

CHAPTER THE SECOND

THE PERSONALITY OF SIR ISAAC

§1

It is to be remarked that two facts, usually esteemed as supremely important in the life of a woman, do not seem to have affected Mr. Brumley's state of mind nearly so much as quite trivial personal details about Lady Harman. The first of these facts was the existence of the lady's four children, and the second, Sir Isaac.

Mr. Brumley did not think very much of either of these two facts; if he had they would have spoiled the portrait in his mind; and when he did think of them it was chiefly to think how remarkably little they were necessary to that picture's completeness.

He spent some little time however trying to recall exactly what it was she had said about her children. He couldn't now succeed in reproducing her words, if indeed it had been by anything so explicit as words that she had conveyed to him that she didn't feel her children were altogether hers. "Incidental results of the collapse of her girlhood," tried Mr. Brumley, "when she married Harman."

Expensive nurses, governesses--the best that money without prestige or

training could buy. And then probably a mother-in-law.

And as for Harman----?

There Mr. Brumley's mind desisted for sheer lack of material. Given this lady and that board and his general impression of Harman's refreshment and confectionery activity--the data were insufficient. A commonplace man no doubt, a tradesman, energetic perhaps and certainly a little brassy, successful by the chances of that economic revolution which everywhere replaces the isolated shop by the syndicated enterprise, irrationally conceited about it; a man perhaps ultimately to be pitied--with this young goddess finding herself.... Mr. Brumley's mind sat down comfortably to the more congenial theme of a young goddess finding herself, and it was only very gradually in the course of several days that the personality of Sir Isaac began to assume its proper importance in the scheme of his imaginings.

§2

In the afternoon as he went round the links with Horace Toomer he got some definite lights upon Sir Isaac.

His mind was so full of Lady Harman that he couldn't but talk of her visit. "I've a possible tenant for my cottage," he said as he and Toomer, full of the sunny contentment of English gentlemen who had

played a proper game in a proper manner, strolled back towards the clubhouse. "That man Harman."

"Not the International Stores and Staminial Bread man."

"Yes. Odd. Considering my hatred of his board."

"He ought to pay--anyhow," said Toomer. "They say he has a pretty wife and keeps her shut up."

"She came," said Brumley, neglecting to add the trifling fact that she had come alone.

"Pretty?"

"Charming, I thought."

"He's jealous of her. Someone was saying that the chauffeur has orders not to take her into London--only for trips in the country. They live in a big ugly house I'm told on Putney Hill. Did she in any way look--as though----?"

"Not in the least. If she isn't an absolutely straight young woman I've never set eyes on one."

"He," said Toomer, "is a disgusting creature."

"Morally?"

"No, but--generally. Spends his life ruining little tradesmen, for the fun of the thing. He's three parts an invalid with some obscure kidney disease. Sometimes he spends whole days in bed, drinking Contrexéville Water and planning the bankruptcy of decent men.... So the party made a knight of him."

"A party must have funds, Toomer."

"He didn't pay nearly enough. Blapton is an idiot with the honours. When it isn't Mrs. Blapton. What can you expect when ---- ----"

(But here Toomer became libellous.)

Toomer was an interesting type. He had a disagreeable disposition profoundly modified by a public school and university training. Two antagonistic forces made him. He was the spirit of scurrility incarnate, that was, as people say, innate; and by virtue of those moulding forces he was doing his best to be an English gentleman. That mysterious impulse which compels the young male to make objectionable imputations against seemly lives and to write rare inelegant words upon clean and decent things burnt almost intolerably within him, and equally powerful now was the gross craving he had acquired for personal association with all that is prominent, all that is successful, all that is of good

report. He had found his resultant in the censorious defence of established things. He conducted the British Critic, attacking with a merciless energy all that was new, all that was critical, all those fresh and noble tentatives that admit of unsavoury interpretations, and when the urgent Yahoo in him carried him below the pretentious dignity of his accustomed organ he would squirt out his bitterness in a little sham facetious bookstall volume with a bright cover and quaint woodcuts, in which just as many prominent people as possible were mentioned by name and a sauce of general absurdity could be employed to cover and, if need be, excuse particular libels. So he managed to relieve himself and get along. Harman was just on the border-line of the class he considered himself free to revile. Harman was an outsider and aggressive and new, one of Mrs. Blapton's knights, and of no particular weight in society; so far he was fair game; but he was not so new as he had been, he was almost through with the running of the Toomer gauntlet, he had a tremendous lot of money and it was with a modified vehemence that the distinguished journalist and humourist expatiated on his offensiveness to Mr. Brumley. He talked in a gentle, rather weary voice, that came through a moustache like a fringe of light tobacco.

"Personally I've little against the man. A wife too young for him and jealously guarded, but that's all to his credit. Nowadays. If it wasn't for his blatancy in his business.... And the knighthood.... I suppose he can't resist taking anything he can get. Bread made by wholesale and distributed like a newspaper can't, I feel, be the same thing as the loaf of your honest old-fashioned baker--each loaf made with individual

attention--out of wholesome English flour--hand-ground--with a personal touch for each customer. Still, everything drifts on to these hugger-mugger large enterprises; Chicago spreads over the world. One thing goes after another, tobacco, tea, bacon, drugs, bookselling. Decent homes destroyed right and left. Not Harman's affair, I suppose. The girls in his London tea-shops have of course to supplement their wages by prostitution--probably don't object to that nowadays considering the novels we have. And his effect on the landscape----Until they stopped him he was trying very hard to get Shakespear's Cliff at Dover. He did for a time have the Toad Rock at Tunbridge. Still"--something like a sigh escaped from Toomer,--"his private life appears to be almost as blameless as anybody's can be.... Thanks no doubt to his defective health. I made the most careful enquiries when his knighthood was first discussed. Someone has to. Before his marriage he seems to have lived at home with his mother. At Highbury. Very quietly and inexpensively."

"Then he's not the conventional vulgarian?"

"Much more of the Rockefeller type. Bad health, great concentration, organizing power.... Applied of course to a narrower range of business.... I'm glad I'm not a small confectioner in a town he wants to take up."

"He's--hard?"

"Merciless. Hasn't the beginnings of an idea of fair play.... None at all.... No human give or take.... Are you going to have tea here, or are you walking back now?"

§3

It was fully a week before Mr. Brumley heard anything more of Lady Harman. He began to fear that this shining furry presence would glorify Black Strand no more. Then came a telegram that filled him with the liveliest anticipations. It was worded: "Coming see cottage Saturday afternoon Harman...."

On Saturday morning Mr. Brumley dressed with an apparent ease and unusual care....

He worked rather discursively before lunch. His mind was busy picking up the ends of their previous conversation and going on with them to all sorts of bright knots, bows and elegant cats' cradling. He planned openings that might give her tempting opportunities of confidences if she wished to confide, and artless remarks and questions that would make for self-betrayal if she didn't. And he thought of her, he thought of her imaginatively, this secluded rare thing so happily come to him, who was so young, so frank and fresh and so unhappily married (he was sure) to a husband at least happily mortal. Yes, dear Reader, even on that opening morning Mr. Brumley's imagination, trained very largely upon

Victorian literature and belles-lettres, leapt forward to the very ending of this story.... We, of course, do nothing of the sort, our lot is to follow a more pedestrian route.... He lapsed into a vague series of meditations, slower perhaps but essentially similar, after his temperate palatable lunch.

He was apprised of the arrival of his visitor by the sudden indignant yaup followed by the general subdued uproar of a motor-car outside the front door, even before Clarence, this time amazingly prompt, assaulted the bell. Then the whole house was like that poem by Edgar Allan Poe, one magnificent texture of clangour.

At the first toot of the horn Mr. Brumley had moved swiftly into the bay, and screened partly by the life-size Venus of Milo that stood in the bay window, and partly by the artistic curtains, surveyed the glittering vehicle. He was first aware of a vast fur coat enclosing a lean grey-headed obstinate-looking man with a diabetic complexion who was fumbling with the door of the car and preventing Clarence's assistance. Mr. Brumley was able to remark that the gentleman's nose projected to a sharpened point, and that his thin-lipped mouth was all awry and had a kind of habitual compression, the while that his eyes sought eagerly for the other occupant of the car. She was unaccountably invisible. Could it be that that hood really concealed her? Could it be?...

The white-faced gentleman descended, relieved himself tediously of the

vast fur coat, handed it to Clarence and turned to the house. Reverentially Clarence placed the coat within the automobile and closed the door. Still the protesting mind of Mr. Brumley refused to believe!...

He heard the house-door open and Mrs. Rabbit in colloquy with a flat masculine voice. He heard his own name demanded and conceded. Then a silence, not the faintest suggestion of a feminine rustle, and then the sound of Mrs. Rabbit at the door-handle. Conviction stormed the last fastness of the disappointed author's mind.

"Oh damn!" he shouted with extreme fervour.

He had never imagined it was possible that Sir Isaac could come alone.

§4

But the house had to be let, and it had to be let to Sir Isaac Harman. In another moment an amiable though distinguished man of letters was in the hall interviewing the great entrepreneur.

The latter gentleman was perhaps three inches shorter than Mr. Brumley, his hair was grey-shot brown, his face clean-shaven, his features had a thin irregularity, and he was dressed in a neat brown suit with a necktie very exactly matching it. "Sir Isaac Harman?" said Mr. Brumley

with a note of gratification.

"That's it," said Sir Isaac. He appeared to be nervous and a little out of breath. "Come," he said, "just to look over it. Just to see it. Probably too small, but if it doesn't put you out----"

He blew out the skin of his face about his mouth a little.

"Delighted to see you anyhow," said Mr. Brumley, filling the world of unspoken things with singularly lurid curses.

"This. Nice little hall,--very," said Sir Isaac. "Pretty, that bit at the end. Many rooms are there?"

Mr. Brumley answered inexactly and meditated a desperate resignation of the whole job to Mrs. Rabbit. Then he made an effort and began to explain.

"That clock," said Sir Isaac interrupting in the dining-room, "is a fake."

Mr. Brumley made silent interrogations.

"Been there myself," said Sir Isaac. "They sell those brass fittings in Ho'bun."

They went upstairs together. When Mr. Brumley wasn't explaining or pointing out, Sir Isaac made a kind of whistling between his clenched teeth. "This bathroom wants refitting anyhow," he said abruptly. "I daresay Lady Harman would like that room with the bay--but it's all--small. It's really quite pretty; you've done it cleverly, but--the size of it! I'd have to throw out a wing. And that you know might spoil the style. That roof,--a gardener's cottage?... I thought it might be. What's this other thing here? Old barn. Empty? That might expand a bit. Couldn't do only just this anyhow."

He walked in front of Mr. Brumley downstairs and still emitting that faint whistle led the way into the garden. He seemed to regard Mr. Brumley merely as a source of answers to his questions, and a seller in process of preparation for an offer. It was clear he meant to make an offer. "It's not the house I should buy if I was alone in this," he said, "but Lady Harman's taken a fancy somehow. And it might be adapted...."

From first to last Mr. Brumley never said a single word about Euphemia and the young matrimony and all the other memories this house enshrined. He felt instinctively that it would not affect Sir Isaac one way or the other. He tried simply to seem indifferent to whether Sir Isaac bought the place or not. He tried to make it appear almost as if houses like this often happened to him, and interested him only in the most incidental manner. They had their proper price, he tried to convey, which of course no gentleman would underbid.

In the exquisite garden Sir Isaac said: "One might make a very pretty little garden of this--if one opened it out a bit."

And of the sunken rock-garden: "That might be dangerous of a dark night."

"I suppose," he said, indicating the hill of pines behind, "one could buy or lease some of that. If one wanted to throw it into the place and open out more.

"From my point of view," he said, "it isn't a house. It's----" He sought in his mind for an expression--"a Cottage Ornay."

This history declines to record either what Mr. Brumley said or what he did not say.

Sir Isaac surveyed the house thoughtfully for some moments from the turf edging of the great herbaceous border.

"How far," he asked, "is it from the nearest railway station?..."

Mr. Brumley gave details.

"Four miles. And an infrequent service? Nothing in any way suburban? Better to motor into Guildford and get the Express. H'm.... And what

sort of people do we get about here?"

Mr. Brumley sketched.

"Mildly horsey. That's not bad. No officers about?... Nothing nearer than Aldershot.... That's eleven miles, is it? H'm. I suppose there aren't any literary people about here, musicians or that kind of thing, no advanced people of that sort?"

"Not when I've gone," said Mr. Brumley, with the faintest flavour of humour.

Sir Isaac stared at him for a moment with eyes vacantly thoughtful.

"It mightn't be so bad," said Sir Isaac, and whistled a little between his teeth.

Mr. Brumley was suddenly minded to take his visitor to see the view and the effect of his board upon it. But he spoke merely of the view and left Sir Isaac to discover the board or not as he thought fit. As they ascended among the trees, the visitor was manifestly seized by some strange emotion, his face became very white, he gasped and blew for breath, he felt for his face with a nervous hand.

"Four thousand," he said suddenly. "An outside price."

"A minimum," said Mr. Brumley, with a slight quickening of the pulse.

"You won't get three eight," gasped Sir Isaac.

"Not a business man, but my agent tells me----" panted Mr. Brumley.

"Three eight," said Sir Isaac.

"We're just coming to the view," said Mr. Brumley. "Just coming to the view."

"Practically got to rebuild the house," said Sir Isaac.

"There!" said Mr. Brumley, and waved an arm widely.

Sir Isaac regarded the prospect with a dissatisfied face. His pallor had given place to a shiny, flushed appearance, his nose, his ears, and his cheeks were pink. He blew his face out, and seemed to be studying the landscape for defects. "This might be built over at any time," he complained.

Mr. Brumley was reassuring.

For a brief interval Sir Isaac's eyes explored the countryside vaguely, then his expression seemed to concentrate and run together to a point.

"H'm," he said.

"That board," he remarked, "quite wrong there."

"Well!" said Mr. Brumley, too surprised for coherent speech.

"Quite," said Sir Isaac Harman. "Don't you see what's the matter?"

Mr. Brumley refrained from an eloquent response.

"They ought to be," Sir Isaac went on, "white and a sort of green. Like the County Council notices on Hampstead Heath. So as to blend.... You see, an ad. that hits too hard is worse than no ad. at all. It leaves a dislike.... Advertisements ought to blend. It ought to seem as though all this view were saying it. Not just that board. Now suppose we had a shade of very light brown, a kind of light khaki----"

He turned a speculative eye on Mr. Brumley as if he sought for the effect of this latter suggestion on him.

"If the whole board was invisible----" said Mr. Brumley.

Sir Isaac considered it. "Just the letters showing," he said. "No,--that would be going too far in the other direction."

He made a faint sucking noise with his lips and teeth as he surveyed the landscape and weighed this important matter....

"Queer how one gets ideas," he said at last, turning away. "It was my wife told me about that board."

He stopped to survey the house from the exact point of view his wife had taken nine days before. "I wouldn't give this place a second thought," said Sir Isaac, "if it wasn't for Lady Harman."

He confided. "She wants a week-end cottage. But I don't see why it should be a week-end cottage. I don't see why it shouldn't be made into a nice little country house. Compact, of course. By using up that barn."

He inhaled three bars of a tune. "London," he explained, "doesn't suit Lady Harman."

"Health?" asked Mr. Brumley, all alert.

"It isn't her health exactly," Sir Isaac dropped out. "You see--she's a young woman. She gets ideas."

"You know," he continued, "I'd like to have a look at that barn again. If we develop that--and a sort of corridor across where the shrubs are--and ran out offices...."

Mr. Brumley's mind was still vigorously struggling with the flaming implications of Sir Isaac's remark that Lady Harman "got ideas," and Sir Isaac was gently whistling his way towards an offer of three thousand nine hundred when they came down out of the pines into the path along the edge of the herbaceous border. And then Mr. Brumley became aware of an effect away between the white-stemmed trees towards the house as if the Cambridge boat-race crew was indulging in a vigorous scrimmage. Drawing nearer this resolved itself into the fluent contours of Lady Beach-Mandarin, dressed in sky-blue and with a black summer straw hat larger than ever and trimmed effusively with marguerites.

"Here," said Sir Isaac, "can't I get off? You've got a friend."

"You must have some tea," said Mr. Brumley, who wanted to suggest that they should agree to Sir Isaac's figure of three thousand eight hundred, but not as pounds but guineas. It seemed to him a suggestion that might prove insidiously attractive. "It's a charming lady, my friend Lady Beach-Mandarin. She'll be delighted----"

"I don't think I can," said Sir Isaac. "Not in the habit--social occasions."

His face expressed a panic terror of this gallant full-rigged lady ahead of them.

"But you see now," said Mr. Brumley, with a detaining grip, "it's unavoidable."

And the next moment Sir Isaac was mumbling his appreciations of the introduction.

I must admit that Lady Beach-Mandarin was almost as much to meet as one can meet in a single human being, a broad abundant billowing personality with a taste for brims, streamers, pennants, panniers, loose sleeves, sweeping gestures, top notes and the like that made her altogether less like a woman than an occasion of public rejoicing. Even her large blue eyes projected, her chin and brows and nose all seemed racing up to the front of her as if excited by the clarion notes of her abundant voice, and the pinkness of her complexion was as exuberant as her manners. Exuberance--it was her word. She had evidently been a big, bouncing, bright gaminisque girl at fifteen, and very amusing and very much admired; she had liked the rôle and she had not so much grown older as suffered enlargement--a very considerable enlargement.

"Ah!" she cried, "and so I've caught you at home, Mr. Brumley! And, poor dear, you're at my mercy." And she shook both his hands with both of hers.

That was before Mr. Brumley introduced Sir Isaac, a thing he did so soon as he could get one of his hands loose and wave a surviving digit or so

at that gentleman.

"You see, Sir Isaac," she said, taking him in, in the most generous way; "I and Mr. Brumley are old friends. We knew each other of yore. We have our jokes."

Sir Isaac seemed to feel the need of speech but got no further than a useful all-round noise.

"And one of them is that when I want him to do the least little thing for me he hides away! Always. By a sort of instinct. It's such a Small thing, Sir Isaac."

Sir Isaac was understood to say vaguely that they always did. But he had become very indistinct.

"Aren't I always at your service?" protested Mr. Brumley with a responsive playfulness. "And I don't even know what it is you want."

Lady Beach-Mandarin, addressing herself exclusively to Sir Isaac, began a tale of a Shakespear Bazaar she was holding in an adjacent village, and how she knew Mr. Brumley (naughty man) meant to refuse to give her autographed copies of his littlest book for the Book Stall she was organizing. Mr. Brumley confuted her gaily and generously. So discoursing they made their way to the verandah where Lady Harman had so lately "poured."

Sir Isaac was borne along upon the lady's stream of words in a state of mulish reluctance, nodding, saying "Of course" and similar phrases, and wishing he was out of it all with an extreme manifestness. He drank his tea with unmistakable discomfort, and twice inserted into the conversation an entirely irrelevant remark that he had to be going. But Lady Beach-Mandarin had her purposes with him and crushed these quivering tentatives.

Lady Beach-Mandarin had of course like everybody else at that time her own independent movement in the great national effort to create an official British Theatre upon the basis of William Shakespear, and she saw in the as yet unenlisted resources of Sir Isaac strong possibilities of reinforcement of her own particular contribution to the great Work. He was manifestly shy and sulky and disposed to bolt at the earliest possible moment, and so she set herself now with a swift and concentrated combination of fascination and urgency to commit him to participations. She flattered and cajoled and bribed. She was convinced that even to be called upon by Lady Beach-Mandarin is no light privilege for these new commercial people, and so she made no secret of her intention of decorating the hall of his large but undistinguished house in Putney, with her redeeming pasteboard. She appealed to the instances of Venice and Florence to show that "such men as you, Sir Isaac," who control commerce and industry, have always been the guardians and patrons of art. And who more worthy of patronage than William Shakespear? Also she said that men of such enormous wealth as

his owed something to their national tradition. "You have to pay your footing, Sir Isaac," she said with impressive vagueness.

"Putting it in round figures," said Sir Isaac, suddenly and with a white gleam of animosity in his face, the animosity of a trapped animal at the sight of its captors, "what does coming on your Committee mean, Lady Beach-Mandarin?"

"It's your name we want," said the lady, "but I'm sure you'd not be ungenerous. The tribute success owes the arts."

"A hundred?" he threw out,--his ears red.

"Guineas," breathed Lady Beach-Mandarin with a lofty sweetness of consent.

He stood up hastily as if to escape further exaction, and the lady rose too.

"And you'll let me call on Lady Harman," she said, honestly doing her part in the bargain.

"Can't keep the car waiting," was what Brumley could distinguish in his reply.

"I expect you have a perfectly splendid car, Sir Isaac," said Lady

Beach-Mandarin, drawing him out. "Quite the modernest thing."

Sir Isaac replied with the reluctance of an Income Tax Return that it was a forty-five Rolls Royce, good of course but nothing amazing.

"We must see it," she said, and turned his retreat into a procession.

She admired the car, she admired the colour of the car, she admired the lamps of the car and the door of the car and the little fittings of the car. She admired the horn. She admired the twist of the horn. She admired Clarence and the uniform of Clarence and she admired and coveted the great fur coat that he held ready for his employer. (But if she had it, she said, she would wear the splendid fur outside to show every little bit of it.) And when the car at last moved forward and tooted--she admired the note--and vanished softly and swiftly through the gates, she was left in the porch with Mr. Brumley still by sheer inertia admiring and envying. She admired Sir Isaac's car number Z 900. (Such an easy one to remember!) Then she stopped abruptly, as one might discover that the water in the bathroom was running to waste and turn it off.

She had a cynicism as exuberant as the rest of her.

"Well," she said, with a contented sigh and an entire flattening of her tone, "I laid it on pretty thick that time.... I wonder if he'll send me that hundred guineas or whether I shall have to remind him of it...."

Her manner changed again to that of a gigantic gamin. "I mean to have that money," she said with bright determination and round eyes....

She reflected and other thoughts came to her. "Plutocracy," she said, "is perfectly detestable, don't you think so, Mr. Brumley?" ... And then, "I can't imagine how a man who deals in bread and confectionery can manage to go about so completely half-baked."

"He's a very remarkable type," said Mr. Brumley.

He became urgent: "I do hope, dear Lady Beach-Mandarin, you will contrive to call on Lady Harman. She is--in relation to that--quite the most interesting woman I have seen."

§6

Presently as they paced the croquet lawn together, the preoccupation of Mr. Brumley's mind drew their conversation back to Lady Harman.

"I wish," he repeated, "you would go and see these people. She's not at all what you might infer from him."

"What could one infer about a wife from a man like that? Except that she'd have a lot to put up with."

"You know,--she's a beautiful person, tall, slender, dark...."

Lady Beach-Mandarin turned her full blue eye upon him.

"Now!" she said archly.

"I'm interested in the incongruity."

Lady Beach-Mandarin's reply was silent and singular. She compressed her lips very tightly, fixed her eye firmly on Mr. Brumley's, lifted her finger to the level of her left eyelash, and then shook it at him very deliberately five times. Then with a little sigh and a sudden and complete restoration of manner she remarked that never in any year before had she seen peonies quite so splendid. "I've a peculiar sympathy with peonies," she said. "They're so exactly my style."