

## II

### A ROYAL COMMAND

WHEN I heard that Bernard Shute, of Clountiss, Esquire, late Lieutenant R.N., was running an Agricultural Show, to be held in his own demesne, I did not for a moment credit him with either philanthropy or public spirit. I recognised in it merely another outbreak of his exasperating health and energy. He bombarded the country with circulars, calling upon farmers for exhibits, and upon all for subscriptions; he made raids into neighbouring districts on his motor car, turning vague promises into bullion, with a success in mendicancy fortunately given to few. It was in a thoroughly ungenerous spirit that I yielded up my guinea and promised to attend the Show in my thousands: peace at twenty-one shillings was comparatively cheap, and there was always a hope that it might end there.

The hope was fallacious: the Show boomed; it blossomed into a Grand Stand, a Brass Band, an Afternoon Tea Tent; finally, fortune, as usual,

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played into Bernard's hands and sent a Celebrity. There arrived in a neighbouring harbour a steam-yacht, owned by one of Mr. Shute's dearest friends, one Captain Calthorpe, and having on board a coloured potentate, the Sultan of X——, who had come over from Cowes to see Ireland and the Dublin Horse Show. The dearest friend—who, as it happened, having been for three days swathed in a wet fog from the Atlantic, was becoming something pressed for entertainment for his charge—tumbled readily into Bernard's snare, and paragraphs appeared with all speed in the local papers proclaiming the intention of H.H. the Sultan of X—— to be present at the Clountiss Agricultural Show. Following up this coup, Bernard achieved for his function a fine, an even sumptuous day, and the weather and the Sultan between them filled the Grand Stand beyond the utmost hopes (and possibly the secret misgivings) of its constructors.

Having with difficulty found seats on the top-most corner for myself, my wife, and my two children, I had leisure to speculate upon its probable collapse. For half an hour, for an hour, for an hour and a half, we sat on its hot bare boards and surveyed the wide and empty oval of grass that formed the arena of the Show. Five "made-up" jumps of varying dimensions

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and two vagrant fox-terriers were its sole adornment. A dark rim of spectators encircled it,



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awaiting developments, *i.e.* the arrival of the Sultan, with tireless patience, and the egregious Slipper, attired in a gala costume of tall hat,

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fashionable ladies, with comfortable brogues and a vigorous taste in scent, closed us in on every side. Throughout that burning period of delay went the searching catechisms of my two sons (aged respectively four and seven) as to the complexion, disposition, and domestic arrangements of the Sultan. Philippa says that I ought to have known that they were thoroughly overstrung; possibly my descriptions of the weapons that he wore and the cannibal feasts that he attended were a trifle lurid, but it seemed simpler to let the fancy play on such details than to decide, for the benefit of an interested *entourage* of farmers' daughters, whether the Sultan's face was the colour of my boots or of their mother's, and whether he had a thousand or a million wives. The inquiry was interrupted by the quack of a motor horn at the entrance gate.

"Here he is!" breathed the Grand Stand as one man. There was a flocking of stewards towards the gate, and the Sons of Liberty, full of anxiety to say the suitable thing, burst into the melancholy strains of "My Old Kentucky Home Far Away." To this somewhat "hearse-like air" the group of green-rosetted stewards advanced across the arena, escorting the yacht party, in whose midst moved a squat figure, clad in grey flannel, and surmounted by a massive

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and snowy turban. My elder son became very pale; the younger turned an ominous crimson, and the corners of his mouth went down, slowly, but, as I well knew, fatally. The inevitable bellow, that followed in the inevitable routine, had scarcely died away in the heart of Philippa's feather boa, when Mr. Shute's red face and monstrous Presidential rosette presented themselves on the stairs at my elbow.

"Mrs. Yeates!" he began, in a gusty whisper, "Cecilia implores you to come and fling yourself to the Lion! She says she simply can't and won't tackle him single-handed, and she trusts to you to see her through! He talks French all right, and I know your French is top-hole! Do come——"

Incredible as it may appear, my wife received this suggestion with a reluctance that was obviously but half-hearted. Such it is to have the Social Gift.

I presently found myself alone with my offspring, both in tears, and deaf to my assurances that neither the Sultan, nor his lion, would eat their mother. Consolation, however, came with the entry of the "jumping horses" into the arena, which followed with all speed upon that of the Sultan. The first competitor bucketted up to the starting-point, and at the same moment the

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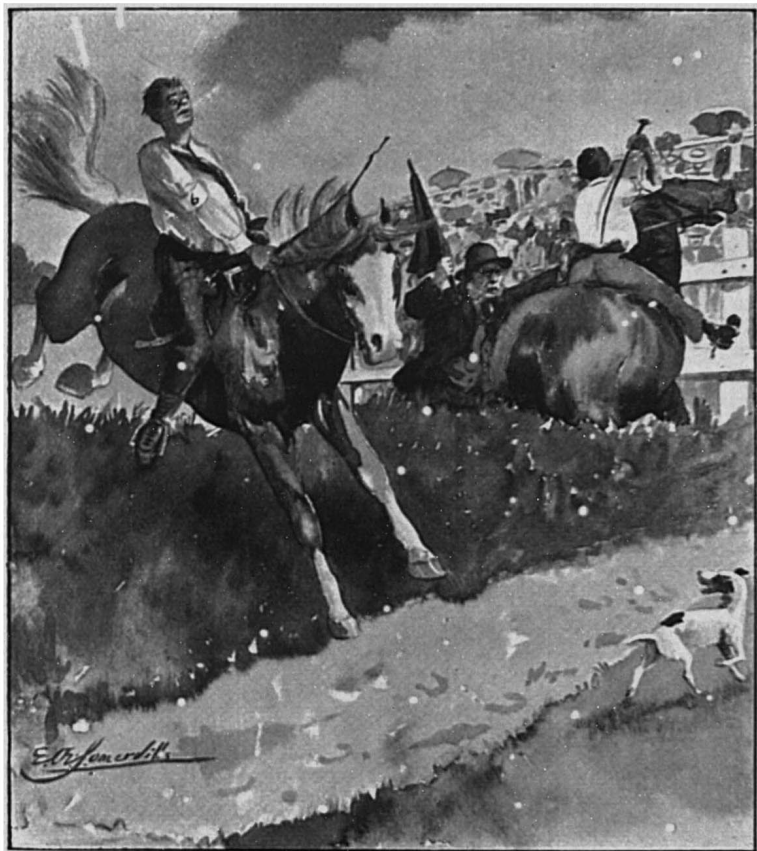
discovery was made that there was no water in the water-jump, a space of perhaps a foot in depth by some five feet wide. Nothing but a thin paste of mud remained, the water having disappeared, unnoticed, during the hot hours of the morning.

Swift in expedient, the stewards supplied the deficiency with quicklime, which was scattered with a lavish hand in the fosse, and shone like snow through the barrier of furze bushes on the take-off side. If, as I suppose, the object was to delude the horses into the belief that it was a water-jump, it was a total failure; they immediately decided that it was a practical joke, dangerous, and in indifferent taste. If, on the other side, a variety entertainment for the public was aimed at, nothing could have been more successful. Every known class of refusal was successfully exhibited. One horse endeavoured to climb the rails into the Grand Stand; another, having stopped dead at the critical point, swung round, and returned in consternation to the starting-point, with his rider hanging like a locket round his neck. Another, dowered with a sense of humour unusual among horses, stepped delicately over the furze-bushes, and, amidst rounds of applause, walked through the lime with a stoic calm. Yet another, a ponderous war-horse of seventeen

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hands, hung, trembling like an aspen, on the brink, till a sympathiser, possibly his o'wner, sprang irrepressibly from his seat on the stand, climbed through the rails, and attacked him from behind with a large umbrella. It was during this three-cornered conflict that the green-eyed filly forced herself into the front rank of events. A chorus of "Hi! Hi! Hi!" fired at the rate of about fifty per second, volleyed in warning from the crowd round the starting-point, and a white-legged chestnut, with an unearthly white face and flying flounces of tawny mane and tail, came thundering down at the jump. Neither umbrella nor war-horse turned her by a hair's-breadth from her course, still less did her rider, a lean and long-legged country boy, whose single object was to keep on her back. Picking up her white stockings, she took off six feet from the jump, and whizzed like a driven grouse past the combatants and over the furze bushes and the lime. Beneath her creamy forelock, I caught a glimpse of her amazing blue-green eyes.

She skimmed the hurdle, she flourished over the wall, flinging high her white heels with a twist that showed more consideration for their safety than that of her rider. She ramped over the big double bank, while the roars of approval



WHIZZED LIKE A DRIVEN GROUSE PAST THE COMBATANTS



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swelled with each achievement, and she ended a faultless round by bolting into the heart of the crowd, which fled hilariously, and as hilariously, hived in round her again.

From my exalted seat I could see the Sultan clapping his hands in sweet accord with Philippa. Somewhere near me a voice yelled :

“Cripes! She’s a monkey! When she jumped the wall she went the height of a tree over it!”

To which another voice replied that “It’d be a good bird that’d fly the height she wouldn’t lep, and John Cullinane’d be apt to get first with her at the Skcbawn Show.” I remembered casually that John Cullinane was a neighbour of mine.

“Well, I wouldn’t fancy her at all,” said a female voice. “I’d say she had a very maleecious glance.”

“Ah! ye wouldn’t feel that when the winkers’d be on her,” said the first speaker; “she’d make a fine sweeping mare under a side-car.”

Meantime, the war-horse, much embittered by the umbrella, floundered through the lime, and, continuing his course, threw down the hurdle, made a breach in the wall that would, as my neighbour put it, give three hours’ work to seven idlers, and came to a sudden conclusion in front

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of the bank, while his rider slowly turned a somersault that, by some process of evolution, placed him sitting on the fence, facing the large and gloomy countenance of his horse.

It was after this performance that my wife looked 'round to see if her sons were enjoying themselves, and waved her handkerchief. The snowy turban of the Sultan moved round too, and beneath its voluminous folds the round, black discs of a pair of field-glasses were directed at us. The effect was instant. With a simultaneous shriek of terror, my children flung themselves upon me and buried their faces in my breast. I shall never forget it to the farmers' daughters that, in this black hour, their sympathy was prompt and practical.

"Oh! Fie, fie! Oh! the creatures! 'Twas the spy-glasses finished them altogether! Eat a sweetie now, lovey! that's the grand man! Pappy'll not let the dirty fella near ye!"

A piece of the brown sugar-stick, known as "Peggy's leg," accompanied these consolations, and a tearful composure was gradually restored; but "Pappy" had arrived at the conclusion that he had had about as much as he could stand. In shameful publicity I clambered down the steep tiers of seats, with one child under my arm, the other adhering to my coat-tail. Philippa

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made agitated signals to me; I cut her dead, and went to ground in the tea tent.

A couple of days later my duty took me to the farthest end of my district—a matter that involved a night's absence from home. I left behind me an infant family restored to calm, and a thoroughly domesticated wife and mother, pledged to one o'clock dinner with the children and tea in the woods. I returned in time for luncheon next day, bicycling from the station, as was my wont. It was a hot day, and as I walked my bicycle up the slope of the avenue, the shade of the beech trees was passing pleasant; the dogs galloped to meet me over the soft after-grass, and I thought about flannels and an idle afternoon.

In the hall I met Margaret, the parlour-maid, engaged, with the housemaid, in carrying the writing-table out of my smoking-room. They were talking loudly to each other, and I noticed that their eyes were very bright and their complexions considerably above par. I am a man of peace, but the veriest dove will protect its nest, and I demanded with some heat the cause of this outrage.

"The Mistress told us to clear this room for the servant of the—the gentleman that's coming to lunch to-morrow, sir," replied Margaret with every appearance of offence.

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She and Hannah staggered onwards with my table, and the contents of the drawers rolled and rattled.

"Put down that table," I said firmly. "Where is the Mistress?"

"I believe she's dressing, sir," replied Margaret; "she only came home about an hour ago. She was out all night on the sea, I believe."

Instant on the heels of these astonishing statements the swing door to the kitchen was flung open, and Mrs. Cadogan's angry voice was projected through it.

"Hannah! go tell the Mistress the butcher's below; and he says he never heard tell of the like, and would she lend him one o' the Major's spears? How would the likes o' him have a spear! Such goings on!"

"What the devil is all this about?" I said with an equal anger. "No one is to touch my spears!"

"Thanks be to God, the Major's come home!" exclaimed the ruler of the kitchen, advancing weightily into the hall. "There's no fear I'd put a hand on your spears, sir, nor the butcher neither, the poor, decent man! He says he's supplying the gentry for twenty-five years, and he was never asked to do the like of a nasty thing like that!"

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“Like *what!*” I said, with growing wrath and bewilderment.

“It’s what the Mistress said,” rejoined Mrs. Cadogan, the flush of injury mounting to her cap-frill. “That, what-shall-I-call-him — that King, wouldn’t ate mate without it’d be speared! And it’s what I say,” she went on, perorating loudly and suddenly, “what’s good enough for Christians and gentry is good enough for an owld Blackamoor!”

• It was now sufficiently obvious that Philippa had, with incredible perfidy, taken advantage of my absence to embroil herself in the entertainment of barbaric royalty. “Tell the butcher to wait,” was all I could trust myself to say, as I started in search of my wife.

“Wait, Sinclair! I’m coming down!” cried an urgent voice from the upper landing, and Philippa, attired in what I may perhaps describe as a tempestuous dressing-gown, came swiftly downstairs and swept me before her into the drawing-room.

“My dear,” she said breathlessly, “let me break it to you as gently as possible. The Shutes called for me in the motor after you left yesterday, and we went on board Bernard’s yacht and sailed round, to tea with Captain Calthorpe and the Sultan. We were becalmed

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coming back, and we were out all night—we had nothing to eat but the men's food—not that I wanted anything!" She gave a nauseated shudder of reminiscence. "There was an awful swell. It rained, too. Cecilia and I tried to sleep in the cabin with all our clothes on; I never spent a more horrible night. The yacht crawled in with the tide at about ten o'clock this morning, and I got back here half-dead, and was just going up to bed when Captain Calthorpe arrived on a car and said that the Sultan wanted to lunch here to-morrow. He says we *must* have him—it's a kind of Royal command—in fact, I suppose you *ought* to wear your frock-coat!"

"I'm dashed if I do!" I said, with decision.

"Well, be that as it may," resumed Philippa, discreetly evading this point, "that green-eyed thing that got the first prize for jumping is to be here to meet him. He wants to buy it for his State carriage. I did my best to get out of it, and I told Captain Calthorpe it would be impossible to manage about the food. I forgot to tell you," faltered Philippa, with a wan giggle, "that he said he must have speared mutton!"

"I call it an infernal liberty of Calthorpe's!" I said, with indignation fanned by the spectacle of Philippa's sleepless black-rimmed eyes and

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pallid face, "dumping his confounded menagerie upon us in this way! And I may tell you that those spears of mine are poisoned!"

"Oh! don't be so horrid, Sinclair," said Philippa, "inventing difficulties like that!"

I arose the following morning with a heart of lead—of boiling lead—as I went down early to the smoking-room to look for cigarettes and found that they, in common with every other thing that I wanted, had been tidied into oblivion. From earliest dawn I had heard the thumping of feet, and the swish of petticoats, and the plying of brooms; but for me the first shot of the engagement was not fired till 8.30, when, as I was moodily stropping my razor, I was told that John Cullinane was below, and would be thankful to see me. As I shaved, I could see John Cullinane standing about in front of the house, in his Sunday clothes, waiting for me; and I knew that he would so wait, patiently, inexorably, if I did not come down till noonday.

I interviewed him, unsympathetically, on the hall door steps, and told him, firstly, that, as I knew nothing of his filly, I could not "say a good word" to the Sultan for her; and, secondly, that I certainly would not mention to the Sultan that, in my opinion, she was a cheap mare at £80. John Cullinane then changed the conversation

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by remarking that he had brought over a small little donkey for a present for the young gentlemen; to which, with suitable politeness, I responded that my children already had a donkey, and that I could not think of depriving him of his, and the interview closed.

Breakfast was late, and for the most part uneatable, the excitement of the household having communicated itself to the kitchen-range.

"If I was to put my head under it, it wouldn't light for me!" Mrs. Cadogan said to Philippa.

As a matter of fact, judging by a glimpse vouchsafed to me of her face as I struggled forth from the cellar with a candle and the champagne; one might have expected it to cause a conflagration anywhere.

My smoking-room had been dedicated to the Sultan's personal attendant, a gentleman who could neither lunch with his master nor with my servants; I was therefore homeless, and crept, an outcast, to the drawing-room to try to read the newspaper undisturbed. Sounds from above told me that trouble was brewing in the nursery; I closed the door.

At about eleven-thirty an outside car drove up to the house, and I saw a personable stranger descend from it, with a black bag in his hand, a forerunner, no doubt, of the Sultan, come over



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to see that the preparations were *en règle*. I saw no reason for my intervention, and, with a passing hope that Providence might deliver him over to Mrs. Cadogan, I returned to my paper. The door was flung open.

"Sinclair, dear," said my wife, very apologetically, "here is Mr. Werner, the piano-tuner, from Dublin. He says he can't come again—he thinks he can finish it by luncheon-time. I quite forgot that he was coming——"

Mr. Werner's spectacled and supercilious face regarded me over her shoulder; he evidently had a low opinion of me, I do not know why. With one Cenci-like glance of reproach at Philippa, I rose and left the room. As I put on my cap I heard the first fierce chords break forth, followed by the usual chromatic passages, fluent and searching, which merged in their turn into a concentrated attack upon a single note. I hurried from the house.

It was a perfect August morning; the dogs lay on the hot gravel and panted politely as I spoke to them, but did not move. Rejected by all, I betook myself to a plantation near the front gate to see how the work of clearing a ride was progressing. The cross-cut saw and a bill-hook lay on the ground, but of workmen there was no sign. From the high road came

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the sound of wheels and of rapid trotting, also something that seemed like cheering.

“Good heavens!” I thought, my blood running cold, “here they are!”

I broke through the tall bracken and the larches to an opening from which the high road was visible. My two workmen were lying on their stomachs across the coping of the demesne wall, and a line of countrymen, with their best clothes on and crape “weepers” on their hats, sat on the opposite fence and applauded what was apparently a trotting match between a long-legged bay colt and John Cullinane’s chestnut filly, owners up.

I joined the entertainment, my two men melting like snow from the top of the wall, and it was explained to me that there had been a funeral in the locality, and that these were a few of the neighbours that had been at it, and were now waiting to see the Black Gentleman. An outside car rested on its shafts by the side of the road, and a horse with harness on it browsed voraciously on the shrubs inside my gate. Far away down the road I saw the receding figures of my two children, going forth to the picnic that had been arranged to allay their panic and to remove them from the sphere of action. Any Irish person will readily believe that one of them

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was mounted on "the small little donkey," the bribe which I had that morning irrevocably repudiated. I knew that John Cullinane saw them too, but I was too broken to interfere; I turned my back and walked rapidly away.

The rhythmic rasp of the cross-cut told me that work at the clearing had been resumed; I said to myself vindictively that I would see that it continued, and returned to the ride. The bill-hook was doing nothing, and picking it up I fell to snicking and chopping, with soothing destructiveness, among the briars and ash-saplings. Notwithstanding heat and horseflies, the time passed not disagreeably, and I was, at all events, out of range of the piano. I had paused for the fifteenth time to wipe a heated brow, and extract a thorn from my finger, when the familiar voice of the Shutes' motor-horn roused me to the appalling fact that it was nearly luncheon-time, and that I was far from fit to receive Royalty. As I hurriedly emerged from the wood, there was a sound of hard galloping, and I beheld the green-eyed filly flying riderless up the avenue. She crossed the croquet ground, thoroughly, from corner to corner, and disappeared into the shrubbery in the direction of the flower garden. I ran as I have seldom run, dimly aware of a pursuing party of mourners on

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the avenue behind me, and, as I ran, I cursed profusely the Sultan, Calthorpe, and chiefly Bernard Shute and all his works.

The chase lasted for twenty minutes, and was joined in by not less than five-and-thirty people. The creamy mane of the filly floated like a banner before us through the shrubberies, with the dogs in full cry behind her; through it all went the reiterations of the piano, the monotonous hammerings, the majestic chords, the pyrotechnic scales; they expressed as fully as he himself could have desired the complete indifference of the tuner. The filly was ubiquitous; at one moment she was in the flower garden, the next, a distant uproar among the poultry told that she had traversed the yard, whence she emerged, *ventre-à-terre*, delivered herself of three bucks at sight of her original enemy the motor, at the hall door, and was away again for the croquet ground. At every turn I encountered a fresh pursuer; it was Bernard Shute and the kitchen-maid who slammed the flower-garden gate in her face; it was Philippa, in her very best dress, abetted by John Cullinane, very dusty, and waving a crushed and weepered hat, who, with the best intentions, frustrated a brilliant enveloping movement directed by me; finally the cross-cut saw men, the tuner's car-

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driver, and a selection from the funeral, came so near cornering her that she charged the sunk fence, floated across its gulf with offensive ease, and scurried away, with long and defiant squeals, to assault my horses at the farther end of the paddock.

When we, *i.e.* Philippa, Bernard, and I, pulled ourselves together on the top of the steps, it was two o'clock. By the special favour, of Providence the Sultan was late, but the position was desperate. Philippa had trodden on the front of her dress and torn it, Bernard had greened the knees of his trousers; I do not know what I looked like, but when Cecilia Shute emerged, cool and spotless, from the hall, where she had judiciously remained during the proceedings, she uttered a faint shriek and covered her face with her hands.

"I know," I said, with deadly calm, stuffing my tie inside my waistcoat, "I can't help it——"

"Here they are!" said Bernard.

The sound of wheels was indeed in the avenue. We fled as one man into the back hall, and Philippa, stumbling over her torn flounce, fell on her knees at the feet of Mr. Werner, the tuner, who stood there, his task finished, awaiting with cold decorum the reward of his labours. The wheels stopped. What precisely happened

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during that crowded moment I cannot pretend to explain, but as we dragged my wife to her feet I found that she had knelt on my eyeglass, with the result that may be imagined.

All was now lost save honour. I turned at bay, and dimly saw, silhouetted in the open doorway, a short figure in a frock-coat, with a species of black turban on its head. I advanced, bowed, and heroically began :

“Sire! J'ai l'honneur——”

“Yerrah my law! Major!” said the bewildered voice of Slipper: “Don't be making game of me this way! Sure I have a tallagram for you.” He removed the turban, which I now perceived to be a brown tweed cap, swathed in a crape “weeper,” and handed me the telegram. “I got it from the boy that was after breaking his bike on the road, an' I coming from the funeral.”

The telegram was from Calthorpe, and said, with suitable regrets, that the Sultan had been summoned to London on instant and important business.

I read it to the back hall, in a voice broken by many emotions.

“I saw the gentieman you speak of waiting for the Dublin train at Sandy Bay Station this morning,” remarked the tuner, condescending for a moment to our level.

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"Then why did you not tell us so?" demanded Philippa, with sudden indignation.

"I was not aware, madam, that it was of any importance," replied Mr. Werner, returning to his normal altitude of perpetual frost.

Incredible as it may seem, it was apparent that Philippa was disappointed. As for me, my heart was like a singing bird.