

THE DIVINE FIRE

Rickman hesitated. That was not what he had said. He was anything but free, for was he not engaged for that evening to Miss Poppy Grace? He was pulled two ways, a hard pull. He admired Jewdwine with simple, hero-worshipping fervour; but he also admired Miss Poppy Grace. Again, he shrank from mentioning an engagement of that sort to Jewdwine, while, on the other hand concealment was equally painful, being foreign to his nature.

So he flushed a little as he replied, "Thanks awfully, I'm afraid I can't. I'm booked that night to Poppy Grace."

The flush deepened. Besides his natural sensitiveness on the subject of Miss Poppy Grace, he suffered tortures not wholly sentimental whenever he had occasion to mention her by her name. Poppy Grace—he felt that somehow it did not give you a very high idea of the lady, and that in this it did her an injustice. He could have avoided it by referring to her loftily as Miss Grace; but this course, besides being unfamiliar would have savoured somewhat of subterfuge. So he blurted it all out with an air of defiance, as much as to say that when you had called her Poppy Grace you had said the worst of her.

Jewdwine's face expressed, as Rickman had anticipated, an exquisite disapproval. His own taste in women was refined almost to nullity. How a poet and a scholar, even if not strictly speaking a gentleman, could care to spend two minutes in the society of Poppy Grace, was incomprehensible to Jewdwine.

"I didn't know you cultivated that sort of person."

"Oh—cultivate her—?"—His tone implied that the soil was rather too light for *that*.

"How long have you known her?"

"About six months, on and orf."

"Oh, only on and off."

"On and orf the *stage*, I mean. And that's knowledge," said Rickman. "Anybody can know them on; but it's not one man in a thousand knows them orf—really knows them."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

He changed the subject. In Rickman the poet he was deeply interested; but at the moment Rickman the man inspired him with disgust.