E. F. BENSON

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CHAPTER I

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CERTAINLY the breakfast tongue, which was for the first time that morning, was not of the pleasant reddish hue which Mrs. Altham was justified in expecting considering that the delicacy in question was not an ordinary tinned tongue (you had to take things as you found them, if your false sense of economy led you to order tinned goods) but one that came out of a fine glass receptacle with an eminent label on it. It was more of the colour of cold mutton, unattractive if not absolutely unpleasant to the eye, while to the palate it proved to be singularly lacking in flavour. Altogether it was a great disappointment, and for reason, when Mr. Altham set out at a quarter-past twelve to stroll along to the local club in Queensgate Street with the ostensible purpose of seeing if there was any fresh telegram about the disturbances in Morocco, his wife accompanied him to the door of that desirable mansion, round which was grouped a variety of chained-up dogs in various states of boredom and irritation, and went on into the High Street in order to make in person a justifiable complaint at her grocer's. She would be sorry to have to take her custom elsewhere, but if Mr. Pritchard did not see his way to sending her another tongue (of course without further charge) she would be obliged....

So this morning there was a special and imperative reason why Mrs. Altham should walk out before lunch to the High Street, and why her husband should make a morning visit to the club. But to avoid misconception it may be stated at once that there was, on every day of the week

except Sunday, some equally compelling cause to account for these expeditions. If it was very wet, perhaps, Mrs. Altham might not go to the High Street, but wet or fine her husband went to his club. And exactly the same thing happened in the case of most of their friends and acquaintances, so that Mr. Altham was certain of meeting General Fortescue, Mr. Brodie, Major Ames, and others in the smoking-room, while Mrs. Altham encountered their wives and sisters on errands like her own in the High Street. She often professed superior distaste for gossip, but when she met her friends coming in and out of shops, it was but civil and reasonable that she should have a few moments' chat with them. Thus, if any striking events had taken place since the previous afternoon, they all learned about them. Simultaneously there was a similar interchange of thought and tidings going on in the smoking-room at the club, so that when Mr. Altham had drunk his glass of sherry and returned home to lunch at one-thirty, there was probably little of importance and interest which had not reached the ears of himself or his wife. It could then be discussed at that meal.

Queensgate Street ran at right-angles to the High Street, debouching into that thoroughfare at the bottom of its steep slope, while the grocer's shop lay at the top of it. The morning was a hot day of early June, but to a woman of Mrs. Altham's spare frame and active limbs, the ascent was no more than a pleasurable exercise, and the vivid colour of her face (so unlike the discouraging hues of the breakfast tongue) was not the result of her exertions. It was habitually there, and though that and the restlessness of her dark and

rather beady eyes might have made a doctor, on a cursory glance (especially if influenza was about), think that she suffered from some slight rise of temperature, he would have been in error. Her symptoms betokened not an unnatural warmth of the blood, but were the visible sign of her eager and slightly impatient mind. Like the inhabitants of ancient Athens, she was always on the alert to hear some new thing (though she disliked gossip), but her mind appreciated the infinitesimal more than the important. The smaller a piece of news was, the more vivid was her perception of it, and the firmer her grip of it: large questions produced but a vague impression on her.

Her husband, a retired solicitor, was singularly well-adapted to be the partner of her life, for his mind very much akin to hers, and his appetite for news was no less rapacious. Indeed, the chief difference between them in this respect was that she snapped at her food like a wolf in winter, whereas he took it quietly, in the manner of a leisurely boa-constrictor. But his capacity was in no way inferior to hers. Similarly, they practised the same harmless hypocrisies on each other, and politely forbore to question each other's sincerity. An instance has already been recorded where such lack of trust might have been manifested, but it never entered Mrs. Altham's head to tell her husband just now that he cared nothing whatever about the disturbances in Morocco, while she would have thought it very odd conduct on his part to suggest a sharply worded note to Mr. Pritchard would save her the walk uphill on this hot morning. But it was only sensible to go on their quests; had they not ascertained if there was any news, they would

have had nothing to talk about at lunch. As it was, conversation never failed them, for this little town of Riseborough was crammed with interest and incident, for all who felt a proper concern in the affairs of other people.

The High Street this morning was very full, for it was market-day, and Mrs. Altham's progress was less swift than usual. Barrows of itinerant vendors were crowded into the road from the edge of the pavements, leaving a straitened channel for a traffic swelled by farmers' carts and occasional droves of dusty and perplexed looking cattle, being driven in from the country round. More than once Mrs. Altham had to step into the doorway of some shop to avoid the random erring of a company of pigs or sheep which made irruption on to the pavement. But it was interesting to observe, in one such enforced pause, the impeded passage of Sir James Westbourne's motor, with the owner, broad-faced and good-humoured, driving himself, and to conjecture as to what business brought him into the town. Then she saw that there was his servant sitting in the body of the car, while there were two portmanteaus on the luggage-rail behind. There was no need for further conjecture: clearly he was coming from the South-Eastern station at the top of the hill, and was driving out to his place four miles distant along the Maidstone road. Then he caught sight of somebody on the pavement whom he knew, and, stopping the car, entered into conversation.

For the moment Mrs. Altham could not see who it was; then, as the car moved on again, there appeared from behind it the tall figure of Dr. Evans. Mrs. Altham was not so foolish as to suppose that their conversation had necessarily

anything to do with medical matters; she did not fly to the conclusion that Lady Westbourne or any of the children must certainly be ill. To a person of her mental grasp it was sufficient to remember that Mrs. Evans was Sir James' first cousin. She heard also the baronet's cheerful voice as the two parted, saying, "Saturday the twenty-eighth, then. I'll tell my wife." That, of course, settled it; it required only a moment's employment of her power of inference to make her feel convinced that Saturday the twenty-eighth would be the date for Mrs. Evans' garden-party. There were a good many garden-parties in Riseborough about then, for strawberries might be expected to be reasonably cheap. Probably the date had been settled only this morning; she might look forward to receiving the "At-Home" card (four to seven) by the afternoon post.

The residential quarters of Riseborough lay both at the top of the hill, on which the town stood, clustering round the fine old Norman church, and at the bottom, along Queensgate Street, which passed into the greater spaciousness of St. Barnabas Road. On the whole, that might be taken to be the Park Lane of the place, and commanded the highest rents; every house there, in addition to being completely detached, had a small front garden with a carriage drive long enough to hold three carriages simultaneously, if each horse did not mind putting its nose within rubbing distance of the carriage in front of it, while the foremost projected a little into the road again. But there were good houses also at the top of the hill, where Dr. Evans lived, and those who lived below naturally considered themselves advantageously placed in being sheltered from

the bleak easterly winds which often prevailed in spring, while those at the top wondered among themselves in sultry summer days how it was possible to exist in the airless atmosphere below. The middle section of the town was mercantile, and it was here that the ladies of the place, both from above and below, met each other with such invariable fortuitousness in the hours before lunch. To-day, however, though the street was so full, it was for purposes of news-gathering curiously deserted, and apart from the circumstance of inferentially learning the date of Mrs. Evans' garden-party, Mrs. Altham found nothing to detain her until she had got to the very door of Mr. Pritchard's grocery. But there her prolonged fast was broken; Mrs. Taverner was ready to give and receive, and after the business of the colourless tongue was concluded in a manner that was perfectly creditable to Mr. Pritchard, the two ladies retraced their steps (for Mrs. Taverner was of St. Barnabas Road) down the hill again.

Mrs. Taverner quite agreed about the strong probability of Mrs. Evans' garden-party being on the twenty-eighth; and proceeded to unload herself of far more sensational information. She talked rather slowly, but without ever stopping of her own accord, so that she got as much into a given space of time as most people. Even if she was temporarily stopped by an interruption, she kept her mouth open, so as to be able to proceed at the earliest possible moment.

"Yes, three weeks, as you say, is a long notice, is it not?" she said; "but I'm sure people are wise to give long notice, otherwise they will find all their guests are already engaged,

such a quantity of parties as there will be this summer. Mrs. Ames has sent out dinner-cards for exactly the same date, I am told. I daresay they agreed together to have a day full of gaiety. Perhaps you are asked to dine there on the twenty-eighth, Mrs. Altham?"

"No, not at present."

"Well, then, it will be news to you," said Mrs. Taverner, "if what I have heard is true, and it was Mrs. Fortescue's governess who told me, whom I met taking one of the children to the dentist."

"That would be Edward," said Mrs. Altham unerringly. "I have often noticed his teeth are most irregular: one here, another there."

She spoke as if it was more usual for children to have all their teeth on the same spot, but Mrs. Taverner understood.

"Very likely; indeed, I think I have noticed it myself. Well, what I have to tell you seems very irregular, too; Edward's teeth are nothing to it. It was talked about, so Miss—I can never recollect her name, and, from what I hear, I do not think Mrs. Fortescue finds her very satisfactory—it was talked about, so Mrs. Fortescue's governess told me, at breakfast time, and it was agreed that General Fortescue should accept, for if you are asked three weeks ahead it is no use saying you are engaged. No doubt Mrs. Ames gave that long notice for that very reason."

"But what is it that is so irregular?" asked Mrs. Altham, nearly dancing with impatience at these circumlocutions.

"Did I not tell you? Ah, there is Mrs. Evans; I was told she was asked too, without her husband. How slowly she walks; I should not be surprised if her husband had told her never to

hurry. She did not see us; otherwise we might have found out more."

"About what?" asked the martyred Mrs. Altham.

"Why, what I am saying. Mrs. Ames has asked General Fortescue to dine that night, without asking Mrs. Fortescue, and has asked Mrs. Evans to dine without asking Dr. Evans. I don't know who the rest of the party are. I must try to find time this afternoon to call on Mrs. Ames, and see if she lets anything drop about it. It seems very odd to ask a husband without his wife, and a wife without her husband. And we do not know yet whether Dr. Evans will allow his wife to go there without him."

Mrs. Altham was suitably astounded.

"But I never heard of such a thing," she said, "and I expect my memory is as" (she nearly said "long," but stopped in time) "clear and retentive as that of most people. It seems very strange: it will look as if General Fortescue and his wife are not on good terms, and, as far as I know, there is no reason to suppose that. However, it is none of my business, and I am thankful to say that I do not concern myself with things that do not concern me. Had Mrs. Ames wanted my advice as to the desirability of asking a husband without a wife, or a wife without a husband, I should have been very glad to give it her. But as she has not asked it, I must suppose that she does not want it, and I am sure I am very thankful to keep my opinion to myself. But if she asked me what I thought about it, I should be compelled to tell her the truth. I am very glad to be spared any such unpleasantness. Dear me, here I am at home again. I had no idea we had come all this way."

Mrs. Taverner seemed inclined to linger, but the other had caught sight of her husband's face looking out of the window known as his study, where he was accustomed to read the paper in the morning, and go to sleep in the evening. This again was very irregular, for the watch on her wrist told her that it was not yet a quarter-past one, the hour at which he invariably ordered a glass of sherry at the club, to fortify him for his walk home. Possibly he had heard something about this revolutionary social scheme in the club, and had hastened his return in order to be able to talk it over with her without delay. For a moment it occurred to her to ask Mrs. Taverner to join them at lunch, but, after all, she had heard what that lady had to tell, and one of the smaller bundles of asparagus could not be considered ample for more than two. So she checked the hospitable impulse, and hurried into his study, alert with suppressed information, though she did not propose to let it explode at once, for the method of them both was to let news slip out as if accidentally. And, even as she crossed the hall, an idea for testing the truth of what she had heard, which was both simple and ingenious, came into her head. She despised poor Mrs. Taverner's scheme of calling on Mrs. Ames, in the hope of her letting something drop, for Mrs. Ames never let things drop in that way, though she was an adept at picking them up. Her own plan was far more effective. Also it harmonized well with the system of mutual insincerities.

"I have been thinking, my dear," she said briskly, as she entered his study, "that it is time for us to be asking Major and Mrs. Ames to dinner again. Yes: Pritchard was reasonable, and will send me another tongue, and take back

the old one, which I am sure I am quite glad that he should do, though it would have come in for savouries very handily. Still, he is quite within his rights, since he does not charge for it, and I should not think of quarrelling with him because he exercises them."

Mr. Altham was as keen a housekeeper as his wife.

"Its colour would not have signified in a savoury," he said.

"No, but as Pritchard supplies a new tongue without charge, we cannot complain. About Mrs. Ames, now. We dined with them quite a month ago: I do not want her to think we are lacking in the exchange of hospitalities, which I am sure are so pleasant on both sides."

Mr. Altham considered this question, caressing the side of his face. There was no doubt that he had a short pointed beard on his chin, but about half-way up the jawbone the hair got shorter and shorter, and he was quite clean-shaven before it got up to his ear. It was always a question, in fact, among the junior and less respectful members of the club, whether old Altham had whiskers or not. The general opinion was that he had whiskers, but was unaware of that possession.

"It is odd that the idea of asking Mrs. Ames to dinner occurred to you to-day," he said, "for I was wondering also whether we did not owe her some hospitality. And Major Ames, of course," he added.

Mrs. Altham smiled a bright detective smile.

"Next week is impossible, I know," she said, "and so is the week after, as there is a perfect rush of engagements then. But after that, we might find an evening free. How

would it suit you, if I asked Mrs. Ames and a few friends to dine on the Saturday of that week? Let me count—seven, fourteen, twenty-one, yes; on the twenty-eighth. I think that probably Mrs. Evans will have her garden-party on that day. It would make a pleasant ending to such an afternoon. And it would be less of an interruption to both of us, if we give up that day. It would be better than disarranging the week by sacrificing another evening."

Mr. Altham rang the bell before replying.

"It is hardly likely that Major and Mrs. Ames would have an engagement so long ahead," he said. "I think we shall be sure to secure them."

The bell was answered.

"A glass of sherry," he said. "I forgot, my dear, to take my glass of sherry at the club. Young Morton was talking to me, though I don't know why I call him young, and I forgot about my sherry. Yes, I should think the twenty-eighth would be very suitable."

Mrs. Altham waited until the parlour-maid had deposited the glass of sherry, and had completely left the room with a shut door behind her.

"I heard a very extraordinary story to-day," she said, "though I don't for a moment believe it is true. If it is, we shall find that Mrs. Ames cannot dine with us on the twenty-eighth, but we shall have asked her with plenty of notice, so that it will count. But one never knows how little truth there may be in what Mrs. Taverner says, for it was Mrs. Taverner who told me. She said that Mrs. Ames has asked General Fortescue to dine with her that night, without asking Mrs. Fortescue, and has invited Mrs. Evans also without her

husband. One doesn’t for a moment believe it, but if we asked Mrs. Ames for the same night we should very likely hear about it. Was anything said at the club about it?”

Mr. Altham affected a carelessness which he was very far from feeling.

“Young Morton did say something of the sort,” he said. “I was not listening particularly, since, as you know, I went there to see if there was anything to be learned about Morocco, and I get tired of his tittle-tattle. But he did mention something of the kind. There is the luncheon-bell, my dear. You might write your note immediately and send it by hand, for James will be back from his dinner by now, and tell him to wait for an answer.”

Mrs. Altham adopted this suggestion at once. She knew, of course, perfectly well that the thrilling quality of the news had brought her husband home without waiting to take his glass of sherry at the club, a thing which had not happened since that morning a year ago, when he had learned that Mrs. Fortescue had dismissed her cook without a character, but she did not think of accusing him of duplicity. After all, it was the amiable desire to talk these matters over with her without the loss of a moment which was the motive at the base of his action, and so laudable a motive covered all else. So she had her note written with amazing speed and cordiality, and the boot-and-knife boy, who also exercised the function of the gardener, was instructed to wash his hands and go upon his errand.

Criticism of Mrs. Ames’ action, based on the hypothesis that the news was true, was sufficient to afford brisk conversation until the return of the messenger, and Mrs.

Altham put back on her plate her first stick of asparagus and tore the note open. A glance was sufficient.

“It is all quite true,” she said. “Mrs. Ames writes, ‘We are so sorry to be obliged to refuse your kind invitation, but General Fortescue and Millicent Evans, with a few other friends, are dining with us this evening.’ Well, I am sure! So, after all, Mrs. Taverner was right. I feel I owe her an apology for doubting the truth of it, and I shall slip round after lunch to tell her that she need not call on Mrs. Ames, which she was thinking of doing. I can save her that trouble.”

Mr. Altham considered and condemned the wisdom of this slipping round.

“That might land you in an unpleasantness, my dear,” he said. “Mrs. Taverner might ask you how you were certain of it. You would not like to say that you asked the Ames’ to dinner on the same night in order to find out.”

“No, that is true. You see things very quickly, Henry. But, on the other hand, if Mrs. Taverner does go to call, Mrs. Ames might let drop the fact that she had received this invitation from us. I would sooner let Mrs. Taverner know it myself than let it get to her in roundabout ways. I will think over it; I have no doubt I shall be able to devise something. Now about Mrs. Ames’ new departure. I must say that it seems to me a very queer piece of work. If she is to ask you without me, and me without you, is the other to sit at home alone for dinner? For it is not to be expected that somebody else will on the very same night always ask the other of us. As likely as not, if there is another invitation for the same night, it will be for both of us, for I do not suppose that we

shall all follow Mrs. Ames' example, and model our hospitalities on hers."

Mrs. Altham paused a moment to eat her asparagus, which was getting cold.

"As a matter of fact, my dear, we do usually follow Mrs. Ames' example," he said. "She may be said to be the leader of our society here."

"And if you gave me a hundred guesses why we do follow her example," said Mrs. Altham rather excitedly, picking up a head of asparagus that had fallen on her napkin, "I am sure I could not give you one answer that you would think sensible. There are a dozen of our friends in Riseborough who are just as well born as she is, and as many more much better off; not that I say that money should have anything to do with position, though you know as well as I do that you could buy their house over their heads, Henry, and afford to keep it empty, while, all the time, I, for one, don't believe that they have got three hundred a year between them over and above his pay. And as for breeding, if Mrs. Ames' manners seem to you so worthy of copy, I can't understand what it is you find to admire in them, except that she walks into a room as if it all belonged to her, and looks over everybody's head, which is very ridiculous, as she can't be more than two inches over five feet, and I doubt if she's as much. I never have been able to see, and I do not suppose I ever shall be able to see, why none of us can do anything in Riseborough without asking Mrs. Ames' leave. Perhaps it is my stupidity, though I do not know that I am more stupid than most."

Henry Altham felt himself to blame for this agitated harangue. It was careless of him to have alluded to Mrs. Ames' leadership, for if there was a subject in this world that produced a species of frenzy and a complete absence of full-stops in his wife, it was that. Desperately before now had she attempted to wrest the sceptre from Mrs. Ames' podgy little hands, and to knock the crown off her noticeably small head. She had given parties that were positively Lucullan in their magnificence on her first coming to Riseborough; the regimental band (part of it, at least) had played under the elm-tree in her garden on the occasion of a mere afternoon-party, while at a dance she had given (a thing almost unknown in Riseborough) there had been a cotillion in which the presents cost up to five and sixpence each, to say nothing of the trouble. She had given a party for children at which there was not only a Christmas-tree, but a conjuror, and when a distinguished actor once stayed with her, she had, instead of keeping him to herself, which was Mrs. Ames' plan when persons of eminence were her guests, asked practically the whole of Riseborough to lunch, tea and dinner. To all of these great parties she had bidden Mrs. Ames (with a view to her deposition), and on certainly one occasion—that of the cotillion—she had heard afterwards unimpeachable evidence to show that that lady had remarked that she saw no reason for such display. Therefore to this day she had occasional bursts of volcanic amazement at Mrs. Ames' undoubted supremacy, and made occasional frantic attempts to deprive her of her throne. There was no method of attack which she had not employed; she had flattered and admired Mrs. Ames openly

to her face, with a view to be permitted to share the throne; she had abused and vilified her with a view to pulling her off it; she had refrained from asking her to her own house for six months at a time, and for six months at a time she had refused to accept any of Mrs. Ames' invitations. But it was all no use; the vilifications, so she had known for a fact, had been repeated to Mrs. Ames, who had not taken the slightest notice of them, nor abated one jot of her rather condescending cordiality, and in spite of Mrs. Altham's refusing to come to her house, had continued to send her invitations at the usual rate of hospitality. Indeed, for the last year or two Mrs. Altham had really given up all thought of ever deposing her, and her husband, though on this occasion he felt himself to blame for this convulsion, felt also that he might reasonably have supposed the volcano to be extinct. Yet such is the disconcerting habit of these subliminal forces; they break forth with renewed energy exactly when persons of exactly average caution think that there is no longer any life in them.

He hastened to repair his error, and to calm the tempest, by fulsome agreement.

"Well, my dear," he said, "certainly there is a great deal in what you say, for we have no reason to suppose that everybody will ask husband and wife singly, or that two of this new set of invitations will always come for the same night. Then, too, there is the question of carriage-hire, which, though it does not much matter to us, will be an important item to others. For, every time that husband and wife dine out, there will be two carriages needed instead of one. I wonder if Mrs. Ames had thought of that."

“Not she,” said Mrs. Altham, whose indignation still oozed and spurted. “Why, as often as not, she comes on foot, with her great goloshes over her evening shoes. Ah, I have it!”

A brilliant idea struck her, which did much to restore her equanimity.

“You may depend upon it,” she said, “that Mrs. Ames means to ask just husband or wife, as the case may be, and make that count. That will save her half the cost of her dinners, and now I come to think of it, I am sure I should not be surprised to learn that they have lost money lately. Major Ames may have been speculating, for I saw the *Financial News* on the table last time I was there. I daresay that is it. That would account, too, for the very poor dinner we got. Salmon was in season, I remember, but we only had plaice or something common, and the ordinary winter desert, just oranges and apples. You noticed it, too, Henry. You told me that you had claret that couldn’t have cost more than eighteenpence a bottle, and but one glass of port afterwards. And the dinner before that, though there was champagne, I got little but foam. Poor thing! I declare I am sorry for her if that is the reason, and I am convinced it is.”

Mrs. Altham felt considerably restored by this explanation, and got briskly up.

“I think I will just run round to Mrs. Taverner’s,” she said, “to tell her there is no need for her to call on Mrs. Ames, since you have heard the same story at club, so that we can rest assured that it is true. That will do famously; it will account for everything. And there is Pritchard’s cart at the gate. That will be the tongue. I wonder if he has told his

man to take away the pale one. If not, as you say, it will serve for savouries."

Summer had certainly come in earnest, and Mr. Altham, when he went out on to the shaded verandah to the east of the house, in order to smoke his cigar before going up to the golf-links, found that the thermometer registered eighty degrees in the shade. Consequently, before enjoying that interval of quiescence which succeeded his meals, and to which he felt he largely owed the serenity of his health, he went upstairs to change his cloth coat for the light alpaca jacket which he always wore when the weather was really hot. Last year, he remembered, he had not put it on at all until the end of July, except that on one occasion he wore it over his ordinary coat (for it was loosely made) taking a drive along an extremely dusty road. But the heat to-day certainly called for the alpaca jacket, and he settled himself in his chair (after tapping the barometer and observing with satisfaction that the concussion produced an upward tremor of the needle, which was at "Set Fair" already) feeling much more cool and comfortable.

Life in general was a very cool and comfortable affair to this contented gentleman. Even in youth he had not been of very exuberant vitality, and he had passed through his early years without giving a moment's anxiety to himself or his parents. Like a good child who eats and digests what is given him, so Mr. Altham, even in his early manhood, had accepted life exactly as he found it, and had seldom wondered what it was all about, or what it was made of. His emotions had been stirred when he met his wife, and he had once tried to write a poem to her—soon desisting, owing to

the obvious scarcity of rhymes in the English language, and since then his emotional record had been practically blank. If happiness implies the power to want and to aspire, that quality must be denied him, but his content was so profound that he need not be pitied for the lack of the more effervescent emotions. All that he cared about was abundantly his: there was the *Times* to be read after breakfast, news to be gleaned at the club before lunch, golf to be played in the afternoon, and a little well-earned repose to be enjoyed before dinner, while at odd moments he looked at the thermometer and tapped the aneroid. He was distinctly kindly by nature, and would no doubt have cheerfully put himself to small inconveniences in order to lighten the troubles of others, but he hardly ever found it necessary to practise discomfort, since those with whom he associated were sunk in precisely the same lethargy of content as himself. Being almost completely devoid of imagination, no qualms or questionings as to the meaning of the dramas of life presented themselves to him, and his annual subscriptions to the local hospital and certain parish funds connoted no more to him than did the money he paid at the station for his railway ticket. He was, in fact, completely characteristic of the society of Riseborough, which largely consisted of men who had retired from their professions and spent their days, with unimportant variations, in precisely the same manner as he did. Necessarily they were not aware of the amazing emptiness of their lives, for if they had been, they would probably have found life very dull, and have tried to fill it with some sort of interest. As it was, golf, gardening, and gossip made the

days pass so smoothly and quickly that it would really have been hazardous to attempt to infuse any life into them, for it might have produced upset and fermentation. But these chronicles would convey a very false impression if they made it seem as if life at Riseborough appeared dull or empty at Riseborough. The affairs of other people were so perennial a source of interest that it would only be a detached or sluggish mind that was not perpetually stimulated. And this stimulus was not of alcoholic character, nor was it succeeded by reaction and headache after undue indulgence. Mr. Altham woke each morning with a clean palate, so to speak, and an appetite and digestion quite unimpaired. As yet, he had not to seek to fill the hours of the day with gardening, like Major Ames, or with continuous rubbers of bridge in the card-room at the club; his days were full enough without those additional distractions, which he secretly rather despised as signs of senility, and wondered that Major Ames, who was still, he supposed, not much more than forty-five, should so soon have taken to a hobby that was better fitted for ladies and septuagenarians. It was not that he did not like flowers; he thought them pretty enough things in their place, and was pleased when he looked out of the bathroom window in the morning, and saw the neat row of red geraniums which ran along the border by the wall, between calceolarias and lobelias. Very likely when he was older, and other interests had faded, he might take to gardening, too; at present he preferred that the hired man should spend two days a week in superintending the operations of James. Certainly there would be some sense in looking after a vegetable garden, for there was an

intelligible end in view there—namely, the production of early peas and giant asparagus for the table, but since the garden at Cambridge House was not of larger capacity than was occupied with a croquet lawn and a couple of flower borders, it was impossible to grow vegetables, and the production of a new red sweet-pea, about which Major Ames had really rendered himself tedious last summer, was quite devoid of interest to him, especially since there were plenty of other red flowers before.

His cigar was already half-smoked before he recalled himself from this pleasant vacancy of mind which had succeeded the summer resumal of his alpaca jacket, and for the ten minutes that still remained to him before the cab from the livery-stables which was to take him up the long hill to the golf-links would be announced, he roused himself to a greater activity of brain. It was natural that his game with Mr. Turner this afternoon should first occupy his thoughts. He felt sure he could beat him if only he paid a very strict attention to the game, and did not let his mind wander. A few days ago, Mr. Turner had won merely because he himself had been rather late in arriving at the club-house, and had started with the sense of hurry about him. But to-day he had ordered the cab at ten minutes to three, instead of at the hour. Thus he could both start from here and arrive there without this feeling of fuss. Their appointed hour was not till a quarter-past three, and it took a bare fifteen minutes to drive up. Also he had on his alpaca jacket; he would not, as on the last occasion of their encounter, be uncomfortably hot. As usual, he would play his adversary for

the sum of half-a-crown; that should pay both for cab and caddie.

His thoughts took a wider range. Certainly it was a strange thing that Mrs. Ames should ask husbands without their wives, and wives without their husbands. Of course, to ask Mrs. Evans without the doctor was less remarkable than to ask General Fortescue without his wife, for it sometimes happened that Dr. Evans was sent for in the middle of dinner to attend on a patient, and once, when he was giving a party at his own house, he had received a note which led him to get up at once, and say to the lady on his right, “I am afraid I must go; maternity case,” which naturally had caused a very painful feeling of embarrassment, succeeded by a buzz of feverish and haphazard conversation. But to ask General Fortescue without his wife was a very different affair; it was not possible that Mrs. Fortescue should be sent for in the middle of dinner, and cause dislocation in the party. He felt that if any hostess except Mrs. Ames had attempted so startling an innovation, she would, even with her three-weeks’ notice, have received chilling refusals coupled with frankly incredible reasons for declining. Thus with growing radius of thought he found himself considering the case of Mrs. Ames’ undoubted supremacy in the Riseborough world.

Most of what his wife had said in her excited harangue had been perfectly well-founded. Mrs. Ames was not rich, and a marked parsimony often appeared to have presided over the ordering of her dinners; while, so far as birth was concerned, at least two other residents here were related to baronets just as much as she was; Mrs. Evans, for instance,

was first cousin of the present Sir James Westbourne, whereas Mrs. Ames was more distant than that from the same fortunate gentleman by one remove. Her mother, that is to say, had been the eldest sister of the last baronet but one, and older than he, so that beyond any question whatever, if Mrs. Ames' mother had been a boy, and she had been a boy also, she would now have been a baronet herself in place of the cheerful man who had been seen by Mrs. Altham driving his motor-car down the High Street that morning. As for General Fortescue, he was the actual brother of a baronet, and there was the end of the matter. But though Riseborough in general had a very proper appreciation of the deference due to birth, Mr. Altham felt that Mrs. Ames' supremacy was not really based on so wholesale a rearrangement of parents and sexes. Nor, again, were her manners and breeding such as compelled homage; she seemed to take her position for granted, and very seldom thanked her hostess for "a very pleasant evening" when she went away. Nor was she remarkable for her good looks; indeed, she was more nearly remarkable for the absence of them. Yet, somehow, Mr. Altham could not, perhaps owing to his lack of imagination, see anybody else, not even his own wife, occupying Mrs. Ames' position. There was some force about her that put her where she was. You felt her efficiency; you guessed that should situations arise Mrs. Ames could deal with them. She had a larger measure of reality than the majority of Mr. Altham's acquaintances. She did not seem to exert herself in any way, or call attention to what she did, and yet when Mrs. Ames called on some slightly doubtful newcomer to Riseborough, it was

certain that everybody else would call too. And one defect she had of the most glaring nature. She appeared to take the most tepid interest only in what every one said about everybody else. Once, not so long ago, Mrs. Altham had shown herself more than ready to question, on the best authority, the birth and upbringing of Mrs. Turner, the election of whose husband to the club had caused so many members to threaten resignation. But all Mrs. Ames had said, when it was clear that the shadiest antecedents were filed, so to speak, for her perusal, was, “I have always found her a very pleasant woman. She is dinning with us on Tuesday.” Or again, when he himself was full of the praise of Mrs. Taverner, to whom Mrs. Ames was somewhat coldly disposed—(though that lady had called three times, and was perhaps calling again this afternoon, Mrs. Ames had never once asked her to lunch or dine, and was believed to have left cards without even inquiring whether she was in)—Mrs. Ames had only answered his panegyrics by saying, “I am told she is a very good-natured sort of woman.”

Mr. Altham, hearing the stopping of a cab at his front-door, got up. It was still thirteen minutes to three, but he was ready to start. Indeed, he felt that motion and distraction would be very welcome, for there had stolen into his brain a strangely upsetting idea. It was very likely quite baseless and ill-founded, but it did occur to him that this defect on the part of Mrs. Ames as regards her incuriousness on the subject of the small affairs of other people was somehow connected with her ascendency. He had so often thought of it as a defect that it was quite a shock to find himself wondering whether it was a quality. In

any case, it was a quality which he was glad to be without. The possession of it would have robbed him of quite nine points of the laws that governed his nature. He would have been obliged to cultivate a passion for gardening, like Major Ames. Of course, if you married a woman quite ten years your senior, you had to take to something, and it was lucky Major Ames had not taken to drink.

He felt quite cynical, and lost the first four holes. Later, but too late, he pulled himself together. But it was poor consolation to win the bye only.

CHAPTER II

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MRS. AMES put up her black and white sunshade as she stepped into the hot street outside Dr. Evans' house, about half-past six on the evening of the twenty-eighth of June, and proceeded afoot past the half-dozen houses that lay between it and the High Street. In appearance she was like a small, good-looking toad in half-mourning; or, to state the comparison with greater precision, she was small for a woman, but good-looking for a toad. Her face had something of the sulky and satiated expression of that harmless reptile, and her mourning was for her brother, who had mercifully died of delirium tremens some six months before. This scarcely respectable mode of decease did not curtail his sister's observance of the fact, and she was proposing to wear mourning for another three months.

She had not seen him much of late years, and, as a matter of fact, she thought it was much better that his inglorious career, since he was a hopeless drunkard, had been brought to a conclusion, but her mourning, in spite of this, was a faithful symbol of her regret. He had had the good looks and the frailty of her family, while she was possessed of its complementary plainness and strength, but she remembered with remarkable poignancy, even in her fifty-fifth year, birds'-nesting expeditions with him, and the alluring of fish in unpopulous waters. They had shared their pocket-money together, also, as children, and she had not been the gainer by it. Therefore she thought of him with peculiar tenderness.