

THE CURMUDGEON

the cigarette in Harry's mouth, as he sat there looking at his mother's picture and thinking of his wife. He did not in the least regret that she was his wife or that he had lied. Any scruples that he ever had on that score he had removed for himself by realizing that she was a curmudgeon. Neither did he regret what he had called the troublesome affair. It had brought new things into his life; new thoughts and new powers had become his. And it had given him Cecily—unless one of them had still to go to town! He glanced at the clock; it was half-past nine. A sudden excitement came on him; but he conquered it or at least held it down, and sat there, smoking still.

Mason returned and began to clear away. "Madame Zabriska has ordered some soup and claret to be placed in the hall for her Ladyship, my Lord," said he, in explanation of his action.

Soup and claret might mean anything—peace or war—going or staying—anything except sitting down to table with him. On the whole their omen was not encouraging. A sudden thought shot across his brain: "By Jove, if she's taken my cab!" He jumped up; but in a moment sat down again. The *coup* would be a good one, but it would not beat him. He would walk to Mingham and get a bed there. He was quite clear that he would not sleep alone at Blent. He glanced at the clock again; to catch the train at Fillingford she must start at ten—and so with him. Stay though, she might go to Merrion. Mina would give her shelter.

She had looked very beautiful. Oh, yes, yes! Harry smiled as he conceded the natural man that point. It was seen plainly in retrospect; he had not noticed it much at the time. He had been too much occupied in proving her a curmudgeon. One thing at a time was the Tristram way—provided the time were reasonably short. But he felt it now, and began to wonder if he