

The Blotting Book

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CHAPTER I

Mrs. Assheton's house in Sussex Square, Brighton, was appointed with that finish of smooth stateliness which robs stateliness of its formality, and conceals the amount of trouble and personal attention which has, originally in any case, been spent on the production of the smoothness. Everything moved with the regularity of the solar system, and, superior to that wild rush of heavy bodies through infinite ether, there was never the slightest fear of comets streaking their un conjectured way across the sky, or meteorites falling on unsuspecting picnickers. In Mrs. Assheton's house, supreme over climatic conditions, nobody ever felt that rooms were either too hot or too cold, a pleasantly fresh yet comfortably warm atmosphere pervaded the place, meals were always punctual and her admirable Scotch cook never served up a dish which, whether plain or ornate, was not, in its way, perfectly prepared. A couple of deft and noiseless parlour-maids attended to and anticipated the wants of her guests, from the moment they entered her hospitable doors till when, on their leaving them, their coats were held for them in the most convenient possible manner for the easy insertion of the human arm, and the tails of their dinner-coats cunningly and unerringly tweaked from behind. In every way in fact the house was an example of perfect comfort; the softest carpets overlaid the floors, or, where the polished wood was left bare, the parquetry shone with a moonlike radiance; the newest and most entertaining books (ready cut) stood on the well-ordered shelves in the sitting-room to beguile the leisure of the studiously minded; the billiard table was always speckless of dust, no tip was ever missing from any cue, and the cigarette boxes and match-stands were always kept replenished. In the dining-room the silver was resplendent, until the moment when before dessert the cloth was withdrawn, and showed a rosewood table that might have served for a mirror to Narcissus.

Mrs. Assheton, until her only surviving son Morris had come to live with her some three months ago on the completion of his four years at Cambridge, had been alone, but even when she was alone this ceremony of drawing the cloth and putting on the dessert and wine had never been omitted, though since she never took either, it might seem to be a wasted piece of routine on the part of the two noiseless parlourmaids. But she did not in the least consider it so, for just as she always dressed for dinner herself with the same care and finish, whether she was going to dine alone or whether, as tonight, a guest or two was dining with her, as an

offering, so to speak, on the altar of her own self-respect, so also she required self-respect and the formality that indicated it on the part of those who ministered at her table, and enjoyed such excellent wages. This pretty old-fashioned custom had always been the rule in her own home, and her husband had always had it practised during his life. And since then—his death had occurred some twenty years ago—nothing that she knew of had happened to make it less proper or desirable. Kind of heart and warm of soul though she was, she saw no reason for letting these excellent qualities cover any slackness or breach of observance in the social form of life to which she had been accustomed. There was no cause, because one was kind and wise, to eat with badly cleaned silver, unless the parlour-maid whose office it was to clean it was unwell. In such a case, if the extra work entailed by her illness would throw too much on the shoulders of the other servants, Mrs. Assheton would willingly clean the silver herself, rather than that it should appear dull and tarnished. Her formalism, such as it was, was perfectly simple and sincere. She would, without any very poignant regret or sense of martyrdom, had her very comfortable income been cut down to a tenth of what it was, have gone to live in a four-roomed cottage with one servant. But she would have left that four-roomed cottage at once for even humbler surroundings had she found that her straitened circumstances did not permit her to keep it as speckless and *soignée* as was her present house in Sussex Square.

This achievement of having lived for nearly sixty years so decorously may perhaps be a somewhat finer performance than it sounds, but Mrs. Assheton brought as her contribution to life in general a far finer offering than that, for though she did not propose to change her ways and manner of life herself, she was notoriously sympathetic with the changed life of the younger generation, and in consequence had the confidence of young folk generally. At this moment she was enjoying the fruits of her liberal attitude in the volubility of her son Morris, who sat at the end of the table opposite to her. His volubility was at present concerned with his motor-car, in which he had arrived that afternoon.

"Darling mother," he was saying, "I really was frightened as to whether you would mind. I couldn't help remembering how you received Mr. Taynton's proposal that you should go for a drive in his car. Don't you remember, Mr. Taynton? Mother's nose *did* go in the air. It's no use denying it. So I thought, perhaps, that she wouldn't like my having one. But I wanted it so dreadfully, and so I bought it without telling her, and drove down in it to-day, which is my birthday, so that she couldn't be too severe."

Mr. Taynton, while Morris was speaking, had picked up the nutcrackers the boy had been using, and was gravely exploding the shells of the nuts he had helped himself to. So Morris cracked the next one with a loud bang between his white even teeth.

"Dear Morris," said his mother, "how foolish of you. Give Mr. Morris another nutcracker," she added to the parlour-maid.

"What's foolish?" asked he, cracking another.

"Oh Morris, your teeth," she said. "Do wait a moment. Yes, that's right. And how can you say that my nose went in the air? I'm sure Mr. Taynton will agree with me that that is really libellous. And as for your being afraid to tell me you had bought a motor-car yourself, why, that is sillier than cracking nuts with your teeth."

Mr. Taynton laughed a comfortable middle-aged laugh.

"Don't put the responsibility on me, Mrs. Assheton," he said. "As long as Morris's bank doesn't tell us that his account is overdrawn, he can do what he pleases. But if we are told that, then down comes the cartloads of bricks."

"Oh, you are a brick all right, Mr. Taynton," said the boy. "I could stand a cartload of you."

Mr. Taynton, like his laugh, was comfortable and middle-aged. Solicitors are supposed to be sharp-faced and fox-like, but his face was well-furnished and comely, and his rather bald head beamed with benevolence and dinner.

"My dear boy," he said, "and it is your birthday—I cannot honour either you or this wonderful port more properly than by drinking your health in it."

He began and finished his glass to the health he had so neatly proposed, and Morris laughed.

"Thank you very much," he said. "Mother, do send the port round. What an inhospitable woman!"

Mrs. Assheton rose.

"I will leave you to be more hospitable than me, then, dear," she said.

"Shall we go, Madge? Indeed, I am afraid you must, if you are to catch the train to Falmer."

Madge Templeton got up with her hostess, and the two men rose too. She had been sitting next Morris, and the boy looked at her eagerly.

"It's too bad, your having to go," he said. "But do you think I may come over to-morrow, in the afternoon some time, and see you and Lady Templeton?"

Madge paused a moment.

"I am so sorry," she said, "but we shall be away all day. We shan't be back till quite late."

"Oh, what a bore," said he, "and I leave again on Friday. Do let me come and see you off then."

But Mrs. Assheton interposed.

"No, dear," she said, "I am going to have five minutes' talk with Madge before she goes and we don't want you. Look after Mr. Taynton. I know he wants to talk to you and I want to talk to Madge."

Mr. Taynton, when the door had closed behind the ladies, sat down again with a rather obvious air of proposing to enjoy himself. It was quite true that he had a few pleasant things to say to Morris, it is also true that he immensely appreciated the wonderful port which glowed, ruby-like, in the nearly full decanter that lay to his hand. And, above all, he, with his busy life, occupied for the most part in innumerable small affairs, revelled in the sense of leisure and serene smoothness which permeated Mrs. Assheton's house. He was still a year or two short of sixty, and but for his very bald and shining head would have seemed younger, so fresh was he in complexion, so active, despite a certain reassuring corpulency, was he in his movements. But when he dined quietly like this, at Mrs. Assheton's, he would willingly have sacrificed the next five years of his life if he could have been assured on really reliable authority—the authority for instance of the Recording Angel—that in five years time he would be able to sit quiet and not work any more. He wanted very much to be able to take a passive instead of an active interest in life, and this a few hundreds of pounds a year in addition to his savings would enable him to do. He saw, in fact, the goal arrived at which he would be able to sit still and wait with serenity and calmness for the event which would certainly relieve him of all further material anxieties. His very active life, the activities of which were so largely benevolent, had at the expiration of fifty-eight years a little tired him. He coveted the leisure which was so nearly his.

Morris lit a cigarette for himself, having previously passed the wine to Mr. Taynton.

"I hate port," he said, "but my mother tells me this is all right. It was laid down the year I was born by the way. You don't mind my smoking do you?"

This, to tell the truth, seemed almost sacrilegious to Mr. Taynton, for the idea that tobacco, especially the frivolous cigarette, should burn in a room where such port was being drunk was sheer crime against human and divine laws. But he could scarcely indicate to his host that he should not smoke in his own dining-room.

"No, my dear Morris," he said, "but really you almost shock me, when you prefer tobacco to this nectar, I assure you nectar. And the car, now, tell me more about the car."

Morris laughed.

"I'm so deeply thankful I haven't overdrawn," he said. "Oh, the car's a clipper. We came down from Haywards Heath the most gorgeous pace. I saw one policeman trying to take my number, but we raised such a dust, I don't think he can have been able to see it. It's such rot only going twenty miles an hour with a clear straight road ahead."

Mr. Taynton sighed, gently and not unhappily.

"Yes, yes, my dear boy, I so sympathise with you," he said. "Speed and violence is the proper attitude of youth, just as strength with a more measured pace is the proper gait for older folk. And that, I fancy is just what Mrs. Assheton felt. She would feel it to be as unnatural in you to care to drive with her in her very comfortable victoria as she would feel it to be unnatural in herself to wish to go in your lightning speed motor. And that reminds me. As your trustee—"

Coffee was brought in at this moment, carried, not by one of the discreet parlour-maids, but by a young man-servant. Mr. Taynton, with the port still by him, refused it, but looked rather curiously at the servant. Morris however mixed himself a cup in which cream, sugar, and coffee were about equally mingled.

"A new servant of your mother's?" he asked, when the man had left the room.

"Oh no. It's my man, Martin. Awfully handy chap. Cleans silver, boots and the motor. Drives it, too, when I'll let him, which isn't very often. Chauffeurs are such rotters, aren't they? Regular chauffeurs I mean. They always make out that something is wrong with the car, just as dentists always find some hole in your teeth, if you go to them."

Mr. Taynton did not reply to these critical generalities but went back to what he had been saying when the entry of coffee interrupted him.

"As your mother said," he remarked, "I wanted to have a few words with you. You are twenty-two, are you not, to-day? Well, when I was young we considered anyone of twenty-two a boy still, but now I think young fellows grow up more quickly, and at twenty-two, you are a man nowadays, and I think it is time for you, since my trusteeship for you may end any day now, to take a rather more active interest in the state of your finances than you have hitherto done. I want you in fact, my dear fellow, to listen to me for five minutes while I state your position to you."

Morris indicated the port again, and Mr. Taynton refilled his glass.

"I have had twenty years of stewardship for you," he went on, "and before my stewardship comes to an end, which it will do anyhow in three years from now, and may come to an end any day—"

"Why, how is that?" asked Morris.

"If you marry, my dear boy. By the terms of your father's will, your marriage, provided it takes place with your mother's consent, and after your twenty-second birthday, puts you in complete control and possession of your fortune. Otherwise, as of course you know, you come of age, legally speaking, on your twenty-fifth birthday."

Morris lit another cigarette rather impatiently.

"Yes, I knew I was a minor till I was twenty-five," he said, "and I suppose I have known that if I married after the age of twenty-two, I became a major, or whatever you call it. But what then? Do let us go and play billiards, I'll give you twenty-five in a hundred, because I've been playing a lot lately, and I'll bet half a crown."

Mr. Taynton's fist gently tapped the table.

"Done," he said, "and we will play in five minutes. But I have something to say to you first. Your mother, as you know, enjoys the income of the bulk of your father's property for her lifetime. Outside that, he left this much

smaller capital of which, as also of her money, my partner and I are trustees. The sum he left you was thirty thousand pounds. It is now rather over forty thousand pounds, since we have changed the investments from time to time, and always, I am glad to say, with satisfactory results. The value of her property has gone up also in a corresponding degree. That, however, does not concern you. But since you are now twenty-two, and your marriage would put the whole of this smaller sum into your hands, would it not be well for you to look through our books, to see for yourself the account we render of our stewardship?"

Morris laughed.

"But for what reason?" he asked. "You tell me that my portion has increased in value by ten thousand pounds. I am delighted to hear it. And I thank you very much. And as for—"

He broke off short, and Mr. Taynton let a perceptible pause follow before he interrupted.

"As for the possibility of your marrying?" he suggested.

Morris gave him a quick, eager, glance.

"Yes, I think there is that possibility," he said. "I hope—I hope it is not far distant."

"My dear boy—" said the lawyer.

"Ah, not a word. I don't know—"

Morris pushed his chair back quickly, and stood up—his tall slim figure outlined against the sober red of the dining-room wall. A plume of black hair had escaped from his well-brushed head and hung over his forehead, and his sun-tanned vivid face looked extraordinarily handsome. His mother's clear-cut energetic features were there, with the glow and buoyancy of youth kindling them. Violent vitality was his also; his was the hot blood that could do any deed when the life-instinct commanded it. He looked like one of those who could give their body to be burned in the pursuit of an idea, or could as easily steal, or kill, provided only the deed was vitally done in the heat of his blood. Violence was clearly his mode of life: the motor had to go sixty miles an hour; he might be one of those who bathed in the Serpentine in mid-winter; he would clearly dance all night, and ride all day, and go on till he dropped in the pursuit of what he cared for. Mr. Taynton, looking at him as he stood smiling there, in his splendid

health and vigour felt all this. He felt, too, that if Morris intended to be married to-morrow morning, matrimony would probably take place.

But Morris's pause, after he pushed his chair back and stood up, was only momentary.

"Good God, yes; I'm in love," he said. "And she probably thinks me a stupid barbarian, who likes only to drive golfballs and motorcars. She—oh, it's hopeless. She would have let me come over to see them to-morrow otherwise."

He paused again.

"And now I've given the whole show away," he said.

Mr. Taynton made a comfortable sort of noise. It was compounded of laughter, sympathy, and comprehension.

"You gave it away long ago, my dear Morris," he said.

"You had guessed?" asked Morris, sitting down again with the same quickness and violence of movement, and putting both his elbows on the table.

"No, my dear boy, you had told me, as you have told everybody, without mentioning it. And I most heartily congratulate you. I never saw a more delightful girl. Professionally also, I feel bound to add that it seems to me a most proper alliance—heirs should always marry heiresses. It"—Mr. Taynton drank off the rest of his port—"it keeps properties together."

Hot blood again dictated to Morris: it seemed dreadful to him that any thought of money or of property could be mentioned in the same breath as that which he longed for. He rose again as abruptly and violently as he had sat down.

"Well, let's play billiards," he said. "I—I don't think you understand a bit. You can't, in fact."

Mr. Taynton stroked the tablecloth for a moment with a plump white forefinger.

"Crabbed age and youth," he remarked. "But crabbed age makes an appeal to youth, if youth will kindly call to mind what crabbed age referred to some five minutes ago. In other words, will you, or will you not, Morris, spend a very dry three hours at my office, looking into the account of my stewardship? There was thirty thousand pounds, and there now is—or

should we say 'are'—forty. It will take you not less than two hours, and not more than three. But since my stewardship may come to an end, as I said, any day, I should, not for my own sake, but for yours, wish you to see what we have done for you, and—I own this would be a certain private gratification to me—to learn that you thought that the trust your dear father reposed in us was not misplaced."

There was something about these simple words which touched Morris. For the moment he became almost businesslike. Mr. Taynton had been, as he knew, a friend of his father's, and, as he had said, he had been steward of his own affairs for twenty years. But that reflection banished the businesslike view.

"Oh, but two hours is a fearful time," he said. "You have told me the facts, and they entirely satisfy me. And I want to be out all day to-morrow, as I am only here till the day after. But I shall be down again next week. Let us go into it all then. Not that there is the slightest use in going into anything. And when, Mr. Taynton, I become steward of my own affairs, you may be quite certain that I shall beg you to continue looking after them. Why you gained me ten thousand pounds in these twenty years—I wonder what there would have been to my credit now if I had looked after things myself. But since we are on the subject I should like just this once to assure you of my great gratitude to you, for all you have done. And I ask you, if you will, to look after my affairs in the future with the same completeness as you have always done. My father's will does not prevent that, does it?"

Mr. Taynton looked at the young fellow with affection.

"Dear Morris," he said gaily, "we lawyers and solicitors are always supposed to be sharks, but personally I am not such a shark as that. Are you aware that I am paid £200 a year for my stewardship, which you are entitled to assume for yourself on your marriage, though of course its continuance in my hands is not forbidden in your father's will? You are quite competent to look after your affairs yourself; it is ridiculous for you to continue to pay me this sum. But I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your confidence in me."

A very close observer might have seen that behind Mr. Taynton's kind gay eyes there was sitting a personality, so to speak, that, as his mouth framed these words, was watching Morris rather narrowly and anxiously. But the moment Morris spoke this silent secret watcher popped back again out of sight.

"Well then I ask you as a personal favour," said he, "to continue being my steward. Why, it's good business for me, isn't it? In twenty years you make me ten thousand pounds, and I only pay you £200 a year for it. Please be kind, Mr. Taynton, and continue making me rich. Oh, I'm a jolly hard-headed chap really; I know that it is to my advantage."

Mr. Taynton considered this a moment, playing with his wine glass. Then he looked up quickly.

"Yes, Morris, I will with pleasure do as you ask me," he said.

"Right oh. Thanks awfully. Do come and play billiards."

Morris was in amazing luck that night, and if, as he said, he had been playing a lot lately, the advantage of his practice was seen chiefly in the hideous certainty of his flukes, and the game (though he received twenty-five) left Mr. Taynton half a crown the poorer. Then the winner whirled his guest upstairs again to talk to his mother while he himself went round to the stables to assure himself of the well-being of the beloved motor. Martin had already valeted it, after its run, and was just locking up when Morris arrived.

Morris gave his orders for next day after a quite unnecessary examination into the internal economy of the beloved, and was just going back to the house, when he paused, remembering something.

"Oh Martin," he said, "while I am here, I want you to help in the house, you know at dinner and so on, just as you did to-night. And when there are guests of mine here I want you to look after them. For instance, when Mr. Taynton goes tonight you will be there to give him his hat and coat. You'll have rather a lot to do, I'm afraid."

Morris finished his cigarette and went back to the drawing-room where Mr. Taynton was already engaged in the staid excitements of backgammon with his mother. That game over, Morris took his place, and before long the lawyer rose to go.

"Now I absolutely refuse to let you interrupt your game," he said. "I have found my way out of this house often enough, I should think. Good night, Mrs. Assheton. Good night Morris; don't break your neck my dear boy, in trying to break records."

Morris hardly attended to this, for the game was critical. He just rang the bell, said good night, and had thrown again before the door had closed

behind Mr. Taynton. Below, in answer to the bell, was standing his servant.

Mr. Taynton looked at him again with some attention, and then glanced round to see if the discreet parlour-maids were about.

"So you are called Martin now," he observed gently.

"Yes, sir."

"I recognised you at once."

There was a short pause.

"Are you going to tell Mr. Morris, sir?" he asked.

"That I had to dismiss you two years ago for theft?" said Mr. Taynton quietly. "No, not if you behave yourself."

Mr. Taynton looked at him again kindly and sighed.

"No, let bygones be bygones," he said. "You will find your secret is safe enough. And, Martin, I hope you have really turned over a new leaf, and are living honestly now. That is so, my lad? Thank God; thank God. My umbrella? Thanks. Good night. No cab: I will walk."

CHAPTER II

Mr. Taynton lived in a square, comfortable house in Montpellier Road, and thus, when he left Mrs. Assheton's there was some two miles of pavement and sea front between him and home. But the night was of wonderful beauty, a night of mid June, warm enough to make the most cautious secure of chill, and at the same time just made crisp with a little breeze that blew or rather whispered landward from over the full-tide of the sleeping sea. High up in the heavens swung a glorious moon, which cast its path of white enchanted light over the ripples, and seemed to draw the heart even as it drew the eyes heavenward. Mr. Taynton certainly, as he stepped out beneath the stars, with the sea lying below him, felt, in his delicate and sensitive nature, the charm of the hour, and being a good if not a brisk walker, he determined to go home on foot. And he stepped westward very contentedly.

The evening, it would appear, had much pleased him—for it was long before his smile of retrospective pleasure faded from his pleasant mobile face. Morris's trust and confidence in him had been extraordinarily pleasant to him: and modest and unassuming as he was, he could not help a secret gratification at the thought. What a handsome fellow Morris was too, how gay, how attractive! He had his father's dark colouring, and tall figure, but much of his mother's grace and charm had gone to the modelling of that thin sensitive mouth and the long oval of his face. Yet there was more of the father there, the father's intense, almost violent, vitality was somehow more characteristic of the essential Morris than face or feature.

What a happy thing it was too—here the smile of pleasure illuminated Mr. Taynton's face again—that the boy whom he had dismissed two years before for some petty pilfering in his own house, should have turned out such a promising lad and should have found his way to so pleasant a berth as that of factotum to Morris. Kindly and charitable all through and ever eager to draw out the good in everybody and forgive the bad, Mr. Taynton had often occasion to deplore the hardness and uncharity of a world which remembers youthful errors and hangs them, like a mill-stone, round the neck of the offender, and it warmed his heart and kindled his smile to think of one case at any rate where a youthful misdemeanour was lived down and forgotten. At the time he remembered being in doubt whether he should not give the offender up to justice, for the pilfering, petty though it had been, had been somewhat persistent, but he had taken

the more merciful course, and merely dismissed the boy. He had been in two minds about it before, wondering whether it would not be better to let Martin have a sharp lesson, but to-night he was thankful that he had not done so. The mercy he had shown had come back to bless him also; he felt a glow of thankfulness that the subject of his clemency had turned out so well. Punishment often hardens the criminal, was one of his settled convictions. But Morris—again his thoughts went back to Morris, who was already standing on the verge of manhood, on the verge, too, he made no doubt of married life and its joys and responsibilities. Mr. Taynton was himself a bachelor, and the thought gave him not a moment of jealousy, but a moment of void that ached a little at the thought of the common human bliss which he had himself missed. How charming, too, was the girl Madge Templeton, whom he had met, not for the first time, that evening. He himself had guessed how things stood between the two before Morris had confided in him, and it pleased him that his intuition was confirmed. What a pity, however, that the two were not going to meet next day, that she was out with her mother and would not get back till late. It would have been a cooling thought in the hot office hours of to-morrow to picture them sitting together in the garden at Falmer, or under one of the cool deep-foliaged oaks in the park.

Then suddenly his face changed, the smile faded, but came back next instant and broadened with a laugh. And the man who laughs when he is by himself may certainly be supposed to have strong cause for amusement.

Mr. Taynton had come by this time to the West Pier, and a hundred yards farther would bring him to Montpellier Road. But it was yet early, as he saw (so bright was the moonlight) when he consulted his watch, and he retraced his steps some fifty yards, and eventually rang at the door of a big house of flats facing the sea, where his partner, who for the most part, looked after the London branch of their business, had his *pied-à-terre*. For the firm of Taynton and Mills was one of those respectable and solid businesses that, beginning in the country, had eventually been extended to town, and so far from its having its headquarters in town and its branch in Brighton, had its headquarters here and its branch in the metropolis. Mr. Godfrey Mills, so he learned at the door had dined alone, and was in, and without further delay Mr. Taynton was carried aloft in the gaudy bird-cage of the lift, feeling sure that his partner would see him.

The flat into which he was ushered with a smile of welcome from the man who opened the door was furnished with a sort of gross opulence that never failed to jar on Mr. Taynton's exquisite taste and cultivated mind.

Pictures, chairs, sofas, the patterns of the carpet, and the heavy gilding of the cornices were all sensuous, a sort of frangipanni to the eye. The apparent contrast, however, between these things and their owner, was as great as that between Mr. Taynton and his partner, for Mr. Godfrey Mills was a thin, spare, dark little man, brisk in movement, with a look in his eye that betokened a watchfulness and vigilance of the most alert order. But useful as such a gift undoubtedly is, it was given to Mr. Godfrey Mills perhaps a shade too obviously. It would be unlikely that the stupidest or shallowest person would give himself away when talking to him, for it was so clear that he was always on the watch for admission or information that might be useful to him. He had, however, the charm that a very active and vivid mind always possesses, and though small and slight, he was a figure that would be noticed anywhere, so keen and wide-awake was his face. Beside him Mr. Taynton looked like a benevolent country clergyman, more distinguished for amiable qualities of the heart, than intellectual qualities of the head. Yet those—there were not many of them—who in dealings with the latter had tried to conduct their business on these assumptions, had invariably found it necessary to reconsider their first impression of him. His partner, however, was always conscious of a little impatience in talking to him; Taynton, he would have allowed, did not lack fine business qualities, but he was a little wanting in quickness.

Mills's welcome of him was abrupt.

"Pleased to see you," he said. "Cigar, drink? Sit down, won't you? What is it?"

"I dropped in for a chat on my way home," said Mr. Taynton. "I have been dining with Mrs. Assheton. A most pleasant evening. What a fine delicate face she has."

Mills bit off the end of a cigar.

"I take it that you did not come in merely to discuss the delicacy of Mrs. Assheton's face," he said.

"No, no, dear fellow; you are right to recall me. I too take it—I take it that you have found time to go over to Falmer yesterday. How did you find Sir Richard?"

"I found him well. I had a long talk with him."

"And you managed to convey something of those very painful facts which you felt it was your duty to bring to his notice?" asked Mr. Taynton.

Godfrey Mills laughed.

"I say, Taynton, is it really worth while keeping it up like this?" he asked. "It really saves so much trouble to talk straight, as I propose to do. I saw him, as I said, and I really managed remarkably well. I had these admissions wrung from me, I assure you it is no less than that, under promise of the most absolute secrecy. I told him young Assheton was leading an idle, extravagant, and dissipated life. I said I had seen him three nights ago in Piccadilly, not quite sober, in company with the class of person to whom one does not refer in polite society. Will that do?"

"Ah, I can easily imagine how painful you must have found—" began Taynton.

But his partner interrupted.

"It was rather painful; you have spoken a true word in jest. I felt a brute, I tell you. But, as I pointed out to you, something of the sort was necessary."

Mr. Taynton suddenly dropped his slightly clerical manner.

"You have done excellently, my dear friend," he said. "And as you pointed out to me, it was indeed necessary to do something of the sort. I think by now, your revelations have already begun to take effect. Yes, I think I will take a little brandy and soda. Thank you very much."

He got up with greater briskness than he had hitherto shown.

"And you are none too soon," he said. "Morris, poor Morris, such a handsome fellow, confided to me this evening that he was in love with Miss Templeton. He is very much in earnest."

"And why do you think my interview has met with some success?" asked Mills.

"Well, it is only a conjecture, but when Morris asked if he might call any time to-morrow, Miss Templeton (who was also dining with Mrs. Assheton) said that she and her mother would be out all day and not get home till late. It does not strike me as being too fanciful to see in that some little trace perhaps of your handiwork."

"Yes, that looks like me," said Mills shortly.

Mr. Taynton took a meditative sip at his brandy and soda.

"My evening also has not been altogether wasted," he said. "I played what for me was a bold stroke, for as you know, my dear fellow, I prefer to leave to your nimble and penetrating mind things that want dash and boldness. But to-night, yes, I was warmed with that wonderful port and was bold."

"What did you do?" asked Mills.

"Well, I asked, I almost implored dear Morris to give me two or three hours to-morrow and go through all the books, and satisfy himself everything is in order, and his investments well looked after. I told him also that the original £30,000 of his had, owing to judicious management, become £40,000. You see, that is unfortunately a thing past praying for. It is so indubitably clear from the earlier ledgers—"

"But the port must indeed have warmed you," said Mills quickly. "Why, it was madness! What if he had consented?"

Mr. Taynton smiled.

"Ah, well, I in my slow synthetic manner had made up my mind that it was really quite impossible that he should consent to go into the books and vouchers. To begin with, he has a new motor car, and every hour spent away from that car just now is to his mind an hour wasted. Also, I know him well. I knew that he would never consent to spend several hours over ledgers. Finally, even if he had, though I knew from what I know of him not that he would not but that he *could* not, I could have—I could have managed something. You see, he knows nothing whatever about business or investments."

Mills shook his head.

"But it was dangerous, anyhow," he said, "and I don't understand what object could be served by it. It was running a risk with no profit in view."

Then for the first time the inherent strength of the quietness of the one man as opposed to the obvious quickness and comprehension of the other came into play.

"I think that I disagree with you there, my dear fellow," said Mr. Taynton slowly, "though when I have told you all, I shall be of course, as always, delighted to recognise the superiority of your judgment, should you disagree with me, and convince me of the correctness of your view. It has

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