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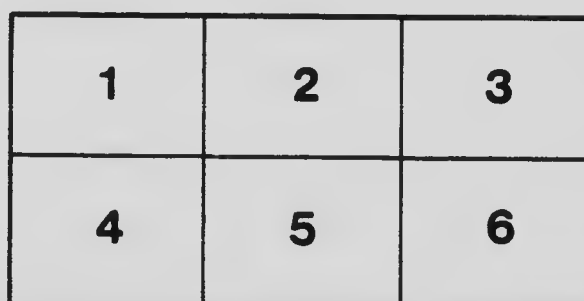
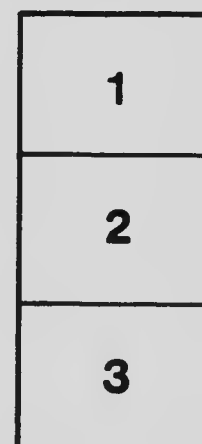
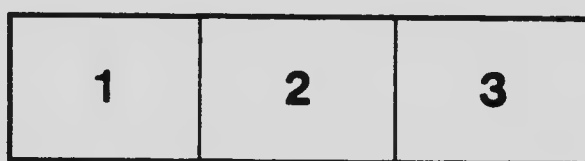
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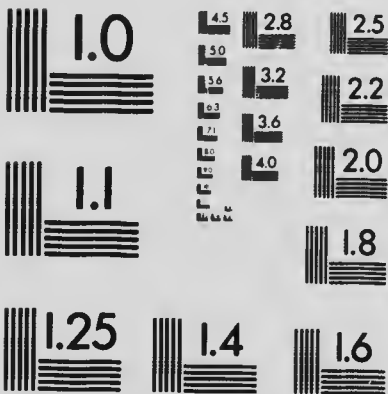
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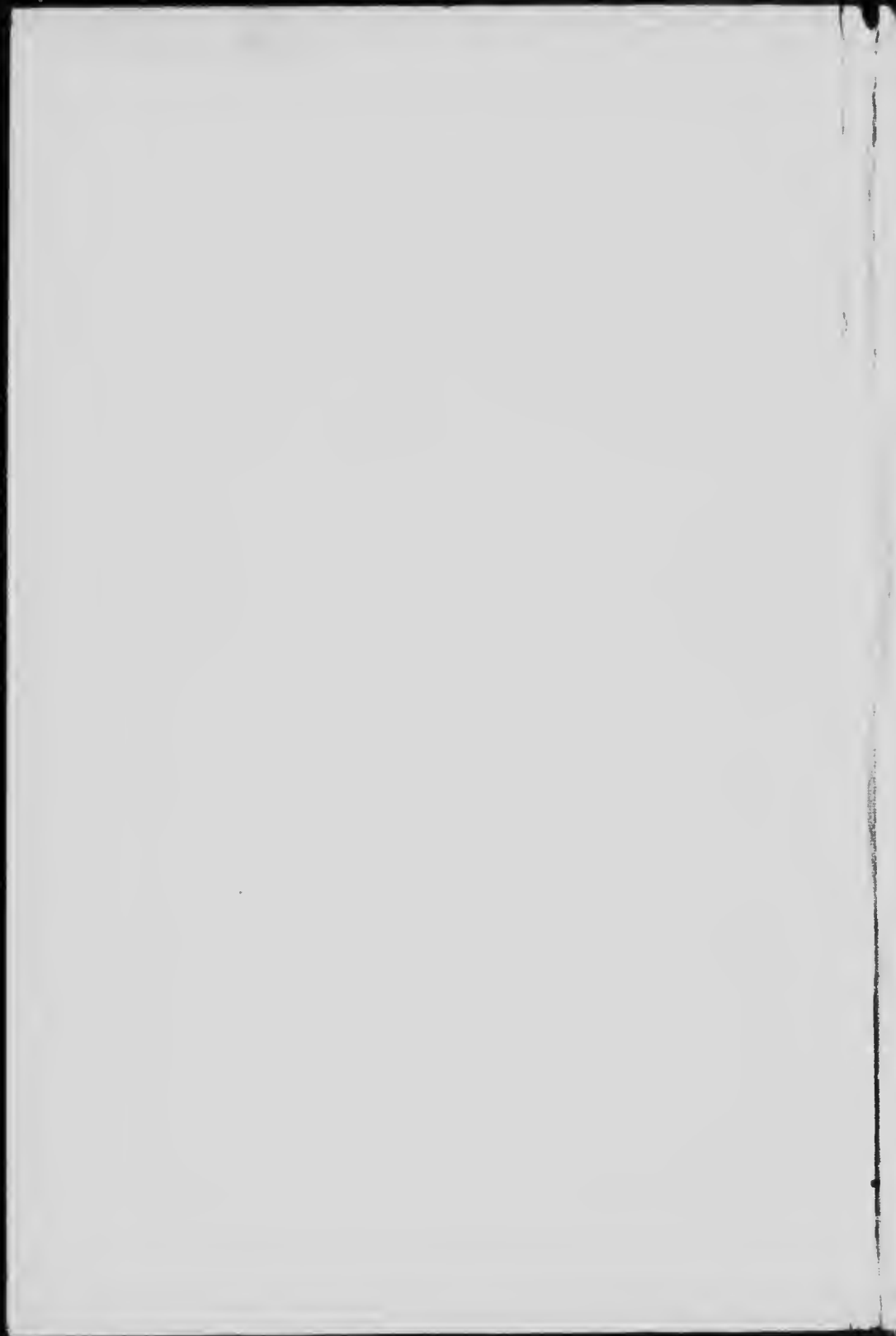
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A TRAGI-COMEDY

BY

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY, B.T.

AUTHOR OF

"THE RED CHANCELLOR," "THE LONG HAND,"
"PAUL BURDON," ETC.

TORONTO

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LIMITED

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CHAPTER I

"THAT'S better, Mr. Pomfret. Try it again, taking a breath before each aspirate."

"The ah-horn of the ah-hunter is ah-heard on the ah-hill," repeated Mr. Pomfret, with vicious determination and an ill grace.

"Now faster, and without so much stress on the aspirates. We want to avoid emphasising our difficulty."

The ungracious pupil of Mr. Mowbray Gore, ex-actor and now Professor of Elocution and general consultant in all oral deficiencies, repeated the teasing line as bidden with fair success and the mere stumble of transferring the aspirate from "heard," where it ought to have been, to "on," where it was superfluous.

"Good!" the Professor commented encouragingly. "Now say, 'A heart that is humble might hope for it here.'"

Mr. Pomfret, millionaire and former proprietor of the world-renowned establishment known as Samuel Pomfret & Co., did so, coming heavily to grief over the less familiar aspirates.

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“Again,” commanded Mr. Mowbray Gore, his mobile face professionally unmoved. “And don’t forget the breath before each letter H.”

“Damn the letter H!” said Mr. Pomfret.

“Don’t,” objected his tutor, speaking from the height of perfect—perhaps too perfect—elocution, and with an easy command of the baffling consonant, “it’s the most elegant letter in the alphabet. What would the English language be without it?”

“None the worse that I can see,” returned his pupil, with impatient decisiveness. “I got on very well without it for fifty years and made a million of money. The letter Haitch——”

“Aitch,” murmured the Professor.

“Aitch”—the correction was accepted doggedly—“would never ’ave ’elped me to twc-and-sixpence more.”

“Perhaps not,” Mr. Mowbray Gore observed blandly. He was a clean-shaven man of indeterminate age, with the flexible face of the actor, a wide, straight mouth, bushy eyebrows and a luxuriant head of grey hair. His manners and gestures (of which he was somewhat prodigal) were precise even to the degree of posing, while his enunciation and general speech were nicely calculated to advertise his business. “Perhaps not. But now,” he added, with a not too subtle touch of flattery, “the mastery of the troublesome letter is

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the one equipment necessary to enable you to shine with equal brilliance in another sphere. Now—'A heart that is humble might hope for it here.' "

"Is it correct to sound the aitch in 'umble," Mr. Pomfret questioned almost defiantly.

The Professor inclined his head with studied dignity. "Preferably."

"A ah-heart that is ah-humble might ah-hope for it ah-here."

"Capital!" exclaimed his tutor, with a geniality which likewise was studied. "Now, repeat, slowly at first, Herbert, hold Harry's hand while Harold hails a hansom."

A restive gleam shot from Mr. Pomfret's eyes. He had spent the most part of a busy life in ordering people about, and did not take kindly to being placed at a disadvantage and commanded to recite nonsensical formulæ by a stage failure who inhabited a so-called studio on a second floor in Bond Street and earned a more or less precarious living by showing a set of abnormally regular teeth and chewing with them every word he spoke into aggressively perfect enunciation.

"Don't see the use of that," he objected. "No man, woman or child in this world ever used so many aitches at once."

"True," Mr. Mowbray Gore admitted, with an indulgent smile. "We might as well put the

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sentence, Charles, take Tommy's arm while John calls a cab. But that would not help our fight for the aspirate."

The argument, if unpalatable, was to the point. Mr. Pomfret wisely put down his head and charged through the hedge of bristling aspirates, only to stick in the middle of it and then scramble out with a stinging sense of failure.

"Very good, very good," said the Professor encouragingly, seeing that his pupil's patience was stretched almost to snapping point. "You are decidedly improving. A few weeks will see the letter H conquered and your slave. Now we will just talk for a while for practice in being prepared for the aspirate when he comes along unexpectedly."

Mr. Pomfret nodded with a certain sense of relief; for, aspiratory deficiencies notwithstanding, he had all his life been a great talker. And it is a curious thing that most of the very successful in trade or finance are men of glib speech. The power of the tongue, acknowledged though it be, is surely underestimated, or at least, overlooked by the world. Talk—constant, fluent talk—seems to exercise the same kind of influence as lengthy, insistent advertisement. Their matter won't bear analysis, not even in the light of common-sense, but the constant hitting in the eye or ear is too much for the average man. He becomes obsessed by the persistent

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iteration, and succumbs, arguing that there must be something in that about which it is found worth while to write or talk so much.

"It is a curious thing," began Mr. Pomfret, returning to a characteristic alert geniality, "what a difference a small thing makes to a man's success. Now 'ere—ah—here—am I, got everything a man can want except this little affair of a single letter——"

"A breath you may call it," put in the Professor indulgently.

"Just so. And it does me no end of 'arm——"

"Harm."

"Ah—harm socially. If a man's got a million of money you wouldn't think his friends would care whether he knocked his aitches about or not. He can give them everything they want; the best of dinners and wines, shooting, cigars, horses, a magnificent time all round. And yet——"

"People look for the H," Mr. Mowbray Gore observed suavely. "It is a little thing which is not noticed when it is present—but which is uncomfortably conspicuous by its absence." By which speech it may be inferred that the Professor had no idea of losing a wealthy pupil before he could help it through any suggestion that his grand deficiency was negligible.

"Just so," replied Mr. Pomfret off-handedly. His commercial instincts were too keen to let him suggest

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that his tutor was indispensable. "All the same, if it wasn't for my wife and family I'd let the letter H go to—well, a certain place that can't get on without it—before I'd trouble about it. But, you see, Mr. Gore, my family are sensitive on the point."

"It is natural," murmured Mr. Mowbray Gore.

"Well, I suppose it is," said Mr. Pomfret in a tone which rather questioned why it should be. "My family"—he drew back one side of his mouth in a sarcastic grimace—"are a little bit over-sensitive, I think. It makes them shudder, they tell me, when I don't pronounce my aitches; consequently they don't like me to talk. But I always was a talker; always a good deal to say for myself, and it's 'ard——"

Mr. Mowbray Gore quickly raised his hand.

"Ah-hard—what was I saying?—'ar—ah-hard that 'aving made my pile, and being in a position to entertain my friends, I should 'ave to keep my mouth shut."

"It is hard," the Professor agreed, with a theatrically elegant gesture of sympathy. "But since you have been so well advised as to put yourself in my hands the difficulty will soon be overcome. With regard to the aspirates, which at present give you some trouble, the great thing is to look well ahead as you talk: look ahead, Mr. Pomfret, for the red lamp of the letter H. You

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are improving rapidly, but Rome was not built in a day, and you made one or two slips just now."

Mr. Pomfret threw out an impatient arm, bringing into desirable prominence his cat's-eye and diamond sleeve-links. "It's not so easy to look a—ah-head," he protested, with a lavish expenditure of breath upon the inimical consonant, "when one is in the swing of conversation and anxious to drive ah-home one's opinions."

"Quite so, Mr. Pomfret, but the habit, persevered in——"

The ex-draper was not too well-bred to interrupt another's speech when he had something himself to say.

"Curious 'ow—ah-how—some people experience more difficulty in this matter than others. Of course I don't pretend to 'ave—ah—had much education," Mr. Pomfret said boastfully, as though it were rather something to be proud of. "Went into business too early for that."

Mr. Mowbray Gore bowed acceptance of the statement with a nice suggestion of blindness to its obvious truth.

"Now, many, I may say most, of my young men, assistants, walkers, and so on, who can't 'ave ah—had much education either, for I made a rule in my ah-house of getting 'em young, they got their aitches all right, at any rate during business hours.

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I made a sign que non that all my assistants should 'ave a gentlemanly address."

"Quite so," observed the Professor, with studied, superfluous courtesy. "Perhaps the difficulty is not altogether a matter of education," he added vaguely.

"What then?" Mr. Pomfret demanded shortly.

"I should say rather one of natural enunciation," was the safe answer. "You have a large party in the house?" he asked, adroitly leaving the delicate topic.

"Ah, yes, for the election. We've rather a distinguished ah-house-party. We are going to bring Moidart in. Do you know Moidart?" Pomfret inquired, with a resumption of a naturally bragging manner.

"Only by name. Son of Lord Doveridge, is he not?"

Pomfret nodded. "I ought to 'ave ah-had this seat," he observed loweringly.

Mr. Mowbray Gore spread out his hands in the accepted gesture of sympathetic wonder. "Why didn't you, Mr. Pomfret? You of all men, I should have thought, with your stake in the county——"

Mr. Pomfret flung out his jewelled cuffs again and paced the room. "Wire-pulling! Favouritism! Influence in 'igh places!"

"High."

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"Ah-high places," repeated Mr. Pomfret, restive at being held up. "Still I 'ave—ah-have—my prospective constituency at Flaxborough, and I—ah-mean to win the seat."

"I have no doubt you will," observed Mr. Mowbray Gore, with more politeness than conviction. "And in the meantime you are doing yeoman's service to the Party by bringing in Mr. Moidart."

"I shall expect it to be recognised," Mr. Pomfret observed loftily.

"No doubt a title——"

"I would take nothing under an 'ereditary one," the great man declared. "I ah-have a sor, and, I think, the wherewithal to keep up a peerage."

"No doubt," said the Professor, hiding a tendency to sarcasm behind a flourish of courteousness.

"You'll ah-join us at luncheon? Your train does not go till 3.40," Mr. Pomfret asked patronisingly. "By the way, it won't do for any one to suspect the reason of your being ah-here," he added dubiously.

"Certainly not," was the prompt reply. "I have come down to see you on business—connected with your late firm, if you like. Gore is not a very uncommon name; we'll drop the Mowbray for the nonce," he suggested, with a graciousness which equalled his pupil's patronage.

"Yes; it would be better," said Mr. Pomfret, still

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doubtfully, as he eyed his tutor's unmistakably professional cut, with his theatrically cultivated bush of hair, and redundancy of studied gesture. A keen eye for business Mr. Mowbray Gore may have had, all the same he did not in the least look like a business man.

"Oh, I can assure you it will be all right," he protested, as he noticed his patron's hesitation. "You may trust an old professional like me to fill the part, whatever it may be. Most of my clients and pupils are a little diffident on the subject of my visits, and I play many parts, I may say, with unvarying success. A certain Member of the House of Lords whom I visit professionally elects to introduce me to his circle as an expert in works of art whom he is consulting with respect to new purchases."

"Ah, Rotherfield," promptly observed Mr. Pomfret.

"I am naturally not at liberty to mention my clients' names," said Mr. Gore, with dignity.

"No," returned Pomfret, with a knowing grin, "but I know that fellow," he went on, jealously spiteful. "'E's leather and pruneller. 'E's no business in the 'ouse of Lords. 'E 'asn't got a haitch in 'is 'ead."

Mr. Gore held up his hands in stage despair. "Mr. Pomfret! This will never do. You are

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neglecting my instructions. How can you expect to improve if you are not more careful ? ”

Indeed, his ennobled brother vulgarian had upset Mr. Pomfret's elocutionary equilibrium altogether. “ All right,” he said sullenly. “ Only I can't speak with patience of that wretched fellow.”

“ You will please to recollect that I have mentioned no names,” the Professor continued, with dignified insistence. “ Then at the country seat of another pupil I always appear as a clergyman ; a lady client receives me under the fiction of a consulting physician ; at various times I have posed as a wine-merchant, an architect, a high-class jeweller, an artist, a dentist, a landscape gardener, a yacht-builder, a journalist and a family solicitor. I say I drew the line at any suggestion of pretending to be a manicurist, a tailor, or a hairdresser. I have the dignity of my own profession to think of, Mr. Pomfret, and although I should not object to play a tailor or even a hairdresser on the stage, if the part were an effective one, yet I could not consent to proclaim myself off the boards even for ten minutes as a member of such undignified callings.”

“ Just so,” said Mr. Pomfret, scarcely smothering an obvious contempt for a talent and profession which brought comparatively so little grist to the mill. “ All the same, I can't say you're quite my

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idea of a representative of Samuel Pomfret & Co."

"Perhaps not," returned Mr. Mowbray Gore in a tone which rather suggested his taking the objection as a compliment. "Although I have always been told that whatever rôle in this connection I assume I play to perfection. Well, how would it be for me to be a political agent?"

"That might do," answered Pomfret, not very heartily. "Do you know anything of politics?" he inquired, with an air of superiority.

Mr. Mowbray Gore extended his lips and drew in his breath. "I shall say nothing about them," he replied sagaciously. "I know everything, but am not at liberty to disclose party secrets or commit myself to any opinions or pronouncements whatever."

Mr. Pomfret's face brightened considerably. "That will do. It will be ah-hetiquette not to ask you any questions. There's the gong."

And he led the way to the dining-room, wishing all the same that his tutor's aquiline nose and luxuriant head of hair had been less recognisable.

CHAPTER II

"Oh, Mr. Blandford, do tell me what are the arrangements for to-day."

Mr. Moidart's much driven private secretary set down the mass of papers with which his arms and hands were laden, and consulted a memorandum.

"Here is the programme, Lady Clanrobert. Scroop speaks at Pixworth. Inchpin talks to his own people in a barn. The political night of the savages of East Saxton is to be illuminated for once by a magic lantern with speeches slid in. The electors of Garsingham will have an opportunity of discriminating between the respective styles of Sir Herbert Higgins and a gramophone; and, of course, we have our big meeting here, with the candidate and this wonderful speaker he has discovered, Mr. Cargill, as principal orators."

Lady Clanrobert nodded approvingly. "He ought to be quite interesting. Have Mr. Moidart and his friend arrived yet?"

"No. They come by the 3.20."

"And this Mr. Cargill stays?"

"Several days, I fancy. The idea is, if he comes up to expectation, to take him round the division

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as a sort of political fiery cross. By the way, Lady Clanrobert"—the secretary sank his voice. "Mr. Pomfret wants to speak at the big meetings. Of course the result would be in every way disastrous. We don't mind using him as chairman in some of the outlying places and allowing him to advertise himself at the expense of the letter H, and talk blatant nonsense where he can't do much harm. But here, in King's Langton, it would be fatal."

"I know." Lady Clanrobert pursed her lips significantly.

"Besides, he's not in the least wanted," added Blandford.

"Which obvious fact has not the slightest weight with him, poor man," continued the lady. "I must stop him."

"If you would, Lady Clanrobert."

"It is not easy," she reflected aloud. "It requires tact to shut up one's host on his own ground. Luckily the tiresome man, like all *nouveaux riches*, is absurdly susceptible to flattery. Yes, I think you may leave it to me, Mr. Blandford."

"Thank you so much, Lady Clanrobert." The secretary gathered up his papers again, and went off with a relieved face.

Lady Clanrobert was Mr. Pomfret's guest at his newly purchased place, Prynnes Park, and indeed something more than his guest. She had, for

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certain material considerations, constituted herself his guide, philosopher, and as much of his friend as was possible between a chill-hearted, patrician woman of the world and an effusively vulgar, if wealthy, plebeian. It follows that Lady Clanrobert was poor, as aristocratic poverty goes; but what she lacked in purse she made up in shrewdness. And of that a plentiful supply was needed. It is no light thing to constitute oneself the social adviser of a parvenu family. The knowledge to be imparted is perhaps the least and most negligible of the requisite equipments for the task. For the newly rich have usually in the nature of things been used to have everything all their own way, albeit that way was strewn with the rough cobbles of vulgarity. Your self-made man is as a rule self-opinionated to the verge of offensiveness, and he does not always stop at the edge. And there is nothing more fatal to the amenities of social life than a tendency to self-assertiveness.

Then for the enterprising person who takes a self-made parvenu in hand and prepares—axe, metaphorically, in hand, to pioneer him through the jungle of deficiencies and vulgarities which interpose between him and the light of social success there is a thick, well-nigh impenetrable, stubborn generations' growth of ill-breeding to cut away. There are the foul excrescences of egotism, brag,

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bluff, ill-manners, self-advertisement, impoliteness, selfishness and the whole list of parvenu tricks (unhappily so well known) to lop away at, and so sturdy and flourishing are they that it is small wonder if the axe of aristocratic temper is turned and blunted against them.

Lady Clanrobert's many enemies would surely have found it in their shallow hearts to pity her had they known all she had to go through in the exploitation of the Pomfret family. But she had pluck and a good deal of inconsistent pride, and she never made even a wry face in public. Endless tact and shrewdness were hers; it is probable that no one in this world could have managed the bounding ex-shopkeeper better than she did, and after Pomfret himself, the management of his wife, his son and his daughter seemed mere child's play. "The millionaires' governess" and similar names the world called Lady Clanrobert; but she did not seem to mind, she had still the grand manner; and the grand manner, when it is genuine and, so to speak, hereditary, is very disarming indeed.

She had begun by making a very good bargain with her pupil, and no one could deny that she performed her part of it conscientiously (if the word may be used in connection with Lady Clanrobert), and with infinite tact added to untiring patience and vigilance.

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Lord Clanrobert did not quite approve of the arrangement—or at least affected not to countenance it—although he was not above enjoying a certain share of the emoluments. He was a thin, dapper little man, always faultlessly got-up, without a wrinkle either in his clothes or face, without even a hair of his white head or moustache out of place. He had all his wife's traditional snobbishness and grand ideas of the glory of aristocracy, quâ aristocracy, much of her sarcastic indifference to people outside her set, but none of the shrewd energy which led her to turn the aggressive invasion of vulgarity to account. He was the incarnation of pure selfishness, and spent his existence in planting himself upon the particular acquaintances who happened to have a place in the locality where at the moment he desired to be. So he flitted, self-invited, from country house to country house, paying for his entertainment from a fund of cynical anecdote and quietly sarcastic jokes, and left his consort to replenish the family coffers by her own devices. Husband and wife were perfectly affectionate, corresponded regularly and racyly, met, perhaps, half-a-dozen times a year, and bore each other's presence or absence with blue-blooded equanimity. It was more or less the custom of their class to live independently of each other, and, as Lord Clanrobert was wont to say, married couples should always

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divide their forces. A clever wife can accomplish so much more when unhampered by her husband's presence.

So here was Lady Clanrobert, a guest for an indefinite term and a very definite purpose at Prynnes Park, Mr. Pomfret's country seat. The house-party was of her choosing and contrivance; indeed, the Pomfrets would have been put to it to fill their great house without her help. In her grand manner she pervaded the establishment, brooded over the party like a tutelary genius with an unsleeping eye for the main chance, and busied herself all day with pulling, very often with a sharp jerk, the strings of her various social puppets.

"Oh, Bulstrode, do come here and advise me."

"Giving Lady Clanrobert advice suggests taking coal to Newcastle."

Bulstrode Vernon was one of the best known and, in a way, most respected men in society. He was a popular fellow, of undeniable family connections, whom everybody liked to see, or, perhaps, to be seen, in their houses and at their tables, yet of whom every one was a little, some a great deal, afraid. He was rarely mentioned without the word cynic immediately cropping up; it followed his name as naturally and almost as inevitably as the Esq. on an envelope.

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Yet Bulstrode Vernon was something more than a cynic. With him cynicism was merely one of the natural attributes of a shrewd, indeed, abnormally acute judge of human nature and character who knew more than most men of a world that is shallow, self-seeking, and rather vulgar. In fact, Bulstrode Vernon was, in his quiet way, an exceedingly clever fellow. But as he had always been well-off and a complete, if quiet, social success, his cleverness had found no outlet wider than the club and the country-house afforded. For the rest, he was a tall, good-looking man, whose rather taking laziness of manner had yet in it a suggestion of power and level-headedness. He took a broad, sensible, sometimes it seemed almost brutal, view of life; but few men and no woman ever questioned his dicta, for he was obviously a man incapable of talking nonsense. He was related to Lady Clanrobert, and it was practically as her guest that he had come down to take part in the election, with an eye at the same time to an amusing medley of character and some undeniable shooting.

“What’s the difficulty?”

Lady Clanrobert shrugged. “Oh, the usual trouble.”

“Pomfret?”

She nodded.

“Ah, I was afraid you were letting yourself in

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for more than you bargained for," he commented quizzically.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "This scarcely comes within my province. The absurd man wants to speak at the best meetings."

"Naturally. Men of his stamp always want value for their money."

"He mustn't speak—here."

"No. It would not improve Moidart's chances. How do you propose to prevent him?"

"That's my trouble. Poor Mr. Blandford is in despair. All I can think of is a little judicious flattery."

"That's it. It is always the vulnerable spot, more particularly in that class of man. Kings of cash can stand like a rock against abuse, but flattery washes them off their feet at once. And the application one can safely leave to you."

There was something in his tone which was hardly complimentary. Lady Clanrobert was well able both to see and to ignore it. Besides, Bulstrode Vernon's manner, though cutting, was never offensive. Moreover, they understood each other.

"I think I can manage that," the lady murmured. "But really I am beginning to think the man is hopelessly incorrigible."

"Commercial push and vulgarity very deeply ingrained. Your task, dear lady, is heroic. By

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the way, who was the theatrical person with the preposterous head of hair at luncheon ? ”

Lady Clanrobert smiled knowingly. “ You did not accept him as an electioneering agent ? ”

“ Scarcely. Even political bagmen get their hair cut.”

“ Well, *entre nous*, my dear Bulstrode, he is a Mr. Mowbray Gore, who comes down every week at my suggestion to try to teach our host to speak more or less like a gentleman.”

He laughed quietly. “ Ah ; I guessed something of the sort. So the proper observance of the letter H, is not included in your curriculum ? ”

Lady Clanrobert looked inclined to be offended. “ My dear Bulstrode ! Scarcely. Details are not in my line. Even if I saw the slightest chance of ever inducing our friend to speak decently. If it— interests me to constitute myself the social adviser of these poor people it is not to be imagined that I should condescend to correct the man’s verbal shortcomings any more than that I should take upon myself to make his wife’s gowns.”

“ Of course ; I know that,” he replied soothingly. “ I was thinking what a good thing it is that Moidart is married. He’d have had an uneasy time with Miss Pomfret if he had appeared here as a bachelor.”

Lady Clanrobert nodded appreciatively. “ Ethelberta has the hereditary eye for the main chance.”

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“The sort of girl that makes one rejoice, while staying in the same house with her, that one is not a matrimonial catch.”

“A clever girl,” murmured Lady Clanrobert. “There is not much I can teach her.”

“Except, perhaps, not to display quite such an unnaturally intimate acquaintance with Debrett.”

“Ah, yes. Like all her class, she overdoes it.”

“I wonder,” he observed reflectively, “the lady in question allowed you to bring down Miss Vane-Trevor, unquestionably her superior at every point.”

Lady Clanrobert looked sagacious. “These Pomfrets have not so many acquaintances in our world that they could allow themselves the luxury of shutting their doors against Horatia Vane-Trevor. Besides, Horatia is worth anything to Ethelberta Pomfret, as an object-lesson in style. It is quite amusing to watch the poor girl trying to imitate her. They are great friends—as friends go—already; Ethelberta takes care of that.”

“Obviously,” Vernon said, with lazy amusement. “I have got much to learn from you, dear lady. I wonder, by the way,” he added, with a just discernible suggestion of interest under his casual manner, “whether you are going to let your niece marry Fortescue Bendish.”

Lady Clanrobert shrugged. “I have nothing to do with that,” she answered, with just a touch of

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resentment at the implication of, perhaps interested, match-making. "Horatia is scarcely a girl to allow interference. She is no fool, and quite capable of choosing a husband for herself."

"Quite so," Vernon agreed, as deprecating futile discussion. "And I don't think," he added slowly, "that she cares for our friend, Bendish."

"You don't?" Lady Clanrobert questioned sharply.

"No," he answered, with lazy conviction. "I don't."

CHAPTER III

THE Hon. John Moidart, the candidate, and Hugh Cargill, the telling speaker whom the party organisers at headquarters had lately discovered, arrived duly by the 3.20 at King's Langton. Moidart was a round-faced, big-limbed Briton of a not unusual type; jovial, affable, with plenty to say for himself in private life and with a somewhat halting diction in public. An all-round sportsman who had taken to politics because he had the reversion of a seat in the House of Lords and had healthy ideas of citizenship which he fatuously considered pointed to the desirability of occupying the interim by sitting in the Commons—while he had the chance, as he naïvely put it, of seeing some fun before being sent upstairs to bed.

His companion was a good-looking fellow of twenty-eight or thirty, with a keen, intellectual face, and a suggestion of strong feeling and alert resource under his quiet, almost contemplative, manner. As they walked down the station platform the two men were vividly in contrast as representatives of the two types of strength, mental and physical. There

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were possibilities, infinite possibilities, in Cargill; in Moidart, there was nothing that was not manifest at a glance. One man was a mine, the other a show-case.

As they were about to pass through the door leading to the booking-office, and so out to the dog-cart which awaited them, a voice, a very distinct and exactly modulated voice, cried, "Cressingham!"

Cargill turned at the sound and found himself face to face with Mr. Mowbray Gore, whom the same dog-cart had just brought in from Prynnes Park.

"What, Cressingham, old man!" exclaimed the professor of elocution. "I thought I could not be mistaken. And what are you doing in this part of the world?"

The momentary flush and embarrassment which the somewhat *voyant* greeting had called up to Cargill's face passed away. He made a step forward and took the ex-actor's outstretched hand. Moidart had turned and witnessed the greeting in some surprise, which, with the tact of his class, he instantly suppressed, and strolled on to the outer door, to fall into the arms of his effusively anxious election agent.

Mr. Mowbray Gore, after the manner of his calling, wrung Cargill's hand with much unnecessary effusiveness. "Why, old man, I haven't heard of or seen you for ages. Have you left the profession?"

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He was no longer playing the professor. His somewhat theatrical dignity had, at sight of an old comrade, given place to a showy bohemianism.

"Yes," Cargill answered quietly. "I left the profession some time ago."

Mr. Mowbray Gore looked disappointed, almost hurt.

"No? Come," he remarked in a tone of remonstrance, "that is a pity. You had a career before you, my boy. A big career, if I know anything. What made you do that? Come into property?" And he glanced comprehensively at Cargill's get-up, stepping back theatrically that he might take him in from his boots to his hat.

Cargill laughed. "Not I. I'm pretty nearly as poor as ever. So poor that I often think of going back to the stage."

A group of two porters and a ticket-collector who were watching the colloquy with interest were made unerringly aware by Mr. Mowbray Gore's expression and gesture that the sentiment uppermost in his mind was remonstrant surprise.

"Why don't you then, dear boy?" he cried, throwing out both arms. "A charming profession. Why don't you? If ever a man had a chance of big things in it, it was you. Why not, dear boy? Why not?"

"Perhaps," answered Cargill, with a smile, his

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quiet manner in strong contrast to the other's pantomimic, "it is because I have an idea that I may do something in another line."

Mr. Mowbray Gore had raised his eyebrows incredulously. That a man who could do big things on the stage should seek another platform for the display of his abilities was inconceivable. He set his teeth, drew back his lips and took in a hard breath. "Of course, my boy, you know best," he said in a tone which intimated that he was prepared to drop all further interest in his former associate. "If you know anything better than the profession from either a financial or an artistic point of view, all right. But"—he inspired deeply through his clenched teeth again—"I should doubt it. Have a drink?" he concluded, with a royal wave of the arm towards the refreshment-room.

"No, thank you. I must be off. There's a man waiting for me."

"Staying in the neighbourhood?" the other asked, with the curiosity of under-breeding.

Cargill hesitated a moment, more from a disinclination to swagger over his old comrade than from reticence. "Prynnes Park," he answered, half turning as though to move off.

It was borne in upon the watching group on the platform that the gentleman with the redundant head of hair was the subject of considerable surprise.

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"Prynnes Park!" he exclaimed theatrically. "Why, my dear boy, that's where I've just come from."

Cargill wondered what had been the ex-actor's business there, but did not ask. Mowbray Gore, with a stagey glance round as though to be sure they were not overheard, came close to him and said mysteriously, "My part at the Park is in the highest degree confidential. You won't give it away, dear boy, if we should happen to meet there next week. A little matter of business, Cressingham. I give you the hint," he went on, coming still closer. "Professional adviser to the big man, you understand. Diction, etcetera, a little——" he made a wobbling motion with his hand. "Placed himself in my hands, and I think that if any one can put him right—well, you know, dear boy, elocution was always my strong suit. But Pomfret is sensitive on the point of my *raison d'être*. You take me?"

"All right," Cargill answered, with a smile of genuine amusement; "you may trust me. And perhaps, Gore, in return you won't say more than may be necessary on the subject of our touring experiences. I'm Hugh Cargill in future, not Cressingham. I am going in for politics: and the highly respectable British Philistine, of whatever degree, is a little suspicious of a man who has ever dabbled in any of the arts."

With a superfluously expressive pantomime of

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secrecy, Mr. Mowbray Gore assured him that the freemasonry of art should prevail over every other consideration, and with another effusive handshake he was about to bend his solitary steps towards the refreshment-room when he suddenly called Cargill back and said, "By the way, you know, I suppose, that Miss de Mertens, who used to be with us, has had a big success and is going"—Mr. Mowbray Gore made an expressive gesture skywards—"to the top?"

"No," Cargill replied. "I had not heard it."

Mr. Mowbray Gore drew back in pitying surprise. "Oh, my dear boy, you have dropped out. Why, she has been starring with our old friend, Dan Roderick, knocking them right and left, turning crowds away, with the result that Basil Newton has taken the Thespis for her and she's going to be another Sarah Bernhardt."

He emphasised the news by impressive taps on Cargill's chest.

"I am glad to hear," Hugh remarked quietly, "that some one of our old friends is a success."

"Success!" Mr. Mowbray Gore exclaimed, with a gesture and facial contortion expressive of the utter inadequacy of the word. "My boy, she's a wonder. Mark my words. The de Mertens will take London by storm. She'll be the biggest hit we've known in our time."

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“ I should not be surprised.”

Mr. Mowbray Gore screwed up his face and made graphic play with his hands. “ There’s a something about her—a suggestion of mystery, of almost uncanny power that is just what is wanted to set all London mad. Personality, my boy, personality is nine-tenths of success. And she’s got more of that than any woman we’ve ever met, eh ? Hard as nails when it suited her, but ”—he screwed his face knowingly—“ she had a soft place in her heart for you, old man.”

“ I was not aware of it,” Cargill replied, with a little constrained laugh.

“ The only one in the company that wasn’t, then,” Gore returned, with a knowing nod. “ Well, a man might do worse than ally himself with a big success, and the de Mertens is going to be phenomenal.”

Cargill rejoined Moidart, whom he found fidgeting at his fussy agent’s volubility. “ That’s right ; come on,” he cried, with an air of relief. Then he introduced the star of the night’s meeting off-handedly to the agent, and climbed into the dog-cart. “ Come across a friend ? ” he asked casually as they drove off.

“ Yes,” Cargill answered ; “ a fellow I met when knocking about the world.”

Moidart took his eyes for a moment off the horse

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to glance curiously at his companion. "Looked rather theatrical," he remarked suggestively.

"Yes : he has been on the stage," Cargill replied in a tone which made Moidart drop questioning on the subject.

Cargill was wise to be somewhat reticent with regard to the past ; wise, that is, keeping in view, with a certain common-sense which underlay his more brilliant qualities, the prejudices and class narrow-mindedness of the set with whom he now found himself brought in contact. For let people boast as they will of a now-a-days enlightened breadth of view ; let them pour, as they say, cold water over the dying ashes of the Feudal System, there is yet, deep down in the hearts that are fed by even a few lingering drops of Norman blood, a predilection for that law of caste which looks down from the ruined watch-tower of its own aristocracy of race and breeding upon that of art and intellect. He had had a hard fight, and could scarcely even yet look upon himself as the victor, although there were signs that the Red Foe was inclined to fall back before him.

On his father's death the support of his mother and sister had devolved upon him, or at least it was imperative that he should not be a burden upon the widow's slender means. He had, by what seemed at the first blush a piece of luck, become secretary

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to a bumptious parvenu M.P., and for two years he had composed his speeches, sent out his advertisements and run his errands, to be treated like a valet in private and like a footman in company. Sick at length of trying to graft cultivated language on a coarsely illiterate stock, and in danger of breaking both health and temper under the stress of incessant work and insult (for the honourable member knew how to take out his money's-worth), Cargill had on a vulgar display of temper from his employer, consequent on that estimable person having been made a fool of in the House both by himself and by an irritated Under-Secretary, whom he for advertising purposes had proposed to interrogate, walked out of the showy house in Brook Street never to return. Then, having come to the end of his resources, he drifted on to the stage through the introduction of an old school-fellow and sympathiser who was making a few pounds a week in that calling. It was a rough experience among not altogether desirable companions, but at least, as he told himself, it was a free life. Far better than shivering or baking (according to the season) in a fireless, airless back room, working his brains to bolster up a blatant vulgarian, a disgusting excrescence on our political and social life which called, not for cultivation, but for lopping off.

With the change of life he regained his health and

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consequently his energy. It was not long before he made his mark on the boards, for he had much in his favour. A handsome, interesting face, a good figure, a telling voice, and behind them all a clever brain. Still, it was but a second-rate touring company in which he found himself, and the recognition of his success was not likely, except by chance, to be taken up by influential managers. That chance seemed never coming, and Hugh Cargill, ambitious and, without vanity, believing himself worthy of better things, of a worthier success on a higher plane, began to weary of the second-rate bohemianism, the loose morality, the vulgar banalities of stage life. Poor and almost friendless though he was, his calling had the effect of making him feel an outcast. He told himself that were he to meet an old acquaintance in another walk of life they would both, for the same reason, viewed from opposite points, be inclined to avoid each other.

He did meet one; a man of some influence in the world of politics, who had known and pitied him during his service under the objectionable M.P. This man, Jasper Thornford, had strolled into the theatre of a provincial town to which electioneering business had taken him, and recognising Cargill in the theatrical Cressingham, had sought him out when the play was over, carried him off to supper at his hotel, and presently asked him bluntly whether

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he thought he was fit for nothing better than greasing his face every night and spouting another man's pretentious fustian or going through depressing farcical antics and absurdities for the amusement of a crowd of provincial illiterates.

"You are throwing yourself away, my dear Cargill," he concluded, "and it is sad to see it. You who used to turn out a capitally telling speech for that impossible bounder, Sampson."

"Much good that did me," Cargill interjected, with a touch of bitterness.

"Because you had the bad luck to fall into the hands, not merely of a sweater, but of a political charlatan of no sort of influence whatever. Your line of country is to speak, not to write speeches for other people, even if they are capable of repeating them coherently, which Sampson never could."

"I dare say," Cargill replied. "But I could not afford to do that. The stage may not compare with the House, but at least it gives me butter to my bread."

"Isn't it uncommonly like margarine?" Thornford rejoined dryly. "You may talk about the dignity of the stage, but at best it is a profession for a showman rather than for a gentleman, and experience proves that a man succeeds or fails there according to the amount of the showman's instinct he has in him. Now, what is the greatest power in

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the world? Is it not the power of the tongue? Ask yourself whether you who possess that talent are not wickedly hiding it under the tawdry trappings of the playhouse."

Cargill did ask himself that question, with the result that, after another interview with his friend, he began to look forward to breaking his connection with the stage. He was strengthened in this resolve by receiving the news that his sister had become engaged to a well-to-do man who was more than willing that their mother should share his home, thus leaving Hugh with no one but himself to provide for. Before long the energetic Thornford found a berth for him in the central office of the Party, where organisation work was to be supplemented by platform speaking, and with the reception of the offer Hugh Cargill bade his theatrical chief, one Roderick, an affectionate farewell, and with something of relief saw the curtain fall upon Henry Cressingham's last appearance.

As a platform speaker he had jumped at once into a success. He possessed a natural gift for putting facts and arguments in a telling way. He had, moreover, an effective style and delivery, and his stage experience proved of great service in enabling him to grip a popular audience. Indeed, it was in this respect that he rose manifestly superior to his rivals in the same line, if not to all but the most

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practised orators among the prominent politicians of the day.

And so a change had indeed come over his life. The effective speaker through whom feeble rhetoricians in the persons of M.P.'s in esse and in posse could vicariously deal out striking party arguments and trenchant perorations became much sought after, from Caithness to Cornwall. So the demoralising Sunday journeys, dismally enlivened by low-comedy "wheezes" and green-room anecdotes, were exchanged for luxurious political progresses; the shabby lodgings with their sordid surroundings and suspicious landladies gave place to great, and often historic, houses with noble hostesses, the free-and-easy bohemianism of behind the scenes to important political gatherings leavened by brilliant platforms crowded with county grandees. It was an exciting life for a man of Hugh Cargill's upbringing and traditions, and one in which he might easily have lost his head. For applause by night with flattery and deference by day is intoxicating food even to one born in the purple.

But to his credit he kept his modesty and his head. He never presumed and never swaggered, even when a boast might have been justifiable; and his absence of "side" made him as many friends as his eloquence. Perhaps it was that his innate common-sense never allowed him to shut his eyes

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to his true position, to the fact that his present success had no solid foundation, and that his name and place in the world were yet to be made. For the moment he was in the great world, but not of it, a mere honorary member of that exclusive club which throws open with a fine air of welcome its vestibule to outsiders distinguished by their brains or their means, but keeps its inner door jealously shut against them.

In another and more delicate quarter, too, Cargill's behaviour had been irreproachable. His was the fascinating personality not merely of good looks, but of attractive cleverness, of persuasive speech. And it was inevitable that in his excursions he should meet many pretty girls, high-born, well-dowered, impressionable. Nevertheless not the sharpest-eyed dowager, putting expectation before evidence, had as yet detected in the prepossessing guest a disposition to make the most of his chances. Had they been forestalled? Mowbray Gore had hinted at an attachment in their old theatrical company. But if it existed it had been one-sided. If the strange, inscrutable, almost bizarre genius who called herself Camille de Mertens had conceived a predilection for the handsome young fellow-player who stood in a class alone from the rest, he had never given her the opportunity for declaring it. She was, perhaps, too much of a mystery for a man in his

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position to think of seriously as a wife, and for the rest Cargill had set his face resolutely against the loose morality of stage life. Probably the sharp eyes in the company were not deceived. There are a thousand ways in which a woman can hint, a thousand by which she can betray, a liking for a man. But what had apparently been patent to all but him, Cargill had, at least, ignored.

CHAPTER IV

THAT night Cargill established himself as a success in the King's Langton division. He made a rousing speech with just that touch of bonhomie in it which appeals to a mixed audience. It was a well-practised effort, altered to suit local requirements, and brought up to the date of that morning's political news, and it made an unquestionable hit. Moidart, who had taken his ally somewhat on trust, was gratified and jubilant, even though necessarily thrown into the shade; the local party organisers were enthusiastically hopeful, and demanded breathlessly that if the seat was to be won, this Rupert of the platform should be retained in the division and sent round to all its outlying centres.

At supper that night, Cargill was the object of flattering congratulations from all the Prynnes Park house-party. He had been received in the afternoon graciously enough, but with just that touch of distance which might be expected to be shown to a professional stranger, say a consulting physician, or any guest entertained for a particular object.

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Pomfret had naturally been inclined to patronise him as a poor devil who lived by his tongue and his wits. But then Pomfret's gauge for every man was the plutometer with the index marked in tens of thousands. Lady Clanrobert who never made the mistake of snubbing a man who lived by his brains, provided these means of support were unimpeachable, was almost winningly gracious in her reception of one who probably would go far, and possibly might be of use to her. She was not one of those stupid, short-sighted people who defer being friendly until the moment they want to ask a favour or a service. "That is a fatal mistake," she was wont to declare to her pupils. "A clever man or woman must live most in the future, much in the present, and not at all in the past. Single out people who may possibly be of use to you hereafter and hold them in a gentle state of cultivation. Keep the ground tilled so that the seed can be sown at any moment."

So the astute lady had quite successfully masked any sense of superiority of caste, any tendency to stiffness, and had received Cargill with even slightly more cordiality than she had shown to his companion Moidart.

When the meeting had ended, one of the first to congratulate Cargill on the part he had borne in it was Horatia Vane-Trevor, Lady Clanrobert's niece.

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They had chatted a little in the afternoon and had perhaps mutually admired each other. Each was, indeed, different from the usual run of men and women they were accustomed to meet. In Captain Bendish's eyes Miss Vane-Trevor was a handsome heiress, a decided catch. Hugh Cargill, knowing nothing of her wealth, saw in her a girl in whom, beneath the reserve which so often takes the form of rather cold small-talk, lay a depth of infinite sensibility and sympathetic charm. He in turn seemed to her a welcome change from the orthodox young man of her set, turned out on the Eton or Harrow model, a slave to class traditions, usually a good fellow *au fond*, but either dull or conceited—often both. Cargill was obviously a clever man, but with the sense, or perhaps the pride, that scorns to be vain of the talent Heaven has lent. He was absolutely natural, yet too alert and experienced ever to allow his naturalness to become naïveté. And so they had talked easily, as chance acquaintances, with a pleasant sense of freshness which took all sense of the mechanical from the conversation.

Lady Clanrobert taking it in, told herself that there was nothing to fear; Cargill was but a passer-by, and Horatia no fool. Captain Bendish once or twice looked uncomfortable enough to call forth a subtly reassuring remark from the astute woman of the world. She knew the danger-point in matters

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of that sort as unerringly as an experienced physician will in a patient's condition. Fortescue Bendish, too, had a good deal of quick shrewdness, but the affair in which he was now engaged, namely the winning of the heiress, was too near a consideration to allow him to regard the fluctuation of his chances with a level head. He had had the good fortune and, be it added, the good sense, to enlist Lady Clanrobert on his side in the undertaking. Certainly that clever schemer could not have supposed that a debt-driven captain in a crack cavalry regiment, whose income had failed to keep pace with and was now fairly out-distanced by his mode of life, voluntary and compulsory, was anything like a good match for such a girl as Horatia Vane-Trevor. But there were other considerations which weighed with the self-seeking lady more heavily than her niece's future. There was a certain honourably understood arrangement between them—if the word honour may be used in such a connection—the Clanroberts were poor, and Captain Bendish had promised that his gratitude should take a practical form. Lady Clanrobert believed in the main chance, and just now the main chance represented her immediate bank-balance rather than her niece's future welfare.

Naturally Bulstrode Vernon saw the tactics and was watching them with a certain lazy amusement. Indeed it was a game which in his lounging existence

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he had seen so often played that it failed to stir in him more than a languid interest.

“Is Forty Bendish the best you can do for Miss Vane-Trevor?” he inquired one day of his wily relative, with a touch of humorous expostulation.

Lady Clanrobert knew her questioner too well to attempt to deny her share in the scheme. “Captain Bendish is quite eligible,” she replied in a corresponding tone. “At least, I think so. Have you anything against him?”

“Nothing,” he assured her promptly. “Forty and I have always hit it off very well. I’d as soon stand next to him covert-shooting as to any man I know. But covert-shooting isn’t matrimony.”

“The same good qualities tell in both,” murmured the lady a little vaguely.

“No doubt. Still it doesn’t follow they’ll be present in both,” Vernon returned dryly. “The most punctilious man I ever knew about taking his birds and leaving his neighbours theirs, exactly reversed the process with his wives—for he lived to have three.”

Lady Clanrobert abandoned the sporting parallel.

“I think Horatia and Captain Bendish eminently suited personally to each other,” she declared.

Vernon bowed his head in limited agreement. “Miss Vane-Trevor is lovely; and Forty is always a spectacular success. Although——”

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“ Yes ? ”

“ I can never quite bring myself to admire a man, however splendid, whose get-up is, I am sure, not paid for, from his polo-boots to his cigarette-holder.”

“ Horatia can happily put that right,” Lady Clanrobert remarked, in a tone so decisive as to obscure the meanness of the sentiment.

“ I don't play polo, but I'm glad I can afford a gold-cased cigarette-tube and various other necessary luxuries without having to marry for them—both for the lady's sake and my own,” Vernon drawled with a complex twinkle in his grey eyes.

It happened that Miss Vane-Trevor and Cargill were neighbours at supper after the meeting. He interested her, this man who, having swayed that great packed, excited audience as he would, for a good hour, carrying it with him, making it echo and thrill with his scorn, his humour, his enthusiasm, working it gradually but surely up to the point of exaltation and conviction where he meant to leave it; with its tumultuous applause still ringing in his ears, now sitting quietly, deferentially beside her, with no more excitement, no more suggestion of being “ above himself ” than if he had been one of the silent, numskull squires on the platform. So quiet the man was; so quiet; and yet the power was there. Yes; he was a power; destined to be a force in politics, or indeed in any profession he might

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take up, and here he was chatting to her so easily, ministering to her wants as attentively as an ordinary dance-supper companion.

Pomfret, the host, had been allowed to second a vote of thanks, and had stumbled through three inapt sentences with a dire havoc among the aspirates; for which effort he had been rewarded by a cutting reprimand from his daughter, and had thereupon fallen foul, in no measured language, of the absent Mr. Mowbray Gore. Yet here he was bragging about his deplorable exhibition as though it had been the speech of the evening.

"Mr. Cargill does not talk about his speech," Lady Clanrobert pointed out to him in her rôle of social tutor.

Mr. Pomfret was somewhat restively amenable to Lady Clanrobert, being dependent on and a little afraid of her; but, as a self-made man, he could seldom bring himself to bow before a superior force without a show of fight. "I don't ah-hold with so much modesty," he replied contentiously. "Especially in a young fellow like that with his way to make. You see nobody is taking any notice of him now."

Lady Clanrobert was rather under the impression that one young lady was taking a good deal of quiet notice of the object of their talk, but she kept her thoughts to herself, with a casual glance in the

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direction of Captain Bendish. "I don't know what you expect us to do," she returned playfully. "Surely Mr. Cargill has had as many congratulations already as the greediest speech-maker could wish for."

"Well," rejoined Pomfret, "I believe in advertisement. Have always found it pay. And a good article needs it just as much as a bad one."

Lady Clanrobert looked as though she was far from agreeing with the application of that banal theory; but she was not concerned to argue it. Her business was to give hints; she could hardly be expected to see that they were taken.

"You are going to speak at other meetings down here?" Horatia inquired of her companion.

"I have been asked to stay and go the round of the constituency," Cargill answered.

"And you will?" If he looked for an advocacy of the invitation in her question he was disappointed. There was just a show of interest, nothing more.

"If Mr. Moidart can arrange it at headquarters I shall be most happy to stay and see him through the contest," he answered. "Otherwise I am due to speak in Staffordshire on Saturday."

"You like the life?" she asked. "I mean," she added quickly, "you go about the country speaking a great deal, don't you?"

He made a rueful face smilingly. "Rather more

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than I quite care for sometimes. Oh, yes; I like it. The life is full of change; even in its sameness it is never monotonous. One meets a great many charming and interesting people, and occasionally makes what one hopes may be a genuine friendship."

"Occasionally?" She repeated the word in a sort of questioning comment.

"It is not always like this," he replied, with a slight gesture to indicate the crowded and rather too brilliant supper-table.

"I suppose not," she said, with a quick, irresistible glance at their loud-tongued host. "Mr. Moidart is a good fellow," she went on, "and you have served him well to-night. I should think you have made a friend there."

"I hope so," Cargill replied quietly. "I feel sure of it, although it does not always follow."

"Has your experience made you a cynic?"

"Heaven forbid. And if it had, Moidart is scarcely an object for cynicism."

Perhaps not. Yet at that very moment Moidart was saying to his neighbour, "Yes; he's a deuced fine speaker; simply magnificent. Can't imagine where he gets all his ideas and his language from. Curious chap too. Forgathered at the railway station to-day with a most appalling bandit, a weird person with long hair. Actor of some description. Been on the stage, shouldn't wonder—our friend,

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I mean—that's where he gets his tricks of the trade from."

"You are going into Parliament yourself?"
Horatia asked Cargill.

"Perhaps; one day; when I can afford it."

"You are fond of politics?"

"I think they are worthy of better uses than to be the stepping-stones for any vulgar parvenu who wants to buy a title, for every pushing lawyer who covets ermine."

"Hush!" She held up, with a laugh, a warning hand.

"Ah, I forgot. How stupid of me. I might have understood. Happily my voice is not as loud as his."

"It is good," she resumed, "to find a believer in the nobler side of politics."

"One must," he argued, "unless one would be an unconscionable hypocrite. At the same time one has often to take ignoble ways to noble ends."

"Necessarily?"

"It is unhappily the case, at least for a poor man. To move a mercenary world one must have a lever either of gold or of——"

"Eloquence?"

He smiled deprecatingly. "I was going to say of expediency."

Her look hardened a little as though the word

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jarred upon her. "Expediency?" she repeated, with a suspicion of scorn behind the interrogation.

"I mean," he explained, "that a man must serve before he can lead, creep before he can fly. High ideals are but vain imaginings unless they can be moulded into practical shape; and for that process rude instruments are necessary. One must catch the ear of the public, not by talking above its head but by labouring to speak the language it best understands. A man's work must illuminate his name before his name can dignify his work. That is what I meant by expediency."

"Yes; I see." The critical look on her face was softened away now. She seemed drawn to him by an interest which held her in spite of herself, in spite of the predisposition of her class breeding to regard men outside her own sphere as but part of the passing show, much as the glory of scenery is viewed from a railway-carriage.

"In politics—I hope I am not boring you——?"

"No, no," she assured him, with unmistakable frankness; "please go on."

"In politics a man with ambition to be a statesman rather than a politician must make himself a power before he can hope to deal the slightest blow at wrong, to elbow an inch of way for right. Many men think they can begin at once, as nobodies, to reform abuses; that they will surely succeed,

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for they are busy and energetic, and that they will, incidentally, make themselves in the process. They simply begin at the wrong end, and are rewarded for their pains by their neighbours' contempt and their own sense of failure. The world is full of men who are beating the air, hammering and pushing at a door they cannot move because they have no weight behind them."

"I understand," she said thoughtfully. "You are happy in having the self-control to master a natural impatience. But would it not be an economy of time to wait in the House rather than outside?"

"Certainly," he agreed. "But unfortunately the House of Commons is at present shut to me. I mean," he added in response to her look of inquiry, "I am a poor man."

"Many people would say that was in your favour," she said, a little awkwardly, feeling she had driven him to a delicate avowal.

He laughed. "It is easily said, and a comfortable theory for those to hold whom it does not touch. But it is hard to have to mortgage one's field to buy the grain to sow it with."

The ladies rose and the subject came to an end.

"Mr. Cargill seemed to interest you, dear," Lady Clanrobert said pleasantly to her niece as they were parting for the night.

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"He is an interesting man," Horatia replied simply.

"People of that sort usually are," the astute lady remarked not quite so pleasantly. "It is their business to play their personalities for all they are worth; to make an impression wherever they go."

"Considering all things I should say Mr. Cargill is a singularly unassuming man," Horatia returned. She was too frank and straightforward herself not to feel a certain inward recoil from her aunt's innuendoes and habitual crafty speech.

"No doubt, my dear, he knows how to play his cards," Lady Clanrobert observed sagaciously. "He is decently educated. One could tell that from his language on the platform to-night. But Moidart tells me that they met that actor person, Mr. Mowbray Gore, at the station to-day and it turned out that he and this Mr. Cargill were old comrades. It appears the man has been an actor."

"Yes, auntie?" For Lady Clanrobert had paused after delivering the shot.

"Well, at election times one has to keep open house for all sorts of queer, if useful, people. But, if one may give you a hint, dear, it does not do to get too friendly with them."

"There is no danger of that," Horatia returned a little haughtily.

"Of course not," her aunt agreed hastily. "Only

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one cannot be too careful. One is apt to forget that they are outsiders, and to treat them as one would one's own set. And it is their nature to take advantage of any little attention one may show them."

"I hardly think that of Mr. Cargill. But I will remember what you say," Horatia replied, almost coldly, as she put an end to the discussion by lightly kissing her aunt's artificially smooth cheek, and bidding her good-night.

CHAPTER V

"It seems to me," said Mr. Pomfret ill-humouredly, "that I, who am providing everything for this business and shelling out pretty liberally, am expected to efface myself in my own house."

"It is quite the wise thing to keep quiet while you are feeling your way," Lady Clanrobert replied with calm decisiveness.

"I'm to pay all the expenses and let other people run the show," he remonstrated querulously.

"If they can run it better than you, my dear Mr. Pomfret, why not?" she said sweetly.

"Can they?" he questioned, with a grimace that was not courtly. "I've run one for thirty years with pretty considerable success."

"Everyone knows that," the lady rejoined, with a covert sneer in the words. "But," she added, condescendingly persuasive, "when will you learn that Prynnes Park is not a draper's shop?"

"I don't say it is," he returned doggedly. "But, for all the fun I'm getting out of Prynnes Park and its two thousand acres, I might as well be back in

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Oxford Street. When I closed my books on a fortune and retired it wasn't with the idea of retiring to my own coal-cellar and letting a lot of paper swells have the run of my place."

"You are impatient, my dear Mr. Pomfret," Lady Clanrobert observed suavely. "I am anxious that, as you have put yourself under my guidance, you should not make the mistake, as so many newly rich people have to their cost, of supposing that even the cleverest man can give up business for society, step from the counter to a Mayfair drawing-room, without any preliminary training. Those who have tried it, well—take the Brockleys."

"Oh, those people," Pomfret cried with infinite contempt, "'e's a 'orrid—ah-horrid bounder, always was a snob—ah-he went in for the Paris business; buying for francs and selling for guineas, corresponding number. Big profits, while they last. Then they tried to work their aristocratic customers socially. Presented 'alf-a-dozen peeresses with their overdue accounts receipted in exchange for invitation cards to big ah-houses. I know."

"Naturally," said Lady Clanrobert, "they did not get a second. If they had put themselves into judicious hands, and not wanted to take society by storm they might by this have claimed quite a decent position. Unfortunately they pushed their way into a ball at Lancaster House under the im-

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pression that the Duchess would forget that they had dunned her for their account. Yes; it was injudicious and could only have one result."

"Our ah-house never gave credit to anybody, let alone duchesses; so that won't 'appen to us," observed Mr. Pomfret.

"I should hope not," Lady Claurobert replied. "People in business who have possible social aspirations would do well to conduct their business with that view, and not as mere tradesmen," she added, with a judicial touch.

"It is astonishing how the business sticks after it has ah-had ample time to fall away from us," Pomfret observed, a little sourly.

"Only natural," his mentor replied, with a smile of superior sagacity. "Hardly surprising, is it, when you consider the pains you have taken and the money you have spent in advertising? You can make a name in six months which it will take a generation to lose."

"That's true enough," Pomfret agreed, the dictum appealing to his business sense. "I'd give a good deal to lose it, though; for the sake of the family at least. It's very awkward for them, especially for Mortimer and Ethelberta, when the conversation turns on shops and shopping. . . . people will call it. We in business never talk about a shop; it is always the 'ouse."

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"The—er——?" Lady Clanrobert could be irritatingly dense sometimes.

"The ah-house," Pomfret repeated testily. She knew well enough what he meant, and he did not pay her to correct his aspirates. "Curious," he went on snappishly, "how some people who set great store by their manners are pleased to throw things up at a man."

"That," returned Lady Clanrobert, suavely ignoring the immediate and personal application, "is the way of the world. It is, I am afraid, my dear Mr. Pomfret, inevitable. People are not going to see you enjoying all the good things of life, many of which they themselves cannot afford, without letting you see pretty plainly they know where—how you came by them."

"It doesn't strike me as being quite good manners."

"Perhaps not. But then, you see, it is understood in society that there are occasions and circumstances in which a certain latitude in what is called 'form' is permissible."

"When a person is enjoying your hospitality, for instance?" Pomfret suggested sarcastically.

"It all depends," the lady replied, quite unruffled. "Not, of course, on that account, but perhaps because that is the time when it would be most likely to happen."

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"The last occasion when it should ah-happen, I take it," Pomfret declared with conviction.

"No doubt," Lady Clanrobert assented graciously.

"Then, you must recollect, my dear Mr. Pomfret, that it is the best-mannered men who can be the rudest when it suits them."

"Oh?"

"Yes," his instructress assured him. "Your bluff, blunt man of no particular manners is never very rude. Perfect manners require a higher form of intellect, and intellect can be very cruel and cutting when its sense of propriety is offended.

"I see," said Pomfret, a little out of his depth, and reduced almost to silence. In Oxford Street he might have been a match for the shrewd, voluble peeress; at Prynnes Park he could make no way against her.

"Take two men, the very antitheses of each other," she continued. "Mr. Moidart and my husband. Mr. Moidart is rough and tactless; for a man in his position comparatively boorish, yet I don't suppose he was ever intentionally rude to anyone in his life. Lord Clanrobert has the manners of a Dufferin, coupled with the most exquisite tact, he is sensitive and witty, yet there is no man in England with greater power to sting a person whose pretensions he dislikes."

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"I'm glad he didn't decide to come here with you," Pomfret laughed grimly.

"Oh, Clanrobert never falls foul of my friends," that amiable peer's wife assured him, omitting to add, however, the reason, which was that he took care to give them a wide berth, although he was not above accepting a share of the emoluments his wife derived from their friends' "pretensions," and spending it in more congenial company whose manners did not irritate him into employing that terrible sting of his.

"I was going to suggest," the lady resumed, finding her eulogy of her preferably absent husband received in a tone which seemed to lack that spirit of reverence due from a retired tradesman to a peer of long standing and many quarterings, "that the best way of meeting people who may find an objectionable pleasure in twitting you with the—er—house, as you call it, is to take the wind out of their sails by never trying to make any secret of it. Once boldly take up the line of declaring that you are the Samuel Pomfret, late of Samuel Pomfret & Co., of Oxford Street, and what more can they have to say on the subject? But try to ignore it, let people see that you are sensitive on the point and—well, we know human nature, my dear Mr. Pomfret, and what a delight it takes in repeating what somebody does not want it to mention."

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"I'd do that fast enough," he said readily. "But the family wouldn't like it. Mrs. Pomfret thinks people are beginning to forget the connection, and as for Ethel and Mortimer, they never were in the ah-house, so it wouldn't be quite fair to put it on their backs now? They would object."

"Naturally, perhaps," Lady Clanrobert murmured. Somehow her innate prejudices and the jealousy of class made her not sorry for the difficulties she was paid to smooth away. "It would be a pity to handicap them. And, after all, people must forget Pomfret & Co. in time. This, of course, is scarcely more than a transition stage for you; and, properly handled, your wealth must take you far. And your children still further. Ethelberta is clever and charming, most adaptable to her new position," she added, with a sort of grudging enthusiasm.

"Clever girl, dear Ethel," her father declared, with proud conviction. "She has just the same talent for getting on in her sphere as I had in mine. And she'll take Mortimer with her. Won't she?" For Lady Clanrobert had looked dubious.

"I have no doubt she will be able to help him on immensely," she agreed, with, however, a very pointed reservation. "One would wish, nevertheless, that your son should make his own way in the social world. It would be far more satisfactory;

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and, after all, his sister can have but a limited power of helping him with men."

"We must get him into one or two good clubs," said Pomfret.

Lady Clanrobert laughed with a sort of genial pity. "My dear Mr. Pomfret! You speak as though there were no more difficulty in getting your son into a good club than in taking a stall for him at a theatre, or engaging a room at an hotel. Do you know that young Baldwin—Tudor Baldwin he calls himself—a very nice, smart young fellow, who goes about a great deal, got no fewer than fifty-one black-balls at the Chesterfield the other day. And for no other reason than that his father was a picture-dealer. They say he paid a good round sum to his proposer and seconder to put him up—I have heard it variously stated from £500 to £1000—and they both black-balled him."

Pomfret gave a short laugh of disgust. "These things are managed somehow, though. There's that fellow Tredgold, the ah-hatter, a member of the Curzon."

"Certainly they are to be managed," Lady Clanrobert assented. "But there is only one way to manage them, and that is through women's influence."

Pomfret had become too much obsessed by the necessity for gaining a footing in the social ladder to ignore the hint.

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"I'd make it worth anyone's while to get Mortimer into the Chesterfield or the Curzon. But," he added, with a business-like touch, "I should wish to defer drawing the cheque till I heard he was elected."

Lady Clanrobert smiled with an affectation of superiority and contempt for such a tradesman-like proposition. "My dear man," she expostulated, "in my position as your social adviser how often have I tried to impress upon you that commercial methods are not suited to social ends. If your son gets into the Chesterfield or the Curzon it will not be by the help of tradesmen, but by being backed by men of a very different class who would not entertain the idea of payment by results. You might as well expect them to send you in an invoice."

"I wonder then," Pomfret returned shrewdly, "they are not above taking money at all."

"It was you," the lady returned loftily, "who mentioned money, not I. Still, people now-a-days expect to receive some recognition of the sort for going out of their way to serve a stranger. You must remember," she turned sweetly to him, "that it is your class who have our estates and our money to-day. Ah, poor dear Lady Haynford! How she loved this place. I little thought in the dear old days I should know Prynnes with any hostess but her."

The change of ownership was not, however, quite

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such a crying shame as Lady Clanrobert's tone suggested. The facts being that the presumably forlorn Lady Haynford had always hated Prynnes, and, abetted by her dear friend Isabel Clanrobert, had landed Pomfret with the ill-kept acres and dilapidated mansion at a figure which made the local estate-agents mute with astonishment and envy.

"Well, shall I put the matter in train for your son?" the lady asked, meaning not to let the chance slip. "I am writing to Clanrobert to-night. His advice will be worth having as to the men who carry most weight at both clubs."

"Ah, do," Pomfret answered. "I suppose five ah-hundred for each ought to make a certainty of it in your ah-hands?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, with no great unction. "It would be a rare bargain for you. The membership of two crack clubs for a thousand guineas." She was not going to have pounds. "Of course, if there was a chance of getting a very exceptional sponsor, say a duke, one might have to suggest an increase in the figure."

"Just so," Pomfret responded, not very cordially, as he thought of what nigger work it had often cost him to make a thousand pounds.

"I was going to say," proceeded Lady Clanrobert, mentally booking the order, so to speak, "I feel it

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rather my business to give you a hint while we are on the subject of your son, that—er—he was not at Eton or Harrow, was he ? ”

“ No,” Pomfret answered, in the tone of a man who owns to not having got full value for his money, “ Mortimer wouldn’t go. Said he’d sure to be sneezed at about the business.”

“ That was a pity. Anybody can go anywhere now-a-days. And it is always worth while for a boy to go to a public school to get rid of the capital I.”

“ The capital I ? ” Pomfret echoed, wondering how many more letters of the alphabet they were to have trouble with.

“ Eton and Harrow boys never talk about themselves,” Lady Clanrobert explained, suavely.

“ Mortimer does ? ”

“ I’m afraid so. It is inevitable ; but it does not sound well. Oh, I know it is quite the usual thing with people whose—er—whose code does not forbid it. But that is no reason why you should do it. And it would make a so much better impression if your son would break himself of the habit. You know young Wainsford, the big jeweller’s son, who aspires to be a man of fashion and all the rest of it ? ”

“ In the Guards, isn’t he ? ”

“ He was. And known as First Person Singular. He has a perfect genius for turning every topic of

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conversation round to his favourite subject—himself. The Guards' mess got it on their nerves at last, and took to fining him a sovereign every time he touched on himself. Being by birth and breeding something of a Jew, this penalty went very much against the grain, and he tried hard to break himself of the habit. Failing in that—he had taken it in hand too late—he at last refused to pay his fines, on which the mess sent him to Coventry, and he had to send in his papers. He is now shooting big game in Africa, and his best friends hope he will stay there."

"Oh." Pomfret who had, from a community of conversational predilection, a certain sympathy with the military egotist, looked a little sour, disapproving as he did of so great a curtailment of choice of subjects for loquacity. "I dare say we all talk about ourselves," he admitted. "You see in business it is a question of competition and advertisement, and you're bound to push whenever you get an opening."

"It is not done in good society," his monitress assured him. "At least not so crudely. You may safely leave your wealth to speak for itself. A person in your position is not required to talk much. Conversational greediness has ruined many an otherwise promising social aspirant. Only the other evening I heard a Mr. Dehrens interrupt the

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Bishop of Tewkesbury in one of his best stories for no other purpose than to drag in some boastful and utterly uninteresting fact about himself."

"Dehrens? I know the fellow. A Jew army contractor," put in Pomfret witheringly. "What happened?"

"It was at Lady Hinchcliffe's, where the wretched man, after much striving, had been allowed to come on probation. The dear Bishop at once said good-night, and Mr. Dehrens will never be seen there again."

"Serve him right," Pomfret commented spitefully.

"Of course, it is my duty to give you these hints," Lady Clanrobert continued, driving home her stings with a smile. "May I suggest you all talk too much? In your case silence is gold, and gold is speech. Look at poor Sir John Rouch, formerly a livery stable-keeper, and, they do say, before that an omnibus-driver. He is a good listener, and by keeping his mouth shut has made himself quite popular, and got a knighthood for nothing else in particular. I am told one meets everybody at his dinners, which are almost the best in London; he never speaks unless he is obliged, and then always asks a question. The moral is obvious and worth consideration."

And Pomfret, the voluble ex-tradesman, who

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owed all the success and the joy of his life to his tongue, seeing himself reduced, like the egregious Rouch, to a golden note of interrogation, fell into an uncomfortable silence, as he weighed the enjoyment of episcopal anecdotes against the beloved sound of his own voice.

CHAPTER VI

HUGH CARGILL had proved such a success at King's Langton, and his fiery speeches so much to the taste of the electors of the division, jaded as it was with mediocre oratory, and craving more highly spiced food, that it was arranged he should remain and see the contest through, speaking at all the polling centres and more important villages. The permission to break or postpone his other engagements had been granted on the strong representations of Moidart and his agent that their chances were shaky. His opponent, Mr. Long, was a local man, solid if homely, who went about the contest in a determined, business-like fashion calculated to capture the fancy and the votes of a lower middle-class constituency. Stray M.P.'s who appeared on the scene to speak for Long made a great point of denouncing his opponent as an aristocratic carpet-bagger, the mere nominee and creature of the metropolitan wire-pullers who were really insulting the constituency by foisting upon it a mere voting automaton.

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For a time it had seemed as though Mr. Long was to have things all his own way. Mr. Pilbeam, Moidart's agent, had been in a state of fussy despair. Then Moidart brought down Cargill, and things took a turn. Common-sense and other sterling business qualities have their value and their force. They appeal strongly to the unimaginative British mind. They extort the ponderous admiration of the middle-class Philistine. They gain the sympathy and, what is more to the point, the vote, of the British workman. But they are as nothing compared to the persuasive force of a really eloquent tongue. They shrivel into impotence and oblivion under the magic touch of a natural orator whom practice has taught, like a well-trained boxer, to put his whole weight behind his hits, and who has the language and the fancy to put his adversary's case in a ridiculous light while he throws a strong glamour of attractiveness upon his own. Such was Hugh Cargill's gift, and before the notes of his silver trumpet the carefully erected structure of the worthy but prosaic Long began to totter. There was, too, a suggestion of romance about Cargill; the same could scarcely be said of Long or his backers; and a touch of romance will often influence very unromantic people.

So Cargill, taking Moidart unassumingly by the hand, led him on from triumph to triumph, and

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gradually the whole division was being brought under the spell of his fascinating tongue.

In the comparatively private life of Prynnes Park also he had established himself as an almost general favourite. It is difficult not to be attracted by a clever man who has no "sic" and never bores. Certainly Captain Fortescue Bendish did not love him, but then the gallant officer told himself that his antipathy was justified. He had a broad idea, not altogether attracted to the obliquity of vision caused by jealousy, that treacherous Vane-Trevor was more attracted by his cleverness than he cared to acknowledge, even to himself. Not that there were any of the outward signs of a flirtation between the two. Just how far Horatia admired Cargill it was impossible to gather, even by so astute a reader of the human thermometer as Lady Clanrobert. But then Horatia was a girl of manifest self-possession; her heart would have to burn very fiercely within her before the snow of her manner showed sign of melting. Still it was obvious that she liked Cargill; that she was at least interested in him; that they got on well together, although he never presumed; and the irresistible conclusion was hardly to be avoided that his coming had not improved Captain Bendish's chances.

Bulstrode Vernon saw this with a certain grim amusement. Lady Clanrobert saw it too, but was

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not amused. She was ever too keen on her schemes to indulge a sense of humour, even if she had had one. She could not lecture her niece; was shrewd enough to know Horatia would not stand it if she tried; the only thing she could do was to set herself to cut short the detrimental's stay at Prynnes.

Bendish, after a conference with her ladyship, appealed to Moidart. "Aren't you making too much of this man Cargill?" he suggested.

"Too much?" Moidart repeated in surprise. "Seems to me we can't make enough of him."

"With the result that Jack is as good as and promises to be a deuced sight better than his master," Bendish insisted. "You're getting pushed out of the picture, Moidart. After all, you are running for the seat, not Cargill."

"It strikes me Cargill is the man who is going to run me into it," the other returned. "Pilbeam told me this morning he considers I am safe now, and doesn't mind confessing that until Cargill came down it was a moral for Long."

"I dare say," Bendish assented, grudgingly. "The fellow has a useful gift of the gab, and knows how to talk to the chaws. But it seems rather feeble, doesn't it, to let him fill the whole bill and run the show?"

"Oh, Cargill's a good fellow," Moidart replied

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easily. "I've not detected any sign in him of swollen head or wanting to spread himself over the canvas."

"That's not quite the point," Bendish argued. "The question for you to consider is, which of you bulks bigger in the eye of the constituency. Naturally the fellow doesn't swagger here; he knows it would not pay."

Moidart was not quite such a fool as the other was pleased to think him. And it began to dawn upon him that Captain Bendish's anxiety was less for his political credit than for his own chances with the heiress. "It's all right, my dear fellow," he returned, in a tone of giving the last word to the discussion. "I've no fault to find with Cargill, who looks like pulling the contest out of the fire for me. It's very good of you to have my *kudos* at heart, but I want to win, and I dare say Long would not be sorry if I took your hint and dispensed with Cargill for the rest of the fight. And if I were beaten it would not be much consolation to know that I had at least kept in the centre of the picture and relegated to the background the feature which made for success."

Bendish gave a shrug as of pity for a man wilfully blind to his own interests, and fell back again upon his more interesting ally, Lady Clanrobert.

"I don't fancy," said that lady, "that Horatia

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is really *éprise*; still the man's presence is unsettling."

"I told Moidart he was making a fool of himself," Bendish said sourly; "but he did not take the hint in good part. Suggested he would rather win as a fool than lose as a man of sense."

"Not an altogether unwise resolve," was the dry comment, for it was one of Lady Clanrobert's mottoes that success justifies anything.

"If we could get him out of the house," Bendish murmured.

"I will speak to these poor people," she said, meaning the millionaire Pomfrets.

"I wish you would," he replied. "I wouldn't bother you, only I am in a fearfully tight place, and my speaking would carry no weight. Besides," he added, to preserve as well as could be the decency of the situation, "I am desperately in love with Horatia Vane-Trevor, and this turn of events is most unlooked-for."

"I will do my best for you," Lady Clanrobert assured him in a tone that satisfied him she meant it and would take care of herself at the same time.

"How are you getting on, Fort, my boy?" asked Bulstrode Vernon, coming presently upon Bendish, who was soothing his temper with one of Pomfret's Celestiales.

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"Getting on?" He glanced at his questioner and noted a certain quizzical gleam in his eye.

"Matrimonially," explained Vernon, lighting a cigar.

"Oh." Bendish smoked a moment in silence. "Can't quite make up my mind," he said, without taking the cigar from his lips.

"As to its desirability?" Vernon asked in his casual tone.

Bendish gave a short laugh. He was calculating whether it would hurt him to take the other into his confidence.

"Unfortunately I have no choice there," he answered. "I meant that I am uncertain how I stand with the lady."

"You should be the best judge of that," Vernon replied dryly. "You ought to have a good chance, especially with the aunt for an ally."

Bendish still hesitated. But Bulstrode Vernon, in spite of his tendency to mordant criticism, rather invited confidence. For one thing he was outside the running, and seemed content to view the world, its prizes and its blanks, merely as a spectator. Then he carried weight. A hint from him was always received with respect, and usually, whether it was addressed to a reckless beauty or a Cabinet Minister, set its recipient thinking. Emphatically, Bulstrode Vernon was a man who saw further than most people,

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and who had a much saner and shrewder idea than the rest of the world of things he could not quite see. And, to crown all, he was safe, quite above blabbing another man's confidence.

"I've been rather queered," Bendish declared at length, "by this fellow Cargill, whom Moidart has imported."

"I know," Vernon replied shortly. His manner, although just then far from inviting confidence, somehow compelled it.

"Women are such curious creatures," Bendish proceeded, flicking the ash from his cigar, "that we never know what to expect from them."

"All the same," Vernon returned slowly, "it might have been expected that a man like Cargill would prove attractive."

"A rank outsider," Bendish protested savagely. "Hang it all, Bulstrode, Horatia Vane-Trevor's form and breeding should have rendered him harmless."

"My dear fellow, a woman's breeding and form are impregnable outworks, but only so long as there is no traitor in the fort. When there is a desire to give admittance to the besieger they are useless."

"You mean," said Bendish sullenly, "that she is taken with the fellow?"

Vernon made a gesture of deprecation. "I don't say that. I am not in the lady's confidence. But I should not be surprised."

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Bendish looked black. "It ought to be stopped," he said viciously. "Quite apart from one's own private feelings in the matter, it ought to be barred. You must think so, Bulstrode."

Vernon laughed. "For the moment I was wondering as to the feasibility of stopping two eminently sane people from falling in love with one another. Miss Vane-Trevor is quite mistress of her actions, and likely to remain so."

"But class," Bendish urged. "Ought she to be allowed—so far as moral pressure can help it—to make a hideous *mésalliance*?"

"After all, Cargill is a gentleman."

"Of sorts," Bendish sneered. "Heaven knows what he is or what he isn't. But you don't pretend he is on the same plane as Horatia Vane-Trevor?"

"Perhaps not," Vernon replied coolly. "I am not holding a brief for him."

"I should hope not," Bendish returned somewhat tartly. "After all, we owe it to our own order to combine to warn outsiders off." His disgust and urgency were strong enough to sweep away the deference he would otherwise have felt towards the other man's higher status and stronger personality.

The fact that the other did not immediately respond to the sentiment further irritated him. "Don't you think so?" he demanded sharply.

"Certainly I do," Vernon answered casually.

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"At the same time we may not all agree upon the exact definition of an outsider."

"Possibly not," Bendish replied, with some temper. "I should hope, however, there could be no two opinions about this man Cargill."

"I think there might," Vernon objected meditatively. "Anyhow, outsiders often win both in life and on the turf. And we are apt to overlook their likely points when we have our money on elsewhere."

"In life—in our *milieu*," Bendish maintained, almost savagely, "outsiders ought to be kept outside. I am surprised that you, Vernon, of all men, should seem to hold a contrary opinion."

"I don't," he replied, smoking on coolly and ignoring the other's heat. "In theory nothing ought to be too bad for those of our class who, either through greed or stupidity, let in pushing vulgarians. But, my dear Fort, are we not sinners in that respect? Why are we here, bolstering up people like these misfits?"

"For two reasons, I take it," Bendish replied sullenly. "To dress the house for Moidart's election, and to give poor Lady Clan a lift."

Vernon laughed quietly. "Reasons which are sufficient in these opportunist days, if not exactly unimpeachable."

"It's a fair exchange," said Bendish bluffly.

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“ We are making use of the Pomfrets, and they are making use of us. If the poor man must have a big house and some thick shooting he must also have friends——”

“ At least acquaintances,” Vernon put in parenthetically.

“ Acquaintances, naturally,” Bendish accepted the correction with a sneer, “ to air his spare beds and to make up his guns. If we didn’t come—to oblige Lady Clanrobert—he would have to fall back upon his old trade friends and fellow shop-walkers and bagmen, whom he has doubtless in unmistakable fashion cut long ago; or, as a last refuge, call in actors and unmentionable Bohemians who would run off with his daughter and shoot him instead of his birds. I maintain we are doing the man a thundering good turn, and he’s getting much the best of the deal.”

“ Granted,” Vernon replied, with a little sarcastic smile. “ Still, our charity towards Pomfret rather bars high falutin about class, doesn’t it ? ”

“ It doesn’t justify us in sitting still and seeing a thoroughbred like Horatia Vanc-Trevor blighted by an outsider like Cargill.”

“ Perhaps not. Yet the fellow is a gentleman.”

“ Is he ? ” Bendish sneered.

“ His father was a parson.”

“ That proves nothing.”

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"No. But coupled with the style of the man himself——"

Bendish threw up his hand impatiently. "Oh, well, my dear Bulstrode, if you are going to make a match of it there's no more to be said."

Vernon smiled at the other's temper. "Not exactly. At the same time I'd rather see a girl like that married to Cargill than to, say, young Pomfret."

"That impossible bounder. That's not much to say," Bendish returned angrily. "Well, it only remains for me to add I am sorry I have been mistaken in supposing you would hold very different sentiments."

Vernon gave a short deprecating laugh at the other man's spleen. "My dear Fort," he said pleasantly, "don't run away with a wrong idea. You have my best wishes in the affair."

"But not your help?" Bendish suggested, with an ugly mouth.

"Any help in reason," Vernon replied. "You can scarcely ask me to be guilty of the impertinence of instructing Miss Vane-Trevor to reject Cargill and marry you."

"And yet," returned Bendish, schooling himself to an aggrieved persuasiveness, "you are the only man who could do it with effect and without offence."

"Your estimate of my influence is too flattering,"

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Vernon said dryly. "I can, however, at least offer a common-sense suggestion. Have you proposed to the lady?"

"No," Bendish answered, with a short laugh. "I've been waiting for the right moment."

"The right moment," said Vernon, "is more often and more easily made than found. It looks as though you were letting Mr. Cargill make it."

"Am I?" the other retorted viciously. "On the contrary I am setting about it by doing my best to have Mr. Cargill bundled out of the way. And that is where I was sanguine enough—fool enough, if you like—to expect your help."

"A man's help to be worth having," Vernon replied, "must be dictated by his better judgment. I'll do what I can for you, my dear Bendish; but you must not expect me to kick a decent fellow simply because he happens to stand in your light."

With which meagre satisfaction Captain Fortescue Bendish was fain to be sulkily content.

CHAPTER VII

THE heat of the contest increased as the days of the nomination and polling drew near. Hugh Cargill's triumphs of successful advocacy of his side seemed likely to be crowned with the desired result. He went on adding one after another of captured meetings to the party's roll of conquest. His taking style and hard hitting seemed to carry all before them. Moidart and his agent, Pilbeam, went about each showing in his own fashion the liveliest satisfaction, and singing the praises of the man who was going to win the election for them, hands down.

"Marvellous young man that," the worthy Pilbeam, who was a person of words, proclaimed. "Wonderful command of language, sir. The number of words and phrases in the ambit of his brain is something astounding. And he hits our people, too. Gives them some pretty tough nuts to crack. I fancy Long's crowd have broken a good few of their teeth over them already. I predict a triumph, sir. Our opponents are at their wits' end.

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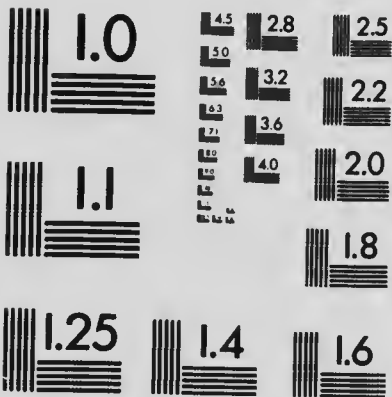
We are cutting the ground from under their feet. Logic and oratory combined have been too much for them. Ah, we shall have a rare treat at the theatre to-night. We've done well, but this will be something quite superior, quite out of the common."

The meeting at the old-fashioned theatre of King's Langton had been designed by the now awakened Pilbeam as a grand rallying muster of the party to materialise, as it were, the effect of Cargill's speeches preparatory to the final stage of the struggle which would lie between the nomination and polling days. And for this purpose it had seemed desirable to the agent in his sudden access of energy to secure the capacious old theatre which had in the palmy days of provincial stock companies been an important house in a certain theatrical circuit. Mr. Pilbeam had, in his unusual enterprise, even gone so far as to buy out for the night a touring company which had a prior claim upon the house. But this was not a very serious matter, seeing that the fashion of play-going was at a low ebb in King's Langton. Naturally Mr. Roderick, the proprietor and manager of the company, had put an enhanced value on his night of forced idleness, shrewdly aware that Pilbeam's necessity was his own opportunity. Accordingly he made much of his grand production and his lady star; assuring Mr. Pilbeam incidentally



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that nothing short of his regard for his country's welfare, of which he recognised the local guardian angel in Mr. John Moidart, would have induced him for any pecuniary consideration to deprive the inhabitants of King's Langton for even one night of such a magnificently soul-inspiring treat.

"A big thing, my boy," he protested, dropping into a refreshment-bar familiarity as he tapped the tolerant Pilbeam impressively on the chest. "A lady, a grand artiste that will be heard of, sir, as a star of the first magnitude, mark you, and no mistake. Simply touring with me as a preliminary canter, a breather, before entering upon a most important engagement, the details of which I am not at liberty to divulge. Ah! yes; we mean to astonish the town, Mr.—ah—Mr. Pilbeam—good comedy name, Pilbeam—and I tell you the few paltry pounds I am accepting, purely in a spirit of patriotism, my boy, purely, as I may say, out of loyalty to my Party and my own convictions, are as nothing weighed in the balance against transcendent genius. No," he continued, folding his arms in a fine display of stage dignity, "I consider, Mr. Pilbeam, that the Party is my debtor, and I shall expect, and I trust not in vain, the countenance of its leading lights in return for the sacrifice I am making solely in its interests."

As this consideration did not seem to have any

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particular or tangible value, Mr. Pilbeam had no hesitation in promising it and in no grudging fashion, being possibly somewhat unduly impressed by Mr. Roderick's grand manner; nor, was it, perhaps, all acting on Mr. Roderick's part. A life spent in making believe is calculated to narrow the line between reality and mere pretence. Mr. Roderick had been born and bred in the theatre, and it was small wonder if, like others of his tribe, he had become imbued with an exaggerated and grandiloquent sense of his own importance, and that of his sentiments and calling. At the same time he had the true showman's eye for the main chance; and as he accepted with a flourish Mr. Pilbeam's cheque he thought he saw his way to getting far more than its face value out of the transaction.

Mr. Pilbeam's complacency was soon, however, to become ruffled in consequence of certain rumours which reached him of the attitude of the Long party with regard to his plans. It did not take much to cloud the fussy agent's roseate outlook, and the reports brought in to the various committee-rooms were to his mind so alarming that late in the afternoon before the meeting he made his way to Prynnes Park with a face full of dark importance.

"We may expect a row to-night," he announced almost tragically. "Long's people are going to do their best to break up the meeting."

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Moidart laughed. "All right, Pilbeam. We'll be ready for them."

The agent wagged his head doubtfully. "It will be no joke, Mr. Moidart, if they got some of the King's Langton Kids in the place. And we've made it an open meeting without tickets."

"Of course we did not expect anything of that sort," Moidart replied more seriously, "I thought Long was going to fight like a gentleman."

"He has got the worst of the argument, owing to our friend, Mr. Cargill, here," said Pilbeam; "and is now going to resort to blows."

"Then the sooner you turn to his own line of argument, my dear Jack," put in Bendish, not without the suggestion of a hit at Cargill, "the better for your chances."

"Just so," Moidart replied. "You will, of course, get up all your stalwarts, Pilbeam, and put them where they will be useful."

"I have already arranged that," the agent answered him. "I was only thinking now about the ladies."

"Better keep them away," Bendish suggested, with the idea of removing Horatia as much as possible from his rival's influence.

"I don't agree with you there, Fort," observed Bulstrode Vernon. "It is a usually accepted fact that women have a restraining influence on a meeting."

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"No doubt, sir, that is the case," Mr. Pilbeam agreed promptly. "I think the presence of ladies on the stage would have a good effect. Only I thought it right, gentlemen, to let you know what we expect to-night."

"All right. Thank you, Pilbeam," said Moidart. "We'll tell the ladies there's likely to be a row and let them do as they feel inclined about staying away."

Mr. Pomfret wound up the discussion by declaring with blatant pomposity that at his own political meetings he always had the protection of ladies; that the Countess of Bosham was a familiar figure on his platforms, and that, owing no doubt to that Peeress's forbidding influence, he had never had anything serious in the way of a row.

On the matter being submitted to the ladies they unanimously declared they were to be deterred from going to the meeting neither by Pilbeam's alarmist news nor by Captain Bendish's interested fears for their safety. Ethel Pomfret, to do her justice, was not wanting in pluck any more than was Horatia Vane-Trevor. Lady Clanrobert had no idea of being bullied by the mob, while Mrs. Pomfret's desire to lose no opportunity for showing herself off in public outweighed her sense of danger.

So after dinner the whole of the Prynnes Park house-party drove in to the meeting.

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Mr. Pilbeam received them with a fussily reassuring manner. "I have taken steps which I think will result in order being kept," he announced egotistically. "I may say our organisation to that end is pretty perfect. Yes, I flatter myself we shall have nothing like a disturbance."

"False alarm, after all, eh?" Pomfret suggested. He hated Pilbeam, suspecting him, not without reason, of being the cause of his playing such a minor part in the King's Langton election.

"Not at all, Mr. Pomfret," the agent objected promptly. "I happen to know, sir, that we were threatened with the complete break-up of the meeting. However, I flatter myself I have known how to meet the emergency. But it has had to be smart work, getting up our stalwarts and telling them off to their various stations and duties. Organisation, sir, organisation is what counts in a crisis of this kind."

Mr. Pomfret had, his recent lessons in manners notwithstanding, already turned away. There is no love lost or patience wasted between braggarts.

When the party took their seats on the stage it was seen that the theatre, a large shabby house, forlorn-looking with its tawdry decorations, was filled to its utmost capacity. And amid the loud, preconcerted cheers which greeted the appearance of the speakers an ominous note of opposition, not

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wholly drowned by the vociferous welcome, caught the more experienced ears.

For a time, however, all went well; suspiciously well, as Bulstrode Vernon whispered to Lady Clanrobert. A neighbour of some real or fancied importance, Sir Sidney Fensome, was in the chair; and the audience listened with good-humoured, if contemptuous, patience to the platitudinous inanities with which he opened the proceedings.

John Moidart, as the candidate, rose next. It had been arranged that he should speak for about twenty minutes, and then give way to the star, Cargill, who was to make a rousing speech of an hour, an effort which was expected to have a marked influence upon the fortunes of the contest.

Moidart's cut-and-dried oration was, like the chairman's, listened to with but few interruptions. An occasional jeering laugh was calculated to be disconcerting, but Moidart was, in spirit if not in equipment, a fighter; and he plodded sturdily on without allowing himself to be for a moment turned aside. As he sat down at length amid a burst of cheering, in which the ironical note was scarcely perceptible, Mr. Pilbeam rubbed his hands, and leaning forward to the front row, proclaimed that the threatened opposition had been effectually scotched.

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The ineffable chairman rose to introduce Cargill, which he did in terms meant to be laudatory, but which were in effect fatuously patronising. Perhaps it was the recognition of this absurdity which caused his remarks to be received in a spirit of irreverence by divers unconvinced spirits in various parts of the house.

Cargill was pale when he rose with a smile which seemed to have in it a touch of defiance. As he stood there, amid cheers and groans, waiting for silence, a woman leaned out of one of the dismal stage-boxes and waved her handkerchief at him. The action was so marked and the woman's appearance so challenging that it drew the attention not only of the occupants of the stage but of a goodly portion of the crowded auditorium. Many heads were turned curiously towards the box in whose dark recess the woman had up to then sat unobserved. A svelte brunette of singular beauty, the beauty that is seldom found in high life, and yet has a distinct refinement of its own, a beauty indefinable, unclassible, and yet alluringly captivating, a personality which, shining out of eyes that index a rare and perplexing character, attract, fascinate and yet seem on the verge of repelling. Her dress was as singularly striking as her face; a curiously arranged mixture of crimson and black, with a black looped-up hat relieved by touches of

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carmine, while at her breast she wore a diamond cluster of peculiar brilliancy.

Her action caught Cargill's eye. He coloured slightly as his look met hers; he gave just the semblance of a bow as it were in recognition; under the circumstances no more, indeed, was called for. Bendish bent forward till he could see Horatia's face; he satisfied himself that she had noticed the episode; that was all, but it was enough.

Cargill had recovered his self-possession long before the cheers and counter cries had given sign of subsiding, and stood with a smile on his face waiting for silence. This seemed for a while a somewhat vain expectation. Doubtless the partisans of the Long party had had their orders not to allow this dangerous champion to have his chance. But here Cargill's personality and reputation came to his aid. A British mob loves a speech; here was a man who, they knew well, could give them a rattling good one; his appearance and manner had nothing aggressive or irritating about them; curiosity suggested, hypocritically enough, fair play; there were cries of, "Let him speak! Let's hear what he has to say!" and the tumult began to die down. It would be easy enough to revive it when the oratorical treat was over.

The fatuous and utterly unconvincing attempts of the chairman to keep order having struck a note

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of hilarity which made for good-humour, silence was at length obtained and Cargill began. His exordium was pleasantly, unconventionally familiar, he took his audience on its soft side and soon seemed to have it with him. A few anecdotes and jocular local allusions went down well; the man knew how to be interesting, his diction was clear and in marked contrast to the halting periods of the other speakers, and even the opposition bullies were held in spite of themselves and their orders.

So all went well for perhaps a quarter of an hour. But it is one thing to amuse and pacify a political gathering, quite another to drive home successfully principles and arguments to which they are doggedly and aggressively opposed. All the same it was to enforce certain doctrines and to gain wavering votes that Cargill was there; sooner or later he must plunge into the serious business of the meeting. So, having spent as much time as he felt he could afford in getting his audience with him, he dropped his pleasantries of speech, though not of manner, and turned to more debatable topics. So deftly was the transition effected that for a while the speaker's militant sentences were allowed to fall without interruption save for the cheers which punctuated them. Probably the dull brains of the rowdies were slow to comprehend the change in the tone of the speech. Presently, however, it began

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to dawn upon them, aided by the promptings of their leaders; the signs of dissent and interruption reasserted themselves, till but a few words of Cargill's fiery periods were heard. Once set going the disorder steadily increased. In vain did Mr. Pilbeam's judiciously placed stalwarts do their utmost, by both menace and persuasion, to quell it; the rough element soon got inebriated with its own noise; it remembered that Cargill was the red rag to the party that paid them and the rock upon which it threatened to be wrecked, and with the recollection they howled their loudest.

Coolly, but with a look of fight in his eyes, Cargill, reduced to silence, stood facing the uproar, while at his side the chairman's absurdly futile pantomime of protest merely served to mingle laughter with the howls.

It soon became apparent to the disconcerted Pilbeam that if the meeting was not to be broken up and resolved into a wasted effort, drastic measures were necessary. Rising, he signalled excitedly, too excitedly, to his lieutenants in the body of the house, who, acting upon the sign, began a determined effort to eject the malcontent ringleaders. It seemed, however, that they had miscalculated the strength of the opposition forces. As might have been foreseen, the attempt at once brought on a series of free fights. A big man, with a voice like

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a bull, assumed the leadership of the disturbers, mobilised them into compact gangs and assumed the aggressive with a vengeance.

Now was the chance of the Long party, of which the big-lunged man was an uncompromising and unscrupulous supporter. They had had enough of Mr. Cargill and his damaging speeches. They were sick of him and his sweeping campaign; now he should have his share of the nausea from which they had suffered.

"Charge your way forward, my lads!" roared the big-voiced man, one Denty. "Make for the stage, boys; and put a stopper on the swell windbags!"

There arose a hubbub of cries. "Down the toffs! Bounce 'em off!" and the disturbers began to fight their way desperately towards the stage. It was obvious that the meeting was now broken up past remedy; nevertheless Cargill still stood facing the tumult unflinchingly. The chairman had thrown up his hands and his office in despair, and was now busy counselling a more or less dignified retreat, ostensibly in the interest of the ladies, in reality through fear for his own skin.

Bulstrode Vernon got up and laid a hand on Cargill's shoulder. "All up for any more speech-making," he said quietly. "It won't do for us to show fight," he added, seeing that the other, with a

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gesture of good-humoured protest seemed inclined to stand his ground. "We had better turn our energies to getting the ladies away before things get worse."

"I don't like our giving in like this," Cargill replied, keeping his eyes on the fighting crowd. "Our people may get the better of the scrum, and then it will pay to have stood our ground."

Rather admiring Cargill's futile resolution Vernon turned away and joined the group of ladies who had risen and drawn together at the back of the stage.

"Cargill won't budge," he observed laughingly.

"Means to get through his tub-thumping or die," sneered Bendish.

"It seems hopeless," said Lady Canrobert.

"I'm afraid so," Vernon agreed.

"Some people never admit the inevitable when it touches their vanity," observed Bendish, with his eyes significantly on the figure standing apart at the front of the stage.

For a few moments now it seemed almost as though Cargill's suggestion might be realised. The stalwarts of the Moidart party made a determined effort and succeeded in disrupting and driving back their opponents. Their success was, however, but momentary. The trumpet voice of the inevitable Denty rallied the Longites; and a counter charge was made to such effect that the rush, bearing down

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all opposition, carried them right up to the stage. Now, indeed, the ladies were in danger, and Cargill for the first time turned anxiously towards them. As the foremost of the enemy were seen to be climbing to the stage a movement was made by those who occupied it to get away. Scarcely, however, had they reached the wings when they were met by the affrighted face of Pilbeam, who announced in quavering tones, " Our retreat is cut off. There's a howling mob outside the stage-door."

Already the stage was in possession of the stormers, who were for the moment employed in hurling the chairs into the auditorium at any likely marks in the shape of prominent workers on the other side. So the stage party found themselves caught between two fires, and Cargill saw when too late the mistake he had made in standing his ground and delaying to take measures for getting the ladies safely away.

The roughs in possession of the stage, finding the supply of chairs running short, began to look round for further aggressive employment. The party from Prynnes Park were being hustled into a tight corner, nothing but the presence of the ladies seemed to hold back the mob from actual violence. Cargill, in search of a way of escape for them, made his way to the extreme back of the stage only to find a blank wall. Returning he saw Horatia Vanne-Trevor, who had somehow got away from the hustling crowd, on

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the other side of the stage. She was standing irresolute, showing no sign of fear, but helpless, and seeing no means of retreat. At that moment Cargill's eye caught sight of a door, the pass-door leading from the stage to the auditorium. He ran to it, calling to her, but a mighty shout from the rioters drowned his voice. He reached the door, but could not open it, and he turned quickly back to Miss Vane-Trevor's protection. As he did so he saw something which made him rush forward to where she stood. An evil-faced fellow, evidently more than half drunk, had caught hold of the rope which worked one of the roller cloths, and had pulled out the hitch knot which held it in its cleat. "Down with the toffs! Smash their nobs for 'em," he cried, tipsily truculent, "Long for ever!"

The rope was now all but loose; in another moment the scene with its heavy roller would be released, and to his horror he saw that Horatia was standing in the line of its fall. In a flash Cargill calculated the respective distances and chances. The man was at too great a distance to allow a restraining effort to be sure of success. Already the rope was running out and the canvas beginning to unroll. With a great shout Cargill leapt forward, crying, "Miss Vane-Trevor!" threw his arms round her, and dragged her out of the line of the falling roller just as it came down with a swish and a bang, pitching

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diagonally as the farther end struck the hustling crowd pressing towards the green-room.

For a moment Horatia did not seem to realise what had happened, then as Cargill with a fervent ejaculation released her, she knew her narrow escape, probably from death. With characteristic self-control she gave no sign of feeling save the indrawing of a long breath. Then her eyes met Cargill's, and the simple word of thanks was as nothing compared to the look he read and understood in them.

The heavy roller had just caught his shoulder, but he had no thought for the pain of that sharp blow. Nor for aught else now but the girl's safety.

The descent of the cloth had struck down several of the rioters and caused a momentary confusion. But now, supposing it was the work of the beleaguered party, they sent up a savage cry, and resumed their onslaught with increased viciousness. Cargill seized Horatia's arm. "Come," he said, "I must get you out of this."

But how? The dreary brick wall forbade all hope of retreat on that side of the stage, the other was filled with a howling mass of the rioters; at any moment they might have their attention turned to Cargill, a marked man; then he and his companion must be at their mercy.

He was seen by some at the back of the bustling crowd; they called out his name, and with a howl

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prepared to make a rush at him. The situation was ugly enough; the two were helplessly hemmed in. Cargill looked hastily round, espied an old iron basket-hilted sword, evidently put to baser uses now than stage combats, stuck between the canvas and framework of a wing. He seized it with a fighting impulse. "Quick!" he cried to Horatia. "Get into the corner there; I'll keep these fellows off as best I can."

His action in thus arming himself was perhaps scarcely wise. With a derisive shout the foremost of his assailants made for him; their methods now would not be too nice.

"Keep off, my lads," Cargill cried. "You forget there is a lady here."

They laughed at him, and one hulking fellow with a stick aimed a blow at his wrist to make him drop the sword. He warded it off, the men began to close round him, forcing him back into the corner. Then suddenly he heard a voice say, "Quick, Mr. Cargill; this way!"

He gave a quick glance round, and saw to his relief that the pass-door behind was half open, and Horatia was squeezing through it. The roughs saw it too, and sent up cries of angry disappointment. "Don't let him get away. The gal's gone; now rush him!"

But before a rush could be formed, Cargill had

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fiercely swept round his sturdy little weapon, and taking advantage of the momentary falling back of his opponents, sprang through the opening, banged to and locked the door in their faces before they could effectively throw themselves against it.

As he turned, Cargill knew by intuition that he would be face to face with the woman who had waved to him from the box. Her peculiarly coruscating eyes, the eyes of genius, met his with an expression half of amusement, half of concern. "Only just in time, Mr.—Cargill." She spoke with a very slight foreign accent, quietly, in strange contrast to the fever that pervaded the place, and with a perceptible and significant pause before his name.

"It is very good of you, Miss de Mertens," he replied in a confusion which might have been the result of his late excitement. "I—I don't know what we should have done if you had not unlocked the door."

"Electioneering seems to have greater excitements than acting," Miss de Mertens observed dryly.

Cargill laughed. "More danger, at any rate. Now," he turned to Horatia, "I think the sooner I get you away from this place the better. Are you not coming?" he asked Miss de Mertens, who had turned back towards her box.

"Not just yet," she answered, with a self-possessed nod. "I am anxious to see how much of the theatre

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is left for to-morrow night's performance. But you had better lose no time."

There was something almost sarcastic in her tone of coolness and the smile with which she seemed to dismiss the pair she had rescued. "Good-night," she said, and went towards her box.

"Miss Vane-Trevor, thank Heaven you are all right," Bendish's voice cried, as he and Bulstrode Vernon hurried to them along the corridor. "We were afraid you were caught by those brutes on the stage."

"So we were," she replied coolly. "But thanks to that lady, we got out of an awkward situation."

Bendish had noticed Miss de Merten's retreating figure as he came up.

"Good luck!" he commented. "We were horribly afraid when we found you had got cut off from us. Will you come?" he added, placing himself at her side as an escort and ignoring Cargill. "They have got the police out in force, and matters are quieting down."

They went out together; Cargill and Vernon following.

"So Cargill's friend, the actress, got you out of a tight place?" Bendish remarked insinuatingly.

"Yes," Horatia answered; and her tone did not encourage him to further remarks on the episode.

CHAPTER VIII

THE supper-party at Prynnes Park that night was a small and somewhat chastened gathering. Not only had everyone had more or less of a fright, and most of them a rough handling, but there was over all their spirits a sense of failure, of defeat which, coming as it did upon their recent high hopes, was unpleasantly galling. And, as is usual in such cases, nearly everyone sought an object at which to fling the blame of the miscarriage. Mr. Pomfret was loudly and derisively down upon the chairman, "that ass, Sir Sidney Fensome," as he called him witheringly. "If you 'ad, ah-had, a capable man in the chair, Moidart, a man of common-sense, a man with his wits about ah-him, this wouldn't 'ave 'appened."

Mr. Pomfret exhibited with an aggrieved swagger a rent in his shirt-front from which what he called a "ket's eye and dymond" stud had been torn. Also it was obvious that Mr. Pomfret was strongly of opinion that he himself ought to have occupied the chair.

"Yes. Poor Fensome did make an ass of him-

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self," Moidart admitted, adding somewhat pointedly, "Of course he is a county man of undeniable standing and family; and one does not want or expect too much from one's chairman."

"You expect ah-him to be able to keep ah-horder," retorted his host futilely.

"No one could have kept order," said Bulstrode Vernon. "Those fellows came prepared to make a row, and we were bound to have it."

"Evidently hired to break up the meeting," was young Pomfret's ventured opinion.

"I don't quite agree with you," objected Bendish with intention. "The whole thing was mismanaged. The opposition was there, I grant you, but there was no ground that I saw for supposing the row was pre-arranged. Else why did they behave themselves for nearly an hour?"

"They evidently were there to prevent our friend Cargill getting a hearing," Moidart replied.

"They heard him patiently enough for a good ten minutes," Bendish maintained with a malicious significance.

"I don't quite follow you, Bendish," said Moidart simply. "Where do you suggest the mismanagement came in?"

"I mean a false note was struck," Bendish answered meaningly.

The innuendo was hardly to be ignored. "I am

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not aware that I struck a false note," Cargill said quietly; "unless you call advocating our party principles a mistake. And from my experience of political meetings I am quite sure that if I had spoken in favour of every plank in Long's platform it would not have prevented the row which was clearly premeditated."

"That is just my point," Bendish returned. "I don't pretend," he put in sneeringly, "to have anything like your experience of these affairs, but it seems to me a tactical mistake when an audience is clearly unfriendly for a speaker to irritate it."

"Logically then," Cargill retorted, "he must either speak against his own side or not speak at all."

"He can speak with tact," Bendish replied viciously.

"I am sorry if my speech was thought wanting in that essential," Cargill said, with great restraint.

"We have seen the result," Bendish suggested unhandsomely.

"Oh, come, Bendish," Moidart put in bluffly, "you're going too far. I saw nothing aggressive in what our friend said."

"Possibly not," Bendish commented scarcely under his breath.

"Long's people organised a break-up of the meeting and unfortunately succeeded. If anyone

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is to blame it is Pilbeam. The only mistake we made was in not getting the ladies away sooner. Don't you think so, Cargill ? ”

Cargill assented. “ I am sorry,” he added ; “ only one likes to stand one's ground and not be beaten.”

“ Not,” said Bendish viciously, “ at the expense of having the ladies hustled and insulted, with the risk of something worse.”

Cargill bit his lip. The attack was obvious in its intention, unfair, yet not to be answered there and then.

“ I am sure we all admired Mr. Cargill for standing his ground,” Horatia said, prompted by the ungenerous dead-set.

“ I hope I have not suggested that it was not all very admirable,” Bendish returned, with sneering emphasis.

“ One would scarcely have gathered as much from your manner, old fellow,” Moidart observed, with tactful geniality. “ We've had a set-back to-night and I'm the principal loser by it, still, I'm not going to blame anybody but Long, who will have a stiff letter from me to-morrow. I had an idea he was going to fight like a gentleman.”

On their way to the smoking-room Cargill took Moidart aside. “ I am sorry I was to blame to-night, and I feel it was stupid of me not to have seen

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that the ladies got away sooner. But I wanted to save a fiasco, if possible. Now, as my usefulness to you seems to be doubtful, I am going to ask you to let me go."

But Moidart naturally would not hear of it. "Usefulness at an end?" he protested. "Why you are my great gun. And I shall want all the artillery I can muster now, since Long is on the aggressive. I'm sorry for what happened to-night, and"—he spoke more feelingly—"for what happened just now. But I am sure you are too sensible, my dear Cargill, not to see through that. Our friend Bendish is rather three-cornered, and some men, we know, can't bear to play second fiddle. It was bad form, and I mean to tell him so. Meanwhile, you must accept my apology for having exposed you to a piece of unpleasantness, and my assurance that I am much more than satisfied with all you have done for me."

There was no doubt that Moidart meant all he said, and perhaps something more, so Cargill could hardly persist in his design of leaving.

Next day the discomfited Pilbeam appeared early at Prynnes Park, and a council of war was held with the object of recovering any ground lost through the previous night's fiasco. And the agent was quite as decided as Moidart in scouting the idea of any mistake on Cargill's part. On the contrary, it was

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the opinion on all hands that his continued aid would be invaluable.

When the conference was over, and Pilbeam had set off again full of alarums and excursions, Cargill strolled out into the garden just as Horatia came out by another door. Their paths converged, and they walked on together. Cargill touched humorously on Pilbeam's apologies and suddenly militant plans; Horatia laughed, and then said seriously, "I wanted to tell you, Mr. Cargill, how sorry I am for what was said at supper last night."

"Oh, I think nothing more of that," he replied lightly. "Moidart has made it all right for me."

"It was not Mr. Moidart who—made himself objectionable."

"No; indeed. But I felt I ought to put myself in his hands; I mean as to whether I could usefully support him any longer."

"I should not have thought," she said warmly, "that you would have taken Captain Bendish's rudeness so seriously."

"No. But after all I may have made a mistake. A fracas like last night's is a damaging thing in a contest."

"Yes," she agreed. "Still, no unprejudiced person could say it was your fault."

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"I am glad to know that at least you don't think so," he said simply.

"There is something else I wanted to say to you," she said. "I have never thanked you for saving my life."

He made a deprecating gesture. "Not that. You are giving me credit for more——"

"Not for more modesty," she returned quickly. "Mr. Cargill," she stopped and faced him, "can you say that the heavy scene would not have fallen on my head if you had not dragged me away?"

"I'm afraid it would have hurt you," he answered.

"I know—I am sorry—it must have hurt you." She had noticed at breakfast that he kept his elbow to his side and avoided the use of his left hand.

"The roller barely touched my shoulder," he replied. "It is nothing."

She just glanced at him with a few murmured words of regret as they walked on.

"I think," he said after a few moments of silence, "we were lucky to get out of it as we did. I fear my manner may have exasperated the fellows, but I was excited and angry with myself for having neglected to see you safe more promptly."

"I cannot see you were to blame," she replied quietly.

"I don't know," he continued, "what would

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have happened if that door had not opened so opportunely."

She laughed a little constrainedly. "No, we were in rather a fix."

"I ought perhaps," he said, with a just perceptible touch of distaste, "to explain who the lady was who came to our release. It was Miss de Mertens, the leading lady of the company that is playing at the theatre this week."

"I thought she looked like an actress," Horatia observed in a neutral tone.

"She is a very clever one; almost a genius in her way," Cargill said. "I should not be surprised if she has a wonderful future before her. I happen to know something of her, having been for a time on the stage myself."

Horatia showed no surprise. "You did not like it?" she suggested.

"Not sufficiently to look forward to spending my life in the profession," he answered, with a laugh. "Theoretically, the life of the theatre has a certain fascination; in reality it is a terrible disenchantment."

"I should imagine that; at least to anyone of refinement."

"Yes," he said, "the art is all very fine; but amid squalid, and often vicious, surroundings all higher ideas of art are killed."

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"After all," she pursued, "it is not real work; the work a man of talent may consider himself sent into the world to do. Of course," she added quickly, "I am not saying that amusement, the brightening of dull lives, has not its place in the scheme of existence, but it may well be left to those who have no capacity for anything higher. Your present work, for instance," she went on, with incentive confidence, "has surely a nobler end and offers you a worthier career than any success on the stage could bring."

"I think so," he agreed simply. "At least it offers something better worth trying for. That is why I gave up the other."

"Tell me," she said, with a tactful shifting of that side of the subject on which enough had been said, "this Miss de Mertens, is she a very wonderful actress?"

"Very," he answered. "I have not seen her for nearly two years. She used to act very finely in certain parts; unequal, but she has with great talent a certain attractive personality—I don't mean mere good looks, but an indefinable air and charm which makes her interesting even in an unsuitable part, and is, I think, going to land her presently in a great success."

He spoke with a certain amount of quiet enthusiasm. A man not given to jealousy, certainly in the

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calling he had abandoned, it was natural that he should take a peculiar interest in the foreshadowed triumph of his former fellow-player. Horatia heard him with the coldness of an apparent want of interest in the subject. He noticed it.

"I must not bore you with personal reminiscences which are, perhaps, not particularly edifying," he said, with an apologetic laugh. "Only I don't like to turn my back on old friends, who were, after all, according to their lights very kind to me, even if their lives ran on a lower plane than my own."

"No," she agreed quietly; "one does not like to see the very shadow of ingratitude."

Her manner scarcely encouraged a continuance of the personal note; but what he considered in her a mere class prejudice piqued him into one more reference to his old life.

"I am bound to say that my short stage experience has been most useful to me in my political work. It taught me how to speak, how to feel the pulse of an audience, and, if I dare say so after last night's failure, how, so to speak, to stage-manage a meeting. It was rough training, but I don't regret it."

"I can understand," she said coldly, "you find its usefulness now." Then she added with more interest, in which he sensitively looked for a suggestion of scorn, "and you have really no desire to return to the stage?"

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"None," he said readily. "Although, as I could have, if I may say so, a very fair chance of success there, I am poor enough to be tempted."

"I should think it would be a great mistake," she declared, with more feeling in her voice. "Your present career is surely far worthier; and, after all, money is not everything. Have we not an object-lesson in that here?"

He laughed. "Wealth is not presented at Prynnes in a very attractive light," he agreed. "No. I never seriously think of going back. My present work will keep me till my chance comes. Happily I have one or two good friends who will not forget me if an opening presents itself."

"Perhaps," she observed, with a return to her sympathetic manner, "you have more friends than you imagine."

"It is encouraging to think that possible," he replied. "I hope at least I may number you among those on whom I may count?"

"Of course," she answered warmly, and with a slight heightening of colour; "that would be mere gratitude on my part."

"Not that," he protested. "I should feel happier if your friendship rested on almost any other foundation. I can scarcely claim gratitude for a merely natural act of preservation, the response to an ordinary and obvious impulse."

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She smiled. "Perhaps we are looking at it from different points of view; you at the act, I at the result—that I am alive to-day to tell you, inadequately, how grateful I am."

He bent his head in acknowledgment. "And that you are my friend?"

"And that I am—will always be—your friend."

The moment, the situation, seemed to vibrate with opportunity, of opportunity streaked with doubt, yet with something worthier, more peremptory, with duty. But the temptation? They were alone, shut in by the winding maze of the shrubbery, in a mood of provocative sympathy, he with ambition reined in by poverty, she an heiress. Her manner, habitually self-contained even to coldness, was it seemed, invitingly responsive. There was but a word to speak; a word which she seemed to expect. Yet he could not speak it. Were she but a poor girl—what a chance for folly it would be. As it was, he had sharply to remember his obligations to the society in which he found himself and beat back the great wave of impulse which swept up to him.

He could not let her speech, her condescension, pass with a mere polite word of acknowledgment. Yet mid-way between coldness and passionate declaration there was peril. The only safety was in keeping his stand on the shore; once he ventured

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out where the line of danger was unmarked, he might slip down into deep water and be carried away. All this flashed through his mind as they stood there facing each other in a moment of embarrassed silence. How could he be the boor to stand there dumb when a girl like this, not lightly given to warmth of interest, told him, surely from her heart, that she would be his friend? Her hand held a little in front of her seemed inviting. Diffidently he put out his and took it. "Thank you," he said fervently, and raised it to his lips.

All the same he was surprised that the action was not resisted. His lips had rested on her hand before she drew it away and half turned as though to walk back towards the house.

Impulsively he had put forth a staying hand, but had withdrawn it, hoping the action had not been seen by her. "You are good to me," he declared, as they went slowly back along the embowered path. "If you knew what it means to me, to my life, you would understand how I am repaid a thousandfold for averting that accident."

Horatia was clearly stirred, but as to which way her feeling urged her he was at a loss to be sure.

"We are none of us the worse for the knowledge of sympathy in our work, our life," she replied, with a manifest restraint that emboldened him.

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“There is but one thing more encouraging,” he said in a low voice.

She turned her head, and for an instant the grey eyes rested on his face. “You mean——?”

“Hope,” he answered; and then hated himself for the personal significance he had failed to keep from his tone. She was looking straight in front of her again.

“Ah, yes. That is the great thing.” Still the restrained tone. If only it were really cold and forbidding the temptation which gripped him would relax its hold.

“The greatest,” he replied, with an effort to speak impersonally, “when it is given us by another.”

He had meant to stop there, but the flush that came to her cheek made him add, “By the one person who holds it for us.”

She bent her head and turned as though looking down a path which here forked off from theirs.

“Miss Vane-Trevor——” In another moment the fateful words would have been spoken had they not been arrested by an interrupting voice which broke disagreeably upon the almost enchanted silence.

“There you are, Mr. Cargill. You are wanted in the house, I think.”

Lady Clanrobert stood at a short distance behind them; her face expressing satisfaction that she had

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found them, mingled with annoyance that she had found them thus, and determination not to find them so again.

“Some old friends of yours, a Mr. Roderick and Miss Camille de Mertens and someone else from the theatre have arrived and are asking for you.”

The words were as unpleasant as the voice that uttered them. There was nothing for Cargill to do but to excuse himself to Horatia with a bow and hasten towards the house.

CHAPTER IX

As Hugh Cargill walked away Lady Clanrobert looked for a moment as though strongly disposed to make a spring at her niece and shake her. But she was nothing if not self-commanded, and the angry look gave way to one of dignified displeasure.

"It is sad, my dear, to see you inclined to make a fool of yourself with that person," she observed, with sour reproof.

"My dear aunt, I am not aware that I am making a fool of myself," Horatia replied simply.

"Presumably not. That is your only excuse," Lady Clanrobert retorted dryly. "But if you are not careful you will wake up to the fact when it is too late."

"You do not know that Mr. Cargill saved my life last night."

Lady Clanrobert raised her eyebrows as she met her niece's steadfast look. "No, indeed; I was not aware of it," she returned, with cold incredulity. "All the same, I am not altogether surprised to hear it."

"I don't understand you, auntie."

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“No? I dare say you do not want to understand me. But my experience tells me that it is quite the *métier* of men of the Cargill type, quite the accepted method with beggarly schemers of that description”—Lady Clanrobert was in measurable distance of losing her temper—“that they should save the life of any rich girl they may have designs upon.”

“My dear aunt, you go too far in your prejudice,” Horatia returned, with a look of defiance, almost of disgust. “If you knew how it happened——”

Her aunt cut her short. “Thank you, my dear, I am not at all anxious to hear the details—from your point of view. What I am more, much more, concerned with is whether you are in danger of making a most hideous mistake; of allowing Mr. Cargill to ruin the life he persuades you he has saved.”

“He makes nothing of it,” Horatia cried, hot at the injustice. “But I know the danger I was in; and surely I may thank him. My position, upon which you are so fond of insisting, does not put me above common gratitude.”

“Assuredly not. But it should put you above common love affairs,” the old lady retorted, quick offence.

“Common love affairs?” the girl exclaimed, with a touch of indignation.

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"Love affairs with common men," her aunt explained relentlessly. "As for gratitude, it is easy to express that, when necessary, without a suggestion of any warmer feeling. Unless you would maintain that any man who does a woman a service acquires thereby the right to marry her if he chooses."

"My dear aunt, this is unprofitable talk," Horatia said, with restraint. "I am not a fool, and I know a gentleman when I meet one. There is no love affair between me and Mr. Cargill up to now. If anything of the sort does develop from an idea in your mind into a fact you will have yourself to thank for it."

Lady Clanrobert was no fool either. She was astute enough to see that her niece's declaration was true only in a sense. The danger was great and imminent, and she congratulated herself that she had arrived on the scene just then only in the nick of time to avert it. But for how long? As a clever woman of the world she knew that when a man and a woman are mutually in love there is no reasoning under heaven that will baulk them in their desire. There is only one expedient which can be practised with any hope of success; and that is treachery. And so Lady Clanrobert told herself that expostulation and argument were mere waste of time; and time was valuable.

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“Very well, my dear Horatia,” she said smoothly; “we will say no more about it. You are certainly old enough to know what you are doing. All the same, you should bear in mind that very few of us are ever old enough to see through all the tricks of designing humanity.”

Which meant by implication that Lady Clanrobert was one of the select few who had attained that desirable age.

Cargill had taken his way towards the house in a state of mind where rapture was jostled by annoyance. He was the last man to turn his back upon old acquaintances, however humble, and especially upon these whose comradeship had marked the beginning of a new era in his life. He could never forget what a contrast their jovially considerate welcome had been to the vulgar patronage and ill-temper of his late chief. They were hopeless bohemians manifestly, still they were, most of them, good fellows; they had shown him a life that was free, full of variety, and in many ways interesting. He had never attempted to “come the gentleman” over them, and they on their part had met him by tactfully ignoring the fact that he was not quite one of themselves. He was frankly poor, and willing to take his share of all the disagreeables and hard work; that had been enough for them. They had parted on the best of terms; perhaps the players

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had recognised that their comrade was worthy of better things—if their imagination grasped the possibility—than a strolling actor's life; perhaps they thought that there was something wanting in his composition to make him wholly one of them. He had left them with regret, in spite of his convictions; and it was always with the kindest thoughts that he remembered them. But now, to crop up so inopportunately, at what looked like a crisis in his life; to assert themselves and their former connection in a place where they would be misunderstood and despised; would not the inevitable effect be to bring him into a certain contempt, and at a time above all others when his social position was being jealously challenged even to the deciding of his fate ?

It was a cruel chance, he felt, and his annoyance at Roderick's showman methods grew rapidly to disgust. There was, however, such a note of frankness in Cargill's character that the proclamation of his former connection with the troupe hardly disturbed him. It was the insistence upon it at this juncture, the possibly unedifying exhibition of theatrical life and manners where they would not be appreciated, which made him feel angry with the fate that had played him such a trick.

As he approached the house he saw the disturbing visitors standing on the lawn. Roderick looking, from

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his point of view no doubt, distinguished in a brick-dust-hued overcoat showily trimmed with Astrachan of doubtful authenticity; Miss Camille de Mertens, dressed as usual with an eye to somewhat bizarre effect, and—of all persons—Tom Vobster, the low comedian of the company, looking like a low comedian, and nothing else. Talking laughingly to them was, to Cargill's great disgust, Captain Bendish.

It seemed that he was the subject of their conversation, for as he drew near they broke off and turned to him. As he greeted them, the men according to actors' custom and tradition making much—too much—of the handshaking, he felt, owing principally to the sneering Bendish's presence, it was one of the most awkward moments of his life.

Roderick, expansive and voluble, was the first to speak.

"Well met, Cressingham, my lad—you won't mind the old name—as old friends we felt we could not be in the same neighbourhood without coming to pay our congratulations. Fine speech of yours, laddie, what we were permitted to hear of it. Ah, you've learnt a trick or two for knocking the boys, eh? That's where the profession comes in. That's what I always maintain; a man who knows his business can hold his own and score before anyone,

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anywhere; whether he is giving them the language of the drama or merely his own gag."

This was not exactly pleasant to Cargill, or a promising opening. He bowed acceptance of the dictum which just then he cared neither to question nor endorse.

"Fat lines those of yours about the fox and the sheep," put in Mr. Vobster, with a "mug." "Think I see my way to boiling it down to a wheeze, if it's not copyright."

"Oh, you're quite welcome to the joke such as it is," Cargill answered, trying to smile.

"Original, laddie?" the low comedian inquired with possibly selfish and personal solicitude.

"I fancy it is anybody's who cares to make use of it," Cargill replied.

Bendish was laughing unpleasantly. He made a remark to Miss de Mertens and they turned a little away, talking with the easy familiarity which bohemianism invites.

"I'll make use of it, my boy; eh, guv'nor?" Mr. Vobster persisted. "Bring the house down, if I know anything."

"Not as it very nearly did last night," his chief observed feelingly. His tone seemed jarringly loud and insistent, even after Pomfret's blatancy. "It is about that we have come up," he went on, assuming

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a stagily confidential manner. "Very serious damage done, my boy. Doubtful whether we shall be able to open to-night. No trifling loss to me, on the top of my being out of pocket by standing aside last night. However," he added, impressively laying his hand on Cargill's shoulder, "I'm a patriot first, my boy, and an actor after. I have my political convictions," he insisted, by way of ramming down the last assertion, which might be difficult to swallow, "and my convictions are just as strong, if not stronger, than those of men who make a trade of politics."

Cargill signified a tolerant assent.

"Now," Mr. Roderick went on, dropping his voice still lower and drawing yet closer to Cargill, "I've come up to ask your assistance, my dear boy. The touchstone of friendship, hah? You're up in the boughs, laddie; hob-a-nobbing with the aristocracy. I don't blame you, my boy; it's good business, though I shouldn't quite take to it myself. Now, I'm going to put myself in your hands."

"Do let me know what I can do for you, Mr. Roderick."

Mr. Roderick pursed his flexible lips and knit his mobile brows. "We are knocked off our legs," he declared with expressive pantomime, "knocked off our legs by last night's riot. We are here to ask

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you and your friends to set us on our feet again. Camille," with a graceful sweeping gesture he indicated Miss de Mertens, "poor Camille is in despair."

Cargill's glance at the lady told him that in the circumstances she was keeping up amazingly well.

"Critical stage in her career," Mr. Roderick proceeded, almost tragically. "You have doubtless heard, my boy. Just signed a highly important contract; on the eve of a big London appearance. It means——" Mr. Roderick, at a loss for an adequate expression, swept his hands round and above him to signify, presumably, the universe. "Starring with me just to keep in training for the big event," he exclaimed, "and then"—he threw up his hands dramatically—"last night! Ye gods! It's enough to shake the nerves of a genius like Camille."

"How can I help you?" Cargill asked, growing tired of the theatrical preamble. "It was an unfortunate business."

Mr. Roderick leaned forward till his nose nearly touched Cargill's ear. "Grand patronage night, my boy," he answered in a stage whisper of quite superfluous intensity. "Big bespeak performance. Brilliant send-off for the star. You take me?"

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Suddenly Mr. Roderick reversed his position, springing back as though to catch the effect of his idea upon Cargill from a proper focus.

The effect was manifestly one of relief. "You mean the people here?" he asked.

"Certainly, my boy. Fine, showy bill, old man. The patronage of the Honourable John Moidart, Candidate for the Division; the Right Honourable Viscountess Clanrobert; Bulstrode Vernon, Esquire, J.P., D.L.—you see I've got them correct, my boy. Trust Dan Roderick for knowing his way about without a dog and a string—Captain Bendish, 2nd Life Guards; Samuel Pomfret, Esquire, J.P., of Prynnes Park; Pomfret Junior, Esquire, ditto. Then the ladies, and the rest of the party; you can give me the lines, my dear boy. Hugh Cargill, Esquire. By Gad, you shall patronise your old guv'nor, laddie, now you've jumped over the floats to the stalls."

Cargill laughed. "Of course I'll do my best for you."

"I'm sure of it, dear boy. And while we're about it you might get us that hamfatter who waltzed on for the chairman's part last night and made an exhibition of himself, like nothing on a stick lading out piffle. Sir Sidney Fensome, Bart., will look all right, and it won't be a speaking part that night. You'll get these nobs for us, laddie?"

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"I'll put it to them," Cargill answered. "They owe you something," he added as he moved away, a little wearily, to meet Moidart who, with Mr. and Mrs. Pomfret, were strolling towards them. He also saw that on the opposite side of the lawn, Lady Clanrobert and Horatia had made their appearance and were drawing near. Before he could reach Moidart, however, Miss de Mertens had, by a quick movement, left Bendish and intercepted him.

"Is Mr. Cargill a stranger when Mr. Cressingham was a friend?" she asked, with an archness which scarcely veiled the significant intention of the question.

"Why should you suggest that?" he returned in good-humoured protest.

The unfathomable eyes were fixed on his face; eyes that seemed to hold in them undiscoverable mysteries of the past and of the future; eyes that were the index of inscrutableness, both of feeling and intent. As Cargill looked at her for the first time comprehendingly he told himself that the woman before him was changed since the old days, developed in power and in that indefinable thing we call style. Camille de Mertens had always been something of a mystery; a suggestion of the unknowable and elusive had seemed to envelop her as with an invisible yet subtly palpable cloud. Yet whereas in former days she had seemed to give her-

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self up to a certain bohemian, if uncertain, *camaraderie*, due perhaps to poverty, and to the necessity for making the best of the *milieu*, she now struck a deeper and more certain note, she was obviously mistress of herself and her ungueable actions. She was a woman full of power, of subtlety, of resource, and, Cargill thought, of pride; not the pride of a high-bred lady, but of an imperious woman who feels her power and means to use and enjoy it.

In her appearance she bore signs of prosperity, too, he noticed. Her dress was by no means startling or even showy, yet, exquisitely made, there was something uncommon about it which would have attracted much more than a casual glance from any other woman. In perfect taste or not, there could be no question but that it was eminently suited to the wearer's indefinable personality and beauty. At her throat she wore a ruby set in diamonds, a gold double chain of unique pattern, marked off at intervals with gems, hung from her neck, and each wrist carried a thin bangle set with a brilliant stone. Cargill, remembering the poorer, though always characteristic, style of her get-up, marked the change with some interest.

She laughed at his deprecating reply as though not meaning to be turned from her conclusion.

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"I think your manner and reception suggested it," she declared, looking at him curiously.

"I was, and am, quite unconscious of any intention such as you suggest," he replied frankly. "Naturally I am interested to meet you again."

"Here?" The question was put insinuatingly.

"Anywhere," he answered. "I hope I am not ungrateful, and don't forget the service you rendered me last evening."

The enigmatical eyes hardened. "You and the lady, eh? A pretty girl. It was interesting to see how you kept by each other."

A shade of annoyance crossed his face. "I don't understand you," he returned, with a touch almost of sternness, for the suggestion behind the words was too plain for him even to pretend to ignore. "Miss Vane-Trevor and I unfortunately got cut off from the rest of our party; that was all. Now," he went on, with a pointed changing of the subject, "tell me about yourself. I hear you have a grand prospect in front of you."

She gave a shrug. "A great chance," she replied, almost, it seemed, in a tone of pique; "and I mean to take it."

"I am sure of that," he said with conviction.

"There would have been the chance of a lifetime for you too if you had cared to wait

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for it," she said, her enigmatical eyes kindling strangely.

"For me?" he repeated, with a shrug, knowing well her meaning.

Perhaps his tone disappointed her, certainly it was not responsive—for she added almost coldly, "As a member of my company; my leading man."

She turned away, ostensibly to take notice of Lady Clanrobert who drew near; in reality, perhaps, because she was annoyed by Cargill's stiffness of manner.

Lady Clanrobert's reception of the actress was characteristic of her. It scarcely needed the spur of her late discovery to put her at the line of expediency in the present situation. And even if her own astuteness had failed to show her the chance to her hand, Bendish's significant word in explaining the visitors' presence would have, as was its intention, suggested it.

Accordingly she received not only Miss de Mertens, but the tawdrily bombastic Roderrick also and the unspeakable Vobster with a cordiality which greatly surprised and puzzled the Pomfret family, who, puffed-up with their new position and smart house-party, and fresh from their tutor's warnings against "detrimentals" and "impossibles," were prepared, each and all, to give the theatrical callers a cool,

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not to say snubbing, reception and a short hearing. They, eyeing the peculiar trio askance, were simply astounded when their noble bear-leader, after a short conversation with Miss de Mertens, left the actress and joined them with a face almost radiant.

“Oh, this is delightful, most interesting,” she exclaimed aloud in her most penetrating tones. “My dear people, you must ask Miss Camille de Mertens and her friends to stay to luncheon. They will”—she dropped her voice adroitly,—“be most entertaining, and will amuse us delightfully, which I am sure we are all in need of after the depressing influence of last night’s business. Do come, dear Mrs. Pomfret, and let me present Miss de Mertens. She is going directly to take all London by storm.”

There was no gainsaying so trustworthy a guide; so the Pomfret family changed their expressions from varying degrees of sour superiority to amiability; the players were presented, their prayer granted graciously, with the unlooked-for addition of an invitation to stay and lunch. It was accepted by the three in curiously different spirit. By Miss de Mertens in one impossible to divine, except that mischief had a place in it; by Mr. Roderick as a tribute to his public spirit, his eminence and his personality generally; by Mr. Vobster as probably the one chance in his life to sit down to a meal (off

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the stage) in a grand country-house, with persons of real position and be waited upon by a genuine butler and real footmen. Underlying this feeling, moreover, was the desire for a meal which in both quantity and quality should not be in the usual direct ratio to his weekly salary.

CHAPTER X

THE luncheon was, indeed Lady Clanrobert and Bendish took care that it should be, the most uncomfortable meal to which Cargill had ever sat down. At the outset he had hardly comprehended the malicious purpose that lay beneath the almost gushing welcome and invitation the players received. But to his quick brain it soon became apparent that the explanation of the unexpected cordiality was an intent to make him look small, chiefly in the eyes of Horatia Vane-Trevor. To this end he was never let alone, never allowed to drop out of the conversation. His stage life was all but canvassed to his face; reminiscences were invited and given by Rodenck and Vobster with a gusto that increased with the frequency of the butler's attentions.

Mr. Pomfret was at home with people in the dry goods business and likewise, he fondly believed, with the aristocracy. But with second-rate theatrical folk he was altogether at sea, as with beings outside his experience and sphere of usefulness. Consequently his strident voice was, com-

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paratively speaking, hushed while his guests were allowed to make the conversational running with his strange visitors.

“You like your profession Of course you do,” Lady Clanrobert asked disingenuously. “It must be a delightful life, with just the spice of adventure in it to keep up the zest.”

“I love it, madam,” Roderick answered pompously and quite truly; the old bohemian being a man quite unfitted by nature for any more staid or respectable vocation. “Custom cannot stale its infinite variety! What’s more, I cannot understand any one—who can act, understand me, madam—disliking it.”

“Does any one?” the lady inquired, suavely incredulous.

Roderick made a stage grimace as he glanced with an excess of mannerism towards Cargill. “I have come across one such case,” he replied, with an overdone business of facetious innuendo.

“Ah, Mr. Cargill?” Lady Clanrobert’s voice was unpleasantly penetrating now. “So he was ungratefully insensible to the charms of theatrical life,” she observed in a carrying tone of grimly humorous reproach.

Before Cargill could speak, Miss de Mertens, who had been with spiteful intent given the place next to him, said, “Mr. Cargill soon found a more con-

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genial vocation." There was a touch of proud, quiet scorn in her tone, and, to a woman's ear at least, a suggestion of pique.

"Better than playing the lover every evening to Miss Camille de Mertens?" Bendish protested with cynical insinuation.

"A good lover, wasn't he, Camille?" observed Vobster, with all a funny man's ineptitude.

"Almost too good," Roderick suggested significantly.

"I wasn't aware that my excellence was so striking," Cargill replied, hiding his annoyance under an assumption of their chaffing tone; "or I might have demanded a higher salary on the strength of it."

"You see, no one is jealous of you now, so you hear the truth," said Miss de Mertens.

"Out of the running. A renegade, my boy," cried Roderick, pronouncing the last words with vicious fervour.

"I presume," remarked Lady Clanrobert, "that it is not impossible to return to the stage when once one has left it. Perhaps now that Mr. Cargill has heard how he was appreciated he may be induced to do so."

The speech was uttered pleasantly enough, nevertheless Cargill recognised the spite that underlay it. He glanced at Horatia. She was talking to young

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Pomfret, ostensibly indifferent to the galling conversation. But he knew she must hear every word, and was sure that she was disgusted.

"Camille has not yet settled on her leading man," said Vobster, with a "mug," following up Lady Clanrobert's suggestion. "Have you, my dear?"

"You would not be the first person to hear of it if I had," she returned, plainly resenting the theatrical familiarity in that company. "But the point is of no consequence now," she added, with a return to a curiously suggestive reserve which seemed characteristic; "Mr. Cargill has left the profession and is not going to return to it."

"You are sure of that?" asked Lady Clanrobert with a smile.

The actress merely shrugged and glanced round at Cargill as though inviting confirmation.

"Mr. Cargill prefers to speak his own words," suggested Bendish, with a half-sneer.

"He might do that and still return to the profession," said Roderick. "Might write his own plays."

"It would be well to keep politics out of them," said Vobster, with a grin.

Cargill's patience came near to exhaustion. "Really, I don't think I am worth all this discus-

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sion," he protested, as good-humouredly as he could. "I should be more embarrassed than flattered even if I thought the interest of which I am the object was altogether genuine."

"My dear fellow," replied Bendish blandly, "it is generally accepted that the stage is very interesting to outsiders like ourselves."

"Discuss the stage, then, by all means," Cargill retorted, with a touch of sternness; "but please leave me out of it."

"There!" exclaimed the irrepressible Vobster. "He has done with us. Shaken the dust off his tans. Camille, awake from your dreams. Like the deaf adder he refuses to hear the voice of the charmer. Spoilt by politics. A fine leading man gone wrong. Fallen away from Romeo to Army Reform; given up Hamlet for the Irish Question. Sad! Sad!" And he finished off with a comic pantomime of sorrow.

Lady Clanrobert shrewdly saw that enough turns of the screw had been given. She therefore released the strain by adroitly changing the conversation.

Miss de Mertens began to ask Cargill about his plans, his ideas—as to his future career, her questions carrying provoking uncertainty as to whether they were prompted by sympathy or sarcastic disapproval. He answered them as shortly as was

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consistent with politeness, disgusted as he was with the whole business.

After luncheon he excused himself from joining the men in the smoking-room on the plea of having a speech to prepare. From his window he saw Lady Clanrobert and Miss de Mertens strolling in the garden together, and wondered what the result of the somewhat confidential talk would be to him and his hopes. For now, for the first time, he permitted himself to acknowledge that he was desperately, overwhelmingly, in love with Horatia. Her avowal of sympathy, her manifest suggestion—unless he was blinded by folly—that he was not indifferent to her had been the spark to fire the accumulated pent-up force of his love. The whole business, he told himself, had been as inevitable, on his part, as it was foolish, even wrong. But there it was. The crisis had arrived, and with it the determination to fight the forces which he must expect to be actively arrayed against him. Their whole scheme was manifest now; and in a way it flattered him to see they felt their chances so desperate that they had to resort to such a method of weakening their adversary's position, doing a thing the very idea of which at another time they would have scorned. So it had come practically to an open struggle. Hugh Cargill was by nature a fighter, and his hesitation to join issue had arisen surely

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from motives of propriety and honour. But if Horatia loved him—let him be once sure of that, and he would fight.

There was, however, another consideration which tended to make him pause. Horatia's wealth gave an ugly look to his candidature. True, Captain Bendish was impecunious, but their cases were scarcely parallel. Bendish had been well off, and had run through his money. More than that, he was a man of family and of fashion, one in Horatia's class of life, and who naturally, not adventitiously, found himself in her society. Assuredly Hugh Cargill was a gentleman; still there are degrees, divisions and subdivisions in that great and somewhat vague class. As the struggling son of a poor country parson, he could not have expected, at least till fortune came to him, to inhabit the same social sphere as these people belonged to. Fortuitously he had been raised into it, and might, he told himself, claim that his particular talent entitled him to a place there if he chose to keep it. But was he justified? True, he was of use, great use to these men, and in no subordinate capacity. Still, was not his position somewhat analogous to that of a barrister who by his gift of pleading wins a great cause for a man socially high above him? Would he thereby, *ipso facto*, take his place in the inner ring of that higher circle to which his aristocratic

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client belonged? Hardly. And it was the palpable social gulf, not so much of caste as of manners, of ideas, between himself, a salaried election-speaker, and this girl of a class living in the tradition of generations of wealth, that faced Cargill and made him question his right, as judged by the unwritten code of society, to aspire, at least in his present position.

On the other hand, and this was much, there was the knowledge of the girl's avowed sympathy with him and his aims. Honestly he knew that those aims were high and pure. He felt that he was capable of doing worthy work in the world; work that should make for the good of his country and his fellow-men. He always vowed that the gift he had he would never abuse; no, nor any position or power which might result from that gift. His principles were as high as his ambition. And yet without means, lacking a competency, how little he could do. He was fettered and crushed down by his poverty. How much longer, he would cry, must I be merely the spokesman of fools and self-seekers? His experience with the unspeakable Sampson, M.P., had been enough to have given a less resolute and right-thinking man a lasting disgust for political life. It had, on the contrary, like a plague-spot, shown Cargill the existence of a disease which he determined, when he should get the chance, to do all in

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his power to counteract. John Moidart was a good fellow, a thorough, straight English gentleman, with as near an approach to a certain nobility of character as a dull, unimaginative Philistine intellect would allow. And when Cargill had helped him into the House, should the election go that way, he would settle down as a loyal, useful, but utterly undistinguished and commonplace member of his party. It was not by bolstering such amiable numskulls into Parliament that any really good work outside the recognised grooves would ever be accomplished. His present work was better than idleness, far better than a stage career; still it was a weary, unsatisfactory employment for a clever, ambitious man, who felt his power strong within him, to gain other men their spurs, to fetch water from the spring of success for his neighbours' use because he could not afford a bucket of his own. He was thankful for the circumstances which had enabled him to put his talents to worthy and remunerative use, but the precious years were passing; must he wait on for his chance, or had it come?

He had been long enough at Prynnes to comprehend the line which Lady Clanrobert was following; the somewhat contemptible game that was being played. He saw through the manœuvre, and realised the position she held in the house. Then he asked himself, was he, if Horatia really cared for him, was

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he to be beaten back from the prize by the machinations of Lady Clanrobert and her protégé? That Horatia did not care for Bendish he was sure; the position proved it, for on the slightest real encouragement he would naturally propose. As it was they were certainly not engaged. Apart from their rivalry he did not like the idea of Bendish being Horatia's husband. The man was selfish, inclined to be dissipated, and obviously a fortune-hunter. A good sportsman, doubtless; but Horatia was worthy of something more than a mere sportsman, however good. And it was with this *viveur* who clearly cared for nobody's good but his own that this scheming old peeress was trying to force her niece into a convenient marriage. Yes; he must fight; only let him be sure of his ground. Of one thing at least he was certain. Horatia Vane-Trevor was not a girl to amuse herself by making a fool of a man for an imaginary presumption. If ever the truth looked out of woman's eyes, this one was true.

He went to the window. Lady Clanrobert and Miss de Mertens were still in conference; but now Captain Bendish and young Pomfret with the two actors joined them. For a while he watched the group in a mood of resentful disgust. How vulgar and out of place his two old associates looked, with their flashy bohemian dress, their loud talk, their posing and their theatrical gestures. Still they were

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but themselves; natural enough in that second nature induced by stage habit; unnatural only by comparison. It was the others, the pair of schemers, who for their own ends were in their hypocrisy egging them on, whom he despised. Presently Bendish took the men away, and the two women were left together once more. After a while they rose and strolled off down a garden path. With an effort Cargill strove to drive the bitter thoughts from his mind; he sat down at his writing-table and resolutely applied himself to his work. There was to be a meeting at a near village that evening, and he had to consider with what judicious references to the previous night's disturbance he should prepare his speech.

He had worked for about twenty minutes when a footman came with a message that Miss de Mertens was leaving shortly and would like to see him before she went.

CHAPTER XI

DISTASTEFUL as the interruption was, coming as it did from a mistrusted quarter, Cargill felt that he could not, short of rudeness, plead his work as an excuse for neglecting the invitation. He went down and found Camille de Mertens waiting for him in front of the house.

"I am sorry to trouble you to come and speak to me," she said coldly as he joined her, "but what I want to say may concern you as nearly as myself. Shall we walk down here?"

She indicated an alley running parallel with the drive, but shut off from it by a thick wall of rhododendrons. They strolled along it, Cargill so far keeping silence and waiting for her to broach the subject of her desire. For a good many paces his companion was silent too; perhaps resenting his taciturnity, for her face was set in a hard expression. At last she said—

"I wanted to ask you, Mr. Cargill, whether you have definitely determined to abandon the profession."

"The stage? Yes; I have," he answered, feeling

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rather mean that he could not bring himself to add a word of regretful compliment.

"I can't help thinking it is a pity," she proceeded; "and especially because, knowing what you can do and, forgive me, how clever you are, I shall very shortly be in a position to offer you a chance which it should be worth your while to entertain."

"It is very good of you, Miss de Mertens," he replied frankly, "and you must be aware that there are naturally many reasons which make such an offer tempting; but the ways have parted, and I have chosen, for good or ill, the path that leads from the stage."

"Not irrevocably?" she suggested, looking into his face for the first time with a complex expression in her eyes, less hard and cold than they had been.

"I'm afraid so," he replied gently, determined not to wound her by disparaging the calling in which she was to shine. "The only way to success in the world is to take one's course and stick to it."

"But politics," she argued, always, it seemed, with a touch of scorn lurking in the deep grey-green eyes, "politics can be taken up at any time."

"Not as I intend to take them up," he objected quietly.

She laughed, unpleasantly, yet somehow with a suggestion of how fascinating, with a slight change

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in its inflection, her laugh might be. "You are quixotic enough to have more romance in you."

He in turn laughed appreciatively. "Life and one's life's work cannot be all romance."

"Art is both," she argued, with a charming sententiousness. "Work and romance."

"And," he returned, with a smile, "there is, or, at any rate, may be, a romance in politics."

"Ah!" she flashed out at him. "You have found one—already?"

His laugh made her bite her lip in vexation. "Scarcely. But I have imagination enough to see where it may lie."

"Certainly," she retorted coolly, mistress now of her impulses. "It cannot be said to need imagination to see what last night's object-lesson showed us plainly. The romantic side of politics," she continued with a sneer, "the rescuing——"

He interrupted her, a little out of patience. "I did not mean that sort of thing. There is a romance in the work, in the life of politics itself. Although perhaps the ordinary stolid British politician does not realise it."

"Do you?" she demanded, with a quick glance, half banter, half scorn. "Do you realise what a political life is, or should be? Hardly a succession of country-house visits, with speeches instead of other amusements in the evenings, and a varying

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amount of admiration and applause thrown in, most acceptably, from the young ladies of the party. Better be honestly on the stage at once."

She spoke with an incisive vehemence that betrayed her animus, if not that, Cargill thought, of Lady Clanrobert. Her lithe fingers were playing with the chain that hung from her neck; the feeling which vibrated in her speech was greater than the mere argument called for. It rather surprised Cargill in spite of his shrewd comprehension of the real incitement behind her urgency. But he remembered that Camille de Mertens was but half English, and that in the old days the passionate Latin nature was wont often to show itself.

"I should quite agree with your conclusion," he replied coldly, "if I admitted your premises. But I do not. The present phase of my political life is accidental and, I hope, temporary. A poor man must take up his work where he can find it. But you did not send for me to argue with you on political ethics?" he added, masking with a smile his impatience for the interview to end.

"No," she assented, falling easily into his manner. "I had a business proposition to make to you. I don't know whether it was I who wandered away from it," she added a little disingenuously.

"I beg your pardon," he said, accepting the blame.

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“ I don't know why I should pursue the matter,” she continued indifferently. “ Perhaps I had better say at once, to avoid misunderstanding, that I am rather thinking of my own advantage than of any one else's in making the proposal. It is just this. The new play in which I open at the Thespis has two strong leading men's parts. Charles Marston plays one, a character part. For the other Percival Mallory, who has written the piece, wants Harry Lovelace. But there are difficulties in the way. For one thing he asks a fancy salary and then he wants to star, which would suit neither me nor Marston. The part would fit you like a glove ; I am confident you would play it as it ought to be played, and I think I could bring Percival Mallory to my view. He comes down to run over the piece with me on Friday. Shall I suggest you ? ”

The proposal was tempting ; might have been, that is, to a man less resolutely set to his purpose than Cargill. Moreover it was made at an unfavourable time ; when his resolution was spurred by love, when he was irritated and disgusted at the very thought of matters theatrical. What her real object was in making him this offer the inscrutable face, handsome yet mocking, gave no indication. Did she really value his support so highly ? His vanity was by no means strong enough to carry him

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to that conclusion. There were plenty of actors in town besides the high-priced Harry Lovelace who would answer her purpose quite as well as he. Was it prompted by a nearer, more personal reason? Mowbray Gore had pointedly hinted at the common knowledge that Camille de Mertens had been ready to accept Cargill as more than her stage lover. Vobster's vulgar chaff at luncheon had made for the same suggestion. If it were the truth—and her face and manner told him neither yea nor nay—that was simply an almost equally cogent reason for refusing it without a second thought. Had Lady Clanrobert's schemes any place in it? It was probable enough, also that the real reason for the proposal partook of all three motives. Their relative proportions were scarcely worth considering.

"It is very good of you to think of me," Cargill answered sincerely, "but——"

"It has been waste of time?" she supplied quickly, forecasting the answer from his manner.

"I can never think that," he replied appreciatively. "But really, I cannot go back."

She laughed derisively, but in her eyes there was now more provocative interest than she had yet shown. "Then there is no more to be said," she returned, her half-veiled discomfiture merging into the show of amused scorn; "except——"

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"Except?" he repeated, since in her studied pause the word could not be ignored.

She turned away with a short laugh. "You would not care to hear the last word on the subject, even if it contained a personal opinion."

Cargill was tiring of the scene. "I am sorry if my unwillingness to accept your offer has led you to form such a bad opinion of me," he said.

"Oh, I did not mean that," she objected coldly. "By not caring I only intended to suggest indifference."

Her tone was that of a woman whose pride has been touched and hurt. It seemed, too, to cast on him the stigma of ingratitude. After all, to a suitable recipient, the offer was a splendid one. He could but recognise that.

"You seem to think," he protested warmly, "that in choosing another walk of life I wish to turn my back on my old friends and comrades."

"Appearances favour that suggestion," she interpolated with a shrug.

"Then they belie me," he maintained. "I have no such intention. I am most grateful, indeed most grateful, to you for your wish to serve me. I hate the idea that I cannot fall in with it. It is natural that, to one with your gifts and future, it should be almost inconceivable that any one with

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some chance of distinguishing himself on the stage should deliberately prefer another and duller profession. I cannot hope to make you see eye to eye with me in this matter. I can only ask you to believe that my preference for one involves no slur on the other, and that I shall always follow your career with the interest of a most grateful admirer and friend."

Camille's face, during his rather long speech, had changed like the light playing among restless foliage. It had been half turned from him, but he could see the rather scornfully tolerant smile with which she began to listen to him give way to a more serious expression, till when he had made an end it was drawn into one almost of bitterness. Then she turned her face full towards him and her eyes showed him a light he did not much care to see.

"We must be thankful in this world for less than we expect," she said, with a coldness of tone which her eyes contradicted.

Her meaning was plainly to be read in them, so plainly as to make his blindness to it obviously wilful.

"I have set a life's programme before me," he said with quiet resoluteness. "It is not one in which I can hope to interest you. But I intend to strive

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to carry it through, at any rate till I am hopelessly beaten."

For a moment she was silent, only acknowledging his answer by a gentle bowing of her head. As his glance rested on her he recognised the woman's subtle power, the sway she could exercise at will over men, not so much by her beauty, although that was challenging, but by the working, impalpable and elusive, natural or studied, as a man could read it, of the mind behind the face. When it showed calm there was always the suggestion of a swift tempest; love and hate, scorn and sympathy seemed to jostle, and all with the hint of passion, suppressed, but held not far beneath the surface. The increased power in the woman's personality, which had struck Cargill a few hours before, he now realised more completely. Happily, with the thought of Horatia filling his being, he was impervious to this deadly fascination.

Camille now turned to him with a little pout of touched pride. "I suppose we must all have our defeats," she said, and, as she spoke, her expression softened dangerously. "Perhaps, Hugh, if ever yours comes and overwhelms you, you will remember you have at least one friend who will be sorry."

Her voice was sunk low, almost to a whisper, and she had drawn close to him.

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"Thank you, Camille, I will never forget it," he responded a little awkwardly, for he was ill at ease and the situation was distasteful. Then he added with what responsiveness he could summon, "Because our paths lie apart there is no reason why we should not sympathise with each other on our journey. And we shall both be in the public eye, and so in sight of one another."

He made a movement as though to turn back towards the house. Camille put out her hand. "So the ways part here," she said, with a wistful smile. "Good-bye."

Cargill felt the self-reproach which touches most chivalrous men when they cannot respond to a woman's advances. He took the hand held out to him. "Good-bye," he said, "and thank you again. Whatever happens I shall never forget the happy days of the old strolling life."

She laughed. "And Camille."

"And Camille," he repeated in the same tone.

"You are a good fellow, Hugh," she said lightly with just a touch of regret. "I wish you would have stayed in the profession—you might—but what's the good of speculating on what might have happened? Much virtue in an if, and often a world of unavailing regret."

As they stood together she lifted her hand in

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what seemed a caressing action, then quickly drew back and let it fall. Cargill turned to see the reason. Passing the end of the arched walk were Lady Clanrobert and Horatia in full sight and looking towards them.

CHAPTER XII

" I MUST say I don't quite square your preaching and your practice, Lady Clanrobert," observed Mr. Pomfret a little testily when the players had gone off, Camille de Mertens with the air of a duchess who had conferred an honour by her visit, Roderick and Vobster with an excess of bibulous acknowledgment.

" How so, Mr. Pomfret ? " the lady asked suavely, but quite ready for him.

" You've always told me not to—ah—have anything to do with theatrical people," he complained. " Knocked it into us that to have actors in your ah-house amounts to a confession that you can't get anybody else; right people won't look at you, and so on, ah-haven't you ? "

" Certainly," Lady Clanrobert admitted, with conscious mastery of the argument to justify her action. " But this is a different affair altogether; these poor people are by no means the sort I alluded to."

" Well," Pomfret maintained unappreciatively, " seems to me you couldn't have 'em much worse.

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The lady wasn't so bad; but the men, well, they made me wonder where I was—Prynnes Park or the New Cut."

Lady Clanrobert smiled with good-humoured tolerance. "My dear Mr. Pomfret, you forget. Am I not for ever urging the necessity for discrimination? Nothing is so misleading as a rule of thumb. Because I advise you in a general way never to let a theatrical person cross your door-mat, that is no reason why we should not, once in a way, let these quaint creatures amuse us."

"They did not amuse me," Pomfret could not help saying. "I thought them ah-horribly vulgar."

"Naturally. But then an occasional touch of vulgarity is amusing, if one does not get too much of it. And really these absurd people are less objectionable in their way than the so-called fashionable actor-folk in town, who give themselves airs and have no sense of social perspective. We need never see these creatures again, except from the stalls. And just at the moment our party here threatened to be a trifle dull. Dear Bulstrode Vernon is witty, but he has his moods; Mr. Moidart, usually so cheery, is worried about the election; Captain Bendish has style and go, a charming fellow, but not wildly amusing; and Mr. Cargill—by the way, dear Mr. Pomfret, I was going to suggest

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whether Mr. Cargill has not stayed here almost long enough."

The transition was so quietly incisive that Pomfret looked round at her in surprise and some perplexity. "Cargill? I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. You know I am in your hands in these matters. Thought he was quite desirable just now."

"He was." Lady Clanrobert made an inclination of limited agreement. "But I fancy his usefulness, if not his desirability, has come to an end."

"Oh. Well, do you want me to get rid of him?" Pomfret inquired bluntly.

"I think you might," the lady said with hard-set mouth.

"Has Moidart done with him?" Pomfret asked dubiously.

"Mr. Moidart," Lady Clanrobert replied dogmatically, "is not exactly the best judge of the man's usefulness. Mr. Cargill saves him trouble at the expense of dignity. It is time John Moidart exerted himself to stand on his own legs. And he will never do that while Mr. Cargill is at his elbow."

"But I can't well send the fellow off if Moidart wants him to stay," protested his nominal host.

"You can," his tutor returned emphatically. "And it is essential you should learn how to get rid of people at short notice. Besides," she added, seeing her pupil looked inclined to jib, "there is

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another reason. Mr. Cargill has been behaving badly."

"'Ere—ah—here?" cried Mr. Pomfret, quickly correcting the slip his astonishment had occasioned.

Lady Clanrobert nodded affirmatively. "Here. Quite forgetting his position, and the obligations and conditions under which he is temporarily admitted into our society. He has had the effrontery to make love to my niece."

The words were spoken in a tone harsh from exasperation and spite. Pomfret looked serious. He was at sea among the subtleties in the code of that class to which he aspired. He did not exactly see why Cargill, manifestly a gentleman, should not fall in love with Miss Vane-Trevor; or, if he saw, the reason for the prohibition did not appeal to him. "Well," he said uncomfortably, "it certainly has struck Mrs. Pomfret and myself that Miss Vane-Trevor was rather sweet on Cargill, but we didn't see much push in that direction about him. An attractive fellow, and clever with his tongue. It's not exactly surprising."

"Perhaps not," Lady Clanrobert returned sourly. "Accepting the fact, with astonishment or otherwise, only one thing remains to be done."

"Clear him out of the Park, eh?"

"Precisely."

"Very well," Pomfret assented, still dubious as

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to the justice of the course. "I don't want to have any fuss on my premises. That's been always my rule. Never would have a row in my ah-house of business; put up with a loss sooner. Well, if he's got to go, how am I to put it to him? I can't start him off like a bad salesman. I think I had better leave the office to you."

Lady Clanrobert's face assumed a hue of negation. "I should have been most happy," she replied, so far with manifest sincerity, "but under the peculiar circumstances of the case it would hardly do for me to interfere. Besides, even if you authorised me to send him away, he would naturally ask why you did not speak to him yourself."

Lady Clanrobert knew quite well that nothing of the sort was likely; still, she was wise in keeping out of the ungrateful office. Pomfret, who disliked it equally, if for other reasons, was not quite convinced.

"Seems to me, Lady Clanrobert, if you can ask my guests for my benefit, you can send them away for your own. However, I suppose I must give the fellow a ah-hint."

"A hint!" the lady echoed. "You gave your bad salesmen something more than a hint, I presume. Mr. Cargill is an outsider, and outsiders don't take hints to their disadvantage."

So it was settled; and the arch-schemer went off

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to tell Captain Bendish that his rival was about to get his *congé*. "The sooner you propose, the better," she advised.

"Now?" he asked in surprise.

"It is an opportunity," Lady Clanrobert assured him. "Horatia is, I can see, horribly disgusted with these theatrical people, as we intended she should be." She gave a short, malicious laugh. "It was more than enough to *désillusionner* any girl. You must take the ball on the rebound. And, after all, my dear Captain Bendish, you need not accept to-day's verdict as final. *Aujourd'hui n'empêche pas demain.*"

Mr. Pomfret lost no time, being essentially a man of action, in seeking his family and communicating to them the ungracious business he had undertaken. He had never before had occasion to tell a guest to leave his house. Mrs. Pomfret was a woman whose mind hardly rose above the desire for adequate occasions for the display of her gowns and her jewellery.

"Well, my dear," she observed casually, "if Lady Clanrobert wishes you to get rid of Mr. Cargill I suppose you must do it."

"I don't agree with you at all, mother," Miss Pomfret objected promptly and with considerable decision. Her cleverness began where her mother's ended; she had her father's grasp of the main

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chance, which was for her, not money, but fashion. She was a gushing young woman of sporting tendencies, since to be sporting was the thing; and her spirit was always tempered by snobbishness. "We are getting too much under Lady Clanrobert's thumb," she added.

"She has done a good deal for us, my dear Bertie," her mother suggested weakly.

"And has been well paid for it," Ethelberta retorted. "That fact alone should absolve us from any obligation to be rude to people at her bidding."

"Cargill is not much," said Pomfret, seeking an argument to excuse himself.

"I beg your pardon, father," Ethelberta returned strenuously. "Mr. Cargill is just the man to whom you ought not to be rude. He is a clever fellow, and there is no knowing where he may not end. He is sure to get into Parliament, and as certain to make a mark there. Is it worth while, just to please old Lady Clanrobert, to have a ready-made enemy in the House when you get there?"

"He's a theatrical chap," depreciatingly remarked her brother, who had come in and was casually interesting himself in the discussion.

"He's a great deal more than that," his sister maintained. "Morty, you're a short-sighted idiot."

Mr. Mortimer Pomfret, whose habit was to take

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the line of least resistance, merely lighted a cigarette and forbore to traverse the epithet.

"I always say," the young lady continued with conviction, "that the people who get on in life are those who can look forward; who don't judge a person so much by what he is as by what he is going to be. Be civil to a man when he's at the foot of the ladder and you'll have a claim on him when he gets to the top. Snub him when he's down, and he'll return the snub with interest when he's up."

"Civility is not thrown away when it comes cheap," Pomfret agreed. "But here it's a question of which of the two it will pay us better to please. Lady Clan carries the weight at present."

"No doubt," Ethelberta assented, with the suggestion of a sneer. "But Mr. Cargill is likely, as things go, to be a Cabinet Minister when Lady Clan is dead and forgotten." She did not like Lady Clanrobert, although she could not well impugn that lady's usefulness in the *ménage*. Ethelberta Pomfret was a masterful girl who naturally chafed at her parents' necessity for a bear-leader. Like most superficially clever women she was quick to adapt herself to new conditions of life. She was now beginning to feel her feet, and to tell herself that she could do very well without any Lady Clanrobert. Still, they owed their smart acquaint-

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ances to their patroness, and looked forward to making many more under the same auspices; for the wily old peeress was shrewdly doling the desirable introductions out to them, and hinting at still better to come. Still there ought to be a limit, Ethelberta thought, to their subservience to Lady Clanrobert. Had Hugh Cargill been a hopeless nobody, she would have been the first to advise sacrificing him to a higher social power: as it was, she saw the mistake and so stood up for him. And this was not the result of any tender feeling for his attractive personality. Her family knew her too well to attribute her championship of Cargill to any such reason as that. Ethelberta had her own ideas of matrimony, as touching her own case, and very decided they were. Not for her was the rising man, the hard-worker, even the triumphant fighter. She meant to ally herself with a ready-made position, of course, the higher the better, and have a good time in the world while she was young enough for its full and active enjoyment; her heart was essentially cold and sufficiently under the control of her head to be trusted; and no fascinating young men with futures before them were in the least likely to turn her from her set purpose.

“You had better tell Lady Clan that you prefer not to dismiss Mr. Cargill,” she instructed her father, with cold decision. “Mr. Moidart is his

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sponsor here, and if she is so anxious to get rid of him, for reasons, by the way, not far to seek, she had better arrange matters with him. And if anything happens it would not be amiss to tell Mr. Cargill quietly to whom he owes his dismissal, and that we are all sorry to lose him, and hope to see him here when Lady Clan is otherwise occupied."

The commission, so far as it related to the lady, was not an agreeable one; but Pomfret, ever recognising and admiring in his daughter the business qualities which he worshipped, was wont to be guided by her.

Nothing happened, so far, that is, as Cargill was concerned. But Mr. Pomfret had an unpleasant quarter of an hour with his patroness, during which time she threatened to cast him adrift in the social Biscay; but finding him firm, even to obstinacy, fortified as he was by his daughter's arguments, made fast the tow-rope again with a bad grace, hinting darkly at the futility of trying to make the harbour of social recognition except by steering and trimming as directed by the pilot-tug.

Then, accepting Pomfret's suggestion, Lady Clanrobert attacked Moidart, but again with no particular success. Indeed, her urgency was received in an unsympathetic spirit. John Moidart was not clever; but the few ideas his brain had room for were eminently sane. Lady Clanrobert had no terrors

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for him. He did not fear her tongue. The worst she could say of him was that he was a fool, and he did not much mind that. Besides, she would say it in any case. Her shifts for ways and means amused him; he liked her in a traditional sort of way; he had sat on her knees when he was a little boy; she being one of his mother's second-hand life he had been used to meeting her and how his mind by club gossip as to her reputation was accustomed to laugh good-naturedly and not for a lady's bad customer.

He was aware of the game the noble strategist was playing with regard to her piece's safety. Bulstrode Vernon had dropped a couple of hints, and this was presently amplified by his own observation. He was also much amused to see that it was not plain sailing, but that the old mariner was in difficulties on an uncharted shoal. So, quite good-humouredly but firmly, he declined to see evil in Cargill and refused to be cajoled into getting rid of him. Lady Clanrobert's artful attempts to make him jealous of his right-hand man quite missed fire.

"Cargill's a deuced fine speaker," he agreed heartily. "Got a natural gift which puts him miles above a fellow like me who hasn't it. He's quite welcome to all the *kudos* if he wins me the seat, and I'm pretty certain I could not have hoped to get it off my own bat."

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Accordingly Lady Clanrobert had to retire baffled once more, with the poor consolation of a Parthian shot suggesting that when modesty opened the door to folly it was liable to let in contempt at the same time.

So, despairing of getting rid of the obnoxious interloper by what she would classify as fair means, she took counsel with Bendish to defeat Cargill's pretensions by a method which could hardly be said to come under that category.

CHAPTER XIII

THE bespeak night at the King's Langton theatre went off as brilliantly as anything well could in that cheerless and dingy home of the drama. The piece was *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, a play beloved by star actresses; as Adrienne, Camille de Mertens scored a triumph. Genius, especially in regard to stage matters, is a vague term, and loosely employed. On one hand it seems to be a question of definition on the part of the user, on the other the synonym for temperament and personality on that of its object. In reality a stage genius in ninety-nine instances out of a hundred is a talented player who possesses besides talent and imagination an uncommon and interest-compelling personal magnetism; the same indefinable gift which in private life constitutes its possessor, *malgré soi*, the centre of attraction. It was easy for a man of judgment and worldly experience like Bulstrode Vernon to predict with confidence a repetition of Camille's triumph when she should appear in town.

"Nothing can stop her," he declared after the first act. "Even if the play is a bad one she is

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bound to draw all London. She does things unlike anybody else; in a way no other woman in our everyday experience ever thinks of. She is safe to attract, if only by piquing curiosity."

"I should like to know her history," said Bendish, with his short sneering laugh.

"My dear fellow, you may as well save yourself the trouble of seeking the unknowable," Vernon returned. "No one, if I may judge the elusive, will ever be master of more than one or two episodes of that woman's history. I fancy——" He stopped. The other man looked round at his face with swift curiosity.

"You fancy what?" he asked with more eagerness than he cared to show.

"Nothing," Vernon answered, with a shrug. "It is waste of time to try to sound the unfathomable. Yes, Miss de Mertens has a triumphant career before her. Happily it is in a sphere more or less apart from the work-a-day world, and where her dangerous attributes can give most pleasure and do least harm."

"A good deal for all that," Bendish observed cynically.

"Oh, yes."

"I wonder," Bendish said tentatively, "what her relations were with our friend Cargill."

To a far less clever man than Bulstrode Vernon

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the reason of the suggestion and the animus behind it would have been patent. "We have no reason or right to suppose it was any other than simple *camaraderie*," he replied, in a tone which did not encourage the other to pursue his speculations aloud.

"You are charitable, Bulstrode," he remarked, with a half sneer. "Lady Clan saw something that day the fair Camille came over which was calculated to lead to a different opinion."

"It is possible," Vernon returned coldly. "I only judge by what I saw. Shall we go back? The curtain is up."

At the end of the third act Bendish suggested to young Pomfret that they should stroll round behind the scenes and pay a visit to Mr. Roderick. They were received by that gratified impressario with his usual pompous effusiveness.

"Isn't she magnificent?" he exclaimed, when the greetings and compliments were over. "This will be a night to live in one's memory, my dear captain, when Camille de Mertens is the star of two continents."

"It will, indeed," Bendish responded with his quiet smile of contemptuous amusement. "I should like to have the honour of congratulating Miss de Mertens."

By all means. Mr. Roderick would send a message

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to her dressing-room. She soon came down, and shook hands with the two visitors. Bendish was clever enough to avoid banality in paying her the inevitable compliments; she received them almost disdainfully, it seemed, as obviously her due. Young Pomfret, somewhat out of his element, was talking, or rather listening, to Roderick. "A bumper house!" that worthy remarked exultingly. "And I flatter myself——"

"Are all your party here?" Camille de Mertens asked Bendish abruptly.

He checked his smile at Roderick's brag, and answered as they turned away from the other two, "All except Moidart and Cargill. They are indulging themselves with a show on their own account somewhere outside the town, but are coming on afterwards."

"To see the last act? It is very kind of them. I hope Mr. Moidart's chance will not be jeopardised."

Bendish gave a swift glance at the enigmatical face, and told himself he understood, for the moment, at least, what was uppermost in her mind. "They will have missed something worth remembering, at any rate," he replied, quietly observant. "Personally, I should prefer a seat at the theatre where you are acting to one in the House of Commons."

She made a little exclamation as of blowing away an uncalled-for piece of flattery. "Each man to his

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taste," she said, with what amount of feeling her companion could not determine.

"Have you succeeded in tempting Cargill back to the stage?" he inquired casually; knowing well that she had failed.

She turned on him almost fiercely. "I? No. I have no wish to tempt him, as you call it. I simply made him an offer which I thought would be mutually advantageous. I found him resolved to continue in politics; that is all."

"I fancy," Bendish said disingenuously, "he has less resolution than you suppose. If he would really be useful to you in your new play, I fancy it might be worth your while to ask him again."

"You think so?"

If he guessed the interest in the question, it was not from its tone, which was one of indifference—or anything.

"He is wavering. I can tell you that much," he replied. "Politics are a rich man's game. An uncertainty cannot hold out long against a certainty, such as I presume your offer opens out to him. I merely give you the hint, in case you still want him."

"I don't know that I do. There are many fish in the theatrical swim."

"He is a fine actor?"

She shrugged. "He had the making of one. But he must be out of practice; almost an amateur

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by this. No, I am not sure that my offer was not a mistake ? ”

Bendish, watching her, was certain of the insincerity of her speech. “ He was a fool not to jump at it,” he remarked casually.

“ Yes, but, then, men are fools—sometimes,” she returned, with a smile which scarcely masked the bitterness for which Bendish looked.

“ To give up such a chance, such a life, for the boring grind of politics—if that was all,” he added insinuatingly.

“ I understand. There is another reason,” she said, quickly seizing the hint. “ Yet he repents, you say ? ” She gave a hard laugh.

“ It is possible. But I said, wavers,” he answered, with a smile as dark as her own.

“ And I said—men are fools ; sometimes, often,” she rejoined, keeping the tone light with an effort. “ Well, I must say good-bye,” she added, as the cab-boy came up and spoke her name.

They shook hands, and as he turned away she called him back.

“ Did Mr. Cargill commission you to tell me this ? ” she asked, with an assumption of a careless tone which forced his admiration.

“ Hardly. I give you the hint for what it is worth, in case you might still care to persuade our friend.”

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The door in the scene was held open for her entrance. "I am afraid not," she said over her shoulder, as she moved away. Next moment she was on the stage, leaving Bendish with a smile of satisfaction on his knowing face.

Moidart and Cargill came in for the last act of the play; and Bendish, ever closely on the watch, saw her once, and once only, look at the man who, he was convinced, might be her lover if he chose; whom he meant should have no choice if he could help it. And that single glance was all he wanted to see.

"That's an extraordinary woman," he remarked to Vernon as they made their way out of the theatre. "I had a chat with her just now. A strange creature."

"Provokingly elusive, and elusively provocative, I should imagine," Vernon suggested. "I hope you've not fallen a victim?" he added, not quite sure that the contingency would be altogether a bad thing for any one but the parties most concerned.

Bendish gave a short laugh of repudiation. "I have other fish to fry, my dear Bulstrode. Otherwise I would not answer for myself."

Vernon smiled to himself, but said no more, for Bendish had suddenly moved aside as though watching something which had attracted his attention.

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A man with a note in his hand spoke to Cargill as though inquiring his name, and then gave it to him. As Bendish turned to rejoin Vernon it was with a look such as comes into quiet men's eyes when their schemes go well.

CHAPTER XIV

THE note which Cargill unfolded was three scribbled lines in pencil.

“Come to the George Hotel at 11.30 to-morrow morning. Must see you on a matter which affects you nearly. C. de M.”

His first impulse was to send back a reply that he could not possibly come. He was not keen on renewing to any extent his theatrical acquaintances; besides, he rather suspected the object of the message. He glanced at it again. “Affects you nearly.” The words made him pause, as, indeed, intentionally vague, they were calculated to do. Had Camille de Mertens anything to tell him respecting his chance with Horatia? She was undoubtedly a shrewd woman, and, at any rate, professed to be his friend. A hint from her was not to be despised. He was hardly in a position just then to ignore any chance; he would be in the town next morning. He could, at least, run into the hotel for five minutes and hear what Camille had to say. So he put the note into his pocket and made his way to the Prynnes Park carriages.

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Since the day when he had come so near to declaring himself, and on which he had afterwards been found in that equivocal situation, Cargill and Horatia had spoken little together. This was due partly to Lady Clanrobert's manœuvring, partly to an idea on his side that the events of that afternoon had lowered him in the girl's eyes, and it was characteristic of him that he had too much pride to seek to justify or excuse himself. He was wretched over the whole business almost to despair. Of what use was it, he asked himself, for him to aspire? Clearly it was presumption and almost bound to be futile. He was fighting, poor and single-handed, against odds which were too great for him. If ever there had been a chance for him, this unhappy theatrical invasion had effectively destroyed it. That his enemies were unscrupulous and meant to stick at no plan for crushing his hopes, he was assured. Horatia's coldness was a sign he could not disregard. He was more in love with her than ever, but that, he realised, must go to make the great disappointment of his life. True, he had not abandoned all hope, nor would he while Horatia was free; but the light in his heart burnt low; he looked for any day, any hour, to extinguish it. So it flamed up with a sudden leap that night when, as they were all assembling for supper after the play, Horatia spoke to him.

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" You did not see much of the play, Mr. Cargill ? "

" The last act. "

" Miss de Mertens was wonderful. She is really quite a genius, which one had been rather inclined to doubt beforehand. "

" Superlatives have lost their force now-a-days, " he observed. " We use them too glibly. But she is really fine. I never had a doubt of her success. "

" No; you told me so, " Horatia said, with a touch of constraint. " The men, " she added, with a laugh, " were almost as bad as she was good. Some were worse than others, but no geniuses there. "

Young Pomfret was standing by them. " It is a pity you were not playing Maurice, Cargill, " he observed, without the least idea of the tactlessness of the remark.

" I'm very glad I wasn't, " Cargill replied as good humouredly as he could.

" How a splendid actress like Camille de Mertens can act with such a stick as the man to-night is more than I can understand, " young Pomfret persisted.

" If she wanted a foil she certainly had one, " Horatia said, with rather a forced laugh.

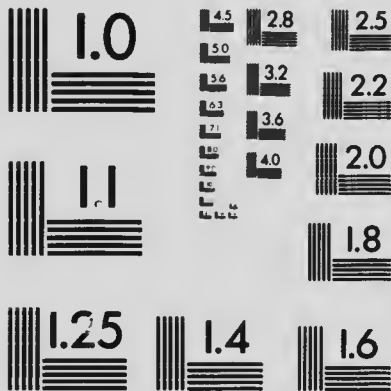
" Have you ever played the part with her ? " Mortimer asked fatuously. But a general move to the supper-table spared Cargill his reply.

That was all. And he was left with the question



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to debate in his mind whether the friendliness she had shown was prompted by mere civility or by a deeper interest. People now-a-days who mix much with the world, he told himself, are far too sensible to indulge in more than a transient show of taking umbrage. Old-fashioned folk, women especially, are pleased to maintain an offended attitude of dignified sulkiness for some slight, real or fancied. But now the person of *savoir vivre* recognises surely the futility and absurdity of the pose, and leaves it to latter-day exponents of the Cranford school of manners. If Horatia Vane-Trevor were really disgusted, as no doubt it was intended she should be, at the presumption of the late comrade of Messrs. Roderick and Vobster, if she were *désillusionnée* and repentant of the interest she had been led to show in him, she was surely too innately a lady to emphasise it by ignoring him for the rest of his stay. He could not be certain; he could only hope, and leave it to future events to tell him.

Next morning he drove with Moidart into the town. On the way to the committee-room Cargill asked his companion to put him down. "I got a note last night from Miss de Mertens," he explained frankly, "asking me to call at the George as she had something important to say to me. I hope it is not to worry me about going back to the stage," he added, thinking that Moidart's face had clouded

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with a certain suspicion. "I have quite made up my mind on that point."

"No; I don't think if I were you I should have any more to do with that sort of thing," Moidart observed with a certain bluff gravity. The prejudice of class was strong with John Moidart. He could not conceive the practice even of higher art than the stage having any claim upon a gentleman.

"I shall be at West Street almost as soon as you," Cargill called back as he ran up the steps of the hotel, and Moidart with a nod drove on.

As Cargill entered Camille de Mertens' sitting-room he saw she was not alone. In a deep-seated chair by the window sat a youngish man smoking a cigarette. For an instant Cargill set him down as one of the company; a second glance told him this could hardly be the case. For the man was dressed in a style to which surely no male member of Dan Roderick's troupe could ever aspire. There was about his get-up a kind of subdued flashiness. Everything he wore, from his patent-leather boots with grey cloth tops to his somewhat striking pearl and diamond tie-pin, was good, obviously expensive, and at the same time such as any man of real taste would reject. It was the same with the first impression of his manner. It struck Cargill as being studiously quiet, without being well-bred; it was a pose rather than a natural ease. But

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knowing well how theatrical folk are given to promiscuous acquaintances he did not trouble himself about the man's identity, beyond a fear that the fellow's presence might delay the business of the interview which for more reasons than one he was anxious to get over as quickly as possible. The man might be, for aught he cared, a well-to-do stage-struck probationer in the company, or an admirer of *la belle Camille* ; possibly both.

It was, then, with surprise and a slight feeling of annoyance that he heard him introduced by a well-known name. It was Percival Mallory, the dramatist and author of the new play in which *Camille* was to take London by storm.

Cargill looked at him now more curiously. A man of a subdued yet unmistakably Jewish type, shrewd-looking even to slyness ; with black straight hair worn just long enough to attract attention. His complexion was the somewhat ruddy olive of the Jew ; his Vandyke beard and moustache were trimmed with obvious care. There was over all the man a manifest effort to look distinguished, which somehow, owing perhaps to insufficient backing-up on Nature's part, ended in making him look merely theatrical.

" Mr. Mallory has come down to run over the new play with me," *Camille* explained.

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"I hope, Mr. Cargill," said Mallory, speaking as was his wont, with a cat-like suavety, "I may be able to induce you to accept a very good part in my play."

"Me?" Cargill purposely emphasised his surprise; he was inclined to be annoyed at Camille's persistency. For to Mallory he could be but an unknown quantity.

"I have been telling Mr. Mallory," she said in answer to his glance, "all about you, and how perfectly you and the part would fit each other."

"In spite of my having told you I had left the stage?" he said, with a touch of protest.

"I hope," she replied, with a smile which scarcely covered a certain resentment at his tone, "I have done nothing very dreadful in offering an old friend the chance of a lifetime."

"You have at least given Mr. Mallory a false impression," he returned, "and possibly some unnecessary trouble."

Mallory gave a gesture of deprecation. He had a deprecating habit. He was wily, and it was his custom to let other men give themselves away while he remained watchfully silent. They might puff and whistle away their steam: he kept himself well stoked. His admirers and parasites always talked of his charm of manner, to an extent, indeed, which

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might lead one to suppose they were rather surprised at so rare a quality in a playwright : his shrewder acquaintances knew that this somewhat stagey affectation was just the veneer with which the man chose to cover his shortcomings in the matter of breeding.

"None that I grudge, I assure you," he declared. "I should consider any trouble that I have taken quite justified by the chance of securing Mr. Cargill's co-operation."

His exaggerated urbanity did not suggest that Cargill's principal attraction in his eyes was that if he accepted the part he would be beaten down, always courteously, to taking less than half the salary any other eligible man would get.

"I am sorry," Cargill said coldly, for the man's manner and personality were distasteful to him ; "but Miss de Mertens might have told you that I have taken up a quite different vocation. Politics and the stage can hardly be carried on together."

"Of course I told Mr. Mallory that," Camille put in bluntly. "But he did not believe you would carry your politics so far as to neglect such a chance as this."

Mallory gave another of his characteristic deprecating shrugs, holding his arms down before him and raising his hands with the backs upwards. For a

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by no means humble spirit his humility of manner was remarkable. "Politics," he observed, quoting from one of his own plays, "are the nearest approach to an earthly Purgatory. To become a politician is the fitting end of a successful, and presumably dishonest, tradesman. I rather wonder that a man of, as I understand, high artistic endowment, like yourself, Mr. Cargill, should give politics a second thought, much less propose to devote your life to any career so uncomfortable."

"I am afraid it would not be profitable to discuss the pros and cons of the question," Cargill replied, with a smile at the words in which the other clothed his theatrical narrow-mindedness. "Nor to offer an apology for my choice of a career, which I dare say, to you and Miss de Mertens appears the act of a madman. All I can say is, I am sorry that I must decline the offer you are good enough to make me."

He felt his refusal was cold and ungracious, but in the circumstances he could not bring himself to elaborate it, nor to tell the cringing yet masterful Mr. Percival Mallory that he was flattered by their obvious wish to secure him.

Camille and the dramatist exchanged glances.

"You have scarcely heard it," Mallory said.

"I have heard enough—as much as I have any

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right to trouble you to set out, considering that I am not in a position to entertain the proposal."

Camille turned away—it seemed in disgust—and went to the window.

"There is one point," Mallory urged in his suave, even voice, "a very important one, which has not been touched upon. The question of—figures."

"Is it worth while discussing the price of a thing which is not for sale?" Cargill returned.

Mallory raised his sharp black eyes to the other man's face in what, had he permitted the emotion, would have been a glance of surprise. Jew-like, he was firmly of opinion that everything, and above all, theatrical affairs, were a mere question of *£ s. d.* He had driven many a hard bargain, in both buying and selling, but had never before heard a man refuse to listen to an offer for a London appearance; practically decline it on any terms. Politics? Why, one would fancy the fellow was already a Cabinet Minister.

But he kept imperturbably cool as he retorted, "Everything, Mr. Cargill, is for sale—at a price."

"I disagree," returned Cargill shortly, hoping his disgust at the Jew's cheap and trite dictum was not too pronounced. "Honest men do not give up their convictions at any price."

There was something in his tone which brought a

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spiteful gleam into the eminent dramatist's eyes. With the salary-giving power he wielded he was not used to being stood up to by less successful men. As has been hinted, his humility was only skin-deep, an easy and effective contrast to the vulgar brag of some of his brethren in stage-land.

"It is more to the point to talk of sensible men," he returned with deliberation, for it was his rule never to make rash or unthinking remarks; he left that to others, and profited thereby. "Surely there is nothing dishonest in being open to sane conviction, or in choosing an honourable path to success in preference to one which, whatever its merits in theory, seems somewhat doubtful."

"True," Cargill rejoined. "But you seem to take it for granted that money-making is the first aim in every career."

"To a poor man it is the necessary adjunct." He raised his hands deprecatingly. "Don't think I sneer at poverty. I have myself known what it is to be without a shilling."

The now wealthy Percival Mallory was rather proud of that fact, pointing as it did by inference to his talent and present enviable position. "But we need not indulge in an academical discussion on the question," he went on with a shrewd touch of the business man which evidently lurked beneath his

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pose as a personage. "If you care to accept the part in the new play—one of the leading parts, I am prepared to send your name in to the management and to offer you a salary—you must remember you are quite unknown in town, Mr. Cargill—a salary to begin with of twenty pounds a week."

"You are very good," Cargill replied, rather pleased at being able to say no to a man whose manner showed that when he came to terms refusal was out of the question; "but I cannot accept it."

"You must be aware that the appearance itself in a big success such as this will be of incalculable value," pursued Mallory, taking the refusal as a matter of bargaining, and confident of carrying his point. "Basil Newton might spring to twenty-five if I pressed it, but when we get beyond that figure, why, Harry Lovelace is walking about and would come for thirty, if not five-and-twenty. He has already been approached, as Miss de Mertens can tell you; and, in fact, Newton is keen on getting him."

Cargill rather mischievously let him run on, studying him the while. He knew the man by reputation, and thought him fair game. Mallory was a keen follower of his art on its pecuniary side. He kept his finger on the public's pulse and gave the town just what it wanted. If he had had it in

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him to write another *Faust* or *Hamlet* he would not have put pen to paper unless he could have seen in it a box-office success.

"I am very much obliged to you for your good offices," Cargill answered, with a smile, "but I really cannot accept the part. I have no intention of returning to the stage."

For a moment Mallory looked as though he could not believe him; then, believing, regarded him as an object of pity—or worse. "Of course, you know your plans best, Mr. Cargill," he said, with a curling lip. "There are some men who prefer to live for the unattainable, and so waste their lives and their chances, and die, as they have lived, failures. Am I to take your answer as final?"

"If you please."

Cargill's tone left no room for further doubt or urgency. Mallory gave his characteristic shrug, and turned away in disgust. Camille looked round from the window as he came towards her. Their eyes met; a certain reproach in his, a strange confidence—considering the position—in hers.

"Will you leave me to talk to Mr. Cargill?" she said, with quiet inscrutableness.

"I really cannot stay any longer," Cargill protested, taking up his hat.

Camille, with a lithe movement, went quickly to

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him and laid her hand on his arm. "Stay five minutes longer," she begged in a low voice. "There is something I must say to you."

He felt he had already stayed far too long, but could not well refuse.

"*Au revoir, Camille,*" Mallory said, as he made a rather stagey exit.

CHAPTER XV

For some moments after they were alone neither spoke. They were standing one at each side of the fire-place, and Cargill, glancing expectantly at his companion's face, saw there a complex expression which made him wonder.

"What is it you wish to say to me?" he asked.

For an instant she raised her glance to his face, then let it fall again. "I want to open your eyes," she answered in a low, even voice.

"As to my folly in rejecting this offer? I am hardly so dense as not to understand all it means."

"I think you are dense, Hugh," she returned, with the familiarity of the old stage days.

"How?" he demanded, with his face set almost to sternness.

She looked steadily at him now, leaning forward a little, with her arm resting on the mantel. "I mean," she answered with, it seemed, a lurking touch of mockery, "with regard to your swell friends at Prynnes Park. You don't seem to realise how you really stand with them."

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"I think I do," he returned, with a short laugh.

"Then," she rejoined quietly, "I wonder you care to stay on there."

He drew himself up, as rather resenting her interference.

"I am staying there for a purpose; almost in a professional capacity," he replied coldly. "So long as I do the work I have come down for to the best of my ability it is no concern of mine how I stand with the people I find there."

"I thought," she said significantly, "it might be. At any rate with one of the party."

Her allusion was obvious; but Cargill, resenting her knowledge, chose to ignore it.

"With Mr. Moidart?"

She leaned nearer to him. "I did not mean Mr. Moidart, Hugh. You know that."

"Please tell me," he said, hiding his concern with a show of impatience, "who you mean."

"Miss Vane-Trevor."

"Really," he protested in a tone of annoyance, real or assumed. "You have no right to couple my name with that lady's."

Camille laughed. She turned round and leaned back against the mantelpiece. "It is, I suppose, as great a liberty as her friends would consider it for you to aspire. Oh, come, Hugh," she continued, with a change of tone, checking his quick move of

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irritation, "you and I are old friends. Hadn't we better agree to understand each other, and drop fencing. I dare say," she went on, with just a slight touch of bitterness, "in your new sphere of life you think it impertinent for me, an actress"—she spoke the word with more pride than deprecation—"to interfere in your affairs. But if I am an actress I am also your—friend, and as such I hate to see you being badly treated."

"I was not aware of it," he observed coldly.

"No," she returned, staring straight in front of her, "I said—in my impertinent way—you were dense. You will allow I am not a fool, and, even if I had not been told, I should have seen how you were being used."

Cargill bowed acquiescently. "Please enlighten me," he said curtly.

"It amounts to this," she replied, with her unfathomable, enigmatic eyes turned on him with a kind of mocking sympathy. "They are simply making a fool of you up there."

"Are they?" he returned, with a constrained smile. "I think I can take care of myself."

"I doubt if you can," she retorted darkly, "in the circumstances in which you have placed yourself."

"You are still enigmatical. I thought we were to understand one another."

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She gave a short laugh. "You make me go all the way. Plainly, then, you are more or less *épris*," she chose the French word, perhaps, as being less real and uncompromising than the stronger English term which had risen to her lips, "with this Miss Vane-Trevor. And let me, as an old friend, take the liberty of telling you, Hugh Cargill, that you are a fool if you imagine that anything but disappointment and contempt will come of it."

Cargill bit his lip. "Really, Miss de Mertens," he said as coolly as he was able, "it is very friendly of you, but I take leave to doubt your warrant for telling me all this."

Camille stood, for one of her eager temperament, strangely still.

"Of course you do," she replied, keeping her eyes from his face. Staring at her as though to probe her sincerity he could see the greenish glitter as they caught the light from the window beyond. "You will make me say things I shall hate to say, things that will hurt and offend you, and make you dislike me. Hugh," she turned suddenly to him with a swift, passionate gesture, and eyes ablaze, "why won't you spare me this, taking my word for your false position, cut yourself free from these people before you force them to throw off their mask of lies, and take my offer?"

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He laughed uncomfortably. "Yours is scarcely a convincing reason," he replied in a dry voice. "The attitude of these people towards me does not appreciably affect the career I have marked out."

The passion, indefinite but none the less fierce, was still in her eyes, although her tone was cooler as she rejoined, "It should at least prove to you the hollowness and insincerity of the class with which you think to cast in your lot. Can you not see that a comparatively humble, if useful, acquaintance like yourself is regarded as nothing more; an outsider, to be ignored when not wanted. You may look incredulous, but what I tell you is a fact. Beyond all I can see for myself, I have been told it."

"From an untrustworthy and interested source," Cargill returned, fighting against the idea of that unpalatable assertion. "No doubt it was intended that you should repeat it to me."

"Intended, you think, by your rival, Captain Bendish?" she retorted vehemently. "Hugh, have you so little sense, are you so blind to realities, as to think that you have the ghost of a chance with Miss Vane-Trevor?"

He gave a hard laugh. "I am not going to discuss my chances."

His laugh seemed to irritate her beyond re-

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pression. "No, you prefer to go blindly to your ruin; wilfully to make your life a failure for the satisfaction of turning a deaf ear to your best friend." Then suddenly she became strangely cool. "Hugh, you are a fool," she declared, with a light laugh. "But if you must be a fool, don't let these aristocratic sharks and hypocrites up there have the pleasure of contriving it. Your eyes are bound to be opened before many days, before many hours, are over; won't you listen to me, your friend Camille, and open them yourself now?"

It said much for Cargill's preoccupation that he could listen to her pleading unmoved. For now she had thrown away all reserve, and her tone was the most dangerous that a fascinating woman can use. She had come close to him, her hand grasped his arm, her eyes, seeking his, were alight with a frank avowal far beyond coquetry; those eyes in whose depths lay the unknowable, and surely the wrecking of many a soul. Her breath was on his cheek, the spell which exhaled from her strange, bewitching personality was focussed upon him. Surely no man had ever resisted her like this. But, doubtless, the reason of his love, he stood immune from her enchantment; if it required an effort to resist her it was not apparent.

"Even if my eyes are to be opened to my real

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position at Prynnes," he replied in a tone, the cool irresponsiveness of which must have stung her, "and I am not so ignorant of it as you would argue, that is scarcely a reason why I should give up on the spot my political career and take Mr. Mallory's offer."

Camille had drawn back, at the first sounding of the unvibrant note, and her hand fell from his arm. For an instant, unseen by him, a very curious look flashed across her face, a look startling in its abrupt change from the expression that gave place to it, the look of a proud, imperious, subtle-natured woman stung by indifference or opposition into hate; the glance which must often have shot from Marie de Brinvilliers' eyes when her victims' looks were turned away.

It passed, for it was but a flash, and its determined successor boded evil for Hugh Cargill the politician. That faded too into an expression in harmony with her tone, as with a slight laugh of expostulation she spoke again.

"Do you think I am urging you to this for my own ends? That I am interested in that objectionable Jew, Mallory, getting his man cheap or dear? That I would break up a man's career elsewhere for the mere selfish whim of having him to act with me? Hugh, I have declared myself

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your friend, your best, if the truth were known; is that your idea of my friendship?"

He could not bring himself to answer her coldly now. After all, it was not her fault that she could not balance his prospects more clearly.

"Indeed it is not," he said. "I should be sorry not to believe in your sincerity. I know you feel I am giving up substance for shadow, the chance of immediate success for one that is quite problematical, roses for thorns. You don't understand my point of view, Camille. If you did I think you are sufficiently my friend not to try to turn me from my course."

Sufficiently my friend? Was it possible he did not see that she was in love with him?

The real motives and feelings of a rare and complex nature like that of Camille de Mertens defy even self-analysis. After her first meeting with Hugh Cargill she had gradually been attracted by him. For one thing, he was that unusual feature in her limited acquaintance, a gentleman. Despite a tactful effort to avoid it, he stood out among his theatrical fellows; to the instinct of a clever woman, markedly so. He had interested her, and the interest had grown in warmth until it was manifest and the company had called it by another name. That was common enough, an everyday occurrence in

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such a *milieu*. The singular part of it, however, was the fact that the feeling was not returned. No. Somehow the strange, wayward, elusive personality of the half-foreign actress did not attract Cargill. For one thing, Camille de Mertens was but a budding glory then. She was clever and original enough to be lightly spoken of as a genius, but she had not arrived at the full maturity of her powers of acting, of fascination, of compelling magnetism. The dynamic force within her was as yet not fully developed. It was doubtless repressed by the struggle for existence, by want of recognition, by the depressing surroundings of her life.

Cargill's sudden secession from the company had been a keen blow to her; that she had tried her powers of fascination on him to induce him to stay, and had failed, was still more bitter. He had gone, as he had meant to go, and her woman's intuition told her that his expressed regrets were more considerate than genuine. She felt she could hate him for his happy indifference; and the impotent hate was but the stinging salve of a wayward and ever-growing love that had gone for nothing.

And now their paths had, with strange fortuitousness, crossed again. She was just being swept up to the crest of success, in the plenitude of

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her powers of enchantment, he still struggling to free himself from the hands that clutched him down. With swift instinct she had comprehended in an instant his position with Horatia Vane-Trevor, and with that spark of intuition her jealousy blazed forth mingling with the leaping flame of revived love. Two years had made a whole world's difference in her. She was a *femme faite* now. What her inner life had been in the interval no one but she might know. Her existence had always had a touch of mystery about it; those inscrutable eyes of hers were the index of her nature. Once more Hugh Cargill stood within striking distance; and now—

“Should I be your friend,” she rejoined, “if, knowing your course leads to bitterness and disappointment, I did not try to turn you from it?”

“You look at it from the point of view of a woman with a brilliant success within her grasp,” he argued. “To a man of grit stern work does not necessarily mean unhappiness. There is the glory of an honest struggle even if one fails to win the prize.”

Camille laughed. “Your castles are in the air, my dear Mr. Cargill. Glory of the struggle!” Her laugh was scornful now. “Are you such a child as not to know how sordid and contemptible political strife must be? Oh, don't let us theorise,”

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she went on, with a change of tone. "Look at facts, look at your position to-day, as a sensible man. What a fool's paradise! And you tell me, a—speaking without vanity—a clever woman, that your chances are hopeful. Do you think I cannot see?"

"What?"

"That you are doomed to disappointment and failure. Will you put it to the test? Will you?"

She was leaning forward, looking into his eyes with a challenge that could not be avoided. Perhaps he saw more in them than bold, impatient argument, for he seemed to avoid the look as though it repelled him.

"How put it to the test?"

"Propose to Miss Vane-Trevor to-day and see what your answer will be, and whether I am not right."

Her tone jarred upon him unpleasantly; more so the idea of the almost familiar canvassing of his love in that theatrical atmosphere.

"Without pretending to your cleverness and insight," he returned, with a suggestion of sarcasm, "you must really allow me to be the best judge of my own affairs."

Camille gave a Frenchwoman's shrug. She could be very foreign sometimes. "As you will," she

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replied in a tone which rather suggested a denial of his claim. "I suppose you will propose to her one of these days, and then—Hugh," she grasped his arm again with a southern emprossement which could scarcely be resented, "if she rejects you, will you come back to us—to me?"

She was appealing to him with a fierce insistence which embarrassed him almost to the point of annoyance. Yet there was scarcely passion in the look he was forced to meet. There was a bold, mocking expression in the opaline eyes, a look as enigmatical and elusive as the woman's whole being. The last words—"to me?"—were spoken as though dragged out almost with a curl of the mobile lips. It was the trick of a woman who would fain be taken seriously and yet fears and guards against repulse.

One thing at least was certain now. Cargill could no longer ignore the feeling that underlay and moved her urgency. And it was with a pang of mortification, of repugnance that he realised it. He was angry with himself for having gone there at Camille's bidding; the visit had been altogether disagreeable, and his one desire now was to bring it to an end. He saw that he must meet her advances diplomatically. He would not wound her if he could help it.

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"You forget my new profession?" he responded lightly. "Am I to abandon that too, if rejected?"

"You will if you are wise, with fame and fortune awaiting you elsewhere." Her tone was as light as his own. Perhaps with unerring judgment she knew she had said, and shown, enough.

"At least you will let me wait," he laughed constrainedly, "till my hopes are crushed. I may see life and the future differently then."

He took up his hat and held out his hand. She was watching him with a curious expression, baffled yet resolute.

"And Percival Mallory? What shall I say to him?"

"I'm afraid it must be no."

She rejected the answer with a laugh, and her laugh was like fate. "I shall tell him he must wait for your answer."

Cargill would not argue the thrashed-out point. "As you will," he responded. "Good-bye."

She took his hand. "Say, Good-bye, Camille, or I shall think you are proud," she said in a voice that vibrated beneath the surface tone.

"Never think me that," he assured her, brightening with relief that the interview was over. "Good-

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bye, Camille; and many thanks for your interest in my welfare."

Her look grew sharp as though suspicious of sarcasm.

"*Au revoir*, Hugh," she responded with a meaning smile. Then the nervous grasp on his hand relaxed, and he could go.

CHAPTER XVI

CARGILL hurried away from the hotel, annoyed to think of the construction Moidart would put upon his long visit. As he turned into the street he saw Mallory, cigar in mouth, strolling back to the George. Cargill merely waved his hand to him and hastened on. He had no further concern with the dramatist, who he had his answer.

At the committee-rooms he found Bulstrode Vernon.

"Moidart has gone to Spackham," he informed Cargill. "He waited for you a good while and then decided to go off alone so as to be back at Prynnes by lunch-time. He will work round by the lower road, and we are to go back direct. It is time, too, that we were off."

So the morning had passed without Cargill's having done anything of the work he had set out to do. Vernon's tone rather suggested this, or at least he fancied it did; of course it was known where he had tarried, and he was annoyed at the idea of what the astute man of the world must be thinking of him.

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"I won't go back to luncheon," he said shortly. "I'll get something in the town. I am sorry not to have got here sooner, but was kept on what was really a matter of business."

Vernon's face expressed nothing; neither acceptance nor doubt of the truth of the statement. He did not often take the trouble to make a grimace of incredulity. "Oh, you had better come back," he said indifferently. "There is not much to do here just now, Mr. Pilbeam tells me."

"Nothing for the minute, Mr. Cargill," Pilbeam put in. "Perhaps you could drive over in the afternoon. Mr. Moidart is coming in again."

"I had a rather tempting offer made me this morning. That's what kept me so long," Cargill said as they drove out of the town together. He was determined to set himself right with Vernon, who doubtless suspected him of philandering with the fascinating Camille de Mertens.

"Oh?" Vernon responded invitingly, as he passed the whip lightly over the horse's withers.

"Percival Mallory, the dramatist, is down here. He offered me a principal part in the new play in which Miss de Mertens is to make her London début."

"You accepted?" It was impossible to tell from Vernon's tone the spirit in which he took the information.

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"No; I refused. That's what kept me so long. They were good enough to try to convince me that I ought, in my own interests, to accept."

"I thought I saw Mallory in the town about an hour ago," said Vernon, who knew most celebrities at any rate by sight.

The implication was obvious. "Yes," Cargill replied, hastening to justify himself; "when I had refused him he went off and left Miss de Mertens to try her powers of persuasion."

"A discreet move on his part," was the shrewd comment. "And you were still obdurate?"

"Yes. It was a good deal to refuse as regards both the present and the future. But I have set myself to a political career, and don't care to turn back. Of course it is uphill work to a poor beggar like me, and for the same reason this theatrical offer was tempting. But I'm glad I refused it."

"So am I," Vernon agreed with unmistakable conviction.

"I am happy in being backed by the approval of a man who knows much more of the world than I do," Cargill observed frankly.

Vernon gave a short laugh. "I have seen a good deal of the world, from crowned heads to tattered bohemians. And my experience tells me you have done the right thing in keeping to your course. The stage is all very well for a man who has nothing

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better in him. If you'll let me say so, I'm sure you have."

"I can't help feeling that, if I dare say it," Cargill replied, without a suggestion of conceit.

Vernon glanced with a curious eye at his companion. "You've got a chance, and I should say a good one," he remarked. "You are rather the type of man that is wanted, and of which there are too few in the political world. People think I'm a hopeless cynic," he went on in a more familiar tone. "Certainly I have kept my eyes open and looked about me for a good many years and have naturally seen the bad side of life. But it doesn't follow that I can't recognise the good as well."

"Certainly not," Cargill agreed.

"If you have really said no to these people," Vernon jerked his whip back towards the town, "let me, as an older man who isn't exactly a fool, tell you that you've done the right thing. Only, having done it, stick to it."

"I mean to, if the luck is not too strong against me."

"Oh, you'll come out all right on the political stage," Vernon assured him. "What I mean is, drop that sort of thing." Again he pointed backwards. "Luck, as we call it, won't bear trifling with. Here it is another name for singleness of purpose, and of heart."

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He spoke so pointedly that Cargill could but read the particular in the general. "I hope you don't think," he said earnestly, "there is, or ever was anything between me and Miss de Mertens."

Vernon gave his quick, knowing laugh. "I am inclined to a half belief in it; that is, to believe in the lady's half, you understand."

"I give you my word there is nothing."

"On your side?"

"On my side."

"You had better stop there," Vernon said pleasantly. "And if I might add a hint, I can give you credit for a good deal, my dear Cargill, but not for such abnormal powers of resistance as would render a man immune from the fascinations of a woman like Camille de Mertens, if once she made up her mind to play for him."

"No; I dare say not," Cargill assented, with a laugh, recalling the glitter of those passionate eyes.

"Then don't play with fire."

"I don't mean to. I never meant to. It was my bad luck, not my fault, that she and my c'd companions came to this town and, of all places, to Prynnes."

"No," Vernon agreed meditatively. "You were treated badly over that business, very badly; by luck and something more."

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Cargill waited for him to continue; but he kept silence.

"It would to many a man in my circumstances have been a piece of rare luck," Cargill said, at length. "A good position, in a London theatre, connected with an assured success, a handsome salary to start with, and the way smoothed to a sure footing on the London stage. Against that I have to set the pittance I get from the Central Office, with the quite nebulous prospect of a windfall without which the House of Commons is barred to me. It is just as well to look facts and chances squarely in the face."

The speech was an implied request for advice from a man whose counsel was proverbially sane and indeed worth taking blindly.

"I don't know," Vernon responded, with a smile, "that you are setting the facts and chances quite squarely. A man, such as I take you to be, who has in him the makings of a Parliamentary figure is not likely, with a decent amount of energy and enterprise, to remain long out in the cold. Political parties are stupid enough, but neither can afford to ignore a useful recruit. And of the choice between the two professions there can be no question. It is absurd to compare them. So, my dear fellow, you have to set the chance of a distinguished public career, with the possibilities of doing real service to

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your country in the long run, against a shallow, tawdry, perhaps lurid, stage existence, in which women like our friend Camille de Mertens are bound to play a tolerably disreputable part. That's the way to see it."

"I am happy to be strengthened by your view," Cargill said appreciatively. "If only I had the sinews of war I should never have any qualms about missing the golden opportunity."

"What looks like splendid opportunity, my dear Cargill, is, oftener than not, a mirage. If the wrong path always seemed uninviting who would go astray? The 'Prince of the Power of the Air' takes care to dress the thorns with flowers—for a certain distance. No; the clever man is he who can discriminate between the real opportunity and the spurious."

"It is a faculty hardly to be acquired except by sad experience," Cargill commented.

"Granted. But that is because men will circumscribe their view by mere selfishness and opportunism. Don't think me rude if I cite your own case. You talk of a golden opportunity. May it not be that this is but a gilded hazard, and that the solid golden chance lies elsewhere?"

Cargill gave him a quick glance of inquiry. "Perhaps you can see it," he said, without letting

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too much implication show in his words. "I cannot."

"Or will not," Vernon laughed. "None so blind——"

Cargill was sure now. "Sometimes honour bids us shut our eyes."

"Often because they are over-sensitive to false lights."

The ideas that surged into Cargill's mind made him silent. He understood his companion's hint, and was unspeakably grateful for it. Not on account of the material prospect, but from the love in his heart for her who seemed by the turn of a phrase on a strong man's lips to be put once again within his reach.

They had now turned into the drive of Prynnes. As they neared the house Cargill felt he ought to say something in acknowledgment of the kindly interest shown in his career by a man who stood in a class apart from him and whose weight and prejudice he might reasonably have expected to find against him. Yet he told himself enough had been said; he would be tactless and wanting in *savoir faire* to push the delicate subject farther. So he waited till they were driving up to the door.

"It is good of you to advise me out of the fulness of your experience," he said simply. "I hope to show myself not undeserving."

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Behind the footmen who came out to them appeared their host with a face puffed with weighty news.

"Let the dogcart be in readiness to take Mr. Moidart—er—his lordship to the station," he ordered with an important air.

"Anything wrong?" Vernon inquired, with a return to his habitual casual tone.

"Wrong!" exclaimed Pomfret. "We're done. The election is over so far as we are concerned."

"Over?"

"Yes. Lord Doveridge is dead. Moidart is a peer of the realm."

CHAPTER XVII

THE news that John Moidart was no longer an eligible candidate for the House of Commons fell like a thunderclap upon the constituency. Coming as it did on the eve of the nomination, it created utter consternation in the local ranks of the Party. Mr. Pilbeam, on receipt of the staggering intelligence, sat speechless and paralysed for half-an-hour; then hastily rousing himself he sent forth flying messengers to summon a meeting of the heads of the local organisation. He also dispatched a despairing telegram to the London head-quarters. "Moidart a peer. What can we do? Nomination Thursday. Fear chances of capturing seat now hopeless. Cargill here. Pilbeam."

The meeting sat till late in the afternoon; a reply from head-quarters was received; also a visit from Mr. Pomfret, who stayed at the rooms ten minutes and then having called at the telegraph office drove back to Prynnes in a high fever of importance.

At six o'clock Mr. Pilbeam appeared at Prynnes with an urgent demand to see Mr. Cargill. He was

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shown into the library and the next moment Pomfret came in.

"Well?" he asked expectantly. "Is it settled?"

"Nothing settled as yet," Pilbeam answered, with obvious embarrassment. "I've come to see Mr. Cargill."

"Cargill?" Pomfret echoed half contemptuously. "What about my offer?"

In spite of his hardly repressed excitement Pilbeam looked limp and awkward. "I am not entrusted with any official communication on the subject," he said, wrapping an unpalatable reply in a flourish of words. "But I may tell you that the urgency committee, while deeply appreciating your offer to stand in Mr. Moidart's place, or rather Lord Doveridge's place, do not feel themselves in a position to avail themselves of it."

"Why on earth not?" exclaimed Pomfret, with lowering face. "Surely after all that's been done, you are not going to let Long have a walk-over? It is madness."

"No," Pilbeam replied darkly; "we don't intend to do that if we can help it. I have come up with a proposition to—ah, here is Mr. Cargill."

"Cargill!" Pomfret's face was of a dark green hue as Cargill and the new Lord Doveridge came in.

"Allow me to offer your lordship on behalf of myself and the committee our respectful condol-

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ences," Pilbeam said, with a flourish of sympathetic importance.

"Thank you, Pilbeam. It is all very unexpected and I fear most disastrous to the Party here," Doveridge replied. "I am off almost immediately to catch an express train home. So if there is anything you have to say, or that I can do, I am at your service for ten minutes. First of all, can you get another man to stand?"

"That's what I've come up about," answered the agent. "We've had an urgency meeting, have been in telegraphic communication with headquarters and have thoroughly discussed the crisis. As the result I am commissioned to ask Mr. Cargill if he will be willing to stand for King's Langton and allow himself to be nominated on Thursday in your place."

"I?" The suddenness of the offer staggered Cargill. He could not for the moment collect his thoughts sufficiently to frame or even bend his mind to an answer.

"Absurd!" Pomfret exclaimed in a tone which indicated that the old Adam was not yet completely whipped out under Lady Clanrobert's teaching.

"It is the unanimous opinion," Pilbeam went on, "that Mr. Cargill's candidature is our only chance of pulling the election out of the fire. He has the favourable ear of the constituency, has had time to

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make himself known and popular, while his speeches have hit hard and been a conspicuous success. To bring forward a stranger at the eleventh hour would be worse than useless. It is agreed Mr. Cargill is the one man available to save the situation."

"If you call me a stranger compared to Mr. Cargill, who never set foot in the place till a fortnight ago, it doesn't say much for your intelligence," Pomfret remarked, with a laugh of disgust.

"The Central Office favours Mr. Cargill," observed Pilbeam, as settling the question of the maligned local discrimination by an *a fortiori* argument.

"But I—I can't afford to stand," Cargill declared, hardly yet master of his thoughts.

"Well, I can," put in his host. "Money is no object with me. That ought to settle it."

Pilbeam shook his head uncompromisingly. "You have your own constituency, Mr. Pomfret," he suggested, with a firmness born of the crisis.

"That's my affair," snapped Pomfret. "If I chose to stand in an emergency for this seat, I shall do it, in face of your cocksure opinion."

"Quite so," retorted the agent, "but you must not count on the support of our association or of the Central Office."

"Speak for yourself," returned Pomfret angrily, snatching a telegram that was just brought in.

"Now let's see."

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Evidently what he saw was not altogether pleasant, for he crumpled up the telegram and thrust it into his pocket. "Fools all round," he muttered wrathfully. "You deserve to lose seats. No wonder men of brains and means cast in their lot with the other side."

"We have," suggested Pilbeam pacifically, "to consider what points most directly to the chance of our gaining the seat. Mr. Cargill has been closely in touch with the constituency of late, and——"

"Yes," the angry one interrupted with a particularly ugly sneer, "we all know that Mr. Cargill 'as been playing 'is own game, and much good may it do 'im. I've kept 'im ah-berre at my ah-house, enjoying my ah-hospitality," he proceeded with an heroic attempt to save the aspirates and his dignity, "against the advice of my friends, and this is what I get for it."

"But my dear Mr. Pomfret——" Cargill began, when his host, bursting with the sense of his rebuff, cut him short.

"Don't talk to me, Mr. Cargill. I'm not the fool you take me for. I've seen you playing your own game at my expense. If you can 'oodwink these gentlemen you don't bamboozle me. I have as much moral right to stand for King's Langton as I have to take up my abode at Prvunes Park. And

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Mr. Cargill has as little. You've not 'eard the last of this, I can tell you. It's a dirty trick all round. And if I don't 'ave myself nominated and go to the poll in spite of you, my name's not Samuel Pomfret."

With which dire threat, and seething with jealous rage, Samuel Pomfret flung out of the room.

Cargill turned to Moidart, who was looking at his watch. "Is this fair, Lord Doveridge?"

"Oh, don't take any notice of him," he replied.

"We can understand Mr. Pomfret's feelings in the matter," Pilbeam put in. "But he is not the man we want here to beat Long. They won't have him, and at head-quarters they are guided by local opinion."

"Ten minutes ago I had never dreamt of standing for King's Langton," Cargill protested, still smarting from the injustice of Pomfret's attack.

"Of course, my dear fellow, we know that," Doveridge assured him, in the hurried tone of a man pressed for time. "But, as it is, you must stand."

"Impossible," Cargill objected, with a short laugh of disappointment. "I have no money."

"Oh, that can be arranged," Doveridge said in the same urgent tone. "Leave it to me. I am bound not to let the Party suffer through this unforeseen shortcoming. Besides most of the ex-

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penses are over and are my debts. For the rest I will make myself responsible. I agree with Pilbeam and our friends you are the one man to save the situation. You must stand, if only as a personal favour to me."

He laid his hand persuasively on Cargill's shoulder. The appeal was manifestly made with earnest conviction. "Now, I ought to be off if I am to catch my train. You must stand, Cargill," he repeated, shaking his hand warmly. "You've been a tower of strength to me, and I'll see the election doesn't cost you a penny. So I rely upon you. Good-bye, a thousand thanks, and may you have the best of luck."

Cargill, having got rid of the effusive Pilbeam with a promise of a definite answer that night, set himself to steady his brain and resolve upon the course he should take. One thing was certain. After Pomfret's unjustifiable language he would have to leave Prynnes at once. So he went up to his room and packed his portmanteau; then went to announce his departure to his hostess.

In the hall he encountered Bulstrode Vernon.

"So your chance has come even sooner than we anticipated," he observed, with his peculiar smile.

"Yes," Cargill responded. "And I am at my wits' end to know what to do."

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With a tacit invitation to follow, Vernon led the way out into the garden. "Now this is the golden opportunity if you like," he said quietly.

"You know—"

Vernon nodded. "The egregious Pilbeam ran into me just now. He told me."

"It is wildly tempting; but the chance has come too soon; before I am able to grasp it. To stand now seems madness."

"Doveridge franks your election expenses, as he ought."

"It is most good of him. But if I got in I should have no means to keep up my position as a Member of Parliament, much less to fight again and hold the seat. We must have a Dissolution next year."

"Don't you think," said Vernon, with shrewd sententiousness, "that it would be an unpardonable mistake not to seize the present chance and let the future develop itself?"

Cargill laughed perplexedly. "If I dared. But to live in a fool's paradise, to build one's house on the sand and to be at the mercy of the tide is a hateful position."

Vernon made no direct reply. After a short silence he said, "Pomfret was rude to you?"

"Abominably. I am leaving at once."

"He has driven into the town, probably to dis-

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charge his wrath along the telegraph wires," Vernon observed, seeming to be following out a train of thought. "He is naturally annoyed at being passed over—I say naturally, because that class of man never realises his disabilities. You had better give him an opportunity to apologise."

"I am not anxious for an apology. His attack is not calculated to do me harm. In any case I must leave."

"You will put up in the town for the election?"

"Yes, if I stand."

"You must stand."

"I don't see my way clear."

"I do. There it lies," Vernon returned, nodding his head towards a figure at the end of the path.

Cargill felt him self flushing as he saw Horatia Vane-Trevor.

"Take the advice of a man who knows a thing or two, and seize your chance before—well, before Pomfret comes back to make things unpleasant."

"It would be too barefaced," Cargill objected, thrilling nevertheless at the idea of realising at a stroke a very world of hopes. "I dare not."

"Nothing venture," Vernon urged in his restrained manner. "Let me give you, a badly treated man, a hint. The lady is ready to help you—with more than sympathy. I know it." He turned away abruptly, with a nod which from him

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counted as one of encouragement, and Cargill was left alone, hesitating between a compelling sense of the exigencies of the situation and a shrinking from the obvious reproach of a glaring, even discreditable, opportunism. How could he bring himself to propose to this girl in that very hour when the question of his ability to stand in Moidart's place hung in the balance, a balance which showed a decided tendency to sink against him? He had always entertained a great contempt for men who deliberately advanced their worldly position by marrying money. Was that not exactly what he was about to try for? True, his great incentive was not mercenary. On that point his conscience was quite easy. He was in love, deeply, with every pulse and conception of heart and soul, with Horatia Vane-Trevor; so madly in love that, now the weight of despair was taken off by Vernon's hint, it left him pulsating with delight and fear, and scarcely master of himself to address her. But who knew this? Who in the world was there, with, perhaps, the single exception of Vernon, who would not sneer at his action as a smart mercenary coup? Even Horatia herself would be almost bound to doubt his sincerity. And yet could he refuse to go forward after such plain direction? How could he bring himself to turn his back on his happiness when it came so unexpectedly within his reach?

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Yet the crisis was urgent, terribly urgent; temporising was out of the question. The whole future trend of his life might depend on the next half-hour. With the knowledge he now possessed from Vernon's hint what would he not have given for time instead of the insistency of this indecent haste? That this position should so suddenly have been forced upon him was cruelly unfortunate. But so it was; and now as with the rush of these thoughts he went forward with hesitating steps, the woman he loved and who had it in her power to make his future so glorious was within a few yards of him.

Horatia had a book in her hand; she had been sitting in the garden reading, and was now on her way to the house, for the light was falling. Cargill's anxious, diffident glance read nothing in her face, not even a natural sign of sympathy; and he began to doubt whether, after all, Vernon had been right. Might it not have been a trap to bring him to discredit in the interests of the Clanrobert party? Cargill told himself it was quite likely. Vernon was a friend of Bendish's; one of that set, and a relative of Lady Clanrobert's. Why should he side against them with an outsider like him?

With that possibility in his mind, Cargill's greeting matched Horatia's outward demeanour in coldness.

"I am sorry the time has come for me to say good-bye."

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She glanced at him inquiringly, but with no surprise.

"I have heard of the strained situation which the last hour has brought about," she said, with a smile.

"Yes," he responded in a like tone, "I am just now the sport of fate; and the future is as dark as to-day's events were this morning unexpected."

"Lord Doveridge's death must have been terribly sudden."

"Yes; he had been ailing, but Moidart told me he heard from him only yesterday, saying he was much better."

"Now you have your chance, Mr. Cargill."

"Which I cannot seize."

"Ah?" She looked at him, in surprise, he thought. "You really mean that? You are not going to stand?"

"I have not given a decided answer; but I know I ought not even to entertain the idea."

It seemed to him that her manner froze a little. "Are you hesitating between the opening for a political career and a return to the stage?" she asked, with a suspicion of contempt at the idea.

"No, indeed," he assured her. "Although I had a very tempting offer made to me this morning by Percival Mallory the playwright. But I refused it."

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"I think you did right," she responded, with quiet conviction.

"Yes," he agreed. "And now this political chance has come all too soon. It has found me unprepared, although Moidart has most kindly offered to be my sponsor so far as this election goes."

They had turned, and were slowly pacing along the overhung path. "If you do not stand," Horatia suggested, "Long will have a walk-over?"

"It looks like it."

"There is no one else?"

"Except Mr. Pomfret," he smiled.

"I mean, with the ghost of a chance?"

"It appears not."

"And yet you refuse?"

"I feel I ought to. Yet I am sorely tempted to accept."

"You decline on personal grounds?"

He nodded affirmatively. "Which unfortunately hold cogent reasons."

"So strong that public considerations cannot override them?"

Her tone seemed to drive him from the line of tact which he was constraining himself to take.

"Oh, Miss Vane-Trevor," he burst out, "don't think I am lukewarm, or hankering after the stage, or half-hearted in this crisis. It almost maddens me to think that this chance which I have dreamed

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of and longed for should have come only to find me unable to seize it. Of course, it is the great opportunity of my life. But I am desperately poor; while my mother lives I have nothing of my own, and my slender income is horribly precarious. I ought not to intrude these personal details upon you, but I cannot bear that you should think me so weak-spirited as to fall away in the hour of fight. I long to accept this chance, and yet I know that I have no right to gratify my ambition at the cost of a false position and at the risk of an ultimate fiasco. Can you advise that ? ”

“ No,” she answered, with a curious smile. “ Yet I want you, all the same, to stand on Thursday.”

“ You ? ”

“ I. I told you I would be your friend.”

Impulsively he caught up her hand. “ My dearest friend,” he said, with a rush of bewildering love. “ And I dare not ask you to be more.”

“ And I ”—she laughed as she stood facing him—“ cannot offer.”

“ Horatia, my darling ! ” She let him kiss her once on the lips and then put back his embrace. “ That is all you must say to me now,” she said, with a smile masking the quiver of love on her lips. “ You have other things to think of.”

“ And I must go from here,” he exclaimed, with a sharp pang of regret.

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"It is better," she declared, in her calm tone of conviction. "Better for many reasons. And your business for the next week will lie in King's Langton."

"A short three miles from my love. I shall see you?" he asked, with a new world of joy in his eyes.

"It is quite likely," she answered, with a quiet smile and a glance that now could speak of her heart, since the barrier of restraint had fallen. "Anyhow you will know I shall be watching you."

"Horatia, my love!"

She held up a restraining hand. "You must win," she said, as though to put her interest on another footing, but the love-light in her eyes made it futile.

"How can I but win—now?" he responded.

"It is not all plain sailing yet," she warned him, with an enchanting touch of archness. "You must throw yourself into the contest——"

"Not single-hearted?" he laughed.

"If you don't you will lose," she declared almost seriously.

"Then I am fore-doomed. But no; I shall fight all the better in the glory of your love."

She checked him again. "Hush! you must not speak another word of that, at least till the fight is over."

"I fear there will be no chance," he said ruefully.

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"All the better," she returned, "if it is to make you neglect your duty."

She spoke in a tone of loving encouragement which took from the words all the chilling effect of their tenor. For the gift of great power, of self-control in no measure implies the absence of material for its exercise. On the contrary that mastery over the obvious and tempting impulse is seldom found, at any rate where women are concerned, in any but those whose passions are proportionately strong. And it is manifest that their strength is not lessened but gains by repression. So now Horatia's perforce damped-down love for Cargill had, as the covering was pierced, sprung up and taken possession of her with a force she found it hard to control. Nevertheless hers was not the nature to throw restraint to the winds once its necessity was over. She had realised the crisis which had suddenly arisen in the life of the man she had come to love, and at the same time had understood his diffidence in asking her, a rich girl, to enable him to turn it to his lifelong advantage. Feeling sure, with a woman's intuition, that he cared for her, she saw too that the very urgency of the situation had increased rather than diminished the bar which forbade him, a poor man, from declaring himself. So there had been nothing for it but that she should meet him half-way with a plain hint that he might speak.

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She had taken the trustworthy Bulstrode Vernon half into her confidence ; and he, like the good fellow which at heart he was, disgusted with the Clanrobert tactics, had spoken his mind pretty plainly, and set Horatia right with respect to Cargill's suggested theatrical entanglement.

They had turned back and were drawing near the house. He laid his hand upon her arm.

"Horatia, you will be my wife ? "

She just let her eyes rest for an instant on his face.

"Yes," she answered simply.

"In spite of Lady Clanrobert ? "

"Even in spite of Lady Clanrobert," she repeated, with a smile.

"My darling ! " he murmured. "And now comes the cruel parting. It must be good-bye."

"For a little while."

"Only for a little while."

She suffered him to draw her close and kiss her lips once more in token of betrothal. Then they walked on in a delicious sadness, for the edges of the little cloud were bright with hope.

A man entered the walk, and came forward quickly to meet them. It was Forteseue Bendish.

"I hear you are leaving us, Cargill," he said in a tone sharp with annoyance. His eyes were fixed, not on the man he addressed, but on Horatia, as though to read the state of affairs between them.

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"I am leaving at once," Cargill announced.

"For town?"

"For King's Langton."

"You are not going to stand?"

"Yes; I have decided."

Bendish said nothing, but his face grew darker than ever.

CHAPTER XVIII

“ I AM really so sorry you must go,” said Ethelberta Pomfret to Cargill, in a voice of studied regret, as they met in the hall, he being on his way to make his adieux. “ I do hope,” she went on in a tone of frankness, also for the occasion, “ that you won’t think anything of what my father may have said. He seemed very much upset before he went out, and thinks he has been unhandsomely treated by the Party here.”

“ Of course not,” Cargill assured her, “ I quite sympathise with Mr. Pomfret, and am only sorry that, by no action of my own, I seem to stand in his light.”

“ It is very unfortunate. Well, if you must go, good-bye,” she said, with simulated reluctance. “ I think my brother has ordered the dog-cart for you.” And Ethelberta went off to try over a new piece of music. She was not in the least sorry at a somewhat unassimilable guest’s departure. As things stood, the sooner he went the better. But she had laid it down, being an astute young woman, never to be, if she could help it, on bad terms with

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any one, and never to take up other people's grievances, not even her own father's. It was even betting, she told herself, that Cargill would win at King's Langton; and in view of future contingencies, it would be a miserable tactical error to show any feeling against him.

On his way to the town Cargill met Pomfret driving out, but his late host went past without slackening pace or acknowledging him by more than a casual wave of the hand.

Making all allowances for Pomfret's natural bitterness of feeling, Cargill could not but feel hurt at the slight, implying as it did that he had been guilty of sharp practice in playing the interloper.

But Pomfret was not, either by breeding or mental training, a man who was amenable to reasoning against his own interests and ambitions. Cargill recognised this, and knew it would be waste of time to attempt to justify his own conduct to that unreceptive character.

In the town he prudently avoided the "George" and took rooms at the "King's Arms"; then went straight to the committee-rooms and gave his decision in favour of standing. On this the staggered spirits of Mr. Pilbeam and his associates received fresh energy. The cheers which greeted Cargill's resolve were promptly caught up by the loafing groups in the streets, and it very soon

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became known all over the town that the situation was saved.

When at last Cargill got free from his noisy admirers, he walked up the street towards his hotel, with a great longing to be alone with his thoughts and to prepare himself to take up the brunt of the half-fought contest which now faced him. At the door of the "George" stood a fly with luggage, and as he passed, Percival Mallory came down the steps. He threw out his hands at the sight of Cargill.

"My dear Mr. Cargill," he exclaimed, with something of a cringe in a manner which was meant to be hearty, "so you are going into the House! No wonder we couldn't persuade you this morning."

Cargill, disliking the fellow's manner, replied coolly enough, "I have only decided to stand within the last hour or two. When I told you I could not accept the proposal you were good enough to make I had not heard of Lord Doveridge's death. As it turns out, it is lucky I was not committed to you."

Mallory made his usual gesture of deprecation. Under his sly Jewish humility he was perhaps a little sore that any man, prospective M.P. or not, should have refused even to entertain the offer he had made. But like all his tribe—his grandfather's name was said to have been Malachi—he worshipped success. For all his lashings of

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social pretension on the stage he was a snob at heart; besides, he never showed temper except at rehearsals, and then only with subordinate performers. A man of spirit might have openly resented Cargill's somewhat off-hand manner; Mallory was keen enough to see it, but too wedded to his line of what friendly and parasitical scribes called "urbanity" to show sign of offence.

"I hope our loss will be your gain," he murmured. "Camille is going to astonish London," he went on, with smug assertiveness of the reverse of the shield. "I am making her close her engagement with dear old Roderick to devote herself entirely to a fortnight's study of the part."

"A good plan," Cargill agreed indifferently; then added with more interest, "So she leaves King's Langton?"

"No," Mallory answered; "at least I think she means to rusticate in the neighbourhood for a week or so. She will never study in town."

"You are off?" Cargill said, moving away.

"Yes, I am going up by the night train. I have some important appointments to-morrow. By the way," he added, with a manner and look of deprecatory slyness, "it would be just as well for Camille not to stay here. The excitement of the election might distract her mind from her part."

The suggestion was obvious from the pointed

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manner of its delivery. With the delicious memory of Horatia filling his mind, it was simply more than distasteful to Cargill. "That is your affair," he retorted irresponsively, and walked off.

Mr. Pomfret returned home in an unenviable and unapproachable frame of mind. He had failed signally in his attempt, after the manner of his kind, to bluff and bully the local executive into adopting him. And now he had in his pocket two telegrams from head-quarters, the first message couched in a polite lavishness of words—and halfpennies; the second a curt—and economical—snub; but both rejecting his pretensions in unmistakable terms. And to think that this beggarly fellow, Cargill, a man without two sixpences to rub together, as the ex-tradesman vulgarly put it, should have the preference over him—a millionaire; it wouldn't bear contemplating.

"I think they're all mad," he replied snappishly to the inquiries of Lady Clanrobert, who met him in the hall, her interest in the Cargill development keeping her on the alert for the turn of events. "I've done with them," he declared. "Not another penny of my money shall they see; after all I've lavished on them!"

"Cargill stands then?" she asked suavely.

Pomfret turned fiercely. "'Ow can 'e stand?"

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he cried. "'E 'asn't a leg to stand on. Wretched under'and pauper. 'Ow's 'e going to run the seat, if 'e gets it, on two ah-hundred a year?'"

"Ah, how indeed," Lady Clanrobert echoed, with a shrewd idea, nevertheless, of how it would be accomplished.

For Bendish had carried to her certain disquieting news, and it followed that, in her heart, Lady Clanrobert was greatly concerned.

"Did you meet Mr. Cargill, father?" Miss Pomfret asked, when she presently encountered the baulked and irate hustler for Parliamentary honours.

"Yes; I met the fellow as I drove out," was the resentful answer. "I wish I'd never 'ad him under my roof."

"I hope you said something civil," Miss Pomfret observed, in a tone which did not add confidence to her hope.

"I didn't speak to 'im. If I 'ad there wouldn't 'ave been much civility in it after the way 'e's be'aved."

Miss Pomfret looked discouraged. "Really, my dear pater, you are too disappointing. Supposing you have a grievance, what possible harm could it do you to keep on good terms with a man who is bound to make his mark? And the very fact of his being chosen, practically by acclamation, to stand for this seat is all the more reason why you

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can't afford to show spleen. How can we ever hope to push to the front if you keep dragging us back ? ”

“ There are some things I can't bring myself to do,” Pomfret declared doggedly. “ It's not pleasant to feel you've been bested by a beggarly chap who——”

“ Who has got the brains, and the gift of appealing to an audience,” supplied Ethelberta, who to a hard heart and calculating mind added a peculiarly sane view of life and human nature. “ Haven't I told you over and over again that feelings, likes and dislikes have no place in society ? People now-a-days go everywhere, know every one, keep on the best terms they can with every man and woman worth knowing. Half the battle is to be able to forecast, to pick out and cultivate those who are going to be powers in our world. Do you suppose that other people who are racing neck and neck with us are likely to snub a man like Hugh Cargill ? Not they. They will run to bow to the rising sun, and we shall have your temper to thank when we are left under a cloud. Would Lady Clanrobert advise your snubbing a coming man ? ”

“ Cargill ? Yes,” Pomfret caught eagerly at the exceptional justification. “ Lady Clanrobert 'ates 'im.”

“ And shows her dislike ? ”

“ Pretty plainly.”

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“Not to him. And if she did, the reason is obvious and one which should make us cultivate him all the more assiduously. If he and Horatia Vane-Trevor don't make a match of it I'm very much mistaken, and then—where's your beggar? He will go to the front at once.”

Pomfret knew better than to oppose or contradict his daughter. Her common-sense, applied in a sphere other than his own, had ever appealed to his business instincts. So now he was fain to pocket his wrath, and grudgingly accept Ethelberta's eminently sane view of the position, especially as it involved no active display of amiability on his part.

Lady Clanrobert was much perturbed at Bendish's information. “Are you sure?” she asked, with an incredulity she failed to persuade herself into feeling.

“Convinced of it,” Bendish answered, in a tone of vicious disappointment. “I'll swear, when I ran them down in the garden, they understood each other. Besides, doesn't everything point to it? The fellow has gone off cock-a-hoop to announce that he'll fight the seat. How could he do that if he hadn't something behind him?”

Lady Clanrobert did not need convincing. She could see more clearly than her companion the trend of possibilities. “It is most disappointing,

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most disgusting," she murmured, her mind busy with schemes. "That a girl of Horatia's *savoir* and breeding should throw herself away like this, should be caught like a vulgar, gushing, middle-class person by the glamour of a theatrical talent. It is terribly humiliating. And a man of such questionable antecedents, too. That makes it all the more distressing."

Bendish was in no wise concerned with Cargill's personal history; he was the rather consumed by his own failure. It would hardly have afforded him consolation if Horatia had been going to marry a crowned head instead of an ex-actor and political adventurer. He was, however, acute enough to see that his noble confederate's words were less the proclamation than the veil of her thoughts. So he was careful not to let his impatience interrupt her.

He had not to wait long for the real index.

"You have found out, you can find out nothing about his past?" Lady Clanrobert asked in a tone which—transparent artifice—carefully implied a primary concern in her niece's welfare.

Bendish shook his head. "I don't think there's much to find out. Much, at least, which would serve our purpose. I've been keen enough on that."

"This Camille de Mertens?"

Again a gesture of negation. "Nothing there,

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I'm afraid; at least on his side. The fellow has been prig enough to keep it on hers."

The corners of Lady Clanrobert's lips drooped in contempt. Then, "Is it all on hers?" she inquired searchingly.

"Yes, yes."

"To what extent?"

He laughed. "Oh, as much as you like. Camille is as far gone as only a woman of that type can go. The feeling is strong enough on that side."

Lady Clanrobert rose. "There is our hope; there is our chance," she said, with sudden animation.

Bendish's face scarcely shared it. "Not much chance, I'm afraid; if I know the man. His is one of those characters——"

She interrupted him. "Our business is to act for him, and independently of his character, which, as unfortunately it turns out, can be of no use to us. Happily Horatia has a character which may be."

"Ah!" Bendish's face brightened now. "Then you don't despair, Lady Clan?"

The lady's answering smile was not exactly pretty or captivating, still it had a wonderfully reviving effect on Bendish. "On the contrary," she assured him, "I am full of hope. I see a break in the clouds. Yes." The scheming mind was manifestly reviewing the chances. "It is a most fortunate thing that

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the man has left the house. It fits in admirably. Really I had no idea poor Mr. Pomfret could be of such use to us."

"What's your idea?"

Lady Clanrobert pursed her lips. "You shall know to-morrow. Give me to-night to think it out. Now, whatever you do, take care not to join in any set against Mr. Cargill. That sort of thing is always a mistake, and I know Horatia. There are times when one can do a person more harm by taking up the cudgels for him than against him."

"I have an idea," said Bendish in an aggrieved tone, "that Bulstrode Vernon has spoilt our game for us."

Lady Clanrobert smiled. She too had her suspicions, but she also realised that Vernon would be likely to take a higher view of the matter than would suit either herself or Bendish. "Dear Bulstrode's tastes are sometimes startlingly catholic," she replied, with an affectation of apology for the strong man whom she knew better than to quarrel with.

"But to side against his own class, his own set," protested Bendish.

"Bulstrode always was liable to be unduly attracted by people of talent," the lady declared.

"One cannot argue with him. He has strange views

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and goes his own way. But he is all right in the main."

"Not much consolation in that when Horatia through his contrivance is married to this fellow."

Lady Clanrobert placed a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Make your mind easy," she said. "That shall not be."

CHAPTER XIX

LADY CLANROBERT'S nocturnal lucubrations on the situation turned out to be like the thinker's character, eminently practical; and next day she was able to submit a very pretty little scheme to Horatia's viciously despondent suitor; a plan, indeed, which put the gallant strategist into markedly better spirits. At the same time, such a thorough-going piece of villainy was it, even coming from an unscrupulous peeress, that Bendish was almost inclined to shy at it. But Isabel Clanrobert had lived too long in an intriguing world not to be a past mistress in the arts of persuasion and plausibility.

"We can't afford half-measures and experiments now," she declared. "It is too late. And a decisive blow must be struck at the wretched business now or never. Indeed, I feel we owe it more to dear Horatia than to ourselves to use any means to stop this deplorable affair from going farther."

"Have you heard anything from your niece?" he asked.

Lady Clanrobert nodded her head significantly.

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"I spoke to her last night. Naturally, perhaps, she would not say much, but the little was enough to convince me that there is something more than an understanding between them. So we cannot afford to be too scrupulous." And in a fresh access of jealousy Bendish could do no less than agree.

As a preliminary he was dispatched to King's Langton to get the latest news of Cargill and Camille de Mertens. The report he brought back was that the new candidate was busy canvassing and speaking, with ever-growing chances of ultimate success, and that Camille had left her quarters at the "George" Hotel and had taken up her abode at the "Crown and Sceptre," a pretty roadside inn at Ellington, a village between the town and Prynnes Park.

"Gone there for quiet, to study her new part," he said. "I looked in on my way back, to pay my respects and incidentally to prepare the ground for what we have in view."

Lady Clanrobert beamed. "Nothing could be more opportune for my purpose than this move of hers from the town. It has simplified matters most delightfully. Yes, it requires nothing now but nerve to win the game."

That same Saturday afternoon Lady Clanrobert drove into King's Langton, and later, on her way out, was quite suddenly and unaccountably struck by the picturesqueness of the flower-covered "Crown and

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Sceptre"; so much so, indeed, that, not satisfied with a passing view of the exterior, nothing would content the sentimental old lady but an inspection of the interior and a cup of tea in the oak-joisted parlour. While discussing the charm of the place with volubility, and her refreshment with a purposeful tardiness, whom should she fall in with but Miss Camille de Mertens. Whereupon there took place between the two ladies a momentous conference, short, but assuredly very much to the point; at the conclusion of which Lady Clanrobert hastily returned to the carriage, leaving her delicious tea scarcely touched.

And on Camille de Mertens' face there was likewise a look of gratification, but of a more subtle and spiritual character.

That evening Bulstrode Vernon and Bendish, sitting and smoking together, discussed, as tacit adversaries keeping touch of each other's points, the strange political situation which the last hours had developed. That was the surface interest, but Vernon was shrewdly conscious that the hands of his companion and Lady Clanrobert had been forced, and he was curious to know what their game would be. There seemed to be an air of reticent confidence about Bendish which he mistrusted. He knew that his kinswoman was capable of much in the way of social strategy and was a tireless fighter while a chance remained; moreover, the Guardsman

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was desperate. He was also, it seemed, inclined to be vicious tempered.

"I suppose you are going to see your protégé, Cargill, through the fight," he observed presently, with a half-sneer.

"I dare say I shall do as much for him as I should have done for Moidart," was the casual reply.

"I had an idea you were inclined to do more."

"Had you?" There was lazy, scornful amusement in the suggestion.

"Yes," Bendish answered insistently. "And it is a little surprising, since one is scarcely used to associate works of supercrogation with Bulstrode Vernon."

"I am in the habit," Vernon replied easily, "of taking up any line that commends itself to me, without reference to its possible effect on my friends' preconceived ideas." His laugh took all stiffness out of the speech. Bendish was forced into a responsive smile.

"I hope that doesn't imply," he returned pointedly, "that you are ready to throw over your friends and the best interests of your—our—class for a whim."

"No. How should it?" The answer was curt enough; disconcertingly so.

Still it is not a bad thing to be forced to drop fencing. "Oh, well, I have thought once or twice

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lately that things rather looked like it," Bendish replied.

"You mean my conduct?"

"Conduct? My dear fellow, I am not a schoolmaster, nor an archbishop."

"Which may possibly account for your objecting to my countenance of Cargill?"

The opening was not to be ignored even if Bendish had wished to evade it. "I suppose he is a taking fellow and a useful recruit for our party," he replied; "but it has struck some of us that you were making rather more of him than was altogether necessary."

He glanced as he spoke into Vernon's eyes and saw there a look of fight which he felt sorry now to have provoked.

"I think it was necessary, my dear Bendish. And I fancy you are the last man to need telling so."

There was no avoiding his meaning, and Bendish did not try. "We are not going to let outsiders in quite so easily as you would suggest," he said.

"Then they should at least be kept out by fair means," Vernon retorted. "The methods of—Lady Clanrobert do not commend themselves to me, nor, I should hope, to any man of honour."

It was a stinging hit, but Bendish did not wince.

"In this world of ours one has to adapt one's tactics to those of one's adversary," he returned coolly. "Dangerous diseases have always been held

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to justify drastic remedies. But I don't know that the methods you allude to leave, to an unprejudiced mind, much to complain of."

"It is," retorted Vernon, "scarcely worth discussing, since they will assuredly fail in their object."

Bendish's face went dark, and Vernon told himself that the Guardsman was not beaten yet—at least he meant to fight on. And, indeed, considering what he was striving for, and how much defeat meant, there was no reason, save honour, why he should give in while a chance remained.

"You seem confident, Vernon," Bendish remarked, with a fencer's eye on his companion. "How do you know?"

"I have an idea that Miss Vane-Trevor is no fool and knows her own mind. Look here, Bendish," Vernon dropped his casual tone and spoke with unerring, stern directness; "it is all very well to talk about the code and our set and all that, but do you think it is quite fair, quite good form, to try to marry, by fair means or—otherwise, a girl who obviously prefers another man?"

It was a straight challenge, and by a direct answer, yes or no, Bendish must have stood self-condemned. Naturally he evaded it.

"My dear Bulstrode," he replied in a tone of easy protest, "I should have thought you, of all men, would have held sane views on the question of

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matrimony. I fancy you and I ought to have advanced a good way beyond copy-book platitudes. Can you honestly maintain that Horatia Vane-Trevor, taking her fairly as she is, with her class, her breeding, her traditions, and all the rest of it, and not as a mere type of the average girl, would have a worse chance of happiness with me, or yourself, if you like, than with this man, Cargill ? ”

“ Yes, certainly. If love counts for anything. I presume we are arguing on the premises that she is in love with him and does not care for us.”

Bendish laughed scoffingly. “ Love ! You are surely not going to advance that seriously as an argument. I mean the sort of love a girl like Horatia Vane-Trevor would feel for a man like Cargill.”

“ I am afraid,” Vernon said quietly, “ I cannot follow you into the subtle varieties of love.”

“ No ? But you can look at the position from a common-sense point of view,” Bendish rejoined. “ This love, for a man of that stamp, falls under the same category as the infatuation which many women, who ought to know better, conceive for a singer, an actor, a musician, or any man with theatrical gifts which enable him to show off and attract the sex on the weak, susceptible side, the vulnerable spot which not the best-bred and most level-headed of them seem to be without. Now, let a woman of

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our class indulge her infatuation more or less within the limits of discretion, as a passing romantic episode, and not much harm may be done. We all of us, I suppose, have had a touch of romance once in our lives. But carry it on to its bitter end; let your girl marry your mountebank musician, actor, tub-thumper, or what-not, and you and I, my dear Bulstrode, know what follows. We've seen it done once or twice, eh? And don't want, if we can help it, to sit out the unedifying performance again."

"I quite agree with you, Bendish," Vernon replied, "so far as that goes. Where I do not follow you is in classing Cargill with the undesirables you have instanced. The man is, as I have said already, a gentleman. There is, if I know anything of character, no low nature behind his engaging qualities, his talents. His is emphatically not the attractiveness of veneer. Horatia Vane-Trevor is not the girl to be smitten by a mountebank or an adventurer."

Bendish flung away the end of his cigar with an impatient gesture. "Of course, my dear Bulstrode, if you are determined to hold a brief for the fellow, there is no use in pursuing the subject."

"I hold no brief," Vernon returned quietly. "I am simply telling you how the affair strikes me."

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"From which, I presume, we have to count you as against us?"

Vernon shrugged. "If you think I am worth reckoning with. But if I have rather broken through my rule of keeping clear of affairs of this sort, you have but yourself and Lady Clan to thank for it."

"I don't quite understand you, Bulstrode," Bendish said almost defiantly.

"I think you do."

"You mean the theatrical business? Well, I deny that we played it down low there. The fellow has been a common, strolling actor. This woman, de Mertens, is admittedly in love with him. Are you, as a man of the world, prepared to maintain that he played the Stoic? Absurd. Inconceivable. Camille de Mertens knows her business too well for that. And things being so, I maintain we had a perfect right—if it was not our duty—to show him up when the chance so opportunely occurred."

Vernon raised his eyes and looked at him steadily. "My dear fellow, I don't want to be offensive, but, supposing there had been anything of the sort in the past, were you exactly the man to fling the first stone?"

Bendish laughed evasively. "We take our chances in these matters. We must, if the world is to go round, and society to hang together. The

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difference between one man and another is not in how far he has slipped down the primrose path, but in whether his divergence has been found out."

"Ah," observed Vernon thoughtfully. "I wonder whether Miss Vane-Trevor would endorse that sentiment."

"Horatia is a sensible girl," returned Bendish, with a parting laugh as he went out.

Bulstrode Vernon sat smoking thoughtfully till a footman came in with some letters for him. That which, after running over them, he elected to open first bore a foreign stamp and contained a photograph, at the sight of which he smiled with a certain grim satisfaction, and having read the letter put it and its enclosure carefully into his pocket-book.

Meanwhile Bendish and Lady Clanrobert were strolling in the dusk along one of the more secluded garden paths.

"I have been talking to Bulstrode Vernon," he said, ill-humouredly. "There is no doubt that he is Cargill's backer."

"The last man I should have imagined to take such a line," the lady replied with asperity. "I always thought Bulstrode had far too much *esprit* to pose as a champion of *mésalliance*. But it does not matter. I have arranged a plan which I fancy will effectually checkmate dear Bulstrode and his protégé, and bring matters to a satisfactory crisis."

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Bendish brightened. "I am delighted to hear it. It is good of you to help me, dear lady."

The dear lady gave a protesting shrug. "Somebody must act, must do something, if we are not to see Horatia sacrificed to this specious nobody. So I have been busy this afternoon."

"May I hear your plan?"

"Yes; but you must keep out of it. It will never do for Horatia to have the slightest suspicion that it is a—stragem, however well it works. That idea would render it futile at once."

Thereupon Lady Clanrobert proceeded to impart to Bendish her precious stragem, and so impressed him with its chances of success that when presently the dressing-bell rang he went up-stairs to his room two steps at a time. For buoyancy of spirits has its outward sign of lightness of heels.

CHAPTER XX

THE next day towards evening a boat leisurely made its way up the winding river which ran through Prynnes Park. Young Pomfret was rowing. In the cushioned stern sat Lady Clanrobert and Horatia. The elder lady seemed to have called a truce in the matter over which they were at issue, the burning question of her niece's alliance. Indeed Lady Clanrobert had been very gentle and affable all that day; charming as only persistent schemers with positive characters can be.

It was pleasant after the uncomfortable breeze of yesterday to enjoy the lull, the calm of happy anticipation. The autumn tints were at their loveliest, Lady Clanrobert declared, waxing romantic. There could be no harm, even on Sunday, in being for an hour on the river to enjoy them.

When it suits material souls to take by force an interest in the romantic aspect of life it is astonishing how enthusiastic they can be. During that placid, restful paddle down-stream Lady Clanrobert seemed to be brimming over with a happy, ingenuous

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admiration for the beauties of the meandering river. Horatia lay back enjoying the scene and the gentle movement, contentedly amused at her aunt's gush.

Presently young Pomfret, whose speciality was small-talk—small, that is, in every particular but capital I's—took up the conversational running obviously to the relief of Lady Clanrobert whose stock of adjectives and notes of admiration was running short. Ignoring the picturesque altogether, he told how he had once rode in a point-to-point at Leighton, and proceeded to give, with a wealth of detail and circumstance, several weighty reasons why he ought to have won. Welcoming the transition from autumn tints, sunset moods, and bulrushes, Lady Clanrobert threw herself into the discussion of the new, and, to her, equally vain, topic with so much zest that Mortimer Pomfret, having for once in his life secured, as he thought, a really sympathetic listener, expanded his story into a self-complacent résumé of his own highly uninteresting career.

And, indeed, Lady Clanrobert was not likely to yawn, even had it been possible for the sketch to be duller. She was too expectantly wideawake for that. It was her design that the talk should not flag; also that her niece should not be forced into the extra boredom of comment. For the schemer had appointed a definite end to that casual

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excursion, a coup for which everything should be carefully prepared.

Perhaps Horatia was lazily comparing this chattering young egotist, self-conscious and shallow, with Cargill, clever, incisive, with a modesty not merely derived from nature and breeding but acquired in the school of adversity. The contrast may have struck Lady Clanrobert too, but just then she held its effect to be negligible.

Amid the lengthening shadows the boat glided along like the grim, steady oncoming of fate. A bend in the river brought them to a short reach where a glade sloped its emerald lawn down to the water's edge. A hundred yards beyond, set back in a smaller clearing in the woodland was a summer-house built, in the taste of a century ago, after the model of a classical temple. It was a round building, encircled by columns and having an upper storey which served as a belvedere.

"Oh, there is the dear old temple," Lady Clanrobert exclaimed, with reminiscent fervour, cutting short a pointless story of Mr. Mortimer Pomfret's banal University career.

"Ah, how well I remember it in dear Lady Haynford's time. The delightful picnic teas we had there. The view from the upper floor across the river is lovely. Ah, poor Lady Haynford; how she used to love a quiet hour there, away from all her

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worries of housekeeping and entertaining. Oh, dear! It is sad to think of the old times."

The note of regret was almost pathetic, anyhow very far from suggesting the real facts, which were that poor dear Lady Haynford's feelings towards the temple—which by the way, she was wont to designate as the Pepper-pot, full of spiders and beetles and tiresome things of that sort, don't you know?—were as near to disgust as utter indifference would allow. Moreover she had been a woman who hated solitude, ignored romantic settings, and regarded picnics as the most uncomfortable entertainments ever devised; holding that the proper and only place for tea was the drawing-room, where nothing in the way of bustle and preparation interfered with the easy flow of scandal and the exigencies of social push.

At the moment, however, it served Lady Clanrobert's purpose to be sentimental, and indeed the qualities with which, during her stay, she had invested Prynnes' late mistress would have considerably amazed that matter-of-fact lady and her friends had they heard them.

"I must have a peep at the dear old temple again as we are here," Lady Clanrobert exclaimed, every stroke which brought them nearer seeming to intensify her sentimental recollections. "You can put us ashore, Mr. Pomfret, can't you, at the little

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landing-place there, which I remember so well—ah, dear me!—and we won't keep you a minute. I must show you the sweet view from the upper window, Horatia dear."

Mortimer Pomfret accordingly pulled in to the landing-stage, and having handed the ladies out, lighted a cigarette and stayed in the boat. Like most bores, he was himself easily bored, and had no fancy for inspecting the temple under Lady Clanrobert's showmanship. Neither he nor any of his family cared a jot about the building except as a desirable feature of the property for which a long price had been paid. Beyond recognising that it was quite proper to have a classical temple somewhere in the grounds the adjunct had no intrinsic value to them. So the young Philistine welcomed the opportunity for a cigarette and a respite from the dowager's somewhat overflowing presence.

Lady Clanrobert and Horatia strolled up the sloping lawn towards the temple, set deep in its background of foliage. "That path, I remember," said the elder lady, indicating a track running obliquely through the wood, "leads to the high-road to King's Langton. Isn't it a charming spot? And to think of it in the hands of these absurd people who have no idea of appreciating it."

"It is delightfully romantic," Horatia responded, in real enjoyment of the beauty of the situation.

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"The perfection of solitude," commented her aunt. "I rather made a point of leaving that tiresome young man in the boat. He would have been quite out of the picture, so to speak, and would have taken all the romance from the scene."

The door of the temple, approached by a few steps, was half open. They went in. The lower room, save for some garden chairs, a table and a boat-hook or two, was bare.

"Quite neglected," observed Lady Clanrobert, almost sadly. "Very different from the old days. A charming retreat like this is utterly wasted on these Pomfret people."

"Somebody has been here lately," remarked Horatia, quietly amused at her aunt's unusual mood. "Don't you smell tobacco smoke?"

Lady Clanrobert sniffed. "Yes; to be sure. I dare say the gardeners are more appreciative of the place than their employers. Let's have a peep up-stairs; this room is nothing; the view is so shut in."

From the entrance a narrow stairway led to the upper room. They went up. The room was empty, but pervaded by the smell of fresh tobacco smoke, of a delicate quality certainly not affected by gardeners. Ignoring the evidence of recent occupation, Lady Clanrobert groaned. "Oh, dear, dear; it is sad to see the old place left like this. I wish we

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had not come. However, there is the glorious sunset view, dear. Happily even the British tradesman can't quite spoil that; although, goodness knows, he tries hard enough."

Horatia, going to the window, which opened upon the pillar-supported balcony, drew back with a start. For there, just out of view from the seat, Claude de Mertens, play-book in hand, sat smoking a cigarette.

"I was hoping you would not find me," she said, throwing away her cigarette and rose and came forward with a laugh. "I am afraid you will be very shocked; but in my profession one has to be unconventional, and Mr. Pommet was kind enough to make me free of his park. I thought this would be an ideal place for studying my new part."

"Quite," Horatia agreed. "I am sorry we have interrupted you," she added, with more inward truth than was altogether complimentary. Somehow she felt this woman's nature and personality to be repugnant to her own; perhaps there was a touch of jealousy and mistrust in her attitude towards this former associate and evident admirer of Cargill's.

"I am glad to find this romantic old temple put to such good use," observed Lady Clanrobert heartily. "Those poor people at Prynnes have no

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eyes for anything more poetical than a shop-window. Yes; quite an ideal retreat for the study of your part."

Horatia had turned to the window, and was looking out over the river and its low fringe of trees across the meadows burnished by the red gold of the sunset. Lady Clanrobert glanced quickly at her watch, and her eyes met Camille's in a smile of infinite meaning.

"We won't interrupt you longer," she said, pleasantly. "Young Mr. Pomfret rowed us up here, and I was bound to show my niece this room where under happier auspices I have spent many pleasant hours. Isn't the view all I said, dear?" she added, joining Horatia at the window.

"It is lovely," the girl answered simply. Then turned back to the room. "Good-bye, Miss de Mertens," said Lady Clanrobert, with much emprossement. "We leave you to your study, which I hope and doubt not will show the most brilliant results."

Horatia, following her aunt's lead, put out her hand. "Good-bye," she said, almost coldly. "I hope your work will not suffer from our disturbance."

"I feel I am driving you away," Canille replied. "If only I had not so much work before me I should love you to stay and keep me company."

To Horatia's sensitive perception there was a

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jarring note in the speech, a note of ill-breeding in the assumption that Camille had a prior right to be there. Lady Clanrobert laughed.

"Impossible, my dear; however much we should have liked it. We shall only just get back before dark as it is."

They passed out of the door. A small window which lighted the stairs showed to Lady Clanrobert's sharply expectant eye the figure of a man approaching down the woodland path. She went down the stairs in front of Horatia. At the end of the winding flight they passed another window. Lady Clanrobert held up her hand and stopped.

"Why, Horatia, who is this coming? Mr. Cargill. Rather awkward, isn't it, after—I wonder—" Horatia had flushed crimson, then went pale. With an elaborate gesture of caution Lady Clanrobert went softly into the lower room, and Horatia followed her.

"If it is an assignation, we had better keep out of the way."

Horatia made no response to the whispered suggestion. Her heart was sick and cold. That momentary glimpse of her lover had turned her life's glory into bitterness and shame. For an instant as they stood there in silence she hoped against almost absolute conviction, only to realise

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next moment how vain hope was. Above, Camille was singing, just loudly enough to show where she was without betraying her identity. Lady Clanrobert noted that approvingly. Cargill's footstep was heard on the wooden floor, and then on the stairs.

"I am not surprised," Lady Clanrobert commented severely. "Let us slip away now."

"Yes," Horatia responded dully; "let us go."

From the window Cargill, in fear and disappointment, saw the two ladies making their way down to the river, realised in a flash his false position and guessed he had been tricked. His greeting of Camille had been none too flattering in its instant note of surprise and disappointment; he had shown plainly enough his annoyance and suspicion, and now as he turned to her she almost pitied him for the look of blank despair that called forth at once triumph and hate. Without a word he rushed to the door.

"Hugh!" she cried, seizing his arm. "Don't be a fool."

"You——" He shook her off, and ran down the stairs, so out and down the lawn. Almost at the water's edge he overtook the two ladies.

"Horatia, Miss Vane-Trevor," he exclaimed, impulsively, desperately.

Horatia gave no sign of greeting. Young Pomfret

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stood up in the boat looking blackly resentful. Lady Clanrobert turned with raised eyebrows.

"Mr. Cargill," she said, in a tone of suave surprise, "you are the last person one would have expected to see here."

Upon which young Pomfret subsided, content to leave the intruder's snubbing in abler hands than his own.

But Cargill heeded no one but her on whom his eyes were fixed imploringly. "Horatia, will you let me speak to you? I must explain this——" His voice was low and unsteady; the hideousness of the trick seemed to paralyse him.

Horatia for an instant let her eyes rest on him, as though for the last time; then she answered coldly in the same low tone: "There is no need. I understand everything now, and how foolish I have been."

"But you don't," he protested despairingly. "Horatia, will you hear——"

But she had turned and already taken Pomfret's hand as she stepped into the boat.

Then Lady Clanrobert spoke. "Really, Mr. Cargill, explanations are quite unnecessary. Under the circumstances the less said the better. I am only too sorry we landed."

Young Pomfret gave a vicious push off from the

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landing-stage, and next moment the boat was in mid-stream.

Cargill remained standing on the bank overwhelmed, dazed by the suddenness of the coup which had in a moment dashed every high hope. When at last he roused himself from his blank despair the boat had rounded a bend in the river and had passed out of sight. His chief desire now was to get away from the hateful place whither he had been lured to his ruin. He turned quickly and went up the lawn towards the path which would take him back to the high-road. As he passed the temple Camille stood in his way. For the moment he had forgotten that she was there, and now the sight of her stung him into fierce anger.

"I hope you are satisfied with your devilish work," he said, in a resentment so bitter that he could scarcely frame his speech.

She looked surprised and not a little hurt. "My devilish work, Hugh?" she repeated protestingly. "I asked you to meet me here, thinking it would have to be the last time, as I am leaving for town to-morrow. I know I am a fool to care for a man who treats me as you do; but if you have nothing but unkindness for me, why did you come?"

She spoke quietly, forgivingly, masking the fierce,

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wayward light of her eyes. Cargill stared at her as though scarcely comprehending the situation.

“ You wrote to me—— ? ”

“ Of course. You got my note—or why did you come ? ”

Then he half understood the trick, which could be explained away as none. So it was she who had written the note which he had loved and kissed as coming from Horatia. It was unsigned ; the hand was indefinite ; he did not know Horatia's and had forgotten Camille's.

“ You wrote it,” he repeated blankly, despairingly.

“ I could not help it, Hugh,” she declared, with a tremor of passion underlying contrition.

“ You have blasted my life,” he said, speaking the trite words from a mind which could scarcely grasp their utter truth.

“ It was unlucky,” Camille said, with repression, “ that Miss Vane-Trevor should have chosen this very time to pay a visit to this place. Could I foresee that when I said five o'clock ? Even if I had thought for a moment you would come.”

“ Come ! ” he echoed bitterly, mad with the stinging pain of his disaster. “ Do you think I came here to see you ? ”

Her eyes hardened now. “ If you came to see

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Miss Vane-Trevor it is unfortunate that I should have been here studying my part, and looking out, foolishly enough, for you. I can say this, that I tried my best not to be seen. When they came up-stairs I hid myself on the balcony, but she looked out and found me."

He eyed her keenly as he now gathered his wits under control. "I don't know whether you are lying, Camille," he said, with a touch of recklessness. "Anyhow, it does not matter now. At least you have the satisfaction of knowing you have ruined my career, my life."

She laid her hand upon his arm, and, to her surprise, he did not shake it off. "I should be sorry to think that, dear," she replied, in a low voice. "And I shall never believe it."

He flung himself round with a despairing gesture.

"Oh, God, what am I to do?" he groaned.

She came behind him and put her lithe arms round his neck, clasping him tightly. "Let me love you, dear," she whispered, with lips close to his ear.

He turned fiercely, facing her and putting out his arms to hold her from him. "Camille, you fiend; I will make you confess," he cried impetuously.

"That I love you?" she responded, holding him fast. "That is all I have to confess to you, sweet-

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heart, darling boy; yes, that I am dying for love of you. Listen to me for Heaven's sake, if you must kill me"—for he was struggling fiercely to get free from her sinuous clasp. "You say I have ruined your life, blasted your career. I have not. I have not. I swear to Heaven, as I stand here before you, I will make you famous, I will make you great. Only let me have a chance. Only let me love you, Hugh; I can't be like her, that girl you are fool enough to regret. You know I can't, cold and proper, and I would not be if I could. But there is ten thousand times more of the woman as God made us in me than there is in her. Would I in her place have snubbed and left you as she did just now? Not I. It would take more than that to kill my love. Hugh, don't think of her again. Am I never to be anything to you? I am going to be famous, let me give you fame and fortune, too, my love, my love!"

She was clinging to him and pleading impetuously in a burst of genuine passion. His mind, ungoverned now since the cutting adrift of his hopes, was swayed by her fierce appeal beyond the resistance of his apathy. It was as though, now that a black cloud had taken the sun from him, he must choose between utter darkness and this lurid glare. And he hesitated to quench it.

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Camille suffered him to free himself gently from her; he turned to the entrance of the temple and sat down upon the steps, bowing his head on his hands. She followed and stood near him, leaning against the window-frame. For a while they kept silence. Then she spoke in a low, sympathetic tone.

“ You talk of your life being wrecked, Hugh; I suppose you mean your career, your political life. Does it depend on that girl? You forget I am going to be rich. Will not my money be as good to fight your election and keep you in Parliament as hers? I know it would be yours more freely, given more lovingly, than Horatia Vane-Trevor’s.”

He made no reply, keeping motionless as he sat there.

She spoke again. “ I don’t want to worry you, Hugh, dear, or make things worse; but can’t you, can’t you see how these people hate and despise you? Does not this girl set her caste and her dignity above, far above her love for you? Has she treated you as a woman who loved you with her whole soul and being would treat you? Does she care whether she ever sees you again? No. You have run counter to her ideas of propriety, and, so far as she is concerned, have ceased to exist. She is now probably telling herself what a fool she was to

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let you make love to her, and congratulating herself in escaping from a man who, happily, Hugh, has such different ideas from her own."

Cargill raised his head. "She probably thinks that to-night's episode confirms the suspicion, carefully fostered, that you and I are old lovers."

Camille's face darkened. "No doubt it is easier to imagine that than to attribute such propriety to any man, particularly to one who has been a strolling actor."

There was a subtle, sarcastic reproach in her tone, but in his reckless, half-stunned condition it did not touch him.

Then her voice softened dangerously. "I won't ask you which of us has shown the truest love for you, since that weighs nothing with a man. Only you might give another thought now to my offer."

It was one of those situations which make crises in men's lives. In the falling darkness, in that environment of romantic solitude, there was room for the full play of that subtle, seductive influence. But the danger to Cargill scarcely came from that. It was the blow he had just received, the conviction of the hopelessness of fighting against villainy in high places, the sense of mistake and failure in aspiring to the jealously guarded Horatia Vane-Trevor's hand, that filled him with a reckless despair, that

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led him to see in Camille the only real sympathy and *camaraderie* he could find in the world. It was that which so blinded him to the true proportion of things as to let him say, "I have a great mind now to accept it."

If he saw Camille's exultant flush he probably misinterpreted it.

"Hugh! You don't mean it?"

He had sprung down to the lower path of the two which stretched before him and now kept his eyes doggedly upon it. "I do," he replied, in a dull voice. "I will go back to the stage."

Her hands stole over his shoulders in a gently alluring caress. "You shall never repent it, dear," she whispered.

He turned from her so that her hand fell from him. She was watching him in the breathless excitement of her triumph.

"Come," he said. "Let us go from here."

"Together?"

As she spoke the word her eyes were burning with the light of fierce love and victory.

He looked back at her as though ashamed of his coldness. "Together," he answered, holding out his hand.

She took a swift step forward, and, seizing his hand drew him to her. "Hugh, my darling.

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Mine at last," she said, with almost voiceless passion, as she held him to her. "Kiss me," she murmured.

Her fierce lips met his and seemed to cling to them. "Hugh, you are mine," she whispered, as he at last drew back from the embrace.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "Come."

And together they set off by the path through the wood.



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CHAPTER XXI

BULSTRODE VERNON, like many men whose mental attitude seems to be a characteristic indifference to all that is going on around them, invariably saw a great deal more than casual observers supposed. He possessed, in fact, something of the "great Duke's" knack of "knowing what the other fellow was going to do," whereas to most of us the information comes only when he has done it. So on the eventful evening under notice he made one or two shrewd guesses suggested by the manner of Lady Clanrobert and Horatia respectively, whom he happened to encounter as they returned from the river.

"If I'm not much mistaken dear old Lady Clan has been up to some devilry," he muttered to himself when they had passed on, leaving him to finish his antepandial cigar. "She has got it plainly in her eye," he told himself; "the positive view was there, as the negative was in Miss Horatia's face. Curious idea of Lady Clan's to take a sudden yearning for river scenery. She was quite gushing, and I don't altogether like that gush. It is not

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satisfactorily to be accounted for by weeping willows and water-lilies."

He threw away his cigar and went in. On his way to change he made an excuse for looking in at Mortimer Pomfret's room, and asked him quite casually a few questions about his river excursion. Lady Clanrobert's private injunction to say nothing about the rencontre with Cargill was doubtless the very reason why the ingenuous youth should enlarge upon it in somewhat slangy language to Vernon.

"Shows the chap's no class, or he'd have had the good taste to keep off our property after playing it down so low on the gov'nor. But he got snubbed till he was fairly sick, I can tell you. The Vane-Trevor girl wouldn't touch him with the boat-hook. Wouldn't have given her credit for so much sense. Had an idea she was rather leaning over on that side."

Vernon comprehended enough to induce him to expedite a business he had proposed to set about in the morning. Accordingly, as soon as he could get away from the dinner-table he made an excuse to his host and set off for the "Crown and Sceptre" where he knew Camille to be staying. On arriving at the inn after a good half-hour's walk, he encountered Cargill just turning out of the gate. Cargill would have passed him in the semi-darkness,

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not noticing him, or dreaming he would be there at that time; but Vernon called his name.

He turned with a start. "Mr. Vernon?"

"Yes," Vernon responded quietly. "I haven't come to see you, and am rather sorry to find you here," he said, putting himself by Cargill's side and walking on slowly down the road.

"No more sorry than I am to be here," Cargill returned, with an ashamed and rather bitter laugh. "But there is no use in disguising the facts. I have told you the truth all along, and I won't try to shuffle now. Fate, or Lady Clanrobert, has been too strong for me. I have had a crushing blow to-day. And in consequence my plans for life are changed. I have just left Camille de Mertens. I am going to try my luck in the old calling."

He spoke quietly, without enthusiasm, as merely stating his case to one who had a right to know it.

"With her, of course?" Vernon asked the question in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes. It will have to be," Cargill answered in like manner. Then added, as though to obviate an almost certain misapprehension, "Of course I shall marry her."

"You will be worse than a fool if you do," said Vernon.

"I am not a profligate," Cargill returned, with quiet incisiveness. "And it is either that or——"

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"There is no reason why it should be either," Vernon replied with conviction.

Cargill stopped and turned to his companion. "You have been kind enough to stand my friend up there"—he nodded towards Prynnes—"and I owe you an explanation. I have had a crushing blow to-day, and it has altered the shape of my life altogether. On Friday evening, before leaving Prynnes, I took your advice and proposed to Miss Vane-Trevor. She accepted me. Last night I got a note, which I never doubted came from her, saying she would be at the temple on the river at five this afternoon. Perhaps I was an impulsive fool to jump to the conclusion that the note came from her; it was unsigned, and I do not know her handwriting; anyhow every probability pointed to its coming from her. I kept the appointment joyfully enough—and to my utter confounding."

"I see," said Vernon. "It is exactly as I fancied. You need not tell me any more. Of course the fascinating Camille was there, lying in wait for you, and the other lady was taken to the spot in the nick of time to witness the meeting. I wondered why our dear Lady Clan was so keen on her aquatic excursion."

Cargill had fallen back a step as though under a blow. Vernon could see his white, despairing face, as he stood speechless for the moment.

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"Then it was a trick?" he said hoarsely, at length.

Vernon gave a short, reassuring laugh. "My dear fellow! A trick most certainly, and a trick of the most abominable description. Now don't take it to heart," he said, laying an encouraging hand on the other's shoulder. "I'll soon set it right for you. You can give me your word of honour that you had no idea of meeting Miss de Mertens?"

"Of course I can," Cargill answered, though the words were spoken without life or hope. "But it is of no avail now. It is too late."

"Too late?" Vernon repeated incredulously.

"Too late," Cargill reiterated, with something like a shiver. "I have bound myself to Camille de Mertens."

"You fool!" was on the tip of Vernon's tongue, but he checked the comment. "Under a misapprehension. Induced by a trick," he said.

"Perhaps. But none the less effectually," was the gloomy reply. "After all, it was not Camille's fault that I was deceived."

Vernon told himself that this was emphatically a man who here needed protection against himself.

"You attribute to Miss de Mertens an ingenuousness beyond all reason," he observed decidedly. "I should say it was very much her fault."

Cargill shook his head. "No, I think not. She

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wrote to me—unjustifiably enough, but then we don't judge a Camille de Mertens by the standard of an Horatia Vane-Trevor—asking me to meet her at the temple. I went—to my cost, to my ruin, the ruin not only of my hopes of happiness, but of my career. Still it does not follow that she foresaw or planned the disaster."

"Not necessarily, but it would take a good deal to persuade me she did not," Vernon replied dryly. "And now the result. You are going back to the stage, as the husband of Camille de Mertens?"

"I have promised. I get a splendid chance as things go, and—and she is genuinely in love with me. I am heart-broken and sick of the hollowness and treachery I have met in that other sphere of life. As a penniless man I can't fight. I must make some sort of competency before I can be free to follow my ideals."

"You won't follow them far, Cargill, if you hamper yourself by an alliance with an actress," Vernon observed, with dry sententiousness.

"On the other hand I can't accept the chance she offers me and then throw her over," Cargill argued. "It would be the meanest of false pretences. I dare say I appear to you to have acted like a fool. But my eyes have been opened to the real character of my late position. I have the

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taint of a lower world on me, and I must fall back there."

Vernon saw that argument was useless. "You are not yourself to-night, Cargill," he said quietly. "Let me, as a man of the world, tell you you are taking a step under the mad impulse of disappointment which you will bitterly regret when you come to your senses."

"Perhaps. But my word is pledged," Cargill returned.

"If that is the only obstacle to your reconsidering your position, I think it can easily be removed."

"Seeing that Miss de Mertens is only an actress?" Cargill suggested, with a touch of irony.

"No. But because—— Look here, Cargill," Vernon said persuasively, "I think I see a good deal farther than you do in this affair. You had better let me help you before the complication gets more difficult. If I get Miss de Mertens to release you, will you take your freedom and resume your political career, accepting my assurance that all will come right?"

Cargill laughed. "You don't know Camille de Mertens."

"I think I do," Vernon retorted; "better than you know her. Anyhow I shall try. I am not going to see your life thrown away through a trick. If the game had been played fair I wouldn't have

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interfered. Good-night. Don't do anything more in the matter till I look you up in the morning. By the way, what are your present arrangements ? ”

“ To resign my candidature, and leave for town in the morning.”

“ With Camille ? ”

“ With Camille.”

“ I am glad I caught you to-night, then.”

Vernon turned with a laugh and went back to the inn. Saying he wished to see Miss de Mertens on urgent business he was shown into the little old-fashioned sitting-room she occupied.

CHAPTER XXII

CAMILLE was writing when Vernon was announced, and as he entered she looked up from her letter in curiosity, and perhaps a little apprehension, as to the motive of his visit. Nevertheless she rose and greeted him with all a clever, attractive woman's confidence in her powers of fascination and ability to get the better of any possible encounter of wits. She had on the dark red dress she had worn at the temple; her hat had been thrown aside and the masses of chestnut hair framed her face in studied disarray.

"And what gives me the unexpected honour of a late call from Mr. Bulstrode Vernon?"

There was a ring of ready defiance and also a touch of vulgarity in her question. Vernon knew well enough that a lady, one of his own set, would have spoken the same words, prompted by like feelings, in a different tone and with less jarring effect. This is no wife for that man, he told himself, as he took the chair Camille indicated, and came to the point without preface.

"I have just left Cargill."

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She was leaning back in her chair, watching him closely, but with an affectation of rather amused curiosity. The slight raising of her eyebrows at his remark was studied, the just perceptible deeper tinge in her face was natural.

"Yes? He left me a few minutes ago. Were you taking an after-dinner stroll? A promenade of digestion?"

She knew she was in for a fight, and, to his practised observation, her eyes betrayed the knowledge.

"Not altogether," he answered coolly. "I came from Prynnes more particularly to see you."

The hardening lines round her mouth forced a disguising smile. "Regardless of the proprieties," she observed, with quiet mockery.

"It is hardly a question of the proprieties," he returned. "My errand goes beyond them. And that my business admits of no delay must be my excuse for this late visit. I have come, as Cargill's friend, to tell you that you must give up all idea of any projected alliance with him, matrimonial or otherwise."

There was unmistakable fight now in the glitter that leapt to her eyes as she rose from her chair.

"Really, Mr. Vernon, I must decline to discuss my relations with Mr. Cargill now or at any time."

Her tone and action manifestly suggested dis-

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missal. Vernon stood up as she rose, and faced her with the cool insistence of one who knows himself master of the situation.

"You will pardon my saying that you will listen to me, Miss de Mertens, when I give you two very sufficient reasons why you must do so."

She laughed scornfully. "Must I?" But he told himself there was fear beneath the scorn.

"Yes. Please sit down again. I will come to them at once."

She sat down. "If you please," she said combatively.

"Reason number one," he said, crossing his knees and speaking quite casually, "is that your plot with Lady Clanrobert, which had its outcome in the trick you played upon Cargill and Miss Vane-Trevor this afternoon, is discovered, to the utter defeat of the end you had in view."

"What end?" She had steadied herself now and was as coolly self-possessed as her opponent. Only the darting light in her eyes showed her to be at bay.

"The estrangement of Cargill and Miss Vane-Trevor."

"And the plot?"

He smiled. "Really, Miss de Mertens, at this late hour need we waste time in going into what is obvious and well-known to both of us?"

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She gave a shrug of indifference. "I deny the knowledge of any plot."

"Leaving all responsibility for it to Lady Clanrobert," he said in a business-like tone. "Just so. I quite expected you would. However, it may save time if we put that question aside for the moment and come to reason number two."

"Please." There was a languid confidence in her manner, as though she felt she had scored the first point and was winning.

Vernon paused for a moment as with deliberation he took his letter-case from his pocket. "The second reason," he said, in the same quiet, incisive tone, "stands on different ground. It involves the introduction of the name of an old friend of mine, Guy Forncett."

He was looking straight, mercilessly at her as he spoke the name, and saw the red blood fade from her face leaving no warmth in the grey olive of her skin.

"Guy Forncett?" she repeated with an effort, an obvious striving for composure.

"You remember him?"

For an instant she hesitated between avowal and denial. The critical choice had to be made with no time for calculation. Then she compromised. "Hardly."

The word was spoken in a neutral tone, and might

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mean anything. Vernon opened his letter-case and, selecting one of several envelopes, drew from it a photograph.

Having glanced at it he stretched forward and laid it on the table before Camille. "Perhaps that will assist your memory," he said quietly.

It was a French photograph of a pair of lovers somewhat vulgarly posed in what seemed the garden of a suburban *café chantant*. She took it, glanced at it, then let her hand fall.

"A glimpse of the days of yore," she observed, with a sneering smile. "Is that reason number two, Mr. Bulstrode Vernon? If so, how does it come into the situation?"

"I hope," he replied coolly, "the situation may be settled without its aid. Mr. Cargill has not seen it—yet."

She laughed; rather staggily, Vernon noted. "My good man, he never will see it," she declared, as she crushed the photograph in her hand and then tore it into fragments.

He made no attempt to restrain her, but watched the action as though it were the pet of a spoiled child.

"Anticipating your argument I had naturally provided myself with other—photographic reminiscences of the past," he observed, with a smile.

Camille was leaning back in her chair with her

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hands clenched now, and with an ugly look of vicious tenacity about the mouth.

“I don't know,” she said in a hard voice, “whether I am supposed to feel honoured by your making this collection of souvenirs. I had no idea that the episodes of my youth could be of interest to any one but myself. May I ask what you propose to do with these precious memorials?”

“Nothing,” he answered quietly. “That is, if you are prepared to do me the honour of falling in with my views with regard to Cargill's future.”

“You mean you don't want him to marry me?”

“I don't wish him to have any connection whatever—either with you or the stage.”

“Rather a blunt way of putting it,” she commented, with a sneer. “I suppose an actress must not expect the niceties of speech from a man of the world like Mr. Bulstrode Vernon. Still, it would not hurt you to be a little less uncomplimentary to me and my profession. I dare say we confer as much good on humanity as you or your grand friends can claim. Do I understand that if I do not choose to fall in with your wishes—very impertinent wishes—with regard to Mr. Cargill, you will show him these photographs?”

Vernon gave an affirmative nod. “And relate to him a certain passage in the life of Guy Forncett.”

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Camille laughed in bitter scorn. "And it is the chivalrous and popular Mr. Bulstrode Vernon who tells me this. I wish some of his many friends and admirers could see him now. My dear man," she changed her tone to one of amused comment, "do you imagine that Hugh Cargill supposes me immaculate? Even were he the fool you seem to think him, in that you judge your interference on his behalf necessary, he would scarcely be under the impression that Camille de Mertens has reached her present age without the experience of a few love episodes."

She spoke with an assumption of careless reasoning, as though the matter were scarcely worth argument. So far it looked as though he were doing little against her tenacity, and she evidently felt she was winning.

"Possibly," he replied, holding her with a steady look. "His experience of the world should have prepared him for that. But at the same time, however charitably he might be induced to regard certain amorous episodes in the career of Miss Camille de Mertens, he would scarcely be prepared to hear with equanimity the adventures of a certain lady once known as Marotte l'Amorcee."

The thrust was swift, deadly, and not to be parried. Camille, who seemed as though by a half-conscious prescience she had anticipated it, was ready with a smile to hide her mortification. "So you know

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something of her, do you ?" she remarked almost indifferently.

"I do," he said, in a tone of almost good-humoured decision. "To have known something of the under-world in one's day may chance to come in useful. Although that is far from justifying it. Yes; I think I could recount certain—love episodes, as you call them—of a somewhat flagrant character in the career of Marotte l'Amorce, illustrated also by photographic proofs of their authenticity."

He had opened his pocket-book again, and now took out a photograph which he held up for her to see. "I won't let this one go out of my hands, as it is the only copy I possess, and to replace it might be difficult, if not impossible. And it speaks for itself."

Camille had made no attempt to take it. She sat looking at him in silence, the tense silence of a designing brain faced suddenly by a crisis. So far, and in a moment, she was beaten. The production of that horribly suggestive photograph, which she might well have thought long ago consigned to oblivion, was a telling blow under which she was obliged to go down. But was the fight over? So far as the pitiless logic of facts went, yes. It was hardly a question now of strength, but of wit and temperament.

"You are," she said at last, speaking slowly, as

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though to gain time, "well provided with arguments for Mr. Cargill's persuasion."

"It is better," Vernon replied, as he returned the case to his pocket, "that if he must see these, it should be before rather than after his marriage with the lady they represent."

With a sudden movement she leant forward. "Why need he see them at all?" she asked with burning eyes.

"He certainly will not with my knowledge, if you accept the condition I have named."

She was still leaning forward, across the corner of the table which separated them, her hands stretched before her and almost touching him. "That I should abandon all idea of marrying him?" she said.

He nodded. "That is all."

"All!" she echoed, in a restrained burst of passionate bitterness. "All! When I love him, would give my life and soul for him, and he loves me."

"Pardon me," Vernon said coldly, "I doubt that, so far as he is concerned. If he loves anybody it is Mrs. de-Trevor."

She laughed scornfully. "Does he? I think he sees that narrow-hearted incarnation of propriety in her true light now. If she had one thousandth part of the love that I have to give him, you might

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work to bring them together again. Mr. Vernon," she continued with passionate intensity, "let me, a woman, speak to you, a man of the world, for it is only a man like yourself who can understand me. Are you doing a very noble or even a right thing in standing between me and the man I love? In raking up my past into a barrier against us? Is it kind, is it manly, is it chivalrous or honourable to set your foot on me and say, you are down, you shall never rise to the level of a true gentleman's hand or heart; you shall stay in your abasement? You know the saying, '*Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner,*' and a man of your worldly experience must know its truth. Do you think you know all about me? That the miserable, disgraceful photograph in your pocket is the true index of my life? What do you, a man who has never known what it was to be at a loss for a hundred or a thousand pounds for your pleasures, know of the dire straits, the starvation, the fears, the temptations of the world, the flesh—other people's flesh—and the devil, the devil of poverty, of hunger, of nakedness, of disappointment, of despair, that a girl such as I once was had to contend against? The wonder is not that I went down, but that I ever rose again. And now you are going to push me under for all time."

"I am going," returned Vernon immovably, "to do my best to frustrate what I consider an

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abominable plot against the happiness of two of my friends."

"Caring nothing," she rejoined, with impetuous bitterness, "that you crush me in the act. You may laugh," she cried, with still more resentful vehemence, as with swift penetration she detected the suggestion of an incredulous smile. "Naturally, as an actress, I ought to have no feelings. That is where you clever men, men of honour, are so fair and generous towards us."

Vernon made a gesture of protest, but she went on without giving him time to speak. "Because your Lady Clanrobert is an *intriguante*, a cold-blooded schemer, is no reason why I, who possess at least sensibility enough to bring me to the front rank in my profession, should not have a warm heart and a desperate longing for the love of a man like Cargill. No; you will not allow that, nor that my happiness is as worthy of consideration as that of Hugh Cargill and Miss Vane-Trevor. As though my one desire in life now was not to give him happiness and fame."

"On the stage," Vernon spoke the words uncompromisingly.

"On the stage," Camille repeated. "He has the making of a fine actor in him. With me at his side, and his own natural advantages, he will go to perhaps the very top of his profession."

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If she looked for any softening in Vernon's attitude, she looked in vain. "That is another point which confirms me in my action," he said, with cold determination. "Cargill may have the making of a great actor in him, but his talents, if I am not mistaken, are worthy of and eminently fitted for a higher career than the stage. I wish to save him from taking a step which, to a man of his temperament and ideals, would surely be the cause of self-reproach and bitter regret hereafter."

From his tone she was astute enough to see that argument was futile to turn him from his purpose. With a sigh of despair she let her head fall upon her arms, which were still extended before her. "You are cruel; incredibly, hatefully cruel! From you, of all men, I should have looked for charity and 'olerance."

The words came with a half-sob. Vernon, thinking the interview had lasted long enough, made a movement as though to rise. In an instant she had intercepted it, and sunk on her knees before him.

"Mr. Vernon," she moaned imploringly, "have you no pity for me? If you knew how I love him you would not do this. Don't take him from me. I love him so. Don't be the one to shatter my heart now, when a glorious life is opening out to me. How can you have the mind to play so cowardly a part

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as to use this weapon against a woman who never wronged you in deed or thought ? ”

He had risen, but she held him fast, still on her knees. The situation was to him distasteful enough, though perhaps a disbelief in her sincerity modified its odiousness.

“ You wronged a friend of mine,” he retorted coldly. “ Perhaps Guy Fornoett was a weak fool, but that did not save him. You ruined his life, utterly. He never was the same man after he knew you.”

She rose from her knees with the swift, lithe action of a woman well practised in bodily transitions. “ Now I understand. This is revenge,” she said in a hard voice.

“ Far from it,” he denied. “ I have no feeling against you, nor wish to do you an ill turn. I can be charitable. But I intend, by all means in my power, to stop your designs upon Cargill.”

For an instant her eyes looked murderous; then they softened. “ Mr. Vernon, for pity’s sake,” she pleaded, “ leave him to me. Think, Miss Vane-Trevor has so much of the world’s real treasure and I so little. Don’t step in between Hugh and me. Leave me my love—my heart’s desire, and I will do anything you ask, I will be your slave, I will pay any price you ask for my one chance of happiness.”

He looked into the iridescent, berylline eyes, and

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understood their offer. If it was temptation, it also meant a contemptible defeat, dishonour so gross that even a man like Bulstrode Vernon, who took the world very much as he found it, would shrink with loathing from the idea. Moreover, it showed, as in a sudden lurid blaze, the woman's unscrupulous nature.

"No," he responded quietly, but with unmistakable firmness, "it is of no avail for you to try to bribe me. I mean to do what I conceive to be my duty in this matter," he continued, anxious to get away from that flagrant suggestion. "If Cargill were nothing more than one of your theatrical set, instead of having been your fellow-player by accident, I would say, let him go and reap such harvest as the stage affords. As it is, no. I will try to save him for higher things."

She was still looking at him with a suggestion of allurements. "You put us low enough," she said, with a laugh.

"Without offence, I hope," he replied. "After all, there is the true proportion of things to be considered."

"Of course," she retorted, with a little sarcastic smile, "the true proportion from your class point of view."

He made no reply to the insinuation. Perhaps he felt that from such different standpoints arguing

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was waste of time. "Now, is it understood between us," he said, ending the interview, "that you give up all idea of marrying Cargill, or of inducing him to return to the stage?"

"Must I?" she protested, lowering her eyes.

"Yes."

"It is a hard 'must,'" she said, with a sigh. "If I do not you will show him those photos?"

Vernon nodded. "In his own interest. And tell him what I know."

She raised her eyes now, boldly, defiantly. "After all, that may not turn him from what I have to offer," she said, with a discomfited laugh, and tapping her foot angrily on the floor.

"If he is the man I take him to be," Vernon rejoined unwaveringly, "he will turn from it with detestation and horror."

She made a quick, fierce gesture of irritation. "You do not spare my feelings, *mon preux chevalier*," she said, resentfully.

To Vernon, watching her impassively, she was like a trapped leopard. She had taken a few agitated steps to and fro in the little room, and stopped close to where he stood.

"Mr. Vernon," she said in a low tone, fixing him with eyes that burned with the passion of desperation, "is this fair? Fair between man and woman?" Then, with a catch of the breath, she seemed to

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recoil for a supreme effort. She shook her head back despairingly, pressing her hands to her temples. Then, as though overwhelmed, she threw them out. "Oh, for mercy's sake, spare me this," she moaned passionately. "You are shattering my life, you are tearing my heart out. Ah, you shall have mercy on me."

With the last desperate cry, she seized with both hands the front of his coat and clung to him tenaciously. He strove to release himself, to put her from him, but could not.

"Mr. Vernon—Bulstrode," she implored, in a despairing, breathless tone, "can you see me like this, and treat me without pity? I must fight for my love, for my life," she protested, struggling against his effort to repulse her. Then suddenly her hand darted to his pocket, and in an instant had drawn forth the letter-case.

Now it was she who tried to free herself. But he held her, caught her hand and, by superior strength, forced the case from it.

Instantly all trace of her passion disappeared; she turned away with a discomfited laugh. Vernon, without a word, returned the case to his pocket and buttoned his coat over it. Then, taking up his hat, he turned to the door. "We understand each other," he said curtly.

"I think we ought to by this," she returned

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scoffingly. She seemed to recognise that the game was over and she had lost.

"Good-night," he said, with a significant nod.

"Good-bye, Mr. Vernon," Camille responded, turning away.

He had half opened the door, when she called him back, and he closed it again, without, however, taking his grasp from the handle.

"You will send me those photos on Hugh Cargill's wedding-day?" she asked casually. Her tone was quite friendly now, without a sign of the late stress.

"If you keep to my condition of seeing no more of him," he answered.

"Don't be afraid," she returned, with a laugh of indifference. "I leave for town by the early train to-morrow. You can come and see me off if you like."

"I think," he replied, "that in the circumstances I can trust you." He bowed to her and went out.

And, as the door closed, Camille broke into a fit of subdued laughter, ending with a long-drawn sigh. "It was a good fight," she murmured. "But perhaps it is just as well that I am not to make a fool of myself over Hugh Cargill. I can't afford a *grande passion* just now, and—I might have gone farther than was good for me. Those wretched photographs! How our mad hours return to convict us."

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And Bulstrode Vernon, stopping in the gateway to light a homeward cigar, muttered in scornful admiration, "What a devil of an actress the woman is. I wonder whether she will go by the early train to-morrow."

The doubt in his tone was beside the mark. Camille did leave for London early next morning, and in the same train were Lady Clanrobert and Horatia, who, by her sudden departure, missed hearing Vernon's intended story of the plot. And the next he heard of her was that she had left for an extended Continent^{al} tour.

CHAPTER XXIII

CARGILL won. With the news Bulstrode Vernon brought him of his freedom from any sort of entanglement with Camille de Mertens, the fit of despairing recklessness, which sober reflection had already subdued, passed away, giving place to a higher ambition and a keen desire to rehabilitate himself in Horatia's eyes.

Accordingly he threw himself heart and soul into the contest, now nearing its end. How, if elected, he was going to support his position as a Member of Parliament he could not tell. But there was no time then for personal calculations. He must try his utmost to win the seat for his Party, and trust to chance to be put into the way of earning his living afterwards. Horatia, he felt, had passed out of his life. He had little or no hope of ever meeting her again on a sympathetic footing. Perhaps, after all, he reflected bitterly, she had deceived herself with regard to her true feelings towards him. Interest and sympathy, even admiration, may stand a long way from love. Very likely that mortifying episode at the temple had shown her the mistake

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into which her accord with his aims was leading her and she was now rejoicing in her escape. Anyhow, no news had been received from her. Bulstrode Vernon had written a letter giving rather more than a strong hint of the plot which had separated her and Cargill, but he had had no reply.

Still, Cargill resolved to do his best in the fight, and, as far as possible, to put his bitterness and disappointment from him. And indeed the hard work and the rush as the polling-day came so near left him little time for sighing, although his heart was heavy enough; and at every turn the contrasts between the present conditions and what might have been came sadly home to him.

The Prynnes house-party had broken up. The ill-used Pomfret in high dudgeon had taken his family off to the Continent to angle, after the manner of *nouveaux riches*, at fashionable hotels, and on boats and trains, for new acquaintances. Bulstrode Vernon lingered at King's Langton to see the fight out, and but for his interesting companionship Cargill felt he would have had a miserable time indeed.

At last, after a short and sharp campaign on the new candidate's part, the polling-day arrived, and by the next noon all England knew that Hugh Cargill, the eleventh-hour man, had been returned by the small but safe majority of 238.

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An autumn session began early, for there was a strenuous fight to be got through before December. Hugh Cargill, on his return to town, soon found reason to congratulate himself on the path whither his fate had led him. He went hard to work with his pen; and, after starting with a somewhat forlorn hope, was gratified to find that editors were inclined to look upon him as a man of mark and accepted readily the articles he sent in. Here, at any rate, was a living. The work was hard, when added to Parliamentary duties, and it seemed likely to bring more fame than fortune; still it was a sufficient livelihood, and his income showed pleasant, if gradual, signs of increasing. His pleasure at every small success was coupled with the most lively gratitude to Bulstrode Vernon, who at that critical moment had stepped in and so adroitly turned him from the tangled path into which his passing madness would have led him.

Success? What would that tinsel success of make-believe have been compared with the solid, honourable reputation which, already even, he felt he was acquiring? It was not pleasant to think what an escape he had had. Nor how, but for that well-timed piece of energetic diplomacy on the part of a disinterested acquaintance—who, indeed, might conscientiously have let him alone—he would have become a mere *poseur*, having buried every noble

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and useful ideal he had ever entertained. It was at least a terrible lesson for him to realise how near he had come to intellectual annihilation. At least, he told himself, Horatia, however cold her feelings towards him, should not despise him now. If he had not been saved from turning back in that critical hour, what would she have thought of him by this? He laughed bitterly, for, after all, if his life was saved, he had lost almost his all when he struck that treacherous rock. He laughed again and promised himself that on the first night his work left him free he would go to the Thespis Theatre and see what he would have been.

For Camille had won too. She had, as the experts had predicted, captured the town, had been declared by the critics to have the divine spark, and the theatre was crammed every night. The astute Mr. Percival Mallory had provided her with an effective play, a *réchauffage* of half-a-dozen old Sardou favourites, skilfully disguised and written up to date. Anyhow, whatever might be said of the dramatist's share in the triumph, Camille's success was made genuinely enough. For she was, as Vernon had cynically recognised, an actress to the finger-tips, while her experience and training had taught her how to use her talent to the extreme of effectiveness.

For a reason which, perhaps, in so complex a

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character, it would be futile to seek, she had kept to Bulstrode Vernon's conditions, and since that momentous interview had made no attempt to see or even communicate with Cargill. It may have been fear, since Vernon was essentially not a man to trifle with; it may have been the engrossing claims of the business of her London début; it may have been that her feeling for Cargill was a mere surface passion fed by pique and the spirit of intriguing; anyhow, whatever the cause, she had left the man, whose life had been within an ace of joining hers, severely alone. The popular and expensive Mr. Harry Lovelace took the part which was to have been Cargill's, playing it as well as conceit, developed to the degree of a disease, would allow, and all went swimmingly at the Thespis, since audiences are given to accept swagger as the mark of a being superior to themselves.

Bulstrode Vernon had seen the play on the first night, and had, in his cool, shrewd way congratulated the divine Camille on her success, with perhaps a quiet suggestion of approval of her sense in abandoning her design upon Cargill. "Best thing for both of you," he observed pointedly.

Camille replied with a shrug and a little scornful laugh. The moment of her triumph was scarcely the time to suggest that the world held a still better fate for him who might have shared it. "And the

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affaire Vane-Trevor? " she inquired a little spitefully.

" Is progressing as well as could be expected," Vernon answered with evasive significance.

Nevertheless he was not very sanguine now of any outcome favourable to Cargill. He would not have been surprised to read any morning the announcement of Horatia's engagement to Bendish. No one knew better than he Lady Clanrobert's unswerving determination, her tireless energy in an affair of this sort. And he feared that even a girl of Horatia's strong character might be caught at last at a favourable moment and induced to yield. If only he had had a chance of putting in a word about the plot all would have been well. But that sudden departure, a characteristic of Lady Clanrobert's methods, had beaten him, and now he feared the worst.

Consequently, it was with a certain misgiving that one evening at the Thespis, where he had strolled in late after dining alone at his club, he saw in a box Lady Clanrobert and Horatia.

So they had come back from their wanderings. He wondered as he looked at them what the result had been. Horatia was attentively following the play with an expression of calm interest; her face told nothing. Nor did her aunt's. But then if it had, the sign would scarcely have been trustworthy;

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anyhow Vernon would have gathered from it just the opposite to what it purported to express.

When the act was over he went to the box. He was determined to lose no time in finding out how matters stood.

Lady Clanrobert received him with an effusiveness which was to be expected, but which by no means reached the point of deception it aimed at.

"My dear Bulstrode," she began volubly, as he shook hands, "how nice to see you so soon after our return. We arrived in town only this morning from Switzerland. We have had such a delightful time, touring from place to place without any fuss, just as our fancy prompted. Of course the first thing we had to do was to come here and see the triumph of our late acquaintance, Miss Camille de Mertens, of which we heard such wonderful accounts out there. Quite an extraordinary success, is it not? But then how clever she is. One could always see that. At the same time she is not as well supported as she might be."

"I dare say," observed Vernon, somewhat pointedly, "you expected to see Cargill in the company."

Horatia looked away as though attracted by some one in the house. Lady Clanrobert smiled rather acidly as she replied, "Oh, dear no. Of course we heard that he had got into Parliament wisely

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or not—although his maiden speech seems to have been quite a success. And really one could not help a little perhaps ungrateful satisfaction in the idea that the impossible Samuel Pomfret was not allowed to contest the seat.”

“ I suppose he would have lost it for us if he had,” Horatia remarked quietly.

“ It is more than probable,” Vernon agreed. “ By the way, Miss Vane-Trevor,” he added, in a tone which seemed to brook no interference from the third party, “ going back to that period, did you ever get a letter I sent you just after you had left Prynnes ? ”

Lady Clanrobert’s face wore an expression of anything but amiability, but she said nothing.

“ No; I never got a letter from you,” Horatia answered, and Vernon knew that it was so.

“ My dear Bulstrode——” Lady Clanrobert began, her face grey with annoyance — and worse.

But he went on pitilessly in a boldly incisive tone, ignoring her interruption. “ That is a pity; seeing that in the letter I gave you, as I felt it my duty to give you, particulars of a plot which had been laid and carried out against your happiness and another person’s honour.”

Lady Clanrobert’s face was now a study of malignity and discomfiture. “ A plot ? My dear

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Bulstrode, the election fuss must have turned your head."

"I think not, Lady Clan," he replied, with easy good-humour, obviously backed, however, by an unthwartable determination to have it out. "I was quite sane, and my letter said nothing I was not prepared to prove. I should like to know what became of it."

Lady Clanrobert shrugged. "We all know how easily letters go astray when one is abroad."

"Or when some one is interested in their not reaching their destination," he rejoined significantly.

"My dear Bulstrode, is that an insinuation?" Lady Clanrobert's face was dark with anger now.

"Certainly," he answered, somewhat to her surprise. "An insinuation which the plot I speak of fully justifies."

Horatia was sitting quite calmly, to a casual observer unmoved, but Vernon could see the suppressed excitement in her deep, blue-grey eyes. "This plot," she said insistently, and as she spoke there was something which told Vernon that Lady Clanrobert had not yet carried her point; "tell me."

Vernon glanced at the dowager. "Shall I tell it now?" he suggested.

"The curtain is just going up," said Lady Clanrobert.

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Vernon accepted the hint with a slight bow and a contemptuous smile. "Then I will content myself to-night with assuring Miss Vane-Trevor on my word of honour that I am in a position to prove that the meeting of Cargill and Miss de Mertens at the temple that evening was accidental so far as he was concerned. Unhappily it was anything but accidental as touching others. Also that the suggestion of any sort of intrigue between Cargill and Miss de Mertens is absolutely untrue."

"We may believe that as we please," said Lady Clanrobert unpleasantly.

"Certainly," he agreed readily. "The only thing is, though, that its non-acceptance will involve its proof. You must understand that, apart from Miss Vane-Trevor's concern in the matter, Cargill's honour is impugned."

"He has," returned Lady Clanrobert sarcastically, "at least a redoubtable champion in Bulstrode Vernon."

"I am the last man to interfere when a game is played fairly," he rejoined. "But when I see cheating I make a point of exposing it."

"Very pretty," Lady Clanrobert snarled. "I hope you have held consistently to your rule all your life."

"I have," he declared simply; "when the cheated have not been able to take care of themselves."

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"There! You hear, Horatia?" was all Lady Clanrobert in her discomfiture could say.

Vernon rose. "You will give me an opportunity of explaining matters?" he said, turning to Horatia and pointedly ignoring her aunt. "I can assure you it is only due to all parties concerned that you should hear the truth."

Horatia's face was set with the bitterness and resentment of a realised deception. Vernon was glad to be assured by that expression that Lady Clanrobert would have a poor chance of turning the position round again.

"I go to-morrow to 88, Cadogan Square," Horatia replied, with just a light of gratitude tempering the sternness in her eyes. "Will you come at four o'clock?"

"I shall be glad," he answered quietly. Then added, "May I bring Cargill?"

Horatia put out her hand. "Mr. Vernon, I can trust you not to make a mistake?" she said, with an earnestness that touched him.

"Implicitly," he answered, in the same tone. "My only desire is to serve your interests, your happiness."

She gave his hand a grateful pressure, and he turned to go. Lady Clanrobert's sharp, metallic voice stayed him.

"You had better be careful, Bulstrode; not only

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as to what you say about us, but as to how you encourage that disreputable intriguer who seems to have nicely imposed upon you of all people."

It was all she could do to steady her voice, which was quivering with anger. Vernon turned and faced her with a look in which she read her defeat.

"Mr. Cargill has not attempted to impose upon me," he said incisively. "He had no more idea that he was the victim of a plot than had Miss Vane-Trevor. It was I who pointed out to him the trap into which he had been led, and I take the full responsibility for all I have said."

He bowed curtly and opened the door. Outside stood Bendish, who was coming in. Vernon nodded coldly to him, ignoring the soldier's more effusive greeting, and passed on.

"He won't find much satisfaction in there," Vernon muttered grimly as he made his way to his seat. "I'm afraid Master Bendish will have to find another heiress, or send in his papers. Awkward for Miss Horatia, but I had to speak out. Happily it is the last act; there won't be another *mauvais quart d'heure*."

After the play Vernon drove to the House and told Cargill the good news.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT four o'clock next day Vernon and Horatia were together in the library at 88, Cadogan Square, the house of a married schoolfellow of hers.

"I haven't brought Cargill," he explained, with a smile. "You see, I thought it would be more regular that you should be absolutely satisfied first as to the manner in which you were tricked on that eventful evening."

"I am ashamed," Horatia said, "to think how easily I allowed myself to be deceived, and how unreasonably I treated Mr. Cargill. But I was, as I thought, bitterly *désillusionnée* and scarcely mistress of myself."

"I can well understand that," he responded. "The plot was well laid and the calculations appear to have come out to a nicety. Naturally everything looked black against Cargill."

He then told her the whole story as he had pieced it together, not omitting the sequel, his rescue of Cargill from the designing Camille, and from a career which seemed unworthy of him.

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“ Don't think there was anything in it beyond the reckless apathy of a crushing despair,” he urged. “ The scheme was cleverly contrived to suit Camille's purpose as well as Lady Clan's and Bendish's. There was just an hour's mad drifting, that was all. And as testimony to Hugh Cargill's character, I may tell you that no alliance with Camille save an honourable one seems ever to have occurred to him. Last night he assured me that since that evening he had held no communication whatever with her. The man is absolutely single-hearted and truthful. You know me, Miss Vane-Trevor. I have had more opportunities than most men for studying my species, and you may take my word that Hugh Cargill is honourable and chivalrous, a gentleman judged by the highest code, and that he is devoted, loyally devoted, to you. I arranged with him to call here at the half-hour on the chance that you would receive him.”

In a few minutes the appointed time had come, and Cargill was announced.

“ I can do no more good by staying now,” Vernon said, taking leave tactfully.

“ I don't know how to thank you for the good you have done,” Horatia responded warmly. “ But for you——” She gave a shrug.

“ Were you in danger of accepting Bendish ? ”

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Vernon asked in a tone of apprehensive curiosity, as he thought what Lady Clanrobert's probable tactics had been.

She shook her head decisively. "No. I have a strong objection to Captain Bendish and a low opinion of his motives."

"I thought you must have," he declared. "Still I have scarcely dared to open the *Morning Post* lately."

She laughed, happily now. "It wasn't exactly Lady Clan's fault that a certain announcement has not appeared there."

"Now, I must not keep you," he said, and left her.

Horatia went to the drawing-room where Cargill waited.

"Horatia!"

"Mr. Bulstrode Vernon has just gone," she said, as she shook hands a little blushing. "He—he has told me everything."

"He has?"

"How we were both deceived. Can you forgive me, Hugh?"

For answer he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I know you could not believe otherwise," he said fondly. "It was a cruel trick, and but for

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a true friend it would have parted us for ever.

Ah, how wretched I have been!"

"I, too," she said. "I thought it was for ever."

"And now——" The sentence finished in a kiss.

As their hostess came in, Lioratia kept Cargill's hand in hers.

"Edith, dear, congratulate us," she said.

THE END

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