

When she reached the ground floor she was informed by Ricketts that they had already gone in.

She had hesitated about putting on the frock in which she had dined with Archie Mackerrow; she had an odd feeling about that frock, he had admired it, and that had set it apart. So she had compromised by putting on the old black silk which Alison remembered as her only party frock when she had lived at the surgery.

Mr. Crewe, from his chair at the bottom of the table, turned his head to nod to her but did not offer to rise.

"No, it isn't at all necessary to get up," Tibbie assured him rather hurriedly to cover her dismay at sight of him. "How are you, Edmund? It seems a long time since we met."

"I don't know how long it is," he answered grumpily. "How did you leave Anne and the boy? Where is she to sit, Alison? Oh there. Well, perhaps now we can go on. Another whisky, Ricketts."

Tibbie felt rather than saw a spasm cross Alison's face.

Tibbie had no difficulty in deciding that during the last months her brother-in-law had been drinking heavily. The fact was proclaimed by the purplish hue of his face, and its puffy fullness, and by the blood-shot eyes, and the unsteady hand, in which the glass shook. She was so stunned and grieved that for a moment she could hardly hide it, and was thankful to Madge who slipped into the breach.

Mr. Crewe's manners improved a little as dinner progressed and he became more affable towards his sister-in-law. He took very little notice of his wife, and when Tibbie contrasted that dinner with a certain supper on the first Sunday Alison had presided at the Hall table, she felt a little shudder within. Things had gone wrong; she kept asking herself how it was possible that they could have gone so horribly wrong in such an incredibly short time.

There was no falling off in the quality of Old Hall