

CASE OF DISCERNMENT.

Hunter sat over the fire in his rooms, smoking and thinking; smoking rather discontentedly, and thinking, quite impartially, of two women. And the impartiality was the trouble. If he could have felt a preference, or if it had been only one woman, matters would have been so simple. But there were two, and both were charming exponents of their respective types. Grace Firth was perhaps the more obvious of the two; Dorothy Dallas, on the other hand, possessed three subtler charms which gave you a nice respect for your own powers of observation.

It was a comfort, at any rate, that he had not compromised himself so far with either. Not in the least. In fact, he would probably have remained in the comfortable, quiescent state of friendship if people had only left him alone. But it seemed to him that all things had been conspiring against his bachelorhood of late. His mother, Lady Hunter, had written tedious letters about the estate and responsibilities. Then Thornton had been in to see him this afternoon; and Thornton, just back from his honeymoon, and radiating matrimonial bliss, was enough to disturb the most rooted of bachelors.

Also, he had just remembered Salter's case, which had led to reflections. Salter had gone, rigid with self-control, to say good-by to Miss Fenwick before his departure for the Sudan, and she had broken down at the last minute, nearly kissed him, and made a scene in which he quite kissed her. Hunter was leaving England in about ten days. How would it be if he kept his destination and the term of his absence vague—he was really going to Italy for six weeks—and make his good-bys as a sort of test? This might greatly influence his indecision. He had so often read that love creates love. Not that he wished to get definitely engaged just at present. Not at all. That would interfere with Italy and be altogether inconvenient. But it would be amusing to know how matters stood, and the knowledge would enable him to make up his mind slowly and carefully during his absence.

Why not do the thing at once? What was to-day? Tuesday, Mrs Dallas' at home day. He would be certain of finding Dorothy. He glanced at his watch; quarter to 6. A hansom would get him to Cumberland place by six o'clock. If there were other visitors they would be leaving, and he would get his chance. He knocked out his pipe, jumped up with the energy of resolve, passed through his exquisite sitting room to the exquisite bedroom beyond closed on the electric light and took trouble with his appearance.

Two carriages drove away from the house in Cumberland place as he drove up. There were still one or two visitors in the drawing-room, but it already had an atmosphere of decayed gaiety; close air, disarranged chairs, used cups everywhere. Mrs Dallas greeted him with an over fatigued smile. Dorothy was sitting between two parasitic girl friends. When Hunter shook hands with her she looked to the height of his scarf pin, and immediately resumed her talk with the girls. Mrs Dallas talked to Hunter with a little confidential air which she did not spend on everybody. He was an old friend; and really a young man with an income nowadays.

Through her long sentences he caught snatches of the girls' talk: 'Pale blue,' 'ridiculously expensive, I think,' 'too much jet,' 'the Barings' dance,' 'all put on,' etc. At last they left in a cloud of appointments. Mrs Dallas muttered something about letters, and went upstairs.

When Hunter had closed the door after her and turned round, Dorothy was warning her hands at the sinking fire with an air of conscious unconsciousness. If only her mother wouldn't do those painfully obvious things!

'Have you had tea, by the way?' she asked directly.

'Nary a cup,' said Hunter. 'Stay me with tea, comfort me with talk—I shall enjoy both.'

She got up and poured out some poisonous drags. She was not looking her best, he thought. She was very variable. He had seen her look almost plain—once, he remembered, when she was talking to an aunt from Australia, and once when she had told him of the death of a friend. But he had also seen her look exquisite, with a spiritual, emotional beauty that made more diffident people afraid of her. She stooped a little, lookably, and wore sentimental things by preference.

'You've missed several friends this afternoon,' she was saying.

'Tant mieux.'

'For whom?'

'For me. I came on purpose to talk to you to-day.'

Her eyelids fluttered imperceptibly.

'We're never alone on Tuesdays, you know,' with a slight emphasis on this 'we.'

'In the other hand, I'm sure of finding you then. No sugar, thank. I've come to bid you a rather long farewell.'

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She went back to the fire and stooped low over it.

'Going away?' she asked, brightly.

He followed her to the fireplace, cup in hand, and took the chair nearest to which she knelt.

'Yes; the spirit of travel is upon me again. And London is too trist for a bachelor in the winter.'

'Going to Paris again? Wasn't it Paris you went to the other day, or the other month, or something?' she said, without looking around.

'Yes, but I'm bound for more distant climes this time. I think of going in Cook's office and asking for a ticket to the furthest point from civilisation. Perhaps I shall return whiteheaded and incoherent in a hundred years, a la Rip.'

She laughed a completely new laugh and rubbed her hands together.

'Well, I hope you'll enjoy it immensely; and please come and see us in the Rip condition when you return—if ever.'

'Of course.'

There was a pause. He wished she would turn her face to the light, but the voice boded no compliment to his vanity. It was particularly cheerful. He stroked his admirable moustache. She curled the end of her ribbon around her forefinger.

Hunter reflected that she had always been just a little difficult, conversationally, even during that charming summer at Pontresina, two years ago, when he had found himself obliged, for conscience sake, to check the course of a Platonic friendship he had been at some pains to create.

A large Persian cat that had been asleep in its basket till now, suddenly remembered the world, and came back to it with a long stretch. Dorothy caught it up in her arms and surprised and annoyed it with a torrent of affection.

'Do you think that mass of wool appreciates all that?' asked Hunter, rather peevishly.

'One can only hope so,' said Dorothy.

'I believe in the stupidity of cats.'

This reminded him of a good cat story and he told it well. It launched them into ordinary conversation, where they laboured more or less for the next twenty minutes. At the end of that time he came around to his journey again.

'When do you start?' she asked.

'Soon, in a few days,' he answered seriously.

'All alone, or with Dick again?'

'Alone. My companionship, you see, is not a frenzied demand. I shan't even have the comfort of leaving a few broken—or even clipped—hearts behind me, I fear.'

She should have her opportunities. She only gave a short laugh.

'Monsieur ne se flatte pas,' she said, with a little mock bow.

It brought the light on her face at last, and he saw one of her plainest renderings of herself. She was pale, with hard lines about the mouth.

'Well,' he said, rising and holding out his hand, 'you are tired, and I am busy. I must say my good-bys now. Good-by till—I don't know when. Wish me well.'

'Of course,' she said promptly. 'I—I do wish you well, and—good-bye.'

He paused a moment at the door. He made a gesture of impatience and went.

She stood quite still for awhile. When the front door banged she made a little low sound in her throat and put her hands over her face.

Later a servant came in to remove the tea things. Dorothy had not moved. But she went upstairs then to dress for a dinner in South Kensington.

'My dear child,' said Mrs Dallas, in the hall, as they were starting, 'you look like your grandmother to-night. Most provoking!'

Hunter, walking briskly homeward, was saying to himself: 'Well, that's one point settled. These small, pale women have no blood in their veins!'

On the following evening Hunter stopped at Strudwick's on his way to Trevillian's. 'At Home,' and got tulleuses for his buttonhole. Tulleuses was Miss Firth's favourite scent, if he remembered aright.

He arrived late (he never made bourgeois mistakes), and the rooms were already packed. The subtlety society roost reached the hall. Grace Firth was there, as he had anticipated. When he first caught sight of her through the crowd she was talking to a tall man with a foreign accent. Now and then she laughed consciously, and Hunter was glad to note that this annoyed him a little. What was that two-penny organ grinder saying to her?

Animated and handsome and picturesque she looked, as usual. Her figure was superb, her eyes decorative, her smile generous. She had realised Hunter's presence at once, but made no sign. He placed himself where he could see and be seen by her, and waited, speaking to such of his acquaintances as were crushed past him from time to time.

Presently Miss Firth rose, threw off her companion with the airy ease that is one of the finest products of civilisation, and made