

Mother of the Bride

**Alice Grant
Rosman**

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MOTHER *of the* BRIDE

BY
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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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TO MY AMERICAN FRIENDS

KNOWN AND UNKNOWN
IN GRATEFUL APPRECIATION

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Mother of the Bride

Chapter I MISS GODOLPHIN

1

The day before Noel Lister's wedding Mrs. Moreland sailed into the office of Moreland and Lister looking more than ever like a neat and affable cockatoo. A woman of no mental attainments and a great deal of energy, she liked to keep every one about her busy, and therefore the chauffeur who had followed her with a package was directed to hand it to a clerk, and he in turn was ordered to precede Mrs. Moreland with it to her husband's room.

"You will handle it carefully, and be good enough some one, to open the door," said the lady, and the procession started.

Old Mr. Moreland, deep in his morning's mail, put the letters aside with a faint sigh at this invasion of his privacy.

He had married at a period when wives, like the furniture and house-linen, were expected to last a lifetime, and was still profoundly shocked at any other view, but in his inmost heart he must sometimes have wished that he had after all chosen a less serviceable specimen.

"I am really very much occupied, my dear," he protested, more from force of habit than in any hope that she would be gone, however.

"The Venetian glass, Tom. The child's wedding present has arrived at last," announced his wife triumphantly. "Though I must say Maud was not as clever with the Customs as I had every reason to expect. A pretty penny I have had to pay for it first and last."

"The country must have revenue, Agnes, and at least the little gift has come in time, let us be thankful for that."

Mr. Moreland was tired of the Venetian glass, of which he had heard too often and too long. The whole of Mrs. Moreland's world had heard of it, in fact, including the bride and her family.

"I shall give you a sherry set in Venetian glass, Noel."

"Charles, we are sending your girl some Venetian glass."

“I am extremely busy, my dear, ransacking London, literally, for Venetian glass—a wedding gift for a young friend.”

But nothing in London had pleased the inveterate shopper, chiefly perhaps because a cousin, reputed to be clever with the Customs, had providentially decided to visit Italy. Mr. Moreland had liked neither the hint of smuggling nor the fragility of such a present for a bride going half across the world. He was ashamed of so much shabby ostentation and had every intention of slipping a check into Noel’s hand in saying good-bye to her tomorrow, behind his wife’s back. An old-fashioned man of rather formal mind, he felt that dignity required no less of him towards the daughter of Charles Lister, who had been his partner for twenty-five years.

Now, therefore, he said with assumed cheerfulness:

“So you want Charles to take it out this evening for you, I suppose?”

“Trust it to Charles? Certainly not,” returned Mrs. Moreland briskly. “I shall send Miss Godolphin at once ... by the Tube. She’s a good sensible creature and I can depend upon her. You might ring the bell for her while I speak to Charles.”

It was useless to protest. She had too long used her husband’s office as a kind of annex to the home. Miss Godolphin was duly summoned, while Mrs. Moreland flung open the dividing door without troubling to knock, and descended upon the junior partner.

She was in the habit of saying that she had known Charles Lister all his life, because his elder brother had married into a distant branch of her family. This connection had never been anything but a discomfort to Charles, for his brother’s widow was a fool and a frequent charge upon him; moreover, it had induced Mrs. Moreland to take him under her wing, as she put it. The humor of this metaphor from one of her type of countenance had ceased to amuse him in the course of years, for it merely meant that she felt herself privileged to be dictatorial to him on all occasions.

This morning as he rose from his desk to greet her, to hear the news of the Venetian glass which Miss Godolphin was to carry to Hampstead immediately, he smiled without quite taking in what all this was about, her onslaught having drawn him all too suddenly from the contemplation of more urgent affairs. He was a tall man in the late forties, rather moody and given to fits of abstraction, but still with a certain charm of manner, and to Mrs. Moreland’s sharp eyes he looked ill.

“What’s the matter with you, Charles?” she exclaimed, in the vigorous tone of one who has no patience with infirmity, mental or physical. “It’s all this wedding excitement, I’ve no doubt, and the thought of parting with your girl. You should be thankful she is making a good marriage and not running off for week-ends in the modern manner. You look to me on the verge of a breakdown, and I shall tell Margaret so. She had better shut up the house, pack off the servants on their summer holiday and take you to the sea. Brace you up,” finished Mrs. Moreland with the satisfied air of one arranging the universe.

He assured her there was nothing wrong, except a slight tendency to insomnia combined with a press of work, and she said:

“Then you should take a good brisk walk before going to bed. My father made a practice of it and slept like a child until he was eighty. And look at me. I am always on my feet and never ill. Don’t sit about. There is far too much of it nowadays.”

Mrs. Moreland, ignoring the fact that Charles could hardly avoid sitting to conduct his business, planted her serviceable feet firmly before her, and sat up straight in her chair to emphasize the point.

“And, by the way, I have been making inquiries about young Flinders’ connections, and you may tell Margaret I am more than satisfied. The family is quite a good one, so I hope you have seen to it that he has made a proper settlement on Noel.”

Charles shifted uncomfortably.

“I am afraid he isn’t in a position to do that,” he said. “Few young men are in these bad times.”

“But there are bound to be reversions, if that is what you call them. You can take it from me that he has expectations, and those should be secured to his bride,” insisted the visitor firmly. “A father has no right to be weak, and you should look into the matter thoroughly before it is too late. And I hope you have talked seriously to Noel about the duties of a soldier’s wife. When children come she will of course have to send them home to Margaret. India is no climate for them and a wife’s place is beside her husband on all occasions. The way to lose a man is to leave him, you can take it from me,” repeated Mrs. Moreland, who had certainly, thought Charles, run no risks.

He hedged as best he could and presently followed her into the senior partner’s room to see the parcel, hear her instructions to Miss Godolphin, to murmur appropriate thanks and agree that he would see her at tomorrow’s

wedding. Then he excused himself and went back to his work, breathing a sigh of relief.

Her vitality was enervating and for the first time he realized that he did in fact feel far from well. The plea of insomnia had been true enough, but that was an old story and its aggravation due to other causes than the wedding excitement and the thought of losing his girl. These trite phrases, all this promiscuous advice!

Noel was to be married tomorrow to Arnold Flinders. He stared at the fact but saw it merely as a succession of empty words. He tried to visualize the two young people, bitterly aware that each was as strange to him as the other, and he knew that he would be glad when it was all over and they were gone, thankful beyond belief.

“My wife seems to think you are in need of a change, my boy,” remarked the senior partner later in the morning. He found it difficult to remember sometimes that the other was not still a mere lad, but he was really attached to him in his own reserved fashion, and he glanced at him sharply. “Upon my word, you do look rather pulled down, Charles, now I come to think of it. Can’t you ease up a bit?”

“Oh, there’s no need for that, thanks. They always think you can down tools at a moment’s notice,” said Charles.

“What, Margaret feels the same way about you, then?”

“Good lord, no. I meant that was generally the woman’s view.”

“Yes, quite.”

The old man nodded and did not pursue the subject, but he found himself thinking of Margaret Lister and how years ago, contrary to all his preconceived ideas of intelligent women whom it was his nature to distrust, she had turned the scale when the question of the partnership was in the balance. Young Lister’s abilities had never been in question, but he had seemed rather too popular, too likely to be a lady’s man—Mr. Moreland kept to the phrases of his period rigidly—and one never knew what undesirable complications that might mean; but meeting the young man’s wife with her undeniable quality and good sense, had set his doubts at rest. Quite rightly too. Lister had settled down, had proved of late years indeed almost obsessed with the business,—overdoing it, was he? Well, that wouldn’t do, too sound a man to be spared, a thoroughly decent fellow in a world where, thought his elder with a sigh, the decencies were far too much neglected.

Well, he had his reward, had Charles, a devoted wife, a charming home and two nice children, the boy already settled and doing well, and little Noel beginning the adventure tomorrow. They would miss her, of course, that was to be expected. Agnes for once was right. They should get away for a bit—have a second honeymoon now the chicks were flown.

Mr. Moreland, with this pretty picture of an empty dove-cote in his mind, smiled a sympathetic Victorian smile, and determined to have a word with Margaret tomorrow.

2

The Listers' house at Hampstead was on a hill in one of those quiet roads still mercifully unspoilt by the jerry-builder—a road of pleasant gardens and substantial houses of the late Victorian period, not altogether guiltless therefore of turrets, gables and various excrescences in iron-work and stone. Long ago the Listers had removed the ridiculous narrow balconies clinging about their upper windows and planted climbing roses and virginia-creeper, so that the architect's worst indiscretions were by now annulled. They had had many other plans for the improvement of the place in those eager years when even the changing of a room or the planting of a rose-bush became an adventure because it was shared, but few of these had come to anything. Nowadays Charles took no interest whatever in the house and behaved towards the garden as though it were a national treasure and he the jealous custodian. It had become soulless in consequence, and much admired by people of no imagination. If his children woke it to life in his absence, their mother went round carefully removing chairs, cushions and any other signs of their guilt before he came home, saying, "You know what your father is," in the disingenuous way of mothers who do not intend them to know anything of the kind.

If the Listers' home then was like a thousand others, it had one real attraction, for it looked to the right over the trees and valleys of the Heath as upon an immeasurable stretch of country touched to a thousand beauties by the changing seasons, though to the left, ten minutes' walk down the hill, were Tubes, cinemas, petrol pumps and all the amenities or atrocities of today, as you chose to regard them.

Up this hill that fine June morning walked Miss Godolphin, carrying Mrs. Moreland's Venetian glass. A sensible young woman somewhere in the thirties (and destined to remain there for another ten years or so with any luck), she knew that fresh air and exercise were essential to one who worked every day in a City office, and she had set off from the Tube station with

brisk pleasure. It was so quiet on the long hill that the sound of her footsteps seemed almost an assault upon the silence, and when a bird sang suddenly she tried to hush them, listening with a sharp sensation of delight to the lovely liquid thread of his song. This to her mind was the way to live, with space—but not too much—about you, with smooth lawns, clipped hedges and a few trees for privacy and shade.

But the precious package was heavier than she had supposed and the sun unbearably hot. Halfway up the hill she paused, discouraged, aware that at this rate she would reach her destination looking none of the things she most desired to appear, cool, competent and faintly aloof as became one—a little unjustifiably perhaps—a complete stranger there.

Miss Godolphin sighed as she took out the mirror from her bag and surveyed her hot face, then carefully wiped away the perspiration and applied her powderpuff. Somehow the dark coat and small hat which had seemed to her quite smart in setting out this morning, had lost their freshness in the strong sunlight; and the sight of a girl striding ahead of her in a sleeveless cotton frock and shady hat further added to her discomfort.

The frock was of apple-green, some figured material, like a pale lawn with daisies spread upon it, and it looked so fresh and gay that it seemed to the other girl typical of the fortunate leisured world into which for a moment she would presently be stepping—a world of young men and women, sun-bathing, cruising, playing tennis and dancing the summer through without a care, all of course exquisitely clad.

The picture had been created by shop-windows, newspaper photographs and the movies between them, and the unconscious wearer of the green frock had brought it to life. Miss Godolphin, abandoning common-sense, envied her bitterly.

She wished now that she had taken a taxi from the station, but Mrs. Moreland had mentioned the Tube particularly, saying nothing of taxis, and as confidential secretary to the heads of the firm, Miss Godolphin was fastidious about claiming the fares from petty cash on an occasion like this, as though she were an errand girl and not merely doing a favor for Mrs. Moreland.

Such favors were many and various. If Mrs. Moreland wanted some shopping done, a servant interviewed, seats booked in trains or theaters, she rang up Miss Godolphin as a matter of course, and the energetic secretary curtailed her luncheon hour, transferred some of her less important duties to an inferior and fulfilled these commissions with competence and dispatch.

Mrs. Moreland in fact considered her husband's employees as among the more useful domestic animals, but Miss Godolphin reaped her own measure of satisfaction from these unjustified calls upon her. She liked to know what Mrs. Moreland paid her cook, where she proposed to spend the summer and what material she had selected for her drawing-room curtains; not that she was a busybody, far from it, discretion being her stock-in-trade, but because the knowledge made her feel important, necessary and therefore secure.

As she continued her way up the hill she reflected rather wistfully that had this been a Moreland and not a Lister wedding, she would have been in the thick of it, run off her feet, with not a moment to call her own—a delicious sensation this to a solitary woman, and the reality in comparison made her feel slightly hostile to the house she was approaching.

It was queer, to say the least of it, she thought, that in seven years with the firm she had neither seen nor had any communication with Mr. Lister's family. A secretary for half her life, she had a wide experience of what she called office wives, the jealous, the humble, the dominating, the fluffy and the avaricious; but a practically non-existent wife was something new and strange, and she was frankly curious about the visit ahead of her.

She had seen the bride's photograph certainly, not on her father's desk, where you might expect to find it, but in her daily newspaper some weeks ago. She had felt a proprietary pride in the fact that the marriage was as important as that, forgetting that photographers must live and newspapers sell, and believing with the majority of her sex that such publicity is only attained by the best people.

Indeed it had increased her respect for Mr. Lister, to whom in her own reserved fashion, she had always been devoted. Where old Mr. Moreland was irascible and often unjust, the younger partner was the natural pivot for the staff's affection, for he was both considerate and kind—appreciative too, indeed, thought Miss Godolphin. When flowers appeared on his desk he never failed to notice them with surprise and pleasure, quite touched by the attention. He was grateful too when one inquired for his insomnia—as small a thing as that. It was more than likely the poor man was neglected at home. His wife no doubt was a society butterfly and his daughter another. Miss Godolphin walking up the hill, grew more and more prepared to dislike the pair of them.

Felicity Osborne, the girl in the cotton frock whose cool appearance had disturbed the secretary, reached the Listers' gate and, before turning in, cast a hopeful eye down the road in search of young men in cars. She was to be the chief bridesmaid tomorrow and quite as much as Miss Godolphin she liked the rush and bustle of a wedding, always so long as it was duly embellished by attendant males.

There were far too few of these in daily life for Felicity's taste, and the prospect with Noel gone looked pretty grim, she thought. Noel had always been able to rouse up some bright spirits and willing to share them. She was not only easy to look at but easy to like, and the empty nest of Mr. Moreland's fancy would be in Felicity's view a howling and empty wilderness, or perhaps a garden of Eden from which not merely Eve but any number of useful Adams had gone.

"Blank," she remarked to the road inhabited only by a toiling young woman with a parcel, and strode up the Listers' drive hoping for better sport. Up here on the heights a breeze rustled the leaves deliciously, tempering the hot sunlight and filling the air with the scent of roses and the cool damp smell of leaves and grass; but these agreeable manifestations of the season meant nothing to Felicity, though she picked a rose and put it in her frock, saying to it:

"Now don't go and die on me. Be a sport. You look rather well there."

It was a pity after these preparations that there was no car before the house. However, on the far lawn to the right men were putting up a marquee under Mrs. Lister's direction, and she sauntered across to give them the benefit of her advice.

"Another yard or so back, why not?" she shouted cheerfully.

The men stopped work and stared at the approaching figure, but Mrs. Lister merely turned her head, then nodded to them to go on.

"Not an inch, Felicity. Charles will be furious if they damage his garden-beds, and I am determined to keep well away from them."

"But Charles has dozens of garden-beds and only one daughter. You are too weak with the man. You need me to deal with him."

"Oh, go *away*!"

Felicity laughed.

"Do you mean to tell me none of my lazy staff have arrived yet?" she inquired.

“Staff?” echoed her hostess. “Am I expected to give luncheon to all you young wretches today, of all days? Then you may break the news to Ada yourself, my dear, and if she poisons you, don’t blame me.”

“I’ll manage Ada. We’re bosom friends. A spot of flattery and the thing will be done. After all, I can’t be expected to run this wedding single-handed,” said Miss Osborne in a reasonable tone. “It’s pretty sickening to be the mother of the bride, so you might as well admit it. You can’t kid me.”

“Sickening? Not at all,” returned Mrs. Lister.

“Not even when the bride is Noel and India is waiting with gaping jaws to swallow her up, you unnatural woman? Why, I was just going to offer to be a daughter to you.... No use? Ah, well, perhaps you’re right. Beware of imitations.”

Felicity took herself off, not much cast down by the lack of response to this kind proposal. Her own home was a place to avoid and she had no intention of losing her entrée to this one if human ingenuity could prevent it. She had tried the sentimental stop experimentally because, in spite of her sarcastic manner, Mrs. Lister had never seemed to grudge Noel her fun or her friends, and what could that mean, unless that she was the old-fashioned fond parent, thinly disguised. This household apart, there were only two parental types in Felicity’s experience, the dear-and-darling-don’t-vex-mother kind who simply made you curl up inside with embarrassment, or those mothers like her own who wanted all the fun themselves. She had so long come in and out of the house at her pleasure, stayed casually to meals if it suited her, used the telephone and the tennis court and shared Noel’s friends and pursuits, that she had acquired almost a squatter’s right to the place, in her own estimation at least.

The hall door was open so she walked in without troubling to ring the bell, pulling off her hat as she went and flinging it deftly to rest on the banister post at the foot of the stairs. This formality would inform the household of her arrival; it was a cross between a visiting-card and a flag of residence, and some one would in due course remove the hat to the row of pegs in the passage beyond.

The lounge and drawing-room were being turned into one for tomorrow’s reception and the hall was piled with chairs and rugs. Skirting them she made for the kitchen, opening the frigidaire under Ada’s nose and persuading her by a mixture of blandishment and impudence that four or five extra to lunch was a mere nothing to one of her caliber.

Ada, who knew what she knew about the Osborne household, gave in after a weak protest, having a liking for the young lady, and, the good work done, Felicity mounted the stairs in search of her friend.

Noel was in her bedroom surrounded by trunks, suitcases and the trousseau. She and Arnold were to have ten days in Paris before joining their ship at Marseilles, and something of the strangeness of the very different world into which she was going, had come home to her vividly this morning, so that Felicity's appearance, being a thing familiar, was in a sense a relief. Tall and bonny, with ruffled short hair and very blue eyes, she stood among her mounds of clothes, grinning a welcome.

"Camp on the bed or somewhere, will you, Felix. Arnold has to lunch an uncle, so I'm seizing the chance to pack," she said.

"Has Auntie Moreland's present turned up yet?" inquired the visitor, accepting the invitation.

"No, of course not. You'd have heard the brass band."

"Funny ass!"

But such a nice ass, somehow. And tomorrow Arnold would be carrying her off. "Oh, hell," mourned Felicity into Noel's pillow.

"Somebody's coming up the drive," remarked Noel at this moment, and the pillow was sent flying while Felicity leapt to see.

"Oh that?" she exclaimed looking down with disgust upon Miss Godolphin. "I saw her plodding up the hill as I came in. She's probably selling something unless it's a bomb from one of Arnold's lady-loves.... I say, Noel, if I marry Martin and come out to India shall I be stationed near you, or not?"

"*Are* you going to marry Martin?" inquired Noel, startled.

"How do I know? I'll have to work jolly fast if I am, as I may never set eyes on him after tomorrow night," admitted Felicity all too cheerfully.

"You can't be such a fool as to marry a man you don't love and hardly know, Felix."

"Oh, love, what is it anyway? Who can tell?"

"You'll know all right when you catch it," said Noel.

Felicity had returned to the bed, piling the pillows behind her, and at this very bridal remark she snorted. Love indeed? A jolly one-sided affair at the

best of times and she had no use for it, but marriage was another matter. It was just like the silly world that Noel, with no particular need to marry, should strike it lucky, while she was left.

Seeing marriage as a necessity Felicity intended to be hard and practical about it; she would have to scheme very likely and do it secretly at that, for it was all very well for old Noel to spout about love and go all wuzzy over Arnold, but she hadn't a mother who snaffled her young men under her eyes.

"It's sort of definite, for one thing," announced Noel, as one who had been seeking a formula.

"So are influenza, measles, egomania and the hives. Look about you. And what does that prove, I ask you? That you'll recover or you'll die. What's the good of it?"

"You have got the pip, Felix. Why?" asked Noel.

"Not at all. I'm just telling you," said Felicity turning over and punching the pillow.

"That's a lie, too."

"Well, you don't expect me to tell the truth at my age, surely. I'm not a child in arms. And anyway I know you too well."

Noel lifted a frock on its hanger, examined it minutely and put it back in the wardrobe trunk.

"I see what you mean, of course," she said at last, "but I'll be gone tomorrow, miles away, so I'm next door to a total stranger, after all."

"Well, you needn't rub it in, dam' your eyes," retorted the guest.

If Noel had been offering her a chance for confidences as she believed, it was decent of her, thought Felicity, but you couldn't chuck your problems on her shoulders and blight her wedding and honeymoon. You couldn't, if it came to that, chuck them on anybody without becoming a public menace, and there were plenty of those already. So she began to carol about the young man on the flying trapeze and Noel gave up all pretense of packing and leaned on her corner windowsill to look at the Heath.

"I shall miss my private park," she said.

"But you'll have a nice jungle. Don't be so fussy. Full of pretty tigers, dear. And I hope they'll crunch that Arnold's bones."

“Um?” said Noel absently. Looking down upon the distant trees which had been a jungle in its time, tiger-ridden too when she and Owen had been of an age for tigers, she thought of more than this that she would miss, and of the queer difficulty of speech between people who are near. A little wind blew in, bringing her the salty smell of tar from some roadway under repair, and with it a sudden memory of Owen, who had once in the holidays driven a steam-roller with disastrous results to his clothes, so that they had had to pool their pocket-money and rush his suit to the cleaner’s, under the rose. And then their mother had found out and most unexpectedly had paid them back in that dry way of hers, while they stood abashed and grinning, quite incapable of thanks.

Thinking of Owen and her sphinx-like mother, she felt the pang of parting in advance, mixed with an uneasy sense of the quiet house when she was gone. In spite of her carefree exterior Noel had imagination and suffered its disabilities—all the possible discomforts and distresses of those about her. Only her brother Owen, being nearer to her than any one else, had discovered this, and tried to cure her of the habit, declaring it weakminded, idiotic and just like a girl. “But I am a girl,” she had retorted with spirit, “not a sheep to follow you.” Yet his baiting had had at least the effect of making her wary of her own fears, and now she shook off the thought of the quiet house, reminding herself that her mother had been delighted about her engagement to Arnold, had raised no obstacles against the hasty wedding and had made everything easy for them from the first.

“Of course she’ll still have father,” reflected Noel, “and I suppose she loves him in a way ... she must.”

Love. There it was again. How could you possibly explain it to your best friend except by saying it was definite, unless you wanted her to laugh in your face?

Noel knew now that love is no laughing matter, that it can come upon you unawares and carry you off almost before you realize it, away from everything you have ever known, can make you in the same moment frightened and brave, happy and in despair.

Was Felicity serious about Martin after all, perhaps loving him secretly and wanting a chance? Noel found that she had selfishly forgotten her friend and began quickly to plan what could be done in the short time remaining. Martin Croft was to be Arnold’s best man, and surely therefore they could find some excuse for his presence at Hampstead this afternoon, if only she

could reach him by telephone. Being on leave, he had no work to do, though the chances were of course he might have some other engagement.

“Look here, Felix, I’m going to ring up Martin and ask him to come over and help,” she exclaimed, making up her mind.

“Don’t worry, he’s coming,” said Felicity with calm. “Ought to be here any minute now, as a matter of fact. I fixed it up with him last night, you poor mug, because it stands to reason we must have a rehearsal and all that, if you don’t want us all to straggle up the aisle.”

“Oh!”

Noel smiled at the stratagem because it was too transparent to deceive a child. Felicity’s underground methods were always aboveboard, as Owen had once sapiently remarked.

There was a knock at the bedroom door and a maid appeared.

“The mistress wants you to go down, Miss Noel. There’s a young lady there. I think it is perhaps another present, miss.”

Felicity rolled off the bed and smoothed her hair.

“Now, shall I fly down and seize the bomb, or wait like a perfect lady till I’m invited?” she inquired of the air.

“Yes, come along,” said Noel. “Mother can always turn you out.”

“I know. She’s such a talented woman,” agreed the visitor.

4

Mrs. Lister was still in the garden when Miss Godolphin reached the house, alternately watching the workmen and consulting a list of the hundred and one details for tomorrow yet to be arranged.

In physique (as in her dress at this moment) she might have been her daughter Noel, her short thick hair blown back from her face by the wind and her head held with the same youthful ease, but there was little other resemblance any more. The years had sharpened her features and perhaps her mind at the expense of that quality Mr. Moreland had sensed in the girl she had been; and she was inevitably as far from the virtuous Cornelia of his imagining as from the benevolent Sphinx of Noel’s fancy. She was indeed sufficiently vulnerable in spite of self-contempt to some private devil of her own to feel a throb of intolerable memory then of very present fear, at the parlormaid’s announcement:

“There’s a lady to see you, madam. Miss Dolphin, I think she said.”

“Dolphin, Spence? Oh, no, surely not! What sort of lady?”

“A youngish lady. She asked for you by name and gave her own as though you’d know it, madam. Dolphin, it sounded like to me. I’ve had to put her in the dining-room seeing as we’re turning out.”

“Very well, I will come in,” said her mistress.

But she did not go in at once. She stood turning over her notes and seeing nothing, every nerve awake, while an inward voice cried, “Not again. Not today of all days.”

Gathering her forces, planning defensively, it was entirely of Noel that she was thinking now, Noel who still for a little while must be protected, must be allowed to begin her new life, happy and undisturbed. Despairingly she had a sense of having dropped her guard and so let danger in, by thinking during these weeks of preparation for Noel’s wedding, only of her own coming release.

She was so convinced of some threat in this stranger’s visit that Miss Godolphin’s suspicions of her seemed in the first moment of meeting to have been all too well justified.

“You wish to see me?” said Mrs. Lister coldly. “The maid didn’t quite catch your name.”

“Godolphin.” As this seemed to convey nothing to her employer’s wife, the girl added rather indignantly, “Mr. Lister’s secretary.”

“I see.”

The visitor was going to be aggressive then? She was red in the face, dangerous probably, but Margaret Lister was determined to give her no help in whatever she had come to say.

“And of course Mr. Moreland’s too, if it comes to that,” chattered Miss Godolphin, quite unnerved by the other’s chilly voice and level glance. “Since Miss Bennett went I do the confidential work for both partners. Mrs. Moreland asked me to bring out Miss Lister’s wedding present, Mrs. Lister, because being glass and very fragile, she didn’t care to trust it to any ordinary messenger.”

Stooping to pick up the package and place it on the table, Miss Godolphin added with dignity:

"I hope you will find it quite in order, I'm sure," and then saw to her complete bewilderment that a transformation had taken place.

Mrs. Lister was now quite human.

"But how kind of you to undertake the responsibility. And I am afraid you are very hot. You don't mean to say you have carried that all the way up from the Tube? My husband should have warned you to take a taxi," she said kindly.

Oh, well, Miss Godolphin was fond of walking but it *had* been rather a climb, having to be so careful of the parcel and everything. And no doubt Mr. Lister would have expected her to take a taxi, knowing the hill, for he was most considerate, but it wouldn't occur to him to say anything—not when it was Mrs. Moreland's errand—naturally.

"Well, you must sit down and get cool," said Mrs. Lister. "And take off your coat and hat for a few minutes, won't you, while I send for my daughter. I daresay you would like to see the present. She can unpack it in here."

Miss Godolphin admitted that she would be glad to tell Mrs. Moreland the glass was intact certainly, for it had come from Italy only last night, and Mrs. Moreland had been really very anxious about it for weeks past, quite upset, in fact, fearing it would be late for the wedding after all.

The secretary, thus exhibiting her intimacy with the senior partner's wife, might, for all the effect it had, have saved her breath, for Margaret Lister, ringing for a servant to bring a newspaper and scissors and to call down Miss Noel, let the flood of words roll over her head. The tragedy was a comedy, after all, and in her relief she felt a mild compunction towards the innocent Miss Godolphin, but very little interest in what she had to say. Her devotion to the considerate Charles was evident, but to one sent hither and thither by Mrs. Moreland, consideration, thought Charles's wife dryly, would be a comparative term perhaps.

"I have been seven years with Mr. Lister now," the secretary announced further.

"Really? I am sure he finds you invaluable," returned Mrs. Lister.

The door burst open to admit the two girls, who were duly introduced.

"Noel, this is your father's secretary who has kindly brought out Mrs. Moreland's wedding present," said her mother. "Miss Godolphin, Miss Osborne."

Noel smiled at the visitor and attacked her gift in a business-like manner. Miss Osborne nodded familiarly and sat on the dining-table to watch proceedings.

Seen at close quarters the girl in the apple-green dress was not so formidable after all. She had no lovely golden tan induced by sun-bathing and Mediterranean cruises; she was merely sallow and as thin as a rake, with scarlet lips put on in slapdash fashion and therefore deceiving nobody. It did not occur to Miss Godolphin that they were not meant to deceive and that Felicity wore them as she wore a hat, almost unconsciously, the rôle of siren never having occurred to her. She was, in fact, it presently appeared, uncommonly ignorant, for when the first piece was unrolled by her friend she exclaimed:

“I say, what pretty Woolworth glasses.”

“Indeed no. They are real Venetian glass. Made to Mrs. Moreland’s order. In Venice,” corrected Miss Godolphin, much scandalized.

To which of course Felicity replied, “No?!” with evident wonder and astonishment. Fortunately at this moment the sound of a car on the gravel outside reminded her of urgent business elsewhere, and Mrs. Lister presently following, Noel was left to do the honors.

Noel was kind and Miss Godolphin thereafter had what she considered a lovely time. She was shown the presents and the wedding dress and at last, coming downstairs into a hall suddenly alive with noisy young people, all drinking iced cider, she found a long fizzing glass pressed into her hand while Miss Lister called for a volunteer to drive her to the Tube.

“I say, you’re not going?” exclaimed a young man reproachfully to the strange girl, under the impression that she was one of the crowd. (It was nearly as good as the wedding itself, in Miss Godolphin’s view.)

Finally, Felicity drove the car, while the owner of it sat perilously outspread on the dashboard, holding on by two fingers, and the visitor, feeling almost gay, was delivered to the Tube and went back to town.

It had been quite an adventure and she was delighted with Mr. Lister’s family after all. The bride was a sweet girl and Miss Godolphin could already see her coming out of church on the bridegroom’s arm under an archway of crossed swords. As he was a soldier this was almost certain, wasn’t it? She wished she had asked Miss Lister, for it had always seemed to her a very pretty fashion; though of course with his regiment in India it might be difficult perhaps. Mrs. Lister too had been kind, after the first few

moments. Miss Godolphin could quite understand her chilly reception now she looked back upon it. It was due to a natural reserve and the fact that her name was unfamiliar to her employer's wife. An intrusion by a stranger at that hour of the morning and right in the middle of the wedding preparations—well, wouldn't any woman resent it? It was unbelievable of course that Mr. Lister had never mentioned her at home, but no doubt he called her by some name of his own—Dolly, perhaps; the clerks, she knew, referred to her thus among themselves, or more likely, "that girl of mine" or even perhaps, "my invaluable secretary." Indeed Mrs. Lister had used this very word (giving him away), and Miss Godolphin glowed to remember it.

She would have much to tell him of her visit and she rehearsed all the nice things she would say, things destined, alas, never to be said, like most imagined conversations, because when the moment comes the other party to them never takes his cue. In fact, her one poor effort in this direction disheartened Miss Godolphin. She had inquired before leaving whether she could take any message to Mr. Lister from his wife. "Oh, no, I don't think so, thank you," had been the reply. "The preparations are going along quite well and there is no need to worry him about anything."

This non-committal statement became slightly inverted in transit, owing no doubt to the excitement of the morning and Miss Godolphin's wish to please. Walking into her chief's room as soon as she returned to the office, she said:

"I've got back, Mr. Lister, and delivered the present. I saw it unpacked myself. Mrs. Lister asked me to tell you there is nothing for you to worry about. All the preparations are going along splendidly."

"Eh!" said Charles in an incredulous voice. He stared at his secretary, looking so strange as she repeated the so-called message that she thought he must be ill. Then he made a curious noise, half snort, half laugh, and buried himself in his work.

Miss Godolphin went out and closed the door quietly behind her, flushing a little as though feeling she had been repulsed. She could almost think he had not wished her to go to Hampstead, except that he could quite easily have prevented it by a word to Mr. Moreland as soon as the senior partner's wife was out of the way.

He was in one of his queer moods again, she supposed.

There were days when he would be perfectly charming, making sly fun of various clients as he dictated his letters, or chatting to her about odd

things he had seen or people he had met; and then without warning his whole tone would change and she would find herself abruptly dismissed as though she had been wasting his time and her own. In the beginning she had been tempted to stand on her dignity after these occasions, but a smile from him could always defeat her, and she had long ceased to struggle against this unfortunate susceptibility in herself, calling it expediency instead. When you are over thirty and self-dependent, you don't toss your head unless it's empty, thought Miss Godolphin (who liked to invent these little phrases), though not without some envy of luckier people who may indulge in such gymnastics.

Chapter II THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

1

Mrs. Lister, leaving Miss Godolphin in Noel's care, went up to her daughter's room to continue the packing, knowing that most of it would devolve upon her, and anxious to have it out of the way.

She had been more shaken than she could have believed possible by the absurd incident of Charles's secretary, shocked that even for a moment she should have permitted that ugly specter to raise its head after all these years; and now for the first time during the busy months of preparation for the wedding (making everything easy for them, in Noel's phrase) she was conscious of fatigue.

Helping to plan and choose her daughter's outfit, meeting Arnold's relatives and dealing tactfully with their own, sending out announcements and invitations, receiving visits of congratulation from a host of friends and curious acquaintances, contriving that Noel should be free for Arnold's demands upon her time and always with the consciousness of Charles, aloof and unhelpful in the background, she had not even felt the strain because of the sense of anticipation that upheld her.

When in some brief moment of leisure the full force of this feeling came home to her, she realized how long it was since she had looked forward to anything as the happy do—spacing out the hours to this or that event, however trivial, perhaps in a blind effort to give a deeper meaning to existence.

Living mechanically for years past, she had not been conscious of the loss, yet some protective instinct within her had ruled her days so that she might guard this happiness for her children. Only to that extent had she imposed her will upon Charles when their marriage to all intents and purposes broke upon the rocks. She was determined that their childhood and youth should not be fretted by dissension or torn by divided loyalties.

Had Charles been of a different temperament he might have seen the chance so unwittingly given him to heal the breach between them. As it was he obeyed the letter but not the spirit of their contract, convincing himself that she had in fact taken the children from him. He paid whatever she demanded in their behalf but ceased to share them in any other sense, growing more moody and difficult year by year.

The noise and laughter downstairs this morning seemed to Margaret Lister the symbol of a success not easily won. Both of her children were popular and had a host of friends, and, absent most of their time at school or University, they had come to take their father's humors very much for granted, attributing them no doubt to liver, business worries and the eccentricity of the middle-aged.

What they thought of her she did not know, having long ago faced that question too, deciding that they must be tied by no special attachment to her, for the sake of the general peace. The fashions of the age were on her side in this, for it was no longer considered correct for parents to be treated demonstratively or indeed as anything other than slightly comic, by the young.

And now at last her work was nearly done. With Noel as well as Owen married there would be nothing to keep her here and she could go.

It came upon her suddenly that there was a queer irony in the relation of these two events, her daughter's marriage and the escape from her own, but such reflections seemed mere weakness after all, due to some subconscious reluctance within herself to make the move now at last her chance had come, a kind of cowardly embarrassment. She swept them impatiently aside, for in every fiber of her being she was impatient to be gone. It seemed to her that she wanted nothing else but that—to be done with shams and bitterness and to live decently again. Charles surely must desire it as much as she, for the long conflict of the spirit had exhausted them both and they had nothing to say to each other any more.

There need not be any open breach, however, if Charles were sensitive about it. She could find a reliable housekeeper for him and go off ostensibly on holiday. She might travel in a modest way, see new places and new people, settle abroad perhaps if it suited her and come over now and then to see Owen, or Arnold and Noel when they came on leave. Once the thing was done, it would be no shock though certainly a surprise to her children. They were of their day and generation, and would merely think she had been wise to go, if she felt that way.

Margaret Lister, folding her daughter's underclothes, was reminded of her own so much more muffling trousseau of Edwardian days, which had seemed to her almost dashing at the time with its fine tucks and insertion and ribbon bows. But she would not look back upon the girl who had worn these things, thinking instead of Noel, who, less muffled and be-decked both in body and in mind, with luck might have a better journey.

As she worked her mind began to register the things still to be done so that everything should go smoothly tomorrow. Only one of the four bridesmaids, fortunately, would be dressing in the house, Cecily Lister, who as the sole girl cousin of the family, it had been difficult to omit.

The other three, Felicity Osborne and the Neville twins, not only lived in the neighborhood, but could be depended upon, if not to run the whole wedding as they believed, at least to appear at the right moment properly clad and take their part in it without prompting. Exasperating, high-handed little wretches they might be, but at least their competence was a boon, even if they did turn your house into a club beforehand in their determination to get every ounce of entertainment out of the occasion. And, as Noel put it, they would “make the wedding go” (as though it were a pantomime or revue, thought the bride’s mother), which was more than could be hoped of poor Cecily. A condescending adjective, perhaps, but the girl invited it by her resentful attitude to everything you tried to do for her.

Margaret sighed with half-amused impatience as she remembered her own efforts to please Cecily by seeing that she had for once a completely new and lovely outfit for the wedding. It had been necessary to give her the frock though the rest of the bridesmaids were providing their own, but the other things had been meant kindly and received, she thought, almost as an affront, with a great deal of talk about having nowhere to wear them afterwards. She had had Cecily up from Surrey for a fitting and her mother had come too, uninvited, to sit by and make suggestions about matters already arranged, such as the color and material of the dresses, and how much better Cecily would look in rose or jade-green.

“I don’t pretend to be artistic myself—I always feel these light colors look a little wishy-washy,” Mrs. John Lister had said with a bright smile at the dressmaker. Yet the pastel-shaded frocks of fine net were charming, Felicity’s ice-blue; the twins’ palest lavender and Cecily’s a delicate pink, each carefully chosen to suit the coloring of the wearer. The girls were to carry bouquets of sweet-peas in all three shades and this also had brought objections, “for surely at a *June* wedding it should be roses or *nothing*,” said Mrs. John, smiling her perpetual smile.

She was a trying woman—one of those people who by innuendo succeed in getting more than they deserve though less than they desire from the world. She had been left a widow with small means outside her pension by the war, a fact upon which she had traded ever since; and her mock-cheerful references to the shifts to which she was put to keep her family on nothing a

year—a subtle reproach to luckier people—punctuated her conversation on all occasions.

“Fortunately I have a very happy nature myself. I never grumble,” she would add. “Give me a book and a crust and I am quite content.”

This last statement was no paraphrase or she would certainly have added that jugs of wine were beyond her means.

Altogether “Aunt Mabel” was unpopular in the family yet, being tenacious, was endured. Charles detested her, but he had paid for the girl Cecily’s education, which in some inverted fashion had made him feel that she had a claim upon them, so that her inclusion among the bridesmaids had seemed the way of peace. Moreover, Mabel was a cousin of Mrs. Moreland’s, which might seem in Charles’s eyes another reason not to offend her. Margaret perpetually found herself caught in a net of such obligations to people they both secretly disliked because of the impossibility of persuading Charles to express a frank opinion.

2

“Found, by Jove!”

The door was pushed open and Owen and his wife burst in upon her reproachfully.

“What’s the idea, hiding yourself away in nooks and crannies?” inquired the former. “We’ve hunted the place down.”

“I’m not one to complain,” added the girl, Frances, who was small and dark-eyed, “but I must say when a total stranger brandishes one of my own chairs-in-law in my face at the hall door, I think something ought to be done about it.”

“Something was,” Owen reminded her.

“That must have been Martin, I suppose,” said his mother. “But what in the world is he doing with the chairs?”

“Brawling and brandishing. Well, I saw at a glance the fellow was the worst type of criminal, so I removed him to the dustbin.”

“Owen, if you have broken that chair, you can go straight out and get it mended immediately,” exclaimed his mother from force of habit.

The pair looked at each other delighted.

“What an inhuman woman!”

"I know. Not a word about the deader in the dustbin. She doesn't even say plaintively, 'But *why* did you kill poor Martin?' "

By this time they were side by side on Noel's bed, Owen attempting to try on such portions of the trousseau as were within reach, his mother automatically removing them from danger.

"I'm only studying them," he protested. "I shall be having to buy these things for my own daughter before we know where we are. We have decided to make an honest grandmother of you."

Frances leaning back on her hands, watched for the effect of this statement wickedly, but was disappointed.

"None of the proper reactions," she said. "Either you should have recoiled (nice snaky word for a mother-in-law, now I come to think of it) or else fallen on our necks emotionally and called us darlings in a hushed voice. All the same, Owen's wrong. It's going to be a him."

"When?" inquired Mrs. Lister skeptically.

"Early next year," said Owen. "Jan. or Feb. We're not joking."

"Joking?" echoed his wife. "I should think not indeed. Why, look how it's going to complicate my life for the next six months or so. I shall have to let my eyebrows grow, I suppose, because it would look so funny if it were born without any."

"It would look pretty odd with scarlet finger-nails too," said Owen, improving the occasion.

"Well, there you are. All my favorite vices. And then we've got to consider its little mind. Do you think if I went and sat in the National Gallery and read the Encyclopædia Britannica to it every day for the next few months it would do?" inquired Frances of her mother-in-law.

Margaret, looking from one to the other, smiled in her dry way. Their elation had been plain from the moment of arrival, but this was the last piece of news she had expected to hear from them, supposing Frances far too frivolous to give up her liberty so soon.

In spite of her determination to stand aloof from her children, Owen was very near to her—and she recognized that this was natural and inevitable between mother and son, inevitable too perhaps that she should not have liked his marriage. More than once when some one had praised Frances to her she had found herself answering: "Yes, she's very bright," a phrase so typical of secret feminine hostility, that she had been instantly ashamed of it.

Yet it was this very brightness which had disturbed her. It seemed brittle and hard, and she could not like the girl's manner to Charles, whose Christian name she used flirtatiously, even flattering him sometimes out of his moody humors. Logically she should have been grateful to any one who could do that, but she had taken it to be typical of her daughter-in-law's approach to all men, and detested it for Owen's sake.

Suddenly she found that this news made a difference, not for any sentimental and grandmotherly reason, but because the girl was embarking upon motherhood, quite aware of what it would do to her freedom, when convention no longer demanded this of young wives as a matter of course. She was not selfish then, nor without character.

Owen had strolled over to the corner window and called to Frances to see the view.

"There's all the National Gallery you can want," he said. "It's obliging of Noel to barge off in the nick of time. Mother, we bag this room, please."

"You what?" asked his mother, startled.

"On little what's his name's account. I thought we'd come home for the winter, if you've no objection. I'd be in such a dither with Frances alone in the flat when the days get dark, not feeling fit, and with all those stairs to climb," announced Owen reasonably, and Margaret found herself saying in what she hoped was a natural tone:

"I've always wondered why you went to a place without a lift."

For a moment she had felt a wave of almost superstitious fear at this threat to her plans from such a source, as though Owen had suspected what she meant to do and was trying to prevent it; but this was fantastic and almost immediately she regained her common-sense. After all, the winter was many months away; she had only to let them assume her consent for the present, and later make some other arrangement for Frances.

The girl, leaning against Owen's shoulder, said to him dreamily:

"You're quite right. This is a jolly place. I don't altogether wonder you brag about it."

"I know."

Behind them Margaret Lister mocked herself because having striven to make her son happy there, she should now feel almost a pang at this revelation that he was fond of his home.

From the garden below sarcastic voices apostrophized the pair at the window and Frances, deciding that retaliation would be more effective at close quarters, departed in haste leaving Owen with his mother. She had a sneaking admiration for Margaret, whose caustic manner of speech amused her. To have a mother-in-law in whose company it was necessary to sharpen her wits instead of minding her p's and q's, suited her temperament. It had not escaped her attention that Mrs. Lister had evaded the suggestion of their removal to Hampstead for the winter, evaded it very cleverly, of course, so that Owen would notice nothing and she could deny having done anything of the kind if it suited her later on—or perhaps merely not wishing to express her views on the subject before her son's wife.

Frances debating both possibilities, thought it as well to give her mother-in-law the opportunity to put her foot down at once if she meant to do it, before the prospect became too attractive and her refusal therefore an offense. She could not deny that a few months of ease in this well-run household before the baby came would be a pleasant novelty, but she had been self-dependent since her late teens, and fending for herself had taught her to be cautious in her expectations. She had also discovered the wisdom of keeping her thoughts to herself and looking as though she had none. Coming a stranger into the family, she had felt the unease between Charles Lister and his wife, but no explanation had ever been forthcoming from Owen, who seemed to take it as a matter of course. She had asked him no questions, for all her approaches to his inner mind were of the lightest, as though guarded by her own reticence.

Frances thought people of the last generation were nearly all fools about marriage, probably because it had not been considered quite nice to get rid of the relationship even when it became plain that it wouldn't work. And then they had never been given a fair chance to know each other thoroughly beforehand, with chaperons forever dogging their footsteps, and parents urging and hinting and protesting.

Her information was gathered from certain modern novels dealing harshly with the almost prehistoric period when the elders mated, inevitably therefore she saw the poor creatures warped by complexes and inhibitions of which she and her kind were mercifully free.

Her father-in-law evidently suffered from an inferiority complex, she thought, having married a woman of personality. Though she considered that he missed a lot of fun by failing to appreciate Margaret's dry humor, she was vaguely sorry for Charles, and in her effort to hide the fact that his awkwardness in the family circle was plain to her, she had tried impudence

with him, and found it quite a success. He liked her, she knew, and he would certainly welcome the projected visit, but Frances had no intention of coming to Hampstead unless her mother-in-law was equally complaisant. It was not a question of petty pride. The girl had some wisdom not gathered from books and a certain integrity of spirit. This household represented something that had a wistful value in her eyes—the kind of stability which her own life had never known, but she was not going to make use of the Listers against their will just because she had married their son.

She hoped, therefore, that Owen would have a clear answer to give her after a talk with his mother, but he, man-like, was blind to any such necessity, taking it for granted that the visit was already decided.

Watching his mother's deft hands as she folded Noel's satins and laces in tissue paper, he remarked:

"I wonder why all women like wallowing in clothes. Even you are enjoying yourself, so don't deny it."

Margaret glanced at his tie and socks, then pulled out the edge of a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, with a significant smile.

"I suppose these all match by a mere chance?" she suggested.

"Not at all, but they are two years old if a day."

"How many sets have you? Three hundred and sixty-five?"

Owen laughed.

"Certainly not. And if I had only one, and one suit of clothes, I or any other fellow would be married in it without turning a hair."

"How noble of you, my dear," said his mother satirically. "And of course you always confine your attentions to shabbily dressed girls and neglect the smart ones, don't you?"

Owen, seeing that he was getting the worst of the argument, took her by the shoulders and kissed her; and this maneuver was so unexpected that Margaret felt a wave of color flooding her cheeks.

"You're surprised about young what's-its-name," he said.

"Surprised? At my age, about anything you do? Am I expected to consider it unique?" she retorted, but her smile belied her, showing her at least defenseless before her son.

“We’ve been saving ever since we were married,” he confessed. “All the royalties from that gadget of mine, you know. The point being that as we mean to have children, we don’t want to be too middle-aged when they are growing up.”

“Oh, but you will be, my poor dear,” she thought. “You’ll be Methuselahs to them just like the rest of us.” She remembered how she and Charles too had hoped to be companions to their children, and saw the same vain wish renewing itself in every generation. It was useless to say this to Owen, and after all how could she be so sure? Her own failure and Charles’s had been an individual thing.

“I mean, we should lose half the fun,” proceeded Owen.

“Oh, quite half.” She was suddenly indulgent and smiling a little, but he had begun to stroll about the room again and after a moment he brought out:

“I say, I suppose it’s all right these days, isn’t it, mother? I mean there’s no great risk and all that?”

So that was what he wanted of her—reassurance, all perhaps that he would ever want of her again, and as she gave it, saying the usual things about taking ordinary care and not fussing too much, she felt the sadness of one facing inevitable loss, and then was impatient at her own folly.

“After all, Frances has plenty of common-sense,” she finished for once without any mental reservations.

“Yes, I know. And we shall have you, thank goodness,” said Owen eagerly, “... to advise her and so on. Bit of a facer for a girl the first time, I expect.... Must be ... and of course she hasn’t any people of her own.”

“No, so we must look after her all the more.” She nodded as though in complete agreement and with a new lightness of heart, for what matter that she knew the danger of offering advice to the young? It was much that these two did in a sense depend upon her and wanted her aid. “Don’t worry, my dear,” she said, “Frances will be all right.”

“Oh, rather! And now I suppose I had better go and offer my valuable services to the toilers downstairs,” said Owen. “You needn’t tell Noel, but I pawned two days of my summer holiday to attend this Tribal Rite.”

“You had better drop a hint of that to your father then. He is sure to wonder how you could get away.”

“Really?” Owen paused in the doorway for a moment with an inscrutable face. Then, “That’s the worst of looking like a lily of the field,”

he said mournfully, and departed.

“You had better tell your father”—it was a phrase which had become almost mechanical to her, but Margaret Lister knew that this time she had used it not in the interests of domestic peace, but rather as an appeal to Owen to let his father taste for once the companionship which he had missed. The morning had brought her several disturbing emotions, and perhaps she owed Charles this act of grace for her unjustified suspicions of an hour ago; yet it was not that which had prompted her, but the sudden and overwhelming knowledge as she talked to her son that in this wretched division between them, Charles had lost so much more than she.

Chapter III THE WAYS OF WOMEN

1

Owen came downstairs to the sound of dance music and the furious ringing of the telephone. Felicity had set her henchmen to return the chairs to the lounge and drawing-room and generally give Spence a helping hand, and some one had turned on the wireless. Two of the bridesmaids were waltzing together, and Martin Croft, with the last chair hooked over his arm, was looking doubtfully at the telephone.

“Do we answer it, do you suppose?” he asked the descending Owen.

“I believe it’s sometimes done,” returned that gentleman.

Martin took up the receiver.

“Am I what? ... No, I’m not Primrose anybody,” he said, slamming it down again. “Now I ask you. Do I look like a primrose?”

“That’s our exchange, you fool.”

“Well, how was I to know? But, good lord, did you say ‘our’? Then you must be the father of the bride.”

“Grandfather, to be exact,” returned Owen, “and I left you for dead.”

The telephone began to ring again and he went to answer it, then recognizing the voice at the other end, put his hand over the mouthpiece and signaled urgently to the retreating Martin.

“Here, quick. Take this and swear we are all out and you don’t know when we shall be in,” he whispered.

“Can’t be done, grandpa. Dead men tell no tales.”

“Oh, come along, there’s a good chap. We simply can’t have the place over-run by aunts on a day like this.”

Martin put down the chair and changed places.

“Yes, madam ... no, madam,” he said into the telephone with great dignity. “I’m sorry, madam, but the family is hout.... I couldn’t say, I’m sure.... No, certainly not to luncheon, madam.”

“And that will be five shillings, if you please, sir,” he added.

“Blackmail, I suppose,” said Owen. “Well, I’ll toss you for it.”

Noel, arriving in the middle of this transaction, exclaimed:

“What on earth are you doing? I thought I heard the telephone.”

“They get these hallucinations when they’re in love,” observed Martin, pocketing the money. “No good, my dear, lovey won’t be ringing dovey this morning.”

“Well, I know he won’t,” retorted Noel imperturbably. “But there are other people in the world.”

“That,” said Mr. Croft, “is a most immoral sentiment in a bride. As best man I shall feel it my duty to report the matter to my superior.”

He picked up the chair and marched off, abandoning it inside the drawing-room door to seize Felicity Osborne and join the dancers.

“Hard-working lot of people you seem to have collected,” said Owen to his sister. It occurred to him that the preparations would have been far simpler without all this amateur assistance, but no doubt the clatter was more cheerful for Noel, giving her no time to feel glum. She might not have any inclination that way, of course, but he could not be sure, girls being so odd. She was uncommunicative, even to him, and since his marriage he had not seen her very often alone.

Owen, realizing this for the first time, wondered why it was. He had expected Frances to be absorbed into his group and Noel’s as a matter of course, but somehow things had not worked out like that, though the two girls seemed to be quite good friends.

“Women are certainly rum,” he mused, and recalled his mother and what she had so unexpectedly said as he went out the door; for what was it to do with his father after all, how he came by these two free days to see the last of Noel?

“It is not any business of his that I can see,” thought Owen without heat. He knew that there had been no such suggestion in his mother’s mind, but no doubt something else, unfathomable to the male intelligence. And this reflection set him thinking of his parents, wondering how they were going to hit it off, with Noel gone.

To be considered modern nowadays, whatever that may be, we are expected to believe that young people are indifferent when not actually hostile to their homes and immediate families, as though inherited instincts, sympathies and the natural affections of the human heart had suddenly

ceased to function. The doctrine is as false as it is sentimental; it is no doctrine of the young, moreover, who are too busy with a multitude of matters to sit down and pin labels to themselves, leaving this futile sport to disgruntled middle-age.

Hostility in the home is as old as the hills and as little universal as the Oedipus complex, that other fetish which the same arbiters of fashion love to brandish as something new and strange. In fact, if a census of emotions could be taken, which heaven forbid, it would probably be found that the average of family hate had considerably diminished with increased transport facilities and the spread of economic independence.

The reaction of the two young Listers to a situation at home which they could not alter and of which they were supposed to know nothing, was that of any other normal members of a normal family, one of sympathetic concern, when some word or incident brought it to mind.

If in the beginning they had seemed to accept their mother's explanation that their father was worried, ill or overworked, this had been due to the child's natural capacity for saving himself embarrassment, for at ten and twelve years old they had been quite mature enough to sense the suddenly changed atmosphere, without understanding its cause. It had driven them into an unspoken alliance to uphold the fiction, incidentally making them nearer because more dependent upon each other than most children; and Owen, who in the distant past had endeavored to quell his small sister's disposition to worry by telling her it was just like a girl, now wondered whether the cure had been sufficiently complete to allow her to go away tomorrow with an easy mind.

She might for all he knew to the contrary have forgotten many little incidents which he still remembered vividly enough; but equally in these last two years she might have received enlightenment to match his own conjectures.

Noel was leaning against the lintel of the drawing-room door watching the dancers, her head thrown back to reveal the line of her throat and her firm chin. She was a graceful creature, but her brother's eyes were not concerned with that or the unstudied picture she made in her blue cotton frock against the dark woodwork of the door. He was noting a likeness in her to their mother, so striking for a moment that the change which the years had wrought in the latter illuminated rather surprisingly the subject about which he had been thinking.

She had been hard hit then by that old affair, whatever it was.

“Where’s Flinders that he isn’t here to lend a hand?” he asked Noel, rather wishing to look the fellow over again with a dispassionate eye. “Lazy brute! I can’t think what you see in him.”

“Oh, he’s rather nice,” said Noel. “He had to do his duty by an uncle this morning, poor lamb. Not that he minds because it’s the Admiral one and his favorite.”

“I’ll bet he is. Not too often on the scene. I wish to God they took aunts in the Navy,” observed Owen, remembering the telephone episode with a grin. On the whole, however, he decided not to confide that story to Noel, distrusting her capacity to lie with conviction if occasion required. So he continued instead: “Are we here to work, or are we not? Hadn’t I better disband this palais de danse?”

Noel, with an interested glance at Felicity and Martin, said: “Oh, let them alone and come and help me arrange the presents. You might take the list and tick them off while I call them out. Frances is going to copy it for me ... she’s gone to unpack.”

“List? For the press no doubt,” said Owen with satire, as he followed her into the lounge.

“No, clever, for us to take away so that we’ll know you haven’t pinched any of our loot when we unpack the case at the other end. Mother’s going to have it sent on board with the heavy luggage after we’ve gone. She didn’t think the aunts and people would be pleased if their presents were not on view.”

“Peace at any price, eh?”

“Yes.”

Noel looked at him soberly as though about to say something more, and then went on to the far end of the room, where a table covered by a lace supper-cloth was awaiting the presents.

“All the same you’d better be careful how you separate aunts from people in that high-handed way,” said Owen as he came up with her. “You’ll be an aunt yourself before you know where you are.”

He gave her news of the expected baby and their proposed removal to Hampstead for the winter, a plan which she applauded with significant eagerness.

“Owen, that’s a marvelous idea,” she exclaimed. “Oh, well ... you know ... it will sort of fill up the empty spaces. It’s a pity you couldn’t have made

it a few months earlier though.”

“Well, of all the sauce!” shouted her brother indignantly. “What’s the matter with you? You surely don’t flatter yourself you will be missed? Vain little cat.”

“Any one is missed when you’ve had them as long as they’ve had me,” she declared obscurely. “And anyway, of course I shall be missed. What do you take me for, a nonentity?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? However, there is still time to chuck that fellow Flinders and devote your life to the aged parents, if that’s what is troubling you. Close-up of gray-haired, sweet-faced Aunt Noel gazing across ocean at sunset, dreaming of her Arnold who is now Another’s.”

“Oh, shut up and do a little work,” exclaimed the bride. “Melodrama is not in your line. You forget the rows of babbling nieces and nephews clinging to my skirts. Nice father you’ll make.”

She gave him the list and knelt down on the floor where the presents, still in their tissue wrappings, were set out on a dust-sheet, and began to hand them up, calling out the items.

“Pair of entrée dishes from Mrs. Osborne; wine-cooler from Stephen (wasn’t it noble of him to spend all that?); coffee-spoons and cocktail mats from the twins. Their mother and father have given me a check for ten pounds, Owen. I do think they’re sports. Mrs. Neville said it would be so nice and easy to carry.”

“Well, that’s what I call practical politics,” agreed Owen. “Has the old boy passed you as sound in wind and limb, by the way? Didn’t I hear some talk of vaccination?”

“Yes, I had to be, but it took beautifully, the doctor said. It didn’t seem beautiful to me for a day or two, I can tell you.”

“Ah, but if you will go and marry into foreign parts, that’s what comes of it. Next time I hope you’ll know better,” said Owen, lightly expressing his brotherly regret at her departure. “What’s this—a tea-set? Rather nobby, too, by Jove!”

“Yes, that’s Felicity’s, and you can arrange it in the front row, if you like ... well away from Aunt Mabel’s awful vases.”

“My hat!” Owen recoiled dramatically as the first of these came to sight, very stout at the base and so narrow in the neck that even a flower would

wilt in it. “She’s true to type, I must say. Auntie’s been throwing hoops at the village fair, and you’re getting the prizes, mark my words.”

“Yes, between looking a gift-horse in the mouth and facing facts, life is very complicated,” sighed Noel, “but India is a long way off and accidents *will* happen luckily.... The Adviser-in-Chief sent our Venetian glasses this morning, Owen.... Over on the windowsill, look. They were hardly in the house before she rang up to tell me how to have them packed and unpacked and washed and insured and almost how to drink out of them. Indian servants are all rogues, she said, so I’d better be warned.”

“Did you ask how they could be desperately roguish about six sherry glasses?” inquired Owen.

“No, I wish I’d thought of it. Funny thing, she sent them out by father’s secretary, of all people. I imagine she just walked in and snatched the girl from under his nose.”

“Free carriage,” explained Owen. “I expect she’ll charge the price of the present to the firm, too. A great financier was lost in Aunt Moreland.” He had taken one of the little glasses from its wrappings and was holding it up to the light.

“Rather lovely all the same, isn’t it?” said Noel. “The secretary was a queer sort of girl, properish almost, and she kept making pretty speeches about father—praising him up.”

“Ah,” said the cynical Owen, “she hoped you’d tell him and he’d raise her salary.”

“He’d be far more likely to bite her head off, if you ask me,” said his sister.

“Why, is the head of the house of Lister growing more ferocious with the years?” inquired Owen with assumed surprise.

“Oh, no, but you wouldn’t exactly call him the light of the home, would you?” Noel looked up at him with a slight frown, hesitated, and then said with a rush, “Owen, I often wonder what happened.... Do you?”

“Can’t say I lose any sleep about it, if that’s what you mean.” He grinned at her and added in a high falsetto, “Owen, wouldn’t it be awful if the house caught fire while we were away?”

“Pig! ... And you said it would be far worse in your opinion if it caught fire while you were in it ... heartless little brute,” but she seemed cheered by the allusion, only to add a moment later, “Hedgehog!”

Owen tucked up an end of the lace cloth and sat on the table.

“Call me all the beasts in the zoo if it relieves your feelings, but for heaven’s sake have a little sense and don’t worry your head about ancient history,” he said. “I doubt if they know themselves what happened at this date. It was probably just temperament and too many relations snooping round. It’s no business of ours, in any case. After all, if it had been anything serious, they’d have parted. These are not the dark ages. You’re dithering.”

“We should,” said Noel wisely, “but you never know with that generation. No, I’m not dithering ... but I’ve been thinking of mother with both of us gone and only father coming home to gloom about the place. Sort of ghastly for her, don’t you think? Anyway, she’ll have you and Frances in the winter and that’s something.” She sat up, ruffled her hair and nodded congratulations at the prospective father, as one abandoning the vexed question of her elders.

“Very clever of you as it turns out,” she said.

2

Noel felt better, though not, as Owen believed, through his superior reasoning. She was not in the habit any more than he of losing sleep over the relations between her parents nowadays, but being in love had sharpened her sensibilities to this subject perhaps, and the prospect of going far away had given her a feeling that she was leaving them defenseless before each other. There was nothing that she could do about it, but it was a relief to have talked it over with Owen and given him a hint. He might jeer but she knew from long experience that he would take it.

Frances, joining them by and by to find the list completed and the presents set out in a glittering array, was rather taken aback by the warmth of her sister-in-law’s congratulations about the forthcoming baby, languid surprise or laconic humor being all she had expected from her own contemporaries; and quite right too, she considered. She was a little shy of Noel, who always seemed to be one of those carefree beings to whom doubt or trouble are unknown—fabulous creatures, but not more so perhaps than most people’s conceptions of each other.

“It is a grand idea to bag my room, because of the view over the Heath,” said Noel. “You’ll love it on misty mornings, Frances. And we always get the first snow there and, with luck, winter sports of a kind—unless you’re so used to the real thing that you’ll despise it.... Oh, but I suppose you won’t be allowed. Never mind, there will be other years.”

Frances smiled. Winter sports indeed! Didn't that show you? But snow on the Heath would be rather lovely from that upper window, and it was something that Noel evidently considered the matter of their visit settled.

The dancers now appeared, the music having become too classical for their taste, and under cover of the noise Frances said to her husband:

"Is it all fixed about our coming out then? Does your mother agree?"

"Oh, rather," said Owen. "Why, you were there when I told her, old thing. Pull up your socks."

"But after I went ... didn't you ask her if it would be all right?"

"Of course not ... no need. She was as bucked as anything."

Owen was obtuse, not on purpose but simply by temperament, seeing the matter already arranged, and always a little at sea among her doubts of this and that, because they were concerned with things which he had taken for granted all his life. He called her a funny little cuss, his way of saying perhaps that still after two years she was full of enchanting surprises, showing such amazing courage when courage was important, and such an amazing cowardice about things of no importance whatever.

As for Frances, sometimes his certainty was like a shield to her; sometimes—and this was one of them—a blank wall set maddeningly in her path. She saw that she would have to find out for herself what her mother-in-law thought, and she was terrified at the necessity.

"Noel, my pet, you have had some awful presents, haven't you?" exclaimed one of the Neville twins.

"Hush! Remember, you're very nearly in church," remonstrated Martin Croft. "I think they're lovely presents, especially mine."

A contest in self-adulation broke out, and fantastic sums were mentioned as having been spent on the bride amid hoots of derision from the rest of the company. Frances, taking the finished list out of Owen's hand, retreated with it from the din as though to sustain her own patience by aloofness from all this easy fooling. She had the habit of getting things done which they had not, and she envied this essential difference in them while she despised the impulse, asking herself what there was here after all that she should desire to be a part of it.

The writing bureau which usually stood in one of the windows looking on the garden had been moved away, and she passed into the drawing-room through the partly-open folding doors, in search of a table at which to copy

the list. As she did so a trumpet sang suddenly from the wireless cabinet in the far corner, and closing the doors softly behind her, she slipped into a chair, the lovely sounds invading her spirit like a rush of refreshing wind. Dissatisfaction, almost thought itself, were swept aside and she was one with the majesty and beauty of the world, snow-clad mountains and the cold pure air of morning, the incredible blue of Southern seas, the enchantment of cities she had never seen. Triumph, exaltation, heartbreak melted together in a thread of sound, piercing and beautiful.

“The Trumpet Voluntary, wasn’t it?” asked a voice as the performance came to an end.

“Yes.”

The girl tumbled to her feet to face her mother-in-law, who, hearing the music as she came downstairs, had paused in the doorway, watching with surprise the absorbed figure in the chair.

“So I suppose the heathen fled.”

“They had gone already, as a matter of fact.”

They exchanged a smile, and shut in the momentary intimacy of a shared enthusiasm, Frances felt curiously happy and at ease.

“I came in here looking for a corner where I could copy the list of presents,” she explained, becoming aware of the roll of papers in her hand.

“I think they have moved my bureau into the dining-room. You had better let me find you paper and ink ... if I can. You were wiser than we are, Frances. You didn’t have all this chaos with your wedding.”

“No, or I’d have starved to death.”

The confidence—this casual laying bare of her own condition—was a tribute to the moment, but both its abruptness and exaggeration had a familiar ring which closed the avenue to Margaret’s sympathy, and as she led the way into the dining-room, she merely said:

“And what would Owen have been doing meanwhile?”

“There is that, of course.” Frances, eagerly seeking some way to broach the question of the winter, knew nothing of this change and continued in what she hoped was a light tone: “I expect you hated the whole thing and me, too.”

“Oh, quite!” assented her mother-in-law.

“Well, that’s a relief anyway. If you had said, ‘Not at all,’ I should have felt dreadful.”

“So you are trying your blandishments on me this morning, are you, as your father-in-law is not available?”

Margaret’s tone was also intended to be light, but the irritation behind it was real, though when she saw a swift color flood the girl’s face and then recede, as under a blow, she was horrified and wished the words unsaid.

What was the matter with her that she should so lose her self-control? Even if the rebuke were deserved, it was indefensible and beneath contempt, and she was none too sure, seeing its effect, that it had been deserved.

She opened the desk, brought out a writing-block and her own fountain-pen, and motioned Frances into a seat.

“There! I think you’ll find everything you want.”

The girl slid into the seat and smoothed out her list uncertainly.

“Now you can see the kind of thing Owen would have let you in for all the winter,” she shot out. “But it’s all right ... I won’t come.... He’s just fussing.”

“Men always do fuss on these occasions, poor things. Still it’s early days yet. You will have plenty of time to think it over and decide what you would like to do in the winter.”

“Oh, I shall manage quite easily.”

“Of course.”

Margaret went away, leaving it at that, feeling that anything she could say now would only make matters worse. She had been incredibly clumsy—cruel too, at a moment when for the first time she had been feeling a real kindness to her daughter-in-law and a new belief in her. It was little wonder, she thought, that the girl should feel averse to spending the winter here. And then she recalled that there was no real question of that, after all, that she herself would be gone, and free of all these surface irritations—free among other things to seek a better understanding with her son’s wife.

“Poor child, she’s very much alone in the world, after all,” she thought.

Inevitably, perhaps, that very condition was Frances’s best safeguard now. Though she felt empty and a little shaken, she was not cast down, for the elation swept away by the snub she had received had been replaced by something more real and more enduring.

She had rejected of her own free will the things she had so much desired, the ease and comfort of the months at Hampstead, and the kindness and strength which she sensed beneath the surface hardness of her mother-in-law's personality. And that quality within herself which forever sat in judgment on her showed her the softness of the one and the safety of the other as insubstantial after all.

In casting them off and glimpsing the spiritual isolation which is part of the stuff of human life, she felt strong.

Chapter IV THE NEVILLES

1

Mrs. Neville drove up to the Listers to bring Noel the wedding veil she had promised to lend her, and to extract the twins, by force if necessary, as she put it.

She was Margaret Lister's most intimate friend and her contemporary, but looked younger, though she had not had an altogether easy life, Dr. Neville's exacting and querulous old mother having shared their home until her death five years ago.

Pretty, talkative and gay, she was also, in consequence of this experience perhaps, reticent, or the friendship between the two women could not have endured. Margaret was not the type to find comfort in feminine confidences or, having taken a difficult course, to defeat it by her own weakness.

What the Nevilles knew or guessed therefore of the other household was merely shown by such oblique ways as worldly wisdom and real kindness might suggest—Mrs. Neville, for instance, when Charles seemed more trying than usual, supplying the hint and the doctor shortly afterwards arriving to engage him for golf or a Sunday's yachting on the Broads, even at times for a more protracted holiday.

The twins had acquired their position in tomorrow's ceremony not by family influence, however, but by the simple expedient of asking for it and pointing out the pictorial advantages to Noel. They could wear the colors she had chosen for the bridesmaids beautifully, and would be a foil to her fairness and Felicity's, to say nothing of the cousin, who was sure to be rather a blight, they said. A long and nefarious career of deceiving friends, school-mistresses and even, at times, their parents by their absurd likeness to each other, had produced an ultimatum that in future they should never dress alike, and here was a heaven-sent opportunity to flout authority. Noel had risen to the occasion, though refusing to write the letter to them which they kindly offered to dictate, setting forth the enormous advantages the wedding ceremony would reap from their participation in it. "You can tell your own lies," she had said firmly.

At their mother's appearance this morning they proved high-handed about going home, and the rest of the company upheld them noisily.

“We simply can’t, my dear,” they protested. “We’ve got to have a rehearsal this afternoon.”

“Yes, rather, it’s most important,” said the Chorus.

“Rehearsal indeed! Haven’t any of you learned to walk?” inquired Mrs. Neville.

“Come and see the presents,” invited Noel, leading her off persuasively. “Not that any of them can come up to yours, of course.”

“I know, darling. Such pretty paper my bank uses, doesn’t it? I’ve reached the age, you see, where one has to be careful about presents, which are so dating, I always think. If I had let myself go you might have been saddled with a nice foot-warmer, dear, or a reading-lamp that looks like a lamp and not a sylph or a bowl of gold-fish.... There’s your mother,” broke off Mrs. Neville. “I shall get her to use her influence with those little brutes of mine.”

She left Noel and went out the long window, through which she had caught sight of Margaret, who turned back at the sound of her voice.

“I wish you’d point out to my children that this is not a hotel,” she called. “They won’t listen to me.”

“Oh, never mind them,” said the other. “Come and sit in the garden with me for ten minutes. I’m longing for an excuse to be idle.”

Straight from her encounter with Frances, she was glad of a diversion, and as she sank into a garden chair at her friend’s side, she went on:

“For that matter why not stay for lunch yourself, Dolly, now you’re here, and see their ridiculous rehearsal?”

“No, I must get back. Timothy would forget his scrambled egg until it was stone-cold. I have to watch him like a lynx.... Rehearsal indeed? They seem to regard a wedding as something between a circus and a farce ... nasty, prophetic little creatures.”

Margaret laughed.

“Felicity seems to think it is indispensable, and one excuse is good as another, I daresay. This is their last day with Noel, after all.”

“And yours—which doesn’t even occur to them, I suppose.” Mrs. Neville, unaware that she was plagiarizing at least one of her juniors in this reflection about the mother of the bride, was too wise to put it into words, and merely said, looking round the garden:

“Yes, tomorrow she’ll be at the mercy of all of us, and we’ll gush and tell her how sweet she looks and how we adore June weddings ... and all the lovely roses. So appropriate. Not,” she went on, dropping her mimicry, “that Charles hasn’t done her very well with them this year. I suppose he has put in a special effort. I wish Tim had a little time to work in the garden, it would be so good for him. It is the only domestic occupation I can tolerate in a man. When they go round sniffing at dust or wanting to overlook your household supplies you may be sure they have all our worst vices and none of our virtues.”

“We should both be reassured then,” said Margaret, in her dry way.

“Oh, abundantly, and what luck for us:

“*‘Maiden, why should you worry in choosing
whom you shall marry?
Choose whom you may, you will find you
have got somebody else.’*”

I rather think that is my favorite quotation. It always makes me feel I must be naturally lucky.... What is your cumulative opinion of Noel’s young man by this time? Because the fact that he is a lamb and a scream and a pet conveys so little to my antiquated understanding.”

“Oh, ‘rather nice,’ ” quoted Margaret. “Noel confines herself to understatement, but the symptoms don’t change if the phrases do, and nothing would induce me to have an opinion in those circumstances.”

“And yet you are pleased,” said Dolly Neville.

“Oh, yes.... One is so afraid they may miss it. I don’t know how it is but there seems more danger of that nowadays. Perhaps it is because they all know too much and too little.”

“Or want too much and have too little,” amended Dolly neatly, and then laughed at herself as she could always do. “Here I sit, like a spinster, generalizing about the young, when I know quite well they are just as wise and as ignorant as we were, as nice and as horrid, as grasping and as generous and no more, wanting the moon, poor darlings, afraid they won’t get it, and not in the least likely to know what to do with it if they should. You are quite right, it is only the phrases that change. For instance, to be quite up to date we are expected to look down our noses at sentimental ballads, but endure without a shudder dreadful young men moaning that ‘my hearret is yourres, baby.’ ”

“Yes. I sometimes wonder if the generation that has grown up with jazz hears how horrible it is,” ruminated Margaret, “or whether they take it for granted with the traffic and the street drills and all the other noises.... By the way, Dolly, I find I have a musical daughter-in-law. I came upon her quite by accident, really listening to Purcell—rapt, in fact.”

“Frances ...? That’s a nice girl, Tim says. You know his way ... he hardly seems to notice a person’s existence and then startles you by pronouncing judgment.... One evening when we had walked round for an hour and she and Owen happened to be here....”

“Oh, Charles likes her too.” Margaret spoke involuntarily, and the implication—that Frances was a man’s woman—was so far from what she now wished to suggest or would ever have allowed herself to put into words, that she added hastily, “but that’s because she amuses him.”

“And perhaps never will again, thanks to me,” ran her despondent thought.

“I know—the dignity and impudence line,” said Mrs. Neville lightly. A rather old line, she had considered it, not even very adroit and betraying a lack of ease in Owen’s wife, but Tim’s penetration, which she had learned to trust, had made her ashamed of so small a view. Tim cared nothing for shades of behavior, “and I suppose,” went on Dolly’s thought, “all women care too much ... or nearly all.”

She got up and strolled over to a rose-tree, very round in its round bed and covered with fat blooms, a little pompous as a whole, but exquisite.

She did not altogether admire Charles’s garden, where everything was either round or square, and the small beds went neatly in pairs like vases on a suburban mantelpiece, but she envied the beautiful order in which it was kept because it was so unlike the busy scramble of her own existence. Margaret’s house had the same quality without the garden’s defect. Even at a time like this when another house would be upside down, thought Dolly, there was no confusion in it, or perhaps there was, but it didn’t show, which was the very genius of housekeeping. It wasn’t entirely a question of money, for the staff was small for a house of that size, “but better paid than mine undoubtedly,” she said to herself. “It is just that Margaret can do what I never could and with not half my incentive, poor darling. It isn’t even that she’s a slave to it, for she has a hundred interests, golf, bridge, and all those committees and books, concerts.... Tim ought to be married to Margaret and live in a restful house like this.... I should hate to be married to Charles, but I daresay it might be very good for him, for he doesn’t know his luck. I should

shake him thoroughly. Still, he might feel exactly the same about me, which would be awkward.”

Dolly, thinking of her own home, where meals could never be regular because of Tim, where the night-bell was a menace to his proper rest, and shabby things could only be replaced one at a time as patients condescended to pay, became preoccupied with a problem of her own, looking vaguely back at her friend, fingering the roses and saying after a moment:

“May I pick one or two as Charles isn’t looking? I know he likes them to die in their beds. He must have a medical strain in him somewhere.”

At a nod from Margaret she gathered a few blooms carefully and returned to her chair with them, explaining,

“Tim has a poor old patient who’s in a bad way; he has been up for nights with her, and she’ll love these.... No, don’t give me any more. Nurse will only put them out.... Margaret, I want you to do me a favor. I didn’t intend to mention it until after the wedding, but why not ...”

Margaret, noting the change of tone, turned her head and looked inquiringly at her guest.

“Of course,” she said, “as long as it isn’t to take on that committee again, because I can’t.... You’re worried, Dolly, what’s the matter?”

“It’s Timothy. He’s working himself to death. Oh, why wasn’t he given a little selfish ambition, and then he’d have been in Harley Street by this time with his abilities, living a life of leisure.... Oh, yes, it is, my dear, compared to Tim’s. He simply never spares himself, and he’s had two nasty turns lately. He swears it is nothing but indigestion, but I’m frightened, I can tell you. Well, the point is, I’m sure Charles is far from well. He must be. Do say he is.”

“Charles?” exclaimed Margaret, startled. “But you were talking about Timothy. There’s nothing the matter with Charles surely?”

“But, darling, I’m telling you. There simply must be ... as a personal favor.”

Mrs. Neville unfolded her plan. Some cousins had offered her their cottage in Cornwall for July, but the doctor, always very difficult to dislodge for more than a day or two, would never be induced to take the holiday he so badly needed on his own account. If, however, it were suggested to him that Charles was in a bad way, if Margaret would put it to Timothy that she was worried about Charles, his medical zeal would be aroused and then she,

Dolly, would suggest the remedy—a holiday for all four of them at the Cornish cottage, why not? Tim, she would point out, could then keep an eye on Charles, and they could get some golf and sailing, while the women amused each other. The twins were already provided for—they were going away to friends. Noel would be gone and Margaret and Charles suffering a post-wedding anti-climax.

Nothing indeed could have been more opportune, and Charles himself had given her the cue by meeting Timothy in the street yesterday evening and dropping a word about insomnia.

“Tim mentioned at dinner that he had scribbled him out a prescription because he wasn’t sleeping too well,” finished Mrs. Neville, “and I immediately had this inspiration. Margaret, I know you’ll do it for me, either with or without Charles’s help. I’ll leave that to you.”

Margaret clasped the frame of the chair until the rough wood grazed her hand, tendering sympathy while evading the main issue as best she could. She would have to think about what could be done, find out when Charles had arranged to take his holiday this year, and if he could leave town, she said, but after the wedding when everything was not so confused.

“Of course. It’s brutal of me to worry you when you have so much on your mind. And yet, though it may sound specious, I wasn’t entirely forgetting you,” declared Dolly Neville. “After all this you’ll need a change as much as any one, so you see how neatly it all fits in.... And now I must fly. Do throw out the twins as soon as you’re tired of them or they’ll be taking root. Good-by, my dear. Don’t bother to come with me. I have the car. I’ve been driving Tim this morning to save him the extra fatigue.”

Margaret, however, walked round with her and then stood looking after her with a troubled face as she drove away. It was quite impossible in view of her own plans to do as Dolly asked, and yet a dozen reasons of friendship and obligation demanded that she should.

So often in the past had the Nevilles unobtrusively eased the strain of her own situation, while never by the merest sign seeming to assume a special knowledge or see anything that they were not intended to see. Such delicacy and understanding deserved the best that she could do for them, at whatever cost to herself, and yet to put off her own departure long enough to fall in with the Cornwall plan, simple as it might seem in theory, was more than she could face. To share with Charles, on the very eve of breaking with him altogether, the inevitable intimacy of such a foursome holiday would argue a degree of cynicism of which she was incapable; to share it, moreover, with

the Nevilles, who, in spite of early poverty and the handicap of Timothy's old mother always in the house, had succeeded in making of their marriage everything that she and Charles had not, would be too bitter a reminder of their own failure.

Dolly, for all her outer lightness of heart, was not a fanciful woman. She was seriously worried about Tim, it was evident, and his absorption in his work was notorious. He would never, in spite of his wife's assumed regret for Harley Street, have been content to draw large fees from the fanciful and frightened. He was the type of medical man who is the bane of local authorities and politicians, harrying all parties with a fanatical zeal in his fight with disease, holding health, and the conditions to maintain it, the only basis of good government.

Margaret could believe that only some such maneuver as Dolly suggested would be successful in getting him away, for he was one of the kindest and most selfless of men, and Charles's supposed necessity would be the bait to move him, not merely for reasons of friendship, but because in a sense this had become an established habit.

She saw that time and again she had accepted from these two friends just the kind of service which was being asked of her, and that it had been asked was the measure of Dolly's necessity. Her casual reference to Charles—"with or without his help, I'll leave that to you"—went to prove it,—the first least hint in all these years that some management in that quarter might be needed and perhaps difficult!

"But I'm not so mean-spirited," she thought, "that I wouldn't put it to Charles, and I'm sure he'd do his best; he's fond of Tim. Only, as things are, it's all so impossible."

And then for the first time she recalled what her friend had said about the prescription because Charles had admitted he was sleeping badly, and mechanically her mind began to seek a reason for this and a possible remedy, to plan some hasty alteration in tonight's dinner, more to his taste, in case he should be in; to wonder whether she had any new book of the kind he enjoyed that she could leave about where he would see it and be tempted to carry it up to bed; to register the resolve to make sure his den had not been disturbed in the rearrangement of the house for tomorrow's reception.

Very often since the preparations for the wedding began he had dined in town, much to her relief; "at the Club playing bridge" had been his usual telephoned explanation, and once or twice a press of business, and of course

this last excuse, which she had supposed conventional, might be true. In these uneasy and difficult times office worries might well be the cause of his insomnia, and she blamed herself for having noticed nothing in her absorption with Noel's affairs, for he would never tell her if he were worried or unwell, obstinately assuming her hostility.

That was the essential difference in their natures; she could not be indifferent to his welfare, and he could not believe her anything else. And in seeing this she saw the pass to which they had come, wondering if she alone could be to blame for it. She had loved him deeply and she knew that he had loved her, but that was over long ago, and yet not perhaps suddenly killed by that betrayal of the spirit as once she would have said. She could remember still with what agony she had been aware of him in every painful nerve long after the revelation of his unfaithfulness had wrecked her peace, finding his presence unendurable, yet plunged in fresh misery when he was gone.

No, her love had died no sudden death, but meanly, impoverished, in the wretched attic of a compromise.

She had not left Charles as every instinct within her had cried out to her to do; she had given in to his frantic pleading—for the sake of the children; for financial reasons because with old Mr. Moreland's views the scandal would bring immediate disaster; because the shock might kill his mother who was ill and old. Had she been a fool to feel it indecent to involve other people in misery to save herself? To expect faithfulness of any man? But why ask such questions now?

She had stayed, and Charles, having had his way, could not forgive her because the world he had broken was not immediately whole again.

And now at last they had come to the end, for none of the old considerations need hold her any more. The children were provided for, old Mrs. Lister long dead, and Mr. Moreland talking of retirement. Charles would not wish to hold her; and she—how thankful she would be to be gone!

The gong rang, and Margaret, turning towards the house, saw a rosebud at her feet, evidently dropped by Mrs. Neville as she got into the car. She stooped and picked it up, the problem of the Cornwall holiday once more recalled to her mind.

"I can't," she thought desperately. "I simply can't.... I shall be gone ... but why not Charles alone?"

There it was, the simple, the obvious solution. She would tell Dolly what she meant to do. The Nevilles would have to know eventually and she need give no reason, at her age, beyond the one which must have been evident to them for years. Her going could be Dolly's excuse to persuade the doctor to take Charles to Cornwall—to do them this last service so that their parting might come about naturally, avoiding the pain and embarrassment of farewell.

The Cornwall project after all might prove a blessing in disguise.

2

In the hall she came upon Noel just leaving the telephone, and there was little need to ask who had been at the other end, for the news was written in her face.

"It was Arnold," she announced unnecessarily. "Mother, his aunts have come up for the wedding and want him to take me in to tea with them at the Berkeley. I've said I'll go because the old funny things are so fond of him and I didn't like to refuse. Is it very awful of me, when there's so much to do?"

"Am I expected to say yes, or no?" inquired her mother.

Noel at this moment was so much the girl she herself had been long ago that she felt suddenly afraid for her, lest she too some day should find broken at her feet this fragile love which she believed imperishable.

"But she's much kinder than I am and wiser," Margaret thought. "Perhaps she won't expect too much."

Noel, opening the dining-room door, had swept up Frances from the bureau where she was still writing and given her a seat next to her own, saying:

"I have hardly seen you for a minute. I never dreamt you were toiling at my list. Now tell me all."

The rest of the party fell into place without waiting for invitations, Felicity announcing that she was parlormaid and Martin butler by private arrangement with Spence. They took possession, waiting assiduously on Margaret, who sat like a guest at her own table watching them all with her dry smile.

Theirs was the future, these young things in a not very happy world. She looked at the twins, deliciously bland and untiring in devilry, and thought of

their father overworking, and how soon, for all one could say, they might have to meet grief and loss; at Felicity, daughter of a queer, fashionable mother, and Noel's boon companion persistently since both were at school. What would become of Felicity, she wondered, with Noel gone, or did these separations mean nothing to the young of today? They gave no hint, speech to most of them being something inconsequent to fling about.

Though he had been to the house half a dozen times she still knew less than nothing of Martin Croft, who chiefly interested her as Arnold's friend. He had taken the tone from the rest of them, become part of the landscape, she thought. Having finished his comic buttling he had carried his chair and plate round the table to a vacant space beside Owen as though he had known the house for years, and the two young men had become engrossed in a world of their own, completely changed. Somehow they had acquired information about each other apparently, for she heard snatches of their talk: "It didn't occur to me that you were that Lister.... I've heard a lot about it from Bing, he was up at Caius with you, wasn't he? ... in my squadron.... Look here, I want to hear something about this ... what lines are you working on?"

And then technicalities.

But, of course, Martin was in the R.A.F. and Owen's work was aeronautics. The phrase "that Lister" was surely a tribute to her clever son, whose gadget, as he called it, a new form of silencer, while not fulfilling all his hopes for it, had found minor use and earned him, besides the royalties, his post in a research laboratory with a leading firm.

It was, she supposed, fortunate, Charles's attitude being what it was, that Owen's talents had taken him directly to a goal of his own. She remembered how he had spent two vacations dogging important people with his invention, seeking introductions or sitting in offices without them, obstinately determined to be seen and heard. In one such office he had met Frances, secretary to the man he desired to see, and their friendship had sprung from the help she had contrived to give him; Frances, who so surprisingly, somehow in this crooning age, loved Purcell's music,—of whom Tim, in his sudden way, had said, "That's a nice girl."

If this revelation from Dolly, coming so aptly to corroborate her reconsidered opinion of Frances, had given her a pang, it had been for her own blindness. It was humiliating to discover that she had been after all the conventional mother-in-law, to face such a degeneration in herself; and there had come over her, not so much this time the desire as the urgent need to get

away, to take stock, as it were, and find her old balance and serenity ... if one ever did. If not, she had the conviction that the loss would be hers and hers alone. It could have no real importance for Frances, none even for Owen, hard as that truth might be.

On the verge of telling Dolly about the expected baby, she had held her tongue, seeing in a flash how it might be construed as enlisting Tim, and knowing that she must keep out of this. Frances, averse from the winter at Hampstead, might equally be determined to choose her own doctor and go her own way entirely, in spite of Owen's talk of the help they should need from her.

And yet there was something which she could do—which she must contrive to do, however cunningly—thought Margaret now, looking at her daughter-in-law seated between the twins, a small strange bird between two noisy sparrows. Owen's salary was not large, yet they had saved his royalties, he had said, in the interests of the coming baby. Most of such saving must have fallen on his wife's shoulders, though this would not occur to a man—that small flat up many flights of stairs!

She had furnished it for them at the time of their marriage but done nothing since, for her own means were small and any attempt at a financial discussion with Charles had always ended in a deadlock of "Just as you please" with no least hint of what he could afford. But now before leaving him this issue must be forced; he was not mean and would agree to make her an adequate allowance, she was sure. Then first and foremost things must be made easier for Frances.

In the contemplation of this—something concrete ahead of her—she began to see, almost with happiness, her new life taking shape.

Chapter V OLIVE-BRANCHES

1

Owen's manipulation of the telephone earlier in the morning had been directed against "Aunt Mabel," the mother of the fourth bridesmaid, though he had forgotten that at the moment, considering merely that she was a nuisance and liable to invade the house if given half a chance.

This was true. Mrs. John Lister indeed did not wait even for half-chances, and although she and Cecily had not been invited to Hampstead until the morning of the wedding, she had chosen to misunderstand this arrangement and come up the day before. There would be high doings, no doubt, and she saw no reason why she and darling Cecily should not be included in them just because they happened to be poor. She cherished an unshakeable belief that the Charles Listers lived a life of constant gayety and spent money like water behind her back, and she lived for the day when she should catch them at it.

Martin Croft's play-acting as the family retainer this morning therefore had its due effect.

"There, what have I always told you, Cecy? They have a butler, as I have suspected for years, though they take pains to keep him out of sight when we are invited there. I am rarely mistaken and I must say it is very mean and deceitful of Margaret."

"Don't be silly, mother," said Cecily sharply. "It is no business of ours."

The girl was miserably aware that she had been included in the wedding unwillingly and was now, thanks to her mother, about to be thrust into a house where she would be unwelcome and probably in the way. Discovering only when they were in the train that they were not expected until tomorrow, she had had a scene with her mother, flatly refusing to accompany her to Hampstead until they had at least telephoned her aunt.

"You see now how silly we should have looked to go there and find every one out," she went on. "For goodness' sake let us catch the next train home."

"And waste the train fares? Really, Cecy, *I* am not able to afford to rush here and there and everywhere, throwing away good money; and there is no food in the house, not that that matters to me for I am a very small eater at

the best of times. Give me a crust of bread ... I shall go and see your Uncle Charles,” finished Mrs. Lister with decision.

Cecily gave up the struggle, for this was better than nothing—better at least than the shame of going out to Hampstead unheralded and seeing their looks of cold surprise; better than having to listen to ridiculous references to crusts of bread too. As if her mother had ever denied herself food! It was just lies, to get sympathy; it was cadging; it was beastly.

2

Charles Lister looked up doubtfully as his secretary entered the room to announce the visitors, and for a moment he did not take in what she had said. His mind had been full of the “message” she had brought him from his wife, and more than once he had put his hand to the bell to summon her on some pretext and so find occasion to ask her to repeat it, as though hearing the words again might convince him of what he badly needed to believe, that this was in some sort at least an olive-branch. For if not, why had she sent a message so meaningless—or indeed any at all—by the girl ... and after all these years?

It is an ironic comment on our limited understanding of each other that we can remain blind to a hundred signs and then in the moment of our own necessity awake at a chance touch to one that is not really there. So Margaret’s forbearance, her patience all these years, had seemed to him only a cold reproach, disguised for the children’s sake, and now when he had broken them at last, he found kindness in a message she had never sent.

Incidentally he looked so much more like himself that Miss Godolphin ventured a smile at his absence of mind as she repeated:

“Mrs. John Lister and her daughter wish to see you, Mr. Lister.”

“Good heavens, what can they want? Did you say I was in?” he asked, looking round as though for a way of escape.

“I’m afraid they saw you letting Mr. Benham out,” said the secretary sympathetically, “but I can remind you of a luncheon engagement in five minutes ... or telephone.”

“Oh, good girl.... Yes, do. Make it the telephone. I rather think I shall have to miss lunch. There’s that confounded meeting this afternoon.”

“I shouldn’t do that,” advised Miss Godolphin earnestly. “I can get all that correspondence of Mr. Benham’s and make a résumé of it ready for you to glance through directly you get back. Then you can give me your

instructions before the meeting. You will want to be fresh for the wedding tomorrow, and Mrs. Lister will be most upset if you go home worn out and lie awake all night.”

Miss Godolphin, cheerfully reducing her own luncheon to a hasty sandwich and adding an extra hour’s work to her day by this suggestion, felt justified, now that she had met Mrs. Lister at last, in bringing her up as reënforcements, so to speak, of her own argument. A capable secretary, she had various unspecified duties far more difficult and subtle than the mere clerical services for which she was engaged, and seeing that her employer did not play ducks and drakes with his digestion was one of them. In the course of her experience she had found that it is part of the eternal child of the male that he will chafe irritably against feminine advice in this direction as mere fussing, while taking fright at the smallest sign of indisposition in himself. One had to be firm but impersonal with the creatures, in fact. This morning she seemed to have found the correct formula, for, after a moment’s hesitation, he said almost gayly:

“I daresay you are right.... Very well then, we’ll give my sister-in-law five minutes and be able to congratulate ourselves if we get rid of her in ten.”

The visitors, ushered in by Miss Godolphin, found him on his feet consulting his wrist-watch.

“Good morning, Mabel. Well, Cecily, my dear. What can I do for you? ... I am extremely busy unfortunately....”

“Now don’t say you are too busy to take us to have a bite to eat,” protested Mabel, seating herself without invitation. “However busy you are, you don’t neglect the inner man, Charles, so don’t tell me. You’re putting on weight.”

Her tone was waggish, one of several in her repertoire which she believed to be irresistible to men, but the tactlessness of the last suggestion was not calculated to endear her to Charles, who said coldly:

“On the contrary. However, that is of no consequence. I have an important appointment for luncheon with a client, so must, I am afraid, deny myself the pleasure of your company. I can give you just five minutes.”

“Ah, well, we must get a crust at a tea-shop, I suppose,” sighed Mabel. “Nasty places but all that are within our slender means. I am no great eater fortunately, but lunch at a nice restaurant for once would have been such a treat to Cecy.”

Cecily, who was standing by the window looking moodily into the street, exclaimed:

“Mother, don’t talk such nonsense. That’s not in the least my idea of a treat, and we are wasting Uncle Charles’s time.”

“Really, Cecily, how you snap one up! I was only trying to explain to your uncle how we had telephoned Aunt Margaret to make sure it would be quite convenient to have us this morning rather than this afternoon. For I always like to consider other people,” said Mabel, losing her point as usual in enumeration of her own virtues.

“You mean you are on your way to Hampstead, then?” said Charles in some astonishment.

“But of *course*. Cecy is to be one of Noel’s *bridesmaids*, Charles. Wake up.”

“Oh, I see, and the bridesmaids have to be on the scene beforehand, is that it? I am not up in these technicalities.”

Charles addressed his niece with an apologetic smile, but her response was unexpected.

“Of course I’m not wanted beforehand,” she said gloomily, “and I know Aunt Margaret won’t expect us till tomorrow morning, but mother would come. It’s not even as though I were the first bridesmaid. In fact,” added Cecily in a rush, “they only asked me to please you.”

“Oh, no ...” began Charles, but his sister-in-law interrupted:

“And who has a better right to be Noel’s bridesmaid, I should be glad to know? You seem to forget that your poor father was the head of the family, Cecily. Some people very easily forget their nearest and dearest when death snatches them away. Now I think of the dear fellow morning and evening regularly ... in my prayers. I am old-fashioned enough to pray,” said Mabel with self-satisfaction and as though she had contributed an argument of crushing weight to the discussion.

The girl gave an impatient shrug, Charles looked merely bewildered and Mabel continued:

“Of course you are wanted beforehand. Isn’t it the duty of the bridesmaids to dress the bride? Do you think your mother doesn’t know how a wedding should be conducted? I have been both bride and bridesmaid and may, I imagine, be supposed to know. Are we expected to get up at dawn tomorrow and arrive at your aunt’s like any Dick, Tom and Harry with no

time to get the creases out of our clothes? Absurd! But as I was telling you, Charles, not wishing to put Margaret to inconvenience, I telephoned her from Victoria Station, but the *butler* informed me the family were out and would not be in for luncheon.”

“Butler?” echoed her brother-in-law. “We have no butler.”

“Well, whatever you choose to call him,” said Mabel cleverly. “If poor John had not given his life for his King and country I should have a large staff of servants myself, for every one says he was the flower of the flock and would have gone far. The dear fellow had a wonderful mind. I assure you it even used to amaze *me* at times, but then of course that’s why I married him. They all laughed at me when I was a girl because I thought such a lot of people’s minds. ‘Whatever happens to Mabel,’ they used to say, ‘she certainly won’t marry a fool.’ ”

Charles suppressed all the obvious replies he would have liked to make to this rigmarole and said, as patiently as he knew how:

“My dear Mabel, I am sure you didn’t come here to tell me why you married John, and my time is limited. If you would just come to the point.”

This was a facer for Mabel, whose point had been to acquire a meal at Charles’s expense, with or without his company. However, she rallied her wits and returned brightly:—

“But I was just *telling* you. The butler said they were all out, and I want to know when their luncheon party is likely to be over and it will be convenient for us to arrive, for here we are stranded with our luggage and it is all *most* awkward.... Where have they gone?” added Mabel on an afterthought. “I suppose they are being entertained by the bridegroom’s family, is that it?”

“Not that I am aware of. In fact, I should think it most unlikely.”

There was a knock at the door and Miss Godolphin appeared.

“You asked me to remind you that your appointment was for 1.30 sharp, Mr. Lister.”

“Yes, by Jove, I shall be late.... Thank you, Miss Godolphin.” Charles, with another glance at his watch, had risen. “I’m sorry, but this is an urgent matter and you must excuse me. I have no idea what they are doing this morning, except that they are undoubtedly very busy. I should advise you to have lunch quietly somewhere, then look round the shops or see a film, and go out to Hampstead at your leisure.”

He shepherded them to the door and shook hands, saying kindly to Cecily, "I'll see you this evening, then."

"Oh, I suppose so," she returned with a faint smile. "That will be nice, even if you aren't the flower of the flock."

Behind her mother's back they enjoyed the joke before the door closed between them.

3

Mabel, indignant at her dismissal, spent a further five minutes inquiring for Mr. Moreland, who was not in, and wondering what she could do with the suitcases, which were far too heavy, she said, to carry about, explaining volubly to the assembled clerks that her daughter was to be a bridesmaid at tomorrow's wedding. Miss Godolphin finally took charge of the cases to be called for later, promised not to let them out of her sight, rang for the lift and saw the visitors into it.

A very officious young woman, Mabel pronounced her. And Cecily could take it from her that she was in love with Charles. No doubt he was taking his so-called secretary to lunch, in fact, unless he was joining Margaret and Noel and the bridegroom's family at the Ritz or wherever it was. She had now convinced herself that her brother-in-law had been lying and knew perfectly well that a party was in progress, from which she and Cecily had been purposely excluded. The other bridesmaids would be there, you might be sure, and it was very shabby of Margaret, very shabby indeed.

Throughout luncheon at a Lyons café, while she consumed her crust, in other words a grapefruit, a mixed grill with peas and potatoes and a large ice, she continued to embroider this theme, while Cecily, who was condemned to pay for her own meal, ate a Welsh rarebit and an orange as though she were deaf and dumb.

"Of course he knows perfectly well where they are. It stands to reason," continued the complaining voice. "Would your poor father have been ignorant of my movements or engagements? Why, every evening when he came home I told him exactly what I had been doing all day and what I intended to do tomorrow, and I expected the same details from him."

"No wonder he went to the war," snapped Cecily, driven to speech at last by sheer exasperation.

4

Charles, meanwhile, over his own solitary lunch, thought of the recent visitors merely as they touched his own private problem. If Mabel's telephone call had actually been answered by a butler, the man must have been engaged temporarily for the wedding reception, he supposed, though it seemed unnecessary and pretentious. That was unlike Margaret, or had been long ago, but perhaps, he thought bleakly, Noel felt it necessary to impress young Flinders' relatives, which was a pity.

Charles knew little of his daughter's tastes and desires, or indeed of his son's, for insensibly he had come to regard them as part of the issue between himself and Margaret.

Though he would not have admitted it, he had always been a little jealous of the children and for years he had had with him the uncomfortable conviction that if she had not left him it had been only for their sake. He forgot that few actions are as simple as that; forgot too that Margaret was the last woman in the world to be swayed by purely material reasons, and that, bitterly hurt as she had been by the shock he had dealt her pride and her love for him, it had argued some remnant of confidence in him that she should have felt it would be better for the children that the home should not be broken up.

"But it must be a decent home," she had said. "You have broken faith with me but I won't let you break faith with them. You've frightened me, Charles. I've lost all sense of security."

He could not see that being a woman she inevitably supposed he no longer loved her and might continue to seek consolation elsewhere, that there was nothing now left but perhaps his love for the children to restrain him.

He had sworn that they should not suffer, translating what she had said in his own fashion, determined to deny her nothing she asked for them in future, to let her have her own way, do with them what she chose.

For it was part of the irony of the situation that further adventures were the last thing which Charles desired. He was suffering from the humiliating knowledge that he had been a fool. A knave would certainly have fared better. An attractive young man of considerable charm, he had been spoilt by women before marriage and had his affairs, but he loved his wife, if the first glamour had passed, and the disastrous interlude had in fact bored him so completely that it would have done little mischief had not the woman in the case been a schemer and out for what she could get. Finding him less malleable than she had expected, she had informed his wife of their

relations, no doubt in the hope of precipitating a divorce and driving him into her arms. Her perfidy and Margaret's bitterness, which he could not see as natural and perhaps temporary, had made him avoid women—driven him into himself in a manner equally bad for his temper and his health. From that date he had buried himself in his work (settled down, in Mr. Moreland's innocent phrase), taking up the study of international finance which had always had a fascination for him in his leisure hours and, in time, adding to his income by articles in the financial press. Times were bad and grew worse, and the firm of Moreland and Lister suffered like every other. Charles worked harder, practiced petty personal economies, and went on paying whatever was demanded of him for the children, being cursed with an obstinate pride that could not change.

They had become virtual strangers to him, for he allowed them little opportunity to be anything else. They gave him information about themselves from time to time under pressure from their mother, self-consciously, as was inevitable, and their casual, aloof attitude, which seemed to him hostile, was three parts the manner of their generation and the fourth due to the uncertainty of his temper and the natural instinct of the young to ignore what is awkward or unpleasant.

Owen left Westminster and went up to Cambridge, invented his gadget and in due course sold it and found himself a post; and his father had neither hand nor pride in these affairs. Equally when Owen announced that he meant to marry, Charles, thinking him far too young, said nothing at all, though Margaret had certainly counted on his support in this, and felt his silence to be the last and worst evidence of the failure of their marriage. From that day she had known she would leave him as soon as Noel's future was assured.

Charles, sitting at lunch and guessing nothing of that, thought of his daughter's marriage tomorrow with a mixture of dread and relief. He was to give the bride away—Margaret had made it plain that he could not relegate the responsibility—, he would also no doubt have to respond to the toast of the bride's parents, if such fooleries had not gone out of fashion, and generally behave, he supposed, like a fortunate and affectionate father. Then, thank heaven, it would be over.

Suffering from the effects of overwork, chronic dyspepsia and periods of sleeplessness, he had found all the bustle and preparation of the past months trying, though mechanically he had done what was required of him, meeting young Flinders, and putting in an appearance at such social occasions for Noel as he could not avoid. But he had not consciously thought very much

about the marriage until Mrs. Moreland's talk of losing his girl this morning had sent his mind back on a bitter survey of the past.

From that he had come to the illuminating fact that after tomorrow he and Margaret would be alone, the children no longer a barrier between them. He had denied them nothing, had kept his word and in that respect at least she could not reproach him. His ruminations perhaps would have gone no further than that—a rather weary sense of triumph—but for Miss Godolphin's "message," for the more he thought of that the more certain it seemed that Margaret was turning to him now that Noel would soon be gone, and her preoccupation with the children finished. A "we have only each other and must make the best of it" gesture no doubt.

Charles cared little what kind of gesture it was as long as it was there. The plain fact was that he felt wretched and wanted to be made a fuss of, though he did not know it. And in this mood something which Cecily had said presently returned to his mind as further evidence of what he wished to believe—. "They only asked me to please you," she had said. He had been incredulous at the time, but now he wondered why, for certainly there was no obligation on Noel's part to have included her cousin otherwise, and no particular friendship between the two girls. Then Margaret had prompted it, knowing he was fond of Cecily? He felt rather touched.

Recalled to the matter of Mabel's visit and her argument with Cecily as to whether they were or were not expected at Hampstead today, he wondered whether he had better telephone Margaret and let her know they were coming. He felt awkward at the prospect and yet increasingly eager as though he might hear in the tone of his wife's voice evidence of the change for which he was beginning to hope.

Back in the office presently he closed his door, looked doubtfully at the telephone, retreated almost with guilt as Miss Godolphin came in to lay the Benham papers on his desk, and then when she had gone, grabbed the receiver and called the Hampstead house.

Only then did he remember Mabel's rigmarole about the butler and the luncheon party, and glancing at his watch saw that it was barely half-past two. They would hardly be back so early and he was wasting his time. He did not know whether he was more disappointed or relieved.

"Yes?" said Margaret's voice at the other end of the line at this moment.

She was exasperated, naturally, when she heard his news, Mabel being the last guest in the world to be lightly endured at such a time.

“Of course she hasn’t telephoned,” she exclaimed. “I haven’t been out of the house, and she knows perfectly well we have no butler. She is always trying to work up some sensation. Owen and Frances are here and we simply haven’t room for them tonight. Why on earth didn’t you tell them so?”

“Haven’t you? You were not expecting them, after all? Well, they can have my room and I’ll stay at the Club,” offered Charles in a tone of awkward propitiation.

“Oh no, indeed you won’t. Now you’ve let me in for Mabel you can just come home and entertain her, for I can’t and won’t,” exclaimed Margaret, hanging up the receiver with a quite audible slam.

Charles put his own back slowly. If he had wished to hear a different tone in her voice he had not been disappointed, for it was years since she had permitted herself to lose her temper with him, and presently he found a kind of comfort in that, reënforced by the indubitable fact that she had ordered him to come home.

Chapter VI THE QUIET HOUSE

1

Margaret at the other end was too furious for once even to consider Charles, and she was glaring at the telephone when Noel appeared to inquire,

“Any one interesting—or not?”

“No,” said her mother. “It was only a message. Go and make yourself beautiful for your aunts-in-law elect. Arnold will expect it.”

It was useless to spoil Noel’s pleasure before she must, for Cecily would certainly not add to the gayety of the young people in the house and her mother would be too tiresome for words.

“Really, Charles might have contrived to put them off,” she thought. “He must know perfectly well they were not expected, or why did he ring me up—so guiltily too? Men are incredible. Even Mabel can get round him.”

With a sigh of impatience she went upstairs to consider the question of accommodation. She was not going to have Noel turned out of her room on this night of all others; and Charles, since he was not sleeping well, must be left undisturbed, though it would serve him right to make him suffer for all this inconvenience. She had given Owen and Frances the spare room, and had no inclination to upset that arrangement either, especially after her recent brush with the girl.

“I am getting thoroughly ill-tempered,” she thought, “—first Frances and now Charles.... It must have been quite a shock for him too.... Oh, it is a mercy for both of us that I shall soon be gone.”

Serenity returned at the thought, and she rang for Spence and began methodically to remove her dress for tomorrow, her brushes and slippers and other odds and ends to Owen’s old room upstairs. It was a smaller room than Noel’s but had been held by its late owner, when the arrangement was first made, as far superior from a strategic point of view, being well away from the eye of authority, as became the stronghold of a desperate character. Later in life he had decorated it to taste on various occasions, and traces of his most ribald period still remained, as well as some of his old belongings. His boyhood books, neater than ever they had stood in the days of his lordship of the place, supported each other sedately in the built-in shelves along one

end of the room. They had been no doubt too juvenile as well as too bulky to take to the little flat and were now merely so many pieces of colored board, until a new generation should arise and pull them from their prison and find their magic worlds again.

Young What's-his Name's library in fact awaited him.

"But we'll have to change the decorations to suit his years, I think," said Margaret, smiling to herself, and then remembered that she would be gone, and long before such a necessity arose, a stranger here.

In the hanging cupboard she found Noel's frocks to be discarded tomorrow, her winter coat and a multitude of hats, put here to make room for the trousseau in the wardrobe downstairs. She had said: "Will you find me a legatee for these, mother? I'm leaving you an awful lot of odd jobs, I'm afraid.... How strange to be setting out all newly upholstered to the last button. It can't have happened before since I was born. I shall feel very swish of course, but rather surprised, I think, and new.... You have done me well, haven't you? I hope it hasn't brought you to penury or anything, because workhouses look so dull."

"Give me a crust of bread," Margaret had replied in appropriate quotation to this obscure vote of thanks, and now, as she pushed the old frocks aside to hang her own, thought of the incident again, with the conviction that Noel's sympathies would certainly have been with her, had she chosen to seek them. She could at least be thankful to have avoided that weakness and to know her daughter would take away with her tomorrow no heavier apprehension than that of a penury induced by the cost of her clothes.

To Spence, coming in with a pile of blankets, she said remorsefully:

"I am sorry this means so much extra work for you and Ada, Spence. You've both been splendid and you must be tired out. Unfortunately, Mrs. John Lister seems to have understood that they were expected today."

"Well, madam, it's not the work," said Spence, who was much too discreet to express her opinion about the visitor directly, "but I do think people might let you have Miss Noel to yourself on her very last evening. It doesn't seem right not with her going so far away."

Spence had a delicacy of perception unknown to the Mabels of this world, and she gave her mistress a brief and sympathetic smile, then briskly began to set the little room in order, purloining an easy chair from the spare room and a bedside rug from her master's, to make it more habitable.

Margaret, standing at the window, thought with a pang that this was indeed Noel's last day, and that there stood between them, not merely these unwelcome visitors, but the much more real barrier of their intimacy and their affection. Remembering all the fussy hints and elaborate confidences which even the most knowledgeable brides of her own day had had to face, she could smile at the thought of her own distant scorn and embarrassment and the downright hilarity with which an attempt at such "disclosures" from her to Noel would have been met. "Thank heaven they can laugh in our faces," she said to herself, "but that is the only real difference, I believe. She would be just as much embarrassed at anything I might try to say to help her, and the desire is a sheer self-indulgence. Perhaps it is just as well the house is full."

Turning to go downstairs again she saw the transformation Spence was busily effecting and exclaimed:

"It all looks very comfortable, but isn't that your master's rug?"

"He'll never notice, madam, and he has his nice carpet after all."

Margaret laughed.

"Yes, I suppose he has," she said.

"He has his nice carpet after all." It sounded almost like a cynical commentary on Charles and the whole situation, yet he had had little else of late, poor Charles, thanks to his own temperament.

"And I suppose mine," thought Margaret going downstairs. "I must have failed him badly somehow, though it is hard to know what I could have done that I haven't tried to do.... There are ways of doing, of course, and I must have lost the way ... perhaps begun to bore him long ago."

Her heart dropped almost as at a pain that was new instead of old and long past remedy, and catching sight of Noel coming from the bathroom, she opened the nearest door, which was that of her husband's room, and went hastily in, unable to control the blind instinct for flight.

"This is perfectly absurd, of course," she told herself, smiling rather forlornly at the nice carpet which had evoked the disturbing subject in her mind.

There was little fear that Charles would miss the rug but, recalling his sleeplessness, she went over and examined pillows and bed and then flung up the lower window sashes, a thing Spence never could be induced to do of her own free will because of hypothetical dust.

The room, like Noel's, looked over the Heath, but except for that there was little to remind Margaret of the years she had shared it. It had been too long a man's room, and twice re-decorated, so that even such small familiar things as might have spoken to her had been removed away—with one exception. An old portrait of her own had for years hung over the mantelpiece, and when the room was re-papered she had been tempted to destroy it, but had not done so because even that might be misconstrued by Charles. She had instead left it unhung with other odds and ends for him to look through on the tallboy, giving him a legitimate excuse to discard it or pack it away. There it still remained, propped, by Spence no doubt, against the wall, a symbol, she thought, of Charles's whole attitude, for he had done nothing about it, neither hung it again nor cast it out, seeing, she supposed, implications in either act though there had been none in her mind, only the knowledge that it was out of date and therefore unsightly.

She took it down and looked at it with the amused distaste most women feel for such representations of themselves clad in clothes which time has made ridiculous. It had been taken for her mother-in-law, who had cherished a perfect gallery of family photographs, even to remote cousins and including groups of different periods—parents self-consciously in chairs and the children disposed about them, the youngest invariably crosslegged at their feet. Charles had liked to bait her about these, saying they should be hung on the stairs like sporting prints or the Cries of London, and entitled "Decline of the Family," but she had not minded his banter. She had had, or liked to believe that she had, the whole history of these people at her fingertips and, as reading became difficult to her with failing sight, they had constituted her library—old Samuel Lister, who had had seven daughters and had fought off all desirable suitors with such ferocity that the three hardier girls had eloped with undesirables ("a young man traveling in soap, my dear, the local dentist, and a scamp who was something in the merchant marine, and none of them got a penny of the old man's money"); her second cousin James, who had owned square miles and spent ten years and a fortune on a lawsuit over a few feet of valueless land; poor Aunt Susannah "of whom the less said the better."

She would tell about them, not without a malicious enjoyment of their follies, yet revealing her own mind, her pride in her own blameless family. Charles had always been the darling of her heart, and his wife and children had shone with a reflected glory, the more perhaps because Mabel was a tiresome creature, the child Cecily undeniably plain, and Peggy Lister engrossed even then in her own affairs. Through the two years of illness before her death she had constantly wanted Margaret beside her.

It had not seemed possible to deal her such a blow as any hint of their disruption, much less an actual separation would have meant.

Margaret put back the portrait of a smiling young woman of thirty with fair hair coiled at the nape of her neck, with a sigh of impatience that she should be canvassing this old matter again, and said to the stranger who had been herself,

“Yes, you look altogether too pleased with life. One could grow very tired of you.”

Charles would be free to burn the wretched thing very soon now, without any fear of implications, she thought, and then glimpsed (as first Noel and then Charles, each in a different fashion, had done this morning) the quiet house. And saw it empty, lifeless, still, a desolate succession of closed doors and silent rooms.

“But it will be far too large for him. He will sell the house, perhaps,” she decided, “take a service flat, or live at his club.”

That would be the logical thing to do. He could keep the pieces he cherished, and send everything else to an auction room.

She tried to view this demolition of the home which had been her care for a quarter of a century with a cold and practical detachment but not with entire success, for inanimate things develop a personality with the years, and obtain a hold, and the waste of such dispersal was not to be denied. She had overlooked all this, but it was something she saw now that must be considered, for Charles knew little probably of what was in the house, and perhaps she ought to leave him at least a rough inventory.

“I shall have to have a long talk with him,” she said to herself. “There is no reason why we should behave like a pair of quarrelsome children and refuse to discuss the matter sensibly. If he decides to sell the place and will tell me what furniture and silver he means to keep, there are any number of things Owen and Frances might have. We must get them away from that little flat, and if they have a lease to run I could keep it on as a sort of foothold, put in a few necessities.... I don’t want possessions any more, not yet at least ... not for a long time yet.”

She recalled the books upstairs in Owen’s room which must not be overlooked; Noel’s belongings which she could not take to India, but which she would confidently expect to find when she came home again; and for a moment saw her simple determination to be gone opposed by all these

complications, as though the house would hold her by the tyranny of the things it contained.

“Yet if I were to die, some one would have to see to all this,” she thought in protest. “None of it is really important. It is just the habit of looking after all three of them. And Charles doesn’t even notice and the children no longer need it. My job is gone.”

Yet not the immediate job.

Margaret came back to the present from all this fruitless meditation, remembering so much yet to be done for tomorrow, and her two unwelcome guests likely to arrive at any moment now.

She could hear Spence moving in Charles’s dressing-room, making up a bed for Cecily, and she opened the dividing door and lifted his dressing-gown off the hook, then collected his shaving kit.

“I don’t think there is anything else your master will want, is there, Spence?” she said. “Then you can lock this door behind me, will you.”

She opened the wardrobe, looking to make sure that his morning clothes had come back from being pressed, and then noticed papers and letters on the floor, evidently fallen from the pocket of the dressing-gown over her arm.

Gathering them together she stuffed them back, hung up the gown and slammed the wardrobe door.

This was the way suspicious or merely inquisitive wives found those incriminating bills, letters and theater tickets so often quoted in the press, she thought contemptuously, discovering things which in nine cases out of ten it would be better for them not to know.

Much better!

The truth of this as far as she herself was concerned swept over her suddenly with an agony of bitterness that was like a physical pain.

“If only I had never been told. If only I’d never known,” she cried out in her heart, with the age-old fruitless longing of the hurt to wake from a bad dream, to put back the clock.

In the lounge Noel’s friends, finding themselves deserted in favor of that fellow Flinders, foregathered to discuss the proper form of attack to be

prepared against the pair for tomorrow. Confetti presumably had not been ordered by Mrs. Lister as far as they could discover by searching the house and cross-questioning Spence, but that was easily remedied. Felicity said she and Martin would presently get the car and go in search of it.

Her attempt to take up a collection to this end proved unavailing. The twins pointed out very reasonably that she was getting the ride in Martin's car and they had not even been invited, and Owen insisted that the cost of the confetti ought to come out of overhead and not the pockets of the working-man. Frances offered sixpence but was repulsed, the sum being considered unworthy of so great a cause.

Every one talked at once and many schemes were suggested and demolished. Owen, who was to be an usher at the church, firmly refused to distribute bags of confetti with the service of prayer on the ground that the rector would consider it irreligious and stop the ceremony if the guests forgot themselves and thought they were at a carnival.

"Nice we should look," he said, "with Noel left on our hands after all."

Martin insisted that all labels intended for the bridal car should be submitted for his censorship because he had to live in the same country as the victims, and Flinders was a vindictive fellow.

Both young men were roundly condemned as cowards and backsliders, particularly by the twins, who were at an age when the discomfiture of the newly married seems sport of the best. In their view, if incriminating horseshoes, true-lovers' knots and wedding-bells did not drip from the luggage of the pair all the way to Paris, the whole thing could be considered a rank failure. They also advanced a scheme for getting down to Victoria station ahead of the bride and bridegroom and enlisting the services of the ticket-collector, porters and guards, but this bright idea was spoiled by the announcement from Martin that Arnold intended to carry Noel off on the first stage of the honeymoon by road, avoiding more vulgar means of transit.

"Where are they going?" exclaimed the twins, "because it would be rather nice to send them a few incriminating telegrams. Folkestone, Martin?"

Mr. Croft, not having the least idea, said mysteriously, "Yes *and* no."

"But that doesn't mean a thing."

"Doesn't it, by Jove? It means the truth is injudicious and a lie undesirable ... or vice versa. It's a second cousin of 'It's neither here nor there,' and a direct descendant of 'You can take it or leave it.' "

Even the twins were momentarily silent, perhaps impressed, or perhaps to memorize the outburst for their own use.

“But all this isn’t getting us anywhere,” Felicity pointed out, rather tired of the twins and all these competitors for Martin’s attention. “Come along, let us get the car and see what we can find. We may have to go quite a distance.”

She fully intended that they should, and Martin being amiably willing to go anywhere or do anything, they departed.

The twins presently drifted away, borrowed tennis racquets and shoes from the cupboard in the lower hall and went out for a game after an affectionate but ineffectual conversation on the telephone with the British Broadcasting Corporation. It had occurred to them that a little judicious flattery might induce this body to let one of its bands burst into the Wedding March tomorrow afternoon at four precisely. A very simple thing to do to oblige a large and fashionable gathering of listeners, when there must be plenty of spare bands at that hour of the day, they said, and hinted that crowned heads would be present at the ceremony.

“Who is speaking, please?” inquired the official at this point.

Unfortunately Mrs. Lister appeared at the same moment so that it seemed a little dangerous to say “Buckingham Palace.”

Meanwhile, Owen and Frances, thus deserted, eyed each other, pleased, and moved together.

“Funny the room looks,” murmured Owen, his lips on her dark hair.

“Does it? You’ve always known it and would feel it funny if a chair were changed, but to me it’s only,” she said, “a stage setting with the open window and the little piece of lawn and the standard rose outside framed in those lovely curtains. They are the shade of green that makes me ache with pleasure. I love to look at it.”

“Look at me instead,” he coaxed. “Do you think I’m going to put up with the rivalry of a damned window curtain?”

She looked at him, a small sudden smile in her dark eyes, changed in a moment by the alchemy of this solitude and her love for him.

She was no longer the daughter-in-law of the house, feeling her way, conscious of being suspect and a stranger, never quite confident yet, after two years, even of going freely from one of its rooms to another, and

concealing all this beneath a light and careless air. She was the girl he had married, quiet and still in his arms.

“Tell me about this wonderful green. I always thought it was blue myself. Where does it make you ache and why?” he murmured lazily.

“I don’t know. It’s beautiful. There isn’t any explanation. Beauty just happens and you catch your breath....”

“I know. I feel the same when I see a bit of little ear that has never grown up under a black lock of hair. That’s my idea of a color scheme. Shall I go out and buy up all the lovely green in the world for you? You’ve only to say the word.”

“Nobody can buy it,” said Frances.

Beauty was of the hour, or sometimes of the moment; you came upon it suddenly and then it was gone, a shy creature not to be held and yet always somewhere near waiting round a corner to flash again before your enchanted eyes.

“Then you shall sit and look at the green curtains all the winter afternoons,” said Owen comfortingly. “In this corner, while the fire crackles and the wind howls and rain comes down.”

“It will be a different color then,” she said.

“What, chameleon curtains, are they? No wonder I thought they were blue. Hope they won’t turn puce on us when we aren’t looking.”

He hadn’t noticed her evasion and she was glad—glad too that the winter was far enough away for her to change her mind naturally about leaving the flat until the baby was born (or, as far as that went, perversely, as long as he got no hint of the real reason). You were allowed to be perverse at such times, she believed, and to have unreasonable preferences. And this one would not be so unreasonable after all. The little flat was kind and familiar, there was no need to dread the long dark days, for they would be just long evenings instead, with curtains drawn and woolies to make, very cosy before the fire and under the lamp, until Owen came home. Even the stairs were unimportant, for she could go very carefully up and down.

After the bed-sitting-room of her single days the flat had seemed spacious and delightful, and she would not let it lose its glamour for this house with green curtains that caught her heart, where always somehow she showed so disastrously that she did not belong. Rather wistfully she wondered why this was and why she should regret it so much. It was

contemptible perhaps to hanker after a dignity of life which was merely objective, when dignity was a quality of the spirit and not an outward form. "Perhaps I have none," she thought, troubled, "or perhaps we all want the things we haven't got and always will, just going on from one wish to another. And yet I don't want any of this for my own, a large house or a great deal of money."

She looked back on the two years of her marriage with a kind of wonder that it had given her so much, not merely happiness but the excitement, still undimmed, of having time to do a hundred simple things; to sit in the park on a sunny morning with a book, to hear music, look at pictures quietly, wander through strange streets, not hurrying any more as once she would have had to hurry, but seeing their strangeness or their majesty, a beautiful doorway or a sudden tree, green against weathered stone, a spire perhaps, an archway, so gracious even in a shabby place that it remained there in her mind, once captured, never to be lost again. And even to look in shop-windows and presently walk inside in search of something she needed if it happened to be there, instead of having to buy the wrong thing, inferior and just too expensive, in a hasty lunch-hour, because it had become imperative, shoes that would never be comfortable to wear, a coat, which would mean a month of meager meals.... To be able to buy unecessaries, as she and Owen called them, thrilled her still, but he couldn't understand her joy in them, she knew.

She remembered her first sight of him, in the office where she earned a precarious £2. 10. 0 a week, and was temporarily secretary to one of the heads in the place of a more important and highly-paid absentee. He had come in without either an appointment or introduction, seeking an interview, and she had had to refuse him, according to routine, making the usual excuses; but he had come again and again, saying he would wait, persistent, reasonable, so that she had begun to think it must be a desperate matter with him. She had liked his looks, his voice, even his obstinacy, and at last out of her own hard experience had been moved to take a chance and let him in to the great man, against all the rules of the firm, risking her own job and shaking in her shoes as soon as it was done.

And all that had happened had been the result of that.

He had stayed half an hour and then come out and said:

"Look here, that was wonderful of you. When do you go to lunch, because you've simply got to hear what you've done for me?"

It seemed strange to her that he should have thought so much of that and not taken it for granted as lucky people do, for of course he hadn't been in any financial need as she had seen at once by the lunch he gave her. He was just a boy still at Cambridge, slightly older in years than she, but a boy to her none the less, and she had returned to the office knowing that if she had lost her job, it would be because she had been soft and a fool.

She had not lost it and in a few weeks he was there again, this time with an appointment, asking for her at the end of it, with the calmest unconcern for what the real secretary, now back in harness, thought, or anybody else.

From his manner perhaps had arisen the assumption that he was a friend of hers and that she had brought him to the notice of the firm, so that six months later when he had accepted his laboratory job and persuaded her to marry him, she had left the office in almost a blaze of glory, instead of with ignominy as she had once expected.

She had not known then how great the change would be; she had been too much carried away by the novelty of his companionship, and her excitement at his success, to see love advancing upon her, though he, so he said, had marked her down from the first as the girl he would one day walk in and marry, offhand ... whether she liked it or not ... by fair means or foul.

Yet every one must have expected that he would marry, as Noel was doing tomorrow, some one from his own easy world, and Frances, looking this fact rather anxiously in the face, saw that though the four-roomed flat had meant luxury to her, to him it must have been quite the reverse after this house with its space and comfort where he had been born and bred; and, suddenly terrified, she began to wonder if his talk of spending the winter here was perhaps the result of that.

"She's frowning," said Owen's voice.

"No."

"Just a little one anyway. What's the deep thought?"

"I was wondering whether the baby will howl," she admitted slowly.

"Of course it'll howl. Do you want the poor little blighter to be dumb?"

She shook her head but said:

"You oughtn't to have married me. I've brought you down in the world. You should have married one of Noel's friends with money and parents and all that."

“Should I, funny one? Why?”

“To have the kind of home you’ve been used to.”

“Sounds a damned immoral reason,” objected Owen cheerfully. “What do you take me for, a gigolo? Because who was going to give me this mythical palace—on my salary? And what has all that to do with the infant’s howls?”

“I was thinking of your coming home, tired out, and not room enough to get away from them,” she said soberly.

“Oh, we can always dump him in the coal cellar,” returned the prospective father. “I may even be strongminded enough to bear it without resorting to murder, you never know. Better let him howl and get it off his chest, perhaps. After all, we have to remember we were young ourselves once. Besides, if this new idea I’m working on turns up trumps, I may be able to give you a suite of nurseries and a flock of warders. Cheer up! It won’t always be four rooms, darling.”

“I don’t mind,” she assured him eagerly. “I don’t want flocks—or herds,” and laughed, a little rueful because her secret worry on his behalf should have merely seemed to him a complaint on her own.

“I can live up to the flat,” she thought, remembering Owen and Owen’s friends there talking far into the night, her own voice joining in and her part in the fast and furious discussions accepted without surprise. They did not suspect her of blandishments, but would propound their themes to her with the reasonable expectation of being understood because she was Owen’s wife and had been more or less in the show (hadn’t she?), devouring the mounds of sandwiches and sausage rolls she had made, and then looking round plaintively to say: “Frances, don’t tell me those greedy brutes have eaten all the grub?”

Because they took her for granted she could be happy with them and untroubled, and she said to herself:

“Why do I try to be somebody else when I come here? No wonder they despise me,” even believing that she was alone in this almost universal exercise.

“Young Croft is coming along to the flat one evening next week. I want him to meet Stephen,” remarked Owen.

“Young Croft? He’s older than you.”

“Old Croft then. Poor old grandfather Croft.”

“What do I feed him on?” she asked doubtfully.

“Feed him on? Well, he ate what was going at lunch today. Seems a nice domesticated beast. What did you think he’d eat—raw fish or half a sheep?”

“Caviare, quails in aspic, sole macabre.”

“I always thought that was a dance,” said Owen.

“Is he going to marry Felicity Osborne?” asked Frances curiously.

“Felix? Oh, I don’t think so. She’s just a natural annexer.”

“Why didn’t she annex you then?”

“Oh, we met in socks more or less. That’s one of life’s great handicaps,” explained Owen.

He looked down at her quizzically, amused at the question, so direct and like her. He was not given to mental analysis. He thought her unique in a world of girls and let it go at that, a funny little cuss with her talk of green curtains and a possibly howling infant.

Noel came in at the moment, dressed for her visit to Arnold’s aunts.

“The crowd has dispersed then?” she said. “I thought I heard Martin’s car going off.”

“Yes, and the next time you marry it will be without my valuable assistance,” Owen declared. “Here you haul me away from work of national importance and then go out.”

“I know, poor lamb, but you see I have to run in for an hour to be civil to the In-laws-elect.”

“We know all about him.”

“They’re his three old aunts—in hats.”

“What do you expect them to be in, berets?”

“They wear them all day from breakfast to dinner, marvelous hats! You should just see them.”

“Do you feel nervous, Noel?” asked Frances curiously.

“Quaking,” returned the bride with a cheerful grin. “I shall practically have three mothers-in-law. They brought him up. Well, good-by, you two. Pray for me, won’t you?”

Frances, watching her go, very smart and trim in her thin silk suit and pretty hat, was afraid that she didn't need it.

Chapter VII THE GIRL AND THE DIAMONDS

1

Noel went in to meet Arnold by Tube, having refused Martin's offer to drive her on the grounds that she would be late, a gesture regarded by Felicity as dashed decent of Noel, which it was not. She simply wanted to be alone. Restlessness was upon her this last day before going away into a world of strangers, and the merry presence of her intimates could not still it. Sitting in the swaying train with its familiar smell of dust and damp and cigarettes and artificial air, she was free to think her own thoughts, to savor this or that common experience for the last time, rather sad to be leaving it all behind. The stations slipped by, kiosks, bookstalls, posters, looming from the tunnel walls, and above ground ran the little crowding streets and busy thoroughfares that tread the grander skirts of London. She had known all this since she was born, so that to be leaving London now of her own free will, forever or at least for a long time, seemed to her all at once incredible. Quickly she began to gather it up into her consciousness as though to hold it fast, the picture she would take away, though expatriation, had she but known it, would do that for her soon enough, gilding it into the bargain.

Beyond the natural regret at going so far from home Noel's anticipations were undimmed. Lugubrious elders who had never been to India, but felt themselves qualified by years to speak their minds about the place, had warned her against the climate of which she had learned at school, dangers of native unrest about which she had read in the newspapers, and the invariable cattishness of officers' wives, of whom she was to be one. Noel had smiled at their warnings politely and said, "Oh, well ..." as much as to suggest that she thought she would chance these disadvantages all the same.

What are the warnings of the Jeremiahs to any girl who will enter her new world with the man she loves and fortified by trunksful of delightful clothes—at the end of a long sea voyage, moreover, an adventure in itself? Noel was sufficiently in love to have gone farther and fared worse, in Arnold's company, though three months ago she had never heard of him.

Then inadvertently—and regretting it a moment afterwards—she had accepted an invitation for a week in Sussex with her father's sister. Miss Peggy Lister was one of those emphatic, hearty people who are a danger on the telephone, though innocuous enough at close quarters when we are prepared to resist them. She had found a perfect cottage in Sussex, she said.

Noel would adore it and she must positively come down on Saturday for a week at least. Booming directions about the train to catch and the station to get out of it, she had then announced that she was too busy for worlds, darling, and rung off before Noel could murmur more than an inaudible “but.”

Unable to get into touch with her aunt at her town flat and not knowing the Sussex address, the girl had made a virtue of necessity while counting the visit a dead loss of seven good days in advance; and there she had met Arnold Flinders, simply flanked by aunts of his own, a bond between them from the first. Miss Lister had rented the cottage from Arnold’s aunts, who thought her almost as clever as she thought herself. For one thing it had been whispered to them that Miss Lister wrote.

“Though I can’t think by whom, darling,” Aunt Peggy had declared emphatically, “for you know I took this cottage for perfect quiet, to finish my book, and really I *was* vexed. However, it’s always the same, somehow. Wherever I go people track me down.”

The vexation was fictitious. Miss Lister loved being tracked down and, when she retired to the country, took care that every one knew where she was going and why. From time to time she published one of those popular biographies so much in demand by people who imagine it is a sign of intellect to read fact rather than fiction; but her chief occupations were rushing from one literary gathering to another, speaking at dinners and seeing herself quoted in the press. These things kept her so busy that she could always say with truth that she was too rushed for words, and her publishers harrying her to distraction.

Noel, having heard these statements for years, was unimpressed, but the three Miss Flinders thought them wonderful. They were pretty and gentle women, devoted to gardening, the National Government and their nephew Arnold. Left early an orphan, he had spent his childhood in their care, and a more ridiculous set of guardians for the huge, jolly young man, Noel had thought privately, it would be hard to find; but later she had learned that he had been passed on from them in due course to a series of uncles, so that his education had been liberal and his existence anything but dull.

Sitting in Miss Flinders’ drawing-room that first day, hearing herself referred to from time to time as “dear little Noel” in her Aunt Peggy’s booming voice, which always seemed to be addressing a multitude, between anecdotes of this or that celebrity, the girl had been fascinated to watch the three elderly ladies in their flower-trimmed hats. By day they never went

bareheaded even in the house, though every evening they dressed for dinner with elaborate care. They had the soft complexions of young children, and it had seemed to Noel that her Aunt Peggy had the air of a good-natured griffin among them.

Then into the house, shouting his hunger after a walk on the Downs, had come Arnold, six feet two and looking a giant as they fluttered about him, introducing him to the visitor and plying him with food.

Presently, to her horrified indignation, Noel had discovered that she was being flung to the giant, not merely by her Aunt Peggy, who was capable of anything, but by all three hostesses in concert.

Her visit was really most providential, they declared, for now dear Arnold would have some young society.

“But Noel will be delighted,” trumpeted Miss Lister. “I am so busy that we have made absolutely no plans.”

“Perhaps you like tennis, my dear?” said Miss Lettice. “Arnold has always been devoted to it.”

“Oh, yes, Noel plays an excellent game,” put in Miss Lister, as though her niece were dumb or needed an interpreter.

“I’m afraid the court has not been used since his last leave,” put in Miss Janet, “but I daresay that is no great matter.”

“They won’t mind,” said Aunt Peggy jovially.

“Really, Janet, of course the court would need attention,” reproved Miss Mary, looking gently amused at her sister’s innocence. “There is of course a croquet lawn in excellent condition, but I understand that young people nowadays rather despise the game.”

“Despise croquet? Where do you think we were brought up? In the gutter?” inquired the young man. “Miss Lister, if you scorn croquet never hold up your head in this drawing-room again. Come along now. I challenge you to a tournament. We had better go and look over the ground.”

Noel, unaccustomed to having her leisure parceled out in this fashion by her elders for the amusement of a strange young man, went with him merely because it would have been ungracious to her hostesses to protest, but she had no intention of letting off her aunt so lightly. Probably her aloof expression gave these sentiments away, for suddenly he was saying to her in a quite different voice:

“Never mind. The first hundred aunts are always the worst, they say.”

She could remember that moment still, the catch of laughter in her throat, the lovely chill of the air, the purple shadows over the Downs. The spring day was almost done and the blossoming orchard looked like piled snow on a field of green; rooks were wheeling about the trees in the drive, “telling the world,” as Arnold said, the sky like frosted glass behind them.

They found the tennis court hidden away in a part of the gardens which was becoming a wilderness, and it was over-run by weeds among which here and there a daffodil lifted a starry head.

“Dividends have fallen off,” explained Arnold. “Did you know that? Sounds rather like Humpty-Dumpty—but the girls have every confidence in the King’s horses and the King’s men. ‘Quite a temporary measure, dear, and we must not grumble, but in the meantime we are unable to keep the place quite as we should wish.’ Well, Miss Lister, I shall have to do my morning exercises with a lawn mower tomorrow.”

“Not on my account,” said Noel carelessly. “I am only to be here a few days and my play would never come up to your standard.”

“I haven’t one. Now answer that. Of course if you don’t like my face I can wear a mask.”

“It’s all very well for you to laugh,” she retorted, “but I’ve heard about India and the gorgeous time you have there, playing tennis and polo and all that.”

“I know, and going to balls at Government House every night of the year and calling ourselves pukka sahibs. And doing a little big game hunting on the side. It’s the only reason we have an army really—to keep the tigers down. You knew that, of course.”

“Well, anyway,” said Noel, “I haven’t brought my racquet.”

“What an obstinate girl you are! Do you think there are no other racquets in the world? However, as you are evidently so set against tennis, shall we brush up our tiddly-winks? I’d offer to show you the sea from the top of the Downs, but you’d probably say you’d already seen a sea or left your spectacles behind. You can’t be so hard-hearted as to leave me on my aunts’ hands. I mean, you saw for yourself how they simply flung me into yours.”

“My aunt flung me at *you* hard enough.” Noel had begun to laugh, and that was the end of her resistance, which had been more an attempt to show him that she could exist without him during her visit than from any serious

desire to try, a whole week of undiluted Aunt Peggy being too grisly a prospect in comparison.

There had been no real danger of that, had she but known it, for Miss Lister had summoned her to the cottage merely because an audience was necessary to her comfort, but not the kind of audience who would expect to be entertained if she felt the urge to work. She did not care greatly for young people, but Noel at least was pleasing to look at and did not give herself airs, and she supposed one ought to take some notice of one's nieces now and then.

If therefore she had flung Noel at Arnold Flinders it had been from practical rather than romantic reasons; she was not given to being romantic about anything but her own career, which absorbed all her available attention; and finding herself in an excellent mood to write that week, it did not even occur to her to be arch about their many excursions together, which was fortunate.

Afterwards Noel was to note this omission as an unexpected virtue in her aunt, but at the same time she merely thought of Arnold as a delightful acquaintance from another world, all too soon alas to be snatched away. At the end of her visit she said good-by to him with casual regret, accepted his statement that he must see her in town for what it was worth and went home to sleep as soundly as usual. Three days later he was at the telephone telling her he had been ejected by the girls during spring-cleaning operations and was now in London, where she was his only friend. Didn't she think, he asked, that it was her duty to save him from melancholia?

Noel didn't think this would be difficult and set off to dine and do a theater with him, generously inclined to introduce him to every one in her own particular circle if he said the word. But before long these bright spirits had begun to ring up and ask the date of her funeral, Noel having apparently vanished from their ken.

Arnold succeeded in monopolizing her by the simple expedient of having some new engagement already planned each time they met and the seats booked or the fares paid in advance—very cunningly, he pointed out—so that she could not let him down. He gave her no chance to be bored, for he began to tell her the story of his life in serial installments and with a dramatic fire that would have put Miss Lister's work to shame, breaking into melodrama without the smallest change of tone at the first sign that they were being overheard. "So the girls sent for new hats in triplicate," he would be saying, "and the next morning the Duke found the fellow shot dead on

the billiard table. Don't mention this, of course, because as far as the public knows he was killed falling off a dromedary. There would be international complications if the truth leaked out."

Noel quickly learned to play up and inquire in an audible undertone: "But surely you haven't the diamonds now?" or "Do be careful! Some one's listening."

It was an enchanting game and they had no doubt that they thrilled many humdrum citizens to the marrow.

Meanwhile Arnold's private narrative was gradually approaching the climax of the Sussex visit—Noel, still unsuspecting, wondered what his inventive powers would make of that. Her friends had begun to be funny at her expense by this time and she was rather reluctantly aware that something would have to be done about it, but he proved difficult to convince.

"After all," he said, "you've known me from childhood by this time and you can't have any older friends than that."

"Well, just once more then. After tomorrow I shall be busy for weeks. I mean it really," declared Noel.

"Good!"

She was no strategist, for she gave him time to buy the ring, which he produced conjurer fashion from her empty glass at dinner the next evening.

"You see, I *have* the diamonds," he remarked blandly. "Just lend me your left hand for a moment."

"You do take things for granted, don't you?" said Noel in a startled voice, tucking the hand in question firmly in her lap.

"But I'm a desperate man. Surely my whole life must have shown you that."

The wine waiter approached at this moment and he went on: "Quick, which shall I order? Champagne or prussic acid?"

The champagne of course had it, but she protested: "What can any one do with such a lunatic?"

"Look in the prayer-book," he advised, "under the Solemnization of Marriage, darling."

Warren Street slipped by, Goodge Street, only three more stations to go. Noel wondered whether the girls would have new hats in triplicate and what the Admiral had said. She felt that she knew intimately all Arnold's people without having suffered the discomfort of being looked over by them, thanks to his "serial story." Uncle George, who had considered a boy of ten should be able to ride like a demon, or dress in petticoats, was long since dead; and Uncle James, the scholar who had given young Arnold pocket-money only when he could cap his Latin quotations, was much of an invalid and never came to town. The Admiral was younger, lavish with tips and sparing of advice. "Find your own line, stick to it and be damned to everybody," was the only admonition Arnold had ever had from him. A popular and unique relative!

Charing Cross. The train ran into the station and Noel alighted. Arnold, who had been lunching at his uncle's club in Pall Mall, had arranged to meet her here at 3.30, so that they could hop into a taxi and take a farewell run round London before calling on the girls, he said. He was clever at such stratagems to get her alone, and in the early days of the engagement had bought a small car second-hand for no other purpose. It had now been resold to Martin Croft, whose leave had still several months to go. Noel wondered as the escalator carried her aloft if this wasn't a hopeful sign for Felicity. Then she caught sight of a familiar head and shoulders towering above the crowd and forgot all such minor matters.

"You're three seconds late," he said, snatching her off the final stair, "and Scotland Yard is beginning to suspect."

"Oh, it's lucky we have our passports then."

Heads immediately turned to look at them, and Arnold, with a hand under her elbow, hurried her out into the street, where they fell laughing into a cab.

"Go anywhere you like," shouted Arnold to the driver. "Are we being followed? ... are we observed? ... Who cares? Darling, where have you been lately? I haven't seen you for the last fourteen hours."

He was in high spirits, for the Admiral had produced a thumping tip in the form of a wedding present, transferring some stock to his nephew which he said he had ear-marked for that purpose, with the further comment that there was too much dam' celibacy in the family already. It was he, nevertheless, who had invited his three maiden sisters to the Berkeley for the wedding as his guests, but not in his company. He was remaining at the club because, he told Arnold, there was a medium in all things.

“And I’ve had a long letter from Uncle James,” went on the young man, “very much impressed and full of flattering references to your father. I say, you are a brainy family, aren’t you, literary aunts, inventors, financial bigwigs and what-not.”

“What *are* you talking about? Why was he flattering father?” exclaimed Noel.

“Aha, you’ve been keeping things dark. Should a woman tell? Most certainly, every jolly thing. It seems your father’s quite a nob on International Finance, writes brochures on it that the old boy swears by. A very sound fellow, and James is sorry he can’t pay his respects in person, but I’m to tell your father that if he should ever be in that part of the country it would be a great pleasure to put him up.”

“Really, Arnold? How nice.” Noel was amazed. She had not imagined her father to be known to the great world, and though she knew his habit of sitting up till all hours of the night, she had vaguely supposed this to be due to his peculiar temperament or the natural ways of the harassed business man. “And, of course,” she thought, “he could hardly walk in and say pompously, ‘Look here, I’m very important.’ It must be rather awkward for him.”

“You’ll have to come back to dinner with me and deliver the bouquet dramatically,” she said. “I am sure it would cheer him no end to hear he was admired by Uncle James, and there won’t be much time to tell him tomorrow. Or will the girls want you?”

“No, the girls should go early to bed because of their school-girl complexions and all the excitement ahead of them. We must be firm about that. I was going to drive you home anyway and stand about looking pathetic until I was asked to dinner, because after all, here have I been without a blessed sight of you....”

The conversation lapsed from that point into lovers’ fooleries about how much she had grown since their last meeting and the way in which he had spent the intervening years. It is probable that they saw very little of London on this farewell run, for the taxi was well away on the road to Richmond—the driver being a literal man—before they discovered the fact and hastily ordered him back.

“What do you think this is—a tour of the world?” inquired the fare most unjustly. “We want to go to the Berkeley, and drive like hell.”

In their sitting-room at the Berkeley the girls meanwhile were entertaining Miss Peggy Lister, with whom they had kept in touch after her return from Sussex. She had even sent them a signed copy of one of her books, a most flattering attention, they considered. It had startled them, it is true, being as they put it, so very broad for the work of a lady, but no doubt this was unavoidable, the subject being a historical character and the period in which he lived therefore licentious. It was of course the duty of a biographer to reflect the times as well as the subject faithfully, however painful this might be to his or her finer feelings.

By such arguments among themselves they had been able to acquit Miss Lister of bad taste and admire her as much as ever. The book, moreover, had most interesting pictures and a handsome binding. They could tell her quite sincerely that they were delighted with it.

Miss Lister liked having tea at the Berkeley and being admired once in a way. ("My dear, so amusing, I am being entertained by some of my fans" was how she described it.) Besides, this was a family matter. Her brother's girl was making an excellent match thanks to her. She was not the woman to consider herself a mere instrument of destiny or any such nonsense as that. She had taken Noel in hand and given her an opportunity of meeting people outside her own restricted circle, and this was the result. Most satisfactory, and if Charles was not obliged to her he should be.

She had neither time nor inclination to see much of any of her relatives, but she was quite pleased for them to be grateful to her, particularly her brother Charles, whom she disliked for many old and some more recent reasons. He had once gone to the length of criticizing the English and disputing the accuracy of one of her most successful books. As she had given him a copy of it and he had not even paid his money like anybody else, her exasperation had perhaps been excusable, and certainly long-lived.

Her hostesses at the Berkeley would never have made so gross a blunder. They told her she was wonderful and they couldn't conceive how she did it, and begged her to explain her method and asked if she had ever thought of turning to novel-writing, for she was so very entertaining. The novels of today all seemed a little sordid and dreary, and they felt sure one from her would be such a relief.

Miss Lister smiled but shook her vigorous head.

"No," she cried, "I should never be able to write a novel. It's curious, but I have no creative ability whatsoever."

Fortunately Charles was not present to cavil at this sentence, and the three elderly ladies agreed that it was indeed curious, very strange, in fact amazing, innocently accepting the assumption that Nature had been guilty of a most unaccountable blunder.

It was at this moment that Arnold and Noel appeared and Miss Lister was obliged to turn from the absorbing subject of her literary career to this later and more accidental handiwork. "And really," she thought, "I have done very well for Noel. They look blooming, the pair of them, and will make quite a charming picture coming out of church."

The press photographers must be there, and she would stand a little to the right with perhaps the Admiral. "Miss Lister, author of etc., etc., at the marriage of her niece, Miss Noel Lister, and Captain Arnold Flinders." It was all publicity, and of course her presence would make the wedding News, which would be nice for them.

It occurred to her that perhaps she should give Margaret a hint about the photographers, drive the two young people back to Hampstead presently and see how things were going for tomorrow. It was a great pity they had not decided to have the wedding at one of the fashionable churches and the reception at a hotel, for Charles must be well able to afford it. Their own business of course, but it was to be hoped they were going to do the thing well, and not in a dowdy suburban fashion. After all they owed it to Arnold's people, no less than to themselves.

"And to me," said Miss Lister to herself firmly.

Noel and Arnold meanwhile were being made much of by Aunt Letitia, Aunt Janet and Aunt Mary, whose hats were indubitably new and less alarming than might have been expected, though still inclined to stand up on their heads and waggle. To wear them firmly over one eye, as their creators intended, would have seemed to the three ladies a little fast in women of their years, though they were far from being censorious about such matters in other people who, living more in the world than they, must keep abreast of the fashions.

They had even provided cigarettes which they offered to Miss Lister and Noel, saying they had never acquired a taste for tobacco, but liked to see it in moderation in young people, and quite enjoyed the aroma.

Miss Lister enjoyed being considered young even though she was never conscious of being anything else and when asked the date of her birthday by books of reference and other pardonable inquisitors, always looked at the

figures incredulously and then blocked them out, deciding that such details were of no public interest.

She was further pleased by a reference to her wedding gift by Noel and Arnold, who were all the more delighted with it because they had fearfully expected a complete set of her works, instead of the handsome pigskin writing-case, complete with monogrammed fountain pens, each containing an electric bulb for writing in the dark. Exactly why any one should want to do this puzzled them a little, but did not detract from the fun of owning such amusing toys; and the cleverness and munificence of Aunt Peggy in providing two pens, male and female, came in for enthusiastic comment.

The other aunts were deeply interested in this unique gift, and wondered what people would be inventing next, congratulating Miss Lister upon having discovered anything so deliciously novel for the young people. Miss Letitia also remembered that the pen was mightier than the sword and fervently hoped dear Arnold would have more use for it.

Miss Lister shouted: "Oh, but no such personal comparison was in my mind, I do assure you, Arnold. Now that is really too bad of you, Miss Flinders. I must confess I thought the lighted pens an attraction ... so useful, you see, for jotting things down...."

Revealing that she, like lesser persons, had chosen the gift she would have been charmed to possess.

Every one hastened to reassure her, and the recipients enlarged on the immense advantage of being able to write their letters on deck after dark during the voyage out, with a bland disregard for the probabilities and an innocence of countenance far too good to be true.

Arnold, recalling the letter from old James, presently told his aunts all about it, and they were able further to congratulate Miss Lister, this time on the possession of such a distinguished brother.

"Oh, Charles is brilliant in his way," she replied heartily, but dismissing Charles.

"You are quite a literary family then," said Miss Letitia, in whose view a brochure which was admired by the scholarly James could be nothing less than literature.

"I hardly think he would lay claim to that," returned the guest with a less hearty smile. If Charles *had* published this trumpery pamphlet, he had undoubtedly done it at his own expense, in the foolish way of the amateurs, she thought impatiently, almost feeling that he was poaching upon her

preserves and stealing her thunder. "Call him rather a mathematician," she added brightly. "And now I must hear all about the garden. I can't tell you how much I missed it when I returned to town."

The conversation was changed, rather meanly, in Noel's view. She felt sorry for her father, quite aware that Miss Lister cared nothing for gardens and was just trying to push his achievements into the background.

Her announcement some time later that she would drive them to Hampstead did not further endear her to the lovers, who had been counting on that half-hour together after doing their duty by their relatives. They protested in vain, and the exclamations of approval from the old ladies at this very kind suggestion on Miss Lister's part, made open mutiny impossible.

"I really ought to have managed to go out to see Noel's mother weeks ago," she told them, "but I have been so much tied up with my wretched publishers and so on."

The pair, exchanging glances, were not surprised that the publishers were wretched, but heartily wished she had never come untied, though the picture evoked had its funny side.

"Now come along, you two. I shan't be able to stay because I have a dinner this evening, but I'll run you out and drop in for a moment just to see if there is anything I can do. Good-by, dear Miss Flinders, Miss Janet. A delightful party. Good-by, Miss Mary. We shall meet tomorrow to see these dear children through the dreadful ordeal."

Booming this pleasantry back from the open door, she drove them before her to the lift.

Chapter VIII THE FOURTH BRIDESMAID

1

Mabel, that accomplished beggar, eventually drove to Hampstead in the Morelands' car, having been inspired after luncheon to call in and see her cousin Agnes and tell her all about the butler and how awkward it was to be stranded in town. Mrs. Moreland said she should have ascertained in advance the hour for which she was invited, and that these dilemmas could always be avoided with a little common-sense. If Margaret had expected her to luncheon she must have said so, and if she hadn't said so, she most certainly had not expected her, butler or no butler. People were far too lax and she for one never encouraged casual visitors.

This shaft may have struck Cecily, but it glanced off Mabel, who was a non-conductor of disagreeable truths, and could always persuade herself they were aimed at somebody else.

She smiled vaguely and said, "No, that's what I always say myself."

Mrs. Moreland had no interest whatever in what Mabel always said, and was more than capable of doing all the saying that was necessary. She repeated the long history of the Venetian glass, bestowing praise on the beauty of the gift, and asked what Mabel had given, finding fault with her choice, which was, she said, a great waste of money.

"Vases? I have no use for them. Mere collectors of dust. Far better have sent them something serviceable, however plain. There are articles within the means of all."

"But they must have vases," protested Mabel plaintively, "... for flowers. A home is not a home without flowers, I always say."

"And where do you suppose they will obtain flowers in India?" inquired Mrs. Moreland, reducing that great Empire to a waste by sheer force of character. "No, I cannot approve of your choice, Mabel. In fact, had I known of it before, I should have advised Noel to change the vases for a bread-platter, or something of that description. You should have asked my advice. I would have arranged to spare you an hour and see that you were not persuaded by some young jackanapes to buy anything so unsuitable. Very plausible, some of those people, I know. They need *me* to deal with them."

Having figuratively demolished the vases, she turned to the question of Noel's future and, with the ease of a childless woman, brought up a family for her in advance. She was well launched on this theme when the car came round to take her to the meeting of a charitable society, which she said it was imperative for her to attend, the committee being all fools together. In order that Mabel and Cecily should not lose any of the details of their folly or her views on how the organization should and must be run, she graciously took them as far as she was going, even acceding to Mabel's instant suggestion that the chauffeur would only idle about and might just as well pick up their luggage and carry them to Hampstead before calling back for her.

"Very well, as the occasion is exceptional, I will make a concession, but be good enough not to loiter on the way as I shall require the car at five o'clock precisely. You may tell Charles that I obliged you out of consideration for him," said Mrs. Moreland, who was not the woman to let her good deeds resemble a mere candle-flame if an arc-light was available.

Mabel, as soon as she was out of hearing, sighed with satisfaction and remarked:

"Well, that's that. We shall at least arrive in comfort. If your poor father had lived, I should have had a car of my own, *and* a chauffeur, but I never complain, though to be poor was the last thing I had any right to expect.... I shall tell the man to ring the bell and let the butler carry in our luggage. Just as well to show these people you are accustomed to a staff of servants."

Her voice went on and on, but Cecily closed her ears from long habit, before her still the bitter ordeal of arriving at another house to which they had not been invited and meeting an even colder welcome.

2

Her fears were of course unnecessary. Margaret, having been forewarned, had no intention of spreading an atmosphere of discomfort through the household in order to ease her own irritation. Indeed, as she thought the situation over, even the satisfaction of letting Charles suffer the burden of entertaining Mabel lost its virtue. He would no doubt be tired and already full of nerves about his part in tomorrow's ceremony, and no one could pretend that Mabel was either a pleasant companion or a restful guest. Eventually she rang up Dolly Neville, explained her difficulty and begged her to bring Tim round for an hour or two after dinner, urging, as an excuse to lure the doctor, that she would be more satisfied if he would have a final look at Noel to see that her vaccination had taken successfully.

“Paint me as the fussy mother, Dolly, as long as you persuade him to come,” she said. “My sister-in-law is a trying fool and always exasperates Charles. You and Tim will be good for all of us.”

Mrs. Neville promised to do her best, knowing Margaret well enough to feel sure she would not have made the request had she meant to reject the plan for the Cornwall holiday.

“Accidents and fatal illnesses permitting, we shall be there, my dear,” she assured her friend. “If necessary, I will embroider the vaccination theme, and that will bring him.”

Margaret turned from the telephone, noticing the unnatural silence of the house and supposing with some relief that Noel’s friends, having lost her, had dispersed. Then she met Owen and Frances, on the point of going out, they said, for a stroll on the Heath, Frances looking very young in her tub frock and shady hat beside the tall young man—almost like a little girl being taken out for a treat. The dress had red flowers on a white ground and she wore a wide red leather belt, all very simple, but fresh as though she had just put it on.

Margaret thought, “She will look nice tomorrow whatever she wears. What a comfort not to have to give her tactful hints about that.”

She gave them the news of the expected arrivals, shook her head at Owen’s feint of collapsing from shock and said to the girl:

“You’ll take charge of Cecily for me as Noel is not at home, won’t you, Frances? She is rather odd-tempered, poor child, and may feel herself neglected.”

Frances nodded, uncertain since this morning of her own response to anything her mother-in-law might say, and yet anxious not to seem unresponsive. Margaret’s tone and smile had been much as usual, dry but faintly amused, with no sign of the irritation of the morning, but this might simply be because Owen was present and she would not hurt him by showing her dissatisfaction with his wife. Frances could understand that impulse and respect it. Antipathy, if that was what Owen’s mother felt for her, was something that could not be helped, and it was only her own very different feeling that made it so upsetting.

After a moment’s hesitation, she said:

“Perhaps we had better not go out then after all, in case they should arrive? We don’t seem to be doing very much to help.”

“Of course you must go. The fresh air will do you both good,” said Margaret. “They won’t be here until tea-time, I hope, and that will give me a chance of finishing Noel’s packing. I shall find plenty of things for you to do in the morning, never fear. I am depending upon you both.”

“For heaven’s sake don’t look so subdued, child,” she wanted to add, but desisted and, having seen them go, went with a faint sigh, upstairs, hoping against hope that Frances would not complicate matters by avoiding Charles this evening. He would be bound to notice any change in her and the one thing to be desired of all others was that somehow he should be persuaded to play his part tomorrow gracefully and not in one of his moods.

When the visitors arrived, therefore, they found neither the butler nor the bustle Mabel had confidently expected. There had, Margaret told her, been no luncheon party in Noel’s honor, and if she had telephoned and received the message she described, she had most certainly been given the wrong number and talked to some other house.

“We are far too busy for parties at this late date,” continued the mistress of the house, leading the way upstairs. “Owen and Frances have come over to help us and we are crowded, so I have had to put you in your uncle’s dressing-room, Cecily. I hope you will manage to be comfortable.”

She opened the door of the little room for the girl as she spoke and Mabel, peering in, exclaimed:

“Oh, but darling Cecily will be delighted. She is so fond of her Uncle Charles.”

“Mother! *really*.”

Cecily glared, then meeting an unexpected twinkle in her aunt’s eyes, gave a shout of laughter, and disappeared inside.

“Now what have I said to amuse you both?” asked Mabel complacently. “I’m sure I don’t know why she shouldn’t be fond of her uncle, having no father, poor little thing. You are very lucky, Margaret, to have a good man’s love, believe *me*.... So this is my room. How nice! I shall miss my south aspect, of course. Silly of me, but I always sleep so much better.... However, anything will do for me ... anything. Now, what was I saying? ... Oh, yes, I went in to see Charles, because I was so *puzzled*, but I had very little time to talk with him because his secretary kept popping in and out.

“A very annoying young woman,” continued Mabel, nodding. “She’s in love with him of course.”

“I should think that most unlikely,” returned Margaret, at her dryest. “And as you have just reminded me that I have a good man’s love, why spoil the pretty picture?”

“Oh, but, my dear, Charles was always run after by the girls. I never could see his attraction myself, but you know it’s true. Why, I remember when you were first engaged, we all said: ‘Now how long will this one last, I wonder?’ ”

“Indeed? All that is rather ancient history, however, and as I have still many little things to do for Noel, I will leave you to unpack. Go downstairs when you are ready, will you?” said Margaret, retreating.

Mabel was even worse than she had expected, and she shut herself into Noel’s room to let her temper cool.

These insinuations against the Godolphin girl were incredible, of course, or were they? Perhaps Charles was as attractive to other women as he had been in the past; perhaps the secretary, who found him so considerate, was fond of him, working with him all these years, day in and day out. Why not? He could be very charming.

“But if she is, I don’t want to know.... Dam’ Mabel,” she thought indignantly “Has she no sense of decency? She is a fool, of course, but is there no privacy that she won’t blunder into? It is too much.”

Perhaps Charles loved this girl or some other girl and, when he found she intended to leave him, would tell her so, asking for a divorce? Perhaps indeed he was waiting, as she had been waiting until after Noel’s marriage to end it all.

It seemed a reasonable assumption, one at least that it was as well to face; and facing it, she saw, with a kind of sad incredulity, the house not dismembered after all, but merely left as it was for another mistress.

Mabel with her talk of the girls who used to run after Charles.... *How long will this one last* indeed! It was exactly what Mabel and her kind would have said, hoping of course that it would not last; but little she and Charles had cared then what they or any one thought or said.

“And why should I care now?” she asked herself impatiently, “after all these years ... except that I hate to admit that the little fool was right.”

For it had not lasted, and very soon Mabel would know it and be saying complacently: “I always said so. I knew it from the first.”

“But all this is preposterous. Have I lost my senses? She doesn’t matter. Nothing she can say or do or think has any bearing on it whatever. It is between Charles and me, our own miserable failure.”

She sat down in Noel’s easy chair and knew all at once that she was worn out. Long ago she had believed herself cured of the pain of all this ceaseless questioning that led her nowhere. By sheer strength of will she had closed her mind against it, as the only way to live with the serenity that her love for her children and her own self-respect required. And now because of the rush and effort of the past few months, because she was dead tired and had not realized it, the whole thing had come back.... Beginning with that absurd fright this morning, when the girl came from the office ... Miss Godolphin.

“She’s in love with him, of course.”

Instinct?

“Oh, no,” she cried. “This is folly. I must pull myself together and think of Noel instead. I hope that everything will go well tomorrow and she will have a lovely day. I hope the old aunts are liking her, but I am glad she is going to be well away from them, all the same....”

“Perhaps when I see his face, I shall know.”

3

As there was no sign of his mother when the visitors came downstairs, Owen carried his aunt off to see the presents, leaving Cecily to Frances. Mabel was delighted to get him alone, for she believed she had a way with young men, and could soon learn from Owen all the things she wished to know.

She waddled beside him, the flesh of her feet bulging over her shoes, which were always half a size too small for her, and this rule seemed to extend to her clothes. In spite of her talk of crusts, she was a solid little woman and, in her anxiety to appear smart, was just too tightly buttoned.

Her cheeks were plump (also her eyes), as though the doll-like prettiness of her youth had hardened and set, for it was not the plumpness of good nature. Had she remained prosperous as in the early days of her marriage, she would probably have become a well-preserved matron, living a satisfied and busy life doing nothing of importance; but the grievance, rather than the grief, of losing her husband and of being reduced to narrow means, had led her into the perpetual envy and depreciation of other people and the

dramatization of her own imagined virtues. Being tiresome, she had few friends, but she ascribed this to her poverty, her small house and the snobbery and selfishness of the world.

“Now tell me all about the wonderful parties for Noel,” she exclaimed, “and what everybody said and did.”

“Parties? If she has had any wonderful parties she has kept it remarkably dark,” said Owen.

“But surely—the bridegroom’s people,” expostulated Aunt Mabel. “Don’t tell me they’ve neglected her?”

Her nephew looked at her with acute distaste and replied:

“Not by any means. But they happen to live in the country and be rather too aged to go the pace and paint the town, if that is what you were expecting.”

“Well, is this Arnold Flinders of good stock? Because you know some very funny people go into the Army nowadays,” said Mabel eagerly.

“Funny people? That must be rather a relief in such a serious profession,” returned her nephew without a smile.

“No, no, I don’t mean funny in that sense,” exclaimed Mabel after puzzling it over for a moment. “I mean young men of no family.”

“Orphans?” suggested Owen.

“Now, now, naughty boy, you are laughing at me. I don’t know how it is that people find me so amusing. There was your mother just now and Cecily ... though I was always considered rather a wit as a girl,” recalled Aunt Mabel, enlightened.

She was so pleased with this discovery that she lost the thread and turned to a new line of research.

“And where was the luncheon this morning and who was there? I am longing to hear all about it.”

“Luncheon? This family lunched in the dining-room as usual. I don’t know what the rest of world was doing. Why?”

“Dear me, I quite understood you were all out at some celebration,” said Aunt Mabel, disappointed. Finding him after all such an unsatisfactory witness, she pounced upon the presents and began to cross-question him, as she examined the cards with minute care.

The twins coming back from the tennis court paused at the open window and, seeing a stranger, whistled softly. Owen excused himself and went out to them, rather distrusting their type of humor in conjunction with Aunt Mabel.

“Visitors?” they inquired.

“Worse. Relatives.”

“Oh!” They looked sympathetic. “Shall we buzz off then, do you think, Owen? What about the rehearsal though?”

“It would relieve the congestion a bit, you know. Croft and Felix seem to have gone to grass, but if they come back and there’s anything doing, I’ll ring you,” he assured them.

“Cheers. If not, we’ll drift along in the morning, tell Noel.”

Owen watched them go cheerfully round to the garden door to deposit their gear and change their shoes, with an approving eye, because they could take a hint without malice, even though it spoilt their fun. And he wondered what could have induced Noel to include Cecily among the bridesmaids and risk the invasion by her poisonous mother, who would never take a hint, however plain. Why, because the woman had married your father’s brother, should you be condemned to her acquaintance? Family feeling was ill feeling most of the time, “damned ill, as far as I’m concerned, anyway,” thought Owen. “I should rather love to strangle dear Auntie.”

“Now who was that?” inquired Mabel as he turned back into the room.

“A message for Noel. You won’t find anything of interest in those envelopes because they are empty,” said Owen, who had caught her in the act. “I won’t deceive you. They contained checks.”

“Really? For how much?”

“Not enough to pay the National Debt.”

“Now, now. I was only asking.”

“Yes, I gathered you were asking,” said Owen with an exasperating smile.

Mabel could extort from him none of the information she wanted and came to the conclusion that it was a conspiracy. Either the bridegroom was a parvenu and they did not wish her to find it out, or she and Cecily had been kept in the background because they were poor. The fact that Cecily had been asked to be a bridesmaid and given her outfit for it made no difference,

because Mabel had convinced herself that Charles had insisted upon this for reasons which she could guess if she could not prove. His conscience was not clear. He was the trustee of his mother's estate and had no doubt done very well out of it, feathering his own nest at the expense of his elder brother's widow. During the old lady's illness, the Charles Listers had simply lived in her pocket and what was the result? She, Mabel, had received not a penny-piece and Cecily only a beggarly £50 a year, to be paid to her quarterly by her Uncle Charles. If that wasn't suspicious Mabel did not know what was, for she, the child's own mother, could not touch the money, could not even get an advance of a few pounds, whatever the necessity.

Mabel's friends had advised her to see a lawyer about it, but he had been utterly dishonest. He had said he could do nothing for her and then had had the impertinence to charge her a fee, just because she was a helpless woman with no one to protect her.

Mabel, poring over her grievances, was glad she had insisted upon coming to Hampstead today. She would stand upon her rights, show them she did not intend to be neglected, and that she knew what she knew.

4

Cecily, left with Frances, whom she had met only once before, looked at her dubiously.

"I shall be awfully out of it tomorrow," she blurted, "because I don't know any of them. I suppose you know them all frightfully well?"

"Oh, no, I don't," said Frances, "but what does it matter? You soon will know them."

She was surprised to find herself reassuring Owen's cousin, which seemed ridiculous, but Cecily evidently didn't find it so, for she said:

"Oh, but it is easy for you. I mean, you're part of the family. Cousins don't count. Look here, did Aunt Margaret expect us today, do you know?"

Frances hesitated for a fraction of a second, wondering what she ought to say.

"Don't be afraid to tell me if she didn't and was furious," went on Cecily, "because I don't blame her. Mother *would* come, and I feel so embarrassed I could die."

“Oh, cheer up. You can’t go dying with a wedding tomorrow,” said Frances hastily. “And nobody is furious as far as I know.”

She could sympathize with Cecily for feeling awkward, but not for saying so, and by way of changing the subject she asked about the bridesmaid’s dress, and agreed readily to go up and see it.

Cecily resembled her father’s family, had the clearcut features of Charles and his sister Peggy, though in the latter they had become cadaverous, and there was still enough young freshness in the girl’s face to make it attractive, when she lost her almost invariable air of gloom. Her hands were slender but rather inert, and having taken up the delicate pale pink frock with momentary pleasure, she put it down again limply: something might have been done for Cecily but for this defect. She had a sense of humor too often in abeyance, she was not petty or really unresponsive to kindness, but she was handicapped by her mother, sensitively aware of it and lacking the will to break away. Her grandmother’s legacy indeed had done her a disservice, in making this just not imperative. Charles and even Peggy had offered to help the girl to any training she might need, but she could not make up her mind to face the drudgery of a career.

Listening moodily to Frances’s admiration of the bridesmaid’s frock, she said:

“The worst of it is I shall have no chance to wear it anywhere afterwards.”

“Oh, but it’s lovely. What is there to stop your wearing it?” asked Frances.

“You have to live up to a dress like that.”

“Well, you’ll probably find you can, when you get into it tomorrow.”

The other girl stared.

“You are funny. You take such a hopeful view of life. Any one would think you were about a hundred.”

“I am only being hopeful about your life,” explained Frances gayly, “not my own. You know I’m one of those altruists who always bear other people’s troubles without a groan.”

“I suppose that’s an epigram.”

“It may have been when it was young.”

“You have brains,” remarked the other. “So have I. Beastly, isn’t it? People with none have all the luck.”

“I wonder if she is trying to talk like a Russian novel,” thought Frances, “or if it just comes natural.”

“How do you know they have?” she asked, “or why do you think they have?”

“Well, look at them. They just go stodging along, eating and sleeping and talking about nothing at all, perfectly satisfied.”

“But you might as well be a cow or a protoplasm. I can’t see what luck there would be in that.”

“They don’t feel anything,” said Cecily. “They don’t realize how miserable it is to be young in this rotten age. They have made the world in a mess and we have to suffer for it.”

Frances felt she had read this somewhere in one of those books in which the characters moan to each other with great intensity about life. As though suffering had been specially invented for their undoing, she thought, as though it were new, and not something inside one, mysteriously responsive to a thousand accidental and trifling causes. But you didn’t talk about it when it was real, she decided, or life either. Life wasn’t something definite and concrete, to be decked out with adjectives, it was everything—all your conscious sensations, good or bad, wise or futile, this moment, tomorrow, yesterday, next year.

It was difficult and probably useless, therefore, to answer Cecily’s outburst, when you did not know if it was just her “line” or due to some private dissatisfaction; so Frances looked round her and remarked:

“I’ve never seen this little room before. It’s rather jolly.”

“It is Uncle Charles’s dressing-room. Aunt Margaret had a bed made up for me.... So she must have expected us, Frances ... unless, of course, he rang her up.”

The change in her voice from sudden hope to the old despondency seemed out of all proportion to the event. Frances began to wonder uncomfortably if her mother-in-law had crushed the visitors, as she herself had been crushed this morning.

“I like Uncle Charles. He’s my trustee, you know,” went on Cecily, spoiling the picture by this touch, which seemed like grandeur to the other girl.

People with trustees were secure at least and had no reason to complain for lack of opportunities—to wear that beautiful frock, for instance.

“Don’t you like him?” continued Cecily.

“Of course,” said Frances.

Caution had crept into her voice, and she added hurriedly, as though warding off comments on the other members of the family, “But I shouldn’t tell you if I didn’t, should I?”

“Oh, but he’s so patient and good-tempered and has such a sense of humor.”

Frances did not dispute the point, though it was a new and surprising view of her father-in-law, and Cecily went on:

“I believe he was tremendously run after by all the girls when he was a young man. So mother says and Aunt Peggy too. Spoilt, they call it.”

“Wouldn’t you like to come down and see the presents now?” inquired Frances, as though remembering her duties as hostess.

She had had enough of the conversation, for the last picture of Charles Lister had suddenly thrown a light, or so she supposed, on the scene with her mother-in-law this morning, and she was glad to get out of the little room because her cheeks had suddenly begun to burn.

“Trying your blandishments on me because your father-in-law is not here.”

The words took on a new and unpleasant significance. They had not been, as she had taken them to be, simply the expression of a distaste for her flippant manner, which was bad enough from some one whose approval she valued. Her mother-in-law thought she was like all the other women, playing up to him, flirting with him, thinking him fascinating.

“And I don’t in the least,” she thought troubled, “but if girls always have rather made fools of themselves about him, she would naturally hate it. And I was only trying to rag him out of being so glum and never saying a word, because I felt awkward ... but I can’t tell her that or explain, it would look as though I thought it queer.”

Suddenly Frances came near to the truth of this queerness, with a stab of concern for Margaret. Charles was not unsusceptible to the attentions of other women. This was just one of the usual domestic situations which many wives had to bear—or break up the home.

“He doesn’t look to me as though he knew how to be gay,” she thought. “Men are strange. If it were Owen I should want to die.”

She took Cecily in to see the presents and somehow answered her when she spoke, but there remained with her an uneasy sense of the trouble in the house and how bitter at the moment of Noel’s marriage the memories of these two must be. Her love for Owen who was their son, and the thought of the child she was to bear, who would be a Lister too and part of them, brought her near to their problem in a special way, and she forgot her own discomfiture in the larger issue, filled by a protective anxiety, as though by her own watchfulness she might ease the strain for them.

Chapter IX THE GLASS SET FAIR

1

Mabel, escorted firmly round the garden by Owen, was critical about the marquee, which would have looked better and more imposing with a covered passage from the house, she said, in case of rain. The improbability of rain with the glass set fair and rising, when pointed out by Owen, made so little impression on her that he maliciously delivered an address on meteorology in general, to take the wind out of her conversational sails.

Nothing is so exhausting to the habitual talker as having to listen to somebody else, and to make the torture worse Mabel was forced to walk on and on because the lecturer was deaf to all her attempted interruptions.

When Margaret came out to summon them to tea she found a panting guest very red in the face, and Owen saying:

“And then of course, if you get a depression over Iceland....”

Reproofs for tiring out the visitor appeared to astonish him, for he said:

“No, have I? But why on earth didn’t you tell me, aunt, and I’d have gone more slowly and given you an arm.”

Mabel bridled a little under this oblique suggestion of her advancing years, said the heat was most oppressive and she felt sure there was a storm brewing, which would be quite a relief.

“I know what you mean,” her nephew assured her and left her to make what she chose of that.

Tea for once was served in the dining-room in order not to disarrange the reception rooms for tomorrow, and Mabel inevitably exclaimed:

“You’re not standing on ceremony with us, that’s right,” a remark so evidently meant to convey the contrary, that Margaret ignored it.

Deafness was the only defense against such a woman, yet even that was unsafe, she thought, and for a moment all these stupidities crowding upon her seemed too much. From now onwards until the actual moment of the wedding there would be no escape from Mabel, and her mind, which ought to be free for caterers, florists and a multitude of other people in the morning, would be beset by this insinuating chatter.

“And if she is not chattering to me, I shall wonder what imbecilities she is saying to the children or even the maids—about Charles and this Godolphin girl. She is capable even of that,” said Margaret to herself.

Charles had let her in for this. Why couldn't he have sent Mabel and Cecily to a hotel for the night? It was all part of his negative attitude, his refusal to cooperate, even at a time like this. It made life impossible.

“And what will you do with this roomy old house, with the children married?” inquired Mabel. “You must ask us to stay sometimes, ‘to keep the rooms aired,’ as they say. Next month ... before the season is over. It would be good for Cecy to see a little life. You lucky folk in London don't think of poor country cousins. Now what do you say to the first week in July?”

“I'm sorry, Mabel, but I can't have any more visitors this summer,” said Margaret firmly. “I shall have too many things to do after the wedding, and the servants have had a great deal of extra work and must have their holidays.”

“But you send them one at a time surely, and one can always get in extra help. I am sure I should make nothing of visitors if I could have a staff of servants,” said Mabel, “but then I was always a good manager. However, what date do you suggest?”

“I can't make any engagements at present. We shall probably be going away ourselves,” returned Margaret, exasperated, and changed the subject.

After a round or two of general conversation, into which even Frances leapt eagerly, Mabel broke in again:

“And very soon I suppose you will be turning the top of the house into nurseries?” she suggested coyly.

Three pairs of eyes stared at her; amazement, rage and fright were severally expressed in them.

“Nurseries?” echoed Margaret.

“Well, of course. When Noel's babies come she'll have to send them home to you,” said Mabel, not troubling to quote Mrs. Moreland as her authority. “You must talk to her seriously about it, because English children never thrive in the East, you know, and young wives who leave their husbands are simply asking for trouble.”

There was a shout of laughter led by Owen, and echoed by his mother and Frances.

"Now what have I said to amuse you?" asked the bewildered Mabel, half plaintive, half pleased.

"Why, aren't you rather in a hurry, providing them with a family and leading them to the divorce court before they are even married?" said Owen.

"Oh, I see. Yes, that is quite funny, isn't it?" exclaimed Mabel, and laughed too at her own incomparable wit.

But to Margaret in this troubled mood, another vein of discomfort had been struck, by the talk of Noel's children, for if and when they came there would be no refuge for them in her father's house.

It was Owen, prompted by Frances, who brought his mother a respite, for he produced a new and simple gambling game for penny stakes, guessing that Aunt Mabel would take to it with avidity as long as she was permitted to win. Cecily was invited to make a fourth, and Margaret was thus able to slip away, the ruse proving so successful that they were still playing, Mabel with a mounting pile of coppers beside her and triumph in her eye, when the taxi containing Peggy Lister, Noel and Arnold turned into the drive.

Margaret's first sensation on seeing this further member of the clan was one of sheer desperation, as though the stars were set against her and she might as well make up her mind to it. She had always rather liked Charles's sister, but for the last twelve years all her associations with the family had been fraught with difficulty, and her own wariness and Miss Lister's preoccupation had set a barrier between them in place of their early friendship. Peggy was liable to be too plainspoken for comfort at a moment like this, she could be very disconcerting when she left her chosen sphere for the domestic hearth, and Charles actively disliked her. It was a relief to learn therefore that this was a mere call on her part and not a visitation, though even so, it was not to pass without a hint of friction.

Mabel was delighted to be found by her superior sister-in-law, seated at the card-table with her winnings beside her, a guest in the house.

"Dear me, Peggy of all people," she exclaimed. "This is a surprise. I didn't know you were going to join the family party."

"Party?" boomed Miss Lister. "I know nothing of any party, though these two young people did meet at my house. Didn't you, Noel—Arnold? What's the meaning of leaving me out? Very shabby of you, I must say."

They reassured her and Margaret said hastily:

“As you can’t stay, Peggy, come and let me show you Noel’s dress, and we’ll leave these people to their game.”

“Do you think I should be giving a party the night before the wedding?” she went on, leading the way upstairs. “Mabel wouldn’t be here herself if she and Cecily hadn’t arrived on the door-step with their luggage, uninvited. Owen and Frances have come over to see the last of Noel, naturally.... I don’t mind telling you, Peggy, that when I saw you get out of the taxi, it seemed the last straw.”

Miss Lister’s laugh filled the house.

“You don’t change,” she said, and gave the other a considering glance, some of her artificiality falling away at this contact with her brother’s wife. “But if you were as ruthless as your conversation, my dear, you’d have sent the loathly Mabel packing, luggage and all.”

“What could one do, because Cecily is to be one of the bridesmaids. It seemed rather unkind to leave her out.”

Miss Lister nodded. “Nice of you,” she said briefly, as one involved. “Poor kid.”

She followed Margaret into Noel’s room and dutifully admired the wedding gown, peered at all the charming things hanging in their swathes of tissue paper in the wardrobe trunk; but the important fact that her parents were certainly doing Noel well, did not even occur to her just then. The combination of all this bridal finery and the woman downstairs had taken her mind back to the only wedding in which she had had any part, Margaret’s own. She had been a bridesmaid, at her friend’s desire and her mother’s obstinate insistence, unwillingly, for she had no interest in weddings, and finery did not suit her. More than that, she had bitterly hated Charles, the fortunate and favored, for winning Margaret, while John, her elder brother and friend, had been captured by a little fool.

Twenty years ago to a month John had been buried with a thousand dead and she had closed the door on all the years before; yet now as it opened again the woman she had become found nothing strange in the rage of that remote predecessor, so deeply rooted had been her one affection.

Sitting down on an upright chair, large, loose-limbed, weather-beaten, one would have said, in spite of her urban life, she looked absently about her, seeing not this room, perhaps, but another.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” she said. “Takes one back. You might have been married yesterday.”

“Or a thousand years ago,” said Margaret, smiling faintly. “You wore pink and how you rampaged about it.... Cecily is wearing the same shade tomorrow. She has a look of you too.”

“Good God, that’s carrying the joke too far,” exclaimed Miss Lister. “If you’d known my sentiments on that occasion....”

“I remember your language vividly.”

“Daresay you do.” Her smile was grim. “I loathed the whole thing. You were a thousand times too good for Charles. It was just his luck. I don’t mind telling you, my dear, that if you had left him any time in all these years I’d have danced all night, just to know there was some justice in the world.”

Margaret stood very still, fighting a hysterical desire to laugh, incapable of speech.

“And there you stand,” said the other, staring at her with unseeing eyes, “marrying Charles’s daughter tomorrow to this nice lad and I, in my innocence, have brought it about.... It’s damned funny, Margaret ... and those old aunts of Arnold’s congratulating me this afternoon on my brilliant brother because some doddering member of their family thinks him an authority on International Finance. Lucky Charles ... as ever.”

Margaret found her voice.

“Luck is such a dangerous word ... justice too.... You can’t tell.... It’s all too involved.”

“Well, there’s nothing in the least involved in good plain hate,” retorted Miss Lister briskly. “You are a prejudiced witness for Charles, and if anything could be to his credit that would be. But you won’t persuade me to admit any virtues in him.”

She got up, nodding her head. “I must be off before you throw me out. Shouldn’t have come, of course. Weddings are bad for me. The psychologists have a name for it, no doubt.”

“Oh, Peggy,” said Margaret, laughing helplessly, “I’m glad to see you all the same. It’s like old times ... before you became a literary personage.”

“Twenty years to a month,” said a voice that only the visitor could hear.

The door had closed again. She was a busy woman with a dinner ahead of her, at which she would speak with great vigor and not too much erudition, forgetting this other world.

She wouldn't trouble to say good-by, would see them all tomorrow, she said, her time was short.

Margaret, watching the taxi carry her away, found Noel at her side.

"She *would* insist on driving me home, mother. Aunts have no tact in our family.... I don't know how it is.... Arnold is staying to dinner, but going early to finish his packing. I knew you wouldn't mind, and besides he has some bouquets for father."

"Bouquets for your father?" echoed Margaret, bewildered. "You don't mean a flower for his buttonhole tomorrow?"

"No, metaphorical bouquets ... from his old uncle who has a brochure of father's on finance, and says he's a sound man and it would be a pleasure to meet him.... I didn't know about any brochure," said Noel cautiously.

"That has always been a pet subject of your father's," explained Margaret.

"Oh, really?"

Noel looked pleased and at this evidence that at least her mother knew, she lost her troubled picture of a distinguished parent prevented by sheer modesty from proclaiming his fame in the home circle.

"Aunt Peggy was quite sniffy about it," she said. "Jealous, probably."

"She's prejudiced, darling. Your grandmother, you see, thought your father could do no wrong. She adored him and cared nothing for your Uncle John, to whom Peggy was devoted. John was the only person she ever cared for, I think, and he was killed."

"Oh, poor old aunt. Hard luck on her. No wonder she has rather a kink," said Noel, thus calmly dismissing the literary attainments of her relative.

Her mother smiled but let it go. Noel was young and happy and her view of kinks was not important. But the bouquets, as she called them, for Charles were opportune, for they would please him, perhaps put him in a good mood and be a set-off against Mabel and all the troubling undercurrents of a difficult evening. She had not known of the brochure, of course; he told her nothing of his own activities, though occasional word of his articles in the newspapers had reached her from outside—the Morelands, the Nevilles and other friends. It was a bitter illustration of their estrangement, but she was too tired, too long accustomed to the necessity of seeming to know what in fact she did not know about him, to give the matter any other thought than that, beyond one of relief that Noel should have this pride in her father to

take away with her, and that his achievements should seem important to Arnold's people.

"I must put Arnold near him at dinner," she decided, "and Noel too on her last evening. I can't consider Mabel."

This was another responsibility—to contrive somehow that Charles should behave like a normal father to his only daughter on the eve of her marriage. It would be fatal to prompt him even by the merest hint, as she had discovered long ago; and what did Noel really think of it all?

Even after the greater intimacy between herself and the girl of the two years since Owen's marriage, Margaret did not know the answer. Noel had asked no questions, given no sign, but whether this was due to a merciful blindness or merely the offhand secrecy of the young, she could not guess.

Her mind went back inevitably to her own father and the close relations which had existed between them, but she had been an only child and motherless, which made a difference perhaps. With the warning of Peggy's visit behind her, she hastily closed that avenue of thought, and turned back into the house.

Noel and Arnold emerged into the hall at the same moment, convulsed with silent laughter, the girl burying her fair head in her lover's shoulder.

"You have the rummest gang of crooks in your family that I've ever seen," explained Arnold. "Card-sharpers! I'm surprised at you."

He addressed Margaret sternly and she exclaimed:

"I refuse to be made responsible for my sister-in-law. She has no sense."

"It seems to pay," grinned Arnold. "Those two in there, Owen and Frances, are cheating right and left to make her win, and she is as pleased as punch."

"Crowing," supplemented Noel. "She always had such a splendid head for cards."

"Go away then, you two, and don't dare to interrupt the good work," ordered her mother. "Desperate remedies are necessary."

"But, mother, how did she get here?"

"By car, my dear, and her own powers of imagination. She thought she was expected."

"Did my retinue take flight?"

Margaret had forgotten the retinue, knew nothing about it, and hoped fervently that she was not expected to entertain it at dinner.

“Or will it spoil your fun?” she asked them doubtfully.

“No, of course not.”

Noel’s response to her mother’s tone was as instant as a delicate instrument to a touch, and it had just the note of carelessness to set her mind at ease, though it left with her a sadness of imminent loss. After tomorrow she would never see just this Noel again, but at periods of years a stranger with her daughter’s face.

2

Martin and Felicity drove in soon after six, armed with excuses which were not required. Miss Osborne had ascertained from her companion in the course of their very circuitous shopping expedition that, as far as he knew, the bridegroom would not expect him either to hold his hand or paint the town this evening. The painting, he gave her to understand, had not been left undone, but as a good watchdog he intended his bridegroom to have a clear head tomorrow.

“Then if he doesn’t like the girl when he’s got her, he can’t blame me,” he explained reasonably.

“Cautious, aren’t you?” said Felicity.

Mr. Croft looked bland but did not commit himself on this point.

He did however say that if she thought the town needed a little further decoration this evening, and she cared to assist, well and good. In the absence of their principals, perhaps a spot of roystering might not come amiss.

Miss Osborne agreed to royster, always supposing she was not needed by Noel. The much talked-of rehearsal seemed to have slipped her mind or perhaps lost its uses.

Noel and Arnold, hearing the car, went out to meet the visitors, shook hands with them effusively, said that it was good of them to call and wouldn’t they come in for a cocktail, having come so far.

“What a welcome! so unexpected,” exclaimed Martin. “I assure you I am all a-tremble. You don’t mind if I cry, do you?”

He draped himself round Arnold's neck and, sobbing loudly, was carried in and deposited on the dining-table which Spence had begun to set, Arnold calling for ice for the visitor's head, and Spence proclaiming that her nice polish would be ruined.

A compromise was effected by Martin, who said he would go to the kitchen for the ice himself and at least smell the dinner, and Arnold decided to accompany him and see he did not eat it.

While the pair of them foraged, Felicity carried her parcel of confetti into the hall, labeled it "Osborne" and hung it among the hats, then had a few words on the telephone with her own household.

"I say, Noel, we are going to dine in town. Can you lend me one of your cast-off frocks?" she asked. "I don't want to go home ... there are people there, and I couldn't leave Martin outside."

Her friend nodded and led the way upstairs. She was delighted about the dinner in town, and understood the little difficulty of taking Martin into the Osbornes' house, where Felicity's mother, if not otherwise supplied with a male attendant, might pounce. Her own more fortunate circumstances in this respect made her say casually:

"You'd better stick to whichever frock you choose, Felix, and keep it here for future need. I'll tell mother I've given you a spot in my wardrobe, in case you want to change here any time."

"That's a good idea. I'll be wandering round for news of you and all that."

"Yes, rather."

They skirted the subject of their coming separation warily.

"You may be seasick."

"What do you bet?"

But betting with an ocean between them had little point and they let it drop, Noel running up to Owen's old room to seek a dress which Felicity had always favored. And there she found her mother's frock for the wedding and other signs of the room's occupation, and Owen's decorations to bring a hundred crowding memories.

Her mother had turned out for Aunt Mabel, and it was too bad. Why did they put up with the tiresome woman?

"Peace at any price," Noel answered her own question, the old doubts tugging at her heart. Yet there was reassurance in the grinning faces and prancing figures round the walls, because by winter Owen would be back again.

"I shall ask her to swap rooms with me and tell her I should like to sleep with his hussies on my last night," she thought, not with any hope that her offer would be accepted, but because she wanted to make some gesture, and did not quite know how.

She carried the frock down to Felicity, and changed her own for one more suitable for a family dinner on a summer evening. Then they rejoined the cocktail makers.

"Marvelous!" exclaimed Martin to Felicity. "Do you carry a wardrobe about with you, or keep one in every port? How am I going to live up to you? I can't take you into the club while I change, and if I leave you in the car you'll certainly be stolen."

"I'll drive round and round—where the police are thickest," said the resourceful Felicity. "Any other compliments you have in stock will be received f.o.b. at the owner's risk."

"Must they be verbal?"

"If we are in the way, you have only to mention it," interposed Arnold.

He and Noel, when the other pair had driven off, strolled round the garden to the tennis court at the far end, a farewell promenade, in happy solitude. Behind them the slanting sunlight of late afternoon touched up the mellow stone of the house and its mantle of Virginia creeper, the leaves folded upon each other with almost the neatness of a design. It looked a tranquil, friendly place, secure, comfortable, its squat chimneys lifted against a sky where a few clouds trailed like wisps of gauze, and the lawns and shrubs spreading about it.

Arnold glanced round him appreciatively. It was his last night in England, his last glimpse of such summer gardens as this, green with a lovely restful greenness which few other countries know in such abundance. It was a thing he always noticed when he came on leave and then forgot until he was pulling out again, having been quickly reclaimed as a native born.

A pleasant spot this hill looking over London, and Arnold, having no roots of his own, wondered a little anxiously how homesick Noel, who had been born here, was going to be.

“And then we came home on leave to a jolly house on the heath where my wife grew up,” he continued his serial story. “Let’s see, I told you I married that marvelous girl I met in Sussex, didn’t I?”

“What, never the one who got the diamonds?” inquired Noel.

“The very girl.”

“You’re rather nice, aren’t you?” she said. “Getting ready to mop up my tears.”

Her quick comprehension transmuted his anxiety into a new delight in her. He was not afraid of her tears. Though he had rushed her, working quickly because it was the only way he knew, because his time was short, because to go back to India without her would have been intolerable, she had gone with him each step with a certainty of her own, very soothing to an ardent lover, her calm a complement to his impatience. If their discoveries about each other were all in the future, they were at that moment where neither doubt nor fear had any substance.

Even Noel’s inner consciousness of the home she was leaving, uneasy when she was within its walls, was lulled by his presence, the delicious quiet of the hour, the serenity of this familiar and unchanging scene.

The house would not move from its moorings; her mother would have Owen and Frances in the winter, and Felicity and the Nevilles coming in and out; her father would write more brochures and be admired by learned men. There would be a grandchild arriving in her room looking over the Heath for their amusement; and she and Arnold would come home on leave.

Chapter X CHARLES

1

Charles walked up the hill, little aware of the charms of the season, his new distinction in his daughter's eyes, or much else except weariness and a dread of the hours ahead.

The anticipations which had come to him at intervals all day, intruding in a fashion quite out of the usual order on matters which should have been engaging all his mind, receded like a mirage as he approached the house, and the prospect of having to entertain his tiresome sister-in-law seemed almost unendurable.

In town the day had been hot, the streets full of the smell of dust and petrol, and the heavy air so still that the sound of the traffic had risen to a roar that set the blood pounding through his head like the beats of a drum. He had had during the afternoon to attend a meeting of creditors of one of the firm's business associates, a man, moreover, for whom he had a great regard. The loss which they would have to face was not at the moment a vital matter, but his friend's tragedy and the fact that such failures, even now in a time of business recovery, could not always be avoided, even by men of foresight and integrity, lit a train of anxiety in his mind. The situation abroad was anything but reassuring too. The whole social system was unstable and how then could there be safety or certainty for any individual? It seemed to him that no mere human qualities were an insurance against disaster any more.

On the way back from the meeting he had stopped at his barber's for a shave and a hair-cut, simply as a respite from his thoughts and the ceaseless tapping of typewriters. The relief had been short-lived for, on returning to the office he had found the senior partner, who usually went home early, impatiently awaiting him, and not to discuss the meeting, a disaster which he had already accepted, but to talk of Noel. He wanted to know whether she had a separate banking account. Charles, who thought it unlikely, could not say yes or no, and had been caught in one of those awkward situations where it was necessary to make excuses for his ignorance. He had supposed that this was another hint that he should have demanded a settlement for her, well-meaning no doubt, but irritating, for in matters of this sort the old man's mind seemed to have remained static. Shrewd though he was in the conduct of the business, he still believed in an order untouched by financial

stress and it would not occur to him, Charles thought, that he was fortunate to be marrying his daughter to a man with a profession to support her, without expecting other safeguards.

Nothing had been said, however, Mr. Moreland merely humming and ha-ing about the banking account and then saying: "Well, never mind," and taking himself off.

The question in reality had had quite another bearing. Mr. Moreland had suddenly awakened to the fact that to slip a check into Noel's hand an hour before she left the country would be a doubtful kindness. To pay it into her banking account would have solved the difficulty, as no doubt she would have made arrangements to have her money transferred in due course to India. He wanted it to be a personal gift to the child for her own use, but he was not the man to advertise his own munificence by giving the check to Charles to carry home. For one thing he wanted no comments on it made in the hearing of his wife, who was convinced her Venetian glass more than fulfilled all requirements. Humming and ha-ing, he had finally made up his mind to give her banknotes instead, a little consoled for the risk of trusting her with open money by the satisfied reflection that even in these days of tottering currencies, a Bank of England note is suspect nowhere in the world.

Charles believed he had appeared to his partner an unbusiness-like fool, but the day had long passed when the old man would have questioned his ability in that direction for a moment.

He thought of the incident again impatiently as he trudged up the hill, and then of his friend Crede, ruined in middle-age with a young family to provide for somehow out of the wreck. His own more fortunate condition was, he felt, purely accidental, and for a moment he saw himself in Crede's place, and facing Margaret with the humiliating admission of this further failure.

The house, he supposed, when he reached it presently, would be already transformed for tomorrow, full of noise and excitement and display, no quiet for him anywhere, for who was he but the payer of bills? What a fool he was to have believed anything else for a moment! Why, in heaven's name, hadn't he gone to the club for the night and avoided all this discomfort?

The sight of a car slipping past him and in at a gateway ahead, increased his depression. Tired though he had been of late, he still clung doggedly to this walk night and morning because it was the only exercise he could get during the week. Their early talk of buying a car had long ago been

abandoned like so much else. Margaret had not raised the question even for the children, and he had avoided it both because of the expense and his increasing detachment from the life of his family.

Now his daughter's wedding had forcibly drawn him back from the interests that had come to engross him, into an atmosphere of supposed domesticity which he found it difficult to sustain without self-consciousness. It was perhaps too painfully reminiscent of the early days of his estrangement from Margaret when his mother still lived and there were other urgent reasons for them to play a part. And Charles was beginning to be aware that his self-imposed cynicism was not altogether proof against the memories evoked by such an occasion as this. He began to dread more and more the meeting with his wife.

2

The card-players had dispersed and gone up to change and but for the marquee on the lawn everything was much as usual when he reached the house, doors and windows open, curtains stirring in the breeze, and none of the noise and bustle he had expected.

Some letters lay on the hall table and he picked them up, but found them of little interest, remembering as he did so that he had suggested Mabel should be given his room. There seemed no one to consult on this point, and he was about to ring for Spence when his wife came out of the dining-room.

She had been waiting for him as she usually did when there were any arrangements of which he was ignorant; it was not an unusual attention, but he looked round uneasily.

"I have had to put Cecily in your dressing-room," she said, "but I think you'll find everything. There is plenty of time for a bath if you want one."

"Oh ... you haven't taken my room for Mabel then?" he inquired.

"No!" The suggestion was so absurd for various reasons which might have occurred to him, that she was impatient with it, but because he still hesitated, instead of going moodily upstairs in his usual fashion, she went on more equably: "Your study has not been disturbed or your room.... Arnold is here, but only for dinner, and the boys are not dressing, Mabel must take us as we are." If he was tired he might not want to get into a stiff shirt, she thought, but it passed through her mind that he looked fresher than usual—the result of the shave and hair-cut, but she did not immediately identify it. "The Nevilles may come round for an hour later, if Tim can get away.... Mrs.

Moreland's Venetian glass arrived this morning, but no doubt you know that."

She was accustomed to tell him about the presents, there had been no conscious intention in the mention of the glass, yet immediately she wished the words unsaid.

"Er—yes," said Charles. "Miss Godolphin—the girl from the office—said she had delivered it safely ... and that everything was going quite well."

Against his own disbelief, he was appealing for confirmation of her message, but to Margaret, his hesitation and the sudden lift of his voice which always meant that he was embarrassed, seemed a proof of her own fears and she turned away, feeling rather sick.

At the same moment there was a stir on the stairs and she caught sight of Frances hastily retreating, a further spur to her disquiet.

The girl had heard their voices and gone back, not wishing to intrude upon them and thinking she had not been seen; but her mother-in-law was annoyed, supposing this the beginning of an awkwardness towards Charles which she herself had provoked, and she walked impatiently back into the dining-room, leaving him to go upstairs.

Let them get their greetings over! She wished to be no witness of them. What did any of it matter in the least? She felt an almost cold desire to let everything go, to abandon the evening and all its disturbing elements to fate, as though the years of petty subterfuge and contriving had drained her of the last ounce of resistance and she could do no more. She moved round the table, straightening a spoon, moving a glass, hardly conscious of what she did, but too tired to sit down; and Spence coming in, put her tray on the sideboard and exclaimed:

"Madam, you've been on your feet all day. Couldn't you take ten minutes' rest and lie down? You'll be worn out tomorrow."

Margaret said uncertainly: "I wonder.... Do you think I might dare? ... Yes, Spence, I believe you're right."

It seemed, now it was suggested to her, the one thing of all others in the world that she wished to do.

She took off her dress and shoes, swallowed an aspirin tablet and stretched herself out on the bed in the little room upstairs, and for a while her only sensation was one of delicious physical relief. No sound reached her here; Mabel was dressing and would no doubt make a long and elaborate

toilet, after which Charles must look after her for a little while. Suddenly she saw him again as in the moment when she had come out of the dining-room and found him fidgeting with his letters, rather like an awkward boy, and for the first time she realized the shave and hair-cut, with relief, because he would not have to shave now and would be downstairs the sooner, but with some other feeling too, not so easy to explain. She did not know whether it was a hope or fear that all her view of him during those brief minutes in the hall had been after all illusory; but if a hope, why? she asked herself. It would be contemptible to grudge him what happiness and consolation he could find. She had none of Peggy's desire to dance all night at his undoing or to think it common justice; indeed she knew too well that it was not. Charles had been no party to the preferences and privileges he had had at the expense of his brother and sister, and his sensitiveness to the tactics of his mother, which he could not change, had been obvious to Margaret almost from their first meeting. If she had soon loved—to her friend Peggy's disgust—the spoilt and lucky Charles, it had been for this quality among others for which equally Peggy gave him no credit.

The very fact that Mabel was now in the house and that Cecily was to be a bridesmaid tomorrow, were all part of this same old question. Charles had done far more than Peggy had ever done for their brother's widow and child, had accepted an obligation for which he received neither credit nor thanks.

"I wish I had told her so," thought Margaret, and then saw the absurdity of this instinct to defend Charles whom she was soon to expose to his sister's triumph by leaving him at last.

The pleasure of that momentary reunion with her old friend now lost its savor and she cried to herself: "After tomorrow I hope that I shall never have to set eyes on her or any one of them again."

On the floor below a door opened and closed, and reluctantly Margaret pulled herself to her feet, and began to get ready for dinner. She felt refreshed by the short rest and all the accidental family annoyances the day had brought her receded as things which did not really touch her own problem, though they had seemed to illuminate it. She made up her mind to think of them no more, believe nothing they suggested, whether likely or unlikely. There was still one loyalty at least that she and Charles owed to each other, to show an outward dignity while they remained together.

Frances and Owen joined Noel and Arnold in the garden, feeling the need of a breather, they said, after conducting a gambling den for the good of the house. Cecily from her window heard the laughter of the four, and guessed immediately that it was concerned with her mother, who had been worse than usual over the silly game, refusing to stop it even when Noel and Aunt Peggy and the bridegroom came in because she was so pleased to win. It was humiliating and Cecily's ears burned at the things which her cousins were probably saying out there.

She was unhappy too about her evening dress which was so much more formal than the light summer frocks into which Noel and Frances had changed, and her mother's elaborate satin and brocade was a thousand times worse, she thought, as though they had been expecting a dinner-party, which of course her mother had.

Full of these troubles the girl at last finished dressing and went downstairs, where she lurked about, pretending not to notice her contemporaries, until Frances caught sight of her and went to the rescue.

"Come and walk," she invited.

"I feel so over-dressed," confided the visitor.

"Oh, no."

It was unfortunately true, however. The backless gown of heavy rose-colored satin would have looked more appropriate in a ballroom than at an informal family dinner on a summer night, and Cecily could not carry off the situation lightly as another girl would have done. It became a tragedy, and she eyed her companion bitterly and with envy, as one to whom such dreadful mistakes did not occur.

Frances who had made her white crêpe frock for 6/9, and then in a burst of extravagance paid 12/11 for the green flower to finish it off, did not dream that she was being envied. She led Cecily to the rest of the party where her apologies broke out again.

"You leave the excuses to me," said Arnold. "I couldn't dress because of a lot of aunts. Mine said if I came to tea at the Berkeley in a dinner-coat or even tails, I should be given bread and water. Breakfast, yes. But not tea. They drew the line at that. And then another aunt—Noel's to be exact—whisked me out here willy-nilly in her cab. If I had been in my pajamas it would have been all one to her."

"In other words," translated Noel, "his clothes are packed." She put her arm in Cecily's and said: "Now close your eyes and hold out your hands

because my young man has a present for you. The other bridesmaids came and clamored for theirs in the most grasping manner, but like a perfect little lady you haven't said a word ... now you can look."

Cecily looked at the pale pink evening bag to match her bridesmaid's dress, its jeweled clasp flashing in the sun, and murmured hasty thanks. Her mother had said the bridegroom's gift would certainly be jewelry, diamonds at least, if he knew his duties, and beyond her own disappointment, about which she was a little uncertain, was the horrified thought of her mother's perhaps audible comments, when she saw the bag.

"I think I had better take it in and put it carefully away," she said, and turned back to the house.

She would show it to her mother and get it over, dare her to say a word about it to any one, and threaten to go home if she did. Mabel, however, looked at the gift contemptuously but with satisfaction.

"There, what did I tell you?" she exclaimed. "This Arnold Flinders is a nobody and no doubt as poor as a church mouse. *I* never thought he was anything else."

The owner of the bag withdrew slightly relieved, and met her Uncle Charles just coming from his bath.

"Well, Cecily! You are looking very beautiful and grand," he said kindly.

"Am I?" She broke into a smile, immediately reassured about her appearance, and delighted that he had come in. "Look at my present from the bridegroom—but I suppose you've seen it already."

"Dear me, is he distributing presents? ... Oh, I see, you're a bridesmaid of course?" Charles took the bag and admired it to please her. "So this is the latest thing to give, is it?"

"I don't know. What did you give when you were married, Uncle Charles?"

"Ah, now you are going into questions of ancient history," said Charles, attempting playfulness. "Nothing as attractive as that, I feel sure."

He had no desire to be reminded of his own wedding, but as he left her, saying he would be late for dinner, and went into his room, he saw the old portrait of Margaret confronting him, and was drawn to go over and look at it.

It had been standing there for years, he seemed to remember, just part of the furniture and as little noticed. It was rather surprising she hadn't taken it away. Yet he was a little touched that she had not, because he had been fond of it once upon a time.

Charles sighed. He was a damned sentimentalist, he supposed, to be suspecting some kindness in her still because of the vague message she had sent him by the girl this morning. And as he put the old picture back and met the faint smile in the subject's eyes, he knew the wish at least was father to the thought. He had never cared deeply for any other woman. Would that count with her if he told her so? Would she believe it, or was it even the kind of thing that after this space of time could be said? Probably not.

"We're past all that," he thought, and hearing his sister-in-law go down, began hastily to dress, remembering that he was required to entertain her, a most effective stop to any day-dreams.

Mabel rustling in her black and gold brocade and looking rather more stuffed than usual, found no one therefore, only a succession of empty rooms.

She was a woman of resource, however, and first examined the dining-room, much disappointed to find no champagne glasses on the table, as she felt she had every right to expect. Strolling into the lounge to make a more systematic examination of the presents than she had been able to do in Owen's presence, she rehearsed a few casual remarks to be dropped to Charles before dinner, such as, "Of course you will give us some champagne to drink Noel's health," or if cocktails were offered: "No, for I am sure we shall be having champagne and I mustn't spoil it." She hoped the hint would take effect.

Mabel had many other things she meant to say to her brother-in-law, and as soon as he appeared she was ready for him, sailing out into the hall and crying:

"Well, *there* you are. I don't know where anybody is, I'm sure. I am quite deserted, but then it never did take *me* long to dress."

Charles, thus caught, made what excuses he could for his absent family, and suggested taking her round the garden, but Mabel did not share the common obsession for this form of entertainment. She had seen quite enough of the garden and said she was worn out and only longing for an easy chair. In fact, the doctor had been much concerned about her and

ordered her a sea-voyage, which was all very well for him, said Mabel with an artificial laugh, as she sank to rest.

This opportunity for Charles to offer to finance the required voyage was missed. He merely replied, "Yes, quite," and looked vaguely about the room as though he had never seen it before. She was forced to try again.

"Or even a week or two in town, he said. I was rather hoping, with Noel gone and such an empty house, Margaret would have had us here for a week or two in July, but she says you are both going away. When do you go and where?"

This time Charles looked at her, momentarily startled, before it occurred to him that this was probably a conventional excuse on his wife's part.

"Nothing can be settled until after the wedding," he replied.

"Because," continued his persevering relative, "I see no reason why Cecy and I could not look after the house for you while you are away."

"Oh, no, we shouldn't care to ask you to do that," countered the owner of the house. He excused himself, went out into the hall and brought back the evening paper for her, but she rejected it, saying:

"Oh, but I would much rather talk," laughing in her foolish way, and obliging him to sit down again.

He wished fervently that Margaret would come in, and then half withdrew the wish, seeing the irony of this instinctive dependence on her. She had said that he could come home and entertain Mabel and quite literally she had meant what she said. There had been nothing else in it, after all; he had been dreaming. And at this realization the indifference in which he stubbornly had encased himself for years gave way to a wretchedness so bitter that he no longer heard what Mabel said, but sat hunched in his chair, staring miserably before him, imprisoned by the whining voice, isolated and outcast, lost.

Mabel had launched into a description of how Cousin Agnes had so delightfully sent them out by car, beginning with a highly imaginary account of her call at the Morelands and the offer of the drive, and how the chauffeur had gone up to the office to collect their bags from that very curious young woman. "What's her name, Charles?"

"Eh? I beg your pardon, Mabel. You asked me something, I think?"

"The young woman typist, or whatever you choose to call her, who kept popping in and out of your room when I was there today," repeated Mabel.

“I don’t like her, Charles, and of course she’s head over ears in love with you, as I said to Margaret.”

“What the devil do you mean?” exclaimed her brother-in-law, now thoroughly roused and jumping to his feet. “My God, is that the kind of folly to come and tell a man’s wife behind his back? Have you no sense of decency!”

“Charles, Charles!”

Margaret, hearing the storm, had come in from the hall. It was impossible to say how much she had heard. She had put on a black lace dress and Charles, beside himself with fury, saw the slenderness of her body and the whiteness of her shoulders through the shadowy lace as though they were unreal, chimerical; he did not look at her face, which was a pity, for it was one of those unguarded moments when the truth looks out.

Mabel was laughing, rather nervously now, and babbling:

“Well, what a fuss about my little joke. Any one would think you had a guilty conscience, Charles, I’m sure.”

“Don’t be silly, Mabel,” said Margaret crisply. “Charles, will you see about sherry for every one, please, as Spence has so much to do.”

“Oh—er—yes.” Charles, recalled to his duties as host, made his escape, bitterly wondering whether Margaret believed this fool’s insinuations and almost wishing he had faced the matter out then and there. Yet what would have been the use? If she did believe it, was there anything he could say that would convince her otherwise? His anger mounted to include his wife. Let her believe it then. He was damned if he would try to justify himself.

Had he but known it, that was the last thing on this occasion that he had any need to do. Margaret had seen in a flash from his reception of the story that there was nothing in it—on his side certainly—as surely as she understood the source of his indignation. As he left the room she said to Mabel:

“I am not in the least sorry that Charles stormed at you, and I hope it will teach you to hold your tongue. How do you suppose Mr. Moreland would like your suggestion that one of his employees behaves like an idiotic young woman in a novelette?”

This was carrying the war into the enemy’s quarters, for Mabel was considerably afraid of losing her footing with the Morelands. She began to

make more excuses, say she had merely been teasing Charles, having a little innocent fun. But then she had always had such a sense of humor.

“Well, we are too busy to appreciate it perhaps,” said Margaret, “so suppose we leave it at that, shall we?”

The young people came trooping in, Owen carrying the sherry. Charles, who had thrust it into his hand, remained in the hall chatting audibly to Cecily, an intimation no doubt that he had not run away. Mabel, not to be outdone, burst into voluble talk with Arnold about her wonderful luck at cards.

Margaret looked round the group, considering her dinner-table and no longer inclined to abandon the evening to its fate, or Charles to Mabel. For the first time her concern for his comfort had no bearing on the wedding or Noel’s last night at home, and she was sorry for him.

Her eyes fell on Frances, who was leaning against the glass door into the garden, and on an impulse she went over and joined her.

“I have a bone to pick with you,” she said. “What do you mean by running away up the stairs because you saw your father-in-law in the hall, making me feel more of a dragon than I felt already?”

“I thought you were talking and I didn’t want to disturb you. It wasn’t *that*, really,” exclaimed the girl, coloring.

“Oh, well, I’m glad it wasn’t *that*.” Margaret’s eyes twinkled and she spoke with real affection. “Considering our sinister relationship we do seem rather to understand each other, don’t we, you and I? Be nice to Charles tonight, there’s a good girl. He would miss your banter and he has enough to bear...”

She gave the faintest of nods in the direction of Mabel, and Frances said confidentially:

“Yes ... that’s what *I* call sinister,” leaving, it seemed to her mother-in-law, a compliment very delicately in mid-air.

She was relieved that this minor worry had been cleared away and that she had been able to retrieve her blunder of the morning. It restored her confidence in herself a little, and the girl’s immediate comprehension and response made her happy for her son.

Frances, the green flower at her breast matching the long curtain behind her, which she had so much admired, was happy too but for a different

reason. To her surprise she had discovered that all her awkwardness had suddenly left her and she no longer felt a stranger in the house.

She gave all the credit for the change to Margaret, not seeing that such things come rather from within than from without, and that the sudden comprehension of the greater disquiet she had always sensed here had made her forget her own.

Chapter XI FAMILY PARTY

1

Charles from his end of the dinner-table saw with considerable relief that Mabel was to sit at Margaret's right hand and well out of his line of vision. He was grateful for this maneuver, even though he supposed it had been prompted by expediency, for the necessity of being civil to the woman in his own house did not add to his anticipations of a pleasant evening, which had never been exactly rosy. He felt the impatient embarrassment of a man who has made a scene under great provocation, instead of behaving with the freezing dignity which the theme deserved.

"Any one would think you had a guilty conscience," the fool had said.

The Godolphin girl of all people, an efficient cog in the machine, whose primness and discretion were a byword. You might as well suspect her of being in love with the old man himself, thought Charles. And what did Margaret think of the precious story? She was no doubt ready to believe him capable of any folly.

"But dash it all, the girl's been here today, she has seen her. Does she imagine I have lost my eyes?"

He pulled himself together as Cecily, directed by her aunt, took the seat on his right, smiling her satisfaction. Then he heard Margaret say:

"As it is your last night at home, Noel, I think you should be allowed to sit by your father. Arnold, will you separate Cecily and Frances? You and Noel will have quite enough of each other hereafter."

Charles supposed there was a double edge in the last statement and did not join the general laughter, but the lovers took a melodramatic farewell of each other and went to opposite sides of the table. Charles found his young daughter beside him, regarding him in a way that was a little too familiar for his comfort, half mirthfully, as once another girl had done.

"The agony will soon be over," she assured him.

"Eh?" said her awkward parent.

"Dinner ... sitting next to me ... getting me married and off the premises."

“So that’s what you think, is it?” said Charles, with a pang because it was true.

“I was fishing for a little fatherly enthusiasm,” explained his daughter modestly. “Has Arnold delivered you his important message from Uncle James?”

“James? Who is Uncle James?” inquired her father.

“His Uncle James and, of course, mine. As I don’t suit, I’m leaving the family for another place. Arnold darling, give the gentleman his nice bouquet.”

The whole table paused to listen to the message about his brochure with interest, even Mabel being impressed by Uncle James, because he seemed to be a person of consequence with a country house, “rather a decent old hole,” as Arnold expressed it.

Requests for autograph copies of the great work reached the author from all sides and with considerable competition, this being an excellent opportunity for the younger element to make a noise.

Frances declared that having spoken first she ought to have preference, but Noel and Arnold, who would have to deal with foreign currencies within twenty-four hours, felt they had a stronger argument. Owen pointed out that interest in figures was a male prerogative, a rash statement which met with its due reward, even his mother producing evidence against him in a reference to his bedroom walls.

Charles missed the point of this shaft, and some of the others, but the charm of the scene touched him for the first time; the dark polished table with its silver and glass, the girls’ bright faces and attractive frocks under the center light, and beyond through the open windows the garden in the fading glow of a summer day.

They were in a mood to be amused at nothing or anything, and listening to their laughter and pleasant voices he felt a sudden kinship with his children, who had unwittingly, as he supposed, drawn him into the scene.

Though he was pleased at a stranger’s interest in his articles he did not take it very seriously. The newspaper had gathered them into pamphlet form for its readers, among whom they had attracted some attention, but he knew that the times had been his opportunity. With countries going off the gold standard in all directions the average person had wanted to know what it was all about. When challenged and able at last to make himself heard, he said as much, but admitted under pressure there were probably one or two copies in

the house for what they were worth. Noel announced that no trousseau would be complete without one.

Charles presently found he had fallen into conversation with Arnold about India. The young soldier had a good deal more intelligence than he had supposed and a keenness about the country and its future, which did not apparently blind him to dangers ahead. As the elder listened he thought about the future of these two young people setting out tomorrow with an anxiety that from being general had become particular, and yet....

Whatever had been sanguine in his temperament as a young man had been overlaid by the troubled times and his own domestic situation, but in reflective moments some quality of doubt in the expected sequence of events still tricked him occasionally into a hope which his colder intelligence rejected. It was so at this moment. He remembered his own youth, rooted in the old secure order and then flung without warning into war, upheaval and the collapse of all the values it had known. Wasn't it possible that this later generation, bred to the expectation of no security whatever, might find it after all, at the turn of the wheel? Was retrogression ever foreseen? Wasn't it, as much as progress, something only to be judged by the future and not the present?

Owen had joined the talk which shifted by gradual stages to aerial surveys and the latest American experiments in flight through the stratosphere. Charles awoke to the fact that he was listening with attention to his son.

2

If Mabel received no champagne and very little male attention, she was not deprived of the powers of speech, though this to her immediate neighbors would have been a merciful dispensation. A versatile woman, no topic was beyond her scope.

She had always had a wonderful head for figures, she said, as a set-off presumably to Charles's pretensions in this direction. She also had a cousin in India whom Captain Flinders would undoubtedly have met, and she made exhaustive and incredulous inquiries of him on this point, with the fixed belief of the untraveled that foreign countries resemble an English village where all twelve inhabitants are acquainted. She adored flying and had poor John not been killed, would have traveled everywhere by aeroplane; however, she never complained, a penny 'bus must do for her. She was not

even going to admit that the stratosphere was over her head, figuratively as well as literally, and said brightly:

“Was it invented by a Scotchman? There’s quite a Highland sound about it, I always think. And why should those Americans be pushing in?”

The one advantage about Mabel was that there was no need and little opportunity to answer her when she was in this vein. Margaret let her talk, thankful that the rest of the company were happy and even Charles for once engrossed. The mention of his articles had been opportune to take his mind from the scene before dinner, for that little triumph would balance the humiliation of having lost his temper so completely.

What a rage he had been in! For the first time she had leisure to recall the scene in detail and to wonder just why he had been so upset. *“Is that the kind of folly to repeat to a man’s wife behind his back?”*

It was a sensitive point with him, of course, or might have been once, but after all these years, did he really think it mattered what anybody told her about him? Did he care in the least what she believed? She could not credit it.

“Does he think I’m a prude, clinging to outward respectability?” she asked herself. “How can he really suppose anything about him concerns me now there’s nothing left between us but empty words? Men are queer.”

Though the possibility that he might love this girl or some other had been painful to her, she knew that his denial had given her nothing but a momentary relief, and the situation was unchanged. They were strangers, worse than strangers because they had once been so near.

She glanced at him and saw him turn kindly to include Cecily in the talk, and noticed her smile in response. At moments like this, when drawn out of his moodiness by a natural sense of courtesy to guests in the house, he had much of his early charm and she thought: “That is the real Charles whom other people know,” as a further proof of the distance stretching between them.

They left the three men to their talk and went into the drawing-room for coffee just as the Nevilles appeared. Margaret sent the doctor to join his fellows and introduced Dolly to the guests, grateful for her ready help in this emergency. Whatever indiscretions or absurdities Mabel chose to utter

would be safe with Dolly. She had a lively sense of the ridiculous and would probably enjoy the performance but take no serious notice of it.

The evening was mild, and the girls, agreeing that it would be a crime to stay indoors, went in search of garden chairs, carrying them across the grass to a sheltered corner backed by flowering shrubs and trees, and then urging the elders out.

Dolly as she walked beside the visitor praised the garden, and learned that Mabel had always had a wonderful way with flowers and would, had her husband lived, have possessed a really large place, receiving the idea that the poor woman had been deprived of a vast estate.

“But how sad,” she said sympathetically. “This one seems large to me after our little plot, I’m afraid. You live in the country then, Mrs. Lister?”

“Alas, yes. It is all my meager purse allows. I had been hoping we could come to Margaret for a few weeks after the wedding, but they tell me they are going away. Lucky people! Where is it they are going again? I forget what Charles told me.”

Dolly’s heart leapt with relief. She had felt sure that Margaret would not let her down about the Cornish plan, and here was proof that she had talked to Charles already and it was all decided. She made some non-committal reply to Mrs. Lister, her mind full of her Tim and what a complete rest might do for him.

The two young men had come out, and Noel had called her mother away to talk to Arnold who would soon be leaving them. Dolly watched them as they strolled apart, the tall soldier and the older edition of the girl he would marry tomorrow, admiring her friend’s calm.

As she leant an ear to Mabel’s voice and put in a word from time to time, she heard the quieter speech of the two in the distance and wondered how she would behave when it came to one of the twins.

“I should fuss the poor lad to death, of course. I haven’t Margaret’s poise,” she thought, and then as they passed by heard with amusement at her own expense the mother of the bride saying practically: “I had better put it in the cabin trunk perhaps.”

Presently they paused and the young man kissed Margaret, an unexpected salute evidently, for she laughed. At the same moment Tim came out of the house and claimed her, looking round for Noel. Arnold, who had been preparing to say good-by, was persuaded to wait.

“Dear me, but who is the big shaggy man?” exclaimed Mabel critically.

Dolly hastened to give the required information before the others could say anything worse, resisting an impulse to ruffle her feathers like an angry hen at any criticism of her Tim. Shaggy after all perhaps did describe him, for he could not be persuaded to trouble very much about his clothes, which were always put on in a great hurry. He was a big fellow and round-shouldered, too gray for his years and rather worn, with none of the suavity associated with his profession in its higher branches. Dolly might sigh for Harley Street in moments of anxiety, but she knew he would never have been happy there. When the night-bell or telephone rang at some unearthly hour, disturbing his rest and calling him out, she would sit up and storm at him for letting the worthless multitude kill him by their selfishness and stupidity, but when he came home again there was always a light for him and a hot drink, and Dolly looking gay and ridiculously pretty to refute her wrath. She was his best refreshment, and she knew it.

4

Dr. Neville, after a chat with Charles, had left him to look up some books he had promised Arnold, and come out ostensibly in search of Noel, but having warned her he would soon be ready, he drew Margaret aside.

“Have you an evening paper in the house?” he asked her.

“There should be, Tim. Do you want it? ... Yes, I remember seeing it on the end of the chesterfield.”

She turned in at one of the long windows and a moment later came back with the paper in her hand. He took it from her, folded it, looked absently for a pocket into which to stuff it, and finally put it under his arm beneath his dinner-coat.

“What *are* you doing?” she asked him, puzzled.

“Putting it out of harm’s way,” he explained, and then with a reassuring smile, “There’s nothing for you to be alarmed about, Margaret, but I want the young man in there to have a good night’s rest. Did he mention this meeting he had to attend this afternoon—Crede’s affair?”

“Charles?” she exclaimed. “No, we’ve had no chance to talk about anything.”

“Of course. Well, it was a meeting of creditors, and it seems to have upset him a bit because he liked the poor chap who has come a crash.... Good fellow, he says. He had evidently missed the stop press in the late

edition.... Crede has committed suicide. I was reading the item just before I came out.”

“Oh, Tim, but he will be bound to see it in the morning,” exclaimed Margaret anxiously.

“Yes. Still there is no reason why the news should ruin his sleep,” returned the doctor; “particularly with the wedding to get through. He takes no care of his digestion, you know, gets far too little exercise, worries, and then wonders he can’t sleep like a child. I’ve read him the riot act as a precautionary measure, and when all these festivities are over, he had better go on a diet again.”

She nodded.

“Will this affect him financially? ... If he had to go to the meeting the firm must be involved.... You see,” she finished with a sudden desperate frankness, “he never mentions his business affairs at home.”

“Oh, well, that’s natural enough, my dear. He probably sees no reason to worry you with them,” said the doctor.

“That might be true if I were a fool,” she said urgently, “but to any one with a glimmer of sense in these days silence may be a good deal more worrying than speech, Tim.”

“Mm, yes ... why not make that point with Charles?”

The suggestion was offered lightly after a moment’s thought, but she was immediately on her guard, feeling that he had been quick to put his finger on the weak point in her argument. He meant that it takes two people to make such a situation as theirs, and she wondered how much he knew.

“I wish you wouldn’t be so reasonable,” she protested.

“That’s purely a medical veneer,” he assured her with a twinkle. “It’s our bread and butter to appear as founts of wisdom. However, don’t let this business distress you, with all you have on your mind. Charles didn’t speak as though there were personal issues involved, but he’s a sympathetic chap, and Crede had a wife and family dependent upon him. These things make a man think ... all of us.”

“Oh, not you alone. You haven’t a monopoly of anxiety, whatever you may think, you men.” A kind of anger filled her as she thought of the past years and how hampered she had been by Charles’s refusal to give her any hint of where they stood. “But what can we do, if you won’t take the help at your hand?” she cried.

He considered the point thoughtfully. She was overwrought, of course, but he knew better than most people how gallantly she had carried her difficult part in this sorry tangle. Whatever the impulse that had upheld her, her loyalty had been unimpeachable until now, and he knew that she might bitterly regret this self-betrayal in a calmer moment.

On the whole this seemed too poor a view of her, however, and he said gently:

“There is nothing I can do, I suppose?”

Margaret shook her head.

“If we can’t—” she said. “You’re not seriously worried about Charles, are you?”

“Oh, lord, no, not any more than I am about the rest of you. You have been doing far too much, of course, and Noel no doubt is up in the air. I have come armed with sedatives all round. Any other candidates you can suggest? ... How is your pulse, by the way?”

He took her wrist between his fingers and thumb but she laughed and shook him off.

“I have no pulse. What time have I for such vanities with all there is still to be done? Tomorrow night I’ll have all the symptoms in the medical calendar if it will please you. Go and prod Noel, you zealot.”

She called her daughter and the girl went gayly indoors to exhibit her vaccination marks to the doctor, Margaret having first extracted the newspaper from beneath his arm, to hide it away.

“Well, young lady, are you feeling nervous?” he inquired.

“Terrified,” she replied pleasantly. “What of—the poxes, or my young man, do you mean?”

“There doesn’t seem much need to fear the poxes as you call them,” pronounced the doctor, examining his handiwork with satisfaction. “As for the young man, I don’t suppose he can say boo to a goose?”

“Have you tried him, doctor?”

He chuckled gently, amused at her impudence and her calm. They were all minxes in these days, he supposed, at least the lucky ones, and she was that, this child, thanks to some one’s watchfulness, charming to look at and in perfect health ... going to a damnable climate however.

“You’ll do,” he said. “You are perfectly fit, but so you ought to be. You have been well looked after, you know.”

“Coddled,” offered the patient sweetly.

“Don’t interrupt me. You’ve had good food, plenty of fresh air and proper exercise from the day you were born....”

“And the best medical advice.”

“Since you are so kind,” said the doctor bowing. “And none of it any thanks to you. Look after yourself now, Noel, like a sensible girl and take reasonable care of your health. What’s your cocktail handicap?”

“Oh, round about eighteen, I should think.”

He laughed.

“Ah, well. One has to reach the truth by inference, I suppose. Take my advice and don’t lower it too much. By the way, your mother is probably tired out. Get her to take one of these little tablets in some water going to bed, and you can have the other yourself, if you like, to give you pleasant dreams.”

Noel took the little box and peered at it with interest.

“How many of these are a fatal dose?” she wanted to know.

“Possibly a hundred, if you took them all at once,” he replied mildly.

“Goodness! What a rotten confederate you do make, Uncle Tim. I had designs on an aunt and was rather counting on you, but a hundred? The thing’s impossible.” She sighed loudly, gazed at him for a moment and went on: “Look after my family for me, won’t you?”

It was too quick, the transition and the “Uncle Tim,” a term she had long ceased to use, had been unconscious, he was sure. A long experience of his fellow creatures showed him that she was not leaving quite so easily as he had believed, but that any open comprehension of that on his part would only trouble her.

“God bless my soul, do you want me to wrap them up in cotton-wool for you?” he inquired in assumed surprise.

“It would be rather cozy for them ... because you and Mrs. Neville are practically my only stand-by. Relatives are no earthly use.”

“Oh, well,” said the doctor, “I daresay we can be persuaded not to drop them entirely just because the most important member of the family has

departed.”

“How well you understand me,” said the bride in an impassioned voice. “I do think it’s noble of you. Thanks awfully.”

They rejoined the rest of the party, which had been reënforced by Charles with his books, and Stephen Ogilvie, a friend of Owen’s, who was to be an usher next day.

Cecily had gone over to hang possessively on her uncle’s arm, a proceeding observed by Frances with a mixture of scorn and astonishment. The girl seemed to have any number of characters. She no longer resembled the despondent female of Russian tragedy as much as a heroine from the more saccharine school of juvenile fiction, who might burst into “darling daddies” at any moment.

Finding herself beside her mother-in-law for a moment, Frances said in an apologetic undertone:

“I don’t seem to get much chance to blandish this evening.”

Margaret looked down at her with a laugh that for a moment banished the strain and weariness from her face.

“She is rather clinging, isn’t she?”

“I thought it had quite gone out,” said Frances.

“Oh, never in this world. And as you very properly observe, at least you didn’t cling.”

“Clutch,” corrected Frances gayly. “Perhaps I ought to hang on the other side. What do you think?”

“You’d never balance, darling.”

Margaret moved back to her guests, and as Arnold took his leave, the rest of the young people drifted towards the house to dance, if there were any music available. Cecily, still clutching her uncle, had evidently persuaded him to join them, for after some hesitation Margaret saw him move away.

From her chair she watched him go with a troubled heart. Tim’s news was most disquieting and she was in no mood to take it with her usual common-sense. Charles was worried just when she wanted him to be at his best. She had schemed and planned to make everything smooth, had even believed that by her watchfulness she had been able to annul the annoyance of Mabel’s idiocy, and now this blow from outside had defeated her after all.

In the morning he would be thoroughly upset and she, with a hundred calls upon her, would know it and be able to offer him no comfort because he would not even tell her of his distress. It was at such moments as this that she saw the division between them as a wall that she could not scale.

It was easy to assure herself that this man was nothing to him—merely a business acquaintance, but she could not rid herself of a fear that there was something behind it. He would hardly discuss matters intimately affecting the firm even with Tim, and surely he must have been greatly disturbed to have mentioned the meeting at all. Round and round her mind these questions ranged, and all the time she watched the drawing-room windows for a sight of him, as though even that would be a relief.

Suppose this man's insolvency meant a serious loss to the firm? Didn't one business failure often bring a train of others? Suppose Charles too was facing ruin? and all these expenses for the wedding piling up ... the caterers, the cars for tomorrow, the bills for Noel's wedding dress and trousseau, even Cecily's outfit! She had been as careful as it was possible to be, and their joint present, a fitted dressing-case and a check for £100, to which Charles as usual had coldly assented, she had paid for from her private account, leaving his share to be adjusted later.... And after all, if necessary, she could pay for the whole wedding from her own small capital. There was no need to get in such a state.

"If we have nothing else, we still have that," she thought, with relief, not noticing the pronoun she had used, or seeing its implication, her own future plans momentarily forgotten.

The Nevilles, with Mabel between them, were nobly sustaining their part of the entertainment. Margaret, sitting beside Tim, had at least no need to talk and could be thankful for that. The twilight was beginning to fade and the lights were turned on indoors so that the moving figures were now and then discernible. They had presumably found some foreign programs to accompany them and the rhythmic sound muted by distance came out not unpleasantly to the group in the garden.

"We are going home at ten precisely," announced Tim, turning to Margaret, but speaking perhaps for other ears. "I insist upon an early night for the whole family. That is an ultimatum from your medical adviser."

She smiled her thanks and excused herself to go and see that Spence had remembered to supply sandwiches and drinks. Everything was in order and, still with Charles heavily on her mind, she looked towards his study which opened from the dining-room, but saw that it was in darkness. She

approached the door and listened. No sound came to her, and as she never disturbed him there, she hesitated about going in. Then seeing the idiocy of such a feeling, she opened the door. The room was empty.

Margaret looked about it, impatient at all this spent emotion. She must pull herself together, for whatever had happened or was going to happen, that necessity was clear.

It had been a bad day, one of those days when some malignant force seems to upset all calculations and collect every mischance, and she was glad that it was nearly at an end.

Shutting the study door she walked across to the drawing-room, and there saw Charles dancing with Cecily.

It was at least reassuring that he could bring himself to dance, unless with the girl clinging about him, it had been simply the lesser evil. Once he had loved it and danced well, but Cecily was clumsy or perhaps he had lost the art. Margaret, as her eyes followed them, thought she would like to see him dance with Noel, and remembered that this was something she had never seen.

The item came to an end, and Stephen Ogilvie immediately came and bowed dramatically before her.

“Our dance, Mrs. Lister, I think.”

“No, no, Stephen, my dancing days are *long* over,” she said, “besides, I must go and look after my guests.”

The words were quite innocent, but to Charles who overheard them, they seemed charged with a double meaning, and as she made for the window, he seized Cecily and began to dance again, this time with defiance masked by enthusiasm.

He had been drawn into it by Cecily’s importunities and was stiff and quickly tired by the unaccustomed exercise. Seeing his wife watching him, he had felt a fool and her remark was meant to make it perfectly clear, he did not doubt, that she thought so too. Did she imagine he was accustomed to spend his evenings dancing—with Miss Godolphin perhaps, or some other equally inoffensive woman? Well, he, for one, was not going to trouble to undeceive her.

Since the moment when she had walked in upon the scene with Mabel he had had no speech with Margaret. There had been neither occasion nor opportunity, and he had lost the habit of seeking either, but because

unconsciously he wanted her reassurance, he was persuaded that she had avoided him, and had grown more and more self-conscious about the matter as the evening advanced.

Charles in short believed he was being made to feel guilty when he knew that he was innocent, the most exasperating of all sensations.

Chapter XII OWEN

1

The visitors had departed and Mabel and the three girls had gone up to bed. Owen was stacking the garden chairs away and bringing in the cushions, more because this was a habit long ingrained than that any harm would be likely to come to them. If he left them, it was ten to one that his mother would do it, and it had not escaped his attention that she was tired to death. Her face had looked almost gray just now under the light, and he intended to mix her a strong whiskey and soda and carry it up to her room.

Charles, who had walked to the gate with the Nevilles, hearing a stir among the bushes as he returned, called out sharply: "Who's that?"

Owen emerged with his burden.

"I'm clearing up." His tone was curt, for it had come over him that the necessity was due to his father's crotchety temper, and being now independent he felt entitled to use what tone he chose.

"Good," said Charles.

"I don't know about that. It seems dam' silly to me, always did, but I'm not going to have mother doing it."

His father said nothing. He stood watching, as Owen carried the cushions into the house, stung by the implied reproach that he neglected such minor courtesies to the women of his family and that the fact had been duly noted by his son.

It was true, perhaps, though once he had been fastidious about such matters and was so still, in intention at least; but in his present mood, the impulse to go in and see if there were anything he could do was defeated by the impossibility of seeming to have taken a rebuke from Owen, and the awkwardness of approaching his wife.

He lit a cigarette and strolled dispiritedly round the garden.

Owen, not much to his surprise, found Margaret mechanically gathering up ash-trays and stacking the used glasses on the salver. He took them out of her hands and said:

"Off you go now and get your beauty sleep like the other girls. I'll see to this."

“Where is your father?” she asked.

“Oh, out there, peering round to see if any one has dropped cigarette ash on his dam’ grass or something.”

“Don’t be silly, Owen. It’s too dark.”

He laughed.

“That shows you up, Mrs. Lister. You’re pretty far gone when you can’t see a joke at close quarters. Will you go to bed or shall I carry you?”

“In a moment.... Carry them into the kitchen for me instead, there’s a dear. With so much to do in the morning, it will be a help to Spence.”

Margaret wandered off, her ear alert for any sound of Charles, remembered that the presents should be covered with a dust-sheet, found that this had been done, and turning off the light again, saw the glow of a cigarette through one of the windows of the lounge.

She unlatched it and went out.

“Charles, if you feel like turning in, Owen can lock up,” she said, walking across the grass to where he was standing before the marquee.

“No, no, I’ll see to it,” he snapped, for the mention of Owen had been unfortunate and she had taken him by surprise. “I can’t go to bed at this early hour,” he went on more quietly.

Margaret had forgotten the hour in her own fatigue and hardly noticed the objection because as he turned to answer her she had seen the newspaper in his hand.

Interrupted by Stephen Ogilvie’s arrival when she was about to put it away, she had thrust it under the rungs of one of the garden chairs, from which no doubt Owen had dropped it as he carried them indoors. Remembering everything else, she had forgotten the possibility of this, and her heart turned over.

“If that is the evening paper, may I have it, please?” she managed to say.

“Of course.... I don’t know what it is ... found it lying about.”

“I must have dropped it.... Stupid of me.”

“Oh, I see,” said Charles, suddenly mild.

A kind of paralysis seemed to have seized Margaret. Now that she had obtained the paper, she longed to go, but was in a panic that if she hurried he

might be suspicious.

“What do you think of the marquee?” she asked, catching at the first topic that occurred to her.

“Seems all right.” Charles in his turn sought clumsily to enlarge so brief a reply and find a more equable tone, but he was so little successful that when he said: “What are they charging for it?” all her fears became a certainty.

“It’s all right,” she hastened to assure him. “I can pay for it—all the wedding expenses, in fact.”

“*What?*” He was hit in his tenderest spot, and he turned on her furiously. “Can’t I ask a simple question? Of course I’ll pay the expenses, whatever they may be. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Just as you like.” She turned back to the house, overcome by relief, and now too shaken to say another word. What a fool she had been to let her imagination play her such tricks! It was quite evident his distress about the man had been merely personal, and although the news in the morning would be a further upset, it was equally evident that she could do nothing about it. Neither her help nor her sympathy could touch him any more.

She did not see him turn as though to follow her or call her back. He was rather ashamed of his flash of temper, but her composure, which always seemed to his different temperament a proof of her hardness, killed the impulse.

Margaret went up to bed at last, determined to worry no more. As she reached the landing she saw Noel’s door wide open and the girl herself moving about the room. Hearing her mother’s step she came out with a glass in her hand, saying:

“Here’s a present for you, a magic potion from Dr. Tim. I have one too, so let’s have a philippine. Swallow him down and you’ll see your young man in your dreams.”

Margaret swallowed the tablet obediently.

“Go to bed, child, and dream about your own young man.”

“I’m just going, but I had to see you take your dose.... Mother, I’ve thought of something. You haven’t had a really good holiday for ages. Why not save up and come out to India for a trip?”

Noel was glowing with the great idea, and her mother's face took light from hers.

"Yes, why not?" she exclaimed. "I should love that. I shall begin saving the day after tomorrow."

She kissed her daughter gayly, ordered her to bed and went on to her little room, with the anticipation of her freedom once more upon her.

Soon she would get away, shake off all these vexations and anxieties and find peace of mind again. Charles would be free of the irritation of her presence, and be happy with his work and his friends. All at once she was beyond grief, exalted, filled with a lightness of spirit that was more than half an ecstasy of fatigue, though she did not know it. Opening the window wide, she pulled the curtains to behind her and looked out at the beautiful semi-darkness of the June night. There was no moon and not a cloud in the sky, which was of the deep blue of some old Italian painting of the Virgin's robe. The nearer world had receded into the dusk and the distance was lovely—a secret and a strange land pierced by a thousand scattered lights, and stretching away to the glow that hangs above the heart of London and only fades with dawn.

She was forty-five, with many years ahead in which to do a hundred things she had always meant to do. Her life would be far from empty. Her children, launched upon their own adventure, would not be lost to her or look upon her with unfriendly eyes. There was Owen and the girl whom this strange day (not wholly bad then, after all) had brought near to her for the first time. There was the coming baby and the pleasure she would have in helping them to a better home. And in a year or two, when Noel and Arnold had had time to settle down, the trip to India, which would be delightful. But these were only incidents, for it was her own life and not theirs that she must live in future, an occasional guest at their table, and no more.

Refreshed by the cold air on her face, she turned back into the room, undressed, and was just about to put out the light, when she heard footsteps on the stairs and a quick tap on the door.

It was Owen and at sight of the glass in his hands she dropped helplessly to a chair and laughed.

"Come along now," said her son imperatively, "drink it up."

"But I have had one dose already, from Noel," she expostulated, "something the doctor left with her."

“Pooh! This will do you more good than all the doctors when you are as tired as that,” said Owen and at this mention of her fatigue, a thing which no one else had seemed to notice, some cord within her snapped, and she clutched the glass, lifting it to her lips and fighting an agony of tears.

“It’s terribly strong,” she said.

“Well, of course it’s strong,” retorted Owen, sitting on the arm of her chair, his own arm round her. “What did you think it was, barley-water?”

She leant against him, shuddering a little with distaste, the hot spirit burning her as it went down; his reasonable tone, his nearness and her love for him, restoring her.

“Now straight into bed, quick march, while you are all wuzzy,” he commanded firmly.

He left her tucked up, turned off the light and was gone.

2

The upper windows were all in darkness when Charles ceased his perambulations and returned to the house. It was still at last and at this hour it became his own, greeting him pleasantly instead of with threats of embarrassment at every turn. He did not notice that none of the disorder he had expected was here, nor recognize that even this brief time of comfort in it was due to somebody’s unceasing care. Like most men he failed to comprehend that neatness does not return to a house at the end of a day of its own sweet will.

Strolling into the hall he saw a light in the dining-room which had evidently been forgotten, and he went in to bolt the windows and switch it off. There, stretched out at ease in a leather chair, he discovered Owen, deep in the brochure.

“Oh ... you haven’t turned in yet then?” said Charles, taken aback.

“No.” The young man took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at his father reflectively. “With your special knowledge I should think you could have made a pile in currencies,” he remarked. “Did you ever have a bit of a flutter, father?”

“Flutters need a lot of capital,” said Charles dryly. “It’s too risky when you have a wife and family to support.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Pretty expensive business,” nodded Owen. “I am about to acquire a kid myself. Did mother tell you?”

“No?” Charles in his astonishment sat down, but remembered to add, “I’ve hardly seen your mother with all these people....”

“Even two relatives make rather a multitude,” agreed Owen, and suddenly recalling his mother’s odd request earlier in the day, went on: “I’ve taken a couple of days off from my next holidays to see the last of Noel and announce the coming event. It won’t be until the winter of course.... We’ve been saving up. I’ve been rather thinking it might be a good scheme to insure the infant’s life from the word ‘Go’ more or less. What is your view?”

“Hm! You seem to have more foresight than I had,” returned Charles, regarding his son almost with the sensation of a man who sees a dummy figure come to life.

“But things must have been rather different in those days, weren’t they? Not so damned uncertain?”

“So we believed.” The elder man smiled for the first time, a little ruefully. “Whatever else we may have been, we were not particularly good prophets, it seems.” He remembered his own ruminations at dinner on this very subject and went on: “I wonder if you fellows of today are going to give us points in that respect. It would be enlightening once in a while to see with your eyes, though you no doubt would argue that our sight is no longer keen enough.”

“You might get a shock,” suggested his son, grinning.

Charles supposed the evasion was inevitable, and the wish perhaps too old to be anything but vain.

“Ah, well,” he said with mild sarcasm, “in that case we had better acknowledge our senility and be done with it. And since I must resign myself to being a grandfather, you’d better let the insurance of the child be my responsibility. We’ll talk over the details together later.”

For the first time in years he was offering to do something for one of his children, but he did not notice that, and Owen, thanks to his mother, had no suspicion of it.

“I say, that is a handsome offer,” he exclaimed. “Do you mean it, father?”

“Certainly I mean it. I realize that you have made your own way rather sooner than most young men and without any capital from me,” said Charles, hurrying away from the admission a little uneasily. “It’s human vanity, I suppose, but there’s a kind of satisfaction in the continuity of one’s

own line, you know, Owen. Heaven knows what else it can be but vanity, for there's no good pretending it is a very rosy world at present."

"Things do look a bit gloomy, I must say," agreed Owen. "What is your view of the European situation?"

The clock struck half-past twelve before the two men finished their talk and went together to lock up the house.

Chapter XIII WEDDING MORNING

1

The sunlight streaming into the little room awakened Margaret from a heavy sleep. She felt stiff with weariness and it was a moment before she remembered why she was there.

It was Noel's wedding-day.

She sat up hurriedly and looked at her watch, but it was only six o'clock, too early to turn on the bath and perhaps wake some one who would be better asleep—Charles, for instance, who soon enough would be reading news in his morning paper to disturb him. Perhaps she could get the papers and keep them until he came to breakfast. She would ask Spence for them when she brought the morning tea, saying that it would be her only chance to glance at the news. Hers was always the first tray to come up—at 7.15. At seven then, she would turn on the bath.

Lying flat on her back, rather glad of the chance to rest a little longer, she went over in her mind all the things to be done. Noel's immediate luggage to be locked and labeled—Owen could see to that. She would entrust the flowers for the house to Frances, who would do them charmingly; and Noel's bouquet and Cecily's when they came, and the white carnations for the men must be put in a cool place. The champagne too, Owen could take charge of it, open the cases and put it on the ice. A cold lunch at 12.30, not a moment later, and by that time every last thing must be done, so that they could all dress quietly and be ready for the cars at two.

What on earth could be done with Mabel and Cecily all the morning?

Margaret sighed and hoped that at least the former, whose breakfast was to be sent up to her, would not hurry to come down. And afterwards, did the wretched woman mean to stay the night? This was a dreadful possibility, a torture ahead, for how could they eject her, when Cecily was a bridesmaid and must naturally be included in the dinner-dance in town?

The hands of the watch crept round to seven, and Margaret went quietly downstairs and turned on the bath, coming back ten minutes later feeling decidedly revived. She could hear Spence on the floor below and was longing for her tea, but it did not come, so she began to dress. At half-past seven the maid appeared full of reproaches because she was already up.

“And I left you late on purpose, madam, to get a little extra sleep. It’s too bad,” she exclaimed.

“I thought I had better snatch a bath while I could,” her mistress said. “I shan’t have a moment later probably. Can you spare time to bring me up the morning papers, Spence?”

But Charles already had the papers, he had asked for them, so there was nothing to be done.

Margaret sat down to drink her tea.

2

Spence knocked at Noel’s door at a quarter to eight and found her leaning out her favorite window in sky-blue pajamas. There was a little spray of white heather beside her tea-cup on the small round tray.

“A happy wedding-day, miss.”

“Now, now, no happy returns of the day, you know,” exclaimed the bride, then saw the gift. “Oh, Spence, how jolly nice of you.”

“It’s lucky when it’s given, Miss Noel ... from Ada and me.”

“It shall go bang in the center of my bouquet,” declared the bride, “and no drowning me in confetti at the church door, now.”

“We’ll be gone, Miss Noel. As soon as you go to the vestry we are to slip out and be driven home in one of the cars, to see that the temporys have got everything right, and be here to welcome you.”

The “temporys” were Spence’s term for all extra help engaged in the house, and held in proper scorn by her. They left whiting in the crevices of the silver, dust in the corners, and altogether there was no knowing with them, she said. However, having several below in the kitchen already, she had time to linger and give the bride news of the household. Mr. Owen had turned over and complained of being offered tea in the dead of night and gone to sleep again, but Mrs. Owen had promised to get him up, tidy the room and make the beds. Mrs. John Lister had wanted to know whether Spence was sure the water had been boiling, because very few people could make proper tea. Spence had replied with point that her master and mistress were extremely particular about the tea and everything else, and had then been asked what wages she received. “If you were thinking of offering me a place, madam, I am well suited, thank you,” Spence had replied, retreating with dignity.

The bride considered this was a topping answer and one in the eye for auntie. Incidentally it gave her a further confidence in the home she was leaving, for if Spence saw nothing wrong ...?

Spence picked up the large steamer labels from the top of the trunk, marked "F" in a circle.

"I've been going to ask you, miss. I've read all the others and I know it's not your cabin, nor yet your deck. What does it mean?"

"F for funny of course, also frisky and fright and finis. It must be finis," declared the bride. "Finis the frisky Noel Lister. Enter Noel Flinders, the fright."

"That you'll never be if you live to a thousand," declared Spence, reckless in her enthusiasm. "Why, it's F for Flinders. There! Imagine me never thinking of that!"

3

Margaret went out to pick the flowers for the house, rejoicing in the lovely morning, the cool air on her face and the freshness of the trees and grass. After a night's rest she felt no longer the burden of the things to be done, and the nightmares of yesterday had assumed more just proportions. She could even visualize with pleasure the scene this afternoon, with Noel and her friends in their charming frocks moving about the lawns.

They had decided against any formal decorations in the house; there would be nothing but massed bowls of flowers in every available space, and because of Charles's attitude to the garden it was necessary to cut the blooms herself and to do it carefully. His touchiness on this score was proverbial, and to be constrained to be niggardly about flowers when they had quantities, for the sake of peace, had always been a trial to Margaret.

He liked them to die in their beds, as Dolly had said, and this in spite of the fact that it was his nature to be generous—or had been long ago.

Margaret, cutting long sprays of climbing roses, kept well out of sight of his windows to spare him the pain of witnessing the desecration. She could not really believe that he would grudge them to Noel, and in a sense she understood that this peculiarity in him was superimposed and merely an expression of his dissatisfaction with his life at home.

"Perhaps when I am gone he will be himself again," she thought blankly, then pushed the thought away as too dangerous on a day when so many painful reminders would be waiting at every turn to distress her mind.

“I suppose he is hating it for the same reason,” she said to herself. “I’m glad we were married in the winter and it wasn’t any of it in the least like this. I remember it snowed a little as we came out of church and we thought it was a lucky omen. Poor fools—but everything seemed lucky to us then.... It’s a state of mind, after all ... yet we were lucky for a long time—we had twelve or thirteen years ... and now it seems unbelievable.... And he won’t even use my name.... But this won’t do. If I begin thinking back at this hour of the morning, I shall never get through the day.”

Margaret carried her laden basket into the house and had filled another with mixed flowers from the herbaceous border beyond the marquee, and emptied that when she heard Charles come downstairs and go into the dining-room. From Spence she learned that he had asked for breakfast at 8.30 as usual as he would be going to town, and she wondered whether this was because of the news about his friend, or merely that he did not want to stay at home, even on Noel’s account.

With Mabel in the house it was perhaps as well however, and indeed that might be the reason in itself, and quite a good one, she had to admit.

She had told the young people breakfast would be at nine o’clock, and was therefore considerably astonished to find Cecily already down and hovering round her uncle. The girl was a limpet, and when told that she was too early by half an hour, merely said:

“It doesn’t matter. I thought I’d come down in case there was no one to pour out coffee for poor Uncle Charles.”

Her aunt made no reply to this hardly tactful suggestion, beyond taking her seat before the urn and pouring the coffee herself, but Charles expostulated:

“I’m not so helpless that I can’t look after myself,” which might have been meant for either of them.

It did not succeed in dislodging the limpet who sat and watched him eat.

Short of telling her to go, there was nothing to be done and, for all Margaret knew to the contrary, Charles had invited her to sit with him, a privilege which might have been accorded to Noel if to any one this morning. Did he care nothing whatever for his own children, perhaps just because they were also hers? Bitterly she knew that this was something she could never forgive.

“*Must* you go to the office, Charles?” she asked him.

“Er, yes, it’s imperative,” returned Charles, “for an hour or so.”

“Poor Uncle Charles!”

“It’s poor Noel, I think,” exclaimed Margaret, unable to contain her impatience with the little toady.

“Some important business has cropped up.”

Charles, looking wretched and eating very little breakfast, had evidently read his newspaper, she thought, but even that now increased her indignation; for he could care for this outsider, just as he could dance with Cecily, though he had never yet danced with Noel.

When he got up to go, she said to him coldly:

“Please remember that lunch is to be at 12.30 sharp, and be here in good time.”

“As soon as I possibly can,” he replied uneasily. “But anyway don’t wait lunch for me.”

And what did that mean? Did he suppose the meal could be kept on the table indefinitely with all these people coming to the house?

Cecily had leapt up to take him to the gate, and Margaret wished she might never come back. How, in her cloying presence, had it been possible to say anything to Charles?

The fact that his departure was taken as a matter of course by the rest of the family, including Noel, restored her spirits and her temper presently, for they were all in excellent form. A further addition to her comfort arrived before the meal was over in the person of one of the twins, bearing a note from her mother.

“DEAR MARGARET:

“It has occurred to me that if your sister-in-law means to stay the night with you (some people have a genius for doing the wrong thing at the right moment), we might persuade her to come back with us to dine. I can get a fourth, rather deaf but at least male, so that if Tim should be called out, there would still be some one for her to talk to. You will be so tired at the end of the day after all the excitement and entertaining, and shouldn’t have to bear the strain of visitors.

“I didn’t telephone in case she might be within earshot and suspect a Plot! Just say yes or no to the twin and don’t trouble to

write.

“In haste,
“DOLLY.”

Margaret felt that one of her worst problems was solved by this offer from the Nevilles, and accepted it gratefully without hesitation. As a hundred times before, they had come to her aid with an understanding that was rare. She recalled Tim’s words last night. “There is nothing I can do, I suppose?” He had not tried to press the point, as the well-meaning so often do, but had simply conspired with Dolly to give her what practical help they could. There came to her mind the Cornwall holiday, the measure of her indebtedness to them and the certainty that she could not let them down. Somehow Charles must be induced to go. Though she had lost any power to reach him, surely his affection for Tim would be enough? His concern for his friend’s bankruptcy seemed a proof that it would, and now she remembered the distress he must have been in this morning, with compunction for her own anger.

4

The bustle of preparations began and the house awoke to hurrying footsteps, laughter and noise. The telephone rang for Noel and a long and exhaustive conversation ensued which, as far as the passers-by could discover, had little bearing on a wedding, though it was of a highly dramatic nature. They learned that the diamonds were still intact, that the police must be put off the scent and that the gang were prowling but could learn nothing of importance, a hint which might have suggested to them that it would be tactful to move out of earshot.

The context was at least highly satisfactory to Noel, who heard a serial installment, prophetic perhaps, but full of matter and with a curtain in the best tradition.

Vans drove up, telegraph boys came and went, a large box of fresh rose-petals arrived by post from a source unknown. The wedding cake was unpacked before an excited audience, and a cable from Arnold’s mess was followed by a special delivery by a Bond Street florist of quantities of cut flowers, addressed to Margaret and accompanied by the best man’s card inscribed: “May I be half as lucky as A. F.” The house was hard put to it to provide enough bowls and jars to hold this unexpected treasure, and the reception rooms and hall were very quickly transformed by masses of roses, carnations, delphiniums, lilies of the valley and early larkspurs.

Frances, in her element over this task, had pressed Cecily into the service, using her as errand girl since she proved one of those people before whose touch flowers wilt or huddle inevitably.

Felicity turned up with an effusive letter of apology from her mother, who had been called away from town by a sick friend. The fiction was received without grief, particularly as Felicity announced that the car and chauffeur were hers for the rest of the day, and at Mrs. Lister's disposal. From her triumphant expression it was clear to Noel that she had fought her mother on her own ground and won this very useful concession.

Private inquiries by Noel as to her evening's excursion with Martin elicited the information that it had been "all right," and was to be followed by a long day up the river tomorrow. "To drown our sorrows and all that."

"Ah, well, see you later, I expect," said Noel with significance.

Miss Osborne admitted cheerfully that you never know and borrowed a sports-coat for the occasion from her friend's ex-wardrobe.

The twins dropped in to say that the church looked simply topping because they had been to see, lilies on the altar and carnations and sweet-peas along the chancel rails.

Mabel, seeing the Osbornes' car, came rustling downstairs and asked who owned it, visibly impressed. The twins suggested that if Felicity had no present use for the car, it should take Mrs. John Lister and Cecily for a drive to Ken Wood, returning them to the house by mid-day. Dolly perhaps had inspired them to engage the visitors' attention, and this suggestion absolved them neatly, permitting them to remain on the scene of the fray as they would have put it.

Mabel was charmed to drive in so smart a car, and Cecily languidly agreed to go, being tired of running about and getting no attention. The twins then turned their energies to the confetti, old slippers and other appropriate missiles, gathered them in a secret place and went round informing those concerned. Frances fixed the little sprig of white heather in the middle of the bridal bouquet of lilies of the valley and carnations, and Noel, followed by Felicity and the twins, carried it in procession round the kitchen, and were there entertained (refreshments by Ada and speeches by Spence and the oldest tempory).

Owen meanwhile did useful work directing the arrangement of chairs and small tables on the lawn, and the erection of the buffet in the marquee, while his mother attended to the caterers. Finally he collected Noel, said he

was about to label and close her luggage, and carried her off to witness the deed, repelling all attempts on the part of her bridesmaids to attend her.

“They want to fill up your bags with their damned confetti. I know ’em,” he said to her.

“Beasts,” said the bride without malice, but because some expression of gratitude for the warning seemed called for.

She curled herself on the bed to watch him, knowing that this was perhaps the last time they would be alone together, and wishing for the protection of her friends, confetti or no confetti, yet at the same time glad that he had shut them out.

“Now then, look alive there,” he commanded. “If there is anything you have forgotten to put in, produce it or forever hold your peace, as the rector will remark to the populace this afternoon.”

Noel surveyed the room.

“There are millions of things I’d like to.... It was easy for you because you could just nip home any time and get ’em.”

“House on fire?”

“And besides,” she went on, ignoring the jibe, “men are different.”

“Absolutely,” said Owen with enthusiasm. “Calm and lofty in hours of peril, such as when dragged to the altar and looking a dam’ fool, full of noble aspirations about keeping confetti out of their sisters’ ears; nature’s greatest triumph, in fact.”

“Especially about the face,” she retorted sarcastically.

“Ah, that is where nature is so subtle. She attended to the inner man, but only the outer woman. I’ll admit poor Flinders isn’t much to look at, but he has a heart of gold, if a cheek of brass.... Here, take care what you’re doing, Noel, and don’t ruin the label.... They’ve done you rather proud in the luggage line, I must say.”

“Everything else too,” said Noel soberly. “I’m one up on you there.”

“I know. Beastly unfair. I’d have looked a dream in white satin.... Still, life has its compensations,” remarked Owen. “The head of the house of Lister has offered to take out and maintain an insurance policy for his first grandchild. What do you think of that for a sensation?”

“Father?” exclaimed Noel. “Really, Owen? But what a rum present.”

“Yes, that’s just like a girl. Rum indeed, it’s a fairly useful offer of the old boy, I can tell you. I was thunderstruck. We had quite a chat last night.”

“And he danced with me, actually. He’s getting almost human.”

“Well, there you are! What did I tell you? Nothing to worry about.”

Noel lay back on the bed at her ease and smiled a secret smile. She knew that she had been brought here, and the world shut out, to learn his news before any one (except Frances whom you couldn’t count, because that was only fair). She had heard of his gadget too when it was only a great conception in his mind, and of the girl he meant to marry, whatever anybody said; and in spite of his outward condescension she had a general idea that these confidences and many earlier ones had been the result of the very thing he said there was nothing to worry about.

“Clever, aren’t you?” she remarked, but more in answer to her own thoughts than to anything he had said, for it had come over her all at once that in these other matters things had turned out exactly as he had predicted. He had made his gadget and married the girl.

One could depend upon him.

Chapter XIV THE LEATHER CASE

1

Frances, when she had finished her decorating, cleared up the stalks and leaves from the enameled table where she had been working and went to see her handiwork, moving a jar here and there, or touching a flower with a careful but decisive hand. With the dividing door folded back, the long room with its French windows on the garden and a bow at either end, looked charming, she thought, and far better now than any scene in a play. You could see its proportions and its grace, which was partly natural to it and partly due to the things it contained, shapely chairs, plain carpet, curtains and paper, dark polished wood. There was nothing modern in it and nothing very old, but it pleased the eye, and to belong to it even remotely seemed to Frances at this moment the strangest thing.

Margaret, coming in from the garden, exclaimed at her arrangement of the flowers.

"They do make a difference, Frances, and you have worked wonders," she said.

"It's such a lovely room."

"Is it? Very shabby though where the sun has faded the carpet, and people have kicked the chairs." Margaret looked at the room again, surprised at this praise of something too long familiar, but thinking, for it was so much safer to do that, of the girl at her side, who brought to it her fresher glance. Because she had not had very much in the way of possessions, this perhaps seemed better to her than it really was, yet her appreciation, whether aesthetically right or wrong, was without envy. She did not, like Cecily, hate because she could not possess.

Recalled to the matter of Charles by this train of thought, she said:

"Well, everything has gone beautifully this morning, and now I believe my only problem is your father-in-law and whether he will bring himself home in time for such an early lunch. Men never seem to realize that meals are not dropped from heaven and cleared away by invisible hands."

"I suppose it wouldn't be any good to telephone him?" suggested Frances, doubtfully.

"I wonder?" Margaret looked at the girl almost as though she thought there might be some particular virtue in advice from such a source. The idea of anything so outside her usual habit, had not occurred to her, but wasn't it, because unusual, the best solution? she thought. Though she regretted her sharpness at a moment when he was already depressed it was not because she believed it would weigh upon his spirits, but because it would sour his temper and make him obstinate. If she telephoned he might, from sheer astonishment, do what she asked, and her anxiety was not so much the matter of the clearing away of a meal as that he should have time to eat his lunch and dress quietly and not be in a state of nerves, on Noel's account.

"It is worth trying at least," she said. "Go and see the arrangements outside, Frances, and then, my dear, sit down. You have worked so hard."

Felicity and the twins were stretched at their ease on the grass, and Frances joined them. Margaret went to the telephone.

The clerk who answered her call said that Mr. Lister was out, and asked if she would care to speak to his secretary. After a moment's hesitation she said yes.

This might indeed be a better plan, for Miss Godolphin could not have been seven years in such a post without having learned how to manage him tactfully when occasion required, and being a woman she would understand the present necessity.

Miss Godolphin was delighted to be of use in the matter. She explained that Mr. Lister had gone out for a few moments only, and she quite agreed that he ought to get home in good time. She would do her utmost to get him away not later than twelve-fifteen in a taxi. In fact, confessed the secretary, she was hoping both partners would leave the office early, so that she could slip out and see the wedding from the back of the church, if Mrs. Lister would not think that very dreadful of her.

"But of course, and come back to the house afterwards," exclaimed Margaret. "It was very stupid of me not to think you might care to do that."

Miss Godolphin begged Mrs. Lister not to think she had meant that as a hint for a moment. She would be afraid of intruding, and besides she wouldn't be nearly smart enough.

Margaret laughed away these objections, promised to look out for her and hung up the receiver, rather amused. She had given the invitation on a natural impulse of kindness but the situation had its funny and perhaps its

useful side. It would be a plain answer to Mabel's idiotic insinuations, and would enlist Miss Godolphin's services in urging Charles to come home.

2

Charles of course had been by no means as insensible to his wife's anger at breakfast as she supposed, though at the moment he had been too much oppressed by Crede's tragedy to do more than escape from it as quickly as possible. If he had intended to go to the office as usual, simply because he had not dreamed that anything else would be expected of him, the necessity of hearing more of Crede's affairs and seeing if there was anything he could do to ease the immediate situation for his friend's family had further constrained him.

The news on the whole proved more reassuring than he had expected. Crede's suicide seemed to have been that of a man momentarily demented by strain and anxiety. His wife had some means and was not without friends to help her. For the moment there was nothing that Charles could do.

Free at last to consider his own affairs, he remembered Margaret's indignant thrust about poor Noel with a discomfort not entirely due to her loss of temper. That indeed to Charles had been almost a relief, for it was the irony of the dissension between them that a little less self-control on her part might have ended it long ago. Much as he had loved his wife he had never understood that this quality was something ingrained in her nature and not merely due to the deep content of their union. Margaret intensely disliked scenes; to her a loss of temper was a loss of self-respect; to Charles a letting-off of steam. Such early quarrels as he had provoked had been quickly ended by his contrition and her desire to save his face. There was no such easy outlet for them when the crash came. He had dealt her a blow which left her too stunned for any response to his first awkward protestations, and Charles, already suffering under the knowledge that he had been a fool, was made to feel a knave as well, which was more than his temperament could sustain. If her incomprehension was as great as his, she had at least, being a woman whose faith in him had been complete, suffered the greater hurt, and her temporary revulsion from him should have been understandable; but Charles retired on his dignity with the sensation of a man who has built upon sand. He was convinced that she had never loved him, or at least loved him no more; and her quiet, which alone made possible the appearance of harmony in their relations, seemed to him merely the evidence of a hardness against which he might beat his head in vain. Through the years while their estrangement became to him mechanical this view had never changed.

Because she bore his growing irritability with calm for the sake of peace, removing as far as she possibly could the outward occasion for it, he saw contempt and a cold indifference in her equability, never guessing how hardly sometimes it had been won.

Her outburst this morning therefore, like that on the telephone yesterday, had a heartening effect upon Charles, already moved by several accidental causes to remember happier times. In this mood the mention of Noel, which ordinarily would have seemed to him merely part of his wife's unfair preoccupation with the children, had pricked him, though for a different reason.

Almost without his knowledge the night before he had been drawn into touch with his daughter as with his son, and rather wistfully enjoyed the experience. She had baited him at dinner and later on had danced with him, calmly offering herself when the music changed and Owen claimed Cecily, whose insistence had dragged him into the unaccustomed scene. She was a far better dancer than his brother's daughter and had encouraged his own somewhat faltering efforts with the assertion that he had been hiding all his lights under bushels and ought to be ashamed of himself—in a manner so little hostile, however, that Charles had taken the reproof with a bow. The suggestion that Noel would feel his absence unkind on her last morning at home therefore, though it surprised him, was not so unbelievable as once he would have found it. And the remembrance of what he had promised to do for his son made some corresponding gesture to her seem perhaps not only fair but just, a gift and an apology in one.

He remembered too his wife's amazing declaration out on the lawn that she would pay the expenses of the wedding. He had been quite unable to discover what had prompted such a speech, for had he ever yet refused to pay anything she asked for the children, hadn't he kept his bargain to the letter? Being peculiarly sensitive on this point, he was convinced that some reproach had been intended by Margaret, perhaps that he had done nothing in person to mark the occasion of Noel's marriage. If so, the gift would be an answer to that. Certainly he had had no wish to hurt the child.

Charles did not realize that what had actually made him unbend to his children was less anything they had said or done than the complete certainty which he had experienced in his contact with them last night, that they knew nothing of his quarrel with their mother, a thing he had too often suspected. For the first time he saw their aloofness in its true light, as the inevitable result of circumstances over which they had no control, and which he might have overcome.

At such moments as he was free throughout the morning he had been considering his gift for Noel, and when at length he went out for “a few moments” it was with this in view. He knew so little what his daughter already possessed that the choice was fraught with doubt and hesitation, and it was nearly an hour later when he returned to the office with the small leather case in his pocket.

Miss Godolphin, distracted by her own excitement and his delay, showed him the clock. It was already twenty minutes to one, she pointed out, and she had promised Mrs. Lister faithfully that he would reach home at 12.30 and not a moment later.

He looked so astounded that she explained the telephone call and the necessity of getting the meal out of the way, and Charles pulled himself together, glanced unnecessarily at his watch, and asked her if she didn’t think he had better then get something in town, in that case?

“No, I shouldn’t do that,” said Miss Godolphin wisely. “You will never persuade Mrs. Lister you have had a proper lunch, and she doesn’t want you to be tired out. I’ll send for a taxi at once, and then I’ll ring up and ask if she will have something left for you on a tray. I’ll explain that you have only this moment got back from an appointment. You leave it to me.”

Charles allowed himself to be persuaded, and while he waited for the taxi, received a further shock.

Miss Godolphin was going to the wedding, that was at least if Mr. Lister thought it had not been just Mrs. Lister’s kindness and she would be in the way.

Seeing that she was obviously delighted at the prospect, he gave her what reassurance he could and hoped for the best. Margaret’s tactics were beyond him and he was so thunderstruck that she had even telephoned Miss Godolphin, that he was half-way to Hampstead before at least one fact became clear to his mind.

She had not believed Mabel’s fool story, or this was the last thing in the world she would have done.

Though the clash with his sister-in-law had been driven from his mind by poor Crede’s affair this morning, the sight of Miss Godolphin when he reached the office had recalled it, making him uncomfortable in her presence in spite of himself. That Mabel’s insinuations were beneath contempt was not in question, but what did his wife think?

Now he had his answer. This might be more a tribute to her common-sense than a sign of any faith in him, but it was nevertheless a relief, and the little leather case in his pocket was another. Charles began to face the afternoon before him with a degree more of comfort than he had yet believed possible.

4

As his taxi drew up Frances came running downstairs. She had undertaken to see that he ate his luncheon, and hurried away from her own to change and be ready to do it or anything else that might be required of her. The mantle of second daughter of the house had fallen upon her unawares, but she was enjoying herself too much to notice that.

She had put on a long frock of pale primrose printed chiffon, the small cape rather high at the neck falling softly over her bare arms, and the sight of her smiling a welcome out of her bright dark eyes against the background of the flower-decked hall, was very pleasant to Charles.

“Why, Frances, you make me believe there really is a wedding. Am I very late?” he asked.

“No, it’s all right, but every one has gone to dress, so I’ve come to see that you eat your lunch. No scamping now. I am ordered to be very strict with you.”

She took his hat away, refused to let him wash his hands and ushered him into the dining-room where one end of the table had been set for him, explaining that Spence was making herself smart for the ceremony.

“Grapefruit, cold beef and salad, a savory in the oven, beer in the freezer and you have only to say the word (or whiskey on the sideboard, would you rather?). *And* strawberries and cream, stolen from the wedding supply in case, Mrs. Lister said, being the poor harassed host, you mightn’t get any. We are spoiling you,” announced Frances.

“Yes, I think you are,” agreed the head of the house with unusual meekness, and having chosen beer, he watched her go off to fetch it, rather touched by these arrangements for his comfort. It had been kind of Margaret to remember his fondness for strawberries, much indeed that she could think of him at all when her mind must be full of the coming separation from Noel. Pondering this for the first time he wondered how she felt about it. Triumph was popularly supposed to be the predominating emotion of the mother of a bride, he fancied, or was that idea like so many others outdated? Margaret at least was no matchmaking mother; considering all things, it

would be surprising if she were, he supposed bitterly. Not that her own experience would deter some women from any folly; but she had been, he had once thought, above all follies, a woman free from the petty weaknesses of her sex, lovely and intelligent and steadfast as the dawn.

Charles, in dangerous waters, saw her again as a stranger and his sister's guest long ago, bound to despise him of course therefore, he had imagined, but writhing under his mother's fond praises and the cold contempt of his brother and sister, he had met her glance, clear, questioning and sympathetic. She had seen what no one else had seen, how bitter his position was between them all and how little of his making.

Charles, caught in a pain he believed he had outgrown, was gazing somberly at his untasted lunch when Frances returned with the beer to attack him reproachfully.

"Charles, you haven't even begun your grapefruit. This is scandalous."

"I was dreaming, I'm afraid," he admitted. "Sorry."

The girl filled his glass and then went to the sideboard to carve his next course, making no reply to his excuse beyond a smile, but her silence was companionable, he thought, though this was a side of her he had never seen before. His son's wife, that was a strange thing, hardly believable somehow. His new knowledge of Owen brought her close, though he had always liked her because in a household where he had felt an outcast, she had laughed and joked with him.

"You are very quiet this morning," he said as she brought his plate.

"Concentration," she explained, "because I was carving. Owen has been giving me lessons in it. Now I'll be as riotous as you like."

"You're fond of the fellow, I suppose."

"What, him?" she exclaimed in assumed surprise.

"Exactly. Him."

"You do make me laugh. Marry a man I like? The thing's preposterous."

"Oh, I see your point. You'd use a stronger word, is that it?"

"Never you mind what I'd use. It's copyright anyway."

"I suppose it is." Charles considered her thoughtfully, recalling Owen's news, but too inexpert to know whether he should speak of it to her or otherwise. Margaret had said not a word to him on the subject and,

forgetting that she had had very little opportunity, he supposed that this was due to her belief that he felt no concern for his children. On an impulse he took the leather case from his pocket and put it on the table beside Frances, saying:

“Tell me if you think Noel will be pleased with that.”

The girl lifted out the small wrist-watch set with diamonds, and her exclamation of delight was abundantly reassuring.

“Oh, but she will simply love it. How perfect.... You know this really is going to be a marvelous wedding.”

“Is it?” he asked, and wondered if she were thinking perhaps of her own, early one morning in a strange church, with only Margaret and Noel and himself for congregation ... three not too friendly strangers, they must have seemed to her. He had rather despised his son’s choice at first, but Owen had gone his own way, and he was happy and justified.

Frances was eagerly explaining all the points of the wedding, the lovely day, the telegrams coming in shoals, the flower-filled house and the garden as a background for Noel, so fair and tall in her white satin frock. There was no trace of envy in her enthusiasm, which was quite impersonal, he thought, and he began to see it in anticipation with her eyes.

“And now this,” she finished, jumping up. “Shall I send her down to you for a minute?”

“Oh, no,” said Charles in alarm. He was suddenly self-conscious about the gift, and she seemed to understand that, for she sat down again, remarking:

“After all, you’ll have her to yourself when we have all gone on to the church, won’t you?”

“By Jove, yes, I suppose I shall,” remembered Charles.

This was an excellent suggestion and he was grateful for it, a last minute surprise for his daughter before they left for the church, when he would have to hear no embarrassing comments on it from other people.

“You know it will go so well with Arnold’s present too,” exclaimed Frances, “the diamond earrings and clip.”

She was excited about it, and the bride’s father, at this reminder, looked hardly less so.

They gazed at each other.

“So it will,” said Charles.

He found he was enjoying his lunch.

5

Felicity and the twins had announced their firm intention of seeing the bride into her wedding-dress, a proceeding made possible by the use of the Osbornes' car, which could pick up the twins and take them on later to the church with Felicity. Margaret as usual had made no protest though she knew they would undoubtedly be rather in the way, and Noel had sworn to go no further than her petticoat without their supervision.

Frances coming upstairs when her duties to Charles were disposed of, met the bride wandering about in her satin slip as though in search of occupation.

“I say, you do look nice. Come along in and let me look at you,” she said.

Frances followed her into the roomy bedroom and turned herself round for a fuller inspection.

“Is it really all right? I've been thinking of it for months,” she confessed. “You take a lot of living up to, you know.”

Noel laughed in obvious astonishment and then sobered.

“Goodness! that sounds as though you thought we had been sniffy to you,” she exclaimed.

“If you had I shouldn't have cared what I wore.”

“Oh, cheers! Quite right too! If you merely mean that I am a spoilt cat, all is well,” returned Noel, grinning.

“No, I meant it's all so new and thrilling to me. I married on ninepence, and it is such a lark to have all the fun of your wedding and none of the responsibility.... I won't even miss you like the rest of them.”

“Well, thanks awfully and all that,” gurgled the bride, collapsing on the bed in a gale of laughter at this frank and solemn declaration. “You are priceless, you know.... Frances, look here, this is your room from now on. I give it to you lock, stock and barrel, last will and testament.”

She waved a lavish hand, not seeing the other girl's startled face. In the excitement of the morning Frances had forgotten the winter at Hampstead

which she had desired and then relinquished; and now she saw the whole question in the air again because her mother-in-law's wishes were not clear.

But did it matter after all? A new confidence had entered into her, as though, without knowing it, she had become part of the house and no longer an alien here. Her approaches to all the family had changed in a day, even to Charles, whom not many moments ago she had seen awkward and rather shy about his present to Noel. She had thought of them all as aloof and fortunate, but now even their faces were changed, and Charles looked to her more like a worn and worried boy than the morose head of the house she had believed him. Noel she would always remember like this, so pretty in her satin slip, offering to give her the room as though it were a penny bun, or saying in dismay: "Goodness, that sounds as though you thought we had been sniffy to you." Of course they never really had been. Her mother-in-law, above all, was different, unhappy perhaps if what Cecily had said were true, but able somehow in spite of it to do a hundred things and yet remember Charles's comfort, and Noel's fun on her last days at home and, strangest of all, the troubled embarrassment of a mere outsider who had married her son.

Frances, knowing nothing of the various currents which had awakened Margaret to her own character, yet sensed that she had found a friend where most she had desired to find one. And whether she spent the winter here or at the little flat now mattered not at all.

6

Margaret, hearing Charles go into his bedroom, came down from the floor above and knocked at his door. There were various arrangements about which she had had no opportunity to speak to him last night or this morning thanks to the presence of Mabel and Cecily and to any earlier discussions he had offered a kind of passive resistance, so that she had given them up in despair. But now they could be delayed no longer, and she hoped against hope that he would be reasonable for once and help her through the afternoon.

She tapped lightly and turned the handle of his door.

Charles was standing with his coat in his hand, from which he had just taken the small leather case, but seeing his wife, he thrust this hastily back again into the pocket.

Margaret saw the gesture but she made no comment though some of the tone went out of her voice as she said:

“I hope Frances persuaded you to eat some lunch.”

“Oh—er, yes, thanks,” said Charles.

“I’ve had no chance to tell you about the cars and so on. Frances and I will go on first with Owen, who must be there in good time, and Mabel can follow with Cecily at a quarter past two when the other bridesmaids go. They have the Osbornes’ car and the girls don’t want to have to wait about too long. Will you see that they all get off? And then I suppose if you and Noel leave yourselves about seven minutes ...?”

“Yes ... ought to be time enough. Look here, am I likely to have to speak or any rot like that?” asked Charles.

The word was unfortunate in the circumstances, as any speech from him would be in response to the toast of the bride’s parents. Margaret said dryly:

“Let us hope not if you feel like that about it. If there are any speeches they will be informal. As soon as the ceremony is over you and I should slip away at once and get home, I think. Owen and Stephen will see to the guests, and Mabel must be made to understand that she is to wait. If she comes with us it will affront Peggy.”

“Peggy be damned ... and Mabel too, as far as that goes,” exclaimed Charles impatiently.

“Very likely, but we can hardly ignore the fact that Noel and Arnold met in Peggy’s house.”

“Hm! It’s the first and only good—” Charles stopped dead, seeing too late the suggestion in what he had been about to say, and his wife, with one look at him, turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Charles might curse his clumsiness and acknowledge that debt to Peggy in his secret heart now the damage was done, but to Margaret, though she knew the thrust to have been unintentional, it seemed inevitably the real expression of his dissatisfaction with their marriage.

It was illogical to be hurt about a thing which she had known for so long, and she thrust it away from her, telling herself that she had escaped merely because to have answered him or to have given him time to try to correct his blunder would have led them into waters which, for today at least, they must avoid. Besides she had finished all it had been necessary to say.

“I believe he actually hates me,” she said to herself. “We can’t even talk over common necessities.... Perhaps Frances had better come back with us in the car.”

She took up the spray of roses which her daughter-in-law had made for her and fastened it in the front of her navy satin gown, put on her rings and then looked at herself in the glass. The dress was graceful and lustrous and she could find no fault with it, but the face above it strained and pale, disturbed her and she touched her cheeks hastily with rouge, relaxing her expression by sheer force of her will to one more becoming to the occasion.

“It’s only that I have had so much to do,” she thought, but even that reflection led back to Charles who had done nothing to help her at all, so she dropped it quickly and went down to her daughter’s room, feeling that solitude was dangerous. As she did so she heard with relief the noisy bridesmaids trooping up the stairs.

Chapter XV FATHER AND DAUGHTER

1

Mabel, that modest woman, was proposing to drive to the church with the bride's mother and sit in the front pew. These things she considered her right as the widow of Charles's elder brother who, had he lived, as she was fond of saying, would have been the head of the family. She believed such empty phrases meant something, like the people who say: "We So-and-Sos belong to a very old clan," as though they had a priority in evolution.

Mabel had invaded her daughter's room and harried her over her dressing. Cecily must make haste and go and assist her cousin; she was also to take care that she stood directly behind the bride and in a position to take off her glove at the right moment; she must assert herself and not be pushed aside; as a Lister it was her right to be the chief bridesmaid. The fact that this was Felicity's privilege meant nothing to Mabel, who said:

"Who are these Osbornes, I should like to know?" and seemed to think that settled it.

Cecily had eventually got rid of her by pointing out that they would both be late if she didn't go away and leave her to dress in peace.

Mabel some time later saw from her window the cars with their white ribbons drive up to the house, and hastily seizing her gloves she sailed majestically downstairs, determined not to be caught napping.

The hall was empty, but as she reached the front door she was horrified to see the first car already disappearing out the gate.

"Stop them ... stop them ... who is in that car?" she exclaimed, losing her head.

"I believe it is the servants, madam," returned the chauffeur of the second car, who had pulled up.

"The servants gone?" cried Mabel excitedly and believing the worst. "What's the meaning of it ... why weren't they stopped?"

"What on earth is the matter, Mabel?" exclaimed Charles, appearing round the side of the house at sound of the commotion.

"The servants ... gone ... quick!" gasped his sister-in-law.

"I am sorry if there has been some mistake, sir," interposed the chauffeur, touching his cap, "but we understood the servants were to be taken to the church and the car come back."

"Well, that is in order, if those were your instructions from Mrs. Lister," agreed Charles, while Mabel put her hand on her tight bosom and gasped,

"Church? You didn't say church ... you said they'd gone...."

Charles took her by the arm and half led, half pushed her into the house, controlling his temper with an effort.

"If you'll just sit down in the drawing-room until 2.15 when it is time for you to start, it would be better for everybody," he informed her.

"I've had quite a shock," said Mabel. "The man distinctly said the servants had gone and naturally I supposed he meant gone and taken all the presents with them, for all I could tell, for I must say you leave them unguarded in the most reckless manner, Charles."

"Very likely. My servants happen to be entirely trustworthy or they would not be here," returned the master of the house.

"But sending them to the church by car! I'm sure I never heard of such a thing. Most extraordinary! I won't sit down, thank you. I shall get into the car and wait for Margaret. So much cooler," said Mabel cunningly, endeavoring to turn back.

"No ... please." Charles guided her firmly into the drawing-room. "The arrangements are all made and we can't have them upset at the last moment. My wife will go on ahead. She has things to see to. You will leave with Cecily and the other bridesmaids in two cars when I tell you it is time to go."

"Don't be silly, Charles, I shall drive to the church with Margaret. I never heard of such a thing. Am I to be treated like any Dick, Tom or Harry? Have I no rights? If your poor brother was alive he would see to it, I can tell you that."

Charles smiled, but his expression was deceptive, the mention of his brother being the last thing to improve his temper.

"You know, if you'd prefer to go home and miss the wedding I can easily send for a taxi," he said. "Perhaps you are not feeling very fit."

"I am perfectly fit," retorted the lady furiously. "I don't know what you mean."

“Oh, yes, you do, Mabel. You are a guest in my house and you have already made a scene, questioning men in my employ about matters which are no concern of yours. If I had forty brothers this would still be my house and my daughter’s wedding, and if you mean to be present you must please allow me to convey you to the church when I choose and to take the seat which the ushers show you. Now is that quite clear?”

Apparently it was. Mabel, perhaps for the first time since the demise of poor John, was silenced.

2

The effect of this minor battle upon Charles was curious. He had struck a blow for the peace of the home, although he most certainly would not have put it like that, and emerged victorious, and perhaps victory for a change was good for him. He had come downstairs deeply disturbed by the remembrance of his unfortunate speech about his sister Peggy, a conviction that he had hurt his wife, and the knowledge that while it had been indefensible and the last thing he desired to do, he would find it very difficult to make that plain. It had begun to dawn upon him that, all his intentions of the past twenty-four hours notwithstanding, he had lost touch with her so completely that at every encounter between them, he had by his own clumsiness made matters worse, so that to attempt any justification seemed merely a counsel of despair.

Now, however, having settled Mabel’s pretensions, a matter which had been obviously a weight on his wife’s mind, his self-confidence, a moment before at a low ebb, was miraculously restored; he even succeeded, when Margaret, Owen and Frances came down, in seeing them into the car and giving his assurances that he would send the remainder of the party off and leave with Noel at the appointed time.

“There’s nothing else you want me to see to, I suppose?” he asked.

Margaret said there was not, too thankful that he was behaving like a normal being to remember that he had not asked her such a question for years.

Ten minutes later Noel and the bridesmaids appeared, Cecily racing ahead to greet him as usual. Charles, though he smiled at her kindly enough, was a little absent; he was recalling his daughter-in-law’s eager picture of the setting and the bride, and enjoying the reality with a warmth that surprised himself. The noisy company brought Mabel from her enforced retirement, and between them all his view of the bride herself was obscured.

At last he had packed them into the cars and seen them drive away. He and Noel were alone together.

Nerving himself for the ordeal, because she was so like her mother, he looked at his daughter and saw that she was lovely. The severe plainness of her satin frock set off her young slender body, the veil held by a wreath of orange-blossom that encircled her fair head gave her almost the look of a medieval maiden, but her response to his inspection was anything but medieval.

“And a nice penny all this is going to cost me,” she said in a bass voice, mockingly.

“Is it? Ah well, I think it’s worth the money,” returned her father, apt for once.

“Really? ... but you shouldn’t give me these shocks or I may burst into tears and ruin the whole effect,” said Noel gayly. “Come along now and let us rehearse our procession up the aisle.”

“Perhaps that would be as well, and you shall instruct me. I am not used to this, you know.”

“You are more used to it than I am,” she caught him up. “You’ve done it before, even if it was in the reverse direction ... and of course with a much superior bride. You may say it. I shan’t be jealous.”

Charles smiled at her a little sadly.

“Now you are trying to make me burst into tears,” he said.

“Of course ... and you don’t know how. You are not up in the fine arts. Come along.”

She took his arm with a deft twist of her train and veil, and Charles for the first time caught the flash of the diamonds in her ears.

“Just a moment.”

He had taken the watch from its case upstairs and put it in an inner pocket. Feeling for it, he looked doubtfully at her empty hands asking, perhaps to gain time:

“Aren’t you carrying any flowers?”

“Rather, Felicity put them in the car ... and there’s white heather in the middle of them. I am also wearing something old and something new,

something borrowed and something blue. Are there any other precautions you think I ought to take against the snares of matrimony?"

"You seem well equipped." He put the little watch into her hand, saying awkwardly: "I hope you haven't a dozen of these already, Noel."

Noel gazed at it for a moment speechless with astonishment. She could remember a time long ago in her young childhood when he had sometimes brought her an unexpected gift and put it into her hand, closing her fingers over it just like this, and then the years between, empty of gifts which did not bear a legend in her mother's writing, to include both parents. She knew now that she had never really believed the legend and there rushed over her an emotion that was more one of pain and an old apprehension than delight in the watch, much as it would please her later.

"Oh, father, that is lovely," she managed to exclaim. "Please put it on my right wrist because the left glove will have to come off presently.... I shall be positively glittering. You are spoiling me dreadfully ... all of you."

Charles put on the watch for her, conscious that her gayety had departed and wondering uneasily why. The little speech he had rehearsed to make to her, about thinking of him now and then, was quite forgotten, and he said instead:

"If that fellow Flinders doesn't take proper care of you now, you're to cable to me, so don't forget."

"And you'll come out with a nice large bomb," she finished for him. "I can manage that fellow Flinders, thank you all the same. You look after your own girl, she needs it. You'll have more time for the job with an expensive daughter off your hands.... You know, I think you are more immersed in your old business than you ought to be. You are not a miser evidently, so there's no excuse for it."

Noel, secretly much astonished at herself and this appeal to him, but carrying it off with a deceptive lightness of touch, kissed him on the cheek at the same time in tardy acknowledgment of the gift.

Charles smiled at her very nicely.

"I'll look after her," he said.

Chapter XVI WHERE'ER YOU WALK

1

Miss Godolphin was not one of those superior persons who consider all weddings alike and a trial to the onlooker. In fact she knew otherwise. A wedding for which one had been shown the bride's dress by the bride herself, and the trousseau and the presents, had mixed, if only momentarily, with the bridesmaids and best man, and at which one would be able to recognize many of the leading personages, had quite a different flavor, she found, from any ordinary ceremony.

Most fortunately, as it turned out, she had worn her new summer frock to the office in the hope of slipping off to see the wedding from the back of the church, and by missing her lunch had been able to purchase a white organdie bow and a pair of white net gloves, luckily in fashion and so much more useful to her afterwards than suede or kid would have been. Thus reënforced, she felt a little happier about her appearance among Mrs. Lister's guests, and set off for Hampstead in excellent spirits.

Before the church door the usual curious crowd had already collected on either side of the red carpet, and Miss Godolphin trod it boldly, aware of curious glances, a rather delightful experience. Once inside a tall young man in morning dress with a carnation in his buttonhole asked her if she were a relative or friend of the bride or the bridegroom, assuming that she was certainly one or the other. She did not quite know what to say to that and, being eminently sensible, told the truth.

"As a matter of fact, I am Mr. Lister's secretary."

"Oh, splendid! because I was ordered to look out for you and see you had an aisle seat if possible and a good view," said the young man, "and afterwards if you will just keep me in view I'll see there's a place for you in one of the cars."

Miss Godolphin, touched beyond measure at these kind attentions, sank into her aisle seat with a happy sigh.

There was a great deal to be said for a real church wedding in her opinion. The high vaulted roof, the lovely flowers, light drifting in through the stained glass window above the altar, the organ already playing a voluntary, the hushed voices of the ushers showing in the guests, how much

more *like* a wedding, thought Miss Godolphin, than saying over a few words and signing a registrar's book. It was one thing she couldn't understand about film stars, the way they always married like that, and with all their huge salaries too. She wouldn't do it in their place, that was certain. No, a church wedding every time!

In the front pew on the left she suddenly discovered Mrs. Lister and a girl in pale yellow, but on the right where the bridegroom's family and friends would sit there were only as yet scattered parties of guests and no one in front at all ... except over there behind a pillar ... yes, it was, Miss Godolphin was sure of it, the bridegroom himself and the best man. Thrilled to the marrow, she watched these chief actors in the drama, and saw that they were not in uniform after all.

Now wasn't that a pity?

It seemed ungracious to admit any flaw in the proceedings however, so she reflected that perhaps military weddings were no longer considered quite good form. After all, we were striving for universal Peace, weren't we? Indeed, having signed the Peace Ballot herself, answering all the questions and even filling in the space headed "Remarks," she began to feel that it had been unthinking of her to desire a military wedding ... unthinking and sentimental, yes quite. She was surprised at herself.

The best man had gone to have a word with Mrs. Lister, and Miss Godolphin smiled in sympathy with their conversation. Yesterday he had said to her as they drank their cider, "I say, you are not going already," and later ridden on the dashboard of the car which carried her to the Tube. She felt that he was almost an old and amusing friend.

There were Mr. and Mrs. Moreland, being escorted of course to one of the front pews. Miss Godolphin was conscious of a little nervousness and some reserve. She did not wish to be fickle, but Mrs. Moreland would never have given her a seat on the aisle or arranged a place for her in the car—at the last moment too, when it must have been quite inconvenient. That was the difference in people. Mrs. Moreland in fact was a taker and not a giver, but Mrs. Lister kindness itself and exactly the wife one would expect the junior partner to have. Very likely he had given her a hint: "I think, my dear, that girl of mine would like to see the child's wedding. There's no objection I suppose?" (Or even perhaps Dolly!) "Of course not, darling. How stupid of us not to have thought of it before."

Now people were arriving in great numbers, and Miss Godolphin recognized with much interest from many newspaper photographs her

chief's literary sister taking her place in the second pew. She wore hornrimmed spectacles which seemed only right, and real orchids actually in her severely tailored silk suit. She had walked down the aisle slowly and importantly, but looking rather bored and nodding to an acquaintance here and there. And who were those charming old ladies in rustling silk and wide hats with a very spruce elderly gentleman? Why, they were going into the front pew, and the bridegroom had come out of retirement to greet them. His mother and father evidently, and his mother's two sisters. But how charming, what a nice family party. Mrs. Lister was bowing and smiling at them. Miss Lister had risen, and church or no church, was shaking hands.

Did you ever?

But every one was turning round in the direction of the door and Miss Godolphin, torn both ways, turned too, to remain in this position with a happy sigh. The bridesmaids stood in the porch, peered one after another in at the church and then moved back. A flutter of pink, blue, and mauve against the outer sunlight, a flash of bouquets and long bright ribbons, what a pretty sight! The blue bridesmaid had walked before Miss Godolphin up the hill, and later driven her down it, only yesterday; the others she would be able to recognize when they passed her presently after the bride.

Oh dear, there was that troublesome Mrs. John Lister who was so difficult to get out of the office once you let her in. Well, she didn't matter, for the bridegroom and best man were already waiting before the altar. At any moment now....

The organist was playing very softly, drifting from one melody to another, biding his time; the church was full and the altar candles lighted. There was a stir and a sudden whisper:

"She's coming!"

The congregation stood up, Miss Godolphin's heart turning over with excitement and sympathy. Poor girl, poor Mr. Lister, what an ordeal for them both!

The organ ceased for a moment and then broke into the Bridal March from Lohengrin as the procession entered the church, the bride very tall and lovely on her father's arm, and the four flower-like maids behind her. Miss Godolphin coined this phrase for them after they had passed her by, having been too busy to notice them in her preoccupation with the distinguished figure of her chief and the daughter who was undoubtedly all the world to him. Poor Mr. Lister indeed! It was no wonder he had been a little odd in his

manner these last few days. He kept his eyes firmly fixed ahead of him, but the bride was simply wonderful, for, believe it or not, as she came face to face with Miss Godolphin, she smiled.

Perhaps she had not known she was smiling, perhaps she had smiled at every one all down the aisle. The guest was determined to be quite fair about it and not claim more than her due, but as she sat down, her knees were shaking and there was a lump in her throat.

This was quite the most delightful wedding she had ever seen or ever expected to see.

2

If it was really much as other weddings, few members of the congregation would have dreamt of saying so, for there is a convention in these matters. Even the dear friend who secretly hopes the bridegroom will not appear or somebody forbid the banns, will be among the first to say how charming the bride looked and what a perfectly delightful wedding it has been. Men clutching silk hats may hope to get the business quickly over, but every woman will wait with bated breath for the "I do's" and "I will's," reading drama into the tone employed by both parties to the contract, thrilled by the manly spirit of the groom who speaks out, and greatly astonished if a bride, who has never fluttered in her life, fails to flutter now.

No untoward incident marred the marriage of Noel Lister and Arnold Flinders. The best man had not forgotten the ring, and Felicity Osborne passed her bouquet to Cecily and drew off the bride's glove, unconscious of the indignant glare of Cecily's mother behind her. Arnold, having decided to take Noel for his wedded wife some time ago, was still quite firm on this point, and she made it clear to the congregation that she was satisfied with the arrangement. Charles, when he had given his daughter away, sat down beside Frances, too much relieved that his part in the ceremony was over, to think of anything else; Margaret, smiling at her daughter's voice, hoped that her confidence might never be shaken and almost believed for a little while that this was a perfect match which the world could not destroy.

The three old aunts were delicately emotional at seeing their favorite Arnold taking a wife; and the Admiral looked at his nephew's choice and thought: "No niminy-piminy about her, good! the girl speaks up. I shall kiss her in the vestry. You can always gauge a woman by the way she takes it, even under the parson's nose."

Miss Lister said to herself: "Yes, they will make a good picture coming out of church. I shall stand on the left and have a word with the photographer"; Dolly Neville whispered to Tim. "The twins look perfect angels but I'm rather glad they're not."

Most people in short were preoccupied with their own connection with the ceremony and few as disinterested as Miss Godolphin, but at last it was over and the wedding party went into the vestry, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Lister and Arnold's uncle and aunts.

Frances sat alone in the front pew listening to an air by Handel and singing the words of it in her mind:

*"Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;
Trees where you sit shall crowd into a shade."*

It was rather a beautiful wish for them both, she thought, seeing it, not as a perfection too rare for a common world, but the secret content and shelter which those who love bring to each other.

Owen came and sank into the seat beside her.

"All's well?" he said.

She smiled at him, and the lovely melody sang in her heart.

3

Margaret after all drove home alone, for photographers held up the crowd in the porch, and Charles was escorting Miss Flinders and her sisters to their car. Taking the Admiral into her confidence, she slipped out the side door and away, and had had time to see that everything was running smoothly before Arnold and Noel reached the house.

Noel, taken completely by surprise, thrust her bouquet into Arnold's hands and hugged her mother while she had an opportunity, and because it was almost the last moment they might have alone together, Arnold turned away ostensibly to give orders to the chauffeur about going back for guests. Then he deposited his hat and the bouquet in the hall and lit a cigarette with ostentatious relief.

"Go ahead," he called to the two who had gone into the drawing-room. "I'll do sentry—go and watch for the crowd."

"I believe you are right about him," said Margaret, smiling at her daughter. "He's rather nice."

"I know ... sort of unusual," agreed the bride. "Large for one thing. I always like my husbands large. Mother, what do you think?" she held out her right wrist with the watch upon it for inspection. "Father gave it to me quite suddenly just before we left for the church.... Isn't it a pet? ... I nearly fainted with surprise."

"I shouldn't wonder if he rather hoped it might surprise you," Margaret managed somehow to say, but in her own ears her voice sounded hoarse and far-away, her raillery a dead thing.

She had remembered the scene in his bedroom, the quick thrusting away of some small article he had been holding when she opened the door, his question about speeches, his sneers at Peggy, seeing in them all a significance so bitter that her control was almost lost.

In such a state of mind, luckily perhaps, she did not sense that Noel also was acting a part.

"Fathers are funny fish," she said. "I believe he suddenly came to the conclusion I really *was* getting married and perhaps he ought to do something about it. He has quite wakened up these last two days, looking slightly dazed, of course, after keeping his nose to the grindstone for so long." Noel, having thus lightly disclaimed any suspicion of strangeness in the situation, went on, "As if a diamond watch could make my marvelous wedding. You did that, every inch of it, you clever little thing. You just wait until you come out to India and we'll give you a wonderful time. It's your turn."

"I shall be there," promised Margaret eagerly. Here at least she was on safe ground, she could smile, thrusting behind her the almost overpowering temptation to confide in her daughter at last and find comfort in the sympathy which every word she had spoken had made sure.

How near a thing it had been, the undoing of all that she had so painfully striven to do, she was only to discover when the first cars turned in at the gate and she was able to slip away, Arnold having returned to take up his position beside his bride. Then leaving them to do the honors, saying she must freshen herself up, she hurried into the dining-room and sank, trembling, into a chair.

Poor blundering Charles, buying the gift for Noel far more to please his wife than for any other reason, hiding it when she suddenly appeared from sheer self-consciousness, and then appalled at his clumsy speech about his sister, going down to annihilate Mabel's claims by way of undoing the

damage and proving his good intentions, would have been astounded to know that the little watch would seem to Margaret a veritable stab in the dark. In all these years he had done nothing for his children but pay such bills as she chose to present. At Christmas and on birthdays, for Owen's wedding and now Noel's she had scrupulously included him in her gifts to them, consulting him beforehand (always ineffectually) and showing him what she had bought. And this was his response.

Behind her back he had bought the diamond watch, and given it to Noel, quite obviously to dissociate himself from her and any gift of hers, and playing for his daughter's gratitude and favor by a lavishness which he had been careful to conceal from her that they could afford.

All her hours of worry about the expenses of the wedding, her careful economy, her frantic anxiety for him last night, when she had imagined that he, like his friend, might be facing ruin, now returned to mock her with their impotence; and for a space her anger knew no bounds.

If she saw the matter out of all proportion it was perhaps because the revelation had come just at the one moment of the day when for the last time she and Noel might be alone together, spoiling it, blotting out all the things she had wanted to say and leading her to the verge of self-betrayal.

Margaret's anger indeed was a good deal reaction, after a peril escaped, against the person unwittingly responsible for it, and she conquered it at length. Her guests were waiting, and still for a little while she must play her part, so that Noel should be happy and untroubled when she went away. For the next few hours her life, she felt, held no necessity but that.

The three Miss Flinders had already arrived, and she carried them off to see the wedding presents and then into the garden to admire the roses, where presently Peggy fell upon them. They were delighted with everything, from their dear new niece to her charming home, and very happy to sink into comfortable chairs in a sheltered spot and watch the pretty scene.

Margaret knew better than to hope that all her guests would be equally amenable, but she felt a little steadied by their gentle chatter, and went back to the reception room, nerving herself mechanically for the task ahead.

Mabel was firmly in attendance upon Mrs. Moreland, but was easily shaken off by her formidable relative as soon as Margaret appeared.

"Ah! there you are at last, my dear. What a babel these young people make. Now tell me," said Mrs. Moreland, "why not a choral wedding? A choir makes for solemnity on these occasions, and we should impress it

upon the young that marriage is a solemn matter. I should have made those bridesmaids wear hats for the same reason. There is far too much fancy dress about weddings nowadays, though no doubt it is something that they condescend to marry at all.... I am quite pleased with the bridegroom. I told Mabel to tell you so, but she has no brains, a tiresome woman. I am astonished that you should have invited her here.... Young Flinders belongs to a very good family, you must introduce me ... and, by the way, I want to talk to you about Charles. He is far from well, Margaret. In fact, in my view, he looks positively ill. You must get him away as soon as possible. Take him to the sea, brace him up, see that he takes proper exercise. Men have no sense. They sit and sit. Look at me. I never sit for more than fifteen minutes in the course of the day, and I am never ill. You had better get Charles away as soon as ever the wedding is over.”

Margaret had listened with only half an ear until it came to the question of Charles, when old habit rather than any present desire to think of him, made her alert.

“Yes, I think he certainly should get away,” she agreed submissively. “Do let me introduce you to Arnold’s aunts, Mrs. Moreland.”

Threading the crowd, she managed the introduction at last, and left the senior partner’s wife to vie with Peggy, her mind mechanically exploring the matter of Charles who looked so ill.

Did he? She had noticed no change in his appearance, but Tim had talked last night about dyspepsia, overwork, dieting.... Yes, dieting, of course, she must see to that.... And then the Cornwall holiday, for Tim’s sake, if not for his own, he must go.... But was he ill?

Martin seized her.

“We’ve brought them all along, every last sheep of them,” he reported, “and there is a wild-eyed young woman with photographs looking for you.... Here she is.... Now this is Mrs. Lister, she’ll tell you.”

He made room for the young woman with the damp photographic proofs of Arnold and Noel in the church door, walking down the red carpet, getting into the car, and Margaret said yes, she would have two of each, recklessly, or perhaps three, unconscious that rival young women with different views would presently assail her. And then she found herself being asked the exact name of the bride and bridegroom because it was for the press, and whether the lady standing beside them in the first picture was not some celebrity who ought to be mentioned.

Margaret looked at the first picture, recognized Peggy and said hastily that it was unnecessary, because to have seen her mentioned would have so infuriated Charles.

Yet why, she wondered, should she have considered that? Why shouldn't Peggy have her ounce of flesh? ... Well, she'd have it after all ... dancing all night!

How hot the room was and how noisy ... all those boys and girls round Noel and Arnold ... so many people to whom one must speak.... Was Charles looking after the men? or was Cecily hanging on his arm and getting in the way?

She could not see him anywhere, but she saw Miss Godolphin looking pleased though shy, and managed to say a word to her and introduce her to some of Noel's friends; and to shake hands with this one and that and say: "Do go into the garden," or "Have you seen the lovely presents yet?"

Her head was beginning to ache, when Owen found her and suggested:

"They've all had a word now, I think. Shall I give the signal for champagne and get 'em all out of doors?"

"Yes, yes," said his mother with untold relief. Frances went round with the box of rose-petals and all the young crowd made for the door through which the bride and bridegroom would pass into the garden. Margaret, waiting to let them go, found herself caught up by her son-in-law's strong arm and carried along, deluged by the shower that fell upon them, amid the laughter and applause of her guests.

Chapter XVII GOING AWAY

1

Charles had seen nothing of his wife, though as he did his duty by the Admiral and other guests, he kept an anxious watch for her, in order to explain how he had missed her coming out of church. Far from wishing to avoid the drive home with her, he had looked forward to it as an opportunity to tell her of his skirmish with Mabel, and prove that he had meant nothing by his unfortunate speech upstairs. To have failed her therefore about her car disturbed him, but he soon saw that explanations in such a crowd were impossible and presently forgot the matter in the company of his peers. The Admiral proved entertaining, and with the senior partner, Dr. Neville, and various other men, the father of the bride enjoyed some good talk until Owen brought word that toasts were to be drunk.

These were not characterized by the solemnity which no doubt Mrs. Moreland would have thought desirable, but they were brief and gay, to the relief of most of the company, and extremely noisy where Noel's intimates foregathered.

Charles found himself on the outside of the throng beside Dolly Neville, who said to him:

"Hasn't everything gone beautifully, Charles? There hasn't been a hitch from the first moment. Noel looks a darling. Nobody but Margaret could have done it, of course. She must be dead tired after all these weeks of preparation, and I really believe she'll need our foursome holiday in Cornwall quite as much as any one."

"Are you and she going away then?" asked Charles, so obviously surprised that she caught his arm.

"But your sister-in-law said you had told her you were going," she exclaimed. "I naturally supposed Margaret had found a moment to tell you our plan."

"No, we've had very little chance to talk of anything. That was a fiction for Mabel's ears, I am afraid. One has to ..." explained Charles.

"Of course. I know the type. Don't breathe a word to Tim for heaven's sake," begged Dolly confidentially. "He is ill, Charles, and I simply can't get him to take a spell. Margaret has promised to help me with a little plot,

because he'd come if he thought you needed looking after and couldn't be got away without him.... There is your insomnia, after all.... Just the four of us. Margaret will explain."

Dolly, fearful that she had blundered, looked at him anxiously, but Charles seemed pleased, to her infinite relief. Having gone so far, she told him the rest; of her fears for Tim, the Cornish cottage, and how, with the wedding over and Margaret inevitably missing Noel, it had all seemed so perfectly to fit in.

Charles, she found, was not merely acquiescent but eager, full of concern for Tim, and ready to make the necessary arrangements to get away from the office early in July. She had never liked him better, and was even a little repentant for her past impatience with him, unconscious that she had given him her news at the one moment of all others when such a scheme would be peculiarly welcome to him.

The Nevilles were almost the only friends of long standing with whom he and Margaret had kept in close touch of late years, and with whom Charles himself felt no constraint. The holiday in their company therefore presented no embarrassment, and the fact, as he supposed, that Margaret had had a hand in planning it, seemed to suggest that she was, no less than he perhaps, ready to seek a better understanding now that they were to be left alone. He remembered that he had a hint of this yesterday in the message Miss Godolphin had given him, and if the encounters between them since then had been hardly propitious, he saw that circumstances and his own clumsiness had been a good deal to blame. With a houseful of people, what else could they expect? Charles began to look forward eagerly to the moment when at last he should have Margaret to himself.

As the crowd parted and the guests found chairs, again Cecily made for him, but was rather coldly received.

"Look here, I have to look after people, you must go and talk to the young men," he said, and saw her move limply away, impatient for once with her incapacity to enjoy herself like any other young creature.

The girl was a problem, difficult to help because she would not help herself, but with such a mother, he supposed, one could hardly wonder, and he found himself thinking of Noel standing in the hall and saying:

"You look after your own girl. She needs it." A hit from the shoulder, and yet he had liked her for it.

A few steps further on he came face to face with Peggy, who boomed at him:

“Well, Charles, I’ve done you well, for the second time in your life, but of course I’ll get no thanks for it from you.”

“You might give Flinders the credit for his good eyesight at least,” retorted Charles, with unexpected spirit, “to say nothing of mine. When you do me a voluntary favor I’ll acknowledge it with pleasure, but I’m damned if I’m going to thank you for something you couldn’t prevent. Come down to earth, Peggy.”

Miss Lister laughed. The affair had been less boring than she had expected, the champagne excellent, and she had met several intelligent people who admired her work. The photographs would certainly be in some of tomorrow’s papers, and she had seen to it that the young women from the agency had the correct captions and the title of her last book. Charles’s thanks or otherwise mattered very little.

2

Mabel thought little of the wedding and considered she and hers had been thrust into the background as usual. If poor John had been alive it would have been otherwise. The champagne was far too dry and probably of poor quality; the bridegroom’s relations looked very queer people as she had always suspected; and all this fuss about Noel’s appearance was quite unnecessary. Any girl can look well in a wedding gown when her parents have money to burn—other people’s money.

Mabel’s only consolation was that those nice people, the Nevilles, had taken such a fancy to her last night that they had asked her to dine with them this evening and play a few hands of bridge. This would be a great relief for, really, lunch today! Cold beef of all things.

Shuddering at the thought of lunch, of which she had partaken with great appetite, she made for the buffet and remained there for the greater part of the afternoon, saying brightly to all comers:

“A cup of tea is so refreshing, I always think.”

Noel, escorted by a large and hilarious company, cut the wedding cake; tea was carried round, sandwiches, ices, strawberries and cream; waiters hurried here and there; Margaret moved among her guests.

“I don’t believe mother has once sat down since she got up this morning,” said Noel to Owen. “Couldn’t you make her come and have tea

with us? Carry her if she won't come any other way.”

So the mother of the bride had a few minutes' rest at last between her daughter and son-in-law, and was chaffed and plied with everything in sight from the largest silver horse-shoe on the cake to a piece of white heather from the bridal bouquet. The parting was very near and Noel was torn by reluctance and impatience to be gone. Only laughter was safe any more.

They were to leave at 5.30 by car for the east coast, crossing to France in the morning, and Margaret's last duty was to see that they got away to time. Leaving them, she slipped indoors to see that everything was ready in Noel's room, and came out again with the news that it was time for her to dress.

Some of the less intimate guests and most of the elders were already saying good-by. The old aunts, gently tearful, kissed their new niece and were taken by Arnold to their car. Mrs. Moreland read the bride a lecture on the duties of a wife and, behind her back, the senior partner kissed Charles's daughter and slipped a fat envelope into her hand, not to be opened until after she had left. Owen brought down his sister's luggage and strapped it with Arnold's on the rack of the car, which the twins were busy hanging with silver horseshoes and old slippers. And while Felicity escorted her friend upstairs the remaining company were armed with confetti for the final scene.

Margaret, finding that Frances had thrust a box of it into her hands, looked at the little colored specks with dismay. They would be scattered all over the grass and the gravel, and Charles would be furious.

And then she remembered that it would no longer matter. Noel would be gone, both her children married, and their father's irritability could not touch them any more. Her job was done.

The house and garden and everything about her suddenly looked unreal. She was so tired that it seemed to be the weariness of years by which she was oppressed. When people spoke to her she answered them with a smile which she could not relax though she was conscious of it as a physical pain.

Then Noel was there, a different Noel in her traveling dress, holding her mother fast, saying things about saving up and coming quickly; and Arnold drawing her to the car. There were shouts and cheers and much tossing of confetti, waving of hats and hands. The car was gone; they were off.

The wedding was over.

Margaret came slowly back to herself. The parting seemed to have passed over her head, though she had a feeling that it had taken a long time to get them away and the noise had been deafening. She saw Charles go into the dining-room to dispense whiskies to the remaining men; she managed to thank Martin Croft for all he had done and for her flowers, and said good-by to him and to Stephen Ogilvie and the two other young men who were to be of the bridesmaids' party in town and had to go home to dress. She sent Frances up to get ready and agreed that Felicity and the twins might use Noel's room to repair their complexions and generally make themselves beautiful. She said good-by to Dolly, who was being given a lift, leaving Tim to bring on Mabel, who had gone up to change; and then she remembered that she had had no chance to say anything to Charles about dinner, and went to the door of the dining-room, but found it full of men.

Owen came out and found her in the hall.

"Will you kindly sit down, woman, before you fall down?" he requested, lifting her bodily into the drawing-room and putting her in a chair.

Leaning back with a sigh of momentary relief, she explained about his father. Aunt Mabel would not be in to dinner, so there was nothing to stop his going to his club. He would be sure to prefer that and they could give him a lift in one of the cars. Would Owen see to it?

"Yes, but look here, you are not going to dine alone. Run along and dress and come with us to the party. If you don't, Frances and I will stay at home," declared her son. "After all two old married people have no real right to be there."

But she would neither go with them nor let them stay. She was so tired of every one of them that she only wanted to lie down and sleep, she said. And Frances deserved her party, she had worked so hard and wouldn't have so many chances of fun in the coming months.

"I'll see you both in the morning, darling, when I'm sane again. Go and get dressed and give those girls a jolly evening. That is your job."

Owen supposed she was right, and promising to give her message to his father, he went off.

Margaret by-and-by looked out into the garden and saw the men clearing away the tables and chairs. She had forgotten the men. Pulling herself to her feet, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, took off her hat at last, washed and came down again with her bag in her hand. Tips for the waiters, thanks for the servants, arrangements to be made about the food that was over,

payment for the temporary staff, cushions to be brought in.... Her mind began the old treadmill of things still to be done.

They all took time. The staff, both temporary and permanent, had much to tell her about the beautiful wedding and what this one or that one among the guests had been heard to say in praise of Miss Noel. She had not the heart to break away, when they too had worked so hard and so well. When she returned to the front of the house the first car was already out the gate, and she was just in time to wave good-bye to the four bridesmaids in the Osbornes' Daimler. Somewhere in the distance she heard a clock strike seven.

She was alone at last and could sit down and relax. Tim and Mabel had evidently gone and there was no sound in the quiet house. The long flower-filled room with the table of wedding presents at the far end was all that was left of the day. "It's such a lovely room," some one had said to her a long time ago. Frances, but she would make a room of her own. This had been just a picture to her, not a place where one hid the faded and shabby spots.

How good it would be to be done with the need of hiding.

Margaret closed her eyes and lay back among the cushions of the easy chair. She would stay here for a little while, and by-and-by Spence could bring her something light on a tray, a scrambled egg perhaps and some fruit. Then she would go up to bed.

She dozed a little, losing the sense of things without losing consciousness. She was rather light-headed from fatigue and lack of food. Her breakfast had been spoiled by the scene with Charles, lunch by anxiety at his non-appearance and the need to get every one away to dress. Scraps of talk ran through her head, without relation to each other, sometimes her own, sometimes other people's. "Don't be silly, Mabel ... a diamond watch couldn't make my marvelous wedding ... how sweet she looks.... Charles looks positively ill ... I'll have two of each ... Miss Godolphin ... see that she gets a seat in one of the cars ... the bridegroom belongs to a very good family, you must introduce me ... my dear new niece.... Sit down, woman, before you fall down ... fathers are funny fish.... Yes, yes, I'll come...."

Margaret sat up suddenly at the sound of an opening door. Here she had been nearly asleep, with things to see to, things to do.... But the wedding was over. They were all gone.

"Is that you, Spence?" she asked, turning round in her easy chair, then half rose and sank back again, staring as if at a ghost.

It was Charles.

Chapter XVIII AFTER ALL

1

He had not accepted Owen's suggestion of a lift into town, allowing his son to suppose that he would go in later to the club. He had had no intention of doing anything of the kind, but had gone up and changed before coming in search of his wife. To have left her alone on such an occasion would have seemed to him, even in a different mood, impossible, though then he would probably have potted moodily in the garden and exchanged few words with her.

This evening he had no desire to potter. The wedding was over and he wanted to know that she was satisfied that everything had gone well, to ask if she had seen the diamond watch, to explain why he had missed her at the church and tell her of the skirmish with Mabel, to hear about the Cornwall holiday which she had been planning and which would be such a rest to them both. Dolly Neville was right of course. Margaret must be worn out after all this, and she would be missing Noel. It would be an excellent plan to take her away. And perhaps, thought Charles in his secret heart, to get a little near to her again.

"You've not gone to the club then," said Margaret, blankly.

"Oh, lord, no! I thought it was time to call it a day." Charles attempted a light tone which she did not heed.

"You had far better go. You will get a very poor meal if you stay at home," she said.

"Anything will do. I had an excellent lunch ... whatever you are having.... I was sorry I didn't get back with you in the first car after all. There was such a jam and I didn't see that I could leave the old ladies high and dry very well."

Margaret had risen wearily. How like a man! Couldn't he realize that the servants had been run off their feet? Now she must break it to Spence that he would be in to dinner.

Rather brusquely she dismissed the matter of the car.

"No, quite! Far better as it was," she said, beginning to move to the door.

Charles, blind to her irritation, and not wanting her to go, inquired eagerly:

“Did Noel show you the little watch?”

The question at least served one purpose, for Margaret stopped dead, stung to fury, and flung at him:

“Yes, she did, though why you should trouble to ask when you were so careful to hide it guiltily away when I opened your door this morning, I don’t see. For I suppose it was that you hid, or have you other shocks in store for me?”

Charles stared at her, utterly confounded at this attack.

“I didn’t really intend to hide it.... I didn’t know who was at the door ... you took me by surprise,” he stammered.

“Yes, and you’ve taken me by surprise with your diamonds, most unpleasantly, as no doubt you intended,” she cried furiously. “It’s too much. You keep me absolutely in the dark about our financial condition, you refuse to do one thing to make it easier for me with the wedding, even to telling me what I may safely spend. You let me worry myself sick about the expenses and deny myself even the pleasure of giving Noel what I should like to give her, and then at the last moment you go behind my back and give her this extravagant present to affront me and show yourself the generous father. In all these years I have never given the children a present without including you, though you showed that they were less to you than any stranger in the street.... Oh....”

Her voice had broken, she turned blindly to the door, unable to see and stumbling as she ran.

“Margaret—!”

Charles had been too quick for her. He was at the door and, standing with his back against it, caught her by the shoulders while she struggled ineffectually to break away.

“Let me go,” she cried. “I can’t talk to you.... Don’t you see that I am worn out!”

But Charles could face her anger even when he could not understand it, and he slipped his arm round her and would not let her go, leading her little by little towards the couch.

“You can’t leave it there, you know, when you have gone so far,” he argued. “Of course you are tired out, but that’s only another reason why I can’t let you believe such utter nonsense. Come and sit down and let me try to understand what this is all about.”

Spent by her own anger, her resistance gone, she allowed him to draw her down beside him, and sat inert, past speech, past caring what he did, and Charles, alarmed by this quiescence and the strained whiteness of her face, drew her back against his shoulder, saying anxiously:

“You are thoroughly done in, you know. Shall I get you a drink or something?”

“No.”

She did not hear her own voice, could not be sure that she had really spoken. She was only vaguely conscious of the comfort of his supporting arm and the overpowering wish to stay still.

Charles had the wisdom to let her alone for a moment and then, feeling her stir, he said:

“I bought the little watch for Noel because I thought it would please you and for no other reason, whatever you may think. Hiding it away when you came in was a pure accident. Can’t you realize that you were the last person in the world I expected to see? I was taken aback and behaved and talked like a clumsy fool.... Do you think I haven’t been kicking myself ever since? If you had reproached me with that I could have understood it.”

“Why should I reproach you with telling the truth as it appears to you?” she said in a low voice.

“Good God, you believe that? Then no wonder you can suspect me of any vileness,” exclaimed Charles bitterly. “You were not always so hard, Margaret.”

Margaret just then felt anything but hard. Terrified by the sudden lifting of her heart into a weak desire for tears, she was yet filled with a confused sense that all this was unreal, that it was part of the emotional tension of the day, and she herself vulnerable from nothing but fatigue.

“I must tell Spence you will be in to dinner,” she managed to say, and tried to get up, but again he prevented her.

“No, no, sit still. My dinner doesn’t matter.”

“It is so bad for your dyspepsia not to have proper meals,” she protested, but this mechanical response to an old worry naturally seemed to Charles a mere excuse to get away from him, and he exclaimed:

“There are worse ills than dyspepsia, I can assure you. Great heavens, you make a lot of absolutely baseless accusations against me, and then expect me to sit down and eat a hearty meal without even giving me a chance to defend myself. What do you think I’m made of?”

“I’m sorry,” she said in forlorn apology.

She wondered now why she had been so angry about the little watch. It seemed very childish, and his indignation justified, for she had lost hold of the context and her mind was in confusion.

“Yes, but look here, you know, you never gave me a hint that you were worrying about expense,” expostulated Charles. “Have I ever denied you anything you asked? Be fair?”

“Fair? Was it fair that I should have to ask?” she exclaimed. “You didn’t make it easy, Charles, when all I could get from you was: ‘Just as you like.’”

“But it was to be just as you liked,” said Charles, obtuse as ever on this point. “If that wasn’t satisfactory don’t you think you might have told me so?”

“I couldn’t have perpetual rows.”

“I see. What you really mean is that it wasn’t worth the risk of even one,” said Charles sadly. “Do you think you made it so easy for me either?”

She supposed that was true enough and saw her policy of peace at any price from a new and doubtful angle. Striving to hide their difference from the eyes of a world that did not matter after all, they had only succeeded in drifting further apart, and perhaps she had failed him in not going half-way, or more, to meet his different temperament. His early experiences at home had not fitted Charles to bear condemnation patiently. Had she perhaps made him feel condemned? She had never seen that possibility, and knew that the original difference between them had long passed into a multitude of little things perhaps no more substantial than her feeling about his gift for Noel.

“At least you knew once that I loved you,” said Charles. “Do you really imagine I could go through a time like this without being reminded at every turn what I’ve lost? ... Why, when I danced with Noel last night it might have been twenty years ago, and you, except that I was not so clumsy then.”

“*Did* you dance with her?” asked Margaret wonderingly.

With the curious inconsequence of most of us at such moments it was the unimportant fact which became important to her.

“Yes, I thought you saw me and felt a pretty fool. I hadn’t danced for years, but they drew me into it, and I was thankful to get at a safe distance from Mabel.... You didn’t believe her dam’ story. You could be generous to me there, Margaret.”

“Am I a fool? When have they said anything else about you—that family ... every one of them?” she exclaimed with contempt.... “Besides, I could tell from your face.”

The last words were quiet and the imputation, which she had certainly not intended, hit him hard.

“I suppose so.”

“I don’t know why you should. You haven’t let me see so much of it lately.”

“What was that you said?” cried Charles.

There had been a new note in her voice, new and yet old, something he had believed he would never hear again, a kind of mirthfulness which she had once kept for him alone, her instant reaction to his despondency. If it had come from her unawares she knew in a moment from his exclamation that here was the answer to all her questions about the future. Owen’s child, the home she had made, the sneers of Mabel, the triumph of Peggy and the Cornwall holiday on Tim’s account, these things she had swept aside; but not this, whatever had happened in the past, because in three words he had shown his need of her.

Charles was filled with a sudden incredulous hope and his arm, which had been loosely about her shoulders, tightened.

“Margaret ... *my dear!*”

With a secret smile she settled herself more comfortably.

“That’s better,” she said. “You know, you do seem a little out of practice, don’t you?”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[End of *Mother of the Bride* by Alice Grant Rosman]