

CHAPTER I

WHEN important people condescend upon acts of benevolence which are lightly esteemed they have a right to feel annoyed. All Lady Stapleton's breeding was not proof against the irritating sense of rudeness and impropriety, that increased momentarily, as she waited without greeting or explanation. First she crinkled her calm brows, then tapped impatiently with her fan, and finally sat bolt upright with unmistakable signs of displeasure.

"I don't understand it," she remarked, looking round the company with an eye of resentment. "I don't understand it at all." Instantly, like a forest of autumn leaves, the assemblage of silks rustled and murmured in agreement that what puzzled Lady Stapleton was past finding out, and, moreover, in this instance smacked unpleasantly of insult.

Here they were, leaders of fashion, devotees of pleasure, assembled at once by invitation and as an act of patronage, yet neither host nor hostess appeared to welcome them. It was enough, they felt, to justify them in washing their hands forever of all deeds of charity.

The occasion was a drawing-room meeting in