The Alien Corn

W. Somerset Maugham

I HAD known the Blands a long time before I discovered that they had any connexion with Ferdy Rabenstein. Ferdy must have been nearly fifty when I first knew him and at the time of which I write he was well over seventy. He had altered little. His hair, coarse but abundant and curly, was white, but he had kept his figure and held himself as gallantly as ever. It was not hard to believe that in youth he had been as beautiful as people said. He had still his fine Semitic profile and the lustrous black eyes that had caused havoc in so many a Gentile breast. He was very tall, lean, with an oval face and a clear skin. He wore his clothes very well and in evening dress, even now, he was one of the handsomest men I had ever seen. He wore then large black pearls in his shirt-front and platinum and sapphire rings on his fingers. Perhaps he was rather flashy, but you felt it was so much in character that it would have ill become him to be anything else.

“After all, I am an Oriental,” he said. “I can carry a certain barbaric magnificence.”

I have often thought that Ferdy Rabenstein would make an admirable subject for a biography. He was not a great man, but within the limits he set himself he made of his life a work of art. It was a masterpiece in little, like a Persian miniature, and derived its interest from its perfection. Unfortunately the materials are scanty. They would consist of letters that may very well have been destroyed and the recollections of people who are old now and will soon be dead. His memory is extraordinary, but he would never write his memoirs, for he looks upon his past as a source of purely private entertainment; and he is a man of the most perfect discretion. Nor do I know anyone who could do justice to the subject but Max Beerbohm. There is no one else in this hard world of today who can look upon the trivial with such tender sympathy and wring such a delicate pathos from futility. I wonder that Max, who must have known Ferdy much better than I, and long before, was never tempted to exercise his exquisite fancy on such a theme. He was born for Max to write about. And who should have illustrated the elegant book that I see in my mind’s eye but Aubrey Beardsley? Thus would have been erected a monument of triple brass and the ephemera imprisoned to succeeding ages in the amber’s translucency.

Ferdy’s conquests were social and his venue was the great world. He was born in South Africa and did not come to England till he was twenty. For some time he was on the Stock Exchange, but on the death of his father he inherited a considerable fortune, and retiring from business devoted himself to the life of a man about town. At that period English society was still a closed body and it was not easy for a Jew to force its barriers, but to Ferdy they fell like the walls of Jericho. He was handsome, he was rich, he was a sportsman and he was good company. He had a house in Curzon Street, furnished with the most beautiful French furniture, and a French chef, and a brougham. It would be interesting to know the first steps in his wonderful career: they are lost in the dark abysm of time. When I first met him he had been long established as one of the smartest men in London: this was at a very grand house in Norfolk to which I had been asked as a promising young novelist by the hostess who took an interest in letters, but the company was very distinguished and I was over-awed. We were sixteen, and I felt shy and alone among these Cabinet Ministers, great ladies, and peers of the realm who talked of people and things of which I knew nothing. They were civil to me, but indifferent, and I was conscious that I was somewhat of a burden to my hostess. Ferdy saved me. He sat with me, walked with me, and talked with me. He discovered that I was a writer and we discussed the drama and the novel: he learnt that I had lived much on the Continent and he talked to me pleasantly of France, Germany, and Spain. He seemed really to seek my society. He gave me the flattering impression that he and I stood apart from the other members of the company and by our conversation upon affairs of the spirit made that of the rest of them, the political situation, the scandal of somebody’s divorce, and the growing disinclination of pheasants to be killed, seem a little ridiculous. But if Ferdy had at the bottom of his heart a feeling of ever so faint a contempt for the hearty British gentry that surrounded us I am sure that it was only to me that he allowed an inkling of it to appear, and looking back I cannot but wonder whether it was not after all a suave and very delicate compliment that he paid me. I think of course that he liked to exercise his charm and I dare say the obvious pleasure his conversation gave me gratified him, but he could have had no motive for taking so much trouble over an obscure novelist other than his real interest in art and letters. I felt that he and I at bottom were equally alien in that company, I because I was a writer and he because he was a Jew, but I envied the ease with which he bore himself. He was completely at home. Everyone called him Ferdy. He seemed to be always in good spirits. He was never at a loss for a quip, a jest, or a repartee. They liked him in that house because he made them laugh, but never made them uncomfortable by talking over their heads. He brought a faint savour of Oriental romance into their lives, but so cleverly that they only felt more English. You could never be dull when he was by and with him present you were safe from the fear of the devastating silences that sometimes overwhelm a British company. A pause looked inevitable and Ferdy Rabenstein had broken into a topic that interested everyone. An invaluable asset to any party. He had an inexhaustible fund of

Jewish stories. He was a very good mimic and he assumed the Yiddish accent and reproduced the Jewish gestures to perfection; his head sank into his body, his face grew cunning, his voice oily, and he was a rabbi or an old clothes merchant or a smart commercial traveller or a fat procuress in Frankfort. It was as good as a play. Because he was himself a Jew and insisted on it you laughed without reserve, but for my own part not without an under-current of discomfort. I was not quite sure of a sense of humour that made such cruel fun of his own race. I discovered afterwards that Jewish stories were his speciality and I seldom met him anywhere without hearing him tell sooner or later the last he had heard.

But the best story he told me on this occasion was not a Jewish one. It struck me so that I have never forgotten it, but for one reason or another I have never had occasion to tell it again. I give it here because it is a curious little incident concerning persons whose names at least will live in the social history of the Victorian Era and I think it would be a pity if it were lost. He told me then that once when quite a young man he was staying in the country in a house where Mrs Langtry, at that time at the height of her beauty and astounding reputation, was also a guest. It happened to be within driving distance of that in which lived the Duchess of Somerset, who had been Queen of Beauty at the Eglinton Tournament, and knowing her slightly, it occurred to him that it would be interesting to bring the two women together. He suggested it to Mrs Langtry, who was willing, and forthwith wrote to the Duchess asking if he might bring the celebrated beauty to call on her. It was fitting, he said, that the loveliest women of this generation (this was in the eighties) should pay her respects to the loveliest woman of the last. “Bring her by all means,” answered the Duchess, “but I warn you that it will be a shock to her.” They drove over in a carriage and pair, Mrs Langtry in a close-fitting blue bonnet with long satin strings, which showed the fine shape of her head and made her blue eyes even bluer, and were received by a little ugly old hag who looked with irony out of her beady eyes at the radiant beauty who had come to see her. They had tea, they talked, and they drove home again. Mrs Langtry was very silent and when Ferdy looked at her he saw that she was quietly weeping. When they got back to the house she went to her room and would not come down to dinner that night. For the first time she had realized that beauty dies.

Ferdy asked me for my address and a few days after I got back to London invited me to dinner. There were only six of us, an American woman married to an English peer, a Swedish painter, an actress, and a well-known critic. We ate very good food and drank excellent wine. The conversation was easy and intelligent. After dinner Ferdy was persuaded to play the piano. He only played Viennese waltzes, I discovered later that they were his speciality, and the light, tuneful, and sensual music seemed to accord well with his discreet flamboyance. He played without affectation, with a lilt, and he had a graceful touch. This was the first of a good many dinners I had with him, he would ask me two or three times a year, and as time passed I met him more and more frequently at other people’s houses. I rose in the world and perhaps he came down a little. Of late years I had sometimes found him at parties where other Jews were and I fancied that I read in his shining liquid eyes, resting for a moment on these members of his race, a certain good-natured amusement at the thought of what the world was coming to. There were people who said he was a snob, but I do not think he was; it just happened that in his early days he had never met any but the great. He had a real passion for art and in his commerce with those that produced it was at his best. With them he had never that faint air of persiflage which when he was with very grand persons made you suspect that he was never quite the dupe of their grandeur. His taste was perfect and many of his friends were glad to avail themselves of his knowledge. He was one of the first to value old furniture and he rescued many a priceless piece from the attics of ancestral mansions and gave it an honourable place in the drawing-room. It amused him to saunter round the auction rooms and he was always willing to give his advice to great ladies who desired at once to acquire a beautiful thing and make a profitable investment. He was rich and good-natured. He liked to patronize the arts and would take a great deal of trouble to get commissions for some young painter whose talent he admired or an engagement to play at a rich man’s house for a violinist who could in no other way get a hearing. But he never let his rich man down. His taste was too good to deceive and civil though he might be to the mediocre he would not lift a finger to help them. His own musical parties, very small and carefully chosen, were a treat.

He never married.

“I am a man of the world,” he said, “and I flatter myself that I have no prejudices, tous les goûts sont dans la nature, but I do not think I could bring myself to marry a Gentile. There’s no harm in going to the opera in a dinner jacket, but it just would never occur to me to do so.”

“Then why didn’t you marry a Jewess?”

(I did not hear this conversation, but the lively and audacious creature who thus tackled him told me of it.)

“Oh, my dear, our women are so prolific. I could not bear the thought of peopling the world with a little Ikey and a little Jacob and a little Rebecca and a little Leah and a little Rachel.”

But he had had affairs of note and the glamour of past romance still clung to him. He was in his youth of an amorous complexion. I have met old ladies who told me that he was irresistible, and when in reminiscent mood they talked to me of this woman and that who had completely lost her head over him, I divined that, such was his beauty, they could not find it in their hearts to blame them. It was interesting to hear of great ladies that I had read of in the memoirs of the day or had met as respectable dowagers garrulous over their grandsons at Eton or making a mess of a hand at bridge and bethink myself that they had been consumed with sinful passion for the handsome Jew. Ferdy’s most

notorious amour was with the Duchess of Hereford, the loveliest, the most

gallant and dashing of the beauties of the end of Queen Victoria’s reign. It lasted for twenty years. He had doubtless flirtations meanwhile, but their relations were stable and recognized. It was proof of his marvellous tact that when at last they ended he exchanged an ageing mistress for a loyal friend. I remember meeting the pair not so very long ago at luncheon. She was an old woman, tall and of a commanding presence, but with a mask of paint on a ravaged face. We were lunching at the Carlton and Ferdy, our host, came a few minutes late. He offered us a cocktail and the Duchess told him we had already had one.

“Ah, I wondered why your eyes were so doubly bright,” he said.

The old raddled woman flushed with pleasure.

My youth passed, I grew middle-aged, I wondered how soon I must begin to describe myself as elderly; I wrote books and plays, I travelled, I underwent experiences, I fell in love and out of it; and still I kept meeting Ferdy at parties. War broke out and was waged, millions of men were killed, and the face of the world was changed. Ferdy did not like the war. He was too old to take part in it, and his German name was awkward, but he was discreet and took care not to expose himself to humiliation. His old friends were faithful to him and he lived in a dignified but not too strict seclusion. But then peace came and with courage he set himself to making the best of changed conditions. Society was mixed now, parties were rowdy, but Ferdy fitted himself to the new life. He still told his funny Jewish stories, he still played charmingly the waltzes of Strauss, he still went round auction rooms and told the new rich what they ought to buy. I went to live abroad, but whenever I was in London I saw Ferdy and now there was something a little uncanny in him. He did not give in. He had never known a day’s illness. He seemed never to grow tired. He still dressed beautifully. He was interested in everybody. His mind was alert and people asked him to dinner, not for old times’ sake, but because he was worth his salt. He still gave charming little concerts at his house in Curzon Street.

It was when he invited me to one of these that I made the discovery that started the recollections of him I have here set down. We were dining at a house in Hill Street, a large party, and the women having gone upstairs Ferdy and I found ourselves side by side. He told me that Lea Makart was coming to play for him on the following Friday evening and he would be glad if I would come.

“I’m awfully sorry,” I said, “but I’m going down to the Blands.”

“What Blands?”

“They live in Sussex at a place called Tilby.”

“I didn’t know you knew them.”

He looked at me rather strangely. He smiled. I didn’t know what amused him.

“Oh, yes, I’ve known them for years. It’s a very nice house to stay at.”

“Adolf is my nephew.”

“Sir Adolphus?”

“It suggests one of the bucks of the Regency, doesn’t it? But I will not conceal from you that he was named Adolf.”

“Everyone I know calls him Freddy.”

“I know, and I understand that Miriam, his wife, only answers to the name of Muriel.”

“How does he happen to be your nephew?”

“Because Hannah Rabenstein, my sister, married Alfons Bleikogel, who ended life as Sir Alfred Bland, first Baronet, and Adolf, their only son, in due course became Sir Adolphus Bland, second Baronet.”

“Then Freddy Bland’s mother, the Lady Bland who lives in Portland Place, is your sister?”

“Yes, my sister Hannah. She was the eldest of the family. She’s eighty, but in full possession of her faculties and a remarkable woman.”

“I’ve never met her.”

“I think your friends the Blands would just as soon you didn’t. She has never lost her German accent.”

“Do you never see them?” I asked.

“I haven’t spoken to them for twenty years. I am such a Jew and they are so English.” He smiled. “I could never remember that their names were Freddy and Muriel. I used to come out with an Adolf or a Miriam at awkward moments. And they didn’t like my stories. It was better that we should not meet. When the war broke out and I would not change my name it was the last straw. It was too late, I could never have accustomed my friends to think of me as anything but Ferdy Rabenstein; I was quite content. I was not ambitious to be a Smith, a Brown or a Robinson.”

Though he spoke facetiously, there was in his tone the faintest possible derision and I felt, hardly felt even, the sensation was so shadowy, that, as it had often vaguely seemed to me before, there was in the depth of his impenetrable heart a cynical contempt for the Gentiles he had conquered.

“Then you don’t know the two boys?” I said.

“No.”

“The eldest is called George, you know. I don’t think he’s so clever as Harry, the other one, but he’s an engaging youth. I think you’d like him.”

“Where is he now?”

“Well, he’s just been sent down from Oxford. I suppose he’s at home. Harry’s still at Eton.”

“Why don’t you bring George to lunch with me?”

“I’ll ask him. I should think he’d love to come.”

“It has reached my ears that he’s been a little troublesome.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He wouldn’t go into the army, which is what they wanted. They rather fancied the Guards. And so he went to Oxford instead. He didn’t work and he spent a great deal of money and he painted the town red. It was all quite normal.”

“What was he sent down for?”

“I don’t know. Nothing of any consequence.”

At that moment our host rose and we went upstairs. When Ferdy bade me good night he asked me not to forget about his great-nephew.

“Ring me up,” he said. “Wednesday would suit me. Or Friday.”

Next day I went down to Tilby. It was an Elizabethan mansion standing in a spacious park, in which roamed fallow deer, and from its windows you had wide views of rolling downs. It seemed to me that as far as the eye could reach the land belonged to the Blands. His tenants must have found Sir Adolphus a wonderful landlord, for I never saw farms kept in such order, the barns and cow-sheds were spick and span and the pigsties were a picture; the public-houses looked like Old English water-colours and the cottages he had built on the estate combined admirably picturesqueness and convenience. It must have cost him a pot of money to run the place on these lines. Fortunately he had it. The park with its grand old trees (and its nine-hole golf course) was tended like a garden, and the wide-stretching gardens were the pride of the neighbourhood. The magnificent house, with its steep roofs and mullioned windows, had been restored by the most celebrated architect in England and furnished by Lady Bland, with taste and knowledge, in a style that perfectly fitted it.

“Of course it’s very simple,” she said. “Just an English house in the country.”

The dining-room was adorned with old English sporting pictures and the Chippendale chairs were of incredible value. In the drawing-room were portraits by Reynolds and Gainsborough and landscapes by Old Crome and Richard Wilson. Even in my bedroom with its four-post bed were water-colours by Birket Foster. It was very beautiful and a treat to stay there, but though it would have distressed Muriel Bland beyond anything to know it, it entirely missed oddly enough the effect she had sought. It did not give you for a moment the impression of an English house. You had the feeling that every object had been bought with a careful eye to the general scheme. You missed the full Academy portraits that hung in the dining-room beside a Carlo Dolci that an ancestor had brought back from the Grand Tour, and the water-colours painted by a great-aunt that cluttered up the drawing-room so engagingly. There was no ugly Victorian sofa that had always been there and that it never occurred to anybody to take away and no needlework chairs that an unmarried daughter had so painstakingly worked at about the time of the Great Exhibition. There was beauty but no sentiment.

And yet how comfortable it was and how well looked after you were! And what a cordial greeting the Blands gave you! They seemed really to like people. They were generous and kindly. They were never happier than when they were entertaining the county, and though they had not owned the property for more than twenty years they had established themselves firmly in the favour of their neighbours. Except perhaps in their splendour and the competent way in which the estate was run there was nothing to suggest that they had not been settled there for centuries.

Freddy had been at Eton and Oxford. He was now in the early fifties. He was quiet in manner, courtly, very clever, I imagine, but a trifle reserved. He had great elegance, but it was not an English elegance; he had grey hair and a short pointed grey beard, fine dark eyes and an aquiline nose. He was just above middle height; I don’t think you would have taken him for a Jew, but rather for a foreign diplomat of some distinction. He was a man of character, but gave you, strangely enough, notwithstanding the success he had had in life, an impression of faint melancholy. His successes had been financial and political; in the world of sport, for all his perseverance, he had never shone. For many years he had followed hounds, but he was a bad rider and I think it must have been a relief to him when he could persuade himself that middle age and pressure of business forced him to give up hunting. He had excellent shooting and gave grand parties for it, but he was a poor shot; and despite the course in his park he never succeeded in being more than an indifferent golfer. He knew only too well how much these things meant in England and his incapacity was a bitter disappointment to him. However George would make up for it.

George was scratch at golf, and though tennis was not his game he played much better than the average; the Blands had had him taught to shoot as soon as he was old enough to hold a gun and he was a fine shot; they had put him on a pony when he was two, and Freddy, watching him mount his horse, knew that out hunting when the boy came to a fence he felt exhilaration and not that sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach, which, though he had chased the fox with such grim determination, had always made the sport a torture to him. George was so tall and slim, his curly hair, of a palish brown, was so fine, his eyes were so blue, he was the perfect type of the young Englishman. He had the engaging candour of the breed. His nose was straight, though perhaps a trifle fleshy, and his lips were perhaps a little full and sensual, but he had beautiful teeth, and his smooth skin was like ivory. George was the apple of his father’s eye. He did not like Harry, his second son, so well. He was rather stocky, broad-shouldered and strong for his age, but his black eyes, shining with cleverness, his coarse dark hair, and his big nose revealed his race. Freddy was severe with him, and often impatient, but with George he was all indulgence. Harry would go into the business, he had brains and push, but George was the heir. George would be an English gentleman.

George had offered to motor me down in the roadster his father had given him as a birthday present. He drove very fast and we arrived before the rest of the guests. The Blands were sitting on the lawn and tea was laid out under a magnificent cedar.

“By the way,” I said presently, “I saw Ferdy Rabenstein the other day and he wants me to bring George to lunch with him.”

I had not mentioned the invitation to George on the way because I thought that if there had been a family coldness I had better address his parents as well.

“Who in God’s name is Ferdy Rabenstein?” said George.

How brief is human glory! A generation back such a question would have seemed grotesque.

“He’s by way of being your great-uncle,” I replied.

A glance had passed from father to mother when I first spoke.

“He’s a horrid old man,” said Muriel.

“I don’t think it’s in the least necessary for George to resume relationships that were definitely severed before he was born,” said Freddy with decision.

“Anyhow I’ve delivered the message,” said I, feeling somewhat snubbed.

“I don’t want to see the old blighter,” said George.

The conversation was broken off by the arrival of other guests and in a little while George went off to play golf with one of his Oxford friends.

It was not till next day that the matter was referred to again. I had played an unsatisfactory round with Freddy Bland in the morning and several sets of what is known as country-house tennis in the afternoon and was sitting alone with Muriel on the terrace. In England we have so much bad weather that it is only fair that a beautiful day should be more beautiful than anywhere in the world and this June evening was perfect. The blue sky was cloudless and the air was balmy; before us stretched green rolling downs, and woods, and in the distance you saw the red roofs of a little village church. It was a day when to be alive was sufficient happiness. Detached lines of poetry hovered vaguely in my memory. Muriel and I had been chatting desultorily.

“I hope you didn’t think it rather horrid of us to refuse to let George lunch with Ferdy,” she said suddenly. “He’s such a fearful snob, isn’t he?”

“D’you think so? He’s always been very nice to me.”

“We haven’t been on speaking terms for twenty years. Freddy never forgave him for his behaviour during the war. So unpatriotic, I thought, and one really must draw the line somewhere. You know, he absolutely refused to drop his horrible German name. With Freddy in Parliament and running munitions and all that sort of thing it was quite impossible. I don’t know why he should want to see George. He can’t mean anything to him.”

“He’s an old man. George and Harry are his great-nephews. He must leave his money to someone.”

“We’d rather not have his money,” said Muriel coldly.

Of course I didn’t care a row of pins whether George went to lunch with Ferdy Rabenstein, and I was quite willing to let the matter drop, but evidently the Blands had talked it over and Muriel felt that some explanation was due to me.

“Of course you know that Freddy has Jewish blood in him,” she said.

She looked at me sharply. Muriel was rather a big blonde woman and she spent a great deal of time trying to keep down the corpulence to which she was predisposed. She had been very pretty when young, and even now was a comely person; but her round blue eyes, slightly prominent, her fleshy nose, the shape of her face and the back of her neck, her exuberant manner, betrayed her race. No Englishwoman, however fair-haired, ever looked like that. And yet her observation was designed to make me take it for granted that she was a Gentile. I answered discreetly:

“So many people have nowadays.”

“I know. But there’s no reason to dwell on it, is there? After all, we’re absolutely English; no one could be more English than George, in appearance and manner and everything; I mean, he’s such a fine sportsman and all that sort of thing, I can’t see any object of his knowing Jews just because they happen to be distant connexions of his.”

“It’s very difficult in England now not to know Jews, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I know, in London one does meet a good many, and I think some of them are very nice. They’re so artistic. I don’t go so far as to say that Freddy and I deliberately avoid them, of course I wouldn’t do that, but it just happens that we don’t really know any of them very well. And down here, there simply aren’t any to know.”

I could not but admire the convincing manner in which she spoke. It would not have surprised me to be told that she really believed every word she said.

“You say that Ferdy might leave George his money. Well, I don’t believe it’s so very much anyway; it was quite a comfortable fortune before the war, but that’s nothing nowadays. Besides we’re hoping that George will go in for politics when he’s a little older, and I don’t think it would do him any good in the constituency to inherit money from a Mr Rabenstein.”

“Is George interested in politics?” I asked, to change the conversation.

“Oh, I do hope so. After all, there’s the family constituency waiting for him. It’s a safe Conservative seat and one can’t expect Freddy to go on with the grind of the House of Commons indefinitely.”

Muriel was grand. She talked already of the constituency as though twenty generations of Blands had sat for it. Her remark, however, was my first intimation that Freddy’s ambition was not satisfied.

“I suppose Freddy would go to the House of Lords when George was old enough to stand.”

“We’ve done a good deal for the party,” said Muriel.

Muriel was a Catholic and she often told you that she had been educated in a convent-“Such sweet women, those nuns, I always said that if I had a daughter I should have sent her to a convent too’-but she liked her servants to be Church of England, and on Sunday evenings we had what was called supper because the fish was cold and there was ice-cream, so that they could go to church, and we were waited on by two footmen instead of four. It was still light when we finished and Freddy and I, smoking our cigars, walked up and down the terrace in the gloaming. I suppose Muriel had told him of her conversation with me, and it may be that his refusal to let George see his great-uncle still troubled him, but being subtler than she he attacked the question more indirectly. He told me that he had been very much worried about George. It had been a great disappointment that he had refused to go into the army.

“I should have thought he’d have loved the life,” he said.

“And he would certainly have looked marvellous in his Guards uniform.”

“He would, wouldn’t he?” returned Freddy, ingenuously. “I wonder he could resist that.”

He had been completely idle at Oxford; although his father had given him a very large allowance, he had got monstrously into debt; and now he had been sent down. But though he spoke so tartly I could see that he was not a little proud of his scapegrace son, he loved him with oh, such an unEnglish love, and in his heart it flattered him that George had cut such a dash.

“Why should you worry?” I said. “You don’t really care if George has a degree or not.”

Freddy chuckled.

“No, I don’t suppose I do really. I always think the only important thing about Oxford is that people know you were there, and I dare say that George isn’t any wilder than the other young men in his set. It’s the future I’m thinking of. He’s so damned idle. He doesn’t seem to want to do anything but have a good time.”

“He’s young, you know.”

“He’s not interested in politics, and though he’s so good at games he’s not even very keen on sport. He seems to spend most of his time strumming the piano.”

“That’s a harmless amusement.”

“Oh, yes, I don’t mind that, but he can’t go on loafing indefinitely. You see, all this will be his one day.” Freddy gave a sweeping gesture that seemed to embrace the whole county, but I knew that he did not own it all yet. “I’m very anxious that he should be fit to assume his responsibilities. His mother is very ambitious for him, but I only want him to be an English gentleman.”

Freddy gave me a sidelong glance as though he wanted to say something but hesitated in case I thought it ridiculous; but there is one advantage in being a writer that, since people look upon you as of no account, they will often say things to you that they would not to their equals. He thought he would risk it.

“You know, I’ve got an idea that nowhere in the world now is the Greek ideal of life so perfectly cultivated as by the English country gentleman living on his estates. I think his life has the beauty of a work of art.”

I could not but smile when I reflected that it was impossible for the English country gentleman in these days to do anything of the sort without a packet of money safely invested in American Bonds, but I smiled with sympathy. I thought it rather touching that this Jewish financier should cherish so romantic a dream.

“I want him to be a good landlord. I want him to take his part in the affairs of the country. I want him to be a thorough sportsman.”

“Poor mutt,” I thought, but said: “Well, what are your plans for George now?”

“I think he has a fancy for the diplomatic service. He’s suggested going to Germany to learn the language.”

“A very good idea, I should have thought.”

“For some reason he’s got it into his head that he wants to go to Munich.”

“A nice place.”

Next day I went back to London and shortly after my arrival rang up Ferdy.

“I’m sorry, but George isn’t able to come to lunch on Wednesday.”

“What about Friday?”

“Friday’s no good either.” I thought it useless to beat about the bush. “The fact is, his people aren’t keen on his lunching with you.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then:

“I see. Well, will you come on Wednesday anyway?”

“Yes, I’d like to,” I answered.

So on Wednesday at half past one I strolled round to Curzon Street. Ferdy received me with the somewhat elaborate graciousness that he cultivated. He made no reference to the Blands. We sat in the drawing-room and I could not help reflecting what an eye for beautiful objects that family had. The room was more crowded than the fashion of today approves, and the gold snuff-boxes in vitrines, the French china, appealed to a taste that was not mine; but they were no doubt choice pieces; and the Louise XV suite, with its beautiful petit point, must have been worth an enormous lot of money. The pictures on the walls by Lancret, Pater, and Watteau did not greatly interest me, but I recognized their intrinsic excellence. It was a proper setting for this aged man of the world. It fitted his period. Suddenly the door opened and George was announced. Ferdy saw my surprise and gave me a little smile of triumph.

“I’m very glad you were able to come after all,” he said as he shook George’s hand.

I saw him in a glance take in his great-nephew whom he saw today for the first time. George was very well dressed. He wore a short black coat, striped trousers, and the grey double-breasted waistcoat which at that time was the mode. You could only wear it with elegance if you were tall and thin and your belly was slightly concave. I felt sure that Ferdy knew exactly who George’s tailor was and what haberdasher he went to and approved of them. George, so smart and trim, wearing his clothes so beautifully, certainly looked very handsome. We went down to luncheon. Ferdy had the social graces at his fingers’ ends and he put the boy at his ease, but I saw that he was carefully appraising him; then, I do not know why, he began to tell some of his Jewish stories. He told them with gusto and with all his wonderful mimicry. I saw George flush, and though he laughed at them, I could see that it was with embarrassment. I wondered what on earth had induced Ferdy to be so tactless. But he was watching George and he told story after story. It looked as though he would never stop. I wondered if for some reason I could not grasp he was taking a malicious pleasure in the boy’s obvious discomfiture. At last we went upstairs and to make things easier I asked Ferdy to play the piano. He played us three or four little waltzes. He had lost none of his exquisite lightness nor his sense of their lilting rhythm. Then he turned to George.

“Do you play?” he asked him.

“A little.”

“Won’t you play something?”

“I’m afraid I only play classical music. I don’t think it would interest you.”

Ferdy smiled slightly, but did not insist. I said it was time for me to go and George accompanied me.

“What a filthy old Jew,” he said as soon as we were in the street. “I hated those stories of his.”

“They’re his great stunt. He always tells them.”

“Would you if you were a Jew?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“How is it you came to lunch after all?” I asked George.

He chuckled. He was a light-hearted creature, with a sense of humour, and he shook off the slight irritation his great-uncle had caused him.

“He went to see Granny. You don’t know Granny, do you?”

“No.”

“She treats daddy like a kid in Etons. Granny said I was to go to lunch with great-uncle Ferdy and what Granny says goes.”

“I see.”

A week or two later George went to Munich to learn German. I happened then to go on a journey and it was not till the following spring that I was again in London. Soon after my arrival I found myself sitting next to Muriel Bland at dinner. I asked after George.

“He’s still in Germany,” she said.

“I see in the papers that you’re going to have a great beano at Tilby for his coming of age.”

“We’re going to entertain the tenants and they’re making George a presentation.”

She was less exuberant than usual, but I did not pay much attention to the fact. She led a strenuous life and it might be that she was tired. I knew she liked to talk of her son, so I continued.

“I suppose George has been having a grand time in Germany,” I said.

She did not answer for a moment and I gave her a glance. I was surprised to see that her eyes were filled with tears.

“I’m afraid George has gone mad,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been so frightfully worried. Freddy’s so angry, he won’t even discuss it. I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Of course it immediately occurred to me that George, who, I supposed, like most young Englishmen sent to learn the language, had been put with a German family, had fallen in love with the daughter of the house and wanted to marry her. I had a pretty strong suspicion that the Blands were intent on his making a very grand marriage.

“Why, what’s happened?” I asked.

“He wants to become a pianist.”

“A what?”

“A professional pianist.”

“What on earth put that idea in his head?”

“Heaven knows. We didn’t know anything about it. We thought he was working for his exam. I went out to see him. I thought I’d like to know that he was getting on all right. Oh, my dear. He looks like nothing on earth. And he used to be so smart; I could have cried. He told me he wasn’t going in for the exam, and had never had any intention of doing so; he’d only suggested the diplomatic service so that we’d let him go to Germany and he’d be able to study music’

“But has he any talent?”

“Oh, that’s neither here nor there. Even if he had the genius of Paderewski we couldn’t have George traipsing around the country playing at concerts. No one can deny that I’m very artistic, and so is Freddy, we love music and we’ve always known a lot of artists, but George will have a very great position, it’s out of the question. We’ve set our hearts on his going into Parliament. He’ll be very rich one day. There’s nothing he can’t aspire to.”

“Did you point all that out to him?”

“Of course I did. He laughed at me. I told him he’d break his father’s heart. He said his father could always fall back on Harry. Of course I’m devoted to Harry, and he’s as clever as a monkey, but it was always understood that he was to go into the business; even though I am his mother I can see that he hasn’t got the advantages that George has. Do you know what he said to me? He said that if his father would settle five pounds a week on him he would resign everything in Harry’s favour and Harry could be his father’s heir and succeed to the baronetcy and everything. It’s too ridiculous. He said that if the Crown Prince of Roumania could abdicate a throne he didn’t see why he couldn’t abdicate a baronetcy. But you can’t do that. Nothing can prevent him from being third baronet and if Freddy should be granted a peerage from succeeding to it at Freddy’s death. Do you know, he even wants to drop the name of Bland and take some horrible German name.” I could not help asking what. “Bleikogel or something like that,” she answered.

That was a name I recognized. I remembered Ferdy telling me that Hannah Rabenstein had married Alfons Bleikogel who became eventually Sir Alfred Bland, first Baronet. It was all very strange. I wondered what had happened to the charming, so typically English boy I had seen only a few months before.

“Of course when I came home and told Freddy he was furious. I’ve never seen him so angry. He foamed at the mouth. He wired to George to come back immediately and George wired back to say he couldn’t on account of his work.”

“Is he working?”

“From morning till night. That’s the maddening part of it. He never did a stroke of work in his life. Freddy used to say he was born idle.”

“H’m.”

“Then Freddy wired to say that if he didn’t come he’d stop his allowance and George wired back: ‘Stop it.’ That put the lid on. You don’t know what Freddy can be when his back is up.”

I knew that Freddy had inherited a large fortune, but I knew also that he had immensely increased it, and I could well imagine that behind the courteous and amiable Squire of Tilby there was a ruthless man of affairs. He had been used to having his own way and I could believe that when crossed he would be hard and cruel.

“We’d been making George a very handsome allowance, but you know how frightfully extravagant he was. We didn’t think he’d be able to hold out long and in point of fact within a month he wrote to Ferdy and asked him to lend him a hundred pounds. Ferdy went to my mother-in-law, she’s his sister, you know, and asked her what it meant. Though they hadn’t spoken for twenty years Freddy went to see him and begged him not to send George a penny, and he promised he wouldn’t. I don’t know how George has been making both ends meet. I’m sure Freddy’s right, but I can’t help being rather worried. If I hadn’t given Freddy my word of honour that I wouldn’t send him anything I think I’d have slipped a few notes in a letter in case of accident. I mean, it’s awful to think that perhaps he hasn’t got enough to eat.”

“It’ll do him no harm to go short for a bit.”

“We were in an awful hole, you know. We’d made all sorts of preparations for his coming of age, and I’d issued hundreds of invitations. Suddenly George said he wouldn’t come. I was simply frantic. I wrote and wired. I would have gone over to Germany only Freddy wouldn’t let me. I practically went down on my bended knees to George. I begged him not to put us in such a humiliating position. I mean, it’s the sort of thing it’s so difficult to explain. Then my mother-in-law stepped in. You don’t know her, do you? She’s an extraordinary old woman. You’d never think she was Freddy’s mother. She was German originally, but of very good family.”

“Oh?”

“To tell you the truth I’m rather frightened of her. She tackled Freddy and then she wrote to George herself. She said that if he’d come home for his twenty-first birthday she’d pay any debts he had in Munich and we’d all give a patient hearing to anything he had to say. He agreed to that and we’re expecting him one day next week. But I’m not looking forward to it, I can tell you.”

She gave a deep sigh. When we were walking upstairs after dinner Freddy addressed me.

“I see Muriel has been telling you about George. The damned fool! I have no patience with him. Fancy wanting to be a pianist. It’s so ungentlemanly.”

“He’s very young, you know,” I said soothingly.

“He’s had things too easy for him. I’ve been much too indulgent. There’s never been a thing he wanted that I haven’t given him. I’ll learn him.”

The Blands had a discreet apprehension of the uses of advertisement and I gathered from the papers that the celebrations at Tilby of George’s twenty-first birthday were conducted in accordance with the usage of English county families. There was a dinner-party and a ball for the gentry and a collation and a dance in marquees on the lawn for the tenants. Expensive bands were brought down from London. In the illustrated papers were pictures of George surrounded by his family being presented with a solid silver tea-set by the tenantry. They had subscribed to have his portrait painted, but since his absence from the country had made it impossible for him to sit, the tea-service had been substituted. I read in the columns of the gossip writers that his father had given him a hunter, his mother a gramophone that changed its own records, his grandmother the dowager Lady Bland an Encyclopaedia Britannica, and his great-uncle Ferdinand Rabenstein a Virgin and Child by Pellegrino da Modena. I could not help observing that these gifts were bulky and not readily convertible into cash. From Ferdy’s presence at the festivities I concluded that George’s unaccountable vagary had effected a reconciliation between uncle and nephew. I was right. Ferdy did not at all like the notion of his great-nephew becoming a professional pianist. At the first hint of danger to its prestige the family drew together and a united front was presented to oppose George’s designs. Since I was not there I only know from hearsay what happened when the birthday celebrations were over. Ferdy told me something and so did Muriel, and later George gave me his version. The Blands had very much the impression that when George came home and found himself occupying the centre of the stage, when, surrounded by splendour, he saw for himself once more how much it meant to be the heir of a great estate, he would weaken. They surrounded him with love. They flattered him. They hung on his words. They counted on the goodness of his heart and thought that if they were very kind to him he would not have the courage to cause them pain. They seemed to take it for granted that he had no intention of going back to Germany and in conversation included him in all their plans. George did not say very much. He seemed to be enjoying himself. He did not open a piano. Things looked as though they were going very well. Peace descended on the troubled house. Then one day at luncheon when they were discussing a garden-party to which they had all been asked for one day of the following week, George said pleasantly:

“Don’t count on me. I shan’t be here.”

“Oh, George, why not?” asked his mother.

“I must get back to my work. I’m leaving for Munich on Monday.”

There was an awful pause. Everyone looked for something to say, but was afraid of saying the wrong thing, and at last it seemed impossible to break it. Luncheon was finished in silence. Then George went into the garden and the others, old Lady Bland and Ferdy, Muriel and Sir Adolphus, into the morning-room. There was a family council. Muriel wept. Freddy flew into a temper. Presently from the drawing-room they heard the sound of someone playing a nocturne of Chopin. It was George. It was as though now he had announced his decision he had gone for comfort, rest, and strength to the instrument he loved. Freddy sprang to his feet.

“Stop that noise,” he cried. “I won’t have him play the piano in my house.”

Muriel rang for a servant and gave him a message.

“Will you tell Mr Bland that her ladyship has a bad headache and would he mind not playing the piano.”

Ferdy, the man of the world, was deputed to have a talk with George. He was authorized to make him certain promises if he would give up the idea of becoming a pianist. If he did not wish to go into the diplomatic service his father would not insist, but if he would stand for Parliament he was prepared to pay his election expenses, give him a flat in London, and make him an allowance of five thousand a year. I must say it was a handsome offer. I do not know what Ferdy said to the boy. I suppose he painted to him the life that a young man could lead in London on such an income. I am sure he made it very alluring. It availed nothing. All George asked was five pounds a week to be able to continue his studies and to be left alone. He was indifferent to the position that he might some day enjoy. He didn’t want to hunt. He didn’t want to shoot. He didn’t want to be a Member of Parliament. He didn’t want to be a millionaire. He didn’t want to be a baronet. He didn’t want to be a peer. Ferdy left him defeated and in a state of considerable exasperation.

After dinner that evening there was a battle royal. Freddy was a quick-tempered man, unused to opposition, and he gave George the rough side of his tongue. I gather that it was very rough indeed. The women who sought to restrain his violence were sternly silenced. Perhaps for the first time in his life Freddy would not listen to his mother. George was obstinate and sullen. He had made up his mind and if his father didn’t like it he could lump it. Freddy was peremptory. He forbade George to go back to Germany. George answered that he was twenty-one and his own master. He would go where he chose. Freddy swore he would not give him a penny.

“All right, I’ll earn money.”

“You! You’ve never done a stroke of work in your life. What do you expect to do to earn money?”

“Sell old clothes,” grinned George.

There was a gasp from all of them. Muriel was so taken aback that she said a stupid thing.

“Like a Jew?”

“Well, aren’t I a Jew? And aren’t you a Jewess and isn’t daddy a Jew? We’re all Jews, the whole gang of us, and everyone knows it and what the hell’s the good of pretending we’re not?”

Then a very dreadful thing happened. Freddy burst suddenly into tears. I’m afraid he didn’t behave very much like Sir Adolphus Bland, Bart, M.P., and the good old English gentleman he so much wanted to be, but like an emotional Adolf Bleikogel who loved his son and wept with mortification because the great hopes he had set on him were brought to nothing and the ambition of his life was frustrated. He cried noisily with great loud sobs and pulled his beard and beat his breast and rocked to and fro. Then they all began to cry, old Lady Bland and Muriel, and Ferdy, who sniffed and blew his nose and wiped the tears streaming down his face, and even George cried. Of course it was very painful, but to our rough Anglo-Saxon temperament I am afraid it must seem also a trifle ridiculous. No one tried to console anybody else. They just sobbed and sobbed. It broke up the party.

But it had no result on the situation. George remained obdurate. His father would not speak to him. There were more scenes. Muriel sought to excite his pity; he was deaf to her piteous entreaties, he did not seem to mind if he broke her heart, he did not care two hoots if he killed his father. Ferdy appealed to him as a sportsman and a man of the world. George was flippant and indeed personally offensive. Old Lady Bland with her guttural German accent and strong common sense argued with him, but he would not listen to reason. It was she, however, who at last found a way out. She made George acknowledge that it was no use to throw away all the beautiful things the world laid at his feet unless he had talent. Of course he thought he had, but he might be mistaken. It was not worth while to be a second-rate pianist. His only excuse, his only justification, was genius. If he had genius his family had no right to stand in his way.

“You can’t expect me to show genius already,” said George. “I shall have to work for years.”

“Are you sure you are prepared for that?”

“It’s my only wish in the world. I’ll work like a dog. I only want to be given my chance.”

This was the proposition she made. His father was determined to give him nothing and obviously they could not let the boy starve. He had mentioned five pounds a week. Well, she was willing to give him that herself. He could go back to Germany and study for two years. At the end of that time he must come back and they would get some competent and disinterested person to hear him play, and if then that person said he showed promise of becoming a first-rate pianist no further obstacles would be placed in his way. He would be given every advantage, help, and encouragement. If on the other hand that person decided that his natural gifts were not such as to ensure ultimate success he must promise faithfully to give up all thoughts of making music his profession and in every way accede to his father’s wishes. George could hardly believe his ears.

“Do you mean that, Granny?”

“I do.”

“But will daddy agree?”

“I vill see dat he does,” she answered.

George seized her in his arms and impetuously kissed her on both cheeks.

“Darling,” he cried. “Ah, but de promise?”

He gave her his solemn word of honour that he would faithfully abide by the terms of the arrangement. Two days later he went back to Germany. Though his father consented unwillingly to his going, and indeed could not help doing so, he would not be reconciled to him and when he left refused to say good-bye to him.

I imagine that in no manner could he have caused himself such pain. I permit myself a trite remark. It is strange that men, inhabitants for so short a while of an alien and inhuman world, should go out of their way to cause themselves so much unhappiness.

George had stipulated that during his two years of study his family should not visit him, so that when Muriel heard some months before he was due to come home that I was passing through Munich on my way to Vienna, whither business called me, it was not unnatural that she should ask me to look him up. She was anxious to have first-hand information about him. She gave me

George’s address and I wrote ahead, telling him I was spending a day in Munich, and asked him to lunch with me. His answer awaited me at the hotel. He said he worked all day and could not spare the time to lunch with me, but if I would come to his studio about six he would like to show me that and if I had nothing better to do would love to spend the evening with me. So soon after six I went to the address he gave me. He lived on the second floor of a large block of flats and when I came to his door I heard the sound of piano-playing. It stopped when I rang and George opened the door for me. I hardly recognized him. He had grown very fat. His hair was extremely long, it curled all over his head in picturesque confusion; and he had certainly not shaved for three days. He wore a grimy pair of Oxford bags, a tennis shirt, and slippers. He was not very clean and his finger-nails were rimmed with black. It was a startling change from the spruce, slim youth so elegantly dressed in such beautiful clothes that I had last seen. I could not but think it would be a shock to Ferdy to see him now. The studio was large and bare; on the walls were three or four unframed canvases of a highly cubist nature, there were several arm-chairs much the worse for wear, and a grand piano. Books were littered about and old newspapers and art magazines. It was dirty and untidy and there was a frowzy smell of stale beer and stale smoke.

“Do you live here alone?” I asked.

“Yes, I have a woman who comes in twice a week and cleans up. But I make my own breakfast and lunch.”

“Can you cook?”

“Oh, I only have bread and cheese and a bottle of beer for lunch. I dine at a Bierstube.”

It was pleasant to discover that he was very glad to see me. He seemed in great spirits and extremely happy. He asked after his relations and we talked of one thing and another. He had a lesson twice a week and for the rest of the time practised. He told me that he worked ten hours a day.

“That’s a change,” I said.

He laughed.

“Daddy said I was born tired. I wasn’t really lazy. I didn’t see the use of working at things that bored me.”

I asked him how he was getting on with the piano. He seemed to be satisfied with his progress and I begged him to play to me.

“Oh, not now, I’m all in, I’ve been at it all day. Let’s go out and dine and come back here later and then I’ll play. I generally go to the same place, there are several students I know there, and it’s rather fun.”

Presently we set out. He put on socks and shoes and a very old golf coat, and we walked together through the wide quiet streets. It was a brisk cold day. His step was buoyant. He looked round him with a sigh of delight.

“I love Munich,” he said. “It’s the only city in the world where there’s art in the very air you breathe. After all, art is the only thing that matters, isn’t it? I loathe the idea of going home.”

“All the same I’m afraid you’ll have to.”

“I know. I’ll go all right, but I’m not going to think about it till the time comes.”

“When you do, you might do worse than get a haircut. If you don’t mind my saying so you look almost too artistic to be convincing.”

“You English, you’re such Philistines,” he said.

He took me to a rather large restaurant in a side street, crowded even at that early hour with people dining, and furnished heavily in the German medieval style. A table covered with a red cloth, well away from the air, was reserved for George and his friends and when we went to it four or five youths were at it. There was a Pole studying Oriental languages, a student of philosophy, a painter (I suppose the author of George’s cubist pictures), a Swede, and a young man who introduced himself to me, clicking his heels, as Hans Reiting, Dichter, namely Hans Reiting, poet. Not one of them was more than twenty-two and I felt a trifle out of it. They all addressed George as du and I noticed that his German was extremely fluent. I had not spoken it for some time and mine was rusty, so that I could not take much part in the lively conversation. But nevertheless I thoroughly enjoyed myself. They ate sparingly, but drank a good deal of beer. They talked of art and women. They were very revolutionary and though gay very much in earnest. They were contemptuous of everyone you had ever heard of, and the only point on which they all agreed was that in this topsy-turvy world only the vulgar could hope for success. They argued points of technique with animation, and contradicted one another, and shouted and were obscene. They had a grand time.

At about eleven George and I walked back to his studio. Munich is a city that frolics demurely and except about the Marienplatz the streets were still and empty. When we got in he took off his coat and said:

“Now I’ll play to you.”

I sat in one of the dilapidated arm-chairs and a broken spring stuck into my behind, but I made myself as comfortable as I could. George played Chopin. I know very little of music and that is one of the reasons for which I have found this story difficult to write. When I go to a concert at the Queen’s Hall and in the intervals read the programme it is all Greek to me. I know nothing of harmony and counterpoint. I shall never forget how humiliated I felt once when, having come to Munich for a Wagner festival, I went to a wonderful performance of Tristan und Isolde and never heard a note of it. The first few bars sent me off and I began to think of what I was writing, my characters leapt into life and I heard their long conversations, I suffered their pains and was a party to their joy; the years swept by and all sorts of things happened to me, the spring brought me its rapture and in the winter I was cold and hungry; and I loved and I hated and I died. I suppose there were intervals in which I walked round and round the garden and probably ate Schinken-Brodchen and drank beer, but I have no recollection of them. The only thing I know is that when the curtain for the last time fell I woke with a start. I had had a wonderful time, but I could not help thinking it was very stupid of me to come such a long way and spend so much money if I couldn’t pay attention to what I heard and saw.

I knew most of the things George played. They were the familiar pieces of concert programmes. He played with a great deal of dash. Then he played Beethoven’s Appassionata. I used to play it myself when I played the piano (very badly) in my far distant youth and I still knew every note of it. Of course it is a classic and a great work, it would be foolish to deny it, but I confess that at this time of day it leaves me cold. It is like Paradise Lost, splendid, but a trifle stolid. This too George played with vigour. He sweated profusely. At first I could not make out what was the matter with his playing, something did not seem to me quite right, and then it struck me that the two hands did not exactly synchronize, so that there was ever so slight an interval between the bass and the treble; but I repeat, I am ignorant of these things; what disconcerted me might have been merely the effect of his having drunk a good deal of beer that evening or indeed only my fancy. I said all I could think of to praise him.

“Of course I know I need a lot more work. I’m only a beginner, but I know I can do it. I feel it in my bones. It’ll take me ten years, but then I shall be a pianist.”

He was tired and came away from the piano. It was after midnight and I suggested going, but he would not hear of it. He opened a couple of bottles of beer and lit his pipe. He wanted to talk.

“Are you happy here?” I asked him.

“Very,” he answered gravely. “I’d like to stay for ever. I’ve never had such fun in my life. This evening, for instance. Wasn’t it grand?”

“It was very jolly. But one can’t go on leading the student’s life. Your friends here will grow older and go away.”

“Others’ll come. There are always students here and people like that.”

“Yes, but you’ll grow older too. Is there anything more lamentable than the middle-aged man who tries to go on living the undergraduate’s life? The old fellow who wants to be a boy among boys, and tries to persuade himself that they’ll accept him as one of themselves-how ridiculous he is. It can’t be done.”

“I feel so at home here. My poor father wants me to be an English gentleman. It gives me gooseflesh. I’m not a sportsman. I don’t care a damn for hunting and shooting and playing cricket. I was only acting.”

“You gave a very natural performance.”

“It wasn’t till I came here that I knew it wasn’t real. I loved Eton, and Oxford was a riot, but all the same I knew I didn’t belong. I played the part all right, because acting’s in my blood, but there was always something in me that wasn’t satisfied. The house in Grosvenor Square is a freehold and daddy paid a hundred and eighty thousand pounds for Tilby; I don’t know if you understand what I mean, I felt they were just furnished houses we’d taken for the season and one of these days we’d pack up and the real owners would come back.”

I listened to him attentively, but I wondered how much he was describing what he had obscurely felt and how much he imagined now in his changed circumstances that he had felt.

“I used to hate hearing great-uncle Ferdy tell his Jewish stories. I thought it so damned mean. I understand now; it was a safety valve. My God, the strain of being a man about town. It’s easier for daddy, he can play the old English squire at Tilby, but in the City he can be himself. He’s all right. I’ve taken the make-up off and my stage clothes and at last I can be my real self too. What a relief! You know, I don’t like English people. I never really know where I am with you. You’re so dull and conventional. You never let yourselves go. There’s no freedom in you, freedom of the soul, and you’re such funks. There’s nothing in the world you’re so frightened of as doing the wrong thing.”

“Don’t forget that you’re English yourself, George,” I murmured.

He laughed.

“I? I’m not English. I haven’t got a drop of English blood in me. I’m a Jew and you know it, and a German Jew into the bargain. I don’t want to be English. I want to be a Jew. My friends are Jews. You don’t know how much more easy I feel with them. I can be myself. We did everything we could to avoid Jews at home; Mummy, because she was blonde, thought she could get away with it and pretended she was a Gentile. What rot! D’you know, I have a lot of fun wandering about the Jewish parts of Munich and looking at the people. I went to Frankfort once, there are a lot of them there, and I walked about and looked at the frowzy old men with their hooked noses and the fat women with their false hair. I felt such a sympathy for them, I felt I belonged to them, I could have kissed them. When they looked at me I wondered if they knew that I was one of them. I wish to God I knew Yiddish. I’d like to become friends with them, and go into their houses and eat Kosher food and all that sort of thing. I wanted to go to a synagogue, but I was afraid I’d do the wrong thing and be kicked out. I like the smell of the Ghetto and the sense of life, and the mystery and the dust and the squalor and the romance. I shall never get the longing for it out of my head now. That’s the real thing. All the rest is only pretence.”

“You’ll break your father’s heart,” I said.

“It’s his or mine. Why can’t he let me go? There’s Harry. Harry would love to be squire of Tilby. He’d be an English gentleman all right. You know, mummy’s set her heart on my marrying a Christian. Harry would love to. He’ll found the good old English family all right. After all, I ask so little. I only want five pounds a week, and they can keep the title and the park and the Gainsboroughs and the whole bag of tricks.”

“Well, the fact remains that you gave your solemn word of honour to go back after two years.”

“I’ll go back all right,” he said sullenly. “Lea Makart has promised to come and hear me play.”

“What’ll you do if she says you’re no good?”

“Shoot myself,” he said gaily.

“What nonsense,” I answered in the same tone.

“Do you feel at home in England?”

“No,” I said, “but then I don’t feel at home anywhere else.”

But he was quite naturally not interested in me.

“I loathe the idea of going back. Now that I know what life has to offer I wouldn’t be an English country gentleman for anything in the world. My God, the boredom of it!”

“Money’s a very nice thing and I’ve always understood it’s very pleasant to be an English peer.”

“Money means nothing to me. I want none of the things it can buy, and I don’t happen to be a snob.”

It was growing very late and I had to get up early next day. It seemed unnecessary for me to pay too much attention to what George said. It was the sort of nonsense a young man might very well indulge in when thrown suddenly among painters and poets. Art is strong wine and needs a strong head to carry it. The divine fire burns most efficiently in those who temper its fury with horse sense. After all, George was not twenty-three yet. Time teaches. And when all was said and done his future was no concern of mine. I bade him good night and walked back to my hotel. The stars were shining in the indifferent sky. I left Munich in the morning.

I did not tell Muriel on my return to London what George had said to me, or what he looked like, but contented myself with assuring her that he was well and happy, working very hard, and seemed to be leading a virtuous and sober life. Six months later he came home. Muriel asked me to go down to Tilby for the week-end; Ferdy was bringing Lea Makart to hear George play and he particularly wished me to be there. I accepted. Muriel met me at the station.

“How did you find George?” I asked.

“He’s very fat, but he seems in great spirits. I think he’s pleased to be back again. He’s been very sweet to his father.”

“I’m glad of that.”

“Oh, my dear, I do hope Lea Makart will say he’s no good. It’ll be such a relief to all of us.”

“I’m afraid it’ll be a terrible disappointment to him.”

“Life is full of disappointments,” said Muriel crisply. “But one learns to put up with them.”

I gave her a smile of amusement. We were sitting in a Rolls, and there was a footman as well as a chauffeur on the box. She wore a string of pearls that had probably cost forty thousand pounds. I recollected that in the birthday honours Sir Adolphus Bland had not been one of the three gentlemen on whom the King had been pleased to confer a peerage.

Lea Makart was able to make only a flying visit. She was playing that evening at Brighton and would motor over to Tilby on the Sunday morning for luncheon. She was returning to London the same day because she had a concert in Manchester on the Monday. George was to play in the course of the afternoon.

He’s practising very hard,” his mother told me. “That’s why he didn’t come with me to meet you.”

We turned in at the park gates and drove up the imposing avenue of elms that led to the house. I found that there was no party.

I met the dowager Lady Bland for the first time. I had always been curious to see her. I had had in my mind’s eye a somewhat sensational picture of an old, old Jewish woman who lived alone in her grand house in Portland Place, and, with a finger in every pie, ruled her family with a despotic hand. She did not disappoint me. She was of commanding presence, rather tall, and stout without being corpulent. Her countenance was markedly Hebraic. She wore a rather heavy moustache and a wig of a peculiarly metallic brown. Her dress was very grand, of black brocade, and she had a row of large diamond stars on her breast and round her neck a chain of diamonds. Diamond rings gleamed on her wrinkled hands. She spoke in a rather harsh voice and with a strong German accent. When I was introduced to her she fixed me with shining eyes. She summed me up with dispatch and to my fancy at all events made no attempt to conceal from me that the judgement she formed was unfavourable.

“You have known my brother Ferdinand for many years, is it not so?” she said, rolling a guttural R. “My brother Ferdinand has always moved in very good society. Where is Sir Adolphus, Muriel? Does he know your guest is arrived? And will you not send for George? If he does not know his pieces by now he will not know them by tomorrow.”

Muriel explained that Freddy was finishing a round of golf with his secretary and that she had had George told I was there. Lady Bland looked as though she thought Muriel’s replies highly unsatisfactory and turned again to me.

“My daughter-in-law tells me you have been in Italy?”

“Yes, I’ve only just come back.”

“It is a beautiful country. How is the King?”

I said I did not know.

“I used to know him when he was a little boy. He was not very strong then. His mother, Queen Margherita, was a great friend of mine. They thought he would never marry. The Duchess of Aosta was very angry when he fell in love with that Princess of Montenegro.”

She seemed to belong to some long-past period of history, but she was very alert and I imagine that little escaped her beady eyes. Freddy, very spruce in plus-fours, presently came in. It was amusing and yet a little touching to see this grey-bearded man, as a rule somewhat domineering, so obviously on his best behaviour with the old lady. He called her Mamma. Then George came in. He was as fat as ever, but he had taken my advice and had his hair cut; he was losing his boyish looks, but he was a powerful and well-set-up young man. It was good to see the pleasure he took in his tea. He ate quantities of sandwiches and great hunks of cake. He had still a boy’s appetite. His father watched him with a tender smile and as I looked at him I could not be surprised at the attachment which they all so obviously felt for him. He had an ingenuousness, a charm, and an enthusiasm which were certainly very pleasant. There was about him a generosity of demeanour, a frankness, and a natural cordiality which could not but make people take to him. I do not know whether it was owing to a hint from his grandmother or merely of his own good nature, but it was plain that he was going out of his way to be nice to his father; and in his father’s soft eyes, in the way he hung upon the boy’s words, in his pleased, proud, and happy look, you felt how bitterly the estrangement of the last two years had weighed on him. He adored George.

We played golf in the morning, a three-ball match, since Muriel, having to go to Mass, could not join us, and at one Ferdy arrived in Lea Makart’s car. We sat down to luncheon. Of course Lea Makart’s reputation was well known to me. She was acknowledged to be the greatest woman pianist in Europe. She was a very old friend of Ferdy’s, who with his interest and patronage had greatly helped her at the beginning of her career, and it was he who had arranged for her to come and give her opinion of George’s chances. At one time I went as often as I could to hear her play. She had no affectations; she played as a bird sings, without any appearance of effort, very naturally, and the silvery notes dripped from her light fingers in a curiously spontaneous manner, so that it gave you the impression that she was improvising those complicated rhythms. They used to tell me that her technique was wonderful. I could never make up my mind how much the delight her playing gave me was due to her person. In those days she was the most ethereal thing you could imagine, and it was surprising that a creature so sylphlike should be capable of so much power. She was very slight, pale, with enormous eyes and magnificent black hair, and at the piano she had a childlike wistfulness that was most appealing. She was very beautiful in a hardly human way and when she played, a little smile on her closed lips, she seemed to be remembering things she had heard in another world. Now, however, a woman in the early forties, she was sylphlike no more; she was stout and her face had broadened; she had no longer that lovely remoteness, but the authority of her long succession of triumphs. She was brisk, business-like, and somewhat overwhelming. Her vitality lit her with a natural spotlight as his sanctity surrounds the saint with a halo. She was not interested in anything very much but her own affairs, but since she had humour and knew the world she was able to invest them with gaiety. She held the conversation, but did not absorb it. George talked little. Every now and then she gave him a glance, but did not try to draw him in. I was the only Gentile at the table. All but old Lady Bland spoke perfect English, yet I could not help feeling that they did not speak like English people; I think they rounded their vowels more than we do, they certainly spoke louder, and the words seemed not to fall, but to gush from their lips. I think if I had been in another room where I could hear the tone but not the words of their speech I should have thought it was in a foreign language that they were conversing. The effect was slightly disconcerting.

Lea Makart wished to set out for London at about six, so it was arranged that George should play at four. Whatever the result of the audition, I felt that I, a stranger in the circle which her departure must render exclusively domestic, would be in the way and so, pretending an early engagement in town next morning, I asked her if she would take me with her in her car.

At a little before four we all wandered into the drawing-room. Old Lady Bland sat on a sofa with Ferdy; Freddy, Muriel, and I made ourselves comfortable in arm-chairs; and Lea Makart sat by herself. She chose instinctively a high-backed Jacobean chair that had somewhat the air of a throne, and in a yellow dress, with her olive skin, she looked very handsome. She had magnificent eyes. She was very much made up and her mouth was scarlet.

George gave no sign of nervousness. He was already seated at the piano when I went in with his father and mother, and he watched us quietly settling ourselves down. He gave me the shadow of a smile. When he saw that we were all at our ease he began to play. He played Chopin. He played two waltzes that were familiar to me, a polonaise and an etude. He played with a great deal of brio. I wish I knew music well enough to give an exact description of his playing. It had strength, and a youthful exuberance, but I felt that he missed what to me is the peculiar charm of Chopin, the tenderness, the nervous melancholy, the wistful gaiety and the slightly faded romance that reminds me always of an Early Victorian keepsake. And again I had the vague sensation, so slight that it almost escaped me, that the two hands did not quite synchronize. I looked at Ferdy and saw him give his sister a look of faint surprise. Muriel’s eyes were fixed on the pianist, but presently she dropped them and for the rest of the time stared at the floor. His father looked at him too, and his eyes were steadfast, but unless I was much mistaken he went pale and his face betrayed something like dismay. Music was in the blood of all of them, all their lives they had heard the greatest pianists in the world, and they judged with instinctive precision. The only person whose face betrayed no emotion was Lea Makart. She listened very attentively. She was as still as an image in a niche.

At last he stopped and turning round on his seat faced her. He did not speak.

“What is it you want me to tell you?” she asked.

They looked into one another’s eyes.

“I want you to tell me whether I have any chance of becoming in time a pianist in the first rank.”

“Not in a thousand years.”

For a moment there was dead silence. Freddy’s head sank and he looked down at the carpet at his feet. His wife put out her hand and took his. But George continued to look steadily at Lea Makart.

“Ferdy has told me the circumstances,” she said at last. “Don’t think I’m influenced by them. Nothing of this is very important.” She made a great sweeping gesture that took in the magnificent room with the beautiful things it contained and all of us. “If I thought you had in you the makings of an artist I shouldn’t hesitate to beseech you to give up everything for art’s sake. Art is the only thing that matters. In comparison with art, wealth and rank and power are not worth a straw.” She gave us a look so sincere that it was void of insolence. “We are the only people who count. We give the world significance. You are only our raw material.”

I was not too pleased to be included with the rest under that heading, but that is neither here nor there.

“Of course I can see that you’ve worked very hard. Don’t think it’s been wasted. It will always be a pleasure to you to be able to play the piano and it will enable you to appreciate great playing as no ordinary person can hope to do. Look at your hands. They’re not a pianist’s hands.”

Involuntarily I glanced at George’s hands. I had never noticed them before. I was astounded to see how podgy they were and how short and stumpy the fingers.

“Your ear is not quite perfect. I don’t think you can ever hope to be more than a very competent amateur. In art the difference between the amateur and the professional is immeasurable.”

George did not reply. Except for his pallor no one would have known that he was listening to the blasting of all his hopes. The silence that fell was quite awful. Lea Makart’s eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“But don’t take my opinion alone,” she said. “After all, I’m not infallible. Ask somebody else. You know how good and generous Paderewski is. I’ll write to him about you and you can go down and play to him. I’m sure he’ll hear you.”

George now gave a little smile. He had very good manners and whatever he was feeling did not want to make the situation too difficult for others.

“I don’t think that’s necessary, I am content to accept your verdict. To tell you the truth it’s not so very different from my master’s in Munich.”

He got up from the piano and lit a cigarette. It eased the strain. The others moved a little in their chairs. Lea Makart smiled at George.

“Shall I play to you?” she said.

“Yes, do.”

She got up and went to the piano. She took off the rings with which her fingers were laden. She played Bach. I do not know the names of the pieces, but I recognized the stiff ceremonial of the frenchified little German courts and the sober, thrifty comfort of the burghers, and the dancing on the village green, the green trees that looked like Christmas trees, and the sunlight on the wide German country, and a tender cosiness; and in my nostrils there was a warm scent of the soil and I was conscious of a sturdy strength that seemed to have its roots deep in mother earth, and of an elemental power that was timeless and had no home in space. She played beautifully, with a soft brilliance that made you think of the full moon shining at dusk in the summer sky. With another part of me I watched the others and I saw how intensely they were conscious of the experience. They were rapt. I wished with all my heart that I could get from music the wonderful exaltation that possessed them. She stopped, a smile hovered on her lips, and she put on her rings. George gave a little chuckle.

“That clinches it, I fancy,” he said.

The servants brought in tea and after tea Lea Makart and I bade the company farewell and got into the car. We drove up to London. She talked all the way, if not brilliantly at all events with immense gusto; she told me of her early years in Manchester and of the struggle of her beginnings. She was very interesting. She never even mentioned George; the episode was of no consequence, it was finished and she thought of it no more.

We little knew what was happening at Tilby. When we left George went out on the terrace and presently his father joined him. Freddy had won the day, but he was not happy. With his more than feminine sensitiveness he felt all that George was feeling, and George’s anguish simply broke his heart. He had never loved his son more than then. When he appeared George greeted him with a little smile. Freddy’s voice broke. In a sudden and overwhelming emotion he found it in him to surrender the fruits of his victory.

“Look here, old boy,” he said, “I can’t bear to think that you’ve had such a disappointment. Would you like to go back to Munich for another year and then see?”

George shook his head.

“No, it wouldn’t be any good. I’ve had my chance. Let’s call it a day.”

“Try not to take it too hard.”

“You see, the only thing in the world I want is to be a pianist. And there’s nothing doing. It’s a bit thick if you come to think of it.”

George, trying so hard to be brave, smiled wanly.

“Would you like to go round the world? You can get one of your Oxford pals to go with you and I’ll pay all the expenses. You’ve been working very hard for a long time.”

“Thanks awfully, daddy, we’ll talk about it. I’m just going for a stroll now.”

“Shall I come with you?”

“I’d rather go alone.”

Then George did a strange thing. He put his arm round his father’s neck, and kissed him on the lips. He gave a funny little moved laugh and walked away. Freddy went back to the drawing-room. His mother, Ferdy, and Muriel were sitting there.

“Freddy, why don’t you marry the boy?” said the old lady. “He is twenty-three. It would take his mind off his troubles and when he is married and has a baby he will soon settle down like everybody else.”

“Whom is he to marry, mamma?” asked Sir Adolphus, smiling.

“That’s not so difficult. Lady Frielinghausen came to see me the other day with her daughter Violet. She is a very nice maiden and she will have money of her own. Lady Frielinghausen gave me to understand that her Sir Jacob would come down very handsome if Violet made a good match.”

Muriel flushed.

“I hate Lady Frielinghausen. George is much too young to marry. He can afford to marry anyone he likes.”

Old Lady Bland gave her daughter a strange look.

“You are a very foolish girl, Miriam,” she said, using the name Muriel had long discarded. “As long as I am here I shall not allow you to commit a foolishness.”

She knew as well as if Muriel had said it in so many words that she wanted George to marry a Gentile, but she knew also that so long as she was alive neither Freddy nor his wife would dare to suggest it.

But George did not go for a walk. Perhaps because the shooting season was about to open he took it into his head to go into the gun-room. He began to clean the gun that his mother had given him on his twentieth birthday. No one had used it since he went to Germany. Suddenly the servants were startled by a report. When they went into the gun-room they found George lying on the floor shot through the heart. Apparently the gun had been loaded and George while playing about with it had accidentally shot himself. One reads of such accidents in the paper often.