

Book First

I

“No, my lord,” Banks had replied, “no stranger has yet arrived. But I’ll see if any one has come in—or who has.” As he spoke, however, he observed Lady Sandgate’s approach to the hall by the entrance giving upon the great terrace, and addressed her on her passing the threshold. “Lord John, my lady.” With which, his duty majestically performed, he retired to the quarter—that of the main access to the spacious centre of the house—from which he had ushered the visitor.

This personage, facing Lady Sandgate as she paused there a moment framed by the large doorway to the outer expanses, the small pinkish paper of a folded telegram in her hand,¹ had partly before him, as an immediate effect, the high wide interior, still breathing the quiet air and the fair panelled security of the couple of hushed and stored centuries, in which certain of the reputed treasures of Dedborough Place² beautifully disposed themselves; and then, through ample apertures and beyond the stately stone outworks of the great seated and supported house—uplifting terrace, balanced, balustraded steps and containing basins where splash and spray were at rest³—all the rich composed extension of garden and lawn and park.⁴ An ancient, an assured elegance seemed to reign; pictures and preserved “pieces,” cabinets and tapestries, spoke, each for itself, of fine selection and high distinction; while the originals of the old portraits, in more or less deserved salience, hung over the happy scene as the sworn members of a great guild might have sat, on the beautiful April day, at one of their annual feasts.⁵

Such was the setting confirmed by generous time, but the handsome woman of considerably more than forty⁶ whose entrance had all but coincided with that of Lord John either belonged, for the eye, to no such complacent company or enjoyed a relation to it in which the odd twists and turns of history must have been more frequent than any dull avenue or easy sequence. Lady Sandgate was shiningly modern, and perhaps at no point more so than by the effect of her express repudiation of a mundane future certain to be more and more offensive to women of real quality and of

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formed taste. Clearly, at any rate, in her hands, the clue to the antique confidence had lost itself, and repose, however founded, had given way to curiosity—that is to speculation—however disguised. She might have consented, or even attained, to being but gracefully stupid, but she would presumably have confessed, if put on her trial for restlessness or for intelligence, that she *was*, after all, almost clever enough to be vulgar. Unmistakably, moreover, she had still, with her fine stature, her disciplined figure, her cherished complexion, her bright important hair,⁷ her kind bold eyes and her large constant smile, the degree of beauty that might pretend to⁸ put every other question by.

Lord John addressed her as with a significant manner that he might have had—that of a lack of need, or even of interest, for any explanation about herself: it would have been clear that he was apt to discriminate with sharpness among possible claims on his attention. “I luckily find—*you* at least, Lady Sandgate—they tell me Theign’s off somewhere.”

She replied as with the general habit, on her side, of bland reassurance; it mostly had easier consequences—for herself—than the perhaps more showy creation of alarm. “Only off in the park—open to-day for a school-feast from Dedborough,⁹ as you may have made out from the avenue; giving good advice, at the top of his lungs, to four hundred and fifty children.”

It was such a scene, and such an aspect of the personage so accounted for, as Lord John could easily take in, and his recognition familiarly smiled. “Oh, he’s so great on such occasions that I’m sorry to be missing it.”

“I’ve *had* to miss it,” Lady Sandgate sighed—“that is to miss the peroration. I’ve just left them; but he had even then been going on for twenty minutes; and I dare say that if you care to take a look you’ll find him, poor dear victim of duty, still *at* it.”

“I’ll warrant—for, as I often tell him, he makes the idea of one’s duty an awful thing to his friends by the extravagance with which he always overdoes it.” And the image itself appeared in some degree to prompt this particular edified friend to look at his watch and consider. “I should like to come in for the grand *finale*, but I rattled over in a great measure to meet a party,¹⁰ as he calls himself—and calls, if you please, even me!—who’s motoring down by appointment and whom I think I should be here to receive; as well as a little, I confess, in the hope of a glimpse of Lady Grace: if you can perhaps imagine *that!*”

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"I can imagine it perfectly," said Lady Sandgate, whom evidently no perceptions of that general order ever cost a strain. "It quite sticks out of you, and every one moreover has for some time past been waiting to see."¹¹ But you haven't then," she added, "come from town?"

"No, I'm for three days at Chanter¹² with my mother; whom, as she kindly lent me her car,¹³ I should have rather liked to bring."

Lady Sandgate left the unsaid, in this connection, languish no longer than was decent. "But whom you doubtless had to leave, by her preference, just settling down to bridge."¹⁴

"Oh, to sit down would imply that my mother at some moment of the day gets up——!"

"Which the Duchess never does?"—Lady Sandgate only asked to be allowed to show how she saw it. "She fights to the last, invincible; gathering in the spoils¹⁵ and only routing her friends?" She abounded genially in her privileged vision. "Ah yes—we know something of that!"

Lord John, who was a young man of a rambling but not of an idle eye, fixed her an instant with a surprise that was yet not steeped in compassion. "You too then?"

She wouldn't, however, too meanly narrow it down. "Well, in this house generally; where I'm so often made welcome, you see, and where——"

"Where," he broke in at once, "your jolly good footing quite sticks out of *you*, perhaps you'll let me say!"

She clearly didn't mind his seeing her ask herself how she should deal with so much rather juvenile intelligence; and indeed she could only decide to deal quite simply. "You can't say more than I feel—and am proud to feel—at being of comfort when they're worried."

This but fed the light flame of his easy perception—which lighted for him, if she would, all the facts equally. "And they're worried now, you imply, because my terrible mother is capable of heavy gains and of making a great noise if she isn't paid? I ought to mind speaking of that truth," he went on as with a practised glance in the direction of delicacy; "but I think I should like you to know that I myself am not a bit ignorant of why it has made such an impression here."

Lady Sandgate forestalled his knowledge. "Because poor Kitty Imber—who should either never touch a card or else learn to suffer in silence, as I've had to, goodness knows!—has thrown herself, with her impossible big

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debt, upon her father? whom she thinks herself entitled to 'look to' even more as a lovely young widow with a good jointure¹⁶ than she formerly did as the mere most beautiful daughter at home."

She had put the picture a shade interrogatively, but this was as nothing to the note of free inquiry in Lord John's reply. "You mean that our lovely young widows—to say nothing of lovely young wives—ought by this time to have made out, in predicaments, how to turn round?"

His temporary hostess, even with his eyes on her, appeared to decide after a moment not wholly to disown his thought. But she smiled for it. "Well, in that set—!"

"My mother's set?" However, if she could smile he could laugh. "I'm much obliged!"

"Oh," she qualified, "I don't criticise her Grace; but the ways and traditions and tone of this house—"

"Make it"—he took her sense straight from her—"the house in England where one feels most the false note of a dishevelled and bankrupt elder daughter breaking in with a list of her gaming debts—to say nothing of others!—and wishing to have at least those wiped out in the interest of her reputation? Exactly so," he went on before she could meet it with a diplomatic ambiguity; "and just that, I assure you, is a large part of the reason I like to come here—since I personally don't come with any such associations."

"Not the association of bankruptcy—no; as you represent the payee!"

The young man appeared to regard this imputation for a moment almost as a liberty taken. "How do you know so well, Lady Sandgate, what I represent?"

She bethought herself—but briefly and bravely. "Well, don't you represent, by your own admission, certain fond aspirations? Don't you represent the belief—very natural, I grant—that more than *one* perverse and extravagant flower will be unlikely on such a fine healthy old stem; and, consistently with that, the hope of arranging with our admirable host here that he shall lend a helpful hand to your commending yourself to dear Grace?"

Lord John might, in the light of these words, have felt any latent infirmity in such a pretension exposed; but as he stood there facing his chances he would have struck a spectator as resting firmly enough on some

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felt residuum of advantage: whether this were cleverness or luck, the strength of his backing or that of his sincerity. Even with the young woman to whom our friends' reference thus broadened still a vague quantity for us, you would have taken his sincerity as quite possible—and this despite an odd element in him that you might have described as a certain delicacy of brutality.¹⁷ This younger son of a noble matron recognised even by himself as terrible enjoyed in no immediate or aggressive manner any imputable private heritage or privilege of arrogance. He would on the contrary have irradiated fineness if his lustre hadn't been a little prematurely dimmed. Active yet insubstantial, he was slight and short and a trifle too punctually, though not yet quite lamentably, bald. Delicacy was in the arch of his eyebrow, the finish of his facial line, the economy of "treatment" by which his negative nose had been enabled to look important and his meagre mouth to smile its spareness away. He had pleasant but hard little eyes—they glittered, handsomely, without promise—and a neatness, a coolness and an ease, a clear instinct for making point take, on his behalf, the place of weight and immunity that of capacity, which represented somehow the art of living at a high pitch and yet at a low cost. There was that in his satisfied air which still suggested sharp wants—and this was withal the ambiguity; for the temper of these appetites or views was certainly, you would have concluded, not such as always to sacrifice to form. If he really, for instance, wanted Lady Grace, the passion or the sense of his interest in it would scarce have been considerably irritable.

"May I ask what you mean," he inquired of Lady Sandgate, "by the question of my 'arranging'?"

"I mean that you're the very clever son of a very clever mother."

"Oh, I'm less clever than you think,"¹⁸ he replied—"if you really think it of me at all; and mamma's a good sight cleverer!"

"Than I think?" Lady Sandgate echoed. "Why, she's the person in all our world I would gladly most resemble—for her general ability to put what she wants through." But she at once added: "That is *if*—!" pausing on it with a smile.

"If what then?"

"Well, if I could be absolutely certain to have all her kinds of cleverness without exception—and to have them," said Lady Sandgate, "to the very end."

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He definitely, he almost contemptuously declined to follow her. "The very end of what?"

She took her choice as amid all the wonderful directions there might be, and then seemed both to risk and to reserve something. "Say of her so wonderfully successful *general* career."

It doubtless, however, warranted him in appearing to cut insinuations short. "When you're as clever as she you'll be as good." To which he subjoined: "You don't begin to have the opportunity of knowing how good she is." This pronouncement, to whatever comparative obscurity it might appear to relegate her, his interlocutress had to take—he was so prompt with a more explicit challenge. "What is it exactly that you suppose yourself to know?"

Lady Sandgate had after a moment, in her supreme good humour, decided to take everything. "I always proceed on the assumption that I know everything, because that makes people tell me."

"It wouldn't make *me*," he quite rang out, "if I didn't want to! But as it happens," he allowed, "there's a question it would be convenient to me to put to you. You must be, with your charming unconventional relation¹⁹ with him, extremely in Theign's confidence."

She waited a little as for more. "Is that your question—*whether* I am?"

"No, but if you are you'll the better answer it."

She had no objection then to answering it beautifully. "We're the best friends in the world; he has been really my providence, as a lone woman with almost nobody and nothing of her own, and I feel my footing here, as so frequent and yet so discreet a visitor, simply perfect. But I'm happy to say that—for my pleasure when I'm really curious—this doesn't close to me the sweet resource of occasionally guessing things."

"Then I hope you've ground for believing that if I go the right way about it he's likely to listen to me."

Lady Sandgate measured her ground—which scarce seemed extensive. "The person he most listens to just now—and in fact at any time, as you must have seen for yourself—is that arch-tormentor, or at least beautiful wheedler, his elder daughter."

"Lady Imber's *here*?" Lord John alertly asked.

"She arrived last night and—as we've other visitors—seems to have set up a side-show in the garden."

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“Then she’ll ‘draw’ of course immensely, as she always does. But her sister won’t be in that case with her,” the young man supposed.

“Because Grace feels herself naturally an independent show? So she well may,” said Lady Sandgate, “but I must tell you that when I last noticed them there Kitty was in the very act of leading her away.”

Lord John figured it a moment. “Lady Imber”—he ironically enlarged the figure—“*can* lead people away.”

“Oh, dear Grace,” his companion returned, “happens fortunately to be firm!”

This seemed to strike him for a moment as equivocal. “Not against *me*, however—you don’t mean? You don’t think she has a beastly prejudice —?”

“Surely you can judge about it; as knowing best what may—or what mayn’t—have happened between you.”

“Well, I try to judge”—and such candour as was possible to Lord John seemed to sit for a moment on his brow. “But I’m in fear of seeing her too much as I want to see her.”

There was an appeal in it that Lady Sandgate might have been moved to meet. “Are you absolutely in earnest about her?”

“Of course I am—why shouldn’t I be? But,” he said with impatience, “I want help.”

“Very well then, that’s what Lady Imber’s giving you.” And as it appeared to take him time to read into these words their full sense, she produced others, and so far did help him—though the effort was in a degree that of her exhibiting with some complacency her own unassisted control of stray signs and shy lights. “By telling her, by bringing it home to her, that if she’ll make up her mind to accept you the Duchess will do the handsome thing. Handsome, I mean, by Kitty.”

Lord John, appropriating for his convenience the truth in this, yet regarded it as open to a becoming, an improving touch from himself. “Well, and by *me*.” To which he added, with more of a challenge in it: “But you really know what my mother will do?”

“By my system,” Lady Sandgate smiled, “you see I’ve guessed. What your mother will do is what brought you over!”

“Well, it’s that,” he allowed—“and something else.”

“Something else?” she derisively echoed.

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“I should think ‘that,’ for an ardent lover would have been enough.”

“Ah, but it’s all one job! I mean it’s one idea,” he hastened to explain—“if you think Lady Imber’s really acting on her.”

“Mightn’t you go and see?”

“I would in a moment if I hadn’t to look out for another matter too.” And he renewed his attention to his watch. “I mean getting straight at my American, the party I just mentioned——”

But she had already taken him up. “You too have an American and a ‘party,’ and yours also motors down——?”

“Mr. Breckenridge Bender.”²⁰ Lord John named him with a shade of elation.

She gaped at the fuller light. “You *know* my Breckenridge?—who I hoped was coming for me!”

Lord John as freely, but more gaily, wondered. “Had he told you so?”

She held out, opened, the telegram she had kept folded in her hand since her entrance. “He has sent me that—which, delivered to me ten minutes ago²¹ out there, has brought me in to receive him.”

The young man read out this missive. “Failing to find you in Bruton Street,²² start in pursuit and hope to overtake you about four.” It did involve an ambiguity. “Why, he has been engaged these three days to coincide with myself, and not to fail of him has been part of my business.”

Lady Sandgate, in her demonstrative way, appealed to the general rich scene. “Then why does he say it’s me he’s pursuing?”

He seemed to recognise promptly enough in her the sense of a menaced monopoly. “My dear lady, he’s pursuing expensive works of art.”

“By which you imply that I’m one?” She might have been wound up by her disappointment to almost any irony.

“I imply—or rather I affirm—that every handsome woman is! But what he arranged with me about,” Lord John explained, “was that he should see the Dedborough pictures in general and the great Sir Joshua²³ in particular—of which he had heard so much and to which I’ve been thus glad to assist him.”

This news, however, with its lively interest, but deepened the listener’s mystification. “Then why—this whole week that I’ve been in the house—hasn’t our good friend here mentioned to me his coming?”

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“Because our good friend here has had no reason”—Lord John could treat it now as simple enough. “Good as he is in all ways, he’s so best of all about showing the house and its contents²⁴ that I haven’t even thought necessary to write him that I’m introducing Breckenridge.”

“I should have been happy to introduce him,” Lady Sandgate just quavered—“if I had at all known he wanted it.”

Her companion weighed the difference between them and appeared to pronounce it a trifle he didn’t care a fig for. “I surrender you that privilege then—of presenting him to his host—if I’ve seemed to you to snatch it from you.” To which Lord John added, as with liberality unrestricted, “But I’ve been taking him about to see what’s worth while—as only last week to Lady Lappington’s Longhi.”²⁵

This revelation, though so casual in its form, fairly drew from Lady Sandgate, as she took it in, an interrogative wail. “Her Longhi?”

“Why, don’t you know her great Venetian family group, the What-do-you-call-’ems?—seven full-length figures, each one a gem, for which he paid her her price before he left the house.”

She could but make it more richly resound—almost stricken, lost in her wistful thought: “Seven full-length figures? Her price?”

“Eight thousand—slap down.”²⁶ Bender knows,” said Lord John, “what he wants.”

“And does he want only”—her wonder grew and grew—“What-do-you-call-’ems?”

“He most usually wants what he can’t have.” Lord John made scarce more of it than that. “But, awfully hard up as I fancy her, Lady Lappington went *at* him.”

It determined in his friend a boldly critical attitude. “How horrible—at the rate things are leaving us!” But this was far from the end of her interest. “And is that the way he pays?”

“Before he leaves the house?” Lord John lived it amusedly over. “Well, *she* took care of that.”

“How incredibly vulgar!” It all had, however, for Lady Sandgate, still other connections—which might have attenuated Lady Lappington’s case, though she didn’t glance at this. “He makes the most scandalous eyes—the ruffian!—at my great-grandmother.” And then as richly to enlighten any blankness: “My tremendous Lawrence, don’t you know?—in her wedding-

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dress, down to her knees;²⁷ with such extraordinarily speaking eyes,²⁸ such lovely arms and hands, such wonderful flesh-tints: universally considered the masterpiece of the artist.”

Lord John seemed to look a moment not so much at the image evoked, in which he wasn't interested, as at certain possibilities lurking behind it. “And are you going to *sell* the masterpiece of the artist?”

She held her head high. “I've indignantly refused—for all his pressing me so hard.”

“Yet that's what he nevertheless pursues you to-day to keep up?”

The question had a little the ring of those of which the occupant of a witness-box is mostly the subject, but Lady Sandgate was so far as this went an imperturbable witness. “I need hardly fear it perhaps if—in the light of what you tell me of your arrangement with him—his pursuit becomes, where I am concerned, a figure of speech.”

“Oh,” Lord John returned, “he kills two birds with one stone—he sees both Sir Joshua and you.”

This version of the case had its effect, for the moment, on his fair associate. “Does he want to buy *their* pride and glory?”

The young man, however, struck on his own side, became at first but the bright reflector of her thought. “Is that wonder for sale?”

She closed her eyes as with the shudder of hearing such words. “Not, surely, by *any* monstrous chance! Fancy dear, proud Theign—!”

“I can't fancy him—no!” And Lord John appeared to renounce the effort. “But a cat may look at a king²⁹ and a sharp funny Yankee at anything.”

These things might be, Lady Sandgate's face and gesture apparently signified; but another question diverted her. “You're clearly a wonderful showman,³⁰ but do you mind my asking you whether you're on such an occasion a—well, a closely-interested one?”

“Interested?” he echoed; though it wasn't to gain time, he showed, for he would in that case have taken more. “To the extent, you mean, of my little percentage?” And then as in silence she but kept a slightly grim smile on him: “Why do you ask if—with your high delicacy about your great-grandmother—you've nothing to place?”

It took her a minute to say, while her fine eye only rolled; but when she spoke that organ boldly rested and the truth vividly appeared. “I ask because people like you, Lord John, strike me as dangerous to the—how