expression of mingled anger and perplexity. Then as the laughter still went on she shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of baffled fury and stumped out of the room.

Hardly had she gone when the other door, through which Sir Frank had so incontinently fled, re-opened, and Miss Lawrence entered cautiously.

Lady Delia looked up and, between her laughs, asked: "Where's Frank?"

Miss Lawrence came slowly forward.

"He's locked himself into the library—he refuses to let me in."

Lady Delia went off into fresh peals of laughter.

"Oh, my dear, isn't it a joke?"

"A joke?" Miss Lawrence hesitated for an instant. Then all at once she burst into tears.

"I never felt so miserable in all my life!" she sobbed.

CHAPTER XVIII

AS MAN TO MAN

SIR FRANK PICARD, when he fled so ignominiously from the garden-room, made straight for the library, where he shut himself in and locked the door. He heard Miss Lawrence follow him, knock on the door, and demand admittance, but he made no sign. Presently she appeared to grow tired of her efforts, and he could hear her moving away up the passage. Not yet, however, did he feel safe. She might return at any moment. With a sigh of despair he threw himself into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

He was trying to blot out the vision of Miss Lawrence as he had seen her just now in the garden-room. In its place he conjured up another vision as he had first seen her on the stage of the theatre, and later in her own rooms, wearing a delightful frock. That frock had been in excellent taste; there had been nothing about it that could offend the eye of the most fastidious—not even of his mother. His mother! He shuddered. What could she have thought of the woman he had chosen for his wife, wearing that awful costume and speaking that horrible language? What did he think of her himself? Could it be the same woman, or was it someone else impersonating her? The latter seemed too slender a hope to rely upon, and Sir Frank did not entertain it long. Even if it had been so, and this was not the Miss Ailsa Lawrence to whom he

had written love-letters and finally made a proposal of marriage, he felt that everything was different now. He began to see himself in the light of his own folly, and a pretty good fool he looked. His sudden infatuation for Miss Lawrence appeared to him to be little better than madness, and his proposal an act of absolute insanity. If only she had put in an appearance quietly, and decently dressed as he had known her, he would have done the honourable thing by her and carried out the bargain to which he had committed himself, even though he realised, as he did now, how fatal a step it would have been to his own happiness. But this travesty of a woman!—she deserved no mercy at his hands. She had outraged every feeling of decency—he felt that he owed her very little, if any, consideration. At the same time he was, he didn't mind confessing it to himself, horribly frightened; his one idea was to get rid of her at once and at all costs.

“What an idiot I've been!” he moaned, pacing up and down the room in his agitation. “What on earth can Delia think of me?” The thought of Lady Delia pulled him up short. Never had she appeared so attractive, so desirable, as she had to-day. Hitherto he had taken her as a matter of course, as he had taken so many other things in his sheltered existence. Now he mentally compared her with that other woman, and groaned again. “How could I? However could I? What evil spirit made me think I had fallen in love with Miss Lawrence, let me write her those idiotic letters, and worst of all, make her a proposal of marriage? I must have been mad—mad! I wonder if other men go through this sort of experience?”

He felt an urgent desire for a man friend in

whom he could confide. The only man in the house was General Taylor; he would send for him—he was better than nothing.

He went to the door and listened cautiously. There was no sound in the passage. Then he rang the bell several times violently. Presently someone knocked at the door.

“Who’s there?” he called.

A footman’s voice answered. Sir Frank unlocked the door and let him in, taking care to see that there was no one behind him.

“Tell General Taylor I want to see him here immediately—no, don’t say immediately, say instantly—instantly, mind. Tell him I’m waiting here and I must see him—absolutely at once.”

The footman gave him a curious glance and departed on his errand. Sir Frank carefully shut and locked the door after him, only opening it again when he heard General Taylor’s voice outside demanding admittance.

The General’s demeanour as he entered was not encouraging. “What’s the matter?” he asked abruptly.

“Please shut the door, General, and lock it.” The General, with an air of some surprise, did so. “I’m—I’m frightfully upset.”

“Have you sent for me to tell me that?”

“I sent for you because I wanted a man to talk to—someone whom I could ask for advice. I—I can’t describe what I’m feeling.”

“Don’t try!” The answer was delivered with military precision.

“But I want to try—I must get out of this mess somehow.” He paused for a moment. “General Taylor, you are one of my oldest friends. You—you’ve known my mother——”

“Never mind how long I’ve known your mother!”

Sir Frank saw that he was on dangerous ground and tried to shift his position.

"I won't—that is—I mean—I was only going to say——"

"Don't say it. A man just came hurrying up to me as if the house was on fire, saying that you wished to see me instantly. Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what you want."

"I am trying to, but when a man's in the state that I'm in——"

"And what condition do you suppose your mother's in?"

"My mother——?"

The General coughed to cover his indiscretion and changed the subject.

"Will you be so good, I repeat, as to tell me in the fewest possible words what it is you want."

Sir Frank moved uneasily.

"Your manner's so—so very abrupt, isn't it? It's—it's bewildering. Don't you think yourself that it's bewildering?"

"I'm not in a position to say what I think."

"But you must see for yourself that when a man's in the position I'm in what he wants—what he really wants—is to keep his wits about him."

"I should think you must often find that rather difficult."

The General's tone was full of meaning, and Sir Frank winced.

"I—I wish you wouldn't poke fun at me. I don't like it."

There was a despairing sigh from the General.

"Will you tell me what you want?"

The asperity of his tone set the other off stammering once more.

"I want—to put it briefly—I want—to express myself in a word—I want—I will be plain with you. General——"

"If you can manage it!" The sarcasm cut like a knife.

"It's—it's really not so simple as it appears."

This was too much for the General. He shrugged his shoulders and began to move towards the door.

"I was about to write a note when your man interrupted me; perhaps by the time I have finished it you will have found out where you are."

Sir Frank rushed after him and laid a restraining hand on the General's shoulder.

"General Taylor—for goodness sake don't go!"

"Then will you tell me what it is you want?"

"I—I will come to the point."

"Then come to the point!"

"I want you to have that young woman removed from the premises."

He appeared to get out the words with some difficulty and straightened himself unconsciously, as though for the effort. The General seemed startled.

"What!" The single word was expressive of a good deal. It set Sir Frank off stammering again.

"It—it may sound singular——"

"It does sound singular," the General interrupted. "May I ask to what young woman you refer?"

It was Sir Frank's turn to look astonished.

"There's—there's only one young woman to whom I can refer, thank goodness. I am referring to the—the young woman who calls herself Lawrence."

"Frank Picard!" The tone implied a coming rebuke and Sir Frank went on hastily.

"Of course I'm referring to her! You know I'm referring to her! Who else can I be referring to? I want her to be removed from these premises

within——” He broke off abruptly. “When I tell you that I shall continue to be in a frightful state till she’s gone, you’ll understand how soon I want her to be removed.”

General Taylor eyed him grimly.

“You’re a remarkable young man.”

“I’m in a remarkable position.”

“I grant that.” The General’s tone was as grim as his looks. “Did I understand you to say that you were engaged to Miss Lawrence? I gathered from your remarks that you became engaged to her yesterday.”

“I did.”

“You invited her to come here this afternoon?”

“I admit everything.”

“And she’s come!” The General’s tone became even grimmer. “I presume that remarkable looking young woman was Miss Lawrence?”

“That is what I cannot realise—I simply can’t. Surely you understood that when you saw me run away from her—I positively ran away from her—and she ran after me.”

“I wonder she thought you were worth the trouble.”

Sir Frank looked aggrieved again.

“General Taylor, I don’t like remarks of that kind. I don’t like their tone.”

The General smiled, still grimly.

“My dear lad, you’re too consummate a young ass for me to care what you like.” Sir Frank made a gesture of annoyance and seemed about to speak, but the General silenced him with a wave of the hand.

“One moment—you are my host. As it is seldom desirable to remain in a man’s house after calling him a consummate ass—I am prepared to go this moment.”

Sir Frank looked slightly mollified.

"I know I'm a consummate ass—I know it. But, General Taylor, if you were never a consummate ass at my age, at what age were you?"

The General fairly bristled with indignation.

"What do you mean by putting such a question to me, sir?"

"I'm merely looking for information. I feel I want it." The answer was given in a tone that was meant to be conciliatory. "I do feel I want it—especially from a man. As man to man, General Taylor, did you never get in a mess with a girl?"

The General began to fidget on his feet.

"I—I'm not writing a volume of reminiscences for your benefit, Frank Picard."

Sir Frank was quick to seize on this concession, slight as it was.

"What I particularly want to know is," he went on, "when you got into a mess, how did you get out of it? It's easy enough to get into a mess—I dare say you found that."

"I never asked a girl to marry me one day and wanted her thrown off the premises the day after."

"What did you do?"

"I always behaved as a gentleman."

"That's what you say." The General started angrily and appeared about to burst into speech, but Sir Frank did not give him a chance. "I mean—you know what I mean. You're a much older and wiser man than I am"—the General visibly relaxed—"I really want to be guided by your experience."

"I thought you were to marry her inside a fortnight."

"That was the idea—but not that girl."

"Not what girl?"

"Not that female Guy Fawkes." Sir Frank shuddered at the recollection.

"Then what girl was it?"

Sir Frank hesitated for a moment in his reply.

“General Taylor, it occurs to me, when I look at it calmly, that I’ve been the victim of what I may describe as a conspiracy.”

The General smiled knowingly.

“Sort of ‘Won’t you walk into my parlour?’ little game?”

“I did walk into her parlour.” The admission was accompanied by a sigh which spoke volumes.

“A girl like that knows a flat when she sees one.” The General actually chuckled as he made this statement. The effect of the chuckle was to bring the aggrieved look back to Sir Frank’s face.

“General Taylor, I don’t like—well, it’s no use my saying I don’t like the tone of your remarks, because I’ve said so already. It doesn’t seem as if, under the circumstances, discussion would be much good, does it? The question is—what can I do? What steps shall I take to—to——”

“Get out of the parlour?” broke in the General.

“Well—yes—if you like to put it that way. It’s crude, but you seem to delight in crudity.”

“You’ll have to fork up.” Sir Frank could almost have sworn that the General chuckled again.

“Fork up?” he repeated, not understanding for the moment.

“Through the nose.”

“Through the—oh, I see! You mean I shall have to pay her a considerable amount of money?”

“Yes, if that’s the way you like to put it. It’s money she’s after. She certainly isn’t after you.”

“You don’t think so?”

The General looked him straight in the face.

“Is it likely?”

Sir Frank seemed about to say something hasty,

changed his intention, hesitated, then putting his hand over his mouth, coughed furtively.

"I've already remarked that I don't want to enter into a discussion, so we'll leave the matter there. I will merely observe that I'm willing to pay practically any sum of money to—to—you know what I mean."

The General suddenly became business-like.

"Has she got any letters of yours?"

"I expect she's got four."

"Giving—yourself—away sort of letters?"

"I should say so—decidedly so." Sir Frank groaned and held his head. "Oh Lord, my head is bad!"

"A nice sort of head it seems to be!" commented the General with sarcasm.

"When you were my age, what sort of head did you have?" retorted Sir Frank, with a show of spirit.

The General ignored the imputation and went on with his question.

"Has she got anything besides your letters?"

"She has my written promise to marry her within a fortnight." Sir Frank groaned again.

"I certainly was never fool enough to give a girl a written promise of marriage," remarked the General pompously.

"Perhaps you didn't behave like a gentleman," suggested Sir Frank. Then seeing an outburst of temper was imminent on the General's part he added hastily, "I beg your pardon—I didn't mean that exactly."

General Taylor with difficulty swallowed his indignation and proceeded.

"If she chooses to take you into court, where do you think you'll be? What sort of figure do you suppose you'll cut—besides breaking your mother's heart?"

Sir Frank's expression softened at the mention of his mother.

"That's the one thing I'm anxious to avoid."

"The expression of such a sentiment does you the greatest possible credit," replied the General stiffly.

Sir Frank hastened to improve the good impression he appeared to have made.

"I want to atone for my errors in the past. You surely can't think that I wish to cause my dear mother pain?"

"I shouldn't care to say what I think—and you wouldn't care to listen."

The reply was not so promising as might have been expected, but Sir Frank persisted.

"General Taylor, will you please go at once—as my mother's oldest friend——"

"Thank you!"

"And tell Miss Lawrence that I'm willing to give her any sum she likes to mention if she will—you know what."

"Suppose she says she wants a hundred thousand pounds?"

"Then give her a hundred thousand pounds."

"Frank Picard!"

"General Taylor!"

The two men eyed one another like combatants ready to spring at each other's throats. The General fancied he could detect a growing change in the younger man—a change for the better, which would make him a foeman more worthy of his steel. He delivered his next remark somewhat in the style of an ultimatum.

"I'll take care that I do nothing of the kind. A hundred pounds is more like the figure."

Sir Frank continued to eye him unflinchingly.

"Do you think so? You'll find you're mistaken. I'm worth more to her than that. You see,

I explained to her my financial position—I told her about the accumulations—I gave her a pretty fair idea of my income. To talk of a hundred pounds is silly, if she is after money.”

“Of all the——” General Taylor stopped short from sheer excess of feeling. Sir Frank chipped in.

“No, I shouldn’t finish your sentence if I were you. Did no one ever talk to you like that? What I want—as I think I originally said—is to have her removed from the premises at once. She may come after me at any moment. She may thrust her society upon my mother.”

“That certainly must be prevented.”

“Then prevent it. Tell her—at once—that money is no object, if she will consent to consider the situation as being what it was before I met her.”

He broke off as a knock came to the door.

“Good Lord! here she is.”

The two men looked at one another in silence. The General appeared to be reconnoitring the position for a hasty retreat. The knocking was repeated. Then a voice called from outside:

“Frank! Open the door! It is I—Delia!”

With an expression of great relief, Sir Frank went to the door and unlocked it. Lady Delia entered.

“Oh, so you are here, are you? Miss Lawrence would like to say a few words to you. Shall I ask her to come here?”

“Ask her to come here? Good gracious, no!” Sir Frank turned hastily to the General. “General Taylor, would you—would you mind going and saying a few words to Miss Lawrence on my behalf—as quickly as you possibly can.”

The General looked at Lady Delia.

“Where is Miss Lawrence?”

“ She was in the garden-room.” Then with a spice of mischief she added, “ I think she went to look for Lady Picard.”

“ Good heavens! ” ejaculated the General, and, turning hastily, rushed from the room.

Lady Delia carefully closed the door after him.

“ Now, Frank,” she said, “ you and I are going to have a talk.”

CHAPTER XIX

A SURPRISING DEVELOPMENT

LADY DELIA, to go back a little, had had considerable difficulty in comforting Miss Lawrence, when the latter had burst into tears in that surprising manner in the garden-room. As a matter of fact she found everything about Miss Lawrence a little surprising. To begin with, her frock had been more than surprising, it was startling; then the fact of her coming down to Dunston Park on such an errand as she had, was surprising, when coupled with the estimate that Lady Delia was beginning to form of her character. Anything less like the traditional adventuress of the stage could hardly be imagined. True, the intention to extract compensation from Sir Frank had been there, but the purpose for which it had been evolved was in itself an unusual one—the desire to find a sum of money for the benefit of the man she truly loved. Moreover, the plot had apparently not been one of Miss Lawrence's own invention, she seemed to have been urged into it against her better feelings. And now, when the plot showed every sign of being successful she was overcome with remorse at ever having entered into it at all. It seemed to Lady Delia that Miss Ailsa Lawrence, or Miss Peggy Simpson, or whatever she liked to call herself, was possessed of too much innate delicacy of feeling ever to make a cold-blooded conspirator.

“I never felt so miserable in all my life,” Miss Lawrence had sobbed, and her looks certainly did not belie her words. Lady Delia drew her down beside her on the settee and tried to comfort her.

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It was a long time before she even partially succeeded. What it was exactly that the girl was so miserable about it was difficult to fathom at first. Gradually it was drawn from her, by dint of continual and judicious questioning, that she felt wretchedly mean in the part she was playing, that she had forfeited all claim to self-respect, that her one idea was to get back home, and that, as a sort of corollary, she wished she was dead.

On hearing this last statement Lady Delia laughed again. It tickled her sense of the ridiculous; Miss Lawrence seemed, to her healthy way of thinking, to be making too much of an ado about nothing.

"My dear girl," she said soothingly, while putting protecting arms around her, "you are making mountains out of mole-hills. What you have done is perfectly natural; I should have done the same if I had been in your place, only probably not half so well, or so thoroughly. But I certainly shouldn't have shown any silly scruples about it, as you are doing. It seems to me that those scruples prove you to be one of two things—either a fool or an angel. I don't think, from what I've seen of you, that you're a fool—in fact, I'm sure you're not—so that the alternative remains, that you are an angel."

Miss Lawrence began to dry her eyes.

"It's awfully sweet of you to talk to me like that. I don't know why it is, but you seem to have been most frightfully kind to me from the first moment we met."

"Nonsense!" retorted Lady Delia cheerily, "and even if I have it's because I took to you at once, because I saw that you were a real good sort, and because—you're in love!"

She said this last rather softly, with the first real touch of sentiment that Miss Lawrence had seen in

her. The latter now turned to Lady Delia with an air of sudden conviction.

“And you’re in love too!” she cried. “It’s no use your denying it, as you did before. You are in love, aren’t you—with Sir Frank?”

“Well, perhaps I am,” Lady Delia admitted, while something that was very like a blush coloured her cheeks, “though I didn’t mean to confess it, even to you. You see, my dear, we modern girls, or rather those of us that are like me, are rather curious creatures, especially where love is concerned. Somehow or other our sense of humour has become so abnormally developed that we find it very difficult to be absolutely serious about anything. The result is that people think us callous and superficial, they don’t credit us with any deeper feelings at all; just because we don’t wear our hearts on our sleeves and can’t help seeing the funny side of things.”

“Then if you’re really in love with Sir Frank, it’s quite simple,” answered Miss Lawrence. “All I have got to do is to give him back his letters and slip quietly back to town, and then everything will come right, as it does in the fairy stories.”

“Oh dear me no, that wouldn’t do at all!” Lady Delia shook her head emphatically. “In the first place, what about your five hundred pounds?”

“I wish I’d never thought of the five hundred pounds!” Miss Lawrence answered rather irritably. “Anyhow that’s out of the question now—it’s got nothing to do with it.”

“It’s got everything to do with it. Surely you’re not going to throw it away just as victory is in your grasp. Think of your fiancé—why should you lose this chance of doing him a good turn, to say nothing of your own prospects?”

"Nothing will induce me to accept one penny from Sir Frank," returned Miss Lawrence firmly.

Lady Delia saw it was no use pressing the subject, for the present, at any rate. She went off on a different tack.

"Well, let's leave that out of the question altogether. But there's my happiness to be considered." Miss Lawrence looked at her curiously as she paused for a moment. "I admit I am very fond of Frank, I always have been, but that doesn't prevent my seeing his weak spots; on the contrary, it rather accentuates them than otherwise. I know it is not altogether his fault—his upbringing has been shameful and too ridiculous for words—but the fact remains that he is only half a man, he has never properly grown up, with the result that he is no longer even an ordinary healthy boy. Now you are the one to make a man of him."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. If you will only consent to go on playing the part you came down here to play, you will do more in one day towards curing him and making him normal than I could do in years—there will be plenty of time for me to put the finishing touches on afterwards." Lady Delia smiled rather whimsically. "It is only the sudden shock of being taught such a lesson as you are, and are going to continue, teaching that can effect the transformation in any reasonable time. I begin to see signs of it taking place in him already. You have begun the good work splendidly; do, like a dear, kind girl, complete it for my sake."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go on as you have begun, to play the game through to the bitter end. I know that, feeling as you do, it isn't nice for you, but

after all, you did come here with that intention, didn't you?"

"I didn't know that I was going to feel like a worm," answered Miss Lawrence.

"That's the fault of your decent nature. But if you'll only forget yourself and remember that you are doing it for me, you won't feel so badly about it. As I said, I want to teach him such a lesson as he will never be likely to forget. I can't do it alone—we must do it between us. I want him to feel the worm, not you. Don't think me brutal, or imagine that because I want him to be made to look ridiculous that I don't love him. It is only because I know it will be his salvation. Some men have to be saved from themselves, and different men require different methods. If I didn't feel that there was so much good in Frank I shouldn't be taking all this trouble to bring him to his senses. I should just let things drift, probably marry him just as he is, and then have to make the best of a bad job afterwards. But your coming has given me a chance of putting things straight before I marry him, and unless I'm mistaken in you, you're not going to rob me of that chance."

"You seem very certain that you are going to marry him," put in Miss Lawrence, with a queer little smile.

"When I make up my mind to a thing I generally get it," retorted Lady Delia promptly.

"Now you will help me, won't you?"

"I don't see how I can very well refuse—under the circumstances."

"That's perfectly splendid of you," said Lady Delia, rising. "I'm going along to the library to interview Frank by myself in the first place. In about ten minutes' time I shall expect you to walk in and back me up in everything I say."

She gave a little laugh. "Poor Frank! I'm afraid we shall make him look very foolish. Now you'll promise, won't you?"

"I promise," Miss Lawrence answered rather faintly, and, as it seemed, unwillingly.

"Good. Then I'll go and prepare the ground for your sowing." Lady Delia moved towards the door. "Don't forget—in ten minutes' time—not a moment later."

With a final wave of the hand Lady Delia disappeared in the direction of the library, which, as we have seen, she entered just as General Taylor was leaving it.

Left to herself, Miss Lawrence looked round her apprehensively. She was sorely tempted to take to her heels and run out of the house, but she had given her promise to Lady Delia and she felt she could not in decency break it. The atmosphere of the garden-room appealed strangely to her senses. It was so unlike anything she had ever experienced—its beauty, its stately dignity, its atmosphere of old-world repose. She felt hopelessly out of place amidst these surroundings. The idea of her marrying Sir Frank, had she ever seriously entertained it, appeared absolutely preposterous now. She knew that she would have felt just the same if she had come down to Dunston Park as the Ailsa Lawrence he had first known and admired, a fairly respectable member of society and at any rate decently dressed. This world was not her world and never could be; she would never have been able to feel really at home in it. Now in her outrageous costume, and with the outrageous Cockney manner she had adopted, she felt like a hideous blot upon a beautiful line engraving.

Again the impulse to fly assailed her. Under its influence she half rose to her feet, when she

heard steps behind her, and then the sound of a courteous voice, a little shaken and trembling.

“Is anyone here?”

Miss Lawrence recognised the voice as Lady Picard's and hastily sat down again. Somewhat to her surprise she found herself quivering all over. The old lady came forward and repeated her question.

“Is anyone here?”

Then she caught sight of Miss Lawrence's hat above the top of the settee. For a moment she seemed to shrink back—the hat was so very awful. But with a great effort she controlled herself and advanced towards the settee.

“Dear Miss Lawrence, they have left you alone, I see. I fear you must think us all very lacking in courtesy and good manners.”

Miss Lawrence appeared almost stupefied. She found it quite impossible to say anything. Lady Picard came and sat down beside her on the settee.

“Indeed, I fear that from the first moment of your arrival you have very just cause to complain of the manner in which you have been treated. But you must make some allowances, my dear, for our surprise and unpreparedness. It was only a few moments before you appeared on the scene that my son had announced to us his intention of getting married. Naturally it came as something of a shock to us. Then you arrived.”

“And you got a bigger shock still.”

Miss Lawrence found that the words had slipped out before she was aware of it. Lady Picard smiled a little pathetically, then went on speaking as gently and courteously as ever.

“I am willing to admit that, at a first glance, you did not appear to be the sort of girl I should have expected my son to choose as his wife.”

Miss Lawrence looked down at her frock and thoroughly endorsed the speaker's opinion.

"But," went on the old lady, "one should never be led away in this life by hasty and unconsidered judgments. If my son truly loves you, of which there would seem to be no doubt in view of his proposal of marriage, it is evident that you must have certain qualities which have led him to believe that you would make him a good wife. After all, he is the one most capable of judging. Hitherto I have always made a point of deciding for him; I begin to see my mistake now. He is no longer a boy, as I in my foolish solicitude have tried to continue to believe; he is a man, and must look at life through his own eyes. A mother, when her son comes to man's estate, can do no more than suggest and advise, she can no longer control, at least not absolutely. Therefore, if he has definitely chosen you as the woman who shall be his wife I shall endeavour to do my best to fall in with his decision."

Miss Lawrence could scarcely believe her ears. This was a complication that she had never even guessed at, and it made the keeping of her promise to Lady Delia increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The old lady's *volte-face* seemed almost incredible; she could not fathom a character such as Lady Picard's, whose first instinct was to do her duty, whatever it might cost her.

"But I do not want to marry your son," Miss Lawrence blurted out in desperation.

"My dear, I can quite understand your attitude," Lady Picard replied calmly. "Naturally you are feeling a little sore and hurt by your reception here to-day. I hasten to tender you my apology—the fullest apology on behalf of all of us—and to beg you not to come to any hasty

decision due to a very pardonable feeling of irritation."

This was growing worse and worse. Miss Lawrence felt absolutely nonplussed. But she made another despairing effort.

"I—I want to marry someone else."

Lady Picard looked almost aggrieved for a moment.

"Surely, my dear Miss Lawrence, if that were the case, you would not have given your word to marry Frank. My son's happiness must be my first consideration; I cannot allow anything else to interfere with it."

Miss Lawrence felt like a fish round whom the meshes of a net are gradually being drawn tighter and tighter. This unexpected development fairly, to use another metaphor, took the wind out of her sails. While she was wondering what on earth to answer she was relieved of the necessity by the sudden entrance of General Taylor.

The General was feeling hot and distinctly bad-tempered. He had been sent on a wild-goose chase by Lady Delia, and had been hunting round the house and garden in the full expectation of having the felicity of rescuing Lady Picard from the unwelcome attentions of a vulgar and unprincipled adventuress. The only person, however, that he had encountered in the garden had been the Duchess of Ditchling. Owing to the fact that the Duchess was in an equally bad temper the encounter had been short and sharp, resulting in the General's very considerable discomfiture. Now as he entered the garden-room he saw the horrible hat, which he knew adorned the head of the adventuress, protruding at him above the settee, and it acted on him as the proverbial red rag is supposed to do upon the proverbial bull. He had no idea of Lady Picard's

presence, his whole attention being focussed on the hat. Moreover, his mind was occupied by one single idea to the exclusion of everything else—he had to offer Miss Lawrence a sum of money in order to get her off the premises as soon as possible. With this notion securely fixed in his head he fired his bombshell direct from where he stood, without troubling to come forward and face the lady to whom he was speaking.

“Miss Lawrence—I am instructed to inquire what sum of money you will accept to release Sir Frank Picard from his promise of marriage and to leave this house at the earliest possible moment.”

The General awaited the effect of his bombshell. It was very different from what he had expected. The hat on which his gaze was fixed only wobbled slightly, but did not rise from the settee as he had anticipated. The figure that rose instead was that of Lady Picard, who cast upon the astonished General a look of indignant reproach.

“General Taylor, I am indeed surprised, I may say scandalised, that you should think fit to offer such an insult to a lady in my house. I have just informed Miss Lawrence that if my son is determined to make her his wife, I shall be fully prepared to accept her in that capacity.” She turned her attention to the girl on the settee. “Miss Lawrence, pray accept my apologies on General Taylor’s behalf, since he appears incapable of apologising for himself.”

Then at last Miss Lawrence rose. She seemed about to make some reply to Lady Picard, but her pent-up feelings were too much for her. Instead she turned and groped her way a little blindly towards the door, summoning up enough spirit, however, to give General Taylor as she passed him a look of withering contempt, which was the last drop in the cup of that gallant soldier’s discomfiture.

CHAPTER XX

LADY DELIA ENJOYS HERSELF

MEANWHILE Lady Delia and Sir Frank, after General Taylor's somewhat hurried departure, were facing one another in the library.

"Now, Frank, please answer my question—shall I ask Miss Lawrence to come here?"

Sir Frank's reply was evasive, to say the least of it.

"Delia, you are not treating me well. I am sorry to have to say so. But in the present state of my feelings, when I want all the help that friendship can give me, it's—it's most distressing."

Lady Delia's response was equally irrelevant.

"Did you quite catch what I said? I said that Miss Lawrence wishes to speak to you. Will you go to her, or shall she come to you here?"

"Neither."

"Didn't you invite her to come to Dunston Park?" Sir Frank began to fidget about uneasily. "Didn't you press her to come to Dunston Park? Isn't she here as your visitor and as your affianced wife?"

Sir Frank was growing more and more restless under her ruthless questioning.

"Delia, I—I—I don't think you're treating me nicely."

"What are, do you consider, the duties of a host to his guest?"

"You're—you're only trying to aggravate me."

She gave him a penetrating look.

"Very well, then. I won't aggravate you any longer; I'll go and bring Miss Lawrence here."

"You'll—you'll do nothing of the kind."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

Lady Delia gave him another look.

"I never heard of such behaviour in my life—it's incredible."

"It's rather an incredible situation."

"For goodness' sake, Frank, don't keep fidgeting about! I want to explain what I mean. Do come and sit down and let me explain."

He sat down rather helplessly. She stood over him like a figure of justice.

"There's your affianced wife in the house. She's here by your special and particular request. She's come down here at great personal inconvenience to herself. You never even met her at the station with the car."

"The car was there."

"She never saw the car, or at least she never knew it was your car come to meet her. When she arrives at the house—at your house—instead of being received with honour, with open arms, with affection, she isn't received at all, not in any real sense. If it hadn't been for me no one would have spoken a word to her." Lady Delia was, of course, ignorant of Lady Picard's attempt at conciliation which was at that moment taking place in the garden-room. "Now so far as I'm able to understand—it is a little difficult to understand—but so far as I am able to understand, you absolutely refuse to speak to her. May I ask if you will continue to decline to speak to her when she becomes your wife?"

During this somewhat lengthy speech Sir Frank had become restless again.

"She will never be my wife."

"Oh yes, she will."

"I tell you she won't."

“ My dear Frankie boy——”

He sprang up suddenly.

“ Don’t you call me——” He stopped as he saw the expression on her face. She was eyeing him fixedly, and continued speaking with slow precision.

“ My dear Frankie boy, I tell you she will be your wife in a fortnight.”

“ It—it isn’t fair of you! ” he protested lamely. “ You used to be quite different, Delia, you—you know you did.”

“ You also used to be rather different,” she retorted. “ I suppose you’ll change again when you’re married.”

“ Nothing will ever induce me to marry a—

a——”

“ A creature—is that the word you’re looking for? ”

“ It isn’t, but I’ll use it. I may say that nothing will ever induce me to marry a creature who can come to a house in which she has never been before in a dress like that.”

“ A dress like what? ” asked Lady Delia, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

But Sir Frank had started pacing up and down, his mind full of his own grievances. His tongue seemed suddenly to become unloosed.

“ I knew the instant I saw it that all was over between us. What a costume in which to pay a first visit to Dunston Park! Could I introduce her to my mother—to my dear mother—with her fastidious tastes—as my future wife, mind, my future wife? In such a dress as that? And the hat! And the boots! Could I introduce her to the country as the future Lady Picard of Dunston Park in a green velvet hat with pink feathers and yellow-brown boots? No, most decidedly no! I always try to make it a practice to avoid using language

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of unnecessary strength—I owe that to my dear mother—but in this case I can safely say that, using the strongest possible language—in this case it's justified—surely it's justified—that rather than marry a woman who can wear such clothes I'd be burnt at the stake."

He paused for breath, and Lady Delia took advantage of her opportunity.

"Frank Picard, you're a prig!" He started and stood still. "You act like a prig and talk like a prig. 'Language of unnecessary strength'—pah! you talk like an antediluvian mummy. Why not say a good healthy 'damn' and have done with it? You'll have to marry the girl. Do you think that, just because you've got lots of money, you can throw yourself at any girl's head and then back out of it exactly as and when it pleases you? Though it's a wonder she should want to marry you: money isn't everything, and you're just a gilded fool, that's what you are, a poor gilded fool. I tell you you'll have to marry the girl."

"And I tell you I will not."

"We'll see!" Lady Delia pulled a face at him. "As for making her clothes an excuse—you knew very well what kind of clothes she was in the habit of wearing."

"I did not!" he answered indignantly. Sir Frank was decidedly waking up. "Do you mean to tell me, after knowing me all your life——"

"I never met you till I was four or five years old," she interrupted provokingly. Lady Delia was enjoying herself thoroughly.

"You've known me ever since——" he paused in anticipation of another retort from her, but none was forthcoming.

Instead of speaking she climbed on to the couch, perched herself on one end and began to whistle.

Sir Frank looked annoyed. "I wish you wouldn't whistle." She whistled again, rather more loudly. "Delia, I do wish you wouldn't take such a pleasure in provoking me, I really do." Still she went on whistling, apparently ignoring his remark altogether. He came up close to the couch and looked at her in a peculiar way. "Do you know it never struck me that you were pretty until just now—in the garden-room—I think I told you at the time." Once more he paused for her to speak, but she only continued to whistle. He came a little closer. "I am struck by it again. The way in which you screw up your lips when you try to whistle is, on the whole, not unbecoming, as I suppose you are not unaware."

Lady Delia's eyelids flickered; Sir Frank was distinctly improving. But she only went on whistling, although a little more softly. He moved still closer. "In all that a girl does, I take it, she has an eye upon her personal appearance. She wouldn't whistle unless she thought it suited her."

"A lot you know about girls." Lady Delia had spoken at last. "You didn't even know what sort of clothes the girl you were going to marry was in the habit of wearing. I can see the future Lady Picard, seated at the head of her dinner-table, lighting up the feast with all the colours of the rainbow."

"You can see nothing of the kind."

Lady Delia went on imperturbably.

"Do you think she'll want the table linen to be blue and green and pink and yellow? Perhaps she'll give the women napkins to match the colour of their frocks. She may want you to wear an *eau de nil* shirt, with a crushed strawberry tie. Shall you do it?"

Sir Frank appeared to be taking not the slightest

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notice of her remarks. He was still regarding her with what, for him, was a decidedly peculiar manner.

“ You know, Delia, you really look rather jolly, even when you talk like that.”

“ You are rather a judge of looks, aren't you ? ” She still spoke in the same calm, unmoved, and rather sarcastic voice. “ You knew what Miss Lawrence looked like the moment you saw her. Seriously, what was she wearing when you called on her to ask her to be your wife ? ”

“ I always have quarrelled with you all my life.”

The remark seemed irrelevant, and Lady Delia practically ignored it.

“ You're so absolutely silly. Look at the fuss you're making about the way in which your future wife chooses to clothe herself ! Are you so simple as not to be aware that this is the age of women's emancipation ? Can't a woman dress to please herself ? What next ? I wonder if she'll be married in a dress of many colours ? Would you like me to be one of the bridesmaids ? ”

“ I should not.”

“ Oh, I'll dress to please her. If you're going to be married inside a fortnight——”

“ I'm not going to be married inside a fortnight ! ”

Lady Delia waved aside the interruption.

“ Since you are going to be married inside a fortnight, there wouldn't be much time to get anything remarkable, but I dare say at a pinch I could manage to get something almost remarkable enough to please her at a theatrical costumier's. I understand they stock all sorts of horrors. After quarrelling with you all your life I naturally want to please you at the end of it, and of course marrying Miss Lawrence will be the end of it. Even the cows will have to quit. To see Sir Frank and

Lady Picard coming across the grass like an enterprising dyer's colour card will be too much for any self-respecting cow."

Sir Frank began to look a little annoyed again.

"You're awfully funny, Delia, aren't you?"

She smiled composedly.

"There'll be something funny about you then. You'll run away from those shocked and startled cows, just as you ran away from your future wife a few minutes ago. Poor Frankie boy!"

He appeared to be growing weary of her badinage. All at once he moved away, sat down, leant his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands. Lady Delia eyed him with a feeling of compunction. But she must be merciless for his sake—and her own.

"What's the matter? Would you like my handkerchief? Shall I ring for some smelling salts?"

"You can ring for whatever you please. I've had enough of you! I've had enough of everything!" He uncovered his face and stood up. "I wish I'd never been born!"

Lady Delia clapped her hands softly.

"Hear, hear."

He looked at her rather appealingly.

"We've been such friends—you and I."

"You said just now I'd been quarrelling with you all your life."

"I didn't know what friends we had been," he persisted.

"Till when?"

"Till just now—in the garden-room."

"And pray how did you come to discover such a singular fact at that particular moment?"

"I don't know. I haven't the least idea. When I sat on the settee—you remember I did sit on the settee——"



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"I remember telling you there was no room."

"When I sat down something went right through me."

"Another memory of Tommy Trent's whisky."

"No, it wasn't—it wasn't that at all. I—I felt that I'd like to be near you. Delia, do you think it's possible to be in love with a girl without knowing it?"

"Anything's possible for you."

"Do you really think so? Then that explains it."

"Don't be so utterly ridiculous! Are you going to see Miss Lawrence, or is she to come and see you?"

"Neither."

"Then let me tell you——" She began to get off the couch as she spoke, but he suddenly laid a detaining hand on her shoulder.

"Delia, stay where you are!"

She looked at him in amazement.

"What? Frank Picard!"

"Stay where you are!" he repeated. "You got on to the end of that couch to please yourself and you can stop there to please me."

Sir Frank was certainly beginning to grow up. But Lady Delia was not done with him yet.

"Can I?" she exclaimed. "I'll soon show you! How dare you put your hand on my shoulder?"

Before he could prevent her she had stepped off the couch, but he caught her by the arms. He spoke in a tone that was full of earnest entreaty.

"Delia, please listen to what I have to say."

"Haven't I been listening? What have you got to say? Why will you keep touching me?"

"Because I like to."

"Because you like to." She repeated the words vaguely, as though not comprehending their mean-

ing. Then suddenly with a little quick movement she disengaged herself from his clasp and walked away. "Now, what have you got to say?"

"I know why I made such an ass of myself about that woman."

"It's more than anyone else does."

"It was your fault."

"My fault." Again she echoed his words as if they were beyond her comprehension. "How like a man—or even a boy—to put the blame of what he's done upon a woman."

"Or even a girl," he said, imitating her.

"Or even a girl," she repeated, ignoring the sarcasm. "You needn't imagine that I'm ashamed of being a girl. I wouldn't mind being anything so long as I wasn't a boy."

"It was your fault," he said once more.

"How do you even begin to make that out?"

"I should never have asked her to marry me if I hadn't loved you."

"Frank!"

Lady Delia was obviously startled. It was difficult to tell from the tone in which the single word was uttered the nature of the emotion it was intended to convey. Sir Frank went on stolidly.

"When I say that I'm standing in the cold, dry light of truth."

"You think you can be rude to me because, as you put it, you've known me all my life." Lady Delia was beginning to recover herself.

"I do love you," he continued, still in the same stolid, even tone, "and as you're a great deal cleverer than you like me to suppose, I believe you knew I loved you, and you wouldn't let me say so."

At this point Lady Delia sank on to the couch and stared at him somewhat blankly.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

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"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to ring for some smelling salts."

He regarded her for a moment, wondering whether she were serious or not. Apparently he decided she was not.

"I shan't! I won't ring for anything. I've got you here, and I'm going to keep you here till I've said what I have to say. I wanted to say it on the day I came of age, only you never gave me a chance."

"I never gave you a chance!" She sounded genuinely surprised this time.

"I know I'm not clever," he went on, "and I know you know I'm not clever. My mother thinks I'm clever, but I know I'm not. I should have to be very clever to be as clever as you."

"Aren't you expressing yourself rather cleverly?" She had taken refuge in sarcasm again.

"That's the sort of thing you would say. I don't care—I don't care how I'm expressing myself. I shall express myself as I choose."

"If you can succeed in expressing yourself at all you probably will."

He moved a step or two nearer to her.

"Oh, I can do that. I can say what I want to say. I can express myself in one sentence, and here it is: Delia, I want you to be my wife."

She started up from the couch and faced him.

"Frank Picard."

He met her gaze unflinchingly.

"Delia, will you marry me? Please will you marry me? I would love you to marry me, Delia. Delia, do!"

Lady Delia continued to stare at him blankly for a moment. Before she could find words to reply to this extraordinary proposal the door opened and Miss Ailsa Lawrence walked in.

CHAPTER XXI

SIR FRANK PICARD GROWS UP

MISS LAWRENCE stood hesitating just inside the door. The sight of those two facing one another, and the expression on their countenances, filled her with the immediate conviction that she had entered at rather an awkward moment, and she began to wish she had not come. Indeed, after her somewhat surprising interview with Lady Picard, she had been very unwilling to enter the library at all; her first instinct was to creep unnoticed out of the house and leave Dunston Park and its inmates behind her for ever. It was only the remembrance of her promise to Lady Delia that restrained her, a promise that was all the more binding because of the kindness which Lady Delia had shown her. Now, as she saw those two together, she felt somehow that her promise had been unnecessary; she turned and was about to leave the room again when Lady Delia called to her.

“ Ah, Miss Lawrence, here you are at last! Sir Frank Picard has been asking for you. Haven't you, Frank? ” She turned and saw Sir Frank making an ignominious retreat towards the other door in the room which gave on to the garden. She immediately went after him and pulled him back. “ Where are you going? You will please stop here. ” She turned to Miss Lawrence again. “ Miss Lawrence, Sir Frank Picard has just asked me to be his wife. ”

There was a dramatic pause. Sir Frank stood

in the centre of the room, the picture of dejection. Lady Delia, on the other hand, was holding her head high as though she felt that she was complete mistress of the situation. Miss Lawrence came slowly forward and spoke to her in a low voice.

"Please let me go now. I have just had a talk with Lady Picard—she was very kind to me. I want to go home. Please let me."

"Nonsense!" Lady Delia answered in the same tone. "Remember your promise—you must remember your promise. He's improving rapidly, but his education is only just beginning. It's for you to put the finishing touches; don't fail me now, or I shall never forgive you."

Miss Lawrence still stood hesitating. She looked from Lady Delia to Sir Frank. The latter was not an inspiring object just then. Suddenly she remembered that this man had lightly made her a proposal of marriage, and then as lightly tried to repudiate it, and promptly offered his hand and heart to another woman. The reflection roused something in her which began to sweep away her scruples, an imp with an irresponsible broom, a very demon incarnate of mischief. Since Lady Delia asked her, why should she not seize the chance of getting her own back a little? She had long ago abandoned the idea of extracting money from Sir Frank; it was a sordid notion, even when one considered the object for which she wanted that money. Now that she had finally discarded it, was there any reason why she should not have a bit of real fun at the expense of a man who, however unconsciously, had undoubtedly insulted her? Besides, she would be helping Lady Delia, at least so she had been given to understand. As a matter of fact, if she had only known it, that was an entirely erroneous supposi-

tion. Lady Delia, if she had only known it too, was making a great mistake in proceeding any further in the bear-baiting process. She had practically gained all she wanted; Sir Frank had already learnt a lesson which he would never forget, a lesson that was even now having its visible effect on him. Lady Delia would have been well advised to have left well alone, to have remained satisfied with the victory she had already won, and to have allowed Miss Lawrence to have gone quietly home as she desired. But the demon of mischief was rampant in her too, and having aroused a similar demon in Miss Lawrence it was too late to turn back.

"Now for it!" Lady Delia whispered. "Let yourself go as much as you like and don't spare him!" Then in a louder voice she said, "You heard, Miss Lawrence? Frank Picard has just asked me to marry him."

"Yes, I heard," Miss Lawrence answered in the same tone. "Perhaps he asks a fresh girl every day."

"You think so?" Lady Delia turned to Sir Frank. "Do you?"

He shuffled about uneasily.

"I'm not going to stay here to be insulted."

"Is it possible to insult you?" This from Lady Delia.

"I—I won't have you talk to me like that."

"No? Goodness!" Lady Delia laughed.

"I'll talk to you as I please—everybody does." She turned to Miss Lawrence. "I believe he asked you to marry him?"

"He did."

"I believe he promised to marry you—inside a fortnight?"

"He did! If he'd had his way I should have been his wife at this moment."

“ Oh! ”

Lady Delia's monosyllable spoke volumes. She stole a glance at Sir Frank, but he had turned away and was looking out of the window, with his back towards them. She winked at Miss Lawrence. The latter was just beginning to enjoy the situation. Her actress instincts were thoroughly awakened; she felt as if she were playing a part in a new and delightful comedy, and she was determined all at once to show just what she could do in this direction, to display talents in the histrionic line which had never been suspected because they had never had the chance of being properly exploited. She now took up her cue, and there ensued a breathless duologue between the two girls during which Sir Frank had no opportunity of putting in a word, even if he had been capable of doing so.

“ I should by this time have been going with him on our honeymoon to the South of France,” said Miss Lawrence, with one eye on Sir Frank's back. “ What I've escaped! ”

“ Unthinkable! You would not marry him? ”

“ I should think not.”

“ He asked you to come here? ”

“ He did, as his affianced wife.”

“ As his affianced wife! ” Lady Delia repeated. They both glanced round in Sir Frank's direction, but his back was still turned towards them. They exchanged a comical look and started off again, hammer and tongs.

“ He asked me to come here,” said Miss Lawrence, “ so that he might introduce me to his mother.”

“ Has he? ”

“ He has not.”

“ Why not? ”

“ I don't know.”

"Will he?"

"It doesn't look like it."

"Yet you'll be married to him in a fortnight."

"Inside a fortnight."

"You will of course live here."

"Of course I shall."

"Without knowing any of his relations?"

"Apparently."

"Is that what he led you to expect?"

"It is not. He told me that his mother would be delighted to know me; that nothing would please her better than that I should be his wife; that as his wife I should be dear to her."

Lady Delia beamed. Miss Lawrence was surpassing herself.

"He led you to expect, in fact, that, metaphorically, there would be a band to meet you?"

"He did!" answered Miss Lawrence.

"And there has been no band?"

"Nothing in the shape of a band. I came up from the station in a grocer's cart——"

"Is it possible?"

"And when I entered the house I was asked if I ought not to have come in by the servants' entrance."

"Incredible! You, who will soon be mistress of it all!"

"Exactly. And after long waiting, the first person to whom I was introduced called me a female nigger minstrel."

"Is the thing conceivable?" The intonation expressive of mingled horror and astonishment in Lady Delia's voice was delightfully done. "And now he has asked me to marry him!"

"Has he?"

"I can only imagine that he proposes to marry me after you are dead."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"He can hardly intend to marry us both at once."

"You never can tell."

"Oh don't say that."

"Considering that he had not been in my room five minutes," returned Miss Lawrence, "and that we had scarcely exchanged half a dozen words before he talked about paying twenty-five pounds for a special licence, marrying me there and then, and starting for our honeymoon the same night, does anything seem too awful for him to do?"

"That's true. And this is supposed to be a man!"

"Is it?" Miss Lawrence asked cuttingly.

They both looked at Sir Frank, who at that moment simultaneously turned and faced them.

"When you two have quite finished," he remarked irritably, "perhaps I may be allowed to say a word." He turned to Miss Lawrence.

"Miss Ailsa Lawrence!"

"Sir Frank Picard."

"It's perfectly true that I did ask you to marry me."

"He admits it," said Lady Delia.

"Did I ever deny it? I won't have you poking fun at me like this." This was to Lady Delia. Then to Miss Lawrence: "I repeat that it's perfectly true that I did ask you to marry me."

Miss Lawrence drew a chair towards her.

"Do you mind me sitting down?"

"What—in that frock?" asked Lady Delia wickedly.

"Why not in this frock?"

"He doesn't like it."

"He wasn't asked," retorted Miss Lawrence, quietly seating herself.

"When I'm allowed to get a word in edge-ways——" began Sir Frank.

"Don't say it again!" Lady Delia interrupted.

"She knows you asked her to marry you."

"Inside a fortnight," put in Miss Lawrence.

"I presume you intend to marry him?" said Lady Delia.

"Certainly. He's got a million pounds in cash, and two hundred thousand pounds a year."

"As much as that?"

"He said so."

"Of course I know you're after my money."

This was from Sir Frank and directed at Miss Lawrence. She rose from her chair indignantly.

"Sir Frank Picard!"

"What else could you be after?" asked Lady Delia, winking at her.

"Of course there is that," replied Miss Lawrence, returning the wink.

"You have only to look at him," said Lady Delia.

"And hear him talk," added Miss Lawrence.

"But that is not the point—I did not go after him."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Lady Delia.

"He came after me."

"That's obvious."

"He wrote me four letters."

"Did he?"

"Would you like to see them?"

"I should very much."

"Look here," broke in Sir Frank in an agitated manner, as though he were fearful of what was to follow next. "I tell you what it is——" he paused, unable to find the right word.

"Yes?" asked Miss Lawrence expectantly.

"Go on!" said Lady Delia encouragingly.

"I tell you what it is," Sir Frank repeated.

"It's no use beating about the bush. I'll put it in a sentence—how much do you want?"

"How much what?" Miss Lawrence asked.

"How much money?"

"Perhaps he's going to offer you your railway fare?" said Lady Delia.

"Four and elevenpence," said Miss Lawrence.

"As his affianced wife—if he loves you," Lady Delia went on, "he may be going to offer to refund it." She turned to Sir Frank. "Are you?"

"Delia, I wish to have absolutely nothing to say to you."

"But you did ask me to marry you," answered Lady Delia provokingly.

"He asked me first," Miss Lawrence put in.

"He admits that," said Lady Delia. "Hush! He has something to say."

"I am hushing," replied Miss Lawrence, sitting down again.

Sir Frank looked at her somewhat helplessly. Then he made a great effort.

"Miss Lawrence, I have not behaved well to you. I want you to tell me for what sum of money you'll let me off?"

"Let you off what?"

"Let me off marrying you. I don't want to marry you—I do not want to."

"Not in that frock!" interpolated Lady Delia mischievously.

"I've got another," said Miss Lawrence.

"There you are!" Lady Delia turned to Sir Frank. "She's got another—perhaps that makes a difference."

"It does not! It makes no difference—absolutely no difference whatever." He ignored Lady Delia with what dignity he could muster, and once more addressed Miss Lawrence. "Miss

Lawrence—I repeat—without wishing to say anything to—to hurt your feelings, what sum of money will you take to let me off my promise to marry you? ”

Miss Lawrence rose from her chair again, and spoke very quietly.

“ Sir Frank Picard, what sum of money would you require to let me off marrying you? ”

“ Hear, hear! ” exclaimed Lady Delia. “ Now we’re beginning! ”

“ I—I don’t understand, ” stammered Sir Frank.

“ Then I’ll explain, ” returned Miss Lawrence, still speaking very quietly. “ When I had your letters I said to myself what poor, silly lunatic is this? ”

“ Miss Lawrence! ”

His indignant interruption went unheeded.

“ All sorts of funny people do write me letters, ” she continued. “ I wondered what sort you were. The same post which brought one of your letters brought me one from a gentleman who said he was a butcher. I didn’t think you were a butcher. ”

“ I take it, ” said Lady Delia, “ that sometimes a butcher is a person of sense. ”

“ I couldn’t think what you were, ” Miss Lawrence went on, still addressing Sir Frank. “ I paid no attention to your letters; I never do to that sort of rubbish. I should have paid no attention to you had you not forced yourself upon my acquaintance, Miss Florence Stacey, and had she not been so foolish as to give you my address. You called on me uninvited. I was weak enough to allow myself to be persuaded to see you. I thought you were rather a nice, clean-looking boy when I did see you——”

“ My dear, don’t flatter him! ” This was from Lady Delia, but Miss Lawrence hadn’t finished yet.

“ But when you began to talk I thought you

were the most abjectly foolish person I had ever met. You seemed to have a great deal of money—it's odd how many people with no sense have lots of money—my friends did think that it might be possible to marry anything with all that money, but I couldn't do it—I really could not do it. I thought so then; I am sure of it now."

Lady Delia touched Sir Frank on the arm.

"She came to the conclusion that you were not a marriageable person."

He turned away from her with a gesture of annoyance.

"Miss Lawrence——"

But that young lady cut him short.

"I prefer not to marry you, Sir Frank Picard, thank you very much. It couldn't be done—not at any price."

"Not at any price!" Lady Delia touched his arm again.

"I don't want your money," continued Miss Lawrence. "Keep your million pounds in cash and your two hundred thousand pounds a year, and all your vast possessions. If you go with them, they're not for me. Instead of taking anything from you, Sir Frank Picard, I prefer to give you something." She slowly produced an envelope from the folds of her dress. "There, Sir Frank, are your four letters—your four ridiculous letters—and your promise to marry me. Permit me to have the pleasure of returning them."

She held the envelope out towards Sir Frank. He made no motion of taking it at first. Lady Delia watched the two rather breathlessly. She thought that at that moment Miss Lawrence looked magnificent, in spite of her appalling costume and her still more appalling hat.

"She means to do what she said, then, and to

let him off scot free. How splendid of her—and yet how foolish.”

Still Sir Frank made no motion of taking the envelope. Miss Lawrence moved a little closer to him with the envelope extended in her hand.

“To Sir Frank—with best wishes,” she said.

Mechanically, as it seemed, Sir Frank took the envelope from her. Miss Lawrence moved towards the door, but Lady Delia ran up to intercept her.

“Ailsa, where are you going?”

“Back home.”

“But surely, after what you told me, you’re not going to give him back his letter—and his promise—and all that—for nothing?”

“I fancy, when you come to think things over,” said Miss Lawrence in a low voice, “you’ll see that he’s had to pay pretty dearly. We’ve been trying our best, you and I, to make him pay.”

Lady Delia looked at her curiously, and there was a sudden strange silence. She could not help feeling an intense admiration for this girl; at the same time she was beginning to feel a little ashamed of the part she herself had played. The silence was all at once broken by Sir Frank.

“Miss Lawrence!”

There was something in his voice that made both girls turn round suddenly; something entirely unexpected, something which neither of them had ever heard in his voice before.

“Miss Lawrence, you have done me the honour to return me my letters, may I now have the honour to insist upon your keeping them?” He strode over to Miss Lawrence and thrust the envelope into her hands. She took it meekly, altogether too overcome with surprise to make any show of resistance. Meanwhile he went on speaking, still in the same tone. “As you have very rightly, and with no more than justice pointed out

to me, I have behaved towards you as an arrant cad. I will not attempt to make any apologies in words; I can only try to prove by my actions that after all I have the instincts of a gentleman."

He paused, but neither girl uttered a word. They were both too utterly dumbfounded even to think of anything to say. Still Sir Frank went on.

"You have reminded me of my promise to marry you, a promise that was made in all good faith and sincerity, and you have offered to release me from that promise. Well, I wish to inform you that I refuse that offer, however kindly it may have been meant, and at the same time to remind you that you, on your side, practically gave your promise to marry me. That promise I intend to hold you to; please, therefore, consider yourself to be my affianced wife."

Lady Delia gave a curious little gasp in her throat. Miss Lawrence was absolutely silent. Neither looked at the other; they both appeared to be absolutely thunderstruck. There could be no mistake about it—Sir Frank Picard had suddenly and unaccountably grown up!

CHAPTER XXII

THE GENERAL ADVANCES

WHILE these exciting events were taking place in the library, there was a scene which was not without its due significance being enacted in the garden-room. General Taylor, hardened campaigner as he was, had found it difficult to make an immediate strategic recovery from the position in which he had been placed by Lady Picard's dramatic announcement of her intention to welcome Miss Lawrence as her son's wife, and her denunciation of his own well-intentioned offer of financial consolation. The exit of Miss Lawrence from the room had been followed by a rather constrained silence.

Lady Picard was the first to break it. She looked reproachfully at the discomfited General.

"General—how could you?"

The gallant soldier began to stammer and stutter.

"My dear lady—I—I——"

Somehow he could get no further. He felt that it was a ridiculous situation, in which he himself was certainly not cutting too glorious a figure, and at the same time he felt distinctly aggrieved. Here was that young fool of a Frank Picard pestering him to get rid of the adventuress, to pay her any sum of money within or without reason, in order to get her off the premises, and when he had tried to carry out his instructions promptly and in a business-like manner, he found himself rebuked by Frank's mother, the very woman whom he was endeavouring to protect from further annoyance

on Miss Lawrence's part. No wonder the General felt at a loss for words. Truly, he thought to himself, women are past all understanding, and, he might have added if he had not been too polite, even in thought, especially old women.

"It grieves me very much, as I have said," Lady Picard went on, "to think that such an insult should have been offered to any young lady in my house, and more especially to the young lady who is so shortly to be my son's wife."

The General gasped.

"But my dear lady——" he began again.

"Please say no more on the subject, General," Lady Picard interrupted. "No doubt you acted with the best intentions, but men do not understand these matters." The General, in spite of his irritation, felt almost amused at this. "After the first shock was over of finding that the woman whom my son had chosen for his wife was so—so"—the old lady paused for a word—"so unexpected, I began to reflect a little, and to see things in their true light. If this was the wife my son desired then it was my duty to fall in with his wishes." The General was evidently on the point of making a remark, but she silenced him with a wave of the hand. "No doubt you will wonder"—the General did—"why I have so readily resigned myself to the inevitable. I cannot pretend that I consider Miss Lawrence an ideal wife for my son"—the General thought of the frock and the hat, to say nothing of the Cockney accent, and shuddered—"but he has chosen her, and I must try to be content." Once more the General appeared to be bursting with speech, and once again Lady Picard silenced him. "Whatever fault there is in his choice is mine, not his."

Lady Picard paused. Now when the General

had a chance to say something he felt so flabbergasted that he was bereft of speech. After a moment the old lady continued.

"It has come home to me very vividly that what dear Sarah said, unpleasant as it was, was right. I have brought Frank up all wrong; indeed, I might even say that I have never brought him up at all. My intense anxiety to shield him from evil has been his undoing. I have let him go out into the world absolutely unarmed against its temptations, and its dangers, and Miss Lawrence is the result."

At last the General found his tongue.

"But surely you are not going to let him ruin his life because, in his ignorance"—he nearly said idiotic ignorance—"he has made a fool of himself?"

"Who can say that it is going to ruin his life?" the old lady answered gently. "If Frank loves her——"

"Loves her!" the General burst in rudely here. "Why, he sent me to ask her how much she would accept to release him from his promise of marriage?"

"That was very wrong of him," said Lady Picard. "Having once given his promise he ought to abide by it. He owes at least that much to the honour of the Picards."

The General looked at her helplessly.

"And how much do you think the honour of the Picards is going to benefit by having this—this—this Miss Lawrence as its future head, or, rather, as the wife of its future head?"

"That cannot be helped now—Frank should have thought of all that before. But as I have already said"—the old lady sighed a little pathetically—"the fault lies not with him, but with me. All we can do is to make the best of it."

“ Make the best of it? ” The General was fairly roused now. “ How can anyone make the best of such a horrible fiasco as this? The only sensible thing to do is to get rid of the young woman at once; Frank will probably have to pay pretty heavily for his folly in hard cash, but anything is better than letting him hang such an awful millstone round his neck for the rest of his natural life.” He drew a little closer to her, and his voice grew a trifle less bombastic. “ Dear Lady Picard, do for goodness sake see reason, and let me settle this unfortunate affair for you in the only logical and commonsense manner in which it can be settled.”

Lady Picard was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head rather sadly.

“ It’s no use, General, the thing has gone too far. Frank has given his word, the word of a Picard, and he must abide by it. As for me ”—her voice broke slightly—“ I have been a foolish old woman, I realise that now. But I must abide by it too—this is my punishment; I have sinned and I must pay. It is true that my sin has been one of foolishness only, due to my great solicitude for my dear son’s welfare, but it was a foolishness that savoured of vanity, and it is for that that I must suffer. It is as though I had set myself up as the arbiter of my son’s destiny; as though I had imagined that I alone could guide his steps safely along the road of life, forgetting that there was a Higher Power that rules these things, Whose aid I should have invoked in my puny little efforts to keep my son on the straight and narrow path. No, General, I have sinned and I must pay, however great the price, the price of my folly and my arrogance.”

A silence fell upon the garden-room. The General felt himself a prey to the most unaccus-

tomed emotions. The foolishness of the old lady's point of view was, of course, obvious, but there was a beauty and a pathos about it which gave him a curious choking sensation. He stole a glance at Lady Picard as she sat there with a far-away expression in her eyes, eyes that held a look of wistful sadness which was almost more than he could bear. She was like a beautiful old-world picture, he thought, or like a precious piece of porcelain that was too frail and too lovely to come in contact with the rude actualities of the ordinary, everyday world. No wonder the problem of Sir Frank's upbringing had been too difficult for her! Looking at life as she did, from the detached and dreamy point of view of the cloister, she was quite unfitted to cope with its baser and more material side. General Taylor began to feel a sort of pity for Frank; but it was something different that he felt for Lady Picard. It was pity too, but while his pity for Frank held something of contempt in it, his pity for Lady Picard was more than half composed of that deeper feeling to which it is said to be akin. He had always had a great admiration for her; during a friendship that had lasted for a good many years this admiration had consistently grown. Only a fear of the ridiculous had kept him from expressing it long before now. But the moment seemed ripe at last. Lady Picard's misfortune was his opportunity; moreover his admiration was, as we have seen, being transformed into something deeper by his compassion. Dare he speak? That was the question.

The General began to fidget uneasily, grew hot, and felt himself trembling all over. Lady Picard, quite unconscious of the emotion she had aroused in him, and of the impending storm that was threatening to burst every moment, sat on absorbed in thought, practically oblivious of the General's

presence. He drew a step nearer and coughed, but there was no response from Lady Picard. He coughed again, more loudly; still the old lady didn't stir. The General took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow; beads of perspiration were standing thick upon it. He was up against a situation which he found far more formidable than anything he had ever experienced on the field of battle. Should he attempt to take the position by storm, or should he employ strategy? The prospect of defeat filled him with fear; it meant the loss of so much that he valued in life, the friendship of this dear and wonderful old lady in the first place, a friendship that he could hardly hope to retain, at any rate in its old intimate form, if he failed in his attempt to win something greater from her. But it was too late to draw back now. Something had been let loose inside him which was determined to drive him on, be the cost what it may. He summoned up all his courage, coughed loudly once again, and spoke.

"Lady Picard!"

Something in the tone of his voice brought the old lady back with a start from her daydreams. She turned and looked at him. Still half absorbed, as she was, in her own thoughts, she realised instantly that there was something unusual in the General's attitude. He looked all at once more important, and yet less self-important, as though something had entered into him which was eliminating his worst qualities and leaving only the undoubted good that was in him. He coughed yet once more and continued.

"Lady Picard! You are aware—you must be aware—that for a very long time I have entertained for you feelings of the greatest admiration and esteem. To possess your friendship has been to me an inestimable privilege, a privilege of which

I fear I have not at all times been altogether worthy."

The General paused. The effort he was making was just a little out of his element, and the words would not come easily. Lady Picard, on her part, became suddenly conscious of something that the Duchess of Ditchling had said to her only that morning. She remembered the flush that had come to her cheeks then; it began to invade them anew now, and she turned away her head so that the General should not see. This was unfortunate, from his point of view. The flush on her cheeks escaped him, but the movement of her head did not. The horrible fear shot through him that he was offending her. It increased his nervousness, which was already considerable, a hundredfold. For a moment he contemplated flight, but only for a moment. He was a soldier—to retreat in the face of the enemy was therefore impossible. He might employ strategy and pretend that he had been about to say something quite different. But that consideration he rejected almost as quickly as the other. He had embarked on the operation—there was nothing for it now but death or victory.

"Lady Picard!" His voice seemed to have lost a little of its confidence. "I have spoken of friendship, for hitherto that has been the only relationship between us, and it is possible that it is the only one which you are prepared to consider for a moment." He paused here, hoping for some sign from her, but none came, and he advanced to the attack once more, though with a courage that felt as if it were about to ooze out from his boots. "But the events of to-day, unfortunate though they are, have awakened in my breast certain sentiments that I cannot refrain, at the risk even of offending you, from expressing. You seem so lonely and so unprotected, with no one to shield you from the

petty annoyances and troubles of life which must penetrate into even the most sheltered households. To-day, moreover, your trouble is a very real one; believe me when I say that, for all my seeming intolerance and hastiness, I realise how real and how deep-seated that trouble is, especially to one of your tender temperament. I wish with all my heart that I could have saved you from it, but it is not too late even now for me to bear at least a portion of the burden, and to protect you from any further consequence with which it threatens you." The General gasped for breath, his stock of words was very nearly exhausted; he had never made so long a speech in the whole course of his career. He braced himself for a supreme effort, and came bluntly to the point. "Lady Picard—in plain language—will you let me be your shield?"

He stopped, and another silence fell, deeper than before. All this time Lady Picard had not stirred; her head was still turned away from him, and he could not see that the flush on her cheeks was still there, and had in fact become intensified with every word he uttered. The General waited in an agony of fear. What would her answer be? Would she pour contempt upon him, or would she gently turn him down, or—would she accept him? This last thought set him trembling all over once more. Still the silence went on. Then at last Lady Picard turned and spoke.

"General Taylor, do I understand that you are making me an offer of marriage?"

The General stared at her. Surely to goodness he had made himself clear.

"I—er—I—that was certainly my intention," he stammered. His worst fears were confirmed—she was going to refuse him!

"Then as far as I can gather," Lady Picard

went on, speaking very quietly, "you merely want to marry me out of pity."

"Pity!" The General stuttered and stammered again. "My dear Lady Picard, how can you say such a thing?"

"But you spoke simply of being my shield, of taking my burdens upon you, and protecting me from the cares and sorrows of life."

The General drew himself up.

"Madam, is not that the privilege of every true lover?"

His words, despite their somewhat stilted tone, rang true; there was no doubting their sincerity. Lady Picard looked at him, and a wonderful light came into her eyes.

"General Taylor, I could not let anyone marry me out of pity. Old as I am, I could not give the rest of my life into another's keeping unless there was something more than pity, unless"—she hesitated and then spoke very gently—"unless there were love."

Their eyes met. The General came forward, took her hand and, raising it to his lips, kissed it reverently.

"There is love," he said tenderly, "and there will be love to the end. Dear lady, you have made me very happy." He kissed her hand again.

Lady Picard rose. She was a little tremulous, but there could be no mistaking the happiness that shone in her face.

"Dear General—since you ask me—I give myself and my life into your hands. I only pray that you will never find me unworthy of your devotion."

By a common impulse they moved together and embraced, just as young lovers might have done. And, after all, is not love always and for ever

young? In the world of romance there is still a little corner reserved for those who are growing old. So for a brief moment or two General Taylor and Lady Picard renewed their lost youth, and the world around them seemed to grow young in sympathy.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROUT OF THE DUCHESS

THE Duchess of Ditchling, tired of her own company in the garden, and still tingling with the memory of her successful passage of arms with General Taylor, had wandered back to the house in search of Lady Delia. She entered the garden-room at the very moment when Lady Picard and General Taylor were folded in one another's embrace. The Duchess stared at them as though at first she thought she was not seeing aright. The sight was so unexpected and, to her somewhat worldly way of thinking, so ridiculous that it took her breath away. It was true that she herself had advised Lady Picard to marry the General, but it had been one of those off-hand, casual suggestions which had never seriously visualised the actual possibility, and certainly not in the light of the lover-like attitude in which she now found them. All at once she laughed—she really could not help it. The laugh awoke the elderly couple from their dream of bliss; they sprang apart hurriedly. Lady Picard's face when she saw the Duchess was a study. The latter advanced towards them, still wearing a rather mocking smile.

“So sorry, dear Margaret, to have come in at such an unfortunate moment. I had no idea that anyone was here—least of all you and the General.”

She gave General Taylor a look of scorn. On this occasion, however, it had not the slightest effect on him. He was still flushed with the fruits of victory, and cared not two straws what the

Duchess of Ditchling thought of him. Lady Picard's reply was a trifle confused.

"Please do not mention it, Sarah; I am sure your coming in does not matter at all."

The Duchess looked at her compassionately.

"So I see you've taken my advice, Margaret, though I am rather sorry that I gave it now." This with another scornful look at the General.

"Hush, Sarah, this is not a subject for jesting."

"Oh, I'm not jesting, I assure you. On the contrary, I'm very much in earnest. The suggestion I made to you this morning was unconsidered and ill-advised; but everybody seems a trifle mad to-day."

"Sarah, whatever are you talking about?"

"Your marriage to General Taylor. I take it, after what I have just seen, that you *are* going to marry him?"

Lady Picard looked distinctly pained. Before she could reply, however, General Taylor put his arm through hers and answered for her.

"Yes, Duchess, Lady Picard has done me the very great honour of promising to be my wife. May I be allowed to say that any remarks you may have to make on the subject should in future be addressed to me?"

The Duchess laughed in his face. The man was putting on the airs of his new position already.

"And may I say, General Taylor, that I have no intention of making any remarks to you of any kind whatever; I consider it would be sheer waste of time."

"Sarah!" Her ladyship's voice was full of aggrieved surprise. "I know your manners are sometimes beyond your control, but there is no need to be deliberately rude."

"I can't help it, Margaret, the man annoys me. But I'll try my best to be polite—for your sake."

Now what about this terrible business of Frank's engagement? That wretched creature wants money of course."

"I have already offered her money," put in General Taylor stiffly, "and she has refused it."

"Naturally, if you offered it to her. I suppose you blundered as usual, offered her some ridiculous sum which no self-respecting female would look at." She turned to Lady Picard. "You'd better let me handle her."

"Thank you, Sarah, but I do not think your assistance is required. I do not wish anyone to offer Miss Lawrence money."

"You'll never get rid of her otherwise."

"I have no intention of getting rid of her. She is the woman whom Frank has chosen as his wife, and I am prepared to receive her as such."

"What!" The Duchess looked absolutely horrified. "Margaret, are you out of your senses?" Then as Lady Picard made no reply she hurled another look of scorn at General Taylor. "This is your doing, I suppose?"

The General's tone was icy.

"As usual, Duchess, you are entirely mistaken. I have already explained my views on the subject to Mar—to Lady Picard"—he corrected himself with a trace of confusion—"and for once they happen to coincide with your own. But, may I add, the matter is one which entirely concerns Lady Picard and myself."

The Duchess could have kicked him; the General was undoubtedly getting his own back. She made one more attempt in the direction of Lady Picard.

"Surely, Margaret, you cannot be serious in what you say? Why, you were as horrified as anyone when that awful creature turned up and announced herself as the future Lady Frank Picard! You're not going to tell me that a miracle has

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happened to make you change your mind—for it would take nothing short of a miracle to do it. The thing is absolutely and hopelessly impossible—you must realise that.”

Lady Picard was about to speak, but once again the General answered for her.

“As I have already indicated, Duchess, there is no need for you to concern yourself in the matter at all. Lady Picard has left the settlement of it entirely in my hands.” Her ladyship started, but evidently thought it wiser to say nothing. “The sentiment she has just expressed with regard to the young lady whom Sir Frank has asked to be his wife is a very right one, and I admire her for it. But if any reasonable means can be found by which her son can be prevented from marrying this—this young person she will naturally only be too pleased.”

“But, General, I should like to say——”

The General stopped her by a gentle pressure on her arm.

“I think, Margaret”—he said it unblushingly this time—“that there is nothing further to be said to the Duchess on the subject. This is a private family matter which, after all, cannot interest her very greatly.”

For once in her life the Duchess of Ditchling felt absolutely nonplussed. The General, to adopt a colloquialism which she herself not infrequently used, had “got her beat.” Anything more amazing than the way in which he had taken possession of the situation and of Lady Picard she would have found it impossible to conceive. She could only continue to gaze at him in silent astonishment.

General Taylor, on his part, was enjoying himself hugely. The sight of the Duchess’s obvious discomfiture was very precious to him. He now proceeded to ignore her entirely, and, offering

his arm to Lady Picard, began to move with her towards the door which led in the direction of the library.

"We must find Frank and tell him the news. At the same time we can adjust this little matter of his engagement. Believe me, it will not be so difficult as you think. I am fully convinced that Miss Lawrence, if properly approached, will listen to reason, and that without doing anything in the smallest way dishonourable or unbecoming we shall get her to release Frank from his promise of marriage without any trouble. You can safely leave it to me, dear Margaret. I am thankful to think that you have someone to rely on, a man—I trust before long I shall be able to say a husband—to advise and assist you in all your little troubles and difficulties."

They passed out of the room arm in arm. Not so much as a murmur of protest had come from Lady Picard. The Duchess gazed after them, still with the same expression of blank astonishment on her face. Her lips moved slightly.

"Well, I'm——"

Fortunately, perhaps, she did not finish the sentence. After a moment or two she followed the others out of the room like a whipped child. For the time being all the arrogance had gone out of the Duchess of Ditchling.

Before she reached the library, however, her natural spirits had begun to re-assert themselves. The General had worsted her for the moment, but somehow or other she meant to be revenged on him. Why she should dislike him so much she couldn't imagine. In fact, she was not even sure that she did dislike him really. But the Duchess loved a fight; she loved more than anything to get the better of someone else, and if that someone else happened to be a man her pleasure was all the

greater. She had a poor opinion of men in the abstract. The General was a type, and she detested types. Sir Frank, on the other hand, was not a type. Fortunately for the sanity of the world at large there were not a great number of Frank Picards knocking about. In these days of sensible upbringing, when parents and children met one another on more or less equal grounds, when a mother treated her daughter more like a sister, and father and son were almost as brothers, it would be impossible for a child to grow up, or rather fail to grow up, as Sir Frank had done.

But Margaret Picard was a mother of the old school; she had made an idol of her son, isolated him from all knowledge of the outside world, after the fashion of the mothers of early Victorian days, yet to an absurd extent, that even the most old-fashioned of these mothers would never have dreamt of. The Duchess recalled the simile she had used in speaking to Lady Picard of Frank; she had accused her of keeping the boy in cotton-wool. But a better description occurred to her now. Frank was like a hot-house plant that had been tenderly nurtured under glass in an atmosphere that was entirely artificial. When the day for transplanting arrived and the boy, for he was nothing more than that, had found himself exposed to the outer air of an unsympathetic world, it was small wonder if he had mentally shrivelled up, and, as the Duchess bluntly expressed it to herself, made a hopeless idiot of himself.

The Duchess all at once felt sorry for Frank. He had not been given a fair chance; he had in him, she felt sure, the makings of quite a good fellow, but while his body had been reared to maturity, forced as it were, under glass, his mind had remained stunted, since it had been given no facilities for natural growth. Hence the appalling

catastrophe that had now come upon him. Even now it was not too late to avert the full consequences of the catastrophe, provided that someone with a little sense were allowed to handle the matter. But the Duchess was full of misgivings as to the way in which it would be handled; between the General with his blundering methods and Lady Picard with her extraordinary old-world notions of honour, the odds were that somebody would do something excessively foolish. Then there was Frank to be considered. He was still an unknown quantity; there was no saying what mental tangent he might suddenly fly off at.

Last of all there was Lady Delia. The Duchess was a little uncertain as to her daughter's attitude; one or two things that had occurred had puzzled her extremely. She had by now quite made up her mind that Delia was the only possible wife for Frank; at least that was how she put it to herself, though probably the more correct interpretation would have been that Frank, with his vast possessions and his more-than-comfortable income, was the only possible husband for Delia. Anyhow, it was quite time that Delia's mother took a definite hand in the game. It was with this thought firmly planted in her mind, and with a step full of purpose and decision, that she approached the library, whither Lady Picard and General Taylor had preceded her. The Duchess of Ditchling was herself again.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END OF THE GAME

THE atmosphere in the library, when Lady Picard and General Taylor entered it, had been, as we have seen, charged with electricity. When Sir Frank Picard had so suddenly grown up and announced his intention of marrying Miss Ailsa Lawrence whether she wanted him to or not, that young lady had found herself all at once incapable of putting up any show of resistance. She could only stand and stare at Frank, nervously twisting in her fingers the envelope which he had just returned to her. Lady Delia, too, appeared unable to render any assistance. She wished now, when it was too late, that she had not carried the process of punishing Frank quite so far. The turn that things had so dramatically taken was entirely unexpected; she could only wonder vaguely what had happened, and why Frank had suddenly adopted this attitude. She did not realise that she herself was almost entirely responsible for it. If she had, she would have known that Frank was genuinely in love with her; that it was largely pique at her refusal of him, and her subsequent determination apparently to drive him into the arms of Miss Lawrence, that had produced this violent metamorphosis. But this knowledge was denied her at the moment; she was as hopelessly mystified as Miss Lawrence, and neither of the two had been able to utter a word before the General and Lady Picard entered.

The appearance of these two arm in arm rather added to the tension than otherwise. Lady Picard, gently disengaging herself from the General's arm, advanced towards her son, blushing like any school-girl.

"Frank, my dear boy, I have some news for you." She hesitated for a moment. "General Taylor has asked me to be his wife."

She waited for some reply from Frank, but none came. He appeared scarcely to have heard what she had said.

"Frank, have you nothing to say?"

He roused himself with a start.

"Oh yes, mother—I'm glad, of course. Let me congratulate you."

The General bustled forward.

"I have your congratulations too, I trust." Frank gazed at him in silence, and the General went on hurriedly, "Now that I am one of the family—more or less—so to speak—I hope, my dear boy, that you will allow me to assist you in this—this little matter that you and I were discussing just now." His glance fell on Miss Lawrence. "I feel sure that this young lady——"

Sir Frank interrupted him.

"Miss Lawrence has offered to release me from our engagement. I have declined her offer, and insisted on holding her to her promise to marry me."

"Good heavens!" The ejaculation came from the Duchess of Ditchling, who had entered unobserved. She came forward and stood at Frank's side. "My dear Frank, you know very well that you are talking nonsense."

The General interposed.

"Duchess, I should be much obliged if you would allow me to manage this little affair——"

"Allow you to mismanage it, you mean," inter-

rupted the Duchess. "You've all made a hopeless muddle of it so far; it's quite time that I took a hand."

"But I insist——"

"General Taylor, you can insist until you're blue in the face, but I shan't take the slightest notice of you. I have every right to speak, seeing that young Frank here has all along been tacitly engaged to my daughter Delia."

"Mother!" The interruption came from Lady Delia, but the Duchess brushed it aside and addressed herself to Frank.

"Frank Picard, do you consider it an honourable thing to get engaged to one girl while you are making love to another?"

"Mother, I refuse to be dragged into this discussion."

"Be quiet, Delia. You appear to forget that you are my daughter, and as such owe me a certain amount of obedience—if not respect." She turned to Frank again. "Answer me, Frank Picard."

"I have already proposed to Lady Delia and she refused me," said Sir Frank stiffly.

"Proposed to her—when?"

"Here—this afternoon."

"This afternoon—when you were already engaged to someone else? Really, Frank Picard, you are beyond all comprehension. May I ask whether the proposal to my daughter was made in Miss Lawrence's presence?"

"No, it was not."

"You surprise me. I should imagine you were capable of anything. However, the fault's not yours, but your mother's."

"Sarah!"

"You've admitted it yourself, Margaret, so it's useless for you to adopt that injured tone."

"Duchess, I must protest——"

“ Just now you were insisting, General, and now you protest. Well, go on protesting.” Once more she turned to Sir Frank. “ Young man, have you by any chance made up your mind whom it is you do want to marry? ”

“ I have just told Miss Lawrence that I shall hold her to her promise to be my wife.”

“ The boy is perfectly right, Sarah. It was the only honourable thing to do.”

“ Margaret, will you be quiet! ”

“ Kindly do not speak to Lady Picard like that! ” The General’s tone was angry and his face flushed.

“ General Taylor, if you will persist in interrupting I shall be compelled to request you to leave the room.” For the first time since she had entered the Duchess spoke directly to Miss Lawrence. “ Miss Lawrence, the decision appears to rest with you. Do you intend to marry Sir Frank, or do you not? ”

All eyes were now centred on Miss Lawrence. Before she could reply Sir Frank went up to her and took her hand with a gesture that was almost reverential.

“ If Miss Lawrence will have me—in spite of my having behaved like an unutterable cad—she will be doing me a very great honour.”

There was a sudden silence. Even the Duchess felt that it would be out of place for her to say anything at that moment. Everyone waited breathlessly for Miss Lawrence’s answer. It came in a manner that was entirely unexpected. Miss Lawrence gently drew her hand away and burst into tears.

Lady Delia ran forward and put her arms around her.

“ Don’t cry, my dear, don’t cry! They’re none of them worth it.” With her arms still held pro-

teasingly round Miss Lawrence, she turned and glared at the others. "I hope now that you're all satisfied! Ever since Miss Lawrence entered this house she has been the object of your scorn and derision; you've done your best to make her feel miserable and you've succeeded. What she must think of your behaviour goodness only knows! She came here as Frank's future wife; she had a perfect right to come here—he invited her himself. You might at least have shown her some spark of courtesy, instead of which you have treated her as an outcast, a being from another world, beneath your notice, almost beneath your contempt. I'm utterly ashamed of you all."

"Delia! You forget yourself!" The Duchess spoke with an unwonted air of parental authority. "How dare you speak to Lady Picard and to me like that!" She purposely omitted to mention General Taylor.

"It's about time someone spoke the truth," Lady Delia retorted with spirit. "You may be my mother, and a duchess, but that doesn't say that you have a monopoly of good manners—far from it!"

"Delia!" The Duchess grew almost purple in the face, her anger increased by the fact that she imagined she heard the General chuckling.

"In a sense I think that Delia is right, Sarah." Lady Picard had come forward with the intention of trying to calm matters. "We have not, I fear, shown Miss Lawrence that courtesy that was due to her, more especially in her position as Frank's future wife."

"Dear Lady Picard, please, oh please do not say any more." It was Miss Lawrence who spoke, a little tearfully. "You have been kindness itself, far kinder to me than I deserve. I have nothing to complain of in the way I have been treated by any-

one"—she included the Duchess by a glance—" I brought it on myself; I should never have come."

" Nonsense, my dear," answered Lady Picard, " you had, as Delia says, every right to come. As my son's future wife——"

" Mother, I should like to say a word to Miss Lawrence, if you will allow me." The interruption came from Sir Frank. Lady Picard drew back a little, and he turned to Miss Lawrence. " Miss Lawrence, I ask you once more, with the utmost sincerity, will you be my wife? "

Again they waited breathlessly for her answer. Miss Lawrence hesitated, giving him a long look before she replied. When she did it was in a low tone that was yet perfectly audible to them all.

" Sir Frank Picard, I thank you for the honour you have done me, but I regret that I must decline it." There was a distinct sigh of satisfaction from the Duchess. Miss Lawrence, if she heard it, ignored it altogether, and went on speaking quietly. " I know that you are genuinely trying to atone for what you called just now your ' caddish ' treatment of me, but believe me when I tell you that I am equally genuine in saying that there is nothing to atone for." Lady Delia seemed as though she were about to interrupt, but Miss Lawrence silenced her with a look. " It is I who ought to be ashamed, not you. When you saw me in the theatre you imagined that you had fallen in love with me; it was only imagination, of course, but you were honest in your belief, and if I had let you you would have married me. At least I saved you from that misery, but that is no excuse. I used your honest intention as a means of trying to extort money from you—I came down here for that purpose"—she saw Sir Frank start—" and I got

myself up in this ridiculous manner in order to shock you and all your family, so that they would be willing to pay anything to get rid of me."

"Ailsa, I will not allow you to go running yourself down like this!" Lady Delia broke in excitedly. Miss Lawrence tried to stop her, but in vain. "Lady Picard, mother, you shall know the truth. The idea was not Miss Lawrence's at all, it was forced upon her by a friend."

"That makes no difference."

"Ailsa, be quiet! It makes all the difference." She turned to the others again. "Besides, she has not told you why she wanted the money. She is engaged to a man who writes plays—he needed five hundred pounds towards getting one of his plays produced—it meant getting married and happiness. She knew that Frank was rich, that he only imagined himself in love with her, and so she carried out this poor little innocent plot of which she now seems to be so ashamed, though personally I can see nothing to be ashamed of."

Miss Lawrence laid a hand on her arm.

"Lady Delia, please let me finish." She moved across to Lady Picard and spoke almost exclusively to her. "As soon as I entered the house I began to realise the horrible thing I had done. I wanted to run away; I meant to go back to London and send Sir Frank a little note releasing him from his promise of marriage, but some evil spirit prompted me and I stayed."

"That evil spirit being me," put in Lady Delia.

"Hush, please!" Miss Lawrence held up an appealing hand, then turned to Lady Picard once more. "Then you spoke to me, and you were so gentle, so kind, that I felt even more mean and

more horrible than before. I had long ago given up any idea of asking for money; all I wanted was to get back home and forget that I had ever meant to do anything so vile. Oh, Lady Picard, try to think as kindly of me as you can. I was sorely tempted, I did so want to be happy, but I see now that happiness could never have been brought in such a way as that, at the price of my self-respect."

The old lady put an arm around her.

"My dear Miss Lawrence, I think you have behaved wonderfully well under the circumstances. I am sure there is nothing to forgive on my part; if anything it is the other way."

Miss Lawrence pressed the arm that held her gratefully.

"It must be lovely to have a mother like you," she said. Then she went up to Sir Frank and held out her hand. "Sir Frank, am I forgiven?"

He took the hand she offered him.

"You heard what my mother said. The question of forgiveness lies all the other way. Do you know, Miss Lawrence, I owe you a great deal. One day I shall hope to repay it."

"There is nothing to repay," she answered rather hastily. "You owe me nothing."

"Oh yes, I do. It is to you I owe the knowledge of myself, the fact that I have all at once grown up; to you also I hope to owe my future happiness." He stole a glance at Lady Delia, but she had turned away to ring the bell.

"I am ordering the car for you," she said to Miss Lawrence, and then moved towards the door, which General Taylor held open for her.

Lady Picard embraced Miss Lawrence affectionately as the latter said good-bye.

"I shall hope to see you again soon, my dear. And mind you let me have a box for the first night of the new play."

The Duchess of Ditchling's method of saying farewell was characteristic of her.

"You've been a little brick!" she remarked.
"But oh, my dear, where did you get that hat?"

CHAPTER XXV

A TURN OF THE WHEEL

WHEN Miss Lawrence arrived home from her visit to Dunston Park it was already evening. She had sent a wire to the theatre announcing that she was too unwell to appear; she wanted to be alone to think. As a matter of fact the telegram contained a certain element of truth. She was indeed feeling far from well; the strain of all that she had been through that afternoon had told on her considerably, and the various emotions through which she had passed had given her a bad headache. As she entered her sitting-room the place was almost in darkness. She switched on the electric light and looked round her. These were her proper surroundings, not the stately grandeur of Dunston Park. Here she was in her element; there she had felt like the proverbial fish out of water. There she had been Miss Lawrence, Miss Ailsa Lawrence; here she was Miss Peggy Simpson, just plain Peggy.

She sank into a chair with a sigh of relief. It was nice to be home again. The events of the afternoon passed rapidly through her mind, one after the other, a sort of mental kinematograph. She still felt terribly ashamed of herself. How she could ever have embarked on such a foolish adventure seemed, in her present state of mind, incomprehensible. She thought of the people she had met at Dunston Park—the Duchess of Ditchling, General Taylor, Lady Picard and Lady Delia. The last two were the only ones that had left any kind of pleasant impression on her memory. The

old lady had been very sweet to her; Peggy—for so we must call her now—felt that she would never forget her courtly kindness, the tones of her gentle voice, the perfect repose of her old-world manners. Lady Delia too, though in a very different way, had been kindness itself. Peggy could not help wishing that she had not allowed herself to be persuaded into that bear-baiting process of Sir Frank, for she felt that it had been a mistake, even more from Lady Delia's point of view than her own. It had hurt her deeply she knew; for it was easy to see, at least to her it had been very apparent, that Sir Frank was genuinely in love with Lady Delia. Peggy liked to think that she might, after all, indirectly have been the means of bringing these two together; Lady Delia had hinted as much when she had bidden her an affectionate farewell at the station. The fact that Lady Delia had not been ashamed of being seen with her at the station in her outrageous Cockney costume had touched a soft spot in Peggy's soul. It proved that the girl was a real good sport, with no nonsense or snobbery about her; she would make Sir Frank a splendid wife, better perhaps than he deserved, and Peggy hoped with all her heart that they would be happy together.

And what of Sir Frank himself? Peggy hardly knew what her feelings were towards him. That he had behaved in the first instance like a ridiculous schoolboy could not be denied; his absurd agitation, too, at her appearance, while perhaps it was natural enough under the circumstances, had not been exactly manly, or good-mannered. But he had made amends at the last; there had been something very genuine and sincere about his offer to ratify their engagement, and, even though it was probably largely due to a feeling of pique at Lady Delia's refusal of him, it had shown him

up in a far better light than anything he had said or done hitherto.

Peggy was aroused from her abstraction by the sound of a loud knocking and ringing at the front door bell. After a moment or two she heard Stanley Brock's voice calling.

"Hullo! hullo! Peggy! Peggy! Are you there?"

She hesitated for a moment and looked down at her dress. How should she explain it to Stan? Then as the knocking and ringing were resumed she dashed off the obnoxious hat which had been the subject of the Duchess's sarcastic comment, went to the door, and opened it. Mr Stanley Brock rushed in.

"Stan—what a noise you've been making! You'll frighten the street!"

"Let the street be frightened! I don't care if I frighten the whole little village." Mr Stanley Brock was evidently labouring under considerable excitement. "What on earth's the matter? I've been to the theatre and they said you weren't appearing this evening—you'd wired to say you were ill."

"So I am ill," said Peggy; "at least, I'm very tired, which is much the same thing. Come in and sit down."

Mr Brock accepted the invitation to come in, but was far too agitated to sit down.

"I've been trying to find you all the afternoon. I've been knocking and ringing, ringing and knocking, but couldn't get any answer. Then I went upstairs to Ethel Osborn. She wasn't on view—doing her back hair or something. I could get nothing out of her. Where on earth have you been?"

"I've been down in the country."

"What for?"

"I—I've been giving an entertainment."

She had indeed, but not quite of the nature that Mr Brock would imagine. He suddenly caught sight of her extraordinary dress.

"Great Scott! What clothes have you got on?"

"I haven't had time to change."

"Do you mean to say you went to the country, and came back from the country, rigged out like that?"

"I'll change now, if you'll let me," she replied, without giving a direct answer to his question. She rose from her chair and began moving towards her bedroom, but he stopped her.

"Oh, hang all that! I'm simply bursting—bursting—bursting with the greatest news on earth! What do you think? Guess! I'll give you three guesses. If you can't do it I'll tell you. Wait a moment till I've got my breath!" He made a great effort to calm himself, but the next minute had burst out again. "Peggy, Levi Isaacs Faulkner has accepted me! So help me bob, he has! Do something! Don't stand there like a frozen what d'you call 'em! I tell you he's accepted me!"

"Do you mean that he's accepted 'Love finds out a way'?"

"Light of my life, that's what I do mean. None of your Neale acceptances; no putting down five hundred pounds and the other chap finds two-pence! Faulkner's accepted me right out! We've fixed up the cast—fixed it up!—the piece is going to be put into rehearsal at once. It's going to be produced at the earliest possible moment, and I've received an advance on account of royalties—two hundred pounds. Two hundred! Two hundred pounds! I've cashed the cheque and here it is!" He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a

bundle of notes. "Have you ever seen so much money in your life? I had to cash the cheque to see what it looked like. This is the greatest day in our life, my queen of delight; between the rising up of the sun and the going down thereof things have happened which will make history for us. Kiss me!" He made a hasty dart at her.

"Stanley—you pecked me!"

"That's all right, I'll get more on to the mark next time, Miss Simpson—I beg your pardon, Miss Ailsa Lawrence."

"Don't call me that, please!"

"Very well — Kiddle-de-winks — that sounds more like it—Kiddle-de-winks. I tell you what we're going to do. We're going to celebrate. If this is not an occasion on which there ought to be a celebration there never will be one. You're going to dine with me, and you're going to choose your place—you can also choose your dinner, if you like."

"I'd rather you chose the dinner."

"I will choose a dinner—I give you my word. I'll show you that I know what a dinner is! We'll drink long life and prosperity to 'Love finds out a way' in something more expensive, if not better, than beer." Then for the second time he seemed to become suddenly conscious of her costume.

"What an extraordinary sight you look!"

"It won't take me half a minute to change, if you'll only let me."

"Half a minute!" he repeated mockingly.

"You just see how much longer I am!" She began moving off in the direction of her bedroom.

"I can change quicker than you, you see." Just as she was about to disappear there came a ring at the front door bell, and she paused.

"There's someone at the door. I wonder who it is?"

"One way of finding out would be to look and see," said Stanley. "Shall I?"

"No—I will. I think I'd better. It may be—perhaps it's Ethel." She moved towards the front door, then suddenly stopped as she remembered the dress she was wearing. "I'm such a guy that—perhaps, Stan, you'd better see who's there."

Stanley looked at Peggy rather quizzically for a moment. Then he made a move to the door.

"Right—o!"

He opened the front door and found a man standing on the mat outside. He looked to Stanley like an extremely respectable manservant to someone of position. The man took off his hat and held out a letter.

"Miss Ailsa Lawrence?" he inquired.

"A young lady of that name does reside in this flat," answered Stanley.

"Then will you please give her that." He handed Stanley the letter.

"Any answer?" Stanley asked, taking the letter.

"No answer."

The man again raised his hat deferentially, and then vanished with the silent step of the well-trained servant. Stanley stared after him.

"A man of few words—and perfect manners." He closed the door and read out the name on the envelope. "Miss Ailsa Lawrence." He entered the sitting-room and handed the letter to Peggy. "Young woman, this appears to be for you. It is probably from the theatre to inform you that owing to your not turning up you've got the chuck. I'll talk to them if it is!"

Peggy examined the envelope with some curiosity.

"It isn't. This isn't anyone's writing at the theatre, and it isn't one of the theatre envelopes.

I wonder whom it's from? I don't know the writing at all. Do you mind my looking?"

Stanley laughed.

"There was some mention of half a minute—that was five minutes ago."

"Stan!" She opened the envelope and withdrew a sheet of paper, folded over in half. Inside the sheet of paper was a cheque. "Why, whatever——" She began reading what was written on the sheet, while Stanley watched her. Then she unfolded the cheque and looked at it. She gave a sort of little cry and collapsed on to a chair.

"Now what's the matter?" Stanley asked.

"Stan!"

"What is the matter?"

"Look—look at that!"

She handed him the sheet of paper and the cheque. He read the former first.

"'Dunston Park, Sussex.'" He broke off. "Dunston Park, Sussex. Sounds as if it were somewhere. My address is 2 Alma Terrace, Belgrave Road, The Broadway, Walham Green, Fulham, London, S.W. But I suppose some places are easily found. Possibly Dunston Park is one." He continued his reading of the letter. "'To Miss Ailsa Lawrence, as a mark of appreciation of a very great service, and as a wedding gift, from one who would like to write herself her very grateful friend, Margaret Picard.'" He looked up at Peggy questioningly. "And who—who may Margaret Picard be?"

"Stan!"

Before she could say any more his eyes had fallen on the cheque. He stared at it as though he could not believe his senses.

"Peggy!"

He dropped his hands in sheer amazement, then

raising them again, stared at the cheque once more, still with the same expression of astonishment. As he read it out his wonder seemed to grow.

““Pay Miss Ailsa Lawrence or Order ten thousand pounds?”” Again he looked at Peggy. “Who on earth—who the something is this? I don’t want to thrust myself on the confidence even of the woman I adore, but this cheque, like the letter, is signed Margaret Picard. Who is Margaret Picard?”

Peggy rose and came towards him.

“I’ll tell you all about it while we’re having dinner. Give me the cheque and the letter.”

He gave them to her without another word. His absolute trust in her stirred her strangely. Suddenly he noticed that there were tears in her eyes.

He moved towards her with sudden tenderness.

“Peggy!”

“Don’t take any notice of my foolishness, Stan. Wait till we’re having dinner and then I’ll tell you everything.” She surreptitiously dabbed her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief, then with an affectation of gaiety added, “You know I said that I wouldn’t be more than half a minute.”

The next moment she had disappeared into her bedroom. Stanley Brock stood gazing after her for several minutes. Then, as though moved by some unconscious instinct, he took from his pocket the bundle of notes which he had shown Peggy with such pride—his precious two hundred pounds advance royalties—and contemplated them rather ruefully. Peggy had reappeared at her bedroom door and stood watching him. She came stealing forward on tiptoe.

“What is it, Stan? What’s the matter?”

He started and made a hasty movement of putting the notes back in his pocket.

"Oh, I was only thinking, Peggy."

"What were you thinking, Stan?"

"Thinking that—well, after seeing that cheque—I was thinking that this two hundred pounds wasn't much after all."

"Not much?" Her tone was wonderfully expressive. "Why, Stan boy, it's everything to me—everything." She threw her arms round his neck and hugged him impulsively. "It's the turn of the wheel that's going to bring us all that life's worth living for. The cheque simply doesn't count!" She hugged him once more, then with a glad little laugh disappeared again into her bedroom, shutting the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

LOVE WILL FIND OUT A WAY

HARDLY had Peggy disappeared for the second time into her bedroom when there came another ring at the front door bell. Stanley opened it to admit Ethel Osborn, who was in evening dress and wearing a beautiful pearl necklace.

"Well, young man," was her greeting.

Stanley gave her a mock bow.

"Thank you, your royal highness, I'm very well." He eyed her pearl necklace. "My word! Haven't we got it on! Is there a drawing-room to-night?"

She laughed good-naturedly.

"Sorry I couldn't let you in when you came up this afternoon, but there are occasions when one can't."

"Oh, that's all right—I quite understood."

"Has Peggy come back yet?"

"She has. And for the last quarter of an hour she has been giving me her notion of half a minute."

At this moment the bedroom door opened and Peggy appeared, looking radiant in the frock in which she had interviewed Sir Frank Picard on the memorable occasion of his visit to her rooms.

"There," she cried, "have I been half a minute? No, I've been exactly twenty-seven seconds." Then she caught sight of Ethel Osborn, and stood eyeing her in some astonishment as

Stanley had done. "Hullo, Ethel! Is it a ball in Grosvenor Square?"

"It's a drawing-room at Buckingham Palace," Stanley put in. "Don't you see the *débutante's* pearls?"

"Are they real?" asked Peggy, staring at them.

"Perfectly," returned Ethel, calmly, as she pulled on her gloves.

"Where did you get them?"

"They were in one of the parcels."

"One of what parcels?"

"One of *the* parcels."

Suddenly Peggy remembered the presents that Sir Frank Picard had brought with him. The remembrance caused a little shadow to fall across her face, and Ethel, seeing it, promptly changed the subject.

"I'm going out to dinner with a friend. What are you two going to do?"

"We're going out to dinner too," Peggy answered.

"Yes," added Stanley, "we're going to celebrate."

"Celebrate? Celebrate what?"

"Oh, all sorts of things," said Stanley.

"All sorts of things," echoed Peggy.

Ethel looked from one to the other.

"You're both very mysterious, but I won't keep you. As a matter of fact if I don't hurry I shall be late myself. Peggy dear, I should like to have a talk to you."

"I should rather like to have a talk to you."

"Shall we say to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning will suit me splendidly."

"All right then—good night. Celebrate well!"

She smiled and nodded and went out. Peggy turned to Stanley.

"Hadn't we better start—if you're quite ready."

"If I'm quite ready—I like that! I've been quite ready for the last three-quarters of an hour."

"Then let's go."

As they opened the front door they nearly ran into a telegraph boy.

"Two telegrams for Miss Ailsa Lawrence," he said.

"Thanks," said Peggy. She opened and read them hastily. "No answer!"

"What's it all about?" Stanley asked as the boy disappeared.

"I'll tell you at dinner," she repeated once again with a bewitching smile.

And at dinner she told him—everything. Then she showed him the telegrams.

"Congratulate us—we're going to be married—inside a fortnight! Delia Haydon and Frank Picard."

That was the burden of the first one. The second was shorter.

"Love to Stanley—Delia."

Then she took out the cheque that had come with Lady Picard's note.

"Stanley—when I caught you looking at that two hundred pounds, you told me that it didn't seem anything after seeing this cheque. Why did you say that?"

He hesitated a moment before replying.

"Well, I just had a sort of feeling—it was awfully silly, I know, but I couldn't help it—I had a sort of feeling—oh, hang it all, Peggy, you know what I mean."

"No, I don't, Stan—please go on!"

"I—I felt it made a bit of difference. I was so bucked at having placed my play and at getting that advance on royalties—it meant I could—do things for you—buy you what you wanted and—and that sort of thing. Then when I saw that

cheque—it altered everything—you had all that money—my poor little two hundred pounds seemed so paltry beside it. I know it must sound rather silly and selfish——”

Peggy interrupted him.

“It doesn’t sound either silly or selfish—I think it’s sweet of you, Stan. I quite understand. And so will she, when I tell her.”

“She? Who?”

“Lady Picard. I’m going to send her the cheque back.”

Stanley stared at her.

“Peggy—are you sure you ought to?”

“Why not? Do you want me to give it to you?”

“I—I wouldn’t touch a penny of it.” He spoke with a good deal of vehemence.

“Then why should I keep it?”

“Well—suppose”—he hesitated—“suppose I’m building castles in the air—suppose the play isn’t a success after all—where will you be then?”

“The play will be a success,” she answered confidently.

“But just suppose it isn’t!” he persisted.

“Then we shall have to fall back on the title.”

“The title?” He was frankly puzzled.

“Yes.” She repeated it softly. “‘Love will find out a way.’”

“Peggy—you darling!”

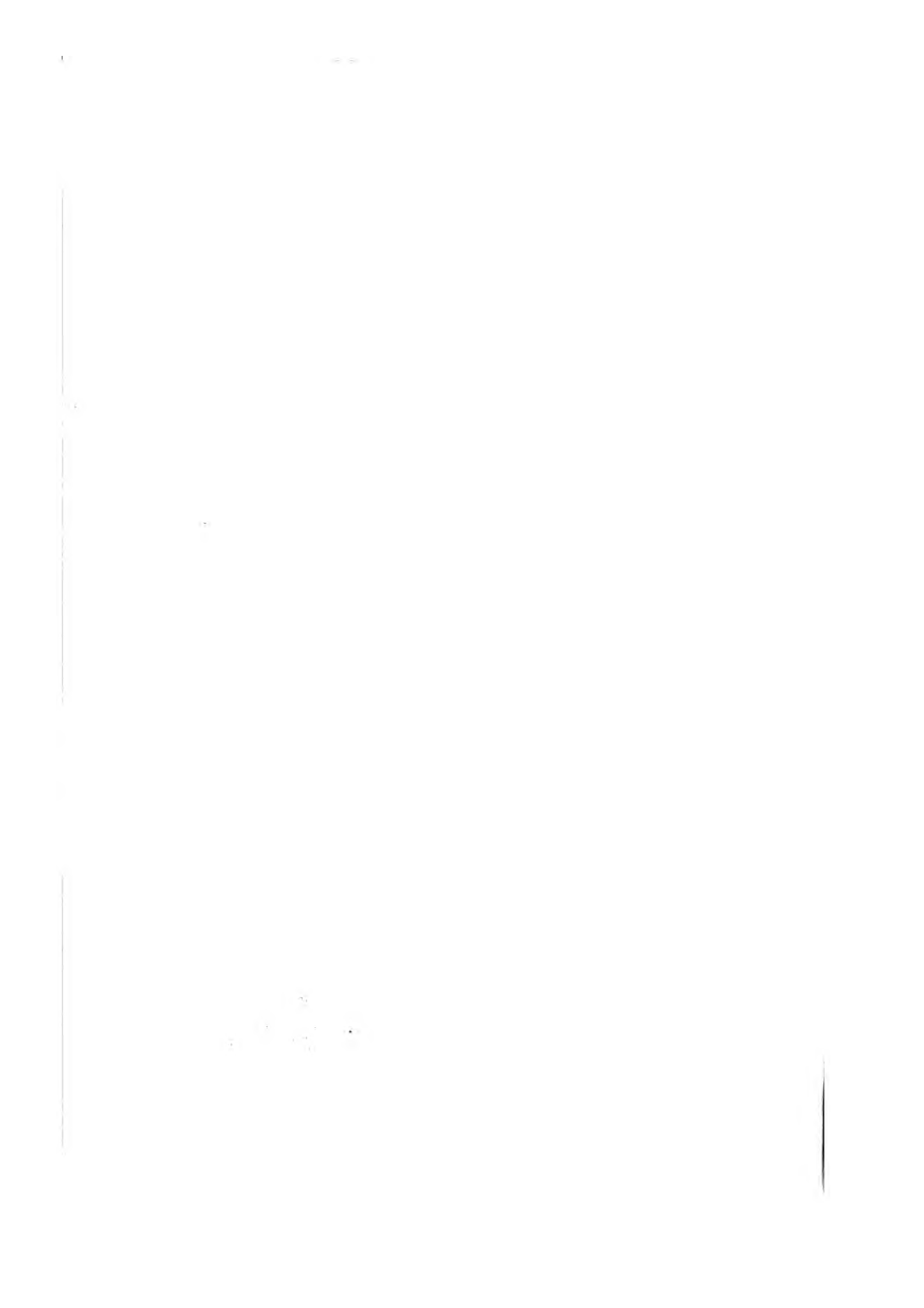
He looked around cautiously. The restaurant was nearly empty. No one was looking in their direction—not even the waiters. He leant across the table and drew her to him in a passionate embrace.

THE END

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