

## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### LADY HARMAN AT HOME

#### §1

Exactly three weeks after that first encounter between Lady Beach-Mandarin and Sir Isaac Harman, Mr. Brumley found himself one of a luncheon party at that lady's house in Temperley Square and talking very freely and indiscreetly about the Harmans.

Lady Beach-Mandarin always had her luncheons in a family way at a large round table so that nobody could get out of her range, and she insisted upon conversation being general, except for her mother who was impenetrably deaf and the Swiss governess of her only daughter Phyllis who was incomprehensible in any European tongue. The mother was incalculably old and had been a friend of Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset; she maintained an intermittent monologue about the private lives of those great figures; nobody paid the slightest attention to her but one felt she enriched the table with an undertow of literary associations. A small dark stealthy butler and a convulsive boy with hair (apparently) taking the place of eyes waited. On this occasion Lady Beach-Mandarin had gathered together two cousins, maiden ladies from Perth, wearing valiant hats, Toomer the wit and censor, and Miss Sharsper the novelist (whom Toomer detested), a gentleman named Roper

whom she had invited under a misapprehension that he was the Arctic Roper, and Mr. Brumley. She had tried Mr. Roper with questions about penguins, seals, cold and darkness, icebergs and glaciers, Captain Scott, Doctor Cook and the shape of the earth, and all in vain, and feeling at last that something was wrong, she demanded abruptly whether Mr. Brumley had sold his house.

"I'm selling it," said Mr. Brumley, "by almost imperceptible degrees."

"He haggles?"

"Haggles and higgles. He higgles passionately. He goes white and breaks into a cold perspiration. He wants me now to include the gardener's tools--in whatever price we agree upon."

"A rich man like that ought to be easy and generous," said Lady Beach-Mandarin.

"Then he wouldn't be a rich man like that," said Mr. Toomer.

"But doesn't it distress you highly, Mr. Brumley," one of the Perth ladies asked, "to be leaving Euphemia's Home to strangers? The man may go altering it."

"That--that weighs with me very much," said Mr. Brumley, recalled to his professions. "There--I put my trust in Lady Harman."

"You've seen her again?" asked Lady Beach-Mandarin.

"Yes. She came with him--a few days ago. That couple interests me more and more. So little akin."

"There's eighteen years between them," said Toomer.

"It's one of those cases," began Mr. Brumley with a note of scientific detachment, "where one is really tempted to be ultra-feminist. It's clear, he uses every advantage. He's her owner, her keeper, her obstinate insensitive little tyrant.... And yet there's a sort of effect, as though nothing was decided.... As if she was only just growing up."

"They've been married six or seven years," said Toomer. "She was just eighteen."

"They went over the house together and whenever she spoke he contradicted her with a sort of vicious playfulness. Tried to poke clumsy fun at her. Called her 'Lady Harman.' Only it was quite evident that what she said stuck in his mind.... Very queer--interesting people."

"I wouldn't have anyone allowed to marry until they were five-and-twenty," said Lady Beach-Mandarin.

"Sweet seventeen sometimes contrives to be very marriageable," said the gentleman named Roper.

"Sweet seventeen must contrive to wait," said Lady Beach-Mandarin.

"Sweet fourteen has to--and when I was fourteen--I was Ardent! There's no earthly objection to a little harmless flirtation of course. It's the marrying."

"You'd conduce to romance," said Miss Sharsper, "anyhow. Eighteen won't bear restriction and everyone would begin by eloping--illegally."

"I'd put them back," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "Oh! remorselessly."

Mr. Roper, who was more and more manifestly not the Arctic one, remarked that she would "give the girls no end of an adolescence...."

Mr. Brumley did not attend very closely to the subsequent conversation. His mind had gone back to Black Strand and the second visit that Lady Harman, this time under her natural and proper protection, had paid him. A little thread from the old lady's discourse drifted by him. She had scented marriage in the air and she was saying, "of course they ought to have let Victor Hugo marry over and over again. He would have made it all so beautiful. He could throw a Splendour over--over almost anything." Mr. Brumley sank out of attention altogether. It was so difficult to express his sense of Lady Harman as a captive, enclosed but

unsubdued. She had been as open and shining as a celandine flower in the sunshine on that first invasion, but on the second it had been like overcast weather and her starry petals had been shut and still. She hadn't been in the least subdued or effaced, but closed, inaccessible to conversational bees, that astonishing honey of trust and easy friendship had been hidden in a dignified impenetrable reserve. She had had the effect of being not so much specially shut against Mr. Brumley as habitually shut against her husband, as a protection against his continual clumsy mental interferences. And once when Sir Isaac had made a sudden allusion to price Mr. Brumley had glanced at her and met her eyes....

"Of course," he said, coming up to the conversational surface again, "a woman like that is bound to fight her way out."

"Queen Mary!" cried Miss Sharsper. "Fight her way out!"

"Queen Mary!" said Mr. Brumley, "No!--Lady Harman."

"I was talking of Queen Mary," said Miss Sharsper.

"And Mr. Brumley was thinking of Lady Harman!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin.

"Well," said Mr. Brumley, "I confess I do think about her. She seems to me to be so typical in many ways of--of everything that is weak in the

feminine position. As a type--yes, she's perfect."

"I've never seen this lady," said Miss Sharsper. "Is she beautiful?"

"I've not seen her myself yet," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "She's Mr. Brumley's particular discovery."

"You haven't called?" he asked with a faint reproach.

"But I've been going to--oh! tremendously. And you revive all my curiosity. Why shouldn't some of us this very afternoon----?"

She caught at her own passing idea and held it. "Let's Go," she cried.

"Let's visit the wife of this Ogre, the last of the women in captivity.

We'll take the big car and make a party and call en masse."

Mr. Toomer protested he had no morbid curiosities.

"But you, Susan?"

Miss Sharsper declared she would love to come. Wasn't it her business to study out-of-the-way types? Mr. Roper produced a knowing sort of engagement--"I'm provided for already, Lady Beach-Mandarin," he said, and the cousins from Perth had to do some shopping.

"Then we three will be the expedition," said the hostess. "And

afterwards if we survive we'll tell you our adventures. It's a house on Putney Hill, isn't it, where this Christian maiden, so to speak, is held captive? I've had her in my mind, but I've always intended to call with Agatha Alimony; she's so inspiring to down-trodden women."

"Not exactly down-trodden," said Mr. Brumley, "not down-trodden. That's what's so curious about it."

"And what shall we do when we get there?" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin. "I feel we ought to do something more than call. Can't we carry her off right away, Mr. Brumley? I want to go right in to her and say 'Look here! I'm on your side. Your husband's a tyrant. I'm help and rescue. I'm all that a woman ought to be--fine and large. Come out from under that unworthy man's heel!'"

"Suppose she isn't at all the sort of person you seem to think she is," said Miss Sharsper. "And suppose she came!"

"Suppose she didn't," reflected Mr. Roper.

"I seem to see your flight," said Mr. Toomer. "And the newspaper placards and head-lines. 'Lady Beach-Mandarin elopes with the wife of an eminent confectioner. She is stopped at the landing stage by the staff of the Dover Branch establishment. Recapture of the fugitive after a hot struggle. Brumley, the eminent littérateur, stunned by a spent bun...'"

"We're all talking great nonsense," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "But anyhow we'll make our call. And I know!--I'll make her accept an invitation to lunch without him."

"If she won't?" threw out Mr. Roper.

"I will," said Lady Beach-Mandarin with roguish determination. "And if I can't----"

"Not ask him too!" protested Mr. Brumley.

"Why not get her to come to your Social Friends meeting," said Miss Sharsper.

§2

When Mr. Brumley found himself fairly launched upon this expedition he had the grace to feel compunction. The Harmans, he perceived, had inadvertently made him the confidant of their domestic discords and to betray them to these others savoured after all of treachery. And besides much as he had craved to see Lady Harman again, he now realized he didn't in the least want to see her in association with the exuberant volubility of Lady Beach-Mandarin and the hard professional observation, so remarkably like the ferrule of an umbrella being poked

with a noiseless persistence into one's eye, of Miss Sharsper. And as he thought these afterthoughts Lady Beach-Mandarin's chauffeur darted and dodged and threaded his way with an alacrity that was almost distressing to Putney.

They ran over the ghost of Swinburne, at the foot of Putney Hill,--or perhaps it was only the rhythm of the engine changed for a moment, and in a couple of minutes more they were outside the Harman residence. "Here we are!" said Lady Beach-Mandarin, more capaciously gaminesque than ever. "We've done it now."

Mr. Brumley had an impression of a big house in the distended stately-homes-of-England style and very necessarily and abundantly covered by creepers and then he was assisting the ladies to descend and the three of them were waiting clustered in the ample Victorian doorway. For some little interval there came no answer to the bell Mr. Brumley had rung, but all three of them had a sense of hurried, furtive and noiseless readjustments in progress behind the big and bossy oak door. Then it opened and a very large egg-shaped butler with sandy whiskers appeared and looked down himself at them. There was something paternal about this man, his professional deference was touched by the sense of ultimate responsibility. He seemed to consider for a moment whether he should permit Lady Harman to be in, before he conceded that she was.

They were ushered through a hall that resembled most of the halls in the world, it was dominated by a handsome oak staircase and scarcely gave

Miss Sharsper a point, and then across a creation of the Victorian architect, a massive kind of conservatory with classical touches--there was an impluvium in the centre and there were arches hung with manifestly costly Syrian rugs, into a large apartment looking through four French windows upon a verandah and a large floriferous garden. At a sideways glance it seemed a very pleasant garden indeed. The room itself was like the rooms of so many prosperous people nowadays; it had an effect of being sedulously and yet irrelevantly over-furnished. It had none of the large vulgarity that Mr. Brumley would have considered proper to a wealthy caterer, but it confessed a compilation of "pieces" very carefully authenticated. Some of them were rather splendid "pieces"; three big bureaus burly and brassy dominated it; there was a Queen Anne cabinet, some exquisite coloured engravings, an ormolu mirror and a couple of large French vases that set Miss Sharsper, who had a keen eye for this traffic, confusedly cataloguing. And a little incongruously in the midst of this exhibit, stood Lady Harman, as if she was trying to conceal the fact that she too was a visitor, in a creamy white dress and dark and defensive and yet entirely unabashed.

The great butler gave his large vague impression of Lady Beach-Mandarin's name, and stood aside and withdrew.

"I've heard so much of you," said Lady Beach-Mandarin advancing with hand upraised. "I had to call. Mr. Brumley----"

"Lady Beach-Mandarin met Sir Isaac at Black Strand," Mr. Brumley

intervened to explain.

Miss Sharsper was as it were introduced by default.

"My vividest anticipations outdone," said Lady Beach-Mandarin, squeezing Lady Harman's fingers with enthusiasm. "And what a charming garden you have, and what a delightful situation! Such air! And on the very verge of London, high, on this delightful literary hill, and ready at any moment to swoop in that enviable great car of yours. I suppose you come a great deal into London, Lady Harman?"

"No," reflected Lady Harman, "not very much." She seemed to weigh the accuracy of this very carefully. "No," she added in confirmation.

"But you should, you ought to; it's your duty. You've no right to hide away from us. I was telling Sir Isaac. We look to him, we look to you. You've no right to bury your talents away from us; you who are rich and young and brilliant and beautiful----"

"But if I go on I shall begin to flatter you," said Lady Beach-Mandarin with a delicious smile. "I've begun upon Sir Isaac already. I've made him promise a hundred guineas and his name to the Shakespear Dinners Society,--nothing he didn't mention eaten (you know) and all the profits to the National movement--and I want your name too. I know you'll let us have your name too. Grant me that, and I'll subside into the ordinariest of callers."

"But surely; isn't his name enough?" asked Lady Harman.

"Without yours, it's only half a name!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin. "If it were a business thing----! Different of course. But on my list, I'm like dear old Queen Victoria you know, the wives must come too."

"In that case," hesitated Lady Harman.... "But really I think Sir Isaac----"

She stopped. And then Mr. Brumley had a psychic experience. It seemed to him as he stood observing Lady Harman with an entirely unnecessary and unpremeditated intentness, that for the briefest interval her attention flashed over Lady Beach-Mandarin's shoulder to the end verandah window; and following her glance, he saw--and then he did not see--the arrested figure, the white face of Sir Isaac, bearing an expression in which anger and horror were extraordinarily intermingled. If it was Sir Isaac he dodged back with amazing dexterity; if it was a phantom of the living it vanished with an air of doing that. Without came the sound of a flower-pot upset and a faint expletive. Mr. Brumley looked very quickly at Lady Beach-Mandarin, who was entirely unconscious of anything but her own uncoiling and enveloping eloquence, and as quickly at Miss Sharsper. But Miss Sharsper was examining a blackish bureau through her glasses as though she were looking for birthmarks and meant if she could find one to claim the piece as her own long-lost connection. With a mild but gratifying sense of exclusive complicity Mr. Brumley reverted to Lady

Harman's entire self-possession.

"But, dear Lady Harman, it's entirely unnecessary you should consult him,--entirely," Lady Beach-Mandarin was saying.

"I'm sure," said Mr. Brumley with a sense that somehow he had to intervene, "that Sir Isaac would not possibly object. I'm sure that if Lady Harman consults him----"

The sandy-whiskered butler appeared hovering.

"Shall I place the tea-things in the garden, me lady?" he asked, in the tone of one who knows the answer.

"Oh please in the garden!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin. "Please! And how delightful to have a garden, a London garden, in which one can have tea. Without being smothered in blacks. The south-west wind. The dear English wind. All your blacks come to us, you know."

She led the way upon the verandah. "Such a wonderful garden! The space, the breadth! Why! you must have Acres!"

She surveyed the garden--comprehensively; her eye rested for a moment on a distant patch of black that ducked suddenly into a group of lilacs.

"Is dear Sir Isaac at home?" she asked.

"He's very uncertain," said Lady Harman, with a quiet readiness that pleased Mr. Brumley. "Yes, Snagsby, please, under the big cypress. And tell my mother and sister."

Lady Beach-Mandarin having paused a moment or so upon the verandah admiring the garden as a whole, now prepared to go into details. She gathered her ample skirts together and advanced into the midst of the large lawn, with very much of the effect of a fleet of captive balloons dragging their anchors. Mr. Brumley followed, as it were in attendance upon her and Lady Harman. Miss Sharsper, after one last hasty glance at the room, rather like the last hasty glance of a still unprepared schoolboy at his book, came behind with her powers of observation strainingly alert.

Mr. Brumley was aware of a brief mute struggle between the two ladies of title. It was clear that Lady Harman would have had them go to the left, to where down a vista of pillar roses a single large specimen cypress sounded a faint but recognizable Italian note, and he did his loyal best to support her, but Lady Beach-Mandarin's attraction to that distant clump of lilac on the right was equally great and much more powerful. She flowed, a great and audible tide of socially influential womanhood, across the green spaces of the garden, and drew the others with her. And it seemed to Mr. Brumley--not that he believed his eyes--that beyond those lilacs something ran out, something black that crouched close to the ground and went very swiftly. It flashed like an arrow across a further space of flower-bed, dropped to the ground, became two

agitatedly receding boot soles and was gone. Had it ever been? He glanced at Lady Harman, but she was looking back with the naïve anxiety of a hostess to her cypress,--at Lady Beach-Mandarin, but she was proliferating compliments and decorative scrolls and flourishes like the engraved frontispiece to a seventeenth-century book.

"I know I'm inordinately curious," said Lady Beach-Mandarin, "but gardens are my Joy. I want to go into every corner of this. Peep into everything. And I feel somehow"--and here she urged a smile on Lady Harman's attention--"that I shan't begin to know you, until I know all your environment."

She turned the flank of the lilacs as she said these words and advanced in echelon with a stately swiftness upon the laurels beyond.

Lady Harman said there was nothing beyond but sycamores and the fence, but Lady Beach-Mandarin would press on through a narrow path that pierced the laurel hedge, in order, she said, that she might turn back and get the whole effect of the grounds.

And so it was they discovered the mushroom shed.

"A mushroom shed!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin. "And if we look in--shall we see hosts and regiments of mushrooms? I must--I must."

"I think it is locked," said Lady Harman.

Mr. Brumley darted forward; tried the door and turned quickly. "It's locked," he said and barred Lady Beach-Mandarin's advance.

"And besides," said Lady Harman, "there's no mushrooms there. They won't come up. It's one of my husband's--annoyances."

Lady Beach-Mandarin had turned round and now surveyed the house. "What a splendid idea," she cried, "that wistaria! All mixed with the laburnum. I don't think I have ever seen such a charming combination of blossoms!"

The whole movement of the party swept about and faced cypress-ward. Away there the sandy-whiskered butler and a footman and basket chairs and a tea-table, with a shining white cloth, and two ladies were now grouping themselves....

But the mind of Mr. Brumley gave little heed to these things. His mind was full of a wonder, and the wonder was this, that the mushroom shed had behaved like a living thing. The door of the mushroom shed was not locked and in that matter he had told a lie. The door of the mushroom shed had been unlocked quite recently and the key and padlock had been dropped upon the ground. And when he had tried to open the mushroom shed it had first of all yielded to his hand and then it had closed again with great strength--exactly as a living mussel will behave if one takes it unawares. But in addition to this passionate contraction the mushroom shed had sworn in a hoarse whisper and breathed hard, which is more than

your mussel can do....

§3

Mr. Brumley's interest in Lady Harman was to be almost too crowded by detail before that impulsive call was over. Superposed upon the mystery of the mushroom shed was the vivid illumination of Lady Harman by her mother and sister. They had an effect of having reluctantly become her social inferiors for her own good; the mother--her name he learnt was Mrs. Sawbridge--had all Lady Harman's tall slenderness, but otherwise resembled her only in the poise of her neck and an occasional gesture; she was fair and with a kind of ignoble and premeditated refinement in her speech and manner. She was dressed with the restraint of a prolonged and attenuated widowhood, in a rich and complicatedly quiet dress of mauve and grey. She was obviously a transitory visitor and not so much taking the opulence about her and particularly the great butler for granted as pointedly and persistently ignoring it in an effort to seem to take it for granted. The sister, on the other hand, had Lady Harman's pale darkness but none of her fineness of line. She missed altogether that quality of fineness. Her darkness was done with a quite perceptible heaviness, her dignity passed into solidity and her profile was, with an entire want of hesitation, handsome. She was evidently the elder by a space of some years and she was dressed with severity in grey.

These two ladies seemed to Mr. Brumley to offer a certain resistance of

spirit to the effusion of Lady Beach-Mandarin, rather as two small anchored vessels might resist the onset of a great and foaming tide, but after a time it was clear they admired her greatly. His attention was, however, a little distracted from them by the fact that he was the sole representative of the more serviceable sex among five women and so in duty bound to stand by Lady Harman and assist with various handings and offerings. The tea equipage was silver and not only magnificent but, as certain quick movements of Miss Sharsper's eyes and nose at its appearance betrayed, very genuine and old.

Lady Beach-Mandarin having praised the house and garden all over again to Mrs. Sawbridge, and having praised the cypress and envied the tea things, resumed her efforts to secure the immediate establishment of permanent social relations with Lady Harman. She reverted to the question of the Shakespear Dinners Society and now with a kind of large skilfulness involved Mrs. Sawbridge in her appeal. "Won't you come on our Committee?" said Lady Beach-Mandarin.

Mrs. Sawbridge gave a pinched smile and said she was only staying in London for quite a little time, and when pressed admitted that there seemed no need whatever for consulting Sir Isaac upon so obviously foregone a conclusion as Lady Harman's public adhesion to the great movement.

"I shall put his hundred guineas down to Sir Isaac and Lady Harman," said Lady Beach-Mandarin with an air of conclusion, "and now I want to

know, dear Lady Harman, whether we can't have you on our Committee of administration. We want--just one other woman to complete us."

Lady Harman could only parry with doubts of her ability.

"You ought to go on, Ella," said Miss Sawbridge suddenly, speaking for the first time and in a manner richly suggestive of great principles at stake.

"Ella," thought the curious mind of Mr. Brumley. "And is that Eleanor now or Ellen or--is there any other name that gives one Ella? Simply Ella?"

"But what should I have to do?" fenced Lady Harman, resisting but obviously attracted.

Lady Beach-Mandarin invented a lengthy paraphrase for prompt acquiescences.

"I shall be chairwoman," she crowned it with. "I can so easily see you through as they say."

"Ella doesn't go out half enough," said Miss Sawbridge suddenly to Miss Sharsper, who was regarding her with furtive intensity--as if she was surreptitiously counting her features.

Miss Sharsper caught in mid observation started and collected her mind.

"One ought to go out," she said. "Certainly."

"And independently," said Miss Sawbridge, with meaning.

"Oh independently!" assented Miss Sharsper. It was evident she would now have to watch her chance and begin counting all over again from the beginning.

Mr. Brumley had an impression that Mrs. Sawbridge had said something quite confidential in his ear. He turned perplexed.

"Such charming weather," the lady repeated in the tone of one who doesn't wish so pleasant a little secret to be too generally discussed.

"Never known a better summer," agreed Mr. Brumley.

And then all these minor eddies were submerged in Lady Beach-Mandarin's advance towards her next step, an invitation to lunch. "There," said she, "I'm not Victorian. I always separate husbands and wives--by at least a week. You must come alone."

It was clear to Mr. Brumley that Lady Harman wanted to come alone--and was going to accept, and equally clear that she and her mother and sister regarded this as a very daring thing to do. And when that was settled Lady Beach-Mandarin went on to the altogether easier topic of

her Social Friends, a society of smart and influential women; who devoted a certain fragment of time every week to befriending respectable girls employed in London, in a briskly amiable manner, having them to special teas, having them to special evenings with special light refreshments, knowing their names as far as possible and asking about their relations, and generally making them feel that Society was being very frank and amiable to them and had an eye on them and meant them well, and was better for them than socialism and radicalism and revolutionary ideas. To this also Lady Harman it seemed was to come. It had an effect to Mr. Brumley's imagination as if the painted scene of that lady's life was suddenly bursting out into open doors--everywhere.

"Many of them are quite lady-like," echoed Mrs. Sawbridge suddenly, picking up the whole thing instantly and speaking over her tea cup in that quasi-confidential tone of hers to Mr. Brumley.

"Of course they are mostly quite dreadfully Sweated," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "Especially in the confectionery----" She thought of her position in time. "In the inferior class of confectioners' establishments," she said and then hurried on to: "Of course when you come to lunch,--Agatha Alimony. I'm most anxious for you and her to meet."

"Is that the Agatha Alimony?" asked Miss Sawbridge abruptly.

"The one and only," said Lady Beach-Mandarin, flashing a smile at her.

"And what a marvel she is! I do so want you to know her, Lady Harman. She'd be a Revelation to you...."

Everything had gone wonderfully so far. "And now," said Lady Beach-Mandarin, thrusting forward a face of almost exaggerated motherliness and with an unwonted tenderness suffusing her voice, "show me the Chicks."

There was a brief interrogative pause.

"Your Chicks," expanded Lady Beach-Mandarin, on the verge of crooning. "Your little Chicks."

"Oh!" cried Lady Harman understanding. "The children."

"Lucky woman!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin. "Yes."

"One hasn't begun to be friends," she added, "until one has seen--them...."

"So true," Mrs. Sawbridge confided to Mr. Brumley with a look that almost languished....

"Certainly," said Mr. Brumley, "rather."

He was a little distraught because he had just seen Sir Isaac step

forward in a crouching attitude from beyond the edge of the lilacs, peer at the tea-table with a serpent-like intentness and then dart back convulsively into cover....

If Lady Beach-Mandarin saw him Mr. Brumley felt that anything might happen.

§4

Lady Beach-Mandarin always let herself go about children.

It would be unjust to the general richness of Lady Beach-Mandarin to say that she excelled herself on this occasion. On all occasions Lady Beach-Mandarin excelled herself. But never had Mr. Brumley noted quite so vividly Lady Beach-Mandarin's habitual self-surpassingness. She helped him, he felt, to understand better those stories of great waves that sweep in from the ocean and swamp islands and devastate whole littorals. She poured into the Harman nursery and filled every corner of it. She rose to unprecedented heights therein. It seemed to him at moments that they ought to make marks on the walls, like the marks one sees on the houses in the lower valley of the Main to record the more memorable floods. "The dears!" she cried: "the little things!" before the nursery door was fairly opened.

(There should have been a line for that at once on the jamb just below

the lintel.)

The nursery revealed itself as a large airy white and green apartment entirely free from old furniture and done rather in the style of an æsthetically designed hospital, with a tremendously humorous decorative frieze of cocks and puppies and very bright-coloured prints on the walls. The dwarfish furniture was specially designed in green-stained wood and the floor was of cork carpet diversified by white furry rugs. The hospital quality was enhanced by the uniformed and disciplined appearance of the middle-aged and reliable head nurse and her subdued but intelligent subordinate.

Three sturdy little girls, with a year step between each of them, stood up to receive Lady Beach-Mandarin's invasion; an indeterminate baby sprawled regardless of its dignity on a rug. "Aah!" cried Lady Beach-Mandarin, advancing in open order. "Come and be hugged, you dears! Come and be hugged!" Before she knelt down and enveloped their shrinking little persons Mr. Brumley was able to observe that they were pretty little things, but not the beautiful children he could have imagined from Lady Harman. Peeping through their infantile delicacy, hints all too manifest of Sir Isaac's characteristically pointed nose gave Mr. Brumley a peculiar--a eugenic, qualm.

He glanced at Lady Harman and she was standing over the ecstasies of her tremendous visitor, polite, attentive--with an entirely unemotional speculation in her eyes. Miss Sawbridge, stirred by the great waves of

violent philoprogenitive enthusiasm that circled out from Lady Beach-Mandarin, had caught up the baby and was hugging it and addressing it in terms of humorous rapture, and the nurse and her assistant were keeping respectful but wary eyes upon the handling of their four charges. Miss Sharsper was taking in the children's characteristics with a quick expertness. Mrs. Sawbridge stood a little in the background and caught Mr. Brumley's eye and proffered a smile of sympathetic tolerance.

Mr. Brumley was moved by a ridiculous impulse, which he just succeeded in suppressing, to say to Mrs. Sawbridge, "Yes, I admit it looks very well. But the essential point, you know, is that it isn't so...."

That it wasn't so, indeed, entirely dominated his impression of that nursery. There was Lady Beach-Mandarin winning Lady Harman's heart by every rule of the game, rejoicing effusively in those crowning triumphs of a woman's being, there was Miss Sawbridge vociferous in support and Mrs. Sawbridge almost offering to join hands in rapturous benediction, and there was Lady Harman wearing her laurels, not indeed with indifference but with a curious detachment. One might imagine her genuinely anxious to understand why Lady Beach-Mandarin was in such a stupendous ebullition. One might have supposed her a mere cold-hearted intellectual if it wasn't that something in her warm beauty absolutely forbade any such interpretation. There came to Mr. Brumley again a thought that had occurred to him first when Sir Isaac and Lady Harman had come together to Black Strand, which was that life had happened to this woman before she was ready for it, that her mind some years after

her body was now coming to womanhood, was teeming with curiosity about all she had hitherto accepted, about Sir Isaac, about her children and all her circumstances....

There was a recapitulation of the invitations, a renewed offering of outlooks and vistas and Agatha Alimony. "You'll not forget," insisted Lady Beach-Mandarin. "You'll not afterwards throw us over."

"No," said Lady Harman, with that soft determination of hers. "I'll certainly come."

"I'm so sorry, so very sorry, not to have seen Sir Isaac," Lady Beach-Mandarin insisted.

The raid had accomplished its every object and was drifting doorward. For a moment Lady Beach-Mandarin desisted from Lady Harman and threw her whole being into an eddying effort to submerge the already subjugated Mrs. Sawbridge. Miss Sawbridge was behind up the oak staircase explaining Sir Isaac's interest in furniture-buying to Miss Sharsper. Mr. Brumley had his one moment with Lady Harman.

"I gather," he said, and abandoned that sentence.

"I hope," he said, "that you will have my little house down there. I like to think of you--walking in my garden."

"I shall love that garden," she said. "But I shall feel unworthy."

"There are a hundred little things I want to tell you--about it."

Then all the others seemed to come into focus again, and with a quick mutual understanding--Mr. Brumley was certain of its mutuality--they said no more to one another. He was entirely satisfied he had said enough. He had conveyed just everything that was needed to excuse and explain and justify his presence in that company.... Upon a big table in the hall he noticed that a silk hat and an umbrella had appeared since their arrival. He glanced at Miss Sharsper but she was keenly occupied with the table legs. He began to breathe freely again when the partings were over and he could get back into the automobile. "Toot," said the horn and he made a last grave salutation to the slender white figure on the steps. The great butler stood at the side of the entrance and a step or so below her, with the air of a man who has completed a difficult task. A small attentive valet hovered out of the shadows behind.

§5

(A fragment of the conversation in Lady Beach-Mandarin's returning automobile may be recorded in a parenthesis here.

"But did you see Sir Isaac?" she cried, abruptly.

"Sir Isaac?" defended the startled Mr. Brumley. "Where?"

"He was dodging about in the garden all the time."

"Dodging about the garden!... I saw a sort of gardener----"

"I'm sure I saw Him," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "Positive. He hid away in the mushroom shed. The one you found locked."

"But my dear Lady Beach-Mandarin!" protested Mr. Brumley with the air of one who listens to preposterous suggestions. "What can make you think----?"

"Oh I know I saw him," said Lady Beach-Mandarin. "I know. He seemed all over the place. Like a Boy Scout. Didn't you see him too, Susan?"

Miss Sharsper was roused from deep preoccupation. "What, dear?" she asked.

"See Sir Isaac?"

"Sir Isaac?"

"Dodging about the garden when we went through it."

The novelist reflected. "I didn't notice," she said. "I was busy

observing things.")

§6

Lady Beach-Mandarin's car passed through the open gates and was swallowed up in the dusty stream of traffic down Putney Hill; the great butler withdrew, the little manservant vanished, Mrs. Sawbridge and her elder daughter had hovered and now receded from the back of the hall; Lady Harman remained standing thoughtfully in the large Bulwer-Lyttonesque doorway of her house. Her face expressed a vague expectation. She waited to be addressed from behind.

Then she became aware of the figure of her husband standing before her. He had come out of the laurels in front. His pale face was livid with anger, his hair dishevelled, there was garden mould and greenness upon his knees and upon his extended hands.

She was startled out of her quiet defensiveness. "Why, Isaac!" she cried. "Where have you been?"

It enraged him further to be asked so obviously unnecessary a question. He forgot his knightly chivalry.

"What the Devil do you mean," he cried, "by chasing me all round the garden?"

"Chasing you? All round the garden?"

"You heard me breaking my shins on that infernal flower-pot you put for me, and out you shot with all your pack of old women and chased me round the garden. What do you mean by it?"

"I didn't think you were in the garden."

"Any Fool could have told I was in the garden. Any Fool might have known I was in the garden. If I wasn't in the garden, then where the Devil was I? Eh? Where else could I be? Of course I was in the garden, and what you wanted was to hunt me down and make a fool of me. And look at me! Look, I say! Look at my hands!"

Lady Harman regarded the lord of her being and hesitated before she answered. She knew what she had to say would enrage him, but she had come to a point in their relationship when a husband's good temper is no longer a supreme consideration. "You've had plenty of time to wash them," she said.

"Yes," he shouted. "And instead I kept 'em to show you. I stayed out here to see the last of that crew for fear I might run against 'em in the house. Of all the infernal old women----"

His lips were providentially deprived of speech. He conveyed his

inability to express his estimate of Lady Beach-Mandarin by a gesture of despair.

"If--if anyone calls and I am at home I have to receive them," said Lady Harman, after a moment's deliberation.

"Receiving them's one thing. Making a Fool of yourself----"

His voice was rising.

"Isaac," said Lady Harman, leaning forward and then in a low penetrating whisper, "Snagsby!"

(It was the name of the great butler.)

"Damn Snagsby!" hissed Sir Isaac, but dropping his voice and drawing near to her. What his voice lost in height it gained in intensity. "What I say is this, Ella, you oughtn't to have brought that old woman out into the garden at all----"

"She insisted on coming."

"You ought to have snubbed her. You ought to have done--anything. How the Devil was I to get away, once she was through the verandah? There I was! Bagged!"

"You could have come forward."

"What! And meet her!"

"I had to meet her."

Sir Isaac felt that his rage was being frittered away upon details. "If you hadn't gone fooling about looking at houses," he said, and now he stood very close to her and spoke with a confidential intensity, "you wouldn't have got that Holy Terror on our track, see? And now--here we are!"

He walked past her into the hall, and the little manservant suddenly materialised in the middle of the space and came forward to brush him obsequiously. Lady Harman regarded that proceeding for some moments in a preoccupied manner and then passed slowly into the classical conservatory. She felt that in view of her engagements the discussion of Lady Beach-Mandarin was only just beginning.

§7

She reopened it herself in the long drawing-room into which they both drifted after Sir Isaac had washed the mould from his hands. She went to a French window, gathered courage, it seemed, by a brief contemplation of the garden, and turned with a little effort.

"I don't agree," she said, "with you about Lady Beach-Mandarin."

Sir Isaac appeared surprised. He had assumed the incident was closed.

"How?" he asked compactly.

"I don't agree," said Lady Harman. "She seems friendly and jolly."

"She's a Holy Terror," said Sir Isaac. "I've seen her twice, Lady Harman."

"A call of that kind," his wife went on, "--when there are cards left and so on--has to be returned."

"You won't," said Sir Isaac.

Lady Harman took a blind-tassel in her hand,--she felt she had to hold on to something. "In any case," she said, "I should have to do that."

"In any case?"

She nodded. "It would be ridiculous not to. We----It is why we know so few people--because we don't return calls...."

Sir Isaac paused before answering. "We don't want to know a lot of people," he said. "And, besides----Why! anybody could make us go running

about all over London calling on them, by just coming and calling on us.  
No sense in it. She's come and she's gone, and there's an end of it."

"No," said Lady Harman, gripping her tassel more firmly. "I shall have to return that call."

"I tell you, you won't."

"It isn't only a call," said Lady Harman. "You see, I promised to go there to lunch."

"Lunch!"

"And to go to a meeting with her."

"Go to a meeting!"

--of a society called the Social Friends. And something else. Oh! to go to the committee meetings of her Shakespear Dinners Movement."

"I've heard of that."

"She said you supported it--or else of course...."

Sir Isaac restrained himself with difficulty.

"Well," he said at last, "you'd better write and tell her you can't do any of these things; that's all."

He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and walked to the French window next to the one in which she stood, with an air of having settled this business completely, and being now free for the tranquil contemplation of horticulture. But Lady Harman had still something to say.

"I am going to all these things," she said. "I said I would, and I will."

He didn't seem immediately to hear her. He made the little noise with his teeth that was habitual to him. Then he came towards her. "This is your infernal sister," he said.

Lady Harman reflected. "No," she decided. "It's myself."

"I might have known when we asked her here," said Sir Isaac with an habitual disregard of her judgments that was beginning to irritate her more and more. "You can't take on all these people. They're not the sort of people we want to know."

"I want to know them," said Lady Harman.

"I don't."

"I find them interesting," Lady Harman said. "And I've promised."

"Well you oughtn't to have promised without consulting me."

Her reply was the material of much subsequent reflection on the part of Sir Isaac. There was something in her manner....

"You see, Isaac," she said, "you kept so out of the way...."

In the pause that followed her words, Mrs. Sawbridge appeared from the garden smiling with a determined amiability, and bearing a great bunch of the best roses (which Sir Isaac hated to have picked) in her hands.