

look of missionary zeal in Murdo's eyes which means trouble for somebody.

NINIAN. They've also come about Elsie.

JANET. About Elsie! My dears, what have you got to do with her?

MURDO. She's getting herself talked about, mother, with a dancing fellow called Mario!

JANET. Oh, no, no, you've got it all wrong. The man is Lord Larne.

MURDO. No, mother, Larne isn't the man! . . .

ALICE (*interrupting him*). He's her ambition.

MURDO. Do you mind if I tell the story, Alice?

ALICE. Not if I'm allowed to make an interjection now and then.

MURDO. You see, mother, it's like this. Alice and I were dining with some friends at the Half-and-Half! . . .

JANET. What's that?

MURDO. A club in Bond Street.

JANET. It's got such a curious name.

NINIAN. The women members are half-men, and the men members are half-nothing.

JANET. That must make it very confusing, but everything is very mixed nowadays. I had a letter this morning which began "Dear Sir or Madam."

MURDO. While we were there, Elsie came in with a

man. I had never been there before, so I didn't know who he was. Our hostess whispered, "That's Mario!"

just as if she were talking about the King or the Pope, and I said, "Oh! And who might Mario be?" "I always think it's a good thing to pretend not to know who popular people are. Takes 'em down a peg or two."

ALICE. And makes you feel frightfully superior!

MURDO. She told me he was one of the finest dancers in the world, and that women wrecked their homes for him. Then she said, "That's his latest lady!"

ALICE. Meaning Elsie, of course.

MURDO. I don't mind telling you I was taken aback.

JANET. Naturally, dear, naturally. After all, she is a kind of mother to you.

MURDO. I said, "What do you mean?" and she replied, "Just what I say!"

JANET. And what did she say?

MURDO. I told you, mother. "That's his latest lady!"

JANET. That may mean a lot, and it may not mean anything.

ALICE. But Murdo hopes it means the worst.

MURDO. I don't deny that.

JANET. But she wants to get rid of your father.

MURDO. Well, I don't mind which gets rid of which, so long as it's done. But I'd rather that she should be divorced than father. I'd like to see some mud splashed on her. It hasn't been very pleasant for Ninian and me to see you and father separated, and I'm perfectly certain he's still fond of you.

JANET. Are you, dear?

ALICE. That shows his good sense.

JANET. Thank you, Alice.

MURDO. I'd be terribly glad if you and father were to make it up again. Terribly glad! I believe in the old-fashioned family—cleaving together until death do you part!

ALICE. That's your Scotch clan spirit, Murdo!

MURDO. And another thing, mother. I don't like having to explain to people that Elsie isn't my mother.

JANET. My dear, considering that she's younger than you are, I shouldn't have thought that was necessary.

MURDO. Oh, I don't know; you never can tell nowadays. I saw a woman at the Half-and-Half that night who looked as if she had just come to London for a mid-term holiday. Her age was sixty-seven, and her skirts were above her knees. But that isn't what I mean.

It's explaining about the divorce. I don't approve of divorce. It's a very disagreeable business for everybody, except the guilty parties.

See Johnstone

JANET. That's quite true. If I'd known the misery I'd have to endure before the decree was made absolute I'd have let him divorce me.

ALICE. Was it very awful?

JANET. Awful! My dear, it was horrible! I was watched and followed by an evil-minded person called the King's Proctor, who treated me as if I had committed the adultery. Twice I was called to his office and cross-questioned because some ill-natured person had written anonymous letters about me. I didn't dare to be seen with Philip after six o'clock in the evening. Whenever I went out, a man, who looked like something out of a sewer, followed me. He began to get on my nerves! . . . James and Elsie suffered nothing. She wasn't even mentioned in the proceedings. I don't think it's right that the innocent person should be treated like a criminal.

NINIAN. Well, let's hope that darling Elsie gets a good dollop of King's Proctory. It'll be a change for her to have to live like an enclosed nun for six months. Whatever will the Half-and-Half do while she's in retreat?

ALICE. You don't appear to like Elsie.

NINIAN. Like her! I'd like to wring her damned neck for her.

MURDO. What we want—I hope I'm speaking for all of us! . . .

JANET. That depends on what you're going to say, dear?

NINIAN. I doubt if you'll be speaking for me.

MURDO. We want father freed from Elsie and married to mother again.

NINIAN (*passionately*). No! No, mother, no!

JANET. My dears, I think you must allow me to settle my own affairs. It is not customary for children to arrange their parents' wedding. (*The Maid enters.*) What is it, Mabel?

MABEL. Shall I clear the tea-things, ma'am?

JANET. Oh, yes, please. (*The Maid begins to do so.*) Tell me what you've been doing lately, Alice.

MURDO. I took her to the theatre last night.

JANET. Did you enjoy it?

MURDO. Yes. I can't remember the name of the piece, but it was all right.

ALICE. We got there so late that if we'd been any later we'd have been in good time for the matinee this afternoon! I hate going to a theatre after the play's begun, but Murdo *will* linger over his meals.

MURDO. Well, my dinner's a lot more important than most of the plays I ever see.

ALICE. And the people who *are* in time look so sourly at you when you kick them. (*A bell is heard.*)

JANET. Was that the door-bell, Mabel?

MABEL. Yes, ma'am. (*She carries the tea-tray out.*)

JANET. Who can this be?

NINIAN. Perhaps someone else come to give us information about Elsie.

JANET. Don't be silly, Ninian. Alice, can you and I lunch together on Monday?

ALICE. I'd love to. Here?

JANET. No, in town. Call for me at a quarter to one.

ALICE. Very well. (*The door opens, and the Maid enters.*)

MABEL (*announcing*). Mrs. James Fraser.

JANET. Mrs. Who?

(*Enter Elsie Fraser, aged about twenty-four, very pretty, very smart, as hard as nails. She is disconcerted at finding herself in the presence of so many of the enemy.*)

Elsie. Oh, I! . . . (*To Janet.*) I thought you were alone.

JANET. I was not expecting a visit from you.

Elsie. No, I don't suppose you were. (*To the others.*) How do you do? (*To Janet.*) I hoped you'd be alone.

JANET. Yes?

ELSIE. You see, I wanted to have a private conversation with you.

NINIAN. About your divorce from father?

ELSIE. How did you know that?

JANET. My hus . . . I mean your husband was here about half-an-hour ago.

ELSIE (*now in possession of herself*). That makes it easier for me to come straight to the point. James isn't here now, I suppose?

JANET. No, you just missed him. He was on his way home. Would you like us to telephone for him?

ELSIE (*hurriedly*). Oh, no, no! I want to talk to you . . . alone. (*No one makes a move, and ELsie goes on, a little nervously*) Of course, I can't very well discuss the matter in front of . . . !

JANET. The children.

ELSIE. That sounds such a funny way to put it, doesn't it?

JANET. Alice, do you mind taking Murdo and Ninian into the Park for half an hour?

ALICE. Will half an hour be long enough? You'd better come and dine with us, Ninian, then we'll all return after dinner.

NINIAN (*hesitating*). No, I . . .

JANET. Yes, Ninian, I want you to.

NINIAN. Very well, mother. (*He goes out, taking no notice of ELsie.*)

ALICE (*to ELsie*). Good-bye!

ELSIE. Oh, good-bye!
ALICE (*to JANET*). I shan't say "good-bye" to you, darling. (*Kisses JANET.*) We'll come straight back after dinner.

JANET (*patting her affectionally*). Bless you!

MURDO. Bye, mother. (*To ELsie.*) Good afternoon!
ELSIE. Oh, good afternoon, Murdo. (*Exit ALICE and MURDO.*)

ELSIE. They weren't a bit pleased to see me, were they?

*obvious -
To get her
to talk
to Janet who
gives me
a divorce*

JANET. No, not very. I don't know that I'm pleased to see you myself.

ELSIE. I don't blame you. I should feel just as you do. You know, I'm fair-minded. I do see other people's point of view. Of course, I know it's very odd my being here at all. I mean, even in these times it isn't quite usual for one wife to call on the other wife.

JANET. I've known it to be done.

ELSIE. Oh, so have I. I know a girl who took the first wife up to her bedroom and showed her some of her wedding presents. I must say I thought that was a bit thick.

JANET. Yes, a little ostentatious.

ELSIE. Still, people don't feel about these things now as they used to do in your young days, do they?

JANET. No—not quite the same.

ELSIE. What I really came for was to talk to you about James.

JANET. Yes?

ELSIE. He's not happy.

JANET. No?

ELSIE. No, he's not at all happy. I have to confess that I've failed to make him happy. James is miserable with me.

JANET. Really?

ELSIE. Of course, I've tried—heavens, how I've tried!—but it's all been useless. The difference in our ages is too great.

JANET. There is exactly the same difference between your ages now that there was when you married.

ELSIE. Yes, but I didn't realise it then.

JANET. You're quite certain that you're not making James happy?

ELSIE. Oh, quite! The truth is, Mrs. Fraser, he still loves you. I've known it for quite a while now. I'm too young and inexperienced for him, and I can feel him comparing me to you . . . to my disadvantage.

JANET. You aren't so very young!

confide

ELSIE. I'm under twenty-five.

JANET. Murdo was born before I was that age.

ELSIE. But people are younger to-day than they were then. Everybody knows that. There are quite a lot of statistics about it. But I'm not thinking of myself, I'm thinking of James' happiness. I'd like him to be happy again, and there's only one way to do it.

JANET. What's that?

ELSIE. I must give him up. Oh, I know, it isn't going to be very nice, but I'm prepared to make the sacrifice!

JANET. I don't quite follow you. I understood from James that you wanted to divorce him.

ELSIE. Well, yes, of course, but that's only a formality. It doesn't matter so much for a man as it does for a woman, and a woman has to think of her reputation sometimes. Now, listen, Mrs. Fraser, I've thought of an idea. You see, I've realised only too well that James loves you; not me. I only roused his passion!

JANET (*a little shocked*). Oh, did you?

ELSIE. I'm sure of it. Now wouldn't it be wrong of me to keep you two apart? I've always said that it is a crime to make a couple who do not love each other live together.

JANET. Tell me about your good idea.

ELSIE. I'm glad you're interested in it. Why shouldn't James return to his old love?

JANET. You mean me?

ELSIE. Yes. Won't you take him back?

JANET. Aren't you being impertinent?

ELSIE. Oh, please, don't be angry with me. I know I express myself badly, but I'm trying to do the best for everybody. I don't seem able somehow to enter into James' ways. He loves to tell Scotch jokes, and I can't understand them, apart from seeing anything funny in them. Now you probably have an instinct for

that sort of thing. Oh, I know it's a trifle, but it's the sort of trifle that tells, don't you think?

JANET. You're not quite telling me the whole story. You want to marry Lord Larne.

ELSIE. Oh, yes, and I'm going to. He's devoted to me.

JANET. Aren't you just a little more anxious to be Lady Larne than to make James happy?

ELSIE. Aren't I to have any happiness? You don't expect me to live alone after I've divorced James?

JANET. You're not going to divorce James.

ELSIE. But I assure you I am.

JANET. You are *not* going to divorce him. He has been divorced once, and he does not wish to be divorced again. . . .

ELSIE. How frightfully selfish of him, just when I've spent hours and hours thinking of a way to make him happy.

JANET. When he came here this afternoon he told me that he did not want a divorce at all. He prefers that you and he should continue to live together! . . .

ELSIE. That's impossible. We can't.

JANET. Why?

ELSIE. I've told you—I don't make him happy. Besides, I don't want to live with him any more. He's too old for me.

JANET. That's the real reason?

ELSIE. Yes.

JANET. Do you love Lord Larne?

ELSIE (*off her guard for a moment*). Don't be silly! . . . (*On guard again*). Why, of course, I do. I shouldn't be willing to marry him if I weren't.

JANET. Would you marry him if he were plain Mister Larne?

ELSIE. Certainly. I have my faults, but I'm not a snob. Titles don't cut much ice nowadays. It's what a man is that matters.

JANET. And what is Lord Larne?

ELSIE (*momentarily nonplussed*). Oh, he's a very good sort! He dances divinely, and never fusses when he sees me dancing with other people.

JANET. Does James fuss when you dance with other people?

ELSIE. I should think he does! He can't dance, but he will. It's like going round with an elephant. I dance very well, and I love it. I love dancing. Naturally, I want to dance with people who can dance beautifully.

JANET. James never was much of a dancer.

ELSIE. And then he's always finding fault. He doesn't like modern dances. Says they're ugly.

JANET. So they are.

ELSIE. Well, they're our kind of dances. We like them.

JANET. We?

ELSIE. Yes. People of my age. We like them. I don't run down the schottische and the waltz, so why should he run down the Charleston and the Black Bottom. I daresay the schottische was very fine away back in Queen Victoria's day, but she's dead. She died before I was born. And you can't go on for ever admiring the dead!

JANET. I needn't tell you that I dislike you.

ELSIE. I can't see why?

JANET. Can't you?

ELSIE. After all, it's possible to like a person even if she has run off with your husband. I've always liked you. Ask James. He'll tell you how much I admire you. I've often told him you were far too good for him.

JANET. Are you too good for him, or is he too good for you?

ELSIE. I don't like you when you talk like that. That's being smart, and you're not smart. Honestly, I like you.

JANET. Well, that's very nice of you considering that I can't bear you. Now, let's get quite clear in our

minds why you want this divorce. All that talk about James' happiness—I don't believe a word of it.

ELSIE. Well, I'd rather he was happy than unhappy, wouldn't I? That's only human.

JANET. You want to marry Lord Larne, and you only want to marry him because some day he'll be the Marquis of Ballymena. Why should James put himself into an ignominious position just to enable you to marry a lord?

ELSIE. Well, I like that! After all, he owes me something.

JANET. Owes you something? Owes you what?

ELSIE. I was nineteen when I married him, and he was fifty. I've given him five years of my youth. Isn't that something to give an old man?

JANET (*indignantly*). He isn't an old man.

ELSIE. Not compared with you, but he is compared with me. I reckon I've given him a great deal more than he's given me. What future have I with him? I'm still a young woman. Am I to spend the rest of my life nursing an old man? He can't do the things I do! . . .

JANET. You should have thought of that when you married him.

ELSIE. How could I? I was nineteen and very poor, and he was rich. I couldn't think of anything else. I consider I've given him all that he's entitled to. Five years of any girl's life are enough for a man of his age.

JANET. I can't tell you how I despise you.

ELSIE. You think I'm cheap.

JANET. Yes, I do.

ELSIE. Well, that's frank anyhow. But I can't see it. I've only got that much of life! (*She indicates a small space with her hands.*) I want to get all I can out of it. That isn't wrong, is it? I'm young, aren't I?

JANET. Stop talking about your youth. Everybody's mad about the young, as if there'd never been any young before.

ELsie. Well, there haven't been any like us before. We're a new sort of young.

~~James. I don't know what you mean. I've never seen anything like you.~~

ELsie. No, I won't do that. I've a right to ask James to let me divorce him.

ELsie. Won't he? He'll be glad to do it before I've finished with him. I've a nasty little nature when I'm roused.

ELsie (conciatory again). Look here, he'll do it if you ask him!

ELsie. Yes. Why not?

~~James. Yes. Why not? I'll do it for you.~~

ELsie (snatching at a straw). Well, why don't you do it for that reason, then?

ELsie. Oh, how dare you suggest such a thing!

~~James. Oh, how dare you suggest such a thing! I'll do it for you.~~

~~James. Oh, how dare you suggest such a thing! I'll do it for you.~~

ELsie. Lie!

~~James. Oh, how dare you suggest such a thing! I'll do it for you.~~

ELsie (with a great effort at being dignified). Of course, if you're going to insult me!

ELsie. Have you anything else to say?

~~James. I have nothing to say to you.~~

ELsie. Good afternoon, Mrs. Fraser! (She stalks towards the door.)

James. Good afternoon! (Exit ELsie, shutting the door with a bang.)

THE CURTAIN FALLS

*same feeling on
high table on
feeling*