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The Luck of The Vails

E.F.Benson.

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1. Fiction, English

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By E. F. Benson

Author of

'Mammon & Co.,' 'The Princess Sophia,' etc.

London
William Heinemann
1901

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To my Brother,

ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON,

This Story,

of his, not of my invention,

is affectionately

Dedicated by its admiring Scribe.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE SHADOWS DANCE

THE short winter's day was drawing to its close, and twilight, the steel and silver twilight of a windless frost, was falling in throbs of gathered dusk over an ice-bound land. The sun, brilliant, but cold as an electric lamp, had not in all its hours of shining been of strength sufficient to melt the rime congealed during the night before, and each blade of grass on the lawns, each spray and sprig on the bare hedgerows, had remained a spear of crystals minute and innumerable. The roofs of house and cottage sparkled and glimmered as with a soft internal lustre in the light of the moon, which had risen an hour before sunset, and the stillness of a great cold—a thing more palpably motionless than even the stricken noonday of the south—gripped all in its vice. Silent, steadfast lights had sprung up and multiplied in the many-windowed village, but not a bird chirped or dog barked. Labourers were home from the iron of the frozen fields, doors were shut, and the huge night was at hand.

The sequestered village of Vail lies in a wrinkle of the great Wiltshire downs, and is traversed by the Bath road. The big inn, the Vail Arms, seems to speak of the more prosperous days of coach and horn, but now its significance to the shrill greyhounds of the railway is of the smallest, and they pass for the most part without salute. About a mile beyond it to the outward-bound traveller stands the big house, screened by some ten furlongs of park, and entering the gate, he will find himself in a noble company of secular trees, beech in the majority, and of stately growth. Shortly before the house

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becomes visible a spacious piece of meadow-land succeeds to the park; thence the road, passing over a broad stone bridge which spans the chalk stream flowing from the sheet of water above, is bounded on either side by terraced lawns of ancient and close-napped turf, intersected at intervals by gravel walks, and turning sharply to the right, follows a long box hedge, once cut into tall and fantastic shapes. But it seems long to have lacked the shears and pruning hand, for all precision of outline has been lost, and what were once the formal figures of bird and beast have swelled into monstrous masses of deformed shape, wrought, you would think, by the imagination of a night-hag into things inhuman. Here, as seen in the dim light, a thin neck would bulge into some ghastliness of a head, hydrocephalous or tumoured with long-standing disease; here a bird with dwindled body and scarecrow wings stood on the legs of a colossus; here conjecture would vainly seek for a reconstruction.

The end of one of the wings of the house, which was built round three sides of a quadrangle, abutted on to this hedge so closely that a peacock with bloated tail peered into the gun-room window, and in the centre of the gravel sweep rose a bronze Triton fountain, bearded like an old man with long dependence of icicle. A bitter north wind had accompanied the early days of the frost, and this icy fringe had grown out sideways from the lip of the basin, blown aside even as it congealed. Flower-beds, a riband of dark untenanted earth, ran underneath the windows, which rose in three stories, small-paned and Jacobean. As dark fell, light sprang out in the walls, as the stars in the field of heaven, but to right and left of the front-door there came through a row of windows yet uncurtained a redder and less constant gleam than the shining of oil or wax, now growing, now diminishing, leaping out at one moment to a great vividness, at the next suddenly dying down again, so that in the corners of the room there was a continual battle of shadows. Now, as the flames from the wood burning on the great open hearth grew dim, whole bat-

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talions of them would collect and gather, again with the kindling of some fresh stuff, they would be routed and disappear. This fitfulness of illumination played also strange tricks with the tapestries that hung on two of the four sides of the hall; figures started suddenly into being, and were blotted out before the eye had clearly visualized them, and in the inconstancy of the light a nervous man might say to himself that stir and movement was going on among them; again they rode to hounds, or took the jesses off the hawk.

The present is the heir of all the achievements of former ages, and while this great house, with its mile-long avenue, its tapestries, its pictures, its air of magnificent English stability, finely represented all that had gone before, all that was going on now was enclosed in the two large armchairs drawn close to this ideal fire, in each of which sat a young man. They talked but in desultory fashion, with frequent but not awkward pauses of some length, for any social duty of keeping the conversation going was to them quite outside a practical call. They had also been shooting all this superb frosty day, and the return to warmth and indoors, though productive of profound content, does not conduce to loquacity.

'Yes, a bath would be a very good thing,' said one, 'but it is, perhaps, a question whether in the absolutely immediate future tea would not be better.'

This was too strong a suggestion to be merely called a hint, and the other rose.

'Sorry, Geoffrey,' he said, 'I never ordered tea. I was thinking—no, I don't think I was thinking. Tea first, bath afterwards,' he added meditatively.

Geoffrey Langham stroked an imperceptible moustache.

'That's what I was thinking,' he said, 'and I'm glad to see you appreciate the importance of little things, Harry. Little things like tea and baths matter far the most.'

'Anyhow, they occur much the oftenest,' said Lord Vail.

'I was beginning to be afraid tea wasn't going to occur at all,' said Geoffrey.

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Harry Vail appeared to consider this.

'You were wrong, then,' he said, 'and you are on the way to become a sensuous voluptuary.'

'On the way?' said Geoffrey. 'I have arrived. Ah, and tea is following my excellent example!'

The advent of lamps banished the mustering and dispersal of the leaping shadows, and threw the two figures seated on either side of the tea-table into strong light, and, taken together, into even stronger contrast. The birthright of a good digestion, you would say, had been given to each, and for no mess of pottage had either bartered the clear eye and firm leanness of perfect health; but, apart from this and a certain lithe youthfulness, it would have been hard at first sight even, when resemblances are more obvious than differences, to see a single point of likeness between the two. Geoffrey Langham, that sensuous voluptuary, seemed the seat and being of serene English cheerfulness, and his face, good-looking from its very pleasantness, contrasted strongly with that of the other, which was handsome, in spite of a marked and grave reserve which a stranger might easily have mistaken for sullenness. Indeed, many who might soon have ceased to be strangers had done so; and though Harry Vail had perhaps no enemies, he was in the forlorner condition of having very few friends. In fact, had he been made to enumerate them, his list would have begun with Geoffrey, and it is doubtful whether it would not also have ended with him.

But these agreeable influences of tea and light seemed to produce a briskening effect on the two, and their talk, which, since they came in, had touched a subject only to dismiss it, settled down into a more marked channel.

'Yes, it is a queer sort of coming-of-age party for me,' said Lord Vail, 'and it was really good of you to come, Geoffrey. I wonder whether anyone has ever come of age in so lonely a manner. I have only one relative in the world who can be called even distantly near. He comes this evening. Oh, I told you that.'

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'Your uncle,' said Geoffrey.

'Great-uncle, to be accurate. He is my grandfather's youngest brother, and, what is so odd, he is my heir. One always thinks of heirs as being younger than one's self.'

'Cut him off with a shilling,' said Geoffrey.

'Well, there isn't much more, in any case, except this great barrack of a house. What there is, however, goes to him, and it can hardly be expected that he will marry and have children now.'

'How old is he?' asked Geoffrey.

'Something over seventy.'

'And after him?'

'The Lord knows. Anybody; the first person you meet if you walk down Piccadilly perhaps—perhaps you, perhaps the Prime Minister. Honestly, I haven't any idea.'

'Marry, then, at once,' said Geoffrey, 'and disappoint the man in the street and the Prime Minister, your uncle, and me.'

Harry Vail got up, and stood with his back to the fire, stretching out his long-fingered hands to the blaze behind him.

'What advice!' he said. 'You might as well advise me to have a Greek nose. Some people have it, some do not; it is fate.'

'Marriage is a remarkably common fate,' remarked Geoffrey; 'commoner than a Greek nose. I have seen many married people without it.'

'It is commoner for certain sorts of people,' said Harry, 'but you know, I——' and he stopped.

'Well?' asked the other.

'I am not of those sorts, the sorts who go smiling through the world, and are smiled on in return. It was always the same with me. I am not truculent, or savage, or sulky, I believe, but somehow I remain friendless. I should be a hermit, if there were any nowadays.'

'Liver,' said Geoffrey decidedly. 'The fellow of twenty-one who says that sort of thing about himself has got liver.

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"Self Analysis, or the Sedentary Life," a tract by Geoffrey Langham. Here endeth the gospel.'

Harry smiled.

'I don't think about my character, as a rule,' he said. 'I don't lead a sedentary life, and I haven't got liver; but if one is a recluse it is as well to recognise the fact. I haven't got any real friends like everybody else.'

'Thank you,' said Geoffrey; 'don't apologize.'

'I shall if I like; indeed, I think I will. No one but a friend would have come down here.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said the other. 'I would stay with people I positively loathed for shooting no worse than what we had to-day. In the matter of friends, what you said was inane. You might have heaps of friends if you choose; but you don't find friends by going into a room alone and locking the door behind you.'

'Ah! I do that, do I?' said Harry, with a certain eager interest in his tone.

'Just a shade. You might have heaps of friends.'

'That may be or may not; it is certain that I have not. Oh, well, this is unprofitable. Take a cigarette from the recluse.'

They smoked in silence a minute or two.

'Your uncle?' asked Geoffrey. 'He comes to-night, you said.'

'Yes, I expect him before dinner. You've never seen him?'

'Never. What is he like?'

Harry pointed to a picture that hung above the fireplace.

'Like that,' he said, 'exactly like that.'

Geoffrey looked at it a moment, shading his eyes from the lamp.

'Fancy dress ball, I suppose,' he said.

'No, the costume of the period,' said Harry. 'It is not my uncle at all, but an ancestor of sorts. The picture is by Holbein; but, oddly enough, it is the very image of Uncle Francis.'

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'Francis Vail, second Baron,' spelled out Geoffrey, from the faded lettering on the frame.

'Yes, his name was Francis, too.'

'What is that great cup he is holding?' asked the other.

'Ah, I wondered whether you would notice that. I will show it you this evening—at least, I am certain that what I have found is it.'

'It looks rather a neat thing,' said Geoffrey. 'But I can't say as much for the second Baron, Harry. He seems to me a wicked old man.'

'There is no doubt that he was. Among other charming deeds, he almost certainly killed his own father. He was smothered in debt, came down here to try to get his father to pay up for him, and met with a pretty round refusal, it appears. That night the house was broken into, and the old man was found murdered in his bed. The burglar seems to have been a curious man—he took nothing, not a teaspoon.'

'Good Lord! I'm glad I'm not of ancestral family. Which is the room—*the* room?'

Harry laughed.

'The one at the end of the passage upstairs. Shall I tell them to move your things there?'

'That is true hospitality,' said Geoffrey. 'But I won't bother you. Do either of them walk?'

'Francis does; so if you meet that gentleman about, and find he is insubstantial, you will know that you have seen a ghost.'

'And, if substantial, it will only be your uncle?'

'Exactly, so you needn't faint immediately.'

Geoffrey got up and examined the picture with more attention.

'If your uncle is like that,' he said, 'I'm not so sure that I wouldn't sooner meet the ghost.'

'I'm afraid it is too late to put him off now,' said Harry; 'and unless there is a railway accident, you will certainly meet him at dinner. But I don't understand your objection to my

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poor old ancestor's portrait. I have always wondered that such an awful old wretch could be made to look so charming.'

'There is hell in his eyes,' said Geoffrey.

Harry left his chair and leaned on the chimneypiece also, looking up at the picture.

'Certainly, if you think he looks wicked,' he said, 'you will see no resemblance between him and my uncle. Uncle Francis is a genial, pink-faced old fellow, with benevolent white hair. When I used to come down here years ago, before my father's death, for the holidays, he always used to be awfully good to me. But he has been abroad for the last three years, and I haven't seen him. But I remember him as the most charming old man.'

'Then in essentials he is not like that portrait,' said Geoffrey, turning away. 'Well, I'm for the bath.'

'After you. Turn on the hot water when you're out, Geoff.'

Harry did not immediately sit down again when his friend left him, but continued for a little while to look at the second Baron, trying to see in it what Geoffrey had seen, what he himself had always failed to see. He moved from where he stood to where Geoffrey had been standing, still looking at it, when suddenly, no doubt by some curious play of light on the canvas, there flitted across the face for a moment some expression indefinably sinister. It was there but for a flash, and vanished again, and by no change in his point of view could he recapture it. Soon he gave up the attempt, and, with only an idle and fleeting wonder at the illusion, he sat down, took up a book, and yawned over a page that conveyed nothing to him. Then frankly and honestly he shut it up, and lay comfortably back in his chair, looking at the fire. He must even have dropped into a doze, for, apparently, without transition, in the strange, unformulated fashion of dreams, he thought that his uncle had come, dressed (and this did not seem remarkable) in the fashion of the Holbein portrait, and having greeted him with his well-remembered hearty manner, had sat down in

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the other of the two arm-chairs; and though unconscious of having gone to sleep, he certainly came to himself with a start, to find the chair opposite untenanted, and the sound of his own name ringing in his ears. Immediately afterwards it was repeated, and looking up to the gallery that ran across one side of the hall, and communicated with certain of the bedrooms, he saw Geoffrey leaning over in his dressing-gown.

'Bath's ready,' he said, 'and the portrait is looking at you.'

'Thanks. I've been to sleep, I think. Did you call me more than once, Geoff?'

'No; the other time it was the second Baron.'

Harry was still a little startled.

'You really only called once?' he asked again.

'Yes, only once. Why?'

'Nothing. Hullo! I hear wheels. That must be my uncle. Turn the hot water off, there's a good chap. I must just see him before I come upstairs.'

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CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE LUCK

THE dining-room of Vail was of the same antique spaciousness as the hall, and as there on the lounger, so here on the diner looked down a serious company of ancestors. For so small a party, it had been thought by the butler that conviviality would be given a better chance if, on this frosty night, he laid them a small table within range of the fire rather than that the three should be cut off, as it were, on a polar island in the centre of that vast sea of floor. And, indeed, though naturally a modest man, Templeton felt a strong self-approval at the success of his kind thought; for from the moment of sitting down a cheerful merriness had held the table, rising sometimes into loud hilarity, and never sinking into the contented slough of repletion which is held in England to be the proper equivalent for joviality. But if it was Templeton in part who was responsible for so desirable an atmosphere, there was credit to be given to at least one of the diners.

Pleasant and pink was Mr. Francis's face, his hair, though silver, still crisp and vigorous, his mouth a perpetual smile. In absolute repose even, a sunshine lingered there, as in a bottle of well-matured wine, and its repose left it but to give place to laughter. All dinner through he had been the mouthpiece of delightful anecdote, and of observations shrewd but always kindly, rising sometimes almost to the dry level of wit, and never failing in that genial humour without which all conversation, not directed to a definite end, becomes intolerable. Though talking much, he was no usurper of the inalienable right of the others to wag the tongue, and though his own wagged to vibration, he was never tedious. Even in the

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matter of riddles, introduced by Geoffrey, he had a contribution or two to make of so extravagant a sort that this dismal species of entertainment was for the moment rendered charming. He unbent to the level of the young men, to the futility of most disconnected conversation, without ever seeming to unbend. You would have said that his narrow, clerically-opening shirt, with its large cravat and massive gold studs, covered the heart of a boy; that the brains of a clever youth lay beneath that silver hair, prematurely white indeed, yet not from grief or the conduct of a world long unkind. In person he was somewhat short, 'without the inches of a Vail,' as he himself said, and pleasantly inclined to stoutness, but to the stoutness which may come early to a healthy appetite and a serene digestion, for it was not accompanied either by pallid flabbiness or colour unduly high, and by the artificial light scarcely a wrinkle could be scrutinized on his beaming face. His dress was precise and scrupulous, yet with a certain antique touch about it, as of one who had been something of a buck in the sixties, his linen far more than clean and fresh, and of a snowiness which certainly implied special injunctions to the washerwoman. His trouser-pockets were cut, we may elegantly say, not at the side of those indispensable coverings, but towards the front of the bow window, and there dangled from the lip of one a fob of heavy gold seals.

They had now approached the end of dinner, decanters glowed on the table, and a silver cigarette-box, waiting untouched, at Mr. Francis's request, till the more manly business of wine was off the palate, stood by Harry's dessert-plate. Already, even in this second hour of their acquaintance, the three felt like old friends, and as the wine was on its first round, the two young men were bent eagerly forward to hear the conclusion of a most exciting little personal anecdote told them by Mr. Francis. He had to perfection that great essential of the narrator, intense interest and appreciation of what he was himself saying, and the climax afforded him the most obvious satisfaction. In his right hand he held his first

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glass of untasted port, and after an interval accorded to laughter he suddenly rose.

'And now,' he said, 'comes the pleasantest moment of our delightful evening. Harry, my dear boy, here is long life and happiness to you, from the most sincere of your well-wishers. And for myself, I pray that a very old man may some time dance your children on his knee. God bless you, my dearest fellow.'

He drank the brimming glass honestly to the last drop, and held out his hand to the young man, with a long and hearty grasp. Then with quick tact, seeing the embarrassment of remark-making in Harry's face, he sat down again, and without pause enticed the subject off the boards.

'How well I remember your dear father coming of age!' he said. 'Dear me! it must be forty years ago, nearly twice as long a time as you have lived. There's a puzzle for Mr. Langham, like the one he gave me to do. It was this very port, I should say, in which we drank his health. The yellow seal, is it not, Harry? Yes, yes; your grandfather laid it down in the year '40, and we used to drink it only on very great occasions, for he would say to me that it was a gift he had put in entail for his grandchildren, and was not for us. And so it has turned out. He was very fond of port, too, was dear old Dennis; it was not a gift that cost him nothing. You would scarcely remember your grandfather, Harry?'

'I just remember him, Uncle Francis,' said the lad, 'but only as a very old man. I don't think he liked children, for whenever he saw me he would have no more than a word or two to say, and then he would send for you.'

'Yes, yes, so he would—so he would,' said Mr. Francis, 'and we used to have great games together—did we not, Harry? Games did I say? Indeed, we seemed to be real Red Indians in the wilderness and Crusaders with paper lances. Dear me! I could play such games still. Hide-and-seek, too—a grand business. It requires, as poor Antrobus used to say, all the strategy of a General directing a campaign, combined with the

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unflinching courage of the private, who has to go straight forward, expecting artillery to open on him every minute. Yes, and the old man felt it, too. I have seen him playing it with his grandchildren when he was Prime Minister, and, upon my word, he was more in earnest about it than the young people!'

Coffee had come in, and after a few minutes the three moved for the hall. At the door, however, Harry paused and stayed behind in the dining-room. Mr. Francis took Geoffrey's arm in his affectionate way, and the two walked into the hall.

'It has been so pleasant to me to meet you, my dear boy,' he was saying, 'for years ago I knew some of your people well. No, I do not think I ever knew your father. But I must tell you I am bad at surnames; one only calls the tradespeople Mr. So-and-so, and I shall call you Geoffrey. You are Harry's best friend; I have a claim upon you. Fine hall—is it not? —and the pictures, well, they are a wonderful set. There is nothing like them for completeness in England, if one excepts the royal collections; and, indeed, I think there is less rubbish here.'

The portraits were lit by small shaded lamps, which stood beneath each, so that the whole light was thrown on to the picture, and the beholder left undazzled. Mr. Francis had strolled up to the fireplace, still retaining Geoffrey's arm, and together they looked at the picture of Francis, second Baron.

'A wonderful example of Holbein,' said Mr. Francis; 'I do not know a finer. They tried hard to get it for the exhibition a few years ago, but it couldn't leave Vail. I should have been quite uncomfortable at the thought of it out of the house. Now, some people have told me——Ah! I see you have noticed it, too.'

'Surely there is an extraordinary likeness between you and it,' said Geoffrey. 'Harry just pointed to it when I asked him what you were like.'

Mr. Francis's eyes pored on the picture with a sort of fascination.

'A wonderful bit of painting,' he said. 'And how clearly

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you see not only the man's body, but his soul! That is the true art of the portrait-painter.'

'But not always pleasant for the sitter,' remarked Geoffrey.

'I am not so sure. You imply, no doubt, that it was not pleasant for this old fellow?'

'I should not think his soul was much to be proud of,' said Geoffrey.

'You mean he looks wicked?' said Mr. Francis, still intent on the canvas. 'Well—God forgive him!—I am afraid he must have been. But, that being so, I expect he was as much in love with his own soul as a good man is. For he does not look to me a weak man, one who is for ever falling and repenting. There is less of Macbeth and more of his good lady in old Francis. Infirm of purpose? No, no, I think not!'

He turned abruptly away from the picture, and broke into a laugh.

'He was a wicked old man, we are afraid,' he said, 'and I am exactly like him.'

'Ah! that is not fair,' cried Geoffrey.

'My dear boy, I was only chaffing. And here is Harry; what has he got?'

Harry had come after them as they spoke thus together, carrying in his hand a square leather case. The thing seemed to be of some weight.

'I wanted to show you and Geoff what I have found, Uncle Francis,' he said. 'I thought perhaps you could tell me about it. It was in one of the attics, of all places in the world—hidden, it seemed, behind some old pictures. Templeton and I found it.'

Mr. Francis whisked round with even more than his accustomed vivacity of movement at Harry's words.

'Yes, yes,' he said with some impatience. 'Open it, then, my dear boy, open it.'

An old lock of curious work secured the leather strap which fastened the case, but this dangled loose from it, attached to its hasp.

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'We could find no key for it,' explained Harry, 'and had to break it open.'

As he spoke, he drew from the case an object swathed in wash-leather, but the outline was clearly visible beneath its wrappings.

'Ah, it is so,' said Mr. Francis below his breath, and as Harry unfolded the covering they all stood silent. This done, he held up to the light what it contained. It was a large golden goblet with two handles, of a size perhaps to hold a couple of quarts of liquor, and even by lamplight it was a thing that dazzled the eye, and made the mouth to water. But, solid gold as it was, and of chaste and exquisite workmanship, there was scarce an inch of it that was not worth more than the whole value of the gold and the craft bestowed thereon, so thickly was it encrusted with large and precious stones. Just below the lip of the cup ran a ring of rubies, of notable size and wonderful depth of colour, and below, at a little interval, six emerald stars, all clear set in the body of the cup. The lower part was chased with acanthus-leaves, each outlined in pearls, and up the fluted stem climbed lordly sapphires. Sapphires again traced the rim of the foot, and in each handle was clear-set a row of diamonds—no chips and dust, but liquid eyes and lobes of light. Half-way down the bowl of the cup, between the emerald stars and the points of the acanthus-leaves, ran a plain panel of gold, on which was engraved in small Early English characters some text that encircled the whole.

Harry was standing close under the lamp as he took off the covering, and remained there a moment, holding in his hand the gorgeous jewel, and looking at it with a curiously fixed attention, unconscious of the others. Then he handed it to his uncle.

'Tell me about it; what is it, Uncle Francis?' he asked, and involuntarily, as the old man took it, he glanced at the picture of Francis, second Baron, who, in the portrait, held, beyond a doubt, the same treasure that they were now examining.

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Mr. Francis did not at once reply, but handled the cup for a little while in silence, with awe and solemnity in his attitude and expression. As he turned it this way and that in his grasp, jewel after jewel caught the light and shone refracted in points of brilliant colour on his face. The burnished band, on which was engraved the circle of the text, cut a yellow line of reflection across his nose and cheeks, which remained steady, but over the rest of his face gleams of living colour shone and passed, and now as a ruby, now an emerald, sent their direct rays into his eyes, they would seem lit inside by a gleam of red or green. At length he looked up.

'Hear what the thing says of itself,' he said. 'I will read it you.'

Then, turning the cup till he had found the beginning of the text, he read slowly, the cup revolving to the words:

'When the Luck of the Vails is lost,
Fear not fire nor rain nor frost;
When the Luck is found again,
Fear both fire and frost and rain.'

'Very pretty,' said Geoffrey, with a critical air; but Mr. Francis made no reply. His eyes were still fixed on the jewel.

'But what is it?' asked Harry.

'This? The cup?' he said. 'It is what I have read to you. It is the Luck of the Vails.'

Geoffrey laughed.

'You've got it, Harry, anyhow,' he said, 'for weal or woe. How does it run? "Fear fire and frost and rain." Take care of yourself, old man, and don't smoke in bed, and don't skate over deep water.'

Mr. Francis turned to him quickly, with a sudden recovery of his briskness.

'You and I would risk all that, would we not, Geoffrey,' he said, 'to have found such a beautiful thing? Yes, Harry, I see you have noticed it. There it is in old Francis's hand in the picture. Where else should it be if not there? Whether

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he made it or not, I can't tell you, but that is its first appearance as far as we know.'

Still holding it, he looked at the portrait, then stretched it out to Harry.

'There, take it,' he said quickly.

'But tell us all about it,' said Harry. 'What happened to it afterwards? How is it I never heard of it?'

'Your father would never speak of it,' said Mr. Francis, 'nor your grandfather either. Your father never saw it, your grandfather only once, when he was quite a little boy. Neither could bear to speak of it when it was lost. And so it was in the attic all the time!'

Harry's eyes were sparkling; a sudden animation seemed to possess him.

'Tell us from the beginning,' he said.

He was already wrapping the goblet up again, and Mr. Francis looked greedily at it, till the last jewel had been hidden in the wash-leather.

'Well, it is a strange story, and a short one,' he said, 'for so little is known of it. It has appeared and disappeared several times since Holbein painted it there, as unaccountably as it has appeared again now. In the attic all the time!' he exclaimed again.

'But the legend—what does the legend mean?' asked Harry.

'I have no idea. Perhaps it is some old rhyme, perhaps it is a mere conceit of the goldsmith. But be that as it may, those of your house who have possessed the Luck always seemed to think that it brought them luck. It was in old Francis's time, you know, that coal was found on your Derbyshire estate, which so enriched him for a while. In his son's time certainly the Luck disappeared, for we have a letter of his about it, and as certainly the field of coal came to an end. It appeared again some eighty years later, and again disappeared, and then the grandfather of your grandfather found it. He, you know, married the wealthy Barbara Devereux,

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and it was he who showed the Luck to your grandfather. Then it was lost for the last time, and with it all his money in the South Sea Bubble.'

Harry looked a shade disappointed at this bald narrative.

'Is that all?' he asked. 'Where does the fire and frost and rain come in?'

Mr. Francis laughed.

'Well, oddly enough, old Francis was burned to death in his bed. Mark Vail was drowned. Henry Vail, the last holder of it, was frozen to death in his travelling carriage crossing the St. Gothard. But a man must die somehow. Is it not so? Poor, wicked old Francis! he thought, perhaps, to bring a curse on the house, if it was indeed he who made the Luck; but how futile—how futile! Did he think that the elements were in league with some occult power of magic and darkness that he possessed? Ah, no; beneficent Nature is not controlled by such a hand. He knows that well, maybe, now, and perhaps therein is his chastisement, for indeed he was a man of devilish mind.'

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PART II

CHAPTER III

THE SPELL BEGINS TO WORK

MR. FRANCIS was by choice an early riser, and next morning, before either of the young men was awake, he had been splashing and gasping in his cold tub, had felt with the keenest enjoyment the genial afterglow produced on his braced and invigorated skin by the application of the rough towel, and was now out on the terrace, pacing briskly along the dry gravel walk on this adorable winter morning, waiting cheerfully for his desired breakfast. Now and then he would break into a nimble trot for fifty paces, or even give a little skip in the air as a child does, from the sheer exhilaration of his pulses. His thoughts, too, must have been as sparkling as the morning itself, as brisk and cheery as his own physical economy, for from time to time he would troll out a bar or two of some lusty song, or stop to chirrup with pursed lips to the stiff, half-frozen birds, and his pleasant, close-shaven face was continually wreathed in smiles. Here was one, at least, in whom old age had brought no spell of freezing to laggard blood, no dulling of that zest of life which is so often and so erroneously considered as an attribute of youth only; life was still immensely enjoyable, and all things were delightful to his sympathetic eye.

Such a buoyancy of spirits is a most engaging thing, provided only it be natural and unforced. But too often the old who remain young have the aspect as of grizzly kittens, their spirits are but a parody of youthfulness, their antics broken-winded and spasmodic. In a moment they fall from the heights of

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irresponsible gaiety to an equally unwarrantable churlishness, they maintain no level way, their capers are those of jerking marionettes, a performance of jointed dolls.

But how different was the joyousness of Mr. Francis! Nothing could be more native to him than his morning exhilaration. Authentic was the merriment that sparkled in his light-blue eyes, authentic the lightness of his foot as it tripped along the gravel walk, and none could doubt that his fine spirits were effortless and unaffected.

To reach so ripe an age as that to which Mr. Francis had attained means, even to those whose life has lain in the pleasantest lines, to have had to bear certain trials, sorrows, and misunderstandings necessarily incident to the mere passage of years. To bear these bravely and without bitterness is the part of any robust nature, to bear them with unabated cheerfulness and without any loss of the zest for life is a rarer gift; and the silver-haired old gentleman who paced so gaily up and down the terraced walks, while he waited for young men to have their fill of sleep and make a tardy appearance, was a figure not without gallantry. Here were no impatient gestures; he was hungry, but the time of waiting would not be shortened by fretfulness, nor had he any inclination to so unamiable a failing, and for nearly half an hour he pursued his cheery way up and down. At length the welcome booming of the gong sounded distantly, and he tripped towards the house.

Harry was down, the clock pointing to an indulgent half-past nine, but the youthful moroseness of morning sat on his brow. To so old a traveller through life as his uncle the ways of weaning this were manifold, and he broke into speech.

'Splendid morning, my dear boy,' he said, 'and the ice, they tell me, bears. What will you do? What shall we do? Are you shooting to-day or skating, or will you like to take a tramp round the old place with me as you suggested last night?'

Harry was examining dishes on the side-table with a supercilious air.

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'Very cold, is it not?' he said. 'We were thinking of shooting. Do you shoot, Uncle Francis?'

'I will shoot with pleasure, if you will let me,' he said. 'Yes, it is cold—too cold for pottering about, as you say. Fish-cakes, eggs and bacon, cold game. Yes, I'll begin with a fish-cake. What a hungry place Vail is! I am famished, literally famished! And where is Geoffrey?'

'Geoffrey was going to his bath when I came down,' said Harry. 'It is to be hoped he will be more nearly awake after it. He had one eye open only when I saw him.'

'Fine gift to be able to sleep like that,' said Mr. Francis. 'I heard you two boys go up to bed last night, and sat an hour reading after that. But I awoke at eight, as I always do, and got up.'

Harry's morose mood was on the thaw.

'And have you been waiting for us since then, Uncle Francis?' he said. 'Really, I am awfully sorry. We'll have breakfast earlier to-morrow. It was stupid of me.'

'Not a bit, not a bit, Harry. I like a bit of a walk before breakfast. Wonderful thing for the circulation after your bath. Ah, here's Geoffrey! Good-morning, my dear boy!'

'We'll shoot to-day, Geoff, as we settled,' said Harry. 'Uncle Francis will come with us. Wake up, you pig!'

Geoffrey yawned.

'How's the Luck?' he said. 'Lord! I had such a nightmare, Harry—you and the Luck and Mr. Vail and the picture of the wicked baron all mixed up together somehow. I forget how it went.'

'Very remarkable,' said Harry. 'I dreamed of the Luck, too, now you mention it. We must have dreamed of the same thing, Geoff, because I also have forgotten how it went.'

'And I,' said Mr. Francis, 'dreamed about nothing at all very pleasantly all night. And what a morning I awoke to! Just the day for a good tramp in the woods. Dear me, Harry, what a simpleton your dear father used to think me! "What are you going to do?" he would ask me, and I would only

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want a pocketful of cartridges, a snack of cold lunch, and leave to prowl about by myself without a keeper, no trouble to anybody.'

'Yes, that's good fun,' said Geoffrey. 'Now it's a rabbit, or over the stubble a partridge, then a bit of cover and you put up a pheasant. Let's have a go-as-you-please day, Harry.'

'The poetry of shooting,' said Mr. Francis. 'Cold partridge for anyone but me? No? You lads have no appetites.'

The keeper had been given his orders the day before, and very soon after breakfast the three shooters were ready to start. They went out by a garden-door which gave on a flight of some dozen stone steps descending to the lawn, and Mr. Francis, leading the way, nearly fell on the topmost of them, for they were masked with ice, and half turned as he recovered himself to give a word of warning to the others. But he was too late, and Harry, who followed him, not looking to his feet, but speaking to Geoffrey over his shoulder, at the same moment almost had slipped on the treacherous stone, and fallen sprawling, dropping his gun and clutching ineffectually at the railing to save himself. Mr. Francis gave one exclamation of startled dismay, and ran to his assistance.

'My dear fellow,' he cried, 'I hope you are not hurt?'

Harry lay still a moment, his mouth twisted with pain, then, taking hold of the railing, pulled himself to his feet, and stood with bowed head, gripping hard on the banister.

'All sideways on my ankle,' he said. 'Just see if my gun's all right, Geoff. Yes, I've twisted it, I'm afraid.'

He paused another moment, faint and dizzy, with a feeling of empty sickness, and then hobbled up the steps again.

'An awful wrench,' he said. 'Just give me your arm, Uncle Francis, will you? I can hardly put my foot to the ground.'

Leaning on him, he limped back into the hall and dragged off his boot.

'Yes, it feels pretty bad,' he said; 'I came with my whole weight on to it. I shall be as lame as a tree.'

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Mr. Francis was on his knees, and in a moment had stripped off Harry's stocking with quick, deft fingers.

'What bad luck! What awfully bad luck!' he said. 'Put a cold water compress on it at once, my dear boy. It is already swelling.'

Harry lifted his leg on to a chair opposite.

'It's just a sprain,' he said. 'Go out, Uncle Francis, you and Geoffrey. I'll put a bandage on.'

Templeton had answered Mr. Francis's ringing of the bell, and was dismissed again with orders for cold water and linen.

'Not till I've seen you comfortable, my dear fellow,' said Mr. Francis. 'Dear me, what bad luck! Does it hurt you, Harry?'

'No, no, it is nothing,' said he rather impatiently, irritated both by the pain and the fussing. 'Do go out, Uncle Francis, with Geoffrey, and leave me. The men are waiting by the home cover. I can look after myself perfectly.'

Mr. Francis still seemed half loath to leave him, and, had he followed his inclinations, he would have instituted himself as sick-nurse, to change the bandage or read to him. But it was the part of wisdom to humour the patient, who quite distinctly wished to be left alone; and as even the most solicitous affection could not find grounds for anxiety in the sprain, with a few more sympathetic words, he followed Geoffrey, who was chafing to be gone. The latter, indeed, might have appeared somewhat cold and unsympathetic in contrast with Mr. Francis and his repeated lamentations; but his 'Bad luck, Harry,' and Harry's grunt in reply had something of telegraphic brevity, not misunderstood.

In spite of his protestations that he was no more than an indifferent shot, it soon appeared that Mr. Francis was more than a decently capable performer with the gun, and his keenness and accuracy as a sportsman were charmingly combined with the knowledge and observation of a naturalist. He pointed out to his companion several rare and infrequent birds

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which they saw during the morning, and implored the keeper that they might not be shot for curiosities.

'Half the time I am shooting,' he said to Geoffrey, 'I am of a divided mind. Is it not a shame to kill these beautiful and innocent things? I often wonder—— Ah!' Up went his gun, and a high pheasant was torn from the sky, leaving a few light neck-feathers floating there. 'And even while the words are in my mouth, I go and contradict my sentiments,' he said, ejecting the smoking cartridge. 'What a bundle of incongruous opposites is a man!'

They shot for not more than a couple of hours after lunch, for the sun set early, and Mr. Francis confessed to a certain unreasonable desire to get home quickly, and see how Harry had fared.

'Indeed, I was half minded to stay with him, in spite of his wish,' he said; 'for the hours will have been lonely to him. But he is like all the Vails, self-reliant, and beholden to no one.'

They were crossing the last meadow before they should again reach the garden, and even as he spoke a hare got up from its form in the tussocky grass not more than ten yards from them, and scuttled noiselessly, head down, across the field. Geoffrey had already taken the cartridges from his barrels, and Mr. Francis raised his gun to his shoulder, hesitated a moment, and then fired. He hit the beast just as it gained the fence of the cover from which they had come. They saw it bowled over, and drag on a pace or two into the bushes, then suddenly from where it had disappeared there came a screaming horribly human. Mr. Francis paused, then turned quite pale, and Geoffrey, seeing his stricken face, imagined he thought that he had wounded a beater.

'It is only the hare,' he said; 'the men were all out two minutes ago.'

Mr. Francis turned to him.

'Only the hare!' he cried. 'Yes, only the hare. How dreadful! how dreadful! I have wounded it!' And he

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started off running to where the beast had been last seen, and disappeared in the cover.'

Geoffrey sent a couple of beaters to assist in the search, but himself went on to the house, wondering a little at the inconsistency which would allow a man to shoot at a hare running straight away in a bad light, and yet send him hot-foot after it when wounded. Yet the inconsistency was pleasing: keenness was responsible for the doubtful shot; an indubitable horror of causing an animal pain prompted the pursuit of it. He found Harry lying up, his ankle somewhat severely sprained, but it no longer pained him, and he asked after his uncle.

'Just at the last moment he shot a hare, wounding it,' he said, 'and ran back to try to recover it. He will be in at once, I should think.'

But half an hour passed, yet still he did not come, and Harry was already wondering what could have happened, when he appeared, all smiles again.

'Dear lad, have you had a very tedious day?' he asked. 'The thought of you has been constantly in my mind. I should have been in half an hour ago with Geoffrey, but I wounded a hare, and had to go and look for it. Thank God, I found it. The poor beast was quite dead. But it screamed; it was terrible, terrible!'

There was a good piano by Bechstein standing in the hall, and that evening, after dinner, as Harry lay on the sofa nursing his injury, while his uncle, sitting by him, recalled a hundred little reminiscences of his own young years which he had spent here, Geoffrey, who was an accurate performer of simple tunes, played idly and softly to himself, listening half to his own music, half to the talk of the others. Now he would indicate some graceful inevitable fragment of Bach, now a verse of some Chevalier song, all with a tinkling elementary technique, but with a certain facility of finger and decided aptitude for the right notes. By degrees, as this went on, a kind of restlessness gained on Mr. Francis. He would break off in the middle of a story to hum a bar of the tune Geoffrey was playing, beating

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time to it with a waving hand, or turn round in his chair to say over his shoulder, 'A graceful melody, my dear boy; please play us that again.'

But before long this restlessness grew more emphatic, and at last he jumped nimbly out of his chair.

'I must fetch my flute,' he exclaimed; 'I must positively fetch my flute. I play but indifferently, as you will hear, but it is such a pleasure to me. What a charming instrument is the flute! So pastoral, the nearest thing we know to the song of birds. Be indulgent, my dear Geoffrey, to the whim of an old fellow, and play some easy accompaniments for me. I have a quantity of little pieces for the flute by Corelli and Baptiste.'

He hurried to the door, and they heard his step quickly crossing the gallery above. In a few moments he reappeared again, a little out of breath, but with a beaming face. He fitted his flute together with affectionate alacrity, turned to the piano, and opened a volume of easy minuets and sarabands.

'There, this one,' he said; 'it is a breath of heaven, a real breath of heaven. You have two bars of introduction. Ah! a shade slower, my dear boy; it is an antique measure, you must remember. Graceful, leisurely—yes, that is exactly right.'

He knew the music by heart, and, when once they were fairly started, turned from the piano towards Harry. His cheerful ruddy face composed itself into an expression of beatific content, his eyes were half closed, the eyebrows a little raised, and his body swayed gently to the rhythm of the tune. The formal delicacy of the composition enthralled him. Perhaps it brought with it the aroma of his youth, the minuets he had danced fifty years ago; perhaps it was only the sweet and certain development of the melody which so moved him. At the end, in any case, he could not quite command his voice, and he patted Geoffrey gently on the shoulder by way of thanks.

'The next,' he said; 'we cannot pass by the next. The two are complete only together.'

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They played thus some half-dozen little pieces, ending with a quick ripple of a gavotte to put them in good spirits again—so said Mr. Francis—and at the last he lovingly packed up his flute and left it on the piano, saying that they must be very indulgent to him and let him play again.

Two or three days after this Harry was sufficiently recovered to be able to go out again, though still limpingly, and it was arranged that they should shoot certain of the covers near the house which might be expected to furnish them with a good day's sport, and at the same time would entail but little walking. The frost had twenty-four hours ago completely broken before a warm and violent wind from the south-west, and the dead leaves, which had lain in ice-glued and compacted heaps, were once more driven about in scurrying multitudes. The sky was low and ominous, a wrack of torn and flying cloud, and scudding showers fell ever and again; but the sport was excellent, and they little heeded the angry fretfulness of the heavens.

Their beats took them at no time far from the house, and they returned there for lunch; but by this time the weather had grown so vastly more inclement that Mr. Francis cried oft the resumption of the day, but Harry, eager for out of doors after his two days' imprisonment, persuaded Geoffrey to come out again. The rain was a steady downpour in the slackened wind, but his argument that they were not made of paper carried weight.

They returned drenched indeed, but with a satisfactory report of themselves and the birds, to find Mr. Francis performing very contentedly on his flute before the hall fire. But he jumped up briskly as they appeared.

'Dear boys, how wet you are!' he cried. 'Of course, you will change your clothes at once, will you not? And I should recommend a glass of hot whisky-and-water. Shall I ring the bell? I told Templeton to see that there was abundance of hot water for your baths. And you've not overtired yourself, I hope, dear Harry?'

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This incessant solicitude of his uncle, however clearly arising from affection, was on the way to get on Harry's nerves and rouse opposition. At any rate, the suggestion that he should guard against a chill predisposed him not to be in any hurry to go upstairs.

'Oh, tea first,' he said, not meaning it; 'one can change afterwards. Are you going now, Geoff? Ring the bell as you pass, will you?'

A positive cloud dimmed the brightness of Mr. Francis's face.

'Dear boy, you are being horribly imprudent,' he said. 'Do let me persuade you to change at once.'

This drove determination home. Harry was unpleasantly conscious of the clinging flabbiness of soaking clothes; but had their touch shaken him with an ague, it would not have moved him from his chair. He intended to do that which he chose to do.

'Oh, I'm all right, Uncle Francis,' he said; 'I never catch cold.'

Tea came, and Harry ate and drank with studied leisure, and conversed politely to his uncle. Already he felt the premonitory prickling of the skin which precedes a chill, but it was nearly half an hour before he lounged upstairs. He did not intend to be fussed over and treated like a child, and the advice to go and change had been so obviously sensible that it should never have been offered, and to the contrariness of youth was impossible to accept. Thus the well-meant but ill-timed counsel drove him into an opposite course.

Again, after dinner, the evening was melodious with the breathings of Mr. Francis's flute; but the child-like pleasure which the performer had taken before in his own performance was sensibly dimmed. He played with a wandering attention and an uncertain finger, without the gusto of the artist, and his eye ever rested anxiously on Harry, who had more than once complained of the cold, and now sat huddled up by a mountainous fire, bright-eyed, and with a burning skin, which seemed to him to cover an interior of ice. At last Mr. Francis

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could stand it no longer, and laying down his flute, came across to where he sat, and with an extraordinary amenity of voice, yet firmly:

'I insist on your going to bed, Harry,' he said. 'You have caught a chill; it is idle to deny it. Dear lad, do not be foolish. I have troubled and worried you, I am afraid, with my fussy care for you, and I am very sorry for it. But do not make a bad matter worse, and do not punish me, I ask you, as well as yourself for my ill-timed suggestions. I have apologized; be generous.'

Harry got up. It was impossible that a mere superficial boyish obstinacy, of which he was already ashamed, should stand out against this, and, besides, he felt really unwell.

'Yes, I am afraid I have caught a chill,' he said. 'It was foolish of me not to change, as you advised me when I came in. It was even more foolish of me to have been annoyed at your excellent suggestion that I should.'

Mr. Francis's face brightened.

'Now get to bed at once, my dear boy,' he said, 'and I have no doubt you will be all right in the morning. You have plenty of blankets? Good-night.'

But Harry was by no means all right in the morning, and it seemed that for his uncle the joy of life was dead. There was no brisk, early walk for him to-day. Vail was no longer a hungry place, and his breakfast was but the parody of a meal. Unreasonably he blamed himself for his nephew's indisposition, and the morning passed for him in blank turnings over of the leaves of undecipherable books, in reiterated visits to the kitchen with suggestions as to a suitable invalid diet, and disconnected laments to Geoffrey over this untoward occurrence.

'Ah, this will teach a foolish old man to hold his tongue,' he said; 'it will teach him also that old fellows cannot understand the young. How excellent were my intentions, but how worse than impotent, how disastrous! It is a cold job to grow old, Geoffrey; it is even colder to grow old and still feel young. Poor Harry simply thought me a meddling old fogey when

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I wanted him to take precautions against catching a chill, and I ought to have known that he would think me so. I forget my white hairs. How are you, my dear boy, this morning? I hope you have not a chill, too. I am anxious and unsettled to-day.'

'Oh, Harry was an ass!' said the other. 'But there's nothing at all to be anxious about. He has a chill, rather a sharp one, and with greater wisdom than he showed yesterday, he stops in bed. Is that *Punch* there? Thank you very much.'

Mr. Francis walked to the window, lit a cigarette, and threw it away, barely tasted.

'I wonder if Harry would like me to read to him,' he said.

Geoffrey looked up with an arrested smile.

'I think I should leave him quite alone,' he said. 'I've just been up to him. He's as cross as a bear, and wouldn't speak to me, so I came away.'

'But that is so unlike him,' said Mr. Francis. 'He must be ill—he must be really ill.'

Geoffrey began to understand Harry's feelings the day before.

'If I were you, I wouldn't fuss either him or myself,' he said; 'people don't die of a cold in the head.'

'Shall I send for the doctor?' asked Mr. Francis. 'We might tell Harry that he happened to call about some case of distress in the village, and wished to consult him about it. Then we could get his opinion. I think, under the circumstances, one might venture on so small an equivocation.'

Geoffrey closed his *Punch*.

'I shouldn't do anything of the kind if I were you,' he said. 'What an abominable morning! I'll play some accompaniments for you if you like.'

'Thank you, dear boy,' said Mr. Francis, 'but I haven't the heart to play this morning. Besides, Harry might be dozing; we should run the risk of disturbing him.'

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PART III

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY OF MR. FRANCIS

HARRY VAIL owned a plain, gloomy house in Cavendish Square, forbidding to those who looked at it from the street, chilling to those who looked at the street from it. It was furnished in the heavy and expensive early Victorian style, and solid mahogany frowned at its inmates. During his minority it had been let for a term of years, but on his coming of age he had taken it again himself, and here, when the gloom and darkness of February and swollen waters made Vail more suitable for the amphibious than the dry-shod, he came to receive in exchange the more sociable fogs of London. Parliament had assembled, the roadways were no longer depleted, and Harry was beginning to find that, in spite of the friendlessness which he had been afraid was his, there were many houses which willingly opened their doors and welcomed him inside. Friends of his father, acquaintances of his own, were all disposed to be pleasant towards this young man, about whom there lingered a certain vague atmosphere of romance, a thing much valued by a prosaic age. He was young, attractive to the eye, he stood utterly alone in the world, with the burden or glory of a great name on his shoulders, and people found in him a charming youthful modesty, mixed with an independence of the sturdiest, which, while accepting a favour from none, seemed to cry aloud for friendliness and bask therein when it was found with the mute, unmistakable gratitude of a dumb animal. His own estimate of his loneliness had probably been accentuated by the year he had spent, just before he came of

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age, in studying languages in France and Germany; but in the main it was, when he made it, correct. But at his time of life change comes quickly; the young man who does not rapidly expand and enlarge must, it may be taken for certain, be as rapidly closing up. Within a month of his arrival in London it was beyond question that the latter morbid process was not at operation in Harry.

He and Geoffrey were seated one night in the smoking-room in the Cavendish Square house, talking over a glass of whisky-and-soda. They had dined with a friend, and Harry had inveigled Geoffrey out of his way to spend an hour with him before going home.

'No, I certainly am not superstitious,' he was saying, 'but if I was, I really should be very much impressed by what has happened. I never heard of a stranger series of coincidences. You remember the lines engraved round the Luck:

'"When the Luck is found again,
Fear both fire and frost and rain"?

Well, as you know, two days after I found the Luck I slipped on the steps as we were going out shooting, and sprained my ankle. In consequence of not looking where I was going, say you, and I also for that matter. The Luck, say the superstitious: that is the frost. As soon as I get right, I go out shooting again, get wet through, and catch a pretty bad chill. Because I didn't go and change, you say. The Luck, say the superstitious: that is the rain. Finally, the very day you left, I tripped over the hearthrug, fell into the fire, and burnt half my hair off. Well, if that isn't fire, I don't know what is. "Fear both fire and frost and rain," you see. Certainly I have suffered from all three; but if old Francis could only give me a cold and a sprained ankle and a burn, I don't think much of his magic. But I've paid the price, and now there is the Luck to look forward to. Dear me, I'm afraid I've been jawing!'

'I wonder if you believe it at all,' said Geoffrey. 'For

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myself, I should chuck the beastly pot into the lake, not because I believed it, but for fear that I some day might. If you get to believe that sort of thing, you are done.'

'I am sure I don't believe it,' said the other, 'and so I shall not chuck the beastly pot into the lake. Nor would you if it were yours. But if I did believe it, Geoff, there would be all the more reason for keeping it. Don't you see, I've been through the penalties, now let me have the prizes. That's the way to look at it. I don't look at it, I must remind you, in that way; I only say, What a strange series of coincidences! You can hardly deny that that is so.'

'What have you done with it?' asked Geoffrey.

'The beastly pot? It's down at Vail. Uncle Francis is there too. I wanted him to come up to London with me, but he wouldn't. Now, there's a cruel thing, Geoff. My God! it makes my blood boil when I think of it!'

'Think of what?'

'Of the persistent ill-luck which has dogged my uncle throughout his life; of the odious—well, not suspicion, it is not so definite as that—which seems to surround him. I was at Lady Oxted's the other night, and mentioned him casually, but she said nothing, and changed the subject. Oh, it was not a mere chance—the thing has happened before.'

Geoffrey squirted some soda-water into his glass.

'Suspicion? What do you mean?' he asked.

'No; suspicion is the wrong word. Uncle Francis told me all about his life on the last evening that I was at Vail, and I never heard anything so touching, so cruel, or so dignified. All his life he has been the victim of an ill-luck so persistent that it looks as if some malignant power must have been pursuing him. Well, I am going to try to make it up to him. I wonder if a rather long and very private story about his affairs would interest you at all?'

'Rather! I should like to hear it.'

'Well, this is almost exactly as he told it me from the beginning. He was a twin of my grandfather's—there's a

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piece of bad luck to start with—and being just half a minute late about coming into the world, he is a younger son, which is no fun, I can tell you, in our impoverished family.'

'That may happen to anybody,' said Geoffrey. 'I'm a younger son myself, but I don't scream over that.'

Harry laughed.

'Nor does he. Don't interrupt, Geoff. Then he married a very rich girl, who died three years afterwards, childless, leaving all her money back to her own relatives. It was a most unhappy marriage from the first, but don't aim after cheap cynicism and say that the real tragedy there was not her death but the disposition of her property. I can tell you beforehand that this was not the case. He was devoted to her.'

'Well?'

Harry's voice sank.

'And then, twenty-two years ago, came that awful affair of young Houldsworth's death. Did you ever hear it spoken of?'

Geoffrey was silent a moment.

'Yes, I have heard it spoken of,' he said at length.

Harry flushed.

'Ah! in connection with my uncle, I suppose?' he said.

'Yes, his name was mentioned in connection with it.'

'It is a crying shame!' said Harry hotly. 'And so people talk of it still, do they? I never heard of it till he told me all about it the other night. That is natural; people would not speak of it to me.'

'I only know the barest outline,' said Geoffrey. 'Tell me what Mr. Francis told you.'

'Well, it was this way. He was staying down at our house in Derbyshire, which was subsequently sold, for my grandfather had made him a sort of agent there after his wife's death, and he would be there for months together. Next to our place was a property belonging to some people called Houldsworth, and at this time, twenty-two or twenty-three years ago, young Houldsworth (his name was George) had only

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just come into it, having had a long minority like me. Uncle Francis used to be awfully good to him, and two years before he had got him out of a scrape by advancing to him a large sum of money. It was his own, and it was this loan which had crippled him so much on his wife's death. The arrangement had been that it should be repaid immediately George Houldsworth came of age. Well, Houldsworth was not able to do this at once, for his affairs were all upside down, and he asked for, and received, a renewal of it. For security he gave Uncle Francis the reversion of his life insurance policy.'

Again Harry's voice sank to near a whisper.

'Two days after this arrangement had been made young Houldsworth and Uncle Francis were pottering about the hedgerows alone, just with a dog, to get a rabbit or two, or anything that came in their way, and, getting over a fence, Houldsworth's gun went off, killing him instantly. Think how awful!'

'Why people will get over fences without taking their cartridges out is more than I could ever imagine,' said Geoffrey; 'but they will continue to do so till the end of time. I beg pardon.'

'Well, here comes the most terrible part of the whole affair,' went on the other. 'There was an inquest, and though my uncle was scarcely fit to attend, for he says he was almost off his head with so dreadful a thing happening, he had to go. He gave his account of the matter, and said that he himself was nearly hit by some of the shot. That, he tells me, was his impression, but he is willing to believe that it was not so, for, as he says, your imagination may run riot at so ghastly a time. But it was a most unfortunate thing to have said, for it seemed to be quite incompatible with the other evidence. Then, when it was known about the insurance policy, horrible sinister rumours began to creep about. He was closely questioned as to whether he knew for what purpose young Houldsworth wanted the money he advanced him, and he would not say. Neither would he tell me, but I understand

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that there was something disgraceful—blackmail, I suppose. He had an awful scene with Mrs. Houldsworth, George's mother. His friends, of course, scouted the idea of such a possibility as was being hinted at, but others, acquaintances, cooled towards him, though not exactly believing what was in the air; others cut him direct. It was only the medical evidence at the inquest, which showed 'that the injury of which Houldsworth died could easily have been inflicted by himself, that saved my uncle, in all probability, from being brought to trial. He said to me that it would have been better if he had, for then he would have been completely cleared, whereas now the matter will never be reopened.'

'What an awful story!' said Geoffrey.

'Yes; and that was not the end of his trouble. Ten years ago he had to declare bankruptcy, and my father gave him an annuity. But since his death it has not been paid. I never knew anything about it, and he would not allow that I should be told, and he has lived in horrible *pensions* abroad. That seems to me such extraordinary delicacy, not letting me know. I never found out till I came of age.'

'You have continued it?'

'Of course. I hope, also, he will live with me for the main part. I have offered him a couple of permanent rooms at Vail, for he would not come to London. Oh, Geoffrey, it was the most pitiful story! And to think of him, bright, cheery, as we saw him down there, and know what an appalling load of misery he has supported so long! Now it seems to me to be a brave man's part to bear misfortune calmly, without whimpering, but one would think it required a courage of a superhuman kind to be able to remain sociable, cheerful—merry even. But oh! how bitter he is when he shows one all his thoughts! He warned me to rely on nobody. He said there was not a man in the world, even less a woman, who would stick to you if you were in trouble. Trouble comes, they are vanished like melting snow, a heap of dirt is left behind. Then he suddenly burst into tears, and told me to

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forget all he had said, for he had given me the outpourings of a disappointed, soured man. I was young. Let me trust everyone as long as I could; let me make friends right and left, only, if trouble came, and they fell away, then, if I could find consolation therein, I might remember that the same thing had happened to others also.'

Geoffrey was staring absently into the fire; his cigarette had gone out, and his whisky was untasted.

'By Gad!' he said. 'Poor old beggar!'

And Harry, knowing that the British youth does not express sympathy in verbose paragraphs, or show his emotion by ejaculatory cries, was satisfied that the story had touched his friend.

Day by day, and week by week, Harry moved more at his ease in the world of people, of whom hitherto he had known so little. The wall of the castle which he had erected round himself, compacted by his own diffidence and a certain *hauteur* of disposition, fell like the fortifications of Jericho at the blast of the trumpet, and it was a young man, pleasant in body and mind, pleased with little, but much anxious to please, that came forth. His dinner invitation to some new house would be speedily endorsed by the greater intimacy of a Saturday till Monday, and the days were few on which he sat down to a cover for one in Cavendish Square.

Among these more particular friends with whom previous acquaintance soon ripened into intimacy, Lady Oxted, an old friend of Harry's father, stood pre-eminent. He soon became *ami de la maison*, dropping in as he chose, well knowing he was welcome, and such a footing, speedily and unquestionably gained, was to one of a life previously so recluse a pleasure new and altogether delightful; for Lady Oxted had the power of creating the atmosphere of home, and home was one of those excellent things which Harry had hitherto lacked. He had not consciously missed it, because he had never yet known it; but his gradual understanding of it made him see how large an empty room there had been in his heart. To come

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uninvited, and to linger unconscionably long, to say firmly that he must be going, and yet to linger, he found to be an index to certain domestic and comfortable joys of life not lightly to be placed low in that delightful miscellany. His nature from his very youth was not yet enough formed to be labelled by so harsh an epithet as austere ; but hitherto he had not known the quiet monotonies which can be the cause of so much uneventful happiness. Even for those whose bulk of enjoyment is flavoured with the thrill of adventure and the frothier joys of living, who most need excitement and crave for stimulus, there yet are times for the unbending of the bow, when the child within them cries out for mere toys and companionship, and the soul longs to sit by the meditative fire rather than to do battle with winds and stern events. And Harry was not one of those who need home least ; simply he had been frozen, but now for the first time the genial warmth of living began to touch him ; he was like a plant put in some sunned and watered place, and its appropriate buds began to appear in this time of the singing bird. Here, too, he met romance with tremulous mouth and the things of which poets have sung.

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CHAPTER V

A POINT IN CASUISTRY

ONE evening towards the end of June Lady Oxted was driving home from Victoria Station, where she had gone to meet the arrival of the Continental express. By her side sat a girl of little more than twenty, who, to judge by the eager, questioning glances which she cast at that inimitable kaleidoscope of life as seen in the London streets, must probably have been deprived of this admirable spectacle for some time; for her gaze was quickened to an interest not habitual to Londoners, however deep is their devotion to the town of towns. The streets were at their fullest in this height of the season and the summer, and the time of day being about half-past five, the landau could make but a leisurely progress through the glittering show. The girl's cheek was flushed with the warm, healthy tinge which is the prerogative of those who prefer the air as God made it to the foul gases which men shut up in their houses; and as they drove she poured out a rapid series of questions and comments to Lady Oxted.

'Oh, I just love this stuffy old London!' she said. 'But what have they done with the Duke of Wellington on his horse? The corner looks quite strange without it. Oh, there's a policeman keeping everybody back! Do you think it's the Queen? I hope it is. Why, it's only a little fat man with a beard in a brougham. Who is he, Aunt Violet, and why aren't we as good as he? Just fancy, it is three years since I have been in London—that's not grammar, is it?—and I had the greatest difficulty in making mother let me come; indeed, if it hadn't been for your letter saying that you would have me to stay with you, I never should have come. And then the difficulties

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about the time I should stop! It wasn't worth while going for a month, and two months was too long, so I made it three.'

'Well, it is delightful to have you, anyhow, dear Evie,' said Lady Oxted. 'And it really was time you should see London again. Your mother is well?'

'Very; as well as I am, and that means a lot. But she won't come to England, Aunt Violet, except for that one day every year, and I am beginning to think she never will now. It is twenty-one, nearly twenty-two, years ago that she settled at Santa Margarita—the year I was born.'

'Yes, dear, yes,' said Lady Oxted a little hurriedly, and she would seemingly have gone on to speak of something else, but the girl interrupted her.

'You know her reason, of course, Aunt Violet?' she said quietly, but with a certain firm resolve to speak. 'No, let me go on. She told me about it the other day only. Of course, poor George's death must have been terrible for her; but it is awful, it is awful, I think, to take it in the way she does. She still thinks that he died by no accident, but that he was intentionally shot by some man with whom he was out shooting. I asked her what his name was, but she would not tell me. And for all this time, once a year on the day of George's death, she comes to England, puts red flowers on his grave, and returns. Oh, it is awful!'

Lady Oxted did not reply at once.

'She still thinks so about it?' she asked at length.

'Yes, she told me herself. But I hope, perhaps, that her refusing to tell me the man's name—I asked only the evening before I left—may mean that she is beginning to wish to forget it. She wished, at any rate, that I should not know. Do you think it may be so?'

'I can't tell, Evie. Your mother——' and she stopped.

'Yes?'

'Only this: Your mother is hard to get at, inaccessible. It is almost impossible to know what she feels on subjects about which she feels deeply. I once tried to talk to her

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about it, but she would not. She heard what I had to say, but that was all.'

The girl assented, then paused a moment.

'Poor mother! what an awful year for her!' she said. 'She had only married my father, you know, a few months before George's death, and before the year was out George, her only son, was dead, and she was left twice a widow, and childless. I was not born for six months after my father's death. How strange never to have seen one's father!'

They drove in silence for a space. Then the girl said suddenly:

'Aunt Violet, promise me that you will never tell me the name of the man who was out shooting with George. You see, my mother would not tell me when I asked her; surely that means she wishes that I should not know.'

Lady Oxted felt herself for the moment in great perplexity. She had the rational habit, now growing rare, of thinking what she was saying, and meaning something by what she said, and as her answer was conceivably a matter of some importance, she paused, thinking intently.

'I am not sure that I had better promise you that,' she said at last.

Evie looked surprised.

'Why not?' she asked.

'I can't quite tell you,' she said. 'Give me time, dear. I will either make you the promise you ask, or tell you why I do not make it, this evening. In the meantime, Evie, I ask you as a favour to avoid thinking about it as far as you are able. Ah! here we are.'

Indeed, the sight of Grosvenor Square was very welcome to Lady Oxted, for just now she had no clearness of mind on the question which the girl had put to her, but very great clearness as to the fact that there were delicate though remote issues possibly at stake. Here was she with a three months' charge of Evie Aylwin, the half-sister of poor George Houldsworth, daughter of his mother, whose attitude towards Mr. Francis

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admitted of no dubiety, while the most constant visitor at her house was the nephew of the man to whom so terrible a suspicion attached. That the two should not meet verged on impossibilities, and was it fair either to one or the other that they should run the ordinary chances of an attractive girl and a handsome boy together without knowing in what curious and sombre prenatal ordination of fate they were cast? It would be like indicating summer rain in hard lines of ink to say that Lady Oxted expected them to fall in love with each other, but among the possibilities such a contingency could not be reckoned very remote or unlikely. Probable, the most hardened matchmaker could not call it, but where was the celibate who would say it was impossible? The sudden, unexpected demand of the girl, 'Promise me you will never tell me his name,' had been, unknown to her, a request which presupposed the solution of a problem of a most complicated kind. Lady Oxted, it is true, had asked for time, already, she was afraid, unwisely; that, however, was done, and she had until the evening the power of making or refusing to make that promise. If she made it, she shouldered herself with the responsibility of countenancing the free intercourse of the two, the mutual attraction to which it might easily give rise, and of seeing it pursue its course to its possible evolution in love and marriage. The girl was staying with her; Harry Vail was so assiduous in his presence that he could scarcely be called a visitor. Both were supremely eligible. It was clearly idle to overlook the possibility. Given that these things occurred, she foresaw a moment, possibly very unpleasant, and certainly to be laid to her door, when Mrs. Aylwin heard of the engagement of her daughter to the man on whose name, in her mind, rested the stain of so intimate a bloodguiltiness.

But this unwelcome conclusion brought with it a sudden reaction of hopefulness. Evie Aylwin had asked her mother the name of George's companion on that fatal morning, and had been denied the information. Did not that argue a loophole of encouraging amplitude? Surely to the weaving feminine

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mind it meant that the mother, though, perhaps, neither repenting nor regretting the black influence which this suspicion, founded or unfounded, had had on herself, yet wished her daughter to move in absolute freedom, avoiding none, open to all, to conduct her life with perfect liberty, not knowing, more, being prevented by her own mother from knowing, anything with definite label of that tragic affair. Else, how was it conceivable that she should not have said those two words 'Francis Vail'? Mrs. Aylwin, so reasoned this acute lady, must have known—for who did not know?—the strange, solitary history of the last and the head of the house, and was not her refusal to mention the uncle's name a silent recognition, if rightly interpreted, that the two might meet?

The thought was a pleasant one, for she was much attached to both Harry and the girl, and for a moment she let her fancy build a fantastic dome in the air. If Mrs. Aylwin had recognised this—and the inference was not unreasonable—did not the recognition imply a hope, though of the faintest and most unformulated, that now she saw her long, bitter suspicion to have been a mistake? Then her silence would amount even to a wish that the two might meet, and that one of her blood might in the remote possibilities wipe away by her union that of her blood which had been shed.

To take the other side, if she did not make this promise, she had to refuse, with what softenings and limitations you will, to bind herself. In case, then, of what event, to meet what contingency, would she make the reservation? Under what circumstances, that is to say, did she desire to leave herself free? Clearly in case of the possible happening, of the two falling under the spell of each other. But in that case (clearly also, she was afraid) it would be far better to tell the girl now, at once, and save her the greater shock. To hear the name Vail now, this moment, would be nothing to her; to hear the name Vail in its more sinister connection, when already it had a vital sound to her ear, was a pang that might be saved her now, but not hereafter.

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Again, still dealing with these remote possibilities, in which connection alone her decision had any significance, was it conceivably fair to Harry to reveal, though in the most intimate way and the most pain-sparing words, the stain that hung over his name? Long ago Lady Oxted had settled with herself that the affair was dead and buried. At the time, even, it had been no more than an unproven and dark suspicion, though endowed with all the mysterious vitality of evil; but was she, of all women, who held that to repeat an evil tale is only one degree removed from inventing it, to stir for any purpose that coiled worm of suspicion? The thought was an abhorrence to her, and Evie's mother, it seemed, in her own dealings with her own child, had endorsed her unwillingness. But it was certain that if the name had to be told it must be told now, for supposing the two remained strangers to intimacy, there would be no greater harm done now than afterwards; but if intimacy was otherwise to be, it was better to kill it in the womb than to let it live and destroy it afterwards.

A third alternative remained, to write to Mrs. Aylwin, saying quite simply that Harry Vale was an intimate friend of hers, that he was attractive, and of unblemished character and reputation—so much she was bound to say for the young man's sake—and what did the mother want done? But such a letter, she felt, would be a thing to blush over, even when alone. How demented a matchmaker she would appear!

Back swung the balance. She was in the position of mother to the girl, and the mother, out of her own mouth, had desired that she should not know the name. That desire had reached Lady Oxted casually, not knowing to whom it journeyed, but it had arrived, and she was bound to respect it. The promise was as good as made.

Evie had gone to her room after tea, and these various fences faced Lady Oxted on all sides till the ringing of the dressing-bell. But that sound suggested the dinner-table to her, and at the thought of the dinner-table she suddenly felt the conclusions wrested from her, for she remembered for the

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first time that Harry dined with them that night. And though she did not expect that, on entering the drawing-room, he would immediately throw himself on his knees at Evie's feet, it seemed to her that, as a controlling power, she was put on the shelf—that the issues of things were in younger and stronger hands than hers.

She found a letter or two for her in the hall, and taking these in her hand, she went upstairs.

'The Luck of the Vails,' she said to herself, and the phrase shaped itself to her steps—a step to a syllable.

Still with her letters in her hand, she looked in at Evie's room, and finding her 'betwixt and between,' went on to her own, and as her maid did her hair she opened the letters. The first was from Harry.

'The greatest luck,' it ran. 'The Grimstons have influenza in the house, and have put me off. So I can and will and shall come to you for Sunday at Oxted. I shall see you this evening, but I can't resist writing this.'

'Kismet,' murmured Lady Oxted, 'or something very like it.'

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CHAPTER VI

THE MEETING

DINNER was over, and of Lady Oxted's party there only remained by eleven o'clock a couple of her guests. There was a ball at one house, an evening party at another, a concert at a third, and each claimed its grilling quota, leaving even at this hour only Harry Vail and Geoffrey Langham. Lord Oxted, as was his wont, had retired to his study as soon as his duties as host would admit without positively violating decency, but the two young men still lingered, making an intimate party.

During the last few months Harry had continued to so expand that it would have been difficult to recognise in him the hero of that recluse coming-of-age party but half a year ago. But this change was the result of no violent revolution; his nature had in no way been wrested from its normal development—merely that development had been long retarded, and was now proportionately rapid. For years his solitary home had ringed him with frost, the want of kindly fireside interests had led him on the path that conducts to the great unexplored deserts of the recluse, but the impulse given, the plunge into the world taken, he had thriven and grown with marvellous alacrity. Indeed, the stunted habit of his teens remained in him now only as shown in a certain impression he produced of holding himself still somewhat in reserve, in a disposition, notable in an age which loves to expose its internal organism to the gaze of sympathizing friends, to be his own master, to retain if he wished a privacy of his own, and to guard, as a sacred trust, his right to his own opinion in matters which concerned himself.

Lady Oxted, however, on this as on many other occasions,

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felt herself obliged to find fault with him, and the presence of her niece, it would appear, did not impose bounds on her candour.

'You are getting lazy and self-contented, Harry,' she remarked on this particular evening. 'You are here in London professing to lead the life of the people with whom you associate, and you are shirking it.'

Harry looked up with mild wonder at this assault, and drew his chair a little closer up to the half-circle they made round the open window, for the night was stifling, and the candles had drooped during fish.

'I never professed anything of the kind,' he said, 'and I don't yet understand in the slightest degree what you mean. But no doubt I soon shall.'

'I will try to make it plain to you,' said Lady Oxted. 'You have chosen to come to London and lead the silly, frivolous life we all lead. That, to begin with, is ridiculous of you. There is no need for you to be in London, and why any fairly intelligent young man ever is, unless he has business which takes him there, passes my understanding. You might be down at Vail looking after your property, or you might be travelling.'

'I still don't understand about my professing to lead the life of the people among whom I move,' said Harry.

'I am coming to that. You have chosen to spend these three months in London without any better reason for it than that everybody else does so. That being so, you ought to behave like everybody else. For instance, when Mrs. Morris wanted to take you to her sister's dance to-night, you ought to have gone; also Lady Wraysbury asked you to go to the concert at the Hamiltons'. Again you refused.'

'She wanted you to come, too,' said Harry; 'at least, she asked you,' he added, getting in a back-hander.

'I'm an old woman, and I choose to sit by my own fire.'

'Won't you have it lit?' asked Harry. 'And I chose to sit there too. But I will go away if you like.'

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'And will you go to the dance?'

'No, nor to the concert. If I go away, I shall go to bed.'

'You speak as if you were all six Great Powers sending an ultimatum to Heligoland,' said Lady Oxted.

'Not in the least; if you send me away, I shall go.'

Lady Oxted laughed.

'Heligoland replies that the six Great Powers may wait ten minutes,' she said.

Harry turned to Evie Aylwin.

'Yes, I feel just as you do,' he said eagerly, reverting at once to the conversation which had been interrupted by Lady Oxted's strictures. 'I love the sense of being in the middle of millions of people, all of whom, just like you and me, have their own private paradise and joy of life, which the world probably never guesses.'

Evie looked at him quickly.

'Have you a private joy, Lord Vail?' she asked. 'Do tell me what it is. A thing that is private is always interesting.'

Harry laughed.

'It is called "the Luck,"' he said—'"the Luck of the Vails."'

'Are you really beginning to believe in that nonsense, Harry?' asked Lady Oxted.

'I have begun,' said he.

'Oh, Aunt Violet, how horrid you are!' cried Evie. 'Do let Lord Vail tell me about it. It is private; I am dying to know.'

'Shall I? I will make it short, then,' said Harry, 'for Lady Oxted's sake.'

'I would rather that you made it long for mine,' said the girl; 'but that is as you please.'

Lady Oxted gave a loud and quite voluntary sigh.

'Poor dear Harry!' she said. 'Geoffrey, let us talk about something extremely tangible the while. You are on the Stock Exchange. Speak to me of backwardation and contango; that may counteract the weakening effect of Harry's nonsense. Are you a Bear?'

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Harry smiled, and drew his chair closer to the girl's. 'I will talk low,' he said, 'so that we shall not offend Lady Oxted, and you must promise to stop me if you get bored. Anyhow, you brought it on yourself, for you asked me about my private joy. This is it.'

Blue eyes, deepened by the shaded light to violet, looked into his as he began his tale; into hers looked brown eyes, which seemed black. He told her of the ancient history of the cup, and she listened with interest to a story that might have claimed attention even from a stranger. Then he came to his own finding of it in an attic upon a winter's day; to the three accidents to himself, each trivial, which had followed the finding; and her eyes, which up till now had been at one time on his, at another had strayed with a certain consciousness and purpose (for he never looked elsewhere than at hers) now this way, now that, had superintended the disentangling of a piece of lace which had caught in her bracelet, or had guided her finger as it traced the intricate ivory of her fan-handle, became absorbed. They saw only Harry's big dark eyes, or at their widest circuit his parted lips from which the words came. Her own mouth, thin, finely-lipped, drooped a little at the centre with interest and expectation, and the even line of teeth showed in the red, a band of ivory set in pomegranate. Once she impatiently swept back a tress of hair which drooped over her ear, but the playing of her fingers with her fan had become unconscious, and her eyes no longer followed them. And it would seem that Harry had forgotten his promise to make the story short for Lady Oxted's sake, and had rather acceded silently to the girl's request to make it long for hers, for the startling revelations about backwardations and Bears had long languished before the tale was done.

At last Harry's voice stopped, and there was silence a moment, though each still looked at the other. Then Evie gave a little sharp involuntary sigh, and her eyebrows met in a frown.

'Throw it away, Lord Vail,' she said sharply, 'throw it away

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at once, when it will be lost, lost. It is a terrible thing. And yet, and yet, how can one believe it? The thing is gold and gems, that is all. Ah, how I should like to see it! It must be magnificent, this Luck of yours. All the same, it is terrible. How can it be your private joy?'

Harry rose. If he was not earnest, it was an admirable counterfeit.

'Do you not see?' he said. '"Fear both fire and frost and rain," runs the rhyme. But think what the cup is called: it is the Luck of the Vails, and the Vails are—well, they are I and my uncle. Ah, I forgot one thing. Only two days ago my uncle found the key to its case. It was locked when I found it, and had to be broken open. Well, I fell into the fire, I caught a chill in the rain, I sprained my ankle owing to the frost. I have paid the penalties of the Luck. Now, don't you see, I am waiting for the luck itself. Indeed, perhaps it has begun,' he added.

'How so?' asked the girl, with security, for she knew he was not the kind of man to pay inane compliments.

'Since I found it I have begun to become human,' he said gravely. 'Indeed, six months ago I had no friend in the world except Geoffrey.'

'What's that about me?' asked Geoffrey, who was playing picquet with Lady Oxted.

'I was only saying you weren't such a brute as you appeared,' said Harry, without looking round. 'I'm a true friend, Geoff.' Then, dropping his voice again: 'Then, on the finding of the Luck, I became—oh, I don't know what I became—what I am, anyhow.' He leaned back again in his chair, blushing a little at his own unpremeditated burst of egotism. 'Of course, soberly, and in the light of nine a.m. earnestness, I don't believe in it,' he continued; 'but my having those three little accidents was a very curious coincidence, following as they did on the heels of my finding the Luck. Anyhow, it pleases me to think that there may be one coincidence more—that those three little bits of bad luck will be followed by a piece of very

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good luck. That is my private joy—the thought of some great good thing happening to me. And then, oh then, won't I just take the Luck and stamp on it, and throw the rent pieces to the four winds of heaven !'

There was a moment's silence as his voice, slightly raised, gave out the blindly-spoken words, which had yet a certain ring of truth about them. But as soon as they were spoken Evie's mood changed.

'Oh, you mustn't !' she cried. 'You could not bring yourself to destroy such a lovely thing. Those stars of emeralds, those clear-set diamond handles ! Oh, it makes my mouth water to think of them ! I love jewels !'

Lady Oxted at this point was deep in the heavily-swollen waters of Rubicon, and her tone was of ill-suppressed acidity.

'Is the nursery-rhyme nearly finished ?' she asked.

Harry advanced to her and held out his hand.

'Make it up, Lady Oxted,' he said. 'My fault entirely.'

Evie followed him.

'Dear Aunt Violet,' she said, 'shake hands with Lord Vail this moment. He has given me the most exciting half-hour, and you may die in the night, and then you'll be sorry you spoke unkindly to him. And now we'll talk about liquidation as much as you please. Oh, you are playing picquet ! Really, Lord Vail, your story was one of the most interesting I have ever heard. You see, it isn't over yet ; you still have the Luck. That makes all the difference. One is never told a ghost-story till the house is pulled down, or all the people who have seen the ghost are in lunatic asylums. But your story is now only at the beginning. Upon my word, I can't make up my mind what you ought to do with the Luck. But I'll tell you some day, when I feel certain. Oh, I shall never feel certain !' she cried. 'You must act as you please.'

'I have your leave ?' he said, quite gravely and naturally.

'Yes.'

At that again their eyes met, but though they had looked at each other so long and so steadily on this first evening of their

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acquaintance, on this occasion neither of them prolonged the glance.

Presently after the two young men left and strolled back to Geoffrey's rooms in Orchard Street, on the way to Cavendish Square. Both were of the leisurely turn of mind that delights in observation, and makes no use whatever of that which it has observed, and scorning the paltry saving of time and shoe-leather to be secured by a cab, they went on foot, through the night bright with lamps of carriages and jingling with bells of hansoms.

'Well, I've had an awfully nice evening,' said Harry. 'Extra nice, I mean, though it is always jolly at the Oxteds'.'

'I thought you were enjoying yourself,' said the other, 'when you refused to go to the concert, for which, as you remember, only this afternoon you were wishing for an invitation. Afterwards, also, I thought you were enjoying yourself.'

'Oh, for God's sake, don't try to be sly!' exclaimed Harry. 'I wished I was a better hand at telling a story. But, all the same, I think it didn't bore Miss Aylwin. After all, the Luck is a very curious thing,' he added.

'You are going to Oxted for the Sunday, are you not?' asked Geoffrey.

'Yes; the Grimstons have the flue in the house, bless them! And you go home, don't you? Oh, I never saw such wonderful eyes in my life!' he cried.

'You are alluding to mine, apparently?' said Geoffrey.

'Yes, of course I am. Deep violet by candlelight, and soft, somehow, like velvet.'

'Very handsome of you. I'll look to-night when I go to bed. My hair, too, soft and fluffy, and the colour of the sun shining through a mist.'

Harry laughed.

'The habit of being funny is growing on you, Geoff,' he said. 'Take it in time, old chap, and see some good man about it. Oh, it's no good going to bed now; let's go to

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the Club; it's only just down Park Lane. I'm not feeling like bed just yet.'

Meantime, at the house they had just left, Evie had gone up to bed, leaving Lady Oxted to do what she called 'write two notes,' a simple diplomatic method of stating that she did not herself mean to come upstairs immediately. These written, she announced, she would come to talk for five minutes, and they would take, perhaps, a quarter of an hour to write. In other words, as soon as Evie had gone, she went downstairs to seek her husband in his room, where she would be sure to find him sitting by a green reading-lamp, in mild exasperation at anything which the Government might happen to have done with regard either to a kindly old President of a South African Republic or the second standard for Board Schools.

'Violet, it is really too bad!' said he, as she entered. 'Have you read the Home Secretary's speech at Manchester? He says—— Let me see; where is it?'

'Dear Bob,' said his wife, 'whatever he said, you would quite certainly disagree with it. But never mind showing it me this minute. I want your advice about another matter.'

A faint smile came over Lord Oxted's thin, sharp face. He usually smiled when his wife came to him for advice. He put down his paper and crossed one leg over the other.

'What sort of advice?' he asked. 'Be far more explicit before you consult me. Do you want to tell me of some decision you have made, and wish me to agree with you, or is it possible that you have not yet made your decision? It is as well to know, Violet, and it may save me from misunderstanding you.'

Lady Oxted laughed.

'I am not yet sure which it is,' she said. 'Let me tell you my story, and by that time, you see, I may have made up my mind; in which case I shall want the first sort of advice, but if I have not, the second.'

'That sounds fair,' he assented.

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In a few words she told him all that had passed between her and Evie.

'And now,' she concluded, 'am I to promise or not?'

Lord Oxted was a cynic in a certain mild and kindly fashion.

'Certainly promise,' he said. 'And, being a woman, you will probably, at the very back of your mind—the very back, I say—reserve to yourself the right to break it if it becomes inconvenient to keep it.'

'Don't be rude, Bob. I think I shall promise, but at the same time write to Mrs. Aylwin.'

Her husband chuckled quietly.

'That is precisely what I meant,' he said, 'only I did not put the reservation quite so far forward in your mind. Did the two young people get on well together?'

'Too well. Harry has developed an amazing knack of getting on well with people. And he is coming to us for the Sunday.'

'Then most likely you are already too late. You should have thought of these things before, Violet. Your afterthoughts, it is true, are often admirable, but, so to speak, they never catch the train. Bear this also in mind: if anything happens—if the two get engaged, we shall be liable at any moment to a crushing descent from Mrs. Aylwin. If she comes, I go. That is all.'

'But she is charming.'

'And completely overpowering. I will not be made to feel like a child in my own house. Dear me, you have probably got into a mess, Violet. Good-night, dear.'

'You agree with me, then?' she asked.

'Completely, entirely, fervently. For it is clear to me that you want the first sort of advice.'

Lady Oxted went slowly upstairs and to Evie's room. Her maid had already left her, and the two settled themselves down for a talk. The night was hot, and Evie, in a white dressing-gown, with a touch of blue ribbon, lounged coolly by the open

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window. The hum of ambient London came up to them like the sound of drowsy innumerable bees, and the girl listened in a sort of ecstasy.

'Hark! hark!' she cried; 'hundreds, and thousands, and millions of people are there! Lord Vail felt just as I do about it. Oh, what a host of pleasant things there are in the world!' she cried, stretching out her arms as if to take the whole swarming town to her breast. Then she turned quickly away into the room again. 'Now, dear aunt,' she said, 'before we settle down to talk—and I have lots to say—let me know that one thing. Do you promise never to tell me the name of that man?'

Lady Oxted did not pause.

'Yes, I promise,' she said.

'Thank you. So that is all right. It would be dreadful, would it not, if I had been obliged to be afraid that every particularly delightful person that I met was the son or the nephew, or the cousin of that man, or even the man himself! But now that is all right. Mother would not tell me, and you, knowing her wish—is it not so?—also will not. Oh, Aunt Violet, I intend to enjoy myself so! What a jolly world it is, to be sure! I am so glad God thought of it! Is that profane? No, I think not.'

Lady Oxted, it has been said, had anticipated one unpleasant moment. This, she considered, made two. And though it was not her habit to question the decrees of Providence, she wondered what she had done to deserve a position where the converse of candour was so sorely in demand. But she had not much time for thought, for Evie continued:

'Only one evening gone,' she said, 'and that not yet gone, and what pleasure I have already had! Aunt Violet, how could you want Lord Vail not to tell me the story of the Luck? It was the most exciting thing I have ever heard, and, as I told him, he is only at the beginning of it. Italy, the south, is supposed to be the home of romance, but I do not find it there. Then I come to England, and in London, in Grosvenor Square,

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I hear, within an hour or two of my arrival, that story. I think——' She stopped suddenly, got up, and sat down on the sofa by Lady Oxted.

'Lord Vail, who is he?' she asked. 'What pleasant people you have at your house, Aunt Violet! He is so nice. So is his friend Mr. Langton, is he not? So was the man who took me in to dinner. What was his name? I did not catch it.'

There was not much comfort here. The girl had forgotten or not heard the name of the man who took her in to dinner; she had got Geoffrey Langham's name wrong, and out of all these 'nice people' there was only one name right.

'Langham, dear; not Langton,' said Lady Oxted. 'And the man who took you in to dinner was Mr. Tresham. Surely you must have heard his name. He is in the Cabinet. Really, Evie, you do not appreciate the fine people I provide for your entertainment.'

The girl laughed lazily, but with intense enjoyment.

'Not appreciate?' she said. 'Words fail me to tell you how I appreciate them all. Mr. Tresham was simply delightful. We talked about dachshunds, which I love; and what else? Oh, diamonds. I love them also. Aunt Violet, I should like to see the Luck; it must be a wonderful thing. So Mr. Tresham is a Conservative?'

'It is supposed so,' said Lady Oxted, with slight asperity. 'When the Conservatives are in power, dear, the Cabinet is rarely composed of Liberals.'

The girl laughed again.

'Dear Aunt Violet, you are a little hard on us poor innocents this evening. You blew up Lord Vail in the most savage manner, and now you are blowing me up. What have we done? Well, now tell me about Mr. Langham.'

'Geoffrey is a younger son of Lord Langham,' said the other. 'He is on the Stock Exchange, and is supposed to know nothing whatever about stock-broking.'

'How very good-looking he is!' said Evie. 'If I wanted to exchange stock, I should certainly ask him to do it for me.

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Somehow, people with nice faces inspire me with much more confidence than those whom I am assured have beautiful minds. One can see their faces—that makes so much difference.'

Lady Oxted assented, and waited with absolute certainty for the next question. This tribute to Geoffrey's good looks did not deceive her for a moment: it was a typical transparency. And when the next question came she only just checked herself from saying, 'I thought so.'

'And now tell me about Lord Vail,' said Evie, after a pause.

'Well, he seemed to be telling you a good deal himself,' said Lady Oxted. 'What can I add? He is not yet twenty-two, he is considered pleasant, he is poor, he is the head of what was once a great family.'

'But his people?' asked Evie.

'He has no father, no mother, no brothers or sisters.'

'Poor fellow!' said Evie thoughtfully. 'But he doesn't look like a person who need be lonely, or who was lonely, for that matter. Has he no relations?'

'Of his name only one,' said Lady Oxted, feeling that Providence was really treating her with coarse brutality, 'that is his uncle—his great-uncle, rather—Francis Vail,' and as she spoke she thought to herself in how widely different a connection she might have had to use those two words.

'Do you know him?'

'I used to, but never intimately. He has not lived in the world lately. For the last six months he has been down at Harry's place in Wiltshire. The boy has been exceedingly good to him.'

'Is he fond of him?'

'Very, I believe,' said Lady Oxted. 'He often speaks of him, and always with affection and a tenderness that is rather touching.'

'That is nice of him,' said the girl with decision, 'for I suppose he cannot be expected to have much in common with him. And so the old man lives with him. He is old, I suppose, as he is Lord Vail's great-uncle?'

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'He is over seventy,' said Lady Oxted, turning her back to the storm.

'And Harry Vail is poor, you say?'

'Considering what the Vails have been, very poor,' said Lady Oxted. 'But you probably know as much about that as I, since Harry took so very long telling you the story of the Luck. It was lost once in the reign of Queen Anne, and during the South Sea Bubble.'

'Yes, he told me about that,' said Evie. 'It is strange, is it not?'

Suddenly she sat up as if with an effort.

'Oh, to-morrow and to-morrow, and lots more of them!' she cried. 'Tell me what we shall do to-morrow, Aunt Violet. I am sure it will all be delightful, and for that very reason I want to think about it beforehand. I am a glutton about pleasure. Will you take me somewhere in the morning, and will delightful people come to lunch? Then in the afternoon we go to Oxted, do we not? I love the English country. Who will be coming? Is it a beautiful place? What is the house like? Tell me all about everything.'

'Including about going to bed and going to sleep, Evie?' asked the other. 'It is long after twelve; do you know?'

'And you want to go to bed,' she said. 'I am so sorry, Aunt Violet. I ought to have seen you were tired. You look tired.'

'And you, don't you want to go to sleep? You were travelling all last night.'

The girl looked at the smooth pillow, and sheet folded back.

'Ah, it does look nice,' she said. 'But indeed I don't feel either sleepy or tired. Anyhow, Aunt Violet, I am not going to keep you up. Oh, I am so glad you got mother to let me come and stay with you! I shall have a good time. Good-night.'

'Good-night, dear. You have everything?'

'Everything. More than everything.'

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CHAPTER VII

THE POINT IN CASUISTRY SOLVES ITSELF

LADY OXTED always breakfasted in her own room, and before she appeared next morning she had spent a long hour in wrestling over her letter to Mrs. Aylwin. She had been desirous to tell the unvarnished truth and yet to steer clear of a production by a demented matchmaker, and her letter, it must be confessed, was an admirable performance. Evie had told her, so she wrote, of her mother's refusal to let her know the name of the man at whose door she laid, or used to lay, her son's death, and taking this to mean that Mrs. Aylwin, for any reason, did not wish Evie to know it, the writer had, at Evie's request, promised on her own part not to tell her. The present Lord Vail, she must add, Mr. Francis' nephew, was a constant visitor at her house, and he and Evie had already met. Mrs. Aylwin, she was bound to understand, put no prohibition on their meeting in the way they were sure to meet during the season. Lord Vail was a young man, pleasant, attractive, and of excellent disposition.

Lady Oxted laid down her pen for a moment at this point, then hurriedly took it up to add an amiable doxology and sign it. She felt convinced she could not do better—convinced also that if she gave the matter further consideration, it would end in her doing much worse. Then she took Evie out with a warm and approving conscience.

That afternoon they left London, as had been originally planned, to spend the Sunday at their country house in Sussex. During the hours of the night Lady Oxted had sternly interrogated herself as to whether she ought on any lame or paltry excuse to put Harry off, but on the strength of her promise

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given to Evie, and the letter she was about to write to Mrs. Aylwin, she felt she could not take any step in the matter until she received her answer. To put him off, argued the inward voice, was to act contrary to the spirit of her promise, which entailed not only silence of the lips, but abstinence from any manœuvring or outflanking movement of this kind. This reasoning seemed sound, and as it went in harness with her instinct, she obeyed it without question.

The house stood high on a broad ridge of the South Downs, commanding long views of rolling fields alternating with the more sombre green of the woods. To the east lay the heathery heights of Ashdown Forest, peopled with clumps and companies of tall Scotch fir; southwards, the smooth austerity of the hills behind Brighton formed the horizon line. Thatched roofs nestled at cosy intervals beside the double hedgerows which indicated roads, a remote church spire pricked the sky, or an occasional streamer of smoke indicated some train burrowing distantly at the bottom of the valleys before it again plunged with a shriek into the bases of the tunnelled hills; but except for these the evidences of humanity were to be sought in vain. The house itself was partly Elizabethan, in part of Jacobean building, picturesquely chimneyed, and high in the pitch of its outside roofs; inside it was panelled and oaken-beamed, spacious of hearth, and open of fireplace. Round it ran level lawns, fringed with flower-beds, wall-encompassed, which, as they receded further from the house, gradually lost formality, and merged by imperceptible steps into untutored nature. Here, for instance, you would pass from the trim velvet of the nearer lawns into the thick lush grass of an orchard planted with apples and the Japanese cherry, but the grass was thick in spring with the yellow of the classical daffodil, the scarlet of the anemone was spilled thereon, and the dappled heads of the fritillary rose bell-shaped. Here, again, in a different direction, the lawn further from the house was invaded by a band of lilac-bushes, and, to the wanderer here, a Scotch fir would suddenly stand

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sentinel at a turn of the grassy path; while, if his walk took him but fifty yards more remote, the lilacs would have ceased, and he would be treading the brown, silent needles of the fir grove, exchanging for the sweet, haunting smell of the garden shrubs the clean odour of the pine. In a word, it was a place apt to reflect the moods of the inhabitants: the sombrely-disposed might easily see in the pines a mirror of their thoughts; the lilacs, whose smell is ever a host of memories, would call up a hundred soft images in hearts otherwise disposed; while for the lover of pointed conversation, what *milieu* could be more suitable than the formality of the lawns near the house, which, clean and trim-cut as French furniture, irresistibly gave to those who sat and talked there a certain standard of precision. Beyond, again, the orchard was every evening a singing contest of nightingales, and through the soft foliage of fruitful trees moon and stars cast deep shadows and diapers of veiled light into grassy alleys.

The party was but a small one, for influenza had for the last month been pursuing its pleasant path of decimation through London; and, as Mr. Tresham remarked while they drank their coffee in the tent on the lawn after lunch next day:

'Those of us who are not yet dead are not yet out of its clutches.'

Lady Oxted sighed.

'I had it once a week throughout last summer,' she said. 'It is a consolation when it is about to know that the oftener you have it the more liable you become to it.'

Mrs. Antrobus finished her coffee and tried to feel her pulse.

'I never can find it,' she said, 'and that is so frightening. It may have stopped for all I know.'

'Dear lady,' said Mr. Tresham, 'I will promise to tell you whether it has stopped or not, not more than a minute after it has done so, as it will then be too late!'

'Ah! there it is,' said Mrs. Antrobus at length—'one, two. It has stopped now. Take the time, Mr. Tresham, and tell me when a minute has gone.'

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'Your mother is the only really healthy person I know,' said Lady Oxted to Evie. 'Whether she is ill or not, she always believes she is perfectly well, and as long as one fully believes that, as she does, it really matters little how ill one is.'

Lord Oxted got slowly out of his chair.

'Some doctor lately analyzed a cubic inch of air in what we should call a clean London drawing-room,' he said. 'He found that it contained over two hundred bacilli, each of which, if they lived carefully and married, would, with its family, be soon able to kill the strongest man. I surrendered as soon as I heard it.'

'Quite the best thing to do,' said Mr. Tresham, 'for otherwise they would kill you. It is better to give yourself up and be taken alive.'

'It is certainly better to remain alive,' said Mrs. Antrobus. 'That is why we all go to bed when we get the influenza. We surrender, like Lord Oxted, and so the bacilli do not kill us, but only send us away to the seaside. It is the people who will not surrender who die. Personally I should never dream of going about with a high temperature; it sounds so improper.'

Evie was sitting very upright in her chair listening to this surprising conversation. She had seen Mrs. Antrobus for the first time the evening before, and had made Lady Oxted laugh by asking whether she was a little mad. It had been almost more puzzling to be told that she was not than if she had been told that she was. And at this remark about her temperature Evie suddenly looked round for a sympathizing eye. An eye there certainly was, and she felt as if, in character of a hostess, she had looked for and caught Harry Vail's. At any rate he instantly rose, she with him, and together they strolled out of the Syrian tent on the lawn, and down towards the cherry-planted orchard.

For a few paces they went in silence, each feeling as if a preconcerted signal had passed between them. Then Evie stopped.

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'I wonder if it is rude to go away!' she said. 'Do you think we ought to go back?'

'It is never any use going back,' said Harry. 'Certainly in this case it would not do. They would think'—and a sudden boldness came over him—'they would think we had quarrelled.'

Evie laughed.

'That would never do,' she said, 'for I feel just now as if you were an ally, my only one. What strange things Mrs. Antrobus says! Perhaps they are clever?'

She made the suggestion hopefully, without any touch of sarcasm.

'Most probably,' said Harry. 'That would be an excellent reason, anyhow, for my finding them quite impossible to understand!'

'Don't you understand them? Then we certainly are allies. You know, I asked my aunt last night whether she was at all mad, and she seemed surprised that I should think so. But really, when a woman says that she wishes she had been her own mother, because she would have been so much easier to manage than her daughter, what does it all mean?' she asked.

'Oh, she's not mad,' said Harry. 'It is only a way she has. There are lots of people like her. I don't mind it myself; you only have to laugh; there is no necessity for saying anything.'

'And as little opportunity,' remarked Evie.

She paused, then pulled a long piece of feathery grass from its sheath.

'England is delightful,' she said with decision. 'I find it simply delightful, from Mrs. Antrobus upwards or downwards. Just think, Lord Vail, I have not been here for three years. What has happened since then?'

'To whom?'

'To anybody. You, for example.'

'Have I not told you? I have come of age. I have found the Luck.'

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Evie threw the grass spearwise down wind. She had not exactly meant to speak so personally.

'Ah, the Luck!' she exclaimed. 'Lord Vail, do promise to show it me!'

Thereat Harry again grew bold.

'Nothing easier,' he said. 'I have to go down to Vail next week. Persuade Lady Oxted to bring you down for a day or two. The Luck is the only inducement, I am afraid—it and some big bare Wiltshire Downs.'

'Big, large, and open?' she asked.

'All that. Does it please you?'

'Immensely. I should love to come. And the Luck is there? You must know that I am horribly inquisitive—perhaps, if you were indulgent, you would say, "interested," and leave out the "horribly"—in other people's concerns. So tell me, what do you hope the Luck will bring you?'

'I don't dare to hope. I am inclined to wait a little.'

Evie frowned.

'That would be all very well for a woman,' she said, 'but it won't do for a man. It is a woman's part to sit at home and wait for the luck; but it is a man's to go and seek it.'

'I am on the look-out for it. I am always on the look-out for it,' he said.

Some shadow passed across the brightness of Evie's eyes; again the personal note had been a little too distinct in her speech, and she replied quickly:

'That is right. I should go for the highest if I were you. I think I should plot a revolution and make myself King of England—something big of that sort.'

'I had not thought of that,' said Harry, 'and I sometimes wonder—it is all nonsense, you know, about the Luck, and of course I don't really believe in it, but I sometimes wonder——'

He paused a moment.

'I wonder whether you would care to hear some more family history?' he said at length.

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'Is it as exciting as the Luck?' asked the girl.

'I don't know if you would find it so. It is certainly more tragic.'

'Do tell me,' she said.

'Promise me to exercise your right of stopping me as before.'

'I never stopped you!' she exclaimed.

Harry laughed.

'No. I meant that you had the right to,' he said. 'Do you really want to hear it? It is intimate stuff.'

'Indeed I do,' she said.

Harry paused a moment, then began his story.

'There lives at Vail,' he said, 'a man whom I honour as much as anyone in the world, my great-uncle, Francis Vail. He is old, he has led the most unhappy life, yet if you met him casually you would say he was a man who had never seen sorrow, so cheerful is he, so full of kindly spirits.'

'He is your only relation, is he not?' asked the girl.

'He is. Who told you?'

'Lady Oxted. I beg your pardon; I did not mean to interrupt.'

'He has led a life of continuous and most unmerited misfortune,' said Harry, 'and when I began just now "I wonder" I was going to say, "I wonder whether the Luck will come to him." You see, it is a family thing. He, one would think, might get the good, not I. And I honestly assure you that I should be more than delighted if he did.'

'It is about him you would tell me?' asked Evie.

'About him. I need not give you the smaller details—his unhappy marriage, his sudden poverty, his bankruptcy even, for there is one thing in his life so terrible that it seems to me to overshadow everything else.'

They had come to a garden seat at the far end of the orchard, and here Evie sat down. Harry stood beside her, one foot on the bench, looking not at her, but out over the dreamy, sleeping landscape.

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'It is nearly twenty-two years ago,' he said, 'that my uncle was staying down at an estate we used to have in Derbyshire, which has since been sold. The place next us belonged to some people called Houldsworth. What?'

An involuntary exclamation had come to Evie's lips, but she checked it before it was speech.

'Nothing,' she said quietly. 'Please go on.'

'And young Houldsworth,' continued Harry, 'who had just come of age, was great friends with my uncle, who was as kind to him as he is to all young people, as kind as he always is—and that I hope you will soon know for yourself. Well, one day the two were out shooting together——'

Evie made a sudden, quick movement.

'And George Houldsworth accidentally shot himself,' she said.

Harry paused in utter surprise.

'You know the story?' he said.

'Yes, I know it.'

'You, too!' he cried. 'Good God, the thing is past this more than twenty years, and people still talk of it! Oh, it is monstrous! So I need not tell you the rest?'

'No,' said Evie quietly. 'Your uncle was unjustly—for so I fully believe—unjustly suspected of having shot him. It is monstrous! I quite agree with you. But I am not so monstrous as you think,' she added, rather faintly.

In a moment Harry's heightened colour died from his face.

'Miss Aylwin, I did not say that!' he exclaimed earnestly. 'Forgive me if I have said anything that hurt you. But indeed I did not say that!'

Evie looked at him a moment. She knew the thing she had so much desired not to know, but the knowledge, strangely enough, did not frighten or affect her.

'No, in justice to you, I will say that you did not. But you broke out, "It is monstrous," when I told you I knew the story.'

Again the colour rose to his face, but now not vehement—only ashamed.

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'I did,' he said. 'It is quite true. I spoke violently and unjustifiably. But if you knew my poor uncle, Miss Aylwin, I do not think you would find it hard to forgive me; you would see at once why I spoke so hastily. He is the kindest and best of men, and the most soft-hearted. Think what that suspicion must have been to him, the years, so many of them and all so bitter, in which it has never been cleared up.'

'I do think,' she said softly, 'and I like you for your violence, Lord Vail. You are loyal. It is no bad thing to be loyal; but'—and she looked up at him—'but you must not think that I am a willing listener to gossip and old scandal that does not concern me.'

'I do not think that,' cried Harry. 'Indeed, I never thought that.'

His words rang out and died on the hot air, and still the girl made no answer. This way and that was her mind divided. Should she tell him all? should she tell him nothing? The latter was the easier path, for his last words had the ring of truth in them, convincing, unmistakable, and she, so to speak, was acquitted without a stain on her character did she decide not to speak. But something within her, intangible and imperative, urged other counsels. Her reason gave her no account of these, but simple instinct only called to her. What prompted that instinct, from what deep and vital source it rose, she did not pause to consider. Simply it was there, with reason warring on the other side. The battle was brief and momentous. Immediately almost she spoke.

'I am sure you never thought that,' she said; 'but I wish'—and her pulse ticked full and rapid—'I wish to prove to you how it was not through gossip that the knowledge came to me. For this is how I heard it: my mother was George Houldsworth's mother.'

Harry drew a long breath, which hung suspended in his lungs. His eyes were fixed on the eyes of the girl in a long glance of sheer astonishment, and hers were not withdrawn. At last—

'God forgive us all!' he said. 'And do you forgive me?'

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Evie looked up quickly, with a glowing face.

'Forgive you? What is there for which I can forgive you, Lord Vail?' she said. 'And I honour you for your championship of your kinsman, who has suffered, as I believe, unmeritedly and most cruelly,' and her heart spoke the words which her lips framed.

They walked back in silence towards the house, for to each the moment was too good to spoil by further speech, and the silence was spontaneous and desired, the distance of the poles away from awkwardness. To Harry, at any rate, it seemed too precious to risk of it the loss of a moment; he would not have opened his lips, except that one word should issue therefrom, for all his Luck could bring him, and that word he dared not utter yet; he scarcely even knew if, so to speak, it was there yet. And in Evie the triumph of her just speech over a more conventional reticence filled her with a deep and secret joy. She ought to have said what she had said; she could have said no less, and she felt it in every beat and leaping pulse of her body. The recognised and proper reserve of a girl to a young man meant to her at that moment less than nothing; her words, she knew, had put her on a new and more intimate footing with him, but she could not have spoken otherwise or have not spoken at all. She had said what was due from one human being, be he boy or girl, or man or woman, to another human being, king or peasant. She had said no more than she need, but, humanly speaking, she could not have said less. The thing had been well done.

But just before they reached the lawn again she spoke.

'My mother, of course, told me the story,' she said. 'I asked her for the name of—for your uncle's name; but she would not tell me. It is better'—and again her blood spoke—'it is better thus.'

Next moment they turned the corner, and found the party as they had left it, for they had been gone scarcely ten minutes. Mrs. Antrobus was lighting one cigarette from the stump of the other.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND RETURN TO VAIL

It was the day following Lady Oxted's return to London from the Sunday in the country that she received the expected letter from Mrs. Aylwin in answer to her own. The opening of it, it would be idle to deny, was made with an anxious and apprehensive hand. Already it was plain to her with how swift and strong a movement, as of flood-water hastening towards sluice-gates, the first attraction between the two was speeding into intimacy, and had she known what had passed between them in the orchard, she would have guessed that its swiftness had outrun her eye. Already it would have been far better, if the girl was to know the name her mother had refused to tell her, that she should have known it on the night of her arrival. But these things were past prayer, and Lady Oxted drew the sheet of paper from its envelope, and found, at any rate, that the communication was short.

'I leave it entirely to your judgment,' wrote Mrs. Aylwin, 'whether you tell Evie or not. You say that you have promised not to; in that case, supposing at some future time you consider it advisable, and you can accept the quibble, tell it her, not in your name, but in mine. My reason for not telling it her you may easily have guessed: the knowledge, or so I thought it, that George was murdered, has poisoned my life, and now I question myself as to whether I have been certainly right about it. But remember this: if there arises between the two—the thing is possible, as evidently you foresee — a friendship which develops, as is natural between a man and a maid, it is certain that some time Evie will know. I leave it to you to decide whether it is better that she should

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know now or later. I thank you, dear Violet, for your care for her.'

'Dear Violet' heaved a sigh of relief. Mrs. Aylwin had been known to stagger those who were dear to her by sending them letters which partook of the nature of an ultimatum. But there was no ultimatum here. She was willing to treat, and this letter, though couched with the precision of an official despatch, was not without amenity.

She hurried downstairs to join Evie—for they were going out to lunch—with the sense of a burden removed. Such being the attitude of Mrs. Aylwin, she determined that her own promise to the girl should certainly stand, and she thought with scornful wonder of her husband's diagnosis that, at the very back of her mind, she would reserve to herself the right to break it. Men's ideas of women, she told herself, were incredibly crude and elementary. They reserved for themselves a monopoly of certain qualities, like courage, justice, and honour, and simply took it for granted that such things did not exist for women. Poor dear Bob, and after so many years, too!

Evie was somewhat silent as they drove down Bond Street, and though her gaze at the jostling crowds was not less intent than usual, it seemed to have lost the sparkle of its avidity, and to dwell rather than alight and be gone again. She looked this morning at the seedy toy-sellers and flower-vendors more than at their fragrant or painted wares, and instead of finding fascination in the little tin figures that moved their scythes over the surface of an absolutely smooth pavement with the industry of those who reap the whirlwind, or commenting on the phenomenal cheapness of collar-studs, it was rather the tragic meanness of their exhibitors which to-day attracted her.

'How do you suppose they live, Aunt Violet?' she asked. 'Look at that man with studs—six a penny. I know, because I bought six on Saturday. Well, supposing he sold sixty a day, which I imagine he does not, and that they cost him absolutely nothing, in the evening he would have tenpence.

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Yet they are not beggars: they work for their bread. Now, in Italy we have nothing like them; their place is taken by the smiling, picturesque *lazzaroni*, who would not stir a finger to help themselves. They just sit in the sun and smile, and get fed. Oh dear!'

'What is it now, Evie?' asked Lord Oxted.

'Nothing. I suppose I am just realizing that it takes all sorts to make a world, and that extremes meet, and so on. Look at me, now. Here am I in this comfortable victoria, much more like the *lazzaroni* than the toy-sellers, and who shall say how far the toy-sellers are above the *lazzaroni*? I sit in the sun, and if there is no sun I sit by the fire, and to do me justice, I generally smile. Yet, supposing I had to work for my bread, should I do it cheerfully, do you think? Should I maintain even a low average of industry? Supposing there came some great call on me for courage or resolution, should I respond to it? I have no reason whatever for assuring you or myself either that I should.'

Lady Oxted's mind flew back with an inward smirk of satisfaction to her own heroic determination to keep the promise she had made to Evie.

'Probably you would,' she said. 'Probably we are not so bad. When it comes to our having an opportunity for behaving abominably, we do not behave as we thought we were going to. The thought of the dentist poisons my life for days beforehand, yet I go all the same, and ring the dreary bell, and behave, I believe, with average courage under the wheel. Morally, too, I expect we are better, when a thing has to be done, than we were afraid we were going to be. Also, on the whole, one is more honourable than one thinks—more honourable, certainly,' she added, with a sudden irrepressible spurt of indignation against her husband, 'than those who know us best believe us to be.'

Evie laughed.

'Dear aunt, have you been very honourable lately?' she asked, 'or has Uncle Bob been doubting your first qualities?'

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'Cynicism always ends in disappointment,' remarked Lady Oxted, leaping a conversational chasm, 'but since it is cynical, I suppose it expects it.'

'Is Uncle Bob a cynic?' asked Evie, dragging her back over the chasm again.

'Well, I made a promise the other day,' said Lady Oxted, 'and asked him his advice about it. He told me I should probably reserve to myself the right to break it.'

Evie sat up suddenly, and toy-maker and *lazzaroni* were swept from her mind.

'A promise?' she said. 'Not the promise you made me?'

Lady Oxted looked up in surprise.

'Yes, the same. Why, dear?'

Evie deliberated with herself for a moment.

'For this reason,' she said slowly: 'because I now know what I asked you not to tell me. Your promise has had the kernel taken out of it.'

'You know? Who told you?'

'Lord Vail,' she replied.

Lady Oxted looked at the girl's heightened colour, wondering what emotion flew that beautiful standard there.

'I will never waste an ounce of resolution again in determining to abide by my word,' she announced.

Evie laughed again, with a great ring of happiness in the note.

'Then you will confirm Uncle Bob in his cynicism,' she replied, 'and disappoint him of all his pleasant little disappointments.'

It was not long before Lady Oxted found that to be chaperon to one of the greatest heiresses in England could not be regarded even by the most negligent as a sinecure, and to fulfil its duties at all adequately cost considerable time and thought. Had the girl been dull, heavy, serious, or plain, her task would have been lighter; but as it was, Lady Oxted became, before a fortnight was past, a really hard-worked woman. Evie's appetite for gaiety was insatiable. She took

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to London like a bird to the air, found everybody charming, and everybody returned the compliment. Indeed, the girl seemed to bring wherever she went a breath of spring and morning, so utterly sincere and spontaneous was the pleasure that bubbled from her; and since nothing pleases people so much as to find themselves pleasing, London in general was exceedingly glad that Santa Margerita was the poorer for Evie's presence here. With the eager avidity of youth, and with youth's serene digestion, she gathered and devoured the heaped-up feast of daily and nightly gaiety. Self-consciousness for once seemed to have been left out of the composition of a human being, and she played and laughed and enjoyed herself among these crowds as a child may play in the daisies by itself in some spring meadow, not hoarding and reflecting on its happiness, but simply happy. Parsifal with the flower-maidens was not more unreflective than she, surrounded by the well-dressed hosts, her charm in the mouth of all.

It might have been hoped, thought Lady Oxted, that since so large a ring was always assembled to see her smile, the smiles would have been, considering the number and variety of the circle, distributed with moderate evenness. In this she was not disappointed, but—a thing far more disconcerting to the responsible chaperon—Evie's seriousness certainly was not impartial. For all the world but one she seemed to have no seriousness, but about that one there could be no mistake.

Already between her and Harry there existed a relation, dear and indefinable, to be dwelt on with silent wonder; some alchemy, secret and subtle, untraceable as the course of the swallow's flight, was at work; an effervescence already had begun to stir, brightening the dark well of destiny within them by a hundred points of light; a mysterious luminosity was growing in tremulous flame.

Until the receipt of Mrs. Aylwin's letter, Lady Oxted had felt a little uncertain as to whether she could accept Harry's invitation for herself and the girl to Vail. In any case, the next two Sundays were impossible, and the matter had been

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left undecided. But now that all restriction was withdrawn, she arranged to take Evie down in three weeks' time, at the end of the month. Harry himself, however, had business at his house which could not be postponed, and towards the end of the week he went down there, with the intention of clearing it off as quickly as might be, and returning again to London.

Mr. Francis had been at Vail almost continuously since the winter, and Harry found him in the enjoyment of his usual merry spirits. He looked even better in health and younger to the eye than when his nephew had seen him last, and the briskness of his movements; the clear, scarcely wrinkled skin of his face, were indeed surprising in one of his years. He had driven to the station to meet Harry, and the train being stopped on an inside curve just before reaching the platform, Harry, leaning out of the window, saw him standing there. Mr. Francis caught sight of his face, and pulling out his handkerchief, continued to wave it till the train finally drew up at the platform.

'And here you are, my dearest boy,' he cried effusively, before Harry was out of the carriage. 'How late your train is! It is scandalous and abominable! I should have found two sharp words for the station-master, I expect, if I had not been so happy to think you were coming. How well you look, Harry! London seems to suit you as well as the country suits me.'

'Indeed, that is saying a great deal,' said Harry, looking at that cheerful, healthy face. 'I have never seen you looking better, Uncle Francis.'

A smile of great tenderness played round the old man's mouth.

'And for that I have to thank you, my dear boy,' he said, 'in that it is to you I owe my quiet retreat, my days of busy tranquillity. Ah, Harry, it has been worth while to grow old if at the end you find such peace as is mine.'

They drove briskly up the mile of deep country lane which

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separated the station from the high-road, and Harry found an unlooked-for pleasure in the wealth of honeysuckle which embowered the hedges in their fragrant curves, and in the clean, vigorous tendrils of the dog-rose, starred with the delicacy of its pink blossom. Something in that young unfolding of simple loveliness which had never really struck him before now smote on his heart with a pang of exquisite pleasure. How wonderful was youth, and the growth of young things! How like in some subtle and intimate way were these springing sprays of blossom to a girl on the verge of womanhood! For instance—and he turned to his uncle again.

'Yes, London suits me,' he said, the thrill and surprise of his thoughts glowing in his handsome face. 'People are so kind, so friendly. Oh, it is a warm, nice world!' and his hand shook the two horses to a swift trot.

'You will always find people kind and friendly to you, Harry,' said Mr. Francis, 'if you look at them as you looked at me just now. Men and women know nothing so attractive as happiness. My dear boy, what have you been doing to yourself? You are more radiant than Apollo.'

Harry laughed.

'I would not change places with him,' he said. 'I will take my chance as Harry Vail. I have done nothing to myself, if you ask; but I have found many friends. But I do not forget, Uncle Francis, that the first friend I found was you, and I do not think I shall find a better.'

They turned into the glare of the white high-road, and Mr. Francis, who, while they were in the shadow of the deep lane-banks, had carried his hat on his knee, letting the wind blow refreshingly through his thick white hair, put it on again.

'Ah, Harry, I hope you will some time, and soon, find a friend, and dearer than a friend, for life,' he said, 'who will speedily make you forget your old uncle. But give him a seat in the chimney-corner. That he asks, though he asks no more, and let him nurse your children on his knee. He has

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a way with children; they never cry with him. I pray, I often pray,' he said, lifting his hat as he spoke with a gesture touching and solemn, 'that I may do that. That, dear Harry, would be the crowning happiness of my happy days.'

The words died gently on to the air; no direct reply was needed. For a moment Harry was half determined to tell his uncle of his dream and his hope, longing with the generous warmth of youth for the sympathy which he knew would so fully be his, and the words were even on the threshold of his lips when Mr. Francis suddenly straightened himself from his attitude of musing, and plunged into less intimate talk.

'I have not been idle, dear Harry,' he said, 'while you have been away, charging about the world, as youth should. I think you will find—I may say it without undue complacence—that the home-farm is in better order and is more profitable than it has ever been. There is no credit due to me; it is simply the work of a bailiff I had the luck to find, an invaluable man. And in the autumn I can promise you better pheasant-shooting than there has been for many years.'

'I am sure it is so,' said Harry, 'and we will prove it together, Uncle Francis. Really, I cannot thank you enough; it is too good of you to devote yourself as you have been doing to the estate. Dear me, it is four months since I was here. I am an absentee landlord, but a better landlord than I has been on the spot, and I am not afraid that I shall be shot at.'

They turned in at the lodge-gates, and bowled swiftly along under the huge trees. The hay was standing high in the fields to the left, on the right the pasturage of the park was grazed by sleek kine, already beginning to leave the mid-day shadows of the trees for their evening feed in the cool, and the sense of smell and scent alike drank deep of the plentiful and luxuriant summer. Rooks held parliament in their debating-houses in the high elms, round the coops of the pheasant-rearing hens chirped innumerable young birds, and the breeze that should blow at sundown was already stirring to try its wings. Extra-

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ordinarily pleasant to Harry was the sense that all this was his, yet there was neither vainglory nor selfishness in his delight, for he valued his own, not for the thought of what it was to him, but for the joy another perhaps should take in it. Then, emerging from the mile-long avenue, they came to the shining lake, and the sound of coolness from the splashing sluice. Swan and water-lily reflected themselves on the surface, and as they turned the corner a moor-hen made its water-logged scurry to the cover of the reed-beds. Then, with a hollow note from the wheels, they rolled over the bridge, and turned in under the monstrous shape of the cut-box hedge to the gravel-sweep in front of the house. There it stood, the shadow of one of the wings fallen half across the courtyard, stately and grave, full of dignity and gray repose, surely no unworthy gift to offer to any. And at that thought a sudden pulse leaped within him.

'It is all unworthy,' he said to himself, banishing with an effort that irrepressible thrill of joy, 'and I the unworthiest of all.'

He lingered a moment at the door, and then followed Mr. Francis into the house. Again the joy of possession seized him. His were the tall faint tapestries of armoured knights and garlanded lovers, his the rows of serious portraits which seemed to-day to his eye to have a freshness and welcome for him which had never been there before. He contrasted, with keen relish of the change, his last home-coming and this. What a curious dream-like month that had been which he had spent here at his coming-of-age! How gray and colourless life seemed then, if looked at in the light of all that had passed since! He had pictured himself, he remembered, slowly putting spadeful after spadeful of time, heaped gradually from month to year, on the grave of his youth, spending a quiet, often solitary, existence here in the home of his fathers. Uncle Francis, so he had planned it in those days when he had been alone here before his arrival and Geoffrey's, no doubt would be glad to come here sometimes. Geoffrey, too, would very

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likely spend a week with him now and again in the shooting-season. Otherwise, it would be natural for him to be much alone, and the prospect had called up in him no emotion even so lively as dislike. He would be out-of-doors a good deal, pottering and poking about the woods, he would read a good deal, and no doubt the year would slip away not unpleasantly. In course of time the portrait of Henry Vail, twelfth Baron, and of seemingly morose tendencies, would gloom from the wall, for that series must not be broken. A little longer, and moss would be green in the lettering of his tombstone.

But now he could scarcely believe that the lad who had meditated thus six months ago, not dismally, but without joy, could be the same as he who stood with a kindled eye beneath old Francis's picture. He looked at his own hand as he raised his teacup, he looked at his boots and his trousers. Yes, they were certainly his, and he it had been who had drunk tea here before. What, then, had happened? he asked himself. He had discovered the world, that was all, and Columbus had only discovered America. And the world was quite full of charming things, and people in particular; to descend to details, or to generalize on the whole—he hardly knew which was which—it was full of one person.

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CHAPTER IX

CARDIAC

MR. FRANCIS soon joined him for tea, and, after proposing a stroll in ten minutes' time, had gone to his room to answer an urgent letter. Harry was well content to wait, for nothing could come amiss to so harmonious a mood as his, and, lighting a cigarette, he strolled round the walls beholding his forbears. Opposite the portrait of old Francis, second Baron, he stood long, and his eye sought and dwelt on the Luck as a familiar object. The sun streaming through the western windows fell full on to the picture, and the jewels, so cunning and exact was their portrayal, sparkled with an extraordinary vividness in the gleam. The Luck! Was it the Luck which had given him these days of wonderful happiness, with so great and unspeakable a hope for the days to come? Was this the huge reward it granted him, for which he had paid but with a cold in the head, a burn on the hand, a sprain of the foot? How curious, at the least, those three coincidences following so immediately on the finding of the Luck had been! How curious also this awakening of his (dating from the same time) from the solitary lethargy of his first twenty-one years! For the awakening had come with the coming of Uncle Francis, and his own instant attachment to him. It was indeed he—he and Geoffrey, at any rate, between them, on their visit here—who had started him on the voyage which had already resulted in the discovery of the world. It was then that his potential self had begun to rustle and stir in the chrysalis of isolation which had grown up round it, very feebly and tentatively indeed at first, but by degrees cracking and bursting its brown bark, then standing with quivering and momentairly-expanding

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wings, which gradually unfolded and grew strong for flight. The Luck! Was it indeed the gems and the gold which had done this for him? It was much, it was very much; but to him now how infinitely more than he had did he desire! Six months ago he had desired nothing, for he was dead; but now, being alive, how he yearned for more—one thing more!

A sudden idea seized him, and he rang the bell, and until it was answered looked again at the picture. Old Francis's face, he thought, and old Francis's hands, did not fare so well in the sunlight as the glorious jewel which he held. The hands clutched rather than held the cup; the lines of them were greedy and grasping; they gripped the treasure with nervous tension; and in the face there were ugly lines which he had never noticed before, but which bore out the evidence of the hands. Avarice sat on that throne, and cunning as deep as the sea, and cruelty, and evil mastery. Still looking and wondering, he suddenly saw the face in a different light: it was no longer a vile soul that looked from those eyes, but the kind, cheerful spirit of his own uncle. He started, for the change had the vividness of actuality, and at the moment the bell was answered by the old butler.

'Ah, Templeton,' he cried, 'I am glad to see you. All well? That's right. I rang to say that I wanted you to get out the Luck—the big cup, you know, which you and I found in the attic last Christmas—and put it on the table to-night as a centre-piece.'

'Mr. Francis has the key, my lord,' said Templeton; 'it is on his private bunch.'

'Ask him to give it to you, then. Say it was by my order. Oh, here he is! Uncle Francis, I want the key of the case in which is the Luck. I want to have it on the table to-night.'

'Dear boy, is it wise?' said Mr. Francis. 'Supposing the house was broken into; you know the thing is priceless.'

'But burglars cannot take it further from before our noses while we sit at dinner,' said Harry; 'and as soon as dinner is over, even before we leave the room, it shall be put back

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again. See to that, Templeton! That is the key, is it? Why, it is gold, too! Old Francis knew how to do things thoroughly.'

Uncle and nephew strolled out together—Harry with his head high and leading the way. An extraordinary elation was on him.

'I have a feeling that the Luck is bringing me luck,' he said. 'Oh, I don't seriously believe it, but think how strange the coincidences have been. Fire and frost and rain! I had a turn with all of them. And you know, Uncle Francis, since I found it, I have had more happiness than in the whole of my life before.'

'What happiness, Harry?'

'Friends—you the first; the joy of life; the conscious feeling that one is alive, which I suppose is the same thing. All, all,' he cried—'the world, men, women, things, all!'

Mr. Francis did not reply at once, but went forward a few steps, his eyes on the ground.

'Don't believe it, Harry,' he said. 'I would never have told you about the foolish old story if I had thought that there was the slightest chance of your paying more attention to it than one gives to a fairy tale. My dear boy, you are really quite silly. You caught cold because you would not listen to my excellent advice and change your clothes when you got in from shooting; you sprained your ankle because you did not look where you were going, and see that the steps were covered with ice; you burned yourself because a careless housemaid had forgotten to tack down the carpet. I do not believe in magic at all; there is, I assert, no such thing; but even if one did, it would be a very childish, weak kind of spell that could only bring curses of that sort.'

'That is just what I think,' said Harry, 'the evil, perhaps, has run down, so to speak; it is nearly impotent. Oh, I am only joking. But if that is the price I have paid for my present happiness, I consider it dirt-cheap. And if the Luck can give me more happiness, I hereby declare to the powers

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that work it that I will take any amount more on the same scale of charges.'

Mr. Francis laughed, and took Harry's arm affectionately.

'Dear lad, you were only jesting, I know,' he said. 'But it is not well to dwell on such fantastic things too much, though we constantly remind ourselves that they are nonsense. The human mind is a very wonderful and delicate piece of mechanism, and if once we begin playing experiments with a thing of which we understand so little, it may get out of order and strike the wrong hour, and fail to keep time. Lead your wholesome, honourable life, dear boy, and take gratefully what happiness comes in your way, and do not forget whence it comes. Then you will have nothing to fear from the Luck.'

'No, and nothing to gain from it,' said Harry, 'for I expect magic cannot touch those who do not believe in it.'

'Dear boy, enough,' said Mr. Francis, with a certain earnestness. 'You have told me you do not believe in it. Ah, what a wonderful evening! Look at those pink fleeces of cloud in the west, softer than sleep, softer than sleep, as Theocritus says. How I wish I was a painter! Think of the privilege of being able to show those sunset glories—to show, too, as the true artist can, the feelings, infinite and subtle, which those rose clouds against the pale blue of the sky produce in one, to show them to the toiler of the London streets. Ah, Harry, what a wealth of senses has been given us, what diverse-facing windows to our souls, and how little we trouble to look out of any, or to keep bright and clean even one! The gourmet even, the man who eats his dinner, using his palate with intelligence, is a step above most people. He has trained a sense. And what exquisite pleasure that sense, even though it be the most animal of all, gives him! And who can say that each sense was not given us in order that we should cultivate it to the fullest?'

Suddenly he raised his hat, and in a low, clear voice he cried:

'"Oh, world, as God has made it, all in beauty!
And knowing this is love, and love is duty,
What further can be sought for or declared?"'

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For a long moment he stood there, his face irradiated by the fires of sunset, his eyes soft with gentle unshed tears, his hair stirred by the caress of the evening breeze, with who knows what early dreams and cool reveries of boyhood reminiscent within him? His harsh, untoward past had gone from him; he had lived backwards in that moment to the days before troubles and darkness came about his path. Aspirations seemed to have taken the place of memory—he was a youth again, and Harry's face as he looked at him was loving and reverent.

It was already deep dusk when they turned back, and only the faint reflections of the fires of sunset lingered in the sky. The green of grass and tree had faded to a sombre gray, and the green of the fantastically cut box-hedge had deepened to black when they again passed under its misshapen shapes and monstrous prodigies. Somehow the look of it cut out against the unspeakable softness and distance of the sky struck Harry with something of an ominous touch.

'That must be seen to,' he said, pointing to it; 'look at the horror of its shapes; it is like a collection of feverish dreams.'

'The old box-hedge?' asked Mr. Francis. 'If I were you I should not have it touched. See how Nature is striving to obliterate the intruding hand of man. How grotesque and quaint it appears in this light! How delightfully horrible!'

'Horrible, certainly,' said Harry; 'but I do not find delight there. Come, Uncle Francis, let us go in. It is already close upon dinner-time, and one has to dress.'

But the box-hedge seemed to have a strange fascination for Mr. Francis, and he still lingered there, standing in the road, with his eye wandering down the lines of that nightmare silhouette.

'Indeed I would not touch it, dear Harry,' he said. 'It is so grotesque and Gothic. What a thickness the hedge must be! eight feet at the least.'

'But it is hideous,' replied the lad. 'It is enough to frighten anybody.'

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'But it does not frighten you or me, or the gardeners either, we may suppose. At least, I have heard of no hysterics.'

'That is probably true, but—— Well, come in, Uncle Francis. We shall be so late for dinner, and I am dying for it.'

An hour later the two had finished dinner, and were waiting for coffee to be brought. Harry, after finishing his wine, had lit a cigarette, which had been the occasion of some playful strictures from his uncle, who still held his unkindled in his soft, plump fingers.

'One sip, only one sip of coffee first, Harry,' he said. 'It is almost wicked to light your cigarette till you have had one sip of coffee. That is the psychological moment. Ah, that dazzling thing! How it sparkles! It was a good idea of yours to have it on the table, Harry. It makes a noonday in the room. How the Luck welcomes you home, my dear boy! But though I cannot sparkle like that, not less do I welcome you.'

Indeed, that winking splendour in the centre of the table was enough to strike sight into blind eyeballs. The candles that lit the table, though shaded from the eye of the diner, poured their unobtruded rays on to it from fifty angles, and each stone glowed with an inward and ever-varying light. The slightest movement of the head was sufficient to turn the blue lights of the diamonds into an incandescent red; again a movement and the burning danger signals were changed to a living green. The pearls shone with a steady lustre, like moons through mist, but even the sober emeralds caught something of the madness of the diamond-studded handles, and glowed with colours not their own. The thing had fascinated Harry all dinner-time, and the spell seemed to grow, for suddenly he filled his glass again.

'The Luck,' he said, 'I drink to the Luck,' and he put down an empty glass.

An affectionate remonstrance with his folly was on Mr. Francis's lips when the servants entered with coffee. Behind

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the footman who carried it walked a man with liqueurs whom Harry could not remember having seen before. He looked at him a moment, wondering who he was, when he recollected that his uncle had spoken to him about his own man, who, he proposed, should wait on him at Vail. Last came Templeton, carrying the leather case of the Luck.

Harry took coffee and liqueur, and had another look at his uncle's valet. The man wore the immovable mask of the well-trained servant; he was no more than a machine for handing things.

'Yes, take the cup, Templeton,' said Harry; 'have you the key of it?'

'No, my lord; it is on Mr. Francis's bunch.'

'Would you give me the key, Uncle Francis? I will lock it myself and keep the key.'

Mr. Francis did not at once answer, but continued sipping his coffee, and Harry, thinking he had not heard, repeated his request. On the repetition Mr. Francis instantly took the key off his bunch.

'By all means, dear boy,' he said; 'it is much better so, that you should have it.'

Templeton packed the jewel in its case, and Harry turned the key on it.

'Lock it up yourself, Templeton,' he said, 'in one of the chests. I must have a new case made for it, I think. This is very old, and it would be much too easily carried away—eh, Uncle Francis?' and he swung the locked case lightly in his hand.

'It is the original case, Harry,' he said. 'I should be sorry to change it.'

The men left the room, Templeton going last, with the case containing the Luck. The candles still burned brightly, but half the light seemed to have been withdrawn from the room now that the great jewel no longer gleamed on the table; it was as if a cloud had hidden the sun. Harry still held the key in his hand, looking curiously at its chased and intricate

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wards, and for a few moments neither spoke. Then he put it into his pocket, and, pushing his chair a little further from the table, flung one leg over the other.

'I propose to stop here four or five days, Uncle Francis,' he said, 'but not more, unless we cannot get through our business. But indeed I cannot see what there is to do. The place looks in admirable order, thanks to you. There is the box-hedge; that is positively all I can see that wants looking to.'

Mr. Francis laughed gaily.

'Dear Harry,' he said, 'if you are not careful you will become as absurd on the subject of this box-hedge as you are in danger of becoming about the Luck. The dear quaint, picturesque thing! How can you want it trimmed and cut!'

Harry laughed.

'As you say, it does not frighten you or me or the gardeners,' he said; 'but, as I was about to tell you as we drove from the station, when something put it out of my head, I shall have to consider others as well.'

Suddenly he stopped. In the intense pleasure with which he had looked forward to the visit of Evie and Lady Oxted, which should be, so he had figured it, hardly less welcome to his uncle, as a sign, visible and pertinent, of how utterly dead and discredited was the lying rumour which at one time had so blackened him, he had not consciously reckoned with the moment of telling him. But he went on, almost without a pause:

'At the end of the month Lady Oxted has promised to come and spend a Sunday here, and with her will come—oh, Uncle Francis, how long this or something of the sort has been delayed, and how patiently you have waited for it!—with her will come her niece, Miss Aylwin, who has just come to England from Italy.'

He looked not at his uncle as he spoke, but, with a delicacy unconscious and instinctive, kept his eyes on the ground. Such an announcement as the visit of George Houldsworth's sister must, he knew, be momentous to the old man, and

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perhaps would give rise to an emotion which it was not fit that other eyes should see. His uncle would know that in the mind of one at least most intimately connected with the tragedy suspicion was not. This visit would be a reconciliation, formal though silent. It was right that the hearer should have as great a privacy as might be, and so, both when he spoke and after he had finished speaking, Harry kept his eyes on the ground.

There was a moment's silence, broken by the crash of breaking china, and, looking quickly up, Harry saw the coffee-cup fallen from his uncle's hand, and the brown stains leaping over the white tablecloth. The spoon clattered metallic in the shattered saucer, and jumped to the floor, and Mr. Francis's hand dropped like lead on the edge of the table. The candles were between Harry and his uncle; he could see no more, and he sprang up with a sudden pang of horror rising up within him.

There, with his head fallen over the back of the chair, lay Mr. Francis, sprawling and inert. His face was of a deadly, strangled white; the wholesome colour had fled his cheeks, and only on the lips and below the eyes lingered a mottled purple. His breathing was heavy and stertorous—you would have said he snored—and from the corner of the slack mouth lolled the protruding tongue. His hands lay limp upon his lap, gray and purple.

Harry made one step of it to the bell, and rang peal after violent peal, scarce daring to look, yet scarce able not to look, at that mask-like horror of a face at the end of the table. 'What had he done? What if he had killed him? Death could not be more ghastly,' ran the shrill voice of terror-stricken thought through his head. His instinct was to go to him, though his flesh shrank and shivered at the thought of approaching *that*, to do something, but he knew not what; yet meddling might only cause damage irreparable, instead of giving relief. Still, he did not cease ringing, and it seemed to him that the muffled clanging of the bell he rang had sounded

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for years, when steps came along the passage and burst into the room.

'There, there, look to him! What is the matter?' cried Harry, still working on the bell like a man demented. 'Send for the doctor—send for his servant; perhaps he knows what to do. Ah, there he is!' and he dropped the bell-handle.

Mr. Francis's valet of the mask-like face had gone straight to his master, and, lifting him bodily from the chair, laid him flat on the floor. Then, with deft fingers, he untied his cravat and collar, and told them to open all doors and windows wide. He tore open his shirt and vest, so as to leave his breathing absolutely free, and then paused. The great rush of warm summer air that poured in gently stirred the hair on Mr. Francis's head, and rustled the folds of the tablecloth; yet in spite of this, and the heavy, stertorous breathing of the stricken man, it seemed to Harry that an intense silence reigned everywhere. Maid-servants had gathered in the doorway; but Templeton, with a guttural word, sent them scurrying down the passages, and the three watched and waited round the one.

Then by blessed degrees the breathing grew less drawn and laboured, and by the light of the candles which Mr. Francis's man had placed on the floor near the body it was possible to see that the colour of the face was less patched. Then the valet turned to Harry, who, white-faced and awestruck, stood at his shoulder.

'He will do well now, my lord,' said Sanders. 'It was lucky you did not touch him. Mr. Francis has had these fits before—cardiac, the doctors say—but the right thing is to lay him flat.'

'He is not dead? He will not die?' cried Harry, shaking the man by the shoulder, as if to make him hear.

'Lord bless you, no, my lord!' he said. 'As like as not he'll be dressed to-morrow before you are awake. Cardiac weakness,' he repeated, as if the words were a prescription, 'and all agitation to be avoided.'

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'Oh, my God, I never meant to agitate him!' cried Harry. 'I told him something which I should have thought he would have given his right hand to hear.'

The man smiled.

'Just the sort of thing which would agitate him, my lord,' he said, 'if you'll excuse my saying so. And now, Mr. Templeton, if you'll be so kind as to get a shutter or something, we'll move him up to bed, keeping him flat. I'll sit up with him to-night.'

'You're a good fellow—an awfully good fellow!' cried Harry. 'And there is no further anxiety? Shall I not send for the doctor?'

'Quite unnecessary, my lord. See how quiet his breathing has become. As like as not he will sleep like a child. He's had these attacks before, and I know well when the danger is over. Cardiac. You can go to sleep yourself, my lord, as if nothing had happened.'

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CHAPTER X

MR. FRANCIS IS BETTER

THE cheerful optimism of Sanders was borne out by events, if not in letter, at any rate in spirit, and Harry on waking received the most encouraging reports from the sick-room. Mr. Francis had slept well for the greater part of the night, and though he would take his breakfast in bed, he expected to be down by the middle of the morning. He particularly desired that Harry should be told, as soon as he woke, how completely he had recovered from his attack, and sent him his dear love.

Here, at any rate, was great good news. Again and again during the night Harry had woke from anxious, feverish dreams of that ghastly mask-like face and sonorous breathing; all the earlier hours seemed a constant succession of agonized awakenings. Now it would be the white mottled face, which grew ever larger and nearer to his own, that tore him almost with a shriek from his uneasy slumber, after long paralyzed attempts to move; now it would be the breathing, that got louder and yet more guttural till the air reverberated with it. Again and again he had sat up in bed with flying pulse and damp forehead, and lit a match to see how much more of the night there was still to run; or, looking for any sound of movement from his uncle's room at the end of the passage, he would think he heard steps along the corridor, and a stealthy opening or shutting of midnight doors. Once it was a spray of jasmine tapping at his window which woke him with a start, and, thinking that some evil news was knocking at his door, it was with an effort that he controlled his throat sufficiently to bid the knocker enter. But about the time of the first hint of the

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midsummer dawn, when the birds were beginning to tune their notes for the day, and the bushes and eaves grew merry with chirrupings, he fell into a more peaceful sleep, and woke only on the rattle of his blinds being rolled up.

His heart leaped as he received his uncle's message, and he got up immediately, and, putting on only a dressing-gown and slippers, went out with a rough towel over his arm for a dip in the lake before breakfast. The sluice at the lower end of it, where a cool ten feet of water invited him, lay not more than a couple of hundred yards from the house across a stretch of nearly level lawn, and was hidden from both road and house by a screen of bushes. Sleep still lingered like cobwebs in drowsy corners of his brain, but all the horror of the evening and its almost more horrible repetitions during the earlier hours of the night, had been swept away by the news at awakening, and it was with a thrill of pleasure, as indescribable as the scent itself of the clear morning, that he drank deep of the freshness of the young day. The sun was already high, but the grass that lay in the shadow of house and bush was still not dry of its night dews, and a thousand liquid gems brushed his bare ankles. The gentle thunder of the sluice made a soft, low bass to the treble of birds and the hum of country sounds—that summer symphony which pauses only for the solo of the nightingale during the short dark hours. The lightest of breezes ruffled the lake, scarcely shattering the mirrored trees and sky that leaned over it. And Harry stood for a moment white and bare to the soft wind, with the sun warm on his shoulders, wondering at the beauty of his bath. Then, with arms shot out above his head, and his body braced to a line, he sprang off the stone slab of the sluice, and disappeared in a soda-water of bubbles and flying spray.

Surely that moment, he thought, as he rose again to the surface, was the crown and acme of bodily sensation. The sleep had been swept from him—house, bed, pillows, darkness had gone. He was renewed, starting fresh again, cool and clean, with all the beautiful round world waiting for him.

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Expectancy and hope of happiness, interest, awakening love, were all strung to their highest pitch in this completeness of bodily well-being; his soul was moulded in every part to its environment, freed of its bodily burden, and with a song in his mouth he stepped out of the water for the glow of the towel.

He sauntered leisurely back to the house, purring to himself at the delight which the moment gave him. How could there be men who found their pleasure in eating and drinking, in the life of crowded rooms and smoky towns, when in half the acres of all England, and round all its coasts, were such possibilities? How, above all, was it possible to exist for a moment if one had not the privilege of being violently in love? Then, with a laugh at himself, he suddenly found that he was hungry, ravenous, and his step quickened.

Half an hour later he was seated at breakfast, but already the first mood of the day was past. He had for an hour gone free, untrammelled by all the obligations which events and circumstances entail, but now he was captured again. One thing in particular wove a heavy chain round him. He had seen with amazed horror the effect on his uncle of that news that he had thought would be so welcome. Was it reasonable to suppose, then, if a name alone produced so ill-starred a result, that he could bear the sight of the girl? After the catastrophe of the night before, it would be cruelty of a kind not to be contemplated to return again to the subject. The disappointment was grievous. That visit of Lady Oxted's and Evie's, so bright in anticipation that his mind's eye could scarcely look on it undazzled, must be given up. Plain, simple duty, the ordinary incontrovertible demands of blood and kinship, compelled him to it. His own happiness could not be purchased at the cost of suffering to that kindly old man; and who knew how much he might be suffering even now?

Then, with the mercurial fluctuation of those in love, he fell from the sky-scraping summits into a black, bottomless gulf of despondency. Evie could not come here, she could never come here, he told himself. And at that, and all which that

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implied, he pushed his chair quickly back from the table, and left a half-eaten breakfast. His reasonable mind could not make itself heard; it told him that he was pushing things comically far, that he was imagining an inconceivable situation when he concluded that a young man must not marry because of the feelings of his great-uncle on the subject; but his mood was not amenable to reason. The world had gone as black as an east wind, and all the flowers were withered.

He heaved a lover's sigh, and, going out of the glass-door into the garden, walked moodily up and down the lawn for a space, consumed with pity, half for himself, half for his uncle. Directly above were the windows of his own bedroom, wide open, and a housemaid within was singing at her work. Further on were the two rooms in which his uncle chiefly lived, a big-sized dressing-room in which he slept, and next door the bedroom which he had turned into a sitting-room. These windows were also open, and Harry, even on the noiseless grass, trod gently as he passed them, with that instinct for hushed quiet which all feel in the presence of suffering.

'Poor old fellow! poor dear old fellow!' he thought to himself, with a pang of compunction at the shock he had so unwittingly caused that cheerful suffering spirit.

Then suddenly, as he passed softly below, there came from the windows, mingling in unspeakable discord with the housemaid's song, a quick shower of notes from a flute.

Harry paused; the player was evidently feeling his fingers in the execution of a run, and a moment afterwards the dainty tripping air of 'La donna è mobile' came dancing out into the sunlight like a summer gnat. Twice the delicate tune was played with great precision and admirable light-heartedness, which contrasted vividly with the listener's mood, and was instantly succeeded by some other Italian air, unknown to the lad, but as gay as a French farce.

Harry had paused open-mouthed with astonishment. His own thoughts about his kinsman, sombre and full of tenderness, were all sent flying by the cheerful measure which the kinsman

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was executing so delightfully. A smile began to dawn in the corners of his mouth, enlightenment returned to his eye, and, standing out on the gravel-path, he shouted up:

'Uncle Francis! Uncle Francis!'

The notes of the flute wobbled and ceased.

'Yes, my dearest fellow,' came cheerfully from above.

'I am so glad you are so much better. May I come up and see you?'

'By all means, by all means. I was just on the point of sending Sanders down to see if you would.'

Harry went up the stairs three at a time, and fairly danced down the corridor. Sanders, faithful and fox-like, was outside, his hand on the latch.

'You will be very careful, my lord?' he said. 'We mustn't have Mr. Francis agitated again.'

'Of course not,' said Harry, and was admitted.

Mr. Francis was lying high in bed, propped up on pillows. The remains of his breakfast, including a hot dish of which no part remained, stood on a side-table; on his bed lay the case of the beloved flute.

'Ah, my dear boy,' he cried, 'I owe you a thousand and one apologies for my conduct last night. Sanders tells me I gave you a terrible fright. You must think no more of it; you must promise me to think no more of it, Harry. I have had such seizures many times before, and of late, thank God, they have become much rarer. I had not told you about them on purpose. I did not see the use of telling you.'

'Dear Uncle Francis, it is a relief to find you so well,' said Harry. 'Sanders told me last night that he knew how to deal with these attacks, which was a little comfort. But I insist on your seeing a really first-rate doctor from town.'

Mr. Francis shook his head.

'Quite useless, dear Harry,' he said, 'though it is like you to suggest it. Before now I have seen an excellent man on the subject. It is true that the attack itself is dangerous, but when it passes off it passes off altogether, and during it Sanders

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knows very well what to do. Besides, in all probability it will not recur. But now, my dear boy, as you are here, I will say something I have got to say at once, and get it off my mind.'

Harry held up his hand.

'If it will agitate you in the least degree, Uncle Francis,' he said, 'I will not hear it. Unless you can promise me that it will not, you open your mouth and I leave the room.'

'It will not, it will not,' said the old man. 'I give you my word upon it. It is this: That moment last night when you told me what you told me was the happiest moment I have had for years. What induced my wretched old cab-horse of a constitution to play that trick I cannot imagine. The news was a shock to me, I suppose. Ah! certainly it was a shock, but of pure joy. And I wanted to tell you this at once, because I was afraid, you foolish, unselfish fellow, that you might blame yourself for having told me, that you might think it would pain or injure me to speak of it again. You might even have been intending to tell Miss Aylwin that you must revoke your invitation. Was it not so, Harry?' and he waited for an answer.

Harry was sitting on the window-sill, playing with a tendril of intruding rose, and his profile was dark against the radiance of the sky outside. But when on the pause he turned and went across to the bedside, Mr. Francis was amazed; for his face seemed, like Moses', to have drunk of some splendour, and to be visibly giving it out. He bent over to the bed, leaning on it with both hands.

'Ah, how could I do anything else?' he cried. 'I could not bear to be so happy at the cost of your suffering. But now, oh, now——'

And he stopped, for he saw that he had told his secret, and there was no more to say.

Mr. Francis, seeing that the lad did not go on with the sentence, the gist of which was so clear, said nothing to press him, for he understood, and turned from the seriousness of the subject.

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'So that is settled,' he said, 'and they are coming, you tell me, at the end of the month. That is why you want the box-hedge cut, you rascal! You are afraid of the ladies being frightened. I almost suspected something of the kind. And now, my dear boy, you must leave me. I shall get up at once, and be down in half an hour. Ah, my dear Harry, my dear Harry!' and he grasped his hand long and firmly.

Harry left him without more words, and strolled out again into the sunlight, which had recaptured all its early brilliance. Had ever a man been so ready and eager to spoil his own happiness, he wondered. Half an hour ago he had blackened the world by his utterly unfounded fears, all built on a fabric of nothingness, and in a moment reared to such a height that they had blotted the very sun from the sky, and, like a vampire, sucked the beauty from all that was fair. A thought had built them, a word now had dispelled them.

He went round to the front of the house, where he found a gardener busy among the flower-beds, and they went together to examine the great hedge. It would be a week's work, the man said, to restore it to its proper shape, and, Harry answering that it must therefore be begun without delay, he went off after ladder and pruning tools. Then, poking idly at its compacted wall with his stick as he walked along it, Harry found that after overcoming the first resistance the stick seemed to penetrate into emptiness, though the whole hedge could not have been less than six or eight feet thick. This presented points of interest, and he walked up to the end far away from the house, and, pushing through a belt of trees into which the hedge ran, proceeded to examine it from the other side. Here at once he found the key to this strange thing, for, half overgrown with young shoots, stood an opening some five feet high, leading into the centre of the hedge, down which ran a long passage. More correctly speaking, indeed, the hedge was not one, but two, planted some three feet apart, and this corridor of gloomy green lights led straight down it towards the house. At the far end, again, was a similar half-overgrown

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door, coming out of which one turned the corner of the hedge and emerged on to the gravel sweep close by the house, immediately below the windows of the gun-room.

To Harry there was something mysterious and delightful about this discovery, which gave him a keen, childlike sense of pleasure. To judge from the growth over the entrances to the passage it must have been long undiscovered, and he determined to ask his uncle whether he remembered it. Then suddenly and unreasonably he changed his mind; the charm of this mystery would be gone if he shared it with another, even if he suspected that another already knew it, and, smiling at himself for his childish secrecy and reserve, he strolled back again to meet the gardener to whom he had given orders to clip it. There must be no possibility of his discovery of the secret doors; the box-hedge should be clipped only with a view to the road; the other side should not be touched, a whited sepulchre. These orders given, he went back to the house to wait for the appearance of Mr. Francis.

The latter soon came downstairs, with a great Panama hat on his head, round which was tacked a gaudy riband; he hummed a cheerful little tune as he came.

'Ah, Harry,' he said, 'I did not mean you to wait in for me on this glorious morning, for I think I will not go fast or far. Long-limbed, lazy fellow,' he said, looking at him as he sat in the low chair.

Harry got up, stretching his long limbs.

'Lazy I am not,' he said; 'I have done a worldful of things this morning. I have bathed; I have breakfasted; I have listened to your music; I have given a hundred orders to the gardeners—at least, I gave one; I have read the papers. Where shall we go, Uncle Francis?'

'Where you please, as long as we go together, and you will consent to go slowly and talk to me. I am a little shaky still, I find, now that I try my legs; but, Harry, there is a lightness about my heart from your news of last night.'

'It is good to hear you say that, for I cannot convey to you

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how I looked forward to telling you. And you feel, you really feel, all you said to me?'

Mr. Francis paused.

'All, all,' he said earnestly. 'The past has been expunged with a word. That burden which so long I have carried about is gone, like the burden of Christian. Ah, you do not know what it was! But now, if she—Miss Aylwin—believed it, she would not come within a mile of me; if her mother still believed it, she would not let her, and Lady Oxted would not let her. A hard, strange woman was Mrs. Aylwin, Harry; I told you, I remember, what passed between us. But it is over, over. Yes, yes, the healing comes late and the recompense, but it comes, it has come.'

'I do not know Mrs. Aylwin,' said Harry. 'I have never even seen her. But I can answer for it that Miss Aylwin believes utterly and entirely in your innocence.'

'How is that—how is that?' asked Mr. Francis.

'She told me so herself,' said Harry. 'How strange it all is, and how it all works together! I told her, you must know, the first evening I met her, about the Luck, and last week, when I was down with the Oxteds, I told her, Uncle Francis, about the awful troubles you had been through—particularly, particularly that one. At the moment I did not know that she was in any way connected with the Houldsworths; I knew of her only what I had seen of her. And then in the middle she stopped me, saying she knew all, saying also that she entirely believed in you.'

Mr. Francis walked on a few steps in silence, and Harry spoke again.

'Perhaps I ought not to have told her,' he said, 'but the Luck held. She was the right person, you see; and somehow—you will agree with me, I think, when you see her—she is a person to whom it is natural to tell things. She is so sympathetic—I have no words—so eager to know what interests and is important to her friends. Yes, already I count myself a friend of hers.'

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'Then her mother had not told her all?' asked Mr. Francis, with the air of one deliberating.

'Not all, not your name. She had no idea that she was talking to the nephew of the man about whom she had heard from her mother.'

Mr. Francis briskened his pace, like a man who has made up his mind.

'You did quite right to tell her, Harry,' he said—'quite right. It would come to her better from you than from anyone else; also it is far better that she should know before she came here, and before you get to know each other better. I have always a dread of the chance word, so dear to novelists, which leads to suspicion or revelations. How intolerable the fear of that would have been! We should all have been in a false position. But now she knows, we have no longer any fear as to how she may take the knowledge; and thank you, dear Harry, for telling her.'

The next two or three days passed quietly and busily. There were many questions of farm and sport to be gone into, many balancings of expenditure and income to be adjusted, and their talk, at any rate, if not their more secret thoughts, was spread over a hundred necessary but superficial channels. Among such topics were a host of businesses for which Mr. Francis required Harry's sanction before he put them in hand—a long section of park-paling required repair, some design of planting must be constructed in order to replace the older trees in the park against the time that decay and rending should threaten them. All these things and many more, so submitted Mr. Francis, were desirable, but it would be well if Harry looked at certain tables of estimates which he had caused to be drawn up before he decided, as he was inclined to do, that everything his uncle recommended should be done without delay. Items, inconsiderable singly, he would find ran to a surprising total when taken together, and he must mention a definite sum which he was prepared to spend, say, before the end of the year, on outdoor improvement. Things in the

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house, too, required careful consideration; the installation of the electric light, for instance, would run away with no negligible sum. How did Harry rank the urgency of indoor luxuries with regard to outdoor improvements? If he intended to entertain at all extensively during the next winter, he would no doubt be inclined to give precedence to affairs under the roof; if not, there were things out of doors which could be mended now at a lesser cost than their completer repair six months hence would require.

Mr. Francis put these things to his nephew with great lucidity and patient impartiality, and Harry, heavily frowning, would wrestle with figures that continually tripped and threw him, and in his mind label all these things as sordid. But the money which he could immediately afford to spend on the house and place was limited, and he had the sense to apply himself to the balancing. At length, after an ink-stained and arithmetical morning, he threw down his pen.

'Electric light throughout, Uncle Francis,' he said, 'and hot water laid on upstairs. There is the ultimatum. The house is more behind than the park, therefore the house first.'

'You see exactly what that will come to?' asked Mr. Francis.

'Yes, according to the estimates you have given me I can afford so much, and the park palings may go to the deuce. One does not live in the park palings, and since you mention it, I dare say I shall ask people here a good deal next winter. Let's see; this is mid-June—let them begin as soon as Lady Oxted and Miss Aylwin have been, and they should be out of the house again by October, though the British workman always takes a longer lease than one expects. I shall want to be here in October. Oh, I wish it was October. Pheasant-shooting, you know,' he added, in a tone of apology.

He tore up some sheets of figures, then looked up at his uncle.

'You will like to have people here, will you not, Uncle Francis?' he asked. 'There shall be young people for you to

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play with, and old people for me to talk to. And we'll shoot, and oh, lots of things !'

He got off his chair, stretching himself slowly and luxuriously.

'Thank goodness I have made up my mind !' he said. 'I thought I was never going to. Come out for a stroll before lunch.'

Whether it was that the multiplicity of the arithmetical concerns came between the two, or, as Harry sometimes fancied, his uncle was not disposed to return to that intimacy of talk which had followed his strange seizure on the first night, did not certainly appear. The upshot, however, was plain enough, and, busy as a committee of ways and means, the two did not renew their conversation about Miss Aylwin and all that bordered there. As far as concerned his own part, Harry did not care to speak of what was so sacred to him, and so near and far; she was the subject for tremulous solitary visions, to discuss was impossible, and to trespass near that ground was to make him silent and awkward. No great deal of intuition was necessary on Mr. Francis's part to understand this, and he also gave a wide berth to possible embarrassments.

The Sunday afternoon following Harry left again for London, for he was dining out that night. He said good-bye to his uncle immediately after lunch, for at the country church there was a children's service which Mr. Francis had to attend, since he was in charge of a certain section of the congregation —those children, in fact, who attended his class in the village Sunday-school.

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CHAPTER XI

MR. FRANCIS SEES HIS DOCTOR

HARRY had held long sessions in his mind as to whether he should or should not ask other people to Vail, to meet Lady Oxted and Miss Aylwin at the end of the month. It was but a thin hospitality, he was afraid, to bring two ladies down to Wiltshire to spend a country Sunday, and provide for their entertainment only the society of himself and his uncle; and this fear gradually deepening to certainty, he hurriedly asked four or five other guests only two days before the projected visit, in revolt all the time at the obligations of a host. All of these, however—as was not unnatural at this fullest time in the year—were otherwise engaged, and he opened each letter of regret with increasing satisfaction. He had been baulked in the prosecution of his duty; it was no use at this late hour trying again.

There were also other reasons against having a party; his uncle's health, for instance, so he wrote to him, had not been very good since his attack. He had been left rather weak and shattered by it, and though his letter was full of that zest and cheerfulness which was so habitual a characteristic with him, Harry felt that it might be better, particularly since his first meeting with Miss Aylwin would of necessity be somewhat of an emotional strain to him, not to tax him further either with the arrangements incidental to a larger party, or with their entertainment. These dutiful considerations, it must be confessed, though perfectly genuine, all led down the paths of his own desires; for it was just the enforced intimacy of a *partie carrée* in the country from which he promised himself such an exquisite pleasure. With a dozen people in the house, his

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time would not be his own; he would have to look after people, make himself agreeable to everybody, and be continually burdened with the hundred petty cares of a host. But the way things were, all that Sunday they would be together, if not in foursome then in pairs; and the number of possible combinations of four people in pairs he could see at once was charmingly limited.

But though to him, personally, the refusal of others to come to his feast was not an occasion for regret, an excuse to the two ladies as to the meagreness of the entertainment he was providing for them, however faltering and insincere, was still required. This he made with a marvellously radiant face a few evenings before their visit, as he sat with them in Lady Oxted's box at the Opera.

'I have to make a confession,' he said, drawing his chair up at the end of the second act of 'Lohengrin,' 'and as you are both so delighted with the music, I will do so now, in the hope that you may let me off easily. There is absolutely no one coming to meet you at Vail; there will be my Uncle Francis and myself, and that is all.'

Evie turned to him.

'That is charming of you,' she said, 'and you have paid us a compliment. It is nothing to be asked as merely one of a crowd, but your asking us alone shows that you don't expect to get bored with us. Make your curtsey, Aunt Violet.'

'But there's the Luck,' said Lady Oxted. 'I gathered that the Luck was the main object of our expedition, though how it was going to amuse us I don't know any more than I know how Dr. Nansen expected the North Pole to amuse him. And why, if you wanted to see it, Evie, Harry could not send for it by parcel-post I never quite grasped.'

'Or luggage train, unregistered,' said Violet. 'Why did you not give it to the first tramp you met, Lord Vail, and ask him to take it carefully to London, for it was of some value, and leave it at a house in Grosvenor Square, the number of which you had forgotten? How stupid of you not to think of

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that! And did you see the Luck when you were down last week?'

'Yes, it came to dinner every night. I used to drink its health.'

'Good gracious, I shall have to take my very smartest things!' cried Evie. 'Fancy having to dress up to the Luck every evening!'

'Give it up, dear, give it up,' said Lady Oxted. 'The Luck will certainly make you look shabby, whatever you wear. Oh those nursery rhymes! Ah, here's Bob! Bob, what can have made you come to the opera?'

Lord Oxted took his seat, and gazed round the house before replying.

'I think it was your absolute certainty that I should not,' he replied. 'I delight in confuting the infallible. For you are an infallible, Violet. It is not your fault; you cannot help it.'

Lady Oxted laughed.

'My poor man,' she said, 'how shallow you must be not to have seen that I only said that in order to make you come!'

'I thought of that,' he said, 'but rejected the suspicion as unworthy. You laid claim, very unconvincingly I allow, the other day to a passion for truth and honour. Indeed, I gave you the benefit of a doubt which never existed. And you all go down to Vail on Saturday? I should like to come, only I have not been asked.'

'No, dear,' said Lady Oxted. 'I forbade Harry to ask you.'

'Oh, you didn't!' began Harry.

'I quite understand,' said Lord Oxted. 'You refrained from asking me on your own account, and if you had suggested such a thing, my wife would have forbidden you. One grows more and more popular, I find, as the years pass.'

'Dear Uncle Bob, you are awfully popular with me,' said Violet. 'Shall I stop and keep you company in London?'

'Yes, please do,' said he.

'But won't it be rather rude to Lord Vail?'

'Yes, but he will forgive you,' said Lord Oxted.

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'Indeed I shan't, Miss Aylwin,' said Harry. 'Don't think it. But will you, then, come to Vail, Lord Oxted? I thought it would be no use asking you.'

'I may not be popular,' said he, 'but I have still a certain pride.'

Here the orchestra poised and plunged headlong into the splendid overture of the third act, and Lady Oxted, whose secret joy was the hope that she might in the fulness of time grow to tolerate Wagner by incessant listening to him, glared furiously at the talkers and closed her eyes. Lord Oxted, it was observed by the others, thereupon stole quietly out of the box.

The curtain rose with the 'Wedding March,' and that done, and the lovers alone, that exquisite duet began, rising like the voices of two larks, from height to infinite height of passion as clear and pure as summer heavens. Then into the soul of that feeblest of heroines began to enter doubt and hesitation; the desire to know what she had promised not to ask grew in the brain until it made itself words, undermining and unbuilding all that on which love rests. Thereafter, the woman having failed, came tumult and death; the hopeless lovers were left face to face with the ruin that want of trust will bring upon all that is highest, and with the drums and the slow, measured rhythm of despair, the act ended.

'The hopeless, idiotic fool of a girl!' remarked Evie, with extreme precision, weighing her words. 'Oh, I lose my patience with her!'

'I thought your tone sounded a little impatient,' said Lady Oxted.

'A little! Why, if Lohengrin had said he wanted to write a letter, she could have looked round the corner to see that he was not flirting with one of the chorus, and have opened his letter afterwards. If there is one thing I despise, it is a suspicious woman.'

'You must find a great many despicable things in this world,' remarked Lady Oxted.

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'Dear aunt, if you attempt to be cynical, I shall go home in a hansom by myself,' said Evie.

'Do, dear, and Harry and I will follow in the brougham. Do you want to stay for the last act?'

'No; I would sooner go away. I am rather tired, and Elsa has put me in a bad temper. Good-bye, Lord Vail, and expect us on Sunday afternoon; please order fine weather. It will be enchanting; I am so looking forward to it.'

Harry himself went down to Vail on Friday afternoon, for he wished both to satisfy himself that everything was arranged for the comfort of his visitors, and also to meet them himself when they came. The only train he could conveniently catch did not stop at his nearest station, and he telegraphed home that they should meet him at Didcot. This implied a ten-mile drive, and his train being late on arrival, he put the cobs to their best pace in order to reach Vail in time for dinner. Turning quickly and rather recklessly into the lodge gates, he had to pull up sharply in order to avoid collision with one of his own carriages which was driving away from the house. A stable-helper, not in livery, held the reins, and by his side sat a man of dark, spare aspect, a stranger to him. As soon as they had passed he turned round to the groom who sat behind.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'I don't know his name, my lord,' said he, 'but I drove him from the station last Monday. He has been staying with Mr. Francis since then.'

Harry was conscious ot a slight feeling of vexation, arising from several causes. In the first place—and here a sense ot dignity spoke—any guest either of his or his uncle's ought to be driven to the station properly, not by a man in a cap and a brown coat. In the second place, though he was delighted that Uncle Francis should ask any friend he chose to stay with him, Harry considered that he ought to have been told. He had received a long letter from his uncle two days ago, in which he went at some length into the details of his days, but made no mention of a guest. In the third place, the appearance of

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the man was somehow grossly and uncomfortably displeasing to him.

These things simmered in his mind as he drove up the long avenue, and every now and then a little bubble of resentment, as it were, would break on the surface. He half wondered at himself for the pertinacity with which his mind dwelt on them, and he determined, with a touch of that reserve and secrecy which still lingered in corners and angles of his nature, that if his uncle did not choose of his own initiative to tell him about this man, he would ask no questions, but merely not forget the circumstance. This reticence on his own part, so he told himself, was in no way to be put down to secretiveness, but rather to decency of manners. His uncle might have the Czar of all the Russias, if he chose, to stay with him ; and if he did not think fit to mention that autocrat's visit, even though it was in all the daily papers, it would be rude even for his nephew to ask him about it. But he knew, if he faced himself quite honestly, that though good manners were sufficient excuse for his reticence, he preferred to employ secretiveness, and nothing else was the reason for silence. Certainly he wished that the man had not been so disrelishing to the eye ; there was something even sinister about the glance he had got of him.

Mr. Francis was in the most cheery and excellent spirits, and delighted to see him. He was employed in spudding plantains from the lawn as the carriage drove up. But, abandoning this homely but useful performance as soon as he heard the wheels on the road, he almost ran to meet him.

'Ages, it seems literally ages, since you were here, dear boy !' he said. 'And see, Harry, I have not been idle in preparing for our charming visitors. Croquet !' and he pointed to a large deal box that lay underneath the clipped yew-hedge.

'Templeton and I found the box in a gardener's shed,' he said, 'and we have been washing and cleaning it up. Ah ! what a fascinating game, and how it sets off the ingenuity of the feminine mind ! I was a great hand at it once, and I think I can strike the ball still. Come, dear boy, let us get

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in; it is already dinner-time. Ah! my flute—it would never do to leave that;' and he tripped gaily off to a garden-seat near, on which lay the case containing that favourite instrument.

It happened that at dinner the same night Mr. Francis passed Harry through a sort of affectionate catechism, asking him to give exhaustive account of the manner in which he had spent the hours since he left Vail a fortnight ago. Harry complied with his humour, half shy, half proud of the number that had to be laid inside Lady Oxted's door, and when this was finished, 'Now it is my turn, Uncle Francis,' he said. 'Begin at the beginning, and tell me all as fully as I have to you.'

'Well, dear Harry, if I have not galloped about like you, taking ditch and fence, I have trotted along a very pleasant road,' he said. 'All the week after you left me I was much employed in writing about estimates and details with regard to the electric light. You must look at those to-morrow. They will be rather more expensive than we had anticipated, unless you have fewer lights of higher power. However, that business was finished, I remember, on Saturday. On Sunday I had my class, and dawdled very contentedly through the day. All this week I have been busy in little ways. One day will serve for another. At the books all morning, and in the afternoon pottering about alone, doing a bit of gardener's work here, feeding the pheasants there—and they are getting on capitally—or down at the farm. Then very often a nap before dinner and a blow on the flute afterwards. A sweet, happy, solitary time.'

The servants had left the room, and as Mr. Francis said these words he looked closely at Harry, and saw his face, as he thought, harden. The lips were a little compressed, the arch of the eyebrows raised ever so little; something between surprise and a frown contracted them. He had already thought it more than possible that Harry might have met the other trap driving away from the house, and he thought he saw confirmation of it in his face. He sighed.

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'Ah, Harry,' he said, 'can you not trust me?'

Mr. Francis's voice was soft, almost broken; his blue eyes glistened in the candle-light, but still looked intently at his nephew. And at the amenity and affection in his tone the boy's reserve and secretiveness, which he had labelled good manners, utterly broke down.

'You have read my thoughts,' he said, 'and I apologize. But why—why not have told me, Uncle Francis? You would not have thought I should mind you having whom you liked here.'

Mr. Francis sighed again.

'I will tell you now,' he said, slightly accentuating the last word. 'I did not tell you before; I purposely concealed it now; yes, I even used the word "solitary" about my life during the last week in order to save you anxiety.'

'Anxiety?' asked Harry.

'Yes. You met, probably, somewhere near the lodge gates, one of your carriages going to the station. A man out of livery drove it, a man of middle age sat by him. He was my doctor, Harry, and he came here on Monday last. I wished'—and his tone was frankness to the core—'I wished to get him out of the house before you came. I did not know you were coming till this afternoon, and I saw he could just catch the train to town. I ordered the carriage to take him instantly, and the man had not time to get into livery. That is all.'

At once Harry was all compunction and anxiety. He left his chair at the end of the table, and drew up close beside his uncle.

'Dear Uncle Francis,' he said, 'what was his opinion of your health? He was satisfied?'

'Fairly well satisfied,' said Mr. Francis. 'The upshot was that I must live very quietly, and take no great exertion, and guard against quick movements. I might then hope—I might certainly hope—to live several more years yet. At my age, he said, one must not go hurdle-racing. Seventy-three—well, well, I am getting on for seventy-three.'

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