CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE BEGINNINGS OF LADY HARMAN

§1

Lady Harman had been married when she was just eighteen.

Mrs. Sawbridge was the widow of a solicitor who had been killed in a railway collision while his affairs, as she put it, were unsettled; and she had brought up her two daughters in a villa at Penge upon very little money, in a state of genteel protest. Ellen was the younger. She had been a sturdy dark-eyed doll-dragging little thing and had then shot up very rapidly. She had gone to a boarding-school at Wimbledon because Mrs. Sawbridge thought the Penge day-school had made Georgina opiniated and unladylike, besides developing her muscular system to an unrefined degree. The Wimbledon school was on less progressive lines, and anyhow Ellen grew taller and more feminine than her sister and by seventeen was already womanly, dignified and intensely admired by a number of schoolmates and a large circle of their cousins and brothers. She was generally very good and only now and then broke out with a venturesome enterprise that hurt nobody. She got out of a skylight, for example, and perambulated the roof in the moonshine to see how it felt and did one or two other little things of a similar kind. Otherwise her conduct was admirable and her temper in those days was always contagiously good.

That attractiveness which Mr. Brumley felt, was already very manifest, and a little hindered her in the attainment of other distinctions. Most of her lessons were done for her by willing slaves, and they were happy slaves because she abounded in rewarding kindnesses; but on the other hand the study of English literature and music was almost forced upon her by the zeal of the two visiting Professors of these subjects.

And at seventeen, which is the age when girls most despise the boyishness of young men, she met Sir Isaac and filled him with an invincible covetousness....

§2

The school at Wimbledon was a large, hushed, faded place presided over by a lady of hidden motives and great exterior calm named Miss Beeton Clavier. She was handsome without any improper attractiveness, an Associate in Arts of St. Andrew's University and a cousin of Mr. Blenker of the Old Country Gazette. She was assisted by several resident mistresses and two very carefully married visiting masters for music and Shakespear, and playground and shrubbery and tennis-lawn were all quite effectively hidden from the high-road. The curriculum included Latin Grammar--nobody ever got to the reading of books in that formidable tongue--French by an English lady who had been in France, Hanoverian German by an irascible native, the more seemly aspects of English history and literature, arithmetic, algebra, political economy and

drawing. There was no hockey played within the precincts, science was taught without the clumsy apparatus or objectionable diagrams that are now so common, and stress was laid upon the carriage of the young ladies and the iniquity of speaking in raised voices. Miss Beeton Clavier deprecated the modern "craze for examinations," and released from such pressure her staff did not so much give courses of lessons as circle in a thorough-looking and patient manner about their subjects. This turn-spit quality was reflected in the school idiom; one did not learn algebra or Latin or so-forth, one did algebra, one was put into Latin....

The girls went through this system of exercises and occupations, evasively and as it were sotto voce, making friends, making enemies, making love to one another, following instincts that urged them to find out something about life--in spite of the most earnest discouragement.... None of them believed for a moment that the school was preparing them for life. Most of them regarded it as a long inexplicable passage of blank, grey occupations through which they had to pass. Beyond was the sunshine.

Ellen gathered what came to her. She realized a certain beauty in music in spite of the biographies of great musicians, the technical enthusiasms and the general professionalism of her teacher; the literature master directed her attention to memoirs and through these she caught gleams of understanding when the characters of history did for brief intervals cease to be rigidly dignified and institutional like Miss Beeton Clavier and became human--like schoolfellows. And one little

spectacled mistress, who wore art dresses and adorned her class-room with flowers, took a great fancy to her, talked to her with much vagueness and emotion of High Aims, and lent her with an impressive furtiveness the works of Emerson and Shelley and a pamphlet by Bernard Shaw. It was a little difficult to understand what these writers were driving at, they were so dreadfully clever, but it was clear they reflected criticism upon the silences of her mother and the rigidities of Miss Beeton Clavier.

In that suppressed and evasive life beneath the outer forms and procedures of school and home, there came glimmerings of something that seemed charged with the promise of holding everything together, the key, religion. She was attracted to religion, much more attracted than she would confess even to herself, but every circumstance in her training dissuaded her from a free approach. Her mother treated religion with a reverence that was almost indistinguishable from huffiness. She never named the deity and she did not like the mention of His name: she threw a spell of indelicacy over religious topics that Ellen never thoroughly cast off. She put God among objectionable topics--albeit a sublime one. Miss Beeton Clavier sustained this remarkable suggestion. When she read prayers in school she did so with the balanced impartiality of one who offers no comment. She seemed pained as she read and finished with a sigh. Whatever she intended to convey, she conveyed that even if the divinity was not all He should be, if, indeed, He was a person almost primitive, having neither the restraint nor the self-obliteration of a refined gentlewoman, no word of it should ever pass her lips. And so

Ellen as a girl never let her mind go quite easily into this reconciling core of life, and talked of it only very rarely and shyly with a few chosen coevals. It wasn't very profitable talk. They had a guilty feeling, they laughed a little uneasily, they displayed a fatal proclivity to stab the swelling gravity of their souls with some forced and silly jest and so tumble back to ground again before they rose too high....

Yet great possibilities of faith and devotion stirred already in the girl's heart. She thought little of God by day, but had a strange sense of Him in the starlight; never under the moonlight--that was in no sense divine--but in the stirring darkness of the stars. And it is remarkable that after a course of astronomical enlightenment by a visiting master and descriptions of masses and distances, incredible aching distances, then even more than ever she seemed to feel God among the stars....

A fatal accident to a schoolfellow turned her mind for a time to the dark stillnesses of death. The accident happened away in Wales during the summer holidays; she saw nothing of it, she only knew of its consequence. Hitherto she had assumed it was the function of girls to grow up and go out from the grey intermediate state of school work into freedoms and realities beyond. Death happened, she was aware, to young people, but not she had thought to the people one knew. This termination came with a shock. The girl was no great personal loss to Ellen, they had belonged to different sets and classes, but the conception of her as lying very very still for ever was a haunting one. Ellen felt she did

not want to be still for evermore in a confined space, with life and sunshine going on all about her and above her, and it quickened her growing appetite for living to think that she might presently have to be like that. How stifled one would feel!

It couldn't be like that.

She began to speculate about that future life upon which religion insists so much and communicates so little. Was it perhaps in other planets, under those wonderful, many-mooned, silver-banded skies? She perceived more and more a kind of absurdity in the existence all about her. Was all this world a mere make-believe, and would Miss Beeton Clavier and every one about her presently cast aside a veil? Manifestly there was a veil. She had a very natural disposition to doubt whether the actual circumstances of her life were real. Her mother for instance was so lacking in blood and fire, so very like the stiff paper wrapping of something else. But if these things were not real, what was real? What might she not presently do? What might she not presently be? Perhaps death had something to do with that. Was death perhaps no more than the flinging off of grotesque outer garments by the newly arrived guests at the feast of living? She had that feeling that there might be a feast of living.

These preoccupations were a jealously guarded secret, but they gave her a quality of slight detachment that added a dreaming dignity to her dark tall charm.

There were moments of fine, deep excitement that somehow linked themselves in her mind with these thoughts as being set over against the things of every day. These too were moments quite different and separate in quality from delight, from the keen appreciation of flowers or sunshine or little vividly living things. Daylight seemed to blind her to them, as they blinded her to starshine. They too had a quality of reference to things large and remote, distances, unknown mysteries of light and matter, the thought of mountains, cool white wildernesses and driving snowstorms, or great periods of time. Such were the luminous transfigurations that would come to her at the evening service in church.

The school used to sit in the gallery over against the organist, and for a year and more Ellen had the place at the corner from which she could look down the hazy candle-lit vista of the nave and see the congregation as ranks and ranks of dim faces and vaguely apprehended clothes, ranks that rose with a peculiar deep and spacious rustle to sing, and sang with a massiveness of effect she knew in no other music. Certain hymns in particular seemed to bear her up and carry her into another larger, more wonderful world: "Heart's Abode, Celestial Salem" for example, a world of luminous spiritualized sensuousness. Of such a quality she thought the Heavenly City must surely be, away there and away. But this persuasion differed from those other mystical intimations in its detachment from any sense of the divinity. And remarkably mixed up with it and yet not belonging to it, antagonistic and kindred like a

silver dagger stuck through a mystically illuminated parchment, was the angelic figure of a tall fair boy in a surplice who stood out amidst the choir below and sang, it seemed to her, alone.

She herself on these occasions of exaltation would be far too deeply moved to sing. She was inundated by a swimming sense of boundaries nearly transcended, as though she was upon the threshold of a different life altogether, the real enduring life, and as though if she could only maintain herself long enough in this shimmering exaltation she would get right over; things would happen, things that would draw her into that music and magic and prevent her ever returning to everyday life again. There one would walk through music between great candles under eternal stars, hand-in-hand with a tall white figure. But nothing ever did happen to make her cross that boundary; the hymn ceased, the "Amen" died away, as if a curtain fell. The congregation subsided. Reluctantly she would sink back into her seat....

But all through the sermon, to which she never gave the slightest attention, her mind would feel mute and stilled, and she used to come out of church silent and preoccupied, returning unwillingly to the commonplaces of life....

§3

Ellen met Sir Isaac--in the days before he was Sir Isaac--at the house

of a school friend with whom she was staying at Hythe, and afterwards her mother and sister came down and joined her for a fortnight at a Folkstone boarding house. Mr. Harman had caught a chill while inspecting his North Wales branches and had come down with his mother to recuperate. He and his mother occupied a suite of rooms in the most imposing hotel upon the Leas. Ellen's friend's people were partners in a big flour firm and had a pleasant new æsthetic white and green house of rough-cast and slates in the pretty country beyond the Hythe golf links, and Ellen's friend's father was deeply anxious to develop amiable arrangements with Mr. Harman. There was much tennis, much croquet, much cycling to the Hythe sea-wall and bathing from little tents and sitting about in the sunshine, and Mr. Harman had his first automobile with him--they were still something of a novelty in those days--and was urgent to take picnic parties to large lonely places on the downs.

There were only two young men in that circle, one was engaged to Ellen's friend's sister, and the other was bound to a young woman remote in Italy; neither was strikingly attractive and both regarded Harman with that awe tempered by undignified furtive derision which wealth and business capacity so often inspire in the young male. At first he was quiet and simply looked at her, as it seemed any one might look, then she perceived he looked at her intently and continuously, and was persistently close to her and seemed always to be trying to do things to please her and attract her attention. And then from the general behaviour of the women about her, her mother and Mrs. Harman and her friend's mother and her friend's sister, rather than from any one

specific thing they said, it grew upon her consciousness that this important and fabulously wealthy person, who was also it seemed to her so modest and quiet and touchingly benevolent, was in love with her.

"Your daughter," said Mrs. Harman repeatedly to Mrs. Sawbridge, "is charming, perfectly charming."

"She's such a child," said Mrs. Sawbridge repeatedly in reply.

And she told Ellen's friend's mother apropos of Ellen's friend's engagement that she wanted all her daughters to marry for love, she didn't care what the man had so long as they loved each other, and meanwhile she took the utmost care that Isaac had undisputed access to the girl, was watchfully ready to fend off anyone else, made her take everything he offered and praised him quietly and steadily to her. She pointed out how modest and unassuming he was, in spite of the fact that he was "controlling an immense business" and in his own particular trade "a perfect Napoleon."

"For all one sees to the contrary he might be just a private gentleman. And he feeds thousands and thousands of people...."

"Sooner or later," said Mrs. Harman, "I suppose Isaac will marry. He's been such a good son to me that I shall feel it dreadfully, and yet, you know, I wish I could see him settled. Then I shall settle--in a little house of my own somewhere. Just a little place. I don't believe in

coming too much between son and daughter-in-law...."

Harman's natural avidity was tempered by a proper modesty. He thought Ellen so lovely and so infinitely desirable--and indeed she was--that it seemed incredible to him that he could ever get her. And yet he had got most of the things in life he had really and urgently wanted. His doubts gave his love-making an eager, lavish and pathetic delicacy. He watched her minutely in an agony of appreciation. He felt ready to give or promise anything.

She was greatly flattered by his devotion and she liked the surprises and presents he heaped upon her extremely. Also she was sorry for him beyond measure. In the deep recesses of her heart was an oleographic ideal of a large brave young man with blue eyes, a wave in his fair hair, a wonderful tenor voice and--she could not help it, she tried to look away and not think of it--a broad chest. With him she intended to climb mountains. So clearly she could not marry Mr. Harman. And because of that she tried to be very kind indeed to him, and when he faltered that she could not possibly care for him, she reassured him so vaguely as to fill him with wild gusts of hope and herself with a sense of pledges. He told her one day between two sets of tennis--which he played with a certain tricky skill--that he felt that the very highest happiness he could ever attain would be to die at her feet. Presently her pity and her sense of responsibility had become so large and deep that the dream hero with the blue eyes was largely overlaid and hidden by them.

Then, at first a little indirectly and then urgently and with a voice upon the edge of tears, Harman implored her to marry him. She had never before in the whole course of her life seen a grown-up person on the very verge of tears. She felt that the release of such deep fountains as that must be averted at any cost. She felt that for a mere schoolgirl like herself, a backward schoolgirl who had never really mastered quadratics, to cause these immense and tragic distresses was abominable. She was sure her former headmistress would disapprove very highly of her. "I will make you a queen," said Harman, "I will give all my life to your happiness."

She believed he would.

She refused him for the second time but with a weakening certainty in a little white summer-house that gave a glimpse of the sea between green and wooded hills. She sat and stared at the sea after he had left her, through a mist of tears; so pitiful did he seem. He had beaten his poor fists on the stone table and then caught up her hand, kissed it and rushed out.... She had not dreamt that love could hurt like that.

And all that night--that is to say for a full hour before her wet eyelashes closed in slumber--she was sleepless with remorse for the misery she was causing him.

The third time when he said with suicidal conviction that he could not

live without her, she burst into tears of pity and yielded. And instantly, amazingly, with the famished swiftness of a springing panther he caught her body into his arms and kissed her on the lips....

§4

They were married with every circumstance of splendour, with very expensive music, and portraits in the illustrated newspapers and a great glitter of favours and carriages. The bridegroom was most thoughtful and generous about the Sawbridge side of the preparations. Only one thing was a little perplexing. In spite of his impassioned impatience he delayed the wedding. Full of dark hints and a portentous secret, he delayed the wedding for twenty-five whole days in order that it should follow immediately upon the publication of the birthday honours list. And then they understood.

"You will be Lady Harman," he exulted; "Lady Harman. I would have given double.... I have had to back the Old Country Gazette and I don't care a rap. I'd have done anything. I'd have bought the rotten thing outright.... Lady Harman!"

He remained loverlike until the very eve of their marriage. Then suddenly it seemed to her that all the people she cared for in the world were pushing her away from them towards him, giving her up, handing her over. He became--possessive. His abjection changed to pride. She

perceived that she was going to be left tremendously alone with him, with an effect, as if she had stepped off a terrace on to what she believed to be land and had abruptly descended into very deep water....

And while she was still feeling quite surprised by everything and extremely doubtful whether she wanted to go any further with this business, which was manifestly far more serious, out of all proportion more serious, than anything that had ever happened to her before--and unpleasant, abounding indeed in crumpling indignities and horrible nervous stresses, it dawned upon her that she was presently to be that strange, grown-up and preoccupied thing, a mother, and that girlhood and youth and vigorous games, mountains and swimming and running and leaping were over for her as far as she could see for ever....

Both the prospective grandmothers became wonderfully kind and helpful and intimate, preparing with gusto and an agreeable sense of delegated responsibility for the child that was to give them all the pride of maternity again and none of its inconveniences.