

Chapter 7

The Secret Orchard



NCIE outside the noisy coffee-room, alone in the dimly-lighted passage, Marguerite Blakeney seemed to breathe more freely. She heaved a deep sigh, like one who had long been oppressed with the heavy weight of constant self-control, and she allowed a few tears to fall unheeded down her cheeks.

Outside the rain had ceased, and through the swiftly passing clouds, the pale rays of an after-storm sun shone upon the beautiful white coast of Kent and the quaint, irregular houses that clustered round the Admiralty Pier. Marguerite Blakeney stepped on to the porch and looked out to sea. Silhouetted against the ever-changing sky, a graceful schooner, with white sails set, was gently dancing in the breeze. The *Day Dream* it was, Sir Percy Blakeney's yacht, which was ready to take Armand St Just back to France into the very midst of that seething, bloody Revolution which was overthrowing a monarchy, attacking a religion, destroying a society, in order to try and rebuild upon the ashes of tradition a new Utopia, of which a few men dreamed, but which none had the power to establish.

In the distance two figures were approaching 'The Fisherman's Rest': one, an oldish man, with a curious fringe of grey hairs round a round and massive chin, and who walked with that peculiar rolling gait which invariably betrays the seafaring man: the other, a young, slight figure, neatly and becomingly dressed in a dark, many-caped overcoat; he was clean-shaved, and his dark hair was taken well back over a clear and noble forehead.

'Armand!' said Marguerite Blakeney, as soon as she saw him approaching from the distance, and a happy smile shone on her sweet face, even through the tears.

A minute or two later brother and sister were locked in each other's arms, while the old skipper stood respectfully on one side.

'How much time have we got, Briggs?' asked Lady Blakeney, 'before M. St Just need go on board?'

'We ought to weigh anchor before half an hour, your ladyship,' replied the old man, pulling at his grey forelock.

Linking her arm in his, Marguerite led her brother towards the cliffs.

'Half an hour,' she said, looking wistfully out to sea, 'half an hour more and you'll be far from me, Armand! Oh! I can't believe that you are going, dear! These last few days—whilst Percy has been away, and I've had you all to myself, have slipped by like a dream.'

'I am not going far, sweet one,' said the young man gently, 'a narrow channel to cross—a few miles of road—I can soon come back.'

'Nay, 'tis not the distance, Armand—but that awful Paris...just now...' They had reached the edge of the cliff. The gentle sea-breeze blew Marguerite's hair about her face, and sent the ends of her soft lace fichu waving round her, like a white and supple snake. She tried to pierce the distance far away, beyond which lay the shores of France: that relentless and stern France which was exacting her pound of flesh, the blood-tax from the noblest of her sons.

'Our own beautiful country, Marguerite,' said Armand, who seemed to have divined her thoughts.

'They are going too far, Armand,' she said vehemently. 'You are a republican, so am I...we have the same thoughts, the same enthusiasm for liberty and equality...but even *you* must think that they are going too far...'

'Hush!—' said Armand, instinctively, as he threw a quick, apprehensive glance around him.

'Ah! you see: you don't think yourself that it is safe even to speak of these things—here in England!' She clung to him suddenly with strong, almost motherly, passion: 'Don't go, Armand!' she begged; 'don't go back! What should I do if...if...if...'

'I think, your ladyship,' said Jellyband, respectfully, 'that the young gentleman is coming along now with Sir Percy's skipper.'

'That's right,' said Blakeney, 'then Armand can join us in the merry bowl. Think you, Tony,' he added, turning towards the Vicomte, 'that that jackanapes of yours will join us in a glass? Tell him that we drink in token of reconciliation.'

'In fact you are all such merry company,' said Marguerite, 'that I trust you will forgive me if I bid my brother good-bye in another room.'

It would have been bad form to protest. Both Lord Antony and Sir Andrew felt that Lady Blakeney could not altogether be in tune with them at that moment. Her love for her brother, Armand St Just, was deep and touching in the extreme. He had just spent a few weeks with her in her English home, and was going back to serve his country, at a moment when death was the usual reward for the most enduring devotion.

Sir Percy also made no attempt to detain his wife. With that perfect, somewhat affected gallantry which characterised his every movement, he opened the coffee-room door for her, and made her the most approved and elaborate bow, which the fashion of the time dictated, as she sailed out of the room without bestowing on him more than a passing, slightly contemptuous glance. Only Sir Andrew Foulkes, whose every thought since he had met Suzanne de Tournay seemed keener, more gentle, more innately sympathetic, noted the curious look of intense longing, of deep and hopeless passion, with which the inane and flippant Sir Percy followed the retreating figure of his brilliant wife.

'La, Sir Percy, your chivalry misguides you,' said Marguerite, coquettishly, 'you forget that you yourself have imported one bundle of goods from France.'

Blakeney slowly rose to his feet, and, making a deep and elaborate bow before his wife, he said with consummate gallantry,—

'I had the pick of the market, Madame, and my taste is unerring.'

'More so than your chivalry, I fear,' she retorted sarcastically.

'Odd's life, m'dear! be reasonable! Do you think I am going to allow my body to be made a pincushion of, by every little frog-eater who don't like the shape of your nose?'

'Lud, Sir Percy!' laughed Lady Blakeney as she bobbed him a quaint and pretty curtsy, 'you need not be afraid! 'Tis not the *men* who dislike the shape of my nose.'

'Afraid be demmed! Do you impugn my bravery, Madame? I don't patronise the ring for nothing, do I, Tony? I've put up the fists with Red Sam before now, and—and he didn't get it all his own way either—'

'S'faith, Sir Percy,' said Marguerite, with a long and merry laugh, that went echoing along the old oak rafters of the parlour, 'I would I had seen you then...ha! ha! ha! ha!—you must have looked a pretty picture...and...and to be afraid of a little French boy...ha! ha!...ha! ha!'

'Ha! ha! ha! he! he! he!' echoed Sir Percy, good-humouredly, 'La, Madame, you honour me! Zooks! Ffoulkes, mark ye that! I have made my wife laugh!—The cleverest woman in Europe!...Odd's fish, we must have a bowl on that!' and he tapped vigorously on the table near him. 'Hey! Jelly! Quick, man! Here, Jelly!'

Harmony was once more restored. Mr Jellyband, with a mighty effort, recovered himself from the many emotions he had experienced within the last half hour.

'A bowl of punch, Jelly, hot and strong, eh?' said Sir Percy. 'The wits that have just made a clever woman laugh must be whetted! Ha! ha! ha! Hasten, my good Jelly!'

'Nay, there is no time, Sir Percy,' interposed Marguerite. 'The skipper will be here directly and my brother must get on board, or the *Day Dream* will miss the tide.'

'Time, m'dear? There is plenty of time for any gentleman to get drunk and get on board before the turn of the tide.'

Her voice was choked in sobs, her eyes, tender, blue and loving, gazed appealingly at the young man, who in his turn looked steadfastly into hers.

'You would in any case be my own brave sister,' he said gently, 'who would remember that, when France is in peril, it is not for her sons to turn their backs on her.'

Even as he spoke, that sweet, childlike smile crept back into her face, pathetic in the extreme, for it seemed drowned in tears.

'Oh! Armand!' she said quaintly, 'I sometimes wish you had not so many lofty virtues...I assure you little sins are far less dangerous and uncomfortable. But you *will* be prudent?' she added earnestly.

'As far as possible...I promise you.'

'Remember, dear, I have only you...to...to care for me...'

'Nay, sweet one, you have other interests now. Percy cares for you...'

A look of strange wistfulness crept into her eyes as she murmured,—

'He did...once...'

'But surely...'

'There, there, dear, don't distress yourself on my account. Percy is very good...'

'Nay!' he interrupted energetically, 'I will distress myself on your account, my Margot. Listen, dear, I have not spoken of these things to you before; something always seemed to stop me when I wished to question you. But, somehow, I feel as if I could not go away and leave you now without asking you one question...You need not answer it if you do not wish,' he added, as he noted a sudden hard look, almost of apprehension, darting through her eyes.

'What is it?' she asked simply.

'Does Sir Percy Blakeney know that...I mean, does he know the part you played in the arrest of the Marquis de St Cyr?'

She laughed—a mirthless, bitter, contemptuous laugh, which was like a jarring chord in the music of her voice.

'That I denounced the Marquis de St Cyr, you mean, to the tribunal that ultimately sent him and all his family to the guillotine? Yes, he does know...I told him after I married him...'

'You told him all the circumstances—which so completely exonerated you from any blame?'

'It was too late to talk of "circumstances"; he heard the story from other sources; my confession came too tardily, it seems. I could no longer plead extenuating circumstances: I could not bemean myself by trying to explain—'

'And?'

'And now I have the satisfaction, Armand, of knowing that the biggest fool in England has the most complete contempt for his wife.'

She spoke with vehement bitterness this time, and Armand St Just, who loved her so dearly, felt that he had placed a somewhat clumsy finger upon an aching wound.

'But Sir Percy loved you, Margot,' he repeated gently.

'Loved me?—Well, Armand, I thought at one time that he did, or I should not have married him. I daresay,' she added, speaking very rapidly, as if she were glad at last to lay down a heavy burden, which had oppressed her for months, 'I daresay that even you thought—as everybody else did—that I married Sir Percy because of his wealth—but I assure you, dear, that it was not so. He seemed to worship me with a curious intensity of concentrated passion, which went straight to my heart. I had never loved anyone before, as you know, and I was four-and-twenty then—so I naturally thought that it was not in my nature to love. But it has always seemed to me that it *must* be *heavenly* to be loved blindly, passionately, wholly... worshipped, in fact—and the very fact that Percy was slow and stupid was an attraction for me, as I thought he would love me all the more. A clever man would naturally have other interests, an ambitious man other hopes... I thought that a fool would worship, and think of nothing else. And I was ready to respond, Armand; I would have allowed myself to be worshipped, and given infinite tenderness in return...'

She sighed—and there was a world of disillusionment in that sigh. Armand St Just had allowed her to speak on without interruption: he listened to her, whilst allowing his own thoughts to run riot. It was terrible to see a young and beautiful woman—a girl in all but name—still standing almost at the threshold of her life, yet bereft of hope, bereft of illusions, bereft of those golden and fantastic dreams, which should have made her youth one long, perpetual holiday.

Yet perhaps—though he loved his sister dearly—perhaps he understood: he had studied men in many countries, men of all ages, men of

with a very stern hand; still to him, a Frenchman, whose notions of bravery and honour were based upon a code that had centuries of tradition to back it, the spectacle of a gentleman actually refusing to fight a duel was little short of an enormity. In his mind he vaguely pondered whether he should strike that long-legged Englishman in the face and call him a coward, or whether such conduct in a lady's presence might be deemed ungentlemanly, when Marguerite happily interposed.

'I pray you, Lord Tony,' she said in that gentle, sweet, musical voice of hers, 'I pray you play the peacemaker. The child is bursting with rage, and,' she added with a *souffron* of dry sarcasm, 'might do Sir Percy an injury.' She laughed a mocking little laugh, which, however, did not in the least disturb her husband's placid equanimity. 'The British turkey has had the day,' she said. 'Sir Percy would provoke all the saints in the calendar and keep his temper the while.'

But already Blakeney, good-humoured as ever, had joined in the laugh against himself.

'Demmed smart that now, wasn't it?' he said, turning pleasantly to the Vicomte. 'Clever woman my wife, sir... You will find *that* out if you live long enough in England.'

'Sir Percy is in the right, Vicomte,' here interposed Lord Antony, laying a friendly hand on the young Frenchman's shoulder. 'It would hardly be fitting that you should commence your career in England by provoking him to a duel.'

For a moment longer the Vicomte hesitated, then with a slight shrug of the shoulders directed against the extraordinary code of honour prevailing in this fog-ridden island, he said with becoming dignity,—

'Ah, well! if Monsieur is satisfied, I have no griefs. You, mi'lor', are our protector. If I have done wrong, I withdraw myself.'

'Aye, do!' rejoined Blakeney, with a long sigh of satisfaction, 'withdraw yourself over there. Demmed excitable little puppy,' he added under his breath. 'Faith, Ffoulkes, if that's a specimen of the goods you and your friends bring over from France, my advice to you is, drop 'em 'mid Channel, my friend, or I shall have to see old Pitt about it, get him to clap on a prohibitive tariff, and put you in the stocks an you smuggle.'

'I protest 'tis marvellous!' continued Sir Percy, imperterbably, 'demmed marvellous! Don't you think so, Tony—eh? I vow I can't speak the French lingo like that. What?'

'Nay, I'll vouch for that!' rejoined Marguerite. 'Sir Percy has a British accent you could cut with a knife.'

'Monsieur,' interposed the Vicomte earnestly, and in still more broken English, 'I fear you have not understand. I offer you the only possible reparation among gentlemen.'

'What the devil is that?' asked Sir Percy, blandly.

'My sword, Monsieur,' replied the Vicomte, who, though still bewildered, was beginning to lose his temper.

'You are a sportsman, Lord Tony,' said Marguerite, merrily; 'ten to one on the little bantam.'

But Sir Percy was staring sleepily at the Vicomte for a moment or two, through his partly closed heavy lids, then he smothered another yawn, stretched his long limbs, and turned leisurely away.

'Lud love you, sir,' he muttered good-humouredly, 'Demmit, young man, what's the good of your sword to me?'

What the Vicomte thought and felt at that moment, when that long-limbed Englishman treated him with such marked insolence, might fill volumes of sound reflections... What he said resolved itself into a single articulate word, for all the others were choked in his throat by his surging wrath—

'A duel, Monsieur,' he stammered.

Once more Blakeney turned, and from his high altitude looked down on the choleric little man before him; but not even for a second did he seem to lose his own imperterbable good-humour. He laughed his own pleasant and inane laugh, and burying his slender, long hands into the capacious pockets of his overcoat, he said leisurely—

'A duel? Lal is that what he meant? Odd's fish! you are a bloodthirsty young ruffian. Do you want to make a hole in a law-abiding man?... As for me, sir, I never fight duels,' he added, as he placidly sat down and stretched his long, lazy legs out before him. 'Demmed uncomfortable things, duels, ain't they, Tony?'

Now the Vicomte had no doubt vaguely heard that in England the fashion of duelling amongst gentlemen had been suppressed by the law

every grade of social and intellectual status, and inwardly he understood what Marguerite had left unsaid. Granted that Percy Blakeney was dull-witted, but in his slow-going mind, there would still be room for that ineradicable pride of a descendant of a long line of English gentlemen. A Blakeney had died on Bosworth Field, another had sacrificed life and fortune for the sake of a treacherous Stuart: and that same pride—foolish and prejudiced as the republican Armand would call it—must have been stung to the quick on hearing of the sin which lay at Lady Blakeney's door. She had been young, misguided, ill-advised perhaps. Armand knew that: and those who took advantage of Marguerite's youth, her impulses and imprudence, knew it still better; but Blakeney was slow-witted, he would not listen to 'circumstances,' he only clung to facts, and these had shown him Lady Blakeney denouncing a fellow-man to a tribunal that knew no pardon: and the contempt he would feel for the deed she had done, however unwittingly, would kill that same love in him, in which sympathy and intellectuality could never have had a part.

Yet even now, his own sister puzzled him. Life and love have such strange vagaries. Could it be that with the waning of her husband's love, Marguerite's heart had awakened with love for him? Strange extremes meet in love's pathway: this woman, who had had half intellectual Europe at her feet, might perhaps have set her affections on a fool. Marguerite was gazing out towards the sunset. Armand could not see her face, but presently it seemed to him that something which glittered for a moment in the golden evening light, fell from her eyes onto her dainty fichu of lace.

But he could not broach that subject with her. He knew her strange, passionate nature so well, and knew that reserve which lurked behind her frank, open ways.

They had always been together, these two, for their parents had died when Armand was still a youth, and Marguerite but a child. He, some eight years her senior, had watched over her until her marriage; had chaperoned her during those brilliant years spent in the flat of the Rue de Richelieu, and had seen her enter upon this new life of hers, here in England, with much sorrow and some foreboding.

This was his first visit to England since her marriage, and the few months of separation had already seemed to have built up a slight, thin

partition between brother and sister; the same deep, intense love was still there, on both sides, but each now seemed to have a secret orchard, into which the other dared not penetrate.

There was much Armand St Just could not tell his sister; the political aspect of the revolution in France was changing almost every day; she might not understand how his own views and sympathies might become modified, even as the excesses, committed by those who had been his friends, grew in horror and in intensity. And Marguerite could not speak to her brother about the secrets of her heart; she hardly understood them herself, she only knew that, in the midst of luxury, she felt lonely and unhappy.

And now Armand was going away; she feared for his safety, she longed for his presence. She would not spoil these last few sadly-sweet moments by speaking about herself. She led him gently along the cliffs, then down to the beach; their arms linked in one another's, they had still so much to say that lay just outside that secret orchard of theirs.

With a quaint little laugh, half of embarrassment and half of sarcasm, Marguerite had turned towards her husband, and was surveying him from head to foot, with an amused little twinkle in her merry blue eyes.

'La!' said Sir Percy, after a moment or two's silence, as no one offered any comment, 'how sheepish you all look... What's up?'

'Oh, nothing, Sir Percy,' replied Marguerite, with a certain amount of gaiety, which, however, sounded somewhat forced, 'nothing to disturb your equanimity—only an insult to your wife.'

The laugh which accompanied this remark was evidently intended to reassure Sir Percy as to the gravity of the incident. It apparently succeeded in that, for, echoing the laugh, he rejoined placidly—

'La, m'dear! you don't say so. Begad! who was the bold man who dared to tackle you—eh?'

Lord Tony tried to interpose, but had no time to do so, for the young Vicomte had already quickly stepped forward.

'Monsieur,' he said, prefixing his little speech with an elaborate bow, and speaking in broken English, 'my mother, the Comtesse de Tourmay de Baserive, has offended Madame, who, I see, is your wife. I cannot ask your pardon for my mother; what she does is right in my eyes. But I am ready to offer you the usual reparation between men of honour.'

The young man drew up his slim stature to its full height and looked very enthusiastic, very proud, and very hot as he gazed at six foot odd of gorgeousness, as represented by Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart.

'Lud, Sir Andrew,' said Marguerite, with one of her merry infectious laughs, 'look on that pretty picture—the English turkey and the French bantam.'

The simile was quite perfect, and the English turkey looked down with complete bewilderment upon the dainty little French bantam, which hovered quite threateningly around him.

'La! sir,' said Sir Percy at last, putting up his eye-glass and surveying the young Frenchman with undisguised wonderment, 'where, in the cuckoo's name, did you learn to speak English?'

'Monsieur!' protested the Vicomte, somewhat abashed at the way his warlike attitude had been taken by the ponderous-looking Englishman.

no pity, because he seemed to require none—he seemed very proud of his clever wife, and to care little that she took no pains to disguise that good-natured contempt which she evidently felt for him, and that she even amused herself by sharpening her ready wits at his expense.

But then Blakeney was really too stupid to notice the ridicule with which his clever wife covered him, and if his matrimonial relations with the fascinating Parisienne had not turned out all that his hopes and his dog-like devotion for her had pictured, society could never do more than vaguely guess at it.

In his beautiful house at Richmond he played second fiddle to his clever wife with imperturbable *bombonie*; he lavished jewels and luxuries of all kinds upon her, which she took with inimitable grace, dispensing the hospitality of his superb mansion with the same graciousness with which she had welcomed the intellectual coterie of Paris.

Physically, Sir Percy Blakeney was undeniably handsome—always excepting the lazy, bored look which was habitual to him. He was always irreproachably dressed, and wore the exaggerated ‘Incrovable’ fashions, which had just crept across from Paris to England, with the perfect good taste innate in an English gentleman. On this special afternoon in September, in spite of the long journey by coach, in spite of rain and mud, his coat set irreproachably across his fine shoulders, his hands looked almost femininely white, as they emerged through billowy frills of finest Mechlin lace: the extravagantly short-waisted satin coat, wide-lapelled waistcoat, and tight-fitting striped breeches, set off his massive figure to perfection, and in repose one might have admired so fine a specimen of English man-hood, until the foppish ways, the affected movements, the perpetual inane laugh, brought one’s admiration of Sir Percy Blakeney to an abrupt close.

He had lolled into the old-fashioned inn parlour, shaking the wet off his fine overcoat, then putting up a gold-rimmed eye-glass to his lazy blue eye, he surveyed the company, upon whom an embarrassed silence had suddenly fallen.

‘How do, Tony? How do, Ffoulkes?’ he said, recognising the two young men and shaking them by the hand. ‘Zounds, my dear fellow,’ he added, smothering a slight yawn, ‘did you ever see such a beastly day? Demmed climate this.’

Chapter 8

The Accredited Agent



HE afternoon was rapidly drawing to a close, and a long, chilly English summer’s evening was throwing a misty pall over the green Kentish landscape.

The *Day Dream* had set sail, and Marguerite Blakeney stood alone on the edge of the cliff for over an hour, watching those white sails, which bore so swiftly away from her the only being who really cared for her, whom she dared to love, whom she knew she could trust.

Some little distance away to her left the lights from the coffee-room of ‘The Fisherman’s Rest’ glittered yellow in the gathering mist; from time to time it seemed to her aching nerves as if she could catch from thence the sound of merry-making and of jovial talk, or even that perpetual, senseless laugh of her husband’s, which grated continually upon her sensitive ears.

Sir Percy had had the delicacy to leave her severely alone. She supposed that, in his own stupid, good-natured way, he may have understood that she would wish to remain alone, while those white sails disappeared into the vague horizon, so many miles away. He, whose notions of propriety and decorum were supersensitive, had not suggested even that an attendant should remain within call. Marguerite was grateful to her husband for all this; she always tried to be grateful to him for his thoughtfulness, which was constant, and for his generosity, which really was boundless. She tried even at times to curb the sarcastic, bitter thoughts of him, which made her—in spite of herself—say cruel, insulting things, which she vaguely hoped would wound him.

Yes! she often wished to wound him, to make him feel that she too held him in contempt, that she too had forgotten that once she had almost

loved him. Loved that inane fop! whose thoughts seemed unable to soar beyond the tying of a cravat or the new cut of a coat. Bah! And yet!... vague memories, that were sweet and ardent and attuned to this calm summer's evening, came wafted back to her memory, on the invisible wings of the light sea-breeze: the time when first he worshipped her; he seemed so devoted—a very slave—and there was a certain latent intensity in that love which had fascinated her.

Then suddenly that love, that devotion, which throughout his courtship she had looked upon as the slavish fidelity of a dog, seemed to vanish completely. Twenty-four hours after the simple little ceremony at old St Roch, she had told him the story of how, inadvertently, she had spoken of certain matters connected with the Marquis de St Cyr before some men—her friends—who had used this information against the unfortunate Marquis, and sent him and his family to the guillotine.

She hated the Marquis. Years ago, Armand, her dear brother, had loved Angèle de St Cyr, but St Just was a plebeian, and the Marquis full of the pride and arrogant prejudices of his caste. One day Armand, the respectful, timid lover, ventured on sending a small poem—enthusiastic, ardent, passionate—to the idol of his dreams. The next night he was waylaid just outside Paris by the valets of the Marquis de St Cyr, and ignominiously thrashed—thrashed like a dog within an inch of his life—because he had dared to raise his eyes to the daughter of the aristocrat. The incident was one which, in those days, some two years before the great Revolution, was of almost daily occurrence in France; incidents of that type, in fact, led to the bloody reprisals, which a few years later sent most of those haughty heads to the guillotine.

Marguerite remembered it all: what her brother must have suffered in his manhood and his pride must have been appalling; what she suffered through him and with him she never attempted even to analyse.

Then the day of retribution came. St Cyr and his kind had found their masters, in those same plebeians whom they had despised. Armand and Marguerite, both intellectual, thinking beings, adopted with the enthusiasm of their years the Utopian doctrines of the Revolution, while the Marquis de St Cyr and his family fought inch by inch for the retention of those privileges which had placed them socially above their fellow-men. Marguerite, impulsive, thoughtless, not calculating the purport of her

wealth, and the high favour in which he stood at the English court; but London society thought that, taking into consideration his own intellectual limitations, it would have been wiser on his part had he bestowed those worldly advantages upon a less brilliant and witty wife.

Although rarely he had been so prominent a figure in fashionable English society, he had spent most of his early life abroad. His father, the late Sir Algernon Blakeney, had had the terrible misfortune of seeing an idolized young wife become hopelessly insane after two years of happy married life. Percy had just been born when the late Lady Blakeney fell a prey to the terrible malady which in those days was looked upon as hopelessly incurable and nothing short of a curse of God upon the entire family. Sir Algernon took his afflicted young wife abroad, and there presumably Percy was educated, and grew up between an imbecile mother and a distracted father, until he attained his majority. The death of his parents following close upon one another left him a free man, and as Sir Algernon had led a forcibly simple and retired life, the large Blakeney fortune had increased tenfold.

Sir Percy Blakeney had travelled a great deal abroad, before he brought home his beautiful, young, French wife. The fashionable circles of the time were ready to receive them both with open arms. Sir Percy was rich, his wife was accomplished, the Prince of Wales took a very great liking to them both. Within six months they were the acknowledged leaders of fashion and of style. Sir Percy's coats were the talk of the town, his inanities were quoted, his foolish laugh copied by the gilded youth at Almack's or the Mall. Everyone knew that he was hopelessly stupid, but then that was scarcely to be wondered at, seeing that all the Blakeney, for generations, had been notoriously dull, and that his mother had died an imbecile.

Thus society accepted him, petted him, made much of him, since his horses were the finest in the country, his *fêtes* and wines the most sought after. As for his marriage with 'the cleverest woman in Europe,' well! the inevitable came with sure and rapid footsteps. No one pitied him, since his fate was of his own making. There were plenty of young ladies in England, of high birth and good looks, who would have been quite willing to help him to spend the Blakeney fortune, whilst smiling indulgently at his inanities and his good-humoured foolishness. Moreover, Sir Percy got