

SIR TOM

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CHAPTER I.

HOW SIR TOM BECAME A GREAT PERSONAGE.

Sir Thomas Randolph had lived a somewhat stormy life during the earliest half of his career. He had gone through what the French called a *jeunesse orageuse*; nothing very bad had ever been laid to his charge; but he had been adventurous, unsettled, a roamer about the world even after the period at which youthful extravagances cease. Nobody ever knew when or where he might appear. He set off to the farthest parts of the earth at a day's notice, sometimes on pretext of sport, sometimes on no pretext at all, and re-appeared again as unexpectedly as he had gone away. He had run out his fortune by these and other extravagances, and was at forty in one of the most uncomfortable positions in which a man can find himself, with the external appearance of large estates and an established and important position, but in reality with scarcely any income at all, just enough to satisfy the mortgagees, and leave himself a pittance not much more than the wages of a gamekeeper. If his aunt, Lady Randolph, had not been so good to him it was uncertain whether he could have existed at all, and when the heiress, whom an eccentric will had consigned to her charge, fell in his way, all her friends concluded as a matter of certainty that Sir Tom would jump at this extraordinary windfall, this gift of a too kind Providence, which sometimes will care for a prodigal in a way which he is quite unworthy of, while leaving the righteous man to struggle on unaided. But for some time it appeared as if society for once was out in its

reckoning. Sir Tom did not pounce upon the heiress. He was a person of very independent mind, and there were some who thought he was happier in his untrammelled poverty, doing what he pleased, than he ever had been as a great proprietor. Even when it became apparent to the wise and far-seeing that little Miss Trevor was only waiting till his handkerchief was thrown at her to become the happiest of women, still he did nothing. He exasperated his kind aunt, he made all his friends indignant, and what was more, he exposed the young heiress hourly to many attempts on the part of the inferior class, from which as a matter of fact she herself sprang; and it was not until she was driven nearly desperate by those attempts that Sir Tom suddenly appeared upon the scene, and moved, it was thought, more by a half-fatherly kindness and sympathy for her, than either by love or desire of wealth, took her to himself, and made her his wife, to the great and grateful satisfaction of the girl herself, whose strange upbringing and brief introduction into a higher sphere had spoiled her for that homely country-town existence in which every woman flattered and every man made love to her.

Whether Lucy Trevor was in love with him was as uncertain as whether he was in love with her. So far as any one knew neither one nor the other had asked themselves this question. She had, as it were, thrown herself into his arms in sudden delight and relief of mind when he appeared and saved her from her suitors; while he had received her tenderly when she did this, out of kindness and pleasure in her genuine, half-childish appreciation of him. There were, of course, people who said that Lucy had been violently in love with Sir Tom, and that he had made up his mind to marry her money from the first

moment he saw her; but neither of these things was true. They married with a great deal more pleasure and ease of mind than many people do who are very much in love, for they had mutual faith in each other, and felt a mutual repose and satisfaction in their union. Each supplied something the other wanted. Lucy obtained a secure and settled home, a protector and ever kind and genial guardian, while Sir Tom got not only a good and dutiful and pleasant companion, with a great deal of sense, and good-nature and good looks,—all of which gifts he prized highly,—but at the same time the control of a great fortune, and money enough at once to clear his estates and restore him to his position as a great landowner.

There were very peculiar conditions attached to the great fortune, but to these for the moment he paid very little heed, considering them as fantastic follies not worth thinking about, which were never likely to become difficulties in his way. The advantage he derived from the marriage was enormous. All at once, at a bound, it restored him to what he had lost, to the possession of his own property, which had been not more than nominally his for so many years, and to the position of a man of weight and importance, whose opinion told with all his neighbours and the county generally, as did those of few others in the district.

Sir Tom, the wanderer, had not been thought very highly of in his younger days. He had been called wild. He had been thought untrustworthy, a fellow here to-day and gone to-morrow, who had no solidity in him. But when the mortgages were all paid off, and the old hall restored, and Sir Thomas Randolph came to settle down at home, with his pretty little

wife, and an establishment quite worthy of his name, the county discovered in a day, almost in a moment, that he was very much improved. He had always been clever enough, they said, for anything, and now that he had sown his wild oats and learned how to conduct himself, and attained an age when follies are naturally over, there was no reason why he should not be received with open arms. Such a man had a great many more experiences, the county thought with a certain pride, than other men who had sown no wild oats, and had never gone farther afield than the recognised round of European cities. Sir Tom had been in all the four quarters of the globe; he had travelled in America long before it became fashionable to do so, and even had been in Africa while it was as yet untrod by any white foot but that of a missionary. And it was whispered that in the days when he was "wild" he had penetrated into regions nearer at hand, but more obscure and mysterious even than Africa. All this made the county think more of him now when he appeared staid yet genial, in the fulness of manhood, with a crisp brown beard and a few gray hairs about his temples mingled with his abundant locks, and that capability of paying his way which is dear to every well-regulated community. But for this last particular the county would not have been so tolerant, nay almost pleased, with the fact that he had been "wild." They saw all his qualities in the halo that surrounded the newly-decorated hall, the liberated farms, the lands upon which no creditor had now any claim. He was the most popular man in the district when Parliament was dissolved, and he was elected for the county almost without opposition, he, at whom all the sober people had shaken their heads only a few years before. The very name of "Sir Tom,"

which had been given rather contemptuously to denote a somewhat careless fellow, who minded nothing, became all at once the sign of popular amity and kindness. And if it had been necessary to gain votes for him by any canvassing tricks, this name of his would have carried away all objections. "Sir Tom!" it established a sort of affectionate relationship at once between him and his constituency. The people felt that they had known him all his life, and had always called him by his Christian name.

Lady Randolph was much excited and delighted with her husband's success. She canvassed for him in a modest way, making herself pleasant to the wives of his supporters in a unique manner of her own which was not perhaps quite dignified considering her position, but yet was found very captivating by those good women. She did not condescend to them as other titled ladies do, but she took their advice about her baby, and how he was to be managed, with a pretty humility which made her irresistible. They all felt an individual interest thenceforward in the heir of the Randolphs, as if they had some personal concern in him; and Lady Randolph's gentle accost, and the pretty blush upon her cheeks, and her way of speaking to them all, "as if they were just as good as she was," had a wonderful effect. When she received him in the hotel which was the headquarters of his party, as soon as the result of the election was known, Sir Tom, coming in flushed with applauses and victory, took his wife into his arms and kissed her. "I owe this to you, as well as so much else, Lucy," he said.

"Oh, don't say that! when you know I don't understand much, and never can do anything; but I am so glad, nobody could be

more glad," said Lucy. Little Tom had been brought in, too, in his nurse's arms, and crowed and clapped his fat little baby hands for his father; and when his mother took him and stepped out upon the balcony, from which her husband was speaking an impromptu address to his new constituents, with the child in her arms, not suspecting that she would be seen, the cheers and outcries ran into an uproar of applause. "Three cheers for my lady and the baby," the crowd shouted at the top of its many voices; and Lucy, blushing and smiling and crying with pleasure, instead of shrinking away as everybody feared she would do, stood up in her modest, pretty youthfulness, shy, but full of sense and courage, and held up the child, who stared at them all solemnly with big blue eyes, and, after a moment's consideration, again patted his fat little hands together, an action which put the multitude beside itself with delight. Sir Tom's speech did not make nearly so much impression as the baby's "patti-cake." Every man in the crowd, not to say every woman, and with still more reason every child, clapped his or her hands too, and shouted and laughed and hurrahed.

The incident of the baby's appearance before the public, and the early success he had gained—the earliest on record, the newspapers said—made quite a sensation throughout the county, and made Farafield famous for a week. It was mentioned in a leading article in the first newspaper in the world. It appeared in large headlines in the placards under such titles as "Baby in Politics," "The Nursery and the Hustings," and such like. As for the little hero of the moment, he was handed down to his anxious nurse just as symptoms of a whimper of fear at the alarming tumult outside began to appear about the corners of his mouth. "For heaven's sake take

him away; he mustn't cry, or he will spoil all," said the chairman of Sir Tom's committee. And the young mother, disappearing too into the room behind, sat down in a great chair behind their backs, and cried to relieve her feelings. Never had there been such a day. If Sir Tom had not been the thoroughly good-humoured man he was, it is possible that he might have objected to the interruption thus made in his speech, which was altogether lost in the tumult of delight which followed his son's appearance. But as a matter of fact he was as much delighted as any one, and proud as man could be of his pretty little wife and his splendid boy. He took "the little beggar," as he called him, in his arms, and kissed the mother again, soothing and laughing at her in the tender, kindly, fatherly way which had won Lucy.

"It is you who have got the seat," he said; "I vote that you go and sit in it, Lady Randolph. You are a born legislator, and your son is a favourite of the public, whereas I am only an old fogey."

"Oh, Tom!" Lucy said, lifting her simple eyes to his with a mist of happiness in them. She was accustomed to his nonsense. She never said anything more than "Oh, Tom!" and indeed it was not very long since she had given up the title and ceased to say "Oh, Sir Tom!" which seemed somehow to come more natural. It was what she had said when he came suddenly to see her in the midst of her early embarrassments and troubles; when the cry of relief and delight with which she turned to him, uttering in her surprise that title of familiarity, "Oh, Sir Tom!" had signified first to her middle-aged hero, with the most flattering simplicity and completeness, that he had won the girl's pure and inexperienced heart.

There was no happier evening in their lives than this, when, after all the commotion, threatenings of the ecstatic crowd to take the horses from their carriage, and other follies, they got off at last together and drove home through roads that wound among the autumn fields, on some of which the golden sheaves were still standing in the sunshine. Sir Tom held Lucy's hand in his own. He had told her a dozen times over that he owed it all to her.

"You have made me rich, and you have made me happy," he said, "though I am old enough to be your father, and you are only a little girl. If there is any good to come out of me, it will all be to your credit, Lucy. They say in story books that a man should be ashamed to own so much to his wife, but I am not the least ashamed."

"Oh, Tom!" she said, "how can you talk so much nonsense," with a laugh, and the tears in her eyes.

"I always did talk nonsense," he said; "that was why you got to like me. But this is excellent sense and quite true. And that little beggar; I am owing you for him, too. There is no end to my indebtedness. When they put the return in the papers it should be Sir Thomas Randolph, etc., returned as representative of his wife, Lucy, a little woman worth as much as any county in England."

"O, Sir Tom," Lucy cried.

"Well, so you are, my dear," he said, composedly. "That is a mere matter of fact, you know, and there can be no question about it at all."

For the truth was that she was so rich as to have been called the greatest heiress in England in her day.

CHAPTER II.

HIS WIFE.

Young Lady Randolph had herself been much changed by the progress of these years. Marriage is always the great touchstone of character at least with women; but in her case the change from a troubled and premature independence, full of responsibilities and an extremely difficult and arduous duty, to the protection and calm of early married life, in which everything was done for her, and all her burdens taken from her shoulders, rather arrested than aided in the development of her character. She had lived six months with the Dowager Lady Randolph after her father's death; but those six months had been all she knew of the larger existence of the wealthy and great. All she knew—and even in that short period she had learned less than she might have been expected to learn; for Lucy had not been introduced into society, partly on account of her very youthful age, and partly because she was still in mourning, so that her acquaintance with life on the higher line consisted merely in a knowledge of certain simple luxuries, of larger rooms and prettier furniture, and more careful service than in her natural condition. And by birth she belonged to the class of small townfolk who are nobody, and whose gentility is more appalling than their homeliness. So that when she came to be Sir Thomas Randolph's wife and a great lady, not merely the ward of an important personage, but herself occupying that position, the change was so wonderful that it required all

Lucy's mental resources to encounter and accustom herself to it.

Sir Tom was the kindest of middle-aged husbands. If he did not adore his young wife with the fervour of passion, he had a sincere affection for her, and the warmest desire to make her happy. She had done a great deal for him, she had changed his position unspeakably, and he was fully determined that no lady in England should have more observance, more honour and luxury, and what was better, more happiness, than the little girl who had made a man of him. There had always been a sweet and serious simplicity about her, an air of good sense and reasonableness, which had attracted everybody whose opinion was worth having to Lucy; but she was neither beautiful nor clever. She had been so brought up that, though she was not badly educated, she had no accomplishments, and not more knowledge than falls to the lot of an ordinary schoolgirl. The farthest extent of her mild experiences was Sloane Street and Cadogan Place: and there were people who thought it impossible that Sir Tom, who had been everywhere, and run through the entire gamut of pleasures and adventures, should find anything interesting in this bread-and-butter girl, whom, of course, it was his duty to marry, and having married to be kind to. But when he found himself set down in an English country house with this little piece of simplicity opposite to him, what would he do, the sympathising spectators said? Even his kind aunt, who felt that she had brought about the marriage, and who, as a matter of fact, had fully intended it from the first, though she herself liked Lucy, had a little terror in her soul as she asked herself the same question. He would fill the house with company and get over it

in that way, was what the most kind and moderate people thought. But Sir Tom laughed at all their prognostications. He said afterwards that he had never known before how pretty it was to know nothing, and to have seen nothing, when these defects were conjoined with intelligence and delightful curiosity and never-failing interest. He declared that he had never truly enjoyed his own adventures and experiences as he did when he told them over to his young wife. You may be sure there were some of them which were not adapted for Lucy's ears: but these Sir Tom left religiously away in the background. He had been a careless liver no doubt, like so many men, but he would rather have cut off his right hand, as the Scripture bids, than have soiled Lucy's white soul with an idea, or an image, that was unworthy of her. She knew him under all sorts of aspects, but not one that was evil. Their solitary evenings together were to her more delightful than any play, and to him nearly as delightful. When the dinner was over and the cold shut out, she would wait his appearance in the inner drawing-room, which she had chosen for her special abode, with some of the homely cares that had been natural to her former condition, drawing his chair to the fire, taking pride in making his coffee for him, and a hundred little attentions. "Now begin," she would say, recalling with a child's eager interest and earnest recollection the point at which he had left off. This was the greater part of Lucy's education. She travelled with him through very distant regions, and went through all kinds of adventure.

And in the season they went to London, where she made her appearance in society, not perhaps with *éclat*, but with a modest composure which delighted him. She understood then,

for the first time, what it was to be rich, and was amused and pleased—amused above all by the position which she occupied with the utmost simplicity. People said it would turn the little creature's head, but it never even disturbed her imagination. She took it with a calm that was extraordinary. Thus her education progressed, and Lucy was so fully occupied with it, with learning her husband and her life and the world, that she had no time to think of the responsibilities which once had weighed so heavily upon her. When now and then they occurred to her and she made some passing reference to them, there were so many other things to do that she forgot again—forgot everything except to be happy and learn and see, as she had now so many ways of doing. She forgot herself altogether, and everything that had been hers, not in excitement, but in the soft absorbing influence of her new life, which drew her away into endless novelties and occupations, such as were, indeed, duties and necessities of her altered sphere.

If this was the case in the first three or four years of her marriage, when she had only Sir Tom to think of, you may suppose what it was when the baby came, to add a hundredfold to the interests of her existence. Everything else in life, it may be believed, dwindled into nothing in comparison with this boy of boys—this wonderful infant. There had never been one in the world like him it is unnecessary to say: and everything was so novel to her, and she felt the importance of being little Tom's mother so deeply, that her mind was quite carried away from all other thoughts. She grew almost beautiful in the light of this new addition to her happiness. And how happy she was! The child grew and thrived. He was a splendid boy. His mother did not sing litanies in his praise in

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