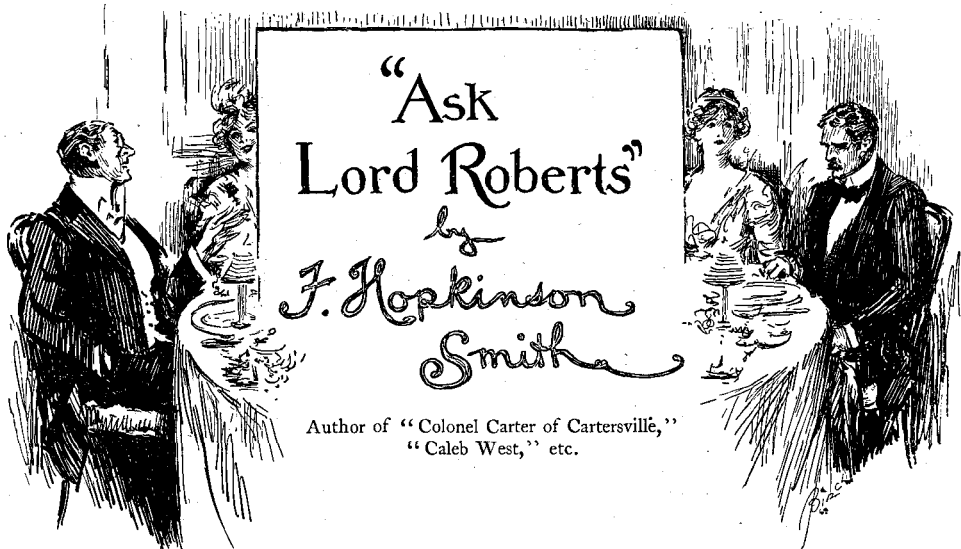


Half-tone plate engraved by H. Davidson

HENRY JAMES

FROM THE PAINTING BY JACQUES EMILE BLANCHE
(EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY FRENCH ART)



IT was a dinner of sixteen—one of those Venetian-lace, orchid-centered, shaded-candle dinners, beginning at caviar and ending at bonbons, with interludes of ter-rapin and canvasback to enliven the repast. The guests had been received in the richly furnished drawing-room half an hour before; had been properly introduced,—those who had been ignorant of each other's existence until that blessed moment,—the immaculate, blasé butler had droned out his announcement, and the two-and-twos had filed in and taken their seats, most of the men quiet, unperturbed, ready to listen while they ate in peace, the women restless, talking incessantly, their shrill New York voices dominating the room.

Half-way down the oval, between two ladies, one upholstered in black velvet and church lace, the other abloom in pink satin and pearls, loomed up a London-groomed American, all shirt-front and white Piccadilly waistcoat, who, from the moment he had taken his seat, had rent even the briefest of silences with the details of his social successes abroad, together with his plans for the coming season, including an apartment overlooking Hyde Park,—“Just a box of a place, you know, where I can ask a few people,”—and later on a hunting-party at his estate in Scotland, including his old friend Lord Tomnoddy and two members of the present Cabinet, who would pass the week shooting over his moors.

Directly opposite him sat a grave, earnest-looking man of perhaps forty, his dress-coat and rather high-cut black waistcoat stretched into wrinkles by the muscles of his compact, well-knit body. He had keen, steady eyes, a firm mouth, the lips tightly shut when the face was in repose, and a skin that showed habitual contact with the open air—the complexion of a sailor or farm-hand, one out in all weathers. He had arrived just as the company were leaving the drawing-room, having mistaken the hour, and had, therefore, been presented to but few of the guests, among them the young woman whom he was to take out to dinner, an up-to-date New York girl, who swept him from head to foot with one of her search-light glances, and who, noting the cut of his clothes, instantly classed him as a misfit and wondered why he had been asked.

The talk was of the customary kind—little hot-air balloons of gossip, loosened and set adrift by Piccadilly, to be further buoyed or punctured at the pleasure of the several guests: the crowd at the opera the night before; how sorry the upholstered lady felt for poor Mrs. A——, who had to wait one hour in satin slippers for her carriage; the cut of Mrs. B——'s corsage and her string of pearls,—the woman abloom in pink satin essayed this; C——'s bachelor dinner two nights before his wedding, and who were there, and what they drank, and what hour in the morning they were all sorted out and returned to their sev-