

**LE GENTLEMAN, AN
IDYLL OF
THE QUARTER**

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Le Gentleman, an Idyll of the Quarter by Ethel Sidgwick

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ETHEL SIDGWICK

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AN IDYLL OF THE QUARTER

BY

ETHEL SIDGWICK

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"SUCCESSION" ETC.



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À MON AMIE

M. R.

CETTE ÉTUDE EST DÉDIÉE

I

It was a Sunday morning, in France.

Alexander Fergusson had known many Sunday mornings, but none the least like this. It was so gay, so insidiously exquisite, as to be quite disturbing. He had set out to the Scotch church, and he sat down helplessly in the gardens. Yet he had a triple duty to church: a duty to his conscience, a duty to Meysie's mother, and a duty to Meysie. He had received such stringent directions from Mrs. Lampeter not to leave Meysie too much alone, while he was in Paris to keep an eye upon her. He felt like a well-trained sheep-dog on his native hills, on trial service, with a single frisky lamb in charge. Of course Meysie was too pretty, too innocently conspicuous, to frisk about Paris alone. Yet he had not found her in her room at the pension, and he could but suppose she had gone on to church without waiting for him. Meysie had been well brought up before she took a fancy to painting in Paris; and he knew of old she was apt to get a little impatient of his dutiful and devoted escort.

Alexander, settling on to a seat well canopied by a flowering tree, only hoped she had not let that fellow Avery take her ; but Avery did not look like a churchgoer. He wore loose clothes and soft hats, and spoke French, when he chose, in a manner—to Alexander—most conceited and incomprehensible. What was worse, he spoke to Meysie, and (whether she understood or not) she listened and laughed. Alexander did not like Avery. He had come, with less weighty deliberation than usual, to that conclusion. He frowned, shifted his position on the seat, and tried therewith to shift the current of his thoughts into more agreeable channels.

It was not difficult. This garden of the Luxembourg was marked, on the map he conscientiously studied every morning, as a little dull-green square. Green it certainly was—dull it was not ; nor was it small in any permanent sense, for it seemed to shut in its short compass the whole of life ; more flowers, more birds, more sunshine, more happy homely people, than he had yet seen in Paris. Alexander had not been in Paris long, and had come well armed with theories. He had passed one year at Oxford, and had rooted out some of his earliest prejudices in the surprising atmosphere of that so-called dreamy city. But a prejudice against foreigners—French foremost, Parisians above all, and Parisian women in particular—had never quite been swept from his Scottish mind. He had

never thought to have to prove his theories, for no natural train of events would have brought him abroad. Even this freak of Meysie's anent the study of art need not have diverted his well-planned course. He was engaged to Meysie: she had succumbed at Christmas-time, in the somewhat sentimental wretch of parting with England and her circle. But he was necessarily detained at Oxford; and it had been settled that when the studios closed, and his term was over, Alexander should join the Lampeters for a summer holiday in Cornwall by the sea, and there take serious account of his lady Meysie and her artistic progress.

Meysie was an only child, and rather delicate; and during her absence abroad her mother fussed momentarily and miserably about her health. Alexander, seeing Mrs. Lampeter occasionally in his rapid sorties from Oxford, installed himself as a son beneath her Kensington roof, entered into all her remarkably varied interests (especially Meysie), and was most tender and encouraging. He never returned to Oxford, however, without a feeling that a telegram might follow, exhorting him to go instantly to Paris and fetch Meysie home. Yet it was but a jesting fancy—and he never thought it was to be his own health that should give occasion for such an expedition.

Alexander, like many of those too confident in their powers of body, had overworked rather seriously during the early spring. He was not a

public-school boy, and he had made his way to Oxford with nothing behind him but his own dogged labour. He was in no "circle" at all in his college. He was, with one or two others of his kind and antecedents, more like the silent grub, far below the current in the river mud, while others darted and whirred on the surface. He worked with all his well-balanced tenacious Scotch brain, and his amusements were most gentle, sentimental, and innocent. One or two of the highest, finest minds with which he came in contact—that of the Master of his college foremost—approved and respected him warmly. Other men looked at him, passed a careless word, and let him go. As for Alexander, he did not need them, for he had evolved an inner society. His daily demands on men and things were small; he had a strong taste for books, the labouring classes, and animals; he worshipped, at a most respectful distance, art and women. There was little more to say of Alexander Fergusson at twenty-four, unless one knew him very well: and he was hard to know.

He had been quite ill in March, and in the retirement of the Home he confided in his nurse a little. The nurse and the doctor together urged him to get away, feeling their responsibility towards him, for he refused entirely to let his mother know anything at all of his illness. He deceived her indeed elaborately with the history of an Easter reading-party at Abinger in Surrey,