

## **Chapter 2. The Painful Fall of a Great Reputation**

Basil Grant and I were talking one day in what is perhaps the most perfect place for talking on earth--the top of a tolerably deserted tramcar. To talk on the top of a hill is superb, but to talk on the top of a flying hill is a fairy tale.

The vast blank space of North London was flying by; the very pace gave us a sense of its immensity and its meanness. It was, as it were, a base infinitude, a squalid eternity, and we felt the real horror of the poor parts of London, the horror that is so totally missed and misrepresented by the sensational novelists who depict it as being a matter of narrow streets, filthy houses, criminals and maniacs, and dens of vice. In a narrow street, in a den of vice, you do not expect civilization, you do not expect order. But the horror of this was the fact that there was civilization, that there was order, but that civilisation only showed its morbidity, and order only its monotony. No one would say, in going through a criminal slum, "I see no statues. I notice no cathedrals." But here there were public buildings; only they were mostly lunatic asylums. Here there were statues; only they were mostly statues of railway engineers and philanthropists--two dingy classes of men united by their common contempt for the people. Here there were churches; only they were the churches of dim and erratic sects, Agapemonites or Irvingites. Here, above all, there were broad roads and vast crossings and tramway lines and hospitals and all the real marks of civilization. But though one never knew, in one sense, what one would see next, there was one thing we knew we should not see--anything really great, central, of the first class, anything that humanity had adored. And with revulsion indescribable our emotions returned, I think, to those really close and crooked entries, to those really mean streets, to those genuine slums which lie round the Thames and the City, in which nevertheless a real possibility remains that at any chance corner the great cross of the great cathedral of Wren may strike down the street like a thunderbolt.

"But you must always remember also," said Grant to me, in his heavy abstracted way, when I had urged this view, "that the very vileness of the life of these ordered plebeian places bears witness to the victory of the human soul. I agree with you. I agree that they have to live in something worse than barbarism. They have to live in a fourth-rate civilization. But yet I am practically certain that the majority of people here are good people. And being good is an adventure far more violent and daring than sailing round the world. Besides--"

"Go on," I said.

No answer came.

"Go on," I said, looking up.

The big blue eyes of Basil Grant were standing out of his head and he was paying no attention to me. He was staring over the side of the tram.

"What is the matter?" I asked, peering over also.

"It is very odd," said Grant at last, grimly, "that I should have been caught out like this at the very moment of my optimism. I said all these people were good, and there is the wickedest man in England."

"Where?" I asked, leaning over further, "where?"

"Oh, I was right enough," he went on, in that strange continuous and sleepy tone which always angered his hearers at acute moments, "I was right enough when I said all these people were good. They are heroes; they are saints. Now and then they may perhaps steal a spoon or two; they may beat a wife or two with the poker. But they are saints all the same; they are angels; they are robed in white; they are clad with wings and haloes--at any rate compared to that man."

"Which man?" I cried again, and then my eye caught the figure at which Basil's bull's eyes were glaring.

He was a slim, smooth person, passing very quickly among the quickly passing crowd, but though there was nothing about him sufficient to attract a startled notice, there was quite enough to demand a curious consideration when once that notice was attracted. He wore a black top-hat, but there was enough in it of those strange curves whereby the decadent artist of the eighties tried to turn the top-hat into something as rhythmic as an Etruscan vase. His hair, which was largely grey, was curled with the instinct of one who appreciated the gradual beauty of grey and silver. The rest of his face was oval and, I thought, rather Oriental; he had two black tufts of moustache.

"What has he done?" I asked.

"I am not sure of the details," said Grant, "but his besetting sin is a desire to intrigue to the disadvantage of others. Probably he has adopted some imposture or other to effect his plan."

"What plan?" I asked. "If you know all about him, why don't you tell me why he is the wickedest man in England? What is his name?"

Basil Grant stared at me for some moments.

"I think you've made a mistake in my meaning," he said. "I don't know his name. I never saw him before in my life."

"Never saw him before!" I cried, with a kind of anger; "then what in heaven's name do you mean by saying that he is the wickedest man in England?"

"I meant what I said," said Basil Grant calmly. "The moment I saw that man, I saw all these people stricken with a sudden and splendid innocence. I saw that while all ordinary poor men in the streets were being themselves, he was not being himself. I saw that all the men in these slums, cadgers, pickpockets, hooligans, are all, in the deepest sense, trying to be good. And I saw that that man was trying to be evil."

"But if you never saw him before--" I began.

"In God's name, look at his face," cried out Basil in a voice that startled the driver. "Look at the eyebrows. They mean that infernal pride which made Satan so proud that he sneered even at heaven when he was one of the first angels in it. Look at his moustaches, they are so grown as to insult humanity. In the name of the sacred heavens look at his hair. In the name of God and the stars, look at his hat."

I stirred uncomfortably.

"But, after all," I said, "this is very fanciful--perfectly absurd. Look at the mere facts. You have never seen the man before, you--"

"Oh, the mere facts," he cried out in a kind of despair. "The mere facts! Do you really admit--are you still so sunk in superstitions, so clinging to dim and prehistoric altars, that you believe in facts? Do you not trust an immediate impression?"

"Well, an immediate impression may be," I said, "a little less practical than facts."

"Bosh," he said. "On what else is the whole world run but immediate impressions? What is more practical? My friend, the philosophy of this world may be founded on facts, its business is run on spiritual impressions and atmospheres. Why do you refuse or accept a clerk? Do you measure his skull? Do you read up his physiological state in a handbook? Do you go upon facts at all? Not a scrap. You accept a clerk who may save your business--you refuse a clerk that may rob your till, entirely upon those immediate mystical impressions under

the pressure of which I pronounce, with a perfect sense of certainty and sincerity, that that man walking in that street beside us is a humbug and a villain of some kind."

"You always put things well," I said, "but, of course, such things cannot immediately be put to the test."

Basil sprang up straight and swayed with the swaying car.

"Let us get off and follow him," he said. "I bet you five pounds it will turn out as I say."

And with a scuttle, a jump, and a run, we were off the car.

The man with the curved silver hair and the curved Eastern face walked along for some time, his long splendid frock-coat flying behind him. Then he swung sharply out of the great glaring road and disappeared down an ill-lit alley. We swung silently after him.

"This is an odd turning for a man of that kind to take," I said.

"A man of what kind?" asked my friend.

"Well," I said, "a man with that kind of expression and those boots. I thought it rather odd, to tell the truth, that he should be in this part of the world at all."

"Ah, yes," said Basil, and said no more.

We tramped on, looking steadily in front of us. The elegant figure, like the figure of a black swan, was silhouetted suddenly against the glare of intermittent gaslight and then swallowed again in night. The intervals between the lights were long, and a fog was thickening the whole city. Our pace, therefore, had become swift and mechanical between the lamp-posts; but Basil came to a standstill suddenly like a reined horse; I stopped also. We had almost run into the man. A great part of the solid darkness in front of us was the darkness of his body.

At first I thought he had turned to face us. But though we were hardly a yard off he did not realize that we were there. He tapped four times on a very low and dirty door in the dark, crabbed street. A gleam of gas cut the darkness as it opened slowly. We listened intently, but the interview was short and simple and inexplicable as an interview could be. Our exquisite friend handed in what looked like a paper or a card and said:

"At once. Take a cab."

A heavy, deep voice from inside said:

"Right you are."

And with a click we were in the blackness again, and striding after the striding stranger through a labyrinth of London lanes, the lights just helping us. It was only five o'clock, but winter and the fog had made it like midnight.

"This is really an extraordinary walk for the patent-leather boots," I repeated.

"I don't know," said Basil humbly. "It leads to Berkeley Square."

As I tramped on I strained my eyes through the dusky atmosphere and tried to make out the direction described. For some ten minutes I wondered and doubted; at the end of that I saw that my friend was right. We were coming to the great dreary spaces of fashionable London--more dreary, one must admit, even than the dreary plebeian spaces.

"This is very extraordinary!" said Basil Grant, as we turned into Berkeley Square.

"What is extraordinary?" I asked. "I thought you said it was quite natural."

"I do not wonder," answered Basil, "at his walking through nasty streets; I do not wonder at his going to Berkeley Square. But I do wonder at his going to the house of a very good man."

"What very good man?" I asked with exasperation.

"The operation of time is a singular one," he said with his imperturbable irrelevancy. "It is not a true statement of the case to say that I have forgotten my career when I was a judge and a public man. I remember it all vividly, but it is like remembering some novel. But fifteen years ago I knew this square as well as Lord Rosebery does, and a confounded long sight better than that man who is going up the steps of old Beaumont's house."

"Who is old Beaumont?" I asked irritably.

"A perfectly good fellow. Lord Beaumont of Foxwood--don't you know his name? He is a man of transparent sincerity, a nobleman who does more work than a navy, a socialist, an anarchist, I don't know what; anyhow, he's a philosopher and philanthropist. I admit he has the slight disadvantage of being, beyond all

question, off his head. He has that real disadvantage which has arisen out of the modern worship of progress and novelty; and he thinks anything odd and new must be an advance. If you went to him and proposed to eat your grandmother, he would agree with you, so long as you put it on hygienic and public grounds, as a cheap alternative to cremation. So long as you progress fast enough it seems a matter of indifference to him whether you are progressing to the stars or the devil. So his house is filled with an endless succession of literary and political fashions; men who wear long hair because it is romantic; men who wear short hair because it is medical; men who walk on their feet only to exercise their hands; and men who walk on their hands for fear of tiring their feet. But though the inhabitants of his salons are generally fools, like himself, they are almost always, like himself, good men. I am really surprised to see a criminal enter there."

"My good fellow," I said firmly, striking my foot on the pavement, "the truth of this affair is very simple. To use your own eloquent language, you have the 'slight disadvantage' of being off your head. You see a total stranger in a public street; you choose to start certain theories about his eyebrows. You then treat him as a burglar because he enters an honest man's door. The thing is too monstrous. Admit that it is, Basil, and come home with me. Though these people are still having tea, yet with the distance we have to go, we shall be late for dinner."

Basil's eyes were shining in the twilight like lamps.

"I thought," he said, "that I had outlived vanity."

"What do you want now?" I cried.

"I want," he cried out, "what a girl wants when she wears her new frock; I want what a boy wants when he goes in for a clanging match with a monitor--I want to show somebody what a fine fellow I am. I am as right about that man as I am about your having a hat on your head. You say it cannot be tested. I say it can. I will take you to see my old friend Beaumont. He is a delightful man to know."

"Do you really mean--?" I began.

"I will apologize," he said calmly, "for our not being dressed for a call," and walking across the vast misty square, he walked up the dark stone steps and rang at the bell.

A severe servant in black and white opened the door to us: on receiving my friend's name his manner passed in a flash from astonishment to respect. We were ushered into the house very quickly, but not so quickly but that our host, a white-haired man with a fiery face, came out quickly to meet us.

"My dear fellow," he cried, shaking Basil's hand again and again, "I have not seen you for years. Have you been--er--" he said, rather wildly, "have you been in the country?"

"Not for all that time," answered Basil, smiling. "I have long given up my official position, my dear Philip, and have been living in a deliberate retirement. I hope I do not come at an inopportune moment."

"An inopportune moment," cried the ardent gentleman. "You come at the most opportune moment I could imagine. Do you know who is here?"

"I do not," answered Grant, with gravity. Even as he spoke a roar of laughter came from the inner room.

"Basil," said Lord Beaumont solemnly, "I have Wimpole here."

"And who is Wimpole?"

"Basil," cried the other, "you must have been in the country. You must have been in the antipodes. You must have been in the moon. Who is Wimpole? Who was Shakespeare?"

"As to who Shakespeare was," answered my friend placidly, "my views go no further than thinking that he was not Bacon. More probably he was Mary Queen of Scots. But as to who Wimpole is--" and his speech also was cloven with a roar of laughter from within.

"Wimpole!" cried Lord Beaumont, in a sort of ecstasy. "Haven't you heard of the great modern wit? My dear fellow, he has turned conversation, I do not say into an art--for that, perhaps, it always was but into a great art, like the statuary of Michael Angelo--an art of masterpieces. His repartees, my good friend, startle one like a man shot dead. They are final; they are--"

Again there came the hilarious roar from the room, and almost with the very noise of it, a big, panting apoplectic old gentleman came out of the inner house into the hall where we were standing.

"Now, my dear chap," began Lord Beaumont hastily.

"I tell you, Beaumont, I won't stand it," exploded the large old gentleman. "I won't be made game of by a twopenny literary adventurer like that. I won't be made a guy. I won't--"

"Come, come," said Beaumont feverishly. "Let me introduce you. This is Mr Justice Grant--that is, Mr Grant. Basil, I am sure you have heard of Sir Walter Cholmondeliagh."

"Who has not?" asked Grant, and bowed to the worthy old baronet, eyeing him with some curiosity. He was hot and heavy in his momentary anger, but even that could not conceal the noble though opulent outline of his face and body, the florid white hair, the Roman nose, the body stalwart though corpulent, the chin aristocratic though double. He was a magnificent courtly gentleman; so much of a gentleman that he could show an unquestionable weakness of anger without altogether losing dignity; so much of a gentleman that even his faux pas were well-bred.

"I am distressed beyond expression, Beaumont," he said gruffly, "to fail in respect to these gentlemen, and even more especially to fail in it in your house. But it is not you or they that are in any way concerned, but that flashy half-caste jackanapes--"

At this moment a young man with a twist of red moustache and a sombre air came out of the inner room. He also did not seem to be greatly enjoying the intellectual banquet within.

"I think you remember my friend and secretary, Mr Drummond," said Lord Beaumont, turning to Grant, "even if you only remember him as a schoolboy."

"Perfectly," said the other. Mr Drummond shook hands pleasantly and respectfully, but the cloud was still on his brow. Turning to Sir Walter Cholmondeliagh, he said:

"I was sent by Lady Beaumont to express her hope that you were not going yet, Sir Walter. She says she has scarcely seen anything of you."

The old gentleman, still red in the face, had a temporary internal struggle; then his good manners triumphed, and with a gesture of obeisance and a vague utterance of, "If Lady Beaumont... a lady, of course," he followed the young man back into the salon. He had scarcely been deposited there half a minute before another peal of laughter told that he had (in all probability) been scored off again.

"Of course, I can excuse dear old Cholmondeliagh," said Beaumont, as he helped us off with our coats. "He has not the modern mind."

"What is the modern mind?" asked Grant.

"Oh, it's enlightened, you know, and progressive--and faces the facts of life seriously." At this moment another roar of laughter came from within.

"I only ask," said Basil, "because of the last two friends of yours who had the modern mind; one thought it wrong to eat fishes and the other thought it right to eat men. I beg your pardon--this way, if I remember right."

"Do you know," said Lord Beaumont, with a sort of feverish entertainment, as he trotted after us towards the interior, "I can never quite make out which side you are on. Sometimes you seem so liberal and sometimes so reactionary. Are you a modern, Basil?"

"No," said Basil, loudly and cheerfully, as he entered the crowded drawing-room.

This caused a slight diversion, and some eyes were turned away from our slim friend with the Oriental face for the first time that afternoon. Two people, however, still looked at him. One was the daughter of the house, Muriel Beaumont, who gazed at him with great violet eyes and with the intense and awful thirst of the female upper class for verbal amusement and stimulus. The other was Sir Walter Cholmondeliegh, who looked at him with a still and sullen but unmistakable desire to throw him out of the window.

He sat there, coiled rather than seated on the easy chair; everything from the curves of his smooth limbs to the coils of his silvered hair suggesting the circles of a serpent more than the straight limbs of a man--the unmistakable, splendid serpentine gentleman we had seen walking in North London, his eyes shining with repeated victory.

"What I can't understand, Mr Wimpole," said Muriel Beaumont eagerly, "is how you contrive to treat all this so easily. You say things quite philosophical and yet so wildly funny. If I thought of such things, I'm sure I should laugh outright when the thought first came."

"I agree with Miss Beaumont," said Sir Walter, suddenly exploding with indignation. "If I had thought of anything so futile, I should find it difficult to keep my countenance."

"Difficult to keep your countenance," cried Mr Wimpole, with an air of alarm; "oh, do keep your countenance! Keep it in the British Museum."

Every one laughed uproariously, as they always do at an already admitted readiness, and Sir Walter, turning suddenly purple, shouted out:

"Do you know who you are talking to, with your confounded tomfooleries?"

"I never talk tomfooleries," said the other, "without first knowing my audience."

Grant walked across the room and tapped the red-moustached secretary on the shoulder. That gentleman was leaning against the wall regarding the whole scene with a great deal of gloom; but, I fancied, with very particular gloom when his eyes fell on the young lady of the house rapturously listening to Wimpole.

"May I have a word with you outside, Drummond?" asked Grant. "It is about business. Lady Beaumont will excuse us."

I followed my friend, at his own request, greatly wondering, to this strange external interview. We passed abruptly into a kind of side room out of the hall.

"Drummond," said Basil sharply, "there are a great many good people, and a great many sane people here this afternoon. Unfortunately, by a kind of coincidence, all the good people are mad, and all the sane people are wicked. You are the only person I know of here who is honest and has also some common sense. What do you make of Wimpole?"

Mr Secretary Drummond had a pale face and red hair; but at this his face became suddenly as red as his moustache.

"I am not a fair judge of him," he said.

"Why not?" asked Grant.

"Because I hate him like hell," said the other, after a long pause and violently.

Neither Grant nor I needed to ask the reason; his glances towards Miss Beaumont and the stranger were sufficiently illuminating. Grant said quietly:

"But before--before you came to hate him, what did you really think of him?"

"I am in a terrible difficulty," said the young man, and his voice told us, like a clear bell, that he was an honest man. "If I spoke about him as I feel about him now, I could not trust myself. And I should like to be able to say that when I first saw him I thought he was charming. But again, the fact is I didn't. I hate him, that is my private affair. But I also disapprove of him--really I do believe I disapprove of him quite apart from my private feelings. When first he came, I admit he was much quieter, but I did not like, so to speak, the moral swell of

him. Then that jolly old Sir Walter Cholmondeliegh got introduced to us, and this fellow, with his cheap-jack wit, began to score off the old man in the way he does now. Then I felt that he must be a bad lot; it must be bad to fight the old and the kindly. And he fights the poor old chap savagely, unceasingly, as if he hated old age and kindness. Take, if you want it, the evidence of a prejudiced witness. I admit that I hate the man because a certain person admires him. But I believe that apart from that I should hate the man because old Sir Walter hates him."

This speech affected me with a genuine sense of esteem and pity for the young man; that is, of pity for him because of his obviously hopeless worship of Miss Beaumont, and of esteem for him because of the direct realistic account of the history of Wimpole which he had given. Still, I was sorry that he seemed so steadily set against the man, and could not help referring it to an instinct of his personal relations, however nobly disguised from himself.

In the middle of these meditations, Grant whispered in my ear what was perhaps the most startling of all interruptions.

"In the name of God, let's get away."

I have never known exactly in how odd a way this odd old man affected me. I only know that for some reason or other he so affected me that I was, within a few minutes, in the street outside.

"This," he said, "is a beastly but amusing affair."

"What is?" I asked, baldly enough.

"This affair. Listen to me, my old friend. Lord and Lady Beaumont have just invited you and me to a grand dinner-party this very night, at which Mr Wimpole will be in all his glory. Well, there is nothing very extraordinary about that. The extraordinary thing is that we are not going."

"Well, really," I said, "it is already six o'clock and I doubt if we could get home and dress. I see nothing extraordinary in the fact that we are not going."

"Don't you?" said Grant. "I'll bet you'll see something extraordinary in what we're doing instead."

I looked at him blankly.

"Doing instead?" I asked. "What are we doing instead?"

"Why," said he, "we are waiting for one or two hours outside this house on a winter evening. You must forgive me; it is all my vanity. It is only to show you that I am right. Can you, with the assistance of this cigar, wait until both Sir Walter Cholmondeliegh and the mystic Wimpole have left this house?"

"Certainly," I said. "But I do not know which is likely to leave first. Have you any notion?"

"No," he said. "Sir Walter may leave first in a glow of rage. Or again, Mr Wimpole may leave first, feeling that his last epigram is a thing to be flung behind him like a firework. And Sir Walter may remain some time to analyse Mr Wimpole's character. But they will both have to leave within reasonable time, for they will both have to get dressed and come back to dinner here tonight."

As he spoke the shrill double whistle from the porch of the great house drew a dark cab to the dark portal. And then a thing happened that we really had not expected. Mr Wimpole and Sir Walter Cholmondeliegh came out at the same moment.

They paused for a second or two opposite each other in a natural doubt; then a certain geniality, fundamental perhaps in both of them, made Sir Walter smile and say: "The night is foggy. Pray take my cab."

Before I could count twenty the cab had gone rattling up the street with both of them. And before I could count twenty-three Grant had hissed in my ear:

"Run after the cab; run as if you were running from a mad dog--run."

We pelted on steadily, keeping the cab in sight, through dark mazy streets. God only, I thought, knows why we are running at all, but we are running hard. Fortunately we did not run far. The cab pulled up at the fork of two streets and Sir Walter paid the cabman, who drove away rejoicing, having just come in contact with the more generous among the rich. Then the two men talked together as men do talk together after giving and receiving great insults, the talk which leads either to forgiveness or a duel--at least so it seemed as we watched it from ten yards off. Then the two men shook hands heartily, and one went down one fork of the road and one down another.

Basil, with one of his rare gestures, flung his arms forward.

"Run after that scoundrel," he cried; "let us catch him now."

We dashed across the open space and reached the juncture of two paths.

"Stop!" I shouted wildly to Grant. "That's the wrong turning."

He ran on.

"Idiot!" I howled. "Sir Walter's gone down there. Wimpole has slipped us. He's half a mile down the other road. You're wrong... Are you deaf? You're wrong!"

"I don't think I am," he panted, and ran on.

"But I saw him!" I cried. "Look in front of you. Is that Wimpole? It's the old man... What are you doing? What are we to do?"

"Keep running," said Grant.

Running soon brought us up to the broad back of the pompous old baronet, whose white whiskers shone silver in the fitful lamplight. My brain was utterly bewildered. I grasped nothing.

"Charlie," said Basil hoarsely, "can you believe in my common sense for four minutes?"

"Of course," I said, panting.

"Then help me to catch that man in front and hold him down. Do it at once when I say 'Now'. Now!"

We sprang on Sir Walter Cholmondiegh, and rolled that portly old gentleman on his back. He fought with a commendable valour, but we got him tight. I had not the remotest notion why. He had a splendid and full-blooded vigour; when he could not box he kicked, and we bound him; when he could not kick he shouted, and we gagged him. Then, by Basil's arrangement, we dragged him into a small court by the street side and waited. As I say, I had no notion why.

"I am sorry to incommode you," said Basil calmly out of the darkness; "but I have made an appointment here."

"An appointment!" I said blankly.

"Yes," he said, glancing calmly at the apoplectic old aristocrat gagged on the ground, whose eyes were starting impotently from his head. "I have made an appointment here with a thoroughly nice young fellow. An old friend. Jasper Drummond his name is--you may have met him this afternoon at the Beaumonts."

He can scarcely come though till the Beaumonts' dinner is over."

For I do not know how many hours we stood there calmly in the darkness. By the time those hours were over I had thoroughly made up my mind that the same thing had happened which had happened long ago on the bench of a British Court of Justice. Basil Grant had gone mad. I could imagine no other explanation of the facts, with the portly, purple-faced old country gentleman flung there strangled on the floor like a bundle of wood.

After about four hours a lean figure in evening dress rushed into the court. A glimpse of gaslight showed the red moustache and white face of Jasper Drummond.

"Mr Grant," he said blankly, "the thing is incredible. You were right; but what did you mean? All through this dinner-party, where dukes and duchesses and editors of Quarterlies had come especially to hear him, that extraordinary Wimpole kept perfectly silent. He didn't say a funny thing. He didn't say anything at all. What does it mean?"

Grant pointed to the portly old gentleman on the ground.

"That is what it means," he said.

Drummond, on observing a fat gentleman lying so calmly about the place, jumped back, as from a mouse.

"What?" he said weakly, "... what?"

Basil bent suddenly down and tore a paper out of Sir Walter's breastpocket, a paper which the baronet, even in his hampered state, seemed to make some effort to retain.

It was a large loose piece of white wrapping paper, which Mr Jasper Drummond read with a vacant eye and undisguised astonishment. As far as he could make out, it consisted of a series of questions and answers, or at least of remarks and replies, arranged in the manner of a catechism. The greater part of the document had been torn and obliterated in the struggle, but the termination remained. It ran as follows:

C. Says... Keep countenance.

W. Keep... British Museum.

C. Know whom talk... absurdities.

W. Never talk absurdities without

"What is it?" cried Drummond, flinging the paper down in a sort of final fury.

"What is it?" replied Grant, his voice rising into a kind of splendid chant. "What is it? It is a great new profession. A great new trade. A trifle immoral, I admit, but still great, like piracy."

"A new profession!" said the young man with the red moustache vaguely; "a new trade!"

"A new trade," repeated Grant, with a strange exultation, "a new profession! What a pity it is immoral."

"But what the deuce is it?" cried Drummond and I in a breath of blasphemy.

"It is," said Grant calmly, "the great new trade of the Organizer of Repartee. This fat old gentleman lying on the ground strikes you, as I have no doubt, as very stupid and very rich. Let me clear his character. He is, like ourselves, very clever and very poor. He is also not really at all fat; all that is stuffing. He is not particularly old, and his name is not Cholmondeliegh. He is a swindler, and a swindler of a perfectly delightful and novel kind. He hires himself out at dinner-parties to lead up to other people's repartees. According to a preconcerted scheme (which you may find on that piece of paper), he says the stupid things he has arranged for himself, and his client says the clever things arranged for him. In short, he allows himself to be scored off for a guinea a night."

"And this fellow Wimpole--" began Drummond with indignation.

"This fellow Wimpole," said Basil Grant, smiling, "will not be an intellectual rival in the future. He had some fine things, elegance and silvered hair, and so on. But the intellect is with our friend on the floor."

"That fellow," cried Drummond furiously, "that fellow ought to be in gaol."

"Not at all," said Basil indulgently; "he ought to be in the Club of Queer Trades."