

I do go out. Don't think I shall, though, I've more than half a mind to send in my papers and cut the whole show."

"Surely not, Mr. Graeme, at your age. What on earth would you do with yourself? You couldn't idle for the rest of your life."

"Couldn't I? I could idle very well, Miss Caldwell, besides, I should always find plenty to do with shooting, hunting, and golf. Those are my interests, and pretty good ones too, I think."

"But surely a mere life of sport wouldn't content you. Don't you want to get on in your profession? Really, Mr. Graeme, I cannot understand a man holding such views."

"Perhaps not, but it's a fact all the same. I've no wish to get on, as you call it, indeed I loathe soldiering. What's the good of it after all, what can it lead to? I've no doubt if I chose I could be as good a soldier as any of them, but I don't choose. It's a life of slavery, the army, it's being at the beck and call of every silly fool who happens to have more gold lace on his hat than you have; and then the end—to become a general, a snuffy, purple-faced old ass, like — —"

"Like whom, Mr. Graeme?"

"Oh, like Grampus, my present lord at Canterbury, who, when he gives a luncheon party, has the lot of us strutting past him on foot parade to show his importance and amuse his lady friends."

"But all generals are not like that, Mr. Graeme."

"All I've met. It's a natural consequence too, I suppose. When a man's young and in full possession of his faculties he's only a humble captain or major, but as he approaches imbecility he rises in rank, till in the height of senile decay he becomes a general."

"Mr. Graeme, you forget, I think, that my uncle's a — —"

"He, of course, is one of the exceptions you just mentioned," said Hector with a rather nasty chuckle.

"Mr. Graeme, you're horrid; I don't wonder people dislike you."

"More do I, though perhaps if you'd been brought up as I have you'd be horrid too."

"What do you mean?"

Graeme hesitated for a moment, frowning, and then burst out, with a ring of passion in his voice:

"You've had a happy life. Miss Caldwell, parents who have been parents, I've not. My father, for some reason, would never look at me, while my mother alternately petted and neglected me. She was a queer being, my mother, mad on spiritualism and such like, and what's more used to drag me into her experiments. She said I was clairvoyant."

"Good heavens, Mr. Graeme, what an awful thing for a woman to do. I beg your pardon; I forget it's your mother I'm speaking of."

"Say what you like; I don't care. I hated her when she was alive, and do now she's dead. It's played the devil with me, Miss Caldwell. I used to lie awake at night often and shriek with terror, and I'm not much better now at times. That's the way I was brought up, nobody to care twopence about me; and gradually I got not to care too, till now I think I hate everybody just as they do me."

"Oh, surely, not everybody," began Lucy, and then stopped suddenly. At something in her voice, Graeme turned and looked at her, a queer thrill of excitement running through him. He tried to see her face, but it was turned from him; the feeling of excitement grew, and his heart began to beat fast.

For some time he too had been conscious of a growing feeling of attraction towards this girl; more, he felt himself to be in love with her—a not unusual experience, by the way, for Hector, to whom all feminine creatures were as magnets to his iron. This feeling, however, though materially contributing to the enjoyment of the past three weeks, had hitherto not been regarded by him as serious, indeed, the idea of proposing to Lucy Caldwell had never

once presented itself to him. Now the charms of such a proceeding suddenly occurred to him. The isolation, in which he had hitherto gloried, seemed no longer desirable but hateful, and with this came a sudden longing for sympathy and the love denied him in his childhood. It would be glorious, he thought, to have someone to care for him; to be interested in what he did, to have a home of his own instead of the Mess, which he hated; and straightway Hector made up his mind to do it, and, flinging prudence to the winds, spoke.

"Miss Caldwell, Lucy, is there anyone who cares?"

"I—I shouldn't think so. I—I don't know."

"Do you care?—because I do. I—I love you most—damnably."

"Most damnably?"

"Yes, and if you'll marry me—I've meant to ask you for a long time, but I've funk'd it before. I'm not much of a catch, I know. I'll try and be different. I could be, I think, if you took me in hand. For God's sake say you will, Lucy."

"But are you sure, Hector? Do you really mean it? Oh, I never said you might, and look, there's an owl flown by; he saw us, I know he did. You might have waited till he'd gone. He has gone now, Hector."

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The four miles an hour dwindled down to a bare half. The darkness deepened, owing to which possibly they lost their way, turning east instead of west. Away from the Hall they wandered, oblivious of a purple-faced gentleman who was awaiting them there, and whose wrath was rapidly rising as he viewed the still mistressless tea-table.