

and always to stand unshakably by what he had said, it was necessary to choose his terms with care.

"He wired from Paris. I expect him in time for dinner," he answered.

"It don't seem like two years," Benson pursued. Sir Aylmer felt that he was wincing mentally. "And not much of a day to come home to."

This time there really seemed no need to answer, but the day, in its intervals of specious sunshine, was certainly uninviting. The winter of 1913 was breaking up prematurely, and the leafless trees dripped on to the steaming earth as though their very fibre were melting. From the west, where the forest line marked the Hampshire border, came a sound of sliding snow splashing in avalanche through the upper branches of the trees on to the open aisles and clearings; snow still lay on the scarred face of the Sussex downs to the south, while already, on the north, the Surrey hills were slate-grey, misty and warm. Forgotten pockets of discoloured snow lingered on the grass borders or between the banks of rhododendron on either side of the drive; melting ice and snow filled the dykes in the park, and the ha-ha was beginning to overflow into the garden. In the fifteen years that had passed since he returned from America and bought the house from Lord Stornaway, he had never seen so much water about; when he had strength, he must go into the question of draining the place more rapidly. In the meantime, someone had been taking a short cut from the engine house to the west lodge, and a corner of lawn at the side of the house was trodden down and shabby. He had spoken about that before, and someone would have to go; orders were meant to be obeyed, and without discipline and obedience it was impossible to get anything done.

The inspection of garden, outbuildings and house was carried out with vigilance and a ruthless particularity. Sir Aylmer felt that there was no room in life for the slack and casual; time, procedure and punctilio had to be observed, and it was comforting to think that this lesson