

ever brought in contact. And if she did not greatly influence the trend of public opinion—well, anyhow, she tried to. Just now, however, Alec knew nothing about her; he was left to think helplessly of the trim figure and the lost ideals—the two things would mix themselves up in his mind.

To his palæstic, stormy presence there succeeded Walter Blake, with all his accomplishment in the art of smooth love-making, with his aspirations again nicely adjusted to the object of his desires (he was so much cleverer than poor Alec over that!), with his power to flatter not only by love, but still more by relative weakness. He, of course, did not run at the thing as Alec had done. That would be neither careful of the chances nor economical of the pleasure. Many a talk was needed before his purpose became certain or Anna could show any sign of understanding it.

He dealt warily with her; he was trying—unconsciously perhaps to perform the task Gaylesham had indicated to him—the task of learning her paces and adapting his thereto. It was part of his theory about her that she must be approached with great caution; and, of course, he knew that there was one very delicate bit of ground. How much had she heard about himself and Sibylla. It was long before he mentioned Sibylla's name. At last he ventured on throwing out a feeler. Anna's untroubled composure persuaded him that she knew nothing of the facts; but her shrewd analysis of Sibylla showed, in his judgment, that she quite understood the woman. It was the dusk of the afternoon again (Anna rather affected that time of day), and Blake, with a sigh which might be considered in the nature of a confession, ventured to say:

"I wish I could read people as you can. I should have avoided a lot of trouble."

"You can read yourself, anyhow, can't you?" asked Anna.

"By Jove! that's good—that's very good!" No, I don't know that I can. But I expect you can read me. Miss Selford. I shall have to come to you for lessons, shan't I?"

"I'll tell you all the hard bits," she laughed.

"You'll have to see a lot of me to do that!"

Anna was not so quite sure of the need, but she did not propose to stop the game.

"Do I seem so very reluctant to see a lot of you?" she inquired.

Blake's eyes caught hers through the semi-darkness. She was aware of the emotion with which he regarded her. It found an answer in her, an answer which for the moment upset both her coolness and her sense of mastery. She had a revelation that her dominion, not seriously threatened would be pleasantly checked by intervals of an instinctive submission. This feeling almost smothered the element of contempt which had hitherto mingled in her liking for him, and impaired the pride of her conquest.

"I was judging you by myself. Compared with me, you seem reluctant," he said in a low voice, coming a little nearer to her. "But then, it does me such a lot of good to come and see you. It's only the pleasure I come for, though that's very great. You keep up my ideals."

"I'm so glad. The other day I was told I'd ruined somebody's ideals. Well, I oughtn't to have told you that, I suppose; but it slipped out."

"Things will slip out, if one takes care to leave the door open."

She was standing by the table, and Blake was now close by her.

"Since I have known you—"

"Why, you've known me for years, Mr. Blake!"

"No, I only knew a little girl till—till I came back to town this time." He referred to that yachting cruise on which he had ultimately started alone. "But since then I've been a different sort of fellow. I want to go on being different, and you can help me." His voice trembled; he was wrapped up in his emotion, and abundantly sure of its sincerity.

Anna moved away a little, now rather nervous, since no instinct, however acute, can give quite the assurance that practice brings. But she was very triumphant, too, and, moreover, a good deal touched. That break in young Blake's voice had done him good service before; it never became artificial or overdone, thanks to his faculty of coming quite fresh to every new

emotional crisis; it was always most happily natural. What it hinted seemed fully to recompose a situation in life with an exceedingly satisfactory match. Who would ask more?

"Anna!" he said, holding out his hands, with those skillfully appealing eyes of his just penetrating to hers.

With a long-drawn breath she gave him her hand. He pressed it, and began to draw her gently towards him. She yielded to him slowly, thinking at the last moment of what she had decided she would never think about and would show no wisdom in recalling. The vision of another woman had shot into her mind, and for a few seconds gave her pause. Her hesitation was short, and left her self-confidence unbroken. What she had won she would keep. The dead should bury its dead—a thing it had declined to do for Christine Egshaw.

"Anna," he said again, "do you want me to say more? Isn't that saying it all? I can't say all of it, you know."

She let him draw her slowly to him; but she had spoken no word, and was not yet in his arms, when the door opened, and she became aware of a man standing on the threshold. Young Blake, all engrossed, had noticed nothing, but he had perceived her yielding.

"Ah, my Anna!" he whispered rapturously.

"Hush!" she hissed, drawing her hand sharply away. "Is that you, Richards?"

Richards was the Selfords' manservant.

The man laughed.

"If you'd turn the light on you couldn't mistake me for anybody so respectable as Richards," he said.

"I've been with your father in the study, and he told me I should find your mother here." Anna recognised the voice.

"Mr Imason! I didn't know you were in London."

"Just up for the day, and I wanted to see your father."

Anna moved to the switch and turned on the light. She glanced hastily at young Blake. He had not moved; his face was rather red, and he looked unhappy. Anna's feeling was one of pronounced anger against Grantley Imason. His appearance had all the effect of purposeful malice; it made her feel at once jealous and absurd. But it was on her own behalf that she resented it. She was not free from a willingness that Blake should be made uncomfortable; so much discipline would be quite wholesome for him. For her own part, though, she wanted to get out of the room.

"May I ring for the real Richards, and—Oh, I beg your pardon, Blake, how are you? May I ring for the real Richards and send word to your mother, Anna?"

Grantley was, as usual, urbane and unperturbed.

"I'll go and find her for you. I think she's lying down."

"Oh, well, then—"

"No, I know she'll want to see you, and Anna ran lightly out of the room."

Grantley strolled to an armchair and sank into it. He did not look at Blake, nor, his formal greeting given, appear conscious of his presence.

Young Blake was in a turmoil. He hated to see Grantley; all the odious thought of his failure and defeat was brought back. He hated that Grantley should have seen him making love to Anna Selford, for in his heart he was conscious that he could not cheat an outside vision as he could manage to cheat himself. But both these feelings, if not swallowed up in fear, were at least outdone by it. His great desire had been to settle this matter finally and irrevocably before a hint of it came to the ears either of Grantley or of Sibylla. What would Grantley do now?

"You saw us?" he asked, in a sullen, anxious voice.

"I couldn't help it. I'm sorry," said Grantley, in colourless politeness.

"Well?"

"I really don't understand your question, Blake. At least you seem to mean it for a question."

"You do know what I mean. I'm not going to ask any favours of you. I only want to know what you intend to do?"

"About what?"

"About what you saw—and heard, too, I suppose?"

Grantley rose from his chair in a leisurely fashion and stood with his

back to the fire. He was looking at young Blake with a slight smile. Blake grew redder under it.

"Oh, I can't beat about the bush!" Blake went on, impatiently. "You caught, if you chose, tell Miss Selford what you know."

"Well?" said Grantley, in his turn.

"And—and—Oh, you see what might happen as well as I do. I—I meant to—to explain at my own time, but—"

"I shouldn't let the time come in a hurry, Blake. It'll be an awkward quarter of an hour for both of you and quite unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?"

"There was a ring of hope in Blake's voice; he liked to be told that any such confession was unnecessary, and would have welcomed such an assurance even from Grantley's hostile lips.

"Certainly; and equally unnecessary that I should tell Anna anything." He paused a moment and then went on.

"In a different case I might think I had a different duty—though, being what you might call an interested party, I should consider carefully before I allowed myself to act on that view."

But, as matters stand, you yourself have made any action on my part superfluous."

"I have?"

"Oh, yes! You so far injured the fame of the woman for whom you hadn't afterwards the pluck to fight, that it's not necessary for me to tell Selford that you were in love with her a few months before you made love to his daughter, nor that you tried to run away with her, but that in the end you funked the job. I needn't tell him, because he knows—and his wife knows. You took care of that."

Young Blake said nothing, though he opened his lips as if to speak.

"And I needn't tell Anna either. That's unnecessary for the same reason. She knows just as well as her father and mother know."

"She knows nothing, I tell you. She hasn't an idea—"

"Did you see her face when she saw it was me and not Richards?"

"I tell you—She was embarrassed, of course—But—"

"She knows quite well, Blake. Oh, not the details, but the main thing. She knows that quite well. And she will have made her decision. There's no duty incumbent on me."

"You'll say nothing, then?"

"I shall say nothing at all."

Grantley relapsed into silence—a most easy, self-possessed silence. His eyes were on young Blake no more, but rested placidly on one of Selford's best pictures on the opposite wall. Blake cleared his throat and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Why do you stay?" asked Grantley, mildly.

"Wouldn't it be better to continue your interview with Anna elsewhere? Mrs Selford's coming in here, you see."

Blake broke out:

"God knows, Imason, it's difficult for me to say a word to you, but—"

Grantley raised his hand a little.

"It's impossible," he said. "There can be no words between you and me about that. And what does it matter to you what I think? I shall hold my tongue. And you'll feel sure I've no real cause of complaint—quite sure if only I hold my tongue. And I think Anna will hold

her tongue. Then you'll forget she knows and go on posturing before her with entire satisfaction to yourself." He turned his eyes on him and laughed a little. "As long as you can humbug yourself or anybody else, or even get other people to let you think you're humbugging them; you're quite happy, you know."

Blake looked at him once and twice, but his tongue found no words. He turned and walked towards the door.

"Wait in the dining-room," said Grantley.

Blake went out without turning or seeming to hear. After a moment or two Anna's step came down the stairs.

"Mamma'll be down directly, Mr Imason," she called as she reached the door. Then her eyes took in the room. "Mr—Mr Blake?" she asked, with a sudden, quick flash of colour to her cheeks.

"I think you'll find him in the dining-room," said Grantley, gravely.

She understood—and she did not lack courage. She had enough for two—for herself and for Blake. She met Grantley's look fair and square, drawing up her trim, stylish figure to a stiff rigidity, and setting her lips in a resolute line. Grantley admired her attitude and her open defiance of him. He smiled at her in a confidential mockery.

"Thanks, Mr Imason. I'll look for him. You'll be all right till mamma comes?"

"Oh, yes I shall be all right thanks, Anna!"

He smiled still. Anna gave him another look of defiance.

"I intend to go my own way. I know what I'm about. I don't care a pin what you think."

The glance seemed to Grantley as eloquent as Lord Burghley's nod. And no more than Lord Burghley did she spoil its effect by words. She gave it to Grantley full and square, then turned on her heel and swung jauntily out of the room.

Grantley's smile vanished. He screwed up his lips as if he had tasted something rather sour.

(To be continued.)

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