

Henty George Alfred

Dorothy's Double. Volume 1

of 3



George Henty

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Henty G. A. George Alfred

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PROLOGUE

A dark night on the banks of the Thames; the south-west wind, heavily charged with sleet, was blowing strongly, causing little waves to lap against the side of a punt moored by the bank. Its head-rope was tied round a weeping willow which had shed most of its leaves, and whose pendent boughs swayed and waved in the gusts, sending at times a shower of heavy drops upon a man leaning against its trunk. Beyond stretched a broad lawn with clumps of shrubs, and behind loomed the shadow of a mansion, but so faintly that it might have passed unnoticed in the darkness had it not been for some lights in the upper windows.

At times the man changed his position, muttering impatiently as the water made its way down between his collar and neck and soaked through his clothes to the shoulders.

'I must have been waiting an hour!' he exclaimed at last. 'If she doesn't come soon I shall begin to think that something has prevented her getting out. It will be no joke to have to come again to-morrow night if it keeps on like this. It has been raining for the last three days without a stop, and looks as if it would keep on as much longer.'

A few minutes later he started as he made out a figure in the darkness. It approached him, and stopped ten yards away.

'Are you there?' a female voice asked.

'Of course I am,' he replied, 'and a nice place it is to be waiting in for over an hour on such a night as this. Have you got it?'

'Yes.'

'That is all right. Well, chuck your bonnet down there, three or four feet from the edge of the water.'

'And my cloak? I have brought that and a shawl, as you told me.'

'No; give it to me. Now get into the boat, and we will shove off.'

As soon as the woman had seated herself in the punt the man unfastened the head-rope and stepped in; then, taking a long pole in his hand, he let the boat drift down with the strong stream, keeping close to the bank. Where the lawn ended there was a clump of bushes overhanging the water. He caught hold of these, broke off two branches that dipped into the stream, then, hauling the punt a little farther in, he took the cloak the woman had handed to him and hitched it fast round a stump that projected an inch or two above the swollen stream.

'That will do the trick,' he said. 'They will find it there when the river falls.' Then he poled the boat out and let her drift again. 'You have brought another bonnet, I see, Polly.'

'You don't suppose I was going to be such a fool as to leave myself bareheaded on such a night as this,' she said sullenly.

'Well, there is no occasion to be bad-tempered; it has been a deal worse for me than it has for you, waiting an hour and a half there, besides being a good half-hour poling this tub up against the stream. I suppose it went off all right?'

'Yes, there was no difficulty about it. I kicked up a row and pretended to be drunk. Not too bad, or they would have turned me straight out of the house, but I was told I was to go the first thing in the morning. The rest was easy enough. I had only to slip down, get it, and be off, but I had to wait some time at the door. I opened it about an inch or two, and had to stand there listening until I was sure they were both asleep. I am sorry I ever did it. I had half a mind to chuck it up three or four times, but –'

'But you thought better of it, Polly. Well, you were perfectly right; fifty pounds down and a pound a week regular, that ain't so bad you know, especially as you were out of a place, and had no character to show.'

'But mind,' she said threateningly, 'no harm is to come to it. I don't know what your game is, but you promised me that, and if you break your word I will peach, as true as my name is Polly Green. I don't care what they do to me, but I will split on you and tell the whole business.'

'Don't you alarm yourself about nothing,' he said, good-temperedly. 'I know what my game is, and that is enough for you. Why, if I wanted to get rid of it and you too I have only to drive my heel through the side of this rotten old craft. I could swim to shore easily enough, but when they got the drags out to-morrow they would bring something up in them. Here is the end of the island.'

A few pushes with the pole, and the punt glided in among several other craft lying at the strand opposite Isleworth Church. The man helped the woman with her burden ashore, and knotted the head-rope to that of the boat next to it.

'That is how it was tied when I borrowed it,' he said; 'her owner will never dream that she has been out to-night.'

'What next?' the woman asked.

'We have got to walk to Brentford. I have got a light trap waiting for me there. It is a little crib I use sometimes, and they gave me the key of the stable-door, so I can get the horse out and put him in the trap myself. I said I was starting early in the morning, and they won't know whether it is at two or five that I go out. I brought down a couple of rugs, so you will be able to keep pretty dry, and I have got a driving-coat for myself. We shall be down at Greenwich at that little crib you have taken by six o'clock. You have got the key, I suppose?'

'Yes. The fire is laid, and we can have a cup of tea before you drive back. Then I shall turn in for a good long sleep.'

An hour later they were driving rapidly towards London.

CHAPTER I

A slatternly woman was standing at the entrance of a narrow court in one of the worst parts of Chelsea. She was talking to a neighbour belonging to the next court, who had paused for a moment for a gossip in her passage towards a public-house.

'Your Sal is certainly an owdacious one,' she said. 'I saw her yesterday evening when you were out looking for her. I told her she would get it hot if she didn't get back home as soon as she could, and she jest laughed in my face and said I had best mind my own business. I told her I would slap her face if she cheeked me, and she said, "I ain't your husband, Mrs. Bell, and if you were to try it on you would find that I could slap quite as hard as you can."'

'She is getting quite beyond me, Mrs. Bell. I don't know what to do with her. I have thrashed her as long as I could stand over her, but what is the good? The first time the door is open she just takes her hook and I don't see her again for days. I believe she sleeps in the Park, and I suppose she either begs or steals to keep herself. At the end of a week maybe she will come in again, just the same as if she had only been out for an hour. "How have you been getting on since I have been away?" she will say. "No one to scrub your floor; no one to help you when you are too drunk to find your bed," and then she laughs fit to make yer blood run cold. Owdacious ain't no name for that wench, Mrs. Bell. Why, there ain't a boy in this court of her own size as ain't afraid of her. She is a regular tiger-cat, she is; and if they says anything to her, she just goes for them tooth and nail. I shan't be able to put up with her ways much longer. Well, yes; I don't mind if I do take a two of gin with you.'

They had been gone but a minute or two when a man turned in at the court. He looked about forty, was clean shaven, and wore a rough great-coat, a scarlet and blue tie with a horseshoe pin, and tightly cut trousers, which, with the tie and pin, gave him a somewhat horsey appearance. More than one of the inhabitants of the court glanced sharply at him as he came in, wondering what business he could have there. He asked no questions, but went in at an open door, picked his way up the rickety stairs to the top of the house, and knocked at a door. There was no reply. He knocked again louder and more impatiently; then, with a muttered oath, descended the stairs.

'Who are you wanting?' a woman asked, as he paused at a lower door.

'I am looking for Mrs. Phillips; she is not in her room.'

'I just saw her turn off with Mother Bell. I expect you will find them at the bar of the Lion, lower down the street.'

With a word of thanks he went down the court, waited two or three minutes near the entrance, and then walked in the direction of the public-house. He had gone but a short distance, however, when he saw the two women come out. They stood gossiping for three or four minutes, and then the woman he was in search of came towards him, while the other went on down the street.

'Hello, Mr. Warbles!' Mrs. Phillips exclaimed when she came near to him; 'who would have thought of seeing you? Why, it is a year or more since you were here last, though I must say as your money comes every month regular; not as it goes far, I can tell you, for that girl is enough to eat one out of 'arth and 'ome.'

'Well, never mind that now,' he said impatiently, 'that will keep till we get upstairs. I have been up there and found that you were out. I want to have a talk with you. Where is the girl?'

'Ah, where indeed, Mr. Warbles; there is never no telling where Sal is; maybe she is in the next court, maybe she is the other side of town. She is allus on the move. I have locked up her boots sometimes, but it is no odds to Sal. She would just as lief go barefoot as not.'

By this time they arrived at the door of the room, and after some fumbling in her pocket the woman produced the key and they went in. It was a poverty-stricken room; a rickety table and two

chairs, a small bed in one corner and some straw with a ragged rug thrown over it in another, a kettle and a frying-pan, formed its whole furniture. Mr. Warbles looked round with an air of disgust.

'You ought to be able to do better than this, Kitty,' he said.

'I s'pose as I ought,' she said philosophically, 'but you know me, Warbles; it's the drink as does it.'

'The drink has done it in your case, surely enough,' he said, as he saw in his mind's eye a trim figure behind the bar of a country public-house, and looked at the coarse, bloated, untidy creature before him.'

'Well, it ain't no use grunting over it,' she said. 'I could have married well enough in the old days, if it hadn't been that I was always losing my places from it, and so it has gone on, and I would not change now if I could. A temperance chap come down the court a week or two ago, a-preaching, and after a-going on for some time his eye falls on me, and says he to me, "My good woman, does the demon of drink possess you also?" And says I, "He possesses me just as long as I have got money in my pocket." "Then," says he, "why don't you take the pledge and turn from it all?" "Cause," says I, "it is just the one pleasure I have in life; what should I do I should like to know without it? I could dress more flash, and I could get more sticks of furniture in my room, which is all very well to one as holds to such things, but what should I care for them?" "You would come to be a decent member of society," says he. I tucks up my sleeves. "I ain't going to stand no 'pertinence from you, nor from no one," says I, and I makes for him, and he picks up his bag of tracts, and runs down the court like a little dog with a big dog arter him. I don't think he is likely to try this court again.'

'No, I suppose you are not going to change now, Kitty. I have come here to see the girl,' he went on, changing the subject abruptly.

'Well, you will see her if she comes in, and you won't if she don't happen to, that is all I can say about it. What are you going to do about her? It is about time as you did something. I have done what I agreed to do when you brought her to me when she was three years old. Says you, "The woman who has been taking charge of this child is dead, and I want you to take her." Says I, "You know well enough, Warbles, as I ain't fit to take care of no child. I am just going down as fast as I can, and it won't be long before I shall have to choose between the House and the river." "I can see that well enough," says you, "but I don't care how she is brought up so as she lives. She can run about barefoot through the streets and beg for coppers, for aught I care, but I want her to live for reasons of my own. I will pay you five shillings a week for her regular, and if you spend, as I suppose you will, one shilling on her food and four shillings on drink for yourself, it ain't no business of mine. I could have put her for the same money in some country cottage where she would have been well looked after, but I want her to grow up in the slums, just a ragged girl like the rest of them, and if you won't take her there is plenty as will on those terms." So I says, "Yes," and I have done it, and there ain't a raggeder or more owdacious gal in all the town, East or West.'

'That is all right, Kitty; but I saw someone yesterday, and it has altered my plans – but I must have a look at her first. I saw her when I called a year ago; I suppose she has not changed since then?'

'She is a bit taller, and, I should say, thinner, which comes of restlessness, and not for want of food. But she ain't changed otherwise, except as she is getting too much for me, and I have been wishing for some time to see you. I ain't no ways a good woman, Warbles, but the gal is fifteen now, and a gal of fifteen is nigh a woman in these courts, and I have made up my mind as I won't have her go wrong while she is on my hands, and if I had not seen you soon I should just have taken her by the shoulder and gone off to the workhouse with her.'

'They would not have taken her in without you,' the man said with a hard laugh.

'I would have gone in, too, for the sake of getting her in. I know I could not have stood it for many days, but I would have done it. However, the first time I got leave to come out I would have taken my hook altogether and got a room at the other end of the town, and left her there with

them. I could not have done better for her than that, but that would have been a sight better than her stopping here, and if she went wrong after that I should not have had it on my conscience.'

'Well, that is all right, Kitty; I agree with you this is not the best place in the world for her, and I think it likely that I may take her away altogether.'

'I am glad to hear it. I have never been able to make out what your game was. One thing I was certain of – that it was no good. I know a good many games that you have had a hand in, and there was not a good one among them, and I don't suppose this differs from the rest. Anyhow, I shall be glad to be shot of her. I don't want to lose the five bob a week, but I would rather shift without it than have her any longer now she is a-growing up.'

The man muttered something between his teeth, but at the moment a step was heard coming up the stairs.

'That's Sal,' the woman said; 'you are in luck this time, Warbles.'

The door opened, and a girl came in. She was thin and gaunt, her eyes were large, her hair was rough and unkempt, there were smears of dirt on her face and an expression of mingled distrust and defiance.

'Who have you got here?' she asked, scowling at Mr. Warbles.

'It is the gent as you saw a year ago, Sally; the man as I told you had put you with me and paid regular towards your keep.'

'What does he want?' the girl asked, but without removing her glance from the man.

'He wants to have a talk with you, Sally. I do not know exactly what he wants to say, but it is for your good.'

'I dunno that,' she replied; 'he don't look like as if he was one to do anyone a good turn without getting something out of it.'

Mr. Warbles shifted about uneasily in his chair.

'Don't you mind her, Mr. Warbles,' the woman said; 'she is a limb, she is, and no mistake, but she has got plenty of sense. But you had best talk to her straight if you want her to do anything; then if she says she will, she will; if she says she won't, you may take your oath you won't drive her. Now, Sal, be reasonable, and hear what the gentleman has to say.'

'Well, why don't he go on, then?' the girl retorted; 'who is a-stopping him?'

Mr. Warbles had come down impressed with the idea that the proposition he had to make would be received with enthusiasm, but he now felt some doubt on the subject. He wondered for a moment whether it would be best to speak as Mrs. Phillips advised him or to stick to the story he had intended to tell. He concluded that the former way was the best.

'I am going to speak perfectly straight to you, Sally,' he began.

The girl looked keenly at him beneath her long eyelashes, and her face expressed considerable doubt.

'I am in the betting line,' he said; 'horse-racing, you know; and I am mixed up in other things, and there is many a job I might be able to carry out if I had a sharp girl to help me. I can see you are sharp enough – there is no fear about that – but you see sharpness is not the only thing. A girl to be of use must be able to dress herself up and pass as a lady, and to do that she must have some sort of education so as to be able to speak as ladies speak. I ought to have begun earlier with you, I know, but it was only when thinking of you a day or two ago that it struck me you would do for the work. You will have to go to school, or at least to be under the care of someone who can teach you, for three years. I don't suppose you like the thought of it, but you will have a good time afterwards. You will be well dressed and live comfortably, and all you will have to do will be to play a part occasionally, which to a clever girl will be nothing.'

'I should learn to read and write and to be able to understand books and such like?'

'Certainly you would.'

'Then I am ready,' she said firmly; 'I don't care what you do with me afterwards. What I want most of anything in the world is to be able to read and write. You can do nothing if you can't do that. I do not suppose I shall like schooling, but it cannot be so bad as tramping about the streets like this,' and she pointed to her clothes and dilapidated boots, 'so if you mean what you say I am ready.'

The thought that she was intended to bear a part in dishonest courses afterwards did not for a moment trouble her. Half of the inhabitants of the court were ready to steal anything worth selling if an opportunity offered. She herself had often done so. She had no moral sense of right or wrong whatever, and regarded theft as simply an exercise of skill and quickness, and as an incident in the war between herself and society as represented by the police. As to counterfeit coin, she had passed it again and again, for a man came up once a fortnight or so with a roll of coin for which Mrs. Phillips paid him about a fourth of its face value. These she never attempted to pass in Chelsea, but tramped far away to the North, South or East, carrying with her a jug hidden under her tattered shawl, and going into public houses for a pint of beer for father.

This she considered far more hazardous work than pilfering, and her quickness of eye and foot had alone saved her many times, as if the barman, instead of dropping the coin into the till, looked at it with suspicion and then proceeded to test it she was off like a deer, and was out of sight round the next turning long before the man could get to the door. The fact that she was evidently considered sharp enough to take part in frauds requiring cleverness and address gratified rather than inclined her to reject the proposition.

'It ain't very grateful of you, Sally, to be so willing to leave me after all I have done for you,' Mrs. Phillips said, rather hurt at her ready acceptance of the offer.

'Grateful for what?' the girl said scornfully, turning fiercely upon her; 'you have been paid for feeding me and what have you done more? Haven't I prigged for you, and run the risk of being sent to quod for getting rid of your dumps? Haven't you thrashed me pretty nigh every time you was drunk, till I got so big you daren't do it? I don't say as sometimes you haven't been kind, just in a way, but you have been a sight oftener unkind. I don't want to part bad friends. If you ain't showed me much kindness, you have shown me all as ever I have known, and yer might have been worse than you have. I suppose yer knows this man, and know that he is going to do as he says, and means to treat me fair, for mind you,' and here she turned darkly to Warbles, 'if you tries to do anything as is wrong with me I will stick a knife into you.'

'I am going to do you no harm, Sally,' he said hastily.

'Yer had better not,' she muttered.

'I mean exactly what I say, and nothing more. Mrs. Phillips may not have been quite as kind to you as she might, but she would not let you go with me if she did not know that no harm will be done with you.'

'Very well, then, I am ready,' the girl said, preparing to put on the tattered bonnet she had taken off when she came in, and had held swinging by its strings.

'No, no,' Mr. Warbles said, in dismay at the thought of walking out with this ragged figure by his side, 'we can't manage it as quickly as all that. In the first place, there are decent clothes to be bought for you. You cannot go anywhere as you are now. I will give Mrs. Phillips money for that.'

'Give it me,' the girl said, holding out her hand; 'she can't be trusted with it; she would be drunk in half an hour after you had gone, and would not get sober till it was all spent. You give it me, and let me buy the things; I will hand it over to her to pay for them.'

'That would be best,' Mrs. Phillips said, with a hard laugh; 'she is right, Warbles. I ain't to be trusted with money, and it is no use pretending I am. Sally knows what she is about. When she has got money she always hides it, and just brings it out as it is wanted; we have had many a fight about it, but she is just as obstinate as a mule, and next morning I am always ready to allow as she was right.'

'How much will you want, Kitty?'

'Well, I should say that to get three decent frocks and a fair stock of underclothes and boots would run nigh up to ten pounds. If it ain't so much she can give you back what there is of it. When will you come and fetch her?'

'We had better say three days. You can get all the things in a day, no doubt; but I shall have to make arrangements. I think I know just the woman that would do. She was a governess once in good families, I am told; but she went wrong, somehow, and went down pretty near to the bottom of the hill; she lives a few doors from me, and gets a few children to teach when she can. I expect I can arrange with her to take Sally, and teach her. If she won't do it, someone else will; but being close it would be handy to me. I could drop in sometimes of an evening and see how she was getting on.'

'Are you my father?' the girl asked suddenly.

'No, I am not,' he answered readily.

The girl was looking at him keenly, and was satisfied that he spoke the truth.

'I am glad of that,' she said. 'I always thought that if I had a father I should like to love him. If you had been my father I expect as you would have wanted me to love you, and I am sure I should never be able to do it.'

'You are an outspoken girl, Sally,' Mr. Warbles said, with an unpleasant attempt at a laugh. 'Why shouldn't you be able to love me?'

'Because I should never be able to trust you,' the girl said. 'I am ready to work for you and to be honest with you as long as you are honest with me. I s'pose you wouldn't be paying all this money and be going to take such pains with me if you didn't think as you would get it back again. I don't know much, but I know as much as that; so mind, I don't promise to love you, that ain't in the agreement.'

'Perhaps you will think differently some day, Sally; and, after all, two people can get on well enough together without much love. Well, have her ready in three days, Kitty; but there is no use in my coming here for her. Of course, the girl must have a box, and you will want a cab. Drive across Westminster Bridge and stop just across it on the right-hand side. Be there as near as you can at eight o'clock in the evening; that will suit me, and it ought to suit you. It is just as well you should get her out of the court after dark, so that she won't be recognised in her new things, and you will get off without being questioned. I shall be there waiting for you, but if anything should detain me, which is not likely, wait till I come.'

When he had gone the girl flung her bonnet into a corner, then knelt down and made up the fire; then she produced two mutton chops from her pocket and placed them in the frying-pan over it.

'Good ones,' she said. 'I got them at a swell shop near Buckingham Palace; they were outside, just handy. Well, I s'pose them's the last I shall nick; that is a good job.' She then took a jug out of the cupboard. 'I have got sixpence left out of that half-crown I changed yesterday. We have got bread enough, so I will bring in a quart.'

The woman nodded. She had of late, as she had told Warbles, quite determined she would not keep the girl much longer with her, but the suddenness with which the change had come about had been so unexpected that as yet she hardly realised it. Sally was a limb, no doubt. She had got quite beyond her control, and although the petty thievings had been at first encouraged by her, the aptness of her pupil, the coolness and audacity with which she carried them out, and the perfect unconcern with which she started on the dangerous operation of changing the counterfeit money, had troubled and almost frightened her. As the girl had said, she had never been kind to her, had often brutally beaten her, and usually spoke of her as if she were the plague of her life, but the thought that she would now be without her altogether touched her keenly, and when the girl returned she found her in tears.

'Hello! what's up?' she asked in surprise. 'You ain't been a drinking as early as this, have you?' for tears were to Sally's mind associated with a particular phase of drunkenness.

The woman shook her head.

'Yer don't mean to say as you are crying because I am going?' Sally went on in a changed voice. 'I should have thought there was nothing in the world you would be so pleased at as getting rid of me.'

'I have said so in a passion, may be, Sally. You are a limb, there ain't no doubt of that; but it ain't your fault, and I might have done for you more than I have, if it had not been for drink. I don't know what I shall do without you.'

'It will make a difference in the way of food, though,' the girl said; 'I am a onener to eat: still I don't think you can get rid of the dumps as well as I can. You got two months last time you tried it.'

'It ain't that, Sally, though I dare say you think it is, but I shall feel lonesome, awful lonesome, without you to sit of an evening to talk to. You have been like a child to me, though I ain't been much of a mother to you, and you mayn't believe it, Sally, but it is gospel truth, as I have been fond of you.'

'Have you now?' the girl said, leaning forward eagerly in her chair. 'I allus thought you hated me. Why didn't you say so? I wouldn't have 'greed to go with that man if I had thought as you wanted me. I don't care for the dresses and that sort of thing, though I should like to get taught something, but I would give that up, and if you like I will go by myself and meet him where he said, and give him back that ten pound, and say I have changed my mind and I am going to stop with you.'

'No, it is better that you should go, Sally; this ain't no place for a girl, and I ain't no woman to look after one. I have been a-thinking some months it was time you went; it didn't matter so much as long as you was a kid, but you are growing up now, and it ain't to be expected as you would keep straight in such a place as this; besides, any day you might get nabbed, and three months in quod would finish you altogether. So you see, Sally, I am glad and I am sorry. Warbles ain't the man I would put you in charge of if I had my way. He has told you hisself what he means to do with you, and I would a lot rather you had been going out into service; only of course no one would take you as you are, it ain't likely. Still if you keep your eyes open, and you are a sharp girl, you may make money by it; but mind me, Sally, money is no good by itself, nor fine clothes, nor nothing.

'It was fine clothes and drink as brought me to what I am. I was a nice tidy-looking girl when Warbles first knew me, and if it hadn't been for clothes and drink I might have been a respectable woman, and perhaps missus of a snug public now. Well, perhaps your chances will be as good as mine was. I have two bits of advice to give yer. When you have finished that pint of beer you make up your mind never to touch another drop of it. The second is, don't you listen to what young swells say to yer. You look out for an honest man who wants to make you his wife, and you marry him and make him a good wife, Sally.'

The girl nodded. 'That is what I mean to do, and when I get a comfortable home you shall come and live with us.'

'It wouldn't do, Sally; by that time I reckon I shall be lying in a graveyard, but if I wasn't it would not do nohow. No man will put up with a drunken woman in his house, and a drunken woman I shall be to the end of my life – but there, them chops are ready, Sally, and it would be a sin to let them spoil now you have got them.'

When the meal was over, and Sally had finished her glass of beer, she turned it over.

'That is the last of them,' she said; 'I don't care for it one way or the other. Now tell me about that cove, who is he?'

'He is what he says – a betting man, and was when I first knew him; I don't know what his real name is, but I don't expect it's Warbles. He was a swell among them when I first knew him, and spent his money free, and used to look like a gentleman. I was in a house at Newmarket at the time, and whenever the races was on I often used to see him. Well, I left there, and did not come across him for two years; when I did, I had just come out of gaol; I had had two months for taking money from the till. I met him in the street, and he says to me, "Hello, Kitty! I was sorry to hear that you had been in trouble; what are you doing?"'

'What should I be doing?' says I; 'there ain't much chance of my getting another situation after what has happened. I ain't a-doing nothing yet, for I met a friend on the day I came out who gave me a couple of quid, but it is pretty nigh gone.' 'Well, look here,' says he, 'I have got a kid upon my hands: it don't matter whose kid it is, it ain't mine; but I have got to keep it. It has been with a woman for the last three years, and she has died. I don't care how it is brought up so as it is brought up; it is nothing to me how she turns out so that she lives. I tell you what I will do. I will give you ten pounds to furnish a room and get into it, and I will pay you five shillings a week as long as it lives; and if you ever get hard up and want a couple of pounds you can have 'em, so as you don't come too often.'

'Well, I jumped at the offer, and took you, and I will say Warbles has been as good as his word. It wasn't long before I was turned out of my lodging for being too drunk and noisy for the house, and it wasn't more than a couple of years before I got pretty nigh as low as this. I had got to know a good many queer ones when I was in the public line, and I chanced to drop across one of them, and when I met him one day he told me he could put me into an easy way of earning money if I liked, but it was risky. I said I did not care for that, and since then I have always been on that lay. For a bit I did very well; I used to dress up as a tidy servant, and go shopping, and many a week I would get rid of three or four pounds' worth of the stuff; but in course, as I grew older and lost my figure and the drink told on me, it got more difficult. People looked at the money more sharply, and I got three months for it twice. I was allus careful, and never took more than one piece out with me at a time, so that I got off several times till they began to know me. You remember the last time I was in – I told you about it, and since then you have been doing it.'

'But what will you do when I am gone?'

'Well, you know, Sally, I gets a bit from men who comes round of an evening and gives me things to hide away under that board. They knows as they can trust me, and I have had five thousand pounds worth of diamonds and things hidden away there for weeks. No one would ever think of searching there for it. I ain't known to be mixed up with thieves, and this court ain't the sort of place that coppers would ever dream of searching for jewels. Sometimes nothing comes for weeks, sometimes there is a big haul; but they pay me something a week regular, and I gets a present after a good thing has been brought off, so you needn't worrit about me. I shan't be as well off as I have been, but there will be plenty to keep me going, and if I have to drink a bit less it won't do me any harm.'

'I wonder you ain't afraid to drink,' Sally said, 'lest you should let out something.'

'I am lucky that way, Sally. Drink acts some ways with some people, and some ways with others. It makes some people blab out just the things they don't want known; it makes some people quarrelsome; it shuts up some people's mouths altogether. That is the way with me. I take what I take quiet, and though the coppers round here see me drunk pretty often they can't never say as I am drunk and disorderly, so they just lets me find my way home as I can.'

'And this man has never said no more about me than he did that first time?' Sally asked. 'Why should he go on paying for me all this time?'

'He ain't never said a word. I've wondered over it scores of times. These betting chaps are free with their money when they win, but that ain't like going on paying year after year. I thought sometimes you might be the daughter of some old pal of his, and that he had promised him to take care of you. I thought that afterwards he had been sorry he had done so, but would not go back from his word and so went on paying, though he did not care a morsel whether you turned out well or bad. Now I am going out, Sally.'

'You don't want to go out no more to-day,' Sally said decidedly. 'You just stop in quietly these last three days with me.'

'I would like to,' the woman said, 'but I don't think it is in me. You do not know what it is, Sally. When drink is once your master there ain't no shaking it off. There is something in you as says you must go, and you can't help it; nothing but tying you down would do it.'

'Well, look here, give me ninepence. I will go out and get you another quart of beer and a quartern of gin to finish up with. I have never been out for spirits for you before, though you have beat me many a time 'cause I wouldn't, but for these three days I will go. That won't be enough to make you bad, and we can sit here and talk together, and when we have finished it we can turn in comfortable.'

The woman took the money from a corner of a stocking, and gave it to Sally, and that night went to bed sober for the first time for months. The next morning shopping began, and Sally, although not easily moved, was awe-struck at the number and variety of the garments purchased for her. The dresses were to be made up by the next evening, when she was to fetch them from the shop herself, as Mrs. Phillips shrunk from giving her address at Piper Court.

During the interval Sally suffered much from a regular course of washing and combing her hair. When on the third morning she was arrayed in her new clothes, with hair neatly done up, she felt so utterly unlike herself that a sort of shyness seized her. She could only judge as to her general appearance, but not as to that of her face and head, for the lodging was unprovided with even a scrap of looking-glass. She had no doubt that the change was satisfactory, as Mrs. Phillips exclaimed, 'Fine feathers make fine birds, Sally, but I should not have believed that they could have made such a difference; you look quite a nice-looking gal, and I should not be surprised if you turn out downright pretty, though I have always thought you as plain a gal as ever I seed!'

CHAPTER II

Epsom racecourse on the Oaks Day. The great event of the day has not yet been run, but the course has been cleared and two or three of the fillies have just come out from the paddock and are making their way at a walk along the broad green track, while their jockeys are chatting together. Luncheons have been hastily finished, and the occupants of the carriages and drags are standing up and beginning for the first time to manifest an interest in the proceedings they have nominally come down to witness. The general mass of spectators cluster thickly by the ropes, while a few take advantage of the clearance of the ground beyond to stroll leisurely along the line of carriages. The shouts of the men with cocoanuts, pincushions, and dolls on sticks, and of those with Aunt Sallys, rifle galleries, and other attractions, are hushed now; their time will not come again until the race is over.

Two men, one perhaps thirty, the other some three or four years younger, are among those who pay more attention to the carriages and their occupants than to the approaching race. The younger has a face deeply bronzed by a sun far hotter than that of England.

'How fast they change, Danvers. Six years ago I knew almost every face in the carriages, now I scarcely know one. Who is that very pretty girl standing up on the seat of that barouche?'

'Don't you know? Look at the man she is talking to on the box. That is her father.'

'By Jove! it is Mr. Hawtrey. You don't mean to say that is little Dorothy?'

'Not particularly little, but it is certainly Dorothy Hawtrey.'

'I must go and speak to them, Danvers. You know them too, don't you?'

'Well, considering I meet them out pretty well every night somewhere I ought to do,' the other said, as with slower steps he followed his companion to the carriage.

'How are you, Mr. Hawtrey?' the latter exclaimed, looking up at the man on the box.

The gentleman looked down a little puzzled at the warmth with which the words were spoken by one whose face he did not recall.

'Don't you remember me, sir? I am Edward Hampton.'

'Why, Ned, is it you? You are changed out of all knowledge. You have come back almost as dark as a Malay. When did you arrive?'

'I only reached town yesterday evening; looked up Danvers, and was lucky enough to find him at home. He said he was coming down here to-day, and as it was of no use calling on people in town on the Oaks day I came with him.'

'Are you not going to speak to me, Captain Hampton?'

'I am, indeed, Miss Hawtrey, though I confess I did not know you until Danvers told me who you were; and I do not feel quite sure now, for the Miss Hawtrey I used to know never called me anything but Ned.'

'The Miss Hawtrey of those days was a little tomboy in short frocks,' the girl laughed, 'but I do not say that if I find that you are not so changed in reality as you are in appearance, I may not, perhaps, some day forget that you are Captain Hampton, V.C.' She had stepped down from her lofty seat, and was now shaking hands with him heartily. 'It does not seem six years since we said good-bye,' she went on. 'Of course you are all that older, but you don't seem so old to me. I used to think you so big and so tall when I was nine, and you were double that age, and during the next three years, when you had joined your regiment and only came down occasionally to us, you had become quite an imposing personage. That was my last impression of you. Now, you see, you don't look so old, or so big, or so imposing, as I have been picturing you to myself.'

'I dare say not,' he laughed. 'You see you have grown so much bigger and more imposing yourself.'

Suddenly Dorothy Hawtrey leapt to her seat again and touched her father on the arm.

'Father,' she said in a whisper, 'that man who has just turned from the crowd and is coming towards us is the one I was speaking to you about a few minutes ago, who had been staring at you with such an evil look.'

The man, who had the appearance of a shabby bookmaker, and who carried a satchel slung round his neck, and had the name of 'Marvel' on a broad ribbon round his hat, was now close to the carriage.

'Will you take the odds, Mr. Hawtrey,' he said in a loud voice, 'against any of the horses? I can give you six to one, bar one, against the field.'

'I do not bet,' Mr. Hawtrey said coldly, 'and by your looks it would have been better for you if you had never done so either.'

'I have had a bad run lately,' the man said, 'but I fancy it is going to turn. Will you lay a few pounds for the sake of old times?'

Mr. Hawtrey shook his head decidedly.

'I have come down rather in the world,' the man went on insolently, 'but I could pay the bet if I lost it as well as other debts. I have never forgotten how much I owe you.'

Hampton took a step forward towards the man, when a policeman stepped out from between their carriage and the next.

'Now, move on,' he said, 'or I will make you, sharp; you are not going to annoy people here, and if you don't go at once I will walk you off to the police tent.'

The man hesitated a moment, and then, muttering angrily, moved slowly away to the spot where he had left the dense line of spectators by the ropes.

'Who is he, father?' Dorothy Hawtrey asked; 'does he really know you?'

'Yes, my dear, he is the son of an old steward; he was a wild, reckless young scamp, and when his father died, shortly after I came into the property, I naturally refused to appoint him to the position. He used some very strong language at the time, and threatened me with all sorts of evils. I have met him once or twice since, and he never loses an opportunity of showing that he has not forgiven me; but never mind him now, here come the horses for their preliminary canter.'

Captain Hampton and his friend remained by the carriage until the race was over. The former had been introduced by Dorothy to the other three occupants of the carriage – Lady Linkstone, her daughter Mary, and Miss Nora Cranfield.

As soon as it was over the crowd broke up, the shouts of the men with the cocoanuts and Aunt Sallys rose loudly, and grooms began to lead up the horses to many of the carriages.

'We are going to make a start at once, Ned,' Mr. Hawtrey said; 'I cannot offer you a seat back to town, but if you have no engagement I hope that you will dine with us. Will you come too, Mr. Danvers?'

Danvers was disengaged, and he and Edward Hampton accepted the invitation at once. Ned's father had owned an estate adjoining that of the Hawtreys' in Lincolnshire, and the families had been neighbours for many years. Ned, who was the youngest of three sons had been almost as much at the Hawtreys' as at his own home, as Mr. Hawtrey had a nephew living with him who was just about the lad's age, and during the holidays the two boys were always together. They had entered the army just at the same time, but James Hawtrey had, a few months after he went out to India, died of fever.

'Who was the man who came up and spoke to them five minutes before the race started?' he asked Danvers as they strolled away together.

'There were two or three of them.'

'I mean the man who said it was too bad, Dorothy not coming down on his drag.'

'That is Lord Halliburn; he is very attentive there, and the general opinion is that it will be a match.'

'He didn't look as if he had much in him,' Hampton said, after a pause.

'He has a title and a very big rent roll, and has, therefore, no great occasion for brains; but in point of fact he is really clever. He is Under-Secretary for the Colonies, and is regarded as a rising young peer. He is not a bad fellow at all, I believe; keeps a few racers but does not bet, and has no vices as far as I have ever heard. That is his drag; he drives a first-rate team.'

'Well, I hope he is a good fellow,' Captain Hampton said shortly. 'You see I never had a sister of my own. That little one and I were quite chums, and I used to look upon her almost in the light of a small sister, and I should not like to think of her marrying anyone who would not make her happy.'

'I should think she has as fair a chance with Halliburn as with most men,' Danvers said. 'I know a man who was at Christ Church with him. He said that he was rather a prig – but that a fellow could hardly help being, brought up as he had been – but that, as a whole, he was one of the most popular men of his set. Now we may as well be walking for the station – that is, if you have had enough of it.'

'I am quite ready to go. After all, an English racecourse makes but a dull show by the side of an Indian one. The horses are better, and, of course, there is no comparison between the turnouts and the dresses of the women, though they manage to make a brave show at the principal stations; but as far as the general appearance of the crowd goes, you are not in it here. The natives in their gay dresses and turbans give a wonderfully light and gay appearance to the course, and though, possibly, among quite the lower class they may not all be estimable characters, at least they do not look such a pack of unmitigated ruffians as the hangers-on of an English racecourse. That was a nice specimen who attacked Hawtrey.'

'Yes, the fellow had a thoroughly bad face, and would be capable, I should say, of any roguery. It is not the sort of face I should expect to see in the dock on a charge of murder or robbery with violence, but I should put him down as an astute rogue, a crafty scoundrel, who would swindle an old woman out of her savings, rob servant girls or lads from the country by means of specious advertisements, or who in his own line would nobble a horse or act as the agent for wealthier rogues in getting at jockeys and concocting any villainous plan to prevent a favourite from winning. Of course, I know nothing of the circumstances under which he lost his place with Hawtrey, but there is no doubt that he has cherished a bitter hatred against him, and would spare no pains to take his revenge. If Hawtrey owned racehorses I should be very shy of laying a penny upon them after seeing that fellow's face.'

'Well, as he does not own racehorses the fellow has no chance of doing him a bad turn; he might forge a cheque and put Hawtrey's name to it, but I should say he would have some difficulty in getting any one to cash it.'

There were at dinner that evening only the party who had been in the barouche, Danvers, Hampton, and Sir Edward Linkstone.

'I wish there had been no one else here this evening,' Dorothy Hawtrey said to Captain Hampton before dinner, 'there is so much to talk about. First, I want to hear all you have been doing in India, and next, we must have a long chat over old times; in fact, we want a cozy talk together. Of course you will be tremendously engaged just at present, but you must spare me a long morning as soon as you possibly can.'

'I suppose I am not going to take you into dinner?'

'No, Sir Edward Linkstone does that. We cannot ask him to take in his daughter or Nora Cranfield, who is staying at his house, and besides, it would not be nice. I should not like to be sitting by you, talking the usual dinner talk, when I am so wanting to have a real chat with you. You will take in Mary Linkstone, she is a very nice girl.'

The dinner was a pleasant one, and the party being so small the conversation was general. It turned, however, a good deal on India, for Sir Edward Linkstone had been Judge of the Supreme Court at Calcutta, and had retired just about the time that Hampton had gone out there. After the ladies had left the room, Danvers remarked to their host:

'That was an unpleasant-looking character who accosted you just before the race started for the Oaks, Mr. Hawtrey.'

'Yes; I don't know that I have many enemies, beyond perhaps some fellows, poachers and others, whom I have had to commit for trial, but I do consider that fellow to be a man who would injure me if he could. His father, John Truscott was my father's steward, or agent as it is the fashion to call them now, on his estate in Lincolnshire. He had been there for over thirty years, and was a thoroughly trustworthy and honourable man, a good agent, and greatly liked by the tenants as well as by my father. As you may know, I came into the estates when I came of age. My father had died two years before. Well, I knew that Truscott had had a good deal of trouble with his son, who was three or four years older than myself.

'Truscott kept a small farm in his own hands, and he made a hobby of breeding blood stock. Not to any great extent; I think he had only some five or six brood mares, but they were all good ones. I think he did very well by them; certainly some of the foals turned out uncommonly well. Of course he did not race them himself, but sold them as yearlings. As it turned out it was unfortunate, for it gave his son a fancy for the turf. I suppose it began by his laying bets on the horses they had bred, then it went on and he used to attend racecourses and get into bad company, and I know that his father had more than once to pay what were to him heavy sums to enable him to clear up on settlement day. I don't know, though, that it would have made much difference, the fellow might have gone to the bad anyhow. He had always a shifty, sly sort of look. About four years after I came into the estates I was down in Lincolnshire at our place, when Truscott was taken ill, and I naturally went to see him.

"I don't think I shall be long here, Mr. Hawtrey," he said, "and you will have to look out for another steward. I used to hope that when my time came for giving up work my son would step into my shoes. He has plenty of brains, and as far as shrewdness goes he would make a better steward than I have ever done. For the last year, since I began to fail, he has been more at home and has done a good deal of my work, and I expect he reckons on getting my place, but, Mr. Hawtrey, you must not give it to him. It is a hard thing for a father to say, but you could not trust him."

'I felt that myself, but I did not like to admit it to the old man, and I said:

"I know he has been a bit wild, Truscott, but he may have seen that he was behaving like a fool, and as you say he has been helping you more for the last year, he may have made up his mind to break altogether from the life he has been leading."

"It is not in him, sir," he said. "I could forgive his being a bit wild, but he is not honest. Don't ask me what he has done, but take my word for it. A man who will rob his own father will rob his employer. I have done my best for your father and you; no man can say that John Truscott has robbed him, and I should turn in my grave if our name were dishonoured down here. You must not think of it, sir; you would never keep him if you tried him; it would be a pain to me to think that one of my blood should wrong you, as I know, surely, Robert would do, and I implore you to make a complete change, and get some man who will do the estate justice."

'Of course I assented; indeed, I had heard so much of the fellow's doings that I had quite made up my mind that when his father retired I would look for a steward elsewhere. At the same time I know that if the old man had asked me to try him for a time, I should have done so. A week later John Truscott died, and the day after his funeral, which I, of course, attended, his son came up to the house. Well, it was a very unpleasant business; he seemed to assume that, as a matter of course, he would succeed his father, and pointed out that for the last year he had, in fact, carried on the estate for him. I said that I did not doubt his ability, but that I had no idea of making a man who was a frequenter of racecourses, and who, I knew, bet so heavily that his father had had to aid him several times, manager of the estate.

'He answered that he had had his fling, and would now settle down steadily. Of course, after what his father had said I was obliged to be firm. When he saw that there was no chance of altering

my decision he came out in his true colours; broke out in the most violent language, and had I not been a good deal more powerful man than he was I believe he would have struck me. At last I had to ring the bell and order the footman to turn him out. He cooled down suddenly, and deliberately cursed me, swearing that he would some day be revenged upon me for my ingratitude to his father, and the insult I had passed upon him in thus refusing to appoint him after the thirty years' services the old man had rendered me. I have no doubt he thoroughly meant what he said, but naturally, I never troubled myself about the matter.

'The threats of a disappointed man seldom come to anything, and as there was no conceivable way in which he could injure me his menaces really meant nothing. I have come across him four or five times since. I dare say that I should have met him oftener were I a regular attendant on racecourses, but it is years since I have been to one, and only did it to-day because Dorothy had set her heart on seeing the Oaks for the first time. However, whenever I have met him he has never failed to thrust himself upon me, and to show that his animosity is as bitter as it was on the day that I refused to appoint him steward. He left my neighbourhood at once, turned the stock into money, and as I know that he came into three or four thousand pounds at his father's death he had every chance of doing well. I believe that he did do well on the turf for a time, but the usual end came to that. When I met him last, some seven or eight years ago, I happened to be with a member of the Jockey Club who knew something of the fellow. He told me that he had been for a time a professional betting man, but had become involved in some extremely shady transactions, and had been warned off the turf, and was now only to be seen at open meetings, and had more than once had a narrow escape of being lynched by the crowd for welshing. From his appearance to-day it is evident that he is still a hanger-on of racecourses. I saw he had the name of Marvel on his hat. I should say that probably he appears with a fresh name each time. I think the chance of meeting him has had something to do with my giving up going to races altogether. It is not pleasant being insulted by a disreputable-looking scoundrel, in the midst of a crowd of people.'

'He has never done you any harm, Mr. Hawtrey?' Captain Hamilton asked, 'because certainly it seemed to me there was a ring of triumphant malice in his voice.'

'Certainly not, to my knowledge,' Mr. Hawtrey replied. 'Once or twice there have been stacks burnt down on the estate, probably the work of some malicious fellow, but I have had no reason for suspecting Truscott, and indeed, as the damage fell on the tenant and not on me, it would have been at best a very small gratification of spite, and I can hardly fancy he would have gone to the trouble and expense of travelling down to Lincolnshire for so small a gratification of his ill-will to me. Besides, had he had a hand in it, it would have been the stables and the house itself that would have been endangered.'

'The same idea struck me that occurred to Hampton,' Danvers said, 'but I suppose it was fancy. It sounded to me as if he had already paid, to some extent, the debt he spoke of, or as if he had no doubt whatever that he should do so in the future.'

The subject dropped, but when, after leaving, Hampton went into the Club to which Danvers belonged, to smoke a cigar, he returned to it.

'I can't help thinking about that fellow Truscott. It is evident, from what Hawtrey says, that he has never done him any serious harm, and I don't see how the rascal can possibly do so; but I am positive that the man himself believes that he either has done or shall be able to do so.'

'That was the impression I had too, but there is never any telling with fellows of that class. The rogue, when he is found out, either cringes or threatens. He generally cringes so long as there is a chance of its doing him any good, then, when he sees that the game is altogether up, he threatens; it is only in one case in ten thousand that the threats ever come to anything, and as twenty years have gone by without any result in this case we may safely assume that it is not one of the exceptions.'

'Do you remember Mrs. Hawtrey?'

'Yes, I remember her well. The first year or two after their marriage, Hawtrey had a place near town. I think she had a fancy that Lincolnshire was too cold for her. They came down when I was about eight years old. Dorothy was about a year old, I fancy. Mrs. Hawtrey and my mother became great friends. We could go from one house to the other without going outside the grounds, and as I was the youngest of a large family I used to walk across with her, and if Dorothy was in the garden she would come toddling to me and insist upon my carrying her upon my shoulder, or digging in her garden, or playing with her in some way or other. I don't know that I was fonder of children in general than most boys were, but I certainly took to her, and, as I said, we became great chums. She came to us two or three months after her mother died; her father went away on the Continent, and the poor little girl was heart-broken, as well she might be, having no brothers or sisters. She was a very desolate little maiden, so of course I did what I could to comfort her, and when my father and mother died, within three days of each other, three years later, I think that child's sympathy did me more good than anything. That is the only time I have seen her since I entered the army, and then I was only at home a few days, for the regiment was at Edinburgh, and it was a busy season. I suppose I could have got longer leave had I tried, but there was no object in staying at home. I had never got on particularly well with John, who was now master of the house; he was married, and had children, and after they arrived I thought the sooner I was off the better.'

'What became of Tom? We were in the sixth together, you know; when you were my fag. You told me, didn't you, that he had gone out to China or something of that sort?'

'Yes; there had been an idea that he would go into the Church, but he did not take to it; he tried one or two things here and would not stick to them, and my father got him into a tea firm, and he went out for them two years afterwards to Hong Kong; but that did not suit him either, so he threw it up and went to Australia, and knocked about there until he came into ten thousand at my father's death. He went in for sheep-farming then, and I have only heard once of him since, but he said that he was doing very well. I shall perhaps hear more about him when I see John. I must go down to Lincolnshire to-morrow, and I suppose I shall have to stay a week or so there; it is the proper thing to do, of course, but I wish that it was over. I have never been in the old place since that bad time. I don't at all care for my brother's wife. I have no doubt that she is a very good woman, but there is nothing sympathetic about her; she is one of those women with a metallic sort of voice that seems to jar upon one as if she were out of tune.'

'And afterwards – have you any plans?'

'None at all. I shall look out for a couple of rooms, somewhere about Jermyn Street, and stay in town to the end of the season. Then I shall hire a yacht for a couple of months, and knock about the coast or go across to Norway. I wish you would go with me; I did Switzerland and Italy the last year before I went away, and I don't care about going there when every place is filled with a crowd. I have only got a year, and I should like to have as pleasant remembrances to take back with me as possible. Do you think you will be able to come with me? Of course I shall not be able to afford a floating palace. I should say about a thirty-tonner that would carry four comfortably would be the sort of thing. I will try to get two fellows to go to make up the party; some of my old chums if I can come across them. Of course I can get any number of men home on leave like myself, but I don't want anyone from India, for in that case we should talk nothing but shop. You saw how we drifted into it at dinner. I should like not to hear India mentioned until I am on board a ship on my way out again.'

'When would you think of going?'

'Oh, I should say after Ascot – say the second week in July.'

'I can hardly go with you as soon as that; I cannot get away as long as the courts are sitting, or until they have, at any rate, nearly finished work; but I might join you by the end of the month, unless I have the luck to get retained in some important case that would make my fortune, and I need scarcely say that is not likely.'

'But you are doing well, ain't you, Danvers? I see your name in the papers occasionally.'

'I am doing quite as well as I have any right to expect; better, a good deal, than many men of my own standing, for I have only been called seven years, and ten is about the minimum most solicitors consider necessary before they can feel the slightest confidence in a man. Still, it does not do very much more than pay for one's chambers and clerk.'

A week later Ned Hampton was established in lodgings in Jermyn Street. He had been down for three days into Lincolnshire, but had not cared much for the visit. He had never got on very well with his elder brother, and they had no tastes or opinions in common. Mrs. Hampton was a woman with but little to say on any subject, while her husband was at this time of year absorbed in his duties as a magistrate and landlord, although in the winter these occupied a secondary position to hunting and shooting. The only son was away at school, the two girls were all day with their governess; and, after three as dull days as he had ever spent in his life, Ned pleaded business that required his presence in London, and came back suddenly. He had been a good deal in society during his visits to London in the three years that intervened between his obtaining his commission and sailing for India. He had, therefore, many calls to make upon old acquaintances, and as at his military club he met numbers of men he knew, he soon had his hands full of engagements. He still managed, however, to spend a good deal of time at the Hawtreys', where he was always welcome. One morning, when he dropped in, Dorothy, after the first greeting, said, 'I have a piece of news to tell you. I should not like you to hear it from anyone else but me.' There was a heightened colour in her cheek, and he at once guessed the truth.

'You have accepted Lord Halliburn? I guessed it would be so. I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Dorothy. At any rate, I hope you will be very happy with him.'

'Why should you not congratulate me?'

'Only because I do not know Lord Halliburn sufficiently well to be able to do so. Of course, I understand that he is a good match; but that, in my mind, is quite a secondary consideration. The real question is, is he the sort of man who will make you happy?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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