

mean. It wasn't a ferry, of course, but it was all the same thing in the end—only of course so much better than a regular ferry. Not that I mean it would do nowadays, or for everybody—— My dear, what *are* you laughing at? Have I said something dreadfully profane? I am so terribly apt to, quite without meaning it, and Ludovic always laughs at me."

Mrs. Tregaskis laughed too, with kindly superiority.

"I don't think you're in any imminent danger of serious profanity, Sybil, and I'm sure Ludovic doesn't. Great cheek of me to call him Ludovic, isn't it? and I certainly shouldn't dare do it to his face—but I always think of you both as sort of relations, you know."

The observation was more in the nature of a small feeler than an accurate statement of fact, and Bertha watched for its effect narrowly.

"So nice of you, dear," said Lady Argent absently, without a trace of meaning in her voice or manner; "and you know I never had any sisters or brothers, so Ludovic has never had an aunt. At least, dear Fergus had one sister, but she was older than he was, a good deal, and so very Scotch. Not that I mean for a moment that her being Scotch would prevent her from being an aunt as well—in fact, I believe the Scotch think more about relationships than we do. Blood is thicker than water and all that, you know, dear, and kith and kin, whatever that may mean, which I always think sounds so very Scotch—but she really wasn't at all like an aunt to Ludovic. Just called him 'my brother's child,' you know, and sent him a little book from time to time. Very Calvinistic," said Lady Argent, shaking her head, "and I always burnt them, even in those days, though he was far too young to read, poor darling. In fact she died before he was five years old."

"Well, I'm only too delighted to do aunt by proxy," said Bertha good-humouredly. "I've been 'auntie' to a good many young people in my time, though the rising generation generally prefers 'Cousin Bertie.' I remember ages ago asking those two poor mites, Rosamund and Francie, what they'd like to call me. D'you remember my bringing them over here to say good-bye to you, Sybil?"